

Hearthlinks

by Grace has Victory

Growing up with two stepfamilies, Sally-Anne Perks has all the usual family problems in triplicate. Now her stepmother wants to prevent her attending the Yule Ball. Will this ruin Sally-Anne's chances of winning her prince? And who has stolen her magic shoe?

This is a response to an old challenge to retell a traditional fairy tale with a Hogwarts setting. You might consider that I put a twist in the ending... or you might not.

Once upon a Time

Chapter 1 of 14

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For Julia,
my princess,
whom the dancing shoes will always fit.

Notes

1. There is nothing original about the setting of this story. It was invented by the great **J. K. Rowling**. Along with all her loyal fans, I am grateful for her permission to borrow Hogwarts and its amazing inhabitants. I have made no capital and I intend no breach of copyright.
2. There is nothing original about the plot of this story. The works of **Charles Perrault** and **Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm** are long since out of copyright, but I thank them for providing the inspiration.
3. There is limited originality about the characters of this story. Many were devised or indirectly suggested by **J. K. Rowling**. Some are more or less mine, but Sophie sprang to life under the guidance of **TDU**, who also gave an impromptu beta read. Thank you, **TDU**, for going beyond the call of your self-imposed duty.

CHAPTER ONE

Once Upon a Time

The morning light spilled through the yellow bed-curtains before seven o' clock. It was the second of September and I was finally at Hogwarts! I resisted the urge to fling back the covers and race to the bathroom. There was no hurry. No family members were depending on me to organise them today. They were miles and miles away, all

looking after each other, while I was beginning my new life at Hogwarts.

I could hear someone stirring in the next four-poster. There were a pair of glasses and a Muggle satchel on her night-table, so I knew it was Sophie. I sat up, hugging my knees and hoping I still remembered all of my dorm-mates' names. There was Hannah, who had been the first to wear the Sorting Hat last night, and Megan, a quick-moving, dark-haired girl who had sat next to me at the welcoming feast. So who was the quiet girl in the fifth bed? That's right, her name was Susan.

I stretched, repeating to myself that I could take my time this morning. But I hate to feel lazy, so in the end I was still the first one to push back the covers and start my day. Ten minutes later, when Susan's alarm finally rang, I had already finished making my bed and was packing my stationery. It was a pity that I didn't yet know what lessons we would have. Should I carry every single textbook around with me?

"Has anyone seen my comb?" Megan's singsong Welsh lilt interrupted my planning. "It's yellow and shaped like a badger."

"Here's the comb." Susan sounded posh, but she was holding the comb out with a friendly smile. "I think you dropped it on the way to the bathroom."

"Oh, no, the *toothpaste* it's all over my trunk!" Hannah, a pink-cheeked blonde, had a note of panic in her voice.

I stepped forward to inspect her trunk. The toothpaste was smeared all over a pile of black school robes. It was messy, but I remembered a spell that Mum uses at home.

"*Tergeo!*" With a noisy squelch, the toothpaste was sucked up into my wand, leaving me a little surprised that the spell had worked.

"Thanks for that. I'll oh, *where* is my Charms book?"

"Sorry, 'Annah, I borrowed it for a moment." Sophie held out a textbook in each hand. Hannah's copy was the same new edition that Grandpa had given me, but the other was dog-eared and losing its cover. "Yers is all shiny new, and I wanted to check whether it's different from mine inside. It is, an all! Oh 'eck, mine must be an old version. We couldn't aff I mean, it inn't from Flourish and Blotts. Do you think that will matter?"

Hannah and I both spoke at once. "You can share mine if "

But we were cut off by an exclamation from Megan. "I'm going to *kill* my brother! He did say he'd hand out my share of the quills on the train and he never did come near me the whole journey!"

"Here's a spare quill," said Susan. "Bother, I don't have a hair ribbon. Those Dungbomb-throwing boys on the train stole my last one."

"I have ribbons," said Hannah. She reached under her school hat and brought out a wicker tray of wide and narrow ribbons, satin and velvet and linen ribbons, all bright canary-yellow. "You have lovely hair, Susan. Can I plait it?"

Susan's hair was glossy chestnut-brown and waist-length. Hannah wove it into one thick plait, while Megan, repossessed of her badger comb, plaited Hannah's hair into two pigtails.

"Can I ask you summut?" Sophie looked up from her damaged Charms book and adjusted her glasses. "I 'ope I don't sound stupid, but I'm a Muggle-born and it's all strange to me. But... badger combs, yellow 'air-ribbons 'ow did yer know yer'd be in 'Ufflepuff?"

"My family always is," said Hannah, "ever since we can remember."

"And mine," said Megan. "Well, everyone in Tad's family Mam's a Muggle."

"So do most people already know their 'ouse before they come to 'Ogwarts?"

"I didn't," said Susan. "Lots of my relations have been in Ravenclaw. What about you, Sally-Anne? Do you have a family tradition?"

"Not really," I said, accepting Susan's help as she combed up the sides of my hair and tied a large butterfly bow on the top of my head. "Mum was in Hufflepuff, but her Dad was a Ravenclaw. Some of you have met him, in fact he's Mr Flourish from the bookshop. My Dad was in Slytherin, and his Mum was in Gryffindor. So, really, I'd no idea. I just *hoped* it would be Hufflepuff. Sophie, let me do that."

Sophie had coiled her hair into an elaborate twist. Lacking pins, she held it down with her fingers while I wound a yellow ribbon through it. Megan's short bob didn't need any ribbon, but Hannah gave her the widest one to tie on as a hair-band.

"What's for breakfast around 'ere?" asked Sophie. "Do wizards eat chip butties? Or is this a bacon and eggs joint or 'aggis?" She looked wistful, as if she never tasted bacon and eggs at home.

"All of those sometimes," said Megan. "When it isn't *bara lawr* laverbread."

"Or hash browns," said Hannah.

"Or cornflakes," I said.

"Or just toast and marmalade," said Susan.

The new timetables, handed out over breakfast, showed that our first lesson at Hogwarts would be Charms.

"That's on the third floor," said a stout, freckled Scottish boy. "We have to look out for the statue of a humpbacked witch my brothesays you cannot miss it."

"But *my* brother did warn me about the staircases," said his friend. "They do move around!"

"Let's stick together," said several people.

We made it safely as far as the third-floor corridor. While we were looking for the humpbacked statue, a group of Slytherins spilled out from the Trophy Room and elbowed their way through us. Hannah gasped as a tall black boy knocked her into a corner, and Sophie frowned as a very blond one hissed, "Mudblood!" at her. Everything that Mum had warned me about the Slytherins seemed to be true and this was only our first day!

As a huge boy marched straight between two Hufflepuffs, one of the Slytherin girls exploded with giggles. I knew that giggle! Sure enough, the last Slytherin in the group was Cecilia Runcorn. She hung back a little, waiting until the others had finished pushing their way through, then deliberately walked up to me.

"All right, Sally-Anne!" she said. "Flavian has spattergroit. He should be fine, but he's spending a week at St Mungo's just to make sure."

She swung her dark curls over her shoulder, jingled a serpent-shaped bracelet and shifted her bag of books, leaving me dumbfounded. I stared at her through a haze of tears, not knowing what to say next.

"He looked so funny the day before yesterday," she continued. "His whole face was like a plate of red porridge. The Mediwitch told me that he'll be polka-dotted for a month, but he can probably go home next Saturday. Anyway... I thought you'd like to know. Seeing as Flavian's your Dad."

I nodded dumbly, knowing it was stupid to cry in front of Cecilia, but not knowing how to stop.

"Sally-Anne, are you all right?" Hannah's voice was floating through the mist.

I didn't have to answer because Megan had thrust her way to the front like a tickled dragon. Her hands were on her hips and she glowered as if Cecilia had plundered sapphires from her lair.

"Get lost!" Her hiss almost snorted fire. "We don't want any messages from you! Shut your trap before I do demonstrate Auntie Gwenog's woodlouse hex."

Cecilia's jaw dropped open, but no words came out. Sophie moved next to Megan and Susan planted herself on the other side of me so that I was completely shielded. Cecilia stared from Megan to Sophie and from Susan to Hannah and saw that they were all glaring identically. She took an uncertain step backwards, and Megan and Sophie stamped another step forwards.

Cecilia dropped her eyes to the floor and pelted off down the corridor in terror.

My friends relaxed their glares, and we all looked at each other.

"Should we tell a teacher?" asked Susan.

"No, that's tattling. Let's just keep out of her way," said Hannah. "We don't need friends like that."

"Besides, how would she know about Sally-Anne's Tad?" asked Megan. "It's none of her business, is it?"

"She were probably making it up," said Sophie.

I shook my head emphatically, although I felt as if an Ashwinder was squeezing my throat, because Dad had been at St Mungo's for at least three days but no one had bothered to tell me. "Cecilia telling truth," I gasped. Hannah's blue eyes were misty and Megan's dark ones were still blazing.

I drew a deep breath and managed to steady myself. "Cecilia knows more about my father than I do, because he lives in her house now. My father is her stepfather!"

Stepping Away

Chapter 2 of 14

Once there was a gentleman who married, for his second wife, the proudest and most haughty woman that was ever seen. She had, by a former husband, two daughters of her own, who were, indeed, exactly like her in all things.
(Perrault)

Warning. This chapter contains sensitive material that some readers have found distressing.

CHAPTER TWO

Stepping Away

My Dad is an actor. He kept a huge collection of character masks in the attic. I remember strewing them all over the floor when I was about three. There were sad and happy masks, angry and surprised marks, fearful and laughing masks, old and young, male and female masks, and masks for every kind of animal.

Dad laughed when he caught me playing with them. He put on a bear mask and growled at me, and he gave me a cat mask so that I could miaow at him. The masks must have been quite valuable, but he never worried about my playing with them. My sister Ella-Jane and I used to go up to the attic on a rainy day to wear the masks, pretending to be fairies or Puffskeins or giants.

There were costumes, too, although they were all adult-sized. I coveted a sparkly robe, its fake diamonds flashing all colours of the rainbow, and a pair of high-heeled dancing shoes. Ella-Jane liked the pirate costume and the Muggle bkie's leather jacket, and we both liked the animal furs.

"When we grow up we'll wear all of them," said Ella-Jane.

"And be actors like Daddy," I said.

But we never did grow large enough to wear Dad's costumes. They disappeared from our house when I was only five years old.

It was on my first day in Year One. I was very excited because I moved up into a new class in the Muggle primary school and I had brought home a real reading book. It had also been Ella-Jane's first half-day at nursery school, so I burst through the front door expecting Dad to talk about school all evening.

Both my little sisters were alone in the lounge. Molly-Rose was reeking of a dirty nappy and Ella-Jane was furiously pulling feathers out of a cushion.

"Ella-Jane, you know you aren't allowed to do that. Where's Mummy?"

"Upstairs crying."

"Don't be silly. Where's Daddy?"

"Gone out."

"Ella-Jane, stop pulling that cushion. How was nursery?"

Ella-Jane looked surprised, as if she had forgotten about nursery school, and said, "Daddy's gone out, and Mummy's crying."

Mum walked in at that moment, and her eyes were red. "I haven't been crying," she lied. "Sally-Anne, let me show you how to wash your lunch box. What did you do at school?"

"Where's Daddy?"

"He'll Floo later and explain." Mum sounded very weary, so I let her show me how to wash my lunch box and make tomorrow's sandwich. Then I had to read my reading book and pack my bag for the next day. The hands on the clock dragged until six o' clock, when the hearth finally flared with green flames, and Dad's head appeared.

"Daddy! *Daddy!*" Ella-Jane tripped over Molly-Rose in her eagerness to be first. I tried to carry Molly-Rose, now clean and combed, but she was too heavy for me, and Ella-Jane had monopolised Dad's attention.

"Hello, darling." Dad smiled lazily. "Blow me a kiss through the fireplace."

It was I who blew the kiss; Ella-Jane demanded, "Daddy, where have you*been?*"

Dad smiled again and said, "I have some news. I'm in Liverpool!"

"Why?"

"I've moved house. I'm living in my new house in Liverpool, and you can come and visit me here over the weekend."

"Oh. Why are we moving to Liverpool?" I asked.

"You're staying right where you are, fairy. I'm the only one who's moved. Mum will look after you, but you can come and visit my new family for the weekend."

I frowned. Ella-Jane burst out with, "*We're* your family, Daddy! Me and Mummy and Sally-Anne and Molly-Rose. You don't need a*new* family."

"Why?" I echoed.

"Mummy will explain it to you," said Dad, still smiling cheerfully. "But I have a brand-new family in Liverpool. It's for the best. Mummy and I weren't happy together, but she's agreed that we'll all be better off now that I've moved out."

Someone shouted from behind Dad.

"Must go!" he finished. "Tell Mummy to send you over at five o' clock on Friday. Sixty-six, Blender Street, Old Swan, Liverpool. Love you all until then!"

His head vanished, and Molly-Rose began to wail. Ella-Jane launched herself on Mum, shouting, "'Splain! 'Splain! Why does Daddy want a new family?"

Mum blew her nose. "Daddy loves another lady now. Perhaps he'll be happier now he's gone to live with her."

"Ella-Jane, stop hitting Mummy," I ordered. "It's Daddy who's moved out. Mummy,*why does he love someone else?*"

But Mum didn't know. And nor did any of us ever know.

* * * * *

On Friday I held Molly-Rose's arms and we whirled through the Floo together. She was crying when we staggered out of the stranger's grate in Old Swan, Liverpool. She was still grizzling even when Dad swept her up in his arms, telling her that everything was safe because Daddy was here. I didn't feel safe until Ella-Jane stumbled out of the grate a minute after us.

"So now we're all together!" said Dad. "One big, happy family. Come this way..." He led us out of the kitchen, past some stairs and into a living room. "Girls, I want you to meet your new stepmother. This is Cressida."

Cressida was scarily tall with long, spiky eyelashes and full, crimson lips. Emerald ear-bobs flashed from under her long, dark curls and there was a sharp-looking emerald brooch on her full bosom. Despite her plump figure, she looked altogether sharp and spiky. Molly-Rose was still grizzling; Ella-Jane was staring warily; and I said the first thing that came into my head.

"How can she be my stepmother when you haven't married her?"

Cressida giggled. "Who *does* get married nowadays? Flavian, if we don't teach these children tolerance for modern customs..."

"Sally-Anne," drawled Dad indulgently, "I wonder who taught you such judgmental attitudes?"

Cressida stopped giggling and her voice became as sharp as her brooch-pin. "We can gues*s*that easily enough! I see that we have a wellspring of poison to stem. Now, girls..." Cressida plastered on her crimson smile. I couldn't help taking a step backwards as she approached. "Let me introduce your new sisters."

For the first time I noticed the two girls sitting in the armchair in the far corner. They were dressed alike, in green velvet dresses with large collars and cuffs of silvery lace, as if they were going to a Muggle party. They both had long, dark curls, round faces and freckles.

"This is Ursula; she is seven..."

The older girl ignored the introduction. She remained settled in the centre of the armchair, petting a black cat as if she had not heard.

"... And this is Cecilia, who is five, like Sally-Anne."

Cecilia, who was perched on the arm of the chair, giggled when she heard her name, but did not look up.

"This is Sally-Anne... and Ella-Jane... and *darling* little Molly-Rose."

There was another giggle from Cecilia and more silence from Ursula. For a moment Cressida looked deflated; she turned around to talk to Dad. The moment her back was turned, Ursula and Cecilia did look up and they both stuck out their tongues at us. Ella-Jane stuck her own tongue back out at them.

Cressida saw her. "Ella-Jane, that's rude! Merlin, didn't that mother of yours teach you any manners?"

"I daresay she's too young to know," said Dad helplessly. He knew that Ella-Jane *had* been taught about rude faces.

"Let's cook," said Cressida abruptly. "We'll leave the children to play together."

As soon as the lounge door closed, Ursula and Cecilia exchanged glances and burst into dialogue.

"These are just *babies!*"

"I thought they'd be prettier. Flavian is handsome, but his daughters are plain."

"Plain like boys."

"That's because of their clothes. Sally-Anne and Ella-Jane dress like boys!"

"*Muggle* boys."

"Muggle boys without manners. The baby cries; the toddler pulls rude faces..."

"... And the girl asks rude questions!"

"Perhaps she goes to a Muggle school. Muggle playgrounds are supposed to be rude places."

"Rude and rough. Our Mummy wouldn't let us go to a Muggle school."

"But I bet it isn't just the school. I bet that girl learned her bad manners from her Mummy. I bet her Mummy told her that the divorce was all our Mummy's fault, because rude, ugly people never admit that the divorce was their own fault."

"Like our Daddy."

"Like our bullying Daddy and their rude-mannered Mummy!"

I couldn't shut out the sound of their giggling, but I turned my back so that I couldn't see their pointing and grinning. They didn't want to play with us, but there must be something to do in this house. I was facing shelves of toys dolls, hairdressing sets, boxes of beadwork and *découpage*, boxes of paints and clay but I had better sense than to touch their belongings. It took me a moment to realise what was missing.

There were no books.

I had been looking for a picture book to "read" to Ella-Jane and Molly-Rose, but there wasn't a single book in the room. There was no piano, either, and the small collection of board games looked as if they had never been played. I wondered if I dared help myself to the box of Snakes and Lions. I reached out my hand.

"Hands off!" snapped Cecilia. "Those are *our* toys."

"Oh, I have a plan!" giggled Ursula. "Let them play their divvy Snakes and Lions if they want to. I've had a much better idea!"

She picked up a jar of sequins from a high shelf and scattered them all over the carpet. She handed Cecilia a jar of buttons to throw around. Then she took a basket of art supplies and began to unscrew the lids on the paint tubes.

"Naughty!" said Ella-Jane.

Ursula squirted a tube of purple paint in Ella-Jane's face before beginning work on the walls and carpet. Cecilia smuggled a tube of orange into Molly-Rose's fist, then grabbed two different greens and helped Ursula.

"Don't!" I begged Molly-Rose. "Give it to Sally-Anne. Naughty paint!" But Molly-Rose was only about eighteen months old and of course she had squeezed out half the tube before I could coax it off her. Her overalls were filthy, and Ella-Jane, bumping the wall to escape Ursula, was also smeared.

When Cressida opened the door to tell us that dinner was ready, Ursula and Cecilia, still pristine clean, were lined up in front of her, pointing at the painted carpet. They both spoke with one voice.

"Sally-Anne and Ella-Jane did it! It was Sally-Anne's idea."

* * * * *

"Julia, don't *worry* so much." Dad was speaking to Mum through the Floo. "Relax! There's a little cash flow problem this end, but you'll have the money by the end of the week."

I don't know how many times my parents had this conversation. Dad was always calm and relaxed, and he always promised to pay the child support "soon". Money usually did turn up, but never as early as he promised, and never the full amount that he owed.

Mum appealed to the Office for Social Services for benefits; but she was never quite entitled to anything from the Ministry because Dad could "afford" to support her himself. Mum would point out that he had defaulted on his payments; a wizard from the Office would follow it up; and Dad would always promise to pay "soon". On paper, in the Ministry filing cabinet, we didn't *look* like an abandoned family, because Dad always paid something sooner or later, and he was charmingly honest about his lateness. In practice, however, there was never quite enough cash for new shoes or Floo powder, and we sometimes received ugly letters from Gringotts about our mortgage repayments.

"Julia, you need to stop and smell the roses. Make time for bubble baths and art galleries play your piano take a holiday marry again it's all in your attitude!"

Dad's grin was so infectious that I thought he must be right. Mum *didn't* have much fun.

"Look honestly at my past track record," Dad pleaded. "I sent those Connect-a-Hex blocks for Ella-Jane's birthday, as well as the tickets for Dudley Zoo and the crate of Easter eggs. You *know* I don't neglect my children, and of course there *will* be gold in your account just as soon as Gringotts has processed my royalties. Oh... Cressida wants a word. Something about arrangements for next weekend. Well, I'm busy recording a new album, so must dash!"

It was only when Dad's head vanished from the fire that I remembered that the larder was empty. Dad sent us presents and funded excursions, but he didn't understand that we needed money for food.

Cressida was angry, her nose sharp and pointed in her round face. "Julia, *howdare* you slander Flavian to your children? It doesn't matter how inadequate you feel about your failed marriage: talking about infidelity in front of the girls is *instructing* them to take sides."

Mum was angry too: her face was white and stiff. "It was *Ursula* who told Sally-Anne that Flavian had been unfaithful. Sally-Anne only asked me if it was true. Was I supposed to lie?"

"You were supposed to tell her not to poke her nose where it doesn't belong. You certainly have no right to use judgmental words like 'adultery'. You *are* *ruining* this family with your spiteful gossip. Have you considered how it damages your children to be turned against their father like that? If any more psychological abuse occurs, Flavian will apply for custody."

After Cressida had gone, Mum turned to me uncertainly. "Sally-Anne... you *do* love your Dad, don't you?"

"Of course we love Dad!" I was suddenly terrified. "Mum... if they thought we didn't love Dad... why would they make us live with him? Wouldn't it be more sensible to stop us visiting him at all? Mum! *Are* they going to stop us visiting Dad?"

"No." Mum sighed wearily. "As long as you love both of us, you'll carry on living with me and visiting Dad. It's only if the Wizengamot thinks that something's gone wrong... Well, the Wizengamot doesn't seem to understand how real families work."

"Cressida's the one I don't love," I complained bitterly. "She's *horrible*."

Mum sprang to her feet with real alarm. "Sally-Anne, don't ever let anyone hear you say that! We could all be in ~~is~~*serious* trouble if... they... thought you didn't like your stepmother. Tell yourself you love her as much as an aunt, and everything will be fine for all of us."

I thought of fat, vague, kindly Auntie Begonia, who worked in Grandpa's bookshop and always had her nose buried in a leather-bound volume. I thought of glamorous, graceful Aunt Odette, who danced in a Muggle ballet company, and of all my grand-aunts, both magical and Muggle. I thought of Great-Grand-Aunt Alexandra Plumpton, who was still agile enough to fly her broomstick to cloud-height by midnight and whose Polishing Charms kept Great-Grand-Uncle Roddy's Quidditch trophies shining clearer than glass. I knew I could never dislike any of them as much as I disliked Cressida.

* * * * *

After about a year of these squabbles, Mum went back to work. I was starting Year Two with my skirt too short and my shoes too tight. Ella-Jane was starting Reception, clutching at my hand because Mum couldn't be there to show her to her classroom and make sure she handed over her medical forms. Mum took Molly-Rose through the Floo to Madam Alma's Sunny House in Diagon Alley, then Apparated home so that she could walk to her job as a clerk at the Muggle steelworks. Mum worked eight or nine hours a day, checking other people's numbers, typing up letters, telephoning instructions through to Dispatch, and brewing the important employees' coffee.

