

George & Annie: An Unofficial Biography

by shosier

Fred and George Weasley's troublemaking careers didn't start the day they reached Hogwarts. In fact, they had been honing their mischief-making talents for years with the help of a feisty little Muggle girl named Annie Jones from Ottery St. Catchpole. Their secret friendship continued even after the twins began leaving for Hogwarts, as the children kept in touch via owl post. It deepened into something more as teenagers, when George and Annie discovered an attraction to each other that they couldn't resist. Their love struggles to survive one of the most trying times in the magical world – the Second War – and its devastating consequences. A happily-ever-after awaits them... eventually. Rating and warnings for later chapters. In this chapter, seven-year-olds George and Fred make an interesting acquaintance in a bowtruckle-infested oak tree, and a friendship is born.

Introductions

Chapter 1 of 80

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Chapter 1: Introductions

1985

It was a drizzly late April day, and the woods were cold and silent. Annie wandered around, bending over occasionally to pick a pretty flower or unusual rock that caught her eye. After wandering for most of the morning, she had been startled to hear voices arguing above her....

"This is the wrong tree, I'm telling you!" a voice cried.

"No, it's not. See the bark?" another, slightly different voice argued with the first.

"I didn't say it wasn't an oak, I said it's the wrong tree."

Annie looked up just in time to see a boy start to slip and barely catch himself on another branch.

"Careful!" a second boy shouted from a little higher up in the tree. "You'll scare them off!"

"What are you looking for?" she called up to them. She had never seen another living soul in the forest before, and was surprised to find other children here today. They didn't look familiar to her she decided she hadn't seen them before at school.

Stunned, both boys looked down at her, open-mouthed. After several moments, one of them answered her with a question of his own.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Annie. Who are you?"

The boy who had spoken paused and looked cautiously around. The other one continued to stare at her, dumbfounded. After a few more moments, satisfied that the three of them were alone, the cautious boy answered her.

"I'm Fred. That's George," he added, nodding his head toward his still mute companion. "Where did you come from?" he demanded.

"I live in the village. Just beyond the woods," she replied. George, the mute one, gasped at this revelation, for some reason.

"Oh. What are you doing here?" Fred further demanded to know, sounding officious.

Annie shrugged. She had no real purpose for being in the woods, other than to entertain herself with whatever she found. The children stared at each other for a few moments longer, and then Fred turned back to the tree and began to climb higher.

"What are you looking for?" Annie repeated. The tree climbing looked like fun, and she hoped they would invite her to join them.

"Bowtruckles," answered the other boy, George, speaking for the first time.

Fred paused in his climbing and shot him a glaring look.

"What are bowtruckles?" she asked. She had never heard of them. "Are they birds?"

Fred continued to climb up the tree, ignoring the exchange. George glanced up at him once before hopping down from the low branch he had been perched on. Now that he was on the ground, Annie could see that he was a good bit taller than she was. But then, that wasn't surprising, as almost everyone was taller than she was except for little babies, it seemed.

"Bowtruckles are like little stick-men. We're trying to catch one. They hide in old trees. But not this one," he said. The last bit he called upwards into the tree for his brother's benefit.

"Oh," Annie replied. She hadn't really understood what he meant, but appreciated his friendly explanation. "Can I help?" she asked.

George pondered her offer for a moment, then shrugged an assent. "You look really small. Are you sure you can climb this big tree?" he asked with a curious look on his face.

"I think I can, if you give me a boost up to the first branch," Annie replied after examining the tree for a few seconds.

"Okay," said George. He then knit his fingers together and bent down for her to reach. Annie put one foot into his hands while bracing her own hands on his shoulders. Then she vaulted herself into the air. Her tiny legs were incongruously strong, and she caught the lowest branch with her body bent at the hips, then quickly swung her legs up and onto the branch in a swift and graceful movement.

"Ooohf," was George's only comment. He didn't seem surprised by Annie's gymnastic feat. He paused just long enough to verify that she wouldn't be falling back down, then took a couple of steps backward himself. With a running leap, he caught the branch in his hands, then swung his body up with his arms. It had taken him only slightly longer than Annie to mount the branch and start climbing up after her.

It took the other two children a few minutes to catch up with Fred, who was perched about two-thirds of the way up the tree. Breathing only slightly harder than normal, Annie asked him, "Did you find one yet?"

Fred had been quietly scanning the branches. "No, not yet," he said absently. He froze suddenly, squinted hard at something in the distance for a few seconds, then relaxed with a disappointed sigh.

"I told you this was the wrong tree," George said a few minutes later.

"Shut it!" Fred replied dismissively.

The three of them sat quietly scanning the tree's branches for a long time. Since Annie wasn't exactly sure what she was looking for, she was getting bored quickly. She decided to examine the unfamiliar boys instead. They both had identical flaming red hair, trimmed short but a bit shaggy and messy with leaves and spider webs encountered while climbing the tree. They had warm brown eyes and lightly freckled cheeks that were rosy from the activity and cold. George had a smudge of dirt on one cheek. Fred was chewing on his lip while scanning the treetop. They were dressed identically as well in blue trousers and blue-and-green-striped jumpers.

"You lot look the same," she commented quietly, not wishing to disturb any unseen bowtruckles.

"Yeah. We're twins," George answered.

Fred scowled at them both for interrupting his silent hunt. He started to creep carefully up a little higher in the tree, muttering something about this branch becoming too crowded. George and Annie watched him as he moved off.

"Where do you live?" she asked, hoping it was nearby.

"Here. These are our woods," he answered off-handedly.

Annie's eyes widened. "In the trees?" she asked incredulously, wondering if these strange boys lived like the family in the book Gran had read to her earlier in the year. She began scanning nearby treetops for an elaborate treehouse.

George snorted. "No, silly. In a proper house, like everyone else." He rolled his eyes at her ridiculous assumption.

"Oh," she answered in a disappointed voice. Perhaps five more minutes then passed by silently. "How much longer are you going to look?" she whispered.

George blinked, then sighed. He'd been looking up at the sky now that the drizzle had stopped. He turned to face Annie, then pressed his lips together in a line and shrugged.

Annie responded by raising her eyebrows quizzically, then looked down at her swinging feet.

George was getting bored as well. He began to casually examine the mysterious little Muggle girl sitting next to him on the branch. He observed her dark brown hair was damp from the mist curly but cut short, just below the ears. Her skin was almost golden in color, but her nose and cheeks were rosy.

He'd known he was tall for seven years old, but this girl seemed tiny to him, perhaps even smaller than his little brother, Ron. *Maybe she's younger than we are?* he wondered. *If so, she doesn't act like a baby,* he thought, unlike his whiney little brother. She was a good tree climber; that was evident. *Maybe Muggles are smaller than wizards?* He had never met one before, after all.

Just then she sniffed and shifted her gaze to a bird that had caught her attention when it landed on a branch just to his right, giving him a clearer view of her eyes. His brow furrowed as he tried to decide what color they were. *Blue? Grey? No... violet,* he concluded with small surprise.

Annie leaned back against the trunk of the tree and started to absentmindedly snap tiny twigs off a branch within reach. She tossed the first one toward the bird, who flew off in response. Then she tossed the next two at George, who smirked as each of them fell short of their intended target, but did not respond any further. Another one, flicked harder this time, she sent toward the tiny rill of a stream below them.

She reached out again toward a larger, dead-looking stick and pulled. But instead of snapping off in her hand, it seemed to twist in her grasp.

It had moved!

Smaller side-branching twigs then began to claw her wrist, leaving behind little red scrapes on her skin. She released her grip and gave out a startled cry, but the stick didn't obey gravity and drop to the ground as it should have. Instead, it crept nimbly all the way up to her elbow. To her surprise, she could see two tiny, angry-looking eyes glaring up at her from a cleft in the stick.

She shook her arm, attempting to fling the frightening thing away from her. At the same moment, the creature launched itself toward her face. She ducked, turning her head away from the attack. Annie cried out again, in pain this time; it was now stuck in her curls and pulling on her hair!

George instantly began shuffling along the branch toward her. "Fred!" he cried, summoning help from above.

Fred had seen the disturbance as well and identified the culprit. "Hold still!" he shouted, weaving quickly through the branches toward them. "I'm coming! Try to grab it, George! Don't let it get away!"

George buried his hands in Annie's hair, attempting to tug the thing out. She held as still as she could, hoping the thing wouldn't bite her. Her eyes stung with tears, but she bit her lip to keep from crying out again. She hated showing what she considered girlish weakness like that, especially in front of these boys she had so wanted to impress. But the pain of her tender scalp was intense.

"Argh!" George grunted. He had gotten a good grip on the creature now, but it was clinging to Annie's hair too tightly to come out. At that moment, Fred reached their branch. "It won't let go!" George cried in frustration.

"Here!" Fred said excitedly. He then fished into his pockets and pulled out a fistful of woodlice. He offered it to what he assumed was the head-end of the creature.

Annie felt the thing stop struggling on her head. Then, slowly the pressure on her scalp began to release. She exhaled in relief, swallowed her hurt, then quickly wiped the traitorous tears from her cheeks and turned around to face the boys.

Fred's attention was completely absorbed with the wriggling creature in George's hands. "Don't squeeze it so hard!" he barked at him.

"D'you want it to get away?" George shot back.

"Give it to me then," he snapped and wrenched the thing out of George's grasp.

Annie peered at the squirming thing. "What is it?" she whispered, not wanting to provoke another attack.

"A bowtruckle," Fred replied, like he was speaking to an idiot.

Annie scowled at him, but then her expression quickly turned to wonder. It was just like George had described earlier: a little stick-man. The angry look in its eyes was gone, but she could tell it didn't want to be trapped in Fred's hands. It had finished with the woodlice he had brought, and was now digging at Fred's hands with his tiny twiggy fingers, attempting to squirm out of his captor's hold. Unlike her own oozing wrists, there were no scrapes resulting on Fred's hands.

"Get the bag out of my pocket," Fred commanded.

George obeyed instantly, holding it open. Fred plunged his hands inside, and George held onto the bowtruckle from outside the bag while Fred extricated his hands then tied the bag shut. The bag twitched around once George released his hold on it.

"Think it'll hold?" George looked at the bag doubtfully.

Fred shrugged. The bag jerked violently then, seemingly in response to the question. "We'd better hurry, just in case," he said.

Fred tossed the bag over his back and pulled a strap over each arm. He grasped the tree trunk and began making his way back down to the ground.

George finally tore his eyes away from the bag and looked at the girl. He could see a smudge on each of her cheekbones now, and then glanced down at her wrist, taking in the slightly bleeding marks. "Are you hurt?" he asked.

Annie was mortified he would dare ask such a thing! She stuck out her chin and replied with a scathing, "No!"

George shrugged. He didn't believe her, but said, "All right, then," anyway and turned away from her. They both began to pick their way back down the tree.

Fred reached the ground first. "Ha! Ha!" Fred exclaimed triumphantly. "I can't wait to see the look on Percy's fat face when he sees this! Ha!"

George beamed in agreement. Then, as if another thought suddenly occurred to him, he glanced back up at Annie seated on the lowest branch. "Need any help?"

Annie's first reaction was to take offense again, but then reconsidered, judging the distance to the ground to be a bit too much for her confidence. "Well, maybe," she admitted grudgingly. George held his arms up, and she took both his hands, then bumped herself off the branch. With George to brace her, she landed lightly on her feet. "Thanks," she whispered.

"Come on, let's go," Fred ordered his brother as he turned his back and marched off.

George watched Fred begin to leave. As much as he was looking forward to showing up his brother Percy, he hated to leave the only Muggle he had ever met so soon. He had a million questions he wanted to ask her. Turning back to the girl, he said, "Well, thanks for helping us. Pleasure to meet you, Annie," he said quietly.

"Likewise, George," Annie replied. "See you around?" she asked, sounding hopeful.

"Yeah, probably," he replied, sounding enthusiastic as well. George was thrilled by the prospect of spending more time with the little Muggle girl. "We might be down by the river tomorrow. Maybe we'll see you there?" he asked, jogging backward to catch up with his brother.

"Okay, see you," she called as she watched the curiously friendly boy follow after his twin.

And she had met them again, countless times over the summer months. Almost daily her new friends had shown her so many amazing things she had never seen before not in any of the books she had ever read, nor in the zoo her grandmother had taken her to. They hadn't always hunted for creatures sometimes they had played slay the dragon, or hide and seek, or some other game. Once they had even stripped down to their underpants and swam in the stream on a scorching hot day. But these last few weeks had been spent on a secret project of vital importance.

On one of their exploratory expeditions, they had come across an ancient willow tree with graceful limbs trailing over a stream. Of course, they had to climb it immediately. And to their delight they had discovered two perfectly level branches that spread parallel to the ground just a few feet apart, well over ten feet up.

George and Fred had looked excitedly at each other. "Tree fort!" they had exclaimed in the same instant.

From that day on, it had become an obsession for the three children. Every day, first thing in the morning, they would set off to meet at the tree. For a whole week, Fred and George would arrive, dragging contraband timber filched from home to use as floorboards. Annie had discovered she could braid and weave the willow's long, flexible branches together to make a frame of sorts for the tent-shaped sides and roof. After a morning's worth of work, they would sit on the bank of the stream, bare feet dangling in the slow current, munching on sandwiches and biscuits brought from home. The afternoon would be spent exploring the surrounding area, remarking on excellent ambush spots and escape routes.

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Annie danced on her feet, shifting quickly from left to right. The small kitchen was bright with mid-morning light and smelled of still-warm biscuits. She looked at them lying on a thin towel, then up at her grandmother, then back to the cookies.

Her grandmother saw everything. She chuckled and muttered, "Go on with you, then," with a smile.

Annie joyfully snatched a fistful of the soft treats and then bolted out the back door. She skipped through the tidy little garden, burst out of the wooden gate, and flew across the open field toward the forest.

Meredith beamed with loving pride after her granddaughter: so full of energy, of life. She had no idea what Annie really spent her days doing in the woods, but she always came home for supper happy, filthy, and tired. Since the day earlier this spring when Meredith first allowed seven-year-old Annie to play in the woods alone, she would always come home filled with fantastic stories about fairies, mythical creatures, and a pair of magical playmates. *What an imagination that child has* Meredith thought. She chuckled again and began kneading the bread dough with her gnarled fingers.

Meanwhile, Annie arrived at the edge of the forest. She wondered if her friends would be there yet. She slowed her pace a bit, weaving around the trees, careful not to follow the same path as yesterday. *It would not do to leave a trail in the forest* she cautioned herself. *A magical hideout must stay secret forever*

Today she reached the tree fort with all but one of the biscuits she'd left the house with. The boys weren't there yet, but she wasn't too disappointed it was still early in the late summer day. She decided to fill the time spent waiting by pulling out one of the books they had stashed in the fort. It was a thin, beaten-up volume with red binding and barely-readable gold lettering on the cover. She loved reading about the creatures inside, but wished it had pictures. There was another book in the fort that had pictures of people in flowing clothes. The text wasn't very interesting, but the pictures were fascinating because they moved!

She opened the red book and turned to the page about bowtruckles, smiling as she was reminded once again about the first time she'd seen one. A folded piece of paper was tucked into the book; it held her attempt to sketch one of the creatures. It wasn't half bad, but not great either. She wished she could make it move as well. She smiled again, imagining her drawing squirming on the page.

She turned to the page with the clabbert description. They had captured one of the froggy-looking creatures yesterday in a nearby tree, and Fred had leashed it to a branch just outside their tree fort. She peered out a tiny window in the branch-wall to see if it was still there. Sure enough, there it was. It peered back at her, and the bump on its head began to turn slightly red. She reached for a red pencil and started to add the red spot to her latest drawing.

Annie and the captured clabbert heard footsteps coming through the forest at the same time. The spot on its head now turned an angry red in response, and Annie turned to face the entrance in the floor of the fort.

"Oh... hey, Annie!" Fred smiled as his head popped into view.

"Hi, Fred, hi, George," she replied as they both pulled themselves into the fort. "I brought some biscuits," she added, holding a stack of them out in her open hand.

"Mmm," hummed George as he reached out for the treats. He reluctantly passed a few to his brother. Both boys gobbled them instantly.

"Thanks," mumbled Fred, spewing crumbs.

Annie smirked at his boyish manners.

George headed over to the rudimentary window in the woven wall. "Is it still there?" he asked no one in particular.

"Mhmm," Annie informed him. "What are we going to do with it?" she asked.

"I caught this on the way here," explained Fred. He pulled a small lizard out of his pocket, showing her. She took it from him gently, examining it closely with interest. "I'll see if I can get him to eat it," Fred continued.

Annie responded by wrinkling her nose. "Eww," she said quietly, and handed the doomed creature back.

Fred rolled his eyes at her delicate reaction and climbed back down out of the fort. Rather than dropping down to the ground, he shimmed along a lower branch to the other side of the willow that hung over the water. From within the fort, George and Annie could feel the vibrations of his movement through the tree as Fred edged toward the clabbert. George looked out the window again to watch his progress.

"That red spot is really raging now," he commented for Annie's benefit. "Watch out for those teeth!" he called out to his brother. "They're not venomous, are they?" he asked Annie, nodding toward the book in her lap.

She shook her head with confidence, having just reread the clabbert entry this morning, and George turned back to observe his brother. Annie went back to work on her drawing. She wasn't sure what else to add to it. She uttered a deep sigh instead.

"I'm going to miss you two," she said quietly, mostly to herself.

"What d'you mean?" asked George. "We're not going anywhere."

"School starts next week," she explained. Once school started, she wouldn't be able to spend all day with the boys only see them in the evenings and on weekends. Nothing could possibly appeal less to Annie than the prospect of sitting still at a desk doing lessons all day long. And none of the children she went to school with were a fraction as interesting, or as friendly, as her forest mates were.

"Why don't you go to school in the village?" she asked, surprised the thought had only just occurred to her.

"Our mum teaches us school stuff at home," replied Fred, just climbing back into the fort.

"Oh, okay," said Annie. After a few moments of thought, she added, "Don't you miss playing with other kids at school?*Not that I would...*

Fred shrugged. "We still have Percy and Ron to hang out with, though Charlie and Bill are both going away this year. Sure will miss Charlie," he said thoughtfully.

"And we knock about here with you," George added.

Annie was confused. "Wait... going? Where are your brothers going?"

An alarmed, guilty look spread across Fred's face. "Away... to school," he said reluctantly after a long pause. He glanced a warning to George.

"Huh?" quizzed Annie. "I thought you just said your mum taught you?"

"Hogwarts!" George interrupted in an excited whisper. "They're going to Hogwarts!" Fred hissed at him to stop, but George looked back with a smirk and shook him off with his head.

"Oh, come on. It's Annie. She won't tell anyone." Then he turned to look at her earnestly. "Right?" he asked her. Well, actually, it sounded more like a command than a request to Annie.

"Of course not," she assured him. Other than the two of them, and her Gran, she rarely spoke to another living soul. Secrets were always safe with her. She was an expert at keeping them.

"What's Hogwarts?" she asked, stumbling over the unfamiliar and strange-sounding word.

"A school. Our school. For wizards," George said in a hushed voice.

Annie's eyes grew round as what George said began to register. She had always known there was something different about George and Fred. Something special. They were certainly not like her... or anyone she had ever met before, for that matter. Had she guessed that they were... wizards?

"George!" Fred barked in a whisper. "Shut it! She's a Muggle!"

Annie whipped her head back around to face Fred. "What did you just call me?" she asked in a snarl of her own, glaring at him. She could feel a fury building quickly inside, tightening in her chest. Her fists clenched, and she took a step toward Fred.

"Cool it, Annie," George replied, his hands raised in a gesture of conciliation.

"It doesn't mean anything bad," Fred answered her at the same time. "It just means people like you. Non-magical people." His left arm was slightly raised in self defense, just in case Annie decided to throw one of those fists his way despite the explanation. Over the summer, both boys learned that Annie's temper flared in surprisingly painful ways for a girl so tiny.

"You're not supposed to know," George added.

"Oh." Annie took a deep breath and dropped her shoulders. Her body quickly released the angry tension of her muscles, as rapidly as it had built up. "Sorry," she added, feeling pleased that they trusted her with such an enormous secret.

Then a disturbing thought crossed her mind. "Will you go, then... to Hogwarts, some day?" she asked, afraid of the answer but unable to resist asking anyway.

Fred nodded. "When we turn eleven."

Eleven, Annie thought. *That was four years away. Loads of time till then. Ages, even.* She sighed in relief, surprised at how upset she had felt at the idea that her new friends would be leaving her soon.

"Where is it?" she pressed.

"Nobody really knows exactly for sure. Somewhere in Scotland, probably," George answered.

"Oh." Annie felt a small twinge in her heart at the thought. "That's far away."

"Yeah. It's an old castle," Fred explained.

As curious as she was about a school in a castle, Annie didn't feel like continuing this conversation for the moment. She wanted a chance to digest this new information first. She glanced around the fort and saw the little red book again. Which reminded her of the creature outside.

"Did he eat it?" she asked to change the subject and walked over to the window.

"Oh, yeah, he did," replied Fred, sounding relieved to talk about something else. "Once I fed him, the spot turned brown again. I bet if we feed him a few more times, we can take off the leash and he'll stay put."

"Maybe," George conceded, moving on, like the rest of them, as if the preceding conversation hadn't occurred.

After a several minutes of silently reviewing the facts that her playmates were wizards who in a few years would be leaving Devon to go to school in a castle in Scotland, and unable to think of anything else, she decided to ask what was becoming a burning question.

"Can anyone go... to the castle school... and learn magic?" Perhaps she could convince her Gran to send her to Hogwarts with her new friends.

"Nah. You get a letter the summer you're eleven, if you get to go," explained Fred.

"How do you know you'll go, then?" she wondered aloud.

"I suppose some kids don't until they get the letter," he mused. "The ones whose parents are Muggles, well, there's no way for them to know about Hogwarts before the letter. The rest of us the ones with magical parents we've known since forever."

"But even Muggle-borns already know they can do magic by then all the odd things they can make happen," George continued where his brother left off. "It sort of busts out of you sometimes, when you're mad or upset, usually. You can't always control it like we do."

"So, you can do magic, like that?" she exclaimed. "Why don't you ever show me?"

"We can, but we're not supposed to," explained George.

"See, it's a bit different for us, being born into a magical family," added Fred.

"We've got the Trace on us. Whenever we do any magic on purpose that is some great Ministry muckety-muck might come, and we'd all get in trouble," George said. "Most people don't get a Trace until they start school, though," he lamented.

Fred chuckled. "We got ours early. Mum insisted."

"Everyone in your family can do magic?" she asked, trying to downplay the tone of jealousy in her voice.

Both boys nodded casually, as if it was no big deal.

"When did you know... that you could... I mean, how did you...?" she said softly, unsure of how to phrase this crucial question.

"Mum tells the story like this: she was trying to get us to eat a plate of veg one day when we were about two," began Fred, understanding what Annie was asking.

"Yeah, but we were having none of it," added George. "Probably turnips or some rubbish."

"And suddenly, the plate flew across the kitchen, smashed into the wall..."

"She says we started laughin' so hard..."

"And then, one by one, all the plates on the table started flyin'..."

"And smashin'..."

"And us laughin'..."

"And she knew exactly what to expect of us from that day on!" Both boys began to chuckle.

"Mess..." George said, indicating himself with his finger.

"And Mayhem," Fred added, bowing formally.

"Sort of our family nicknames, really," George said with a smile.

Annie smiled as she pictured the scene in her mind of her friends as babies. But something more important was nagging at her brain. The most important question she would ever ask....

"Could I... I mean, can you... teach me any?"

The smiles on both boys' faces fell then. Fred slowly shook his head and turned away.

Annie's heart sunk. What had been her dearest ambition for only the last few minutes, ever since she had learned the truth about her magical friends, had now been shot out of the sky for good. She could never be like them, ever.

George was looking at her with... no, it wasn't pity, but... concern. He seemed genuinely sorry that her feelings were hurt. He patted her shoulder. "Sorry, mate. You have to be born with it. Dunno how it works, but there it is," he explained with a shrug.

Fred turned back to them and continued. "Bein' a Muggle isn't so bad, is it? I mean, you've got cool stuff like airplanes, and eccleristy...."

"Electricity!? You mean you don't have electricity in your house?!" Annie exclaimed. The whole thing was becoming more unbelievable by the moment.

"Can't... Dad says the magic messes it up," George answered, sounding somewhat dejected.

"You're joking," Annie cried, incredulous.

Both boys shook their heads in unison. "Nope."

"How do you cook, or have lights, or do anything?" she asked, unable to imagine such a primitive existence. She and her Gran didn't have many of the modern toys her schoolmates talked about, but they certainly had electricity, for crying out loud!

Fred looked at her as if she was missing something very obvious.

"Oh, right." As hard as it was to imagine living without electricity, Annie was sure that she would be able to give it up, and happily, to be like her friends. To do magic. She didn't know what else to say. Her eyes fell to the floor in disappointment.

George glanced at his brother, silently asking him what they should do next. Fred chewed his cheek as he thought. He decided they needed to distract their friend.

"Hey, let's head down to the river today, see if we can catch another imp," he offered, remembering how that had entertained Annie once before. A slow smile began to spread on their little friend's face as she recalled the silly antics of the imp they had found a couple weeks ago.

"Race you," she offered as she launched herself out the trapdoor.

Snow Day

Chapter 2 of 80

A blizzard in Devonshire, a toboggan, a Chocolate Frog... and a secret kept.

Chaos and mayhem were in the ascendant.

No less than three glasses of milk had been spilled in the ten minutes since lunch had begun. George and Percy had had to be physically separated to prevent further injuries. They were currently glaring daggers at each other from opposite ends of the table. Bill and Charlie were shouting at one another about something Quidditch most likely. Ron was currently in tears, protesting the fact that he didn't get the portion he had wanted. Ginny was jumping up and down in her mother's lap, refusing to eat altogether.

Molly was at her wit's end.

Fred was the only quiet one at the moment. That fact alone made Molly extremely nervous. He was dreamily gazing out the window, she assumed at the spectacular vista: a once-in-a-decade blizzard had hit Southern England yesterday, and two feet of pristine snow sparkled in the sun.

The December morning had dawned bitterly cold, which was why Molly was now clinging desperately to her last scrap of sanity. All seven of her children had been cooped up together in the house for over a day and a half. *But since the sun's been shining all morning long, surely it'll be warm enough now...*

"Mum, can I go outside and play?" Fred asked excitedly, interrupting her thoughts, which had been rather similar in their vein.

"Yes!" she cried with relief. "All you lot out! I don't want to see any of you for the rest of the afternoon! Dress warmly, now.... Bill and Charlie enough with the brooms, you two. Stay on the ground today, I'm warning you! You're in charge of Ron and Ginny," she admonished her eldest sons.

Noise rivaling that of an earthquake shook the cramped kitchen as seven bodies jostled each other to be the first dressed and out the door. Ron was soon in tears again, unable to find his hat. George had nearly strangled Percy with his own muffler, and they were wrestling with each other once again, crashing heedlessly into the other children who shouted in protest. Ginny got knocked over and began to cry.

"OUT!" Molly screamed, stabbing her finger at the door.

All seven children were momentarily stunned into paralyzed silence. Then they slowly turned as one and filed out the door quietly.

Blessed peace descended upon the kitchen.

The Weasley children began trekking toward the orchard paddock. Bill and Charlie had snuck their brooms out with them and were planning on flying despite what their mother had told them. All the other children followed them. Except for Fred, who struck out toward one of the hills in the distance.

"Where're you off to?" yelled his twin. When Fred didn't answer, George jogged after him.

"Look. Out there," Fred whispered and indicated with a subtle nod where to look when George caught up with him.

George gazed toward the distant hill. A small figure stood at the top, jumping up and down and waving at them. It took a seat on something and then started sliding down the hill, picking up a great deal of speed by the time it reached the bottom.

"Let's go!" George whispered excitedly as they made their way through the drifts as quickly as they could.

"Where'd you get it?" Fred cried when they arrived at the crest of the hill.

"It was my Gran's when she was a girl in Wales. She told me it snows a lot more there than it does here. It's really old, but it still works. Want to have a go?" Annie offered.

Fred nodded enthusiastically and sat down upon the toboggan.

"Look put your feet on this bit here. You can steer it a little, but not much. Don't aim it at a tree, for crying out loud," she instructed.

"All right, all right. I've got it. George, gimme a shove," he ordered impatiently. With his brother's push, Fred sped down the hill, whooping in delight.

"Bring it back up! Hurry!" George shouted, eager for his turn.

"That your house?" Annie asked, pointing in the distance toward the oddest building she had ever seen. It looked almost imbalanced, like it should be toppling over. Smoke was lazily curling up out of several chimneys, and icicles dangled from every horizontal edge. It was strange-looking, but also cozy and inviting, somehow.

"Yeah," George answered. "I'm sick of being stuck in it with that lot, that's for sure."

"Who were all those people who came out with you?" she asked.

"Hurry up, Fred!" he shouted, then turned back to Annie. "My brothers and sister."

"All of them?" she asked, incredulous.

George shrugged and looked at her as if she'd just asked a very stupid question.

Annie pondered this revelation. She hadn't quite realized that her friends had had so many siblings all at home. They usually only ever talked about their older brothers, who were away at school this year. She guessed they must be home for the holidays now.

It was such a completely foreign concept to her: the idea of sharing a home with children her own age. And there were so many of them! *How did they all fit? Could there be even more in there, too little to come outside?* she wondered.

Fred had reached the top now and handed the sled off to George. "That was brilliant!" he cried.

George, not satisfied with merely copying his brother, tried lying down on the sled. He plowed headfirst down the hill at breakneck speed, roaring all the way.

"Your brothers were carrying big stick-things. What were they?" she asked Fred while they waited for George to return.

"Brooms," he answered simply.

"What for?" she asked. *What good could two scrawny little brooms do to clear away all this snow?*

"Flying," he answered her distractedly. "Move it!" he called to his brother who had paused halfway back up the hill to catch his breath.

Annie's eyes bugged out. "What?" she cried.

Fred turned to her with a smile, pleased by her reaction. He liked the way she was consistently amazed by all their everyday magical stuff, no matter that it was all second-hand or second-best. "You ride them. They fly."

"Witches really fly on brooms?" she cried softly in amazement, revealing a common Muggle misconception.

"If girls can do it, boys can do it better, I assure you," Fred snapped quite defensively. "Come on, d'you want your turn or not?" he asked testily as George held out the tow rope to her.

"Oh, yeah. Push me, you two. I want to go as fast as you this time!" she commanded.

Both boys put their hands on her shoulders and gave a shove. She flew down the slope, tumbling off the sled into the snow when she tried to steer away from a rock. The boys roared with laughter from the top of the hill.

A few minutes later, she was back at the top herself, beaming with pleasure. "Brilliant!" she cried. "Did you see me catch air?"

"We saw you eat a face full of snow, if that's what you're referring to," laughed Fred. He bent over the sled and began to run, pushing it from behind, then throwing his body on it once he reached top speed.

"Can you fly on a broom, George?" she asked.

George sighed wistfully. "Not a real one. Not 'til we're older after we get our wands."

Oh, right. They had talked about that before, she remembered. How they were not allowed to do magic until they were eleven, when they would each get a wand. The same year they'd go away to wizard school.

She wondered sometimes if maybe the whole wizard story was just that: a story. She had begged, cajoled, teased, and attempted to trick her way into catching them doing magic. And after all that, they'd never shown her a single trick, had they? Never uttered one ruddy magic word.

But then, if they weren't magical, how else could she explain all the rest of it? The creatures in the forest that no one else she knew had ever seen? Or the books with the pictures that moved? And now, the astonishing house they lived in?

"You know, you never follow any other rules. Why obey that one?" she asked. She knew Fred and George spent a good deal of their lives being punished by their parents. Nearly anything that was any fun at all to do was against the rules, it seemed.

"The rules we break aren't serious ones. Fred and I are the only ones who get in trouble," he explained.

"And me, don't forget," she added slightly indignantly. She had gotten into plenty of trouble with Gran, usually for coming home too dirty, too late, or both.

"That's your own fault. You don't have to follow along, if you don't like it," he snapped. "Anyway, we can't do magic because of the Trace, remember? Mum and Dad would get in trouble, as well. Especially if anyone knew a Muggle had seen it," he said with a nudge to her shoulder.

There was that word again: the one that made her feel like something less. She knew George didn't mean anything hurtful by it. It was no different than him calling her a girl, or a human just simply what she was. But it was different than what they were, and that caused her pain.

"Cheer up! We like it when you get into trouble with us!" he teased, misinterpreting the cause of her glum expression. "Here it's my last, but I'll split it with you," he said as he dug into his pocket, pulled out a small colorful package, then handed it to her.

She turned it over in her hands. The label read "Chocolate Frog."

"Let me open it. They can get away from you if you're not careful," he explained.

George took it back from her and carefully ripped open the package. He deftly caught something in his hand as it attempted to jump away. It struggled in his grasp as he lifted it to his mouth and bit down. A long pair of squirming legs stuck out from between his smiling lips.

Annie's mouth hung open in shock.

George pinched the still-moving hind-end portion of the treat in his fingers, pulled it away from his own mouth, then shoved the wriggling thing in hers. She tasted only creamy chocolate as she closed her mouth, trapping the morsel. The treat gradually stopped moving as it melted on her tongue.

"Ooh, Godric Gryffindor," he said as he pulled a card out of the wrapper. "That's a good one. Here, I've already got it you take it."

Annie looked at the small card in her hand. A dashing heroic man filled the frame, his cape billowing behind him. His hands were resting atop a glittering sword. He abruptly swung it round his head and pointed it directly at her, as if he could see her, then rested the point back on the ground in front of him. She stared at him the entire time it took Fred and George to ride down the hill together on the sled, then climb back up to the top.

"You mean I can keep this?" she asked incredulously when George was back.

"Sure. I've got at least two more of him at home. Fred's probably got even more. Your turn."

"You go ahead. I'll go in a minute," she said, mesmerized by the man on the card. He was winking and smiling at her now. She wondered what he might do next and didn't want to miss it.

"You're sure?" he asked, already climbing on the sled.

Annie nodded without taking her eyes from the card. She slowly turned it over and read the details about this wild-looking man who had been a wizard nearly a thousand years ago! *Could any of this be true?* she wondered.

"Fred! Is this stuff for real?" she asked him.

"What's that? Oh, Famous Wizard card. Yeah, it's true. Which one have you got there?"

"Some bloke named Godric Gryffindor," she answered, her tongue tripping slightly over the outlandish name.

"*Some bloke?* He's only one of the founders of Hogwarts! One of the greatest wizards that ever lived! Some bloke, indeed," he sniffed, rather put out by her lack of proper respect for one of his heroes. "Where'd you get that, anyway?" he asked suspiciously.

"George gave it to me," she answered defensively, snatching it away as Fred reached out for it. She carefully tucked it inside her jacket pocket.

Fred looked at George, who shrugged from his seat on the sled. "Let Annie go this time, George," he ordered.

George rose reluctantly from his seat on the sled. Annie was only too happy to comply with the command. She didn't appreciate the tone of Fred's voice or his grabby hands at the moment.

Annie took her turn, but with far less enthusiasm than before. As she slowly walked back up the hill, she watched her friends arguing amongst themselves at the top. *Was it about the card?* she wondered.

She caught a few snippets of the conversation drifting down the hill from above.

"... not even supposed to know..."

"... shouldn't be so paranoid..."

"What if somebody sees it?" argued Fred.

"I trust Annie! Why don't you?" asked George.

The boys stopped talking when she reached the top of the hill.

She decided she'd rather give it up than have them be upset with her. She dug into her pocket and pulled out the magical card. "Here. You can have it back. Don't be mad at him, Fred. He was only being polite, anyway." She held out the card in her hand, waiting for Fred to take it.

Fred narrowed his eyes, looking carefully at her face while chewing on the inside of his cheek. Then he scowled. "Don't be thick. I've got six of him," he growled and waved away the card.

Annie burst into a smile. She could keep it, after all! "I promise I won't show it to anyone," she assured him.

"I know you won't, Annie," he said with a sigh, lightly punching her shoulder as he took the sled's tow rope from her hand.

Birthdays

Chapter 3 of 80

Turning eight is a big deal. Gran starts to worry about Annie and her runaway imagination.

Chapter 3: Birthdays

1986

Meredith and Annie walked hand in hand down the road toward the bridge that would lead them into town. A cold mist fell on the pair of them, huddled underneath a broad umbrella as they moved briskly in order to keep as warm and dry as possible.

"So, my Annie.... What are you wishing for on your birthday this year?" her Gran asked her with a warm smile.

Her granddaughter was fairly bouncing with excitement. "I really, really want a bike this year, Gran," she cried earnestly, an excited light glowing in her eyes.

"A bicycle? Good heavens!" Meredith exclaimed with false surprise. Annie had been hinting for weeks now, practically since Christmas, that she had wanted a bicycle. *more than wanted it needed it, more like, if she was ever to go on living.*

"Oh, yes! I could ride it to school, you know, every day. Even in the rain. And run errands for you, as well, Gran."

"What a clever girl! You've given this some thought, I see," she answered, barely hiding her amusement. "And where do you suppose we could find such a dead useful thing?"

"Renaker's has them, right in the window!" Annie exclaimed, beaming with a gap-toothed smile.

"Renaker's, you say? Right here in Ottery? Well, now, isn't that convenient?"

Annie nodded rapidly, grinning ear to ear. She was so excited that she skipped ahead of her Gran, completely disregarding the foul weather.

Her cheeks were rosy with the exertion once they finally arrived at the premises of the general store in Ottery, which carried a bit of everything just as promised. Annie's face was pressed up against the glass as she stood on her tiptoes to peer inside. Three different bicycles stood in the window.

Meredith caught up to her granddaughter a few moments later and ushered her inside, out of the cold damp. They stood together in front of the display, examining the different models.

"D'you like the yellow one, then, Annie?" she asked. It was the girls' model, with streamers dangling from the curved handlebars and a basket in the front. The bell sounded dainty when Meredith rang it.

Annie looked at her grandmother in shocked distaste, shaking her head vigorously. "Oh, no not that one. I want this one, Gran," she explained as she reached out and reverently touched what Meredith had assumed was the boys' model.

It was painted red and black, with straight-across handlebars and thick knobby tires. There were two solid-looking tubes that extended out a short distance on either side from the rear tire axle. Meredith had no idea what purpose they served. But one look at Annie's rapturous face made it impossible for her to say no.

"All right, then. The red one, if you please, sir," she directed the young man attending them.

The store clerk lifted the bicycle out of the window display for them as Meredith paid the cashier. The bike looked terribly large now that Annie was standing right next to it. She hoped it wasn't so big that Annie couldn't manage it. What a disappointment that would prove to be, if it had to sit and wait in the shed while Annie grew big enough to ride.

Meredith soon discovered her fears had been unfounded. Annie deftly scrambled up onto the seat and began pedaling as soon as they were out the door. She was a bit wobbly at first, until she found her proper balance, but soon was riding circles around her Gran as they walked back toward home.

Annie quickly gobbled her lunch down once they got home, in order to head back outside on the bike. *At least the rain has stopped* thought Meredith, hoping Annie wouldn't catch cold. She was making Annie's favorite chicken noodle soup for tonight and had planned to bake a batch of her favorite biscuits as well this afternoon as a

surprise.

"Be back for suppertime, Annie," Meredith called out. She was answered by the back door banging shut.

Annie rode her bike along the road this time instead of running directly across the field toward the woods. There was a small path that led from the road into the forest she figured would be easier to navigate the bike on the trail than the grassy field. Then she'd probably have to walk it the rest of the way through the undergrowth to the fort.

Her excitement was rapidly building along the way, for her secret friends had told her to meet them today after lunch. On any other day, this would be perfectly usual. But over the course of the past couple of days, she had intercepted several meaningful looks between the two of them when they thought she wasn't looking.

They were plotting something, of that she was sure. But what it could be, she hadn't had the foggiest idea. Sure, she might be on the receiving end of something unpleasant it was most likely an ambush of sorts. But even so, their pranks were usually pretty funny, if not hilarious. The entertainment value alone was worth a little discomfort or embarrassment on her part.

Adding to the anticipation, she had her new bike to show them today. She had been talking about wanting one for weeks now, trying to describe it to them but never quite conveying it adequately, she reckoned. She had been only slightly surprised that they had never heard of or seen one before. After all, who would need a bicycle when you can fly on a broom? Still, it would be a riot of fun, she was sure of that: sharing it with them and teaching them to ride it around this afternoon.

As she reached the fort, she could hear them already inside. She leaned her bicycle against a nearby tree and stood at the foot of the willow, gazing up.

"Hang on a sec, Annie. We're almost ready," called Fred, acting as lookout and bending down to poke his head out of the trapdoor in the floor.

Annie's eyes narrowed. "What are you lot up to?" she asked suspiciously.

"You'll see!" Fred turned his head behind him to direct his brother. "Hurry up already, George!"

"Okay... done," she heard George's disembodied voice reply.

"Come on up, then, Annie," Fred invited her, stepping away from the trapdoor.

Annie hesitated for a moment, unsure if it was wise to trust them. But her curiosity quickly got the better of her, and she clambered up the willow tree.

"Surprise!" they both cried as her head cleared the trapdoor.

Annie's mouth dropped open at the sight that greeted her inside the fort. About fifty twinkling fairies were fluttering inside the dim space near the roof. The boys had hung a hand-painted paper banner across the far end of the fort that read "Happy 2nd Birthday Annie!" She smiled at that they had gotten such a kick out of the idea that strictly speaking, since this was only the second time Leap Day had come around since Annie's birth, she was two instead of eight.

Fred and George sang "She's a Jolly Good Fellow" as she pulled herself wholly into the tree fort, beaming with pleasure. She had had no idea that they had been planning this: a surprise birthday party. Her very first party of any kind, in fact.

She cheered as they finished the song and cried, "Well done!"

Fred then ceremoniously placed a small package into her hands. It was wrapped in red paper and tied with a small piece of string. "Happy birthday, Annie. It's from both of us," Fred explained proudly.

She was stunned. They had gotten her a gift?

In all her life, no one but her Gran had ever acknowledged her birthday. No schoolmates or teachers or neighbors had ever spoken of it, much less made any effort to celebrate. And certainly no other relatives had ever marked the day if she even had any of those anywhere, anymore.

Slowly, she untied the bow and pulled back the paper to reveal a thick stack of Famous Wizard cards. Annie slowly shuffled through the stack of nearly sixty magically animated cards decorated with witches, wizards, and the like. Each one was inscribed with fantastical information that no one else she knew would ever believe. She had never imagined anything could rival the gift of her bicycle, but what she now held in her hands nearly eclipsed it: her very own magic.

"They're our extras, see. It's nearly a half a full set, I reckon," George said.

"We promise to help you complete it, if you want," Fred added.

Annie was at a loss for words for several moments. "These are brilliant! Thanks," she finally mumbled in a whisper.

"No trouble, really," mumbled George uncomfortably, swatting at a fairy that had flown at his nose.

Annie laughed, breaking the quiet seriousness that had momentarily fallen upon them.

Fred poked his head out the trapdoor once more, looking toward the ground. "What's this thing you brought?" he asked.

"My bicycle! Gran bought it for me just this morning. Come on, I'll show you," she cried, hopping to her feet.

They spent the next several hours entertaining themselves with Annie's new bicycle. They found a reasonably level, clear spot within the forest where Annie proceeded to teach each of them how to ride. The boys picked the skill up quickly, and they were soon taking turns pedaling while one child sat on the handlebars in front and the other stood on the footrests behind. Even though Annie's legs were unusually strong for her size, she was barely able to keep the bike moving with both boys riding, so she took point on the handlebars most often.

As they took shelter in the treehouse from the mist that had begun to fall again, Fred and George continued lavishing praise on Annie's birthday gift.

"We have got to get bicycles of our own, George!" Fred exclaimed.

"That would be brilliant! We could ride them all over together!" Annie cried, imagining fantastic adventures awaiting them.

George shrugged. "How?"

Fred pondered this for a while. "What if we asked for them for our birthday, like Annie did?"

"How on earth would Mum and Dad get them? Not likely to find them in Diagon Alley now, are they?" George argued.

"Dunno," Fred admitted, momentarily defeated. "Hang on.... You know how Dad loves tinkerin' around in the shed on that bleedin' car.... Maybe he could make them!"

George raised his eyebrows as he considered this idea. "Maybe.... D'you think he's heard of bicycles before?"

"If anyone has, he will," Fred chuckled.

"And if he hasn't?"

"You could show him mine! He could copy it!" Annie offered, jumping up and down with enthusiasm.

"You would let us borrow it?" George asked, incredulously.

"Nah. Won't work. Dad would get suspicious.... Where would you and I get ahold of one? Think about it, George," Fred warned.

"Blast! Thanks, Annie, but Fred's right. It would stir up too much curiosity, if you know what I mean."

Annie nodded. She understood that while the boys had never been specifically forbidden by their parents to play with Muggles, in general the practice of magical and non-magical children mixing together was not encouraged. It was why they didn't go to school with her in the village, after all.

As a Muggle, she wasn't supposed to know that magic was real. But they trusted her: that she would never reveal their secret to anyone else. Gran didn't count of course she'd never keep secrets from her Gran. And Annie was beginning to suspect her grandmother didn't quite believe all of it anyway.

"What about a picture? Could we draw it carefully enough so that your dad could make a copy from the picture?" she suggested.

George began to nod with more enthusiasm the longer he considered the idea. "That could work, Fred! It really could!"

"We could say we saw one on the road from the forest," Fred added with growing eagerness.

"And he'd never suspect the truth...."

*

Meredith tapped her finger on the table as she took a sip from the teacup. *I should have put a stop to this*, she ruminated, *before it had gone so far*. She gazed out the window at the overcast yet dry April morning. *April first, of all days*, she thought, sighing with the irony of it.

All morning long, Annie had toiled over the two small cakes: her 'birthday gifts' for her imaginary friends. She had spent her own allowance to purchase the gumdrops she used to decorate them. Meredith didn't begrudge her the cakes she had a hunch Annie herself would consume a good portion of them. It was the running conversation all morning long that had disturbed her the most.

Certainly her granddaughter had mentioned the two imaginary boys previously, but Meredith had had no idea the depths to which this fantasy had penetrated before now. This morning, Annie had rambled for hours about the boys' large family, the many siblings, the parents, the preposterous house they all lived in. How they all did magic.

Meredith could understand where most of it came from. As an only child, Annie would of course be curious about what it would be like to have brothers and sisters. And there was no mystery why she imagined them having two parents living at home what orphan wouldn't fantasize about that? And the magic.... Well, all children believed in magic, didn't they?

Annie used to talk mainly about imaginary creatures, so outlandish that even she would smile and shake her head in disbelief. Meredith had been impressed with her granddaughter's imagination even gone so far as to encourage it by asking her each night over dinner what amazing thing she had encountered that day. Perhaps that had been unwise, in retrospect.

Meredith drained the last of the tea from the cup. Tonight, she decided, she would have to have a serious talk with her granddaughter.

Annie carefully walked across the field toward the tree fort. Her arms were held out from her body, fingers looped into the strings that held each box closed. She was very proud of this morning's work and hoped her friends would enjoy the fruits of her labor.

The boys called out a welcome to her from where they were already perched up in the fort as she approached. She paused to consider how she would be able to climb up herself with her hands full. *Not possible*, she concluded, and she ordered them to come down and collect their presents. Annie was heartened by how quickly they climbed down from the tree, how excited they looked upon seeing the boxes.

"Happy birthday, Fred!" she announced as she placed the one intended for him in his hands.

He immediately began pulling the string loose.

"Wait a sec. You have to open them at the same time," she commanded. "Here you go, George."

The boys untied the strings and lifted the lids. Identical looks of surprise crossed their faces at the same time.

"I know your mum made you one cake already, but I thought maybe you might each like a cake of your very own, you know. With just your own name on it. What do you think?"

"That's a good point, Fred," exclaimed George, looking at his brother. "Everyone else in the family gets their own. Why not us?"

"Did you make it yourself, then?" asked Fred, sounding impressed.

"With a Muggle cooker?" added George eagerly.

Annie nodded and beamed with pride. "And bought the gumdrops, as well." She dug two forks out of her pocket and distributed them to each boy.

"What about you? Don't you want any?" asked George, confused why there were only two utensils.

She shook her head. "They're for you. Your presents."

Fred's eyes narrowed. "Hang on.... This feels like a setup. Did you put something disgusting in them?"

"Of course not!" Annie cried. "It's your birthday present!"

George smiled while trying to look suspicious. "I'm not taking a bite until you do," he chuckled.

"Oh, for heaven's sake! There's nothing wrong with them! I'll prove it!" She snatched the fork out of George's hand and roughly dug a bite out of the cake, shoving it in her mouth.

George's grin grew wider as she chewed and swallowed. "You didn't have to take such a big bite, for crying out loud! That's half my present gone!" he complained loudly.

Annie reached out with the fork toward Fred's cake.

"Not so fast, greedy git," he said, yanking the box out of her reach. "I thought this was my cake, to share or not as I see fit."

Annie growled in exasperation, but smiled as well. She tossed the fork back at George, who caught it easily. She was pleased as they each dug hungrily into their cakes.

"Fis is 'ood," mumbled George around a large mouthful.

Fred was nodding silently in agreement, his cheeks bulging.

"Don't sound so surprised!" Annie teased in an offended voice. "And don't choke on it, you idiot!" She snatched a gumdrop from Fred's cake, licked off the frosting, and popped it into her mouth.

Annie lay quietly in her bed that night with a contented smile on her face. The day had been a wonderful celebration, and her friends had truly enjoyed her efforts. *An unqualified success*, she thought proudly.

And the best news: their bikes were well on their way to being built. The twins' father had been thrilled by the plan they had concocted to construct the strange Muggle objects, and as of yet had no inkling of the real inspiration. Two more weeks at most, Fred had assured her, and they would be ready.

She looked up when she heard Gran in the doorway. Her happy anticipation of bicycle-mounted adventures with her friends began to dissipate as she saw her grandmother's grave face. *What have I done now?* she wondered. There hadn't been a fight at school in almost a month. She hadn't even gotten all that dirty today.

Gran came to sit on the edge of her bed and stroked her hair. Annie was confused by the look of concern on her face.

"Annie, love, we need to talk about something. Something important. I'm worried about you, you see. Worried if you're all right," she said.

Annie could hear the concern in her voice. But this was coming from out of the blue. *What was Gran talking about?* "I'm fine, Gran. Never better."

"Are you sure? Is there something you're not telling me? Something that bothers you.... Maybe even hurts you?"

"No." It was only a small lie. Lately, her heartaches had been few and far between. Most of her difficulties originated at school as a result of being teased by a few bullies but she could endure anything as long as she had her time in the forest to look forward to.

Stymied for a moment, Meredith tried another tack. "An imagination is a wonderful thing, love. And you have a prodigious one, to be sure. But as wonderful as it is, you mustn't let it take over, you see. It's a fine thing, and very useful, in its proper place. Yet you must always keep both feet on the ground, as they say. Do you understand what I'm trying to tell you?"

Annie couldn't answer for sure. She was still too confused and didn't want to say the wrong thing, possibly upsetting her Gran even further.

"Perhaps... perhaps you're spending too much time alone in the woods, Annie."

"NO! Please, Gran, please let me go!" Annie begged her grandmother. *Anything but that!*

"Annie, you must rein in this fantasy world of yours. I want you to spend time with real children, not imaginary playmates."

"Real children?" Suddenly, understanding clicked into place. Annie's suspicions had been right. Only it went further than she had realized: Gran had never believed her, not any of it, all this time. Every night when she'd asked Annie how she spent her day, and Annie would tell her about her friends and their adventures, that odd smile on her Gran's face had been her way of humoring Annie, rather than shared amusement, after all.

"I'm not lying!" she cried. *How could Gran think so about me?*

"No, not lying, Annie. I don't believe you are deliberately trying to mislead me, darling girl. I just worry that... well... you seem to believe these daydreams yourself. And I'm afraid that could be... dangerous... if we let it go on too long."

Annie's mind was working quickly, trying to understand how best to handle the situation. She couldn't *wouldn't* stop seeing her friends in the forest, no matter what. Gran wasn't being fair.

"So, you think I should play with the kids in Ottery, instead?" Annie shuddered to consider it. Gran had no idea what she was asking her to do, the sacrifice she was asking for.

"Yes, Annie. I do," she said gently but firmly.

Annie recognized the tone of voice that indicated her grandmother would not be swayed on this point. "But I love the forest, Gran!" she whined.

Perhaps her Gran would accept a compromise? "What if I went to the park... maybe once a week? Then could I still go to the woods?" Annie bargained with her.

"That seems fair, dear," her Gran replied. "And I'm sure that once you make friends in town, you'll want to spend your time there instead. You must make an effort, Annie, to make friends. Surely there are some children from school that you could play with?"

Annie doubted it, but if it meant she could preserve her time with Fred and George, she would do any penance called for, meet whatever horrible arbitrary conditions her Gran saw fit to impose. "Fine, Gran. I'll go to the park tomorrow afternoon, if you like," she said sadly.

"That's all I'm asking for, Annie. Just try. Make an effort. Keep yourself grounded," her Gran said, stroking Annie's hair away from her face.

"Okay, Gran. I promise."

Annie lay in the dark that night, unable to sleep. Tears rolled down her face and wet her pillow. Her Gran didn't believe her. More than that apparently thought she was mental. Wanted her to spend her time with those beastly morons at school, who knew nothing about magic or garden gnomes or flying brooms. They only knew about cruelty, swear words, and pecking order. And her mother they knew all about that, unfortunately.

No matter. If the playground once a week was what she had to endure, then endure it she would. But she couldn't help thinking her Gran had it all backwards. Her schoolmates were the imaginary friends. And she would keep her real adventures with her true friends to herself, from now on.

Curious

When Annie doesn't show up at the treehouse for a week, the twins decide to investigate.

Chapter 4: Curious

1987

"What do you think?" George asked his brother. They were sitting together in the tree fort, pondering the situation. The day had been dry so far, but who knew for how much longer? Grey clouds hung heavy in the cold sky.

Fred's brow furrowed in response. "Where is she?" he muttered.

"It's been a week now," George added.

Fred shook his head slightly. "Did she get in trouble again, do you think?"

George shrugged. "Dunno. I suppose it's as likely as anything." Whenever Annie got in trouble at her Muggle school, she was usually punished by not being allowed into the forest for a day or two.

"But she usually figures out a way to let us know, at least," countered Fred.

"I know," George agreed. It wasn't like her at all, to be gone so long without a word to them. "You don't think she's angry at us for something, do you?"

Fred shook his head. "She's never been one to simmer in silence before, has she?"

George snorted and smiled slightly. His brother was right: Annie certainly had a temper, and she was never shy about showing it. But what flared quickly always died away just the same.

"I don't like it," said Fred, standing up. "You don't think she's... gone, or anything?"

"Where would she go?" George replied.

The twins had figured out, without being directly told, that Annie didn't live with her parents that she lived with her grandmother instead. They also knew she definitely *didn't* like to talk about it. *Could her parents have returned from wherever they were and taken her away with them?* George wondered.

Fred threw his arms out in exasperation. "How the hell should I know?"

"She wouldn't leave without telling us... or saying goodbye," George argued. *Would she?*

Fred sighed and thought for a moment. "Well, it's no good sitting on our arses here. Let's go."

George followed his twin brother out of the fort and down the tree. But instead of turning west toward home, Fred turned eastward.

"Where are you going?" George asked, confused.

Fred didn't answer just kept marching. They reached the edge of the forest, the borderline of Weasley property, in less than two minutes at the pace he set. Together they stood just hidden from view behind the tree line and gazed across the open field at the little white house with weathered black trim. They had watched Annie emerge from this house's garden gate countless times before.

For the past two years, the three of them had seldom gone more than three days without seeing each other. Usually, whenever Fred and George would reach the tree fort, she would be there waiting for them. But on the occasions when they had found it empty, they would walk to this spot and whistle a loud signal that sounded like a bird's call. Without fail, their friend would then come out from her Muggle home at the edge of the Muggle village that was visible in the distance and dash across the grassy area that separated them.

Fred tried the signal once more, just like they had done every day for the past week. They waited ten minutes. Nothing.

"This is bollocks," Fred barked in frustration and began to walk out into the field.

"Fred!" cried George. "Come back!"

Fred dismissed his twin with a disgusted wave and kept walking.

George hesitated only a moment longer, then dashed out of the forest to catch up. "What are you doing?" he demanded.

"Getting some answers."

George stepped in front of him, blocking his path. "How? You think you can just walk up, knock on the door?"

"No!" Fred cried, his tone of voice indicating how stupid he thought the suggestion was.

"We can't do this, Fred," George urged, beginning to panic a little.

"Go back, then, if you're scared," Fred retorted and stepped around his brother. He marched off more quickly than before.

"If we get caught..." George hissed, jogging to catch up. It would likely be a death sentence. Their mother would have a fit like none other.

"We won't," snapped Fred.

"Fred..." George said, trying to come up with an excuse that would work to turn his brother around.

"Don't you want to know? Aren't you curious?" Fred asked as the distance between them and the little house was rapidly closing.

George pursed his lips. He had to admit, he was terribly curious. *Why had Annie not come to the forest for a whole week? Was something wrong?* And now that they were nearly at the garden gate themselves.... *What was it like, the home she lived in?*

He felt the temptation of his curiosity begin to take over. Here he was, within feet of an actual Muggle house! He could smell something delicious in the air surrounding them, they were so close. *Muggle food cooked with ekelrity-something!*

We've already come this far, he rationalized, might as well take a quick peek.

Fred and George crept up to the tall wooden fence that surrounded the back side of the little home. After listening carefully for what felt like several minutes and hearing nothing that would indicate anyone was on the other side, Fred reached out for the handle of the gate. George held his breath.

It opened easily.

George watched, his heart beginning to race, while Fred peeked his head inside the gate and looked around. He waved a signal for George to follow him and then passed wholly into forbidden territory.

George felt a thrill of adrenaline surging through him as he entered the garden and looked around. The neat planting beds were well-cared-for yet mostly empty, waiting for warmer spring weather to thaw the ground. He knew that Annie's grandmother was an avid gardener and often asked Annie to help her with planting, weeding, and harvesting chores, just as their own mother did. Only Muggles never had trouble with gnomes, for some reason, according to Annie. In fact, nothing here looked outlandish at all hardly any different from their own garden at the Burrow....

"Where d'you suppose her room is?" George barely whispered.

Fred pointed toward the eastern side of the house; the one that faced the village. George nodded. Annie had mentioned before how she could see the steeple from her window.

They crept around the corner. Luckily for them, the entire eastern side of the house had only one window, making it simple enough to deduce which one was hers. Unfortunately, it was at least six feet above the ground.

"Gimme a boost," Fred commanded after a moment's consideration.

George braced himself so Fred could climb up to his shoulders. Together, they were just tall enough so Fred could rap lightly on the window.

Seconds later, the window sash flew open. "Fred!" cried a hushed yet familiar voice. "What are you doing here?!" she whispered.

"Trying to find out where you are, git," he answered.

"Fred, you weigh a bloody ton," George grunted. His spine was beginning to feel crushed.

"Oh, sorry," his brother responded and promptly slid off George's shoulders.

Once both boys were freely standing on the ground, they looked back up at the window. Annie was leaning out, smiling down broadly, clearly pleased to see them.

"Ooh, wicked!" the twins whispered in unison, impressed with the sight of her.

Annie's face and arms were covered with little red spots, each spot surrounded by odd-shaped pink splotches that looked like she had been painted with polka dots by someone in a hurry. They could see above the windowsill she was wearing a plain white t-shirt.

"What's all over your face?" asked George after the momentary shock had passed.

"Chicken pox. I got 'em Monday sent home from school, even. Everyone's gotten it now. It's not too bad, actually, except they itch like crazy!" she explained, holding her arms out from her body and twisting them to better display the spots.

"Are they everywhere?" asked Fred.

George elbowed him, letting him know the question was inappropriate.

"Nearly." She nodded and absently scratched at her neck. "Sorry I couldn't come out. I heard you whistle a few times. But Gran keeps coming in to check on me every hour or so and put more of this bloody pink stuff on me," she said, now scratching her armpit.

"Well, hope you feel better soon," George offered, nervously glancing around at the mention of Annie's Gran. The last thing they needed was for yet another Muggle to know about them. Annie was one thing, but if anyone else saw them....

"Thanks. It's really nice of you to come and see me," she said, smiling.

"Yeah, well, George was worried about you," said Fred.

"It was your idea, git!" George protested, shoving his brother.

"Get off!" barked Fred in a loud whisper, shoving back.

"Shh!" Annie hushed them. "You'd better go.... I'll come back out to the forest as soon as I can. Gran says I'll be back at school by the middle of next week, so I guess I'll see you then," she said.

"Okay... see you then," agreed the boys.

Now that they were satisfied nothing was seriously wrong with their friend, they turned away from the window and began slinking back toward the gate. Just before he rounded the corner, George glanced back. He saw Annie was still leaning out the window, watching them leave, smiling slightly to herself. He gave her a little wave.

She returned it, then slowly, quietly began to shut the window. "Gran!" he heard her call before it completely closed. "Could I have another glass of water?"

George smiled. Annie was providing them a diversion, to help them escape without notice. *Good old Annie* they could always count on her.

Once they were outside the gate and halfway across the field, George peppered Fred with questions.

"What was it like?" he asked with bated breath.

"What?" Fred replied, exasperated.

"The inside! Did you see any plugs? Or batteries?"

"Merlin's hairy arse you and Dad are complete nutters. Yeah, I saw some plugs, I think. They were stuck to the wall."

"Really? What else?" George asked excitedly as they re-entered the forest.

Mud

Chapter 5 of 80

Is the forest beyond Ottery St. Catchpole haunted? Annie, Fred, and George do a little exploring and find more than they bargained for.

Chapter 5: Mud

1988

Annie chased after the ball that had gotten away from her. Once again, she found herself playing alone in the schoolyard as the other children busied themselves with their friends. She didn't care much that no one else wanted to play with her. She already understood it was better to fly under the radar, when possible.

As she ran past a small knot of children, she overheard something interesting for a change.

"And then my brother heard a horrible howl..." said a boy rather dramatically.

The audience of kids *oohed* and *ahhed* appropriately.

"And he ran like hell out of the woods. He got away from the werewolf, but just barely...."

"Wow!" whispered a girl reverently.

"Amazing!" added another boy.

"What?" exclaimed Annie, pausing as she walked by with the ball in her hands. "What woods? What werewolf?" she demanded.

"The one right next to your house," the storyteller said testily, upset he was being interrupted by such a skeptical tone of voice.

"Didn't you know?" a girl asked her. "The forest outside of town is haunted. I thought everybody knew that!"

"It's true!" cried another boy. "My brother says you can hear shouting and see flashes of light, but never see anyone. It's ghosts!"

"My sister says somebody got murdered in there and haunts it every full moon," yet another child chimed in.

"It's not haunted!" Annie cried. "That's stupid. I go there all the time..." she said, her voice fading as she spoke. She had not intended for anyone at school to know about her forays in the forest. *So much for flying under the radar.*

"Rubbish!" claimed the boy storyteller.

Annie looked around at the faces surrounding her. Most of them looked doubtful of her claim as well, but one girl had a different look on her face.

"Well, that's no surprise. I mean, look who she lives with," said the girl, her tone getting nasty.

Annie was torn. The last thing she wanted to do was draw any more attention to herself, and she would never reveal any of the secrets Fred and George had entrusted her with. But they were calling her a *liar*.

"You're being stupid," she said, hoping another tack would diffuse the situation. "Everyone knows there're no such things as ghosts or werewolves." She said it with as much conviction as she could muster. She had neither seen nor heard mention of either, but she knew that didn't mean much, in light of what she understood about the magical world.

"Says you," snapped the storyteller boy.

The suspicious girl sniffed. "What about witches, then?"

Annie froze in fear. *How could she know? What if Fred and George's family were found out?* "What do you mean?" she asked, carefully nonchalant.

The girl snorted. "I mean, it's no surprise your grandmother sends you off into the woods. She's a witch. My mum told me all about it."

After a stunned moment, Annie burst out laughing. "My Gran..." she gasped, unable to catch her breath. "A... a witch!"

Some of the other children began to giggle as well. This certainly wasn't the reaction they had expected from Annie Jones. No arguments, no threats, no fists were flying.

The suspicious girl looked quite put out at having the audience turned against her so quickly. "It's true!" she claimed, then stomped off, unhappy at being laughed at by her intended victim.

"A witch!" Annie sighed, still giggling. "My Gran!"

The crowd of children began to disperse. "What a weirdo," she heard one of the kids mutter as they walked off and correctly assumed they were referring to her. After another moment, Annie found herself alone once again, holding a soccer ball. She walked out onto the field and began kicking it around.

The next day a Saturday she met up with her friends at the tree fort. "You'll never believe what happened at school!" she exclaimed.

Fred and George looked at her with surprised expressions. Annie rarely talked about her Muggle school and certainly not with excitement in her voice.

"One of the kids said his brother met a werewolf here in the forest!" she laughed. "How ridiculous is that? Considering all the stuff that really is here... the idiot picked werewolves!" she said, shaking her head.

The surprised amusement on the twins' faces was immediately replaced with shocked, fearful ones.

"A werewolf?" George whispered.

"What?" she asked, confused by their reactions. "It's a joke... isn't it?"

Fred slowly shook his head. "Oh, they're no joke," he said. "But I've never heard of one around here. Mum and Dad must not know, or we'd never be allowed out of the house," he said worriedly.

"This isn't funny, Fred," scolded Annie, hoping they were teasing her. She was beginning to feel a bit frightened.

"How did this Muggle see a werewolf and live to tell about it?" George wondered aloud. The look on his face told Annie such a non-fatal encounter was unusual in the extreme.

"I dunno... I thought it was a lie so I didn't ask! Billy said his brother heard a howl last week in the forest," she said, getting upset.

"So, he never saw it.... Only heard it?" George verified.

"Hang on... last week? That can't be! It's a new moon today!" argued Fred.

George breathed a sigh of relief. "For crying out loud, Annie! Don't scare us like that!" He chuckled her shoulder playfully.

"*Me* scare *you*? What in the hell are you on about? You're the ones claiming friggin' werewolves are real!" she cried.

"Well, they are!" Fred insisted indignantly. "And not exactly friendly sorts of creatures, either. But you wouldn't hear howling unless it was a full moon, so this Billy bloke is full of it."

"That's just super. You're telling me that people can turn into wolves, but only during a full moon. I'll be sure to point that out to Billy when I see him on Monday," she said sarcastically.

George chuckled in response.

"Think it's funny, do you?" Annie said, her attempt at sounding stern greatly undermined by the giggle that followed.

"I think *you're* funny... looking, that is," he corrected her.

She stuck out her tongue at him. "Well, that wasn't the funniest thing they said, either. Apparently, there's a rumor in town that this forest is haunted, and my Gran is a witch!"

The boys began laughing along with Annie. They started to climb down out of the tree fort in search of something fun to do.

"Muggles will believe anything," Fred said, shaking his head as he jumped down to the ground.

"Most of 'em can't see a kneazle right in front of their faces," George added, landing next to his brother.

"And then they pick your Gran, the Muggle-iest old dear in town, for a witch!" Fred laughed.

"Yeah, well, they didn't exactly mean it as a compliment, did they?" Annie said with a wry smile while dangling from the lowest branch. She began kicking her legs to swing herself back and forth.

"How d'you mean?" asked George, pausing, then turning to look at her. Fred had already struck out toward the north.

Annie let herself drop, then answered. "Most Muggles I know think witches are ugly, evil old bats with green skin and warts and claws, and they eat little children, and they laugh like this," explained Annie, cackling for effect.

"That's hags," Fred corrected her from about fifteen paces in front.

"Beg your pardon?" Annie asked.

"What you just described is a hag. Except for the green skin, that is," laughed George. "And you do a very good impression, I must say."

Annie playfully swatted at him. He expertly ducked out of reach.

"Is a hag a witch, too?" she asked him.

"Hmm. Good question. I guess a hag is a sort of witch... maybe. What do you think, Fred?" he asked, following behind Annie.

"I don't. Who cares?" Fred answered, seeming to lose interest and patience all at once.

George and Annie rolled their eyes. As Fred led them deeper into the forest, the two of them continued conversing quietly about hags, witches, and werewolves.

It was slow going. The past week had seen two days' worth of torrential rain followed by a string of warm, dry days. The forest floor was still damp everywhere, with several mud pits they had to skirt around to avoid getting stuck.

"Are we going anywhere in particular, Fred?" Annie asked after half an hour.

"Do you ever stop asking questions?" he retorted testily.

"I'll take that as a no," she replied.

A minute later, they came to a stop. They seemed to be on a sort of ridge. Below them, maybe ten feet or so, was a small hollow that ran from east to west. It looked like it had been flooded by the rain, and the walls of the ridge looked slick with mud. What appeared to be a large but shallow mud puddle was at the bottom. The three of them scanned from side to side, searching for a way across.

"Maybe we'll find a fallen tree or something," Annie suggested, beginning to walk toward the west. The ridge crest was crowded with trees, and it would be difficult to pick their way along it if they had to go very far.

Fred reached up and tugged on a grapevine that hung down from a large tree. "This'll do," he suggested, tugging harder on the thick vine while taking several steps back from the crest.

George looked up into the tree. "I can't see where it's wrapped around," he warned his brother.

"What? You're going to swing across like Tarzan or something?" Annie asked, incredulous.

"I have no idea who this Tarzan bloke is, but yes, I'm swinging across," Fred said with an eager smile.

"Stupid," muttered Annie.

"Good luck, moron," mumbled George.

Fred took a running leap, whooping as he swung across the hollow. They could hear the sounds of leaves ripping and wood groaning. He was nearly to the other side... then began to swing back toward the bank.

"ARGH!" Fred groaned in frustration.

"Try running harder next time," George suggested.

Only there wasn't a next time. Fred didn't have enough momentum to come all the way back to the side of the ridge he started from. He dangled in midair, hanging from the vine as it swung only part of the way back to the near bank, then found its new equilibrium, stranding him over the puddle.

"Oh, crap," Fred muttered.

George and Annie each tried to reach out and catch the vine, attempting to pull Fred back. After several unsuccessful individual attempts, George wrapped an arm and leg around the nearest tree trunk, supporting Annie by the hand as she leaned out into the open space below the ridge. Her fingertips barely reached, then wrapped around the vine.

"Got it!" she exclaimed triumphantly.

At that very instant, an alarming cracking sound ripped through the tree. The vine yanked out of Annie's hand, and she felt herself jerked backwards by George. A look of panic crossed Fred's face as he plunged five feet, then jolted to a halt. Somehow he managed to keep his grip on the vine.

"Whew, that was close!" called George.

A second later, with another whoosh of ripping leaves, the vine gave way completely. Fred landed on his backside in the puddle, which he discovered was less than a couple of inches of water suspended above nearly six inches of mud. A rain of leaves and bark fell from the tree above onto Fred as he spluttered in shock.

"Are you okay?" Annie and George called out together.

"Nothing's broken," answered Fred after taking a moment to collect himself. "Ack!" he cried in disgust as he attempted to stand up, slipped again, and fell forward into the slimy pit, catching himself on his hands and knees.

Annie and George began to chuckle from the ridge above him.

"You look like a wallowing pig!" giggled Annie.

"Mum is going to murder you!" laughed George. "Well done, git!"

"Stop laughing and get me out of here!" Fred yelled, flinging handfuls of mud at them.

George and Annie ducked the mud grenades successfully.

"That stops right now or you can rot down there, understand?" Annie demanded in a taunting voice.

Fred obeyed, looking supremely disgruntled.

George grabbed the loose grapevine and wedged it into a low branch of a tree. "Give that a try," he suggested. "You should be able to haul yourself up."

"Careful, that bank looks slippery!" warned Annie as Fred failed to find much purchase.

"You're not being helpful!" Fred shouted in aggravation, lobbing a few more handfuls of mud. He smiled with satisfaction as one found its mark, and Annie squealed.

"You idiot!" she screamed in a temper as George guffawed at the two of them. "That's it! You can stay down there, for all I care!" Annie marched angrily over to the vine and started tugging it loose from the tree.

"Don't!" cried Fred as he watched Annie dismantling his only hope for escape.

"Shut up!" cried Annie, glaring at George, who was still laughing at her.

George grabbed her arm and tried to pull her free from the vine, attempting to help his brother. Annie shoved him away, then felt herself lose her own footing. Her arms made windmills as she scrambled to find purchase. George was in the process of stumbling backward himself and fell onto his backside on the ground next to the tree.

"Oh!" she said in surprise as she began to slip down the ridge. On her way down the bank, Annie managed to grab a hold of something. She clung to it, eyes closed, praying it would break her fall and keep her out of the mud at the bottom.

George dug his hands into the soft earth at the top of the ridge as he felt himself being pulled over the crest and down the bank.

"Ahhh!"

"Nooo!"

The next thing Annie knew, she was lying in cold, wet goo with a heavy weight on top of her. She could hear hysterical laughter coming from somewhere nearby.

"Get off!" she grunted, shoving against the weight.

George rolled off of her. "You pulled me in!" he yelled angrily.

"It's your own fault!" shouted Annie, although she couldn't really see how that was true. She began to try to stand up. Her heart sunk as she surveyed the damage: she was covered head to toe with the muck.

In the next instant, another splat of mud hit her in the head.

Annie screamed with rage and lunged at Fred, who was laughing but scrambling to get away. Both of them were slipping and sliding in the mud. She managed to tackle him by sheer force of will, mashing handfuls of mud into his hair and face, swearing like a deckhand as she did so.

She felt two hands on her arms pulling her off her spluttering victim.

"Annie!" George yelled. "Lay off!"

Annie was startled back into reality. She looked at the two figures before her, dripping with brown muck. Fred was spitting, scraping mud off of his face and flinging it to the ground.

"Sorry," she said with an iota of sincerity.

"S okay," Fred assured her with only slightly more.

George offered his brother a hand, and he stood up. "Okay, morons," asked George, losing patience. "How are we going to get out of here?"

"The sides are too slick here," said Fred. "Let's walk down a bit and see if they get any better."

"The water had to drain somewhere. Maybe this leads to a stream or something," Annie suggested.

George was scanning the treetops above them, searching for any better ideas. He sighed, finding nothing. "Fine. Let's get going, then," he said and began heading east.

Fred faked like he was going to fling another handful of mud at Annie, and she flinched. He smiled in smug triumph. Annie glared and shook her head slightly, hoping to convey a threat of over-retaliation if he did it for real.

After slogging for almost half an hour through even more mud, they finally reached a place where the miniature canyon met with a quickly moving stream. Knowing with confidence that it was sure to ultimately lead them to the River Otter, they began to relax. They reached the fast-moving stream soon after.

"I'm going to try to wash some of this off," Annie said. "You lot stay here. I'll go upstream a bit," she offered.

Annie knew she could trust them to stay put and give her some privacy. They all were ten years old now, after all, and even though there was nothing different to see now that they hadn't seen when she was seven, none of them was comfortable anymore with the casual nakedness they had taken for granted when they were younger.

She reached a spot several yards upstream, just around a bend, which would offer her plenty of cover. First she scrubbed her shoes, then set them in a sunny spot on the rocky bank. *They don't look too horrible*, she reckoned. It certainly helped that her trainers were black.

She dunked her whole body in a slightly-deeper pool, rubbing her skin and hair briskly to wash off the dried muck. Once again, she felt like throttling Fred for starting the mud fight.

Next she slipped out of her shirt and began scrubbing it against the rocky stream bottom. Clouds of mud bloomed in the water and washed away. Even so, she realized the shirt was likely ruined. Which meant Gran was going to be furious with her. She wrung it out as best she could and put it back on to dry.

Finally she took off her shorts. They were old cut-off jeans, so the mud stains weren't nearly as visible. Annie dutifully scrubbed them clean as well, wrung them out, and wrestled her way back into the wet denim.

Carrying her shoes as she waded back toward the boys, she looked skyward, attempting to tell the time *Probably noon, or shortly thereafter*, she figured. She was starting to feel a little bit hungry.

"I'm coming!" she called out in warning before getting too close.

"We're decent!" came an answering yell.

As she approached, she could see her friends had draped their dripping wet shirts on a tree limb and were sitting in sopping wet trousers on the far bank in a sunbeam. Annie made her way over to join them, lying back in the sun, hoping the warm light would dry her quickly.

About an hour later, having almost dozed off, Annie was startled into full alertness by a rumbling stomach. "Was that you or me?" she asked.

"Dunno, but I'm starving," said Fred.

"I suppose there's no use putting it off any longer," sighed George. "We've got to eat. Think your Gran's going to be really pissed?"

"What d'you think?" she asked, spreading her arms wide to display her mud-dingy, once-white shirt.

George and Fred grimaced.

"Yeah, she's gonna blow a fuse," Annie sighed dejectedly. "What about you?"

The boys nodded as well. "Mum'll be right pissed, yeah," muttered Fred.

"Well, I guess I'll see you again someday," Annie said, standing up slowly. "She can't ground me forever."

"Good luck, mate," offered the boys, patting her shoulders as she passed between them, heading toward home and punishment.

"Thanks. You, too."

Hidden Hurts

Chapter 6 of 80

George and Fred discover Annie's been keeping a few secrets, and not just theirs. Annie struggles to get a grip on her emotions and steel herself for her best friends' leaving for Hogwarts.

Chapter 6: Hidden Hurts

1989

Fred, George, and Annie were riding their bikes aimlessly along the streets of Ottery St. Catchpole. The late summer afternoon was very warm and sunny, and they were looking for a shady place to cool off for a bit. Annie was leading them toward the schoolyard where some swings sat beneath a large tree.

As they turned the corner, Annie's heart sank in disappointment. She usually tried to steer clear of any other local kids while she was with Fred and George in order to

keep the explanations and lies to a minimum. Unfortunately, the schoolyard was not empty, as she had hoped it would be. Instead, four boys already sat perched on the swings.

Her mood soured further as she recognized one of the boys: Tim Molloy. He was a year behind her in school, but large for his age and rapidly gaining the reputation of alpha school bully.

Annie tried to catch her friends' attention and redirect them away, but it was too late. They had rolled in front of her as she had slowed down and were already hopping off their bikes, walking toward a bench. While they never sought out the company of any Muggle children other than herself, the twins had no reservations about interacting with them occasionally. It almost never happened, anyway.

If she called out to them now, asking them to leave with her, it would look like she was scared of Molloy. And that she most certainly was not. She dropped her bike next to Fred's and strolled over to the bench. *Maybe we can just sit peacefully for a few minutes, then move on....*

She never made it that far.

"Ooh, lads. Look who's here. It's that stuck-up Annie Jones."

Annie glared at the beady eyes sunken into a rodent-like face, his sharp little teeth exposed in a sneer. Of course Molloy would choose her to pick on. She was the smallest of the children present in the schoolyard, appeared to be the least likely to be able to defend herself. Wouldn't he look so cool in front of his friends for picking on someone unpopular and known to be older than he was? Annie turned away from him, praying he would drop it if she didn't rise. *But if he didn't....*

"She thinks she's too good for the likes of us here in Ottery, don't she? Don't talk to none of us. Turns her pig-nose up to the sky. Well, I know better. I know a little secret," he said, oozing malevolence.

Annie turned toward the boy and took several steps closer to him, her worst fears coming true. "Shut up. Now," she warned him.

She knew the secret he was referring to and hoped the threat in her eyes would convince him to keep it to himself, for now at least. She could care less what he or the other school kids thought they knew about her, but Fred and George were different: they didn't know. They were the only ones who didn't, it seemed and she desperately wanted to keep it that way.

The boys behind Molloy were chuckling amongst each other. Then the laughter stopped suddenly as they rose to their feet, glaring over her shoulders.

She glanced around to see what they were looking at. Fred and George were now standing supportively on either side of her. George had a curious look on his face, as if wondering what all this fuss was about. Fred, on the other hand, had a look of anticipation, clearly itching for a fight to relieve the boredom of the day.

"Who the hell are you lot?" barked Molloy.

"Reckon we're the fellows who'll even up the odds in this fight," answered Fred.

"Unless you wise up and get lost, that is," added George.

"I don't think there's a brain cell among 'em, mate," taunted Fred, shaking his head.

"What's your problem, anyway?" asked George.

"My problem," Molloy hissed, rising up from his swing and taking a step closer, "is people who think they're better than they are. I know the truth about you, Annie Jones. You're nothing but a *bastard*, and your mother's a *crack whore* to boot. What's your dad's name, anyway? You don't know, do you? Bet your mum don't, neither."

Annie launched herself with a screaming snarl into Molloy's doughy body, knocking him to the ground. Her fists pounded his face in the immediate moments afterward while he was too stunned to defend himself. When he gathered his wits an instant later, shoving his hands into her face in an attempt to push her away, she bit down on some unknown part of a hand, and he screamed in pain.

"Ged'erovme!"

One of Molloy's toadies tried to yank Annie off of him and partially succeeded. Her tiny body weighed next to nothing, after all, and her weight alone offered little resistance. Her fists and feet were still flying, though, and her writhing body made her difficult to hold on to.

As soon as her feet made contact with the earth again, she arched her back as she kicked against the pavement, crashing the back of her skull into her captor's face, bloodying his nose and knocking him out cold. The boy released her on his way down. Annie stumbled a bit then, her own head rattled by the collision.

Fred and George had been standing still, open-mouthedly watching the melee, stunned not only by what the boy had said, but at Annie's reaction as well. Their first instinct was not to believe the boy's outrageous claim. But then, they had never seen her so furious: she had gone berserk.

As soon the second boy joined the fray, however, they were jolted into motion and leaped to help their friend. George caught Annie before she could fall to the ground. He hauled her away from the fracas to prevent any more damage to her or the other boys. Fred took on another boy, who had sensed an easy target in Annie while she was dazed and had started to move after her. He gave the boy a good shove to the ground. None of the others moved to challenge him further.

"Should've listened to her and kept your mouth shut," Fred spat, shaking his head as he turned to walk away.

It was a long way back to the tree fort. The three of them rode their bikes silently along the road. As she pedaled her bike, Annie's rage dissipated, only to be replaced by a mixture of shame and dread.

Yes, she was ashamed of her parentage. Who wouldn't be? Everything Molloy had said was true: her mother was a drug addict, and the identity of her father was a mystery. *But that isn't my fault!* She became angry at herself for being ashamed. *She* hadn't done anything wrong, after all.

And then the dread.... What would be her friends' reaction, now that they finally knew the truth about her? Her awful secret she had kept hidden from them for four years was finally exposed. Would this be the end of her idyllic escape from the world of the village, where everyone knew the sordid tale about her mother? The knowing looks, the clucking tongues, the pitying gazes: she loathed them all equally.

The three children sat quietly for a few moments in the safe haven of the fort. As she stared at the floor, Annie steeled herself to see on their faces one of the two expressions she hated most in the world: embarrassed distaste or condescending superiority. They were pretty much the only two reactions she had ever met with, once someone discovered her secret. At that moment, she hated all secrets with a passion.

Reluctantly determined to face the music, she looked up at the boys, meeting their gaze for the first time since the schoolyard. She was surprised by what she saw: two pairs of warm brown eyes that were full of genuine concern mixed with a generous sprinkling of confusion.

"Are you okay? You took a pretty good hit to the head, back there," asked Fred.

"I gave a good hit to the head, you mean," she argued. Then she bit her tongue. That wasn't what she had wanted to say. She didn't want to argue with them. She tried again.

"I suppose you're wondering what that was about," she started.

Both boys shrugged in response.

"Somebody had to shut that bloody git up," offered George.

Annie sighed. "That's not what I mean. I'm talking about my... parents." She said the word with discomfort. It didn't have the same cozy, reliable connotation for her that it did for everyone else she knew.

Fred shook his head, dismissing her attempts at any explanation. "You live with your Gran. End of story, as far as we're concerned."

Annie looked at him with unveiled consternation. "It doesn't matter to you... that I don't have a mother and father?"

"Not that way. I mean... well... maybe it sucks for you, but you've got your Gran, right? You're doing fine without them. And honestly, you've heard us tell you the stories about our mum how she's bangin' on at us all the time about every little thing. Take it from me: mums can be overrated, you know?"

Shocked fury flooded into Annie. "How can you say that?" she yelled at Fred, scrambling to his feet. "You have no idea what you're talking about! I hope you never know what it's like! Your mother *loves* you! She's there at home... waiting for you... RIGHT NOW!"

Angry tears began flooding down her cheeks. She had to get out, get away from the alarmed, almost frightened looks on her friends' faces. Annie practically dove out of the trapdoor on the floor, running as soon as she hit the ground.

"Annie!" they both called from inside.

She didn't turn around. She couldn't face anyone right now. Her mental anguish had translated itself into an almost physical pain, stabbing at her gut. The rage and the tears were mortifying beyond reason. *Why do I always do this? Completely lose control of myself, when I get upset? Especially about... her.*

Annie kept running until she reached the big river.

"Annie!"

She recognized George's voice coming up behind her. She had heard him following her, calling her name, but had hoped he would have given up the chase before now. "Please go away," she begged him, keeping her back to him while struggling to keep her voice from breaking. She had already lost the battle with her tears she didn't want to be a complete display of weakness in front of him.

"He didn't mean it that way. He was just trying to cheer you, you know. Being stupid about it, yes, but he didn't mean any harm," he explained.

Judging by his voice, she reckoned he was standing right next to her. But she couldn't risk turning to look at him. "I know. Go tell him I'm sorry, will you?" She sniffed.

"I'm not leaving until you're okay. We'll go back together and you can tell him yourself," he argued.

She nodded and stared out over the rippling water of the river. Deep breaths were helping her to regain some semblance of control.

"He's right about one thing, though. You're doing just fine, you and your Gran. She loves you, you know," George offered softly.

"I know!" Annie wailed as she fell to her knees, a fresh new pain bubbling up. There seemed to be a never-ending fountain of it somewhere inside her. She knew they were traitorous, the thoughts she secretly harbored. "And I'm a miserable little shit for wanting my mother instead! My stupid mother, who never wanted me!"

She looks a lot like Ginny, George thought as he watched Annie, hunched over on the ground with her face in her hands. Just like his little sister, sobbing with some hurt or other. *Only this is a bit more serious than a skinned knee or singed finger,* he sensed.

He knelt beside Annie and put his arm around her, like he had done to comfort his baby sister in hundreds of other instances. Annie turned toward him, rested her head on his shoulder, and cried, just like Ginny would do.

Based on past experience with Annie's temper, George predicted this storm would likely blow itself out quickly as well, and he was thankful for that. He was disturbed by this side of Annie: the raw, hurting one. It bothered him that there was something inside his friend that caused her such pain. Something he didn't understand at all. It bothered him even more that there seemed to be nothing he could do to help. Everything he or his brother had said so far had just made it worse. He sat next to her, stewing in silent, concerned confusion.

"Thanks," she whispered after a long minute. "Sorry for taking your head off. 'Fraid you're just in the wrong place at the wrong time, mate."

"I'll survive," he assured her. "How about you?"

Annie nodded. "I'll survive." She sighed, wiping her face with her hands. "I suppose I'd better go apologize to Fred now."

"He'll keep; take your time," he said, giving her shoulder a quick squeeze before dropping his arm. "You look like crap, anyway. Take a minute and wash your face," he teased her, hoping to cheer her a bit.

Finally, something he said worked to lighten the gloom. She sputtered and laughed as she crawled to the river's edge and splashed water on her face. She turned and tossed a handful of water at him.

In a comfortingly typical response, George took a running leap and splashed into the shallow water, soaking them both. The cool water helped restore a more pleasant mood, and together they walked dripping through the woods back to the fort.

*

Annie stood on a stepstool in order to reach the counter and carefully sliced a mushroom. She held the large knife confidently in her small hand. What she lacked in speed she made up for in uniformity each slice of mushroom was equally thin.

"Careful, now," her Gran cautioned needlessly as Annie made the last cut. She had been rolling out the dough for the crust on the counter next to her granddaughter and now arranged it into the dish. Afterwards, she reached up into the cupboard above Annie's head and removed the cow-bell shaped grater.

Meredith knew this was her favorite part, and Annie's eyes lit up with pleasure, as expected. The girl giggled as she shredded a hunk of cheese with gusto.

"That's plenty, Annie," her Gran chuckled. "A good handful is all we need," she explained. "Would you like to break the eggs this time?"

Annie nodded eagerly. That part had always looked like fun cracking the shells and she had never been asked to do it before.

"Watch me do the first one.... A quick knock on the edge here, not too hard... then push your thumb into the dent here, like this. Your turn, now," Gran instructed as she pushed the carton of eggs toward Annie.

"Oops," Annie exclaimed as the first eggshell shattered into the bowl.

"That's all right," Gran reassured her. "Just reach in and fish them out.... You missed a piece... there. A little less force this time.... Ah, that's better. Eight all together, love... then whisk it up. Throw in a bit more elbow into it, Annie, don't be shy. That's my girl!"

Meredith beamed at her granddaughter while she herself arranged the mushrooms and cheese into the pie crust. "D'you think you can pour them in?"

Annie nodded with confidence. She did a good job, too; not a drop was spilled on the counter.

They sat together at the table while the quiche was baking in the oven. "All right now go over it again."

Annie recited the recipe, step by step. She loved spending time like this with her Gran, learning to cook. Her worst day in the kitchen with Gran beat any day at school; that much she was sure of.

Gran nodded, letting her know that she had gotten all the steps correct. "Someday soon I'll teach you how to make the crust," she promised.

After finishing a tall glass of milk, Annie broke the companionable silence. "May I go camping this Friday in the woods?" she asked nervously.

"Overnight? By yourself?" Meredith was concerned and inclined to say no. *Annie's only eleven, after all.*

Annie was quietly chewing her bottom lip, debating her next move. By answering her Gran's question honestly, she knew she would either save or doom her chances. She wasn't really ready to start sneaking out of the house and had determined to abide by her decision.

"Actually, I've been invited by some friends," she confessed uncertainly. She knew enough to omit the identity of those friends and hoped Gran wouldn't ask for specifics. She never liked lying to her but lying had become unavoidable over the past four years.

"Oh, well, that's all right then, I suppose. Just in the woods here, and not too far?"

Annie nodded eagerly.

Meredith was relieved: not only that Annie wouldn't be alone, but that she was actually making friends in the village. Small towns could be brutal when it came to gossip, and she understood that life was tough on Annie because of it. It was nice to think some girls in town were making an effort to include her granddaughter in a fun activity.

"You can go get the bedroll from out of the attic, and we'll air it out today. Is there anything else you need to bring?" Meredith asked.

Annie was surprised as well as thrilled at how easy this was turning out to be. She decided to push her luck. "They asked if I could bring some snacks. I thought maybe I could get some sodas, as well?"

Meredith smiled. *Of course the children would want sweets and junk to eat, and who could blame them?* "We'll nip into the market later today then."

Annie was over the moon with happiness. The stage was set for a grand party, for sure!

Two days later, Annie waddled off across the field and into the woods as Meredith watched through the open window. Her little body looked overwhelmed by the large backpack stuffed with food, her sleeping bag, and the rest of the gear she thought she might need: rubber bands, squirt guns, playing cards, a flashlight, and the whistle Meredith had given her to blow if anything went wrong, promising to come and find her. She could see even from this far away that Annie's face was the picture of contentment.

Annie entered the woods, still shady and cool this early in the morning. The trek to the fort took a bit longer than usual due to the heavy pack, but she still got there before the boys. She propped the backpack against the willow's trunk, dug out the cans of soda, and set them into the cool water of the nearby stream. Then she fished out a large handful of rubber bands, hid her pack in a nearby shrub, and crept up into the fort, preparing for an ambush.

Not much later, she heard the boys crashing through the woods. *They never have been much for stealth*, she laughed silently to herself. She twisted the rubber band in her hand, forming a gun shape with her fingers, and took aim.

"Ouch!" cried Fred, claspng a hand to his ear as the first missile hit her target.

George immediately took evasive action and barely ducked in time, avoiding what would have been a direct hit to the face. Annie revealed her position with a giggle.

"You're gonna get it, now," warned Fred as he clambered up the tree and cornered her in the fort. He caught Annie and put her in a headlock she was laughing too hard to put up much of a fight and fiercely rubbed her scalp with his knuckles.

"Stop!" she gasped. "Not my hair!"

The boys always knew that doing anything to her hair would get her riled up. They thought it was vanity, and maybe it was a little, Annie granted. But mostly it was because she was cursed with a very tender scalp. She could handle all the punches, slaps and pinches anyone could dish out anywhere else, but when her curls got pulled, tears would always come unbidden to her eyes. Attacking her hair was taking an unfair advantage, she felt.

Finally, Fred released her, and they all sat down on the floor. The boys' long legs took up the majority of the floor space, so Annie folded hers underneath her body.

"Wish you could've come too, Annie. It was bloody amazing!" Fred raved.

George eagerly agreed with his brother. "Fortescue's was brilliant! I've never seen so much ice cream in one place!"

"And Quality Quidditch! That latest Nimbus model looked wicked fast, I swear. Bet Charlie wishes he could ride one of those, instead of the old Cleansweep..."

"But Gambol & Japes that was the best. We spent everything we had there."

"That's the life, isn't it, George? Nothing but jokes and pranks all day long, year in, year out...."

George nodded in hearty agreement with his twin.

"So, show me some! Didn't you bring any?" Annie asked.

Both boys' smiles faded to rueful smirks.

"Nah, Mum confiscated practically the lot," George groaned.

"We'll be lucky to nick it back before we leave," Fred sighed.

And there it was: the elephant in the room. The twins were leaving for Hogwarts in just a couple of days from now, leaving Annie to suffer through life in Ottery without them. Her best friends were so excited to leave her behind, heading off to live in a castle and learn to do magic like proper wizards, while she got to look forward to algebra and book reports. Annie scowled.

"So, what about you? D'you bring anything?" Fred asked.

She was slightly cheered by the thought of the soda cooling in the river. "Oh, yeah. Thirsty?" she asked as she began to clamber down out of the tree house.

"Sure," they both agreed, but made no move to follow her.

Annie trekked the short distance to the stream and retrieved the now chilled cans out of the water. She pulled three of them out of the plastic rings, then replaced the rest in the water to save them for later that night. She looked up when she reached the base of the tree once more. Two smiling faces were peeking down at her from the trapdoor.

"Catch!" she ordered as she tossed up the cans one at a time.

"What's this stuff?" Fred asked once she climbed back into the fort.

"Soda. Gran usually doesn't let me have it, but seeing how this is a special occasion and all...."

Annie popped open the tab as the boys watched curiously, then copied her action. Both of them were startled by the loud pop and hiss as the pressurized gas escaped the can. Fred even sniffed the small opening, much to Annie's amusement. They both looked back to Annie for further direction.

"It's sweet... and fizzy, see?" she instructed, then took several large gulps. After a few more moments and some excellent gastro-esophageal command, Annie produced an impressively loud belch.

"Good one!" cried George, as both boys rushed to swallow their own gulps.

The children spent the following half hour trying to outdo each other's rudeness, laughing between turns. Annie made it all the way to F, and Fred won the contest by making it to H when attempting to recite the alphabet in one go.

"It's a bit like butterbeer, isn't it?" George asked his brother, draining his can of the final sip.

"Not as sweet, though," argued Fred, "and a bit fizzier. Nearly as good as belching powder, I reckon."

The children climbed back down out of the stifling heat inside the fort. The day was growing hot quickly, and they all agreed that getting wet would be a good solution. They walked in single file toward the deep pool Annie had discovered last year in a bend in the stream.

"I bet we could chuck her halfway across," Fred whispered, turning his head slightly back towards his trailing brother. He slowed their pace slightly, allowing Annie to pull ahead of them a bit.

"You think? That far?" George sounded doubtful.

"At least," Fred assured him confidently. "She can't weigh more than four stone. One sickle."

"You're on. And you don't have one sickle."

"I'll take the arms...."

George nodded slightly in agreement, understanding the rest of the unspoken plan immediately.

As soon as they reached the bank and Annie had kicked off her shoes, she was ambushed by the boys. Fred grabbed her arms and George her feet.

"Hold your breath!" Fred hollered as they began to swing her back and forth.

"One... two... three!"

Annie flew into the air over the stream, arms and legs flailing, before she plunged into the refreshing water with an enormous splash. As she surfaced, she could hear the raucous laughter of her friends still on the bank.

"She was five feet in the air, at least!"

"Still, that was nowhere near halfway across. You owe me a sickle!"

"That was brilliant! Do it again!" she cried as she splashed her way back to the shore.

They built a small fire that evening, just enough to heat their dinner and toast a few marshmallows; it was too hot for anything more. Rather than suffer inside the fort, they'd set up their bedrolls on the cooler ground near the bank of the stream, hoping to take advantage of any cooling breezes. The sky was cloudless, at any rate, so rain wasn't a concern.

The stars were just beginning to twinkle as they sat around the dying fire. Suddenly Fred noticed something was poking his leg, and an excited smile spread across his face as he recalled what was hidden in his pocket. He had completely forgotten about it all day.

"Oi, Annie. Check it out!" Fred exclaimed as he slowly pulled out his new wand from his pocket.

"Is that what I think it is? A real magic wand?" she murmured.

Annie's wide eyes lit up. He could see the excitement in them even in the dim light of the tiny fire. The awestruck tone of her voice was as gratifying to him as it was unmistakable. Fred nodded as Annie crept closer to get a better look.

Her brow furrowed in slight confusion. "It looks like an old stick, doesn't it?"

"What d'you mean? It's a proper wand and brand new to boot! Blackthorn, with dragon heartstring," he explained with injured pride. Fred put the wand back in his pocket in a huff.

"Oh," said Annie. She hadn't meant to offend him, but apparently had anyway. "Did you get one as well, George?"

George nodded and began fishing in his own pocket. "Apple wood, with dragon heartstring as well," he informed her casually as he held it out for her inspection.

Annie reached out a tentative finger and gingerly touched it. It felt cool and smooth, just like any polished wood would.

"It won't bite. Here, you take it," he offered.

Annie's heart skipped a beat. She'd been dying to ask him that very thing. But as she reached out for it, Fred interrupted.

"George, be careful," he warned. "She probably shouldn't touch it."

George smirked at his brother and rolled his eyes.

Annie's hackles rose. *Why shouldn't I touch it? It's nothing but a silly piece of wood, after all.* She wouldn't harm it. And she certainly wasn't afraid of it....

Annie took the wand in a firm grasp, glaring at Fred with indignant anger. Immediately, the handle began to grow warm in her grip. It quickly became frighteningly hot.

"George?" she asked, a little worried.

George's face instantly became alarmed at her tone. He reached out with his own hand to take the wand back from her. For an instant their hands met, both holding the wand at the same time. A brilliant yellow explosion of light shot out of the end of the wand and struck the willow's trunk with a loud clap.

A black scorch mark about the size of a dinner plate now marred the tree. It was still smoking as Annie and George stared wide-eyed at each other, mouths agape.

"You idiot! George, you've done it now!" cried Fred, panicked at the thought that George had activated his Trace and they were about to be descended upon by the Ministry.

"It wasn't me, I swear!" cried George, defensively.

Fred considered this a moment, apparently deciding whether or not to believe his brother. "I told you not to let her touch it," he snapped in his indecision. "Put that damn thing away!"

"You mean I did that?" Annie stammered in a weak voice.

"No, stupid git! The wand did. Muggles aren't supposed to touch them. They're liable to go off. You could've done some real damage, you know," Fred scolded her.

"Sorry," she said in a soft, humbled voice.

"Lay off, Fred," growled George. "No harm done. Blimey, though, that was friggin' awesome, Annie," he tried to cheer her, chuckling in surprise.

"It's still smoking, Annie," Fred laughed in spite of his concern.

Annie smiled. "That was the coolest thing ever, wasn't it? Completely wicked, eh?" She took a moment to imagine how useful a wand would be in the schoolyard this year, fantasizing about picking off a choice few of her schoolmates....

"You're a hazard, Annie, that's for sure," laughed George.

All three children were deep but restless sleepers, so when they awoke with the morning sun shining in their faces, arms and legs were scattered and tangled like a pile of sleeping puppies. They sat up, stretched, and headed off in opposite directions to take care of personal business.

Annie returned to the campsite a short while later to find the boys looking at her expectantly. *How typical*, she grumbled inwardly she, as the girl, was expected to be responsible for feeding them. She didn't mind, for the most part. Like her Gran, she enjoyed cooking and took pride in the fact people liked her food. She was in a bit of a mood this morning, however, and decided to have some fun with them.

"What?" she asked testily.

"Aren't you hungry?" George asked.

"Yes, I am. What's for breakfast?" she asked innocently.

Both boys began to look a bit concerned. "Dunno what have you got?" Fred asked, shrugging his shoulders.

"Didn't *you* bring anything?" she asked, faking incredulousness.

"We never do, Annie. You always bring the food," Fred explained.

"Huh. You know what, you're right. I always do. How about that?"

"Blimey, Annie. I guess we just assumed..." George mumbled.

"Yes. You *assumed*. You take me for granted, you know," she scolded them as she started digging through her backpack.

"Don't get all bent! We always say thanks," Fred argued defensively.

"No, she's right Fred. We never offer to bring anything, or help out. Sorry, Annie."

"That's much better. You may have a muffin, George," she said as she tossed it to him.

Fred scowled, irritated by her manipulative tactics. He was irritated even more that his brother caved in to them so quickly. Still, he was rather hungry. "Sorry, Annie," he grumbled with as much sincerity as he could muster.

Annie chuckled. "I know you don't mean to be such a git, Fred," she smiled sweetly as she tossed him a muffin as well.

He stuck out his tongue at her before stuffing the muffin whole into his mouth.

Annie sighed as she ate her muffin slowly. She wanted to savor their last brief hour together before the twins left for the year. George had explained that they would have to spend the day at home, packing their trunks and cleaning their room before they left early tomorrow morning. Fred reached out to grab the box of muffins from her for seconds and likely thirds, and in her distraction, she made no move to protest.

George punched her lightly in the shoulder. "Don't look so glum," he coaxed her.

Annie forced a half-smile onto her face. She was tired of moping and whining, of wishing she could go where she never could, of wanting to be who she never would become. And she sure as hell didn't want their pity.

"It won't be so bad. We'll write you, you know," he offered.

"D'you swear? Both of you?" she demanded.

Both boys crossed their hearts and nodded. "Swear," they both mumbled around mouthfuls of muffin.

Annie smiled a genuine smile this time. *It will have to do*, she supposed. *It's better than nothing.*

Hogwarts Year 1

Chapter 7 of 80

Left on her own now, Annie makes some questionable Muggle friends. The twins make good on their promise to write from Hogwarts, and a correspondence develops. Much to Annie's chagrin, the boys become proper Quidditch fanatics.

Author's Note: There are grammatical and punctuation errors in the correspondence portion of this chapter that are intentional, dear readers, reflecting the maturity level and mood of the eleven-year-old pen friends. They are entirely my own fault and not that of the lovely admins here at TPP.

Chapter 7: Year 1 at Hogwarts

1989 1990

Annie rode her bike aimlessly through Ottery and its surroundings, mindlessly searching for something to do. She hadn't been this bored since... well, maybe never. It was nearly impossible now to recall life before she had met her best friends, after all. She hadn't gone three weeks like this without seeing them since they had met four years ago.

On the far side of town as far as she could get from her house and still be in Ottery she began to hear an unfamiliar sound: a mechanical... buzzing sort of noise. Sometimes louder and slightly higher pitched, other times lower and rumbling. *Maybe a saw?* she wondered. *Finally, something remotely interesting!* She sped up to search for it, letting the sound guide her.

She soon reached a large, open field out past the edge of town. Three boys were standing together not far from her, watching as a fourth was riding about on the source of the buzzing: a small motorbike built for riding on a dirt track. She recognized it from a book she had read about them once. She'd read that there were tracks for dirt bikes elsewhere with jumps and hills for them to launch off of. Of course, here in Ottery, there was nothing so exciting as a great flat field at the base of Stoatshead Hill. Annie stood watching them for a while, transfixed.

The current rider's turn must have been over, because he returned to the group and climbed off. Annie noticed at that moment something unusual about the boy: he had hair almost, but not quite, like Fred's and George's. It was flaming red, but it stood up stiff and bushy on his head, not lying down soft and straight like her friends' did. Annie took it as a favorable sign anyway and pedaled over to meet them.

One of the onlookers noticed her approach. "Hey, kid get lost," he called out.

Another turned to look for the source of the disturbance and echoed his mate's sentiment. "Yeah, go home."

The first boy was further emboldened by the fact his friend followed his lead. "A baby like you belongs safe at home with mummy!" He laughed derisively along with the others.

The last comment got Annie's dander up. "I'm not a baby! I'm eleven. And I've got just as much right to be here as you."

"Oh, really?" asked the boy, taking a few steps intended to be threatening toward her.

Annie let her bike drop, lifting her head defiantly, standing her ground. The boy then halted his forward movement, apparently unaccustomed to being stood up to.

The red-headed boy, still holding the bike, finally weighed in. "Hey, kid! What's your name?"

"Annie Jones," she answered proudly. She wasn't scared of these boys, and she wanted them to know it.

The first boy's mouth dropped open in surprise. "A girl?" he cried in disbelief.

The second boy, seizing upon the mistake of his friend, pounced immediately. "You were gonna pick a fight with a girl!" He laughed in an unfriendly way.

The red-headed boy's eyes narrowed, as if he recognized her name. "Aren't you the kid who beat seven shades of shit out of Tim Molloy?" he asked her.

The three other boys stopped their teasing of each other and quietly looked at her with newfound interest. Apparently, news of the incident at the schoolyard had spread quickly. Annie wondered if the story had included the reason for her attack on the bully.

"Some people don't know when to keep their mouths shut," she offered with a shrug.

The three sheep, for Annie had now pegged them as the followers of the group, turned to look at the red-headed boy to see his reaction to this girl's unlikely claim.

"Yeah, that kid sure has a big mouth. And a big fat arse to match," the boy said as he turned to his flock with a smile.

They understood it was expected of them to laugh and did so promptly.

The leader looked back at Annie and introduced himself. "My name is Stephen, and these gits are Geoff, Tom, and Mike. Come on, Geoff your turn," he said as he handed the bike to the next boy. Stephen strolled over to where Annie stood, and together they watched as Geoff peeled out, flying down the field away from them.

Annie was now watching the dirt bike with something akin to lust in her eyes. She desperately wanted to get on that thing. Her brain began to work in overtime now, plotting her strategy. She knew it would take some clever diplomacy, if it was even at all possible....

Now that their leader had relocated his focus, the other boys did the same, walking as casually as they could manage over to where Annie stood as well.

"Nice bit of work, there, kid," one of them muttered. "Didja break Stewart's nose as well, then?"

Still on about that? Annie groused silently, irritated at the boy for interrupting her thoughts about the dirt bike. "Yeah, I suppose. He made the mistake of getting involved. Should've minded his own business."

"You don't look like you could take on two blokes all on your own," the argumentative one pressed her.

Annie tore her eyes away from the dirt bike and glared at him squarely as if to tell him if he wanted proof, she'd be happy to oblige. Even though technically it had been four bullying boys she had taken on, she hadn't been precisely alone at the time, and there was really no need to go into such complicated explanations. "What's your name, again?" she asked him quietly.

The boy, to his credit, read her expression accurately. And while part of him was itching to challenge this tiny little interloping girl with her unbelievable assertions, he also knew that if the story was true, there were good odds he might suffer some damage himself whilst fighting a girl. With his gang as witnesses, no less. It was a no-win situation, and he knew it. He licked his lips, then snorted in a dismissive way. "Tom," he answered.

The boy named Geoff finally returned after a signal from Stephen. Tom and Mike began to argue amongst themselves who should go next. Apparently they had already had one turn each and were jostling for their second chance. Annie took advantage of the disturbance to step up to the bike.

"Can I have a go?" she asked, looking Stephen right in the eye and speaking only to him. She figured that she might improve her chances by acknowledging him as the ringleader, if indeed she had any chance at all.

The rest of the boys silently glanced at each other, unsure how to respond. Normally, they would have dressed her down for her cheek *A girl? On the dirt bike?* But Stephen seemed to like her, for some reason, and no one wanted to cross him until the situation became clearer.

Stephen stepped forward, taking the handlebars from his friend. "Yeah, I'll give you a ride," he offered with a smug grin on his face, as if it pleased him that she had chosen him to ask. That she wanted to ride with him. "Just hold on tight," he said with a chuckle as he began to climb on to the seat.

"No, I mean on my own. Will you show me how?" Annie fiercely wanted to ride the bike, but only on her own terms. She didn't want to be anybody's pet. She wanted to be accepted as an equal: no more, and certainly no less.

Uncertainty was painted on Stephen's face. This clearly was not what he had expected.

"I promise I'll be careful," she added, not sure if it would help.

After a pause, Stephen shrugged. "If you really think you can handle it," he said without enthusiasm.

"Just show me," she urged with a smile.

Annie couldn't believe her luck. Stephen held the bike still as she climbed on. He pointed out the throttle, clutch, and brakes, explaining briefly how to use them.

"Got it?" he asked her doubtfully.

Annie nodded, eager to take off. Following his instructions, she slowly rolled forward, then built up speed as she became sure of her balance. Within a minute, she was flying through the tall grass, the wind screaming past her ears and bringing tears to her eyes. *This must be what it feels like to fly*, she thought elatedly. *Who needs a manky old broom after all?*

24 September, 1989

Dear Annie,

See, we promised we'd write. Fred's handwriting is completely illegible, not to mention he's a lazy git, so I have to do it all. Anyway, Hogwarts is loads of fun. The first night after we got here on the train, we both got Sorted into Gryffindor house, just like everyone else in the family before us. Then there was this massive feast and more food than we ever saw before just appeared on the tables out of nowhere!

And guess what? There are secret tunnels that lead out of the castle all over the place! Well, so far we've only found the one, but we're betting there's more. We will find them all, I swear, or die trying.

Classes are okay, I suppose. It's cool to get to do magic finally, but something about sitting in classrooms all day leaves a bit to be desired. You must know what I mean you've been doing it for years now. How the blazes do you stand it? How long did it take you to get used to it?

Well, that's all we've got for now. Write back soon, and tell us how you are.

Love,

George & Fred

1 October, 1989

Dear Fred & George,

Why am I not surprised Fred can't write? I suppose you both do read, don't you? So glad to hear you're having fun. It's dead boring here. And, sorry to be the bearer of bad news: school stinks. Always has, always will.

All castles have secret passageways, you git. And ghosts. And dungeons. And suits of armor. And moats with drawbridges. Do you have a dragon there as well, guarding a tower?

As for the magic business, I've said it before, and I'll say it again: I'll believe it when I see it. At least I can say I can make something happen with a wand.

I met some blokes in the village who let me try riding their dirt bike. It was loads of fun. It's a sort of bicycle with a motor and it can go pretty fast. They don't fly, of course, but a good time all the same.

Better go. Write back soon.

Love you more,

Annie

15 November, 1989

Dear Annie,

Blimey, you should've been here for the Halloween feast! Never seen so much food, and that doesn't even count the heaps of sweets. We literally ate ourselves sick. I mean it we puked. Swear it's true!

Just yesterday was Gryffindor's first Quidditch match of the year! Charlie plays Seeker, you know. He was brilliant, of course caught the Snitch right under the other team's nose but we lost anyway. The rest of the team are complete morons. Two more cack-handed Beaters you'll never meet. Fred and I could do far better.

Hogwarts definitely doesn't have a moat or a drawbridge. Or a dragon that we can find. It's got the rest though, plus a lake and the Forbidden Forest. How do you know so much about castles?

The dirt bike sounds cool. Do you think we could put those motor-things on our bikes and make them go faster?

Speaking of brooms, flying lessons started a while back. It's just as brilliant as you can imagine. Fred seems to think that if we practice a lot, maybe we could make the Quidditch team next year. As horrid as Gryffindor are now, he just might be right.

Write back soon.

Love,

George & Fred

19 November, 1989

Dear Fred & George,

Sorry I missed the puke fest. That surely must have been entertaining. No, on second thought, it wouldn't. How disgusting! You lot are pigs!

You'll have to explain more about the Quidditch stuff. I only know what's in the Cannons mag you kept at the fort, which means nothing at all. What's a seeker or a beater do? And who was the snitch? Aren't you allowed to play Quidditch?

I know about castles because I can READ, idiot. Funny little rectangular things made of paper, words all over: they're called BOOKS. Look into it.

I picked up a very useful trick in the last week: a school chum of mine has a brother who well let's just say he knows some very interesting stuff. Been around the block a bit, if you get my meaning. Anyway, he showed a few of us how to open a locked door without a key. Like I said, could come in pretty handy some day. Maybe I'll show you when I see you, since this magic business of yours is all talk anyway.

Speaking of seeing you, are you lot coming home for Christmas? Write back soon and tell me.

Love you more,

Annie

8 December, 1989

Dear Annie,

It would take several rolls of parchment to explain Quidditch, especially to a great Muggle like yourself, so that will have to wait until we see you. And unfortunately, it doesn't look like we're meant to come home just yet. Now that Bill's in Egypt (did we tell you he got a job as Curse-Breaker for Gringotts?), and the four of us are here at school, I think Mum has really gotten used to the "peace and quiet" of having only two kids left in the house. She's one of those odd birds who enjoy that sort of thing. Suffice it to say that now she's got us out of the house, she's in no great hurry to have us all back.

We can open locked doors without a key as well, silly girl. But I'll admit your way sounds intriguing, too.

It's flipping cold here. Snot freezes in your nose while you sleep, I swear. Been snowing for three weeks already now! For the first time, I'm grateful for all those bleeding jumpers Mum has made us over the years.

Write back soon, and have a happy Christmas if we don't write again before.

Love,

George & Fred

10 January, 1990

Dear Fred & George,

Sorry I haven't been able to write. Got into a bit of hot water a while ago, and Gran's only just now letting me see the light of day again. Remember that little trick I told you about in my last letter? Well, some mates of mine and I decided that some previously confiscated contraband materials (which shall remain nameless to protect the guilty) deserved to be liberated from the place they were doomed to spend the holidays. Employing said trick on several doors, including the rear entrance of the school building, our merry band gained entry and began to search. Being the only non-moron of the group, I was able to maintain my focus on the mission at hand. Sadly, my git companions were not so focused, and unbeknownst to me began to inflict damage on our hallowed halls (the stupid wankers!). Also unbeknownst to me, the rear door was equipped with a silent alarm. Long story concluded: I was caught red-handed.

Unsurprisingly, Christmas was grim. Hope yours was better. Write back soon.

Love you more,

Annie

15 January, 1990

Dear Annie,

Well done you! Did they really have you bang to rights? Were the cops involved or just the teachers? Are we talking jail or merely house arrest?

As for trouble, you do remember who you are corresponding with, don't you? Fred and I pride ourselves on the fact that we haven't spent a free evening out of detention for a solid month. Most often due to our dear old mate Mr. Filch (the castle caretaker) nabbing us, thanks to his bloody cat. I swear I will poison that thing personally if it's the last thing I do! We were just nipping down to the kitchens, recently discovered during our holidays here, for a snack. Sure, it was well after curfew, but when you're hungry you know, growing boys and all. Or maybe you don't, pocket-sized pipsqueak as you are.

Anyway, we were lucky enough to be left alone in his office when he got called out for another 'incident.' He really should have known better. We had a full fifteen minutes unsupervised to rifle through his files of prior student offenses, as well as drawers crammed with confiscated booty. It was bloody brilliant, I tell you! We can't even begin to fully appreciate the windfall yet some of the stuff will take a while to figure out how to operate.

Don't take so long to write back this time you had us worried you were carried off by a cat or something.

Love,

George & Fred

7 February, 1990

Dear Fred & George,

Cops don't arrest eleven-year-old kids, you morons. Honestly, it must say something about me that I surround myself with half-brained gits all the time.

Tell me more about your classes. We have mostly a great load of crap: maths, science, history, literature, the usual. Dead boring bullshit about dead boring old farts.

There is absolutely nothing happening here. I miss you two.

Love you more,

Annie

29 February, 1990

Dear Annie,

Happy Birthday! You're finally 3! Been a long time coming! Ha Ha Ha!

You sounded horribly mopey in your last letter, so we brewed this up to cheer you. Either that, or you might become very forgetful for a bit. Maybe write your name on your hand before you drink it, just in case.

Our classes: Astronomy (snore), Charms (decent fun, for a class), Transfiguration (okay), Herbology (so-so... Fred likes it more than I do), Potions (ugh the absolute worst due to the massive git who teaches it), Defense Against the Dark Arts (sounds like it should be fun, but it isn't), and History of Magic, which is literally taught by a dead boring bloke.

Gryffindor lost again. Oh well, maybe next match Charlie will get luckier.

Cheer up, Annie! Second term's half over! Write back soon.

Love,

George & Fred

20 March, 1990

Dear Fred & George,

Wow that stuff is amazing! What is it? How did you make it? It was such a weird color at first I was scared to try it so I waited for a few days but then I did this morning and WOW!

The most hilarious thing happened today I just have to tell you! I was sitting at school minding my own business when Miss Pilton (I know, the name alone is hysterical!) asked Justin Day what was the name of the bones of the hands and he said phalanges which is right I know but he didn't say the word the right way it sounded more like fall-angles and I just about died laughing! She sent me to the hallway for disrupting the class but I mean come on that was just too funny! Nobody else in the class was laughing but nobody here has a sense of humor anyway so that's no surprise.

Hold on, Gran is knocking at my door. Oops she says the school just called and wanted to know if I was DRUNK today at school! Ha! No Gran I said just really cheerful. Then she smelled my breath and I tried really hard not to laugh but I did giggle a little bit so she made me drink two cups of coffee even though she said she couldn't smell any booze but now I feel a little jumpy. I think I'll go outside for a bit and run around. Hey, why don't I just send this off to you right now good idea. Write back soon.

Love you more and more and more!!!

Annie

27 March, 1990

Dear Annie,

Next time someone gives you a potion to drink, don't let it sit around for so long. Sometimes those things can get stronger with age, which is apparently the case with that one. Hope you didn't embarrass yourself too much.

Anyway, here's some thrilling news. We just cracked one of the more brilliant items we've ever come across. Remember when we told you about nicking stuff from Filch? Well, one scrappy bit of parchment turns out to be a dead useful map of Hogwarts including 7 (count them!) bloody awesome secret tunnels. But wait, there's more! It

shows where every single person is at any given moment! We'll never get caught again!

Well, we're off for adventures tonight!

Love,

George & Fred

1 April, 1990

Dear Fred & George,

I can't decide whether to be mad at you or not about the potion. I got in trouble, but it was pretty brilliant, I have to admit. You could make a fortune selling that stuff.

Here is some fleabane I found yesterday in the woods. It's starting to come up early this year it's been a warm spring. You told me once it was good for something, but I don't remember what. Hope you like it. Happy Birthday!

Two terms down, one to go. See you soon!

Love you more,

Annie

15 April, 1990

Dear Annie,

Thanks loads for the fleabane! We've seen it mentioned in several very interesting-looking potion recipes... should make for some fun experiments.

Unfortunately, we don't have much time to write. Far from keeping us out of trouble, the map has landed us in quite a bit more as of late. Sure, we always know who's coming, but can't always escape in time. I told Fred we really need to start focusing on Disillusionment Charms, but they're pretty advanced, so no luck yet. Maybe Charlie can help us out with them this summer.

As you know, we didn't make it home for Easter holiday either. Mum has to let us come home for summer though, so we'll see you then!

Love,

George & Fred

17 May, 1990

Dear Fred & George,

I don't have much free time either. Between studying for exams under Gran's watchful eye and going to school, she's got me renovating the entire garden this spring. Says it's time for me to learn horticulture, and since it's not part of school curriculum, it falls to her to teach it. I think she's just trying to keep me under her thumb and out of trouble. Doesn't matter much now anyway... I kind of like the gardening, and I've been on my best behavior lately, keeping my nose clean so we can be free to knock about together this summer. Write back and tell me when you'll be home.

Love you more,

Annie

10 June, 1990

Dear Annie,

I can barely write anymore, so I don't blame you if you think it's Fred and not me. This exam business is for the birds. There has to be a more dignified way of proving you were not listening to a word your professors were saying all year long. I mean let's all be reasonable, shall we?

And to add salt to the wound, Gryffindor lost AGAIN. That's 0-3, if you're counting. There's always next year, I suppose.

Can't wait to get out of here and be done with it! Meet us 23 June at the fort, and bring your bike.

Love,

George & Fred

Annie leaned back against the wall of the tree fort, smiling in utter contentment, anticipating her best friends' arrival. This summer had been everything she had hoped for throughout all the long months of school. It was as if they had never been apart. The comfortable rapport of before picked right up where they had left off. They met nearly every morning in the forest, on bikes or on foot, usually with some adventurous plan for the day.

Well, there was one significant difference: Quidditch. Each afternoon after lunch, the boys left Annie alone for several hours to practice the game with their brother Charlie. It had become an obsession of theirs. They were fiercely determined to make the Gryffindor team next fall.

They had tried for an entire day to explain all the rules and strategies of the game to her. And she understood the general point of the game, she reckoned. It was just so difficult for her to picture in her mind. Annie was sure they had to be exaggerating about some things anyway, which didn't help. Hoops that soared fifty feet into the air? *Get real.*

The favorite game of wizards and witches all over the globe had become a serious inconvenience to Annie. But she was willing to sacrifice a few hours each afternoon in exchange for the reliable happiness and entertainment of the rest of the day. And to kill the time while she waited for them, she had developed a surprising hobby: she'd begun to read for pleasure. Usually she read tales of fantasy and adventure, borrowed from the library and easily hidden from her friends who'd caught her once and took

the mickey out of her for being a swot, which she most assuredly was *not*. Other times she chose true tales of travel or technology. She ruefully confessed to herself that she was learning quite a bit this summer.

She had almost forgotten, over the past year, what it was like to be treated like an equal among friends. Like her opinion mattered. Like her ideas were worthwhile. Her 'friends' during the school year certainly didn't subscribe to any notions of equality amongst their ranks. To them she was small and female and therefore least interesting or important.

Still, it had been far better killing time pulling stunts with her new mates than those first mind-numbing weeks of lonely boredom after Fred and George had left. She had had some fun, shared some laughs with her substitute friends, hadn't she? And they had learned that she wouldn't be bullied. Nor would she tolerate any fresh remarks, which had begun to surface this spring. She had held her own in every fight and never chickened out of a dare. She had proved herself trustworthy by never ratting them out during the fiasco of the school break-in. Surely she had earned some level of their respect, she reckoned.

And anyway, what choice did she have? Apparently, all the girls her age were interested in topics Annie couldn't care less about: romance first and foremost, then television, movies, clothes, and makeup, but only as they related to the primary topic. Not only did Annie not have access to any of those things she and Gran had a TV, but it was only turned on for an hour in the evening for the news she wouldn't want them if she did. She cringed to merely contemplate being forced to listen to all that drivel. *Blech*.

No matter. Today promised to be an adventure to remember: she and the twins planned to ride their bikes six miles to the nearest beach. She had stuffed her backpack with food and her camera her twelfth birthday present from Gran and her bike was leaning against the willow's trunk. And the best part of all: she would be with her friends all day long for once. *No Quidditch today!*

The ride had been long, hot, and quiet especially that last mile. But now they were sitting on the beach, enjoying the cooling breezes on their wet skin.

"Have to admit, George... it's nice to not be sitting on a broom for a change," Fred confessed.

George chuckled. "My backside will never be the same, I'm afraid."

"Surely we'll make the team, don't you think?"

"Charlie seems to think so...."

Annie sighed and rolled her eyes. *Quidditch again?* Her friends had always been determined fellows when it came to adventurous stunts, but this was bordering on pathological.

"Charlie's captain anyway he gets to choose who's in. Why are you worried?" she asked them, exasperated.

"No, he isn't. Didn't we tell you?" asked Fred.

"Last match of the year, he swore to the team he'd quit captain if they didn't win. Sort of a radical, balls-to-the-wall pep talk," explained George.

"And as you well know..."

"Gryffindor got clobbered..."

"And he was true to his word. Resigned the captain position."

"So, who's to be the captain this year?" Annie asked, only very slightly curious.

"Dunno. But it won't be Charlie."

"Which actually helps our chances a bit. Charlie might've passed us over just to avoid any suspicion of nepotism."

"But that's an excellent question, Annie. Who do you think it might be, George?"

Annie should have seen it coming. How stupid of her to say anything that would continue the conversation in this vein. They droned on, naming every bloke and lass in Gryffindor House, comparing relative skills and other merits. Of course they came to no conclusion whatsoever. And she'd been subjected to yet another pointless half hour of Quidditch blather.

"Let's go for another swim. I'm roasting!" she cried, finally managing to get a word in edgewise.

The three of them dove into the water, splashing and dunking each other for almost fifteen minutes before the subject was broached again.

"Did we tell you, Annie? Dad promised us both brooms if we make the team!"

"No, you hadn't mentioned that. You haven't mentioned Quid-effing-ditch for nearly a quarter of an hour. It's a record!"

Fred laughed. "Are we boring you?"

"To tears!" she cried. "I'm utterly stupefied with boredom. Please can we talk about something else? Anything else!"

"How about the state of cauldron bottoms?" teased George.

"Oh my, it's frightful! Shamefully thin and dirty to boot!" exclaimed Fred. "What has the world come to?" he added, splashing Annie.

"You can kiss my cauldron bottom!" she laughed with a splash in return.

Both boys made convincingly realistic retching noises in response.

"I'm famished. Bring anything else in your bag to eat?" asked Fred, changing the subject.

"Dunno if you've left anything uneaten. We can go look, if you like," she offered, and they began traipsing back to their spot on the sand.

As they sat down, Annie took a good look at both boys. "You know, maybe we should move out of the sun. You two are looking a bit... lobster-ish."

"Don't be silly, it's nothing," explained Fred confidently.

"Have you ever been sunburned before?" she asked dubiously.

Both boys shrugged as they dug into the last of the sandwiches.

"Maybe you should put your shirts back on..." she recommended.

"It's hot!" George complained. "Mind your own business, anyway."

"Whatever. Don't say I didn't warn you."

The trio munched quietly on the food for another minute.

"I wonder if we could get a couple of used Cleansweep Fives?" asked Fred.

"I suppose so," agreed George. "Now that the Seven is out, Dad could probably find a good price on a couple of Fives."

"ARGH!" Annie flopped backwards onto the sand in frustration.

Year 2 at Hogwarts

Chapter 8 of 80

George and Fred are obsessed with Quidditch. Annie's becoming something of a hoodlum. By summer's end, she's also fed up with being ignored, but pays a heavy price for her spying. And there's something fishy about Stephen.

Author's Note: There are grammatical and punctuation errors in the correspondence portion of this chapter that are intentional, dear readers, reflecting the maturity level and mood of the twelve-year-old pen friends. They are entirely my own fault and not that of the lovely admins here at TPP.

Chapter 8: Year 2 at Hogwarts

1990 1991

28 September, 1990

Dear Annie,

We did it! We made the team! Oliver Wood is captain this year he's Keeper as well. And Charlie's still Seeker, of course. But at least no one can say we got on the team just because of Charlie.

Actually, it wasn't much of a competition. No, I'm not bragging. There was only one other bloke who tried out against us. I suppose after last season, expectations for Gryffindor glory on the pitch are at an all time low. Still and all, Wood did choose the best fellows for the job!

This season promises to be an uphill battle, to be sure. Apart from Wood and Charlie, the rest of us are rookies and have never played a proper match. Angelina and Alicia do show a good bit of promise as Chasers. We've no idea yet how we'll stack up against the other house teams, or how much new blood they'll all have.

Got to go practice every night this week.

Love,

George & Fred

P.S. You'll be happy to hear we've finally finished peeling from that bloody sunburn!

15 October, 1990

Dear Fred & George,

Congratulations on achieving your heart's desire so young in life. I suppose you won't have much time left over for keeping in touch with old friends, now you've got Quidditch to live for. Seriously, though, well done both of you.

The term here is going slowly, and the weather's turning crap. My mate's brother just got out of the slammer again just in time to show us another useful trick involving a motor vehicle. Handy to know we'll never be at a loss for transportation again. Unfortunately, some nosy old bag in town happened to mention to my Gran she saw me driving, and I haven't seen daylight since. I'll have to sneak out tonight to post this, in fact...

By the way, have you ever played poker? I got a book on it at the library and been teaching myself during my incarceration. We'll have to play when you come home.

Love you more,

Annie

10 November, 1990

Dear Annie,

Sorry to hear you got busted. Your luck seems to run out when we're not around. Although come to think of it, you probably get in as much trouble with us as without.

And yes, we've heard of poker, you git! Profitable enterprise, indeed. Shows you've got a good head on your shoulders, old girl! We'd be happy to help complete your education, so long as you're willing to make it interesting. Save up your allowance, in other words, and be prepared to part with it. Although what we'll do with all your useless Muggle money is beyond me.

I'm saving the exciting news for last: we won our first match against Hufflepuff! Now, in the interest of complete honesty (don't look so shocked, it's been known to happen), I have to confess the following facts:

- 1. We barely won by ten points*
- 2. It was a lucky accident*

See, Charlie caught the Snitch in spectacular fashion, as usual. But the fact that we scored a single goal was the most improbable thing of all. Suffice it to say our Chasers are still somewhat inexperienced (that's the most charitable word I can think of), and somehow in the process of falling off her broom (I swear I am not having a laugh), Alicia tossed (ahem) the Quaffle into the goal.

But a win's a win, right? Now we have three months to prep for Ravenclaw. We'll need it they'll be good, I'll wager.

Tell us more about the motor vehicle business in your next letter...

Love,

George & Fred

12 December, 1990

Dear Fred & George,

Happy Christmas, you lot! Although it sounds as if you got your present early, according to your thrilling account of the match (nearly as exciting as seeing it, I'm sure). Congrats, once again!

Regarding the 'motor vehicle business' you understand of course why I cannot commit the details to paper. I suspect it was a trick question on your part anyway.

Gran has forgiven me at last and thinks I've learned my lesson. And indeed I have: I will not get caught again. Actually, I feel bad for her, sort of. She's only doing her best, trying to deal with me. It's not her fault I'm so bloody bored that I can't resist the temptation of trouble. Now that I think about it the fault here is entirely yours.

Best of luck in your next match sounds as if you'll need it. Assuming you don't get suspended, expelled, or kicked off the team for whatever nonsense you get up to over the school break, that is.

Love you more,

Annie

27 January, 1991

Dear Annie,

Rough skies ahead: Ravenclaw flattened Hufflepuff. Quite literally, I'm afraid. Three 'Puffers are still in hospital as I write this. We don't have a prayer against them. We have only until mid-February to improve exponentially or somehow infect the entire Ravenclaw team with dragon pox.

And then Slytherin beat Ravenclaw today. It was close, but... I suppose the good news right now is that for the next three weeks, we're tied with Slytherin for first place for the Quidditch Cup, ha ha ha!

Weather is crap. School is crap. Only thing worth doing here is Quidditch, and even then we freeze our arses off. Bloody miserable place the Highlands in winter.

Fred and I have been working on a new move called backbeating, where we hit the Bludgers behind us (as I'm sure you could've figured out all on your own from the descriptive moniker, clever girl as you are). So far we've accidentally (I swear) knocked out nearly everyone else on the team but ourselves perhaps we're better at getting out of the way, or expecting a Bludger from any direction? Needless to say our popularity with our teammates is currently on the wane. Angelina now refuses to practice if we're on the pitch, in fact. Some people are just prone to overreaction, I guess.

At least you still care... right?

Love,

George & Fred

14 February, 1991

Dear Fred & George,

Sorry to hear things are so desperate with you. Things are not much better here. What is it about winter that is so conducive to misery? Oh, right: cold, rain, and lack of sunlight. I think I'd rather live on a tropical island rather than this one.

Nothing happening here worth writing about. Good luck against Ravenclaw tomorrow.

Love you more,

Annie

28 February, 1991

Dear Annie,

Happy Birthday! We will not spoil the day by discussing what happened on the pitch two weeks ago. You don't want to hear it, and we're trying to block out the memory.

We snuck into Honeydukes via secret tunnel last night and got you a few things. No, we did not nick them, you suspicious little rat old Flume will find the coins on the countertop this morning, I promise. My favorite are the peppermint frogs and Fred sends you the pepper imps. Goes without saying I hope that you should not eat them with witnesses present. Enjoy the effects!

Love,

George & Fred

1 April, 1991

Dear Fred & George,

Happy Birthday you lot! I think you'll enjoy these hide the metal part in your palm, then shake someone's hand. Right up your alley, trust me.

Chins up, mates! No use dwelling on the past! Second term's nearly over just a few more weeks of school and it's lazy summer holidays once again.

Thanks for my present though you could have warned me about the pepper imps. They certainly clear the sinuses, don't they? Sorry it took so long to write back. Got into another spot of a bother won't bore you with the details. But now that the light's at the end of the tunnel, I'm on my best behavior, anticipating freedom once you're back home.

Love you more,

Annie

3 May, 1991

Dear Annie,

Those hand buzzers were brilliant! We nailed everyone in the House with them before they broke. Now no one in the whole school will shake hands with us! You're the absolute best!

Slytherin has just won another match, taking first place in the standings. At least we can't finish dead last. We're set to play them 2 June. No matter what Wood says (he's full of pep talks these days), Fred and I no longer care if we lose (and we will, let's be realistic). But we're taking out as many snakes as we can along the way.

The gloves are off, so to speak. I'm sick to death of them prancing about, talking smack. It's going to be rather difficult for them to speak at all when we're through with them. Though I do hope I can convince Fred to abandon his plan to launch a few Bludgers into the Slytherin supporters in the stands.

Love,

George & Fred

P.S. Thanks for fingering me you prat! (Fred wrote this ha ha!)

1 June, 1991

Dear Fred & George,

Don't give up hope, boys! It's your brother Charlie's last match, after all. Try to win one for him! Or at the very least, don't get Gryffindor disqualified and ruin it for him. Miracles do happen, you know. Okay, usually not to people like you and Fred, but still... maybe someone else on your team is due for one!

Write back soon and tell me when you're coming home. Only a couple of weeks left to go now...

Love you more,

Annie

15 June, 1991

Dear Annie,

Just a quick note today. Unless we hear from you before then, meet us at the fort Saturday. Bring your bike we want to see what you mean about the motor vehicle thing (no, we didn't forget).

Love,

George & Fred

P.S. No miracle to report unless you count 5 Slytherins in hospital versus only 3 Gryffindors. Do hope Wood recovers fully I feel bad about missing that Bludger that beaned him...

It's not fair, Annie fumed, bristling at their inconsiderate treatment of her. They were supposed to be here by now. If her friends weren't coming, they should have told her. They didn't have more than a couple of days left to spend together before they left once more for school.

She strongly suspected she knew exactly where to find them. After all, they seldom stopped talking, writing, or thinking about it. All day, everyday That bloody stupid game! What was so all-fired wonderful about it anyway?

Okay, flying on brooms sounds like a lot of fun. So does chasing after that little Snitch ball with wings And she had to admit, she was pretty interested in seeing exactly what those Bludgers did.

Well, then, what's stopping me? she asked herself.

She knew where they would be she'd been to the orchard before with her friends. It was their favorite spot to blow things up, whenever they were lucky enough to get their hands on a bit of explosives. *That was before all this rotting Quidditch business, though.* She'd bet all the money she had in the world that's exactly where they were right now. Maybe she'd just march over there and give them a piece of her mind!

As she trekked through the woods, she considered what she'd say to them if given the chance. *I'll tell them exactly where to stick those blessed Cleansweep Fives, that's what. It's a fine way to treat an old friend: leaving me to sweat in that tiny tree fort, twiddling my thumbs with nothing to do. Forget it! Screw them!* she huffed as she stomped through the trees.

As she approached the gentle incline that led to the paddock hidden by the orchard, her anger was quickly dissipating and turning into self-doubt. *Who could blame them, after all? Why would they want to spend all day with an uninteresting Muggle girl when they could be flying about, playing a magical game with other wizards?* She knew she'd do the same in a heartbeat, if she could, regardless of who was waiting for her elsewhere.

She crept closer, attracted by the voices of her friends and their brothers that she could now hear clearly. She knew the heroic Bill and legendary Charlie were both back at home for a brief period: two more reasons her best friends would rather be here than with her. *Who wouldn't prefer a dashing Curse-Breaker and a daring future dragon-tamer for company?* Not to mention their brothers were wizards who were of age and could do magic with no fear of recriminations.

Annie peeked around the large tree trunk she was hiding behind, careful to remain hidden by a neighboring shrub. Her jaw dropped at the sight before her: five ginger boys flew about like zooming dragonflies, dipping and looping and soaring. *Apparently the youngest brother can fly now as well. Or maybe he's just getting away with something* there was no way that could be Percy on a broom, from what her friends had told her about their prat of a brother. The five of them were making an unholy racket, either shouting commands at each other or just simply whooping with the joy of the activity.

She heard a loud, metallic crack and recognized George's voice as he called out, "Take that one, Bill!" A soccer-sized ball went whistling through the air toward a very tall-looking man, his long legs and arms gripping a hovering broom and his long hair fluttering behind him in the breeze. Bill easily maneuvered out of the way of the Bludger, which then changed direction and began chasing him.

Annie nearly clawed the bark from the tree in anxiety. *Fly faster, Bill!* she silently urged him. She didn't like the way the menacing ball was closing the distance between itself and the broom rider. *Look out!* she nearly shouted out loud. She edged out from behind the tree to get a better view.

Just then, Fred appeared beside Bill. He raised a smallish bat with his right arm and swung against the Bludger. There was a loud *clank* as the bat made contact with the pursuing ball, and it changed direction for good this time. Annie breathed a sigh of relief that Fred had been there to rescue his older brother from the intimidating cannonball.

It was thrilling to watch, this Quidditch game, she had to confess. How could she have ever thought that riding a stupid dirt bike could ever compare to this? She watched as the one she assumed was Charlie circled the makeshift pitch, spinning through the air on his broom like a rifle bullet with one arm extended out in front of him, reaching out for something invisible to her eyes. *That move would have definitely made me sick* she thought with glee.

And then the realization hit her like a Bludger: she would never know for sure, would she? She would never fly on a broom like her friends and their brothers could do. She would never feel this kind of freedom.

Sickening jealousy wrestled with a profound sense of loss within Annie. The cursed circumstances of her birth began piling up in her mind. She had been born too small, too early, too ill. Worst of all: unwanted. Unloved by her parents. And now yet another 'un' to add to the list: un-magical.

Was it harder to deal with because she alone knew the alternative? No one else she knew lamented the fact they could not do magic. Not that she'd ever asked, of course but it was obvious all the same that nobody but her spared a moment's thought about it. Yet Annie knew the existence of another world; that magic was real. That it was so close she could reach out and touch it, or at least walk amidst it. She often snuck into the woods when Fred and George were gone at school, searching for imps and fairies to cheer her. It helped that she could still find them on her own, reassuring her that all her memories were real, and everyone else was mistaken.

"Look out, Charlie!" shouted George.

Annie's attention focused once again on the activity in the air before her. Across the orchard, Fred and George both were jetting toward a Bludger chasing after Charlie.

"They're going for a doppelbeater!" cried the smallest boy in a high-pitched voice.

That must be Ron, thought Annie as she watched the twins both raise their batting arms as one.

With a force that made them each spin on their brooms, Fred and George hit the Bludger simultaneously and were treated to a rousing cheer from the other flyers around them.

Annie had only a split second to react. The Bludger was headed directly for her at nearly the speed of lightening, she reckoned. She ducked, reflexively bringing up her right arm as a shield. The next instant, she was on the ground and heard the ball zoom past her head once again as it returned to the orchard-pitch.

And then she felt it.

Blinding pain had finally traveled the nerve endings from her right forearm to her brain. It was so intense she could barely breathe, let alone cry out. Instinctively, she hugged her arm to her body an action that resulted in a new wave of pain that made her retch.

Using her legs, she gingerly scooted on her back until she reached the tree and eased herself into a seated position, leaning against the trunk. Then she hazarded a glance down at her injured arm. About halfway between her elbow and her wrist, her right arm bent outwards at an odd angle. The sight was so jarring it made her head spin.

Annie took a few moments to catch her breath. The pain wasn't going away, nor was it getting any easier to bear. She heard the voices of the boys still playing from behind her. They hadn't noticed her presence, much less that she had been hit.

"Fred?"

The most she could muster was a very faint whimper no good at all. Should she try again, see if she could yell any louder? Maybe try to stand, walk out onto the field? She thought about what would happen then: Fred and George would see her, help her home... *in front of their brothers*

Then the jig would be up. Their secret blown. The rest of the family would find out about her, and that was unacceptable. She couldn't put Fred and George in jeopardy like that. She wouldn't risk their friendship, no matter how much it hurt her.

Annie gritted her teeth as she braced herself against the tree trunk, using it to help her get to her feet. The pain was making her head spin, but she steadied herself against the tree until the spell had passed. Then slowly, panting with the effort, she began walking home, cradling her broken arm against her body.

Three hours later, Annie was sitting in a stark, antiseptic emergency room. *At least the pain is gone,* she thought gratefully, watching the doctor adding wet, goopy plaster and gauze to the cast on her arm. At least, that's what she imagined it felt like, since her arm was completely numb at the moment. She could hear him periodically mutter words like, "Ludicrous," and, "Unbelievable," under his breath.

The walk home through the woods had been excruciating. Gran had thankfully been too shocked at the sight of her mangled arm to give her any immediate third degree about how it happened. Mrs. Finnerty, the neighbor lady, had graciously driven them the short distance to the hospital in Ottery.

Annie had exited the x-ray room and taken a seat next to the examination table with her arm propped on it, waiting for the pain medication to take full effect before they set the break. Glancing then at the doctor and her grandmother, she had seen that the inquisition was about to commence.

It had come from the doctor first. "Young lady, how did this happen?" he had asked, glancing at the x-ray films.

"Er-um... I sort of... fell?"

Gran raised an eyebrow, looking at her quizzically.

"You fell? From where, a three story building?" the doctor had demanded, still not looking at her.

"Well, no. I fell from... my bike."

"You expect me to believe that you snapped both your radius and ulna by falling from a bicycle?" he had asked incredulously.

Annie had nodded, feigning confidence she did not feel. "I was going really fast. Sorry, Gran," she had added. She'd meant it, but not for the reason she'd hoped Gran would assume.

"Then where are the other bruises and abrasions, hmm? You must have skidded along the road, going so fast as you were," he had asked then, clearly figuring he'd caught her in a lie.

Annie had shrugged. "I just sort of... hit a rock... and then I flew over the handlebars... and landed on my arm... on some grass. No skidding."

"Well, I can see I'm not going to get the real story out of you," he snapped, glaring at her. He gave her Gran a suspicious look, as if sizing her up. Then pursed his lips, dismissing the thought.

Annie's Gran had spoken up then. "My granddaughter doesn't lie, Doctor. If she says that's how it happened, that's how it happened. Now, if you please, just patch her up so I can take her home."

Annie's eyes and heart had sunk to the floor as her grandmother spoke. She felt like a toad, forcing her Gran to defend her bald-faced lie to the doctor. She was only in this predicament because of her stupid temper and her revolting jealousy of her best friends. She didn't deserve her loving Gran, or her friends. She had never felt so utterly worthless, and that was saying something.

After the cast was set and her arm was resting in a sling, they finally left the hospital. It was well after dinner time, and Annie was starving.

"I sent Mrs. Finnerty home, dear. It wouldn't be right to make her wait on us all that time. I hope you feel up to walking home," Gran said tenderly.

Annie nodded. Her arm was beginning to ache as the medication wore off, but she reckoned she deserved whatever pain she felt and probably more. She almost hoped her Gran would call her out for the lie, punish her, even send her to bed with no supper anything to relieve the guilt.

"We'll have a quick fry-up, then you need to lie down and get some rest. I expect tomorrow will be quite difficult for you, learning how to manage with that cast, my dear. No more bikes or forest walks for you for a while, I imagine. I'm just glad your bicycle wasn't damaged and you weren't hurt any worse." Gran gently put her arm around Annie's shoulders, then gave her a little squeeze of a hug and a peck on the cheek.

Why was Gran being so understanding, now that she knew Annie was a proven liar? She couldn't have believed the bike story any more than the doctor did. Was she now *punishing* Annie with kindness instead of anger, making her squirm with the guilt of it? Annie had never felt more miserable than she did at this moment, and a tear rolled down her cheek as they walked home together with darkness falling around them.

*

Annie strolled down the street. She had been cooped up in the house with Gran for almost exactly a week and couldn't stand any more. It didn't matter that she wasn't feeling well at the moment, or that Gran had gone out of her way to be nice to her the entire time both these things worked together to force her out, in fact. She reckoned she deserved the nagging, aching pain in her arm. But she was sick of wallowing in the guilt that Gran's never-ending kindness left her mired in.

The weather was still quite warm, and the cast and sling were distinctly uncomfortable. Annie's arm felt swollen, itchy, and heavy on top of the pain from her broken bones. *At least it isn't my writing arm* she thought gratefully. That is, assuming Fred and George would write her at all, since she had stood them up before they left. She hadn't even gotten a chance to say goodbye to them this year.

And while the physical activity of her brisk walk in the sunshine was improving her mood somewhat, she was still feeling a bit prickly as she turned down the street toward Stephen's house. She had not seen nor spoken to any of her other friends since the last day of school. She didn't even know for sure that they would be there, but that was the most likely place to find them, she figured.

Annie was in luck. Three boys sat on the front stoop, looking lazy and bored. *Perfect*, she thought. She'd much rather unleash her mood on them than her Gran. Knowing them, they probably deserved it.

Tom smirked as she approached the steps. "Well, well, well. Look what the cat dragged in."

"Thought you must've fallen down a well or something," laughed Geoff.

Stephen alone stood up and smiled at her approach, like he was the slightest bit happy to see her again. "What happened to you?" he asked in a playfully accusatory tone of voice.

Annie shrugged. She was unsure if he was referring to her arm or her absence. Either way, she had no intention of discussing her summer with this lot. "Been busy. Had an accident."

"Obviously," he said, bristling at the brush off. "Did you fall or something, clumsy git?"

"What do you care?" she asked him defensively.

"I don't!" he exclaimed, perhaps a tad too vehemently.

"Then why d'you ask?" Annie cried. She began to think maybe she should've gone somewhere else, after all.

"Jesus, you're touchy!" Stephen complained and turned away, dropping the conversation for the moment as he sat back down on the stoop.

Geoff narrowed his eyes, silently thoughtful, as if puzzled by the strangely heated interaction.

Tom wasn't done antagonizing Annie yet, however. She had always been a thorn in his side, ever since he had been unsuccessful in asserting his dominance over her that

first day they had met. "On the rag or something?" he jeered, looking to get a rise out of her as well as placate his leader.

Annie froze for a moment, stunned by the rude vulgarity of the comment. Point of fact, she actually was menstruating at the moment for only the third time in her life. She looked at Tom, searching for a clue as to what had brought on the unprovoked attack. All she saw was the most revolting smirk on his face.

She glanced at Stephen, who she discovered was watching her with an amused smile of his own, anticipating what punishment might be in store for Tom. She felt a flare of resentment toward him and the way he enjoyed pitting his friends against one another. She suspected that was the only reason Stephen sometimes gave her preferential treatment: for entertainment value alone. It was never to the point of sticking up for her, of course only enough to stir up resentment against her amongst the rest of the herd.

She asked herself for the hundredth time why she put up with this bullshit from them, then deflated slightly as she answered herself *because my real friends are gone*

Still, it made her blood boil that Tom imagined he could get away with comments like that. Annie casually took a few steps over to where he was standing. "What did you say?" she asked softly, daring him to repeat it.

"You heard me," Tom replied, daring her to retaliate. She was one-armed, after all. He had finally caught her with a distinct advantage in his favor.

He was clearly expecting nothing more than a verbal retort, despite the fact he had spent so much time in her company last year *Slow learner, Tom*, she thought.

With her good hand and with lightening quickness, she slapped the smirk right off his face. "Don't you ever speak to me like that again," she said, maintaining a soft, calm tone of voice, completely belying the indignant rage inside.

Tom took a second to recover himself, then scrambled upright. He loomed over Annie, glowering at her. "You little..." he snarled, clenching his fists.

Annie glared right back into his eyes, planting her feet, refusing to back down.

"Tom!" barked Stephen. He leaped up off the stoop and moved to stand between the two of them with his back to Annie, facing the threatening boy. "Leave her alone," he warned him.

"Is that how it is?" he asked, his tone scathing. "She's your little pet now?" With narrowed eyes, Tom snickered condescendingly.

Stephen shrugged with nonchalance.

"The hell I am!" cried Annie angrily. She struggled to push Stephen out of the way. She could have done it, too, she reckoned, if she'd only had two good arms.

Tom sneered with delight, recognizing Stephen had just handed him a weapon to use against her. "Forget it," he said dismissively, taking several steps backward down the street. "Since you're just going to hide behind your boyfriend...."

Annie moved to follow Tom down the street. "I'm not hiding behind anything!" she shouted.

But Stephen had shifted also, putting himself bodily between her and her quarry. He had puffed himself up as well, as if he was trying to encourage them all to think... what? That he was her protector? She damn well didn't need one, if that's what he thought!

"Get out of my way!" she yelled at Stephen, attempting to dart around him. "Hey, Tom..." she called out as she dashed ahead of Stephen, taking quick steps to catch up with the retreating boy.

Just as Tom paused and turned around to face her once more, Stephen grabbed her around the waist from behind, jerking her backward. She writhed and fought to escape, but it was no use. Tom laughed derisively at her, then turned again and jogged away.

"Get your hands off of me NOW!" she yelled, squirming and clawing at Stephen with her good hand.

After a moment's pause, Stephen complied.

She spun around to unleash her fury on him. "Keep your goddamn nose out of it!" she cried. "I don't need you to stick up for me! You never have before!"

Stephen rolled his eyes. "You were about to get your arse kicked, sweetheart."

Annie snorted. "By Tom? I can more than handle anything he can dish out. Even with one hand tied behind my back," she yelled, brandishing her cast.

Stephen smiled and shook his head. "You must think you're about a foot taller and fifty pounds heavier than you actually are, git."

Annie attempted unsuccessfully to fold her arms across her chest in a huff. *Damn bloody cast*, she growled to herself. Instead, she sat down on the stoop and glared at Stephen for the next ten minutes, grinding her teeth. He didn't help matters by occasionally chuckling at her, rolling his eyes, and constantly smirking.

She happened to glance over at Geoff. He was looking at her strangely, as if he had just arrived at some sort of conclusion about something.

"What?" she demanded, testily.

"Nothing," he answered, but the look didn't go away.

Annie continued to stare back at him, strongly suspecting he was lying to her.

He nervously looked over at Stephen, then down at the ground. "I should probably get going... catch you lot later," he said, awkwardly.

As Geoff was walking down the street, Stephen sat down next to Annie. She was beginning to smell a rat, and the stink got worse the closer Stephen got. A disturbing thought occurred to Annie in that moment. "Why did Tom call you my boyfriend?" she asked him.

Stephen shrugged. "Who knows?" he replied, then looked away. "He's an idiot."

"Right," said Annie dubiously, unconvinced.

Year 3 at Hogwarts

Concurrent with *Philosopher's Stone*. Gran's fed up with Annie's antics, and so is the school. She's got herself saddled with a tutor now. George and Fred's letters become peppered with mentions of some kid named Harry. Annie begins to see the importance of one's associates. Rated for swearing, juvenile delinquent activity, and some underage drinking.

Author's Note: There are grammatical and punctuation errors in the correspondence portion of this chapter that are intentional, dear readers, reflecting the maturity level and mood of the thirteen-year-old pen friends. They are entirely my own fault and not that of the lovely admins here at TPP.

Chapter 9: Year 3 at Hogwarts

1991 1992

2 September, 1991

Dear Annie,

Where were you? We went to the fort for three days in a row before we left, and you weren't there. What's wrong? Are you all right? Did you get sick again?

Here's a bit of news: we met Harry Potter on the train to school, and he got Sorted into Gryffindor! He's sort of a famous kid legend says he battled another famous wizard when he was a baby and won! He seems to be mates with our little brother Ron, who also Sorted into Gryffindor last night.

Our friend Lee brought a wicked cool giant tarantula to school this year. It's living under his bed in our dorm bet no one messes with our room this year!

Write back soon. We're worried about you.

Love,

George & Fred

10 September, 1991

Dear Fred & George,

Thanks for asking. I'm okay... just felt a little under the weather for a while. Feeling better now, anyway.

Tell me more about this Harry Potter. How does a baby fight with another wizard if he doesn't have a wand yet? That doesn't make any sense. What kind of world do you live in, making babies fight against each other?

Just how big is this giant tarantula? The ones I've seen are about as big as a hand. And anyway, I thought pets there were limited to rats, toads, and owls. What gives?

Sorry I missed saying goodbye to you lot. I'll miss you both! Have a good year! Now punch each other in the shoulder from me. And don't wuss out and make them soft... leave a bruise, just like I would.

Love you more,

Annie

1 October, 1991

Dear Annie,

Exciting news! Harry has joined our team as Seeker! Which is kind of a big deal he's the youngest Seeker here in a century. Not that there's any competition for the spot since Charlie left last year. The lucky bloke gets to study dragons in Romania this year, remember?

Anyway, back to Harry: he's damn good. Wood wants to keep him a secret (too late of course, everyone knows) and we've been practicing like mad. Maybe, just maybe, we might win this year. On purpose, even! The real test will be Slytherin on 9 November.

Glad to hear you're all right. Like I said before, we were worried. Fred wanted to sneak over and break into your house to check on you before we left. He was convinced you were being imprisoned by your Gran again and required liberating. I was barely able to talk him out of it. Thought that might have been a bit difficult for you to explain away to her... You're welcome, by the way!

Love,

George & Fred

14 October, 1991

Dear Fred & George,

Congrats on fielding a decent team, we all hope for the best. Please be careful around those Bludgers I imagine they could do some damage.

Have you heard anything from Charlie? Working with dragons must be pretty cool. Is it like a zoo or something, in Romania where he's working?

Thanks for not coming over before you left. I'm in enough trouble lately and don't need your help to find more. School is cracking down hard on me this year. Palmer the Prick has informed my Gran that my grades are so poor, unless I get a tutor AND stop causing trouble (roll eyes here) I will be politely asked not to return after first term is over.

You can imagine how I wanted to respond to that. Fine by me! I'm sure I've got better things to do with my time! K.M.A.!

But Gran is another thing entirely. She's pretty upset about the whole business. And she doesn't deserve all this rain of crap I'm bringing down on us. So yours truly gets to suck it up and begin tutoring sessions twice a week after school.

And you can wipe those bloody smiles off your faces this instant, both of you.

I hope I don't get stuck with a Percy, but what hope do I have? Pray for me, that I don't snap and go mental on this poor git they're going to assign to me.

Love you more,

Annie

Annie sat at the kitchen table, nervously picking at a sheet of notebook paper, pruning off the ragged edge bit by bit. *She seemed nice enough yesterday when she rang to arrange to meet*, she mused. But it was hard to read a person accurately over the phone, she reminded herself. *Best not to have high hopes.*

Jane Moruki had phoned yesterday afternoon, introducing herself as Annie's school-appointed tutor. Working with Annie was to be Jane's community service project this year, and Annie knew she was in no position to refuse her: Jane was free as well as mandatory.

Ugh, how humiliating, she thought. Annie hated being backed into a corner like this. *But I'm stuck with her, no matter what*

She took a deep breath in an attempt to shake off the pessimistic turn her thoughts were taking. Even though life in general had taught her to prepare for the worst when dealing with the citizenry of Pottery St. Butthole and she smiled to recall the nickname Fred and George had given this place she knew it served no good purpose to have a bad attitude before the girl had even arrived. *Don't want to be guilty of the same nasty habit as the rest of this miserable town*, she reminded herself.

After all, Jane was new here this year and already had the reputation for being a star student. She was pretty and popular even though, or maybe because, she'd only lived here a little more than two months. *Maybe this place hadn't contaminated her soul yet* Annie mused sarcastically.

Yikes! Annie cried silently. She was shocked by the dark depth of that last thought. Did she really think her neighbors and schoolmates were evil? *Cruel and ignorant? Yes. Malicious? Maybe some of them...*

She was saved from dissecting the idea further by the doorbell.

Annie heard her Gran answer the front door and greet the new girl. She could detect no accent in her voice, offering no clue as to where she'd grown up or been since, other than not here. Jane was perfectly polite to her Gran and a perfect mystery to Annie. She had to admit her curiosity was piqued.

"Annie, Jane's here," Gran explained unnecessarily as she ushered their guest into the kitchen. "You're both welcome to anything you like to eat or drink. I'll just be out in the garden, if you need anything...."

Annie smiled tentatively at the tall, beautiful girl who had taken a seat at the table next to her. "Can I get you something?" she asked her politely. *No harm in being civil, after all.*

"No, thanks," Jane replied with a friendly smile of her own. "Your grandmother is sweet. I like her," she declared.

Annie nodded in agreement, immediately warming to this newcomer. *Anyone who likes Gran can't be completely bad* she reckoned. To her delighted surprise, Jane seemed warm and genuine traits in short supply at school, as far as Annie had found.

Jane propped her chin in her hand and gazed at Annie with curiosity. "So, Annie Jones... what am I doing here?" Jane asked pointedly, but not in an unfriendly way. Almost like she was teasing. But this was the friendly sort of teasing the kind Annie enjoyed, like Fred and George would do. Not the kind she usually encountered from her peers.

"Beg pardon?" asked Annie, perplexed.

"You're not stupid, that much is obvious. You ask clever questions and give decent answers. I've seen you in Stratford's class, remember?"

"Oh, right." Annie had seen the older girl her in the science class, working quietly in a corner by herself. "What is it you're doing in there, anyway?"

"Independent study project," Jane said, waving her hand dismissively, as if her impressive accomplishment wasn't important at the moment. "I don't get it you clearly understand the material, better than a lot of the dunderheads in there with you, I'll wager. How is it you can be failing this class?"

Annie blushed with the compliments. She had asked herself the same question quite often lately. "I dunno, really."

"Do you have trouble with taking exams? Do you get all anxious or something?" Jane asked with concern.

"No," replied Annie, shaking her head. Exams were one thing that never really bothered Annie at school. *Nearly everything else, on the other hand...*

"May I see your last exam?" Jane asked, holding out her hand expectantly.

"Sure," said Annie, digging it out of a folder and handing it over.

Jane spent several minutes perusing Annie's last train wreck of an exam. She began shaking her head slightly, pursing her lips. She then flipped to the essay section and began reading what Annie had written. "What an idiot..." she mumbled.

Annie sighed dejectedly. Maybe Jane had been wrong about her and no longer thought she was so clever after all.

"Oh, no, I didn't mean you, Annie!" Jane rushed to explain, noticing her quiet sigh. "This is the most poorly written test I've ever seen. With any decent professor, you could argue for at least partial credit for every question you got wrong. And your writing style is clear and concise. But Stratford's such an arse!" Jane rolled her eyes.

Annie's mouth dropped open. Jane had just echoed her thoughts about the test exactly. A fifth year honor student was telling her she was right and the professor was wrong!

"Look, if you want my advice..." Jane offered.

Annie nodded eagerly, keenly interested in what Jane would have to say.

"You don't need my help with the material, that's obvious. But you since you have to do your penance anyway...."

What an interesting choice of words Annie thought. She had viewed the tutoring sessions as a sort of punishment, herself. She smirked and nodded again in understanding.

"And I need this volunteer tutoring assignment for my service requirement, so why don't we make the best of it? Plus, I like you, Annie Jones," she added with a smile and

a wink. "So how about this: I'll keep coming here twice a week, but instead of wasting time reviewing what you already understand, I'll teach you the fine art of academic bullshitting. That's probably the only skill you're lacking at this point, frankly. But I'll be honest with you it won't look good for either of us if you continue to balls-up the exams, so you have to promise me you'll try to do better. Do we have a deal?"

Annie nodded and smiled. She was really starting to like this girl and her no-nonsense approach. "What do you mean, 'The art of academic bullshitting?'" she asked.

Jane laughed. "A little trick my mother taught me," she explained. "Here, look.... Take this question you missed, for instance. It was a trick...."

"I knew it!" exclaimed Annie.

Jane nodded. "And you fell for it," she chided. "The answer you gave isn't technically wrong in fact, it would be perfectly acceptable in most other classes."

"So, why did I get it wrong?" Annie interrupted with a whine.

"It's all in the wording. Take a look at *B*," she instructed.

Annie reread the multiple choice answer. "It says the same thing as *D*, really," she argued.

"I know," Jane agreed. "But *B* contains one of Stratford's favorite pet phrases, see? I'll bet you even have it written in your notes, he repeats it so often. That's why *B* is the right answer in this situation."

"But that's bullshit! They're both right!" Annie argued.

"That's exactly my point," explained Jane.

Annie rolled her eyes. "Why should I kiss Stratford's arse for a grade?" she cried. It infuriated Annie to encounter unfair people and practices, and she never resisted a chance to call them out on it, *the bloody hypocrites!*

"And there's your problem, right there. You have to ask yourself, Annie, if it's really worth it," Jane said in a kind voice.

"Huh?"

"Is it worth your time and effort, all this pain and suffering, to argue with a great gasbag of an idiot like Stratford, who'll never change anyway? Yes, you're right about the answer on the exam, and you're right that he's a prick. But what good does it do to beat your head against a brick wall?"

"So, everyone should just let him get away with being a pompous jerk?" Annie asked in disbelief.

Jane shrugged.

"Some things are worth fighting for!" Annie cried. "When I see something that's... that's *bullshit*... then I'm bloody well going to say something about it! He shouldn't be allowed to get away with it!" she reiterated.

"You're absolutely right, Annie. *Some* things are important enough that one must never be willing to compromise. Other things, however... like a third-rate science teacher stuck teaching thirteen-year-olds in a dead-end job in a backwater of Devon no offense intended just aren't," argued Jane.

"So, you're saying I should just play the game," Annie replied, disgusted by the suggestion.

Jane shrugged once more. "Do what's right for *you*, Annie. But bear in mind that Stratford's a jerk who gets off on lording himself over students with no power to do anything about it. By taking the bait, you not only hobble yourself by giving him a chance to hurt you with a poor mark, you're giving him an ego boost as well by offering the challenge in the first place. I think of it more as choosing *not* to play the game."

"Oh. I hadn't thought of it that way before," Annie said, truly intrigued by Jane's way of looking at the situation.

"Don't give the arseholes of the world so much power over you, Annie," she said gently. "Don't let them stand in the way of doing something with your life, of getting the hell out of here. You want to go to university, right?"

Annie shrugged. "Haven't really thought about it much. Gran wants me to go, but I'm not sure. I'm not really the school-type."

"Well, what is it you want to do with your life, then?" Jane sounded genuinely interested, once again taking Annie by surprise. "You don't strike me as the type who plans to hitch herself to one of these idiots here at school. Surely you've got more ambition not to mention self-respect than that?"

"Good God, no!" Annie cried. "Regardless of what you might have heard about me, I have absolutely zero interest in any of the boys in this town!"

Just because all her friends (and she used the term loosely in reference to Stephen and his herd) were boys, all the rest of the students at school assumed Annie was... well... that she had very loose morals, to put it politely. Rumors about her had been circulating like wildfire lately. She might not have understood every one of the fresh comments she'd been hearing at school, but that hadn't stopped her from shutting the mouths that uttered them.

"Good! And for your information, I never listen to idle gossip. I mean, consider the source!" Jane exclaimed, rolling her eyes for effect.

Annie beamed an enormous grin at Jane. She was an angel that much was clear sent to Annie in her darkest hour, for this term had been turning into exactly that. Here was a smart, decent, friendly young woman, two years ahead of Annie at school, who was willing to see past all the meaningless crap the rest of the people in this town weren't and give her a chance to be herself. And Jane lived here year 'round! How could Annie be so lucky?

"Are you sure you don't want a biscuit or something?" Annie chuckled, delighted with the serendipitous change in her fortune.

"Only if you have one, too," Jane said with a smile. "And then it's back to work. We'll go over this exam for starters and study where you went wrong. I promise with my help, you'll do better next time!"

9 November, 1991

Dear Annie,

Lots of news, but first how are things going with your very own personal Percy? How did it get to this point without us knowing about it? You've never been anything but dead clever in our opinion (but don't get a big head about it), so what gives? There must be something more to it you're not telling us...

Back to more thrilling stuff: there was a mountain troll loose at Hogwarts on Halloween! Remember reading about those? Anyway, our idiot brother Ron and his friend Harry somehow rescued a little first year twit from being flattened by it. I'm still not sure I believe half the story Ron's telling, but something spectacular happened, that's for sure. I'm starting to suspect something fishy is going on here this year...

Oh, and did I mention WE WON THE FLIPPING MATCH! It was effing brilliant! Harry caught the Snitch in his mouth! Despite the fact that someone sabotaged his broom during the match and he nearly fell off to his death (more evidence of the fishiness I mentioned previously). I only wish that I had more opportunities for bashing in Slytherin heads to look forward to. And as it's the first match of the year, we stand alone in first place for the Cup!

Write back soon with your report regarding the tutor! And don't do anything we wouldn't do!

Love,

George & Fred

P.S. It's a Romanian dragon reservation, not a zoo. Dragons aren't really fit for cages. The flaming breath, you see.

1 December, 1991

Dear Fred & George,

Congratulations on the win! I'm sure it was all down to the excellent play of the Gryffindor beaters! Rah Rah Rah!

Things are going well here. Jane that's my tutor has turned out to be a really nice girl. And she's helping me loads. I never realized how much more there is to learn at school than books and exams. We've even gone out to the cinema together once. Finally, I've got a friend that Gran knows about and approves of to boot!

But don't worry you two are still my favorites! No one could replace you two gits in my heart!

How are your new classes going? Do you get to work with any cool creatures? And what do you learn about in Muggle Studies? Is it as easy as you thought it would be?

In case I don't write again before Christmas, hope yours is happy!

Love you more,

Annie

26 December, 1991

Dear Annie,

Well now, don't you sound chipper! It's good to hear you cheerful again! Glad to hear things have worked out well with the tutoring business... although your raving attitude toward such a star student leaves us strongly suspicious that you've turned into a massive prat. Send us proof you haven't.

Magical Creatures with Kettleburn is pretty cool. We studied unicorns for a good bit this fall. You would've liked it better than we did. They don't care much for boys, see. And it's hard as hell to pay attention down at the paddock we'd much rather be exploring the Forest on our own instead. It's way better than the one we have at home...

Muggle Studies is a complete joke. We strongly suspect most of Burbage's information is dead wrong or out of date at the very least. I mean, she's been telling us about Muggle medicine this term, and most of what she described was either laughably backward or downright barbaric. Does it really take two months for Muggle bones to heal? In a plaster tube? I'm betting Fred it's crap, so please write back soon (money's at stake).

Love,

George & Fred

13 January, 1992

Dear Fred & George,

Happy New Year! Gran let me spend the night at Jane's on New Year's Eve and we had a good time watching videos and sipping champagne (have you ever had any?). Good news: my grades have improved and Gran is now thrilled with me. So much so that I now have a curfew of 9 p.m. even on school nights!

Now, I've had to be careful not to ruin my good fortune with Gran, but I did manage a little stunt. You see, I've been burning with a desire to avenge myself on the git of a professor that landed me in so much trouble last term. Although in retrospect, meeting Jane was one of the luckier moments in my life, so in actuality I am an ungrateful little shit for doing this. However, said professor is an unmitigated jerk, so I spare no energy on feeling remorse for his sake.

This idiotic fellow has a curious habit of displaying a family of odd-looking scarecrows in his front yard. It makes no sense whatsoever, so don't ask me why. Anyway, as you can see by the series of snaps enclosed, I've a habit of re-arranging them under cover of night once a week or so. They are naughty little scarecrows, no? The most amazing thing is why the bloody fool hasn't put them away by now! I think he secretly enjoys waking up in the morning and catching those shameful things in their latest scandalous pose.

As for Muggle medicine, it seems perfectly fine to me. Not that I've had much experience with it, you understand. Why exactly are you asking me about broken bones, anyway? Yes, a clean break would be set in a cast and takes 68 weeks to heal, so I've heard. Sorry, George, but you lose this time.

Love you more,

Annie

1 February, 1992

Dear Annie,

Well done you! We busted a gut laughing at those snaps. Fred has them mounted on the wall in our dorm room. Lee and Ken send you cheers, as well!

And thanks for losing me the bet, prat! I can't imagine clunking around in a cast for such a ridiculous amount of time. Every time I break a bone (I think I'm up to an even dozen now), it's just a quick dose of Skele-Gro and everything's hunky-dory in the morning. Okay, in point of fact it is pretty painful, but there's sleeping draught too, so who cares?

Next weekend is our second 'legal' trip into Hogsmeade. It's not nearly as much fun that way, we've found. We might not even bother with going. The village is far more interesting after dark... and anyway, Wood's been killing us lately with so much extra Quidditch practice that I'd rather just sleep. He's gone a bit off, if you ask me. I mean, it's only a game, after all.

A word of warning: we've got quite big plans for your upcoming birthday!

Love,

George & Fred

13 February, 1992

Dear Fred & George,

Glad you enjoyed the snaps. The silly git finally put the things away, under pressure from the neighbors I suspect, so my fun is over.

Skele-Gro and sleeping potion, huh? Typical wizard response to a health crisis: brew up a kettle of poison and bottom's up! Must be nice...

And what has happened to the Quidditch-obsessed Weasley twins? Since when is Quidditch "only a game?" Have you recently taken a Bludger to the head?

Yes, my periodically non-existent birthday is rapidly approaching. I am sick of being 13, that's for sure. I certainly hope 14 treats me better! Gran says I can invite Jane to sleep over that night my first slumber party at our house! Squee! Aren't you jealous? Seriously though, I suspect that you two would like Jane as well. She's got a pretty good sense of humor for an honor student, that is. Can't seem to convince her to join me in any hijinks, though.

Best of luck against the Puffers!

Love you more,

Annie

1 March, 1992

Dear Annie,

Happy birthday! Please refer to the enclosed snap for your gift. You are now the one and only Muggle proudly memorialized in the Hogwarts seventh floor boys' toilet! Fourth stall from the left. You can see what an emotional moment it was for us. Truly moving. We originally planned on posting you the seat, but I convinced Fred that Errol would have perished en route.

More good news: WE WON ANOTHER MATCH! Harry came through again, catching the Snitch a mere five minutes into the game, bless him! And not a moment too soon Snape refereed, can you believe our luck? He clearly had it out for us and would have surely thrown the game away if it had lasted very long at all. But now we are first in line for the Cup at 2-0!

Yet another update: there is something afoot here in the castle. That sneaky little rat of our brother just happened to let it slip that he and his sneaky little rat-mates discovered way back in September the reason why the third floor corridor is off limits this year! Apparently there is a hellhound guarding something hidden behind a trapdoor. I have to admit I'm a bit impressed with the little shit, not only for finding the damn thing, but for keeping it quiet for this long as well. Bloody irresponsible of Dumbledore to keep a hellhound in a school, regardless. One more example of why we respect him so much!

Love,

George & Fred

Annie crouched down behind the car as Geoff picked the locked driver's side door open. "Why don't you just nick your mum's keys?" she whispered.

"Where's the thrill in that?" he retorted. "Anyway, she's out with her boyfriend tonight, so there're no keys to be stolen, are there?" Geoff yanked the door open and waved her inside.

Annie gave him a half-smile as she scooted into the front passenger seat, keeping her hood low around her face. She knew she was far too small to look old enough to drive, whereas Geoff was quite a bit taller, so he got the honors. He had been too chicken-shit to do it alone, though, so that explained her presence. If he got in trouble, he'd be taking her down with him, she was sure of that. That was, of course, if he didn't flat-out hang her out to dry in his stead.

They drove straight to Stephen's house to pick up the rest of the gang. Once there, Mike made her give up the front seat, claiming his long legs couldn't fit anywhere else, and forced her into the back seat with Stephen. She thought she caught a wink exchanged between them, but couldn't be sure. Mike was a blinker, almost to the point of it being a facial tic.

As they drove to a nearby town in search of adventure, Stephen was quite chatty with her. "I'm glad you came out with us tonight. You should join us more often."

"I'm usually busy," she explained, pleased that she didn't even need to lie much.

Between study sessions with Jane, her weekly shooting lessons at the firing range (which she looked forward to as the high point of her week), and taking care of all the housework for Gran, she had very little free time. Still, it was nice to be out tonight even with these idiots for company letting off a bit of steam for once. Jane was a great friend, but she didn't have much of a sense of adventure.

"Too risky," Jane had explained, shaking her head when Annie had once asked her to participate.

Annie had nodded eagerly in agreement. "That's the whole point, isn't it? Come on, live a little!" she urged in vain.

"That scarecrow business at Stratford's house was excellent," Stephen continued. "I knew it had to be you that did it! You're still the same old Annie, even though you're pretending to be a star student all the sudden. You don't fool me, you know."

She snorted derisively at his presumption. "You think you know me that well?"

"I bet I know you better than you think I do," he argued. "I know you're bored stiff hanging out with that swot all the time."

"You're not nearly as clever as you think you are," she laughed. But he did have a point: she missed having an outlet for mischief. As wonderful as Jane was, Annie

sometimes felt almost caged in her presence.

To Annie's disappointment, Geoff pulled up in front of a liquor store. *All the adventures this lot ever want to have anymore involve booze* she lamented. She had no real interest in the stuff. Not that she didn't enjoy a bit now and then she just didn't approve of the volume of consumption they considered a prerequisite to a good time. Nor did she appreciate the method by which they counted on scoring it.

"C'mon, Annie. Time to get to work!" encouraged Geoff.

"Yeah, Annie. Make yourself useful," Mike urged. "There's a likely sod right there. Looks a bit hard up oughta be easy enough for you."

"Sod off, every last one of you. I'm not doing it anymore," she snapped, refusing to budge.

"Forget it, chaps she's a good girl now," Stephen taunted in response to her scowl. "Too good for the likes of us. You stay here then, Annie, and we'll take care of this...."

The three boys looked pointedly at each other, then slowly turned to open their doors.

Annie was startled and a bit pleased at the fact they gave in so easily. She turned to get out of the car as well she didn't want to be left behind if they were all participating. *Maybe they're finally starting to respect me after all?*

She shut the door behind her and stepped out onto the street. As she turned to walk toward the curb, she heard all three other doors shut at once, then heard the clicks of the door locks. Three smugly smiling prats were waving at her from within.

Annie took a deep breath. The anger she felt building inside her was not directed toward the moronic, manipulative jerks in the car. It was for her own idiotic notion that they would ever give a damn about her. That they would ever see her as an equal. *Talk about beating my head against a brick wall....*

She began to think maybe she wanted a drink after all as she marched over to the store entrance: a good stiff belt might indeed help improve her mood.

She looked up at her quarry as she approached. *He looks the part*, she thought to herself. *Well-greased, a bit scruffy, already leering*. She smiled at him half-heartedly.

"Hello, dearie," he said, slurring his words.

"Hey. Mind buying some for my mates and me?" she asked awkwardly.

The drunk shrugged. "What's in it for me?"

"We'll pay you. You can keep the change," she offered.

He harrumphed but took her money and went inside the store. About ten minutes later, he came shuffling back out of the store carrying a large bottle.

Annie stepped up to him with her hand out. "Thanks, mate," she mumbled.

"There wasn't any change," he said, grabbing her hand instead of handing over the liquor. "You still owe me," he growled as he pulled her toward him.

Annie struggled to resist, but found him to be a stronger drunk than she expected. His grip was tight and beginning to hurt her wrist. And she was being inexorably pulled toward an alley behind the shop.

"Let go of me!" she demanded, digging her heels into the pavement and yanking backwards. Pain shot through her arm as she felt as if she'd nearly dislocated her shoulder, but was still caught in the steel trap of the pervert's grip.

He laughed darkly at her. "Quit struggling. I might drop the bottle. Your mates won't like it if you come back empty-handed."

"Hey! Get your hands off her, arsehole! She's mine," she heard Stephen's voice from a distance behind her. "Give her the bottle and get lost!"

She turned to glance toward the car, noting Stephen was marching quickly toward them. *About effing time*, she thought, heart racing.

"Or what?" the drunk snarled.

"Or the three of us are gonna kick your sorry arse!" Stephen shouted.

The man squinted in Stephen's direction, sizing up the threat. Annie felt his grip begin to loosen and took advantage of it, escaping him and quickly darting out of arm's reach.

"Let's kick his arse anyway, mate," offered Geoff, who was only standing halfway out of the car.

Mike was still fully inside. *The bloody cowards*, she thought.

Annie snatched the bottle from her attacker. She was tempted to break it over the drunk's head, but Stephen relieved her of the precious booty before she had the chance. He grabbed her arm as well and pulled her back toward their car.

"Let's go, mates," he said as he opened the rear door for her. "We got what we wanted. No harm done...."

Annie stood before the open door, looking at Stephen incredulously. *No harm done!?* Her wrist, elbow and shoulder were throbbing from the fight to get away from that creep. Not to mention her hands were shaking from the adrenaline still pumping through her system.

Stephen pushed her into the back seat, holding her head down like she was a criminal being taken into custody. He must have recognized the subsequent look on her face and steeled himself for the imminent attack. "Here, have a snort," he said, offering her the bottle first in an effort to stave it off. "You earned it."

She took the bottle from him, struggling to master the urge to deck him. *He's not worth it.... None of them are worth it....* she continually chanted silently in her head as she took a long pull. The alcohol burned her throat and empty stomach, but it was a preferable sensation to the combination of fury and self-loathing that was in there already. *Not worth getting all riled up. What did you expect, anyway?*

She turned to Stephen, who had taken the bottle back from her and was tossing back a swig himself. "What the hell did you mean back there when you said, 'She's mine?'" she asked him angrily, ignoring her own advice.

Stephen snorted, almost choking on the swallow. "I just saved your arse back there, sweetheart, and you wanna bitch at me about semantics?" he cried.

"Excuse me!?" she asked, dumbfounded. He was the reason her arse had been on the line in the first place, she reckoned. *Did he really fancy himself a hero?*

"Look, can we discuss this later?" he asked her, looking pointedly at Geoff and Mike in the front seat.

Annie reluctantly let the argument drop for the time being. In point of fact, she didn't care for squabbling in front of an audience, either; especially one which never sided

with her anyway. She folded her arms across her chest and sat in silence for the duration of the short ride home, arm aching.

They pulled up to Geoff's house and snuck the booze into the garage, hoping that his mum would be none the wiser when she got home later that night. The fellows continued passing the bottle between them, but Annie was no longer interested and shook off the offer.

"What's the matter with you, now? You're not still on about that harmless old drunk, are you? Loosen up, why don't you?" chided Mike, blinking and holding the bottle out to her.

"Oh, the peer pressure is tearing me apart," she exclaimed mockingly. "I do so want to fit in with your herd of pathetic sheep!" she taunted with a derogatory smile.

They laughed like she had just made a particularly funny remark. *Were they really so ignorant that they mistook an insult for a joke?* she wondered.

Impatiently, she grabbed Stephen's arm and began to drag him away from his admirers. "C'mon, let's finish what we started in the car," she muttered.

As they stepped outside, she heard knowing chuckles from behind them and glimpsed Stephen smiling and winking at the other boys.

"What the hell was that?" she demanded angrily as the door shut behind them.

"What? Nothing, I swear!" he exclaimed defensively. He took her by the arm and began to pull her around toward the back of the garage.

"What's wrong with right here?" she asked, resisting him.

"You want them to see and hear us?" he retorted, knowing with confidence what her answer would be.

"Fine." Once they were out of sight of the door, she refused to go any further. "We need to talk," she started.

Stephen released her and leaned against the wall of the garage. "Okay. Talk, then."

"Why is it everyone thinks there's something going on between us?" she demanded.

Stephen shrugged, unable to fully quash a smug smile.

He was lying: that much was patently obvious. Annie fumed in frustration, but swallowed her anger and put her calmest metaphorical foot forward. "Please just be a decent human being for a change, instead of a massive git," she begged him.

Stephen's response was to smirk and reach out for her.

Annie's temper flared. Enraged, she swatted his hands away. She grabbed the lapels of his jacket, shoving him against the wall with a loud *thump*.

Stephen's smile grew even bigger. "You are sorta cute when you're pissed off," he teased her, wrapping his large hands over her much smaller fists.

Annie screeched in exasperation, letting go of him and stepping back out of reach. She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples as if she had a throbbing headache.

"Okay, already," he offered, giving in. "Look, it's not my fault. I didn't start the rumor. I think it started last fall when you pissed off Tom," he explained.

"So, you're telling me Tom's been spreading these lies? For revenge? Because I slapped him?" she asked in disbelief.

"Well, maybe not just that. I think he's a bit jealous of you and me," he replied.

Annie stared at him in shock.

"Of our friendship," he added hastily.

Annie shook her head slowly. *How could anyone be jealous of what passed for friendship with Stephen? What was there to be envious of? That couldn't be the whole story....*

"What about you?" she demanded.

"What about me? I told you already I didn't start it!" Stephen whined.

"You obviously knew about the rumor, as well as who was responsible for it. Did you ever do anything to stop him?"

Stephen shrugged. "In my experience, the best thing to do is ignore something like this. It'll all blow over after a while..."

"It's been more than six months. I don't think your strategy is working," Annie snapped.

"What can I do?" he asked, feigning helplessness.

"Start denying it!" she cried vehemently. "Start telling people there's nothing happening between you and me! Please!"

"Why do you care what other people think, anyway? I thought you were above all that?" he chided her.

"Because it's not true and it's getting out of hand! Stephen, people think... people are saying that we... *have done it*," she mumbled uncomfortably.

"Really?" he asked, sounding surprised and rather pleased.

"You idiot!" she hissed, barely controlling the urge to punch him in the face. "If this ever got back to my Gran, it would... it would break her heart! If you won't do it for me, as a friend, then please do it for her. She doesn't deserve this!" she pleaded, her eyes searching his face for some shred of chivalry.

Stephen looked at her with some small stirring of pity. *She loves that old lady, for whatever reason* he mused. And he had never really meant to hurt Annie by encouraging the rumor both its creation last summer and its persistence throughout the school year. He hadn't thought much beyond himself, to be honest.

And he could see now that it had hurt Annie. Her reputation had been falsely ruined all because he thought it would reflect positively on his own. It was the paradoxical double-standard of modern sexual mores: a promiscuous girl was a whore, but a promiscuous boy was a chap to be admired. And what had he gotten for his trouble? Far from bringing her within reach of making it actually come true, it had driven her further away from him.

"I'll see what I can do," he offered reluctantly.

"Thank you," she replied tersely. "I would certainly appreciate whatever effort you can spare," she added sarcastically.

Stephen bristled at her smart attitude. He had liked it much better when she was pleading with him a moment ago. He was already starting to regret offering to help her

out. *Maybe it would be too little, too late, anyway.*

"You wanna go back in?" he asked.

"Not really. I think I'll just go home," she said.

He could tell she was still pissed off, but was cooling down all the same, now that he had promised her what she wanted. Maybe he might still have some leverage....
Maybe out of gratitude, she might offer up some small concession....

"C'mon, I'll drive you," he offered, taking her hand. *It's dark, and she shouldn't be walking alone,* he reckoned, even if it was only a short way to her house. Not to mention it would make him feel better about himself to play the valiant protector for a bit.

"Okay," she agreed somewhat reluctantly. It was starting to mist, after all, and she shivered a little.

He led her around the garage again, poking his head in the door to let the others know he was taking Annie home, and that he'd be back soon.

"Sure, mate," slurred Geoff, well into the bottle by now. "I read you loud and clear!"

Annie heard Mike guffaw in the background. "Things were gettin' a bit rough out there, were they?" he taunted.

Stephen chuckled in response. Annie yanked her hand out of his and gave his shoulder a shove, knocking him into the doorframe.

"Erm, no. It's not like that. You guys know Annie's not like that," he argued weakly. "I'll be back in ten minutes, tops. So save some o' that bottle for me, you sods."

He turned around to see Annie glaring daggers at him, arms crossed, chin jutting out. "I changed my mind. I think I will walk after all. You stay here with your mates," she spat, turning away.

"Annie, don't be angry," he said, taking a step after her.

But she had already turned her back and started running now. He knew there was no chance to catch up she could easily beat every one of them in a foot race and had proven it time after time. Disappointed, he turned back to the garage.

"Thanks a lot, you sorry gits," he greeted them gruffly.

"Woman troubles, mate?" laughed Mike. "Can't live with 'em, can leave 'em by the side of the road...."

"Come and drown your sorrows with us!" cried Geoff, patting the seat beside him.

1 April, 1992

Dear Fred & George,

Happy birthday, yourselves! The photo was quite amusing, I admit. Thank you so much for my very own toilet, even though I will never get to see it. It's certainly a gift that keeps on giving, isn't it?

Speaking of birthday presents, here are yours. This stuff is called cling film; I'm sending you each your own roll. It's one of the most useful things in a Muggle prankster's tool kit. It clings to porcelain, metal, and glass (and itself, which is bloody frustrating at times, you'll find). You can make practically invisible barriers with it. Try it on doorways, toilet seats, and the like. I promise you will enjoy the results.

Here's something you'll appreciate: Gran says now that I'm fourteen, it's time for me to learn some self-defense (snort!). She's sending me to the firing range to learn to shoot my grandfather's old RAF pistol!!! So far I've gone 3 times and let me tell you it is frigging AWESOME!!! I don't know how we'll work it out, but you two simply have to try it!!!

Congratulations on your second win of the season. And, since you apparently have access to a camera now, could you send a photo of the hellhound? Sounds quite interesting.

Love you more,

Annie

13 May, 1992

Dear Annie,

Let me get this straight: you want me to take a snap of a gigantic, ferocious three-headed dog? Are you mental? I grant you I'm a sucker for a dare, but I also have a strong self-preservation streak. So forget it.

The film is magnificent! Any way we can get some more? We'll be glad to pay you name your price!

You've finally done it now: Fred and I are properly afraid of you at last. The thought of you packing heat when your temper turns has given the house-elves here a nasty job with our laundry. I can't believe anyone was stupid enough to put a lethal weapon in your hands. What has the world come to?

Ron has proven to be quite the pain in the arse this year. Remember Hagrid, the half-giant gamekeeper we told you about? He's a bit of a nutter when it comes to magical beasts, if you'll recall. Well, Ron and his mates quite idolize the fellow and spend loads of time visiting him. Anyway, Hagrid got a hold of a dragon egg apparently, which hatched and somehow bit Ron, who wound up in hospital with a poisoned and infected hand. Bloody git! Now Mum is having a hissy fit because Ron got Charlie involved with smuggling the damn thing out of here at midnight one night last week. Add to that the fact that the little brats managed to get themselves caught in the act and lost our house 150 frigging points!!! Fred and I have managed to prevent any other Gryffindors from inflicting physical damage on the little shits, but it hasn't been easy. Especially since I quite feel like kicking their little butts myself.

Love,

George & Fred

21 May, 1992

Dear Fred & George,

Hopefully two more rolls will see you through the end of term. I'll get you some more once you're back this summer.

Didn't realize you were so frightened of the dog. My mistake. Never mind, I'm sure it's not worth the risk. Sigh.

And give Ron a break. It's not as if you two haven't lost loads of points for Gryffindor over the past three years, is it? He was trying to do the right thing... wasn't he?

I've been thinking... I think we should try backpacking this summer. Dartmoor isn't that far and we could take the train there, you know. Do you think your mum would let you be gone for a few days in a row? Gran is so pleased with my 'transformation' that I'm betting she'll let me go. What do you think?

Looking forward to seeing you both soon. Good luck against Ravenclaw!

Love you more,

Annie

7 June, 1992

Dear Annie,

Thanks for the film. We'll settle up with you when we get back.

Well, things took quite an unexpected turn here lately. Turns out one of the professors here spent the past year being possessed by an evil entity, and he was scheming to get a hold of the mysterious thing that was hidden behind the trapdoor. So Harry, Ron, and Hermione (the little girl I mentioned last fall the three of them run in a pack) figured it out and followed him down there to try and stop him. I'll tell you all the gory details when I see you, but in the meantime I'll let you know they not only survived but defeated the SOB as well (and by defeated I mean permanently).

Guess Dumbledore'll be searching for yet another Defense Against the Dark Arts professor this summer. Have I ever mentioned there's a rumor the position is cursed? I'm starting to believe it: this'll be the fourth D.A.D.A. professor for Fred and me in as many years!

And now for the bad news: we lost the last match yesterday. By a lot. We've lost the Quidditch Cup for sure as a result, and things look really bad for the House Cup as well. And as for all these alleged points Fred and I have lost over the years the way we look at it, we've earned hundreds of points for all the times we haven't been caught.

Fred and I both love the Dartmoor idea. We'll make definite plans when we see you meet us 21 June at the fort!

Love,

George & Fred

Summer 1992

Chapter 10 of 80

Concurrent with *Chamber of Secrets*. Annie's boys are back for the summer, and the seeds for the Wheezes are planted. A camping trip leads to a very profound discussion about the nature of magic. And the twins share a daring tale of rescue.

Chapter 10: Summer 1992

Age 14

"Here, hold this a minute," Fred instructed her as he handed her an object.

Annie took what looked like a foot-long stick in her hand. "What is it?" she asked, turning it over in her hand while examining it for clues.

"What does it look like?" he asked with a smile.

"It looks like a wand, I suppose," she answered, peering at it closely.

"I wouldn't hold it so close to your face," George warned her.

"But, Fred, I thought you said Muggles weren't supposed to..."

BAM!

Annie couldn't finish her sentence before the thing exploded in her hand. It didn't hurt aside from being startled by the noise and encircled by a thick cloud of smoke, her hand merely felt a slight stinging sensation, as if she'd just slapped something very hard. She waved her arms a bit to clear the smoke as Fred and George bellowed with laughter.

"Well?" asked Fred, once he caught his breath.

"What d'you think?" added George, an expectant look on his face.

"That was...." Annie paused to cough, clearing the smoke from her throat. "Bloody brilliant!" she exclaimed, grinning at them both.

"Pay up, Fred!" cried George happily, holding out his hand expectantly.

"What were you betting on this time?" she laughed. "Was I the guinea pig?"

"Your reaction," chuckled Fred. "I must say I'm happy to lose this one to you, George," he said with a smile as he handed over a coin to his twin. "Didn't fancy being hunted down and picked off like a pheasant by Big Game Hunter Annie," he teased.

"Fred thought you might be pissed off," George explained, pocketing the coin. "I tried to remind him how much you love it when stuff blows up," he added with a shrug. He handed her a handkerchief he had pulled from his back pocket. "Here you'll want to clear off the soot."

Annie glanced down at her hand that had held the wand, noticing it was blackened. She began to wipe it off as she spoke excitedly. "What else have you got? Any more explosives?"

"Don't forget your face as well," Fred reminded her.

Annie obeyed, wiping more of the black stuff off her face.

"Just the fake wands, as yet," George replied. "It's taken a while to tweak the charm, see. It has to be hidden in the object..."

"Then go off at the right time..." added Fred.

"But not cause any real physical damage," George concluded. "Quite a challenge, actually."

"Bet Flitwick lives to regret letting that exploding spell slip in front of us," laughed Fred.

"Mum'd do a lot worse than send him a Howler, I expect, if she ever found out!" George agreed.

"I can't wait to start leaving a few of them around the common room next term!" Fred said in anticipation, with his brother nodding in agreement.

"Can you enchant anything with this spell?" Annie asked eagerly.

"I suppose..." muttered George, as if the thought hadn't occurred to him before.

"What did you have in mind?" asked Fred, intrigued.

"There must be a million things! What about ink pens? Cups? Dishes! Spoons! Clothing!" She was nearly shouting with excitement. Then she gasped. "What about *underpants*? Can you even imagine it?"

The boys looked at her in stunned amazement.

"George, are you writing any of this down?" Fred asked, eyes wide.

"Underpants?" George spluttered. "You're diabolical, you are," he whispered reverently.

"You'll be rich beyond your wildest dreams!" she squealed, jumping up and down. "I'd buy a hundred if you'd sell me any, that is."

Fred snorted at Annie's delusions of grandeur.

"Sell them?" cried George. "Who would buy a stupid fake wand?"

"Who wouldn't?" she countered. "They're not stupid they're fantastic! I'd give anything to distribute a few of them to some choice idiots in town, myself.... Everyone will want one! There'll be a huge demand for these, mark my words."

"Fred, d'you really think...?" George asked, turning to his brother.

Fred shrugged. "Dunno. But I'm definitely willing to give it a go, if you are."

"We'll have to work on them this summer. Build up the stock," George mused aloud.

"What can I do to help?" Annie asked.

"Help?" both boys asked in unison, surprised by the offer.

"Sure! I can collect sticks and whittle them a bit to look like a wand. Then you lot can enchant them."

"What's in it for you?" pushed Fred. "We can't pay you...."

"Sure we can," argued George. "With the profits."

"If there are any, that is. I'm not convinced there will be. I mean, what's the market for these wands anyway, besides gits like us?" Fred argued back.

"I don't want your money. Keep it and use it to expand the business," she argued.

"The business.... I like the sound of that, Fred!" cried George.

Fred nodded. "Me, too!" he said with a grin.

Annie danced around, whooping with excitement. "The business!" she chanted repeatedly.

"I think this calls for a toast, Fred," said George, looking at his brother pointedly.

"Excellent idea, George," agreed Fred.

They snuck up behind Annie as she celebrated and scooped her up between them.

"Ready for a drink, Annie?" George asked.

"Bottom's up!" Fred warned her.

They tossed her into the river as she screamed and flailed through the air. An instant later, they jumped in after her.

*

Annie lay on her back, gazing up at the stunningly clear black sky. Uncountable stars were scattered across the universe laid out before her. Tiny, insignificant human girl that she was, she peered out at the galaxy from the surface of her tiny, insignificant backwater of a planet. The staggering vista put her in a rather philosophical frame of mind.

"Are you still awake?" she asked her companions quietly.

She wouldn't be surprised if they weren't. Whenever the trails had gotten too crowded today, they had veered off into the thick woods or scrambled over any rocky outcroppings that had looked interesting. It had been a long day hiking through the Dartmoor wilderness, and they were all quite tired.

"What?" came a quiet answer.

"How do you do it, exactly? How does it happen?" she asked in a whisper.

"What are you on about now?" a slightly different voice asked.

"When you do a spell, I mean. What exactly happens?" Annie heard some rustling as a body rolled over inside a sleeping bag, then a hushed voice answered her.

"Well, usually you say a word... and you sort of wave your wand in that direction... and it happens," whispered Fred.

"So, is it the word, then, that does it?" she asked.

"No, I don't think so," George weighed in quietly. "Loads of wizards do spells without saying anything. Saying the word out loud helps you learn how to do a particular spell in the beginning, but it's not always required, especially after lots of practice."

"Then it's the wand?" she asked.

"A wand definitely helps.... I can't imagine doing magic without one. But just by itself, it doesn't do anything. A wand helps to... focus... the magic. I don't know if that's the right word, actually. Maybe 'conduct' is more accurate?" George mused aloud.

"If it's not a word, or the wand, then what is it? Something inside you?" she pressed.

"It's like we told you before," offered Fred. "You're born with it. The words and the wands just help train it up," he explained, sounding mildly interested.

"I know that bit. But *what* were you born with, exactly? Where inside you does it come from? Is it your soul, maybe? Or your brain?" she asked.

After a pause long enough to make Annie wonder if they had both fallen asleep, she rolled over onto her stomach to check on her friends. Fred was lying on his back to her left, eyes closed, hands folded behind his head. Beside him, George was to her right, facing her while lying on his stomach, head held up in his hand, propped on his elbow, clearly deep in thought.

"If I had to guess, I'd say it was brain," George offered. "When you get down to it, doing a spell relies on concentration. That's what all the professors bang on about anyway: 'Concentrate! Focus your mind!' That would explain how really little kids pop off weird little bits of magic before they can even talk properly."

Annie nodded. *That makes sense.* "So, you were born with something in your brain... that allows you to consciously... manipulate, for lack of a better word... the laws of nature," she rambled, thinking aloud.

In the starlight, Annie could see George's eyebrows lift in surprise. *Laws of nature?"*

"You know, like gravity," she explained. Annie concentrated, dredging through what she had learned last year in physical science class. "When you fly on a broom, you propel your mass forward or upward while resisting the force of gravity, but without using any energy. Or at least, any form of energy a scientist would understand. You call that energy 'magic,' I suppose."

"Interesting way of looking at it," George agreed, contemplating the idea.

"I wonder if you can affect other forces? Or maybe even atoms? You told me before about a class called transfiguration. Is that what I think it is?" Annie asked.

"Turning something into something else," Fred offered, apparently still awake and listening.

Annie nodded. "Right. So, how deeply does that change go? Is it just a visual trick? Does the thing actually remain the same but only look different to the observer? Or does it literally change from one thing into another?"

"The latter, I think," answered George after a moment's consideration. "The teacup really does become a mouse. It breathes, eats, everything... for a little while, anyway."

"So, it's a transformation at the molecular level, at the very least," continued Annie excitedly.

"Molly-whats?" George asked.

"Gibberish. She's makin' up words now, George," Fred muttered.

"Molecular," she said, enunciating carefully. "Everything in the universe well, everything that has mass, anyway is made up of tiny little particles called molecules, which are made up of tinier particles called atoms, which are made of even tinier things yet, and so on. *You* lot can take the atoms of a teacup and somehow rearrange them into the atoms of a mouse, apparently just by wishing it to happen." Annie closed her eyes and rubbed her temples in concentration as she spoke.

"Everything is just little tiny particles? Is that really what Muggles think? What a load of rubbish," Fred said with no small amount of amusement.

"It's true!" Annie insisted. "Scientists have even seen them. There's a picture in my school book they all line up in rows to make something solid, or otherwise float around bouncing off each other for liquids and gasses. I'll show you someday. Every different thing in the universe uses different combinations of the same basic stuff in an infinite number of different ways. Pretty amazing, actually."

Fred and George both nodded slightly in agreement as they pondered Annie's comments.

"What about light? Can you affect light?" she asked.

"Well... sometimes, but not always, there's a flash of light when you do a spell," offered Fred.

"Right! Like when George's wand shot off a couple summers ago I forgot about that. So that means electromagnetism is involved as well," she said.

"Say that word one more time?" George requested.

"Electromagnetism. Light waves and particles and magnets. Positive and negative charged things, that bit," she explained.

"Light and magnets them I've heard of. Is this like the 'electricity' business that Dad's always on about?" George asked, sounding curious.

"Yep, that, too," Annie replied. "Electricity is electrons little negatively-charged specks moving around. You said one time that electricity and magic don't mix well...?"

"Yeah. Dad says Muggle stuff gets all bollocksed-up by magic. He must mean the electrical things," George answered.

"But that's not always true. I mean, remember that time we went to the store and you two were messing with all the different stereos? They worked just fine," Annie argued.

"We weren't stupid enough to use magic in the middle of a Muggle store, git!" laughed Fred.

"We were twelve years old, for crying out loud. We do have some control," chuckled George, swatting Annie's head gently.

"But that's something else, isn't it? It means magical force fields aren't just gushing out of you at all times. Your bodies aren't made of magic or producing magic at all times. It's something you can direct or produce only at will," she thought aloud.

"Oh I see what you mean now. Wizards are just humans, after all; same as you, except with something more an ability Muggles don't have," said George.

"Right. An ability..." Annie mused.

"And some wizards have more ability than others," added Fred.

"They do?" Annie asked.

"Yeah. There are some with massive amounts of ability, like Dumbledore. He can do stuff most of us would never even dream of," explained Fred while George nodded enthusiastically. "And then there's the opposite extreme a Squib."

"Like Filch," George interjected, snickering.

"A Squib doesn't have any ability at all, even though everyone else in their family does," continued Fred.

Annie felt a stab of sympathy for those poor people, forced like her to always feel inferior among those they cared about *What a cursed life, she thought, knowing you were supposed to be able to do magic, yet couldn't.* At least she had an excuse, being a Muggle.

"Or you can be magical but just incompetent, like Longbottom," added George.

"Tosspot," said Fred as he laughed gently.

"So, your ability level is something you're born with, as well?" she asked.

"To some extent, I think the answer is yes," explained George thoughtfully. "You can usually get better at something with practice, of course; but for some people, certain kinds of magic will always be just too difficult. Out of reach, so to speak.

"And on the other hand, some types of magic come really easily to some. Like me and Fred with charms. We're usually the first ones in that class to pick up a new spell..."

"Or Lee, with transfiguration. He's really something..." added Fred.

"It can affect the quality of the spellwork, as well," continued George.

"What do you mean quality?"

"How completely something is changed, or how long the change lasts," George replied. "Within limits of course. Some things are guaranteed not to last, like conjuring money or food. Can't be done. On the other hand, some simple, small changes can last a pretty long time. Other things, especially if you're willing to stretch yourself or take some big risks, can be permanent."

"Like what?" Annie asked.

"Well, you could become an Animagus a wizard that can turn himself into an animal whenever he wants. That's one way," George explained.

"Any animal?" The thought thrilled Annie. Was she constantly surrounded by wizards posing as animals? How would you know which ones were actually wizards?

"Well, always the same one, every time. I'm not sure you get to choose which one, either. I think the one you become somehow reflects you, or your personality," George replied.

"You two'd better never try it. You'll be pigs for sure," laughed Annie.

George and Fred both snorted dismissively.

"Maybe you'd like to try it..." warned Fred, pretending he was reaching for his wand.

"Don't forget I know about the Trace, moron," she taunted.

Fred stuck out his tongue at her while George laughed at him. "Three more years... then you had better watch out, Little Miss Muggle," retorted Fred.

Annie laughed at the empty threat. Fred was always promising to hex her beyond recognition. "What else? You said becoming an Animagus was one way of making a permanent change...."

"Right. Well, another way is... well, not very nice, to put it mildly."

"George, don't," warned Fred, suddenly very serious.

"Tell me! I want to know!" she begged.

"Look, without going into details because I happen to agree with Fred, for once there are kinds of magic, and different sorts of wizards who do such magic, that you wouldn't want to cross, if you get my meaning."

"Bad guys?" Annie asked, trying to follow his vague hints.

George nodded. "That sort of magic a curse isn't something you can undo, once it's done. That's why it's illegal. Shouldn't be taken lightly. They can do some real damage... permanent sorts of damage."

Annie pondered this thought: that some wizards could use magic for evil purposes. *Just how evil are they talking about? What sort of permanent damage? Is this what he'd been referring to in their last letter, about the wizard who had been permanently defeated by the Harry Potter kid?*

"Can you kill somebody with magic?" she whispered, unwilling to believe the possibility.

"Yes," they both whispered in reply.

"Holy shit!" she exclaimed.

Both her friends winced at the volume of her voice. "Shut it!" hissed Fred as George, being closer, roughly clamped his hand over her mouth to stifle any further outbursts.

"Sorry," she whispered an apology once George finally released her. "That was just a bit of a shock, is all...."

"Maybe we should talk about something else," whispered George as he scanned the surrounding area for evidence anyone had overheard her.

"Or go to sleep," suggested Fred sternly.

"No! I promise I'll be quiet," she pleaded.

Fred rolled over to face away from them. Annie stuck her tongue out at his back, and George chuckled quietly.

"Tell me something else about magic," she asked in a whisper as she and George both lay back down on their backs, heads resting on each other's shoulders.

"Like what?" he asked.

"I don't know.... What's your favorite spell?"

"Disillusionment Charm, hands down," George replied.

"What's that?"

"Makes something or someone invisible for a bit."

"Oh. I should have guessed something like that, delinquent that you are," she chuckled. "That must come in handy avoiding detention."

George quietly laughed his agreement. "Now it's my turn. I want to ask you some questions about Muggles," he said, slightly more serious.

"What could you possibly want to know?" she asked incredulously. It always amazed her that George was interested in everyday, non-magical stuff, him being a wizard and all.

"First is it true that Muggles have been to the moon?"

Annie snorted in surprise. "Yes, it is. Haven't wizards?"

George shook his head. "Not that anybody knows of; or at least, nobody takes the claims seriously. It's too far away and nobody's been there before so there's no frame of reference. But Muggles did!? Blimey, that's amazing!" he whispered in excitement. "How did they manage it?"

"Well, it was a long time ago, actually before we were born." She was pleased he was so interested. It never occurred to her that Muggles had done something wizards had apparently not. She had done a report and presentation about this very thing for school, so could speak somewhat knowledgeably, as well. She found it amusing that this topic had interested them both.

"The Americans landed there six times between 1969 and 1972. Each time, they launched a rocket into space which was more than 350 feet long and went as fast as 15,000 miles an hour."

"Merlin's beard!" George whispered, incredulous. "You're joking...."

"Nope. And it took almost three days going that fast to get from the Earth to the moon. The next day, the lunar module separated from the orbiter and landed on the surface of the moon. Two astronauts got out and walked around on it, collected some rocks. Then they came back to Earth. Their footprints and some of the equipment are still there."

"Can anybody do it? Ride a rocket into space?" he asked, awestruck.

"Hypothetically, yes, I suppose there's no law against it that I've ever heard. But practically speaking, no. Only governments have the billions of pounds it takes to build the rockets, and nobody's sent one to the moon for ages. You could argue almost anyone could become an astronaut, though, if you study and train hard enough. The Americans still send them up pretty regularly into Earth orbit. There's a space station there now that belongs to the Russians and talk about building an international one." She had read about these things while doing her research for the report.

"So, *you* could go up there... into space... if you really tried?" he asked her wistfully.

"I suppose so," she said with a smile as she gazed at the ocean of stars above them. She harbored little doubt that if a wizard ever truly wanted to go into space, it would not be an insurmountable difficulty to do so. But it was nice to hear the wishful tone in George's voice instead of her own for once.

*

The three friends were walking along the main street of Ottery, making their way back toward the forest after having completed their errand. Each boy carried a grocery bag filled with rolls of plastic wrap and other generic pranking equipment. The twins were making final preparations for their journey back to Hogwarts in one week's time.

"You're awfully jumpy," George commented to Annie. "Are you expecting an ambush or something?"

"Hmm?" Annie asked distractedly. She had been scanning the street, praying they'd avoid being seen by anyone who knew her. And since pretty much the entire population of this place would recognize her on sight, the odds were not in her favor. People here certainly seemed to love talking about her lately, and if that scrutiny should turn itself on the twins, or their family.... That was why she hadn't caught what George had said.

"You seem anxious," he repeated patiently.

"Worried someone will spot you with us?" teased Fred.

Annie smiled nervously. Her anxiety level increased with his on-the-mark guess. "Don't be silly."

"Hey, Fred, look! The phone booth! Remember the first time we used the phone?" George cried.

"That was a laugh, wasn't it, Annie?" Fred chuckled.

"Oh, yeah. My ear is still ringing. What on earth made you think you had to shout?" she giggled, momentarily cheered by the funny memory.

"One usually has to speak loudly to be heard by a person far away," chided Fred defensively.

"Let's do it again. Run home and ring us, Annie," urged George.

"Can't you lot hurry up? It's hot," she argued, made more anxious by the thought of prolonging the boys' exposure a moment longer than absolutely necessary.

"And you're grouchy," added Fred.

George shook his head in puzzlement. "What's bothering you?"

"Nothing! But for someone who's supposed to avoid the notice of Muggles, you two gits certainly are taking your sweet time parading down High Street in broad daylight!" she barked.

"Okay, then!" cried Fred, taken aback.

"So, you're worried about us walking down the street carrying marketing bags. I can see why you'd think that might draw attention," George commented sarcastically.

"Yes we're positively glowing with magic at the moment, aren't we?" Fred added.

"Let's just keep moving, okay?" she sighed, picking up her pace. They were almost to the river's bridge, and then she would be able to relax again.

A while later, Fred and Annie were sitting in the shade of the willow, feet dangling in the little stream beneath it, chatting quietly. George was standing in the water, bent over and searching the opposite bank for signs of an imp. He knew they were Annie's favorite and thought one might cheer her out of her strange anxious funk.

"I swear it's true!" cried Fred, attracting his brother's attention.

"You expect me to believe that old Anglia of yours that absolute bucket of a car flew to Surrey and back. That's nearly 150 miles, Fred. Be reasonable," Annie argued.

"Tell her, George," Fred urged his brother, looking for backup.

"That *bucket*, which you so rudely insulted, is far superior to any heap you've ever found yourself in, I'll wager," George weighed in with a teasing smile.

"Well, obviously, since it can fly," she countered, smiling herself.

"Invisibly fly, I might add," said Fred.

"Of course it's invisible. I'll bet it has an infinitely large trunk as well and can carry a family of seven in comfort," she joked sarcastically.

"How did you know?" Fred laughed, a bit startled by her accurate description.

"Don't you ever get tired of spinning all this bullshit?" she said with a laugh.

"Anyway, back to my thrilling tale of adventure. We got to Harry's house in the wee hours of the morning. A bit of a surprise for Harry, it was, to see us there outside his window!" he laughed.

"It was a prison, that room of his! Door locked, his owl's cage locked, his trunk locked away downstairs.... They slipped him his food through a little trap in the door!" George added in disgust.

"There were even bars on the window! Complete nutters, those Muggles he lives with," Fred cried.

"Those people are horrid!" she agreed, indignant on their friend's behalf. "That's child neglect, that is. Illegal! Someone should report them!"

Fred and George both looked at her in exasperation. *How would involving Muggle authorities help the situation?* their expressions asked her.

"Right. That was stupid. Go on," she encouraged.

She felt sorry for their friend Harry, whose parents had been murdered when he was a baby. She could empathize, being an orphan herself. Apparently life with his Muggle aunt and uncle wasn't much of an improvement over an orphanage. The situation sounded like something out of *Oliver Twist*. Once again, she thanked her lucky stars for her Gran.

"So, anyway, as I was saying... thank goodness for you, Annie. We'd never have gotten him out if you hadn't taught us that lock-picking trick," Fred added, patting her on the head in a patronizing manner.

Annie swatted his hand away. "Glad to be of service. Finally, the skill was used for a noble purpose!" she laughed.

"Any mischief is noble, as far as I'm concerned," argued George.

"That'd make you a knight in shining armor, then, wouldn't it?" she giggled.

George grinned. "Reckon so," he chuckled. Then he turned and began conducting an imaginary sword battle where he stood in the stream, splashing and grunting and roaring as he did, until he took one theatrically in the gut.

"Now, if I could just finish my story *uninterrupted*," said Fred crossly as his brother expired noisily on the ground beside Annie, flopping like a fish.

"Please continue. I'm hanging on every word," Annie said mockingly, ignoring George's curiously persistent and convulsive last gasps.

Fred smirked. "On the drive home, Harry shared an interesting tale of his own. Apparently, a house-elf has been causing trouble for him lately..."

"Intercepting letters. Crashing cakes onto the heads of important houseguests," George chimed in, rising from the dead.

"Says Harry shouldn't go back to Hogwarts this year. Says something bad is going to happen there."

"That doesn't sound promising," said Annie, worried. "And what's a house-elf? You mentioned them before, in a letter this spring...."

"A servant," Fred explained. "Well, a bit more than just a servant, actually. They're little creatures... odd-looking things, really. Powerfully magical to boot."

"And Harry has one?" *That doesn't really fit with the concept of him being a poor, friendless orphan* Annie thought.

"No," laughed George. "But somebody who wants to mess with Harry does. And you can bet they're an old, stinking rich family."

"Does that narrow down the list of suspects?" she asked. They'd never really discussed the economics of wizarding society before, aside from showing her the funny coins the boys used as money.

"Not really. It does eliminate us, however," sighed Fred.

Annie looked at him in bafflement.

"Haven't you noticed?" he asked.

"Noticed what?" she replied.

"The Weasleys are nearly as far as you can get from rich. Nearly everything we have is old and second-hand," George explained simply.

"What difference does that make? And no, I hadn't noticed. You've always looked perfectly fine to me. I mean, I've always thought it was a bit odd that you insist on dressing identically, but other than that..." she teased, hoping to cheer them. It was disturbing to see them both looking so morosely thoughtful at once.

Both boys laughed.

"That's Mum's fault. She started it when we were little..." George began to explain.

"And it's actually come in quite handy at times," Fred followed.

"Aside from you, nobody else can tell us apart, see."

"We've gotten out of a few spots of trouble that way."

"Due to an inability to positively identify the perpetrator...."

"We'd both get off on a technicality," they said in unison.

Annie shook her head in mock awe. "Masterful!" she exclaimed. "Forget the trick wand business. You two were tailor-made for lives of crime."

Two nearly identical smiles beamed at her. "Thanks!" they said.

Year 4 at Hogwarts

Chapter 11 of 80

Concurrent with *Chamber of Secrets*. Annie fears for the boys' safety with a monster on the loose. Meredith contemplates her granddaughter's increasing self-sufficiency and maturity.

Author's Note: There are grammatical and punctuation errors in the correspondence portion of this chapter that are intentional, dear readers, reflecting the maturity level and mood of the fourteen-year-old pen friends. They are entirely my own fault and not that of the lovely admins here at TPP.

Chapter 11: Year 4 at Hogwarts

1992 1993

10 September, 1992

Dear Annie,

Greetings from Hogfarts. Our trip to school on the train was uneventful. Can't say the same for Ron and Harry, though. They took the bleedin' car flew it from London all the way up here, the effing prats! They're sticking to some lame excuse that the barrier to the platform was sealed. We're pissed off they didn't invite us for the ride... I mean, who were the blokes that came and rescued Harry in the first place? Which generous elder brothers taught Ron to drive? A little consideration, please!

Ginny Sorted into Gryffindor. That makes the lot of us, including Mum and Dad. It's sort of nice, having the five of us here together. Makes it almost like home. Except, of course, the added bonus of no parental supervision. Grin.

Quidditch practice has begun. We're keeping the same team as last year and Wood's still captain. Except for Harry, we'll be playing together for our third year in a row now, and I can't help but think that bodes well for our chances at the Cup this year. I wouldn't bet against us!

Except, that is, for the fact that Slytherin are now mounted on the fastest brooms in existence. Some little rich git's father bought his son's way onto the team with them.

There's a bit of history between this Draco Malfoy and Harry, apparently. And Ron as well. The little shit Slytherin called their friend Hermione a rather offensive epithet, and Ron tried to curse him. His wand is broken from the car trip and therefore the curse backfired, causing him to urp slugs for an afternoon. I just wish it hadn't been so entertaining to see Ron so miserable Malfoy deserved it more.

That's about it for us. What's going on in your armpit... erm... neck of the world?

Love,

George & Fred

2 October, 1992

Dear Fred & George,

Hello from Pottery St. Butthole. Whatever happened to the car? I snuck over to your place and it's nowhere to be seen. Do you still have it with you? If so, do you think you can skive off with it some time, maybe come home for a visit during the holidays?

You mentioned a name I haven't heard before: Draco Malfoy (that's quite a mouthful for a Muggle like me). You also mentioned he's from a rich family. Do you think he's got access to a house-elf? Could he be the one messing with Harry?

I had a nice bit of news myself last week. The P.E. teacher happened to mention my name to the track coach as a likely candidate for the team. Coach Williams asked if I'd be interested in joining, and I said yes! He also mentioned that the team gets together a few times a month in the off season (which is now) to train. Tomorrow will be my first day to run with them. Wish me luck!

Love you more,

Annie

9 November, 1992

Dear Annie,

The car is currently running wild in the Forbidden Forest. Not much chance of us taking it anywhere anytime soon. It's apparently rather put out by the treatment it suffered at the hands of Ron and Harry (Gits!).

What is a track team, and what does it have to do with running? Are you being chased by something or is it just a race-type setup?

I've got loads of news for you today. Most importantly: something is attacking Hogwarts residents. There've been two attacks in the span of a week, and the victims are lying petrified in the hospital wing. The first victim was that bloody cat, Mrs. Norris. I can assure you I was not the only one cheering that news. But then a little first year kid was attacked yesterday, and no one's laughing now.

Nobody has a clue who or what's behind the attacks, except for a message written in chicken's blood on the wall something about a Chamber of Secrets being opened. I thought that bit was codswallop at first, but even the professors are acting skittish, so now I'm not so sure.

Despite all of this, I am happy to report we won the match versus Slytherin. Harry caught the Snitch right out from under the nose of that little git of a Seeker, Malfoy. One of the Bludgers had been tampered with to hunt Harry exclusively, and unfortunately it got past Fred and me and bashed his arm. Then Professor Lockheart (our latest excuse for a DADA professor) took it upon himself to de-bone the poor bloke's arm which actually looked pretty cool, I must confess! What an unmitigated idiot this Lockheart fellow is turning out to be.

As for your theory about Malfoy... it's worth keeping an eye on, that's for sure. Write back soon and explain the track team business.

Love,

George & Fred

19 November, 1992

Dear Fred & George,

I want both of you out of that place! Come home this instant! How can a school stay open with a monster on the prowl, attacking students? What are the parents saying? What will happen to the victims? Is there some way to cure them? Go find the Anglia and do whatever it takes to get the hell out of there!

Sorry about that. I know it's useless to rant, but it made me feel better to say it. Just please don't get petrified yourselves.

Glad you won the match. Sorry to hear about Harry, but from what I understand about magical medicine, he was only out of commission overnight, correct?

Running is great! There is more than one kind of track team. I am on the sort that runs races over a natural course rather than a paved oval. No sprinting involved, thank goodness. It's more a test of endurance.

Write back often so I know you are safe.

Love you more,

Annie

19 December, 1992

Dear Annie,

I was going to write and tell you to calm down, take a deep breath, and don't get your knickers in a knot. However, that was before yesterday, when there was another attack: some kid I don't know and a ghost got it this time. Nobody understands how a ghost could be petrified, but there you have it.

And yes, there is a way to cure them, but it takes a long time, so all is not lost. Don't worry. Fred and I have decided to curtail our post-curfew forays for a bit we're not complete idiots, you know.

Can't say the same for Lockheart. He started a dueling club for students, which I'll admit is a brilliant idea. However, this git can't seem to cast a spell to save his life.

Harry, on the other hand, did pull quite a stunt. He was pit against Malfoy, who shot a bloody snake out of his wand at him (creepy, no?). Then Harry spoke to the damn thing in Parseltongue (snake language), which pretty well trumped Malfoy's creepiness. Now everyone thinks he's the Heir of Slytherin (and therefore responsible for all the attacks), which is complete bollocks, of course.

I will say, however, that Harry, Hermione, and Ron have been acting a bit dodgy lately. They are definitely up to something.

Weather here is crap an effing blizzard blew through and we are stuck indoors like rats in a cage. Hope yours is better. Happy Christmas!

Love,

George & Fred

26 December, 1992

Dear Fred & George,

What are you trying to do to me? If the answer is make me worry until my hair falls out, congratulations.

Weather here is crap as well, but thankfully not snowy, so I guess I can't complain to you about it. All the cold rain doesn't make for pleasant running conditions, however.

Christmas was nice enough. Gran and I had our traditional feast at the soup kitchen in Exeter, helping out. My friend Jane thinks it sounds depressing, but I think it's got the opposite effect. I always feel cheered up, counting my blessings and grateful I'm not as destitute as those poor sods. Maybe that makes me a jerk. I can't decide.

You haven't mentioned anything regarding the fake wands yet. Are you having any success with them? Even if you haven't, I don't think you should give up on them! Maybe this year, with the seriousness of all the attacks, just isn't the right time.

Be safe and write back soon.

Love you more,

Annie

2 January, 1993

Dear Annie,

I knew it! As I write this, Hermione is in the hospital wing here covered in cat fur. She even has whiskers and a tail! Harry and Ron are allowed to visit her every day, but the rest of us weren't allowed in. Surely Pomfrey knows better than to expect Fred and me to swallow that rubbish without a fight! We snuck in last night to see for ourselves, and blimey, what a shock! I simply must find out how she managed such a brilliant transformation!

Term starts Monday (ugh). Break has been utterly boring, except for last night's escapade, that is. Otherwise we've been killing time shut up here in the common room, playing Exploding Snap and practicing dueling.

We've only shown the wands to Lee and Ken for exactly the reason you mentioned. We'll bide our time until the attacks are over, then start marketing them in earnest.

Love,

George & Fred

30 January, 1993

Dear Fred and George,

Do not sneak out again! Do not turn yourselves into cats! Do not risk your necks for any other stupid reason, including dueling with other idiots like yourselves!

What the hell kind of school are you going to anyway?

Ah, I do miss Exploding Snap. That certainly brings back pleasant memories. Of course, the bang isn't quite as satisfying as the one you get with the wands, but enjoyable nonetheless.

Official team practice begins next week! Three times a week for the month of February, then down to twice once the weekly meets begin.

Write back soon and don't do anything stupid in the meantime.

Love you more,

Annie

28 February, 1993

Dear Annie,

Happy birthday! We got the hint... here's your deck of Exploding Snap cards. Use them in good health (and in secret).

We just spent the most loathsome Valentine's Day in the history of the bleedin' thing. Professor Prat-Heart decided to facilitate the delivery of love notes, (retch) which mostly amounted to idiotic girls sending him fan letters. Poor Harry was attacked by one I felt sorry for the miserable fellow.

One bright spot: we did win the match against Ravenclaw. It was close though, so even though our record is undefeated, points-wise we are still vulnerable in the Cup standings. Hope you have good luck in your running matches as well.

Love,

George & Fred

30 March, 1993

Dear Fred & George,

Happy birthday boys! I am fairly bursting with cheer and good news.

Item 1: Running is going really well. We've had three meets and I have beaten every other girl in my year, as well as a few upper classmen. My biggest obstacle is the fact that my stride is so short (I can hear you sniggering, so shut it!) but Coach says I have a good deal of natural talent. So I just have to grow longer legs...

Item 2: I am now gainfully employed! I got a job bussing tables at the curry house here in Ottery on weekends. Hopefully by the summer, once running season is over, I'll

get promoted to waitressing (higher wage plus tips squeel!).

Item 3: Due in large part to Item 2, here are your birthday gifts! Jane drove me to a Muggle joke shop in Exeter last weekend (she just got her license) and I picked up a decent smattering for you. Hope you get inspired, and enjoy!

Love you more,

Annie

P.S. I was not hinting, but thanks for the cards!

15 April, 1993

Dear Annie,

You are an angel of mercy, sent to us in our darkest hour of boredom, delivering us from certain petrification! Those gags are nothing short of miraculous!

Fred has become an expert at casting the "whoopee" cushions underneath girls just before they sit down in the common room. At first they were furious about it, and I thought they were going to murder him (or me they didn't seem picky, even though I was perfectly innocent). But now they just smile at him and giggle when he does it. I will never understand women as long as I live.

I'm intrigued by the idea of gag sweets, like the gum you sent that dyes your mouth blue. I'm thinking there must be infinite possibilities for charming sweets or mixing potions into them for amusing effects.

Good news: there hasn't been another attack in months. People are still jumpy though. Ginny's been acting quite strangely lately, but I can't get her to talk to me about whatever's bothering her. So is Percy, for that matter. Caught him sneaking back into the common room last night nearly five minutes after curfew (shock-horror)! You can be sure Perfect Prefect Percifect (say that three times fast!) would have docked me points if it had been my arse that was late (not that he'd ever catch me, nor would I only be a measly five minutes late).

Thanks again for the gifts. You're a lifesaver!

Love,

George & Fred

1 May, 1993

Dear Fred & George,

Glad you enjoyed the jokes. Maybe we can head over to Exeter this summer, and I'll show you what a Muggle version of Zonko's might look like. Time is getting short now and I'm counting the days until school is out!

Here's an absolutely true, utterly hilarious story for you. Last weekend, I spent Saturday night at Jane's. Sunday morning the family dragged me to church with them. I was fully prepared to be bored to tears, but instead wound up crying with laughter.

There were guest speakers that morning a lovely Indian couple who had come to share the story of their conversion from Hinduism to Christianity (not the funny part). It was a very moving story actually: they were persecuted by their families and neighbors but remained true to their new beliefs (again, not funny). After the gentleman shared his story, he left the dais and his wife began to speak.

A few moments later, strange noises began to echo through the sanctuary. It sounded like a series of doors opening and closing. Turns out the husband had forgotten to remove his microphone (a little device that Muggles wear to amplify their voices). Which wouldn't have been a problem except HE WENT TO THE TOILET! The entire congregation listened while HE TOOK A PISS (and he must've had loads of coffee that morning, if you catch my drift)!

I thought I was going to die trying not to laugh out loud. And the shocked faces on all the proper church ladies didn't help to sober me up either. My stomach muscles ached with the effort. The poor wife was mortified, of course, but valiantly tried to march on with what I am sure was an equally moving tale, not that I heard a word of it.

As I reread my account, I realize it doesn't read nearly as funny as it was in person. Sorry about that.

Looking forward to seeing you again soon!

Love you more,

Annie

"All right then, Annie.... What should we be doing in the garden today?" her Gran asked her. The morning was chilly but the ground had fully thawed, and it was time to start planting their little garden.

Annie began thinking aloud. "Let's see.... Full moon was about three days ago, so that means it's waning in... Taurus, is it? That would mean potatoes and carrots and the like. The root crops." She knew they didn't really make any scientific sense, her grandmother's methods of gardening, but it was hard to argue with her success. No one else she knew had as productive a garden as they did.

"Very good! Exactly right. Gravity increasing, pulling water up, light decreasing, and the moon in an earth sign, which is fertile and moist." Meredith handed her granddaughter several seed potatoes in a paper bag. "Do you remember how to cut them?"

Annie nodded. "At least two eyes per piece, planted six inches deep, eyes facing up. Then in a few weeks, after they sprout, we start to hill them."

"Right again, so make sure you leave plenty of space in between," Meredith reminded her.

Annie cut the potatoes carefully, then carried them out into the garden. Meredith followed her, shuffling slightly, carrying several seed packets. The hand tools they would be using today were already set out on the ground where they would be working this morning.

Meredith took a seat on a small bench nearby. It was getting too difficult, too painful for her to be down on her hands and knees in the garden. Her knees and hips protested nearly every step she took these days, not to mention her gnarled and knobby fingers were practically useless anymore.

She watched as her granddaughter worked expertly and efficiently in the soil. Even though it bothered her that old age was making it challenging to do her share of the household work, she swelled with contented pride in the knowledge that Annie was handling it all on her own: the gardening, the laundry, the cleaning, the errands, the cooking. And now she was working outside their home as well, learning about earning and managing her money.

Annie could do it all.

In fact, she did do it all without so much as a reminder from Meredith. Had been doing so for quite a while now *My Annie is turning into quite a capable young woman*, she mused proudly. And now that her granddaughter had turned things around at school with the help of her dear friend Jane, Meredith was feeling more at ease, at peace with the fact that her own time was likely growing short.

It was something that had always worried her from the day she had driven home from London in the borrowed car at age sixty with her newborn granddaughter beside her. Would there be enough time? Would she be able to teach Annie everything she needed to know? Could Meredith get her to the point of self-sufficiency before their time together was at an end?

It was a relief to know that for the most part, she had been successful. Annie was still terribly young, of course. No fifteen-year-old, no matter how mature and responsible she might be, was prepared to be completely on her own. But Annie was close. And Meredith was feeling fine, despite the nagging arthritis, and still had several good years left in her, she reckoned. *If I can just last a few more years... at least until she's of age...*

"Annie, my darling girl, have you thought much about what sort of person you want to be as an adult?" she asked her.

It was Meredith's dearest ambition that Annie would go to university. So much so that she almost didn't care what else Annie did with her life, as long as she had a proper education. Perhaps that would prevent her from making the same mistakes her mother had made....

Annie paused, sitting back on her heels in thought. "You know, Gran... I have been thinking about that. I wish that... well, I wish that I had better control over my temper, for one thing. I'm tired of being so angry all the time at every stupid thing. It's too hard... takes too much energy."

Meredith was surprised by the turn of the conversation. This wasn't what she had intended to talk about at all, but was indeed something she felt strongly about as well. She lamented the fact that Annie's hot-headedness had gotten her into so much trouble over the years. Not that her anger wasn't nearly always righteous, just that it was usually an overreaction. And so often caused her more pain than it ever avoided or relieved.

"Well, that's a valid point. A good knowledge of yourself will serve you well. Shows you've got a good head on your shoulders, if you can take an honest look at your own faults," she offered.

"I've got plenty of those, I'm afraid," Annie giggled and smiled at her Gran.

"We all do, my dear. For instance, I'm an unmitigated optimist and often fail to notice a person taking advantage of me until it's too late. I guess I just always want to believe the best of everyone," Meredith confessed. She gazed off at the woods in the distance, thinking of her own daughter, missing her terribly once again. She didn't notice Annie guiltily looking down at the dirt.

"You're a good person, Gran. That's not a fault," Annie argued as she returned to working the soil.

"Even good traits can be faults, if they blind you to the truth. If you keep making the same mistakes in life because of them," Meredith explained.

"Like me flying off the handle all the time," Annie agreed.

"That's one example," Meredith offered, though she had been thinking of something else entirely something far more personal. "So what do you plan to do about that? Introspection does no good if it doesn't result in a plan of action."

"I think I've noticed that I'm better... calmer anyway... after I run. Or when I'm out here, working in the garden. Would you agree, Gran?" she asked curiously.

Meredith pondered the question. "Yes, I think I would. This spring has been much better for you in that way. Maybe the physical activity helps burn some of that temper off," she teased her.

"Like the gas flare on a refinery tower?" Annie asked, giggling.

"Rather like that, I suppose," her Gran agreed, chuckling herself. "But you can't always run away from something that angers you."

"Jane recommends I try some self-calming techniques, like deep breaths, counting to ten, visualization...."

"Visualization?"

"Yeah," Annie chuckled. "But not the kind I usually do envisioning beating the hell out of whoever is making me angry. She thinks I need to imagine I'm somewhere happy and relaxing, like the beach."

"Sounds like a load of waffle to me," Meredith muttered dubiously.

Annie nodded. "I agree. So far I can't picture myself anywhere else but exactly where I am. And the counting to ten... well, let's just say ten isn't nearly far enough for me to count to, usually. But the deep breaths do help a bit."

"That's good to know, I suppose. What other self-improvement suggestions does Jane have to offer you?" Meredith said, attempting to lead the conversation back to her original goal. She knew that Jane spoke with Annie often about planning for the future, regarding schooling and careers.

Annie smiled in understanding. "Jane also thinks I should be planning for university, Gran," she said as if reciting a lesson, half-teasing, half-ruefully.

"Wise beyond her years, that Jane," Meredith laughed. "Are you planning any such thing?"

"I do think about it honestly, Gran," Annie assured her. "I just have no idea what to do with my life. So far, nothing feels like a calling."

"You don't have to start university with a career in mind, you know. Perhaps it'll come to you after you've got a few terms under your belt," Gran suggested.

"Or maybe I just need a few years to travel the world... experience what life has to offer," teased Annie. "You wouldn't mind footing the bill for that sort of invaluable education, would you Gran?"

"Pfft," Meredith snorted. "Fat chance, dearie. I'd spend every cent I had to my name to send you to the university of your choice through whatever graduate degree you choose to pursue, but I am not financing some fancy-free vacation!"

Annie laughed along with her Gran. "Point taken. Hand me the carrot seeds, will you? They aren't going to plant themselves, you know."

Dear Annie,

Things have gotten desperate here. Yesterday, while we were all preparing for our match against Hufflepuff, there was another attack. Two girls this time: a Ravenclaw prefect, and Ron's friend Hermione.

The match was cancelled before it even began. Campus has been shut down, and we are now being kept under lock and key. We are escorted as a group between our classes and are shut into the Tower for the night as soon as dinner is over. As worried as we all are, it is absolutely maddening to be cooped up like this.

And it gets worse. Apparently this situation with the Chamber of Secrets happened once before a long time ago, and Hagrid (the half-giant gamekeeper, remember?) was blamed for it then. He was later cleared of the charge, but now the Ministry wants to make a show of actually doing something about the recent attacks so they sent the poor bloke to Azkaban (wizard prison nasty place, trust me).

Think that's all that can go wrong here? Not by half! That nasty piece of work Malfoy's father (and if you met the father you'd see where the son gets his personality) is on the school's governing board and they have all voted to sack Dumbledore. You remember him, the headmaster? Amazing fellow incredibly powerful and clever to boot. To be honest, now that he's gone, I feel far less secure. I'm not the only one who feels that way, either.

Had enough bad news? Well, I'm tired of writing it, so I'll sign off for now. Hope we see you soon.

Love,

George & Fred

20 May, 1993

Dear Fred & George,

That wasn't very nice of you. I sent you a humorous story, and you send me horror.

Please stay safe. Please come back to me in one piece.

Write again right away and let me know you are all right.

Love you more,

Annie

14 June, 1993

Dear Annie,

This rotten effing year is finally over. We'll be home soon and tell you everything. You probably won't believe it, though. Meet us at the tree fort next Sunday.

Love,

George & Fred

Summer 1993

Chapter 12 of 80

Annie learns more about Dark wizards, including the Weasley family's enemies, the Malfoys. But they're not about to waste the summer fretting about it. And does a bit of mild flirting begin to rear its saucy head? You be the judge.

Chapter 12: Summer 1993

Age 15

Annie met her friends as planned the day after they arrived home from school. They gathered at the stream bank near the willow tree, and she knew something was amiss as soon as they'd said hello. Both boys were agitated, wearing uncharacteristic scowls on their faces. The three of them sat on the ground beneath the tree as Annie asked them what was wrong.

"It was Malfoy," Fred explained, his eyes blazing with fury and hate. "He was behind it all. You nearly had it right from the very beginning, Annie. Only it was the father, not the son."

Annie tore her eyes away from Fred for a second and spared a glance at George, who had been seated on the ground and leaning against the willow trunk with his eyes closed. He seemed too upset to join the conversation instead, he'd sat silently while his fingers were drumming against his legs with nervous energy. He now stood up, fished a pocket knife out of his trousers, and began carving something into the bark of the tree.

"What happened?" Annie asked Fred.

"It started back at the bookshop before the school year began. Dad had words with Lucius Malfoy right there in the doorway.... Came to blows even. We figure that somehow during the scuffle, Malfoy planted the diary on Ginny."

"A diary?" asked Annie, unsure if she had heard correctly.

Fred nodded. "It was cursed or something. Full of Dark magic."

"But why would he do this to Ginny?" she asked, confused.

"For revenge. He hates Dad," Fred snarled in an angry whisper.

"Your Dad? Why?" she exclaimed, stunned that anyone could even dislike, much less hate someone who sounded as congenial and easygoing as Fred and George's father.

"There are several possible reasons take your pick. Most likely because Dad was doing a lot of raids on houses suspected of Dark activity last fall. Maybe Malfoy was nervous he might be next and wanted Dad to think twice before messing with him. Or maybe because Ginny being found with a Dark object like the diary would smear the Weasley name, cause trouble for Dad at the Ministry.

"Or maybe just because Malfoy thinks we're all worthless, Muggle-loving disgraces to wizardry," Fred continued ranting. "And if Ginny accidentally released... the monster... hidden in the diary, then maybe one or more of us might've been the victims. In the end, it doesn't really matter why he did it. Fact is he did. And that's how the Chamber was opened and the basilisk was released."

"A basilisk!" she gasped in shock, instantly recalling several lethal details about the horrible monster she had read about as a young girl in the tattered little book they had kept in the treehouse. "It's a miracle no one was killed!" The startling news about the basilisk made her forget that Fred hadn't clearly explained the connection between the diary and the Chamber of Secrets being opened. She also forgot about the sense she had that Fred was trying to hide part of the story from her.

"Then three weeks ago, Ginny herself was taken into the Chamber. We were afraid she was... dead," he choked in a whisper.

"NO!" cried Annie. *It couldn't be true! Fred and George's little sister... dead? Did the basilisk claim a victim, after all?*

"It was the worst feeling.... I thought I was going mad, feeling so helpless and sad and angry," Fred choked. "But Ron and Harry, they had it all figured out. They went down into the Chamber, hoping they would be in time to rescue her. Thank God they were...."

"Ginny's okay? They found her, and she survived, right?" Annie asked, demanding they confirm the outcome, unwilling to consider the alternative.

Fred nodded. "Thanks to Harry, she's alive."

Annie sighed with relief. "So what's going to happen to this Malfoy maniac? Is he going to Azkaban now?"

Fred laughed sarcastically, a grim smile on his face. "There's no proof it was him. A legal fight would serve no purpose other than to drag Ginny's name through the mud. Money like Malfoy's ensures he wouldn't set foot in prison, even if charges were ever brought," he explained with disgust.

"Are you saying nothing's going to happen to him?" Annie had leaped to her feet and was yelling angrily at this point.

Fred's eyes narrowed as he shook his head slowly. "Not if I can help it. Someday... he'll pay for what he did."

*

Annie wandered a little distance behind her friends, trying to develop her photographer's eye. She had always loved taking pictures, ever since her grandmother had given her a camera for her twelfth birthday present. The midsummer light streaming through the trees of the forest was dim and greenish for the most part, but occasional bright spots caught her attention. She experimented with taking extremely close-up shots of interesting leaves or flowers, once even an intriguing pattern in some tree bark.

She paused to look up, her conscious mind suddenly alarmed by a silence that had lasted far too long. As she glanced around, she saw Fred was far ahead of her, bent over to collect some herb or insect for his illicit store of potion ingredients.

Uh-oh, she thought. That leaves one of them unaccounted for....

"BOO!"

Annie was spared the embarrassment of screaming since she had had an instant to prepare herself. All the same, she jumped with the surprise of it, and her heart was pounding. *How the hell does he do that go so bloody near invisible?*

"You're so very talented, George. Now run off like a good boy and help your brother," she scolded him.

"I'm bored. Entertain me," he replied, shoving her gently.

"I have better things to do, and so do you," she answered, peering through the viewfinder of the camera at him.

He smirked and crossed his eyes.

"Stop it! Take a normal picture, for once," she admonished him.

He lifted an eyebrow at her. "That is a normal picture, for me," he argued.

"Look over at that big rock.... No, on second thought, look up, not down," she directed. She was slightly surprised that he followed her commands and quickly snapped the picture before he lost interest. "Good. Your mother would like that one, I'll bet," she said, letting the camera hang again from the neck strap.

"Wonderful," he answered, rolling his eyes. "Now can we do something fun?"

"I happen to think this is fun," she argued.

"What's fun about it?" he asked sarcastically.

"Here, I'll show you. Have a go, yourself." She removed the strap from around her neck and passed the camera to him. "Just look through this bit, spin this part until it's not blurry, and hold very still when you push this button with your finger when you're ready. No... not at me," she cried, blocking his view through the lens with her hand. "Pick something else, please," she instructed him.

George began slowly turning around in a circle, peering through the camera. "Oh, this makes things look closer," he muttered as he spun the focus on the lens. "Cool!"

Annie heard the shutter click. "What did you snap?" she asked.

"That little rock outcrop," he replied, pointing to it in the distance.

"Good. That bit's nice and sunny so it should come out. Now, try composing something with this wild rose over here. The shape of it is nice, I think, and the light is good," she instructed, suddenly inspired to give him an impromptu lesson in photography.

George took a moment to frame the shot, then the shutter clicked again.

"All right, show me what you saw," she asked.

He took a step back so she could stand in his place, then passed the camera to her, careful to keep the same view in place. "That should be about it... except the aspect was from about a foot or so higher up. What me to lift you?" he laughed.

"Not necessary," she giggled. "Okay, not bad. But look at it this way move the frame over, so the subject isn't dead centered like a target."

George peeked into the viewfinder over her shoulder. "Hmm... Interesting. I think I see what you mean," he replied, becoming genuinely curious.

Annie held the camera up to her own eye, took a moment to get the composition exactly right, then clicked the shutter. "We'll look at them side by side when they're developed and compare. Want to take some more?" she asked as she offered him the camera.

"As long as I get to choose what to look at," he said.

"Fine. As long as it isn't me."

"Why not?" he demanded.

"I hate pictures of me. *Blech!* Don't waste my film...."

George rolled his eyes. "How mature of you," he chided her.

"That's the rule take it or leave it," she argued.

"Take it," he answered, and he took the camera from her.

By the end of the afternoon, George had finished her first roll of film, and she had begun another. Several were of the brothers together, hamming it up for her. Then she had become intrigued by the play of light on the water and experimented for a while with a photographic study of the glare patterns.

George had talked her into letting him take one more shot near the end of the second roll, and she had reluctantly agreed, accurately expecting a setup. As soon as she handed the camera over, Fred appeared from out of nowhere.

He pinned her arms behind her back, set his head on her shoulder, and shouted, "Say cheese, Annie!"

Annie scowled and turned her head away, refusing to cooperate. "Not remotely funny, you jackasses."

"She's not smiling, Fred," George egged his brother on as he looked through the camera. "Try tickling it out of her."

"I will murder you," she warned Fred, attempting to squirm out of his grip before he followed through on his brother's command. "Do not...."

But she couldn't finish her sentence as she burst out laughing from the rib torture. To her further aggravation, she heard the shutter click.

"Ready to run for it, George?" laughed Fred. "I'm about to let her go...."

"You'd better worry about yourself as well, you bloody git," Annie yelled at him, gasping for breath, still pinned against him.

"Hang on.... Let me set this down in a safe spot, first," George replied, placing the camera carefully in a protected position at the base of a tree. "Okay, let 'er rip!"

Later that night, when the full moon was approaching its zenith in the sky, Annie found herself high on a hill facing a field of wheat.

"Remind me again.... What are we doing here?" she asked with a yawn.

"Nice try. I *didn't* tell you, yet," George replied. "I thought you liked surprises."

"Then you're more of a dim bulb than I took you for. I hate surprises," she muttered. "Especially *your* sort of surprises."

"I seem to recall you were very pleased by a certain surprise birthday party," he protested defensively.

"I was eight years old at the time," she giggled.

"Don't tell me you're too grown up now," he said with disgust.