"It sounds boring," complained Ella-Jane.

"That's what the workforce is like," said Mum. "You can all have your new shoes next week isn't that worth it?"

"No," said Ella-Jane frankly.

Ella-Jane and I came home to an empty house. Ella-Jane always wanted to play outside, but I made her read her flash cards and wash her lunch box before she went outdoors. She whined that I was bossy, but she shut up when I asked, "Do you want Mum to have to do the jobs this evening?"

After Ella-Jane had crawled under the garden fence to play with the Muggle boys next door, I would read my own book to myself, write down the number of pages I had read and scribble "JMP" so that it looked as if Mum had signed it. Then I would learn my spelling or tables, make tomorrow's sandwiches for all of us and lay the table for dinner. Mum had usually left dinner cooking in a slow oven, so I only had to peel vegetables. After that, I would mop the kitchen floor, then go upstairs to clean up the bathroom. Mum could have done it all much faster by using magic, but when she stumbled through the Floo at half-past six, clutching Molly-Rose in one arm and her briefcase in the other, she always looked so exhausted that I was glad I had saved her the job.

At dinner, little Molly-Rose would perch on three telephone directories next to Mum, picking at her food without any appetite. She never said a word unless Mum coaxed a brief "Yes" or "No" out of her. Mum always tried to talk over dinner. She asked about our day, even when she was too tired to hear our answers properly.

"We dug down to Australia, Mum!" Ella-Jane usually had dirt smeared all over her face to prove her point. "We nearly reached the end of the earth's crust; I bet we go through the mantle tomorrow! And we climbed the next-door tree and dropped water-bombs. You'll never guess who walked past it was Sally-Anne's teacher, Mrs Prunefrown. We dropped a big one on her. It serves her right for being mean to Sally-Anne at school!"

"Sally-Anne, is this true? What did Mrs Prunefrown do?"

"She shouted at me in P.E. because I couldn't climb the rope. I was trying, Mum, but I'm not good at P.E. Mrs Prunefrown shouts at everyone equally."

"She's just mean, mean, mean!" chanted Ella-Jane. "I hope I'm never in her class. She's nearly as mean as Cressida. No, she isn't. No one in the world could be as mean as Cressida."

"Ella-Jane, be careful..." I began.

"Shut your mouth! It's the truth. The only people who are *nearly* as mean as Cressida are Ursula and Cecilia. They shout at us more than Mrs Prunefrown shouts at her class."

After dinner, Mum used magic to wash up, but then there was the pile of laundry to sort between bathing Molly-Rose and writing the shopping lists. These jobs were not very much slower without magic, so Mum soon had me helping with them. I always finished the day just as tired as Mum there were never any late nights in our family, not even on Saturday.

On Saturdays Mum went charring at the neighbours' homes. She would unlock the front doors with a Muggle key. Molly-Rose stood behind her, clutching a picture-book; Ella-Jane stood behind Molly-Rose, carrying a large, plain-bound book; and I stood behind Ella-Jane, carrying a bucket of potions and powders. The Muggle family was usually out, so Mum could use magic to clean their house. The spells were all in the plain-bound book that had been Great-Grandma Flourish's wedding present to Mum: it had old-fashioned charms to operate mangles and sweep chimneys, old-fashioned recipes for mixing home-made cleaning powders and disinfectants that we could nowadays buy from Skweekerkleen's in Diagon Alley, and old-fashioned etiquette tips for how to write a christening invitation and how to dress for a funeral.

"I would never use a mangle," said Ella-Jane. "And I would never go to a christening either."

"You would if you lived in those days," I said. "Everyone was christened then. I think it's a nice idea; it welcomes the baby. And everyone had a mangle too. They didn't have another way of drying their clothes."

"Why didn't they just use a Drying Charm?"

Mum used the *Desiccatio* all the time on the baths and ovens that she cleaned. She looked up from the dirty toilet now and patiently explained, "Because that would make creases in the clothes. Yes, we do it that way nowadays, but nowadays the ironing is much easier."

Mum could set up a laundry sequence wash, rinse, squeeze, dry, air, iron, fold in just a couple of minutes. Then she would leave it alone, and by the time she had cleaned the rest of the house, she would have a beautiful pile of perfectly clean clothes, ready to be returned to their wardrobes. She could clean a bathroom in about five minutes, using a combination of Cleaning Charms and cleaning agents. Kitchens took only a little longer. Mum's *Pulvinexpulso* charm ripped the dust out of a carpet in a matter of seconds she never went near those Muggle vacuum cleaners and a jet of *Aguamenti* followed by a *Scourgify* polished up the most stubborn window. Molly-Rose would follow her around with a little duster, pretending to be useful, but of course her pretend-cleaning could never keep pace with magic. Mum did jobs that had never been mentioned in her contract: polishing up wooden furniture, dusting out the insides of cupboards (without removing the contents), stitching up leaky pillows and cushions with *Consuo*, tending pot-plants with *Floresco*, even resetting the clocks and tuning the pianos. It wasn't surprising that her clients were delighted with her work.

Mum could work much, much faster than any Muggle char-lady. But it still took a great deal of time and energy to clean five houses in one day. And, of course, if the family should happen to be home, she couldn't use magic at all.

All the Gold in Gringotts

Chapter 3 of 14

[T]hey sent her into the kitchen. There she was obliged to do heavy work from morning to night, get up early in the morning, draw water, make the fires, cook, and wash. (Grimm)

CHAPTER THREE

All the Gold in Gringotts

Ella-Jane never did have to use a mangle, but she ended up having no choice about attending a christening. For, of course, we had to spend half our weekends at Dad's house. And in due course, there was a christening in Dad's family.

Cressida had persuaded Dad not to invite us to their wedding, probably because she didn't trust Ella-Jane to keep silent when the officiant asked whether anyone knew of any just cause or impediment to the marriage. But nine months later, she had an abrupt change of policy. She suddenly decided that the birth of their son was an occasion to make a public demonstration of family unity and rejoicing. She needed the *whole* family, right down to third cousins, to drink champagne and eat cake in the new baby's honour.

"Isn't he handsome?" Dad was glowing like a lamp in the week after little Xavier's birth. "I think he'll grow up to be an actor like me. Look, Sally-Anne isn't your little brother bursting with talent? Look at that yawn! I think he has the Plumpton nose."

Molly-Rose stood up on tip-toe to look and grabbed at Xavier's arm. Dad smiled indulgently, but Cressida was furious.

"Hands *off*! Flavian, you might remember that newborns are fragile and keep the little ragamuffins away from him."

"Yes, yes," said Dad lazily. "I'm sure they didn't mean any harm. Be careful, girls. Isn't it amazing to have a boy at last after all those girls?"

Ursula's eyes narrowed at these words, but she giggled in a silly falsetto. She waited until Dad had laid Xavier on the lambskin and was looking the other way before she gave his eye a careful poke. I came running when Xavier shrieked, which was a mistake, because Cecilia announced, "Sally-Anne did it!"

"Oh, rubbish, Sally-Anne was nowhere near him," said Dad.

"Ella-Jane!" Cressida interrupted the baby's howls. "What were *you* doing?"

"Ursula did it," said Ella-Jane.

"No, Molly-Rose did it," said Ursula. "This is the second time she's hurt the baby. She must be jealous."

Dad carried Molly-Rose up to sit in the bathroom and cool off her jealousy. "Let's talk about something happy," he said when he returned to the rest of us. "Clothes. You'll all need new dress-robos for the christening. Mummy and I thought it would be nice if our five daughters were dressed alike. Madam Twilfitt has designed a special velvet robe just for our family, but we still haven't chosen the colour. What do you think?"

"Black," said Ursula.

"Red," said Ella-Jane.

"Green," said Cecilia.

"Who's going to pay for it?" I asked.

"Oh, don't *fuss*, Sally-Anne," said Cressida. "This is a special occasion!"

My brother's christening was a very special occasion, for it was Molly-Rose's third birthday. But no one had made her a cake, and there were no presents for her in Dad's house. The elaborate three-tiered fruit cake in the centre of the dining table in Liverpool was only for the toothless new baby, and so were the piles of beribboned parcels from the Honeysmoaches, the Plumptons, the Hepplewhites, the Bergamots, the Selwyns, the Vances, the Podmores and the Brocklehursts. Only the Perksees were inconspicuous, for Grandpa Perkse was a Muggle, and his relatives didn't count on this glorious wizarding occasion.

Our new dress-robos were of purple velvet (Cressida had ended up not giving any of us a choice) with bright amethyst-and-silver buttons.

"Birthday cake for Molly-Wose?" asked Molly-Rose hopefully, as I helped her with her buttons.

"Cake later," I said. "And perhaps a special cake for Molly-Rose when we go back to Mum's house."

"Sally-Anne!" rebuked Ursula. "Don't make Mummy or Flavian sound tight! Remember that they've had to fork out for this expensive christening with *no* help from their exes! Daddy was so mingy; he wouldn't pay a Knut, not even for these dress-robos."

"Daddy *is* mingy," echoed Cecilia dutifully.

"He's just had a promotion," boasted Ursula. "He's now Lord of all Muck in the Ministry. But does that give him a Sickle extra for his own daughters? No, all he cares about is throwing Galleons at the debt on his fancy wedding. And our new stepmother is *gopping*."

I wasn't sure what "gopping" meant, but Ella-Jane had enough of the idea to remind them, "You shouldn't say bad things about your stepmother, or they might make you go and live with her."

"Give your chin a rest, Ella-Jane. What do you know about it?"

Xavier screamed when the Vicar poured cold water over his face. He did not sound at all interested in fighting valiantly against the world, the flesh and the Devil; he just wanted to fight off the Servant of Christ who was wetting him. The Vicar ignored this ingratitude and pronounced that his name was Xavier Marlow.

"I wanted to name him after someone in the theatre," said Dad proudly. I wondered who Xavier Marlow had been, and it was clear that all the christening guests were wondering that too.

Ella-Jane, Molly-Rose and I were extremely glad to stumble through the Floo back to Mum's house. Mum had indeed baked a birthday cake, shaped like a rabbit and covered in pink icing, but she was also frowning over a manila envelope.

"Mum, what is it? Bad news?"

"Just grown-up stuff, darling. Let's light the candles for Molly-Rose."

"Is it money?" Grown-up stuff was usually about money.

Mum sighed. "Did your stepmother give you new dresses this weekend? That was sweet of her, but I do wish she'd told me the plan before she sent me the bill. Come on. Candles."

After Molly-Rose had blown out her three candles and unwrapped the new picture books from Grandma and Grandpa Flourish, we put her to bed. Ella-Jane was asleep in her chair (Aunt Odette hadn't been quite quick enough to stop her drinking a glass of alcoholic punch), so Mum put her to bed too, while I sneaked a look at Cressida's bill. I couldn't believe my eyes.

Five hundred Galleons!

Just for *dress-rob*es? All right, they were real velvet, but we hadn't*asked* for velvet. And this wasn't a request for half the price, which might have been fair if Mum had agreed in advance that we needed the robes. Mum was being charged for *all* of it.

Wait a minute... *all* of it. I squinted at the bill, which was in Tabitha Twilfitt's grown-up, slanting writing.*Sixty* amethyst buttons? There had only been twelve on each robe. I was quite good at the multiplication table now.

"Mum!" I exclaimed, as soon as she returned to the kitchen. "Mum, I think they're trying to make you pay for Ursula and Cecilia as well as for Ella-Jane, Molly-Rose and me. And they're making you pay *all*, not just half, even though we've had to leave the robes behind in Liverpool. Mum, I think they I mean Cressida's cheating!*Not* Dad, I told myself. Dad wouldn't cheat deliberately. Dad just didn't understand money very well. But Cressida... She hadn't been able to make her ex-husband pay, so she was trying to trick Mum into paying instead.

Mum didn't even bother to tell me off for being rude about my stepmother. "Sally-Anne, do you know how difficult it will be to challenge this bill? If we request a Wizengamot hearing, it will cost us more than five hundred Galleons anyway."

"Can't we just ignore it?"

"We could try, but then your father will take it to the Wizengamot, and we'll probably end up paying the court costs after all, as well as the cost of the robes."

"Well... can we sell the robes? I hated mine. It was all scratchy."

"Darling, this is my problem, not yours. Just... just go to bed so that you'll be ready for school tomorrow. Oh dear, oh dear, and I had only just managed to clear the last lot of debts that they dumped on me! If we want to stay in this house, I'll be charring for a long time yet!"

* * * * *

"And I will be faithful to you as long as we both shall live..."

Mum decided to remarry when I was nine; Ella-Jane was seven and Molly-Rose was five. The wedding was to be in an ordinary Anglican church with an ordinary Muggle Rector, because our new stepfather was a Muggle an industrial maintenance mechanic whom Mum had met through work. I wondered if he would really be faithful to Mum "as long as they both lived".

"Sally-Anne, don't worry. This is different so different from when I married your father." Mum had fallen into the habit of talking to me like an adult. She kept saying, "Don't worry," but then she'd tell me her worries. "Let's be honest: I married your Dad for his looks and because the theatre life seemed exciting. I'm marrying Raymond because he's truly a friend. He was loyal to his first wife, so he has a good track record."

I nearly asked why Raymond had left his first wife, but I caught myself in time: divorced people became angry when you asked about their divorces.

Mum answered my unasked question. "It was she who left him; she fell in love with someone else six or seven years ago. Raymond's been on his own all that time and he's a very good father."

"Oh, *no*," said Ella-Jane, who could never be trusted not to listen at doors. "*Notmore* stepsisters!"

"Definitely not," said Mum. "This time it's *stepbrothers*. Jeremy is ten and Christopher is eight. Do try not to let magic happen around them, girls they still believe it doesn't exist. We'll have to tell them eventually, of course, but let them get used to us as human beings before they think about us as witches. Now, what colour shall we choose for the bridesmaids' dresses?"

Molly-Rose did not look up from her book: she had progressed to chaptered stories and was an avid reader. Ella-Jane turned up her nose and muttered something about wearing jeans to the wedding. So in the end Mum and I made the decision by ourselves. Yellow didn't suit our mousy complexions; the new stepbrothers probably wouldn't agree to pink waistcoats; blue would be difficult to match to flowers... In the end, we agreed on a lovely cherry-red that could be matched to red roses, and even Ella-Jane was happy.

Cressida made a fuss. She tried to say that the wedding had been timed for Dad's access period, even though it was right in the middle of Mum's section of the summer holidays, and she tried to say that Dad had never agreed to the "religious indoctrination" that we would receive from spending a single hour of our lives in a church. She complained that the bridesmaids' dresses looked too Muggle and couldn't be worn again, even though they were only hired and Grandma Flourish was paying, and she complained that the Muggle stepbrothers would be a "toxic influence" on girls who were "already poisoned against the best sectors of wizarding society".

Actually Jeremy and Christopher looked very harmless. They both had dark hair like Raymond; Jeremy was tall and wore glasses, while Christopher was stocky and arrived at the church with his hair uncombed and his cherry-red waistcoat half-unbuttoned.

Mum and Raymond were allowed to be married in church even though they were both divorced. "It's a good church," said Raymond. "They allow for human nature. They deliver food parcels to unemployed people and there's a Sunday School programme why don't we try it out sometime?"

"Yes, let's!" I agreed. "Oh... but, Ella-Jane, *don't* tell Cressida!"

Ella-Jane said a rude word. "I never tell Cressida*anything*!"

At first Ella-Jane gave Raymond a hard time. She argued when he told her go to bed; she ignored him when he told her to put on her shoes and walked through the streets in stocking feet; she whined in the back of his car about wanting sweets and nearly caused an accident. When Raymond found me drying the dishes as well as washing them, while Ella-Jane lounged in front of his television with her homework untouched, he almost lost his temper. But in the end, Ella-Jane had to admit that Raymond was good for Mum, and not just because he had provided us with the amazing Muggle television set.

We never found out what Molly-Rose thought because she rarely said anything to anyone; Ella-Jane talked enough for both of them.

Mum was able to give up her charring jobs so that we could have family time on Saturday. She was less tired, and we would go to museums or amateur football matches over the weekend. Raymond found the money to pay for my piano lessons, and even talked about saving up to buy bikes so that we could cycle alongside the canal, which he had always dreamed of doing with his own sons.

We got along well with the boys, too. Jeremy talked about books with Molly-Rose and music with me and taught both of us to play draughts. Christopher climbed trees and dug holes with Ella-Jane; her proudest moment was when Christopher's teacher happened to walk past and ask, "Christopher, is this your brother?" But we only saw them once every couple of months, because Cressida usually arranged to have us in Liverpool when the boys were due to be in Hereford. She said that Ella-Jane and Molly-Rose were too young to understand the Statute of Secrecy and they might leak something out to "those hooligan boys". We really only saw our stepbrothers at all because their own mother was so disorganised that they sometimes turned up at our house unexpectedly.

On Sundays Mum and Raymond went to church, taking with them whichever children were resident. All of us liked the church more than we had expected to. We made new friends, who invited us round to their houses, and we joined a roster that helped elderly people with their shopping and gardening. Ella-Jane and Christopher found that the Sunday School teacher allowed children to wear jeans to church and that the crafts were satisfyingly messy, while Molly-Rose loved the Bible stories.

I did wonder whether there was a deeper meaning to this religious hobby. It was difficult to keep track of the spiritual messages when I could only attend church every other week. I learned that God had made the world (obvious) and that He loved everyone no matter what (good to know) and that He wanted us to share our possessions and do our work without complaining (one would certainly hope so!). I asked Jeremy if he thought it was true that God really answered prayer, but Jeremy didn't know.

* * * * *

Unfortunately, the improved financial situation only lasted about six months. Then Cressida realised that Mum was in a two-income family.

"It is so unfair that you ask Flavian to pay for their school excursions and new shoes," she told Mum through the Floo. "Why do they want to go on those Muggle excursions anyway? You know very well that Flavian has Xavier and my girls to support now; he shouldn't have to maintain two homes. Get your new fellow to pay for something for a change!"

At about the same time, Raymond's ex-wife and her second husband came to the same conclusion. Mr and Mrs Bufton were like Muggle versions of Dad; nothing ever worried them because nothing was ever their responsibility. Every time Mrs Bufton dropped the boys off at our house, there was the same argument.

"Jeremy and Christopher are *your* sons too," she would say. "You can't expect Clinton to support them - he's already putting their food on the table six days out of seven, and we have two children of our own to consider. And it would be wrong of me to go out to work while Nathan and Adam are so young. Yes, yes, I know you've acquired three stepdaughters, but you've also acquired a working wife - can't she support her own children? What about *her* ex? Let him pay for something for a change!"

I ran my fingers over the ancient piano that Great-Grandmother Plumpton no longer wanted, but the scale of D major could not drown out Mum and Raymond's worried discussion after the Buftons had departed.

"I spend as much on my sons' food and clothes as you do on your daughters'," said Raymond. "And I have only two! If the money isn't lasting, am I subsidising the Buftons' mortgage?"

"Could you offer to pay goods in kind instead of cash? That's what Flavian offered me - although, in his case, the only 'goods' that arrived were those party dresses three years ago, for which I ended up paying. Oh dear, I only asked him to pay for *half* of the girls' expenses, but Cressida seems to think I want him to pay for everything."

Mum applied for a small promotion, which resulted in a higher salary but longer hours. Raymond took on more mechanical contracts, which resulted in more wages but more hours away from home, sometimes even at the weekend. Fortunately, I was now old enough to manage the stove safely, so most evenings I could help by cooking the dinner. After Mum came home, I could borrow her wand to cast some of her household charms; it wasn't really allowed, but it was a more efficient way to clean the house, and how was the Ministry to know which of us had done the magic?

On Saturdays I went down to the Muggle supermarket to select our food and organise a delivery. One afternoon the lorry arrived while Raymond was out, and Mum didn't have enough cash in her purse to pay for it. It was so embarrassing! Fortunately I had enough in my dragon-bank to make up the difference.

"Mum, you had money yesterday. What *happened*?"

She bit her lip. "Cressida came right into the lounge after you were in bed. She said *had* to pay my share of the trip to Cornwall that you'll all be taking over the Easter holidays. What could I do? I couldn't let her start a figh... I mean, the argument might have been loud, and Raymond might have tried to intervene. So I gave her the money; I hope I can sort it out with your father next weekend."

"Mum, let me see your bills. I think/ should be managing the money in this family. And if we can't afford extra holidays, we just won't go!"

Needless to say, when Mum complained to Dad, he lazily replied that the girls needed a holiday and that we couldn't *not* go because it was all scheduled for his access week. Needless to say, Cressida managed to reschedule the trip for the other week of the school holidays and to announce that the Perks girls didn't deserve to go because we had been "ganging up" on Cecilia.

We did not go to Cornwall. Mum did not get her money back. But I did end up balancing the books for the PerksSlater household. All I managed to prove was how many more hours Mum and Raymond would have to work in order to pay the debts that Dad, Cressida and the Buftons poured down on them.

"Enough is enough," said Raymond. "Jeremy and Christopher are mine, and I won't neglect Sally-Anne, Ella-Jane or Molly-Rose. But it isn't my job to support Adam, Nathan, Xavier, Ursula and Cecilia as well. We'll show them Sally-Anne's numbers and pay only what's fair."

The next Friday evening Cressida arrived in our lounge in a very good mood. "I have delightful news!" she announced. "Odette has finally hit the zenith of her career - she is dancing *Swan Lake* tomorrow night."

I was surprised; Cressida had always seemed to despise Aunt Odette's Muggle ballet company and her string of Muggle husbands.

"Odette is dancing the part of *Odette*," Cressida repeated. "She's finally a prima donna! We're taking the children to the première performance tomorrow night. I'm sure you'll appreciate what an important family occasion this is, cultural experiences aside, so we've booked dress-circle seats."

We all knew immediately what was going to happen. Before Cressida had time to demand that Mum should pay for our tickets, Raymond moved to the centre of the room and looked her straight in the eye. "It sounds great," he said. "You're lucky to be able to afford it, Cressida, for *we* certainly can't."

"What?" Cressida slid her wand into her hand. "No, of course we can't afford to take *six* children, Raymond. I'm here to tell Julia that -"

"Don't bother." Raymond spoke quietly, yet somehow Cressida shut up. In that moment, I knew I loved him like an uncle. "If Odette can't supply her nearest relations with free tickets, then I'm sure she understands that the children can't watch her dance until they are old enough to earn their own spending money. I actually believe that it's quite good for children not to have luxuries before they've learned to work for them."