"Of course not! I refuse to grow up, ever!" she laughed.

"That's the spirit!" he said encouragingly. He turned back to scan the field before them.

"Why isn't Fred with us?" she asked.

"Couldn't wake him. He sleeps like the dead, lately, and snores like a goddamn troll to boot," he complained.

"So, I'm the lucky one, then," she said, yawning again.

"Trust me, you won't want to miss this. In fact, it looks like they're starting," he whispered, pointing out toward the field.

There were two creatures beginning to move about, that much she could see. But they were too far away to make out any distinct features about them. The moonlight washed out all colors, reducing everything to shades of grey.

"What are they?" she asked in a whisper.

"Mooncalves," he answered, whispering as well.

"What are they doing?"

"Mating dance."

George and Annie watched as an elaborate circular maze was being flattened by the creatures as they moved slowly about, getting ever closer to each other. As time passed, they began to see few small patches of glittering silvery material in the pathways behind the mooncalves.

"What's the shiny stuff?" she whispered.

"Dung. That's what we're here for," he answered. He then stood up, pulling her up with him, and began to walk down the hill.

"Wait... where are we going?"

"To get the poo," he chuckled.

"But... don't you think we should wait for a bit longer? Erm... until they're, um, done?" she stuttered. If it was indeed a mating dance, the poor creatures deserved to finish what they started, Annie figured.

George paused, then chuckled again. "I suppose it would be rather rude of us to interrupt, wouldn't it?"

They both sat back down, but this time looked at the sky instead of the mooncalves, offering them what privacy they could. Nearly twenty minutes later, Annie felt a gentle tap on her shoulder. She hadn't fallen completely asleep, but had been dozing a bit.

"They're gone now. Let's go," he said quietly.

Annie staggered up and followed George down the hill. As they reached the first pile of shining dung, and George withdrew a shovel from the large sack he had been carrying, Annie spoke up.

"Why do you want to collect this stuff?"

"Makes excellent fertilizer. You want to shovel or hold the bag?"

"Bag, please. I thought Fred was the one with a green thumb?"

"He is," George agreed. "He's also catatonic at the moment, so I reckon the job falls to me," he answered, dropping the first load into the bag.

They could see another pile a few yards away and began walking toward it.

"And you need this for...?"

"We'll give some of it to Mum," he said as the next load fell into the bag with a wet splat. "Never hurts to butter her up with gifts, we've found. She starts feeling a bit remorseful for all the times she's screamed at us," he said, smiling.

"And the rest?"

"Not exactly sure," he admitted. "We're trying to figure out how to obtain the ingredients for our next project the charmed sweets, you know. Both the effects and the cures, especially during the development phase. We'll need more volume than we can safely nick from the school stores or the greenhouses. It'll be a right pain in the arse to grow it ourselves, but what other option do we have?"

"Sounds to me like you need a supplier," she said, smiling. "Someone on the outside you can trust."

George looked at her curiously. "You're plotting something, I can tell."

"Do you have a list of what you need? Is it all super-magical, man-eating plants?"

"Not all of it, no. Quite a bit of the stuff grows wild around here, free for the taking. But won't be ready to harvest before we leave, and therein lies the rub," he sighed disapparently.

"You really are thick, aren't you?" she snapped, pretending to be irritated with him. "Are you telling me you can't think of any way for you to get plants that grow here when you're at school?" She screeched as George missed the bag, slopping a bit of the shiny manure onto her shoe.

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?" he asked, excitedly. "And sorry about your shoe; that was an accident," he muttered.

"Depends. You're being pretty stupid tonight, so maybe not. Frankly, I'm offended you didn't think of me sooner."

"Don't get your knickers in a knot. We actually did consider asking you...."

"Why didn't you?" she cried, starting to become offended for real.

"We didn't want to impose! I know you'll be really busy this year with running and working. Plus it's fifth year, and that means big exams for you..."

"And OWLs for you," she interjected.

George snorted. "Which aren't nearly as important to me as your exams are to you, tutor-kissing, school-loving prat that you are."

"Maybe they should be," she scolded, carefully waiting until after he unloaded the last shovelful of dung into the bag before she did. "An education is a useful thing to have, you know."

"Ugh. The mere thought of another year of any of it turns my stomach," he moaned.

"You don't fool me for a second. You spend far more time skiving off than you ever do sitting in a classroom," she teased.

George smiled. "Burbage must think we teeter at death's door, even if she only believes half our excuses," he said with a laugh. "So, you'll do it, then? Collect some ingredients for us?"

"On one condition," she replied.

"Here it comes," George sighed, dropping his shoulders and lifting his eyes toward the heavens.

"You have to let me try everything you invent," Annie insisted. "By all means, test it on yourselves first. But before it gets released to the public, I get to sample it. Promise?"

"It's your stupid mistake to make, mate. But I promise," he said, chuckling.

Concurrent with *Prisoner of Azkaban*. Annie decides kissing's far more trouble than it's worth. While George and Fred are dealing with Dementors and escaped criminal maniacs, Annie's left with only the shreds of her reputation. She celebrates her 16th birthday with a couple of very nice young gentlemen at a bar. Huh? Rated for language, juvenile delinquent activity, underage drinking, and adult situations.

Author's Note: There are grammatical and punctuation errors in the correspondence portion of this chapter that are intentional, dear readers, reflecting the maturity level and mood of the fifteen-year-old pen friends. They are entirely my own fault and not that of the lovely admins here at TPP.

Chapter 13: Year 5 at Hogwarts

1993 1994

2 September, 1993

Dear Annie,

Egypt was amazing! Bill is one lucky so-and-so, getting to work there for Gringotts. Mum nearly lost it when he took us all out for dinner to a place with belly dancers, and every one of them knew him by name!

Fred & I got you a little present it's for good luck, or so goes the legend. Bill says he finds them with mummies all the time. They are set over the dead bloke's heart and are supposed to help him avoid going to hell for his sins. We figured you could use something like that.

Lots of changes here at Hogwarts this year. I am utterly ashamed to write this, but Percy is Head Boy this year. Please do me the kindness of never mentioning it to my face again. We will speak of it nevermore.

Got a new DADA professor, as well (as per usual). Looks like the poor fellow is barely hanging on perhaps he's not long for the job, either. Dumbledore may be scraping the bottom of the barrel just to come up with one at this point.

And some truly good news: Hagrid is now the Magical Creatures professor! Perhaps I will actually enjoy a class this year. Unfortunately, I think he may have been a tad too ambitious, introducing hippogriffs in his first lesson to the third years. Rumor has it that it mauled that little shit Malfoy today. Fred and I are planning to sneak down to the paddock tonight with a brace of ferrets for it as a reward. Maybe Hagrid will let us train it to attack Malfoy on sight.

I'm enclosing a list of the items we spoke about earlier. Most of them are ingredients to help reverse spells, not cause damage, so just in case this all blows up in our faces you'll not be implicated. I realize the rue is a long shot, considering the season, but I figure it doesn't hurt to hope. Can't thank you enough for agreeing to do this! We certainly don't have the funds to buy all this stuff.

Love,

George & Fred

Agrimony leaves and roots

Briony roots

Gentian roots

Hyssop (blue & white only) flowers

Moonwort whole plant

Pennyroyal whole plant

Rue young shoots

Snapdragon leaves

Toadflax flowers

Skullcap whole plant

14 September, 1993

Dear Fred & George,

Glad to hear you had a good time in Egypt. I'd say you're entire family is pretty lucky, considering you won a trip for eight to such an exotic destination! The scarab is beautiful thank you both.

As requested, I will not mention your book-loving, rule-kissing, teacher-worshipping, stick-in-the-arse Head Boy brother. You're welcome.

Please keep your distance from the hippogriff. I remember reading about those. I don't think it's the sort of beast that appreciates first-rate smart-arses like the two of you.

Here is your first delivery! The riverbanks were loaded with skullcap this year, and the blue hyssop was quite abundant as well. Might even be able to send a second batch of it next time. And you're in luck: I stumbled on a thick growth of briony and dug up the roots for you. Now you can beat the hell out of one another and the bruises should be all cleared by morning.

I'm also enclosing the snaps from the roll of film you took this summer, as well as the one I took of the rose in comparison. What do you think?

And George, aren't you tired of forging Fred's name on these letters yet?

Love you more,

Annie

P.S. Do you realize your previous letter was the first one I've gotten without a Quidditch reference in years?

Annie rode her skateboard into town, picking up speed as she coasted down the artificial hill of the bridge. She still had more than an hour to kill before her shift started at the restaurant, so she turned off High Street and onto a residential one. The weather was perfectly mild and dry, and she was hoping that would translate into a busy and profitable night when it came to tips.

She missed working at the curry house. The family that had owned it had been friendly and the food delicious, but sadly they had decided to relocate to a larger town. So, now she was stuck waitressing at one of the cafes here in Ottery. She wasn't doing badly at all, though she had a tidy little sum saved up in her account at the bank and put most of every paycheck in it.

Annie had been wandering aimlessly through the winding side streets of town when she suddenly she heard a familiar voice call out her name. She turned to see Stephen sitting in his open garage, a guitar in his lap. She hadn't even realized she was on his street.

"Looking for trouble?" he asked her with a smile.

"I've certainly found it, regardless," she answered with a laugh. She coasted up the small paved path from the street to where he sat. She had a few minutes to spare for an old comrade, she figured, just to be polite. She hadn't seen him in ages, after all Jane, Gran, running and work occupied most of her out-of-school time.

"Been a while. Where is it that you hide yourself all summer long?" he asked her teasingly.

"I don't hide myself," she protested. "Some of us have adult responsibilities, like jobs," she teased him back as she leaned against the doorjamb.

Stephen grimaced. "I have a job as well," he argued, referring to the garage band he had started late last year.

"A *paying* job?" she needled him.

He laughed. "Any day now, we'll get our big break. You'll see."

"Right. Don't you need to know how to play a musical instrument first?"

"Nah," he laughed, strumming a few chords. "You just need good looks. The rest can be faked."

Annie laughed. She had almost forgotten that Stephen could be funny and pleasant to be around, especially when there was no one else around to posture in front of. He seemed to be a different person when he was with her, alone. More genuine, somehow.

"You should join us. Wanna be in the band?"

Annie shook her head. "No way. You'll never convince Geoff or Mike to go for it."

Stephen raised an eyebrow. "They'll do whatever I tell them, trust me," he boasted.

Annie smiled and bleated like a sheep in response. It was their private joke, though she had never really been kidding about it. She wondered if perhaps that was the reason Stephen sought her out sometimes that she would say or do what *she* wanted, rather than submit to him in all things like the others seemed to be content to do.

"You don't want me I have no musical talent whatsoever," she argued with a giggle.

"Weren't you listening to me before? You've got great legs and a nice rack. The rest doesn't matter," he said, cocking his eyebrow and grinning.

"Okay, then! I'm out of here," she said, disappointed once again that he chose to resort to macho rudeness. Dropping her skateboard back to the ground, she hopped on. *Why did he always have to ruin any pleasant moment with his vulgar mouth?*

"Can't you tell when somebody's kidding, Jones? Why are you always so uptight?" He stood up, set the guitar down, and followed after her.

Annie hesitated and turned around to look at him. *Maybe he's right maybe I am being oversensitive. Wewere just joking around.* At least he had finally quit calling her sweetheart, like she asked.

"Sorry. I guess maybe I do overreact to comments like that," she admitted as she coasted to a stop at the end of the driveway.

"No, I'm sorry. I know you don't like it, and I shouldn't have teased you. Come back and sit down," he asked her, taking her by the forearm and pulling her back toward the garage.

She remained on the skateboard, and he chuckled as she rolled on it after him.

"Okay... so play something. Let's hear it," she said with a smile. She leaned back against the wall of the garage. *Maybe if his brain is focused on playing the guitar, he might be prevented from sticking his foot in his mouth again.*

"All right," he said, sitting down again. "Here's a song for you, Annie," he added, beginning to strum some chords.

As he played the gentle, lilting introduction of the song, she tried unsuccessfully to place it. It was complex and beautiful, eventually resolving into an enticing rhythm. *Surely he hasn't written something of his own?*

Then he began to sing, looking straight at her as he did.

Hey lady, you've got the love I need

Maybe more than enough.

Oh darlin', darlin', darlin',

Walk a while with me.

Oh, you've got so much,

*So much, so much.... **

Annie was mesmerized. *Where had this come from? This sweet, charming side of Stephen?* The smooth voice and bright smile had never been there before, she was sure of it.

Watching him play, she could understand why some of the girls at school had begun to fancy him. He wasn't unattractive, she conceded. Pair that with the bad boy reputation which was greatly overblown and largely undeserved, as she knew from personal experience and now the fact that he could sing a serenade.... She could see that he could be very charming, indeed.

He finished the song, only looking away from her occasionally to glance at the fret board, checking his finger placement.

He must have been practicing this song a lot, she thought. "That was surprisingly good," she offered as a compliment.

He set the guitar down gently, stood up, and walked over to where she was standing just inside the doorway. "I have a confession to make," he said as he stood in front of her.

Annie's eyes narrowed slightly in suspicion, but she said nothing.

"I wasn't kidding before," he said in a hushed voice, placing his hands on the wall on either side of her head, pinning her loosely in place. It was a gesture that made it clear she was free to escape if she wanted to, but the intensity of his stare was keeping her frozen in place. "I do think you're beautiful," he whispered.

Annie was stunned. No one had ever used that word in reference to her. No one had ever looked at her in this way before, either. She was confused and flattered and curious, but also rendered speechless.

"May I kiss you?" he asked.

Annie shrugged, at a loss. *What would it be like? To kiss a boy?* she wondered.

Stephen slowly leaned in, giving her every chance to refuse. He closed his eyes and pressed his lips against hers. His hands moved from the wall to rest lightly, warmly on her hips.

Annie wasn't sure what to do. She tried to kiss him back, experimenting, echoing what she perceived he was doing while keeping her own hands flat against the wall. Meanwhile, her eyes were open, watching him, and her mind was attempting to analyze what was happening.

Not only did it make no sense to her, it felt... odd. Wrong, somehow. Not in a moral sense, but just not... right *for her*. She could only describe it in a clichéd term: like a puzzle piece that didn't fit. One thing was very clear, however: this was not what she wanted from Stephen.

She then began to wonder how long this was going to go on. He was apparently in no hurry to come up for air. Her mind began to work on coming up with ways to extricate herself from the kiss without causing too much offense.

Stephen solved the problem for her. One hand began creeping up her torso toward her chest.

Annie angrily swatted his hand and pushed him away. "I said you could kiss me, and that was all," she said.

"You were kissing me back," he argued. "I thought you liked it."

She caught herself just in time she was about to snap at him, tell him he was mistaken, but reconsidered. Perhaps she *had* given him some sort of signal how would she know? She had never kissed a boy before. And there was no reason to hurt his feelings because of her own ignorance.

"It was... fine, I guess," she offered, lying through her teeth.

"Do you want to do it some more?" he asked eagerly.

"No," she said firmly. She was startled as his face fell in disappointment. Feeling sorry for him and slightly guilty that perhaps she had led him on, she added, "I have to go to work now," as an excuse, avoiding the truth.

"Oh," he said brightly with false understanding. "Maybe later?"

"I don't know..." she answered. She hoped the tone of her voice adequately conveyed her reluctance to consider the possibility. She didn't want to keep leading him on. If he thought for one moment that this wasn't an isolated incident, then trouble would be unavoidable. "I think we should just be friends, Stephen," she said with finality.

"Whatever," he answered, as if this didn't bother him in the least. "We can keep it casual," he added.

"Keep *what* casual, exactly?" she asked, confused.

"This. You and me. Nothing official or exclusive. Just whenever..."

Annie was alarmed now. "There is no *this*, Stephen, exclusive or otherwise. The kiss was a one time thing. Do you understand?"

He smiled at her, as if he knew her own mind better than she did. "I get it," he replied.

Annie was pretty sure he didn't. She glanced at her watch. It really was time for her to go, if she wasn't going to be late for work. But there was one more thing she needed to tell him before she left.

"Stephen, I hope it goes without saying, but... please don't tell anyone about this, okay?"

He nodded at her once, still smiling that smug smile. "Gotcha. Our secret."

"I'm serious, Stephen. Not a soul," she urged as she hopped onto her skateboard and started down the driveway.

"I'll see you around," he called out as she sped away.

Her first instinct had been right all along. *She had* found trouble. *When will I ever learn to steer clear of Stephen Drake?* she asked herself.

15 October, 1993

Dear Annie,

Cheers! The briony was a real lifesaver. We've been working on a fainting potion and have the bruises to prove it. Didn't want people to get the impression we were anything but invincible in a fight, you understand (wink snort).

Quidditch practice has begun. This is Wood's last year, and he's maniacal about winning the Cup. It's completely out of hand. If he's not careful, he'll either run us ragged with overwork or we'll go loony from all the whiny pep-talks.

Not much else to add. Ron's rat is sure to give up the ghost soon. The thing is ancient already, been looking like it's at death's door for weeks now, and Hermione's new cat keeps pouncing on it. I'm tempted to feed the damn thing to Buckbeak (Hagrid's hippogriff) and end the stalemate.

Fred says he has no idea what you're talking about regarding his signature. Looking forward to the next package!

Love,

George & FRED

30 October, 1993

Dear George & FRED,

Happy to be of service. Here's your latest and possibly last package of goodies for a while. We've had several good frosts this week, so I'm not anticipating finding much more for you from here on out. It's everything but the rue you were right, it's too late in the season. Gran has a bush of it in our garden, so I'll keep my eyes on it this spring and ship it right out as soon as it starts growing again.

Your first match must be coming up soon. Plus you've got the Halloween feast tomorrow. You must be looking forward to those two events. And feel free to crack a book I won't tell a soul.

Jane is taking me with her family on a weekend trip to Cardiff to tour the university there. Never really been outside of Devon before, and of course Gran is thrilled I'm headed to her terra mater, Cymru. She's pestering me to take loads of pictures while I'm there. Oh and please would I make her the happiest woman on earth by attending a nice Welsh school myself when the time comes?

Write back and tell me all about the match. Win Gryffindor!

Love you more,

Annie

November 8, 1993

Dear Annie,

Thanks for the package. It was a bit large we got a few suspicious looks from the professor's table but managed to escape the Great Hall before anyone could confiscate it.

We had quite a bit of excitement here at Halloween. Somebody attacked the Fat Lady's portrait, presumably trying to get into Gryffindor Tower. Rumor says it was Sirius Black, an escaped convict, but I find that highly doubtful. At any rate, no one was hurt, but everyone is now quite jumpy, especially the professors. So many watchful eyes are making life for Fred and me rather difficult at the moment.

And now for the bad news. The Malfoy prick somehow managed to get Slytherin excused from playing in our regular match, so we played Hufflepuff instead at the last minute. Which should have been fine, except for the fact that there's a great filthy herd of Dementors infesting the grounds of Hogwarts this year. They swarmed around Harry during the match, who fell off his broom because of it and wound up in hospital (he's recovered, don't worry). The worst of it was his lovely Nimbus2000 was bashed to smithereens by a Whomping Willow. Damn crying shame, that was. And the final insult: we lost.

Write back soon with some happier news. Did you have fun in Cardiff?

Love,

George & Fred

17 November, 1993

Dear George (& Fred),

Sorry to hear you're having such a bad term. A real shame about the match. Maybe we should be optimists and assume things can only get better?

I hesitate to ask this, but what is a Dementor? Judging from the name, it doesn't sound like anything pleasant.

And how does an escaped convict get inside Hogwarts? I thought you said the place was virtually impenetrable.

Cardiff was quite a bit of fun. The university is pretty much what one would expect: lots of old buildings. I spent one morning with Jane's parents touring the Welsh National Gallery. I don't mean to be ungrateful to them for taking me, and I do appreciate art, but how many paintings of pastoral landscapes and portraits of dead fat ladies does the world really need? At least your sort of art is interactive.

Cheer up, lads. The term is almost over and the holidays nearly upon us! Cheers!

Love you more,

Annie

Two girls were chatting at the mirror of the girls' toilet at school. Annie was just about to step out of the stall when something she heard made her freeze.

"So, Felicia, how was your date with Stephen Drake?" said a girl's voice, eager for gossip.

Annie stepped back away from the stall door. The last thing she needed right now was to show her face when Stephen was the topic of conversation. Somehow, the 'casual' kiss they'd shared which was supposed to have remained a secret had exploded within a week's time into a full-blown relationship via the gossip mindfuck that was school. She had been so furious about it that she hadn't spoken to him for nearly two months since.

"Poor bloke! He's brokenhearted, you know. That Jones bitch really did a number on him," Felicia answered her friend.

"What did he expect from a whore like that?" cried the friend.

Annie pressed her fingers against her temples so hard it hurt. Surely they would leave soon, before she made a spectacle of herself and went berserk. For a moment, though, she felt a pang of guilt. *Did I really hurt Stephen?* she wondered. That had certainly never been her intention....

"I know! Anyway, it was so romantic! He's in a band, you know. He played me this Zeppelin song; it was so sweet. Then he told me he thinks I'm beautiful," Felicia reported. "And then we snogged for about an hour straight," she bragged.

Annie thought she was going to vomit. The serenade... telling her she was beautiful.... All of it had been an act, she now realized. A routine. Had she been Stephen's guinea pig? A test case? *Market research?*

"Is that all?" asked Friend, apparently expecting more.

"Well, I let him feel me up a bit, of course," Felicia claimed, giggling.

Annie was shaking with disgusted rage at her gullibility. Stephen's every single syllable, his every single gesture had been identical with her *Count to ten*, she desperately urged herself. *One... two... three....*

"Over or under the sweater?" asked Friend curiously.

"What do you think?" Felicia replied, implying the racier of the two took place.

"Ooh, you are a naughty girl," laughed Friend, pretending to be scandalized. "Are you going to see him again?"

"He asked me to come over Friday. Said we could go somewhere after the band practices...."

The girls' voices began to recede as they left the bathroom. Annie sunk back onto the toilet seat as the small room grew quiet once more. Her breath was coming in rapid gasps, and she was feeling dizzy with the effort not to scream.

The bell rang for the next class, but she stayed where she was, knowing she was no state to face a roomful of fellow students. The slightest offense from one of them would send her off the deep end, and she couldn't afford the scandal.

It was a routine, she repeated in her head. And she had fallen for it. She had been so stupid to think for even a moment that she had ever meant anything to him. Certainly not as a friend. Not as anything other than a tool. Something only to be used.

She spent the next fifteen minutes getting her anger under control physically. Her breathing and heart rate were calmed by force of will; the adrenaline in her blood gradually dissipated. Meanwhile, she steeled herself to face once more the hellish world school had become.

Jane! I need you now! she cried inwardly, wishing she could somehow summon her confidante. She screwed her eyes shut and imagined what words of wisdom her friend would advise her with.

Don't give the arseholes of the world so much power over you, Annie.

As she sat there on the toilet, Annie resolved she would no longer acknowledge, much less try to quell the persistent rumors. Her efforts to do so had done no good whatsoever, and she now realized that Stephen had been right, last spring, when he had told her the more one refuted a claim, the more it seemed to stick as gospel truth. Further, she would not attempt to punish the traitor who started them would instead ignore the idiots who spread or believed them. She would not give them the satisfaction of seeing her upset by anything they did. From this moment on, they would have no power over her.

And she would never again spare another kind thought for Stephen Drake.

16 December, 1993

Dear Annie,

You don't really want to know what a Dementor is. They're Azkaban guards, here hunting for Black. Hopefully they catch the bloody fellow soon and get the hell out of here.

The weather is even colder and gloomier than usual, and that's saying something. It's getting hard to get out of bed in the morning, to be honest. I should probably be eating more chocolate.

Ravenclaw pounded Hufflepuff, which is good news for us. Means there's still hope for the Cup, as long as we play astoundingly well in our next two matches. Which is quite possible, actually: Angelina, Alicia, and Katie are really rather impressive. And Wood never lets anything through the goals anymore. Hopefully Harry will have a new broom soon.

Speaking of Harry, Fred and I have decided to bequeath him the map. Poor bloke is stuck here in the castle while the rest of us get to escape to Hogsmeade (his idiot uncle wouldn't sign his permission slip). It took a bit of work, but I convinced Fred we didn't need it anymore. We've already memorized all the shortcuts and secret tunnels, and we're better at Disillusionment Charms than anyone we know. Time to pass it on, share the knowledge.

Happy Christmas! Oh, and why was Fred's name in parentheses? He's curious.

Love,

George & Fred

31 December, 1993

Dear George (& Fred),

Happy New Year (nearly)! Christmas was fan-flipping-tastic for me this year. Gran got me a laptop computer WITH an internet connection into my room. She says it's for school, university in particular (she's trying to guilt me into it with the gift), but all I care about is it's mine now! No more trudging to the public library whenever I have to write a paper! Woo-hoo!

That was very generous of you, giving Harry the map. You're true humanitarians, you lot. Maybe Harry will use it for good rather than idiotically reckless purposes. Maybe he'll sneak into the library to study after hours (ha ha).

Oh, and if the Dementors are still at Hogwarts, who's guarding Azkaban?

Got to go... off to Jane's for a soiree. Hope you find something to raise your spirits next year!

Love you more,

Annie

P.S. Fred's name is in parentheses because I no longer believe Fred either reads or writes any part of these letters. And I do not believe he is curious about it either. He is a toad, and please tell him so from me.

21 January, 1994

Dear Annie,

Explain more about your Christmas present. I remember what a computer is, but what is an internet connection? Is that like the cord that plugs into the wall? I thought that was called electricity.

Who's guarding Azkaban, you ask? That's a good question! Black is still on the loose, no sign of him since Halloween. Maybe he's moved on, and Dumbledore will make the creepy things leave empty-handed.

Excellent news: we've had a breakthrough with one of the sweets! Fred came across a spell that turns you into a canary for about ten seconds, then you molt and return to normal. We've been experimenting with casting it into edible stuff, and so far the best fit seems to be biscuits. It does affect the taste, though (a bit gamey), so it still needs work. Hopefully we'll have something to send you soon!

More excellent news: Slytherin beat Ravenclaw, so they have a loss now as well. Things continue to look good for us regarding the Cup.

And the most excellent news: Harry got a new broom. Actually, I hesitate to even refer to the magnificent thing as a broom. A rocket, more like. It's an M.F. bloody Firebolt (I would ask you to pardon the profanity, but since I learned it from you...). The only downside is that it was sent to him anonymously, and the old bidy professors here seem to think it might be jinxed. I say, who gives a flying eff? He'll get it back soon any day now, we all hope and then we're practically invincible!

Love,

George (& Fred all right, I admit he doesn't participate, but he always asks after you when he notices you've written us! Ribbit!)

1 February, 1994

Dear George (& Fred),

The internet is a difficult thing to explain. It basically boils down to loads of computers all over the world being connected by wires. They store and share information and can communicate with each other, on command. This is probably ridiculously simplified to the point of being completely wrong, but it'll have to do. Sometime I'll show you how it works. It will help make studying for exams a bit easier for me, that's for sure.

Speaking of studying for exams... are you? Never mind I can hear you snorting from here.

Excellent news about the canary biscuits. Can't wait to try one!

Good luck against Ravenclaw! Hope Harry has a better time of it, this go. Are the Dementors gone yet?

Love you more,

Annie

29 February, 1994

Dear Annie,

Cheers! Happy birthday! It's the big #4 for you! Hope you like this little scribble. Cartoons like this are rather popular here these days, and we thought you'd enjoy one of your own. Fred drew the pictures he seems to be better at animation than handwriting. And here are half a dozen Canary Creams!

Lots of news to share today. First, Harry got his Firebolt back in time for our match versus Ravenclaw. It was a rout! Gryffindor haven't had a win like this in a decade at least. And the best part: (insert your favorite rude insult here) Malfoy was caught bang to rights trying to sabotage the match! Fred and I hosted a soiree of our own to celebrate in the common room with the culinary help of the Hogwarts house-elves.

Next item: apparently Sirius Black has his sights set on something or someone in Gryffindor. He snuck into the tower at night after the party and slashed the bed curtains of one of the students here. Ron's manky old rat appears to be the only victim. Apparently Longbottom the Tossplot left the passwords lying around, WRITTEN DOWN on paper, and that's how he got in.

Now there's security trolls in the corridors. Smelly blighters, those trolls. So, no, the Dementors are not gone yet.

And as for studying, that's what Easter holidays are for. Don't tell me you've started already?

Love,

George & FRED (Happy birthday, you git and yes it's really me. Ribbit!)

"Relax, Jane. You're eighteen for real, and you won't be the one going to jail," Annie reassured her friend who was anxiously glancing around the bar. "I'll take the fall alone if I get caught."

"No one's getting busted," argued Jane's old boyfriend, Robin.

He had been in seventh year when Jane arrived in Ottery, and she had promptly snagged the cutest, smartest, most popular boy in school as her boyfriend. Robin was a nice fellow to boot, Annie reckoned, and had always treated them both with respect. He and Jane had mutually decided to break it off when he left for university, but Annie

suspected they both still harbored feelings for each other.

"The fake ID got Annie past the bouncer, and that's all that matters. We're in, and that's the end of it," he said as he gave Jane a bracing one-armed hug. "My birthday's not 'til May, Annie, so I got plenty of use out of mine my first year here, that's for sure. It's a good one, I promise."

Jane had arranged for Robin to get the ID for Annie as a birthday present, "In case you find a car to buy sooner than you think," she had explained. She knew Annie was in the market to buy a vehicle to help her transport her Gran to medical appointments (which were becoming increasingly frequent and farther away from home), rather than always borrowing Mrs. Finnerty's. And it would still be two years before Annie could legally drive or drink in public, for that matter, hence the source of Jane's anxiety.

Annie had been at least as touched by the thoughtfulness of the gesture as she had been shocked that Jane had resorted to illicit activity to obtain the gift. Granted, Robin was the one who had actually procured it, but it was at Jane's request, after all.

"Sorry. I guess this just goes against everything I'm used to," Jane said with a nervous giggle.

"It's good for you to step outside your comfort zone, once in a while," Annie said with a wink. "I've been begging you to get into trouble with me for ages."

Jane laughed in response. "I suppose... it is a bit thrilling," she confessed.

"Finally!" cried Annie. "Perfect Jane loosens up a bit!"

Jane stuck out her tongue at her.

"Rob, go dance with her. She needs to burn off some of that nervous energy," Annie encouraged them.

"We're not going to leave you alone here," Jane scolded.

"She won't be alone... here comes Andy," Robin answered, rising from his seat.

After they said brief hellos and introductions, Robin dragged Jane over to the dance floor, leaving Annie with his flatmate, Andy. She hadn't met him before, nor had she been able to find out anything more about him from Robin other than, "He's a good bloke."

"So, it's your birthday, then?" Andy asked, making small talk as they sat alone at the table. "Rob told me that's why you two are visiting. Having fun?"

"Sure," she replied cheerfully, appreciating his effort to be friendly.

Andy had light brown hair, brown eyes, was of average height and build. In short: he was completely nondescript *But not in an unattractive way*, Annie reckoned *more like safe and reliable*. She took a long drink from her pint.

"Do you mind me asking how old?" he asked, smiling.

"Eighteen, of course," she said, laughing, holding up her pint glass of ale as proof.

He laughed as well. "I don't think so..." he added in a lower voice.

Annie paused. "What do you mean?" she asked a bit anxiously. *Had Rob told him about the fake ID?*

"Well, if your birthday really is on Leap Day, then your age would have to be divisible by four. I may not be a genius at maths, but that rules out eighteen, I'm afraid. Your options are twenty, which is highly unlikely, or sixteen, which is highly illegal," he said with a smile.

"Aren't you clever?" she replied. "Actually, my birthday was yesterday...." She attempted to sound casual in her false explanation as her anxiety was building.

"I'm sure it was," he laughed, unfooled. "That's the most logical conclusion, after all. Don't look so nervous I'll never tell," he assured her. "Although I do think it's rather irresponsible of Rob to bring a pretty sixteen-year-old to a place like this. The sharks are already circling," he added, nodding toward the crowded bar.

Annie looked at him guardedly. She had fallen victim to flattery once before and wasn't eager to repeat the experience. *Eighteen-year-old, remember?* And I can take care of myself, thank you very much," she instructed him. The safest bet was always to stick to the original story, she'd found. Fervent conviction was often more convincing than facts or logic.

"Right," he answered, smirking. "I hope you don't take offense, but I think I'll keep an eye on you tonight anyway. And do me a favor," he added, waving the waitress over to their table.

"That depends," Annie replied, leery.

"Try to keep hydrated," he recommended, then turned to ask the waitress to bring a pitcher of water and a few empty glasses. "It'll help you feel better tomorrow."

"Oh," she responded, surprised by what now appeared to be Andy's genuine concern for a complete stranger. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," he replied, taking a drink from his glass.

Jane and Rob returned to the table then and joined the conversation. The four of them continued to chat for a while, and Annie learned Andy was studying to be a doctor.

"Really? Wow I can't imagine anyone voluntarily going to school for so long," she teased him.

Andy shrugged. "It's what I'm good at. A professional student, me."

Annie shook her head. "No offense, mate, but that sounds like hell on earth, to me," she laughed.

He laughed in response. "Not far from the truth, actually. And no, to answer your next question: I have no life," he added.

"You need a hobby," she counseled him, "to get you out of the library. Something that doesn't involve books. Something reckless maybe skydiving? Or racing motorcycles?"

Andy laughed, shaking his head. "I'm studying human anatomy, remember? I know exactly what a mess I would make upon impact."

"All right, ladies," Robin interrupted. "Ready for tonight's lesson? Time to learn proper pub etiquette, you two."

"Wipe your hand after you sneeze into it?" Jane teased.

"Save the spitting for outdoors?" added Annie.

"Har, har," Robin laughed sarcastically, setting two full shot glasses in front of them. "When a fellow offers you a drink, what do you do then, smarty pants?"

"I already know the answer to this one, Annie. Why don't you give it a try?" Jane bluffed.

"Of course you do, Jane. Is there any question in the world you don't know the answer to?" Annie replied sarcastically.

"The answer is," Robin said in an exasperated tone, "you accept it and politely chat with the generous fellow until the beverage is finished."

"Glad it's a shot, then," Annie teased him as she knocked it back. "Just about time enough to say thanks and move on!"

"Point well taken," laughed Robin. "I'll remember that, next time. Pints only, from now on!"

As the evening progressed, Robin, Jane, and Annie proceeded to get somewhat inebriated under the watchful eye of their babysitter and designated driver, Andy. Annie was careful to follow his advice, downing as much water as she could in between alcoholic beverages bought by friendly gentlemen. By the end of the night, Annie and Jane both had pockets full of bits of drink napkins and coasters containing phone numbers, pressed into their hands by hopeful, drink-buying admirers as they'd danced and mingled.

"I can't believe the utter pigs there are in this town," Andy said in shock as Annie emptied out her pockets in his car, letting the scraps fall to the already cluttered floor. She sat in the front seat next to him, while Robin and Jane were exploring the possibility of rekindling their romance for the evening in the back. "They couldn't all be so drunk as to fail to notice your age."

"Maybe they were blinded by my beauty and charm," Annie giggled drunkenly at her own wit, poking fun at herself.

Andy snorted. "It's amusing how you think that's a joke," he said quietly.

"Don't be such an old biddy," she needed him, misinterpreting his comment. "So they thought I look a bit older than you did. Most of them were just being polite to me. I think the term is 'wingman?' Jane was the flame drawing the moths."

"I suppose they deserve whatever they get, in the end," he said shaking his head with a rueful smile.

The occupants in the backseat were starting to make suspiciously romantic kiss-like noises, so Andy turned on the radio to block them out. He and Annie drove the rest of the way back to his flat in silence.

Andy flipped on the lights as the four of them entered the apartment. He led Annie to the doorway of his room, politely indicating she was welcome to have his bed for the night, adding, "I'll take the sofa."

"I should be the one on the sofa," she argued as he pressed another glass of water and some aspirin in her hands. "I'm the interloper."

"Won't hear of it. Let me pretend to be chivalrous," he said with a smile.

Suddenly the light in the front room was switched off. They heard Jane quietly giggle in response.

"Uh-oh. Think I should go break those two up?" he asked, genuinely concerned.

Annie thought for a moment, then nodded. "Best to turn the hose on them for tonight. If they feel the same way when they're sober tomorrow morning, then I'll apologize and take the blame."

"Right. Off to bed with you now," he said softly as he closed the door behind him, leaving her alone in his room.

She heard him rousting the amorous couple in the front room, then the other bedroom door close shortly after. "No sneaking back, Rob," Andy admonished his roommate about ten minutes later from where the two of them were bedded down in the front room. Annie fell asleep soon after that.

She was the first to awaken the next morning. Apart from a very dry mouth, she felt none the worse for wear. Annie dressed and tiptoed into the bathroom for a drink of water and quick attempt to tame her hair. Then she crept quietly into the tiny kitchen and nosed around. Finding nothing at all to eat, she happened upon a set of keys instead. She nicked them and silently headed out of the flat, hoping to find a market within walking distance.

Annie had been back in the flat for nearly twenty minutes and had a pile of sausages cooked and on a plate before anyone else began to stir. She had just begun to pour a second round of pancake batter into the skillet when a voice startled her.

"I didn't know we had any food in here," mumbled Andy from the doorway.

"The cupboards were bare, in fact. You might be shocked to learn there's a market just around the corner," she said with a smile.

Andy chuckled. "Are you surprised we don't do much cooking here? This is a bachelor's flat, after all."

"No. Especially once I discovered the cobwebs on the pots and pans," she giggled.

"You don't have to go all this effort," he said, serious for a moment.

"I do if I'm to have a prayer of eating this morning," she teased.

"Point for Miss Jones," he laughed as she handed him a plate with a stack of steaming pancakes. "You seem to be feeling all right this morning," he added.

"All due to your expert advice," she replied. "Thanks again. I had a great time last night. One of my better birthdays," she added.

"Not the best?" he asked, pretending to take offense.

"No... not quite," she said, sounding slightly wistful. The best ones were far behind her now, in her childhood. Eight had been magical, nine had been fantastic, and ten had been simply wonderful. She was reminded of that one rather often whenever she was alone in the garden, in fact.

"Well, you've only had *sixteen* of them, you know," he said disapprovingly as he took a bite.

"Still on about that, are you?" she said, rolling her eyes.

"I don't blame you, you know. I'm not really such a wet blanket as you might think," he said before taking another bite. "These are amazing! What's in them?"

"Secret family recipe," she giggled. "I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you," she joked as she poured them each a cup of tea.

They were joined at that moment by a shuffling and grimacing Jane.

"Good Lord. You look like you got the rough end of it, Jane," said Annie sympathetically.

"Aspirin. And tea, if you please," she croaked in response.

Andy pushed the bottle of pills toward her and Annie passed her a cup. "Want any breakfast?"

Jane shook her head and winced again. "Not just yet," she moaned. After another moment, she asked Annie, "How is it you're so chipper this morning?"

"I came in a distant second in the popularity contest," Annie needled her. "You had far more free drinks than I did," she explained further in response to Jane's confused look.

"What an idiot I am," she groaned, laying her head onto the table. "Could I have another?" she asked as she pushed her empty teacup toward Annie.

"Of course, poppet," Annie cooed. "And maybe a nice, hot shower if that's all right with you, Andy?"

He nodded. "I'll just go set out some towels," he offered as he rose to leave the table.

It was late in the morning before Jane and Annie were finally prepared to leave. Jane was nearly recovered from her hangover, but agreed to let Annie drive them home anyway. The morning had been a bit awkward once Robin had woken up both he and Jane were a bit embarrassed by their behavior the night before.

Annie and Andy had tried to give them some privacy to sort it out while Annie loaded their things in the car.

"Rob's a decent guy, you know," Andy offered. "I don't think he meant to take advantage of her last night. They were both pretty drunk...."

Annie nodded in agreement. "It was at least as much Jane's fault as his, and she knows it. I think they still have some unfinished business between them, though."

"The perils of teenage romance," he said a bit sarcastically.

"I wouldn't know," Annie laughed, assuming it was yet another dig at her age.

"You can't expect me to believe that," Andy replied, strangely serious.

Annie shrugged, but was saved from arguing the point as Jane and Robin walked out the door, holding hands. Annie looked at Andy with her eyebrow raised, as if to point out her assessment had been accurate, and he rolled his eyes in response. He walked around to the driver's door and opened it for her.

As she started to step into the car, Andy gently took her hand and put a small piece of paper in it. "I hope you'll call me... when you're really eighteen," he whispered, and gave her a quick kiss on her cheek. "Drive safely, ladies," he said more loudly as Annie sank slowly into the driver's seat, and he carefully shut the door behind her.

"Nice fellow, Andy," said Jane innocently, gazing out the window at the two fellows now chatting with each other on the sidewalk.

Apparently Jane hadn't noticed the brief exchange between Andy and herself, to Annie's immense relief. She had been stunned by the kiss and was scrambling to recover her composure as she stuffed the slip of paper into her pocket.

"That he is," Annie agreed as she pulled out onto the road, doing an immediate U-turn. "Couldn't agree more," she added as they both waved at the two young men standing in front of their flat.

"Now, spill it. What's going on between you and Rob, my dear? We have a long drive ahead of us, and I expect to be entertained for my trouble," Annie teased, eager to change the topic.

Jane groaned. "Oh, Annie, what am I going to do?" she whined, and they proceeded to dissect every aspect of her complicated relationship with her ex-boyfriend for the entire way home.

1 April, 1994

Dear George (& Fred),

Happy birthday! It's been a warm spring here, and the rue is budding early, so I should have another parcel for you soon.

Meanwhile, please enjoy your gifts. I found them while shopping this spring with Jane. Don't be put off by the insulting title of the economics book: the bookshop clerk highly recommended it. He also gave the entrepreneurship one a glowing review, and he owns his own shop, so there you go. I realize I might be putting our friendship in jeopardy by sending you books for your birthday presents, but I'm hoping their usefulness and warm sentiment behind them outweigh the revulsion you have to reading. Fingers crossed that you'll give them a go....

Other than studying, track practice and meets, and working, I do little else but sleep and eat. Have you two started studying at all?

The Canary Creams were absolutely a riot! They promise to be a raging success, I'm sure. Do the elves make the biscuits for you or do you have to buy them before enchanting them?

Oh, and congrats on the win.

Love you more,

Annie

15 April, 1994

Dear Annie,

I cannot believe I am writing this and will deny it until my dying day if you ever repeat it, but... thank you for the books. They are very illuminating. Aside from being a bit dry (nothing blows up in them, does it?) they promise to be dead useful.

In fact, these very useful tomes led Fred and me to have a serious heart-to-heart discussion about our futures. We have come to the conclusion that we are destined to forge our own path in the world, independent of school or ministry or employer of any sort. The siren song of profitable enterprise is ringing in our ears, drowning out any argument to the contrary.

Therefore, we are making strategic plans regarding our upcoming OWLs. There are certain courses which we recognize will behoove us to continue over the next two years. However, that is nowhere near the majority of what we are currently saddled with. Ergo, we will be taking pains to ensure we will not be in any position to continue any of said unnecessary courses of study, regardless of what our professors and/or MUM thinks to the contrary.

So... we are planning to fail a minimum of six OWLs each. That should ensure sufficient unoccupied time over our remaining sentence erm years here at Hogwarts to

devote to product development and marketing strategies.

Now, if we could just come into some money, we'd be set. I'm curious to know what you think of our plan. Write back soon and tell us.

Love,

George (& Fred)

P.S. Tomorrow is our final match against Slytherin. Promises to be a bloodbath.

May 1, 1994

Dear George (& Fred),

Well... I say more power to you! If I knew for certain how I wanted to spend my life at this point, I'd like to think I'd have the balls to go for it, everyone else be damned. Kudos to you both for figuring out your calling and sticking to your guns. You'll be brilliant at it as well, of course.

Are you really sure you have to fail six OWLs, though? Why not five? Or four? How arbitrary is that number? If you only have three courses each for NEWT studies, you'll barely go to class once a day! Which I realize is not a persuasive argument for you, but still. Have you considered you might get a bit bored with nothing to do all day? I suppose I'm presuming you would attend class at all.... Whatever I trust your judgment.

This year has been exhausting and soul-crushingly boring. I need a holiday. Promise me we'll go back to the beach after these (insert string of rude epithets here) exams are over with.

Looking forward to hearing all about your match....

Love you more,

Annie

10 May, 1994

Dear Annie,

Thanks for your glowing support. I knew we could count on you to understand. I promise you'll always have a position with us to fall back on! We'll keep you off the streets! Hopefully that takes a bit of the pressure off you before your exams.

On to the match: it was bloody brilliant, of course. The Slytherins never knew what hit them (every Bludger I could put a bat on, that's what!). We beat them by 110 points and clinched the Cup! We're all heroes, and not just in Gryffindor everyone in the whole school is thrilled that Slytherin has been beaten at last! The reign of darkness is over!

As for the courses, only four are worth pursuing: Defense Against the Dark Arts (for obvious reasons), Charms, Transfiguration, and Herbology. Now, we figure we both need DADA, and Charms is just plain fun. But we reckon only one of us needs either of the other two we'll divide the workload between us. Astronomy, Muggle Studies, and History of Magic are utterly useless. Care of Magical Creatures well, just about anything you need to know can be found in about three or four books, so why waste time in class? And Potions, while admittedly crucial to our business plans, we will be failing on principle. There is no way Snape will accept us to continue to NEWT, no matter how well we do on the exam, so what's the point? We're boycotting that exam in its entirety.

Believe it or not, I'm going to sign off in order to do a bit of studying. I'll understand if you're not able to write back before we see you after term's over. If we don't hear from you, good luck!

Love,

George (& Fred)

25 May, 1994

Dear George (& Fred),

Just a quick note to say hello. And thanks for the job offer. It's the best one I've gotten so far. Congrats on winning the Cup! That's fantastic news! And good luck to the both of you... though I strongly doubt you'll need luck to do well on the OWLs you've chosen to take seriously. You're far too clever for your own good, you know. You'd be ace students if you ever decided to apply yourselves in that direction (not that I'm in any way endorsing that lifestyle ugh). But since some of us still need to study....

Love you more,

Annie

P.S. I have a big surprise for you both when you get home!!

8 June, 1994

Dear Annie,

We like surprises... hope it's a good one! Meet us on the 19th at our usual spot, and bring a snack.

Love,

George (& Fred)

**Lyrics from "Over the Hills and Far Away" by Led Zeppelin*

Reputation

Chapter 14 of 80

A footrace in the park turns ugly. George learns some very disturbing things about his brother and best mate. And I do believe those are hormones beginning to trickle in...

Chapter 14: Reputation

Summer 1994

Age 16

"What the hell happened to you? How did you manage to injure every single one of your toes?" George asked, gazing incredulously at his friend's sandaled feet. They were walking down the street next to the park in the village, bored and searching for entertainment. The sun had just set, leaving the clouds in the sky livid.

Annie wiggled her blood-red toes within her shoes. "It's called nail polish, dufus."

George smirked. "They look positively gory," he praised her. "Since when did you get so girlie?"

"Some of us mature as time passes," she retorted.

Fred laughed. "You'll have to excuse my brother, Annie. George still thinks all girls have cooties."

"Shut it! Like you know any better," George said with a forceful shove to his brother.

"Actually, I've recently discovered a few things girls are rather useful for," Fred answered, stumbling a step before righting himself.

"Watch it, Fred. Don't make me defend the honor of my entire sex," Annie warned him jokingly.

Something about hearing Annie say that word made George want to giggle. He smothered that embarrassingly immature feeling immediately with a quick swallow.

"No offense intended, I assure you," his brother said, patently lying. "Girls are excellent at lots of things. Better than me at loads of stuff like school for one. Or wearing skirts." For emphasis, he knocked at the back of Annie's own rarely seen but currently exposed knees with his foot, making them buckle.

That is unusual, George agreed silently. Instead of her typical jeans, Annie was wearing a skirt made of denim, pleated in a style vaguely similar to the girls' uniform skirt at school. This one looked better, though; a bit more stylish, in his opinion. The ones at school were absolutely dreadful.

"This list had better get a lot longer, and quick," Annie threatened Fred, brandishing a fist in his direction. "And should *not* be limited things like cooking and cleaning, if you know what's good for you."

"But you're really good at those things, Annie. You have loads of domestic talents. What's wrong with that? Nothing to be ashamed of," Fred taunted her in a smarmy voice.

Annie halted, planting her feet. "I'm better than you at just about anything you care to name, Fred Weasley, including standing up to pee," she huffed, hands on her hips.

"Ha! How about kissing, then?" Fred dared her.

Annie rolled her eyes disdainfully, then started walking again. "Grow up."

"Like you've ever," George chimed in as well. *Where is all this rubbish coming from? What's Fred on about?* he wondered. They'd always ribbed each other about every little thing, but never about... *kissing*.

"You don't know everything about me, George," Fred snapped, clearly annoyed with George's lack of support.

George snorted in disbelief. *As if...*

"For your information, I *have* kissed a girl, which is more than I can say for either of you two gits." Fred folded his arms, getting defensive. He sat down in a swing with a huff.

"Why would I want to kiss a girl?" Annie asked, purposely misunderstanding him.

Fred stuck his tongue out at her for her mockery.

"In your dreams," George taunted, nearly at the same time. *He's lying!* he thought with confidence that was beginning to waver slightly.

"Actually, it was in the library... last spring. With Allison Stewart," Fred boasted.

"Bullshit! She's a seventh year!" cried George. *What the bloody hell is he trying to pull?*

"I know mate! I was a bit shocked myself! She just... sort of... cornered me. Said I was really cute...." His brother smiled with the memory of it.

"When the hell did you ever set foot in the library?" protested George, suddenly nervous. He wracked his brain to think of any significant span of time they'd spent apart during the last school year. Since when were they keeping things like this a secret from each other?

"Doesn't sound as if there were any reliable witnesses to this supposed kiss. How convenient for you." Annie added, sounding rather dubious herself.

"Don't be jealous, Annie! There's plenty of Fred to go around. I'll still be your first, if you like," Fred teased smugly as he let go of the chain and reached out to take her hand. He puckered his lips like a dying fish.

Annie shoved him away roughly, making the chain rattle and Fred chuckle. "You're nearly a year too late, dork," she informed him. She strolled casually over to a merry-go-round nearby, spun it forcefully, then hopped on.

Annie, too? George was getting increasingly uncomfortable with this conversation. It was extremely disturbing to think his twin brother and best friend had spent the last year snogging people without his knowledge. And he had... well, he had not. "Are you still running, Annie?" he asked, attempting to redirect them.

"Yeah," she answered, sounding eager to change the subject as well.

"Away from all the boys, obviously, George," Fred baited her.

Annie smiled at Fred with dangerous sweetness. "I can sure as hell outrun you."

The hairs on the back of George's neck stood up at the knife-edge tone in Annie's voice as she challenged his brother.

"Care to prove it?" asked Fred with all the machismo he could summon.

But George heard the slight hesitation in his brother's voice and was willing to bet Annie did, too. He smiled in anticipation of the imminent battle *This promises to be entertaining.*

"Name the time and place you can stand to be humiliated," she taunted him without reservation, throwing down the gauntlet.

"What's wrong with here and now? Unless you're chicken..." Fred replied coolly.

George could see Fred knew he was trapped with no escape and was coasting on bravado alone at this point. A part of him was hoping Annie would teach Fred a lesson he nearly always deserved to get taken down a peg or two, after all. But he felt a little traitorous, taking so much enjoyment from watching his brother squirm.

"Nothing at all," Annie said with a confident shrug. She began to remove her sandals, which were unfit for running.

George was momentarily distracted by her red toes now standing out against the green grass. Her feet looked far too small and delicate to be up for the challenge. He and his brother were wearing trainers, after all. *Doesn't quite seem fair, really,* he thought with a tiny pang. *Then again, Fred gave her every chance to back down. Typical Annie not to do so, though.*

"First one to reach the far end of the park that sign over there wins," she said.

"That far?" asked George, slightly concerned. It went without saying that anything Fred did, George was expected to do as well. Plus, family honor was at stake now, and even though it was all in fun, George wasn't about to leave his brother without a second for support. He and Fred would definitely have an advantage in a sprint, he reckoned, but over longer distances...

"Winner gets what...? A kiss?" teased Fred, presumably attempting to make her think twice about the dare.

"Why would I reward the loser and punish the winner?" she cried, hands on her hips.

George laughed nervously. Though exactly why he felt nervous at the moment was unclear to him. *Why does he keep banging on about kissing tonight, anyway?*

"Ouch! Okay, just for bragging rights, then," Fred said with a laugh. "Ready?"

Annie nodded, accepting the terms of the contest. All three of them toed an imaginary line.

"Steady?" George asked.

Annie looked over at him and winked. "GO!" she yelled.

The three of them flew across the flat expanse of the park. Fred and George's equally long legs carried them farther per stride, but Annie's strength and training kept her neck and neck with them the entire way. She forced them to run flat out, that was for sure.

There was no clear winner by the time they reached the finish line. All three doubled over, sucking in air for several minutes before they were able to speak again. At which point they started laughing.

"You know... kissing isn't... so bad.... You should... let a boy... catch you... sometime..." Fred teased her as he struggled to breathe.

"Oh, I know... it isn't.... It was just... the idea of... kissing you, Fred," she giggled.

George bellowed with laughter. "Good one, Annie!" He held out his hand to her, and she high-fived it gently.

Annie started walking back to the starting line to collect her shoes. The boys quickly caught up with her, taking turns bumping her with their shoulders into the other one. She shoved each one back in turn. Both boys kept on walking slowly as she paused to put her shoes back on. Afterward, she jogged a few paces to catch up, then launched herself with a leap up onto Fred's back.

"Argh! A little warning would be polite," he complained as he caught her knees with his hands to support her weight, stumbling for a moment.

"Suck it up, wimp. She can't be that heavy she's barely four feet tall," George teased his brother.

"Shut up, George!" Annie complained. "I'm five-two now!"

"It's not the weight it's the force of the impact," Fred groaned, then yelped as his earlobe was pinched.

"Isn't that a pretty picture," called out a female voice from a picnic table a short distance away. It was dripping with venom, unfriendly to the utmost degree.

"Excuse me?" Annie turned toward the voice, easing herself down off Fred's back. She squinted into the darkness, trying to make out the source of the malice in the dimness, and took several steps forward.

"You heard me, slag," snarled the voice.

Annie recognized the girl now: a particularly stupid one from school had been seated at the table and was rising from it threateningly. She was tall and solidly built, but otherwise unremarkable. Annie had heard through the rumor mill that this one had had a big crush on Geoff last year, but she had never spoken a direct word to her in her life. At the time, Geoff had made it clear to anyone who would listen that he was uninterested.

Annie took several more steps closer to the table. She had completely forgotten the fact that anyone else was with her. Nothing registered apart from the threat emanating from the girl in front of her.

"Care to say that to my face?" she answered in a soft, threatening voice.

"Run yourself through all the boys at school, have you? Casting yourself about for something new? You disgusting whore," the girl baited Annie malevolently.

Annie felt hot blood gush out of her gut and into her limbs and had little motivation to subdue it at the moment. Perhaps some of those vicious school rumors about her, the dirty looks launched her way, might be avenged tonight.

She noticed a few other girls rising to stand near the big girl. She hadn't realized before that there was a group of them at the table. But Annie didn't care *No matter collateral damage, if they're stupid enough to get involved.*

Her breath was coming in rapid gulps, oxygenating her blood for the imminent attack. Her mind emptied of everything but the immediate battle to come. Her muscles tensed as she shifted her weight slightly to the balls of her feet in preparation to spring. Her hands curled themselves into fists, throbbing with the craving for impact. She took several more steps forward, ready to engage the enemy.

Annie was startled by a hand on her arm that suddenly yanked her backwards.

"Now, now, ladies. Let's all be civil, shall we?" warned Fred, standing a few feet to the left side of her.

"Step off, Annie. She's not worth it," whispered George, maintaining his grip on her arm. He turned his back on the group of girls strategically arranging itself and faced her instead, standing firm between them.

"I'm gonna put my fist through her fucking teeth!" Annie shouted as she ducked her head around him, glaring at the girl. She pushed back against George with her arms, forcing him to take a step backward.

"You and what army, bitch?" the girl retorted.

"You're the one with the army, you bloody cow!" Annie spat back at her.

She kept trying to get around George, but he continued blocking her with his arms and body. She didn't want to hurt him, but if he didn't get out of her way soon....

George was now having some difficulty restraining his friend. He and his brother had learned a long time ago that there was some strange reserve of strength she could tap into when angry, and he realized she was definitely connected to it now. "Annie! Leave it!" he hissed quietly, reluctant to get much more physically forceful with her.

"Let go of me!" Annie snarled at him in a whisper. Frustratingly, every time she got one arm free, the other one was captured. Against her wishes, he had forced her to take several steps backward at this point. "I'm warning you, George...."

"Lovely manners with a face to match," growled Fred toward the big girl as he took a few steps backwards to help George restrain Annie's nearly murderous rage. "Pleasure to meet you. See you next Tuesday, all of you."

"That's right," the girl called out after the retreating trio of friends. "You'd better get that slut out of here! She won't be in any state to fuck you if I get my hands on her!"

Annie screamed and clawed at the body between her and her prey, finally breaking free of George's grip. In the instant of freedom that followed, she stumbled for two steps, righted herself, then lunged toward the insulting girl, sneering with pleasure at the look of shocked fear that crossed her intended victim's face. She roared in triumphant anticipation as the girl panicked, taking several quick steps backward, then fell on her backside.

Fred grabbed her from behind just as Annie was about to pounce, pinning her arms and dragging her away from the confrontation. Kicking and howling, Annie spewed threats and epithets at the girls who now stood stunned and speechless. Working together, the brothers managed to turn her around, each firmly holding one of Annie's arms, and marched her out of the park between them.

"Damn, Annie! What the hell was that?" Fred demanded once they were seated in a chip shop a few blocks away.

They had all three been silent during the walk away from the park to this place. George had just set a basket of food and some drinks on the table, then scooted himself into the booth as well. Annie sat between them in the back, staring with sullen anxiety at the table.

"Just a few of my charming schoolmates," she answered bitterly, biting her lip. She felt sick to her stomach, which was roiling full of a cocktail of nervous worry and adrenaline. *What must Fred and George think of me? What if they believe that girl?*

"Leave her alone," George ordered his brother. *This is who Annie is forced to go to school with? They're as bad as than any Slytherins* he marveled.

He thought he could see tears beginning to well up in her eyes and had no clue what to do if she started to cry. Other than run back to the park and murder that herd of horrid girls, that is. He shook off the thought of them and returned his focus to his friend. He couldn't remember when he had seen her this upset. Not in a long time, at least.

They sat quietly for several minutes. Neither boy had any idea what to say. Fred began munching on the food.

"I'm not like that. What she said," Annie said quietly.

"Of course you're not!" cried George, astonished she could entertain the notion they could think something like that about her. They'd known each other for more than half their lives at this point. He granted he might not know much, but he reckoned he understood what a *whore* was, at least, and Annie was the furthest thing from it. The idea was utterly preposterous.

"Don't be ridiculous," added Fred dismissively. After a moment, he continued. "You're so cute, I bet all the girls at school are jealous of you," he said as he gently punched her in the arm.

Annie snorted at Fred with his mocking smirk. "You're so full of it...."

"Don't take my word for it, then. Isn't she cute, George?" prompted Fred with a grin.

"Cute as a bug," he agreed, laughing cheerfully. *Smile, Annie*, he encouraged her silently. *Shake it off, mate....*

"A cute little cockroach," Fred teased, using his arm to deflect a retaliatory slap to the head from Annie.

"I was thinking more along the lines of dung beetle," George laughed as he caught the playful fist she threw at him in his hand.

"An adorable little bloodsucking tick," sang Fred, quickly spinning his legs from under the table, out of kick range.

"The most charmingly annoying mosquito," George said as he swatted her pinching fingers off his arm.

Annie giggled. "Both of you can kiss my..."

"Have a chip, will you?" George interrupted as he tossed one at her head.

Annie caught it in mid-flight with her mouth and smiled.

Quidditch Mania

Chapter 15 of 80

Fred and George sneak Annie into a Chudley Quidditch match. Annie wonders when did George suddenly become so handsome?

Chapter 15: Quidditch Mania

Summer 1994

Age 16

Annie was sandwiched between her two best friends on the seat of her truck. Her truck, which she'd bought with the money she had earned working over the past year and a half. It was a beat-up old Peugeot farm truck, nearly as old as they were, but the previous owner had recently installed a re-built engine in it, and it ran like a dream. Considering it was the only operational vehicle within fifty miles that she could afford, her purchase decision had been practically made for her.

"This is the surprise?" the twins had exclaimed in delight when they saw it for the first time that summer.

"Brilliant!" George had cried excitedly, peering into the cab at the dials on the dashboard.

"Matches your personality perfectly," Fred had joked, probing at a rusty spot with his wand. When she turned her back, the little spot disappeared.

But it bothered her that she never got to drive it with the twins, though. They always insisted on one of them being behind the wheel whenever they went somewhere together. She supposed it had something to do with the now astonishing length of their legs, at least compared to hers.

Regardless, she spent most of today's ride barking frustrated instructions at George like a backseat driver. "Watch out! Slow down!"

It was a tribute to how excited the twins were that neither of them responded much to her nagging, nor engaged in their usual tag-team torture of her while she sat between them in a perfect trap. Instead, they spent their time raving about today's upcoming match, which they were now on their way to see. It was almost as if she wasn't even there at all.

Will they ever outgrow this Quidditch mania? she wondered.

"Here we are, then," George explained as he suddenly pulled off the road in the middle of nowhere.

"Let's park over near the trees. If anybody notices the truck, it'll look like we're off hiking or something," Fred suggested.

"Is this some sort of joke?" Annie demanded.

There was a broad, nearly empty expanse surrounding them. The open desertedness seemed to stretch for miles in all directions. Directly in front of her, there appeared to be what looked like an old, abandoned rubbish dump with hazard signs scattered all about, encircled with barbed wire fencing. An eerie mist was swirling all around it.

"What do you see?" Fred looked at her with amused interest.

She looked at him with suspicious disbelief. "*Adump*," she answered. *As if it isn't perfectly obvious*

"It could do with a bit of fresh paint, sure, but I wouldn't call it a dump," George laughed.

"Paint what? That manky old refrigerator? What are you on about?" she demanded.

"So you don't see the pitch in front of you, right now?" George asked with another laugh.

"If that's a Quidditch pitch, then I have no interest at all in going any further," Annie snapped impatiently. "You lot go on ahead, I'll wait here. If you're lucky, that is...."

She was beginning to feel like they were pulling her leg about the whole Quidditch match thing. And she wanted to get out of this place the sooner the better. It was starting to look more than a little bit dodgy. The mist looked as if it could swallow her whole and no one would be the wiser.

"Come on, we'll prove it," Fred said as he tugged her out of the truck behind him.

They began to walk toward the dump. But something was holding Annie back, nagging at her brain. She could feel it becoming more insistent as her friends walked on, getting further ahead of her. *What was it...?*

"Oh!" she exclaimed when it finally occurred to her. *How could I have been so careless?* she scolded herself.

The twins spun around to look at her with startled curiosity.

"I'm so sorry! I have to get back! I'm going to be late, I know it, but maybe if I hurry I can still get her there...." She began walking quickly backward to the truck.

"Annie, what are you..." George began to ask.

"Gran has a doctor's appointment," she said, cutting him off. "Today! In less than an hour. I just remembered...."

An amused smile was spreading across Fred's face. "Annie, we've been planning this for two weeks. There's no appointment. Your day is free, remember?"

Now that he mentioned it, she realized he was right. *That's odd, not to mention stupid of me*, she puzzled. She was beginning to feel rather annoyed with the entire situation, her smugly smiling friends included.

"What's going on here? I feel strange...."

Fred laughed and took her elbow in his hand, guiding her along. "It's the repelling charm. Keeps Muggles away so they don't see anything they're not supposed to. Which is why you're dressed up in Ginny's robes, so nobody here realizes that's exactly what you are, git."

Annie glared at him with narrowed eyes. She did not like to be laughed at. Especially by annoyingly smart-mouthed jerks.

George took two steps toward them and took her other arm. "This may be more of a challenge than we expected, Fred," he teased, helping to pull her forward. "She's pretty thick, even for a Muggle."

They both began dragging her toward the barbed wire fence. Her every step was reluctant, no matter what she tried to tell her legs. She just couldn't convince her body that this was where she wanted to be.

"People are starting to stare," Fred warned her in a whisper.

"People? What people?" she demanded. They were completely alone out here in the middle of this godforsaken moor! *This rubbish has gone on just about long enough....*

Suddenly, her feet refused to take another step forward. Annie stood directly in front of the fence, involuntarily frozen. She looked at George in panic. "I can't move!" she hissed.

George looked first at her, then at his brother with alarm. "What now?"

Fred bent swiftly and threw Annie bodily over his shoulder. "I'm *not* missing this match," he grunted in agitation, then began walking forward again, passing *right through the fence!*

To Annie's astonishment, the fence shimmered like a reflection in still water being disturbed, then disappeared altogether behind them. The unnerving silence of the empty moor was suddenly replaced by loud cheers and raucous music, then a booming voice called out like an announcer at a sporting event, rattling off the names of the players for each team. A gigantic, well-groomed pitch now stood where heaps of decaying garbage had been an instant ago.

Using her arms as braces, she propped herself up against Fred's back and looked around in wonder as she was carried further into the stadium by him. An enormous sunken oval field was in front of them, surrounded by rickety-looking wooden stands. Six large hoops, three at each end, soared into the sky. Colorful pennants and banners snapped in the breeze.

Fred set her back on her feet when they reached the stairs leading up into the stands where their seats were. "I'm not lugging your arse up all these steps, that's for damn sure," he warned her.

"It's okay, Fred. Whatever the trouble was before, I think it's gone now," she said softly as she gazed around her.

This was magic on a much grander scale than she had ever imagined. A vast stadium had been completely invisible and inaudible to her only moments ago. And it was filled with hundreds of wizards and witches in the craziest getups she had ever seen. It was like the wildest costume party ever. Her mouth was agape and smiling slightly.

Fred led the way up the steps to their seats, which were pretty far up. George climbed behind her, keeping a hand at her back just in case she needed any further prodding. As they sat down, Annie was still gobsmacked by the scene surrounding her, and the boys chuckled, pleased with her awed reaction.

A few minutes later, Fred offered to head back down for some food. Annie stood and began to dig into her pockets, pulling out some money.

"Put that away! Your money's no good here," Fred laughed as he rose and walked away.

George pushed her hand back into her pocket. "He means it. Nobody accepts those Muggle notes here. You'll draw attention to us," he warned.

"Oh, sorry. I'll pay you back later, I suppose," she said.

"Forget it. This is our treat, mate!" He beamed at her, patting her shoulder as he spoke.

Annie was instantly struck by the bright warmth of his smile and his pleasant, friendly face. And those shining brown eyes, framed with the longest, palest eyelashes she had ever seen on a boy. The familiar juvenile plumpness of his cheeks had now been replaced by the more maturely masculine features of a strong nose and jaw. She was utterly astonished to suddenly realize that George had grown really quite... *handsome...* over the past year.

How had she missed that before today?

This day is full of odd discoveries, she mused. Is the same true of Fred? She made a mental note to check when he returned.

George pointed at something on the field, commanding her attention while he began to explain to her once more the rules of the game. The noise level made it necessary for him to lean quite close to her ear to be heard.

The rules were difficult enough to remember without the novel distraction of his face being so close to hers. She hoped it wasn't too obvious that her eyes kept being drawn to his. She nodded every once in a while, praying her act of paying attention was convincing.

It was a small relief to her to see Fred making his way back up the stairs, carrying a large pile of food and several bottles. *Yes, she realized, Fred's matured over the past year as well handsome in a similar way.* He smiled at her, too, but it was just a fraction less brightly, not quite as warmly. At any rate, she did not have the same internal reaction to his as she had to George's.

Which is odder still, she thought. She had always considered the twins as completely separate individuals with distinct personalities that was nothing new. But she had also always felt an equal amount of affection for each of them. *Is that starting to change?* she wondered, aghast at the thought... *That wouldn't be fair!* She made a conscious decision on the spot to carefully examine her treatment of them, with the intent of ruthlessly weeding out any outward signs of favoritism.

The match began, and the noise level increased. Despite the fact that she hadn't quite grasped all the strategy behind the game, she found the play to be exciting due to the frenetic pace of the flyers. The broom riders zipped about with robes fluttering in trails behind them.

George leaned in close to her again, directing her focus to a player that was currently hovering for a moment at their end of the field. The man was holding a bat and scanning the field. "That's my position Beater. Fred's as well," he explained into her ear.

She could feel his breath on her neck as he spoke. Goose bumps erupted on her flesh as a result. She was equal parts mortified and fascinated by them. She forced herself to watch the action as the flyer suddenly sped off, a barely visible blur.

"Nice shot!" cried Fred. He leaned back toward her and spoke into her ear. "The Beaters' job is to knock the Bludgers, those big flying balls, at the other team's players."

Nothing. Annie felt no physical response to the identical action by Fred. *What the blazes is happening to me?*

She leaned toward Fred, rising on tiptoe to shout a question at him. "Does anybody ever get hurt by the Bludgers?" She knew the answer from personal experience, but

thought it sounded like a logical follow-up.

Fred had tilted his head toward her to hear better, but kept his eyes on the game as she spoke. He turned to her briefly with a smile and a nod, giving her a thumbs-up gesture. "If we're lucky!" he cried, then immediately turned back to the action on the pitch.

She smiled and shook her head ruefully at him. *Dear, funny Fred: master of mayhem and disaster* She could imagine that he would truly feel in his element, bashing bewitched Bludgers at opponents while speeding through midair on a broom, risking his own neck. The game was likely heaven on earth, to him.

She turned to George and tapped him gently on the shoulder to get his attention. He bent his ear down to her, absentmindedly putting his arm around her back, resting his hand on her hip to steady them both. Electricity shot through her body as every nerve fiber focused its attention on that spot on her hip now externally warmed by his hand, almost causing her to forget her question.

"Do the Bludgers... ever come into the stands?" she stammered, slightly worried as she recalled the force of impact from a few years ago. She absentmindedly rubbed the phantom ache in her right forearm with the memory of it.

George looked directly at her and smiled reassuringly as he shook his head. Her heart skipped a beat.

"You're safe," he added. "They have extra referees around to protect spectators at matches like this." He turned and cheered with the crowd the boys' favorite team had scored another goal.

She spent the next half an hour forcing herself to follow the match. It didn't help that George's leg regularly brushed against hers, sending flickers of delight rippling through her body. *What in the bloody hell is wrong with me?* she thought with mounting anxiety, finally giving up on the game. Why was she reacting in such an annoying yet physically thrilling, she had to concede manner to George, but not Fred? What exactly did it all mean?

Was it something to do with all the magic swirling about her? Had it addled her Muggle brain somehow? Would it go away after they left this place?

Could anything go back to normal after this?

She took a long drink, draining her bottle. "What's this stuff called again?" she asked no one in particular.

Fred hadn't heard her; his attention was entirely absorbed by the match.

George turned toward her apparently he had. "Butterbeer. Like it?" he asked, flashing another one of those thought-scrambling smiles at her.

She nodded. Yes, she liked it. Far more than was good for her, she reckoned.

Two Boys, a Girl, and a Sailboard

Chapter 16 of 80

Oh, those are *definitely* hormones now. George and Annie begin that awkward teenage dance around feelings of attraction.

Chapter 16: Two Boys, a Girl, and a Sailboard

Summer 1994

Age 16

A week after the Chudley Cannons match, Annie knelt on the ground in front of the open tent, gazing at the two red-haired slumbering heads resting on the pillows in front of her. Her own tent was a few feet away from theirs, but she had been awake and out of it for hours by now. Impatient to get on with the day, she bent down to croon softly in George's ear.

"Wake up, you lovely great lump of a boy," she sang in a quiet, mockingly seductive voice.

She saw a flicker of a smile cross his face, followed by a brief, low, quiet sound that she almost didn't catch. Had it been a sigh? Or a moan?

That's strange, she thought. She'd been expecting a response more along the lines of a swat to the ears....

George smiled to hear her voice crooning so close to his ear. He was still smiling as his eyes blinked open and his gaze alit on Annie's upside-down head hovering above his. He saw an answering half-smile on her face, along with a puzzled expression.

It took about four seconds for George to realize the following things:

1. He was awake and, therefore, no longer dreaming.
2. He *had*, in fact, been dreaming moments ago. About Annie. And himself.
3. It had been a very vivid dream, and he was about to die of embarrassment if she happened to look in the wrong direction....

George quickly rolled over in his sleeping bag so that he was now lying on his stomach and buried his face in his pillow. This position felt uncomfortable, to be sure, but it was infinitely preferable to resembling a flagpole in front of her. He felt the mortification of it burning on his face, which he reckoned must now be a similar shade to his hair.

"Oh, come *on!*" she cried in frustration. "The tide is coming in now, and I want help to get the sailboard down to the beach. Get up already, you lazy git!" She shoved his face further into the pillow as she tousled his hair with her fingers.

"Just a minute. Let me stretch," he mumbled into his pillow. *That's a pretty good excuse, right?* Why *this* morning, of all mornings, did this have to happen to him?

He tried thinking of something else. But it didn't help that the image currently burned onto his retinas was Annie kneeling over him wearing shorts and a bikini top a reality which meshed rather well with the dream he had been having. After a long, over-exaggerated stretch and roar of a yawn, he lifted his head. He saw that Annie now sat back onto her heels on the ground in front of him with her hands set on her hips. "What time is it?" he asked, attempting to stall a few moments more.

"Nearly eleven," she whined impatiently. "I've been trying to wake your blasted brother for about ten minutes now. He appears to be dead. Sorry for your loss, by the way. Then you started moving a bit, and I thought you might be easier to arouse, so I gave up on the corpse and began torturing you."

Arouse. Torture. Interesting choice of words, he mused. He filled his lungs with the sea air and blew it out again forcefully. The worst of the embarrassment had past, and he figured he could safely stand up now. He rolled himself over and sat up, legs still in the sleeping bag, his back to Annie.

Fred chose that moment to snort loudly and roll over, then returned to the stillness of the grave.

"If you promise not to fall back asleep, I'll give you some privacy," Annie giggled quietly.

George chuckled in return. "Not necessary. I fell asleep in my trunks last night." He crawled out of the tiny tent he shared with his brother. "I'm starved. What's to eat?" he asked through another yawn as he stood upright at last.

Annie tossed him a plastic bag full of scones, and he stuffed one whole into his mouth.

He had almost finished it when he began to explain, "The only reliable way I've found to wake Fred is with a forceful kick. Placement doesn't appear to be critical. Just be prepared to sprint for it once his eyes are open." He stuffed in another scone. "These are good!" he added, barely intelligible.

"Feel free to swallow before speaking next time, you troll," Annie teased.

"I'll remember that next time I try to give you a compliment, hag," he parried.

This is more like it the teasing insults. Back to normal! he thought. *Must have simply been some random, crazy dream, before* He'd certainly had some bizarre ones lately... involving a disturbing cast of characters, to boot.

He ate two more scones. "Want one?" he offered.

Her hand fluttered theatrically at her heart. "Such a gentleman!"

"Forget it then. More for me," he retorted, full of mock indignation.

She had probably already eaten, he figured. Judging by her wet hair, she'd already been swimming, too. He finished chewing the last of the scone as he watched her bend over to collect the mast and sail of the rented sailboard, lifting them to her shoulders and shifting their weight to find the right balance point.

"All right, no more excuses. I let you sleep late and fed you. Now make yourself useful and bring the board," she ordered.

"What a ray of sunshine you are this morning!" he replied.

She ignored him and started walking along the path that led to the beach.

"I thought this was supposed to be a vacation, not a forced labor camp!" he called after her.

Annie responded by flashing him a rude hand gesture over her shoulder without turning around.

Chuckling, he grabbed the board and jogged after her. His long legs caught up with her comparatively short ones quickly. The path to the shore from their campsite was level and didn't demand much attention, so his eyes and thoughts began to wander. His gaze kept roving back to look at Annie.

Suddenly this morning, for no reason he could quite understand, he had become hyperaware of her. He noticed, for instance, how she had grown a bit taller over the last year or so. Yet her body was still compact; the top of her head barely cleared his shoulders. And she had.... Well, there was no other description for it, was there? Annie had *filled out*, and quite pleasingly so.

His eyes grazed over her body, taking careful note of the many new and interesting features there. It lacked any hard edges or sharp angles anymore. He'd never paid attention before to the soft curves of her shoulders, waist and hips, or how they moved synchronously together as she walked. He caught himself staring at her buttocks as they moved rhythmically underneath her shorts with each step.

He shook his head violently in an attempt to scatter the unbidden thoughts *Forbidden* thoughts. *This is Annie, for crying out loud!* the sensible, ethical part of his brain railed. *She'd probably deck me if she knew what I was thinking just then. And for good reason!*

What was wrong with him this morning?

Show some self control, man, he admonished himself silently. He now forced his eyes to stare straight ahead, above Annie's head, at the horizon line.

They reached the beach after a short walk further. Annie set the sail and mast down on the sand next to her towel and bag. He stopped a few feet away from her, still attempting to clear his mind.

"The sun is getting stronger this late in the morning. Best to slather up," Annie recommended.

She pulled a bottle of sunscreen out of her bag and started distributing it on her arms and legs. Stomach. Chest *Sweet bloody Merlin....*

George tore his eyes away from ogling her and forced himself to stare out at the water, but couldn't completely help that his attention was still acutely focused on the movements he could still see out of the corner of his eye. *Control*, he sternly reminded himself once again.

"Your turn," she called and tossed him the bottle.

"No thanks, *Mum*. I'll pass," he said disdainfully as he threw it back to her. It was just habit to argue with her, really. What they always did, after all. Just like *normal...* and normal was good. Right?

"Don't be thick. Look at your skin, ghost boy. You'll fry to a crisp!" she scolded and tossed the bottle at him once again.

He rolled his eyes but decided she was probably right. He didn't fancy the idea of spending the rest of the week with skin on fire. She busied herself by rigging the sail onto the mast as he put on some sunscreen. He handed the bottle back to her after he finished.

"Here, turn around. I'll get your back, then you can do mine," she said.

She didn't wait for an answer, just spun him around on the spot and began rubbing the lotion across his shoulders, neck and back. He lost his self control momentarily what little there seemed to be of it this morning, anyway and allowed himself to relish the sensations of her impromptu massage.

Mistake! his rational mind screamed in panic. Recovering just in time to avoid humiliation, he slammed his curiously raging libido back behind iron bars *Control!*

She finished spreading sunscreen on his back, then handed him the bottle once more. She stood in front of him now, facing away with her arms raised horizontally. Expectantly.

CONTROL!

He forced his hands to quickly spread the lotion across her shoulders. He could feel he was rapidly approaching the brink of mortal embarrassment the longer he touched her. He swallowed hard and paused for a moment, trying to think.

He cast around in his head for the most revolting thing he could think of. *The smell of a Dungbomb? Flobberworms? Aunt Muriel?* Yes, that would do: Aunt Muriel. The worst of the crisis was staved off for the moment.

"Don't forget this part," Annie requested. She was pointing to the small of her back, directing his attention there. The string from the tiny knot at the middle of her back dangled down onto her lovely golden....

No, wait... DUNGBOMBS! he shouted in his head.

No good. He closed his eyes and focused instead on the mental picture of Aunt Muriel in her lavender muumuu as he brusquely slopped sunscreen on Annie's lower back, dropping the bottle clumsily into the sand.

"Thanks," she said softly, looking back at him over her shoulder with an oddly apologetic expression.

They both bent down to pick up the pieces of the sailboard and dragged them to the water a short way. Working together, they began to fit the sail onto the board. Annie had positioned herself in front of him, her body bent a little over the board, leaning toward him. She held the board still in the water, braced against her thighs, and her... her.... George gulped. The view was spellbinding. He wasn't sure whether to thank God for bikinis or to curse Him.

George fumbled about, working the mast into the socket. Distracted by her alarming proximity and the flurry of inappropriate images now coming to mind, he smashed one of his fingers in the attempt.

Dungbombs! Frog spawn! But the reasonable voice in his head was growing more feeble by the second. The images, however, burned with disturbing intensity. Nothing was working to dispel the horrible rush of blood now, not even the throbbing pain in his finger. George felt an urgent need to get himself into deeper water.

"You can go first," he rushed to offer.

"Okay," replied Annie, shrugging her shoulders. She turned her back to him and started pushing the sailboard through the waves, out into deeper water.

George dove into the next wave, aiming himself at an angle away from Annie. The cold water helped him regain some measure of control over his renegade body, and he stayed under until his lungs were burning for another breath.

What the hell is wrong with me today? he asked himself yet again as he dove under the next wave. *Some strange surge of hormones?*

He surfaced once more and faced the shore. Fred was now standing there near Annie's pile of stuff. He swam back to join his brother, eager for distraction.

Fred had dug around in Annie's bag until he found the sunscreen and was dousing himself with it by the time George reached him. Together, they entertained themselves for a while by watching Annie teach herself through trial and error to stay upright on the sailboard. After several spectacularly hilarious wipeouts, she seemed to get the hang of it. Maybe it was the physical distance between them now, or perhaps the buffering presence of his brother, but George felt a welcome normalcy return to his mind and body once more.

Half an hour later, Annie cruised all the way back onto shore. Hopping off the board, she struck a body-building pose with her fists in the air and roared in triumph. "That was bloody brilliant!" she exclaimed as she flopped down on the sand in front of her audience, spraying them with icy, refreshing droplets of ocean.

"I agree," offered Fred. "Which part was more brilliant, George? The time she was thrown in headfirst? Or the one when she belly flopped?"

"I would have to vote for the time she flew arse over teakettle off the back end," he offered.

"Ah, yes. One for the highlight reels, that," Fred agreed as both brothers laughed heartily.

Annie indignantly stuck out her tongue, but then couldn't resist breaking into a good-natured grin, too. "Let's see you do any better, George."

George leaped up and ran toward the board. "Pay attention now, children," he called back to them.

They spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon similarly engaged. The boys caught on to the sailboard a bit faster than Annie had done, and they bragged incessantly about their consummate skill. She argued it was because their fat heads were better able to counterbalance the sail.

They took shelter from the worst of the afternoon sun at the movies in town nearby. All three agreed the mindless action film would be a far superior waste of their time than the romantic sap-fest that was also being offered. Afterward, they stopped at a market on their way out of town. Then it was back to the campsite for dinner. Annie whipped up an enormous pot of camp stew, which the boys devoured entirely.

"That was excellent!" offered Fred.

"Don't give her a compliment. It brings out the inner hag," George warned.

"In that case, it was a particularly putrid poison. I think I'm about to puke."

"Sod off, the both of you," snapped a smirking Annie.

"Didn't I tell you?" laughed George.

"Quite haggly," agreed Fred.

They lounged around the campfire late into the evening. Fred and George spent a good deal of time arguing amongst themselves whether or not Ireland could possibly make it to the Quidditch World Cup finals that summer.

Annie was well used to this sort of exclusive conversation between them by now. She didn't mind so much anymore. It was simply good to hear their voices again after the long school year of doing without. Unable to actively participate, she let her mind drift as she gazed alternately between the fire and the tiny scrap of a setting moon.

She was in trouble.

She couldn't deny it any longer: it was definitely a crush. What better word could describe the feeling in her chest, her stomach, her knees whenever she found herself lately in George's presence?

That morning at the beach had been a particularly excruciating spot of heaven, when she had been alone with him and inspired by an excuse to touch him. She felt guilty about that, now. Even more so for forcing him to touch her when she'd asked him for help with the sunscreen for her back. But oh the rush of her heart and the surge of her blood when he had! Her body sang as it relived those moments.

Instantly, she was disgusted with herself. *How pathetic!* He could barely stand it having to touch her that much had been obvious. The look of utter distaste on his face had been perfectly clear. And she was paying for it now: the swath of burned skin across the middle of her back was painful enough that she'd be sleeping on her stomach tonight.

What could she do? Ever since Fred and George had begun leaving for Hogwarts every fall, she practically held her breath until the time they reunited with her each summer. There was no one else on the planet with whom she felt more comfortable, more relaxed, more at peace. It was ironic that as different as they were from two separate worlds, practically there was no one she was closer to (excepting her Gran, of course). She imagined, for just a moment, spending the summer days without them and instantly felt an emptiness inside that she thought would leave her for dead.

Misery to keep herself apart. Heart-wrenching torture to stay.

"That's it for me. I'm completely knackered," yawned Fred, interrupting her thoughts.

"You've only been awake for eleven hours!" George chided him.

"Your point?" Fred demanded.

"None. Forget it. You clearly need your beauty sleep," he chuckled.

George then turned to Annie. "You ready for bed as well?" he asked.

His soft, smooth voice sent a thrill through her. "I suppose," she replied as casually as she could manage.

Annie smiled to herself as she turned to crawl into her tent. Yes, this must be her own tiny little bit of heaven/hell, she thought. She would be replaying his voice repeating that phrase in her head all night long; of that she was sure.

On their second morning at the beach, Annie gingerly removed her shirt and had just begun to apply more sunscreen as George approached.

"Oi!" exclaimed Fred when he saw the angry red band across the middle of her back. "That must hurt!"

"Indeed, Captain Obvious," she answered sarcastically. "Your brother missed a spot yesterday."

"Git," Fred snorted. "Let me show you how it's done, idiot," he called to George, who had just reached them. "Pay attention now!"

George had been stalling that morning, trying to avoid being alone again with Annie. He rolled his eyes, but did in fact watch as his brother carefully spread the sunscreen over Annie's back. He cringed when he saw her flinch, heard her suck in a breath through her teeth as Fred tried to gently cover the burned skin.

"Sorry!" his brother muttered sympathetically, then continued rubbing his hands down the rest of her back. Back up to her neck. Now her shoulders.

If his brother didn't stop touching Annie soon, George felt he would be unable to keep from punching him. "Save some for the rest of us," he growled.

Fred smiled at him and winked, then handed the bottle to Annie. "Would you get mine for me?" he asked her, all innocence. Turning to face away from her, he grinned broadly at George and wiggled his eyebrows lecherously as Annie doused him with sunscreen.

George looked down at the sand. As difficult as it had been yesterday when Annie had touched him, when he had touched her this was worse. A hundred times worse. He knew that he could not risk looking at Fred again. The urge to knock that leer off his face would be irresistible.

From now on, he would make sure that he and Annie got down to the beach before Fred woke. Yes, he decided, *that would be better than this*

The next five days fell into a similar pattern. Mornings and early afternoons at the beach. Late afternoons in town. Suppers back at camp. Lounging by the fire before bed. Sleep. Repeat.

The last day of their trip came too soon. Annie kept her camera with her nearly the whole time that morning, alternately snapping shots of her friends around the campsite and on the beach, then riding the waves on the sailboard.

Fred stole it from her bag when she went out for her last turn on the board. He took a picture of George with his eyes crossed and nose pressed up like a pig's. Then he hiked down his shorts and took a picture of his own arse.

"Classy!" cried George.

He reached out and yanked the camera away from his brother before he embarrassed himself any further. Recalling the lessons Annie'd given him last summer, he pointed the camera out to sea. He chuckled to himself, knowing she'd be furious to find a sneaky, forbidden picture of herself when the roll was developed.

"Oh, yeah!" Fred encouraged him, instantly realizing what he was doing. "She'll be right pissed at that! Good one!"

He spun the lens to bring her into tight focus. George paused, staring at her for several moments through the viewfinder, arrested by the sight.

Annie was seated, straddling the board with her legs dangling in the water and her hands resting on her thighs, relaxing for a moment between waves. The colorful sail fanned out on the water's surface to her right. The sun glinted on the water beaded on her damp, golden skin, and she'd lifted her face toward it like the sunflowers in his mother's garden. Wet curls clung to her forehead, cheeks, and neck. There was a bright, contented smile on her face as she floated serenely on the waves.

It was a lovely scene. George swallowed the strange lump that had formed in his throat, then snapped the picture.

The three of them spent the afternoon laughing and joking with each other as they packed up the campsite and loaded Annie's truck. Then Fred drove them home.

They never let Annie drive her own vehicle, primarily because neither one of the brothers could fit on the seat when it was pulled up far enough for her feet to reach the pedals. They always made her sit in the center behind the gearshift on the floor, instead. It was an added perk that it reliably drove her batty having to sit between them where they could take the mickey out of her mercilessly, and she had no escape.

Today, Annie's legs were forced to rest across George's lap the whole way home while her head was leaning on Fred's shoulder. George couldn't decide whether he or his brother had the better end of the deal. At least, with a week's worth of practice controlling himself, he was able to avoid further embarrassment. It took a lot of concentration, though.

Fred pulled off the road just onto the overgrown lane that led to the Burrow and parked. The boys clambered out of the cab. George shut the passenger door and walked around the front of the truck to the driver's side.

"See you Saturday?" George asked, closing the door for Annie as she scooted the seat forward in order to drive.

"Nah. Gotta work. Sunday?" she offered.

"Can't. We're all going to pick up Harry then."

Fred had finished unloading all their gear from the back of the truck as they were talking. "See you, Annie!" he called, then banged an all clear signal on the side of the truck bed with his hand.

They both turned to look at Fred. Annie leaned out the window and waved goodbye to him. Fred turned and began trudging through the tall grass of the lane, which had been taken over in the years since the Anglia had been gone, headed to the Burrow.

"Oh, right Harry's coming. Well, have fun at the big match. Hope this Krum bloke is as amazing in person as Fred seems to think," she said.

George turned back to her as she began to speak, only to discover her face was now inches away from his.

Krum? She said something about Krum? Are we talking about the Cup, then? George covered his disquiet with a dismissive snort. "We'll tell you all about it when we get back. Next Friday, then?"

"Okay. See you then. At the fort."

Several moments passed, and George still hadn't moved away from the door. Annie hadn't moved to restart the truck, either. They seemed frozen by each other's gaze, stunned by realization of how physically close they were after a week of careful avoidance.

"Are you coming?" Fred hollered impatiently.

That broke the spell. George shoved himself off the door of the truck, turned away and bent down to gather the stuff Fred had left behind. Annie was mortified to discover she had still been leaning out the window from when she'd waved at Fred, practically in George's face. She turned the key and drove off.

The following week dragged interminably for Annie. The sole bright spot, as well the most depressing, was when she had collected the photos of their trip from the developer.

Lying in her bed, she laid them out one by one on her quilt. Out of thirty-six frames, no less than twenty-five were of George. She was particularly angry with herself for taking the one of his sleeping face. He had looked so peaceful, so handsome that morning that she couldn't resist. It had crossed a line and she knew it. So far it was her favorite.

There were three near the end of the roll that were unexpected. One was of George mugging for a picture *Of course, Fred stole the camera when I wasn't around to guard it*, she realized with a smirk. Another was a blurry, flesh-colored photo that could only be Fred's arse *Classic Fred*, she chuckled to herself.

And then she saw the photo of herself on the sea. She was impressed by how well it was composed. The colors were vivid, the focus sharp. She usually hated photos of herself, but this one was different. *Maybe because it's a candid?* She was surprised by how... how happy she looked. Blissful, almost.

Another thought suddenly entered her head: which of the boys had taken the picture of her? The two previous shots were unquestionably taken by Fred, but was this one as well?

Or could it have possibly been George? A grenade of excitement exploded through her as she considered this option.

Could she afford to hope? Probably not. Could she resist? Unlikely.

When Annie met up with the boys again the following Friday under the willow, they were practically bursting with the tale of their adventure at the World Cup. She'd had nine years of experience following the tennis match that their conversations could become when they were excited, but this one was a bit hard to follow even for her.

Some poor git had eaten one of their trick treats. The Quidditch match had been unparalleled Krum's performance was as spectacular as expected but she would have to find out what a veela was, exactly. A riot of some sort had followed during the night. Then they launched into their plans for vengeance against a bookie who had cheated them.

She was exhausted from the heat as much as the animated monolog or was that technically a dialog? by the time they finished the tale.

"I'm roasting. Anyone else care for a swim?" asked Fred.

Annie looked at George, who she discovered was looking at her. He raised an eyebrow in question. She gave a small shrug and a tiny shake of her head.

"Nah," they both replied coincidentally in unison.

"Suit yourselves." Fred strolled off toward the river.

And then they were alone. What each of them hoped for at least as much as they dreaded, unbeknownst to the other. Neither could bring themselves look at each other directly.

Annie broke the silent, awkward standoff. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small envelope. "I made duplicates of the snaps from the trip. Thought you two might like some. They don't move, but they're not half bad." She had sharply edited the collection, of course.

George took the envelope and flipped through the photographs. The first one was of his brother and himself, cheeks bulging with breakfast, the tents visible over their shoulders. The next several were rather impressive action shots of each of the two of them riding the sailboard Annie was a talented photographer. Here was another one with Fred in the midst of being toppled by a wave; he had to chuckle at that one. Another one of a beautiful sunset from their campsite.

Then came the stupid ones Fred had taken. He laughed out loud when he noticed she had given him both copies of Fred's arse portrait.

"I want him to autograph my copy before you leave," she explained, laughing with him.

"Oh, no, don't! He'll never let it go!" George begged her.

"Sorry. That's just too classic Fred," she giggled.

George turned back to the pictures. He knew which one should be next. He held his breath in hope as he looked.

And there it was: Annie floating on the sailboard. He didn't mean to stare at it for so long, but found he couldn't look away.

"Did you take that one, or was it Fred?" Annie asked quietly. She hoped her voice sounded casual. She stared out across the little stream.

"I did," he confessed, wondering why it felt so dangerous to do so. He had never hesitated to boast usually in ridiculous exaggeration in front of her before. And he'd told himself when he'd taken the shot that it had only been a prank to get her riled.

Annie's heart spun within her chest. After taking a few seconds to get herself back under control, she continued. "It's really good. The composition, I mean."

"Thanks," he mumbled, failing to notice she didn't seem angry with him for taking it.

He flipped through the final two pictures, not really seeing them. He replaced the stack into the envelope and set it carefully aside.

"Thanks. For the snaps, I mean. It was fun. The trip, I mean," he stammered. George wanted to punch himself for sounding so stupid.

"Yeah," Annie agreed awkwardly.

They sat quietly for a while.

"I'm going to miss you two," she confessed softly. She felt safe saying it, since she had said exactly the same thing for the past five years. She had a feeling it was even more of an understatement this time, however.

George nudged her shoulder with his own. "Cheer up. We always write."

She chuckled and shook her head. "Fred never writes, does he?"

"No, not really," George admitted. "I've been forging his signature for a couple of years, now. He's a self-centered prat, so what do you expect?"

She giggled and shrugged.

He reached out and patted her hand with one of his. For some reason, it mutinously remained there, refusing to return to its rightful owner. "I promise to write you," he added with half-mocking sincerity, hoping his teasing tone would excuse his silly bid to touch her.

"You're such a saint," she laughed.

"True. Destined for celestial paradise, me," George agreed, smiling.

"Via martyrdom, most likely," Annie teased him.

They laughed together for a moment longer. Then they heard Fred squishing and dripping his way back to where they sat. George let go of her hand and put the photos safely into his pocket.

"Come on, Annie, love. Give us a goodbye hug!" called Fred.

"No! Fred! Cut it out!" she squealed and tried to dodge his open arms without luck.

The three friends laughed. It was the last time they would see each other for two years.

Year 6 at Hogwarts

Chapter 17 of 80

Concurrent with *Goblet of Fire*. George carries out a disastrous experiment and makes a startling realization. The boys "discover" girls. Annie makes an impulse purchase and confesses her secret crush to Jane. The owl post gets a little flirty.

Author's Note: There are grammatical and punctuation errors in the correspondence portions of this chapter that are intentional, dear readers, reflecting the maturity level and mood of the sixteen-year-old pen friends. They are entirely my own fault and not that of the lovely admins here at TPP.

Chapter 17: Year 6 at Hogwarts

1994 1995

6 September, 1994

Dear Annie,

THE TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT!

That was all I was going to write this go, but Fred suggested I explain a bit further how bloody flipping amazingly cool this year is going to be. I can't believe everyone else at home knew about it but us and wouldn't tell! They've been driving us mental since the Cup, dropping hints.

It hasn't happened in a century, but it's happening this year at Hogwarts! Students from two other schools in Europe are coming here for a magical competition. One champion from each school will be chosen, and the winner gets 1000 galleons!

Yes, to answer your next question. We are going to try to enter, obviously. Might be a bit tricky, though the old nervy-birds here are limiting competitors to the over-seventeen crowd, but Fred and I agree that hardly seems fair, does it? What difference could a few months make? The champions don't get chosen until the end of October, so we've got a bit of time to work out how to manage it.

Here's another bit of news you'll enjoy our little mate Malfoy got turned into a ferret this week by a professor! Ha! Wish I had been there to see it. It was the new DADA prof, Mad-Eye Moody, who did the admirable deed. Don't let the name fool you he's the coolest professor we've ever had. I predict that Fred and I will not even be tempted to skive once, so that should tell you something about him. Now I'm really glad we didn't blow that particular OWL!

One down side to the year: because of the Tournament, Quidditch is cancelled. But if Fred or I get chosen as Hogwarts champion, it won't matter much, will it?

Write back soon and wish us luck!

Love,

George

30 September, 1994

Dear George,

Tell me more! What sort of things does the competition entail? Flying on brooms? Magical duels? Dealing with bizarre creatures? And why would they put an age limit on the Tournament? It's not like a student competition would be that dangerous! I mean, they let you play Quidditch, for crying out loud!

And the prize money holy cow! You could stake the shop! No pressure, but one of you simply has to be chosen! Good luck! A thousand times over!

You didn't mention anything about the Wheezes in your last letter. How goes it? Have you been able to build up your inventory again yet? You need to find a place to store the lot where your Mum won't be able to torch it again. Maybe the old tree fort would work if you can figure out how to make it waterproof, that is.

Write back the instant you find out about the champions. Oh, and do you lot need anymore hyssop or toadflax? There's loads of it again this year.

Love you more,

Annie

5 October, 1994

Dear Annie,

Nobody really knows what sort of trials to expect in the Tournament since it's different every time, and it hasn't happened in so long. Actually, it was cancelled back then due to the death toll. But don't worry the only reason they brought it back now is because they're making it safer (roll eyes here).

Now that Fred and I have scaled back on attending classes, we've been able to build up our stores a fair bit. The fake wands especially Fred has gotten particularly inspired with them lately, and now they turn into about twenty different things. We had to abandon the exploding ones, though, since our store of erumpent fluid has been used up.

Hiding stuff at the fort is not a bad idea should be simple enough to enchant a few boxes to repel water.

Yes to the hyssop especially. And any knotweed you can find just the stems. Thanks!

Love,

George

16 October, 1994

Dear George,

The death toll? Ha ha, very funny.

And here's the stuff you asked for, with a bit more briony as well.

Don't have much else to write about: nothing cool happens at my school. Or at work. Or at home. Snore. Now that Jane is gone to Cardiff, I never do anything even remotely resembling fun. Boo hoo me.

Write back soon. I'm living vicariously through you, so make it interesting. Even if you have to invent stuff, like the possibility a student competition could be fatal.

Love you more,

Annie

George stared out the window, chin in his hand. Rain was beating on the outside of the panes, and the moist heat produced by the classroom full of students was steaming them up from within. Flitwick's monotonous voice droned on about some complicated theory or other, making it impossible for several of the students to resist daydreaming, if not falling asleep outright.

George Weasley was one of those daydreamers. He had always been gifted with a particularly vivid imagination, which was facilitated by a high level of distractibility when bored. At this particular moment, he was imagining he was lying on warm sand as a cooling sea breeze blew over him. It was the furthest thing possible from this god-rotten, soggy, freezing place, he reckoned. And as a result of his gift, he could now smell the brisk salt air. The sound of the ocean waves lapping on the shore began to drown out the professor's voice.

He heard a familiar giggle next to him and turned to see the smiling face of his best friend. The joke she had told him one afternoon that summer now came to mind, and he could hear the words in her voice....

"A little old lady goes to the doctor and says, 'Doctor, I have this problem with wind, but it really doesn't bother me too much because they never smell and are always silent. As a matter of fact, I've farted at least twenty times since I've been here in your office.'

"The doctor says, 'I see. Take these pills and come back to see me next week.'

"The next week, the poor old dear goes back to his office. 'Doctor,' she says, 'I don't know what you gave me, but now my farts, although still silent, stink horribly!'

"So, the doctor says, 'Ah, good. Now that we've cleared up your sinuses, let's get to work on your hearing!'"

They had both laughed together.

"It's really about you, isn't it?" he had teased her.

"What? Did you just say something? Speak up, why don't you?" she had teased back, giggling even more.

He smiled just thinking about it again.

Suddenly, a wadded up piece of parchment hit him, startling him out of the reverie. He surreptitiously unwadded it, recognizing his brother's handwriting. It contained one word: *Gillian?*

George sighed and shook his head. He much preferred to be thinking of having fun with Annie and Fred at the beach. That was a far cry, to be sure, from the sticky situation he'd found himself in after last night with Gillian.

The disturbing conversation in the park between Fred and Annie last summer had stuck like a thorn in his side for months. Both his twin brother and best friend had confessed they'd already experienced their first kisses (thankfully not with each other) as long ago as *last year!* George had been feeling rather left out ever since.

He'd made the decision to remedy the discrepancy as soon as possible this term and singled out a tall, blonde, sixth-year Ravenclaw girl for the job. She'd seemed interested in him as well, at least at first. They had sat together a few times in the library to study although the fact that he was willing to pretend to study in a library should have told him something about his desperation level. They had held hands while taking a walk one afternoon, which had led to what George hoped it would: his first kiss.

Which surprisingly had been quite a disappointment, for some reason he could not fathom. It had been sort of... cloying and flat... like a can of Muggle soda left open overnight. His experience had not fit at all with what Fred had described. He couldn't understand it; she was good-looking and a nice enough girl. What had he done wrong? *Maybe Fred had been exaggerating after all....*

But then, he'd found himself stuck. Ever since they had kissed, Gillian seemed to think the relationship was now destined for something serious. That they even *had* a relationship at all. And he, in turn, had begun to see a side of her that wasn't attractive in the least.

Last night, he had been escorting her to the Ravenclaw dormitory tower after dinner at her request which was stupid, in his opinion: she had been here six years and could get there just fine without him when she had unsuccessfully attempted to stifle a burp.

"You don't want to bottle that up," he had teased her, smiling. "What if you explode?" *No harm intended just having a bit of a laugh* he had thought at the time.

She'd looked at him, horrified. "What are you talking about?"

"You belched. Excuse you," he laughed, thinking she was putting him on.

Suddenly, her face started to screw itself up. *Oh, Merlin*, he thought, appalled, *she's going to cry!*

"No, I didn't!" she protested, sounding hurt and angry.

"Okay," he replied, confused and beginning to feel a bit defensive. "My mistake. Sorry."

He'd thought he'd successfully smothered the majority of sarcasm in his voice. Evidently, he hadn't.

"I'm tired," she said resentfully. "I'd better go inside now."

I don't believe it, he marveled. *She's pissed at me! Because she burped and I heard it!* There had been no offer of a kiss goodbye, unlike the other nights before.

"Yeah, me as well. It's a bloody long walk back to Gryffindor from here, anyway," he said testily.

Gillian's eyes narrowed. "Sorry to be so much trouble," she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Maybe you shouldn't bother anymore."

George had looked at her then, incredulous. How had they gotten to this point? She had belched, he had laughed, and now she had turned into some sort of bitchy thing. For the simple reason that she was human and he had witnessed it?

Gillian had turned and gone into her dormitory, leaving George standing there like an idiot. An angry, confused idiot.

He had stormed off a second later, vowing never again to spend a moment with Gillian or any other stupid twit like her. Throughout the long walk back to his dormitory he had fumed, arguing in his head. He would swear off women, if necessary. *Maybe Charlie's on to something preferring dragons to females*

Sitting there in Flitwick's classroom, he pondered the ridiculousness of the situation once more. *What was so criminal about a burp?* he wondered. Hell, his sister Ginny could produce one better than that. Annie could say the alphabet all the way to *H*, once even to *K*, in one go.

All at once his mood became brighter, and he was off again on another pleasant daydream trip to the beach with his friend, remembering the belching contests the three of them had any time they got their hands on Muggle soda. Just last summer, when they had been camping together on the beach, Annie had brought an ice chest full of the fizzy stuff along. He recalled sitting around the moonlit campfire one night, all three of them ripping off eruptions that could've woken the dead. He and Annie had even tried to sing in harmony while they'd belched "God Save the Queen." What a riot that had been!

I wonder if I could bottle this? he mused. Perhaps he could come up with a charm to conjure daydreams. He considered tossing Fred a note, then decided instead to ask him later in person what he thought about the possibility. *Might be worth a bit of gold, if done right....*

1 November, 1994

Dear Annie,

Well, it's not our year, unfortunately. We didn't even get to enter Dumbledore conjured an age line and we couldn't fool it with the potion Fred brewed (we got some cool beards for our efforts though!).

The students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang arrived two days ago. Talk about making an entrance! The B. students flew in the biggest carriage I've ever seen, pulled by enormous flying horses. The D. students were brought in a ship that surfaced in the lake. I would like to see the inside of that ship.... Might have to pay a visit invited or not, if you catch my drift.

And another big surprise: there are four champions instead of the usual three. The champions were chosen yesterday by an enchanted goblet (very theatrical, no?). The B. champion is a girl has to be part veela. Didn't catch her name. And the D. champion is none other than Viktor Krum, the Bulgarian Seeker we told you about this summer. Lucky bloke imagine playing in the World Cup and the Triwizard Tournament in the same bleedin' year!

And the biggest shock: Hogwarts has two champions (which you have already figured out, being so clever at maths) Cedric Diggory (a seventh year in Hufflepuff) and Harry Friggin' Potter. Yep. That sneaky little git somehow got his name in. Wish he would've shared how, but I don't really hold it against him. Ron seems a bit put out with him though.

Other than the spot of interest yesterday, this term has been for the most part deadly dull. I didn't realize how much time I must have been spending on Quidditch because without it, I have nearly nothing to do. It can't all be down to fewer classes I didn't spend that much time in them before. In the meantime, I've been tinkering with some eavesdropping gadgets.... I'll send you some once they're working more reliably.

Thanks for the herbs. How did you find so much hyssop? I didn't see near this amount around the forest at home!

Love,

George

9 November, 1994

Dear George,

Sorry to hear about your bad luck. Bummer! Either of you would have made brilliant champions! And did you get a photo of yourselves with the beards? Please say yes!

So Krum is there at Hogwarts this year? Fred must be over the moon. And what exactly is a veela? You've mentioned them before they were mascots or something at the World Cup weren't they?

Weather here is even soggier than normal I haven't been properly dry since early September. We're paying for that fantastic sunny summer, I suppose. I'm doing some extra training on my own, hoping I can improve my times when the season starts again next year. I'm sick of finishing second in every race!

I took a drive down to Beaulieu, and there was loads of hyssop there. It's really quite lovely we could go next summer, maybe?

Miss you both terribly. I don't suppose there's any chance you will be coming home for Christmas this year?

Love you more,

Annie

27 November, 1994

Dear Annie,

Wow! I wish there was some way to sneak you up here to see this, like we did with the Cannons match. You would've loved it!

DRAGONS! That was the first trial! The champions had to steal a fake egg being guarded by a dragon (nesting females, to boot). That's why Charlie knew about the Tournament he was one of the fellows who brought them over (there were four different ones). Anyway, Harry is now tied for first place with Krum. And now he has to figure out what the bleedin' egg is screaming about (it's some sort of clue).

We introduced the Canary Creams, along with the fake wands, to the house this week. You were right we can barely make enough of them to stay ahead of demand, and that's just Gryffindor! If we hadn't had that nasty setback this summer (Mum's Raid a day that will live in infamy!), we would have been loaded with gold by now! Argh!

Oh, well between sales of the Wheezes and facilitating a few students in making wagers at the Tournament, we've now got enough to our names to restock some supplies with a bit left over. Now if only Bagman will pay up, we'd be set! If he comes through by Christmas, we could even leave school entirely, and then I promise we'd stop by! It's been ages since we've spent a Christmas holiday at home....

You asked about veelas. Well, they're a nymph-like sort of creature, and some blokes find them very attractive, especially when they dance and sing (just ask Ron). Best not to piss them off though not exactly the type of lady you want angry with you.

Write back soon. I'm bored... entertain me! Do something stupid and tell me all about it you're usually good for a laugh.

Love,

George

11 December, 1994

Dear George,

Dragons?!?

I hope this is the part where you are making stuff up for my entertainment! Surely nobody would be stupid enough to unleash four dragons against seventeen-year-old students! No matter how magical they are! I am no longer disappointed that neither of you are the Hogwarts champion.

That's wonderful news about the success of the Wheezes stuff! I'm not sure about planning to leave school so early though.... I can sympathize with the motivation behind it, but is it really practical for you? I mean, you'll never have another opportunity like this to do market research. Spend your remaining two years building up your client base, if nothing else!

And as for "facilitating wagers," I hope you've learned something in your dealings with a crooked bookie. Do be careful not to step in anything, if you get my meaning. Folks tend to get a bit miffed once they've been cheated, not that you would ever (frankly, I'm far more worried about Fred keep an eye on him if you can).

In case Bagman doesn't come through for us, or if you change your mind about staying, Happy Christmas!

Love you more,

Annie

George was alone in the dormitory. Everyone else had dressed themselves up like idiot penguins and pranced down to the Great Hall for the Yule Ball an hour ago. Everyone except the children. And himself.

He wasn't entirely sure why he had decided not to go. Fred had been badgering him for days, suggesting possible dates. But George had found an excuse not to ask every one of them. Too tall. Too blonde. Too skinny. He had to admit his last excuse was the lamest yet: the poor girl's hair was 'too straight.'

Fred's eyes had narrowed at that one. "So, let me see if I've got this right: you like petite, brunette, shapely girls with curly hair?"

George had had no idea where his brother was going with this line of questioning and had shrugged his shoulders in reply. But at least Fred had finally stopped annoying him about it.

"Suit yourself. Mope around all night for all I care. Just don't expect *me* back before dawn," he had said derisively.

Fine! All he knew was that he had no interest whatsoever in dancing with some twit of a girl just for an excuse to prance around in what amounted to a straightjacket. A girl who would likely pout all night if he made the slightest misstep. Or who couldn't take a bit of good-natured teasing. That sounded like torture, not fun. *Thanks, but no thanks. Been there, done that, never again.*

If he was moping and he was damn sure he wasn't it was probably because he was still quite disappointed there was no Quidditch this year. Or that he was sick to death of this boring, goddamn freezing cold castle.

Once again, he thought of the warm beach from this summer the glorious sun, the sparkling bright sea, the exhilarating sailboard rides. He would so much rather be there with Fred and Annie, instead of this frigid stone tower that was little better than a prison.

She came to mind again, like she had hundreds times this term, whenever he was bored. He envisioned her smiling, friendly face laughing at their teasing jokes, then the awestruck look on her face when they had taken her to the Cannons match. Last summer had been a crack, for sure driving around in that brilliant heap of her old truck.

He sighed, missing his home and his friend.

*So, what **am** I doing, anyway?* he asked himself.

He opened his trunk and started digging through it until he found the package from his latest trip to Zonko's. A plan was beginning to form in his mind: perhaps a booby-trapped bed or two might be just the thing to improve his mood. An empty dormitory was the perfect opportunity to take out his frustrations on a few unsuspecting victims, his twin brother first and foremost.

As he lifted the bag out of the trunk, a small envelope caught his eye.

George was perfectly familiar with what the envelope contained. If he had ever stopped to honestly examine himself, he might have noticed that he stumbled across this envelope at increasingly frequent intervals this past term. But he wasn't much for introspection, usually. He lifted out the envelope as well and pulled out the pictures.

He set the bag of pranks on the bed and grinned as he reminisced with the photos. He chuckled to himself, remembering Annie's first turn on the sailboard. She had fallen, what, ten times at least? And did she ever cry or sulk when he and Fred had teased her and they were truly merciless, if he did say so himself about it? Never. She usually gave as good as she got, he had to admit. Cracking girl, Annie.

Why couldn't everyone have a sense of humor like that? he lamented. *Why couldn't more girls be like Annie? Smiling, giggling, feisty, easy-going, pretty....*

Suddenly, there was no further need for introspection. It knocked him upside the head and gave him a sucker punch to the gut for good measure. He wasn't interested in nor could he stand to be with any of the girls here at Hogwarts, because none of them was Annie.

Laughing, fun-loving, petite, brunette, curvy Annie. *Annie* was the one he wanted.

Shit.

It hadn't been just a random flare of hormones that had bothered him last summer and went away soon after he came back to school, had it? *Except for the dreams*, he grudgingly acknowledged: the dreams about Annie had plagued him quiet a bit since then.

George's stomach turned in a knot. Fred was right! He *had* been moping around this term. Like a miserable lovesick idiot.

Bloody hell!

He crashed back onto his bed, pulling the pillow over his face. He heard the bag from Zonko's hit the floor and the items in it scatter. A vision of those lovely, sparkling violet eyes in a face framed by soft, dark curls came unbidden into his mind and refused to leave.

Five minutes passed and he had yet to move.

She was his *best friend*. This was stupid! It wasn't fair! He was royally screwed, that was for sure.

"ARRGH!" he yelled out loud in frustration.

A few seconds passed.

"Everything all right?" a puny voice called out from below.

"Sod off, you nosy little git!" he barked.

Twenty minutes later, he finally rose from the bed. He kicked the fallen Zonko items underneath it. He decided he needed a shower preferably a cold one.

It was one in the morning before George got back to his room. He pulled out a piece of paper, laid it on a firm school book that likely had yet to be cracked open, and started to write.

Dear Annie,

Not much news here. Tonight is the Yule Ball, which is why nobody went home for Christmas holidays this year, and the castle is so bloody crowded. Fred is taking Angelina Johnson. Been on the Gryffindor team as long as we have decent Chaser. I didn't feel like going. Bah humbug and all that.

This term has been monumentally boring. Sure, the Tournament sounded exciting at first, but I'm not in it, am I? At least with Quidditch, I kept busy practicing and playing in matches.

I sound like a whingey prat. Sorry.

Thanks for the good advice in your last letter. As much as I hate to admit it, you're right: we should be taking advantage of the opportunities here while they last. And don't worry I'm an expert at reining in Fred's more outrageous schemes by now.

How's your school year going? How is your Gran doing? How's the truck? Take care of the old girl for us.

Well, it's late. Best to sign off now. Hope Father Christmas makes all your wishes come true. Ho Ho Ho.

Love,

George

He was tempted to bin it. Though he supposed it was no more or less stupid than all his previous letters. What difference did it make? He couldn't bring himself to write what he really wanted to tell her anyway.

Actually, come to think of it, he had. At the very end. He had always signed his letters this way. But now it meant something entirely different. It actually meant something.

10 January, 1995

Dear George,

Happy New Year! Hope the holidays have helped to cheer you. You didn't sound like your usual bubbly self in your last letter. Write back and tell me the best joke you've heard this week. I hope it will be in sufficiently poor taste and contain enough swear words to put a smile back on your face.

Now that our season is just a few weeks away, Coach Williams has started each of us on a running schedule. I'm training for a 5K race in addition to school meets. Sadly, this is the most fun I have all week. I turn into such a pathetic old bat when you two aren't here. Nothing but school, work and sleep. Ugh. Talk about sounding like a prat!

Indeed, Father Christmas was quite generous to me this year. Gran doesn't get around too much without me, so present shopping is a bit stupid. She gave me lovely cash instead, bless her. I treated myself to something special. No, I am not telling you what.

Be a dear and pinch Fred for me. Pick a nice tender spot... under the armpit, perhaps. And while you're at it, do something equally nice for yourself.

Love you more,

Annie

Annie was on her knees, leaning onto the bed to write the letter. The skin on her lower back burned with pain from the fresh tattoo. How she would keep this a secret from her grandmother, she wasn't sure. For Gran was bound to be furious if she found out. Not to mention how much worse it would be if she ever saw *what* it was. She wouldn't understand, that was for sure.

But it was worth every penny, every painful millimeter, Annie reckoned. She had never seen anything so lovely: a glorious St. George in full body armor mounted on a white steed. His spear was piercing a dragon's heart.

"Can you give him ginger hair instead?" she had asked, handing the fellow the picture she had ripped from a book.

"Sure, whatever you want," the tattoo guy answered.

Yes, Gran would probably have kittens if she ever saw the patron saint of England tattooed on her granddaughter's lower back. It didn't exactly scream "Welsh Pride," now, did it?

But Annie knew it was perfect. The best Christmas gift she had ever gotten.

31 January, 1995

Dear Annie,

How did the race go? Still can't wrap my head around running 5K for self preservation, let alone just for kicks. Whatever floats your feather, I suppose.

Here are my guesses what you bought yourself for Christmas:

- 1. A gilt frame for your precious autographed picture of Fred's arse (seriously that is creepy).*
- 2. A face full of piercings (could be an improvement, but use caution around magnets).*
- 3. A height implant... or maybe just stilts.*

I did happen to hear a good joke recently. However, I've decided I will no longer encourage your odd, perhaps pathological obsession with filth. It was hilarious, though. Fred laughed so hard he wet himself. I pulled a muscle. But I'M NOT TELLING YOU. (How does that feel? A mite frustrating?)

You're right... I haven't been feeling my usual cheerful self lately. For some reason, I think I'm feeling particularly homesick this year. Oh well, one term down, only two more to go until we're home once more!

Write back soon, especially if you change your mind about spilling the beans re: your prezzie.

Love,

George

15 February, 1995

Dear George,

I hate, loathe and despise Valentine's Day. Whoever invented it ought to be shot (well I suppose old St. Val was likely martyred, but still, you know what I mean). If I have to wait tables for another one while watching idiot cows squealing over a few ruddy roses, I will go on a rampage. I can read the headlines now: "Mad Waitress Killing Spree Dozens Dead!"

The 5K race won't happen until March I'll let you know how I did then.

As for you being homesick, I don't see what's so enthralling about rotten old Pottery St. Butthole. Especially in winter (although, weather-wise, I grant you it does probably beat out Scotland... slightly). It's only fun in summer when you lot are here.

You probably just miss Quidditch. You and Fred should go flying on your brooms one of these days just because there's no Cup this year doesn't mean you can't do a bit of practicing, right? I'll bet the rest of the team is missing it just as much as you are (excepting Harry, of course).

When is the next Tournament event? You haven't said anything about that lately. And how are the inventions coming along? Anything new to report on that front?

Write back soon.

Love you more,

Annie

George had just begun reading Annie's latest letter the second time through, smiling at the thought of her going berserk on some poor twit and bashing her with a fistful of roses, when his brother spoke, interrupting him.

"You know, that Katie Bell is a right cute little bird," Fred mused.

George looked up to see his brother smiling warmly at the girl seated further down their house's table. He glanced at Katie, just in time to see her look away from Fred with a shy smile of her own, returning to her breakfast.

"Marching through the team now, are you?" George chided him.

Fred and Angelina had had a few more dates after the Ball. Or whatever you could call them, considering the limited options available, trapped as they all were in this crowded castle in the dead of a Scottish winter. But whatever it had been, it had fizzled since, and Fred was clearly moving on to new pastures.

"Watch yourself. You're not exactly covering your tracks very well, mate," he added for good measure.

They both glanced over at Angelina, who was staring at them sullenly. George felt sorry for her being treated so shabbily by his brother and for their friend, Lee, as well. It was no secret that Lee had fancied Angelina for ages now, and he was understandably sore that Fred had succeeded where he had failed. And now, George was caught in the crossfire, unable to defend his brother's actions, but unwilling to openly side against him, either.

"That's exactly why I'm moving on," he said, indicating Angelina's glum expression with a jerk of his head. "You snog somebody a few times, and they think they've got some sort of claim on you," he argued defensively. "Nutter," he added in a mumble.

"Imagine that," George retorted sarcastically. "Angelina upset at being dumped and forced to watch you make a move on someone new what, has it been four days already? And who happens to be a teammate and friend of hers, no less? She's well shot of you, if you ask me."

"I'm pretty damn sure I didn't," Fred replied grouchyly, then took a bite of breakfast. "That a letter from Annie? What's new with our very own little pet Muggle?" he asked cockily.

"She'd lay you out for that one," George laughed in spite of himself.

"She'll never hear it, will she? I'd never be stupid enough to say it in front of her," he said with a roll of his eyes.

"It's nearly her birthday. What should we do this year?" George asked.

"Believe it or not, I'm way ahead of you. Been pondering that very thing this morning, in fact. What d'you think about this...?"

*

Annie awoke on her birthday full of anticipation. The boys had never failed to remember it, and she couldn't wait to see what creative, hilarious gift she'd be getting from them this year. She had been reminiscing last night, perusing all the previous birthday gifts she kept carefully stored in a shoebox under her bed. Most people would probably not understand how precious the trading cards and little bits of parchment were to her. Not that she could ever show anyone, anyway.

She dressed in the dark and snuck out of the house, headed for the dilapidated tree fort. It had become a sort of glorified post box, over the years. The morning sun peeked between the horizon and the low layer of clouds for just a few minutes as she dashed across the field. It was a lovely sight: the forest was all lit up in rosy pink light.

Ten minutes later, she reached the willow tree and clambered up the branches.

There it was, lying on the floor of the fort. Her name was written in George's funny scrawl on the front where the address should be. She ran her fingers over it, tracing the trail left behind by his pen just a few hours ago, she wagered. After savoring that thought, then chastising herself for the pathetic-ness of it, she finally opened the letter.

It was a cartoon. Not just a drawing, but an actual animated cartoon. She had seen similar ones before she was used to things moving that shouldn't actually be able to, in reality. But this one was an improvement: it talked as well as moved, like it had been imbued with a voice recording, somehow. She laughed out loud with pleasure at her newly favorite birthday gift ever.

First, two caricatures of George and Fred strolled into view on the parchment. They waved and shouted, "Happy birthday, Annie!" Next, they proceeded to sing a rather offensive version of the birthday song.

And for the finale, something that looked like a large, rounded *W* appeared in the center of the page and wiggled itself from side to side while a falsetto voice cried, "Give us a kiss!" The twin caricatures proceeded to noisily kiss the *W*, which then sported a banner reading "Annie's Arse" across the top. Two lip-prints now decorated the cheeks of the *W*, and each boy's voice called out, "Love you, Annie!" in turn.

How could any Muggle gift top that?

28 February, 1995

Dear Annie,

Happy birthday! Hope you enjoy this little doodle.

As for us, the term continues to drag on. We did have a spot of fun during the last Tournament task. Ron was part of it, lucky git. Harry had to save his sorry hide from drowning, poor sod. Not sure if that would be sufficient motivation to jump into a freezing cold loch, myself.

Fred and I have made a tidy little sum taking bets at the last two events. Can't fathom why anyone still bets on the Beauxbatons girl not very resourceful at all, to my mind. She actually gave up during the latest test. Can you believe it?

We ran into Scum Bagman a while ago. Slimy arsehole is going to stiff us, I just know it. Fred wants to push back harder, but I suspect it's a dry well. Where has all the honor in gambling gone? Used to be a respectable way to earn an illicit income.

You'll be pleased to know Fred and I are acing Apparition lessons. I promise to show you when we see you. Actually, as we'll be seventeen by this summer, therefore sans Trace, we'll be able to show you loads of cool stuff. Prepare yourself to be amazed!

Have you won any races yet? Here's a suggestion: just picture yourself running away from the scene of your murderous floral rampage that ought to get you moving. Or maybe attempting to escape Fred's puckering mug (smooch smooch). That made you run pretty fast once before, as I recall.

I just realized there is nothing entertaining to look forward to here between now and the end of the term. Ugh. I think I'll go down to the kitchen and bury my sorrows in a pile of tarts.

Love,

George

P.S. Ha Ha! I guess that last line could be interpreted in a few ways. I'll leave you to ponder which one I mean!

"So, then I decided to pierce my nose, nipples and navel," deadpanned Jane.

"Sorry, what was that?" asked Annie, shaking off a daydream involving a beach and a red-haired boy.

"Do I have your attention at last?" Jane laughed.

"Nipple is a word that usually rings alarm bells when heard, yes," Annie chuckled. She and her good friend were sitting in a café in Exeter, catching up during the spring holiday between terms.

"Where are you today?" Jane demanded gently.

"Sorry I'll be good from now on, I promise. Start over and I'll listen this time. You can even quiz me after," Annie offered.

"I'd rather you tell me what's got you so distracted," Jane countered, concerned.

Annie sighed. "Do I have to? It's too pathetic and embarrassing."

"Okay, so we've established it's about a boy. Go on," Jane urged.

"Oh, God. Is it that obvious? Bloody hell..." Annie groaned.

"Spill it. I want details *now*. Do I know him?"

Annie shook her head. "He lives nearby, but he's away most of the year at... a boarding school," she fudged. That was a believable explanation, she reckoned, and not altogether untrue. "We've hung out together, as friends mind you, since we were little kids. I told you it was pathetic," she said, wincing.

"I wouldn't go that far yet. So you know him pretty well, and he knows you exist. Those are both points in your favor when it comes to crushes. That's what this is, isn't it?"

Annie nodded. "I suppose...."

"So what about recently? Since he started leaving for school?"

"Well, we've always kept in touch writing letters while he's been at school. And we hang out together during the summers when he's home."

"Letters? Really?" Jane exclaimed. "You don't hear that very often, anymore. Definitely another point in your favor. Anything mushy? In the letters, I mean."

"Not in the slightest," she laughed, recalling the latest one from her birthday.

"Tell me more about him," Jane requested.

"Well, he's tall...."

"You'd say that about everyone," Jane teased. "Hair?"

"Ginger."

Jane's eyebrows raised in surprise. "Eyes?"

"Two," Annie answered flippantly. "They're brown," she added a moment later as Jane scowled at her.

"Name?"

Annie sighed. *No turning back, now*. "George." There. She'd finally said it out loud. And survived. For the moment.

"Very nice. Respectable, classic name. So tell me about George's abundance of excellent qualities."

Another sigh escaped Annie. This was excruciating talking about it. About him. "He's really clever. A smartarse, for sure, but also... sweet, sometimes. He's beautiful, but not self-absorbed almost like he doesn't know it. Excellent sense of humor... adventurous... athletic...." Annie finally shrugged, not content with such a meager list, but unsure of what else to add.

"Too perfect. Either you're exaggerating, or he can't be real," argued Jane.

"I know what you mean," Annie agreed as she buried her face in her hands.

"What brought you to the sudden realization that he was so wonderful?" Jane asked.

"It was a long time coming, I think," Annie admitted, only just realizing the truth of her statement. "But the light came on for me last summer when we were camping at the beach."

"You and he went camping together? Overnight?" Jane squeaked in shock.

"Don't get your knickers in a knot," Annie giggled. "We've been taking trips together like that for years, all perfectly innocent. His brother always comes along, anyway...."

"Still sounds scandalous, if you ask me. However did you get your Gran to let you go?"

"She doesn't *precisely* know the details," Annie confessed with a grin. "She made a few assumptions along the way, and I decided not to contradict her."

"Obviously," Jane scolded, shaking her head in mock disapproval.

"Anyway, that's sort of when it hit me." Annie moaned in distress and dropped her head onto the table.

"Like the broad side of a barn, by the look of you," Jane offered, sympathetically patting Annie's shoulder. "Do you think he's interested in you? Or could become so?"

Annie lifted her head. "I honestly don't know. There certainly wasn't any overt sign from him the last time we saw each other. Or in his letters this year. But maybe a few odd glances, last summer? There were a few awkward lulls in a conversation, here and there. Of course, this could easily be wishful thinking on my part," Annie lamented.

Another thought struck her, and she gasped. "Or even worse maybe he could tell! What if he knew and was embarrassed for me? Oh God!" she sighed in defeat, hiding her face in her hands.

"If you feel so strongly, why haven't you said something to him?" Jane asked gently.

Annie shook her head vehemently. "Can't risk it. We were best friends first the three of us. I can't bring myself to give that up for anything."

"You'll have to, eventually. Tell him, I mean," Jane counseled her.

"Maybe it'll just pass?" Annie asked hopefully.

"You don't really believe that why should I?"

"He just... lives in a completely different world from me!" Annie cried, her worst fears about the situation gushing out of her. "And believe me, Jane, when I say I wish I meant that metaphorically! The people he knows the girls like him at his school I can't hope to compete. It's very intimidating."

"Don't sell yourself short, Annie," Jane urged her. "You're a beautiful, clever woman. And aside from his physical description, this George sounds like he could be your long lost twin."

Annie laughed at the irony of Jane's comment.

"I'm serious! You two sound like a great match. And I'll bet he knows it, if he's as clever as you say he is," Jane continued.

"You're biased," Annie chuckled, "at least to my face. Thanks, though. It's good to let it out: vent the pressure, a bit."

"Anytime. And I'll be ringing you every week this summer for updates and moral guidance. Have you made any plans with him yet? Any more infamous camping trips on the docket?"

Annie shook her head. "Nothing specific. But he has mentioned in the letters a few times about being homesick and wanting to get together again."

"See what I mean?" Jane exclaimed with a grin. "I'll bet he's just stewing there at school, feeling the same way about you."

Annie rolled her eyes at Jane's ludicrous suggestion. "Anyway, about those alarming piercings you were talking about...."

1 April, 1996

Dear George,

You are truly the world's biggest prat. And I mean that in the most respectful way possible. You take pratfulness to an astonishing level. I've never seen your equal, and that's saying something, because I know Fred. That tart comment certainly sounded like him. You're lucky I wasn't there, or you'd need some of that briony paste!

Yes, the 5K race went well, as have most of the others. I am pissed that I haven't yet won any, but I am finishing well ahead of the pack at least. I have been improving my times this spring and could run circles around you; that's for sure.

Here's a flash of brilliance: you should get off your lazy arse this summer and run with me. Might come in handy for you if you ever need to run from the authorities. Probably a good idea to start developing that particular skill as soon as possible, mate.

And thanks for the warning about the Trace. I haven't forgotten all those times Fred has threatened me over the years. I'll keep my distance from him for a while, but I'll be relying on you to turn me back into what passes for normal for me.

Happy birthday to you both, by the way. These are what normal people call magic tricks. Did you know there are Muggles who call themselves magicians and make a career out of performing these tricks at children's parties? Maybe a sideline source of income for you?

Love you more,

Annie

P.S. I absolutely love my birthday present! You two make the most adorable arse-kissers ever!

"Run, George!" Annie laughed.

He obeyed. He followed her through the familiar forest they'd grown up in, watching her body running, yet moving strangely slowly in front of him. Her graceful legs stretched themselves to meet the ground, and her back twisted from side to side as her arms swung from her shoulders with each stride. For some odd yet wonderful reason, she was wearing that bikini from last summer....

"Catch me!" she cried.

George ran faster, but she danced just out of his reach. Her laughing voice and glittering eyes taunted him.

Suddenly, she was gone. He was alone in the dark, quiet woods. "Annie?" he called out to her, begging her to come back to him.

"I'm right here, silly boy," she purred into his ear once again, standing behind him. Her hands began to caress his back and shoulders, just like before on the beach. The pleasure of it nearly drove him mad.

He couldn't stand it any longer. He spun around, caught her in his arms, and kissed her.

She was kissing him back. He felt her arms wrap around his neck, her body press against his....

"Annie..." he mumbled, pulling her closer.

"George!" barked a new, groggy voice.

Not Annie. She disappeared instantly. As did the forest.

"Shut the hell up!" a male voice hissed quietly.

George was fully awake now. Fury mingled with mortification within him as he realized what had just happened. He was relieved beyond measure that Fred was such a heavy sleeper and was safely snoring away on the other side of the room. He shuddered to think of the consequences if his brother had heard him call out Annie's name in his sleep.

He hoped he could trust Lee to keep his mouth shut about this. But no matter what, Lee would pay dearly for interrupting that kiss. Even though George had had similar dreams for four nights running, he hated that this one had ended so soon.

George sighed, quietly this time, and began silently reciting Annie's latest letter from memory. His favorite part was that single line that would give him an excuse to see her more often than usual this summer. Maybe even every day, if he played it right.

Run with me, George....

The next morning was chilly and raining. He sat on his bed, alone in the dormitory with the blank page in front of him. In his mind, he composed a reply to Annie.

Dear Annie Of course I will run with you. I want to chase you. I want to catch you, then I want to kiss you. Please kiss me back. Love, George.

That pretty much summed it up. It was a succinct outline of his recent dreams, at the very least.

Ugh. Revoltingly pathetic, not to mention disgustingly creepy. It made him want to punch himself, and further, he was sure Annie would be much obliged to do the job for him. Clearly, this was going to take some editing maybe a few days worth of polishing the prose.

One thing was for sure: he wanted to send her a signal. He couldn't stand pretending anymore that everything was the same as it always had been for him. He had to let her know that he wanted to see her, to spend more time with her. Alone, if possible. Maybe if he could lay the groundwork now, it might make things a bit easier when he finally saw her again this summer....

Nothing. The blank page was stifling his brain. He couldn't get beyond "Dear Annie."

As he glanced out the window, he noticed the rain had stopped. Perhaps some fresh air would help clear his mind and improve his focus, he thought.

He decided to jog down to the Quidditch pitch. After all, if he was going to be running with Annie this summer, he'd better not embarrass himself in her presence by not being able to keep up.

4 May, 1995

Dear Annie,

Oh, please! Be reasonable, will you? Have you seen your little legs? Running circles around me sounds about right maybe a ten-foot circle, tops. I will gladly run with you every day this summer if that's what it takes for you to learn your lesson.

Fred and I have decided to expand our product line and are currently developing some pyrotechnics. We recently found a cheap, reliable source of explosives, much to our delight. It's all quite hush-hush (at least as quiet as explosives can be) so mum's the word for now. So far, nothing of any real value has been permanently damaged beyond repair, so stop worrying (I know you are). Eyebrows always grow back, don't they?

Spring is coming very slowly here this year. How is the weather back home? I wish we were back at the beach, lying on the warm sand, soaking up the sun together again. I miss it. That sounds like heaven right now.

We both want to thank you for the birthday gifts, as well as the career advice. Both were highly amusing. I suspect that's why we love you so you're funny. Always entertaining and good for a laugh.

Can't wait for this damn school year to be over already. What a waste of my time. See you soon!

Love,

George

P.S. I will be happy to restore you to "normal," for a small fee, that is, payable in advance.

Annie couldn't wipe the idiotic grin off her face. He'd said he wanted to go back to the beach with her! He'd called *itheaven*, echoing her own thoughts exactly. He was looking forward to seeing her again. And the best part of all: he promised to run with her EVERY GODDAMN DAY!

After screaming into her pillow like a twelve-year-old, she was able to calm down, become more rational. And that rationality led to doubt. Of course, the offer to run every day was probably just teasing exaggeration. And who wouldn't prefer a beach to a crummy, cold, damp castle? She knew she ought to be more careful.

Don't get your hopes up too high, her brain tried to warn her.

Shut the hell up! her heart cried out. *Stop ruining my buzz!*

Even her rational mind had to admit, the tone of George's latest letter was... well, downright *flirty*, at least for him. She tried to picture him writing it, which was not difficult to

do, considering the frequency with which she practiced the exercise. She added her favorite sly smile to his face as she watched him scribble away on the parchment in her mind. It was the one he usually wore in anticipation of taking the mickey out of her.

Annie sighed. Throwing herself back onto the bed, she read the letter for the twentieth time.

30 May, 1995

Dear George,

Oh, it is on, you swollen-headed prat. Get used to looking at my backside, because that's the only view you're going to get this summer until your lesson is learned. Maybe if you're lucky I'll even let you kiss it (I know it's a fantasy of yours, remember?).

Thanks for the update regarding the explosives. Please spare only enough caution to keep yourself in one piece. You look so much more pleasingly symmetrical with all your appendages intact. And I've heard that burning hair smells absolutely horrid: something to bear in mind.

Honestly though, I can't wait to see them. You know how much I love wanton destruction are they the sort that actually blow things up or just look pretty?

The weather here is warming up nicely. And I wholeheartedly echo your sentiments about the shore. Let's plan to run off together, leave this dreary workaday world behind, and be beach bums somewhere. I'll get there first, of course, since we'll be running off but I'll save a spot next to me just for you.

Come home soon.

Love you more,

Annie

Summer 1995

Chapter 18 of 80

Annie's left to deal with the fallout from the Triwizard Tournament on her own. Summer isn't quite what she'd hoped for.

Author's Note: There are grammatical and punctuation errors in the correspondence portions of this chapter that are intentional, dear readers, reflecting the maturity level and mood of the seventeen-year-old pen friends. They are entirely my own fault and not that of the lovely admins here at TPP.

Chapter 18: Summer 1995

Age 17

27 June, 1995

Dear Annie,

I'm warning you now: this will not be a cheerful letter.

Things here have gone to shit. During the final competition of the Tournament, one of the Hogwarts champions was killed. Cedric was a good bloke it's a damn shame.

It gets worse. His death was apparently not an accident. Somehow, the final maze trial was tampered with. I'm not sure exactly what happened the stories get confusing at this point but it all boils down to Cedric being murdered.

Annie, we've spoken about this before, and I think you already understand that not all wizards are like my family. A long time ago, before we were born, there was one who went as bad as anyone ever has. Everyone thought he was destroyed fourteen years ago, but this now appears not to be the case. He is back, and he is who killed Cedric.

I've just found out as well that we will not be coming home for the summer holiday. The idea of not being at home this summer is massively depressing to me. I was really looking forward to seeing you again. And to add insult to injury, I will not be able to write you another letter for a while, maybe until school starts again.

Don't worry about us we're perfectly safe. I'll write you again as soon as I possibly can. And I'll miss you loads. Hope you manage to have some fun without us.

Love,

George

This couldn't be happening. She must have misunderstood. She read it again.

He's not coming home.

The letter he had sent her last month, giving her hope that maybe they might have a chance to...

He's not coming home.

She had mentally worked for weeks, building up her self-confidence. She had played out innumerable scenarios in her head, planned a hundred ways how she would get him to realize they might be more than....

He's not coming home.

What was the point anymore? Why bother with summer? She wanted to punch the sun for shining so warmly.

He's not coming home.

She started to run. She didn't know if she could ever stop.

That night, Annie cried herself to sleep for the first time in over a decade.

1 July, 1995

Dear George,

Thanks so much for perhaps the worst letter in my life. Don't misunderstand I'm glad you told me. I am, however, worried sick about all of you. How can you be sure you're safe when these terrible things have happened? Has the murderer been caught at least?

I am absolutely gutted that I will not see you this summer. I can't tell you how much I was looking forward to no, make that relying on seeing you again. Everything here is so boring and stupid without my favorite gits to entertain me.

Please swear to me that you and Fred will be careful. I forbid you to do anything stupid, no matter how much fun it looks like. If anything ever happened to either of you well, it should go without saying that I would be devastated at the very least.

And yes, I know how pathetic I sound, thanks.

Write as soon as you can. I will try to be patient, but you know my store of patience has never been very great.

Love you more,

Annie

It had been a difficult three days, to be sure. She had frightened her Gran when she got back to the house that first evening. To be honest, she had frightened herself: she'd had absolutely no idea where she had been during the three hours she spent running after reading The Horrible Letter. That night had been the longest of her life.

After she woke up the following morning, she began to feel disgusted with herself and her pathetic behavior. It was ridiculous to put so much store on seeing the boys each summer, she told herself. It wasn't healthy. And it was high time to find something else to occupy her mind, to break the obsessive hold spending summers with them apparently had on her.

After all, there had been no guarantees it would have had a happy outcome even if they had come back, had there? She might have misinterpreted the letters of earlier in the spring, of course. George might have come home only to decide to make it clear he was not interested in her in that way.

She sucked in her breath in response to the stab of visceral pain that latest thought had delivered. Maybe she wasn't quite ready for that degree of self-flagellation.

20 July, 1995

Dear George,

It's been three weeks now since your last letter. I can't tell you how miserable this summer has been. At least it's been overcast lately sunny days are even more depressing. When I'm not obsessed with worry over you two, I'm bored out of my mind with nowhere to go and no one to have fun with.

I've been picking up all the extra shifts I can at work, saving all my money now with nothing amusing to spend it on. Work and running are my only distractions I'm up to 10K a week. Maybe I'll finally win some races.

God only knows when or if you'll ever see this. More of a mental exercise for me, I suppose. Oh well. You've always known I was a bit off, so it can't come as any great surprise now, can it?

Write when you can. Take care.

Love you more,

Annie

This wasn't getting any easier. The opposite was true, in fact. Time was proving completely ineffectual at relieving her heartache.

"Do you mind?" she snapped at the couple pawing each other in front of her. "I do have other tables, so if you're not going to order anything...."

"Annie?" came a voice from behind her.

Ah, shit. She shot a parting glare at the offensive couple.

How dare they look so stricken? she fumed as she marched over to the counter. She stared insolently at her "manager," who was a dork and had only been a year ahead of her at school, confident she could handle whatever he had to dish out.

"Erm, Annie? You seem a bit... tired. It's not very busy, so why don't you go home?" he tentatively ordered her.

"I'd rather finish the shift if you don't mind. I need the money," she snapped.

It was a lie. She needed distraction, not money. What was there to spend it on? The idea of going anywhere fun was laughable. No place was fun anymore.

"Well, I wouldn't count on a tip from them, that's for sure. And you can't keep working so many hours. I can't let you have any more overtime. That's from the owner, not me," he dodged.

"Whatever," she sneered. She took off her apron and tossed it on the counter. She glared once more at the couple who glared right back at her as she walked out the door.

Maybe I'll feel better on the way home she thought with little hope as she stretched her legs for a moment then began to jog. She never drove the truck anymore, preferring to run wherever she had to go.

A reliable distraction, running. Something in this world she could count on.

1 August, 1995

Dear George,

I miss you terribly. Things here have gone from bad to worse.

Gran is ill. I'm not sure what's wrong yet. I'm sitting in hospital now, waiting for test results. What started out as a summer cold has suddenly turned a bit nasty. She's been coughing a lot and has trouble catching her breath.

Just one more brick to pile on my heap of depressing events this summer, I suppose.

Sorry, that was rather melodramatic of me.

I keep telling myself that everything is going to turn around soon. Any day now, Gran will wake up just fine, and you'll write me that this was all just a big misunderstanding and you're coming home after all, and we'll laugh ourselves silly back at the beach.

Take care of yourself. Write back when you can. Feel free to come back to me soon.

Love you more,

Annie

What more was there to say? She couldn't bring herself to write about the panic she'd felt, listening to her Gran gasping for breath last night. The horrid wheezing sound brought tears to her eyes just thinking about it.

She had lost her grip on reality, before. Yes, she had been depressed without the twins, perhaps even behaved a bit sullenly. Okay, she had been wallowing in it, if she was being truly honest with herself.

But this was different, now. Gran was threatened. She felt utterly terrified by the thought of losing her Gran: her life, her family, the only person she had left to her in the world.

Annie said another little silent prayer, just like the hundred others she had muttered over the past day.

Please God, don't take her. I'm sorry. For everything. I promise to stop being such a little shit. Just let me keep her, please.

10 August, 1995

Dear George,

This summer sucks.

Gran has drug-resistant pneumonia. She didn't respond to the first round of treatment at all, but they have finally found a medicine that seems to be working. She's still very weak, and they tell me someone her age may take a long time to recover. At least the doctors say she should recover, eventually. That's good news, and I'm clinging to it.

I'm tired. My stomach hurts. Boo hoo hoo.

I'm being a baby about this I know it but you and Fred are not here to cheer me up. So, I suppose all this is your fault, ha ha. In that case, you owe me big. Three weeks of non-stop fun at least. Plan on spending your entire bank account of wizard gold on my entertainment. If it hasn't yet been seized by the authorities, that is.

I'm going mental, in case it isn't obvious. Write to me soon.

Love you more,

Annie

Annie had been stuck in the hospital now for ten days straight, but it felt like far longer. She had spent almost every minute of those days watching her Gran lie in a bed, feebly trying to breathe, wasting before her eyes. She had never looked old to Annie before. But now Gran was frail, ancient, so very awfully fragile-looking.

Annie hadn't had the luxury of running, or working, or any other distraction for a while now. The only difference was that she didn't feel such a strong need for them anymore. She still thought of Fred and George often, still worried about their well-being. Especially George: she still felt the same ache of longing for him in particular. But it seemed more manageable now, somehow. Put in better perspective, at least.

For nothing in the world mattered more than Gran. There was no place else Annie would rather be than right here at her side, doing whatever she could to cheer her, to help her get better. She was ashamed it had taken such a crisis to open her eyes to the truth.

25 August, 1995

Dear George,

Thank God this summer is almost over. I can't take much more of it.

A bit of good news: Gran is slowly getting better. The doctor says she should be able to come home by the end of the week. She's still too weak to get around much, though. I'll likely miss the first week or so of school here to stay home with her.

One week from today you should be safely (?) on your way back to school. I keep reminding myself of all the times you've said how safe it is there, usually with disgust in your voice. If you value my sanity in the least, you will write to me the instant you set foot on the grounds. Send it straight to the house this time if you can.

Love you more,

Annie

Annie fixed the letter to Errol's leg and watched him fly precariously northward once more.

Year 7 at Hogwarts

Chapter 19 of 80

Concurrent with *Order of the Phoenix*. Annie and George are forced to resort to devious methods of communication thanks to the Hogwarts High Inquisitor.

Author's Note: There are grammatical and punctuation errors in the correspondence portions of this chapter that are intentional, dear readers, reflecting the maturity level and mood of the seventeen-year-old pen friends. They are entirely my own fault and not that of the lovely admins here at TPP.

Chapter 19: Year 7 at Hogwarts

1995 1996

"Ah, Mr. Weasley. Might I have a word?" a deep voice full of authority called out from behind.

Fred and George both halted and slowly turned around in unison. Their minds scrambled to find a reason for this voice in particular to be addressing them. For this of all summonses was definitely the most serious.

"Yes, sir?" they both responded glumly.

"Just a quick word, I assure you. Please accompany me to my office, won't you?"

Both boys took a reluctant step toward him.

"Oh, no.... My apologies, Fred. I only need to speak with George today. Doubtless we'll have our chance to catch up together soon." Professor Dumbledore smiled with a teasing glint in his eyes.

Fred looked at George as if to say, *Sorry, mate you're on your own*

George pursed his lips and followed Dumbledore all the way to his office. Despite their stellar careers in misbehavior, George could count the number of times he had been in Dumbledore's actual office on one hand. He cringed inwardly as he recalled some of the consequences.

"Have a seat, please, George," Dumbledore offered. "I trust you had an interesting summer?"

His tone of voice seems pleasant enough George reckoned. "Yes, sir," he answered, still confused as to why he was here in the first place. He'd only been back at school for a few hours, for Merlin's sake! Nothing could have been traced to him already, could it? And as far as last year was concerned, surely the statute of limitations had passed over the summer?

"Good, good. I wish to speak to you of a matter of some importance, so please forgive my lack of further polite banter. It has recently come to my attention that you have a correspondent. One of which you have been neglectful during your holidays. Now, I do of course understand the necessity behind your lack of response to these letters. Not only were you unable to respond, summering where you were, you were also most certainly unaware of the persistence of your pen friend."

At this point, Dumbledore removed a small packet of letters tied together with ribbon from his desk and handed them to George. The old professor looked at him expectantly.

Unable to think of any way to avoid doing so in front of him, George untied the ribbon. There were five letters, all of which were addressed to him here at Hogwarts; no return address was to be found. He instantly recognized the handwriting, of course. A wild gush of delight momentarily broke through the heavy blanket of nervous dread that seemed to wrap around him here in Dumbledore's presence. He was careful to keep both emotions from his face, however.

"Thank you, Professor," he said simply, unsure of how to proceed.

"You are most welcome, of course. Someone clearly wishes very much to hear from you, so I'm confident you will respond with all due haste," Dumbledore suggested. He wore a bemused smile, and his hands were clasped together in his lap.

"Yes, sir," George replied tentatively.

Dumbledore stared piercingly at him for several disquieting moments, then spoke once more. "May I also be so bold as to offer that most unwelcome of all gifts, some unsolicited advice?"

Here it comes, thought George. He nodded reluctantly.

"I deduce from the volume of unanswered letters that your correspondent is a very dear friend. In my experience, neither casual acquaintances nor business colleagues will often write five times to the same address without answer. I further conclude that, as your friend addressed your letters here, he or she did not know your whereabouts, but did indeed know that you were not at home. Even more interestingly, this person anticipated your arrival here."

He paused to look carefully at George's face, then continued in a softer voice. "May I also assume that your friend is a Muggle?"

George looked directly at Dumbledore's face for the first time since he entered the office. He narrowed his eyes and gritted his teeth, attempting to hide his anxiety and confusion by trying to look indignant about the invasion of his privacy.

How had he guessed it? George's mind scrambled about for a moment, then it hit him like a battering ram: *the envelopes. They're paper, not parchment. Oh, shit....*

They had kept her a secret for so long now! Was it all about to blow up in their faces? How had he not considered such an obvious detail before now?

Dumbledore smiled again. "Let me reassure you that the last guess is merely that: a guess. I can see that you do not feel comfortable discussing this matter with me at this time. It is none of my business, I agree. You are perfectly within your rights to tell me to go jump into the lake."

After a chuckle, he continued. "I must confess I am impressed by your discretion. It is good to know my trust in you is well-founded. I'm sure I only echo your own thoughts when I say that in times like these, such as they are, we must carefully guard our friendships."

"Are you saying I should or shouldn't answer the letters?" George asked, confused.

"Do whatever you like, dear boy. Though I strongly suspect that even if I forbade you in the most stringent terms to write, I would be flatly disobeyed," Dumbledore said with a chuckle and a wry smile. Then he paused, pressing his fingertips together and bringing them up to his lips for a moment, as if hushing the already silent room. "Do keep in mind, however, that, unthinkable as it may seem, owls can be intercepted by people with, let us say, less than honorable intentions," he explained with quiet seriousness.

"I wish you to simply continue to exercise your careful discretion." Dumbledore's smile was heavily weighted with worry. "You may go now, Mr. Weasley."

George slowly exited Dumbledore's office and began the long walk to Gryffindor Tower. He mulled over everything that had happened, everything Dumbledore had said, until he reached the staircases. At that point, the desire to read the letters began to take control, and he was fairly sprinting up the empty steps and through the empty corridors by the time he reached the portrait.

Once inside, he scanned the common room. It was crowded, just as he expected. He spotted Fred and made right for him.

"What was that all about?" Fred asked him under his breath.

George pointedly looked about him for signs of any eavesdroppers. "I'll tell you later. I need a few minutes alone. Cover for me, all right?" he asked guardedly.

"Right," said Fred with a short nod and no further questions asked.

George casually headed upstairs toward their dormitory, carefully keeping his pace in check, unwilling to convey any sense of hurry. Behind him, he heard Fred begin engaging Lee with their latest plans for fortune and glory with the Snackboxes.

Upstairs, he found their dorm room empty. He pulled the bed curtains closed, likely for the first time in years. The letters rested on his lap, still sorted in order of postmark he must have left the ribbon in Dumbledore's office. He began to read each one in turn.

He rolled his eyes and snorted often while reading the first one. Annie was apparently developing quite the mother hen streak. The line about her being devastated if anything were to happen to them, while likely an overstatement, did please him, however.

The second letter was more of the same. Was it really terrible of him to feel so glad that she had been miserable without him?

The third letter wiped the smile right off his face. Now it was his turn to worry about her. She sounded horribly depressed. George hoped for Annie's sake that her Gran was all right. He wondered for a moment how difficult it would be to escape this place if the worst were to happen: if her Gran didn't make it. But he'd be damned if he would let her go through that alone.

He almost ripped the fourth letter in a rush to find out what happened next. He was relieved to find out disaster was averted her Gran would be okay. He couldn't decide by the end if Annie had started to sound better or not.

The final letter sounded much more like the first more mother hen-ish. He decided to interpret that as a good sign.

The noise level coming from the common room was beginning to rise, and he didn't want to draw attention to himself by being conspicuously absent for much longer. He tucked her letters safely in his trunk with all the others, thought about it for another moment, then locked it. He would write back a little later, sneak out to the owlery after curfew, and send it off tonight.

1 September, 1995

Dear Annie,

Calm down, you complete nutter! Fred is fine. I am fine. Everything is fine. I'm not going to tell you anything anymore if you're going to have kittens like this.

I, too, had a shitty summer, cooped up indoors day after day. We missed you as well. It was so utterly boring that we couldn't resist torturing our mum to the brink of insanity. It may take the poor dear most of this term to recover. I do hope that facial tic goes away soon, for her sake.

Seriously, how is your Gran? I'm usually one to jump at any chance to skive off school, but for her sake I hope you're back at the books soon, if not already.

The best thing that happened this summer is that Fred and I passed our Apparition tests. I promise I'll show you next time I see you. And speaking of skiving off school, we managed to amass quite a store of useful ingredients while we were put to work by our mum this summer and have developed a line of 'Skiving Snackboxes' as a result. Each item enables the purchaser to bring on an instant onset of illness in order to escape whatever unpleasant situation they find themselves in, then simply eat the other half as an antidote once in the clear. I predict they will be quite a success for us.

And it sounds like we'll need all the gold we can lay our hands on since you're making plans to bankrupt us when we see you next. I suppose it's worth it as long as it cheers you.

I can't believe this is the last year of school. It can't pass quickly enough, if you ask me. Only thing I'll ever miss is Quidditch.

Relax. Go for a run. Do some knitting or whatever it is that mother hens do.

Love,

George

He carefully omitted how he had thought of her every day, dreamed of her every night during the past two months. Fred had definitely noticed something was off about him over the summer, but George was equally sure he hadn't figured it out. He would have been verbally flayed alive, if not physically as well, if his brother had fully understood the source of his foul moods.

Annie's answer came with the morning's post four days later. After delivering it in the Great Hall, Errol appeared to have a stroke on the rack of toast. George guessed

Annie must have forced him to wait for a response, rather than sent him home to the Burrow to rest. To his relief, he noticed several other students at the table had received letters written on paper rather than parchment that morning maybe the paper envelopes weren't so obvious a clue after all.

George eagerly opened the letter right there and then. He rationalized that it would have looked more suspicious if he didn't.

3 September (5 a.m.)

Dear George,

I forgive you for the stomach ulcer I've developed as a result of all the worry you caused me this summer. I even forgive you for the heart attack I had when your stupid owl bashed itself against my bedroom window (which was already open, by the way) at 4:30 this morning. But I will never forgive you as long as I live for calling me a mother hen. You are a toad.

Gran is back at home again. She still doesn't have the strength to move around much, but at least she's eating more now. I've worked it out with school that I'll come home during lunch hour and leave a bit early each day to care for her.

I can tell it truly toasts Palmer's teacakes to have to bend so many of his precious rules for me especially but his hands are tied by doctor's orders. Tee hee! I do so love to see him chew on his tongue! Perhaps that's the silver lining in all this?

The Snackboxes sound brilliant! Good to know you've got financial success to count on. One less worry for me. Now if you can just keep yourselves safe and sound until I see you again, I'll be happy as a pig in... well, you know.

Do drop a line once in a while to let me know you're still alive. Every month or so, at the very least. Apparently there's a mass murderer on the loose, and God knows what ridiculous magical disaster is about to descend on your ruddy school this year, so mind you take care.

Love you more,

Annie

12 October, 1995

Dear Annie,

Thanks so much for your kind letter. Good news about your grandmother, what? Sorry I haven't written sooner, but I've been studying so very hard lately.

Did I tell you about our newest professor? Lovely woman. Can't say enough about her. She was recently appointed Hogwarts High Inquisitor. About time somebody took this place in hand, if you ask me.

A mate of mine told me his owl was attacked recently while delivering the post. My, my what has the world come to?

Well, that's all I have for now. I may not have a chance to write again for a while, what with exams coming up at the end of term. Nose back to the books for me!

Very Sincerely Your Friend,

George

Annie took a deep breath and read the letter for the third time. It was definitely George's handwriting; of that much she was sure. But nothing else rang trueGeorge Weasley studying? In the middle of a term? Not bloody likely!

She was also sure he was trying to tell her something. What was a High Inquisitor? Why would she care? And someone's owl had been attacked while delivering a letter?

Something was not quite right at Hogwarts, the supposed safe haven of the wizard world: a claim which Annie was beginning to think was complete bollocks. Further, George didn't think it was safe for him to tell her outright in a private letter.

Annie puzzled over George's letter for a week. She was desperate to find a way to communicate with him especially now, if something worrisome was going on. But she worried that if it wasn't safe for him to write to her, maybe she shouldn't be writing to him, either. She didn't want to get him in trouble. Yet she also knew she would go insane if she had to go without his letters again for any real length of time.

She turned off the truck in front of the house. As she gathered her things and climbed out, the mail slipped out of her arms and spilled all over the groundStupid bloody junk post, she grumbled to herself.

And then an idea hit her. Did wizards ever get junk mail?

That evening she made tea for her Gran and took it in to her in her bedroom.

"What's the matter dear? You've been so distracted now for a week," Gran asked her.

"Sorry, just a little worried about a friend," Annie replied.

"Mmm. Anything you want to share? I'm so bored with being cooped up in this house, I could do with a juicy bit of gossip!" she teased, trying to cheer her granddaughter.

Annie smiled at the irony of her Gran's almost literally prescient statement. "Not really. Nothing juicy involved," she lied.

"Oh, well," Gran sighed in an overly disappointed voice that contrasted with her smile. "How was school today?"

"Fine. I met with Mrs. Johns today and filled out the paperwork for early graduation. As long as I don't fail anything and pass the exams, I'll be finished in December."

"Oh, I'm so glad! I'd never forgive myself if I kept you from getting your education. Have you been thinking any more about university?" Gran pressed.

The honest truth was the thought hadn't crossed Annie's mind for a very long time. That was the last thing in the world she wanted to deal with right now. "Plenty of time for that later, once you're back up on your feet," she assured her grandmother.

"Annie, don't throw your future away on my account," Gran counseled her. "If not right now, then soon. Promise me you'll think about it, won't you dear?"

"I promise," she said with a reluctant nod.

Annie cleared away the dishes after her grandmother was finished, then helped settle her in for the night. Back in the kitchen while she did the washing up, she re-lived the summer day eight years ago when she had learned the trick on which all her hopes were now pinned. At the time, she had been so pleased to teach her own bit of magic to the twins. They had thought it great fun to leave secret messages written with lemon juice on paper for each other in the tree fort.

But she didn't know if it would work the same on parchment as it did on paper, and that was the crux of the plan. She finished squeezing the last drop of fluid from the lemon into a teacup. It was time for an experiment.

Annie went to her room and sat at her tiny desk. She took out one of George's previous letters which had been written on parchment, as usual. She dipped a bamboo skewer into the small puddle of lemon juice and scribbled a doodle onto an empty space on the surface. She waited patiently for it to dry, blowing on it gently a few times to help speed the process. She carefully examined it under bright light to make sure no trace remained visible.

Satisfied it was undetectable, she lit the small candle. Carefully, she held the parchment up to the flame close enough to heat but not to burn. She held her breath.

A few seconds later, the doodle began to reappear. Relieved, the air rushed out of her lungs so forcefully that the candle was extinguished.

She took out a piece of scrap paper and started writing. Usually, she wrote to George on regular paper, but for this letter to be convincing, it had to be on something a real wizard would use. She only had a few partial pieces of real blank parchment scrolls that Fred had nicked for her a long time ago. And she wanted to get the wording just right, so as not to waste any of the suddenly precious stuff.

After half an hour, she figured she was ready. She carefully copied the brief lines onto the top of the parchment with her grandfather's ancient fountain pen, hoping it would look convincingly like a quill had written it. Then, in the empty space below, she wrote another equally brief message with the lemon juice. After it was dry, she cut the rest of the roll off, being careful to make the letter look centered.

She addressed it formally to Mr. George Weasley, at Hogwarts, and added her own return address: A. Jones, Tree Fort. She figured if "The Burrow" was a plausible address, so was this. Owls apparently didn't need very specific directions.

She sat back to examine her work. It looked reasonably authentic to her. She closed her eyes and prayed her plan would work. That he would remember the trick and figure out the clue. If he did, she was confident he was resourceful enough to charm a few lemons from the elves at Hogwarts to respond.

Gran was asleep; Annie could hear her quiet snoring. Silently, she snuck out of the house and took off running into the woods.

When she reached the right tree, with the Burrow in sight and gleaming beneath the intermittent moonlight, she whistled the signal Errol had been taught to respond to. Once. Twice.

Please let that stupid owl be here! she wished desperately.

"Yes!" she whispered aloud triumphantly when she heard his wings flap, then saw his body flop to the ground as he missed landing on the branch. She carefully picked him up and tucked the letter around his leg. She gave him a kiss on the head, then fished out a chicken nugget from her pocket.

Errol greedily ate the morsel, then took off into the night.

So far, so good. Now it was up to George to do the rest.

19 October, 1995

Dear Mr. Weasley,

Thank you very much for your recent order. I regret to inform you that we are completely out of the item you requested. Would you be interested in substituting the lemon scented eau de toilette instead?

Please advise at your convenience.

Regards,

A. Jones, Prop.

Mystical Escentuals

George if you get this message, you know what to do. Love you more, Annie

George carefully laid the parchment down on the desk next to the candle.

"Brilliant! She is bloody brilliant!" raved Fred. "That's utterly diabolical, that is! I'm gobsmacked... completely gobsmacked."

"You're too bloody loud to be gobsmacked," George replied, hushing his overly-enthusiastic brother.

"It's not *magically* invisible ink, so a Revealer won't work, I'll bet. Cracking girl, Annie! I think I'm in love!" joked Fred.

"Me, too," agreed George. And if Fred had bothered to look at his brother's face, he might have been shocked at what he saw there.

3 November, 1995

Dear Mr. Jones,

I am sorry to hear that you are out of Eau de Centaur. It really is my favorite. I would prefer to wait until it is back in stock. How long do you think that will be?

Sincerely,

G. Weasley

Annie you are brilliant! Fred wants to propose, he's so impressed. I'll keep this short. A hag (no offense) named Umbridge has taken over Hogwarts and is running it like a prison. Harry thinks she's intercepting the post in and out of school. Then yesterday, Fred, Harry and I got into a spat with some Slytherins during our match. Now we are banned from Quidditch. But we're not going to take this lying down. Promise me you'll stay calm and write back soon. Love, George

9 December, 1995

Dear Mr. Weasley,

I am pleased to hear you enjoy Eau de Centaur. It happens to be one of my favorites as well. Unfortunately, I do not anticipate being able to replenish our stock any time in the future. Our source is no longer in business, you see. Since the lemon scented toilet water is not to your taste, would you care to try Essence of Putrescence? Or perhaps Bundimun Extract?

I eagerly await your selection.

Regards,

A. Jones, Prop.

Mystical Escentuals

George I promise to stay calm as long as you promise not to do anything stupid. You know I usually support thumbing one's nose at authority, but let's keep a clear head, shall we? You must be depressed without Quidditch to look forward to, poor chap. Any chance you'll be coming home for Christmas this year? Love you more, Annie

16 January, 1996

Dear Mr. Jones,

Words cannot express my disappointment that Eau de Centaur is no longer available. While Essence of Putrescence does sound tempting, I think I'd rather just have my money back.

Sincerely,

G. Weasley

Annie Sit down. Don't panic. My dad was attacked just before Christmas. He's recovering now but we're all a bit shaken. We had a wild ride back to school after the holiday on a bus instead of the usual way; remind me to tell you about it someday. More bad news two days ago there was a massive breakout from Azkaban. Something big is definitely going on, but the teachers aren't allowed to tell us anything about it. I am just about at my limit with the state of things here! Love, George

13 February, 1996

Dear Mr. Weasley,

It is not our policy to issue refunds. Please reconsider sampling one of our many other fine products. Would you like me to send you our latest catalog?

Regards,

A. Jones, Prop.

Mystical Escentuals

George I'm glad to hear your dad is better. Nothing else you are telling me is very reassuring, however. What do you mean, you're "at your limit?" If you do blow your top just remember to escape in one piece. You promised to show me Apparating this summer, remember? I finished school in December. Gran wants me to go to university, but I can't leave her for more than a few hours at a time. She's still so weak. I started a new job at an office near home. Monumentally boring, but on its worst day, it still beats school. Love you more, Annie

28 February, 1996

Mr. Jones,

Just what kind of racket are you running here? I want my money back now.

G. Weasley

Annie Happy birthday! Fred and I are considering celebrating in your honor with an 18-Dungbomb salute. You'll just have to take our word for it, I guess. Next year, we promise to celebrate with you. Well done you for finishing school early; you are a prat after all. Ron has joined the Gryffindor Quidditch team to the lasting embarrassment of the Weasley family name. This year just keeps getting more and more depressing. Your last letter was definitely opened, by the way. Love, George

15 March, 1996

Mr. Weasley,

Let's not get snippy, shall we? I'm afraid a refund is completely out of the question as corporate funds are insufficient at the moment.

I do happen to have an entire case of Essence of Putrescence with your name on it. Just say the word and I'll send it right off.

Regards,

A. Jones, Prop.

Mystical Escentuals

George keep a stiff upper lip. Term is almost over. And I presume you and Fred will be finishing officially (it wouldn't hurt to crack a book once in a while, as long as it doesn't become a habit). Then it's off to the beach with your old pal Annie. I deserve a bloody holiday. Love you more, Annie

17 April, 1996

Mr. Jones,

Forget it, you crook. Keep the sodding money. I hope you choke on it.

G. Weasley

Annie it won't be long now. We're planning something spectacular. We'll make you proud! Love, George

Annie was perplexed. How was she supposed to answer this one? George didn't really leave her much of an option. She'd have to think about this for a while.

Reunion

Chapter 20 of 80

George is back in Devon, ready to pay his neighbor a visit. How will his oldest friend receive him? Annie is surprised, to say the least. Fred has something to say about the matter, as well. Rated for swearing (some F-bombs make an appearance).

Chapter 20: Reunion

May 1996

George woke up early in an excellent mood. Well, early for a Saturday, at least. Their first week as shop owners had been a smashing success, and owl orders were starting to pour in from fellow rebellious students left behind at Hogwarts. He was in the frame of mind to celebrate, and he'd been looking forward to a free morning in Devon for a very long time.

Fred started to stir while George was dressing. "Have the bloody decency to keep quiet, would you?" he snarled, launching a shoe missile in his direction.

"It's ten in the morning, you idiot," George laughed as he took evasive action.

Fred raised his head from the pillow, a sleepily inquisitive look on his face. "You sound criminally chipper. What are you plotting?"

"Nothing. Go back to sleep." George ducked out of the room.

"Oh, no. You're not brushing me off that easily. Must be good if you won't share," Fred called after him. He hopped out of bed and started to dress.

George barreled down the stairs without pausing until he reached the kitchen. He grabbed some food he could eat along the way and took a moment to butter up his mum with a few compliments on her cooking. She was still pretty furious with them about the quitting school thing, and as long as they were going to be living under her roof, she had the potential to make life rather miserable. So he'd been making very overt attempts to get back into her good graces ever since.

Unfortunately, this delay gave Fred a chance to catch up with him.

As they both headed out the door, his incarnately suspicious mother called out, "What are you lot up to today?"

"It's been such a busy week at *work*, Mum, I think I fancy a bit of fresh air," George answered.

Now that they had premises on Diagon Alley for the Wheezes, his mother was finally beginning to take them seriously. Whenever she began to sound testy, he found that if he brought up the fact they were now responsible, wage-earning members of society, she would back off for a bit.

"What he said," Fred added when she looked inquisitorially at him.

"Oh, all right, then," she replied, unconvinced but too busy directing knives chopping vegetables to argue.

George ducked quickly out the door before she could think of a reason to keep them home. Much to his chagrin, Fred tromped after.

A few minutes into the woods, Fred spoke up. "So, what are *wereally* doing, then?"

"You honestly can't figure it out yourself? You *are* as bloody stupid as you look," George snapped.

Half a minute passed as Fred pondered. "Oh! Brilliant!" he exclaimed as the answer finally occurred to him.

They walked the rest of the now short distance left mostly in silence. Along the way, George had tried but failed to think of a way to rid himself of his brother's company. He did manage to pull ahead of him, however, and reached the edge of the woods well before his unwelcome companion. Fred wasn't in nearly the hurry he was and had delayed himself further when he had decided to, "Pause for the cause," as he'd announced to the trees a few minutes ago.

George couldn't believe his luck: Annie was outside her house, gardening on the side of the fence facing the forest. He enjoyed almost two whole minutes to himself, simply watching her for the first time in two years. All the hormonal insanity that he'd felt the last time he'd seen her came rushing back in an instant. But the reality of her was so much better than the pictures, than his dreams had been.

"Oh, hel-*lo*" said Fred when he caught up to him. "Now*that's* a sight for sore eyes. Our little Annie's all grown up...."

George closed the distance between himself and his brother in an instant. He grabbed the front of Fred's shirt in his fists and pulled his face to within inches of his own. "I want you to leave now," he said through his clenched teeth.

"Huh? You inv..."

"You invited yourself," he corrected him, shaking his head once.

"What the bloody hell has gotten into...?"

"*NOW.*"

Understanding slowly dawned on Fred's face. "Oh!"

George realized that, to his brother's credit, Fred held his tongue further if only for the time being. But he apparently wasn't able to suppress the smug grin spreading across his face. He understood Fred would save the verbal abuse for later. Oh, would he give it to George later, make no mistake. The anticipation of it would likely warm the cockles of his heart all afternoon.

"You could have told me closer to home and saved me the walk," Fred complained.

George released his grip on Fred's shirt. His twin snorted in response, turned, and slowly walked several yards back the way they had come. Then he paused.

Fred turned around to face George again, only to find him still standing in the same spot, looking over his shoulder at Annie. "Well?" he prompted.

"What?" George replied, still staring at her.

"Go on."

"In a minute."

"Bloody coward," Fred muttered. He put his fingers to his lips and blew the signal they had used since they were children to let Annie know they were waiting for her in the woods.

Annie had just finished digging a hole on the outside of the garden fence. It was an excellent spot for the new rose bush, perfect to support the rambling canes. She knelt to finish the job of planting the root ball, enjoying the feel of the soil in her hands. It was a warm day, and the sun felt wonderful on her bare shoulders. After a few pats to firm the soil around the new planting, she stood up to stretch.

She was startled by a loud whistle echoing from the forest across the grass.

Her body spun instinctually toward the unexpected yet thoroughly familiar sound. Her eyes searched along the trees but saw nothing. Even so, she felt her heart race and a wild, stupid grin spread across her face.

She hesitated for a split second and considered changing out of her grubby garden clothes, maybe even showering, but the urge to run toward the trees was too great. She snatched the lightweight shirt she had been wearing earlier off the fence and clumsily yanked it on over her tank top as she took off across the field.

Fred and George both watched Annie tear across the field, closing the distance surprisingly fast. George still seemed frozen in place.

"Go!" Fred shoved him.

George finally took off running in the direction of the tree fort.

Annie reached the willow that had been their childhood haven and found it empty. Had she imagined the signal? She began to feel her heart sink in bitter disappointment as she caught her breath. *What an idiot I am*, she thought, turning slowly in a circle, looking for any sign to give her hope *It's only May, for God's sake...*

George had arrived at the tree about five seconds before Annie and had watched her approach. He crept up behind her as she tried to catch her breath. She was scanning the forest any second now, she would be turned to the point she would see him.

He did the first thing that popped into his head: he Apparated directly behind her and covered her eyes with his hands.

"Guess who?"

Annie's first reaction should have been to scream. She probably would have if she hadn't spent the last two years dreaming of that voice.

"George!" she cried and spun to face him.

She was so ecstatic that she threw her arms around him without thinking. Her heart was leaping in her chest and not due to the flight across the field. He was a miracle... an angel... a vision! He was real and *here* standing before her and so much better than her dreams.

"Are you sure about that?" he teased her.

"Oh, come *on*," she said while rolling her eyes. She pulled her head back from his chest to turn her face up to him and bathed in his smile. "You have to know by now you can't fool me!" She couldn't bear to release her hold on him just yet, regardless of how inappropriate it might be.

"Right again," he said, struggling to disguise how thrilled he was she had wrapped her arms around him. Awkwardly, he put his arms around her in response. "How do you do that, actually? Our own mother can't tell us apart."

"Dunno. Just seems obvious to me. Never really thought about it," she replied.

Self consciously, they released each other.

"It's absolutely *brilliant* to see you!" she exclaimed. "But why are you here? The term's not over.... You've got exams next month, right?"

"Wrong. Fred and I are done. For good. It's rather a thrilling story, actually...."

"Is *that* what you were planning? In your letter? To quit school?" She was shaking her head in disbelief. "Your mother must have done her nut. How long have you been back?"

"Not long. And you're right about Mum," he replied as he chuckled.

After another awkward pause and several evasive glances between them, Annie continued.

"I can't believe you've grown *taller*. That's hardly fair," she teased.

George just chuckled. He wasn't sure yet what to say.

"You look good, by the way," she added with a bashful smile.

He raised a questioning eyebrow. Afraid to take her compliment too seriously, he smirked.

"Handsome, even. Rakishly handsome," she laughed teasingly, entertained by his now mugging face.

He was drinking her in and getting drunk in the process; he reckoned that was the only explanation for the confidence that was growing within him with her teasing compliments. Her smile was brilliant, and the eyes that had never left him in peace for the past two years now sparkled before him with delight. He reached out and

touched her cheek just to prove to himself she was real.

"You look great, as well," he answered with a smile. Testing....

He carefully watched her face react. Her expression seemed to mix surprise with... pleasure? They stared at each other for a few more seconds, then laughed as they both dropped their eyes to the ground.

"Where's Fred?" Annie asked.

"He said he wanted to have a lie-in this morning," George lied without hesitation.

"That lump! At least you have the common courtesy to say hello to an old friend!" Annie huffed in indignation.

He laughed with her. Something about her answering smile was feeding his newfound confidence further. He casually reached out and took her hand in his and asked, "Are you busy today?"

"Unfortunately, yes. Gran has an appointment to see the doctor today at two." She looked up into his face and smiled a rueful, crooked smile.

"Oh."

George was suddenly unsure what to do next. A portion of the strange new confidence ebbed away. He slightly loosened his hold on her hand to let her go. Then he felt hers tighten in response. The confidence surged back to him like a wave.

"How about tomorrow, then?" he asked.

"I'd love to! I'll pack us a picnic, and we'll spend the whole afternoon here, catching up," she offered, her face beaming. "Can you prepare your exaggerated version of events carefully enough by then? You know, to make it sound remotely believable?"

"Just like old times," he agreed. "I promise you'll be amazed. Is ten too early?"

She shook her head.

A few moments passed. *Now what?* wondered George.

"I'd better get back," Annie said hesitantly. "I've got to fix lunch for Gran before we leave."

"Okay." He let her hand slide out of his. "Tomorrow, then," he added.

Annie nodded and smiled again. She turned slowly and began to walk away. George stood rooted to the spot, watching her, unable yet to move.

Annie spun round and started walking backwards. "Fred is coming tomorrow, right?" she asked. "Just so I know how much food to bring, I mean."

"Erm, sure... if you want."

"I suppose we *should* include him," she offered.

"I suppose so," he answered reluctantly.

"See you both tomorrow, then."

George watched her turn and jog away. Then he turned toward home and the unavoidable verbal flogging waiting for him there.

*

"What are you doing back here so soon? Chicken out, did you?"

"I didn't chicken out." *Not completely, anyway.*

"Did she deck you, then? I don't see any bruises yet."

"No. She didn't hit me." *She hugged me. She smiled at me. She held my hand for nearly two minutes... before she found an excuse to leave*

"Are you so wretched at snogging she sent you packing already?"

"Fuck off, Fred." George sighed. *Best to tell him now and get it over with, I suppose* "She wants to see you, as well."

"She asked about me, did she? Well, who could blame her? I do have that effect on women."

George averted his eyes, strangely sickened by the smugly leering look on Fred's face. "Picnic. Tomorrow morning."

"I suppose I *could* make myself scarce tomorrow... for the bargain price of ten galleons."

"Done," George said, reaching into his pocket for the money.

"Did I say ten? Silly me. I meant fifty."

Of course Fred spent every hour of the rest of the day taking the mickey out of him. George had expected nothing less. He had known it was coming and had prepared himself for it. But he also knew that while Fred would likely make it a challenge for him to be alone with Annie tomorrow, he wouldn't make it impossible either. They were brothers, after all.

What did surprise him was Fred's final comment of the evening as they lay in their beds that night. "Seriously, George, ~~am~~ pleased for you. Annie is a great girl. But just remember this: she's *our* Annie, and if you fuck this up and hurt her, I will beat the bloody shit out of you."

Unsurprisingly, neither George nor Annie slept much that night. Both of them replayed the scene of the prior morning in the forest hundreds of times in their minds, analyzing every word, searching for encouraging signs or telltale warnings. By the time they coincidentally stepped into their respective showers at exactly the same moment the next morning, they both had thoroughly distorted the events beyond recognition. Each was completely convinced they had imagined or misunderstood every compliment, every look.

So it was with no small amount of trepidation George and Annie readied themselves for their long-awaited reunion.

Annie worked with slow, deliberate precision in the kitchen that morning. Her Gran kept her company as she fixed their breakfast, cleared the dishes, then began preparing

the picnic lunch.

"What's all this?" her Gran asked curiously.

"I ran into some old friends yesterday. We made plans for a picnic," Annie replied.

"How lovely, dear! You spend too much time trapped in here with me anyway."

"Would you like some of this for lunch? I can leave a plate in the fridge," she offered.

"That would be nice. Thank you, dear."

"Are you sure it's all right for me to go?" Annie asked, beginning to feel nervous about leaving Gran home alone for such a large chunk of time, among other things. "I can cancel if you'd rather have company."

"Don't be silly. I feel like having a nap right now, in fact," she yawned unconvincingly, then winked.

Annie giggled. "You can call Mrs. Finnerty if you need anything when I'm gone."

Thank heaven for Mrs. Finnerty! she cheered silently. Her cell phone didn't always have reliable reception in the neighboring woods; she was never sure if it was due to technological or supernatural reasons. The phone seemed like an extravagance to some people she knew, but the peace of mind it brought her to know her Gran could get in touch with her almost instantly was worth the expense.

"Your friends expect you to bring all the food?" her Gran asked as the stack of sandwiches was joined by apples, a container of cookies, and several bottles of water.

"I don't mind. Their expertise lies more in consumption rather than cooking," she chuckled as she explained.

"Hmpf. That sounds like boys to me."

Now it was Annie's turn to smile and wink.

Meredith slowly rose from her chair and shuffled over to where Annie was working at the counter. She held her chin in her hand and kissed her granddaughter's forehead. "Be careful. And good luck. Hope he's worth you."

"He is," Annie assured her.

Annie got to the rendezvous spot first. She spread out a blanket in a little patch of sun next to the willow near the stream bank and sat down. While she waited, she gazed up at the old tree fort.

The floorboards were still there, strong and secure amongst the broad branches, along with a surprising percentage of the woven-branch walls. It looked so very small, though. Dimensions that had once been cozy and comfortable years ago for little children now looked cramped and claustrophobic.

She leaned back on her hands and watched in the direction she expected her friends to come. She didn't have to wait long. Fred came into view first, followed closely by George.

"Oi, Annie! Give us a hug!" Fred cried.

"Fred!" Laughing, she hopped up and jogged over to him with arms open. He grabbed her and lifted her up in an exaggerated bear hug, spinning her around.

"Enough!" she begged, getting dizzy from both the spinning and lack of air.

He released her from the hug but held on to her hand, guiding her back to the blanket. He plopped down, then patted the ground beside him, inviting her to sit next to him. When she hesitated, he gently but insistently pulled her hand down toward him. Once she was seated, he draped his arm about her shoulders in a friendly way.

She thought she saw George roll his eyes, but couldn't be sure.

"Glad to see you could drag your sorry arse out of bed today to come see me," she needed him.

"Annie, didn't George tell you?" Fred asked, theatrically incredulous. "We're proper businessmen now with customers and a shop. It's bloody exhausting!"

"A shop!? Tell me everything!" she cried, delighted by the surprise news.

Fred spent the next hour monopolizing the conversation. George didn't mind so much, though. It eased some of the pressure that he'd felt building to an uncomfortable level all morning. His brother blathered on about everything that had happened in the days since they had left school. He went into every detail about the business and surprised George by tossing some actual, non-backhanded compliments his way.

"Oh, yeah. George has a real knack for inventing this stuff. Truly inspired," he offered after explaining their newest prototype of a decoy detonator.

Annie turned to give George a pleased smile, and Fred winked at him while she wasn't looking.

"I'm famished. What's to eat?" asked Fred finally.

Annie started to empty the pack of food onto the blanket. While her focus was occupied, George caught his brother's eye and jerked his head toward the Burrow, reminding him to get lost. Fred smiled, blinked, and nodded slightly.

"Well, Annie, I'm out of time. I must be off."

"Fred, I can't believe you!" Annie protested. When Fred merely shrugged, she continued, "How could you rush off already? What could be more important than spending time with your oldest, dearest friend?"

"Oh, I don't have an appointment or anything. George here fancies you and wants some time alone. I'll just take a few of these sandwiches and leave you to it, then. Lovely to see you again, Annie." He smiled, wiggled his fingers goodbye, then disappeared into thin air.

They sat in stunned silence for a whole minute. If George hadn't been paralyzed by shock and mortification, he would have surely hunted Fred down and committed fratricide in that time.

"Did you catch any of that?" Annie asked, finally breaking the silence. "Because I'm not sure I did. Fred mumbles a lot, I've noticed."

She was throwing him a lifeline, and he was grateful. "Not a word," he answered. George bit into a sandwich, happy to have an excuse not to talk for a moment.

"So, was that Apparating?" she asked.

"Yeah," he mumbled with his mouth partially full.

Annie spent the rest of the meal asking questions about Apparition, giving him something neutral yet interesting to talk about. He knew what she was doing trying to ease his discomfort and loved her all the more for it.

They had finished the food when Annie added, "You promised to show me, so...." She clapped her fingers to her palm twice like a sultan's command.

"What am I, a trained monkey?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Almost as good as. Go on, you promised!" she whined good-naturedly.

"Where should I go?" he sighed as he stood up.

"Over there... by that fir tree." She pointed, indicating a spot about fifteen yards away.

He rolled his eyes in mock exasperation. "Fine." He disappeared, then popped back into view where she had pointed. "Ta da!" he cried, waving his hands a little.

Annie's mouth had dropped open. Her eyes were wide, staring at him. "What was that sound?" she asked quietly.

"What sound?"

"That little popping sound... when you left... and then again when you reappeared?"

He shrugged. "Dunno. I didn't hear it."

"Okay. Come back," she directed him with a wave of her hand, expecting him to walk.

But he popped away again. An instant later, he was back on the blanket, much closer to her this time. Annie had to take a moment to recover her composure while he seated himself.

"You know, I've known for such a long time that you were a... *awizard*," she whispered quietly, hesitating slightly to utter the last word aloud. "But I've never actually seen you do magic before. Do you mind... I mean... would you show me some more?" She was sitting back on her heels, leaning in toward him slightly. Her eager face smiled.

George felt a thrill run through him to have her eyes staring at him like that. He smiled back at her but tried to keep his voice casual. "Erm, sure. What do you want to see?"

"I don't know.... Surprise me."

He glanced around, looking for raw material and inspiration, sensing this might be his moment. He took his wand out of his pocket then looked back at Annie with his eyebrows raised to confirm this was what she had in mind.

She nodded in encouragement.

George summoned two delicate white flowers from the riverbank. As they floated through the air toward Annie, he made them dance around each other in the air, then brought them to rest in her hair, sliding their stems into her curls above each ear.

"That was beautiful, George," Annie cried softly, her awestruck face beaming at him. "Amazing! You are amazing! Thank you!" she gasped.

He felt heat rising in his face and looked away.

"With talent like that, I'll bet the girls at Hogwarts are pining for you right now," she said in a teasing voice, but he noticed with a surreptitious glance that her own face was blushing as well.

George snorted. "Not likely." He could name a few at least that were likely happy to see the back of him.

"So you say," she teased. "How many broken hearts did you leave behind at school, honestly?"

"Aside from Filch? He was *really* hoping to draw and quarter me by the end," he joked.

Annie laughed and gazed at him skeptically. She shifted from her knees to stretch her legs out in front of her and leaned back instead, propping herself up with her arms behind her.

"What about you?" he asked with morbid curiosity, unable to look her in the eye.

"I'm not really that into girls," she joked.

"Don't be thick," he said, nudging her shoulder with his own.

Annie laughed again. "Well, there is one boy I've had my heart set on for a while now," she said shyly, staring at her hands in her lap.

"Oh." George hoped he still sounded casual. He felt his heart literally sink into his stomach. He was too late.

Annie decided to go for broke. "Yeah. I'm hoping he'll lean over here and kiss me any minute now."

A slow smile spread across George's face as her words registered. He edged himself even closer to Annie until their bodies were just barely touching. He put a hand beside her face, stroked her cheekbone once with his thumb, then slipped his fingers into her soft curls just like he had done hundreds of times in his dreams. The movement disturbed the flower, causing it to fall out of her hair onto the blanket beside her.

He pulled her face closer and finally kissed her for real.

They spent the rest of the afternoon there on the blanket; sometimes kissing, more often talking quietly, but always their bodies were touching. Their every movement seemed designed to sustain and maximize contact. They talked about everything and nothing, subjects profound and pointless, simply content to be in each other's company after such a long, forced absence.

At sunset, they gathered up the blanket. "I have to go back and get Gran her supper," Annie explained.

"Shall I walk you home?" he asked. He wasn't ready to part from her yet.

"Yes, please," she smiled and nodded in agreement, feeling the same way.

They walked through the woods and across the field as twilight fell around them. Annie looped her arms around his waist, leaning her head against him. George's free arm draped over her shoulders. He carried the picnic items in the other hand. When they reached the steps up to the back door of her house, he tossed them lightly on the stoop and gathered her closer. They kissed for several long moments more.

"I have to go in," she sighed.

"Can't I come in with you?" he asked. The house seemed dark and quiet, almost empty, to him.

Annie considered this for a moment. It was a tempting thought: not to let him out of her sight. But she soon thought better of it. "Not tonight. I'm not ready to share you with anyone else yet."

He smiled and kissed her again. Her hesitation was understandable: he wouldn't dream of dragging her into the Burrow at the moment, either. When she pulled back after several moments, he chuckled.

"I don't think I'm quite finished, though," he protested.

"Wait for me here?" she offered.

He accepted her offer immediately and nodded.

Annie was gone for not quite an hour. Meanwhile, George stood leaning against the back of the house, waiting patiently out of sight. He revisited some of his favorite parts of the afternoon, permanently committing them to memory. He listened to her voice drifting out the open windows of the house as she chatted with her grandmother throughout the meal, trying to dodge giving out too many details, telling her just enough about the day to avoid suspicion. He was amused by the concession he was forced to make: Annie might well be just as good at deception as he was.

"It's such a lovely evening, Gran. I think I'll sit outside a bit longer."

"All right, then, dear. I'm off to bed. Glad to hear you had such a nice time today."

Annie reappeared at the back door a few moments later. "I brought you some food. You must be famished."

He hadn't noticed until she'd mentioned it, but she was right. He gobbled up the plate of food, not wanting to waste any more of his time with Annie than absolutely necessary.

"Delicious, as usual," he praised her. He tipped back the glass of ale and finished it in one gulp. He mostly smothered a quiet belch, then grinned.

"Excuse you," she teased, wrinkling her nose but smiling.

"Oh, right. I had temporarily forgotten about the inner hag that emerges with compliments." He set the dishes down on the step. "Like I haven't heard you do worse!"

"There's the trollish bit I know and love. I wonder how you've kept it hidden all day," she snapped back with a smirk.

He smiled, took her hands and pulled her closer while he grunted twice.

"What was that?" she laughed quietly.

"That's troll for, 'Get over here, woman.'"

"I didn't realize you were quite so fluent," she purred softly.

"I have many hidden talents," he assured her.

"How do you say, 'Shut up and kiss me?'"

It was nearly midnight when Annie finally made him leave. "Not that I have any hope of actually sleeping tonight, but *wædo* have work in the morning, and it's probably best to keep up the appearance of propriety," she teased him.

"When can I see you?" he asked.

"I'm yours all next weekend."

George walked home slowly through the woods rather than Apparating; he wasn't sure he could concentrate well enough to avoid splinching himself. His arms felt oddly empty, his skin unusually cool, his body strangely exposed to the elements without Annie draped around him. He fervently hoped she was wrong and that he *would* in fact fall asleep tonight, because he was rather looking forward to his dreams.

He snuck quietly into the house without detection for the most part. Fred did roll over, partly awake, and opened one eye when George closed the door to their room.

"That's more like it, old boy!" he mumbled, then promptly fell back asleep.

Just Like Old Times

Chapter 21 of 80

George and Annie share a soggy afternoon stroll through the old woods, catching up on the events of the last two years.
And George has saved a surprise for later – will Annie survive it?

Chapter 21: Just Like Old Times

May 1996

Annie and George had planned to meet, just the two of them, back at the tree fort the following Saturday afternoon.

Annie had been distracted from her chores all that morning in anticipation. Consequently, a red sock somehow found its way into a wash load of whites. Annie pulled out the newly pink skivvies and sheets from the machine and berated herself in embarrassed anger.

Her Gran had laughed in an attempt to abate Annie's overly harsh tirade of self-criticism. "No worries, dear. Pink's an improvement, don't you think?"

The overcast morning had turned to drizzle by lunchtime. Annie bustled about, fixing lunch and pulling together most of dinner as well for her Gran. After she cleared the dishes, she went to her room excitedly to dress for her afternoon date with George. Her excitement quickly dissipated when she realized her raincoat would cover her entirely, so what was the use of wearing anything special?

Gran raised an eyebrow when Annie popped into the doorway of her bedroom to say goodbye. "I'm off for a bit," Annie said lightly. "Supper's in the fridge. Don't wait up I could be a bit late, not sure."

"Fancy a soggy afternoon stroll, do we?" Gran smiled a smile that told her granddaughter that she was not fooled in the least.

Annie shrugged, barely stifling a smile herself.

"Bye, then."

George had arrived at the tree fort early. He'd wanted to stash a surprise there for Annie for later, but wasn't sure if the weather would cooperate. He'd then leaned against the tree trunk, waiting for her. He watched her approach once she came into view, suddenly unsure of what to do next.

Annie smiled brightly when she saw him. Her hood was down, her curly hair dripping already, collecting the drizzle. And those eyes he found himself staring at them and looked away in embarrassment.

"Fancy a soggy stroll?" he asked.

Annie laughed out loud. "Gran just asked me the same thing as I was leaving!"

Her friendly laughter put him at ease. It was like old times yet even better as he took her hand, and they started walking in no particular direction. After a few minutes more of teasing banter, he felt her thumb rubbing the back of his hand in the same place, over and over. She lifted it up to her face to get a better look.

"What's this? Some sort of sick joke?" she asked. There was a deep concern on her features as she examined the scar Umbridge's torture pen had given him.

"That's exactly what it is," he said as he laughed sarcastically.

He considered for a moment whether it was a good idea to tell her all that had happened during his last year of school. He had only hinted at the troubling events in his letters, trying to spare her the worry. He wasn't entirely sure he understood all the ramifications himself.

Then he looked into her face. Her beautiful violet eyes were troubled the eyes he had seen every night in his dreams for so long now. He wouldn't be able help it; he could see that now. He would spill his guts to them whether he wanted to or not.

George shrugged. "She's a right nasty bitch, that Delores Umbridge."

"I never understood what she was doing at Hogwarts. You and Fred always said it was so safe there," Annie said, puzzled.

"Used to be safe as kittens for the most part... until a year ago. The end of the Tournament changed everything. You remember what I told you then?"

She nodded. "That a student was murdered. A bad wizard came out of hiding." She shuddered to remember the letter that had nearly ruined her sanity last summer.

"Everyone calls him You-Know-Who; let's just say it's not a good idea to speak the name out loud. Anyway, our mate Harry saw the whole thing; some foul bit of Dark magic gave You-Know-Who a body back, and then all his old toadies came sniveling back to lick his boots. He killed Cedric. Tried to kill Harry, too, but he escaped."

"If a kid like Harry could get away, then surely he can't be as powerful as you think..." she said, struggling to understand.

"Nah, that's not it, see? He's killed loads of people but not Harry. Tried before... loads of times. You-Know-Who has it out for Harry for sure his whole life since he was a baby but he always manages to get away. Something special about him... dunno what."

"So, Umbridge belongs to him? This You-Know-Who person?"

George snorted. "Not quite, but she'd make a lovely addition to the club, no mistake. She's with the Ministry."

Annie's shocked, confused look prompted him to explain further.

"Ever since last summer, the Ministry have been trying to discredit Harry, to deny You-Know-Who is back. Reckon that's why Umbridge was there at Hogwarts: to make sure we all swallowed the lies. Dunno why they're doing it exactly, but it's a fat load of bollocks. Makes those of us who know the truth pretty nervous to boot."

"I still don't understand why this Umbridge was torturing you."

She caressed his scar again with her fingertip. It made him shiver slightly.

"Oh, well, that's because my mates and I decided not to partake of the bullshit pudding she was serving up. We took matters into our own hands, so to speak," he explained, grinning.

George then regaled her with the story of how Harry had taught them to defend themselves from Dark magic attacks. How they were able to avoid detection. How even the castle itself seemed to help them by providing them a secret room to hide in. He watched as the worried look on her face was replaced by impressed surprise while he described their accomplishments. He paused for a moment to bask in her delighted expression.

"And then, I presume, you got caught," she said ruefully as her face fell slightly.

George grimaced. "Yes, well, thanks to a snitch, the fun was over for a bit. But we got our revenge, Fred and me."

"I want to hear every detail of how you punished the evil cow that did this to you," she said, a ferocious tone underlying her voice. She ran her finger once more along his scar.

Annie's thoughts were roiling. *That Umbridge woman was lucky I hadn't been there at Hogwarts*, she fumed.

Annie could feel a familiar angry heat spreading through her body, inciting her to violence. She swallowed hard and tried to calm herself in the way she had practiced so many times before that it was nearly rote. But her thoughts could not be easily turned this time. How dare that... that bloody *witch*... harm her dearest friends?

"Your concern is very touching," George said teasingly as he smiled.

He watched as the well-known expression came over her face that prelude to an outburst of violent temper with something close to wry amusement. Her chin jutted out, lips slightly parted. He recognized her attempt to rein herself in as deep, calming breaths filled her chest, slightly flaring her nostrils. And her eyes they glittered dangerously. He found himself momentarily mesmerized by them like a deer in headlights, not unlike how he had been a few times as a boy as a direct target of Annie's

flaring wrath.

But this time was different: the rage wasn't directed at him but rather at someone else on his behalf. He could not resist the urge to gingerly reach out a hand to touch her face, to kiss her for her fury that was so endearing this time.

Annie heard George say something, but the meaning of his words didn't register. She was distracted, still struggling to dissipate her anger. Out of the blue, she felt a whisper of pressure of fingers on her lips. Her faraway mind instantly dialed into the sensation.

Her eyes, which had been staring out at nothing in the distance, brought George's face into tight focus. She registered that it was closing in on her, but her mind immediately disregarded the movement as a threat. She felt his fingers slide lightly over the flesh of her scalp as he bent to kiss her.

In the space of the following heartbeat, her body redirected the anger-adrenaline into this new physical outlet. The hands which had been itching to throttle something now curved themselves behind George's neck, pulling him closer, returning the kiss.

George was momentarily startled by Annie's reaction to his intention of delivering a barely-a-kiss brush of his lips on her forehead: she had grabbed his neck and pulled him down to her lips instead. He could feel her fingers in his own hair, curled around the back of his skull. Her body rose to meet his, closing what was already a tiny distance in a heartbeat.

Her kiss was much stronger than his, almost fierce. He made no hesitation, however, to join her. Uncounted minutes passed as they kissed with a passion that had taken them both by surprise.

Last weekend, their first kisses had certainly been exciting; yet they had also remained tentative, gentle, bordering on polite. In contrast, this was almost frightening in its intensity. It was hard and messy and grasping. Two years of forced separation, desire and fantasy were finally tapped, venting a pressure that had been building night after longing night they had spent apart.

After a while, once the worst of that pressure had been spent, they felt themselves returning to a semi-normal, more human state. Annie released him first, gently pushing herself away slightly from his embrace.

"Sorry. I don't mean to be a tease," she said breathlessly.

Oh. Right. She would be able to feel that, of course. He chuckled embarrassedly and smiled bashfully, which helped to further ease the tension as he took a step back, separating their bodies completely.

"Don't apologize, please. I don't mind... if you don't," he stammered. Despite his body's evidence to the contrary, he was not ready to take that leap forward so soon, either. He was relieved to discover Annie felt the same. "It would be horrible if I couldn't kiss you at all, though," he added, planting a comparatively chaste kiss on her cheek.

Annie giggled as she nodded in agreement. "Would it help you to know that I feel the same? That you're driving me just as mad?"

"Yes, actually, it does. A lot, in fact," he laughed, immensely pleased by the news.

"Maybe we should keep walking?" she suggested. "You were about to tell me how you revenged yourself on the vile Umbridge."

"Right. Well, with Dumbledore sacked..." He paused as he saw Annie raise her eyebrows in shock again. He nodded, his expression mirroring hers, acknowledging what had been his own surprise at the turn of events. "Fred and I decided there was no point in hanging around Hogwarts, twiddling our thumbs, waiting to get buggered ourselves. It was time to move on, we reckoned. We had already made a tidy mess of galleons from the Snackboxes and the rest. Combined with the stake Harry gave us, we were finally set to go on our own."

"Hang on.... Harry gave you money?" she asked in surprise.

"Yeah, last summer! It was a shock, believe me. Harry won the Triwizard Tournament technically, even though it all went to shit after. The prize was a thousand effing galleons, no less! And the nutter gave it to us, all of it, right there on the train back to London. Felt guilty, he said, about what happened to Cedric, and didn't want the money. Cracking bloke, Harry. Completely mental, but a good mate, all the same."

"You two are the luckiest gits on the planet!" she mused in wonder. "How do you do it? Most people with your track record are on the run from the devil or the law."

"Whatever are you implying? My brother and I are pillars of the community! We're respectable entrepreneurs, I'll have you know," he argued with mock indignation.

"Yes, yes. You and Fred are nothing if not angelic," she said sarcastically.

"It's not all down to good looks. Our success is attributable to loads of hard work," he teasingly protested.

"Usually *other* people's hard work," she argued with a laugh, knowing the jab was false.

"Well, you're nitpicking now," he grumbled good-naturedly.

George spent the next twenty minutes relating in minute detail the conflagration he and Fred had detonated at Hogwarts the day they'd left it for good. Annie loved watching his animated face describing each of the different kinds of fireworks: what they looked like, how they worked. It all sounded absolutely brilliant. She begged him to show her in person someday.

He promised he would. "We'll have to find someplace remote. They're a bit loud and try to escape, you see."

Then, apparently, he and Fred had felt it necessary to conjure some sort of boggy mess in a castle corridor. His younger brother had written him to say the professor in charge of clearing it up had left a bit of it for posterity's sake, it was so impressive.

"Which hasn't spoiled your humble nature at all, I can see," she groaned with a roll of her eyes.

George shrugged and laughed. "So what have you been doing for the past two years?" he asked her.

"The life of a lowly Muggle isn't nearly as exciting as that of a wizard's," she answered.

George rolled his own eyes impatiently and butted her with his hip.

Annie stumbled a few steps, laughing. "Mostly just the same old stuff. It's been dreary and boring without you two. Jane is off at Cardiff, studying to become an architect. My old mates," and she reckoned she used the term 'mates' in the loosest way possible, "and I never really spend much time together anymore. They formed a band a while back. Not a hair of original musical talent in the lot of them, though. Their primary aspirations are to make loud noise by playing cover songs and attract groupies."

"You're not one of them, I hope," he said scoldingly.

Annie snorted and smirked in answer to his ludicrous suggestion. "Lacking in suitable troublemaking companions, I got a respectable job. I spend my days now working for Dr. Dan, the dentist. Don't laugh, that's honestly his name. I run a few days a week. Otherwise, I try to be at home with Gran as much as possible."

"How is she, your Gran?" George asked.

"She's well for seventy-eight years old. Still gets out a little with her garden ladies, putters a bit outdoors. Her mind's still keen. She knows something's going on, by the way, with me skiving out of the house two weekends in a row."

George smiled. "Surely that won't be a problem for the infamous Annie: Sneak Extraordinaire? I overheard you dodging her last week, remember?"

Annie shook her head. "I can manage Gran. She's not concerned, just curious. She'll be asking to meet you soon," she said, wanting to test the waters.

George nudged her with an elbow. "*I can* behave in polite society, you know."

"And how would I know that? Not from personal experience, surely!" she cried.

"Well, I never really considered you to be polite society, did I?" he explained.

Annie's hand darted under his arm, and George grunted in pain from the vicious pinch.

"I knew you couldn't go another day without inflicting bodily harm, you malevolent little rat. Ow!" He rubbed the painful point where she had pinched him. "You'll pay for that one," he muttered, but she had already dashed away.

He caught up to her easily, which he knew meant she wasn't trying very hard to get away. He wouldn't actually inflict pain in retaliation, unlike when they were children, but he would have to do something in order to salvage his self respect. He immediately targeted her hair she had always been vain about her hair.

He put her in a firm hold, pinning both her arms with one of his. She was laughing as she weakly squirmed to escape. He mussed her hair with his free hand, tugging just a bit on a few curls.

"Get off!" she whined after a minute, and he let her go. "Not fair! You know hair is out of bounds!"

She hauled off to smack his arm, but he caught her wrist and held it, smiling.

"Weak," he chided. "You're not even trying."

Annie clawed playfully at his large hand clamped around her comparatively delicate wrist. He grabbed that one, too, holding them both a foot apart.

"Claws in, puss," he teased.

She pretended to bite at his fingers: her bared teeth gently closed on his thumb as her smiling eyes gleamed teasingly. He pulled her arms above her head in response.

"Wish I had a rope. Hang on... I guess I could just conjure one right up, now, couldn't I? Tie you up and leave you here for the crows to pick at."

"You wouldn't dare!" she laughed.

Her cheeks were flushed and smiling from the rough play. A bit of setting sun began to peek from behind the clouds and lit her up with warm light. Her dark hair shone with red streaks, and her eyes glittered once more.

George shifted his hold on her wrists to free one of his hands. This one he now slipped around her waist and gently pulled her closer. In response, her playful grin softened into something more expectant. When he finally released Annie's imprisoned hands, they fell gently to his shoulders.

They kissed for a while. It wasn't as frantic as earlier in the day, but still less tentative than a week ago. Not quite as shy more confident, this time. Their hands grew braver as well, resting in places that would have been deemed impertinent before.

"I've got a surprise for you," he whispered when the sun had completely gone below the horizon. The sky still glowed brightly with reddish-purple light. He laughed as he saw her wary expression. "Come on, don't be chicken," he teased.

"I've learned the hard way to be gun-shy of your surprises," she laughed and dragged her feet a bit as he led her back toward the fort.

"Close your eyes," he said when they reached the willow tree.

"No."

"Trust me," he cajoled.

"Not bloody likely."

"Fine, then. Do something profitable with your time and watch my arse while I climb up here to get it." George launched himself up into the tree and reached into the fort with one arm.

Annie could not see what it was he removed from the little ramshackle fort, and he kept it well-hidden as he hopped back down to the ground.

"Fancy a bit of flying?" he asked, eyebrows cocked like he was daring her.

Annie felt a thrill of excitement. "How?" she asked eagerly. She stood on her tiptoes attempting to peek around his body at the mystery object.

"That's more like it," he joked, pleased in the end with her enthusiastic reaction. He produced a broom from behind his back.

Annie's eyes grew wide as she took in the odd-looking thing. She had seen them before in photos, of course. She had even seen George flying on one once, but she would never confess it to him in her lifetime. She took it reverently from him and held it in front of her to better examine it. Curiously, with the footrest-type thing near the base, it somewhat resembled a pogo stick, she thought.

"Wanna have a go?" George asked.

"Absolutely! How do I fly it?" she asked enthusiastically.

"You can't, silly girl. I didn't mean on your own. With me."

Annie's face fell slightly. George took the handle back from her and straddled it, then motioned with his hand for her to come to him.

Suddenly, Annie felt unsure about the plan. Her face must have shown it because George teased her about it.

"You're *not* scared," he chided her.

"Dubious is not the same as scared. Where am I supposed to sit?"

"Right here." He indicated a spot on the broomstick just in front of him.

"Like this?" Annie tried to straddle the broomstick in the same manner. But there was no place for her to brace her feet; she would be dangling in midair, balanced on the broomstick, supporting all her weight directly on her crotch.

"Erm, no, that won't do..." he muttered, trying to find an arrangement that would allow them to get airborne, at least. "Okay, not that either. I can't see around you now. Hang on, get off a sec.... Here, try this way...."

Clearly, George had not tried this with anyone before. Annie was slightly mollified that no one else had rated an attempt prior to her, but that feeling was quickly overwhelmed by the nervousness she felt at being the guinea pig.

Annie ultimately found herself sitting sideways with both hands on the broomstick in front of her, sort of sidesaddle. George was astride directly behind her, supporting her back with his chest, steadying her as she pressed against him, and would be steering the broom with his hands just behind hers. They were both hunched forward a bit awkwardly, and his chin was nearly resting on her shoulder.

"Are you completely sure about this?" she asked.

"Utterly," he assured her, his expression one of disbelief that she could ever doubt him. "I am quite good at flying this thing, you know."

George pushed off the ground, and they lunged upward into the air with the force of his kick. Annie wobbled a bit, but George corrected for it expertly. They rose slowly and steadily, following the pathway of clear air directly above the river until they reached the tree tops. He skimmed just above the treetops, picking up a bit of speed as they headed away from the village.

Annie thought it was exhilarating. Terrifying, too, as he started to swoop a bit, dipping under a branch here, darting around a tree there. She had to admit he was quite good at flying the broom. Their flight was utterly smooth, his body and arms supporting her whenever they changed course. It was the most amazing feeling of freedom: to be moving through midair with nothing but his arms surrounding her.

They were now flying over the Weasleys' orchard, where Annie had paid dearly for sneaking a peek at the boys playing Quidditch years ago. Fred was there, below them on the ground, with a broom resting on his shoulder. She wondered if maybe he was going to join them.

"Oi, Fred!" she shouted down to him as George circled in the air.

Fred looked up in surprise and waved once he located the voice. George directed their broom to dive down toward his brother, forcing him to hit the dirt in order to escape a collision. He and Annie were both laughing as they sped skyward again, circling around for another go.

Swearing as he jumped back to his feet, Fred grabbed a rotten apple on the ground and chucked it after them in retaliation. It missed them completely and fell harmlessly into a tree filled with sparrows. The birds protested the intrusion and took flight en masse.

George and Annie were still laughing when a hundred tiny bodies suddenly swirled around them. George tried to maneuver out of the flock, but the birds seemed to center their movements on them, tightly orbiting around the two of them on the broom. Annie felt a few of their little bodies pelt painfully into her.

George momentarily lost control of the broom, trying to dodge down and away from the birds. Annie then lost her already delicate balance and began to lean to one side. Unfortunately at that exact moment, George had chosen to let go of the broom with one arm to swat at the birds. Without George's arm to catch her, Annie tumbled backward. One hand came loose as she fell.

Annie now hung precariously from the broomstick by her knees and one hand.

George managed to regain a little control over their flight a moment later as the sparrows had finally dispersed, alighting in another tree, but it was difficult because Annie was swinging, throwing off all his attempts at balance. He tried to pull her back up with his hand but quickly discovered he needed both hands on the broom to steer as they almost crashed into a tree. She managed on her own to get her other hand back on the broomstick at least.

Annie thought quickly. It occurred to her that she had been in this identical position probably ten thousand times before during the hours she had been forced by her Gran to spend at the playground in Ottery. Dangling by just her knees, she had practiced flipping herself off the monkey bars daily for about seven years at least. It seemed like a reasonable solution to her now.

"Let go!" she shouted to George, who was trying to hold on to her legs and steer the broom at the same time. "And look out!" she warned.

"What!?" George cried.

"Trust me!" she yelled.

She let go of the broomstick with her hands as soon as she felt George release his grip. As her body swung down, she felt the broom lurch. She swung her arms back behind her head for momentum, kicking out with her feet, and felt her knees release the broomstick.

"Annie!" she heard two panicked voices yell in tandem.

The aspect of the plan she had failed to account for was the difference in altitude, she realized far too late, her body rotating as it fell through the air. The monkey bars in the park had been about six feet from the ground, whereas the broom was closer to twelve, maybe more. She felt her body over-rotate, but didn't have an opportunity to compensate.

Instead of landing solidly on the balls of her feet, as she reliably had done on the playground, she barely caught land with her heels. Unable to scramble backward quickly enough on her feet to correct herself, she hit the ground hard, flat on her back. The force of the impact knocked the wind out of her.

Seconds later, both boys were at her side.

"Annie?" George had a frantic look. His face was closest, and she felt his hands on her shoulders.

"Don't move her!" Fred barked, searching her face from slightly farther away. She could see he was angry and afraid.

Annie's eyes and mouth were wide open, struggling to draw air back into her empty lungs. She couldn't tell them she was fine, that nothing was seriously hurt. *Maybe I could try to nod or something*, she thought.

She looked up into their faces, attempting to nod. But she could only see George's face; Fred was now looking away toward her feet, inspecting her for additional damage.

"She's moving her head!" George cried. "Are you all ri-ARRGH!"

Fred had responded to George's exclamation by spinning back toward Annie's face. The brothers' heads then collided with a loud *crack*.

"You stupid git!" yelled George, hand pressed to his eye socket.

"You bloody idiot!" countered Fred, clutching his forehead and reeling backward.

At that instant, air finally rushed back into Annie's lungs. A moment after her brain registered the delicious sensation of a chest full of air, she blew the breath back out in a loud guffaw. She couldn't help it, even though it was quite painful. She began laughing hysterically.

"You addled her brain!" Fred accused his brother with a violent shove.

"Annie? Did you hit your head?" asked George in a worried tone, scrambling back to look her in the eye with the one of his that wasn't screwed shut from pain.

"You.... The birds.... I fell... on my arse... then you two... cracked heads...." She was laughing so hard tears were running down her cheeks.

Fred was smiling now. "She's rung her bell a bit, that's all," he chuckled, still rubbing the bump on his forehead.

"Did you see that?" she squealed with glee as she sat up, George's arm immediately around her back for support. "I flipped off that effing broom in midair, goddamn it!"

George, too, began to chuckle now. "That was bloody impressive. Stupid, but impressive, I'll admit."

"Poor Fred. Gave you quite a fright, didn't I?" she laughed.

"Shut it," he said with a playful shove to her shoulder.

"Get off!" George angrily shoved his brother back.

"Now, now, don't quarrel over me, boys," she teased. "Fred, it's been lovely to see you, mate. Hope your head feels better in the morning."

"No harm done. Drop in again anytime," he chimed in, a sarcastic smile lighting up his face.

Annie and George groaned in unison at the horrid pun. George began gingerly probing his brow ridge, examining the damage and wincing.

"George, I think we'd better start walking back. No, I'm not getting back on that thing tonight," she said as he brandished the broom. "I'd prefer to keep my feet on the ground for the rest of the evening, thank you."

George proffered his hand to help her to her feet. She took it and didn't let go as they made their way back to her house through the rapidly darkening woods.

Ottery St. Catchpole

Chapter 22 of 80

George meets Stephen. Meanwhile, Annie would prefer to be anywhere else. Then Gran comes sniffing about, insisting on meeting the new fellow in Annie's life. George learns far more than he bargained for when he takes tea with Meredith. By the time he meets Jane, discovering new things about Annie has become par for the course.

Chapter 22: Ottery St. Catchpole

Summer 1996

"Can't we just stay out here tonight?" begged Annie. Even a damp forest would be preferable to the previous plan; of that she was now sure.

"What's wrong with the pub?" George asked with a chuckle, certain she had to be joking.

Annie shrugged and looked away, which served only to make George suspicious. He was beginning to get the impression she was hesitant to go out in public with him for some reason. He hoped it was nothing more than her usual overreaction regarding the secrecy laws; she had always been jumpy when the three of them spent time in Ottery.

"Anyway, what are we going to do with this git if we don't?" He indicated Fred with a nod of his head.

His brother flipped him off in response.

Annie sighed. "Fine. I want it on record that I tried to avoid this; that's all I'm saying," she mumbled under her breath.

The three of them piled into her truck and headed into the village. It seemed a bit silly to drive such a short distance, but it was raining lightly, and they preferred to keep dry.

"What's so terrible you want to avoid?" George asked from behind the wheel.

Annie was sitting next to him, arms folded across her chest, staring anxiously out the windshield. Her current mood was really starting to annoy him. When had he ever given her reason to be embarrassed by him in front of other Muggles?

"Nothing much, really," she sighed. "I just ran into an old schoolmate this week. His awful band is playing there tonight and he asked me to come see. I told him I was busy...."

He rolled his eyes, dismissing her fears, feeling better now that he understood the reason behind her obvious discomfort. Glad it wasn't *his* fault, at any rate. "So, you'll get caught in a lie, big deal."

"We won't let anyone rough you up too badly, git," Fred assured her with a little shove to her head.

They arrived at the pub a few moments later. It was a tribute to the band's reputation that the three of them had little trouble finding seats in the back of the pub with barely ten minutes before the show was due to start. Fred wandered off to get drinks and chat up a couple of Muggle girls at the bar. Meanwhile, George and Annie sat together at the table.

He tried to tease her out of her nervous funk, which had only escalated since they had entered the pub, by telling her a few jokes from school. "A hippogriff, a unicorn, and

a thestral all walk into a pub...."

It worked: she smiled and giggled at the punch line, finally relaxing a bit. Then the evening's performance began, and everyone's attention turned toward the makeshift stage.

"Blimey, they are rubbish!" George shouted into her ear during the second song. "You weren't kidding!"

She shot him an exasperated look that asked him: *What else could you have possibly expected?* Fred came back to the table then, bringing pints and a new companion for the evening. The four of them tried to chat politely despite the necessity of shouting across the table over the racket of the band.

Annie sat next to George, her stomach stewing in an annoying draught of nerves. Here they were, sitting in a pub in Ottery, bold as brass and begging for notice. In the ten minutes since they'd entered, she'd felt every pair of eyes in the room dart over to their table, instantly recognizing her. Universally, eyebrows peaked suspiciously a moment later when they failed to recognize her companions just as quickly. Somehow, she just knew it was going to get worse before it got better.

She toyed with the idea of pretending to get sick, cutting short the date entirely and sending the twins back to the safe obscurity of the Burrow. But she'd sensed that George was feeling a bit put out with her that she'd connived her way out of a public date every time he'd asked her out so far. For some odd reason, he *liked* spending time in the Muggle world and was usually fascinated with all the silly little gadgets that made life simpler for them in the ways magic couldn't.

Then Fred had dragged some blonde over to their table. Annie had recognized the girl from school, but didn't know much more than that about her. The twins looked mildly entertained by their surroundings for the most part, although George looked slightly preoccupied, like he was puzzling over something. *Wonderful. Yet another reason to worry....*

"Aren't they great?" the girl asked her, nodding her head to the beat.

Annie lifted her eyebrows in surprise. *Is she serious?* "Not really my cup of tea, I suppose," she said with a shrug.

"Didn't you and that Stephen bloke go out for a while?" the girl shouted across the table.

Fred and George instantly straightened up in their chairs and turned toward Annie. Fred was grinning like he'd just been handed a winning lottery ticket. George simply cocked his head to the side and looked at Annie expectantly.

She gritted her teeth. *Shit!*

"No," Annie sternly corrected the girl. "We used to hang out sometimes as a group but never dated," she said, emphasizing the last two words.

She wasn't surprised this girl had bought into the rumor that had circulated for most of Annie's high school career. Very few people hadn't, after all, but it was embarrassing to have it brought up at this particular moment in this particular company. Just one of the many reasons she would have preferred to stay away from here tonight.

"Oh," the girl answered with a confused look. "Which of them was it, then, that you were with?"

Annie narrowed her eyes and gave her a hard stare. *Is she trying to start something, or just another stupid cow?* Judging by the vacant eyes and smile, Annie decided the latter was most likely and gave her the benefit of the doubt. "None of them. Like I said, we just hung out. I didn't really date *at all* in school."

Stupid Cow took one look at George, then turned her eyes back to Annie. Her face lit up with false understanding. "Oh, okay," she said, then winked.

Annie took a long drink from her pint, then bit her tongue. She prayed for the strength to resist the urge to throttle Stupid Cow.

George put his hand on her knee under the table and squeezed it. Still furious, she refused to look at him. Instead she stared at the soundless television showing a soccer match, fuming silently. Why couldn't he have just listened to her and spared her this embarrassment?

The first set didn't last long. The band only had about twenty playable songs at last count, and she used the term 'playable' quite loosely. Of course Stephen, Geoff and Mike caught sight of her as they made their way to the bar during the intermission. They waved. She gave them a nod and a forced smile. While Mike remained there at the bar with what appeared to be his current girlfriend, the other two invited themselves to sit at Annie's table.

Annie's stomach turned. *This is definitely getting worse.* She wondered if George had brought his wand with him tonight and would he please make her disappear if she begged him insistently enough.

Stupid Cow looked overjoyed with the attention and made a big show of scooting more chairs to the table. She must not have noticed she was the only one at the table with such enthusiasm.

"Annie, love, good to see you!" and, "What trouble have you been into lately?" accompanied the pecks on the cheek and unwelcome hugs from her old school chums.

Please don't embarrass me, she silently pleaded them with her eyes.

"Stephen, Geoff, these are Fred and George, and... sorry dear, I forgot your name...?"

She couldn't resist antagonizing Stupid Cow by forcing her to introduce herself. She instantly regretted it when Fred gave her a mildly quizzical look, his eyebrow cocked ever so slightly.

Everyone shook hands all around the table.

"Glad to see you changed your plans," said Stephen. He began sizing up George immediately, since Annie was seated next to him. "How long have you known *our* Annie, then?"

Both George and Annie bristled to varying degrees at the possessive pronoun.

"A long time. Since we were kids," George explained in a quiet but strong voice now that the necessity for shouting had passed.

"Never seen you around school. You a relative?" Stephen asked, revealing the stunning depth of his ignorance about Annie.

She answered before George could open his mouth. "George and Fred grew up around here but went to boarding school," she explained with another forced smile as she pointedly nestled herself against George's shoulder. She hoped her body language would cut Stephen's interrogation short.

George added some of his own by draping his arm around her shoulders.

Stephen's eyes narrowed in response. "Boarding school, eh? Bit posh, are we?" Stephen nudged Geoff in the ribs with a laugh.

"Not really, no," disagreed Fred in a warning tone.

Stephen seemed to notice Fred for the first time. Realizing the odds were at least even, if not in fact against him for the twin strangers did look a bit bigger than him, even

seated he took a different tack. "So, you've come back home to Ottery for a bit, then?" he asked.

George shook his head. "My brother and I have a flat in London above our business."

Stephen couldn't hide the fact that impressed him.

Annie wasn't satisfied, however. "You still at your mum's?" she needled him. "How is she now?"

"Yeah. Still at home..." Stephen chuckled. "What can I do, leave the poor dear home alone? You know what it's like, don't you, Annie?" he asked, pointing out the fact that she was in roughly the same boat as he was.

Annie smiled wryly but didn't answer. She took another drink from her pint instead.

"Did you hear Geoff and I joined the fire service?" Stephen added, perhaps hoping to impress her.

"No, I hadn't. Good for you two. A chance for you to make up for some of the stupid stunts you've pulled over the years," Annie offered, making it obvious she was not impressed in the least. And she meant it when she implied they owed something to the community for their dipshit behavior as juvenile delinquents.

Stephen then turned to Stupid Cow, recruiting her into his efforts. "Remember all those mad stories from school?" he asked her, trying yet another tactic: illustrating how he also had a shared history with Annie.

Annie cringed. How could he possibly think she looked back on any of it fondly?

But Stupid Cow was thrilled to be invited to join the conversation. "Ooh! You lot were so bad. Did you naughty boys really steal the cop car?" she squealed.

Stephen shrugged and smiled, clearly indicating to the girl that the tale was true. Then he turned his eyes back to Annie, looking at her like blackmail. "You remember that night, don't you, Annie?"

Annie glared back at him. *Typical Stephen bullshit*, she thought. His alpha male ego was feeling threatened by George's and Fred's presence, and he was taking it out on Annie. She didn't want to cause a scene, but she wasn't about to put up with it, either.

"Yes, I do. We boosted your *cousin's* squad car," she snapped, folding her arms across her chest. "Not unlike the many times we stole Geoff's *mum's* car. After which you lot used to drive around and dangle me as bait to get the pervs to buy us booze. That was a crack, for sure," she answered bitterly.

"You had your fun. Don't act like you didn't. Fed that little adrenaline addiction of yours," he chided, flashing a knowing smile.

As if, Annie thought with disgust. She rolled her eyes and refused to continue the discussion. She looked at George as if to ask if he was ready to leave.

George just sat there, reclined in his seat, arm casually about her shoulders, gazing at the bandmates as if he was utterly bored and unimpressed with the conversation.

She could see, though, that none of the tension between her and Stephen was escaping his notice. She felt a gushing swell of acid in her stomach, contemplating what he must be thinking.

She was rescued from further persecution by the barman toddling over to their table to shoo the band back to the stage for their second and final set. After they left, George leaned close to her in order to speak in her ear.

"You were right. We should have gone elsewhere."

Annie turned to smile at him with an eyebrow raised, relieved to hear his conciliatory, apologetic tone. She didn't resist when he put his hand gently on her neck and pulled her close for a kiss. Annie knew the uncharacteristic public display was for one person's benefit primarily, but she didn't care. *Serves him right!*

"I don't like him," he added into her ear before leaning back into his seat.

Annie leaned close to answer him, lips grazing his ear. "Stephen's harmless. Of course he's a complete prick: they all are. Bunch of gormless gits who used to make due as entertainment when you weren't here."

George smiled, apparently satisfied for the moment with her explanation. They sat for a few more songs, shouted a bit more with Fred and Stupid Cow about nothing in particular.

Then Stephen announced into the microphone that the next tune was to be the final song for the night and especially dedicated to his dear old girl, Annie. Her anger at his insulting possessiveness was tempered only slightly by the relief she felt that George seemed utterly unruffled by it. The band proceeded to mutilate what was a horrid rock ballad in the first place.

At least he has the decency to avoid playing his patented seduction song Annie thought charitably as George stood up and led her to a spot on the sparsely populated dance floor in front of the band. He pulled her close, and they began to dance slowly while he made a point of kissing her frequently.

Annie felt no guilt whatsoever that George was using her to rub Stephen's nose in it. He had asked for it, after all.

*

Annie walked into the house that night to find Gran still awake and waiting for her at the table.

"Oh! Gran!" she exclaimed, startled to see her. "Is everything all right?"

"I'm fine, dear. Just fancied a cup of tea and a chat."

"I'm not late, am I? I thought we agreed on eleven," she said nervously, glancing at the clock on the wall.

"No, not late." Her Gran smiled reassuringly. "I'm just so happy to have you back again."

Annie's heart sunk. Would this mean she would have even less time to spend with George? Between both their work schedules and taking care of Gran, she felt she hardly got to see him as it was. "Is four hours of an evening too long for you?" she asked, concerned.

"More like a year. Maybe even longer, come to think on it."

Annie was confused and must have looked the part.

Her Gran smiled again and, reaching out for her hand, explained, "You've been so sad for such a long time now since last summer, in fact. The light in your smile, the bounce in your step, all your joy seemed to have left you then. I thought it was my fault that you were worried about my health. But now I see it was something more."

"Gran, of course I've been worried sick about you," Annie protested. "Don't be silly! Nothing in the world is more important to me than you. I owe you everything! And you're

getting so much better now; it's been such a relief to me. But if you need me at home...."

"Now, Annie, I didn't mean it that way," Gran assured her. "I know how concerned you've been for me. And I'm not jealous, for heaven's sake. I'm not so insecure that I can't accept you developing romantic attachments. That's the natural course of things, love. I'd be far more worried for you if you weren't."

Romantic attachments? Oh, no... here it comes Annie stared at her hands, unsure how to proceed, so Meredith did the talking for her.

"So, you're finding yourself falling head over heels for this young man.... Now, now, don't look so alarmed! I'm a very observant person and, believe it or not, felt the same way myself about a hundred years ago. That smile you think you're hiding from me the one that brightens your face all day long now I recognize it from personal experience, you see."

Annie hung her head and nodded sheepishly. Her Gran had her dead to rights.

"So... tell me about him already. What's he like?" she asked.

Annie shrugged, at a loss for words. "Perfect?"

Gran snorted. "He'd have to be to be good enough for you. Oh, you poor thing! You're absolutely besotted, aren't you?"

Annie groaned and hid her face in her folded arms on the table. "Stop!" she begged from her hiding place.

Gran chuckled. "And this... what's his name, dear?"

"George," she mumbled from behind her defensive ramparts.

"This George, then. Does he feel the same?"

Annie sighed and peered over her arms at her Gran. "I think... maybe. Does anyone ever really know for sure?"

"Doesn't he tell you so?" Gran asked.

"Neither of us has really put anything into words. It's still too soon, I suppose. I don't want to scare him, you know?"

"Hmm. Maybe you need to involve a third party. A neutral observer could help you figure this all out," Gran suggested. Her eyes glinted with mischief.

"Meaning you, I suppose. I know what you're trying to do, you nosy old bint," Annie giggled.

"Well, of course I'd be happy to share my years of wisdom, use my keen eye to search for signs of lovesickness, and give this boy the once-over for you," she said, grinning from ear to ear.

"Gran!" exclaimed Annie, mortified by the thought.

"Tea, I think. Next Saturday. I want to meet George."

*

Annie had been a nervous wreck all day long, anticipating this moment. The two people she loved most in the world now stood awkwardly together in the kitchen, laying eyes on each other for the first time.

"Gran, this is my... erm... friend, George Weasley." She couldn't bring herself to say *boyfriend* not in front of them, not out loud. "George, this is my grandmother, Meredith Jones."

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Jones," he said simply with a shy half-smile and a nod.

"And I'm so pleased to meet you, George. Please have a seat," she said, gesturing to the table. "Let's get to know each other, shall we?"

George looked almost as nervous as Annie felt. He moved to take a seat, then suddenly re-thought himself, paused, and pulled out the chair next to him, looking at Annie expectantly. She smiled at him reassuringly and sat down, reaching for his hand under the table once he was seated.

"Welcome to our home, George. I wish I could say Annie's told me all about you, but she's been rather selfish when it comes to sharing such details. Tell me, where do your people come from?" Meredith asked in a pleasantly curious tone of voice.

"Oh, erm, I suppose the Weasleys have been around here for a long time."

"Ah, a nice local boy. I'm not familiar with the name, though. But then again, having lived here for only the last fifty-nine years, I confess I am something of an outsider. You went to school here in Ottery, I suppose?"

"No, actually." He looked at Annie with a smile for what was now their private joke. "Boarding school... in Scotland."

"So, you've been away for a while, then?"

George nodded, and Annie jumped in. "We kept in touch letters every once in a while when he was away," she explained for him.

"So, you didn't meet Angharad at school, then?"

"Ann-who?" George looked at Meredith with a confused look.

"Angharad." Meredith spoke with deliberate enunciation. When the baffled look on George's face persisted, she looked at Annie with alarm. "Do you mean to tell me this boy doesn't know your given name, girl?"

"I beg your pardon?" he asked, looking at Annie with amused shock.

"Gran, it's not a big deal, honestly." Annie squirmed under her grandmother's stunned, indignant stare. "The entire world knows me as Annie. You yourself never use Angharad unless I'm in trouble."

She turned next to George, explaining, "It's Welsh. Gran was born there considers herself an ex-pat down here in Devon."

She turned back to face her Gran's stern gaze. "Could we please save the political fallout from this discussion for another time?" she begged.

Gran forced a smile back onto her disappointed face. "Of course. How rude of me. I didn't realize your proper name had developed such negative connotations. I'll be sure to use it more often in a positive light from now on, dear."

George stifled a snicker and gazed at Annie with newfound curiosity. As if he was wondering what else she might have hidden from him over the years.

"Now, George, I've been trying to impress upon Annie the importance of higher education, of her going to university. Are you off to college this fall?" Meredith asked him.

It was Annie's turn to stifle a giggle at the idea of George going to school any longer than he absolutely had to. Or helping her Gran talk Annie into going, either. Poor Gran was barking up the wrong tree there.

George shook his head as he took a drink of tea, the delicate little teacup dwarfed in his hand. "My brother and I are in business together."

"Oh, how nice. What sort of business?" Meredith asked, her disappointment tempered by her appreciation for his initiative.

"Erm...." George looked to Annie for help with this one.

She willingly chimed in, "George and his brother Fred have a shop in London and a mail order business, as well. They sell magic tricks, jokes, sweets, that sort of thing. Does really well, doesn't it?"

George nodded. "Pretty well. Fred and I were talking last week how we might expand to a second location early next year, maybe."

"That's wonderful news, George! Well done!" Annie said earnestly. She hadn't heard about this idea yet and was excited for her friends.

"Thanks," he said, a bit embarrassed.

A quiet ding of a bell interrupted the conversation.

"Oh, Angharad, that'll be the wash. Would you mind putting it out on the line, dear? I'd hate for it to sit in the machine and wrinkle. You don't mind, do you, George?"

Annie's eyes narrowed as she shook her head slightly at her Gran. *I know what you're trying to do* she told her silently with her expression.

Gran lifted one eyebrow as she looked back at Annie, daring her to refuse.

Annie sighed in defeat. "Sorry to leave you to the wolf, George. I'll be back as quickly as I can to rescue you," she teased.

A moment later, Annie marveled at her Gran's cunning as she pulled every pair of socks, every hanky, every little dishrag they owned out of the washing machine. It would take her an hour to hang the hundred things she now had in the basket.

"You're a horrible old sneak, you are," she muttered into her grandmother's ear on her way through the kitchen to the back door with the basket of laundry. "Be nice to him," she warned, then kissed her on the cheek.

Annie banged the door shut behind her, and after they had listened to her stomp down the back steps, Meredith turned to George with a warm smile. "Don't worry, dear. You'll have no more third degree from me."

She rose from the table and motioned for him to follow, leading him into the front room. "I fully trust Annie's judgment, and she obviously thinks the world of you. I thought, perhaps, you might have some questions for me. If not, feel free to just sit and relax, and I'll leave you alone."

"Thank you, Mrs. Jones," he said politely.

George gazed around Annie and her Gran's small living room for the first time. Along with a collection of lamps, a radio, and a television that would make his father salivate, there were at least a dozen photos of Annie on the wall, all at different ages. He examined one of Annie as a toddler, her dark hair long enough to reach down her back, coiling in perfect little ringlets. He had never seen her with hair so long; she had always worn it short ever since he had known her. Her violet eyes looked huge in her baby's face.

"She was such a tiny thing, even then," Meredith offered, interrupting his thoughts. "Not even five pounds when she was born, if you can believe it. The doctors said it was likely she would be mentally retarded, maybe even blind, she was born so early. She came into the world so sick, so fragile. And now look at her a force of nature, my Annie! Running everywhere all over town, hiking through the woods day in, day out.... She used to ride her bicycle all over hill and dale, when she was little."

George was stunned into silence for several moments. He'd had no idea Annie had physically struggled with anything in life. She had always seemed so strong and vital to him. He couldn't imagine anything in the world with power enough to lay her low.

"When I met her as a kid, I was a little afraid of her at first. She was so... strong, for such a little girl. And her temper...." He smiled with the memory.

"Yes, that temper. Not sure where that comes from. Her father, I suppose. She looks so completely different from anyone else in the family. Except the eyes she has my own mother's eyes."

"Annie told me... a long time ago... that her mother and father weren't around," he said quietly, unsure of how to respectfully frame the question he was thinking of asking.

"I imagine that was something she found very difficult to talk about. The fact she mentioned it to you at all should tell you something about her regard for you, even then."

Meredith pulled out a small framed photo from inside a drawer and handed it to George. He looked at the picture of a slim, blonde, blue-eyed teenage girl.

"This is my daughter, Carys Angharad's mother. When her father died, my Llewellyn, she suffered a nervous breakdown. In an attempt to anesthetize the pain of it, she turned to chemicals. Absolute poison, they are, George. They ruined her body and her mind. Destroyed us our love for each other when we only had the two of us left."

George looked up from the blue eyes in the photo into Meredith's identical but watery ones, listening intently to the clearly painful memory.

"I told her to leave and never come back until she stopped using them. Tough love, they call it. And I never heard from her again."

"When the hospital in London called and told me to come but wouldn't say why, I was certain I was on my way to claim her body for burial. But there was no sign of my daughter. Instead, there was my Angharad, all alone."

Meredith smiled through her tears, briefly struggling with the sadness for a moment, then continued. "She was so tiny in so much pain from the drugs leaving her little body. But, oh, how she fought! Dug her claws into this life, she did, and refused to give up. Amazed the doctors by how quickly she caught up with the other children her age. Not in stature, of course," she chuckled, and George joined her, not exactly sure why.

She took the photo of Carys from him and put it away in the drawer once more.

He picked up another frame from the table next to him, this one containing a more recent version of Annie decked out in a simple black dress and heels, standing with her arm around Meredith. Her smile wasn't as full as usual in this picture; she looked slightly melancholy, or stressed with worry, perhaps. Not like the brightly smiling face he had memorized from the beach two years ago.

He had had no real idea at all about the pain Annie had grown up with. He and his brother had just blindly taken her for granted a playmate who was just as reckless as they were, if a little bit moody at times. How could they have comprehended, living the comparatively idyllic life they had done growing up in his family?

Her flaring temper, the angry tears they must have been just the tip of the iceberg of hurt inside her. How could someone survive such a thing *abandonment at birth* let alone adjust to become a remotely normal person? He struggled with the urge to dash out the door and gather her up in his arms, to tell her how sorry he was for everything, to protect her from every possible hurt, and never let her go.

"I'm an old woman, George," explained Meredith, startling him out of his reverie. "There's far more of this life behind me than before me, and that's as it should be. I understand you're young, and so is she. Plenty of things left for you both to learn, especially about love.

"But one thing's for certain: Angharad is more precious to me than anything on earth has a right to be. I won't suffer a fool to hurt her. Tell me now, as a man, that your intentions are honest, and I'll take you at your word. Otherwise, leave her to someone who can value the treasure she is."

George swallowed hard, summoning control over the strong emotions roiling within him. There was a new hardness to Meredith's voice now. He appreciated the fact that she was only trying to protect Annie in her own way. Hers was a fair question, and he reckoned Meredith deserved an honest answer.

"Mrs. Jones, I've known Annie for eleven years now. What started as a true friendship has grown into... well... something more. I am young, as you say, and while I can't speak for Annie's feelings, I can assure you that mine are real and sincere. And I would never dream of hurting her; that's a promise."

Meredith nodded as she considered what he had said. "I believe you," she responded quietly. She smiled to lighten the serious mood that had descended onto the room. "You're a sweet, lucky boy. I think I can see what calls her to you," she said with a wink.

"I'll leave you to your thoughts, then, George. You may tell Angharad I got sleepy right after she left and went to lie down, if you like."

*

Meredith had become an expert at crying silently while pretending to sleep. It was no wonder, considering how many years she had spent perfecting the art. It had become a necessity, for Annie must never know, never see how often Meredith wept for her daughter.

It pained Meredith that Annie refused to ever talk about her mother, although she understood why: Annie blamed her mother for a good deal of the troubles in her life, and rightly so. Though the narrow-minded residents of Ottery St. Catchpole surely should shoulder a goodly portion of the blame for Annie's childhood miseries, she reckoned. They had shamefully used the scandal of Annie's bastard status as a weapon against the unarmed child.

Ah, Carys her own dearest daughter. So much promise, all of it thrown away for nothing. Meredith never understood what exactly had gone wrong inside her daughter's mind when Llewellyn died, but something surely had. She had lost them both in one fell swoop: her husband and their only child.

It haunted her, the memory of the dark creature Carys had become. The despair that Llewellyn's death had brought upon her had sucked the light of love from her eyes. The poison she'd turned to in order to soothe the pain had destroyed every spark of humanity in her mind. The addiction that resulted had enslaved her soul. Meredith's sweet little girl had been consumed by an evil inferno which left behind a burned-out hull of a human being: a hopeless animal left with no vestige of free will.

Meredith had not been strong enough to defeat her daughter's sadness or the resulting addiction to drugs. She had failed when the stakes had been at their highest. It was the blackest blemish on her soul her secret, everlasting heartache that drove her to weep silently in her bed at night.

But, paradoxically, a powerful good had come of such evil. Precious Annie, her shining beacon of love, was Carys' greatest glory as well as her most heinous sin. Meredith was not so naïve as to imagine Annie's conception was anything other than the result of her daughter's rape or prostitution. And Carys had clearly disregarded the gift growing within her poisoning the tiny life in her womb in the blind pursuit of numbness.

Yet Carys had made Annie; she was a part of her very being forever. She somehow kept Annie alive, nurtured her just enough to be born and survive. And while Carys' abandonment had scarred her child for life, it had also given Annie a chance at life, at happiness, at love.

For Annie had persevered. She had survived her mother's pre-natal abuse and subsequent abandonment. She had lived through so much cruelty life had thrown at her and, like the strongest alloy, had become strengthened by the curing fire.

And now Meredith's strong, beautiful granddaughter had fallen in love with a boy. Annie had been hurt and betrayed by so many unworthy people her mother first and foremost on that list yet miraculously was still capable of joy, still open to love. Meredith could see why Annie had chosen this boy in particular: the sweet, idealistic innocence that exuded from him like perfume, his warm, gentle manner with her, and that dash of impish mischief that glittered in his eyes. If he played his cards right, he just might find himself matched with his perfect mate in Annie.

Meredith could hear them now outside the house, murmuring to each other. She could hear the tenderness in their voices, even if she couldn't make out their words. They sounded just like she and Lew had done, all those years ago.

Meredith had prayed for this: to see Annie settled before she died. What a blessing it would be for them to have found each other so early in life. If it was within her power to do so, she determined she would nurture this young love, shield and encourage it as best she could with the final breath of her body, if necessary.

*

It took Annie half an hour of rushing to hang out the load of laundry before she was finished and reentered the quiet house. She peeked into Gran's bedroom and saw she was sleeping with her back to the door, as usual. She started to panic as she searched the remaining rooms of the house without finding George. *Had Gran driven him away with her probing questions?* she worried.

"George?" she called out in a hushed voice.

"Out here," he called to her softly.

Annie found him outside, seated on the front porch swing. His hands were folded behind his head, eyes closed, slowly rocking it back and forth with his long legs stretched out across the width of the narrow porch.

"Was it horrible, the interrogation?" she asked with a sympathetic wince as she sat beside him.

He put his arm around her and pulled her close, smiling reassuringly. She leaned her head on his shoulder.

"Don't fret about it. Your Gran loves you very much," he said, stroking her arm. "Who around here doesn't?" he added quietly.

Annie's heart tumbled in her chest. Did he mean to say what she thought she had just heard: what she had hoped for and fantasized about for two years?

"Tell me again how to say it," he said.

"Say what?"

"Your name. The long version."

"Ang-hah-rad. Like you're swallowing the *N* emphasis on the laugh in the middle."

He practiced saying it a few times. She looked up at him, her mind making a careful recording of his face, his smiling mouth in particular, as her name rang out in his voice.

This would fuel her dreams for the next month, at least, she reckoned.

"I like it," he declared.

"I suppose I'll keep it, then," she teased him.

"Middle name?"

"None."

George lifted an eyebrow to express his doubt. Annie shifted, turning her body toward him so she could face him and put her arms around his neck and drape her legs across his lap. George shifted toward her as well, lacing his arms around her waist.

"Gran is very old-fashioned, in case you haven't noticed," she explained as he gently swung them. "According to her, young ladies don't need middle names. That's what a maiden name is for, after they've married. So I'll be Annie J. Something, someday."

"Angharad J. Something," he corrected her. "Someday?"

Annie shrugged. "I assume it will happen at some point. Like it does for most people. I'm not in any great hurry, though. Don't you ever think so?"

"Never really thought about it," he confessed.

"You're a boy. You're not supposed to," she giggled.

"Anything else you'd like to tell me?" he asked in a teasing, mock-accusing voice. "Any other secrets you've been keeping for a decade or more?"

"Perhaps now would be as good a time as any to tell you about my tail?" she joked.

"I hate to be the one to burst your bubble, but the tail's not a secret. Neither are the horns." He lightly rapped on top of her head, chuckling.

"What about you?"

"No tail, sorry," he teased her.

"I meant a middle name," she sighed.

"I know. I should make you guess it you never will."

"So save me the effort, already."

"Darius."

Annie's face registered mild surprise. He was right; she never would have guessed it. "And Fred?"

"Cyrus."

Her forehead wrinkled as she tried to suss out where she'd heard the names before. "Persian kings?" she asked, trying to see a connection between the historical names and her twin friends. Her fair-skinned, ginger friends had never struck her as being of Persian origin.

George looked at her as if she was being thick.

Her eyes widened. "They were wizards?" she asked excitedly. She had never before considered famous historical figures as possibly being magical people as well.

After a moment, he spoke. "How did *you* know they were Persian kings?" he asked her curiously.

"Because I studied world history, and I'm not retarded," she teased. Actually, she had been rather impressed with herself for recalling such an obscure fact.

His eyes narrowed slightly as he considered what she had said for a moment. He looked like something she said caused him concern. Had she offended him somehow? Maybe with the retarded comment?

"Are you actually related to them?" she asked, hoping to redirect him quickly.

"Not likely the originals," he laughed and pulled her even closer. "More like some obscure twin Prewitt uncles.

Thank goodness he doesn't sound angry, she thought with relief, leaning her head on his shoulder.

"Magical families tend to hang on to those sorts of names," he continued, "recycling them through the generations. At least my parents gave us boys normal first names and saved the odd ones for the middle. Not everyone is so lucky."

"Like what?"

"In order, we're William Arthur..."

"Normal enough," she interrupted.

"Then Charles Septimus, Percival Ignatius, Frederick Cyrus, George Darius, and Ronald Bilius."

"Ooh, I see what you mean. *Bilius*... really? Poor Ron maybe that's why he's such a whinger. Well, you were one of the lucky ones, at least. Darius isn't bad at all."

George chuckled.

After a few moments, she continued. "Thank you... for coming here and doing this. She's a sweetheart, really, no matter what impression she might have given you today," Annie laughed.

"I already told you, it was fine," he chuckled again. He leaned closer, rubbing the tip of his nose against hers. "But if you insist on believing it was some sort of torture, then by all means, do try to make it up to me."

*

The short ride had been quiet. They slowly pulled into an expensive-looking subdivision where all the cars parked in the driveways were new and the color-coordinated houses were virtually identical, if you didn't count the small variations in trim. Annie's old beast of a farm truck definitely looked lost amongst the rest of the smart vehicles on the street.

"You're not nervous, are you?" Annie chided him.

"Why would I be nervous?" George asked defensively.

She stared pointedly at his hands on the wheel. He hadn't noticed his fingers had been drumming themselves, and he stopped them immediately.

"My point exactly," she said with an encouraging smile. "She's going to like you."

Actually, he couldn't care less what anyone else thought of him, or Annie, or the two of them together. He was far more anxious for her, and their track record of socializing with Muggles in this town left quite a bit of room for worry. It usually ended up with him pulling her off some kid, fists flying. Admittedly, that hadn't happened in several years, though....

But then there was the incident a few weeks ago, meeting up with the town morons in the pub. It had bothered him immensely: how they had affected her. The encounter had revealed Annie still had a sore spot on her heart from her school years, and George couldn't stand to see her hurting.

He noticed it whenever they spent an evening in Ottery, actually, which had become a rare occurrence once he'd seen how it affected her. Neither had it escaped his notice that almost every time they found themselves among the people she grew up with, Annie morphed from the fun-loving, sunny-dispositioned girl he grew up with and loved into some sort of armored and prickly being: arms crossed, back stiff, face in a near permanent scowl.

He didn't blame Annie for reacting to the Ottery denizens the way she did. They would have driven him bloody insane himself. Maybe it was presumed as something of a birthright in this tiny backwater: apparently, being raised here gave you the right to stick your judgmental nose into everyone else's private business.

He had thought about it a lot lately: *What is wrong with the people in this bloody town, anyway?* How could they not see Annie for who she was instead of merely the circumstances of her birth? Ever since his conversation with Meredith, when he'd learned the details about those circumstances, he found it made his blood boil: how the idiots in this town treated Annie.

And then there was her ridiculous and patently false reputation among the youth in this perverse corner of the world. Those girls in the park two years ago, then the vapid one from the pub, all insisting Annie was some sort of slut. *Small minds with far too much time on their hands and hormones in their blood* she supposed. It pained him greatly she'd felt it necessary to defend herself to him, swearing they were all lies. As if he didn't already know her better than that.

Sometimes he felt the temptation to torch the whole place, just to make her feel better. One thing was for sure: as the weeks had passed this summer, George had become more and more certain of his purpose on this earth. He had to get Annie the hell out of here. And rescue her he would, if it was the last thing he ever did.

"What's not to like?" he answered her with a shrug and mock bravado.

Annie smiled at his confident response. "I agree wholeheartedly. Let's go in... I'm getting hungry."

They strolled hand in hand to the door, Annie slightly in the lead. George was feeling an increasingly familiar sensation beginning to spread through his body: the strong desire to protect Annie from whatever was surrounding her, threatening to hurt her. Situations like this brought out a protective side of him he had previously thought was reserved for his flesh and blood family.

Tonight, though, she seemed different. Better. More relaxed. She had a smile of anticipation, looking forward to social interaction, for once. She was finally going to introduce him to her best Muggle friend in Ottery: the legendary Jane. Her tutor, mentor, and mate through the years while he and Fred were stuck at school far away.

Jane was home for several days from her studies in Cardiff. According to Annie, she had decided to pursue a career in architecture, ensuring many more years of schooling were ahead for her. Both he and Annie had found that concept personally distasteful, yet Annie assured him that Jane was not a 'Percy.'

The door swung open just as Annie reached up to knock on it. Standing before them was a tall, slim Asian girl with a broad, friendly smile. Dressed casually in jeans and a cotton shirt, she had finely chiseled facial features and graceful, willowy proportions.

He could see now why Annie had told him she looked like a fashion model. Not his type at all, but certainly beautiful in an exotic way. Fred, on the other hand, would have been all over her like a niffler on gold; George was quite confident about that.

"Annie! It's so good to see you!" Jane cried with genuine pleasure in her voice. She pulled Annie inside the door and into a warm embrace which Annie returned with enthusiasm.

The alert level in George's body immediately dialed itself down. Annie would be safe here; that much was clear. Or at the very least, she would have more than one defender. When the girls released each other, Annie introduced him to Jane with a glowing smile on her face that pleased him immensely.

"Go put your coats on the bed, will you, then meet us in the kitchen," Jane directed her.

As Annie headed down the hallway, Jane turned toward him. "It's nice to finally meet you, George," she said with a smile, flipping her long, straight, black hair back into place behind her shoulder, offering her other hand to him for a friendly handshake.

Or so he'd thought. Jane was as tall as he was in flat shoes, he suddenly realized to his surprise, and had a strong grip to boot. As she squeezed his hand firmly, she leaned slightly toward him and spoke in a low voice. "Annie thinks the world of you, you know. Her happiness means a lot to me. And if you hurt her, I will hunt you down and emasculate you."

George was momentarily taken aback. Jane's smile was still genuine, but the glint in her eyes was hard and serious. He understood her threat was utterly real.

He smiled broadly. Finally, he had found someone else in this godforsaken village who had a real appreciation for Annie. "I can't tell you how nice it is to hear you say that," he responded earnestly and, he expected, somewhat paradoxically.

But Jane had grasped his meaning and nodded with a little laugh. "I'm glad we understand each other. Welcome, come on in," she said with warmth as she began to lead him through the house.

Eight young people now milled about near a large table filled with snacks. Jane introduced Annie and himself to everyone; apparently, Annie didn't know anyone else here, either. George predicted that boded well for the evening. If the other guests weren't from around here, the odds were improving that Annie would feel more comfortable among them and enjoy the evening.

After a short while spent mingling, they arranged themselves around a large felt-covered table. Each seat had a stack of poker chips arranged neatly in front of it. Jane began to deal the cards as soon as everyone bought in.

"The game is five card stud, ladies and gentlemen. Ante up, if you please."

"Keep your hands where I can see them, you," Annie whispered the warning in his ear.

Such a suspicious little thing, he thought as he laughed quietly to himself. He confessed it was probably for good reason.

As the evening wore on, George spent some time observing the dynamics of the group; that is, when he wasn't absorbed with watching Annie have a ball, cleaning everyone else out. He quickly realized Jane had a real knack for social situations. At first, he'd assumed that they were four couples, but soon discovered that he and Annie

were the only pair currently dating. Jane had used this opportunity to set up several of her friends and fancied herself a matchmaker, apparently.

And the bloke seated next to Jane herself.... Well, she wasn't putting the moves on him, and it wouldn't have done any good if she had, George surmised almost immediately. He was clearly gay. So she wasn't in it for herself, he was led to conclude. *Interesting*, he thought, *and well done, Jane*.

The evening ended when Annie had won every chip on the table. She was up two hundred pounds for the night. He thought back to all the grief she had given him for taking bets at the Triwizard Tournament and shook his head. *Hypocritical little hustler, she is*

On the drive home that night, he pondered again at the contrast between the Annie of tonight charming, comfortable and confident amongst complete strangers and close friends and the creature she became around her former schoolmates, even now. *What on earth had they done to her?*

After all, hadn't he and Fred teased her every single day they had ever spent together? She had almost universally responded to them by being playful, adventurous, and easy-going, just as she had been tonight. Sure, there had been a few fits of temper when they were growing up, but they'd always blown themselves out in a few minutes, as quickly as they developed. And she had never held any grudges against them.

Why is it so different with the people she grew up with? He ground his teeth as he imagined what they must have been like to elicit such a sea change of temperament *You poke any animal with a sharp stick enough times, and it's bound to bare its teeth, isn't it?* Once again, he found himself tempted to avenge her hurts, somehow, someday.

"You're too quiet tonight. I'm getting more nervous by the mile," she said teasingly, interrupting his train of thought.

"Sorry. I'll make more noise from now on," he answered, then belched for effect.

"Why I spend so much time with a troll is beyond me," she giggled.

"I wonder the same thing myself, some days," he said with a smile. "You deserve far better, you know. Despite the fact you're a hag."

The drive home was short, and they sat in the parked truck for a little while after they arrived at Annie's house. He pulled her closer to him, across the empty expanse of the bench seat, and after kissing her for a few minutes, rested his head on her shoulder. Her curly hair brushed softly against his forehead, and he breathed in the sweet, clean, slightly spicy scent of the skin of her neck.

After a few moments, he lifted his head and continued in a light tone. "So, you were counting tonight, weren't you?"

"Counting what?" she asked innocently.

He didn't buy it for a second. "The cards," he answered slowly, as if it was patently obvious. And it had been. Annie had won all but a dozen hands tonight.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Her voice sounded convincing, but she couldn't hide her tiny, telling smile from him.

George was impressed. He and Fred had tried to teach themselves the same skill but never quite got the full hang of it. It took massive amounts of concentration; that was for sure. Here was one more delightful little discovery about this girl: his amazing Annie.

"Nobody's that lucky, Annie. You should've covered your tracks better and lost a few more hands to make it less obvious," he chuckled.

Annie gazed directly into his eyes with a soft smile. Her hands were laced behind his neck, and her incredible violet eyes stared intently into his own. George felt a stab of emotion to his heart, and the familiar gush of desire poured out from the pit of his stomach.

"I am. I'm the luckiest girl in the world," she insisted, then kissed him.

The Order

Chapter 23 of 80

Concurrent with *Half Blood Prince*. Dumbledore's doing some reconnaissance regarding the newest applicants to the Order. The long-awaited camping trip gets interrupted when a Dark skirmish brings the war to Devon. Stephen makes a serious miscalculation.

Chapter 23: The Order

Summer 1996

Annie gazed dreamily out of one of the windows of the reception room. Just a few more weeks were left to wait until she would be back at the beach once more with George and Fred. She had very high hopes that this trip would be even better than her memories of the last time, which already ranked in her personal all-time top ten.

She was startled out of her fantasy by the door opening unexpectedly. The last patient scheduled for the day was currently seated in the examination chair; she could hear the high-pitched whine of a dental instrument. Her surprise grew as the oddest-looking man she had ever seen walked through the door and directly up to her desk.

He was tall and elderly with a smiling but careworn face. Although, truth be told, she could barely see his face peeking out from behind the vast amounts of hair and beard that surrounded it. He was dressed plainly, yet even his clothes were a bit off, as if he was trying very hard to look dodderly and non-threatening. One thing she knew for sure: he was a stranger to Ottery.

"Good afternoon," she greeted him in a professional manner. "Would you like to make an appointment with Dr. Dan?"

"Good afternoon, Miss Jones. No, thank you.... As a matter of fact, I am here to speak briefly with you, if I may."

Immediately, Annie was wary. How did this stranger know her name? *Oh, right*, she thought, *he probably read the placard on my desk* "Certainly, sir. How can I help you?"

The odd old man removed a small piece of paper from his breast pocket. "Allow me to present my card, Miss Jones," he said as he handed it to her.

A salesman, perhaps? She looked down and read the card in her hand.

Professor Albus P.W.B. Dumbledore

Headmaster

Hogwarts School

She recognized the name instantly, of course, yet the knowledge did nothing but confuse her further. It made no sense for this man to be here, wishing to speak with her. Were Fred and George in trouble perhaps for quitting school? Was this man really even who he said he was? There were too many unknowns, so she decided to play dumb.

"I'm afraid I don't understand." Annie met the old man's gaze with a questioning face.

"Perhaps things would become clearer if you read the reverse?" he offered. As she turned the card over, he continued, "I'd like to speak with you about a young man of our mutual acquaintance: George Weasley."

She read the back side of the card.

It's okay to talk George

It did indeed look like George's handwriting, but you didn't need to be a wizard to fake a signature. Furthermore, George had never given her a single word of warning, nothing that would have prepared her for this visit. Unconvinced, she kept up with the possum routine.

Pursing her lips and shaking her head, she spoke once more. "I'm sorry, Mr. Dumbledore. It appears there's been a misunderstanding. I don't know anyone named George Weasley."

"Hmm. I was under the impression you were correspondents, at the very least." He gave her a long stare.

Hadn't George told her their letters to each other had been tampered with at Hogwarts? Far from reassuring her, if that indeed was the old codger's intent, the last comment further fueled her anxiety.

Annie shook her head again. "Would you like to use the phone index? Perhaps you'll find the person you're looking for there?" she offered, leaning down to open the desk drawer in which it rested. She hoped she sounded convincingly casual.

"No, thank you. I've taken up enough of your time already. I believe I'll just nip 'round the corner for a bit of tea and ponder what avenue to pursue next. Goodbye, Miss Jones. Lovely to meet you," the fellow said in a pleasant, unruffled tone.

"Again, sorry I couldn't be of more help, sir."

"Not at all, Miss Jones. You have been *most* helpful," he assured her. And with that, the old man smiled and left.

Annie crept up to the window and peeked through the blinds to confirm he was heading down the street. Then she dialed her cell phone. To her surprise, George picked up after only the second ring. She had fully expected to leave a message for him to call her as soon as possible.

"Where are you?" she demanded in confusion.

"I had a feeling you'd be calling," he replied, avoiding her question.

"So, you know..."

"About Dumbledore, yeah. Didn't you read the card?"

"Forgery isn't so hard. I've done it myself numerous times for the sake of convenience. I just wanted to make sure..."

"Your paranoia is endearing as is your penchant for criminal behavior. All part of the lovely little package of neuroses, I suppose."

"Are you in trouble?" she asked, dreading the answer.

"For once, no." He chuckled. "I'll come over tonight and find out how it goes. About eleven?"

"Okay, see you," she said, ending the call.

Eleven.... After curfew. Once again, she'd be sneaking out tonight.

She smiled wryly as she folded the phone closed. George had been so thrilled when she had given him his own phone last month and delighted in using it to call her several times daily. Usually, though, he kept it turned off when he was in the magical atmosphere of Diagon Alley so as not to fry its circuits. Since he had actually picked up the phone when it rang, he must be somewhere else.

It was nearly time for the office to close. She hurried the last patient out the door and said goodbye to Dr. Dan. Then she headed straight for the little café around the corner. *Maybe he would still be there?*

Dumbledore was indeed seated in the nearly empty café. He smiled at her as she rounded the corner, as if he was expecting her to meet him. He rose politely as she walked inside. "Miss Jones! How delightful! Won't you join me?"

Mrs. Gordon, the owner, looked at Annie curiously.

The curse of a small town, Annie thought. *Nothing could remain private or unremarked-upon for long.*

"I'm afraid I can't stay, Mr. Dumbledore. But I thought about your question, and I think I know someone who can help you find what you're looking for." She wrote her address on a slip of paper and a time later that day: five p.m. As she handed it to him, she prayed he'd be discreet in front of one of the town's biggest gossips.

"Thank you. That is very kind. I'm so lucky to have met you just now at Dr. Dan's." He gave her the slightest of understanding winks.

"Good luck, then, sir," she added, then left the café. She could feel the Gordon woman's eyes on her back, almost feel the silly woman's finger itching to dial a phone.

It was three-thirty in the afternoon. She decided she had plenty of time to run her errand and get home to prepare for an interrogation. She stopped at the market and was home within an hour.

She gathered her groceries from beside her on the truck seat and carried them inside. It wasn't until she had kicked off her shoes and set the rustling bags down on the counter that she heard Gran's voice coming from the front room. It almost sounded as if she was having a conversation with someone.

"Gran?" she called out, walking down the hall toward the front room.

"There you are, Angharad," she said as Annie paused at the end of the hallway, dumbfounded by the scene. "Your friend, Mr. Dumbledore, has been waiting for you."

She looked at him with consternation. "You're early, sir."

"A hazard of being punctual, my dear Miss Jones," he replied. "In the meantime, I've had a delightful chat with your grandmother about her lovely delphiniums. Please, do not let me interrupt your marketing."

Annie hustled back to the kitchen, cramming the food into the fridge or pantry. She didn't feel right leaving Gran alone with him any longer than absolutely necessary, so she rushed about. She returned to the front room with a tray of tea, knowing Gran would have sent her back for it anyway. After teacups were filled, distributed, and everyone resettled, Dumbledore began to speak.

"As you know, Miss Jones, I wish to speak with you about our friend, George Weasley. Young George has requested I consider him for a position within my organization."

Annie remained silent. She had a strong suspicion she knew a little about the organization he was referring to, for George and Fred both had been talking lately about joining some secret wizard's group which they refused to name. But more importantly, was she *supposed* to know?

Meredith felt no such reticence and carried on with their friendly conversation from before. "Isn't that nice, dear? May I ask, Mr. Dumbledore, what sort of organization you represent? Would I be familiar?"

Dumbledore looked directly at Annie. "An excellent question," he remarked, then turned back to her Gran. "My organization prefers to remain anonymous to the general public; therefore, you are unlikely to recognize the name. But rest assured, we strive to promote the very highest ideals of peace and justice."

"Lofty ideals, indeed!" Gran exclaimed. "How lovely to learn that George wishes to help you further them."

"Indeed, indeed, I am pleased as well. May I ask you now, if you would be so kind, to share with me your impressions regarding young George? In particular, have you ever noticed anything... out of the ordinary about him?"

"Well, Mr. Dumbledore, I have only known George for a few weeks myself. My Angharad, on the other hand, has known him a bit longer, I think. How long would you say, dear?"

"A while, yes. A few years...." *Best not to be completely honest about that one just yet* she reckoned. Annie smiled, amused that Gran was doing all the talking during what was supposed to be her interrogation.

Meredith returned her smile, then turned back to Dumbledore. "In the brief amount of time I have spent with George, I have found him to be polite and respectful with a genuinely friendly manner."

Dumbledore's eyebrows lifted in curious surprise at Meredith's choice of words. Meanwhile Annie struggled to keep a straight face.

Her Gran continued, "So, yes, I must confess I find him quite out of the ordinary, compared to most young people his age. Refreshingly so. But of course, Angharad knows him far better than I. Would you agree with me, dear?"

Annie smiled at her Gran. "I see what you mean, Gran. But I would have to say to Mr. Dumbledore, that while George has many fine qualities of character that set him apart, he has always represented himself as a completely normal fellow and nothing more special." Annie looked pointedly at the old man to see if he understood her meaning: George was upholding the secrecy laws, at least with everyone other than herself.

Meredith was a bit confused by what in her opinion was a less than stellar recommendation, but said nothing. She filled the lull in the conversation by asking if Dumbledore had any other specific questions for them.

"No, no, my dear ladies. You have been most helpful, and I find your insight quite illuminating. I shall be on my way very soon. But before I take my leave, may I have a moment with you, Miss Jones, in private. That is, if you don't mind, Mrs. Jones?"

"Of course. I'll just take these things back to the kitchen," Meredith said, gathering up the tea service. "It was very nice to have met you, Mr. Dumbledore. I hope you'll find George to be a successful addition to your organization."

"Thank you again, Mrs. Jones. Miss Jones, shall we?"

"Please call me Annie, Mr. Dumbledore," she said as they stood alone together just inside the front door.

"Thank you, Annie, I will. May I say that I am rather impressed by your discretion? It will serve you and those you care about very well in the future. In fact, I quite rely upon it. Do you understand my point?" he asked, looking intently at her over the rims of his spectacles.

"I think so, sir, yes." She had become expert at keeping secrets over her lifetime, after all.

Dumbledore smiled. "I perhaps flatter myself that I feel I know the members of the Weasley family quite well. Their loyalty and dedication to what is right should be a shining example for us all. They shoulder many risks... and may suffer sacrifices... for remaining true to their ideals.

"George has been a student of mine for many years, as I suspect you well know. My estimation of him has grown with time and continues to do so. Not only has he shown prodigious talent that is accompanied by the high ethical standards of the Weasley family, he has also shown himself to be an excellent judge of character." He then smiled warmly at Annie.

"George is an easy person to love," she responded. She was startled by her own declaration; she had meant to say "like" rather than "love," but it was true all the same.

"I'm confident he feels the same about you, my dear, and I am happy for you both. Nothing is more vital to our cause than love, I promise you. And now, I must be off. I have another pressing engagement, you see." Dumbledore patted her shoulder, then proceeded to walk quickly down the road away from town toward the Burrow.

*

Annie awoke as the sun broke over the horizon and shone into the back of her tent. Looking out the open flaps of her tent, she could see it promised to be a glorious day gorgeous blue sky, puffy scattered clouds, a light sea breeze. She stretched and hazarded a glance at the tent next door.

She could see just a little way inside; the fronts of their two tents had been pitched perpendicular to each other. Two identical red-haired heads lay perfectly still on pillows near the entrance, four muscular arms splayed in all directions.

She propped her head up and watched them sleep for a few minutes. Her heart swelled with contentment to be back on the beach with her best friends, just like it had been so long ago, only even better now.

She sat up and quietly closed her front tent flaps for privacy. She dressed slowly as she knelt in the small space, tying the knots on her bikini tightly and carefully. She slipped on her usual long board shorts the better to keep the tattoo, as well as the runner's thighs she regarded as her worst feature, hidden. Though the day promised to be warm, it was still a bit chilly in the breeze, so she donned a long-sleeved shirt as well.

When she finished, she rolled up the tent flaps, tying them securely open. She glanced once more toward the boys' tent and was startled to see George awake with his head propped up, gazing at her with a strange smile.

"What?" she whispered testily, preparing herself for some crack about the state of her hair.

"Those were some interesting shadows," he whispered back.

So much for privacy. At least Fred is still asleep she thought gratefully. She felt a raging blush flare on her neck and face. "Pervert," she muttered with an embarrassed smile. "I thought you were sleeping."

"Trust me, it was worse in my dreams," he teased her.

He crawled slowly out of his tent, stood, and stretched his long, lean body. A pair of swim shorts clung to his waist; he wore nothing else. Annie felt like a bit of a pervert herself as she stared at George bending and flexing the muscles of his back and shoulders. She tore her eyes away just as he caught her watching, turning away with another bashful smile. She busied herself digging through the food box for some breakfast.

They sat side by side at the picnic table. George consumed four scones in the time it took her to eat just one. But she was in no hurry today and planned to savor every minute of their short holiday. It had been far too long since the last time.

As she slowly chewed, she reviewed the memory of last night at the pub. It had been atypical in that Fred hadn't spent all his time chatting up girls at the bar. For once, he had given his attention to her and George as they reminisced about all the prior holidays they had taken together. Other than the fact that George had been holding her hand under the table, it had felt just like old times. It had been a wonderful start for the weekend.

It had been so long now since she had enjoyed the sun and sand. The mere thought of it last summer would have driven her into a depression. But today, with George by her side and Fred set to join them by late morning, nothing promised to feel more wonderful.

The day was warming quickly, so they snagged a spot on the beach with an umbrella. George set to laying out the blankets for her underneath it.

"Put mine in the sun for now," she requested as she pulled off her shirt. She dug through the bag for sunscreen, tossing it onto a corner for later.

The warmth of the morning sun felt tantalizingly luxurious on her skin. *What the hell*, she thought, *as long as I'm careful not to turn my back to him, he'll never notice* She quietly slipped her shorts off and sat carefully on the blanket, making sure her back faced away from him and the umbrella, preparing to lie down on her back.

George coughed loudly on purpose.

She turned to face him, thinking: *What now?* Had he caught a glimpse of the tattoo already? Her stomach quailed at the prospect.

"Yes?" she asked, slightly nervous.

"Is that really appropriate?"

"What are you talking about?" she asked, beginning to panic a little.

"Your... ah... ensemble, for lack of a better word."

"What's wrong with it?"

Annie quickly checked to make sure nothing was inadvertently exposed. She found everything in its proper place, to her immense relief. He'd just been teasing her, she reckoned. She lay back on the towel, propping her upper body up on her elbows and looked out at the ocean. Her skin delighted in the warm sun shining on it.

"Would you mind putting on some clothing? You're indecent as you are," he scolded her.

Now even more confident that he had to be teasing her, she didn't bother to look back at him. She decided to play along instead. "Excuse me? Who do you think you are? I don't know what sort of repressed patriarchal society you grew up in, but that sort of macho attitude doesn't fly with a liberated girl like me," she shot back.

He tossed her shirt and shorts at her in response, and they landed on her belly.

"Thanks, dork," she said sarcastically. She folded them both together, then tucked them under her head for a pillow. She lay back, closed her eyes and arranged her arms and legs flat to most effectively soak up the sun.

"You were supposed to *wear* those," he said sternly a few moments later.

His voice sounded like it was coming directly above her, but the sun's bright glare made it impossible to open her eyes and look. Suddenly, she found herself being lifted up by her arms and led across the sand to the water.

"Maybe if you're cold and wet, you'll want to cover yourself up," he chided, wearing the barest of smiles.

She laughed at his persistence and followed him into the water, careful to face him at all times. "You know, most normal boys enjoy looking at girls in swim suits at the beach," she teased.

"Which is precisely why I'm begging you to get dressed," he said, dragging her through the waves.

"That repulsive, am I? Embarrassed to be seen with me?" she laughed.

"Fishing for compliments, are we? Fine."

He pulled her down into the cold water up to her neck. She gasped at the shock of it.

"You look utterly... indecently... cruelly..." He paused, searching for a word to use here because the one he had in mind sounded ridiculous, even if it was perfectly accurate. He gave up after a couple of seconds and said it anyway. "Ravishing, at the moment."

"Really?" she asked. Annie looked at George with a surprised yet pleased smile. Her nose wrinkled slightly as she squinted to see him clearly. She still wasn't convinced he was remotely serious.

"Like you don't know it," he said with a roll of his eyes. They were floating in shallow water, letting the gentle waves push them along.

"I am glad to hear you think so," she said as she swam closer to him.

They had drifted to a point where George was chest-deep as he rested his knees on the sandy sea bed. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and the rest of her body followed, slowly moving through the water until it came to rest against him. He held her there with his hands pressing unknowingly on the tattoo on the small of her back as she kissed him.

Even with the warmth of his body and their kiss, she soon began to shiver in the chilly water. "Okay, I give in. I'm freezing. I'll put the shorts back on," she promised as she stood up and slowly walked backwards, holding his hands, pulling him along with her.

"Let's not be too hasty. It's possible I was overreacting before," he argued.

Later that day, Fred and Annie sat at an outdoor table, looking out across the street over the sand to the ocean. The sun had just dipped below the horizon. Annie's curly hair tossed in the light breeze, and her lightweight blouse fluttered as well.

"You look almost girlish tonight. Not your typical tomboy uniform of denim and t-shirt. What gives? Run out of clean laundry?" Fred teased her.

Annie shrugged with a smile. "Perhaps I'm branching out? Expanding my horizons?" She leaned back in the chair and crossed both her arms and legs.

Fred chuckled. "Are those heels on your shoes?" he asked as he tapped them gently with his foot.

"I think they make my legs look nice," she said defensively.

"They do," he agreed. "It's even more surprising to see those legs peeking out from under a skirt. You know, my dear, I'm beginning to think you might be female after all."

"I will assume you mean that as a compliment," she laughed.

"You're looking well. The past two years have been good to you," he offered.

Annie grimaced. "That's ironic. I would have expected to look a bit worse for wear. I feel quite battered and bruised by them, actually."

"Shit, Annie... I'm such a prat! I forgot about your Gran. How is she?"

Annie paused, considering what to say. "Honestly, she's doing well to just hold her own. The infection last fall really took a toll. I'm starting to realize she might never be her old self again. But she's keen and still putters around the house on her own. She was looking forward to having a friend stay with her while I'm gone. I think she's sick of me hovering," she giggled.

Fred wanted to change the subject; not that he didn't care, but rather preferred to lighten the mood. "So, you and George.... How did this calamity happen?"

She shrugged her shoulders again. Her face lit up in a blissful smile she was unable to suppress. George had just returned with an armful of bottles and a basket of chips, and he sat down next to Annie, across from himself. Fred could tell that George had just slid his hand into Annie's under the table and shook his head slowly in mock disapproval of it all.

"Granted, it was bound to happen at some point: you falling for one of us. You couldn't be expected to withstand the sheer tonnage of charm and good looks surrounding you," he teased, indicating his brother and himself with a wave of his finger. "No woman can resist the onslaught forever. But why George? Out of the two of us, I mean?" he prodded playfully.

"Hmm. I guess you could say you're a bit too... Fred-y... for my taste. Overpoweringly so. Whereas, George is more subtly... George-ish. Not quite as flamboyantly git-like."

"I see. I'm too masculine, too suave. You're intimidated by my superior gorgeousness, as well."

"Exactly," she agreed sarcastically with a roll of her eyes.

"Yeah, well. You're short. Of course, it goes without saying you're none too bright, either," he said, waving his hand dismissively toward George in explanation.

She kicked him though not very hard with her foot under the table, smirking.

"And that temper of yours is obnoxious. Can't you control her, George?" Fred complained.

"I wouldn't dream of preventing her from injuring you, Fred. Get 'im, Annie!" he encouraged her. "Ow!" he exclaimed a moment later as she punched him in the arm.

"You two deserve each other. I'm going to go find more pleasant companions perhaps some sharks might suit," she threatened, pushing her chair back.

"See you, then," said Fred, unimpressed by her little snit. He knew her well enough to know when she was well and truly pissed, and this wasn't one of those occasions.

But to Fred's chagrin, George grabbed her hand. "Stay! We'll be nice, I promise," he pleaded, smiling charmingly.

Annie paused, looking skeptical.

"George, you idiot! She was bluffing, and you ruined your advantage! You're pathetic," Fred chastised him.

"You may come with me, as long as you behave," she said to George, tugging him up off the seat. *You* can sit here and rot, for all I care," she scolded Fred.

Annie led George over to an empty pool table. She had just finished distributing all the balls on the table when Fred rejoined them.

"Flip you for it," she offered, digging through her pocket for a coin.

"Heads," called Fred.

"How about ladies first, git?" George scolded his brother.

"Aren't you sweet," teased Annie, patting a smugly smirking George gently on the cheek.

Fred pretended to retch.

Annie leaned onto the table and broke the setup. Two red balls ducked noisily into pockets, and the cue ball rolled lazily back toward the middle of the table.

"Blue," she called out and easily knocked it in.

She continued on quite a tear for several minutes before the boys got bored and started interfering. At first, it was subtle; she couldn't be entirely sure it wasn't her own mistake. They covered their tracks by taking turns affecting each other as well: equal opportunity cheating.

But before much longer, it started getting silly. Balls began stopping dead in their tracks on the table and changing direction arbitrarily. It was a good thing the pub's televisions were showing a popular football match and the rest of the pub patrons were completely absorbed by the action on the screens. Complete defiance of the laws of physics generally would have caused any casual onlookers some level of consternation, at least.

Finally, it was Annie's turn again. As she walked around the table, she looked up to see twin smirks standing about four feet apart, opposite hands resting on cues, the other hands tucked into their pockets. They looked like impish book ends, watching her.

"Is there any further point to this?" she asked.

The smirks broadened into full grins in response.

"I thought as much."

Might as well have some fun with this, she thought. She strolled to a spot at George's end of the table, giving him a profile view. She bent over the table, balancing on her toes. Surreptitiously, she glanced at George. Confident she had his attention, she carefully aimed the cue, slowly pumped it a few times, then forcefully blasted a shot.

Every ball on the table pocketed itself instantly, regardless of its proximity to the path of the cue ball.

"That was one for the record books, Annie," Fred teased, laughing as he put away the cue he had been holding.

George remained in place, gazing appreciatively at Annie still draped over the table, smiling up at him. "Well played," he agreed.

It wasn't all that late, but they decided to head back to the camp anyway. George lit a small fire and they sat around it, just like every other time they had camped there. Only this time, Annie was nestled against him, and his arm was around her. She and Fred were laughing and teasing each other about something he hadn't been paying close attention.

As he watched the warm light of the flickering fire illuminate her smiling face, he chastised himself once again for not recognizing his feelings for what they were two years ago. Not that it would've helped the intervening time pass any faster. In fact, the opposite was more likely to be true.

Doesn't matter now, he supposed. They were together, at last. She was his to hold, to talk with, to kiss almost whenever he wanted. And who knew... maybe someday she would be Anharad. J....

Something smacked against the back of his head, disrupting his thoughts. At the same time, there was a loud screech. A moment later, a tiny owl was hopping and flapping on the ground in front of him with a small message on its leg.

"What the hell is Pig doing here?" cried Fred.

George had finally caught the frantic thing and was in the process of removing the message. Pigwidgeon flew off again as he unrolled the scrap of parchment.

Fawcett's place attacked & burning. Need help. Come at once Dad.

George handed the note to Fred, who was now kneeling next to him. "Annie, we've got to go. Something urgent's come up.... We'll be back as soon as we can. You'll be all right here on your own for a bit, won't you?"

Annie nodded, her brow furrowed with concern. "Of course. Be careful!" she called out after them as the twin brothers stood, then disappeared into the darkness.

Annie didn't see the boys again until nearly dawn. She was lightly dozing in her tent when she heard the familiar hushed popping sound they made when arriving by Apparition. In the dim light, she could see they were both grimy and sweaty.

"What happened?" she asked softly, sitting up.

Fred yanked off his shirt, crawled into their tent and flopped himself noisily onto his bedroll without speaking. George, on the other hand, crept into Annie's tent and lay down on his back next to her on the floor.

"There was a fire... at our neighbor's house," he answered quietly.

A wizard neighbor? A magical fire? Confused, Annie scooted closer to him, hesitantly resting her hand on his chest. "Is everyone all right?"

George's brow furrowed. "The Fawcetts escaped any harm, and the rest of us were able to avoid anything worse than a few minor burns. The fire was so big it attracted the Muggle fire brigade, though. One of them was injured, I think, but I'm not sure. It was a pretty chaotic scene." He closed his eyes.

"Here, take this," she said, offering him her pillow.

"It'll get all sooty and smelly," he argued weakly.

"It'll wash, don't worry," she said, lifting his head with one hand and pushing the pillow underneath him with the other.

"Thanks," he whispered, sounding nearly asleep.

She started to gingerly get up, intending to leave him in peace, but his arm tightened around her, holding her close. She lightly rested her head against his shoulder instead and soon drifted off to sleep as well.

When they finally woke up later that day, it was nearly noon. As they sat at the picnic table eating breakfast, Fred broke the silence.

"We should probably get back home," he suggested.

To Annie's disappointment, George nodded in agreement. "Dad'll probably offer our help to clean up, maybe even rebuild Fawcett's place," he said.

"So much for a holiday..." Fred sighed.

"You should stay, Annie. You deserve a vacation," George suggested.

"What's the point of staying here without you lot?" she asked with a shrug. "Finish these muffins, and I'll start loading the truck."

Two days later, Annie was seated at the reception desk at work when she was startled to see Stephen Drake walk through the door. Even more surprising was the expression on his face. He looked stunned, utterly lost almost zombie-like.

"Stephen, what's wrong?" she asked. Regardless of all the baggage their friendship had collected over the years, she couldn't help but feel pity for any fellow human being who looked as miserable as he did at the moment.

"Your Gran said you were here. Do you have a while to talk?" he asked her, cryptically.

She glanced at the day's schedule. "I can probably take an early lunch. You spoke to Gran today?"

He nodded. "She told me to tell you that she was meeting... I forget the name... Fibberly, was it?"

"Mrs. Finnerty, our neighbor," she replied.

"That's it. Meeting her for lunch today. She forgot to tell you this morning."

Annie knew there wasn't a scrap of truth about that plan. She assumed Gran had taken note of the haunted look in Stephen's eyes, just as she was doing now, and cleared

the way for Annie to be of some help to her one-time friend.

"All right. How about I meet you at old lady Gordon's around the corner in about ten minutes?" she offered.

He nodded mutely but otherwise stood still.

She could hear Dr. Dan wrapping up with his current patient, saying his goodbyes, uselessly urging him to floss. She wanted Stephen out of the foyer before they left the exam room, so she stood and led him out the door.

"I'll be there in ten minutes," she reminded him.

It was almost fifteen minutes later when she rushed into the tiny tea shop. Stephen was there, staring out into space. He had ordered sandwiches and tea which now sat before him on the table, untouched.

She took the seat facing him. "Stephen, what's wrong?" she asked once again.

"Geoff," he said flatly, working to bring her face into focus. "Geoff is dead."

Annie gasped, and her hands flew to her mouth. Geoff Stephen's faithful sidekick for all these years was dead? How could that be? They were only eighteen! Eighteen was too young to die!

"What happened?" she whispered.

"There was a fire... a few days ago now, I suppose. What day is it?" he asked her, suddenly distracted by the thought.

"Tuesday," she answered flatly. Her stomach was resting on the floor, fearing the odds against such a coincidence as two separate fires on the same day.

"Tuesday? Really? Feels like longer...."

"Tell me about the fire, Stephen," she said.

Stephen shook his head slowly, but continued his story. "Worst mess I've ever seen. I never even knew there was a house back there.... Maybe it was abandoned or something. Went up like fucking tinder, it did."

"A complete loss?" she asked, afraid she already knew the answer. George's neighbors' place had burned to the ground.

"I don't see how it couldn't be. We couldn't get close enough with the trucks to fight it. We were just trying to keep it from spreading into the woods.... There were a bunch of people already there shouting at each other. Didn't sound like they were speakin' English, though. Neighbors, I suppose. Or maybe gypsies. Damn fools wouldn't go away no matter how much we yelled at them to leave it to the professionals."

Annie bit her lip. She had a feeling she knew exactly who the fools were he was referring to.

"Geoff was standing there, screaming at one bloke to get out of the house. At least, that's what I thought I saw... from where I was. The guy was standing in the doorway... actually *in the fire*; that's what it looked like. I figured he was toast... a lost cause, for sure... and I yelled at Geoff to give it up, just back away.

"And then, the bastard turned to Geoff. Pointed at him. And I saw this... flash.... It was *green*, I fuckin' swear. Hurt my eyes, it was so bright. Even against the fire.

"The next thing I knew, Geoff was on the ground, and the burning man was gone. Went up in smoke, I suppose. I ran to Geoff, of course. But he was already gone when I got to him. He was dead. Lying there with his eyes open, mouth open, like he died of surprise.

Annie patted his hand that was resting on the table. "I'm so sorry, Stephen."

"But I still can't figure it out.... What happened to Geoff? Why did he just collapse like that?" Stephen's eyes searched hers, as if he thought he might find the answers there.

"His poor parents. They must be devastated," she said, tears welling up in her eyes at the thought.

"There's going to be an autopsy. They think he must've had a heart attack or something. But that's bullshit. What eighteen-year-old has a heart attack?" Stephen kept talking like he hadn't heard her. Like he was talking out loud to himself rather than having a conversation.

"What the hell happened? It wasn't the fire; I just know it. Something killed him. Someone... maybe the burning man had a gun?" Stephen continued to muse aloud.

Annie had an inkling she understood the situation a bit more clearly than Stephen did. George had told her a few things lately, things that hinted the bad wizards were up to something. And to think that George and Fred had been there, as well as their family, amidst all the danger! Tears spilled over onto her cheeks.

"They'll find a bullet wound, if that's the case," Annie argued weakly, knowing full well the coroner would find no logical reason for Geoff's death. He would probably make something up just to save himself the embarrassment of having an inexplicably dead teenager on his hands.

"The funeral is Thursday. I thought you'd want to know," he said.

"Thank you for telling me. I'll make some arrangement with Dr. Dan... I'll be there, if I can," she assured him.

Stephen nodded. Absentmindedly, he took a bite of the sandwich in front of him.

That Thursday afternoon, nearly the entire town turned out to bury the young hero firefighter cut down in his prime. Annie had come alone and found herself standing with Stephen and his mother and brother her Gran was not up to attending herself. She even let Stephen hold her hand strictly for moral support during the service.

Afterward, he invited her to come to the wake at the firehouse. She didn't want to go, but the haunted look still on Stephen's face made her feel too guilty to say no.

She quickly came to regret agreeing to come to the wake. Stephen wasn't the only one in the brigade that was intent on getting fall-down drunk, but he was the one who she was stuck next to, seeing as he wouldn't let go of her hand.

"Stephen, I need to go now," she argued after about an hour. "I need to check on Gran."

Stephen nodded, his eyes half dead with whiskey already. "I'll drive you home," he offered.

"Not likely," she muttered under her breath. "I can get there just fine on my own. You stay here with your mates," she urged, standing up.

He still hadn't let go of her hand. "I'll walk you to your truck, at least," he said, slurring the words slightly.

She didn't want to embarrass him in front of his coworkers by jerking her hand away or otherwise making a scene. "Fine," she agreed. If it came down to making a scene, at least outside might be slightly more private and therefore less embarrassing, she reckoned.

They stood together at her truck. Annie turned to Stephen, who was looking more and more depressed. Out of pity, she moved to loosely embrace him. "I'm so sorry, Stephen. I know Geoff was a good mate to you," she whispered, patting him on the back.

She felt Stephen nod, then rest his head on her shoulder. He was hugging her back, a bit too tightly for comfort, but Annie didn't think much of *it*. *Poor chap is really hurting*, she figured.

And then she felt his lips against her neck.

This fucking git is trying to kiss me at his best friend's wake! She couldn't believe it. She immediately pulled back from him, tried to push herself away, but his weight had pinned her against the truck.

"Get off me!" she hissed, shoving his shoulders away as forcefully as she could.

He responded by kissing her neck harder, like he was trying to leave a mark.

"I will kick you in the balls if you don't get off me now!" she shouted while gripping his face with her hand and pushing him away.

That got his attention. For as drunk as he was, he nimbly jumped back, using his hands to protect his groin.

"You are the biggest prick I have ever met, Stephen Drake! Get out of my sight!" she said angrily, yanking open the door to her truck.

"Wait! Annie, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to make you angry!" he cried, scrambling in front of the truck.

"I will run your drunken, worthless arse over if you don't get out of my way," she shouted, revving the engine.

Stephen jumped to the curb as she floored the gas pedal, tires smoking and squealing as she tore down the street toward home.

Rules

Chapter 24 of 80

Christmas is coming. Fred stirs the pot. George and Annie exchange prezzies.

Chapter 24: Rules

Winter 1996

"I think I'll take the first one after all, dear," the quavering old voice said.

"Certainly, Mrs. Monroe. Let me get that for you right away," Annie answered in her friendliest clerk voice as she turned to scoot the ladder as far as it would go along its tracks to the right.

Annie had taken the part-time job at the paper store as a favor to her friend Jane's mother, who had opened the little shop as a sort of hobby two years ago. Mrs. Moruki did a bustling little business in stationery and art supplies out of the tiny storefront in downtown Honiton and had claimed to be in desperate need of holiday help. Annie was only too happy to help out her friend's mother, who had been such a gracious host to her for so many years, as well as collect a few more paychecks to help cover her extra holiday expenses this year.

Annie climbed up the little stepladder, grateful it was attached to the wall and therefore far less wobbly than the one at home. Of course the desk set Mrs. Monroe wanted to buy would be on the highest, least accessible shelf. *This is going to take some acrobatic maneuvering*, she figured as she rose up on her toes, stretching her fingers, leaning over the side of the ladder as far as she dared. *One more inch....*

Just then, the bell chime on the door rang.

Damn! Another customer and only five minutes before closing time she thought ruefully. Annie's hopes to dash out right at six p.m. were now looking dim. Still straining to reach the box, Annie called out to her co-worker in the back storeroom. "Natalie, could you come out to the front and help the new customer?" she asked without taking her eyes off the package that was her goal.

At the periphery of Annie's vision, she saw Natalie's head pop out from behind the curtain, then smile broadly.

"I think they're here to see you, Annie," Natalie chuckled inscrutably.

Rather than waste effort pondering the mysterious comment, Annie held her breath and stretched once more, willing the box to come to her.

In the next instant, the box in question did indeed begin to slide of its own accord off the shelf and into her outstretched fingers. Annie struggled to contain her surprise as well as maintain her grip on the levitating box in order to make it appear like she was in control of what was happening. It floated slowly off the shelf, made a right turn, and headed toward the top of the ladder.

"Hi, Annie! Hi, Natalie!" came two very familiar voices from behind her. Even though they spoke in unison, she could hear how each voice was slightly more enthusiastic about a different name.

They were followed by a girlish giggle and, "Hello," in return.

Suddenly, everything made perfect sense. "I've got the box right here, Mrs. Monroe," Annie announced, far more for the shop's newest visitors' benefit than her customer's. With the box now firmly tucked under her arm and obeying the law of gravity once more, she made her way back down the ladder, unable to completely smother an amused smile.

As Annie hopped off the ladder and turned to face the store, she was unsurprised to see Fred and George grinning at her. Old Mrs. Monroe was absentmindedly humming along to the Christmas carol playing on the store's little radio; it was unclear if she had even noticed the newcomers' arrival. Annie rang up her purchase and sent her along

her merry way, turning over the "CLOSED" sign as she shut the door and called out, "Happy Christmas!" to the little old lady's backside.

"You can finish the closing up on your own, can't you, Annie? I'll just keep Natalie company outside while she waits for her ride," said Fred, smiling at her coworker, leaning across the counter toward her.

"Actually, Natalie, I need to you stock up the bags for tomorrow, if you don't mind, while I close out the drawer," she countered.

Annie felt sorry for her as Natalie's hopeful and smiling face fell, but there was no way she was leaving that poor girl alone to fend off Fred. She was far too young and far too attractive for her own good. "Then we'll all wait with you," she promised with a sympathetic smile.

Once Natalie stepped behind the stockroom curtain, Annie returned Fred's unamused smirk with one of her own.

Annie and Natalie worked quickly to finish the day's work, both of them eager to get on with the evening. As a result, Natalie was rewarded with nearly ten minutes worth of flirting from Fred at his most charming properly supervised by Annie, of course while they waited for her older brother to collect her. As Natalie was driven away, fingers waving shyly and somewhat reluctantly goodbye, Annie turned to scold her friend.

"Fred! She's only fifteen, remember?"

"Which means she'll be sixteen soon, if my math is correct. I wonder when's the happy day? D'you know?" he asked eagerly.

"I wouldn't tell you if I did!"

Annie shook her head, laughing as the three of them walked down the street to the nearby pub. George had taken her hand and stuffed it into his jacket pocket to keep warm. It was a lovely evening: flurries of snow lightly falling but melting instantly beautiful and festive but without the lingering mess of accumulation.

"She's an impressionable young girl, full of romantic idealism. The last thing she needs is a broken heart, Casanova," she teased.

Fred rolled his eyes and snorted. "I forgot I was with the Puritanical League tonight. What fun," he said as he opened the door of the pub, holding it for them as they walked in, then grabbed a table.

"That's exaggerating things a bit," she giggled as George helped her out of her coat. It was true that Fred was far more focused on variety, rather than actual depth of feeling, than she and George were, but that hardly meant they qualified as saints.

"I'm sick to death of all this holiday music. Go find something good, will you?" she begged as she tossed several coins across the table at Fred.

Fred collected the change as he rose to patronize the jukebox, fishing out a few coins from his own pocket as well. Annie turned to George for a quick kiss as they sat alone for a few moments, hidden from general view in the booth.

"That was hardly puritanical, now, was it?" George chuckled as the kiss lasted a good bit longer than Annie had originally intended.

She giggled in agreement. Then she quickly rang her Gran, checking in on her and letting her know where she was.

"How is she?" asked George with polite concern.

"Fine. Dinner will be ready when we get there. You're staying for a while tonight, yes? For presents?" she asked. She was terribly excited to see his reaction to the gifts she had bought him this year. They had never exchanged anything much more than gag gifts at birthdays in the past, so she was quite a bit nervous as well.

George smiled and nodded. "I'll stay until she kicks me out," he laughed, pulling her close for another kiss. "Or longer..." he whispered tantalizingly in her ear before nibbling on it.

"Bloody hypocrites! You think you're the only ones who deserve any fun?" whined Fred as he returned to the table with their pints, interrupting another kiss.

"Shut up, Fred," Annie and George said in unison, separating themselves to a more respectable, yet still cozy distance.

"Shut up, Fred," he mimicked them in a grating falsetto voice.

"Whine about it all you want. Fact is, until Natalie turns sixteen, she's off limits to the likes of you. She's what you call *jailbait*, mate," Annie said with a laugh.

Fred snorted again. "What do you think *you* are, Little Miss Muggle?" he argued.

Annie sat up ramrod straight. "What are you talking about? We're eighteen."

Fred looked pointedly at his brother. "George knows what I mean," he said cryptically.

"What does he mean, I'm jailbait?" she demanded, turning to George.

George shook his head. "He's exaggerating, as usual."

"Exaggerating!?! So there's some truth to it? What am I doing wrong now?" Annie whined, exasperated.

"*You're* not doing anything wrong. *Romeo* here is," explained Fred, smiling smugly, apparently pleased by her reaction.

"One of you had better start making sense," Annie threatened slowly, feeling her temper starting to flare.

"You're a Muggle. He's not. That's a bit of a no-no where we come from," explained Fred when George refused to participate in the conversation, crossing his arms in front of his chest and glowering at him instead.

"That's not true and you know it. Stop trying to scare her. There's no law against our kind mixing with Muggles," said George dismissively.

"There is when they know as much about us as she knows," Fred argued.

"What the bloody hell are you on about?" Annie asked, truly agitated now.

"What Fred is referring to and blowing completely out of proportion, I might add are the secrecy laws, which you already know all about."

"Still not following. I've known about you lot for ages, and nothing's happened yet. I mean, you don't have the Trace anymore, right? Nobody keeps track of you like that now."

"Exactly my point. There's nothing to worry about," agreed George.

Fred snorted a third time, and George bristled at the sound.

"You really ought to get that looked at, you know," warned George with a glare at his brother.

Fred ignored the latter comment and continued, "Like you can guarantee that. You're not exactly hiding out here, are you? Why not be honest with her? She deserves to know the whole truth."

"That's true, George," Annie said worriedly. "We're out in public right now, in fact. What could happen if someone saw you and me together?"

"Nothing! Like I said before, there's no law against you and I being together!" George said vehemently.

"Maybe not, but there *is* a law against doing a certain something in front of *any* of them, present company technically included," Fred argued.

Annie's eyes grew wide, and her hand flew up to cover her mouth as understanding began to dawn on her *The levitating box, right there in front of Mrs. Monroe and Natalie....*

"And since there are no witnesses to this *alleged* activity, the issue doesn't exist!" George spoke softly but with feeling.

"But George, what if there were?" Annie cried. "Like today, in the shop.... What if somebody else saw it?"

George sighed, then patiently began to explain. "Annie, the only *remote* chance there could be a problem is *if* I did it... in front of a Muggle... who *realized* what was actually happening," he said, ticking each requirement off on his fingers.

"Meaning me," she smirked. She was pretty sure neither Mrs. Monroe nor Natalie had seen the box defying the laws of physics, but could not say the same for herself.

"*And* it was witnessed by another wizard," he added.

Both of them looked directly at Fred, the only such person who fit that particular bill, who rolled his eyes in response.

George continued, "Who not only could identify me positively but then further chose to report the incident to the authorities."

"Then it's off to Azkaban for you, mate," taunted Fred with a smirk, followed by a long drink of ale. "Jailbait, just like I said. While you, darling Annie, would get a date with an Obliviator. And don't think for a moment I'm not tempted."

"Azkaban?" squeaked Annie. She had heard quite a bit about the wizard prison before now. A cold stab of fear penetrated her gut at the thought of George locked away with those horrible soul-sucking demons....

"Fred, you fucking git!" George snarled. "Stop it!"

He turned to Annie, holding her face in his hands. "For some idiotic reason, he's *lying* to scare you. No one is going to Azkaban. At most, I might be brought in for questioning. At *most*, understand? And then all I have to tell them is how much you mean to me...."

Fred nearly did a spit take, choking on his latest gulp of ale.

"Are you sure? Do you swear you can't get in trouble because of me?" cried Annie, terrified for his sake *Azkaban!*

"Of course I swear! And it wouldn't matter to me even if I could," George declared earnestly, staring directly into Annie's eyes in an attempt to convince her.

"I think I'm feeling a bit queasy," muttered Fred.

"Then why don't you leave?" George spat, tearing his eyes away from Annie to glare daggers at his brother.

"Fine. I can tell when I'm not wanted," Fred complained, offended. Surely they knew he was only having a bit of fun winding them up, taking his revenge for Annie thwarting his flirtatious attempts with Natalie earlier. *Some people can be so bloody sensitive!*

"No, wait, Fred," said Annie, anxious herself to change the subject. "I brought your gift with me." She began to dig around in her satchel.

"You're still giving it to him after all that?" cried George in disbelief. They had been shopping together when she had bought it, so he knew what it was.

"Of course. I'm sure Fred was just trying to be a good friend to me, weren't you?" Annie asked scoldingly.

Fred had the decency to have difficulty with his answering smile as he took the box from Annie's outstretched hand. "Maybe I did exaggerate things a bit," he confessed as he tore open the paper. He chuckled as he read the words silk-screened onto the t-shirt: *Drive it like you stole it*

"That's brilliant, Annie. Thanks. Erm... I sort of left your gift at home...."

George shook his head, knowing the truth. "You're so full of...."

"That's okay, Fred," Annie interrupted, letting him off the hook. "It's the thought that counts. Happy Christmas."

Fred tipped back his glass and drained the last of it. "Here... I'll get this, you two, and leave you to your plans, boring as they likely are," he offered, tossing some money on the table. "Happy Christmas, Annie. See you back at home, George," he said as he rose from the table.

Nearly two hours later, George and Annie were seated on the sofa in her front room. Her Gran had cooked dinner for everyone as her gift to them and had offered to clear the dishes as well. Normally, Annie would have refused to let her do either, but her Gran had been so excited to busy herself about the kitchen once again and had seemed so unusually full of energy that Annie decided to let her have her way. Annie suspected doing the dishes was also her Gran's way of giving them a little bit of privacy for the presentation of their gifts to each other.

Suddenly, Annie was a bundle of nerves. Never had she felt so much pressure to get something right. They had seemed a good idea at the time, but now.... She timidly held two small, wrapped packages out to George.

"Be honest and tell me if you don't like them. We can take them back and get something else, if you'd rather...."

"Don't be stupid, Annie. I'm sure I'll like them... if you give me a chance to open them, that is," he teased, tugging them out of her reluctant hands.

The first one he opened was a DVD documentary about the American Apollo missions. George was silently pouring over the thing, turning it over in his hands while reading it, obviously interested in the gift but unclear as to what exactly the thin box signified.

"There's a disc inside that will play this movie on the television any time you want to see it. Well, any time you're here, that is. Sort of an ulterior motive, I have to confess, to keep you here more," she explained with a sheepish smile.

"This is really cool! I love it!" George smiled reassuringly at her as he began to open the other, larger package. "Are these the same sort of thing?" he asked, sliding similar-

looking cases out of a larger cardboard container built to house all three.

Annie nodded. "These are some old science fiction movies a trilogy, actually, from before we were born. They're really good, though. I think you'll get a kick out of them. Lots of spaceships and aliens. I watched all three of them at Jane's once, one after the other. Took nearly all day."

She laughed at the memory of the marathon. Jane and her father were big science fiction buffs. She was confident George would get a kick out of the concept of The Force, as well.

"This is too much.... You went overboard," he argued absentmindedly, reading the back of each of the DVD cases in turn.

Annie sighed in relief, deciding he did seem to genuinely like the gifts. "We can watch one tonight, if you like. Something we can do in mixed company, if you know what I mean," she whispered.

George turned to her with a sly smile. "Sounds good to me. At least, for a start," he added, cocking his head to the side as he did. Then he carefully stacked all the boxes and set them aside. Next, he began digging through his trouser pocket.

"What are you doing? Keep your wand put away!" she hissed in alarm. After all they had just been talking about down at the pub?! What if Gran were to see?

George paused and looked at her in amusement. "Don't be so paranoid, Annie. I'm not an idiot, you know. Pockets carry more than wands, believe it or not," he said as he slowly drew his hand back out.

Annie's face flared in embarrassment at her mistake. The blush only deepened as she saw the small box now resting in his hand. She recognized the name of the business printed on the lid: it was a jeweler in Ottery. Annie had to make a conscious effort to close her mouth. She was speechless with shock.

"It won't bite, I promise," he said softly, still smiling, holding out his hand. He was obviously enjoying her reaction. "No fangs. No jinxes. Nothing funny at all, in fact."

Annie reached out slowly and took the box from his hand. She reminded herself to breathe as she opened the lid. Inside was the most delicate thing she had ever seen: a small, golden heart, formed into a lovely filigree cage, rested on a thin gold chain. It was only about as big as her thumbnail. It was perfect in proportion, design, and sentiment.

"Not too sappy, I hope. If you don't like it, we can take it back," he mumbled slightly nervously, throwing her own words back at her.

"Oh, shut up, will you?" she said without taking her eyes off the pendant.

George laughed. "Well, I've never seen you wear anything but earrings before, so I wasn't sure...."

He gently reached out to retrieve the box and gingerly removed the necklace from the display card. It looked even more delicate as it dangled from his large fingers. He reached around her neck and fastened the clasp.

"It's perfectly lovely, George," she said softly, resting her hand on his forearm as he tapped the little heart now resting on the tip of her breastbone with his finger.

"Something to remind you..." he whispered.

"Of what?" she asked, smiling in confusion.

"You have my heart, of course." He spoke the words directly in her ear, then kissed her.

"It should go without saying that you have mine," she added afterward.

"It does, but I still like hearing you say it," George chuckled.

They could hear Meredith pointedly making noise in the kitchen, finishing up with the dishes and preparing to join them in the front room. Annie chuckled at her grandmother's antics, letting them know she was on her way, warning them to wrap up anything they didn't want her to see.

"My goodness!" she exclaimed as she sat in the chair always reserved for her own exclusive use. "I'd forgotten how much work that is! I should help you out more often, Angharad."

"Don't be silly, Gran. And I told you I'd do the washing up later...."

"No, no. My treat. Takes a bit out of you, though," she sighed for effect. "I think I'll be turning in early tonight," she added, winking at George.

Annie could barely stifle a giggle. "Gran, you don't have to do that...."

"I'm seventy-eight years old, and there's not a bloomin' thing I have to do, young lady," she teased lightheartedly. "However, I'm tired, and I want to go to bed. I hope you don't mind, George, if I beg off playing hostess tonight. There's ice cream in the freezer if you two want afters," she teased as she stood up once again.

George had instantly liked Annie's grandmother when they had first met nearly six months ago, and Annie's Gran had endeared herself to him even further with her playful, pretend crotchiness ever since. It was an added bonus that Meredith's antics would wind Annie up as well, and she'd usually make a point of trying to make it up to him later.

"Not at all, Mrs. Jones. Please don't stay up on my account," he said, playing along as he politely began to rise out of the seat to say goodnight.

"There now, see? You were worried about nothing, Angharad. George doesn't mind a bit if I abandon you tonight," she said. "For heaven's sake, sit back down, George. And happy Christmas, dear," she said as she patted his shoulder.

Annie rose to help her grandmother back to her bedroom as George returned the sentiment and sat back down. He quickly turned his attention back to his new DVDs as he waited patiently for Annie to return.

"Did he like the movies?" Meredith asked, smiling conspiratorially once they had slipped into her room.

"Yes, I think so," Annie laughed as she helped her Gran undress.

"I told you he would. And now you have nearly eight hours worth of cuddling on the sofa to look forward to."

"Gran! Mind your own business! I'm sure I don't understand what you're suggesting, anyway," she exclaimed in mock indignation.

"Pfft. I'm not so old that I don't have *you* figured out bang to rights, little missy."

"You really are a piece of work!" Annie laughed, shaking her head as she pulled the nightdress down over her grandmother's head.

"And what did he get for you, then?" she asked.

Annie's face raged with yet another blush, but an enormous grin spread across her face unabated. "This," she said, indicating the pendant draped around her neck.

"Ooh, that's lovely, that is," cooed her Gran in appreciation of the bauble. But then she began to cluck in disapproval. "That boy knows what he's about, that's for certain. One smooth operator, he is, make no mistake. I was going to extend visiting hours to midnight, but now I'm not so sure...."

"Gran, for heaven's sake," Annie groaned as she tucked the blankets around her.

"I'm only winding you up. Midnight it is. Goodnight, dear."

"Goodnight, Gran," Annie whispered with a kiss.

Annie tiptoed back into the front room. George had opened the documentary DVD box and was carefully examining the disc inside.

"Mind you don't get any fingerprints on it," she instructed.

"How the bloody hell is a movie on this thing?" he exclaimed quietly.

"Well, I don't know the precise details, but... there are tiny little bumps on the shiny side, packed in there very tightly. The disc goes inside this machine here," she said, pointing to the DVD player under the television.

He rose to join her, and they were soon both kneeling in front of the machine. She indicated for him to push the button to open it, and his eyebrows rose in curiosity as the drawer slid out from its little garage in response. Annie showed him how to load the disc, then close the drawer again, as she turned on the power to the television.

"Now, there's a motor in there that spins the disc really fast, and a laser beam shines on it, and the computer inside reads the reflections of the laser light off the bumps. That's sort of it, in a nutshell."

George looked thoroughly perplexed. "If you say so," he mumbled as they stood up. "How is that any different than magic?"

Annie shrugged. It might seem pretty amazing, she supposed, especially to someone who grew up without electricity in the house. She began pushing the necessary buttons on the remote to start the program. "You don't have to be born with any special powers to watch a DVD," she argued.

"Tell that to the Muggle who invented this business," he chuckled as Annie led him back to the sofa. "Or that thing, for that matter," he added, indicating the remote with a nod of his head.

"Only some batteries and infrared light," she chuckled, "and very limited in its application. Not nearly as versatile as a wand," she added in a whisper.

The room was getting chilly, and the two of them arranged themselves as comfortably as possible on the sofa under an afghan. George was significantly interested enough in the subject matter to actually pay attention to it for the next hour and a half. And while Annie was a bit frustrated by that fact, she was far more pleased that he really did enjoy the gift, so she didn't attempt to distract him from the program.

Once the movie was over, however, and they sat in the darkness after the television was powered off, all other distractions were put aside for a while. It was getting much more difficult lately to rein themselves in when they had the rare chance to be alone. Despite what impressions Fred might have held, George and Annie were not so repressed that the sexual urges weren't there... and mightily hard to resist. They were even beginning to wonder why they were resisting them anymore.

Especially now. Tonight hadn't been the first time they had declared their love for each other. Far from it. In fact, it was just the latest in a long history of similar declarations they had made throughout the past fall. Declarations that strongly intimated a future committed to each other. And here, inside the dark, warm embrace of the person they loved, the idea of restraint was pushed far out of mind.

How could there be anything wrong with one more passionate kiss, one more loving caress, just a little bit more...?

From the back of the house, a cough echoed through the hallway, startling them back to their senses. They both froze as if caught by a searchlight. Annie's heart was racing in panic. She strained her ears, listening for telltale shuffling footsteps, but only hearing George's rapid, shallow breathing next to her own.

It was a false alarm sort of. Gran was still safely asleep in bed; she wasn't about to discover them nearly *in flagrante*. But if it had been five minutes later, who could say? Slowly, reluctantly, they extricated themselves from the incriminating position they were currently in. Annie smoothed both her skirt and jumper back down to where they belonged.

George sighed in frustration. "One of these days...."

"I know," Annie sympathized.

It wasn't precisely a moral issue: neither of them believed premarital sex was ethically wrong. Not within the bounds of a love like theirs, at any rate. They both knew that they were meant for each other, and it was only a matter of time before the ultimate declaration of love was made between them.

But to another person in this house, it most certainly *was* an issue of morality, and Annie wasn't ready yet to take her betrayal of her grandmother's trust in her to that level. How much deceit stood between them already? Granted, it was all to keep her Gran safe and free of worry, but the years worth of lies were lies all the same. And they gnawed at Annie's heart all the time.

Annie checked the clock. It was already after midnight. "Won't your Mum be worried about you?" she asked in a whisper.

George snorted in the dark. "I'm betting she doesn't even notice I'm not there. The house is absolutely full. We're packed in like kippers! I probably don't even have a bed to return to; Bill's likely called dibs on mine already," he said softly, starting to kiss her neck again, attempting to prey on her sympathy.

It was working. Damn her body for being so slavish for him! *Find your spine, you stupid cow* she urged herself. *Preferably before you melt any further....*

"What's a.... George, stop.... What's an Obliviator?" she finally managed to utter.

George sighed again, leaning his head back against the sofa in frustration. "I'm going to kill Fred for upsetting you about this, just so you know," he muttered.

"Not that you ever have to worry about it, but Obliviators are teams of wizards who help keep us all a secret," he explained. "Whenever a Muggle sees something they aren't supposed to and starts makin' noise about it, an Obliviator performs a memory charm to make him forget whatever it was he saw."

"Teams of them? Just how many are we talking about?" Annie asked, mildly alarmed.

"Dunno exactly. Sometimes a lot of Muggles stumble upon something all at once, if it's a big enough incident."

"So this is something that happens with some amount of frequency?" Annie was beginning to get agitated again. She definitely did not like the sound of these Obliviators.

"Please stop worrying about this," he begged her. "Nobody is going to turn us in because we're not doing anything wrong in the first place."

"It's not that I don't trust *you*, George...."

"Annie... look, there are loads of kids at Hogwarts with one Muggle parent and one magical one. That doesn't even count all the Muggle-borns. Now, I can't believe that not one of these Muggles has a clue what their spouse can do, or at the very least, their own kid.

"They *have* to know about magic. They *have* to have seen it for themselves. How could you be married to someone and not know? How could a wizard be married to a Muggle and not tell them?"

"And they're not all being followed around by Obliviators at all times, memories wiped clean of every little odd incident. It just doesn't work that way. It can't. It's impossible. This secrecy thing is neither universal nor absolute."

Annie listened carefully to his argument and had to agree with the logic. All those marriages couldn't be based on such an enormous lie, could they? "So it's not that unusual? A couple like us?"

"Not remotely," he assured her. "We're not the first, nor will we be the last. In fact, if it wasn't for mixed marriages, wizard kind would have died out ages ago. Anyone with any sense at all realizes that."

"Anyone with sense? So there *are* some wizards who don't feel the same? Some who think it's wrong?"

George groaned. "I shouldn't have said that," he muttered to himself, pinching the bridge of his nose. "The truth is, yes, there are some nutters out there that think wizards should strictly stick to their own kind. But they're mental. Probably due to the inbreeding, if you ask me."

"And these are the wizards we have to hide from, then," she stated rather than asked. "This is why I can't come to London to see your shop."

"Not hide from, exactly. But maybe just... not flaunt ourselves. Not at the present time, anyway," he mumbled, sounding a bit less confident than before.

Annie stroked a finger along his jaw line. "I don't care if we have to live in a cave, as long as we can be together, and you can be safe," she whispered.

"That's taking it to an extreme, don't you think?" he chuckled. "And everybody's perfectly safe. I promise. When we do go out, it's almost always to a different spot and almost never here in Pottery." He bent close once more to kiss her. "Never drawing attention," he said, stroking her hair. "Always taking precautions," he murmured, nuzzling her neck.

She burrowed a little deeper into his arms. *Mmm. So warm. So dark. So very nice. Oh, yes, some more of that, please...*

Oh, hell. Annie reluctantly pulled herself back mentally from the temptation to follow George down the path he was headed. She glanced at the clock once more; it was nearly one a.m. Another glance out the window showed her the snow really coming down now. *It might even be a white Christmas if it keeps up like this* she thought.

Before she lost her concentration completely, she took his head in her hands and held it gently away from her. "It's getting really late, love. Gran'll have your hide... after tanning mine, that is. Time for you to head home to your crowded house."

"My over-stuffed room," he sighed for effect.

"Your already-occupied bed," she giggled. "It had better be Bill in it, that's all I have to say. Why isn't he in his own room?"

"Lupin's in there. Old family friend. Ginny's stuck with Fleur, and that's no picnic either."

"Who's Fleur?" Annie asked, brow furrowed.

"Remember that girl in the Triwizard Tournament? The one from Beauxbatons? Apparently she decided to stay here in Britain after the whole thing was over, got a job at Gringotts, and developed quite a thing for Bill. He's brought her home to meet the folks."

"And? This is sounding serious...."

George nodded. "Well... Mum can't really stand her, to be honest. Apart from Bill, of course and Ron making a blithering idiot of himself whenever he's around her nobody else can stand her, either."

Annie rolled her eyes, extremely doubtful of this paltry explanation. "This is the one who's part veela, right?"

"Oh, you remembered that bit, did you?"

She could hear the smile in his voice, even if it was too dark to see it. "So, I'm sending you home to a veela-infested house?" she cried softly in aggravation.

"You don't have to, you know. I won't tell if you won't." His purr-like voice rumbled deep in his chest as he began to nibble on her earlobe again.

"Very funny," she managed to say as she pushed him off of her once again. "Out!"

George heaved himself up off the couch with a dejected sigh. They stood together at the door, kissing far more chastely now that it was definitely goodnight.

"I probably won't be able to get away again until after Christmas," he informed her.

Annie nodded. The holidays were rightly reserved for family, after all. She owed it to her Gran as well, especially considering the plan now forming in her head. Because the situation was getting ridiculous. It was unfair to them both.

If only she could be allowed to visit his flat in London.... But then, what to do with Fred? Not to mention she now understood Diagon Alley was crawling with wizards that could report them to the Ministry busybodies. The wintry weather precluded anything outdoors, so that left only one option: the home she lived in, her grandmother's house. She was going to have to bite the bullet, add another deception to the already towering pile, and soon. The alternative was driving her mad.

The Burrow

Chapter 25 of 80

It's high time Molly met Annie, don'tcha think? At least Fred thinks so. And since when has Molly failed to fall in love with an orphan? Annie fears she just might be her first.

Chapter 25: The Burrow

Winter 1996 1997

It was two days after Christmas, and Molly had been extremely moody all day, alternating between weepy and waspish. George had managed to escape to Annie's just after the family had eaten lunch.

"And where do you think you're off to?" Molly had snapped at him, her eyes rimmed with red.

"I'm off to check on the shop think I'll do a little year-end bookkeeping," George had lied coolly as he bundled himself into his coat.

"I'll help," Fred offered, eager to leave the depressive atmosphere as well.

"No, no, you're no use at all with numbers. Stay here and keep Mum company, why don't you," snickered George with a wink.

Lucky bastard to have an excuse Fred fumed in his seat, manually shuffling a deck of cards. *Bloody git for not sharing it!*

The afternoon wore on in excruciatingly slow fashion. So much so that Fred had dozed off in a room full of quietly chatting people only to wake up in a nearly empty one as his mother rose and made her way into the kitchen.

"Come help me get dinner on the table, Fred," she whimpered.

"Ah, Mum, why don't you ask the girls?" he whined.

"I don't know where Ginny is, and I... I don't want to bother *Fleur*," she answered dolefully. Her lower lip started to tremble, and he could tell her thoughts had turned once more to Percy.

A string of silent obscenities poured forth in his head. He wasn't sure which of his brothers George or Percy he would most like to pummel at the moment. "Fine, Mum. I'll help," he sighed, heaving himself off the sofa.

"Dear Fred. I can always count on you, can't I?" she mumbled, a sad smile on her face.

Merlin's hairy arse! He couldn't stand any more of this moping! It was time for drastic measures. Quickly, a plan began to form in his mind: something to cheer his mum and revenge himself on George for abandoning him to this misery....

"So, Mum... have you spoken with George lately?" Fred asked, keeping his voice purposefully cryptic as he began magically peeling a large pile of carrots. He certainly wasn't going to perform any *manual* labor, for Merlin's sake!

"George? No. Why ever for, dear?" his mother asked, perplexed.

"Oh. That *is* surprising. Hmm...." He waited patiently, letting the bait hang there between them.

"Why is that?" Molly's brow was wrinkled in confusion.

"Well, it's not really my place to say, I suppose. It's just that I thought *surely* he'd told you by now...." *She must be overwrought not to get suspicious of this*, Fred thought. He could hardly be more blatantly obvious.

"Told me what?" She was sounding exasperated now.

Fred hammed it up, screwing his face up as if he was seriously debating what to do next.

"Spit it out, Fred," she demanded impatiently.

"Well..." he said, drawing out the word. He made a big show of looking around to see if anyone else was in earshot.

Baffled, his mother did the same.

Fred leaned down to whisper in her ear, working his mother's curious nature to his profit. The payoff was coming....

"George has a *girlfriend!*" he said conspiratorially. "Pretty serious, I think. Been seeing her since last summer. You won't tell him I told you, will you?"

At first, Molly's mouth dropped in shock, then her eyes lit up and a big smile spread over her features. "That's wonderful! Who is the lucky girl? Do you know her? Ah, who would've known? Of all the.... George!" She dithered about the kitchen, not really expecting any answers to her questions, forgetting that she'd asked Fred to help with anything.

And now Fred leaned back in his chair, smug smile on his face, looking forward to George coming home.

George should have been more suspicious before he opened the door. Granted, it wasn't all that late, but he had thought it a bit odd that the kitchen windows were still lit up from within at this hour. *Oh, well. Hindsight and all that.*

"George? Is that you?" called his mother when she heard the door open.

As his eyes adjusted to all the light, he realized his mother must have been sitting there for who knew how long, waiting to pounce on him. She rushed over to embrace him, a huge smile on her face. Odd as her behavior was, it was a welcome change at least to the moping woman he had left behind earlier in the day, he thought.

"Welcome home, dear! Sit down, have some biscuits. I'll make you a cup of tea, shall I? Or perhaps some warm milk?" She busied herself at the stove.

"Erm, thanks Mum," he mumbled, confused. A small voice in his brain warned him something wasn't quite right, encouraged him to escape, but he never passed up a chance to eat on principle. He sat down and started munching on a cookie.

"Here you are, then." She set a cup of tea in front of him. She was positively beaming.

This is getting more bizarre by the minute, George thought. He stirred some milk into his tea.

"So, I thought we might take a moment, just you and me, well, to chat. Catch up on the latest, hmm? Anything new with you, dear?" she asked expectantly.

George stuffed another cookie into his mouth. He shrugged and shook his head silently. He was completely at sea now, and the confusion was evident on his face.

"Nothing at all?" she prompted. Her tone was beginning to sound impatient.

Alarm bells began ringing loudly in his head. *She thinks she knows something* George realized, quailing at the thought. *What sort of trap is this?*

"Met anyone special?" she asked pointedly.

George choked on the cookie, spewing crumbs over the table. It was clear what she was hinting at now, and if she knew about that, he also knew exactly where the information had to come from. *I'll murder him in his bed* he swore to himself.

"You mean a girl, don't you?" he answered once his throat was clear.

He had initially planned to deny it, but then reconsidered when he saw the obvious joy on her face as she clapped her hands together over her mouth and gasped. She had been so morose lately, especially after the latest fiasco with Percy.

"Oh, George! I'm so happy for you! I want to meet her! You are going to bring her 'round, aren't you?" she exclaimed.

That confirmed it. This wasn't a random fishing expedition on her part. She had knowledge beforehand. And for all intents and purposes, she had also just fingered the informant.

"Sure, if you like," he reluctantly agreed, itching to get out of the kitchen and hunt down his quarry.

"When? Soon? Oh, I can't wait to meet her!" she gushed.

"I don't know, Mum. We'll see, all right? I'll ask her when she'll be free. Calm down!" he insisted.

Molly had jumped up from the table and proceeded to energetically hug her son. "Wonderful! Simply wonderful!" She patted his cheek and bounced off up the stairs to bed, humming a happy tune.

George followed upstairs soon after his mother. His room was dark as he opened the door. He stepped inside, then shoved it shut with a loud bang. "I know you're in here," he said quietly into the dark.

A diabolical chuckle answered him. "Mum certainly sounded happy just now."

"You're a dead man, you know that?" George growled.

"Bring it," dared Fred.

"Shut up, the both of you," mumbled Bill, half-asleep.

The next day, Fred discovered his plan had backfired on him in an unforeseen way. His mother *did* indeed spend that morning pestering George to invite his "new" girlfriend 'round to meet the family, as expected. And he found his brother's discomfort was quite enjoyable, as usual.

What Fred had not anticipated, to his dismay, was how his mother now began to badger *him* about meeting a girl, settling down, et cetera. First Bill had chained himself to the matrimonial barge (lovely as it was to look at), and now George was tentatively dipping his toe in the waters of commitment. When would he be bringing a nice girl 'round? *Merlin's beard!*

Still, George's lot was the worst, he figured, so he added this one to the victory tally.

"I think I'll go out for a walk," said George, just after lunch.

"You don't fool me, silly boy! Why don't you ask her to dinner tomorrow?" Molly said, giving him a knowing smile.

She's probably busy," he said in an attempt to dodge her.

"The next night, then. Any night this week. Any night this month!" Molly cried.

"Yes, George just turn on the charm. She won't be able to say no!" Fred couldn't resist adding.

"Don't get me started on you! Leave your brother alone! At least he makes an effort!" Molly snapped, swatting him on the head.

"Yeah, Fred. At least I make an effort! Why can't you be more like me?" George called over his shoulder on his way out the door.

*

The day had finally arrived for Annie to meet George's parents. George had tried to fend them off as long as possible, to the point that things were getting quite dodgy between him and his mother. He thanked his lucky stars he was no longer living at home, in which case the henpecking would have been ten times worse.

Finally, she threatened to send him Howlers on the hour at the Wheezes shop unless he confirmed a date within the next week. Grudgingly admitting defeat, he had invited Annie to dinner at the Burrow.

They walked together through the frozen forest along the way from Annie's house. George was dragging his feet, trying to make the walk last longer. It certainly wasn't because he was ashamed of Annie; neither was he worried about how his parents would react. On the contrary, he was confident they would fall in love with her on the spot. Not to mention how eagerly he was anticipating the moment of denouement when they discovered who she really was after all these years.

His reticence stemmed from the fact that he was being forced to share her with everyone now, thanks to Fred's big mouth. A part of him wouldn't have minded keeping her all to himself forever.

"Hurry up, George!" Annie tugged at his arm, marching ahead of him.

"What's the rush?" he complained.

"I'm freezing! Let's go!"

"C'mere. I'll keep you warm," he said as he smiled and pulled her back toward him.

They finally arrived at the back door of the Burrow. The walk, which should have taken fifteen minutes at most, had been stretched into forty. Their cheeks were rosy from more than just the brisk air.

George took a deep breath and squeezed Annie's hand. "Into the fire, then!" he said teasingly.

Annie recognized the wicked, anticipatory smile on his face, and a mild sense of wary foreboding began to descend upon her.

Molly and Arthur were waiting to greet her on the other side of the door. She took in the sight of George's parents. They were exactly as she had pictured them: kindly, friendly, and smiling. And, of course, as ginger as the rest of the family.

George's mother was beaming. "Hello, dear!" she cried, opened her arms wide, and embraced her.

Arthur wore a bemused smile. "Welcome!" he offered from a more polite distance.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Thank you for inviting me," Annie said.

"Please call me Molly, dear," his mother said as she took the pie Annie offered to her.

"And you must call me Arthur. We're not much for formalities here, you'll find."

Annie smiled her thanks. Molly stared pointedly at George.

"Oh, erm, Mum, Dad, this is Annie. Annie Jones," said George awkwardly.

"Annie! What a lovely name! We're so thrilled to meet you. Come in and sit down; make yourself at home. Let me just go check on dinner. I'll be right back," Molly gushed as she flitted about.

The four of them, for Fred had just walked into the room, found seats. Fred gave Annie an encouraging wink as he noisily flopped down onto a chair.

She began to gaze around the room, amazed at how every cozy little corner was crammed with something magical doing something impossible. Knitting needles were knitting a scarf independently of human hands. Cards were shuffling themselves on a table. A clock with nine hands and no numbers ticked quietly for no readily discernable purpose.

"Annie, is it?" Arthur chuckled. "That name brings to mind a funny story. Quite embarrassing for the boys, I'll wager. We used to have a running joke about someone named Annie. These two used to blame all their naughty hijinks on an imaginary friend of theirs. You must remind me to tell you about it some day."

The brothers weakly smothered snorts and snickers. Annie squirmed uncomfortably on the sofa next to George. So this was how it was going to be: they had given their parents no advance knowledge whatsoever. She suspected she was about to be their latest prank.

Molly bounced into the living room to announce that dinner was ready. They followed her into the kitchen and arranged themselves around the table: Arthur at the head, Molly and Fred to his left, Annie and George to his right.

As they began to eat, Molly eagerly dived into conversation. "So, tell us about yourself, Annie. George has been very tight-lipped when it comes to you." She cast an aggravated look his way.

"Erm... I'm not sure where to start," Annie replied demurely.

"How about the beginning, then? Did the two of you meet at school?"

Annie nervously wondered how long Molly's friendly smile would last once she knew the truth. Fred and George had both assured her that after an initial shock, their parents would warm to her quickly and wouldn't mind in the least that she wasn't a witch. They seemed quite certain that this fact would be an especially funny joke to their mother if not at first, then at least eventually. But the whole thing was feeling more and more like a setup to her.

"Well, ah... n-no...." She paused, looking to George for help.

He was staring at his plate, his mouth full of food, but she could tell the corners were ever so slightly turned up in a sly smile. She tapped her foot smartly against his shin. He coughed, then swallowed, but refused to look up.

Arthur didn't seem to notice anything amiss, thoughtfully chewing. Perhaps he hadn't heard her. Molly, however, looked slightly confused.

"Annie didn't go to Hogwarts, Mum," George answered for her, barely intelligible. He was still looking at his plate, pretending to be intent on shoveling food into his mouth at a record-breaking pace. He was also finding it difficult to smother a grin.

That tidbit of information finally got Arthur's attention. His fork paused in midair with the next bite. The confused look had not left Molly's face.

"I went to school in the village," Annie explained, all her confidence draining away. *Why do I sound like I'm confessing a crime?*

"What village would that be?" Molly asked, foundering.

"Ottery St. Catchpole?" Annie tried to sound as upbeat as possible, despite the sense of impending doom that was settling upon her. She was making plans to throttle the twins for hanging her out to dry like this.

She watched the light beginning to dawn on Molly's face, her eyes widening slightly in shock. Arthur slowly let his fork fall to the table.

"I'm what you call a Muggle," Annie said hesitantly.

Continued silence met her confession.

"Am I saying that right, George, darling?"

Annie turned to glare at George, forcing the last endearment through her teeth. Her fists were gripping the hem of her skirt under the table in nervous agitation. He busied himself by scooping another helping of peas onto his plate. She dug her heel into what she reckoned was his foot he merely winced slightly in response.

"This is delicious, Mum! One of your best!" exclaimed a beaming Fred, far too loudly.

Molly and Arthur both were startled by Fred's jovial exuberance. Annie shot him a look warning him to stop enjoying himself or else. She looked back at Molly, then Arthur. They were now both giving George stern looks in stereo.

"Is everything all right? Have I done something wrong?" she asked, suddenly concerned. Maybe George overestimated his parents' tolerance of a relationship such as theirs. Maybe the rules against it were stricter than he had let on. Maybe they were in trouble....

"No, no, dear, everything's just fine," Arthur reassured her, smiling for her benefit. "It's just that, well, George didn't tell us...."

"And he *should* have told us," interrupted Molly, scolding her son through her teeth.

"That you were a, well, erm...." Arthur faltered.

"Muggle?" Annie offered.

"Well, yes," sighed Arthur.

"My, my, George, what *were* you thinking?" Fred tsked his tongue.

A second later, Fred grimaced and involuntarily sucked in his breath. Annie silently cheered George for the kick she was sure he had just launched at his brother from under the table.

Molly was beginning to recover her composure. Her smile was just as friendly as before, but her voice had a slight undertone of exasperation now. "Well, then, Annie, dear.... Wherever did you meet George, if not at school?"

Annie felt a pang of sympathy for George's mother. Poor Molly was being so nice to her, trying so hard to be pleasant through this. She was left hung out to dry this evening, too. And it wasn't about to get any easier for either of them. Annie swore silently to herself that Fred and George would be punished for this somehow.

She steeled herself: *nothing for it but to do it* She plunged in to the truth of the matter. "We met in the woods here, over by the stream, if I recall."

George finally spoke up voluntarily. "In the big oak tree, to be precise."

"The woods? Really? I didn't realize Mug-... erm, village folk bothered much with the forest," Molly said, a look of mild surprise crossing her face.

Fred laughed out loud. "They don't. Only Annie does. She's just weird that way," he interjected.

"Fred!" Molly scolded. "That's quite enough rudeness out of you this evening."

But Fred pressed on. "You know, George, I have the strangest sense of déjà vu right now."

"Like we've had this conversation before, you mean?" laughed George.

Annie recognized the setup routine. They were going for the punch line.

"Exactly. I seem to recall discussing..."

"Being interrogated, more like..."

"Meeting a Muggle girl..."

"From the village..."

"In the woods..."

"Hmm, I'd say about, oh, eleven years ago, was it?"

Fred and George burst out in guffaws. They were having so much fun; Annie couldn't help but smile at them. She quickly stifled it, though, after glancing at Molly.

"I fail to see anything funny about this!" Molly cried, flustered.

"Boys!" Arthur called them to order. "Please explain yourselves," he commanded.

"Mum," George explained with a victorious smile, "this is *the* Annie."

Molly's brow furrowed in confused frustration. "The... Annie?" she whispered quietly, trying to comprehend.

A few more seconds passed.

"Blimey!" Arthur muttered, reaching the correct conclusion before his wife. Hadn't he just been thinking of it before dinner?

Molly got there a second after. Her hands flew up to her mouth, and her eyes boggled, staring at Annie with new understanding.

Annie smiled hopefully back at her, praying she wasn't about to be thrown out of the house.

"You're real!" Molly exclaimed quietly.

"Real as apples, I'm afraid," Annie answered consolingly.

"And as sweet, I might add," piped up George with a wink in Annie's direction.

She answered him with a withering look that informed him it was too little, too late. Meanwhile, Fred pretended to gag at all the sweet talk.

"All those times you lot were in trouble... and you blamed it on *Annie*... and I never believed you...." Molly was fumbling for words, still flabbergasted.

"Well, likely not quite *all* those times," George confessed.

"But a fair portion, to be sure," Fred insisted.

"The mud bath?" Molly whispered.

"Fred started that one!" Annie claimed in her own defense.

"All those pieces of stolen attic furniture... blown to bits over the years?" Molly gasped.

"Yes, well, sorry about those," Annie mumbled, averting her eyes and bowing her head. She had rather enjoyed all that destruction, whenever the boys or she had managed to get their hands on any explosives. It had been ages ago, though, since they'd done anything like that.

"*Burning down the old wooden shed?*" Molly cried weakly.

"Guilty as charged for nearly all of it except for the shed business. I assure you I hadn't even heard about that one," Annie said with remorse mixed with amusement at her own recollections of the events mentioned. "I should probably apologize to you for being party to... well, Fred and George in general... as we were growing up," she added with perfect sincerity.

Annie faced George's still gobsmacked parents, feeling a nervous twisting sensation settling in her stomach. She was still waiting to see some sign of the promised enjoyment of the situation on their part. *This really doesn't seem like it's going as well as they'd planned* she thought.

Arthur stood up silently and made his way to a cupboard. "Alohamora," he muttered, then opened the little door. He reached in and took out a large bottle of brown liquid

and a glass.

"I'll have one of those as well, if you please, dear," Molly said shakily.

Arthur pulled out another glass and brought the items all back to the table. He poured a generous finger's worth of the liquor in each of the glasses. Annie caught a glimpse of the word "Firewhiskey" on the label then set one in front of his wife.

"Ten years, now, Arthur," Molly mumbled.

"Eleven, Molly," Arthur corrected her, then knocked back the shot.

Molly emitted a squeak as Arthur's declaration registered. "All this time... a village Muggle girl's known about us...." She brought the trembling glass to her lips and drank it in one gulp, then coughed.

"And *nothing* has happened," Fred reminded them. "Not in eleven years."

"Relax, Mum," George assured her. "Annie's never told another soul."

Now it was Arthur's turn to laugh out loud. "Well now, Molly, this is quite a pot of plimpies!"

Molly had not quite gotten over the shock, but a sheepish smile was beginning to cross her features. Annie wasn't sure if it was due to her acceptance of her sons' explanations or the Firewhiskey.

Annie offered to help Molly clear the table after dinner was finished. Arthur headed out to the living room to listen to the wireless, and Fred and George followed in order to escape doing any work. Though it wasn't as if doing dishes in a witch's kitchen was real work. Molly flicked her wand first at the table, then at the sink, and the dishes literally did themselves. Annie and Molly merely sat together at the table, sipping tea.

Annie was still astounded by how well George's mother had taken the revelations at dinner. After a few minutes of initial shock, Molly had returned to her warm, friendly self, just as George had predicted. They had all laughed quite a bit throughout dinner, recounting several stories from the twins' childhood which had now taken on a new significance.

"That was a lovely pie, dear. Did your mother teach you?" Molly asked in a friendly tone.

"No my Gran. She's been teaching me to cook for many years now," Annie replied.

"Oh, how nice. Do you spend much time with your grandmother, then?" she asked kindly.

Annie still felt badly about how Fred and George had blindsided their mother this evening. Not to mention the guilt she felt over all the trouble she had helped cause for so many years. She felt she owed it to Molly to be as honest as possible. So even though she hated talking about this story her dark and sordid past she was willing to do it tonight in order to give Molly something to make up for her sons' shabby treatment.

"Yes. I live with her, actually. Always have. I've never known my mother," Annie explained.

"I'm so sorry, dear. How difficult it must have been for you, growing up without a mother." Molly patted her hand sympathetically. "It's all right if you don't want to talk about it...."

"Thanks." Annie steeled herself with a deep breath. "I don't mind," she lied. *Well, here goes*, she thought.

"My mother was twenty years old when my grandfather died. She took it quite hard, apparently. Gran says she just... sort of... broke apart. Couldn't move beyond it. She fell in with the wrong crowd, so to speak, in her grief. She became addicted to drugs; I don't know if you have the equivalent, in your world, so you might not understand what I'm talking about."

Annie paused. She noticed George was standing in the doorway, gazing at her thoughtfully. She had already confessed this story to him not so very long ago now.

Molly spoke softly. "I think I do, dear."

"They took over her life. Gran tried everything to get her to clean herself up, but nothing worked. Finally, Gran says, she felt she just had to let go, to wash her hands of it. She couldn't take the heartbreak of watching her daughter kill herself like that, I suppose. She told her daughter that she wasn't welcome at home any more; kicked her out, cut her off."

Annie paused again. George had silently re-entered the kitchen while she had been speaking. Now he sat down beside her, folded her into his arms and pulled her close for moral support. She reckoned she appreciated his gesture more than he would ever know. Annie looked down at her hands resting on the table and continued her story.

"Five years went by without a word, not even a call. Then early one morning, Gran's phone rang. They told her they were calling from a hospital in London and to come up right away. They wouldn't tell her why over the phone. Gran assumed it was to collect her daughter's body. She was pretty upset, as you can imagine.

"But when she got to the hospital, they took her to the maternity ward, not the morgue. The doctor there showed her a slip of paper. It was a birth certificate form with Gran's name, address and phone number written on it, and one more word: sorry.

"My mother had snuck out of the hospital twelve hours after I was born, the doctor told her, and never came back.

"Then they took my Gran into the nursery. There I was, lying in a bassinet, screaming my head off. I was born addicted to heroin, they said. It would take about a week or so for the drug to leave my system, but then Gran could take me home if she wanted. Or she could fill out the adoption forms that day and leave. They just needed the next of kin to make a decision, one way or the other.

"Gran says she started yelling at the doctor right there. How could he even think she would give me up? she railed at him. Really gave him the business, she brags. She says she took over a room in the hospital and wouldn't let them kick her out. She spent every hour of every day of that time with me, holding me while I screamed and detoxed.

"She always tells me she fell in love with me that first week. I tell her she's a glutton for punishment. She brought me home, here, to Ottery. We've always lived in the house just on the other side of these woods.

"I'll be nineteen years old next month and, to my knowledge, I've never laid eyes on my mother. Never heard a word from her my whole life and don't care anymore if I ever do. My Gran's all the family I ever had, and that suits me just fine."

Annie took a deep breath to indicate she was finished. She had been staring with unfocused eyes at the tablecloth. Now she looked up at Molly seated across from her to find she had a tear glistening on her cheek.

"Your Gran is my kind of lady, Annie. I hope I get to meet her one day," she sniffed. Molly reached out and squeezed one of Annie's hands resting on the table.

"I should probably take you home now," George spoke quietly in Annie's ear.

She nodded. It was getting late time to get back home to Gran. They stood up from the table and George went to gather their coats.

"Thanks again, Molly. I had a lovely time. Sorry for... well, you know: George and Fred."

Molly waved off her apology. "Anytime, dear. I hope you'll come back very soon. I have the most adorable photos of them as babies to show you next time!" The glint in her eye was unmistakable: she was looking forward to her revenge on the twins as much as Annie was.

"I can't wait to see them!" gushed Annie as George began to wind a scarf around her neck, then up over her face. Annie batted him away. She called out her goodbyes to Fred and Arthur as George hustled her out the door.

"Finally, I get you all to myself for a few bloody minutes!" he sighed when they reached the far side of the garden. "That was very well played tonight. Mum and Dad are totally smitten with you. I know the feeling myself, of course," he purred, sidling up to her from behind, nuzzling her cheek.

Ooh, he is smooth. "Don't think you're getting out of trouble that easily. You left me swinging in the breeze at dinner, you... you..." she snapped, casting about for a suitable insult.

Before she could hit on one appropriately damaging, he had spun her around and was kissing her *Unfair!* her brain cried out, but her body's response stifled all further protest.

It Was a Dark and Stormy Night

Chapter 26 of 80

It's Annie's 19th birthday, and true to their word, George and Fred celebrate with her. How exactly did the topic of birth control come up? And how does the patron saint of England factor into this? Think Fred could possibly resist taking the mickey out of George? Think again. The brothers do manage to have a heart-to-heart talk the next day... just before Ron gets himself poisoned.

Chapter 26: It Was a Dark and Stormy Night

Winter 1997

"Bottom's up, Annie!" cried Fred. "It's not like you have a birthday every year, you know!" He laughed uproariously at his own joke.

Technically, it was true, Annie admitted to herself. Technically, as well, this year was not a birthday year for her; next year would be. She wondered if perhaps Fred's thought process was slightly muddled by all the beer.

The waitress stepped up to the table. "Can I get you anything else?" she asked. Annie supposed she intended the question for the entire table, but the woman had directed herself to Fred alone.

"I think we're finished," chuckled George. "Fred's got a full tank, anyway," he added under his breath for Annie's benefit alone.

"Just your phone number, then, Beautiful!" Fred replied, grinning ridiculously at her.

Annie rolled her eyes at Fred's heavy-handed, albeit most likely drunken, attempt at flirting, but the waitress was apparently smitten nonetheless. She giggled, made a show of biting her lip in pretend hesitation, and wrote her number on an unused paper coaster.

"I'm done here in an hour," she cooed as she handed it to him, then walked slowly back to the bar.

"I love Muggle girls," Fred sighed as he watched her walk away.

"I know what you mean," George replied.

Annie spun around to give him a smack, but he was too quick for her. He caught her hand in midair, then laced his fingers into hers. He smiled and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "Just one of them, anyway."

"That's more like it," Annie said, and she gave him a forgiving smile.

Turning to Fred, she sized him up for sobriety. If this was his last drink, she reckoned he'd likely be fine in an hour or so. Still, she was a bit worried about her friend.

"Fred, make sure you let her drive if you go anywhere, all right? And just... you know... be careful," she said pointedly, hoping to get the message across. She didn't like the idea of making assumptions like this about other women, but the waitress was making her intentions pretty plain, so Annie didn't feel too guilty about it.

Fred snorted indignantly. "I absolutely will not! When have you ever known me to be careful?"

"That's precisely my point," she argued. This was awkward, but he was a bit impaired at the moment, and she didn't want anything stupid to happen because of it, so she tried being a bit clearer, albeit quietly so. "I'm just saying, you know, be sure you use protection."

"What? You mean a wand? Whatever for?" Fred looked baffled. "She comes across as rather the friendly sort to me," he muttered.

Annie let out an exasperated sigh. This wasn't funny, and she didn't appreciate the joke. She looked to George for help and was aggravated to see an equally baffled look on his face, too. *Bloody immature prats*, she fumed. They were going to make her say it out loud.

"Oh, grow up, both of you!" she snapped. "It's not a laughing matter, Fred. You don't know anything about that girl. Don't do something stupid you'll regret. Just make sure you wear protection."

The baffled looks on both of them persisted.

"Annie, honestly, what are you on about?" George's voice sounded perfectly earnest.

Oh, dear God. Could they really not know? "Didn't you ever talk about... you know...*birth control*... with anyone before?" she stammered.

Both boys had quite serious looks on their faces now, intently listening to her every word. George shook his head ever so slightly.

Annie wanted nothing more than to sink into the floor. "Wait here. I'll be back in a minute, and we'll continue this discussion."

She made her way to the ladies' toilet, positive that her face would burst into flames at any second. She bought two condoms from the vending machine on the wall there and tucked them into her pocket.

A woman putting on lipstick at the mirror smiled and gave her a wink. "Atta girl!" she cried. "Have your fun, darlin'!"

Annie splashed cold water on her blazing face for a few seconds before heading back to the table to surely die of embarrassment. At least they weren't in Ottery, where someone she knew might have recognized her, she thought gratefully.

She sat down, then dug the little packets back out of her pocket. She tried to discreetly hand them to the boys, but had no luck. Fred began curiously examining the thing, turning it over in his hands in plain view. George, being significantly more sober, had noticed instructions written in tiny print on one side and was reading them under the table lamp. After a few moments, Fred noticed, then copied his brother.

"Sweet bloody Christ!" George exclaimed an instant later, in a rush to pocket the thing.

Fred just sat there, gobsmacked for the moment. Half a crooked smile broke over his face. "D'you mean to tell me," he asked in a quiet, awed voice, "that you can shag all you like with one o' these on your...." He paused, thankfully letting the word go unsaid, before continuing, "and never worry about nothin'?"

"That's why it's called 'protection,' moron," Annie replied in a smart-aleck tone but still squirmed uncomfortably.

"How the bloody hell do you know about this?" hissed George in curious shock.

"Calm down!" she hissed back defensively. "It's common knowledge in my world! I mean, we even talked about it in health class at school. I swear to God I am about to smack that look right off your face, Fred Weasley!"

"Burbage never talked about this in Muggle Studies, did she?" mused Fred, gazing at his brother in amazement. "I reckon I would've remembered a lesson as useful as that. This is fuckin' *brilliant*!" he cried excitedly, then guffawed at his unintentional pun.

"Keep your voice down!" demanded Annie.

"I *really* love Muggle girls!" exclaimed Fred only slightly less loudly as he shot George another look and smiled. Then he glanced over to the bar and caught the waitress' eye.

She wiggled her fingers in a little wave and smiled. Fred returned the wave and smiled as well.

"Common knowledge, you say?" Fred pondered that thought aloud, obviously pleased with the implications. He turned back to his companions at the table after another moment. "Well, I won't keep you two any longer. Off you go! Don't mind me, I'll find my way home some way or another, George. And don't bother waiting up, old man." And with that, he sauntered over to the bar where the waitress was standing, giving him a come-hither stare.

"I don't think I want to see any more of this, do you?" Annie forced a chuckle, feeling nervous regret at unleashing Fred on the unsuspecting females of the world. "Let's go."

"Thought you'd never ask," groaned George, sounding rather dyspeptic himself.

It started to rain as they drove home. By the time they reached Annie's house, the night-black sky had opened up. They sat in the truck for a few minutes, hoping the torrent would let up. They kissed for a while to kill time, trying to wait out the downpour, but noise of the rain on the truck's roof was terribly loud in the small, chilly space.

"Let's make a run for it, shall we?" she suggested, deciding she couldn't stand it any longer.

George agreed. They leaped out of the truck together and dashed up the back steps. While Annie unlocked the door as quickly as she could, she instructed George, "Quiet as you can, all right? Watch for me."

He nodded, then followed her inside. He understood the necessity for stealth: it was past Annie's normal curfew, past the time when he was welcome to be in Meredith's house.

Just inside the door, she took off her shoes; he did the same, holding them in one hand. She held up a hand to tell him to stand and wait. He obeyed, meanwhile dripping on the kitchen floor. Annie crept to the open door of her Gran's bedroom. He could hear the quiet sounds and see the flickering light of the television behind it.

"Just me, Gran. Need anything before I'm off to bed?" she asked her.

George heard Meredith yawn as the TV was muted. "No, thank you, dear. Did you have a nice time?"

Annie nodded. "Night, then."

When she was clear of the doorway, she turned back to George and motioned for him to go into her bedroom, rather than the front room, where they usually spent their evenings together prior to eleven p.m. Then she turned the other way, creeping down the hallway.

George was pleasantly surprised and suddenly nervous at the same time. Annie's bedroom was only a few steps away from where he was now standing. How many hours had he spent sitting here in the kitchen or there in the front room over the past few months? Yet he had never set foot in here, he thought as he crossed the previously forbidden threshold into the dim sanctum, silently closing the door behind him.

Unexpectedly, a small light on the bedside table flicked on. For an instant, he was blinded. Squinting, he saw Annie's arm pull away from the wall switch, then back out through the other doorway from her bedroom that led to the hallway. He wondered briefly where she had gone.

While he waited for her to return, he began to look around. The walls of Annie's room were painted a crisp white, just like every other wall in the house that he'd seen. It looked nothing like Ginny's room, though the only other girl's bedroom he'd ever had reason to be in. Ginny had crammed loads of pictures and trinkets and books into far too small a space. It appeared that Annie, on the other hand, was not a fan of clutter.

Her room held a full-sized bed, neatly made and covered with a patchwork quilt composed exclusively of shades of blue. The bedside table held a small lamp that was currently the sole illumination for the room, as well as an alarm clock. The only other furniture was a small roll-top desk that was closed and a small bookcase which held perhaps only a dozen books. Arranged on the rest of the shelves were some seashells, a bird's nest, a few dried flowers, and the scarab he and Fred had bought for her in Egypt. He recognized several of the treasures Annie had collected in the woods and on the beach with them as a child.

A large frame perched on top of the bookcase attracted his attention next. It held a collage of photos: all were of their trip to the beach two summers ago. He was familiar

with only five of them; the rest he had never seen before. It pleased him immensely that he was in every one of them.

Annie tapped gently on his shoulder then, and he turned to look at her. She was holding out a towel for him. She already had one draped over her shoulders and was using it to gently dry her hair. He noticed she had closed the hallway door behind her.

"Stop dripping on my floor, you nosy git," she scolded in a whisper.

He shook his head vigorously like a wet dog, splattering her with raindrops. She giggled almost silently as he hung the unused towel around his neck. He picked up the frame, holding it out for them to study together.

He pointed at one near the center. It was a photo of him, asleep. "That's a bit creepy, huh?" he whispered and smiled.

"I know! Sorry! I had such a crush on you then, I was a bit mental," she replied.

"I don't mean the snap I mean me," he chuckled. "I was probably having very indecent dreams about you at that moment," he confessed. He set the frame back on the bookcase and pulled Annie in close for a kiss.

George shivered involuntarily, whether from the kiss or his wet clothing he wasn't sure, and Annie pushed herself away slightly.

"You should get out of those wet clothes," she said, "before you catch cold. I've put a shirt and pajama pants on the bed there the largest-sized things I have. They likely still won't fit, you are so freakishly tall, but it should be an entertaining sight." She laughed quietly.

He examined the black t-shirt and blue flannel pants on the bed. The pants would be far too short, but the waist did have a drawstring, so they might work. He quietly began making clucking hen sounds to tease her.

"Give me your wet things, and I'll put them in the dryer. You can have them back in less than an hour," she giggled.

George pulled off his wet shirt over his head.

Annie looked up at him with a sly smile, laying her hands on his now bare chest and tracing the outlines of the muscles there. "This is my favorite birthday present ever," she said, only half-teasing.

George pulled her closer and they started kissing again. His shirt flopped wetly to the floor.

"Your turn," he whispered in her ear. "Wouldn't want you to get the sniffles, you know," he added. He took the hem of her shirt in his hands and lifted it gently.

Annie eagerly lifted her arms over her head.

George echoed her earlier motions on his chest: caressing her collar, shoulders, lingering over her chest. He bent to kiss the notch on the top of her breastbone where the heart pendant rested.

Annie thought she might faint. To her surprise, she discovered every cliché she had ever read in a romantic novel was apparently accurate: her knees were weak, she couldn't catch her breath, her stomach was performing a gymnastic routine, and her heart was pounding with deafening echoes in her ears.

Annie slowly drew her hands down George's torso to his waist without stopping the kiss. She heard his sharp intake of breath as her fingers worked to undo his belt, then button, then zipper. He had one hand on the small of her back, pressing her waist tightly against him, and the fingers of the other were tangled in her still-damp hair. Keeping their lips together, she momentarily pulled her hips slightly away from his.

George preferred to wear his trousers loose, and they were bottom heavy due to being soaked from the rain. Without Annie's body or the belt holding them in place, they fell to his ankles. He stepped out of them toward Annie, reuniting the connection of their bodies from the previous moment.

Their kissing was more urgent now. Their hands couldn't explore each other fast enough. They kissed for several minutes more, clutching each other tightly, unable to press their bodies together tightly enough to satisfy the yearning for contact. Electricity overloaded every nerve ending in her skin.

George's fingers became frustrated with Annie's waistband. "A little help, here," he urged in a whisper.

She dislodged her fingers from his neck and began taking off her soaking wet jeans herself with a little bit of a struggle. She became unbalanced in the process, and they both giggled as he caught her by the arm before she could fall to the floor with a crash.

Some of the frantic energy had now dissipated due to the humorous moment. They resumed kissing, caressing more gently now. George found more success with unhooking Annie's bra and slid the straps off her shoulders. While his focus was drawn to the previously unexplored territory of her bare breasts, Annie used her fingers to slide the waistband of his underwear off his hips, and they fell to the floor.

George held Annie's body tightly to his own, relishing the electrifying heat of skin-to-skin contact. He lifted her off the floor, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. He bent and set her down on the bed. Annie then leaned back, propping her head and shoulders up with her elbows.

George's mind was racing. He reckoned he understood enough about the mechanics of what was about to happen. He'd read his share of racy stories and seen enough movie love scenes to know what was coming in a rudimentary way. Not to mention the innumerable dreams he'd had about it. He figured he knew pretty well what to expect: how this was going to feel the pleasure of release for himself, at least. He was, after all, a healthy nineteen-year-old boy and no stranger to the solitary pursuit of self-gratification.

And now it was about be his turn to experience it himself. For real. With Annie.

George took a moment to stare at her. He was grateful she had left the light on, enabling him to take in the sight. None of his fantasies had come close to accurately portraying the golden hue of her bare skin or the graceful curves of her figure. Or the desirous look in her violet eyes which nearly made him gasp aloud.

Annie smiled with what she hoped was encouragement. She was rewarded with a reverent smile from George; he seemed pleased with her. She reveled in the sensations of his hands as they trailed down her body from her shoulders. When he reached her waist, she lifted her hips an inch from the bed. He looked up into her eyes for a moment, searching for confirmation, then back to her body as he pulled the last tiny bit of clothing off of her.

He crawled onto the bed, holding the weight of his body well above hers. She let her head fall back to rest on the pillows and reached out to pull his body down closer to her. She drew her knees up, pressing the insides of her thighs against his hips.

Annie laced her fingers behind his neck and started kissing him again. She felt the pressure of his body on hers increase slightly and longed for even more. She wanted to pull him down onto her, for George to crush himself against her. He could not get close enough to satisfy her craving for him. The pulse of desire was pounding so loudly in her head, her ears were practically ringing.

"I'm ready," she whispered.

He lifted himself up again so he could look once more into her eyes. Without looking away from him, Annie reached over and opened the bedside table drawer with one hand. She pulled out a now familiar-looking little packet. George briefly glanced at it, then returned his gaze to Annie's violet eyes.

"Allow me?" she whispered and smiled.

George smiled tentatively in answer. He heard a tiny ripping-paper sound, then a second later felt her fingertips put the condom on. He gasped and closed his eyes. He had been mistaken, before: he had apparently vastly underestimated how this was going to feel. He fell back to kissing her.

Annie thrilled to hear him make another gasp when she had touched him so intimately. It pleased her to think that she could make him as wild with desire as she was feeling. She loved the raw force of his kisses now. She took his hips in her hands and pulled him to her.

George plunged into Annie. He heard her briefly inhale, her breath slightly hissing through her teeth. Then she uttered a little moan, followed by a deep sigh.

He was astonished at the intensity of pleasure no, make that *euphoria* that he was feeling. Each little noise she made, each movement of her body, each caress of her hands quickly drove him to the brink. A tiny part of his mind realized that it was too soon, wanted to try to delay it, but had no idea how. He was swept overboard.

Annie clung to George's body. She had never imagined this would feel so wonderful! All the stories she had heard or read had made it sound like the first time was something to be endured, not enjoyed. But she thought she might burst with the joy of it to finally share *this...* with *him...* after the long months of self-denial and restraint. It was too much to be contained....

She heard George groan, then felt him shudder slightly. They were both startled when the bulb of the tiny table lamp beside them exploded with a loud pop in the same instant, plunging the room into darkness.

They lay there together for several minutes, catching their breaths. As the sweat on their bodies began to cool them, then chill them, they crawled under the quilt. George gathered her into his arms. He was quiet for quite a while, and she assumed he might have fallen asleep.

"Are you awake?" he whispered after another minute.

"Yes," she answered.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" he asked gently, full of concern.

"Of course not! It was wonderful!" she assured him honestly.

"Thanks," he chuckled. "Not quite as wonderful for you as it was for me, I expect."

"Don't be silly," she teased, then shifted onto her back. She understood what he meant that he had climaxed and she hadn't but it didn't matter to her in the least. She kissed him as he leaned closer, then added, "We just need more practice is all," she said softly with a coy smile.

George murmured in agreement. He stroked her body with long caresses, gently kissing her lips, jaw, neck, collarbone.

"You're driving me mad, you know," she moaned quietly, unable to hold still.

"Show me how," he whispered.

In a million years, Annie never would have imagined she would be capable of what she began to do now. A day ago, even an hour ago, the mere thought of it would have absolutely mortified her. But her desire for George was immediate and overpowering, and he was fueling it further with all his kisses and caresses, his naked closeness. She took his hand in hers and showed him how, the way she had learned all on her own, to bring her to release.

But this was infinitely better than those comparatively desperate times alone. His kisses continued, and his whispers of love in her ear enhanced every previously pleasant and familiar sensation into something new and far superior. She arched her back and softly gasped his name when the zing of electricity zapped through her body, flooding her with a warm, glowing ecstasy.

They both slept lightly for a couple of hours. George began to stir first. He blinked one eye open the clock told him it was still rather early in the morning but the light through the window was growing slightly brighter. He had accidentally rolled apart from Annie while they dozed, and his body craved to remedy that mistake. Gently and quietly, he curled himself around her once again.

Annie began to stir as she felt the growing warmth of George's chest against her back. She stretched carefully so as not to break the connection and yawned, ending with a smile.

"Good morning," whispered George.

"The best one ever," she whispered back.

They lay there together for a couple of minutes, savoring the intimate closeness.

Annie soon felt a new pressure point near her hip. "Ahem," she teased and carefully shifted onto her back to face him, smiling.

"Sorry," he chuckled. "I'm not used to waking up naked next to a beautiful, naked woman. With a bird's nest for hair, it appears."

She playfully boxed his ears.

He began kissing her again. "Weren't you saying something about practice last night?" he murmured.

She giggled quietly and nodded. "I could get used to this," she whispered.

"Me as well," he agreed, filling his palm with her soft breast.

His kissing and petting quickly brought her to a similar state of arousal. Sweet, silky bits of skin he'd formerly only felt through a layer of lacy bra or satiny knickers were now warm, responsive, and clamoring for his exploratory attention. And then she grabbed his arse with both hands, commandeering and redirecting his attention elsewhere.

Rather more familiar with the territory, so to speak, George was able to implement a few improvements over his first attempt. He managed to hold himself off a bit longer, for one, despite the fact that Annie felt even more amazing this time, if that were indeed theoretically possible. Not to mention she hit upon the most magnificent rhythm with her hips, this go.

How does she make that sound? he marveled when his ears filled with her breathy little whines, impatient and encouraging. It fueled the most incredible feeling in the pit of his groin. Meanwhile, he barely controlled the animalistic urge to grunt with each thrust. Then she moaned his name, and he was lost.

Disappointment in his own sub-par performance slightly diminished the mind-spinning euphoria he felt in the wake of his climax (inasmuch as any post-orgasmic teenage boy could register such a negative emotion). But George had proven himself a determined fellow in many things before this, however, and he set himself the goal of making Annie's current experience better than her first. With barely a pause to get his bearings, his fingers began to work with delicate precision, just as she'd taught him a few short hours before: sliding, plunging, swirling.

He felt her fingernails dig into his shoulder, her body writhe against his. Her back arched, pressing her breasts against his chest, and she bit her lip in an attempt to stifle a

shuddering cry of her own. The whole business nearly brought him fully ready to go once again.

"You were paying attention," she gasped, catching her breath as she dazedly lay back on the pillows.

"Quick learner, me," he agreed, also a bit out of breath.

"It's getting late. You'd probably better go," she said reluctantly a few minutes later. She sat up, tossed the quilt off her body, and threw her legs over the edge of the bed. She stretched her arms above her head, arching her back. Then she stood up and surveyed their clothes scattered across her floor.

"They're still a bit damp and horribly wrinkled, but they'll have to do as they are," she whispered as she bent to collect them.

"Come back here," he ordered her.

"George! You have to get dressed!" she scolded in a whisper. Her voice sounded stern, but her face was smiling as she turned back and hopped into the bed. She tossed his clothes onto the blanket at the foot of the bed and dove back into his arms.

He kissed her, then gently rolled her onto her stomach. She felt his fingers tracing something against the small of her back. "What do we have here?" he asked her with a smile in his voice.

Oh, right. She had forgotten about the fact that he had never seen it. She'd kept it carefully and successfully hidden from him at the beach last summer. There must have been just enough ambient light in the room from the streetlight outside for him to notice.

"What does it look like, idiot?" she taunted him.

George summoned his wand from his trousers, and Annie's room lit up with a dim, bluish light. "Hmm. It's obviously a tattoo, but the question is, who the hell is that supposed to be?"

"Don't be thick," she said dismissively as she started to roll away, but he pressed her hip back down onto the mattress with his hand.

"You're not going anywhere until I get some answers," he said playfully. He moved quickly and sat on her legs, pinning her in place on the bed. His fingertip kept caressing the tattoo while he said, "When did you get this, and who is this strange man etched forever into your flesh?"

She tried to use her arms for leverage to roll over and escape, but he caught one of them and gently pulled it behind her body. Far from being in pain, she found being immobilized by him a bit thrilling, to be honest. Frustrating, surely, but also... tantalizing.

"Yes, it is a tattoo," she said.

"Previously established fact. Keep talking," he commanded.

"I've had it for a while," she confessed.

"Hang on.... Flash of insight coming.... Is *this* the mysterious Christmas gift from two years ago?"

Annie failed to completely stifle a giggle. She was a bit shocked he had connected the dots so quickly. She squirmed a bit, trying futilely to escape rather than admit to anything out loud.

George leaned forward, pressing his body against hers to keep her still, and whispered in her ear. "I'll take that as a yes. And now for the identity of the gentleman in question, who will spend eternity so close to your lovely arse. I'm quite envious, you see. Go on, spill it."

"You can't honestly be as blind as you are stupid," she teased back.

He pulled back up to sit on her legs again, she presumed in order to get another look. "Patron saint of England? St. George and a dragon?" he asked.

Annie responded by pounding her feet on the bed. "Let me up!" she demanded in a loud whisper.

"Aha!" He drew the word out, unfazed by her struggling. Apparently, saying the name out loud triggered a 'eureka' moment for him. "Well, well, my dear. It seems you do care for me. And quite a bit, now, don't you? *Saint* George, though? That's a stretch."

"You're insufferable!" she cried in a muted voice. "Put your clothes on and go home!"

He chuckled and released his hold, permitting her roll over onto her back again. Then he pinned her down with his body once more, holding her wrists to the mattress at her head. When he spoke next, every phrase was punctuated with teasing kisses along her neck, jaw and collar. "Don't worry... your secret's safe with me.... I must confess... I rather like it. It's almost... sort of... a *brand*, isn't it?" he taunted her. "Marking my territory... so to speak. Yes... I like that very much indeed."

She desperately wanted to argue with him, if nothing else than for the sake of her self respect. His smugness was infuriating, even if it was justified. But the close weight of his body, compounded by his kisses, was leaving her at a loss for words, much to her chagrin.

"It's late. You have to go now," was the best she could muster.

George sighed theatrically, reluctantly admitting to the truth of her statement. He got up and began to dress. His still damp clothes felt excruciatingly cold on his skin. He gasped and swore as he pulled them on.

Annie hadn't moved from her place on the bed. He took one last look at her, committing to memory the vision of her naked body laid out on her bed before him. Then he bent to kiss her and whispered into her ear, "I'll come back tonight. And every night hereafter, if you'll let me."

"Maybe I'll be here, maybe I won't," she teased petulantly.

"Then I'll have to mount my trusty steed and come find you, won't I?"

They laughed quietly together.

Annie rolled onto her side to face him. "Have a good day, then," she added by way of goodbye, burrowing back under her quilt.

"It can only go downhill from here," he said, shaking his head as he kissed her one last time. Then he stood up straight and started to spin on the spot. He disappeared with a familiar quiet pop.

*

George prayed he'd be home before his brother woke up, allowing him to sneak unnoticed back into his own bed. Even better, maybe Fred had spent the night elsewhere as well, and their flat would be empty. The waitress last night had certainly seemed receptive before he and Annie had left Fred, per his request, at the pub.

Their flat was still dark and quiet as he rematerialized in the front room. Perhaps he was in luck....

"Welcome home, brother."

Shit. He could hear the malicious anticipation of a disembowelment in Fred's voice. "Fred, what an unpleasant surprise. Didn't expect to find you here. Wallowing in rejection, are you?" he needled him. Perhaps the best defense would be a good offense?

"Rejection?" Fred chuckled. "Not exactly. In fact, *quite* the opposite. I was so eager to come home to you, my dear brother, and share my tale of conquest that I left the lovely Bridget during the wee hours of the morning. I was planning to offer you the benefit of precious wisdom gained from *experience*, you see.... And what did I find waiting for me? Empty flat, empty bed, no brother...."

"And you were so disappointed to be lacking an audience for your exaggerated, if not completely false tale," George parried.

The light flicked on, causing him to blink at the brightness as his eyes adjusted. Fred was seated at the small table where they ate whenever they weren't mooching back at the Burrow. A smirk was smeared across his brother's face.

"Yes, I admit I was disappointed at first. But as I sit here looking at you now, staggering home at dawn, I see that you must have quite a tale of your own to share. My, my, look at the state of you. Those clothes have been lying in a heap all night long somewhere, I'll wager. Perhaps a floor? In Ottery?"

"Or slept in." George turned away from his brother's salacious gaze and poured himself a glass of water from the tap, affecting nonchalance. Perhaps Fred's penchant for always believing himself first and best at everything might come in handy now, and he'd be willing to believe the lie.

"Hmm. Now that *would* be a disappointment. Surely you can come up with something better than that," Fred taunted him.

"Only little girls kiss and tell; let's choose to be grown-ups, shall we? I have no interest whatsoever in your *story*, and I mean that in the strictly fictional sense. Do me a favor and keep your lurid imagination to yourself," he replied. Not only was he confident that Annie would be mortified to think he would share such a private thing about her with Fred, George bristled at the idea that his brother thought it was any of his goddamn business in the first place.

"Only guilty consciences fuel a blush like that, George. *Oh ho*, we have been naughty, haven't we? Imagine that... we were born on the same day as well," Fred snickered.

George shook his head in false denial of his brother's assumption. "I'm embarrassed for you, you bloody immature prat. At least pretend to have a little dignity," he urged, leaning back against the counter.

"You're trying awfully hard to defend her reputation. How noble of you, George! I assure you, there's no need for further pretense," he chuckled. "Annie's a warm-blooded woman, after all, and entitled to her fun, just as we are."

"You *really* should shut up," he warned his interrogator. "A broken face won't help you much tonight at whatever pub you'll be trolling for your next imaginary escapade."

"Escalating it to threats of violence, now?" Fred laughed. "Come off it, George. God knows you put your time in pursuing her. You deserve a payoff. I believe the term is 'friends with benefits.'"

"You have absolutely no idea what you're talking about. I'm taking a shower. Feel free to be gone by the time I'm done," George said, trying to make it sound like he didn't care so perhaps his brother would drop the whole thing before it really did come down to punches.

"We have plans today, remember? Checking out the old Zonko's in Hogsmeade. And afterward, we'll have a nice long chat..." Fred called out after him.

George shut the bathroom door behind him in hopes it would put an end to the conversation.

The trip to Hogsmeade was a complete bust. The streets were empty of students, thanks to the cancellation of further school visits due to all the recent troubles. What was the use of expansion into a dead market, as it currently stood?

They decided to hit the Three Broomsticks for a meal, then trek up to the castle. Maybe afterward they could see Ron and Ginny and drop off his birthday gift before they left town.

The brothers were seated at a table and George had just taken a bite when Fred started up again. "So... back to you and Annie."

"Fred, I *really* don't want to talk about this with you right now." *Or ever, if I can help it....*

"Humor me. Now that I've had some sleep, some food, I'm in a far better mood. Feeling much more brotherly."

"Not to mention chatty. How wonderful," George mumbled sarcastically around his mouthful of food.

"Are you sure she understands it's casual?" Fred asked in his most serious tone of voice. "Remember what I warned you about when this all began. I will not tolerate you ruining our friendship by breaking her heart."

"How does it feel to be so far off the mark, you can't even see it anymore?" George taunted his brother, shaking his head.

"Okay, I'll bite. What am I missing?"

George rolled his eyes at his brother's thick-headedness. "What part of the last ten months has led you to believe this is something *casual* for me or for Annie? When I'm not stuck at the shop or on a job somewhere with you, where do you think I spend my pittance of free time? On the rare occasion when we three go out to a pub together, which of us is looking for a new companion? Is your head really that far up your own arse that you can't see it?"

"So... what? Are you saying you're *in love* with her? That she's *the one*?" Fred asked incredulously, using sarcastically exaggerated finger quotes.

"How can that be so hard for you to believe?" George protested.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe because we're eighteen years old? Or maybe because there's a world full of girls that you've never met?" Fred cried.

"Nearly nineteen," George countered. "And I don't need to meet anyone else. I've found what I want. Just lucky that way, I guess." He shrugged, indicating there was no point in arguing the matter further.

"Really, George? The girl next door? Your childhood playmate?" Fred said skeptically. "Don't get me wrong; I think Annie's a great girl. But I can't fathom how you can be so eager to throw your freedom away like that. We're just out of school. We're making good money. The world's our oyster, as they say. Why would you even be looking for 'the one' at this point?"

"You're not making any sense, as usual," George argued. "If I've happened to have found 'the one,' why would I keep looking? You don't want me to hurt Annie, yet you can't understand why I wouldn't want to cheat on her?"

"I never said anything about cheating, and you know it," Fred countered. "What I'm saying to you goes the same for Annie. Don't you think we're too young to be so serious? Whatever happened to sowing some wild oats? Experiencing what life has to offer?"

"There's no point in sowing oats just for the sowing's sake," George insisted. "If it doesn't have any chance of being something real, why would you bother? It's just a whole load of bullshit, otherwise."

Fred snorted. "Don't you sound like a good little girl! The point is: it's *fun*. It feels good. Nobody gets hurt."

"And you sound like a prick," George argued. "What you're describing is something empty and meaningless. And I guarantee you that somebody gets hurt in the long run."

"When did you get to be so middle-aged? Is your entire world view so tainted, or is it just limited to sex?" Fred asked.

George rolled his eyes again, looking away from the table, refusing to answer the question. He took a long drink from a bottle of butterbeer, finishing it.

"What about Annie? I hope she's being more sensible about this. Or is she just as ridiculously eager to limit her options as you are?" Fred asked.

George couldn't hide the smile that spread across his face as he thought back to this morning's discovery of her tattoo. "I'm pretty confident the attachment is mutual. Virtually permanent," he added with a snort.

"Permanent? That's a scary word. I'd be running for the hills, if I were you." Fred looked at him with amused alarm.

"That's the difference between us, bro. To me, 'permanent' sounds bang-on bloody perfect," he said as they both stood up to leave.

"Shall we head up to the castle, then?" Fred asked, ready to move on in more ways than one.

"Sounds good to me," George agreed as he grabbed Ron's birthday gift. He followed his brother out the door.

It was just after eleven before they finally made it back to their flat that night. They had stayed as long as Pomfrey would let them, hoping Ron might wake up, meanwhile re-hashing the details of his poisoning while they waited. Where had the tainted mead come from, and who was its intended victim? Everyone had their own theory, each one as seemingly implausible as the last. Hermione seemed to have the clearest ideas, but even those didn't lead to any likely suspects.

Clever Hermione. Prim, mousy little Hermione her teary eyes never left Ron's face as he lay there unconscious.

George had never noticed her much before. He reckoned maybe his recent time spent with Annie had brought him more in tune with the previously inscrutable body language of girls. But poor Hermione had it bad for his little brother - that fact was glaringly evident to him now.

He wondered for how long this little stew had been simmering. He'd have to give Ron the business for it the next time he saw him up and about.

And Pomfrey had assured them Ron would be fine. It was the only reason they had been persuaded to leave. That and the fact that Harry had promised to write them with any news about Ron or the criminal responsible, whoever it turned out to be.

George yawned, standing in the warm light of the front room of their flat. "I told Annie I'd see her tonight. I'm going to check in, at least, so she won't worry. See you in a bit," he announced to his brother shortly after they had arrived in Diagon Alley.

"I'm so bloody knackered, I'm not even going to give you any shit for it tonight. Give her my best," Fred added with an answering yawn, staggering into their bedroom.

A few minutes later, George stepped onto the dark street in front of the Leaky Cauldron and turned on his phone. A few moments after that, it vibrated in his hands, announcing a message. He casually paced up the street as he listened to it.

"It's me. I'm awake, no matter how late. Come let me know you're okay.... Love you." Her voice was quiet and clearly concerned.

The time stamp said 10:45 p.m. not so very long ago. He *had* promised to see her tonight, so it was reasonable she'd be worried that he hadn't shown up by fifteen minutes before her curfew. He decided a personal visit would be preferable to a phone call. *Especially after last night*, he thought, unable to suppress a smug smile.

He Apparated to one of his usual spots at the back corner of the garden, out of view from any windows of the house. Noting all the lights were off and the house was quiet, he crept around to Annie's ivy-wreathed window. He glanced around the ground for something to toss at the glass to let her know he was here, not wanting to trample the plantings below it.

"Looking for something, Romeo?"

He jumped and spun around to face the voice addressing him, uttering a choked swear.

"Sorry.... Are you all right?" Annie asked with a giggle.

"Just let me swallow my heart. You're a sneaky little bugger, aren't you?" he muttered, catching his breath.

"You're the one creeping around my garden, lurking under my window like a peeper," she teased.

"Right. I'll just be going, then," he teased back.

"Don't be so sensitive, Sally. Give us a kiss, at least, before you march off in a huff."

"Maybe just one little peck," he said with mock reluctance as he pulled her close. They kissed with some enthusiasm before the adrenaline subsided.

"Spill it, then. What on earth could have kept you away from me until nearly midnight tonight?" she asked in a snarky voice.

"Only the smallest of snags: my little brother was poisoned and nearly died at school today."

"Oh my God, George, you're not joking! Is he all right?" Annie cried, barely able to keep her voice quiet.

"Yes, he'll be fine. And for your genuine level of panic and remorse, I forgive you for being such a shit a moment ago."

"What happened? Tell me everything!" she demanded.

George began with their visit to Hogsmeade and the decision he and Fred had come to about their possible expansion, but left out the rest of his conversation with his brother at the pub. He then recounted for the seemingly hundredth time that night all the details that were known with any certainty, as well as most of the speculations.

"So, nobody knows for sure how or why or who did any of this?" she asked.

"Not yet..." he admitted.

Annie's eyes narrowed into a glare. "You've been lying to me for years now, haven't you? 'Hogwarts is so safe,' you said, over and over. Yet I've heard nothing but tales of possession by evil spirits, monsters on the loose, soul-sucking demons, raving escaped criminal psychopaths...."

"Sirius was an innocent man! I told you that!" he interrupted.

"Right. Turns out it was your brother's pet rat that was the actual psychopath, and he's scarpered off to join the Grand Master Psychopath," she spat back angrily. "Whatever. I've been a bloody fool for years to trust you at that school. The student body at Hogwarts certainly seems to be in mortal peril for most of any given term. Your family in particular, I might add, seems to be a magnet for it. I can assure you, George, that this sort of business does not happen in *normal* schools," she said with angry anxiousness.

"I suppose when you put it that way, I can see your point. At the time, though, it mostly just seemed dead boring," he argued playfully, trying to distract her with humor.

"That's because you're an idiot with a pathological need to be reckless," she snapped but threw her arms around his waist and held him tightly. "I can see now how lucky I am to have you here now. That's the only explanation for it: nothing but blind, dumb luck."

"I just love it when the hysterical mother hen in you takes over," he joked, oozing sarcasm himself. But the truth was her concern did touch him, and he lifted her head to face him. "May I come in?" he whispered, just before he kissed her.

"I wish I could say yes," she sighed softly. "But we'd better not risk it: Gran's sleeping fitfully tonight. She's gotten up once already."

"Oh," he said, his disappointment unmistakable in his voice. They continued to kiss for a while anyway.

It was getting late, or rather very early, and Annie took his face in her hands and held it apart from her own. "You have to go home," she urged reluctantly.

"This sucks," he sighed.

"You used to be content with a bit of snogging," she joked.

"How did you ever get that completely false impression?" he argued half-teasingly.

"Go!" she laughed.

Waiting With Bated Breath

Chapter 27 of 80

George's birthday starts out disappointing but ends with a bang. Fred knows exactly how to make him squirm. And when George shows up with some very bad news, Annie ponders just what it is she's getting into. HBP spoiler is a biggie.

Chapter 27: Waiting With Bated Breath

Spring Summer 1997

George stared out Annie's window at the nearly day-bright light emanating from the miserable yellow ball looming high in the sky. He was sitting on her bed, back propped up against the headboard, feeling quite put-out.

"I think I hate the full moon. I'm beginning to appreciate a werewolf's point of view," he complained sullenly. "It's not fair. *Your* birthday was far more enjoyable."

"Didn't you have a nice time at the restaurant?" she asked him in a taunting voice. She was sitting next to him on her bed, holding his hand while leaning her head on his shoulder, keeping an ear out for her Gran.

He understood why. It was still somewhat new, this particular sort of sneaking around: being together in her bedroom. If it wouldn't have disrupted more things than it silenced, he could have put a soundproof charm on the room. But except for the convenience of Apparating, George had discovered that magic was of no help at all to him here.

He sighed. "Yes. It was nice. Thank you," he answered her without sounding or feeling very sincere.

He should have seen it coming sooner, he supposed. The fun was going to have to come to an end at some point, at least temporarily. Biology will out, after all.

She giggled almost silently.

He turned to look at her to find a half-smothered smile on her face. He was beginning to feel rather annoyed at her lack of sympathy. "Don't see what's so damn funny about it. Maybe I should just go," he said petulantly and shifted toward the edge of the bed.

"Careful. You'll shoot yourself in the foot, if you're not," she warned him in a surprisingly seductive tone.

He looked at her more carefully this time. Annie now had a sly smile and smoldering glint in her eyes. *All right, then*, he decided, curiosity getting the better of him. *Couldn't hurt to sit tight for a bit longer...*

Annie then climbed into his lap, facing him, and began to kiss him.

He responded reluctantly at first because this could only end up in frustration, after all then with more enthusiasm, despite himself *Perhaps a bit of a snog was better than nothing at all*, he consoled himself.

He began unbuttoning her shirt, kissing her collarbone, then followed her bra strap down her chest where it began to swell into soft fullness. It was one of his favorite activities now: undressing her. Hard to resist the temptation under the best of circumstances.

Now that they had taken their relationship to the next level (and he couldn't imagine a more accurate euphemism for the state of things between them since the night of her birthday), every minute he spent with Annie held the magnetic potential of being the greatest ever. Nothing else could compare to it: no potion or spell he could imagine, not the most spectacular magical creature, not even the best day of Quidditch.

She leaned close to his ear and whispered, "Have you ever heard *offellatio*, George?"

He paused in his kisses but continued pushing her shirt the rest of the way off her shoulders. He shook his head slightly, barely heeding her question. "Sounds like a spell," he commented distractedly as he returned to kissing her neck, caressing her breasts.

Odd thing to bring up, actually. He immediately dismissed her question from his mind. He could see no point in expending much effort thinking about it now. If it was that important, they could talk about it later. There were far more pressing things to occupy his thoughts at the moment than a chat about random magical trivia.

She began to move again, easing herself onto all fours while kissing him. But then she soon crawled out of his reach, for some frustrating reason.

"Lie down," she told him.

He squirmed his way down the bed until his head was on a pillow. His curiosity was piqued; that was for sure. It certainly wasn't typical: Annie ordering him about like this. After a moment's consideration, George decided he maybe liked it, perhaps quite a bit. *Kind of... sexy. Certainly arousing. As if she needs any help in that department*

Then she reached for his belt and began to unfasten it.

He grabbed her hands to still them. "What are you doing?" he asked, truly confused now. It wasn't like Annie to tease him.

She gently pushed his hands away, then up above his head. "I'm giving you your birthday present," she said softly, reassuring him with a few more kisses.

He could feel his confusion dissolving into a far more potent mix of desire and frustration. Then she returned to his trousers, unfastening them and hauling them off with no further argument from him. He no longer had the mental resources for it.

She brought her lips back to his mouth, kissing him, lightly twirling her fingers in his hair around his ears. It was impossible now to focus his mind on trying to figure out what was going on. His body was utterly confident it didn't matter anyway.

"Not a sound, remember," she whispered into his ear, nibbling on his earlobe.

That's a strange warning, he thought. *Again, with the orders? Why was she so chatty tonight?*

While he was distracted, pondering her last command, she casually pushed his shirt up but not off to expose his stomach and part of his chest.

What the hell is going on here? his brain demanded.

Why do you care? shouted his every nerve ending in concert.

Slowly, she began to kiss her way down his neck, chest, and stomach. Again, he lost his train of thought as he felt her lips and fingers on his skin. They were everywhere at once, it seemed.

And then, suddenly, she was kissing him *there*. Without warning, her mouth and tongue and lips and hands and fingers had focused onto one place. Miraculously, it quickly became so much more than kissing there was licking and stroking and sucking and *oh, sweet Merlin* the vibrations when she started to hum.

Dear. God.

He grabbed a pillow and shoved it onto his face barely in time to muffle an otherwise unstilled groan of pleasure. He bit down on it in an attempt to follow her instruction for quiet.

He had never felt all of her concentrated efforts restricted to such a narrowly-defined area before. And the part of his body she had chosen to grace with her attentions! He had never imagined such a thing. He would never have thought of it in his wildest dreams, and he had had a few, he reckoned. Had she invented this? Had anyone ever felt like this before?

The sensations were too intense to experience in silence. It was maddening.

Warm.

Wet.

Soft.

Another moan escaped him. It was too much....

Annie smiled as she kissed her way back up George's torso, then pulled away slightly to look at him. He lay there, motionless, with a pillow on his face.

She quietly giggled to herself and reached up to pull it off. It resisted her initial tug for a moment, then pulled away as she heard his teeth snap shut *Had he really been biting it?* she wondered in surprise.

George's face, fully illuminated by the bright moonlight streaming in from the window, was smiling slightly in stunned, silent bliss. He slowly turned to look at her, amazement gracing his features now. Gone was the face dripping with self-pity that had been evident just a few short minutes ago. He pulled her closer to him and held her in a tender embrace, stroking her hair, kissing the top of her head absently.

She nearly giggled out loud, pondering the humorously sharp contrast between his expression now and the disappointed shock on his face when she'd pointed out two days ago the convergence of his upcoming birthday and the full moon. He'd been pouting about it ever since. The first day of her period had always come on the day of the full moon, ever since puberty began, and poor George's birthday hopes had gotten crushed by the coincidence. At least, she had let him think so. Perhaps, in retrospect, that had been a little cruel of her.

That had been when she had gotten the idea, upon seeing his look of utter dejection. His was a silly reaction, actually, considering what they had been up to throughout the month of March, since the night of her own birthday. A few days of going without wouldn't have hurt them. But that heartbroken look on his face had pulled on her heartstrings and massaged her ego as well, to the point that she had become determined to reward him for it.

Annie was no less innocent than George when it came to experience with sex. But growing up as she had in a world that used it to sell everything from television programs to vehicles to cosmetics, she had been unable to escape a wider exposure to the depth and breadth of the subject. Her years in the local school had at least familiarized her with many sexual concepts and ideas that were apparently completely foreign to him. It had only taken about five minutes' worth of searching on the internet to learn what she needed to know.

Another memory came to mind: the first time she had ever heard of oral sex. She had been fourteen when a boy at school had told her someone had written something about her on a bathroom stall door, and he'd asked if it was true. She had gotten detention for punching him in the face, then for sneaking into the boys' toilet to read it herself.

"Annie Jones

gives

great head"

She had set off the school fire alarm in her attempt to burn it off the metal door. How ironic to find it had been a prophetic statement after all.

*

He knew. They knew he knew. He knew they knew he knew, and so on. And therein lay all the fun.

George had never confessed to it outright. Never let the barest acknowledgement slip through his lips. Fred had not yet been able to cajole, tease, or trick him into telling the truth. But he hadn't given up trying, either. The challenge was irresistible. And so utterly entertaining. He simply couldn't help himself.

As if it mattered that they were. As if he didn't know the truth already.

It was as plain as the brightly blushing looks on their faces whenever he needled them about it. It was as obvious as the collection of bruises on his body in various stages of healing, resulting from Annie's pinches in retaliation for alluding to it. It was as clear as the smothered smiles, darting looks, and squirming evasions that were intended to convince him of exactly the opposite but were instead confirming every suspicion.

No one on earth came closer to knowing exactly what was going through the head of his brother like he did, Fred reckoned. Not even little Miss Annie Jones, no matter what she thought otherwise. As a united front, Fred and his twin could lie like the most accomplished of criminals. And one doesn't develop such consummate skill without learning to recognize a tell especially ones as blatant as these.

George and Annie were having sex. A lot of it, if Fred was any judge.

George seldom spent two nights in a row at their London flat anymore. Tried to get him to believe instead that he was staying at the Burrow*Mum needed something fixed... sure*, or Bill's place (Ha! As if Bill wasn't enjoying his bachelorhood, living out from under Mum's watchful eyes as much as the rest of us), or even that he*had* spent the night in the flat whenever Fred had not (*Fat chance he'd let an opportunity like that pass him by*).

Whatever. As good a liar as George could be and Fred had seen George's artistry in falsehood for himself a myriad of times he was not fooling his twin brother about this for a second.

And good for them. He'd meant it when he'd said his brother George deserved his success. He'd meant it when he'd declared his friend Annie was entitled to some fun. And while their blind, exclusive commitment to each other seemed a bit extreme from Fred's point of view, he didn't begrudge them that either.

She was cute; he granted George that much. Annie had always been good for a laugh and quick with a warm smile, both of which certainly enhanced her attraction. And she had a nice figure couldn't discount that, either. If it hadn't been for his brother's infatuation, Fred might have been tempted to have a go at her himself.

On second thought no, I wouldn't. Fred knew his friend Annie well enough to understand that she was not the sort of girl who would ever have consented to anything casual. Even if she could have been convinced, or maybe gotten drunk enough, to have ever said yes to him, it would have become an unmitigated disaster in record time. And as shallow as he admittedly was when it came to most women, he valued Annie's friendship far too much to risk it for a roll, no matter what.

Good for George, he said to himself once again. *To each his own, I suppose. Leaves more for the rest of us, anyway....*

They were sitting in a bar in Plymouth at the moment, listening to one of Fred's favorite bands performing live. Annie had gotten him tickets, claiming it was a sort of belated birthday present the mention of which made George look away and light up like a flare.

Good grief, he'd thought, *get over yourselves already*.

They had driven Annie's truck over, eaten a delicious supper in a pub, then found themselves a booth with a good view of the stage. The crowd was a mix of ages: older couples who liked to dance to the traditional songs and younger people who just liked the music.

"Ready, Annie?" he asked his friend. The song beginning now had a nice, quick beat and would serve his purpose well.

"Sure, Fred," she replied, smiling as she slid out of the booth.

George smiled at them both and took another drink of his pint. "Have fun," he offered.

Fred led Annie out onto the dance floor. It was what they always did whenever the three of them went out dancing: Fred would have the first dance with his friend, who was very good, he admitted one of the few girls who could actually keep up with him. It meant nothing more than friendship, of course, and all three of them knew it. George would then have all subsequent dances with Annie, and Fred would have all the rest of the girls at the bar as dance partners afterward.

He and Annie were younger than the rest of the dancers on the floor by a half-century at least. The song moved quickly, and Fred spun her around at a nearly breakneck pace, leaving the elderly couples in their wake.

The bait was working: he could see that several girls scattered about the place were watching him with interest. They would be impressed that a young, handsome fellow like himself could dance so well. And they would be imagining what it would be like to dance with him themselves. *Excellent*.

The song ended, and a much slower one began. Fred and Annie returned to the booth. Annie and George kissed, then began to cuddle a bit, swaying in their seat to the slow beat of the song.

Fred knew that his audience's curiosity would now be piqued. He had been dancing with a girl who was now demonstrably unavailable to him. All the girls that had been watching him previously would now be planning how best to catch his unattached eye. *Excellent*.

"So, Fred," Annie said, once she caught her breath from the exertion of the dance. "I've always wondered how you came to be a dancer. Doesn't seem likely, actually, that you would ever be interested or have the patience to learn something so... civilized."

Fred snorted dismissively. He suspected Annie was being thick on purpose. Still, it was important to kill time for a song or so to allow the anticipation amongst the girls in the bar to build for a bit. "I have Minerva McGonagall to thank for that. God bless that dear old battle axe!" he said, holding up his pint.

"Hear, hear," laughed George, joining him in the toast.

"Poor McGonagall has no idea how many randy Romeos she set loose with those Yule Ball dance lessons," Fred laughed. "The moment I saw how eager every single girl in the room was to be asked to dance, not to mention how pathetically chicken most of the other blokes were, I knew that this would be a *useful* lesson for a change."

"I should have known," Annie sighed, shaking her head.

"Yes, you should have," agreed George, laughing.

"Dancing is also an excellent way of vetting girls, I've found," Fred added, looking to stir the pot a little more. Because... well, why not?

"Vetting girls?" she echoed, getting slightly riled.

Excellent, Fred thought. Of course a clever, modern girl like Annie would pick up on his meaning and get a tad offended. And if his audience saw Annie looking a bit put out with him, they might also presume she might get a bit jealous of his attention, and that would fuel the fires even more. *Catty things, girls they enjoy nothing more than thinking they're stealing a boy out from under another girl's nose.*

"Absolutely. Dancing with me requires a good bit of coordination, balance, flexibility, and stamina, as you well know. All qualities that promise to serve well in other, less public pursuits," he said with a smug smile.

"You are a pig, Fred Weasley!" Annie cried indignantly.

Fred shrugged. He had found there were plenty of females who could care less that he was the way he was. And he never pretended to be otherwise. The most attractive ones usually felt the same as he did, in fact.

"Plus, it's a good way to see how well we'd fit together, if you catch my drift," he added with a wink to wind her up for good, perversely enjoying her look of shock and disgust.

"I am never dancing with you again!" she cried.

"Don't get yourself all bent!" he said, laughing. "You're far too short, mouthy... and not to mention *vicious*," he added, sucking in his breath as her sharp little foot connected with his shin, "to hold any attraction for me. I'll leave that little fetish to George, thank you very much." He rubbed what promised to be yet another new bruise on his leg.

"No, thank *you*, Fred," laughed George, putting his arm around Annie and kissing her cheek. Her anger instantly diffused, and she leaned back into his brother, lacing her fingers through his.

How sweet, Fred thought sarcastically, rolling his eyes. "Well, I'm off. There's a blonde at the bar that's nearly got herself brave enough to come over here, and I certainly don't need any comments from you lot to interfere. See you back at the flat, George... or not," he added pointedly, then chuckled at the fact he could get the two of them to blush on command.

"Did you really not know you were bait?" asked George after his brother had sauntered off toward his latest quarry.

"I had my suspicions, of course," Annie said, giggling.

George watched his brother steering the blonde girl around the dance floor. She was smiling, batting her eyes, and generally soaking up the charm that was Fred. "He's the better dancer, I admit," he said.

"Not really," Annie disagreed. "With Fred, everything is a competition. He's always testing me to see if I can keep up. The furthest thing from romantic, that's for sure."

"You always do keep up, though," he pointed out. He'd been as impressed as the rest of the audience had been.

"I'm not letting Fred beat me in *anything*," she said pointedly, smirking.

"Good girl!" George laughed.

They sat a minute longer, enjoying the music, sipping their pints. Annie broke the companionable silence first. "Any news?"

George knew exactly what she was referring to. Odd, dangerous things had been happening at Hogwarts this year, what with the cursed necklace and the poisoned mead. Ron was now fully recovered, thank goodness, but as of yet no one knew anything more about the who, how, or why of the incidents.

"Got a letter from Ginny yesterday," he said, nodding. "I never realized just how sneaky she could be. I'll remember to watch what I say around her in the future," he added with a half smile.

"Spill it, already," Annie urged him impatiently.

"Apparently, Ron and Hermione are speaking to each other once again, now that the other girl is out of the picture. And practically the only thing they talk about is that Harry is having some sort of private lessons with Dumbledore. Has been all year, in fact. And when Harry joins them, he mostly wants to talk about the fact that he suspects Malfoy is up to something big."

"Malfoy?" she said in alarm. She was familiar with the name and understood the significance.

George nodded silently. "And if Harry's right, that likely spells trouble for the rest of us. That little shit doesn't have the brains or the gumption to pull off something completely of his own design. He's acting on orders, mark my words. And I'll give you a guess who might be pulling the strings...."

"The father," she stated as if it was obvious.

"Clever girl," he replied.

Annie rolled her eyes. "So what is it? Malfoy's plan?"

George shrugged. "Either they don't know or Ginny didn't overhear them discuss it. Hopefully, Harry's told all of this to Dumbledore, especially since they're spending so much extra time together," he explained.

"All of this cloak and dagger business is getting tiresome," she sighed.

"Sorry to bore you," he teased, deliberately misunderstanding her.

"You know that's not what I meant," she said, butting him with her shoulder.

They sat together without talking for a few more minutes, listening to the music and watching Fred dance with yet another eager girl.

"I suppose you're waiting for me to ask you to dance?" George offered.

"Not at all. That would be the *polite* thing for you to do, see," she teased.

"Come on then, hag." He scooted along the booth, roughly shoving her out of it ahead of him with his hip.

"My favorite thing about you is how utterly suave you are. My Troll Prince Charming..." she said as she was bumped along the seat despite her uncooperative resistance. She giggled as he took her hand and led her to the dance floor.

Annie lay on her back, alone in the darkness, and kicked off the sheet. It was too hot to sleep, and her brain would not shut off. She gazed out the window at the waning moon as her mind reviewed for the hundredth time that night, the millionth time that week, what she did and did not know about the current situation she found herself in.

Something magically Dark was on the move in Britain; that was for certain. A menace so terrifying, everyone feared to say his name. He and his mad followers were strategically positioning themselves, recruiting like-minded bigots and intimidating anyone weaker, most likely in preparation to make a grab for absolute power.

And why did this concern her?

The least important reason, to her mind, was that the nameless evil and his cult Annie shuddered now to think of their name: Death Eaters had a very low opinion of non-magical people like herself. *Big deal*, she thought. *Since when have I ever been anything but unpopular?*

Far more importantly, they did not care at all for people who stood up to their bigotry in defense of reason and justice. People like her kind, friendly, generous neighbors: the magical Weasley family. More than merely neighbors now, they were her dear friends even the ones she hadn't met in person yet, she reckoned.

Worst of all, in the Death Eaters' power-mad eyes, were people like George: pure-blooded wizards who chose to associate with Muggles like her. Blood traitors, they were called. Regardless of how hard George had tried to shield her from the truth, she had a very good idea what would happen to him now if he were ever caught by the enemy, if anyone of them ever learned of their relationship torture, likely followed by death. He would serve as a warning to anyone else with similar ideas: wizard blood must be kept pure at all costs.

Annie took a deep breath to calm her racing heart. Thank goodness there were people like George's family. The Weasleys and others like them were willing to take a stand in these increasingly dangerous times. They put their own safety on the line to stand up for what was right. She admired them immensely for their courage.

The specifics of their activities were kept shrouded in secret and not just from Annie. George and the rest of his family, while eager to assure her they vociferously disagreed with the pure-blooded mania and Dark agenda of the Death Eaters, were also careful to remain vague about the details of their fight. Annie understood: they were loyally protecting each other from possible discovery. She respected this and never pressed for any more than they were willing to share.

She was clever, though, and had figured out a few things on her own. The resistance group met with some frequency and had been meeting for some time now. Who was included or where they met she did not specifically know. She understood what it was they discussed in only the most general terms. They were also in a recruitment mode, trying to gain support and learn more about their enemy's plans.

One thing, however, was patently clear: they regarded Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, as their leader. According to them, he was the most powerful, wisest wizard there was. So powerful, even You-Know-Who feared to cross him. They trusted his instructions implicitly and had every confidence that with him in charge, they were sure to defeat the nameless evil one in the end.

It was for this reason that one week ago, a tragedy of unfathomable enormity had rocked the Weasleys and their wizard comrades to the core: Dumbledore had been killed. Their brilliant leader with his secret plans to defeat the enemy was gone. And seemingly with his death, the odds of their victory had now plummeted.

Annie recalled the night a week ago when George had told her the news. She had never seen him so rattled before in her life. He couldn't speak at first.

"Something really bad has happened," he had finally managed to say.

Annie had felt her stomach drop to the floor. She had never before heard this tone of real fear in George's voice. "What is it?" she had whispered, dreading the answer.

He had told her then about the devastating blow to their cause. "They killed Dumbledore."

"Who?" she'd gasped.

"Snape. And Malfoy," he'd hissed, his voice wracked with fury and disgust.

Annie had recognized the names and now began to fear them nearly as much as she loathed them.

The first she had disliked ever since the twins had begun school at Hogwarts. The vindictive Potions professor had failed to recognize her friends' talents or appreciate their sense of humor. He had been overzealous in his criticism and over-harsh in his punishments to the point of driving them from his classroom. Before the skirmish this week, she had regarded him as little more than a small setback in the otherwise stellar future outlook she had foreseen for Fred and George. His refusal to teach them had simply meant they would have to discover for themselves what they needed to know about potion making, and Annie had every confidence they were more than sufficiently intelligent and driven to do so.

But now they had discovered this former turncoat, this double-agent spy was not what he seemed or rather, was indeed what many of them had suspected all along a traitor in their midst. A traitor who had been assisting a Death Eater family of the highest rank: Malfoy.

The name alone made the bile rise in her throat. The viperous family never seemed to rest in their dogged pursuit of Dumbledore over the years, not to mention the persecution they directed toward the Weasleys at every opportunity. And they had finally succeeded in both: Dumbledore was dead, and everything the Weasleys stood for, fought for, had now been crippled as a result.

Her dearest friends the good guys in this battle had been plunged into chaos. What were they to do without Dumbledore? Where would it even be safe for them to meet now that one of their own had betrayed them so gravely? What was the next best plan of defense, much less attack?

Only one thing was certain one thing remained clear: Harry Potter was still the key to it all. He was their last, best chance of victory. Dumbledore had always thought so and had taken great pains to keep him safe. Harry was the one on whom they now pinned all their fragile hopes. He had been marked by the nameless one as his greatest threat ever since his birth. He had been with Dumbledore when he died, had spent all that extra time with him over the past term, perhaps even knew his plans for defeating the enemy.

Harry Potter was the weapon that was left to them.

So what did that mean for her and for George? She understood that every moment he spent with her made him vulnerable to the enemy put him in danger. The thought made her blood run cold, even on this sweltering summer night, and she shivered.

She considered for a moment making the noble sacrifice: giving him up for his own good. But she knew it remained a bluff for her to even consider the possibility, just like it had been the night he had told her about Dumbledore's death. She was not that strong, not that good-hearted, not that selfless. It would be suicide. She could not live without George not now, in the full knowledge of what it meant to be loved by him.

It had been excruciating to hear his own half-hearted attempt to say it himself. "Maybe... Maybe we should... Maybe it's best if we didn't..." he had stammered.

"Are you breaking up with me?" she had asked him, feeling a steel rod pierce her soul as she spoke.

George shook his head involuntarily. "I don't want to, but..."

"Then don't," she pleaded, feeling the steel rod twist, entangling her organs like spaghetti.

"I don't want to.... It's too dangerous." He sighed then.

"If you think you and your family are in danger, then you have to do what you need to do. Living without you but knowing you're all safer that way is more important to me than the alternative." It had been like chewing glass, saying the words to release him. But she would swallow a truckload if it kept all of them safe and alive.

"What? No, not me! *You!* You're the one I'm worried about!" he'd cried.

"Then why are you killing me right now?" she had choked, cursing herself for losing control in front of him at that moment.

He had grabbed her roughly then, squeezed her so hard she could not breathe. "I had to try! I had to give you a chance.... But I'm too weak to do it right, for real. I'm sorry...."

Suddenly then, crushed in George's arms, she had remembered her brief meeting with the odd old man last summer. If she hadn't been told about his greatness, she certainly would never have suspected it herself from her own experience. But George had told her all the stories of his amazing feats, the articles of proof, and she had been forced to agree: Dumbledore was a great and wise man. And she'd recalled the words he had said to her regarding her and George in particular.

Love is vital to our cause.

"This is what they want, isn't it? For people like you and me to be afraid, maybe even frightened enough to abandon each other?" she'd whispered.

George had nodded silently, then a tiny smile began to tug at the corner of his mouth. "We can't let them win, can we? It's our duty...."

"To stay together," she had said, finishing his thought. As if she'd had any other choice.

She clung to that part of the memory, those words, as she lay in her bed alone, praying once again for the safety of her own true love *Bring him home again to me*, she commanded the universe, *safe and sound for me to love*.

Battle Scar

Chapter 28 of 80

Concurrent with *Deathly Hallows*. Annie discusses her relationship with Jane, then spends a tense day at the Burrow waiting for George to return from his first big Order mission. DH spoiler is a biggie.

Chapter 28: Battle Scar

July 1997

Annie spun around once more and watched how the skirt draped. "Are you sure?" she asked her friend.

"The color is so dramatic and just lovely with your eyes!" Jane nodded enthusiastically.

Annie had to agree. The soft plum silk did accentuate all her best features. The halter bodice was simple yet elegant, highlighting her trim waist and curves to best advantage. The skirt flared slightly at her hips to flutter at her knees, hiding what Annie considered thighs too large to look proportional with the rest of her body. While her thighs would be adequately hidden by the skirt, her defined calves would be nicely displayed with the right heels. It would also be cool enough to wear outdoors in August, she thought practically.

"George is going to love it," Jane added teasingly.

Annie gave her friend a stern look to scold her for such an anti-feministic sentiment, which quickly melted into a broad smile. There was no use pretending that pleasing him wasn't the primary goal of this particular shopping foray. George had invited her to be his date for his brother's upcoming wedding, a gesture which Jane assured her was the mark of a serious romantic attachment. Annie reckoned she couldn't argue the point that she already understood the depth of their commitment for many other reasons without incriminating herself, so she'd merely nodded.

"Well, I am running out of time. The wedding is just a week away at this point. All right, I'll take it."

"I saw some silver sandals at the shoe store a few doors down that would look gorgeous with this," Jane suggested.

"And then I'm treating you to lunch! All this flattery deserves a reward!" Annie smiled.

Annie was thrilled to have her friend along today. She felt entirely out of her element, shopping for formal wear. Annie valued Jane's opinions because she was honest; when something wasn't flattering, she said so. Annie felt she wouldn't have had the fortitude to do it alone, which probably explained why she had waited until the last minute to find something to wear. Jane had patiently sat as Annie tried on twenty dresses at least, sharing her critical designer's eye. Once again, Jane had rescued her.

Spending the day with Jane had reminded Annie of what she regarded as the best part of her teenage Ottery experience. Through so much of Annie's high school years, Jane had stepped into the roles of best friend and elder sister, teaching Annie what it meant to be a modern young woman. While Gran had instilled in Annie her old-fashioned core values, who she was as a person and the skills of self-sufficiency, Jane had taught Annie how to express herself within the current culture. She had instructed her in how to dress fashionably, introduced her to popular music, even took her to get her ears pierced the only instance of Gran disapproving of anything Jane ever did.

After Annie paid for the dress, she and Jane walked down the street, chatting amiably.

"So, Annie.... You and George? How are things going?"

Annie giggled. She found it funny that this exact question had been asked of her so often over the past year. Nearly everyone she knew: Jane, Gran, even Fred occasionally would ask her the very same thing. Annie didn't mind a bit. She still regarded the fact she and George had a relationship to be talked about as something of a sweepstakes prize.

"Brilliant, thanks," Annie replied.

And it was true as far as the two of them were concerned, she reckoned. Or even in the opinion of their immediate families. In the eyes of the wizarding world at large, however....

"Kudos on your completely uninformative answer," Jane retorted sarcastically. "Of course things are going well you never stop smiling, and he's taking you to a family wedding. What I want to know is just how serious are you two? I mean, he's taking you to a *family wedding*, for crying out loud. This sounds rather... I don't know...*serious*."

"You might want to brush up on your vocabulary, Jane," Annie teased her.

"And you should cease employing asinine excuses in a vain attempt to evade my question, Annie," Jane retorted.

"Right," she giggled. "How serious are we?"

Annie paused, contemplating how best to answer the question. She wanted to be at least somewhat honest with Jane after all, her friend only had her best interests at heart. On the other hand, there was no way Annie was going to be completely honest, either. Some things were absolutely no one else's business; other things were not her secrets to share.

"I'm waiting..." Jane goaded her.

"I guess you could say... very serious," Annie offered vaguely, finding it ironic to use the word *serious* in reference to George or herself, for that matter.

Jane raised an eyebrow. "On a scale of one to ten?"

"Nine-point-five?" Annie replied, unable to repress an enormous grin.

"Yikes!" Jane cried. "Horrid girl! You're exaggerating to give me a heart attack," she accused her, one hand clutching her chest.

This time Annie raised an eyebrow. "Is it really so hard to believe? You've met him.... You even said we were perfectly matched!"

"Well, yes... I grant you George is a great guy, and you make a good couple. Don't get me wrong, Annie I'm very happy for you both...."

"I sense a 'but' is coming next," Annie offered.

"You have an excellent 'but' sense," Jane teased her, and Annie giggled. "Annie, you and George are both so...*young*," she continued, her voice now full of grave concern. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but... isn't George the only guy you've ever dated? How can you be so serious when forgive me for saying this you have no idea what else is out there?"

"There is no one else in Ottery worth dating, Jane," Annie argued. "You well know what a crop of losers and arseholes there are in that town."

Jane rolled her eyes. "Which is precisely my point," she said. "You should get out of there! Expand your horizons! Go to university!" Jane had been arguing this same issue with Annie for years now, encouraging her to continue her education nearly as strenuously as her Gran had done.

"How am I supposed to do that?" Annie protested. "I can't leave Gran she needs me more than ever now."

"I grant you that," Jane conceded. "So maybe you should just... I don't know... cool your heels a bit. Take your time. Don't rush into anything. Especially anything *permanent*."

Annie gave Jane a patient smile. Her heart had been permanently given away years ago. There was a permanent reminder of it dyed into her flesh. The way she felt about George would never change, and he had made of point of telling her the same thing. They were not rushing into anything that she could see.

"I'm not stupid," Annie assured her, carefully avoiding making any promises she couldn't keep.

"Exactly," Jane said. "Just remember that."

Annie sighed. "Look, I appreciate your concern, I really do. And in most cases, I would agree with your argument. But this is... different. What George and I have is special."

Jane smiled gently. "Every infatuated teenager thinks the same thing, Annie."

"Maybe you're right. But that doesn't mean I'm wrong. We're meant for each other, Jane. It would be a waste of time to date anyone else, not to mention unfair to any other guy, who wouldn't stand a chance of measuring up."

"Oh, dear. You *are* going to hitch yourself to one of the local idiots, aren't you?" Jane said teasingly.

Annie laughed out loud. "He hasn't proposed, if that's what you're asking!"

Jane looked at her dubiously. "Hmm," was all she said.

*

Two days later, Annie found herself at the Burrow. George had waited until the night before to tell her about the mission to move Harry Potter safely out of the Dursley's house. She was furious that he had waited so late to tell her, but proud as well of his brave loyalty to his friend. She didn't really understand why exactly this boy was so vitally important he just seemed ridiculously lucky, to her mind but trusted the Weasleys' judgment. If they said he was worth the risk, then he surely must be.

And she could tell George was thrilled to be involved. It was his first 'real' mission since joining the secret wizard's group nearly a year ago. He and Fred were nearly twitching with excitement, smiling and joking with each other as the kitchen steadily filled with people.

The Burrow was soon buzzing with activity. There were many extra people Annie assumed they were all magical in the house that morning, anxiously reviewing each detail of the complicated plan over and over until Fred and George couldn't resist giving smart-arse answers by the end. Annie giggled quietly at them from her corner of the kitchen, then pretended to be fascinated by her teacup when a few wizards looked questioningly at her.

Throughout the meeting, in fact, she'd noticed several of the wizards casting nervous looks her way. Fred had also caught one of the looks whereupon he'd whispered to the person sitting next to him, who'd then passed the message around the table. After that, no one had given her a second glance. She assumed whatever the wizards were worried about, it didn't involve any threat a Muggle could possibly pose.

It occurred to Annie as she eavesdropped that the group certainly seemed to be prepared for some disastrous consequences, the thought of which began to worry her once more. George and Fred had, of course, assured her earlier that nothing at all could go wrong; the whole thing was safe as kittens and only the stupidest mother hen would feel anxious. That had been Annie's first clue that the mission would be dangerous.

She decided to redirect her anxiety toward preparing the food. Molly was expecting a large contingent for dinner, so there were mounds of vegetables waiting to be washed, peeled, and chopped. Of course, Annie couldn't do much of the actual cooking, since the stove seemed to require a wand to operate, but she was an excellent sous chef,

taught at her Gran's knee for a decade at least.

In the months since she had first met Molly, Annie had visited several more times and become familiar with the kitchen. Molly seemed genuinely thrilled to have a willing and able volunteer helping out for once. They would often chat amiably about nothing terribly important as they worked together. Molly would ask her sometimes about her Muggle life in the village, and Annie had learned a great deal about the magical world from George's mother. And she was immensely grateful to have been invited to spend the day with her today, of all days.

Finally, the rescue mission participants all left. George had given her a quick peck on the cheek and a reassuring wink: a goodbye that Annie felt was appropriate considering the company present, yet distinctly unsatisfying, nonetheless. The urge to cling to him was strong, but she bravely smiled and wished him well instead.

Molly, George's sister, Ginny whom she had just met that day and Annie sat together in silence, unable to speak much while they waited nervously for everyone to return. As awkward as it was to sit with his family and wait, it was far better than waiting at home with Gran, who could know nothing about what was happening. At least Annie's companions here could appreciate the anxiety she felt, and she didn't have to try to hide it.

Ginny and Molly couldn't help staring out the back window, searching for a sign that someone was arriving, so they soon gave up any pretense of conversation. Time dragged by as Annie picked at loose threads on the hems of her sleeves and tapped her fingers on the table.

An hour later, Annie could tell by their worried looks that things had begun to go wrong: people should have been arriving back by now. Annie's legs bounced nervously on the tips of her toes beneath the table, and the cuffs of her shirt had come completely unraveled.

After what seemed like an eternity, Ginny screamed and the two of them bolted out the door. Annie ran to the window, and what she saw there made her heart sink: it was Harry Potter and the enormous Hagrid. Not Ron, not Fred, not Arthur. And definitely not George.

A few more minutes passed while Molly and Ginny fussed over Harry and Hagrid outside. Annie couldn't focus on listening to what they were saying from where she stood inside; she was too distracted with her own worry. She continued staring out the kitchen window, searching the sky, waiting for a sign.

Molly bustled in, grabbed a bottle of liquor from the cabinet, and turned to exit the kitchen again. "George and Remus are due next, dear. Any minute now..." she said as she passed by, and then walked out the door.

"Mum!" Annie heard Ginny cry a minute later. A blue light flashed and two figures appeared, then collapsed to the ground. She could tell by the way the rest of them dove toward the new arrivals that something was terribly wrong.

Annie was momentarily paralyzed as they walked through the kitchen door, carrying what she now recognized was George's bloody and inert body into the living room. Her ears had stopped working: she could see their lips moving but could no longer hear what they were saying. *Why are they moving so slowly?* she wondered.

Suddenly, her mind snapped back into reality as they carried him out of the kitchen and passed through the doorway into the living room. She grabbed an armful of towels from a drawer in the kitchen and dashed into the living room behind them. She had to elbow her way through the door, past a couple of arguing wizards, in order to get to his side.

Molly snatched one of the towels from her arms and began to staunch the wound. As the first towel filled with blood, Annie handed Molly a new one.

Annie couldn't take her eyes off of George's completely expressionless face, streaked as it was with blood and eyes closed. She took his hand. It was cold and moist and offered no response to her touch. There was a large lump in her throat, making it difficult to breathe. Annie was reasonably sure it was her heart attempting to escape and swallowed forcefully.

She heard Molly whispering his name, over and over again. "George? George? Wake up dear.... George?"

"Think he's passed out... from the blood?" someone asked.

"Most likely," another voice replied.

After a few more minutes, it was becoming clearer to Annie that George was not dead. She could see his chest rise and fall, breathing normally. There was only a single wound that they could find, and no internal damage appeared likely.

Annie tried to reassure herself in her thoughts. *Just a silly ear... that was all* Head wounds always bled heavily; that didn't necessarily mean it was serious. If only he would just wake up and tell them so....

She heard more scuffling sounds behind her. She assumed correctly that more people were arriving but didn't bother investigating. They weren't as important, after all.

Someone came into the room and asked Molly a question. Annie didn't catch it; her focus was centered on George's still unconscious face.

Molly answered, mentioning something about Dark magic, and then uttered the words Annie would cling to for the rest of the evening: "He's alive."*

George's wound finally started to clot, and the blood loss had, for the most part, been stopped. Annie was now holding three blood-soaked towels in her hands. Molly was currently pressing the fourth against his head. She rose slowly to carry them into the kitchen.

As she stood at the sink, she heard another disturbance. She recognized Arthur's familiar voice yelling at someone. *Thank God*, she thought, *that he and Fred were safe now.*

But she did not turn to greet them she was mesmerized by the violently red towels she held in her now trembling hands. She turned on the tap and let the water run on them, watching while George's blood made trails down the white porcelain of the sink to the drain.

It hit her then like a tidal wave, inundating her: this was real. No longer hypothetical. Not just stories about someone else's fight, far removed from her own world. Not just something that might happen in the future if things didn't change.

George's blood was on her hands.

This was a war. Fought with curses that were just as deadly as any killing machine Muggles had ever invented. Fought by real people. People she knew. People she loved and couldn't live without.

Another inch to the left, and....

Someone else walked through the kitchen, whispering. Annie thought she recognized Ginny's voice but wasn't sure, and she couldn't tear her eyes away from the bloody mess in the sink to confirm her suspicion.

Minutes, or maybe hours later, Annie felt a pair of hands on her shoulders. "Never mind those, dear. He's awake now. Go in and see him."

Annie left the towels in the sink and followed Molly back to the living room. She saw that George was still lying on the sofa, surrounded by people she vaguely recognized but did not consciously acknowledge. From somewhere within her she summoned the energy to walk to his side, then her knees gave out.

Luckily, George seemed to think she was just kneeling energetically, and he simply smiled at her. "Told you I'd make it back," he said softly.

"No, you promised you'd make it *backin one piece*," she answered, struggling not to break into sobs.

"Well, at least the larger of the two pieces made it back, then," he replied.

Even now he's trying to cheer me she thought with rueful amazement. *Bloody idiot. Literally.* She half-giggled, half-sobbed at the realization.

"Is it really gruesome?" he asked in a slightly more serious tone as he stroked her cheek with his thumb.

Annie was encouraged by the fact that his hand now felt warm and dry. She felt a cool wetness left behind on her cheek and realized she must have been crying despite her struggle not to. "I can hardly bear to look at it," she said truthfully, but with a forced smile so he wouldn't take it the wrong way.

"At least it wasn't anything vital. Didn't damage my rakishly handsome face, right?" he joked, attempting a wink but grimacing with pain instead.

Annie snorted. "Good point. You certainly never used your ear listening to anything sensible."

"There's the hag I fell in love with," he chuckled.

Annie stayed by George's side, holding his scarred hand and stroking his hair until he fell asleep. Other people came and went from the room she heard discussions start and stop but paid attention to none of it. There was only one thing that mattered, and he was right in front of her.

Molly then gave her a firm hug, assuring her that George was fine now, urging her to go home and get some sleep herself.

Annie nodded and rose to leave. It was late, or actually very early, and she was, in fact, quite tired. She would've liked to stay with George, perhaps until he woke the next morning, but realized it was futile to try. Gran could never be told the truth of the situation, and no excuse could cover being gone all night long. Not to mention the fact that George's mother had not invited her to stay.

"Help her home, Fred," Molly directed.

Annie and Fred walked slowly to her truck, his arm gently draped around her shoulders for support. She was grateful for his company, his strong, reassuring presence, and leaned into him.

"Gimme the keys," he commanded as they finally reached the rusty, beat-up heap. It looked perfectly at home, parked as it was next to the Burrow.

"Can't I ever drive my own damn vehicle?" she asked, exasperated.

"I've had a rough night, in case you hadn't noticed," he argued impatiently, "and I don't feel like folding into a pretzel just so you can indulge yourself *Accio* keys!"

Annie tried to grab them in midair as the keys flew out of her pocket into his hands. "Jeez, a little patience would be nice..." she scolded him as she made her way around to the passenger side.

"You're a fine one to lecture me about patience," he retorted as he climbed into the driver's side door.

"What about the secrecy laws, then? Awfully blatant magic, that was. My Muggle sensibilities are very upset right now," she teased him.

"Again, not much room for you to talk," he said with a smile, turning over the engine. "What is it they say about people in glass houses? If I go down, rest assured Lover Boy goes down with me."

They drove in silence the short distance to Annie's home. Only after he turned off the engine, and they stood at the garden gate, did he speak once more.

"I get it now. What George meant."

"I'm glad someone does.... Care to enlighten me?" Annie said, confused but too tired to push the issue much. She leaned her aching forehead against the cool glass of the window, relishing the modicum of relief it offered.

"You two really are in love."

"Well spotted, Sherlock," she teased, lifting her head to look at him. *Where is this coming from?* she wondered. *And why now?*

Fred was undeterred. "When I saw your face tonight, looking at him... it finally clicked. You love him as much as he loves you, apparently," he mused, as if a mystery had finally been explained. He was quiet for a while after that.

"Does it bother you?" she asked, unsure what his silence meant.

"No," he answered without hesitation, and she knew from the tone of his voice he was telling the truth. "At least, not in the sense of you and George as a couple. You lot do have piss-poor timing, which is business as usual for George, unfortunately. Though I'm sure I'm not telling you anything you don't already know," he teased wickedly.

"Don't start that shit with me tonight, Fred. I'm in no mood," she warned as she felt a raging blush begin to flood up her neck and spill onto her cheeks. She heard him huff petulantly, and Annie was thankful it was too dark for him to see her clearly, sparing her any further teasing. She hated that she was so transparent and that Fred refused to just drop it already.

"Still and all, as long as you know what you're getting yourselves into, I suppose you have my blessing," he offered.

"Well, thanks for that," she said in a sarcastic voice. And then more seriously added, "That does mean a lot... to me, anyway."

Fred gave her forehead a quick, brotherly kiss, tousled her hair, then gently shoved her toward her house. "Sleep tight, git," he said softly, then disappeared into the dark.

*Quote from "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows" by J.K. Rowling

Storm

Concurrent with *Deathly Hallows*. Ever wonder where "Barney's" hair came from? Annie attends a wedding as George's date. Is it any surprise all hell breaks loose? DH spoilers are biggies.

Chapter 29: Storm

August 1, 1997

Five days later, at precisely five a.m., Annie awoke to tiny stones rapping themselves repeatedly at her bedroom window. *Thank goodness Gran is still asleep*, she thought. She pulled on some clothes and crept out the back door.

Just outside the door, she saw it was Fred who was waiting for her. Immediately, she panicked. "What's wrong?" she hissed as she dashed down the back steps.

"Nothing," Fred whispered. "Earless Wonder is fine. He's milking this injured hero business to the hilt. It's making me sick, actually." He rolled his eyes.

Annie was relieved but irritated, as well. She was tired, not to mention anxious about her Gran waking up and discovering the two of them at the crack of dawn. "Then why are you here?"

"Secret mission," Fred whispered excitedly. "Mum is keeping her ickle Georgie under lock and key, so I'm the lucky bloke who gets to drag your charming mug out of bed at this ungodly hour." Fred went on to explain that he needed to get a red hair from some fellow in town so Harry Potter could pretend to be this person during the wedding.

"So, I figure, who better to help me out than Annie?" Fred winked and turned on his most winsome grin.

Annie snorted derisively but couldn't help giggling as well. *Doesn't exactly make any sense*, Annie reckoned, *but whatever does, these days?* She tossed him the keys and the two of them clambered into the truck.

She knew exactly whom she had to ask he was the only non-Weasley male in town she knew with red hair but had no idea how to go about it. She wracked her brain while she directed Fred where to drive, trying to come up with a plan that would avoid actual direct contact with the potential donor. But it was no use.

As they pulled up in front of Stephen's house, she figured that there was no point in being overly deceptive and sneaking in magically and she refused to risk exposing Fred in such a manner. She'd just swallow her pride, ask for a hair, and pray Stephen wouldn't ask why.

She had to knock three times before he finally answered the door. "Sorry to drag you out of bed so early. I need a favor."

"Shit, Annie your timing sucks," he grumbled. Stephen hadn't bothered getting dressed before coming to the door; just stood on his stoop wearing a sheet wrapped around his waist.

Annie looked nervously away from him, avoiding his direct gaze. "Like I said, sorry. Look, I know this sounds idiotic, but, erm, well... I just need, um...." Annie got distracted when she heard a female voice call out from inside, asking him what was going on.

"Spit it out already. I've sort of got company," he said as he ran his hand through his bed-disarranged hair, smiling smugly.

"Right. I need one of your hairs. Please don't ask why," she begged, mentally crossing her fingers that for once in his life he would just be cooperative with his mouth shut.

"You're joking." He paused, waiting for a punch line. "You're not joking," he said a moment later, eyebrows raised. He grinned, then asked, "What, is it some kind of voodoo thing?" Then he reached out for her hand. "You know, if it's for a love potion, I could save you the hassle," he purred, placing her hand over his heart and holding it there.

"Ahem."

Stephen's vain attempt at seduction was interrupted by a noise from the street. He turned to notice for the first time that someone was in Annie's truck, scowling back at him.

Annie took advantage of his distraction yanked a tuft of hair out of Stephen's chest. "Thanks, mate. I really owe you one!" she called as she hurried back to the truck.

Annie waved at him as the truck pulled away. She couldn't help but wonder at the vacant, confused look that had suddenly appeared on his face. She turned to Fred and noticed he was replacing his wand back into his pocket.

Fred began to open his mouth to say something.

"Not a goddamn word," Annie warned him, and after an instant's consideration, he took her advice.

It was almost noon when she woke up that day for the second time. She stumbled into the bathroom, looked in the mirror, and winced. Her hair made her look like a victim of natural disaster. She stripped down and took a long, hot shower, which helped to wake her up.

She went into the kitchen dressed in her bathrobe and began to make something to eat. She heard her Gran shuffle toward the table behind her.

"Late night, dear?" she asked.

"Sorry, Gran. There was so much pre-wedding activity at the Weasleys' last night, I just lost complete track of the time. I should have called, I know. You weren't worried, were you?" Annie winced she couldn't have called even if she'd thought about doing so, because her phone never worked at the Weasleys'. She'd mostly just prayed her Gran was peacefully sleeping through it, as usual.

The scene at the Burrow the night before had been rather chaotic: Molly had insisted on putting on a birthday celebration for Harry Potter on top of all the wedding hubbub, which was then crashed by no less a person than the Minister of Magic himself, delivering an inheritance of sorts from the late, great Dumbledore. There certainly seemed to be no shortage of drama at the Weasley household lately.

"I know you can take care of yourself, dear. I raised you to, remember? You're an adult and not on a leash," Gran reassured her.

"Are you hungry? I thought I'd make pancakes. Care for some?" Annie offered, weakly attempting to assuage her own guilt for neglecting her Gran.

"That sounds delightful! Thank you, dear."

Annie was still mixing the batter when Jane arrived. All three sat at the table to eat the late breakfast.

"What on earth have you done to your eyes? Did you get any sleep at all?" Jane chastised her as she took a sip of tea.

"Not a wink," Annie giggled. "You knew this mission was impossible when you signed up for it."

"Not impossible. I can work miracles!" Jane boasted.

"You'll need to," Annie laughed.

Jane spent the next hour painting Annie's fingernails and toenails to complement her dress. Normally, she was far too fidgety and impatient a person not to mar the finish, but she was so tired today she nearly dozed off waiting for the polish to dry. Annie's curly hair was pretty simple to style: there wasn't much else that could be done with it, beyond a little mousse to keep it smoothly in place.

"I feel silly putting any makeup on you. You have lovely skin, you know," Jane muttered as she gently dabbed Annie's face with a soft sponge.

"Keep flattering me I'll pay you handsomely," Annie joked, holding motionless as Jane held her face with one hand.

She had never spent much time learning to use makeup herself, feeling it was too much of a hassle and expense to bother with. Rarely did she ever feel the need to impress someone in town, anyway. But today was a grand occasion: George's brother was getting married. Annie had never been to a Muggle wedding ceremony before, much less a magical one.

"Finished, I think," Jane sighed.

Annie took a few moments to gaze at her reflection, now fully dressed and made up. She'd never in her life felt so pleased with what she saw there. Her eyes leaped out from her face, expertly lined and shadowed as they now were. Faint rosy blush adorned the apples of her cheeks, and her lips were just the barest shade darker than natural.

"You're a miracle worker! A genius!" Annie embraced her friend and whispered her thanks.

Annie checked the clock only to realize she was nearly running late. She dashed about, collecting a few things she thought she might need and tucking them into her tiny excuse for a purse. She'd just spun around, intending to head for the back door, when she nearly careened into her grandmother.

"Sorry, Gran!" Annie cried.

"Oh, Annie, you are a vision!" she exclaimed happily, then hugged her gingerly so as not to muss the dress. "Off you go now," Gran said as she pushed her toward the door. "Don't worry about me; you stay as long as you like tonight. Have fun!" she called as Annie waved goodbye to her from the cab of the truck.

Annie felt jittery as she drove the short distance to the Burrow. She was eager to see George, of course, to make sure he was still healing all right, just as she had done every day since his injury. But she was also eager to see him all dressed up in his finery, which he hadn't let her see beforehand, and to see his reaction to her own as well. She felt slightly ashamed of what she considered was her idiotic vanity, but had butterflies in her stomach all the same as she pulled up the lane.

She turned off the engine when she reached the house, then sat in the parked truck for several minutes, mysteriously at a loss for how to move. Somehow the butterflies of a minute ago had transformed themselves into a large, leaden mass that took up residence in her gut. Only moments ago she couldn't wait to get here. *What am I suddenly feeling so nervous about?* she asked herself.

Oh, not much, she promptly answered. Here she was, the Muggliest twit ever, getting ready to parade into her wizard boyfriend's wizard brother's wizard-filled wizard wedding. A wizard brother who happened to be marrying a veela. Who had brought an entourage of veela relatives along with her. No worries at all there.

Annie had been staring dejectedly down into her lap while she nervously obsessed over her folly, resting her head on the steering wheel, which explained why she did not see anyone approaching. She almost jumped out of her skin when Fred flattened himself loudly against the windshield, making a grotesque face at her.

Glaring at him, she turned on the windshield wipers in revenge for the near coronary he had just caused her.

"Come on, then. Out you get." He yanked open the door and hauled her out of the truck unceremoniously. He gripped her firmly by the elbow and began marching her around the back of the house.

"Let go!" she hissed, stumbling a bit. "I'm not ready to...."

"I must admit, you do clean up pretty well. For a chicken-shit hag, that is," he chuckled back. "You two really are a pathetic pair," he mused cryptically as they crossed the short distance to the orchard.

"Where's George?" she asked, scanning the crowd as they approached the tent.

"Probably trapped in the clutches of a veela. That's what you're worried about, isn't it?" Fred taunted her. "Take it from me, that's not a bad place to spend an hour or so."

"What? No... I'm not worried..." she argued, trying to sound more indignant than anxious.

"You can lie better than that. I've seen you," he laughed.

"You are a...."

But Annie couldn't finish the insult. Fred had guided her to a seat in the empty second row and turned her wrist, forcing her to sit in order to avoid pain. He turned away from her and started to return to the back of the tent.

"Wait! Don't leave me here by myself!" she whispered frantically.

"Don't... make... a... scene!" he whispered loudly, enunciating each word emphatically, and causing several nearby heads to turn with inquisitive looks. He smirked wickedly as he retreated toward the back of the tent.

Annie sat in the seat, burning with embarrassment and anger directed at Fred. She had half a mind to get up and run out of the tent, had nearly convinced herself it was the right thing to do, when suddenly, several people rushed into the row and sat down, blocking her exit. To her astonishment, a perfect replica of Stephen now sat two seats away from her. She was so shocked by the sight that she didn't even notice George was sitting in front of her for a whole minute.

Everyone then stood as the bride walked down the aisle. Annie saw Fred nudge his twin brother and whisper something, who then surreptitiously turned his head in her direction, away from the bride. When he recognized her, he ignored the procession and wholly turned to face her, his eyes lit up and smiling.

She felt herself grinning hugely back at him. George was simply stunning in his smart dress clothes, dashing and handsome. She decided she liked this outfit almost as much as seeing him in his swim trunks.

Fred yanked George back into his seat once the bride reached the front. George looked back at her one last time before reluctantly turning his attention back to the ceremony.

She was not at such a disadvantage. It was easy for her to pretend to watch the wedding couple and simply take in the sight of George instead: his bright, soft hair, his cheek a bit pink from the heat inside the tent, his strong, handsome profile. She felt a twinge as she contemplated the perfect curve of his ear, recalling the fate of the other one hidden from view on the other side of his head. She had briefly glimpsed a bandage still there when his face had been turned toward her.

Suddenly, everyone was standing again. Annie had not heard the cue, lost in her reverie as she was, and was late to respond. She almost fell backwards as the chair disappeared from beneath her, and the tent arranged itself for the reception.

George came bounding over to her in the next moment. "When did you get here? I was looking all over..." he asked as he swept her up in an embrace.

She hoped he hadn't just seen her almost tumble onto her arse. "I was running a little late. Fred was his usual helpful self and found me this perfect seat," she said sarcastically.

"Bloody git! I told him to come get me if he saw you," George grumbled.

"And you're surprised he did the opposite? You're the bloody git!" she teased.

George led her over to a table not far from the dancing floor, then went to get refreshments. Annie surveyed the other wedding guests while he was gone, recognizing only a few members of his family out of the throng surrounding them. She'd had no idea there were so many magical people around!

She noticed that George's sister kept stealing looks at Stephen/Harry, her expression an odd mixture of longing, resentment, and pride. Once, when Harry-as-Stephen caught Ginny's eye, Annie was disturbed to see a sad, regretful, yearning look on his face as well. Such a complicated, tender emotion looked completely out of place on Stephen's features, in her opinion. It occurred to her then that Ginny might have stronger-than-friendly feelings for the hero-apparent of the resistance movement. Feelings that just might be reciprocated by said hero.

"You look very nice," George offered with a smile when he returned and sat down next to her, setting two champagne flutes on the table in front of them.

"Thank you," she replied, pleased by his simple compliment which seemed to be genuine. She took a small sip of champagne.

"What, that's it?" he asked her, sounding surprised.

"It goes without saying that you look heart-stoppingly handsome yourself," she added sincerely.

"No, I wasn't fishing," he chuckled. "I mean you didn't pinch, hit or insult me. *l'ad* just give you a compliment, you know."

"I'd be happy to indulge your masochistic streak now, if you like," she argued as she gently swatted the back of his head, carefully steering clear of his injury.

"That's better," he laughed. "Heart-stoppingly handsome, did you say?"

"You should probably shut up before you ruin it," she recommended.

"Yes, I probably should," he agreed as he smiled. He rose then, bowed deeply to her, and held out his hand.

She could see he was going to be infuriating tonight. Donning her most withering smirk, she put her hand in his and stood up. He then led her to the dance floor with an obnoxious flourish, spinning her around him three times before finally placing his hand at her waist. Other nearby guests began to stare at them curiously, but even so, Annie couldn't help laughing at his put-on pompous performance.

They danced for several songs, laughing and chatting as he explained who several of the more colorful guests were in relation to himself. George then led her over to Bill and Fleur, and they both shared friendly congratulations with the newlyweds. But as they danced away, George fell uncharacteristically quiet.

"What are you plotting? You're far too quiet for comfort," she joked, hoping to nudge him out of his suddenly pensive mood.

He slowed down their dancing, pulled her even closer. He leaned in to kiss her jaw just below her ear. "That should be us someday," he whispered.

Annie's heart did indeed stop. She closed her eyes as he continued to kiss along her jaw, moving slowly toward her lips. "George Weasley," she whispered with barely controlled breath. "Did you just mean to propose to me?"

"What if I did?" he smiled impishly as he gazed at her, but his eyes were smoldering.

"I'll hold you to it, I swear," she answered, staring straight into his warm brown eyes, feeling like perhaps there was an electrical short within her body, and her nervous system was no longer in control. *How exactly does one breathe, again?*

"Good. That's that, then," he replied and kissed her again.

They began to make their way off the dance floor toward the exit, planning to take advantage of the quiet, darkened garden. Annie's feet no longer registered contact with the earth, her senses wholly tuned to the presence beside her. She could barely spare enough concentration to restrain her racing pulse.

Before they reached the exit, however, the tent behind them became ominously silent, and George and Annie turned around to face the odd disturbance. A silvery blue figure had suddenly materialized on the floor and now began to speak.

"The Ministry has fallen..."* a deep, booming voice echoed from the large cat-like figure. Annie missed the next bit due to the shocked gasping of people around her, but the ghostly thing continued to deliver its message. "They are coming," it warned, and then it was gone as the mist dissipated.

Annie's ears were ringing in the moment of silence that followed. She looked at George's face for some clue as to what just happened. All she saw there was horrified shock.

Then all hell broke loose. Wedding guests began to scatter, screams of panic erupted all around. A dozen or so glasses fell to the floor, shattering.

She heard Arthur's voice, obviously directed to George. "Find Fred and get her out of here!" he yelled before he spun around and dashed into the crowd.

They turned together and bolted to the far exit. Annie heard what sounded like cases-worth of champagne corks popping as wizard guests were Disapparating en masse. As she ran, she searched the crowd for any sign of Fred. She saw instead five or six columns of billowing black smoke beginning to condense at spots scattered around the rapidly emptying dance floor. She noticed the few wizards that weren't madly dashing away had drawn their wands, aiming them toward the black smoke.

It took them only a few moments more to find Fred; he crashed into them as he was running back into the tent to discover the source of the chaos.

"What the bloody..." he yelled.

"Death Eaters!" George shouted. "Come on!"

In the seconds it took for the exchange, Annie yanked off her heeled shoes and chucked them into the hedge. The three of them turned as one and raced into the forest. Behind them, the tent erupted in flashes of light and crashing sounds.

"Search the area!" someone bellowed behind them. "No one escapes!"

Annie soon realized they were heading straight for her house. "Not to Gran!" she said as loud as she dared and began to veer away from the boys, away from her home. She wouldn't lead whoever could be chasing them to poor Gran.

The twins must have either heard her or noticed her change of direction, because they followed her immediately. They reached a large stream a minute later, which forced them to pause for a few moments to consider their next options.

But it was too late for strategy they heard voices no more than twenty yards behind them. Each dashed to hide behind a nearby tree. Fred was maybe fifteen feet away from her, George a mere five. He was just close enough for Annie to hear him whispering.

Is he trying to tell me something? she wondered. She shook her head silently to let him know she couldn't hear him.

They could hear bodies crashing through the undergrowth as they approached, then a rough, cruel voice growled, *"Homenum revelio!"*

When he thought about it later, George wasn't sure if maybe his magic was spread too thin, attempting to cast so many protective spells at once. Or perhaps it was weaker because she had no magic within herself to sustain it against the force of the revealing spell. Regardless of the reason, George's shield charm surrounding Annie failed right before his eyes. To his horror, her shocked face momentarily lit up in a horrible green light.

"Over here!" shouted the hard voice. *"Crucio!"*

George launched himself at Annie in the same moment, tackling her to the ground. The force of the spell roared above them as it crashed into a tree trunk just a few feet away with a flash of red light. The tree shuddered, groaned, then snapped in two. Its branches ripped through the surrounding canopy as it crashed to the ground.

Annie was dazed by the impact. Another moment later, she became aware of a heavy weight pressing down on her. She opened her eyes, realizing immediately it was George above her. She felt her legs being forced together by his feet, her arms roughly grabbed and shoved underneath his chest. His left hand then clamped over her mouth and his right arm curled over the top of her head. She could feel the tip of his wand resting against her collarbone. All this activity took only seconds to accomplish.

"Don't move," he commanded her in the barest whisper.

She obeyed him, even though she didn't understand why. She heard George whisper more unfamiliar words, unintelligible to her even though she could hear them far more clearly this time. *Perhaps a spell?*

But why aren't we running, trying to get away? she wondered desperately. It didn't make any sense....

"STUPEFY!" Fred roared, and a red light flashed. Then she heard a pop as he Disapparated. A large, wooden crack followed an instant later as a distant tree absorbed the energy of the spell.

She wanted to urge George to do the same: to Disapparate and save himself. But she couldn't open her mouth, couldn't move any part of her self. He had thoroughly immobilized her body with his own. A stabbing pain from something caught underneath her shoulder began to make itself felt.

"There must be more! Fan out!" commanded the cruel voice.

It was sickeningly close now, and she suddenly understood why they weren't running: it was no use. Their attackers were too close. She and George were sitting ducks.

Annie watched mutely as a light began to cast its glow on the tree leaves above them. A bright beam first shone on the shattered tree trunk next to them, then shined directly into her eyes, blinding her to everything else, making a halo around George's head above her.

Abject terror flooded her body. George was absolutely motionless: he had even halted the continuous whispering in her ear. She couldn't breathe.

We're going to die, she thought.

She would never know what it was George had tried to tell her in his whispers during these final moments of their lives. In the seconds she had left to her, she silently asked Molly's forgiveness for the death of her son. At least they would face it together.

I love you! she shouted silently over and over in her head, hoping somehow he could hear her.

"Stupefy!" Fred shouted again, further away now. Then she heard a crash, followed by a furious scream. The lit wand spun away from them, toward the crash, plunging them into darkness again.

Fred!? she wondered.

"Stupefy!" Fred's voice rang out once more, but from yet another direction.

It occurred to her that he was trying to draw the pursuit away from his brother, toward himself *Oh, Fred!* she cried silently. *Be careful!*

The lit wand flashed over them for one more instant. "Could've sworn..." mumbled the cruel voice. Then both the light and the voice disappeared.

Annie's mind tumbled about. What had just happened? How had they not been seen? How were they still alive?

She heard Fred's voice shout again, now joined by at least two others, farther away from them still. She recognized the shouts of other wizards now joining him in the battle. She heard the cruel voice howl in pain and frustration, then everything was silent.

George waited a few more moments, then released her. "Can you still run?" he whispered urgently.

She nodded. "I think so."

George and Annie scrambled upright, and she pulled several deep breaths once more into her lungs. Miraculously, her legs still worked. Adrenaline was coursing through her veins, helping her to keep up alongside George as they followed the stream further away from the road. After hearing no sound of pursuit for ten minutes at least, they decided it was safe now to cross it and head back toward Annie's house.

They waded the stream, which came up to Annie's waist at its deepest point. The wet silk of her skirt clung to her legs annoyingly as they made their way back to her house. She had begun to mentally relax slightly while they ran unpursued, but now, as she saw the dark house looming before her, she became anxious again and picked up the pace. She had to make sure Gran was all right....

George took her hand to slow her down as she drew nearer to the house. They walked cautiously together as they approached the garden fence. He halted, protectively pulling her closer, slightly behind his body. George's wand was drawn.

Does he see something? She stared hard into the darkness, searching for some sign of a threat.

There was a quiet bird's call directly in front of them. In the same instant, she recognized Fred's childhood identification signal, and darkness seemed to melt away from him as he emerged into sight. She realized she had been gripping George's free arm rather tightly, probably hurting him, and loosened her grasp.

"The house is clear," Fred said with a jerk of his head toward Annie's home. "They're searching our place right now. You stay here and wait for me to send word," he commanded.

George nodded silently.

"Is everyone else all right?" Annie asked.

"We think so."

"Harry?" asked George.

"Dad said he saw them Disapparate; that's all we know right now."

"Thank you, Fred, for everything..." Annie whispered into his ear as she gave him a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"Lucky we were there to save your scrawny Muggle hide," he teased, patting her condescendingly on the head. "I'm off, then." The brothers thumped each other on the back, and Fred disappeared.

George put his arm around Annie and lead her up the steps into the house. They silently crept through the kitchen and into Annie's room. George kept his wand in hand the whole time.

"You should get out of these wet clothes," he said, and they both half-smiled, remembering the phrase from another moment months ago in this room. "Sorry about your dress."

Annie put her hand on his lips to hush him. "We're *alive*. You saved my life. Who cares about this stupid dress?"

"I *am* the heroic type," he joked, leaning his forehead against hers while he unzipped the back of her dress. He gently turned her around to help her out of it further.

"What the hell?" he quietly exclaimed. His fingers gingerly touched the sore spot on her back just below the shoulder.

"A rock, I expect. When we fell," she explained, resisting the urge to flinch as he probed the injury with his fingers. She looked at him over her shoulder.

"Shit my fault.... Sorry about that!" he said with a pained grimace.

"Yes, do remember to be gentler the next time you save someone from deadly attack by evil wizards," she teased, rolling her eyes. She stepped out of her dress and turned to tiptoe out of the room. "I'll be quick."

In front of the bathroom mirror, she turned to examine her back for herself. There was a gash under her shoulder blade, made to look worse by the dark bruise forming beneath it and a trickle of dried blood. It hurt but not as badly as it looked.

After a fast shower, she donned a robe and headed quietly back to her room. George had already changed into a set of his clothes he kept there, just in case they ever needed them to keep up appearances. They had never required them before now; usually he just Apparated directly in and out of her room whenever necessary.

She still felt guilty for sneaking around behind Gran's back so much, but what other option was there? She was nineteen years old, living at home instead of a flat of her own for one reason only: to take care of Gran. She couldn't leave Gran, and she wouldn't do without George. And it was ridiculous to expect Gran to knowingly permit any modern nonsense like sleepovers.

George was pointedly looking out her window into the darkness as she dressed.

"Anything wrong?" she asked nervously.

He shook his head. "Just checking," he reassured her. He turned back to her as she finished pulling on a pair of jeans. They sat together on the bed, leaning against the headboard with their arms around each other, waiting for word from George's family.

"What happened, exactly, back there?" she asked him quietly.

"A bit of retaliation, I expect, for last week," he explained.

Annie tensed, remembering George's near-fatal injury that resulted from Harry's rescue. The bandage had fallen off during the melee, and the scabby wound on the side of his head was now oozing a bit.

"You-Know-Who wants Harry dead. Must've figured there was a good chance he'd be there at the wedding. Apparently, he's in charge now," he muttered with disgust at the news they'd received just before the fracas erupted.

"Your family is in danger now because you're helping Harry?" It was more of a statement than a question.

"Among other things. The list is far from brief, actually. The Weasleys have been blood traitors and troublemakers for generations," he said in an attempt to lighten the conversation. But his stern, determined face belied any humor.

Blood traitor. She had heard that term before and knew what it meant. Fred and George had often used it jokingly amongst themselves. George's family was "pure" wizard, and she, a Muggle, was the furthest thing from it. None of this was news to her.

"So, by being with me, you put yourself in even more danger," she whispered, staring down at her lap. They had had this discussion more than once before, but obviously things had changed since then — as of tonight, in fact. There would be no more being brought in for questioning, no further pretense if they were caught together. It would be official public policy now: their relationship would be forbidden and openly punishable.

George pulled her face up to his and looked her squarely. "Don't..." he warned her. "We've been through this before. Nothing's going to happen to me, and I won't let anything hurt you," he said confidently. He kissed her, then continued in a lighter, teasing voice. "Too late for second thoughts now, anyway. We're engaged, remember?"

The memory of the wonderful moment on the dance floor caused another enormous grin to break across her face despite the grim situation. The gloomy mood had broken, and they began to kiss with some enthusiasm now.

"All the same, we should probably lay low for a while.... No more nights out on the town... no carousing.... Better to just stay in," she murmured, each phrase punctuated by a kiss.

"Now you're just being prudent," he said in mock disgust, then chuckled.

*Partial quote from "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows" by J. K. Rowling

The Aftermath

Chapter 30 of 80

Concurrent with *Deathly Hallows*. What happened at the Burrow after the Golden Trio Apparated away? Arthur demands a sacrifice, George offers a compromise, and Annie takes an oath.

Chapter 30: The Aftermath

August 1-2, 1997

A masked and hooded Death Eater stood before Arthur, wand drawn.

He had done all he could do now and hoped the last of his guests had escaped any harm. Panting from the exertion of battle, Arthur glowered at the figure before him. It was no mystery to him who he now faced.

"Hello, Lucius," Arthur said angrily.

The mask was swept away by the wand. "Arthur Weasley," Malfoy spat in disgust. "You're in rather a spot of trouble, I'm afraid."

Arthur didn't respond, only glared at his longtime nemesis. The cold, haughty face with heartless eyes glared back at him. Arthur had always considered himself an easygoing, friendly man, always tried to be magnanimous and forgiving. But standing here, wandless and at Malfoy's mercy, meeting nothing but an evil sneer looking back at him, Arthur felt only an icy fire of hate in his heart.

"Have I interrupted something?" Malfoy mused, looking around, feigning surprise. "A family celebration, perhaps? My heavens, Weasley... all this must have bankrupted you! A hired tent, a few morsels of peasant food...." Malfoy clucked his tongue as his boot toed a shredded gift.

Arthur glanced around at the wreckage of his son's wedding, the hate-filled heart-fire building within him. "I wouldn't expect you to understand a wedding's true purpose, Lucius. What would you know about marrying a woman for love, as opposed to genealogical gain? Isn't that why you joined *our* noble family of Black, after all? Working to purify your own muddy Malfoy blood?" Arthur smiled as the sneer fell from Malfoy's face.

"Where is Potter?" he snapped.

Arthur had strongly suspected Harry had been the goal of the ambush and found it interesting that Malfoy had cut to the chase so quickly. He surmised things must not be going well for Malfoy within the ranks of the Death Eaters. Arthur took only a moment's pleasure in that knowledge, however, considering the fact he had just watched his youngest son and Harry Disapparate into the unknown a few minutes ago.

"I haven't the foggiest idea, Lucius. Harry hasn't shown his face around here today." It was technically true, after all. Might even hold up against a Legilimens, if Arthur really concentrated. "Perhaps whoever your informant was," said Arthur, wrinkling his nose as if smelling something revolting, "has misled you."

"*Crucio!*" snarled Malfoy.

Arthur had only an instant to prepare himself for the onslaught of the curse. When he regained his senses, he had no idea for how long he had been tortured. He lay on the ground, gasping for breath, as the pain slowly receded. *Must not have been too long*, he thought. *I still have my wits, I think...*

"I am not a patient man, Weasley. I will ask you once again. Where is Potter?" he said slowly and malevolently.

"I don't know, Lucius. And even if I did, I would never betray him to your master, puppet that you are."

Malfoy ground his teeth, unwilling to consider the possibility this cur was telling the truth. "What about your son, then? Where is he?" he growled. Draco had often told him how Potter and the Weasley brat were thick as thieves at school, along with that mudblood girl. Perhaps a more familial threat would loosen the father's tongue?

Arthur had recovered sufficiently from the Cruciatus Curse to carefully rise to his feet. "I have *many* sons, Lucius.... Which one are you referring to at the moment?"

Malfoy bristled at the thinly veiled insult. What did it matter that he only had one child? Quality over quantity, he'd always consoled himself. It was not his fault that Narcissa was too delicate for childbearing, nor cared much for the act itself. Unlike the cow Weasley had wed himself to.

The peasant had the nerve to smile smugly at him. He knew how to wipe that knowing smirk off his face. *Crucio!* Malfoy screamed once more.

A minute later, he released Arthur from the grip of the curse. Malfoy had to be careful, after all *Mustn't destroy him outright, more's the pity*. For Weasley, lowly as he was, had connections... connections that might someday be exploited, when the time was right, according to the Dark Lord's wishes.

"You know the one I mean: the one that forever rides on Potter's coattails," he hissed.

Arthur lay gasping once again on the ground. It took him several moments to collect himself. "Ron is ill, unfortunately. Missed the wedding. He's upstairs at home, if you want to see him yourself," he said shakily.

Malfoy was momentarily stunned into silence, shocked by this news. Panic began to creep into his gut. "I don't believe you!" he sputtered. "Prove it!" He grabbed Arthur by the arm and dragged him into a standing position, jabbing his wand into the soft flesh of Arthur's neck.

"Certainly, Lucius," he said, wincing at the rough treatment. "I must warn you, though... he has spattergroit. Have you ever had it? I wonder if perhaps you have, judging by your face?"

Malfoy burned with fury at his bald impudence. He couldn't resist another go. Just a few more seconds worth. *Crucio!*

Thirty seconds later, as his prey lay motionless on the ground, Malfoy momentarily worried that he had finally gone too far. But then the worthless lump began to move again.

"Stop playing with me, Weasley, or you might get my temper riled," he warned.

"Ron is upstairs," Arthur uttered in the barest whisper. "Got sick a month ago, right after he came home from school."

"Search the house!" Malfoy shouted the order to his nearest henchman. "Tear it apart, if necessary. Bring anything... or anyone... of interest directly to me."

An hour later, after everyone had reported back to him without a single scrap of useful information, Lucius Malfoy was becoming rather put out. After the failure at the Department of Mysteries over a year ago and Draco's only partial success at Hogwarts this spring, his family was in dire need of a successful raid tonight. If Potter had been here, only to have escaped yet again.... Lucius' bowels quaked to consider the consequences.

"Assemble the rest of your pathetic ragamuffin family, Weasley. We'll see what they have to say," he ordered.

"We're all here already, Lucius. Please forgive me if I forgo the usual polite niceties... I'm not quite up to playing the host at the moment," Arthur replied.

Molly was supporting much of his weight in order to keep him upright in his seat. He gazed at the rest of his family assembled in the living room: Ginny, Charlie, Bill and Fleur. They all looked upon him with concern. The icy hate for Malfoy flared in his heart once again.

"I am looking for Potter," Malfoy spat at the family sitting before him. "Where is he?"

As a group, his prisoners all shook their heads, shrugged their shoulders. *They certainly stick together: this vulgar, disgraceful rabble* He would soon teach them the folly of that.

Malfoy directed his attention to the comely girl he deduced was the bride. *She really is quite exquisite*, he was forced to admit to himself. He grabbed her by the chin, holding her gaze by force. *A proud thing, too*, he mused as she glared back at him, resisting his grip. He squeezed harder, making her wince.

The tallest young man rose in anger and lunged toward Malfoy. Another, smaller one rose as well and moved to restrain him.

So... the groom takes the bait this easily? Malfoy grinned with anticipation.

"Poor, unfortunate, stupid girl. Do you see now your mistake? Binding yourself to this common trash?" he said, shaking his head and clucking his tongue.

Fleur wrenched her face away from Malfoy's grasp and threw back her head. "My family is the finest in Britain. I see nothing before me to contradict this," she spat with fury.

Malfoy turned to the groom next, who had noticed the angry red marks now appearing on the bride's face. The disfigured young man looked at him with a burning hatred in his eyes.

"Dear, dear. Those bites look awfully nasty," Malfoy taunted the boy with relish. "You must have been in the wrong place at the wrong time, hmm? An unfortunate Weasley habit, that. And now, you're left so damaged, you were forced to take a half-breed to wife? No proper witch would have you, I suppose. Oh, wait a moment; I seem to have forgotten something, haven't I? Tainting pure wizard blood is a favorite Weasley pastime as well, isn't it?"

Charlie was struggling to physically hold his brother back. Bill was growling, snapping his teeth in fury as if he wanted to shred Malfoy with them. Arthur was trying to get through to Bill by shouting at him to back down, since he was too weak yet to stand and help Charlie restrain him.

The wolfish ferocity of the angry young groom was beginning to make Malfoy uncomfortable. The boy was tall and physically intimidating even without the unpredictable effects of Greyback's attack. He flicked his wand and the curiously canine young man howled in pain. The smaller one, to his credit, took it in silence. The females sat frozen in horror, unable to help them.

Finally the great cow of a mother screamed, "Stop!"

He released the boys from the curse a moment later, noting with satisfaction how they both crumpled onto the tatty furniture. "Do you have anything to add, woman?"

"They're telling the truth!" she cried in desperation. "Ask anyone here. Harry never came today. We haven't seen him!"

"Oh, rest assured, madam, I plan to interrogate each and every one of you. Carefully and thoroughly," he said softly, enunciating each threatening word. Malfoy turned back to Arthur. "Where are the rest of your urchins, Weasley?"

"Don't know. Things have been a bit chaotic since you and your lot decided to ambush a perfectly innocent family wedding celebration," he answered, his voice still weak from before.

Malfoy grinned, belying the anxiety that was rapidly mounting within. It was imperative that he not return to the Dark Lord empty-handed like the last time. "Hmm. A few chickens have flown the coop, have they? Well, well, well, let us see who comes back to roost."

He turned to the men who had accompanied him on this mission. "Make yourselves comfortable, gentlemen. That is, what paltry comfort you can find in this dirty hovel. It appears we will be imposing upon the Weasley hospitality for a while longer, I'm afraid."

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The sky was just beginning to lighten with the coming dawn when a silvery fox coalesced from nothing at the foot of Annie's bed. "Come home now. We told them you were at Aunt Muriel's, who then sent you to the shop. Keep the story straight, you *will* be asked." Then the spectral animal disappeared in a puff.

"Fred's Patronus," George responded to Annie's baffled look. "I'll explain it more to you later. Stay at home today.... I'll be back as soon as it's safe."

He kissed her more urgently than his calm tone of voice would have indicated necessary then was gone.

*

"We need to talk, George."

The Burrow was finally quiet once more. It was mid-afternoon, and the rest of the family was asleep. But George and his father were standing guard by the hearth.

George met his father's eyes. He had known that this was coming sooner or later. It was inevitable, after last night. He wasn't exactly looking forward to it, but here it was.

"I know..." he answered with a sigh. George watched as his father took a seat next to him on the sofa.

Arthur rubbed his face with his palms. "George, I'm worried... about you and Annie."

"Don't be. We'll be fine," he replied, deliberately misinterpreting his father.

Arthur gave George a look that told him he would brook no nonsense from him at the moment. "I'll be straight with you, son. She knows too much already. She could identify practically every member of the Order, even if she doesn't know precisely what it is."

"She'd never tell! You don't know her like I do!" George protested.

"And you have no idea the brutal tactics a Death Eater will resort to. She's a danger to us and a danger to herself. If they ever found out...."

"They never will!" he hissed.

"And how can you guarantee that, George? There's only one sure way...."

"NO!"

"You have to give her up," his father persisted. "For her own good. For now, at least."

"I *can't!* I *won't!*" George argued, nearly shouting, carefully omitting the fact that he had already tried to do so unsuccessfully.

"George, you must see reason! If nothing else, you must remember you have a responsibility to the Order. Look, she's a lovely girl; I like her, too. But you're both only nineteen years old...."

"Oh, not you, too!" George spat. "It doesn't matter! How can you, of all people, expect me to swallow the 'you're too young' crap?"

Arthur had to concede his son had him dead to rights on that point. He and Molly had been the same age when they were wed, after all. But this was completely different. Wasn't it? "You have some other solution?" he asked, exasperated.

"Actually, I do."

George had been thinking about it for a while now. Well, to be precise, he'd been very careful not to think of it all day today, just in case. But now the house was empty of uninvited guests. They had only really been interested in where Harry was, anyway. The fact that a Muggle had slipped through their clutches had completely escaped their notice.

"Bring her in. Give her the Fidelius," he urged softly. "You're Secret Keeper you could do it. Then she wouldn't be a danger to the Order anymore."

Arthur looked at his son in shock. "George, be serious! How would putting her under a Fidelius Charm keep her safe?"

"It wouldn't, I know. But it would protect the Order, right? And that's your main objection, isn't it?" George looked at his father, whose pained expression confessed silently that he had no argument with his son's logic so far. "Then I could protect her! I'll charm their house."

Arthur shook his head. "It wouldn't work. Nothing in their home would function anymore. And all those spells on a Muggle house would stand out like a searchlight, if someone was looking for trouble. You'd be putting her at incredible risk, George."

George nodded reluctantly, understanding the logic of his father's argument. It galled him to think of her alone with her Gran, utterly unprotected. But as long as no one found out.... "I know, but... I have to. She'll say the same, I'm sure of it. Just ask her."

Arthur's eyebrow rose inquisitively. "Is it truly that serious between you two?"

George looked earnestly into his father's eyes and nodded. "She's the one, Dad," he said softly.

Arthur sighed deeply, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. He was exhausted and aching, desperate to lie down. Despite all the sensible arguments he could pile up against his son's relationship with the Muggle girl, he wouldn't go up against true love. No one had the right to interfere, if that's what this really was.

"All right, look we'll leave the choice up to her. But George, if she chooses not to take the oath, then that's the end of it, understand? She has to do it of her own free will. And if she doesn't, you will drop it, is that clear? Promise me now you *will not* do anything rash!"

George nodded with a smile, brimming with confidence at an argument he judged to be already won. He leaped to his feet. "Fair enough. Let's go get her."

"Later," Arthur sighed. "I need to rest for a bit, first."

*

Gran wanted to hear all about the wedding, of course, as they sat at the table in the kitchen for breakfast. Annie had to carefully edit the tale, sticking to the traditional highlights regarding the bridal dress, decorations, cake, et cetera. When she got to the part about dancing at the reception, though, her voice caught. She wasn't quick enough to hide the contradictory smile on her face and eyes welling up with tears.

"What is it, Annie?" Gran asked, concerned and confused.

Annie shook her head. She wasn't ready to share George's proposal with Gran just yet. "It was just... very romantic, that's all."

She spent the rest of her day keeping herself busy with household chores, keeping out of Gran's view as much as possible. Annie struggled to remain calm, to hide the anxiety she felt for George and the rest of his family, while she waited. It didn't help that George didn't return until well after dark. She had grown quite desperate for news of his family's safety as the day had worn on and was therefore frantic when he finally reappeared in her room.

"Are you safe? Are they safe? What happened?" she spluttered as she kissed him fiercely.

George was almost as agitated as she was. "Calm... down.... Let me... breathe," he was barely able to gasp out between the kisses.

"Sorry." She stopped kissing him but still clung tightly to his neck.

"We're all fine, as far as we know. Nobody's sure where Ron is, other than he's with Harry and Hermione. The Death Eaters," his voice spat the name like a particularly vile epithet, "are finally gone, but we're likely being watched."

George sat her down on the edge of her bed and knelt before her. He held her by the shoulders as he looked seriously into her eyes. He took a deep, steeling breath, then began to speak once more.

"Annie, as you can tell from recent events, things are getting a bit hairy around here. That's not likely to change, considering who's in charge now. My family... is involved in s-something.... I can't tell you specifics, but it's s-secret... and dan-dangerous... and *right*."

Annie noticed that, for some reason, George was having difficulty saying what he wanted to say. Almost, but not quite, like he was having trouble choosing the right words. His speech was full of awkward pauses, and she could see that he had an almost physical struggle to speak.

"B-but something's changed.... It's not just my d-decision anymore.... For us to be together... you have to do s-something. If you love me like I love you, then I need you to come with me tonight."

"For how long?" she asked frantically.

George's words, aside from being cryptic, struck panic in her heart. She couldn't leave Gran! Not yet not for good. She prayed George wasn't asking her to make a choice between them. She felt her heart begin to rip apart at the thought....

"For a while. I'll have you back by morning. Will your Gran be all right until then?"

Annie sighed with relief, saved from tearing her heart in two, and nodded. "I think so."

"So, will you come?"

"Of course."

They snuck out of the house after Annie checked in on her Gran to reassure herself she was sleeping peacefully. As they crept past the garden gate, she was startled to see George's father waiting for them in the shadows.

"Hello, Annie. I'm here to take you to the Burrow now, the only safe way that's left to us. It will be a bit uncomfortable for you, but only for a moment. Do you trust me, dear?"

Annie nodded. Even in the darkness, she could see Arthur was rather the worse for wear at the moment. She wondered what had happened over the past twenty-four hours to take such a toll upon him.

"All right, then; come stand by me, and I'll hold on to your shoulder like this. You might want to put your arms around me to help steady yourself. Ready?"

Again, Annie nodded silently, obeying his instructions.

Suddenly, she felt as though she had been instantaneously plunged to the bottom of a deep oceanic abyss. An immense blackness and monumental pressure began to stuff itself into her ear canals and nostrils. She was sure something had gone terribly wrong. This must be death....

And then, another instant later, she opened her eyes in front of a crackling fire in the living room of the Burrow, still clutching George's father around his waist. A second later, George popped into being right next to her.

"Here we are, dear. I hope that wasn't too terribly disconcerting for you," Arthur said as he patted her on the shoulder.

She shook her head to reassure him, confident that if she tried to verbally respond, it would be made completely obvious by her quivering voice that whatever had just happened had shaken her tremendously indeed.

She looked to George, who directed her to the sofa. They sat together, completing a small circle of family members. Molly was there with Fred. A shabby-looking man she had seen here once or twice before but never been properly introduced to was also in the room, nervously hovering around the margins.

"Now, Annie. I'm not sure how much George has already explained to you, but I want you to know that whatever happens tonight, whatever decision you make, I promise we will do our utmost to keep you and your grandmother safe. That is our ultimate priority," Arthur began in a serious voice.

Annie nodded slowly, taking in the gravity of the situation. Every face in the room was looking at her with a similar solemn expression. Each of them looked haggard, worn down by the day's events, but yet showed concern for her. She was touched that they spared such feeling for her even now, but also felt a resentment that was growing into anger at the ones responsible for hurting these dear people.

Arthur began to speak again. "As you have unfortunately seen throughout the last week, there are those in our world who do not respect the rights of anyone else to live peacefully as they choose. They value only power and are willing to use any means necessary to obtain it. And they have recently gained control of the Ministry of Magic: our government, so to speak.

"My family and others like us are committed to resist them. More than this, I cannot tell you... yet. First, I must ask you to make a decision. A very important one with far-reaching effects, I'm afraid. I must honestly warn you now: it will determine your future with George."

Annie looked at George, who was looking at her earnestly himself. She reached for his hand and squeezed it for support. Whatever they asked her to do, she would. At this moment, she was willing to take any risk for them.

"Annie... you, as a non-magical person, have far too much knowledge of our world to remain safe, either in our world or in your own. We are putting you in danger by allowing you any further contact with us. We are putting ourselves in danger as well, not to mention risking our cause. This is something we can no longer do, circumstances as they are, unless you are willing to make a commitment: to take a special kind of oath. Do you understand me so far?"

"I think so."

She understood that George's family and friends were in danger. A danger that grew as the influence of the nameless menace increased. Whatever it took, she would keep them safe if it was within her power to do so.

"Now, if you choose to continue your relationship with my family, with George, I will ask you to take the oath I mentioned before. It is magical, and binding, and permanent. It will force you to keep our secret forever, no matter what. You will never be able to reveal the secret to anyone, no matter what duress you yourself may be under. No matter your own conscious, rational thought. Even to save yourself... or someone you love."

"I would never betray you, Mr. Weasley," she assured him, falling back on formal address under the stress of the situation.

"Annie, my dear... this is not because I do not trust you to keep a secret! God knows you have demonstrated your trustworthiness beyond a shadow of a doubt over your years of friendship with the boys. The oath is necessary because the enemy who wishes to learn the secret will resort to evil measures to get it. You see, magic can be used to torture as well as heal, to destroy as well as create. I don't blame George if he has not explained this Dark aspect of our world to you."

"And the alternative?" she asked, swallowing hard.

She trusted them, trusted George completely. But this was serious. George's father was talking about *forever*. And Annie had a responsibility to her Gran. She couldn't justify risking Gran's safety any more than she could the Weasleys'.

"I will be forced to erase your memory. You will have no recollection of any member of my family, ever, for the rest of your lifetime."

Arthur paused to let the enormity of this sink in. The poor girl looked like she had been slapped. No worse than that shot with an arrow through the heart, perhaps. He looked upon her with pity, wishing that he had any other solution.

"I'm sorry, Annie," he said gently. "These are drastic options I am asking you to choose between, I know. As I said before, it is only because the safety of my family and our friends requires such measures. These are trying times for us all, to be sure.

"If you choose to take the oath, I can assure you we will do everything in our power to keep you and your grandmother safe. You will be carefully guarded. If you choose the alternative well, we'd still keep an eye out for you, even though you'll never know it. Either way, you will be as safe as we can possibly keep you.

"I know I've given you a great deal to ponder. Do you have any questions for me, Annie?"

"Just one. If I take the oath, is my Gran affected in any way? I have to take care of her, you see: I'm all she's got," Annie said in a choked voice.

"George has assured us that she knows little more than his name and nothing about our family. Is this true?" Arthur asked.

"Yes," Annie assured him without hesitation.

"Then no, she will not be affected in the least. However, if you choose the alternative, she will lose all memory of George as well. As will anyone else who knows about the two of you."

Arthur paused for a moment, considering this young Muggle girl before him. Her head was bent, and she was gazing thoughtfully into her lap while his son George was holding her hand. He was staring at her intently with concern for her, but also with the naïve confidence in love that only teenagers have. He seemed to think he knew the

decision she would make. Arthur was not so sure.

They looked so very young, the two of them. How could he ask either of them to make such a life-altering decision at nineteen? It wasn't fair of him but what choice did he have? He glanced up at Lupin, who was seated in the corner, shaking his head slightly, looking conflicted as well. *Why does love have to be so complicated?*

"Would you like some time alone to consider?" Arthur asked her gently.

Annie gazed up at George, sitting beside her and holding her hand. There was never really any question that she would ever give him up. "No. Give me the oath."

Crash Course

Chapter 31 of 80

Concurrent with *Deathly Hallows*. The Weasleys teach Annie a slew of magical secrets. George and Annie discuss strategy. Who can blame them for sneaking a little cuddle?

Chapter 31: Crash Course

August 1997

Once Arthur had extended the Fidelius Charm to include her the night after the wedding, Annie began a crash course in magic. She had to admit, the spell itself was rather anticlimactic, considering the traumatic events leading up to it. No magical ties now connected her to the Weasleys, no glowing gag bound her mouth, not even a measly flash of light. She simply read a sentence written on a scrap piece of parchment: "The headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix is at the Burrow."

But as a direct consequence, George had Apparated into her room every night after curfew that week, instructing her in the basics of magical communication, starting with the Patronus. He began that first night by conjuring a beautiful, silvery falcon that flew in a circle once around her room, then alit on the chair by her desk.

"This is my Patronus, Annie. No one else can make exactly the same one. It can't be faked. In an emergency I can send it to you along with a brief message. It will speak with my voice in that case. You can trust whatever information it will share with you, but you can't ask it anything in return. It's not as good as a phone that way. Understand?"

Annie nodded slowly with amazement. She was mesmerized by the eerily lifelike bird of prey, cocking its head from side to side as it appeared to be sizing her up. She was disappointed when the shining quicksilver bird faded back into the darkness from whence it came.

"Now, you've already seen Fred's Patronus. The fox, remember? The same rules apply anytime you see it. The rest of my family will show you their Patronuses the next time you see them. You must memorize them so you know which ones you can trust."

Annie nodded mutely, picturing in her mind the fox she had seen a week ago. "How will I contact you, then?"

George pondered this for a moment. "Well, we still have the cell phones. That will have to do. Why don't we set up some sort of schedule to check in with each other? Maybe a few times a day?"

"As long as you don't feel that's too restrictive... for you, I mean," Annie agreed.

George laughed in disbelief. "That promises to be one of the least restrictive things we'll be dealing with from now on." He became serious then. "It's all about to get really complicated, Annie.... Are you sure you still want this?"

Annie barely let him finish his sentence. "Don't you dare even ask, George! No second thoughts now.... You're stuck with me, remember?" she teased.

George smiled. "I'm counting on it."

The next night, as they sat together on her bed, they discussed the personal security measures they needed to begin taking. It was the single most frightening conversation Annie had ever had in her life. Even more jarring than the one she had had with George's father about the Fidelius Charm business.

"Annie you need to start verifying that I am who I say I am every time we see each other from now on," he recommended, leaning back against the headboard.

"What d'you mean?" she asked, alarmed. She sat at the foot of the bed, hugging her legs to her chest. "If I can tell the difference between you and Fred...."

George shook his head. "It's not that simple. There are two ways a Death Eater could impersonate me...."

"You mean like when Harry turned into Stephen?" she interrupted.

"Yeah!" he exclaimed, impressed with how quickly she made the connection. "That's the effect of Polyjuice Potion: the imposter would look *exactly* like me but might sound or act differently. And the effect only lasts about an hour or so, then you start to revert back to yourself unless you take another dose."

"Got it. So if you look like you but act or sound a bit off and make a point of drinking something odd every hour, I know you're not really you, right?" she said, only slightly sarcastically.

She thought about the disorienting shock of seeing Stephen at the wedding a few days ago, concluding it had been the result of the chest hair she had plucked from him that morning. He certainly hadn't acted remotely like the Stephen she knew. "So the Death Eaters would have to get a part of you to make this potion, just like we did for the wedding?" she continued.

George nodded, unwilling to elaborate further on such a scenario: if he was captured, his family's safety compromised, the Order's secrecy at risk.

"And the other way?" Annie asked, not really wanting to know.

"It's called the Imperius Curse. In which case, it would actually *be* me, but I would be mentally and physically under the control of someone else. Now, Fred and I have been practicing resisting being Imperiused, and I'm getting better at it. So there's a decent chance that I'd be acting a bit strangely in this case as well because I'd be fighting it off."

"Are you *trying* to make me a paranoid train wreck? Or is that just a perk for you with all this rubbish?" she half-teased him.

He rolled his eyes. "The fact is, someone could be impersonating you as well. It's for both our safety that we come up with some way to verify we are who we say we are."

"Okay, then how?"

"I know it sounds stupid," he said, smirking, "but... we have to come up with a password of sorts. Some questions to ask each other that would only be known by the two of us if we were in our right minds."

"Oh, is that all?" She laughed with relief. "I was worried we were going to resort to some elaborate magical fingerprint business or something."

"I grant you it seems a bit silly, but we probably ought to take it seriously, all the same," he said.

"How do I know you are who you say you are right now? You certainly don't sound like *my* George Weasley, so serious and grave..." she teased him, moving from the foot to the head of the bed and sidling up next to him.

"Good question. Ask me something that only I would know," he suggested, putting his arm around her.

Annie thought for a moment, then smiled slyly. "How about... identifying markings? Like what's on my back?"

George smiled and chuckled. "I like what you're implying by that, but it's no good. Anyone could make a pretty good guess at a leading question like that, and you wouldn't necessarily prevent me from looking if you thought I was me. Try again. Maybe a memory we share, instead."

"Like when we first met?"

"Better, but it's a bit predictable. If I was going to Imperius someone, that'd be one of the first questions I'd make them to tell me."

She was tired of getting shot down. "What do you suggest, then?" she sighed.

"How about... the first birthday presents we ever gave each other? That might be sufficiently obscure."

"You remember that?!" she exclaimed quietly.

"Of course! The only cake I've ever seen before or since with my name alone on it. And the gumdrops were an excellent touch," he said, nuzzling her jaw line.

"I can't believe you remember," she said, shaking her head in wonder.

"And you? You can't have forgotten your surprise birthday party? Fred and I went to so much trouble, catching all those blasted fairies," he laughed.

Annie smiled as she lay down and leaned over the side of the bed. She pulled out a shoebox from beneath it and set it on the quilt between them. She carefully opened the lid, then gingerly set aside dozens of letters and several scraps of parchment. There at the bottom of the box, lying next to a photo and an empty glass vial, was the very first gift she had received from the boy who would someday become her true love. She picked them up and held them in her hand, offering them to George.

"Fifty-seven Famous Wizard cards, numbers one through sixty, missing numbers seven, twenty-one, and forty-five."

George looked up from the box to gaze at her in quiet amazement.

She winced as she misinterpreted his expression. "Pathetic, I know." She carefully replaced the contents back into the box, then returned the box to its proper resting place. "Is it bordering on creepy, or is it just generically obsessive-compulsive, d'you think?" she asked lightly, attempting to minimize what she suspected was his growing discomfort.

George laid his body down next to her, staring at the quilt, his fingers fiddling with a seam. They both were lying on their stomachs, propped up on their elbows. Annie's feet were resting on the quilt while George's legs were hanging well over the opposite edge of the bed. "That depends," he replied, a nervous half-smile now brightening his face.

"On what? I might be mental, but I wouldn't harm you," she teased, wondering if he felt leery of her now that she had revealed how truly psychologically disturbed she was. "Don't be frightened by my weirdness," she reassured him.

"You think I don't have a similar collection? Mine's a bit more disorganized than yours, of course," he chuckled, "but they're all there in my old school trunk. Your letters, anyway, and the books you sent, and the snaps. Most of the toys and the plastic wrap are long gone, as you can imagine," he laughed.

Annie shook her head, calling his bluff. "Bullshit. I don't believe you." She was convinced he was just trying to make her feel better about her perverse compulsion to cling to anything associated with him. But as embarrassed as she felt about it, she had no intention of getting rid of her treasure collection. She would keep those things with her forever.

"Why not?" he protested. "We had to hide the evidence that we were pen friends with a Muggle, for starters. And then... well, aside from Fred, you've always been my best friend."

"What about all the other wizard kids at Hogwarts? What about Lee?" she asked doubtfully. As much as she wanted to believe him, she found it very difficult to think he had felt the same way about a Muggle girl as she did for her wizard boys, back then.

"Oh, Lee was great. Still is," he insisted. "Always good for a laugh. But... it wasn't the same. You know, I don't think he ever once broke curfew with us."

"Never!?" she exclaimed, incredulous. "How can anyone live in a magical castle and not explore it after dark?"

"My thoughts exactly. I always knew that if you had been there, you would've come with us every time," he chuckled.

"No question about it," she agreed. "And likely spent every night in detention, right along with you both," she added ruefully. His scarred hand was resting on the bed next to her, and she ran her finger along the faintly pink scribble.

"We missed having a kindred spirit to share it all with. We missed you." He shifted to lie on his side, facing her. He began to play with a curl near her ear, winding it around his finger.

Annie leaned in to kiss him. "You're sweet to say so, but forgive me if it's a bit difficult to believe. You were surrounded *everywhere* by magic, George. And *everyone* around you was magical, just like you. You got to do magic *every day*. I'm still amazed you managed to write to me at all."

George looked at her with a genuinely perplexed expression. "Are you remotely serious? I was shipped off to school in the dreariest place on the planet, in my opinion, separated all those long months from my home and my best friend, surrounded by a great bloody throng of strangers. I'd never been around anyone but you and my family all my life until then, remember? Not to mention sitting in those classrooms was unadulterated torture. If it hadn't been for Fred, I would've ditched it all for good far sooner, I assure you. And I'm fairly certain he'd say the same."

"Nobody else there ever really... got the point, you know? That they were all being so idiotic so bloody serious about every little goddamn thing all the time. Everyone thought Fred and I were the idiots sure, good for a laugh, but primarily just a couple of clowns. That's why we started the Wheezes: to show this wand-up-the-arse world how to lighten the hell up!"

Annie gave him a knowing smile, nodding her head. He was preaching to the choir, after all. She reckoned she knew exactly how he felt.

"I've always known that about you both... and you're geniuses at it, if you ask me. You'll change the world, you know, with your Skiving Snackboxes and Canary Creams and magic fireworks. You've made it a better place to be already: a happier one. Joy and laughter are far more important than wealth or status, but the two of you will have all of it, mark my words. Probably even have your own Famous Wizard cards before it's all said and done."

If George hadn't been watching her earnest face the entire time, it would've been easy to assume she was just being a smart-arse, just winding him up. But he could tell tonight that she was utterly sincere, and he could barely contain the surge of emotions pulling through him at the moment.

Annie *understood* him. She always had, while nearly everyone else, including his own mother, had dismissed him as nothing more than a frivolous goofball. She took pride in him, in his accomplishments, as much as if they were her own. But even more than that, she felt the same way as he did about the world with an empathy deeper than reason would deem possible a soulmate, if he believed in such a thing.

George had spent his entire life in the constant presence of a mirror image. From the moment of his conception, the never-ending process of separation had begun. For regardless of their physical indentity, both George and his twin had always felt a strong drive to establish their distinctive natures. *I am different! I am me!*

Fred was the talkative one. More impulsive. The leader. George was quieter, more thoughtful, more sensitive to others. Or at least, that's what people thought. What they didn't understand was that both brothers actually shared every trait, but had almost subconsciously cultivated in himself what the other had chosen to ignore.

Yet George felt precisely the opposite urge with Annie. He could never be close enough to her. Something within her called to him, demanding his attention, his allegiance. He felt compelled to be connected with her, physically and emotionally. To melt into her, to be one with her, was his only ambition.

Love and desire partnered to overwhelm whatever silly reason there might have been for restraint, and he took her into his arms to show her how he felt. He began to kiss her gently at first, then rapidly growing in intensity. It never took much every moment they spent together was in a perpetual state of semi-arousal, anyway. A minute or so of kissing, a few caresses, sometimes even just sitting next to each other was enough to kindle the fire between them.

They quickly helped each other out of their clothing. He felt her legs entwine around his as he lay between her thighs, her arms around his body, her hands on his back, fingertips trailing along the ridges of his backbone. Only a few tiny sighs, a hushed moan reached his ear from her lips, but they propelled him quickly to the brink.

It took every ounce of concentration to hold off, every scrap of willpower to resist succumbing completely to the seductive pleasure. But he managed it.

"George!" she cried in a throaty whisper. He felt every muscle in her entire body strain beneath him, around him. Her fingernails dug into the flesh of his back, her thighs tightened against his hips.

"Annie!" he groaned as he shuddered with release.

A couple of hours later, Annie lay wide awake, watching the moon's shadows cast on her wall slowly slide downward to the floor. She listened to George's quiet breathing as he slept, and the peaceful rhythm of it helped to calm her racing mind while it repeated their final conversation of the night.

After he had made love to her, the first time since before the night he was injured, he had insisted on finishing his thoughts about her security. "Annie... you told me once that you learned how to shoot a gun, right?"

"Yes. Gran sent me to the firing range for several months after I turned fourteen. I learned how to use Grandfather's old pistol. Why?"

"Where is it?" he'd asked, dodging her question for a moment.

"In Gran's closet."

She had heard George pause and felt his chest rise against her back as he took a deep breath. "Annie, it's not that I think you aren't safe, because you are. As safe as we can possibly keep you. But... well, I can't be here all the time...."

"That might start arousing Gran's suspicions, true," she'd teased, desperate to lighten the mood.

George had been undeterred. "If the unthinkable were to happen.... If someone found out about us, about you, and came here...."

"George, don't worry about me..." she had tried to assure him, even though she knew it was a preposterously false sense of confidence that he would see right through. She was right: he had ignored her comment and continued, completing his previous thought.

"You would only have an instant, and that's only if you had surprise on your side. An ambush is the best option you've got. And Annie... you'd only have one shot. You must make it count.... Do you understand what I mean?"

Annie had swallowed the sour taste of fear that had risen in her throat and nodded, rather than answer aloud.

"I think you should keep the gun here in your room for the time being. Can you get it? By tomorrow night?" he had persisted.

"Okay," she had whispered, struggling mightily against the urge to cry. She had refused to let him feel how her fear had begun to overpower her self-control.

"Good," he'd said simply.

It had been the last thing George had said to her that night. If she hadn't been currently nestled so tightly within his arms, she'd be anxiously pacing the floor. So instead, she lay wide awake, watching the moon's shadows now slowly creeping across the floor toward her, listening to him quietly breathing.

*

The following weeks settled into a routine of sorts. Several times daily, Annie would check in with George by leaving him messages on his phone, which he would retrieve at specific hours of the day when he could escape unnoticed from whatever enchanted place he found himself. He would phone her back, share any interesting news, and discuss the likelihood of them seeing each other that evening. It was becoming increasingly rare he was free to do much more than ring her.

For George had become quite busy lately. He and Fred spent the daytime hours struggling valiantly to keep the shop on Diagon Alley open, but it was rapidly becoming a useless gesture of defiance. Not only were they being harassed on an almost daily basis by the Death Eaters' minions for no actual Death Eater would deign to be seen setting foot in their establishment but there were fewer and fewer customers coming into the shop each day, anyway.

And it wasn't only Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes that was suffering every shop on Diagon Alley was hurting for business. Word had begun to spread through the wizarding world: disturbing changes at the Ministry were afoot, and times were uncertain. Best to stay home, keep yourself to yourself, and keep your wits sharp about you.

The good news was that the owl order business kept them afloat. Orders were still pouring in for the defensive products they had developed, even without their advertisements in the *Daily Prophet*, which they had pulled immediately after the filthy rag had published the names of all those Muggle-born wizards wanted for

questioning. And they were almost single-handedly keeping Madam Malkin in business, making cloaks, hats and gloves for them to subsequently enchant into shield devices.

After dark, however, he and Fred would set out on their latest foray into subversive behavior: aiding and abetting the growing ranks of fugitives. Ranks which they assumed likely included their own brother Ron and his friends Harry and Hermione, at this point.

By the middle of August, the situation Muggle-born wizards found themselves in was becoming dire indeed and many had fled into hiding. George and Fred had suggested at an Order meeting that something be done to help them and volunteered their services. They were uniquely suited for it, they argued, having perfected the fine art of creeping around undetected in the darkness, usually directly under the noses of authority.

"We could leave caches of supplies for wizards on the lam all over the country, really," Fred had suggested.

"It's a waste of time and resources. How would anyone on the run be able to find them? Or even know they existed?" Bill had argued.

"Easy!" George had cried. "We tell them on the wireless!"

He'd then outlined the plan that he, Fred and Lee had concocted to combat the load of rubbish that passed for news on the radio these days by broadcasting an underground program of their own. It could be secured by a rotating password, he'd explained, broadcast on a secret channel, and used to promote the Order's agenda to a far wider population than direct contact by members was currently doing.

"I must admit, it's an excellent plan," Remus Lupin had said as he smiled at Molly and Arthur, who were looking at the youngest Order members with a mixture of worry and pride. "Well done, you three. We'll start a collection to fund the purchases of supplies, and you can get started immediately. And remember to *be careful*," he'd admonished them as they were grinning and high-fiving each other.

Annie had been keeping herself quite busy as well. Three days a week, she worked full time at Dr. Dan's office as receptionist and bookkeeper, zipping home to check in and make lunch for her Gran during her midday break. Her days off were filled with doing errands—often buying supplies for the Order's subversive activities (for George and Fred couldn't very well be seen stocking up on foodstuffs in Diagon Alley)—doing household chores, and running Gran to doctor's appointments.

Appointments that were becoming increasingly frequent, for Gran was not her usual vivacious self as autumn approached. She was tired all the time, weaker, and not eating well to boot. So far, no doctor had solved the riddle, choosing instead to simply chalk it up to old age: a diagnosis Annie was unwilling to accept. She was determined to keep getting second opinions until someone started taking the symptoms seriously.

Saturdays were a bright spot of the week to look forward to. George would arrive in the morning, like he had nearly all summer long, primarily for Meredith's benefit. It was a ruse they had constructed to keep her safely in the dark, as it were. As far as she knew, George and Annie spent only Saturday mornings together under her watchful eye, then afternoons at his parents' home, also properly supervised, and that was the end of it. Annie would report back home in time for dinner, escorted by George, and occasionally invite him to stay for the meal. Then everyone returned to their proper places for the night... or so Meredith assumed.

It wasn't something Annie was proud of—all this deception directed at her Gran—but she couldn't see any way around it. Especially now, when so much was riding on appearances—or more accurately, the complete lack thereof. George and Annie could no longer see each other in public, a point made moot by the fact that they rarely had the chance to be together before midnight, anyway.

Except for Saturdays. After lunch, while Gran was lying down for her afternoon nap, George and Annie would walk out the back door, ostensibly to walk through the woods to his home. As soon as they reached the garden gate, an invisible hand would reach out for Annie's arm, and a disembodied voice would greet her.

"Hello, Annie. Ready to go?" an invisible Arthur would quietly ask her.

Annie would nod, then be plunged into the icy, black nothingness of some other dimension for an interminable instant, only to re-emerge in the friendly coziness of George's childhood home.

For three weekends in a row, George and Annie practiced Side-Along Apparition under the watchful eyes of his parents. He had always done solo trips so casually that Annie had had no idea of the true complexity of the process, or the dangers inherent to it. Dangers compounded by the fact that Apparating while pulling along another person was not an easy thing by any means, and George was rather young to be learning it. He'd only been Apparating himself for two years.

Arthur had fueled Annie's anxiety further as he explained to her the possibility of splinching. "You see, if a wizard loses focus on what he's doing, he can leave a part of himself behind."

"A part of himself?" she'd asked nervously.

"Only a real problem if the part is very big," George had joked with her. "Ron leaves bits of himself all over the place: eyebrows, fingernails, and the like. He's healed all right, most of the time."

"Maybe he's splinched his brain. That could explain a lot, you know," Fred had added.

They'd taken baby steps at first, popping from the living room to the kitchen and back. On the first couple of attempts, George had only been able to move himself, leaving Annie behind—once dropping her unceremoniously on the floor, to Fred's howling delight. The next twenty times had been more successful, however, and by the end of the first day of practice, she had, for the most part, overcome the terror she felt during the time spent *elsewhere*, for lack of a better word—each time they Apparated.

On the second Saturday, they began attempting trips between floors of the Burrow. Molly would remain in the living room and Arthur would await them at their destination, both of them ready to perform whatever emergency spells they could if anything went wrong.

It was getting easier, but all the effort was mentally and physically exhausting to them both. Near the end of the afternoon, when Annie was tired and hungry, George perversely decided to attempt their furthest jump—from the kitchen up to the attic—without telling anyone.

As they popped back into being in a dingy, tiny room, Annie was greeted to a horrifying sight. A large, hideous thing wearing pajamas and munching on an unidentified something with at least five legs protruding from his mouth was staring at her. She screamed in shock.

"It's okay," yelled George immediately to reassure the rest of the family. "It's just the ghoul frightened her! Nobody's hurt!"

Just then, likely agitated by the commotion and noise, the thing wailed loudly and tossed an old, broken chair at them. George waved his wand, repelling the chair and causing it to crash into the wall with a racket. He grabbed hold of Annie and they Disapparated in the next instant.

"George! What were you thinking? You were supposed to go to the fourth floor landing, not the attic!" Molly shouted angrily when they reappeared in the living room a second later.

But he and his brother were laughing too hard to respond at first.

"You should've seen her face, Fred!" George finally cried, gasping for breath, holding his sides.

"Did you wet 'em, Annie?" Fred asked, nearly crying himself. "What's the matter? Never seen a ghoul before?"

"No, Fred; that was my *third*, in fact!" she snapped, implying she was currently glaring at the first two. She sustained her anger for perhaps five more seconds before

beginning to giggle herself at the two of them, hysterically hiccupping with laughter.