"What... you think..." Cressida spluttered; then she recovered her composure. "Oh, mind your own business, you Muggle drongo *Cornifors! Furnunculus! Crures*

Flaccidae"

Raymond crumpled to the ground as if his legs were jelly. Horns were sprouting from his head and boils were erupting over his skin. My stepparents each took a long glance of derision at the other, then Cressida abruptly Disappeared.

Mum cast a *Finite Incantatem* while I helped Raymond to his feet. After that, I really didn't want to walk through the Floo to Dad's house for the access weekend, but I reminded myself that none of this had been Dad's idea. After all, he was *Dad*.

On Saturday evening, Dad and Cressida left my sisters and me alone in their house while they took Xavier and the girls to watch Aunt Odette's ballet.

"I can't *imagine* what you must have done to deserve this punishment," sneered Ursula. "After all, Aunt Odette did send eight free tickets."

The Badgers' Sett

Chapter 4 of 14

It happened that the king's son gave a ball, and invited all persons of fashion to it. Our young misses were also invited, for they cut a very grand figure among those of quality. They were mightily delighted at this invitation, and wonderfully busy in selecting the gowns, petticoats, and hair dressing that would best become them. (Perrault)

CHAPTER FOUR

The Badgers' Sett

Dear Dad,

I'm sorry to hear that you have spattergroit. I hope you will be well soon. You must hate lying around at St Mungo's when so much is happening in the family. I did miss you at King's Cross Station, but I'm glad to hear your illness is no worse.

I have arrived safely at Hogwarts and I have been sorted into Hufflepuff. Guess who was sorted next after me the famous Harry Potter! He was put in Gryffindor, though, so I haven't really met him. One girl in my dormitory, Susan Bones, is also a Plumpton descendant: have you heard of this family?

We have had Charms, Herbology, Astronomy Theory and History of Magic so far. Homework takes about an hour every evening, which seems like nothing when there is no housework. Quidditch will start in November.

Cecilia is well too. Best wishes to Cressida and Xavier.

Love,

Sally-Anne.

I paused before writing kisses on the end of the letter because I didn't really want to send kisses to Cressida; that was far different from a polite "best wishes".

"Yer 'ave neat writing," said Sophie. "Could yer lend us a quill?"

I opened my bag. Megan gasped out loud. "How do you manage to keep your bag so neat after a long day at school?"

"It isn't only her bag," said Hannah. "Did you notice her trunk? Everything folded up and colour-coded. Sally-Anne, doesn't *anything* jumble your stuff around?"

"It's just an Order Charm," I said. "It helps me not to lose things. Here's a quill, Sophie."

Dear Mum, Raymond, Ella-Jane and Molly-Rose,

I hope you are very well. I am very well. I have arrived safely at Hogwarts and I have been sorted into Hufflepuff, just like Mum. The other girls in my dormitory are Hannah Abbott, Susan Bones, Megan Jones and Sophie Roper. They have all been very good friends to me already.

Music lessons at Hogwarts are still free, so you need not worry about that. Professor Vector has agreed to teach me piano twice a week. Megan will be

having violin lessons, and a boy called Wayne has an oboe: I think he is more talented than Megan and me put together!

I expect I will manage to stay away from the Slytherins. A boy called Ernie says we won't share any lessons with them. Cecilia seems to have made herself a group of friends already, so I hope she won't bother with me any more.

Lots and lots of love to all of you. Best wishes to Jeremy and Christopher when you see them.

Sally-Anne

It felt strange not to worry about shopping or laundry. Susan pointed out that I didn't even need to make my own bed in the mornings. "The house-elves will re-make it for you anyway, because they'll think you can't have done it properly." There was nothing to do except concentrate on my homework and practise my scales, even though I wasn't exactly gifted at the piano.

My dorm-mates all became very good friends very fast. We were all very different, yet we were exactly right for each other, fitting together like the parts of a jigsaw. Hannah was easily flustered and very sweet-natured. Susan was the opposite calm, relaxed and very logical in her thinking. Megan, different again, was fiery-tempered, impulsive and passionate about her violin. Sophie was down-to-earth, practical and persistent with no time at all for flights of fancy. They all teased me about my orderliness; Megan once joked that, "Sally-Anne would obey a notice to keep off the grass even if that did mean leaving a toddler to drown in the lake!" But I was the one who never lost stationery or ran out of clean socks. When exam time came, we planned our revision sessions around my notes because we all knew that mine had nothing missing.

Mum wrote every week with the news from home: the family routine, the jobs and the schools, the church, the weekend outings. Reading between the lines, I knew she still had plenty of money troubles.

Dad wrote irregularly, perhaps once a month, to tell me all about Xavier. Xavier was four when Cecilia and I started at Hogwarts, but Cressida flatly refused to send him to the Muggle primary school. She taught him at home for a couple of hours a day, just as she had taught her daughters, and seemed to spend the rest of the time towing him around the Diagon Alley shops or Witches' Institute meetings. Sometimes Dad wrote that he had work; since the wizarding theatre in Liber Alley is only open six weeks a year, a wizarding actor has to find work with Muggle companies for the rest of the time. Dad had long periods of unemployment between the seasons when he struck lucky. He was sometimes asked to sing at Muggle pubs on Saturday nights and he made several recordings of his songs, which were marketed to Muggles as well as to wizards. He loved seeing his face on the cover of his albums, but of course they didn't bring in the kind of money that would make him rich.

Dad's letters always asked how Ursula and Cecilia were. Reading between the lines, I don't think they wrote home very often. I wasn't able to give Dad much information because I didn't see much of my stepsisters at Hogwarts. Most days the Slytherins shoved us aside in the Entrance Hall on their way to the first lesson; Hufflepuffs quickly learned to stand quietly by the kitchen door until all the Slytherins had gone. So I could only write to Dad that Cecilia seemed to be in good health or that she was trying out a new hairstyle or that I had heard her practising her flute in the music corridor (there was no need to mention that she played very badly!).

* * * * *

The first summer holidays caused another family row. Dad wanted us to spend the whole of July with him. Mum reminded him that the Muggle primary school broke up three weeks later than Hogwarts.

"Oh, right..." Dad hesitated. "Okay, I'm not trying to make trouble. Just send the younger ones around when they do break up."

"What?" shrieked a voice behind Dad. "Flavian, are you *barmy*? If you start sacrificing your access rights now, you'll never see your children again!" Dad's head abruptly disappeared from the Floo, and Mum was face to face with Cressida. "We *can't* take the girls in August. We've booked a boarding-house in Blackpool, just Flavian, Xavier and me. We're even sending Ursula and Cecilia to their father it's time he took some responsibility. Our holiday is *not* going to be cancelled just because you choose to be awkward. Besides, we're not beginning the habit of separating your little trio and seeing them in ones and twos; none of us will ever manage to keep track of that kind of arrangement. So we need to access Ella-Jane and Molly-Rose in *July*. That's Flavian's right under the Wizengamot ruling the first half of each school holiday."

Mum had no success in persuading Cressida that Ella-Jane and Molly-Rose's school had different holidays, so my sisters had to miss the last few weeks of term. They lost out on sports day, several excursions and their parts in the school play, while Mum had to explain to the Aurors why she had cast a Confundus Charm on the Muggle truancy officer.

Dad met Ursula, Cecilia and me at King's Cross Station and took us through the public Floo in The Leaky Cauldron to Liverpool. Cressida immediately swooped down on her daughters and ushered them up to her room to try on new clothes. I decided to make a start on dinner. After I had sliced the onions and peeled the potatoes, Dad wandered in to help me.

"You've learned a few tricks from your mother, I see," he said. "Is cooking a big hobby for you?"

"I cook most evenings at Mum's. Where does Cressida keep the flour?"

"Merlin knows! Here, let me look in the larder. Why do you need to mix flour with the beef? Don't answer; I can see it's one of the Great Secrets of Womankind. Flour coming up."

I dredged the meat in the flour while Dad washed the knife and carried on chattering about the family.

"Ella-Jane's turning into a proper little tomboy, isn't she? I hope she'll agree to grow her hair out in time for Aunt Odette's next wedding. I told you that Odette had found her Number Four, didn't I?"

"I hope she'll be happy this time."

"Well, if she isn't, she can always get divorced again. She isn't having bridesmaids or anything it's just a Register Office affair but she'd like you all to dress up a bit. Ursula wants to wear black, but that doesn't seem quite right for the occasion. I think Ursula will be the family beauty. Still, we never really know, do we? I wonder what young Xavier's up to? Too quiet is a bad sign. Put that casserole in the oven quickly, and we'll go and look for them all."

Molly-Rose was curled up on the sofa, her nose buried deep in *The Treasure-Seekers*, and she didn't glance up at us. Upstairs, Cressida's voice sailed clearly out of the master bedroom. "That pumpkin-gold is *gorgeous* on both of you! Come on, Ursula, it will look hideous on those pasty-pale Perks girls you'll outshine them without needing to lift a wand."

Dad didn't seem to hear this. He opened the door to the next bedroom, where we found Ella-Jane teaching Xavier to write rude words on his bedroom mirror. Dad thought this a tremendous joke and dismissed it with a cheery, "Don't let your mother find out!"

"She won't," said Ella-Jane. "She's too busy playing dress-ups with Ursula and Cecilia, isn't she, Xavy?"

"Ella-Jane," I said, "come upstairs and help me unpack."

"But I'm having fun here!"

"Do you really want Cressida to know what you've just been doing?"

"Bossy," she grumbled, but she followed me up to the attic, which Dad had converted into a bedroom for the five of us. He had designed a five-door wardrobe, but Ursula and Cecilia had spread their clothes over two sections each, while Ella-Jane and Molly-Rose had crammed theirs into the fifth.

"We'll have to move some of Cecilia's stuff if I'm to put mine away," I said, trying not to worry about what Cecilia would say when she found out.

"I'll punch her nose in if she complains," offered Ella-Jane.

Over dinner, Xavier burst into tears because his plate was full of mushrooms. No one was forcing him to eat them, but Ursula crossly complained that I might have remembered that he didn't like them.

"Sally-Anne never considers other people," said Cecilia. "She's been *monopolising* Flavian this evening. She wants him all to herself."

"So what if she does?" argued Ella-Jane. "He's our Dad, not yours."

Cecilia's mouth fell open in horror; she looked on the verge of tears.

"Don't be silly, girls," said Dad indulgently. "I love all five of you the same."

Cressida cleared her throat and glanced pointedly at Xavier, who was now piling up his mushrooms on my plate.

"Yes, love, but Xavier isn't a *girl*," Dad reminded her. The undisguised pride in his tone told all five of us who his favourite child was.

"I have my own father," Ursula announced with dignity. "I'm going to go and stay with him next month."

"But, Ursie, he's a bully," said Cecilia. "I don't want to see him. Do I have to go, Mummy? I don't *like* my father."

"Of course you have to go," said Cressida. "He won't belt girls of your age, and I'm sure you're old enough by now to stay out of trouble if you try. Pass the salt, Molly-Rose."

"Besides," said Ursula, "Daddy is on the pig's back." Cressida raised her eyebrows, and Ursula hastily corrected herself, "He has lots of money."

It was a very long July but every school holiday was to be the same. Cecilia wept and Ursula stormed whenever their favourite shirts were unavailable in the ironing basket or there was no money for ice cream. If they lost something, they accused us of stealing it; if they were bored, they picked a quarrel; if their parents paid attention to Xavier, they planned a practical joke for which they could blame us. And they whined all day long about how they didn't want to stay with their bullying father next month. Molly-Rose escaped into her books; Ella-Jane wandered off to meet Muggle boys at the city docks; and I went on a housekeeping rampage, tidying up the cramped little house and preparing meals five days in advance.

Xavier said more than once: "I'm glad I only have one Mummy and one Daddy in one house."

"Yes, you are the child favoured by fortune!" Dad would reply, tossing him in the air.

I tried to make friends with Xavier, but I truly could not stomach his collection of dead beetles and live worms. Cecilia noticed my gasp of horror, so of course I found half Xavier's collection awaiting me in my bunk that night. Xavier wailed inconsolably that his "pets" were lost, and Cressida was furious when she discovered that I had "stolen" them.

At the mid-point of every holiday, my sisters and I returned gratefully to Mum's house in Hereford. Meanwhile, our bitterly-complaining stepsisters flooded to the fashionable end of Liverpool to stay with their father. Yet it was noticeable that they always returned to Hogwarts a little friendlier towards him. Every morning for the first week of term, Cecilia would station herself and a friend next to the kitchen door so that when the Hufflepuffs emerged for our first lesson, I would be sure to overhear her chattering about my family's doings.

"Daddy said our old school trunks were a disgrace, so he donated them to a second-hand shop and bought us these new ones. They're of dragon-hide, and my new flute case matches them exactly. It's a sterling silver flute, too."

"Really?" asked Tracey Davies. "Does the silver flute sound better than the steel one?"

Cecilia giggled. "Well, it must, mustn't it? It's pure silver! Daddy also bought me a new moggy. She's a pedigree chinchilla and she cost forty-five Galleons."

"She must mew louder," muttered Tracey under her breath. "But, Cecilia, I thought you didn't *like* your father!"

"Oh, I don't," declared Cecilia blithely. "He's still a bully. Mummy exaggerated his cruelty *a little* bit..." She giggled again. "But only a little. He's a bossy-boots with his wife and he belts their daughters and he never lets Ursula or me do anything." Her voice became a little louder as she said, "I *much* prefer my stepfather. Such a *gentlewizard*! But, between you and me, Tracey..." Every Hufflepuff in the Entrance Hall heard her stage whisper. "Flavian is a *poor* man. Daddy's one good point is that he has splosh and he does like his family to display it."

By the next summer holidays, of course, Ursula and Cecilia were disenchanted with their father.

"He might have Galleons, but he's mingy about how he shares them out."

"He spends them all on that Ambassadors-for-Fashion-Deregulation Natalie."

"And her brats. Primula can't wipe her own nose and Marcella's barely bog-trained. But Daddy bought them make-overs at Madam Pimpernelle's."

"He thinks of them as his *real* family. We're just a nuisance to him."

"Let's be careful what we ask for," Ursula concluded. "He doesn't listen to wheedling, but he might cough up the goods on a really special occasion."

The story continued to vary over time. By the Christmas holidays, Mr Runcorn was generous after all but he didn't have as much money as he pretended. By Easter, he had "social status in the Ministry" but there was no talk about his financial affairs.

"Daddy is a genuine pure-blood," babbled Cecilia. "And he says that blood speaks louder than money."

* * * * *

The "really special occasion" finally arose at the end of my third year (Ella-Jane's first and Ursula's fifth). That summer my stepsisters announced with a smirking pride that there was to be a Slytherin House ball.

"In the summer holidays?" asked Ella-Jane. "I wouldn't go to school in the summer!"

"No, silly, at Christmas! It's a great secret, but Daddy heard about it at the Ministry. We shall need new dress-robos."

"I wouldn't do anything that needed dress-robos," said Ella-Jane firmly.

"That's lucky, since you always look gopping in dress-robos," said Ursula. "But who'd invite you? After all, you're in Gryffindor! Oh, Mummy, did you hear any of that? There's going to be a ball next term and we'll need new dress-robos."

Cressida shrugged. "It's no good asking me for Sickles. Perhaps Odette has something you can borrow or cut down."

Ursula howled. "*Not* Odette, Mummy. You *know* she wears all that Muggle stuff!"

"And we want something *new*!" wailed Cecilia. The wails turned to simpers when Dad walked in. "Flavian, you're always so kind to us."

"Dear, darling Flavian, have you heard the news?"

"You girls want something," said Dad indulgently. "Dress-robos, is it? Well, you certainly reward good dressing, but we do have to be realistic. I didn't get that Muggle contract with my new album. I can give you ten Galleons each."

Cecilia's mouth dropped open with disappointment, but Ursula held her hand out firmly while plastering on a smile. "Thank you so much, Flavian. We do understand that money is tight, but you'll be proud to see how far we make that ten Galleons stretch." Her fingers closed around the gold coins and she scowled at Cecilia, who said no more.

After they had all gone, Ella-Jane remarked, "I'm surprised they didn't make more fuss."

Molly-Rose looked up from her book. "You didn't hear what they were saying before you came in. Their own father has already given them twenty Galleons each. They only *pretend* that he's mean."

They kept up the pretence right through July. When we went to visit Cressida's parents, Ursula and Cecilia hung around their grandparents like leeches, fetching their tea and admiring their photograph albums. But once Dad and Cressida were out of the way, the wheedling and presents in advance?"

"Because we can't go to the ball unless we have dress-robos."

"We wouldn't ask you, Grandad, but it would be unfair of us to ask Flavian, for he has his own children to consider."

"And Daddy doesn't give us a Knut. We can't think why!"

Molly-Rose was distracted from her book for long enough to notice that Mr and Madam Honeysmooch separately handed over ten Galleons to each granddaughter without consulting one another forty Galleons in total. Even Great-Grandmamma Black joined the party.

"I've no money, but I can give you something better," the old lady promised. "You know that your late great-grandfather was banished from his ancestral home, that his niece burned his very name off the family tapestry. But among the few little treasures that he took away with him that he gave to me on our wedding day..." Madam Black opened her hand to reveal two strings of perfect ocean pearls.

Molly-Rose was awed into silence by the story of the young man whose family had eradicated his very name from their records. Ursula and Cecilia just grabbed at the pearls.

"Fifty Galleons each," they reckoned. "And pearls. We could always *ask* Aunt Odette. She's Muggle-loving and mingy, but we could still ask. What a pity Aunt Messalina's living in Brazil!"

"I hope I'm *never* invited to a ball," muttered Ella-Jane.

"Never mind," I said. "We're going home to Mum's house next week."

Ursula paused in counting her gold and whipped her head around to face me. "And we're glad to be getting rid of you!" she snapped.

* * * * *

We had a wonderful August at Mum's house. She couldn't afford to take us on holiday, but we went hiking and cycling and swimming around Hereford with Jeremy and Christopher. I had almost forgotten about the Slytherin ball when our Hogwarts letters arrived.

And there it was, large and clear, the final item on the uniform list.

Dress-robos.

This mysterious festivity was not a "Slytherin ball" after all. Whatever Cecilia had claimed, I too was invited to whatever the occasion was. And I too would need dress-robos next term.

I didn't own any dress-robos, of course. I didn't even own a Muggle party dress. And I couldn't mention it to Mum and Raymond, who had just had to buy football boots for Christopher. So I would have to ask Dad, who had managed to find ten Galleons each for Ursula and Cecilia. Unlike my stepsisters, I could take that ten Galleons to the second-hand robe shop in Diagon Alley and make it stretch!

But when I Flooed Dad, he was preoccupied by his own troubles. "I do finally have a contract for that album," he said, "but only a small one, and it'll be twelve months before I see any money." I made sympathetic noises, while Dad talked on about how it could only be short holidays and small presents this year and how quickly his credit rating with the goblins was running out. It was ten minutes before he remembered that children weren't supposed to know about money. "That frown will spoil your pretty face, Sally-Anne! Don't worry about all that grown-up stuff your Dad can take care of it. What's up with you?"

"It isn't a good time..."

"Yes, it is! Who can you tell your problems to, if not to your own Dad?"

"It's just that my Hogwarts letter came today and it says... I need dress-robos."

"Oh, you're going to this Christmas dance, are you?" His smile faded. "Sally-Anne, there just isn't money for luxuries like dress-robos. Couldn't you wear whatever you wore to Odette's last wedding?"

I shuddered at the thought of that hideous pumpkin-gold cocktail dress. "That was two years ago, Dad; I've long since outgrown it. Besides, it's a Mug "

Dad snapped his fingers. "That's it! You girls grow! *Accio!* There you are, Sally-Anne this one will never fit Ursula again." He thrust his hand through the hearth, the flames whirled and shimmered, and there it was: the identical pumpkin-gold cocktail dress that had been made for Ursula. "Perfect! She won't even notice that it's missing!"

I thanked Dad numbly. Ursula's figure was much broader and fuller than mine, and she always wore much stronger colours. Besides, the Muggle style didn't look at all like a dress-robe, and there was a champagne-stain right across the bodice. I knew I couldn't wear it.

I racked my brains. Some girls could borrow clothes from their mothers, but Mum didn't own any formal robes. It was too late in the holidays to look for a job. I couldn't ask my grandparents for help Mum's family already supplied me with free schoolbooks, while I saw so little of Dad's parents that I could never make contact just to ask them for favours. Was there any chance that this ball would turn out to be non-compulsory?

Otherwise I would have to wear my Hogwarts uniform and volunteer to serve the drinks and clean the tables.

Invitation to the Ball

Chapter 5 of 14

The prince said he would go with her to take care of her, for he wanted to see where the beautiful maiden lived. But she escaped him and jumped up into the pigeon-house.... And the prince followed her, for he wanted to see to what house she belonged; but she broke away from him and ran into the garden at the back of the house. There stood a fine large tree, bearing splendid pears; she leapt as lightly as a squirrel among the branches, and the prince did not know what had become of her. (Grimm)

CHAPTER FIVE

Invitation to the Ball

"Ella-Jane's in the nick *again*," giggled Cecilia. "Did you hear about it, Sally-Anne? Flavian says she's the black sheep of the family."

I tried to think of a polite way to end the conversation.

"Sally-Anne, did you hear what I said?" Cecilia stamped her foot impatiently. "It's very rude not to answer when I speak to you! I asked if you knew about Ella-Jane's ~~latest~~ detention."

"Of course." I hoped the one I knew about really was the latest; the news was three days old.

"She really is a meff, isn't she? She has no feminine grace at all." Cecilia made a preening gesture over her own plump curves and tossed back her dark curls. "Flavian boasted to Granny that Ursula and I are already queen bees among the boys. But he called Ella-Jane a tomboy and Molly-Rose a bluestocking. I don't imagine they'll ever get married, do you?"

"Cecilia, do you even know what the word 'bluestocking' means?"

"Are you calling me *thick*?" The ready tears glittered in her eyes again. "It means a girl who's too busy reading to bother doing her laundry. Molly-Rose's like that. If Mummy didn't tidy up after her, she'd be smelly. But even though you're mean to me, Sally-Anne, I'm going to say something nice to you. Flavian told Granny that you were a homebody. That means you *aren't* going to end up an old maid like your sisters, because some mer*like* the homebody type."

She paused for me to say something, so I said, "I can't predict the future."