"Bet you'll be paying for that one, George," Fred teased his brother.

"I swear I forgot about him being there, Annie. I didn't intend to scare you shitless," he explained, still laughing. "That was just a bonus."

George reached out to pull her into an apologetic hug, but yanked his arm back an instant later with a yowl. "You're more vicious than an offended hippogriff, you know that?" he complained, rubbing the tender spot where the pinch had landed.

"Oh, I didn't *intend* to cause you pain, George. That was just a bonus," she retorted with a smirk.

The third Saturday was more fun: the weather was fine, and they began to practice Apparating across further distances outdoors. Annie and George were in much brighter spirits to be in the fresh air once again. It was quite a bit more difficult, however, requiring even more concentration, because Arthur wanted George to practice extending a Disillusionment Charm over them both, making them invisible before and after they Apparated.

"No funny business today, George," warned his mother. "You've really got to focus now."

The first time he cast the Disillusionment Charm over them both, Annie couldn't stop giggling. It was an amazing sensation, glancing down at her own body and seeing nothing at all. "This is really trippy!" she laughed.

"How did you get that right the first try? When did you learn to do this spell?" Molly demanded.

"D'you really want to know, Mum?" George's disembodied voice laughed.

Molly reconsidered for a moment. "No, probably not," she muttered, agreeing with her son.

Annie felt George squeeze her hand, heard his voice. "Ready?" he asked her.

She nodded.

"I'll assume you're nodding, idiot," he chuckled invisibly a moment later.

"Oh, right. Yes, I'm ready," she giggled.

The next thing she knew, they had traveled from the back door to the frog pond. She suddenly realized her feet were wet. George had overshot the mark and landed them about a step away in the wrong direction from the bank. They were standing ankle deep in the water.

"Ugh!" she exclaimed.

"Ack!" cried George in the same instant. The Disillusionment Charm fell away instantly as they dropped hands and scrambled out of the water.

"What did I tell you, George?" Molly scolded, appearing an instant later on the bank. "This is serious business, and you've got to concentrate!" Molly waved her wand over Annie's shoes, and they felt dry and warm once again.

"Now, try that again," she instructed.

"What about my shoes?" whined George.

"Let that be a lesson to you. Serves you right for not paying attention!" she argued.

"How am I supposed to concentrate with soggy feet?" he argued back.

"Honestly, George. How old are you, anyway? Mummy won't always be there to dry your footsies," teased Fred, who had popped over to join them on the bank as well.

"At least tell me the spell, then," George said petulantly.

Molly chuckled. "*Siccato*," she spoke clearly, waving her wand over her son's shoes. "Think you can remember that one, dear?"

"Thanks, Mum," he replied in a meek, placating voice. "I think so."

"He doesn't deserve you, does he Mum?" teased Fred.

"None of you do," Molly laughed. "Bunch of ingrates, the lot! Now, off to the yard, and we'll have another go, shall we?"

Underground

Chapter 32 of 80

Concurrent with *Deathly Hallows*. Living a life of hiding and secrets isn't quite what the spy movies promise. A new member joins the Jones household. Annie deals with a pesky problem.

Chapter 32: Underground

Fall 1997

Annie was taking advantage of a few dry hours early Saturday morning to do some gardening. The weather was supposed to turn wet by lunchtime, and the heavy grey clouds looked as though they might start raining at any moment. She had already cleaned out all the dead ivy from around her bedroom window and hoped she would be able to plant all the new tulip bulbs Gran had bought through the mail, as well as clear up what was likely the last bit of weeding before a frost would make it more difficult to do so.

As she dug and prepared a bed for the bulbs, a familiar little creature came toddling over to her, and she smiled at his approach. The thing looked like an oddly shaped potato with legs and arms. Annie had taught him to avoid Gran, but since she never came outside to the garden anymore, he knew it was safe for him to emerge from his underground den.

"Hello, Spud," she said softly, greeting the gnome George and Fred had given her for her tenth birthday, captured from their mother's garden.

"Sod off," he replied in a raspy but friendly voice, peering over her arm into the hole she was digging.

Spud had learned a full vocabulary of insulting words from the twins before he had come to live with her, and she had not been able to rid him of the habit, nor had she managed to teach him any more pleasant ones in the ensuing years. She figured perhaps it required magical talents to do so but conceded that since she thought the foul-mouthed little fellow was hilarious, it was certainly possible she had never really tried very hard to do so.

"Cold, wet weather's coming.... Are you all ready for it this year? Need any more insulation?" she asked, smiling. Annie always made sure he had plenty of scraps of fabric to line his den with before the first frost. She began to arrange the tulip bulbs in the holes.

"Bugger," he said, nodding as he plopped down onto the ground next to her. He eyed the bulbs longingly.

"All right, then... just one, mind," she warned him while she reached into the bag and pulled out a bulb to give him. "Gran won't be pleased if she doesn't see tulips next spring. She might get a cat!"

"Shite!" he squeaked nervously but wiggled his fingers with anticipation until the bulb was within his grasp. "Snotty snot," he said, bidding her adieu, and traipsed back to his burrow underneath the hawthorn.

Annie giggled and went back to work. After she finished planting the bulbs, she made her way around to the vegetable bed, yanking out the last few weeds from the soft, dark soil.

An odd noise made her pause. She froze for a moment, straining her ears to hear it.

There it was again: a soft whine followed by a scratching sound at the garden gate. Annie stood up and walked slowly to the gate, where she waited until she heard the sound a third time.

Why would a dog be trying to get into the garden? she wondered, certain she had identified the sound. Slowly, she opened the gate to peer outside.

A beautiful, reddish-brown speckled white dog with amber eyes sat on its haunches just outside the gate. Its long coat was slightly matted and dirty, and a few dead leaves clung to its belly. It looked up at her expectantly.

"Where on earth have you come from?" she wondered aloud.

The dog uttered a single bark, as if responding to her question.

"Oh, well, that clears it up," she said sarcastically.

The dog made a move as if to enter the garden, then sat back down. As if it was prompting her to invite him in.

"All right, then come in if you like," she said, amused. She took a step backward to admit him.

The dog scampered inside the gate, then darted about the garden, nose down, as if on the trail of something. After half a minute, it honed in on the hawthorn, whining and digging at the soil underneath it.

"NO!" Annie commanded sharply, worried for her little friend. "Away from there!"

Immediately, the dog stopped what it was doing and trotted over to her, then sat down at her feet, looking up at her as if awaiting another command.

"Lie down," she said, testing it.

Instantly, the dog obeyed.

"Roll over?"

Like a show dog, it rolled over. She discovered the dog was male at this point.

"Speak."

He sat up and replied with a single bark.

"Shake hands?" she said, crouching down and offering her hand.

The dog placed his paw in hers. Gently, she reached out with her other hand so he could sniff her. He did so, then gave her hand a few friendly licks.

Clearly, this is an extremely well-trained dog, Annie reckoned, and she imagined its owner was likely frantic with worry. Other than a bit of road wear from his travels, he appeared healthy and otherwise well-cared-for.

She set his paw down and began to inspect his collar. The tag read "Michael" and bore a phone number. "Michael?" she asked him for confirmation.

He jumped up and spun around before sitting down again.

"Nice to meet you," she said, giggling. "You're a bit of a show-off, aren't you?"

With another answering bark, the dog lay down on the ground, head on his front paws, as if pouting.

"Only teasing," she said as she stood up and began fishing her phone out of her pocket. She kept it with her at all times now in order to catch any call George might make to her. "Don't get all bent," she said.

The dog scooted himself around until his hindquarters faced her, then looked back at her over his shoulder. He lifted an eyebrow and twitched his ears.

Great, she thought. *Just what I need: yet another smart-arse in my life*

She dialed the phone number from the dog's tag only to hear a recorded message informing her that the number had been disconnected. "That's odd," she muttered, carefully dialing the number again as she read it directly from the tag, just to make sure. The same recording answered.

She gazed curiously at the dog, who sat up and cocked his head, returning the look right back at her. "I wonder what your story is?" she asked him.

Annie could've sworn she saw the dog shrug.

The air began to fill with mist. She considered for a moment what to do with the dog and decided it would be cruel to send him away with bad weather coming. "I hope you're housebroken," she said, waving for him to follow her into the house.

"What's this?" exclaimed Gran as the two of them tromped into the kitchen. She was sitting at the table, sipping a cup of tea.

"Gran, meet Michael. He's a vagabond and a performer, apparently. The number on the tag is disconnected," Annie said, relaying all the information she had gleaned so far. "Any idea if he belongs to anyone in town?"

"Not a clue." Gran harrumphed. "Michael, eh? Saint or archangel?" she asked him, patting his head.

The dog put his paw gently on Gran's knee and whined.

Annie giggled. "It's almost like he can understand us. I've never seen anything like it!"

"What's your story, little one?" Gran murmured, holding his chin.

Michael smiled at her with his tongue lolling out.

"I already asked him that, and he's not telling," Annie said. "I've got to run to the market today, anyway.... If you don't mind, I'll pick up some things for him as well," Annie said, obliquely asking her Gran if it was okay to keep the dog, at least for the time being.

Gran looked at Annie out of the corner of her eye. "Hmmpf. I suppose it's just coincidence you've wanted a dog all your life, and here's one I'm in no position to say no to," she said suspiciously.

"I could take him to the shelter, if you really object," Annie said, smiling in victory.

Gran snorted, dismissing the suggestion. "Make sure you get some sweet-smelling shampoo and promise you'll give him a bath as soon as you get back," she replied, wrinkling her nose at the dirty-wet-dog smell now filling the kitchen.

Michael did a little happy dance, wagging his tail and darting between the two women as they laughed at his antics.

Annie began to busy herself with making lunch while Michael rested his head on Gran's lap, accepting her petting. He politely lay down quietly at their feet while they ate, refraining from begging for table scraps even though Annie figured he had to be hungry.

After Annie cleared the dishes, she made her way to the back door. Michael leapt up to follow her.

"You want to come?" she asked.

Michael's answering yelp nearly sounded like a "Yep!" and he seemed to nod his head.

"All right, then. Let's go," she said, smiling.

Together they dashed outside through the rain to the truck. Michael hopped into the cab and sat down on the passenger side like he had done it every day of this life. Annie was surprised by how happy she felt to have the company.

"I hope you don't expect to be invited into the store," she warned him as she turned the key and the engine roared to life.

They drove through town to the market on the far side, and the dog watched the houses and buildings go by with interest, as if it was all new to him. Annie cracked the windows for him while she went inside and did her shopping for the week, adding a leash, bowl, bag of food, bottle of shampoo and brush for Michael to her cart.

"New puppy, dear?" the cashier asked.

"Sort of," Annie replied.

Michael barked and danced with animated happiness when she returned to the truck with his new supplies. He laid his head on her lap as they drove home.

Nearly half an hour later, when she was elbow deep in soapy water giving the dog a bath, her phone rang.

"George!" she cried, happy as always to hear from him, holding the phone to her ear with her shoulder. "You'll never guess my news! I have a dog!"

"What?" he laughed.

"A dog! A stray showed up at the garden gate this morning and invited himself in."

"A stray, you say?" he asked, sounding a bit less enthusiastic.

"He's amazing," she said, hoping to elicit more excitement from him. "The smartest dog I've ever met. It's almost like he can talk!"

"He can talk?!" asked George, now clearly alarmed.

"Well, no, obviously. Not *actually*. He's a *dog*," explained Annie, confused by George's reaction.

There was a pause, then George asked, "Is it all right if I come over for a bit?"

"What... Now?" she asked, suddenly excited by the prospect of seeing him so soon. And in daylight hours, if the rainy gloom of the day could actually qualify as daylight. "Of course. You know you're welcome anytime," she said, smiling with anticipation even though his tone was anything but cheery.

"And your Gran?" he asked. It was code for asking if he could Apparate directly inside the house or if he had to visit via the garden.

"Napping," she said, pulling the stopper out of the tub and draining the water.

"See you in a minute, then," he said, and the call clicked off.

Annie turned on the shower to rinse the lather from Michael's coat. He stood up and placed his body as cooperatively as possible within the stream of warm water. She was still drying him off in the bathroom when she heard the quietest of pops from her bedroom across the hall.

Michael's head immediately jerked alert and he darted, still wet, out of her arms toward the sound. By the time she scrambled up from the bathroom floor and dashed after him, he had already introduced himself to George. He was standing on his hind legs, front paws propped on George's leg, sniffing him. George stood still as a statue, hands in his jacket pockets, looking down sternly at the dog.

"Michael, down," she commanded in a whisper.

The dog immediately obeyed, sitting at George's feet but looking up at him, panting.

"Isn't he amazing?" she asked him softly.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" he reminded her.

Annie sighed. Inspired by her other visitor of the day, she asked him the required question. "Tenth?"

"Hmm." He looked suspiciously at the dog. Instead of answering out loud, he leaned over to whisper in her ear. "Wind-up set of chattering teeth," he replied with a smile. "And you... the same," he added, leaning his ear down to her.

"Spud the Insulting Garden Gnome," she whispered back, then giggled and kissed George in greeting.

"George, this is Michael the Wonder Dog," she introduced them.

Michael cocked his head and raised one eyebrow.

George looked at the dog with a stony face, staring at him like a judge would examine a convicted felon. "When did he get here?" he finally asked.

"This morning. I was outside gardening...."

"Where did he come from?" George interrupted.

"Dunno. He was dirty and had a few leaves in his coat, so I presume the forest at some point," she explained.

George bent down, looking the dog directly in the eyes. Michael averted his gaze in submission, refusing to look directly back, but otherwise held his ground.

George examined the tag on his collar. "Did you call the number?"

"Disconnected."

George pursed his lips, not pleased with her answer.

"What's wrong?" Annie asked, thoroughly confused. Did he not like dogs for some reason?

George glanced distrustfully at the dog.

Annie wondered if he was worried about speaking in front of him. "Do you want him to leave the room?" she asked teasingly.

"He'd likely be able to hear anyway," George replied with all seriousness, shaking his head slightly, much to Annie's shock. After a short pause, he continued softly, "Do you remember a long time ago that night in Dartmoor when we talked about permanent kinds of magic?"

Annie nodded. "Like Dark magic," she answered, beginning to feel alarmed.

"I think... it's possible... this dog could be an Animagus," he whispered.

"A spy?" she cried softly.

Michael responded by lying down, putting his head on his paws, and whimpering.

"It happens. Remember Scabbers?" he asked.

Did Annie remember Scabbers? The long-lived pet rat that turned out to be the wizard Peter Pettigrew: mass murderer, traitor, and servant of You-Know-Who? "Oh my God, George! You really think?" she gasped.

George shrugged and stared hard at the dog. Michael responded by cocking his head again, then panting and letting his tongue hang out of his mouth.

"How do we find out for sure?" she asked.

George pursed his lips again. "I dunno. Maybe Dad knows."

"Should we walk him over to your place?" she asked.

George shook his head. "If he is what I think he might be, that would be a mistake," he said pointedly.

Annie nodded in understanding. It would be unwise in the extreme for Annie and George to bring another wizard in disguise to the Burrow, the current secret headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix, and possibly compromise the guarding spell. If, in fact, that was what Michael turned out to be.

"How about I meet you both at the old fort in about fifteen minutes?" he offered.

Annie nodded. "Okay."

"See you in a bit," he said, leaning in to give her a kiss goodbye. "Don't worry," he said, smiling slightly. "We'll figure it out, one way or another. Everything will be fine," he assured her. Then, with one last distrustful glance back at the dog, he Disapparated.

Annie sat on the floor next to Michael. He looked at her, put a paw on her leg, and nuzzled her ear with his wet, cold nose. "Are you a wizard?" she whispered as she scratched his ears.

Michael sneezed, shaking his head violently, as if responding negatively to her query.

"I hope not," she said. "Or at least, if you are one be on our side, okay?"

The dog whimpered once, licked her cheek, then trotted to the back door and sat, awaiting her. Annie clipped the leash on his collar, left a brief note for her Gran on the table, and pulled on her raincoat.

Annie and Michael made their way slowly across the open field, neither of them in any hurry to get to the rendezvous point despite the rain. As they approached the fort, she could see George and his father waiting for them, eyes wary and wands drawn.

They're afraid of him! Annie realized, startled by what she now desperately hoped was an overreaction on their part. In the few short hours she had known him, she had already grown attached to the dog's friendly, comforting presence.

"George, what is going on?" she asked worriedly.

"Annie, drop the leash and come to me," he said quietly.

"Wait! What are you going to do to him?" she cried, stepping between Michael and the threatening men.

"We won't hurt him," Arthur assured her. "At least, not without provocation," he added, directing this last part of his response to the dog.

"Come here, Annie," George repeated. It was a gentle command, but a command all the same.

Reluctantly, she set the leash down. She crouched, meeting Michael's questioning gaze. "Sorry," she said as she patted his head. "Please just be a dog," she pleaded in a whisper, then stood up and commanded him to stay.

George took her hand as soon as she was close enough and pulled her behind him. Meanwhile his wand remained aimed at the dog.

"Reveal your true form!" commanded Arthur.

Michael cocked his head and wagged his tail but never moved from his seated position. The standoff lasted a whole minute.

Next, Arthur cast a silent spell at the dog with a flourish of his wand. The flash of light startled Annie and she uttered a small cry, starting toward the dog. George held her in place, behind him, with one arm. Michael was also startled; he flinched but still remained in the spot where Annie had commanded him to.

Thankfully, he remained a dog.

"Are you satisfied yet?" she asked impatiently. She didn't like how she felt inside right now, as if she was betraying a friend's trust for no apparent reason.

"Dad?" asked George.

"Seems to be a dog to me," he replied, shrugging his shoulders. "But you were right to come to me with this. We can't afford not to be on our guard right now."

Annie released Michael from the stay command by patting her thighs. He bounded over to her, jumping up on her and smiling as if very pleased with his own performance. Annie giggled and rubbed his ears roughly, then pushed him gently back to the ground.

"Thanks, Dad," George offered as his father said goodbye to them and Disapparated, leaving the two of them alone in the woods.

Michael dashed to the spot where Arthur had been a moment ago, excitedly looking around and sniffing.

"Are you mad at me?" George asked Annie with a half-smile.

"No. Not really. I hate that we're turning into this, though. So suspicious of every little thing," she answered honestly.

George nodded in understanding and agreement. "A life of paranoia and covert operations isn't quite what it's cracked up to be in the spy movies, is it?"

Annie snorted. "Not quite. But it's worth it, I suppose. The alternative is completely unacceptable, at any rate," she said as they embraced.

Michael shook the rain from his coat and barked in annoyance as they began to kiss.

George chuckled. "I guess he has some hard feelings," he teased.

"Come over tonight and make it up to him," Annie coaxed.

"Make it up to him... or to you?" George smiled at her.

"Both," she said, kissing him again. "Okay... mostly me."

*

The situation was getting out of control, and she was definitely going to have to do something about it. Tonight was as good a time as any, she figured. Time to put a stop to this obnoxious harassing behavior before George found out about it.

Her worst fear was that the idiot would call when George was with her. Granted, this was unlikely, considering the hours she and George were currently keeping, but who knew? Neither good manners nor common sense were Stephen's strong points. She did not want to incite some sort of chest-thumping male ego contest or give George any motivation to do something reckless, putting himself at risk. Or, even worse: give him the slightest reason to doubt her feelings for him.

She listened to Stephen's most recent voicemail message, feeling her blood pressure rise as she did.

"Come out with me tonight. I'll be at the old school hall, boxing some cop for charity's sake. You know you'd love a chance to see me get my arse kicked, unlikely as that may be...."

She pushed the button that would delete the message, erasing Stephen's voice from her phone. There was no purpose in listening further. Nothing he could possibly say would change her mind about him. He was a self-absorbed, manipulative jerk, and she never wanted to see him again if she could help it.

But something had to be done. Simply refusing to accept any more of his calls wasn't making the message plain enough, apparently. And it was infuriating, that tone of smugness he had. Her reaction to it so completely the opposite of how she felt when George good-naturedly baited her. It was a tempting offer: to be there as witness to Stephen getting his just desserts at the hands of some cop.

Any reason to escape this house is a welcome thing, she had to admit to herself, *even one as lame, as dubious as this.* She and George had been good as gold so far this autumn. Not once had they gone out together where they could be seen or, more importantly, recognized by whomever might be watching.

How could they? Just like tonight, George spent the majority of every evening out on a mission for the Order. He was her very own personal hero, bravely defending the world of unsuspecting Muggles and cowering wizards from an evil menace. The thought made her smile and cringe at the same time.

George's subversive evening activities left them primarily the hours between midnight and dawn to be together. Whenever possible, usually several times a week, he would pop directly into her bedroom from wherever he had been that night. They would lie in her bed then, talking, dozing, kissing which sometimes led to more but they were careful not to risk that too often.

And nearly always in the dark, it seemed, for fear of watching eyes. She had almost forgotten what he looked like in daylight. There was so much sneaking around now, hiding the true nature of their relationship from his parents, her Gran, the possibility of enemy spies. Far from being sexy or exciting, it was demoralizing and beginning to drive her mad.

Stop it! she scolded herself. *What's the alternative? Give him up? Risk his safety? Time to grow up, already, and stop complaining!* The love of her life spent every possible minute he could with her; wasn't that enough?

Back to the issue at hand: Stephen and his annoying, ego-fueled phone calls had to be stopped once and for all. Annie brusquely donned her trainers and coat. Michael

was dozing on her bed and barely acknowledged her exit with a twitch of his ear. She said goodbye to Gran and Mrs. Finnerty on her way out of the kitchen, promising to return within an hour or so, and drove off toward the school.

She was further incensed to see Stephen was waiting outside the entrance, scanning the crowd, searching for her. *That's the final straw*, she thought angrily, her blood beginning to boil. *How thick could he possibly be?*

She had been rude to the point of cruelty, she reckoned, over the past several weeks while he had repeatedly called to 'apologize' for what had happened at Geoff's wake more than a year ago. *How could that have been too subtle? Perhaps a large piece of timber forcefully applied to his temple is required to deliver the message?*

She marched up to him with a scowl on her face. At least he had the decency to replace his initial inane grin when he first saw her with something more appropriately chagrined upon seeing her black expression.

"We need to talk," she said sternly.

"Right," he answered dejectedly, his shoulders sagging.

What possible hope could he still be nursing? she wondered in amazement. *After everything that has gone wrong between us?*

They took a few steps away from the queues of people making their way inside. Annie stopped before they went too far out of sight, though, unwilling to be completely alone with him for any reason. He turned around to face her but didn't speak, like he wasn't looking forward to saying what was on his mind.

Annie decided to unload her own thoughts instead. "Stop calling me, Stephen. I'm not interested. I love George, and he loves me. End of story."

"He keeps you under lock and key now, doesn't he? You never come out anymore to the pub," he retorted.

She suspected he was trying to get under her skin. And the look on his face was a familiar one to her: he had not been paying any attention at all to what she was saying. His mind was entirely focused on his own agenda.

She brought the hammer down on what she hoped was the final nail. "We're engaged."

Stephen's eyes narrowed. "I don't see a ring."

Annie huffed in frustration, folding her arms in front of her chest, self-consciously hiding her hands. She and George had had a similar discussion once the dust had settled a bit after Bill's wedding. George had asked her if she'd wanted a diamond engagement ring, which was a Muggle rather than wizarding tradition. She'd been against it, arguing they didn't need anything that would draw attention to their relationship for the time being. George had reluctantly agreed with her.

"I'm not exactly a jewelry sort of person, Stephen. Doesn't change anything. We're going to be married."

Stephen ran his fingers through his bushy red hair, looking anywhere but at her. "Look, that's not really what I wanted to talk to you about," he said, then sighed.

I'll bet not, she thought uncharitably. "Fine. Get it off your chest. I will listen, then I will leave, and we will not see each other again. *You will not* call me anymore, understand?" she snapped.

"Jesus Christ, yes! Your bitchy attitude isn't making this very easy, okay?" he whined.

Perhaps I will be the one to kick his arse tonight she fumed. Her palms itched to smack his face. She clenched her jaw and glared at him with thinly veiled fury.

"And stop staring at me with your witchy death-ray eyes," he barked.

Oh, Stephen. If you only knew.... She looked instead at a brick in the wall behind and above his head.

"Look, I get it: you're pissed. And you're not interested in me. Frankly, sweetheart, I figured that out a while ago," he snapped.

"Then why am I here?" she spat through clenched teeth. He knew the "sweetheart" thing would have to be driving her berserk.

"So I can apologize, for chrissake! Yes, believe it or not, I realize I've been a right arse to you, among others, over the years. Not a very good friend, at any rate. Losing my chance with you, and then Geoff getting killed, has made me realize some things about myself. I'm a dick, and I'm sorry, all right?"

"Oh," she mumbled. She was truly shocked by his admission of guilt. She'd never imagined Stephen was capable of introspection on such a level.

"It's not like you were nothing but a saintly victim in this situation, either. If you hated us so much, why did you keep coming 'round? You were using us as well using me, weren't you?" he asked accusatorially.

"Probably," she admitted, nodding reluctantly.

Despite the fact nearly every bone in her body rebelled to say it, she knew Stephen was right. She had been desperate at the time for something to take her mind off of missing her twin friends, for something to occupy her time while they were gone. Yes, Stephen and his gang of hooligans were a flimsy substitution for Fred and George's friendship, but she had disloyally abandoned her Muggle companions without explanation the instant her magical ones reappeared each summer. And despite her assumptions to the contrary, Stephen had noticed he'd never rated first in her life. Realizing such rejection might have hurt his feelings, she felt a momentary pang of regret.

Stephen let a few moments pass in silence then asked her a question. "You kissed me once, remember? Why?"

"I don't know," she replied flatly.

Actually, not being such a stranger to introspection, she knew that wasn't true. Perhaps she owed Stephen an explanation, if not an apology of her own. But what could she tell him that wasn't far too dangerous to reveal? "It's complicated," she added with a sigh.

Oops. Wrong answer. She had to stamp out that tiny spark of hope that just lit into his eyes.

"*Not* for the reason you're thinking, sorry. Stephen, we were fifteen, bored, and curious. That's all it was. The bottom line is: kissing you helped me realize what I really wanted, and it wasn't you. Again, I'm sorry for that, if I led you on." She carefully avoided any thought of the horrific fallout afterward, how the last vestige of her reputation in Ottery had been ruined by the rumors he'd allowed to fester, not wanting to incite herself to murder at the moment.

"And you've got that now? What you wanted?" he demanded.

"Everything and more. No question about it," she replied without hesitation.

Stephen paused and smiled ruefully. "Funny. That kiss showed me everything I ever wanted, as well."

Annie shrugged. She didn't believe it for one second. It was just another manipulative thing to say, another attempt to make her feel wretched. There was nothing she could say in response that wouldn't either give him false hope or be overly cruel, so she stood in silence.

"For what it's worth, I wish you all the best," he added, reaching out to give her a parting hug.

"Thanks. You, too," she offered, taking a few steps backward to avoid the embrace. She wouldn't be making that mistake again. Annie turned and walked back to her truck without a backward glance.

Silly Wand Waving

Chapter 33 of 80

Concurrent with *Deathly Hallows*. It's Molly's birthday, and Annie's invited to help celebrate. George gets himself in trouble.

Chapter 33: Silly Wand Waving

October 30, 1997

"I'm very disappointed in you. Didn't know you were such a kiss-arse. Percy would be pleased."

"Fuck you," Annie spat the whispered swear at George. She knew being compared to Percy was a low blow from him, even though she had never met his elder brother.

George snorted. "Kiss your Gran with that mouth? Tsk, tsk."

Annie shoved a heavy bag of groceries into his arms. It contained all the ingredients for dinner that night; she had offered to cook for the Weasleys in honor of Molly's birthday.

"I'm not your beast of burden!" he protested.

"Bye, Gran! Bye, Mrs. Finnerty! See you about eight, I expect," she called toward the front room in a light, cheery voice that was completely at odds with the glowering look on her face directed at George.

"Bye, dear!" came two answering ladies' voices.

Annie smiled to herself, pleased that her Gran was up and out of bed for once. She had been so tired lately. The prospect of an evening of cards and gossip with her dear friend and neighbor had cheered her immensely.

Then Annie turned back to George with a stern look. "Your mother deserves a night off. It must be excruciating for her to be stuck in that house with no one but you lot all day for company. The poor dear must be stark raving mad by now," she argued in a whisper.

George insolently stuck his tongue out at her while mimicking her pose: hands on his hips, foot tapping the floor. Annie rolled her eyes, spun on her heels, and grabbed the carefully packaged cake. Michael trotted into the kitchen from where he had been napping, keeping the ladies in the front room company. George and Annie both patted him on the head as they walked past him through the back door.

They left the house and climbed into the truck. It was a complicated process now to get to the Burrow. First they drove off in the truck for Gran's benefit they couldn't exactly Disapparate from the kitchen in front of her. But neither could they risk a Muggle truck being spotted at the Burrow, since they were never sure if the house was being watched. Usually, they parked it at different random spots on the side of a deserted country road, then Apparated once they were out of sight and invisible.

"Hope you don't get splinched, prat," George taunted her just as they were about to disappear.

Annie knew he was teasing, but that thought was never a welcome one as the oppressive blackness hit her and she fell into whatever dimension they passed through on their way. She never liked it much to begin with, but they were forced to travel this way rather often these days.

"Bloody knob," she huffed under her breath and forcefully jabbed her elbow into his ribs when they found themselves rematerialized at the back door of the Burrow.

She usually loved the predominant smart-arse streak in George, but he had been getting rather stroppy with her lately. She understood his aggravation at being forced to remain hidden in his home; his only opportunity to escape his henpecking mother was to work on his owl-order business at his unlikable Aunt Muriel's house or trek off on what he described as "another boring, safe, and stupid" routine Order mission after dark. Understanding his grouchy mood only made it slightly more tolerable, however.

Captivity did not sit well with George, and she could tell he was itching for a victim on which to unleash his frustrations. Annie realized this probably meant she had a target on her back. She'd had higher hopes for tonight; it felt like ages since she was last in Molly's cozy kitchen for nothing but a simple, friendly visit. Not to mention forever since she and George had seen each other before midnight. It had been a week since they had seen each other at all.

George dumped the bag onto the kitchen table and sat down noisily, looking profoundly put upon.

"Annie, dear!" Molly hugged her in welcome and relieved her of the cake.

At least someone in the room seems happy I'm here Annie thought. "I know it's not easy to let someone else putter in your kitchen, Molly," she began.

"Don't be silly, dear. Nicest thing anyone's done for me in the longest time. No one else even raises a finger to help around here," she said as she cast a disparaging look toward George, who smirked in response.

"My pleasure," Annie replied. "I'll still need your help operating the stove, but otherwise, you just sit back and relax."

Molly was beaming at her with delight. George looked utterly disgusted and rolled his eyes. Fred sauntered in, said hello to Annie, and then joined his mother and brother at the table.

Annie set to work. Behind her, she listened to Molly continue to harangue the boys about chores that needed to be done around the house. She had to admit, being

badgered like that all day long would have driven her batty as well, and she felt a pang of sympathy for both twins.

Then something began zapping Annie's ear like a tiny, electrically charged mosquito. All sympathetic feelings dissipated as she closed her eyes for a few moments, willing herself to resist the urge to swat at it and give him the pleasure of seeing her irritated. She forcefully kept her focus on the potato she was peeling instead.

As she reached out for the next one, she watched as the peelings from the first potato wrapped themselves back around it.

"Oh, come on," she muttered in frustration under her breath.

She tried peeling another one with the same results. *Fine. It'll be mashed potatoes with peel, then.* She started chopping one roughly, tossing the pieces into a small pot. As soon as she reached for the next potato, all the chopped bits began to float up and out of the pot, swirling around each other in midair like asteroids in orbit.

"Not funny," she whispered, biting her lips to quell the amused smile before it spread visibly across her face.

Suddenly, the cubes all crashed loudly into the pot, splashing her with water. She sighed audibly as she grabbed a towel to mop up the mess.

She turned then to the carrots. The peelings stayed in the sink this time, to her relief. A relief that turned out to be short-lived, however, when one carrot started attacking her by rapping her knuckles as she tried to chop the first one.

"That's it!" she hissed, spinning around to face the table, rubbing her painful hands.

Both boys were carefully looking at their mother with innocent expressions, apparently listening intently to Molly's current rant regarding their slovenly housekeeping habits.

"What's wrong, dear?" Molly asked, surprised and curious.

Annie didn't answer, only glared at the boys.

"Serves her right, eh?" Fred muttered under his breath in George's direction.

George responded with a smug look.

Molly caught the exchange between her sons, unbeknownst to them. She glanced toward the sink and noted the carrot still jabbing Annie roughly in the back. Annie watched the expression on Molly's face swiftly change from curiosity to suspicion and finally to vengeance as a plan instantly formed in her mind.

"I'm warning you two: stop this nonsense this instant!" their mother scolded.

"What d'you mean?" and, "Didn't do anything!" the twins protested. The innocent looks were replaced by ones full of indignation.

"*Culpablo!*" snapped Molly, her wand instantaneously appearing in her hand.

"Ow!" George yanked his hand out of his pocket, vigorously shaking it like he had just received an electric shock. His right hand began turning red before their eyes.

"You should be ashamed of yourself, George! Apologize to Annie this instant!" Molly demanded.

"Why d'you always blame me for everything?" George whined, persisting with the shocked innocence defense.

"Shameful," Fred chimed in, shaking his head in an attempt to egg his mother on.

"You're no better! Out of my sight!" Molly barked at him.

Fred and George both rose from the table, laughing at their cleverness.

"Oh, no! Not you, George. *You'll* be helping Annie now."

Fred laughed harder as he strolled out of the kitchen. George shrugged and walked toward Annie. A malicious grin appeared on his face once it was beyond Molly's line of sight. Annie gulped nervously, realizing she was really in for it now.

"Hand it over," commanded Molly from behind his back.

George spun back around to face his mother, a confused look on his face.

"Your wand. Give it to me. Clearly, you can't be trusted with it," she said, holding out her empty hand.

The confusion turned to disbelief. "You're joking!" he cried.

"*Accio wand!*" Molly shrieked.

George's wand flew out of his pocket and into her hand.

Molly pointed with her finger at the sink with a stabbing motion and a scowl on her face. "Chop!" she commanded her son. Then she turned to Annie, smiling. "He's all yours now, dear. Let me know if he gives you any more trouble."

George was standing in the middle of the kitchen, still spluttering, paralyzed in shock. Annie, who had been just as stunned by the exchange as George, began to giggle. George shot her a glare as his mother gave him a rough shove toward the sink.

Reluctantly, he began to chop the carrots while Annie started on a pie crust. "Done," he grunted after almost a minute of work.

Annie glanced over to the pile of carrot pieces. He was apparently attempting to punish her with incompetence: the irregular sizes wouldn't cook evenly, and she suspected he knew it. She smiled sweetly, feeling full of mischief herself now that she had Molly on her side. "Hmm.... These bits are too big. Make them smaller," Annie instructed him.

The look on George's face told her he'd like to see her try to make him do it.

"Is there a problem, George?" asked Molly in a warning tone from her seat at the table.

George scowled at Annie as she laughed, "Ah, ah, ah be nice now. Show me a smile."

He stuck out his tongue at her.

"That's much better!" she teased.

George spent a minute more chopping before he quit again, folding his arms on his chest in a pout.

Annie made a show of inspecting his work. "I've certainly seen better, but I suppose that will do."

"What next, dear?" asked Molly, who was clearly enjoying this as much as Annie. "Pots need stirring?"

"Erm, no," Annie chuckled. "The intent is for you to enjoy your birthday meal, which could be difficult if it's poisoned. I'll take it from here. Just sit here on this stool and keep me company, George. I do so love your cheerful face."

He did so with a dark look.

Molly did everything in her power to make her son squirm. All she and Annie talked about were fashion (*That skirt looks lovely on you dear. Is that jumper wool or cotton? I do love to knit, you know...*), recipes (*I do like a bit of rosemary with the beef, don't you?*), and romantic stories of Molly and Arthur's days of courtship at Hogwarts.

George spent the entire time shooting looks at Annie promising painful revenge. She couldn't help but smile back at him. It was difficult to remember back to a time when she had been quite so entertained.

"All right, George. You may set the table now," directed Molly.

She continued to harass her son throughout the dinner, requiring him to perform all the serving duties—second helpings, refilling beverages, clearing the table—all without the use of his wand. Fred was working his brother's punishment to the hilt, stopping just short of insisting his brother feed him bite by bite. Annie was starting to feel pity for George, who was wallowing in sullen misery, by the time the meal was finished.

While the rest of the family sat in the living room, listening to the wireless, she walked into the kitchen with George's wand hidden in the waistband of her skirt. Molly had slipped it to her during dinner when he was in the other room with a warning to be careful not to point it at anything valuable. She found George standing at the sink full of sudsy water, pouting.

"I'll wash, you dry," she offered. She was willing to help him the old-fashioned way but not so stupid as to surrender her only advantage.

"You're enjoying this far too much for your own good," he grumbled as he took the last dish from her dripping hands.

"Careful now—don't say something you're going to regret," she warned him playfully.

"She can't protect you forever," he retorted, unamused. "Just remember... paybacks are a bitch."

"Oh, dear. You had to go and spoil it, didn't you?" she lamented theatrically, shaking her head. "Molly! Need anything else?" she called out, looking smugly at George.

"Couldn't keep his mouth shut, then?" Molly answered from the other room. "Oh, well. Some more wood for the fire would be nice, I suppose."

George threw the dishtowel on the counter and stomped out the back door. Annie followed him outside, skipping coyly.

It was a surprisingly warm night for so late in the fall, and they didn't even need jackets. The cloudy sky glowed a deep ruddy purple to the west where the sun had set a short while ago. She casually leaned back against the fence in front of him and watched as he split a few pieces of wood. The sight of George hefting an axe was possibly even more entertaining than witnessing him slaving away in the kitchen.

"Despicable—hiding behind my mother like that. Where's your self-respect?" he needled her as he worked.

Annie made a show of looking all around her. "Oh, I'm not hiding from anybody." She carefully pulled out the wand from its hiding place and spun it between her fingers, tempting him. "I suppose you want this back?"

"How long have you had it?" he asked in a gruff voice. He held out his hand expectantly.

Annie shook her head and gave him her sweetest smile. "Not yet, I think. I'm having far too much fun for my own good, as you said."

George returned her smile now, accepting her invitation to play. "I could *just* take it back, you know."

"Hmm. I rather doubt that, actually. No tricks to help you now, Magic Boy." She twirled his wand in lazy circles in the air.

George lunged at her but missed. Annie had anticipated the move, easily dancing out of his reach. They had played similar games since they were children, and she knew his tactics too well. He chased her briefly, but she managed to stay just ahead of him. They stopped after a minute, breathing a little harder now, cheeks flushed.

"Maybe you should try asking nicely?" she offered.

"Please?" he said insincerely as he held out his hand.

Annie shook her head and tsked, unsatisfied.

He rolled his eyes and tried again. "May I have *it please?*"

"It's missing something. Perhaps it needs an apology. You know, for your horrid behavior toward me this evening," she baited him.

He gave her a half smile and a look that told her he wasn't ready for the game to end. He'd not be capitulating just yet. "Sorry. Please," he said flatly.

"Surely you can do better than that," she encouraged him.

Clicking her tongue again, she began to draw the tip of the wand slowly down her throat, her breastbone, down to her navel. It emitted a few tiny sparks along the way. "Ooh," she exclaimed quietly.

George's eyes widened slightly, taking in the show: just the reaction she was looking for. Then he emitted an expansive, put-upon sigh and began to speak. "I'm sorry for...?"

"Torturing me," she prompted. She lightly tapped her chest with the wand, indicating the identity of the victim.

"I'm sorry for *torturing* you." His voice was low and quiet. He began taking slow, cautious steps toward her. "Please may I have my wand back?"

"Hmm," she mused, resting the tip of the wand on her lips, mimicking how she would sometimes tap her finger there while thinking. She could see she had lit a fire now burning in his eyes. "Still sounding rather forced, I'm afraid. Not very sincere. Try again."

George heaved another sigh. "I'm sorry...."

"On your knees, I think," she interrupted him. "And make it *really* heartfelt. I want to be moved," she taunted.

George fell onto his knees at her feet, smiling up at her in an insufferably smug manner. In a soft, pleading voice, far more patronizing than sincere, he said, "I am ever so

sorry for torturing you, my love. Please may I have my wand back?"

Annie was confident they were no longer talking about the wand. She bit her lower lip, then smiled as she gently tucked the wand into her cleavage. "Come and get it, then."

George rose to his feet. Towering over her, his body mere inches from hers, he slowly withdrew his wand from its momentary resting place. Annie felt a thrill of electricity that was not entirely due to the wand being reunited with its master.

He pressed her tightly against his body with his left arm. "You ought to be more careful," he said as he drew the wand lightly along her jaw line. "In the wrong hands, this thing can be quite dangerous," he warned, pressing the tip of it into the flesh of her throat just slightly.

"Ooh. Promise you'll show me sometime," she cooed sarcastically. She had already demonstrated with explosive force what a wand could do in her hands.

"No time like the present," he insisted. His lips claimed hers in a fierce kiss, almost bruising in its forcefulness.

She threw her arms around his neck and melted into him. He lifted her up bodily while still kissing her and carried her a short distance toward a small nearby building, out of view of the house's windows. He pressed her back against the rough surface of a stone wall covered in bare, dormant vines.

"Inside?" she asked breathlessly when she noticed a tiny eave above them, realizing it was a building supporting them. Her knickers had somehow found themselves dangling around her left ankle, her skirt hiked up indecently. She heard the faint tinkling of his belt buckle bouncing against his thigh. The sound of it was maddeningly arousing.

"Spiders," he offered as an explanation without skipping a moment of a kiss.

There would be no stopping him now, even if she had the slightest inkling to do so. This was what she'd wanted, after all, and she had done exactly what she had to do to get it. Two weeks was far too long to go without, she rationalized, and the self-denial had driven them both into some sort of fiery insanity.

Annie braced herself with her arms against the wall, felt a vine jab into her back repeatedly through her thin sweater with his every thrust. She had wrapped her legs around George's waist in a deathgrip, losing herself in the quest to take him ever deeper within, to fill herself to overflowing. His strong hands were on her arse, supporting her weight, guiding her down onto him as she met his rhythm. *Any second now....*

It was over quickly. As they both leaned against the side of the tiny building, catching their breaths, Annie's conscience came alive once more, and she was mortified by her own behavior. "What... was that?" she asked him, gasping and bewildered.

"How can you... expect me... to resist... such a performance?" he answered between breaths, his head leaning against the wall next to her ear. She could tell from his expression that he was equally shocked by what they had just done.

Annie brought her hand to her forehead and looked away in shame. He was right: she had incited him mercilessly. She searched within herself, casting about for some excuse that could help her feel better about what had just happened... outdoors... up against a shed... at GEORGE'S MOTHER'S BIRTHDAY DINNER!

It was no good: her behavior had been irresponsible and disrespectful. Didn't she have some scrap of self control? "This has got to stop," she muttered to herself.

"You don't want to... do this... anymore?"

She glanced at George's stricken face, immediately realizing that he had misunderstood her. "No, I don't mean that. Of course that part is... amazing. *Irresistible, obviously*, she chided herself. "It's all this sneaking around. I hate it!"

George nodded slowly, considering what she'd said. "I just don't see any other option right now. Anything else is.... Would put us you, me, my family in danger," he said after a few moments.

Annie nodded. She knew all about the danger. More than she had ever wanted to know, in fact. And because of that knowledge, she was in it up to her neck. As a Muggle with her particular awareness of the magical world, she would be a target for persecution, as well as George and his family. But that was only the tip of the iceberg when it came to the list of crimes the Weasleys were currently involved in.

"The Ministry's rounding up wizards just because they have Muggle parents, putting them in prison," he added softly. He held her face to his, stroking her cheek with his thumbs. "You know how I feel about you, Annie! We'd be married tomorrow if it wasn't for...." He trailed off, unwilling to voice the rest of the thought.

"I know, George," she reassured him quietly. She gave him a gentle kiss and stroked his slightly shaggy hair; he was in the process of growing it out to cover his missing ear. "And getting married would create far more problems than it would solve, anyway," she admitted.

George grimaced at the truth of her statement. She knew how much it pained him: the fact that they were forced to hide their relationship like it was something to be ashamed of. Their engagement was still a secret from everyone, for what was the point of celebrating something that had no reasonable chance of happening in the foreseeable future, anyway?

"It's not your fault. I'm the one who lacks the moral fiber to say no," she said in an attempt to lighten the mood.

"Moral fiber?" he laughed.

She gave him a confused look - apparently it was some private joke she didn't know about.

They had righted themselves now and had begun to readjust their mussed clothes and hair. He'd been helping by brushing debris from the back of her sweater. He paused and hugged her around the waist from behind, resting his chin on her shoulder. "Moral fiber's highly overrated, love. I can see I'll just have to work that much harder next time to distract you from that guilty conscience of yours."

"Next time? You're being presumptuous," she teased back.

He kissed her neck, sending chills traveling down her body into the pit of her stomach. *Already? So soon after?* It wasn't fair, this hold he had on her. Like gravitational pull, almost. She inhaled deeply, willing her mind back in control of her body.

He chuckled to feel her body respond to him despite her wishes to the contrary. "Not presumptuous. Let's call it confidence, shall we? You just admitted you can't say no to me, remember?" he said softly, brushing his lips against her ear. He pressed his body against her back, one hand at her hip, the other sliding up her side toward a breast.

"George? Annie? Time for cake and presents, you two!" they both heard his father call out.

Arthur's voice was like a bucket of cold water, dousing them with a more appropriate mental focus. They walked back inside the Burrow without touching each other again to better diffuse any suspicions in the house, as well as keep their own responses under control.

Fred wasn't fooled, however. He took one look at them as they walked by and wrinkled his nose in disgusted disbelief. Thankfully, Molly and Arthur had busied themselves with cutting and serving the cake and missed his theatrical display.

As Annie sat down at the table, she felt Fred briefly brush her back with his hand. He walked around behind her to sit directly across the table from her, next to his brother.

The look on his face further fueled her now very anxious stomach.

Fred flicked the tiny twig he had plucked from the back of Annie's sweater at George's face. George's arm lashed out and punched his brother in the arm before he could mount a defense.

The scuffle drew Molly's attention. "What's the matter now, you two?" she asked them.

Annie noticed George's face was flushing and felt her own begin to do the same.

"Ask him," Fred answered, rubbing his arm where the punch had landed. "He started it."

George shrugged under his mother's gaze. "Happy birthday, Mum. Open this one first," he said awkwardly, holding out his gift for her in a weak attempt to redirect her focus.

"All right, then," Molly said slowly, suspiciously.

Annie hid behind her camera, which she had busied herself with by digging out of her bag while most of the last exchange had occurred. She hovered around the margins of the room, snapping away as the mood began to brighten once again. Molly was visibly pleased with the gifts her children and husband had given her, and Annie's cake was met with rounds of compliments. The light was soft and warm, and the genuine happy feeling amongst the family was making for some wonderful candid shots. Annie looked forward to seeing how they would come out.

Heartache

Chapter 34 of 80

Concurrent with *Deathly Hallows*. The straits are dire. George puts the war on hold and comes to the rescue.

Chapter 34: Heartache

Winter 1997

"You have congestive heart failure, Mrs. Jones. We're going to start you on some medications to help alleviate some of the symptoms so you should begin feeling more comfortable, breathing more easily."

"So she'll start getting better?" Annie asked, relieved that the cause of her Gran's failing health was finally identified. She was sitting next to her Gran's hospital bed, bleary-eyed from lack of sleep and worry. Months of useless doctor's visits had resulted in nothing but mounting frustration. It was not until the crisis of the previous night that anyone had finally taken them seriously.

The doctor paused.

That's never a good sign, Annie worried.

"I said she would start *feeling* better. The damage to her heart is not going to repair itself, however. I'm afraid there's not much we can do about that," he said.

"What are you saying?" Annie demanded.

"He's trying to tell you I'm dying," murmured Meredith.

"Gran! Don't say that!" Annie cried.

"Isn't that right, doctor?" asked Meredith, ignoring her granddaughter's protest.

"Well, yes, Mrs. Jones. Not immediately, but...."

"Soon," she offered, finishing his thought.

No matter how she tried to distract herself, Annie couldn't get it out of her head. That conversation replayed itself over and over every night as she sat in the chair in her grandmother's room, watching her sleep. For the moment, her Gran's face looked peaceful enough, despite the fact it was trussed up by the oxygen tubes now stuck in her nose. How anyone could get a decent rest with that thing strapped to their face was beyond Annie's comprehension. But Gran's chest rose and fell rhythmically with slow, even breaths, however, and Annie was grateful beyond words for that fact.

Annie felt like she losing her grip on sanity once again. Ever since she had rushed Gran to the hospital, gasping for breath and alarmingly swollen like a charm gone awry, Annie hadn't been able to sleep for more than an hour or two at a stretch. She was so worried that something might happen while she slept. She had taken an extended leave from her job with the dentist and hadn't gone for a run in weeks. She sensed she no longer had all the time in the world with her Gran and felt each moment was far too precious to waste on anything else.

Which meant she had even less time with her other beloved. Gone were the nights spent together in her bed, in his arms. She couldn't believe how stupid she had been then, daring to feel unsatisfied with the hours of glorious, invaluable time they had been able to spend together just a few weeks ago.

Her time with George had been constrained now to a few minutes every night out in her garden as they updated each other with the events of the day, followed by a kiss goodnight before he went off on some Order mission or another. Then once more, just before dawn, he would return with a kiss good morning and a wish for a positive day to come.

"How is she?" he would ask every night, his breath visible in the cold moonlight.

"The same. Breathing all right. Still not eating much," she would inevitably reply.

It had become a sort of script. There was never any improvement, but at least Gran hadn't gotten significantly worse. Tonight's exchange had included a slight derivation from the routine, though.

"Why don't I stay here tonight? I could watch her for you, and you could get some sleep," George had urged with worry in his voice.

Annie had shaken her head, touched by his offer but refusing all the same. "No point. I wouldn't be able to sleep anyway. I can't anymore. Go save the world instead," she said, clinging to his warm, strong embrace. It never failed to cheer her, to steel her for the long night to come.

"Annie?"

Annie was startled out of her almost-dozing state by her Gran's quiet voice. "I'm here, Gran. Do you need anything?" she asked, rising from the chair to stand at her bedside.

"Yes. We need to talk," she said. The words were a struggle for her, the breath to power them difficult to summon.

"All right. You should be resting, though," Annie replied.

"Plenty of time to rest later," Meredith argued weakly. "We need to talk about this."

Annie shook her head silently, pursing her lips, anticipating what was coming.

"Annie, you can't deny it any longer. We've always known it was going to happen. It's happening...."

"NO!" she shouted, startling herself as well as her Gran with her vehemence. Even Michael whimpered from his spot on the floor where he had been sleeping.

"Annie!" Meredith scolded her. "Behaving like a stubborn child isn't helping the situation."

"Gran, please! I just can't. Not right now," she pleaded, afraid she was about to burst into sobs.

"When? Perhaps you'd rather I should make an appointment?" she snapped in frustration.

Her Gran's sarcasm nearly made her laugh. "Okay, I think I have an opening in a few years. Shall I pencil you in?"

Meredith chuckled along with her but persisted with the serious conversation. Softly, she said, "You have to start accepting it. It'll make it easier for you later if you do. And I want you to know something, Annie. Something important. *I'm ready.*"

"But I'm not," Annie argued, tears starting to flow despite her efforts to smother them.

"Then you had better get yourself ready, hadn't you, my love?" Gran warned her gently.

*

Annie could tell something was wrong the instant she woke up that morning. Michael was not asleep at her feet. Instead, he was whimpering and scratching at Gran's bedroom door, trying to wake her. Immediately, she bolted out of the chair and leaped over to Gran's bedside.

A cursory examination told Annie her Gran had definitely gotten worse overnight. Not only were her legs now terribly swollen, but she was struggling to breathe, even with the oxygen. Just like the last time.

How many more times were left? "That's it. We're going back to hospital, Gran."

Meredith meekly nodded.

Annie dialed the phone to request an ambulance. Michael seemed to sense the tension in the house, her impatience to leave it, and went quickly about his own business once she let him out. She filled his food and water dishes, took half a minute to dress, then grabbed a few important things to bring with them to the hospital.

It didn't take them long to come for her Gran. Annie supposed things weren't very busy for the emergency services this early on Christmas Eve morning.

After she followed her Gran being wheeled on the gurney into the hospital, Annie calmly went through the motions that were like second nature to her now: filling out the forms, talking with the nurses about Gran's medical history, listing all her Gran's current medications. She had done it often enough in the last few years, it had practically become rote. She even chatted with a couple of the nurses, having gotten to know them personally during her previous visits.

"When can I see her?" she asked after nearly two hours had passed with no word.

The reception nurse drew up some information on her computer screen. "Soon, dear. Doctor Shakoor wants to speak with you first. She'll be along in a bit."

Annie nodded. She knew enough about hospital waiting rooms to know this nurse was not at fault for the delay. She was used to a certain constant baseline level of anxiety regarding Gran, anyway, but the extended wait was causing it to escalate quickly. Each minute that ticked by without news incrementally added to her worry. *Surely she should have been settled into a room by now?*

Finally, the doctor came to fetch her from the miserable waiting room with its pathetic holiday decorations. She was a beautiful young Indian woman with lovely dark eyes that were soft pools of concern. But instead of taking her directly to her Gran, she led Annie into her office.

"Please take a seat, Miss Jones."

A blanket of doom settled onto Annie's shoulders as she took the offered seat. Before she could get a word out, the doctor continued.

"Your grandmother is gravely ill, as you know. We are doing what we can for her to make her comfortable. But you must understand that there are limits to what we can do at this point. The medications we have available to us are not keeping up with the fluids being produced, and her lungs are beginning to fill. In a younger patient, more aggressive options, like surgery, would be indicated. In your grandmother's case.... Well, a heart transplant is just not feasible. We do not have the time to find a donor, nor will we try to for a seventy-nine-year-old woman with the disease in this advanced state. The odds for success would be too low to justify such a risk.

"You must understand that this episode is very likely going to be terminal. You don't have much time a few days at most, I think. I urge you to help your grandmother get her affairs in order, contact any family you think necessary.

"I am very sorry, Miss Jones."

A few minutes later, Annie followed another nurse through the hallways of the hospital as if she was on a leash. Like a docile, brainless animal being led along with blinders on. The doctor's words were echoing inside an empty space in her head: she had a few days, at best, to say goodbye.

Gran was on a bed which was propped up to help her lungs function as best they could. Nothing had changed from that morning at home she was still struggling to breathe. Each breath came as a gasp with an alarmingly long pause before the next one. Cords and tubes were everywhere, looking as if they had crawled out of the walls and machines and were trying to engulf her Gran's body.

She leaned over the bed to kiss her Gran's forehead. She took her hand and felt a weak squeeze in response. Her Gran looked purposefully into Annie's eyes, trying to

read her expression. After a minute, Gran nodded slightly. Annie had to look away.

"Richard... Mason... solicitor... my will...."

"Gran, don't. Save your strength." The first of Annie's tears began to roll.

"Call... him... Annie."

Annie nodded. "Please don't try to talk. Just rest."

Meredith nodded and closed her eyes.

Annie sat alone beside her for the next seven hours, holding her hand. Listening to her gasp. Waiting.

*

George had spent the entire day decorating the Burrow with Ginny and Fred. They had been trying to put on a bit of holiday cheer for their mother's benefit. It had now become a sort of family tradition to truss up a garden gnome as an angel for a tree-topper, and he faintly smiled to himself to think of it. *Stupid gnomes.*

But it had all been for show. The mood in the house was far too solemn for a holiday. Bill had sent word that he and Fleur wouldn't be coming tomorrow for some lame reason nobody believed, Charlie was in Romania drumming up support for the Order, Percy was still being an arse, and Ron was on the lam. It had all been too much for his mum to take. Arthur had finally put Molly to bed early with a generous dose of Firewhiskey.

George had promised his father he wouldn't be away for too long tonight. Just dinner with Annie and her Gran. Nothing else had been planned; he would be gone a few hours at most. The time together would be their Christmas gift to each other, he and Annie had agreed, after these past weeks of surviving on stolen, brief moments in the garden.

He knew Annie and her Gran had always held their own celebration on Christmas Eve. It was a tradition born when Annie had been quite young. Instead of a huge family gathering on Christmas day, like the Weasleys had always done, she and her Gran would always volunteer at a soup kitchen in Exeter, although Meredith's poor health precluded that plan this year.

He had promised his father he would be back at the Burrow early tonight and all day tomorrow, but then planned to spend more time with Annie throughout the next week. Sitting at Meredith's bedside, if that's what it took to be with her, he figured. *Screw the bloody Order in the meantime*, he grumbled to himself. *This is more important.*

George Apparated just outside the garden fence and trudged through the garden to the back steps. His hand slid off the suddenly immovable doorknob and he crashed bodily into the door. He stood still for a moment, completely flummoxed; he'd never once found it locked before. He knocked and called out, "Hello?"

He could hear no sound besides the dog whining inside the house. Worry began to gnaw at the base of his brain. He popped inside to take a quick look around, wand drawn.

Everyone was gone, but nothing else was amiss, except that Michael kept whimpering. Thinking perhaps he needed to go outside, George unlocked the back door. The dog scampered quickly out, as if he'd been cooped up alone for quite a while. As George walked around inside, looking for a clue as to why the house was empty, it occurred to him to turn on his phone.

Sure enough, there was a message waiting for him. The recorded female voice of the phone informed him the message was old from this morning, in fact. Then he heard Annie.

"George, we're at... hospital. It isn't good. Ring me when you get this." Her voice was shaky, and long pauses fell between each sentence while she had been struggling for control during the silences.

He turned off the phone as he called for the dog to come inside, then left the house. In the next minute, he sent his Patronus to his father at the Burrow, briefly explaining why he wouldn't be coming home tonight as promised. He paused for a moment to clearly visualize an abandoned building he remembered being not too far from the hospital. Counting on the distraction of the holiday to decrease his chance of being witnessed, he Apparated directly onto the street there and began to run.

"Meredith Jones, please? She was admitted this morning," George panted as he leaned onto the reception desk for support.

"Are you family, sir?"

"Yes," he lied.

"Room 1893. Would you like me to call someone to escort you there?"

"I'll find it," he answered, shaking his head, and jogged off to the lifts.

"Visiting hours are nearly over, sir!" she called after him.

It took another ten minutes of running through the maze of hallways, accounting for one wrong turn, to find the room. He paused outside the open doorway to catch his breath. He pressed his palm into his ribs, attempting to relieve the pain of the stitch in his side. It took a minute before he could register any sound over the noise of his own pulse pounding. He realized then that the wheezing gasps he heard were not coming from himself, after all.

George took one step silently across the threshold into the room. Over the quiet humming and beeping of several large machines, he was assaulted by the grating, raspy sound of Meredith's each and every intake of breath, followed by the painfully long interval of quieter exhalation. The room was dimly lit by a small light above the bed. Annie had her back to the door, sitting on the edge of a seat, holding something: Meredith's hand, he presumed. He couldn't see her Gran at all his view was blocked by Annie and a machine only hear her labored breathing.

"Pardon me, sir."

He hadn't realized he was still standing in the doorway until the officious voice asked him to move from behind. He stepped aside as a small, dark-skinned woman walked by him.

The woman walked up to each of the machines in turn, collecting information, before gently touching Annie on the shoulder. When Annie turned to look at the doctor, George could at last see her face, if only in profile. It was exhausted, wet, and puffy... and beautiful. He felt his heart wrench to see her so.

"I want to drain the fluid now from your grandmother's lungs. It will relieve some of her discomfort, I think. Then I want to put her on a breathing machine."

"No... machine..." a pitiful voice came from the bed, creaking out between gasps.

"Gran," Annie pleaded softly with her. "The machine will help you live."

"Not... a life... on a... machine," Meredith argued with as much force as she could summon.

Annie turned back to the doctor, fresh tears dripping down her face. "You may do the procedure, but no machine, please."

The doctor nodded slowly. "You'll need to wait outside until we're done. Afterward, she'll likely be a bit out of it for a while from the pain medication, but you can see her then." She looked up toward the doorway and nodded, directing two more people to come into the room. One of the nurses carried a large tray full of metal and plastic objects.

Annie winced at the horrible snapping sound of latex gloves being pulled on.

"You need to leave now, dear," a nurse reminded her.

When Annie didn't move, the nurse took her firmly by the shoulders and turned her away from the bed, pushing her gently toward the door. The curtain made a loud rattle as it was tugged around the bed, blocking their view of Meredith.

Annie's eyes finally came to rest on George. She stood stock still, unable to move, as if petrified, and just stared at him with the barest hint of recognition.

George walked over to her, put his arms around her, and drew her from the room, away from the indecent sounds of plastic and paper packaging ripping apart, of metal instruments clanging against a metal tray.

They stood in the hallway, just outside the door, for over an hour. George leaned his back against the wall and held Annie tightly, supporting her. She stood silent and still in his arms, her face pressed against his chest, never so much as shifting her weight on her surely tired feet. She might have even been asleep, he thought if he hadn't been able to feel her wet tears soaking through his shirt, that is. They didn't move from their spot until a nurse came to tell them it was all right to go back in the room. Annie finally lifted her head to nod at the nurse in acknowledgement.

They sat together at Meredith's bedside. She was at rest now, and the ghastly wheezing had stopped. Thankfully, she was breathing much easier, though not entirely without effort. The medication had allowed her to fall asleep.

A while later, another nurse entered one he had not seen before. After checking the machines, she placed a hand on George's shoulder. "The poor thing hasn't eaten all day. She won't leave, no matter what we tell her. Go and get her something," she suggested in a soft voice.

George didn't want to leave Annie either, but nodded. He whispered his plan in Annie's ear, which she barely acknowledged with a tiny nod, never tearing her eyes from Meredith's face.

He returned shortly with a sandwich and steaming cups of consommé and coffee for them both. His gentle suggestions for her to eat went unnoticed. Finally, he barked at her sternly. "Annie! Eat!" he commanded, shaking her by the arm.

She looked at him with an expression of disbelief and annoyance.

"I'll drag you out of here and force feed you if you don't cooperate," he warned, hoping she wouldn't call his bluff.

"Fine," she capitulated and took the cup of broth from his hand. It was the only word she had spoken to him since he'd arrived at the hospital, her first word in hours. Her voice was raw, low and weak.

The rest of the night passed slowly in vigilant silence. Annie left Meredith's bedside once, briefly; George assumed she went to the loo. He spent most of the time standing or sitting next to Annie, holding her, or massaging her tense shoulders. At some point, just before dawn, he must have dozed off in the bedside seat.

"Gran?"

George was startled awake by the sound of hopeful excitement in Annie's wracked voice. Bright sunshine was now streaming into the room. He leaped up from the seat to stand by her side.

Meredith was blinking away sleep, smiling at them both. "Good morning, you two," she whispered, a little breathless. Her voice sounded tired but cheerful. "Happy Christmas."

George and Annie both chuckled in welcome relief.

New tears spilled onto Annie's smiling cheeks. "Happy Christmas, Gran."

Dr. Shakoor came in to check on Meredith not long after she woke. "Good morning, Mrs. Jones. I am so glad to see you awake. How is your breathing?" she asked, gently listening in various places on her chest with a stethoscope.

"Happy Christmas, doctor."

"Hmm, and to you," the doctor murmured. "Are you feeling any pain?"

"Not much," Meredith responded softly.

"We want you to be as comfortable as possible, Mrs. Jones. Let us try for no pain at all. I will slightly increase your medication for now." The doctor turned to Annie and motioned for her to accompany her out into the hall.

"Thank you so much for what you did for Gran last night. It's like a miracle!" Annie gushed as soon as they were out the door. She wanted to hug the lovely Indian woman who was nearly as small as herself.

"You are very welcome, of course. This is my job. But Miss Jones, please do not misinterpret these events. It is indeed almost miraculous that your grandmother has rallied so well over the past few hours. Commonly, most patients in her condition would have slipped into a coma by now. But do not take her current lucidity as a permanent reversal. Her heart is failing, Miss Jones. The blood oxygen level analysis proves it. I say this not to be cruel or to crush your hopes, but rather to be kind. You must prepare yourself. Make the most of this interval. It will likely be brief."

Annie hugged herself tightly, holding herself together against the body blows of the doctor's words. The news, while devastating, was not entirely unexpected, if she was honest with herself. No one could look at her grandmother lying in the bed and not see that the doctor was telling the truth. Her time was short. The urge to run back to Gran was nearly overpowering as she nodded in understanding.

"I hope you don't mind, but I took the liberty last night of contacting the hospital chaplain," the doctor continued. She was waving at a young man dressed in black, walking swiftly toward them down the hall, a small book in his hand. When he reached them, the doctor began her introductions. "Miss Jones, this is Reverend Sean Wallace."

He nodded a greeting to her while wearing a sympathetic smile. Annie's first impression of him was that he had a kind face. His young, handsome visage harbored idealistic eyes and a friendly warmth that she thought must serve him well in this calling.

"Mr. Wallace can assist you in making any arrangements you might yet need," the doctor said. "If all continues to go well, I'll check in on your grandmother again at the end of the day before I leave."

"Is it all right if I meet your grandmother now, Miss Jones?" the fellow asked.

"Sure," Annie answered without enthusiasm as she turned to reenter the room and lead the chaplain inside.

Annie glanced into the room and, to her surprise, immediately noticed George was leaning over the bed, looking intently at her Gran, nodding his head slightly. His hands tightly gripped the bedrail, causing the muscles in his forearm to bulge; Annie recognized the attempt to physically battle for control over grief from personal experience. She took a few steps closer, beginning to overhear the conversation in progress, having completely forgotten about the chaplain for the moment.

"We spoke about this once before," said Meredith, slowly and softly. "You're a good man, George. A good match for my Angharad. You're meant to be together, you two, like my Llewellyn and I were. I see him in my mind so clearly now. Like he's here in the room with me, almost. My love...." Meredith gazed past his shoulder with unfocused eyes for a few moments.

George glanced around while waiting for Meredith to continue, unable to tolerate the look on her face the calm acceptance of her own impending death in her eyes and noticed Annie and a man with a bible in his hand standing just inside. *Must be a chaplain*, he thought, *here for last rites or some such thing* Annie was staring at Meredith intently, her wide violet eyes rimmed with red, new tear streaks shining down her face. He looked back at Meredith, who was looking at him once more, as she began to speak.

"You and Angharad have our blessing, of course. So much happiness ahead for you both. So much love. We'll be there in spirit for your wedding day."

"I'd rather you be there in person, Mrs. Jones," he argued earnestly.

Meredith smiled and weakly patted his hand. Her expression was that of patience being taxed. "Don't be silly, dear. You and I both know my time is far too short for that. And please, for pity's sake, call me Meredith."

"Perhaps not, Meredith." George looked away from her and up at the woman he loved with a determined gaze, a flash of inspiration bolting through his brain. "Annie, it seems as if fate has sent us a sign." He nodded to indicate the clergyman standing beside her. "I think it's time we got married. Sir, I presume you have the legal authority to do the job?"

Shock crossed everyone's face in the room. Meredith turned to see Annie and the chaplain in the room for the first time. A nurse, who had just stepped in the room to check on Meredith, exclaimed in surprise.

"I do, yes. I can perform a marriage ceremony," the young man spluttered. "But are you quite sure this is the appropriate time?"

"You heard Mrs. Jones: time is of the essence. No point in postponing the inevitable, anyway," George added with a half-smile. "What d'you say, Annie? Have these five months been a long enough engagement for you?"

Annie knew she could not safely speak out loud. She pressed the back of her hand to lips in an attempt to hide the inane grin, as well as hold in the sob that was about to rip out of her. Her heart was bursting with too many contradicting emotions: boundless love and gratitude, debilitating sadness, soaring happiness. She merely nodded as George stepped around the bed and scooped her into an embrace.

"Oh, my heavens!" exclaimed the nurse. "Have you ever seen anything like it in your life?" she asked no one in particular.

The chaplain was smiling. "All right, then. We'll have ourselves a wedding, I suppose. May I ask, young man, if you have the rings already?"

"Oh, erm... no. Are they entirely necessary?" George asked with concern, feeling his excitement deflate. Surely such a stupid detail as rings wouldn't spoil the plan, would it?

"Not a problem!" cried the excitable nurse. "No worries. My brother-in-law is a jeweler here in town. He'll open the store special for you on Christmas day no less!" She dashed off to phone him with the plan before any of them could agree or disagree.

"Oh, Llew, would you just look at them," sighed Meredith as George and Annie sat together at the foot of her bed. "George, Annie, I'm so pleased for you both. You're like a magician, boy," she laughed. "Snap your fingers and *poof!* a wedding."

"He is amazing, isn't he, Gran?" Annie was able to choke out.

"Careful I'm liable to get rather big-headed with all these compliments," George laughed. He felt embarrassed by the elation he felt at this moment, sitting on Meredith's sickbed and holding Annie in his lap. He leaned his forehead into her curls, closing his eyes. *We are about to be married... really MARRIED... TODAY!*

Wedding Nurse returned a few minutes later with the news. Her brother-in-law had kindly offered meet them at his shop in town in an hour. George watched Annie's face carefully: she was happy, but he could tell she didn't want to leave Meredith's side.

"Would you rather I go by myself?" he asked her.

"What? You don't want to choose your ring? You're only a bride once, you know," exclaimed the nurse.

"It's all right. I trust him not to mess it up," she teased with as much of a smile as she was capable of. She squeezed his hand as he kissed her forehead. "Just keep it simple," she suggested.

He tore a little strip of foil off the wrapper from her sandwich and twisted it around her finger. Then he carefully slid it off. "I won't be long," he assured her.

After Wedding Nurse drew him a map to the jeweler's, George left the hospital. He had just enough time, he figured, for a very quick side trip. When the coast was clear, he Apparated back to the Burrow.

"George!" Molly exclaimed when he marched through the back door. "How is she? We've been so worried!"

"It's not good." George shook his head. "I've only got a minute before I need to get back. Where's Fred? I need to speak with him."

"Upstairs, I expect. It's been quiet for a while... must be asleep," offered Ginny. Like the rest of his family present, she wore a slightly baffled look.

George had neither the time nor the inclination to explain his erratic behavior. He took the stairs two at a time and burst into the bedroom he still shared with Fred.

"Wake up! I need every note of Muggle money you've got," he ordered his brother as he dug through his own closet, tossing boxes and scattering clothing, searching for his own stash of the same.

Fred hopped up and immediately reached under his bed, pulling out a small box. "What's going on?" he asked as he handed George a wad of cash.

"Thanks, I'm good for it," he assured him. "I'm in a bit of a rush... no time for details, but I'm off to a jeweler's to buy our rings."

"Rings? As in wedding?" Fred asked.

George nodded. "Keep your mouth shut while I'm gone, will you?"

"Not a problem. You won't be going anywhere without me," Fred insisted.

"What are you on about, git?" George snapped impatiently. He had no time for his brother's nonsense at the moment.

"Well, obviously, I'm your best man. You're in such a rush, you forgot to ask me. I forgive you."

George smiled at his twin brother. "You're right, of course. How bloody stupid of me."

Fred chuckled in response. "This should be entertaining. I've had you two pegged for a shotgun wedding for a while now," he joked.

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"Well, are we all here now? And ready? Brilliant, then. I must confess this is my first wedding. Wish me luck," the man in black joked, and everyone in the room chuckled nervously.

Mr. Wallace cleared his throat. He took his place next to Meredith, who was beaming at the bride, groom and best man standing at the foot of the bed. Wedding Nurse was on the other side of Meredith's bed and snapped a picture with a disposable camera. All eyes then turned to the chaplain as he began to speak.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony."

Fred handed his brother a ring, fidgeting nervously back and forth on his feet. George and Annie turned to face each other, holding hands and looking calmly into each other's eyes.

"George Weasley, do you take Angharad Jones to be your wedded wife, to live together in marriage? Do you promise to love, comfort, honor and keep her for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful only to her so long as you both shall live?"

In a strong, clear voice, George answered, "I do," and smiled. He placed Annie's plain gold band onto her finger.

"Angharad, do you take George to be your wedded husband, to live together in marriage? Do you promise to love, comfort, honor and keep him for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful only to him so long as you both shall live?"

"I do!" she cried with a sheepish laugh at her own enthusiasm.

Fred handed her a ring, and she placed it on George's finger.

"In the presence of God, George and Angharad have made their marriage vows to each other. I therefore proclaim that they are husband and wife. Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder. Now, I'm sure you both know what to do next," he added with a chuckle.

George and Annie leaned in close to kiss. Wedding Nurse took another snap.

"And that's that. Cheers to the newlywed couple!" cried the chaplain.

Meredith lifted her arms to embrace them each in turn as they leaned over the bed. "I'm so happy for you both!" Meredith cried softly into George's ear. "Thank you, my boy, for the most wonderful gift of my life!"

"I'm the one getting the gift," he assured her in a whisper.

The camera snapped again.

Fred opened a tin of butter cookies and passed it around. "Best wedding I've ever been to! Absolutely the tops! That was five minutes, at most, good man! Well done, you!" he complimented the bemused chaplain, thumping him soundly on the back.

Annie and George signed their names on the first line of an official-looking book of the chaplain's. They thanked him again before he left the room.

"Group photo, dears," cried Wedding Nurse.

Annie stood next to her Gran with George beside her and Fred behind them both.

"Lean in close," the woman suggested, and then took the picture. "Here you go, dear. There's plenty more left on the roll," said Wedding Nurse, handing the camera over to Annie. "Consider it a wedding gift. That was the most fun I've ever had pulling a holiday shift," she laughed as she left the room as well.

Fred hung around for another hour or so, chatting and laughing, snapping a few more pictures until the cookies were gone. As he rose to leave, he shook George's hand and thumped him on the back, then turned to Annie.

"You know, I'm now *officially* your brother, Annie. Prepare yourself for an onslaught of torture like you've never experienced before," he said with a smile. He leaned down to give her a hug and a peck on the cheek. "Welcome to the Weasleys, mate," he chuckled.

Evening had settled outside the hospital, and the room grew very quiet. Meredith was exhausted that much was clear but she was still smiling happily. Annie perched on the side of the bed, holding her Gran's hand in both of her own, one of which now sported a gleaming golden band around one finger, smiling blissfully. George sat in a chair, elbows propped on his knees, chin in his hand, tiredly staring off out the window. He was somewhat surprised by how utterly anticlimactic the whole wedding business had turned out to be.

Dr. Shakoor knocked on the open door on her way inside the room. "Hello, Mrs. Jones. I understand you had quite a bit of excitement here today," she chatted absentmindedly as she scanned information on a clipboard. "How are you feeling? Any pain?"

"No, no pain. Just a bit tired. Happy and tired."

"I want you to get a good rest now, Mrs. Jones, so I'm going to order a light sedative. It's very important for you to sleep in order to conserve your energy."

Meredith nodded.

The doctor continued, addressing Annie next. "It is also imperative for you to rest as well. The staff informs me you have been here without rest since Mrs. Jones was admitted. Your grandmother's vital signs are stable, and she should sleep for about eight hours on the medication. I want you to go home and do the same. We'll ring you if anything happens before then."

Annie pursed her lips and crossed her arms in defiance. George recognized her reaction, having seen it an estimated fifty-two million times himself over the years: Annie wouldn't be going anywhere without a fight. The little doctor had no idea who she was tangling with.

The doctor raised her eyebrow while looking at her, then turned to George. "Mr. Weasley, please convince your wife that she needs to rest. Take her home," she insisted, then she turned and left the room.

"I'll be fine for a while now, dear. Go home and let me rest. Come and see me tomorrow morning. I promise I'll be here waiting for you," Meredith assured her newlywed granddaughter.

"Gran..." Annie began to protest.

"Doctor's orders," warned George as he took Annie's hands, yawning himself. He pulled her gently away from the hospital bed, taking his new official duties as husbandly protector very seriously. He was flat-out exhausted, and could only guess at how much more so Annie felt.

"Just a few hours. I'll be back in a few hours, Gran," Annie said as her feet reluctantly shuffled toward the door.

"Goodnight, dear," Meredith called softly as they walked out the door of her room.

George and Annie strolled out of the hospital, hand in hand, and walked through the car park. They stopped at Annie's truck, parked beneath a streetlight. George opened her door, lifted her inside to the seat, and kissed her passionately for a couple of minutes. Then he shut the door, jogged around the back, and climbed into the driver's side.

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A pair of unfriendly, calculating eyes watched them as the truck drove off.

*

Out of the blue, George's kiss had lit her on fire. After the last thirty-six grueling hours Annie had just spent, she was thoroughly shocked that her body and mind could respond to it in this way. As George drove her home, she stared at him as his face was alternately lit up by yellow streetlights, then faded to reflect a greenish glow from the dashboard.

She wanted him more than ever. He was her *husband*. The word repeated itself in her mind the entire way home.

When they pulled up to the house, he shut off the engine. "Stay there," he commanded as he climbed out.

She watched his every movement as he walked around the front of the truck, then opened her door. She started to slide out, eager to be with him, but was bodily lifted off the seat before her feet could touch the ground.

"You'll need the key," she said, smiling as they reached the steps to the door. "Put me down and I'll fish it out of my pocket."

"Nope." He hefted her over his shoulder, slipped his hand into his own pocket, and the door opened on its own.

"That's a convenient little trick," she laughed, twisting around to partially face him.

"I'm full of them, or hadn't you noticed?" he said. "I told you ages ago you weren't the only one who could get through a locked door."

Michael bounded with happiness around them, barking his welcome. George set Annie down in the kitchen and leaned in to kiss her.

Annie's heart raced, but she forced herself to resist him a little longer. "I'm famished," she explained with her hand on his lips. "Let's eat a bite first."

George threw his head back to gaze at the ceiling and heaved an enormous, frustrated sigh.

"Sit down and I'll make us something," she laughed as she opened the fridge and searched for inspiration. From behind her, she heard the back door open again, and Michael scampered outside. "How about an omelet? That won't take too long," she giggled, then started pulling out the ingredients, stacking them on the counter.

To her surprise, George went directly to the cabinet where the cutting board was stored, pulled it out, grabbed a knife from the proper drawer, and started chopping the vegetables.

"What on earth are you doing?" she cried in surprise.

He grinned as he dismantled a stalk of broccoli. "I'm not your guest anymore. We're partners now."

"How very enlightened of you, George! Very progressive, even. No, I mean it, really," she joked and quickly ducked to dodge a bit of broccoli thrown at her.

The eggs smelled heavenly as they cooked, and Michael danced around the table happily as they ate. She hadn't realized quite how hungry she had been and fairly gobbled up an entire plateful. George cleaned his plate even faster and went to take a quick shower while she finished eating and cleared the table.

He strolled into the kitchen as she was finishing the washing up, wearing nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist.

Annie's heart skipped a beat to see him so. "Ugh! I'm stuffed. Why did you let me eat all that?" she whined, attempting to disguise the rush of desire for him that threatened to embarrass her.

"You're going to need all the energy you can get," he warned with a smirk. "Now, go take a shower you look like hell. Then come to bed."

Annie snorted dismissively even as her knees felt a bit wobbly, eager to obey his commands. "So romantic, so smooth. You should be a poet."

"Hurry," he ordered as he sauntered into her bedroom.

She did exactly that. She walked into her bedroom a moment behind him. He was already lying on his back in her bed, covered with the sheet, hands behind his head, eyes closed. He looked at her questioningly with one eye open as she crept to her closet.

"Just grabbing some pajamas," she lied.

"Waste of time," he scolded her. "Quit stalling."

She dashed into the bathroom, pulling out the tissue-wrapped package stashed under her shirt once she was behind the closed door. She set it on the counter and showered quickly. Once she had dried off, she unwrapped the tissue, careful not to make too much noise in the uncharacteristically silent house. She spared a moment looking at the elegant, black, lacy underthings she had bought a couple of months ago. Back then, she had intended then to wear them for George tonight as a Christmas present. Now it was an occasion even more special: her wedding night.

"This marriage isn't going to consummate itself!" George called from the bedroom.

She giggled and began to put on the lingerie. "Be patient!" she called back.

A moment later, she was startled by several loud thuds on the bathroom door as George knocked on it with the back of his head.

"You're taking too long! What are you doing in there? I could very easily open this door, you know," he warned.

"Go back to bed. You're going to ruin my entrance!" she complained, trying to calm her pounding heart.

"Entrance?" He sounded intrigued now, still just outside the door.

"Are you in bed yet?" she demanded testily.

"Ready," he called, his voice sounding further away again.

She opened the bathroom door a crack, just enough to peek out and make sure he wasn't still standing there.

The hallway was empty.

Next, she timidly poked her head around the door and looked into her bedroom.

George was seated on the bed, his back resting on pillows piled against the headboard. He had been watching the door for her and smiled as soon as he saw her. He patted the empty space on the bed next to him expectantly. "Nothing to be nervous about," he teased. "Come on, then. I promise I'll be gentle."

Annie was surprised to find that she did indeed feel nervous. It didn't seem to matter that they had made love countless times before now. It had always seemed more spontaneous than this, somehow. Less... contrived. With lower expectations, perhaps. She suddenly felt ridiculous and thought about turning around, running back to the bathroom.

George's smile was fading. "Annie? Is something wrong?" His voice had switched from teasing to concerned.

What was wrong with her, indeed? She was *married* woman now, for crying out loud! And wearing very grown-up underwear to boot. *Time to pluck up your courage, girl*, she commanded herself. She stepped out from behind the door and into her room.

George's eyes practically bugged out of his head as he took in her finery.

Precious, sweet George, she thought with prayerful gratitude. His reaction helped bolster her confidence. She walked slowly over to the bed, then around it to his side instead of the one she usually occupied.

"You look fucking amazing," he whispered, his eyes following her every move.

"That's the general idea behind these things," she whispered back. She climbed onto the bed, into his lap, facing him. "Open your wedding present, love," she said softly as she kissed him.

George gently tugged on the bow holding the short black satin robe closed. He pushed it open to reveal a lacy black bra and matching underwear. With the lightest of touches, he slowly traced over the lacy straps, delicate seams, and intricate embroidery like a blind man reading Braille.

For several minutes, his caresses drove her to a lovely madness, until she could hold back no longer. She fell into him, unable to resist the force of his gravity another second. She was greedy for him, a starving woman gorging herself on his kisses.

For the first time, they made love in an empty house with no one to hide from or keep quiet for. As husband and wife. And it was brand new, all over again.

Heartbreak

Chapter 35 of 80

Concurrent with *Deathly Hallows*. Annie chooses to do the hardest thing of all: to stop fighting and just let her go.

Chapter 35: Heartbreak

December 1997

George woke when Annie rose from the bed and began to dress. He lifted his head from the pillow, glanced at the time on the clock, and winced.

"I want to be there before she wakes up," Annie whispered.

George sighed quietly. Their honeymoon had lasted six hours.

They arrived at the hospital well before dawn. George managed to drag her into the hospital's café and force her to eat a pastry and drink a coffee before they made their way upstairs into Meredith's room.

Meredith turned to them as they entered with a serene smile. "Good morning, my dears. Did you get some rest?"

Annie nodded and perched on the bedside. George had taken a seat near the foot of the bed, gazing tiredly at the pair of women. She leaned over to kiss her grandmother on the forehead and took her hand. "How about you?"

Meredith nodded in response. "You know, I had the oddest dreams last night," she said with a curious smile on her face. "Must have been the sedative. I suppose 'dream' is the wrong word, actually. More like... reliving old memories. I've quite a store of wonderful ones to draw from. I'm very lucky in that way." Meredith patted Annie's hand as she spoke.

Annie wasn't sure she was comfortable with the odd direction the conversation was turning, but at the moment couldn't think of how to redirect her Gran.

"Do you remember when you were a little girl... that first summer you started playing in the woods? You were such a little tomboy then, barely a girl at all," Meredith chuckled. "Every day, you would come back home to me utterly filthy but happier than I'd seen you in years."

Annie smiled slightly and nodded. Of course she remembered the happiest days of her life, when she and George and Fred had spent every day together in the forest building the tree fort. Every hour of them was more precious than gold to her. But why would Gran be thinking of that now?

A sad, faraway look came into Meredith's eyes. "I remember how unhappy you were before those days."

After several moments' pause, she continued. "But whatever it was you discovered in the forest, it was like a little happy light turned on inside you, day in, day out. That is,

until a few years later. Then the happy light was only on during the summer. I used to tell myself it had something to do with the sunlight," Meredith chuckled, casting a sly, knowing look at George.

The look wasn't lost on Annie. *What does that mean?* she wondered, swallowing nervously.

"Last night, I started remembering some of those stories you used to tell me." Meredith looked intently into Annie's eyes, which were welling with tears once again.

Annie spared a moment's thought to wonder at the fluid volume that had left her body through her tear ducts over the past two days, but smiled at her Gran anyway.

"So many stories you shared with me back then... about fantastical, magical creatures. Magical people, even. That first day, you came home and told me you had met a pair of little ginger twin boys up in a tree. And you had found a stick that you imagined had become alive. Such an imagination you had back then.

"At least, that's what I used to think... before last night."

George got up from the chair and stood at the foot of the bed. He looked with nervous alarm toward Annie and then Meredith *Where exactly is this conversation going?* Had Meredith had some sort of epiphany overnight? And if so, how was she going to react to a dozen years of deception by her granddaughter and himself?

Meredith noticed his movement and turned to look at George. The look on his face had confirmed every suspicion she had come to overnight. No confusion or bemusement at the outlandish story coming from a senile old woman was to be found there. Only anxious concern and a guilty blush.

She offered him a reassuring smile. *Sweet, strange boy*, she chuckled to herself. His odd secret was safe with her that had to be obvious at this point. She would be taking it to her grave shortly.

"I've been rather a fool, haven't I?" Meredith chuckled at the two of them, both looking like children just caught in a lie and waiting for the scolding to commence. "You were nothing but honest with me, Annie. And I, in my rational adult mind, dismissed your childish accounts as imagination," she said.

"Then last night, out of the blue, two ginger twin boys well, young men, actually stood at the foot of my bed as I watched my granddaughter marry one of them. Even then, I didn't puzzle it out. Not until after the sedative took effect.

"Ginger twin boys who mysteriously happen to live next door to us. A wedding that happened like magic. All your fantastical stories of creatures and spells in the woods next door. All of them ended once we had that stupid conversation, and I told you I didn't believe you."

Meredith lifted her hand and stroked Annie's hair. "You never stopped living in a magical world, did you? You only stopped telling me about it. My granddaughter lives in her very own fairy tale, where fairies are stupid little insect-things, not flower princesses like in the books, apparently," she mused aloud with her brow furrowed in mild confusion.

But Meredith's smile returned brightly as she looked back into Annie's eyes. "I always suspected you were meant for better things than this world, Annie. You came into it in such an accidental way. Your little self seemed so much at the mercy of the worst the world had to throw at you. But you always resisted it, like a little sapling bending before the gale just enough so as not to break, then springing aright once more. You were building up strength inside you to better weather the next storm. It astonished me, how you survived it time and again. You always managed to cling to something within, waiting patiently, as if you knew something better was ahead for you.

"And it is, isn't it? This silly world is just a temporary trial for you. Something better is ahead, virtually within your reach now. It's your destiny. Nothing is left to tie you here to this one any longer."

Annie shook her head, the earlier foreboding swiftly turning into bald fear. She definitely didn't like where this was going. What did Gran mean by, "Nothing is left to tie you here?"

Her Gran now turned to George. "And the fairy tale prince. Come to take my granddaughter off to her happily ever after," she smiled again. "I trust you with the job, you know," she added. "Angharad deserves it."

Meredith closed her eyes and rested for a while. The conversation seemed to have exhausted her last reserve of strength.

Annie and George looked at each other with confusion and alarm. All their years of careful deception had seemingly just crumbled before their eyes, and yet another Muggle had discovered the existence of magic. They sat in silence for a while, lost in their own thoughts. Now what were they going to do?

Annie felt a small squeeze of her hand. Her Gran opened her eyes once more and began to speak again. "Angharad... forgive me... for my weakness," she whispered.

"Gran, you're the strongest person I've ever known," she argued as yet another volley of hot tears sprang to her eyes. This was *definitely* not a conversation she wanted to have right now.

But her Gran shook her head. "I was weak, and in that weakness, I failed my Carys, my love. By failing your mother, I failed you, Angharad."

"No!" Annie cried harshly. "That's not true! You did *everything* for me! I would be nothing without you," she sobbed.

Her Gran smiled weakly and patted her hand. "Thank you... for your forgiveness. For your understanding. For your love. You have been the light of my life. It's why I named you Angharad my increase of love."

Annie shook her head. "Stop this, Gran. You're frightening me," she pleaded.

"It's time now. Time for me to go. Time for you to move on... to your destiny."

"NO!" Annie begged.

"Annie, I *want* to go. I don't want to stay here... a burden... in pain... any longer. Life in a bed is not a life."

Annie shook her head vigorously as her Gran spoke. "You're not a burden! You never would be! I need you!"

Annie sobbed nearly silently, only strangled sounds of breaths inhaled and trapped inside until they burst out again, as she held her grandmother's fragile, withered hand in her own. The hand that used to feel so strong and large around her own childish one. The one that had wiped her tears, held her tenderly, guided her for so long.

"You have a new purpose in life now," Meredith murmured softly. "A married woman. You have George to care for, and he you. And a family of your own someday, I'll wager."

Annie bowed her head, a panicked feeling swelling in her stomach. *Maybe the wedding yesterday wasn't such a good idea* Now that Gran didn't have something to look forward to... to try to live for....

"Let me go," Meredith calmly, quietly commanded.

Annie looked at her grandmother. Meredith's eyes were pleading, sunken into her skull, floating above pools of dark circles. She was wasted no longer resembling the vital woman who had raised Annie. Her face was drawn with pain and worry, but yet calmly composed, as if at peace with her decision, now that it was made.

It's the least I can do for her Annie realized, to grant this, her last request She slowly nodded. Annie lifted her grandmother's cool, papery-skinned hand to her lips, kissed it tenderly, and rested it back on her lap.

No further words were spoken. Meredith closed her eyes. A few minutes later, she smiled and exhaled for the final time.

The sustained monotone of the cardiac monitor did not trigger a frantic rush of medical personnel to descend upon them, like one sees in televised hospital dramas. Instead, a single nurse quietly entered the room, almost unnoticed, and began to methodically turn off the several machines, unplugging and disconnecting them from Meredith's body.

Annie felt George's warm strength enfold her; his arms held her up as she released the cold steel of the bedrail in response. Her brain and heart could no longer be bothered with the effort it took to hold herself upright, and she was grateful beyond words for the ability to sink into his support.

They stood together, next to the bed, for an unmarked amount of time. She could hear his soothing voice in her ears, though she was unable to distinguish the actual words he said.

The rustling sounds of a person entering the room skittered along the border of her consciousness. She heard George's deep voice rumbling something in his chest; he was holding her head against it, a hand covered her ear and muffled most of the sound, almost as if she was underwater. Then four sharp metal knocking noises broke through the dam and startled her.

"I said *wait!*" George bellowed.

His voice penetrated the gloom around her. Annie looked up to see what had angered him so. She found an unfamiliar man standing next to the bed.

"Is it all right, Annie, for him to take her? Are you ready?" George asked softly and tenderly, as he held her face toward his and looked searchingly into her eyes.

Annie nodded slowly. Whatever had happened to the vital spirit that had been her Gran, it was no longer within the body on the bed. It had flown elsewhere. Perhaps it would come back to Annie, and she would feel her grandmother's presence again in time. But it was gone now. It had left her behind.

George pressed her tightly to himself again, blocking the sight and sound of the bed being wheeled out of the room. She was thankful once again for his strength in this hour when she had none of her own.

"Annie? Mr. Wallace wants to speak to you."

George's sweet voice spoke directly into her ear. She looked up again, blinking with the brightness of the light. It had been warm and dark and quiet wherever she had been.

"Is there someone you wish me to call? Can I help in any way perhaps to organize a service?" he asked them.

Annie moved to sit down, realizing guiltily that poor George must be getting tired of holding her all this time...*How long has it been?* she wondered. Judging by the light outside the window, it was perhaps late afternoon.

The two men kneeled now in front of her.

"My grandmother was not a church-going woman, sir," she said. Her voice sounded hollow and flat even to her own ears. "I think she liked you, though. Would you mind taking care of a... a service, for us? Make whatever decisions you think appropriate or necessary. Something simple... brief... dignified. There won't be a large crowd of mourners, so please don't go to the trouble of anything indoors. She has a plot next to my grandfather in the Ottery cemetery."

"Of course. I'll ring you tonight or tomorrow morning at the latest with the details. Feel free to contact me for anything at all," he offered generously. "I'm pleased to help in any way I can."

"Can we go now?" she asked.

The kind young man nodded. "Take her home," he instructed George quietly. "I'll handle everything here."

Annie managed to summon the strength to walk out the hospital doors and into the truck under her own power, but that was as long as it lasted. As they pulled up to the house she had lived in all her life with her grandmother, her resolve failed her. She was actually terrified to go inside afraid of confronting Gran's permanent absence.

"Would you rather go to my house?" George asked when she made no move to exit the truck.

Annie considered his offer, but the thought of facing his family was too much as well. She wanted to be alone with George and no one else. She could handle that... no, she *needed* that. She wanted to crawl into her bed and curl up into her numbness and let go of conscious thought for a long while. For as long as she could escape it. She shook her head.

George seemed to read her thoughts and carried her into the house. She hid her face against his neck, avoiding looking at anything else, pretending she was anywhere but here. He set her on the bed, helped her to undress, and changed her into more appropriate attire for an attempt at suspended animation. Then he left, made a few noises in the kitchen, and brought in some tea a few minutes later.

Michael had meanwhile hopped onto the bed and nestled himself against her stomach. She buried her face in his soft fur, curling her body around the warm oval that was the dog.

She heard the back door open, then bang shut. She figured he must be sending a message to his family. A few minutes later, George returned to the kitchen and, by the sound of it, began cooking some food. A tiny, isolated part of her brain found that concept amusing and wished she could watch.

Her mind drifted about, not quite asleep, for a little while longer. Just before she finally submerged into unconsciousness, she heard a soft pop and another familiar voice.

What is Fred doing here? she wondered. Her last ounce of concentration was spent trying to overhear the quiet conversation in the kitchen.

"Mum wants to know why you didn't bring her straight to our place," asked Fred.

"Would you want to be there if it were you? Annie needs some peace and quiet for now," George replied.

"Understood." There was a pause. "Mum's upset you're staying here, the two of you alone."

"I don't care. I'm not leaving Annie in this place by herself. Mum'll just have to lump it."

"Why don't you just tell them... about the wedding?" Fred suggested.

"That would surely ease Mum's mind now, wouldn't it?" George snapped sarcastically.

Fred snorted. "Okay, so she'd do her nut. Keep us posted, will you? Mum and Dad both want to be there for Annie at the funeral. And me, as well."

"We should know more tomorrow. The bloke from the hospital is taking care of it. I've got a few phone calls to make myself, letting her people know. Hand me her phone there, will you?"

Annie heard a familiar quiet pop, and the house was quiet once again.

*

Annie woke to the sound of her phone ringing. Her eyes opened. She wondered what time, what day it was.

George answered it after the third ring. She noticed his side of the bed was no longer warm *How long ago had he gotten up and dressed?* Her ears followed his one-sided conversation as he paced in the kitchen.

"Jane? Thanks for ringing me back.... Yeah. Would you...? She won't even leave her bed.... Thanks.... See you soon."

Poor George. She had frightened him, apparently; she could hear it in his voice. It had been so nice, so comforting to lie here in his arms, feeling nothing but his warm strength enveloping her. He'd been a buffer against the sadness, the loss.

But it was time to deal with it. She realized that now. She had been hiding from her responsibilities, childishly pulling the blankets up over her head. It was time to grow up. Time to honor her grandmother's life by acknowledging her death.

"George?" she called softly, carefully exercising her unused vocal chords.

He was by her side in an instant, his hand stroking her hair, her cheek. She wasn't entirely sure whether he had run from the kitchen or Apparated.

"Is that Jane coming over?" she asked him.

"She's worried about you," he nodded.

He didn't need to state the obvious; it was staring her straight in the eyes. *He was worried* no, more like nearly panicked, if she wasn't mistaken. She glanced away from him toward the clock, partly to find out the time, but mostly to escape the pain she saw in his face, which she felt responsible for.

Ten a.m. Time to get moving. "What day is it?" she asked, ashamed of the necessity of doing so.

"The twenty-eighth."

No wonder he was panicked. She'd been catatonic for nearly forty hours. The anger she now felt was directed at herself, her own weakness. She felt it building and giving her body the strength to move, to fight against the otherwise immobilizing grief.

How could she have been so immature, so selfish? She forced herself to look at the unnecessary pain she had caused George, so evident there in his expression. In that moment, she vowed never again would she give him any reason to suffer on her account, if she could help it.

Annie sat up, tossing the covers off. George was still kneeling on the floor in front of her. She held his head in her hands and kissed his forehead.

"Thank you, George, for everything you've done. Thank you for being here for me. I've put you through hell, I know it, and I'm sorry. I'm better now, I swear. I'll be stronger from now on."

"Don't apologize, Annie. No one expects you to be fine, but you have to try, okay?"

Annie nodded. "I'll take a shower. I'll visit with Jane for a bit, and then I'll take care of whatever needs to be done this afternoon. Make a list for me. And why don't you take the chance to go see your family? They must be worried sick about you."

"Maybe I will... while Jane's here with you," he mused.

"I don't need a babysitter," she began to argue.

He raised one eyebrow. "Humor me."

As wonderful as it was to see Jane again, Annie was rapidly running through her tiny stockpile of self-control. They'd sat for only a few minutes in the front room before she found herself struggling to keep her breathing normal as the photo-strewn walls began to close in on her.

Jane noticed Annie's discomfort and offered to move into the kitchen, make her some tea. That helped a little until her friend handed her Gran's teacup filled with steaming brew. Annie's hand shook so hard she nearly dropped it.

"D'you mind, Jane.... Could we get out of here?" Annie croaked hoarsely.

"Absolutely, darling. I'll get your coat."

It was better out there with the frigid air numbing her exposed skin and lungs. Her head was clearer without the vise of memories and reminders that the house had become. She and Jane strolled slowly down the road toward the town, arm in arm.

"Thanks. This is much better. If you're cold, we can go inside somewhere," Annie offered.

"Don't be silly. It's invigorating, don't you think?" Jane replied.

Or anesthetizing, rather, Annie thought, nodding as if she agreed.

Jane hugged her as they kept walking. "Will it bother you... if I talk about her?" she asked gently.

"It's okay. I can handle it... as long as you don't let go of me," Annie promised. She was doing it again: physically drawing strength from outside herself, only from Jane this time, instead of George.

"Your Gran was such a wonderful person, Annie. She really lit up her little corner of the world, didn't she? And now it's in you, that light. She still shines through you."

Annie used every ounce of control she had left to choke down a sob, leaving nothing in reserve to battle the tears that flowed now. "Thank you. That was a lovely thing to say."

"She was strong, as well," Jane continued. "Just like you. You'll get through this. You've got George. And me."

Yes. She had her dearest friend now by her side. And she had her secret treasure, now her husband: George. Annie smiled through her tears. "Did he tell you what he did for her? For me?"

Jane shook her head, a curious look crossing her face. "We hardly spoke about anything on the phone."

Annie held out her left hand, her smile growing larger as Jane's eyes bugged out in shock as she noticed the gold band encircling her third finger.

"Annie! You have to tell me everything!" Jane squealed excitedly.

"Shh! It's a secret! You really can't tell anyone, understand? I can't tell you why just trust me."

"That makes no sense at all, but whatever you want. Just tell me what happened, already!" Jane insisted.

Annie spent the next ten minutes recounting the whirlwind wedding of two days ago. As painful as it was to remember her Gran lying there on the hospital bed through what had ended up being her last hours, it made Annie feel hopeful when she felt a rush of happiness as she relived her pledge to love George, and his to her, forever. It pleased her to have shared that happiness with her Gran, after all.

"Well, I can't pretend I'm not disappointed I wasn't there, and some of it still doesn't make sense.... How did his brother get there again? Never mind.... I'm so happy for you both!" Jane squeezed her in a cheerful hug.

Annie glanced around them to get her bearings. She hadn't been paying attention where they were going while she'd been talking and was surprised to find herself standing in front of a familiar storefront: it was the tattoo parlor she had come to almost exactly two years ago to commemorate her feelings for George. She smiled ironically as she remembered it; she'd thought she was in such pain then, emotionally, so fearful that he might never feel the same for her. Then she recalled the distraction from the anxiety that the physical pain of the tattoo had brought. *Hmm. Perhaps it was fate that brought me here just now....*

"D'you mind if we just pop in here, for a bit? I think I might be in the mood for a little distraction."

George was waiting for her when Jane brought her home that afternoon. Molly had sent an enormous volume of food back with him so much that even George's appetite couldn't hope to plow through it before it spoiled. Annie begged Jane to stay and eat with them, and then demanded she take some with her as well.

The sun had set by the time they were finally alone again. Focusing on the burning skin on the back of her neck helped to keep the worst of the depression at bay as the quiet descended between them. It was coming, though; she could feel it. A hard night was ahead, most likely sleepless.

"I think I'll have a run before bed," she told him as she stood up from the table *Best to face the night to come completely exhausted, if possible*

"It's dark," he warned, deeper lines of worry adding to the ever present concern now in his brow.

"I won't be long. A couple miles or so... just to clear my head. I'll be fine."

"I'm not letting you go alone," he said, shaking his head.

"All right. It would be nice to have company, actually."

She smiled timidly. She held out her hand to him, grateful when he took it and let her lead him out of the kitchen and into her bedroom. She saw that George had brought a bag of his things back with him that afternoon while she had been gone. *It's not so bad in here*, she realized as they dressed for exercise. *Not so many memories of Gran in this room.*

"What's that on your neck?" he asked in an alarmed tone as she removed her jumper. That was another thing that had come back with George: her very own Weasley sweater a Christmas gift from Molly.

"The latest addition to my collection," she said lightly, attempting to relieve his worry with a stab at levity. "You can look, if you like. It's likely scabby and grotty right now, though."

He carefully peeled the bandage back slightly with one hand, the other rested warmly on her bare shoulder. "A Cymru dragon?"

She nodded and turned to look at him over her shoulder. A half-smile graced his face for the first time in a long while. It was a balm to her heart to see it there again.

"She'd have liked that," he offered, grasping its significance immediately.

"Actually, she'd have had kittens," Annie argued with a weak smile. "Gran wasn't very supportive of what she considered self-mutilation. 'If God had wanted holes or pictures on a person, he'd have put them there himself', she'd've said."

"She never knew about this one, then?" he chuckled, brushing the small of her back with his hand.

Annie shook her head. It was good to hear him laugh and to be able to speak lightly of her Gran. She had been a woman with a sense of humor, after all, and not very tolerant of moping about.

George carefully replaced the bandage and finished getting dressed for their run.

"I'm warning you, I feel like sprinting tonight. Might be too fast for you," she teased as they stood in the garden and stretched their legs against the back steps.

"You do have a rather vivid imagination, don't you?" he teased back.

Annie fell into her rhythm quickly, flying down the road away from the village. She barely marked the lane to the Burrow as she sped by it, arms and legs working together to pull her through the cold air. It felt wonderful to push her muscles and lungs and heart to their limits. And to hear George's shadowing footsteps, just a pace behind.

Her blood was pumping. Her nerves were firing. She was *alive*.

It was a trick she'd discovered when she was much younger: the turmoil and angst in her mind and heart were somehow dispelled by the physical work of running. It was so much easier to think clearly in this state. She reckoned it was the sole reason she survived those last two years while George and Fred had been gone from her, when she had nearly gone mad with longing and worry.

She banished any lingering sad thoughts from her mind. Her Gran would have wanted her to dwell on happier things. Instead, she replaced the empty, painful sadness with a recitation of their wedding vows. The kiss in the truck. Her wedding night.

She reckoned she had gone far enough, for tonight at least. She paused at the side of the road, catching her breath and letting George catch his. "We can go slower on the way back, if you want," she offered.

"Are you kidding...? I could go another five miles... at least..." he falsely boasted between sucking in breaths, bent over.

Annie laughed at his bravado. She was startled at how good that felt: to laugh. She began to jog slowly back down the road the way they had come. She was tired now; the sprint following her prior lack of exercise had exhausted her. Soon she slowed further to a walk. She was in no hurry, after all, to get back to that house. George took her hand, and they walked along in silence for a while down the dark road.

"It took a lot of... strength... for you to do what you did. To let her go," he said softly as they approached the house.

"It would have been selfish of me not to. She was ready. It was the least I could do," Annie replied.

"Not the least. The hardest, more like," he argued gently.

"Yes. It was hard. Still is hard."

"Let me help," he pleaded as he squeezed her hand.

"You are," she assured him. She brought his hand to her lips and kissed it. "This does. Just having you here means more to me than you'll ever know. I don't think I could... handle this... without you."

They had reached the house. She hesitated at the steps, unsure if she was ready yet to go back in. It felt so much easier to deal with... out here in the cold. She shivered.

"I know it hurts to go in there. But we can't stay out here. You'll freeze," he said, sounding omniscient.

Annie nodded silently and let him pull her up the stairs. She looked down at the floor as her feet took the steps to the bathroom. It helped not to look around too much, especially not at the closed door that led from the kitchen into Gran's room.

George stood at the bathroom door as she walked past. She found she couldn't let go of his hand. She took a few steps further in, pulling him along with her. Annie turned on the water of the shower and let it run to get warm, still holding his hand. When she stood up once more, she pressed her body against him, turned her face up to kiss him.

"Make me forget... for a little while...?" she asked him.

*

Once he was sure they had gone inside the house, the man let the Disillusionment Charm fall away from him. It had been an effective one they had strolled right by where he had been hidden by the side of the house, not two feet away from him.

What a stroke of luck! he thought. He had finally tracked down the truck he had seen them drive away in from the Muggle hospital a few days ago and had now stumbled onto so much more.

So this was the way it stood: no longer holing up with Mummy and Daddy in the safely charmed little hovel he called home? Something powerful must have drawn the pathetic ginger brat out. The little female must have some charms of her own, by the looks of it. From the tender tone of the pup's sickening voice, she had her claws in deep.

He personally had no particular grudge against the Weasley family... but he knew someone who did. And that someone would likely be willing to shell out many a galleon for this information. It was practically money in his pocket.

*

Two days later, Annie stood in a brief period of afternoon sunshine beside a gaping hole in the ground. Next to her, holding her hand, was her source of strength. She resisted the urge to lean against George. Over the past several days, she had only rarely relinquished bodily contact with him. She was worried she was becoming parasitic, after a fashion.

That morning, as they had dressed for the funeral, George had gently removed both their wedding bands from their fingers as she nodded in understanding. Hers was now framing the little golden heart he'd given her, hanging from the chain around her neck, hidden underneath her blouse. Once again, like it had been for most of their lives, their true relationship had to be kept a secret from the world at large.

Behind them stood his parents her in-laws now, unbeknownst to them. Across the vulgar hole in the ground stood Mrs. Finnerty, Jane, and a smattering of Gran's garden ladies. There were not many of them left anymore, but here they stood in loyal devotion to their friend, to each other. Fred had been called away for the day, but had personally expressed his condolences to her at the house while the three of them had eaten breakfast together.

Annie had been rather proud of the fact she had been dry for well over a day. That record was over now. Tears slowly coursed down her cheeks, leaving behind frozen tracks on her face. She twisted her head, stretching the muscles of her neck and shoulders, eliciting a welcome wave of angry pain from underneath the bandage at the base of her neck.

The kind young chaplain from the hospital began to speak. "'I am the Resurrection and the Life,' saith the Lord; 'he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.'"

Reverend Wallace had respected Annie's wishes and kept the service simple and brief. He included a familiar psalm, "The Lord Is My Shepherd," and the garden ladies nodded their heads and recited the words along with him. He then said some lovely things about her Gran; she wondered who would have given him the details. Or maybe it was just more generic than she realized. It certainly was hard to pay close attention.

"We therefore commit her body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life."

All eyes turned to Annie as she grabbed a handful of small bits of frozen mud. She stumbled slightly as she took several steps toward the open grave. Slowly, she commanded the fingers of her fist to open one by one. The tiny pieces of solid mud rained down dully on the wood below.

*

The man found himself being ushered into the impressive mansion by a sniveling house-elf. He could barely resist the urge to kick the filthy, groveling thing. Instead, he directed his attention to the rich furnishings, smiling to himself at his good fortune.

The room he was led to looked empty and dark. The only light was cast by a small, dim fire in the grandiose fireplace. He supposed this was one of the perks of wealth: making people wait for you.

He was startled to be addressed almost immediately by an oily voice issuing from a chair near the fire. It had looked empty, sitting as it was in a shadow. He squinted, trying to make out the speaker with no success.

"I was told you had an item of interest to me, yet you seem to have come here empty-handed. I hope for your sake you do not dare to waste my valuable time."

"No, sir. I have something for you, indeed. Information."

"Yes?" the voice said indulgently. Doubtfully.

"It concerns a family of some interest to you...."

"This is getting tedious rather quickly," the voice warned.

"Weasley, sir."

A thoughtful pause followed. "Continue."

"Seems that one of the brood has developed a fancy for a little piece of Muggle filth. Spends most of his days... and every night with her."

"Which one? Do you have a name?"

"Dunno his name. He's one of those twins, I think."

"Hmm. Not as valuable as some of the others, I fear. But valuable enough, to be sure. Can you produce any proof?"

"Shouldn't be any trouble to snare the little bitch. He'll come runnin' after, make no mistake. Then, with the pair of 'em...."

"Yes, I see your point. One Weasley in the hand may draw out the younger brother, who might in turn bring along something far more valuable. Does anyone else have this information?"

"No, sir. Came straight to you, I did."

"Be sure to keep it that way. And keep in mind, I have friends in very high places. It would not do to cross me."

"You make it worth my while, and we'll have no trouble at all, Mr. Malfoy."

A bag of coins was tossed at him, landing on the floor. He had to stoop to pick it up. But the moment of humiliation was worth it; the bag was heavy with gold.

"Let us shake this tree and see what fruit may fall," Malfoy said smugly.

Author's note: Meredith's funeral rite is adapted from <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/lifeevents/funerals>. The bible quote is misidentified on this site, however; it is from John 11: 25-26, according to virtually every other online source.

Ambush

Chapter 36 of 80

Concurrent with *Deathly Hallows*. George regrets not listening to his intuition. Arthur begins to puzzle out the situation. A significant decision is made.

Chapter 36: Ambush

January 1998

Fred and George had just finished hiding and marking the last cache for the night. They were walking quickly through the frozen woods toward a small clearing about twenty feet away.

"What's the rush?" teased Fred.

George smirked in Fred's direction a totally unseen and therefore useless gesture on this thickly overcast, moonless night.

His twin somehow perceived his nonverbal response anyway. "Seriously, you've been touchy all night. What's wrong? You two have a fight or something?" his brother persisted.

"Not a fight. I dunno. Something's not right. Gut feeling, I suppose. Probably nothing, but I want to get back as soon as...."

George's answer was cut off by a quiet buzzing sound emanating from his pocket. He had left his phone on that night in an attempt to relieve a strange sense of nervousness about leaving Annie home alone. He snatched the phone out of his pocket and quickly flipped it open.

It was a numeric message from Annie: *999home*.

His heart stopped. It was the signal they had agreed upon just in case. "Annie's in trouble!" he whispered frantically.

"Where?"

"Her place! Go!"

Both of them disappeared into thin air with a soft, simultaneous pop. Four seconds later, George and Fred reappeared in the field about fifteen yards behind Annie's house. It took another second for George to recover his bearings and begin running in the right direction.

A gunshot reported from the house, the sound reverberating across the field and bouncing off the trees. It startled him, causing him to stumble momentarily.

"ANNIE!" he bellowed at the top of his lungs.

He sprinted toward the house faster than he'd ever run before. *Oh God oh God oh God oh God*, he kept repeating in his mind or maybe it was out loud, he couldn't be sure. Why had he agreed to go along tonight? He should have stayed home when Jane had backed out of coming over. He never should have left Annie alone!

He drew his wand as he approached the house. Obeying silent commands, the gate, then the back door of the house burst open with loud bangs. A small part of his brain noted the sound of his brother's footsteps continuing to run toward the front of the house. *Brilliant*, he thought. *Whoever is in here won't be leaving alive....*

He halted as soon as he reached the kitchen and paused for one second to allow his eyes to adjust to the even deeper darkness inside. Another tiny part of his brain registered surprise that he was not much out of breath. His heart, however, felt on the verge of exploding. The house was profoundly silent.

"Annie?" he called, his voice breaking from emotion.

"George?" Her ragged voice answered from her bedroom.

A wave of relief crashed into another wave of fury at the sound of her frightened voice. He dashed through the kitchen doorway to her room. His eyes had perfectly adjusted to the darkness now, and he saw her standing just behind the other door the one that led to the hallway. He quickly scanned the room and saw nothing else out of order.

"It's me, Annie," he called softly. "Are you hurt?" As he spoke, he walked slowly into the room and noted the gun held perfectly still in her hand. A gushing fountain of relief now welled up inside him; Annie had been the one to fire the shot.

"George," she repeated.

He could hear relief in her voice as well. He continued quickly across the room to Annie, never taking his eyes off of her face. It was strangely expressionless, an observation which worried him.

"Give me the gun, love," he said, his voice just above a whisper now that he was at her side. He gently took it from her hand, which was now starting to tremble slightly. He tossed it gently onto the bed and took both of her shoulders in his hands as he stared intently into her eyes.

"Are you hurt?" he asked again.

She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. She closed her mouth, then shook her head slightly. Her eyes never blinked, never left his face.

In the next moment, they both heard a sound from the front room. He felt Annie's body flinch at the noise. "Fred?" George called out, aiming his wand at the doorway.

"It's me," he responded.

Without taking his eyes from Annie's face, George could see moving shadows on the wall through the door behind her, cast by Fred's lit wand searching the room and hallway as he slowly made his way back to Annie's room. George gingerly pulled Annie into his arms. It disturbed him that he felt no response from her, no resistance whatsoever. *Could she be under a spell?*

"Bloody hell!" exclaimed Fred, his voice just louder than a whisper. He stood in the doorway to Annie's room now, on the other side of the door behind which George and Annie stood.

George looked away from Annie for the first time since he entered the room. He noticed on the floor lay a man's body. A dark mess was forming and spreading on the floor. How had he missed that before now? How had he not bloody *tripped* on the damn thing to get to her?

"Get it out of here," he commanded Fred. "Take it into the woods where no one will find it. I'll take care of the floor in here."

"Right," was Fred's only answer.

The body lifted a few inches off the floor and began to float back out the door. As soon as the body of her attacker was out of the room, George eased Annie over to her bed and sat her down on the edge. On his knees before her, he took her face in his hands and kissed her forehead.

"I'm here. It's over. You're safe now," he murmured as he kept his lips pressed there.

Annie nodded silently when he pulled away.

"I'm going to clear up this mess now," he explained.

She hesitated, as if processing his words slowly. Her brow furrowed, then she nodded again.

George brusquely waved his wand over the floor, Vanishing the mess as he went, following the trail of gore as it led through the kitchen, down the steps, and into the garden all the way to the back gate. A minute later, he was back in Annie's room, wand lit, examining the walls and floors, looking for any leftover traces of blood. He was determined nothing would remain as witness of what had happened.

Finding nothing, he went back to Annie's side. Her whole body was starting to tremble now. George sat down on the bed next to Annie, arms around her, rubbing her shoulders and back, trying to soothe her.

They heard Fred return two minutes later. "It's me," he called quietly from the back door.

When he got to the doorway to Annie's room, George began issuing new orders in a quiet voice. "I'm taking Annie back to the Burrow. Make sure there's no trail leading to the woods. Lock up the house and come home as soon as you can."

"What do you want me to do with the dead dog in the front room?" Fred asked quietly.

George winced and glanced at Annie. Thankfully, she didn't seem to have heard the question. He spared a respectful thought for the faithful stray who had just given his life for Annie's. *Poor Michael.*

"Bury him in the garden once we're gone."

Fred nodded, turned, and left for the front room.

George turned to Annie and gently held her face up toward his. "We're going to my house now. Can you stand up?" he asked.

Annie blinked for the first time. Her body was no longer merely trembling but now violently shaking. She attempted to stand and immediately collapsed.

George easily caught her; his arms were already around her. She clung weakly to his neck as he lifted her up. As he started to Apparate on the spot, he felt the shaking stop as her body went limp.

Two seconds later, he was at the kitchen door of his childhood home. He could see a light burning within *Someone must be awake still* he thought. He opened the door with a verbal command and strode indoors.

His mother was sitting at the table. She must have been waiting up for someone, he reckoned Fred, perhaps? George hadn't spent a night in the Burrow since before Christmas, so it was not unreasonable that his mother was shocked to see him. Her eyes grew large and her hand flew to her mouth as she surveyed the two of them in the doorway.

"What...?" was all she could manage to utter.

"I'm all right. Fred's on his way. Annie was attacked at her house. I think she's passed out from shock," he quickly explained as he carried her inside.

In the seconds it took for him to speak, Molly recovered herself. "Take her into the living room. Lay her on the sofa by the fire," she calmly directed him.

George nodded and did as he was told, moving quickly into the other room. Molly hurriedly gathered a bottle labeled "Smelling Salts," one labeled "Calming Draught," and a teacup, then followed him through the door.

"Gently, gently," she admonished her son as he bent to his knees and laid Annie's still-limp body on the cushions. "Annie...? Annie.... Wake up now, dear," she said gently.

Annie's eyes fluttered open and rested on Molly's smiling face for a moment, then frantically searched around until she found George. Her body started to tremble again, and her face turned an alarming shade of pale.

"Quick, George! The bin," Molly commanded.

George grabbed the wastebin at the far end of the sofa and handed it to his mother just in time. Annie rolled over and started to retch into it.

George could barely contain the rage that welled up at the sight of Annie in this state. He clenched his fists until his the skin of his palms stung and ground his jaw until his head pounded from the pressure. *How could this have happened? How could they have found her? We were so careful....*

Meanwhile, Molly gently stroked Annie's hunched back and spoke soothing words that George couldn't quite make out over the ringing in his ears. Finally, Annie was still for a whole minute.

"There now. All done?" Molly crooned.

Annie hesitated a few moments more, then nodded.

"A cool, wet flannel, if you please, George," Molly said.

Reluctantly, George stood up and walked away toward the bathroom. *Who could have known about her? About us?*

When he returned to the living room with the washcloth, Annie was sitting upright, holding a steaming teacup full of liquid. George's father was standing next to the sofa now in his robe, regarding Annie with a concerned look. He felt his father's eyes rise from Annie and follow himself as he crossed the room. He handed the wet cloth to his mother, then took a seat next to Annie on the sofa. George couldn't face his father's curious stare and looked away. *Someone must have Vanished the mess in the wastebin*, George commented to himself.

"Try another small sip, dearie," Molly coaxed. "That's it.... A little more.... There. Feeling better?" Molly cooed in her warmest, most motherly voice.

"Yes. A bit," squeaked Annie.

George's emotions spun once more in turmoil. He felt relief at her answer that she could finally speak but this feeling was quickly eclipsed by the increasingly impotent rage he felt inspired by the pitiful tone of her voice. *When I find out who's behind this....*

Molly carefully took the cup from Annie's hand and set it aside. Next, she gently mopped Annie's brow with the cloth, held it in place on her forehead, then gingerly placed Annie's own hand on it. "You hold it there, now. Ah, good, good. Now, why don't you tell us what happened?" said Molly softly.

At that moment, the back door banged open then shut again, startling everyone in the room. Molly and Arthur spun around toward the noise.

"Hold on a sec. I'd like to hear this, too," called a voice moving quickly through the kitchen.

"Fred!" cried Molly as he strode through the doorway and took a seat near the sofa.

George made eye contact with his brother, who nodded almost invisibly, indicating the tasks he had been charged with had been taken care of. Then all eyes turned again to Annie.

She cleared her throat and started to speak, addressing herself to George but staring into the fire. "Michael and I were lying in bed after you left. He was acting oddly all night long whimpering and whining but he didn't want to go out. Wouldn't leave my side, even." She paused, as if pondering the dog's behavior anew.

Arthur and Molly both looked quizzically at George. *The dog*, he mouthed silently. They looked back at Annie.

"There was a quiet sort of noise. From the front door. Michael started to growl and got down off the bed."

Annie paused again. A violent shudder went through her body but quickly passed. Molly responded by handing her the teacup once more and gestured for her to drink again. Annie obeyed, then continued.

"He left my room and walked into the front, growling the whole way. Then I heard him snarl and lunge, then a howl, then nothing."

She stopped and looked at George, who was staring at the floor and would not meet her eyes. She gazed up at Fred, searching for information. "Michael?"

Fred pursed his lips, shook his head slightly, then looked away. A grimace of pain crossed Annie's face, and her breath began to come more quickly, more raggedly.

George's fists were clenched so tightly in his lap his knuckles were white. He thought they might be starting to go numb. *Someone will pay dearly for this.*

"Take another drink, Annie," Molly encouraged. When Annie was slow to respond, Molly gently pushed the cup up to her lips and tipped some of the liquid in. A moment later, Annie seemed calm again.

"Go on, dear," Arthur urged quietly.

"I pressed the button on the phone to send the message to George. I grabbed the gun and hid behind the door." She turned again to George and said, "Just like you told me to."

George swallowed and carefully nodded. "Good girl," was all he could say.

He couldn't imagine where he found the self-control to keep his voice from breaking, let alone screaming. The vision of Annie hiding behind her bedroom door, terrified, while that subhuman thing walked through her house nearly drove him insane. Darker thoughts than he'd ever had before began to whisper themselves. *Azkaban's too good.... Dementor's kiss too merciful.... Crucio.... Avada.*

"I heard footsteps walk down the hall. I saw what looked like a wand come through the door first, then an arm, then a head."

Annie was silent for several seconds as her eyes filled with tears. Then her face crumpled. "I shot him! I killed him!" she cried as her lips trembled. Sobs began to rip out of her.

For a few moments, everyone else in the room was paralyzed by Annie's declaration.

George felt like he was going to burst into flames with the pent-up rage inside him, and his breath came in ragged gasps through his clenched teeth. He wanted to leap up from the couch, run from the room, and hunt down whoever was responsible. He wanted to hold Annie tightly and soothe her until she felt safe again and would weep no more. But he found that he could not move; his every muscle was rigid with tension and would obey no conscious command.

Molly was the first to recover. She gathered Annie into her arms, stroking her hair, rocking her gently, hushing her sobs. Annie slowly started to regain control. A few minutes later she was quiet again and drinking from the cup at Molly's urging.

"After...." She gulped rather than speak the words. "I just stood there. I don't know how long. The next thing I remember is George coming into the room. And then... then I woke up here."

The room was quiet for a few moments as everyone absorbed the tale. No one looked at anyone else as they each tried to decipher the significance, interpret the ramifications of what had happened that night. *What exactly did it all mean?*

Fred was the first to break the silence. "George got her message just as we finished tonight. We got to Annie's house in time to hear the shot," he said, adding what little bit of their own perspective there was to offer.

George had spent the last minute forcing his breathing to slow and his clenched fists to open through monumental effort of will. As Fred spoke, he braced his elbows on his knees and hung his head in his now aching hands, pressing his palms into his eyes until he saw stars. His fingers began to contract again involuntarily, pulling on his hair as they did.

I will murder the filthy sons of bitches who dared to try to touch her!

Annie saw George's agonized movement out of the corner of her eye and turned away from Fred to face him. Alarmed by what she saw, she raised the cup to her lips and hastily gulped the last of the potion.

Molly took the cup from Annie's hands once again. She gently turned Annie's face toward her own and held it there until Annie's eyes finally tore themselves away from George. "Annie. Listen to me now," Molly spoke with quiet fervor. "You did nothing wrong. Nothing! You had no other choice. Do you understand?"

She waited for a response. When Annie just stared blankly back, Molly prompted her further. "You did nothing wrong," she repeated. "Now nod your head yes and tell me you understand."

Annie nodded her head silently.

Arthur spoke next. "Fred, George, join me in the kitchen, will you?"

His father's stern voice seemed to snap George out of whatever dimension of insanity he was currently residing in. His arms dropped to his sides as he lifted his head once more. He looked directly at Annie for the first time in... how long had they been here? Two hours? Ten minutes? He couldn't tell. But he could see the potion was well into her system now, and she was starting to look a bit stoned. She stared dumbly into the fire.

His mother gathered up the cup and bottles. "I'll just clear this away, then I'll sit with her until you lot finish," she said quietly. She rose from the sofa, then stood next to her still-seated son. Molly could not resist the urge to pat his shoulder, rub his arm, and, finally, smooth his mussed hair.

George closed his eyes as he felt his mother's soothing hand on him, willing himself to be calmed by it. A brief time passed maybe a minute, he wasn't sure then his mother was back.

"Go on now, George," she urged.

George took a deep breath. He was surprised by the amount of relief that act brought him. Perhaps he had forgotten to breathe before? He nodded to his mother, rose from the sofa, and walked Inferius-like to the kitchen. Fred and his father were already seated at the table.

"Who was it?" asked Arthur as George sank heavily into a seat.

"No one I recognized," answered Fred. "Possibly a Death Eater but definitely not one of the higher-ups. No Dark Mark. Maybe a new recruit?"

"What if he was Imperiused?" worried Arthur while his hand rubbed the back of his neck.

"What does that matter?" whispered Fred angrily.

"He was there for one purpose: to hurt Annie," growled George at the same time. "For that he deserved to die. *As will others, when I find them.*"

"You're sure he's dead?" continued Arthur, looking at George with thinly veiled alarm.

"No question," Fred answered when George didn't.

"Where is he now?"

"Let's just say he won't be turning up again," said Fred with a grim smile.

"Any witnesses? Muggle or otherwise?" Arthur questioned.

"Doubt it. Her house is far enough away from any neighbors for them to hear or see much.... I didn't see anyone else around the area," Fred reported. "Either he was alone or his companions bolted before we got there."

"This doesn't make any sense," Arthur sighed. "Why *Annie*, out of all of us? Why now?"

Neither of his sons attempted an answer this time. Arthur stopped drumming his fingers after a moment and looked up from the table, unnerved by the quiet. He saw Fred was staring at his brother with a face of stone. George clenched his jaw and refused to look anyone in the eye.

"George, is there something you want to tell me?" Arthur asked.

Silence. A moment later, George stood up and left the room without a word.

Arthur looked back at Fred. Stone-faced Fred, who watched his twin brother leave the room while boring into his back with his eyes.

Another moment passed, and a thought clicked into place in Arthur's brain. He closed his eyes and dropped his slowly shaking head to his chest *Oh, George, you didn't....*

Several minutes later, Arthur wearily rose from the table and walked back into the sitting room. Annie was sitting on the sofa between his wife and his son. She leaned heavily on George, whose arms were around her and eyes were closed. He glanced at the one clock in the room that actually told the time; it was four a.m.

"All right, then. Nothing more for it tonight. Let's all get some rest for a few more hours 'til morning and make whatever plans we need to make then. Annie, you're welcome to sleep in Ginny's room for tonight, at the very least."

Annie seemed to snap out of her trance at the sound of Arthur's voice. She clutched at George's arm. "You'll stay with me?" she pleaded.

Molly pursed her lips. "Now, Annie, I don't think..." she began to protest.

"Oh, for pity's sake, Molly," interrupted Arthur. "Leave them be." He took his wife by the arm and led her up the stairs to their room.

Fred followed them up a few minutes later, his arms loaded with a plate of sandwiches and a bottle of butterbeer.

George took Annie's arm and wrapped it around his, lacing their fingers together. He eased her up off the couch and escorted her upstairs to the bathroom. She squeezed his hand, then released him and closed the door.

A couple of minutes passed, then the door opened again. He replaced her arm and hand in his, opened the vanity's cupboard, and removed a small bottle. He extinguished the light and walked her back down a flight of stairs and into his sister's room.

"Sit."

Annie obeyed him instantly.

He removed the stopper from the bottle and held it out to her. "Drink this just a sip."

Utterly compliant, she took a drink straight from the bottle. He set it on the nightstand.

"Lay down."

He climbed into the bed behind her. It was too small for them both; if he stretched out his legs, they would hang off the end. Instead, he curled his too-big body around her tiny, fragile one and held her as she succumbed to the sleeping potion and drifted off.

Meanwhile, his brain began its obsessive work. *Who was behind the attack? How much do they know? How did they find out?*

Where can I find them?

*

Arthur also lay awake in bed upstairs, unable to stop the racing thoughts in his head. If his theory was correct, George had managed to escalate the Weasley family's blood traitor status tenfold, maybe more.

Arthur had nothing against Annie; in fact, he genuinely liked her. Thought she was a charming girl, really. If one could ignore the current political climate, he'd've been happy to think of her as a member of his family. And anyone could see the depth of their feelings for one another, the love that bonded his son to her. If there were any justice left in the world, they shouldn't have had to give this marriage a second thought.

For that's what it was now, wasn't it? A marriage. He didn't know the how or when, but he was growing more confident by the moment of his suspicion: George had married her.

Arthur had to admit he was actually quite proud of George for taking such a stand, even in secret. He had always taught his children to judge others by their characters, not their pedigrees. Clearly, George had taken the lesson to heart. And it was beyond ridiculous: the way the Ministry was treating people they deemed had imagined impurities of bloodline.

Who could really blame them for eloping? Even so young? Hadn't he seen this coming, after Bill's wedding?

Hadn't he done the very same thing?

His son's timing was just impeccably horrid. But then again, his own family, and that of his wife, had made the same arguments when he and Molly were newly married in the midst of the last war.

Oh, George what have you done?

Like father, like son, he supposed.

What a nest of trouble we've all found ourselves in now he thought. One son defying the government by secretly, not to mention illegally, marrying a Muggle girl. Three more sons were covertly working alongside him in the resistance movement. His youngest son was on the lam, plotting with public enemy number one (no less!) to destroy the one who oppressed them all. And he had heard the rumors of what Ginny was up to, doing what she could to resist what was going on at Hogwarts under Snape. *Mustn't forget to include myself, spying within the Ministry for the Order.* They were all in it up to their necks... excluding Percy, of course.

All in all, he couldn't be more proud of his children. Or more afraid for them.

*

Annie woke. The tiny room was bright with light streaming in through a window. Even though she'd had a completely dreamless sleep for which she was grateful the rest had done little to dissipate the memory of last night. Her body had relaxed, at least no more tremors, no more nausea. Actually, she was feeling slightly numb. She wondered if it was a result of whatever was in the little cobalt blue bottle sitting on the nightstand.

Her mind, however, was a different story. She could feel the maelstrom of horror was hiding somewhere near the base of her skull, waiting for an opportunity to take over again.

Just then, George lightly kissed her cheek.

He had taken it upon himself to be both her pillow and her blanket last night. A small but steady upwelling of warmth began to spread into her body from within her heart, and the maelstrom shrank significantly in its presence. She took his hand in hers, raised it to her lips, and kissed his palm in response. She said a silent little prayer of thanks for her own personal security blanket.

"You hungry?" he asked her quietly.

Not his usual morning greeting. She thought back to the recent mornings she had woken up with him in her bed and hearing, "Good morning!" in his cheerful voice. She recalled how he nearly always awoke in a playful mood, smiling, often aroused. She hated hearing the anxiety, the seriousness in his voice now.

"I suppose," she answered. She wasn't really but didn't want to give him further reason for concern.

Annie sat up stiffly and began to stretch. She turned back to look at George and instantly regretted it. There was no smile on his face to greet her; it had been replaced by a

brow furrowed with worry. He clearly had not slept at all. His somber expression and the self-blame in his eyes stabbed at her heart. She felt the maelstrom twitch awake.

"What time is it?" she asked as she stood up and stretched some more.

He rolled out of bed and hovered next to her. "Dunno. Maybe nine or so."

Another stab at her heart. The lively animation in George's voice had gone. She desperately hoped it was temporary. "I must be a frightening sight," she said, running her hands over her tangled hair. "Maybe I should shower first."

George took her face in his hands, stroking her cheekbones with his thumbs like he often did. Annie closed her eyes to avoid his searching gaze.

"I've never seen you look so horrible. You look like you've had the worst night of your life."

The words themselves could have been typical smart-mouthed George, if not for the choked sound of his voice. She opened her eyes to see his face was grimacing. "George. Stop it."

He dropped his hands and looked away.

That wasn't what she had intended. She reached up and took his face into her hands instead. "I'm...."

"Do not lie to me and say you are fine, or I will lose it," he interrupted harshly in a voice that was no less fierce just because it was quiet.

"No. You're right. I'm not exactly fine at the moment, but I *will* be," she assured him earnestly.

He pursed his lips but nodded slowly all the same. Reaching over her shoulder, he grabbed Ginny's bathrobe and flicked it off the hook with his wrist. "You can put this on when you've finished," he instructed, then led her to the bathroom.

Annie took a long, hot shower. When she was done, she put her pajamas back on, for lack of anything else, then wrapped the robe around her body snugly. She went directly to the kitchen, following the sound of quiet voices.

Everyone stopped talking when she entered the room. Molly greeted her warmly but with a cheerfulness that was somewhat forced. Fred and George sat at the table, drinking from steaming mugs. Annie joined them at the table and took a scone from a plate there. She began to nibble at it mostly for show and Molly set a mug of coffee in front of her.

"Have a bite to eat, dear, then it's back to bed. The best thing for you today is rest," she said in a comforting, motherly voice.

"Actually, I was planning to have a run," Annie replied. Spending the day in bed was the last thing she wanted. She needed physical activity the more strenuous, the better, she reckoned not more drugged-out sleep.

Molly opened her mouth to argue, but George stepped in quickly. "I'll join you, if that's all right."

Annie knew he wasn't really leaving her the option to refuse, but she was glad to think he'd be with her. She wanted to be alone with her thoughts, but not actually alone. She nodded in acquiescence.

"I'll pop over to your place and get some of your things, then," he added.

"We'll have a look around while we're there," Fred chimed in. The two of them looked pointedly at one another, and George nodded slightly.

Molly looked as if she wanted to discourage her sons, or at least urge them to be careful, but held her tongue, not wanting to acknowledge in front of Annie there was anything to be worried about. "Be quick, then," was all she said.

Molly and Annie waited in the kitchen for the boys' return, awkwardly trying to keep up a casual conversation that died in fits and starts. They were relieved in more ways than one when Fred and George strode through the door once more. George set a small knapsack on the table next to Annie, kissed her quickly on the top of her head, and headed off upstairs to get ready.

"Nothing unusual," Fred shrugged in response to his mother's unspoken question. He yawned. "I'm knackered," he added and headed out of the room, dragging his feet.

"I'll get all of this, dear. You go on," urged Molly, clearing off the table with a wave of her wand.

Annie went back to Ginny's room and got dressed in her running gear. George was ready and waiting for her in the kitchen when she returned.

"Don't be too long," Molly's voice called after them through the door.

They spent a few moments stretching and acclimating their muscles to the chill air. Then they jogged down the lane. By the time they reached the road, Annie was in her zone.

She was deeply comforted by the sense of command she felt over her body. Her muscles and bones moved flawlessly in concert to propel her forward. She felt her mind detach itself from any conscious effort; running became more like steering a giant ship on an open ocean, requiring only slight, occasional adjustments. This detachment was precisely what she sought out today. Here in this trancelike state, she found her conscious mind somehow became more malleable.

Annie had discovered a few years ago that she was adept at compartmentalizing her brain. She had honed that skill ever since, working to build a sort of inner, mental vault in which to trap thoughts that were far too disturbing to permit to roam freely in her mind. In this way, she could protect herself from the brunt of their hurtful tendencies, since she was unable to banish them completely. This was the visualization skill that Jane had suggested and Annie had adapted for her own use.

The first thoughts she had ever stored in the vault were of her mother. The pain of her abandonment, the guilt over longing for an actual mother when her grandmother had done so much for her, the hatred she felt for her mother's weakness, the rage against her idiotic, selfish choices. Even the grief over her mother's death that she could only assume must have surely happened long ago now. These thoughts had plagued her as a younger girl, making it difficult sometimes to think clearly, leaving her so vulnerable to anger and hurt. Now, they each had their own place within the vault.

The newest portion of the vault contained the sad loneliness she felt upon her Gran's death. There she had wept over the fact that Gran would be unable to share the future of happiness her life with George would surely hold in abundance. Annie lamented that they would share no more holidays, no more quiet chats. There would be no chance to place her own babies into Gran's welcoming arms. The sharp, destructive, nearly crippling agony of them was locked away in the vault, for it did no honor to her grandmother's memory to wallow in it. Once those were safely segregated, the gentler feelings of grief and happier reminiscences were permitted to occupy her thoughts, instead.

The control she had developed over her mind was perhaps equal to that which she had over her body while she ran. She had not yet found a thought powerful enough to break out of the vault unbidden once she had placed there. Only once in a rare while could something upset her to the point that she would open one of those rooms and connect with the wild emotion inside for a brief moment sometimes even draw release from it.

The only possible exceptions to the rule, she reckoned, were her love, her desire, her need for George. She doubted those could ever be contained in something as small as the vault; they already overflowed her mind, heart and soul.

She now set to work on construction of yet another new addition to the vault. She needed to be able to think clearly and logically about the events of last night, unclouded by horror. She carefully teased out the powerful emotions swirling in the maelstrom of last night. One by one, she examined them, identified them, and placed them in this new room.

The terror she felt as she had watched the unknown man creep into her bedroom...*click*.

The agonizing guilt she felt for ending the life of another human being...*click*.

The fury she felt at the violation of it all...*click*.

The ache she felt for Michael's sacrifice she paused as she considered it and decided to leave that one free for the time being. It would not be right to lock that away just yet. He deserved the honor of her grief.

The rest were now sealed in the vault. Now that her mental work was done, she began to disengage the auto-pilot of her body. Slowly, she became consciously aware of her surroundings, the jolting sensations of her feet rhythmically hitting pavement. She cast around with eyes and ears for George and heard him at a comfortable distance a few feet behind her.

She had no idea for how long or how far they had run, but she wasn't quite ready to stop. She focused now on the senses she had ignored before. The air was cold on her skin and in her lungs. The sun was weak, peaking through the clouds only periodically. The road was quiet; the only sounds she could hear were footsteps and breathing.

It wasn't much longer before she felt her leg muscles start to tire. She slowed to a stop, breathing hard but pleasantly so. The exertion had been a comforting relief, but she didn't want to completely exhaust herself. She needed to save something for the way back, after all.

George had mirrored her pace exactly, following her lead, yet leaving her in peace. She watched his chest heave as he caught his breath. His face was screwed slightly into a squint, as if the light was a bit too bright. His cheeks were flushed in the loveliest shade of rose.

Annie closed the distance between them in three steps. She wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her forehead against his breastbone. She felt him fold his hands around her in response. They stood silently together for a while until all the bodily signs of effort were erased: their breathing slowed, the muscles cooled, the perspiration dried. Meanwhile, Annie silently thanked and praised the universe for the person in her arms.

George held Annie, lightly yet closely, until she lifted her head to look up at him. When he finally gazed into her eyes, he saw no remaining vestige of the terrified panic he'd seen there last night. Their violet calmness washed over him.

George was as relieved as he was baffled. For the second time in less than a month, he had witnessed Annie get hit with successive crushing blows: first her Gran's death, then the attack of last night. Each time, his heart had wrenched as he saw her body buffeted, her knees start to buckle under the force of the traumas. And just like the last time, he now found himself astounded by her strength, her resilience.

He had been in an agony of his own last night, worried that this new violation, following so soon after the loss of her grandmother, would destroy the peace she was beginning to recover. He found instead that he had seriously underestimated his wife. She had bounced back even more quickly this time.

On her cue, they began to walk hand in hand back down the road. He guessed they had come several miles at least. He offered to pop back to the Burrow and bring the truck 'round to collect her.

"I'm not too tired. If it's all right with you, I'd rather walk," she answered.

They walked without speaking further for most of the distance back, keeping their thoughts to themselves. Finally, when they reached the lane that led to the Burrow, he broke the silence.

"Mum and Dad want you to stay with us now... for a while... at least until we know more about what happened. Dad went in to work this morning to see what he could find out." George didn't hold out much hope that his father would discover anything more about last night's attack. Death Eaters hadn't taken to broadcasting their activities openly at the Ministry... yet.

Annie nodded slowly. "I don't think I could stay in my house again. Remind me to thank them when we get back," she replied. She kept her head bent, looking down at her feet, deep in thought.

George breathed a deep sigh, grateful she was being so reasonable. He had feared she might be unwilling to leave her grandmother's house afraid she might see the move as abandoning her Gran's memory, or a step toward giving up her independence. Or even worse: conceding defeat in the face of last night's attack. He had personally witnessed time and again how bull-headed she could get, digging in her heels if she thought she was being bullied or manipulated into something. Her willing cooperation was likely a testament to how deeply she had been shaken a thought which brought yet another flare of rage against the perpetrators responsible.

"What do you think he was after?" she asked him after a few moments passed.

George looked intently at Annie's face, searching for a sign the fear had returned. Seeing no such signs, he decided it was safe to answer honestly. "Dunno. I've been wondering that myself. Might have been a random incident of Muggle harassment, I suppose."

She wasn't buying it anymore than he did. "Or maybe he was after you? Because of your work?" she said.

George knew she wasn't talking about the Wheezes. Perhaps the Death Eaters had discovered who was providing aid to the refugee wizards throughout the country. Or the source of the radio broadcasts, for that matter. But he thought that was unlikely. "Possibly. Though if that were case, why didn't he come after Fred or me directly? At the Burrow, or..."

"Or maybe he was after you," she interrupted, "and he thought... or he *knew*... he could find you at my house. Which means he knew about us."

George took another deep breath. "Yes, that's sort of what Fred and I have concluded as well. *But how?* he wondered silently once again. They had been so maddeningly careful for so long! *Why now?*

Annie continued, following the logic of her train of thought. "And, failing to find you, there was always me and through me, the chance to get to you," she said, swallowing hard.

"I will never let that happen!" he cried, immediately wincing at the idiocy of the statement.

Annie caught it, too; she shot him an exasperated look as if to say, *That's exactly what almost did happen*

"Annie, any way you look at it, we'll all be safer keeping you with us," George insisted. "I could've hexed your house six ways from Sunday, and it would have kept him out, but it also would have been a beacon, pointing to something valuable being hidden. Put a target on your head the moment you stepped outside. At my house, I can protect you so much better than before, and you'll never be alone..."

"I'll never get to leave, you mean," she argued, cutting him off.

George hadn't fooled her for a second: she clearly understood his primary motivation for moving her into the Burrow. He wouldn't have to worry about her being alone and

vulnerable in her grandmother's house anymore when he wasn't there. And he could tell by her expression that she looked forward to what amounted to house arrest in her eyes just as much as he would have. Further, he conceded she was right: it had been a nightmare for him, being cooped up in the Burrow for the last few months. But this way, he rationalized, at least they could be together all the time.

George took hold of her shoulders and turned her to face him. He had to convince her that it was time for her to leave Ottery behind for good, to live with him where he could keep her safe *his* way, fighting magic with magic. And he had wanted this for so long now, anyway.

"We belong together! You already have leave from your job just quit it altogether. There's nothing keeping you in your Gran's house you said so yourself. Nothing's left to hold you in that world anymore. It's time to come with me and live in mine now!" He searched her eyes, begging her to say yes with his own.

Annie was swept away by the emotional force of his plea. He was completely right she could see that. Now did seem to be the perfect time to cut loose from the real world and enter the fairy tale entirely. There was nothing left in Ottery, or in her Gran's house, or in her Muggle life that she wasn't willing to abandon in a heartbeat to be with him. And now that they had been found out by whatever criminal syndicate that passed for the wizarding authorities at the moment, it was asking for trouble to remain in the village, exposed and waiting for another attack.

She slowly nodded in agreement. "So that's it, then? I just drop off the face of the earth as far as the normal world is concerned? Move in to your parents' house?"

George nodded and grinned, pleased by how well this was going. A major decision in their lives had just been made: she had just agreed to forsake the life she had known, everything she grew up with, for him. He sighed with relief, enhanced by a healthy dose of elation at his victory.

"I was worried you were going to put up a fight make this more difficult. 'An obedient wife is a treasure for life,' isn't that what they say?" he teased her.

Annie reluctantly smiled. As monumental and serious as this decision was, she was happy to hear him joking with her again. She shoved him playfully away in mock indignation and smirked, though. Did he really have to use the word *obedient*?

He righted himself, then scooped her up into her arms. They were only a few yards from the Burrow now. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him as he carried her the rest of the way, magically opened the door, and crossed the threshold.

A throat cleared, startling them both. "Have a nice stretch of the leg, then, dears?" Molly asked in an unnerved voice, eyes wide.

Smiling, George set Annie down; she couldn't quite suppress a giggle.

Minutiae

Chapter 37 of 80

Concurrent with *Deathly Hallows*. Annie's gone into hiding with the Weasleys. She and George seem to be collecting secrets to keep. Could this get any more complicated? I doubt it.

Chapter 37: Minutiae

February 1998

Annie trudged up the winding steps to the second floor, balancing the two baskets of clean laundry she had offered to deliver upstairs for Molly. The past week she'd spent in the Burrow had been far from the miserable prison sentence she had been dreading. Now she was with George and his family all day, every day, in the magically fascinating and cozily charming home he grew up in. And someday soon, the time would be right when they could reveal to his parents that they were married, and there would be no more hiding anything from anyone.

When she reached the boys' bedroom, the door was inconveniently closed. Lifting one leg to brace the baskets, she tried turning the knob. It moved, but the door only budged about an inch. Annie gave it a firm shove with her backside. She heard the sound of a cardboard box scraping against the floor as she pressed her way in.

Annie found herself alone in George and Fred's room. She'd walked past it many times before on the way to the bathroom, but never set foot inside before now. The most noticeable features of the room were the two identical unmade beds that extended parallel to each other from the wall. It wasn't immediately clear to her which boy slept in which bed.

*I should probably stop thinking about my husband as **aboy**,* she corrected herself silently, smiling. It gave her a little thrill just to think the word *husband*!

She stood in place, resting the stack of baskets on the edge of one of the beds, and surveyed the chaos surrounding her. Boxes in various states of dilapidation from abusive overuse lined the walls; several of them either jerked occasionally or made odd noises. The floor was littered with bits and pieces of parchment, wood, metal, broken quills and other magical detritus. A collection of nearly a dozen cauldrons of various sizes teetered precariously atop an armoire that she guessed must be serving as a closet, due to the shirt sleeve caught between the almost-closed doors. Several plates of half-eaten food rested on the bedside tables. Three large posters featuring Quidditch players randomly darting in and out of the frames were stuck to the wall above the beds.

Something else caught her eye. Four small, unmoving pictures were pinned just above and to the side of the bed furthest from the door. She carefully waded through the mess on the floor to get a closer look at them, then smiled in recognition.

One picture had been taken when they were fifteen: she was a bit blurry in it because she had been attempting to escape being photographed by George while Fred's goofy face rested on her shoulder. Another was older still they were fourteen, and the three of them were smiling together for the camera; it had been taken by a passerby who had offered to photograph them together when they had gone hiking in Dartmoor. Then there was the picture he had taken of her floating on the sailboard at the beach.

The final and most recent picture had been taken nearly a year ago on the night of her birthday. A semi-sober Fred had snapped a slightly unfocussed picture of her and George together in the booth at the pub while declaring his photographic services were his birthday gift to her. Their pose was the furthest thing from romantic: George had been in the midst of taking a drink from his pint, and Annie was reaching out toward the camera, an aggravated smile on her face as she demanded Fred give it back to her. She did recall that George had been resting his hand on her knee at that moment....

"I'm fairly sure this room is out-of-bounds for the likes of you," she heard George's hushed yet playful voice from the doorway behind her.

"Oh!" She jumped and partly turned around toward the door, startled by the interruption. In the process, the top basket tumbled over, spilling the once neatly folded clothes onto the floor.

"Damn!" she muttered in frustration. "Though I suppose this lot will end up there soon enough," she teased. "You two are absolute pigs. Look at this mess!"

She bent down and began putting the clothes back in the basket while George fully entered the room and shut the door quietly behind him.

"You don't have to do that, you know. You're living in a wizard's house now," he laughed and flicked his wand a few times. The clothes sailed into the closets, and the beds made themselves. She watched the mess on the floor retreat to hide underneath the beds.

"You think you're so impressive," she said as she folded her arms and sniffed, trying to hide how impressed she really was. It didn't matter that she witnessed this sort of thing day in, day out, now. *My husband can do magic!*

"My wife seems to think so, anyway," he joked quietly, as if he could hear her thoughts. George put his arms around her and pulled her close, smiling conspiratorially as he uttered their secret out loud.

"Clearly biased, the silly cow. With shamefully low standards, to boot," she teased him.

George laughed and tried to pull her down with him as he sank onto the bed. She resisted lying down with him, but instead sat to the side of the bed while he lounged on his back down the middle, keeping hold of her hands and pinning them to his shoulders.

"Oh, no, you don't. Your mother would murder me on sight for corrupting the innocence of her little darling," she protested.

"No use crying over that particular spilt potion," he said with a wicked look in his eyes.

"You mean milk," she corrected him as her heart began to pound in response to his gaze.

"I *mean*, you're here already... in my room... on my bed.... So, in for a Sickle...."

"I was *trying* to snoop before you so rudely interrupted me," she said, desperately trying to resist the temptation. If they were caught now, before they had told everyone....

"Oh, well, in that case, by all means, please do continue." He released her hands, folding his own behind his head. "You'll likely find some racy mags under Fred's mattress."

"Is *that* your hiding place?" she quipped.

George snorted dismissively. He tapped on the side of his forehead with his finger, then waggled his eyebrows at her in an exaggerated leer. Annie laughed out loud at his naughty implication. George hushed her, scandalized by the volume of her outburst.

Annie turned to the closet at the foot of his bed against the opposite wall. "I wonder what's in here?" she said more quietly this time, coyly looking back at him over her shoulder.

"Probably nothing, but while you're poking your nose about, would you mind bending over again? I think I stashed some interesting stuff on the floor in there you might like to inspect."

"Such a troll!" she scolded him.

George grunted in validation, and she rolled her eyes.

Turning back to the closet, she opened the doors to have a look inside. There were indeed boxes on the floor, but she knew George well enough to be extremely leery of their contents. Instead, she ran her hands over the clothes that hung on the bar, rifling them and stirring up his scent in the process. A dark, billowy article toward the back caught her attention.

"What's this?" she asked in genuine curiosity.

George sat up in bed to see what she meant. "Oh school uniform," he replied, wrinkling his nose in distaste.

Annie pushed the other clothes to one side in order to better examine the uniform. A white shirt hung with a red-and-yellow-striped tie draped around the collar. A dark grey jumper had a lion crest on the left breast. And the black robe, which had caught her eye in the first place, had yet another crest featuring a prominent letter H. She traced the line of buttons down the white shirt with her finger.

"You wore these clothes every day when you were at Hogwarts," she mused aloud.

"Not every day for seven years! Some people *growthroughout* adolescence, you know," he teased her.

Annie stuck out her tongue in response.

"Those were part of my final set. I wanted to bin the lot of them, but Mum insisted we keep some. For posterity's sake, I suppose." He got up as he spoke and walked toward her. "As if anyone would ever give a flying...."

"Put them on! I want to see you!" she whispered excitedly, cutting him off. Suddenly, she desperately wanted to see in person what he had really looked like during all the long months, years even, while he was apart from her.

"Don't be daft!" he chuckled. "Surely we can think of something better to do..." he whispered as he reached out for her.

She bit her lip and looked up at him through her eyelashes. She had been beginning to experiment with these sorts of tactics instead of resorting to her usual, more violent coercions, and so far met with far more success than failure. With both hands on his chest, she pleaded in her most sugary voice. "Please?"

George groaned and rolled his eyes. "You cannot be serious. Absolutely not." Then he bent to kiss her disappointed face. "I escaped that place to come for you," he said in a low voice as he began kissing her neck. "Just like a knight in shining armor... on a white horse," he whispered, a sly smile spreading on his face while his fingers traced the tattoo he was describing on her lower back.

Annie was not to be deterred. How many times had she imagined being a student at Hogwarts along with George and Fred? She determinedly pushed him away. "Well, if you won't, I will!"

She yanked off her shirt and slid her arms into the white uniform oxford. George's face was a mix of amusement and curiosity as he watched her do so. The uniform shirt was far too big on her. In her haste, she buttoned only the first three buttons, then reached for the tie.

"Help me with this," she commanded.

George shrugged but played along, wiggling the knot up to the notch at the base of her throat. She carelessly stuffed the front shirttails into her waistband of her jeans. She

didn't notice the unbuttoned lower portion of the front of the shirt had split open, revealing her navel, but George did.

"Now hand me the robe," she ordered him.

George continued to humor her, helping her pull it on over the too-long shirt sleeves that hid her hands. A slow smile began to break over his face. He took her by the shoulders and spun her around to face the mirror on the inside of the closet door.

"There. You look like a proper little Gryffindor witch now," he teased.

Annie wasn't sure what she had expected, but it wasn't this. She looked like a child trying on an adult's clothes. She sighed in disappointment. "I'm swimming in these! I look like a complete idiot," she whined. She turned back to face George, shaking off the robe and tossing it on the bed. "I'm surprised you're not laughing yourself stupid at this."

George was as well. He had to admit, she did look somewhat ridiculous in the clown-sized clothes. But, to his surprise, there was something about seeing her *in* his clothes that was quite... arousing.

Maybe it was because they had not made love since before the attack. The first couple of days following, neither of them had felt very romantically inclined. Not to mention that in the meantime, his mother had taken it upon herself to serve as a constant chaperone, hovering around them at all times. He had even overheard her once, whispering to his father, asking him to put a chastity charm on Annie's door.

"I most certainly will not, and neither will you!" his father had said, scandalized. "How would that make Annie feel safe or welcome in our house?"

All this was made all the more aggravating because here she was, *his wife*, living in his house. She was never more than a few feet away, yet remained frustratingly untouchable. It had been driving him mad for days at this point.

Whatever the reason, they were miraculously alone now. He slid the fingers of one hand into her curls and gently tilted back her dejectedly-hanging-down head, lifting her face to his. The other hand found its way through the open front of the shirt at her waist and moved slowly upward to cup one breast, his thumb caressing the line where the lace of her bra ended and flesh began.

Annie's eyes closed and her hand clutched his forearm as George kissed her.

They were so caught up in the moment that neither one heard the door open behind them. It was the loud, obnoxious retching sound which followed that startled Annie and made her break away from the kiss. She couldn't see around George's body to the doorway where the sound had come from.

George didn't let go of her, or even turn around, in response. He still held her head, but removed his hand from inside the shirt.

"That is the most repulsive, perverted thing I have ever seen! I want to gouge out my eyes. You people *disgust* me," Fred exaggeratedly hissed.

"I'll do far worse than gouge your eyes if you're not gone in two seconds," George snarled in a whisper, turning his head only slightly to address his brother.

Annie heard Fred snort, unimpressed.

In a lightning fast move, his wand now in hand, George flashed a jinx over his shoulder in Fred's direction. There was a loud bang, a scuffle, then a muttered swear, followed by another, slightly softer bang made by the door shutting itself.

"Missed him by that much," George muttered ruefully. Then he leaned his forehead against hers. "Get dressed. We will continue this 'discussion' later." He stepped away, opened the door just enough to squeeze through, then shut it tightly again.

Bewildered and mortified, Annie quickly began to replace George's Hogwarts uniform back on its hangers and into the closet. As she crept out of the room, carrying the now empty laundry baskets, she noticed a brand new black mark on the wall near the door, still smoldering slightly.

Annie spent the remaining hour of the afternoon in the kitchen. Her mind bounced back and forth between burning anticipation for the night to come to abject mortification about that afternoon. She begged Molly to let her help with dinner anything for the sake of distraction.

Molly finally agreed to let her chop vegetables. It was a far more welcome way to occupy her thoughts, Annie reckoned. Only when Molly cleared her throat did Annie realize she had practically diced the vegetables into puree.

"A bit preoccupied, are we?" Molly asked.

"Erm, yes. Sorry about that," Annie mumbled, wishing she could crawl out of her skin at this point.

"No worries," Molly said as she scraped them into a large pot. "We'll have soup instead of a pie." After a short pause, she continued. "Worried about tomorrow, dear?"

Annie nodded, thankful for the opportunity to tell a half-truth instead of a bald-faced lie. She had indeed been worried for most of the afternoon about tomorrow's meeting with the solicitor about Gran's will just not precisely at that moment. Annie didn't like the idea that she perhaps couldn't handle it herself, but in truth she did feel a bit at sea when it came to this legal business. She wasn't looking forward to it in the least.

"I'm sure everything will go just fine," Molly assured her.

Annie smiled her thanks.

Molly summoned two loaves of bread out of the oven and onto the table. "Let those cool a bit, then you can slice them. About an inch thick, I think, will do fine," she cautioned, recalling the vegetables and not wanting to eat breadcrumbs.

Annie promised to be more careful.

The five of them ate when Arthur arrived at home. Annie struggled to keep her mind on the meal, forcing herself to follow the casual conversation. Once the topic turned to recent events in the magical world, it was easier to pay attention.

It happened frequently as dinner wound to a finish: the Weasleys would begin discussing the latest dark portents and rumors swirling throughout the magical world. There was almost always bad news, it seemed to Annie. People were being harassed or arrested or simply disappearing outright with no explanation. New laws were being passed weekly, each more ridiculously invasive and controlling than the one before it. Less frequently, they might have news of a family friend, but never the ones they most hoped to hear from: Harry, Hermione, and Ron.

Fred and George would then rise together, heading off to do their secret broadcast with their friend Lee or deliver fresh supplies to an established cache. As worried as she always was these days when anyone left this pleasant sanctum, she also felt a glowing pride in her new family. Each was doing their part to fight against the injustices of the new ruling regime.

Often, while the boys were gone in the evenings, Annie would sit and chat with Molly and Arthur. They would usually try to cheer her, or perhaps cheer themselves, by sharing humorous stories about the Weasley children growing up. On previous nights, she'd even shared a few of her own scandalous tales of the boys' childhood misbehavior. Tonight, however, she was not in the mood.

"I think I'll turn in early," she said to excuse herself and rose from the chair to head toward Ginny's room.

Molly smiled sympathetically at her then, thinking she was still preoccupied with tomorrow's meeting with the solicitor. Annie was tired of trying to hide the real reason for her distractedness from them and went to hole up where she could obsess about it privately.

George will come to me tonight. Her stomach did a little flip as her heart raced.

Once inside, she found something unexpected on the bed. A scarlet t-shirt, soft and slightly tattered with wear, was folded and resting on the pillow. She unfolded and examined it, turning it over in her hands. The front was decorated with a dark brown sketch of a roaring lion, rearing up on its hind legs and pawing the air. On the back was a large number six, and "WEASLEY" was printed in smaller yellow letters in an arc above.

She undressed and put on her own pajama pants with the new shirt. It fit a bit snugly, but still quite comfortable in its well-worn softness. She lay down on the bed in the dark room, staring at the ceiling, waiting.

She had not quite dozed off two hours later when she heard a tiny metallic click. The door slowly and silently opened, and a dark figure crept in. "It's only me," the figure began to whisper reassuringly.

Annie leaped off the bed and launched herself into George's arms, preventing him from saying anything further. She wrapped her arms and legs around him, frantically kissing him. George stumbled toward the bed, trying to avoid making noise, while he kissed her back just as fiercely.

Her fingers clawed at the singlet he wore, hands yanked at the knot at his waist, unable to undress him fast enough to suit her madness. For a fleeting instant, she wondered if this lunacy was anything similar to what her addict mother had felt, insanely desperate for a fix. She needed him so badly, so deeply, so desperately.

Only when his warm strength enveloped her did she ever truly feel secure. Only when he sighed her name and professed how much he loved her did she feel beautiful. His pure and shining brightness was the only thing left to her worth striving for in this shitty world. All the death and danger and oppression and injustice could be forgotten for those few moments when she was close to him.

No, she wanted to be more than just close... she craved to be a part of him. To commit to memory every inch of his skin with her hands and lips and to be mapped by him in return. To take him within herself and feel the flicker of the supernatural, his glowing magic spreading through her. To give him pleasure and receive her own in kind.

He wanted her. He alone saw something within her that was worthy. He had given her his heart and his trust and his understanding and took hers in return, somehow considering it a fair exchange. She belonged to him, and he to her.

This was what they fought for. This was what it meant to love. This was what it meant to be alive.

An hour or so before dawn, they awoke. Kissing each other gently now that the worst of the gale-force desire had been spent, they spoke softly.

"Thank you for the gift. I love it," she purred. The t-shirt was the only article of clothing left between them. "How old were you when you wore this?" she asked.

"Dunno. About fourteen, I think. Maybe younger."

She huffed in surprise. "That's sick," she cried in a hushed voice. "You were my size at fourteen?"

"It's not my fault you're so bizarrely small," he teased her.

"I'm five-foot-three, which is perfectly *normal*. I'm not the freak in this situation."

"That's debatable, love," he teased, running his finger along her jaw line. "If I had known it was destined for this, I would have taken much better care of it," he chuckled. "On second thought, no I wouldn't. I rather like what that little hole is revealing," he added and wiggled his finger through said hole, coming up against the sensitive underside of her breast. "Perhaps it's not too late to add another rip or two...."

They kissed for several moments longer until they began to hear a few quiet creaks from the floorboards above.

"That woman wakes infernally early," sighed George.

"You never complain about the breakfast that results," Annie giggled. "In fact, your mouth is usually crammed full to bursting."

He raised an eyebrow in response, then kissed her again, gently sliding his tongue along her lips, then parting them with it. She got the joke and giggled; ~~was~~ rather enjoyable to be filled to bursting.

Quiet voices now joined the occasional creaks upstairs. George growled softly as he got out of bed and dressed in his pajamas quickly. He planted one more kiss on her forehead, then whispered, "See you at breakfast," and disappeared.

She lay in bed for nearly half an hour longer, basking in the warmth that remained of him under the blanket, and pondered the day ahead.

Annie had finished her own breakfast and was sipping coffee at the table when Fred and George finally came downstairs. George sat down next to Annie and gave her a peck on the cheek his usual behavior keeping up appearances for his mother's benefit, she assumed.

Fred was having none of it. "Well, don't you two lovebirds look a bit tired this morning. Late night, was it?"

George gave her a wink, as if to warn her not to rise to Fred's bait. They both stoically made a show of ignoring him.

Molly returned to the table from the sink. "Don't be silly, Fred. Annie turned in early last night before you lot got home," she answered him. "Still worried about the meeting today, then, dear?"

"Yes, a little," she replied with perfect honesty.

But Fred wasn't put off that easily. When Molly turned back toward the sink, Fred grinned malevolently at Annie and George. "*Lovely muffins*, Mum," he oiled sweetly while pumping one finger into his other fist, nodding knowingly and sneering.

Annie absently scratched her nose with her first two fingers for Fred's benefit. George drew one finger slowly across his neck, glaring balefully at his brother.

Little more than three hours later, Annie and George were seated in the solicitor's office. Richard Mason was about the same age as George's parents, Annie guessed balding and quite portly. His manner was more business-like than friendly, but in an honest way, which was reassuring.

"Miss Jones, are you aware that you are named as the sole heir to Meredith Griffin Jones' estate?"

"I suspected as much. She was my grandmother."

"Please accept my condolences for your loss, Miss Jones." After the briefest of pauses, he continued, "There are no other family members, no matter how distantly related, that you anticipate would attempt to contest this decision?"

"No. No one else. It was just Gran and me, my whole life."

"Good." The lawyer nodded. "That will make this even simpler. Miss Jones, your grandmother's will is nearly twenty years old and has been unchanged since then. Usually, this sort of situation would present no end of problems. This particular testament, however, was written by my own father, who I am given to understand was a very good friend of your grandparents. It is simple, straightforward, and virtually uncontested. Job well done, if I may say so myself."

He smiled briefly at the couple seated before him before continuing. "The will stipulates that a trust would be formed in the event that your guardian, Meredith Jones, died before you came of legal age. This clause is now moot as of your eighteenth birthday, which was... let me see... nearly two years ago."

"Your grandmother has left you the title to her house and land, which, at the time of her death, was held solely in her name, entirely free and clear of any debt or lien. In short, this means that you may keep or dispose of the property as you please. Further, there is a tidy sum set aside as your personal inheritance. Not a vast amount, by any means, but certainly respectable."

Mason handed her a document listing her grandmother's assets and their worth. Annie scanned it quickly, becoming alarmed by the growing sums as her eyes proceeded down the paper. They'd never wanted for anything, despite the fact they'd always lived frugally, but Annie'd had no idea of the money her grandmother had managed to put by.

"I understand your grandmother spent some time in hospital before her passing?" Mason didn't wait for her answer, but pressed on. "There's more than enough here to cover that as well as any other remaining expenses. I anticipate the money will be released for transfer to your account within the month. And that appears to be the whole of it. Do you have any questions, Miss Jones?"

"No, I don't think so," she answered in a quiet voice.

"Well, if you think of any later on, please don't hesitate to ring. We have a stack of documents for you to sign now before you leave today."

George gently squeezed her shoulders as they rose to leave a while later. The solicitor hadn't been kidding about the stack of paper; her left hand was cramped from signing her name what felt like nearly fifty times at least.

As they walked out of the office, Annie couldn't help thinking this was all just as her Gran had planned it, ever since Annie had been born. Gran had spent her final twenty years, Annie's entire existence, preparing her for this: for life without her. All the childhood lessons in cooking and gardening, every household chore she ever did, every recipe she ever learned, every errand, all were for the sole purpose of teaching her self-sufficiency, leading to this inevitable moment.

She was on her own.

George drove Annie home to the Burrow in silence. She didn't even glance at her inheritance as they passed by on the way out of town.

*

Annie awoke this morning, like she had every morning for the past three weeks, next to George. Every night, he would pop into her bedroom well, technically it was still Ginny's after his parents had retired for the night. It was like she had passed through a kind of hell those autumn months of misery behind her and now resided blissfully in paradise. She stretched, then curled herself around his warmth.

"Happy birthday, by the way," he said as he kissed her good morning.

It took a moment for that to sink in. "Really? Is it the twenty-ninth already?"

"You are now the ripe old age of twenty years," George nodded sleepily while yawning.

She smiled as they kissed again. Slowly, a thought began to tickle her brain, drawing her attention away from George. Twenty years old. February twenty-ninth. Something wasn't quite right. She began to tap on George's chest with her fingers.

"Twenty isn't that old, Annie," he teased her. "Do you need to borrow my fingers to help you count it up? Although, come to think of it, you probably are too old for me now, a mere teenager yet...."

"Shh. I'm thinking," she said distractedly.

"I can tell that by the wisps of smoke drifting out your ears," he chuckled.

Annie didn't respond to his teasing. Her eyes were wide, mouth agape. She couldn't escape the conclusion any longer. The numbers didn't lie.

"What is it?" George demanded, worried now.

"I'm late," she barely whispered.

"For what?" asked George, now completely at a loss. He cast about, trying to figure out the mystery. Late? Counting? Her birthday? Then a light began to dawn.

Oh.

The night sky had been overcast every night for a week; it was no wonder they hadn't noticed the growing light of the moon. Annie's hand was covering her mouth, her face still gobsmacked.

He was quiet for a few moments more before he spoke again. "I thought you were taking a pill for that?" he whispered gently.

"I forgot!" Annie's eyes closed as she smacked her forehead. "Everything went haywire after the attack.... All my things still back at the house.... I didn't notice....*That the pills weren't here*, she let the thought fade away unspoken. She wasn't blaming George for leaving them behind in the bedside table. She had taken the responsibility for birth control much earlier in the relationship and clearly just dropped the ball in truly spectacular fashion.

"George, I'm so sorry! *So stupid!*"

"Stop it," he urged her. He didn't much care for her tone of voice. Or her ridiculous overreaction. "Let's not rush into any conclusions. Are you sure? Really sure?"

She was sure as she could possibly be. She had never been a day late in her adult life. And now, as of February twenty-ninth, she was three days past due. But George did have a point: things had been pretty stressful recently. Maybe she was getting worked up over nothing. Unlikely, but....

"Pretty sure," she still had to admit. "I can take a test and find out for sure."

"A test?" he asked curiously.

She nodded her head distractedly. She would have to explain that bit to him later. "I need to nip over to the chemist in town the sooner the better. No, scratch that. Not in Ottery. Better head somewhere else," she said, thinking better of the plan. This was definitely not a purchase to be made in the tongue-wagging burg that was Ottery St. Catchpole.

George nodded slowly, lost in his own thoughts.

Annie closed her eyes, pondering the possibilities, the options, before them. *How much more complicated could this get?* she wondered, wanting to slap herself once more. Not only were they secretly married, sneaking around to be together behind his parents' backs, but now she might be... was almost *certainly*, if she was honest with herself....

Not to mention the larger political ramifications she preferred not to consider. They had always known their children would be considered half-bloods in his world, born to a blood traitor and a Muggle but it had always seemed like nothing more than a joke before. Something off in the misty, distant future. Now, though.... Annie cringed.

"Relax, will you?" he interrupted her thoughts. "It's not so bad, really. Kinda cool, actually."

She shot him a disbelieving look. How was he not in a panic about this?

He gave her a small but encouraging smile, reading her expression. "It's a bit unexpected, sure, but...." He shrugged. Then he pulled her closer and kissed her temple.

Annie turned to look him straight in the eye. "You're not just saying that because I'm freaking out? Attempting to talk me down from my hysterical ledge?" she asked.

"Think about it," he said, stroking her bed-crazy curls away from her face. "We said before that we both wanted kids. Maybe lots. Looks like it'll just be a little sooner rather than later," George chuckled.

"I can't believe you're so calm about this," she said, shaking her head in genuine bafflement.

"It's a big deal, I know. But there's no point in going mental about it. If it's meant to be, well, then...." He shrugged again, then kissed her once more, on the lips this time. "Plus, this pretty much proves I'm a stud, doesn't it?" he said with a sly smile.

She had to laugh out loud at that one.

"Not *that* funny," he warned her, hushing her.

"Okay, then. *You* get to tell your mother."

Two hours later, Molly had given them a stern look; she wasn't buying their excuse to get out of the house together this morning. Annie couldn't blame her either *it was* weak. A forgotten paper to sign at the solicitors? That was the best she could come up with? Certainly not up to Annie's usual standard of deceit which had been vastly overworked lately, much to her chagrin.

But here they now stood in front of a dizzying array of small boxes promising both speed and accuracy. George glanced up and down the aisle to confirm no one was looking, then surreptitiously picked up one of the boxes. His face grew slightly dumbfounded once he had read enough to understand the gist of how the thing was operated. He looked at Annie and shrugged.

Annie swallowed her growing discomfort and grabbed three different boxes at random off the shelf. After marching straight up to the counter, eyes on the floor, she refused to look at the cashier as she paid for them. She instead hazarded a glance at George, who pulled a comical face at her. She couldn't help it and laughed out loud.

Dear George, she thought as she thanked her lucky stars once again for him.

They stood outside the shop for a moment while Annie scanned the street. She spotted a small café that was open and headed for it, dragging George by the hand behind her.

"You're hungry!? At a time like this!?" George asked incredulously.

"Of course not, idiot!" She rolled her eyes when his confused look persisted. She shook the plastic bag, rustling its contents. "You want all this evidence at your house where your mother can find it?"

George's face looked stricken at the thought. "Excellent point. You know, it really is a comfort to know I can always count on you for a devious plan," he answered with a wink.

Annie made a beeline for the café's restroom and spent the next ten minutes alone there. When she finally came out, she glanced around, looking for George. In her haste to get to a toilet, she hadn't noticed where he'd sat down.

She found him seated at a small table, head leaned back against the wall, eyes closed. He might have been asleep, his face looked so completely unperturbed. Meanwhile, Annie thought she might throw up with anxiety if her head didn't explode first. *How does he do it?* she marveled.

George opened his eyes when she sat down next to him. He pushed a glass of water across the table toward her, and she gratefully drank it down.

"Well?" he asked.

Annie sighed. "It's official. You knocked me up."

George was silent for only a moment. A grin spread across his face and he pulled her into a crushing embrace, nearly knocking the glass off the table. "Brilliant," he whispered into her ear. "Fucking brilliant!"

Annie laughed despite her shock at his consistent, inexplicably positive reactions to the discoveries of the day. "You could say that, yes. I must admit you usually are," she teased.

George laughed out loud at her joke, pleased to hear that her tense mood was easing. Annie hushed him, embarrassed that the waiter was now looking at them curiously.

"I just hope you can convince your parents it's so brilliant," she added.

"They'll be thrilled," he assured her. "Well, maybe not initially, it's true..." he admitted when she looked at him skeptically. "But I'm thinking more long-term."

They sat quietly for a minute, foreheads pressed together, letting the revelation sink in. *A baby*.

"Let's not tell anyone right away," he suggested in a low voice. "Don't get me wrong: I'm not *afraid* to tell them, or anything...."

"You should be," she corrected him.

He shook his head, dismissing her concerns. "I just want to... enjoy it, for a while... just the two of us. Does that make any sense?"

Annie nodded, understanding him perfectly. Just like their friendship, their love, and their marriage had been, this was something private and special for the two of them to cherish. It was just an inconvenient coincidence that each of those precious things was also forbidden or illegal in the society at large.

"We can't wait too long," she warned him. "It will be better if we tell everyone before they start to guess it themselves. I don't want them to think we're hiding something we think we should ashamed of."

George nodded in agreement. "Soon," he promised.

*

Two weeks later, as the house began to stir in the morning, George strongly advised his brother to make himself scarce for the day.

"It's likely to hit the fan, mate. Fair warning save yourself."

"You're telling them? Today?" Fred asked.

George nodded, even though Fred only knew half the Dungbomb about to be dropped. "I'm fairly certain Dad has guessed already," he said. Again, only a half-truth. "No matter. We're both sick of sneaking around." The last line was literally true for poor Annie; he'd heard her retching in the loo that morning and had hastily cast a Silencing Charm on the door.

Fred shrugged. "Good luck, then. See you later... if you're not both out on your connubial arses, that is."

"Thanks."

George left his room and headed to Ginny's. He found Annie sitting on the bed, staring nervously at the opposite wall, hands resting on her knees. He sat down next to her, took her face in his hands and gazed into her violet eyes, attempting to exude confidence. Or perhaps draw some from her, if she had a bit to spare.

Annie reached up, grasping his hands in her own. She felt then that his wedding ring had been returned to its proper place on his left hand. She gave him a tiny nod of agreement, indicating she was ready, as well.

George fished the gold chain from under her collar with his finger. He unclasped it, letting the ring fall into his palm. As he held her left hand, he slid the ring onto her finger, just like he had done at their wedding almost three months ago. It had not been there since the morning before Meredith's funeral.

"Let's go."

Beware the Ides of March. The phrase had repeated itself in Annie's mind throughout the morning. She couldn't avoid the fact that this day certainly held the potential for disaster. She hoped they'd fare a bit better than old Julius Caesar had done.

Annie had wondered all night long if her courage would fail her today. She was pleased when she found, as she sat next to George, facing his parents, that she instead felt eager to make the declaration, for the subterfuge to finally end. But she had agreed to let George lead the conversation they were his parents, after all. She smiled at him with encouragement as he took a deep breath and plunged ahead.

"Mum, Dad... you know that Annie and I are... well, we love each other. There's no one else for me for either of us ever. So, that being said, we want you to know... erm...."

"Spit it out already, George. You're making me nervous," Molly said with a forced smile and furrowed brow.

He took another deep breath. "Annie and I decided to get married."

Molly smiled more genuinely this time. "You're getting married. Well, that's no big surprise, dear. Your father and I have been pretty much expecting something like this for a while now." She turned to smile at her husband.

"Wonderful news, of course," offered Arthur cautiously. As if this was not quite what he had been expecting to hear.

George's face registered shock at his mother's calm reaction to the news. Annie realized he had missed the crucial change in verb tense between what he had said and what his mother had heard.

Annie nervously cleared her throat. "Not *getting* married, Molly. We *are* married," she explained as gently and in as soothing a voice as she could muster.

Immediately, George also realized the misunderstanding. He placed Annie's left hand on the table in front of them all and rested his own above hers as he held it gently.

Molly's face fell from a pleased smile, paused briefly at disappointment, and landed finally at anger as she glared at the wedding bands on each hand.

"George!" she gasped. "How could you? Of all the stupid, selfish stunts! And you, Annie? I trusted you! Welcomed you into my home! Is this what you did when you lot snuck out two weeks ago? Having a good laugh now, are you?" she cried in fury.

"Molly! Molly!" Arthur had to repeat her name several times before she was quiet.

"I'll grant you there's a long list of stupid things I've done, but not this!" George was on his feet now, shouting back at her. "Annie and I belong together, and you know it! Plus, I think you're being a bit hypocritical, Mum, seeing you and Dad DID EXACTLY THE SAME THING!"

"George! Sit down! I will not allow you to shout at your mother in my house," commanded Arthur. "Everyone please calm down," he urged.

Annie silently surveyed the table. George and Molly were glaring at each other. Arthur held his head in his hands, leaning on the table. She found it ironic, with her temper being what it was, that of all the people at the table now, she was the calmest one.

Annie reached into her pocket and pulled out a photo. She set it on the table and turned it to face Molly. It was their wedding portrait: Fred, George, and Annie were all leaning toward Meredith, who was lying on a hospital bed, looking frail and ill, but beaming in obvious pleasure.

Molly's angry countenance began to soften as she gazed at the picture, its import registering. Annie dropped her gaze to stare at the table and began to speak softly.

"This was taken Christmas night. That morning, by some miracle, Gran regained consciousness. That's exactly the word the doctor used: miraculous. She told me not to expect it to last long.

"I had been in the doorway talking to her the doctor. Gran must have thought I had stepped out; that she was alone with George. He was there with me every moment of that whole horrible time, right by my side, you know. I heard Gran tell him that she knew we were meant for each other, just like she and my grandfather had been. She told him she was happy for us, glad we had each other, grateful he would be there for me after...." Her voice cracked.

She swallowed the growing lump in her throat, then pressed on. "She told him her only regret was that she wouldn't see our wedding."

Annie then looked directly into Molly's now tear-filled eyes. "I know you're upset with us, and you have every right to be. But we weren't being selfish. George granted my grandmother's dying wish by marrying me that day in her hospital room."

"You make it sound like it was all for Meredith," George spoke in a rough voice that was choked with emotion. "The *wedding* was for your Gran. *The marriage is for me.*"

Annie was overcome by his simple, heartfelt declaration. She threw her arms around George, who held her tightly for several minutes. It was as if they were completely

alone, instead of in the middle of the tense confrontation they were actually in. They didn't let go of each other until Molly broke the silence.

"George, Annie, I'm so sorry," Molly spoke quietly but with strong emotion. "Please forgive me the horrid things I said. My temper gets the better of me at times."

George released Annie from their embrace but kept hold of her hand. He nodded in silent forgiveness toward his mother.

"Of course," Annie reassured her, knowing the feeling well herself.

"And as disappointed as I am to have missed it, I can understand now why you did what you did. I'm glad your Gran got to see you settled, and I'm sure that made things much easier on her," Molly added, reaching out for Annie's other hand.

Annie smiled at her new mother-in-law, who in just a few short months had been more of a mother to Annie than her own had ever been. "Thank you, Molly. I think it did. She was so happy that night, as you can see," she said through her tears.

"Well, it seems congratulations are in order, then, you two. Welcome to the family, dear Annie!" Arthur spoke in a calm, cheerful voice that was a welcome sound, breaking apart the last remnants of tension.

Everyone around the table smiled, chuckled and wiped their tears as they took turns hugging each other.

"There's just one more thing," added George a few moments later, slyly smiling at Annie as everyone resumed their seats.

"Yes, just a little thing," she added, playing on his joke and bashfully smiling.

"You could even say it was tiny." George laughed at his own cleverness.

"Miniscule," Annie said, before giggles started to take over.

"All right, you two. Enough," warned Molly with a smile.

"Right. See, Annie and I... I mean *we*... well, technically just Annie, I suppose, but I was definitely involved...."

"George?" Molly's voice was getting exasperated.

He took a deep breath. "We're... expecting?"

Annie couldn't believe he'd just said it out loud. The look on George's face told her he felt the same way. Nothing about the entire situation seemed real to her; it was like watching a movie from within.

Molly was quiet for a moment, as if waiting for him to complete the sentence. "Expecting what, dear?" she prompted. "If you wanted presents, you should've thought of that before you eloped," she teased them.

George and Annie found the confused looks on his parents' faces amusingly uncomfortable, but couldn't bring themselves to speak any plainer, and shrugged at each other instead.

"Oh, you must mean a room of your own. Of course. Why not take Bill's old room. Ginny will be home for Easter soon anyway," Molly offered.

"Molly!" Arthur gasped, reaching the correct conclusion before his wife, "They're...."

"Going to have a baby, yes," Annie completed her father-in-law's sentence. "I'm pregnant." She nearly stuttered saying the word.

After a moment of surprise, Molly shot her husband an I-told-you-so look, then turned back to the couple. Annie could see a look of understanding begin to settle on her face. "How far along are you?" she asked carefully but without obvious anger.

"MUM!" George barked. Annie saw him bristle at his mother's implication.

"Only four weeks, Molly," Annie answered pointedly. It was important to her that everyone be perfectly clear: this baby was conceived *within* her marriage to George. She would never saddle her own child with the challenges she had faced growing up. And further, she wanted to assure Molly that she had not forced George into marrying her by getting pregnant. She didn't necessarily blame her for jumping to that conclusion but still wanted her mother-in-law to understand the wrongness of her assumptions.

"I'm going to be a grandpa!" exclaimed Arthur. "George! Annie! How wonderful. Truly!"

Annie was relieved he sported a genuinely happy expression. Molly's eyes were beginning to sparkle with happiness and anticipation as well. Annie could tell she was relieved to know that, despite the seeming suddenness of the marriage, all was still as it should be. Annie knew Molly liked her; she'd often told her she was a good match for her son, despite the dire consequences they faced if they were found out. She understood the unfairness of the fact they had to hide their love in the first place.

Molly smiled and patted her husband's hand. "It will be so nice to have a baby in the house again after so long, won't it?"

Tension

Chapter 38 of 80

Concurrent with *Deathly Hallows*. The twins have a bit of a spat. The Weasleys are forced into an emergency evacuation. It doesn't take prescience to know a battle approaches. DH spoiler a biggie.

Chapter 38: Tension

Spring 1998

Annie couldn't believe how good it felt to have the weight of constant deceit finally lifted from her. She no longer had to hide anything from the people she loved. Of course,

she was still trapped in the Burrow, for all intents and purposes; no one else in the world, wizarding or otherwise, could be permitted to find out their secrets. But even that confinement was bearable especially now.

Molly and Arthur were happy for them, after all! As the afternoon wore on, it became clear to Annie that after the initial shock of their secrets revealed, George's parents had no objections to her or her marriage to their son. Their approval meant so much to her; it was an almost physical relief.

And to learn they had done the same thing! She had sat with Molly for a while afterward, sipping tea, while George busied himself putting together what would be their room together for the foreseeable future, musing about all the things the two women shared in common: falling in love with a sweet, ginger-headed Weasley boy, their romantic elopement, how Molly had feared their families' reactions, just as Annie had done.

Then, of course, came the inevitable discussion of Annie's pending motherhood. How was she feeling? What could she expect in the coming months? It was a bit awkward to discuss pregnancy with her new mother-in-law, but also the most wonderful, comforting thought that Annie could look forward to help from an expert like Molly, willing to share her wisdom and guide her along the way.

"You're still here!" Fred joked, pretending to be shocked when he finally returned to the Burrow that evening at dinnertime. "What sort of house are you running here, Mum? Absolutely scandalous!" he teased as he sat down at the table.

"George, have you told your brother all the good news?" asked Arthur with a smile as Fred took a seat.

"Dad, I was there. I think I know more about it than you do." Fred rolled his eyes. "Didn't you show them the snap of all of us?" he asked Annie without looking up from his plate as he helped himself to some food.

A moment later, Fred did look up to a silent table. His parents had curious, shocked looks on their faces. Annie was staring at her plate, blushing outrageously. George was the only one looking directly at him, only the barest hint of uncomfortable amusement on his face.

What exactly are they talking about? Fred wondered. Then his father's words finally registered: what had he meant by "all" the good news?

"Fred..." George began to speak, but halted as he searched for how to say the words.

And in the space of the pause, Fred guessed the truth. It didn't require a giant leap of intuition his brother hadn't spent a night in their room for weeks now.

"A baby." His voice rang flatly hollow. It wasn't even a question. He dropped his fork loudly onto the table as he glanced momentarily at Annie, then back to his brother.

Fred and George continued to stare at each other, stone faced, for another minute. Annie's alarm was growing by the second. This was not the reaction she had expected or hoped for.

Fred rose from the table. "I'd like a private word with you, George."

"Certainly, Fred."

The words were civil, but the glares were not. Fred followed George out of the kitchen, up a flight of stairs, into the far bedroom George and Annie now officially shared, and shut the door.

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"You stupid son of a bitch! What the hell do you think you're playing at?" Fred spoke low and threateningly.

"I'm warning you now, Fred. Don't say something you'll regret," George responded in kind.

"Regret? Are you joking? If anyone should feel *regret* at the moment, some scrap of remorse...."

"I will *never* feel regret for *any* of this. Ever," George averred.

"Then you're a bloody stupid idiot! I told you the first day we met her. I said it again when you started to realized you wanted her *Don't. Hurt. Her.* She doesn't deserve it. She wasn't even supposed to know about us... from the beginning! Why the hell did you ever drag her this far into it?"

"You're so full of shit! We spent practically every day with her back then. At no point did you ever not want to see her. You wanted to be with her just as much as I did when we were kids. You never once said no!"

"I had to, to keep an eye on you..." Fred spluttered angrily.

"Bullshit. This entire conversation is complete bullshit," George sneered.

"Fine. So you fell in love. Whatever. That, at least, was a mutual decision. Annie's a grown woman, and what mistakes she makes are her own...."

"*Mistakes?*" cried George, incredulous.

"A *stupid* mistake when she decided to go along with you, knowing full well the danger you were putting her in!" Fred replied, raising his voice. "That's right. Because it's bloody dangerous now, isn't it? Or maybe you haven't noticed, since you've obviously not been thinking with an intellectual organ lately," Fred spat.

"This is ridiculous!" George retorted, shaking his head and throwing up his hands.

But Fred wasn't finished. "And then you got married. I went along with it. Reckoned it was still your decision to make, even though it put a fucking target on her on you *both*. Like I said, you're both *adults*, technically. But did you ever stop to think that by making her part of our family, you dragged us into it? Now we're all guilty by association, aren't we?"

"You want us to leave? Fine, we'll go. Don't put your arse on the line for me save it for *real* reason, like an adrenaline thrill," George snapped.

Fred dismissed his brother's threat with a snort. "But *ababy?* You bring a *baby* into this... this *fucking WAR?* How could you, you selfish prick? What chance are you giving your kid?"

"You obviously wouldn't understand..." George barked condescendingly.

"That you couldn't keep your dick in your goddamn pants?" Fred snarled.

"The difference between love and lust!" George fairly screamed now. "The difference between what I feel for Annie and what you feel for every girl you've gone home with from a pub and never spoken another word to again! I know what it feels like to *love* her!"

Fred rolled his eyes in disgust.

"Should I crawl on my knees, then, asking the Ministry for permission to love Annie?" George demanded. "You think I would get it? I refuse to let them or anyone else dictate my life! This is exactly what we're supposed to be fighting for! The right to decide our own lives!"

Fred sneered, shaking his head. "And will that be enough your righteous fucking ideals when they come for you both? What do you think the Death Eaters will do with Annie? Or your kid? Send them off along their way with a pat on the head?"

"They'll never get a chance..." George swore.

"Like they never have before..." Fred cut him off.

"I'll die to protect my family!" George shouted.

"And where does that leave them?" Fred yelled.

They were at each other's throats, literally. George's fist was cocked, ready to plow into Fred's face. Fred's fist was pulled back, ready to launch as well. Their voices were raw from shouting, panting with exertion. Neither was sure what the other was waiting for, and each was braced for impact.

"Guess we'll just have to agree to disagree, then," Fred growled as George slowly released him. "I'm out of here," he spat with a final shove to his twin brother.

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The atmosphere at the table during the brothers' argument was intense, to say the least. No one sitting in the kitchen could make out the precise words, but the gist was clear from the occasional word that did ring clearly through the house.

Molly began to cry. "Arthur, do something..." she begged.

"They've got to settle it themselves," he disagreed, keeping his seat.

The volume of the twins' voices continued to increase. They heard scuffling sounds as the argument grew even more heated. They all jumped, startled when the bedroom door upstairs suddenly banged open. They heard someone stomp up another flight of stairs, remain quiet there for a few minutes, then march back down and through the house.

Fred strode into the kitchen then, carrying a small satchel. "I need some space. I'll be fine don't worry," he said, speaking to his parents. He deliberately avoided any eye contact with Annie.

"Stop this, Fred! Don't go! Arthur?" cried Molly, looking to her husband for support.

Arthur shook his head slightly, and Molly turned back to look at her son with a pleading look.

Fred ignored his mother. As he turned to leave, he paused at the door. "Congratulations, Annie," he said softly, in a voice that clearly indicated he didn't mean it. With that, he was gone, slamming the door behind him.

"ARRGH!" a frustrated, angry shout came from the back bedroom above, followed by a loud thud.

Annie turned away from the door and surveyed the scene around the kitchen table. Molly was silently weeping on Arthur's shoulder. He looked over to Annie.

"Go see what that was about, would you, Annie?" he asked softly as he continued to comfort his wife.

She was grateful for a reason to leave the kitchen. Slowly walking through the house toward their new room together, Annie felt horribly responsible for this new mess. Already, her presence their marriage was tearing her new family apart. How could she have not seen this coming? How deluded she had been all afternoon, thinking that everything would be fine now!

Were they doomed, then? Was her love for George, the only good thing she had left in the world, going to destroy his family? Now, when they had so much to look forward to, so much depending on them? She couldn't bear to be the reason for that to happen. All the happiness of the afternoon had drained away. The wedding ring now felt heavy on her finger, and she fidgeted with it nervously as she reached the door to her new bedroom.

George was leaning his forehead against the wall. A fist-sized dent was in the wall next to him.

"Do you want to be alone?" she asked him quietly.

George straightened up when he heard her speak. He shook his head and held out a hand to her, keeping the other one held tight to his body. Annie embraced him, carefully avoiding his injured hand. After several moments, she offered to get him some ice. He merely nodded silently.

The kitchen was empty when she got there. Molly and Arthur must have gone up to their room, she figured. *Out of their seven children, tonight, only one was still left to them at home.* How could they stand it? How could they stand her, after this? She wrapped a small bit of ice into a towel and hurried back to the room to George.

He was sitting on the bed, running his good hand through his hair. She gingerly took his injured one and wrapped the ice pack around his knuckles.

"Thanks. That feels better," he said softly. George turned out the light with a wave of his hand and they lay down together on the bed, fully dressed.

Annie rested her head on his chest. "I feel terrible that you two had a row," she said. "I don't want to be a wedge between you and your family."

"Fred's issues are with me alone. He's not angry with you," he said, trying to reassure her.

"The distinction between 'you' and 'me' doesn't mean much anymore, George," she corrected him. "It's 'us' from now on."

He hugged her tightly with his good arm and kissed the top of her head. "The thing is he's right, in a way. We both are. I'm just...*more* right, I think."

"Fred thinks it's wrong for us to be together. That I put you all in danger," she said.

That part of the argument she had heard. And she was forced to admit she was starting to agree with him just not for exactly the same reason. Like George, she refused to let anyone intimidate her into living her life in any way but how she chose to. But it was hard for her to justify her own happiness at the expense of others'. She hated that her presence was causing strife in her new family.

"Fred doesn't understand that the danger doesn't matter. It's not what's important," said George.

"How can you say it doesn't matter? With everything you and your family talk about every night at dinner?" she argued.

"I'm not saying the danger isn't real. And because of it, none of us take any unnecessary risks. You and I almost never leave the house together. No one else knows we're married or about the baby. But *love* is a necessary risk.

"See, Fred's partly right. When you love someone, you give your enemy a weapon to use against you. You show him where you're most vulnerable," George explained.

"I'm a chink in your armor," she said ruefully.

"You could say that, yes," he conceded. "But then, so is the rest of my family. All our friends. The Order.

"But there's another side to it that Fred isn't seeing. *Love* makes you that much stronger, as well. It gives you the strength to resist your enemy, to fight back. It gives you something to stand up for, to live for.

"I don't blame him for not understanding. I never did until I felt it myself for you. And he's not the only one who makes that mistake: discounting the power that love gives you. That's what will bring them down in the end the Death Eaters, I mean. They don't understand that love isn't a weakness. It's what makes us invincible."

"Dumbledore said something like that to me when I met him. 'Love is vital to our cause,' he said," Annie reminded him.

"Which makes my argument that much stronger: that someone like Dumbledore agreed with me. I know I'm right. And you have to know that *would* never, *will* never... sacrifice what we have... for *anything*. Especially not fear."

Tears were streaming down her face as she clung to him, soaking his shirt. It felt right, what he was saying. And she loved him so much loved him even more for believing it. But if anything ever happened to *any* of them she didn't know if she could live with the consequences.

*

Seven days ago, Bill arrived at the Burrow in the wee hours of the morning, shouting to wake them and frantically urging them to leave. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had been caught by a band of Snatchers, he explained. Then, by some miracle, they'd escaped the clutches of the Death Eaters and were now hidden at Shell Cottage.

"Dad, you've got to get everyone out of here! This'll be the first place they'll look for them!" Bill cried. "NOW!"

The five of them had taken ten minutes to gather all they could, then fled to the infamous Aunt Muriel's.

As crowded as the Burrow could sometimes feel, this was worse. As grateful as they all felt to Aunt Muriel for taking them in, hiding them in their time of need, they were tempted to throttle her for her never-ending, pointless monologues and insulting, judgmental comments. And as tense and heated as things had been between Fred and George that night when Fred stormed out of the house nearly two weeks ago, relations between them now had become positively frigid.

Fred refused to make eye contact with, speak to, or even acknowledge the presence of either George or Annie. Not to be outdone, George took the silent treatment further, refusing utter a single word to anyone at all if he found himself in the same room with his brother.

They'd been in Muriel's house for an entire week. Between the old bat's insensitive comments about Annie's Muggle heritage ("If you lot say she's worth it, I suppose that's your business. I just don't see the point of risking your necks any further than you already have.") and the childish behavior of her husband and his brother, compounded by the tragically misnamed morning sickness that amused itself by literally popping up unannounced throughout the entire day, Annie had reached the end of her rope.

She had spoken to George about it one night as they lay cramped in yet another tiny bed that was never meant to hold two people. Muriel hadn't seen the necessity of providing them with a larger room ("Well, she's terribly small, isn't she? Can't take up any room, eh? You're *certain* they're properly married, Molly?"). Trying to cheer her, George claimed he preferred the sleeping arrangements this way, having become used to his arms going numb while wrapped around her.

"Can't you do something about this?" Annie begged her husband, not referring to the dimensions of the bed they were lying on. "It's ridiculous that it's gone on as long as it has. Swallow your pride already."

George sighed. "I know! I have! But what can I do? He won't even talk to me."

"Try harder," she urged. "There must be something else we could do."

"Look, you've known Fred nearly as long as I have you know how stubborn he gets. We just have to be a little more patient. He'll come around soon," he assured her. ~~He~~ *has to*, he grumbled silently to himself.

Annie took her turn to sigh. "And you've known *me* for nearly as long, so you should also recognize by now when my patience has reached its limit. I can't stand it anymore!"

George began trying to distract her by kissing her earlobe, but she ducked away from him.

"What makes you the expert on interpersonal relations, anyway? Just because you shared a womb with him?" she snapped frustratedly.

George chuckled, tracing his finger from where the little heart charm rested on her neck, down her sternum, finally resting his hand on her still-flat stomach below her navel. "Who knows... maybe it runs in the family?" he whispered just before he kissed her.

The next night, the four of them sat together in the small living room. Annie, Ginny and George had been trying to coax Fred into joining a conversation with them to no avail. Annie took it as a good sign, however, that this time, Fred had not left the room entirely, choosing instead to hide behind an old issue of *The Quibbler*. He must be listening to them, at the very least, she figured.

"I'm hungry. Come help me find something to eat, Ginny," she asked, holding out her hand to her sister-in-law. Over the past couple weeks, since George's sister had left school at Easter, she and Ginny were becoming fast friends. She liked the cheerful yet sassy young girl whose personality seemed more like that of the twins than anyone else in the family she had met so far.

"What a surprise! Annie's hungry yet again," she teased with a smile. "Maybe if you'd try a little harder to keep something down, you'd last longer between meals."

As Annie and Ginny left the room, Annie turned to look pointedly at her husband. She nodded her head subtly toward Fred, urging George to try once again to speak to him. George rolled his eyes but nodded all the same.

The girls scrounged around the kitchen searching for a snack. Annie cried out in delight as she discovered a cache of popcorn kernels. Ginny helped her fire up the stove, and they popped a large batch for the four of them to share.

Each girl carried two full bowls of steaming popcorn back into the living room. Annie was somewhat disheartened to discover Fred was still hiding behind the newspaper while George was seated across the room now, looking out a darkened window. Her disappointment only served to fuel her determination to break through Fred's wall of silence for good.

She purposefully sat next to Fred on the small, cramped love seat and set the bowl of popcorn roughly onto his lap. He hadn't seen it coming from behind his paper, so was quite startled by it. He overreacted to a heavy thing being dropped onto his crotch consequently, the bowl was overturned, dumping popcorn onto the seat and floor. Three of the people in the room chuckled; Fred merely smirked and returned to his reading.

While Ginny magically whisked all the kernels back into the bowl, Annie sidled up a bit closer to him. "Whatcha readin', Fred?"

Silence answered her.

Ginny tossed a popcorn kernel at Fred, which landed on his hair and slid off onto his lap. He made a show of noisily folding his paper and huffed, "Go bother someone else, pest," to his sister.

Annie made encouraging eye contact with Ginny, who then threw another kernel toward Fred. Annie dove in front of him to catch it in her mouth. She landed in his lap with a thud, smiling up at him with the popcorn puff between her teeth.

Fred stared straight ahead at the wall, refusing to acknowledge Annie in his lap. Laughter from everyone else filled the room.

Annie examined his face carefully and saw that Fred was trying far too hard to maintain the façade of being angry with her. She was encouraged to see him struggle to quash the twitch of a smile hiding at the corners of his mouth. Even he could see how ridiculous it was for him to ignore her now.

Ginny tossed another volley of popcorn kernels their way. Fred retaliated by vaporizing the remaining popcorn in Ginny's bowl, leaving behind only ash.

"That's quite enough of that..." he said flatly.

Yep. He's trying way too hard to be so grouchy, Annie reckoned. "Fred!" she whispered.

No response.

"Psst... Fred! Hey, Fred," she continued, the volume of her whispering voice increasing. "Down here. In your lap. Fred!"

He was really struggling not to smile now. She knew she was in.

"I have a suggestion for you, Fred," she whispered loudly. "Have you ever thought of keeping your wand in your pocket instead of up your arse?"

"You are an utter fucking cow, you know that?" he yelled sternly at her, looking her directly in the face for the first time in weeks, but it was no use. By the end of the sentence, he was laughing along with the rest of them.

"I didn't know it was possible to fuck an udder, but I'll take your word for it, Fred. I guess you learn something new every day!" she teased him.

"I hate you," he said, smirking, shaking his head.

"No you don't. You love me, Fred. Say it."

"I absolutely do not."

"It's pointless to deny it, Fred."

"You wish."

"Three little words, Fred. So easy to say."

"Never."

"That's all right. Everybody knows it, anyway. It's written all over your face. And you know what? I love you, too, Fred."

"You've proven your point. Get off me already, you fat cow," he teased, shoving her off his lap onto the floor with a thump.

"Hey now!" cried George. "Let's be a little more careful with other people's wives, if you please!"

"Then keep her under better control," Fred argued, speaking to his brother for the first time. "Or on a leash, at least, in polite society."

"Since when are *you* polite society?" echoed three voices in unison.

*

The next couple of weeks were spent obsessively dissecting and analyzing the topic of Harry Potter and, to a slightly lesser extent, their brother, Ron, and Hermione. What did it signify now that the three of them were holed up at Bill's? What had they been doing all this time without a word to any of them? And what were they planning? For Bill was sure they were planning something, even though they had refused to tell him what.

Now that Fred and George had repaired their relationship, they redoubled their efforts with the owl-order business. Demand for shield items was at an all-time high for some strange reason no one wanted fake wands anymore and they scrambled to fill every order as fast as they possibly could. And the result was an astonishingly large and growing pile of gold, hidden every night under the floorboards in the back room of Muriel's house, which they had taken over months ago after the Wheezes shop in Diagon Alley had been finally forced to close.

Annie often sat with them in their work room in the mornings, helping to open the post for them, entering the accounts. She had been so pleased with them when, on the first day, she had opened a letter from a wizard begging for hats for his family but lamenting the fact he had no access to funds for the time being.

"Here's one with no money," she began, moved by the fellow's plight and hoping to convince the boys to help anyway.

Fred stepped over to her and immediately flipped to the back page of the account book. "Put the name here," he instructed, indicating a list that occupied nearly a whole page of the large book. "No one is refused. They'll be good for it later," he said.

"That's very wonderful of you!" she had exclaimed sincerely.

"Don't sound so surprised," he said, sounding slightly offended. "It's just good business, after all."

Another refugee soon joined them at Aunt Muriel's: an ancient, decrepit man who apparently commanded a great deal of respect amongst wizards. Aunt Muriel certainly was pleased to have him, and therefore Annie was as well, because this Ollivander fellow now occupied Muriel's time and conversation, finally abating the increasingly offensive comments that she felt necessary to spew whenever Annie was within earshot.

The old man had merely raised his eyebrows when Muriel told him of Annie's marked deficiency. "Not even a *Squib*, mind you... but an actual *Muggle*," Muriel had informed him. "Not that there's anything *wrong* with that, of course.... But really, I don't know *what* the boy was thinking, the times being what they are...."

Annie had caught the old man looking at her a few times after that, and his penetrating stare made her highly uncomfortable. Mr. Ollivander spoke to her politely but only as politeness dictated, which was fine by Annie. She was glad to be spending most of her time holed up with Fred and George instead.

Something was brewing everyone could feel it. Harry Potter was plotting something. You-Know-Who and his Death Eaters were getting increasingly impatient for a showdown, a fact that was made clearly evident in the newspapers and official radio broadcasts clamoring for the coward and false idol to show his face already. And they weren't the only ones; much to Annie's chagrin, the twins were itching to see action as well. Both were convinced a battle was both inevitable and rapidly approaching. A fire of anticipation lit in their eyes whenever they discussed it, which was dishearteningly often.

Annie understood how they felt: they were unsatisfied with what they had accomplished so far for the cause. Never mind the fact that their valiant efforts had provided protective armor for the masses, food and shelter for refugees and persecuted runaways, and vital, accurate and uncensored information via the airwaves. They didn't see it that way at all. Instead they felt cooped up coddled, even like children kept safely far away from the real action.

Annie *understood* it. That didn't mean she *agreed*.

*

George hadn't been sleeping well lately. His mind was too active, and he had difficulty keeping it calm enough to rest for more than a few hours at a time. He couldn't stop thinking about what was to come. So, as usual, it was three in the morning, and he was wide awake.

Annie didn't seem to have the same trouble lately. Now that she was pregnant and his stomach did an elated flip every time he even thought the word *pregnant!* she was exhausted every night. He knew the days were hard on her, feeling sick all the time. Not to mention the stress they all felt, living with obnoxious Aunt Muriel while waiting for the next crisis to happen. He was thankful that Annie at least seemed to sleep deeply and peacefully all night long.

He buried his face in the soft curls at the back of her head, breathing in the scent of her. It couldn't be mere coincidence that her body folded perfectly into his as they lay together in this little bed every night. He took it as just one more piece of evidence that they were made for each other.

He'd futzed around one time last summer, crunching the numbers. Arithmancy wasn't his best subject, but maths in general had always come pretty easily to him. He reckoned he'd probably left a few minor aspects and vectors out, but even so, the results had confirmed what he'd suspected for quite a while now: there were an impressive number of alignments, an encouraging number of positive signs. It was mind-boggling how well-suited they were for each other.

Meredith had been right: Annie was his destiny, and he had never been more sure of it than right now. He would dedicate his life to doing everything in his power to being her real knight in shining armor. He owed it to her, after all. She was his every fantasy come true, so how could he be anything less for her?

Dumbledore'd had the true sense of it all along. Love *was* everything: the be all, end all. George pitied anyone who didn't feel the way he did. How did they face the world without it? How did they survive? He didn't think he could he make it through a single day now without seeing her smile, hearing her laugh, or simply gazing into the startling violet of her eyes.

Every night now they celebrated it, silently making love to one another. Once again, their bodies fit together precisely, brought each other joy and pleasure. More confirmation they belonged together, belonged to each other.

They had survived so much, both apart and together, over the past thirteen years. And now they were in love, married, with a baby on the way. Nothing could temper the happiness he felt certainly not this stupid war. He couldn't wait for the battle to come couldn't wait for it to be over for he never spared a moment thinking they would be anything other than victorious. They had love on their side, after all.

And a battle *was* coming. He could sense the electrical portent of it, feel the tingling of it with his fingertips, hear the buzzing of it in his ears. It would prove to be his chance to make the vile, slithering Death Eaters pay for all they had done to his family. To Annie, especially.

George could picture the marble-white face and platinum blond hair of one in particular. Malfoy would be his personal quarry in the clash to come, he would make sure of it. George would find him and he would punish him with every ounce of fury in his soul for the ongoing persecution of his family. George's vengeance would be righteous, for he was made more powerful, invincible even, by Annie's love.

And George couldn't wait for the chance afterward to shout to the world how happy and proud he was to be her husband. How their lives would start in a home of their own, his own little family starting to grow. It promised to be paradise... with Annie by his side.

Adrift

Chapter 39 of 80

Concurrent with *Deathly Hallows*. The aftermath of the Battle of Hogwarts. Rated for intense adult situations. Massive DH spoiler – no, really. MASSIVE. You've been warned.

Author's Note: And now, dear readers, we leave canon behind us altogether. The rest of my story does mesh with the Infamous Epilogue, but do not look for the Golden Trio to figure very heavily in it. And it may interest you to know that, as of the next chapter (#40), we are only halfway done! For anyone who's seen/read the story on the other archives, there are added scenes and whole new chapters coming up for you to enjoy here on the TPP version (not to mention that, due to the fabulous admins here, the story's just all-around BETTER!). Thanks so much to all of you who continue to reward me with reviews I appreciate it more than you'll ever know!

Chapter 39: Adrift

May 1998

Ginny came tearing though the house and burst through the door to the twins' work room, nearly startling Annie off the stool she was perched on. "The coin!" she cried. "It's starting! At Hogwarts!"

"What?" her brothers demanded in unison.

"The battle! Harry's there.... *Come on!*"

Fred immediately tore after his sister as she turned and ran off the way she'd come. George paused on his way after his siblings to grab Annie, kiss her briefly, and reassure her that they would be back soon.

Annie heard two quiet pops, then silence. They were gone.

Annie proceeded to endure the worst hours of her life. It surprised her to find that this waiting could be so much worse than all the waiting she had been forced to endure in the hospital for her grandmother's sake. It was absolute torture, perhaps because this time the outcome was unknown.

Her anxiety completely blocked out everything else. She didn't hear a word Muriel said to her the whole time the Weasleys her entire family now were gone. For hours on end, as day turned to night and night into dawn, she sat mutely in a chair by the fireplace, eyes closed, visualizing protective bubble-like shields around each and every one of their precious ginger heads. Waiting for a sign. Waiting for them to return.

Ragged and worn, the Weasleys emerged from the hearth slowly and silently the next day. Annie's joy and relief were instantaneous and overwhelming when George finally came back to her. She ran to him, and he embraced her, crushing the breath from her body. But Annie didn't mind; his arms around her were the only thing that mattered. The world was whole again and began to spin on its axis once more.

Then the spell was broken. A crushing agony followed upon hearing Molly's wail of pain, watching George's face crumple, then sob, as he told her the news *Fred was gone*.

Fred.

Glorious, ridiculous, infuriating, reckless, handsome, brave, precious Fred.

Annie had been gutted by the sharpest blade ever forged, expertly wielded to leave a maximum of ragged, bloody edges to the wound. George's rent face swam before her eyes. Her own mangled heart threatened to choke her.

Fred!

*

The following week passed in a numb silence. George and Annie retreated from the world, from their family, and folded themselves into a tiny, protected space. They clung to each other bodily like life preservers, rarely breaking physical contact. Emotionally, however, they were adrift almost out of sight of one another, each only catching glimpses of the other as the waves tossed them, battered them, and periodically submerged them.

They lacked the strength for anything but the most basic functions. Someone brought them food; they did not know who it was. Plates of it just appeared to them it seemed at random on a bedside table. Annie forced herself to eat for the baby's sake.

A part of her mind desperately wanted to run, to chase the comfort of control, but even that was out of the question. Even if she could somehow summon the strength to move, she had been forbidden to run while she was pregnant. She was trapped in this room, anchored to this bed, struggling to keep them both afloat.

For George was sinking like a dead weight. He did not speak only wept silently. He did not rest when he slept only dreamt about terrors that woke him, screaming and shaking. He did not hold Annie tenderly only clutched at her frantically whenever he felt her move.

So it was a hundred times harder: the taming of this grief. The hardest thing she had ever done in her life. She wasn't sure she had the strength to wrestle with a monster of this size. It was so much larger than any sadness she had felt before, fed not only by her own heartbreak, but gorged as well on the agony of witnessing the bottomless pit that was George's devastation.

But somewhere, deep inside, she did find a source of strength. Like a tiny, distant point of light might appear to someone trapped in a cave, she noticed it, then later was slowly able connect with it by crawling forward on her hands and knees. She suspected she knew where it came from; she felt incrementally stronger whenever she rested her hands on her little bump of a belly.

Tapping into this reserve, she began to battle the monster. As the hours, then days passed, more and more pieces of the monster were hacked apart and locked away. Each day it was shrinking, becoming slightly more manageable.

One morning, she awoke to feel she could finally peek outside the little protective shell, face the family and at last acknowledge them. She left George in their bed, sleeping peacefully for once (she strongly suspected the contents of the little cobalt blue bottle on the nightstand were responsible), to wander the house.

Each person she met with was kind and careful, treating her like a fragile object. She indeed felt as though she was made of glass, but each interaction somehow strengthened that glass, reinforcing it. Throughout the day, she pieced together the story of the battle: both the heroism and the loss. She sensed each time that the act of telling the tale helped the storyteller to heal as much as it helped herself to know the truth.

She discovered a wonderful thing had happened: Percy had reunited with the rest of the family during the battle, and she met her brother-in-law for the first time. He had been there, had fought alongside Fred, had seen what had happened to him firsthand. His was the hardest story to hear.

They had won, at least. She learned that the enemy had been defeated once and for all, never to come back again this time. Harry had destroyed Voldemort, and the Order had vanquished the majority of Death Eaters, the remaining few to be hunted down and brought to justice later. Annie did feel some modicum of relief with that knowledge: at least the sacrifices were not entirely in vain. She was far from prepared to believe they were worth it, however. How could any success justify the loss of so many? Of Fred, especially?

She also learned that it had been Molly, over the past fortnight, who had cared for George and herself. That afternoon, as the sun set and twilight descended, she sat with Molly on the sofa before the crackling fire, feeling a little guilty for basking in the comforting warmth and kindness that was her mother-in-law but greedily lapping it up anyway.

Annie marveled at her strength in the face of this catastrophe, her courage to persevere. *How did a real mother like Molly survive the loss of a child?* she wondered. The woman who had given birth to Annie didn't even deserve the title of mother in comparison, she reckoned.

Molly seemed to read her mind, or perhaps it was somehow written on her face. She smiled at Annie, her face all at once full of love and sadness and hope. Looking her straight in the eye, holding both of Annie's hands in hers, she spoke.

"A mother always lives for her children, you know. Even if...." Molly paused to steel herself with a deep breath. "Even if she loses one, she must live for the rest. And that's why I'm asking you, Annie... one mother to another... for help. For George."

Annie nodded as she wiped the tears spilling down her own cheeks and promised to do what she could. That night, as she held George in her arms, she engaged the monster once again, determined it would be for the last time. She called on the tiny, shining light within her for strength.

Sometime during the wee hours of the morning, it was done. Soaked with sweat and tears, she had subdued the monster not within the vault, where her other hurts and sadnesses were imprisoned, but someplace new. There was now an iron cage within her that contained her grief for Fred. She could still hear the monster rattle the bars, reminding her of its presence, but even this disturbance began to decrease in frequency and intensity. It no longer ruled her mind, nor held her soul captive.

She had won.

*

"George, wake up."

He obeyed her by opening his eyes, nothing more.

"Come down with me to breakfast."

"Not hungry," he mumbled.

"You haven't eaten since noon yesterday," she countered.

No answer. No movement.

Annie persisted. "I want you to get out of bed. Eat something. Shower and get dressed."

"Why?" His voice didn't sound curious in the least. It was just something one said in response to a request one had no intention of complying with.

"Today is our appointment for the sonogram," she explained.

His brow furrowed, as if trying to make sense of the foreign language she was speaking in.

"You promised me you would go. I don't want to go alone." They had made the appointment weeks ago, before.... But Annie shut the door on the direction that thought would take her, unable to complete it. She had to stay strong today.

George turned to look at her while he pondered this information. Annie was sitting back on her heels on the bed next to him. He reached out tentatively with one hand and placed it lightly on her belly.

That's right, she urged him silently, placing her hand on top of his while he held it there *Do it for the baby*. Her plan today relied heavily on using the baby and any other instrument she could find to lever her husband up and out of bed. She would use any manipulative tool, no matter how pathetic or desperate, to get George to join the living with her at last.

She watched as his face squared itself up with determination. *Yes!* she cheered in her mind, willing him all the strength she could spare.

"Okay. Let's go," he said, slowly sitting up and rubbing his face with his palms.

The day was warm and sunny. They rolled down the windows of the truck as they drove into town to the doctor's office. Casually, they discussed what to expect at the appointment.

George parked under the shade of a large tree. They had arrived more than an hour early and now had time to spare. "Fancy a stroll?" he asked.

She smiled and nodded, heartened he was making so much of an effort. As they walked hand in hand through the town, Annie was the first to break the silence.

"George, I want us to think about moving out of your parents' house."

She braced herself, unsure what his response would be to this: what must be a bombshell to him. They had never discussed the idea before; they had never had the chance to consider the option until now. She prayed he would listen to her argument but feared he might get angry with her for even suggesting it. Maybe he wanted to stay there to feel close to the family. Close to....

"Okay..." he said, cautiously acknowledging her suggestion. His tone told her that he was indeed listening, waiting for more of an explanation. Like perhaps he was even willing to entertain the notion.

It caught her by surprise his reasonableness, his possible openness to the idea. Momentarily thrown for a loop, she recovered quickly and pressed on.

"When Gran died, and I went back to the house living there without her but surrounded by... well, everything... it was like I couldn't... just... get a good breath, even... the memories were so thick. Don't get me wrong; I didn't want to lose any of them. But I couldn't handle them all at once like that, you know? All around me, every single object in that house was so full of Gran. Taken individually, each thing was a little sad, yet bearable, and still something to treasure. But as a whole, all together, it was just too much weight. It was crushing me. I was starting to think I *had* to get out... for good... by the time when, well... you remember... the attack. What I'm trying to say is I was ready to leave when you asked me to."

She held her breath, wondering if there was the slightest chance he might be feeling the same way right now.

"I think I know what you mean," George offered after considering what she had said for a short while. "Every night for at least a week now, I've fallen asleep telling myself that tomorrow I'd get up out of that bloody bed. But then, morning would come... and I just couldn't. It's pathetic, and I hate that I've been so weak about it. And then this morning, when you asked me to come, it was so hard... to move. Everything back there is so... like you said: thick and heavy. But now, out here in the sun, walking with you, it *is* a little lighter, a little easier to bear," he said, giving her hand a small squeeze.

She nodded and brought his hand up to her lips for a kiss. That was enough, for now to know that he would think about it. They didn't speak any more as they walked toward the doctor's office and went inside.

A nurse led them into a small room. There was a hospital-like bed next to a large machine with a monitor. Its lights were blinking and they could hear it emitting a whirring sound.

"Get a load of that thing. Dad would love this place," George commented as he surveyed the number of instruments and electrical cords fanning from the outlets on the wall.

Annie chuckled in agreement, cheered by his attempt at enthusiasm. The doctor entered at that moment, and after a brief but friendly greeting, he folded Annie's shirt above her belly and began the examination. First, he measured from her pelvic bone to the top of her belly where it began to bulge.

"Hmm," he muttered. "Are you sure about the date of your last menstruation?"

"Pretty sure," answered Annie. Things had been a bit hairy at that time, she had to admit. It was possible she might be off by a day or two.

Then he began to poke and prod around her belly with his hands, as if searching for something. His face was intent with concentration. He paused with his hands at opposite points from each other, as if they had found an axis running through her belly just slightly skewed from top to bottom. His brow furrowed and he cocked his head to the side as he focused a few more prods in those two areas alone. Before she could get a chance to ask him if anything was wrong, he smiled and took his leave, promising to send in the sonogram technician directly.

"What was that all about?" George wondered aloud.

He, too, must have noticed the look on the doctor's face. Annie could only shrug. They only had a minute to wonder to themselves before a new lady in a white lab coat entered. She pressed several buttons, bringing the large machine to life, smiling and chatting mindlessly.

"So, what exactly does this thing do?" George asked her in a tone that sounded almost like genuine curiosity. It might have fooled someone who didn't know him better, Annie thought.

"Oh, well, it uses sound waves to see inside the womb," she explained as she squirted clear goo onto Annie's bare belly. Annie wrinkled her nose as the woman began to spread it around her skin. "This wand here," she said as she indicated the gadget in her hand, "sends sound waves into the body. The waves bounce off the tissues inside and then get collected by the wand again."

Annie smiled wryly upon hearing George snort at the woman's use of the word *wand*.

"The computer uses the information to make a picture up here," the woman said, pointing at the screen with her finger.

Annie and George both peered intently at the screen but were unable to make any sense of the garbled and quickly moving picture.

"Hmm," said the technician, mimicking the doctor's previous perplexed tone. A pause of a few minutes followed. "Let's just make absolutely sure..." she mumbled to herself.

George nervously reached out for Annie's hand. Both of them worried the same thought: was something indeed wrong?

Several more minutes passed as the woman worked silently, directing the device in her hand, pressing buttons. Finally, just as Annie thought she might scream with anxiety, the woman spoke directly to them.

"Well, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley... congratulations! You're having twins! Everything looks just fine.... See a head here, and then, down here, another one? Ten fingers, ten toes well, make that twenty," she chuckled at her own joke.

Stunned silence answered her.

"Surprised, are you?" she asked.

"To say the least," stuttered Annie, finally able to speak. She turned to George with wide eyes and a smile spreading over her face. She was thrilled to find he was grinning, too.

"Really does run in the family, I suppose," he offered with a tiny shrug.

Annie was overjoyed, both by the news and by George's pleased reaction. Excitement ran through her like she was electrically wired. The word repeated itself in her mind over and over: *twins!* There would be *two* new little ones to love instead of just one!

They left the office a short while later, both still in a bit of shock. The gloom of earlier that morning had almost completely dissipated, so diluted had it become by all the happy anticipation. George and Annie climbed back into the truck. But instead of heading back the way they had come, George headed off in a different direction.

"Where are we going?" asked Annie.

"Shopping. You need some new clothes." He smiled and turned to her. "At this rate, you'll have outgrown of all my shirts by next month at the latest."

She was indeed wearing one of George's shirts. All of hers had already grown too small to wear, not to mention the discomfort of wearing her jeans unbuttoned and unzipped, waist tenuously held together with rubber bands. George's shirt was still too long and too wide everywhere on her body except in the middle, where it hugged her growing waist rather more snugly. She laughed out loud, patting it.

The sun was setting as they pulled up the lane and parked the truck in front of the Burrow. Leaving their packages in the back, they walked hand in hand out through the garden, neither of them willing to break the wonderful, happy spell of the afternoon yet by going back inside the house. As they stood at the fence, gazing out across the fields and trees, George wrapped his arms around Annie from behind, resting his hands on her swollen belly, and she leaned back into his embrace.

"Where do you think we should go?" he asked, referring to their earlier conversation for the first time since that morning.

She twisted around and looked up at him as she answered. "I don't think we'd have to go far. I wouldn't want to, anyway."

"I'll speak to Dad tomorrow," he said in a strong, clear voice; she recognized the determination ringing through.

He bent to kiss her gently. Some of the familiar, hot feeling the wanting began to return for them both during the kiss, which slowly built into something far more passionate than it had begun. They were both startled when Molly called them inside for dinner.

George and Annie shared the happy news of the babies with the family at dinner. George's brothers, all of them now either living at the Burrow or returning regularly for meals, each thumped his shoulders and shook his hand in congratulations. Annie showed off the picture given to them by the technician, directing Molly and Arthur through a tour of the important details: head number one here, head number two there, et cetera. His mother practically took flight, fluttering about the room in excitement, offering advice and encouragement to Annie for what was to come, claiming she had suspected twins all along.

That evening, George quietly watched Annie interacting with his family as they surrounded them both. Had there really been a time when she had not been a part of it? She fit in with them seamlessly now, smiling and laughing. Like she had always belonged.

He found she was like something new to him, all over again. Still his Annie, but also changing into something... more. Physically, of course, she was rounder, even softer than before. Her lips were slightly plumper, and her belly, hips all her curves were enhanced. He had heard the cliché that a pregnant woman glowed, but had been distinctly unprepared for the new light that was in her violet eyes, her smile, her laugh tonight. How could his perfect Annie have improved? If he hadn't seen it for himself, he would have sworn it would have been impossible.

Yet it was real. All of it. He had seen them with his own eyes this morning *twins* were growing inside Annie. *His* children. *His* wife. *His* family.

For a rare moment, he pulled his stare away from Annie and accidentally caught his father's eye. Arthur was gazing back at him with a tiny, knowing smile on his face. He nodded slightly and George looked away, unsure of how to respond, unwilling to share his epiphany with anyone else. His father would, of course, have known exactly how he was feeling. George felt a new confidence bloom within himself, thinking about talking to him tomorrow about his and Annie's new plans.

She was right, of course. They needed to *do* something: to get out, to move on. It was time, at last, for them to start their own life together. No reason left to stay every reason now to go. The world outside his childhood home was calling. It was time to stop wallowing in the past. Their future beckoned.

George stood up and pulled Annie up from the sofa with him. They all said goodnight to one another everyone else decided to turn in at the same time. As the rest of the family trooped further up the stairs, George led Annie back to the room they had shared ever since telling his parents they were married. It had seemed so dark and oppressive that morning. It was still dark, but the darkness was a bit softer, warmer, more welcoming now.

George sat on the edge of the bed and pulled Annie close. Her belly was sandwiched awkwardly between them as they kissed, making her giggle. She pulled off first his shirt, followed by her own, then pushed his shoulders back until he was lying on the bed. She crawled up after him, her knees straddling his waist, and bent over to kiss him.

They made love for the first time in weeks. He couldn't bring himself to recall the last time or, in fact, any of the times before the battle, before the loss. But he remembered enough to recognize this was different: even more meaningful, if such a thing were possible. The tender care they took with each other was no less passionate for what it lacked in wild abandon. It might have even been more so.

Domestic Quest

Chapter 40 of 80

Househunting stirs up some unpleasant memories. George comes up with a brilliant solution, as usual.

Chapter 40: Domestic Quest

Summer 1998

George squeezed Annie's hand. "Ready?" he asked her, smiling with a forced eagerness she knew he did not feel.

She appreciated the effort and sentiment behind the attempt all the same. "Absolutely," she replied, hoping her own artificial cheerfulness sounded more convincing than his had done.

This would be the third vacant magical domicile they had seen that week. In an attempt to get his bearings, George looked carefully once more at the photo that had accompanied the letter the agent had sent along with a description of the place. *It looks like a pleasant enough spot in the snap* Annie figured as she looked over his shoulder.

"All right, then I think I've got it. Here we go," he warned her, holding her hand tightly.

For an instant, they were plunged into the all-too-familiar black abyss, then popped back into being in the front yard of the little house. Annie took in the sight of it and supposed it looked charming if you went for medieval peasant farmstead, that is. *Probably when it was built*, she thought.

The property agent appeared in front of them a few moments later. "Ah, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.... Welcome!" he gushed, shaking their hands. "Lovely little place, isn't it? Such a pity about the family, though. Such a tragedy! I suppose that's all too common a situation these days. Still, even more so for the Diggorys, eh?"

George nodded silently, reluctantly, avoiding any eye contact with the chatty agent. *Diggory* the name rang a bell for Annie. Where had she heard it before?

"You're a young chap yourself, Mr. Weasley. Perhaps you knew the boy? What was his name again?"

"Cedric," George replied flatly.

Now she remembered: Cedric Diggory was that poor boy who died in the Triwizard Tournament. The one murdered on the night You-Know-Who had kidnapped Harry, using him to magically create a body to harbor the evil fragment that was left of his soul. Annie shuddered at the thought of him. They had lived for so long under the dark, unnamed threat of Voldemort and his Death Eaters, it was easy to forget it was all finally over and the menace had been defeated for good.

"That's right!" the agent cheered. "Cedric Diggory. A right shame about the parents. Too many good wizards were lost...."

Annie wished she could think of some way to politely tell this git to shut the hell up. His chosen topic for inane chatter was defeating her whole purpose today. The other agents had been far more circumspect perhaps they had been better informed about the Weasley family's recent history.

"Shall we see the inside?" Annie suggested. Maybe then she could shut the arse in a closet or something.

"Oh, erm, of course." He wished his wand and the ancient door creaked open on black iron hinges. "Here we are, then."

Annie led a yielding but unenthusiastic George by the hand into the house. Inside, it was dim but warm and cozy. Well, perhaps *cozy* was the wrong word. *Cramped* might have been more accurate. She gazed up at the rough-hewn ceiling beams that seemed awfully close, then reached up and touched one easily with her fingertips while remaining flat-footed.

The agent noticed her movement. "Strong, sturdy construction there, Mrs. Weasley." Either he misinterpreted her, or he was trying to put a positive spin on the situation.

She looked around, noticing George had wandered over to a doorway and was now peeking through it. "How many bedrooms?" she asked.

The agent looked carefully at her, as if considering for a moment how to respond. "Well, erm, that's a tricky question, actually," he said cryptically.

The agent directed her over to the room where George was standing in the doorway. "It's rather charming, really," the agent said with a pasted-on, crocodile smile.

"Remarkable craftsmanship! They don't make them like this anymore, I assure you." He walked into the small room just off the main living area, then spread his arms wide.

Annie and George stepped into the small room. It was completely empty and the walls were lined with several sets of what looked like built-in cabinet doors. They looked at the agent in confusion. The floor space barely looked big enough to hold a full-sized bed.

The agent smiled uncomfortably, then walked over to one set of doors. He threw them open with a dramatic flourish. "Now, you don't see that every day, I'll wager. Unique, no?"

Annie's jaw dropped. Behind the doors was a completely enclosed *bed*. A mattress, resting on a frame about three feet off the floor, was surrounded by three solid walls. No shelves, no windows, nothing but a single sconce interrupted the perfectly smooth walls.

"We're supposed to sleep in *closets*?" cried George with more animation than she'd seen him muster in a long time.

The agent's smile faltered a bit. "Well, no. The closets are some of the other doors of the room here. I suppose it might take some getting used to. But it certainly is nice and dark... and quiet inside, I would assume."

George and Annie shared a look of dubious shock, wondering if the other was buying any of this. Neither had any intention of ever testing out the validity of such a statement. It was no wonder they didn't make houses like this anymore, in Annie's opinion. She took a few steps closer, peering in. *As claustrophobic as a coffin in here*, she thought morbidly.

"Would you care to see the kitchen now?" the agent offered, sensing he might be losing them and eager to move on.

Annie nodded and followed him back out of the sleeping quarters. George was on her heels, grumbling. She thought she heard the words "barking mad" and "bloody closets!"

"Nice big fireplace easy as a swish to get that connected to the Floo Network, if you like," the agent said with a wave toward the sooty black portal to the rest of the magical

world.

"And just look at that view!" he exclaimed, indicating a small window that was the sole source of natural light in the room. The three of them couldn't stand side by side in front of it, so the agent took a step back behind them. As it was, Annie and George nearly stood cheek to cheek in the window frame. It was a lovely pastoral view, Annie had to admit. She just wished there was a bit more of it.

The agent then swept them into the kitchen. Annie heard a solid thud behind her, instantly followed by a muttered, "Ow!" She turned around to see George rubbing his forehead. Unbelievably, the ceiling rafters were even lower in this room.

"I'm sure we could make arrangements for any of the furnishings you see here to stay," the agent added, rapidly trying to distract them from the tiny kitchen dimensions by sweetening the deal. "Just say the word. It's a buyer's market now, that's for sure." The agent waved his wand around and all the magical appliances hummed into life; the sconces lit up and cast the little room in a warm, inviting glow.

Annie scanned each wall. As she'd predicted, there were no outlets to be seen. None of the houses they had toured so far had been wired for electricity, nor had she expected them to. They had all been wizards' houses, not Muggle ones, after all.

"How far is the nearest road?" she asked.

"Erm road? You mean the sort Muggles drive cars on? Well, I must admit, you've got me on that one. I'm afraid I have no idea at all. Likely a good distance, I'd imagine. I'm curious though why do you ask?"

Annie chuckled, more at herself than the agent. "Because I'm particularly thick. I mean, there's no lane leading away from here, so why should I expect a road nearby?" she replied, smiling at her husband as she spoke.

George smiled back at her attempt at humor, which was a relief to her. The agent, however, looked at George with confused concern.

"My wife is a Muggle herself, Mr. Stanley," George explained.

"Really?!" the agent spluttered. "Oh, well, isn't that lovely? Erm how do you like the house so far, my dear?" he asked, attempting to recover himself. "Good bargain for the price, you must admit," he said, hoping she'd agree.

"It's very... nice," she offered, noncommittally.

The agent's persistent crocodile smile finally deflated into a disappointed smirk.

"Would you mind giving us a few moments alone, Mr. Stanley? To discuss the house?" George asked.

"Of course, Mr. Weasley," he agreed, eager now to leave the awkward atmosphere and convinced they were a lost cause anyway. "I'll just be out front if you have any questions."

"Are they all going to be like this, then?" she asked as soon as they were alone.

"You mean built to elfish specifications?" George countered as he knocked his head a second time on a rafter and swore softly.

Annie couldn't help giggling. "You could start wearing helmets at home," she teased him.

"Ha, ha," he laughed sarcastically, rubbing his temple.

"No what I mean is, are they all so completely...*magical*? Not one thing in here is useable by someone like me. I couldn't boil a pot of water, George!" she cried in quiet desperation. "And so remote.... I'd be completely isolated: no road, no neighbors...."

"Well, that bit's sort of required by law, remember?" he reminded her. "Minimizes the risk of...."

"Being discovered," she said, completing his sentence. "Right." After a pause, she added, "How far do you think we are from the Burrow?"

"About seven miles, I think, as the crow flies. Maybe a bit more," he said as he walked over to her side while keeping his head bent comically low. "It's the closest one we've seen. And you won't be lonely for long. You'll have more company than you'll know what to do with pretty soon." He hugged her, patting her rapidly growing belly.

She laughed. "No one will hear me scream at them like your mother did at you, which is convenient," she teased.

"No one will hear much of anything out here. That's a perk," he said softly, kissing her forehead.

Annie smiled wryly at what she understood was innuendo from her husband. They had never really spent any time together without the constant threat of being overheard or interrupted.

"Nearly the only one," she agreed sarcastically. "This won't work. None of them we've seen will work," she said with more seriousness, heaving a sigh of frustration.

"I know," he agreed. "But we've already seen everything in the area, unless you want to reconsider living in a Muggle village."

"No!" she cried. "I'm sick of hiding in plain sight. No more pretending. I refuse to live a life that way anymore."

"You don't have to convince me! I'm just laying out all our options, you know," he said, his smile belying his defensive tone.

"What are we going to do?" she groaned.

"I suppose it's back to the drawing board," he muttered with a shrug.

Inspiration hit Annie like a flash. "That's it! George, you're a genius! "

"I know," he responded in surprise. "What exactly did I figure out?"

"The drawing board! We'll build our own house... exactly as we want it...*wherever* we want it. It's the perfect solution, of course, love. You're absolutely brilliant!"

"I admit that last bit is true," he chuckled. "But, Annie, I don't really know much about building a house."

"But we *do* know someone who *is* an expert: Jane!"

*

Annie had not seen Jane since her Gran's funeral the previous winter. Jane's university studies, compounded by the series of traumatic events that had befallen Annie as winter thawed into spring, had led the two friends to practically drop all communication between them for a while. Annie was careful not to spend too much time catching up over the phone, diverting most of Jane's inquiries about what had happened in Ottery over the past months while she was away in Cardiff by lying through her teeth.

"Not much, really," Annie had demurred. "You know... the same old."

Her friend had squealed with excitement as soon as she laid eyes on Annie, of course understanding the biggest bit of news without a word. And Jane was further thrilled to learn they wanted her to design a home for them.

"This won't be a typical house, Jane," warned Annie.

"I never expect anything typical from you, Annie," she teased her. "I'm just so excited to have the opportunity to do this for you! It'll be a real test for me, as well. What did you have in mind?"

Annie looked at George and shrugged. "Any suggestions?" she asked.

"Erm... yeah, I've got one request: high ceilings," he said with a chuckle.

Annie giggled as well.

"I sense this is a private joke," teased Jane. "Right vaulted ceilings. Anything else? What sort of architectural style do you like?"

"Dunno. What have you got to choose from?" Annie asked.

Jane handed them a book. "This might give you some ideas. Flip through it, you two, while I start dinner," she instructed them. Jane's parents had already made plans to be out of town this weekend, wrecking her plan to visit with them as well, so she was on her own in their house in Ottery.

Annie and George began looking at the pictures of homes. The first was an example of medieval design. "Definitely not," they both said in unison, smiling at each other in agreement. They continued, rapidly flipping through an assortment of historical styles, agreeing they held little interest for them.

Not until they reached the very end of the book did they begin to see anything they truly liked. The clean, straight lines, open floor plans and bright, natural light of the most modern designs attracted them both.

"It's so different from what you or I grew up with, isn't it?" she asked him.

"I really like it, though," he agreed. "It's... easy, you know? No fuss. Just simple."

Annie nodded in understanding. "Effortless, almost," she added.

Jane peeked over their shoulders. "I wouldn't say effortless, exactly, but very doable," she chimed in. "I'm impressed you two have very good taste!" Jane sat down in a chair across from them and took out a pad of paper. "Now, let's start making some decisions. First off... how many rooms? How many floors?"

"We *are* planning for a large family, right, Annie?" George winked. "Better make it big."

"Four bedrooms should be plenty," Annie giggled. "One for us, one for guests, one for boys, and one for girls. Best to just keep it simple," she recommended.

"But the rooms should be big enough to accommodate lots of each," he insisted, laughing again.

"Well, with this type of modular design, we can even make that part flexible. Moveable walls, if you like," Jane laughed, not entirely sure if they were joking or serious. "How's that for compromise?"

"Sounds perfect," said Annie.

"And we'll need a big fireplace," suggested George, spreading his arms wide to indicate the dimensions.

"A big, open ground floor would be nice," added Annie. "A roomy kitchen... and dining space for a crowd for when your family comes over," she said to George.

"And I'll want a workshop a big one," he said.

"Okay, I get it already. Lots of square footage," Jane said. "Definitely two, maybe three floors. What else?"

"We want to try to minimize the use of electricity," Annie said tentatively. "We'd prefer to stay off the grid, actually, if possible."

"We can try solar, if you want," said Jane thoughtfully. "But you'll still probably want to supplement it with a regular residential line."

"Right, well... we have a peculiar situation when it comes to electricity," George said, carefully pronouncing the word. "All the lines have to be strongly protected from surges... from *within* the house as well as out," he added somewhat guardedly.

"What exactly are you going to be doing to cause electrical surges?" Jane asked curiously.

"I warned you we would have some unusual requests," Annie said with a smile. "And that's one of the big ones. But we'll only need five, maybe six outlets in the entire place."

"That's ridiculous, Annie. I'm all for conserving energy, but that's too extreme. What about lights? Appliances? You'll overload the house trying to pull too much power through too few outlets."

"We plan to rely on natural light and old-fashioned mechanical appliances whenever possible. Trust me, the number of outlets is plenty," Annie argued.

Jane was unconvinced. "What about resale value? No one else will want a house with only six outlets!"

"Not a problem," chimed in George. "It'll never be for sale."

Jane scrutinized the couple in front of her for several moments. "You're not involved in anything illegal, are you?"

George and Annie both laughed at Jane's suspicions.

"Not anymore," George said cryptically. "Strictly aboveboard, I assure you."

"We're reformed!" Annie added. "It's the straight and narrow path for us from now on!"

*

Over the following weeks of the summer, George met with Jane numerous times, tweaking the house plans to what Jane called his "quirky specifications." Once satisfied with the design, he conferred with her extensively, making sure he understood the blueprints perfectly, confirming what each little symbol stood for and footnote signified. Jane promised to help serve as a contractor of sorts, helping to place orders for materials and as many prefabricated features as possible.

Meanwhile, George and his father began discussing the location of their new home. After touring a few nearby yet reclusive locations, including a very tempting one on a cliff above the sea, they came up with a plan to find a spot on Weasley land instead, thereby avoiding mountains of paperwork and months of waiting on the Ministry to process a new construction request. It was no small undertaking, after all: the building of a new magical residence. There were reams of secrecy laws to be followed, not to mention a parade of site inspections that had to be scheduled whenever a brand new spot was chosen. George agreed with his father that he had neither the time nor the patience required to deal with the complicated bureaucracy entailed. An "improvement" on already-developed Weasley property would be far simpler to pull off.

Just after dawn one morning in July, George and his father walked through the woods toward the willow tree that had figured so prominently in George's childhood in order to collect a dowsing rod. As he scanned the enormous tree, Arthur's eyes took in the graffiti-smattered trunk, smiling at the bark carvings that read "Cannons Rule!" and "Gryffindor!" He noted the newest-looking addition was a heart that contained the initials "GW + AJ" within. He was puzzled by a large, suspicious black scorch mark near the ground but decided not to ask. He was even able to smile sadly at "Fred was here," scrawled much higher on a branch near a weatherworn but still solid-seeming platform constructed of slightly familiar-looking pieces of timber.

Arthur shook his head slowly, processing the implications of what his twin sons had gotten away with as children. "You know I adore Annie, George but if I'd had any idea about all this at the time, I'd've wrung both your necks, you know," Arthur chuckled, testing some of the branches by twisting them between his fingers.

George smiled in response, though it looked more like a grimace. It was terribly hard, being here in this place with so many memories of Fred clamoring around him. It was making him jittery, the way they jumped out from their hiding places behind nearly everything.

"Don't blame me. We told Mum the truth from the beginning," he joked half-heartedly.

Arthur laughed in response as he cut a switch from the tree. "That you did, indeed. And is it any wonder she didn't believe you, with your track record?"

George couldn't bear to look at the willow tree anymore and tried looking out across the stream bank instead. His eyes fell on the spot where Fred used to ambush them with volleys of chestnuts whenever he had the chance. He could hear his brother's childish voice yelling, "Duck and cover!" from across the years.

"Are we ready to move on, Dad?" he asked hopefully.

"Certainly, George. I've got what we need," Arthur replied softly.

After spending the morning wandering around Weasley property, they found an excellent location for a well a good distance away from the Burrow yet within sight of it, near a small hill.

"This would be a lovely spot, George," offered Arthur. "Good light, nice views, plenty of privacy," he said, indicating the positive aspects with broad sweeps of his arm.

George nodded in agreement. It was nice, and he was confident Annie would like it as well. He could easily imagine their house nestled into the hill, with its large windows facing out over the meadow that extended on to the south and west. Annie could transform the area surrounding the hill into a pleasant garden, just like she'd planned, with no trouble at all.

He took the opportunity to climb to the top of the little hill. As he stood at the summit, he was hit with a flash of a memory: they had been here before, the three of them, that winter of the blizzard. For an instant, he was flying down the hill on an ancient toboggan, snow spraying into his face once more. He remembered their excited laughter. He remembered sharing the chocolate frog with a tiny Annie, her eyes lit up with wonder. He remembered arguing with his brother about whether or not they could trust her with their secrets....

There was no escaping them; they were everywhere. Memories of Fred permeated the air and littered the ground, clogging his lungs and catching his ankles, making him stumble. George doubted there was a foot of land in the surrounding five square miles that wouldn't hold some recollection of their childhood together. They had been as thorough here in their explorations and adventures as they had been at school, never satisfied with already-discovered territory.

But it wouldn't matter where he and Annie went; he had realized that by now. The current goal was not so much to escape the memories altogether, but rather to learn to live in peace with them. Hopefully, the brand new house would serve as a sort of filter, abating the flood into a more manageable stream. It was slow going, but he was optimistic that someday it would be tolerable. Either that or he would go mad.

No. As tempting as it was, some days, to let go of rational thought he would not allow that happen. Too many people were relying on him now. He smiled a tiny but genuine grin in anticipation of the twins growing inside his wife even now. His stomach did the tiny little flip it always performed whenever he thought of them.

He turned his thoughts, as usual, away from the departed and toward her instead. His best friend who had become his wife, who was soon to become the mother of his children: Annie. She came the closest to understanding what he was going through, even more so than his father or mother. And she had been the one who'd reached out to him again and again, penetrating the crippling depression and pulling him out from under its smothering weight every time. She was made of stronger stuff than he was, he gratefully acknowledged.

Thank God for Annie.

Moving

Chapter 41 of 80

Work progresses on the new construction, and it gets a name. An old friend helps out. Another old friend says goodbye.

Chapter 41: Moving

Summer Fall 1998

Summer continued to pass. Two Muggles called surveyors came with fascinating gadgets to measure out and mark exactly where the house would go. The fellows seemed surprised by George and his father's enthusiasm to learn about what they were doing. Annie, too, had smiled and giggled at the two of them, rather entertained herself by the two wizards gleefully fiddling with the surveying instruments.

Next, George began the task of excavating. A good bit of the hill would need to be dug out for the house, as well as his mostly subterranean workshop. He had been practicing the spells for days and, with his father's help once again, spent a hot summer day removing and either relocating or Vanishing the necessary tons of soil.

Even though the work was done by magic, rather than by hand, it was still physically exhausting as well as mentally draining. But George discovered in the process that the mental focus required for the work helped to keep the darker thoughts at bay. He returned to the Burrow that night far more cheerful than he had been in months, having finally spent a day thinking of something other than the battle or the loss.

Vast amounts of cement for the foundation were required next. He and Annie spent an evening discussing the best way to obtain it. To his very great disappointment, they ruled out having it delivered wet by cement truck, convinced that there was no way to hide the use of magic in front of the Muggle driver who would be delivering it. Rather than hire a construction crew of local men, risking exposure even further, George became determined to do it all himself.

"How are you going to get all that out there?" Annie asked him. "You're going to need tons!"

"The only trick will be getting it from the supply yard. Once it's as far as the Burrow's lane, it'll be easy," he explained. "I figured I'd just haul it in your truck, if that's all right with you," he added, not wanting her to feel taken for granted.

"Our truck," she corrected him. "And no, you won't. The poor thing can't handle it, especially not all at once."

"It could with a bit of help," he assured her with a knowing wink.

"And you won't look at all conspicuous hauling a house-worth of cement in a rickety old pickup, will you?" she argued sarcastically.

George smirked, conceding the point. "All right, maybe a few trips...."

"More like fifty! George, just rent a lorry," she suggested.

"Can you do that?" he asked, surprised and excited at the possibility of playing with a new bit of Muggle machinery.

"Darling, everything in the Muggle world is for sale or hire," she replied.

A few days later, Annie accompanied George and his father to the supply yard, the better to keep their eager excitement in check as they watched the materials being loaded by machine onto the flatbed truck. Arthur's eyes were like saucers, watching the forklifts load and unload their pallets.

Once back at the Burrow, George bewitched each pallet to levitate off the truck and led them to the construction site. Annie watched him with an amazed smile as the raw ingredients of their home followed him like an invisible-camel caravan across the meadow toward the large hole dug into a hill in the distance.

The next morning a Saturday an army of young wizards reported for duty. George had recruited his entire family and their friends to help mix and pour the cement for the foundation. He and Annie both were touched by the outpouring of support their willing helpers demonstrated.

Of course, if it hadn't been for the heat of the day, not a single one of them would have even broken a sweat. George was by far the most physically active of the group, scrambling about with the blueprints in hand, ensuring drainage and plumbing pipes and support beams were magically held in their proper locations until the cement set, and directing the work crew.

Annie had spent most of the morning helping his mother prepare lunch for the crowd, but still came over to see the activity before it was finished. He could tell by the look on her face that it was a spectacular sight to her: wands waving all about, wheelbarrows of cement being mixed by unmanned shovels and hoes, then floating in midair over to the proper spot where they were unceremoniously dumped. Everyone was laughing and enjoying themselves, all of them genially teasing George at every turn that he was working them too hard.

Steadily, over the weeks of the summer, the house came together. After the foundation came the walls, then roof, then doors and windows. George was careful to use magic only in the process of building, rather than upon the materials themselves, thereby ensuring that Annie would be able to operate a few necessary electrical appliances in their home without any lingering interference.

There were days when he was unable to work at the site, forced to halt temporarily due to weather or a delay in obtaining a critical supply. In that case, Annie would usually find him somewhere in the Burrow's living room or kitchen, nose in a book about construction or pouring over the blueprints spread out on the table.

"Aren't you the bookworm now?" she would say whenever she found him thus, sidling up next to him.

"Somebody has to put a roof over our heads," he would tease her. "You're not lifting a finger, are you?"

"You won't let me!" she would argue. In fact, she frequently protested the entire Weasley family was coddling her due to her "delicate" state.

"No excuse," he'd reply, kissing her on the top of the head or patting her burgeoning stomach, then returning to his studies.

George managed to get the house completely enclosed before the wet autumn weather could set in. By mid-September, the distance between the Burrow and the new house was too difficult for Annie to manage with any frequency. So, while George spent every day at the work site, Annie had to be content with his descriptions of when something significant was completed, like the fireplace, the kitchen cabinetry, or the hardwood floors.

Annie was especially encouraged when George's old school friend, Lee, began spending more and more time helping him. She didn't think it was good for her husband to be spending so much time alone he needed to talk, not become a recluse, she'd argued. As the days went by, George and Lee grew closer together as friends: a thought which cheered him as much as it did Annie. It did feel good to have the company while he worked, he realized, even though they were usually very careful to avoid any discussion of Fred.

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George directed the roller to dip itself in the pale green paint once more, then drove it along the wall with a flick of his fingers. The color perfectly complemented the honey-colored wood floor and the forest view out the window. *Annie really has an eye for this decorating business* he mused, pleased with how their house was shaping up. She had picked out nearly everything for their house, from the fixtures to the furniture, and he continued to be impressed with her taste as each item he'd secretly ordered arrived and was put in its place.

The décor was exactly right, in his opinion: a collection of quality, well-constructed materials that would last them for ages partnered with a who-cares sense of style where comfort and practicality were prized above any other consideration. As much as he had told himself over the years that it never really mattered to him, he had to admit that all these *new* things about him made him feel... well,*good*. Almost optimistic, even. It would be nice to be the first person to sit in a chair or sleep in a bed, for once.

He smiled to himself in anticipation of his latest secret plan: revealing a completed house to his unsuspecting wife by their first anniversary at the latest. Annie was so big with the twins now that she could barely walk up the stairs to their room in the Burrow and hadn't been by the construction site to see the progress for several weeks. He had been feeding her false information all the while, leading her to believe the house wouldn't be ready to move into until spring.

It was ambitious, as far as pranks went, but he had every confidence he'd manage to pull it off to extremely entertaining effect. The big unveiling promised to be epic. And it was so nice to have something distracting to think about. He was sick to death of all his otherwise gloomy thoughts and was desperate to have something fun to look forward to.

Other than the babies, that is, he thought with an even bigger, satisfied smile. Thoughts of his and Annie's children to come never failed to cheer him, either.

"What the hell is this thing?" Lee asked him.

George looked up to see him holding up a small L-shaped piece of metal with a perplexed look on his face. "It's called an allen wrench," he replied and knelt beside his friend. Two cribs lay in forty pieces spread about on the floor.

Lee's expression was dubious. "And how the hell am I supposed to use this useless-looking thing to put these stupid bits together?"

George chuckled as he took the allen wrench from his friend's hand and tossed it theatrically over his shoulder. "You don't, git." He pulled out his wand and used it to summon the assembly instruction booklet. "Only a nutter like my dad would attempt anything so ridiculous."

"That's a relief," Lee sighed.

"Keep the paint roller going, will you?" he requested. Then George directed him to hold two large crib pieces together while he fed the fasteners into their proper holes. "*Turbonis*," he said with a roll of his wrist, and the bolts spun themselves in.

Lee lazily waved his hand toward the wall. "I'm takin' off early today, mate," he said softly, tentatively. As if testing George's reaction.

"Oh, yeah?" George replied absently, squinting at the directions which suddenly made no sense. Had he missed a step?

"Got a date, see," Lee said, trying desperately to sound casual about it.

George looked up from the instructions. "Do tell," he said, a smile beginning to spread across his face in anticipation of taking the mickey out of his friend. What a kind, generous soul Lee was to lay such a gift at his feet, he thought.

Lee was grinning broadly, unable to help himself. "Angelina finally agreed to let me take her out for dinner," he said.

George felt guilty that his jaw dropped in shock. "That's great news!" he cried enthusiastically in an attempt to make up for it.

Lee wasn't fooled. "Thanks," he said with a snort. "I knew I could count on you for support," he snapped sarcastically.

"I'm serious!" George cried. "Just goes to show how persistence pays off when it comes to women. It's rather inspirational, really. You're living proof that a fellow can blatantly pine for a girl for a decade before finding enough spine to tell her so and still meet with success. Or was she the one who asked you?"

"I asked her, thank you very much," Lee protested. "I knew I shouldn't have told you."

"Don't peddle that rubbish with me," George chided him. "I could see you've been dying to tell me something all morning. You've been scratching about like an old biddy sitting on a juicy piece of gossip the whole time."

Lee chuckled, then fell silent again. He redirected the paint roller while George wrestled with the drop-side of the crib, muttering futile threats against it under his breath, warning it to cooperate or suffer the consequences.

"You're not pissed off?" Lee asked softly.

"Why the hell would I be pissed off?" George demanded, then barked a swear when his thumb got smashed as the precariously rigged thing fell apart before he'd gotten the bolts threaded in place.

"I dunno," Lee mumbled, squirming a bit. "She and... Fred... well... you know."

George sighed. "Lee, that was over ages ago." He was careful not to let on that the brief fling with Angelina after the Yule Ball had meant next to nothing to Fred, remembering how upset about it Lee had been at the time. "Help me figure this bloody thing out, will you?"

Lee knelt beside him. Together, they managed to fit the guide pegs into the proper grooves, and the drop-side finally clicked into place. The two of them turned the entire thing right-side up, then pushed it out of the way against the window wall.

"I cannot bloody believe you're gonna be a dad! How in hell did that happen?" Lee asked, a mockingly incredulous smile on his face.

George sat on the floor, leaned against the crib, and chuckled, deciding to take a break before trying to put the second crib together. "Are you asking me to explain the fairies and the flowers to you, Lee? Poor Angelina...."

"Sod off," Lee snapped, punching him in the arm as he took a seat beside George.

"You see, when a boy *really* fancies a girl, and she *really* fancies him as well...."

"You're a right prick, you know that?" Lee grumbled. "I pity your offspring, I truly do."

"Save your pity for your own, should you ever figure out the mechanics required to make one," George retorted.

"How does she put up with you? Have you got Annie under a *Confundus* or something?"

"You might say that," George agreed, grinning wickedly. "Let's just say she loves me for a good bit more than my sparkling wit," he said with a smug wink and a leer.

"I'm telling Annie you said that, you bloody pig," Lee threatened.

"You wouldn't dare," said George with a stricken look.

"Ooh, look who's scared of the little wife! I reckon it's clear who wears the pants in your family, mate," Lee said with delight.

"Shut it," George growled as he shoved his friend forcefully to the floor.

Lee laughed raucously. "You're in an utter panic! How delicious! I haven't seen you scared this shitless of anyone besides your mother," Lee taunted, arms braced to fend off the pending attack.

"Shut it or go home, I'm warning you," George said, looming over his friend menacingly, aiming his wand at Lee's nose.

Lee grinned from ear to ear. "Oh, this is rich, indeed! Christmas has come early to Lee Jordan! Thank you, George. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you," he cried, rubbing his hands together with relish.

"You will shut up now or I will shut you up," George threatened, then blew it by bursting out laughing himself.

Lee laughed as well. "Relax, mate. I'm only joking. Still, it is lovely to have something to lord over you."

"You fail to recall the song, I see."

Lee's smile was wiped from his face. "Song? What song?"

"Oh, Angelina, my angel on a broom... without you life is full of gloom..." George crooned, purposefully sounding like a decrepit set of bagpipes, with a dreamy look on his face, batting his eyelashes exaggeratedly.

Lee gasped in mortified shock. "You bloody bastard!"

"Your face is lovelier than a rose's bloom," George pressed on, undaunted. "Or was it her arse that was lovelier than the moon? Pity, I seem to have forgotten the next line...."

"All right. You win, you son of a bitch," Lee snarled, scrambling upright.

"It's not my fault you're a bloody wretched poet, mate," George laughed.

"You're a horrid excuse for a mate," Lee grumbled. "I don't know why I bother."

"The saddest part of it is I'm the best you've got," George needled him.

"That is a fucking tragedy," Lee muttered.

He snorted and turned back to painting the walls while George began working on the second crib. Progress was made more quickly this time, now that he understood how the pieces fit together. The two young men worked quietly for several minutes.

"I'd like to bring her 'round here, if you don't mind," Lee said. Again, his voice was tentative, as if testing the waters.

"Anytime," George replied, although he wasn't exactly sure how he felt about the prospect of having so much company. Lee was almost as much as he could force himself to take.

Not that Lee was any trouble; the opposite was true, in fact. He was a great help around the new house and good companionship to boot. It was just hard to be around much of anyone for any great length of time. Annie being the exception to that rule, of course.

"I think it would be good for her," Lee said. His voice dripped with tender concern for Angelina.

"How is she?" George asked with genuine worry. He had always considered Angelina to be a good friend and hated to hear she was having a difficult time of it.

"She's taking it hard. Ken, Patty, Siobhan... Fred," Lee spoke just above a whisper. "Nearly half of us gone. She dwells on the ones who didn't make it. I think it would help her to spend more time with those of us still here, you know?"

George took a deep breath, feeling the familiar crushing ache begin pressing against his chest, and bent over the pieces of the crib. Their dorm-mate, Kenneth Towler, had been killed just before Christmas for refusing to be recruited into the Snatcher Corps. Patricia Stimpson had been tortured in an attempt to gain information because of her position in the Ministry a junior member of the Invisibility Task Force just before the coup. Siobhan Follyfoote had simply disappeared into thin air two weeks after her name appeared on that horrid list published in the *Prophet* last fall. And Fred....

"Ah, Christ..." he muttered, gripping the rail of the crib. The pieces began to swim before his eyes. George screwed his eyes shut and sniffed in an attempt to bring all the rogue moisture back within him where it belonged.

"Shit, George. I'm sorry, man. I didn't mean...."

"S'all right, Lee. Not your fault," George stammered. Growing angry with himself, he took a deep breath and roared, startling his friend. He'd recently discovered that, for some strange reason, making a really loud noise helped dispel the darkness when it began to close around his mind.

George sighed more calmly now, confident the depression was beaten back into its corner for the moment. "It happens all the time, mate," he explained, not wanting Lee to feel badly.

"George...."

"Just... give me a minute." George tried to surreptitiously wipe his damp face on his sleeve. He concentrated intently on the task at hand *Cribs... twins... house... Annie....*

"It'll be nice to see Ange again," he said after several minutes, his voice forcefully composed and managing to sound only slightly strained. "Bring her by tomorrow, if you like. I'll put you both to work on the kitchen plumbing."

Lee chuckled, determined, like George, to return to lighthearted banter. "Is that all your mates are to you? A source of cheap labor?"

"Cheap? I thought you were free!" George teased back.

"*Au contraire*, git. I'm only here for your mother's treacle tart."

"Wait 'til you try Annie's redcurrant cheesecake," George said.

"She puts up with your nonsense, *and* she's a good cook?" Lee asked, feigning incredulity.

"Why d'you think I married her? I'm not a complete idiot, you know," George retorted. "A bloke's got to eat, after all."

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The first time Angelina accompanied Lee to the construction site, George was made to feel a bit uncomfortable with the way he often caught her looking at him. There was a haunted look on her face, almost as if she had seen a ghost. He could tell Annie noticed it, too, as they all ate lunch together at the Burrow. Angelina's stare was a strange mix of sadness and longing, which left his wife feeling confused.

That night, in bed, Annie asked him about Angelina. He told her the basic details: Angelina had been in his same year at school, same house as well, and a chaser on their Quidditch team. Suspicion began to cloud Annie's expression.

"Did you ever...? I mean, did you and she ever...?" she asked, having trouble putting her question into words.

"What?" he asked, honestly baffled.

"Were you ever a couple?" she said, uncomfortably spitting it out.

"*Me?*" he spluttered. "No, that was Fred," he assured her. "He took her to the Yule Ball, I remember. They had a bit of a thing afterward.... Didn't end so well, now that I think about it," he mused aloud for her benefit.

He could tell Annie was relieved by his answer but saw she was also upset with herself for having brought Fred to mind for him. Despite all his efforts to hide it, she could see how much it still hurt him, and Annie usually went to great lengths to avoid inflicting the pain. An effort which he appreciated, even as he felt ashamed for the necessity

of it.

"I suppose that's likely the case for just about any female you went to school with, isn't it?" she said with a sigh.

George chuckled without thinking. It took him by surprise: laughing at a memory of Fred. He hadn't realized he was capable of it yet taking pleasure in remembering his brother.

"Honestly, yes. He was a bit of a hound dog, wasn't he? I remember when you used to call him Casanova," he replied, pulling her closer to him. Her physical presence acted almost like an anesthetic, taking the edge off the aching loss.

Annie smiled with just a little bit of sadness, wrapping her arms securely around him like a bandage, her big belly wedged between them. "Just as long as I can continue to pretend you were saving yourself for me, I don't care how many of Fred's old conquests I have to face. Do me a favor and don't burst my bubble, all right?"

"It's a promise," he assured her as she kissed him, omitting how completely unnecessary the promise was.

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Annie stood amidst a sea of cardboard boxes. Ron had brought a dozen of them down from the attic that morning before he'd left to join George at the construction site, and she was sorting through them in the bright light of the living room of the house she had grown up in.

"That enough for you?" Ron had asked her as the final box came to rest on the floor at her feet.

Annie had nodded. "Thanks, Ron. How many do you think are left up there?" she'd asked.

"Not much more. Maybe six or seven. Well, if you're all right, then I'll be off. Oh, and George said to remind you...."

"Not to lift anything," she'd interrupted. "Right. For the hundredth time, I've got it. And please tell him to kiss my arse for me," she'd added, smiling sarcastically.

"With pleasure," Ron had chuckled, smiling as he disappeared.

Her Gran's house had only been on the market for a month before it sold, and now Annie had a mere fortnight left to empty it out before the new family moved in. Before the flurry of work this week, she hadn't been inside it since she'd moved into the Burrow with the Weasleys. It was a little disconcerting to be in it again: almost as if it was home, but not quite *Home* anymore.

Annie took a seat on a small stool and began poking through the first box of the morning. Her Gran had not been much of a packrat, and neither of them had ever set much store on the concept of heirlooms. "Knowledge and love are the only important things that must be passed on from one generation to the next," her Gran had often told her, growing up. Therefore, if something had not been immediately needed anymore or used often enough, it had been gotten rid of already. Their frugal lifestyle had made this part of the grieving process a bit easier.

But it was still grief to be waded through, even though it was a completely different sort of sadness than the one she felt for Fred's loss. Her Gran had meant everything to her, but her death had not been unexpected. Both of them had always known, on some level, that it would happen eventually. They'd had time to say goodbye to one another, and for that Annie was immeasurably thankful.

It was the way of things, after all: the older generation passed away, and the younger ones left behind made their way without them. The idea that Gran's passing made sense in the larger overall purpose of the world made the sadness a bit softer, a bit easier to take.

Unlike the other: the gut-wrenching, senseless rip in the fabric of her world that had once, but no longer, included Fred.

She shook her head to clear away that thought and threw herself into the work of the morning with new determination, keeping the other grief at bay, quieting the rattling cage within her. The box she had just opened contained old photo albums and loose pictures. Rather than sort through them singly, she decided to transfer the contents of the box in its entirety to a plastic tub and marked it with its destination in her new home: OLD PHOTOS ATTIC.

Annie spent the morning thus occupied, weeding through the old boxes. Most of the useable stuff was destined for a charity shop in Exeter; she had no need for the superfluous kitchen items, clothing, and knick-knacks. The rest of it mostly reams of old files would be thrown away.

But she was touched to discover that Gran had saved a few boxes of things especially for her that she had never known about. One contained a stack of carefully folded baby blankets: some were crocheted, some quilted, but all promised to come in very handy in the winter to come. She was also pleased to find a box of her favorite childhood story books, which had been her mother's before her, and included full sets of Beatrix Potter and Winnie the Pooh books, among others. She wondered if George would have ever heard of any of them.

Molly popped over just as Annie had finished moving the books one by one out of their beat-up cardboard box into a safer, sturdier plastic tub. It had been years since someone had made lunch for her, she reckoned, and Annie was touched by Molly's concern. They sat together at the kitchen table which Ron had already called dibs on, anticipating being in a position to move out of the Burrow soon himself. He and Harry had been working on a scheme to get jobs at the Ministry and a flat together in London.

Annie and her mother-in-law chatted for a short while about the likelihood of the boys' plans while Molly warily eyed the half-dozen electrical kitchen appliances lined up on the counter. She knew they were destined for her husband's workshop and was worried about how they might be troublesomely enchanted in the near future.

"Sorry about that, Molly," Annie said, waving toward the collection of blenders and toasters and such. "But I couldn't say no. He was so excited about them...."

"I know, dear. It's not your fault," Molly said with a rueful smile. "They do have an oddly determined, almost obsessive streak, don't they?" she said, referring to the one-track mind-set her husband had passed on to several of her children.

Annie smiled in agreement. "Almost like a bulldog, once they set their teeth into something." *Like bloody Quidditch*, she grumbled to herself.

Molly chuckled. "You know, I was admiring your garden today," she said, changing the subject. "It looks to be in remarkable shape, considering it's been abandoned for more than half a year. Mind if I take a closer gander? I thought I might help out when you're ready to take some cuttings or dig up some transplants, if you like."

"That would be wonderful!" Annie said, eagerly accepting her offer. She heaved herself up out of the chair and led Molly out the back door and down the steps.

"I especially want to bring some of the hawthorn with me. Gran always told me it's a tradition in our family to have a hawthorn in the garden. Said she brought this one with her from Wales," Annie added, pointing out the shrubby tree in question.

"Ah, I see there are definitely some things here that mustn't be left behind," Molly chuckled. "I had a feeling, you know, that there might be something like this here," she added, indicating a few of the more mundane-looking magical plants the twins had smuggled out of their mother's garden and into Annie's over the years.

Annie smiled sheepishly. "Nothing too terribly noticeable. We were careful because of Gran," she argued.

"Careful, were you?" Molly said with a laugh as Spud, the garden gnome, came scurrying over to Annie, barking swear words in greeting. "The plants I can understand... but a *gnome*?"

"He's sort of a pet, actually," Annie giggled as she bent awkwardly down to tug out a dead tulip from amongst the overgrown weeds, offering him the dormant bulb. "We will most assuredly be relocating you, Spud," she called out as he headed back to his den.

"It really is a miracle we weren't run in on charges a hundred times over," Molly mused while shaking her head. "Between Arthur and his ridiculous hobbies and you lot, I have no idea how we've avoided it as long as we have!" she cried.

"Just lucky, I suppose," laughed Annie.

"Yes, we were so lucky our very reckless sons made friends with a Muggle child who knew how to hold her tongue and kept our secret for.... How long has it been now, dear?" Molly asked as she put her arm around Annie's shoulders.

"Thirteen years," Annie mumbled, wincing at the thought and bracing herself for a tirade.

"Thirteen!" Molly spluttered. "Merlin's.... Well, his bleedin' unmentionables, that's what," she said, editing herself in front of her daughter-in-law. "I'll come back tomorrow for this nonsense, dear," she added, waving absently at the garden. "Don't work yourself too hard. Ginny will be over in a bit to help you move the boxes," Molly said with a hug and peck on the cheek for the mother of her imminent grandchildren, then Disappeared.

It was late in the afternoon when Annie heard a knock at the front door. It was so unexpected that it startled her, making her jump. Her heart raced with the unwarranted adrenaline as she heard Ginny call out from the front room.

"I'll get it, Annie." A few seconds later, she heard her speak again. "Oh, very funny, Harry. You're hilarious," Ginny said sarcastically.

"Erm no, it's Stephen, actually. Have we met? I'm sure I would remember someone as beautiful as you, love."

Annie dashed down the hallway as quickly as she could manage. "Ginny! I'm coming! That's for me!" she called, desperate to rescue her sister-in-law from the idiot she couldn't believe had the nerve to show up at her door.

"That you, Annie?" she heard him call out in curious surprise.

"Stephen!" she barked scoldingly as she shoved him out the door in front of her and onto the porch. She poked her head back inside the door for a second, bidding Ginny to wait to start loading the truck, just before closing the door behind her. Then she turned to face Stephen.

She was prepared to launch into a tirade of her own, berating Stephen for daring to show his face again after their discussion nearly a year ago, last October. But the look on his face made her laugh out loud instead. His eyes were nearly popping out of his head, and his jaw was slack with shock.

"You're..." he started to speak but was seemingly unable to complete a sentence.

"Pregnant. Yes. Brilliant observation skills, as usual. You should've been cop instead of a fireman, Stephen." She folded her hands on the top of her large belly, unconsciously displaying her wedding ring on her finger.

Stephen noticed it; his eyes focused on it like a laser. "So you really...?"

"Got married? Yes. George and I are married now. You're on a roll, mate: two for two."

A slightly trembling finger pointed at her distended stomach. "Is that why...?"

"Don't!" she interrupted fiercely, her hands clenching into angry fists. "Do not utter the offensive thing you were about to say. If you were clever enough to do the math, you would understand how stupid you sound right now."

"Right. You're right. Sorry I seem to settle into some bad old habits around you," he admitted with a wry half-smile. "So, you're married, kid on the way.... Is that why you're selling the house?" he asked with a nod toward the sign in the front yard.

"For the most part, yes. Now that Gran is gone," she said, softly. She was sad to think how, from his point of view, his one careless sentence summed up the past ten months since her Gran's passing, but in reality, failed to scratch the surface.

"Yeah, um... sorry about that. I heard, but I couldn't get off work to come," he stammered.

"It's all right. I understand, really," she assured him, managing to sound only slightly sarcastic. Her Gran's funeral would have been the last place she would've wanted to see him, anyway. Not that she could have imagined such a selfless act on his part.

"So... he's taking you away from here," Stephen said, disappointment in his voice.

Annie considered arguing the point: that George wasn't taking her anywhere she didn't already want to go. But it would be a useless effort. Stephen would believe whatever he wanted to, regardless of what she told him.

"Yes. We're leaving Ottery."

"Are you going far?"

Annie paused. Physically, of course, the answer was no. She would spend her life on the other side of the small patch of woods Stephen could see beyond her shoulders, if he cared to look. But she was going where Stephen would never be admitted, could never follow. She was leaving his world behind.

"Yes. Pretty far."

"Where?" he asked.

Annie silently shook her head. She had no intention of answering. He had no right to ask.

"Well, I guess this is goodbye, then," he said with a sad smile, standing up to leave.

"For the last time, yes. Goodbye, Stephen."

To his credit, he did not attempt a hug or kiss this time. Annie watched him walk down the steps of the porch to the street. He climbed into his car, sitting and watching her on the porch from inside. She turned to go back into the house and face the third degree likely waiting her from Ginny.

It began before Annie got the door closed behind her.

"*What* was that?" Ginny demanded.

Annie looked into Ginny's eyes. They sparkled with indignant anger on behalf of her brother. Behind her, outside, she could hear a car engine fire up, then drive away.

"Yes, that's the bloke we stole a hair from for Harry's potion at Bill's wedding," she replied, deliberately misunderstanding Ginny and praying she'd drop the inquisition.

No dice. "Obviously. That's not what I'm talking about and you know it," Ginny growled.

Annie sighed. "It's not what you're thinking, I swear. And it's a long story, but I'll tell you if you really want to know."

They sat together in the front room while Annie told Ginny the whole story. How when she'd met Stephen as a young girl, she had been desperate for distraction, missing George and Fred so terribly. How she'd put up with his belittling treatment for so long, always afraid that her magical friends would tire of her some day, leaving her with nothing else. How her relationship with Stephen had led to so many of her problems at school, her false reputation in town.

"He lied about *that*, and you let him *live*?" Ginny exclaimed in disbelief.

Annie smiled ruefully, wincing slightly at Ginny's choice of words. Neither George nor Annie ever spoke lightly of death anymore, even joking with family. "Believe me, it was very hard to resist beating the shit out of him. But I swear to you, Ginny, George is the only man that I have ever loved."

"Enough," Ginny interrupted her, holding up her hands to prevent her from continuing. "I don't need to hear it. I know it's true."

Annie took Ginny's hands and squeezed them in thanks. "You're the only one I've ever told the entire story to, you know. George even met Stephen once, believe it or not, but thinks he's nothing more than another obnoxious old schoolmate of mine. He doesn't know the whole truth... and I don't want him to. Ever. I'm just afraid it would drive him mad, and he might do something stupid and macho and unnecessary. Can you understand that?"

Ginny nodded. "You're right. He can't ever find out. He would murder that idiot, if he knew."

"So you'll keep your mouth shut?" begged Annie.

Ginny nodded once more. "Your secret's safe with me." After a pause of several moments, she added teasingly, "What a sordid past you have, Annie!"

"Everybody here in this stupid town seems to think so, and that's been my problem my whole life," she replied, rolling her eyes.

*

It was early October when four young Weasleys sat around the fire one rainy Sunday afternoon in the Burrow, discussing what to name Annie and George's new house.

"But isn't it a bit pretentious: naming a house?" Annie asked, curiously. Her round belly visibly moved every once in a while, to George's utter entertainment. He sat on the floor at her feet, head leaning onto the armrest of her chair, occasionally prodding her stomach in hopes of eliciting more movement.

"You think 'the Burrow' is pretentious?" Ginny teased her.

Annie laughed. "Good point," she said, gently brushing George's poking hand away.

He ignored her and immediately went back to manually communicating with his unborn offspring.

"You have to give it a name. How else will you get your post?" Ron chimed in.

"We expect you to hand deliver it to us every morning," said George, batting his younger brother on the knee and only partially avoiding being kicked in the arm in retaliation.

"Let's not give Ron an excuse to drop in uninvited, shall we?" offered his wife, the barest blush beginning to break over her face.

"Excellent point, love," George agreed. Ron had stumbled onto them kissing several times. Thankfully he hadn't seen anything more, but so far that was only a matter of lucky timing.

"It should be something compatible with the Burrow, anyway," said Ginny, trying to bring the conversation back to the topic at hand. "Maybe... the Den?"

"The Warren, more like," said Ron, giving George a pointed look.

George smiled at what he recognized was frustrated jealousy on his brother's part. He and Hermione were only just beginning to acknowledge their relationship, and it was apparently moving forward very slowly. "Poor Ronnikins! Getting tired of all those cold showers, are you?" he teased his brother.

"Sick of hearin' all that bloody thumpin'!" spat Ron under his breath, getting riled.

"George!" cried Annie, interrupting Ron and swatting George's head simultaneously.

"He's lying. He can't hear anything but the ghoul bangin' around up there," muttered George, glaring at his troublemaking brother. Ron's bedroom was separated from theirs by three floors; George was confident he couldn't actually hear what he was referring to. Annie was already leery enough about having sex, due to the number of people in the house nowadays, and he would personally be making Ron's existence a living hell if she became any more reluctant because of his stupid comment.

"Let's see.... What about the Nest? Or the Roost?" cried Ginny, desperate to prevent an argument between her brothers about sex noises from occurring in front of her.

"The Hole?" added Ron unhelpfully, still smarting.

"Is it really that important? I think we're making a mountain out of a molehill with this business," argued Annie.

"That's perfect!" Ginny squealed with delight. "Mole Hill! Your house even looks like it's tunneling out of a little hill."

George pondered her suggestion for a moment. "I like it," he admitted, looking up at his wife with a half-smile.

Annie answered him with a half-smile of her own, amused by the idea. "Mole Hill it is, then."

Family Ties

Chapter 42 of 80

It's Molly's birthday once again. Can the Weasleys manage a family celebration? Will the drama never end?

Chapter 42: Family Ties

Fall 1998

Annie woke at dawn. Her left hip, upon which she was currently lying, was aching in protest of the enormous amount of extra weight crushing it. She yawned with exhaustion. Never being able to sleep for more than a couple of hours at a stretch without waking in discomfort or having to pee was taking its toll.

Then she smiled in excited anticipation. *It won't be much longer now*, she thought as she felt the little bodies inside her abdomen try to shift themselves into more comfortable positions. *Sorry, kids no more room left to stretch. Wouldn't you be so much more comfortable outside rather than in? I want to meet you, already* she silently coaxed them.

A new thought came into her mind then: it was a scene from a movie she had watched as a child. An obnoxious, gum-chewing little girl had stolen some sort of trick candy from Willy Wonka, then proceeded to swell up to ridiculous proportions and turn blue. Annie could empathize. Everything about her was swollen now: ankles, feet, fingers, and belly most of all. Her hushed giggle woke George, who was curled around her.

"Good morning, You Lot!" he said softly, then kissed the base of her neck where it met her shoulder as he stroked her belly. That had become his nickname for her "You Lot" ever since the day of the ultrasound when they had discovered twins were on their way.

"The best one yet," she answered with optimistic enthusiasm. It was impossible to be grumpy around George's cheerfulness, no matter how uncomfortable and tired she felt. Especially considering how hard-earned his peace of mind was. "How are the pyrotechnics coming along?" she asked him as she attempted to literally roll herself out of their bed.

George chuckled as he gave her rear end a gentle push to help her. "Assembled and ready. I'll set them all up to launch from the trees this morning," he explained as he rose out of bed himself.

"Not from your broom?" she asked, raising a dubious eyebrow. She'd been under the impression that he'd usually risked life and limb by aerially detonating his fireworks by hand.

"I think I'd like to see them from the ground, for once. From a purely professional point of view, of course," he replied, attempting nonchalance.

Annie smirked. "I'll be fine! You don't need to hover around me at all times," she assured him.

"It's getting close now, Annie." He looked at her with earnest seriousness for a moment, which then broke into an amused grin. "You look like you're nearly ready to pop," he chuckled.

"I feel like I'm nearly ready to pop," she agreed with a laugh as she waddled out of their bedroom to the bathroom.

Today promised to be a big day. A bell-weather type of day. For the first time in ages so long ago no one could actually remember when it happened last the entire Weasley family would be assembled under the roof of the Burrow to celebrate Molly's birthday. Everyone, that is, except for the one they had lost, who would never again join them for any reason.

And that was the fulcrum upon which the entire thing was delicately balanced. Could they pull it off? Could the family have an actual *celebration* without Fred?

It was an ambitious undertaking, to be sure. Annie and Ginny had planned the menu carefully to include some of Molly's favorites while avoiding any of Fred's. Each of her children had agonized for weeks over her gifts, searching for the perfect thing to cheer her yet not remind her of the reason she needed cheering. It wasn't as if they wanted to deny Fred or his absence; everyone just wanted something else to be the focus for once.

As admirable as the motivation was, Annie thought that they were taking it a bit too far, actually, even though she could sympathize. Molly had done exceptionally well, dealing with the grief. If anything, it was her children who were making things more difficult for her. They never allowed her to reminisce about Fred, no matter how happy the memory, always changing the subject immediately. They were so afraid of causing Molly any pain, they didn't seem to realize that they perhaps weren't dealing with their own.

George was the exception to this rule but only on his good days. Usually, those were the days he spent outdoors or working on the house. Physically exhausting activity and fresh air seemed to be reliable, if temporary, remedies for depression in his case, at least. On those evenings, after dinner, the two of them would sometimes sit with Molly and Arthur at the table and share a happy or funny Fred story, smiling with the memory. Other days, he was just as skittish as the rest of them: eyes downcast, shoulders and head bent, deliberately avoiding contact with his brother's ghost.

So Annie had kept her gift for Molly a secret from everyone but her husband. She had worked on the photo album for weeks, alone and holed up in their room. Some days it had been hard not to damage the photographs with her own tears, as she had often been smiling through them. And that was what had kept her conviction firm: if she could feel happiness when she saw Fred's face in a picture, she thought surely Molly would treasure them as well. George assured her it was a nice sentiment that his mother would likely appreciate, but couldn't bring himself to look at what she'd done or even be present when she worked on it.

The morning was uneventful. After breakfast, George and Ron took off to work together on the evening's entertainment project. Annie and Ginny began baking an enormous cake and lunch for the six of them now living at the Burrow for the time being. That was yet another reason Molly had been more than usually cheerful lately: her house was full of her children once again.

The rest of the family was expected to start arriving in the late afternoon, helping to set up everything else. For once, the celebration would be limited to actual Weasleys, either by blood or marriage. None of the family friends felt it was appropriate to intrude (*or they were chicken, more like*, Annie grumbled to herself). But that was fine by her; she already had ten to cook for tonight. *And my back is aching more than ever today* she complained silently.

George tromped back inside for lunch just as a particularly uncomfortable muscle spasm hit her. She was leaning a bit on the counter, eyes closed, and pressing her hand into her tailbone which usually offered a modicum of relief.

"Back hurting again?" he said with concern as he came over to her and rubbed her shoulders.

Annie nodded.

George pushed her hand gently away and pressed down firmly with both his thumbs on the same spot: right at the top of her tailbone. Annie sighed audibly with the relief it helped bring.

"You know, it wouldn't hurt so much if you lost some weight," he chuckled.

"You're hilarious," she moaned but smiled as well.

George pressed it further, apparently in a mood for mischief today. "If I'd had any idea you'd get *this* fat so soon after we got married...."

The worst of the muscle spasm had passed, and Annie smacked his hands away in indignation. "I have you to blame for my predicament, you know. A little sympathy would be nice."

"You have nothing but sympathy from me, Annie," laughed Ginny from her seat at the table. "Must be hell, married to this git."

"Nobody asked you, brat," snapped George playfully. "Don't you have someplace else to be? Someone else to annoy?"

"Annie likes me because I actually help her in the kitchen. Unlike some others I could mention, pawing on her all the time," Ginny retorted.

Annie laughed out loud at George's shocked face. "Don't be cross, George! I like the pawing, usually. Ginny, nose out!"

Ginny and Annie continued working on dinner preparations until about an hour after lunch. By then, everything for the evening was either fully cooked or ready to pop in the oven later. Annie was utterly exhausted by the morning's effort far more than she expected to be. She sat down for a few minutes on the sofa in the living room and closed her eyes she told herself it was just for a moment.

Ginny shook her shoulder gently. "Annie, why don't you go lie down? I've got everything under control here, and you look like you need the rest."

To Annie's surprise, she had completely fallen asleep while sitting up on the sofa. Nearly thirty minutes had passed. Perhaps Ginny was right; it would likely be a late night, after all. Just a short nap might be a very good idea.

Annie nodded as she yawned and stood up, embarrassingly requiring Ginny's assistance to haul her out of the seat. As she waddled back to their room, her back began to ache again. She thanked God she only had a few weeks more to go. *These damn muscle spasms....*

Annie fell back asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow, too exhausted to be bothered by the backache.

Annie awoke to the clamor of familiar voices laughing and joking downstairs in the front room and the sounds of furniture being moved. She glanced at the time on her watch and immediately panicked. It was nearly time for the party to begin!

What is the matter with me today? How could Ginny have let me sleep so long?

As she sat up in bed, she took a deep breath. She could smell that dinner was indeed in the oven. *Oh, bless you, Ginny!*, she cried silently. She would have to do something special to thank her sister-in-law, who had just saved her lazy arse.

Annie took a quick look in the bedroom mirror and cringed at the sight. She snuck unnoticed up the stairs and into the bathroom for a fast shower. She hoped it might help wake her up as well as make her more presentable.

As she stood basking in the spray of the warm water, soap in hand, an odd sensation suddenly took her breath away. It was like nothing she had ever felt before. Forceful. Involuntary. Not sharply painful more closely resembling a squeezing ache but certainly uncomfortable. And completely un-ignorable. She turned off the water and stood dripping in the shower.

Could it be?

The sensation had passed now. Annie stepped carefully over to where she had taken off her watch. It read 6:45 p.m.

After she had gotten dressed, she crept back down to her bedroom. There was something she wanted to check on something she remembered reading. She quietly turned on her little flashlight the only source of illumination in the house she could control and flipped to the page in question.

Braxton-Hicks Contractions are also called 'practice contractions'....

Maybe, she thought as she read further. She would have to pay attention, tonight. Keep an eye on the clock and try to stay objective. *Damn! Why tonight, of all nights? When I can't afford the distraction?*

"There you are, lazy cow!" cried George with an impish smile as she entered the living room. He hurried across the room to embrace her. "Have a nice lie-in, love?" he asked sarcastically.

Annie smiled at his teasing; she hoped it was convincingly. She glanced at her watch as she quickly sat down, taking a deep breath. It was 7:00 exactly another one.

"George! It isn't as if it was undeserved!" scolded Molly. "How are you feeling, dear?" she asked with concern.

"Fine!" Annie exclaimed brightly. Apparently too enthusiastically, for Molly's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Relax tonight, Annie. I've got it covered," Ginny said, patting her on the shoulders.

Annie nodded mutely in thanks. Ginny had no idea how much relief she had just given her.

The evening's festivities went along as planned, for the most part. Ginny had done wonderfully with the final work on the meal, and Molly beamed with happiness to be surrounded by her children once again (7:13). They ate and chatted and joked together in the relaxed, cozy setting (7:24, 7:33, 7:42, 7:48). Everyone and everything was enveloped in a warm, rosy glow (7:53). It was proving to be a perfect night, and the celebration plans were working like a charm... almost.

George had absentmindedly rubbed small, firm circles on Annie's tailbone with his knuckles for most of the meal as he visited with his siblings. It felt heavenly, that little bit of relief, she thought. It was the only thing keeping her seated, in fact. She was certain she would otherwise be nervously pacing by this point. Everything else about tonight was going along so well, she couldn't stand the idea of interrupting it. Especially before Molly opened the presents they had all put so much effort into. Especially if this was some sort of false alarm.

Finally, Percy suggested it was time for the gifts. Annie wanted to kiss him in gratitude. It was a chance for her to stand up, stretch her legs, and walk a bit back to the bedroom to collect the photo album she had worked so long to make for Molly.

She bent to her knees to fetch the album out from under the bed, then dropped it on the mattress as soon as she stood up again. Her watch read 7:59. She clutched the bedpost and gasped at the strongest one yet, somehow resisting the urge to cry out for George and his magnificently distracting, soothing hands.

She got back to the table just in time for the next contraction (8:03). As she sat down, she turned partly away from him and the rest of the family at the table and grabbed his hand, pressing it into her lower back.

"It's really bothering you tonight, eh?" he said with mild concern.

She was thankful his attention was currently otherwise focused on Charlie's latest adventurous dragon tale. The entire table was intent on Charlie just now, in fact. Annie's eyes nearly rolled back into her head as George's two thumbs pressed deeply into the base of her spine. She bit her lip in order not to sigh audibly with relief.

Molly made a large show of being enormously pleased by each and every one of her children's gifts (8:08). Annie was torn; she was glad that Molly was enjoying herself, that everyone was so happy, of course. The night was turning out to be an unqualified success. But she was beginning to desperately wish her mother-in-law would speed things up a bit (8:13).

By 8:17, Annie could no longer deny what was happening and smiled to herself with her thrilling secret. *They're coming! If I can only hold out a bit longer....*

"Annie, it's your turn," George whispered in her ear.

She had been biting her lip again, head bent, gripping the edges of the present a bit too tightly, and hadn't realized that all the other gifts had been opened. She looked up to find Molly was looking at her strangely.

"Oh, sorry. Here you are, Molly," she rushed to say and held out the present to her.

Molly was staring at her with narrowed eyes once again. She took the gift hesitantly, as if preferring to remain occupied instead by the thought in her head.

Annie pasted on her biggest and, unfortunately, she figured, most likely fake smile for her mother-in-law's benefit.

Molly slowly tore her eyes away from Annie's face and finally looked at the gift. "Oh, Annie, it's lovely! Just perfect, really," she cried sincerely as she flipped through a few of the pages at random.

Many of the photos she would have never seen before, Annie reckoned proudly, even if they didn't move. The majority of them were of Fred and George together, mugging for her camera as children, but a few were of Fred alone: on the beach, surfing, hiking, even munching cookies at their wedding ceremony.

Molly touched one tenderly with her fingers. "My birthday, last year..." she said wistfully. Annie had captured the moment that night exactly a year ago when Fred and George had both leaned in to give their mother a peck on the cheek.

Annie sucked in a loud, involuntary gasp through her teeth as a new, forceful contraction squeezed her. She held it in, hoping against hope nobody noticed.

It was a lost cause. Everyone was looking curiously at her now.

Molly smiled brightly. "That's about every five minutes for nearly an hour now, Annie. Time to go!"

Annie winced. Apparently, she had been deluding herself that she had hidden her situation from *everyone* at the table.

George grabbed Annie's chin and pulled her around to face him. "What does she mean, 'Every five minutes?' What's wrong?" he demanded angrily.

"Don't yell at her, George! Help her into the truck!" Molly cried as everyone at the table leapt up at once, upsetting several glasses. "Everyone out of the way now, children. *Move*, I said, Ron! There now....*GENTLY*, George!"

But Annie was not moving fast enough for him. He scooped her up in his arms as soon as she eased her way around the table and dashed out the door with her.

"This is not a license to drive like a maniac!" Annie yelled as he sped backwards down the lane in the truck.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he yelled back at her but kept his eyes facing out the rear window.

"I didn't know myself, for sure, until a few minutes ago," she argued, fudging the time frame a little bit, trying to assuage his understandable anger. If it had been any other night, she would have told him instantly.

Her excuse seemed to mollify him slightly. But then she made the mistake of failing to adequately stifle her outcry at the next contraction. They were getting so much more intense now....

"What? Another one? How far apart are they now?" he shouted at her.

"I don't know anymore!" she fairly screamed in panic, panting in pain. *Please let us make it to the hospital in time*, she begged silently. *George will never forgive me if they're born in the truck!* In retrospect, she was willing to perhaps concede her stoic attempt at delay had been a bit misguided.

Two contractions later, Annie and George burst into the doors of the Ottery St. Catchpole hospital, and Annie was summarily whisked off to the nearest delivery room with George jogging behind. Annie's labor was now quickly and thoroughly Muggle-ified and institutionalized: she was stripped of her clothes and made to wear a hospital gown, poked and probed and scanned and wired up to a platoon of monitors.

Molly and Arthur arrived a few minutes later by some magical means or another, Annie guessed. They poked their heads in the door just to let them know the family had arrived, then began to excuse themselves to the waiting room.

"Molly?" Annie cried out in the midst of another contraction.

Molly dashed over to her daughter-in-law. "Yes, dear?" she asked, gripping Annie's hand.

Annie couldn't yet speak, riding the crest of the latest contraction, but looked at Molly with a pleading look. She looked at her son and saw an equally panicked expression upon his face. Molly nodded at them both in understanding.

"George, hold her hand like this and keep rubbing her back like you did at home. Good boy. Now that's it, Annie. Let it come, don't fight it," she murmured her words in a soothing voice.

Once the pain had passed for another brief interval, Molly spoke up again. "Are you certain, dear? I'm happy to help, of course, but perhaps you'd like to be alone, just the two of you? I don't want to intrude...."

"You don't mind, do you George?" Annie asked, still gasping in recovery.

George shook his head gratefully, eyes wide with excitement.

"Thank you, Molly. It would mean a lot to me if you would stay," Annie said.

Molly nodded and smiled reassuringly as she divested herself of her coat and hat and began taking charge. "Now, I have no idea how Muggles do this sort of thing, of course, but I'll help as much as I can, dear. Next one, I'll show you a trick for breathing that may help a little bit, all right?"

Several contractions later, a doctor arrived and offered Annie pain relief in the form of an epidural. Annie looked to Molly once again for advice.

Molly looked directly into her eyes and leveled with her. Even having no idea what an Eppy-door-all was (*Muggles and their silly pills*), she said, "If I had had the option to ease the pain, I would've taken it in a heartbeat, believe you me! It's your first time and may take a while, dear. And twins, to boot. No use in trying to be a hero."

Fifteen minutes later, Annie was seated on the edge of the bed, curled into George's supporting arms while her back was exposed to the anesthesiologist. She squeezed his shoulders tightly, trying like hell to keep still as yet another wave of pain broke over her. Then a tiny prick, its minuscule discomfort lost amidst the greater of the contraction, and a warm sensation began to flood down her legs. She slowly eased back onto the bed a few minutes later, feeling the faint beginnings of blessed relief.

Annie began to laugh as her pain-fueled stress began to dissipate; she reckoned the looks on George's and Molly's faces were the funniest things she had ever seen. They

were utterly gobsmacked as well as somewhat disgusted with what they had just seen: an enormous needle had just pierced her spine and a tube then inserted which was now pumping numbing bliss into her body. This particular bit of "backward Muggle nonsense" was priceless, as far as Annie was concerned.

Molly was the first to speak. After visibly swallowing her discomfort and nervously smoothing down her clothes, she stepped over to the bedside and took Annie's hand. "So, dear.... How do you feel now?" she asked in a guilty, worried voice, as if regretting she'd made the recommendation to Annie in the first place.

"It's nearly completely gone. I hardly feel a thing." Annie smiled in genuine relief.

Molly's shocked look returned. "Nothing? At all? Blimey!"

Annie shook her head and sighed. After a moment, she pointed to the foot of the bed. "Can't move 'em, either," she giggled.

Molly pursed her lips in stern disapproval. George had resumed his position at the head of her bed, stroking Annie's sweaty hair back away from her face, trying like hell not to be useless.

A nurse had come in to check the monitors, and she paused to urge Annie to take the opportunity to rest. "Doctor will likely dial it back in a bit so you can push. You'll need your strength then, dear."

Annie nodded, took George's hand, and closed her eyes.

Just after midnight on October thirty-first, Arthur Llewellyn Weasley was the first to make his entrance into the world. A mere fourteen minutes later, his twin brother, Fred Rhisiart, joined him. Tiny, perfect, and healthy, the first of a new generation of Weasleys had arrived.

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"My job is more complicated than yours, you know," George muttered through a yawn. He had just finished magically warming a bottle of formula with a burst of little blue flames flowering from his wand held beneath it. Now, he re-seated himself on the bed next to Annie. He was holding a tiny infant in one arm, the bottle expertly propped at an angle with his free hand. His head leaned back against the wall, but his face was turned toward her.

Annie could see his tired smile in the dim wand-tip light of the otherwise pitch-black room. She smiled back. "Mine's a bit more painful, though," she replied with a slight grimace. Her breasts were sore and nipples chapped from so much nursing over the past week since the twins were born. An identical, tiny body was happily and noisily sucking away there in her own arms now.

George snorted, then closed his eyes in exhaustion, giving up on the argument. It was one a.m., according to Annie's watch.

Her gaze fell again onto the miniature face just inches from her own. She could smell that powerful attractant that intoxicating baby smell emanating from the top of his fuzzy little head. It seemed to never leave her nose now; it had permeated everything in the room. It fed her almost bodily like manna.

She ever-so-gently stroked his bulging cheek with her finger, not wanting to disturb her infant son, but unable to resist making contact with his silky soft skin. He paused for a moment without opening his eyes, then began gulping eagerly once again. His little hand, weighing no more than a butterfly, was resting on the bare skin of her breast as he nursed. Her body heat was keeping it warm in the otherwise slightly chilly room.

Tears came unbidden to her eyes as her thoughts began to wander uncontrollably. It had been harder to keep them in check in the days since the twins had been born. Annie didn't want to startle the poor thing by leaking tears all over him, so she quickly wiped them from her cheeks with her free hand.

"What's wrong?"

Damn. She'd thought he still had his eyes closed. She didn't want to upset George, especially for some silly hormonal reason. She shook her head.

"Tell me," he pleaded, carefully shifting closer to her on the bed.

"It's nothing, George. Don't mind me," she tried to reassure him, only to begin to cry harder. *Dammit!*

"That's not nothing, Annie," he argued in a whisper.

"It's just...." Annie took a long, deep breath, wrestling for control. Her gaze returned to the infant in her arms. "When I think of how... ~~w~~*made* them... when we *loved* each other. *Because* we love each other...."

"How could she do it? How could she have looked at her own newborn baby and... just... left me there? Never looked back? I look at Fred and Art... and I think I'll go mad, I love them so much! I can't bear a minute not holding them in my arms, watching them breathe, being with them.

"How could she leave me? Why didn't she love me?" Annie began to sob quietly, much to her aggravation.

The bottle George had been holding was nearly empty anyway, so he gently wiggled it out of his son's mouth and propped him against his shoulder, in order to better comfort his weeping wife. He'd had a feeling this issue would surface at some point; perhaps sooner was better than later. To be honest, he had spent some time thinking much the same question himself these past few days. With his free arm, he held Annie tightly to him, resting his forehead in her soft curls.

"I don't know, Annie. It doesn't make a goddamn bit of sense to me. I ask myself that every bloody day, you know. How could anyone on earth not love you?"

A chuckle and smile broke through Annie's sobs as she wiped more tears away. His silly exaggeration was amusing. She loved him for trying so hard to cheer her.

"It wasn't my intention to be funny," he added, but a smile began to spread across his face as well.

"Your mother warned us about this, didn't she? The hormonal insanity?" Annie said, trying to laugh about it all.

"Chalk it up to hormones if you want," he said, not fooled for a moment. "But you ask a fair question, and you deserve an answer you'll unfortunately never get. It was completely fucked-up what your mother did to you. An absolute bloody miracle you're a normal person in spite of it. All I can say is, in an equally fucked-up and selfish way as well: I'm damn glad she did. Because you're *my* wife, sitting right here next to me in *our* bed, holding *our* sons, because of it."

George gently kissed away a fresh volley of tears now rolling down Annie's cheeks. "Sorry, love," he whispered, cursing himself for his selfish idiocy. "I made it worse, didn't I?"

Annie shook her head. "Better. Infinitely better."

Home

Chapter 43 of 80

George pulls off the mother of all pranks. Annie feels a bit overwhelmed. Together, they face a difficult task.

Chapter 43: Home

Winter 1998 1999

The Burrow was filled to bursting. Six Weasley siblings with spouses and significant others in tow, a set of nearly two-month-old twins, and a pair of beaming patriarchs had crammed themselves into the living room around a Christmas tree that morning. Inspired by the spirit of the holiday, they had even invited Aunt Muriel to join them for dinner, but she had thankfully declined to "join the herd at the trough," as she'd so eloquently put it in her reply.

Molly's knitting needles had been flying for months now, clicking away all day long in a corner in order to produce the quantity of jumpers needed for the holiday, including two very tiny ones. All morning long, people had been tripping over the avalanche of wrapped presents that spilled out from under the tree, the majority of which were toys for the two people in the family least likely to care and most likely to sleep through the entire thing.

Molly and Annie had been preparing for days and cooking since the early morning: two enormous turkeys, bushels of roasted and sauced vegetables, puddings, relishes, and half a dozen pies were racked and stacked all around the kitchen. Ginny, Hermione, and Fleur who was even more beautifully radiant now that she was pregnant herself had played with the twins, calling on Annie only when they needed to be fed so she could help Molly in the kitchen.

George and Ron had been conspicuously absent for a good portion of the morning. Annie wondered if they had perhaps planned another surprise fireworks display since the one for Molly's birthday had been preempted by Annie's labor. No one she'd asked would admit to knowing anything about it, though.

Finally, the two brothers reappeared just as dinner was ready. *How convenient... and typical*, she thought with amusement as her husband sidled up behind her, bestowing a distracting peck on her cheek while nicking a chunk of turkey from the platter she was carrying. Annie mused that George was very much like an ant that way, never failing to sniff out a food source and help himself to it.

The dining table was now crowded and cramped, groaning with food. The family sat with elbows and shoulders touching but smiling and laughing comfortably all the same. Annie smiled, suddenly struck by the idea that a claustrophobic person would be driven utterly mad in the Weasley home.

Then Arthur stood and made a moving toast about how love and family had supported them through dark times, how life goes on, and how new life would bring them joy. Glasses clinked, and rounds of cheers echoed throughout the room.

Annie smiled sympathetically at George when he set a plate of Canary Creams on the table, understanding the effort it took him to do so. Not that the spell was at all difficult for him; the hard part would have been how much it must've brought Fred to mind as he did so. They were the biggest hit of the table, though, and anyone who was distracted for even a moment during dinner found a few crumbs of one in their next bite. Everyone, including Molly, transformed into a large yellow bird at least once. Annie got canary-ed about six times; people began to suspect she enjoyed it and was doing it on purpose.

After the meal, presents were opened. Annie laughingly handed Molly her gift: a sweater she had attempted to knit herself, Muggle-fashion. It was a wretched failure with more dropped stitches and loose strings than not, but Molly was gracious and honestly touched by the effort. She claimed to love it.

Annie's present for George—an MP3 player—met with more realistic appreciation, even though he would be unable to use it while they still lived in the Burrow. He had long been quite interested in "Muggle" music and, for the most part, shared her taste—or at least claimed to enjoy whatever she had playing in the truck or in her room at the time. He looked genuinely eager to play with his present once he could safely get away from all the interference of so much magic. Though Annie figured she could have given him a pocket calculator, and he would have been thrilled with the non-magical, battery-operated gadget.

Annie gazed around at the cheerful scene and thought about how she would miss this happy chaos once her own house was finished in the spring. Not so much, of course, that she was willing to stay here any longer than necessary. For as wonderful as the Burrow was, she knew there was no long-term future for them staying there. Better to get started on a life of their own. She looked forward to it with excitement; George had predicted Mole Hill would be finished by the end of March at the latest.

Once the twins were fed and down for a late afternoon nap, along with a good deal of the rest of the family, George asked Annie to go for a walk with him.

"Let's wander by the house, and I'll find a proper place for this in the garden," she suggested with a smile. On their way out of the room, she grabbed the plaster garden gnome he had given her that day. Harry had laughed aloud when she'd opened the gift, and the rest of the family had looked bemused when Annie had been forced to explain yet another Muggle-magic misunderstanding. Molly and Ginny had berated George for what they deemed a woefully substandard and unromantic gift until Annie assured them she loved the little statue far more than she would have enjoyed something fancy or expensive.

Arm in arm, they strolled slowly across the frozen meadow that separated George's childhood home from their new house. From the outside, it looked completely finished, as it had done for a couple of months now. Annie loved the huge rectangular windows that filled the northern, southern, and western faces of their house which reflected the surrounding countryside like mirrors. She would often gaze at it in the afternoons from the Burrow's kitchen window, imagining how dramatic it would look when she planted a trailing rosebush at the top of the hill, how it would eventually cascade like a floral waterfall down the hill, washing over the corner of house before spilling finally to the ground below.

"Fancy a look inside?" he asked her as they approached the back door.

"Absolutely!" she cried excitedly. "You haven't let me in for ages!"

He had been dodging her lately, always complaining about being too tired to take her for a tour after he'd gotten home to the Burrow for the day. His reluctance, compounded by the fact she was now subject to the chaotically unscheduled demands of infant twins, had worked in concert so that she had not seen the interior of the house since long before the babies had been born.

"Happy anniversary," George said softly as he slowly opened the door for her. "Welcome home."

Annie stepped inside to find a fully finished, completely furnished living room. Her mouth dropped open in shock. She was stunned into speechlessness as he took her hand and led her further inside.

The silent living room felt enormous, especially compared to the overcrowded one they had just spent the afternoon in. A large collection of warm brown leather sofas and chairs were arranged to face a huge fireplace that was tall enough for a man to stand inside. The stone hearth of the floor spread upward along the entire eastern wall of the room, reaching all the way up to the vaulted ceiling. Two framed photos rested on the mantle, dwarfed by the dimensions of the rest of the room: one she had taken of George holding Art, the two of them gazing into each other's eyes, and the other was one he had taken of her cuddling with little Fred.

Behind the leather furniture were a large dining table and chairs, then a tall kitchen island with stools arranged along one side of it. She recognized all the furniture from catalogs they had looked at together—they had already agreed on everything that was now in the room—but he must have purchased all of it in secret, she reckoned. And

had it delivered. And assembled it. And arranged it.

Annie tore her eyes away from her new furnishings to stare at George's smugly smiling face. He watched the realization dawn upon her and nodded victoriously: she had just been pranked.

And not just some average, everyday, run-of-the-mill practical joke, either. This was the prank to end all pranks. The mother of all practical jokes. It was the stuff of legend: his eternal ace in the hole, a get-out-of-jail-free-forever pass. No retaliation would ever be commensurate, no repayment possibly sufficient, no thanks adequate and he knew it. He would always be able to play the "But I Gave You A *House* For Christmas" trump card.

You bloody, stupid, beautiful git, she marveled. *You got me.*

He led her past it all to the staircase. She only had a brief opportunity to glance at her kitchen, but she glimpsed through the glass cabinet doors that all her Gran's dishes and the many antique mechanical kitchen gadgets they had been collecting at fairs over the summer were already neatly arranged there.

He pulled her up the stairs. A balcony of sorts, the solid wall of which came up to George's hip, spanned the length of the second level, open to and overlooking the living room. He directed her past the first doorway and led her inside the second.

There she found two identical cribs made up with the baby blankets Gran had saved for her. It was warm and cozy in this room the nursery where their children would sleep from now on. The far wall was a large window which faced north, open to a vista of forest and hilly pasture now glowing golden in the late afternoon light. Movement above her caught her eye to her further amazement, George had enchanted the ceiling in this room to look like a night sky, complete with twinkling stars and an occasional meteor shower.

"It's beautiful," she whispered.

"Not nearly as good as the original," he muttered cryptically, then smiled at her. "You haven't seen the best part, yet." He led her back into the balcony/hallway, back toward the stairway to the first door they had passed.

Inside was the bedroom of her dreams. The walls of the room were a lovely, fragrant wood paneling except for the floor-to-ceiling window wall that faced north. The most ornate thing in the entire house she'd seen so far was the modern, simple curve of the wrought-iron bed frame that stood in the center of the room. George had draped her old blue patchwork quilt over the foot of it; the rest of the linens were a crisp, clean white.

Two large but plain dressers stood side by side to her right. She pulled open one of the drawers and found it filled with neatly folded clothes. "Is this what you were up to this morning?" she asked, the realization dawning upon her. "Moving us in?"

George nodded. "It's finished. At least, enough for us to live in now. Still a bit of work left to do in the unused rooms yet. Do you like it?"

"Do you really have to ask?" she wondered aloud.

He shrugged, a slight smile on his face. "It's nice to hear it, anyway."

"Of course I love it! It's everything I've ever dreamed of!" Annie exclaimed.

Annie paused for another minute, looking around, taking it all in. She was feeling overwhelmed and increasingly small and insignificant in the face of her husband's latest accomplishment. "George... you built a *house*... with your bare hands!" she exclaimed. "And it's utterly amazing, as usual."

George snorted, thinking she was exaggerating for effect. "Hardly bare hands. A wand eliminates a good bit of the manual labor. And Lee and Angelina helped loads. Lots of people did, you know."

She turned to face him, attempting to make him understand. "Once again, you are a shining example of supernatural superiority," she said, trying to compliment him. She held her hands out, indicating the house as proof.

"Oh, shut up," he chided her.

"I'm serious!" she cried. "Have you *ever* tried to do something and failed at it?" He opened his mouth to answer, but Annie quickly added a caveat: *Not* on purpose?" She anticipated he would bring up his OWLs, which didn't count. That made him pause for a moment, and Annie knew her argument was won.

Then George shook his head. "Loads of times, obviously."

She knew he was lying to make her feel better. "Name one."

"You're being ridiculous." He smirked dismissively. "I'll admit I come damned close, but nobody's perfect."

Annie wasn't ready to give up. She began ticking off all George's impressive qualifications that supported her argument. "You're a very talented wizard.... Don't roll your eyes plenty of people have told me so! You're clever, and brave, and determined. You're an incredible father...."

"Don't forget fantastic lover," he interrupted her, being facetious. He sat down on the edge of the bed and looked skeptically at her, eyebrows cocked askew.

"That goes without saying, of course," she agreed, far more serious than joking, but smiling at his attempt at humor anyway.

"This is quite a flattery fest. Happy Christmas to me," he said sarcastically.

"Why am I here? Why *me*?" she asked him, honestly curious. Out of everyone in the world, how was it she was the one standing here with him?

"Isn't it obvious?" he replied, reaching out for her and drawing her closer.

"Not in the least," she protested.

"You're just incredibly lucky, I suppose," he said, resting his chin on her chest and looking up at her, smiling impishly.

Annie laughed in agreement. It was pretty much what she had been thinking herself at the moment. She bent down to kiss him as a reward for his smart-arse comment.

"I confess it might also have something to do with the fact that I have trouble breathing... and my heart resists beating... without you," he added as he leaned back onto the bed, pulling her along with him.

"Did I forget to mention poet and world-class bullshitter in your list of stellar qualities?" she teased, lying atop him.

"Takes one to know one," he argued.

He gently rolled to the side, kissing her as he gently laid her next to him on the bed. He slowly began to lift the hem of her sweater as his hand caressed its way along her waist toward her ribcage. "Did I forget to mention you're a really brilliant... *mother*?" He ended with an exaggeratedly disappointed sigh as Annie halted the upward motion of her sweater.

He kissed her on the neck as she giggled. Then he propped himself up on one elbow and smiled wickedly at her. "I shall beget many excellent sons upon you, woman!" he proclaimed theatrically.

"Ack! You troll!" she laughed, weakly pushing away from him.

They lay on the bed for several minutes longer, kissing and holding each other, until Annie broke the silence. "Speaking of your many excellent sons.... They're likely going to wake up soon."

"Meet you back here tonight?" he offered.

"It's a date," she agreed, smiling.

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"Um... George? I hate to be the bearer of bad tidings, but you have a little... erm...mess... on your shirt."

It was January, and a driving, icy rain was pelting the giant windows of Mole Hill. Annie and George had been sitting on the sofa in front of a roaring fire, feeding the twins their mid-morning meal. Art was draped over Annie's shoulder, gurgling and cooing while she gently patted his back, trying to coax a burp from him.

George sighed. "I've been shat upon once again, haven't I?"

"Fred seems to have it out for you, for some reason," Annie giggled sympathetically.

He carefully stood up, trying to prevent the mess from spreading further. "I swear you're part seagull, son," he muttered as he headed toward the stairs.

The little baby in his arms giggled in response.

"I'll be up in a minute," Annie called after him. She took advantage of Art's alertness to play with him a bit, drawing out several smiles from him as her reward before they were rudely interrupted.

"OH MY GOD! That is DISGUSTING! It's absolutely EVERYWHERE!" George howled.

"George! Calm down!" she yelled up to him. "You're Daddy's overreacting, as usual," she muttered to the babbling infant in her arms. She carried him up the stairs and into the nursery, following the sounds of his brother squealing in delight and her husband dramatically gasping in revulsion.

"You're going to give him a complex, George. Stop freaking out about it. It's only a little poo," she scolded him.

"Only a *little*?" he cried incredulously. "I honestly don't know how a body that small can produce a volume of...." He quickly edited himself in the face of Annie's warning look. "Of *poo*... like that!"

Fred responded by screeching and kicking out his legs repeatedly. He had an enormous, toothless grin on his face.

"Look at him! He's bloody proud of it!" George exclaimed, pointing an accusatory finger at his son.

"Do you need my help?" Annie asked him pointedly, struggling to quell an amused smile that was beginning to spread anyway *Like father, like son*, she thought, remembering how, as boys, George and Fred both used to be exceedingly boastful about all their bodily functions.

"No," George muttered, chastened but still indignant. "I can handle it."

Annie set Art gently down on the other changing table and began to undress him. He was squirming uncooperatively, making the task challenging, to say the least. He never seemed to like this part: the changing of the diaper. She reached down to the shelf below, feeling around for a clean one.

"Where did they all go?" she mumbled to herself. She was positive she had seen a large stack there earlier that morning.

"Need something?" George asked her.

"Toss me a nappy, will you?"

"Where did the other stack go?" he asked, tossing a cloth diaper from the stack on his changing table toward her.

"Good question. You're sure you don't know anything about it?" Annie said, beginning to feel suspicious.

"About what?"

"The mysterious disappearance of the stack of nappies, idiot," she said testily.

"Why would I know anything about it?" he cried defensively.

"Revenge for being the one shat upon, I suppose?" she sighed accusatorially.

George snorted. "That's the story of my life though, isn't it? The universe craps on me, then I get blamed for everyone else's problems."

"Oh, you poor, pitiful thing," Annie said in a mockingly sympathetic voice. "Forgive me for thinking your innocence is unlikely, love," she giggled.

"I will if you give me back the bottle of powder."

"I didn't take it."

"Then why is it on your table?"

Annie paused for there it was, right in front of her. It hadn't been there a moment ago, had it? She was so flummoxed by it that she re-opened Art's diaper to check if she had used it unconsciously. Just as she thought: she hadn't. Still puzzled, she lobbed the little bottle to George.

Annie finished dressing Art and set him gently on his tummy on the floor. George did the same with Fred, then scattered half a dozen baby toys on the floor about them for their entertainment. Annie sat on the floor, her back leaning against one crib as he left the room, she presumed to change his shirt.

She leaned her head back against the slats and closed her eyes. She was exhausted and clearly beginning to crack up. Her imagination had been getting the better of her lately she was seeing things that weren't there, apparently. And missing things that actually were.

She heard George return a moment later and sit down next to her. Then she felt him lay his head in her lap, lacing his fingers together around her thigh which he used as a pillow. He yawned loudly.

Annie opened her eyes and smiled. *This must be what paradise feels like* she thought as she stroked George's hair, listening to the excited and contented noises of their children as they scooted and rolled themselves about the floor, snatching up a toy and eagerly shoving it into their mouths.

Delicately, she traced the outline of the scar left behind from George's missing ear with the tip of her finger. "I'm going to miss this... when you go back to work," she said softly.

It was time to broach the subject, she admitted reluctantly. As wonderful as the past month had been, together with him and the twins here in their new home and she would treasure it forever George didn't belong here with her. He was wonderful with the babies, but he was not meant to be a stay-at-home father, all day, every day. He was meant for something... not *better*, exactly, but... different.

George rolled his head backward to look up at her. "You're trying to get rid of me?" he asked, pretending to be offended.

She shook her head, refusing to make it a game. "It's pure selfishness that's kept me from saying it sooner," she replied. "I'm very jealous of my domestic bliss, you see."

"I don't want to go," he said. "I want to stay here with you lot." He reached up and touched her cheek with a finger.

"You have to face it some day, love," she said gently, combing his fringe back with her fingers. "It's what you were meant to do."

"We were supposed to do it together," he muttered in protest, pressing his palms into his eyes.

"I know," she said, tenderly pulling his hands away from his face so she could look into his eyes. "And it's not fair that you have to do it without him. But you do."

"Time for me to be a man about it, you mean," George sighed.

Annie shook her head once more. "No... just time to take another step forward."

He looked deeply into her eyes, as if he was able to pull something from them. "You're right, I know. Soon. I promise."

"Monday, I think," she suggested.

He winced slightly. "Monday," he echoed grudgingly.

WWW Redux

Chapter 44 of 80

Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes is almost ready to reopen for business. Annie makes her first visit to Diagon Alley and makes several interesting, disturbing discoveries.

Chapter 44: WWW Redux

March 1999

George, Molly, Ginny, and Ron had spent long hours over the last month working to get number ninety-three, Diagon Alley back in shape to open as Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes once more. It took three days just to clean up the mess left behind by vandals, another two weeks to repair and paint the walls and fixtures, and nearly a whole month to create enough inventory to restock the shelves. The preparation phase was nearly over now; another week and George would open his doors for business once more.

"Well, I'm off," George said one morning as he downed the last of a cup of coffee. He was dressed in paint-splattered jeans, worn yellow t-shirt with a cartoon monkey on it that had been a private joke between him and his wife for ages, and his grubbier old shoes. "Ginny and I are going to tackle the windows today. What an unholy mess all those posters made," he muttered while shaking his head. "I'll never do that again, for certain. It'll be nice to see the sun shining through them again."

"Are you sure I can't do anything to help?" Annie asked. The twins were seated in side-by-side bouncy seats on the floor, kicking and screeching joyously in tandem. She was mixing up a bottle of formula while pulling out some food from the refrigerator for George to take to work with him for lunch at the same time.

"Like you don't have your hands full here," he chuckled as they both became distracted by some sofa pillows beginning to bounce around the room behind them. "I can make my own lunch, you know," he added, gently taking over for her and nudging her aside with his hip.

Annie jogged over to the twins, caught the pillows out of midair before they became too dangerously energetic, and pitched them into the guestroom, shutting the door behind her. Luckily for her, it was out of sight, out of mind for the babies. They redirected their efforts to batting at the toys suspended from a bar on their seats with their hands and feet.

"Just trying to be Wonder Woman," she laughed as she walked back toward him.

"I'll let you if you promise to wear the costume," he joked back, amused by the obscure reference from their past. The three of them had gone through a comic book fascination one summer as kids. George and his brother had thought the stories of superheroes with such fantastical powers were hilarious, which had led to several interesting conversations regarding the limitations of what magic could and could not do.

At least, George and Annie had had the conversations. Fred hadn't been interested much. Then again, Fred had always preferred action to discussion. George sighed quietly to himself and redirected his attention to making a sandwich before any more of the darker thoughts could weigh him down. It would be hard enough today, trying to keep them at bay while he was at the shop.

"I will if you promise to enchant me my own invisible jet," she laughed, coming back into the kitchen to collect the bottle.

"Deal," he agreed, swatting her rump as she headed back to the living room. "But are you sure you wouldn't rather have the lasso? I know I would," he added with an exaggerated waggle of his eyebrows.

Annie rolled her eyes at her husband's innuendo and snorted.

"Have you thought any more about my suggestion?" she asked him as she sat down on the floor in front of the twins. She was referring to her idea for a Muggle-style grand opening celebration with prizes and free samples for customers. George had been intrigued by the idea and had promised to consider it.

"Yeah. I spoke to Millie Malkin about it yesterday, and she thinks it's a good idea, too. She said she might even do something similar on the day," he called out to her over his shoulder as he finished packing his lunch for the commute. "She also mentioned it to that Rodgers bloke over at Flourish and Blotts said he seemed keen as well."

"All of you should go in together and take out a big advert in the *Prophet*, then, to publicize it," she suggested. She picked up little Fred and laid him across her lap, preparing to nurse him. Once he'd latched on, she had found she could prop a bottle into Art's mouth with a free hand.

"Aren't you the savvy one?" he teased her as he walked into the living room on his way out the Floo. He had been thinking exactly the same thing just before falling asleep last night and planned to chat with his Diagon Alley neighbors about it this morning.

He was arrested momentarily by the sight of Annie hunched over awkwardly, sitting cross-legged on the floor with both twins greedily slurping away. "Is that how you've been managing it while I've been gone?" he chuckled in disbelief.

"Don't laugh. It works," she said warningly.

"Blimey, you are Wonder Woman," he said as he bent down to kiss the top of her head.

"I'll expect my jet by the weekend," she said, craning her head back to look up at him.

"See you later," he chuckled, stepping into the fireplace.

"Have a good day," she offered as he disappeared into green flames.

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The day had finally come. George had promised to take Annie to Diagon Alley for the first time today: the day before the grand reopening of the store. After three years of hearing about the shop but never being allowed to see it, she was at last going to visit Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes. And he would finally get the chance to introduce her as his wife to what amounted to the wizarding world with no more fear of repercussions. George had to admit he was nearly as excited as Annie seemed to be.

Annie had been too keyed up about the trip to sleep well the night before, and as they'd lain in bed, she'd peppered George with so many questions that he'd finally made love to her in order to shut her up and make her fall asleep. Though judging by her eager enthusiasm to participate, he'd strongly suspected afterward that perhaps her primary goal had been sex, rather than information, after all.

As they stood before their fireplace that morning, wearing dark grey traveling cloaks as a precaution against the soot (and the flames as well George was unsure how completely Annie would be protected from the magical fire, so he had made hers doubly-fireproof), he attempted to explain the process to her once more.

"It'll feel like we're spinning very fast. Just hold on to me tightly," he instructed her, remembering the first time he'd traveled by Floo when his father had taken him to the Ministry once as a small child. It had been the only day he had ever spent alone with his father before....

But he shook off the thought quickly. It was important to concentrate on the task at hand. "And keep your elbows tucked in close. You can close your eyes if you want," he offered.

"Okay," she answered with a bit of nervous excitement. "Let's do it, then."

They stepped together into the cold hearth. Annie tucked herself under his arm and wrapped her arms around his waist. He draped his cloak around her as he pressed her close with one arm.

"Have fun!" his mother called out, waving her fingers goodbye and smiling at them both encouragingly. She had offered to babysit the twins for the afternoon so Annie could travel with him.

"Diagon Alley!" George called out as he tossed the handful of Floo powder at his feet.

Annie felt like she was in the center of a flaming green tornado. She had promised herself to try to keep her eyes open, not wanting to miss any part of this magical experience. But after a mere second of it, she was feeling dizzy and sick, and her eyelids clamped down of their own accord. The next thing she knew, George seemed to take a step out of the roaring chaos of the tornado, pulling her along with him and onto something firm. The whooshing noise stopped instantly.

"We're here," he whispered.

Annie opened her eyes. Before her was a comfortably stationary, quiet, and dark tavern. She guessed it looked largely unchanged from the medieval period when it was likely built. It was smoky and smelled of stale beer and pea soup. As soon as her eyes adjusted to the lack of light, she noticed an ancient-looking man standing behind the bar.

"Hello, George!" called the hunchbacked man with a far stronger voice than she would have expected from someone who looked so decrepit. "And this must be your Annie, at last," he added, smiling at her to reveal nothing but pink gums.

"Hello," Annie said with as much confidence as she could fake at the moment, stepping out from beneath George's cloak.

"Annie, this is Tom, the barman here at the Leaky Cauldron," George said as they walked together toward the fellow.

"George here has told us so much about you," Tom rumbled, offering her his hand to shake.

"None of it is true," Annie said with a wink, her confidence growing with Tom's friendly manner, touched by her husband's excited grin. "George is a massive liar."

Tom laughed loudly while George smirked good-naturedly. "No... I reckon he told the truth about you, lassie," he replied.

The two of them removed their heavy cloaks and draped them over their arms. Annie began to look around her, noticing perhaps ten patrons in the tavern seated at scattered tables. Many of them were looking at her and George with varying degrees of mild to moderate curiosity. The two of them stood out like sore thumbs, she realized, dressed as they were in jeans, t-shirts, and fleece pullover jackets. Everyone else was wearing robes and other flamboyant wizard clothing; several of them were sparkling and, in one witch's case, faintly glowing in the darkness.

George promised Tom they'd be back for a meal later, then escorted her through the back door into a small courtyard. He tapped on a few of the bricks with his wand, like it was a combination to a lock, and led her through the magical opening that subsequently appeared.

Annie at long last set foot onto Diagon Alley with George by her side, arm in arm. "Where are we?" she asked in a hushed voice, her eyes roving between the shops lining the cobbled street.

George conjured up a map of London with a wave of his wand, startling Annie because he didn't typically do magic so casually or blatantly in public. It still thrilled her a little bit, whenever he did. She reminded herself that here, on this magical street, he had nothing to hide anymore, thereby calming her habitual apprehension.

He searched the map for a few moments, then pointed to a spot. "Here... sort of," he said.

"Sort of?" she asked, confused. How could a location be approximate?

"Yeah. Diagon Alley's Unplottable, see. The doorway of the Leaky Cauldron opens onto Charing Cross Road, halfway down between Old Compton Street and Denmark Street. So that would mean Diagon Alley is in this general spot," he explained, moving his finger around an area encompassing several blocks.

"That doesn't make any sense," she argued. *Those blocks* of London/reality occupied the area indicated on the map, none of which were labeled Diagon Alley. How could this magical street exist on top of, or hidden inside, or extra-dimensionally alongside London? The concept was too esoteric for her distracted mind at the moment, she reckoned, and she decided she'd have to ponder it later.

"You asked," he argued back, shrugging. The map in his hands vanished into thin air with a wave of his fingers.

Annie was enchanted by the street that stretched out before her. It was a scene out of...*Dickens? No*, she thought, *wrong by several centuries more like Shakespeare*. Buildings likely built during the reign of the first Elizabeth stood shoulder to shoulder, leaning out over the narrow street as if peering down at her.

It was mid-afternoon, overcast and chilly but dry. She scanned the wrought iron and wooden signs that hung over the street as they walked by, recognizing familiar names from conversations with George over the years: Madam Malkin's, Flourish and Blotts, Eeylops. Down the street she saw the sign for Ollivanders, which brought to mind the old man who had lived with them for a short while at George's Aunt Muriel's. She smirked when they passed by Quality Quidditch Supplies; that particular establishment that had been the bane of her existence for several years, she reckoned.

A few shoppers were out and about, most giving her quizzical looks, but nearly all the other shopkeepers made a point of greeting George enthusiastically as he made the rounds, introducing Annie to them in turn. While most of them had a quick word with him about the street-wide grand opening celebration he had apparently taken charge of, she would wander within the shops, marveling at the magical stuff there.

They finally reached number ninety-three, and Annie took in the sight of George's storefront. Stunned into silence for a moment, she tried to decide if it was what she had expected or not. The riot of garish colors, for it was painted up like a Victorian whore of a building, nearly hurt her eyes. Fuschia and chocolate and plum and mustard and olive green all fought tooth and nail with each other for attention.

"What do you think?" George asked her impatiently.

"Are you colorblind, love?" she asked softly, genuinely wondering if it was possible something like that could have escaped her notice before now. It was the only explanation she could think of how anyone could find this... this regurgitated rainbow... even remotely pleasing.

George laughed and shook his head. "Fred chose the color scheme. I didn't feel like changing it. Plus, we had loads of the old paint left over."

"So, you're telling me he was the colorblind one?" she teased, unsure if she felt relief with his answer or not. If she could no longer blame the appalling lack of taste on a genetic defect....

"I never thought about it before, but maybe you're on to something," he replied, suddenly thoughtful. George squinted at the shop's entrance. "He said it would help us stand out. And Fred always did like things to be colorful."

Annie smiled at him and took his hand. "Show me the inside," she suggested before the thoughts of Fred threatened to turn the happy, exciting day into a sad one. She could see through the windows that Ginny was already inside, arranging inventory on display shelves. His sister paused to wave at the two of them through the window.

Once inside, Annie was overwhelmed by the distracting displays of pranksters' supplies. It was a truly troublemaker's paradise. The fake wands and Extendable Ears sat quietly next to a jostling basket full of Decoy Detonators. A lovely antique wood and glass case displayed the various trick sweets he and Fred had developed over the years. One wall was dedicated to a menu of fireworks available for special order. It resembled the flashing electric scoreboards one finds at large sports stadiums.

"It's amazing! Better than I dreamed it," she raved. The calamitous color scheme seemed more apropos in here, a better fit with the promise of mayhem and limitless potential for disaster all around. Annie offered up a sacrificial shudder in honor of all the parental and professorial anguish about to be unleashed. She imagined the name of Weasley was about to be roundly cursed by them, at least as much as it would be spoken of in hushed and reverential tones by legions of teenage boys and girls.

"Thanks! It's all due to me," Ginny chimed in. "By the way, may I have an advance on my wages, dear brother?" she asked in her sweetest tone of voice.

"What happened to the money I paid you last Friday?" he asked, playing the role of stern elder brother to the hilt.

"None of your bloody business," Ginny retorted, all pretense of sweetness gone.

"What on earth do you need more for now?" he inquired less than politely.

"A girl's got to eat! I was planning to head over to the new noodle place, Nefertari's. I heard the Squirring Spaghetti is excellent."

"I suppose if it will get you out of here for a bit, then," he grumbled, sounding hopeful and looking annoyed. He tossed her a couple galleons from his pocket.

"Absolutely," Ginny assured him with a glint in her eye as she caught the coins. "I promise to take a ridiculously long lunch hour. Please be discreet, you two, and try not to knock over the large stack of Snackboxes in the back room I've been slaving over today," she said as she dashed out the door.

George was hard on her heels. "That's not what I meant, brat!" he yelled down the street after her, leaning out the door. He turned back to Annie as the door shut behind him, arms crossed in front of his chest. "We've somehow gotten a rather unsavory reputation amongst my family, you know," he scolded his wife, looking askance at her as if she was responsible.

"Don't blame me! You're the one who's insatiable." She giggled as he plastered a mock-mortified look on his face.

"You're the one who can't say no," he laughed, unable to sustain the pretense. "Moral fiber," he muttered under his breath, rolling his eyes.

A few minutes later, as he was pointing out to her some of the Knockturn Alley buildings visible from the window of the back room, they heard the bell ring in front. Annie followed George out, curious to see who had come in since the shop had not yet officially opened for business.

"Verity! It's bloody good to see you!" George called out, sounding enormously pleased. He had mentioned to Annie that he had contacted his one-time employee to ask her to return to her job. They had received a reply a few days later from her, accepting the offer. George had been immensely relieved not to have to train someone new in such a short amount of time.

"Hello, Mr. Weasley," a young, pretty woman smiled as she walked timidly into the shop.

"Annie, this is Verity Parson. You remember me telling you about her she used to work for us before. And please, Verity, call me George, already. This is my wife, Annie," he added with a smile, giving her shoulders a quick squeeze.

Annie smiled reassuringly at the shy witch. "Hello, Verity. I remember George and Fred both speaking very highly of you," she said.

"Oh!" Verity exclaimed quietly, looking surprised. Annie wasn't sure whether it was due to the fact that she wasn't expecting to see Annie or if she was shocked that Fred and George would have mentioned her. "It's very nice to meet you, Mrs. Weasley," she said politely.

Annie sensed something was off; there was something about the young woman's eyes that put her on her guard. For some reason, Annie felt like her presence was adding to Verity's discomfort. Her gaze was darting among the displays almost... nervously. She suspected the girl was considering dashing back out the door, like she might be regretting the decision to return.

"I'm so glad you agreed to come back and help. You've really saved me," George said as he made his way back behind the stockroom curtain, either unaware of Verity's discomfort or choosing to ignore it. "I'll be back out in a minute with your uniform robes," he called out from the other room.

Annie surreptitiously observed Verity while pretending to be fascinated by the boxes of daydream charms. She now noticed a brief, familiar look pass over the blonde girl's features as she watched George walk away: a sort of sad, disappointed longing, combined with a pained, spooked sort of expression. Like Verity was being confronted by a ghost of someone she had loved. Annie had seen the look once before on the face of none other than Angelina Johnson, now days away from becoming Angelina Jordan.

Annie began to follow the trail of logic. Angelina, like Verity, had found it somewhat disturbing to be in George Weasley's presence since the death of his twin. Angelina had confessed as much to Annie as they had spent time together, gotten to know one another, even become friends over the past several months. Annie knew from George that Angelina and Fred had had a bit of a fling when they were in school, therefore....

Oh, dear. Annie wondered if George understood the awkward position he'd put himself in by rehiring one of Fred's old flames. And while Angelina had moved on beyond her teenage romance with Fred, Verity possibly still held a candle for him, by the looks of it.

Annie puzzled for a moment why it wasn't the same for her. Why didn't she view George as a ghostly reminder of Fred? She supposed it must have something to do with the fact that she had loved George first and best, rather than the other way around, like Angelina and apparently Verity had done. She found it odd that they were so easily able to confuse their attraction to Fred with what must surely be a hollow echo of feeling for his brother, George. The concept seemed impossible to her.

"Erm... Mrs. Weasley?"

Annie was startled from her reverie by Verity's formal address. She looked at the girl, who somehow wore every emotion she felt, every thought she was thinking clearly on her face. *Poor thing,* Annie sympathized. She could see that while a part of Verity certainly wished there was no such thing as a Mrs. Weasley, she was also decent enough to have no intention of contesting the fact.

"Please call me Annie. I feel like Mrs. Weasley is my mother-in-law," Annie replied with another reassuring smile.

A flicker of a pained smile skittered across Verity's face. "Um... did I understand you to say that... Fred used to speak of me?" she asked.

Annie's heart went out to her as tears began to well up in Verity's eyes. And while Annie had for the most part made the comment to be kind, she decided it couldn't hurt to soothe the girl's aching heart with a bit of embellishment.

"Oh, yes," she told her. "He used to say how he thought you were kind... and clever...." Annie felt about blindly for more nice, generic, non-committal things to say, something that might cheer Verity. "And pretty. I can see he was right about that," she added for effect.

Verity dropped her gaze to the floor, smiling and blushing. "Fred was very sweet to me," she said in a hushed voice.

I'm sure he was, Annie thought, then sighed as a vision of a dashing Fred, smiling as he danced with an eager bar-girl, came to mind. "Fred was a very charming man," Annie agreed.

"I miss him," Verity added in a whisper, trying to discreetly wipe away tears from her cheeks.

Annie helped her out by looking out the window. "We all do," she commiserated, patting the girl on the shoulder. *Oh, Fred! How many broken hearts have you left behind?*

"Here you are!" George said as he emerged from behind the curtain with several bright fuchsia robes on hangers. His attention was on the robes, not the women, so he didn't notice that he'd startled them.

"Good Lord, George! Don't tell me *that's* what you're forcing her to wear while she works here!" Annie exclaimed as she got a look at the uniforms.

"What's wrong with them?" George said defensively as Verity began to smile.

"No one on the planet looks good in *fuschia*, for heaven's sake!" Annie cried, glad she could cheer Verity out of her sad moment of missing Fred. "If I were you, Verity, I'd refuse to wear them. It's not fair."

"What do you mean, 'not fair'? We've all always worn them," explained George, examining the robes as he held them up, completely at a loss as to why the two women were now laughing at him.

"Oh, no!" Annie wailed. "Not you, too! You must look utterly ridiculous or is that the whole point?" she said, nearly laughing hard enough to cry.

"Ridiculous?!" he sputtered, beginning to get riled.

"Do you not have a mirror in here?" Annie gasped. "Honestly... *fuschia*? With your hair and coloring? My God, you must be a sight in those. Tell me the truth, Verity. How did you not bust a gut working here before?"

"It wasn't easy," she confessed, tentatively joining in the teasing as George continued to splutter indignantly. "But I got used to it after a few weeks," Verity said, smiling but doing a much better job at containing her amusement than Annie was.

"George, it's cruel to make anyone wear such hideous things," Annie teased.

"She's never complained before! Have you, Verity?" George said in an accusing voice.

"I guess they're not so bad, really," Verity admitted sheepishly, taking the robes from him.

"There!" George smirked at Annie in victory. "Now stop trying to cause trouble, you meddling cow!" he demanded, putting his wife in a headlock and winking at Verity to let her know they were just playing around.

"She's only saying that because you're her stupid, mean boss!" cried Annie into his elbow, pushing against his back and arm with her hands, straining to escape.

"No, she's only saying it because she's *polite*, you wretched shrew," he replied. "You should take lessons from her."

Annie retaliated by slapping him hard on the backside. She could hear Verity laughing at the silliness of the situation.

"Not in front of the employee, dear," he teased her. "Sorry you had to see this, Verity. Not a pretty picture, is it?"

Annie screeched in frustration, jerking violently in an attempt to break his hold and nearly knocking George off his feet. He successfully maintained his grip, however.

"Don't hurt yourself, love," he scolded her after righting himself. Then he redirected his attention to his employee and, in an unruffled manner, said, "Thanks for coming by,

Verity."

"Let me go!" Annie demanded. "Now!"

"Certainly. As soon as you apologize for fomenting rebellion amongst the ranks," George insisted.

"The *ranks*?" Annie shrieked. "You have *one* frigging employee! Who helps you out of a misguided sense of pity on her part, I might add! Now that she sees what a troll you truly are, you'll have none!"

"Did you hear an apology in there, Verity?" George asked, affecting exasperation.

"Don't drag me into this, mister... I mean, George," Verity answered, laughing.

"You will be punished for this!" Annie howled in aggravation. "I don't mean you, Verity," she added in a far calmer, friendlier voice.

"That's a threat, stupid. Not an apology. Try again," George taunted her.

"George! This is starting to hurt!" Annie complained falsely.

"Oh, sorry," he said, releasing her instantly.

Annie grabbed and twisted an inch of flesh just under her husband's armpit as she dashed away from him, out of immediate reach. George roared in pain and swatted at her in vain.

"Sorry about that, Verity. It's been very nice to meet you. Would you like to join us for lunch?" Annie offered, darting around a display shelf, smoothing her hair, and smiling at the young woman who was looking amused by their antics. "I promise we can pretend to be mature adults for your sake."

"No, thanks," she answered, smiling in return. "I've got some other errands to run."

"See you tomorrow, early," George called out as Verity left. "Nice girl," he said to Annie once they were alone. "I'm lucky she decided to come back."

"Very nice," Annie agreed. "And very *pretty*."

"Aw," George laughed teasingly. "Feeling threatened, are we? That's adorable, that is."

"Which of you hired her?" Annie asked, giggling as George took her into his arms.

"Mutual decision, of course," he said, beginning to get that faraway, I'm-thinking-of-Fred-now look. "It was down to Verity and an older fellow named Ed. I thought Ed was a bit better at the charm work required, but Fred argued we'd likely sell more with her in the front room. He was right, as usual."

"I'm not surprised Fred chose the pretty girl over the bloke, but I am a bit shocked you didn't see through his excuse."

"How d'you mean?" he asked curiously.

"I'm hungry. Let's go eat," she suggested, avoiding the subject for a bit.

George looked at her skeptically, then shrugged. "I need to stop by the bank first," he said.

They left the shop, George enchanting the door to lock behind them, and he led her further down the street to an imposing vault of a building. The name "Gringotts Bank" was carved into the marble above towering columns. He explained that he needed to make a final deposit of money leftover from the mail order business during the war: the last stash of galleons from Aunt Muriel's place.

Annie spent the next twenty minutes astounded by the bizarre sights she encountered: goblins dressed like very small, very ugly Victorian gentlemen, a harrowing ride on an underground roller coaster, magical doors to cave-like vaults that opened with a touch of a finger. But of all the marvelous stuff she'd seen that day, both within the bank and outside it on Diagon Alley, the most mind-boggling thing was the enormous pile of money in George's vault.

"How much money do you have?" she gasped, her eyes forced to almost squint in the glare coming off a storybook pirate's treasure worth of gold and silver coins.

"We have," he corrected her as he was emptying out a sack, adding even more to the pile and causing a small avalanche of coins. "And don't forget half of it was Fred's that bit's mostly getting rolled back into inventory. And I owe you still for some of the cache supplies...."

"George, how much is this?" Annie demanded, losing patience with his dodging of the question.

"About ten thousand galleons, give or take," he said, his voice a mixture of nervous discomfort and glowing pride in the subject matter. He scratched at the back of his neck, avoiding her gaze.

"That's *after* we paid for the house?!" she exclaimed.

She started doing the math. With one galleon roughly equaling five pounds... that was fifty thousand pounds! And he had been out of business not sold a thing since before the final battle of the war for the better part of a whole year!

"We used your money for the house, remember?" he argued, referring to the inheritance and portion of the proceeds from the sale of her Gran's house, which she had forgotten had paid for the materials to build Mole Hill. Since they hadn't had to purchase land or pay labor expenses, the materials alone were the sum total cost of the house. It had been easier at the time to just use the Muggle account, rather than bother with the hassle of exchanging wizarding money.

"That's *our* money as well, remember?" she corrected him, then turned to ogle at the contents of the vault once more. Whatever money she had in the Muggle bank in Ottery, virtually the entirety of it was her inheritance from Gran, which she had done nothing to earn. She felt overwhelmed yet again today, this time by George's success.

"You're loaded!" she whispered, staring incredulously at him.

"We're loaded," he corrected her with a smile. "Half of all our good ideas were yours, you know. Not to mention the books you gave us to get us started."

"No!" she said, dismissing his equivocating. "You're *filthy, stinking RICH!*" she cried, barely able to process the reality.

She had always known the twins had found some success in business... had always predicted they would be massively *soeventually*. But to see it had come to fruition already, manifested in the obscene pile of gold before her, was something else entirely.

"Shut up!" he said, getting a little defensive about being wealthy.

Unable to think of anything else to say, she punched him in the arm.

The ride back to the surface was a quiet one. Annie wished she could have paid more attention to the trip some part of her mind recognized that the thrilling ride should be more fun than it was but she couldn't help but obsess over what she had seen.

She wasn't jealous of George's success; she was very happy for it, in fact, and felt it was well-deserved. Nor was she upset that he hadn't told her in detail just how successful he and Fred had been that would have been actual bragging, not the false kind he was so fond of, and she knew better than to expect such behavior from him. It was more like she was upset with herself for being so surprised by it, for failing to recognize how truly amazing his accomplishment was. *His many accomplishments*, she corrected herself dejectedly.

She was married to a Superman of sorts, she mused. A war hero who had risked his life over and over again to save others. A brilliant, inventive entrepreneur who was wildly successful and likely to be even more so in the future. A wizard who'd magically built the house she lived in. The sweetest, cleverest, most decent human being she had ever met, next to her Gran.

How much smaller, how much more insignificant could she be?

Stop it! she commanded her brain, determined not to wallow in such self-destructive thoughts. It wasn't George's fault he was so wonderful. And it wasn't just her good fortune he chose to be with her. After all these years, she recognized that he kept coming back to her for some good reason. He loved her, and that ought to say something about her better qualities, as well. He knew he could trust her. She was decent and clever, too, she reckoned. And made him laugh. That counted for something, surely. Even a superhero needed a place to rest his head and just be human for a while.

"I never would have taken you in there if I'd known you were going to get upset," he said quietly as they walked outdoors in the open street once more, finally breaking the silence.

"I'm not upset, George. Just... humbled. And terribly proud of you, by the way." She was ashamed that she was punishing him with her somber mood. He deserved better from her. Today, especially.

"I told you, it wasn't just me! You and Fred did as much if not more than I ever did to earn it," he argued in an exasperated tone, nudging her gently with his elbow.

"And of course, you're modest and humble about it, as well," Annie sighed.

"It's utterly maddening that you refuse to see how much we owed it to you.... How much I owe you still!" George said, rolling his eyes and throwing up his hands in frustration.

Annie smiled. She didn't feel like arguing about it anymore. Or even thinking about it. It was sweet of him to try so hard to make her feel better, to feel like she had contributed to his success.

"Okay. Dinner is on you, then, Moneypants," she offered. "And I'm soaking you for dessert, too," she teased.

George laughed in relief that the subject of their finances could finally be dropped. "Right. And then you will explain that scandalous comment you made about why Fred hired Verity instead of Old Ed...."

*

Annie woke up out of habit. She glanced at the clock to find it was two a.m. Even though the twins were now thankfully sleeping through the night, she still woke up at their usual feeding time. She quietly got up out of bed and tiptoed to the bathroom.

She had just climbed back into bed and arranged the covers back around her when she felt George sidle up behind her.

"Sorry.... Did I wake you?" she whispered.

"No. I was already awake," he whispered back, molding himself around her.

A smile began creeping across her face; she could feel he had divested himself of his pajamas while she was in the bathroom. Clearly, he was snuggling with a motive. She decided to have a bit of fun and play dumb.

"What do you want?" she asked innocently, yawning, as he pressed his face into the hair on the back of her head and inhaled. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up, like they always did whenever he did that.

"To make good use of a rare moment we're alone and not asleep," he replied. His fingertips stroked her abdomen he claimed to like the rippled texture of the stretch marks there. Annie was skeptical, but also touched that he would try to make her feel better about them.

"What woke you?" she asked. As if she didn't know.

"Dunno," he replied, kissing the little dragon on the back of her neck and sending a wave of chills that flew down her spine to lodge at the base of her pelvis.

She knew that was a lie. He'd been distracted the whole evening since they had gotten back from Diagon Alley and had probably lain awake all night, fretting about the grand reopening celebration now just a few hours away.

He began kissing her neck just below her ear, right in the spot he knew would quickly get her going. And it was working like a charm. Sometimes she even wondered if it was possibly a magically-enhanced sensation.

"There's no reason to be nervous about today, you know," she said, trying to reassure him. It was bound to be a raging success: the reopening of his shop. Everything he touched always was. She rolled slowly onto her back, and his kisses traveled along the necklace chain to where her heart pendant rested.

"I'm not nervous. I'm horny," he argued softly as he pushed her pajama pants down.

She wiggled a bit and helped kick them off with her legs. "It's going to be fine. Even better than fine," she averred, lifting her arms above her head as he pulled his old Quidditch practice t-shirt off of her. She rested them around his neck when he tossed it to the floor. "It'll be fabulous."

"Be quiet, will you?" he said, insinuating himself to lie between her legs.

"You'll be more successful than your wildest dreams," she persisted, knowing her sort-of-over-the-top, half-teasing encouragement was pleasing him at least as much as it was annoying him.

He kissed along her collarbone from her shoulder toward her neck, one hand resting along her jaw with his fingertips in her hair. "Please stop talking about it," he insisted, pressing his thumb firmly on her lips as he began nibbling on her ear.

She smiled, then tickled the rough pad his thumb with the tip of her tongue. A low, quiet chuckle rumbled from deep in his throat as she opened her mouth and gently bit down on the thumb for a moment, letting a hushed giggle escape herself. His hand pulled away from her neck and traveled down to cup a breast.

"Nothing will stop you now," she whispered into his ear, then began kissing his throat. She was only partly talking about his business ventures.

"I'm begging you to shut up," he groaned as she began to slowly move her hips against him.

"The world will be at your feet," she purred and curled her hands around the back of his skull, delighting in the silky feel of his hair tangled in her fingers.

"Shh," he whispered, kissing her mouth.

"We'll be rolling in galleons," she mumbled against his lips, unable to resist one more teasing comment, referencing her discovery of this afternoon. She kissed him back, on fire now as well.

He silenced her for a moment with his tongue, until she began to moan with pleasure.

Author's Note: This chapter was written before the release of the HBP movie and associated film trailers. For the record, I think the filmmakers did a fabulous job depicting Fred and George's shop way better than I did. I imagined it so much smaller! So, if you prefer to imagine Annie in that version of WWW, be my guest! ;)

In Memoriam

Chapter 45 of 80

Harry tries to make an apology. George sets him straight. Pie soothes all wounds. Then it's May 2, 1999: the first anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts. The Ministry has their proper ceremony. The DA has their proper wake. Rated for swearing, sexual references, and widespread inebriation, although everyone is of age now.

Chapter 45: In Memoriam

April 4, 1999 and May 2, 1999

Annie sat at the table, sipping a cup of tea and listening to the washing machine hum loudly as the load of clothes spun within. The twins were asleep upstairs, and George was in his workshop below, puttering about. Small, muffled explosions had punctuated the afternoon while he worked, and a weak but nearly constant stream of dingy smoke curled out from one of the ground-level windows. The house was otherwise quiet.

It was for this reason that she was startled by an unexpected knock at the door. She dashed over, wondering who would come visiting to Mole Hill who felt the need to knock at the door. Everyone they knew simply Floo'd in, and they were far enough back from the road that non-magical strangers never wandered by.

A further surprise greeted her when she opened the door. "Harry?"

"Erm, hi, Annie. Um, I was wondering... is George in? I went to the shop first, and they told me he might be here," Harry stammered uncomfortably.

"Come in, of course," she replied, stepping aside for him to enter. "Yes, he's here. I'll get him for you, just have a seat."

Harry came inside and stood awkwardly by the sofa. Annie poked her head in the door that led downstairs and called for George to come up, letting him know he had a visitor.

"Who is it?" he called up from the bottom of the stairs.

His face had a few comical streaks of greenish-purple soot across his brow, making her giggle. "Clean yourself off and come see Harry. He wants a word with you."

"Harry?" he mouthed, looking puzzled. He shrugged and furrowed his brow, silently asking her what it was she thought he wanted.

Annie gave a tiny shrug and shook her head slightly in response. She was as baffled as he was at this point. She pointed at her forehead, then at him, to let him know he wasn't presentable yet.

"Tell him I'll be up in a sec," he replied loudly, she assumed for Harry's benefit, wiping his face with his sleeve.

Annie turned back to Harry. "Can I get you anything?" she offered politely.

"Erm, no, thanks. I'm fine," he replied, squirming a bit.

Whatever it is, it's bound to be unpleasant Annie mused. Confident George would tell her all she needed to know later, she smiled reassuringly at Harry. A few moments later, she could hear George stomping up the stairs. "I'll just leave you to it, then," she offered quietly to the preoccupied young fellow.

"I'll be out hanging the wash, love," she said to George as she left the room.

"And I'll keep an ear out for the boys," he assured her. Turning toward Harry, he gestured for him to take a seat on the sofa. "What brings you 'round, mate?" he asked as he sunk into the neighboring chair.

"I... I meant to come... sooner than this, actually," Harry stammered.

Immediately, George was on his guard. He figured whatever was making Harry so uncomfortable was likely to make him so, as well. "Okay...."

Harry took a deep sigh and bent his head. "I just wanted you to know... all of you... your whole family, I mean... but you especially...."

George sat silently, at an utter loss to comprehend what was so difficult for Harry to say.

"I just need to tell you... I'm sorry."

George mentally scrambled to think of what Harry could possibly be referring to. Had something happened between him and Ginny? Were they on the outs once again? If so, why the hell would he feel the need to apologize to her brother?

"Sorry for what?" he asked with trepidation. He genuinely liked Ron's best friend and Ginny's love interest and wasn't sure he wanted to hear whatever confession seemed

to be imminent.

Harry finally looked him in the eye. "For what happened. To you."

George's brow furrowed, thrown for a loop. "To me?"

"Last year," Harry mumbled patiently.

Last year? He hadn't seen Harry at all last year. At least until...

Harry hung his head once more as he saw the look of understanding dawn on George's face. "It was my fault. All of it. If I hadn't been distracted by the Hallows.... If I had just paid attention to Dumbledore.... And all of you paid the price for my stupidity."

George's mind reeled. Usually, whenever the events he suspected Harry was referring to were brought to mind, George would begin to sink into a dark place. But today this moment, at least felt different. The darkness wasn't closing in, pulling him downward. Instead, it felt more like a glowing, growing heat inside him. "Are you seriously trying to tell me you think...?"

"I'm telling you I *know* what I did. I *know* that I'm responsible!" Harry cried, cutting him off. "I *know* that my actions led to them all getting killed. And I'm sorry. George, I'm so sorry!"

George felt his pulse begin to race, felt the fury of it spreading warmly through his limbs. "You fucking idiot," he mumbled.

"I know!" Harry moaned, wallowing in his misery.

"No! You don't! You really are a piece of work, you know that?" George hissed.

"Trust me, I know." Harry winced, bracing for the outpouring of George's angry grief that he seemed to think was certain to follow.

"Shut up and listen to me, you arrogant little prick!" George snarled.

"Sorry?" The stunned look on Harry's face told George how unexpected his reaction to the apology was.

"Let me just get this straight. You, Harry Potter, are taking responsibility for the death of my twin brother?"

"It was my fault, George," he argued. "Everyone was there that night because of me." A tortured, angsty look took hold of Harry's face, begging to be smacked off.

George stood up, unable to contain the anger boiling up within him by any other method. He began to pace in front of the hearth, clenching his fists, reminding himself not to wake his sleeping children by screaming at the unmitigated idiot sitting on his sofa.

"Everyone there was fighting for their own reasons, not for *you*!" George whispered in a barely restrained voice. "And I bloody guarantee you every Weasley would have been there even if your sorry arse had been killed when you were a baby! Every one of us would have been there, taking a stand against evil and fighting for what we believe in, no matter what!"

"The fact remains that none of you would have been at Hogwarts that night if I hadn't been so thick! If I had just figured it all out sooner," Harry protested.

"What... then you could have committed suicide right off, destroyed that nasty bit of Horcrux inside you and saved us all the trouble?" George seethed. "That's utter bullshit, Harry. Not even you could be that stupid."

Harry stood now as well, glaring at George angrily. "Well, actually, that is sort of what I did do, when you think about it," he snapped.

George snorted, unimpressed by his friend's umbrage. "Fred always swore you were a nutter," he muttered. Taking a few deep breaths and swallowing the worst of his anger, he summoned a calmer voice from somewhere inside himself. "Look, Harry, mate you're a decent fellow and I consider you a friend. Hell, I'll even welcome you into the family as a brother when the time comes. But you can be a helluva self-absorbed prat sometimes."

"Self-absorbed?!" Harry cried incredulously, growing increasingly defensive at George's less-than-understanding appreciation of his sacred remorse.

George chuckled in response. "Your reaction proves my point. Right now I can see you're thinking, 'How the hell can someone as self-sacrificing as me be self-absorbed,' right? I mean, you literally gave your life for the cause, for Merlin's sake, as you so patiently just pointed out. You're a hero. Our savior."

Harry rolled his eyes. "That's not what I meant."

"And Harry, I grant you every part of that," George continued as if Harry hadn't interrupted, "but it doesn't mean your head isn't fully up your own arse."

"But..." Harry sputtered.

George cut him off before he could say anything else more infuriating. "With or without you, everything Dumbledore said about the power of love being the only true weapon against evil like You-Know-Who was right. With or without you, I would have been there at Hogwarts, or wherever the battle would have been, putting my life on the line to defend my family, to protect Annie and my unborn half-blood children," he said, stabbing his finger toward the nursery door upstairs. "And if I were there, I assure you *nothing* would have kept Fred away. So by your stupid logic, I am as responsible for Fred's death as you seem to think you are."

"That's insane," Harry snapped.

"Well stated... for a *loony*," George retorted. "Harry, Fred was my twin. I was with him for the entire year you and Ron and Hermione were gone. I reckon I come a bit closer than you ever can to understanding his state of mind leading up to the battle. And it may apparently surprise you to learn that neither of us really gave a shit whether you were there or not. Everything was coming to a head anyway you just happened to turn up in the right place at the right time, probably due to that freakish string of good luck that seems to follow you around."

"I made the decision to go to Hogwarts, fully knowing it might draw Voldemort," Harry insisted. "It was *my* stupid decision to put everyone there in danger."

"Because they were all so safe where they were before you got there with Snape as Headmaster and You-Know-Who pulling the Carrows' strings!" George argued. "And you really should have known Neville and Ginny had been fomenting student rebellion all year long without you. Should have expected them to alert the DA with the Hermione's coins."

That twist of logic made him stumble. "No... I mean, maybe, yes. The point is I should have thought it through a bit more," Harry stammered, trying to mentally get back on his feet in the argument.

"You still don't seem to get it!" George snarled. "You, the Great Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived, are not the center of the goddamn universe, despite what you might think to the contrary. You are neither all-knowing nor all-powerful, and no one reasonably expects you to be so, except yourself for some reason. Only the most conceited, ignorant git thinks *everything is his fault!*"

"I've got news for you, Harry: shit happens. And you are not God. Get over it, already."

Harry huffed in frustration, screwing his mouth into a grimace. "I'm just trying to say I'm sorry," he began again.

"Enough, already!" George shouted, then hushed himself immediately. He held up his hand, commanding Harry's silence, while he listened for evidence he had woken his sleeping sons. After several moments of silence, he continued in a much quieter tone. "I will accept your 'sorry' as a condolence, even as a commiseration. I miss the hell out of him, too. But fair warning to you: I will punch you in the face if you ever try to take the blame for his death again."

Harry blew an angry, frustrated sigh. "Fine. I've said what I came here to say."

"All right, then," George said tersely, flopping into a chair. "End of discussion."

An awkward silence descended upon them. Harry's hands were fists clenched at his sides, and he was staring at the floor. George suddenly noticed his own fingers were drumming on the arm of the chair and halted them.

"Want a slice of pie?" he asked him.

Harry swallowed, then looked up at him. "What kind?"

"Apple, I think," George said. "Annie made it this morning."

"Yeah, all right," Harry replied.

*

The day was warm and grey. Low clouds scudded across the sky. Occasionally, a fine mist would descend from one of them for a short while. Otherwise, the air was still. The army of workers who'd usually surrounded Hogwarts Castle for most of the past year, rebuilding it where possible and expanding it elsewhere when not, was silent today out of respect. Shops in Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley were shuttered; the Ministry offices were closed. It was a national day of mourning.

By midday, a vast throng of people had assembled on the damp grounds of Hogwarts. Directly in front of a large, veiled monument, in the shadow of the still-ruined section of the castle, a hundred and fifty chairs were arranged in prim rows. Each seat was filled with a mourner of one of the fallen heroes of the Battle of Hogwarts, as it was now known. Stretched out behind the seated was a solemn crowd of at least twice as many people, standing shoulder to shoulder, clad in dark robes, staring gravely ahead. Despite the mob of people, the air was quiet as everyone awaited the start of the ceremony.

Annie and George sat together at the end of a row. It was well past the twins' usual naptime, and by some miracle, they had fallen asleep in their parents' arms. The entire Weasley family was seated near the front, surrounded by their usual retinue of otherwise family-less Order members. The ranks of honorary Weasleys were burgeoning at this point; Molly perpetually seemed to be a magnet for orphans in dire need of a mother figure.

Like myself, Annie mused.

Annie watched mutely as a very small man directed a choir of young people in a mournful song. Dignitaries she neither recognized nor had ever heard of stood and spoke briefly in turn. It was painfully hard for her to pay attention to them.

It was hard to be here at all. The monstrous grief within her rattled the bars of its cage. She tried to concentrate instead on little Fred's innocent sleeping face, on his comforting weight in her arms.

Finally, the curtain fluttered, then vanished, and the monument was unveiled. A gleaming white marble phoenix, captured in the moment of landing on its perch with its wings curled like an embrace in front of its body, rested atop a six-foot-high by ten-foot-wide cubical base. Sitting as close as she was, Annie could see that more than a dozen names were carved on each of the two faces of the base closest to her, memorializing merely half the defenders of Hogwarts who had perished in the battle. She closed her eyes rather than accidentally read his name.

A tall, elderly woman strode confidently to the front of the audience. In a strong, lovely brogue, she introduced the next speaker: Harry Potter. The man of the moment. The hero of it all.

The crowd behind the seated mourners began to murmur and rustle. This is what they had come here to see, what they had been waiting for with bated breath.

Harry walked purposefully up to the front, like he didn't really want to be there and wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible. Annie knew it had taken a great deal of coaxing and arguing and laying on of guilt-trips by a lot of different people to get him to speak here at all. He owed it to the ones who followed him, fought alongside him, and gave the ultimate sacrifice, they had all argued, until he had finally given in and agreed to come.

At least he doesn't revel in it: this adulation people seem to shower him with Annie thought charitably. And as she had gotten to know him better during the past year, on a personal level as her sister-in-law's boyfriend, she was able to see he was a nice enough fellow. A bit overly serious, sometimes, in her opinion. Perhaps a little too sensitive about some things.

Harry now turned to face the crowd, pointed his wand at his throat, and began to read from a piece of paper. His voice boomed throughout the gathering.

"We come together today to remember those who gave their lives one year ago. They did not die in glory, for nothing about war is ever glorious. They did, however, die with honor, defending Hogwarts, their families, and our comrades. They died protecting a way of life that values people and love more than power.

"Voldemort is gone. He was destroyed because we were all willing to give our lives for something worth believing in. Every single one of the heroes we remember today made that choice of their own free will. They chose love and were willing to die for it.

"We who stand here today because of the sacrifice of our loved ones must never forget. We must never let anyone ever forget. Let us honor their sacrifice by living the kind of lives they chose to defend. Lives committed to love, and justice, and doing what is right."

An almost perfect silence answered Harry's brief words: no animal moved, no breeze ruffled, no bird called. The only sounds that interrupted the quiet were a few scattered sniffles and muffled sobs from the ranks of the seated mourners.

Well done, Harry, Annie thought. *Brief, inspirational, not too saccharine*. She'd shivered when he'd said the forbidden name aloud, as had most of her family around her. It wasn't the first time she'd heard him say it; for some reason, it seemed to be Harry's thing to do so. *Being an icon himself, perhaps he revels in the iconoclasm*

After five minutes of mutely observed grief, the stately witch returned to dismiss the audience. The standing multitude turned and began walking back toward the village. The rest of the day and the school's grounds were reserved for the families of the heroic dead.

The seated mourners slowly began to rise and queue up to file past the monument. Each stood silently before the names that meant the most to them. Some gathered into various vessels a few drops of water that dripped from the marble bird's eyes into a small, shallow collection bowl before spilling over the edge and onto gravel below. Afterward, they greeted and consoled each other, spreading about the grounds, assembling into small groups which dynamically dispersed and reformed anew.

The Weasleys held themselves back and were the last family to arrive at the statue. They arranged themselves into a sort of semicircle before Fred's name for a few moments of silence. Molly and Arthur had silent tears on their cheeks, holding each other for comfort. The Weasley siblings stood stoically around them, gazing at the statue, or the ground, or the sky. They held their arms folded across their chests or with clenched fists firmly shoved into pockets. Annie held George's free hand; each of

them still carried a sleeping infant in their arms.

George's breathing started to become irregular as he fought to maintain control. The uneven, jerking movements woke little Art, who reached up toward his father's cheeks with innocent curiosity to examine the tears he found there.

Annie heard George's struggle over the growing clatter within her own soul. Tears were coursing down her own cheeks as she handed the still-sleeping baby Fred to Charlie, then took little Art from her husband's arms to pass off to Ginny. The rest of the Weasleys retreated, leaving George and Annie to grieve in peace.

Annie held her husband in her arms as he gave up the battle for control. George bowed his head, burying his face in her hair, and cried as his trembling hand rested on Fred's carved name. Annie could barely hear his sobs over the cacophony the caged monster was making within her, having now fully awakened. It snarled and howled as she clung to George.

They had struggled so valiantly for a year now, trying to move beyond the crippling grief. Missing the integral part of them that had died in the battle. Trying to fill the gaping hole that existed by loving each other even more. They'd followed everyone's advice to just put one foot in front of the other, worn a brave face for the world. They'd trusted that time would help heal their wounds, help ease their pain. But today this moment proved too much to bear.

George and Annie held each other and wept where they stood before the statue.

No one else, it seemed, was ready to leave. Several of the older generation struck up a song, and as more people joined in, the swelling sound of it broke through George and Annie's little shell of sadness. The crowd of voices united in a lovely, sad harmony, drawing their attention away from the turmoil within to the comforting camaraderie surrounding them.

The worst of the grief-squall was spent now the monster within Annie was quieting down again and they began to compose themselves in order to rejoin the family.

"Sorry about your hair. I know how vain you are about it," George said with a half-smile as he wiped his wet cheeks with the back of his hand.

"Don't you start with me I'm in no mood whatsoever," she threatened, but with a timid answering smile and snuffle.

They began to walk together toward their waiting family, hand in hand.

Annie smiled warmly at her very large family that now encircled her, who were all smiling back at her as they embraced each other in turn. Everywhere she looked, there were loving and supportive Weasleys surrounding her. She, who had grown up without parents or siblings, with no one but her grandmother, now had more family than she'd ever imagined possible.

All were smiling except for Fleur, that is. Her usually serenely beautiful face was pale and haggard now, anxiety shadowing her otherwise preternaturally lovely features. Annie wondered when this change had come over her for she had been seated at the far end of the row from Fleur during the memorial ceremony and of course had been preoccupied since.

"Fleur, are you all right?" she asked worriedly.

Her sister-in-law looked at her with frightened eyes. "I think perhaps I need to sit down," she replied.

Fleur gripped Annie's arm painfully as she helped her into the seat that had just flown to them and settled on the ground. Her grip didn't loosen once she sat, but held tightly for a minute longer. Bill fell to his knees in front of her, beside Annie, staring into her eyes, asking his wife what was the matter.

"The baby. I think it is coming," she whispered.

Of course. Annie should have recognized that look of anxiety in Fleur's eyes. They were a mirror of her own a mere six months ago. Annie hugged Fleur's shoulders, whispering words of reassurance, while Bill yelled for his mother.

Molly quickly deduced what was happening and immediately began barking orders to her sons. Percy sprinted into the castle's hospital ward to alert Madam Pomfrey while Charlie and Bill first helped, then ultimately carried Fleur into the castle. Molly trotted behind them, calling out encouragement and direction.

"No shortage of drama here," mumbled Ginny with a roll of her eyes.

Another long-winded funereal song had finally finished, and the excitement of Fleur being carried off had lightened the mood of the gathering considerably.

"Enough o' this weepin'! Let's have ourselves a proper wake!" someone shouted in a thick Irish accent. Annie recognized the voice *Seamus, wasn't it?* from the "secret" planning meeting held at her home a few short weeks ago. Cheers went up all around as the younger members of the crowd heartily agreed with him.

A month ago, when word had gone out that the Ministry was planning a memorial service to be held at Hogwarts, George and his school chums responded by going into immediate action. Their fallen friends would never be satisfied by an "officially sanctioned" event, they reasoned, so why should they? And when it came to matters unofficial and non-sanctioned, there was really only one man left to turn to, and that man was George Weasley.

Annie recalled the meeting: a dozen or so of George's friends and siblings had gathered at Mole Hill to brainstorm. At first she'd feared that they would try to disrupt the official ceremony in some inappropriate way, and while she agreed with such a sentiment in principle, she was rather tired by now of being a target for official disapproval.

Seamus, whose voice Annie had just recognized, was the one who'd suggested a "proper" Irish wake (for no one could combine political protest with mourning like the Irish, he'd argued), complete with live music, tables groaning with food, and rivers of booze. It was surely the only reasonable send-off, he'd insisted, and everyone at the meeting had agreed wholeheartedly.

They had all pitched in funds though George and Harry had ponied up the lion's share, being by far the most solvent of the group and Seamus had contracted the band, who just happened to be one of Fred's old favorites. Ron had enthusiastically volunteered to work closely with the proprietress of a local pub in Hogsmeade regarding the libations. Hermione had then glared daggers at him, for some reason unknown to Annie.

On George's signal (an enormous volley of fireworks, what else?), the band began to play a rousing rebellious tune, exhorting them all to resist authority whenever possible. Kegs were tapped and bottles were drained. Everyone sang and danced long into the evening. Annie had to admit this would have been Fred's idea of a cracking good time.

News came down from the castle several hours into the party, just before the sun set, that Fleur had delivered a healthy baby girl, eliciting a loud cheer and multiple toasts from the revelers. Soon after, Arthur offered to take the twins home to the Hill so Annie and George could stay with his friends.

Annie sat with George within a small group of chairs near the fringe of the party and a good distance away from the band (they'd chosen the quieter spot earlier for the twins' sake). Harry had parked himself there with them, George's younger siblings in tow, most likely to hide out from the majority of the crowd. But the crowd found him nonetheless nearly everyone in attendance filed by and paid their respects.

George's friends from school came and went all evening long. Many of them she met for the first time, finally putting faces to names she'd heard for years, and her husband introduced her as his wife to each and every one with pride. She giggled at the astonished faces that resulted each of the dozen times he retold the story of how they'd met in the woods of his home when they had been merely seven. How they had secretly exchanged letters via owl post right under the noses of all the professors of Hogwarts. By the end of the night, he was boldly claiming to have fallen in love with the tiny Muggle girl with a bowtruckle stuck in her hair up in that oak tree that very first day.

What a load of crap, she laughed to herself. It took this fool a decade to figure it out.... Though I wasn't much cleverer, was I?

She learned so much from listening to their reminiscing, their stories of school, and the battle tales from the war. She discovered the name of the student resistance group during his last year in school had been "Dumbledore's Army" George had never told her that before. She could see they all still considered themselves members.

A fellow named Neville fished out some sort of magical coin from his pocket to show her, having something to do with the DA. It was difficult to understand his explanation or anything that any of the rest of them said, for that matter as the night was getting late, and they were each and every one of them tanked pretty well up by that point.

Annie and Hermione seemed to be the only sober ones remaining in their now small group. Well, the dreamy girl named Luna might not have been drunk, but she still seemed a bit flighty to Annie, so she couldn't be sure. Annie offered to track down the older Weasley brothers, hoping to find them in a better state to help move the partygoers back to their homes, if Hermione would keep an eye on the group currently assembled.

It was nearly midnight when Annie found Charlie and Percy seated on some steps leading up to the castle. She was relieved, yet mostly unsurprised, to find them both sober and far removed from the festivities. Percy wasn't much for parties that didn't involve schmoozing with Ministry officials, and Charlie always made himself scarce around strangers, she'd learned. She recruited them to help bust up the last tenacious bit of the party, which primarily consisted of every Weasley younger than they and their respective companions.

"Percy, would you mind taking me back home first so I can get things ready for the rest of them? Your poor mum doesn't deserve an invasion of rowdy, stinking drunks tonight," Annie offered.

"Excellent plan, Annie," Percy replied with a prim nod. "Best to keep her in the dark about such shenanigans."

Poor Percy, thought Annie. He could not help but sound pompous, apparently. Her two brothers-in-law rose to follow her back to the party.

"Charlie, can you take Angelina and Lee back to their house?" she asked while they walked.

He shook his head apologetically. "Erm, I've never been to their place before, so...."

"Damn," she muttered. As convenient as it could be, Apparition proved itself rather limited at times. "Oh, well; I suppose it'll be the sofas for the lads and the guestroom for the newlyweds."

They reached what was left of the happy circle of drunks; according to a giggling Hermione, Luna had taken Neville off by herself. The thought occurred to Annie that perhaps Hermione was not quite as sober as she had first assumed.

"Right, let's do this before one of these useless sods passes out," Annie directed. "Hermione, you keep an eye on Harry and Ron until Charlie and Percy come back for them on the second trip. Then you can take Ginny back to the Burrow, and *try* to keep out of Molly's sight. She won't be thrilled to discover her daughter in this state, to say the least."

"Whaddyamean?" Ginny asked, honestly curious. She apparently couldn't hear herself slurring the words together.

"You're pissed, Ginny, love!" giggled Harry, patting her cheek clumsily as she smiled blearily back at him. He planted a sloppy kiss on her upper lip, then giggled, "Oops. I missed. Shall I try that again?"

Ginny grabbed him with both hands and pulled him toward her. They both fell over onto the ground into a giggling heap.

"Gaahh," Ron groaned, sickened by something. Whether it was the sight of his little sister and his best mate drunkenly slobbering all over each other on the ground or the alcoholic contents of his own stomach was unclear. He leaned over, hands on his knees, and noisily spit on the ground.

"That's disgusting, Ronald," Hermione barked, wrinkling her nose and swatting at him.

"Good luck with them, Hermione," Annie laughed. She'd tugged George up out of his seat and was passing him off to his brother. "Okay, Charlie have you got him?"

"Have you got me, Charlie?" echoed George, grinning broadly as he leaned heavily into his brother.

"Let's go," laughed Charlie, bracing the extra weight by holding George's arm around his shoulders.

Annie took Percy's arm. A disorienting moment later, Annie was far from the damp, foggy Scottish highlands and in her warm, dry home. She discovered Arthur dozing on the sofa. She gently woke him and let him know he could leave, and probably should, due to the company she now had to prepare for.

"Oh, dear. I suppose I should have seen this coming. Anything I can do to help?" he asked.

"You could clear the way for Hermione to bring Ginny back to the Burrow, if you know what I mean," she said, grimacing slightly. She was tossing blankets and pillows on the sofas as she spoke.

Arthur nodded. "Understood. Consider Molly corralled. I'm off," he chuckled as he disappeared.

"I'll take him from here, Charlie," she said softly, moving toward him and George. "Go get the lads now and set them up on the sofas, please. Warn them from me if either of them chucks in my house, I'll have their miserable guts for garters! And try to keep the noise down, if you can, for the babies' sake."

Annie took George by the waist and one arm to lead him, rather than support him. He was inebriated, for sure, but still managed the stairs just fine. She heard Charlie and Percy pop out of the house behind her. She had just managed to wrangle George into their room and sit him down on the bed before she heard more pops, followed by a bit of scuffling downstairs, announcing the arrival of her houseguests.

"Whassat?" George asked, puzzled by the noise outside their bedroom door.

"Your drunken brother, his drunken best mate, and your drunken accomplices in crime, the Jordans," she informed him. She pushed him down onto the bed and began to undress him, starting with his belt.

"Not tonight, Annie. 'Mm a bit pissed, love," he said in an inappropriately loud voice.

Annie heard Ron giggle downstairs. "Hush! George, be a good boy and cooperate, will you?" she begged in a whisper, but smiling herself as she tugged off his trousers. Realizing too late it would have made more sense to start with them, she began to wrestle with his shoes.

"Give it a firm tug that's a good girl!" he encouraged, still far too loudly.

More giggles erupted downstairs.

"You are such a pain in my arse!" she complained, laughing quietly. "Help me out, why don't you?"

George sat up and kicked off his shoes, then pants. Meanwhile, Annie went to their bathroom, collected a bottle of aspirin, and a filled a large carafe with water. She returned to find George still sitting up as she left him, gazing at her with slightly unfocused eyes, a silly smile on his face.

"Oh, honey! You're gonna to have a full head tomorrow. Take these and drink as much of this water as you can stand. D'you think you might be sick?" she asked sympathetically as she stroked his hair.

George shook his head as he swallowed the aspirin and downed the glass of water.

"All right, then lie down and sleep it off, I suppose. I'll be back in a bit," she counseled him.

"Okay, Annie," he said pleasantly and obeyed her without further comment.

Annie walked quickly down the stairs. Charlie was still there, looking up at her as she descended. Two large lumps were motionless on her sofas, draped with afghans knitted by Molly.

"Lee and Angelina seem to know their way around the place, and they're in the back of the house somewhere. Ron emptied his tank before we left Hogwarts. I think Harry's not nearly so bad off he should be fine," he reported in a whisper.

"Thanks, Charlie. Can I get you anything before you go? There's a bit of a roast in the fridge, if you're hungry," Annie offered.

"Nah. See you later," Charlie said as he walked out the door, headed to the Burrow.

Annie walked the rounds, checking on all her guests, dispensing water and aspirin and wastebins to everyone. Fifteen minutes later, she crawled exhaustedly into her own bed, cringing as she imagined what tomorrow morning would be like with a house full of raging hangovers and rambunctious six-month-old twins.

George rolled over and pulled her closer.

"Not tonight, love you're a bit pissed," she teased him.

"Maybe just a kiss and a cuddle, then," he murmured, giving her a few soft kisses on her neck and earlobe.

"Go to sleep, George," she urged gently and somewhat reluctantly.

He sighed and flopped his head back onto his pillow, but didn't let go of her. Which was just fine by Annie.

Author's Note: There seems to be some disagreement regarding the year of Victoire Weasley's birth, depending on the website used for source material. I chose for her to be born on the first anniversary of the battle (as does HP Lexicon), keeping her age closer to that of Ted Lupin's.

If you are interested in hearing what I imagined the wake music to be like, please listen to anything by Flogging Molly. None of the following songs had been released by the date of this memorial, but they evoke the spirit of the thing, I think. In particular, take a listen to any (or all) of these tunes:

[*Rebels of the Sacred Heart*](#)

[*What's Left of the Flag*](#)

[*To Youth \(My Sweet Roisin Dubh\)*](#)

[*Screaming at the Wailing Wall*](#)

[*Requiem for a Dying Song*](#)

[*\(No More\) Paddy's Lament*](#)

[*You Won't Make a Fool Out of Me*](#)

The Summer of Love

Chapter 46 of 80

Annie and George return to their beach-camping nostalgia, and a new Weasley family tradition is born. The family is slowly but surely healing and moving on.

Chapter 46: The Summer of Love

Summer 1999

George was awakened this morning by Annie's gentle kisses on the back of his neck and shoulder, her fingers stroking his chest. He smiled without opening his eyes, relishing the arousing sensations. But all too quickly the stressful demands of the day to come returned, crashing back to mind and scattering all other, more pleasant thoughts. There was far too much to do and too little time to do it in. Deadlines were looming, and his professional arse was on the line.

"What time is it?" he asked through a yawn.

"Don't ask," Annie moaned, propping herself up on her elbow.

"That late? I've got to get moving. Sam and Verity will be in early this morning." He threw off the sheet and sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"The two of them can surely handle it for an hour or so," she argued, tugging gently on his arm.

"That's not very fair to them," he chuckled as he stood up and stretched. "Sam's still new, and they both look to me to set an example, you know," he teased with a wink.

"Come back here right now," she ordered.

George smiled at her frustrated face but shook his head. "This should be the last week of it. We ought to have the big order finished then. Don't roll your eyes..." he said as he headed into the bathroom.

"You'll get this order done just in time to accept the next one which will overstretch you further," she argued with a sigh, flopping back onto the pillow in exasperation.

"I seem to recall you were far more supportive of this a few months ago," he called back from the shower. "'You should open up the shop again, George,' you said. Couldn't wait to get me out of the house, in fact," he needled her.

"That doesn't give you license to ignore me," she whined, raising her voice to be heard over the rush of water. "You've got to do something! Either hire more people or automate the process."

George thought about what she'd said for a moment as he brushed his teeth in the shower. "Automate the process?" he asked, mumbling around the toothbrush in his mouth.

"Use that brilliant mind of yours to invent a machine to make this stuff without so much hands-on involvement. Surely that would be a better use of your time than cooking up little batches of sweets by the cauldron," she argued from the vicinity of the sink.

"Maybe... maybe I'll have a chance to think about it this summer. Things are just too busy right now. Interesting idea, though," he offered.

Annie was already downstairs by the time he got out of the shower. He could smell coffee brewing as he dressed and heard the twins begin to wake up. George walked into the nursery, looking forward to greeting his boys. He always got a kick out of their smiling, happy faces every morning.

George had discovered soon after their birth that the more time he spent with them, the easier it was to feel cheerful *it was even more reliable an antidote for the sadness than working on the house had been*, he thought to himself as he dressed them for the day. His sons' innocent, eager faces always looked so thrilled to see him, and their happiness worked like a charm to dispel any lingering depressive thoughts.

After several minutes of tickling and playfully tossing them in the air, he scooped them both up in his arms and carried the giggling infants down to their mother.

"What's this?" he asked as he set each squirming boy into a high chair. There was a small vase with a few sprigs of blooming hawthorn sitting next to his place and the morning paper. Even though Annie had only planted the cutting from her grandmother's tree this past fall, it had already grown to a respectable size, largely due to a generous dose of mooncalf dung fertilizer. Thanks to the same treatment, the rosebush at the top of the hill had already begun draping itself over the roof of the house, just as Annie had envisioned.

"Take them in to Verity. She deserves a little something for putting up with you," Annie said with a smile.

"So what does that entitle you to?" he teased.

Annie stuck out her tongue at him. "I could do with an hour of your undivided attention," she complained.

George smirked at her comment but inwardly conceded the point: he had been neglecting Annie lately. In the past year, the mood of the wizarding world had turned from one of fear and distrust to an atmosphere more conducive to celebration and fun, and he was reaping the benefits. He and his employees, and a few family members to boot, had all been working like house-elves for the past several months, trying to keep up with demand.

But while he'd been working long hours at the shop, Annie'd been left home alone with the twins, bearing the brunt of the parenting duties. Lately, by the time he got home often after the twins were down for the night they were both too exhausted to do much more than collapse in bed. Maybe he *would* put an advertisement in the paper next week to try to bring in some more full-time help, like she'd suggested.

Annie sat down in front of the two boys and began feeding them their breakfast, cooing and coaxing them in her sweet mum voice. The little babies beamed up at her with their toothless grins, gobbling their oatmeal and mushy bits of fruit as she praised them.

George loved watching this scene repeated every morning; it was one more cheering thing to help him face the day. He marveled as he was forced to admit she was astonishingly good at it being with their children. Motherhood had found Annie tapping into previously unknown and unexpected depths of patience, especially remarkable considering he'd never had personal experience of such patience on her part before. He smiled, taking a moment's enjoyment of the irony.

Annie was just... good, he reflected, cereal crunching noisily in his head as he chewed. There was no other word for it, really. His mother positively doted on her, thrilled to have another female within her domestic domain; his father delighted in having a Muggle in the family on hand to explain the function and purpose of all the mysterious gadgets he'd collected over a lifetime. His brothers and sister appreciated her down-to-earth manner and good-natured sense of humor.

And she was good for *him* miraculously so and he knew it. She deserved better, and he resolved on the spot to be that for her. He would definitely hire more help, the sooner the better. In his head, he began writing the want ad on the spot, planning to owl it over to the *Prophet* this very morning... if he found a spare minute.

"Right. I'm off," he announced as he walked round the table, doling out kisses on each forehead.

"The flowers, George," Annie reminded him.

"Mmm. They do smell nice. Thanks." He smiled as he collected them and headed toward the fireplace.

George arrived at the shop a few minutes later. Good old ninety-three, Diagon Alley it had taken quite a bit of elbow grease to get it back in shape to open for business just a few months earlier. *Bloody ruined mess, it was*. But now, it was bright and well-stocked for the moment, anyway.

He predicted the shop would be quiet for a couple of hours yet until they opened the door for the business day. He checked the clock; Verity would probably be here in half an hour or so, Sam shortly thereafter. He set the vase of flowers on the worktable next to his desk, then sat down to begin writing out the want ad, taking advantage of the temporarily peaceful atmosphere.

He turned on the little music device Annie had gotten him for Christmas that year. Each morning, she would queue up one or two songs for him to listen to, either a tune from her own collection or perhaps something she herself had recently discovered. It was her way of helping him to do research for the Muggle-music-themed radio show he and Lee were considering doing together (as if he wasn't spread too thin already). Still, it was fun, and he and his friend rationalized that the time and effort they spent on it served a higher purpose if it helped the wizarding world better relate to the Muggles they were all surrounded by perhaps even encouraging a more fellow-feeling, if possible. He envisioned it would become a sort of Muggle appreciation society for wizards. *Excellent with music, those Muggles*, in his opinion.

As he listened to the song she had prepared for him this morning, it didn't take him long to decide that while he enjoyed it, this one would likely never hit the airwaves of their show. The rhythm was slow and the bass line very deep; the melody was haunting. A woman's voice, sounding like a mythical siren, softly crooned increasingly suggestive lyrics. Quite conducive to trouble.

Message received, Annie, he thought, smiling to himself.

George took a deep breath as he pressed the button to replay the song. The pleasant scent of the flowers had now permeated the work room. He considered perhaps

knocking off early tonight and getting home before the sun had set, for once.

"Those are for you from Annie." George nodded toward the vase on Verity's desk as she arrived for work shortly after.

"Oh, how lovely! Please thank her for me," she answered with a smile as she leaned close to the sprigs and inhaled their fragrance.

They began to work together on the latest Ministry order for shield cloaks. George found it deeply ironic that the defensive products he and Fred had developed as a prank were just as popular, if not more so, than the rest of the Wheezes. Never in their wildest dreams had they ever intended to produce anything sensible or practical. Galleons were galleons, however, he had to admit.

The thought of Fred only caused him a moment's pause this morning. It had been a real struggle to daily face this place again when he'd first begun reestablishing the shop. There were so many memories of his brother they seemed to have soaked into everything here. It had been almost as bad as their shared bedroom at the Burrow. But the sadness of it had been slowly dissipating as he and his family had all worked together to resurrect the joke shop. Now it stood almost as a tribute, of a sort, to laying the dead to rest and moving on with the living. The bustle and busy-ness of each day helped make the memories easier to tolerate, if not enjoy. Perhaps enjoyment would come in time as well, he reasoned hopefully.

Too soon, it was time to open their doors for the day. As Verity donned her uniform robe, George took another deep breath. His nose filled with the perfume of the flowers. *They really are potent*, he thought with mild surprise.

"Why don't you take those out to the front with you so you can enjoy them," he recommended. The scent was actually becoming distracting. Not to mention that suggestive song that was replaying itself in his brain. He shook his head for clarity, then continued with the job at hand.

About an hour later, George had made excellent progress in filling the latest order. He looked up at the clock, wondering where Sam had gotten off to; he had stepped out to the front fifteen minutes ago to ask Verity a question. George was just about to call out to ask Verity if she had seen him, when he heard... a giggle? From behind the stockroom curtain? He took a few steps closer to the curtain, intending to check.

"You look exceptionally lovely today, Verity," he heard a hushed male voice say.

Sam?

There was a quiet pause, followed by Verity scolding, "Sam, stop it...." She very obviously didn't mean a word of it.

George cleared his throat loudly, and Verity immediately dashed out from behind the curtain into the showroom, face ablaze. Sam followed a few moments later, a completely unconvincing expression of innocence plastered on his features.

George gave him a stern look. "Sam, let's focus today and get this done, all right?"

"Right," he agreed. Sam took a deep breath, filling his lungs. "This place smells great today! What is it?"

"Annie sent Verity some flowers...." George's answer trailed off. His brow furrowed as a thought occurred to him. He was beginning to smell a rat. A very pleasantly-scented, attractive little rat, but a rat all the same.

He ambled over to his desk, above which was a shelf with some old reference books on it. He pulled out a Herbology text, flipped through it until he reached the entry for hawthorn, and read to himself, "The stale, sweet fragrance of the trimethylamine the flowers produce makes them suggestive of sex, especially to men."*

A slow smile spread across George's face as he shook his head, marveling at his wife's cunning. He was ninety-five percent sure that Annie sending him off with those flowers that morning was not a coincidence. He didn't know how Annie knew, but was willing to bet that she did. Maybe she had read it in one of his books at home? Regardless, he no longer believed that the vase of hawthorn was a casual, spur-of-the-moment present for his overworked employee; rather, it was a deliberate sabotage of the work day.

He glanced back at his randy-eyed new employee, Sam Spellman, who was currently staring lustily at the curtain that led to the showroom, chewing on his lower lip. *Neither does she seem much concerned about collateral damage. Poor Sam... or maybe I should say lucky Sam?* he mused. Verity certainly hadn't seemed averse to his attentions a moment ago.

George considered asking Verity to get rid of the flowers but was unable to conjure a decent excuse for doing so. The truth that his wife was so sexually frustrated she was resorting to manipulative torture tactics was too profoundly embarrassing to be confessed. The situation was made all the more galling by the realization that Annie would have counted on that, too.

He tried breathing through his mouth or alternately taking shallow breaths instead. Neither strategy helped.

He forced himself to hold out against the hawthorn and the maddening song in his head until almost eleven a.m. "Sam, I... I promised Annie I would take an early lunch at home today," he began to explain, conceding defeat.

The eager, calculating look on Sam's face in response to this news was disheartening. Feeling increasingly helpless himself, George made Sam swear that he would continue the work they had begun this morning. Hoping for the best that the fellow would leave Verity alone while he was gone but resigned to a more realistic sense of futility, George promised to be back at the shop in an hour, ninety minutes at the most, after lunch.

Ahem. Lunch. That's right.

As George stepped out of the fireplace into his living room, he noted the house was quiet. The twins were sleeping, just as he'd predicted. As he scanned the room, he counted no less than four vases filled with hawthorn scattered about. The house was rife with their perfume. He realized then he had never stood a prayer against his wife's onslaught. Resistance was not only futile but was also rapidly becoming physically uncomfortable.

Annie was perched on a stool, leaning onto the counter, reading something. She blew a small bubble of gum which popped as she sucked it back into her mouth. It was a warm, late spring day, and she was wearing her ubiquitous jeans; these had the cuffs rolled up to mid-calf, revealing her delicate ankles and bare feet. Her lightweight plum-colored sweater, his favorite for the way it set off her eyes, was zipped barely past halfway up, the sleeves pushed back to her elbows.

Pulling out all the stops, aren't you, love? he laughed inwardly.

"About time you got here," she said without looking up at him. She continued reading, instead. Or at least pretending to do so.

He strode purposefully across the broad, open room. "You're almost as subtle as a Hungarian Horntail," he said with a smirk. He tossed his work robe onto the stool beside her. As he stood next to her, he caught a glimpse of something black and lacy peeking from beneath the sweater in the vicinity of her cleavage. George reflexively took another deep breath to steady himself, only to fill his nostrils with more of the seductive perfume. *Fucking hell.*

"Clearly not obvious enough. Took you all of four hours, didn't it?" she retorted, still staring at the book but smiling slyly now. "Must be the hole in your head," she mumbled under her breath and blew another bubble with her gum.

George lifted her off the stool, threw her over his shoulder, and carried her quietly giggling upstairs to their bed.

"It truly pains me to say this, due to the already colossal size of your fat, swollen head, but this was a brilliant idea," Annie confessed aloud.

"How could you doubt it? You've known me for how long? Fourteen years? And yet you continue with the perverse notion that I could ever be wrong." George looked down at the small figure sitting next to him on the sand. "Your mum is silly," he explained to his miniature companion.

A small clump of sand hit him on the chest. He made an exaggerated, you-got-me face, then flopped to the ground. The distance wasn't far he had been reclining on his elbows, after all. All the same, a squeal of delight erupted next to him.

Annie wiggled her fingers, and the small mound of sand covering them collapsed, eliciting an enchanting giggle. She held out her hand to receive a small shovelful of sand being offered to her. "Thank you, my darling," she purred.

"Mum... Mum," cooed a tiny voice.

"Silly Mum," encouraged a much deeper one.

"See-yee Mum."

"That's excellent, Fred! Your Uncle Fred would be very proud!" George cheered.

Annie smiled, happy to hear George mention his late brother in a casual, lighthearted way. And he was right: the elder Fred would have been very pleased indeed to hear Annie's infant son insulting her.

"Now your turn, Art. Say, 'Silly Mum.' Go on...."

"See-wee."

"Silly Mum...."

"See-wee... Dad!"

Annie burst out laughing. "Good boy, Art! My little hero!"

"Oh, Art, how could you?" moaned George. Still reclining on the sand, he lifted the little body into the air and held him suspended there. Art giggled with glee as his father swooped him from side to side.

"Dad! Dad!" cried little Fred, arms raised, pleading for his turn as he clambered up onto George's chest.

George set Art down on his stomach next to Fred and addressed his troops. "We must stick together, men! Resist the maternal menace! And don't forget, Daddy's *always* right." The twin boys collapsed in giggles onto the sand as George tickled them.

Annie dusted the sand off of their bodies, out of their dark red curls, laughing herself. "Time for lunch, you lot."

"Yunts! Yunts!" they echoed her as best they could as they were each scooped up by a parent and carried off toward the small group of tents pitched where the sand ended and grass began. Only two of the tents were real; the rest were magical mirages serving as decoys to prevent any nosy Muggles from being curious as to how fourteen people could fit inside only two small tents. Not that there was any great threat of that happening; the repelling charms had worked perfectly to keep everyone else off this part of the beach for the past week.

"This has been really good for your Mum and Dad, vacationing with the lot of us," Annie said, picking up their previous conversation. "And I'm so glad Bill brought Fleur and the baby, even if it's just for the weekend."

"I got the distinct impression our dear sister-in-law is not pleased about being forced to rough it," chuckled George, always relishing what he deemed was the unwarranted discomfort of others. Fleur had not been here a full day yet but had already made several disparaging comments about the lodging arrangements.

"She doesn't seem the outdoorsy type, to be honest," Annie agreed. "Though how anyone could consider this to be roughing it is beyond me," she added, still boggled by the luxurious interior of the five-bedroom tents, each fully furnished with bathrooms and a kitchen.

"Not much like the old days when we came here as kids," he commented.

"No, I suppose not," she agreed.

Annie changed the subject before their reminiscing had a chance to darken the happy mood. Too much thinking about his brother was never a good thing for either of them. "And what about Percy? Bringing yet another new girl along? I didn't happen to catch this one's name.... He seems to be cutting a wide swath through the Ministry's female population," she wondered aloud.

"Which doesn't say much for them," George replied with a slightly disgusted smirk.

"Oh, I don't know.... Still waters run deep, they say," she giggled, baiting him.

"Yech! I think I'm gonna spew," George said, repulsed. He pursed his lips together, theatrically fake-heaved, then ballooned his cheeks with air. In his arms, Little Fred began to try to poke his fingers into his father's mouth to see. "Only joking, Fred," George explained. *Not really, though*, he then thought silently to himself. *Gah!*

They had reached the tents. Molly and Arthur were seated on lounging chairs in the doorway, enjoying the view and the air, watching their other children cavorting with their friends nearby in the waves. They rose to greet the returning family.

"Come and see Granny now, dearies!" Molly exclaimed, beaming with joy at her twin grandsons who nearly jumped from their parents into her outstretched arms.

"Leave them with us while you get everything ready," instructed Arthur, smiling and gathering his namesake from Molly to bounce on his lap. "Now, boys, tell us everything. Did you see the great bird swooping by? That was a seagull," Annie heard him explain as she and George headed into the kitchen to prepare the boys' meals.

Bill, Fleur, and baby Vickie (a name they never used in front of Fleur out of fear of being hexed for their trouble) were the first to join them inside for lunch. They had mostly been keeping to the tent since Victoire was still practically a newborn. The rest of the family straggled in as small groups of two or four at a time, scrounging food for themselves and grabbing whatever seating they could find. Meanwhile Annie, having nothing else to do since Molly and George were feeding the twins, offered to hold the baby while Fleur ate.

Annie marveled at the world of difference between this tiny, stunningly beautiful infant girl and her own boisterous boys. Little more than half a year separated them in age, but lovely and cuddly as she was, Victoire did... well, nothing really but sleep and eat. In contrast, Annie's own boys were engines of discovery. Just this morning, they had pulled themselves into standing position and cruised along the benches everyone was currently seated at or standing around.

"They'll be walking in no time, Annie," Molly had said, her tone a combination of pride and sympathy. "Not even a year old..." she had marveled, shaking her head in

amazement.

Annie's focus snapped back to the present, and she watched her boys for a moment. Molly was trying to coax Art to eat the last few bites of his lunch. He was having none of it, screwing his mouth shut and turning his head away from her. Molly tapped the spoon gently to his lips, and suddenly, the food vanished from both the spoon and plate instantaneously. Molly huffed in shock.

"Aw dun," Art announced to her with a smile.

Annie observed George and little Fred next. Fred had made a typical mess of himself and his surroundings *or was it George who had made a typical mess of Fred?* she wondered. The little boy watched intently as his father summoned a flannel and began cleaning him up. A moment later, a tin of cookies resting on the table began noisily lurching toward Fred in fits and starts. The event remained unnoticed in the bustle of the table at least, by everyone but George and Annie.

George paused in his cleaning efforts and smiled proudly at his precocious son. "That's it! Concentrate," he whispered encouragingly.

Annie gazed back down at the sleeping infant in her arms and tried to recall the twins at the same age. She was troubled by the difficulty she had of it. They had already been older than this by the night of her own birthday earlier that year. She smiled slightly to herself with the memory.

The night of her birthday, Molly and Arthur had just left Mole Hill to head home after an evening of babysitting when Annie'd heard noises from the nursery. She'd crept upstairs and opened the door to a shocking sight: the twins had been cooing with delight, making those sweet, happy-baby sounds that were impossible not to smile along with, while every toy in the room spun around in midair as if on an invisible carousel.

"George, stop it!" she had called softly to her husband, smiling to herself at the charming sight. "They should be sleeping."

"Stop what?" His voice had answered her from further away than she'd expected. He'd still been downstairs, by the sound of it.

"The spinning toys and put them away where they belong. Don't just leave them where they drop," Annie had scolded him.

George had bounded up to her then, taking the stairs two or three at a time to reach her. His face had registered curious concern, which then morphed into open-mouthed shock as he took in the spectacle in the room.

"It's not me! I swear!"

That hadn't been the first incident, either just the most memorable one. Odd little things had been happening for weeks, at that point. Annie had been blaming her own sleep-starved brain and faulty senses, making excuses, unwilling to consider an alternative explanation so early in their infancy. Usually around a few years old, Molly had explained, the magic would surface if it was there. But there was no denying it now: George and Annie's twin sons were definitely born wizards.

And the Muggle doctor what a joke! He had warned her not to be overly concerned if the twins were a bit late in reaching developmental milestones, due to their slightly premature birth. "They'll catch up in time before school at least," he had assured her. And now, her ten-month-old boys were days away from taking their first independent steps, already talking up a storm.

Her reverie was broken by Fleur's hand on her shoulder. *Merci, Annie. I will take her now,* she spoke softly.

Annie kissed her niece's tiny, smooth forehead, then handed her off to her mother with a smile. Fleur whisked her off to their room.

It was time for her own little ones to go down for a nap, she reckoned. Annie began to rise from the table, but before she could even speak, George had already collected the boys and headed toward their little temporary nursery in the tent.

"I'll put them down," he called back to her over his shoulder. "What'll it be today, boys: 'Babbitty Rabbitty' or 'Jeremiah Fisher?'"

Meanwhile, Annie and Molly began clearing off the table.

"Wish he'd been half as helpful while he was at home," muttered Molly with a teasing smirk.

"Just goes to show you raised him right, after all!" Annie laughed.

Half an hour later, as Molly and Arthur were seated again in chairs under the tent's awning, Annie and George approached them from inside.

"They should be down for a couple of hours now. Would you mind keeping an ear out for them, Molly?" Annie asked softly.

"Of course, dear. No trouble at all," Molly assured her. "Go have fun for a bit, you two."

"Thanks, Mum," George said and, to Molly's astonishment, gave her a peck on the cheek.

George and Annie strolled toward the surf, hand in hand. Molly watched the couple as they walked down the nearly deserted beach directly in front of her. She wondered absentmindedly whether George had cast the repelling charms, or had it been Arthur? Either way, it was a lovely, peaceful spot, empty but for their family.

"This is so relaxing. Why did we ever stop camping, Arthur?" she asked.

"I think it had something to do with the fact that we were nearly murdered in our beds when our last tent burned down around us," he chuckled. "Officially, of course, we never discovered who was responsible."

"Oh, yes. I remember that now," she replied, thoughtfully. "No wonder I blocked it out," she murmured.

Several minutes later, Molly harrumphed as she saw George and Annie strip down to their swimming suits at the waterline. "Since when did young people stop wearing clothes at the beach?" she muttered.

"What was that, dear?" Arthur asked distractedly. He had been drowsily reading the newspaper.

"The swim costumes these days or lack thereof, more like," she scolded.

"Oh, my," he agreed, taking in Annie's bikini and George's low-slung trunks which were not out of place with what any of the rest of their children and their companions were wearing, all of them lounging on the sand under umbrellas. "I'm afraid we're showing our age, I suppose."

George and Annie were each waist-deep in the water now. Together, they dove into an oncoming wave. George surfaced a short distance further out from shore than Annie did. They laughed and swam and splashed together for a while as Molly and Arthur gazed out at the sea.

"They'll be sixteen forever, those two," Molly mused.

George, who had risen to stand and face the beach, suddenly buckled and submerged. Annie resurfaced a second before he did, laughing and attempting to dash away. The patriarchs were not the only ones watching the scene, apparently; the group lazing on the sand laughed and heckled him.

George lunged after Annie, splashing as much as an elephant in pursuit. He caught her, lifted her above his head, and threw her body sprawling into the next wave to a

smattering of applause and male cheers.

"Lucky them," Arthur chuckled as he reached out and patted his wife's hand.

*

"How did you manage it, George? I mean, these first few months with Victoire have been...." Bill's voice trailed off as he searched for a suitably expressive word.

"Brutal?" George suggested, then chuckled, as did the rest of their companions seated around the table.

Bill shrugged, then nodded reluctantly. "Don't get me wrong, she's absolutely amazing... but *every three hours*, all day and all night long, she eats! And the nappies! The laundry!"

"Been there, done that. Times two," George boasted as he laughed.

"Right. Like I said, how did you manage?"

"You just... do, I suppose." George shrugged as his older brother nodded appreciatively. "Anyway, I think the boys started sleeping through night around... four months, if I remember right. Happened right around Annie's birthday this year."

"So there's a light at the end of the tunnel, then?" Bill asked hopefully.

"Oh, absolutely. Of course, then come the teeth," George warned half-teasingly.

Bill groaned, theatrically banging his head on the table to the amusement of everyone else gathered around. All seven of them George's four brothers, Lee Jordan, and Harry were seated around the large dining table inside the tent, chatting as they kept an ear out for the three sleeping infants in the other rooms. The women of the group had taken themselves elsewhere for the time being.

"You make it all sound so *glamorous*," Ron said with a sarcastic roll of his eyes. "Why would any intelligent person put themselves through all that rubbish?" he asked, shaking his head.

"I never said it wasn't worth it, twerp," argued Bill, good-naturedly swatting his youngest brother on the back of the head.

"And it does get easier, you know," George laughed.

"And no one would mistake *you* for an intelligent person, Ron," added Percy. He was rewarded with a hearty round of laughter as Ron pulled a face at him.

"What about you, Percy? When are you gonna settle down?" needed Bill.

Percy shook his head. "No hurry.... I like to keep my options open," he explained with a grin.

Every pair of eyes at the table rolled, and George snorted disdainfully. As unlikely as it would seem, Percy and his late brother Fred shared very similar views when it came to relationships with the opposite sex. The more casual, the better, in their eyes. Only in Percy's case, it wasn't a lust for variety that spurred him on, George guessed. *More like holding out for the most socially and professionally advantageous pairing possible. Always looking to move up in the world, our Perce.*

Percy redirected the question. "What about you, Charlie? Ever going to spend as much time with a woman as you do a dragon?"

Charlie shook his head with a smile. "Not likely," he laughed. "Dragons have better dispositions, I find." This response elicited more guffaws and a few murmured agreements.

George wadded up a napkin and tossed it at his brother Ron, hitting him in the forehead. "And you, Ron? When are you finally going to make an honest woman out of Hermione?"

"*Honest* woman, you say?" Ron sighed and rolled his eyes again, slumping in his chair. "She's perfectly honest, believe me."

The table erupted with that confession.

"You're joking! After all this time?" sniggered Percy.

"Good girl!" Bill cheered, feeling his role as his daughter's protector quite keenly at the moment.

"Hermione's got a clever head on her shoulders, after all!" added George with a curt nod.

Ron smirked, rankling at the teasing. He turned to Harry for sympathy, only to find him giggling and staring with disbelief as well. "What are you laughing at?" he snapped as he swiped at his best friend's arm.

Suddenly, the table got very quiet. Harry looked up to see five pairs of glittering eyes trained on him, smiles fading slightly.

"Careful, Harry. You're treading on dangerous territory here," warned Lee in a soft but smiling voice, terribly amused by the predicament.

Harry sat up straighter in his seat, wiped the grin from his face, and cleared his throat. "My mouth is shut. I'm not saying a word," he offered in a level voice.

"Sounds about right," somebody muttered.

Several of the ginger heads nodded slightly. The conversation slowly began to pick up again on a different topic: Charlie mentioned the upcoming Quidditch opener between the Cannons and the Catapults. Ron was the lone optimist at the table who predicted a Cannons victory, claiming not superior talent but the simple mathematical certainty that any given squad had to win *sometime*.

Lee stood up, chuckling, and walked to the kitchen area. As he neared the doorway, he heard female voices offer up a cheer outside. Curious, he stuck his head out of the tent flap and looked around for the source. Once he found it, he stood transfixed.

Perhaps a minute later, George noticed he hadn't returned to the table. "What is it, Lee?" he asked once he located his friend in the doorway.

"Bloody brilliant, that's what," he answered.

That comment got everyone's attention, and they rose as a group to join Lee at the entrance. Several murmurs of appreciation echoed Lee's sentiment as they took in the scene: their wives and girlfriends were playing a friendly game of volleyball on the sand, each in some various state of near-nakedness that served as acceptable attire at a beach. The men began to file out of the tent to get a better view, jostling each other's shoulders in the attempt.

George was standing between Bill and Ron, all of them just outside the tent, still keeping an ear out for any noise from the babies. "Let's have some fun, shall we?" he muttered devilishly, reaching purposefully into his pocket. After a moment or two, the mischievous smile faded to a look of consternation. "Blast!" he grumbled. "Someone's

shielding the court...."

Ron and Harry both looked at him. "That'll be Hermione," they said in unison.

"Don't bother trying to break it, either," Harry added knowingly.

"All right, then, since it's apparently going to be a fair game.... Anyone care to make it interesting? A galleon says Annie's team'll win," George offered.

The group all shook their heads, chuckling.

"No one's stupid enough to bet against Annie, git. She's cutthroat, she is!" Charlie cried.

"I'd hate to see her on a broom, that's for sure," agreed Bill.

"Wish somebody would've warned me before I played poker with her," growled Ron, glaring accusatorially at his brothers.

"Ah, come on! Lee?" George cajoled his friend.

"Angelina's on the same team, mate!" Lee cried. "I'm not a bloody idiot, you know. Can't we just watch in peace?"

"Fine," George huffed in frustration. "Bunch of gits, the lot of you," he muttered and took a seat in the doorway next to Bill.

As the game proceeded, however, sides were, in fact, taken, with each fellow cheering enthusiastically for his favorite player's team, groaning in frustration with any points lost. The women acknowledged the attention with occasional waves and smiles, sometimes laughing at the spectators making a spectacle of themselves.

It was at last time for the final point to be played. Annie served, and Fleur returned it. Hermione moved into place to hit the ball, but got the angle wrong. Instead of heading back across the net, the ball soared in a broad arc backwards.

"Sorry!" cried Hermione, cringing.

Annie, who had been playing the baseline, turned her back to the net and flew after the ball, face skyward, elbows and knees pumping, sand flying. Angelina jogged after her, keeping herself about half the distance between Annie and the net, calling out, "Relay it! Relay it!" to her teammate.

"Get it, get it, get it, get it!" George murmured in quiet encouragement, clenching his fists in the tension of the moment.

"Come on, come on," urged Lee, leaning forward in his seat.

Annie went onto her knees just in time, sliding several feet, and hit the ball, sending it back over her shoulder toward the net.

"YEAH!" the whole audience roared appreciatively in unison.

Annie remained kneeling on the sand, some distance now from the game, but twisted to watch the ball's course over her shoulder. Angelina, keeping her eyes on the ball, ran back toward the court. By some miracle, the ball just barely cleared the net and dropped to the sand inbounds as Fleur, Ginny, and Percy's latest girlfriend lunged futilely toward it.

Once she confirmed both the point and match had been won, Annie collapsed in a heap and lay nearly motionless on the sand as celebratory cheers and commiserating groans rang out again from the audience. Angelina jogged back over to her friend, bent over her, and said something unheard by the audience. Annie lifted up one hand, and Angelina high-fived it, then hauled her up off the sand.

The rest of the women had closed the distance to Annie by then. Arm in arm, the group trudged off into the sea for a cooling swim.

*

Annie couldn't believe her wretched luck. *A rare night out of the house away from the twins wasted with this?*

The table was crowded with empty pint glasses, including hers. She had been sitting in the pub for over an hour now without saying a word. How could she? What did she know about the British and Irish Quidditch League? And why would she care?

She nudged Angelina under the table with her foot. When Angelina snapped out of her own boredom-induced daydream, she looked over at Annie with a question on her face.

"I'm sick of this," Annie mouthed silently.

Angelina nodded in agreement.

Annie jerked her head toward the jukebox. It was partly hidden behind an elderly couple dancing with each other to an oldies tune.

Angelina smiled and nodded again. Subtly, she got Hermione's attention. Hermione wore an equally miserable look on her face until she got the message to follow them. She nodded eagerly as well.

Annie tried to get Ginny's attention, but she was at the far end of the table and was the only one of them paying the slightest bit of attention to the current conversation. Unsuccessful, Annie gave up for the moment. The three of them rose and made their way to the jukebox.

"I hate Quidditch, I swear," sighed Annie.

"It's not so bad as long as you're actually playing it," Angelina joked. She was scanning the song titles.

"What are we doing?" Hermione asked.

"Either of you got any money? I'm skint," said Annie.

"Bullshit! You and George are rich as Croesus," Angelina teased.

"Empty pockets, I mean," Annie laughed.

"Me, too," moaned Hermione.

Annie looked back at the table. Ginny had finally noticed they'd left and was watching them with curiosity. Annie waved her over.

Ginny stood up. She stared for several moments at Harry, who hadn't noticed her sudden exit. She poked his shoulder, and he batted her hand away distractedly without skipping a word of the argument. Ginny rolled her eyes and stomped toward the women. The four guys remained completely engrossed in the conversation about some idiotic Quidditch match, or team, or championship what did it matter which?

"Got any money? We don't."

"For what?" Ginny asked as she pulled a note out of her pocket.

"Perfect!" Annie waved at the bartender, asked him for change. He smiled warmly at her as he handed over the coins. "See anything promising, Ange?" she asked when she returned.

"Excellent! They've got the one we want and some other good ones as well. Give me the money," Angelina demanded. She fed the machine some coins and selected several songs, pressing the necessary buttons.

"Would someone please tell me what we're doing?" asked Ginny.

"Who cares? As long as it's not about Quidditch..." Hermione laughed.

"Us old married ladies are about to teach you girls a handy trick," assured Angelina.

"Ha! You're still a newlywed," Ginny argued. It was true: Angelina and Lee had only been married a little more than four months.

"Time-tested, tried, and true, I promise," Annie assured them and winked. One more oldies song began the last one before their own set would start.

Angelina took the opportunity to explain themselves further. "First you choose a song. Not too fast, not too slow... but more slow than fast."

"And no ballads allowed; they won't go for that," Annie added.

"Yeah. Some sexy lyrics help, though," Angelina agreed.

"And a good bass beat to carry through the room. That way even if they can't quite hear it, they'll feel it. If you stick with the song a few times, you'll have them trained like Pavlov's dog," Annie explained.

Hermione giggled at the reference which was apparently lost on the others.

"They'll learn to respond to the song every time," Annie clarified for the rest. "Which can be inconvenient at times, like when you hear it on the radio or something," she laughed.

"You see, getting the attention of a man engrossed in a discussion of sport is almost, but not quite, as difficult as distracting him with a household chore when he's got a hard-on. Oh dear, Annie. I think we've shocked them now," Angelina laughed, taking in the looks on the other girls' faces.

Annie grinned. "Better you learn the truth sooner rather than later, girls."

"Now, our song's coming on next. Watch George and Lee at first to see their reaction. This will be your goal, ladies. Do not make eye contact with Ron or Harry in the meantime. It's imperative that, during the initial training phase, they believe you have no ulterior motive for dancing in front of them."

"Dancing?" gasped Ginny, revolted.

"Oh, I don't know about this," Hermione whined nervously.

All four of them looked over at the table where their male companions still sat. They were arguing vociferously amongst themselves, gesticulating for emphasis, laughing loudly. It was glaringly apparent that none of them had even realized the women had left the table.

"Trust me! This is golden," urged Angelina.

Their song began. Annie and Angelina pulled a hesitant but curious Ginny and Hermione to an open area of the floor, not too close but well within sight of their table. Annie and Angelina had their backs to the table, serving as a sort of screen for the other girls to peek around.

"Follow us, and remember to watch Lee and George," Annie reminded them.

They began to sway with the slow, jazzy beat. Annie and Angelina stood close enough to occasionally bump their shoulders and hips together in rhythm with the music. Ginny and Hermione merely stepped from side to side, directing most of their attention to the table rather than into their dance moves.

Before the first phrase of the song had finished, George looked about the table. His eyes then searched the pub until he found Annie.

"Merlin's... ruddy... knob," whispered Ginny, incredulous.

"I can't believe it!" added Hermione, equally surprised.

Moments later, Lee noticed George had suddenly dropped out of the conversation. He glanced at his friend, then followed his stare onto the dance floor, turning around in his chair.

"What did I tell you?" asked Angelina in a smug voice.

"They're staring like idiots!" said Ginny, still awestruck.

"Watch it! That idiot happens to be my husband!" Annie laughed.

Annie and Angelina began to dance a bit more enthusiastically, enjoying themselves. They clapped their hands to the beat over their heads, swaying and bumping their hips together. They casually acknowledged their target audience with sly glances and half-smiles.

George and Lee smiled back and nodded slightly to the beat of the music. Harry and Ron were still oblivious, laughing and talking with each other. They hadn't noticed anything yet.

Annie and Angelina turned back to the younger girls. "Now, really go for it, gals. Here comes your audience. Remember, no direct eye contact."

Out of the corners of their eyes, Ginny and Hermione surreptitiously watched the scene at the table as Annie and Angelina split apart, took their hands and led them in the dancing.

George nudged Ron in the ribs with his elbow.

"Check this," was all he said as nodded toward the dancing floor. He laughed as he watched Ron's face go slack with shock.

"What are you look..." Harry began to ask, then let the question fall unfinished as he twisted around in his seat and took in the sight of the four women dancing together on the floor nearby. Arms in the air, shoulders and hips swaying, bodies sinuous, their legs almost looked tangled together.

"Hermione, let down your hair and shake it a little," Annie coached, leaning close to her ear, dropping her hands.

Hermione obeyed, reaching back to pull out the rubber band holding her hair in a ponytail and giggling at the ridiculousness of the suggestion. She shook it out with her fingers, then flipped it back away from her face.

Ron visibly gulped. Hermione laughed harder.

"What the bloody hell is that?" squeaked Ron.

George laughed at his brother. "That, lads, is how a woman changes the subject of the conversation." He knew from experience the song was almost half over. "Watch and learn, boys," he instructed as he rose, slowly walked over to his wife, took her hands to spin her around to face him, and began dancing with her.

"Dancing?" Ron looked a bit queasy but couldn't pull his eyes away.

Lee rose to leave as well, but paused before stepping away from the table. "Look around this place, mates," he suggested.

Ron and Harry both took his advice. Either blatantly or furtively, every male in the room was watching the women on the floor with appreciation, to the consternation of several of their female companions.

"Now, you two do what you like. But unless you fancy a cold wind to blow tonight, you'd best get your arses off the seats and dance with these ladies," he recommended.

"Since when did George become Mr. Smooth?" Ron mumbled as Lee left to join Angelina.

"Dunno, but if he can do it, I reckon we can," offered Harry without looking at his friend. He took a deep breath, plucking up his own courage, and rose from his chair.

"You're heartless, unleashing that on the likes of Harry and my poor baby brother," George scolded.

"And you're a bunch of self-centered prats who've ignored us for the last hour," Annie retorted. She turned her back to George, but didn't step away from him or stop dancing.

He rested his hands on her hips and bent his head to speak in her ear. "Just look at them they're paralyzed! It's cruel, I tell you. They've no idea how to defend themselves against your feminine wiles."

She glanced at the table. The two boys did look like a pair of deer in headlights. "I wish I could feel an ounce of pity for them. Perhaps they'll find some solace playing with balls and broomsticks."

George laughed and spun her back around to face him. He took her hands, then guided them onto his shoulders. Lee had joined Angelina now, and Hermione and Ginny were dancing together, barely staying upright, both laughing hysterically.

"The lads are plucking up their courage now," George murmured. "Here they come.... Oh, well played, Ron! Poor Hermione she'll likely be limping tomorrow," he commented between laughs for Annie's benefit, since her back was to the group now.

The song wound to a finish, and there was a brief pause before the next one began. When it did, George groaned with recognition. It was one Annie liked to play at home lately when they were.... Well, as a prelude, of sorts.

"Don't you think it a tad irresponsible to be exposing them to this?" he scolded her.

Annie smiled, pulling him down to her level to speak directly into his ear. "It wasn't me. Ange chose the music. Completely coincidence," she explained, brushing her lips against his ear.

They danced for a minute or so longer. *Well, not dancing, exactly*, she thought to herself. More like full-body-contact swaying to the slow beat.

"We need to leave before I make a spectacle of myself," George said softly. He took her hand and led her off the dance floor to the bar, handed the barman enough to cover the entire table's tab, then they left without saying goodnight to any of the other couples still swaying on the dance floor.

Molly and Arthur were seated in the central area of their tent when they got back to the campsite. "They're sleeping like angels," Molly whispered as Annie peeked into the room that served as the twin's nursery. "Not a bit of trouble."

"Thanks, Molly. We had such a great time. It was nice to get out again," Annie replied.

"See you tomorrow then, dear," Molly said softly as she and Arthur left for their own tent next door.

The tent flap was still swinging when George scooped her up and set her on the table, kissing her passionately. A few moments later, with her halter top at half-mast and the hem of her skirt pushed up to her hips, she managed to get George to pause for a moment.

"While I'd love to partake of this lovely feast right here with you, your brother's family is in the next room, and I suspect Lee and Ange will be back soon as well, so...."

George growled but lifted her off the table and carried her into their room. He set her down just inside the canvas partition and began to finish undressing her.

But Annie had other plans. She took his hands in hers and led him to the bed. "Sit," she ordered.

Once he was on the bed, she undressed herself slowly in front of him. The light of a brilliant quarter moon was reflected by the sea and diffused by the walls of the tent, making it easy to see each other clearly. George was watching her with an anticipatory smile and desire in his eyes.

She pushed his shoulders down onto the bed. Now there was curiosity added to the lusty smile.

Annie stood on the floor between his parted legs. Her hands lightly pushed the hem of his shirt slowly up his body. She began kissing his stomach at his navel and worked her way upward. He moved slightly to assist her removing his shirt over his head while she kissed his chest, throat, and chin.

"You should probably do that *Muffliato* business now," she suggested, then continued kissing his jaw, neck, and collarbone.

George reached into his pocket and withdrew his wand, made a tiny flourish with it to cast the sound-proofing spell, then tossed it on the bedside table with a clatter.

She retraced the pathway of kisses back the way she had come. Then she stood up straight and, in a very business-like manner, unfastened his belt and trousers. He lifted his hips as she pulled the waist down to his knees, then she pushed them the rest of the way to the floor with her foot.

She arched her hands and, starting at his knees, gently ran her fingernails up the inside of his thigh, then even more gently over the sensitive skin where leg meets torso. It pleased her to hear his sharp intake of breath when she did so. Then, with the back of her nails, she lightly traced her way up his body.

Crawling up onto the bed, straddling his body, she held hers barely above his. She kissed his chest, lightly teasing his nipples with her tongue. She continued up his sternum, neck, and along his sharp jaw line. She began to nibble on his earlobe.

"Are you enjoying my feminine wiles unleashed?" she asked him.

"Yes." No smart-arse answer, no argument, no innuendo. Just a husky monosyllable.

She looked up at him. His eyes were closed, his face an expression of blissful transport. She sat back on her heels, still straddling his waist.

"Open your eyes, George, and look at me."

He obeyed, reaching out his arms for her.

She was not willing to surrender control just yet. She redirected his hands with her own, placing them at her knees. She slowly guided them up along her thighs, over her hips, up her body, feeling his fingers pass over each rib. She held both hands to her breasts for a few moments. Then, she brought one hand to her mouth, kissing first the palm, then every fingertip in turn, ending each kiss with a tiny, gentle pull of a suck.

George's next move was strong and swift. She instantly found herself on the bed on her back, head on pillows, George inside her. His kisses barely muffled her cries of pleasure.

Author's Notes:

* This quote was found on the website <http://druidry.org> and is attributed to Geoffrey Grigson: The Englishman's Flora, Phoenix House, 1956.

The song George listened to at the Wheezes shop is [Come to Me](#) by Bjork. I particularly liked the line where she mentions "Break the *charm*...."

The first song the girls danced to in the bar is [Where It's At](#) by Beck, followed by [Stir It Up](#) by Bob Marley and The Wailers. Apologies for the audio quality on the last one I had a hard time finding a decent link. I wonder if Bob had intended it to sound like someone was brewing a potion....

April Fools

Chapter 47 of 80

George and Annie take a trip – the honeymoon they never had – with rather predictable results.

Chapter 47: April Fools

Spring 2000

"Are you awake?" he asked her.

"Of course," she replied.

"Have you thought about it? The thing we talked about?" George asked her in a soft voice as he held her in his arms in this strange room, in a strange bed, on a tiny island in the South Atlantic.

She could hear the smile in his voice, even if she couldn't see it in the pitch blackness. He must think he was being funny. Had she thought about it, indeed? As if her brain had thought about a single other thing for the past five days. It had barely spared enough neurons from obsessing over the idea to keep her body upright.

She thought back to the night of the conversation he was referring to a mere week ago. They had been in their own bed at Mole Hill then, unlike now. She had been lying on her back, eyes closed, with what felt like a silly, blissed-out grin across her face: her usual post-coital state. As the nerve synapses of her body slowly regained their composure, and the perspiration cooled her, he had pulled the pin on that particular grenade and lobbed it into her peace of mind.

"I think it's time we had another, don't you?" he had purred into her ear.

"Another what? Another go? Didn't you finish?" She had been confused as well as embarrassed by her selfishness. How could she have missed the fact that he hadn't reached the same conclusion she had done only moments ago? She'd turned toward him, reaching out her arms, eager to remedy her oversight.

"No, not *that*," he had laughed as he kissed her forehead. "I mean another *baby*."

Just like that. No warning. Out of the clear blue sky. *Kaboom!* Her mind had been set to reeling in that moment, and she had idiotically and mutely stared at him in the shock of it.

He had misunderstood her silence. She'd watched as a mild amount of concern began to cloud George's features, dampening his smile. "Don't you still want more?" he had asked her.

As if it was possible not to want more of George's children little copies of his ginger hair and chocolate eyes and freckled nose and laughing voice and devilish humor. It was the reason she was put on this earth, after all: to love him, care for him, and bear his children. As pathetically sappy and primitively backward as it sounded, even wordlessly in her own mind, she knew it was true with every fiber of her being. It was blasphemy to pretend otherwise.

"Of course I do!" she'd cried in an earnest whisper, and relief had washed over her as she'd watched the smile return to his face. "You just took me by surprise. I simply haven't thought about it at all. I mean, we never really planned it last time."

"That's true," he'd chuckled as he'd thought of the circumstances surrounding the twins' conception. "It was a bolt out of the blue last time. A happy accident, though," he had mused as he'd stroked her hair.

She'd giggled along with him, glad to have a chance to release the tension. "What brought all this on, anyway?"

"Dunno..." George had shrugged. "The boys are getting so big now. They're growing up too fast. Faster than I ever expected. I guess I just assumed that once we started having kids, I mean more would just keep coming along, sort of like the way we all did in my family. Every couple of years, you know?"

Annie had nodded, considering his argument. She agreed that the twins were maturing quickly in fact, quite a bit faster than any of her parenting books had led her to

expect. She also thought about George's family, the close-knit ties among all his siblings. She imagined she would like that for their children as well, never having had the chance to experience it herself.

"You think it's still too soon?" he'd asked.

"I dunno. Like I said, I haven't given it a moment's thought, honestly. Let me think about it for a bit, okay?" she'd offered.

"Sure," he'd said, comfortingly holding her head in his hand and stroking her cheek with his thumb. "We'll talk more about it later, then."

"Soon," she had promised.

A flash and a simultaneous ear-splitting *crack* rent the sky above them, startling her back to the present time and place. George's strong, protective arms held her even more tightly in reassurance.

"The worst of it'll blow through quick enough," he whispered in her ear as large drops of rain began to fall on the roof of the tiny, spare cabin they were renting.

The beautifully exotic seascape just beyond their door more than made up for the unimpressive interior of the spartan room. Lee and Angelina, who were riding out the squall in the cabin next door, had found this place on their honeymoon last year. Angelina had been right it was the most romantic spot Annie had ever seen.

"Anyway, back to the original question..." George reminded her as he began softly kissing her.

What is it about electrical storms? she wondered. She had always felt it too, as if the electrical potential in the air somehow affected their bodies as well, demanding a connection be made to release the pent-up energy. She responded to him with enthusiasm.

Another flash, and the rolling thunder that followed was not quite as close as the last, but loud enough to startle her again. Then rain began to pour harder, pounding on the roof and windows, rattling them loudly. It only served to excite them further, though, as if some primordial part of their brains recognized danger in the cacophony of the storm, and the resultant adrenaline heightened their arousal.

George paused a moment to whisper his intentions into her ear. "I want us to make a baby."

Annie smiled as she kissed him, then placed her lips to his ear, whispering her answer. "Yes!" For she had come to the same conclusion as George, just a few days later than he had: it was time to bring a new life into their little family.

When she awoke late the next morning, Annie was disappointed to find it misty and overcast. As wonderful as it felt to sleep until her own body woke itself up instead of when the twins began calling for her or with the rising sun shining in through the bedroom window she would have rather been on the beach at dawn. She had been so looking forward to basking in the sun and warm waters for an entire week with George by her side, as well as their good friends, the Jordans.

George had apparently awakened some time earlier and was humming while teacups clinked onto saucers. He was standing in the tiny kitchenette in the far corner of the room, brewing a pot of tea.

"How can you be so chipper on this dreary morning?" she asked, amused.

"I think it's a perfect day!" he argued. George inexplicably seemed thrilled by the promise of the morning.

She noticed a plate of fruit, bread, and cheese was already on the bed, waiting for her. But she feasted instead on the sight of him: his strong, lean, athletic body dwarfing the tiny proportions of the miniature kitchen. *No one has a right to look that good without their clothes on* she thought and quickly whispered prayer of thanks for perhaps the millionth time to whatever supernatural force had created her husband.

"Aren't you worried someone will see you, or have I simply missed this exhibitionist streak in you all these years?" she asked him teasingly. The curtains of the two windows had been opened to allow as much grey light as possible into the otherwise dim room. She sat up in the bed, wrapped the sheet around herself, and set the plate in her lap.

"There's not a soul within miles of us, Annie," he chuckled as he carefully carried two steaming cups over to the bed. For the most part, it was true: half a dozen little beach cabins were shrouded by a large orchard of ancient Dragon trees, magically hidden from the Muggle Canary Islanders. George had promised to deliver a large bundle of the valuable resin-laden leaves to his mother in exchange for a week of babysitting duties.

"Except for the couple right next door," she corrected him with a smile, accepting the cup he proffered and setting it on the little table beside her.

"Who are holed up inside, escaping the rain, same as we are," he argued, sitting on the edge of the bed and taking a sip from his cup. It looked so much smaller, cradled by his large hands, than hers did.

"So explain to me how being trapped inside here on our first holiday alone together, during what was supposed to be a *sunny* tropical island escape, is a 'perfect day' in your twisted mind." She took a bite of the banana she had been peeling as she spoke for effect.

George laughed into his teacup, a mischievous glint in his eyes as they peered over the rim at her. "I think it's finally my chance for a Naked Day," he explained, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

Annie laughed out loud as she fell back onto her pillow. It had been a little pet fantasy of his for about a year now, likely arising out of the fact that throughout their entire courtship and marriage, they had never had any significant amount of time to be truly alone, just the two of them. There had nearly always been at least one someone else close enough to see, or overhear, or even worse walk in on them. It seemed they were forever doomed to sneaking around, hushing themselves, hiding their intimacy from her Gran, or his family, or more recently, their own children.

George had often lamented this very fact and cherished aloud with her the notion that the day would come when he and Annie could do whatever they wished, whenever and wherever the thought struck them, without any inhibitions or interruptions. Thus, the dream of Naked Day was born. And any time he found himself frustrated, thwarted by the demands of parenthood and other adult responsibilities, he would close his eyes, heave a sigh, and whisper, "Naked Day!" as a mantra. It had never failed to make her smile.

"Are you even remotely serious?" Annie laughed. She set the plate of food on the pillow next to her, turning toward him, propping herself up on her elbow.

"Why not? We're not missing anything outside, that's for sure." He crawled across the bed toward her and slowly pulled the sheet off of her body. "I won't let you get a chill." He laid himself down beside her, on his stomach, propping himself up on his elbows.

She offered him the banana. "But all day long? You must be kidding," she teased.

"Nope," he replied, popping his lips on the *P*, then he took a bite of the banana. He shook his head slowly, locking his gaze onto her eyes as he chewed.

"I don't know..." she said with pretend reluctance. *He's right the day is sounding more perfect by the second*

"Good luck finding anything to wear," he added with a smirk as he swallowed the bite of fruit.

"George..." she said in a mock warning tone.

She sat up and scanned the room. There was no sign of the small satchel all their belongings had been magically packed into. He laughed as he set the plate of food onto the floor beside the bed.

That had been quite entertaining, actually: watching him stuff all their clothes, food, gear, and even surfboards into something the size of a small backpack. "Little trick I picked up from Hermione," he'd explained as he'd done so. Annie had even lifted the bag herself it had been as lightweight as if it were empty. *A backpack bewitched to perform some bizarre folding of spatial dimensions or something*, she guessed. *Typical wizard's solution to any ordinary problem: simply defy all known laws of physics*

"It's no use; you'll never find it," he said with a smug smile.

She knew he was right. In fact, it was likely staring her in the face, sitting invisibly in plain sight. Or equally likely, she could search the entire room all day long but always have a good reason to look everywhere except exactly where it rested.

"Hmm. I'm not sure I'm quite convinced," she said doubtfully. She had to put up some sort of resistance, or where was the fun? It was so entertaining to watch him maneuver, after all.

"I can be very persuasive, as you well know," he warned her as he reached out, hooked his arm around her waist and gently pulled her closer. As she lay back onto the bed, he began kissing in a small circle around her navel. All thoughts of the sun, sand, or sea were being washed away from her mind. Nothing was left there but love and desire.

"We have important work to continue today, anyway. Remember?" he declared in a serious tone.

"Are you referring to your latest little home improvement chore?" she teased as she twirled her fingers in his hair.

George looked up at her with his most charming, knee-weakening smile: the one that lit up his eyes especially. "Happy to be *o*service, as always, for your personal expansion project," he purred and brushed his lips once more against her belly.

Annie sighed with contentment and arousal. George rolled onto his back, catching her elbow as he did, lifting and guiding her to rest above him. As she straddled his waist, he reached up to hold her head with both hands, then pulled her face down to meet his for a kiss.

By midday, the mist had moved on, but the low grey clouds remained. Angelina and Lee knocked on their door then, waking them both from a light, post-orgasmic doze.

"Go away!" Annie and George both called out simultaneously in response.

"Well, that was rude!" Angelina complained loudly from behind the door as Lee laughed. "We were just going to invite you to walk into the village for lunch, but forget it!"

Annie began to slip out of bed, but George grabbed her hand. "Don't break the rules," he warned her in a whisper.

She smiled and nodded the rules of Naked Day required participants to remain completely naked for the entire day, no exceptions then crept carefully to the door, keeping out of sight of the windows which were fully curtained now, anyway. "Sorry, Ange," she called out from the closed door. "Just catching up on some sleep, you know. You caught us napping." Technically, it was the truth....

"Yeah, right," laughed Lee, not buying the excuse for a second. "Come on, Angelina. Looks like we're on our own today."

"Just you wait! You'll find out what it's like soon enough living without a decent night's sleep," George called out from the bed. Lee and Angelina had confided in them last night at dinner that they were expecting a baby themselves in the fall.

The new parents-to-be chuckled as Annie heard them shuffle off the small porch of their cabin. She tiptoed back to the snug little bed-nest she and George had created for the day and nibbled on a slice of cheese.

"That's a good point, you know. All that work, the sleepless nights.... Are you sure you're ready for it all again?" she asked.

"Sleep is for the weak," George said in a low voice, wrapping himself around her. "Highly overrated," he continued, kissing the little red dragon on the back of her neck and sending ticklish chills down her spine.

He certainly is being thorough, she laughed silently to herself as the foreplay began once again.

They would make love three times that day only rarely leaving the bed at all otherwise dozing, or eating, or talking quietly together. It was a perfect day, she had to agree: beautiful, relaxing, and precious.

Annie peeked out the window as the sun was setting that evening, searching for the source of the constant buzzing sound she had been hearing during their otherwise quiet afternoon, and saw their two friends frolicking far out to sea. While she and George had been lolling about all that day, Angelina and Lee had found a place on the island that rented jet skis.

"You're in for fun tomorrow, George. Wait 'til you see the toys they got," she giggled.

"I'm not convinced anything will draw me out of this cabin," he chuckled in a low voice from behind her. "Now come back to bed this instant," he demanded.

The rest of their week spent on the island was just what Annie had been dreaming of: sun and beach and warm sea. Something about the ocean she didn't know whether it was the water, or the sunny breeze, or scent of it recharged her psyche more the longer she soaked it in. Annie wondered with amusement if perhaps she had been a sea lion in a previous life.

And the days had proven to be fun. It was almost like being children again themselves, she thought: playing with their toys, cavorting about in the sea. She and Angelina had even built a sand castle one afternoon, childishly digging and piling the sand, getting themselves filthy in the process. Annie couldn't remember being that dirty since she had played as a child with her twin playmates, and the thought brought her a small twinge of sadness.

She reckoned they all deserved some childish fun, though, considering how much of what should have been their carefree teenage years they had spent in the shadow of a war. They had taken a holiday not just from the gloomy winter weather at home, but from all the responsibilities of being grown-ups as well.

About two weeks after they had arrived home and were well-settled back into their daily routine of work and the twins, Annie greeted George as he came downstairs on April the First, the morning of his twenty-second birthday, with a smile and a kiss. She knew that this day, of all days, was hardest on him on them both. The sadness felt sharp again, the loss heavy once more.

But today she was forearmed with more than one weapon she hoped would help them both combat the grief. She handed him a small pen-shaped piece of plastic the first of his surprises of the morning knowing he would demand physical proof on today of all days.

"Mission accomplished, love," she said softly, kissing his cheek as a broad, self-satisfied grin spread across his face, registering the implications of the small pink plus sign. "Happy birthday, George!"

"You should see it. It's unbelievable," Ron raved.

"Sounds really cool, Ron," Harry said to placate his best friend. He wasn't really sure he cared.

But Ron persisted, either ignoring or simply unable to pick up on such subtleties of tone. "Look, nobody else is stupid enough to hang around here, wasting the first nice day of the year," Ron said, pausing for a moment as they both glanced around the mostly empty office. "Let's skive off. Maybe George is free, and he can show you."

Harry was forced to agree about the waste of time. At the moment, it didn't seem as if the wizarding world was in imminent peril, nor would it be likely to miss a couple of junior Aurors for an hour or so. He could see the glorious day beckoning them outside the window of the Ministry. "Okay, let's go."

They took the Floo to the Leaky Cauldron, then headed straight to the Wheezes shop. George welcomed them warmly, as usual.

"I've brought Harry to see your birthday present. Are you free?" Ron asked his brother.

"Yeah, I was just leaving for lunch anyway. Have you lot eaten? I'm sure Annie would whip up something for you," George offered.

"Don't bother; we ate already," Harry answered.

"Well, there's always room for dessert," amended Ron.

"How do you not weigh twenty stone?" George marveled sarcastically.

"Who says I don't?" Ron boasted as he flexed his arms and puffed out his chest.

Harry rolled his eyes and laughed at his best mate's bravado. Ron's teenage bottomless appetite had yet to disappear as of his early twenties.

"So he told you about my birthday present, did he?" George spoke softly, almost conspiratorially, under his breath, and paused while Harry nodded. "It's so damn fast... well, maybe not compared to a Firebolt, but for the rest of us mere mortals...."

"Come on, already! Let's show him," whined Ron.

"Hang on a sec...." George poked his head through the curtain to the back room, and they heard him speak to an employee there. "Verity, I'm off to lunch. When Sam gets back, have him start on last week's orders first; they're piling up. See you in an hour or so."

They left the shop walking a lively pace, chatting and laughing the entire way. All three stepped into the fireplace of the Leaky Cauldron at once and headed to Mole Hill. As they emerged into the large, open living room of George and Annie's house, it became clear that the gorgeous, sunny day had not been limited to London. Every large window and sliding glass door of the house was wide open, allowing the sunshine and breezes to pour in.

"Annie?" called George softly, glancing around for sign of his wife. "I've brought the lads!" he announced.

"Over here," she answered quietly.

The twins must be asleep thought Harry, reminding himself to keep it quiet. Suddenly, he was startled by George suddenly bolting across the room the moment he discovered Annie in the kitchen at the top of a stepladder, straining to reach a dish stored above a cabinet.

"Get down from there this instant!" George insisted as he lifted her off the ladder.

Harry shot Ron a look of amused curiosity, only to see to his surprise that Ron was looking slightly concerned as well. He turned back to see George summoning the platter from its storage place. No explanations were offered, no clues to the odd behavior.

Since when is a stepladder something dangerous? Harry wondered. Sure, Annie was petite, but reaching for a platter on a shelf was hardly a death-defying activity, even for a Muggle.

Annie smirked with amusement at her husband's overreaction. "Hello, boys," she greeted them once her feet reached the floor. "Come to nick a ride on the bike, I suppose?"

"Harry wanted to see it," explained Ron. "And then George mentioned something about dessert." He smiled expectantly, ogling the blueberry tart on the table.

Harry noticed there were also a large bowl of salad and two small meat pies on plates waiting for diners, all smelling delicious. Annie had a well-earned reputation within their group for being an excellent cook. Almost as good as Mrs. Weasley, in his opinion.

Though Annie's a Mrs. Weasley now as well, isn't she? he chuckled to himself. The idea really did boggle his mind. Who knew that George, of all people, had hidden a Muggle girlfriend from everyone for so long? That he'd married her while they'd all been living in hiding? *The man certainly could keep a secret*, Harry mused.

"Go on then, help yourself," Annie laughed, waving toward the small dessert plates and forks next to the tart.

George then lifted her up to sit on the counter, bringing her face level with his. He leaned in to press his forehead to Annie's and spoke softly, tenderly to her. "Are you feeling all right today?" he asked.

Annie nodded slightly, careful not to break their contact. "Not nearly as bad, this time," she replied.

Harry was made uncomfortable by the intimacy of the moment, but was curious all the same. *Is something wrong with Annie?*

Ron handed him a plate with a huge slice of tart, then coughed in a blatantly artificial way.

George fished into his trouser pocket without looking away from his wife and tossed Ron a small set of keys. "Not a scratch, mind you, or I'll curse you both sideways," he warned. "Mythical hero status or no."

Ron responded verbally, but no one in the room understood what he was trying to say around the enormous mouthful of tart blocking all intelligible speech.

As they left the house and headed to the garage, curiosity finally got the better of Harry. "What's the matter with Annie?" he asked.

"Oh, right. You wouldn't have heard yet," Ron chuckled. "She's expecting again."

"Really? Already? Wow, erm, I mean, good for them, I suppose," Harry said with a surprised smile.

"I know, right?" Ron laughed. "It's like George is taking it seriously, living up to the Weasley reputation for breeding like rabbits."

Harry laughed. "How soon will she.... I mean, when's the baby due?"

"This winter, I think. They went with Lee and Angelina on their anniversary trip last month sort of the honeymoon they never had, you know? That island vacation must

have been really something, eh?" Ron joked.

"That's disgusting, Ron! Shut up!" Harry had no desire to pursue that line of conversation, or to think of George and Annie that way. *blech*. He also knew from considerable personal experience as Ginny's boyfriend that he was not permitted even the smallest allusion to sex in the presence of any Weasley male if he did not wish to be pummeled for his trouble. He did, however, stow away the idea of an island honeymoon for future reference. *Maybe I could ask Lee about it....*

Finally, they had reached the large outbuilding that served as a garage for Mole Hill.

"Here it is. Wicked-looking beast, isn't it?" Ron said reverently.

A shiny, futuristically-styled black and chrome motorcycle was parked inside, looking completely out of place next to a beat-up old farm truck and an only slightly newer, slightly less beaten-up Toyota Land Cruiser that bore an amusing bumper sticker that read "My other car is a broom." Two bicycles with baby seats were hanging suspended from the ceiling. Several surfboards and George's old Cleansweep hung on the side wall, and a large, double-seated jogging stroller was parked underneath them. The back wall was lined with shelves crammed with various objects, about half of which Harry recognized as magical in origin or purpose.

Harry was impressed by the motorcycle. It did look fast – rocket fast, in fact. "Annie bought this for George for his birthday, you said? Lucky bastard!"

"Yeah. She has an inheritance or something from when her grandmother died," Ron explained. "Ginny and I tease her about being an heiress. She says it's not much, but it must be something. This thing wasn't cheap, I'll wager." He scraped the last bite of tart off the plate and into his mouth. "I don't care if she's a Muggle – what that woman can do with pastry is magic," he mumbled, spewing a few crumbs.

They set down their dishes on a bench, and Ron eased the motorcycle outdoors. "Grab the helmets, will you?" he directed Harry. "I can drive it all right – George showed me how – but I'd rather not kill us, all the same."

Harry hopped onto the back of the bike once they were in full gear, and Ron slowly drove them down the gravel lane to the road, where he then opened the engine up. It was fast, Harry discovered, as the trees and fields blew past them in a blur. He suspected the motorcycle would be quite a bit more fun to drive than it was to be the passenger, but all in all, he still felt the Firebolt was superior. He made a mental note to take advantage of the lovely weather later, after work, and take his broom out for a bit of real flying.

It was more than half an hour later before they returned to the house. All the doors and windows were still open, curtains fluttering like banners in the spring breeze.

"How did George learn to ride it?" Harry asked as they strolled toward the house from the garage.

"Annie showed him – can you believe it?" Ron chuckled. "Said she learned how as a kid."

"After all that in the kitchen, he let her on that thing?" Harry asked, incredulous.

"Are you surprised to learn that George doesn't have the slightest bit of control over his wife?" Ron laughed, and Harry joined him.

They walked right into the bright, inviting house to find George and Annie were seated at the dining table. Ron tossed the keys toward his brother, who caught them midair.

"That was really cool, George. Thanks," Harry offered as he and Ron stood by the table.

"Precision engineering... isn't that what the Muggles call it, Annie?" George nodded slowly, smiling smugly as he chewed.

"A high performance machine, to be sure, love," Annie giggled.

Harry's nearly two years of working in the Auror office had fine-tuned his brain to detect when something didn't fit. That sense was nagging at him just now. Out of habit, he scanned the room, looking for the source.

He found it quickly: the food. He and Ron had been gone for nearly forty minutes by now, yet Annie was filling an unused, clean bowl with salad. George's meat pie had one, maybe two bites missing, at most.

Harry's eyes scrutinized the pair at the table, and he instantly regretted it. Barely flushed cheeks. Slightly tousled hair. Clothes disheveled in the smallest degree. *Oh, dear God!* Wincing, he scolded himself that he was going to need to find a way to turn his suspicious brain off somehow, at least when it wasn't called for.

"You can set those dishes in the sink, Harry," Annie instructed him.

The interruption caused him to break his involuntary stare. He gladly walked away from the table into the kitchen. Only a few seconds had passed, but Harry was incredibly relieved when Ron made an excuse for them to leave quickly.

"Better get back.... See you around.... Thanks again for the food, Annie. It was delicious, as usual," Ron stammered.

They took the Floo directly back to the Ministry. As they stepped into an empty lift, Ron burst out giggling, and Harry couldn't resist the temptation to join him.

"I can't believe them!" Harry cried.

"Rabbits, I tell you," laughed Ron, shaking his head.

Author's Note: The Canary Island Dragon trees are real: [Dracaena draco](#). The resin obtained from the leaves is called Dragon's Blood and has been used for ages for medicinal, artistic, and magical purposes.

Bygones

Chapter 48 of 80

The Weasleys have a run in with some old adversaries. Annie meets a blast from the past in the midst of a trying moment. George and Lee share a moment of remembrance.

Chapter 48: Bygones

Fall 2000 Spring 2001

August 11, 2000

A shaft of sunlight illuminated the long table around which a dozen people were arranged, laughing and joking with each other. Plates and pint glasses littered the table's surface. The party made up the majority of the occupants of the dim tavern, and the cool darkness was a welcome respite from the blazing heat awaiting them outside. No one was in any hurry to leave.

"Happy birthday, brat," said George, tossing a small package across the table. It landed on the empty but dirty dish in front of his sister, knocking the fork to the floor with a clatter.

Ginny stuck her tongue out at him in response and gingerly picked the present up between two fingers.

"Are you just gonna take that from him, then?" asked Harry, teasing her.

"Nose out, Potter. You're not family yet," warned George playfully.

"You're just jealous because Mum likes Harry better than she likes you," laughed Ron.

"And she likes strangers better than you, git," George retorted.

"She's always liked me best," boasted Percy.

"Small wonder, the way you kiss her arse all the time," muttered George.

"Mama's boy," added Bill, smirking in agreement. He high-fived George as they laughed together.

"Isn't every boy a mama's boy?" asked Art from his perch on his mother's lap.

"Technically, yes," Annie agreed with a smile, giving his curly hair a tousle. "But that's not precisely what Uncle Bill means."

"No, son, you give your mother far too much trouble to qualify as a mama's boy. You are what's called a hellion," corrected his father.

"Am I a hellion too, Dad?" asked Fred.

"Absolutely," George assured him.

A round of gentle laughter echoed through the room as Percy smugly added, "Like father, like son."

Several eyes glanced up in casual curiosity as emerald flames flared in the fireplace nearby. The laughter around the table died awkwardly a moment later.

Annie looked up as four people she had never seen before emerged from the fireplace. Three of them were tall, blond, aristocratic sorts: an older couple, perhaps slightly younger than her mother- and father-in-law, with what was unquestionably their son. The other was a pale, raven-haired girl, clearly unrelated but with a similar demeanor, who linked her arm possessively around the younger man's.

The people looked about themselves at their surroundings, their noses wrinkled in obvious distaste. Annie wondered if they had perhaps never been to the Leaky Cauldron before and had not known what to expect. Maybe they were foreigners? She granted that the dingy little tavern took a bit of getting used to, certainly, but it wasn't really all that bad.

The tall, haughty man's gaze fell onto the occupants of her table. His expression instantly turned into one of utter contempt.

Annie glanced around her in alarm. The feeling only intensified as she discovered every single one of the Weasleys was glaring back at the newcomers with loathing *what on earth is going on?*

"Well, well. I see how the Weasleys are moving up in the world. And dragging the usual shameful assortment of half-breeds and Mudbloods along with them," the man's icy voice sneered.

Annie's jaw dropped, shocked by his vicious rudeness. She had certainly endured her share of nasty behavior from the ignorant boors at school, but this was her first face-to-face encounter with the wizard-variety, pure-blooded bigotry she had only heard about up until now.

The situation disintegrated in an instant. Seven chairs simultaneously scraped the floor as everyone bolted up from the table. Bill, Ginny, and George had drawn their wands, glaring hatefully at the insulting man. To her dread, Annie saw the stranger had done the same. She stood as well and grabbed hold of the twins' hands, pulling them behind her.

"No!" cried the blonde woman, grabbing for her husband's wand arm. She was weakly tugging on the man's arm to no effect. The younger man and his girlfriend took several steps backward, distancing themselves from the pending fracas.

In the same moment, Fleur rushed up to Bill. "He is not worth it!" she cried, succeeding in pushing a snarling Bill a few steps away from the confrontation while begging him to back down.

Tom the barman added his own shouts from behind the bar. "No wands drawn in my inn! I'll have no wands now! Put them away or take it outside!"

Harry had dashed from his seat and was now standing between the Weasleys and their pale assailant, arms braced outward to keep the factions separated. "It's over now! Stop it! It's over!" he bellowed.

Percy was standing behind Bill and George, urging them to calm down and listen to Harry. Ron and Hermione were struggling to subdue Ginny, who was attempting to charge forward and perhaps tackle the other family by brute force if necessary.

But George slowly shook his head in response to Harry, Percy, and Tom, his wand still aimed directly at the enemy's nose. His mind was filled with the innumerable insults, the unforgivable attacks over the years: what happened to Ginny in the Chamber of Secrets, the torture of his father at the Burrow, the melee of the night of Bill's wedding. *It is not over. It is far from over, in fact. This slimy, slithering son of a bitch doesn't deserve to draw a free breath, no matter what Harry says to the contrary. Azkaban is too good for him....*

"Not in front of your children, George," Annie begged quietly.

His wife's voice broke into the vengeance-fueled storm that was taking over George's mind. He looked at her, saw his twin sons peeking out at him from behind her legs. The worry, shock, and fear on their faces sapped his anger, and he slowly let his wand fall.

The pale man's eyes narrowed with understanding as he watched George, then looked at Annie, taking in her rounded, pregnant belly. "She's a clever one, *your wife*," he sneered, as if the idea was disgusting to him. "For a *Muggle*, that is," he added. Annie could see by the look in his eyes he was daring George to retaliate, that he considered the word "Muggle" to be an insult of the highest degree.

George slowly turned his head back toward the man, eyes narrowed in suspicion, a new understanding beginning to dawn. For a moment, Annie saw the man's expression falter, as if he recognized that he had perhaps said something he shouldn't have. Then the over-confident sneer returned in the next instant.

"Come on, Father," the younger blond man urged him, speaking for the first time. "Let's get out of this place." He gave his father's shoulder a gentle but firm tug toward the rear door that led to Diagon Alley.

Annie noticed the young man had never drawn a wand, hadn't participated in the exchange, though his haughty expression plainly demonstrated how he felt about the relative worth of the Weasleys. He clearly agreed with his father's assessment but was too cowardly to challenge the family, fully assembled as they were.

The father snatched his arm away from his son with a glare, and with a flourish of his voluminous robes, threw back his head and marched out the door. The rest of his family walked quickly after him. The Weasleys remained standing, poised for battle, as they watched them leave.

The pub fell quiet once more. Percy walked over toward the bar and spoke with Tom. Annie presumed he was apologizing for the scene, probably offering a few galleons for the man's trouble. *Ever the placator*, Annie thought, then scolded herself. He was only trying to do what was right, after all.

"What was all that, Mummy?" asked Art. Both boys looked at her with curiosity.

"I don't know, exactly," Annie said honestly. "Why don't you take Victoire over to Tom and ask him to give you some more pumpkin juice?" she suggested, handing them several coins. They eagerly agreed, and Annie was grateful they were still young enough to be so easily distracted. She watched them for a few moments as they took their little cousin's hand and dashed over toward the bar with her.

Ron, Harry, and Hermione had just succeeded in marching a still-irate Ginny out the front door onto the Muggle street, intending to keep her there until she calmed down. Bill and Fleur were talking quietly but animatedly, their heads together, sitting at the end of the table.

Annie returned her gaze to George, who was the only one left standing at this point besides herself. She noticed the small movements in his jaw as he ground his teeth, attempting to dissipate the tension. She reached out and took his hand, and he turned toward her.

"How did he know about you?" he whispered under his breath, his brow furrowed as his mind raced with thought.

For a moment, she wondered if it was a rhetorical question. Was he referring to their marriage? Or her status as a non-magical person? "It's not exactly a secret anymore," she replied, answering both questions at once.

Ever since the war was over, George had never hesitated to introduce her as his wife to anyone they'd ever met. And frequently, the fact she was a Muggle would come up in the introductory conversations. It never bothered her, at any rate. In most cases, people would take it in stride. Many appeared genuinely interested. At worst, she sometimes noticed a few wizards had seemed slightly uncomfortable with the fact. She always gave them the benefit of the doubt and assumed it was because they had never had much prior interaction with non-magical folk. Today was the first instance of anyone in the wizarding world becoming nasty regarding her heritage.

"Yeah, I suppose so," he said, not really convinced by her argument.

Something she did not understand was bothering him, but she sensed this was not the time or place to pursue it. She would ask him about it later. One question would not wait, however. "Who was that?" she asked, still reeling from the bizarre confrontation.

"Lucius fucking Malfoy," he muttered, glancing back toward the door his nemesis had left from.

*

January 1, 2001

Dr. Walsh strolled down the hallway of the ER. He had just been joking around with the nurses in the lounge, sharing stories of their craziest nights on shift. This one promised to be hairier than most, they assured him: a full moon coincided with New Year's Eve. They were bracing themselves for babies and drunks galore tonight.

He paused outside a curtained-off bed and grabbed the appropriate chart. It informed him here was a woman claiming to be in labor inside *Probably eager to be the first baby of the new year*, he mused. According to the intake papers, she'd only been feeling contractions for a couple of hours at most. He glanced at the clock 12:50 a.m. She'd likely missed the first baby boat already.

A voice from behind the curtain caught his attention and made him look up. The curtain was parted just enough for him to see a young, ginger-haired man the father, he presumed holding the woman's hand while rubbing her lower back. *Either the fellow has excellent instincts, or this isn't his first go* Dr. Walsh looked back down at the chart for a few more moments, searching for any obvious red flags in the mother's medical history.

"Why do you keep doing this? Waiting until the last minute to tell me you're in labor?" he heard the man tease the woman in a warm, relaxed voice.

"Perverse sense of humor, I suppose," the laboring woman answered, sounding tired but also calm.

Walsh was encouraged by their banter, thankful he wouldn't be dealing with frantic new parents, even though the fellow did look awfully young.

"And anyway, I *did* tell you as soon as it started. It's just going much faster this time." She stopped talking then Walsh assumed another contraction had occupied her focus.

He was just finishing up reading the chart, signing all the necessary paperwork to transfer the patient out of the ER and upstairs into Maternity, when he heard something that caused him a great deal of alarm.

"Breathe it out, love," the presumed husband urged. "The nurse said *not* to push yet."

"IhavetopushIhavetopushIhaveto," she answered, undeterred and determined.

Dr. Walsh threw open the curtain at that moment. In a commanding voice, he addressed the woman. "Mrs. Weasley, DO NOT PUSH!"

The pregnant woman on the gurney looked up at him, startled.

Walsh would've recognized those violet eyes anywhere. "My God! Annie!?"

An equally shocked look of recognition met his own. "Andy!?" she gasped.

"And I'm George," added the husband, curious but amused. "I take it you two have met?"

Walsh noticed Annie was panting now as the last of the contraction spent itself. "A long time ago," she explained, turning away from him to look at her husband once more

and smile weakly.

The young man glanced at him with slightly narrowed eyes. "Did you go to school together, then?" he asked his wife.

She shook her head, and immediately her husband looked relieved for some strange reason. Apparently, a positive answer to that question would not have boded well for him, Walsh realized.

Dr. Andy Walsh felt embarrassed by his unprofessional behavior and rapidly collected himself. "May I examine you now, Mrs. Weasley, or would you prefer me to call someone else?"

The couple glanced at each other, clearly amused by their predicament. "We're in a bit of a rush, actually," answered her husband as Annie nodded sheepishly.

The awkwardness of the examination only lasted two seconds. "Good Lord you're crowning!" Walsh exclaimed as soon as he lifted the sheet, his eyes taking in the top of an infant's head in an instant. He realized there was no time to get Annie out of here and up to the maternity ward. The baby would be born in the lift if he tried.

"Please may I push NOW?" she cried as another contraction gripped her.

"Erm yes, of course," he replied, reaching down to support the head as it rapidly emerged with Annie's efficient work. He called out for a nurse to bring the emergency delivery supplies.

He glanced up to see Annie's husband tenderly supporting her as she curled her body around her belly, eyes closed, face calm but determined, bearing down. Andy could see the fellow's lips were moving against her ear but couldn't hear the words.

"This is not your first, I take it?" he asked after the contraction passed. He had just turned the head and begun clearing the baby's mouth.

"Our third, actually," the husband replied with a proud smile, while Annie gasped to catch her breath. "We've got two-year-old twins at home," he continued absentmindedly as his focus returned to his wife.

Andy couldn't have asked for an easier birth. A baby girl was born after two more contractions, just a few minutes after one a.m. Mother and daughter were perfectly healthy and doing well, so he sent his patient up to Maternity as soon as possible to recover, then spent the rest of the night patching up drunken revelers.

Andy Walsh strolled down the hallway of the maternity ward after his shift, far too curious to leave without saying a proper hello at the very least. It was midmorning, getting on toward noon, and he told himself it would be unprofessional of him *not* to check that they were still doing well.

To his relief, he saw that Annie was awake as he peeked around the doorway. Annie's husband was dozing in a chair next to the bed. She held her new baby in her arms, a broad, tired smile lighting up her face.

"Hello," he said softly, glancing around the room. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," she answered genially. She didn't appear to feel any lasting discomfort from the awkwardness of their reunion a few hours previously.

"What did you name her?" Walsh asked politely, unsure of what else to say.

"Molly Meredith. For George's mother and my Gran," she replied.

"It's very pretty," he said. "And very fitting for a pretty little girl."

After a few moments passed while he paid proper tribute by gazing admiringly at the little infant, he continued. "You never called me," he said teasingly, speaking just above a whisper. "I suppose this is why?" he asked, indicating her husband and child with a wave of his hand.

Annie blushed as she nodded slightly. "It's good to see you again," she offered. "How have you been?"

Andy was surprised by her abashed reaction. "Good. Busy. I've even got a semblance of a life now that I'm out of school," he replied lightly, testing her memory.

"Did you take up skydiving, then?" she said, giggling quietly.

It pleased him that she remembered their conversation from so long ago. He hadn't really thought of her all that much since that night at the bar in Plymouth, but she had made enough of an impression that he had thought of her occasionally through the years, wondering what had happened to her. Especially on nights like last night, on the rare occasion whenever he covered shifts for a mate here at the Ottery St. Catchpole hospital. Just idle curiosity, really.

"Not hardly. I did manage to find someone who's willing to put up with doctor's hours, though. We're getting married this summer." He wanted to assure her she was off the hook. He didn't want her to feel awkward or think he was holding a candle or any other such idiotic notion.

"Congratulations!" she said sincerely. "Jane will be thrilled! She always thought very highly of you," she added kindly. "I'll be sure to tell her when I see her."

"I knew you were only sixteen, you know. Your medical chart now proves it," he continued in a joking manner, trying to let her know there were no hard feelings. It was years ago now, and after all, they had only spent a few hours together that night. He had never really expected her to call.

"Guilty as charged," she admitted with a giggle.

"You still look it, by the way," he added. It was true: she'd hardly changed a fraction since he had met her that night of her birthday. In fact, Annie looked far too young to have three children already. *What an interesting tale that must be* he thought.

"Yes, she does," a voice spoke softly from beside them.

Andy turned to see Annie's husband gazing calmly at them both, curiosity in his eyes.

"Good morning, George," she greeted him softly, her voice filled with confidence and unmistakable adoration. "You remember Dr. Walsh from a few hours ago, don't you?"

"I do," he said, rising and shaking Andy's hand. "Thank you for delivering our daughter," he added sincerely. After a moment's pause, he continued. "And you remember my wife from...?" he asked expectantly.

Andy glanced at Annie, silently asking her what to do.

Annie giggled in response. "Go ahead and tell him, Andy," she said. "He revels in anything that embarrasses me."

"I was a party to sneaking this one into a bar on her *sixteenth* birthday," he confessed with a smile, nodding toward her, adding the emphasis on her age for her husband's sake.

"Why am I not surprised? My wife has quite a rap sheet when it comes to juvenile criminal exploits," George replied with a light-hearted laugh.

"I was not the only criminal that night! Jane was responsible for providing me with the illegal means to get in," she added defensively.

"So I have *Jane* to blame for corrupting you?" he teased in a voice that clearly enjoyed the irony of the statement.

"You know the blame for that falls squarely on your own shoulders, git," she retorted.

Andy smiled at the exchange. Annie had clearly found an excellent match for herself. He decided it might be safe to add a bit of fuel to the fire. "You should've seen the pile of phone numbers your then-underage wife collected that night."

"Oh, really?" George replied in mockingly disturbed voice, turning to level a dramatically shocked look at Annie. "And did you ever contact any of these gentlemen with such questionable morals?"

"Not a one of them," Andy answered for her with a wink. "I confiscated every number."

Annie huffed at his historical revision of the facts.

"Thank goodness someone was behaving responsibly that night," laughed George.

"Like you'd know responsible behavior if it bit you in the arse," Annie quipped sassily.

"Please, dear! I'll thank you to watch your language in front of the baby," George teased. "Or are you trying to corrupt her as well?"

"Troll," she muttered, smiling at him. Then the baby in her arms began to fuss a bit, probably ready to nurse.

Andy took that as his cue to leave. "It was very nice to meet you, George," he said, offering his hand to shake once more. "And congratulations on a lovely family," he added.

"Thank you, Dr. Walsh, for taking such good care of them," George replied warmly.

"Good to see you again, Annie," Andy said as he moved toward the door.

"Take care, Andy."

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April 1, 2001

Transcript: River & Wrackspurt Episode #68

RIVER: Welcome once again to River and Wrackspurt, the show committed to introducing wizard folk to the wonderful world of Muggle music. In today's episode, children, we'll be featuring some oldies but goodies. Today's eclectic collection is dedicated to an old mate who, accidentally and through no fault of his own, had semi-reasonable taste in music.

WRACKSPURT: Right you are, River. We've got some excellent punk, both homegrown and imported, from the seventies and eighties, a real classic from one of the most popular British Muggle bands of all time, and some alternative stuff from the nineties, not so very long ago.

RIVER: Heavy on the American tunes, this go, Wrackspurt. We begin with the Ramones, a seminal American punk band we've featured here on the show before. Are these boys really all related to each other, Wrackspurt?

WRACKSPURT: No they are not, River, despite the fact they share the same last name. I believe they were being clever, mate.

RIVER: Here's "Blitzkrieg Bop," a song older than I am, for your edification.

[song plays]

"Fred and Annie used to scream this song together whenever they heard it," George said with a soft, sad smile. "He used to play along on air guitar, not knowing what the hell he was doing, and Annie would laugh at him until she cried."

"He was a pisser, for sure," Lee chuckled. "Remember when he pinched all of Umbridge's knickers from the elves, enlarged 'em with an Engorgio, and replaced the Great Hall banners with 'em? I thought that cow was gonna have a conniption! For sure her head was gonna explode or somethin', I reckoned."

George guffawed with the memory. "She had to know it was one of us, and I thought he'd really done it, that time. She was gonna hang him or me for certain, maybe both. But then he just kept makin' eyes at her all day, blowin' her little air kisses... remember? Like those hideous girdles were the sexiest things he'd ever seen, just turnin' him on no end. She didn't know what the hell to make of it. I still can't believe we got nothin' for it. Not even a line!"

The song ended, and Lee took the microphone once again, nearly gasping for breath from laughing.

RIVER: Now here's a treat for you, dear ones. "Blister in the Sun" is a lovely little ditty by those irrepressible Yanks, the Violent Femmes. I dare you to be in the throes of puberty and not adore this band.

WRACKSPURT: Ah, River, those were the days, were they not? Bad skin, worse hair, a voice that can't decide its register.... Who doesn't remember those days fondly?

RIVER: You, for one. You were a miserable sod, if memory serves. Pining away for the future Mrs. Wrackspurt, if I'm not mistaken.

WRACKSPURT: Who asked you anyway? Like you were any better.

RIVER: Can't argue with you there, sir. For all you children who think teenage angst and heartache are something new, listen up.

[song plays]

"How did we survive it?" George asked his friend. "All that misery?"

Lee was quiet for a few moments, staring at his fists in his lap. "I wanted to kill him, you know. When he took Ange to the Yule Ball..."

"You should have asked her first instead of being such a chicken-shit," George needled him. They'd had this conversation more than once before.

"I knew she'd say no," Lee argued.

"You knew no such thing!" George protested.

Lee smirked dubiously.

"You forgave him, though," George said a few moments later.

Lee snorted. "What else could I do? He was just Fred being Fred. Can't blame a dragon for breathin' fire, can you?"

"And she ended up with the one she belongs with," George added after a minute had passed.

Lee smiled. "Yeah. That's true."

RIVER: Now we come to a band that, if you've been paying the slightest bit of attention to this program at all over the past year and a half...

WRACKSPURT: Unless, of course, you've been living in a cave, in which case, welcome back to civilization.

RIVER: You will have heard these boys numerous times on our humble little program. Here is "White Riot" from The Only Band That Matters.

[song plays]

"Art loves this song squeals when the siren comes on," George chuckled. "And little Fred jumps around, crashing into stuff just like he knew what slam dancing was."

"Annie's raisin' 'em right, then. Every child of the realm should listen to The Clash from birth. Oughta be a law, I reckon. Maybe everbefore birth," Lee argued. "I used to set the speaker right next to Ange's belly so Roxy could hear it."

"Fred worshipped them, remember?" George asked after another chuckle. Then he paused, staring off into space a bit. "I think that's why Annie does it: so they'll share something with him."

A long pause followed while they listened to the song.

"I hate that they'll never know him. That he never got to meet them," George whispered.

"You can't dwell on stuff like that, George," Lee insisted.

"How am I supposed to ignore it?" George pleaded. "Tell me, please, because I'd fuckin' love to know."

"I don't know, mate," Lee mumbled apologetically.

George threw his head back, staring at the ceiling, blinking furiously. "Sorry I'm being such a jerk."

"You're not being anything," Lee interrupted, reassuring him. "Today is a sad day. I understand, mate. Frankly, you've done better than anyone could ever have expected. Plenty of people who didn't lose anything near what you did are still wallowing in it."

George bowed his head as Lee was speaking. "Ah, shit," he mumbled, then pinched bridge of nose as a tear rolled down.

Lee grabbed the microphone after two seconds of dead air.

RIVER: Here's the Dead Milkmen with "Punk Rock Girl."

[song plays]

George sniffed and shook his head vigorously in an attempt to dispel the grief. "Other days even holidays and anniversaries are fine. Christmas is no big deal: the kids are the focus then, you know? Not even May Second all those bloody memorials 'cause it's for everybody, right? Nothing else hits like today."

A choked sob escaped his throat, and George pressed his palms against his eyes. "For chrissake, Annie can't even make me a goddamn birthday cake anymore because I start to fucking cry when it's just my name on the thing!"

"Why don't you take a break, man? I can finish up here," Lee urged him.

"No!" George nearly shouted. A deep breath and a few moments later, he continued with more composure. "I have to do this. It's like an exorcism, you know? It helps... I think."

A quiet minute passed.

"You know, I can't help thinking," Lee said with a small smile, "that Fred would've been takin' the bloody mickey out of you right now. 'Pansy-arse baby girl,' he'd call you. He'd punch you in the face without a moment's hesitation and give you somethin' to really cry about."

George laughed despite the tears. "I know. He was a prick with the emotional range of a flobberworm," he said, drying his face. "Maybe that's just what I need, though," he said with a sigh. "A good kick in the arse."

"It would've killed him to go on, but he would have. Just like you are," Lee said quietly. He pressed another button on the console, and the next song on the list began to play without being introduced. Slow guitar and drums rang through the little room they used as a broadcast booth, and Mick Jagger began singing, "I'll never be... your beast of burden...."

"You think?" George asked, knowing Lee was probably right.

"Well, he'd be burying his sorrows in a parade of bimbos, make no mistake. But yeah, he would," Lee argued.

They paused for a few moments, listening to the music.

"I could probably name ten girls listening to this song right now, each of them remembering spending the night with him. He used to call this his 'sex anthem,'" George said, rolling his eyes. "'Nothin' drops the knickers faster than the Stones, George,' he'd say."

Lee shook his head ruefully. "He wasn't even that good lookin'!"

"Thanks a lot, arsehole," George chuckled. "You're not exactly *Witch Weekly's* Sexiest Wizard Alive, yourself."

"I'm serious!" Lee laughed, amused by his unintended joke, as well. "How'd the bastard get so much tail?"

George shrugged. "How the hell should I know? I wasn't even gonna play the Stones this year, but Verity requested it."

"Verity *Parson!*?" Lee cried, incredulous. "Your shop girl!?"

George cringed. "Shit... it's supposed to be a secret, okay? Forget I ever said anything, would you?"

"She *told* you?" Lee hissed, further astonished.

George shook his head vigorously. "Don't be stupid! Of course not! Annie guessed a while ago, but I wasn't convinced until this week, when Verity told me she knew how much Fred liked this song and how I should maybe play it today."

Lee started laughing. "The man is legend! I'm surprised there isn't a venereal disease named after him!"

"Seriously, Lee, keep your damn mouth shut about this," George threatened, trying to remain stern but having difficulty stifling a chuckle. "I don't think she knows I know."

"How many do you think...?" Lee asked, marveling.

"Even if I had a clue, I wouldn't effing tell you, Lee!" George barked.

Lee chuckled wickedly all the same.

George couldn't help himself; a smile spread across his face. "You know how much he was prone to exaggerate, anyway."

Several quiet moments passed after their laughter died away.

"Do you think he ever...?" Lee asked, unable to put the rest of his thought into words.

George shook his head, understanding his friend's meaning immediately. "You know Ange better than that, mate."

Lee nodded to himself. "Right."

The song wound to a close, and Lee took the microphone once more.

RIVER: That was.... Well, for Merlin's sake, you all ought to know who that was, shouldn't you?

WRACKSPURT: And shame on you if you don't. I think from now on, if anyone fails to recognize a Stones song, they should be permanently cursed with the word "git" tattooed on their forehead.

RIVER: Sounds appropriate, Wrackspurt. Now, let's turn our focus westward once more to the West Coast of America. Here's a bit of what the Muggles call "grunge" from nearly a decade ago. This is "Come as You Are" by Nirvana.

WRACKSPURT: River, I reckon this band had a stranglehold on what it meant to be an angry youth in the 1990s.

RIVER: This particular version is from a live, acoustic performance. Do enjoy, children.

[song plays]

"Before I forget... Annie wanted me to invite you lot for dinner tonight," George said.

"Sure, if you want," Lee replied. "What's she making?"

George shrugged. "Dunno. Come over around six?"

Lee nodded. "I'm bringing a cake with your name on it," he said without looking at his friend, pretending to examine a new CD case George had brought along with him today.

"I'll shove it in your fuckin' face, I swear," George warned him.

"I want some goddamn birthday cake, git," Lee teased, smiling. "So get your shit together and smile while we all eat it."

"You're a right prick, you know that?" George retorted, laughing.

RIVER: Wrackspurt, why don't you introduce this one? I find I cannot bring myself to do it justice.

WRACKSPURT: All right, River. Here is, for my galleons, one of the best American exports of all time. These gentlemen brought to hip-hop which is a dubious enterprise at best, to my mind....

RIVER: I've got to disagree with you there, Wrackspurt....

WRACKSPURT: And all I can say is everyone's entitled to their wrong opinion. As I was saying, these gentlemen brought a level of intellectual discourse that was hitherto missing from said genre. They lifted it from the quagmire of gangland criminal exploits and anti-feministic rants about sexual conquests to wax poetic about tolerance, life in a multicultural metropolis, liberation from parental oppression, and robots. Here is "Sabotage" by the Beastie Boys.

[song plays]

"I hated this song before I ever even heard it for real," Lee groaned, turning down the volume in the room. "Where did he even hear it?"

"Blame Annie for that one," George chuckled. "She bought it that summer before the Triwizard Tournament, figuring Fred and I would like it. I did at first, but I admit Fred ruined it that year at school."

"It was cool for one week, how every time he walked into the common room he screamed, 'Listen all y'all: it's a sab-o-tage!' Then it was just kinda funny for a few more days. By Halloween, I swore if he did it again I was gonna bind his effing tongue."

"If Fred had a fault, it was that he never did develop a good sense of when enough was enough," George agreed.

"That was part of his genius, though," Lee argued. "Pushing a joke from funny, to old, to annoying, to *really* fuckin' annoying, then to hilarious again. Like when he bewitched the blokes in Ron's autographed Cannons team photo to start makin' out with each other whenever anyone walked into the room, then stuck it damn near permanently in that frame."

"Oh, God," laughed George, remembering Ron's furiously red and pouting face at the time. He could be a bit oversensitive when it came to the Cannons, to be sure.

"First it was a riot, then mildly amusing, then kinda sick, then so effing funny I couldn't even look at it anymore without nearly pissin' myself," Lee laughed.

George snickered and dabbed his eyes. At least these tears were from laughter, this time.

"You almost started to feel sorry for the poor guy," Lee continued through his laughter, "cause Ron was livid as hell about it. But then it was just too damn funny and you

laughed, which only served to piss him off further. How was it Fred got the soundtrack to stick so well? Never heard such loud, sloppy snoggin' sounds."

"I did that bit. I'll show you, sometime," George confessed.

RIVER: Children, there is a magical place across the ocean, over the mountains, and through the desert called southern California, USA. There on the shore of the Pacific Ocean is a city of angels that calls to all thespians, musicians, and beach bums the world over.

WRACKSPURT: Someday Mrs. Wrackspurt and I will surf those waves, River. Mark my words!

RIVER: Everyone deserves a dream, Wrackspurt. Glad to hear you have one.

WRACKSPURT: In my opinion, which is the only one you need listen to, Sublime is one of the best bands ever to come out of the glorious surf-ska-punk-reggae-whatever stew. Lend me your ears, young witches and wizards, and I dare you to contradict me. This is "What I Got."

[song plays]

"A bit racy for the WWN airwaves, this one. You're ponying up the galleons for the fine this time," Lee warned him. "I can't remember when did this one come out?"

"Summer of ninety-seven," George replied, instantly recalling the pub in Bantham where he had heard it first. Fred had hooked a tarty raven-haired university coed that night and had received what was, for all intents and purposes, a lap dance to the tune. Fred and the girl had left the pub as soon as the song was over; George and Annie hadn't seen nor heard from him for two days afterward.

"Liliana's got a pretty little roommate, George," Fred had eagerly shared with him when he had finally stumbled into the Wheezes shop the following Monday morning just after they had opened the doors for the day's business.

"And I care why?" he had replied testily, himself having just stumbled back from Annie's a mere twenty minutes before.

"They're both very liberated, open-minded girls," Fred had chuckled conspiratorially. "And they both fancy ginger fellas, if you read me."

"Are you attempting to set me up or merely boasting again?" George had asked with no small amount of exasperation.

"Either way suits me fine," Fred had said with a shrug. "Come on... live a little!"

"Annie's right: you are a pig," George had snapped, unamused. "I'll pass."

"That's right. Be a good little girl," Fred had needled him, rolling his eyes.

Lee's voice brought George back to the present. "Ninety-seven? Just before...."

"The shit hit the fan at Bills' wedding. Yeah," George replied. "Let's just say Fred certainly believed in making hay while the sun shined that summer and leave it at that."

RIVER: Ladies and gents, our time together is once more nearly at an end. As we mentioned at the beginning of the program, today's music is dedicated to the memory of someone very near and dear to your hosts' hearts. Sadly, he has gone to his reward, as they say.

WRACKSPURT: Gone but not forgotten... and dearly missed. Like so many of us who have lost loved ones recently, not a day goes by that we don't think of him and the others like him who made the ultimate sacrifice for a greater good. This final song is dedicated to each and every one of those heroes who, over the past thirty years or more, have fought the good fight... and those of us who are left behind to remember them. We leave you this week with "Gone Away" by The Offspring. Thanks for listening.

[song plays]

Author's Note: I can't imagine *Potterwatch* would ever end; instead, it evolved into *River & Wrackspurt*. I think each of the songs on this show have something to say about Fred and George as well. I strongly believe Fred would've had a deep and abiding love for punk music (any excuse to thumb his nose at authority), a healthy respect for grunge, and would've been eager to exploit a sexy song for seduction purposes (smile and wink). Here are the requisite links....

[Blitzkrieg Bop](#) by The Ramones.

[Blister in the Sun](#) by Violent Femmes.

[White Riot](#) by The Clash.

[Punk Rock Girl](#) by Dead Milkmen.

[Beast of Burden](#) by The Rolling Stones.

[Come As You Are](#) by Nirvana.

[Sabotage](#) by Beastie Boys.

[What I Got](#) by Sublime (apologies for the commercial at the beginning). This is the "clean" version rather than the one aired on the show. George isn't much for censorship. :)

[Gone Away](#) by The Offspring.

Hermione's Hen Party

Hermione's getting married tomorrow morning, and her friends and sisters-in-law gather together to show her a good time. Luna proves to be the hit of the party, although Fleur gives her a run for her money.

Chapter 49: Hermione's Hen Party

May 2001

Six women sat around a table loaded with empty wine bottles and dessert dishes in a private room at the back of a restaurant in Muggle London. The other patrons could still overhear the genial chatter that was occasionally interrupted by raucous laughter as the night wore on. Now it was late in the evening, and the rest of the restaurant was nearly empty, but their little hen party was still going strong.

"You know, in my country, a virgin witch's mother or oldest sister would spend this night before her wedding carefully explaining the act of love, then consoling the poor girl by plying her with brandy or calvados," Fleur laughed. "I presume none of us need perform this duty for you, Hermione? Surely there are books on the subject, and you have read them all thoroughly?"

Hermione looked as though she would have loved to crawl under the table at the moment. Ginny smiled sympathetically at her while the rest of the women laughed along with Fleur.

"I'm not answering that," Hermione croaked, then took a large gulp of wine.

"It's nothing to be afraid of, my dear," Fleur pressed in a rather patronizing voice. "Ron is a Weasley male. Whatever skills they may lack from inexperience are most assuredly counter... counter... outshined by other generous familial endowments." A very femininely delicate belch followed this pronouncement. "You're not missing out on anything."

"Good lord!" Angelina cried. "I'm afraid to ask how you think you know this."

Fleur smiled, waving her hand dramatically as she spoke. "We live in modern times, *cheri!* I am not ashamed to tell you Bill was not my first. I knew my way around a boudoir well before I settled down. But, of course, a lady never admits to any definitive number, nor would she name names."

"The *lady* should feel free to shut it at any time," Ginny grumbled, sending a dark look across the table at her sister-in-law.

"Ah, poor little sister! Forced to look outside the family for her satisfaction. What a shame, in an odd sort of way," Fleur giggled, indelicately dancing around the suggestion of incest. "I feel sorry for you, *ma petite* Ginny."

"Don't bother," Ginny snapped indignantly with an angry flip of her hair, her chin jutting out proudly. "I assure you it isn't necessary."

"Ooh! Wondering if you picked the wrong one of the pair now, Hermione?" Angelina teased, tapping Hermione on the shin with her foot and leering playfully at her. "Apparently, those pretty green eyes aren't the only thing Harry's got going for him!"

Before a mortified Hermione could answer, Fleur chimed in again. "No, no, Hermione! Don't listen to her! I tell you Weasleys have more to offer than the majority of men you'll ever meet," she insisted. "On top of this they are adventurous, attentive, and have an enormous appetite for sex. Well, I mean, you've seen them eat at the table, haven't you? And the virility *mon Dieu!* Unquestionable! Seven siblings! Two of them have already spawned five children in four years!" she cried, patting her own swollen waistline.

A waiter came into the room then and asked if they needed anything. Angelina ordered another bottle of wine while Fleur batted her eyes at the poor fellow. He backed out of the room, mesmerized, nearly stumbling over several chairs.

"Bah!" Fleur cried in disgust. "No man will look at me, now I am so fat!"

"He practically tripped over his tongue, Fleur!" Angelina cried, disputing her assertion.

Fleur ignored her. "At least Bill still makes love to me! Even though I am such a whale!" she whined, sticking her lower lip out petulantly. "Thank God he is so strong to hold me up, eh!"

"He... holds you up?" Angelina cried, unable to master her lurid curiosity. "Even now? That's a bit...."

"Hard to believe?" Hermione said, smirking dubiously. "Not to mention nearly physically impossible," she added sharply.

Fleur nodded. "Like I said, he is very strong. Tell her, Annie."

The table turned curious, widened eyes toward Annie.

"I... erm... wouldn't know anything about Bill, Fleur," she stammered.

"This is not what I mean, of course!" Fleur huffed, rolling her eyes in exasperation. "Is George not so strong as Bill, then? Maybe it is the wolf, eh?" Fleur asked innocently. "Or did he not like to love you when you were fat?"

Annie coughed uncomfortably. This was hardly a subject she ever spoke so blatantly about. But something within her bristled at Fleur's implication that George was anything less than his brother. Her sister-in-law had been accurate in every other detail although Annie reckoned she couldn't really comment as to the size factor, having only ever been in the presence of one naked man in her life.

She wasn't about to let George's prowess go questioned, however especially by Fleur. Annie plucked up her courage in order to defend her husband's talents, which were no less than anything Fleur was claiming on Bill's behalf. *Family pride, after all.*

"George is a very loving, inventive fellow," she replied obliquely. She felt the flare of a raging blush the sort Fred used to be able to elicit at will with a similar sort of teasing light up her face. *Dammit!*

Several at the table chuckled.

"And perhaps you might want to ease off the wine, Fleur," Annie suggested, looking to change the subject. "It goes against most medical advice for pregnant women to imbibe, you know."

Fleur expressed her disdain for Annie's suggestion with a rude raspberry noise. "I am part veela, as is my daughter. *Merèalcohol* cannot harm us. And if she doesn't like it, she can *get the hell out of me already!*" Fleur cried in frustration, directing her last command at her belly.

Annie patted her sister-in-law's shoulder in sympathy. Fleur was already five days past her due date and made utterly miserable by this fact.

"All the same, I think you've had enough," Angelina concurred, shifting the open bottles to the far end of the table, away from Fleur.

Fleur muttered something under her breath in French, but made no move to argue further.

"Can we please talk about something else, now?" Hermione begged.

"Like what? The current state of cauldron bottoms?" Angelina teased.

"Or the latest Quidditch standings?" Ginny added.

Hermione grimaced. "Oh, God! Anything but Quidditch, please! I'll get enough of that starting tomorrow!"

"Did you really not know Barcelona was hosting the European Cup Qualifying Tournament this month?" Annie exclaimed. "As a Weasley wife, it'll be unconscionable for you to lose track of such a thing. Look, for your own good, you've really got to pay closer attention to the calendar, Hermione. Let this be a lesson to you!" Annie playfully chided her almost-sister-in-law.

"He promised me Spain in the spring!" Hermione cried defensively. "Ron said we'd lie all day on the beach, and then... then celebrate all night. I didn't realize he meant we'd be cheering at a bloody *Quidditch* match!" Hermione blushed.

"Beware of Weasley men making promises," Angelina said in a low, mock-warning voice. "Especially when a Snitch is involved."

"Can't trust 'em any further than you can throw 'em," Annie agreed with a wink. "Except when it really counts," she added with an encouraging smile for Hermione.

"It won't be so bad," Ginny assured her friend, draping an arm about her shoulders. "It's still Barcelona, after all. And isn't there some famous library there? That should make you happy."

Annie smiled to herself. *Only Hermione might find consolation in the thought of spending any part of her honeymoon in a library.*

Hermione was just about to begrudgingly nod when she was interrupted by another one of her future sisters-in-law.

"Bill is absolutely unsurpassed at cunninglingus," Fleur exclaimed out of the blue, slightly slurring her words.

"WHAT!?!!" the entire table erupted in unison.

"It was all that time he spent in Egypt before the war," Fleur explained with a casual wave of her hand. "Some Egyptian witch taught him, claiming it was all part of learning how to 'fuck like a pharaoh.' I really do owe the woman a debt of gratitude, I suppose," she added with a chuckle.

"And that statue of Min you know, the one in our bedroom it really is a stunning likeness! I'm telling you, Hermione just be patient with our young Ron!" Fleur counseled her. "You won't regret it! You can't learn to use what you haven't got, you know, and if Ron's anything like Bill...."

"I think I'd like to go home now," Hermione squeaked.

"Maybe it's time for *Phlegm* to go home," Ginny growled, glaring.

"Lighten up, Ginny. Sex talk is what happens at one of these things. And it's just coincidence that half of us here are screwing one of your mob of brothers," Angelina teased. "Myself excluded, of course."

"I think I'll be skipping mine, then," Ginny chuckled.

"Oh, no, you won't!" Hermione cried. "If I have to suffer through it...."

"Well, pardon us, you little swot!" Angelina cried, mildly offended. "Sorry you're so miserable!"

"No, it's not that, Angelina!" Hermione rushed to say, mortified once more. "I appreciate the effort, really."

Angelina harrumphed but gave her friend a half-smile anyway.

Hermione sighed and hung her head. "I guess it's just... the prospect of tomorrow is... nerve-wracking," she stammered, sounding increasingly defeated as she spoke.

Looks of confusion and concern filled the table.

"What's the matter, Hermione?" Luna asked softly, resting her hand on Hermione's shoulders. She'd been rather quiet for most of the evening up to now.

"Nothing's really the matter, I suppose. It's just... such a... massively big... *thing!*" Hermione sighed, struggling for words.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you!" Fleur cried, pounding her hands on the table in a dramatic way.

"I don't mean that!" Hermione spat. Then she looked pleadingly toward the other women at the table. "I mean *marriage*. It's so traditional and weighted down with old-fashioned baggage. I've always thought of myself as an independent, self-sufficient person. And now... as of tomorrow... I'll have a... a *husband*."

"Who happens to be Ron," Annie said softly, patting Hermione's fisted hand resting on the table. "The man you love, and someone who thinks the sun rises and sets with you."

"Your marriage will be what the two of you make of it," Angelina added confidently. "It doesn't come with a set of rules. You make your own rules."

Hermione sighed, clearly unconvinced.

"Is there... someone else?" Luna asked cautiously. "Viktor, maybe?"

Oh, that's right! Annie recalled suddenly. George had mentioned something to her a long time ago about Hermione's brief liaison with the infamous Bulgarian Seeker, Viktor Krum.

"What!? No!" Hermione cried. "Of course not! What in the world would ever lead you to think...?"

"But... you did kiss him, I remember. I saw you both in the rose garden the night of the Yule Ball," Luna said.

Ginny had to bite her lips to prevent herself from grinning broadly. She apparently knew Luna had Hermione dead to rights, and the troublemaker within her was delighted by the prospect.

Hermione huffed. "Well, I mean... of course I've... *kissed*... other men before!" she spluttered. "But nothing *serious*...."

"And why shouldn't you enjoy yourself!?" Fleur declared, interrupting Hermione. "We are modern women! None of this prudish pretense of virginity on the wedding night! How ridiculous!"

"Not... so ridiculous, really," Hermione mumbled quietly.

But the rest of the table hadn't heard her over their laughter. "Speaking of kissing other men.... I've just got to ask you, Annie," Angelina purred tauntingly

"Ask me what?" Annie giggled.

"Did you ever... with Fred?"

"Did I ever *what* with Fred?" Annie demanded, suddenly sober as a judge.

Angelina shrugged. "Kiss him, I suppose."

"No!" Annie proclaimed decisively. "Fred was my friend. And George's *brother*, Ange."

"But how can you know for sure?" Fleur asked. "They certainly enjoyed playing jokes like that on people, I remember. Pretending to be each other."

Annie snorted. She was certain beyond a shadow of a doubt that Fred would have known better than to even try it. If the mere idea of kissing her hadn't thoroughly revolted him first, that is. And George would have pounded him to a pulp for even suggesting, much less attempting such a thing. "Fred and George tried to fool me a million times when we were little kids, but *never* succeeded," she announced with utter confidence.