This time she flushed with anger. "That isn't magic, that's just common sense! You're a half-blood with no Galleons; you aren't pretty and you never tease boys; your sisters are an absolute embarrassment to you; you aren't even nice. So anyone would think you didn't have a hope with the wizards. But as long as you keep up your cooking and cleaning, some wizard will want you for his housewitch. And talking of you not being nice, I'm going to *tell* Flavian what a toe-rag you've been today!"

I wasn't too worried about that, because Cecilia usually forgot to write home. But I knew I would lose my temper in earnest if I didn't get rid of her quickly. I put my hand on the owlery door and said, "I'm going in. Are you coming?"

"*That* manky place! No fear!"

So when the owlery door closed, Cecilia and I were on different sides of it. I did in fact have letters to send.

Dear Mum and Raymond,

Everything is fine. I know you're worried about Ella-Jane, but it really isn't a problem by Hogwarts standards. Professor Snape put Ella-Jane in detention because she threw a box of live lizards at Astoria Greengrass. We blame Astoria because she threw Billywig stingers at Ella-Jane first.

Yes, Ella-Jane had to spend all Saturday morning shelling snails, but this is a very normal kind of thing at Hogwarts. I know she's been complaining that Snape didn't punish Astoria, but unfair treatment between houses is quite normal here too...

I was exhausted with trying to explain away Ella-Jane's behaviour so that Mum wouldn't worry and Cressida wouldn't make excuses to give her extra punishments. As I tied the letter to a school owl, the boy in the next stall turned to look at me. It was Terry Boot from my Potions class.

"Was that your own owl?" he asked.

"No, just a school one. Oh, yours has purple eyes!" Terry's eyes were blue, and his face had a fresh, scrubbed look.

"He's a spotted wood-owl from Java. That is, the breed is Javan; Tychicus was hatched at Eeylops."

"He's beautiful. You're lucky if you have a place to keep an owl at home."

Terry laughed; he laughed a great deal. "I don't, really; I hate cages, so I have to be very careful to keep Tychicus clean. It's surprising that my parents tolerate him, actually, as they're Muggles."

"My stepfather is a Muggle, and he had real trouble understanding why my sister keeps her old Shooting Star indoors it drops twigs everywhere, and she can't fly it in the house. And when my stepbrother..."

But before I could enlarge on the complications of living with Muggles, Anthony Goldstein poked his head around the door. Terry hastily patted his owl, apologised to me and fled. I followed him out, to find that Cecilia was still lurking in the corner. I pretended not to see her, but her voice rang in my ears anyway.

"Sally-Anne! Did you hear what Molly-Rose did to Xavier on her last access weekend? Flavian says she must be ~~be~~ still jealous of him!"

A week later, it seemed that Terry Boot was following me everywhere! I first noticed it over dinner, when he seemed to be hanging around the Hufflepuff table. But he didn't speak to anyone, and Michael Corner soon called him away. Then he chose a seat near me in the Quidditch stands. But Susan and Megan sat themselves down on each side of me, and with a startled look at all of us, Terry gave up the effort to speak. He even threw a paper dart at me during History of Magic, but it missed, and Draco Malfoy picked it up with a snigger. The note couldn't have been very interesting, since Malfoy seemed disappointed by the contents, but I knew it would be asking for trouble to claim it from the Slytherins. Terry would come and talk to me if it was important.

But he didn't. He walked right up to me in a Potions lesson, almost as if he wanted to share my cauldron, but Snape put a stop to that.

"Trying to chat up the girls in class-time, Boot? I assure you, no conversation with Miss Perks will raise your Potions marks. Sit here next to Smith at once!"

"Terry Boot seems very friendly all of a sudden," remarked Hannah, as soon as our practical work was underway.

"Do you think he does fancy Sally-Anne?" asked Megan.

I shook my head. "It doesn't look like that kind of thing."

"It doesn't look as if he wants to borrow your homework notes either," pointed out Susan.

"I know. I can't work out what he wants. But it isn't either of those."

"Does it annoy you?" asked Hannah.

It didn't; but I was surer than ever that I wasn't imagining it. I meant to ask him about it after Potions, but Snape set so much homework that we decided to go to the library instead.

Terry didn't finally catch me alone until the weekend, when a few of us volunteered to help Professor Sprout with some new supplies. Neville Longbottom was building a moist habitat for the jewelweed and angelica, a task that Sprout couldn't entrust to anyone else, and I was building a dry corner for the prickly pears. I had been at it for fifteen minutes when Terry Boot came over to my side of the greenhouse.

"Did you lose a quill?" he asked. He put down his trowel and held out a grubby goose-feather with split ends. "Did you drop this in the owlery the other day?"

I couldn't remember; my head had been full of my altercation with Cecilia. "I might have, but it's all right I have plenty of spares." We grinned: it was rather absurd that he had been chasing me around the school to return such a wilted specimen.

"So perhaps you don't want this either?" He held out a dog-eared parchment, printed with the unmistakable pattern of a shoe and signed with my signature.

This time it wasn't funny. It was my letter to Dad. "But how could I forget...? Anyone might have read it!"

"I don't think so; no one else went into the owlery while I was talking to Anthony, and I went straight back inside afterwards. I'm sorry I stepped on your things before I noticed them. I didn't like to owl your letter for you in case it was a draft or a stray essay."

"Thank you for rescuing it," I said, feeling foolish. "I'd rather you saw it than... some other people. Oh, what on earth did I write?"

"No idea. I only saw the signature."

I scanned it. I had indiscreetly written all about how Astoria Greengrass had started the fight with Ella-Jane, and how Xavier's version of what Molly-Rose had done to his wormery need not be either accurate or a lie, and how Mum had no spare money for a piano exam... Our personal business was all over it!

"Terry, I am so lucky that you are the only person who saw this. It's out of date now; it needs to be ripped up."

"Here, let me burn it. *Incendio!*"

The paper flared up for a second, and then a spark jumped onto the mini-desert.

"Oh, look out! *Aguamenti!*" Fortunately, I managed to make the correct wrist movement, and water gushed out of my wand, drenching the flames before the prickly pears were harmed.

"Trust me to forget how dry that sandy soil is," he said ruefully. "And under the greenhouse lamps, too. Judgment by fire! Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

I winced. Terry dropped the preacher-pose and asked if I had pricked myself.

"No, it's just... Well, this judgment-by-fire is rather old-fashioned, isn't it? Even if you were only joking. At my church, the Rector says that God is love."

"And at mine." He didn't seem at all annoyed that I had criticised his beliefs. "But don't you think that love and judgment "

"Good work, students," interrupted Professor Sprout. "But I'm going to ask Longbottom to finish this task. Boot, I'd like you to clean up the Shrivelfigs some of the second-year Slytherins made rather a mess of pruning them yesterday. Miss Perks, can I send you to Greenhouse One to deal with the burst puffapods that the first-year Gryffindors dropped?"

So that was the end of that conversation with Terry.

* * * * *

A week before term ended, Professor McGonagall announced that there was to be a Yule Ball. "It is a traditional part of the Triwizard Tournament," she said. "It is your opportunity to do your part towards establishing international goodwill among wizards by socialising with our guests. Everybody in fourth year and above is invited to attend... Yes, Miss Perks?"

"Please, Professor..." I gulped. "Is it compulsory?"

Professor McGonagall blinked. "Not compulsory, no. We cannot actually require students to be on school premises on Christmas Day. But *we strongly* recommend that you make the effort. After all, the whole point of the Triwizard Tournament is to make friends."

So it was official. Hufflepuffs *were* invited. But I could go home for Christmas if I preferred.

No, I couldn't. This year I was due to spend Christmas at Dad's house. Cressida might not particularly want me there, but she would certainly kick up a fuss if I tried to go to Mum's. So the choice was between Christmas with Cressida and Christmas at Hogwarts. Put that way, I was glad that Cressida was already in favour of sending us to the ball. Of course, I would need dress-robos. But even if I wore my school uniform and spent the evening serving drinks, it would be fun to watch my friends dancing.

"What are you wearing?" asked Susan.

"I... well, I hope it will be all right... Mum and I made the robe together," said Hannah. "What about you, Megan?"

"Mine's red," said Megan. "It has dragons woven into the silk, although you do have to look closely to see them. What about you, Sally-Anne?"

I could see that Sophie didn't like the clothes-talk any more than I did, so I changed the subject. "But the really important question is *who is taking* us to the ball? Are we just going together as a group, or are we pairing off with boys?"

Hannah flushed pinker than ever. "Well... I... goodness, I thought Professor McGonagall meant we were to look for partners! Ernie thought so too, because he asked me to be *his* partner on the way out of Transfiguration."

"Yes, I'm sure that's what McGonagall meant," agreed Susan. "But no one has asked me yet."

"Is it all right if *we* do ask the *boys*?" asked Megan. "It doesn't seem fair that we have to wait around until they do think of it, is it?"

"I expect we can give 'em a little 'elp in thinking of it," said Sophie. "But what if they still don't ask? Do wizard rules allow people to go to balls without any partner?"

"Oh, yes," I said. This was one point on which Great-Grandma Flourish's plain-bound book had been quite clear. "The original purpose of a ball was to help young wizards find suitable spouses. So it's *quite* all right to turn up alone and hope to find dance-partners after you arrive. And I can't really think who would invite me."

"I can't dance!" exclaimed Hannah. "Sophie, do you know anything about...?"

Talking about the ball did not seem to "help the boys think of it". We sat around discussing dance-steps, dress-robos and possible partners, but boys would walk straight past us, pointedly staring in the opposite direction and whistling. Occasionally one boy seemed to be daring another to speak to us, but his friend would always refuse the challenge.

"They aren't interested in the ball," said Megan.

"Or they're pretending not to be," said Susan.

We didn't realise that the boys were nervous about girls being in groups until Sunday afternoon. Susan was writing to her parents, and Hannah was taking a walk around the lake with Ernie and Justin. I was discussing with Megan and Sophie whether we wanted to brave the cold and watch the Quidditch practice when Wayne and Stephen sidled up, looking sheepish.

"Er... Sophie," said Stephen. "I mean Sally-Anne. I'm meaning, both of you." He drew a deep breath and began to speak very fast. "Have-you-a-copy-of-that-essay-question-that-McGonagall-set-for-homework-because-Longbottom's-toad-jumped-on-my-parchment-and..."

While Sophie and I tried to make sense of Stephen, Wayne furtively beckoned to Megan to follow him around a corner.

"It's this one," I said, pulling a parchment out of the Transfiguration section of my bag. "Here you are, Stephen."

"Oh..." He looked deflated and glanced at his watch. "Thanks. Well... yes, that's kind of you, Sally-Anne. And I..." He looked at his watch again. "Yes, I was also wanting to ask... if you know about that Potions test... Jabbering Jarveys, Wayne's taking a long time!"

"What did you think of Professor Sprout's cassia plants?" I asked. "Did you manage that Anti-frosting Charm?"

"It's bad about what happened to Terry Boot," Stephen spluttered.

"What?" I hadn't heard anything; instinctively, I took a step towards Stephen (who looked as if he was about to run away) while Sophie moved in the opposite direction. "Stephen, what happened to Terry?"

"Morag told me that Terry's cassia plant caught fire and he burned his hands. He *he's* going to be all right. But it was a bad accident. And he *Where's* Wayne?"

Sophie reached the courtyard door at the same time as a fifth-year Ravenclaw.

"Miss Roper, I believe," he said. "I saw you in the library on Friday *you* were asking about that new release on Quidditch. You can borrow my copy." He held out a brand-new book.

"Ta... I mean, thank yer. But won't yer want it...?"

"You can give it back to me at the Yule ball. *You are* going, aren't you? Good. Who's the lucky man?"

"No one yet."

"Then you can go with me. Excellent, I'll be wanting to hear all your thoughts *on Quidditch Teams of Britain and Ireland*."

He walked off at the same moment as Wayne and Megan came marching around the corner, not looking at each other. Stephen charged off towards Wayne.

"Did he ask you to the ball?" I asked.

"Yes!" exclaimed both Megan and Sophie.

"I did say no," said Megan.

"He dinn't give me t' chance to reply," said Sophie. "I think that means I've accepted."

"But you don't know him," said Megan to Sophie.

"I do that. 'Is name's Eddie Carmichael."

"And you refused Wayne," I said to Megan.

"That's because I do know him. Come on, let's go and watch the Quidditch. That's where we'll meet boys."

But although we cheered enthusiastically at the boys on broomsticks and discussed the defence tactics loudly enough for the boys sitting on the stands to hear, no one invited Megan or me to the ball. One sixth-year Slytherin did try to show off his pet lizard to Sophie, but he lost interest when he realised that she already had a dance-partner. Then two brooms collided, Andrew Kirke fell spectacularly to the ground, and the lizard-boy guffawed raucously.

Why did some girls find it so easy to attract a partner? Hannah, who was a blonde, had taken about five minutes. Megan was so vivacious and enthusiastic that she could afford to refuse a good offer. Susan had a calm confidence, so she was certain to be invited soon. It wasn't so obvious why the boys were interested in Sophie, but clearly some of them were. Whereas I...

My thoughts lingered on Terry Boot's smile. It would be such fun to go to the ball with Terry! I pushed that idea to the back of my mind. There must be lots of girls who wanted to go with Terry, and he had probably chosen one already. So... would Stephen muster the courage to ask me? Would Wayne transfer his interest in Megan to me? Or should I try to enjoy myself as a wallflower?

One thing was quite certain. I would rather go alone I would rather not go at all than go as the partner of a guffawing Slytherin with a lizard.

* * * * *

I met more guffawing Slytherins the next day on the way down to the library. Draco Malfoy and his cronies could be heard from the stairwell. But when I arrived at the library doors, Malfoy was pulling his gang inside. Only Blaise Zabini was standing outside, smiling as if he had been waiting for me.

"Amazing what some people find funny," he was murmuring to himself. "Sally-Anne! Could you by any chance lend me a quill?"

I handed him one.

"You are *so* well-organised!" His long-lashed lids dropped swiftly towards my bag, then up at me. "Everyone says so, of course, but I never realised... I expect you manage your time efficiently, too. You must have finished that Transfiguration essay by now."

His eyes were like liquid treacle and somehow large, so that I couldn't look away *He probably wants me to write his essay for him!* I tried to remind myself. I drew a steadying breath and said, "Yes yes, I have. How did you find it?"

"And you must be completely organised for this Yule Ball too. I'm not so sure I'll bother to go all the nice girls are taken." His fingers stroked through the quill before he moved it into his bag, and he dropped his voice conspiratorially. "So tell the great secret who's taking you?"

"I er "

His face suddenly lit up like a sweepstakes-winner's, and the treacle-eyes seemed to sparkle. "You mean I'm *not* too late? Would *you* go with me?"

It had happened a boy had asked me! I nearly lost balance nearly tumbled into those deep, black wells of eyes. "I that would be..." I forced myself to breathe through my grin. "Thank you. I'd like that!"

"Good." His warm breath fluttered near my forehead for a second, not quite close enough to be called a kiss. "I'll see you then, beautiful one if not sooner!"

An instant later, the library door had swung closed on Zabini, and I was left standing outside, completely forgetting that I had homework to finish in there. What *haddone*? I had agreed to go to the Yule Ball with Zabini! Blaise Zabini, who swaggered and showed off all through the Herbology lesson and never spoke a word to us half-bloods! I had heard Cecilia giggling with Ursula about how she fancied him, and that was hardly a recommendation.

But Terry hadn't asked me to the ball, so I needed to forget about him and plan to enjoy myself with Zabini.

Sororal Devotion

Chapter 6 of 14

Cinderella, when she heard this, could not help crying, for she too would have liked to go to the dance, and she begged her stepmother to allow her. "What, you, Cinderella!" said she, "in all your dust and dirt, you want to go to the party! you that have no dress and no shoes! you want to dance! ... You cannot dance; you would put us to shame." Then she turned her back on poor Cinderella and made haste to set out with her two proud daughters. (Grimm)

CHAPTER SIX

Sororal Devotion

I was still reeling from the astonishment when, Herbology homework finished, I went down to dinner. Before I reached the Hufflepuff table, I heard Ella-Jane's voice bawling from the wrong end of the Hall.

"It has nothing to do with how ugly you are! It's because you're stupid!"

I raced over to the voice. Ella-Jane was standing on a Slytherin bench, bellowing down at Cecilia.

"I'm not ugly, I'm *choosy*," Cecilia protested. "I've been asked by five different boys, but do you think I'd go to a ball with any old berk who asked me?"

"Yes, you would," said Ella-Jane. "That's how I know that no one has asked you."

"Ella-Jane!" I exclaimed. "Why do we care whether Cecilia has a dance-partner or not?"

Ella-Jane scowled as she jumped down. "She started it. She said that you'd never find a partner."

"Well, she's wrong. I do have a partner. But is it worth all the fuss?"

"Yes, it is! This ball is another excuse to get us into trouble with Dad." Ella-Jane called after Cecilia, "Did you hear that, Miss Cabbage-Brain? Sally-Anne ~~does~~ have a dance-partner!"

"Then it must be Filch! And not even Filch would ask *you*, Ella-Jane!"

Pansy Parkinson and Daphne Greengrass howled with mirth. For a moment I really wanted to tell them that I was going with Zabini, just to wipe the smirks off their faces. But something stopped me. It wasn't their business, after all.

"I wouldn't go to a stuffy old ball with anyone," declared Ella-Jane. "Have you any idea how stupid you all look, fussing over dancing and dress-robos? I wouldn't even go to a ball with with Roger Davies with Cedric Diggory with Blaise Zabini!"

As I seized Ella-Jane's arm, hoping she would go and sit quietly with the Gryffindors, Cecilia's face drained as white as coconut. Her mouth fell open in utter horror. "None of them *would*..." she whispered, but without conviction. Ursula chose that moment to walk past, and Cecilia clutched at her sister, white-faced. "Ursula! Ella-Jane says... This can't be right... She thinks some pure-blood is taking Sally-Anne to the ball!"

Ursula tried to soothe Cecilia while I dragged Ella-Jane away hissing, "What if a teacher had walked in while you were shouting?"

Ella-Jane was unrepentant. "Why do you think Cecilia's trying to stop you going to the ball with a pure-blood? Is she jealous?"

"Probably." Everyone knew that Roger Davies was a half-blood and that Cedric Diggory was taking Cho Chang, so presumably Cecilia was upset at the thought that I might be going with Zabini. Well, I was. But I hadn't said so. It was sheer coincidence that Ella-Jane had guessed correctly; and only Cecilia would have been paranoid enough to take Ella-Jane's angry ranting seriously. "But it's absurd. I mean, we're only fourteen, and this is just one dance!"

"Do you know how many of the Hogwarts girls are already engaged?" Ella-Jane retorted. "Astoria Greengrass told me. Her sister Syrinx is going to marry Marcus Flint the minute she finishes her N.E.W.T.s."

"But that's..."

Ella-Jane nodded firmly. "It's what happens to pure-blood girls who are allergic to work. They marry. If Ursula doesn't have a fiancé by this time next year, she'll go into panic. I expect Cecilia caught the panic off her. That's why you wouldn't catch me *dead* at that stinky old Yule Ball. It's just a cattle-market for spouse-hunters, and I'm not ever getting married!"

* * * * *

"Sorry to interrupt, Professor Binns, but Miss Perks needs to go across to Deputy Head's office immediately."

My heart leapt to my throat. Professor Binns didn't seem to notice that Filch was in his classroom, but I stood up anyway, with every fourth-year staring at me.

"It's trouble," said Filch gleefully. "Lady in the fireplace was most insistent. You have big, big trouble."

Mum! I thought, my heart hammering. *Or Dad? Molly-Rose, Xavier, a grandparent?* I couldn't imagine what would be serious enough to justify pulling me out of lessons, especially as there was no sign of Ella-Jane or the Runcorn girls near Professor McGonagall's office. She indicated that I should enter and left me to approach the hearth alone.

My stepmother's head was in the flames. "Sally-Anne, how dare you do this to Cecilia?"

I waited, wondering what I had done.

"Cecilia tells me that she doesn't have a partner for the Yule Ball, but that someone from Slytherin house is taking you!"

My throat might have been tied up with string: I had not a word to say.

"If you want a hop at this party, aren't there any Hufflepuffs who would take you? *How dare* you cut in on the eligible pure-bloods before Cecilia's had a chance! Tell me at once, what's his name?"

I opened my mouth, then had a moment of defiance. His name was none of their business! It wasn't a good idea to antagonise Cressida directly, so I asked, "Don't you think Ella-Jane might exaggerate?"

"The Malfoy boy has confirmed that your partner is in Slytherin, but he was cagey about the name. It had better not be Malfoy himself! Cecilia thinks it's Blaise Zabini. Answer me, Sally-Anne! *Are you stealing Cecilia's escort?*"

"No," I said, finding my heartbeat was normal again. "I promise. I haven't been stealing anyone from anyone. Cressida, I really do need to be in a lesson right now."

Cressida might not have believed me and she might have had more questions for me, but suddenly I was racing out of McGonagall's office, for the first time in my life glad to be going to History of Magic. It was stupid to run away from a rebuke, of course; my stepmother would only find a way to punish me later. But it was almost as if I was jinxed to preserve my privacy.

To think I was going to this trouble for the sake of Blaise Zabini, a swaggering show-off whom I barely liked!

History of Magic dragged to an end at last, and on the way out Zacharias Smith stopped me.

"Sally-Anne listen, I'm needing to tell you something. It's about this Yule Ball. No, I'm *not* asking you to be my partner do not get the wrong idea."

Thank goodness, I couldn't help thinking.

"But have you a partner yet?"

"Yes, I have, but..."

"Good. I mean, congratulations. You have a partner. But it's not Blaise Zabini, is it?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, it is. Zacharias, why does this matter?"

"Do not be all huffy with me! I'm not wanting to break your heart, but I'm needing to warn you. Zabini keeps on asking girls to the ball. But he's not meaning it. It's some daft bet he has with Malfoy, to see how many girls will accept him before he's found out."

I stared. "So he really might have invited Cecilia as well!"

"I'm not knowing exactly who. But he definitely has this bet, and I've already caught him out asking a couple of them."

Zacharias was tactless, but he had no reason to make this up. I lifted my chin and tried to look dignified. "Thank you for warning me, Zacharias. I'm by no means broken-hearted; I only accepted Zabini to be polite."

"Desperate, were you? Who'd you rather go with?"

"Terry " The truth escaped before I could control myself; Zacharias had tricked me! "Well, just about anyone, really!" I finished. "I ought to have known better than to accept a Slytherin. Thank goodness I'm well out of it."

I tried to remind myself that Zacharias was probably trying to help; but I could have punched his snub-nose when he loudly replied, "I'll spread the word that you're available, then. Good luck!"

Spread the word to Cecilia, I said to myself. *Let her tell her gold-digging mother that I'm not stealing anyone's escort!* But all I heard in my head was Zacharias broadcasting to a crowd of boys that Sally-Anne Perks had been vain and naïve enough to take Zabini seriously, so she was obviously really desperate for a dance-partner.

I decided to keep to myself for a while! I would *definitely* not pay any attention to Terry in tomorrow's Potions lesson.

But I had no choice about that, because Terry abandoned Michael Corner at the dungeon door in order to move in next to me. My cheeks flamed scarlet when I realised that Wayne had also taken over the seat next to Megan (some people never give up!), Robert Rivers was chatting to Mandy Brocklehurst, and Justin was politely asking if he could sit next to Susan, which of course left Ernie to the undivided attention of Hannah.

"Let me sharpen your knife," said Terry. *'Practus!* I'll measure the edelweiss roots if you'll cut the arvensis stalks."

He sounded so normal that I dared to steal a glance at him.

"It is still term-time," hissed Snape. "You all know to work in silence fifty points from Hufflepuff and fifty from Ravenclaw!"

Terry gave me a look. Snape evidently hadn't noticed how hard the whole class was working. Terry was suppressing his laughter, as if Snape-behaving-like-Snape was somehow funny, and I was giggling over the edelweiss roots for no reason at all. We chatted like friends throughout the lesson. Terry told me that he came from a family of Muggle potioners, and I recalled that both Hereford and Liverpool had Boots shops in their high streets. I had never made the connection with Terry.

"My parents don't own shares or anything," he told me. "The firm was founded too long ago. But my family has always worked there that's where Dad met Mum."

"Was it a real shock to come to Hogwarts and find out that all that Muggle Potions was wrong?"

"Muggle chemistry isn't exactly *wrong*; it's just that there are huge areas missing everything to do with magical ingredients. I'm really looking forward to the Potions N.E.W.T., when I can find out exactly how the magical component works. Perhaps I'll understand better then why we aren't allowed to share magical Healing with the Muggles."

The lesson ended disastrously, when a cauldron exploded, for which Zacharias and Michael Corner earned an on-the-spot detention. Terry departed with a cheery, "See you!" and soon Megan and Hannah were standing between us.

"Did he ask you?" Megan's eyes were sparkling.

"Ask me what?"

"You looked as if you were having fun together," supplied Hannah. "So we wondered..."

"Did he ask you to the ball?"

"Oh. No, I... wasn't thinking about the ball." My stomach dropped as I admitted, "He didn't ask me."

"Shall I give him a *hint*?" asked Megan.

"Better not," said Susan. "He's just had all the hints that anyone could reasonably need."

A chill settled on my very empty stomach. If I'd really given that many hints without even meaning to and Terry hadn't taken them, then he clearly wasn't planning to ask me to the ball. "Let's go to lunch," I said, trying to keep a wobble out of my voice.

But we were all wrong. At break the next morning, Terry very deliberately approached me, wearing a slightly nervous smile, and came straight to the point.

"Morning, Sally-Anne. Do you have a partner for the ball yet?"

"No."

"Good. Would you like to go with me?"

"Yes yes, I would." It was automatic; I hardly knew it had happened before Terry's grin became broad and natural. "I'd like that very much!" Suddenly the winter sky was like silver and the bare tree-branches were dancing in the wind. I was going to the ball with Terry!

"I think I should warn you," he said, "that I can't actually dance."

"Nor can I. None of my friends can, except Susan. But didn't Madam Hooch say something about teaching us on Saturday?"

"That could be "

"*There* you are, Sally-Anne, showing off in front of the boys*again!*" Ursula's voice cut into the conversation like a foghorn.

I felt myself flushing, but Terry was still relaxed. "It's amazing what some people think they know about other people's business," he said.

"Ursula could write a book about other people's business," I told him.

"She's a creative storyteller, is she? Perhaps she should be a novelist."

"Sally-Anne, pay attention when I speak to you!"

But I didn't pay attention. I was remembering that I had to find myself some dress-robos. There must be something suitable in the second-hand section of Gladrags.

* * * * *

On Friday, as I emerged from the Hufflepuff common room for dinner, I saw my father in the Entrance Hall.

"Dad..."

"Don't look so surprised to see me!" He pecked my cheek. "Are you packed? You of all people can't have forgotten the plan!"

"I... Did we have a plan?"

He blinked. "You're coming home for Christmas, remember? Goodness, did Ursula forget to tell you? Never mind, no harm done. Go and check that Ella-Jane and Cecilia have remembered, and meet us here in ten minutes."

"Dad, what is the plan?"

"Did Ursula tell you that her Aunt Messalina is home from Brazil? We're having a big family dinner on Christmas Eve. Yes, yes, I know this Yule Ball thing is on; Dumbledore's arranged a special Portkey to have you dancers back at Hogwarts in time for that. But we couldn't leave Ella-Jane at school, pining over a ball that she's too young to attend, so Cressida said she should come home and meet Messalina. And then we decided it would be nice to have all of you home for at least the first half of the holidays. Ah, here's Ursula now!"

Ursula, dressed in her cloak and lugging her trunk, was carrying her cat across her shoulders. She glanced at us triumphantly, realised that Dad wasn't angry, hesitated a moment, then plastered on a smile.

"Merry Christmas, Flavian! Cecilia's just locking her trunk. I bet Ella-Jane's still crawling under her bed looking for socks."

"Ursula," I hissed, "does Ella-Jane know she's supposed to be leaving school tonight?"

Ursula shrugged. "If you don't want her to cop it, I suggest you check that out."

Ella-Jane, when I called her out of the Gryffindor common room, *did not* know; but finally I made her understand the situation and pack her trunk, ran back down to the cellars to pack my own, and made excuses for her as we waited for her in the Entrance Hall.

"I'm going to tell Dad that Ursula didn't tell us," she grumbled as she finally arrived. "McGonagall still thinks I'm staying in school over Christmas!"

But she didn't tell Dad, of course. By the time the Portkeys had brought us back to Liverpool, Dad was happily wondering how many gallons of champagne we would need and whether we would run out of Spellotape before we finished our present-wrapping. Cressida pounced on me for help in the kitchen.

"Not a minute too soon!" she exclaimed. "As Ursula told you, we're hosting a family party for twenty-two on Christmas Eve, and my sister is accustomed to living off satin and sable in Brazil. We have to make almond icing chestnut stuffing mincemeat... Do you know the best way to boil a plum pudding?"

"The best way is to boil the pudding six weeks before it will be eaten and then store it in the airing cupboard."

She gasped in fury, as if I had spoken some mortal insult. "That must be *aMuggle* custom. You will certainly find a charm to accelerate the time for now! Sit there at that table and write out a menu for Christmas dinner, two lunches and a breakfast, together with a complete plan for the preparation and cooking."

I tried to tell myself that it was a compliment if Cressida trusted my cooking over her own. I wondered how she was going to seat twenty-two people around a dining suite that had trouble fitting eight. I hoped I could owl Terry to explain why I had left Hogwarts so suddenly. And I worried that I wouldn't have time to go shopping for a Christmas present for Mum.

* * * * *

At noon a week later, the oven door closed on two huge turkeys, each glazed with honey and rosemary and bursting with chestnut stuffing. Cressida had howled that the eighty-degree oven temperature would leave the meat raw and that a thirty-hour roasting period would dry it to straw. But Great-Grandma Flourish's plain-bound book clearly stated that the only correct way to roast was long and slow. Terry had explained to me that this was because proteins toughen under high temperatures according to him, cooking was just applied chemistry. I washed the last mixing-bowl and began to sift the icing sugar. Today was the earliest time I could royal-ice the Christmas cake without the almond icing turning it yellow; it was also the latest time I could royal-ice it and be confident that the icing would be hard enough by tomorrow. It was also the earliest sensible time to make the trifle, the bread sauce, the bacon curls and the tomato soup.

The kitchen door opened. "I think you need a hand in here," said Dad. "I've brought you some house-elves." Following him in line were Molly-Rose (bewildered and still holding a book), Cecilia (sulky) and Ella-Jane (grinning). "Give us each a task, Sally-Anne. It isn't fair that you do all the work."

"You could all start by washing your hands. Now, if Molly-Rose could grate breadcrumbs... Cecilia could cut the fat off the bacon... Ella-Jane could wash her hands *again* before she chops tomatoes... and if Dad could spread jam on the stale cake that I left in that tin... Oh no, where is it?"

Dad smiled forgivingly. "I think Xavier ate it yesterday, the little rogue! Never mind, give me another task for now, and I'll buy you some cake before Spencer's closes this evening."

"I *hate* touching raw meat," complained Cecilia.

"I hate people who complain," muttered Ella-Jane.

"How do I separate the egg-yolks, Sally-Anne?" asked Dad. "Is there a charm that does it for me?"

Molly-Rose grated silently, grating the skin off one knuckle as she progressed.

"Why should Sally-Anne make all the rules?"

"Because she's the only one who knows how to cook!"

"Do I sift the cornflour before I measure it or after?"

"Sally-Anne, is this enough breadcrumbs?" A drop of blood fell onto the rim of Molly-Rose's dish.

"I don't see why Ursula gets away with not doing anything!"

"It's because she's too busy staring at herself in the mirror."

"Girls, don't bicker. Let's sing a Christmas carol!"

We had dutifully raised a stanza of *Santa Claus is Coming to Town* (Terry had told me that he didn't consider this a Christmas carol) when the door opened again.

"This is absurd!" Cressida stood in the doorway, her earrings swinging dangerously. "Flavian, you have four of them to help you here, while I'm struggling with the table-setting and candles all by myself. To say nothing of having Xavier run around underfoot! He was nearly crushed when I Banished the sofa upstairs. Oh, *look* at how Molly-Rose is dripping blood all over the breadcrumbs that lot will have to be thrown out! Ella-Jane, you disgusting child, you should tie a tea towel over your tangled mop before you handle food. Out of the kitchen, you two you can both help *me*!"

Ella-Jane and Molly-Rose glanced at me apologetically, then followed Cressida's pointing finger out of the door. Cecilia stabbed her knife into the pile of bacon rashers and followed them. Dad let his wooden spoon fall into the egg bowl, trying to look as if there was nothing in the world to quarrel about.

"Flavian, we have to come to a sensible decision. Having six children sabotaging our every move just doesn't work when we have to organise a dinner-party for twenty. Xavier's too young to know any better, but Ella-Jane and Molly-Rose... Everywhere I look, they're destroying something! I really, really think we should send them back to their mother."

Dad's jaw dropped. "Fine, darling, but I thought you *wanted* your sister to meet our family."

"I did, but it's just causing too much chaos. Let's grant Julia the favour of extra access time at Christmas. Sally-Anne can stay; she at least knows how to make herself useful; but I want Ella-Jane and Molly-Rose in the Floo within the hour."

"Anything you say, sweetheart. Sally-Anne, how do I...? No, you'd better finish this; I'll help your stepmother shift the furniture. How much longer do you think you'll need the dining table to stay in the kitchen?"

And so, to their own delighted amazement, my sisters were shunted into the Floo to spend Christmas with Mum, because Cressida had never intended to trouble her glamorous sister with her younger stepdaughters. But I was permitted to stay because, after all, who else was going to cook the Christmas dinner?

Sleeping with the Ashes

Chapter 7 of 14

At last the stepmother said, "I have strewed a dish-full of lentils in the ashes, and if you can pick them all up again in two hours you may go with us." Then ... there came to the kitchen-window two white doves ... chirping and fluttering, and they alighted among the ashes; and the doves nodded with their heads, and began to pick, peck, pick, peck ... and put all the good grains into the dish. Before an hour was over all was done, and they flew away. (Grimm)

This godmother of hers, who was a fairy, said to her, "You wish that you could go to the ball; is it not so? ... Well," said her godmother, "be but a good girl, and I will contrive that you shall go." (Perrault)

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sleeping with the Ashes

Dad had managed to expand the family dining table to seat nineteen. Xavier was nearly crushed on a two-seater bench between Cecilia and their cousin Luke, but there was room for everyone except me. I wouldn't have had time to sit down anyway, because someone had to serve the food, and serving nineteen people took time!

Lunch had been fine. The tomato soup was hot, with the right amount of basil; the green salad was crisp under the French dressing; the lobster terrine was standing up straight; and the royal icing was shining and solid on the Christmas cake. There was even time for me to eat in the kitchen between brewing the coffee and washing up. Mum would be proud of me, and perhaps Dad would even remember to give me some photographs to show Terry.

The afternoon was much more hectic. I had planned to spend it peeling potatoes and shelling peas, but Ursula and Cecilia kept running into the kitchen with other demands.

"Aunt Messalina would like more mince pies. No, I don't remember where you hid them you fetch them out!"

"Xavier's just spilt Uncle Polonius's sherry can you bring up some Mrs Skower's to mop it?"

"Flavian's father was divvy enough to over-eat and now he's asking for alka-seltzer. I suppose that's some Muggle remedy. He's *your* grandfather you go and find him some medicine."

"Great-Grandmamma needs a glass of water, chilled but not frozen."

"Cecilia," I said wearily as I topped another sprout, "can't *you* organise a simple thing like a glass of water?"

Cecilia burst into tears. "Are you calling me lazy?" she sobbed. "I'm *bursting* for the bog this was my one chance to scarper before they trapped me for another hour! I'd hoped you wouldn't mind giving up a few minutes of your cooking hobby to help a poor old lady."

"Then can you ask Dad to lay a charm on this knife so that the vegetables will be chopped automatically?"

"Flavian's *busy*," she protested. "He's entertaining our guests and showing an interest in their lives something that *you* never make time to do. Come on, bring Great-Grandmamma that water!"

Terry bothers with people, I told myself as I turned off the tap. *This is just one day of my life, and tomorrow I'll be free to be selfish.*

But finally the dinner was on the table. Dad had done a good job with laying out crackers and holly wreaths and he also carved for me, and Cressida's mother had wafted

cologne around the walls. The prawn salad was piquant. The turkey was succulent; the sausages and potatoes were cooked through, and the carrots and sprouts were not over-cooked; the gravy was free from lumps and the bread sauce was not too bland. When I set a dish of cauliflower next to the cranberry sauce, Aunt Messalina was telling fabulous tales of their life in Brazil, and her father was topping up Aunt Odette's wine glass. By the time I brought the plum pudding to the table, ablaze with blue fire, Grandpa Perks was telling a joke about a wizard, a Muggle and a Squib, and it had become a very merry party.

I was finishing the first round of washing up when Cecilia's voice behind me whined: "No one in Aunt Carduela's family eats parsnips. Didn't you *listen* to that information before you planned the menu?"

Ursula carried a pile of sticky dishes into the kitchen so that she could ask me, "Whypork sausages? Grandad will have a heart attack if you keep stuffing him at this rate. By the way, Great-Grandmamma was not *at all* amused by *your* grandfather's joke how insensitive to tell a Squib-bashing joke in front of a Squib's widow!"

The blood rushed to my cheeks as I recalled that Terry never told that kind of joke. I couldn't imagine that his parents even ~~new~~ any anti-Squib jokes.

Cressida loomed up in the doorway. "You really might have left a hint about where the lucky charms were hidden in the pudding. Xavier is in tears because his slice wasn't lucky."

I tried to shut out the sound of their voices. I thought about Mum and Raymond, who would have finished with the parish food parcel distributions by now, so they must be on their way to the late-night carol service. The church choir would put a spiritual dimension as well as music into their celebrations. Tomorrow the family including Grandma and Grandpa Flourish would all share the work of cooking Christmas dinner, with Mum and Grandpa using magic to speed up the boring bits. Then on Boxing Day they would take a long walk through the woods and fields to burn off the Christmas calories... A wave of loneliness overwhelmed me and I tried to remember: *The week is nearly over. After I've cleaned the kitchen, I can go to bed. Then tomorrow I'm going back to Hogwarts. I'm going to the Yule Ball with Terry.*

Terry. Terry could laugh at anything. And Terry really wanted to go to the ball with me.

The visitors had left the house by now, but they would be back in time for breakfast. I checked the froster-box: the pancake batter was mixed. I checked the sink and the stove: both were sparkling clean. I didn't have the energy to climb the stairs to bed. Before I knew what I had done, I dropped to the ground and curled up on the kitchen floor. I fell asleep with my feet virtually in the fireplace.

* * * * *

Christmas at Dad's house was finally over. The guests had eaten breakfast, exchanged presents, eaten lunch and said goodbye. I had scrubbed the kitchen clean again. Dusk was falling, and Ursula and Cecilia were whispering and giggling about the Yule Ball.

"Should we change into dress-robos now?"

"No, let's do it at Hogwarts. You don't want to lose your pearls on the way."

"Besides, Flavian might work out what the robes really cost."

"No, he won't; he's clueless about prices. But it's boring here, so let's leave soon."

"Yes, let's go while Sally-Anne's still busy, so that we don't have to take her with us."

"We won't be taking her with us. Mummy promised..."

I carried the last bag of kitchen rubbish to the dustbin as the clock was striking four. When I re-entered the tiny house, it suddenly seemed very silent. Was that just in contrast to the noise of yesterday? Or had Ursula and Cecilia been serious about leaving for Hogwarts without me? Not that it mattered. I could take a Portkey by myself. I would go and fetch my trunk, which I had kept packed through the week.

Cressida stopped me on the landing. "Young lady, where are you going?"

"Upstairs. Why is it so quiet?"

"Because Xavier has finally admitted defeat and lain down for a much-needed nap. And your father has gone to his parents' house some tosh about a burst pipe that needs magic to be fixed. Ursula and Cecilia have returned to Hogwarts, but before you stir from this house, you can clean up the kitchen properly."

"It's clean, Cressida."

She snorted furiously. "Let *me* judge that. You are not leaving this house until it's in a state that can be left." She half-pushed me down the stairs and followed me through the kitchen door.

She saw at once that the kitchen was clean. She ran her hands over the table for dust, peered into the sink for grease, pulled at the oven door for burnt crumbs, slid open drawers of saucepans... but she was disappointed. Even her exacting eye could not find a fault. Her kitchen was far cleaner than she had ever managed to scrub it herself, even though she could use magic to do it.

"You are *not* returning to Hogwarts until I say. You have done enough mischief to Cecilia, and you are not following her there to disrupt her big night."

I blinked.

"Stop looking so innocent! You did your best to steal her escort. Blaise Zabini, wasn't that his name? You see, everyone knows about it. It would be unspeakable if you arrived at the ball on the arm of the young man who originally invited her."

I was so enraged that I forgot to be afraid of Cressida. "I am not going to the ball with Blaise Zabini. I've found someone better!"

"So you *say*. But why should we trust you? I am keeping you at home this evening so that Cecilia can enjoy the ball. You need not look for the Portkey; it's where you won't be able to find it."

"But I *promised*..." That was a stupid thing to say, since Cressida did not care about promise-keeping. "Cressida, I promised my friend that I would be there!"

The triumphant curl of her lips told me that she had never intended me to go to the Yule Ball. She was so convinced that I would spoil the evening for Cecilia that she had planned in advance to keep me at home. Perhaps even the family Christmas dinner had been an elaborate ruse to lure me away from Hogwarts. Just how desperate was Cressida to see her daughters dance with eligible wizards? Did it already matter, even though Cecilia and I were only fourteen?

"Children have no right to promise anything without their parents' permission. Meanwhile, you can start putting your family first *Accio!*" Something swirled, and a huge bowl of something black landed in Cressida's hands. "See? Someone has interfered with Xavier's creature collections most likely Ella-Jane and the beetles are mixed up with the spiders. Xavier is heartbroken. You are to sit here and separate them out again." She glared at me, as if the point were not quite obvious. "*Without* using magic. You have one hour."

I shuddered; Cressida knew that I hated touching creepy-crawlies. But there was no chance of being released from her house unless I obliged her, so I lifted a couple of

spiders into an empty bowl. A spider-leg crumbled off in my fingers: I knew at once that I wouldn't be able to complete the task safely within an hour.

Perhaps I should just run away? If I couldn't go to the ball, at least I didn't have to stay in this house. I threw a handful of Floo powder onto the kitchen fire and called for Mum's house.

Molly-Rose's head appeared in the fireplace. "Sally-Anne, why aren't you back at Hogwarts?"

I explained the situation. "Molly-Rose, I want to come home. I can't go to the ball, but I can't stay here..."

"And you can't come home!" Molly-Rose interrupted. "Imagine how much trouble Mum would be in if the Wizengamot found out that you'd broken access! Besides, you *promised* Terry, and we don't have a way of getting you to Hogwarts from home. Wait a minute Ella-Jane do you have a wand?"

"Course," said Ella-Jane's voice, "but I can't use it in the school holidays, can I?"

"Never mind that. Sally-Anne, stand by with those bugs. I'm coming through the Floo!"

It didn't seem very safe, but there was a swirl of green and Molly-Rose stepped out into Cressida's kitchen. She grabbed the bowl of creatures and stepped back into the fire before it had time to change colour. Presumably she landed at home, because I soon heard her talking to Ella-Jane.

"If you do a spell, will you be in trouble?"

"No, we'll say that Mum did it. No one will ever know."

"I read that *Diffindo* might separate things."

"Rip them up, more likely. There *is* a Summoning Charm, but I haven't learned it yet."

"Mum, *how* do you separate spiders from beetles?"

"Girls, whatever possessed you to attempt magic outside of school? Here, let me...*Accio, Arachnai!*"

Two minutes later, my sisters were both hurling through the Floo, Ella-Jane bearing a bowl of dead spiders and Molly-Rose one of beetles.

"That'll show Cressida! You didn't use magic!"

"And it *wasn't* me that mixed the beetles with the spiders. Xavier did it himself when he was having a tantrum."

"We'd better leave she'll murder you if she catches us here!"

Ella-Jane grabbed a much larger handful of Floo powder than was strictly necessary, and they jumped back into the hearth together. The flames were still green when Cressida walked in to check up on me.

"You had *help*," she hissed. "Who've you been letting into my house?"

"No one." She loomed up over me, wand aloft, and for a moment I thought she would hex me. "I didn't invite anyone in," I repeated. "But the task is finished."

"You *spoke* to someone," she raged. "No matter *Intercludo!* There, I've blocked the Floo. You can prove to me that you didn't use magic by handing over your wand and repeating the task. *Accio!*"

A stream of shimmering dust sailed out of nowhere and landed on the kitchen table, enough to fill two of those large bowls. I looked more closely. It wasn't dust: it was metallic glitter from my stepsisters' childhood craft kits, the type that sticks to the fingers a hundred grains at a time.