"But *how* do you know?" Hermione asked. "They were identical! Even Molly couldn't tell them apart!"

It struck Annie that Hermione seemed oddly very curious about the matter. Or maybe she was simply grateful for the opportunity to deflect the focus from herself.

Annie shrugged. "I always could. The eyes... their faces are just... different. And their voices are completely distinct. If I was ever confused for a second like if I was blinded or something the instant one of them spoke a word, I'd know."

"Maybe you only *think* you know," Angelina challenged her smugly.

"No, it's true," Luna chimed in before Annie could argue the point. "Fred and George were very different, even before George lost his ear. And I thought Fred was a very good kisser, Angelina. Didn't you? Though I never kissed George, so I suppose I can't really give an accurate comparison of the two."

To describe the table as profoundly gobsmacked would have been a gross understatement. Mouths were agape, eyes widened, and bodies were frozen.

Hermione managed to overcome her shock first. "You... you dated Fred, Luna?" she stammered, shaking her head slightly. "I never knew."

"No, I wouldn't really call it dating," Luna explained in her dreamy, sing-song voice.

"Just what would you call it, then?" Angelina asked, stunned.

Luna shrugged. "We... met up with each other... a few times," she explained as if such a bombshell was the most routine, everyday subject in the world. "Yes, I suppose that's what I'd call it. It was never a planned thing, really. Once in the Forbidden Forest we ran into each other. Then another time in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom."

"What was Fred doing in a bloody girl's toilet?" Ginny demanded, sounding skeptical in the extreme.

Luna smiled beatifically. The memory very obviously gave her enjoyment. "He said he wanted to know why Hermione and Harry and Ron were so interested in it, spending so much time in there over the years," Luna replied. She turned to smile at Hermione. "Then he said if the three of you were doing what the two of us were doing, he could finally understand the attraction. Fred could be surprisingly sweet, sometimes."

Hermione blanched, then took a big gulp of wine, emptying her glass. "I *wasnot*...! I would *never*...!"

"You don't have to explain yourself to me, Hermione," Luna said calmly. "Harry and Ron are both very attractive fellows."

Hermione spluttered, unable to summon words to defend herself, while Angelina and Annie laughed at the ridiculousness of the implication. *Hermione? With Ron and Harry?*

"Did you kiss them as well, then?" Ginny cried accusingly at Luna, nearly sounding in a panic. Apparently, the hypothetical situation didn't seem nearly as ridiculous to her.

Ooh, Harry! Watch out! Things would not go well for him if Luna ratted him out in the next moment, Annie reckoned. Over the years of their courtship, Ginny had revealed herself to be terribly prone to jealousy where Harry was concerned.

Luna was thoughtful for a moment. "No. I don't remember ever kissing either of them."

"Is it that hard to remember them all?" Angelina cried in disbelief.

"Well, I am a little bit intoxicated right now," Luna said, beaming a smile. "So, yes, my memory is a bit fuzzy. Or maybe it's the Wrackspurts again." She swatted at the air around her head. "Let's see... there was Fred... and Lee...."

"Lee!?!?" Angelina hissed, aghast.

Luna turned to face Angelina, apparently baffled by her reaction. "He was very brokenhearted the night of the Yule Ball. I felt so sorry for him. You really shouldn't have gone to the dance with Fred that night, Angelina."

Angelina bristled. "I went with the bloke who had the nerve to ask me," she grumbled defensively.

But Luna had moved on. Dreamily gazing above their heads, she continued her recitation of a list of names. "And there was Seamus, Blaise...."

"You snogged a *Slytherin!*?" Hermione screeched.

Luna turned a patient gaze toward Hermione. "I'm not so judgmental as you and prefer to make my decisions based on an individual's attributes rather than house affiliation. Blaise did not turn out to be nice, nor was he a very good kisser, though," she added absently.

"What did you expect?" Ginny asked.

Luna almost looked irritated. "I'm not a preconceived-notions sort of person, Ginny. I make a point not to ever 'expect' anything."

Ginny smiled in wry amusement. "Right. Do go on."

Luna sighed. "Pretty much every Ravenclaw boy a bit of intellectual discussion leading up to the kissing is very nice, I find."

"Every one?" Ginny asked, sounding rather put out. "Including Michael Corner?"

Apparently, *Ginny's jealousy isn't confined to Harry*, Annie realized with amusement.

Luna's mouth screwed itself into a mildly impatient expression. "Not while you and he were dating, dear. Nor did I kiss Dean or Neville while you toyed with them, waiting for Harry to notice you."

Annie cringed. Luna was proving herself a remarkably keen observer. *Is she oblivious, then, to the reactions she's producing in the women around her or just naturally foolhardy?* Annie wondered. Ginny, Angelina, and Hermione all looked rather upset by the evening's revelations.

Ginny, for one, was getting angrier by the second. "I've never *toyed* with anyone!" she snapped.

"No? What were you doing, then?" Luna asked with seemingly innocent curiosity.

"I was... I was trying to move on," Ginny stammered, suddenly very uncomfortable.

Luna hummed thoughtfully, considering her answer. "Not doing a very good job of it, were you? Seems a bit cruel, really, in hindsight. You still loved Harry but pretended to be interested in other boys. If it was me, I would have waited more faithfully for him to come 'round. But all's fair in love and war, I suppose."

Ginny sniffed, upset by being called out for her teenage romantic escapades. "Yes, well... I remember *your* behavior during the war. Every boy hiding out in the Room of Requirement knew where to go to find a bit of easy comfort," she lashed out.

A bright, genuine grin spread across Luna's face. "Thank you, Ginny! That's very kind of you to say!"

Ginny's jaw dropped, stunned her insult had somehow been twisted into a compliment by her intended victim.

Luna pressed on, though, lost in a nostalgic recollection. "I tried my best to soothe their hurts, to comfort their fears, to remind them that love and tenderness were worth fighting for. I know you remember how very dark and scary those times were, Ginny. That was almost the worst part, I think, when the Snatchers took me from the train at Christmas. I felt badly for my father, of course. But it was my friends at Hogwarts the ones still fighting without me that I missed the most."

The table was quiet as everyone considered Luna's revelations.

"You're right, Luna. About love... and tenderness," Annie agreed softly. "That's what kept us together through the war what kept George alive after the final battle, you know."

Annie looked at each of the women surrounding her in the eye as she spoke, nearly every one of them as dear as any family she could have imagined. "Looking back now, it seems so utterly stupid, so unforgivably reckless, what we did. He married me anyway, knowing full well we'd both be killed if they ever discovered us. Then he was so happy when we found out I was pregnant right before the final battle, so excited about starting a family... ignoring the fact our half-blood children would be marked for death, too. He refused to be afraid of them, refused to let them dictate who he would love."

Annie paused to wipe a few rogue tears from her cheeks. "And then... when we lost Fred... I'm convinced that the knowledge of the twins on their way kept him going. He lived for them."

"And for you," Angelina added, squeezing Annie's shoulder. "Family's always meant everything to George."

Annie nodded. "We lived for each other, yes." She turned her gaze to Hermione. "That's what a marriage is about, Hermione."

"I'm ashamed of it," Angelina murmured, hanging her head and sniffing a bit. "Ashamed it took a bloody war for me to see how wonderful Lee is. I don't regret much in my life, but you're right, Luna. I should have seen Lee's worth sooner."

Annie hugged her friend's shoulders. "I know he thinks you're worth the wait, Ange."

"I'd like to propose a toast," Luna announced, filling a few glasses with the last dregs of wine. "To the dear friends and sisters assembled here. May we all be blessed with happiness in love, peace in life, and joy in marriage! To love... and tenderness!"

"Hear, hear," the table concurred, clinking glasses and echoing her sentiments.

"That was beautiful, Luna! Thank you!" Hermione choked, dabbing at tears on her cheeks.

"It was my pleasure, Hermione," Luna replied with a soft smile. Suddenly, her face grew utterly serious. "Now, what are your plans to keep the nargles at bay tomorrow? They absolutely adore wedding cake, you know. I could suggest a few spells, if you like...."

Hermione smiled back, throwing her arms around Luna, startling her. "That's so very kind of you, Luna!" she cried.

The Haunting of Mole Hill

Chapter 50 of 80

A day in the life of Annie.

Chapter 50: The Haunting of Mole Hill

June 2001

Annie woke as the sun began to peek over the hill behind her house. She gazed out the window for a few minutes, past the still-sleeping form of her husband, as the rosy light crept across the sky. She listened as the symphony of birds waking up in the forest beyond the garden made a slow, gradual crescendo. Soon, her daughter's coos and gurgles added themselves to the morning's song.

George must have heard them, too. He rolled onto his stomach and stretched. "Morning," he mumbled through a yawn.

Annie kissed him, then kicked off the sheet and pushed herself up and out of bed as her husband did the same. George shuffled into the bathroom while Annie headed into the nursery.

Happy. Joyous. Merrie. They were all synonyms and the very definition of George and Annie's baby daughter. Little Molly Meredith had arrived on the heels of the millennium, and as far as Annie could tell, life was nothing but one big, very entertaining party for her daughter. She had begun smiling at two weeks of age and had never stopped. A sweet baby grin, made all the more adorable by the two tiny pearls of teeth peeking out from her lower gum, accompanied by squeals and kicks of excitement, greeted Annie when she entered the nursery.

Annie heard the water turn on in George's shower as she sat with her daughter in the rocking chair. She ran her fingers through Merrie's wispy auburn curls as soft as down, counted for the thousandth time each freckle on her cheek as her daughter nursed contentedly. Annie murmured sweet nothings to the baby, keeping a running commentary of their plans for the day, making her voice sound excited regardless of how utterly mundane they were: laundry, cooking, gardening. Merrie popped herself off the breast every few minutes or so to offer her mother a smile or giggle of encouragement.

By the time Merrie was finished, Annie could hear noises coming from the room next door that sounded suspiciously like bedsprings being bounced upon. She was startled to hear a loud thud, then relieved to hear two identical giggles in stereo. Annie figured as long as no one was hurt, it was probably better if she didn't know what they were doing....

"All right, you monkeys. Time to get the morning started," she heard their father command as he entered their bedroom, now showered and dressed himself. George had nearly always taken on the duty of waking and dressing the children, thereby giving Annie a window of opportunity to shower and prepare for the day.

Annie heard the boys respond by howling and hooting like chimpanzees as well as more thumping-jumping sounds. She put Merrie back in her crib with a kiss and a toy to wait for her father.

Annie took a quick shower and dressed for the warm summer day in jeans and a t-shirt that happened to advertise the brand new Wheezes shop in Hogsmeade, which had opened the previous spring. She skipped downstairs to get breakfast ready for her family with the twins hard on her heels. From upstairs, Annie could hear Merrie erupt with hysterical giggles as her father noisily pretended to gobble her tummy.

"Please can we have pancakes today?" begged Art.

Fred bounced beside him; Annie thought she could detect him nodding in agreement, but it might have just been the exuberant jumping. It pained Annie to say no to him, but Art asked for pancakes every day. "How about tomorrow? I've got berries and yogurt and granola today for breakfast sundaes."

"Okay," Art sighed disappointedly.

Annie tousled his curly red hair and turned away from her son to put the kettle on. Then she opened the cabinet door that housed her dishes and began pulling out what was needed for breakfast. She owned an impressive collection of antique mechanical kitchen gadgets, amassed over the last few years, all in working order and used frequently. Her favorite, as well as that of her children, was the hand-cranked apple peeler, followed closely by her Gran's old cowbell-shaped grater.

In addition, she had three Muggle appliances in her house: a stove, refrigerator, and clothes washer. They weren't the only things that ran on electricity in her home, but they were the only ones that remained permanently plugged in. For instance, the television in her bedroom was only plugged in while it was being watched. So far, they had not yet had a power surge strong enough to damage the major appliances beyond repair though they'd run through several lamps and a small radio but Annie predicted it would only be a matter of time, considering the twins.

Annie had wondered what it would be like to live without electricity back when she and George were dating and contemplating their future together. She remembered being worried she would struggle to do without it. Annie laughed now at how little she missed blenders, vacuums, and coffeemakers. She imagined her life might be very much what it was like for her grandmother as a child except for being surrounded by people performing magic, of course.

Annie placed dishes, utensils, and food on the table as George carried Merrie down the stairs. She helped the boys assemble their messy (but for the most part healthy) breakfasts, then began spooning yogurt and baby cereal into Merrie's ever-smiling mouth. George tended to the whistling kettle on the stove and began to make coffee in the press pot.

They chatted casually over the noise of the children about the day to come. Today George was due to visit the little factory building that housed his manufacturing floor as well as handled all the mail order business. He would be reviewing new orders and observing the machines he had invented last summer to mass produce the Skiving Snackbox components. He never failed to find something to tinker with or improve upon each time.

"How about you?" he asked, sipping some coffee.

"Same old. Your mum is coming over for a magic lesson this morning, so the boys will be thrilled."

George gave her a crooked, half-smile. She knew part of him was enormously pleased and proud of his precocious twin sons and their burgeoning magical gifts. But another, only slightly smaller part was clearly nervous about leaving his Muggle wife alone all day with so much uncontrolled magical ability. The possibilities for accidents dangerous ones, even were enough to make him uncomfortable. Annie suspected this was why Molly spent so much time at Mole Hill during the weekdays, per her husband's "secret" request. The entire family was focusing their combined efforts on teaching the two-and-a-half-year-old twins the necessity of control.

Her thoughts were interrupted by green flames flaring in the fireplace.

"Teddy!" cried the twins in unison as they leaped off their chairs and dashed toward the living room to greet their best friend.

"Morning, Andromeda," George called out, downing the last of his cup as Annie began clearing the table.

"Morning, George," Andromeda Tonks answered with a pleasant smile on her face.

"Cup of coffee?" offered Annie.

She had quickly grown to like the kind, sad woman who brought Teddy to her house each day. Her story was so tragic: losing her daughter, son-in-law, and husband, all within such a short period. *But then again, whose isn't?* One was hard pressed these days to find anyone who hadn't lost a loved one during the Second War.

"Not today, Annie," the much older lady replied. "I want to get an early start so I can knock off a bit early this afternoon."

"Another time, then," Annie said, smiling as she watched Teddy say goodbye to his grandmother.

Little Teddy Lupin held a special place in Annie's heart, and not just because he was her sons' favorite playmate. She knew what it was like to grow up without parents, what it was like to be raised by a doting grandmother. She was finding herself becoming rather attached to the funny, sweet little fellow who looked a little different from moment to moment.

"I'd best be going as well," George said as Andromeda stepped into the fireplace and vanished. He squatted down next to Merrie's high chair and tickled her cheek with his nose. She rewarded him by grabbing hold of his lone ear and bestowing a slobbery, yogurt-sticky kiss on his nose, which he graciously thanked her for before he stood and wiped the mess off his face.

Laughing, Annie pulled Merrie out of her seat and followed George to the fireplace.

"Be good and listen to your mum, boys," he shouted at the twins as they were sprinting around the furniture, chasing after Teddy, who had a miniature elephant's trunk for a nose at the moment.

They neither paused in their game nor acknowledged their father as they continued playing.

Annie giggled as she set Merrie down in the playpen. The little girl laughed and clapped her hands, entertained by the older boys' antics.

"I'll see you later," George said as he laced his arms around Annie.

"I'll be here. Can't speak for the house, though," she teased, doing the same.

"At least you listen to me," he chuckled as the boys tore up the stairs, making a thunderous amount of noise as they did so.

"Hmm? Did you say something?" Annie teased.

He smirked. "Oh, you're a riot."

"Have a good day," she giggled and kissed him goodbye.

The fireplace flared again mid-kiss, and a familiar voice called out a familiar greeting. "Get a room, you two," teased Lee, like always, as he stepped out of the fire with his eight-month-old daughter in his arms.

"It's my damn house, git!" cried George in response, like always.

"Good morning, Lee," Annie smiled as he handed his daughter, Roxanne, off to her. Roxanne Jordan was a beautiful, chubby, happy baby with dark brown skin, eyes, and hair. Annie made a silly face at her, and little Roxy beamed a smile.

"Hello, Annie," Lee replied. He tickled under Roxy's chin with his finger, then gave her nose a light tap. "And goodbye to the prettiest little girl in the world," he cooed, planting a kiss on his smiling daughter's forehead.

George harrumphed. "*One* of the prettiest little girls in the world," he corrected his friend good-naturedly.

"Yes, yes Merrie is pretty, too," sighed Lee, winking conspiratorially at his own daughter. He handed Annie a small satchel containing Roxy's bottles and diapers for the day.

"After you," George said, holding out the canister filled with Floo powder for his best mate, Lee. The two men left, one after the other, to their separate destinations.

Lee was off to work at the WWN Wizarding Wireless Network as a radio announcer. He had gotten the job there immediately after the war, once the network bigwigs had all been imprisoned for supporting and/or colluding with Voldemort's regime. His wife, Angelina, currently worked for the Ministry in the Magical Transportation Department. She had discovered during the war that she'd had a talent for bewitching Portkeys, a skill that had served the Order well. Annie reckoned her friend was something akin to a Muggle travel agent now, enchanting spoons and tin cans to transport wizards all over the globe for business or pleasure.

Annie set Roxy down in the playpen next to Merrie, and the babies excitedly greeted each other with screeches and drool-bubbles. It pleased Annie that the two baby girls appeared to be as good friends as their mothers and fathers were. Once the boys were safely outdoors with Molly, she would let the girls loose to crawl around on the floor.

Meanwhile, she started a load of diapers in the washing machine and began to make a grocery list. Tomorrow, on Saturday, she would drive into the preferred anonymity of Exeter for she avoided Ottery except in emergencies to do the marketing. George would give her the entire morning for it, and she often spent an hour or so online at the library, catching up with Muggle culture. She would read up on the news of the world she used to live in, keep in touch with Jane via a weekly email update, and search the web for interesting tidbits regarding music or movies that she and George might enjoy on a rare night out.

The boys had finally tired of chasing each other around at breakneck speed and flopped down on the sofa together, catching their breaths.

"When is Vickie coming back?" asked Teddy.

"She's at home with her mummy and new baby sister, love," Annie explained. "She'll be back at the end of the summer, I expect."

Teddy nodded, accepting her explanation, having nothing further to add himself.

The twins' cousin, Victoire, just turned two-years-old, had been missing from Annie's house for more than a month now. Fleur had just delivered her youngest another daughter named Dominique and was keeping her elder daughter at home as well while on temporary leave from the bank. Annie had been rather shocked that the goblins at Gringotts would subscribe to such an enlightened notion as maternity leave, but there you have it.

She was slightly surprised that the girl's absence was even noted by any of the boys. Victoire had always been such a quiet, aloof child. Delicate, fair, and stunningly beautiful, she seemed to have difficulty at times finding ways to interact socially with the other children. Sometimes she would tag along after the boys but never said much. Very rarely would she spend time with the infants. Most often she would play quietly by herself, seeming happiest when coloring or painting. Already her niece was a brooding artist, Annie reckoned.

The summer day was fine, and every door and window of the house had been thrown wide open by mid-morning. The baby girls were contented with dozing together in a playpen set in the shade of a small umbrella while Annie hung out the wash on the line and did a bit of gardening. She could hear Molly and the boys off in the distance, playing on a tire swing suspended from an enormous oak tree on the perimeter of the forest.

She planted another round of lettuce, spinach, and chives, just like Gran had taught her, in order to have a steady supply throughout the summer. She checked on the strawberries and discovered they'd be ready soon for jam. George would be pleased by that news, she mused it was one of his favorites.

The morning passed as lazy summer days do. She brought the girls inside once they woke from their morning nap and played on the floor with them, letting them crawl around after each other. They were playing hide-the-toy-under-a-burp-cloth when Molly finally delivered the boys back into the house after their magic lesson for lunch. Annie let the boys have a picnic of sandwiches outside with their Granny before Molly left to go home to the Burrow.

The afternoon was growing quite warm, and all the children retreated into the cool of the house to lie down for a nap. Annie worked for a bit around the house: doing dishes, some prep work for their afternoon snacks and supper, folding the laundry. Once all the normal, non-magical domestic chores were done, it was time for a few quick jobs in "Daddy's dungeon," as it had been christened by the twins.

She placed her hand against a small, mirrored panel affixed to the door behind the fireplace that led down to George's workshop. Both she and George had agreed upon the necessity of preventing the children from straying down there at all costs. He had been inspired by an article on biometrics in a Muggle technology magazine to enchant a special locking mechanism that would recognize Annie's handprint but no one else's and permit her to bypass the magical spell otherwise necessary to open it. She crept silently down the stairs, flashlight in hand.

George's workshop was almost completely underground. Just below the thick, bunker-like concrete ceiling (necessary to shield the rest of the house from the interfering

effects of all the magic performed here) were three small windows that were positioned just above ground level, allowing light in and, oftentimes, billowing smoke from a spell or potion gone awry to escape.

Even though she came down here at least once a day, she still marveled at the magic surrounding her in this place. Plants that wriggled in their pots were arranged beneath bewitched grow-lights. Cauldrons and scales littered one section of countertop, above which hung a glass-doored cabinet containing jars and vials of various magical ingredients, many of them looking more than slightly grotesque. Another area nearby held a disorderly collection of recycled coffee cans and plastic yogurt cups repurposed to hold the various bits and pieces of metal, wood, and glass George used for his inventions. Several notebooks lay open on a desk with quills in various states of brokenness. George was the sort of person (if he had been a Muggle, that is) who would continue to use a pencil until it had no eraser and was only two inches long.

On the desk she found a note addressed to her.

Igor I already watered the plants today. Love, Dr. F.

Annie giggled. She had teased George once that he was like Dr. Frankenstein, laboring away down here in his secret laboratory on monstrous things that were an affront to nature. He'd had no clue, of course, what she was talking about until she had rented Mel Brooks' version of the movie. He'd been highly entertained by the comical story and persisted ever after in calling her his very own Igor.

Since he had already taken care of one of her daily tasks, the only thing left to her now was to water and feed the breeding pairs of Pygmy Puffs. She filled the little food dishes with the table scraps she'd carried down with her (*Who needed a disposal or tissues, for that matter when you had puffskeins?* she mused.) and they began to hum pleasantly as their long tongues snaked out from unseen orifices.

Back upstairs, she figured it was pointless to do much straightening up of toys since the boys still had hours of playing to do yet and decided to save the task for after supper. Instead, she sat down on the sofa for a few minutes, sipping a cup of tea and gazing out the window at the meadow. The busy-ness of the day conspired with the warmth of the weather to cause a sinking spell. She closed her eyes, telling herself it was just for a moment....

Annie heard a familiar chuckle in her ear. *Aren't you the good little wife? Did you always aspire to live in the 1800s?*

"Shut up, Fred. I'm very happy, thank you very much," she whispered back, screwing her eyes shut. She knew from experience that his voice would leave her if she opened them. She also knew, with similar confidence, that there was nothing to see.

I can tell, and that's what slays me! All those times you used to argue with me, calling me sexist... and here you sit, the furthest thing from a liberated woman I can see. You were just pretending to be a modern girl all those years.

"You're just jealous," she said softly, smiling. It was so good to hear his voice once more!

Of you!? he spluttered. *D'you think I'd be sitting here, surrounded by a litter of sniveling, snotty brats all day long if I were you?*

"If you had half a brain, yes. How is this any different from heaven?" she argued.

She heard him snort in response, and it nearly made her laugh out loud. *Nice try, git. You'll just have to wait and see.... I'm not telling you*

Annie heard another sound from her own dimension this time. Reality was intruding once more. "That's little Fred starting to wake up," she mumbled, recognizing the signature bounce of little feet. She knew her time with Fred's ghost, or whatever it was she was communing with at the moment, was short now.

I suppose you think I'm touched by that how you named your son after his glorious uncle?

"We miss you. It still wrecks him, you know: that you're gone and he's here," she whispered. It was true. Survivor's guilt that's what it was called. Just one of the aspects of hurt George was still struggling with. Not that George necessarily wished he had been the one to die just that he would have preferred for Fred to have lived.

I know. I miss you, too. And you're right.... I am jealous... and touched

"Don't go!" she begged, but it was too late. She could already hear his voice was fading. She felt the barest, imaginary pressure of a kiss on her forehead.

Catch you later, idiot.

Annie sighed and opened her eyes. It wasn't the first time, and she confessed to herself that she hoped it wouldn't be the last. It happened every once in a while when she was alone, and quiet, and drowsy: her maternal-hormone-soaked, over-worked, and under-rested brain would misfire, causing her imagination to conjure up her lost friend. Fred would come to her in her mind, for a few minutes at most, and typically launch into a volley of teasing insults. *Why couldn't he share any profound universal wisdom or investment tips?* She never told George about it, for what purpose would it serve him to know his wife was cracking up, she reasoned.

Little Fred clambered silently up onto the sofa with her, placing a book in her lap.

"Would you like to read Pooh with me?" she asked tenderly.

Fred nodded, stuck his thumb in his mouth, and leaned against her. While Annie was reading the book to her son, the other two boys woke up and made their way downstairs to join them. The three little children all snuggled up to her as she told the story of the imaginary stuffed-animal toys come to life.

The rest of the day played out like a script. Andromeda and Angelina both arrived late in the afternoon to collect their children. George came home soon after, and Annie made supper. Her little family played together outside in the garden in the late summer twilight, then George took the kids upstairs and plopped them in the tub. They operated on the theory that by bathing them at night, their bodies would stay clean for a stretch of nearly twelve hours an impossible feat otherwise. Afterward, Annie nursed Merrie to sleep while George read bedtime stories to the boys.

Some time later, George and Annie sat outside together in the dark, watching fireflies and fairies blinking across the meadow, talking quietly about the day just finished. Annie shared a few tales of funny things the boys had done or said, of Merrie's latest developmental accomplishment. George told her about his plans for a new product he was developing: two-way parchment, inspired by a fax machine he saw one day recently at the Muggle pediatrician's office.

"What should we get for Ginny and Harry? The wedding's only two weeks away now," asked Annie.

"How about a gross of condoms?" joked George.

"Could you be serious for a moment?" she laughed.

"What newlywed couple wouldn't think that a dead useful gift?" he countered.

"Are you saying you regret the circumstances of your own sons' conception?" she teased him. They had only been married for a few weeks before she had gotten pregnant with the twins, after all.

"Perish the thought!" he chuckled. "Nothing could be further from the truth!" He reached out for her hand and laced their fingers together.

"Not to mention such a gift is tantamount to acknowledging, if not outright condoning, the fact that the great and heroic Harry Potter will be imminently deflowering your precious baby sister," she argued.

"That's quite enough of that," he warned her, his tone suddenly shifting from playful to irritated.

"Assuming he hasn't done the deed already, of course..." Annie needed him.

"I'm warning you to shut up now," he said, standing up, stepping next to her chair, and looming threateningly over her.

"Which is a pretty asinine assumption," she couldn't resist adding, knowing Ginny as well as she did. She couldn't clearly see George's face in the dark, but accurately predicted it was scowling at her.

"Now you've done it," he said. Spinning around, he sat rudely on top of her, squashing her into the seat.

"Are you saying I was wrong to succumb to your very persistent charms back then?" she said, finding it hard to breathe as he crushed her into the wooden slats by leaning backward.

"Not at all. No one blames you for being unable to say no to this," he teased, indicating himself. "Least of all me."

"So, it was all right for me to relinquish my virginity before marriage, but not for Ginny?" she gasped but refused to cry uncle.

"She's my *sister*, moron," he explained. He wiggled himself a bit, grinding her backside into the chair to punish her for overtly mentioning the subject of Ginny's sex life in his presence.

Annie hoped the poor chair wouldn't bust into pieces with the two of them in it. "Mine as well," she pointed out. She had long since abandoned any distinction between her blood relatives, of which there were none left besides her children, and her in-laws, of which there were multitudes. They were Weasleys one and all end of story.

"We knew we were going to be together forever, anyway," he rationalized.

"And how many years have Ginny and Harry been dating exclusively now?" she asked, knowing the answer was nearly as long as she and George had been together.

"It's a completely different situation," he protested.

"I suppose you're just lucky I didn't have a big brother threatening to avenge the loss of my innocence," she countered.

"Your innocence?" he cried, snorting. "I think it was rather the other way around, don't you?"

George grunted in pain from the pinch that landed on his waist, then grabbed both her hands to prevent further retaliation on her part. They sat in silence, at an impasse, for a whole minute.

"So, we'll get them the same thing we got for Ron and Hermione?" Annie asked. Her legs were beginning to go numb.

"A set of never-boil-over pots and pans sounds perfect," George nodded as he stood up once more. "I'll pick them up at Cauldrons, Kitchens & More after work one day next week. Time for bed?" he asked.

"Just give me a minute," she replied, stalling until the feeling returned in her legs.

Impatiently, George took her hands and hauled her up to a standing position. Annie's left leg buckled as she tried to put a bit of weight on it, due to the fact no blood had entered or left it for the last five minutes. He caught her before she hit the ground, understanding immediately what was going on.

He laughed and shook his head. "You are more stubborn than a mule," he teased her.

"Yeah, well, you *are* an arse," she teased back.

"Takes one to know one," he argued, lifting her up and carrying her toward the house.

"I happen to know you are very enamored with my arse," she shot back. "And have been for ages. Cheeky bum-lover."

"It's inarguably your best feature, love," he taunted as they crossed the threshold. "Followed closely by your...."

Annie clamped her hand over his mouth as he mumbled something lewd. "I suppose you think sweet talk like that might get you laid tonight," she whispered as he closed and locked the doors and windows with a silent command.

"Unless you think you've got the moral fiber to say no," he countered, eyebrow cocked, daring her to contradict him.

"I never have, have I?" she admitted, giggling as he kissed her.

Igneous Portents

Chapter 51 of 80

George combines business with pleasure.

Chapter 51: Igneous Portents

March 2002

Annie was excitedly bouncing her leg while she threw back the last of a bottle of ale.

"What are you so keyed up about?" George asked her as if he didn't know the answer to his own question. They were seated at the dining table inside the tent he had just pitched, finishing up the sandwiches they had made for lunch.

"I'm going for a swim," she replied as she hurriedly stood up from the bench and headed into the bedroom.

Not if I can help it, he chuckled to himself. He predicted it might not be easy to distract her—his wife was maniacal about beaches, after all. The ocean was like a drug for her; he knew it well. And now that they were physically a mere twenty feet away from one of the most beautiful seashores they had ever seen, she would understandably be jonesing for it.

George stood slowly after he finished his own beer a minute later and followed her into the bedroom. He parted the curtain that divided it from the rest of the tent just in time to see Annie tying the last knot of her swimsuit at her right hip. His eyes took in the little red Cymru dragon at her neck, now partially obscured by a delicate string bow, then let them drift down to the larger tattoo at the small of her back peeking above the suit bottom, the sight of which never failed to make him smile. He felt a familiar rush of blood in response to her nearly-nude silhouette. It was warm inside the closed tent, and he shrugged off his shirt.

She bent over, rummaging through her backpack. "Are you coming with me?" she asked him distractedly.

"What are you looking for?" he asked her, not quite ready to own up to his true motivation for getting undressed. It would have only taken him a second to summon whatever she was searching for, but she never asked him to do so. Ever. She was always determined to do everything herself, no matter how inefficient or unnecessary the effort was.

She held up the bottle of sunscreen she had just located as an answer. They both smiled at the private joke, remembering that silly moment at the beach when they were sixteen. *What an idiot I was back then*, he thought with wry amusement.

Annie began to slather the stuff on her arms, turning just slightly toward him. George caught a glimpse of another tattoo: her most recent addition—the one almost no one else knew about or ever noticed, even though she'd had it now for several years. On the inside of her left wrist was a tiny fox prancing above a string of letters: I.L.M.F.C.W.R.I.P.

In Loving Memory, Frederick Cyrus Weasley, Rest In Peace

He had the same string of letters wrapped around his upper right arm, just below a sketch of the ruined section of castle that had claimed his twin brother's life. Above the broken battlements that to this day had not been rebuilt—damage from such Dark spells resisted either removal or remediation—were the words "NEVER FORGET." George was not the only male his age he knew with this memorial permanently etched into his flesh; every one of his brothers and the majority of his friends had an almost identical tattoo—some dedicated to Fred, some to other fallen mates—but all were gotten the summer after the first memorial service.

His had been the original, though.

He was only distracted from his purpose for a moment by the thought of his brother, however, as Annie promptly interrupted his thoughts.

"Can I trust you this time?" she asked, tossing him the bottle and holding out her arms horizontally, facing away from him.

"You've never met anyone more trustworthy than me," he said, lobbing her a chance to spar with him. He saw a sly smile spread across her face as she looked over her shoulder at him.

"Too easy," she giggled.

He began to spread the lotion across her back, then bent to kiss her neck. It was his go-to spot, never failing to arouse her.

"Focus, love," she encouraged him unnecessarily.

Although she had a different intention, the sentiment was still remarkably appropriate for his ulterior motive. "These are in the way," he said softly, gently tugging on the strings holding her swimsuit in place.

"Trustworthy, eh?" she scolded him weakly, but offering no resistance as her bikini top fell to the floor.

His plan was working. "Just trying to be thorough," he pressed. "You don't want a sunburn now, do you?" His hands were running over her hips, stroking her stomach. He felt her inhale deeply and arch her back slightly as he pulled her closer, her body now resting against his.

"George... I want to swim," she protested as he untied the remaining knots at her hips.

Her stern tone belied the truth her body confessed. She wanted *him*, not water—as much as he did her at the moment—and he knew it.

"You just ate. You should wait at least an hour," he argued superfluously, nuzzling her ear.

Annie turned to face him and began to untie the drawstring of his swim trunks. "That's an old wives' tale," she said, kissing the base of his throat as his trunks dropped to the floor.

"Better safe than sorry, though," he added, stepping out of them.

He lifted her up as they kissed, and she responded by wrapping her arms around his neck, her legs around his waist. Briefly, he considered taking her someplace else a bit more adventurous while she was so conveniently portable. *The table? The hammock?* But then again, they *were* standing next to a perfectly comfortable bed. They had four more days to take advantage of every other solid horizontal surface of the tent.

He laid her down on the bed, feeling her fingers curl into his hair. George stared into the exotic violet-ness of her eyes. He loved to see that look on her face: the paradoxical expression of relaxed tension, of contented yearning, the impatient anticipation of an ending she was in no hurry to reach. She bit her lip and closed her eyes.

"No one will hear you," he said, reassuring her. He had now developed the habit of including a silencing spell along with all the usual repelling and hiding charms he cast whenever he pitched their tent now. That was one of his favorite parts, after all: listening to her enjoyment.

Annie sighed softly and smiled. Her eyes looked into his as her hips began to move in complement to his own.

And then it was his turn to sigh.

George woke up a couple of hours later when he felt Annie sneak out of his arms and crawl out of bed. "Come back," he muttered sleepily.

She quickly re-dressed into her swimsuit as he watched. "George, some of the world's best surfing is right outside this door, and I, for one, am not going to miss it entirely by spending a lazy day in bed. Plenty of time for sleeping tonight," she argued scoldingly.

"Think so, do you?" he laughed wickedly. He knew she was right however: he could spare time enough to enjoy the delights of this tropical island during the day. He would save further pursuit of the primary goal of this trip for the evening hours.

"It's no use trying to avoid destiny," he called after her anyway as she made her way out of the tent to the beach.

George marveled at Annie's energy level. He felt utterly exhausted and groggy, his brain still struggling with the time difference between Hawaii and Britain. He lay in bed for a few minutes more, his body unwilling to put forth the effort to move just yet, contemplating the strange string of events that had brought them here.

George had been intrigued by a letter he had received two months ago from a farmer on Niihau, suggesting the possibility of opening up trade in magical ingredients between the two of them. George was always interested in the sort of thing this fellow happened to be offering: a new and more powerful sort of explosive. And when Mr. Nui invited him to come see a demonstration in person, a plan began to hatch in his mind: perhaps he could repeat a bit of personal history on another island holiday.

It had been nearly two years since he and Annie had been able to get away two years since the heavenly vacation on Tenerife when Merrie had been conceived. Their lives had been ridiculously busy in the intervening time since his time had been absorbed in the Wheezes business, and Annie had been raising their three children as well as nearly everyone else's.

He had taken his wife's suggestion about automation to heart and spent one whole summer inventing several machines that would mass-produce the sweets for the Skiving Snackboxes. And once all the repairs to Hogwarts were complete and the school had opened again for students, it made no sense at all not to expand into Hogsmeade. George now employed more than a dozen people between the two shops and a separate production facility.

Meanwhile, Annie had come to the rescue of their friends and family by coordinating child care for the apparent baby boom that was following the end of the war. It had started when she and George's mother began watching little Teddy Lupin soon after the twins had turned one year old so his grandmother, Andromeda Tonks, could work a few days a week at her Ministry job. Teddy had been the perfect playmate for the twins, being six months older, and they remained thick as thieves to this day.

Then Fleur had asked Annie if she would mind watching Victoire as well, thereby permitting her to go back to work. Annie was pregnant herself by then with Merrie, but would never say no to a request from a Weasley in need. Eventually, the crowd of children spending their weekdays in George's house numbered seven, and the rambunctious herd had begun to take a toll on his furniture. Last fall, he offered to build Annie another outbuilding, a rumpus-room of sorts, to house the growing pack of Weasley, Lupin, and Jordan offspring spending the days with her.

She was brilliant at it, of course. Annie was a natural mother, falling easily into the warm, nurturing role. Every one of the children lit up in her presence. She was always willing to play any game they wanted, read another story for the tenth time, kiss away any hurt, cuddle for any reason at all. So wonderful at it, in fact, that they had now both agreed it was time for another of their own.

George smiled and put his hands behind his head in contentment, watching shadows cast by palm fronds dancing on the ceiling of the tent. He could have kissed that little old woman for mentioning it that very morning. He would have to remember to send something special to thank Mrs. Nui.

Mr. Nui, the farmer from Niihau, had invited them to stay last night in his farmhouse following the impressive demonstration of the explosive properties of the local frogs he raised (which had something to do with all the volcanic minerals in the water, he'd explained). After they had agreed to terms and feasted on an enormous and exotic celebratory dinner, he and Annie had collapsed on the sofa bed, exhausted, for they had been awake for twenty-six hours straight at that point. The lanai where they'd slept had been lit with nothing but starlight; George had carefully scheduled their visit to coincide with the approaching new moon.

And then the lucky lightning bolt had hit this morning after a breakfast of eggs and rectangular slabs of tinned meat. Mr. Nui's mother had taken Annie's hand and begun speaking to her in the lilting native Hawaiian tongue while Mr. Nui had translated for them.

"My mother calls you *maka nani*, which means 'beautiful eyes,' Mrs. Weasley," the genial man had said.

George had been immensely entertained when Annie had blushed beautifully at the compliment.

The old woman had spoken again, followed by her son's translation. "She says that your husband, *lulua'ina*, which means 'freckles,' loves you very much. You are a lucky woman."

George had been terribly pleased when Annie had nodded in agreement. "Please tell your mother thank you for me," she had said.

"We say '*mahalo*,'" Mr. Nui had explained.

"*Mahalo*," Annie had repeated, smiling at the old crone who was patting her hand as she held it and continuing to chatter.

Mr. Nui had then begun to smile sheepishly. "I hope you are not offended by this, Mrs. Weasley, but my mother says you will leave Kauai with child," he had explained, avoiding eye contact with either George or his wife. "My mother is a very gifted seer, you see," he had added.

"Your mother is very talented, indeed, Mr. Nui! No doubt about it," George had exclaimed, smiling at Annie's astonished face. He had shaken the farmer's hand enthusiastically, patting him on the back, then turned to the fellow's ancient mother. "*Mahalo* very much, Mrs. Nui!" George had cried, winking at the smiling old witch, who was now cackling in amusement at the two of them.

During the boat ride between the two islands, while Mr. Nui was occupied at the helm, Annie had turned to George. "Did you put her up to it?" she had asked, smiling suspiciously at him.

"How could you suggest such a thing?" George had replied, affecting innocence and indignation.

"Track record, perhaps?"

"I honestly swear that I did not." He had then smiled and kissed her. "However, now that you bring it up, Miss *Maka Nani*...?" Holding his breath, he'd waited for her response.

"How can I refuse?" she'd answered, gazing out over the ocean. "My husband loves me very much, and I'm a lucky woman, you see," she'd explained with a teasing smile, throwing the old witch's words back at him.

"Then it would seem as though we have a date with destiny, love. How convenient that we happen to be in the right place at the right time," he'd said, barely containing his elation, bringing her hand to his lips and kissing her palm.

"Expedient, indeed. Suspiciously so, in fact," she had replied with a broad grin.

Just then, Mr. Nui had called out, directing them to look out over the water to starboard. Two whales had been visible off in the near distance, spectacularly leaping out of the water.

They had waved goodbye to Mr. Nui in the harbor, promising to be in touch soon with the first shipment of unicorn tail hair in exchange for the exploding frog powder. George had then hired one of those ridiculously overloaded American sports cars, almost lewd in its powerful grace, to transport them about the island of Kauai. He had even let Annie drive it first.

As she'd practically flown down the road that followed the mountainous shoreline, throwing the snarling engine into ever higher gears, she had smiled slyly. "I know what you're doing... and it's working," she'd said.

"Good," he had replied.

He'd known being in control of the race car would get her adrenaline pumping. Plus, he'd been counting on the fact that she had even more of a leaden foot than he did,

which would get them to the day's destination that much sooner. He'd aided her as much as he could, magically convincing any slower moving traffic ahead of them of a sudden need to pull over.

The beach at the end of the road was divinely beautiful. Nestled at the foot of a towering volcanic wall, the crystal clear azure water met silky soft sand. And here he lay, having just made love to his beautiful wife, with the sound of the waves crashing against the shore in his ears. He sighed deeply, contentedly, and contemplated following her to the beach.

They spent the first night of their holiday on the idyllic beach, magically hidden in plain view from the Muggle crowds surrounding them. The next night, they camped to the side of a long, muddy, strenuous trail that had led them through the mountainous rainforest. The sight of the magnificent waterfall had been worth the trek, they agreed, as they washed the mud and grime off of each other in the shower that evening. The next morning, they hiked for miles back the way they had come, then drove to an enchanting bay nearby, pitching their tent once again on the beach and surfing until the sun set.

Every night as a gentle rain would fall, and again in the morning before the sun had a chance to break through the clouds, George would make love to Annie. He was a man on a mission on a date with destiny, even.

The final day they spent exploring the area, each choosing a tourist activity. Annie wanted him to ride a zipline through a nearby canyon with her in the morning, and George bought tickets for a helicopter tour during the afternoon. That evening, they strolled through a few tourist-trap shops in a tiny village near their campsite, collecting presents for their family and souvenirs for themselves.

"Is it me?" George held up a bright turquoise shirt printed with hula girl dolls that had caught his eye.

"You *are* colorblind, aren't you?" Annie replied.

"You should get one as well. We'll match," he jokingly suggested.

"No, thank you," she teased. "You are more than capable of embarrassing the family on your own no need to drag me down with you."

He perused the collection of toys and shells in her basket, all intended for their children. "Aren't you getting anything for yourself?" he asked.

"I have a feeling I already have something to remember this trip by," she whispered, looking at him pointedly.

"Of course you do. That's fate. But I'm talking about a souvenir," he teased her, understanding exactly what she was referring to and fervently hoping she was right.

"The snaps will be enough for me. And the memories," she said with a dreamy smile. She had taken rolls and rolls of film he had only managed to take maybe a dozen photographs himself; she had been so possessive of the camera.

George smirked at her response. "I'm getting you a shirt," he said decisively.

"Don't waste your hard-earned money," she argued. "I wouldn't be caught dead in that thing."

"Then do something useful and go get us some ice cream across the street," he directed her, relieving her of the basket. He needed a few minutes alone to remedy the situation, since she was being so uncooperative.

"Only if you promise *not* to buy those god-awful shirts."

"I promise not to get *two*," he assured her.

Back at the tent, later that evening, as they swung back and forth in the hammock and ocean breezes fluttered her curls, George handed Annie a small box he'd fished out of his pocket. She opened it slowly: inside were two small, sparkling green stones.

"Those are made in the volcanoes here," he said, sharing the information the salesperson had explained to him.

Annie looked directly at him as she expertly placed the earrings into her earlobes. "They're beautiful," she said, stretching up to kiss him. "Thank you... for all of this," she murmured, resting her head on his shoulder.

They lay in the hammock together for another hour, kissing and watching the approach of the evening's rainstorm as it made its way toward the island. A tiny fingernail-silver of a newborn moon hung on the western horizon, almost ready to plunge into the ocean. Tomorrow they would pack up their things and be magically transported via Portkey back to their home in Devon. And as much as he missed his daughter and twin sons, George was in no great hurry for this night to end. Tonight he would complete his mission, making love to his wife at least once more in the warm tropical darkness.

Author's Note: Since I can't afford to go to Hawaii, I sent Annie and George. Here's some information with links [Niihau](#) was once a privately owned island, now used by the US government and referred to as the "Forbidden Island," which I thought made a great cover story for the indigenous magical residents. Their first night camping was spent on [Ke'e Beach](#), made popular in the TV miniseries "The Thorn Birds." (Yes, I'm showing my age here.) Then they hiked the [Kalalau Trail](#) on the Nā Pali Coast of Kauai, camping beside the trail for one night. The final campsite was on [Hanalei Bay's beach](#). The north shore of Kauai (the "Garden Island") is known for excellent surfing during winter months.

[Author sighs theatrically].

Percy Gets Married

Chapter 52 of 80

Percy is made understandably leery by the prospect of a bachelor party planned by George. The ceremony that follows nearly makes George blow his cool.

September 2002

"Absolutely not!" Percy cried, arms folded across his chest. "I will not be moved on this! I refuse to participate if he is involved in any way." He jabbed his finger toward a smirking George.

Bill laughed at his little brother. "Lighten up, Perce," he teased him. "We just want to see you have a good time, is all."

"Fine by me," George retorted, contradicting the eldest Weasley brother. "I have far better things to do with my time. Cleaning out the Pygmy Puff cages would likely be more entertaining anyway."

"You cretins might not care that we've all been banned from Wandwright Memorial Library, but I do!" Percy yelled. His brothers' resultant laughter only served to aggravate him further.

"Who could've predicted Ron would recite 'The Ballad of the Lusty Selkie'... for twenty minutes straight... using a bloody *Sonorous* Charm... from the top of the second floor balcony?" Charlie barely managed to utter while laughing.

The memory was equally amusing to several other members of the group as well.

George chuckled. "Who could've predicted Ron could read? I was betting he couldn't, and that's why I dared him in the first place!"

"I did what?" Ron asked, a confused and disbelieving smile on his face. "Why am I only hearing about this now?"

Harry snickered. "You don't even know the half of it, mate," he taunted his best friend wickedly.

Ron blanched.

"You nearly ruined his wedding!" Percy snapped, glaring at George exclusively. "I'm surprised Hermione's even speaking to you yet. I'm surprised she didn't hex you into oblivion!"

"We got him to the ceremony dressed and on time!" George protested, pretending to lose his temper as well, just to egg Percy on.

"He could hardly stand!" Percy shrieked.

"It's not my fault he can't hold his Firewhiskey!" George shouted back, milking it.

Bill held up his hands in a gesture urging the two of them to calm down. "You're exaggerating, Perce, as usual. Ron twisted his ankle that night on the steps and hobbled a bit, that's all. Ron and Hermione's wedding was perfectly fine, and you know it."

"George is only yanking your chain," Charlie chimed in.

"I promise we won't force you to do anything you don't want to do," Bill continued. "But if you really don't want to celebrate your last night of bachelorhood..."

"I never said that, exactly," Percy countered, hedging a bit. "I'm simply asking that for *once* we maintain an air of maturity. Is it really so difficult for you all to behave in public for one night? I just want to do something dignified and decorous for a change."

"Dickish and what, now?" George interrupted, sounding perplexed.

Ron and Harry barely stifled snorts. Charlie chuckled openly. Bill rolled his eyes and cast a warning look at George.

"That's precisely what I'm talking about!" Percy cried, throwing up his hands.

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The night of the party, all five Weasley brothers and Harry assembled at Mole Hill. The twins and Merrie had just been put to bed for the evening, and Annie was directing the smartly-dressed young men to arrange themselves in front of the large hearth for a portrait. She was standing behind the sofa, pregnant belly resting on the back of it, while she took several photos.

"Let's have one for Molly," she said, and they all smiled warmly with arms around each other's shoulders.

"One for Percy," she said, and they all puffed themselves up into pretentious poses with solemn expressions.

"And one for me," she giggled. Five of the six men pulled faces and flashed offensive hand gestures. The other wore a rueful, exasperated smirk.

Percy then made a show of inspecting their respectably dressy robes. Several minutes later, he declared them all fit for the evening, to his surprise.

"Are you *positive* there isn't any other way you could manage to suck all the fun out of the evening? Perhaps we could all wear shoes a size too small?" Ron asked, tugging uncomfortably at his collar.

Percy glared at his youngest brother. "If George can suffer in silence, surely you can as well."

"Oh, I'm not sufferin' one bit," George said with a smile, dangling the bait.

Percy glared at him with narrowed, suspicious eyes. "What are you up to?"

George slowly shook his head, setting the hook. "Nothing," he lied unconvincingly on purpose.

"Bill!" Percy warned.

"Relax, Perce. Can't you tell he's only winding you up?" Bill chuckled.

George snickered. "I don't know what you're complaining about, Ron. I'm comfy as *ajaybird*, myself. I find these robes quite *liberating*, I must say," he said, sashaying his hips from side to side.

Percy gasped as the realization hit him. "You wouldn't *dare!*" he hissed.

"When have you ever known me *not* to dare?" George taunted him in a quiet voice, wearing a diabolical grin.

"I must agree with George," Charlie said, rocking on his heels, folded hands resting on his stomach. "Never realized how nice it feels to be so *unshackled*."

"There's a new breeze blowin', that's for sure," Harry added, standing with his hands on his hips, legs shoulder-width apart.

"No!" Percy barked in a high-pitched squeak, careening headlong toward a full-blown hissy. "Absolutely not!"

"What's he complaining about now?" Ron whined, lifting his leg slightly and wiggling his rump as if shaking something loose.

Percy's face began turning an alarming shade of purple. "I cannot believe how utterly infantile you all are!" Percy shouted, nearly apoplectic. "No one sets foot outside this house unless they prove to me they are *fully* dressed!"

"Proof, you say?" George asked wickedly.

"Proof!" Percy demanded, jabbing a pointing finger an inch away from George's nose.

"Got the camera ready, Annie?" George called out, smiling.

Percy whirled around, a shocked look on his face. "Oh, erm, Annie... I forgot you were here," he stammered.

Meanwhile, five robes flashed open behind him, the resulting breeze of which fluttered Percy's own robes, and Annie's camera clicked. "Got it!" she laughed, then looked apologetically at her flabbergasted brother-in-law. "Sorry, Percy," she said with a smile.

Slowly, reluctantly, Percy turned on his heel to face his brothers. All five men stood before him, robes open, wearing colorful silk boxer briefs and t-shirts emblazoned with a small green toy steam engine and the words, "Percy is a Really Useful Engine."

"I don't know why you never trust me, Perce," Bill said with a laugh.

"You're gonna give yourself a stroke some day if you're not careful," Charlie warned him.

It was nearly midnight when the group found themselves seated at a long table, sipping drinks at the Cauldron. They had eaten dinner earlier in a fancy restaurant in Diagon Alley, as per Percy's request, and on their best behavior throughout. *Not a rollicking time*, George mused, *but still enjoyable. The food was good, anyway.*

The unequivocal success of tonight's prank on Percy had restored George's reserves of goodwill to the point he was willing to be cooperative for the most part. With the exception of ripping off several large belches, he'd been as good as gold, he reckoned. And it was good to spend a few hours with the family all together again. Now that everyone had lives and families of their own, such a thing was becoming rare indeed.

He'd been patiently waiting for a chance to make use of the anthropomorphic little toy train for a whole year now, ever since the twins had discovered the popular Muggle stories and playsets. Annie had helped him find a place that made customizable t-shirts using her computer a few weeks ago, and the idea had blossomed from there. The whole thing had been pulled off to perfection, in his smug opinion. It helped to know he could always count on Percy to take any bait.

He couldn't wait to see that picture! The look on Percy's face was bound to be priceless. Add to that the chance to doctor it up a bit with that gizmo on Annie's computer (*Bloody useful things, those Muggle computers*), and the possibilities for entertainment were nearly infinite. Percy would be haunted by that image for years, if George had anything to do with it.

Somewhat tipsy at this point, Percy leaned toward his eldest brother and asked the question that was now burning in his brain. "How did you know Fleur was the one, Bill?" Despite his state of mild inebriation, Percy's expression was intent and serious.

George shook his head. Was it possible Percy was second-guessing his choice of bride? Getting cold feet? He couldn't blame his brother for doing so if he were faced with the daunting prospect of marrying into that family, he'd be running for the hills. He took another drink as he listened to Bill's answer.

Bill was laughing, though. "When I stopped wondering what other women would be like and started comparing them unfavorably to her. Fleur outshone them all. I knew then I was done messing around and ready to settle."

"I'd hardly call life with a veela settlin' for anything," Ron said, snorting.

Bill looked at him with a glint in his eye. "Gabrielle still asks after you, Ron."

Ron's face lit up with a pleased smile. "She does?"

"Of course not, you git," Bill replied scathingly.

"Shame on you, Ron!" Charlie scolded him as Ron's face fell into a scowl at being duped once again by an elder brother. "I've half a mind to tell Hermione just what a little prick she's married to."

"Somehow, I think she knows the little prick bit all too well, poor girl," George added.

Ron sneered at him as the rest of the table laughed. George mentally patted himself on the back for scoring yet another zinger on his hapless little brother.

"Speaking of the union in question," Percy said with a sly smile, "what about you, Ron? When did you realize Hermione was the one for you?"

Ron shrugged. "Hard to say, really," he stammered.

He's actually blushing!? George marveled to himself. *Oh, this is too rich for words!* George was practically licking his chops, anticipating making the most of his brother's discomfort.

But his brother's best friend beat him to the punch. "You ruddy fat liar!" Harry cried, exasperated. "It was ages I put up with the two of you, waiting for one of you to grow a pair and make a move. Remember which one of you did? I'll give you a hint: it wasn't the one with a prick."

The table erupted in raucous laughter even Ron smiled sheepishly. "Shut up, Harry," he laughed. "Took you a bit of time as well, if I remember correctly."

"I had an excuse!" Harry protested. "Her army of older brothers all threatened to kick my arse every time I so much as kissed her on the cheek!"

"Too right," grumbled Bill.

"That's our baby sister, git," Charlie added with a curt nod.

"But when did you *know* it was Ginny and not anyone else?" Percy asked after all the chests had been properly thumped and Harry had rolled his eyes several times.

Harry grew pensive and the group fell quiet. *Amortentia*. Sixth year... in Slughorn's class."

George smiled while the rest of the table remained silent. "You were sitting in a dungeon, high on some potion fumes, when you realized you loved my sister? How very romantic," he said sarcastically. But the true significance of Harry's confession was not lost on any of them, including him. Not that there was any question of Harry's devotion to their sister, but no one was going to argue with *Amortentia*, either.

Everyone took a few drinks from their glasses or bottles, waiting for the conversation to resume.

Percy sighed. "I shudder to ask, but... George, when did you know Annie was the one?"

George took one more long pull from his bottle as if considering Percy's question. For once, he decided to be openly truthful with his frequent family nemesis. "There was never anyone else, Perce. If you ask her, she'll tell you it was when we were sixteen. And in one sense, she's right. That was when we both finally realized it."

"That was when the hormones kicked in, you mean," Bill teased him.

George shrugged, unable to refute the observation as the memory of the raging frustration of those last two years of school came back to mind. Had anyone at Hogwarts ever been more miserable than he had been during the year and a half after he'd realized he wanted Annie, and she remained so far out of his reach?

"Go on," Percy prodded him. "Maybe it's the mead, but I'm sensing a rare moment of soul-baring honesty approaches."

George stared at the empty bottle in his hand. "The truth of it is... I think I always knew. Maybe even from the moment I met her."

Percy rolled his eyes, not believing a word of it. "At age seven?" he said dismissively.

"Now *I'm* gonna retch," Ron said, coughing theatrically. "Annie's the only one who would have you, and I can't decide if that makes her a saint or an idiot," he laughed.

The rest of the table chuckled with him, and George smiled. *Who am I to argue?* he mused. Ron's teasing comment pretty much summed up his own assessment of the situation.

"You have no romance in your soul, little bro," Charlie chided Ron, taking George by surprise. He gave George a tiny wink and the barest of nods. George wasn't sure if that meant he believed him, or was just playing along with what he thought was another joke.

"And you do, I suppose? Hiding out on a mountaintop with a herd of dragons brings out the love poet within, eh, Charlie?" Ron retorted.

"Leave Charlie alone. Even dragons need love, too," Bill scolded him jokingly.

George felt an irresistible, pathological need, an almost biological drive to chime in and heap abuse on his younger brother. "And you should know, Ron. I've seen Hermione when she gets a head of steam on. I reckon she's roasted you alive more than once...."

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George's temper was set to slow burn. He hadn't quite reached fully outraged... yet. But his companions in the small room recognized the set of his jaw, the look in his eyes, and gave him as wide a berth as possible. They all knew he would rather be anywhere else in the world right now.

The whole thing was just so monumentally stupid. He had never wanted to be here in the first place. Granted, only one of his brothers actually did want to be there, but still, it rankled him more than any of the rest of them, he reckoned. It wasn't until both his mother and wife had joined forces against him "For the sake of peace in the family," they'd said that he'd grudgingly agreed to participate in this overblown spectacle of a wedding ceremony.

Audrey was a decent enough person, George knew, but her priorities were seriously out of balance, in his opinion. This ridiculous wedding had been in the planning stages for well over a year and promised to be as pretentious and pompous as possible, as befitting the illustrious Cavendish family's social status.

Of course Percy would have chosen his bride from one of the most snobbish, obnoxious families in wizarding Britain. So elitist even Hogwarts wasn't good enough: the Cavendish children had been educated at home by a series of private tutors. The family's superiority complex didn't descend into outright persecution of the 'lesser' folk which was pretty much everyone, as far as they were concerned like so many of the pureblood families had done in recent years. They had not been supporters of You-Know-Who. The Cavendishes weren't exactly "followers," you see.

But then again, they hadn't signed up to fight against him, either. They had decided instead to take an extended holiday to one of the many other Continental estates in their holdings until the unpleasantness blew over. And that sort of attitude didn't sit very well with George. At all.

And then there was Audrey's reaction to their announcement earlier in May that he and Annie were expecting again. "Oh, no! You can't be! What will I do about your dress, Annie? All that planning... and now it won't fit!" Percy's fiancée had cried, utterly distraught.

That had been the last straw. George had refused to participate in the wedding any further.

"She didn't really mean it like that, George," Annie had said to him shortly after, attempting to calm him down. He'd seen that she'd been furious too, though nearly as much as he'd been. "Some people just can't see beyond their own noses, sometimes," she'd grumbled.

And now, here he was in this bloody room in this bloody outfit with all these bloody people....

George pulled at his collar for the hundredth time that afternoon. Why did they have to be fully dressed an entire hour before the ceremony? And then forced to stand here in this anteroom that was hardly bigger than a broom closet doing nothing but waiting in the meantime? There was no good reason on earth for spending an extended amount of time in dress robes, as far as he could see. He didn't care how much Annie gushed about how good he looked in them he felt like he was wearing a straitjacket.

Finally, someone came to collect them. The groomsmen lined themselves up in order of tallest to shortest: yet another stupid idea seemingly conjured up purely for his irritation. Not only was he reminded that Ron had shot a few inches taller than him in the years since school (*Seriously, how is it that the little freak could still be growing?*), but because the bride's cortege was aligned similarly, it meant that only Bill would be escorting his own wife down the aisle. George would be stuck with his sister, Ginny, instead. It was all so very bloody ridiculous.

Musicians numbering nearly a full orchestra, with a choir of boys in accompaniment, began playing and singing as they slowly marched down the interminable aisle, one couple at a time, while George fumed. *Of course this torture must be extended for as long as possible, extracting every last minute, draining the last drop of enjoyment from the attendees' lives.* Bill and Fleur went first, then Ron and Audrey's sister, Aurelia (*there's a piece of work. That cow's lucky someone hasn't wrung her neck by now*). He wanted nothing more at this moment than to throttle someone, preferably Percy.

As Ginny walked slowly toward him from the far side of the room, and they met at the middle of the aisle, he could tell by her expression that she was feeling aggravated as well. George smiled slightly as he contemplated what the mood must have been like in the bridal waiting room. Yes, he imagined Audrey's domineering behavior would have ensured that every one of her attendants was abjectly miserable and likely plotting grievous bodily harm.

He and Ginny reached the area in front of the audience, bowed to each other while pulling faces and sticking out their tongues (*take that, Audrey*), then took their respective places flanking the bridal 'stage,' which was elevated above the rest to ensure the audience had a proper view of the bride's backside. *As if anyone would be confused as to who was supposed to be the center of attention today.*

George ground his teeth as Charlie began the long walk toward him with Hermione on his arm. Then he looked up at the ceiling in impatient frustration. He had to squint from the glare of several hundred floating candles there.

He thought back to the weddings of last summer: his younger brother and sister had finally tied the inevitable knots with Hermione and Harry, who had been Weasleys for years already in every other sense. Both had been small affairs (*Anything would be small compared to this monstrosity. How does anyone even know four hundred people?*). George had been mildly surprised by only one thing: it hadn't been a double wedding. Ron and Hermione's wedding had come first by about eight weeks. "Maybe

Hermione finally put her foot down and made Ron do something apart from Harry," he had said jokingly to Annie at the time.

The furor over the great Harry Potter's wedding had been rather amusing, as well. The witches and wizards of Britain apparently considered Harry, as their savior and hero, to be owing them something further when it came to his nuptials. There had been a small but vocal minority that clamored for his wedding to be an official state occasion, with articles and letters to that effect having been plastered all over the *Daily Prophet* for a month. Harry and Ginny threatened to leave the country if that were the case, but were finally convinced that with enough security, they could marry quietly enough in the Weasley orchard, with guests limited to family and select friends and Order members patrolling the perimeter. *What an entertaining show that had been!* At least a dozen people had been booted unceremoniously off the property, enhancing George's enjoyment of the happy event immensely.

Of course, no wedding could compare to his own. Five minutes, six people, and the result had been that Annie was his wife forever. He pitied the poor idiots, including himself, who were forced to endure this one.

At last, the final attendant couple came into view. Harry and Annie met at the far end of the aisle. George finally saw his wife for the first time since they'd parted hours ago as she turned and walked toward him on Harry's arm. *Lucky effing bastard*, he thought with a sigh.

He had seen the gown before on its hanger and had even touched the soft velvet and satin as he carried it for her while they'd traveled here *What idiot dresses everyone at a summer wedding in black velvet, anyway?*. During their forced separation of this afternoon, however, it had been transformed into a thing of true beauty. On the other attendants, the same gown had hung loosely in large billows, shapelessly fluttering to the floor as they walked the better to show off Audrey's figure in contrast, he could only assume. But on Annie, the satin band folded enticingly around her generous cleavage, and the black velvet draped down her body, clinging to her swollen belly the current but temporary home of their fourth child. The golden skin of her bare arms and shoulders was positively glowing in the candlelight of the cavernous room. Her short hair was pulled back from her face by three thin, glittering bands around her head, but several curls had escaped and now fluttered around her forehead and cheekbones.

Okay, he had to admit it: here was a redeeming moment in this otherwise pointless endeavor. Annie was a vision. He smiled as she winked conspiratorially at him during her bow to Harry, flashing a luscious view of cleavage George desperately wanted to pretend no one else saw but him.

Next, George's twin sons, decked out in miniature versions of his own torturous dress robes, marched solemnly down the aisle carrying satin pillows with the rings atop. His heart went out to them. *Poor little chaps! What four-year-old deserves to look that ridiculous? Percy will pay for this* George swore under his breath once more, but gave his sons an encouraging wink and smile despite the smoldering anger inside himself.

They went to stand by their Aunt Fleur and Uncle Bill.

George looked into the audience, scanning it for a sight of his parents. He found them in the front row, his mother and father sitting uncomfortably with forced smiles. It was obvious they felt completely out of their element, surrounded by all this pomposity and formal luxury, as did the rest of the family.

Baby Merrie (*Well, toddler now, actually*, he admitted.) was fast asleep on her grandmother's lap. That was the only reasonable way to spend this time, he figured, and George was envious of his daughter. Bill's little Dominique was even luckier: she'd gotten to stay at home at Shell Cottage with her maternal grandparents visiting from France.

George sighed wistfully at the thought of his cool, comfortable home waiting for him in Devon *Please, please, let this be over soon*, he prayed.

Finally, his niece, Victoire looking like nothing so much as a meringue toddled down the runway, pitching flower petals and fairies out of a silly basket.

George was rapidly reaching his limit and bit his lip. The bloody procession alone had taken thirty minutes!

Then the music changed, and the only two people who actually needed to be present finally made their entrances. Yes, he conceded, Audrey looked nice in her pretty white dress, if you went for that sort of thing. And Percy looked excited, and pleased, and... well... happy. *Maybe I'm overreacting a bit*, he considered. *Who of us doesn't deserve some happiness? As long as this is what Percy wants...*

But then George was reminded that his feet were hurting in his dress shoes, and he shifted his weight. He swallowed and felt choked by the neckline of the dress shirt and tie. Every muscle in his arms and shoulders craved the opportunity to flex and rip the constricting seams of the hot, heavy velvet he was encased in. The grumpy, smoldering feeling began to return.

He glanced over at Annie, who he discovered was trying to hide the fact that she was standing on one leg, flexing and shaking the other foot, then proceeded to do the same for the first.

That was it: the limit of his patience had just been reached. His pregnant wife was clearly uncomfortable, and that was something he refused to tolerate. He wouldn't make a scene at the moment, but they were leaving as soon as the ceremony was over. *Family peace be damned!*

No less than forty-five minutes later George was silently screaming in frustrated fury by then the ceremony had unmercifully concluded, and the entire wedding party had been directed to assemble in a large sitting room off the ballroom where the reception feast was to take place. George had disengaged Ginny from his arm and waited at the head of the aisle, rather than following Ron and Aurelia like a bloody mindless sheep. As soon as Annie cleared the aisle, he scooped his wife into his arms and carried her into the waiting room, setting her gently on a sofa (*More velvet? Merlin's beard, it was everywhere in this bloody house!*). She smiled and giggled when he did it, but didn't protest or resist, either. He thought her eyes looked tired.

"I'm going to get Merrie, and then we're leaving," he informed her, whispering through clenched teeth in an attempt to avoid screaming. "Stay with your mum, boys," he charged them as he marched out of the room.

The slam of the door caught Audrey's attention. "What was that? Did somebody leave? We have to wait here until the guests are seated for the reception, then make our entrance. We rehearsed this, Percy!" she barked, exasperated.

Annie bit her tongue as she slipped her aching feet out of her shoes. *Don't make this harder than it has to be* she steeled herself.

The twins snuggled themselves against her body, trying to get comfortable around her belly, using it as a pillow. It was hours past their bedtime at this point, and they were dead on their feet. She had promised Molly to do what she could tonight, keeping George in check, but Annie was exhausted and tapped out of patience herself.

It had been something out of a nightmare: wrestling the twins into their dress robes, chasing after them while they'd been cooped up for so long in that room with all the other increasingly sullen female attendants, not to mention blasted Audrey herself, before the ceremony. She agreed with her husband: they had done their familial duty, participated in the important (Annie snorted silently to herself at the word) part of the event, and deserved to be excused from the rest of it, in her opinion.

George was back five minutes later with their sleeping daughter in his arms. He passed her gently to Annie, then roughly struggled out of his fancy jacket. Annie giggled as she heard a seam rip and meanwhile, gently and one-handedly, helped her sons to do the same with far less damage to their clothing.

George then strode purposefully over to the newlyweds. "Congratulations. *Lovely* ceremony. Very moving. Unfortunately, we can't stay any longer. The kids and Annie are exhausted, you understand. Best wishes, bon voyage, and see you soon." George barely kept himself civil, and Annie appreciated the effort he was expending by not punching something or someone, running one hand through his hair and shoving the other deep into his trouser pocket instead.

"But you can't leave now!" whined Audrey. "What will people think? You're Percy's brother! You're supposed to..."

"Audrey, it's enough. Let him go," Percy warned his bride in a stern voice, who began to pout. He turned to George, holding out his hand to shake. "Thanks for coming, George. I know it was a sacrifice for you, and I appreciate it."

Startled, George looked at his brother with a portion of newfound respect and appreciation, tempered with a little bit of embarrassment for his own childish attitude, as he shook his proffered hand. "Not a *sacrifice*, Percy, really. But the kids... and Annie.... It's just too much for them," George stammered in explanation.

"No worries. We'll have you over for a visit once we're back from the honeymoon trip," Percy assured him.

"Sure. See you then," George replied.

George turned away, picked up his sons in his arms, and strolled out of the room. He felt a bit guilty about leaving now, but not enough so to stay any longer, that was for certain. Annie followed him silently in her bare feet, Merrie still mercifully asleep in her arms, high-heeled sandals dangling from one hand.

Most of the rest of the wedding party mumbled their own goodbyes, eyeing them enviously. George chuckled, predicting Audrey would have a mutiny on her hands within two hours, tops. With any luck, he would be fast asleep in his own bed by then.

Snow Angel

Chapter 53 of 80

George jinxes it.

Chapter 53: Snow Angel

December 8, 2002

George woke up early one December morning to the sight of snow falling outside his window. The clouds were a heavy, leaden grey, and the trees in the distance were bending before a strong wind. The ground was covered in a thin layer of white. The landscape looked positively frigid.

Wrapping himself around the comfortably convenient human heat source beside him, he lightly placed his hand on his wife's burgeoning belly. He was rewarded with a strong kick that brought a smile to his face.

"Ouch," Annie muttered sleepily. "If you two are going to fight, kindly leave me out of it," she added after yawning.

George and Annie and their unborn child snuggled quietly for fifteen more minutes in their warm cocoon. He was lightly dozing when little Merrie climbed into bed behind him. She burrowed herself down under the quilt, shoving her shockingly ice-cold little feet underneath, and making him gasp quietly. As sweet as his little girl was, this was an all-too-common rude awakening lately.

This winter promises to be an unusually bitter one, he mused. Almost Scottish in nature, if memory serves. Ugh.

Annie inhaled sharply. "Ooh. That's a good one."

George agreed as he felt the flesh of her belly underneath his hand tighten for half a minute, then slowly release. Each time it happened and it had happened often lately his heart started to race. Annie was due any day now, and Braxton Hicks contractions had been frequent over the past two weeks. *Maybe this is finally the real thing*, he thought excitedly, eager to meet their fourth child.

But Annie rolled out of bed, donned an enormous Molly-knitted jumper that stretched taut around her abdomen, and toddled down the stairs to begin fixing breakfast for everyone as if nothing was amiss. George grew more disappointed as the early morning slipped by and the dim light brightened slightly; a birth was apparently not imminent. Despite a few more strong contractions and Annie was dutiful in reporting them, not wanting to be accused of "hiding her labor" a third time nothing came close to resembling a regular schedule.

According to the radio weather reports, a powerful winter storm was set to descend upon southern England that day, and the weather forecasters were predicting more than a foot of snow in some areas. And while the weather made no difference at all to George's daily commute, the thought of Annie being left alone in stormy Devon while he went to work in London made him especially uneasy. He decided on the spot to take the day off instead, popping into the shop in Diagon Alley only long enough to tell them his plan.

"Not a problem, George. I've got things well in hand here," Verity assured him. "Doesn't look to be too busy here today. And say hello to Annie for me."

"Will do and thanks," he called, then dashed back out the door, down the frozen street to the fireplace at the Leaky Cauldron. Unlike in Devonshire, it hadn't started snowing in London yet, but the sky was threatening. George reckoned perhaps three or four inches had accumulated on the ground back home already.

He returned to the Hill just in time to see Annie and their kids bundled up at the back door, ready to head over to the oversized playroom next door. He jogged to catch up, calling for his family to wait for him. Then he took Annie firmly by the arm, the better to steady her as she walked, just in case the snow might be slippery.

He started off the morning by playing crash-up derby with Teddy and his sons, bewitching several large plastic cars to bash each other to bits, reassemble, then do it all over again to the endless entertainment of the three boys (and himself as well, he confessed). He was now listening to the silent heartbeat of a stuffed dragon as Merrie looked on.

"Is she okay, Daddy?" Merrie asked in her funny baby's voice, her tongue challenged by forming the sentence.

He understood her even though she mispronounced every word but "Daddy." George found it amusing how being a parent had forced him to be an interpreter of sorts. Over the past few years, he had become quite fluent in several dialects of toddler-ese.

"I dunno Dr. Merrie. You listen," he offered. The toy stethoscope stretched between both their ears.

"Yep. She's okay. But she must take loads of nasty medicine, right, Daddy? She's very ill," Merrie counseled him, serious concern clouding her features.

"That's probably for the best, yes," he agreed, smiling with silent laughter as his daughter forced the toy to ingest several pints of foul, imaginary potions.

His niece, Dominique, nodded solemnly, wearing a dour scowl on her face and a sparkly, feathery tiara on her strawberry blonde head, hovering over the patient. Roxanne Jordan, decked out in similar mismatched finery consisting of a ruffled apron and caution-orange hard hat, stood by. *The three of them always move in a pack* George remarked to himself.

"There you are, Snorty," Merrie said, lovingly patting the dragon as she laid it on a makeshift bed. "Let's find some more poor, sick creatures," she suggested to Domi and Roxy, taking them by the hands and leading them to a shelf crammed full with more stuffed animals.

"This giraffe looks peaky to me," offered Domi, grasping it firmly by the neck.

"I think the frog has spocks," lisped Roxy, swinging it by its elastic tongue.

"You lot start work on these patients; I'm going to check on lunch," George directed the little girls as he heaved himself up off the floor. He headed toward Annie and Fleur, who were busy in the kitchen fixing lunch for everyone.

It was Fleur's regular day off from the bank, which she spent helping Annie out at the co-operative daycare in exchange for Annie and the other mothers watching her own children the rest of the week. George had put his foot down a couple of years ago, insisting that they all help his wife out, arguing that it was impossible for her, a Muggle, to handle seven magical children by herself. Annie had grudgingly agreed and now coordinated a schedule whereby Fleur, Angelina, and Andromeda would alternate one day of the workweek to share in the child-watching duties. Molly graciously agreed to help the remaining two days, claiming she was thrilled to spend the extra time with her grandchildren and their dear friends.

George took a moment to watch the women working efficiently together, assembling plates of sandwiches, apple slices, peas, and dollops of yogurt for each of their charges. Fleur was about five months pregnant, if he wasn't mistaken she was due sometime in the spring but never really showed much until the very end. Annie, on the other hand, was as round as if she'd swallowed a Quaffle whole and had been so for a good while.

"What's to eat?" he asked, reaching out toward a pile of biscuits on a plate.

Fleur lashed out and slapped his hand. "That's for after you eat your lunch," she barked.

George looked at his sister-in-law in frozen shock as Annie laughed out loud.

"Oh, I am sorry, George!" Fleur cried, his name sounding more like *Zhorzh* in her still thickly-accented English. "It is habit, you know, with the children. Forgive me!" she pleaded, handing him several cookies.

George eyed her warily as he accepted the tokens of apology, then moved quickly out of arm's reach. Munching on them, he strolled to the window in order to survey the storm's progress. As noontime approached, the weather had definitely worsened. The amount of snow on the ground had easily doubled in the past couple of hours, and it was falling even heavier and faster now. Strong gusts of wind rattled against the side of the building.

"That's beginning to look a bit dodgy, if you ask me," he mused aloud to no one in particular. He silently congratulated himself for deciding to stay home today. This was definitely no time for Annie to be stranded home alone.

After the children had been fed their lunch, the three adults sat together at a tiny table, sipping tea and watching the snow fall outside as the children napped in cots before the roaring fire.

"I wonder if it is this bad at Shell Cottage?" said Fleur, sounding a bit worried.

George shrugged. "Want to go over to the house and hear the weather report?" he offered.

"No, *merci*," Fleur said as she shook her head. "I might take the girls home a bit early, though, if you don't mind, Annie."

"Not at all, Fleur. I don't blame you one bit," Annie replied.

About an hour later, as the children were waking from their naps, George's mother stomped into the building. Snow blew in behind her, and her grandchildren tackled her with excited hugs and cries of, "Granny!"

"Oh, George! I'm glad to see you here. I was just coming to offer to go collect you for Annie," she said amidst a flurry of childish kisses. "I haven't seen snow like this since that blizzard when you lot were little yourselves," she mused aloud.

George and Annie smiled at each other for a moment with the shared memory. It was a little sad for both of them, reminding them of the one who was no longer there. George looked out the window, lost for a bit in the remembrance of his brother and the toboggan.

"Come and see the animal hospital, Granny," he heard Merrie squeal. George turned away from the window and his memory to see her dragging his mother to the collection of animals laid out on blankets.

"Oh, dear! I do hope nothing's contagious!" Molly exclaimed for her granddaughter's benefit. Then she directed herself to her son. "Perhaps you should contact Lee or Angelina, George, and warn them about the state of things here. Might be best if everyone gets home early today," she called across the room to him.

George understood this was a suggestion only in the loosest sense of the term. His mother seldom issued anything but commands or accusations, regardless of the phrasing and such was particularly true whenever she was addressing him. But in this case, he happened to agree with her.

"You might be right," he conceded. Although the weather mattered little to the Jordans, traveling as they would be by Floo Network, George was anxious to get his own family settled snugly back into their house before things got much worse outside.

It would do no good to contact Lee at work at the WWN if he was on the air as scheduled, there would be no opportunity for him to leave. George conjured his Patronus and watched as the falcon vanished again into thin air with a message for Angelina to come fetch Roxy as soon as she could get away, due to the worsening weather.

"Whoa," muttered Annie, her hands clutching at her abdomen. "There's another one," she added, smiling at George. He glanced at the clock: four p.m. It had been six hours since the last contraction.

"Wouldn't it be just our luck if you went into labor tonight?" he chuckled unthinkingly.

"Well, thanks for jinxing it, git," she muttered, glaring weakly at him.

"That is a complete misuse of the word 'jinx,' as I've explained to you a hundred times," he teased her.

"Have you ever considered maybe you lot are the ones misusing it?" she argued petulantly.

"Hmm. Let's examine that theory for a moment, shall we? Which population is most likely to correctly use the word 'jinx': wizards who actually perform them or Muggles who are clueless to the entire business?"

"All right," Annie laughed. "You've made your point."

"Too right, I have," he laughed with her.

Three hours later, George was no longer laughing at anything. Snow was falling furiously, the wind was howling, and Annie had continued having contractions, which had become stronger and more regular throughout the rest of the afternoon into the early evening.

He had made her lie down while he fixed dinner for their kids. With the children seated at the table, eating spaghetti with meatballs his one and only specialty he crept upstairs and into their darkened bedroom.

"So?" he asked.

He could just make out Annie nodding in the dim light as his eyes adjusted. "This is definitely the real thing. I told you that you jinxed me, idiot," she argued teasingly.

"How far apart are they?" He couldn't help feeling elated by the promised birth ahead, despite the anxiety caused by the weather situation.

"Still only about ten minutes," she assured him.

Plenty of time yet, he reckoned to himself. "I'm going to fetch Mum," he explained. "You stay here; I'll only be gone a moment. The kids are eating downstairs they'll be fine."

"It's the kitchen I'm worried about, not them. You made spaghetti, I assume?" she scolded him while giggling.

"Excellent guess," he chuckled. "I'm off...."

A minute later, he had arrived back at Mole Hill with his mother in tow, then rushed back upstairs to collect Annie. Molly was in the process of cleaning off her three grandchildren, who had applied tomato sauce like it was war paint onto their faces and hands, as George helped Annie down the stairs. "Why in Merlin's name did you make them *this*, of all things?" his mother asked, astonished at the mess.

"Are you surprised that the only thing George knows how to cook happens to be the messiest meal possible?" giggled Annie as she gingerly made her way down the stairs.

"You certainly picked quite a night for it, Annie," Molly teased back.

"Not me.... George's fault," she said as she eased herself off the bottom stair then hunched over slightly, leaning against him, letting another contraction do its work.

His mother looked at him with suspicious curiosity, and George instinctively winced slightly. He pressed his thumbs against the base of Annie's spine, trying to do what he could to help her through the contraction. "I *might* have mentioned something this afternoon about it being funny if she went into labor tonight," he confessed.

"Men..." his mother muttered, shaking her head. "Well, it's not fit for mountain trolls out there, so you'd best get a move on before it gets any worse. Good luck to you, Annie, and keep us posted, George," she called out after them as they walked slowly toward the door.

George lifted Annie up into the Toyota just in time for another contraction to start. Annie dropped her chin to her chest and panted through it, gripping the dashboard as she sat on the edge of the seat. He tried to rub her lower back, but the angle was wrong, and he sensed it wasn't helping at all.

"We'll be there in a couple of minutes," he said, attempting to reassure her.

Annie nodded.

It took fifteen minutes just to get to the end of their driveway, however, and another forty-five to drive the five miles to the hospital. George could easily blast through the drifts of snow along the narrow roads with his wand, but was at a loss when their old Land Cruiser got stuck twice on icy patches. The wind was so bad, the ice re-froze as fast as he could magically melt it.

As the wheels of the car spun uselessly for a third time, he threw up his hands in surrender. "That's it!" he yelled, pounding the steering wheel for good measure. "I give up! We're Apparating to the bloody hospital!"

"We can't abandon the car in the middle of the road, George!" Annie argued, breathing deeply. He was no longer sure if it was due to a contraction or frustration with his ineptitude. "Just get out and push, and I'll drive," she ordered.

He started to shake his head in disagreement. A laboring woman was in no condition to be behind the wheel....

"JUST DO IT, DAMN IT!" she yelled, kicking open her door and sliding out of the seat.

"FINE!" he shouted back, dashing out his own door and running around the front of the car to intercept her. He intended to hold on to her to make sure she didn't slip. But he fell twice trying to get to her, bruising his hip and possibly fracturing an elbow in the process. The wind drowned out the steady stream of profanity pouring forth from him.

Meanwhile, she walked carefully on her own, holding on to the hood with both hands, without incident.

Annie drove the last mile to the hospital herself, and it only took five minutes. While she gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles, her cheeks billowing as she panted through two contractions while keeping her foot steady on the accelerator, George sat in the passenger seat, holding his throbbing arm close to his side, muttering useless things like, "Careful!" and "Watch it!" As they parked in the lot near the emergency entrance, George dove out of the car before it stopped rolling completely, nearly getting himself run over, and scrambled around to the driver's side to help Annie climb out.

"Here we are. Everything will be fine now. Let's just get inside," he said, leading her toward the automatic doors while walking with a slight hobble. *Now we're safe*, he sighed, relief beginning to settle in.

They had just stepped inside when all the lights went out.

"Oh, you have got to be KIDDING ME!" bellowed Annie.

"Not to worry! The back-up generator will be on in a sec," cried a nurse as she rushed over to them. Several flashlights flickered on around her.

They made their way inside, and Annie was undressed in the dark, given a bed to lie on, and examined. "Goodness... eight centimeters... you got here just in time!" the nurse exclaimed a moment later. As she dashed out of the room to fetch the delivery team, the lights began to flicker back on.

"See, everything is gonna be fi" George began before he was abruptly silenced by his wife clamping her hand over his mouth.

"Not another word, George!" she commanded through gritted teeth. "Do not jinx another thing! Keep your bloody mouth shut... darling," Annie cried, adding the last word to try to soften the blow.

That was when the ridiculousness of the situation hit him, and he began laughing hysterically. The nurse looked at him in alarm, which only made him laugh harder.

The next morning dawned bitterly cold and grey, but the snow had finally stopped falling. It was piled in drifts, sculpted into graceful, poetic curves around rock

outcroppings, trees, and tufts of grass. If anyone had bothered to look out the window of their hospital room, they would have seen nothing but a barren, ugly rooftop anyway a point made moot by the fact that the glass was frosted over entirely.

But George and Annie never noticed. They only had eyes for their newborn daughter: tiny, pink, and lovely. Like the rest of her siblings, she'd been born with dark blue eyes which were destined to turn brown and downy reddish hair that formed a ruddy halo around her perfect head. The three of them huddled together in the warm nest that was the hospital bed.

"You've evened up the score, little one," Annie whispered as the infant girl began to nurse again.

"For the time being," George added with a smile and a wink.

They had discussed names quite a while ago. George had wanted to name their next child, male or female, after Harry. "He saved Ginny's life, he saved Dad's life, and he's saved Ron about a hundred times by now. Because of him, you and I don't have to hide or live in fear for our kids," he had claimed with fervor. "And that doesn't even cover the fact that he staked me and Fred in the beginning."

Annie had agreed without argument, adding that if they had a girl, she wanted to name her Jane as well, as tribute to all her dear friend had done for her for them both, really over the years.

"Welcome to the world, little Harriet Jane Weasley," Annie said, gently stroking her daughter's rosy cheek with her thumb. "We're so very happy you're here."

Dragon Tamer

Chapter 54 of 80

George's family descends upon a remote Romanian dragon reservation research station. Warning: implied slash, but not enough to make "Genre."

Chapter 54: Dragon Tamer

June 2003

Annie was currently sandwiched between the twins, who were packed into booster seats in the third row seat at the back of the car. Molly sat on the seat bench in front of her with Merrie facing forward and Janie facing Annie in their respective car seats. George was driving, and Arthur rode in the front passenger seat, talking a mile a minute in anticipation of the adventure ahead. A collection of small backpacks was stacked on the floor behind Annie, containing everything they would need while away from home. The distinct lack of bulky luggage was a fact that would be sure to arouse curiosity if anyone else understood the group of eight was on their way to a fortnight's camping trip in the Romanian mountain wilderness.

At the moment, they were riding in the old Land Cruiser, speeding along the freeway in the rain on their way to the airport. Annie smiled as she listened to her three oldest children singing "*Frere Jacques*", taught to them by their Aunt Fleur, who would be meeting them at the end of the second leg of their trip today. The second leg of the trip was a special gift from George to his father: Arthur would be fulfilling a lifelong dream today when they boarded the flight to Paris.

She had to admit George seemed to have a real talent when it came to planning family outings or parties of any sort, actually. The annual family reunions/camping trips they hosted each August had proved to be huge successes every time, cementing the bonds between the Weasley siblings, spouses, and growing ranks of next-generation cousins. *Would it be the same if Fred hadn't been taken from us?* she wondered. *Would we all feel the need to come together quite as strongly as we do?*

Today they were on their way to see Charlie, a stubborn holdout when it came to family gatherings. As the years had passed since the end of the war, Charlie had withdrawn into his life in Romania, throwing himself into his work with the poor, helpless dragons. (Annie chuckled silently to herself at the thought of a dragon being considered helpless.) They hadn't really seen him for two years now, and George was insistent it had been long enough. And if his brother Charlie wouldn't come to see them, then they were going to Romania to see him!

Annie wholeheartedly agreed with her husband's plan. She genuinely liked Charlie and enjoyed his company. He had never been anything but friendly, easy-going, and welcoming to her. But that wasn't to say that she thought she knew him well at all. Charlie was not very forthcoming with personal information of any sort, preferring instead to redirect the conversation away from himself and onto something else dragons, usually. Thereupon he would become effusive, waxing poetic, spinning incredible tales of daring adventure. Otherwise, he was quiet, bordering on reticent.

Even so, Annie had her suspicions as to why Charlie had stopped coming home for visits. Perhaps he felt it was too sad now that Fred was no longer with them, preferring instead to avoid the memories that would be unavoidably triggered by a stay at the Burrow. Or maybe he really was too busy to get away from the dragon reservation for a few days a year. Or most likely, in her opinion, he was feeling increasingly out of place now that every one of his siblings was married, families already begun or likely on the way soon. And if this was in fact the case, Molly had proven particularly unhelpful by badgering her remaining bachelor son about settling down for the entire time he was ever in her presence.

They arrived at the airport with several hours to spare, just as planned. Annie gave in to the urge to laugh out loud several times they were all so fascinated by the novelty of a modern international airport. She supposed all eight of them must've looked like utter rubes, herself included, for she had never had the opportunity to fly before, either. Though as a Muggle, she had been so thoroughly exposed to the concept of airline travel via the media that, among the Weasleys, she was considered an expert.

Arthur spent the time before the flight wandering around like a man in a waking dream, exclaiming about every new thing he saw and chatting up random strangers to their consternation asking them their opinions about the marvels around him. Even Molly was intrigued, though Annie could tell the prospect of boarding an *Egorgio'd* biscuit tin and trusting it to carry her thousands of feet in the air over the English Channel did not appeal to her the way it did to her husband.

The twins were nearly as enthralled as their grandfather. At four and half years old, they stood on either side of Merrie, holding her hands and leading her through the airport, pointing out items of interest: the metal detectors, the baggage handling system, the lifts, the airplanes themselves. They had only ever read about them in books, but were able to explain the inner workings of the mechanical systems from memory, sounding like adult experts as they did.

Finally, it was time to board the plane. They took up three consecutive rows: Molly and Arthur in the lead, George and the boys next, then Annie with their daughters bringing up the rear. Before taking her seat, Annie made a point of explaining to her in-laws the purpose of the small paper bag in the seat pocket, just in case. Molly pursed her lips in displeasure at the thought.

They were the only people on the flight who listened intently to the stewards as they explained the operation of the seat belts ("Ingenious, aren't they, Molly, dear?"),

flotation devices (Molly blanched at this point.), emergency exits ("Those slides look like fun, Daddy! Can we ride them, please?") and lavatories ("Are you sure you can't hold it, Merrie?"). The four small children were, for the most part, perfectly behaved on the flight, largely due to its newness and brevity rather than their own self-control. Annie could tell Arthur was as disappointed as Molly was relieved by the fact it was over so quickly.

Fleur was standing across the street from the airport in Paris, waiting for them. She had offered to be their translator *Well, insisted, actually, would be more accurate* Annie thought), helping to deal with the French Ministry who had a reputation for being as unhelpful as their Muggle counterparts in obtaining the proper Portkeys for the rest of their journey. Angelina had already done quite a bit to smooth the way before them from her position within the British Magical Transportation office, but it was comforting to know they would have Fleur on their side all the same. As it was, Fleur was forced to deliver tongue lashings that nearly drew blood to two separate people before they were finally handed a cracked dinner plate (outbound from Paris to the dragon reservation in Romania) and moldy fedora (inbound direct to Devon). Then she led them to a quiet, empty suburban park from which to leave.

"Thank you so much, my dear! We couldn't have done it without you," Molly exclaimed with a hug.

Molly always makes a point of being generous in her praise with Fleur Annie mused. George had long ago explained that it had to do with the werewolf attack on Bill and Fleur's subsequent reaction to it. Even though she often still rubbed Molly the wrong way, she would always have a special place in Molly's heart for that reason alone.

"It was my pleasure, of course," Fleur assured her. "Bon voyage!"

After they hugged and kissed their goodbyes to her, they were off once more. Annie far and away preferred travel by Portkey to Apparating or even the Floo Network; the sensation of moving at blazing speed was thrilling to her. Each adult held a child carefully in their arms as they all held on to the plate and hurtled through some unknown cosmic dimension, momentarily coming to rest in an idyllic mountain meadow overlooked by a cottage.

Charlie came bounding over to them right away. "You made it! How was the trip?"

"Amazing! Charlie, you simply *must* fly on an airplane for yourself someday, son! Simply fantastic!" gushed Arthur, vigorously shaking his hand.

"We survived it, dear," Molly muttered unenthusiastically with a kiss and a hug for her son. "How have you been, Charlie? You look thin," she said, clucking her tongue.

"I'm fine, Mum," Charlie said with slight exasperation. He turned to his brother next. "George! You look well!" he said, thumping his younger brother on the back.

"Not well-rested, but well, thanks," joked George.

Annie rolled her eyes. It was one of his favorite complaints: lack of sleep. He loved it because not only was it true, primarily due to a house full of young children who kept odd hours, but he could never resist winking at the implied innuendo, either. The fact that it riled Annie whenever he did so was a bonus. As was expected of her, she scowled at him, making him laugh.

"Good to see you again, Annie," Charlie said with a smile, offering her a peck on the cheek. "And this must be Harriet?"

The six-month old in Annie's arms hid her face against her mother's neck, shy around the stranger she had never met.

Annie nodded. "She goes by Janie now. Uncle Harry starts to squirm whenever we use her given name around him," she giggled.

"And who are these three? Why haven't you brought Fred and Art and Merrie with you?" Charlie exclaimed, bending down on one knee as George's children gathered around him in curiosity.

"We are Fred and Art and Merrie, Uncle Charlie," said Art with concern.

"Don't you recognize us?" added Fred with surprise.

"No, no, no," Charlie argued playfully. "You're far too big to be Fred and Art and Merrie. Where are my little niece and nephews?"

"Right here!" they cried, beginning to suspect their Uncle Charlie was teasing them.

"Where?" he said, looking all around him in an exaggerated way, picking up a small rock and looking beneath it for effect.

"Right here in front of you!" they shouted and giggled, jumping up and down.

"Are you sure? You look like a mob of kangaroos to me. Has someone transfigured you? Your Dad, maybe?" He fell to tickling the children until they ran away, screeching.

"This your place, then, Charlie?" asked George as the adults began walking toward the large cottage uphill from the meadow.

Charlie nodded. "An observation station, actually. Keepers are housed at several of them throughout the reservation. We play host and field guide to visiting scholars when called for."

"Looks terribly lonesome, doesn't it?" commented Molly, preparing to launch into yet another harangue about Charlie's deplorable lack of nuptial bliss.

"Looks peaceful and quiet to me," argued George in an attempt to head his mother off. "At least, it must've been before we got here."

Annie silently applauded her husband for defending his brother, deflecting his mother's pending onslaught.

"As peaceful as it can be, surrounded as we are by dragons," Charlie laughed along with his brother. "Wait 'til you see them, bro," he said excitedly. "Annie, you'll love them!"

"I'm sure I will. I'm always interested in seeking out things that would enjoy roasting me alive," she teased. Despite the sarcasm, she was, in fact, rather looking forward to seeing the terrifying creatures in person. It was a thrilling prospect, and she assumed it might be akin to what big game hunters would feel: a surge of adrenaline in the face of an animal that was perfectly content to be as well as quite capable of killing you.

They entered the alpine cottage then, taking a moment to allow their eyes to adjust to the comparative dimness of the room compared to the blazing sunlight of the meadow. It looked exactly like what she imagined a scientific research station might: spare, utilitarian furniture, bookshelves crammed with well-worn books, and several things that resembled telescopes near the windows.

"This is my room, just here," Charlie said, leading them down a narrow hallway to the back of the building. It was small no bigger than Jane's dorm room had been at Cardiff. It contained a single bed, a desk, a dresser, and a bookshelf.

Annie looked about, finding only two items indicating someone with any sort of personality lived here. The first was a family photo Lee had taken of the Weasley clan in its entirety that first summer at the beach. It was framed and sitting on the desk, everyone within it waving enthusiastically, including herself. The other was a little plaque she and George had found one day in a little Muggle tourist trap in a seaside Devonshire town, claiming to specialize in "magical" gifts. They had thought it funny and figured Charlie would appreciate the humor. It read, "Do not meddle in the affairs of dragons, for you are crunchy and good with ketchup."

"There are five rooms like this here in the station," Charlie explained, breaking the silence that threatened to become uncomfortable. "I'd invite you lot to stay, but they're all being used by us keepers and a few visiting researchers at the moment."

"No worries, Charlie. We wouldn't exactly fit inside one of these, anyway," joked George. Annie noticed he also looked slightly surprised by the spartan furnishings and Lilliputian proportions of what amounted to his brother's home.

"The tent will be perfectly fine for us," Annie said, adding her own reassurances.

"Thanks for understanding," Charlie said with a slightly uneasy smile, leading them back the way they had come.

They were sitting around a large dining table in the kitchen area of the station, chatting and catching up, when the front door opened. Four men came traipsing in, three of whom were speaking excitedly to each other in Chinese. The other was a tall, darkly complected, handsomely bearded man, who smiled and waved at them.

"Hello, Sasha," said Arthur, apparently recognizing him and sounding pleased to see him again. He rose to shake the fellow's hand, clapping him on the opposite shoulder as he did.

"Hello, Mr. Weasley. It is very nice to see you again," the tall man said in heavily accented English. His voice was deeply booming, yet gentle.

Charlie stood up and introduced Sasha to the rest of them as a fellow keeper stationed at the cottage. They all chatted politely as Mrs. Weasley began fixing a meal for the family. The Chinese dragon researchers all went directly to their rooms, not speaking a word of English and apparently uninterested in mingling. George and Arthur excused themselves to set up the tent nearby before it got too dark. The twins and Merrie were attempting to spy a dragon using the telescopes at the window, which left Annie alone with Charlie and Sasha at the table, Janie asleep in her arms.

"So, Sasha. Have you had any more success in finding a nice girl than my obstinate son has since we saw you last?" asked Molly from her post at the stove.

"Oh... no, Mrs. Weasley," Sasha replied uncomfortably.

Annie gave both men a look of sympathy that she hoped conveyed her embarrassment at the interrogation tactics currently employed by Charlie's mother.

Sasha smiled and winked at her in response. "Not many women find this sort of life attractive," he added.

"My point exactly! I've been telling Charlie the same thing for years. You can't tell me you two don't get horribly lonely up here," Molly argued.

Charlie hazarded a quick, meaningful glance at Sasha, which was unseen by Molly at his back, then returned his focus to the bottle of butterbeer in his hands. Sasha smiled patiently at him in response, then looked back at Molly. Annie gazed down at Janie, pretending not to have seen the exchange.

"I admit that it can get lonely, at times," Sasha said.

"The both of you need to get out more," Molly urged. "Surely there's a village pub somewhere nearby with nice girls to meet. I mean, don't count them out just because they're Muggles... right, Annie?"

"You said it, Molly," she giggled as both Sasha and Charlie smiled warmly at her. She winked at them both. "Muggle girls need love, too."

*

The next evening, after George and Annie said goodnight to his parents, they were getting ready for bed themselves now that the children were all asleep. They had had an amazing day, touring the reservation with Charlie and Sasha and seeing five different kinds of dragons. As incredible as it was to see the dragons close up and in person, George reckoned the best part had been seeing the looks on his children's faces, as well as Annie's reaction to the beasts.

"You know, Mum may have a point," he said as he fluffed up his pillow. "Charlie should settle down soon, find a wife. He's been single far too long. What?"

Annie had been looking at him with a surprised stare. "Nothing," she muttered, looking away again quickly.

"Even I'll admit Mum has occasionally been known to be right, you know," he joked, assuming he understood the reason behind her look, as he climbed into bed.

"Not likely this time," Annie mumbled under her breath, lying down on her back beside him.

George heard the comment anyway and was somewhat surprised by it. "What d'you mean? Charlie's a great fellow! He deserves to be happy, just like us," he argued, sitting up in bed. He found it peculiar that she wouldn't feel the same as he did about the subject. Up to this point, they had always been in perfect agreement when it came to assessments of the romantic relationships of their friends and family.

"You'll get no argument from me on that point. I totally agree: Charlie is a wonderful guy. Everyone deserves to be loved, no matter what," she replied.

"What's that supposed to mean: 'no matter what?'" he demanded.

"Look, it doesn't matter to me one way or the other," Annie said cryptically. "I'm just saying we shouldn't assume that what makes you and I happy would make Charlie happy as well."

"You've lost me," he said, confounded by an argument that seemed to come from out of the blue. *How could love not make someone happy?*

"Okay, then.... You've never mentioned if Charlie's had a girlfriend before. Has he ever?"

"Sure.... I mean, well, now that you ask, I can't think of ever meeting one. He was really popular at school, though, so I imagine he must have."

"Ever talked about fancying anyone?" she pressed.

"Not to me, no.... But he'd more likely confide in Bill. They're closer."

"And that doesn't seem unusual to you? That you've never seen him with a girl or heard him talk about one?"

George shrugged. Charlie had always squirreled himself away from people, preferring the company of creatures out of what George had always assumed was a symptom of shyness. He'd often felt the same way himself, though to a lesser extent, he reckoned content to let Fred take the lead in most social interactions when they were growing up. *Small wonder if Charlie didn't have many girlfriends* he thought. After all, George had only really ever had one himself, and she was sitting right next to him at the moment, now his wife of five years.

"Maybe he just hasn't met the right woman yet, is all," he offered.

"Maybe you're right. Maybe he never will," Annie replied.

"That's a harsh thing to say!" he cried, surprised at such a callous comment coming from Annie. He had expected her to be far more sympathetic to his brother's plight.

"Not at all!" she exclaimed defensively. After a short pause, she continued somewhat hesitantly. "George, you know that not everyone prefers a companion of the opposite sex, right?"

"I'm not an idiot. Of course I do, but what's that got to do with.... Hang on.... *Is that* what you're driving at? Are you saying Charlie's...?"

"I'm not saying I *know* anything about Charlie," she insisted, cutting him off. "It's none of my business, nor yours as far as that goes. And it doesn't matter to me either way, like I said before. But most research shows that about ten percent of the population is *not* heterosexual, and there're seven of you. I think we can safely assume that Fred was very much into female companionship, the rest of you are married, and that leaves Charlie the only one not accounted for," she concluded simply.

"You think Charlie's *gay*?" he said again, uninterrupted this time, still flabbergasted by the very thought.

"You don't think it could be... at the very least... a possibility?" she asked.

George didn't respond. After a pause of several minutes, while George's mind was still reeling from the implications of her comment, Annie spoke again. "Is homosexuality a taboo in your world?"

"Our world," he corrected her out of habit. "And there you go again, misusing words. A taboo renders someone traceable when they utter a forbidden word," he explained patiently.

"All right, Mr. Pain-in-the-Arse Dictionary who is missing the point on purpose, allow me to rephrase. Do wizards consider it morally wrong for people of the same sex to... well... have sex with each other?"

"No, not exactly," he replied thoughtfully after a short pause. "It's not *amoral* issue. But it's... different. Not the usual way of things, is it? Not something people casually discuss over dinner, for example. It's a private thing. Not like those Muggle bars in London, where fellows parade it around...."

"And ladies, don't forget," she amended.

"Right. And ladies." After another pause, he continued. "You really think *Charlie* could be *gay*?" He was asking himself as much as Annie at this point.

"I think it's possible, yes. But like I said, it doesn't matter to me. You were right when you said that Charlie is a great guy, and everyone deserves to be happy. I hope for his sake he is, or at least will be someday," she said, sounding slightly evasive.

"And you're right, as well," George replied, choosing to ignore whatever it was she was trying to hide by her last comment. She clearly knew, or thought she knew, more about the situation than she was letting on. "I shouldn't assume that what makes me happy would be the same for him."

George's mind was now racing, trying to make sense of what was increasingly feeling like a revelation to him. Now that Annie had pointed it out, the conclusion was rapidly becoming unavoidable to him. To the point that he now wondered how could he have not seen it before?

"D'you think that's why he won't come home anymore? Is he afraid of what we'll think?" he exclaimed as more and more of the possible ramifications began dawning on him.

"You'd have to ask him, love. But no matter what, I could certainly see why he'd want to avoid your Mum bangin' on about him finding a wife, couldn't you? She was relentless, last time," Annie said sympathetically.

George snorted in agreement. His mother had been like some kind of matchmaking harpy the last time they had seen him at home, foisting suggestions of eligible women onto Charlie and urging him to get married as soon as possible.

"We should invite him to stay with us, instead," he suggested with a flash of excited inspiration. "Maybe then he'd feel more comfortable and come to visit more often!"

"I think that's a brilliant idea, love. Well done, you," she said in the midst of yawning, then closed her eyes and patted him on the shoulder to indicate she was finished with the conversation.

He turned off the light then, plunging them into brightly moonlit pseudo-darkness.

*

They finally had some time alone, just the two of them, on the last day of their visit. George and Charlie sat together at the small dining table of the keepers' cottage, sipping the last of the butterbeer George had brought from home for his brother.

"You should come home for Christmas this year, Charlie," George began.

"I dunno, George. I'm really busy..." Charlie protested evasively.

"I know. We all are. But we miss having you there. None of us have seen you since Ginny's wedding," George argued.

"What are you talking about? I came back for Percy's," Charlie argued.

"Right. And I heard you stayed just a little bit longer than I did," George laughed. "That doesn't count."

"Okay," Charlie chuckled as well. "I'll give you that one." He paused, considering what to say next. "It's just... difficult... now that all of you are paired off," he said.

"How d'you mean?" George was not entirely sure he wanted to hear Charlie pouring his heart out, but was willing to listen to whatever he had to say for his brother's sake. He reckoned Charlie deserved that much from him.

"Whenever I come home, Mum is merciless about it: how I need to find a wife like the rest of you. I just don't think I'm the marrying sort, is all," Charlie said carefully.

George nodded slowly, taking in what his brother was saying. Nothing he had seen or heard so far over the past two weeks confirmed Annie's theory outright (*All right, it's mine as well at this point*, he silently confessed.), but nothing had flatly contradicted it, either.

"So, stay with Annie and me instead," George offered. "I can't promise you it won't be utter chaos in fact, I think I can guarantee you it will be," he added with a chuckle, "but you're always welcome, and we promise we won't bother you about *that*."

Charlie smiled politely. George could tell he was preparing to thank him but refuse just the same.

"You can bring someone with you, if you like.... A friend, maybe. Why not bring Sasha back with you this year?" he suggested with a casual shrug, feeling his way. Maybe the obvious explanation had been right in front of them all along? "He seems like a nice bloke."

Charlie looked searchingly into his eyes then, looking for what, George wasn't sure. Would Charlie be upset by the veiled implication? He wasn't fishing for information George's only intent was to let his brother know that as far as he and Annie were concerned, Charlie would get no more grief about relationships.

"We just want you to be happy, Charlie," he insisted. "Holidays are for family. We've already lost one brother.... Please don't take another one away from us."

Charlie nodded slowly, then shrugged. "Maybe I will. And if Sasha doesn't have anyplace else to go...."

"He would be more than welcome in my house," George rushed to say. "Anytime, for any reason. Annie and I love you, Charlie, and we miss you. Come home this year,"

George quietly urged his brother.

"Okay," Charlie promised and smiled weakly. "I will."

"Excellent!" George cried, clapping his elder brother on the back.

Charlie chuckled. As George rose to rejoin his family in the tent, Charlie added, "And thanks for... the offer. It means a lot, actually."

George smiled at Charlie. "Anytime, bro. Anytime."

The Remarkable Restorative Properties of a Little Black Race Car

Chapter 55 of 80

Annie's got a surprise birthday present for George.

Chapter 55: The Remarkable Restorative Properties of a Little Black Race Car

April 1, 2004

Annie leaned against the parked car, thankful the promised rain had held off so far. She couldn't wait to see the look on George's face when he saw her and realized the significance of what she stood next to. She was confident he would love his birthday present, even if it wasn't his to keep.

She didn't have to wait long. He emerged from what looked like an abandoned storefront which she alone among the pedestrians on the street understood actually served as a popular pub and busy point of travel for magical Britain almost as if materializing from thin air. Which just happened to be another feat she had seen him perform thousands of times by now.

He looks good. He wore a plain white t-shirt under a lightweight, heather green v-neck jumper and a light grey denim jacket cut like a blazer. He dug through the front pocket of charcoal grey jeans, which fit him a bit more snugly than his usual baggy trousers, and pulled out his cell phone. Unfortunately, he then turned the wrong direction and began walking up the street away from her.

Annie reached inside the open car window and gave the horn a quick honk.

George spun around, looking for the source of the disturbance. His jaw dropped when his eyes found her. Quickly recovering, he jogged over to her with an enormous delighted smile lighting up his face.

George had been on pins and needles all day, looking forward to the evening ahead with excitement. Annie had told him to wear something nicer than his usual work clothing but not fancy (*Bless her heart!*), yet nothing else about her plan. He had been distracted at work, thinking about it all day long, wondering what she had in store for him on his birthday.

The thought occurred to him that the whole thing might have been a devious little trick on her part. His wife knew that April first, of all the days of the year, was often the most difficult for him to get through. Had she intentionally tried to distract him from dwelling on the gloomy, depressing thoughts of the brother he no longer shared the day with? If so, it had been a successful ploy, for the most part. The anticipation of his surprise to come had driven most of the sad memories from his mind.

Even so, he had to admit: each year the day had gotten a little easier. The sharp blade-edge of sadness had dulled significantly with the passage of time, blunted by all the other days filled with comforting routine, weeks filled with cheering moments, months of watching his own family grow and prosper. Life with Annie and his children had been a healing salve, helping to knit closed the once gaping wound, softening the scar tissue left behind.

"Hello, George!" old Tom the barman called out to him as George practically dashed through the Leaky Cauldron toward the front door instead of the fireplace. "Not heading straight home today?"

"The wife and I are off for a night on the town tonight, Tom," he answered with a smile.

"Give my best to Annie, then," Tom replied.

"Will do, mate," George answered cheerily.

He stepped outside and blinked. The grey light of the overcast city was still much brighter than the dim tavern inside, and it took a moment for his eyes to adjust. Meanwhile, he began walking away from the interference of the magical entrance to Diagon Alley and turned on his phone, anticipating a message might be waiting for him from Annie.

A car horn blared, startling him. He spun around, curious to see the source of the disturbance. He was stunned a moment later when his eyes found his wife leaning against a magnificent sports car.

As he jogged toward her, he noted she looked as sleek and beautiful as the car. Like the machine, Annie was dressed modestly in all black modest only in the fact that very little of her golden skin was exposed. The v-neck jumper did not plunge so far as to reveal any cleavage, nor did the knee-length skirt expose anything more than an inch or two of leg above the heeled boots she wore. The allure was in the fit; her curves were displayed to maximum advantage by the clinging clothes. And he knew her body well enough by now that she might as well be standing there naked.

"You are a lovely, wicked girl to give me a Porsche 911 Carrera for my birthday," he said, kissing her on the cheek and lacing his fingers into hers. "And in my favorite color, even." He noted with pride that the only jewelry adorning her tonight the peridot earrings, the heart pendant that lay in the hollow at the base of her neck, and the golden band around her finger were each presented to her by himself.

"Not given, exactly. Only hired for the night," she corrected him gently.

He knew that, of course. It would have been preposterous to think otherwise. Owning a car like this was impossible to consider not with a family of four children all under

five years old at home. *And likely more to come...*

He kissed her again, pressing her body lightly up against the car. He considered again how she was like it: compact, powerful, and responsive. Not to mention dead sexy and out of his league. "May I have the keys?" he whispered expectantly.

"Not yet. I'm hungry, and I'm taking you to dinner first. Get in," she ordered him as she used her hips to push him away from the car.

"I thought it was *my* present," he whined.

"You'll get your turn after we eat," she assured him, smiling with devious delight at his frustration.

Like a thwarted and pouting toddler, he walked around to the passenger side and sank into the seat. Annie had already slipped inside. The driver's seat was pushed so far forward as to be comical in order for her feet to be able to reach the pedals.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Not far," she replied as the engine roared awake, then purred in response to Annie's gentle guidance, directing the car to pull into the street. "A little place I found on the internet that's supposed to be the best fish and chips in London."

George smiled happily, immensely pleased their mode of transportation would promise to be the fanciest thing about the entire evening. They had only been traveling for about ten minutes when she parked in front of a greasy-looking dive of a chip shop his favorite sort of dining establishment. They strolled in together, arm in arm.

"Aren't you finished yet?" he asked impatiently about twenty minutes later, eager to get behind the wheel. He had already plowed hungrily through his own food. It had been delicious and well-deserving of its reputation, but now he was itching to get on with the evening's entertainment.

"Don't rush me," she teased, tossing the last morsel into her mouth. "You'll get your turn soon enough. I'm thinking I might have dessert first...."

Huffing with impatience, he snatched the empty basket from her hands and tugged her up off the seat. Annie giggled in response, jogging behind him as he pulled her quickly out the door.

"The keys," he demanded, holding out his hand as soon as he stood next to the car.

"I should make you frisk me for them," she said with a sly smile.

"Trust me, that would go far worse for you than me," he laughed.

"Right here you go," she laughed as she dug them out of her pocket.

"So, what's the plan?" he asked as he eased the ridiculously overpowered car into the tiny street.

"No plan. Just drive. Hop on a freeway and go nowhere," she said, waving her hands as if shooing him on his way. "We've only got to bring it back by noon tomorrow."

"My birthday present is to chauffeur your arse around London all night long?" he teased. The first gush of adrenaline hit his bloodstream as he fantasized about tearing down an empty roadway.

"No, your birthday present is a chance to drive around like a bloody maniac in a race car," she retorted. "And nothing says we have to stay in London. You've brought your wand, I assume, so you can magic your way out of jail once you get caught criminally speeding?"

"Of course," he assured her, revving the engine at a stoplight. "Buckle up, then, love."

Annie gazed out of the passenger side window, watching streetlights, buildings, and trees fly past her at breakneck speed. She wished the weather had permitted her to get a convertible; the feel of the wind in her hair would have been even more exhilarating. As it was, George was very obviously in seventh heaven, zipping along a suspiciously empty freeway. She watched as beads of water streaked past her, leaving trails along the window pane.

She had thought ahead to bring several of their favorite CDs, giving her something distracting to listen to while he enjoyed himself behind the wheel. She certainly knew him better than to expect him to share such a glorious piece of Muggle ingenuity, which was why she had picked up the car at noon and driven it around for several hours by herself. She also knew he would feel guilty about his selfishness later, a fact she planned to use to her advantage once they were in the hotel room.

"Thirsty?" he asked her after they had been driving aimlessly for nearly two hours. "I'm a tad parched."

"I could do with a pint," she replied.

He pulled off the freeway and entered a nice-looking neighborhood. Annie did not know London well, but from the looks of the buildings they were now driving past, she suspected they might be near a university of some sort.

"Aha! That looks like destiny, love," he cried, pointing at a well-lit pub down the street. She smiled when she read the sign above it: *The George and Dragon*. He stopped the car in front of the door and instructed her to save them a table while he found a place to park.

Annie stepped out of the misty rain into the warm, dry pub. It was busy, but not crowded. George's namesake was a pleasant-looking place with a typical wooden bar, worn tables and chairs, and a few old televisions everything in a state of welcoming dilapidation. She found an empty table within sight of both the door and the bar and took a seat. Not long afterward, George entered the pub. He glanced around, then smiled at her once he located her. He walked over to the bar to get their drinks.

"You look familiar," a stranger's voice addressed her.

She tore her eyes away from George to find two young men now standing before her. "Really?" Annie scoffed. The boy's pick-up line was silly, and she nearly laughed out loud at it.

In spite of the fact that George had often told her he found her beautiful, she knew she did not have a typically attractive face. Instead, she conceded it was perhaps striking in its uniqueness, her features being a quirky combination of classic Welsh stock and some unknown, possibly exotically foreign genes. In particular, her violet eyes were far from anything commonly encountered. In no way would she ever look familiar to anyone who hadn't met her before.

"Yeah. I think we have a class together... maybe Psych?" he continued.

"I'm not a student," she explained, shaking her head and smiling in amusement. She glanced back toward the bar but had now lost sight of George, perhaps because the two young men were largely blocking her view.

"My mistake, then. Would you like some company anyway?" he asked, still not giving up hope.

"I'm here with someone, actually," she replied. Annie had to bite her lip to keep from giggling at his persistence.

"Great! Where is she? At the bar?" asked the other fellow, who had been silent up until now.

"He was," she answered.

They didn't seem to catch the pronoun gender switch because the first bloke began introducing himself and his friend. "I'm Seth, and this is Tim."

"Hello," she said politely. She turned to look at the little menu on the table, hoping they would lose interest if they saw she had none.

"The food here sucks, but the beer is cheap," Seth offered.

"Thanks for the tip," she said, dropping the menu. She was going to have to be a little more direct, she reckoned.

"I didn't catch your name," Seth asked, doggedly pursuing the effort.

"I didn't drop it," she said, unable to help herself from smiling at his attempt. "I'm Annie Weasley..." she began, about to explain that she was unavailable and ask them to move along.

"Lovely to meet you, Miss Annie Weasley," Seth interrupted, making a move to sit down next to her despite not being invited to do so.

"That's *Mrs.* Annie Weasley, gents," her hero's voice came from behind the suddenly startled young men. George stepped around them and set two pints on the table.

"George, darling!" she cried in blatant relief as he leaned over the table and gave her a quick kiss. "These are Seth and Tim, psychology students here at the university. They've been explaining to me about the menu," she said teasingly. She was confident George knew better than to feel threatened for real.

"Oh, excellent! The world can never have enough scholars, I always say. Don't I, my dear?" He was looking at the young men like a cat who'd just cornered a couple of mice.

"Always, love. Remember, nothing's more important than a good education, boys," she said, playing along and only feeling the slightest twinge of guilt for doing so.

"Psychology, eh? I suspect that takes up quite a bit of your time, then, what with all that contemplation of the mysterious workings of the brain and whatnot," George needed the interlopers, toying with them now.

"Erm, yeah. We should probably go study or something," muttered Seth, disappointed and feeling ill-used.

"Oh, that's a pity," George hypocritically sighed. "Well, we understand, don't we, Annie, love? The never-ending quest for wisdom, and all that..."

"Of course. Good luck to you, Seth and Tim!" she called out as they skulked away.

"That was entertaining," George mumbled insincerely as he took a drink.

"Rather. Quite a boost to the old ego, I confess," she said with a smile, taking a drink as well. "And well done, you, for remembering what psychology is."

George snorted as he set his pint glass down and leaned back into his chair, gazing at her appraisingly. "I suppose you don't really look like a woman who's been married six years with four children waiting for her at home," he conceded.

"They're at your mother's tonight, actually. And I'll take that as a compliment, regardless of what you intended," she teased. Then she leaned onto the table toward him, stroking his forearm with her hand. "Further, I freely admit you look every bit the cunning, sexy, ruthless entrepreneur well on his way to making the first of many millions."

"That's quite enough of that now," he chided her. "As if I don't know every third word out of your mouth is utter bullshit. Those poor boys don't realize I rescued them from you, rather than the other way around."

"Well, what did you expect from a bar sitting across the street from a college? The allure of fresh meat, and all that," Annie giggled.

"So, where are all the pretty coeds, then?" he replied.

Annie glanced around the room. She realized within a few seconds that she was one of only a handful of females present. "Well, thanks for bursting my bubble! Here I sat, feeling my oats, only to be crushed now that you point out I'm only slim pickings," she whined petulantly.

George laughed as he leaned across the table toward her, taking her hand in his. "Don't look so deflated. I promise you won't spend the night alone in an empty bed," he added with a wink.

Now *that* was a pick-up line she could appreciate.

Author's Note: In the interest of full disclosure, I freely admit to stealing the name of the pub George and Annie visit [The George and Dragon Pub](#) here in Phoenix, AZ is a favorite of the local ex-pats looking for a bit of home, and the fish and chips are simply to die for. The coincidence was just too tempting to resist.

Borrowing Tahiti

Chapter 56 of 80

George Weasley has connections. And he knows how to use them. Unapologetically fluffy smut ensues.

Chapter 56: Borrowing Tahiti

June 2004

Annie moved calmly and efficiently through the market, filling her shopping cart. She knew exactly where everything she needed was located and could write out her list from memory in the order she passed things in each aisle. *Oatmeal, sugar, flour, eggs, orange juice...*

She relished the early morning quiet of the empty market, and purposefully chose Saturdays at dawn to do her shopping for precisely this reason. It was the furthest thing

from hectic and a welcome, if brief, respite from the chaos of her life.

Not that the chaos was unwelcome, precisely. She wouldn't want her life any other way, in fact. Nor could she imagine it so, at this point. Surrounding oneself with happy, active children all day long – the oldest of whom was six – never left time for boredom. Still, what it lacked in ennui, it made up for in exhaustion. A few moments of peace, even in a grocery store, helped strengthen her for the next onslaught of motherhood duty or teaching to come.

Good lord! Teddy is six already! She groaned inwardly at the thought as she inspected several bunches of grapes, then tossed three in her cart *Which means the twins aren't far behind....*

She headed next toward the dairy case, stocking up on milk, cheese, and several cans of her newest weapon in potty training: aerosol whipped cream. Somehow, Merrie had learned that her older brothers, whom she idolized, did not sit down on a toilet to wee. Annie had been unable to find any logical argument or other bribe to counteract her usually compliant daughter's insistence on standing for the job as well. Only the promise of a dollop of cream squirted directly into her mouth could lately convince Merrie to perch her bottom on the toilet seat.

"There she is," the friendly clerk at the register exclaimed in greeting as Annie began emptying her overloaded cart onto the conveyor belt. "Here for our Saturday morning rendezvous, and right on time. You know, Old Bob and me've got a wager on you, m'dear."

Annie giggled. "You do?"

"Old Bob says you must feed an army with all this, every week," she chuckled, rapidly scanning Annie's items as the dozens of bangle bracelets on her arms tinkled. The balding, toothless old gent named Bob deftly bagged each item as it left the clerk's hand, but otherwise made no acknowledgement of the women or their conversation.

"And what do you think?" Annie asked with a smile.

The woman's lips pressed together in a thoughtful expression. "Me mum always said I had a bit of the second sight, see. Very intuitive, yeah? And you give off a very earth-mother, nurturing vibe," she mused without skipping a beat with her scanning.

Old Bob rolled his rheumy eyes and harrumphed.

The woman ignored his interruption. "And everything you buy is quite healthy. But you're far too young to have enough kids of your own to polish all this off in a week, so I'm going with a daycare center."

Annie laughed out loud. *Second sight, eh?* "You're both right," she said. "And I might be older than you think," she added with a wink.

As she packed her bags into the back of the Land Cruiser, she pondered the cashier's comments. It was funny how magic popped up at odd intervals and in such strange places in her dealings with the Muggle world. Funny how some people went to extravagant lengths to deny the existence of anything mystical or paranormal, while others grasped at what might be the most profoundly mundane thing, insisting it was supernatural. And both of them were so very wrong.

Who am I to say she didn't really sense something intuitively? Annie argued with herself. *I do run a daycare, of sorts. And Old Bob wouldn't be the first person to refer to the Weasley family as an army – and a hungry one, at that.*

It was highly doubtful either of them was magical – Annie was reasonably confident she could identify every magical resident of southwestern England, having socialized with nearly all of them. But George had explained to her long ago how magical ability manifested itself as a range of strengths. Magic could be prominent in some people – her own sons, for example – and piddlingly weak in others, like Squibs.

Once the car was loaded, she drove home with the windows open, for the June morning was sparkling bright and warm. As the countryside flew by, she made a mental list of everything she still needed to accomplish today: *strip the beds, wash the sheets, weed the garden, shell the peas...* If there were no major sibling squabbles or medical emergencies, she reckoned she might get it all done by lunchtime. Then she could spend the afternoon working in the school: *windows, toilets, sink, and counters all need disinfecting...* Tomorrow, she'd do some online research, collecting and downloading the next week's lessons for the school.

She pulled the car up to the door closest to the kitchen and was slightly surprised that none of the children rushed out to greet her. They were usually excited to see what sort of things she brought home and would fall upon her like a horde, begging for treats.

Instead, "About time you got here," George greeted her impatiently, striding purposefully out the door. His powerful legs closed the distance between the car and the house in a trice.

"Am I late for something?" she giggled. He was smiling, so she reckoned nothing could be seriously wrong.

"Very," he retorted.

Suddenly, all the marketing bags, including the ones already in her arms, began levitating. In an orderly fashion, they floated themselves into the house.

"George, what's all this?" she cried, following after them as he led the parade. It was a house rule that they never did this sort of thing – replace a simple task with magic – especially in front of the children.

She watched in surprise as the bags began emptying themselves. Items flew into the pantry and refrigerator, whose doors opened wide to receive them. So bewildered was she by the display that it took several moments before the silence of the house finally struck her as odd.

"Where are they?" she asked, looking out the windows, scanning the meadow but seeing no sign of their children.

"Identify whom you mean by 'they,'" he replied as all the kitchen doors closed on their own.

"The fruit of your loins, git," she snapped playfully.

George smiled fiendishly, and her insides clenched. That look usually meant a prank of epic proportions had just been set into motion. And since she'd had no prior warning, she was likely the target. *Oh, shit.*

"Relax. They are safely distributed amongst our entrusted family and friends," he assured her. Then he slung a small backpack onto his shoulders.

"What are you up to?" she demanded, planting her feet and setting her hands on her hips defiantly, determined to meet whatever doom he had in store for her head on.

George slid his hand around her waist, pressed her body against his, and lifted her chin to face him. "I solemnly swear I am up to no good," he said with another smile.

This particular smile made her stomach do a little flip. But not out of anxiety, this time.

He bent to kiss her – the sort of kiss he usually saved for when the kids were asleep and they were alone. "Trust me?" he asked.

"About as far as I can throw you," she retorted, slightly breathless.

"It'll take too long to explain," he countered, fishing through his pocket. He pulled out a bottle opener that was beginning to glow with silvery-blue light. "Suffice it to say we

need a vacation."

The next thing she knew, they were hurtling through some unknown cosmic dimension.

Over the next two hours of real time, George and Annie traveled by a complicated series of Side-Along Apparitions and Portkeys. They barely stayed in one place long enough to do anything but catch their breaths, adjust their clothing, and let the dizziness in her brain begin to subside. It was not wholly different from the time they'd gone to Hawaii a few years ago, and Annie wondered if he'd decided to return there.

If so, however, he seemed to be taking a rather circuitous route. *Perhaps to throw me off the scent?* she wondered. Last time, at every way station they'd stopped whilst traipsing across North America, everyone spoke English. This time, people babbled in tongues she couldn't understand, wore strange clothing, and had exotic features.

During their seventh jump, she decided to scold him when they rematerialized. This was far too tiresome a distance to go just to keep something a surprise, and he was being infuriatingly childish, refusing to tell her where they were going.

They fell back into reality a few moments later. Annie felt soft, warm sand under her feet. It was dark – possibly the middle of the night – without a cloud or moon in the sky. Just a breathtaking infinity of stars.

"George, where are we?" she whispered reverently, humbled by the view.

"We're here," he sighed in relief, letting the backpack slip from his shoulders onto the sand.

"Where is here, exactly?" she pressed.

He began digging through the backpack. "Dunno, *exactly*. Somewhere in the middle of the South Pacific, I think."

"It doesn't have a name?" she asked, taking in the scene around her.

For all she could see through the darkness, they were on an abandoned, isolated beach. The only thing she could hear was the soft shushing of the waves against the shore. The only thing she could feel – besides nearly crushing exhaustion – was warm sand and a warm breeze.

"If it does, I don't remember it," he replied. He'd just managed to wrestle their tent out of the backpack and now began walking away from the water.

"Here, let me help," she insisted, taking a few steps after him.

"Absolutely not," he commanded her. "You'll not lift a finger for the next five days, if I can help it. Your job is to relax and let me take care of things ~~my~~ way, for once." Drawing his wand from his pocket, with several dramatic yet weary flourishes, he magically erected the tent several yards in front of them within a small circle of palm trees.

Shouldering the backpack once more, he held his hand out to her, beckoning her to join him.

"I am not going another step until you explain what the hell is going on here," she said, tired and confused. The trip had been as mentally and physically draining as a full day of work.

He sighed tiredly, his shoulders sagging as if admitting defeat. Annie took several steps toward him, beginning to regret using such a snappish tone with him under the circumstances. Then, suddenly, he scooped her up in his arms when she least expected it. His smirk conveyed how self-satisfied he was with his deviousness.

As he carried her over the sand to the tent, he explained, "This is an island not far from Tahiti, Miss Nosy Knickers, owned by a business colleague of mine. He's lent it to us for the week as repayment for a small favor."

"A *small* favor?" she repeated skeptically.

"A *small* kindness done, yes, but in a most opportune moment, I'll admit," he laughed.

"Authorities were involved, I presume?" she asked, knowing the likely answer already. Her husband had a penchant for thumbing his nose at the Ministry's Law Enforcement efforts, even though his own bloody brother was an Auror.

"I'd rather not say, love," he replied with a smug smile. "No reason for you to be implicated, after all."

"And this colleague of yours owns a *private island*?" she cried in disbelief. "Is he here now?"

"Nope. Just us."

"I'm waiting for the punch line, George," she teased, unwilling to believe the incredible circumstances, yet forced to admit that as long as her husband was involved, the story was actually plausible.

"Why don't you ever believe I'm serious about anything?" he chuckled.

He stepped inside the tent and set her back onto her feet on the now familiar oriental carpet in the main room. The backpack floated away toward the bedroom. Then he spelled all the tent flaps to roll themselves open, allowing the sea breezes to flutter through the entire tent. Next, he transfigured the little pot-bellied warming stove into an enormous cast iron clawfoot tub right in the middle room. As he bewitched the tap to fill the bath, bubbles began to rise from the water, drifting through the tent rather than popping.

He turned back around to face her. The look in his eyes made her breath hitch in her throat.

"Are you hungry? Shall I make us something?" she asked softly as he stalked toward her.

His only response was to begin undressing her. His movements were calm and unhurried as he lifted her shirt, unfastened her bra, unbuttoned her jeans, and slid her knickers off. All the while, he kissed her gently – tenderly rather than passionately. He lifted her into his arms once again, carried her to the tub, then set her inside.

Annie luxuriated in the perfectly warm water. Effervescent bubbles tickled her skin as they formed on the bottom of the tub, then floated to the surface. Every time a new bubble reached the surface, another one launched itself into the air. She imagined it was what bathing in warm champagne might feel like. For an instant, she wondered...

Surreptitiously, she dipped her fingers in the water, then brought them to her tongue. *Ha! Only water, after all! Silly cow,* she scolded herself.

"This is lovely, George!" she hummed in contentment, sinking lower into the water by propping her feet up on the far rim. "I can't remember the last time I've had a proper bath." Another ocean breeze wafted through the tent, stirring the drifting bubbles within and setting them spinning in little eddies. The scent and the sound of the waves were hypnotic. She could almost make out the shadows of them as they rolled to shore.

Annie watched curiously as George busied himself in the kitchen nearby. He filled two glasses with what looked like a thick, yellow juice and a rather generous amount of rum. A knife next to him was cutting up fruit.

"What are you doing?" she asked lazily.

"None of your concern," he replied.

Annie felt a nervous little niggle on the back of her neck. "It never fails to concern me when you start evasive action." She shifted her position to lean her chest against the side of the tub, arms dangling to the floor. The sound of the water swirling as she moved was a delightful music all its own.

George garnished the glasses with the fruit and spun around to face her. "Check your suspicious little brain at the door – or flap, as the case may be – my love," he said as he carried the two glasses to her, then presented her one with a flourish. "Cheers."

Annie took the glass, and they clinked them together. The vessel was tall and icy, and the fruit had been cunningly carved into a rampant lion that pranced along the lip of the glass. She took a sniff and decided it smelled fruity, rummy, and very appetizing.

"This smells good," she said, sounding slightly surprised. "What is it?"

George smiled and winked, then drained his own glass. "A strong dose of sustenance with a little splash of relaxation," he told her, setting his empty glass on the carpet next to the tub.

Annie took a long pull from her drink. The fruit-lion rubbed its head against her lip like an amorous kitten as she did. The sweet, tart flavor of the juice mingled perfectly with the spicy rum. As the drink – or, more likely, the *potion*, she was beginning to realize – spread through her body, taking effect, she felt strangely invigorated yet peaceful.

"I could get used to having a valet," she teased him. She took several more gulps of the delicious concoction.

George wore his patented smirk/smile, beaming down at her from where he stood just next to the tub. He kicked his shoes off.

Annie bit her lip. "Shirt next, love," she encouraged him, lustily anticipating watching her husband strip for her.

He chuckled, his eyes twinkling. Then, without a warning, he suddenly leaped into the bath, fully clothed. Water gushed all about, pouring over the sides of the tub, knocking over the glass on the carpet.

Annie sputtered in shock, crying out in protest. "George! Oh, you've ruined it!" Careful not to spill her drink, she nevertheless swatted him about the head and shoulders as he laughed wickedly. Her heart sunk at the sight of a huge flood of puddles on the carpet. "Look at this mess!"

"Clearly, you've forgotten who you're married to," he scolded her. With a dismissive flick of his wrist, all the water on floor instantly vanished.

"Oh," she said softly, humbled by the reminder.

He took her nearly empty drink glass and set it on the floor. Then he reached for her hand and pressed his lips against her palm.

"Would've been far sexier if you'd properly mopped it up," she teased him with mock aggravation.

Letting her hand fall back into the warm water, George braced one hand against the edge of the tub, the other he slid under her backside. He lifted her up to press against his body as he hovered above her, water gushing around them. "You're sure about that, love?"

Annie wrapped her legs around his waist as he kissed her neck. She could feel his burgeoning wet jeans against her. "In my janitorial fantasy, you're not wearing any silly shirt, of course," she murmured as she pulled it off of him. It flopped wetly to the floor beside them.

George paused in the middle of his kiss. "*That* is your fantasy? We're alone on a beach on a private island in the middle of the goddamn southern Pacific, and you want to watch me *mop*?"

"What can I say?" she giggled. "I've got a dirty mind, I suppose."

He bent once more to her neck, began nuzzling her ear. "You're teasing me."

"Ditto," she sighed, vining her fingers in his hair.

"Get used to it," he warned her, then fell on her lips with a passionate kiss.

"Mhmm," she mumbled her assent.

The next morning, the teasing began again in earnest nearly the moment she awoke. They made love as the sun rose over the horizon behind them, then George treated her to breakfast in bed. He stood naked in the kitchen, directing toast and eggs to cook themselves, then sent a parade of plates, fruit, and coffee her way before he joined her for breakfast in bed.

"Are you contemplating becoming a nudist?" she asked teasingly as he stood at the sink afterward, washing the dishes magically.

"That's a rather tempting thought, actually," he chuckled in response.

"You'll lose your fortune, my fair freckled friend, spending every galleon you've ever made on sunscreen," she countered.

"Worth every bloody Sickle," he laughed as he approached the bed, dishes rinsing and stacking themselves behind him.

"Seriously, George! As much as I enjoy the view, let's get dressed. I'd like to see more of this island today," Annie suggested.

With a strangely smug expression on his face, he summoned the backpack. He made a show of rummaging around for a few moments, hemming and hawing. "Huh. Imagine that," he finally marveled aloud. "I could've sworn...."

"George..." she said warningly. All signs pointed to another prank. She scanned the tent, looking for any sign of the clothes they'd worn yesterday and failing to find any.

She was right. For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, the devilish grin appeared on George's face. "I seem to have forgotten to pack any clothing, love!"

"Not even faintly amusing!" Annie cried, snatching the backpack away from him. She peered into the cavernous darkness within it, seeing nothing. "What the bloody hell is in this thing?" she demanded to know, her voice echoing inside the depths of the magically-expanded backpack.

"Oh, drat! No fancy dinners. No tourist activities," he mock-lamented, ignoring her protests.

"George!" she whined.

He continued on like she hadn't spoken. "No pajamas even! Whatever will we do? However will we fill the time?"

"What if we get cold?" she cried.

"This is a *tropical* island, git," he retorted. "It doesn't get cold."

"The sun, then! We'll fry!"

He reached into the bag, pulled out a bottle of sunscreen, and tossed it to her. "I'm not an idiot."

"That remains to be seen, and I'm not leaving this bed until you find something for us to wear," she threatened, realizing a second too late how empty the threat would seem to him.

"That was the plan, love," he growled quietly, confirming her suspicion as he tossed the backpack to the floor, which fell with a loud *blank*. Then he crawled like a predatory cat across the mattress toward her.

She shoved him firmly backwards. "And you're not *entering* this bed until I am fully clothed. Naked Day is one thing, George, but I am not spending the next *five days* in the nude!" *The chafing! The sunburn! The sand!* Annie winced at the thought.

George looked shocked. "B-but..."

"I don't care how you do it. Apparate to the nearest store. Transfigure the palm fronds. Conjure something out of thin air. *Budget... me... dressed.*"

George huffed in indignation. Muttering along the lines of, "Tropical bloody island," and, "This is the thanks I get?" he reached into the backpack, felt around inside for a moment, then produced a single swimsuit for each of them.

"This is it?" she asked, barely suppressing a giggle as she examined the little green bikini. *It really is quite pretty*, she decided, decorated as it was with tiny paisley designs. She was rather impressed with him that he'd bought it for her without her knowledge.

"It's a good as you're gonna get, you ungrateful cow," he grumbled, shoving his legs into a pair of swim trunks. He sat on the edge of the bed with his back to her, pouting.

She laced her arms around his waist, pressing her naked body against his bare back. She kissed the back of his neck just below the hairline. "Thank you, love. For everything. It's beautiful."

George harrumphed, unwilling to give in so easily. But she could tell from the relaxed set of his shoulders that she was forgiven, if indeed she'd ever truly made him cross in the first place.

"Perhaps a spot of surfing would improve your sour mood," she coaxed him, brushing his hair behind his lone ear with her fingertips.

"Perhaps..." he reluctantly conceded.

They spent the next several hours playing in the surf. George had, of course, remembered to pack their surfboards, as well as some new snorkeling gear. The crystal blue water was teeming with colorful fish, and he informed her of his new plan to recreate it on the ceiling of the boys' room when they returned home.

That afternoon, he and Annie lay on the beach in the shade of a palm thicket, she on her stomach, he on his back. A blanket was beneath them, and the soft, warm sand made a particularly relaxing bed.

He rolled up upon his elbow. "It really is silly of us to be wearing anything at all," he insisted, fingering the knot at the back of her neck. "~~Were~~ the only two human beings on this island."

"Let's spare the wildlife, then," Annie giggled, as the tension in the string suddenly disappeared.

George tugged on the string in the middle of her back next. "Let's not and say we did."

She rolled onto her side to face him. Unsurprisingly, her bikini top did not travel with her. "Playing Adam and Eve, are we?" she teased him as he wriggled out of his trunks.

"Tarzan and Jane, rather?" he chuckled. He loudly beat his chest and grunted like an ape for a moment. Then he lay back down next to her.

During the quiet pause that followed, she reclined on her back, and he laid his head on her chest, tracing lazy circles around her navel with his fingers.

"I want another," he said softly. Testing.

Annie stroked his soft hair with her fingertips. "I figured as much."

The night of their arrival had been dark with the approach of the new moon. She had strongly suspected that while his intent for her to enjoy a relaxing vacation was genuine, the timing was impeccably convenient for the purposes of conception. Janie was eighteen months old now, just as the twins and Merrie had been when their next-younger siblings had been conceived.

George lifted his head to look in her eyes. "That wasn't a yes."

"It wasn't a no, either," she countered coyly.

He picked up on the slightly teasing note in her voice. "Why am I the one who always has to ask?" he cried with mock petulance.

Annie smiled. He'd been the one to propose the idea twice before, in Tenerife and Kauai. "Because I love it when you beg?" she teased him.

George rolled on top of her and pressed his whole body heavily against her in punishment for her cheek. "Just once, I want to hear you ask me."

"To roll your bloody arse off me?" Annie grunted, pretending ignorance. She weakly tried to push him away.

George ground himself against her, crushing her against the sand and pinning her arms down beside her head. "Not a chance, git."

"I'm not one to cry uncle, George," she warned him, even though she was thoroughly immobilized.

He smiled. "I know exactly how bloody stubborn you are," he chuckled. Then he lifted his weight off her, releasing her wrists. Now hovering above her with a very serious, intense look in his eyes, he said, "And that's not what I mean."

Annie laced her fingers together behind his neck and pulled him down to her. She began kissing him lightly on the lips, cheeks, jaw – anywhere she could reach. "You want me to ask you to make love to me?" she whispered.

"Almost right," he replied, his smoldering gaze lighting a fire within her.

"Make a baby with me, George," she purred. Annie guided his hands to the strings at her hips. "Right now," she murmured as he untied them. "I want you to get me pregnant." She cooperatively lifted her hips as the final remnant of her bikini was pulled away and could feel his urgency increasing with every kiss. "Love me and make me conceive," she coaxed him, positioning herself to receive him. "Give me another baby."

And she meant it with all her heart. Nothing would make her happier than to give him everything he wanted, and a new baby was what she wanted as well. Their family

would grow once more, all because they loved each other.

George moaned his agreement, a tiny yet blissful smile gracing his face as they began to move together.

Annie thanked her lucky stars for the sand-repelling charm he'd cast – ironically, they'd discovered it in one of Molly's old child-rearing tomes in a section addressing how to keep children clean and tidy at the shore. Considering how much she loved the beach, and how often he wanted to love her whilst they were there, the simple little spell had proven itself a godsend over the years.

He rolled onto his back, pulling her along to be above him. Annie shifted herself to sit up, straddling him, smiling down upon him.

"I love to watch you swell," he murmured as his hands caressed from her shoulders to her breasts to her belly and hips as she rocked. "I love that light that glows in your eyes when you're pregnant."

She knew exactly what he meant. It was such a precious time: the anticipation of a baby to come. She loved that special smile he wore when she was expecting, smug with his not-so-secret satisfaction. *I did that...*

Close to her orgasm now, she threw her head back, thrusting her hips, encouraging him. "George... baby...."

He took her hips in his hands, arching his back and driving himself deeper. "Annie!" he called out, then shuddered.

The week passed in a languorous, indulgent manner. They denied themselves nothing. When they were hungry, George summoned food and they ate. When they were tired, he conjured a blanket or a hammock wherever they were and they slept. When they were hot, they swam in the refreshing water or sat in the shade, allowing the breeze to cool them. They entertained themselves with the sea or each other. And never once did the outside world intrude upon their paradise.

As they watched the sun set for the final time and prepared themselves for their last night on the island, George pulled out something from the backpack. He laid it down on the bed between them, then sat silently, waiting for her to make the next move.

It was a book; she could see that much. Annie pulled it closer until she could read the title. It was called *Los Amantes Encantados*

The Enchanted Lovers? she mused, translating the title in her head.

Upon opening to the first page, she read that it was a compendium of charms, potions, and et cetera, all devised to enhance the act of love. It had been translated into English a few centuries ago by someone calling himself Philo Perpetuo, and a rather old and worn copy now lay open on the bed between them.

She flipped through a few pages in casual curiosity, amused by what were likely once considered vivid descriptions of the effects of the racy spells. Small sketches of Rubenesque women swooning as their foppish lovers brandished wands at them nearly made her giggle out loud.

"You have no need for any of these endurance charms," she proclaimed as she theatrically made a show of flipping past that particular section.

George chuckled. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, love!"

He leaned closer as he reached out toward the book. He turned to a page that had been dog-eared, then pointed to an entry. "This *Fuego Tentador* looks tempting," he suggested, his voice tentatively questioning.

It became clear to Annie in that moment that this was not the first he had seen of the book. That he had possibly studied it for a bit before showing it to her. That he had not shared it with her for the sake of amusement, but rather....

She smiled to let him know she was open to a little experimentation. "It means, 'Tantalizing Fire,'" she offered, dusting off her secondary school Spanish skills.

George grinned eagerly, pleased she'd accepted his invitation to play. He pointed his wand at his other hand which was turned with the palm facing up, as if to catch the magic. "*Arda!*" he said, using his commanding sorcerer's voice.

As soon as he uttered the word, a strange red fire appeared in his palm. They both looked at it for a few moments, watching as it behaved just like any normal fire would. Then, with his wand, he collected the flame from his hand. He took her hand in his and gently stretched out her arm.

Annie watched in amazement as little tongues of fire flickered, burning on her skin wherever his wand touched her. There was no discomfort whatsoever: instead, she felt a warm, tingling sensation that slowly penetrated her skin down to the muscles below wherever the fire burned.

He directed her to lie on her stomach, and he painted a trail of flames along her spine, the back of her knees, and the palms of her hands, just as the diagram in the book had showed them. Annie lay facedown on the bed, relishing the sensations the aptly named fire delivered.

"Do you like it?" he asked softly.

"Yes," she whispered back.

Then she shifted her position slightly and brought a hand to her face, wanting to watch the fire as it worked. She discovered she could direct it all by herself by moving slowly; it would roll about on the surface of her skin, always finding the highest point from which to burn.

She summoned George closer to her with a flaming finger, then gingerly touched his lips with it. A trail of even smaller flames was left behind on his mouth, yet he smiled.

Emboldened, Annie slowly ran the fingers of her hand down his neck to his chest. Down to encircle his navel. Down....

George's head knocked back against the headboard. He hummed with pleasure as she caressed him intimately.

The effect didn't last much longer. The flames began to sputter and die, leaving a physical sense of warm contentment behind. They smiled at each other and chuckled when the last one finally vanished.

Immediately, George turned back to the book. He flipped through a few more pages until he reached another dog-eared one. Annie wondered absently for just how long he'd had this book.

"This one looks like a bit of fun," he announced. Pointing his wand at his mouth, he said, *Viento invernal.*"

Nothing happened that Annie could see, but George grinned broadly. "Cool!" he cried. Then he leaned closer, puckered his lips, and blew frosty air across her body, eliciting goose flesh.

Annie giggled, shivering. *Winter wind, indeed.*

He teased her further with a deep kiss. His tongue was still soft and yielding, yet it felt as cold as an ice cube in her mouth. Annie giggled when he released her, then gasped when he bent to take a nipple into his mouth. She shuddered as he played with it, nipping it slightly with lips that were not quite as frigid as his tongue, but still very cold. Then he began to kiss his way down her belly.

"George!" she whimpered, writhing in response to the torturous, wonderful sensations of his glacial mouth against searing flesh. It was too intense – she pulled away, then pulled his face up to meet hers again, falling on his lips with her own.

Once again, the spell wasn't permanent. His tongue began to warm as they kissed passionately over the next several minutes.

"Want to try another?" he murmured when the cold had completely dissipated, flipping through the book once again.

Annie cocked an eyebrow at him. "Are you working from some sort of script? How long have you been studying this book?"

George chuckled. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean," he insisted playfully as he summoned a bunch of grapes from the kitchen. He plucked one and held it between his thumb and forefinger. "Abbey-jore-oh," he said with a flick of his wand, his tongue slightly tripping over the word.

Nothing happened. George frowned with consternation.

"Let me see that," she requested.

He slid the book toward her, then pointed to the word in question. *Abejorro*, Annie read. *The bumblebee*.

"Pronounce the *J* like it was an *H*, love," she instructed him. "And you must roll the double *R*. Ah-bay-horrr-oh," she demonstrated, rolling the *R* rather impressively, in her opinion.

He repeated the word just as she done, mimicking her perfectly, and as a result, charmed the single grape to buzzingly vibrate. He popped it into her waiting mouth.

She held it against the roof of her mouth with her tongue for a few moments, giggling as the vibrations tickled slightly. The effect halted the moment she bit into it, releasing fizzy juice that tasted like champagne.

"Try one!" she encouraged him.

He charmed another one, then tossed it into his mouth. He chuckled, then smiled lasciviously. An instant later, he flicked his wand toward a small basket of zucchini, cucumbers and carrots on the counter of the kitchen, all of which began noisily vibrating, jiggling their way across the surface.

Annie laughed. "Drawing the line at that one, George!"

With a small smirk of mock disappointment, he flicked his wrist and the produce was quiet once more. Then she pulled him closer, wrapping her arms around him and draping her leg over his, and kissed him.

"This is all very entertaining, darling," she purred. "But... you *do* know that you don't need any of this rubbish, don't you? You know that you, and you alone, drive me mad. That you always have and always will continue to do so?"

"It's nice to hear you say it," he said softly, nuzzling her ear for a few moments before pulling back a little.

Annie's next breath was arrested by the lusty, anticipatory smile on his face as he summoned something from the backpack. A strange orb she'd never seen before floated toward them, and he plucked it like an apple from the air. With his mouth open, he breathed on it, almost as if it was made of glass and he was going to polish it.

Light flickered from within the sphere.

"Now you," he said, holding the orb in his palm before her.

She repeated his action, huffing onto the ball, and it began to glow softly, steadily red. He rolled it off the tips of his fingers, but instead of plummeting to the bed, it floated upward a few feet, then struck a stationary position, levitating above their heads. It then began slowly pulsating with light, casting warm colors on the wall.

"It's lovely, George. But what is it? Mood lighting?" she asked with a small giggle. There was something strangely hypnotic about the way the colors flickered, moving gradually from red to orange to a fluttering yellow.

"This is a very delicate instrument," he whispered as he began to kiss her neck once more, sending chills down her body. "It was designed to measure passion. The colors change depending on your state of arousal."

He chuckled smugly as the orb began glowing steadily green. "You're nearly halfway there, love."

Annie drew him closer, matching each of his kisses and caresses with one of her own. "You don't need a ruddy disco ball to tell you that," she countered.

George hummed contentedly, trailing kisses along her collarbone, positioning himself between her legs. "It was invented by Cleopatra... to train her harem of pleasure boys."

"Clever girl," Annie mumbled, taking hold of his hips and attempting to drive him, impatient to leave the history lesson behind and get on with a more satisfactory activity. Something that involved a good deal more friction.

"It delivers a psychosomatic reward to both partners when it begins to glow with white light, just before an orgasm," George continued. "The longer you can hold it off... while remaining on the brink... the more intense the eventual dividend."

Annie was barely listening to him at that point. "George!" she moaned. "Please!"

The orb rapidly flickered from turquoise to deep blue to plum to lavender, then began fading in color altogether.

"You're making it... very difficult... for me to... concentrate," George muttered through clenched teeth.

"I don't care about... any stupid... light trick!" Annie whined. "Just... *please!*"

"If you'll... hush.... I think... I might... be able...."

A nearly blinding white light burst forth into the cloudless, starry night, lasting nearly half a minute. A palm forest full of startled birds took wing, squawking in alarm. A passing ocean liner radioed the nearest harbor to report such a strange phenomenon, but no investigation was ever mounted.

Author's Note: When I originally wrote the George & Annie story two years ago, I skipped writing about their vacation in Tahiti, assuming there was nothing to be gained by including yet another island sex romp, and merely referenced it in later chapters. Just for fun, I later posted it as an "outtake" story on Fanfiction.net, and it has since proven to be one of the most popular things I've written. I include it this time where it chronologically belongs and hope you enjoy it as much as the naughty-minded ff.net readers have.

Out and About

Chapter 57 of 80

Another August at the shore for the ever-expanding Weasley family. Several confessions are made. Rating for sexual references including homosexuality.

Chapter 57: Out and About

August 2004

The entire Weasley clan (all twenty-three of them, including two Potters plus the three Jordans) was seated around two large tables under a large awning on the beach along the Devonshire coastline. Everyone was laughing, joking, and chatting with each other as they ate. Parents, aunts, and uncles alike corralled and fed the eight children, regardless to whom they actually belonged, as the sun began to set into the sea.

"Who needs a drink?" Harry called out, standing next to a large cooler. Several of the adults responded positively and he tossed bottles to each one in turn.

"Beer, Annie?" he said, checking with the only person who didn't say yes to the offer.

"No, thanks. I'm fine," she replied lightly and casually, immediately turning back to her dinner.

"No alcohol for Annie," George said loudly at the same time, grinning broadly.

Several nearby Weasleys, who had up to then been involved in independent conversations, now glanced at the couple in curiosity.

"George, you idiot," Annie muttered, irritated that he was on the verge of blowing their supposed secret. Judging by the look on his face, he was dying to spill it, anyway. She wasn't much surprised he never could hold out for long with this sort of news. She swatted at his head anyway.

George expertly deflected the blow with his arm, then caught her by the wrist to prevent further attack, chuckling all the while. "What? I haven't said anything incriminating," he said, faking a tone of defensiveness. "Your silly overreaction is what's making everyone suspect."

Curious looks began to turn into suspicious ones.

"Oh, crap," mumbled Ginny. "They *did* just get back from another island vacation."

George smiled and winked at his little sister, confirming her theory.

Annie sighed. The cat was fully out of the bag now. They had indeed just returned from a week in Tahiti in early June. Annie couldn't halt the abashed smile growing on her face as she remembered it how George had pretended to "forget" to pack any clothing beyond one measly bathing suit for each of them.

"Is it true, Annie, dear?" asked Molly excitedly.

Annie was amazed that after seven grandchildren, her mother-in-law could still get excited about more. "Yes, Molly. We're expecting again," she said, giggling herself now.

"Ooh!" Molly cried excitedly. "That makes three more on the way, Arthur!" She was referring to the fact that Ginny and Audrey were also pregnant.

"Five, George?" scolded Percy in a disapproving voice, scandalized by what he deemed was his younger brother's recklessly prolific over-procreation.

"We had seven," Arthur interjected defensively on George's behalf. He frowned slightly as he noted Percy rolling his eyes. Of all their children, Percy seemed to have the biggest chip on his shoulder about growing up in a large, less-than-well-to-do family.

"You do understand what causes it, don't you little bro?" Bill joked good-naturedly.

"Sounds to me like somebody's manhood is feeling a bit threatened," George teased him back. He had been glaring daggers at Percy only a moment before.

"Don't you ever say no to him?" Ron cried, smiling in fun as he nudged Annie's leg under the table with his foot.

Hermione screeched in protest and whacked her husband over the head while Annie giggled at his joke.

"You can't blame her, really. What woman could be expected to resist me?" George laughed at one of his favorite running gags, immensely pleased with himself.

The rest of the table responded with rolling eyes, groans, and dismissive snorts.

"It's true you *can* be annoyingly persistent, love," Annie agreed, eliciting a smirk from her husband and a few appreciative laughs from the table.

"Seriously, when are you two going to stop? I mean, when is enough enough?" Lee asked as he thumped his best friend's back in congratulations.

George and Annie shrugged, smiling at each other. The subject was dropped soon after, once everyone had offered their good wishes and Annie had confirmed her expected due date of early March. After all, it wasn't as if a pregnancy in the family was a rare occurrence by this point.

As the group moved on to discuss something else, Annie found herself quietly pondering Lee's question quite seriously, however. At what point *would* they stop adding to their family? Would they choose a certain target number as their limit? Try again for another boy or girl, depending on which this one turned out to be, to even up the score once more? Or just wake up one day and decide they were finished?

She was one of those lucky women who took pregnancy in stride, even enjoyed it. She had never had any difficulty with labor either; she supposed having twins first might've had quite a bit to do with that fact. The singleton births of their two daughters had seemed ridiculously quick and easy in comparison. From where she stood, she couldn't really imagine a reason for *not* wanting more children.

She tuned back into one of the conversations surrounding her. Percy sat on her right and was discussing the most recent events in his own life with Charlie and Sasha, who couldn't have gotten a word in edgewise if they'd wanted to. Percy waxed poetic about his life as lord of the manor, now that he and Audrey had been given one of the many Cavendish family mansions that were scattered about the country as their own. His wife was pregnant with their first child, due sometime in the fall, but that wasn't

the only reason she hadn't joined her husband's family this summer. She had never come along to their reunions at the shore had only been to Mole Hill twice and the Burrow once, in fact and Annie suspected Audrey wouldn't be caught dead in a tent regardless of the reason.

Across from them, Annie noted Ginny was chatting with Hermione. The two of them had grown almost as close as sisters during their time at Hogwarts, and being married to Harry and Ron all the years since had only served to strengthen the bond. She could pick up bits of the conversation from across the table; it sounded like Ginny was talking about her pregnancy, as usual. She was terribly excited about the whole thing, as every mother-to-be ought. Hermione, though, had a slightly sad expression lurking behind her smile. Annie wondered if perhaps she was feeling somewhat sensitive about being the only one of the Weasley sisterhood not to have started a family, even though she'd made it clear to everyone that her Ministry career was the most important thing to her right now.

Dinner was finished and cleaned up as twilight descended. After all the children had been put to bed and the rest of the family were all gathered around a fire outside, Annie sat at the table in her tent, quietly chatting with Molly. Annie had agreed to hang back, listening out for the children, since she was feeling somewhat tired herself. She and her mother-in-law were sipping tea when the conversation turned once again to Charlie.

"Don't get me wrong; it's nice that he has such a good friend. But they spend too much time together, those two. I think Sasha prevents him from getting out more, finding a nice girl. I want you lot to take him out tomorrow night to the village. Find a good girl for him, Annie," Molly charged her.

Annie had been thrilled last Christmas when Charlie, true to his word, had come back to stay with them at Mole Hill for the holiday. And she had been pleased as punch he'd felt comfortable enough with her and George to bring Sasha along. It meant a great deal to her that Charlie and Sasha's experience over Christmas had been positive enough that they had subsequently agreed to come back for the annual family summer camp-out on the beach. And having his brother back with the family had meant the world to George.

"No offense, Molly, but no," she replied as gently as she could. "I won't find someone for Charlie because it's you who wants it, not him. I think it's time you just accept Charlie for who he is. Stop trying to force your idea of happiness onto him."

"It's high time somebody forced something!" she began to argue. "He's nearly thirty-two years old!"

"Charlie *likes* what he does for a living," Annie countered. "He *likes* where he lives. He *likes* who he spends his time with. Not many people get that lucky in life. Let him be happy, Molly. Let him *be*," Annie urged.

Molly pursed her lips, looking unconvinced. "I'm his mother, Annie, and I think I know a bit better than anyone else...."

"You're driving him away," Annie cut in, warning her in a quiet voice.

Molly sat quietly for a moment, taking in what Annie had just said. "Is that why he stays with you and George now? Because of me?" she cried softly.

Annie nodded reluctantly. She was sorry to hurt Molly's feelings, but reckoned it was better coming from her now than for Charlie to let it keep building within and either lash out in anger at his mother, or even worse, withdraw completely from the family.

"He feels like he's done nothing but disappoint you. He is who he is, and he shouldn't be made to feel like that's not good enough. Especially for his own mother."

"I'm only trying to help!" Molly exclaimed, keeping her voice down because of the sleeping children but starting to get teary. "I can't stand to see him so lonely! I just want to see him happy! How can he be satisfied sitting all alone on that mountaintop? What about love? What about having a family? The rest of you have settled down you're all happy why won't he?"

"Just because you or I may not understand it doesn't mean his life doesn't make him happy," Annie argued. "Maybe Charlie's already found the right thing for him, and that's what matters. The *only* thing that matters, in fact. But one thing's for sure: you harping on him to get married *doesn't* make him happy. So maybe you could try to lighten up a bit?" she suggested.

Annie handed Molly a napkin. Molly stared at the table in front of her while she dabbed her eyes and blew her nose.

"You're right, dear. I only want for all my children to be happy, but if I'm making it worse.... I'll try to hold my tongue from here on. Thank you, Annie, for being honest with me," she said, hugging her daughter-in-law.

The next night, Molly and Arthur offered to stay with the children, insisting the adults venture out to the village for an evening. Annie caught Molly's eye and gave her a stern warning look. *Perhaps it was too much to expect for Molly to go cold-turkey when it came to Charlie* Annie thought ruefully. To her credit, she could tell Molly was trying desperately *not* to ask her to set Charlie up, or to encourage him to return to their tent tonight engaged to a nice girl.

"Have fun!" Molly called out to everyone as they walked down the beach toward a nearby pub.

An hour later, Annie sat at one end of the table, staring off into space, bored silly. She had chatted with Ginny for a little while, answering a few pregnancy-related questions before they decided to drop the subject when Hermione began to look a bit put out with them. Then Hermione'd asked Ginny to take a stroll with her Annie suspected maybe she'd had another row with Ron and needed to vent. Everyone in the family had at one time or another witnessed the two of them snapping at each other like a couple of hungry dogs over a carcass, usually over some silly misunderstanding. Annie felt relieved rather than left out by not being asked to join them.

Not long after they left, while the rest of the table was arguing over the merits of the newest change to the rules of Quidditch (a new penalty to which George took exception), Charlie asked Annie to dance.

"I can tell you're bored stiff," he said, smiling. "Fancy a spin around the dance floor?"

"Don't bother asking me," George huffed possessively, pausing momentarily in his tirade against Quidditch referees in general.

"Why should he want to dance with you, you troll?" Annie teased, deliberately misunderstanding him. "Go back to ignoring me for the sake of your stupid argument, which is completely unfounded, by the way."

Annie and Charlie walked away from the table as the argument heated up again. "I'm pants at dancing," he warned her as he placed his hand at her waist.

"You're fine," Annie assured him, putting her hand in his. "This is just my speed tonight," she said, barely stifling a yawn. "Sorry it's not you. I get this way when I'm... well, you know," she giggled.

Charlie laughed. They swayed in comfortable silence for a minute, Charlie slowly shuffling her around in a small circle.

"I wanted to thank you for what you did last night," he said softly.

"What do you mean?" she asked him, confused. It was Molly who had cooked the fabulous meal yesterday, not her.

"I heard what you said to Mum," he said with a shrug.

"Oh." Her face burned with mortification that Charlie had caught her talking about him behind his back. "I didn't know anyone could hear us," she said, worried now that they might have been overheard by the rest of the family. It had not been her intention to broadcast her thoughts to the entire group.

"I was just outside the door the smoke from the fire was giving me a headache, so I stepped away for a bit. You could say I was eavesdropping, I suppose. You're not angry with me, are you?" he asked with a reassuring smile.

"No, of course not," she insisted, relieved he didn't sound angry with her.

"Anyway, thanks for sticking up for me. It means a lot to me that you and George feel that way.... That you accept me the way I am," he said shyly, stumbling a bit over the words.

A long pause followed as Annie waited for him to collect his thoughts. She sensed he was debating with himself about something or maybe plucking up his courage. Like he was about to jump off of something rather high up. A cliff, perhaps.

"Are you going to say it out loud to me?" she said gently. "Want to practice?" Annie gave him her most encouraging smile.

He looked at her curiously for several moments. Charlie's brow furrowed, then a small, amused smile grew on his face. He leaned down just a little bit, for he was the shortest Weasley brother, and whispered in her ear. "I'm gay."

Charlie straightened up immediately and looked searchingly at Annie's face to gauge her reaction.

"Well done you!" Annie stood on her tiptoes and whispered back. "I'm proud of you for saying it. And honored that you trusted me. Thank you."

He looked at her with an odd, perplexed look on his face, shaking his head slightly. "You are the strangest person, Annie. Is it a Muggle thing?"

"Thanks. And no, I don't think so," she chuckled. "Have you come out to anyone else?"

Charlie vigorously shook his head.

"Not even...?" she asked, glancing at Sasha rather than identifying him out loud.

Charlie rolled his eyes and smirked, indicating it was a stupid question on her part, and the answer should be obvious. "Don't be thick."

After another minute, Annie spoke again. "I think you should tell George next," she suggested.

Charlie inhaled a deep breath then let it out slowly. "I don't know," he said hesitantly.

"You know we love you, Charlie. And that it makes no difference to us. There won't be an easier person to tell than he will be," she coaxed him.

"As easy as you?" Charlie laughed.

"That's sweet of you to say. Honestly, why don't you come over to our room tonight, and you can pretend you haven't told me yet. It'll give you another go," she offered.

He thought about it for a moment as the first song ended and another one began. "Okay. I think I can handle the two of you at once," he conceded, smiling at the ridiculousness of the setup.

"And then we can help you work on what you'll say to the rest," she pressed on.

"*The rest?*" he said, looking alarmed.

"I think you should tell the family," she said.

"Why?" he demanded, obviously leery of the prospect.

"It would be a mark of... trust. Of respect. Show them that you love them enough to share this part of you with them," she urged him softly.

"I don't know..." he said again.

"Charlie, George and I spent a long time hiding a relationship from the rest of the world. I know how miserable it feels not to be able to share the one you love the most with the ones who love you. Can you honestly say you want to do that forever?"

Charlie sighed, then slowly shook his head. "I suppose not."

"Are you worried they'll react badly?" she asked.

"You don't think they'll be upset?" he replied, slightly surprised she might disagree.

Annie shook her head confidently.

"Even Mum?" he asked pointedly.

"Well... all right. Molly will be upset, that's true," she conceded. "But the rest... I think will be fine with it, truly I do. Maybe a bit surprised, but okay with it, still," she added, recalling George's initial bafflement when she'd broached the subject last summer.

"And Molly.... Well, your mother will have to take her time with it, but she loves you like crazy, Charlie. And she'll come around. She was telling the truth last night, you know she does just want you to be happy. And maybe this will finally convince her that you are."

"We'll see," he said doubtfully. "Let's take it one step at a time, okay? Tonight I'll tell George...."

"And me," Annie amended.

"Right and you," Charlie chuckled. "And we'll go from there."

Hiccup

George panics, and for good reason. Then he gets mad, and for good reason. And Ron comes up with the solution. Yes, that Ron.

Chapter 58: Hiccup

December 2004 January 2005

"Once upon a time there were three little kittens, and their names were Mittens, Tom Kitten, and Moppet." George's deep, clear voice carried down the stairway.

Annie heard him reading a bedtime story to their daughters from where she stood in the kitchen, finishing the washing up. The boys had been reading on their own now for three years and were in their beds as well, quietly doing just that. They'd always divided the household labor this way; Annie felt George's time at home before and after work was best spent with his children. Meanwhile, she would be free to take care of whatever other chores needed attention in blessed peace.

A paper bird had bashed itself against the window for ten minutes before George had finally let it in with a black look once their dinner was finished. It now fluttered weakly about her head, and Annie caught the pesky thing easily. It was nearly in tatters, but the message it contained was still readable.

Annie Sorry to bother you, but I'm running late for a team meeting. Could you take the rubbish out for me tonight? Thanks, Ginny.

Annie sighed it was the third note this week. First, Angelina had forgotten to wipe down all the tables and counters one night, and could Annie please pop over and do it? Then Fleur had had to run home urgently, could Annie please take care of sweeping the floor? And now Ginny, who was still only pregnant with her and Harry's first but was helping out at the school anyway in the off season for Quidditch, had made the latest request.

Annie had put so much time into the careful scheduling and parceling out of tasks just to keep the "school" they called it that for lack of a better word from occupying her every waking moment. Caring for all nine children everyday was exhausting and nearly impossible under normal circumstances without help. Add to that the chance that at any moment, one of them might produce a blast of uncontrolled magic.... Well, she was not thick enough to insist that she, a Muggle, could do it alone (as much as it aggravated her to admit it). Andromeda, Angelina, Fleur, and Ginny had juggled their various work schedules to free up one day a week to spend at the school, helping Annie out with the day to day work involved, and Molly volunteered for the day remaining.

Meanwhile, Annie had taken the lead and begun a more formalized course of instruction for the older children. The effort largely stemmed from the fact the twins had begun clamoring years ago to learn how to read for themselves, and the curriculum had simply grown from there. In addition to the twins, Teddy, Victoire, Roxy, Domi, and Merrie had all begun formal lessons with Annie now.

But every night this week, Annie had found herself back in the large outbuilding George had built to house the daycare now a one-room schoolhouse of sorts to finish up at least one final housekeeping task someone had left undone before going to bed herself. She didn't mind too terribly much; none of the tasks had been that big of a deal. But three nights in a row was getting out of hand. She resolved to speak to the others about it right away.

As she pulled on her sweater and headed out the door into the chilly December night, she felt the baby in her belly squirm, bringing a smile to her face. She patted her stomach, smiling to herself, and thought, *More than half-baked*. By the time she'd reached the school, the poor thing had gotten the hiccups. It was such a funny sensation: the rhythmic spasms coming from within her belly. It made her laugh every time it happened.

Annie emptied the three small waste bins into a large plastic bag and headed toward the back door. She planned to do the same in her house tonight, then drive the load down to the end of the lane in her truck early tomorrow, ready for pickup by the garbage service. If she was a betting woman, though, she'd lay money down that George would likely notice the truck full himself and do it for her unasked. She took a deep breath and pulled the sweater tightly around her, steeling herself for the cold walk ahead.

Suddenly, from out of the blue, a familiar sensation gripped her: a sensation made all the more terrifying in its familiarity. "NO!" she gasped aloud *It's only December. Not due until March.*

Annie breathed through the frighteningly strong contraction. It was far stronger than any false-labor pain she'd felt before *But it couldn't be anything else, could it?* she argued in her mind. She was just barely seven months along. *Not yet....*

Annie sat down on one of the tiny children's chairs, gathering her wits, attempting to make some sense of the situation *Maybe it's nothing serious*, she tried to convince herself. *Just an isolated incident.*

At any rate, it was over now. She felt perfectly fine for the moment. The bag of rubbish was not the least bit heavy, so she dragged it along the ground behind her, out of the school and over to the truck.

Bam. Another one. She glanced at her wrist and calculated eleven minutes had passed since the first one. She gripped the side of the truck bed, head bent and eyes closed, waiting for it to pass, then tossed the bag in.

Not yet. Not yet. Oh God, not yet!

Annie quickly walked back into the house and lay down on the sofa. She thought maybe if she just rested for a while, they would stop *Please make them stop*, she begged silently. *Hang on... hang on...* she urged the little life within her.

The baby squirmed once again, almost as if it had heard her thoughts.

George found her there on the sofa in front of the fire, legs tucked up and arms curled around her belly. She was panting through another strong contraction, unable to hide from him the terrified tears beginning to roll down her nose.

George was a veteran of just as many deliveries as she was and instantly deduced what was happening. He dove to his knees in front of the sofa, stroking her hair away from her face with one hand, pressing against her tailbone with the other hand. "When did they start?" he asked when it was over, fright ringing clearly in his urgent, quiet voice.

"Half an hour ago, maybe," she whispered her answer. It was easier to control the panic in her own voice if it was only a whisper.

A breath blew forcefully out of his nose, and his jaw clenched. "How many?" he asked through gritted teeth.

Annie braced herself for his fury. "This is the third...."

"Three?!" he cried angrily. "Why didn't you call for me sooner?"

"I was outside... you were upstairs with the girls... I thought maybe it was nothing serious..." Annie stammered, silently cursing the catch in her voice *Stay calm. Stay positive.*

George swore quietly for fifteen seconds straight as he paced the floor in front of the fireplace, and Annie lay motionless on the sofa.

"Okay, here's what we'll do," he said, shifting into battle mode. "You will stay right there. Do not move for any reason, understand? I'll go to the Burrow and get someone to stay with this lot here, then we will go to hospital. *Do... not... move!*" he commanded her forcefully.

Annie nodded, and her husband disappeared before her eyes.

An instant later, George popped into being directly into the kitchen of the Burrow. Such a thing was the height of rudeness, but he didn't care. "Mum! Dad!" he called out loudly, dashing toward the living room.

"What on earth is it?" cried Molly, nearly frightened to death.

"It's Annie. Something's wrong. Can you come to the Hill right now for the night?" he cried, sounding rather panicked himself. He started to think it might have been a mistake to leave her alone, no matter how briefly....

"Of course. We'll only be a moment, George," assured his father in a calm voice.

George didn't wait to hear any more and Disappeared immediately back to his own living room. He found Annie still curled up on the sofa, eyes closed, exactly as he'd left her. He would have guessed she was asleep, if he hadn't known better. "They'll be here any second.... Let's go," he whispered.

Annie nodded and began to push herself up to a sitting position.

"Don't!" he ordered as he gingerly scooped her up into his arms. As he carried her to the door, he heard his parents popping into the room behind him.

"Is everything all right?" cried Molly in a hushed voice. "Where are you going?"

George couldn't bear to answer the first question. "We're going to the hospital," he answered as he carried his wife out the door.

*

George woke the next morning with a sharp pain in his neck. He'd fallen asleep, he suddenly realized, in the chair beside Annie's bed with his head resting on the mattress next to her. As he lifted and rolled his head, stretching the muscles of his neck as they protested vociferously, he carefully examined her. He was relieved to find her breathing was slow and relaxed, her face was serene as she slept.

Next, his eyes darted to the large machine at her bedside. A long tongue of paper was slowly extruding out of it, adding to the pile already on the floor, and the energetic drumming sound of a fetal heartbeat filled the room. That strongly comforting rhythm must have been what had lulled him to sleep.

They're safe for the moment. Both of them.

He reckoned last night had been one of the worst of his life. The hospital staff had rushed Annie inside, strapping on electronic monitors and sticking her with needles galore. But it had worked, thank God. They'd been able to stop the labor, for that was indeed what it had been. George offered up yet another prayer of thanks for blessed Muggle ingenuity. He shuddered to think what might have happened without it.

"Mother and daughter are fine now," a doctor had assured him around midnight as he'd scribbled notes onto a clipboard. "If I were you, I'd go home and get some rest."

George had glared at him, grinding his teeth. *Then you're an idiotic fucking prick* he'd growled to himself. Nothing in the world could drag him away from Annie's side right now.

Mother and daughter, he said. Another girl. They hadn't known the sex of the baby before last night. George mastered the sting in his eyes that threatened to unman him once again. *Please, God, let them be all right. I can't... I can't do this without her.*

Sometime around two a.m., a nurse had come in and offered to turn off the sound of the fetal monitor so they could sleep, but George had begged her not to. The reassuring sound of that galloping little heartbeat had been the only thing keeping him sane at the time. Annie had smiled at him in understanding, looking tired, as the nurse had left the room.

"You should rest, though," he'd urged her quietly, stroking her hair.

She'd nodded, closed her eyes obediently, but started a conversation all the same. "I want to name her after you," she'd whispered with another tired smile. "Georgia Weasley."

"What've you got against the poor thing already?" George had snorted dismissively, trying desperately to pretend everything was normal. "We should call her Angharad, name her after her beautiful mother, instead," he'd argued as he'd held her hand, careful to avoid disturbing the IV.

Annie had stuck out her tongue at him then. "You're going to find me very stubborn about this, George. I'm not going to be swayed."

"You don't even know from stubborn," he'd warned his wife softly.

"This argument is far from over," she'd mumbled as she'd drifted off to sleep.

After a deep, lung-filling breath, George yawned and stretched, looking out the window at the sun beginning to wake up. Annie could name their daughter Boo for all he cared, as long as they both were safe and sound. He rubbed his eyes, pressing his palms so deeply into them they forced stars to appear, and considered selling his soul for some really strong coffee. Maybe he could nip over to the waiting area for a second and get some?

There was a quiet knock on the door behind him. George spun around to see his younger brother and sister standing in the doorway wearing worried faces.

"Mum sent us to find out what's happened. Is she all right?" Ginny whispered.

George nodded as they tiptoed inside. "They both are... for the time being," he whispered back.

"Thank goodness for that," his brother offered. Ron handed him a blessed cup of steaming coffee, and George took a foolish gulp, burning his mouth.

"What about the school?" asked Ginny.

George paused in the midst of taking another drink to stare disbelievingly over the rim of the cup at his sister. *The school? What about it? Who gives a shrivelfig about the school, anyway?*

Before he could ask her what she meant, he was distracted by another knock. Angelina and Lee were standing in the hallway.

"George, we just heard. Is Annie okay?" whispered Angelina.

George nodded. "Both of them are, yes...."

"What will we do without her?" she turned to ask to Lee, interrupting George's explanation. "Who will watch Roxy while we're at work?"

What the hell is going on here? George grumbled to himself. *Have they all lost their bloody minds?* "Look, everyone, I don't know what's going to happen with...."

Just then, Fleur swooped into the room, descending upon him with an exaggerated hug. "Oh, George!" she exclaimed far too loudly.

George tried to hush her but was ignored.

"We only just heard the news. Poor Annie! And the school! What will happen to it?" she cried in her thick accent.

That did it.

"Excuse me!" he said loudly enough that everyone in the now crowded room stopped what they were doing and stared at him in surprise. "My wife and unborn child are fine, thank you all for asking. And as for that sodding school, I thoroughly intend to burn it to the ground as soon as we get out of this *hospital room!*" he shouted.

"George!" Annie cried out in alarm, awake now.

"I'm sick of it, Annie!" he cried as he spun around to face her. His temper was fueled further by the sight of her, wired and tubed up as she was, lying weak and exhausted in the bed. "You work like a bloody house-elf in that fucking place, and look where it's got us!" He turned to face the assembly of family and friends. "None of the rest of you can be bothered to lift a goddamn finger!"

"That's not true! Stop this right now, George," Annie demanded.

"It *is* true! Every night this week, you've been there 'til all hours, clearing up some mess you lot couldn't bother yourselves with," he barked, pointing a damning finger at the guilty looks his audience's faces. "Every one of you seem to forget that *Annie can't do magic!* What takes you two seconds and a wave of your wand, she has to do with her own hands!"

"That's enough, I said," Annie cried angrily. "The doctor said it's no one's fault!"

"The hell it isn't," growled George, quite certain he knew upon whom the blame should be laid. *Doctors don't know everything.*

The rest of the crowded room was cowering in shock and shame.

"Oh, Annie! I'm so sorry," whispered Ginny, her lower lip trembling. "I made you do the rubbish last night...."

"Ginny, don't..." Annie sighed, exasperated.

"He's right," said Angelina softly. "We take you for granted, Annie."

"No, you don't, Ange!" she assured her friend. "We've all got to pull our own weight to make it work, me included."

"And you insist on pulling more than your share," scolded George, more softly now, "always so afraid you don't measure up. When are you going to get it through your head, Annie? Magic doesn't make you better. You, of all people, should know that! Maybe I don't tell you often enough how wonderful you are." He took her hand, careful not to disturb the heartbeat monitor on her finger.

"None of us do," Ginny added. "You're amazing, Annie. The best...."

"No one's better with the kids than you are," said Angelina, with Fleur nodding heartily over her shoulder.

"Please don't get upset, everyone. I'm fine, and the baby's fine. We'll work something out about the school in the meantime," she said with forced cheerfulness, trying to redirect the focus away from herself. All this gushing was making her extremely uncomfortable.

"*WE* won't be working out anything. *YOU* are not setting foot in that place again," argued George, his voice hard again.

Annie snapped her head around to face him. An imperious tone of voice always got her blood boiling, no matter whom it came from. She glared at him, seething. "If you think you can order me around like that...."

"Not just me, Annie. Those are *doctor's* orders. You're on bed rest until the baby's born," he commanded.

"I'm not talking about right now. I know that I can't go back until after she's born. But after that...."

"End of discussion, Annie," he warned her in a soft voice.

"Far from it, George," she warned equally softly.

A few moments later, the room was cleared of visitors anxious to leave the now tense atmosphere, and George was alone with Annie once again *Well, almost alone.* For some reason, Ron was hovering in the corner, apparently deep in thought.

Is it congenital, George wondered, *this gift of Ron's for being intrusive and annoying?* He was about to relive some of the stress he was feeling by physically escorting Ron out of the room when his brother finally spoke up.

"You know, George, I was just thinking about something you said."

"What?" George asked flatly, gripping the bedrail tightly in order to avoid breaking something. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Annie had her arms crossed, simmering silently while waiting for Ron to leave, attempting to burn a hole in the far wall with her eyes in the meantime.

"Well, you mentioned something about Annie working so hard. As hard as...."

"I believe I said she works as hard as a house-elf, Ron," George snapped. "So sorry if that offended you," he added insincerely.

"Right. And then I thought, maybe that's the answer."

"Not following you, Ron," George said, losing his remaining pittance of patience rapidly.

"A house-elf. Maybe you should get a house-elf," Ron offered timidly.

"What? Are you mental?" George cried.

"Ron," said Annie, joining the conversation, "thanks for your concern, but I neither need nor want a servant in my home."

George snorted in disbelief. "And you seem to be laboring under the delusion that I'm rather more wealthy than I actually am. Mole Hill is the furthest thing from some posh

manor...."

"All right not for the house, then. What about for the school?" Ron countered.

"For the school?" they both asked simultaneously. Annie and George stared at Ron with stunned looks on their faces.

"Yeah! Why not?" Ron said, beginning to sound excited. "A house-elf could do all the stuff that Annie needs help with: the cleaning, the washing up, even the cooking for the kids. You know, like they do at Hogwarts. They live for that stuff. That way Annie could spend her time just on the teaching bit, see?"

George and Annie now looked at each other, asking silently if the other was seriously considering what Ron was proposing. If it was remotely realistic to expect such a thing could solve the problem now facing them.

"A house-elf *could* do all that stuff..." mused George, answering her quizzical expression. "But how the hell would we get one? We don't exactly mingle with that sort of crowd now, do we?"

"But we *do!*" Ron insisted. "Not the way you mean, but still. When it comes to house-elves, I've got connections, remember?"

Annie shook her head, baffled. "What are you on about, Ron?"

"Hermione, of course. Don't you remember? We're all founding members of S.P.E.W.!"

*

And so it came to be that a house-elf was due to begin living with the Weasley family at Mole Hill shortly after the Christmas holidays that year.

Annie's anxiety about the new arrangement was only exacerbated by the fact that, as she spoke separately with Hermione and her husband about house-elves, their accounts differed widely. According to Hermione, house-elves were a race of beings that had been enslaved and oppressed by wizards for ages and longed to be free. She'd made them promise to pay for the elf's services or she wouldn't help them find one at all. George had rolled his eyes but agreed to try to pay... *if* the elf would take it.

George, however, couldn't disagree with Hermione's assessment of the situation more. "They want to be servants," he assured her as he kept Annie company, lying in bed with her one afternoon. "I don't know why they just do. I mean, nobody likes being mistreated, including them. And God knows, most of the sodding prats who have them often do exactly that, but they live to serve them anyway. Most of them take quite a bit of pride in the job. Part of the enchantment, I suppose."

"What enchantment?" *How interesting that Hermione had called it "enslavement" instead* Annie mused.

"Once they're hired on with a family, they can never leave unless they're dismissed. The bargain lasts for generations sometimes on both sides," George explained.

"Generations!?" she cried. She'd assumed hiring an elf was a temporary solution to their temporary problem.

George shook his head, then continued. "They can never refuse to do whatever you tell them to do. If the relationship between master and elf is good, then everything is fine. If not, then watch out. Elves can be quite keen at finding loopholes," he muttered, frowning.

Hearing him use the word "master" made her cringe. "This is very odd, George. Are we sure about this? Bringing an elf into our home?" She had only very grudgingly agreed to accept help with the school while she was confined to bed rest, and then perhaps for a few weeks after the baby's birth, just until she'd recovered. Then it was right back to her work with the children....

"No, I'm not," George averred. "That's why we're setting up this whole mad business on a trial basis. We'll see how this year goes and then make a decision."

"A year?!" she shrieked. This was a new wrinkle to the situation.

"I will not continue this discussion until you calm the hell down," George threatened.

Annie took several deep breaths. In as calm a voice as she could muster, she began to speak again. "I never agreed to take *awhole year* off, George," she said.

"As far as I'm concerned, you're done with it for good, Annie," he replied sternly. "But I know how bloody stubborn you get, so I'm willing to compromise. And a full year was the shortest amount of time any elf would accept."

Annie groaned, massaging her throbbing temples. "What have we gotten ourselves into?"

"A goddamn bloody mess, that's what," George grumbled.

*

"When is she coming, again?"

"Ron said they'd bring her 'round at ten."

"All right, then," sighed Annie. "I suppose we'd better head downstairs." She threw her legs over the edge of the bed.

"Why don't you let me help you with that?" George offered with a warm smile. He scooped her up before her feet touched the ground.

"I must weigh a ton," Annie giggled as she threw her arms around his neck. "You don't have to carry me all the time, you know."

"But it's very rewarding," he argued, nuzzling her neck behind her ear.

"Please pay attention to where you're going," teased Annie. "It won't help matters much if we both tumble arse over teakettle down the stairs."

A minute later they sat together on the sofa, facing the fireplace, waiting for the arrival of their guests. Molly was already at the school building with her slew of grandchildren. She'd offered to stay with them at the Hill during Annie's confinement as well as help out with the school. Even so, Annie insisted on showering and getting dressed every morning, claiming she felt like an invalid, otherwise. This morning she managed to ready herself in five minutes flat.

"Twenty minutes is all you're allowed, remember?" George warned her.

"That's a completely arbitrary number!" argued Annie.

"Which the doctor imposed upon you for good reason. You're always trying to cheat," he complained.

"I didn't get out of bed once yesterday!" she countered.

"I suppose you think that means you get forty minutes today? It doesn't work like that, Annie," he said impatiently.

Annie's retort that she was expecting that very thing no matter what he thought about it was interrupted by a greenish flare of light in the fireplace, and three figures

stepped out. Someone looking at their profiles might assume it was a young family, but that assumption would be dashed upon closer inspection of the smallest member of the group.

The thing's no bigger than Merrië Annie mused. The house-elf had a large red nose, erect ears, and sad brown eyes. She was wearing a neat little blouse and skirt and carrying a tiny satchel. Her face was smiling and nervous, as if she was hoping to make a good impression.

"Welcome to our home, Winky," said George warmly but cautiously, choosing his words carefully as he stood to greet her.

"Thank you, Master! Winky is so very happy to be meeting you at last!" she cried enthusiastically.

"No, Winky. I'm not your master, remember?" George corrected her with a kind but firm voice.

Winky's smile fell from her face, and she hung her head. "Yes, sir. I remember. Winky must prove herself to you for one year before you is trusting her."

Annie and George looked at one another, utterly perplexed. This was not what Annie had expected at all. George shrugged, at a loss as well.

"That's not it at all, Winky," Hermione chimed in, trying to help. "George and Annie are good people and want to pay you fairly for your work. You're a free elf, don't forget."

Winky looked at Hermione with thinly veiled loathing, as if no one could have said anything more insulting to her. "Yes," she said with distaste. "Master I mean Mister Weasley may be paying me... if he must."

"We should get going, Hermione," Ron urged.

How unlike Ron to be so perceptive Annie thought. She smiled her thanks to him as he shuffled a reluctant Hermione back into the fireplace and left.

George knelt down before the little creature, and she looked a bit frightened as a result. "Winky, I know Hermione said that I would pay you, but that's your decision," he said, speaking in the sort of quiet, gentle voice he usually reserved for comforting their children. "I don't want you to do anything you don't want to do. That goes for everything here, understand? Now, do you want to be paid?"

"Not really, no, sir. Such a shameful thing," Winky mumbled, shaking her head, eyes downcast.

"Then that settles it," he said with a nod. "I will put money aside for you each month in order to keep my promise to Hermione. If our arrangement doesn't work out at the end of the year, it is yours to do with as you please. Use it for yourself or throw it in a lake for all I care. If this does work out, and you wish to stay with us, then you can help us decide what to do with the money. Do you agree to this?"

"You is wanting Winky to... to *decide* all these things?" Winky stared at George, flabbergasted.

George looked pointedly at Annie, searching for confirmation as well as help explaining the situation. They had both agreed to this stipulation, and she nodded.

"Winky, you will decide many things if you choose to stay here," she said. "We will always ask you if you want to do something. It will always be your choice whether to do it or not. You will always wear proper clothes. And you will always be welcome in our home to stay or go as you please. You will never be enslaved here," Annie explained softly.

Winky looked thoroughly confused, her eyes searching each of their faces. "Winky thought you is wanting a house-elf for your family," she said with disappointment. "I is been wanting a family of my own for a long time now. Winky is been missing it so, ever since Master Crouch.... That's why I is agreeing to leave Hogwarts." She began to sniff and blubber a bit toward the end of her speech.

"I'm so sorry about your previous family, Winky," said Annie gently. "My husband explained to me that you're a sort of orphan, like me." Annie knew it was technically true that she was an orphan herself but she hadn't felt like one in so long now that it almost felt like a lie to say it.

Winky wiped her eyes and nose with the tissue George held out for her.

After the elf composed herself, Annie continued. "I very much need someone to help me care for our school. I would like to show it to you, if you're still interested in the position. This school is for our own children and a few others as well. You will find we have a very big family to care for," Annie added with a proud smile.

Winky finally looked directly up at her. There was a look of hope on her face at Annie's mention of the word *family*.

She looks so pitiful, Annie thought. A strong motherly urge to comfort this poor creature came over her. It was hard not to think of the elf as a little child, odd-looking and ageless though she was. Annie gingerly stood up and held out her hand to her. "Will you come with me, Winky?"

The little elf looked at Annie's hand with consternation, then back up into her eyes. Apparently, Annie's behavior was difficult for Winky to understand. Annie wondered what sort of mistreatment she must have suffered in the past to be so skittish of such basic human kindness. Winky took a few moments to consider the offer, then, with a look of determination, took Annie's hand with a curt nod.

Annie and Winky walked hand in hand through the house, out the door, and across the short, frosty walk to the school building. George hovered nervously behind them, ready to snatch his wife away at the slightest inkling of trouble. As he opened the door of the school for them, they were greeted by a blast of warm air and a chorus of children's voices at play.

Winky's eyes grew large at the sight of nine children, the oldest only six years old, running about. Boys and girls alike had been busying themselves with the many toys and games spread about the room. They looked up as one to see who it was that had come to visit them.

"Daddy! Mummy!" cried four of the little children, who then came dashing over.

George moved to intercept them, catching them all in his arms before they could tackle Annie with their enthusiastic greetings. Winky took several steps backward, startled by their exuberance.

"Have you come to play with us?" asked Fred.

"Not just now, I'm afraid. But I promise to come back later after lunch," George offered.

"Mummy as well?" Janie asked eagerly.

"No, not Mummy. She must rest, remember?" George answered the child, but looked pointedly at Annie as he spoke.

"What's your name?" Merrie asked with friendly curiosity, directing her question to the elf. "Have you come to our school to play with us?"

"She's a house-elf, Merrie," explained her elder brother Art. "And she's very old, not a little girl like you."

"Oh," said Merrie, disappointed. "Well, sometimes grown-ups like to play, too," she argued, smiling at Winky.

Tentatively, Winky returned the little girl's smile.

"All right now, off with you! Your Mum is making me do grown-up things this morning," George explained, sighing dejectedly for their benefit. "Promise to save me a game of Slay the Dragon."

The children nodded and drifted away from their parents, back to their games.

"You see, Winky, this is our school room. The children come every weekday to learn lessons and play. Our job is to teach them, feed them, and keep them safe," Annie explained as she led Winky to the kitchen area, then sat down on a chair under George's watchful gaze. "There are nine children now and more on the way." She smiled, patting her growing belly.

The elf looked at Annie sideways, giving her a bashful smile in return.

"Did Hermione explain to you that I am a Muggle, Winky?" Annie asked.

Winky's eyes grew large again, and she looked away in embarrassment, as if she didn't think the question was appropriate for polite conversation. Almost as if Annie had used a crude word. "Erm, yes, Miss."

Annie noted Winky's careful use of formal address. "Does that make you uncomfortable, Winky?" she asked, honestly curious.

"Oh, no, Miss. Winky is understanding many wizards look beyond their own kind for... erm...."

George began to chuckle, causing Winky to squirm with discomfort. Annie shot her husband a look, warning him to desist.

"But Winky is knowing all about the Weasley family, Miss," she cried eagerly, attempting to change the subject to something she thought would be more pleasing to them. "Weasleys is one of the finest wizarding families in Britain! Pure-blooded for many generations!"

George rolled his eyes and snorted. Winky seemed to realize her gaffe then and looked back down at the floor, mortified.

"Yes, well, you will find that the importance of bloodlines matters very little to our family," Annie explained gently. "But the children all the rest of the family but me, in fact they are all magical. That's one of the reasons I so desperately need your help, Winky. It's just too much for me to keep up with!"

Annie hammed it up a bit, hoping to sway the elf by playing on her sense of pity. All her reservations about adopting a strange magical creature into their lives, all her resistance to accepting help with the school were melting away. Replacing them now was a strong urge to give this little elf a loving home.

"Yes, I is seeing how much Miss needs my help," Winky nodded, scanning the room around her. "Winky finds it hard to believe you is managing so long without her."

"Does that mean you agree to help us, Winky?" Annie asked her, employing a pleading, hopeful voice.

"It would be an honor to serve the House of Weasley, Miss." Winky smiled generously and nodded.

"Thank you very much!" Annie exclaimed, barely stifling a giggle at Winky's lofty idea of her household. *House of Weasley, indeed.* She glanced at George, who was pressing his lips together as well in an attempt not to laugh out loud.

"We're so pleased to have you with us!" Annie cried enthusiastically. "Welcome to our family, Winky! We hope you'll be very happy here."

* From "The Tale of Tom Kitten" by Beatrix Potter

Labor and Delivery

Chapter 59 of 80

George and Annie get put through the wringer.

Chapter 59: Labor and Delivery

February 2005

Annie felt a sharp sear of pain low in her abdomen. She cried out from it, waking herself and her husband.

"What is it?" George whispered urgently.

"Hurts," was all she could gasp.

"Another contraction?"

She managed to shake her head. There was no squeezing, no dynamic rise and fall of the pain level. Just a stabbing, constant pain concentrated in one spot.

"Annie?" he asked, panicked.

Must be too dark for him to see she thought. She was going to have to speak. "No... just hurts," she gasped again.

She felt the bed shimmy slightly as George leaped out of it, heard him dressing quickly. Then the baby moved within her. The pain soared to new heights along with the fetal movement, and Annie cried out again, failing to fully muffle the scream into her pillow. A few moments later, once the baby was still again, the pain settled back to the previous level of agony.

George had frozen in place, only one leg of his trousers pulled on.

"She's okay," Annie hissed to reassure him. "She's still moving."

In the next second, George was dressed and disappeared. Five seconds later, he was back. "I sent Winky to the Burrow to get my parents. Let's go."

Annie tried to shift her weight in order to make it easier for George to lift her and felt a small gush of fluid between her legs. If she hadn't been in so much pain, she would have been mortified.

George took a deep breath. *Secrecy laws be damned* he thought, clearly envisioning the hospital entrance. He'd personally Obliviate every one of them later if necessary. Under the cover of pre-dawn darkness, he Apparated with Annie in his arms, then dashed through the emergency entry doors.

Ten minutes later, strapped into what George reckoned was every monitor the hospital owned, Annie lay once again on a hospital bed. Her knuckles were white as they gripped the side rail bars, and her face was wracked.

"Can't you give her anything for it?" he growled pleadingly as the doctor began lifting the bed sheet covering her.

"Mr. Weasley, we must first determine what's happening," the doctor explained, speaking infuriatingly slowly and calmly. He then turned to Annie. "Mrs. Weasley, I need to examine you now. Please try and relax."

Annie laughed at the idiot now leaning between her propped-up and spread-open legs. "Oh, sure... why didn't I think of that sooner?" she said softly with a snort.

Despite the tension or maybe because of it George couldn't stifle a smile either, even though he truly hated witnessing this part. He took her hand in his.

The smile on his face was gone as soon as Annie sucked her breath in through her teeth a moment later. Her eyes began to roll back into her head before she screwed them shut. He desperately wanted to look away, or at least to rip the doctor's fool head from his neck for causing her more pain, but couldn't do either. It was small consolation that his hand felt close to breaking as she crushed it in her grip he would've taken all her pain onto himself, if he could.

"Yes, well, this is simple enough. I've found the trouble right here.... Mrs. Weasley, your cervix is about four centimeters dilated, I'd say, perhaps fifty percent effaced, most likely due to your previous pre-term labor. And at this very moment, I am touching your baby's foot."

"The baby's foot?!" cried George.

"Can't you... push it back in?" rasped Annie, grimacing. "Still too early!"

"I could, yes, at great personal discomfort to you, Mrs. Weasley. But there would be no point. You see, I can feel the actual foot, not the amniotic sac around it. Your water has broken. The baby must be born this morning."

"But... it's still a month before she's due!" said George, still in shock.

"Yes, I know it's a bit early. But still very good odds. Much better than six weeks ago, I assure you. There's nothing else for it, after all, once the water breaks. No turning back now, I'm afraid!"

Half an hour later, George was dressed in a surgeon's costume, feeling idiotic and frightened. Annie was not in labor, and due to the fact that the baby's foot seemed to be stuck where it was, their daughter was going to be delivered "cesarean." George was not entirely sure what was meant by this word, but judging by the fact they were making him dress up for the occasion, he was confident it wasn't going to be like anything he'd seen before.

And he was right. He followed an entourage of nurses as they wheeled Annie into yet another room and warned him not to touch anything. Then one of them asked him if he could stand the sight of blood.

"Yes?" he answered her, perplexed. He'd seen his share of blood, having witnessed three prior deliveries. *What an unnerving question to be asked* he thought. *Doesn't exactly bode well, does it?* He began to fret, nervously drumming his fingers against his thighs.

Then the nurses lifted Annie from the bed onto a table like she was a slab of meat and literally strapped her down to it, causing George's sense of alarm to escalate rapidly. He glanced at her face as they draped large pieces of light blue-green paper over her. But Annie was calm and awake, and she smiled at him. He assumed she was trying to reassure him with her smile, rather than expressing any enjoyment of the process.

A nurse directed him to stand by Annie's head. "You don't have to watch, you know," she instructed him, her eyes searching his face with a worried look.

What is it with this nurse? Why is she saying such odd things?

Then Annie looked searchingly into his eyes and spoke to him in a carefully regulated voice, like she was comforting one of their children. "This is perfectly all right, George. It happens all the time, I promise. Whatever you see, *don't panic*, all right?"

Annie apparently knew something he didn't. He was about to ask what she meant by that comment when the doctor announced he was ready to begin.

George stood in paralyzed shock as his wife was gutted before his eyes.

"George, it's fine. I can't feel anything. Do you hear me, George?"

The murderous monster standing next to his wife reached inside her and began rooting around.

"George, look away! *George!*"

The two masked demons standing on either side of his wife's disemboweled carcass both continued defiling her body, one nearly elbow-deep inside her, the other pushing and pressing on her belly from above. Her blood was everywhere, lurid red against the blue paper.

George hated himself for standing here, mutely watching this horror happen. *Murderers! I have to stop them!* He reached for his wand as a fiery rage flared within him. *They will pay!*

"GEORGE! LOOK AT ME!" Annie yelled, and everyone in the room flinched, including him.

Annie yelled? He must be hallucinating her voice. There was no possible way she could be speaking after this. He looked at her face.

"George!" she cried in relief. "You see that I'm okay? Keep looking at my face!"

Her lovely violet eyes held his attention now. *Was she truly still alive?* She kept talking to him. He had no idea what she was saying his brain couldn't process the speech but he saw her lips moving and heard her voice. That had to mean something, didn't it? She was speaking, therefore she was breathing, ergo she must be alive.

Another sound now penetrated his consciousness: a tiny wail. Not from Annie. He hazarded a glance toward the abattoir the other end of the room had become.

The baby. Their daughter. She was alive and crying. The butcher handed her off, bloody and squirming, to a nurse who whisked her away.

"Go with her, George. Stay with the baby. Do you understand me?"

George looked at his wife's face once again, searching for confirmation of the command he'd just heard.

"Stay with the baby," Annie repeated. "I'll be fine, I promise. Go!" she urged him.

He nodded and took a few steps away from his wife, his gaze still locked onto her eyes.

"I'm all right, George. Go!" she repeated.

He finally turned away from Annie and faced the bustle of activity around his newborn daughter. He sucked in a shocked breath as he registered how profoundly tiny she looked. One of the nurses was rubbing her briskly, attempting to clean off the muck covering her. Another was holding a tiny plastic oxygen mask in front of her face.

But his baby daughter stared right at him, completely ignoring the chaos and gore around her. Her dark blue eyes were open and alert, her face calm and serene despite the rough treatment from the nurse scrubbing her. He could almost imagine she was trying to reassure him somehow, letting him know she was all right. That everything was all right.

They began wheeling the strange contraption she was lying on out of the room, and George silently followed as if he'd been Imperiused by her. He watched as they finished cleaning her, weighing and measuring her, examining her, and poring over her every physical aspect.

He had no idea how long he'd been standing there, mute as a post, when one of the nurses announced cheerfully, "She's perfect, Mr. Weasley! Would you like to hold her?"

Would I? This hospital is staffed by idiots and monsters he thought. Never again would he or his wife set foot in this slaughterhouse! Hell would be better than this den of sadism and butchery!

"Yes," he answered simply, reaching out for her.

He gathered the tiny swaddled thing in his arms, looking all the more miniscule as he touched her rosy cheek with his rough finger. Her eyes opened, and she gazed up at him again. *How can she be so alert,* he wondered, *after all that?* He quietly communed with his daughter as they stared into each other's eyes, leaning against the wall of the nursery.

George felt a tap on his shoulder, startling him. He glanced around. His daughter was still in his arms, asleep now. He wondered when had he sat down in this rocking chair, and where was he, exactly? He looked up at the clock: it was after ten in the morning.

A nurse whispered, "Mr. Weasley, your wife is ready to see you now. She's in a recovery room, resting. You may take your baby with you."

George nodded, thinking of Annie for the first time since he'd left the operating room. He smiled at his daughter, imagining how impatient his wife must be to see her by now. He rose carefully to avoid disturbing the sleeping baby in his arms, and the nurse led him to Annie's room.

"There you are, you two!" came a weak voice from inside when he reached the doorway. "Stop hogging her, George. It's my turn now!"

George tore his eyes away from the baby and looked at Annie. A visceral stab of shock hit his gut as he took in the sight of her. His wife had not kept her promise to be all right: she looked deathly pale, utterly spent. Her eyes were sunken into her head. She was smiling, but it was a forced smile that failed to belie her pain.

"Give her to me, George," she whispered shakily, weakly lifting her arms. The small movement looked as if it took every ounce of strength she had left.

She doesn't look strong enough to support a feather he thought with dread as he eased himself onto the bed next to her. He carefully passed the bundle in his arms to her, but kept one arm underneath their daughter, just in case.

Annie's smile grew bigger, became far more genuine now that the baby was in her arms. "So lovely!" she cooed. "And so impatient! What was so important about today that you couldn't bear to miss?" she said softly, stroking the ruddy fuzz on her head.

Their daughter began to root against the blanket swaddled around her face. Annie spoke soothingly to her as she gingerly moved to offer a breast. The baby eagerly took it and began to nurse.

"Poor little Georgia! So hungry!" she whispered.

"Oh, don't start with that," George groaned, leaning his head gently against Annie's. He couldn't look away from the tiny, angelic face before him. She was mesmerizing.

"Get used to it. It's her name," Annie giggled, unable to tear her eyes from their baby, either.

"Absolutely not. Look at her she's the spitting image of you. Annie would be much more fitting," he argued.

"Not a chance," she said smiling, shaking her head.

"Perhaps a compromise?" another voice came from elsewhere in the room.

All three of them were startled by it. Annie and George looked up to see a nurse had entered the room and had been checking on Annie's monitors.

"How about Georgeanna?" the woman said. "That's both of them covered."

"You know, that's not half bad," offered George.

"I could live with that," agreed Annie. "What do you think, little one? Are you a Georgeanna?"

The little girl began rooting against Annie again, and the motion of her head was identical to a nod. Her parents chuckled as Annie helped her find the nipple once more.

"Georgeanna it is," George said softly as their daughter nursed greedily.

"Georgeanna Muriel," added Annie.

George was incredulous. "You want to name her after that old bat? After all the crap she gave you?"

"She gave us a roof over our heads! She opened her home to us when it was very dangerous to do so!" Annie argued.

George conceded the point, however reluctantly. Great Aunt Muriel had housed a good portion of the Weasley family when it was her neck on the line for it during the last days of the war. He wondered if the old battle axe would be pleased to be memorialized by his daughter's name or more likely, in his opinion spinning in her grave.

"You look tired," he whispered. Actually, Annie looked far more than tired. He'd never seen her look worse, and that was saying something.

She nodded. "I am, but I wouldn't miss this for anything," she answered with a weak smile, still gazing down at their daughter.

*

Three days later, they were still in the hospital. Tiny Georgeanna was improving: eating well and gaining weight admirably. Annie, on the other hand, was not.

George was nearly frantic with worry. His wife was still bleeding too much, the doctors had said, to go home yet. And as of this morning, she had begun running a fever. None of the nurses would look him in the eye any more.

George looked up as he heard a quiet knock on the door to find the doctor motioning for him to join him in the hallway. He nodded and rose carefully to avoid jostling the baby.

On his way out of the room, George glanced at Annie she was asleep, as usual. She had barely enough energy to feed the baby every three hours and slept all the rest of the time. When he wasn't curled around Annie in her sick bed, keeping her warm (because she shivered constantly, otherwise), he was holding Georgeanna. Wrapping his arms around one or the other of them was the only thing that kept him from putting holes in the walls out of impotent frustration.

He reached the hallway and stood there, swaying gently as all parents reflexively do while holding a sleeping baby.

"Mr. Weasley, I would like to give your wife a transfusion, if that's all right," the doctor said in a pretense of requesting permission. "Perhaps a round of blood will help strengthen her system, give her some energy to fight back against what may be an infection developing."

George nodded without understanding, unwilling to display his ignorance by asking for clarification. *Why in hell is he asking me? He's the doctor, after all.*

"I like to ask family members of transfusion recipients if they would be willing to donate blood," he continued. "Do you know your blood type?"

"Human?" George answered, completely at a loss with this effing Muggle's infuriating questions.

The idiot chuckled in response. "Very funny, Mr. Weasley. I'm glad to see you still have your sense of humor. I'll tell the nurse to arrange for you to donate a few pints. If you're compatible, we'll give it to your wife. I find it often helps the family to feel like they're actively doing something to help."

"Sure... whatever she needs."

The doctor pasted a false smile on his face, lasting only a moment.

"There's something else, isn't there?" George asked.

He nodded solemnly. "Mr. Weasley... I'm afraid I must warn you... it is imperative that your wife not attempt another pregnancy in the future. She ought not to risk it, after this."

George nodded slightly, unable to produce any other response. He calmly, numbly absorbed the information. He understood what the man had said could comprehend the words he'd used but had nothing in reserve to process what in any other instance would have been a crushing blow. Little Georgeanna would be the last of his and Annie's children. Never again would Annie glow with pregnancy, never again would he feel a baby kick from within her.

"She'll be all right, though? After you give her my blood?" George asked a moment later, his voice shaky. He was unabashed by the pleading tone heard there.

The doctor smiled faintly but did not answer.

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When the doctor returned the next morning, his tone was far more upbeat. "Well, Mrs. Weasley, you've made some excellent progress overnight. The transfusion helped even more than I expected. The bleeding now seems under control, and your vital signs are much better. And no more fever, I see."

"I'm thinking of becoming a vampire. I had no idea how good it feels to have other people's blood pumping through my veins," she replied. Her voice was quiet but stronger than it had been for days.

"Your husband's blood, to be precise," the doctor added, scribbling a note on her chart. "He's type O negative what we call a universal donor. I do hope he'll consider donating regularly."

"Now that I have a taste for it, he'd better be on his toes," she warned hoarsely.

"That's no way to thank someone for rescuing you," the doctor chided her teasingly.

"George does it so often, it's becoming passé," she explained.

The doctor looked up at the strange couple. They were smirking at each other for the moment. *Far too young to have so many bloody children*, he muttered silently to himself. *Hopefully, this will knock some sense into them!*

"I'm pleased to say that if you continue to make as much progress throughout the day today as you did last night, I'll be releasing you tomorrow morning. That ought to provide sufficient motivation for you to pursue the path of improvement, I'll wager," he offered.

"Deal," the woman said simply.

"No take-backs," said her husband.

Trouble in Paradise

Chapter 60 of 80

George is rattled, and he's taking it out on Annie. Ron and Hermione have some trauma of their own, reminding George and Annie how lucky they are.

Annie quietly shut the back door of her house behind her and began tiptoeing silently toward the stairs so as not to disturb her sleeping daughter. It was the middle of the afternoon, and Georgeanna was napping in the little sling Annie always carried her around in. A happy, contented smile graced her features.

"Ahem."

She was startled to see George's sullen face where he sat at the dining table, drumming his fingers. Her heart sunk as she realized he appeared itching to go another round with her. *When is this row going to end?*

"You're home early," she said, keeping her voice quiet and level. She continued walking toward the staircase, intending to go upstairs and lay the baby down in her crib before tangling with George once again.

"And where have you been, as if I don't know? Caught you sneaking over there, haven't I?" he said quietly, but there was no masking the fury in his voice.

Stay calm. Don't rise. Annie turned to face him, one foot on the first step. "I wasn't aware I had *tosneak* anywhere. Angelina wanted to show me something."

It was adorable, what the children had been working on that day: a large mural painted with their hands and feet on an old sheet. They'd been extremely pleased with themselves, and every one of them was now a walking rainbow with the mess. The whole thing had been happy and hilarious. Every vestige of those pleasant feelings vanished with her husband's next comment, however.

"A handprint to clean off a window, perhaps? A spill that needed mopping up?" he said icily.

He'd found the hot button. A fury to match his flared before her eyes. "Is that what you think I do all day? I spend my time tidying up behind them?" She wished she could stomp loudly up the stairs but controlled the urge so as not to wake the sleeping infant in her arms and crept silently instead.

She heard him leap up from his seat and follow her up the stairs. "That's what got us into this mess, isn't it?" he snapped in a strained whisper from just behind her shoulder. "They take advantage of the fact you won't say no to any of them!"

"That's not true!" she hissed. She had never felt taken advantage of. It was only fair for her to pull her own weight.

"You're nothing but a glorified house-elf to the lot of them, and I won't stand for it any longer!" he hissed back. "They have Winky now. You *stayhere*, understood?"

Annie bit her lip as she gently set their baby daughter into her crib, covered her with a blanket, then turned to her husband standing in the doorway. She glared at him and stabbed her finger toward the staircase. They both held their tongues as they dashed quickly down the stairs together until they were both back on the ground floor.

Then she spun around on him, using the same finger to stab him in the chest for emphasis. "Don't you dare speak to me like that!" Annie cried. "That was a hurtful thing to say, not to mention utterly false, and *you know it!* What's wrong with you lately? Why are you being such an overprotective and overbearing git?"

"Why are *you* being so perversely pigheaded about this?" he parried, equally livid. "I'm sorry if I've hurt your feelings, but if that's the only way I can keep you safe...."

"*Safe?* I'm supposed to believe this is about my *safety?*" she spluttered in disbelief. "The war is over, George. It has been for a long time. Let it go! No one's coming for us anymore," she argued.

George grabbed her roughly by the shoulders as if he planned to shake her. "I can't lose you too!" he choked, his eyes glittering with panic and fury. "I won't watch you kill yourself for that bloody school! *I need you more!*"

Finally, we're getting somewhere, Annie thought with relief. All their arguments for four months now ever since the night she'd gone into early labor had been dancing around this, the real issue. And it became crystal clear to her in this second that they all led back to Fred, of all things. It wasn't about a balance of power between her and George, after all. It wasn't about his feeling neglected. This was about fear, pure and simple.

"George," she whispered, all the anger now sapped from her voice. She held his face in her hands as she spoke. "You won't lose me. I won't leave you!" she swore.

Her husband's lower lip trembled for a split second until he bit down on it.

"Every doctor in the hospital told us the same thing: the trouble with Georgeanna had nothing to do with my working at the school, or at home, or anything," she reminded him. "It was just one of those inexplicable things that no one can predict or control. And there's nothing you or I could've done to prevent it. I'm not in any danger now, especially from anything at the school. You can't hover over me like this for the rest of our lives."

"Can't I?" he asked, his sighing tone admitting his defeat.

She could see that in his rational mind, he knew she was right. He pulled her into a gentler but still firm embrace, holding her head against his chest with one hand as he buried his face in her hair. "I don't understand it: this hold it has on you," he mumbled.

"Do you remember when you were sixteen, and you decided to go into the joke business with Fred?" she asked, listening to his strong heartbeat pounding as she held him just as tightly as he held her. "Can you remember why?"

"We were idiots," he said lightly.

She lifted her head to look up at his face. George wore a slight, pained smile.

"Let's have some honesty, please. At least pretend to have a serious, adult conversation," she said.

"It was what we were meant to do, and we both knew it," he said with a shrug.

Annie nodded in understanding. "It was your calling. It still is. The humor, the creativity, the challenge of inventing something new: it's a perfect fit. Going to work every morning isn't a chore for you it's a labor of love."

"I suppose you're right," he admitted reluctantly.

"So, why are you trying to take the same thing away from me?"

"Is that really how you feel about it?" he said, surprised.

"Yes!" she cried. *How can he be so blind as to not see it?* "This isn't some hobby or something I do just to fill time. Being with the children every day, taking care of them and teaching them all at the school.... I love it! It's what I was meant to do. It's something I'm good at something valuable I can contribute...."

George snorted like a bull ready to charge. "There it is: that Muggle chip on your shoulder. I knew it was behind all this stubbornness somewhere. When are you going to get it through your remarkably thick skull that you are just as good, if not better, than any of the rest of us? Magic counts for nothing!" he said in a growl that would be shouting if not for the sleeping baby upstairs.

Annie paced across the kitchen floor. It frustrated her that he couldn't seem to put himself in her shoes, see things from her perspective on this point after all this time.

"How would you feel if the situation were reversed?" she asked, and not for the first time. "If every effort you made could be improved upon, done faster and better with nothing more than a wish? Would you be satisfied to be kept like a bird in a gilded cage?"

George sighed. "You're not a pet..." he protested. They'd had this argument before, a dozen times at least.

"I know that. But it *is* how I feel, sometimes." She had already given in, conceded the upkeep of the school was outpacing her capability, and agreed to accept Winky's help. But the *teaching...* that was another matter entirely. She would never give that up!

"Imagine how wonderful it is to me to discover something I can do that can't be done better by magic!" she pleaded with him. "Something I can contribute through my own effort that is appreciated and important! And you want me to give it up!"

"I *want* you to be happy..." he argued. "But I want you to take it easy, as well. Don't lie to me or to yourself and say the past four months haven't shaken you, too. You're not as strong as you were before. Don't push yourself too soon. *Promise* me that."

Annie nodded, acknowledging his request was a fair one. And he was right: she had been rattled by the events in the hospital and would never be the same after what had happened with Georgeanna. "As long as you promise you won't punish me for going back to work at the school, eventually. I don't want to fight with you about it forever. I will take it easy for now, but I will go back," she said decisively.

George winced at the finality in her tone. "At a later date... to be determined jointly?" he countered, clawing for some small concession on her part.

"Deal," she agreed.

George pursed his lips, far from satisfied, but recognizing the futility of pressing the issue further for the moment. "No take-backs," he added grumpily.

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Ron stepped out of the fireplace to an unexpected sight. The room was dark that much wasn't a surprise. But the fact that his brother was standing half-naked a yard away, wand pointed directly at his face, was a bit of a shock.

"This had better be life or death, you little shit," George snarled, keeping his wand pointed right between Ron's eyes.

Frozen still, Ron glanced around for clues to explain his brother's irrational, aggressive behavior and immediately wished he hadn't. George was holding up his trousers with the hand that wasn't aiming his wand, and Annie was clutching an afghan around herself, bare arms and legs exposed, reclining on the sofa cushions.

"For Merlin's.... Right in front of the *hearth*?" Ron spluttered. "Why not outdoors? Or on a busy street where a few more people could see?"

"It's eleven fucking o'clock at night in my own goddamn house!" George hissed, taking a step to the side, attempting to help hide the worst of Annie's exposure and nudging his wand a few inches closer to Ron's nose as he did so.

"Ron, what's wrong?" Annie said, peeking around from behind George's legs. Hers was the calmest voice in the room by far.

Ron spoke while looking at the ceiling. "Right. Sorry, Annie. It's just... something's the matter with Hermione. She's locked herself in the toilet at our place. I can hear her crying...."

"What the hell did you do now?" spat George.

"Nothing! I swear! At least, I don't think so," Ron answered, indignation and confidence waning in his voice the longer he spoke.

George rolled his eyes, but lowered his wand at last.

"Ron, what's the matter?" Annie repeated.

"That's just it! I don't know, and she won't tell me. She just said she wants to see you," Ron whined.

"Me?" Annie exclaimed. That was certainly unexpected. As sisters-in-law, they got on just fine, but Annie and Hermione were hardly close. That was Ginny's special role.

"Please... will you come?" Ron pleaded.

Annie looked at George, who sighed in frustration but nodded all the same.

"You go on with the idiot here," George said as he jerked his head toward his fuming brother. "I'll go see if anyone at the Burrow can come watch the kids, then I'll meet you at their place in a bit."

Annie understood George still didn't like the idea of relying entirely on Winky for anything important, especially leaving her unsupervised with their children. He seemed to have some deep-seated trust issues when it came to house-elves.

"D'you mind?" Annie asked her brother-in-law, spinning her finger around in midair.

"Oh, right. Sorry," Ron muttered as he turned his back to her.

Annie quickly gathered up her clothes and scurried to the first floor bathroom to get dressed. A minute and a half later, she stepped into the fireplace, holding Ron's thick forearm, and emerged another moment later in his and Hermione's little London flat.

"Just upstairs and to the right," he directed her. Ron's face betrayed an enormous amount of stress and worry.

As Annie climbed the stairs, she began to hear snuffles and muted sobs from behind a small door with a light visible underneath. She knocked quietly on the door.

"Hermione? You wanted to speak to me?"

"Annie?!"

She heard a click, and the door opened a crack. Hermione's puffy, distraught face peeked out, then pulled her quickly inside.

"Hermione! What's wrong?"

"Oh, Annie!" she wailed and buried her face in a handful of tissues. A fresh round of sobs issued forth.

Annie put her arms around her, trying to soothe her. "Calm down now, dear. Tell me what's happened."

Once Hermione finally gained some control, she began to speak. "Have you ever.... I mean, when you were... pregnant... did you ever... bleed?"

Annie closed her eyes as the air was involuntarily forced out of her lungs. *Poor Hermione!* Annie reckoned she understood what was wrong now. "How far along are you?"

she whispered.

"Not long.... Only six weeks," Hermione choked out.

"And Ron?"

"Doesn't know. I never told him.... I was going to wait until our anniversary..." she choked and began to cry anew.

Their wedding anniversary. About two weeks away, Annie calculated. "Hermione... I'm not a doctor, you understand... but I'm afraid that if you're bleeding... heavily, that is... that it's not a good sign," Annie spoke as gently as she could. "Do you want to see a Healer or doctor or something, just to be sure?"

"I think I already knew," Hermione sniffed, shaking her head slowly. "You know me as soon as I found out, I began reading every book there was about it. They all said that... loss... was more common than most people knew. And when it happens as early as this, it usually means... there was something really wrong... with the baby." And with that she lost control once more.

Annie held Hermione as they sat together on the edge of the bathtub, rocking her gently back and forth, allowing her to grieve. They cried together over the loss of the little life that had barely even started. It brought back the fear *No, abject terror, more like,* she corrected herself Annie had felt when she'd been worried about losing little Georgeanna so recently.

Annie brushed Hermione's hair back, turning her head up to face her own. "Listen to me, Hermione. I've read those books, too. And they all say just because this happened once, it doesn't mean you can't have a perfectly healthy baby next time. I know you must be hurting horribly right now, but don't give up hope. Promise me?"

Hermione nodded mutely, hugging herself tightly.

"Now, the best thing for you, I think, is to lie down for a while. Get some rest... 'til it's over. Can I get you anything?"

Hermione shook her head. She let Annie lead her into her bedroom and tuck her gently into bed.

"Hermione, dear... Ron really needs to know what's going on. He's worried sick about you right now," Annie said. "Are you ready? To tell him, I mean."

A panicked look joined the hurt on Hermione's face.

Annie sighed inwardly. She had already figured as much. There were some things that could cause even the much-vaunted Gryffindor courage to quail. "Or would you prefer it if someone else does?"

"Would you? I'm not sure I can...." Hermione squeezed her eyes closed, and tears coursed once more.

Annie kissed her tenderly on the forehead. "I'll send him up in a minute, all right?"

Annie went downstairs to find George and Ron silently glaring at each other from across the dining table she recognized from her Gran's kitchen. Or rather, she imagined Ron was glaring, since his back was toward her. One look at Annie's face, though, and George changed his expression. Genuine concern replaced every trace of irritation in an instant.

"Ron..." she said softly, not sure how to begin. She looked into his perplexed face *Perhaps a direct route is best in a time like this* "First... Hermione is going to be all right, yeah? But right now, she's... having a miscarriage." It was so hard to say the words she could only imagine how hard it was for him to hear them.

Ron stared at her in utter confusion, shaking his head. "But that's impossible. She's not...."

"She was.... She just hadn't told you yet. I'm so sorry, Ron."

Ron's face began to screw itself up in pain as the significance of what Annie was telling him finally began to register. She patted his broad shoulders as he stared at the table in front of him, and tears began to silently roll down his cheeks.

"I know it hurts, Ron... but Hermione needs you right now to be with her. You need to grieve together, to comfort each other. Go on up to her," Annie urged.

Ron nodded with a great sniff, wiping his cheeks with the back of his hands. The chair made a horrible scraping noise in the silence of the flat as he rose from the table and began to trudge upstairs.

"Ah, Annie. This is awful. Poor kids..." George muttered when Ron was out of earshot. He buried his face in his hands for a moment, sighing deeply.

"Come on let's leave them alone for now. We'll check on them tomorrow morning." Annie held out her hand, which George took, and they moved together toward the fireplace.

"I feel like such an arse," he sighed as they arrived moments later in their own home once again.

"Surely that's familiar territory?" she teased as she hugged him tightly. She was desperate for some way to lighten the horrible mood that had descended upon them.

"Ha, ha, ha," he answered sarcastically, but held her just as tightly anyway.

Light snoring could be heard coming from the guestroom. "Let's not wake Mum," George suggested in a whisper. "I don't want to talk to her about this tonight."

Annie nodded in agreement. Molly would find out about the tragedy soon enough. They both tiptoed up the stairs, still holding hands.

Annie let him go at the top. "I have to go give every one of them a kiss right now," she whispered, feeling an urgent need to gather each one of her children into her arms and hold them there forever.

George nodded and followed her, lurking just inside the doorways, feeling the urge to check on them as well. Both parents silently gave thanks for the five healthy little ones sleeping safely in their beds. The events of that night reminded them just how precious, how miraculous each one of their children was.

Afterward, as they crept into their own bed, Annie reached out and held her husband's face in her hands. "We've been so lucky, haven't we?"

George wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer. "Unbelievably so," he agreed as he kissed her forehead. "We're ridiculously lucky."

George rolled onto his back, and Annie rested her head on his chest. "I guess it's their turn now, isn't it?" she said wistfully. "Ginny and Hermione and Audrey, I mean. It's their turn to have all the babies."

"Don't be sad, love. Our family is perfect exactly the way it is," he assured her, stroking her hair with his hand.

"I know.... But I can't help wishing. It's hard... to know there'll never be another new baby in our house again."

"You just finished saying how lucky we've been. You expect me to risk losing you *for any* reason?" he countered.

"You're right, of course. It's silly of me to be so selfish," she agreed, trying to be rational about it.

George had made it quite clear, in fact, that another baby was completely out of the question. Just after Georgeanna had been born, while Annie lay weakened in the hospital bed, the doctor had warned them that she should never try to get pregnant again. The toll on her body had been too great, he'd said. And then, it had taken her so much longer to physically recover from the birth this time. They hadn't been home long at all before George had made the appointment.

The surgeon had certainly been perplexed to see a not-quite twenty-seven-year-old man and his young wife in his office requesting a vasectomy. "Are you quite sure, young man? This is permanent, you understand, regardless of the nonsense you see in films."

George had nodded solemnly. "We have five children, sir, and the doctors said the next one could kill her," he had said in a rough voice, swallowing hard.

It had nearly wrecked Annie to see him so upset.

"Well, I suppose I can't argue with that, now, can I? Very well, then. Come back next Friday morning for the procedure," the doctor had replied.

It had broken her heart just a little to give it all up. Raising children was the closest thing to a calling she had ever felt. A happier, lovelier purpose in life she couldn't imagine. Being pregnant felt wonderful to Annie feeling the little life inside as it grew, watching George smile with anticipation as he would kiss and stroke her swelling belly. She already missed it desperately. *Perhaps it's just because it's still so soon after the last baby?* she tried to comfort herself.

So soon, in fact, that tonight had been their first attempt at sex in months since before all the trouble began, before Georgeanna was born. Annie had finally been declared completely recovered from the traumatic birth, and George's test results had come back that very afternoon: he was officially sterile. Annie had nearly teared up with the news but refused to make it worse by letting him see her cry about it.

And then Ron had burst through their fire. *He certainly has a talent for interruption* she thought, recalling at least five other times her brother-in-law had unwittingly stumbled upon them nearly *in flagrante* over the years. Not that she begrudged him tonight, of all nights. It was just... frustratingly bad timing.

Oh, well, she thought with a sigh. *There's always tomorrow night.*

"You still awake?" George whispered.

Annie nodded against his chest.

"Mind if we pick up where we left off earlier?" he asked her, lifting her face toward his for a kiss. "It's been an awfully long time...."

Precocious

Chapter 61 of 80

George decides the twins have gotten away with underage magic for too long.

Chapter 61: Precocious

May 2005

Annie glanced up from the uncomfortable position of being bent over the sink when she heard flames flaring in the fireplace. Her husband's arrival at home was now imminent, which meant her time was up. "Thanks anyway, Winky," she said with a sigh.

"Sorry, Miss. I is not knowing anything else to try," the little elf replied, clearly disappointed that she was unable to solve the problem.

Annie began speaking as soon as George emerged from the unnatural green fire. "Now don't get upset, George," she called out.

"What the bloody hell happened to you?!" he cried out, eyes growing large as he strode rapidly across the room. He flung his work robe onto the sofa instead of hanging it up in his haste to reach her.

"Let me repeat: *do not* get upset. They didn't mean any harm."

"Arthur! Fred!" he shouted angrily up the stairs, knowing exactly whom she meant by "they."

"I've already dealt with them," she told him but was ignored.

"NOW!" he roared toward the ceiling.

The tops of two curly ginger heads were just visible over the balcony wall as they slowly made their way toward the staircase. Their dejected and remorseful faces worked to help cool their father's wrath somewhat as they slunk guiltily down the steps.

"Explain yourselves," George asked in a calmer voice once they stood before him.

"Well, we were just reading one of your old spell books, Dad," offered Art.

"Which will now be off limits to the both of you," George interrupted snappishly. "Continue."

The boys looked at each other.

"And we saw one that gave us an idea," Fred admitted only after being nudged roughly by his brother.

"So, you were inspired to turn your mother's hair *orange*?" George cried in disbelief, his anger flaring again.

"Not orange, exactly. We thought it would look more like ours," explained Fred.

"See, Merrie was saying..." Art began.

"You're trying to blame your little sister for this now?" George interrupted again, incredulous.

"Let them explain, love," Annie said, taking George's hand, helping to rein him in. There was a time not long ago when he would have been laughing hysterically at her predicament. The recent stress of the past few months was getting to him, impacting even his sense of humor. She hoped it wasn't a permanent change.

"Fine. Go on," he said, looking sternly at his sons.

"Merrie was saying how she thought maybe Mum might be sad sometimes," Art began once more.

"Feeling a bit left out," added Fred.

"Since she's the only one without ginger hair like all of us," Art finished.

"You expect me to believe you did this out of the kindness of your hearts?" George asked them, shaking his head.

"That's exactly what happened, love," Annie said. She squeezed his hand. "Merrie already confirmed it."

George closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. Annie nearly giggled out loud he looked so much like his father Arthur must have done when preparing to punish him and his twin for any multitude of infractions.

"Go get the book and show me the spell," he said softly.

He watched his sons as they trudged back up the stairs to fetch the book. Then he turned to the house-elf timidly peeking around the corner of the kitchen island. "Thank you for trying to help, Winky. What have you tried so far?"

"It won't wash out," Annie said glumly.

"Not even with Mrs. Skower's All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover, sir," Winky added tremulously.

George sighed. "That doesn't bode well, I'm afraid," he said, looking sympathetically at his wife.

Annie cracked a smile. "You have to admit, it is pretty funny."

George smiled grudgingly in response. "You do look ridiculous, yes," he said, pulling her into a hug. "Not to mention reek," he added, his eyes beginning to water from the smell now that her head was directly under his nose.

"That's the bleach, I'm afraid," Annie replied, stepping away from him and helping Winky with their dinner preparations. "Don't be too hard on them, George. They really thought they were doing something nice for me," she urged again.

"I know they didn't mean any harm," he replied. "But that's not really the issue. Every one of us has to learn this lesson at some point."

Just then the twins returned, Merrie trailing them guiltily as well. Fred handed him the book opened to the correct page. It was worse than he thought the spell book was his from *third* year. George shuddered to think what they might be capable of with wands.

"Do you see this swirly symbol?" he asked, pointing to it on the page.

All three of the children nodded.

"Do you know what it means?"

They all shook their heads.

"It means no effective counter-spell has yet been discovered. Do you understand?"

The boys hung their heads and nodded. George looked up at his wife and silently mouthed, *Sorry*.

Turning back to his children, he began to address them calmly, for all his anger had dissipated now. "Look at me, boys. You as well, Merrie," he said, looking down at his oldest daughter who had crawled up onto his lap.

George spoke gravely. "You all know that you are not allowed to do magic on purpose. Now, I blame myself for letting you get away with too much for too long. Clearly you haven't been taking the rule seriously enough. But no more. Are we clear?"

"Yes, Dad," the three of them mumbled contritely.

"Good. But the most important thing for you to understand is this: you must *never* cast a spell on someone without their permission."

"What about in an emergency, Dad?" asked Art.

"Yes, well seeing that you're six years old, let's leave the emergencies to the adults, shall we?"

"Or if we're attacked? You can use spells to defend yourself, right, Dad?" asked Fred.

Annie was biting her lips to keep from laughing. George was trying so hard at this. After all the time he'd spent in life on the other side of these conversations, she knew it was quite galling to him to be the heavy now.

George sighed. "Are you anticipating any such thing, Fred?" Then he rushed to add, "No, I don't imagine you are," before the little boy could answer to the contrary.

"Well, you shouldn't have said 'never,' then," muttered Art anyway.

"The point I'm trying to make, *Arthur* and *Fred*," he said sternly, looking both of them in the eyes in turn, "is this: do not... cast spells... on anyone... in this house. Especially if you don't know how to reverse them. Understood?"

"Yes, Dad," they said in unison once more.

"Now off with you wash up for dinner."

Dinnertime helped to lighten the mood considerably. Two-year-old Janie wouldn't stop laughing at "funny Mummy," and eventually her giggles spread throughout the table. By the end of the meal the twins were spouting off silly carrot-themed knock-knock jokes, making Merrie laugh so hard she got hiccups.

Later that night, after the children were in bed, George did what he could to try to help Annie. Several color-changing transfiguration attempts and a few generic reversal

charms later, nothing had changed.

"It is rather impressive," Annie said, trying to cheer him as he flipped through a potions manual for ideas next.

"That's what worries me most," he replied without looking up from the book. "It's too impressive. They're six-year-old wandless children they have no business managing a spell like this. It'll soon be too dangerous around here... if it isn't already."

"How can you say that?" she cried quietly. "They're sweet boys they'd never do anything to hurt anyone," she argued.

"Not on purpose," he agreed. "Damn," he sighed, shutting the book noisily. "Nothing in here either."

"Oh, well. It's only hair. It'll grow back won't it?"

"Hmm. That's not a bad idea, actually. I think I remember seeing some sort of hair-growing spell," he mumbled, flipping through yet another book. "Yes!" he cried in triumph when he reached the remembered page. "Here it is! Shall we give it a go?"

Annie nodded. "Ready," she answered.

She grunted in pain as it suddenly felt like she was hanging in midair suspended only by her hair, every strand being pulled out of her scalp at once. Even clutching the sink for support, she sank to the floor as her knees buckled, biting back a shriek. She closed her eyes, afraid to see what a gory mess she must look like.

George snarled a swear word and quickly halted the spell. "I swear I didn't know it would hurt you!" he cried, lifting her up off the bathroom floor and carrying her to the bed in the next room. "The bloody book didn't mention it!"

"It's okay," she gasped, gingerly reaching up to touch her scalp. It felt normal still attached to her skull, at any rate and the burning pain was receding quickly. "Probably just my stupid, tender head. Did it work?"

"A little," he said ruefully. "You've got about an inch of your normal hair now, maybe two," he said, gently wiping the tears from her cheeks.

Annie smiled to reassure him there was no lasting harm. "That'll have to do, then. Go get the scissors and take the rest of it off," she said with a sigh.

George asked her several more times if this is what she really wanted, nervously holding the scissors. Each time Annie confirmed her decision, eager for the horrible hair to go.

"Are you going to help me or do I have to do it myself?" she finally said, getting aggravated with him and impatient to have it gone.

George took his time, careful to snip only what was necessary, and tenderly avoided pulling any of her curls. Eyes downcast to avoid looking in the mirror, Annie watched as the pile of garishly orange hair grew on the bathroom floor in front of her.

"Done," he announced after nearly fifteen minutes. "Want to see?"

"Not really. I'm sure you did the best you could," she said nervously, gathering up the clown-like hair and throwing it in the bin.

George gave her a hug and kissed her forehead. He stroked her head gently, running his fingers through her cropped hair. "It's actually quite... cute. It sort of sticks out in all directions now. I like it," he declared, only a slight amount of surprise in his voice.

"Don't patronize me I don't need your pity," she half-teased him. She was touched that he would put out so much of an effort to make her feel better, though.

"You haven't got my pity. I'm serious," he protested, holding her chin and pulling her face up to him for a kiss. "More than cute... sexy even," he whispered, leading her into their bedroom.

"You're only desperate," she teased, following him.

"You might be right. We *do* have five months of doing without to make up for," he said before he kissed her once more.

*

George strolled across the familiar grounds. The day was surprisingly warm, and he squinted when the sun popped out from behind a cloud. In his mind, he had always associated Hogwarts with bitter cold, and the midsummer heat was disconcerting.

Smoke curled from a small hut near the woods he considered perhaps stopping by to see if Hagrid was around, just to pay his respects, before he left *Thankfully, that bloody memorial is around the other side of the castle, out of view*, he thought. *That's the last thing I need to deal with this morning*

Professor McGonagall was standing in front of the massive entrance doors, waiting for him. He nervously glanced at his watch, checking that he was on time for their meeting. Five minutes to ten, it said. He was, in fact, early.

Minerva McGonagall greeted him pleasantly enough she had never been what he would've considered a warm woman *Not like Sprout or Burbage, certainly*, he mused, recalling his classes with the comparatively affectionate witches. At her instruction, he followed the ancient witch through the castle.

As they silently wound their way up the staircases and down the hallways to the Headmistress's office, memories of George's school days began to creep back to mind, unbidden. They passed by the charred and still-blackened alcove which served as a memento of the time Fred had dropped the jar housing their swarm of illegal Sonoran Fire Ants *(resulting in a sweaty week's worth of detention spent scrubbing ovens in the kitchen, if memory serves)* And here was the tapestry behind which they had discovered a secret passageway into Flitwick's office, granting them illicit access to the professor's private library the contents of which were now kept under far stricter security. George wondered if anyone else knew Flitwick had such an extensive collection of African Charms texts, or harbored such a predilection for magical erotica involving sphinxes?

Soon he was ushered into what had been Dumbledore's office when he was in school, now McGonagall's. The large fireplace was blessedly empty of a fire, and all the windows were open to catch any and all breezes. The portrait of Dumbledore smiled down at him in a grandfatherly way and winked. Next to it, the one of Snape scowled, wrinkling his gargantuan nose in distaste. George returned the expression, glaring at the man he couldn't help but think had been a cold-blooded traitor, even though Harry swore he wasn't.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Weasley?" McGonagall asked in her prim brogue.

George's attention was snapped back to the real world. "I've come today to discuss the education of my sons, Professor," he began awkwardly.

"Yes, you mentioned that much in your letter. Of course your children will be welcome to attend Hogwarts when they reach eleven years of age," she assured him. Her forced smile failed to belie how little she was looking forward to the daunting prospect of another set of Weasley twins roaming the halls. "And how old are they now?" she asked with morbid curiosity.

"They'll be seven this Halloween," he replied.

"Seven years old! My stars, George, are you certain?" she exclaimed in shock, grasping the edge of her desk to steady herself.

George chuckled. "I left Hogwarts nine years ago, Professor. We've got five altogether now," he informed her.

"Merciful heavens," McGonagall muttered, digesting that particular bit of news: five more upcoming Weasley children *George* Weasley's, no less on their way to Hogwarts. She wondered if the new construction would be sturdy enough to withstand that particular onslaught.

"Yes, well," he said, redirecting her attention. "You see, the boys are... well, not quite what you'd expect from typical six-year-olds. We discovered they had prodigious... erm... *talents*, for lack of a better word, quite early on."

McGonagall raised one eyebrow in dubious curiosity. Every parent liked to think their little darlings were particularly intelligent or magically gifted in some way, and she'd long ago learned to take such declarations with a healthy dose of salt. Still, she'd heard a few vague rumors about these particular boys herself already, even from no less a personage than Kingsley Shacklebolt, who had met the twins a year ago when Arthur Weasley had brought his grandsons with him to work at the Ministry one day.

"Can you be a bit more specific, Mr. Weasley? Or perhaps I should call Professor Trelawney to help us divinate what it is you're trying to say?" she said impatiently.

"Right. Well, for starters, they were levitating multiple objects in concert at four months."

"Four months of age? Infants!? Oh, come now, Mr. Weasley," she tsked incredulously. She'd been on the lumpy end of a Weasley-spun tale too many times to count. Would the boy never tire of such childish pranks?

"I saw it myself my wife as well. But that's not all. Far from it. Annie that's my wife taught them to read just after they turned three years old, and it's been off to the races ever since. Built a Muggle car from a kit with my father last year. Dad swears they did most of it, too."

"This is all very interesting, but I fail to see...."

"They can perform any spell you care to name from the Standard Book of Spells *GradeThree*, mind you without having had any direct instruction. Not sure how they got ahold of the book, actually," he added the last bit in a mutter, mostly to himself.

"Grade Three?" McGonagall sputtered. "At six years old?" she cried. "And you were stupid enough to give them wands?!"

George shook his head. "No wands," he corrected McGonagall.

She stared at him, open-mouthed, for several seconds. "You expect me to believe this... this... unbelievable bit of...?"

George shrugged. He had anticipated this reaction. It was completely unbelievable, even for him, and he lived with it each and every day. "Don't take my word for it, then. There are plenty of witnesses: ask anyone in my family. Better yet, meet them yourself."

"And what purpose would that serve?" she asked.

"My wife and I want them to start Hogwarts...*this* fall."

"Preposterous. Not possible," she argued, shaking her head.

"Professor... we're worried," he spoke with quiet urgency. "My sons are rapidly progressing to the point where no one in my family will be capable of counteracting anything they happen to do. Don't get me wrong: they're good boys. Not a malicious bone in their bodies. But what if there's an accident? My wife... my wife is a Muggle, for Merlin's sake! She can't be expected to handle them for much longer, and frankly, I'm worried for her. Myself as well I don't have much beyond them at this point."

He paused to note Professor McGonagall's eyes roll at what she must've presumed was either exaggeration or false modesty on his part. "They need to be somewhere where they can be properly directed, taught by real teachers, and I'm bright enough to know I'm not the man for the job," he pleaded.

"All right, Mr. Weasley," she said reluctantly after a long pause, perhaps moved by his sincerity. "Bring them 'round. I will meet with...?"

"Arthur and Fred, ma'am," he informed her.

"Of course." She smiled, slightly sadly, upon learning their names. "I will meet with Arthur and Fred. I'm making no promises, you understand, Mr. Weasley."

George nodded eagerly. Now that McGonagall had agreed to meet the boys, he considered the battle already won, confident that no one who met with his sons could deny their gifts. "Thank you, Professor! When can we bring them by?"

McGonagall pondered for a moment. *Best to get this nonsense over with as soon as possible* she reckoned. "Next week? Same time?"

"Of course. Next Tuesday it is." He stood to shake her hand. "Thanks again, Professor. I know you'll come to the same conclusion we have," he added.

Minerva McGonagall cast a doubtful smirk his way, and he chuckled.

"We're in!" George cried as he burst through the door of his home. He had Apparated as soon as he'd reached the edge of Hogsmeade, so excited was he to share the news.

"What? Just like that?" The answering cry came from his wife, somewhere above him in the vicinity of the stairway. Four little bodies came running from all directions, all clamoring for his attention at once. He grabbed the nearest one, tossing it into the air and catching it with a triumphant roar before setting it back down upon its little feet.

"Well... nearly, anyway. She agreed to meet them next Tuesday morning," he explained as he met Annie's anxious gaze, tickling another someone. He glanced down and identified Merrie as the squirming, squealing victim of the moment.

"Tuesday?! That's so... so soon!"

Things were beginning to move awfully fast for Annie's taste. She had agreed with George that the twins definitely needed formal instruction in magic, but was far from convinced they were ready to be shipped off to a Scottish boarding school. They were only six, her little darling boys, after all.

Her little darlings, however, were of the quite opposite mind. They began to parade around the room upon the furniture, leaping from sofa to chair and back again, singing that blasted Hoggy-Warty song. Fred and Art had been begging to go all year long, ever since last Christmas when their Aunt Hermione had given them that bloody Hogwarts: a History book. Annie was looking forward to getting her revenge on her sister-in-law for that one.

All the noise woke Joey, who had been sleeping peacefully in her little sling, nestled against Annie's body. Now she was peering out around the edge of it, attempting to identify the source of the ruckus. Two red-haired, pig-tailed girls were each perched on strong, broad shoulders, and two curly carrot-tops had now wrapped themselves around long, sturdy legs, each one screeching as they were dragged slowly across the floor back toward the door.

"Ten a.m. Tuesday morning. I'll arrange for Mum to take the Munchkins for the day and cover for you at the school, and you and I will escort the Perps with us to the castle," he explained, using the family vernacular in reference to their children.

Annie wondered sometimes why they had bothered with naming their offspring in the first place. Actual given names were only used in situations requiring the implementation of dire consequences.

"We'll be back in a bit!" her husband called out, draped in a cloak of giggling toddler girls, as he headed off to visit the Burrow, update his own parents with the news, and make the necessary arrangements for next week. The boys were delightedly whooping in distance, already far ahead of their father.

Peaceful silence descended on the now nearly empty house as Annie stood in the large living room and got a foreshadowing taste of the future. "Never grow up, Joey," she admonished the infant in her arms, who was gazing up at her in curiosity.

Confession

Chapter 62 of 80

Annie lets Jane in on a little secret. Okay, it's a whopper.

Chapter 62: Confession

June 2005

George wondered for the twentieth time why he was sitting in a strange pub in London, waiting to meet Alec Magruder. He took another drink of his pint and reviewed once again the events that had led him here.

First, there was the initial shock of the phone message that afternoon. The fact that Alec had known his mobile number was a surprise. And why had he asked to meet George here, of all places, and tonight, of all times? He hadn't sounded upset or urgent. Nor had he left any clue as to why he had wanted to meet.

George's response had been to immediately ring Annie with the news. She'd been as shocked as he was.

"How did he get your number?" she'd promptly asked.

"I was going to ask you the same question," he'd replied.

"Huh. I suppose I might've given it to Jane at some point, but I can't fathom why," she mumbled, thinking aloud.

"The bigger question is why Alec wants to meet *me* at seven p.m. tonight. Any clue?"

"I'm as curious as you are at this point. By all means, stay and find out. We'll be fine here. See you when you get home, love."

So, here he sat in London, nursing a pint and waiting. George was checking his watch it was almost seven p.m. exactly when movement near the entrance caught his eye. He glanced up to see Alec wave at him from across the pub. *Certainly is punctual*, he thought to himself as he waved in response.

Alec had married Jane Moruki nearly two years ago. He was a pleasant sort of fellow easy-going, genuine, and friendly. All characteristics seemingly at odds with Alec's choice of profession: political bureaucrat. George supposed someone had to do the job, after all. His father, for example, had made a career of it. And then there was his brother Percy, who was practically born wearing Ministry robes.

None of this knowledge was helping to illuminate why Alec wanted to speak to George, however. The two men were little more than friendly acquaintances. It was their wives who had the deeper relationship. Annie and Jane did still make attempts to keep in touch, though it had gotten harder over the years as they'd all gotten busier with their adult lives. Not to mention the fact that Annie had, for all intents and purposes, left the Muggle world entirely behind her years ago now.

Alec sat down across the table from George and greeted him with a smile and a warm handshake. "Good to see you again, George," he said.

"And you, Alec. How've you been?"

"Busy. As I imagine you've been as well. Jane tells me you and Annie just had another baby this spring. That brings you up to...?"

"Five," answered George with a proud smile.

Alec gave a low whistle. "You're a better man than I, George," he said, his smile a compilation of admiration and pity.

"Oh, I don't know about better. Maybe just a bit luckier," he joked.

Both men chuckled at the veiled innuendo. Jane and Alec had yet to start their family, if indeed one was in the cards at all. They were both such driven young up-and-comers: Jane with her architecture firm and Alec moving up rapidly through the ranks of government. Annie had informed George that Alec was now a member of the Muggle Prime Minister's staff, no less.

Alec raised his glass for a toast. "To the continued health and happiness of your family!" he offered.

"Thank you," George said as they clinked glasses. "And to you, as well."

"So, I suspect you might be wondering why I asked you to meet me tonight," Alec said, finally cutting to the chase. He smiled at George as he took another drink from his glass.

"I'll confess to being curious," George replied.

"I had a very interesting meeting in the Minister's office today. Very illuminating in many ways."

George raised his eyebrows, waiting for the shoe to drop. He couldn't imagine why he should care about this meeting.

Alec looked at him with an amused smile. "Someone you know was at the meeting as well: your brother."

George's polite smile froze onto his face. "My brother?" he asked, trying hard to maintain an innocently casual tone of voice as his brain scrambled to make sense of the information. He tried to remember if he had ever mentioned any of his family to Alec before.

"Yes. Percy, I think, was his name. Of course, the moment I saw him, I thought of you. The family resemblance is striking, as you must know. And then there was the surname. Not a very common name, Weasley. There can't be that many around that aren't related to you, I reckon."

"No, I suppose not," he agreed noncommittally, deciding to ignore what he considered to be an inadvertent insult that Alec thought there was the slightest resemblance between Percy and himself. *What the bloody hell is going on?* he wondered. *What was Perce doing in the Prime Minister's office today?*

Alec continued. "So, I asked him, 'Do you know a George Weasley from Devon?' Well, he looked at me like I had just punched him in the gut. 'How do you know George Weasley?' he asked me, nearly stuttering. 'He's married to Annie Weasley. She's a dear friend of my wife's,' I said.

"And then, of course, he said yes, he did know you. That you were in fact his younger brother. Wouldn't you know it... small world, eh?"

George took a few moments to collect himself. There was no point in denying the connection since Percy had confirmed it. "So, you've met Percy. I hope you won't hold it against the rest of the family," he joked, hoping to diffuse the situation with a bit of humor. Just because Alec had met Percy didn't necessarily mean he knew about... *everything*.

"The rest of the family?" Alec asked, curious.

"There were seven of us kids. We lost my twin brother seven years ago now," he replied softly.

"My condolences. But seven children? Well, now I see why you take five children of your own in stride," he exclaimed.

George shrugged while Alec maintained a friendly, genuine smile on his face. George wasn't picking up any subterfuge from him at all. They were just two blokes chatting about a curious coincidence, perhaps?

Alec took another drink. "Your brother Percy was on an *official* visit today. From the *other* Ministry..." he said softly.

"Aha," sighed George. "And now we're getting to the real reason for this chat."

"Absolutely fascinating, you know," Alec's eyes sparkled. "That it really exists. That it's *allreal*. I suppose you can...?"

George nodded slowly, silently, just once.

"Tell me... does Annie know?" Alec asked.

"Are you joking? Of course she does!" George exclaimed quietly.

Alec snorted in amazement. "When did you tell her? How did she take it?" he asked with eager curiosity.

"Annie and I met in the woods that separated our homes when we were seven years old. She's known since then." George smiled at the memory of it.

Alec's eyes grew wide with astonishment. "Good Lord! Seven years old? Really?" He shook his head as he pondered the repercussions.

"So, is that all this is about? Idle curiosity?" George asked patiently.

"Well, no, actually. It's mostly about Jane, in fact."

"About Jane?" George repeated, surprised. "Is everything all right?"

"Again, no. She's been quite worried about both of you for a while now."

"Worried how?" George asked a bit defensively.

"Only in so far as she feels like she and Annie don't get to spend much time together. And she's felt for a long while that Annie has been keeping something from her. Maybe even avoiding her, because of it," he explained. "Is she? I mean, other than the obvious?"

George thought carefully of how best to answer him. "It's complicated... because of the life we've chosen. You of all people now understand there are restrictions laws even that control interactions between us and you. Annie has to follow them, just like everyone else."

"That's all it is, then? There's nothing wrong with Annie?"

Again, George paused before answering. "She had a difficult time with the birth of our youngest. It's taken her a long time to recover from it. But no, there's nothing wrong with Annie." George supposed it was something of a leap forward for him to say it out loud. She *was* fine. It was just hard to remember that fact whenever the vision of her lying in that horrible hospital bed came roaring back to mind.

"Jane misses her terribly, you see. She worries about Annie because of it. She's got herself convinced that... well... that one or the other of you is terminally ill, in fact."

"Good Lord, no!" It was George's turn to exclaim. "We're all in perfect health, I assure you," he laughed. "Please tell her so."

Alec's answering smile turned into more of a grimace. "I was rather hoping perhaps you and Annie would tell her so," he said.

George's eyes narrowed. He had a good idea what was coming next.

"George, my wife is a very trustworthy person, I assure you. I trust her with all my own secrets, you know, and she's never let me down. Perhaps you might consider doing the same?"

So, this is what it all boils down to, George thought. Despite all the rules and regulations forbidding it, Alec wanted his wife to be in on their secret. George had to admit he was impressed by the fact that Alec had come to him first instead of going directly to Jane with the information. Alec apparently appreciated the fact that it was not his right to divulge it, and George was grateful for that discretion.

"Look, I'll be straight with you. It's not just up to me, as you well know. But I do promise you one thing: I'll speak to Annie about it, and we'll make a decision together. I'll let you know as soon as I can."

*

The following weekend, Annie sat nervously on the sofa as George went to the door to greet their guests. He was wearing his "party" shirt: the garish turquoise one he'd bought in Hawaii with hula girls tossed about all over it. He claimed the color reminded him of the old Anglia his family used to have. The silly thing usually made her smile, and today was no exception.

"Hello, Jane, Alec," her husband welcomed them warmly.

Jane peeked around George, searching for Annie.

"Over here, Jane," she called, standing and taking a few steps toward her friend.

Jane's hand went to her mouth, and her brow furrowed in concern. "Oh, Annie!" she cried, dashing over and pulling her into a fierce hug, tears beginning to flow. "I knew it! I knew you were ill! Why didn't you tell me sooner?" she admonished.

"Ill?" asked Annie, confused. "Why would you think that?"

Jane pulled back from the hug. "You look... you look so tired... and pale. And your hair is so short! Are you in much pain, love?"

"I look tired and pale because I'm exhausted, Jane!" Annie laughed. "And I'm exhausted because I'm nursing a five-month old who still wakes up twice a night!" Annie punctuated her declaration with a yawn for effect. "Not to mention the rest of my army of children is running me bloody ragged!"

"So, you're not... ill?" whispered Jane, sounding hopeful but looking doubtful.

"I promise you, I'm fine!" Annie assured her, still laughing. "Though apparently I've looked better, considering your reaction."

Jane hiccupped, sobbed, and laughed all at the same time to amusing effect. "You must think I'm a complete idiot," she said while accepting the box of tissues offered by Annie.

"Not completely," she teased as she and Jane each took a seat on the sofa. "You're not an idiot at all, Jane," she said with more seriousness. "You're right about one thing... I have been keeping something from you... for a long time now." She glanced up at George, who was standing behind her, resting his hand on her shoulder for moral support.

"I swear I didn't put Alec up to this. I only found out after the fact that he met with George and told him I was worried about you." Jane took her hand. "As long as I know you're all right, Annie, nothing else matters. You don't have to tell me, whatever it is, if you don't want to."

"I've always wanted to tell you, Jane, but I couldn't. It wasn't my decision to make, not even my secret to tell, really. But now, things have changed, and... well...." Annie took a deep breath and dove right into the confession. "George is a wizard, Jane."

"At what?" her friend chuckled, a sly, amused smile on her face.

Annie giggled at Jane's wicked assumption. "I mean, he can do magic. With a wand."

Jane lowered her eyes bashfully and squirmed a bit. "Erm... Annie... that's really none of my business...."

Annie looked at George in amused frustration, her face flushed. "I never realized how much this would sound like innuendo," she mused with a giggle. Her husband laughed as well. "Looks like you'll have to show her, George," she suggested. "Why don't you serve the hors d'oeuvres?"

Jane began sputtering in shocked protest as George reached into his trouser pocket... then drew out his wand. Her eyes grew wide as he aimed it at the dishes on the kitchen counter and, with the slightest flick of his wrist, summoned them from across the living room. Both Alec's and Jane's jaws were slack as George directed the plates of food to fly through the air, coming to rest gently on the low table before them.

Slowly, Jane tore her eyes from the food to look at Annie. "George is a wizard?" she repeated in a whisper. "He can do magic...?"

"With a wand," Annie confirmed with a giggle and a nod.

"How long have you known?" Jane asked, still incredulous.

"A long time," Annie said evasively. "I couldn't tell you. I couldn't tell anyone or George and his family could've gotten in trouble. No one is supposed to know. It's the law, actually."

"And you've kept this secret all this time... from everyone?" she asked.

Annie nodded, wincing slightly. "You're the first living soul I've ever told."

Jane's eyes boggled again. "Not even your Gran?" she cried.

"Well, I did try to tell her at first, but she never swallowed it. I don't blame her for not believing such a mad story from a little kid would you?" Jane shook her head, and Annie continued. "She did figure it out herself, though, the night we were married."

Annie reached under the coffee table and pulled out a photo album from the shelf there. She flipped to a picture taken at her wedding and tilted the book to show her friend. "This was us our wedding in Gran's hospital room. I think it was meeting Fred that must've finally tipped her off," Annie explained as she tenderly stroked the edge of the photo with her fingertip.

Jane examined the photo with her. "I never knew you were a twin, George," she mused. Then she snorted, looking up at him accusingly. "I suppose there's quite a bit I don't know about you, isn't there?"

"Most likely," he agreed with a smile.

"And you," she cried, turning to Annie. "You little sneak! I can't believe you kept this to yourself all these years!" Jane exclaimed in mock indignation. "Some friend you must think I am! You don't trust me a bit, do you?"

"It was the law! I couldn't tell anyone," Annie cried defensively.

"And you're such a stickler for rules, I well know," Jane parried, smirking.

"Don't be ridiculous, Jane. You know far too much about me! I know I'm at your mercy, and so do you," she teased, grateful her friend was taking the revelations so well.

"Too right I do. Maybe it's time for me to spill my guts tonight as well. A little revenge might make me feel a bit better about the whole thing. Perhaps I might recall a few teenage lovesick conversations...."

George edged himself onto the arm of the sofa behind Annie and put his arm about her. "Ooh, do tell, Jane," he encouraged her like a gossip-starved biddy.

"Oh, let's not play 'Who Can Embarrass Annie More?' tonight, if you please," Annie groaned. "I freely and with fear in my heart acknowledge both of you know enough to put me under."

"Don't think you're off the hook either, Mr. Wizard," Jane said as she gave George a scolding glare. "I expect quite an entertaining show this evening for my trouble," she

warned, gesturing at the plates of food.

"Why don't you and Alec take yourselves to the garden, George?" Annie suggested. She wanted some time alone with her friend, whom she hadn't seen in so long.

"Only if Jane promises to save at least one teenage lovesick confession for me," he joked as he got up from the sofa.

"I promise I'll save the juiciest one just for you," Jane teased as Alec rose and gave her a peck on the cheek on his way outdoors.

*

George and Alec sat on lawn chairs together in the garden at Mole Hill, watching the sun set as dinner cooked on the grill. Each held a bottle of beer in one hand.

"I'm curious.... Why was Percy at the Prime Minister's office the other day? You never did tell me. Or is it a state secret?" asked George.

"Actually, it is something of a state secret, but seeing as you are who you are, I suppose I could let you in on it. You'll likely find out about it on your own soon enough. I don't suppose it will be such a great secret in your world."

George's brow furrowed as Alec paused for dramatic effect before continuing. "Would it surprise you to know that Elise Clevenger, youngest daughter of the Right Honourable Silas Clevenger, will be attending Hogwarts in the fall?"

George nearly did a spit take. "She's a witch?!" he sputtered. "My God... I mean... how? Is the PM... or his wife maybe?" he coughed.

Alec shook his head. "All as Muggle as they come... that's the word, isn't it? No, Elise is the only one of the family with that particular talent," he chuckled.

"Blimey! Must've been a shock to them, for sure. How've they kept it under wraps this long?" he asked.

Alec shrugged. "They've always been very protective of the privacy of their family, kept the children out of the public eye for good reason, I now understand. She's a good girl, runs on an even keel, so I reckon they didn't have too much trouble with, ah... accidents, as you say. And ever since his election, there've been a team of what you lot call Obliviators at every interview and press conference, ready to intervene whenever someone brings up the topic of his children or their education."

"If they're so secretive, as you say, how did you manage to get the privilege to know?" George pressed, terribly intrigued by the prospect. "Why were you at the meeting? I thought only the Minister himself was permitted to know about our world."

"The Clevengers are old family friends of mine," Alec explained. "So, yes, that also partly explains why I'm working in the Prime Minister's office, young as I am. I've long suspected there was something different about Elise I've known her since her birth, you see but never would've guessed at the truth."

"You seem to be pretty well-versed in the workings of higher government liaisons," Alec continued after they had both paused for a bit to ponder the revelations. "How did you know the PM even knew about you all? Is it common knowledge?"

"Not exactly," George confessed. "By strange coincidence, several high-ranking Ministry of Magic officials are old family friends of mine as well. My father has worked there for years, as well as my brother, Percy, but Dad's not really what you'd consider high-ranking," he added with a chuckle.

"Strange coincidence, indeed. Then you must know all about the recent troubles a few years ago?" Alec asked curiously.

George nodded slowly, not at all sure he wanted to continue the conversation if this was the direction it was headed. "You could say that, yes," he replied hesitantly.

"I'm sorry... I don't mean to pry. Is that how you lost your brother?"

George nodded again. "Don't worry my family was on the good side," he winked, hoping to keep the atmosphere light and casual. The last thing he wanted tonight was to rehash the events of the war. "No hard feelings toward Muggles, obviously," he added, holding up his hand and wiggling the finger wearing his wedding band.

Alec paused with a thoughtful look on his face. George correctly figured he was doing the math. "And you married her in the middle of it?" he gasped when he reached the correct conclusion. "My God, man! You're either recklessly brave, or...."

"Stupid in love," George added, chuckling. "That's me. Best idiotic stunt of my life, that one. And between you and me, that's saying something. I'm rather a connoisseur of idiotic stunts."

*

Jane continued to flip slowly through the photo album. She seemed to take the fact that some of the pictures were animated in stride.

"George seems to have a big, happy family," she mused, noting the predominance of red-headed people in the photos.

"They're wonderful and very close-knit. I'm lucky to have them nearby," Annie replied as she pointed out the window toward the Burrow. "That's where he grew up. His parents still live there."

Jane took in the view from the large window. The preposterously lopsided house in the distance, lit up by the setting sun, brought a smile to her face. "So, they're all...?" Jane asked, letting the sentence hang unfinished.

"Magical, yes. It's not nearly as rare as you might imagine. Thousands of them live here in Britain, even more all over the world. The secrecy laws require them all to hide, to live apart from the rest of us. It's practically a separate culture with a few exceptions."

"Like you?" Jane asked.

Annie nodded. "Sometimes Muggles that's what they call us marry into magical families. Quite a bit rarer, a magical child can be born to non-magical parents. I suppose it must be a spontaneous mutation or something."

"Mutation? It's genetic?" she asked, surprised.

"Most think so. You have to be born with the ability. It certainly runs in families," Annie explained.

Jane's eyes grew round again as she reached the next logical conclusion. "Does that mean...*your kids?*"

Annie smiled and nodded. "Every one of them, just like their dad," she said with glowing pride. Even though Georgeanna hadn't expressed her abilities yet, there was no reason to think she'd be any different from her older siblings.

Jane shook her head once more, flabbergasted. "How do you do it? I mean, it must be hard enough to keep up with five, but... my God!"

"It's not easy, no," Annie giggled. "But they're amazing kids. Exceptional, in fact, because they manage to control it as well as they do. That's not to say we haven't had a few accidents over the years," she laughed, running her hand through her current cropped hairstyle. "But they've had to learn to control it early, me being what I am. And Molly and Arthur that's George's parents or George himself has always been able to put everything to rights again afterward whenever they slip. The four older ones are all over there now," she said, nodding toward the Burrow, "spending the evening with Granny and Grandpa. Joey's upstairs asleep."

"Joey?"

"Didn't I tell you Georgeanna's nickname? Her sisters have trouble pronouncing her name, and George jokes she's like a baby kangaroo, always peeking out of the sling I carry her around in," Annie laughed. "So, the poor thing's Joey now, I'm afraid."

"That's adorable!" Jane gushed. "I hope I get to see them. It's been ages!"

Annie nodded. "Molly and Arthur will bring them home before bed tonight. You'll get to meet them as well, if you like."

"I'd love to meet the whole family, if I may. Especially George's twin."

Annie's face fell.

"What's wrong? Did I say something?" asked Jane, noticing immediately and sounding worried.

"Fred... that's George's twin brother... died shortly after we were married. We were devastated by it the whole family for a long time," she said softly, picking at a seam on her jeans.

"I'm so sorry, Annie. What happened?" Jane asked sympathetically.

Annie sighed, steeling herself to continue. The whole point of tonight was to tell Jane everything. As much as it brought the hurt back to her heart, Annie knew she owed it to her friend to share the complete story. But the hibernating monster of her grief snorted awake. "When George and I were married, there was a magical war going on," she began to explain.

Jane's eyes boggled once again, but she kept silent, enrapt in Annie's story.

"One faction, the enemy, felt magic belonged only to wizards from established magical families. They persecuted any witch or wizard that couldn't prove their heritage wasn't tainted by Muggle blood. Some even went so far as to preach that non-magical people were less than human. They came to power the night of George's oldest brother's wedding, when they took over the Ministry of Magic. They ambushed the celebration, searching for a wizard they felt was a possible threat to their claim."

"Oh my God, Annie," Jane whispered, remembering the day. She had helped Annie get ready to attend, after all. It suddenly became clear to her why Annie had been so reluctant to discuss what had happened that night she and George hadn't had a row, after all, like Jane had supposed.

"It probably goes without saying that George's family didn't buy into that rubbish. In fact, they were some of the leaders of the resistance against the awful regime. They were very brave and outspoken, and therefore targets for retribution. They were eventually driven into hiding, like hundreds of others, for their own safety."

"And where did that leave you?" Jane asked, full of concern that was no less touching because it came so many years after the fact.

Annie smiled her thanks and continued, "That's why we had to be so secretive about our marriage; why I told you at the time that you couldn't tell anyone. They took me in after Gran died at great personal risk, I might add. We all hid out together for several months. Then Fred was killed in the final battle of the war... in the spring following our wedding, when I was pregnant with the twins. It was a miracle the family didn't lose any more every one of them was there, fighting against the evil ones. So many died that night..." she said, shaking her head with the old sadness.

"But you won, right? The good guys?" asked Jane quietly.

Annie forced a smile back onto her face. "Yes. We won. The leader of the Dark wizards was destroyed, his forces scattered and hunted down afterward. There're still some pockets of discrimination against Muggles and Muggle-borns, of course, but it's no longer official public policy to persecute them."

"So, that's why your son is named Fred? After his uncle?"

Annie nodded. "Our little band of half-bloods are some of the first children born after the war," she explained with a wink and a giggle. "And they're being raised not to take any crap from anyone who tries to treat them any differently because of it." Her eyes glinted with pride and indignation as she smiled mischievously.

"Good for you!" cried Jane. "It just goes to show it must be human nature to insist some people are better than others, no matter how ridiculous the qualification might be."

Annie snorted. "I suppose you're right. Thank goodness there always seems to be a group of reckless rebels willing to thumb their noses at authority and call the buggers on it," she said with another wink.

Jane laughed out loud. "You and that husband of yours certainly fit the bill there, Annie Weasley!" she exclaimed.

They were interrupted then by George calling out, "Dinner's on, ladies," as the two men reentered the house.

Annie and Jane rose from the sofa and made their way to the large dining table behind them. George was arranging the food upon the table while Annie collected a stack of plates to distribute. As Jane sat down, she let out a startled cry when Winky appeared at her elbow, setting utensils at her place.

"Winky is sorry, Miss. Not meaning to startle you."

"That's my fault, Winky. I haven't introduced you yet. Winky, these are our good friends, Jane and Alec. And this is our dear Winky, whom we couldn't live without!" gushed Annie, beaming at the house-elf.

Winky glanced nervously at the floor but smiled at the compliment. She clambered up onto a tall stool set next to Annie's spot. "Miss is very gracious, as always. Winky is knowing no other house-elf what eats with the family, not ever. Weasleys are the kindest wizards, I is knowing it well."

"Stop it, Winky, we're blushing!" George chuckled awkwardly, embarrassed by the praise. "Now sit and eat, all of you."

Alec and Jane couldn't help but stare at the creature sitting at the table next to Annie. She felt the best solution was to make Winky the topic of conversation on her own terms, rather than as an object of curiosity.

"Winky came to live with us this year, just before Joey was born. She helps keep the school in order. I don't know how we survived without her before," Annie explained as Winky shyly nodded, her mouth full of a bite of food.

"A school? I thought Jane said you were home-schooling your kids," Alec asked.

"Just another of the twisted half-truths, I'm afraid," Annie confessed. "Magical children are kept away from Muggle schools. It's in everyone's best interest, actually. Very few of them have the level of self-control necessary to interact with Muggles safely."

Annie glanced at George, who was chewing his food carefully. He was avoiding looking at her or participating in the conversation. Perhaps their compromise about the school was still too new, still felt too much like a defeat on his part. At least he wasn't arguing with her, and for that she was thankful. That clouded, angry look had not come to his face... yet. She determined to do what she could to keep the conversation light and brief, for her part.

"Anyway, several of our friends and family with little ones bring them here while they work elsewhere. We call it a school for lack of a better term. It's really just a daycare of sorts for the youngest ones, but I've started teaching the older ones a bit."

"A bit?" piped up George. "It's a full primary curriculum, Annie! Reading, maths, writing.... You're too modest, as usual," he huffed, shaking his head. To her relief, a half-smile graced his features now.

Annie gave him a pleased smile. "I suppose so," she conceded. "I can show you after dinner, if you'd like to see," she offered to her guests.

"That's really impressive, Annie," praised Jane. "I'd love to see it."

Annie smiled, feeling mischievous after the small success with George. "So, you don't hold it against me? That I hitched myself to one of the local idiots instead of going to university?" she teased, throwing her friend's old words back at her.

Jane gasped in mortified shock as George guffawed and Alec smiled. "I can't believe you told him I said that!" Jane cried. "You'll pay for that one, Annie," she threatened.

"Does that mean it's time for the juicy confessions?" asked George eagerly as Annie groaned.

"Like you haven't worked it out on your own by now," Jane scolded him. "She certainly was miserable over you for quite a while."

"Miserable? I like the sound of that. Just how much misery are we talking about?" George leered.

"I remember a certain conversation one Easter holiday..." Jane began.

"Jane! Confidentiality!" Annie cried, horrified. "I have a reasonable right as your oldest and dearest friend to expect some level of confidentiality!" she demanded.

"I was visiting home from my first year at Cardiff, so you must have been in sixth year, correct? Terribly lovestruck and certainly full of a good deal of moping and sighing..." Jane continued, ignoring her.

"I'm begging you!" Annie pleaded. "I have to live with him after this! He's merciless, he is! His big, fat head is swollen enough already!"

"I think I can recall you saying something along the lines of 'sweet' and 'beautiful'.... Maybe even a 'perfect' or two thrown in there for good measure. You were clearly looking through some rather thick love goggles at the time," Jane teased as she smirked at George.

The men of the table oohed and ahed for good measure.

"Was this before or after you got the tattoo of me on your back, Annie?" George asked with a glint in his eyes.

"Tattoo!?" Jane shrieked. "What is he talking about?"

Annie put her head down on the table with a soft thud and waved her white napkin above her in surrender.

"Let the public flogging begin!" cried Alec, entertained by the spectacle.

"Is Miss all right?" asked Winky timidly as she eased herself down off the stool to put her empty dish in the sink.

"It's fine, Winky. I'm just about to be drawn and quartered by my husband and an *oldformer* friend, that's all," she assured the house-elf with a smile as the rest of the table laughed.

Genius

Chapter 63 of 80

George gives Annie a tour of Hogwarts while Art and Fred are being interviewed by the Headmistress.

Chapter 63: Genius

July 2005

Three days later, Annie stood with her husband and sons in the shadow of the enormous castle. She had only been here once before six years ago, for the memorial service. She had understandably paid very little attention on that day to the imposing structure now before her. But today, as she gazed at the hulking edifice, her courage nearly failed her.

There's not a chance in hell I'd abandon my children here to spend their childhoods in this monstrosity she swore to herself. *They'd be lost inside a week in this jumbled mess of turrets and towers!*

George, seemingly sensing her anxiety, squeezed her hand. "Dear old Hogwarts!" he exclaimed cheerfully with an excited smile.

Annie wasn't sure if it was more for her benefit or for that of their uncharacteristically silent twin boys. She wondered if perhaps they also felt intimidated by the behemoth towering over them. They looked up at their father's face and smiled in response, encouraged by his tone.

"Come on, then. Mustn't be late," he prompted them.

Annie nodded briskly. "We've got to make a good impression today, boys. And please, for the love of Mike, don't *accidentally* burn it down," she teased, plucking up her own courage.

"Unless Professor McGonagall asks you to," George amended.

"And then, by all means, blast the bloomin' thing to smithereens!" she laughed as they trudged up the stairs to the entryway.

"Welcome to Hogwarts, my dear Weasleys!" a dark figure called out from the doorway in a lilting brogue.

Annie immediately recognized the elderly witch from the memorial service. Apparently the dark, somber robes she had worn then were what she wore everyday, not just

something donned for the solemn occasion so long ago. She looked like every cartoon caricature of a witch that Annie had ever seen, lacking only the green skin and warts.

"Good morning, Professor McGonagall," George replied. "Say hello to the Headmistress of Hogwarts, boys," he instructed his sons.

"It is very nice to meet you gentlemen," she spoke gently, bending down to their level. Annie was greatly relieved to see such kindness directed to her sons from the otherwise intimidating witch. "Now, if you please, which one of you is Arthur?"

"I am, Professor," Art spoke up with perfect politeness, offering his right hand to her.

Annie smiled at his bravery.

"And I am Fred, of course," added his twin, hand also extended.

"My goodness. Such very grown-up young fellows," McGonagall exclaimed. She cast a look of impressed surprise at George, who was biting his lips in an effort not to laugh out loud. "And you must be Mrs. Weasley," she added, looking directly at Annie, who nodded as she shook her hand.

"Oh, sorry. Yes, this is my wife, Annie," George rushed to say.

"I understand you've started a magical infant school down in Devon? I must say I was thrilled to hear of it. High time somebody did. You'd be shocked, I'd bet, to see the state of some of the students I get here. Some of them can barely read, for heaven's sake! It's absolutely scandalous! Apparently some parents think all you need to get through life is a wand," Professor McGonagall exclaimed as she ushered them inside.

"Erm... well, yes. A few of us parents have formed a co-operative of sorts together, sharing our expertise, that sort of thing. Most of them work at the Ministry and manage to juggle their work schedules to help out one day a week," Annie explained. The five of them were strolling through the cavernous entryway, and Annie found it somewhat difficult to concentrate on the conversation as her eyes roved over the castle's interior for the first time.

"But you are the day-to-day teacher, correct?" McGonagall pressed.

"Oh, erm, yes. Just the basics, of course. Reading, maths, that sort of thing. I'll be back to it full time this fall," she explained, glancing at George to judge his reaction. They had never really fought about anything else during their entire marriage, and as much as she hated to cross him, she had refused to give up the school.

George gave her a half-smile, reassuring her that their compromise decision still stood.

"Mr. Weasley told me yesterday that you were able to teach these young ones to read at... well, he claims they were three years old!" the elderly woman said, her doubt displayed clearly on her smirking face. They had reached what Annie thought looked like a large classroom, and they filed through the entrance as Professor McGonagall held the door open.

Annie nodded with a bashful smile but was exempted from making any further explanation by her sons.

"Oh yes, Professor. We've been reading for ages. My favorite sorts of books are the ones about Muggle machines like steam engines and construction vehicles!" cried Arthur.

"Really? And what about you, Fred?" McGonagall asked, eyebrows raised.

"Yes, I like those as well. I read one yesterday about making potions, though. I think I'd like to try that," he spoke with all the seriousness a six-year-old could muster.

"And what were you doing in my library, young man? I thought I made it very clear you are not allowed," said George sternly.

"It wasn't your library, Dad. It was Grandpa's! There's no rule about Grandpa's books!" Fred retorted.

George sighed in frustration. Technically, his son was right. And he should have seen such an obvious loophole himself much sooner than this *must be losing my edge* he thought ruefully. Annie giggled softly at his side, and McGonagall smiled with amusement herself.

"Well now, boys, please take a seat. Has your father explained to you why you're here today?" Professor McGonagall asked them.

Both boys nodded. "Dad says that you want to see if he's full of...."

"Art!" barked George, cutting his son off just in time.

"Dad told us you'll ask us questions," Fred explained now that his brother had been shushed into silence.

"And ask us to do magic," Art added, more subdued this time.

"To see if we can come to Hogwarts," concluded Fred.

"Would you like to come to school here, then?" asked Professor McGonagall.

"Oh yes, please!" exclaimed the boys in unison.

"We even know the song!" cried Fred.

"Do you now?" chuckled McGonagall. As the boys began singing, she waved their parents out the door, whispering for them to return in about an hour and a half.

George quietly closed the door to the classroom. He took Annie's hand and led her off down the hallway. "Fancy a tour, love?" he whispered.

Annie smiled and nodded conspiratorially.

"But no funny business, mind. Show some restraint for once and keep your grabby hands to yourself," he teased, swatting her on the rump.

"You are such a troll! Some things never change, I suppose," she muttered.

He stopped just outside a very familiar door and sniffed. "Smell that?"

Annie inhaled, then screwed her face up from the stink. "That's awful!"

George knocked quietly on the door, then gently tried the doorknob. Finding it locked, he reached sneakily into his pocket and pulled out his wand.

"Please don't get us in trouble!" Annie pleaded. "You have your sons to think about, now!"

"Shh!" he hushed her, then with a silent *Alohamora*, opened the door to Filch's office. It was exactly as he remembered it, right down to the names on the filing cabinet. "Come see this," he whispered, dragging her into the dim room behind him and closing the door quietly.

Annie's eyes grew wide as he opened the drawer labeled "Weasley, F. & G." They each combed through the folders and parchment documents for a few minutes. He pulled out one of them to read: this one immortalized the dozen Dungbombs in the prefects' bathroom incident, second year.

"My God, George! Did you ever even set foot inside a classroom while you were here?" she whispered in amazement. Even so, her voice sounded funny; she was holding her hand up to her nose to ward off the stench that permeated the place.

"Not if I could help it, no," he chuckled. "I can't believe he's kept this rubbish for nine whole years!"

He and Fred were responsible for a sizeable number of amended rules for this place, George reckoned with no small amount of pride. They had spoiled a good bit of the fun for future generations. It was part of the reason he worked so diligently each year to introduce new, creative ways for his young customers to get in to trouble: he felt he owed it to them, having personally ruined so many other good opportunities.

Suddenly, they heard a loud crash behind them in the hallway. Annie slammed the file door shut and spun around, looking criminally guilty. George nearly burst out laughing at the stricken look on her face.

"Filch-ee! Filch-ee! Come and see! Sneaky buggers in your office!" cried a cackling voice from just beyond the door.

Annie dove into George's arms, roughly shoving him back into a dark corner. "Hide us, you idiot!" she hissed urgently.

"Sneaky creepies in the summer?" The voice was inside the room with them now. "Come out, come out, wherever you are, cheeky chums."

George couldn't hold it in anymore. An odd, snorting chuckle escaped him.

"What's this?" cried the voice, blowing a blast of air that scattered all the parchments on the desk to the floor.

George felt Annie's grip around his body tighten further, her face buried against his chest.

"Red-haired rotten so and so? Bless my stars and garters, if it isn't... GEORGE WEASLEY!" A hovering spirit-being materialized in front of him and doffed his hat in respectful salute.

"Peeves! Pipe down!" George cried, his stern tone undermined by the laugh that accompanied it.

Annie began to loosen her grip on him slightly, allowing him to take a full breath at last.

"Oh, *sir!* Such a great honor to see you again!" Peeves cried, punctuating his greeting with a loud farting noise. "Has Filch had you locked up in the dungeon all this time? Are you starkers?" he asked hopefully.

"I'm not a student anymore, Peeves," George tried to explain.

Annie lifted her head and began to peek around, trying to make out what exactly was addressing them.

"So, what you doin' here, then?" demanded the poltergeist petulantly.

"I've brought my sons today," George replied.

Peeves' eyes grew wide, and he blew a loud raspberry, violently dousing them both with some sort of unpleasant wetness. George didn't want to think about what it might be.

"What stupid cow would marry your manky mug?" Peeves demanded.

"This one," George laughed, pointing at Annie's now dripping form still wrapped around him.

Peeves snorted. "Whassa matter wif 'er? Don't she talk?"

"Good question. I usually have trouble shutting her up," George teased, then winced in pain from the sharp pinch beneath his ribcage.

"Hey, girlie! Are you stupid? Izzat why you got stuck wif 'im?" Peeves shouted at her.

Annie had turned fully around and was now face to face with Peeves' leering visage. "Can't you make it go away?" she whispered to George. "Whatever it is...."

"HA!" screamed Peeves, blowing another gust of stale air right into her face. "Peeves answers to no wizard! Stupid girlie!"

"Is that the Baron I hear?" asked George, feigning innocent curiosity.

Peeves zoomed away in an instant, once more scattering all the parchments in the smelly office.

"Should we try to straighten this up?" Annie asked, attempting to wipe some of the gunk from her clothes with some parchment. Her face was a perfectly even mixture of confusion and revulsion.

The whole thing was rather entertaining indeed, and George chuckled once again. "What's the point? At least this way, Filch'll blame Peeves, not us," he reassured her. "Tergeo," he said as he waved his wand over them both, removing the poltergeist residue far more effectively than the parchment did.

"Shall we move on?" he asked her after they were presentable again.

"Yes, let's," she giggled.

George led her down the corridor back the way they had come until they reached the large double doors of the Great Hall. "This is where we ate," he explained, sliding his arm around her waist. "It's where all your letters were delivered to me," he whispered in her ear, pleased when a bashful smile spread across her face and a faint blush graced her cheek. "Each morning the owls would fly in from over there," he pointed to a far wall where a louvered door was visible just under the ceiling.

Annie's eyes grew large again as she took in the enchanted ceiling. She stood watching it for a whole minute, flabbergasted, while George looked around the room himself, remembering seven years worth of feasts and Sortings.

"Is this where you got the idea... for their rooms?" she gasped with wonder.

"I told you mine sucked in comparison," he laughed ruefully while nodding. He had attempted to similarly bewitch the ceilings of both the boys' and girls' rooms at home, but had never managed to figure out how to link them to the actual sky in real time. Instead, each ceiling was animated with a scene, much like an idle computer screen, which he would switch out upon request or as the whim struck him. Currently, the girls' room's ceiling was full of fluttering butterflies, and the boys' room had the view from the deck of a pirate ship.

Annie looked at him in surprise. "Yours are just as wonderful!" she exclaimed. "I love them!"

George smirked, but was quite pleased with her reaction. His ceilings *would* seem pretty impressive, he supposed, to a Muggle. "Come on.... Lots more to see and little time to do it in," he said while pulling her back out of the hall. "I suppose you want to see Gryffindor Tower now, don't you?"

"Could we?" she asked with an eager smile.

"We'll see... I've no clue what the password might be," he mused. They began to trudge up the first staircase. "First floor: Muggle Studies, Defense Against the Dark Arts, and History of Magic. I suspect Binns is in there lecturing as we speak. He doesn't seem to mind that no one's been listening to him for more than a century," he joked as Annie laughed.

"He's the *literally* dead boring bloke, right?"

"Excellent memory, love!" George praised her. "And here we are at the second floor. Not much here but the Headmaster's... I mean *Headmistress's* office. Best not to be too familiar with that particular floor," he said mischievously as they continued to trudge up the grand staircase.

"Third floor, and we'll take a bit of a breather here," he said since both of them were slightly winded. He directed her gaze by pointing down a corridor as he placed his cheek next to hers. "See that statue of a wizard there? Just behind him is the tunnel we found during our first week here," he informed her.

George fell quiet as he thought about another statue, another tunnel that used to be just around the corner. Both statue and tunnel were gone now, the corridor foreshortened when it was walled off during the repairs. Now a large window looked out upon the ruined portion of the castle; the Dark destruction of that battle had been irreparable by magical or mundane means. He stood quietly, just breathing, bracing himself for the crushing weight of grief that usually came whenever he thought of the events of that night.

"Oh God, George.... It was here, wasn't it?" she asked, spinning around to face him.

His unfocused gaze came to rest on Annie, now worriedly searching his face, her eyes full of concern. Of course his clever wife would figure it out so quickly: that at that very moment, they were standing mere yards away from where Fred had met his end.

"Come on, let's keep moving," she rushed to say. She took both his hands and began trying to pull him up the next staircase, walking backward herself. Her eyes were beginning to tear up whether in sympathy for him or due to her own grief, he wasn't sure.

"Annie, it's okay," he said softly after following her nearly halfway up the staircase. "I'm okay. Surprisingly... I'm okay," he reassured her.

And he *was* surprised. The dark depression that usually descended upon him whenever he contemplated Fred's death *hadn't* come, maybe wasn't *going* to come, after all. In its place there was... a little sadness, yes, but otherwise... nothing. Blessed nothing. It had taken eight years, but finally, just maybe, the wrecking grief was over.

George smiled at Annie. "I'm okay," he repeated, planting his feet.

She took his face in her hands she was standing on the step above him, which brought her nearly level to his own height. "Good," she said simply, earnestly, then pulled him closer for a kiss.

They had almost forgotten where they were when the staircase they were standing on began to move. Annie lost her balance, tumbling onto her backside with a startled squeak, and pulled him down with her.

"Did I forget to mention the staircases move?" he laughed as he tried to right himself.

"Yes, you did forget that minor detail," she laughed with him. "That's going to leave a bruise," she moaned, rubbing her rump and wincing.

"I've got an excellent paste for that," he chuckled, rubbing it for her until she swatted his hand away. "All right, slight detour," he explained as he led her along a contorted route to get back to a staircase that led the right way again. "Here we are, now. Fourth floor: nothing here but the library," he said, only pausing briefly on the landing and proceeding directly up the next flight.

"I'll wager you can't even find it, can you? Did you ever venture inside it once?" she needed him.

"Only for clandestine romantic rendezvous," he teased her. It was a complete lie, but worth it for the stunned look on her face. He laughed out loud.

"Here's the fifth floor.... I wonder if it's still there?" he said a few moments later when they had reached the landing. George walked quickly down the corridor, so much so that Annie had to jog to keep up.

"Aha!" he exclaimed as he turned the corner. There before them was a remnant square yard of the swamp he and Fred had created just before leaving Hogwarts. It still bubbled and burped, emitting a foul stench that filled the corridor and enveloped them where they stood.

To his utter astonishment, Ron hadn't been joking there was indeed a plaque mounted on the wall.

This swamp conjured

in protest of

Delores Umbridge, Hogwarts High Inquisitor

by Fred and George Weasley

Hogwarts NEWT Students

April 1996

And perhaps even more impressively, carved into the stone walls all along the corridor were the names, swear words, insults, cheers, and declarations of love from nearly a decade's worth of Hogwarts students, all in tribute to two of her most legendary students.

"Now who's a mythical hero?" said Annie, voice full of awe.

"I had no idea," he whispered, shaking his head in disbelief.

"You're going to be utterly impossible to live with now, aren't you?" she groaned, shaking her head.

"When have you ever known me to be anything but perfectly humble?" he exclaimed, pretending to be affronted.

Annie rolled her eyes and began shoving him down the hallway. "Then there's no point in standing here any longer, is there? Come on, before you get puffed up like Percy."

George laughed and put Annie in a gentle headlock, pulling her down the hallway toward the shortcut to Gryffindor Tower. To his happy surprise, the Fat Lady's portrait

was already swung open into the hallway.

"Oho! A Weasley, if I'm not much mistaken," she greeted him. "And which one are you, darlin'?"

George suspected she was into her cups again. "George, ma'am," he answered with a smile.

"Well, you're all the same to me, I'm afraid. Too many of you lot to keep track of. A century of ruddy Weasleys've been comin' through this door," she complained good-naturedly. Then her mouth puckered thoughtfully. "Hang on you look a bit long in the tooth for a student."

"I'm an alumnus giving a tour," he chuckled, indicating Annie beside him.

The Fat Lady examined his wife with a skeptical eye. "She a Hufflepuff?" she asked dubiously.

"Honorary Gryffindor," he said with a laugh.

"Go on in, I suppose," she sighed, waving her hands dismissively. "The elves are in there givin' it a good scrub-down. Some bloody idiot must've been runnin' a special on Dungbombs last term. That common room was in desperate need of an air-out!" she complained, then hiccupped.

"Cheers!" George offered as he led Annie around the large portrait and through the porthole opening.

Bright sunbeams streamed into the common room, forcing George and Annie to squint. Every window was wide open, and the tower bustled with the activity of perhaps a dozen house-elves. The room smelled strongly of Mrs. Scower's All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover, the floors were bare of carpets, and none of the furniture had proper cushions; he presumed they were all out on the lawn being beaten to within an inch of oblivion.

"Well, it's not much to see right now, but this is where we all hung out when we weren't in class," he explained. Then he spread his arms wide. "This is where Fred and I made our first fortune," he added with a snort.

He'd just done it again, he realized. This time, the thought of his twin brother actually made him feel..*happy*. Actually, genuinely happy to recall their days and nights together here in the Tower.

Annie smiled at him and squeezed his hand. "You can't bring me this far and not show me where you slept," she whispered.

He looked at her aghast. "Mrs. Weasley, behave yourself, please! There are house-elves present!" But he immediately began pulling her up the stairs to the dormitories.

"Now I know why you had such a great arse when we were in school. How much further?" she huffed after climbing three flights.

"It's only five floors from the common room," he laughed. "Plus seven from the ground floor. And what do you mean *had* a great arse? What's wrong with it now?" he asked, feeling a bit breathless himself. This hadn't seemed so difficult ten years ago....

"Well, let's just say none of us are what we were back in school," she teased, trudging up behind him. "Bearing five children takes a toll on the body, you know."

"What's my excuse?" he cried as he finally reached the fifth floor dormitory. George bent over, hands on his knees as he caught his breath, wondering if perhaps he could get away with blaming it on the altitude. He heard a rattle of a bucket handle just as Annie reached the doorway behind him. He looked up to see a smiling house-elf scrubbing the windows.

"Hello... Nixin, is it?" He thought he recognized the red and green striped pillowcase the elf was wearing.

"Yes, Mr. George!" the little creature cried, apparently quite pleased to be remembered. "Hello!" he answered cheerfully as he finished wiping the window sill with a rag. "Just be finishing up here, sir. Nixin be off in just a moment, sir."

"No hurry," he reassured the elf.

George was finally breathing normally again, and straightened up. The ceiling seemed a bit lower and the beds a tad smaller than he remembered. He walked over to the window which Nixin was struggling to open and helped the little elf with it. The breeze was quite a bit cooler up here than it had been down at ground level, and he leaned out the window sill to catch as much of it as possible.

"Which one was yours?" asked Annie from behind him.

He spun around to face her, ready to spout off some smart-arse innuendo, but quickly changed his tune when he saw the look on her face. She was leaning against one of the bedposts, staring pensively at the bed.

"That one. You're leaning on it now," he answered. "This one next to it was Lee's, then Fred's, then Ken's. We didn't have a fifth back then," he explained. "Bill told me once that he'd had Fred's bed as well, back when he was here. I think they both carved their names on it somewhere."

Annie sat on his old bed and slowly sank backward until she was lying down, looking up at the ceiling. She spread her arms out on the mattress, like a child making a snow angel. "I dreamed of this place a million times, you know when you and Fred were here, so far away from me. I wished so hard that I could be here, too," she confessed softly. "I would have given anything to be like you, back then. Did you know that?"

George didn't know what to say. He had suspected it, of course even wished the same thing a few times while he was here but wasn't sure that was what she wanted to hear at this moment.

"I missed both of you so much, it was like an ache," she sighed quietly. "My heartache for ten months every year. And then, after that summer when we were sixteen.... I'd had no idea before then how much worse it could be. I loved you so."

"Every night, I lay right there, just like you are now, and dreamed of you," he was moved to confess, hoping to ease her pain by admitting to sharing it. "Those were the longest two years of my life. I never thought I could hate school more than I already did." He was standing at the foot of the bed, his arms stretched out, hands grasping opposite bedposts. "Do you remember that letter I sent you? The night of the Yule Ball?"

Annie nodded. "You seemed depressed," she answered, her brilliant violet eyes turned to gaze at him.

Was he surprised that she instantly recalled that letter, one of nearly fifty he had sent her over the span of seven years? A faint echo an aftershock of the realization that had rocked him ages ago on that very bed: that he was in love with his best friend rattled through his gut once more.

"I was depressed," he agreed. "Utterly lovesick. It hit me that night, alone here in this room: I realized I was in love with you. I had been dreaming of you every night that term. Even daydreaming of you in class, completely clueless what was happening to me until that night." He chuckled wryly, shaking his head with the memory.

She chuckled herself. "It sounds so romantic now, doesn't it? I only remember feeling wretched and pathetic." Then she sighed. "And now this horrid place is trying to steal my precious ginger boys once again." She rolled onto her side and curled herself into a fetal position.

George gently scooped her up off the bed and held her tightly in his arms. "It's for the best, love," he said softly. "It's the right thing for them. They'll be safer here with all the professors to help them learn how to manage it. I hope you can understand."

Annie nodded, wrapping her arms around his neck. "I do, at least in my rational mind. Only that argument isn't working for my sappy, overprotective mother's heart."

George led her down the dormitory's spiral staircase to the common room. They walked silently hand in hand back the way they had come to wait outside the classroom door where their sons' futures were being determined.

The echoing sound of gigantic boots clomping down the hallway startled them out of their respective quiet thoughts.

"Why, hello, George! Hello, Annie! What brings you two here to Hogwarts?" cried Hagrid in surprise once he recognized them. He shook George's hand and thumped him on the back, nearly knocking him to the ground as Annie giggled by his side.

"Fred and Art are being interviewed by Professor McGonagall. We're trying to get them into Hogwarts early," George explained.

"Blimey! Are you really?" exclaimed Hagrid. "Tha's funny. I just go' a message from her sayin' to come up here an' see her 'bout summat."

Just then, the door to the classroom opened. Fred and Art ran out the door into their parents' arms, eager to share all their news.

"We got to play with wands!" cried Art.

"And do all sorts of spells!" added Fred.

"Can I borrow yours someday, Dad? Please?" asked Art with a face full of hope.

"I sincerely doubt it, Art," answered George with a chuckle. "You'll get your own soon enough," he said, looking to Professor McGonagall for a hint as to just how soon that might be.

But McGonagall's expression offered no clue. She was turned toward Hagrid, her face tilting up to him. "Ah, Professor Hagrid, there you are. These boys are Arthur and Fred Weasley. They are very interested to meet Witherwings the hippogriff. Do you think that might be possible while I speak with their parents for a bit?"

"Certainly, Pefesser," agreed Hagrid, smiling at the boys. "Come along now, you two."

Both Art's and Fred's eyes grew very wide, contemplating the idea of going anywhere with the enormous hairy man.

"Professor Hagrid is a very good friend of mine and your mum's," George assured them both with a smile and a tousle of their curly hair. "Please be on your best behavior, so he won't have to thump you," he said as he gently pushed them toward the half-giant. "You can't afford to get any smaller."

Hagrid got down on one knee as the comparatively tiny twins crept cautiously toward him. "I can tell you loads of stories 'bout your dad, and uncles and aunties to boot, when they were wee ones as well. Want to hear some?"

Both boys nodded eagerly.

"Well, come along with me, then," he chuckled. "Let me tell you about the first time your dad ever came across a Blast-Ended Skrewt..." he said as he led them down the hallway like the Pied Piper, their little legs jogging to keep up with his stride.

"Well, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, we have quite a bit to discuss," McGonagall said as she motioned for them to enter the classroom. After everyone had found seats, she began again. "I owe you an apology, Mr. Weasley, for doubting you. I am utterly astounded. They are truly gifted, both of them. And for a six-year-old to have any control whatsoever to be able to govern the magic with intent is absolutely shocking. With or without a wand, apparently..." she mumbled, her thoughts drifting a bit in contemplation.

"They must begin formal instruction immediately, of course. I will make the necessary arrangements with the Ministry. Your sons will be accepted to Hogwarts for the upcoming fall term."

"Thank you, Professor!" said George excitedly.

"Wait!" Annie cried. "Professor McGonagall... I have a few questions, if you don't mind, before we rush into this," she added, trying to be as respectful as she could but feeling panic rise in her throat.

"Certainly, Mrs. Weasley," McGonagall answered patiently.

"First... I'm worried about my sons, Professor. They're only six years old, after all, and only half the age of the other first year Hogwarts students. Frankly, I have strong reservations about sending them off to a boarding school so young. Has this situation ever happened before?"

"Honestly, no. I did some research last night in preparation for today. You see, I was fully planning to deny your husband's request out of hand. No previous Headmaster within memory has ever admitted a student as young as your sons. But after seeing with my own eyes... well, you must know yourself."

Annie nodded. "I do. And I understand the necessity of beginning their schooling early; truly, I do. It's just that... Hogwarts is so very far from Devon, from their home. What sort of accommodations are you prepared to offer for our boys?"

"That is an excellent question, Mrs. Weasley. For you see, that is a problem indeed. I have no place at all to put them. Each house has room in the dormitory for boys and girls aged eleven through seventeen; no more, no less. The only open beds in Hogwarts are the ones slotted to be filled by the incoming eleven-year-old class of first-years. Apart from housing your sons in the hospital ward, I am out of options.

"And that doesn't even address the more important issue to my mind and to yours, I suspect. I fully agree with you, Mrs. Weasley, that no six-year-old belongs in a boarding school under any circumstance.

"Therefore, this is what I propose. Mr. Weasley, do you not have premises for...*business*..." she uttered the word in rueful distaste, "here in the village of Hogsmeade?"

George and Annie both smiled at her allusion to the Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes shop in town. George Weasley had managed to be a thorn in Professor McGonagall's side far beyond his school years, considering the volume of business brought each year to his doorstep by visiting Hogwarts students.

"I do indeed, Professor," he said with an impudent laugh.

"And these premises are connected to the Floo Network, I presume?"

George nodded. He and Annie began to see where Professor McGonagall was going with this.

"So, you would be able to personally deliver your sons each day to school for their lessons and home again each night?"

"Of course!" Annie answered for him. "That would be perfect!"

"Then may I consider the matter quite settled? Your sons will begin the fall term at Hogwarts on September second, rather than the first. They will not ride the Express, nor will they be Sorted into a house for the time being. They will begin their studies in classrooms with the other first years, with the possible exception of Charms that would be pointless now, wouldn't it? I suspect Filius will want to meet them once he returns from his holiday in the Congo and make his own determination of their placement in

his classes. You will receive the standard letter next month listing all the items they will need.

"Do you have any further questions, Mrs. Weasley?"

"Not at present. Thank you, Professor," Annie said earnestly, shaking the woman's hand.

"Of course, my dear. I am honored to have your trust in this very important matter. And thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, for bringing your astonishing sons to Hogwarts today."

Détente

Chapter 64 of 80

The formerly idyllic couple has one more public row.

Chapter 64: Détente

October 31, 2005

Mole Hill was abuzz with activity. Weasleys by birth, marriage, or acclamation were scattered throughout the house and environs, chatting and laughing. Fully two dozen people had arrived just after lunch to celebrate the Weasley twins' seventh birthday.

A collection of happy, chattering children flitted into, out of, through, and around the house like a flock of noisy sparrows. Toys were scattered across the garden lawn and paved portion of the driveway nearest the house like a minefield: scooters, tricycles, bicycles, toy brooms, Quaffles, and a soccer ball were casually discarded and then picked up again by children at random.

But by far the most eagerly anticipated, the most popular items of the day were Arthur and Fred's new wands. Every other child now gathered around the boys, clamoring to get a peek at them.

"What's it made of, Art?" whispered his awe-struck cousin, Victoire.

"Hazel with core of unicorn tail hair," he announced proudly.

His audience nodded in appreciation. A couple of *ahhs* escaped from the youngest children, who could not contain their envy more appropriately.

"What about yours, Fred?" asked Roxy Jordan.

"Hazel as well, but with phoenix feather core instead," he explained in an awfully professional tone of voice for a seven-year-old.

"Ooh! Can I hold it?" asked his cousin, Dominique, with bated breath.

Both boys looked up, scanning for sign of a parent nearby, tempted by the opportunity to show off a bit. They noted with disappointment that their father was currently staring straight at them from across the lawn. "Sorry, but Dad and Mum say we aren't allowed to let anyone else touch them," they explained in unison, with loud, clear voices for their father's benefit.

"Come on, Ted. Let's get some Muggle soda," said Art, carefully sheathing his wand back into its pocket. His brother followed suit, and the three boys dashed away into the house.

"Hello, boys," their mother greeted them as the twins and their best friend careened into the kitchen, nearly crashing into her. Annie, Molly, and Winky were busy setting out snacks, drinks, and trick sweets (a special treat at Mole Hill, for George rarely brought these particular Wheezes home with him anymore, per Winky's request).

"Remember to only eat the Fainting Fancies on the lawn. I'm not taking any of you to the emergency room tonight!" she shouted after them as they tore back outside with soda cans and fists full of candies.

"Okay, Mum," they replied, voices fading fast as they ran off into the distance.

Ginny and Fleur were seated on the chairs in front of the fireplace, keeping an eye on the youngest members of the clan. Little James Potter, only a few months older than Joey, sat next to her on a blanket on the floor. They cooed and giggled at each other, smiling and drooling.

"He has such lovely eyes," gushed Fleur.

"Yeah, they're just like Harry's," said Ginny with a pleased smile.

"Hopefully, they will not be hidden behind horrible glasses, no?" Fleur added.

Ginny looked at her sister-in-law with consternation. "What's the matter with Harry's glasses?" she asked defensively.

"Oh, nothing, nothing, of course," backpedaled Fleur. "Oh! I think I hear Louis crying outside.... Do you mind watching them both, Ginny?"

"Of course not, Fleur," Ginny replied testily. As soon as Fleur was out of earshot, Ginny sighed deeply and sank low in the chair. "Ugh," she muttered, pretending it was for her own benefit.

Annie giggled. She could admit that Fleur was not the easiest person to get along with, but Ginny barely contained her dislike for her sister-in-law. "I will never understand what Bill sees in her," Ginny would mutter to anyone who would listen whenever the subject came up.

"Don't you start," warned Molly, setting out a large plate of various cheeses.

"She started it!" whined Ginny.

"You could give her a chance, you know," scolded her mother. "She's not so bad."

Ginny snorted. "Only because you've brainwashed everyone else," she mumbled. After a few moments passed, Ginny spoke again, grimacing. "What's that revolting smell?"

"I don't smell anything," Molly replied. "Is it the Stilton, d'you think?" she asked, sniffing the cheese plate.

"Does Joey need changing?" asked Annie, starting to make her way toward the babies.

"No, it's not that," answered Ginny quietly, swallowing hard.

Annie looked carefully at her sister-in-law. "You don't look so well, Ginny," she said worriedly.

"I don't feel so well... all the sudden," whispered Ginny. "D'you mind?" she said, waving her hand toward the babies on the blanket.

"Go ahead," Annie urged.

Ginny walked quickly into the downstairs bathroom. While she was gone, Molly walked over to where Annie was seated on the floor and took a seat on the sofa. Annie gave her a questioning look, wondering if Molly was thinking the same thing. Molly returned her gaze with a suspicious smirk.

"Hope it's not catching, whatever's making her ill," said Annie with a smile, confident they'd arrived at similar conclusions.

"Let's just say I don't think it's anything she ate, at any rate," Molly replied with a laugh.

About half an hour after Ginny returned from her suspicious visit to the loo, Ron poked his head into the house to announce, "We're all heading out to the orchard for a match."

"Okay, thanks, Ron. Tell George I'll follow out once I get the breadsticks out of the oven," she called back.

"Hang on, Ron. I'm coming," Ginny said, hopping up out of the chair eagerly. "Would you mind bringing Jamie with you, Mum?" she asked.

"Of course not, dear," replied Molly, delighted with the prospect of more time spent cuddling with a grandbaby.

"You're feeling that much better, then?" asked Annie wickedly, winking at Molly.

"Must have been a passing thing," Ginny replied nonchalantly, fooling no one.

A few minutes later, Winky offered to stay at the Hill to finish baking the next batch of breadsticks so Annie and Molly could go see the match.

"Are you sure, Winky?" asked Annie. I hate to think of you doing all the work here by yourself,"

"Oh, yes, Miss. Erm... Winky is rathering not to watch..." she stammered.

Annie nodded, understanding what Winky meant. The little elf harbored a great dislike for Quidditch, and for good reason. Her previously happy life had been destroyed by it, according to her. Annie could empathize, being somewhat on the fence about the sport, herself.

"All right then, Winky. We'll see you back here in a little while," Annie said with a sympathetic smile. She gathered up little Joey, loading her into the ever-present sling, and headed out toward the makeshift Quidditch pitch with her nephew and mother-in-law, chatting amiably.

Annie halted as she approached the open paddock area surrounded by apple trees and forest. What she saw in the sky sucked the breath out of her body, made her heart race, and every muscle in her body tensed for battle.

"That son of a bitch," she whispered under her breath. "No offense, Molly."

"None taken, dear," her mother-in-law assured her, just as furiously shocked as Annie was by the sight above them.

*

George was standing in the grassy paddock, surrounded by his brothers, Bill and Ron, his brother-in-law, Harry, and his best mate, Lee. He was beaming with pride as he watched his sons and oldest daughter zipping around on brooms in the air above him. He couldn't help it: whenever he felt this happy, he simply had to share it. And the only way he knew how to share it was to take the mickey out of somebody else.

George had nobly picked up the slack throughout the post-war years since the role of Weasley Court Jester had fallen squarely upon his solo shoulders. No one was exempt, almost no topic off-limits. He pondered for a moment, weighing his options. Which of his companions would be his target *du jour*?

Ron was too easy the entire family teased him for being clueless, uncoordinated, and whingy and he seldom mounted any sort of counter-offensive worth the definition. And Harry was no fun anymore since he'd learned to stop reacting to all the "world's greatest hero" jabs soon after he'd married Ginny. George couldn't think of anything to tease Lee about at the moment, so that left the old standby: Bill.

Not long after Bill had been attacked by the werewolf, once it seemed clear that he wasn't going to become one himself, Fred and George had begun ribbing him about being a dog. At first, it had nearly driven their mother into conniption fits. But over the years, the furor had died down a bit *Thankfully, not to the point of the joke not being funny anymore*, George thought with relief. Consequently, Bill had endured countless jibes about flea collars, leashes, dog bowls full of his food being served on the floor, chew toys wrapped up as gifts, getting swatted with rolled-up newspapers, and the like. George even spent a year refusing to call his elder brother by his name, instead referring to him as "Fetch." And he considered his elder brother a sporting target because Bill usually gave as good as he got.

"So, I'm dying to know," George said with a glint in his eye and a smile in his voice as he sidled up next to his brother. "What does it feel like to lick your own balls?"

"You're about to find out," snarled Bill, lashing out at George, who ducked out of reach just in time. The rest of the group exploded in howls of laughter.

"*What is that?*" a furious voice cried out from the far side of the paddock, near the forest line.

"Ah, shit," George muttered under his breath, recognizing the voice as well as the tone. "Thought you said she wasn't coming," George snarled, shooting a glare at his brother Ron.

Ron shrugged with his patented befuddled-incompetence. "Thought she said she wasn't."

George spun around to see his wife marching toward him, building quickly into a towering rage. Joey was peeking out from behind the sling, bouncing roughly with her mother's brisk pace.

"Now you get yours, little prick," muttered Bill, a satisfied smirk on his face.

A moment later, Annie was standing toe to toe with George, her eyes glaring up at him with violet fury. *What is our four-year-old daughter doing on YOUR OLD BROOM?* she said angrily through her clenched teeth, futilely trying to avoid making even more of a scene than she had already done.

The other adults in the clearing were averting their gazes and ducking their heads slightly, as if attempting to shrink out of sight. Luckily, George and Annie's children hadn't noticed their parents having yet another row. They were oblivious, having too much fun in the air or playing with cousins on the ground. Joey was giggling at the spectacle above her.

"Nearly five," he said defensively. "And she's flying, obviously. Isn't she great?" he asked with exaggeratedly cheerful positivity. It was true: Merrie was a born flyer, already better at it than her older brothers. George had been sneaking behind Annie's back for most of the summer, giving their three oldest kids flying lessons anticipating just this sort of reaction from her.

"I thought we'd agreed that *seven* was the minimum age for flying?" she snapped, setting her hands on her hips. That had been the whole point of giving the twins their first brooms as birthday gifts earlier that morning, after all. And it had taken loads of convincing just to get her to agree to that much.

"Did we?" he asked with the sort of mock innocence he habitually slipped into when finding himself in situations such as these.

He glanced around at his brothers and sister, all looking distinctly uncomfortable at having to witness yet another argument between what used to be the idyllic couple of the family. Things had been a bit hairy around Mole Hill for the better part of a year now, and everyone was hoping the argumentative phase he and Annie had entered would be over soon. And it was, for the most part.... This was just a minor scuffle, compared to earlier in the year.

Still, Annie was well in the midst of a proper wobbly-pitch, and while it didn't quite reach the gale-force furies his mother had been capable of in her prime, his wife's temper was nothing to trifle with. Her chest was heaving with the deep breaths she was pulling in, and her fists and jaw were clenched, desperately trying to regain control of her anger.

"Don't peddle that shit with me, George!" she barked. "What were you thinking? Never mind don't answer that. It is painfully clear you weren't thinking at all."

"Annie, will you stop your tantrum long enough to really watch her? She's brilliant the best I've ever seen," he said softly in a conciliatory voice. His tone told her he didn't want another fight any more than she did.

"And that matters how?" she retorted, but he could hear her voice was softening.

"You know, I've been made to understand that being *overprotective* and *overbearing* isn't a good thing," he said with a smile.

Annie now worked hard to disguise her smile as a smirk. Throwing her own words back at her from a months-old argument had the desired effect, and George silently congratulated himself for diffusing the situation so quickly.

"Have you forgotten how dangerous it is on one of those things?" she said, unwilling to give in quite so easily.

George rolled his eyes. "It's hardly *that* dangerous."

"I fell off, remember?" she cried but without anger now and flapped her arms in exasperation.

George noted that several members of the gallery now had looks of surprise on their faces as they leaped to the obvious conclusion: he had taken Annie flying before. Bill and Ron failed to smother their knowing smiles, eyes sparkling with the anticipation of making George pay for the revelation.

"Actually, you *jumped* off in midair, if you'll recall..." he replied loudly, so everyone could hear. *Let them make of that what they will*, he thought with a smile.

"Which is exactly my point! I've been known to make a few stupid decisions," she yelled, waving the finger wearing her wedding band under his nose and barely avoiding giggling as she did it. They both recognized they were putting on a show now for the benefit of his family.

"Yeah, well, Merrie's a lot smarter than you are, love," he teased her.

"She's smarter than the two of us put together, darling," she countered, playing along.

"I couldn't agree more! Now, will you calm down and just watch her before you embarrass yourself any further?" he said, laughing and putting his arm around her, patting Joey on the head.

The entire family breathed an almost audible sigh of relief.

"George I still don't like it. This game is bloody dangerous!" Annie said anxiously a few moments later, watching her daughter and twin sons zooming through the air as their Aunt Ginny and Uncle Harry kicked off the ground to join them. George noticed she was absentmindedly rubbing her right forearm, like she always did for some unknown reason whenever she watched a Quidditch match.

"Hmm... I wouldn't know how that feels: living with a compromise," he murmured softly into her ear.

"You think you're so clever, don't you?" she grumbled.

"Hardly. If I was at all clever I wouldn't have just gotten caught," he quipped, sliding his arm around her shoulders and pulling her close.

"Promise me she won't get hurt! Make sure she only does it with you around," she pleaded, serious for a moment.

"I've already made her swear," he assured her. "And you know Merrie she'd eat slugs rather than break a promise."

Just then, Janie bounded up to her parents. "I want to fly too, Daddy!" she cried with a toddler's lisp.

George gathered his little daughter in one arm, his wife in the other. "Sorry, honey. No flying for you. Mummy would viciously remove an important part of Daddy's body if he let you on a broom," he said for Annie's benefit. Then he whispered into Janie's ear, "Maybe next year," and kissed her on the cheek.

"All right, everyone mount your brooms!" Arthur cried, holding a Quaffle in one hand.

George set his daughter back down as his father walked to the center of the makeshift pitch. Merrie dutifully landed and passed the broom back to George as a group of adults took off into the sky. She watched her father launch into the air, then ran back to stand by her mother's side, beaming with self-satisfied pride. "Did you see me fly, Mummy?" she cried.

"Let's have a clean match this time, shall we?" Arthur announced. "This means you, George and Ron! All right, then... ready? Steady? GO!" He tossed the ball high into the air and released the Snitch.

Annie spent most of the match explaining the basics of Quidditch to her friends, Jane and Alec, who had never heard of the popular wizarding sport before and predictably stood gobsmacked, watching nine people flying around on brooms. It was a highly modified version, of course played with the Quaffle and Snitch only, and taking into account that seven-year-olds were attempting to compete with adults.

George and Angelina played the Chaser positions with the twins and Teddy, gently tossing the ball to the boys, flying slowly alongside them, while Bill and Ron were particularly inept Keepers, truly defending the goals only when an adult made an attempt to score. The rest of the crowd cheered wildly at the children's efforts, both at flying and at scoring.

Harry and Ginny, as the Seekers, were the only ones taking the match at all seriously, flying at blinding speeds and daring heights in pursuit of the Snitch. The match concluded when Ginny landed, beaming, with the golden ball held aloft in her hand.

"I let you win," Harry cried, smiling as he landed beside her.

"Like hell you did," she cried back. "You're rusty, old man," she teased.

Shortly after the match was finished, George discreetly Apparated with Ron and Harry to the family's favorite pizza place in Exeter. He led them down the deserted alley and around the corner to collect the dozen pizzas Annie had just ordered by phone. The twins had been allowed to choose what food was served at their birthday celebration, and pizza was their current favorite.

They had several minutes to spare before the food was ready, so they bought a round of pints and sat at a table, chatting.

"So, not much longer now, eh, Ron?" asked George.

"Fingers crossed, man. Just keeping fingers crossed," his brother responded guardedly.

George squeezed Ron's shoulder, nodding. "I hear you, bro. We're all pulling for you," he said.

Ron nodded, mutely accepting his brother's good wishes. By some stroke of fortune, right after the tragedy of the past spring, Hermione had gotten pregnant once more. She was well into her second trimester now, feeling strong and, by all the doctors' and Healers' opinions, the baby was doing fine.

"Odds are good, though, at this point," offered Harry, hoping to cheer his friend.

"Yeah. Good odds," Ron agreed, sighing deeply. "Joey's doing well now, isn't she?" he said, hoping to lead the subject away from the pending birth of his own first child.

"Brilliant, yeah. You'd never know, would you?" George replied, smiling slightly and shaking his head slowly. There had been far too much baby-trauma to go around this year, in his opinion.

"And James he's enormous!" laughed Ron. "No one would've ever predicted *your* son would be so big, Harry," he teased.

"Shut up, Ron," retorted Harry, irritated that his brothers-in-law never seemed to tire of making fun of his only very slightly shorter stature.

"Must be the Weasley genes," added George, piling on the abuse.

"Sod off, the both of you," Harry said, grinning.

"Touchy," laughed George.

"Ginny sure bounced back quick," commented Ron. "She was back on the team in what, six weeks? Talk about superior Weasley genes!"

Harry chuckled. "More like eight weeks, but yeah, she did recover really quickly." He was unable to quash a bashful smile, and a faint blush spread across his face.

"What's that all about?" teased Ron with a laugh, noticing his friend's strange reaction.

"Nothing," protested Harry, yet strangely giggling in his odd, nervous manner whenever the subject of sex arose in the company of his wife's brothers.

"No way!" George's eyes grew large as he instantly guessed the source of Harry's discomfort. "*You must* be having a laugh!"

"What?" cried Ron, still clueless.

George shook his head in disbelief. "Remind me someday to share a little Muggle secret about that with you," he taunted, as if faulty birth control methods were responsible. *Eleven months!* he mouthed silently, astounded by the math. James is only eleven months old!

"Please just drop it, will you?" begged Harry, yet smiling somewhat proudly all the same.

"What are you lot on about?" Ron whined, frowning petulantly at the two of them. "Will one of you explain what's so funny?"

"Go on, Harry. Explain it to your massively thick best friend," laughed George, leaning back in his chair, preparing to be entertained by watching Harry squirm.

Harry's sigh was closer to a groan, and he predictably shifted about uncomfortably in the chair. "Erm...Ginny said she wanted to try for another one right away," he explained in a mumble, keeping his eyes glued to the fascinating bubbles in his beer.

Ron punched his friend in the arm as understanding dawned. "I don't believe you! And we joked about George and Annie being like rabbits!" Ron cried.

"Ow," moaned Harry, rubbing his arm.

"Like rabbits!?" cried George, punching his brother in the arm.

"Ow," complained Ron, rubbing his arm.

Harry laughed. "You've still got everyone beat in quantity, George," he teased, kicking him lightly under the table since he couldn't quite reach across to punch him.

"Too right," George laughed, nodding once. "Still the stud of the family, me," he added with a wink, daring them to argue.

"Which is easy when you produce children by the litter," mumbled Ron.

"Come again, Ron?" asked George, brandishing his fist for another jab.

"Nothing, George. Cheers!" Ron said with a smile, raising his glass.

"Cheers!" echoed George and Harry, clinking their glasses with Ron's.

Author's Note: Just a little warning... from here on out (only 16 more installments to go), larger chunks of (fictional) time will be passing by between chapters. New chapters will still be posted each Friday, however.

Fancy Dress Party

Chapter 65 of 80

George and Annie prepare to attend a costume party.

Chapter 65: Fancy Dress Party

Fall 2006

The bell on the door tinkled behind them as it pulled itself closed. Annie scanned the crowded little shop that was empty of other customers besides herself and her husband. Racks upon racks of colorful costumes and shelves of hats and wigs on Styrofoam heads stood together cheek by jowl. The walls were lined with displays of accessories and makeup.

Jane deserves to be drawn and quartered for this Annie grumbled to herself. "Maybe we'll get lucky and one of the kids will come down with something. She can't argue with that excuse," she said aloud but under her breath.

George merely laughed at her. "I think it sounds like fun."

"*You* would," she said accusatorially.

Their good friends, Jane and Alec Macgruder, were hosting a fancy dress party during the upcoming weekend at their home in London. Annie confessed that out of all the people in the world, Jane was likely the only one who could manipulate her into putting on a costume and parading herself in public although her dearest school friend had called in several favors to do so.

At least it's for charity, Annie consoled herself, hoping the denizens of London's newest animal shelter duly appreciated the sacrifice of her dignity, such as it was.

While Annie was petulantly wallowing in self-pity, George perused the racks. A few moments later, he pulled out a Darth Vader costume and turned on the accompanying lightsaber. His eyes lit up with delight when he discovered the weapon made the famous humming-swishing noise when it moved.

"Oh, cool!" he exclaimed unreservedly.

Unable to sustain her fit of malcontent in the presence of his childlike playfulness, Annie laughed at him as he lunged and feinted. "How old are you again?"

The answer, of course, was that they were both breathing hard on thirty. She couldn't decide if his immaturity in the face of the passage of so much time was inspiring or daunting.

George ignored her jibe and flipped through the rack of costumes eagerly, as if searching for something in particular. A few moments later he gave up, sighing in disappointment as he pulled out a hanger. A flowing white robe dangled from it, along with a ridiculous double-bun wig. "They don't have the wrought iron bikini, more's the pity," he lamented.

Annie flicked the wig disdainfully with her finger. "I am *not* wearing that stupid hair. And why didn't Leia ever get a lightsaber of her own, I'd like to know? She'd've been just as good a Jedi as that git Luke ever was."

George shrugged as he put both costumes back on the rack.

Meanwhile, Annie pulled out a witch and wizard combo, replete with pointy hats and black, tatty robes frayed at the hems. "This is perfect, don't you think?" she proposed without any real conviction.

"Ha, ha, ha," George deadpanned. "You're hilarious."

"Where's your sense of humor gone?" she teased him as she put the costumes back on the rack.

"The same place your imagination's apparently hiding," he countered.

There was a short pause while they both searched the racks for more inspiration.

"Here we are!" George announced as he pulled out a suit of faux armor and a frilly, pink, organza-supernova of a gown. "Knight and damsel."

"Not bloody likely," she replied. "Absolutely wretched, that is," she added, screwing her mouth in distaste as he held the lurid pink thing up to her while holding the silver-lame armor against his body.

"You're right: it's too obvious. Everyone would know it's me right away," he said as he tossed the costumes back onto the rack, then slyly laid a hand on the small of her back, resting on her tattoo.

Annie stuck out her tongue at him even as she felt a little thrill at his touch.

Then George set the cone-shaped, tulle-draped hat on her head, laughing. "But you.... Nobody would recognize you in a million years! Damsel, indeed. Wench, perhaps...."

"Get bent," Annie snapped, bumping him aside with her elbow. She pulled out another suit of armor. "I'll be Joan of Arc and kick your arse."

"Didn't she get burned at the stake for having ideas above her station?" George parried, rubbing the spot on his ribs where her elbow had connected.

"Not before she kicked a whole load of uppity English *male* arse," Annie retorted.

They put the armor back and returned to browsing.

Annie pulled out a mad scientist lab coat and hunchbacked assistant duo next. "May I please wear the hump?" she pleaded.

George appeared to consider the idea thoughtfully for a moment. "Eh," he said noncommittally, shrugging. "Let's consider it a maybe."

Annie sighed as she put the costumes back. "Do we have to go as a matching pair?" she moaned.

"You tell me," George replied, riffling through a new rack.

"Do we have to go at all?" Annie asked with her fingers crossed. Perhaps if they failed to find suitable costumes, they might avoid the whole business and just post their generous donation from home?

He answered her with a question of his own. "You'd rather stay at the Hill with the thundering herd than have a night out with me?" he cried, incredulous and sounding a little offended.

"Probably," Annie replied, but let him know she was teasing through her smile. It wasn't the idea of going out, or spending time with him she was finding unpleasant.

George snorted in mock-indignation and turned back to the job of finding a costume.

But Annie pressed on with her argument. "I mean, it's not like we'll just be us two. It's a bloody party. We'll have to chat and be polite to people." *And lie about our lives*, she whinged to herself.

It was an aggravating chore, forever carefully editing one's conversation, making sure not to give anything away. Sure, she shared a lot of her life in common with other Muggles: she was a working mother of five, wife of an independent businessman, enjoying the country life in Devon. One might think she could chat for hours about her life.

The problem was that no one else's husband commuted daily to work in London or Scotland through the fireplace in the living room. No one else employed a live-in house-elf to help out with the custodial duties. No one else's family kept up with the Quidditch standings or flew on brooms for entertainment. And each of these things were fundamental aspects of their lives.

"It's all so tiresome," she sighed.

"When did you get so old and boring?" he ribbed her.

Annie stuck out tongue again, recognizing her cause was lost. George had always loved a party. *Damn*.

"Aha!" George exclaimed as he pulled out Superman and Wonder Woman uniforms. "I'm begging you! Please say yes!"

Annie swallowed her amusement at his unbridled enthusiasm and put on a scowl. "You wish," she sneered. But her withering look was betrayed by her subsequent giggle at his wagging eyebrows.

"I thought I'd made that fact reasonably clear," he pouted. Crushed, George replaced the costumes.

Annie laughed out loud at his theatrical disappointment before turning back to the rack in front of her. "As much as I'd love to see you in those tights absolutely not. I've had five children and I've got the thighs to prove it. Ugh."

She was slightly startled when she felt George sidle up behind her, sliding his hands around her waist. "I very much like your thighs," he murmured as he nuzzled her neck, then brazenly groped her arse.

Annie quickly scanned the room, noting that while they were the sole customers present, they were also being recorded by security cameras. "Duly noted and much appreciated, love. However, let's keep the subject of my thighs between the two of us," she suggested as she spun around in his arms to face him.

George hummed contentedly as he grabbed her arse with both hands now and pressed her firmly against him. "Is that an invitation?" he asked, taking an earlobe in his mouth.

Annie smiled. "Rain check?" she offered as his kissing grew more insistent and her resolve to resist weakened. "At least until we can find somewhere slightly less illegal than a public place of commerce?"

George smirked as he released her a few moments later. "All right. Let's just pick something quickly so we can get out of here, then."

"Fine by me," Annie agreed, eager to get the trial over with and move on to something more pleasant, as well.

A few moments later....

"Oh my God!" George moaned.

"What?" Annie demanded, alarmed.

George slowly drew out a French maid costume, his eyes wide and jaw slack as he took it in. "Oh, pretty please!" he whined. "I'll do anything!"

Annie smirked, irritated that he was apparently not taking the job of finding a suitable costume even the slightest bit seriously, and what did that say about her allure? "Will you be wearing one to match?" she snapped.

George's shoulders drooped. "Maybe not quite anything," he mumbled.

Annie patted his cheek, flattered in a small way that he'd even suggested the idea. He did always make her feel desirable, she conceded. "Sorry, love. Now, let's get serious about this, hmm?"

But George was not yet completely deterred. "Try it on for me, at least?" he whispered in her ear.

Annie shook her head as she relieved him of the burden of the ridiculously tiny dress, then resolutely put it back where it came from. George whimpered dejectedly as he watched her bury it back on the rack.

"Oh, that brokenhearted puppy look is absolutely devastating, George," she giggled, "but the answer's still no. I wouldn't be caught dead in that in public!"

Another few minutes passed. Then, simultaneously, they both pulled out pirate costumes, laughing at each other when they realized the coincidence.

"Looks like we can finally agree on something," he said.

"Adventure on the high seas?" she concurred.

"I was thinking more along the lines of a spot of pillaging," he corrected her, snaking an arm around her waist once more. Leaning in closer, he said softly, "Booty should be involved at some point of the process," as he groped her arse once more.

Annie smiled sarcastically. "There looks to be only one fitting room. You go first," she directed him, pushing him gently toward the door.

He emerged a couple of minutes later, dressed in the costume and shouting, "Avast, ye hag! Prepare to be boarded!" He then chased her around a rack a few times, bellowing, "That's quite a treasure chest you've got there, arrrr!"

Annie laughed so hard at his antics, she got hiccups. "Yes! Perfect!" she cried, fending off a few more gropes and shoving him back into the dressing room.

"Your turn, matey," he growled when he reemerged, dressed normally once more, eyebrow cocked.

Not entirely sure she trusted the mischievous look on his face, Annie shuffled into the little room.

As soon as Annie was ensconced in the dressing room, George darted over to the counter. Waving the clerk close enough for him to whisper, he said, "Hey, mate, do me a favor and put one of those black-and-white frilly numbers in the bag before the missus comes out."

The fellow chuckled conspiratorially. "Sure, mate. What size?"

George grimaced, only then realizing the gaping whole in his brilliantly diabolical plan. "Damn. If I guess wrong, I'm screwed, aren't I?"

The clerk shrugged. "Or not, more like."

George chewed on his lip for a moment until, right on cue, inspiration hit. He held up a "eureka" finger for the clerk's benefit, commanding him to wait silently for his next instruction.

"How goes it, Annie, love?" he called out. "Have you got the right size?"

"Yes, I think so," she replied.

George metaphorically kicked himself for his stupidity. *Did I really think she'd announce it? I am a bloody wanker.*

Annie emerged from the dressing room a few moments later. The fringed ends of the scarf wrapped about her waist dangled down to her knee, and the clingy trousers did a lovely job showcasing her muscular, shapely legs. For the life of him, he'd never understood her odd, obsessive hang-up with her thighs they were positively delectable, in his opinion. She spun around, and he noted her arse looked pretty damn delicious to boot.

George chuckled. "You sexy swashbuckler, you."

Annie scowled at him, hands on her hips, and stomped her foot. "I'm fearsome, dammit! You're shaking in your shoes!" she snapped.

The clerk laughed from behind the counter.

"Quite right, my dear. Now, shuck it and let's finish up," George said and gestured for her to hurry, a new plan forming in his mind.

As soon as she was safely back inside the dressing room, George assured the clerk the plan was still on with a confident wink. He wandered over to the accessory wall, selected two eye patches, a hook, and a shoulder parrot. Annie brought her costume to the counter, joining him as he emptied his arms of the accessories.

"All ready, then?" he asked.

Annie looked over the stuff he'd just unloaded. "George, you idiot! You forgot swords!"

"Ah, damn. You're right. Nick over there and get us some, would you?"

Annie rolled her eyes as she turned to walk away toward the accessories. "It's a piss poor pirate who forgets his sword," she grumbled.

The clerk winked, instantly and wordlessly cabbaging onto George's plan with just a discreet point of his finger toward the tag on the collar.

George eyed her as she made her way to the other side of the store, covering for clerk who was checking the size on the pirate costume. "Too right, love," he called out after her. "Make sure mine's bigger than yours, if you don't mind."

"And if I do mind?" she retorted, calling out from across the store.

"We'll arm wrestle for it," George suggested as the clerk darted into the stock room for the other costume.

A minute later, Annie came back with the swords. "Where did he go?" she asked, puzzled.

George pretended to ignore her question and examined the swords instead. "Ah, an excellent blade, this.... Nice heft," he said as he slashed it through the air.

Then he spun around to face Annie again. "Hang on," he cried, theatrically slapping his forehead. "We forgot mustaches and beards! And big gold hoop earrings!"

"For crying out loud, George!" Annie barked, clearly exasperated with him.

"Maybe they're over by the wigs. Have a look, hmm?" he suggested.

"You're absolutely useless, you know that?" she muttered.

"Yes. Yes, I am. Yes, I do," he agreed meekly.

Annie sidled up to him, a sly smile on her face. "What's got you so distracted? Are you still thinking about my thighs?"

George coughed in order to disguise a swallowed chuckle, then smiled. *Not far from the truth at all, love.* "You know me so well," he said, planting a kiss on her cheek. "Now hurry up so we can get the bloody hell out of here."

Annie winked at him, then trotted off to the back of the store once more.

Meanwhile, the clerk came out of the stockroom carrying a large bag already packed and gave George a covertly reassuring wink, indicating the mission had been accomplished. He began to total everything up, including the artificial facial hair Annie returned with a few moments later.

"All set now, I think. Have fun!" the fellow chuckled after them as George hustled Annie out of the store, making a fuss about carrying the bag himself.

"We will!" George called out over his shoulder.

"Cheers!" Annie said with a smile, offering the helpful chap a wave.

*

It was the rarest of occurrences, like a blue moon on her birthday: Annie had the house to herself. No kids. No husband. Not even an elf disrupted the profound peace of Mole Hill that afternoon.

It was Saturday, the day of the fancy dress party. She and George had duly distributed their children for the evening: the twins were having a sleepover with Teddy at Andromeda's, Merrie was at Roxie's, and the littlest girls would be with Granny for the night.

And Winky was... well, to put a polite spin on it, she was off on a date for the weekend. Or as George had wickedly muttered, "She's on the prow! Got herself an itch to

scratch, our little Wink."

Oh God, that is so weird, Annie thought with a shudder, then promptly scolded herself for being so judgmental. After all, this was an entirely different species she was dealing with. Not to mention an intensely private, personal matter.

Still... eish!

Annie had recently learned that female house-elves had a strong sense of their biological clocks, so to speak, and Winky was currently hearing hers ticking loud and clear. Strangely, since caring for and protecting a magical human family was so important to them, marriage and a two-parent family unit of their own were not notions elves ascribed to for themselves. Instead, a "randy" female (George's term, not hers) would leave her home for a short time, search out a receptive male, and let nature take its course. Elves were a love-'em-and-leave-'em sort of race, apparently; all elvish children were reared by their mothers alone, and very few ever had contact with their biological fathers.

It was not unusual for elvish sons and daughters to live with their mothers for the entirety of their unnaturally long lives, inheriting their position within a wizarding house upon their mother's death. But since Winky was a free elf, her position within the Weasley household a paid one, it was unclear whether her son or daughter would follow this tradition.

The more insensitive or greedy of wizardkind often made it plain they preferred to take female elves exclusively into their employ, thereby ensuring a future increase in the labor force without significant increase in expenditure. For while elves were never compensated beyond the merest room and board, the magical contract that initially bound them to a new family was a difficult bit of magic to perform successfully. Every elf master knew it was far simpler to inherit an elf than to recruit one. Only the most accomplished of magical solicitors could be entrusted not to leave potentially damaging loopholes in the spell, and they were paid handsomely for the job.

Still and all, Annie was terribly curious about the process to come. How long would Winky's pregnancy last? What would it be like to have an infant elf in the house? Were they cute? Did they nurse? If not, then what did they eat? Neither George nor any of his family were of any help at all in the matter, having no prior experience with elves.

Annie had been mindlessly folding a load of laundry as she'd pondered the Winky situation. Now finished, she gathered up the basket and trudged upstairs, lamenting the fact that laundry never took a vacation. After distributing the children's clean clothes, laying them on their beds for them to put away when they got home tomorrow, she carried the remainder into her room. She put her pajamas away in her dresser drawer, then took the last few t-shirts into the closet to hang up.

She nearly dropped the basket on the floor when she saw it: there, prominently displayed on a hanger dangling from a hook beside the two pirate costumes for tonight, was the French maid outfit from the costume shop.

"You bloody prat!" she laughed aloud. *Did he go back to the store afterward? Or did he somehow sneak it out right under my nose?* she wondered. Either way, she reckoned she'd been played for a fool.

She touched the cool, smooth black satin with her fingertips, fluffed the lacy white ruffles peeking out from beneath the hem. *He really wants to see me in this?* she mused, flattered and a little surprised by a few flutters of arousal at the thought. *The house is empty....*

Annie's mind started working, a plan beginning to form. George was off for the afternoon on a collecting trip in Cornwall, hunting for pixie nests. (For what reason, she'd been disinclined to ask.) With her cell phone, she took a picture of the costume on its hanger and sent it to him with a message.

WTF?

A few minutes later, she received a text response.

You found it! Tonight?

Of course she'd found it. He'd very obviously wanted her to do so. But there was no way in hell she would be wearing it tonight at Jane's blasted party. No, the pirate costumes would definitely be put to use in public.

She decided to have a bit of fun teasing him in the meantime, though.

Annie put on the maid costume, replete with fishnet stockings, black suspender belt, matching black bra underneath. She was rather impressed he'd gotten all the sizes right she hadn't dreamed he paid that kind of attention to those sorts of things. She tied on the ridiculous little apron, donned the comical little cap atop her short curls. Finally, she slid her feet into her black high heels she saved for the rare occasion she needed to wear something other than trainers.

Now for a laugh! Annie lay with her back on the floor and took a picture of her legs propped up and crossed at the ankles against the wall. She sent it off to George with a message.

Sooner, rather.

She went back to the closet to finish putting away the t-shirts. She'd only managed to get one on its hanger before he texted her back.

Oh my. 2?

Two p.m. was more than an hour away! She'd be damned if she was going to sit around for a whole hour, wearing this bloody costume, twiddling her thumb. *Heeey bugger! This git clearly needs a lesson in manners when it comes to sex games.*

She marched over to the large mirror in the closet. Bending over a bit, she took a photo of her backside in the mirror, giggling less at the silly big bow and piles of ruffles than at the utter ridiculousness of the situation. She reckoned the sight of the suspenders peeking out from under the skirt ought to make him smile, though. Once again, she sent it to George with a message.

Try again.

A minute passed before her phone buzzed to alert her there was a new message.

You're a cruel woman. Give me fifteen minutes more?

Surely he's collected enough bloody pixie-whatever by now! She lay on the bed on her stomach with her ankles crossed in the air. Her bosom was barely covered by the lacy ruffle at the plunging neckline that, in actuality, made a mockery of the word *neckline*, falling nowhere near her neck at any point. It took almost a minute before she managed to find the right angle, but she finally got a photo she liked.

Now, I think.

Thirty seconds passed.

On my way, love. Don't move from that spot!

Ten seconds later, Annie heard a familiar pop just behind her at the foot of the bed. Giggling, she feigned surprise. She rolled over to face him, theatrically putting her hand to her mouth. "Ooh, sir! You're home early! And you've caught me having a lie-in on the job!"

"It's impossible to find decent help these days!" George chuckled lustily, conjuring a feather duster and tossing it at her. "You've been shamefully neglectful of this bit, I've noticed."

He pulled off his dirt-smudged and spider-webby t-shirt and kicked off his old trainers, leaving only a pair of baggy cargo pants that hung low about his hips. He took a seat on the edge of the bed next to her, smiling with delight at her willingness to play along.

Annie bit her finger in a manner she hoped he'd find provocative rather than ridiculous. "Will you be docking my pay, then?" she pouted.

George spelled his hands clean, then slipped a finger under the elastic garter, stroking the back of her thigh where it was exposed. "That depends. Do you promise to correct your errant ways?"

Annie drew the feather duster slowly down his bare chest. "You taught me all my errant ways."

George's hand was exploring under the ruffled skirt, caressing the hill of her hip, playing with the garter belt. "You've been an excellent pupil; I'll grant you that much."

Annie sat up then, thrusting her chest out a bit, and almost laughed when his eyes immediately fell from her face to her nearly exposed breasts. "And judging by the uniform you've provided me, *decent* help isn't precisely what you're looking for, either."

"Aren't you a clever one?" he murmured, his hand cupping her arse.

When he bent to kiss her breast, she noticed his hair smelled like sunshine and forest. His broad, sturdy shoulders were still faintly sunkissed from their annual summer family reunion at the shore; the freckles that appeared every summer, then faded through the fall, were yet gracing the skin of his back and chest.

"Far too clever for such menial work, that's for certain," she retorted sassily, winding her hand behind his neck and her fingers in his hair in order to weakly hold him in place.

"I agree," he mumbled against the flesh of her bosom.

Without lifting his head away, he climbed fully onto the bed. Then they shifted a bit, until he was sitting back on his knees between her legs.

She leaned back, propped herself up on her wrists, and raised her knees to face him better. "I deserve a promotion."

"Done."

George ran his hands along the stockings from ankle to thigh and up under the skirt. Annie felt herself flush slightly. He discovered now that she wasn't wearing underpants and began teasing her with his fingers. She ran her hand down his chest to his crotch, felt his erection through his trousers, and caressed it.

"And a raise," she demanded.

"You can tell you've already got it," he countered.

He cooperatively helped her remove his pants. She settled back into her former position, lying back on the bed but propped up on her elbows. He hovered frustratingly above her without touching. Annie arched her back a bit, straining against the costume, striving for contact.

"And a more comfortable uniform," she insisted petulantly. "All this lace is itchy."

He guided her hand back to his erection. While she stroked it, he reached around her back and unzipped the little dress. She shimmied a little, and it fell down her arms, exposing her sheer black bra.

"I'll go you one better how about no uniform at all?" he offered, kissing her nipples through the nearly transparent fabric of the bra.

Annie lifted her hips and George eased the dress down past her waist. Then she kicked her legs up into the air as he lifted it the rest of the way off, tossing it to the floor. He gazed at her for several moments, taking in the view: black bra, black garter, black stockings. Then he eased her heels off her feet, setting each ankle on one of his shoulders as he did.

"Christ, woman! This should be illegal," he uttered in a semi-groan, his hands running down her legs toward her hips once more.

"Is that the next little fantasy of yours? Playing with handcuffs?" she teased him, her body responding to his insistent caresses. "You can wear the bloody cop costume, if so."

George chuckled. "But I'm *always* the perpetrator," he insisted. He bent to kiss her belly, her thighs now on his shoulders, his hands at her hips. "Always the naughty boy."

"Mmm," Annie half-hummed in amusement, half-moaned with pleasure. "That's quite enough chitchat, don't you think?"

George kissed his way up her torso. She rose to meet him, and he reached behind her as their lips finally met, unfastening her bra.

"Back to work, then?" he whispered.

Annie helped him slide the straps off her arms. Then she reached for the forgotten feather duster. She ran it down along his bare chest and stomach, teasingly caressing his erection with it. She sighed with delight when he moaned.

The games were over, now. For both of them. He took her hips in his grasp, and she shifted slightly, positioning herself to welcome him.

"I saw the price tags for all these things, you know. This little charade is rather dear," she whispered.

George slid inside her with painstaking slowness. They began to move against each other, relishing the sensations made almost torturous by his deliberately languid pace.

"Worth... every... bloody... Knut," he groaned.

Author's Note: I really wish Brits celebrated Halloween like we here in the U.S. do. But since they don't, I had to orchestrate another excuse to get George and Annie to dress up in costumes. Just a silly bit of racy fluff that I haven't posted anywhere else before this: especially reserved for my readers here at TPP! Hope you enjoy!

Surprise

Chapter 66 of 80

George and Annie's tenth anniversary party ends up exactly as you ought to expect: with the tables turned.

Chapter 66: Surprise

December 25, 2007

Age 29

Annie sat in a chair before her grand fireplace and twinkling, fairy-lit Christmas tree, her back to Mole Hill's large window wall. George's head was resting in her lap he was sitting on the floor at her feet and she was absentmindedly stroking his hair, staring hypnotically at the magically enlarged and animated picture she had taken of a Tahitian sunset that hung on the wall opposite.

It was early on Christmas afternoon. The family had just finished eating an enormous potluck dinner, for it was impossible now to cook an entire meal for the extended Weasley clan in any one kitchen. A large tribe of children clad in new-this-morning-yet-already-mussed jumpers, ranging in age from nine years to newly-walking, were running through her house, weaving through the furniture, crashing into each other, going up and down the stairs, in and out of the bedrooms above. Fueled by an overdose of sweets and holiday adrenaline, they were eagerly sharing and showing off their latest gifts. Annie suspected far more of the latter than the former was occurring: a judgment based on her now rather extensive knowledge of the general nature of children. *These children in particular*, she mused with a smile, having spent most of every day with them at her school.

The parents of said children could easily be identified. They were the bleary-eyed ones sunken into the other seats surrounding her, leaning against furniture or each other for support, too exhausted to sustain any meaningful conversation. Every one of them had been awakened well before dawn by frenzied offspring who could no longer contain their anticipation. The only adult noise came from the patriarch, Grandpa Arthur, seated in the chair directly across from Annie, who had begun to snore a bit.

One little brown-eyed boy toddled through the nest of immobilized parents, nearly tripping over George's extended leg.

"C'mere, snotface," George said, digging into his trouser pocket for a tissue.

"Dat's not bery dnice, Ukle Dgordge," the child with the runny nose whined even as he obeyed and stepped closer.

"Neither is what's drippin' from your nose, kid," George argued, holding the tissue in place. "Blow," he commanded.

The little boy did as he was told.

"Where the hell are your parents, anyway?" George muttered as he cleaned the last bit of mucus from his nephew's face.

"Righ' dere," he said, pointing at the sofa next to where George and Annie were sitting.

"Go give this to them, then, with my compliments," he instructed, placing the used tissue into the grubby, moist little hand.

Without moving from his spot, the little boy tossed it at his father, who was seated on the floor approximately four feet away. It bounced off his face and landed on his lap.

"Thanks, James," Harry muttered as his son ran away, giggling.

"Where's the other one? What's his name again? Albus, is it?" asked Ginny with a yawn.

Harry, who was seated on the floor like George, glanced around. "I think I hear him on the stairs with Rose," he answered, lifting his glasses and rubbing his eyes. Albus and Rose were the newly-walking members of the clan, apparently busy practicing their step-climbing skills together.

"And you don't see a potential problem with that?" Ginny asked sarcastically, scratching her pregnant stomach.

"Not really, no," Harry replied with a yawn.

"I suppose he would just bounce his way down, wouldn't he?" Ginny sighed, pulling her long red hair back away from her face with her fingers and then holding the makeshift ponytail there with her fist.

"Most likely your Mum would catch him," Harry muttered sleepily. "Er... Ron...?"

"Hmm?" Ron answered, also from the floor, startled out of a semi-sleeping state. Hermione, sitting behind him, was curled up on the sofa, staring vacantly into the fire.

"Hugo's got a mouthful of something," Harry warned his best mate and brother-in-law, apathetically pointing at the baby propped up between Ron's legs.

"Oh, crap. Thanks, Harry," Ron mumbled, fishing a gooey mess of wet wrapping paper out of his infant son's mouth. For the past quarter of an hour, Hugo had been happily shredding a large piece of it into bits and, apparently, shoving them all in his mouth. "Yech," Ron complained, looking around for a place to dispose of the mess.

"Do *not* attempt to hide that under my furniture, Ron," Annie warned him, anticipating his next move.

"I wasn't!" Ron argued but flushed red with the knowledge Annie had just read his mind.

"Just pitch it into the fire, git," said George, giving his brother a small shove with his foot from across the floor.

Ron flung the pasty gob into the fire, and they all spent the next quiet minute listening to it hiss.

Annie casually looked over toward the dining table, where Molly, Charlie, Sasha, Percy, Audrey, Angelina, and Lee were seated, visiting quietly with each other. Angelina checked her watch, then looked pointedly at Molly, who nodded in understanding. The two of them then looked at Annie, smiling.

Annie smiled back. That was the signal she had been told to expect.

Angelina had broached the idea with Annie nearly a month ago. "Look," she had explained, "we all want to do something for the two of you on your tenth anniversary, but since you've got the only place big enough to hold everyone, and most of us will all be at your house that day anyway, we've got to work with one of you. So, how would you like to throw a surprise party for George, and pretend to be surprised yourself?"

Annie had been tickled and touched that they had thought to even try something so ambitious. She agreed to help her friend with the stipulation that they would not go to

any great effort and keep the thing small.

"Sure, sure," Angelina had agreed, dismissing her concerns with a wave.

Molly cleared her throat. "George, dear, would you mind popping over to the Burrow to fetch my knitting? I seem to have forgotten it," she said according to plan.

Annie glanced down at her husband for his reaction. Counting on his practically guaranteed reluctance to do anything his mother requested of him, she had already planned to offer a bribe to convince him to come with her, but that would have to be *quietly* whispered in his ear.

But to her surprise, he didn't complain or argue with his mother's request. Her especially cunning plan would not have to be put in effect, after all. She was rather put out by this, in fact.

"Sure, Mum," he replied cooperatively almost as if he was expecting it, himself. The hairs on the back of Annie's neck stood up as suspicion began to nag the edge of her brain. Had someone let the secret slip? If so, and George knew what was coming, she knew him better than to expect anything less than outright sabotage.

But maybe she was just being paranoid?

"I want the blue merino wool. Take Annie with you, dear. She knows the one I mean," Molly suggested, barely sounding scripted.

The plan relied on Annie going with George, keeping him occupied for a bit, then delivering him to the appropriate place at the right time for the party. Annie considered for a moment the tempting idea of being uncooperative herself, just to see their reactions. But she dutifully stood up, was helped into her coat by her husband, and then followed him to the door instead.

"Mind if we just walk?" they both said at the same time as they stepped outside. Both of them smiled and laughed at the coincidence, then George took her hand and they began walking across the meadow along the little trail that led between Mole Hill and the Burrow.

"I think this morning was a success, don't you?" she said, making small talk as she silently rehearsed her next lines for after they had arrived at the Burrow

"As long as the goal was spoiling everyone rotten," he scolded her.

Annie knew he was joking. George was the one who always had difficulty reining himself in at the toy stores, both Muggle and magical, when they went shopping for their children's gifts every year. Every mechanical and electrical toy in London made his eyes light up and his fingers twitch to try them out for himself. Annie was the one responsible for setting limits, and he relied on her to make him hold to them. It wasn't an easy task, either; he was forever trying to cheat. It never failed that on Christmas morning, there were always a few "surprise" presents she had not seen before, waiting beneath the tree for the children.

They walked along in comfortable silence for another minute while Annie's thoughts wandered. Neither one of them had mentioned their anniversary to each other today. At first, Annie had been grateful for the fact that it had seemed to slip his mind, for she was afraid if he brought it up, her face would be a dead giveaway that something was afoot. After being together for so many years now, it was extremely difficult for her to successfully keep anything from him for very long.

However, as the day had passed, his apparent forgetfulness had become suspicious in and of itself. Either he really did forget, in which case she would be royally pissed off, or (*More likely*, she reckoned) he did indeed remember and wasn't mentioning it on purpose. After all, what idiot, even a male one, forgets his wedding anniversary when it falls on Christmas Day?

And if he wasn't mentioning it on purpose, what was he up to?

Annie examined her husband carefully. His face was blank, eyes staring straight ahead, lips lightly pressed together. It was too much of... nothing... for George. He was usually far more animated than this.

"George?"

"Hmm?" he answered, purposefully looking straight ahead rather than turning to her.

"Oh nothing," she said, now completely convinced he was up to something. *Too many little coincidences: the forgetfulness, the cooperation, and now, he's avoiding eye contact...?*

"What?" he asked again, this time glancing at her from out of the corner of his eye, working to keep his face expressionless. His tone of voice sounded slightly nervous.

"Nothing, really," she assured him, purposefully sounding fake. Maybe she could sweat it out of him. "Let's hurry... I'm cold," she said, picking up her pace, testing for a reaction.

"Oh, erm..." he mumbled.

She took a perverse delight in watching him mentally scramble, pulling back on her arm slightly.

"Here... I'll warm you up," he offered, brusquely pulling her closer and rubbing her arm with his free hand.

He made no move to quicken his pace. In fact, Annie suspected the opposite: he was dragging his feet *What is going on?*

Then he checked his watch.

A light was beginning to dawn in Annie's mind. It was now blatantly obvious that more than one "secret" plan was afoot today *All right*, she thought. *I'll play along... for now.*

They finally reached the back door of the Burrow a few minutes later. George could no longer suppress a smug, I-know-something-you-don't-know smile. Annie began to suspect she had not, in fact, been involved in planning a surprise party after all. Rather, it appeared the opposite was true: she had been duped. She strongly suspected something unpleasant was waiting for her on the other side of that door. *Well, if they think they can pull one over on me, they have another think coming...*

"Ready?" George asked, smiling broadly, eyes twinkling.

Ready? For what? Annie shook her head, fully confident she understood what was going on. Instead, she gazed at her husband with her best attempt at come-hither eyes and summoned a sultry voice in the chilly wind. "George... I'm still cold," she said, taking his hands and beginning to lead him a few steps away from the door.

"What?!" he said, alarmed by her odd reaction. "It'll be warm inside," he argued, nodding toward the door but allowing her to pull him along all the same.

"Come warm me up... the right way, this time," she cooed, smiling wickedly, dragging him a few more steps further from the door.

"R-right now?" he asked, his voice nearly breaking in surprise. He planted his feet, weighing his options.

Annie nearly blew it by laughing out loud at the bewildered look on poor George's face. He was utterly torn, apparently thinking that it was rather important for him to deliver Annie to the Burrow at this, the appointed time. Yet here she was, tempting him with... well, an invitation to something he rarely, if ever, said no to.

"Annie... we need to go in... to get the yarn, you know..." he said, his resolve beginning to weaken as she kissed his neck and earlobe, attempting to sway him. He was not

putting up much physical resistance, however. In fact, he was pulling her closer, holding her tightly.

"What's the rush? They'll never know." She pulled his mouth down to hers and let loose her most passionate kiss. She cast her mind about for a place out of the cold wind that they could actually escape to, if she was about to be as successful as she thought.

"Actually, they probably suspect it already," he said, chuckling when they came up for air. "C'mon, before you embarrass yourself any further," he teased, thinking he was being cryptic, lifting her up and carrying her back to the door. "Trust me... you'll thank me for this later," he said, setting her down and taking her hand firmly in his, then reaching for the doorknob.

"Don't!" Annie cried, cringing as the door flew open.

"Ta da!" he yelled at the same time.

Silence greeted them.

"Huh?" George grunted, poked his head inside, then dragged her into the Burrow's kitchen behind him. "What the hell?" he mumbled softly, dropping her hand and dashing through the ground level rooms, looking frantically for something. A look of profound confusion bordering on panic was on his face.

"Were you expecting something?" Annie asked, smugly folding her arms across her chest and leaning against the sink. She was beginning to be impressed by the rather complicated ruse playing out before them.

"Erm... well..." he stammered, trying to cover for whatever mistake he had just made. That is, until he turned to look at his wife, who was biting her lip to keep from laughing but burst out giggling anyway. "What's so funny?" he asked, eyes narrowing with suspicion.

"Who told you there was a surprise party here today?" she asked.

George looked momentarily stunned, then the light began to come on for him as well. "Lee is a dead man. Who told you, as if I had to ask?"

"Yep," she said, confirming his guess that the Jordans were in on it together. "They've been playing us against each other," Annie said with a smirk.

"Where are you supposed to deliver me?"

"To the school building. I'm supposed to say there's something in the fridge I forgot to throw out."

"The *school*?" he asked, incredulous. Then he shuddered, pondering the thought of a celebration held in a building he tried to avoid as much as possible just on principle. It was a *school*, after all, and he was *George friggin' Weasley*. "Eww."

"I know. I told her it was a bad idea, but she insisted. Now I see why it wouldn't have mattered anyway."

George's brow furrowed. "You don't think that's were it really is?"

Annie shrugged but shook her head. "We could just blow them off entirely..." she said, lacing her arms around his neck.

George laughed. "Tempting, yes. But wouldn't you rather get a little revenge?"

"I'm listening."

*

After George made himself invisible with a Disillusionment Charm, he Apparated just outside the school building. He crept over to a large window and peeked in. It was empty. *No surprise there*, he thought. *Just as Annie suspected*.

Next, he crept over to his house, careful to disguise his footprints in the frosty grass and remain unseen. Sure enough, an even bigger crowd of their family and friends who had not been there when they'd left fifteen minutes ago were amassed there now. Angelina Jordan was standing on a chair, shouting and pointing, explaining the plan to everyone gathered.

"You were right," he said as he re-appeared in the Burrow's kitchen. "They're all at the house. They think we'll be coming in the back door from the school." He had overheard Angelina shouting to the group their instructions, expecting them at any minute now. That would be the direction everyone would be facing from their hiding places.

"All right, then let's teach them a lesson," Annie said, beaming with devious anticipation.

"This is going to be brilliant," said George softly, a devilish smile gracing his features. He reached out for her hand.

"Happy anniversary, George," she said, barely above a whisper, smiling at him lovingly.

"Happy anniversary, love," he replied in kind, kissing her hand.

George cast another Disillusionment Charm over the both of them, then they Apparated back into their home right into the small gap between the Christmas tree and the fireplace, out of sight. He was slightly surprised to find invisible Side-Along Apparition was still so easy to do, even though they hadn't done it together in nearly a decade.

"Do you see them yet, Harry?" Angelina whispered loudly from where she was crouched behind the dining table.

"Nah, nothin' yet," Harry replied softly from his post, peering out the back door window.

Keeping silent behind everyone's backs, George let the invisibility charm fade away. Holding Annie's hand, they crept up together behind Ron and Hermione, who were hiding behind one of the large leather chairs.

"What's taking them so long?" whispered George into Ron's ear, disguising his voice.

Annie bit her finger to keep from laughing and giving them away.

"You know George and Annie. Whenever those two get a minute alone... pfft!" whispered Ron, straining to peek over the chair and not even looking at who was speaking to him.

"Who?" George asked.

"You know the guests of honor?" Ron said testily. "George and AAARRGH!" he screamed, jumping up in shock and falling backwards just as he finally turned to look at the person whispering such a stupid question to him. He lay there on the floor, clutching his chest, staring bug-eyed back at his brother.

"Shut up, Ron!" forty very visible people who thought they were hidden turned around and hissed at him. Hermione closed her eyes and hung her head, shaking it slightly in mortified exasperation.

"SURPRISE!" George and Annie screamed as they jumped up from behind the chair.

Hermione screeched in startled shock on the floor next to them, joining her husband to sprawl on the wooden planks.

"SURPRISE!" echoed a crowd of children as they leaped up from behind the balcony wall. It was the signal they had been told to wait for, after all. Then they jumped and cheered for themselves, considering it a job well done.

Forty adults, all folded in half in an attempt to hide themselves behind furniture, stairs, and kitchen counters, stared up at the happy couple with slack jaws and wide eyes.

"Son of a bitch!" cried Lee softly, smacking the floor with his fist.

"You rotten little..." mumbled Angelina, shaking her head slowly in disgust.

Another moment passed. The children, wondering why they were the only ones cheering, fell quiet in their confusion.

"Any second now, you're going to realize how completely hilarious this is," George explained to the group with a smug smile.

Slowly, everyone began to stand up and stretch their cramped muscles. A few people began to chuckle.

"Come on!" cried Annie, goading her friends and family. "Don't all be such party poopers!"

A few more people began to laugh.

"Were you surprised, Daddy?" called out Janie from the balcony.

"Absolutely, love. Everyone was. Well done, all of you!" George replied and began applauding the children.

Annie joined him, cheering enthusiastically. Most of the adults joined them in congratulating the children. The majority of the people in the room were chuckling now, or at least had amused looks on their faces. There were a few grumpy hold-outs Angelina, most notably but most could appreciate the joke and were being good sports. Especially since they were all in the same boat; being the surprisees rather than the surprisers.

"Pretty stupid of us, trying to put one over on George Weasley," joked their new neighbors, Neville and Hannah Longbottom, who had recently moved into the old Diggory place.

"I told you this was an utter waste of time," Ginny complained to no one in particular from the floor where she was still stuck on all fours.

"Why doesn't anyone ever listen to you?" Harry teased her as he struggled to haul his uncooperative pregnant wife up off the floor.

Neville reached over to help the two of them.

"Everyone seems to think they know better than me just because they're older," she said loudly. "Ha! You'll all be geezers before me, and who'll be laughing then?" she said, finally righting herself with both Neville and Harry's help.

"The same whiney little brat who's laughing now?" Charlie chuckled from his perch on a bar stool.

"Too right!" Ginny exclaimed, grinning at her brother.

"You realize you just admitted to being a whiney little brat?" asked Harry, chuckling.

Ginny blew a raspberry at him and waddled her way toward the kitchen. "Somebody better reward me with some cake, that's all I have to say," she laughed.

George and Annie wove their way through the guests, accepting reluctant congratulations and a few shoulders thrown in their way, until they reached the Jordans.

"Whose idiotic idea was this, anyway?" teased Lee, nudging Angelina with his shoulder.

His wife cracked the slightest of smiles. "I'm pretty sure it was yours, git," she muttered, nudging him back.

"Let that be a lesson to you, then," he replied. "For Merlin's sake, don't ever listen to *me* again!"

"Sorry, Ange," said Annie, holding out her arms and offering a hug to her dear friend.

"You're an ungrateful cow," mumbled Angelina, refusing to move.

"I know," Annie sympathized, hugging her anyway. "But you really should have known better."

"Than to try to do something nice for the likes of you two?!" Angelina exclaimed.

"We don't deserve it!" Annie agreed.

"I ruin *everything*," George assured her with a smile.

Angelina harrumphed, steadfastly refusing to return the apologetic hugs of Annie and George, still pretending to be put out.

"We'll have to make it up to her somehow, I suppose," Annie said loudly, as if Angelina couldn't hear her.

"Might I recommend free babysitting for life?" suggested Lee hopefully.

George ignored his friend. "I know just the thing! We ought to throw her a surprise party! I happen to know she ~~adores~~ surprise parties," he gushed jokingly.

"I *hate* surprise parties!" cried Angelina, laughing openly at last. "Never again!"

"Promise?" Annie pleaded.

"Trust me, I've learned my lesson," giggled Angelina.

Valentine

Chapter 67 of 80

Annie and Angelina host the radio show for their incapacitated husbands just before Valentine's Day. Other than a few swears, the raciest bits are the songs themselves.

Chapter 67: Valentine

February 7, 2008

Age 29

Transcript: River & Wrackspurt Episode #363

MRS. RIVER: Welcome once again to River and Wrackspurt.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: And no, your beloved hosts are not the victims of a Polyjuice Potion mishap....

MRS. RIVER: But instead have been laid low by a brutal case of the sniffles.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: Well, Andean Aluxob Flux is what the lovely and helpful folks over at St. Mungo's are calling it, actually. Oh, and by the way, we've been requested to pass on the following public service announcement. The folks over at Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes would like to announce a recall on all Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder purchased during the last five days, asking that you please perform a standard Vanishing Charm on all packages bearing the lot number eight-three-nine. Do contact your local Wheezes for a full replacement or refund. Do NOT under any circumstances continue its use.

MRS. RIVER: And our thanks go out once again to the long-time sponsors of this program, Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes. Now, allow me to introduce ourselves: we happen to be the oft-referenced, long-suffering spouses of your aforementioned hosts, filling in for the poor dears on this last Saturday before the dreaded Valentine's Day holiday. And yes, I said dreaded.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: I propose a boycott of the whole rotten thing, Mrs. River. All Valentine's Day does is set one up for failure and disappointment. When will everyone realize that no matter what, your lofty romantic hopes for the day will not be met? All such ridiculous expectations do is serve to pressure and frustrate the one you supposedly love, anyway.

MRS. RIVER (chuckling): Have you always felt this way, or is it only in later life you've become such a crusty, cynical old bat?

MRS. WRACKSPURT: Crusty since the day I was born, I'm afraid.

MRS. RIVER: Well, I must confess I've come to agree with your point of view. Now, don't get us wrong, all you idealistic young romantics out there. We might be grumpy old married cows, but we truly believe romance with a capital R is alive and well and certainly something to aspire to. But why set a date for it, we ask? Why should we expect that everyone all over Christendom must experience a profound moment of love on the same day?

MRS. WRACKSPURT: Very well put, Mrs. River. I applaud your argument. Where is it written that the wholesale slaughter of roses and consumption of tons of artery-clogging, albeit scrumptious, chocolates must be ritualistically performed in the middle of ruddy freezing February, when everyone is at their palest, sickest, and most depressed?

MRS. RIVER: Hear, hear!

MRS. WRACKSPURT: However, that being said, we have decided to put our two Knuts in on the whole matter, and today we feature songs that deal with the subjects of love and romance.

MRS. RIVER: But not the sappy rubbish you'll hear at Madam Puddifoot's, mind you.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: Perish the thought! Not that Madam Puddifoot's isn't a perfectly lovely place for a cuppa and a canoodle any day of the year.

MRS. RIVER (laughing): Truer words never spoken, Mrs. Wrackspurt! And to take it one step further, all the songs today will also feature female artists and, therefore, a feminine point of view on the subject.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: Not that our better halves particularly ignore the artistic efforts of women on the program, you understand.

MRS. RIVER: Far from it, and kudos to them.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: We're just doing it... well, because no one's here to tell us any different, frankly.

MRS. RIVER: And I hope it goes without saying that any complaints should be directed to us rather than your regular hosts, bless them, who had absolutely no input on today's program. Much to their chagrin, most likely.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: At the moment, they cannot summon the energy to do anything but listen passively, poor dears. Do feel better soon, boys.

MRS. RIVER: I echo those sentiments whole-heartedly, Mrs. Wrackspurt. So let's get on with it, then, shall we? We begin today with "Divine Hammer" by The Breeders.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: Here's a curious fact this American band is formed around twin sisters, Kim and Kelley Deal.

MRS. RIVER: That is an interesting coincidence!

MRS. WRACKSPURT: One of whom is also a member of another band previously featured on this show, the Pixies. You'll also hear a reference to dowsing "You're the rod, I'm water" but despite the water-witching references, these ladies are as Muggle as they come, I believe.

MRS. RIVER (giggling): What's the 'divine hammer' to which the Misses Deal refer?

MRS. WRACKSPURT (giggling): A Norse god named Thor was, in ancient times, believed to throw his hammer during lightening storms. I'm pretty sure that's what this song is about. That and a carpenter.

MRS. RIVER: How very literal of you. Nice save. You see, dear listeners, sometimes a girl's not looking for love, precisely....

[song plays]

"My word, I've never seen Lee laid so low," Angelina murmured.

"I know!" Annie lamented. "George has something horrid pouring out of practically every orifice, poor fellow."

Angelina expressively wrinkled her nose. "It'll be a miracle if Roxy doesn't get it. St. Mungo's gave us a potion to help boost her immune system, supposedly. I just hope I sent her off to Katie's in time."

Annie nodded. "Molly's got our little ones. You know, Muggles have these things called shots that help prevent diseases like this...."

"Shots? Like, you drink them?" Angelina asked, confused.

"Nah. Injected."

Angelina looked like she found the concept disturbing. The women were quiet for a few moments, then Angelina sighed. "You're so lucky to have family nearby. I mean... well, you know what I mean."

Annie nodded, smiling sympathetically. While she no longer had any blood relatives to her name, George's extended family had adopted her fully into the clan. Her situation was certainly preferable to Angelina's: she and Lee had both lost their parents in one or the other of the wars. "I know," she assured her friend.

"I miss my mum so much," Angelina said softly. "You must miss your Gran a lot, too."

"I do," Annie agreed. *I miss her every single day*

"What's going to happen to this next generation?" Angelina lamented. "Almost no one has the sort of extended families like we all grew up with. And these days, both parents have got to work just to make ends meet present company excluded," she added with a teasing smile.

Annie smiled back. While she chose to work outside the home at the school, it wasn't because they needed the money. She also spent every day surrounded by her own children as well as everyone else's, so she reckoned she didn't really fit the typical definition of a working mother.

"They'll survive, same as we did. They're all wonderfully well-adjusted kids, Ange," she argued. "We're doing a good job."

The song finished, and Annie pressed the green button, just like George had taught her.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: Here's another American band, this one fronted by sweet-voiced little Hayley Williams. She's singing about the pursuit of her fellow, who unfortunately gets his head turned by a rival.

MRS. RIVER: Sadly, some girls can be catty things.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: The hurdles we sometimes have to surmount, I suppose.

MRS. RIVER: Sometimes one must get one's hands dirty in the chase, mustn't one?

MRS. WRACKSPURT: Remember that patience and determination pay off, girls. Stay true to yourself, though, throughout.

MRS. RIVER: An inspirational tune, indeed.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: Not to mention nicely strident guitar. Girls can rock.

MRS. RIVER: Agreed, agreed. Here's "Misery Business" by Paramore.

[song plays]

"Any particular reason you picked this one, Annie?" Angelina asked, feigning nonchalance.

Annie could tell her friend was fishing but wasn't sure what she might be in search of. "Nope," she replied honestly. "I just like it."

"It was very short-lived, as I recall," Angelina said cryptically after a hesitation of several moments. "Lasted a little longer than Fred and I, though," she added with a derisive snort. "She never meant a thing to him, really. That girl."

Annie was flummoxed. "What girl?"

"Don't you know? About Gillian St. Martin?" Angelina asked, sounding surprised.

"Oh, right.... Gillian." Annie made a strange sound a hybrid of a snort and a chuckle. "The kissing experiment."

Angelina breathed a sigh of relief. "So you do know!"

"Of course," Annie laughed.

Angelina smiled devilishly. "Did Fred rat him out?"

"That does sound like something Fred would do, but no," Annie explained. "George confessed all on his own, actually." Annie sighed then, recalling those difficult years spent apart. "Teenagers can be so stupid, so cruel. He felt really guilty about that for a while."

Angelina harrumphed. "Gillian was no peach, either. She was just using George to get back at McLaggen for dumping her right before the summer hols."

Annie looked at her friend in surprise. This was a part of the tale she hadn't heard before. "Does George know that?"

Angelina shrugged. "No idea. It was ages ago, though. What difference does it make?"

Annie hummed thoughtfully.

MRS. RIVER: And yet one more American band. Next we have Mazzy Star.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: Nearly a one-eighty degree turnabout from the previous song, this one features Hope Sandoval's ethereal voice partnered with a mellow melody. She's almost hypnotic, I think.

MRS. RIVER: *This song is about falling for the wrong guy....*

MRS. WRACKSPURT: *You know the one your friends don't like.*

MRS. RIVER: *Here's a heads up there's usually a good reason, if they're your **real** friends. But who among us hasn't hankered after a bad boy? And when has a warning about him ever done anything but make him look even cuter?*

MRS. WRACKSPURT: *I suppose it's one of those lessons everyone's got to learn for themselves, like touching a hot pot with your bare hand. It hurts like hell, and you'll only do it once if you're at all clever. This is "Give You My Lovin'."*

[song plays]

"What about you? Was George your first?" Angelina asked.

"Kiss?" Annie asked, confirming the only interpretation of the question she was willing to answer.

Angelina rolled her eyes impatiently and nodded.

"Not technically," Annie replied.

"That's an intriguing answer," Angelina said, her tone demanding further clarification.

Annie giggled. "Not nearly so. My lips indeed met with someone else's, but it was hardly a kiss. There was no... romantic feeling behind it."

"So who was it?" Angelina demanded, looking as if she had a strong suspicion as to the identity of the kisser in question.

"Nobody you know," Annie retorted pointedly, understanding exactly to whom she was referring. For some reason, Angelina wouldn't drop the idea that something sometime must've happened between Annie and Fred. "Just some Muggle bloke."

Annie's expression darkened as she pondered the deeply buried memory. That part of her past was not something she permitted herself to think about much, if at all. An echo of it flashed through her mind: sitting on a toilet in the girl's lavatory while snide, hurtful voices rang out from the other side of the door. *What does he expect from a whore like that?*

"What's wrong?" Angelina said with concern.

"Some unpleasant memories," Annie confessed to her friend.

"Want to talk about it?" Angelina asked.

"Not really," Annie said with a fixed smile. "The song's almost over, anyway...."

MRS. RIVER: *Now we take a trip to the middle of the North Atlantic an Icelandic group, this.*

MRS. WRACKSPURT: *The vocalist her name is Bjork Gudmundsdottir has this lovely child-like voice: rough, raw, and emotional.*

MRS. RIVER: *I often find her lyrics simplistic yet deep. Perhaps because English is a second language for her?*

MRS. WRACKSPURT: *Possibly. She's a bit of a kook, this one: one of those eccentric artists.*

MRS. RIVER: *This the one with the odd fashion sense?*

MRS. WRACKSPURT: *The one who showed up at an awards gala dressed like she was wearing a dead swan, yes. (giggling)*

MRS. RIVER: *Talk about the sense God gave a goose.*

MRS. WRACKSPURT: *But you know what? That was ages ago, yet people still remember her for that. The stunt served its purpose.*

MRS. RIVER: *She's singing here about the infatuation period: how it feels when that lovely little arrow strikes, and you get unexpectedly knocked on your arse. Oh, and she mentions she's been hit with his charm is that another inadvertent magical reference by Muggles?*

MRS. WRACKSPURT: *Most likely, I expect. This is "Hit" by The Sugarcubes.*

[song plays]

"I miss this, sometimes. That dizzy, crazy feeling," Angelina sighed. "Don't get me wrong... I'm not saying I'm unhappy with what I've got. It's great and comfortable and reliable. But... still... remember that sickening nausea? How your internal organs shifted position whenever you caught a glimpse of him?"

"We've been married for ten years now, and it still happens to me sometimes," Annie said, smiling to herself. "I still can't believe it, some days."

"Good grief!" Angelina growled. "Rub it in, why don't you? Everybody already knows you have the perfect marriage," she added sarcastically.

Annie stuck out her tongue and laughed. "The summer we were sixteen.... Oh, God, I was miserable! I had such a massive crush on him, I could barely breathe. When we went on our usual camping trip that year...."

"I'm still just utterly gobsmacked Molly let this happen right under her nose!" Angelina interrupted, shaking her head judgmentally. "And you keep insisting nothing ever happened! Bollocks!"

Annie laughed. "I won't say the boys were gentlemen, because we both know what rot that is. But when it came to... proprieties... they were always very considerate."

Angelina shook her head, not buying a word of it. "That autumn at school, Fred kept offering us each a galleon me and Katie and Alicia if we could touch our elbows together behind our backs! At every bloody team practice! I nearly yanked that Beater bat away from him and pulverized him with it."

Annie giggled. "I didn't say they were mature about it. Innuendo abounded at all times, of course. But... I don't know. They always made me feel safe. Respected. It's probably part of the reason why I was so miserable for so long, I suppose. George was so careful not to cross any lines I was never sure if he could feel the same about me."

"Aw! That's just... precious," Angelina retorted sarcastically, pretending to have an awful taste in her mouth.

"Well, clearly I can't compete with you," Annie snapped with mock irritation. "Nobody wrote a bloody song about me, for instance."

"Song? What are you talking about?" Angelina demanded, suddenly keen.

"Ask your husband dearest when he recovers enough to speak," Annie giggled.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: We draw closer to home now with an Irish band, and I cannot rave enough about these lovelies. Dolores O'Riordan has one of those beautiful, haunting voices that only Irish women seem to be able to summon. Her ballads are absolutely devastating, but she can really rock out, as well. I spent much of my youth with her songs in my ears, and they've stood the test of time, in my opinion.

MRS. RIVER: Ah, new love. Are we ever more vulnerable?

MRS. WRACKSPURT: That's precisely what this song speaks to, Mrs. River. Ms. O'Riordan prays that things will stay as wonderful as they are in that moment.

MRS. RIVER: Do prayers like that ever work, Mrs. Wrackspurt?

MRS. WRACKSPURT: That depends on one's definition of wonderful, I think. It never stays like it is in those first moments. But as long as one remains wide open, refrains from paralyzing one's evolution, and can learn to see the magical in what other people consider mundane, then yes, I think those prayers are realistic.

MRS. RIVER: How very profound. Words of wisdom, children. Do cherish them, won't you? Here is "Analyse" by The Cranberries for your enjoyment.

[song plays]

"For a long time, I was so confused about him," Angelina said softly. "He was really the first bloke who paid any attention to me as a girl, not a Chaser."

"Fred, you mean?" Annie asked.

Angelina nodded. "My first dance... my first kiss. And then it was over before it began, really. I couldn't understand it."

"Poor Ange!" Annie crooned sincerely.

Angelina snorted and shook her head ruefully. "I was so pissed at him, but I didn't really understand why. I mean, I knew we weren't in love or any such rubbish, for heaven's sake. Before the Yule Ball, I'd never thought of him as anything other than a teammate, to be honest." Angelina sighed with nostalgia. "Nothing more than wounded pride on my part, I suppose."

"I loved him to death, but Fred was, for the most part, a jerk when it came to women, Ange. Your pride wasn't the only casualty he left behind," Annie assured her friend.

Angelina nodded knowingly. "Lee's said something along those lines to me before," she sighed. "I saw it myself, in fact. That little prick moved on to Katie right after me, and she got the same treatment. Oh, well. Doesn't matter, does it? Ancient history."

"Ancient history makes us who we are," Annie corrected gently. "You were perfectly reasonable to be pissed back then. And reasonable to move on. And reasonable to miss him still."

MRS. RIVER: Now, here's a song about realizing things are not quite as they should be.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: We know the situation is heading for calamity, but do any of us ever jump clear of the ship before the collision with the iceberg? Hell, no.

MRS. RIVER: The Cardigans are a Swedish group, as I understand. The lead singer, Nina Persson, has another of those hypnotic voices: sweet and pop-y. And please explain what is meant by "erase and rewind."

MRS. WRACKSPURT: Muggles used to make sound recordings on spools of magnetic tape. The tape could be erased with another magnet, wound back onto another spool, and recorded over again. Now, of course, they use computers and lasers and plastic discs, but that's another discussion for another day.

MRS. RIVER: Here is "Erase/Rewind."

[song plays]

"Ginny gone into labor yet?" Angelina asked.

Annie shook her head. "Any day now." Then she sighed in exasperation. "She and Harry are fighting over names again."

"Oh, dear," Angelina commiserated.

"She swore last time he crossed the line with Al's middle name," Annie said.

Angelina's forehead wrinkled with the effort to remember. "Remind me?"

"Severus, for chrissake!" Annie cried.

Little Al Potter's middle name was still a very sore spot with most, if not all Weasleys. Despite Harry's insistence that Snape was actually a good guy, that he had done exactly as Dumbledore had instructed all along and played the part of double agent perfectly, that he had redeemed himself at the very end none of them could shake the feeling he'd been a traitorous, greasy git.

Angelina cringed. "Ugh."

"And now he wants to name this one it's a girl, if you haven't heard after Luna," Annie added.

Ginny had been fascinated by Annie's ultrasounds and finally convinced Harry to accompany her to a Muggle obstetrician for one. Harry obsessively eschewed the Muggle world otherwise, and Annie reckoned it was a predictable consequence of his abusive upbringing. The upshot of the whole thing being that the sex of the baby was already known with scientific Muggle confidence, rather than magical doodling with dangling wedding rings and such.

"You're joking!" Angelina gasped.

"Yes, you can imagine Ginny's reaction to that one," Annie growled with disgust. "She told him she was fine with naming her after his mother, Lily. But Luna!?"

"What was he thinking?" Angelina marveled.

"Not to mention he singlehandedly named both the boys," Annie pointed out. She shook her head as she pondered the situation. *James Sirius was understandable. Honoring Dumbledore with Albus wasn't unexpected. But... Luna!* "Does Harry really not see how threatened Ginny's always felt by all his previous girlfriends?"

Angelina raised one eyebrow, wondering if new scuttlebutt was about to be revealed.

Annie smirked. "You know what I mean. Remember how Gin nearly went after that pretty Asian girl at one of the memorials? Just for saying hello to Harry, apparently?"

"Men are stupid," Angelina grumbled. "And Ginny's... well... a mite unbalanced when it comes to jealousy. Think Harry gets off on it a bit?"

Annie shrugged. "Who knows?"

MRS. WRACKSPURT: Alanis Morissette is Canadian. Quelle surprise! a nationality not often represented on this illustrious program. Her voice is so versatile, ranging from sweet and lullaby-like to furiously raw and angry.

MRS. RIVER: Ooh, and hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: The world is knee-deep in "woe is me, I miss you so, please come back" songs written by the dumped. But here is one that takes a decidedly different outlook, to say the least.

MRS. RIVER: Open up your mokeskin purse, Mrs. Wrackspurt. I predict a fine is forthcoming.

MRS. WRACKSPURT (giggling): Did you bring your crystal ball with you today, Mrs. River? This is called "You Oughta Know." The uncensored version. You've been warned, dear listeners.

[song plays]

"When is Hermione going to start helping out at the school?" Angelina asked.

Annie smiled wryly. "I wouldn't hold your breath," she replied.

Angelina huffed. "I thought the excuse she gave when Rose started last year was that a big yearlong project came up at the Ministry. Isn't it finished, yet?"

"If it is, I'm sure another equally important one has arisen," Annie replied. "Face it, Ange, she's not going to sacrifice one day a week from saving the wizarding world from the menace of pure-blood prejudice. And good for her for sticking it to those bastards for all of us!"

"That's rubbish, Annie! The rest of us have adapted our schedules...."

"I know it's not exactly fair, but think about it," Annie urged. "Honestly, it might not be such a bad thing. Don't get me wrong, she loves all the kids, and she's great with Rose and Hugo...."

Angelina laughed. "I don't know if I'd go that far," she interrupted. "You should hear some of the stories Ron's told Lee."

Annie giggled. She'd heard a few of those stories, herself. As loving a mother as Hermione was, dealing with an infant and a toddler who had no concept of logic or consideration for others was perhaps one of the biggest challenges she'd ever faced.

"Anyway, I'm just saying, and I hate that I think this, but she'd likely be more trouble than she'd be a help, to be perfectly blunt."

"You're probably right," Angelina conceded. "Still, it isn't fair to the rest of us. Maybe Ron should start spending a day a week at the school."

"Argh!" Annie exclaimed, horrified by the thought.

"He's great with the kids!" Angelina protested, laughing.

"Because he is one himself!" Annie countered. "And as much as I adore Ron, I doubt he's quite so liberated as that. Can you honestly imagine him spending a whole day at the school on a regular basis?"

Angelina laughed in agreement. "Okay, okay. But if that's the state of things, then they should pay for the service, just like every other parent in Britain."

"They're family, Ange," Annie moaned. "I'm not going to ask them to pay me."

"Then Fleur, Ginny, Hannah, Andromeda, and I will do it for you," Angelina insisted. Her smile was mockingly sweet.

Annie huffed. "Fine. I'll talk to them."

"Soon," Angelina added.

MRS. RIVER: Back to America, and Ms. Sheryl Crow is not my typical fare, I confess. But her lyrics really speak to me here.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: Same for me. She has this amazingly feline, almost purring voice. The melody is stark, serving to really direct one's focus onto the words. And as you said, the lyrics are heartfelt, mature.

MRS. RIVER: None of us survive adolescence and young womanhood without some battle scars on our hearts. Once reality hits and you realize a mythically perfect Prince Charming who does and says everything right doesn't exist, it's time to reevaluate your outlook.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: This song is about moving on, growing up, and perhaps acknowledging you yourself are not perfect, either.

MRS. RIVER: Hey, we're all complicated and full of contradictions. Deal. This is "Strong Enough" by Sheryl Crow.

[song plays]

"I can't believe Joey's three already!" Angelina cried, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Trust me, I know!" Annie agreed. "She's about half the size of James but insists on doing everything he and the older kids do. We're lucky she hasn't broken her neck three times over!"

"She's a caution, that's for certain," Angelina agreed with a smile.

"The healers at St. Mungo's will know her by name soon, I predict," Annie lamented. "I've given up forbidding her to do things, it only encourages her! Now I just tell her not to hurt herself.... Fat lot of good that does, either."

"Sounds like she takes after her father," Angelina teased. "Daredevil extraordinaire."

Annie smirked and nodded. "Bill's nicknamed her 'Molly's Revenge.'"

"Oh, that's perfect!" Angelina guffawed. After nearly a full minute, she finally gathered her laughter under control, dabbed her tears, and asked, "When are you

rescheduling her birthday party?"

"The fifteenth, tentatively," Annie replied. "Hopefully this nasty Flux business will have run its course through by then."

MRS. RIVER: We're going way back with this one, Mrs. Wrackspurt. The Pretenders are a British band with an American front woman, Chrissie Hynde.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: Now, Ms. Hynde is one of the groundbreaking women of rock and roll, Mrs. River. I regrettably cannot express how genuinely inspirational and clever and amazing she is. Many of her songs spoke to me during the recent troubled times that are thankfully behind us now.

MRS. RIVER: Sometimes we are not free to be with those we love. This song is about lovers forced to be apart by outside influences. And please explain what a chain gang is for our listeners, Mrs. Wrackspurt.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: Convicted Muggle prisoners were once shackled to each other by chains around the ankles and forced to do manual labor. Oh, and P.S. Delores Umbridge can kiss my motherf (long bleep). Right. Okay. But if I ever get my hands on that bi (longer bleep).

MRS. RIVER: Apologies for that to all you listeners with tender ears.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: Suffice it to say you'd better run if you ever see me coming, you effing bloated pink cow!

MRS. RIVER: Got it out of your system, yet, love?

MRS. WRACKSPURT: I think so, yes. Thanks.

MRS. RIVER: Take a listen to "Back on the Chain Gang" from the Pretenders, an oldie but certainly a goodie.

[song plays]

"Sorry about that, Ange," Annie muttered. "Still a bit of a sore spot for me, I suppose. This song always reminds me of that year."

"You have every right to be furious," Angelina grumbled. "That woman is evil."

Annie suddenly realized they'd never spoken of the events of that fateful year. It had been so long ago, but she was still reminded of it every time her eyes alit on the faint scar on George's left hand. "You, too?" she asked softly.

Angelina nodded reluctantly. "Fred and George got it worse than pretty much everyone else. It got to the point where anything that happened got blamed on them whether they did it or not. Granted, they were usually involved they hated her so much. But even so, I don't think any of us who weren't members of the Inquisitorial Squad escaped that bloody pen."

"Inquisitorial Squad?" Annie asked. She hadn't heard that term before.

"Mostly a gang of Slytherins all either out for revenge or on a power trip," Angelina explained, scowling. "They had carte blanche and took advantage of it, running anyone they ever harbored a grudge against into detention, whether the charges were proven or not."

"Let me guess... the little Malfoy shit was one of them," Annie spat.

"Clever old you," Angelina replied. "Right in one."

"I don't care if she never got a Mark Umbridge was a bloody Death Eater in all but name!" Annie cried.

Angelina assented with a snort. "I hear she's on a campaign to get herself appointed to the Hogwarts Governing Board, now."

"Over my dead body!" Annie snarled. *Fred and Art will never set another foot in that bloody castle if she succeeds!*

"The woman is barking," Angelina argued. "After the utter shambles she made of the school during her High Inquisitor days, she doesn't have a prayer. Nor does she have the funds to buy her way on."

"Unless she finds a rich benefactor with a name even more sullied than hers," Annie countered angrily.

The two women looked at each other. "Like Malfoy," they said simultaneously.

MRS. RIVER: And now we hurtle seventeen years into the future to this lovely tune.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: Lovely, yes. "Ladyfingers" is heavily electronic, with a thick, full sound that you ought to crank until you feel it in your spine, my dears.

MRS. RIVER: The ladies of Luscious Jackson sing in beautifully layered harmonies, so don't entirely neglect the treble as you skew to the bass.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: Don't let the title fool you, either: this song is not about dessert.

MRS. RIVER: Just a reminder to all the unattached blokes listening out there: don't overlook the shy, or prickly, or sensitive girls standing there on the edge of the crowd. Take it from me, they're worth your time and effort.

MRS. WRACKSPURT: This song is dedicated to our poor, dear husbands home in bed, who followed exactly this advice. I hope they feel the better for it. See you there soon, darling.

MRS. RIVER: With any luck, your beloved hosts will be back in the broadcast booth next week, just in time for Valentine's Day. Hope yours is everything you wish for, because if you've listened to a word we've said, you've accordingly adjusted your expectations to a more reasonable level. Best wishes, thanks for listening, and toodle-oo!

[song plays]

Author's Note: Here are the links to the songs in case anyone's interested.

[Divine Hammer](#) by The Breeders.

[Misery Business](#) by Paramore.

[Give You My Lovin'](#) by Mazzy Star.

[Hit](#) by The Sugarcubes.

[Analyse](#) by The Cranberries.

[Erase/Rewind](#) by The Cardigans.

[You Oughta Know](#) by Alanis Morissette. The naughty word is blanked out in this one. ;)

[Strong Enough](#) by Sheryl Crow.

[Back On The Chain Gang](#) by The Pretenders.

[Ladyfingers](#) by Luscious Jackson.

Monsters Aren't Real, Son

Chapter 68 of 80

Art has a nightmare. George gets called in by Ron to help the Aurors deal with a nasty situation, and he finds himself face to face with an old nemesis.

Chapter 68: Monsters Aren't Real, Son

October 16-20, 2008

Age 30

George woke up to the sound of muffled whimpering. A quick glance at the clock proved insulting. *Two in the bloody morning! Another damn feeding?*

Annie barely lifted her face from the pillow next to him. "That's not Joey," she mumbled through a yawn. "Sounds like one of the boys."

"I'll get it," he muttered, only slightly amused his wife's thoughts were running in a similar vein as his. It was instinctual for them both at this point assuming a noise in the night signaled a hungry child even though Joey, their youngest, was three and a half now. After nearly a decade of childrearing, they'd discovered (much to their chagrin) that parental sleep deprivation didn't end with weaning.

Annie's head fell back onto her pillow. Apparently, she'd taken his offer to deal with the situation seriously. *Damn*, he grumbled silently as he kicked off the covers and hauled his reluctant body out of bed.

George staggered into the hallway, noting the whimpering was indeed emanating from the farthest room, just as Annie had predicted. *That's odd*, he thought. *What in hell would cause a practically ten-year-old boy to cry in the middle of the night?* Then a disturbing thought came to him. *Please, God, don't let it be vomit.*

George reached the twins' bedroom a few moments later. Despite the large window wall, the room was dark, mostly shielded as it was from a newly-risen last-quarter-moon's light by the hill at the back of the house. Even so, he could see each bed had a boy-sized lump in it. One of them was still and quiet. The other was sitting up, crying softly.

George tentatively sniffed the air. *Can't smell any sick.*

He took a hesitant step toward Art's bed. With the next one, George's foot came down on something hard and sharp, and he felt it crunch beneath his weight. The toy squealed for a second as it broke into pieces. An impressive litany of profanity streamed silently in George's head, ending with, *Motherfucking Legos!*

"Dad?" a small, frightened voice squeaked from the bed.

"What's the matter, Art? Are you ill?" George asked quietly, limping the last few steps to his son's bed. He was grateful that little Fred was sleeping through the noise, just like his namesake would have done.

Art shook his head and sniffled.

George took a seat on the bed beside him. To his surprise, Art then leaned against him, wrapping his arms around George's waist. He put his arm around his son's shoulders, then felt his son's forehead with the other hand. *No fever.*

"Art, tell me what's the matter."

"Bad dream," the boy mumbled, his face pressed against George's chest.

George rubbed Art's back, hoping it might soothe his agitated son. "Why don't you tell me about it?"

"I was being chased," Art said and sniffled once more. "I couldn't get away."

At least the worst of the tears appear to be over George thought with relief. He couldn't ever remember dealing with a nightmare of one of the boys' before this. They'd always been a bit mature for their ages and certainly not prone to a runaway imagination. Their creativity usually lay within more logical boundaries.

"You're safe, son. Monsters aren't real," George reminded him.

Art looked up at his father. "It wasn't a monster. It was a man."

"A man?" George asked, startled.

Art nodded. "He was dressed in black and had long white hair and scary eyes...."

An unholy, infuriating image came to George's mind. *Malfoy!? Art dreamed about Malfoy?* George seethed with a surge of fury, and hatred boiled in his blood. The bastard's name had come to mind more than a few times lately, with all that stupid Governing Board business with Umbridge.

Meanwhile, Art continued with the description of his dream. "We saw him once... at the Leaky Cauldron. You were going to fight him, I remember. He's a bad man, isn't he, Dad?"

Words could not describe how massively disturbed George was that Art remembered the incident. He'd been less than two years old, for Merlin's sake, when they'd gone to the Cauldron for Ginny's birthday and had the unfortunate encounter with the Malfoys. For his son's sake, George brought his furious heart rate back under control.

"I would never let anything happen to you, Art," he assured the boy.

"I know," Art mumbled. "But you weren't there in my dream; it was at school. He was chasing me... in the corridors... down into the dungeons. I think it was scarier because I know he's real. Was he a Death Eater, Dad?"

"Where did you hear that word?" George demanded angrily. *I will wring Ron's bloody neck if he's been spouting war stories in front of the kids again!*

Art shrank within George's embrace, taken aback by his father's heated tone. "S-some kids at school.... They were talking about the war," he answered timidly.

George took a deep breath. *Maybe Annie's right. Maybe they are too young to be at Hogwarts with all those bigger kids....* "Nobody has to be afraid of Death Eaters anymore, Art. They're gone now."

"You were in the Order, weren't you, Dad?"

Christ, he knows about this, too? "Yes," George replied softly, reluctantly.

"And you fought against Death Eaters?" Art pressed.

George sighed. *Better he hears the truth from me, rather than a lot of exaggeration and lies from somebody else, I suppose.* "Yes. A lot of people did."

"Did you... did you kill any?" Art stammered.

That's as far as this goes tonight. He's not even ten bloody years old yet! "It's very late, Art, and you have school tomorrow. D'you think you can get back to sleep now?" George asked with a calmness he most assuredly did not feel.

Art nodded hesitantly. George stood up, and Art lay down, allowing his father to tuck the blankets in around him.

"G'night, Dad."

"Good night, son," George said softly. After only a second's hesitation, he bent to place a quick kiss on his boy's forehead. He turned around and, carefully, so as not to lift his feet and impale himself on some other lethal contraption masquerading as a child's toy, left the room.

George did not return directly to his own bed. Instead, he tiptoed past his door, down the stairs, through the living room, then down into his basement workshop. He turned on the lights with a midair flick of his fingers, poked through the contents of a plastic cup in search of a useable quill, then rifled through a stack of parchment rolls for an appropriately small piece. Once he'd assembled the necessary tools for correspondence, he summoned the stool from the other side of the room and began to write.

Ron,

Next time you do a raid on Malfoy Manor, I want to volunteer. The sooner, the better.

- G.

"Sorry, mate," George muttered quietly as Horatio, the laziest family owl in existence, protested against being pressed into service. He fastened the note to the bird's leg, then opened one of the workshop's windows. "At least it's a lovely night for a jaunt to London," he argued with the owl's irritated expression.

George could have sworn the owl made a very rude noise as he launched himself into the air and flapped his great wings silently. As he watched the beast disappear into the night, it occurred to him that the rest of the world, most likely including his brother's family, was sound asleep. Or if not asleep....

Maybe I'll get a bit of revenge and interrupt the two of them for a change he chuckled to himself.

*

The following Saturday was a quintessential English autumn day: thoroughly soggy. Janie and Joey were outdoors, brightly visible in their ironically sunny yellow rain macs and wellies. Annie kept an eye on them as they sloshed in the puddles outside while she hung the laundry on indoor lines in front of the fire.

Inside, Mole Hill was peacefully quiet. Merrie had gone to the Jordans' for a sleepover the night before and had yet to return. The twins were seated at the dining table, diligently finishing the weekend's homework. Annie was about to call out for Winky and suggest they start making lunch when the flames in the fireplace suddenly flared a brilliant emerald green.

"Who is it?" Fred asked.

"Dunno," Annie replied, stumped. They weren't expecting Merrie back until supper.

"Halloo!" Ron's voice called out from the flames. "Everybody decent?"

Annie heard another familiar chuckle emanating from the fire as well.

"Uncle Ron! Uncle Harry!" the twins cried excitedly, recognizing the voices at the same time as Annie did. They ran to Annie's side, eager to greet their surprise visitors.

"Come on through," Annie hollered toward the fireplace.

Ron burst out of the fire in the next moment, calling out, "Oi, George!" Typically not paying attention to where he was going, he took three bounding steps out of the hearth and promptly collided with the first line of laundry. In patented Ron fashion, he somehow managed to get tangled up in a clothesline full of Annie's undergarments.

Harry's initial chuckle quickly morphed into a full laugh. He sidestepped around his struggling friend, walking around the spectacle to stand beside Annie and the twins, who were all staring gape-mouthed at Ron.

Ron squawked like he was being attacked by one of Ginny's finest Bat-Bogey Hexes, batting bra straps and lace-trimmed underpants away from his head. His great arms spun like windmills, and nearly one entire line of clothing bounced into the air, then rained to the floor.

Harry was now bent over, hands on his knees, laughing. The twins began to giggle at their comical uncle, as well. Annie's hands were perched on her hips, however, her mouth pursed, thoroughly unamused.

Finally standing still amidst a sea of damp women's underwear, Ron suddenly noticed a bra on his shoulder. Screeching, he threw it off of himself.

"Oh, honestly, Ron! They're not lethal!" Annie barked.

"They don't bite," Harry cried, his voice registering an octave higher than normal from laughter.

"Just... a bit... startled..." Ron stammered. He glanced down to the floor for an instant to survey the damage, then his eyes flew skyward in embarrassment. "Sorry... about your... *things*," Ron mumbled, the last word uttered in a mousy squeak.

Harry was now laughing hysterically, unable to catch his breath. The twins were laughing as well, perhaps more at Uncle Harry's merriment rather than Uncle Ron's haplessness, at this point.

"Well, put them back where you found them!" Annie demanded, aggravated that a good bit of her morning's work had been undone, as well as by Ron's ridiculously immature response.

Ron withdrew his wand from his pocket.

"No fair! You never let us clean up messes with magic," Art whined to his mother.

"Just because you *can* do something with magic doesn't mean you *should*, Uncle Ron," Fred scolded.

"Uncle Ron is a grown-up, boys," Annie replied. Then she turned back to her brother-in-law. *Presumably*, that is."

But Harry was far from finished with his fun. *Expelliarmus!*" he cried, and Ron's wand flew out of his hand and into Harry's. "Now, do set a good example for our nephews, Ron," Harry taunted his friend.

Ron, face flaming red and pouting, bit his lower lip as he bent down and began to gather Annie's underwear off the floor. Gingerly holding each item with fingertips only, he shot murderous glares at Harry for several minutes while he hung them all back on the line. Annie would have preferred Ron to have used magic, actually. The job would have been finished quickly and without him having to touch... *everything*. At least Ron wasn't trying to whine his way out of it in front of the boys, she conceded.

Meanwhile, Harry staggered toward a chair and fell into it. Doubled over with laughter, he wrapped his arms around his chest and began hiccupping. "Worse... than... spiders... are they?"

Annie smacked Harry upside the head. "Grow up!" she snapped.

Her scolding did nothing to abate the hilarity for Harry, however. He continued laughing, occasionally wiping tears from his cheeks, watching Ron hang their sister-in-law's panties and bras on a clothesline.

Annie turned back to Ron, who looked like he was about to implode with humiliation. For some reason, this irritated her immensely *Who the hell does he think he is?* "It's not like you've never seen women's underwear before!" Annie barked, exasperated. "Or do you expect me to believe Hermione doesn't wear knickers?"

"Oh, God!" Harry wheezed and launched into a new round of hysterics, sliding off the chair and onto the floor with a thud. "H'mione...noknickers...."

Mercifully finished with his task at last, Ron marched over to where Harry was sprawled, yanked him up off the floor, and punched him hard on the arm. He shoved his hand roughly into Harry's jacket pocket and retrieved his wand.

"Ow," Harry protested, finally able to take a full breath.

"Show's over, boys," Annie said, shooing the twins back to their studies. She turned back to her brothers-in-law, eyes closed and pinching the bridge of her nose (a habit she'd picked up from George). "What do you want, you two?" she asked with feigned patience.

"Where's George?" Ron asked through gritted teeth.

Not here, thank God, Annie thought, *or you'd've been jinxed to kingdom come for that little bit of nonsense* She shot Harry a glare as he continued to periodically erupt in twitters and giggles. They were apparently an involuntary side effect of his previous paroxysm of mirth. "He's at the factory. Why?"

Ron shook his head. "Official business," he replied.

Annie searched both men's faces. All traces of amusement and discomfort were gone instantly, replaced by serious focus. "I probably don't like the sound of that, do I?" she sighed.

Ron and Harry both shrugged noncommittally, giving nothing away.

"At the factory, you say?" Ron repeated.

Annie nodded. "Will he at least be home for supper?" she asked.

"That's up to him," Ron replied.

Harry followed Ron back into the fireplace, and they were gone an instant later.

*

George had finally identified the uncooperative loose bolt after an hour of searching for the rattling noise. Lying on his back under a large, formidable-looking piece of machinery, he aimed his wand at the blasted thing. "*Turbonis*," he growled with extreme prejudice.

"George!"

Startled, George cracked his skull twice: first against the underbelly of the machine above him, then in rebound against the concrete floor below. "Fuck!" he groaned as he saw stars.

"Is this what you do all day? Lie about like a flobberworm?" he heard Harry tease him from the vicinity of his feet. "Must be nice," he chuckled. "Some of us have real jobs, you know."

"Get out from under there, you stupid git," Ron said, kicking the soles of George's shoes. "Time to do some real work for a change."

You miserable little...!

George shot an angry jinx at Ron's legs and felt slightly mollified when his brother howled in pain. Although he doubted anything could compare to the agony in his own head at the moment.

"What the bloody hell are you two arses doing here?" George snarled as he wriggled his way out from under the machine.

"Why only me and not him, too?" Ron whined, jabbing his finger at Harry. He was sitting on the floor, trying unsuccessfully to counteract the burning sensation on his skin. "Why is it always me?"

"The whingy wheel gets the hex?" George muttered under his breath. Sighing with irritated dissatisfaction, he reversed the spell.

All the while, Harry had been giggling like a schoolboy.

"What's gotten into you?" George demanded, annoyed.

Harry grinned like a cat-eating canary, still giggling. "Be nice to him! Ron's out of sorts because he's just been attacked by Annie's underwear."

George stared hard at Ron.

"Not my fault!" Ron spluttered. "I didn't exactly step out of the Floo into your house expecting to find it transformed into a bloody lingerie shop, did I?"

George continued to glare silently at his brother, who looked nervously away.

"Tell him how you tried one on," Harry goaded his best friend.

"Shut up, Harry!" Ron cried, scrambling to his feet.

Harry turned to George with a surprisingly mischievous glint in his eyes. "And then he started touchin'all of 'em," he added.

"Enough!" Ron shoved Harry forcefully.

Harry stumbled and crashed against the side of the machine, guffawing.

"I didn't, George! I swear!" Ron insisted in a squeaky voice.

"You're a bloody idiot," George growled as he slowly clambered to his feet, batting away Ron's hastily proffered, supplicant hand.

"Runs in the family, then," Ron snapped petulantly.

George gingerly probed his head with his fingers, finding two diametrically opposed goose eggs were rapidly forming on his forehead and rear skull. He conjured two ice packs, then applied them to his injuries. "You've spent the morning pawing through my wife's underwear then tracking me down here *why?*" he grumbled.

"Oh, right," Ron replied, his mood brightening instantaneously. "You said you wanted to come along on the next raid. Ring Annie and see if she'll let you come out and play with us tonight," he said tauntingly.

*

"I must confess, I wasn't expecting you to accommodate my request quite so soon," George said.

He stood in the darkness outside Malfoy Manor with five other figures, all of them dressed in black from head to toe. Every inch of their clothing was magically charmed to repel offensive spells, thanks to his patented and extensive Weasley's Magical Defensive line (now almost universally referred to as WMD).

"Coincidence, actually," Harry chuckled softly. "We'd just gotten word from an operative the day before your letter arrived."

"At four in the bloody morning, thanks ever so," Ron grumbled.

George joined Harry in quiet laughter. *Ah, revenge is sweet, indeed!*

"Anyway, it's a flimsy lead at best, but we've got a secret weapon with us tonight," Harry said.

"Secret weapon?" George asked.

"A hotshot rookie ward buster," Ron explained. "We're hoping to find a few more of the bastard's secret hiding places tonight."

"What's he up to this time?" George asked.

"Nasty business, as usual," Ron hissed. "You know all about that rot involving Umbridge and the Hogwarts' Board from this spring, right?"

George nodded, feeling an angry heat begin to well up inside of him. Delores Umbridge had made a bid to seat herself on the school's governing board. He'd laughed it off at first, confident the mad cow was harmlessly flapping her gums. The idea was utterly preposterous Umbridge on the Governing Board of Hogwarts!

But then articles supporting her nomination began getting published in the *Prophet*. People in Diagon Alley began talking about how she'd supposedly changed and what a wonderful, inspirational example she'd now set as a reformed (and tragically misled, according to her own revisionist history) woman. "She ought to be given a second chance!" proclaimed the gullible. "She's paid her debt to society and wants to be of use now."

Some bloody idiot had even come into the Wheezes shop in Hogsmeade, asking George to sign a petition in support of her campaign. George's reply had been as vehement as it had been impolite, to say the least. The git had been unceremoniously tossed out into the street on his arse.

But it was only after Headmistress McGonagall personally wrote to every single Hogwarts student's family, urging them to oppose Umbridge and reminding them of the horrific disciplinary methods she'd implemented during her stint as High Inquisitor, that people started to come to their senses. In an effort to throw his support behind his former Head of House, over the past summer, George had been among the first and loudest to proclaim he'd not only withdraw his children but also his generous financial support of the school as well if Umbridge was appointed.

That was when Malfoy began to surreptitiously rear his ugly head. George and his father had suspected he'd been lurking somewhere behind Umbridge since the very beginning, salivating greedily at the thought of having a puppet on the Governing Board a position he'd once held himself but was now barred from. He'd always used his money to smooth things over, to cover the rotten stink with perfume, to disguise the poison with honey.

"He's got to be buying the positive press, but why?" George had asked his father one day last summer.

"Doesn't Draco have a boy about Joey's age?" Arthur had pointed out.

"A bit younger, I think." Then George had snorted. "But why would they even bother with Hogwarts this go 'round? Why not just send the little creep to Durmstrang where he belongs?"

"Now, George, be charitable. The faults of the father don't necessarily pass to the son," Arthur had countered.

"Somebody forgot to explain that little gem of wisdom to Draco," George had grumbled. "His kid doesn't stand a chance."

Arthur had grimaced. "It certainly would appear that Lucius is looking to get his fingers in yet another pie of influence once again. His name still carries quite a bit of weight in the Ministry."

"Which doesn't say much for the Ministry idiots," George had sneered.

"Kingsley knows, and he's watching the situation closely," Arthur had assured his son. "He's put the Auror Department on notice. There's a fine line between legal influence and corruption, to be sure, but he's determined to root out the latter absolutely."

Yet even under the gaze of such auspicious, official eyes, as the new school term began that autumn, questions began to surface about McGonagall's age and health. Mutterings were heard about how she had cooperated with the infamous Headmaster Snape in his torturing of students during the war (conveniently forgetting it was the Carrows who'd been responsible and McGonagall who'd fought them tooth and nail). Rumors spread about her current lack of adequate control at the school.

Utter hogwash, the lot, George railed silently. *As if anyone who'd ever met the woman could question her authority! Or her moral conviction!* She'd received the Order of Merlin, First Class for her war efforts and subsequent leadership at the school, for heaven's sake!

Conveniently for the suspected but as yet unproven Umbridge-Malfoy alliance, unrest began to spread throughout the centaur population of the Forbidden Forest at the same time. Seemingly from out of the blue, the centaurs insisted they were under attack from Wizarding Britain that one of their own had been murdered in cold blood at the hands of a wizard and threatened retaliation against whatever human was at hand at the moment unless the guilty party submitted to their own brand of justice.

All eyes had turned to Hogwarts in the days that followed.

McGonagall had insisted there was a peaceful solution to be found. Personally heading up the negotiations with the centaurs, she'd worked to convince them that no one at Hogwarts had anything to do with any attack. She'd offered both her own services as well as those of the Auror Department to discover who was responsible. The Ministry had promised to do what they could to apprehend the perpetrator as soon as possible. Hermione'd even added her guarantee that every available legal resource at her disposal would be provided to the prosecution.

The centaurs were understandably skeptical. They had little faith in the humanly-fallible Ministry that had betrayed them so often. But grudgingly, they had agreed to a temporary truce.

As a show of good faith, a small team of un-wanded Aurors including Harry and Ron had ventured into the forest, gathering what evidence there was to be found at the scene of the crime. No body was recovered the centaurs claimed it had been removed from the Forest, the act of which had been a desecration in and of itself. Finally, Chief Auror Potter had announced at a press conference that clues had indeed been recovered, and leads were being pursued, but that to comment further on any details might tip off the guilty before they were apprehended.

But the damage to McGonagall's reputation had already been done. It made no logical sense, but since when did mob mentality ever bend to logic? The whole mess had happened in her back garden, as it were, and on her watch. Parents began to panic. Children were withdrawn from the school and terrified letters published in the paper. In one fell swoop, McGonagall had lost the confidence of the general public.

Just last week, Delores Umbridge had stepped forward with a plan of her own to deal with the "Centaur Problem," as it was now referred to. She insisted she'd decried the presence of the centaurs all along, exhorted for years about the dangers they posed. Reminding everyone how she'd been kidnapped and tortured by them herself, she proposed a new plan: forcible relocation of the British centaur population to a new reservation on an island in the middle of the North Sea.

"They don't appreciate proper civilization," Umbridge had explained in the latest *Prophet* interview, her horrible photograph tittering girlishly. "If they don't wish to live peacefully beside decent humans, then by all means, they should leave. A deserted island ought to seem like paradise to them, I should think. They certainly have no business living anywhere near a *school*, for goodness' sake a fact which I have frequently mentioned in numerous unanswered complaints to the current Headmistress.

"After all, we must always think of the children, mustn't we?" Umbridge had urged plaintively.

"Yeah, I remember," George growled in distaste. "Malfoy's stink is all over that mess."

"Whatever you think you know, I promise you, it's worse," Ron insisted.

"Ever heard of *gris-gris*?" Harry asked.

George was taken aback. He had heard of such a thing, but only in whispered tones from his dodgier connections for potions ingredients. Dabbling in voodoo often proved to be a very slippery slope and could quickly go from comparatively innocent love charms to Dark stuff, indeed. The talismans and amulets often contained horrific items: body parts human or otherwise were considered powerfully magical in the religion.

"What does that have to do with anything?" George demanded, fearing he already knew the answer.

"Apparently, someone in Britain is sending out feelers, claiming to have centaur parts for sale," Harry said, his voice hard.

"Three guesses who it is, and the first two don't count," Ron added in an equally stony voice.

George nearly took a step backward, literally reeling as the connections clicked together in his mind. "Malfoy murdered the centaur? To get back at McGonagall for opposing Umbridge?" he hissed, horrified.

"Malfoy needed someone slimy enough to do his bidding on the Board but with a public face that could be shined up," Ron explained. "The pink bitch was perfect for the job."

"But Umbridge hated her time at Hogwarts. Ever wondered what could have possibly induced her to consider having anything to do with it again?" Harry asked, unnerving George by glaring at him with a green fury in his eyes George'd never seen before.

"I'm betting the centaur part of it was Umbridge's requirement. Her reward, I suppose, for cooperating with the plan. The fact that all of it's causing problems for McGonagall right now is just icing on the cake," Ron spat.

"Nothing's proven... yet," Harry replied darkly.

Monstrous! George thought, his mind roiling. *The bastard's greed knows no bounds! It wasn't enough to murder for political gain? He had to desecrate the body and attempt to make a **financial** profit as well?!*

"It'll be a war," George gasped. "If the centaurs find out the victim was...." *Dismembered*, he gulped silently. *Then sold off as parts!? Parceled out to the highest bidders? Put to unspeakable uses!?*

"If it's true, and if they find out, you're right," Ron said pointedly.

George looked at his younger brother, startled by the jaded tone of his voice. "You aren't going to just let Malfoy and Umbridge get away with it!" George cried. "For the sake of political expediency?" *The centaurs have a right to justice, just like anyone else!*

"Why do you think we're here tonight?" Ron snapped. "They're not getting away with anything," he snarled.

Harry waved the group to huddle up. "Is everyone ready?" he asked. "Are there any questions about the plan tonight?"

George shook his head along with the rest of the team. He understood what was expected of him and now looked forward to it more than ever. *They're not getting away with anything*, Ron's voice repeated in his head.

"I want everything tonight to go by... *the... book*," Harry directed, slipping into command mode. "Let's ensure everything we find will be admissible before the Wizengamot.

"Sykes, Petersen you'll go with the Weasleys. And all of you remember, you *do not* recognize Landis. None of the Malfoys have much talent for Legilimency Occlumency is more their style but we have no idea who else might be in there, so keep it clear in your mind. Take her into custody with everyone else. She won't be speaking English, as part of her cover, but she'll understand everything you say."

"Understood, sir," a young woman answered him, the young man beside her nodding as well.

Harry turned to another young man standing a little away from the group, wand drawn and moving seemingly at random. His eyes were closed, yet it was clear he was intently focused on the mansion before them.

"Have you broken through the wards yet, Abercrombie?" Harry asked.

"Nearly," replied the little fellow who barely looked old enough to be of age. "I can feel it's linked to an alarm of some sort. When I break this last bit, they'll know it," he warned his superior.

"Right," Harry said. "Let me know the instant you're through." He turned back to the group. "We'll Apparate into the main hall on my signal."

Ron turned to his little patrol. "We're to fan out, cover all four floors. Nobody goes anywhere alone got it? Round up everyone you find, disarm them, and bring them back to the main hall. There's a good chance the little boy is in there no spells on him, no matter what."

Sykes, Petersen, and George all nodded.

George's pulse was racing and his hands sweaty with excitement. He'd just been handed a legal excuse to exact revenge on Malfoy, and he was planning to make the most of the opportunity. *Rotten, stinking, filthy excuse for a human being anyway....*

"I'm through!" Abercrombie hissed.

An unnaturally loud wail pierced the night in the same instant.

"Now!" Harry shouted, and all six wizards disappeared into thin air.

Seconds later, George found himself inside the darkened mansion. Ron shouted at the other two to take the ground floor, then waved for George to follow him up the stairs. Harry and the one called Abercrombie were already up the stairs, nearly toward the landing.

Shouts, bangs, and flashes of lights erupted in several places at once as the house itself attempted to repel the invasion. The Auror force encountered no human resistance, though.

Is the place empty? George wondered. Were they tipped off? Have they scarpered off like the cowards they've so often proven themselves to be?

George and Ron silently worked their way down the hallway, casting revealing spells along the corridor until they finally came across an occupied bedroom.

"What the hell is going on?" Draco roared as George and Ron kicked the door in and disarmed the occupants of the bed.

"Just another house call, Ferret," Ron barked with glee, summoning the couple's wands and pocketing them beneath his shield-protected jumper. "You ought to be used to this by now."

"There's absolutely no excuse for a *Weasley* to be in my home, *ever!*" Draco snarled. The woman in bed beside him clung to him. She whimpered in protest as he roughly extricated himself from her clutches, then leaped out of bed with a haughty snap of the sheets. "Your kind belongs in the stable with the other livestock, Weasel. You will pay for this! I'll have your job! My father...."

George bristled at the conceited gall of the little prick. The Malfoy superiority complex was a well-known phenomenon by the Weasley clan, especially *But... "your kind"!? Really?*

Ron leveled his wand an inch from Draco's pointy little nose. "Save it for the Wizengamot, Ferret. *They might* give a shit about your precious pedigree," Ron taunted him. "I don't."

The cowardly man's indignation fled in an instant. Draco bit his lip to keep it from quivering.

George instinctively spun around toward the door at the sound of a baby crying. He poked his head out, attempting to locate the source. A few moments later, a young woman he presumed was the nanny came running down the hall, arms full of a bundle, jabbering in an unfamiliar language.

"Scorpius!" the woman in bed wailed.

The nanny bolted into the room carrying the baby, still yammering. George couldn't understand the words, but her tone made it clear: she was confused and terrified.

"Speak in *English*, you stupid fucking cow!" Draco bellowed as his wife, Astoria, gathered the child from the distraught woman.

"Enough!" Ron barked. A second later, Draco's hands were magically bound together in front of his body. "Come with us, all of you," Ron directed.

Astoria slid off the satin-bedecked bed. The little boy was now howling in protest. George took up a position behind them, escorting her and the nanny out the door.

"If you harm a hair on their heads, I'll kill you," Draco hissed.

"You're hardly in a position to threaten, Ferret, but by all means, do feel free to say something to further incriminate yourself in front of all these witnesses," Ron retorted.

Downstairs, Ron and George met up with the rest of the team as they delivered their prisoners to the agreed upon rendezvous point.

Lucius Malfoy was there already, sneering and seething. "What is the meaning of this invasion? I demand to speak to Minister Shacklebolt. You will all be brought up on charges!" he raged.

The nanny kept blubbing in her native language despite Draco's demands for her silence and subsequent threats of punishment for her disobedience. Astoria was proving herself incompetent in soothing baby Scorpius, who continued his crying. All in all, it was a cacophonous mess.

"Shut up, all of you!" Harry shouted.

As if he'd cast a Silencing Charm, merciful quiet descended. George wondered if it was, in fact, some sort of spell.

Harry leveled his gaze at Lucius. "You, especially."

Lucius shook his head and shoulders, as if attempting to cast something off.

"Is this everyone in the house?" Harry asked.

The one named Petersen responded. "All floors are now accounted for, sir."

"Where's the mother?" Harry asked.

"Mr. Malfoy claims she's abroad at the moment," Sykes replied.

Harry stared hard into Lucius's eyes for several moments. Lucius glared right back.

"You barely know what the truth is anymore," Harry muttered at last, disgusted.

Lucius sneered once more. "I survived the Dark Lord, and you think you can see anything in my mind I don't want you to see?"

Harry switched his focus onto Draco.

Draco screwed his eyes shut. "Get out, Potter!" he yelled.

"Concentrate, Draco!" Lucius growled quietly.

A moment later, Draco roared in fury.

"Narcissa's in Haiti?" Harry stated rather than asked, his tone smug. "What a remarkable coincidence."

"Draco!" Lucius scolded his son with an angry hiss. Then he turned to Harry. "Since when does the Ministry condone such questionable interrogation tactics?" he snarled with indignant disdain.

Harry turned back to Lucius. "Tell me what I want to know. Where is the body?"

There it was again that peculiar commanding voice. In all George's previous dealings with Harry in combat situations, he'd proven himself an excellent leader by simply being himself. People did what he told them to do out of respect and admiration, secure in the knowledge he'd never ask them to do anything that wasn't necessary, or that he wasn't willing to do himself.

But this was entirely different, dealing with an antagonistic force. George was now convinced Harry was using some sort of compulsion spellwork, almost like Veritaserum in charm form, if possible. George had never dreamt such Dark-leaning, aggressive magic could be legally used by the Aurors. And if it had been anybody but Harry doing it a person whose morality George trusted implicitly he'd have been scared shitless just knowing it existed.

Lucius appeared to have some difficulty responding now. "I have no idea what you're talking about," he replied, stammering slightly.

"I am authorized to ask once more. A second refusal to cooperate will result in a full search of the premises," Harry said softly, warningly.

"You won't find a damn thing, Potter!" Draco bellowed in arrogance.

Harry ignored Draco completely. Staring hard into Lucius' eyes, he asked once more, "Where is the body?"

Several long, quiet moments passed as the two men glared at each other. Lucius began to squirm slightly, then emitted a quiet grunt of effort. "Are you hard of hearing or simply stupid, Potter?" he retorted, a little out of breath. But the haughty sneer was gone now, and he was beginning to sweat.

"Abercrombie?" Harry barked.

"Yes, sir."

"Your report?"

Abercrombie responded by rattling off a list. "Numerous hidden wall niches in the library and the drawing room, next door. One bunker off the master bedroom. Underground passageways leading from the bunker, butler's pantry, and library, all ending beyond the hedge to the west. Oh, and a large chamber below the drawing room."

Harry snorted. "Yes, I'm acquainted with that particular room."

"This invasion of privacy is illegal!" Lucius shouted at everyone but Harry. "You'll all be sacked by morning if you do not leave this instant!"

Harry wore a faint, smug smile. "Getting nervous now, are we? Last chance to cooperate, Lucius...."

Lucius chewed on his lip.

"Father?" Draco asked, his voice unsure.

His son's faltering voice seemed to strengthen Lucius' resolve. "You won't find it!" he hissed.

"Where is it?" Harry bellowed, and everyone in the room flinched.

Lucius stood pointedly silent, staring at the wall across the room.

Harry took a deep breath. In a calm, collected voice, he began issuing directives. "Break the wards, Abercrombie. Every single one. Sykes, get the women and child out of here."

Sykes nodded curtly, then took the other two women by the arm and escorted the nanny and Astoria out of the room.

"Where are you taking them?" Draco roared.

Harry turned toward his schoolboy nemesis. "Into custody, of course," he replied evenly. "You remember how this works, don't you, Draco?"

Harry faced the other men under his command. "Petersen, Abercrombie, come with me. We'll search every drawer, every box, every closet, every cupboard. We'll rip up the floors and tear out the walls. Be on your guard the human residents aren't the only nasty things in this house."

He turned to his brothers-in-law. "Ron, George...."

"We'll keep an eye on the Ferret and the Snake," Ron assured Harry without him having to issue further directives.

The house was quiet and their prisoners relatively docile (discounting the murderous glares, of course) for nearly half an hour. The Malfoys stood with their hands bound, leaning against adjacent walls of the room, under Ron's and George's watchful eyes and drawn wands.

It was at that point when someone from the underground level shouted, "Mr. Potter, sir! I think I might have found something here!"

Lucius took advantage of a moment's distraction by lunging toward the room's exit.

George blocked him with a body slam that sent Lucius crashing back against the wall. He shoved his wand up, jabbing the point of it into Lucius' throat. He saw Lucius' eyes dart around the room, searching for any weapon.

"Go for it," George snarled. "I beg you to give me a bloody reason...."

"George!" Ron barked.

"Look the other way, Ron," George suggested, glancing sideways at his brother for only a millisecond before his vengeful gaze returned to his quarry. "Ever heard of karma, Malfoy?" he said, his voice filled with soft menace. He leaned into the odious, quintessential Slytherin and increased the pressure on his wand until a large crater now formed on soft, privileged flesh of Lucius' neck.

Lucius glared back silently, baring his teeth in a large grimace.

"No? Too enlightened a concept for you?" George taunted him. "How about the golden fucking rule, then? Do unto others as you'd have done to you? In that case, how many *Crucios* does the world owe you, Malfoy?"

Lucius only sneered. "Don't forget, you've got to mean it. Unforgivables aren't the sort of things for children to play at. You don't have the balls, boy."

George's free hand darted up and curled around Lucius' throat, causing the man's head to bang against the wall. He drew back his wand, aiming right between the eyes. This was the monster who had been behind it all. *For Art's nightmares. For the ambush at Bill's wedding. For Ginny's ordeal in the Chamber of Secrets. For the attempt on Annie's life....*

Lucius flinched as George's fingers tightened. From somewhere in his mind surfaced an age-old, long-buried vision of Malfoy crumpling before him, writhing on the ground in pain, begging for mercy. *No... no mercy for you....*

"But what if I *do* mean it, Malfoy?" George hissed so quietly it was barely audible.

"George!" Ron barked again.

George came back to himself in that instant. His brother's voice reminded him of the husband and father he now was, of the wounded, imperfect, yet decent human being he'd always attempted to be. Nothing was worth losing what he'd made of his life since the war. He would not ruin his mind, his soul, for *this* piece of shit.

Lucius snickered smugly as George's wand hand dropped.

Fury flaring, George hauled off and punched Lucius in the nose, then grabbed him by the lapels of his dressing gown and slammed him against the wall, knocking a portrait off in the process. The other paintings began screaming and shouting in protest.

"What I don't have is a slimy, rotten cesspool for a soul," George growled over the racket. "And I don't have a single fucking thing to prove to you."

Suddenly, magic erupted. Draco somehow managed to summon his and his wife's confiscated wands out of Ron's pocket during the distracting scuffle between his father and George. Aiming at George, he shouted, "*Crucio!*"

George managed to dodge most of the force of the spell and deflect the rest with a hasty Shield Charm, but still staggered back a bit as sharp little stabs of pain stung him all over.

Taking advantage of his guards' surprise, Lucius threw his body forward, knocking George to the floor. Stumbling, he staggered toward the doorway.

"Father!" Draco screamed, heaving his wife's wand in Lucius' direction.

But instead of catching it, Lucius' bound yet flailing arms batted the wand to the floor.

"*Attero animus!*" Ron bellowed, wand leveled at Draco.

Draco's eyes glazed over, and he sank to the floor, head lolling. His wand clattered to the floor beside him.

George scrambled to his feet just in time to launch himself toward Lucius, attempting to head him off at the door. "*Stupefy!*" he thundered, blasting the hex across the room. His aim was off, though. It missed Lucius, but did manage to hit the wayward wand, scattering it across the floor in the second before Lucius' hand closed around it.

"*Corpus ingravescio!*" Ron shouted.

The spell hit its target broadside. Lucius crashed heavily onto the floor with a guttural groan, unable to move.

Ron dashed to the immobilized prisoners, binding them with multiple spells and gags this time, while George, still recovering from Draco's attempted curse his joints were throbbing at the moment staggered around the room, collecting the wands. Together, they shoved the father and son into a seated position on the floor, backs propped against the wall.

"Everything all right up there?" Harry called out from the room below them.

"Under control, mate!" Ron shouted back.

George sank heavily into a chair, grunting in discomfort as he did so.

Ron dug into another jumper pocket, withdrew a vial, and handed it to George. "Analgesic potion. It'll take the edge off the effects of the Cruciatus."

George gratefully took the proffered potion and downed it. As the throbbing began to subside, he looked quizzically at his little brother. "Where the hell did you learn those spells?" he demanded in his usual teasing, older-brother voice he nearly always used when addressing either Ron or Ginny. "I've never heard of them."

Ron grinned smugly. "One of the perks of spending your time with Hermione thumpin' Granger, that," he quipped.

George smirked, recalling how the fact that Hermione had chosen to keep her maiden name after marrying Ron had made their mother do her nut. "Not even bloody hyphenated!" Molly had shrieked for several years afterward whenever the subject had inadvertently come up. More than a few Weasleys had their noses a little out of joint for that one, actually. What was so bad about the Weasley name, after all? *But then again, Hermione's so damn touchy about any whiff of patriarchal pure-blood traditional bullshit*, George grumbled silently.

"She *taught* you that?" George asked aloud. *If she did, you were most likely on the receiving end* he thought with amusement as a vision of all six-and-a-half feet of Ron crashing to the linoleum in front of the fridge in their little London flat came to mind.

"Not exactly," Ron confessed with a chuckle. "She's always got her nose in some bloody book or another, and you know how she can prattle on. Most of the time, I ignore it," he said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "All that elves' rights rubbish...." Suddenly remembering who he was talking to, he rushed to add, "Not that I don't agree, mind you. But she never gives it a bloody rest, does she?"

"Back to the subject at hand..." George prompted his mentally wandering brother impatiently.

"Oh, right. Well, every so often, I'll notice she's spoutin' off something remotely interesting or useful about an old spell that's fallen out of favor or the like. Or, once in a while, I'll thumb through one of those moldy old books of hers.

"It's not that they're all that powerful," he explained. "It's more the element of surprise, actually. That, and nobody remembers the counterspells anymore," he added with a grin George was confident would have earned him a swat from either his mother or his wife.

"So, you're a parasite, really," George countered.

Ron pasted on a mock-pensive expression, gazing at the ceiling and stroking his chin. "I prefer to think of myself as a sponge, soaking up all that knowledge at my fingertips," he said, wiggling his fingers and winking at the innuendo.

George shook his head, pretending to disapprove. "I see you have Hermione to thank for your glorious Auror reputation, then."

"I'm the one casting the bloody spells when it counts!" Ron protested in his characteristic whine.

"Which you'd never have the gumption or intelligence to find on your own, prat," George insisted.

"I'm damn good at my job!" Ron argued, bristling.

George realized then he'd gone a bit too far with the teasing. The matter of Ron's career as a subordinate to Harry in the Auror Department could sometimes prove to be a touchy subject with him. There were always the whispers and rumors that he was still riding Harry's coattails, even now.

Not that he had ever really done so. Ron was an adequately intelligent, perfectly capable wizard gifted with an occasional flash of insightful brilliance in other words, he was no different from the rest of the magical world. In any other scenario, he'd be accepted or rejected completely on his own merit, succeeding or failing in life with little public notice.

But it just so happened he was best mates with Harry friggin' Potter. No matter how much the Boy Who Lived tried to avoid it, the spotlight always shone on him, leaving everyone else around him in the shadow. On some level, Ron had to have known he'd always be the sidekick in a friendship like that. Still, George reckoned, it had to rankle sometimes.

"Not all of us can save the world selling Dungbombs and exploding underpants, can we?" Ron snapped testily.

"Only the cleverest ones," George parried, carefully softening both his voice and his smile.

"You stole half those ideas from your wife anyhow," Ron countered, a grin beginning to turn up the corners of his mouth once more.

George could tell from his tone that Ron had forgiven him. "I've never denied it," he chuckled.

Ron laughed along with him. "Maybe that's another thing that runs in the family," he suggested.

"What's that?" George asked.

Ron beamed with mischief. "We may not be geniuses, but Weasley men consistently marry above their intelligence."

Mystery

Chapter 69 of 80

George and Annie run into an old friend of hers, sparking George's curiosity.

Chapter 69: Mystery

June 2009

Age 31

It was a Friday, nearly noon, as Annie and her family strolled down a grassy aisle between two long rows of cars. Her husband and twin sons had chosen today's activity: a car show held in a large open field near Plymouth on this warm summer day. The family was roaming between the rows, chatting with the different car owners, marveling at

the custom details and hard work each one displayed.

The children were thrilled to be out and about on an adventure in the Muggle world. As they had grown older, George and Annie trusted them more and began taking them around on short trips more often. They had always behaved beautifully or at least not completely exposed the family and today was proving to be no exception.

Little Joey was on her usual perch on Daddy's shoulders having finally outgrown the sling. Merrie and Janie were alternately being drug along to the next fascinating vehicle or engine by their older brothers or taking a brief respite by standing in a quieter spot next to Mum. At the moment, Fred was lifting Janie up so she could see inside a fancy red race car, and Merrie was leaning against her hip while Annie soothingly rubbed her back between her shoulders.

"Shall we go find a place for our picnic?" Annie asked her daughter softly.

Merrie looked up at her with a squinty, gap-toothed smile, nodding.

"All right, then go tell Daddy and the boys their time is up," she directed, and Merrie skipped off enthusiastically on her errand.

"Ho-ly shit! It's Annie goddamn Jones!" shouted a voice from beside her.

Annie was startled, not to mention grateful her daughter was out of earshot. She turned to see who it was accosting her. It took her several seconds to put a name to the vaguely familiar, smiling face of the man who was waving to her from just a few feet away.

"Mike...?" she asked, testing her memory. The name had been buried rather deeply....

"Mike Preston, yeah! We went to school together you remember?" he asked, blinking at her.

The twitchy blinking solidified her recollection. "Sure, I remember. Mike Preston. How are you?"

"I'm well, yeah. And you?" he asked more enthusiastically than she.

At that moment, Merrie and Janie bounded up to her. "Let's go find a shady spot, Mum," cried Janie. Both girls grabbed one of her hands and began tugging her away.

"Hang on just a moment, girls," she said softly. "I'm well, thanks, Mike," she said, offering a smile for a long-lost schoolmate.

"Annie goddamn Jones," he muttered again, shaking his head, apparently astounded.

George and the rest of her children had caught up with her then. Her husband laced his fingers into her free hand, sensing something out of the ordinary was happening. Perhaps he had overheard Mike's profane exclamations.

"Annie Weasley now, actually," she informed him. "This is my family, Mike. My husband, George, and this is Art, Fred, Merrie, Janie, and Joey," she said, introducing everyone.

Mike shook George's proffered hand, and they exchanged the usual brief pleasantries. "Stephen is going to ruddy flip when I tell him I've seen you," he said, beginning to look around him.

Annie swallowed hard at the mention of that particular name from her past felt her palms sweat and blood pressure rise and immediately berated herself for it. How could someone like him still affect her peace of mind, after so many years? It was ridiculous for her to react so. "You still see Stephen, then?" she forced herself to ask politely.

"Oh, yeah. We've still got the band, see. Got a gig here this afternoon. You've *got* come see us," he said, beginning to wave at someone behind her, as if summoning them.

"I don't know, Mike. We'll see how the kids are faring later..." she offered with no intention of committing to any such thing. "Say hello to Stephen for me," she said for the sake of politeness, beginning to take her leave.

"You can tell him yourself in just a second," Mike said with a smile, casually holding out his arm to prevent her from walking away. "Oi, Stephen, look who I found!" he called out.

"Annie Jones..." proclaimed Stephen Drake. He walked around her from behind, then stood boldly in front of her, smiling, fingers stuffed into his pockets with thumbs protruding.

"Annie *Weasley*," she corrected him, forcing herself to politely return his smile. It was probably ridiculous to expect him to remember the fact that she and George were married. After all, it had been ten years ago now since she had seen him last and told him so... if he'd even been listening to a word she'd said that day, that is.

"And company," he added, gesturing to her family with one hand. He shook hands then with George. "We've met before," Stephen said to her husband.

"I remember," George replied, keeping his voice perfectly pleasant. Annie wondered if he did indeed remember meeting Stephen in the pub in Ottery so long ago or if he was also just being polite.

"No doubt who these all belong to, then," he said, nodding toward the collection of her red-headed children gathered around them.

Annie's eyes narrowed, then rolled. She didn't really believe Stephen intended anything malicious by the comment. It was just a nasty habit of his: saying things without thinking. George glanced at her in consternation as well, and she shook her head slightly, dismissing the comment.

"You look good, Annie," Stephen offered. "Married life suits you well, it seems."

"Thanks. Never been happier," she replied. "Is Shelley here with you as well?" she asked, referring to his current wife, according to a grocery cashier she had spoken with sometime last year.

"Nah... we're separated now," he said, grimacing slightly.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Annie said sincerely.

"That makes me naught-for-two," he added grimly. "Mike says I'm a serial monogamist, whatever the hell that means."

"The next one, mate. She'll be the one," Mike said cheerfully, butting his shoulder.

"Are you staying for the show later?" asked Stephen.

"We'll see," said George. "We've been here for a while now, and the little ones are getting tired," he added as an excuse, and Annie squeezed his hand in thanks for bailing her out.

"Well, it was great seeing you, anyway," Stephen said by way of goodbye.

Annie nodded. "Take care, you two," she said as she was finally dragged off by her daughters.

"Did you know those Muggle fellows, Mum?" asked Janie once they were several yards away.

"A long time ago, yes," she replied softly, still slightly shell-shocked by the unexpected encounter.

"Did they go to Muggle school with you, then?" asked Merrie.

"Yes."

"What do Muggles study in school, Mum, instead of magic?" asked Fred.

"Lots of things, love," she answered, somewhat at a loss to explain the British public education system and its curriculum in her current state of distractedness.

"Muggles have a magic of their own that they study, boys," George offered, generously taking over the conversation so Annie could collect herself. "It's called technology," he said.

"Like engines and machines?" asked Art, perking up with interest.

"Yeah, like machines. Brilliantly clever people, Muggles. They've figured out loads of cool things," George explained. "Did you know they've even been to the moon?"

*

"I think I'll take the bike out today for a little spin," George said in passing at the breakfast table the next morning. "Four more bites, Joey then you can leave the table...."

"Ooh, sounds lovely. Winky and I are planning to put up some strawberry jam this morning. Please move your glass of milk away from the edge of the table, Janie...."

"Would you rather I stay here and help out?" he offered.

"Not at all. Too many cooks and all that," she said, waving him off.

"Well, if you're sure," he said, giving her one more chance to tell him no. "Put your dish in the sink, Fred, if you're done...."

"Go," she told him.

"Want to come along?" he asked.

"Somebody has to pretend to be a responsible adult around here," she said absently while reading up on canning procedures from a cookbook opened in front of her. "I'll take the first shift today."

George chuckled. "Just make sure they're all asleep by the time my shift rolls around," he teased.

"Pfft!" was all she said.

George drove aimlessly around the countryside for nearly half an hour, weighing the pros and cons of the idea he was considering.

Running into that bloke yesterday was what had precipitated his current state of indecision. Got him thinking about Annie and her past. Remembering how she used to react whenever they were so unfortunate as to meet anyone she went to school with in Ottery. Wondering why exactly that was.

He hadn't seen that side of her in ages. But he had seen a flash of it again yesterday. Oh, it wasn't nearly as bad as it used to be; that was for certain. Time had apparently healed quite a few of her old wounds. But the fact that something was still there, even after all these years, nagged at him.

They'd decided to stay for a little while after their picnic yesterday at the car show to listen to the fellow's band. They'd stood well back from the stage, near a side exit of the large tent venue. The band had been decent, but limited to playing cover songs nothing original. The kids had danced around a little, burning off a bit of energy from their meal.

"They've gotten better, thank God," George had joked, remembering their woeful performance at the pub in Ottery all those years ago.

"Well, they've had more than a decade to practice. I should hope so," Annie'd laughed.

"Not bad at all, actually," he'd commented as they performed a passable rendition of one of his and Annie's favorites.

Took some balls to cover a U2 song George reckoned as he rocketed through the countryside. But it hardly compared to the real thing, he thought, remembering when he had taken Annie to see them for her birthday present a couple of years ago. *Hell of a show, that one* Buenos Aires had been warm and beautiful that night. He smiled, remembering how pleased Annie had been. How she'd expressed her gratitude....

With a shake of his head, his focus returned to the road ahead. His thoughts returned to yesterday.

"There was never any question Stephen had some talent," she had agreed. She'd been trying hard to be even-minded, giving the fellow some credit where she thought it was due. "And now at last he's got some pretty good people with him."

"Doesn't sound like he's had much success with the groupie thing," George had added, recalling how she'd told him that had been one of the band's primary goals when it had formed. Annie had since filled him in on the details she'd gleaned from her occasional and only when absolutely unavoidable trips into Ottery for errands. People there always assumed she cared what happened to these old schoolmates of hers. Apparently Stephen was soon going to be twice-divorced, leaving his three children to live with his ex-wives in different towns.

What a sorry excuse for a man, George mused. *Poor kids....*

Then Stephen's band had begun playing another familiar song.

I've got another confession to make,

I'm your fool...*

At first George had thought nothing of it. Just another cover. But then he happened to glance over at his wife.

Annie had been fuming. Absolutely livid. Refusing to look anywhere near the stage.

George had looked back at the band. Several times throughout the song, far more than could be explained by chance, Stephen had looked out into the crowd, directly at Annie. Every time he sang the refrain, in fact.

Is someone getting the best, the best, the best, the best of you?*

It might have meant nothing. The song was about someone who had a very difficult time with love and his broken relationship. Stephen obviously had personal experience

with such things. He'd sung the lyrics quite passionately, clearly acquainted with the pain expressed therein.

But the son of a bitch had kept looking at *his* wife when he did.

And it had made her so mad she'd looked like she could breathe fire at any moment. Not to mention the fact that he himself her husband *and* their children had been standing right next to her at the time. George had been too astonished by the audacity of it to get angry himself. Plus, he figured Annie had been furious enough for the both of them. They'd left immediately, barely waiting until the song was over.

He'd waited until they were alone that night to ask her about it. That had given her nearly six hours to calm down. Even so, she was still smoldering a bit when he'd brought it up.

"Trust me, George. It meant absolutely nothing," she'd said. "Stephen Drake is an idiot who cannot help but say and do offensive things because he seldom employs his frontal lobe when speaking or making decisions."

"Then why are you so pissed off, if it was nothing?" he'd asked, chuckling at her characterization of the fellow.

Annie'd ground her teeth together. "Let's just say that by this point, Stephen should know better than to try to serenade me," was all she'd said.

Thinking once more about the look on her face last night, George pulled off the road. He used his cell phone to dial for information and asked for Stephen Drake's address.

Twenty minutes later, George cruised slowly down the quiet street. He could see the house that was his goal this morning, see the fellow in front of it, bent over and working on his car. One moment more and there would be no chance to turn back.

Not that he was having any second thoughts. His curiosity had been piqued, reminded of Annie's mysterious Muggle life. What had happened to her during those years while he was gone away to school? What had made her so willing, even eager to leave the Muggle world behind, joining him and never looking back? What was it that she was so reluctant to talk about?

He turned off the engine, parking across the street. Stephen turned his head to see what the disturbance was, taking in the unusual sight of a stranger on a side street in Ottery, apparently not by accident. George removed his helmet as he swung his leg off the motorcycle.

Stephen stood up then, clearly surprised to see Annie's husband, of all people, here in front of his house, and so soon after they had run in to each other just yesterday after more than a decade.

"Hey, George. What can I do for you?"

"Hello, Stephen. Fancy a pint?"

Stephen looked puzzled. He considered the offer for a moment, then shrugged. "Sure, mate. I could do with a pint," he agreed, and began to wipe the engine grime off his hands.

They strolled together to a pub a couple of blocks away, chatting pleasantly about nothing important. Stephen had asked if he had caught last night's game on television, and George confessed he was not a great fan of football. Regardless, Stephen prattled on about the match for several more minutes.

As they walked inside and George looked around, he realized that this was the very place he had met Stephen and his old band nearly thirteen years ago. He hoped this meeting between them would not be nearly so tense. The two of them had behaved like two silverback gorillas back then, posturing in front of Annie.

"So, what brings you to Ottery?" Stephen asked as two pints were set before them.

George shrugged and led Stephen to a nearby yet out-of-the-way table. "Wanted to have a bit of a chat with you, actually," he confessed.

Stephen looked alarmed. "Look, I don't know what you've heard, but I assure you, there's nothing going on between me and...."

George began laughing. *How intriguing that his first reaction is to defend himself against a presumed charge of adultery* His wife was right: Stephen did have an unnatural habit of saying offensive things, apparently not on purpose.

"Relax, Stephen. Honestly, that's the furthest thing from my mind," he said, still chuckling, as Stephen sighed in relief and visibly relaxed. "Annie has never given me any reason to question her faithfulness, I assure you."

"What did you want to chat about, then?"

George hesitated for a moment, pondering how best to approach the subject. "I'm curious how did you and Annie meet?" Perhaps beginning at the beginning would be best.

Stephen chuckled but didn't really sound amused. "She never told you?"

"Not really. She doesn't talk about Ottery or her school days very much," George replied guardedly.

Stephen snorted, taking a sip from his pint. "Not surprised. Why would she? She was fuckin' miserable, for the most part."

"Why d'you say that?" George asked, figuring he might know at least part of the answer already.

Stephen took a deep breath, considering for a moment what to say. "It started with her mum. Carys Jones was just about the biggest scandal this little burg ever had. The golden girl gone bad, she was. Tongues wagged for a lot of years about that one. Annie took it real personal... used to beat the shit out of some kid or other on just about a weekly basis for making a comment about her crack whore mother," he said, chuckling.

George grunted as a memory of his own came to mind. "My brother and I saw her do it once. We had to pull her off the kid she went berserk. Would've killed all four of them, probably, if we hadn't stopped her," he said, shaking his head. Apparently, that flare of temper hadn't been an isolated incident.

Truth be told, he had long suspected something along these lines had happened. What was wrong with the people in this town, he wondered for the hundredth time, that they would punish a child an orphan, no less for her mother's sins in such a manner? Why didn't the other parents or the teachers put a stop to it? Not that Annie was the sort of person who ever asked for anyone's help.... Was it possible they hadn't known?

Stephen's face lit up with the recollection. "Yeah, I remember hearing about that one! That fat kid... Molloy something. He was pretty much the last one who ever brought her mother up to her face. Everybody kinda steered clear of her after that, considering the damage she did to that little prick. I reckon it wasn't much later when we met," he said.

"You didn't go to primary school with her, then?" George asked, somewhat surprised to learn this fact.

"Nah, me and my mum didn't move here until I was eleven. I met Annie in secondary school," Stephen explained. Then he began to laugh as he spoke. "She came pedalin' over to where we were ridin' the dirt bike one day at the bottom of Stoatshead Hill.... Tiny little thing she was, with a great big bad-arse attitude. She asked if she could have a ride. I dunno, I guess I felt sorry for her or somethin'. So I said, 'Sure, I'll give you a ride,' and then she says, 'No, I want to ride it by myself,' like I was some

kind of idiot for thinkin' any different," he said, still laughing.

George smiled, remembering how Annie had written him about riding a dirt bike, just after he and Fred had left for Hogwarts the first time. She'd had nothing else to do with him and his brother gone, he supposed, and had taken off in search of adventure. Stephen and his dirt bike were what she'd found.

"So you let her ride it?" he asked, knowing the answer but wanting to keep Stephen talking.

"Yeah. Pretty stupid, huh? By all rights, she should've broken her neck. It was like sittin' a baby on it. But she looked so... determined. I guess I figured I couldn't say no. And I'll be damned if she didn't do it right her first try. Never once stalled the engine or lost her balance or anything," he mused.

"That's Annie for you," George offered, easily able to picture his wife as a girl on the little motorcycle.

"Yeah. That's Annie," he agreed. "She was a riot. She'd take any dare back then, didn't matter how stupid. I had to step in a few times; the other guys would let it get out of hand, otherwise."

"You stepped in?" George asked. That fact surprised him.

"Yeah," Stephen answered, picking up on the surprised tone and sounding slightly regretful. "Probably not as often as I should have, though. I suppose I fancied myself her protector of a sort... for a while, at least. She just seemed too... *little* for this world or something. Used to resent the hell out of it, though: me steppin' in," he said, shaking his head with the memory.

George nodded slightly. This interview was becoming very informative, to be sure.

Stephen took another drink. "So, you like cars?" he asked.

George assumed he was referring to yesterday and nodded. "My Dad used to tinker a lot on an old Anglia when I was a kid. I suppose I picked it up from him. Now my boys are into it, too. I guess you could say I find technology like that utterly fascinating," he replied.

"Right," said Stephen, drawing out the word and apparently finding George's comment amusing. "That explain the motorcycle as well? Pretty sweet ride.... Triumph, right?"

George nodded once more, smiling. He couldn't resist poking the fellow a little bit. "It was a birthday gift, actually. From Annie."

It worked. Stephen's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Didn't know she was that well off," was his only mumbling comment.

"I reckon there's quite a bit about Annie that you don't know, mate," George said calmly. He wasn't trying to start something just stating a fact.

Stephen nodded thoughtfully. "True. But then again, there's a good bit I do know, and that's why you're here," he parried.

"True," George conceded the point. "What did you lot do together, then, when you hung out?"

"Find trouble, primarily. My older brother was in and out of prison while I was growing up. Not exactly the best influence on us, as you can imagine. Probably some kind of miracle we all didn't end up in custody ourselves," he said ruefully.

"That also sounds like Annie," said George, laughing.

Stephen nodded. "A right little adrenaline junkie, she was. The only time I ever saw her smile, or even look the slightest bit happy, was when we were pullin' off some stupid stunt or other. The rest of the time she just looked kinda depressed. Like she was lonely.

"Used to piss me off quite a bit, you know? I mean, what right did she have to feel lonely if she was hanging out with us all the time? Why weren't we good enough for her? And then she'd disappear all summer long. We'd never see any sign of her, even though she just lived right over the river. But she'd come strolling back to us as soon as school started. Never figured out why.... She refused to talk about whatever she did in the summertime."

"That was me. And my brother, as well. She hung out with us when we came back from boarding school for the summers," George explained, careful to keep the ancient cover story straight, but still feeling it was important for Stephen to feel like the sharing of information was going both ways.

"Ah... that makes sense. I remember now that you said you knew her since you were kids. So, what was it that you lot did that was so special?" he asked a little petulantly.

George shrugged. The honest answer that he and Fred treated her with respect and real friendship would have been rude to the point of being harsh. And he certainly didn't want to go into the details of how the three of them would hike and camp together, which he suspected would merely fuel the ridiculous assumptions most people in this town had about his wife as a young teenager. "Dunno. Just hung out, mostly," he offered.

Stephen grimaced anyway. "Well, that puts me in my place," he said, snorting. "I suppose I deserved it," he added, his voice dripping with regret.

"How d'you mean?" George asked, sounding as casual as he could. He suspected Stephen was about to tell him something very important, and possibly difficult to hear.

Stephen took another deep breath. "I told you Annie's trouble began with her mum. What you don't know is that... well... it didn't end there. Annie had an unfortunate... reputation... for being...." He shifted in his seat a bit, refusing to look George in the eye, and shrugged instead of completing the sentence.

George had known about Annie's reputation here in town for ages, of course. Since they were sixteen, in fact, when he'd been utterly shocked by those girls in the park who'd attacked Annie. They had called her a *whore*, of all things she who had been so quick to punish the slightest bit of innuendo from either him or his brother back then.

What he *didn't* know was how it had arisen. And now, he began to understand he was possibly sitting face-to-face with the squirming bastard that had given it to her. A person she at some point had considered to be her friend.

George felt no pity whatsoever for the discomfort of the man sitting across from him. But as furious as he was in that moment, he willfully forced himself to swallow the anger. He would not punish Stephen; it was not his place to do so. He would, however, force him to confess his sin out loud, looking Annie's husband in the face while he did it.

"A reputation for being what?" George said carefully.

Stephen looked him in the eye, realizing a confession was an unavoidable and mandatory part of his penance. He squared his jaw, preparing to speak. "Annie had a reputation for being a slut. There was a rumor that went around back in school one of many, actually that she and I had sex. I didn't start it, but I know who did... and I didn't do anything to stop it. Truth be told, I probably encouraged it at the time. It spread from there, like rumors do, and blew all out of proportion. I was stupid and selfish, and what I did cost me any chance I had with her."

They sat in silence for a whole minute. George glared at Stephen, who kept his eyes trained on the table in front of them. When he did finally summon the courage to look at George in the eye, he quickly offered a protest in his defense. "I swear that it isn't true. She and I never...."

"I *know* it isn't true, you arsehole," George cut him off, keeping his voice soft and ominously loaded with threat. He was utterly confident beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was the only man Annie had ever loved, had ever been intimate with. She knew that the same was true for him, as well. But the fact that this moron felt the need to reassure *him*, her *husband*, was an insult George was not inclined to overlook at the moment. He breathed deeply to summon control over the anger now boiling within him.

"Are you gonna try to beat the shit out of me now?" asked Stephen, daring him to start a fight.

"I confess to being strongly tempted, yes," said George as calmly as he could, gripping the edge of the table. "But I won't for two reasons. First: this matter is between you and Annie. She is fully capable of fighting her own battles with no help from me. She left things between the two of you the way they are for a reason, and I respect that.

"But fair warning to you," he said in a voice that was barely above a whisper yet rang clear as a bell, "If she ever gave me the slightest invitation to participate on her behalf, you would be *toast*. And I mean that in the most literal sense you can imagine."

George paused to let that sink in. Stephen glared back at him like an indignant child being disciplined in public.

"Secondly, I have absolutely nothing whatsoever to prove to you. I'll admit to being curious about my wife's past, but let me set something straight: I am not threatened by *anything* in it. Annie left Ottery and every one of you far behind years ago now. And never looked back. She chose me."

Stephen smirked. "I suppose I deserve that, too," he said unconvincingly.

George and Stephen both took long drinks from their pints, nearly draining them. During the awkward silence afterward, George decided to risk asking one more question. "You mentioned just now that you thought at one time you had a chance with her...?"

Stephen shrugged, attempting to downplay the confession. "Sure, I had a thing for her for a while. There was a time, yes, when I thought I had a chance... but I blew it. Over and over again, I blew it. You might even owe me a debt of gratitude, mate; I fucked it up so many times over," he said, smiling wryly.

George stared at him for a moment and began to chuckle. *As preposterous as the theory is, Stephen might have a point* he thought. After all, Annie spent quite a bit of time with this idiot as a teenager while George had been trapped far away from her at school. If Stephen hadn't been his own worst enemy, maybe the tables would be turned?

Another thought occurred to him like a thunderbolt. "You were Annie's first kiss..." he wondered aloud, suddenly recalling that part of the conversation in the park when he and Annie were sixteen.

Stephen looked momentarily stunned. "She told you that?" he exclaimed.

George shook his head. "Educated guess, actually. Were you?"

Stephen shrugged. "Dunno if I was the first; she never told me so. We did kiss, once. And what a fuckin' catastrophe that turned out to be," he said as he wearily ran his fingers through his hair.

George snorted. Judging by this guy's track record, he could guess what had happened next. Pick the most stupid, most inappropriate, most self-destructive of the several possible scenarios, and he'd likely have a reasonable proximity of what had taken place. *Thank God for Stephen's penchant for crashing and burning...*

"So, just to be clear, you don't harbor any feelings for Annie anymore?" he asked. It came out as more of an instruction rather than a question, though. The "serenade" song from yesterday was beginning to take on new connotations for him now.

Stephen looked him in the eye, either sizing him up or debating whether or not to tell the truth. "Not really. Not anymore. Once you and she got together, and I could see how happy that made her, I realized whatever opportunity I might have had was gone. And she is happy anyone can see that. Congratulations, mate you won," he offered grudgingly.

George nodded to himself. "Thanks for your honesty," he said. "I appreciate it."

"Happy to help, and thanks for the pint. I should probably get going now, though," Stephen said, rising to leave.

"Cheers," George said, remaining seated.

He watched as Stephen left the pub, then remained sitting there for a while longer, reviewing all that he had learned from the interview. He looked out the window of the pub, gazing out at the houses and buildings lining the streets he could see from the corner, fantasizing once more about burning the entire place to the ground.

Who wouldn't want to run screaming from this place? From these people? Perhaps it was no wonder Annie had been so willing to risk life and limb to be with him, even during a war that targeted relationships like theirs, rather than subject herself to Ottery. The citizenry obviously had no idea the treasure they'd let slip through their fingers.

He gave Stephen a ten-minute head start, then left the pub himself. Stephen had wisely absented himself from his front yard by the time George got there. He climbed onto the bike and drove himself straight home.

He arrived at Mole Hill shortly before one p.m. He walked into the cool quiet of his home to find the children were gone and evidence that Annie and Winky had just finished with the morning's work. Several rows of jars filled with dark red jam sat cooling on the counter. The house smelled intoxicating with the aroma of the strawberries now concentrated into thick, crimson ambrosia.

"Hey," she quietly greeted him as he strolled into the kitchen.

Annie was elbow deep in soap suds at the sink, scrubbing a large pot. She was barefoot and wearing old clothes for the messy job: cut-off shorts and a tie-dyed tank top that had been created for her by their children. The outfit was quintessential Annie, he mused: casual, whimsical, and practical.

"You missed lunch," she said, rinsing the pot and draining the sink.

George lifted her up onto the counter, bringing her to his eye level, and laced his fingers together, resting on the small of her back. "I'll make a sandwich later," he replied. "Where are the kids?"

Her arms wrapped around his shoulders. "The boys are helping Grandpa install something this afternoon on the car they built most likely some kind of enchantment or other, I didn't catch the name of it. Your Dad will probably get fined for it once they're caught," she added with a smile.

George returned the smile. "And the girls?" he asked, leaning in to kiss her neck.

"Left ten minutes ago for the swimming hole," she said, tilting her head to give him better access.

"Winky?" he mumbled against her throat.

"Right behind you," she whispered.

George dropped his shoulders in frustration, then turned to face the house-elf and her half-grown son. "Hello, Winky, Doozy!" he said cheerfully with a smile that looked only slightly forced.

"Hello, Mr. George," she replied with a smile as her son nodded silently. "If it's being all right with you, Miss, I is heading over to the school now to finish the weekend work there."

"Certainly, Winky," Annie answered in a friendly voice.

"Likely take all afternoon, it will, Miss," the elf added as she made her way out the back door, her little boy toddling after.

George could have sworn he heard a faint noise that sounded like an elfish version of a giggle.

Annie leaned across the counter toward the stove, reached out with one arm, and grabbed a half-full jar of jam with a spoon in it. "Here, have a taste," she offered, spooning some jam into his mouth.

George closed his eyes and smiled, relishing the flavor. Strawberry jam was one of his most favorite things in the world. This sample was still warm from the stove. Sweet, innocent, sunny: it was like tasting the essence of summer on his tongue.

And summer meant everything to George.

Sure, a crisp, bright fall day spent walking through the woods lit up with colors like each tree had been painted by an artist: that was nice. He confessed that lying on the sofa with Annie in his arms, gazing out across the frozen meadow, watching a rare winter snowfall decorate the grass and trees: that certainly was peaceful and lovely as well. He freely admitted that the sight of the apple orchard in spring bloom, the snowy-pink blossoms adorning each and every delicate twig well, that was heart-breakingly beautiful, too.

But *summer* with its promise of warm, dry, sunny days... lazy green weekends... long, drawn out sunsets what else could compare? Every insect, plant, and animal even a frozen and miserably homesick boy at Hogwarts awoke and began to live once more in the summer sun. Breathing in the summer air, storing it up in his body was what kept him going throughout the rest of the year.

Summer was the queen of seasons. Ever since he could remember, George had lived for summertime. He supposed it'd probably begun during his school years, and no wonder. Summer had always meant home and happiness to him. Summer days held memories of sand and sea, of woods and earth, of homecoming and real friendship.

Summer was heaven.

"Any good?" she asked.

He opened his eyes to see his wife's pleased smile. He nodded slightly, then held her face in his cupped hands. "I love you," he said, staring straight into her magnetic eyes.

After a moment's startled confusion, a spark of coy mischief glinted in her eyes. "Prove it," she dared him.

* Lyrics from [Best of You by the Foo Fighters](#).

Sorting

Chapter 70 of 80

Art and Fred are about to begin their fifth year at Hogwarts... and finally get Sorted into a house.

Chapter 70: Sorting

September 1, 2009

Art had lain awake for nearly an hour, staring at the tropical fish swimming about on the ceiling. He glanced at the clock for the thirty-fourth time since he woke up.

Today I am ten years, ten months old. 10.83 years old. 120 months old. 3,895.25 days old. 93,485.5 hours old he figured, his mind running through the familiar calculations like water running through a riverbed.

"You awake?" his brother asked him from the next bed, interrupting him.

"Of course."

"Mum's in the kitchen," he said.

Art sniffed the air. "Smells like pancakes."

Fred sat up and threw his legs over the edge of the bed. "She's making us our favorite this morning."

"To say goodbye," Art added.

He hopped out of bed and began to dress. Today was nearly as exciting as Christmas, he reckoned. He'd been looking forward to this morning in much the same way, counting down the days all summer long. And just like the last few days before a major holiday, time had seemed to creep by at a snail's pace for the last week.

He opened the trunk that sat at the foot of his bed and rifled through the neatly arranged contents once more, confirming again everything that was required, necessary, or wanted was in its proper place. There was never any doubt, really. He'd been packed for two days already.

Downstairs, Art discovered his mother had made a huge breakfast of her special pancakes, just as he'd predicted. As he tucked into breakfast with gusto, he wondered if he would miss it much: seeing Mum every morning before school, eating breakfast and supper at home with his little sisters, sleeping in his own bed. While the food he'd eaten at Hogwarts over the years had always tasted very good for he'd eaten lunch there nearly every day for the past five years it was almost, but not quite as delicious as Mum's. He imagined his younger Weasley and Potter cousins might feel differently in the future, however, when it was their turn to start at school. Aunt Ginny's and Uncle Harry's cooking was certainly edible, and Aunt Fleur had her better dishes, but Aunt Hermione's was just plain gross, in his opinion. *No wonder Hugo's such a pip-squeak.*

The stack of pancakes on his plate was now gone, and his stomach was feeling comfortably stuffed. Art glanced around the table at his family while he downed his orange

juice. Dad was reading the morning's paper, as usual. Joey was making a mess, as usual, with syrup spread nose to chin and ear to ear, and would likely have to be changed again before they left. Janie was looking at a picture book about unicorns. The little girls had no idea what was happening today, and likely wouldn't care too much even if they did, he figured. At six and four, they were too young to understand.

Mum was smiling at all of them, but he sensed she was not exactly happy about today *Putting on a brave face*, he thought. Even though she had never once said it aloud where Art could overhear her, he knew she was not thrilled about sending any of her children away from her, especially to live at Hogwarts. It didn't take a genius to figure that out.

But then again, what mother would be? Mums were like that, weren't they? Always wanting to pretend their kids were babies forever

Merrie sat next to him, sniffing occasionally. *She really doesn't want us to leave*, he reckoned. Art felt a small pang of sympathy for his favorite little sister *I'll really miss her, too*, he thought. And then he belched.

Now, as a typical ten-year-old's brain is often like to do, his mind switched gears. However, unlike a typical ten-year-old, he began to ponder the chemical composition of the gasses contained in the belch.... Whether or not any of them were combustible.... How the flash points of said gasses compared to that of petrol.... How small, controlled explosions (sort of like belches) propelled a Muggle car's engine.... How they would be driving almost a hundred and seventy miles today in their own car....

Once everyone had finished eating and pitched in to clear the table, it was time to load their trunks into the family Toyota. Fred and Art grunted and pushed and pulled and heaved the ungainly things down the stairs, out the door, down the pathway and into the garage. Their dad was waiting for them there with the rear door of the car open.

"Tell me again why we can't just *Locomotor* them, Dad?" Art asked, huffing with the effort while his father smiled amusedly at him.

"You think I got to *Locomotor* my trunk to school?" his father said jokingly.

"Probably not," Art said, affecting an exaggerated sigh and rolling his eyes, clearly indicating how lame he thought this excuse was.

"But you weren't a genius like us," joked Fred, grinning broadly.

"Smart-arse trumps clever any day of the week, son," he laughed. "*Andnobody* beats me there." Then he reached into his pocket, winking at them, and the trunks hopped themselves into the car. "Don't tell your granny...."

Everybody piled into the car, and they started off by seven a.m. in order to make it to the train station on time. Art and his brother sat in the back seat on either side of Merrie. They spent the first part of the trip telling her jokes and funny stories to try to cheer her up. She would giggle at first, then sigh again each time, as if every story they told her reminded her of how much she would miss them when they were gone. They tried playing some road games instead, like *Bury Your Cows* and *Road Sign Alphabet* and *Slugbug*. Without having to say anything to each other, Fred and Art let Merrie win every time.

Art's younger sisters were sitting in the middle row. Joey got obnoxiously whiney about halfway through the three-hour-plus trip, so she got a "special" lollipop from Dad. Five minutes later she was fast asleep, and she napped the rest of the way into London. It made Art smile, remembering how he was nearly eight before he figured out that Dad always slipped *Sleeping Draught* into the sweets he doled out to them on road trips.

Looking out the window now, things began looking busier. There were more cars on the road, houses were closer together, and buildings were getting taller. It was not the first time he'd been to London, but this was the first time he was on his way to Kings Cross Station. Art glanced at the wristwatch Mum and Dad had given him on his first day of school five years ago. *10:05 a.m. Less than an hour to go!*

They finally arrived at the large, busy station. His dad parked the car deep underground in the carpark next to the station, then gave them Muggle money with instructions to go fetch two trolleys for the trunks. Art became a bit distracted by the trolley vending machine, fascinated by the buttons and the note acceptor. He got down on his hands and knees to examine the cart release mechanism in action while Fred fed his money into the machine. Once they got both carts free, they raced each other back to car, nearly crashing into a van trying to exit the carpark, horn blaring. Art and his brother tugged and wrestled their trunks onto the trolleys, then the family took the lift up to the station.

Kings Cross Station was almost as busy as he remembered the airport being back when they were four and on their way to see Uncle Charlie in Romania. Muggles were rushing about everywhere. Real Muggle trains were waiting on tracks in every direction he looked. Art now fervently wished they had left the house even earlier, so he could spend more time exploring this amazing place! He was looking longingly at the trains on tracks nine and ten when his father began to speak to them.

"Watch these kids in front of you now," he said, indicating two second-year Hufflepuffs Art recognized by sight but not by name. "See how you must take it at a good clip? Then remember to clear out of the way so you don't get run over by whoever's coming behind. You two go through it first, and we'll be there in another minute."

His father paused, looking carefully about them to make sure no one was paying attention who shouldn't be. "Now... GO!"

Art pushed the heavy cart with all his might and quickly got up to speed. He felt a thrill of excitement as the wall loomed larger and larger in front of him. He tucked his head down, glancing at his watch one last time: *10:43 a.m. nearly there!* He heard an odd sort of whooshing sound as he passed through the space between the atoms of the wall, then loud gushes of steam being released by the magical engine on the track that had just appeared next to him.

Art stood frozen in place, amazed, attempting to process what had just happened to him *I have just passed through solid matter... because I wanted to!*

"ARGH!" he cried out in pain three seconds later when Fred crashed his cart into his heels because he forgot to keep moving. "Watch where you're going, bloody git!" Art yelled.

"Why the hell did you stop, moron?" Fred yelled back.

"Open your goddamn eyes!"

"Move your stupid arse out of the way!"

"Shut up!"

"You shut up!"

Then Dad brought Mum and his sisters through the barricade. He began to chuckle once he saw them bickering, immediately assuming correctly what had happened. "Ten-forty-five, boys. Get your trunks on the train, you lot," he said.

Merrie was openly weeping as she hugged Art and his brother, making them promise to write her all the time. Even Mum was getting a bit teary, but at least she wasn't making a production of it. One hug and kiss for each of them, then she held out a box. "It's a little something to tide you over until you get to school. Promise to share it with each other, you two," she said softly, tousling first Art's hair, then Fred's.

"Mum!" they each protested, ducking away. Art took possession of the treat box.

Then Dad patted them on the shoulder and handed them a galleon each. "Get yourselves something from the trolley," he told them. "And please swear you'll write to Merrie, tomorrow morning at the latest," he added with a surreptitious roll of his eyes.

The brothers nodded, promising to do their best and try to behave and stay safe and write often and blah, blah, blah. They were finally rescued from the goodbyes that seemed as if they would never come to an end when Ted Lupin came dashing up to them.

"Fred! Art!" he cried, an elated look on his face.

This was to be Ted's first year at school, and the three of them had been talking about it all summer long. They'd made detailed plans for a year full of fun and adventures now that the three best friends would be living together at Hogwarts and far removed from the fun-dampening effects of parental retribution.

The clock on the wall said it was 10:55 time to board the train and find a place to sit. Art's heart was racing, and he couldn't stop smiling in his excitement.

"Let's find a compartment," offered Fred, and the three boys climbed aboard the famous scarlet steam train.

As the train began to move, they leaned out the window to wave for a minute at the people they were leaving behind on the platform. Joey and Janie were jumping up and down, shouting and waving and laughing at the spectacle of the train. Dad had now picked Merrie up and was patting her back, trying to comfort her sobs. Mum and Ted's grandmother were waving back, arms about each other's waists, sad smiles on their faces.

The three boys sat back into their seats once the train had pulled out of sight of the station.

"What did your mum pack for you?" asked Ted, nodding to indicate the box on the seat next to Art.

Art shrugged, then opened the box. "Looks like chocolate chippies... banana muffins... and strawberry scones," he answered, pulling out a cookie.

"Share!" demanded Ted, holding out his hand as Fred reached in and drew out a scone. Ted liked to imagine that since he was slightly older than the twins, he could boss them around.

"Earn it," laughed Art through a mouthful of cookie.

"Impress us," added Fred, dangling the scone in front of their friend.

Ted pretended to sneeze, and two dark green squirming tentacles began growing out of his nostrils, reaching toward the box.

"Wicked!" cheered the twins in unison, holding out the box and offering a reward. Art reckoned one of the best things about Ted was that he was a Metamorphmagus, just like his mother had been, or so they'd been told. And despite the fact that his streaky blond hair always looked shaggy and unkempt no matter how recently it had been trimmed, and his bushy, mad-scientist eyebrows looked utterly out of place on his eleven-year-old face, and whenever he laughed *really* hard it sounded disturbingly like a howl, Ted was *not* a werewolf like his father had been.

Ted grabbed a muffin and began to eat it once he sniffed the tentacles back up into his nose.

For the first hour or so of the voyage, it was just the three of them. Ted asked loads of questions about the castle and the grounds, every one of them asked and answered five times before over the summer, but once more Art and Fred shared their knowledge enthusiastically with their oldest and dearest friend.

"Will we have any classes together at all?" Ted asked, slightly hopeful.

"Nah, mate," Fred replied gently while Art shook his head. Even though the three boys were the same age, all riding the Hogwarts Express for the first time, and tonight would finally be Sorted into houses, Art and Fred were first years in residence terms only. Academically, the twins were considered fifth years in all subjects but Charms. (Flitwick was now meeting with them privately for lessons in advanced Charm Theory once a week.) While Ted would be spending his time this year learning to use his new wand, Fred and Art would be preparing themselves to take OWLs in June.

Just then, there was a knock on the compartment door. The twins looked up and waved in a tall boy.

"There you are! I've been looking up and down this bloody train for you!" exclaimed Henry Babbitt, a fifth year Ravenclaw and friend of the twins. Art noticed he was wearing a "River and Wrackspurt" t-shirt; apparently he was a fan of his father's Muggle music show on the wireless. Somehow his dad's identity as co-host was still a secret, although pretty much everyone knew "River" was Roxy's dad, Lee Jordan. Art's father had been rather surprised to learn how popular the show currently was in the castle.

"Good summer, Henry?" asked Art.

Henry nodded. "You?"

"Excellent. Dad and Mum took us to India," Art said.

"Cool," said Henry, sounding impressed. "Did you finish the runes translation for O'Shaughnessy?" he asked, flopping down on the empty seat next to Ted.

Art nodded, but Fred answered, "Nearly... I'll do the last paragraph later today."

"Beast of a thing, wasn't it?" Henry moaned.

"Oh, yeah," Art agreed out of politeness. He'd thought it was no big deal, but didn't like the look on people's faces when he contradicted them about things like that. He glanced at his brother, who looked back at him with a slight smile. The only reason Fred hadn't finished was that he was even more of a homework procrastinator than Art.

"I'm Ted," Ted added, offering his hand to the newcomer. Art was impressed by the effort his friend had expended to do so. Ted didn't usually speak to strangers.

"Hey," said Henry in friendly greeting, shaking it. "You a first year?"

Ted nodded.

"Thought I didn't recognize you," commented Henry, who then turned back to the twins. "Which house do you think you'll Sort into?" he asked, bubbling with curiosity now that Ted had offered him a perfect segue into the subject he was most interested in.

"Gryffindor, most likely," Fred replied, rehashing a conversation he and Art had had at least a hundred times before. "The whole family's been Gryffindors for generations...."

"But it could be any of them, couldn't it?" asked Henry, sounding as if he was still trying to keep hope alive.

Art realized it was a strange and unique situation he and his brother found themselves in. Fred and Art were already well-known throughout the student body at Hogwarts, having attended classes for the last five years, but were only now going to be Sorted into one of the houses themselves. And it seemed that, because of their reputation for being clever, their fellow students must be figuring that opportunities for earning house points abounded if Art and his brother became their housemates. Added to the fact that they were well-liked in general, the Weasley twins found themselves in the position of being quite desirable commodities amongst their schoolmates. No other first years were being approached by older students, or asked a similar question. Art was somewhat pleased, but equally made uncomfortable by this fact.

Art shrugged. "Sure. But Dad would do his nut if we got put in Slytherin, that's for sure," he said.

"Probably disown us," agreed Fred, nodding.

"Make things a bit awkward at the hols, wouldn't it?" added Art, smiling in amusement at the thought.

"What's so bad about Slytherin?" asked Ted, trying to join the conversation.

"Oh, nothing, really," assured Art, sincerely. "I know lots of them, and they're fine, for the most part. Maybe a bit... self-centered? A few of them, anyway. But Dad... well, let's say he's just a *bit* prejudiced."

Fred added a loud, "Ha!" at this understatement. "Dad has a real doxy up his arse about Slytherin."

All four boys laughed at the crude humor.

"Have you seen Padraig?" Fred asked Henry, referring to another fifth year Ravenclaw boy they were friends with.

Henry smiled. "Erm... yeah. But don't bother him at the moment... he's *busy*."

"Did he leave the rune translation to the last minute as well?" asked Art.

Henry laughed, shaking his head. "Not busy with homework. Busy with Radha Singh."

The twins looked quizzically at Henry.

Henry rolled his eyes. "Sometimes I forget you two are only eleven."

"Ten, actually," Art corrected him, out of habit. They would not turn eleven until Halloween, in two months' time.

"Right. Reckon you'll figure it out in a few years," he said, chuckling, as he rose to leave. "See you later...."

Now that Ted had his friends' attention once more, he began asking them about the different Hogwarts houses. The twins explained to their friend the various pros and cons of each house: the locations and attributes of the dorms and common rooms for they had often been invited to study with their classmates from all four houses as well as the unifying characteristics for each one.

"But isn't that boring if everyone in your house is the same as you?" Ted asked.

"Well, just because all the Hufflepuffs are determined and Ravenclaws are clever doesn't mean there aren't loads of differences between individual people. You're not guaranteed to like everyone in your own house, and there's no reason you can't be best mates with someone from another house," argued Fred.

"Yeah," agreed Art. "You just might have a few more things in common with your housemates, personality-wise," he added. "And that could be a good thing or a bad thing, I suppose. I mean, if you believe that all Slytherins are power-hungry, back-stabbing megalomaniacs, then it would be easy to imagine they all hate each other for being the same way. But I find, actually, that while they may not be best mates, they all usually scratch each other's backs, if you get my meaning. Quite an old boys' club, the Slytherin House. One of the most extensive professional networking societies there is."

Ted's brow furrowed as he tried to understand what his friends were trying to explain to him. He didn't really know what they meant about Slytherins, and had no idea what the word "networking" meant, but wasn't feeling in the mood to ask at the moment, for two more students girls this time invited themselves into the compartment. Ted found himself frozen into muteness, intimidated by the fifteen-year-old girls who casually sat next to him as he scooted over toward the outside window.

"Did you hear there's to be a new Muggle Studies professor this term?" one of the girls asked.

Art and Fred looked at each other, shrugged, then shook their heads, looking back at the girls.

"My father told me.... He's on the Hogwarts Board of Governors, you know," the other girl added.

Art and Fred rolled their eyes, as if that particular tidbit of information had been mentioned rather frequently before, then nodded wearily.

"Get on with it, Lydia," urged the first girl, pursing her lips in impatience.

"Right, well... apparently, some half-blood witch named Nimue Prewitt got herself hired for the job."

Art and Fred both looked at Lydia with narrowed eyes.

"Some *half-blood*, you say?" Fred asked quietly, warningly.

"Why would anyone's bloodline matter?" Art growled, glaring at the girl.

"Oh, it doesn't! Of course not! I mean...."

"Merlin's eyebrows, Lydia! How stupid can you be?" the second girl chastised her gossipy companion.

Lydia was flustered. "I didn't mean anything by it! I swear!"

Art continued to glare at Lydia, but Fred decided to assume it was an innocent slip of the tongue, and let the matter go. "Prewitt, huh? Our granny's maiden name was Prewitt..." he mused.

"Oh, maybe you're related?" Lydia asked in a desperately casual tone of voice, hoping the conversation could be salvaged.

"Probably," he said. "I mean, our family's so big, odds are we're related to most people by now, I expect," he said with a smile.

"This a relative?" the second girl asked, nodding toward the boy cowering next to her.

The truth was yes, Art and Fred were very distantly related to Ted, since his mother had been descended from the Black family, just like their Grandpa Arthur. But this was far too complicated a subject to discuss with the girls at present. "Nah, this is our mate, Ted Lupin. Ted, this is Lydia Windsor and Elise Clevenger, fifth year Hufflepuffs."

"Hi," the girls said in unison, looking at him.

Ted swallowed and choked out a somewhat garbled greeting, making them smile.

"Lupin.... Where have I heard that name before?" Lydia asked.

Ted shrugged. His face was beginning to shine with nervous perspiration, and his irises were fluctuating randomly through a rainbow of hues.

Elise leaned over and whispered something into Lydia's ear, and Lydia's expression changed from haughty curiosity to sincere sympathy. "Oh," she said with a sad note in

her voice. "You poor thing," she said softly as she patted Ted's knee.

Art suspected Elise had just reminded Lydia of the fact that Ted's parents names were to be found inscribed on the war memorial on school grounds. Remus and Nymphadora Lupin had both fought and died at the Battle of Hogwarts, along with Art's Uncle Fred. He looked at his friend quizzically. Ted was frozen stiff, staring at the girl's hand on his knee as if it were a venomous snake about to strike.

"Well, we better get back to the Prefect's car," said Elise.

"Yeah.... Hope you guys get Sorted into Hufflepuff!" said Lydia by way of goodbye.

After the door closed behind them, Fred spoke up. "Ted, dude.... You've really got to loosen up around girls, mate!" he joked.

"They're everywhere, man," Art teased. "Nearly fifty percent of the population, people reckon...."

Ted smirked. "Very funny. You lot are hilarious."

"Seriously, Ted. You don't get all freaked out like this with our girls at home," Fred continued, referring to the raft of his female siblings and cousins they'd all grown up with together at the school.

"That's different," Ted argued.

"How d'you mean?" asked Art.

"I dunno. It just is!" he replied, testily. "Can we talk about something else, please?"

"Like what?"

"Flobberworms, for all I care," Teddy barked.

"Maybe it's for the best you clam up around girls if all you can think of to talk about is flobberworms," teased Fred.

"Not really your best foot forward, is it?" added Art, wrinkling his nose.

Ted launched himself at his friends, wrestling with them until he had Fred in a headlock.

"A little help here!" Fred called out to his twin, giggling but unable to escape.

Art was laughing so hard he was incapable of answering, much less coming to the aid of his brother. He fell off the seat instead, landing on the floor of the car with a loud thud.

"Say it!" commanded Ted with a smile, forcing Fred to bend nearly in half.

"I give!" Fred gasped.

Ted released him, then shoved him forcefully into the seat cushions once more. Just then, a little old dear toddled by pushing a cart loaded with treats. "The trolley!" all three of them cried at once and leaped out of the compartment.

Art and his brother bought a sampling of nearly everything, including some sweets from their dad's shop. Art bought one of his favorites: Weasley's Bubbly Gum. The compartment filled up with iridescent, long-lasting orbs as all three boys blew bubbles while they chewed.

As the afternoon wore on, the twins dug out their books and began to study. Ted was left with nothing to do but absentmindedly skewer a few of the remaining bubbles with his new wand when they floated within reach, so he stared out the window and watched the scenery flash by.

Well after the sun had set, the train pulled into Hogsmeade Station. Like all the rest of the students from third years on up, the twins knew the town quite well. Their father had been taking them back and forth from Hogsmeade to Devon, to and from school for years. Every morning, they'd arrived via the Floo Network to the shop on High Street, then walked up the road together. Dad would wave goodbye to them at the gate in the mornings, watching to make sure they actually got to school. Then, when lessons were over for the day, they'd dash back down the lane and into the shop, where Dad had set aside a table in the back room for them to do their homework. As they got a bit older, they would often spend more time in the school library or studying with friends, but would always report back to Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, Hogsmeade branch in time to head home with Dad for supper.

But tonight, like all the first years, they'd be crossing the lake by boat. As Fred and Art exited the train and milled around in the confusion of the station, lots of older students greeted them on their way to board the carriages.

"Firs' years this way!" a deep voice boomed out from nearby, startling a few of the new students, including Ted.

"Hagrid!" the twins cried together. Art threw an arm around Ted's shoulder and pulled him along as they ran up to greet their old friend.

"Hello, Art! Hello, Fred! Who've yeh brought wi' yeh this year?" Hagrid asked cheerily as all the other first years turned to look, wondering who these three boys were, and why they rated personal attention from the gargantuan Hogwarts professor and groundskeeper.

"This is our mate, Ted Lupin, Hagrid." Art explained. He reckoned that Hagrid would likely know Ted's parents, just like he knew nearly every one of the magical families of Hogwarts' students. He further hoped that some of the extra attention paid to him and his brother could be shared with Ted and might cheer him a little. Art sensed his friend was beginning to chafe from it, a bit.

"Lupin, eh? It's very nice to meet you, young Ted. I knew your mum and dad, I did. Excellent wizards, your parents," Hagrid said kindly.

Teddy's eyes were large as saucers, but he smiled at the enormous man addressing him. "M-my dad used to be a professor here a long time ago," he stuttered, repeating a tale often told to him by his grandmother.

"Aye, he was. Jus' about the best Defense Against the Dark Arts professor we ever had here at Hogwarts, and we've certainly had a lot of 'em over the years," agreed Hagrid with a smile. Then he turned away from the boys and directed all the first year students to begin boarding the boats that would carry them across the lake and into the castle.

Art gripped the edge of the boat tightly as he watched the glittering castle looming closer before them. He had dreamt of this moment for more than five years, ever since Aunt Hermione had given him the *Hogwarts: a History* book. His heart was nearly in his throat with excitement. He looked over to his twin brother and saw an expression of enrapt anticipation on his face as well. Fred smiled back at him.

Once inside, they were met by the Deputy Headmaster, Professor Flitwick, who explained the Sorting process for the Muggle-borns amongst them everyone else already knew and were impatient to get going with it already. Then he led them into the Great Hall. Once he began reading their names, Art quickly realized he and Fred would likely be the very last to be Sorted due to their surname. His mind began to wander once more, looking around him.

He'd been here before for lunch and study sessions with classmates but never at night. It was beautiful: candles floating above them, tables decorated with fancy table

service, the enchanted starry sky above. He was reminded for a moment about the one his father had made for their room at home.

"Theodore Lupin," called Flitwick, snatching Art's attention back to the stage.

Art and Fred watched as the short wizard placed the tatty-looking yet ancient and wise Sorting Hat onto Ted's head. Their friend's eyes flashed nervously through an inhuman palette of colors. It almost looked like they were swirling, the colors were changing so fast.

"Gryffindor!" shouted the hat. The Gryffindor table applauded politely. Ted looked pleased as he hopped off the stool and joined his new housemates.

Art noted that as the crowd of first years progressively began to thin around them, most of the eyes in the room were directed at him and his twin. Students at every table were looking at him, whispering amongst each other, nodding their heads toward him. A few that met his eye would smile encouragingly, wave, or mouth, *Good luck!* One bloke close by even gave him a thumbs-up sign and said, "Think Hufflepuff!"

If Art had been either a paranoid or shy person (like poor old Ted), he would've been in perfect hell. As it was, the pressure was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. He knew it was a time-honored tradition for Sorting to happen this way, but he couldn't help wishing it could be done in a slightly less public manner. A broom closet would be preferable at the moment.

"Weasley, Arthur."

Finally. It would be over in a moment, he thought, as he walked confidently up to the stool. Professor Flitwick set the Sorting Hat gently on his head.

"Hmm," sighed a quiet voice from inside the dark brim. Art knew he was the only one who could hear the hat at the moment and listened with fascinated interest as it began to do its work.

It dismissed Hufflepuff right away. "You have the ability to work hard," the hat assured him, "but are seldom put to the test. Your presence in Hufflepuff would serve to discourage your housemates rather than inspire them."

Slytherin was eliminated next. "Ah, yes.... You have ambition, but not for power.... No point corrupting your purer instincts," it explained. "Save your questing nature for the pursuit of knowledge, rather than influence."

"A nimble mind... a noble heart.... Gryffindor or Ravenclaw? Gryffindor or Ravenclaw?" it kept repeating, puzzling over the issue. "Which is dearest... heart or mind?"

Art's brain answered for him without a second's thought: *Mind*.

"Very well then, my boy..." the hat chuckled into his ear. "Ravenclaw!" the hat bellowed to the crowd.

Thunderous cheers erupted from the Ravenclaw table as Art's new housemates stood to welcome him. He received a few hesitant smiles but otherwise sportsmanlike applause and claps on the back from some disappointed Hufflepuffs as he made his way past them to his new table.

Art glanced over at the Gryffindor table to find Ted, who had a crestfallen look on his face, apparently disappointed they would not be rooming together after all. He offered his friend a sympathetic smile. Next, he glanced back up to the front of the room, beyond the stool at the staff table behind it. Professor Flitwick looked ecstatic. Professor Longbottom looked surprised but was smiling all the same. Headmistress McGonagall was smiling ruefully and clapping with the rest of the room.

"There's still one more of 'em," he heard a Slytherin girl mutter loudly to her neighbor as he sat down.

Art winked encouragement to Fred, the very last kid to be Sorted that night, as he strode up to the stage. It was a similarly lengthy examination as the room held its breath, with Art becoming more panicked with each silent, passing moment. He'd never thought about the possibility they might not be rooming together until that very moment.

"Ravenclaw!" the Sorting Hat cried out once more, then fell silent for another year.

Groans of dashed hopes came from the other three tables, but they were barely audible over the screams of exultation from Ravenclaw. Both twins were hugged and patted and hands shaken by all their new housemates until they were nearly dizzy. Art even felt his cheek kissed by some unidentified girl. It was hard not to feel elated from so much adulation.

The feeling dissipated only slightly throughout the enormous feast that suddenly appeared before them. Art and Fred spent the meal getting to know the other first year Ravenclaws, committing their names to memory by making a point of introducing them to all the older students who came by to congratulate the twins.

On the way out of the Great Hall, Art glanced over to the Gryffindor table once more and waved goodbye to Ted. He noticed with relief that Ted seemed a bit happier now; perhaps he'd made a few new friends over dinner.

"See you tomorrow," called Art to his best mate.

"At breakfast," added Fred, smiling as well.

"Sure. See you tomorrow," replied Ted with a half-smile as they followed their respective Prefects out the door.

*

"Oh, Merrie... look what came for you today," sang Annie, watching her daughter's eyes light up in delight as she waved the morning's owl post in front of her.

"My letter!" she squealed, dashing up to her and snatching it from Annie's hands.

"Why don't you read it to us?" asked George, happy for his little girl and relieved her big brothers came through on their promise. He heaped a pile of diced fruit onto his plate as she tore open the envelope.

"Okay, Daddy," she said, and began to read aloud.

September 2, 2009

Dear Mum & Dad & Merrie & Janie & Joey,

The train trip was brilliant! Merrie, you will love it lots of pretty farms with loads of cows and sheep to see. Take the east side I only saw one cemetery.

And the boat ride across the lake was excellent as well. Fred reckons he saw the squid, but I think he imagined it.

Hogwarts Castle sure looks amazing at night, all lit up from inside.

Ted Sorted into Gryffindor. He seems pretty happy about it.

And now for the news you've been waiting for. Tell Granny to get out her blue merino yarn for our jumpers this year: both of us are Ravenclaws now.

Write back soon, Merrie, and tell us all the news from home. See you at Christmas!

Love,

Art & Fred

"Wow," sighed Merrie with a dreamy smile on her face.

"Where's Art and Fred?" asked Joey for the hundredth time.

"At Hogwarts," answered Merrie and Annie in unison.

Annie walked over to stand below the girls' bedroom. "Janie! You should be dressed and down here by now!" she called up, then turned back to the breakfast table.

"George?" she asked, alarmed by the fact that he sat frozen in his seat, a strawberry speared on his fork held motionless in midair.

"Not in Gryffindor?" he mumbled quietly, a stunned, puzzled look on his face.

"No, that was Teddy who Sorted into Gryffindor. The boys are in Ravenclaw," she said, repeating the information contained in the letter. She had been educated ~~and~~ *nauseam* about the four Hogwarts houses over the past summer by the twins. "What's wrong?"

"Not in Gryffindor..." he repeated, as if the information was just beginning to sink in. "I'll be damned.... Not in Gryffindor?!"

"Do you have a reset button somewhere?" Annie teased, gently guiding his fork-wielding hand to put the strawberry in his mouth. "I thought you said it didn't matter?"

George chewed thoughtfully, then swallowed. "You're right. It doesn't really. It's just that... well, I guess I just assumed... since all the rest of us, for ages now... *Ravenclaw?* Really?"

"That's what they said," Annie replied, beginning to giggle.

"You think this is funny?" he said, smiling.

"Isn't it?" she asked.

"Being Sorted into a house isn't a joking matter," he scolded her.

"But your reaction is," she scolded back. "Aren't the Ravenclaws supposed to be the clever ones?"

"Brains aren't everything," he retorted.

"That doesn't carry much weight, coming as it does from someone with absolutely none," she teased back.

"Like you would know brains if they bit you on the...."

"Oops! Sorry, Mummy," cried Joey as the sound of cereal and milk splattering on the floor interrupted the adults.

"That's all right, Joey," laughed Annie as she dashed for a dish towel to clear up the mess. "You just saved Daddy from letting his mouth get him into trouble again!"

The Truth About Neville

Chapter 71 of 80

It's Leap Day, and Neville drops by the recording studios at WWN.

Chapter 71: The Truth About Neville

February 29, 2010

Transcript: River and Wrackspurt Episode # 453

RIVER: Welcome once again, my lovelies, to another installment of our little radio program. And an auspicious day it is, Wrackspurt.

WRACKSPURT: Indeed! Today is February 29 and all you bachelors had best keep your wits sharp about you if you wish to remain so.

RIVER: Or pack enough cash to buy your way out of the proposal, as the rule goes.