"Your *wand*, Sally-Anne, or I will hex you with rabbit-ears. You can have it back after you've separated the silver glitter from the gold. If you can do it *in half* an hour without magic or any other help, I'll even give you back your Portkey."

She flounced out triumphantly, twirling my wand because she was so certain that I could not succeed.

I was certain too. I stared dumbly at the huge pile of gold and silver glitter, trying not to cry and praying for help to come. I had no idea what I expected to happen surely not even God could solve this kind of problem! It was so senseless. Ursula and Cecilia hadn't cared about their glitter for years, yet Cressida had mixed it deliberately just to set me a task. The Floo was blocked, I had no wand, and Dad wouldn't be home until the ball was over. Meanwhile, Terry would be waiting for me at Hogwarts, and I didn't even have a way of owling him my apologies.

* * * * *

"Is your Floo connection broken?"

I startled at the voice behind my ear and whirled around.

"Aunt Odette! What are you doing here? No, the Floo isn't broken; Cressida's just blocked it for the evening."

"I won't ask why." Dad's sister moved to stand in front of me, still holding her wand, but she didn't sit down. "I'm sorry to Apparate into your house like that, Sally-Anne, but I had to ask if you were all right. I didn't like the flavour of last night's party... the way they kept you waiting at table without offering you so much as a potato for your dinner."

I didn't know how to begin telling Odette that I *wasn't* all right, but my silence must have spoken for me.

"Can I get rid of all this glittery stuff?" she asked.

"No! That is... it needs to be separated... the gold and the silver in these two bowls."

She waved her wand without verbalising any incantation, and the glitter all swirled up into the air. It landed neatly in the two bowls, the gold and silver completely and perfectly separated.

"So what *is* Cressida playing at? Weren't you supposed to be at this Yule Ball by now?"

Haltingly, I explained the situation. "Don't blame Dad," I finished. "He doesn't seem to know what Cressida does behind his back."

"Then he doesn't *want* to know," said Odette. "He always was lazy. Anyway, let's bring back this wand of yours." She waved hers again, and mine sailed right into my hand. "And the Portkey." This time nothing happened, even when Odette repeated the Summoning Charm out loud. "Bother, she must have put a Staying Charm on it. All right, no Portkey. Well, how about your trunk?"

We both stood back as my neatly-packed trunk crashed onto the kitchen floor.

"If I put a Weightless Charm on it, you can lift it one-handed. Good. Now hold me round the waist and don't let go. I'm taking you there Side-Along."

Odette's arm was flung tightly around my shoulders; the kitchen went black; my insides squeezed themselves out; and before I knew what had happened, we were outdoors in the dark, open countryside. I shivered before I could help myself.

"Where are we?"

"Somewhere between Hogsmeade and Hogwarts, of course!" She pointed her wand, the tip now lit, and I saw the snowy path, with the gates of Hogwarts a hundred yards ahead. "It's cold here, but before you go... I'm sorry I didn't have a chance to give you your Christmas present this morning."

She held out a purple box bristling with rosettes. With trembling fingers, I pulled at the silver ribbon and tore the paper, which Aunt Odette Vanished with a wave of her wand. I lifted the lid and saw, by the beam of wand-light, a flash of sparkling glass.

"Shoes? Of glass? But how did you know my size?"

"Gallus Cobbler is an old friend of mine. He put three charms on these shoes. First, they are a perfect fit for their true owner, even if she grows and they won't fit anyone else at all, even if her feet are the same size as yours. Second, the crystal is Unbreakable. Third, they are dancing shoes, charmed with the pattern of every dance. Just whisper the name of the dance whenever the music starts, and the shoes will tread it out flawlessly. I thought they were a good idea for a ball."

"Especially as I missed all the dancing lessons," I said. "Oh, *thank you*, Aunt Odette! Thank you so much for rescuing me for doing that stupid chore for bringing me here for the shoes for everything!"

"Think nothing of it. After all, I am your godmother! Make sure your young man treats you well tonight. Goodbye!"

Aunt Odette Disapparated before I had time to hug her, and I skimmed down the footpath into Hogwarts. A few boys were still throwing snowballs at each other; they hardly noticed when I slid through the front door and across the Entrance Hall, through the Hufflepuff entry and down to the warm cellar.

Down in our dormitory, Hannah was asking, "So you're quite sure this will be all right?"

"Yes, it's exactly right!" said Susan. "Your pattern was definitely a Twilfitt number, and that's a very flattering neckline for you... Sally-Anne! You're here!"

"I'm here." I dropped my trunk onto my bed. "You all look very..." But my voice died away. It was only at that moment, safe at Hogwarts with nothing to do but dress for the ball, that I remembered that I didn't own any dress-robos.

I stared and stared at my friends' good taste. Susan's robes were very obviously new, buttercup-yellow with black badgers bordering her wrap-over neckline and hem. Megan said that hers, which were two shades of red with a subtle interwoven pattern of dragons, were a hand-me-down from her sister, but they looked as good as new. Hannah's were home-made, white lace floating over sky-blue silk, but Susan was right about the pattern: it was a tried-and-true classic. Even Sophie, who had entered a second-hand robe shop with no knowledge of wizarding fashions and next to no money, had sensibly opted for an ultra-simple line in blush-pink that would look right on anyone anywhere.

But I hadn't had a minute to think about robes all through the holidays, and now it was too late. I still had nothing to wear except Ursula's discarded pumpkin-gold Muggle cocktail dress. Before I could hide my embarrassment, I found my well-dressed friends all swirling around me and asking what was wrong.

"I don't know what to wear." My voice sounded very small. "I only have... this."

Megan couldn't suppress a gasp of horror as they all inspected the hideous strip of cloth with dismay.

Then Sophie said, "So what's magic for, then? There *must* be spells to fix that robe! Put it on, Sally-Anne."

Haltingly, I stripped off my Muggle jeans and pullover and drew the cocktail dress over my shoulders, while Susan leafed through *Intermediate Transfiguration*.

"Here we are how to increase the amount of fabric. *Cresco!*"

The hem of the dress obligingly shot downwards. With a neat flick, Susan turned her wand away, and the hem rested stably on the carpet.

"Let's try again with the sleeves."

This was harder, since the Muggle dress was sleeveless, but after several experiments with lengthening, shortening, tightening and loosening, the sleeves and the neckline were finally decent.

"You shouldn't wear that colour," said Megan. "*Caesius Coloro!*"

Immediately the unflattering pumpkin colour shimmered into pale grey-blue. I couldn't believe it. It had actually become a pretty dress-robe. It looked right with the crystal shoes. Sophie helped me put my hair up, and Hannah scattered some of her silver stars over it.

A glance in the mirror was astonishing. It was impossible to tell whose robes were new, old or downright faked. ~~We~~ *We* all looked good!

"Time to go upstairs," said Susan.

I was floating. I hardly heard when Hannah whispered to Sophie, "I hope those charms will hold."

Until the Stroke of Twelve

Chapter 8 of 14

The Prince came to meet her, and took her by the hand and danced with her, and he refused to stand up with any one else, so that he might not be obliged to let go her hand; and when any one came to claim it he answered, "She is my partner." (Grimm)

CHAPTER EIGHT

Until the Stroke of Twelve

"Hey Sally-Anne!"

For a moment I couldn't see Terry in the crowd because Stephen was cutting across him. Then Terry was grinning down at me, his square chin crushing the high collar of his grass-green dress-robe.

"You're here," he said. "So much for all the strange gossip about you!"

I smiled back at him. "Of course I'm here," I said. "I'm sure the gossip would make a great work of fiction. Are you having a good Christmas?"

We were still talking about how Terry's family celebrated Christmas (it turned out that his parents weren't Christians and they were highly bemused by his churchgoing) when Professor McGonagall called us into the Great Hall. Terry. I followed Megan and Wayne, who were apparently together after all, to a small table.

"Sally-Anne Perks!" There was nothing subtle about Cecilia's screech. "Sally-Anne, what are you *doing* here?"

Cecilia was draped in jade-green silk. Madam Black's pearls were wrapped three times around her throat, and her dark curls were cascading out of something silvery. She was leaning against Theodore Nott, a stringy boy who kept his hands in his pockets.

Terry replied easily. "Sally-Anne is favouring me with her company for the evening. What are *you* doing here, Cecilia?"

She ignored him. "Sally-Anne, you've just backed yourself into the world's smallest corner! Mummy *told* you not to come tonight."

I felt Terry's voice nuzzling my ear. The words sounded like, "Answer not a fool according to his folly..."

I laughed for no reason. "Cecilia, we're going to sit down now," I said. "Have fun with Theodore!" Somehow, that seemed a hollow thing to say, because Nott looked thoroughly bored by the whole exchange. I glanced their way again as I took the seat next to Megan, and Nott still looked bored; I wondered why he had invited Cecilia. Michael Corner sat down next to Terry and introduced his partner, an eccentric-looking blonde, and the Yule Ball had begun!

To my left, Megan and Wayne were whispering together in Welsh like lovers. Perhaps she liked him more than she was admitting. I hoped so, because he couldn't tear his eyes away from her. Next to them, Longbottom was apologising to a redhead. Michael was staring at Longbottom's partner as if his eyes would pop out of his head, and Michael's partner did not seem at all concerned about that; she was watching them as if they were actors on a theatre stage. Opposite me sat Tracey Davies, a sulky, curly-haired Slytherin, who was apparently Zacharias's dance-partner.

"Are *you* a good dancer?" she asked the blonde.

"No, dancing isn't really my thing. I trip over my own feet."

"Yet you bothered to turn up!" snorted Tracey. "Didn't anyone tell you the point of a ball?"

Ignoring this rudeness, the blonde serenely replied, "I've been looking forward to the company."

"So have I!" chimed in the redhead, smiling broadly at Longbottom. "But I love dancing too."

I exchanged a grin with Megan. I knew she couldn't wait to be let loose on the dance floor and nor could I.

But when the feast was cleared away, and a waltz finally soared out of the cello, we still couldn't dance, because the champions had to open the ball. My feet were tapping against their will as the four champions and their partners swayed across the hall (Harry Potter looked very uncomfortable). Terry winked at me and I blushed; I hadn't meant to be so obvious about my impatience. But why had we come to a ball, if not to dance?

The teachers followed the champions onto the floor (I was so glad that I wasn't dancing with Karkaroff or Snape!), and we were watching them for three long minutes before the exchange students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang began to stand up. I hoped Terry would stand up next, and Wayne was trying to pull Megan onto the floor almost before the music changed, but before we could move, the floor was flooded with sixth- and seventh-years.

"Skank!" remarked Wayne to Michael. "Everyone is now equal, is it? Who did claim that?"

"This is us, Tracey!" shouted Zacharias.

Wayne and Megan followed them into the waltz. A crowd of our classmates swirled past. Terry stood up and held out his hand. As I took it, there was a final crash on the drums, and the music stopped!

The dancers clapped. The Weird Sisters began to play again.

Terry did not falter. "All right there is a time to dance! It's a jive."

I nodded, hoping that Aunt Odette's crystal shoes were strongly charmed, as the Weird Sisters accelerated their beat. "Jive," I whispered, almost mesmerised and then almost thrown off-balance as one foot lurched backwards. Terry's hand was strong around mine, so I let my other foot tap, then the first again... Then it hit me. The spell was working! The crystal shoes really did know the dance.

I relaxed as Terry swung me under his arm. The less I thought about it, the more forcefully the shoes bounced over the flagstones, and the less I tried to give the shoes any help, the more easily Terry and I were spinning after them. I dared to focus my eyes and found I was staring into Terry's. He looked surprised by the speed at which he was throwing himself towards me and then kicking away, but a happy flush was driving through his cheek as we twisted into an impossible position and then sprang away again. We whirled breathlessly between two Slytherin couples and all-but cartwheeled over a table before Orsino Thruston's cymbal sang a glass-shattering crash and the music abruptly halted.

My head was spinning and Terry's eyes were sparkling. "You're *good* at this! I'm amazed I kept up. Are you sure you've never had lessons?"

I was still gasping for breath. "Not me. It's my shoes a Christmas present." I lifted the hem of the blue-grey dress-robe to show him. "They have a dance-charm. I'm not sure how it works."

"Wow! The charm certainly works and apparently for your partner too. I didn't have to think about anything except keeping hold of your hand. Here we go they're starting up again." He grabbed my hand as Thruston rolled out a steady rhythm.

"Foxtrot," I said, recognising a piece I played on the piano.

The crystal shoes immediately swept across the floor even before Gideon Crumb's bagpipes picked up the melody. Step step trot-trot step step and-turn I relaxed in Terry's grasp, trusting that it didn't matter whether or not we knew the dance, because my shoes would carry both of us on the rhythm of the bagpipes. Terry's arms were

around me in a ballroom hold, closer than the dance needed us to be, and I no longer noticed what our feet were doing because I couldn't look away from his brilliant blue eyes.

"You must have been practising!" I told him.

"No, I've never done it before apart from a couple of last-minute lessons with Madam Hooch. It's all coming from your shoes."

I glanced around the hall as Blaise Zabini and Daphne Greengrass sailed past us flawlessly, but they weren't speaking. I noticed that Geoffrey Hooper and Emma Spinks were staring into each other's eyes as they swayed on the spot, but that barely counted as dancing. William Stebbins and Sylvia Fawcett were executing the foxtrot moves with a determined correctness, but their only conversation seemed to be giggled apologies for their mistakes.

"Yes, it must be the shoes," I conceded. "Not many other people are managing to combine smooth dancing with meaningful conversation."

"Or perhaps they've nothing meaningful to say."

When the music stopped, we were lucky enough to finish up next to the refreshments table. Terry collected two glasses of fruit punch. Behind him, Theodore Nott ostentatiously asked for two tanks of mulled mead and passed one of them on to Cecilia without looking at her.

"That was impressive dancing, Perks," he said, yawning. "Would you like to dance the next one with me? Boot will agree to a partner-swap, I'm sure."

Cecilia's mouth dropped open, but Terry spoke before she could voice a protest.

"If I have a choice, I'd rather be faithful to my own partner. Sally-Anne promised to spend the evening with *me*."

I slid my hand through Terry's arm, feeling a little sorry for Cecilia.

"Possessive, are we?" asked Nott.

"Yes," said Terry and I together. I glanced sideways at him, suppressing a giggle, but he would not meet my eye until we were well clear of Nott and Cecilia. Music was rippling out of Herman Wintringham's lute, and soon we were galloping around the hall.

It was becoming a game. Terry and I didn't have to think about what we were doing, yet we seemed to be turning at double everyone else's speed. I waved at Megan and Wayne as they passed, but they didn't see us; they were panting to keep up with the rhythm.

"Oh, *look* at your friend Michael! I think he's enjoying himself!"

Michael Corner was staring into the eyes of Ron Weasley's sister, looking completely smitten. Terry swung me over a misplaced chair as if I were as light and limp as a rag doll. Did those crystal shoes make me weightless too? and then we swirled past a surprised Hannah and Ernie before we had time to recognise them. One couple who did seem to be fitting some conversation between elegant dancing was Justin and Susan.

"Justin must have had dancing lessons," I said. "He makes it look easy."

"But Anthony now, he's about my standard." Terry swung me almost down to a backbend and then caught me on the other side. "My standard when there are no magic shoes, I mean."

Morag MacDougal suppressed a wince as a happy Stephen, hopping like an excited puppy, stomped on her toe, and the dance was over.

"Oh, *sorry*, Morag! I'm not knowing why I "

"You're a good dancer, Sally-Anne," said Morag, ignoring him. "Where did you learn?"

"Yes, you're good," Stephen echoed. "Will you dance one with me? Perhaps I can pick up a few tips from you."

"Not tonight," said Terry. "Tonight Sally-Anne is my partner." He waited until Stephen had pulled Morag off to the refreshments before asking, "You didn't want to dance with Cornfoot, did you?"

"No! Not unless it would be doing a favour to Morag. But she really doesn't seem to mind about the foot-stamping. Morag's like that with Stephen." Everyone knew that Morag and Stephen, who were first cousins, had nothing whatever in common, yet they loved one another with the fierce devotion of Highland clansmen. It was Morag's life-work to keep Stephen out of trouble, and Stephen's life-game never to notice that any kind of trouble existed.

The next dance was a progressive, so for a couple of turns I did end up sacrificing my toes to Stephen's feet (the crystal shoes blocked out most of the sensation). After twenty minutes of being skilfully turned by Justin, firmly held by Ernie, wonderingly followed by Anthony Goldstein, exuberantly swirled by Dean Thomas, enthusiastically clapped by Seamus Finnigan, experimentally stroked by Zabini, experimentally poked by Crabbe, and greasily breathed over by Pucey, I couldn't wait to run back to Terry. My stepsister Ursula, festooned in a low-cut emerald velvet, grabbed possessively at Pucey and kissed him in full public view. I took no notice of whatever she was saying to him, or of the boys who were shouting across the hall to each other.

"So much for being faithful!" said Terry. "Come on, it's a schottische next. This might be my only chance ever to dance one properly!"

We were having so much fun dancing the schottische that at first I didn't notice who was standing behind Terry. I barely registered that he shrugged off a tap on his shoulder. Only at a second, more insistent tap did we pause our dancing to look up at Pucey.

"May I cut in here?" he asked.

"Sorry," said Terry. "You'll have to wait your turn and ask like a gentleman."

Pucey did his best to take a gentlemanly tone. "I should particularly like to dance with Miss Perksnow." He held out his hand. "I'm sure Sally-Anne does not mind."

My head was shaking before I knew what I was doing. *What* mind and I didn't really care if it was rude to say so, since I was fairly sure that Pucey didn't even like me. What was his game? Before I could frame my objection, Terry's arm was around my waist.

"Nice try, Pucey," said Terry. "But Sally-Anne is my partner for the night. I'm not giving anyone else a turn." When Pucey did not move, Terry and I walked away.

As soon as we found a spare space, Ursula stepped into it. "You're Queen of the Midden tonight, Sally-Anne Perks," she said. "You even feel you can afford to brush off the Puceys."

"If that was brushing off, then Adrian Pucey brushed off the Boots first," I said.

"Ha!" Ursula cawed mirthlessly, and her eyes narrowed with anger. "There are no *Boots*. But there are Puceys, and you have offended them! Whatever will Mummy say when she hears what scuts you prefer?"

"Yes, I do prefer my own partner," I said. "Why did you want me to dance with yours anyway?"

Ursula's cheeks became even redder, but she did not reply.

"Anyway, we want to dance," said Terry. He took my hand and swept me back into the first clearing among the dancers.

Most couples were dancing happily without worrying about other people's business. Eddie Carmichael was dipping a pink-faced Sophie, and Mandy Brocklehurst's hair was flying loose as Robert Rivers swung her.

"You can tell that Sally-Anne's had dancing lessons," said someone behind me, but I never looked back to find out who.

The crystal shoes led us through a dreamy minuet and a breathtaking gavotte before I gasped, "I really must take a rest now!"

"Don't you want to try the bourée? It's said to be the most difficult dance of all."

"Hush, don't say the name of the dance out loud, or the magic shoes might not give us a choice!"

"You could always take them off." Terry handed me a Butterbeer and we sat down to watch the brave dancers who wanted to attempt the bourée.

The girl on the next chair suddenly jumped up with a furious scowl on her face: it was Ursula. "Com~~on~~, Adrian!" she hissed to Pucey. "We're dancing!"

"Was there a pin on Ursula's chair?" asked Terry.

"No, it was because of me. She doesn't like me, remember? She's angry that I even turned up tonight."

"And that you snubbed her partner by refusing to dance with him," Terry remembered. "Why would your stepsister's boyfriend leave her to ask you?"

"I don't know if he's a real boyfriend." I considered for a moment. "They certainly seemed to be cooking up something together. I think Ursula might have ~~old~~ him to ask me. But if I *had* danced with Pucey, Ursula would have complained that I'd stolen her escort."

"Now she'll just have to complain that you dance with Muggle-born riffraff."

"But if I'd come to this ball with a pure-blood, then I'd have been in trouble for reducing the pool of eligible bachelors available to the pure-blood girls."

"Some people are never satisfied," Terry agreed. "Your family does seem to be taking this ball very seriously. Did I miss something? I thought this dance was just for fun."

"I think Ursula's friends see it as their first step into polite society, so *they* have to be seen with a prestigious partner."

"What do witches and wizards do," asked Terry, "when they don't *want* to enter polite society?"

I laughed. "Grow up normal, I expect! Work for a living. What do you want to be when you leave Hogwarts?"

"A healer or potioneer perhaps a spellcrafter. Any career that makes the world a better place. What about you?"

"I'd like to do something that makes people comfortable at home. Write cookery books or sell children's clothes or design furniture... No, there's no money in that. If you want to work in furniture or spellcrafting in lots of trades, really you have to know someone who's already in the business. They give all the jobs to their friends' children."

Terry looked disconcerted for a minute, then he laughed. "I have a lot to learn about wizarding society. How do Muggle-borns usually get jobs?"

"By brain-power. They earn Ministry positions or set up their own businesses. If they can't do either of those, they find menial jobs in the large firms in Spencer's or Woolman's or Cloaca Harington."

We spent so long discussing the workings of wizarding society and the difference that it might or might not make to know the right people that we nearly missed the call for a Conga. William Stebbins was pulling Sylvia Fawcett into line while Seamus Finnegan and Lavender Brown raced straight past us, and the musicians repeated, "Come on, everyone Conga!"

Terry put his hands on my hips, and I put mine on Michael Corner's. At the front of the line, Professor Dumbledore kicked up his heels, while Professor Flitwick clung to his robes, his feet completely missing the floor. The crystal shoes began to shuffle, then to kick an instant ahead of the beat, and Harold Dingle yelled.

"They raise their voices and shout for joy," Terry whispered in my ear. "Wait for the dominoes to topple."

When the Conga collapsed, Blaise Zabini was hovering near me.

"You are a charming dancer, Miss Perks," he said. "Have you forgotten that you originally promised to go to this ball with me? Come, make up for lost time and give me this final dance."

Terry and I looked at each other with suppressed smiles. I took Terry's arm, wondering if there was any point in even replying. Then a furious Daphne Greengrass marched up and seized Zabini's shoulders. A scowl crossed his face, but he hastily wiped it.

"You're popular tonight!" Terry whispered, taking me in a ballroom hold. "Is this dance a Strathspey?"

"Perhaps Aunt Odette put a popularity spell on the shoes," I said. "We're lucky that this is a Strathspey, or we'd be dancing the wrong steps by now."

"No, it isn't the shoes. You always were... er... the best sort of person!"

"So were you," I replied automatically.

As we floated away on the wafts of the Strathspey, I wondered what it would be like to be all grown up and married to someone like Terry. For a moment, I understood why some of the older girls had already decided whom they were going to marry. It made sense of why my stepsisters were taking this ball so seriously, even though I couldn't imagine why anyone would want to marry Nott or Pucey. But Terry... There would be lots and lots of girls who wanted to marry Terry...

The music faded away at the slow tolling of a clock. It was midnight, and the Yule Ball was over. We stopped dancing, and most people seemed to be clapping. Terry was smiling at me, his eyes still dancing. On the final stroke of twelve, a cold breeze whistled through my bare shoulders.

Bare?

Terry's face was startled, and as I glanced down, I saw that my skirt was *orange*.

The beautiful blue-grey robes had vanished. My pumpkin-gold skirt was once again knee-length at the front, calf-length at the back. The sleeves had disappeared. There was only the sleeveless bodice's halter-neck...

... The *indecently* low-cut bodice. It wasn't really a neckline at all, just a split bodice.

No wonder Terry was shocked. I might as well be standing there naked! I wanted to run, but my feet were rooted to the floor.

"*Accio!*" Terry's soothing voice was penetrating my embarrassment, and a tablecloth from the punch table sailed through the air. "Here, wrap this around yourself. Those corridors are chilly. Was that costume really all charm-work?"

I nodded as I draped the punch-stained tablecloth over my shoulders.

"I'm *impressed!* That was a stunning constellation of charms, and it looked so real. I don't know why the other girls wasted their worldly mammon on dress-robcs tonight a few charms would have scrubbed up the school uniforms to Twilfitt standards."

I had to laugh at that. I couldn't imagine dancing in the school merino; I would stew in my own perspiration. Whereas now I was shivering...

The hall was emptying around us. The Weird Sisters were packing away their instruments; only a few students were brash enough to try to prolong the ball artificially. Blaise Zabini was marching straight past us without glancing left or right, but his shoulder gave mine a hard shove as he passed, and I stumbled. Terry caught me.

"Anything wrong, Zabini?" asked Terry for Zabini had stopped a few paces ahead and was glowering at us.

"Go to Hell."

"Can't," said Terry cheerily. "I've already been assigned elsewhere. Can we help you with anything?"

Zabini's reply was so rude that I didn't properly understand it; but Terry steered me across the deserted hall, looking even more embarrassed than I had been when my dress-robe charms broke, so I didn't ask about it. I let him take me into the Entrance Hall as far as the Hufflepuff door, where we both stopped, a little uncertainly. My heart was beating and for a moment I was shy of Terry.

"Good night," I said, recovering my manners. "I've had a wonderful time. Thank you so much for being my partner."

"Thank *you* for being *mine*. It was a good party."

"Yes, it was. Do you think they'll hold another one next year?"

He shrugged. "If not, we'll just have to find ourselves a school-holidays ball. Good night!" He tapped my arm lightly and disappeared up the main staircase. I opened the Hufflepuff door, savouring his words as I tripped down to the cellars. Another ball! Next year! Even if we had to look for one! I might not have found the right dormitory if my friends' voices had not been echoing beyond the barrel-top door.

"So do tell us, Susan," Megan was saying. "Did Justin kiss you?"

"Of course not; we only went as friends. But we had a lovely time together! Megan, do you want to tell us about Wayne? Did he kiss you?"

"He did *try* to," said Megan meaningfully, "but I did take it on the cheek. Hannah..."

As I opened the door, Hannah, Susan, Megan and Sophie were half-undressed and combing out each other's hair. Hannah was blushing and gave a tell-tale nod.

"But, goodness, I can't have been thinking! We have to share lessons together next term... I hope we'll still be friends! Sophie, did you... Did Eddie...?"

We never found out whether Eddie had kissed Sophie, because at that moment, they all saw that I had entered. Instead of replying to Hannah, Sophie asked, "Sally-Anne, why are you wearing a tablecloth?"

"Oh." I slid it off, to reveal the pumpkin-gold cocktail dress.

Susan groaned. "It's my fault. I'm *sorry!* I was thinking so hard about the charm needing to last until midnight that I ended up making one that lasted ~~only~~ until midnight."

"It's all right. Terry thought it was a really good charm."

"Oooh, *Terry*," said Megan. "So tell us. Did he kiss you?"

"Sally-Anne!" interrupted Sophie. "Yer've lost a shoe. Why 'as only one of them glass shoes survived midnight?"

A Prince Among Youths

Chapter 9 of 14

She left behind one of her glass slippers... She reached home, but quite out of breath, and in her nasty old clothes, having nothing left of all her finery but one of the little slippers, the mate to the one that she had dropped. (Perrault)

CHAPTER NINE

A Prince Among Youths

"Me ears 'urt," said Sophie. "Do yer think we could make a rule that stepmothers aren't allowed to use t' common room fireplaces?"

My ears hurt too, and Hannah was shaking. Megan was muttering about casting a *Lingaugeo* on "Sally-Anne's dragon-hag", and perhaps a *Splingio* too. Only Susan was calm.

"Mrs Perks seemed angriest about the fact that we were all sitting there listening," she said. "I wonder what she wanted to say that was too private for us to hear? She didn't spare us very much. Sally-Anne, can your stepmother *do* anything to you?"

I tried to remember whether anything in Cressida's furious rant had actually made sense. "I expect she's saving up some kind of punishment. And she'll tell Dad that I spoilt

the ball for Ursula and Cecilia. If he believes her..." It was difficult to imagine Dad actually turning against me, but he would be disappointed in me and he would support whatever punishment Cressida allocated. "Let's hope the boys didn't hear," I said as Megan opened the door to the Entrance Hall.

Several boys were waiting for us there.

"Sally-Anne, are you all right?" asked Terry. "We could hear your stepmother all the way out here."

"Of course she isn't all right!" exclaimed Megan. "None of us! The Wizengamot ought to banish stepmothers to the moon."

"Been working on that one for years, I have," said Wayne. "But the munting stepmams do have all the rights."

There was an awkward moment before Eddie Carmichael said, "Anyway, let's flit. Sophie, do you think that cloak is thick enough for the pouring rain?"

I was glad to drop the subject and let my friends move most of them were going to Hogsmeade despite the weather. Hannah was going with Justin and Ernie, but had forgotten her shopping list. Megan, who had rashly promised to accompany Wayne and then regretted it, now had to explain to him that Susan would be coming with them. Michael Corner slid away from Terry's side when Weasley's sister appeared on the staircase. Soon Terry and I were alone with Anthony Goldstein. Since I had no money, I hoped they would suggest a different plan.

"Aren't you meeting anyone?" I asked Anthony.

"No, I'm going to catch up on some reading." He displayed a large Bible.

"Have you read *all* of it?"

"Of course although this is only the Hebrew part."

I took courage and asked, "Will you read some to us?"

We went to sit in the little antechamber. There was no table, so Anthony balanced the great book on his knees and began to read.

"When I declared not my sin,

my body wasted away

through my groaning all day long.

For day and night

Thy hand was heavy upon me;

my strength was dried up

as by the heat of summer.

I acknowledged my sin to Thee,

and I did not hide my iniquity;

I said, 'I will confess

my transgressions to the LORD.'

Then Thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin..."

Anthony read very well, even if the words were disturbing. I didn't remember hearing anything so old-fashioned at Mum's church. I looked at Terry, but he seemed enthralled.

Anthony reached the end, and Terry said, "Let Sally-Anne choose something now. What would you like to hear?"

"Something a bit more cheerful," I told them.

Anthony turned the page. "Try this," he said.

"How precious is thy steadfast love, O God!

The children of men take refuge

in the shadow of Thy wings.

They feast on the abundance of Thy house,

and Thou givest them drink

from the river of Thy delights.

For with Thee is the fountain of life;

in Thy light do we see light.

O continue Thy steadfast love to those who know Thee..."

This is more like it, I thought. Terry smiled at me, and we both smiled at Anthony. Who would have thought that, at the tail-end of the twentieth century, three young wizards would give up shopping trips and flying practice because we found it more entertaining to read the Bible?

* * * * *

"What... Terry hasn't kissed you yet?" Megan sounded disappointed. "But you've been going out together all term!"

"I don't know whether we're going out together or not," I admitted.

Hannah looked flustered. "But... goodness... you two are always together! And the way you talk about him..."

"Annah," said Sophie, "yer always with Justin and Ernie. Are yer going out wi'*them*?"

"Everyone knows I'm going out with Ernie! Justin and I only... well... you know..."

"Whereas Sally-Anne and Terry only... well... *you know*," said Megan.

"And 'ere *is* Terry," said Sophie. "Yer 'ave to admit, Sally-Anne, that 'e's *allus* around."

He was. Whereas Sophie had broken up with Eddie Carmichael after only a couple of weeks, and Megan had more or less shaken Wayne off by the time of the Second Task, Terry and I were still the best of friends.

"Hello, Sally-Anne," he said. "Is there something exciting on that notice board?"

"No, we're just removing a few." I ripped off yet another page; I had been taking them down all morning.

LOST

Glass (but unbreakable) dancing shoe for the right foot.

Last seen in the Great Hall at the Yule Ball.

If found, please return to Sally-Anne Perks, 4th Year Hufflepuff.

Since the left shoe had survived the Yule Ball, I knew that the other could not have magically disintegrated, but must be lost in the ordinary way. Obviously it wasn't worth stealing without its fellow; and it was too distinctive to be overlooked or thrown away by anyone who might find it; so I had hoped all term that it might come back to me. But the spring term was over, and no one had replied to my notices, so I had to accept that the glass shoe had gone. However would I tell Aunt Odette?

"Did you try Summoning it?" asked Terry.

"Yes, but that didn't work. If the shoe still exists, it must have a Staying Charm on it."

"Who would want to do that?" asked Susan. "It seems a pretty pointless prank."

"So perhaps the worst is true," said Megan. "Perhaps some idiot did use it to practise the *Reducto*."

"They're unbreakable, remember," said Hannah. "Or is the *Reducto* charm stronger than the Unbreakable one? Perhaps lost shoes automatically return to the manufacturer. You could try going to Cobbler's over the holidays."

"Or perhaps they simply return to the owner's home," said Terry hopefully. "Perhaps the magic shoe will be safely waiting in your own wardrobe. Are you packed?"

I indicated my trunk next to Susan's; we were the only ones going home for Easter this year. I had to go home because Mum needed me, and of course I couldn't go to Mum's without first going to Dad's. I would just have to face up to whatever was waiting for me there.

"I'll miss you," said Terry. He hugged me but did not kiss me. "I'll send Tychicus with all the news in a couple of days."

* * * * *

"Why isn't Ella-Jane here?" was Cressida's first question as Molly-Rose and I stepped out of her Floo.

"She's staying at Hogwarts all Easter."

"I'm going to check that with her Head of House! Anyway, you two are here, so make yourselves useful. Molly-Rose, you can do the ironing. Sally-Anne, go and start dinner. Cecilia, love, no sneaking off. You can read to Xavier."

As soon as I reached the kitchen door, something clicked into place. I knew my own footfall had activated some kind of booby-trap. Next minute, my wand flew out of my sleeve, as if someone had Summoned it. In alarm, I pushed forwards, but my toe hit an invisible barrier.

The bruise was real. It was clear that I could not *step out* of the kitchen. I soon established that Cressida had locked the kitchen fireplace and the windows, so I was trapped. What was she trying to achieve? I began to peel potatoes, assuming she would have to let me out at bedtime.

I served lobscouse for dinner. We ate in the kitchen as usual; Dad praised my cooking without noticing what it was, while Cressida complained about money. After dinner I washed up. Then I cautiously felt the doorway, but the invisible barrier was still there.

"Of course you aren't getting out!" said Ursula, thrusting a flat, heavy box into my arms. "Did you really think you would get away with defying Mummy at Christmas? She's sent me to tell you to polish all this silverware. Don't go to sleep until you've finished the job."

Cressida had never owned silver before; if she was buying luxury goods on credit, it was no wonder she was short of money.

That was how the week progressed. When I wasn't cooking for the family, Cressida kept me busy with other tasks. For the first couple of days they were sensible: I had to clean the family's shoes; I had to plan a month of menus and write out the recipes "with no fancy French-chef words"; I had to disinfect Xavier's toys because they had been exposed to the Muggle neighbours' bout of measles; I had to hand-wash the woollens. When Cressida ran out of real jobs, she set me silly ones. I had to chip the ice out of the froster-box with a teaspoon (a job that Cressida could have done in an instant with a *Thermo* followed by a *Desiccatio*). I had to clean the stove-range with only vinegar because Xavier had inconveniently spilt the last bottle of dragon's blood. I had to scrub the floor with an old toothbrush.

Dad didn't seem to notice that I was sleeping in the kitchen, or even that I was there all day long; perhaps he was Confunded. He did amble in to talk to me sometimes.

"This unemployment situation is getting us all down," he admitted. "I've been singing in Muggle pubs, but it doesn't bring in enough money, and Cressida isn't happy with all the Muggle contact. She says working with Muggles was all right when you girls were younger, but now we have to think about making the right impression on the pure-blood bachelors. She wants us to look like the kind of family who only mix with magical society. So when I thought about working in the Muggle post office, Cressida wouldn't have that for the same reason. So I just hope my next album sells well."

"What kinds of songs are they?"

"The new album is dedicated to you six," he said proudly. "It has lullabies and educational chants and hopes of a better world for the next generation. But it's a bit of a gamble. Cressida thinks I should have stuck to love-songs because that's what sells. She says that if we don't break even soon, she might have to open up a shop. But we're hoping she won't need to do that before Xavier goes to Hogwarts..."

* * * * *

Fortunately, Cressida became bored with Molly-Rose and me, and she let us go to Mum's house on Easter Saturday. We stumbled out of Mum's Floo to an angry, chaotic household.

"I won't go! Try to make me!" Christopher's bellows were punctuated with swear-words.

"You'll do as you're told!" shouted Raymond. It was unusual for my stepfather to shout.

"If it really doesn't work out, I'm sure we can find a way to change the arrangement legally," Mum pleaded.

Jeremy looked up from his book. "It's all a trap," he said bitterly. "Yousay we can make a change, but I don't trust the courts to act before my exams."

The situation was that my stepbrothers' stepfather had accepted a job in London. The boys had stayed with Mum and Raymond while the Buftons were sorting out their move, but now Mrs Bufton wanted them to "come home to their family".

The telephone rang before I had even unpacked my trunk. Mum's voice was strained as she murmured, "Yes, of course, Cynthia... I'll fetch them at once, Cynthia..."

"I am *not* going to speak to my mother!" shouted Christopher.

By the time Raymond had dragged Christopher to the telephone, Jeremy was nowhere in sight. With a shout of, "Mum, I am not going to live in London because my home is *here*!" Christopher slammed down the receiver.

There was no dinner started, so I went into the kitchen. Christopher was still shouting at Raymond, but soon Molly-Rose brought an empty laundry basket in from the garden, and Jeremy began loading a full one into the washing machine.

"Don't listen to all the shouting," said Jeremy. "It's about nothing. They can't *make* us live with our mother."

"Can't they? Then the Muggle law courts must be much less interfering than the Wizengamot."

"But I'm of age," said Jeremy. "They can't make me live with *either* parent if I don't want to. So if I say I'm living here, that's that. Christopher is legally old enough to have a say in what happens to him, and the courts don't like to split siblings. He's an idiot to upset everyone by making so much fuss now."

How amazing! "The Wizengamot doesn't give me any say until I'm seventeen," I said. "Jeremy, what's so dreadful about your mother's house that you don't even want to visit her for Easter?"

"Nothing much," he admitted. "I mean, she's terribly disorganised, so we're always running out of milk and clean socks... Speaking of which, can you do something magical or mechanical to make this washing machine switch on?"

"You know I can't use magic out of school." I showed him how to turn the dial.

"Always running out of things, and we never know what time dinner will be, and the house is such a mess that everything gets lost. And she'll only be worse now that she finally has a job to take up half her day. But that isn't really the point, is it? The point is that she wants everything her own way. Why should we give up our home and friends and routines just so that Cynthia Bufton can keep her family together?"

"What, don't you think it's important to keep families together?"

"I don't accept that 'keeping families together' means always giving in to the most selfish family member. Isn't Dad part of my family? But twelve years ago, Mum decided she fancied a change of husband, so she just walked out on him. Then she decided she couldn't bear to give up her children for her boyfriend, so six months later we were uprooted to live in their house. Then she decided she couldn't be bothered going out to work, so Dad's been milked for every last penny to support us. And you already know how many times she's forgotten his access, or forced him to take extra access because having Christopher and me didn't suit her plans. And now she "

Molly-Rose's book crashed to the floor. "Jeremy, you shouldn't *talk* that way about your mother! If the Wizengamot..."

Realising what she had said, she blushed, and we both giggled.

"If your Muggle Family Court," Molly-Rose pressed on, "knew what you were saying, they would accuse Raymond of poisoning you against Cynthia, and you might never be allowed to see him again!"

"That was only true before I was sixteen," repeated Jeremy. "But why should I have to move to a new school just two months before I sit my G.C.S.E.s? London uses a different exam board, so I wouldn't be prepared to sit those exams, and the London schools wouldn't be able to finish preparing me for the Midlands exams. But Mum didn't think of *that*. Her attitude was, 'Just do your best, and if you fail, you can always sit them again next year.'"

I agreed that Jeremy had a point.

"Besides, do you really think we'll be seeing much of Dad once she has us trapped in London? And what about the way we're being forced to leave all our friends behind? Mum's been getting away with too much for too long, but the law's on our side now. All we have to do is sit quietly, and everything will work out."

Whether Jeremy was right, we never knew, because Christopher refused to "sit quietly". While I cleaned the house and helped organise the Muggle legal documents, Mum and Raymond wasted their money on solicitors and social workers. Jeremy studied for his G.C.S.E.s (the Muggle version of O.W.L.s), Molly-Rose tried to look invisible, and the telephone rang all day long. Christopher was rude to Cynthia whenever he couldn't avoid speaking to her, and twice he even cut the telephone wire with scissors (Mum used a *Reparo*, but she wasn't pleased). His friends swarmed all over the house, except on the days when he vanished and he sometimes stayed out until midnight. He left sweet wrappers all over the place because he said there was no point in tidying up a house where he wasn't going to be allowed to live, and I found cigarettes in his anorak pockets.

"No wonder my room smells horrible!" I complained to Molly-Rose.

"It isn't your room any more," she said. "The boys have decided to move in permanently. They want you to shift your stuff in with Ella-Jane and me."

"If that's what they want, they ought to say 'please'," I grumbled. My sisters' room was always a mess because Ella-Jane left her possessions all over the place, and Molly-Rose never spoke a word of protest. "Fine, let's tidy up before we have to find spots for yet more stuff."

Molly-Rose obligingly picked up an armload of ironed clothes that had never been put away. "Ella-Jane won't like it if you hide her things."

"Well, those are her only choices. Either she tidies her things herself or she lets me tidy them for her. Come on, let's organise a new system now, while she isn't around to protest."

After a week of this, Mum was exhausted. She confided that she was starting to want Christopher off her hands. "I understand why he wants to stay in Hereford, but the more he punishes us, the more determined Cynthia becomes to fight it out in court. Oh, dear, we really can't afford another court hearing!"

"Mum! Do you need me to go through your bills again?"

She smiled wearily. "We'll be all right if we can last out until September. Once Molly-Rose is safely at Hogwarts, I'll be able to leave the steelworks and start my own business."

"Mum, that sounds terribly risky."

"There is a risk, but my parents will help. I've wanted for a long time to have my own bookshop, and I'm sure Grandpa can help me do it properly. Oh *who* could that be at the door?"

It was Mr Bufton. "I've come for the boys," he said. "They have half an hour to pack."

Jeremy began by saying, "I'm not going," but after Raymond and Mr Bufton forcibly dragged Christopher downstairs and stuffed him screaming into the car, Jeremy packed a suitcase full of schoolbooks and followed docilely. I packed their clothes, and they were off in ten minutes. Jeremy was so quiet that I knew he had a plan, and Christopher was so loud that I knew he hadn't.

"I wish we hadn't had to force them," said Mum.

"So do I," said Raymond. "But we must work within the law."

* * * * *

"Terry, thank you so much for all your letters. They saved my sanity!"

Terry hugged me. "I liked your answers too. But did you really tell me everything? It sounded as if you had quite a lot of trouble at home."

"In both homes," I admitted. "And it isn't over yet. Mum told me to keep my mind on my studies, but I've really started to wish I could leave school."

"You can borrow Tychicus any time you need to write home. And I'll "

He was interrupted by a jingling of bells, a clacking of canes and a swirl of long, coloured ribbons. A string of second-year girls had taken over the Entrance Hall, and my sister Ella-Jane was leading them in a rhythmic stamping.

With a cry of, "Slay the dragons! Slay the dragons!" they nearly knocked us sideways.

"Ella-Jane, what on earth ?"

"It's St George's Day, Sally-Anne! Don't be a square; join in!"

Three days later there was an owl from Mum.

Dear Sally-Anne, Ella-Jane and Molly-Rose,

I hope you are all well and having a productive summer term. We are very busy at the moment, so please don't worry if you don't hear from us as often as usual.

The boys have run away from London. Jeremy had saved up the train fare for both of them, and they arrived on our doorstep on Monday afternoon. They have gone back to their old school, despite being officially struck from the enrolment, and are refusing to speak to their mother.

Our solicitor says there is no legal way to force Jeremy back to his mother's house but that Christopher will have to obey the court's orders. We are doing our best to negotiate with the Buftons, who are naturally frantic, with the schools and with Christopher. Unfortunately, we are not progressing very far. Raymond and I are trying to accept that going to court is now inevitable...

Breaking the Spell

Chapter 10 of 14

Moral: Beauty in a woman is a rare treasure that will always be admired. Graciousness, however, is priceless and of even greater value. Young women, in the winning of a heart, graciousness is more important than a beautiful hairdo.
(Perrault)

CHAPTER TEN

Breaking the Spell

You are not to enter our home again. I have tried for nearly ten years to treat you like a daughter, but you have never returned the least gratitude or affection. After the outrageous way you behaved at Christmas, I cannot allow you to embarrass your stepsisters any further. From now on, you can be your mother's problem, for we no longer consider you a member of our family.

My hands shook; I nearly tore the paper in the effort not to let Cressida's letter upset me. Since I hadn't ever been happy in her house, I ought to be overjoyed that I could never go back.