WRACKSPURT: A fine tradition, I think! Especially for all those lily-livered blokes out there who can't manage to summon up the nerve to do the asking themselves. (cough) Ron (cough). Simply sit on your hands, gents, until today rolls around every four years and bank on the lady taking the reins.

RIVER: Can't help but think that plan must backfire more often than not, Wrackspurt. In my experience, most self-respecting ladies don't appreciate being backed into such a corner and might very well dump your arse for attempting such a lame manipulation.

WRACKSPURT: An excellent observation, River. Let's put it to our listeners, shall we?

RIVER: Oh, let's! Any of you ladies out there have a story of donning the proverbial pants in your relationship and doing the asking? We'd love to hear from you, if so. Send us an owl at the usual address. We'll read our correspondence on the air next week.

WRACKSPURT: *I look forward to it with bated breath.*

RIVER: *Troll breath, more like. Well, let's on to the whole point of the program, shall we? Play us a tune, my good man.*

WRACKSPURT: *We begin today with "Extraordinary" by the lovely Liz Phair. She's a quintessential liberated American female songwriter, in my opinion.*

RIVER: *Ah, yes. Ms. Phair has quite the reputation for... let us say... refusing to mince words?*

WRACKSPURT: *(clears throat) Her albums are labeled "explicit" for a valid reason, yes. And yet, as brash and blue as they are, the lyrics are rather spot on really getting to the heart of the business of modern male-female relationships. And I find there's nothing wrong with a little well-placed profanity, is there?*

RIVER: *You'll get no argument from me on that point. Anyway, this particular song of hers is less strewn with naughty words than most, so never fear, tender listeners. But I'm curious, Wrackspurt is there any special reason for choosing this particular tune?*

WRACKSPURT *(chuckling)*: *Other than a selfless, generous impetus to impart excellent music to our listeners?*

RIVER *(chuckling)*: *That goes without saying, yes.*

WRACKSPURT: *Ah, well... this artist happens to be a favorite of the missus.*

RIVER: *Who is actually the source of the lion's portion of whatever good taste in music you pretend to have.*

WRACKSPURT: *Most likely, yes.*

RIVER: *Well, then... do enjoy, Mrs. Wrackspurt! Cheers, love!*

[song plays]

"Interesting choice," Lee mused after listening to the first few stanzas. "The premise being she is extraordinary?"

George smiled his friend's supposition had been perfectly accurate. A description of Annie as an "average everyday saint psycho super-goddess" was apt, to say the least. Still, an argument was clearly expected. The truth of the matter was that both of them were devoted family men utterly besotted with their wives. They each understood this about themselves as well as each other. And yet, masculine pride still burned brightly within, and each reckoned he owed it to his gender to present a macho face to the world.

"I'm settling for my second choice. You wouldn't let me play 'Supernova,'" he countered.

"I'd like to keep my job, thank you very much," Lee insisted. "And don't flatter yourself by imagining you are the man in question."

"I'll have you know I have frequently been compared to a volcano!" George laughed.

"Only in reference to your penchant for explosive destruction! Not your sexual prowess!" Lee said with a sneer.

"Only because Annie doesn't like to gloat," George taunted his friend.

Suddenly, Lee's focus was distracted from their banter by a familiar face waving at him through the window. "Hey, look, George! It's Neville!" he cried.

George spun around in his seat. "Hey! Longbottom!" he cried in greeting.

Both men waved their old schoolmate into the broadcast booth.

"What brings you to WWN?" George asked, shaking Neville's hand vigorously.

"Ah, I just did a guest spot with Tilden Toots," Neville explained, taking a seat on the stool Lee proffered. "He's a right old fraud, he is!"

All three men laughed.

Neville continued. "I mean, he just told some old dear she could prune a Snarling Henbit...*in bloom*... by herself. Bloody irresponsible, that is!"

"Nutter!" Lee marveled.

"How old is that codger? He's likely mazed by this point," George suggested.

"But it gets worse! Then he confused a Puffapod with a Bubotuber, for Merlin's sake!" Neville cried.

George whistled in appreciation. "Even I can tell those apart!" he declared to another round of laughter.

"You two doin' your show?" Neville asked superfluously.

"Yeah," Lee replied. "Can you stay a bit?"

"Sure!" Neville replied, pleased to be invited.

Lee held up a finger, warning him to be quiet, then pressed a button.

WRACKSPURT: *Next up is a very danceable tune, so buck up your courage and ask the person next to you to cut the rug.*

RIVER: *This music has been described as celtic punk, and I think that's remarkably accurate. There's very much a take-no-prisoners sort of feel to this band.*

WRACKSPURT: *"Between a Man and a Woman" is one of the better, more realistic love songs in existence, I think.*

RIVER: *Not your average teeny-bopper drippin-with-sap or reekin-with-angst crap, I agree. A love song for grownups.*

WRACKSPURT: *This is Flogging Molly, children. Get on your feet and show your appreciation.*

[song plays]

"Fred would have loved this band," Lee offered.

George nodded. "Might be why Annie and I listen to them so much. That, and they're friggin' brilliant."

"No argument here," Neville chimed in, tapping his foot along with the beat. "Hey, whatever happened to the Weird Sisters? I never hear them anymore."

"They broke up about three years ago now, if I'm not mistaken," Lee replied. "The official word was 'creative differences,' but I heard it was a fight over a witch who was playing a few of the band members at the same time, if you get my meaning."

George smirked skeptically, shaking his head, but Neville looked gobsmacked. "Really?" he asked eagerly.

"Rubbish," George insisted. "Have you gotten a good a look at those hairy goons? They should have called themselves the Severus Snape Experience. I personally sent them a case of the full line of Sleekeazy's along with a little note explaining their purpose and use."

"You didn't!" Lee guffawed.

"Poor blokes. They might have felt their artistic voice was misunderstood and underappreciated," Neville chuckled. "Maybe you're the reason they broke up, George."

RIVER: Continuing with the Irish theme, the lovely Dolores O'Riordan graces us with this next crackin' tune.

WRACKSPURT: The little wife introduced me to this band, and it's one of the nicer things she's done for me over the years. Oh, and by the way, for no particular reason... did you know people born on Leap Day are called "leaplings?"

RIVER (chuckling): No, I hadn't heard that before.

WRACKSPURT: It's amazing the things you can learn from the Muggle internet. Look into it, listeners! And let's take a moment to wish all the leaplings out there a very lovely birthday with many happy returns!

*RIVER: Anyway, back to the **musical** program.... I like the idea the song proposes here that one must accept one's love just as they are, warts and all.*

WRACKSPURT: Couldn't change 'em if you tried, could you? And yet, that lesson is one of the most difficult to learn. Pay attention, young ones, and hopefully save yourselves some heartache.

RIVER: This is "Stars" by The Cranberries.

[song plays]

"You are such a bloody kiss-arse!" Lee exclaimed the moment they were in the clear.

George laughed. "Whatever it takes, mate! I am not above greasin' the wheels, playin' a tune I know she loves. And it's not a bad one, either. Anyway, this one's gonna get me in good. And thank God, because the next one's gonna piss her off to high hell!"

"Then why are you playin' it?" Lee cried, throwing a wadded up piece of scrap parchment at his best friend's head. "Why do you continually hex yourself in the foot?"

George unsuccessfully ducked the missile as Neville laughed. It kept smacking itself into his head like a paper Bludger until George incinerated it, Vanishing the ashes. Then he shrugged, grinning broadly.

Lee shook his head in disgust. "Pathological! You are *pathologically* stupid. Isn't he, Neville?"

"Doesn't seem like the brightest idea I've ever heard," Neville said thoughtfully, then grinned. "But George always did have his own way of doin' things."

"I'll take that as a compliment, regardless of how you intended it," George grumbled.

RIVER: Might've known you'd find a way to stick U2 in here, Wrackspurt.

WRACKSPURT: You know me so well, River! This is one that isn't so well-known, which is a trick to find, considering how flippin' popular these blokes are.

RIVER: The next song is called "Big Girls Are Best?" Really? Big girls?

WRACKSPURT: Presumably, Mr. Rock God Bono means grown-up ladies, not particularly large ones, but take it any way you want, mate. Though I'm willing to wager any fella married with children and in possession of half a brain would apply the "sexy mama" appellation to his own lovely missus, if he knows what's best for him.

RIVER: Remember, children: we don't write 'em, we just play 'em. Send your indignation owls to U2, not us.

[song plays]

"How is this gonna piss her off?" Lee asked, curious. "She loves U2 almost as much as you do!"

"More, actually. But she's got a doxy up her arse about this particular song," George replied with a familiar mischievous grin on his face and devilish chuckle. "The 'big girl' thing drives her up the bloomin' wall, it does. Actually, I half-wish I was home to see the look on her face when she hears it," he added wistfully.

Neville wore a furrowed brow. "Hang on... you know it'll piss her off and likely make your life more difficult, yet you do it anyway? Why?" he asked, sounding genuinely baffled.

"I told you he's an idiot," Lee retorted.

George shrugged and a flicker of thoughtfulness crossed his face. "It's more fun that way. It's sort of our thing, I reckon."

"You insult and annoy each other? And this turns you on?" Neville cried, laughing.

"Well, now you just make us sound like deviants," George muttered, smirking.

"How's business at the Cauldron?" Lee asked.

"Boomin'," Neville replied. "To look at it, you'd never really realize how the place is an absolute money spinner!"

"I'm glad Hannah knew better than to change it much," George added.

"Well, when a thing works for as many centuries as that old hovel has, it doesn't take a genius to leave well enough alone," Neville responded.

"Glad she updated the menu to reflect more modern tastes, though," Lee commented. "Pea soup is fine and all, but did it always have to ferment for nine days before old Tom would serve it? *Blech!*"

"The dragon-fired pizza is a nice touch!" George exclaimed with praise. "I like how crispy the crust gets."

RIVER: Ah, this is an interesting choice. And an oldie, too.

WRACKSPURT: It is rather old, true. But the Cure were cutting edge in their day. For those of you with Muggle or Muggle-born friends or acquaintances, ask them about Goth subculture sometime. This band will get mentioned, I guarantee you.

RIVER: Funny lookin' blokes, though.

WRACKSPURT: Uh, yeah. The lead singer looks like he got ahold of his sister's makeup.

RIVER: Or passed out drunk whilst surrounded by mates who enjoyed a good prank. (Cough) Ron. (Cough)

WRACKSPURT (laughing): This is "Close to Me" by the Cure.

[song plays]

"Poor Ron," Neville joined them in their laughter. "How long did he have to wear that horrid blue eyeshadow and sparkly pink lipstick?"

"Wasn't it at least a week?" Lee howled, dabbing his eyes.

"A couple of days, at most," George corrected him. "And if Hermione hadn't thrown that epic wobbly at Mum, it would've lasted a month, I reckon."

"I heard Harry still posts that snap all around the Auror Department every year on Ron's birthday," Neville wheezed.

"It's not Harry that posts it, mate," Lee informed Neville, gazing accusatorially at George. Then he rolled his eyes. "This band is so friggir**queer!**" he cried.

"You don't have to be gay to have good taste in music, but it helps," George countered.

Lee cocked his head, surprised at the unexpected edge in George's tone.

Strangely, Neville didn't seem to find it unusual, either. "Speakin' of... Hannah and I went to Padma Patil's and Rose Zeller's commitment ceremony November last."

"They finally made it official?" George asked, sounding keen. "Well done, them!"

Lee attempted to shake off his consternation at his best friend's instant (and seemingly genuine) acceptance of such an *unusual* lifestyle. "How was it?" he asked with morbid curiosity.

"Oh, brilliant!" Neville declared. "Hannah knew Rose pretty well from school, of course."

Lee started to snicker and glanced at George, anticipating a good shredding. But the dark warning on George's face stunned him, and the laugh died ignominiously in his throat.

How is he not taking this and running with it? Lee marveled. *What the hell has come over George? Could there possibly be a topic so taboo even he would shy away from razzing someone about it?* He tried thinking back to other instances when the subject of poufs had come up *Surely it hadn't been Fred cracking all the jokes?*

Neville continued with his description of the ceremony, adding, "And it was nice to see Parvati again.... Been ages since we'd spoken."

"H-how is Parvati?" Lee asked, flustered and trying to get his bearings.

"Pretty well, I think," Neville replied. "I heard her parents are having a tough time with Padma's decision to come out. Didn't see them at the wedding... which is a real shame. You couldn't ask for a nicer couple than Padma and Rose, really."

"That is a shame," George agreed, lacing his fingers behind his head and leaning back in his chair, utterly composed yet bafflingly concerned for the women in question. "Love is love, mate. What does it matter who makes you happy?"

Lee struggled to keep his jaw from dropping. He gave George a strange, confused look anyway *Since when did George friggin' Weasley become so progressive and tolerant!?! He's a gay-rights activist all the sudden?*

Then George turned to him with a look that said, *Got a problem with it?*

"The wedding was good fun, even so," Neville pressed on, apparently oblivious to the stare-down. "The food was bloody amazing, of course. And then Padma and Rose rode in to the reception on an elephant! My Alice made a pest of herself, I'm afraid, begging for a turn to ride."

RIVER: *Lovely. Simply lovely, this next tune. Excellent choice, mate.*

WRACKSPURT: *See, you have better taste in music than you think, River. And I must admit: this song really speaks to me. It brings back to mind a very angst-ridden, heart-achy, miserable time of my adolescence at school, but in a pleasant, nostalgically poetic way.*

RIVER: *What, precisely, is Foo, may I ask?*

WRACKSPURT (snorts): *Well, it's very obviously something sinister that begs to be rebelled against. Duh. These are the heroic Foo Fighters with "Summer's End."*

[song plays]

"How do you do it, man? Spend your life in that bloody prison?" George chuckled, shaking his head as memories of his time spent homesick and lovesick at Hogwarts bubbled up to the conscious surface as this particular song played.

Neville chuckled in response. "It's not so much of a prison when you're faculty, mate."

"That's a good point!" Lee commented lamely, still recovering his footing from the previous conversation.

"Still, it's so bloody... wretched!" George protested. "The Highlands weather, the drafty old castle... not to mention the hundreds of brats and punks who live to make your life difficult!" he said, laughing.

Neville laughed with him. "Well, it doesn't help that there's a Wheezes branch in Hogsmeade now, that's for sure. And no fair using Peeves for free advertising, you bastard! Bloody hell, George! Have some pity on us, will you? Raise your prices on Dungbombs, at the very least."

"Never," he said with a grin. "And what Peeves does out of the kindness of his own heart...."

"Please!" Lee interrupted. "Peeves? Kindness? *Heart!?*"

"At least the Weasley twins I have to deal with are a damn sight more civilized than their predecessors. Must be the Muggle blood!" Neville teased.

"Absolutely the mother's influence! No question!" Lee agreed.

"Can't argue there," George concurred. "You know, Bill's oldest daughter will be starting year after next."

"Oh, Merlin!" Neville groaned, wincing. "Thanks for the heads up, George. I'll warn Poppy Pomfrey to stock up on love potion antidotes now."

RIVER: Now this is an interesting selection, mate. There are some very curious turns of phrase in this tune. And some speculate they're not just accidental Muggle fumbblings.

WRACKSPURT: We're all familiar with the accusations that American wizarding society is far less hidden than the international secrecy laws demand. That the Yanks live far more openly within Muggle society and are, to varying degrees, accepted by their non-magical neighbors. And conspiracy theorists grab at any little mention of magic in today's popular music as proof positive. I'm just not convinced.

RIVER: So the line, "I clear my mind and I turned around," is not a reference to Apparating?

*WRACKSPURT: I doubt it. The song also mentions "magic worlds" and "a shaman's dream" as well, and I, for one, am confident that the songwriter is merely attempting to evoke a symbolic notion of the metaphysical aspects of love. The word "magic" is bandied about ubiquitously in Muggle marketing, music, cinema, and more on an international level. The notion of the supernatural permeates **human** culture, not just wizarding enclaves.*

RIVER: But what if the reason for that is because some of us haven't been as careful as we should? Reckless wizards caught with their wands out, so to speak?

WRACKSPURT: I lean more toward the theory that magic as a concept is a psychological archetype. Human beings are programmed to search for patterns in the world around us, and when we imagine we see one we can't rationally explain, we chalk it up to a supernatural force.

RIVER: But Muggle shrinks argue that this is a false reasoning. And you and I and everyone listening knows that's bollocks. Magic does exist.

WRACKSPURT: Mate, it's just a nice love song.

RIVER: Make up your own minds, listeners. Here is "Nobody Knows" from Live.

[song plays]

"Lighten up a bit, Lee," George scolded his friend. "Not every song lyric is fraught with hidden, insidious meaning. Sometime's a fella's just trying to get with a girl."

Lee smirked and flashed a rude finger gesture in George's direction, unamused.

George ignored him and continued. "It's only coincidence and a universal human habit to search for patterns where sometimes none exist that makes a song speak to one particular situation. To me, this one describes bang-on how I felt about Annie during the war when we had to hide ourselves. Doesn't mean the bloke who wrote it ever had a damn clue about me or her or magic or You-Know-Who. Nor does it mean the same thing to anyone else in this room or the world at large."

"Whatever," Lee grumbled, begrudgingly conceding the truth of George's statement. It still boggled his mind to think of his schoolmate, who had never been serious about anything but pranks and Quidditch, actually risking his *life* for the sake of romance at the age of eighteen. Then again, there was something different about his and Annie's relationship no one would argue that point.

Neville nodded thoughtfully as well.

"Back to the subject of excellent weddings," George said in a suddenly lighthearted voice, clearly looking to change the subject. "Luna's turned out to be a riot of fun, as expected, was it not?"

"That girl is somethin'!" Lee agreed, chuckling. "I heard she originally wanted to have it in the Forbidden Forest with the wedding party mounted on thestrals, but McGonagall put her foot down, claiming the centaurs would riot."

"I thought her wedding was very nice," Neville said sincerely.

Lee snickered. "I've never seen so many mad hexes scattered about as there were at her place. And has anyone actually ever seen one of these bloody nargles she's always on about?"

"Just because nobody's seen one doesn't mean they don't exist," Neville countered valiantly. "You know, people used to think the same thing about Lethifolds."

Lee smiled and cocked his head to the side, intrigued. "You know, Neville... I wasn't alone in thinking you'd be the bloke that ended up with Luna. The two of you seemed like such a good match."

Neville shrugged, looking away from Lee's gaze, shifting uncomfortably on the stool.

"Just ignore him, Neville," George suggested, kicking Lee under the table. "He has no sense of proper social boundaries. Fred and I likely fried his brain with all those experimental potions we made him sample."

"No, it's all right, George." Neville hesitated for a few more moments, gathering his thoughts. "Luna.... She's *acracking* girl, but... maybe our timing was off?" he replied as if he was thinking aloud.

"How so?" Lee pressed. He grunted slightly as George's foot connected a second time with his shin.

"I think it all boiled down to our being in different places in our lives. When we were together, she told me she wasn't ready for a long-term commitment, wasn't even sure she wanted kids," Neville answered. "And I was ready for both."

Lee and George glanced at each other, both surprised things had gotten so far between Neville and Luna before they'd split. It was as if they'd expected some off-the-wall, bizarre reason for the break-up, like perhaps nargles had been responsible.

"And now I've got Hannah," Neville said with a soft smile. "Well, she's made me one bloody lucky bloke, and I know it!"

"I never knew her that well in school, to be honest," Lee said.

"You know that her mother was killed by the Death Eaters in ninety-seven, right?" Neville asked.

Both men in his audience nodded solemnly.

"Well, she left then and didn't come back to school. But even so, she did what she could to help out the cause. She'd sneak supplies to Ernie and me that year Snape was

Headmaster whenever she got the chance and sent us some very useful information once. And don't forget she showed up to fight in the final battle," Neville said.

"I remember," Lee replied.

"She might not look it, but Hannah's one tough biscuit. After what I saw that day... I wouldn't want that birch wand pointing at me in anger!" Neville chuckled, smiling slightly with the memory.

"For a while, we were just old war veterans who got together for a pint and a bit of commiseration every so often. Then, after... after Luna and I split... she was always there for me. Thank Merlin it didn't take me too long to recognize we could make each other happy."

"Well done you, mate," George offered, chucking him on the shoulder.

WRACKSPURT: Now here is definitely one of the greatest bands of all time, children.

RIVER: An ambitious claim, but a fair one. Difficult to argue against, to be sure. It's challenging to name many other equals. Consider their longevity....

WRACKSPURT: Relevance....

RIVER: Uncompromising character....

WRACKSPURT: Intelligence of lyrics....

RIVER: Musical originality....

WRACKSPURT: We sound like smitten fangirls, River!

RIVER (laughing): Right you are, Wrackspurt! They haven't written a lot of love songs, but this one ranks pretty highly in my less-than-humble opinion.

WRACKSPURT: I'll second that. Here's "Be Mine" from some of my personal heroes, REM.

[song plays]

"What's with all the sappy love songs today?" Neville asked teasingly. "Certainly not your usual fare."

"Glad to know you're a fan of the show!" George cried. He tossed him a Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes t-shirt from a large carton in the corner. "Consider it a reward for a frequent listener."

"It's Annie's birthday today," Lee explained. "George hijacked the playlist to play her favorites and kiss her arse."

"Really? Oh, excellent! Give Annie my best, will you?" Neville gushed, pulling on his new t-shirt over his long-sleeved oxford.

"Done," George replied with a single nod. "And you've got an anniversary coming up, yes?"

"It'll be our eighth on the twenty-first of March," Neville answered, sounding slightly surprised by the fact.

"Got any big plans?" Lee asked politely.

"Nah," Neville replied ruefully. "We can't really do much of anything during the school year, and she's usually busy at weekends with the Cauldron now."

"Send Alice over to our place and take Hannah out for a nice dinner, at least," George suggested. "She and Janie can have a sleepover, if you like." Neville's daughter and his were the same age and knew each other from Annie's school.

Neville brightened up immediately. "Ah, thanks, mate! That's a great idea! I'll owl you a bit closer to the date, yeah?"

"Sure, sure," George agreed.

"Look, it's been great, guys, but... I'd better run," Neville said as he rose to his feet.

"Good to see you, Neville. Give our love to Hannah and Alice!" Lee said with a wave.

"Take care, Longbottom," George added as the door closed.

Neville waved at them through the window, then walked down the hall. Three seconds later, he walked past the window again, going the opposite and correct way toward the building's exit this time.

RIVER: And now, for the finale of the program, we turn to Southern California. I think we've demonstrated we are huge fans of the 'surf' sound here at the program.

WRACKSPURT: This song in particular is a favorite of ours, isn't it, River?

RIVER: I certainly can sympathize with the idea of running away to a sunny island with one's significant other.

WRACKSPURT: Can't recommend it highly enough, myself.

RIVER: The sentiment, the band, or the song?

WRACKSPURT: Yes to all. For those of you either not quick enough to dodge a proposal today or who simply find yourselves pleased to accept, might I suggest a tropical island honeymoon? Start off your lives together on the right foot by digging your toes in warm, wet sand.

RIVER: Hear, hear! Lounging about in the sun sounds especially nice at the moment now that England is at its absolute dreariest. Do have a wonderful week to come, dear listeners. And just a reminder, April first is only one short month away, and everyone ought to do their part to spread levity and embarrassment on the day! Make your plans now to stop by the premises of our generous sponsor, Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, and stock up on all your pranking necessities. We leave you today with "Island in the Sun" by Weezer.

[song plays]

George donned his jacket, then draped his traveling cloak over his arm. "That was brilliant chatting with Neville again. I hardly ever see him."

"Why not? He's practically your neighbor in Devon, not to mention you spend all your time in Hogsmeade now," Lee asked.

George frowned thoughtfully. "You're right. There's no excuse. I should make more of an effort." He was quiet for several more moments as the two of them strolled

leisurely down the hallway toward the WWN Floos.

"You know, Neville certainly came into his own during the war," George finally mused aloud. "Meeting him now, you'd never really recognize the complete tosspot he was in school."

Lee snorted in agreement. "And don't forget, he's dated some of the more amazing women we know: Ginny, Luna, Hannah. A professional Quidditch player, a world-renowned magical zoologist, and one of the most successful business women in Britain every one of them decorated war veterans. And those are just the ones we know about."

Lee suddenly halted in the hallway, standing stock still, nearly clotheslining his best friend and looking at George with amused amazement. "I've only just realized it *Neville Longbottom* has way more experience with women than the two of us combined!"

George chuckled. "Who could've imagined it? Neville Longbottom: Legendary Gryffindor Stud!"

Author's Note: This is the last of the "song" chapters, I promise! As per usual, here are the links for the music. Enjoy....

[Extraordinary](#) by Liz Phair. And here's the other Liz Phair song George referenced: [Supernova](#). It's the censored version, much to George's disappointment, but one naughty word does creep in.

[Between a Man and a Woman](#) by Flogging Molly.

[Stars](#) by The Cranberries.

[Big Girls Are Best](#) by U2. The video doesn't appear to match the song, but the sound quality is reasonably good.

[Close to Me](#) by The Cure.

[Summer's End](#) by The Foo Fighters. Really wish I could make a music video for this song starring a teenage George and Annie. Sigh.

[Nobody Knows](#) by Live.

[Be Mine](#) by REM. This is not *exactly* the version I was looking for, but it'll do.

[Island in the Sun](#) by Weezer.

Tantrum

Chapter 72 of 80

"I wish you could do magic!" Janie screams in a fit of anger. What's a Muggle mother to do, especially when she wishes the same thing?

Chapter 72: Tantrum

2011

Age 33

George arrived home from work that evening to a silent house. He stepped out of the fireplace to find Merrie and Joey sitting at the dining table, quietly doing their homework rather than running up to him for hugs. They looked up briefly and said, "Hello, Daddy," in solemn unison not their usual effusive greeting. Winky and Doozy were uncharacteristically working alone in the kitchen, presumably preparing dinner.

All of which told him something was very wrong.

"Where's Janie?" he asked, although he was pretty sure he knew the answer already.

"Upstairs in our room," Merrie answered as predicted, keeping her eyes on the table in front of her. Her lips pursed, as if she was angry with her sister.

Perhaps they had a fight, thought George. That in itself would not be out of the ordinary, considering Janie's penchant for pissing people off with her sarcastic comments or pathological streak of uncooperativeness. The fact that either girl would still be pouting about it was unusual, though.

"Where's your mother?" he asked.

Merrie bit her lip and would not answer. Instead, she stared at the page in front of her, twirling her pencil nervously.

"Upstairs in your room," said Joey softly, anxious and upset.

George climbed the stairs and stepped inside his bedroom to find Annie sitting on the edge of the bed, staring out the window. "What happened?" he asked from the doorway.

Annie shook her head without looking at him. "Nothing, really. I know it's just her temper. God knows I can empathize with her about that. Just give me another minute, and I'll be down to help with dinner."

George was unsatisfied with her evasive answer. Something had happened to send his household into turmoil, and no one would look him in the eye. He had been made to understand from Bill and Lee that a house full of females could be like this, but he had never experienced it himself before today.

"Please tell me what happened," he repeated, sitting next to her on the bed.

Annie spoke in a soft, carefully controlled voice. "She didn't mean it to be as hurtful as it was, I know that. I really do. I'm the one that's being oversensitive. But the part that kills me, George... is that she *did* mean what she said. She does wish it. They all do at one time or another. Janie's just the only one who's ever said it out loud to my face."

George was alarmed to see tears beginning to well up in his wife's eyes. Aside from tears of joy at the births of their children, he had not seen her so emotional since.... "What did she say?" he asked, as patiently as he could.

"Isn't it obvious? Our daughter wishes I was a witch."

A few minutes later, he stood in the doorway of the girls' room. "Janie, come with me," said George.

His daughter rose from her bed, head hanging. George could see by the set of her jaw that she was not the slightest bit remorseful, though, but rather smoldering at the perceived injustice of her life.

He tossed her a jumper. "Put this on. We're going for a walk."

Janie looked up at him then in surprise. She had apparently been expecting some other form punishment.

George led the way. As they passed by his room, he paused to speak to Annie. "Don't wait for us for dinner. We might be gone awhile," he explained. Then he turned back to Janie and held out his hand.

His daughter was utterly perplexed, but she trustingly placed her little hand in his and followed him down the stairs and out the back door. They strolled through the garden, toward the woods to the east. After several minutes of silence, George began to speak.

"You know, you really hurt her feelings."

"I said I was sorry," Janie snapped defensively.

"Did you mean it?" he asked calmly, refusing to rise to her disrespectful tone.

Janie looked at him in confusion.

"Did you mean you were sorry she was angry with you, or sorry that you hurt her? Or were you sorry you lost control of your temper? Or did you just say it because that's what you're supposed to say when you're in trouble, regardless of what you really feel?"

"I... I...." Janie was at a loss, unsure of what to say.

"I know you're young, Janie.... Maybe too young to understand what I'm trying to talk to you about. But you're also a very clever girl, so I'm willing to bet you do. Tell me why are you sorry? You can be honest I promise I won't get angry."

"I guess... mostly sorry she got angry. And I didn't mean to hurt her feelings, either."

George nodded. "Thank you for being truthful. And I believe you that you didn't mean to hurt your mum. But the fact is you did. Do you know why?"

"Because I wouldn't clean the loo when it was my turn?" she replied, sounding resentful.

George looked his daughter in the eye and shook his head slowly. "That's why she was angry, not why she was hurt."

"But it's not fair!" she cried. "Louis says his mum never makes them clean up after themselves. Aunt Fleur just waves her wand and everything's spic and span. Roxy says the same thing! Why do we have to do all the work ourselves? We're the only ones!" she ranted, yelling and stomping her feet and thrashing her arms in an attempt to physically diffuse her anger.

George sighed deeply and waited patiently for the tantrum to pass. He had seen them before and was usually amused by the fact that two little girls, separated by twenty-four years, could throw exactly the same fit. He wondered absentmindedly how many fellow Hogwarts students would be pummeled for their sins by his daughter in the future. After all, Annie had certainly flattened a wide swath of Ottery children in her day.

"Are you finished?" he asked her.

Janie took a deep breath, then nodded.

"First of all, you are not the only ones," George countered. "I happen to know for a fact that Roxy has chores to do at her house. Second, what works in other people's houses doesn't work in ours. We have our own rules, and you are expected to follow them regardless of whether you agree with them or not. One of those rules is that everyone helps out with chores. And third, just because you *can* do something by magic doesn't mean that's the way it *should* be done."

"Okay," muttered Janie, sounding unconvinced. Or unimpressed. After all, she'd heard that last bit a million times before, likely.

"Do you really mean that? Or is it what you think I want to hear?"

"A little of both," she confessed.

George chuckled. "All right. I'll accept that," he replied.

They walked a little further through the woods, holding hands once more, as the sun was slowly setting. The trees were brightly lit with the reddish light. A few leaves were just starting to turn autumn colors.

"Do you know why I call you 'Annie II?'" he asked her.

"Because of my temper," she said, smirking ruefully.

George laughed. "That's part of it, true. Your mother has a ferocious temper as well. And the same struggle to control it. But you also have the same sense of humor. The same gift with sarcasm. The same sense of righteous indignation when you see something that's wrong with the world."

"What's 'righteous indignation?'" she asked, carefully pronouncing the words.

"That's when you get angry for a good reason and want to use your anger to help make something right."

Janie nodded, thoughtfully pondering the idea that anger could serve a positive purpose, not just a destructive one. "Like when you and the rest of the Order of the Phoenix fought against Voldemort?"

George slightly winced to hear his daughter utter the name, even after all these years. *Old habits*, he figured. "I suppose so," he replied. "Many people, not just the Order, realized it was silly to think that there was anything wrong with having a non-magical parent or grandparent. That it was wrong to make anyone live in fear because of it. It

wasn't fair, and they got angry about it. What kind of person you are depends on the choices *you* make, nothing else."

Janie nodded such was a popular refrain amongst the extended Weasley family. "And because of you, half-blood people like me are safe. Mum says you and all my uncles and aunts and even Granny and Grandpa were very brave fighters and heroes for standing up to fight against Voldemort."

George gave his daughter a half-smile. Of course Annie would have indoctrinated their children with that side of the story, the one that revolved around and glorified him and his family. "Has your mother ever told you about when she was little?"

After thinking for a moment, Janie shook her head.

They had reached the edge of the forest on Weasley land, just where it ran up to the field surrounding the first little house of the village of Ottery St. Catchpole. A rosebush had grown to nearly engulf the side of the fence facing them. The once white house had been painted slate blue with black trim at some point in the last decade.

"Do you see that house there, across the field?" he asked.

Janie nodded.

"That was where your mother grew up," he said, smiling as Janie's eyes grew wide with surprise. "She lived there with her grandmother, who loved her very much. You see, your mum's mum made some bad choices about her life. She made herself sick, in a way sick in her mind, and her heart, and her soul."

"You mean crazy?" asked his daughter, struggling to understand.

"Not exactly, but sort of. She was too sick to feel love anymore. She ran away from her family. And when your mum was born, her mother ran away from her as well. That's why your mum lived with her Gran your great-grandmother, Meredith."

"That's really sad, Daddy," his daughter said, her brow furrowed with empathy.

George nodded, pleased his daughter was properly moved by the tale, as was his intent. "When she was growing up, your mum felt different from the other children in the village, who all lived with their parents. They would tease her about it, and it hurt her feelings. It made her angry as well."

Janie nodded, a furious look beginning to darken her face. "That's mean," she muttered. "Not fair."

"You're feeling righteous indignation right now, Janie," he explained. "And you're right. It's mean to tease someone about something they have no control over."

"Oh," she said, beginning to see the direction the lesson was going.

"You know, it's very hard on your mum to live in our world. She feels like everyone else is better than she is because they can do magic, and she can't."

"But that's not true!" exclaimed Janie. "Magic doesn't make you better," she added, repeating the mantra of their household.

"You're right, it's not true. But imagine how you would feel if everyone around you, even your own little babies, could do something special that you couldn't."

Janie grimaced with the unfairness of it, recognizing now exactly how she had hurt her mother's feelings.

But George pressed the point in order to drive the lesson home. "And imagine how it would feel if someone you loved very much told you that you weren't good enough for them because of it; that they wished you could do magic when that's the one thing in the world you never could do?" he added, gently.

"Daddy, I didn't mean it!" she cried, throwing herself at him, clinging to his leg.

"I want you to remember this the next time you wish for magic to get you out of doing something you know you should."

"I promise!" she wailed through her sobs.

"All right, calm down now," he said, bending down on his knee to hug and comfort his distraught daughter. "I know you didn't mean it, and your mother knows it, too. Just try to be a bit more careful of other people's feelings the next time you throw a tantrum," he said.

"It's just too hard to think about anything else when I'm mad like that," she blubbered, wiping her eyes and nose onto her sleeve.

"You're right again. See, I told you how clever you were. Maybe that's a good reason for working a bit harder to control that temper, hmm?"

Janie nodded, sniffing. "I'll try."

They turned together and walked back into the woods. George found himself following his daughter's lead, and after a few minutes, they drew near to the old tree fort. He'd known his children had discovered the fort for themselves years ago, refurbished it even, and played here frequently, ignorant of its provenance. The early autumn sky was aglow with a glorious sunset, lighting up the ancient, majestic willow that had been his childhood haunt. Thousands of memories now floated to the surface of his consciousness, ready to be accessed in an instant. He and Fred precious and eternally youthful Fred, too glorious and magnificent for this world and Annie.

Janie clambered up the tree into the fort exactly like her mother had done countless times over the years. George felt warring feelings within him as he watched her play. In one sense it was perfectly right, almost like destiny fulfilled, that his and Annie's daughter would play here just as they had. In another sense, it was almost unbearably painful; how had they come so far from that point themselves? Had it really been so long ago that they were children together, innocent and carefree? Had they ever really been innocent and carefree, or was that just a trick of memory?

He ran his fingers over *"Cannons Rule"* carved about halfway up the tree's trunk. He could clearly remember gouging it into the bark to distract himself from the murderous rage he had felt that day while Fred had been explaining to Annie the horror that had happened to Ginny in the Chamber of Secrets. He had said the words of the Unforgivable Curse over and over in his head while he'd worked, picturing Lucius Malfoy crumpling and falling before him. *Avada Kedavra... Avada Kedavra*. He shuddered to think how impulsive, how ready he had been to commit murder at age fourteen.

His eyes were drawn then to a happier memory the blast mark his wand had made near the base of the trunk. He kicked it lightly with the toe of his shoe, smiling as he recalled the look on Annie's face when his brand new wand had shot off in her hands. He thought again with mild amusement how that was the first night they'd ever spent together at age eleven.

His eyes roved around the canopy, reckoning the three of them had spent upwards of fifty nights sleeping on the ground under this lovely, protective shelter. Every one of those nights he'd lain innocently dreaming next to the girl who would become his wife, bear his children. The love of his life had been within arm's reach the whole time....

He traced the outline of the heart he had carved with their initials as Annie had waded in the neighboring stream the summer they were eighteen. They had both just confessed they were in love, using the actual words for the first time.

"I love you."

Those words echoed across all the intervening years like they were nothing but a short hallway. How many millions of times had they said it since?

"Who are they, Daddy?"

"Hmm?" He hadn't caught what his daughter had said being off somewhere else entirely.

"Who are G.W. and A.J.?" Her legs were dangling from the trap door entrance, and she was leaning forward a bit in order to see him.

"Who do you think they are?" he asked, curious.

"Merrie says they were a Muggle prince and princess, but there's no castle anywhere around here, so I don't think that's right. I think it's you and Mum. G.W. is for George Weasley, and A.J. is mum's name."

"Angharad Jones. You *are* a clever girl, Janie," he praised her, thinking to himself that Merrie was partly right as well. For all their struggles and hardships, for all the pain and sadness they had endured, Meredith's prediction of a happily ever after had come true. He and Annie's life together *had* been a sort of fairy tale. He chuckled to himself then, thinking of how the habitual Muggle misuse of words had rubbed off on him. *Fairies can't tell tales...*

"Was this place here when you were a boy, Daddy?"

"Not until your mum and I built it with your Uncle Fred. We were younger than you are now when we did it."

"So this is your tree house?" she said, her voice full of wonder.

George nodded. "I met your mum right here in these woods when we were seven. We were best friends, the three of us, like Merrie and Roxy and Domi. We used to play together almost every day. When my brother and I left to go to Hogwarts, we were all of us a little sad. We missed each other. We wrote letters to each other, you know, and would see each other in the summers, but it was still very hard to be apart."

"But she's a Muggle, Daddy! Didn't you get in trouble?" she asked, incredulous, as she climbed back down out of the fort to stand on a lower branch.

He smiled. "We kept it a secret. Nobody ever found out until we told them a long time later."

Janie nodded, eyes wide, enthralled by the story she had never heard before.

"Then when we were older, your mum and I realized we loved each other even more than friends, but also still as friends. And I began to understand that there is nothing in the world more important than love that it's worth any risk, any sacrifice," he explained.

"And that's when you joined the Order of the Phoenix and fought against the Death Eaters and beat them at the Battle of Hogwarts *And* you rescued Uncle Harry from the house he grew up in, and that's how you lost your ear. And Mum says how you are her hero and her knight in shining armor and you rescued her loads of times. And I think you are absolutely the bravest man ever," she exclaimed, nearly breathless.

George smirked at his daughter's recitation of the exaggerated, overblown list of his accomplishments. He could hear Annie in every word Janie said. He held out his arms, silently offering to catch her if she jumped to him. His daughter sat herself down on the branch she'd been standing on, then bounced off into his arms. He set her on the ground, then knelt before her so he would be at her eye level for what he wanted to say next.

"You probably don't know this part of the story, but your mum was every bit as brave as I ever was. She knew it would put her in danger as much if not more than any of us but she chose to love me anyway. She would have been killed if they'd ever found out about her and me, and she knew it, but she chose to be a part of our family just the same. And then somebody did find out. Did you know that one night, your mum was attacked by a Death Eater?"

"Did you save her?" Janie asked, eager for a new tale of derring-do starring her heroic father.

George shook his head. "I didn't. I tried to, but I didn't get there in time. Your mum saved herself. She took on a bad wizard and won. Like I said, she's a very brave person."

"All by herself?" Janie gasped, astonished at this revelation. "Without magic?"

George nodded. The memory of that night brought back a slightly queasy feeling.

"I've never heard this story before!" she cried.

"Your mum doesn't like to remember it. It was very scary for her, and she was sad about killing someone. It's a difficult thing to live with, no matter how necessary it was at the time," he explained solemnly. That was yet another internal struggle he shared with his wife. Only, for some stupid reason, the deaths on his hands had resulted in medals of honor from the Ministry.

"And after my brother, your Uncle Fred, died, we were all very sad. Sometimes I forget how *sad* she was about it... how he was her very good friend, and she missed him terribly. Back then, I thought I would be sad forever. But she was strong for me. She helped me remember how to be happy again. She rescued me."

"Why didn't she ever tell me?" she asked with childlike innocence.

"Talking about yourself is just not something most grownups do. But it's important for you to know how amazing your mum is, regardless of whether she can do magic or not. Will you promise me to remember that the next time you get mad at her or wish she was something she isn't? Will you remember that she's a hero, too?"

George and Annie's daughter nodded. "I promise, Daddy," she said.

*

Annie looked up to see George in the doorway. His dark silhouette swam a bit before her damned teary eyes.

"Don't wait for us for dinner. We might be gone awhile," he said softly, then turned to go down the stairs, pulling a confused Janie along behind him.

Annie continued to sit on the edge of her bed, staring out the window at the forest beyond, furious with herself for still being so upset. It was beyond ridiculous that Janie's comment had affected her so deeply. It was inexcusably immature for her to sit up here in her bedroom, pouting about it.

And yet... she could not deny it had cut her to the quick to hear her own daughter utter the words to her face. The careless remark had taken her breath away, leaving her speechless.

The whole thing had started as a typical argument between them, the two hotheads of the house. As usual, Janie resisted doing her chores without the aid of magic. It never mattered to her the rule against underage magic was a Ministry one, not merely a household one. She didn't even have her own wand yet, for crying out loud. But she was always one for pushing boundaries, testing her limits. And as usual, Annie had refused to budge an inch.

"I wish *you* could do magic!" Janie had shouted in her fit of temper. "Then you'd understand how stupid it is for us to have to do any of this without it!"

Joey had poked her head out of the girls' room she'd been straightening. Merrie had gasped from her spot at the table where she'd been folding a load of laundry. "Janie! Shut up!" she'd cried a moment later.

Janie had stunned herself as well. She'd stood there, wide-eyed and slack-jawed, as if she couldn't believe she had said it out loud, either.

"The rules apply to everyone, Janie," Annie had mumbled, still reeling from the blow. "Go to your room, and we will discuss this later when we both are calmer."

Annie had then taken her own advice. Moments after her daughter had stomped up the stairs and marched into her room, evicting Joey and slamming the door behind her, Annie had taken refuge in her own room, unwilling to demonstrably illustrate for her other daughters how hurt she had been by the comment.

And here I sit, making it worse for them by hiding out up here she chided herself. Why had she let Janie's comment get under her skin so? If only she could stop the angry tears from rolling down....

She shook her head vigorously and stood up. *Enough!* she cried silently. *No more self-pity. Time for you to act like the adult you presumably are, Annie*

She went to the doorway and peeked downstairs. Winky and Doozy were in the kitchen, busy making supper. Merrie and Joey were still sitting at the table, whispering to each other, anxious looks on their faces.

"D'you think Mum's okay? Should we go up there and see?" Joey asked.

Merrie shook her head sadly. "We'd better leave her alone. Janie really hurt her feelings. She'll come out when she's ready."

Annie nearly choked to hear them talk about her so. She hadn't fooled them for an instant. And just as she'd predicted, she'd made things worse by hiding here in her room like a child. She had to prove to the girls that she was fine before this whole stupid thing got blown even further out of proportion.

So why was she crying again?

Damn it! she screamed in her head, angrily pressing her fists against her eyeballs *Fake it if you have to! Show them it doesn't matter! Show them some shred of self-respect! Keep it together until... until....* An idea suddenly lit into her head. *Until you can go for a run.*

Annie splashed cold water on her face. She quickly changed into her running clothes and trainers, in order to be ready to dash out the door the moment an opportunity presented itself. Now that she had an outlet to look forward to, it was easier to fake a veneer of composure. She took a deep breath, then stepped out from the shadows of her bedroom.

"Can I do anything to help, Winky?" she asked as she trotted down the stairs.

Four pairs of concerned eyes immediately locked themselves on her.

"Oh, no, Miss. Winky is got this in hand, Miss. Be ready in just a few moments, it will."

Annie bit her tongue to distract herself from the irritatingly pitying tone of the elf's voice. "All right, then. Girls, let's set the table for dinner, shall we? It'll just be us tonight, I expect."

Annie's eldest and youngest daughters cleared away their school things and carried them up to their room. By the time they'd returned, Annie had distributed the place settings and Winky had brought the food to the table. As the five of them took their seats, Annie was determined to make light conversation.

"This is delicious, Winky. Isn't it, girls?"

Annie's daughters nodded and murmured their appreciation for the meal. Winky's smile looked a bit forced as she accepted their compliments. Doozy stared silently at her with his enormous eyes.

"I apologize for not helping you with dinner this evening, Winky," Annie said. "I don't know what came over me this afternoon. I suppose I was more tired than I realized. I haven't napped like that in ages," she lied.

Three dubious pairs of eyes looked at her. Annie yawned noisily in an attempt to sell it.

It was no great surprise that the rest of the meal passed quickly and in silence. Annie, the elves, and the girls had spent all day together at the school there was no news to share between them. Dinner conversation usually revolved around George anyway, as the girls would report to him each night what they had learned, or he would share some funny story with them from work.

Plates were emptied in record time. The girls did the dishes without being asked. Meanwhile, Annie set the rest of the food in the oven to keep warm, waiting for George and Janie to return. Winky bid them goodnight and headed to her room with Doozy in tow.

"Are you going for a run tonight, Mum?" Joey asked.

Annie saw Merrie shoot her sister a warning look.

"Yes, love, I think I might," Annie replied softly.

"All right," she said, then Joey threw her arms around her and hugged her tightly.

Annie bit her tongue until it bled and hugged her daughter gently in return.

"I'll put her to bed tonight, Mum," Merrie said, tugging her sister away from the embrace.

Joey cast an annoyed smirk at her older sister's presumption. "I can do it myself," she grumbled.

Annie watched them walk up the stairs together. Once they were safely in their room, she dashed out the back door. She didn't even bother stretching, just tore out of the garden and into the woods, away from civilization. The last thing she wanted to do was run into anything human.

After ten minutes of sobbing out loud as she ran, she at last succeeded in accomplishing what the hour spent in her room had failed to do: she had finally tapped the tears out, to her relief. Now she could begin the real work. Her mind was sharp and clear as she began to analyze the roiling emotions within.

She was not angry with Janie; that much was certain. Her daughter's thoughtless comment had done nothing at all to lessen the ferocious love Annie felt for every one of her children, the overwhelming pride she took in their every accomplishment, be it magical or mundane. She knew in her heart every one of them was bound for greatness in their own way, and nothing gave her more pleasure than to see them all blossoming before her eyes.

She understood as well that her children faced unique challenges, considering the parents they had been born to. On the one hand, they were Weasleys: the latest generation in an ages-long line of talented, respected wizards, not to mention the direct descendents of several recently decorated war heroes. Great expectations were placed upon them by both their family and the magical world at large, and Annie's children had much to live up to.

On the other hand, unlike many of their peers, they were forced for the most part to grow up on the fringes of that magical world, if not completely outside of it. And they did so because of the limitations of their mother, pure and simple. While Annie could not independently make her way day to day in the magical world, her children knew they belonged to it. For all intents and purposes, they lived every day as if they were in the Muggle one, all the while in full knowledge and view of the one they were destined

for.

It wasn't easy for them. But her children handled living with one foot in each world—both the Muggle and the magical ones—with grace and aplomb. Rarely did they ever stumble, forgetting which world they were in at any given moment. Almost never did they complain about the extra burdens upon them, through no fault of their own, that they carried for Annie's sake.

And while they were in no direct danger from the dark, malevolent bigotry that had haunted her and George in the early years of their relationship, it was no secret that pockets of discrimination against children like hers still existed. Already, they'd felt pressure to prove they were just as good as any pureblood wizard child, regardless of how often Annie and George assured them how unnecessary such actions were.

She could never be angry at any of her children. Five more wonderful people with greater potential for success couldn't exist anywhere else. Her heart swelled with love and pride whenever she thought of them. And yet...

She was jealous of them. It was her horrible, shameful secret.

Annie had felt an envious longing for ages now—ever since that moment in the treehouse decades ago when she'd realized her future had already been determined by a fate that had denied her a gift no one else even knew existed. She'd been only seven years old when she'd learned the crushing truth.

"You have to be born with it," George had told her.

As much as she'd adored her magical twin friends, it had been a struggle sometimes to keep the jealousy at bay. To keep it from poisoning their friendship. And for the most part, she reckoned she had been successful. She suspected it was perhaps largely due to the boys themselves. They had always been so careful not to make her feel inferior because of her limitations. Quite the opposite, in fact: George especially had always gone to great lengths to point out her special qualities, the unique advantages she enjoyed by growing up in a world of technology.

Like her children, Annie had grown up in the Muggle world, all the while knowing full well the existence of something different hidden alongside, something secret and special just beyond. But, unlike Annie, her children knew it was only a matter of time before they entered into the magical realm to participate in it fully. Not as an outsider, a passive observer, like herself, but as fully capable wizards and witches.

She knew she was not the first, nor would she be the last person to be in this situation. Wizards had been marrying Muggles and having families for ages, just like she and George had done. Her situation was far from unique. Even now, she was not the only person she knew struggling with the challenges of parenting such exceptional children. Dean Thomas' wife, Sarah, was a lovely, sweet woman who, like Annie herself, lacked any scrap of magical talent. Jeremy Litton had married a witch who had been a year ahead of George at Hogwarts and had a sharp sense of humor about the whole thing. There were a few other men and women, fellow Muggles wed to witches and wizards, with whom she had become acquainted over the years. George had gone out of his way to get together with them, providing Annie opportunities to socialize with people with whom she had such a bizarre thing in common.

And it had helped... a little. But none of the others had known about the secret, magical world as a child like she had—back when youthful naiveté had instantly accepted the reality of magic. Nor had they struggled to understand, like she had, why she had been denied the gifts her friends took for granted. At most, the other Muggle spouses seemed to feel a little resentful toward their significant others at not having been told the secret a little sooner—at an imagined lack of trust—but that was apparently as far as it went. They did not appear to harbor the envious feelings she did.

Added to this, Annie's children were the oldest of the bunch. The rest of the Muggle parents usually asked her for advice, rather than being in a position to offer any. As a result, Annie felt pressure to put on her bravest face whenever she was with them, offering encouragement and reassurance whenever possible.

She could always turn to the stack of books in their library on the subject: *A Muggle Mother's Guide to a Magical Childhood; Discipline Without Wands* and *What to Expect: the Toddler Years: Magical Milestones from Birth to Age Three*. She had dutifully read them all and committed them to memory. She knew how to deal with accidental spell mishaps (wait calmly and patiently for the effect to wear off, and/or call for help), how to cope with levitating infants (tether child firmly, call for help), or the inevitable yet thankfully temporarily pyromaniacal toddler stage (Muggle mothers always kept fire extinguishers near at hand... oh, and remember to call for help when and if the opportunity presents itself—just not the local Muggle fire brigade, dear).

None of them contained a chapter, not even a measly paragraph, about dealing with feelings of jealousy. About how to stop wishing you were a witch. Especially when you had done it for the majority of your life.

Annie agonized for the millionth time over her secret shame. Surely she couldn't be the only person in the world who had ever felt this way! Surely someone else longed to be something she could never be.

She came to the edge of the woods and stopped running, breathing hard from exertion. The small meadow that lay between her and her house was lit up by a bright, almost-full moon. To her right, lazy curls of smoke floated out from one of the many mismatched Burrow chimneys. Directly in front of her, Mole Hill itself quietly gleamed in the chilly silvery light, the rosebush cascading down one side like verdant tresses. She stood for several minutes, taking in the spellbinding beauty of her home.

Who the bloody hell was she to wish for more than this?

Surely such a whingy, pathetic idiot as herself deserved a slap in the face for complaining about her idyllic life! Surely such an ungrateful prat as herself was entitled to a firm boot up the arse for failing to appreciate how wonderful things were! A devoted husband. Five healthy, intelligent, talented children. A supportive, active extended family around her always willing to help. A beautiful home. A fulfilling career. She had to be the stupidest cow to ever come down the pike, she reckoned, to bitch about such a peaceful, blessed existence.

I am not a witch, she scolded herself, and yet my life is more magical than I have any right to expect.

Annie closed her eyes. In her mind, she envisioned surgically removing the slimy, greenish-black rot of jealousy that threatened to spread like a cancer through her soul. She placed it on an imaginary pyre and held her breath as the toxic smoke from its ritual incineration blew away.

She knew it was not a permanent fix. This was not the sort of malady that had a once-and-for-all cure. But as long as she monitored it carefully, she could perhaps prevent it from consuming her or tainting her relationships with her family.

As Annie approached the Hill from the moonlit meadow, she could see George's silhouette against the large window, searching as he waited for her. Of course he would be concerned for her—probably even expected she would have needed a run to clear her head after the events of the evening. Thankfully, the physical exertion had reliably helped to straighten out her thoughts, and she was in a far better frame of mind when she reached the back door.

He was there, just inside, ready to greet her. "Feeling better now?" he asked softly.

Annie nodded. She was grateful that he appreciated how running was her way of dealing with emotional issues. How it was her time to think. He had gotten used to it over the years.

"Ready to call it a night, then?" he asked, handing her a large glass of water.

She took it from him and nodded once more. She gulped the water until the glass was empty, then set it in the sink to be dealt with tomorrow morning.

He took her hand, and they walked upstairs together. Once inside their room, George began to undress for bed.

"I think I'll have a quick shower," Annie said softly, kicking off her trainers and tossing them into the closet.

George smiled slightly, thoughtfully, and nodded.

Annie rapidly washed the sweat from her body, letting the lukewarm water cool her heated muscles. The last of the tumultuous anxiety in her mind drained away with the water. She toweled off her body and hair and took several deep, cleansing breaths.

She debated for a brief moment as she brushed her teeth, then decided not to bother with dressing in pajamas, anticipating George's likely intention. Whenever they had important discussions about their lives, they had developed a strange habit of making love first. Initially, she thought it odd usually, one hears of make-up sex *after* an argument, rather than before. Over the years, however, Annie realized it made a sort of sense for them. As if to remind them of what always remained the most important consideration: their love for one another.

Annie shut the light in the bathroom and crept into their bedroom. She found him as she'd predicted illuminated by moonlight and clad in nothing but the sheet across his lap, George was seated on the bed with his back against the headboard. And while she wasn't in the most romantic of moods at the moment, she knew it was important to him to make her feel loved, and it would help them both feel better. She climbed into his open and waiting arms and turned her face up to receive his kiss.

*

George held Annie in his arms. Now that his mind was clear and heart was calm once more, he found could better deal with the issue at hand. He knew that she was still hurting, though. And would be for a while, regardless of what he said or did. Still, he couldn't just not do anything about it, could he?

"We were so jealous of you, you know," he said softly.

"George, stop it. I'm... I'll be fine. You don't have to do this," Annie replied, sighing patiently. Her body was draped along his, her head resting on his chest as he stroked her curls absently.

He knew she didn't believe him. She never did whenever he tried to explain to her the reasons why he and his brother had been so devoted to her as children. He wasn't sure if it was due to her astonishing stubbornness in refusing to realize how incredibly wonderful she was, or simply the fact that she always thought he was teasing her about nearly everything the latter an understandable reaction, to be sure, considering the mountain of historical evidence.

"I'm serious!" he protested. "We used to imagine what it would be like to have someone else's undivided attention, like you did with your Gran. To not get shoved around by everyone in the house bigger than we were. To not get stuck watching over everyone smaller. To consistently be addressed by your actual given name instead of someone else's, or a collective FredandGeorge."

Annie giggled, and he took it as an encouraging sign.

"You could go anywhere you liked without worrying someone might discover what you were. You never had to hide out every bloody day at least, until I forced you to."

"George..." she said warningly. "That's not precisely true. And anyway, you know I have no regrets about that." She sighed. "Despite all the evidence to the contrary, this is where I belong."

He kissed the top of her head.

"It was heaven, for us the tree fort. Spending time with you there kept us sane, I reckon. We didn't have to hide anything from you. And you lived with all that amazing stuff in your house, yet you still managed to seem impressed by our tatty old hocus-pocus crap.

"And you knew our bloody names! We would have followed you anywhere for that reason alone!"

"It was heaven for me, too," Annie agreed. She laughed quietly, as if she thought he was having a laugh.

But nothing could be further from the truth. He gave her a little squeeze for emphasis.

"We missed you so much when we were gone at school. D'you know, we used to talk about trying to sneak you into Hogwarts somehow. We had it all planned out: how we'd steal food from the kitchen and uniform robes from the laundry for you. How we'd show you all the cool things we'd found."

Annie lifted her head and smiled at him. She pulled his head closer and kissed him. "What a very typically sweet and stupidly reckless thing for you to think of, love."

He held her in place by the chin. "Your letters kept me going while I was there. The knowledge that you still thought about us... that we were special in your eyes. All those long months away from home."

"Me, too," she whispered. "More than you'll ever know."

George sighed expansively. "Then, by some bloody miracle, I was the lucky git that caught your heart. And how did I thank you for it? Only in the most selfish way I could manage! I dragged you through an absolute shitstorm. Took away every safe and reasonable thing you grew up with and plunged you into a fucking war. Painted a pretty target on your head while I was at it. All because I couldn't bear to be without you."

Annie pressed her finger against his lips to hush him.

He kissed her fingertip, then gently pulled it away, determined for her to hear this. "Without me, you would have gone to university, like Jane. Been brilliant at it, no question. Had your pick of every Muggle bloke you met. You'd be married to some surgeon or solicitor or young lord by now, the world at your feet, if it wasn't for my idiotic selfishness."

Annie shook her head. "All I can say is, thank God for your idiotic selfishness, then. I wouldn't wish that other misery on my worst enemy. I am exactly where I'm supposed to be, George. This is where I want to be."

George clutched her tightly, clinging to his wife and pressing himself against her. "That's a relief. Because I can't live without you, Annie. Don't ever make me prove it."

Empty Nest

Joey boards the Hogwarts Express, and George has a cunning plan for what to do in a big, empty house.

Chapter 73: Empty Nest

Fall 2016

Age 38

6 October, 2016

Dear Mum & Dad,

Hello from Hogsmeade. Things are going well here for us. I've been working on a new charm that you'll be particularly interested in, Mum: it would have saved you all those years ago from a drastic haircut! But it really is a very intriguing theory, not all just fluff and vanity.

Fred is making plans to travel to Ecuador with Professor Longbottom this winter during the holidays. I'm sure this is the first you're hearing of it because I know how well my brother does keeping in touch with anyone. He's been trying to teach himself Spanish in the meantime, so don't be surprised if you can't understand a word he's saying when you visit next month. Sometimes he doesn't realize which language he's speaking. When that happens, just say, "Habla Ingles, idiota!" and he'll switch.

At the moment I'm sitting in the stands at the Hogwarts Quidditch pitch, watching the Gryffindor team have tryouts. I don't know why Merrie even bothered. Actually, yes I do: she's just trying to be fair as always, but it's still a pointless waste of time. It's not as if every position isn't already guaranteed. No one can touch Domi and Roxy as Chasers, no one has the cojones (Ask Fred what it means, it's his new favorite word.) to take on Janie at Keeper, and we all know Joey's a sure bet for Seeker. Not to mention the Beaters have been the same two blokes for two years now. Ryan and Warren are decent fellows... I'm sure you'll be meeting Ryan Murphy when you visit this time.

All this is common knowledge, of course, and yet 32 male Gryffindors (apparently the girls have better reasoning skills) are here at the pitch as we speak, desperate to catch the eye of a Weasley lass (they aren't picky as to which one) and impress her. Excepting, of course, our little cousin James he's here to actually play Quidditch, poor little squirt. He doesn't have a prayer to make anything but reserve... at least, not this year. But don't worry, I'm sure Merrie will let him down easy. And little Louis is probably thrilled to have the rest of the Gryffindor girls (if not the entire female population of the castle) all to himself at the moment! Quite the cunning Slytherin, he is.

It's like the girls are part veela or something (and in Domi's case, a literal truth). A swarm of smitten boys follows them wherever they go, posturing and posing in front of them like peacocks. This is largely why I am here, in fact. My presence causes some anxiety for this herd of Romeos, and that's precisely my goal. They know I can pluck any one of them out of the sky at any moment and so are on their best behavior.

Mum, I hope you've not gone batty this past month, bangin' around in that big, empty house. At least you have a bit of chaos during the day at the kiddie school to enjoy. Now that we're all out of the house, you should make Dad come up out of the dungeon once in a while and take you out someplace nice for dinner you deserve it! The both of you must be bored stiff without any of us at home.

Say hello to Winky and Doozy for me. See you when you come up for the match... I'm sure it will herald yet another perfect season for Gryffindor, and the Weasley Quidditch Dynasty will bring home the Cup once again. As they have for three years running. Oh well if it can't be Ravenclaw's victory, I suppose I'm glad it's a family one.

Love,

Art

Annie read through the letter from her eldest son once more. His handwriting was the polar opposite of his father's funny, crooked scrawl: every loop perfectly even, every line perfectly straight. She was glad to read about his life and that he was willing to stay in touch with his mother, even at age eighteen (almost). But for as intuitive and observant as Art could sometimes be, especially when it came to figuring out how things worked, she was grateful beyond words that he had no idea what the past month at Mole Hill had been like for his parents.

George had become like a man obsessed. His lifelong dream had just come true: they finally had the house completely to themselves. She had drawn the line at his Naked Month suggestion, but even so had never been more thankful that Winky had chosen to move herself and her son into a room at the school now that Joey was gone. Annie didn't put it past George to have bribed her to do so.

It was as embarrassing as it was wonderful: at age thirty-eight, they were behaving like sex-crazed teenagers. Every meal was now eaten in their upstairs bedroom in an at least partial state of undress. All bathing activities had become communal. She hadn't laundered a set of pajamas in weeks. It was like they were on vacation permanently, except for the fact they still had to go to work everyday. George had wanted to solve that little inconvenience by proposing they each take a year-long sabbatical in celebration of their newfound freedom.

The festivities had begun just a few minutes after their three daughters had boarded the Hogwarts Express together on September first. As she and George had stood on the platform, waving at the train as it pulled out of the station, he had been counting backwards out loud. As soon as the train had rounded the corner out of sight, and he'd simultaneously reached zero in the countdown, he'd dragged her through the barrier and back into the Muggle part of the station.

"Where are we going?" she'd asked, confused as to why they weren't just Apparating home.

"You'll see. I have a surprise for you," he'd said, grinning wickedly.

"Oh, dear," she'd said nervously.

Annie had become thoroughly perplexed by the time George had led her into the enormous car park next to the station and down into the bowels of London. "George, I don't know *what* you think is going to happen down here, but there is no way on God's green earth...."

"Don't get your knickers in a knot just yet, love," he'd interrupted. "I think I can see the one we want from here." He then reached into his trouser pocket, and a nearby vehicle had suddenly flashed its lights and beeped.

"Are you *boosting* a car?" she'd cried out in disbelief. "Absolutely not! I will not be a party to this!"

"I'm not *stealing* anything, git!" he'd exclaimed in response, drawing out the keys from his pocket and jangling them in front of her. They were now standing behind a sleek, muscular, expensive-looking silver car.

"Ooh," Annie had cooed appreciatively at the vehicle. "Very nice. How long did you hire it for?" she'd asked, running her fingers along the rear spoiler, imagining what it would be like to fly down the freeway in it. Perhaps they were going on a little surprise weekend excursion?

"It's not hired. It's a gift," he'd said.

Annie had looked up at him in shock, certain he was winding her up. "Who in the hell would give *you* a BMW 335?"

"It's not for *me*, you incredibly obtuse woman. It's for *you*. I am giving *you* a gift," he'd said, wearing a sly smile as he tossed the keys at her. "And how do you know what kind of car it is, anyway?"

Annie had caught the keys in midair. "I read the same car magazines you do, for one. And it's here on the boot, as well, idiot. But this is a very cruel joke, George. At least I was honest about the Porsche. Be serious this is a £32,000 automobile!"

"A bit more than that, actually. Wait until you see all the nifty stuff inside. D'you want to see the registration as proof it's yours?" he'd asked, folding his arms across his chest.

"You did not just buy me a *car*, George!" she'd exclaimed, pressing her forehead against the glass, cupping her hands beside her eyes and attempting to peek through the heavily tinted window.

"Are you going to stop arguing and thank me at some point, or should I just go fuck myself?" he'd muttered.

"Is it really for me, then?" she'd asked in a tiny, awestruck voice.

"YES, you complete moron! How many times do I have to say it?" he'd cried in exasperation.

She had taken a running leap into his arms at that moment, knocking him into the car parked next to her own new, beautiful one and setting off its alarm. It was the first brand-new, off-the-lot vehicle they had ever owned; the first transportation they'd bought since the beast of a Toyota right after the twins were born nearly eighteen years ago. The old farm truck had collapsed into a pile of rust years ago, and while the Land Cruiser still ran, it left a bit to be desired in the "fun-to-drive" department.

"Thank you!" she'd cried over and over between kisses.

"That's a bit more like what I was expecting," he'd murmured.

*

It was a crisp, early November day when George and Annie Apparated into Hogsmeade for the first Hogwarts Quidditch match of the school term. They met up with their twin sons at the boys' flat in town, then walked up to the pitch together. Since the match was Gryffindor against Slytherin, the boys felt no compunction today about supporting their sisters' team. Although they did quietly applaud a few excellent plays made by Cousin Louis for the Slytherin team, too.

The match was spectacularly exciting. Merrie, Roxy Jordan, and Domi Weasley were more than impressive, scoring more than two dozen goals altogether. Much to George's delight, Janie managed to block the majority of goal attempts made by the opposing team, and furthermore was assigned a penalty for every one that got through she didn't handle getting beaten very well and had a well-deserved reputation for punishing anyone who scored a goal against her. Joey was practically invisible, jetting around on the fantastically fast (and excessively dangerous, in Annie's opinion) Nimbus 3000 model broomstick her father had splurged on.

George even spared a few compliments for the members of the team he was not related to. "That Murphy kid is a pretty fair Beater. Almost as good as I was," he said, winking at his wife.

Unsurprisingly, Joey caught the Snitch, and the match was won in a landslide. The Gryffindor team landed and celebrated with a group hug. Roxy and Domi lifted the tiny Joey onto their shoulders and paraded her about. A few minutes later, the majority of the team turned their faces up to the stands and waved at George and Annie.

"Why does that Murphy fellow still have his arm around Merrie?" George asked no one in particular as he waved back to the team, his smile slowly fading.

Fred and Art barely attempted to stifle their snickers.

"You mean Merrie hasn't told you yet all about how *wonderful* and *amazing* and simply *lovely* Ryan Murphy is?" said Fred in a falsetto voice, his hands fluttering about his heart.

"In our experience, she won't shut up about him," added Art wearily.

"I haven't had a conversation with her about anything else for eight months now," complained Fred.

"Eight months?" asked George darkly, deeply disturbed that a daughter of his was within ten feet of an unrelated male at the moment. He looked like he was about to dash down to the pitch at any moment. He turned to glare accusatorily at his wife. "Did you know anything about this?"

"George, love, please control yourself. She's a good girl, and it was bound to happen sometime," Annie pleaded with him, holding tightly onto his arm with both hands. She had had her suspicions, of course, but Merrie had not yet confided in her. "She's nearly sixteen, remember?"

"I remember. I remember all too well. Sixteen is quite clear in my mind at the moment," he said through his clenched teeth.

"Dad, calm down. He's a decent bloke, really," offered Art.

"We wouldn't have let him within a mile of Merrie if he wasn't," added Fred.

Annie giggled. "Look at him... he's so happy! He's smitten like a puppy dog. You can see it from here," she argued, indicating the object of George's ire.

"Oh, I'm lookin' at 'im," George assured them. "Believe me... I'll be keeping my eyes on that one from now on," he muttered, glancing at his sons and his wife suspiciously, as if they were part of a conspiracy against him.

"While you're at it, have a look at your daughter. She's over the moon with happiness. You wouldn't want her to be miserable, now, would you?"

"A bit of misery is a good thing, now and then. Especially for a hormonal teenager," he argued, but his tone of voice was much softer now. He doted on his daughters, which led him to be overprotective in some ways, but Annie knew he wouldn't wish his own experiences with school and teenage romance on his worst enemy. He was telling the truth when he had said earlier how easy it was for him to recall when he was that age: homesick, lovesick, and depressed. It was just as easy for Annie to do the same.

"She's waving us down. Can you be civil, or do you need to stay here while I go meet Merrie's boyfriend?" she teased him.

"I can be civil as long as he can keep his bloody hands to himself," George mumbled.

George and Annie made their way down the steps to meet their daughters, niece, and goddaughter on the grassy pitch. George had a big hug and smile for each of the girls, congratulating them on a match well-played.

Then he turned to the two boys standing before him. With dangerously glittering eyes, he offered each of them what to Annie looked like an overly-firm handshake accompanied by congratulations that were far less sincere.

"You know, I used to play Beater for Gryffindor," he said softly, a little threateningly.

Poor Ryan Murphy squirmed like he was on trial for murder. "Yes, sir. Merrie has told us all about that, sir," he stammered.

"Don't mind tellin' you I cracked quite a few heads in my day," George added, grinning with the warmth of a shark.

Ryan attempted a laugh that died instantly, sounding more like a squeak.

"Oh, Daddy. Don't be mean," said Merrie, giving her father a peck on the cheek and taking his hand in hers. George immediately softened, his gaze now directed at his daughter. "Ryan sent a Slytherin to the hospital wing today himself. I thought you of all people would be particularly pleased by that," she added, taking Ryan's hand in her other one.

"I suppose anyone who knocks a Slytherin off his broom is okay in my book," he admitted grudgingly. "As long as it's not Louis, of course," he added with a cough.

"Well, we're off to the common room to celebrate. See you at Christmas!" Merrie called out, dashing off with her boyfriend in tow to meet up with the group waiting for them.

George snorted. "She'll be lucky if we let her go back for second term," he said as he watched the two of them run toward the castle.

"I suppose that's the problem with being married so young," Annie mused, leaning her head against his shoulder. "You remember those teenage years too well, yet have no sympathy for your own children."

"You might be right about that," he agreed.

"Speaking of lovesick teenagers in need of sympathy, did you notice the look on your son's face today?"

"No which one?" he asked curiously.

"Unless I am very much mistaken, Arthur is rather taken with our Miss Jordan." As she spoke, she was watching him shyly trying to chat with Roxy, awkwardly congratulating her on the win.

"Oh, that? No news there."

"What do you mean? When did you discover this?" Annie cried, very put out that he had known something of this magnitude and hadn't shared it with her.

"When he asked me for information about love potions about two years ago."

Annie's eyes boggled. "You've known since then and never told me? What happened?"

"Well, to be honest, I didn't know he still felt the same because he never brought it up again. And I told him back then that a potion was definitely not the way to go about things. 'Stick to the old-fashioned way,' I told him."

"So what did he do?"

"Nothing," chimed in Fred, who had just rejoined them. "He doesn't have the *cojones* to ask her out properly. Says he's too afraid of ruining their 'friendship,'" he said, rolling his eyes and adding exaggerated finger quotes in the air for effect.

Annie and George shared sympathetic smiles for their son.

"What is it about Weasley boys? Why do they make themselves suffer so needlessly in love?" Annie said wistfully. "She's so clearly interested in him," she added, recognizing that look on the sweet girl's face, having worn it for so long herself. She nearly felt as bad for Roxy as she did for her own son.

"Probably because we always go for the beautiful girl we think is out of our league," George said with a smile, lacing his arm around her.

"You'd better go have a talk with him, George," Annie said.

"Waste of breath and time," muttered Fred in warning.

"Maybe you ought do it this time, love. My talk apparently didn't help much," chuckled George. "Ready to go, Art?" he called out as his son was dejectedly watching the Gryffindor Quidditch team make their way back inside the castle.

"Walk with me a bit, Art," said Annie softly, slipping her arm around her son's and steering him away from his father and twin brother. He had been taller than she since he was thirteen, and now fairly towered over her, the twins both taking after their Uncle Ron in build. "Let's have a little mother-son chat, shall we?"

Beautiful

Chapter 74 of 80

George isn't ready to let her go.

Chapter 74: Beautiful

April 2020

Age 42

George stood in her bedroom, looking out its large window. The view of the forest outside became a bit blurry around the edges, most likely due to the tears that had begun welling up despite his struggle to quell them. In his arms he held one of the most beautiful young women he had ever seen in his life. Which was saying something, he figured, considering who he was married to.

How had he become so lucky? What great deed had he ever done to deserve to have her in his life? And how could he be expected to let her go while she was still his and

his alone to love?

Inconveniently, ironically, he found himself clad in dress robes once again. *I should probably get used to it* he complained silently. There was no denying that this would not be the last time he would find himself here, likely in this very room, in a similar situation. He would have to come to terms with this fact, somehow.

It's not fair!

His heart rebelled against what he was steeling himself to do. He pressed her closer, wanting to prolong this moment as long as possible. Why was she forcing him to do this? It was cruel. It was too much to ask of him.

I'll never let her go!

She turned her glowing face up to him then, her warm, kind brown eyes impaling him with a look of pure and innocent love. Her breathtaking smile contained all her happiness, her excitement, her expectations for the moment. "We should probably go before people begin to wonder where we've gotten off to," she said softly.

"Can't we just stay here like this forever?" he asked her, kissing her tenderly on the forehead. But he already knew the answer to that question.

They broke apart reluctantly and began to smooth their mussed clothing. She helped him adjust his tie and collar, and he smiled his thanks. To his embarrassment, he felt a tear spill over onto his cheek.

"Don't cry, Daddy," she whispered.

"Only tears of joy, honey," he replied, lying through his teeth and wiping the traitorous tear away.

He wrapped his daughter's arm around his, and they stepped out from her room into the hallway balcony. *Oohs* and *ahhs* erupted from the four girls standing below them in the living room. He carefully led Merrie down the stairway, ready to catch her if she stumbled. Ready to run away with her if she asked.

"You look so beautiful, Merrie!" they exclaimed. "Amazing! Gorgeous!"

All of it was true, yet all of it was insufficient, ridiculously inadequate in the face of her fabulous beauty. She was radiant in her gown, her wavy auburn hair intricately arranged on her head to frame her bewitchingly lovely face. He knew every father probably felt like this about his daughter that she was the most beautiful girl ever but surely it had to be different for him. More true, somehow. She was so devastatingly angelic today, especially.

He smiled at the four young girls currently buzzing around them. Joey and Janie looked achingly lovely themselves, dressed in blue gowns of identical color but different design. Roxy Jordan and Domi Weasley, who had never been more than arm's length away from his oldest daughter throughout her entire life, were also there in their own blue gowns, looking charming as well. Of course, Merrie would let each girl choose her own dress according to their own preference. Other people's happiness always came first with Merrie.

Mine! She's mine! Forever!

"Where's your mother?" he asked. Maybe Annie had some words of wisdom, some escape plan to help him deal with this.

"Fred and Art took her down to the tent a few minutes ago. Don't feel bad, Daddy. She's just as much of a train wreck as you are," Janie ribbed him.

It was time for the ceremony to begin. They looked out the window and saw the large tent in the meadow between Mole Hill and the Burrow. It was full of guests all dressed in finery of their own. Today was the first sunny spring day after weeks of unending rain, and the natural world seemed to be celebrating the occasion of George's evisceration.

"Time to go!" someone said excitedly.

There's no more avoiding the inevitable, George thought ruefully. He took a deep breath, pulling in courage along with the bright scent of the girls' bouquets of flowers. He grasped Janie's and Joey's hands, then the group of them Apparated to just directly outside the tent. One by one, the bridesmaids left them: first Joey, then Janie, then Domi, and finally Roxy. He stood alone once more with his sweet little girl who was all dressed up all *grown* up, he was forced to confess.

It was their turn now. They paused at the doorway, and everyone in the tent stood and faced them. George slowly began to walk down the aisle with Merrie on his arm. Each and every member of his family, all of his friends, as well as a horde of strangers watched and witnessed his heart breaking with every step he took.

The boy stood there at the end of the aisle, waiting for them. The blond-haired, blue-eyed Irish fellow stood transfixed by the enchanting vision that was walking toward him at the moment. He was flanked by three older, slightly taller versions of himself, and another boy who looked a little familiar. A moment later, his identity came to George's mind: he had been the other Gryffindor Beater on Merrie's team.

Ryan Murphy was a good man, and George knew it. He and Merrie had dutifully waited to get engaged until after they'd both finished school. They had even patiently waited the extra year since, insisted on by George, before being "old enough" to get married. They were now nineteen years old as old as he and Annie had been. As old as his parents had been. He couldn't rightly ask them for anything more.

Oh, can't I?

He *is* a good man, George reminded himself. They were an excellent match for each other: two optimistic, quiet idealists. They both were easy-going and perpetually cheerful people. Ryan and Merrie had been two of the most popular boys and girls at school, not because they were the best-looking or the most talented athletes (although a strong case could be made for them on both those points, George reckoned), but rather because they were everyone's best friend. They were approachable, warm, and comfortable with anyone they came in contact with. They made everyone around them smile.

And they were so clearly in love with each other. The looks of joy and adoration now on their faces reminded him of his own wife, of the moment they had shared twenty-two years ago in Meredith's hospital room. He couldn't in good conscience deny that kind of happiness to anyone else.

Can't I?

He's not good enough for her! No one is! his heart screamed as it bled within his chest. How could he hand over his daughter's precious heart to this boy? How could he trust her happiness to him? Her heart and her happiness had been his and his alone to cherish for so long now. He was the rightful guardian of them! The thought of relinquishing them to another man made him feel agonizingly hollow inside.

To his further torment, they had reached the end of the aisle. Ryan held out his hand for George to shake, smiling in humble, grateful bliss.

"Take good care of her." George somehow managed to speak, rather than howl, taking his nearly son-in-law's hand.

"I will, sir. Thank you," he stammered, looking at George briefly in the eye before returning his gaze to his lovely bride.

George turned once more to his daughter. He slowly lifted up her veil, trying to make the moment last as long as possible. He kissed his baby girl once more on the cheek and whispered, "I'll always love you, honey."

"I know, Daddy," she said, giving him a kiss on his cheek as well.

He took a step back then, as the boy *Ryan*, he reminded himself to think of him by name from now on took his daughter's hands in his, and the rest of the audience fell away from the two of them in that moment. As far as they were concerned, they were the only two people on earth. *And that is as it should be*, he told himself. He would have to take what comfort he could from that.

He must have messed up her veil because Roxy and Domi began fluttering around Merrie, adjusting and arranging her dress and veil back into their perfect positions. He turned away from the couple then, and for the first time caught the eye of Annie. She was seated in the front row with Fred on her right, his arm around his mother for comfort and support. Her cheeks were glistening with tears, and a sad smile graced her lovely features. Her violet eyes leaped out at him, drawing him to her as they always did.

George closed the distance between them in three steps and took his seat in the empty chair between Annie and Art. Winky and her son, Doozy, sat on the other side of Art, the mother elf blubbering as loudly as if Merrie were her own. His parents and the rest of his siblings' families were spread out behind them.

Despite the fact that they were both on the verge of openly weeping, he was amazed once more by how beautiful his wife was. She was dressed in a gown of tawny, golden silk, the color nearly that of champagne. It almost, but not quite, perfectly matched the golden color of her skin. Which meant she almost, but not quite, looked like she was wearing nothing at all.

Around her delicate wrist hung a bracelet of Tahitian pearls the one he had bought for her on the holiday that had resulted in Joey. He knew without looking the Hawaiian peridot earrings were gracing her earlobes, hidden behind her soft, silver-strewn brown curls, and could see that his heart rested in the hollow at the base of her throat, just as it had for the last twenty-three years.

A fresh tear rolled down Annie's cheek as he laced his fingers into hers. He squeezed her hand. She lifted his hand to her lips and gave it a small kiss in response.

He looked once more at his daughter and her almost-husband. George thought of how he had spent her lifetime trying to show her all the world had to offer, helping her to become the person she wanted to be. He remembered innumerable individual moments of soothing her little hurts. Teaching her to fly. Tossing her giggling into the air. Bathing her grubby little toddler's body. Reading her bedtime stories. Watching her nurse at Annie's breast. Seeing her enter into the world. Witnessing her growing inside Annie's belly.

He and Annie had *made* her.

And now she stood before them, committing her life to someone else, giving her heart to him. They would be happy together, that much he was sure of. They would have a home and someday a family of their own. *A beautiful, peaceful, happy life*, he prayed silently.

The ceremony was wrapping up. In an effort not to sob in front of the assembled guests, George had to turn away. He glanced at his son, Art, instead.

The tactic worked: he was instantly distracted from his father-of-the-bride distress by the tortured look on Art's face. George surreptitiously followed the boy's gaze to discover what was paining him so.

It can't be possible.... He's still pining for her? George shook his head in amazement. Poor Art couldn't take his eyes off of Roxanne Jordan. It was beyond pitiful, at this point. *How long has it been now? Five years? No likely closer to seven.*

George leaned over, put his hand on his son's shoulder, and spoke softly in his ear. "Do something," he urged, "or you will go mad. Don't miss your chance!"

Art looked questioningly, pleadingly into his father's eyes, desperate for someone to understand his plight. George could see it was agony for him to watch the object of his affection standing there, looking so lovely, and feeling utterly impotent to do anything about it. The poor fellow was somehow blind to the fact that Roxy had had a crush on him as well for nearly as many years as he had for her. The two of them made quite a pair, pointlessly frozen in fear of rejection that would never come to pass, clinging to a dear friendship that, far from being irretrievably lost, would only be enhanced if they were honest with each other about their deeper feelings. *Annie was right what is it about Weasley boys?*

"It's worth the risk, trust me," he assured his smitten son, confident that his best friend's daughter would leap at the chance to be with him. *Do it today!*

Art took a deep breath, and the hang-dog look on his face was replaced by a determined expression. He nodded slightly.

George patted his son's shoulder firmly in encouragement, then turned back to the wedding couple just in time for the kiss. His daughter and her new husband turned toward the audience, blissfully beaming like their wildest dreams had just come true, as everyone stood and cheered. Even George had to smile with them. Annie turned to him then, and he kissed her.

Now that it was over... now that Merrie had officially begun her married life, George found he was able to start to feel genuinely happy for her about it. It was a good match; she had made an excellent choice. And at last it was no longer looming ahead of him like a gallows.

As soon as it could be deemed polite to do so or perhaps a minute or two before hand, but who was counting? Art marched up to where Roxy stood alongside his sisters and cousin. George nudged Annie and surreptitiously directed her attention toward them. They weren't near enough to hear what their lovesick son said to the pretty girl he had been admiring for so long, but felt elation for him when she smiled and nodded eagerly at him in response. The resulting look of ecstatic surprise on his face was heartwarming as he took the hand of the girl of his dreams and led her out of the tent, into the garden for a more private discussion.

"That was certainly a long time coming," commented his wife, a pleased look on her face.

"About damn time, you mean," he replied, smiling.

George's parents had made their way over toward them. His father gave him a warm hug and a smile.

"That's one of the hardest things a father has to do, son," Arthur said knowingly.

"I never want to do it again," George agreed.

"Good luck avoiding it," Annie laughed.

"I'm planning on running away, next time," he threatened.

"Actually, I've found it's far worse when you miss it," scolded his mother. "Not that I'm holding any grudges, dear," she added with an impish smile, patting Annie gently on the back.

"Enough, Molly. Don't add to their troubles today," Arthur admonished his wife.

"That's all right. I know you've forgiven me years ago now for stealing your favorite son away," teased Annie with a glint in her eye. George winked back at her.

"Ha! Stole him, did you? Seems to me you didn't take him far enough away," cried Molly jokingly. "I can still see him out my kitchen window every day."

"Mum!" George protested indignantly.

"Favorite son? Not by half! Most likely to be incarcerated, certainly, but favorite? Nah... that was always Charlie," added Arthur at nearly the same time.

"Hey! You're supposed to stick up for me! I'm your flesh and blood, remember?" laughed George. "No wonder I'm such a rotten parent look what I had for role models!"

"Is that your excuse?" joked Annie.

"Too right, and I'm sticking to it!" he cried with a curt nod to indicate the discussion was over. "Never forget: nothing is ever my fault as long as I can deny it convincingly enough."

"Plausible deniability: the cornerstone of your empire," Annie muttered sarcastically.

George strolled arm in arm with Annie toward Ryan's parents in order to exchange the mandatory pleasantries and congratulations of the day. As they passed by the newlywed couple, they heard Janie teasing her older sister.

"Thanks again, Merrie, for screwing us out of a family trip somewhere interesting for Easter hols this year. I heard Mum and Dad were considering Madagascar but no, we get to spend a soggy fortnight in exotic Devon instead. What lovely timing you have," she said acerbically.

Merrie understood that her sister's most biting sarcasm was reserved for those she loved best. It was a mark of respect if Janie thought you could appreciate it. "Poor Janie. I *suppose* you could come along with us on our honeymoon," Merrie said with a laugh. Ryan looked alarmed, like he was about to protest, but Merrie reassured him with a wink.

"Ugh. No thank you, all the same," Janie replied, theatrically shuddering at the thought.

They were a nice family, the Murphys: warm and cheerful and lively. George and Annie spent nearly an hour chatting with them, each reminiscing about the newlyweds when they were children for George grudgingly conceded they were probably adults at this point. They both expressed their happiness about welcoming their newest family member, as well as lamented the fact that they were all too young to have children getting married. George and Annie then wandered back toward the Weasley side of the tent.

The Jordans were the first group of friends they met, chatting with Charlie and Sasha. "Congratulations!" cried their friends and relatives as they approached.

"I can't believe you actually let her do it, bro!" teased Charlie. "I had galleons riding on it that you would kidnap little Merrie rather than let her go through with it!"

"You came very close to collecting on that bet," George laughed, remembering how the thought had crossed his mind several times today.

"You're *old*, mate," teased Lee.

"You've got a daughter the same age, git," he replied. "Just wait until the shoe is on the other foot you'll get no sympathy whatsoever from me."

Lee shook his head. "I've got ages before I'll worry about that. Doesn't even have a boyfriend yet, my Roxy."

"Oh, really?" asked Annie, winking at George.

"Speaking of our little darling, have you seen her?" asked Angelina.

"Perhaps..." George replied in a manner implying he absolutely had but was refusing to cooperate. "And I wouldn't be too sure about the boyfriend thing."

"Just what are you saying?" asked Lee, brow furrowing in mild concern. He had known George long enough to distrust nearly everything he said in that tone of voice.

"The father's always the last to know, isn't he?" Annie giggled.

"I think I'll let you sweat it for a while longer," George needled his friend. "You can ask Roxy when you see her, if it isn't obvious before then," he laughed.

Lee and Angelina excused themselves and wandered off, eyes searching the crowd for their daughter, or at least for some clue as to what George was slyly referring. Meanwhile, Charlie and Sasha led them over to an empty table.

"Take a load off you two must be tired of standing," Charlie offered courteously.

"My feet are killing me," George agreed, untying his tie and unbuttoning his collar to loosen it. "I've said it before and I'll say it again: whoever invented dress robes should be cursed."

"But you look so handsome!" Annie said.

"You're biased," he said, smiling and grateful she still thought so.

"Not to mention blind," added Charlie as Sasha laughed a deep, rumbling laugh.

"Or at least profoundly farsighted," chimed in Ron as he and Hermione flopped down in the empty seats next to them.

"Who invited you ungrateful lot anyway?" George grumbled, scowling at them.

"Everything was so lovely, Annie. The girls all look so beautiful!" Hermione complimented his wife.

"Thanks, but it was all Merrie," Annie said, deflecting the praise.

George smirked, letting the table know they were being treated to Annie's usual self-deprecating response to compliments. And while the fact that Merrie had made all the decisions was true, Annie had worked herself nearly ragged making sure all her daughter's wishes came to fruition. "Hardly nothing," said George, nudging her. "Where do you think those beautiful girls got their good looks?"

Annie smiled and shook her head slowly in astonishment. "You can be so charming when you want to be," she teased, leaning in for a kiss.

The rest of the table rolled their eyes. Ron coughed loudly, and Hermione sighed in exasperation.

"So anyway, back to polite conversation. How are the rest of your kids, George?" Charlie asked, interrupting the kiss before they got carried away.

While George would have happily ignored the question, Annie turned away from him to answer. "They're doing fantastically. Janie's going to start her final year next fall, going for six NEWTs..."

"And Flitwick couldn't be happier to see the back of her, I'm sure," George added, referring to Hogwart's current Headmaster and his former Charms professor.

"Oh, come on. Nobody could come close to the legendary student miscreant, George Weasley," cried Charlie as the table laughed in agreement.

"It's not so much that she misbehaves, per se..." Annie explained with a rueful smile.

"She's the campus agitator," George explained. "She led a 'Half-Blood Pride' parade and rally in Hogsmeade during the February school trip. Threw the residents of that sleepy little burg into a right tizzy, she did. They were glaring at me for weeks after. Surprisingly, she is no longer allowed to visit the village with the rest of the school."

"She's the cleverest, most tenacious little thorn in the side of authority there ever was," laughed Annie.

"Little Miss Furious, just like her mother," George added. Annie swatted him. He smirked at the table, as if to point out she had just proved his point.

"What about Joey? I hear she's a wonder on a broom," Charlie asked.

George looked around the tent at the mention of his youngest and located her immediately. She was sitting at a nearby table with who else? Uncle Harry and Aunt Ginny. The three of them were having an animated discussion, hands zooming and twisting in the air in front of them.

"You've never seen the like, Charlie," gushed Ron, relieving George of the necessity of bragging about his own daughter. "She's amazing! The best Seeker I've ever seen!"

"Better than Charlie?" asked Sasha, speaking up for the first time.

Charlie smirked. "Better than Harry?" he asked.

"Better than Ginny?" cried Hermione, dubious and wanting to be loyal to her dear friend. Hermione had always been too busy to join the family at any of the Hogwarts Quidditch matches, so couldn't truly offer her own opinion.

"Better than Krum!" exclaimed Ron, dismissing the others with a wave of his hand. "And it absolutely kills me that she's *George's* daughter," he laughed ruefully.

"Taught her everything she knows, I did," George boasted, beaming with pride.

"See? He's insufferable about it, the bloody git," moaned Ron.

"Ron, she's only fifteen," cautioned Annie.

"Exactly! She'll only get better! I sent an owl last fall to that Preston bloke, the talent scout for the Cannons. Told him he had better get his arse to a match and see her for himself. She's destined for greatness, our Joey, mark my words. And if I have my way, she'll lead the Cannons to the League Cup."

"Be reasonable, Ron," chided Charlie. "If she's really as good as you say, why would she bury herself with the Cannons?"

"Of course she's *that good*. First of all, Gryffindor's never lost a match since she's been Seeker, which has been for the past five years..." Ron argued.

"Four years. This year is her fifth season..." Annie corrected him.

"Five. I'm counting this year's final match won already, which is a foregone conclusion," explained Ron. "Second, they've won the Cup seven years in a row now..."

"Merrie and Janie have been on most of those teams as well, you know," countered George, playing devil's advocate because he happened to share Ron's view about the whole thing. "There's been a lot of talent in Gryffindor lately." He left unsaid the fact that either Weasley or Potter children comprised the majority of that talent.

"Maybe so, and some of those matches in the early years were landslides, clearly due to the Chaser Trio," Ron continued, referring to his nieces and Roxy by their collective nickname. "But ever since Joey's been Seeker, nearly every single match has been won by a hundred and fifty points or less, and all of them *within... one... hour*. Better never show up late to a Gryffindor match, or you just might miss it!"

"That's my girl!" cheered George.

"Ugh. Shut up," groaned Ron. "And as for playing for Chudley... well, hopefully her uncles and father have some pull with her when it comes to that decision. As much as I hate to admit it, George raised her right, supporting orange and black," he conceded.

"Have you got a couple of future Quidditch stars then as well, Ron?" asked Charlie.

"Not really," he sighed. "They take more after their mum, see. Two little bookworms, they are," he said, affecting a lack of enthusiasm but smiling with pride all the same. Rose and Hugo both were top students in their years.

"That's just what we need in the family: more Prefects, Head Boys, and Head Girls," teased George.

"You're just jealous," chuckled Ron.

"Head Boy and Head Girl are brilliant accomplishments!" cried Hermione indignantly, finally rejoining the conversation. Everyone knew she was still sore that the war interfered with (in her opinion) her own unquestionable selection as Head Girl.

"They absolutely are, Hermione!" added Annie, reassuring her sister-in-law and winking surreptitiously at George at the same time.

"Nothing to sneeze at, anyway," said Ron, putting his arm around his wife and giving her a little squeeze. "Oh, look! It's Luna and Rolf! Let's go have a laugh and say hello, Hermione," Ron suggested, pulling her up by the hand before she had a chance to answer and leading her off.

"What news about your school, Annie?" asked Sasha with polite curiosity.

"It's going well, thanks," she said simply.

George rolled his eyes. "Yeah, 'Going *well*.' There's a waiting list about thirty kids deep to get in, and she's pulling in a tidy little profit now I've finally convinced her to charge tuition," he cried, exasperated by her perverse sense of humility. He was terribly proud of her accomplishments and enjoyed boasting about her almost as much as he did his children.

"That's brilliant, Annie!" said Charlie.

"Well done," agreed Sasha.

"It's not all me. Winky is still such a huge help. And I've got four teachers helping now all excellent former Hogwarts students who are wonderful with children and content to teach elementary knowledge rather than magic," she said with a smile. "As well as put to rights the occasional unfortunate accident," she giggled.

"I'm not even bothering to ask about the twins," continued Charlie. "All I've got to do is read the latest issues of *Challenges in Charming* or *The Practical Potioneer* to see what they've been up to."

George smiled. "At least they never embarrassed us by becoming Prefect or..." and he paused to gulp for effect, "Head Boy," he muttered.

"Well, that would have been unlikely, considering they were only twelve years old when they started their seventh year courses," commented Annie.

"Still, I can't believe they were Sorted into *Ravenclaw!*" Charlie cried, pretending to be scandalized.

"Oh, don't bring it up," Annie warned his brother. "Someone's still a little sensitive about that one...."

"At least it wasn't Slytherin. I told my kids I'd disown them if that ever happened," George confessed. And while Annie had protested at the time, she admitted she didn't really understand what it meant. The point was moot, however. Aside from Louis, Lily, Rose, and the twins, an entire generation of Weasleys had once again packed themselves into Gryffindor Tower during their years at Hogwarts.

Their conversation was interrupted by music it was time for the dancing to start. After all the traditional dances were finished, George finally got a chance to spend a few moments alone with Annie. Well, in actuality they were surrounded by nearly a hundred people on the dance floor, but for all intents and purposes, no one else existed for the space of several songs while he held her in his arms.

George then looked around them at the assembly of guests: Tonks, Lupin, Longbottom, Jordan, Thomas, Finnegan, Potter, and, of course, Weasley families were all represented. A veritable smorgasbord of war heroes had come to celebrate Merrie's wedding with them. The illustrious personages were smiling, laughing, and dancing together. Charlie had taken it upon himself to twirl each of his single, unattached nieces in turn: Domi, Janie, Joey, Rose, and Lily.

"I never knew Charlie was much of a dancer," mused George.

"Lily is so lovely Harry's going to have just as hard a time with her as you've had with your girls, I'll wager," Annie offered.

"Serves him right, if you ask me. None of them ever had the proper sympathetic feeling, to my mind. Misery loves company, I suppose," he added, chuckling to himself.

"Take a look at the couple dancing next to Teddy and Victoire," she said.

George looked up to see Art and Roxy spinning slowly around, foreheads touching. "Good boy!" he cried softly, happy to see the end of his long-suffering son's misery.

George's niece, Victoire, had rested her head on Ted Lupin's shoulder, the two of them barely swaying back and forth. Even though Ted and Victoire had been a couple for several years now, they had always struck George as an odd match. Ted was such a lively, animated fellow, always friendly and game for adventure at least, he was once he got to know someone. But in George's opinion, Bill's daughter often came across as universally cold and distant.

Annie assured him he was mistaken. "She's just content to be the quiet observer, you see, rather than the center of attention. Which is a blessing, considering a lot of people with her sort of looks prefer the opposite," she explained. Her natural reticence, coupled with the fact that virtually all the other students at Hogwarts were intimidated by her stunning beauty, had combined to set Victoire apart from the crowd, quite literally.

With the curious exception being Ted Lupin. The two had been nearly inseparable from the time Victoire had first sat at the Gryffindor table next to him after being Sorted. Despite being separated from his best mates when he was Sorted into Gryffindor, he'd become fast friends with the other boys in his dorm while curiously remaining pathologically shy around the females of his house, not to mention the entire school in general. That is, until the Weasley girls began arriving at Hogwarts. To the utter astonishment of the rest of the love-struck Gryffindor boys, Teddy managed to spend loads of time with the prettiest girls in the whole school, Victoire in particular. Just like he had done for most of the years of his life, either at Mole Hill or Annie's school.

Closest in age, Teddy and Victoire's easy rapport with each other soon grew into romantic attraction once they hit puberty. And as much as Victoire's delicate, porcelain-doll-like features contrasted with Teddy's unkempt, almost feral ones, Annie claimed the match made perfect sense. She theorized Teddy's more canine attributes were perhaps comfortably familiar to Victoire, growing up as she did with Bill as her father. "If it's not part of the attraction, it certainly doesn't detract from it," she had explained.

Glad it's not my problem, George mused. "Looks like the next wedding headaches belong to Bill and Lee!"

"I would have thought you could spare a little more sympathy for your brother and best mate, having gone through what you did today!" Annie teased him. "And where is your other son?"

"Where else? He's been all night at the table with the Longbottoms, planning his latest expedition with Neville, I expect."

They danced quietly for a while longer, covering less and less of the dance floor, until finally they were spinning just as slowly as the young couples.

"Dancing with you at Bill's wedding is one of my favorite memories," Annie purred.

"Mine as well. Despite how our luck changed for the worse right after you accepted my proposal. You were a brave girl to stick with me after that," he said with a trademark wink-and-smile combination.

"I disagree. I think we've always been terribly lucky. We found each other just in time to help each other through our darkest hours," Annie claimed, a thoughtful look on her face.

"I never thought of it that way," he murmured thoughtfully. "I suppose you're right."

"Of course I am. Don't you forget it," she said, hugging him tightly.

"I have no doubt you'll keep bangin' on about it forever so I don't," he said as he leaned down to kiss her.

Then the night sky above them suddenly exploded with an extravaganza of Weasley's Wild-Fire Whiz-Bangs, announcing the departure of the newlyweds.

Recollections

Chapter 75 of 80

When Annie's children discover a tatty old shoebox filled with photographs, her history hits her hard.

Age 44

"Wake up, Gramps. Time to rise and shine."

"I will throttle you the next time you call me that," George warned her. He opened his eyes to see a dreary winter day outside their bedroom window. Icy fog permeated the air around the house, veiling the woods in the distance.

"Empty threat. You'd never catch me, old man," Annie retorted.

He could hear the smile in her voice. *She certainly woke up in a feisty mood today* he mused with delight, rolling onto his back to face her. "You're older than I am, hag," he taunted, pressing a hot button he knew would rile her further.

"And you're a bloody troll to keep throwing a difference of thirty-one days in my face," she cried, batting his head with her pillow.

"All I know is neither of us is old enough to be a grandparent!" he exclaimed, snatching the weapon out of her hands and tossing it across the room. Their daughter, Merrie, had given birth to twin boys, Liam and Ruari, earlier in the year. It *definitely* ran in the family no doubt about it now.

"Well spotted, git. And yet, somehow, we find ourselves in exactly that predicament. I blame you, of course, and your blasted ruddy Weasley fertility," she said, turning onto her side to face him and propping her head up on her elbow.

"Bloody hell," he muttered, feeling sorry for them both at the realization that faced them: They were growing old. Not just older, *bub/d*.

"Too right. I refuse to be a grownup, much less a Gran," she whined.

"I didn't mean that bit. I just realized I've been married to a hag now for twenty-five years," he teased, smiling in smug satisfaction at the zinger.

"Kiss my arse!" she said, giggling.

"With pleasure," he assured her as he rolled her onto her stomach and began kissing his way down her bare spine.

"I love it when you're so obedient," she purred as she looked back at him over her shoulder.

"I love it when you're naked," he responded in kind, looking for a moment into her violet eyes before continuing on his course.

"I love it when *YOW!*" Annie spun back away from him and scrambled into a sitting position against the headboard.

"What?" George chuckled.

"Did you just *bite* me?" she gasped in disbelief.

"You can't expect to call me 'obedient' and escape retaliation," he said, smiling with devilish glee at her reaction.

"You just *bit* me!" she cried, pulling the sheet up to cover herself and leaning further away from him.

"Sorry, I got a little carried away, all right?" he admitted, chuckling and tugging the sheet back off of her.

"Your *bite mark* is on my *arse* at the moment!" she scolded him, still in a state of shock.

He pulled her closer to him and began kissing down her belly. "I said I was sorry. Let me make it up to you...."

Annie then grabbed his chin and roughly lifted his head. "If you think those pearly whites are coming anywhere *neathere* at the moment, you are insane. Or maybe it's senility.... Do you even remember who you are, old man?" she laughed.

George smiled wickedly. Then he lunged at her, growling and snapping his teeth.

Annie was startled by the sudden, aggressive movement, crying out in surprise. Now pinned beneath him, she began to giggle.

George chuckled in response and began kissing her again. "A little adrenaline never hurts," he whispered.

Annie smiled, her eyes glinting with mischief of their own. Her fingers, which were entwined once more in his hair, closed and gave a gentle but firm tug, yanking his head back slightly. "And a little *pain* can do wonders, as well," she said softly as he sucked in a tiny bit of breath through his teeth.

Two hours later, after they had made love, eaten a light breakfast in bed, and showered, they were getting dressed together in the bedroom.

"Where's my party shirt?" he called out to her from within the closet.

"What party shirt?" she asked, playing dumb.

He stood in the doorway, eyeing her suspiciously. "You know the one I mean."

"Isn't it there?" she asked, keeping her face turned away from him.

"You bloody well know it isn't," he said accusatorily.

"It's too cold for it today, anyway," she said, changing tacks.

"Annie..." he said in a warning tone.

"Don't wear that horrible old thing. Find something else," she urged.

"*Accio* party shirt!" he said in a loud, clear voice. A dresser drawer opened of its own volition, and the brightly-colored shirt burrowed its way out from under a pile of old Weasley jumpers and flew through the air into his outstretched hand.

"You never would have found it if you hadn't cheated!" she cried. "That was a damn good hiding place!"

"Let that be a lesson to you," he scolded her. "Do not mess with my party shirt."

"I'm going to burn that bloody thing some day," she threatened teasingly.

"You'll never find it again I'll make sure of that."

"And I suppose you'll be doing the laundry from now on, then?" she countered, calling his bluff.

"Hmm... not hardly. Suppose I'll have to make it fireproof instead," he chuckled.

They went downstairs next and curled up together on the couch, sipping coffee and gazing out over the meadow separating Mole Hill and the Burrow. His childhood home was barely visible through the mist, looking even more magical because of it.

"I feel like I should be cooking something," said Annie after a long quiet spell.

"Relax. Just sit here with me for a bit. We never get to do this anymore," he complained. He was warm and comfortable with her body reclining against his.

"It feels odd, not being in the kitchen when I know they'll all be here later," she explained.

"Merrie told you she'd take care of the food for today," he said, wrapping his arms around his wife, hoping to hold her there a little longer but recognizing the likely futility of it. *She can be so ridiculously stubborn about the stupidest things...*

Annie's brow wrinkled. "I know! And why d'you suppose that is? They always seemed to like my party food before," she worried aloud.

"You're absolutely right. Just because your children asked you not to spend the entire day making food for an army at your twenty-fifth anniversary party, it means they've hated your cooking all this time," he teased.

Annie slapped his leg. "Very funny, smart-arse," she snapped. "I think I'll just make a little something anyway...."

George threw his head back and sighed with disappointment. "Don't you like just spending time with me anymore?" he whined. Perhaps a guilt trip would keep her next to him?

No good she sat up and scooted down toward the opposite end of the sofa. "How about a cheesecake? I've got some frozen redcurrants," she said, tempting him with his favorite.

"Oh, well, in that case, be quick about it, would you?" he said, sensing a lost cause and gently shoving her the rest of the way off the sofa with his feet.

"Troll!" she said.

"Troll!" he cried at the same time in a falsetto voice, anticipating her usual insult, pulling a face to mock her.

"Make yourself useful and go get the boxes of snaps Merrie and Janie want to sort through today," she directed him, launching a weak kick that was more like a shove toward him as she walked by.

He grunted exaggeratedly when her foot connected with his hip. "Are you sure that's a good idea, letting them go through those boxes?" he asked. He had nothing against the plan just felt like arguing with her for the sake of entertainment.

"That's why I'm telling you to get them *now*, so we can edit the collection before our children see them and become scarred for life," she teased.

George snorted but heaved himself off the sofa anyway. There really wasn't anything that embarrassing to be found in the collection of family photographs. The raciest ones would be Annie in a swimsuit on the beach, and they were hardly indecent. But Annie would want them removed for vanity's sake. Which was fine by George: they were all taken by him anyway, typically without her knowledge, mostly for his own amusement, which was only enhanced by the anticipation that she'd throw a fit when she saw them later. He smiled in contemplation of what would likely be a tidy little stack of bikini-clad Annie photos he'd have stashed in his bedside table before afternoon. *Why haven't I thought of this idea sooner?* he chided himself.

While Annie busied herself in the kitchen, George sat on the sofa in front of a now roaring fire, flipping through pictures and listening to some of their favorite music. Once the cheesecake was in the oven, Annie came back over to sit with him. They spent the morning sharing memories brought back to mind by the photos, laughing at the fun adventures and sighing at the beautiful vistas they had seen.

George and Annie had never taken their financial success for granted, and their home life had always been comfortable yet frugal. Their children had never wanted for anything, but their parents had been purposefully very careful not to spoil them with too many possessions. Once they'd become confident they were financially secure enough to weather most any storm, they'd chosen to splurge on travel opportunities for the family rather than luxuries or an even worse sin in their minds inheritances.

George firmly believed that the worst sorts of people, in his experience, were those who felt entitled to things without having worked for them. He'd loathed the "rich" kids at Hogwarts who'd pranced about with their noses in the air, treating everyone else like dirt and yes, he referenced one nasty snob in particular by the name of Malfoy. And while Annie hadn't had any experience with wealthy brats around Ottery (no one in town was that well off), she fully agreed with her husband that in order to teach their children the value of anything, they should be expected to earn it and take good care of it afterward. It was the way she'd been raised, after all.

Their children had always had sufficient food, clothing, and toys and never second hand, at George's insistence but not an item more than necessary. After all, it was no good to grow up in a miserly household, either, they'd decided. It might've led their children to overcompensate later, to excessive consumption just because they could. So they'd attempted to reach a reasonable balance, and by all accounts, they felt they'd been successful in providing a happy childhood for their family.

The one excess they'd permitted themselves was travel. George and Annie had been all over the world during the quarter-century span of their married life; perhaps it was a continuation of their childhood penchant for exploration. They'd rationalized that the opportunities for adventure and broadening one's mind far outweighed any guilt they might've felt for spending so much money to take all five children to so many exotic destinations. Not that they'd spent time or money in luxurious accommodations, either; the family always camped in their magical tent wherever they went and occupied their time seeing the sights, meeting Muggle and magical people alike, experiencing and learning about new cultures and lands.

Often, the destinations were determined by George's business interests: either scouting out new magical ingredients, import opportunities, or more recently, accepting invitations to speak to fellow entrepreneurs about his successful ventures. He was now considered to be something of an expert in adapting Muggle marketing and business practices for use in the magical world, as well as magical automation in manufacturing ventures. As a result, they had been all over North and South America, Europe, Australia, and even a good bit of southern Asia. They tried to avoid visiting the same place twice and were most recently looking to expand their horizons further by exploring the continent of Africa.

"Here's one that's fallen out of its proper envelope. D'you recognize it?" Annie asked him, holding up a photograph.

"Let me see it," he replied, and she handed it to him. It was a beautiful shot of the ocean. In the distance, just barely in the frame, was Annie poised on a surfboard, peeking out from behind the curl of a wave. "Hawaii," he said confidently.

"Really? Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. Without a doubt, that was taken in Hawaii. You were probably pregnant at that point," he added with an amused smile.

"Me?" she exclaimed. "Where?"

George pointed to the tiny figure that was semi-accidentally in the picture.

"How d'you know it's Hawaii? I thought the water looked more like Tahiti," she said suspiciously.

"Because you're wearing yellow," he explained. Annie looked at him in confusion, so he explained further. "Blue in Tenerife, yellow in Hawaii, green in Tahiti, red in India, ooh and the purple one in Australia..." he said in a wistful voice.

"Are you telling me you remember our holidays by the color of my swimsuit?" she interrupted his recitation, starting to laugh.

George smiled. "You remember your way, I remember mine. And at this point, my way appears to be the more reliable of the two."

They spent the rest of the morning thus occupied until their children began arriving just after noon. Joey had been staying with Janie in her London flat for the past few days while on break from school, but both girls had dutifully reported to Merrie's place early that morning to help prepare the banquet. Annie was highly entertained by watching dragonhide-gloved arms full of various dishes of food appear in the green fire, which were passed off to Janie and Joey through the Floo, who in turn carried them into Annie's kitchen.

Finally, Merrie and Ryan arrived through the flames, each with an infant in their arms. George nearly snatched the little boy in his daughter's arms from her, lifting him high up into the air. The baby squealed with delight.

"Please don't drop him, Daddy!" Merrie teased, taking off her traveling cloak.

"Liam knows he can trust me even if you don't," George scolded her, then pretended to take noisy bites out of Liam's tummy, eliciting more giggles.

"Merrie, you went overboard," Annie cried, indicating the dozen large containers of food now on her table.

"I wonder where I learned that habit from?" she teased. "And I see you made a cheesecake even though I told you I'd bring everything," she reprimanded her mother mildly.

"Oh, well, that's for your father. He insisted on it," Annie replied with a wave of her hand. George snorted in rebuttal but continued playing with Liam as Annie moved to take Ruari from Ryan. The baby boy bounced himself excitedly in his grandmother's arms, smiling and drooling at her.

"Merrie made us slave all morning," whined Janie, flopping exhaustedly on a chair and yawning theatrically.

"She wouldn't even let us use magic," Joey chimed in, joining her sister.

"Lies! You used nothing but magic all morning, you lazy gits!" Merrie laughed.

Fred arrived through the back door a minute later, having Apparated directly from Hogsmeade. He hung up his traveling cloak on the wall pegs with the rest of them, casually gave Annie a peck on the cheek in greeting, then made directly for the refrigerator. "Butterbeer, anyone?" he asked.

"In a bit," his father answered, mugging for his grandson in his arms and eliciting more giggles.

Annie watched her son and husband stand together, casually chatting, while Ruari enthusiastically gummed on her finger. Fred was a little taller than his father, yet seemed smaller due to his slighter, more youthful physique. Where George was solidly built, Fred was lean and sinewy. Having spent most of the past eight months in a Brazilian rainforest, his skin was tan and freckly. Annie knew he hadn't spent many nights under an actual roof while he'd been out in the field, touring the Amazon jungle with native witch doctors, searching for flora and fauna that were rare and unknown to European wizardry. Each specimen had been dutifully collected and shipped off to his mentor-turned-colleague, Professor Longbottom, back home at Hogwarts for further investigation.

Fred tossed his head slightly, swinging back the shaggy curls from out of his eyes. The move brought to Annie's mind his namesake uncle at age sixteen, when he and George had let their hair grow long, much to Molly's aggravation (the woman still nagged Bill about his ponytail, for heaven's sake). Now, at forty-four, George's hair was just slightly longer than most men his age, for the sole purpose of hiding his missing ear. It wasn't precisely for vanity's sake: she knew George cared little about his appearance, but since the incident that led to the injury was now so well-known as to be nearly mythologized, he preferred that the general public not be reminded of it every time they looked at him. Annie had recently noticed his still-bright red hair had just started to thin a bit in a small circle at the top of his head.

A far cry from the state of her own hair: Annie's curls were heavily streaked with grey now. Her hairdresser in Exeter had been trying to convince her to dye it for years, but she had steadfastly refused. To her mind, it was a privilege to grow old, and she had planned to do so as gracefully as she could. She had always considered her Gran to be beautiful and strong, rather than old, and couldn't imagine attempting to alter her lustrous silver hair or kind, warm wrinkles.

However, it was becoming apparent to Annie that she was aging a good bit faster than her husband. Despite her grey, Annie still looked younger than her years yet George looked younger still. It was beginning to get to her, she had to admit. Lately, she was actually starting to consider following her hairdresser's advice.

"Hello?"

Annie was distracted from her train of thought and turned to see the Jordans coming through the front door with her other son in tow.

Art spent all his free time at their house these days, but Annie didn't mind: whenever she saw her previously moody and mopey son now, he usually had a cheerful smile on his face. She took a moment to wonder if Molly had experienced anything similar when she and George had been dating. She doubted it. George had never been the mopey type, even as a teenager.

"How are the wedding plans coming, Roxy?" she asked, hugging her future daughter-in-law with one arm while balancing Ruari on her hip with the other.

"Brilliant!" she exclaimed, beaming at Art, who was beaming right back at her.

Annie giggled as she took in the haggard smirk on her friend Angelina's face that contradicted Roxy's assertion. "I owe you an apology, Annie," she groaned. "You deserved the Order of Merlin for all you accomplished with Merrie's wedding!"

"Let me help!" she offered. "There's no rule that forbids the groom's mother from being put to work, you know."

"I swear I will take you up on that," sighed Angelina. "But I refuse to think about it for the rest of the holidays!"

Everyone began making their way toward the table nearly groaning with food when one more knock came on the door. Joey bounded over to let in the last of the expected guests. "The Macgruders are here, Mum!" she called out as she accepted hugs from their old family friends.

Jane and Alec considered Annie's children to be nieces and nephews of a sort and often participated in Weasley family celebrations. They had never taken the time out from pursuing their careers for a family and doted on Annie and George's children instead. The Weasleys welcomed them with open arms, as was the family habit.

Annie gazed about the table at her family gathered once more around her. Merrie and Ryan looked tired and happy and grateful to have a chance to eat a meal uninterrupted for once while someone else entertained the twins for them. Annie could commiserate, having survived a set of infant twins herself. For all their exhaustion, the young couple still looked blissfully in love. In their own way, they were the mirror of herself and George at that age, Annie reflected.

Ryan Murphy had landed his dream job at the Ministry after finishing school, working with the Department of Magical Games and Sports as a liaison for coordinating the Triwizard Tournament every four years. George had confessed to Annie at the time that it was a sweet position perhaps the only Ministry job he could ever be tempted to accept for himself. The traditional competition had started up once more soon after the war was over, with the idea that international magical cooperation and friendship was never more necessary to prevent a similar nightmare from ever happening again. Annie, however, was thankful that the timing of the most recent Tournaments had

been such that none of her children had been eligible to participate. She would never be able to forget what happened at the Tournament when George had been at Hogwarts, nor the nightmarish fallout that followed.

Merrie, on the other hand, was happily busy at home. Like Annie, motherhood agreed with Merrie. She spent her days caring for, playing with, and loving her baby boys. To Annie's utter delight, Merrie was planning to bring them with her to the infant school, as Annie had recently hired her daughter to work in the daycare portion of the business. She would start early next year, once the boys had turned one year old. Annie was immensely looking forward to spending her days with them.

Janie sat next to Merrie. The two sisters looked so much alike, but were diametrically different temperamentally. Where Merrie was always sensitive to other's feelings, Janie would run roughshod over them if she suspected an ounce of hypocrisy or caught a whiff of oppression. As easy-going and cheerful as Merrie was, Janie was equally brash and impatient. Both young women understood the world they lived in was imperfect, but while Merrie always attempted to soothe ruffled feathers and gently make small improvements around her, Janie reckoned she knew how to fix the whole job, and everyone else would do well to either follow her direction or get the hell out of her way.

She's Harriet now, Annie corrected herself, for Janie used her given name professionally at the Ministry and had been causing quite a stir there for the past year or so. Uncle Percy had pulled strings and gotten what he had considered a plum position for his niece within the Department of International Magical Law. Janie's troublemaking reputation at school had been glossed over by Percy, who instead touted her NEWT accomplishments to his superiors, which were far more important in his mind anyway. It wasn't long before Uncle Percy was made to pay for that misjudgment.

Janie had been sent to America for a year to a magical embassy of sorts after only three months in London spent berating her superiors and colleagues alike for being snobs, idiots, and hypocrites. At the time, being shipped off to a foreign embassy was akin to being banished especially the *American* embassy, for nothing of interest was ever happening stateside, according to the biased British Ministry counterparts.

But Janie had been a bit happier there, in the States, where pureblood superiority was not so deeply entrenched into the society. She loved the polyglot culture, where wizarding traditions from all over the world met, blended, and (to her mind) improved. She spent her time there soaking it up, plotting and planning how to implement similar improvements once she got back home to Britain.

Oh, and Janie had fallen in love.

Elliot Baldwin was a good-looking American boy filled to the brim with sky-high idealism. He had met Janie at a hospital in Salem, Massachusetts, after she had gotten into a scuffle with a Muggle criminal who had been attempting to rob a little old lady. Janie had wound up with a broken finger for her troubles. The mugger had gotten the worst end of it, of course, but would never remember how his nose got broken. Elliot the Healer had splinted her finger, given her a tiny dose of Skele-Gro, and sat with her for two hours while the potion did its work. They went on their first date as soon as his shift was over, enthusiastically discussing possible ways to provide magical healing to the underprivileged and underserved the world over.

After her tour of duty in America, Janie had been politely *un*invited to return to her position within International Magical Law. Instead, Uncle Percy shifted his problematic niece off onto another relative: Aunt Hermione, in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Hermione had been working in an understaffed and unpopular sub-office, dedicating her efforts to ending pro-pureblood laws for several years now. Unsurprisingly, working with her aunt turned out to be Janie's dream job, as well as a turning point in her life.

Harriet Jane Weasley had finally found her true calling. She had a lawyer's keen mind and an activist's powerful drive. She worked tirelessly, combing through ancient law texts, finding each and every obscure law that discriminated against wizards with Muggle blood, and writing an iron-clad, uncontestable law that overturned it. She and Hermione were peas in a pod, happy to spend the day together railing against the stupidity of the hypocrites who supported the idiotic status-quo. The problem was they managed to offend most of the people who could "grease the wheels," so to speak, and get the laws passed. They were reluctantly coming to the conclusion that it might be in their best interest to recruit a *gulp lobbyist* to help them in that capacity.

So now, Annie's middle daughter sat before her at a difficult crossroads. The only thing clouding Janie's happiness now was the fact that while her professional soul was singing, her emotional heart was hurting, for Elliot Baldwin was still in Massachusetts. They kept in touch via letters posted by Muggle air mail, (Owls tended to be unreliable across the Atlantic and somewhat slower than jet airplanes. Plus, it was just so much more romantic this way.) and promised to visit each other whenever possible, pining for each other in the meantime.

Annie could relate. For seven years she'd felt the same way, missing her best friends. She'd experienced the same misery, separated by a vast, seemingly insurmountable distance from the boy she loved for what had, at the time, felt like ages. Her heart went out to her little Janie.

Her sons sat on opposite sides of the table from one another. As usual, Art sat with his arm casually wrapped around his fiancée, Roxanne Jordan. They were seldom much further apart ever since they'd finally overcome their fears of rejection, apparently attempting to make up for lost time. Annie could tell that while Art participated in the conversation of the table, Roxy was always at the center of his attention, even as he and Fred would spar teasingly, launching insults at their siblings and laughing at inside jokes.

Annie wondered if all twins behaved the same way, or if it was something special about Weasley ones. Art and Fred were so much like George and Fred had been a generation ago that it was almost painful for her to witness their banter. And like history repeating itself, the one named Fred was content to remain single while his twin brother was eager to marry the love of his life as soon as possible.

Not that Annie had any inkling her son Fred was anything like her friend Fred had been when it came to love nor would she want to! No, her son seemed perfectly dedicated to spending his life out and about, discovering the world for the sake of science, rather than chasing women. *Maybe later he'll decide to settle down*, she thought. But she had learned her lesson from Molly's bad example: Annie swore to herself that the last thing she would ever do would be to nag him about it. She would not drive Fred away from her like Molly had nearly driven Charlie.

Next to Annie sat her youngest daughter her baby little Joey. Georgeanna had never caught up to her peers in stature, remaining petite and slightly built despite an appetite like a Weasley male. She was the only one of her daughters who kept her curly, dark red hair cut short, wearing it in a style almost identical to Annie's. She had a little less than six months left at Hogwarts and only two more Quidditch matches in which to defend her spotless record of consecutive victorious Snitch-snatches (Annie was very proud of herself for coining that term) before fulfilling her father's and uncles' life-long dreams for her: playing professionally for the Chudley Cannons. Only Aunt Ginny had been at all disappointed with the decision, hoping instead for her niece to play for Holyhead, even though it would have meant Ginny giving up her own spot on the team as Seeker.

Joey had been heavily recruited in her sixth year by nearly every British team once word had gotten out about her astounding talent. She and her parents had had a very serious discussion about her quitting school altogether to begin her professional career that much sooner. While Annie had calmly explained her position that it likely couldn't hurt to spend one more year in school George had carefully remained neutral, pointing out pros and cons for both sides of the question. Annie appreciated what a struggle that had been for him, for she knew he reckoned the sooner his daughter began playing, the sooner she would raise the Cup wearing his beloved orange and black.

"You left school early, Daddy," Joey had pointed out.

"True. And it was the right decision for me at the time. But you have to decide what's right for you and not just follow in my footsteps without a good reason. Your mother *did* finish school, you know, and that was a good decision, as well," he had argued.

George and Annie had promised to support her no matter what her decision. In the end, she decided to play for Gryffindor for one more year, extending the house's Quidditch Cup winning streak to an almost guaranteed ten years running. Annie wasn't exactly sure what had been the deciding factor in Joey's decision: she had, in fact, been willing to bet her daughter would have chosen to start playing professionally as soon as possible. For Joey seemed to be born for Quidditch.

Georgeanna Weasley was tiny built like a bird, in fact. Her delicate-looking frame somehow concealed remarkable balance and muscular strength. Nothing could knock her from a broom, not even point-blank Bludger hits (each of which had resulted in a near-apoplectic fit on the part of her mother). Joey had ridiculous flexibility as well, performing acrobatic feats in midair, literally dangling from her broom at times to snatch victory in her hand.

Annie had recognized the determined, excited look on her daughter's face whenever she flew on her broom. She imagined it represented something akin to the satisfaction Annie felt when she ran: the joy of being in control of one's body, driving it to perform, exerting itself to reach a goal.

Once the family had finished the feast and Merrie had put the twins down for a nap in the cribs in the twins' old room George had re-erected for just such use, they gathered around the boxes of pictures and dug in. The girls squealed and giggled at the photos of themselves: plump little infants, snot-nosed little toddlers, and grubby little tomboys in pigtails, denim overalls, and freckles.

"Ah, Cape Canaveral in the States! This trip's still my favorite," said Art, marveling again at the rockets and computers. He held the photo out for Roxy to look at with him: he and his brother were standing with their father, looking ant-like next to a space shuttle.

"That's because you're a geek," teased Janie.

"And you're a pest," he joked back.

"Ooh, this one's adorable!" cried Jane. She held a photo taken on the family trip to India. It was of Annie and her daughters, only just their four pairs of feet were in the frame. The four of them had spent the morning together while Indian women had decorated their feet with henna, and the reddish-brown swirls and dots were strikingly beautiful against the girls' pale, rosy skin.

"That was a lovely trip," said Annie, nodding. It was easy for her to summon back to mind the sights and wonderful smells of it. She was lost for several moments in a reverie.

"Oh my... Joey, look at this!" exclaimed Janie. She passed a photo over to her sister, who was sitting next to Annie.

"Mum! Is that you?" Joey exclaimed with a giggle.

Annie looked over at the photo and gasped in surprise. The sight of it felt like a punch in the gut. It was the photo George had taken of her on the sailboard, afloat on the ocean, that summer so long ago.

"It might as well be you, Joey. Mum could practically be your twin!" laughed Janie.

"Where did you find this?" whispered Annie, still immobilized by the shock of it.

Janie looked slightly confused by her mother's reaction. She understood, of course as everyone in the family did that her mother abhorred all pictures of herself, but this was extreme even for her. "Here, in this little box," she replied, indicating a well-worn shoebox barely held together with packing tape.

"I don't think your father meant to bring that box down," Annie said softly.

"What have I done now?" George asked, appearing at Annie's shoulder. He glanced at the picture Joey was holding. "Whoa! That's a blast from the past," he chuckled, taking the photo from Joey's offering hand. "My God..." he muttered, smiling with the memory of that week on the beach.

"Hand me the rest of that box, will you, Janie?" Annie requested. These photos had not been part of the bargain.

But it was too late. Everyone was peering into her past now. Stacks of Annie's teenage years had already been distributed to the assembled crowd.

"Hey, this must be Uncle Fred!" said Art, sharing the snap with his twin brother.

"And look, this must be Dad and his brother in the tree fort!" exclaimed Merrie, who was sitting on the other side of Annie.

George looked over his daughter's shoulder and exhaled sharply at the sight of the snap: he and his twin, their arms around each other's shoulders, mugging stupidly for Annie and her camera. They had been eleven years old she had just gotten her camera as a gift for her birthday, and these snaps had been the first roll of film she'd ever shot. Annie reached out for George's hand, and he squeezed hers for support in return.

"Did you take all these, Mum?" asked Fred, flipping casually through the banks of Annie's memory. "Most of mine are snaps of Dad and Uncle Fred at the shore.... What are you, Dad maybe thirteen, fourteen at most?" he said, chuckling at their antics captured on film.

Annie was struggling to maintain some semblance of her composure. She felt blindsided, unprepared for the onslaught of such ancient, powerful memories. She nodded rather than spoke.

"Here's one at the Burrow. Must be someone's birthday," Joey chimed in, holding a photo of a grinning George accepting a slice of cake from his mother.

"Dear God, Annie," George whispered, having sunk to his knees, reaching out for the photo still in Merrie's hand. "Look at us!" The smile on his face was equal parts amused and pained.

Angelina was holding a profile portrait of Fred at age fifteen, tears beginning to well up in her eyes. "Look how young, how beautiful he was," she whispered. She turned to Lee, who put his arm around her in comfort. "We were all so young," she lamented quietly.

Lee nodded. "He was a good mate. I wanted to kill him a few times, but he was a good mate," he replied.

"Mum," asked Janie softly, kneeling in front of her and presenting yet another photo. "Is this her?"

"Ah," cried Annie softly, and tears finally won out and began to roll. It was Gran, looking lovely and warm and alive. She was kneeling in the garden, her head framed with a riot of colorful blooms in the background. Her sparkling, smiling blue eyes were patiently and lovingly looking straight at Annie, right through the lens of the camera, across decades of time.

"Sorry, Mum," muttered Janie, reaching out to take the photo back.

"Are you all right?" asked Merrie, putting her arm around Annie.

"It's fine, girls," Annie assured them, wiping her tears from her cheeks. "Just a bit of a shock, is all. I haven't looked at these for ages, you know. Yes, this is your great-grandmother, Meredith."

"What was she like?" asked Joey. "You almost never speak about her...."

"You're right, and that is very stupid and selfish of me not to share her with you more," Annie conceded. "My Gran was beautiful and wonderful, and she would've been over the moon proud of you lot," she gushed, a sad smile on her face.

"She was the sweetest person I ever knew," Jane chimed in. "She was the very essence of kindness. I liked her the moment I met her."

"She was a great lady," added George. "Strong and clever and funny. I loved her very much, and I still miss her."

Annie looked at her three daughters' curious faces surrounding her. It was time for them to know about Gran the whole story. Probably overdue, she thought. If she had been a stronger, a braver person, she would've seen it sooner.

"Meredith Griffin was born on the twelfth of June, 1918 in Caernarfon, Wales. Being Welsh was something she was always terribly proud of. She was the only child of David and Tegwen. She married my grandfather, Llewellyn Jones when they were nineteen and then moved to Ottery St. Catchpole just after the second Muggle war with Germany was over. He was a mechanic worked on airplane engines for the RAF, then civilian engines after," she explained.

"Cool," commented Art, intrigued to think of the possibilities of tinkering with Muggle airplane engines.

"Nineteen. Just like us," Merrie mused aloud with a smile, patting her mother's leg.

Annie smiled back at her, then continued. "Gran said she and my grandfather had pretty much given up hope for children, and then, sixteen years after they had married, Carys was born."

"Your mother," added Merrie.

"Yes. My mother," Annie replied. It was difficult, even now, to use the phrase. It seemed the furthest thing from the truth, actually, to refer to Carys as a mother. "She was twenty when my grandfather died quite suddenly of a stroke. He was young only in his fifties."

"And that's when your mother lost her mind and ran away," said Janie.

Annie looked at her with surprise. Had George told her? Or Molly, perhaps? They were the only two who would have known, the only ones she had ever told the whole story to. "Yes, in a manner of speaking. She wasn't strong enough to handle the sadness of it, so she tried to escape. She ran away from Gran, made friends with some bad people. She started getting into real trouble." Annie paused, unsure if her children would have any frame of reference to understand what she was trying to say.

"Then you were born in London," prompted Joey. "And you were very ill."

Annie nodded. Somehow they had the basics of it already; that was apparent. She didn't mind they had a right to know, in a way. It was perfectly natural for them to be curious. It was an odd feeling, though, to realize they had known so much about her all along.

"Several years later, yes I was born premature and ill. You see, my mother was unable to curb her drug habit while she was pregnant with me. I was born addicted to something called heroin...."

"Oh!" exclaimed Jane, covering her hands with her mouth. She had never heard the details of the story before, either. Annie understood the significance of Carys' addiction would weigh more heavily with her and Alec, as Muggles themselves. She gave her friend a reassuring smile, then pressed on.

"And she left me in the hospital when I was twelve hours old."

There. She had confessed her deepest, darkest secret out loud to her children. Merrie began crying silently next to her. As a mother herself, it hit her particularly hard, just as the pain of it had resurfaced for Annie when Art and Fred were newborns. This was why she had never broached the subject with them before: why would she want to inflict such discomfort on anyone else her own children, especially? She had just been shielding them from it, all these years hadn't she?

"Jesus," muttered Alec in shock.

"Oh, Annie!" cried Angelina.

"How did you... I mean..." mumbled Lee.

"How did I survive?" she asked. "That part's easy my Gran. She took it all in stride. Drove to London, gathered me up, and brought me home here to Ottery. Never gave it a moment's pause. She was an angel, my Gran," Annie said with a smile, hoping to cheer her audience's sad, stunned faces.

"You're a lot like her," George said, pressing his hand to her shoulder.

Annie reached up and patted his hand. "Thank you, love. I consider that the greatest compliment I could ever receive," she said. She reached out and touched each one of her daughter's cheeks in turn. "Forgive me for not telling you about this before now. It's a difficult thing for me to talk about, but that's no excuse. You deserve to know how incredible your great-grandmother was. Ask me anything, if you like," Annie offered.

"Did she know about... Dad?" Merrie asked.

"About magic, you mean? Yes. She figured it out at the very end," Annie replied.

"At your wedding? In the hospital?" verified Joey, piecing a familiar part of the family history together with one the revelations of the moment.

"Just after. Twenty-five years ago today, as a matter of fact." For just as yesterday was the twenty-fifth anniversary of her marriage to George, today marked the anniversary of Meredith's death. "She called your dad my 'handsome fairy tale prince' come to take me away. Just goes to show you she couldn't see all that well in the end," Annie joked, struggling to lighten the mood of the room, wiping a few more tears from her cheeks.

George mussed her hair in teasing retaliation, and she gently batted his hand away.

"Are you certain she was a Muggle, Mum?" asked Art.

Of all the questions she had steeled herself for, this one came out of the blue. "What do you mean?" she asked, shocked.

"Well, actually, it's a little pet theory of Granny's," he confessed.

Annie's jaw dropped open in astonishment.

Fred picked up where his brother left off. "Granny thinks that somewhere down the line, you've got wizard blood in the family, most likely on the maternal side."

"But then again, no one knows who your father is, either," added Art. "Could be he was a wizard."

"Maybe you're a half-blood too, Mum," laughed Janie.

"Why on earth would anyone think...?" Annie sputtered.

"Granny says she first got the idea after she saw your Gran's garden," Art said.

"Which was then reinforced when she was helping you set up the one here at the Hill," added Fred.

"She was impressed by how you knew all about the different plants, where they belonged together in the garden, and when to plant them according to the moon," said Art.

"And what they were used for," said Fred.

"But that's all just folklore and old wives' tales my Gran told me," she said, dismissing their outlandish idea. "I figured it was just coincidence they always did so well. I kept doing it out of a sense of tradition, or loyalty, or something. I never really gave it much credence...."

"No, it's not. It fits with pretty much everything we learned in Herbology, actually," argued Art.

"Uncle Ron always says your pies are magical, too," added Joey, making everybody laugh.

Annie turned to look at George. "Have you heard of this before?"

George smiled, shrugged, then nodded. "Yeah, Mum mentioned it to me," he said, chuckling.

"When?"

"After the twins began, you know, showing off," he said, laughing. "She thinks they get all that *latent* from you."

"I don't understand. I'm a *Muggle*," she cried, still flabbergasted by the suggestion. "*You're* the wizard, George."

"Okay... you know how Ginny was the first Weasley girl born in a long time, and when that happens, magic tends to concentrate in that child?" George explained.

Annie nodded. She was familiar with the story of why Ginny seemed so powerfully magical to the others in her family, even if she had never really seen it for herself.

"Well, then at some point you must've told Mum about how you and your mum and your Gran were all only children all girls and she wondered how far back that trend might have gone. How maybe the twins were the first *boys* born in your family for a long time...."

"But *you're* the wizard, George. Not me. The magic comes from *you*," she said once more.

"But Mum, you can't say for sure that there's absolutely no wizard blood in your family, either. I mean, maybe a few generations ago, a witch or wizard married into your family in secret," argued Joey.

"It happens all the time, you know," added Merrie with a wink for her mother.

Annie shook her head, giggling. "This is all very amusing, you lot. But I think I have proven beyond a shadow of a doubt over the years that I am a Muggle, through and through. Believe me, if I could have summoned a scrap of magical power, I would have turned it on you kids in a heartbeat!" she joked, and everyone laughed.

"But what is a Muggle, anyway, Mum?" argued Fred, still serious and intent on continuing the discussion. "I mean, where do you draw the line? What constitutes magic, and what isn't? Both Muggles and wizards summon control over the same forces and matter in different but equivalent ways: in one world, it's called technology, and in the other, magic."

"On the other hand, how many magical feats are performed by so-called Muggles everyday and merely chalked up to odd coincidence, blind luck, or divine intervention?" Art proposed. "How much active power do you have to have before you're considered a wizard? Or a Squib? Or a Muggle? What if it's all just latent inside you?"

"This is turning into a very profound conversation," commented Lee, an amused smile on his face.

"And how does anyone explain how wizards and witches get born into Muggle families, if that term even means anything anymore?" Fred continued. "If it's genetic, which I, for one, am convinced of, I can't believe the very same spontaneous mutation or mutations happen that often, over and over again, year after year, all over the world."

"So you're saying it's always present in the genome and just activated in magical people somehow?" Art suggested.

"I think that makes the most sense," Fred agreed. "Everyone in this room, Muggle and magical alike, could likely all have the same magical gene or genes. Just some of us have been turned on, some haven't."

"Fascinating idea," mused Art, sounding impressed.

"Mind-boggling," added Angelina.

"My brain hurts," whined Joey.

"My ears hurt," complained Janie.

"I'm hungry. Anyone else care for more dessert?" asked Ryan, heaving himself out of a chair.

"Hands off my cheesecake," warned George.

Resemblance

Chapter 76 of 80

George and Annie make a shocking discovery in a nearby Muggle village.

Chapter 76: Resemblance

November 2027

Age 49

George and Annie were spending a chilly, drizzling fall morning running errands together in a nearby town.

"Let's stop in and say hello to Beth Macarthur," Annie suggested as they approached her friend's shop. She had discovered, while planning Merrie's wedding, that Beth's artistry in flowers was combined with a calm sensibility that benefited any mother-of-the-bride and had made a friend of her in the years and weddings since.

George agreed to her suggestion and parked in front of the florist's shop.

"Annie! George!" a squat little lady called out in welcome from behind an enormous bouquet of roses as they entered the shop. "What can I do for you today?"

"Nothing, just stopping by to say hello," Annie replied cheerily, "and to say thanks once again for all your help with Janie's wedding flowers." Their daughter Janie had finally married her American beau, Elliot Baldwin, earlier that fall in a very small and quiet ceremony at Mole Hill.

"Two weddings in two years! You're going to wind up with all my money," George lamented. "Are you certain we're all settled up?"

The little florist cackled with an infectious laugh as she nodded, tossing George a long-stemmed red rose. "On the house, that one," she joked. "I ought to be giving you a volume discount after that other extravaganza!"

"I'll take it!" George cried. "Any chance you'll consider making it retroactive?" Then he put the stem of the rose between his teeth, turned to Annie and wiggled his eyebrows. Both women laughed at his antics.

The extravaganza they were referring to was Fred's wedding to Alice Longbottom a year ago, which had been an enormous undertaking to the point that Annie suspected Janie's strictly-immediate-family guest policy at her own more recent wedding had largely been a backlash against it. Annie and Hannah Longbottom both had been astounded by how rapidly the thing had grown out of control. Between Neville's popularity as Hogwart's professor and war hero, Hannah's business associates and social connections through the Leaky Cauldron, and the Weasleys' own enormous family, simply addressing the invitations had nearly crippled Annie (until George took notice and bewitched a quill to take dictation).

The bridal couple had been quite amused by how their vision of a simple little wedding had quickly taken on a life of its own and had jokingly offered to elope (like both sets of their parents had done) in order to save everyone the hassle. But Neville had put his foot down in refusal of that suggestion, even in jest. According to him, the Longbottom family had waited a long time to celebrate a wedding, and no one was going to deny them their happening. Annie had smiled everyone knew it was really Neville's grandmother who had insisted on the big to-do. And as she was nearly 110 years old by now, who was going to argue with her? So the huge wedding, bankrolled almost entirely by the Longbottoms, went off as planned. But far from being a pompous or stately occasion, it had been a gigantic, laid-back party. It ended up being the social event of the year: people were still talking about it a year later.

"That makes four down, one to go," Beth pointed out. "My first thought when you came in today was that it must be the littlest one's turn."

"Oh, no. My Joey will stay Daddy's little girl forever," George averred, only slightly joking. "If I have to lock her in a tower, even."

"You'll have to forgive him, Beth. My husband lives in a fantasy world. We'll be back, mark my words!" Annie laughed. After all, Georgeanna was twenty-two now and had been dating Landon Wood for years. It was a foregone conclusion that a wedding would be in the works before much longer.

They bade goodbye to the friendly florist and headed out the door. As they strolled down the street, now that the drizzle had stopped, George continued the conversation begun in the shop. "Joey is far too focused on her career now to think about boys," he said, more to reassure himself than to actually argue with Annie.

"Men, you mean," Annie corrected him. "And women are very good at multitasking, don't forget. For instance, I can walk and chew gum at the same time," she giggled as George tripped on a crack in the pavement at that very moment.

"You're trying awfully hard to get me riled today," he teased her grumpily, knocking her into the wall with his hip in retaliation.

"Not at all! I'm only trying to get you to open your eyes to reality. Landon isn't some passing fad, you know," she retorted, purposefully clipping his feet with her toes three times in a row before he lashed out in irritation and put her in a headlock.

"I grant you Oliver's boy is a very nice young fellow, but she's at the top of her game at the moment. And he plays for an opposing team, now they're not in school together any longer. No reason to complicate things with romantic distractions," he said. "Plenty of time for that to come...."

"You sound like Percy used to," she mumbled into his elbow. "So much for you being the enlightened one," she said, finally squirming out of his grasp.

"This is completely different," he argued, releasing her.

"Only because it's *your* daughter," she retorted.

"For Merlin's sake, she just won the Cup, you silly woman," George laughed. "Why would she be thinking of anything else?"

"Since when does being in love preclude all other pursuits? Even ones as pointless as Quidditch?" she countered.

"Careful, now," he warned her in a voice that was still slightly hoarse. "You're dangerously close to slandering the Cup champion in my presence."

Annie smiled. "I was cheering just as hard as you were, and my ears are still ringing, even though that match was over a week ago! And her teammates might argue the point that the *Cannons* won the Cup, not Georgeanna Weasley all on her own."

They laughed together then, holding hands and enjoying the memory of the happy celebration that had followed the match. It had been a chaotically ecstatic scene at the stadium when Joey had caught the Snitch, winning the British & Irish League Championship Cup for Chudley for the first time in 135 years. The screams of the Cannons supporters had built upon the roaring volley of actual cannon fire to deafen her, and her ribs had felt bruised for days from when George had grabbed her and spun around in happiness, nearly falling off the rickety stands and breaking both their necks.

"Her teammates would freely admit it would have never happened without her, to a man. She's the most brilliant Seeker in an age, and every Cannons supporter thanks their lucky stars for her," George disputed in characteristically overly-enthusiastic form.

"First and foremost, her Uncle Ron," Annie giggled.

"Yeah, at least I wasn't openly weeping for a day and a half afterward," laughed George. "Blubbing git," he added affectionately.

"Ooh, look. I haven't seen this one before," Annie exclaimed as they passed by a festive-looking little shop decorated for the upcoming Christmas holiday. "Let's go in and do a little early present shopping."

George's eyes lit up at the tantalizing window display of the toy store. "All right, I'm game," he agreed, holding the door open for her.

"Good day to you! Let me know if I can help you with anything," a voice called out from a back room.

"Thanks, we'll be fine on our own for a bit," Annie called out in response.

She and George strolled up and down the aisles in search of gifts for their five grandchildren.

George started to play with a remote control car on display. "Let's get these for Liam and Ruari," he suggested, somewhat distractedly.

"Says here they're for ages eight and up," she argued, reading the box. "The twins are only five. And the RF remote won't work at their house," she added in a whisper. Merrie and Ryan lived in a thoroughly magical residence in a wizarding neighborhood of London.

"They're already smarter than the average eight-year-old," he argued back, boasting in exaggeration. His body leaned and jerked in a misguided attempt to steer as he drove the little car up the aisle. "And the remote will work just fine at *our* place," he added as he guided the car to weave in and out of the boxes of the floor displays.

"Why don't you cut out the middle man and just buy one for yourself? That way your grandsons won't cry on Christmas morning when you hog their toys," she teased him.

George smirked at her and, in his distraction, caused the little car to crash into a large basket of toy cricket bats, toppling them. "When did you become such a hag? Oh, right I forgot: you were born that way," he said, sticking out his tongue and surreptitiously tidying the bats up with a wave of his hand. "I'm going to ignore you until your crabby mood improves," he muttered, righting the toy and then following it down the aisle.

Annie rolled her eyes before strolling into the next aisle, which was stocked with several different kinds of blocks. She found some plastic interlocking ones especially made for small hands and selected an assortment of each for the three-year-olds in the family: Art and Roxy's little George and Merrie's little girl, Maureen.

Annie was often struck by how her oldest daughter's life paralleled her own in so many ways: married at nineteen, twin boys a couple of years later, followed by two daughters, the oldest of the two named after her grandmothers. *Well, the timing of my own twins was a bit different* Annie laughed to herself. Merrie's way was far more sensible, she reckoned, not following quite so hard on the heels of her wedding day. All four of her daughter's children had blue eyes and flaming red hair, looking far more like Weasleys than Murphys. Annie had teased Merrie to expect another girl in two years and wished her better luck with the delivery than she'd had with Joey.

Merrie's littlest, baby Meg, was only a few months old. Annie smiled with nostalgia as she picked out a blue dragon from a wall of stuffed animals for her, confident Merrie would get a kick out of it as well.

Just then, the little car crashed into her heels. She spun around to find her husband smiling wickedly. "Look where you're going, why don't you?" he chided her.

"I'm standing still! I see you're no better at driving little toys than you are the real thing, klutz," she scolded back. "Look," she said, holding up the dragon. "Snorty redux."

George laughed and caught the stuffed dragon she tossed at him. "Brilliant! For Meg, I assume?"

Annie nodded with a smile.

"Good old Snorty," George mused, referring to Merrie's constant childhood companion. "She was a dragon of many talents and very poor health, if I remember correctly."

Annie set the two containers of blocks on the counter as George set three remote control cars and the dragon next to them. "Three of them? Are you serious?" she teased him. "How old are you?"

"Older than eight, so shut up," he retorted.

"Physically, maybe," she teased him.

"Dad will love one, as well," he added as he flicked at her earlobe with his finger.

Annie rolled her eyes yet again at her husband's immature-little-boy streak. "I'm sure he'll get a chance to play with it because you're so good at sharing," she said sarcastically while ducking out of the way and batting at his hand. "Help me find something for Jordan," she ordered.

Art and Roxy had two beautiful little boys now George and Jordan and the family lived in a cozy little house in Hogsmeade. The boys had pale cocoa skin, a smattering of freckles on their cheeks, deep brown eyes, and light brown hair with the faintest hint of red in it. Roxy had decided to stay at home with Art, raising their boys together while helping him out here and there with his research and publishing. Like both her mother and father, she had a good store of musical talent as well and often played her guitar and sang at the local pubs in the evenings. Annie's son and daughter-in-law made an excellent team and were very obviously deliriously happy together.

She and George made their way through an aisle full of infant toys, perusing the shelves and finally selecting a toy with several buttons that made objects pop up for their little one-year-old grandson. "He'll love this!" Annie assured George.

As they strolled up to the counter with the final toy, Annie teasingly asked, "Are you sure you're finished? Got everything *you* wanted?"

George smirked. "Wish they had a slingshot," he replied, miming shooting her in the backside.

She giggled and stuck out her tongue.

"I think we're ready now," George called out to the shopkeeper.

Annie sucked in her breath when the clerk emerged from the back room. He was slightly bent over and looking down, clapping his hands in an attempt to shake off the Styrofoam packing material stuck to his arms by static electricity. He began to speak to them while still gazing toward the floor.

"Thanks for being so patient. Just got a new shipment in for the holidays...." His voice trailed off when he looked up at the couple at the counter.

Annie was so shocked she nearly forgot to breathe. *The same red hair. The same brown eyes. Tall and solidly built. Even the freckles!*

Annie glanced at George, who was staring at the young man just as gobsmacked as she was: his eyes were round as saucers, his mouth hanging slightly open. She looked back to the shopkeeper, who had fallen silent as well, staring at George like he had just seen a ghost. His brow furrowed, as if he was struggling to understand what was standing in front of him.

"You?" he stammered, his eyes searching George's face, unable to fully voice the question.

George slowly shook his head. From behind the counter, the young man's face further crumpled in confusion, then he glanced at Annie. He dropped his eyes quickly when she met his gaze. The young man stared down at the boxes of toys, avoiding further eye contact, and began to ring them up.

"Is this a new store?" Annie asked nervously, trying to ease the awkwardness of the situation. Meanwhile she was feeling somewhat faint. *Is it really possible? Could he really be...?*

"Erm... yes. Just opened last summer," the fellow mumbled, hazarding another sidelong look at George.

"Congratulations, it's wonderful," she complimented him. The young man smiled slightly in response. "Is it yours?"

The fellow nodded, looking pleased with himself for a moment.

"Forgive me, but you seem rather... young... to be such a successful entrepreneur," she said carefully *What other explanation could there be...?* She swallowed hard, desperately trying to summon command over a wave of nausea at the thought. *All this time, and we never knew!*

"I just turned twenty-nine this spring, actually, but everyone always thinks I'm younger than I am," he explained. "My girlfriend says I have a boyish face," he added.

"You do indeed," Annie said softly and a little sadly.

She handed him her credit card to pay for the toys. He looked at it for a long moment, as if considering what to do next. She watched as he ran his fingers over the raised letters of her name.

"Can I see some ID, please? I'm supposed to ask everyone, you see," he said.

"Certainly," Annie answered, pulling out her drivers' license.

"Weasley," he mouthed silently, pretending to check the data, then nodding to indicate she could put it away. "These toys for your own kids, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley?" he asked, obviously fishing for information.

"Grandkids, actually," George answered, verifying his assumption they were married by not contradicting it. "Our children are all grown up now," he added, eagerly offering more information than the fellow'd asked for. "My name's George... George Weasley. And you are...?"

The young man stared hard at George, as if torn between a desperate craving for more information and what was possibly an old, bitter resentment that was beginning to flare, if his instincts were correct. The craving won out.

"Ben Furlong," he replied. The young man held out his hand for George to shake.

George accepted it, looking him directly in the eye. The two of them stared at each other, hand in hand, for a whole minute. Ben's jaw began to twitch as he ground his teeth in what looked like frustrated, mounting anger. Annie suspected he was probably squeezing George's hand hard enough to cause pain perhaps the resentment was beginning to win out over the curiosity.

George wrapped his other hand around Ben's. "Look, I'm not who you might think I am... but we do need to talk," he said gently.

Ben released George's hand, and George pulled a business card out of his jacket pocket. "Please call me... when you're free," George added.

Ben took it, chewing on his cheek, deep in thought.

Just like he used to, Annie thought, feeling another stab to her heart. The young man once more looked searchingly at George, then at her. Annie nodded, hoping to encourage him of their sincerity. "Please call us," she pleaded. "It's important to *both* of us, Ben," she added.

Ben's expression added surprise to the confusion, clearly unsettled by her calm, less-than-furious reaction, as if he expected her to feel as angry as he apparently did. After all, if the young man's assumption was correct, her husband was a philanderer. He nodded silently.

"Soon," George urged. "I hope you'll call soon."

The young man took a deep breath but did not answer. George and Annie collected their purchases and made their way silently out the door.

Five minutes later, Annie was behind the wheel, per George's suggestion. She sped down the tiny, empty road that would bring them back to Mole Hill in the shortest amount of time.

"George... we don't really know..." she began, breaking the silence first.

"Come off it, Annie! Did you not see that boy?" he cried.

"Man, you mean. Young man. Of course I saw him. And I admit he bears some resemblance..." she replied, but didn't get a chance to complete her sentence.

"Bears a *resemblance*?" he yelled incredulously. He punctuated his declaration by slamming both palms on the dashboard. Annie hushed him, but he persisted, only slightly less loudly, "He's either Fred's or mine, and I should hope by now you know the odds of the latter are zero!"

"Calm down!" she demanded. "George, we can't know for sure.... Let me finish, goddamn it!" she cried as he snorted and rolled his eyes.

"Sorry. Go ahead," he said with only a bare modicum of forced patience, struggling mightily to control himself at the moment.

"We don't *know* that he's Fred's son," Annie countered. "We don't know anything at all about him: where he's from, what his childhood was like. There could be a perfectly logical explanation that doesn't involve your brother."

"You can delude yourself if you want, but that was *Fred's boy* back there! I know it!" George cried. Looking back over his shoulder out the rearview window, as if he could catch a glimpse of the young man once more, he worried, "I shouldn't have left things that way I should have stayed, tried to explain it so he can understand. Maybe we should turn around right now," he wondered aloud, staring pointedly at the steering wheel in her hands, drumming his fingers on the dashboard.

"We will do no such thing!" Annie cried, desperate for him to listen to reason. "How do you imagine this is all going to pan out, George? That he's going to just say, 'Oh, looky there, my daddy was your twin brother, and that makes you my uncle, so let's all have Christmas together, now pass the pudding...?! That's truly idiotic, I hope you know,'" she scolded him.

George pursed his lips together, displeased with her lack of enthusiasm and unswayed by her assessment of the situation.

Annie pressed on. "If he *is* Fred's child, then who is his mother? What did she tell him about the circumstances of his birth? How will she feel about our sudden appearance? What did he have to deal with, growing up? Ben may have absolutely no interest whatsoever in hearing what you have to say, depending on the answers to those questions. And it's his right *not* to know, if that's what he chooses. You can't force this on him if he doesn't want it."

"Listen, I respect your opinion, but not everyone had your bad experience," George countered. "Just because you got a shitty deal doesn't mean he did."

"I grant you that," Annie argued. "But seeing as I am technically the only actual dictionary-definition bastard in this vehicle at the moment, you have to admit I have a mite better perspective on it than you do, love. And judging by his initial reaction and he clearly thinks you're a lying sack of adulterous shit at the moment, in case you didn't notice I'm betting my read on the situation is slightly more accurate."

"Annie... that was *Fred's child*!" he yelled at the car's ceiling, clenching his fists in frustration. "How can you expect me not to care? To just leave him behind like this? Like I don't know he exists?"

"Of course you care! And I care, too!" she yelled back. "But you have to let Ben come to you," she urged him a little more quietly, a bit more calmly. "If you go marching back there, insisting he's your kin, you will either piss him off or scare him away. Give him some time to digest this and come to you. Let him decide when he's ready."

George drummed a staccato beat with anxious fingers on the dashboard, pondering her suggestion. "Tonight," he conceded. "If he doesn't call by tonight..."

"One week, minimum!" cried Annie. "I will tie you up and sit on you if necessary!"

George laughed despite himself at what he considered to be an empty threat.

She was slightly relieved to hear some of the tension in his voice dissipate. "We will wait a decent, reasonable amount of time, and if he still hasn't called us, then we'll discuss our options."

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Annie was grateful she didn't have to carry out the threatened punishment. That afternoon, Ben called and offered to meet them that evening at a restaurant in town, his eagerness apparently on par with George's. Although what exactly he was eager for—reunion or revenge—was still up for debate in Annie's mind.

On the way to meet him, George and Annie drove in silence as the sky darkened from twilight to full night. George was far calmer, far more rational, now that Ben had agreed to meet with him. He had taken the call from Ben, so she was relying on him to accurately relay the young man's tone. George had dismissed all her concerns outright, but she didn't want to take any chances.

"George... you don't think he's... *magical*... do you?" Annie asked. She was feeling nervous about the possibility of a full-out wand battle if the discussion turned unfriendly.

He shook his head right away. "Can't be. He told us he's the same age as our boys. Surely we would have seen him at Hogwarts, if he was."

"Maybe that means he's not who we think he is," she pointed out. "I mean, all of our kids were born with it, and the rest of the family...."

"Please don't try to argue that with me at this point. He's Fred's boy, and I couldn't care less if he's a Squib," he replied, staring out ahead of the car.

"I suppose you're right," she said.

After all, how many coincidences have to pile up before one is forced to admit something? Ben Furlong was practically the spitting image of Fred, and therefore her own husband, as well. And Fred's history of—well, sleeping around, to put it bluntly—ancient though it was, certainly opened up the possibility of Fred's parentage. The timing fit perfectly as well: Bill and Fleur had just celebrated their thirtieth wedding anniversary this past August. Fred had been particularly... *social*... that summer leading up to Voldemort's *coup d'état* at the Ministry and the wedding's subsequent ambush. George himself had often snuck over to Ottery that summer whenever his brother was out to secretly spend time with her.

"What are you going to tell him... about that?" she asked.

"I have no idea," he confessed, sighing and dropping his shoulders in defeat.

"May I make a suggestion?" she said softly.

"Of course," he replied.

"Don't. I think it'll be hard enough on him to accept the fact he has a father he'll never get a chance to know personally. It would be cruel to pile one more unbelievable disappointment on top of that," she argued gently.

George nodded, conceding the point for the time being. "Okay, I won't. For now, at least. But it feels sort of wrong... dishonest, somehow... to deny such a fundamental part of Fred. His son deserves to know the kind of man his father was."

"I suppose so," Annie sighed. "Just... not that bit—not yet, George."

They drove slowly through the little town and parked near the meeting place. As they approached, they could see through the restaurant's window that the young man already sat at a table alone, waiting for them. He looked up as they entered and made their way to the table.

"Hello, Ben," Annie greeted him quietly. The restaurant was busy but not loud, and she prayed he wouldn't make a scene.

"Hello, Mrs. Weasley," he replied.

Annie thought he sounded reasonably calm, considering the bombshell that had been dropped on him this morning. "Please, call me Annie," she asked him.

Ben looked uncomfortable with her suggestion but didn't refuse outright. All three of them sat down at the table.

"Look, let's just get down to it, all right? Are you my father, Mr. Weasley?" Ben asked. He stared at George with an intense gaze, clearly fearing his answer as much as he was hoping for it.

"No, Ben. I'm not," he replied.

Ben snorted in disbelief. He looked at George with contempt, sparing a telling glance at Annie. "Forgive me if I don't believe you. I'm sure it was an impressive snow job, whatever line you got your wife to swallow. After all, what's one more lie, eh? On second thought, I hope you don't forgive me. I hope you're pissed off. Why did you even ask me to call you, anyway, if you weren't going to admit it? Bloody arsehole..." he snapped. He pushed himself away from the table and began to get up from his chair.

"Wait! Ben, please sit down," Annie begged.

George had silently and deliberately pulled out a photograph from his jacket pocket while Ben was ranting. He set the picture on the table in front of Ben. *So that's what he was doing in the guest room closet this afternoon*, Annie thought when she realized what it was.

The young man's expression melted from suspicious hostility to startled confusion. He slowly sat back down, picking up the photograph.

"That's me and my twin brother, Fred. We were about fifteen in that picture. I'm willing to bet you looked just like us at that age," George explained softly.

"Twin brother?" Ben mumbled, his mind reeling.

The three of them sat silently at the table for several minutes as the young man processed this newest bit of information.

"Ben, if you don't mind.... Would you tell us about your mum, dear?" Annie asked quietly.

Ben considered the request, staring at the photo for several more moments, then nodded. "My mum never told me anything about my real father. I grew up thinking my stepdad was.... Then, about four years ago, my mum was killed in a car accident. Not long after, he told me the truth—said she'd always meant to tell me, now that I was grown up, but never had the courage, I suppose," he said, tears beginning to well in his eyes.

"I'm so sorry about your mum, Ben," Annie said, patting his hand. He wore the pain of his grief for his mother on his sleeve, and it tugged at her heart.

He looked up at her with no small amount of consternation. "Thanks. Anyway, he said she told him about it a long time ago—that she just made a mistake when she was young and got herself in trouble. He never knew who it was.... She'd always told him it was a foolish one-night stand and she regretted it except for the fact that I was the result. My stepdad married her when she was pregnant with me and raised me as his own. The bastard that got my mum pregnant never showed his face again," he said, his voice growing angrier as he told the tale.

"Ben... I can assure you my brother never knew about you," George began.

"So what?! That's no excuse! He never came back 'round or tried to see my mother again. He left her behind with no way of reaching him, to tell him about me...."

"You're right. That was wrong of him," George admitted.

Annie knew it killed George to say it to betray his brother's memory by disparaging him even slightly but he was trying to be as honest as possible with this young man. In George's mind, all Fred's sins were absolved the moment he perished in the battle so long ago. Whatever his brother's faults were, they paled in comparison to the shining good in him, the heroic sacrifice he had made. Annie was inclined to agree but for a different reason: for all his gifts and faults, Fred never had the chance to develop the wisdom gained from a bit of suffering in life, to later come to grips with stupid choices made recklessly in youth, to redeem himself.

"Damn right it was *wrong* of him. So where is he? *Your brother*, the miserable bastard?" Ben made it sound as if he was still a bit dubious about George blaming it on a twin brother. Annie could admit it all would seem rather convenient to an outsider.

George sighed. This was the part he was looking forward to the least. Annie took his hand for support.

"Ben, my brother is dead. He was killed when we were twenty years old. I'm guessing you were maybe a few months old when it happened," he said quietly.

Ben looked like he'd been sucker punched. "Jesus Christ!" he gasped. The angry look on his face struggled to fight off the tears that were threatening to fall.

"I'm so sorry, Ben," Annie said again, tears of her own beginning to course down her cheeks, hating the fact they were hurting him so undeservedly. "This must be some kind of nightmare for you."

"He's dead? My real father is dead?" Ben asked, begging either of them to contradict him.

At least he was no longer blaming George for being the perpetrator, Annie noted. George barely nodded at the young man, struggling to maintain control himself. Meanwhile, Annie answered him. "If Fred is truly your father, then yes, he is," she said as gently as she could.

"How did he die?" Ben asked, staring unseeing at the table.

Annie shot a look of warning at George, urging discretion, and he nodded slightly in response.

"It was in a battle, actually," George explained carefully.

Ben looked even more startled. His head snapped up to look at George once more. "He was a soldier? In the army?"

George pursed his lips, then nodded reluctantly. It was true, after a fashion, Annie supposed. Better to save the details of that particular explanation for later, if ever.

"My mum never told that to anybody," Ben muttered softly. "I never knew...."

"She might not have known either, Ben," Annie suggested. "I'm guessing that they were both quite young, Fred and your mother, when they met." Annie didn't think it was a question of *if* they'd met not really, not anymore.

Ben thought about what she said, then nodded reluctantly. "She was twenty-one when I was born. My dad stepdad, I mean told me she never blamed the bloke for it, never was bitter. Said she went into it with her eyes open and knew it for the fling it was.... I guess it was just easier for me to think ill of the bas... I mean, of the guy, than it was to think badly of Mum."

"I don't think badly of either of them, really," Annie offered. "Young people make mistakes... and your mum made the best of it, that's clear. I mean, look at you! She must have done a wonderful job to raise such a nice young man."

Ben chuckled and looked at her sideways. "You don't know me, Mrs. Weasley... but thanks. And you're right. My mum and dad... stepdad... were great."

"Ben, I can assure you that if my brother had ever known about you, he would have done right by you and your mother," George averred. Annie could hear the rest of his thought as clearly as if he'd shouted it: *I would have made sure of it!* He leaned his body on the table, closer toward Ben, trying to convince the young man of his sincerity.

Ben looked hard at George, sighed, then gave him a slight smile. "Are there any more of us? I mean, have I got any half-brothers or sisters?" he asked.

George hesitated for only the briefest of moments, and shook his head. "Fred never married."

Ben snorted softly, not fooled by George's answer for a moment. "So, none that you know of, you mean," he said with chagrin.

Annie took advantage of a lull between them and spoke up. "Ben, Fred was a very dear friend of mine for a very long time. We grew up together. And while I admit that, yes, he was reckless and immature when it came to love he was also a wonderful human being. He was kind and brave, trustworthy, clever, and funny as hell. He spent much of his short life trying to help other people and lost it defending their right to live freely. He had his faults, I won't deny it. But he was a good man. I still miss him every day. He would have loved you and been proud of you, I know it."

"I wish I could have known him," whispered Ben, staring at the photograph once more.

"I wish you could have, too," said George softly. After a short pause, he added: "Listen... would you like to come to dinner some time? Meet the rest of your family?"

Annie shot him a look, warning him it was too much, too soon. She was worried if he moved too quickly, Ben would be scared off, lost to them forever once more. Sometimes George could be too determined for his own good.

"The rest of the family?" Ben asked, curious.

George nodded, beginning to smile. "You've got six uncles and five aunts, not to mention fifteen cousins. And a set of grandparents who will definitely want to know you."

"You really think your brother was my dad, then?" Ben asked.

"Looking at you... yes, I do. It seems an inescapable conclusion to me, at least. But I suppose it's possible that it's just a remarkable coincidence...."

"How do I know it isn't really you?" Ben said, finally voicing his nagging suspicion.

George sighed. "You don't. You can't. You just have to take my word for it."

"Would you take a paternity test?" Ben dared to ask.

"Ben, Fred and George were identical twins. A paternity test wouldn't be able to distinguish between them...." Annie began to argue.

"Yes, I would," George interrupted her. "It would at least prove you belong to our family. That you're a Weasley." He and Annie had, in fact, discussed paternity tests that very afternoon while waiting for Ben to ring them. "If you want to think it was me... well, then, go ahead. It's the least I can do for Fred's son."

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Two weeks later, Annie sat next to her nephew at the dining table in her own home. George had participated, per Ben's request, in a paternity test. Three days later, the results had come as no surprise: there was a 99.99% chance that George, and therefore Fred as well, was Ben's father.

"For what it's worth... I do believe you," Ben had offered that morning as he and George sat flipping through old family photographs. "When you say that you aren't my father, I mean. I figure nobody could really make this whole mad story up," he added with a laugh.

He smiled at Annie. She knew her reaction her implicit trust in and calm acceptance of George's explanation had likely helped to convince him.

"Thank you... for your trust," George replied simply. "It means a lot. I know this hasn't been easy for you...."

"A bit of an understatement," Ben muttered.

"Right," George laughed. "But, Ben... I can't tell you how much it means to me to have found you. I feel like... like it's a bit of a miracle, actually," he said, sounding incredulous, as if he couldn't believe it himself.

"I know what you mean," Ben agreed. "Like it can't really be real this whole 'instant family' thing."

"Thank you for agreeing to do this, by the way," George added.

Just then, before Ben could respond, Annie darted over to the door. She had caught a glimpse of her in-laws as they were walking up the path between their homes. "They're here," she warned them softly.

"So, Annie, dear," Molly said as soon as the door was thrown open, "What's all the secrecy about? I hope you didn't go to all the trouble of a surprise party. Surely we've all learned our lesson with those," she laughed, hugging Annie and kissing her cheek.

Arthur wore his usual bemused expression, standing slightly behind his wife as always.

"Come in, Molly, Arthur," Annie said, taking Molly's hands and leading her into the house. "Thanks for coming over. Like I explained, George and I have someone we want you to meet." Annie directed their attention to the dining table with a wave of her hand.

After a second's initial shock, Molly uttered a startled cry, then covered her mouth with her hand, presumably to stifle any further shrieks.

"Oh my God," whispered Arthur.

The resemblance apparently struck them the same way it had George and Annie.

George rose to face his parents. "Dad, Mum, I'd like you to meet Ben Furlong: Fred's son."

Conviction

Chapter 77 of 80

A sensational Prophet headline sends the Weasley family into a tizzy.

Chapter 77: Conviction

May 2031

Age 53

Annie and George were startled awake early one spring morning by vigorous pounding on the back door of their house.

"What the bloody hell?" mumbled George, lifting his head slightly, momentarily, but otherwise not moving.

The pounding continued even louder now. The window of the door rattled with the abuse.

"Allow me, you lazy git," Annie scolded as she rolled reluctantly out of bed. She dressed quickly and trudged halfway down the stairs before discovering with irritated disappointment it was Ron at the back door. He smiled and waved at her, encouraging her to hurry up and let him inside.

"It's your idiotic baby brother!" she called back up the stairs, tempted to go back to bed rather than deal with him. It was far too early in the morning to be faced with Ron in such an excited state.

"No brother of mine is stupid enough to wake me this early on a Saturday morning, not even him," George replied, his voice sounding muffled, as if his face was pressed against a pillow.

"Think again," Annie replied. She reconsidered leaving him there Ron did look rather agitated, after all and continued down the stairs, praying no family catastrophes had happened overnight.

"What the hell do you want, Ron?" she asked, bleary-eyed, as she opened the door. Ron had years ago been forbidden from entering Mole Hill via the Floo or Apparition, having interrupted the marital congress of his brother and sister-in-law one too many times, and was instead required to noisily announce his presence non-magically via the doorways.

"Seen the paper yet today?" he asked, waving his copy in front of her.

"No," she yawned. "By all means, do come in," she said sarcastically as he blew past her on his way to the kitchen.

"You won't bloody believe it!" he cried. "Got any coffee?"

"Send him away before I hex him!" George yelled from upstairs.

"Oh, shit... I didn't do it again, did I?" Ron asked, looking stricken and a bit frightened. The consequences had been severe, last time. His nose was still slightly off-center.

"If you had, I wouldn't be nearly so pleasant to deal with right now," she retorted, scowling with a sleep hangover and straightening her hastily donned pajamas.

Ron grinned at her, apparently amused at the state of her hair (as most people were when they caught her before her morning shower). His smile did little to appease her aggravation at being so rudely awakened so bloody early.

"One more time Ron, what the *hell* are you doing here?" she asked impatiently.

"Read the headline of today's *Prophet*," he said while filling the teakettle with water, jerking his head toward the paper he had tossed onto the dining table. "I reckon that'll make it clear enough. How do you turn this ruddy thing on again?" he asked, jabbing at her stove with his finger.

"Try turning the knob," she said in exasperation. "You can figure out how they all match up, can't you?"

Ron smirked. "Just read it," he commanded.

Annie took a seat at her dining table and unfolded the paper. What she read there made her eyes bug out. "George get down her~~e~~*ow!*" she cried.

"See? I told you!" said Ron triumphantly.

"Have you got rid of him yet?" George asked loudly.

"He's making coffee," Annie called up. Just then, telltale green flames flared in the fireplace, announcing the arrival of another visitor.

"I cannot bloody believe it! Have you lot read the paper today?" yelled Ginny as she bolted out of the hearth across the living room, holding her copy aloft like a torch.

"Did I miss the memo declaring my house a bloody common room?" bellowed George from the bedroom.

"Get your lazy arse down here!" Ginny yelled back. "Harry's on his way, Annie. He offered to pick up some pastries from the bakery for breakfast I told him we'd all turn up here eventually, and you shouldn't be made to feed us."

"Hermione's obviously got a shitstorm to deal with at the office but said she'd be here as soon as she could." Ron added.

Annie nodded in understanding. Bill was likely due here any minute now, she figured. Maybe Fleur as well. She started pulling out enough coffee mugs for a crowd from the cupboard while her eyes were still glued to the paper, reading the lead story.

"What in the name of Merlin's ingrown toenails are you idiots bangin' on about?" George hollered from the head of the stairs. "It is 6:20 in the *morning* on my goddamn *Saturday off!*"

"*Read the paper!*" the three of them cried in unison. Ginny tossed hers at him, almost succeeding in hitting him in the face.

"Jesus Christ!" he muttered as he took in the headline. "Is this for real?"

"It's in the *Prophet*, isn't it? Must be!" Ron exclaimed facetiously.

"I can't believe it. He's *dead*?" George mumbled. "Lucius motherfucking Malfoy is dead?"

"Not just dead *murdered!*" cried Ginny.

"Poisoned by his own bloody house-elf!" Ron added with a morbid leer. "Kinda poetic justice, innit?"

"Poor Hermione. She's got her work cut out for her on this one," Ginny mused.

"Excuse me? Did you just say, 'Poor Hermione?' I mean, a bloody human being has just been murdered!" Ron sputtered.

"That's being generous with the term 'human being,'" snapped George. "And the son of a bitch had it coming from eleven different directions." George included himself in that elite group but refrained from voicing such a sentiment.

Flames erupted in the fireplace again. "Have you seen the morning paper?" Bill cried as he leaped from the hearth. Fleur darted out of the flames a mere step behind him. But the rest of the crowd ignored them.

"Says here the elf claims it was self defense; that Malfoy commanded her to... Jesus, this can't be right... *to kill* her own mother? Because she was too old to serve anymore?" Annie cried in disbelief. Her heart twisted at the thought of Winky and Doozy, and she quailed to think of breaking this shameful news to them. *Damn Malfoy!*

"Bloody Malfoy piece of shit," growled Ginny, echoing Annie's sentiments and shaking her head in disgust.

"That poor creature deserves a medal, as far as I'm concerned," George swore, throwing Ginny's copy of the paper back at her and dashing back into his bedroom. "A parade! A statue in the Ministry Hall of Heroes! Some small reward for services rendered above and beyond the call of duty to humanity for ridding the world of that scum-sucking dirtbag!" he called out.

"How do you really feel about it, George? And don't mince words this time," Annie chuckled darkly.

"What she'll get is a one-way ticket to Azkaban," Ron argued. "Any way you look at it, poisoning's premeditated. No matter how justified it might've been, they're not going to let an elf get off with murder."

"Not if I can bloody well help it, she won't!" cried George. "You said Hermione's at the Ministry this morning?" he asked, wiggling his feet into shoes. He had just reemerged from the bedroom and was still pulling on his shirt at the same time.

"Yeah so?" Ron answered.

"Annie, I've no idea how long it might take. But I'll ring when I can and keep you posted," George said, plunging down the steps two at a time.

Annie had a good idea what George had in mind. "You can have all of what's in the Ottery bank, too if she needs it," Annie told him as he kissed her goodbye.

George smiled at her in understanding and gratitude. "Come on, Ron let's go."

"But I haven't had any coffee yet!" his younger brother whined. "Where are we going?"

"To bail out that elf. Legally or otherwise," George announced as he grabbed his brother by the arm and marched him toward the fireplace. "Thank God I happen to know an Auror or two, as well as an excellent solicitor...."

It turned out to be the trial of the century. Not since the second fall of Voldemort had the wizarding world been whipped into such a furor. Every wizard in Britain talked about nothing else for months. The whole thing quickly moved beyond the simple question of Dippity's guilt or innocence in the murder of her master, but to the very heart of wizard-elf relations. What constituted too much to ask of a being under enchanted servitude? Was it the duty of an elf to obey its master unquestioningly in all things, or was it instead reasonable to expect it to refuse to commit a crime as heinous as matricide?

Hermione was, of course, thrilled that the discussion of elf rights was on everyone's lips. Donations and memberships to S.P.E.W. soared. But while many magical folk seemed to agree the little creatures deserved some recourse from abusive treatment, no one was willing to abandon the practice of elfish servitude completely first and foremost, the elves themselves. Hermione was disappointed by this, but still and all considered the whole situation to be the first in a series (hopefully) of small victories for the rights of non-wizard kind.

The fact that the elf's late master was none other than Lucius Malfoy actually helped rather than hurt her. While he'd been alive, Lucius's money and dastardly reputation had worked extremely well for him, getting him out of many legal scrapes as well as greasing the wheels to promote his own subversive agendas. However, now that he was dead, he was much less of a threat. Wizards and witches previously intimidated by his wealth or status or power now found themselves in a new position: free to make up their own minds without coercion.

Draco had little success trying to convince the Wizengamot or the press, for that matter that his father had been an innocent victim. Ron wasn't the only person who viewed the murder as a form of poetic justice: everyone knew the family's Dark history, and no one was willing to give the Malfoys the benefit of the doubt yet again. Lucius was bewitched into joining the Death Eaters the first time, then somehow had a change of heart after rejoining them for the second go-round? "*Not bloody likely*," was the general consensus. He might have escaped a sentence in Azkaban, but Lucius Malfoy was the furthest thing from *innocent*.

Not to mention the fact that for the first time ever, a Malfoy found himself up against pockets that were just as deep as his. No matter how much money Draco spread amongst the more shady denizens of the Ministry's halls, someone else inevitably countered with more. Mysteriously, no expense was spared in the defense of Dippity the house-elf all of it put up anonymously, of course.

While Janie had made far too many political enemies during her time at the Ministry to take a public role in Dippity's defense, it was her brilliant legal mind that came up with the strategy used to defend her. The elf's defense team successfully argued that since elves knew right from wrong, they could not expect to avoid legal punishment for any crimes they committed. However, since elves were magically bound to obey their master, a master who commanded them to commit a crime must be held responsible as well. By illustrating how Dippity understood that if she refused her master's command, he would just order another elf to do the job and she since she had no legal recourse outside the family she was bound to serve the only way for her to stop a murder from happening was to kill the murderous master who ordered it.

The argument didn't get her off completely. The elf was still found guilty of murder, but rather than condemning her directly to Azkaban, the Wizengamot agreed to charge her with a fine of one thousand galleons. The older, more conservative members all figured that since no elf had money of his or her own, it was as good as a death sentence, and justice had been served. However, an anonymous wizard came forward to pay the fine that very afternoon. The elf was released into the mysterious person's custody without setting foot inside the prison and was never heard from again.

Interestingly, the Wizengamot, in its infinite wisdom and sense of justice, found Lucius posthumously guilty as well. Eager to get their hands on the Malfoy fortune one last time, his fine was exorbitant, since imprisonment was an impossibility. For the rest of his life, Draco Malfoy subsequently whinged about his supposed penury to anyone who would listen.

Coincidentally, on the first Monday following the trial, a free elf named Doty came to work at the Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes production facility. She and her aged mother took up permanent residence in the closet of an executive office on the premises. For the remainder of their lives, the devoted elves would sing the praises of the good and generous Mr. Weasley to anyone who would listen.

Passing the Torch

Chapter 78 of 80

Breakfast gets interrupted by an unexpected owl, and George and Annie's dinner guests drop a surprise proposal in their laps. Or at least it's a surprise to George.

Chapter 78: Passing the Torch

September 2041

Age 63

It was a gorgeous Saturday morning: the sky was stunningly beautiful, clad in a deep blue sapphire color that could only ever be seen in autumn and adorned with puffy white clouds that seemed to purposefully avoid blocking the sun for any length of time. Leaves were just beginning to turn, so little spots of color could be found tucked surprisingly amid a sea of green in the forest encircling the meadow.

Annie and George were seated at their dining table, eating breakfast and chatting. Every few minutes or so, George would share something he read in the paper with his wife. She would nod or make a noise to let him know she heard him, but mostly, her attention wandered.

"The house is too quiet. I miss having Hannah here," Annie lamented, sipping her coffee and popping the last bit of toast into her mouth.

She and George had spent a fortnight in Brazil in July with Fred and Alice and his young family, then brought eleven-year-old Hannah back with them for a few weeks before school started. It had been so much fun to visit Kings Cross Station on September first once more, setting their granddaughter on the Hogwarts Express and waving as it pulled out of the station. It had been nineteen years since they had done so with one of their own children.

And Hannah Augusta, named after her maternal grandmother and great-great grandmother, was a darling thing: dark brown hair with a hint of reddish highlights, deep brown doe-like eyes, and bronze skin. She and her younger brother, Frank, were being raised by their parents in the Amazon rainforest, and both could scramble through the enormous trees like the monkeys they often chased after. She spoke Portuguese, Spanish, and the indigenous tongue of the local tribe as fluently as she did English. Their granddaughter had been a joy to be around and get to know over the summer.

"I know what you mean," George mumbled absently. "I think your company leaves something to be desired, as well."

Annie chose to ignore her husband's latest teasing insult and poured herself another cup of coffee instead. "This is almost the last of the beans we brought home. I told you we should've brought more."

"I suppose we'll just have to make plans to go back, then," he said with a half smile. "Maybe we can squeeze in a trip after the new year."

George had spent the last forty years building up the Wheezes business, hiring many talented wizards during those years who had, over that time, developed a deep loyalty to him. The whole enterprise practically ran itself by now. Similarly, Annie had worked hard with the school, which now boasted a small but dedicated staff of teachers and a reputation for excellence as well. Annie did little day-to-day teaching anymore, focusing most of her energy on administrative duties and helping Merrie with her enormous new undertaking: a sister school in London. Both their ventures had succeeded to the point that he and Annie were now free to devote a good deal of their time to one of their greatest loves: traveling.

They were currently making plans to visit Japan later in the fall, and George was at least as excited about riding the Muggle bullet trains there as he was about pulling off one of the greatest wizarding-business-coups in recent memory: opening up trade with the notoriously secretive Japanese potion-making industry. Rumors had abounded for ages about the unrivalled potency of Japanese potion ingredients, and by some stroke of genius, he had convinced several professional potioners' consortiums there to exchange their knowledge and access to stores of ingredients for his engineering expertise in the field of magical automation.

"Are you busy with plans today?" she asked him, an idea beginning to form in her mind.

"Nothing that can't be put off," he replied, sounding keen. "The boys are coming later for dinner, I think."

Yes, indeed she knew well that their twin grandsons, Ruari and Liam, were planning to come to the house tonight for a meal, as well as for a crucial conversation with their grandfather about their future in the business. George had been thrilled when the boys had come to him when they were fourteen, asking for summer jobs at the shop in Diagon Alley. He had raved about their work ethic, cleverness, and sound business sense—praise that only grew in its effusiveness as the boys returned to their jobs each subsequent summer. This past spring, they had finished their studies at Hogwarts and embarked on full-time employment with Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, and George couldn't have been more delighted.

Ruari and Liam had come to her several weeks ago, wanting to gauge her opinion and pick her brain for suggestions on how to approach their granddad with their latest plan. Annie was happy to help and convinced it was a magnificent idea as well. She knew that if they proposed it in the right manner, George would be enormously pleased with his grandsons.

"Let's go to Dartmoor today and enjoy the last bit of sun," she suggested. The day's lovely weather would someday soon spoil into the usual cold and rain of the season, and she disliked wasting a moment of it indoors. And ever since they were children, Dartmoor National Park had been one of their favorite places to enjoy the natural beauty of the land they had been raised in.

"Brilliant idea. A stretch of the legs sounds nice," her husband agreed, folding the newspaper and setting it down next to his plate. "D'you fancy a drive, or should we just pop over there?" he asked casually.

Annie had grown so used to magical modes of transportation over the years that the question didn't faze her in the slightest. She was about to tell him that she didn't care and offer to let him decide when an unfamiliar owl screeched at the back door. They both looked at each other with mild surprise for a moment, then Annie stood up. She set their dishes in the sink on her way to the back door, then opened it to allow the large bird entrance into her home.

It flew directly to the table, and George removed the letter from its leg. "It's for you," he said as the owl exited the house and headed back off to whence it had come.

"Me? Who's it from?" Annie asked as she returned to the table, expecting to hear a grandchild's name. They were her only correspondents, for the most part. She and George had eight of them at Hogwarts this year, three of them on two of the Quidditch teams. George was carefully planning their travels around the various matches of the season. It was a source of immense pride for him that he had never missed a match where their grandchildren or their daughter, Joey, who still played professionally for Chudley, were playing.

"Governing Board of Hogwarts, it says," he said quizzically.

"But they've been hounding you for a decade to join. Why would they be sending something to me?" she asked, confused.

"Well, I don't know, do I? Maybe they think you could persuade me," he suggested with a smirk.

"They're idiots, then. Everyone knows you never listen to me," she said with a roll of her eyes.

George snorted. "Name one thing you've asked me to do that I haven't!" he protested.

"Did I miss the Tickling Tentacula getting pruned this week? It keeps trying to goose me whenever I hang up the wash."

"Other than gardening chores," he argued.

"Been to see the dentist lately?"

He sighed theatrically. "Something *important*..."

"Your teeth *are* important especially at the rate you eat," Annie ribbed him.

George loudly snapped them shut and chuckled. Annie laughed at him, then opened the letter. She was forced to hold it out as far away from her as her arms could reach, attempting to bring the handwriting into focus.

"Need me to read it for you?" he laughed.

"Shut up," she warned him as she reluctantly slid reading glasses onto her face.

"Four eyes," he mumbled loud enough for her to hear.

"You know, it really is astounding to me how you have resisted any and all civilizing influences over the years. You do realize you are sixty-three years old, do you not? Grow the hell up, already!" she admonished him, pretending to be cross.

"The last thing you want is for me to act my age," he warned, looking over his mug at her as he took a sip.

"Perhaps you could attempt to mature beyond adolescence, then," she snapped sarcastically.

"You weren't complaining about my teenage tendencies an hour ago," he laughed, leering at her.

"Okay... mentally, then," she laughed with him. She finally turned back to the letter. Annie was silent for several minutes as she read it, then read it again.

"Having trouble with the big words?" he teased her. "Just break them into smaller bits and sound them out."

"Sod off," she said without lifting her eyes from the letter.

"Kiss your grandchildren with that mouth?" he needled her. After another moment, he spoke again, impatiently. "What is it, already?"

"This can't be right," she muttered, brow furrowed, reading through it once more.

"Someone in trouble? Hannah doesn't seem the troublemaker type, really," assuming the letter must then refer to their temporary guardianship of their granddaughter while her parents resided in South America. "At least not to the point of getting herself *expelled*. At least, not her *first* term."

"They want... *me*?" she asked no one in particular, refusing to believe what she had read three times now in the letter.

Her husband snatched it from her hands and perused it quickly. "Well done you, prat." He smiled and tossed the letter onto the table.

"It doesn't make any sense," she said, wrinkling her forehead in confusion.

"Makes more sense asking you than it ever did asking me! I hated school. Always have, always will. Poor McGonagall would've had a stroke if I'd've joined the Board. They only wanted me for a donation, anyway. Ever since I gave 'em money they've left me in peace. But you... you're a *famous* teacher, after all, with your ever-so-brilliant schools," he said, lingering on the final *S* to emphasize the plural, referring to the school she and Merrie had started last year in London, and managing to sound only slightly patronizing. "You should do it," he encouraged her.

Annie shook her head slowly. "I dunno...."

"Imagine that a Muggle on the Governing Board of Hogwarts!" he chuckled.

"That's just it. It must be a joke," she said. Suddenly, a thought occurred to her. "Are you behind this? It isn't even real, is it?" she asked, turning the letter over in her hands, looking for clues of forgery.

"My God, your paranoia knows no bounds, does it?" he cried, rolling his eyes but smiling all the same.

"Lesson learned the hard way, love," she said, smirking at him. But the letter looked genuine enough to her. "Maybe they want money from me as well? A bit of milking the same cow twice?"

"Doubt it. You've kept the fact that you're independently wealthy well-hidden from absolutely everyone else but me. They probably think you know something about education," he argued.

"Not *magical* education! What the hell do I know about teaching spells and potions?" she cried.

"Well, they're not asking you to *teach* it, git," he said.

"What are they asking for, then? What does the Governing Board do, anyway?" she asked as she left the table and walked toward the back door.

George followed her. "Well, they have great boring meetings, don't they? About sucking money out of people by promising to carve their names on a wall somewhere a trick I accomplished in your honor *for free*, mind you about half a century ago now," he said, referring to the Annie Jones Memorial Boys' Toilet on the seventh floor. "And they figure they've got the right to stick their noses into loads of things they know nothing about, like curriculum and getting professors and headmasters sacked for no good reason. That's about it, as far as I can tell."

"You make it all sound so glamorous. I can't wait to start," she laughed, offering sarcasm for sarcasm.

He'd held up her jacket and was now helping her into it. *You* don't have to be that way, you know. You could be a force for good... a bit of desperately needed common sense... a voice of reason," he encouraged her with a smile.

To protect his balding head from the sun, he donned a tatty blue baseball cap with an embroidered *B* on it a long-ago gift from his American son-in-law to commemorate their visit. Annie smiled, recalling George's opinion of the American national pastime: "Imagine nearly forty thousand people spend ten galleons or more apiece to watch paint dry for four hours! At least there's beer, thank Merlin." He had appreciated the frenetic action of the ice hockey game far more.

"Come on, let's get going already," he said. "It's no use standing here arguing about it. You know I couldn't care less about the state of magical education in Britain these days. As long as they continue to let the house teams play Quidditch, they can do whatever else they sodding well want," he said, holding the door open for her.

"Oh my, yes. God forbid anything threatens to interrupt bloody Quidditch Cup matches! Why, I think the world might just stand still without them!" she snapped back.

"I will not tolerate blasphemy in this house, woman!" he warned her as he put her in the gentlest of headlocks and pulled her out the door.

They spent the morning and early afternoon strolling leisurely along the trails in Dartmoor. George considerably kept his pace moderate so that Annie could easily maintain a similar one. It was not that he was more fit than she was, but that his legs were so much longer than hers. Annie prided herself that, although her days of running were well behind her, she still walked frequently for exercise and looked younger than her age because of it.

Many of those walks now occurred with her youngest grandchildren in tow, exploring the extensive forest lands belonging to the Weasley family. Janie's youngest daughter, Meredith, and Joey's children twins Harry and Charlie and little baby Ginny all attended her school, at least for the time being. Starting next year, little Ginny Wood would be the only student calling her "Gran" at school. Of course, she still had several grand-nieces and -nephews Ron's and Ginny's grandchildren who always greeted her as "Auntie Annie." She had refused to adhere to any formalities of address in her school, insisting initially that it was silly for her own children to call her anything but Mum, and had extended the courtesy to the entire ranks of Weasley-descended children. The rest of the unrelated students called her Miss Annie, and that was as formal as it got.

"Are you going to do it, then?" George asked her as they reached the crest of a hill.

Spread out before them was a wide open space with scattered outcroppings of stone. Several teenage boys were scrambling over the nearest one, their antics bringing a smile to both Annie's and George's faces as they recalled doing the same thing ages ago. *As millions of children over thousands of years must have* Annie mused.

"I dunno... it doesn't make any sense for them to want me," she reiterated for the tenth time that day.

"You know, Annie, your habit of self-deprecation is absolutely maddening!" he said, shaking his head in annoyance. "I think it makes perfect sense that the leading secondary school for magical children in Britain would value the opinions and seek out the guidance of the person who founded the most successful primary school for magical children in Britain," he argued, losing patience with her.

"George, the success of our school depends largely on the fact that we've got a wonderful staff who works with the children, Winky and Doozy included. I have almost nothing to do with it anymore," she argued.

"But none of them would be there if it wasn't for *you*!" he cried. "*You* assembled the staff, *you* determine what they teach. You are sixty-three years old and have dedicated your life to educating two generations of wizards in Britain. You have been vastly successful at it. Grow the hell up already and take credit where it's due!" he yelled, exasperated with her.

Annie giggled at her husband, amused that he threw her own scolding words from this morning back at her. She supposed he was right, on some level. The school was

doing well so well, in fact, that the sister school in London had filled up to enrollment capacity immediately its first year. Annie conceded that the reputation she had worked hard to build had some part in that.

"Still, I don't think I'm going to take the seat on the board," she hedged.

"And why the hell not?" he demanded. "And I swear that if you say, 'It doesn't make sense,' one more time, I will hex you until you resemble the stupid hag you're pretending to be," he warned.

"Okay... then how about this? First, the fact that our son is the current Charms professor *and* Head of Ravenclaw house, *and* rumored to be next in line for the headmaster's position would likely be considered a conflict of interest for me. The last thing I would want to do is tarnish his accomplishment by giving anyone the chance to cry nepotism," she argued.

"So what? I'll bet Art couldn't care less. And you could always abstain from that particular vote," he argued.

"I'm not finished. Second, I hate, loathe, and despise meetings. I have neither the time nor the patience for them. I'm busy enough with life as it is. It may perhaps come as some surprise that taking care of you is a full time job, love," she added teasingly.

"I agree with you about the meetings bit, but...."

"Don't interrupt me, darling. Third, and most importantly, I have quite a bit of resentment stored up against the great bastion of learning that is Hogwarts. That place made my life miserable between the ages of eleven and eighteen, and I haven't forgiven it. As far as I'm concerned, the castle should be dismantled stone by bloody stone and tossed into the lake for the merpeople to build shithouses out of. I'm afraid that would be my solution to every problem or my opinion of every suggestion. And that would not, I think, be what the Governing Board is looking for from its newest member," she concluded.

George was laughing by the end of her mockingly spiteful tirade. "All right, then point well taken. I suppose you should tell them no if that's how you really feel."

By the time they arrived back home at Mole Hill, it was late in the afternoon, and Annie fell to preparing dinner. George dutifully helped her with the chopping and mixing duties, something he'd always done once their children were old enough not to require constant supervision. She'd always appreciated his efforts in return and enjoyed their time together in the kitchen. It was one of the rare times she could count on him to be obedient and cooperative, for he never questioned her when it came to cooking.

Annie had worked diligently over the years of their marriage to curb some of the worst dietary sins George had learned growing up in the Burrow on his mother's cooking. The Weasley metabolism must be a scientific marvel, she reckoned, because none of them had succumbed to heart disease or diabetes yet. Molly had a talent for preparing delicious food, as Annie could readily attest, but it was nearly always rich and heavy, buttered and creamed to within an inch of cholesterol Armageddon.

Consequently, George had arrived at Hogwarts as a boy with a taste for fat and sugar, partnered with an appetite equal to that of an adolescent dragon. The menu at school, magically prepared by house-elves who loved to please the children and were generous with treats to a fault, only served to reinforce his worst habits. He had daily gorged himself on greasy sausages and bacon at breakfast, chips and sweets for lunch, followed by an artery-hardening supper of red meat, starchy vegetables, and creamy desserts. Not to mention his nearly nightly forays down to the kitchen for snacks.

By the time they had started their married life together, Annie reckoned George was a walking, ticking time bomb: a heart attack just waiting to happen. And while she liked all those "naughty" foods as well the sweets and fried things and such she had been raised by her economical Gran to eat them in moderation rather than as a primary component of a daily diet. Armed with her public school health class education regarding a food pyramid a concept utterly foreign to magical folk, she soon learned and an general understanding of the health consequences of poor eating habits, Annie became determined to cultivate in George an appreciation for steamed vegetables, baked chicken, and fat-free dairy products.

George's saving grace was that he seemed to be one of the least picky eaters in existence: he didn't care much about *what* he ate as long as there was a lot of it to fill him. Annie first introduced him to salads with unequivocal success. Next came breakfasts of whole grains and fresh fruit again, as long as there was vast quantities of it, George never complained. Annie was grateful that her children, at least, had arrived at Hogwarts with a greater appreciation for healthy food than their father had done.

Tonight, Annie was roasting the equivalent of three whole chickens along with side dishes of vegetables, salad, rice, fruit, and a dessert. Most people would have considered such bounty to be overly-generous for four people, and in most cases, they would be correct. Almost everyone she knew accused her of making far too much food, yet for some reason no one else could fathom, Annie's refrigerator never contained leftovers. Tonight, she was expecting three Weasley males for dinner, therefore cooked for an army, confident in the knowledge gained by experience that after the meal, her table would look like it had been pillaged by a Viking horde.

"That was delicious, Gran," offered Ruari as he scraped his plate clean with his fork a few hours later.

"Thank you, my dear," Annie answered. It pulled at her heart, just a tiny bit, every time her children's children called her that. It never failed to bring back some image of her own Gran to mind, gone now these many decades. Yet it made perfect sense what else would they call her? Molly was "Granny" to everyone now, and Annie felt honored to share the moniker with Meredith.

"*Bee-ru ip-pon ku-da-sai!*" George said.*

"I'm not a waitress. Get it yourself," Annie replied with a smirk.

"What was that, Granddad?" Liam asked curiously.

"Just a little Japanese," George chuckled smugly.

Annie snorted at her grandsons' impressed looks. "Avery little Japanese," she said.

"How do you know what he said, Gran?"

"It's the only thing he knows how to say, love," she giggled.

"I'll have you know I speak thirty languages," George boasted.

"You know how to order a beer in thirty languages, git," she admonished her husband while her grandsons laughed. "That hardly qualifies you as fluent."

"Bah!" George snorted and waved his hand dismissively. He took another large bite of apple pie.

"Now there's an example of the one language he speaks fluently, boys:*Troll!*"

"What about English, moron?" George taunted, his cheek resembling that of a chipmunk's full of a bite.

"Not hardly. You're unintelligible fifty percent of the time, usually due to your mouth being full of food! I know for a fact you were ~~not~~ raised in a cave, but you seem hell-bent to promote that very impression."

"Let that be a lesson to you, boys. You *think* you're marrying a sweet, pretty girl then one morning, you wake up next to a hag!" George stabbed his finger in the air in Annie's direction before downing the bite.

"Chew and swallow, George! For pity's sake, chew and swallow, *then* speak!" she cried in exasperation.

"I bet you boys heard I lost this ear in a battle," George grouched, tapping the empty side of his head with the tip of his butter knife. Then he pointed it accusingly across the table at his wife. "Ha! This one's been chewin' 'em off for bloody decades! I've only got one left, and it's hangin' on by a thread at this point, but d'you think she'd show a scrap of consideration?"

The twin boys were laughing at the elderly couple's antics. Their grandparents were legendary within the family for their playful, insulting tirades against each other, as well as the loving, tender care they took of one another during more quiet, private moments. All of their grandchildren loved spending time with them, for not only were they sure to be indulged with sweets and toys, but promised to be thoroughly entertained by their silly teasing and pranks on each other.

After the laughter died down, George offered a complement to his grandsons. "I spoke to Sam the other day, and he mentioned you two had a clever idea for a new product line," he said. George's second in command had shared the news yesterday when he and his wife had joined George and Annie for lunch. Sam and Verity Spellman were practically family to them by now.

Annie smiled. While George never praised his children or grandchildren unless they truly earned it, he lavished it whenever they did. He doted on each and every one of them, to boot. And she reckoned such a discussion would be just the opening her grandsons needed to initiate their plan.

"Oh, yeah. Li and I were talking the other day with Uncle Elliot about how American kids celebrate Halloween, dressing in costumes and going door-to-door for sweets," Ruari replied.

"He says it's popular to wear tattoos that wash off but look like scars and open wounds and such," Liam added.

"And we figured something like that might work over here," Ruari continued.

"We're thinking along the lines of temporary talons, fading fangs, a few gory-looking injuries, and such," Liam explained.

George was smiling eagerly. "That's brilliant! Back in my day, the best we had were grow-your-own-warts kits, and they were lame beyond belief. Temporary talons... now that sounds like *real* fun. How long do they last?"

Liam held up his left hand and wiggled his fingers, displaying fingernails that looked like they belonged on a great ape rather than a properly civilized nineteen-year-old boy. "Not quite temporary enough, yet. But we'll get there, I reckon. Maybe in time to roll them out for Christmas, even."

"Well done, boys! Really well done," George raved. "Let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

"Thanks," Ruari mumbled yet beamed at his brother. Liam smiled back and gave him a tiny nod. George noticed both boys then glanced at their grandmother, who gave them an encouraging wink.

"There was something else, actually, that we wanted to talk to you about, Granddad," Ruari said.

"Something important," added Liam.

"Well, go on. I'm listening," George said after an awkward pause. He looked at Annie, seated across the table from him, who was carefully keeping her face expressionless. He immediately recognized that the three of them were in on this together, whatever it was.

"First, we just wanted to tell you how much we love working at the Wheezes. How grateful we are that you've hired us on," offered Ruari.

George's eyes narrowed, wondering where this was going. "The pleasure is all mine, boys. You do a good job; everyone makes a point of telling me so. And you've got good heads for it like the ideas you've shared with me tonight," he said cautiously.

"Right," Liam agreed awkwardly. "What Ruari is trying to say is that, well, we can't imagine doing anything else. Ever."

"We just wanted to let you know, now that we've been at the Wheezes for a while, we are completely committed to the joke business."

"To the point that, well, we wanted to ask you if you would be willing to..."

"If you would ever consider it, that is..."

"Eventually, we mean, of course..."

"Completely on your own timetable, definitely..."

"And for whatever price you think it's worth..."

"Because we've been saving all our wages, see..."

"Boys," George interrupted. "Just spit it out, already."

"We want to buy you out," Liam said, smiling with nervous hope. "Someday?"

"Whenever you're ready to retire, that is," Ruari added, then held his breath.

George leaned back into his chair, flabbergasted by the proposition his eldest grandchildren just presented. *They want to buy the Wheezes!?*

He had never wasted a single thought about retirement, or what would happen to the business when he was finished with it. None of his own children had ever expressed an interest in it, and that had been just fine with him. He had always encouraged them to pursue their own paths in life, and they had done just exactly that. Each of them were successful in their own way.

"Why not start up your own business? I'll loan you seed money," he offered the boys. He didn't want them to feel limited in their options. He could certainly understand them wanting to be their own boss after all, he and Fred had felt the same way. But he didn't want them to feel obligated in any way to commit themselves to anything they didn't truly believe in.

"Jokes are what we know, Granddad. What we love," Ruari explained.

"And we don't want to be in competition with the best in the business we want to be *with* the best. It doesn't make sense to re-invent the broom," Liam said.

"We love the Wheezes, and we both want to see it continue," Ruari added.

George sighed and rubbed his chin with his hand, pondering the offer. "Boys, let me think about it for a bit. I promise I will seriously consider your offer."

"Thanks, Granddad," Ruari said, beaming.

"That's all we ask," Liam said, excited.

Both boys directed pleased smiles at their grandmother, who gave them a smile of her own and a tiny nod of her head.

That night, as the two of them were climbing into bed, Annie revisited the subject. "You know you're going to do it," she said.

"Of course I am. That was never an issue," he replied.

"So, what is it you've been obsessing over tonight, then?"

"It's going to take some creative accounting or tricky financing, at the very least. Otherwise they'll be my age before they can afford to pay what the Wheezes is really worth," he said distractedly.

"Give them raises," she suggested.

George nodded. "That's a start," he agreed.

"And I'm sure Bill can arrange for favorable terms on a loan from Gringotts," she continued.

"Most likely," he said, smiling. "Are you that eager to have me at home, underfoot, all day long?"

"Good Lord. I hadn't thought that far ahead. Well, there's no great rush, is there? Forget I said anything, will you?" she teased, leaning in for a kiss.

* The Japanese here is from an online translation site. My apologies if, in actuality, it is incorrect and/or some really offensive phrase.

A Life Well Lived

Chapter 79 of 80

All good things must come to an end.

Chapter 79: A Life Well Lived

Fall 2078

100 years old

Annie opened her eyes. She knew she was awake and alive because of the pain. Sleep offered a temporary, partial respite. Death promised relief. But she wasn't quite ready for that just yet.

It was only a week ago now that she had been strolling on the beach, hand in hand with George. She'd felt the strangest yearning to go back there, which had grown in strength and urgency for several days beforehand. She'd been unable to explain it at the time unclear as to why it felt so important for her to go. But the feeling had persisted, nagging her, disturbing her peace of mind. She simply *had* to go. It was imperative for her to see the water, feel the sand, and breathe in the breeze once again. When she had finally given in to the ridiculous compulsion and asked George to take her to the shore where they had spent so many summers every August for so many decades he'd looked at her with amusement.

"Of course, love. Sounds delightful," he'd replied. Then he'd taken her hand, cast the Disillusionment Charm about them both, and they had Apparated unseen to the beach. It had been miraculously empty, and without attracting any unwanted attention, they had become visible once more.

Annie had filled her lungs with the scent of it. Her ancient but not entirely decrepit body had soaked up the warming sun through her nearly translucent skin. She'd looked down at her spotty, gnarled hand, cupped tenderly as it was within his equally spotty, yet still warm and strong one. She'd lifted her husband's hand to her lips, as she had done millions of times over their years together, and kissed it.

"Have a seat," he'd offered as he conjured a pair of camp chairs.

She'd accepted his considerate offer with a smile, braced herself against his strength, and eased her body down into the chair. He'd knelt before her, gently removing her shoes and setting her pale, bony feet in the warm, soft sand.

"Just like old times, eh?" he'd asked her with a smile as he eased himself into the chair beside her.

Annie had nodded silently. A lifetime ago, they had been twelve-year-old children here together, frolicking in the sand and sea. Teenagers caught in the throes of hormonal infatuation. New parents with babies of their own, then grandparents, and finally great-grandparents. And now, even those babies were having babies. A century had flown by.

They'd sat together for nearly an hour, watching the sea birds circle above them. Annie had contemplated the seeming infinities about her: the expanse of the ocean, the grains of sand on the beach, the miles of sky above them. The eons of time that had come before her and all that would follow after.

"Chudley looks to have a decent chance again this year," George had mused aloud. "Joey's got some good talent on the team again."

Quidditch! Annie had giggled. She had never been able to escape it. Admittedly, she had grown to enjoy the sport after watching so many of her descendants play countless matches. But it was a grudging sort of enjoyment, almost as if despite her better judgment.

"I think I'd like to walk a bit, George, if you don't mind," she'd said.

"Excellent idea, love," he'd agreed. George had knelt before her once more and rolled up the cuffs of her trousers a few inches so they wouldn't get wet, then rose and lifted her from the seat. The chairs had faded into the ether behind them as they walked away toward the water.

George's arm had been firmly around her, offering support, relieving any fear she might stumble. Annie had shuffled through the soft and forgiving sand, her bare feet reveling in the sensations of the wet sand and the cool, tickling waves as they'd washed over them. They'd walked for a short distance a few hundred yards at most before

she grew too tired to continue. The ancient couple had then stood alone on the empty shore, embracing each other, gazing out at the sea.

That evening, lying in bed, was when the pain had begun.

Annie now turned her head, and her eyes rested on the recumbent form of her husband. He was awake and silently watching her, like usual. He never left her side now. Loyal and determined, despite everything it cost him. One more heroic thing about him for her to love and admire.

She was grateful to him for allowing her to stay here, in their house, in their bed, rather than a hospital somewhere. She knew it wasn't easy for him to simply let her be. To watch her accept what was coming. Not to fight against it tooth and nail. She could see he desperately wanted to do precisely that.

At least he wasn't bearing it all alone. Their children and grandchildren were hovering about her constantly. Two of the grandchildren one of Merrie's and one of Janie's were Healers now and never seemed to leave. She was thankful they were here to take on the more arduous tasks, the more humiliating ones, sparing George the torture of helping her to bathe and use the toilet.

It wouldn't be much longer now. She could see it on everyone's faces. She felt it in her bones, knew it with every fiber of her being. The end was near.

She found it surprising fascinating, actually that for the past two days, her soul had begun taking test flights, practicing leaving her body for longer and longer periods of time. Into the Other. That's what it felt like, anyway. The experiences were far too real, too vivid, to be mere dreams.

The first trip her soul had taken, she'd discovered the anteroom of heaven looked exactly like the woods from her childhood. She'd walked laboriously through the thick undergrowth, listening to the birds singing adieu to the day as the sun set. It had been difficult going without George's arm to lean on, but she'd managed. In the distance, she'd seen a bright, gleaming light ahead, the brilliant shine drawing her forward. As she'd approached a stream, the light dimmed slightly as it coalesced into a bodily form on the near bank.

It was Gran. She was glorious and beautiful, just like she had been before she'd caught pneumonia when Annie was seventeen: healthy, hale, and glowing.

"Is this heaven?" Annie had asked her, weeping with the joy of seeing her again, afraid to try to touch her and discover none of this was real.

Gran had smiled an angelic smile. "Almost," she'd answered.

Another glowing body had joined them then. At first, the glare had been too strong for Annie to discern what, or who, it was. Then Gran had spoken again. Her voice was like a symphony in Annie's ears.

"This is my Llewellyn, Angharad. Your grandfather."

Annie had watched as the bright light transformed itself into a handsome, middle-aged man. He didn't speak but smiled warmly at her, as if excited to meet her at last. There seemed to be no need for words. Anything she could have said would have been either superfluous or woefully insufficient. She'd stood silently in their presence, basking in their smiles, their light and warmth, taking it within her by osmosis.

George took her hand and brought it to his lips. He shifted gingerly in bed, trying hard not to disturb her, afraid his every movement brought her pain. It did, but she didn't mind. His presence beside her was far more soothing than any of the potions her granddaughters had been plying her with.

On the second foray her soul had taken, she had walked again in the woods. But this time, the going had been much easier. Annie had glanced down and, to her surprise, found her body had grown younger. She could feel the confident power in her muscles and bones once more. Coursing through her veins was the strength of sturdy adulthood that had been missing for two decades now. She'd begun to jog along a sunny trail something she hadn't done in more than forty years.

Just ahead, she'd heard a childish giggle. She'd jogged toward it, eager to meet whoever would be greeting her this time. As she'd approached, she heard happy sounds of a mother and child, laughing and talking with each other. They'd been seated on an old quilt spread out beside a stream in a sunlit spot.

Somehow, without knowing exactly why, she'd known it was Meredith again. But this was a version of her grandmother she had never seen in anything but black and white photographs before now. Her blonde hair was styled in a short, curly bob, and her dress was practical yet smart. She was young and beautiful. Sitting next to her on the blanket had been a lovely little girl, also with blue eyes and blonde hair.

Meredith had called Annie over like a friend, then introduced her to the darling child. "Angharad! Come see! I want you to meet my daughter. This is Carys."

The little girl had crept over to Annie and looked up at her with curiosity. "Are you my Annie?" she'd asked.

Annie had fallen to her knees and nodded mutely. The little girl before her was a sweet and golden child, innocent and angelic. Unable to hold it within any longer, Annie had sobbed then, clutching the baby girl to her breast, rocking her as she wept. The little one had stroked her cheek in a soothing, motherly way and patiently submitted to Annie's emotional embrace.

As she'd cried, Annie had at last mourned the tragedy that had happened to her mother from a point of view other than the victim she had been, finally understood now that all was forgiven between them. She'd opened her heart to her mother, and the damage that had scarred her for a lifetime had healed seamlessly and instantaneously.

"Thank you," Annie had managed to croak, grateful beyond words for the miracle of grace.

"Don't cry, Annie. It doesn't hurt anymore, here," the little girl had assured her.

When Annie's soul had returned from this adventure, she had asked to see her children, ready to say her goodbyes to them. Each of her five now elderly children, for all of them were in their seventies now, had come into the bedroom one at a time. She'd made a point of retelling each of them the story of their birth, in order to illustrate for their benefit that she was sane and lucid. She'd told them how much she would always love them and how proud she had always been of the people they had become, their accomplishments, their families. The differences they had each made in the world. They had nodded and accepted her words, said their loving goodbyes in turn.

It really was impressive: the life she and George had built together. The Wheezes business, the schools those were the least of their accomplishments. Their five children had lived glorious lives, in Annie's eyes, and were her crowning achievement. Her numerous grandchildren, all middle-aged now and with children and grandchildren of their own, were prosperous and prominent wizards and witches in their own right and, more importantly, good and decent people she was proud to claim as her own. If she had had the opportunity, she would have said a personal goodbye to each of them as well. But she knew better than to even ask: George would never have tolerated such a drain on her energy. He was always encouraging her to rest, to save her strength. As if it mattered.

That night, as a full moon rose over the forest, Annie lay awake and listened to George's breathing. She felt something outside of her tugging at her being, felt something within her lift in eager response. It was time for another expedition.

Annie began to walk silently through the brightly lit woods on this warm night. It felt like soaring, requiring no more effort than breathing or thinking. She was startled by how the trees towered over her, how even the undergrowth seemed tall. She glanced down at her body and was shocked to discover her thin, boyish frame held no sign of maturity, no telltale evidence of childbearing, no swell or curve of womanhood.

She was a little girl once more.

She skipped with the unfettered, energetic joy of it. She thrilled at the marvelous power and stamina that had returned to her. She relished the gift of it: vivacious youth that had been taken for granted at the time now felt magical beyond belief. She spun and danced along the trail, leaping over fallen logs and small streams. She whooped with raucous laughter. She felt like she could fly.

Suddenly, she was no longer alone. Two other girls had caught up to her and were running by her side. They were similarly pretty, both with blue eyes and long, blonde pigtailed that bounced in the air as they ran with Annie. Meredith took one of her hands, Carys took the other, and they ran together, perfectly in step.

They ran and played together in the woods for hours. Annie showed her little friends the fairies and imps, the warrens and salamanders she had discovered as a child in the woods. They played in the streams and puddles, barefoot and dirty. They laughed and giggled and climbed trees together in the moonlight.

Annie brought her friends to the treehouse in the willow tree. "Come and see!" Annie called out.

The little girls came to stand at her side and held her hands. "Who is that?" Carys asked, pointing into the woods.

Annie turned to see a red-haired young man walking toward them. He was tall and handsome, grinning at her with brown eyes glinting above freckled, rosy cheeks. He was carrying a little red-headed toddler boy in his arms, who was laughing with him.

"Fred? Ben?"

The toddler squealed and clapped in response to his name.

"It's time now, Annie. Time to say goodbye and come with me," the handsome man said gently.

She knew he wasn't talking about saying goodbye to him, or her new little friends. He meant the Real world, which had become Other to her now.

Annie awoke for the last time on earth. George was by her side, as he had been the entire time. She knew she was awake and alive because of the pain, which now made it difficult to catch a full breath. Sleep offered a temporary, partial respite. Death promised relief. And she was ready.

"George?" she said softly.

"Yes," he answered. "I'm here, love."

"It's time," she said, repeating Fred's words.

"Don't," he pleaded, his face crumpling.

She could see he was struggling with whether or not to beg her to stay. He understood she was in pain and felt she deserved release from it, but could not bear to let death deliver her.

"I understand. It will be all right. Gran told me. And mother."

Tears began to course down his cheeks as he shook his head, determined to deny it.

Her heart hurt worse than her belly. It was cruel of her to do this to him. But it was out of her hands, now. Because they had come here this time all of them followed her right here into her bedroom, rather than calling her out into the woods. Fred, Carys, Gran, Jane, Ben: she could see them, hear them whispering encouraging words to her.

"He's here now," she whispered. "Come to collect me." She smiled at George, tried to ease his pain by showing him she was not afraid.

"Tell him to go away," he begged. "It's not his turn yet."

Was she surprised he'd understood what she had meant? Could George see him as well? The light now in the room was making her squint. It was getting crowded.

She put her hand to his tear-streaked cheek. "We promise not to have any fun until you get there, too," she offered.

George laughed in spite of himself. "That doesn't sound like the Fred I grew up with," he said.

Annie giggled. "Yes, well, he's arguing with me right now, actually. Says I have no right to make promises on his behalf he has no intention of keeping."

"That's a bit more believable," George agreed.

They lay together for another minute.

"Let me go, George," she said.

"Never."

George gingerly picked Annie up for she weighed next to nothing now and gathered her into his lap. She was frail and old, her golden skin wrinkled and speckled, her curly hair a snowy, gleaming white. She gazed up at him with her still sparkling violet eyes, then she rested her head against his chest, her arms draped around his shoulders.

He silently held her in his arms.

"I love you," she whispered.

"I love you, too," he answered, kissing her forehead.

George felt the instant her heart stopped beating. An inhuman howl ripped through Mole Hill, startling the rest of the family gathered downstairs.

30 August, 2078 *The Daily Prophet*

Angharad "Annie" Weasley, nee Jones, wife of prominent wizard, businessman and philanthropist George D. Weasley, died yesterday at her home after a short illness. Mrs. Weasley, a Muggle, was born 29 February, 1978 in London and was raised in Ottery St. Catchpole, Devon, by her grandmother, the late Mrs. Meredith Griffin Jones.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were married in secret during the unrest of the Second War, in direct violation of the laws of that troubled time. Mrs. Weasley was 100 years old at the time of her passing and had been wed to Mr. Weasley for nearly eighty-one years.

In 2000, Mrs. Weasley founded a daycare and infant school for magical children at her home, which continues in operation to this day. It currently serves as a model for several similar programs across Britain.

Mrs. Weasley is survived by her husband, Mr. George D. Weasley; her five children and their spouses: twin sons Professor Arthur L. Weasley and Mr. Fred R. Weasley, both renowned for their independent achievements in magical theoretical research; Mrs. Molly (Merrie) Murphy, director of the Molly Prewitt Weasley Magical Infant Schools in Devon, London, Hogsmeade and Godric's Hollow; Mrs. Harriet Weasley-Baldwin, distinguished member of the Wizengamot, and Mrs. Georgeanna Wood, former Seeker and current manager of the Chudley Cannons and six-time captain of the All-England team; her fifteen grandchildren, thirty-seven great-grandchildren, and six great-great-grandchildren.

A private family service is planned for two days hence. In lieu of flowers, the Weasley family has asked that memorial donations be made to any charity of choice.

George gazed into the mirror, debating whether or not to bother with shaving. Who was this bald, one-eared old codger staring back at him, anyway? When had he become so ancient? It had crept up on him, this curse of old age.

He briefly considered his father, who had died just a couple years ago at the preposterous age of 127 years old. How he had become a hollow shell of a man during that last decade of his life after George's mother had died. *Hell on earth*, George had thought at the time. *Ten bloody years alone*

The thought of it chilled him to the bone. Because now he knew it for certain: he was in that very same hell. For his Annie was gone.

It had been brutal, those last few days of her life, watching her endure the pain. It was a sort of blessing when she'd finally escaped it. Their daughter, Merrie, had explained to him that to reach a hundred years of age was unusual, extraordinary even, for a Muggle. As if that had been any comfort.

She was gone, and nothing would ever be the same.

That first week after he'd buried her under their willow tree still remained mostly a blur for him. He remembered railing at her for leaving him behind to drown in this ocean of agony. How could she have done this to him? She knew he wasn't strong enough. He couldn't take it. He should have been the one to go first.

Then he took the idea to its logical conclusion and immediately regretted ever having thought it. After eighty years of marriage, there was no doubt left how they felt about one another. And to even consider hurting his precious Annie in the way he was hurting now well, it was truly unbearable. He thanked God once again for sparing her that.

Now, if only she could have been spared the physical pain at the end. He really should have done something he berated himself for failing her that, even though she'd never asked him to end it. But he simply hadn't had the courage to offer. It would have been too much to ask of him maybe she'd known that, too. He hoped she could forgive him that weakness.

By the end of that week after the funeral (*Talk about hell on earth!*), he had made his decision. He did not share it with anyone else; that would have been utterly foolish. No sense in getting his children and grandchildren and the rest of them all riled up, waste time arguing about it. But it was the only reasonable solution, even if they wouldn't have agreed with him.

George had spent the last two and a half weeks in a never-ending round of meetings, signing reams of legal documents, quietly dispersing the wealth he and Annie had amassed over their near-century together. It was no small sum. He had been taken slightly by surprise with the final tally of it, actually. And it had taken a bit of creative accounting on his part, some smoke and mirrors to disguise the fact that he was keeping nothing in reserve to see him through the rest of his old age.

There would be no point to it. He was as old as he was ever going to get.

Together, he and his wife had already broached the subject of money years ago with their children, who were all perfectly well-off and had no need of any inheritance bullshit. George and Annie both had abhorred the idea of creating a family legacy of spoiled heirs, insisting instead on raising self-sufficient members of society. They had always lived modestly and taught their children to do the same. Their one extravagance had been travel: they had made a point of taking their children all over the globe to discover everything the world had to offer. And besides, there were plenty of worthy causes and needy folks who deserved the money far more. He and Annie had spent most of their adult lives supporting, even founding a few of the many charities and foundations that had now reaped their final benefits from him.

He stood alone in the large, open living room of the house he had built with his own hands for his Annie and their newborn twins that summer and fall following the final battle of the war. Astoundingly, the twins were going to be eighty years old themselves next month. George listened with his eyes closed, heard nothing but silence in this house that had once been full of children's voices. His eyesight and hearing and general health were still quite keen, blast it. If he didn't take matters into his own hands, he might even be cursed with decades of this morbid remembering. Or even worse: forgetting it all, bit by bit, like his mother had done.

Heaven forbid.

He walked slowly upstairs and shuffled into the bedroom he had shared with his beloved. Sitting on the edge of their bed, he gazed at the crowded army of framed photos on his bedside table. His children. And his Annie.

Here she was, young and beautiful, standing on the porch of the cabin on Tenerife, leaning against the corner of the wall, smiling shyly at the camera, at him. He vividly remembered taking that snap, could even now smell the ocean. Remembered the days and nights darling Molly Meredith had been conceived. Merrie the baby who laughed at birth and never stopped. Annie's golden skin glowed in the photo, barely covered by the bikini and sarong that fluttered open in the breeze. Even now, his body stirred faintly with the sight of her.

Ugh. It was depressingly weak an insult to the far more powerful response he used to be able to summon, the desire he'd had for her and she'd had for him. Their relationship had not been sexual for quite a while now, as was to be expected for a couple their age, but even so, the memory of their earlier days the majority of their marriage, in fact brought a sly, smug smile to his wrinkled face.

He placed the earbuds into his ears and turned on the ancient music device. He laid down on the bed, listening to music that was even older than the player. The music he and Annie had lived and loved to. The memories came unbidden now, quick flashes of moments, not unlike photographs themselves. It was just like the cliché: the significant parts of his life relived during the final moments.

He thought of those nights in the Burrow during the war, so very long ago now, when the twins were conceived. How he and Annie had clung to each other with the ridiculous optimism and idealism of new love. How it had never left them.

And the business trip to Kauai, where spunky, firebrand Harriet Jane was created. Yes, if Merrie had inherited Annie's sunny disposition, Janie had gotten her volcanic temper and wicked sense of humor. And Tahiti Georgeanna Muriel had come after that magical week in paradise. Acrobatic, tiny yet preposterously strong Joey, who was physically her mother's twin except for the red hair and brown eyes. Perhaps the fact that all their daughters had been conceived in all those exotic locations were the reason his girls were so beautiful?

No *that* was ludicrous.... It was all due to Annie, of course.

Now came to mind the births of his children: the nervous excitement of the unknown the night the Arthur and Fred were born, the delightful anticipation when Merrie and Janie each came into the world. The nerve-wracking anxiety when Joey was delivered: such a tiny little thing who'd had such a struggle to get here. He remembered with a wince the toll both the pregnancy and the birth had taken on Annie, and how devastated she had been when the doctors told her she should have no more.

But she got over it, pillar of strength that she was. Nothing could ever break her. It was always like that, time and again. She would bend just as much as she had to, only to rebound stronger to meet the next challenge.

Their family had been perfect just as it was, even if they hadn't realized it at the time. He saw now one of the myriad summer afternoons they'd spent outside in the garden, five half-naked children running around in the lawn sprinkler. He'd pulled Annie up out of her seat and waltzed her, giggling, through the spray. He could still feel her body in his arms, see the sparkling smile in her eyes.

He recalled the Hogwarts Quidditch matches they had watched as their daughters had darted expertly around the pitch, commanding everyone's attention and cheers. Despite her tentative beginnings, baby Joey had been the best, the fastest, the strongest of them all. Not unlike his Annie, he mused.

Trips to the zoo. Family vacations at the beach. The innumerable holidays, birthdays, and celebrations at Mole Hill. And later, when the children were grown, the precious

time alone with Annie, just the two of them. They had traveled the globe on business and pleasure trips, visiting their Fred in exotic locations, cheering at Joey's international matches. The last fifty years of their marriage, just the two of them, had been everything he had hoped for during the first thirty. And the first thirty had been well nothing short of magical. They had indeed lived a fairy tale, just as old Meredith had predicted.

A series of visions swam before him: of tiny, seven-year-old Annie in the oak tree that very first day they had met, her violet eyes full of curiosity. Annie on a surfboard. Annie running through the fields and trees. Annie in the fort. Annie holding their first grandchildren: Merrie's little twin boys. Young or old, always beautiful.

Such a long life together. So many wonderful memories. It was selfish of him to want more.

And yet he did. With all his being, he wanted more time with Annie.

George closed his eyes. He would be the first of his siblings to go... except for Fred, of course. He doubted seriously if he could have survived it the death of his twin brother if he hadn't had Annie then. No question about it, in his mind: her love had rescued him from that dark place Fred's loss had left him in. Would he have ever gotten over the pain of it, moved on and had a life without Fred, if not for Annie? It was impossible to know for sure, but he didn't think the odds were good.

He took a deep breath one for the road, so to speak. He had left a note downstairs in the kitchen, explaining to his granddaughter, who always took it upon herself to check in on him since Annie's death, that none of this was anyone's fault in any way. How it was his choice. That he was tired. He was ready. He wanted to go. He apologized that she would be the one who had to deal with it first.

George turned up the volume of the music and willed his heart to stop beating. It wasn't all that hard, after all. His soul had already left four weeks ago.

1 October, 2078 *The Daily Prophet*

George Darius Weasley, Order of Merlin, Second Class, prominent inventor, businessman and philanthropist, died yesterday in his home. Mr. Weasley was born 1 April, 1978 to Mr. and Mrs. Arthur S. Weasley and raised near Ottery St. Catchpole, Devon.

Mr. Weasley attended Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry from 1989 to 1996. He and his twin brother, Fred C. Weasley, left Hogwarts in spectacular fashion before completing their studies in protest of the firing of the great Albus P. W. B. Dumbledore, then Headmaster of the school. The story is now legendary and well known to all those who have passed through the halls of Hogwarts, thanks in large part to the resident poltergeist, Peeves, who memorializes the occasion each April first. It was at this time that the Misters Weasley established Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, currently one of the most successful enterprises in Britain with locations in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, now owned and operated by his grandsons, Mr. Ruari and Mr. Liam Murphy.

Mr. Weasley married his late wife, Angharad Jones (a Muggle), in secret during the unrest of the Second War, in direct violation of the laws of that troubled time. He was a member of the illustrious Order of the Phoenix, was injured by a curse during the Battle over Little Whinging, and a decorated veteran of the Battle of Hogwarts. It was during this campaign that his twin brother, Fred, died heroically fighting against the forces of Voldemort.

Mr. Weasley is credited with several important inventions and innovations in magic and wizardry, including clothing items bewitched with various patented Shield Charms which were immensely popular during the War, as well as automated production processes that revolutionized the magical manufacturing business.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley both were renowned for their idealism and dedication to many charitable and philanthropic causes. Their primary goal was to promote not only tolerance of, but further equality for Muggles, Muggle-born wizards, and non-wizard magicalkind. They most recently endowed the Arthur S. Weasley Chair for Muggle Studies at Hogwarts upon Mr. Weasley's father's death in 2075. Mr. George Weasley, along with his longtime friend, Mr. Lee Jordan, secretly co-hosted the long-running and immensely popular radio program *River and Wrackspurt*, which contributed greatly to the current popularity of non-magical musical groups with the youth of today. He also founded the Argus Filch Center for the Study of Squibs and Remedial Magic and was a major contributor to the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare as well as the BellaLuna Project, which provides free Wolfsbane Potion and other rehabilitation services to those afflicted with lycanthropy.

Mr. Weasley was 100 years old at the time of his passing and had been wed to Mrs. Weasley for nearly eighty-one years.

He is preceded in death by his father, Mr. Arthur S. Weasley; his mother, Molly (Prewitt) Weasley; his aforementioned twin brother, Fred; and his wife, Annie, who died only thirty-two days ago.

Mr. Weasley's surviving siblings read like a Who's Who of wizarding Britain. His oldest brother, Mr. William A. Weasley, is currently a high-ranking executive for Gringotts Bank; Mr. Charles S. Weasley, a well-known and well-respected dragon researcher; Mr. Percival I. Weasley, Deputy Director of International Magical Law for the Ministry of Magic; Mr. Ronald B. Weasley, distinguished Auror for the Ministry of Magic; and Ginevra Potter, wife of Harry Potter, former Seeker for the Holyhead Harpies and currently senior Quidditch editor for this publication.

Mr. Weasley is also survived by his five children and their spouses: Professor Arthur L. Weasley and Mr. Fred R. Weasley, both renowned for their achievements in magical theoretical research; Mrs. Molly (Merrie) Murphy, director of the Molly Prewitt Weasley Magical Infant Schools in Devon, London, Hogsmeade and Godric's Hollow; Mrs. Harriet Weasley-Baldwin, distinguished member of the Wizengamot; and Mrs. Georgeanna Wood, former star flyer and current manager of the Chudley Cannons and six-time captain of the All-England team; his fifteen grandchildren, thirty-seven great-grandchildren, and eight great-great-grandchildren. The further achievements of Mr. Weasley's ten nieces and nephews are too extensive to recount in this article.

A memorial service is planned for 6 October, 2078, and will be held in Devonshire at the family home.

Author's Note: Firstly, props to Rose of the West who inspired the change in this chapter title with a comment of hers about a year ago thanks!

Next, I found these songs eerily appropriate as well as deeply inspirational. So just in case you need a good cry, give them a listen.

For Annie's portion: [Home](#) by Foo Fighters.

For George's portion: [Beloved Wife](#) by Natalie Merchant.

The final installment of this interminable story an epilogue will post tomorrow.

Epilogue

Chapter 80 of 80

Epilogue

October 8, 2078

Eleanor Angelina Weasley stood in front of the giant fireplace facing the large living room, trying to warm her bum. She stomped her feet a bit, hopping and dancing in front of the roaring flames, attempting to get the blood pumping into her extremities once more. It was the first really cold day of the autumn, and she had been playing outside with a mob of children that consisted of her siblings and cousins who, like her, were too young to go to Hogwarts yet. But she had grown cold and hungry, so decided to venture inside where the adults ruled the roost.

She had been to Mole Hill loads of times before this and always enjoyed it. Every Christmas, of course, the entire Weasley clan amassed here for an enormous buffet of food, a cornucopia of presents, and a traditional fireworks display after sunset. Not to mention the many private trips her family had made from Hogsmeade to Devon especially to visit her great-grandparents. A few times, she had even come over all by herself to spend an afternoon with them, skiving off school next door. Those were by far the best times, for Ellie shared the common opinion of the rest of her generation: Great-Gran and Granddad were the most entertaining old people ever.

That's what made today so sad. The funny, kind old man and lady were gone now. This was no longer their house. Somehow, for reasons she did not fully understand, it was to be hers. Her parents had explained to her earlier that morning that they would be moving here in a fortnight's time.

The funeral two days ago had been even sadder. Ellie remembered how the seats of the front row had been filled with ancient, white-haired wizards she had only ever seen once or twice at family weddings before now and certainly never spoken to. They were Great Granddad's brothers and sister, her mother'd explained. She had never before seen people so old as they were. Her father had whispered to her, identifying each of them in turn. That was the day she had first laid eyes on the famous Harry Potter, who she now understood she was distantly related to.

And she had never seen so many people in one place before in her life as she had at Great Granddad's funeral. Which was saying something, considering the fact that when all of George and Annie's direct descendants had assembled for Christmas last year, there were 112 people, ranging in age from ninety-nine to newborn, all crammed into Mole Hill. Hundreds more people had come to Devonshire to pay their last respects to her Great Granddad. And while the memorial ceremony itself was rather somber, the wake that had followed immediately afterward was some of the best fun she had had in a long time. Dancing, singing, food, and fireworks had lasted long into the night.

Ellie looked out at the sea of adult faces that filled the large room. People were standing or sitting in groups, all talking together. A few were smiling, sharing happy memories or funny stories. A few were weeping, their companions doing their best to comfort them. Over the quiet noise of the conversations, she could hear the wireless playing a song: the WWN was airing a day-long retrospective of the old *River and Wrackspurt* programs her great-grandfathers used to do together. She knew that several other members of the family were working in the various rooms, clearing out the closets and dressers to make way for her and her family to move in.

She began weaving her way through the maze of chairs that had been conjured up to hold the gathered throng. As she struck out toward the kitchen, where she hoped something warm and sweet awaited her, she could overhear snippets from several of the conversations.

"Mum always said he wouldn't last long without her."

"No, it was hardly a surprise, was it?"

"Can you imagine being a hundred years old and married to someone you've loved for ninety-three of them? How could anyone expect him to go on?"

"It was like he lost part of himself... when she died."

"Poor Mairie Catrin she was the one who found him, you know. Thought he was just havin' a kip, she did, until she found the note...."

"She's a saint, she is. Caring for old Molly and Arthur so long, and now this...?"

Ellie moved away from the solemn, teary group of women toward a more boisterous group of men, nearly half of whom had ginger hair.

"Tell that story again, Joe. Frank hasn't heard it yet."

"I swear to you, Frank, it was the funniest damn thing I ever did see the two of 'em were goin' at it, barkin' like dogs, but smilin' the whole time. Just like they always did, you know. I forget what exactly they were havin' a row about... most likely Quidditch or somethin' like, knowin' them. Anyway, the old man was losin' the argument, mind you, so then he puts her in a headlock to shut her up. I swear on Merlin's eyebrows, he put that little ninety-eight-year-old slip of a woman *in... a... headlock!* The small crowd of males surrounding the storyteller erupted in laughter.

"You should try that on Lenore sometime, Joe," one of them jokingly suggested.

"Probably work just as well, too. Auntie Annie swore and swatted at Uncle George like an unholy ragin' veela for it," the storyteller replied to more guffaws.

It was toasty and warm once Ellie reached the kitchen area, and she felt her cheeks flushing with the welcome heat. She managed to score a plateful of biscuits and a mug of hot chocolate from the several aunts and grown-up cousins that were milling about in the kitchen. She found a quiet corner at the base of the stairs near the back door where she could savor them without being underfoot.

Not long after she sat down, she became aware that she was not alone after all. Strange noises were coming from somewhere to her right, in the little mudroom where her Great-Gran's exotic Muggle washing machine was kept. She stood up and crept toward the wet, blubbering sounds that seemed to be coming from behind a large pile of cloaks.

"Mother, you is got to stop drinkin' this horrid stuff! You is forgettin' your proper duties!" an elf squeaked anxiously. Ellie recognized his voice he was one of the house-elves that helped out at her school.

"Oh, Doozy, they is gone! They is both gone now!" an equally squeaky voice wailed in reply. "My dear, good Weasleys is gone!"

"Hush! Miss Annie and Mr. George would be powerful upset with you right now! You know you is not supposed to be drinkin' butterbeer!"

"Winky is gutted! Gutted! Miss Annie got sick, and Mr. George couldn't be going on without her! Poor Mr. George!" Ear-grating sobs ripped from the little elf's throat.

Ellie heard Winky's son shushing and soothing his mother, trying to calm her. "Mother, you is got to be listening to me now. I is taking you to your bed, and you is going to be sleeping this off. You is shaming us, going on a bender like this! What will our new Weasleys be thinking?"

"You is right. I is knowing better. Miss Merrie told I young Mr. Arthur is going to be in charge of the school now," she said, snorting and hiccupping a few times. Ellie heard several more sniffles as Winky began to get herself under control and realized that she must be one of the "new" Weasleys they were referring to. She dashed out of the room just in time to avoid being caught eavesdropping by the two elves as they made their way back to the school where they lived.

Ellie was about to make her own way back outside, her mind already beginning to ponder the ramifications of the overheard elfish conversation, when her attention was caught by the assembly of three elderly women on the sofa in front of the fireplace. Now that Great-Gran was gone, they were the matriarchs of the family. They were all

looking at her with smiles on their faces.

"Hello, Ellie," said Great Aunt Merrie in a gentle, friendly voice. Ellie recognized her from school as well as family gatherings. She had always been kind and grandmotherly to Ellie, as well as to all the other children at school. Merrie beckoned her to come closer, and she took a few hesitant steps toward the ladies.

"Are you Arthur's little girl?" asked the lady seated next to Merrie.

Ellie recognized Great Aunt Harriet primarily from newspaper articles, but couldn't remember ever speaking directly with the intimidating woman before this. She knew that her Great Aunt Harriet was a famous witch, powerful within the Ministry, often "angrily outspoken in the Wizengamot" that was a phrase she read often about her in the *Prophet*, anyway. But today, in person, she seemed soft and nice.

Ellie nodded in response. Both her father and grandfather were named Arthur, and the two men couldn't look more different. Her grandfather had pale white skin and curly auburn hair (what was left of it, that is). He was a respected scholar and Charms Professor at Hogwarts, as well as being her favorite grandpa. Her father, on the other hand, had light cocoa brown skin and tightly curled brown hair. He was a teacher here at her school in Devon. And that was why they would be moving here, into Mole Hill, he had told her: to be closer to the school he would now be directing.

Ellie herself looked just as different from the two men as they did from each other. She remembered an aunt once telling her she had skin the color of a perfectly toasted marshmallow, and she had been pleased by the compliment. Her light brown, faintly-reddish hair grew in tight ringlets that bounced like springs whenever she moved. She was tall, and slender, and strong. Her most striking feature, though the one everyone always noticed and commented on was her eyes: they were a vivid, sparkling violet. She was one of four girls in her generation with them. Everyone in the family called them "Annie's eyes."

"Of course you're Art and Roxy's granddaughter. You look tall for your age, lucky girl! How old are you, dear?"

Ellie was momentarily stunned into silence. For seated there, next to Great Aunt Harriet and Great Aunt Merrie, was none other than *Georgeanna Weasley Wood!* And she was speaking directly to *her*, no less! The star of Chudley Cannons, winners of the league championship fifteen times in the past fifty-five years, captain of the All-England team six consecutive World Cups running (and the only witch to ever do so), *the greatest Seeker that ever flew!* Ellie had always felt enormous pride just being *related* to her!

"Erm... I'm eight, ma'am," a star-struck Ellie managed to stammer.

The other elderly ladies chuckled at her, but Great Aunt Joey smiled. "Eight! My goodness! I was going to guess ten at least!" she said generously, and Ellie thought she might jump for joy. She beamed with pleasure at the compliment.

"Do you fly, my dear?" she asked.

Ellie nodded eagerly. After all, she was descended from a proud line of excellent amateur Chasers herself: her great-grandmother, Angelina, and her grandmother, Roxanne, both had their names etched on the Hogwarts Quidditch cup. She had been flying for two years now, and Granny Roxy raved about her skill.

"Heads up! Look out below!" a voice called from the balcony.

Startled, everyone in the room looked up to see a large, battered, and beaten trunk levitating over the half wall and beginning its descent into the living room.

"You won't believe what we've found, Mum!" cried Great Aunt Merrie's daughter, Maureen. "Look out, little one," she said as she carefully directed the trunk to land at the three ladies' feet.

Ellie took several steps backward toward the hearth to avoid getting squished underneath it.

"It's a treasure trove!" added Great Aunt Harriet's daughter, Angharad, shaking a small shoebox above her head. She was dashing toward the stairs with her prize. Ellie watched her middle-aged cousins dance with excitement, racing each other down the steps. Other cousins began popping their heads out of doorways to see what the fuss was about, and everyone began making their way over to the hearth. She was disappointed that her brief audience with famous Great Aunt Joey appeared to be at an end, but was curious about the hubbub as well.

"What is it, dear?" chuckled Great Aunt Merrie.

"Found some old lottery tickets, have you?" teased Great Aunt Harriet.

"Oh Janie, don't be so snarky," said Great Aunt Joey, nudging her older sister with her elbow. Great Aunt Harriet snorted in response.

The women had finally made their way through the curious crowd and took seats offered to them by nearby relatives. "We found these up in the far corner of the attic. Judging by the inches of dust on them, nobody's looked at them for decades," said Maureen breathlessly.

"It looks like an old school trunk," offered Ruari. He was part of the crowd now assembling themselves in a semi-circle around the sofa. Ellie recognized him from family gatherings before and had met him in person a few times at the famous family joke store on Diagon Alley.

"*Granddad's* old school trunk, to be precise," boasted Angharad, pointing out the nearly unreadable gold-foil initials near the lock: GDW. "And wait! You see what's inside!"

"Are you quite sure it's safe?" joked Ellie's Uncle Jordan, leaning over their shoulders. "Granddad sure knew how to lay a good jinx, you know." Several people chuckled appreciatively, and he winked at her.

Maureen opened the lock with her wand, and she and Angharad gingerly lifted the lid. Then Maureen reached down into the trunk and gently scooped up a handful of ancient paper. She handed a few to each of the three women seated on the sofa.

"Letters," she explained. "From Gran. Every one of them."

"And this one's full of his letters back to her," Angharad said, indicating the shoebox in her own hands. "And some other funny little bits of stuff, too."

The three aged sisters looked at each other, flabbergasted. "Did you ever know about these?" whispered Great Aunt Joey.

Merrie shook her head. "I only knew about the photos, like the rest of you," she replied. "What about you, Art? Fred?" Great Aunt Merrie asked.

Ellie's grandfather, Art, and her great uncle, Fred, who had just shouldered their way to the front of the crowd, both shook their heads. They reached out to take a few of their father's letters from their niece.

"Hang on... I think I remember Dad telling me about this, sort of," said Great Aunt Harriet. "When I was a little girl, he told me once that he and his brother used to write to Mum from Hogwarts. Maybe these are...."

"Those letters! Do you think so?" cried Great Aunt Joey. Her excited eagerness battled with the delicate care she was trying to take of the fragile envelope as she opened it, gingerly drawing out the letter inside.

"Look at the return address! It says Hogwarts! They must be!" exclaimed Angharad.

"I can't believe it! There must be nearly a hundred of them altogether!"

Silence descended upon the siblings as they all absorbed the unlikely surprise. Most of the crowd began to disperse, either resuming the conversations that had been interrupted a few moments ago or musing about the new discovery. George and Annie's five children each began to read a letter.

After several minutes, Maureen spoke up. "May I have them? Borrow them, I mean... for a little while. For my book?" she asked her mother.

Great Aunt Merrie glanced at her brothers and sisters, looking for any sign of hesitation on their part. Seeing none, she smiled warmly and nodded at her eldest daughter. "Of course, Mo, darling. Take the photos too, if you like. You'll find them in the guest room closet. There's a box that's smaller than all the others, wrapped up with tape. That's the one you'll want first."

"And we'll help. Ask us anything you want to know, and we'll tell you, if we can remember," Great Aunt Joey offered with a giggle.

"I know the Jordans would be thrilled to tell you their stories, as well," Great Aunt Harriet added. "They both knew Dad at school, and Mum was friends with her since before we all came along."

"We'll all be happy to do whatever it takes to help you write your biography, dear," Great Aunt Merrie added.

Author's Note: I began writing this story in August 2008, and it was the first piece of fiction I'd written since high school (and definitely the longest!). When I posted it to FictionAlley beginning in December of that year, I had naively considered it "finished." Ha. Since that first posting, it has undergone innumerable revisions. I am one of those authors who can't read through a chapter without tweaking a word here, moving a sentence there, and finding yet another wretched comma in the wrong place. I've also added several chapters since then, making a long story even longer, and rearranged the ones that were already there, but I promise that this version, here and now, is the final one. Scout's honor. Cross my heart. As my BFF, Kathie, says, "Just let it go, already!"

Everlasting thanks and praise belong to all the amazing admins here at TPP, and in particular, WriterMerrin, Sempra, and my beloved Lyn_f for all their hard work, eagle eyes, and superb suggestions. I've learned so much about self-editing from them! I can't even begin to describe or adequately thank them because every lesson they've taught me has carried over into my original works. You have made me an exponentially better writer, and I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

And finally, thanks to all of you who have read and enjoyed this story. Those of you who have shared your reactions to it have inspired me more than you'll ever know. It's because of all the wonderful readers at FictionAlley, FanFiction, and the fantastically supportive TPP community that I've found the thing I want to do in life: write. And wonder upon wonders, I've found a virtual home to do it in!

XOXO,

Shanyn

P.S. I am working on a few "spin-off" fanfics, so if you're interested, keep an eye out for me here on TPP or tag me as a favorite author. :)