"It was still a cruel way to write it," said Hannah. "She could have just written that the access arrangements had changed."

"But hurting Sally-Anne's feelings was the whole point of writing it at all, isn't it?" said Megan. "This letter doesn't guarantee that Sally-Anne really won't go back to Liverpool because Mrs Perks could change her mind at any time."

"Yes, I bet she'll miss all yer 'ousework," said Sophie. "Yer stepsisters don't seem the 'ouse-elf types."

"But Mrs Perks must know that she can't keep Sally-Anne prisoner in her kitchen more than once," Susan pointed out. "She'd be in real trouble if Mrs Slater complained to the Wizengamot about what happened over Easter."

"I know I should be glad," I said. "But... it's my Dad. What if I never see him again?"

"Surely 'e'll find a way to see yer!" said Sophie.

"He might if he does even notice that Sally-Anne is missing," said Megan. "His wife does have him properly under her thumb, remember. He'll believe whatever excuse she does feed him, isn't it?"

"Be careful," said Susan suddenly. "You need to file a copy of that letter with your family solicitor just in case it's a trap to accuse your Mum of withholding access."

"Oh, my goodness, Susan!" exclaimed Hannah. "However do you manage to think of these things so clearly?"

Terry had the profoundest comment of all. "You have a real, live enemy to forgive."

"I've never before thought about forgiving Cressida," I admitted, "because I've never dared to think of her as an enemy. Terry, do you have any enemies?"

"I've never forgotten the bullies at my primary school and the chief bully was the headmaster. But I've never had *real* enemy of the kind Harry Potter has, or even like your stepmother. Talking of which... We need to keep our eyes and ears open. The Triwizard Tournament isn't over yet, and Michael reckons that someone still has it in for Harry Potter."

Of course I promised to bear it in mind, but there wasn't really anything suspicious to see or hear. The summer term was a blur to me because I was so concerned about family problems. Dad wrote more often than usual and he wrote nearly the same thing in every letter, almost as if he had forgotten that he had already written.

Let's hope my royalties come through quickly, because money is tighter than usual! I know I'll soon have to bring you girls out in society to meet the right wizards and I'd like to do it in style. Cressida is thinking of opening a shop. Of course we'd rather she didn't have to work for a few years yet, especially as Xavier has been sick lately (nothing serious! don't be a worry-wart!), but it might be a matter of need. Luckily, her own parents are happy to help out with business advice and a little capital, so she might have her shop before summer ends.

If Cressida wanted part-time work, and her own parents were willing to help, why didn't she just work in *their* shop?

Mum didn't write for weeks. She and Raymond were worrying about more than money.

Raymond has been ill. Don't worry: he's fine now. I had to take him into St Mungo's (you know how much paperwork they demand to bring in a Muggle relative) and the Healers say his illness was "only" stress. They prescribed all kinds of disgusting potions, which Bobbin's mixed for us, and they seem to be working.

The Healer said we have to take it easy or we are at risk of more serious illnesses. But I don't see what we can do. First we have to sort out Christopher's custody problems, and then we have to raise the money to pay the legal costs somehow...

I asked Terry and Sophie how much it cost to go to those Muggle family courts, but they didn't know: they both came from intact families. A few weeks later Mum wrote:

The judge at the local court has ruled that Christopher can live with us. But Mrs Bufton is very upset and has decided to challenge this ruling. While I don't want to throw Christopher out, it really would be less traumatic for all of us if he would simply agree to go to his mother's house of his own accord. But the boys refuse even to go on access visits at the moment because they are so afraid of being trapped in London.

On the bright side, Jeremy says his first two G.C.S.E. exams went well. He spends all his spare time revising...

I really wanted to forget about school and run home, but both Mum and Dad told me that I should concentrate on my studies. The term ended with tragedy, when Cedric Diggory mysteriously died. I hadn't known him well, but he had been in Hufflepuff, and everyone had liked him we had all assumed he would be the next Head Boy. So it was in a sober mood that I arrived home for the summer, the first summer holiday in my whole school career that was to be spent entirely at Mum's house.

* * * * *

Mum was not exactly "at home". She spent all day in a shop in the Muggle High Street that she had just leased.

"I know it's terrible timing," she said. "But I've had to resign my job because of taking too many days off this year, so I need to start a business just to pay the bills. Then this shop became available, so I *had* to take it it might be months before there's another opportunity this good. But I don't know how I'll find the time to make it happen."

"Mum, it's *good* timing," I told her. "I can be here every day through the summer, even if you have to be in court. In September Molly-Rose will be starting at Hogwarts, so

you'll have spare hours in the evenings."

Mum sighed. "I hope so, Sally-Anne. But most small businesses flop. What if we run at a loss and end up making more debts for ourselves?"

"It's a chance we have to take," I said. "Don't Grandma and Grandpa Flourish know enough about bookselling to give the right advice?"

"They've certainly given me a head start. But do they really know Muggle books and the Muggle tax laws? My mother is a Muggle, but she's already admitted that she's forgotten most of how Muggles do things."

"It's more likely to be a success if I help you tidy up," I said.

Jeremy and I spent nearly every day of our summer working in the shop, dusting bookcases, shelving crate-loads of books, reconciling accounts. Most days Jeremy managed to force Christopher into helping us.

"This is just a load of little kids' books," Christopher grumbled. "Isn't Julia going to sell anything exciting?"

"No, she's going to sell children's picture books. If you're serious about living in Dad's house, you need to support Julia's business so that we have some money to live off."

Jeremy greeted the picture books like old friends. The Muggle wholesalers had sent in crates full of *Spot* and *Mog* and *Hairy Maclary* and *The Baby's Catalogue*.

"The Railway Series was my favourite ever," said Jeremy. "I was terrified of the Fat Controller and I cried when he was angry with Thomas. Oh look, they've sent us *The Butterfly Ball*. I would have expected that to be out of print by now. Didn't you ever read any of these?"

"A few, but wizard children have their own stories *Beadle the Bard*, *Nigel the Knight Bus*, *Seven Fat Puffskeins* and so on."

Just as Mum was ready for the grand opening, she heard that she was required in the Family Court!

"We'll look after the shop," said Jeremy at once. "How hard can it be to sell picture books?"

Mum wanted to protest, but she didn't really have a choice. She never saw the first day of her own shop. Jeremy unlocked the glass doors at eight o'clock, and I spent the next eleven hours making cappuccinos for the customers.

At nine o'clock, Terry and Susan arrived to help us. Susan immediately installed herself in an enticing corner where a stuffed lion guarded a rainbow rug and began reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* out loud. When I brought out the next tray of coffee, I saw that she was surrounded by an eager crowd of Muggle children. Terry was standing behind the counter, waiting to ring up prices, and Jeremy was near the door, persuading pedestrians to walk in.

For parts of the day, the shop was packed. The local children loved Susan's reading, and we soon had a crowd of shoppers queuing for free coffee whether they wanted books or not. We did make sales. There were times when young parents were crowding around us for advice. It was lucky that Terry and Jeremy knew their Muggle literature.

"Your Miss Bones is a *wonderful* storyteller!" enthused one grandmother as she paid for an armload of board books. "If she's going to be here every day, I'll tell all my friends."

"Certainly *someone* will be reading every day this summer," said Jeremy. But as the shop-bell clanged behind that family, he hissed, "Sally-Anne! Are you a good narrator? I'm not, so I don't know how we'll manage to continue this!"

I looked around in alarm, but there were no customers in sight. For frightening stretches of the day, the shop was empty.

"This is going to be a slow-paced business," I said.

"You certainly need to think about your marketing campaign," said Terry. "The customers have loved this shop once they were inside it, but people don't buy books every day. You can't rely on random patrons wandering in off the street if you hope to make a profit."

"Mum advertised in the local paper," I said. "But that won't be enough, will it? What should we ~~do~~?"

* * * * *

The Family Court decreed that Christopher could live with Mum and Raymond but he would have to spend alternate weekends with the Buftons. He would have no choice about going to London on Friday evenings, and they would have no choice about sending him back to Hereford in time for Monday morning school.

"You'd think sensible people could have sorted out that much without resorting to the expense of the law courts," I complained to Terry.

"Since when have people ever been sensible?"

Terry made several trips to Hereford through the summer, despite the fact that all we ever really did together was work in the bookshop.

"I don't want to go back to Hogwarts," I said. "Mum, don't you think it would be more useful for me to help you here?"

"Of course it would, but we can't argue with the law." Mum looked around the shop furtively, established that there were no Muggles inside, and threw a Sweeping Charm at the floor. "You have to be in some kind of education for at least one more year."

"Couldn't I go to the Muggle school?"

Jeremy laughed. "Sorry, didn't mean to mock your ignorance, Sally-Anne. But can't you see that it's too late to make the change? You'd never catch up on all the maths and science that you've missed. And you wouldn't help Julia by going to the Muggle school; it's during the day that she'd need help in the shop."

"Mum... does that mean you'll have to *pay* an assistant?"

"Perhaps it does, or perhaps I'll manage by myself. But don't worry about it, Sally-Anne. I need you to concentrate on your O.W.L.s and take care of your sisters. That way, at least I don't need to worry about *you*."

So on the first of September, I was back at Hogwarts to watch Molly-Rose being sorted into Ravenclaw. On the second of September, Ella-Jane earned a triple detention from Snape. On the third of September, Cecilia fell off a broomstick and suffered a moderately severe concussion. When I went up to the Hospital Wing, Madam Pomfrey sat me beside her bed to hold cool compresses against her forehead. I was there all evening, but none of Cecilia's Slytherin friends came to visit. After one week, I heard from Dad.

Sorry we didn't manage to see each other over summer. But life's like that sometimes, isn't it? Perhaps you could manage to come home for a few weekends during term. We'd really appreciate the help around the house now that

Cressida is so busy setting up her shop. Poor Xavier has been having one illness after another and he could use some nursing...

I couldn't tell from Dad's letter whether Cressida was trying to trap me into entering her house or to trick me into staying away or even whether Dad knew that she had tried to banish me. I couldn't think about that now; I wouldn't have time to go to Liverpool during term. I wondered what Cressida sold in her shop.

After two weeks, I was back in Hereford, ready to help a very disgruntled Christopher pack his suitcase for a weekend with his mother. After Raymond had settled Christopher on the train, I gave my attention to the kitchen. On Friday I prepared a week's supply of casseroles so that Mum wouldn't have to worry about cooking when she was busy with her shop. On Saturday, always the busiest day for a shopkeeper, I worked in the shop. On Sunday Mum and I cleaned the house (using magic, because no one would know that it was my wand that had been busy) and balanced the books (in the ordinary Muggle way, because there is no magical short-cut for arithmetic). Christopher arrived home late in the evening, complaining loudly about how much his mother resented the new residence arrangement, how she had nagged him all weekend, and how surprised he was that she had even let him "escape" to catch his train.

"Let me start your laundry," I said as soon as I could put a word in edgeways.

"You'll have a job," he said darkly. "Mum's sent back all the clothes that are normally at her house, and most of them haven't been washed for about a year."

"All the more reason to start now," I said, biting back all my thoughts about how much Christopher's attitude was contributing to his conflict with the Buftons*lust do whatever will make this easier for Mum!*

* * * * *

I looked up from the deadly-dull DADA textbook that had been allocated for our fifth year. All it really seemed to say so far was that decent wizards*shouldn't* defend themselves against the Dark Arts. A heavy, sullen silence seemed to be hanging over the library, but my day had brightened because Terry had taken the seat next to me.

"Deadly dull, isn't it?" he said. "All Slinkhard really seems to say is that it's wrong to stand up to evil. Is Professor Umbridge growing on you yet?"

"Not at *all*," I told him. "We Hufflepuffs all dislike her completely. Not even*you* could find anything good to say about her."

"I don't have to say anything at all about her," he said. "Rather than complaining about quality of teaching at this school, some of us have decided to do something about it."

"What?" I closed Slinkhard's boring book. "Are you petitioning Dumbledore to get rid of Umbridge? Good. See if he'll get rid of Snape and Binns while you're at it."

"What we actually had in mind was an alternative way of studying Defence. Ron Weasley's trying to form a kind of homework club that will help us pass our O.W.L. and deal with real-life Dark Magic. I don't know a lot more than that, but Ron's pretty keen to get a group of us together."

"Much needed," I agreed, although I hoped it wouldn't turn out to be the kind of club that took up hours and hours. I had*mine* O.W.L.s to fit around my family problems!

"So, will you come to Ron's meeting? It'll be in Hogsmeade next Saturday."

"*Next* Saturday? Oh, Terry, I can't! I promised Mum I'd be home this weekend she really needs me there. She's overworked, and my stepfather is making himself sick with worry about his sons."

"All right." Terry didn't look happy, but he didn't comment further.

"Terry!" I protested. "I'm sure Ron's had a great idea. Almost any homework club would teach us more than we learn from Umbridge. But surely you understand that I have to put my family first. Listen, if this club turns out to be worth joining, I can go later, can't I? Tell me all about it, and perhaps the next meeting will be at a more convenient time."

Spending a weekend at home doing household chores and selling in the shop was much harder work than doing homework at Hogwarts, but I was always glad I'd gone. By Sunday afternoon, Mum was relaxed, and Raymond was saying that he didn't feel sick after all. I was continually counting down the days: it was two hundred and ninety, two hundred and eighty, two hundred and seventy days until I could leave school and be home permanently.

I returned to Hogwarts on Monday morning via the Hogsmeade Floo, reaching the History of Magic classroom with only five minutes to spare.

"I can't *believe* she did this!" Megan was complaining.

"Is she really wanting no more Gobstones?" asked Stephen.

"Orr school music perrhaps the old hag does have something against that," said Wayne.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Everyone began to talk at once. "It's Umbridge," said Sophie. "She's decided to break up all student clubs. Everything from Quidditch teams to 'omework groups!"

"She has destroyed this school's musical life," said Megan. "There's no choir and no orchestra. We can't even hold informal practices in groups of three."

"No homework groups?" I asked, incredulous. "Is Umbridge opposed to students having friendships?"

"I should imagine that's exactly what she does oppose," said Justin. "Tyrants always fear alliances among their subjects."

"She did say that groups could apply for permission to re-form," said Ernie. "The point is that she'll be personally controlling every club in the school."

* * * * *

It was Thursday before I remembered to ask Terry about his meeting. "I suppose your Defence club won't be allowed," I said. "Umbridge isn't very likely to allow a group that only exists because she isn't doing her job properly. That's a pity... Did the meeting last Saturday go well?"

Terry glanced around the courtyard. Ursula's cronies were standing only just out of earshot, and she glared at us pointedly when she saw us looking.

"Let's go somewhere else," I said. "Shall we walk around the lake?"

The path around the lake was muddy and covered with dead leaves, but it left us more or less private.

"The meeting went very well," said Terry. "In fact, we... Put it this way: have you been reading the newspapers lately? You must have heard the rumours that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back."

"No. I haven't had a minute to think about current affairs. I mean, I know Harry Potter is supposed to have seen You-Know-Who alive again, but people are always saying weird things about Harry Potter."

"Harry Potter *has* seen You-Know-Who."

I stopped and stared at Terry's face. "Seriously? Is Harry himself really saying that?"

"Yes."

"He actually believes that the most evil wizard of all time is back among us?"

"Yes."

"Then... Why isn't everyone talking about it? Why haven't we heard about more murders?"

Terry shrugged. "I've no idea why a Dark wizard would want to hide himself away. I only know that he's back, and it's a bad thing."

"Could Harry have made a mistake?"

Terry shook his head emphatically. "We are on what Christians call 'the horns of a trilemma'. Either You-Know-Who is back or he isn't. If he isn't, then either Harry *knows* he isn't that is, he's deliberately lying; or he doesn't know that is, Harry has made an absurd and dramatic mistake. But if You-Know-Who *is* back, then we need to do something about it."

A chill wind whistled around our ears. "Isn't that a little simplistic?" I suggested. "I'm not close friends or anything with Harry Potter, but I do know that he's perfectly normal. He doesn't tell tales to show off; he isn't stupid; he isn't mad. So there must be some other explanation..."

Terry relaxed and smiled. "My point exactly! No lies, no mistake... so Harry must be right. You-Know-Who is back, and I want to be ready for him."

I stared at a leaf in the mud so that Terry wouldn't see my confusion. He couldn't *couldn't* believe such a fantastic story! "Even if the worst *is* true," I said at last, "I don't see what we can do about it."

"Come and find out. Er..." His expression became cagey. "I can't tell you exactly right now. But if you'll trust me for a bit... You don't do homework every evening, do you?"

"Actually, I do. We have so many family problems at the moment that leaving my homework to the weekend isn't an option. I'll be going home a lot this year."

"On *weekends*, silly. I know your Mum needs you, but surely that wouldn't make any difference to what you might be doing... say... one school evening each week?"

"*Silly*? Terry, I'm putting my family first! Don't they tell you to do that in church?"

"No, they tell us to put God first. Or you might like to think of it as finding a balance among your responsibilities. Whatever. My point is you can both help your family *and* confront the political situation."

We stared at each other in wide-eyed annoyance. There was supposed to be a "political situation", but where was the evidence? Terry wanted me to "confront" it, but he wasn't willing to tell me exactly how. But he had hinted that it would take up quite a lot of time, just when Mum needed my time. It also sounded like the kind of thing that would infuriate Professor Umbridge; and if Dad heard that I was in trouble at school, I dreaded to think how Cressida would use the situation against me.

"Terry," I said, "I don't know how you would find a balance if you were in my situation. I only know that right now *I don't have time*."

His face stiffened, and the breeze seemed even colder. After a moment, he opened his mouth. "Fine. It's up to you. I just thought you might be interested. But only you can decide."

He turned around and walked back to the castle.

It began to rain.

The Enemy Within

Chapter 11 of 14

Another moral: Without doubt it is a great advantage to have intelligence, courage, good breeding, and common sense. ... However, even these may fail to bring you success, without the blessing of a godfather or a godmother. (Perrault)

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Enemy Within

At first I didn't notice that Terry wasn't at our usual study spot in the library. He wasn't watching the Quidditch practice on Saturday either, but I assumed he must be in the library. After lunch, when I walked right past the Ravenclaw table, he was so busy with Anthony Goldstein that he didn't even see me. When I finished my piano practice, I heard laughter from Music Room Three. Terry was sitting there although he didn't play anything with Colin Creevey and Katie Bell. I waved, assuming they would ask me to join them.

But they didn't. Terry smiled just enough to indicate that he had seen me, then turned back to ask Katie a question. I stopped stock-still for a moment before I had the sense to hurl myself down the corridor towards the stairs.

Terry was avoiding me!

What was this about? Terry had told me only this term that he couldn't tell Katie Bell from Alicia Spinnet and had asked me which class Colin Creevey was in, so I knew they weren't close friends. What were they talking about that I couldn't share? I told myself that I would ask Terry about it, but it's easy to miss people in a place the size of Hogwarts, especially people who have suddenly decided to avoid their usual haunts.

On Monday morning, Terry marched into History of Magic with his Ravenclaw friends, waved at me casually and sat down next to Michael Corner. Despite the friendly

wave, something suddenly seemed very wrong.

As soon as the bell rang for break, I swept up my parchments and raced to Terry's desk. But Terry already had his back to me. He moved towards the door, still chatting to Michael and Anthony.

I stared at their retreating backs, not hearing whatever Megan was saying to me. *Terry had walked out.* That was what people did after History of Magic, of course and as quickly as they could. But Terry's way of walking out was now horribly different. Not like an enemy, or even like a stranger, but simply as if we had never been friends.

Were we breaking up? *Could* we break up when we had never exactly been going out together anyway? But we had certainly been friends. And the dark certainty steadily grew in my mind that we were no longer friends.

* * * * *

"He can't mean it," said Megan. "Terry did *really* like you, Sally-Anne. You didn't quarrel, isn't it?"

"No-o."

"And he hasn't found someone else, isn't it?"

"We probably wouldn't know if 'e 'ad," Sophie pointed out.

"It doesn't *feel* like a finding-someone-else," I said. "It feels like a quarrel. Except that... we didn't quarrel."

"Not about *anything*?" asked Megan.

I felt myself blushing. "The only thing... It seems so odd... He did want me to join some kind of homework club, and I said I didn't have time. But that can't be the reason... can it...?"

"Yer disagreed about an 'omework club? No, definitely not, that inn't it," said Sophie.

"He ought to have had better sense," said Megan. "Everyone knows that Sally-Anne wouldn't go joining any club once Umbridge had passed her idiotic decree against it."

* * * * *

I tried to pull my eyes away from Terry setting up Michael Corner's cauldron while Anthony Goldstein poured newts' eyes into Terry's scales. I had known before the Potions lesson began that Terry would not choose to work with me today. It was nearly a week since we had talked about that stupid homework club, and we hadn't talked since. I almost wanted to apologise, but what on earth had I done wrong?

"Hello, Sally-Anne!" said Stephen. "Are *you* not speaking to friends either?"

"What?" I scanned the dungeon, hoping Stephen didn't know about Terry and me. Hannah was working with Ernie and Justin, which was quite usual, and Wayne had moved into the space between Megan and Sophie. Susan was chattering away with Padma Patil, which was not at all usual. Since when had Susan been friends with Padma or chatter with *anyone*? And why wasn't Padma with Morag MacDougal?

Morag was behind me, testing Stephen's scalpel. "Come and work with us," she said to me. "We'd best try to look as if nothing's wrong."

"Morag, what's going on around here?"

She passed me a pile of fungi and a knife. "We're brewing Doxycide."

"That's not what Sally-Anne meant!" burst out Stephen. "She's wanting to know why some folks are behaving so oddly." He took no notice of Morag's reproving frown although he must have seen it. "There's stuff going on, Sally-Anne. My Mum and Dad have told me to have nowt to do with Harry Potter or Ernie Macmillan or Neville Longbottom or a whole heap of folks. And my uncle that's Morag's Dad has told her to keep away from Padma Patil. But they did not say your name, so you must be all right."

Morag flushed pink under her freckles. "They're liking us to keep out of trouble," she said. "Stephen, you're needing to sift the arsenic. Sally-Anne, we're hoping that this fuss will not last long and that everybody will stay friends. But meantime it's seeming wiser not to discuss... politics."

Politics? Terry had said something about politics. But how did Stephen and Morag expect to "stay friends" when *they* were the ones refusing to speak to half the class?

Just what was this "homework club" that Terry had urged me to join? If it was really about politics and not homework, then why hadn't Terry told me the truth? If it was important, why hadn't he invited me to the next meeting? And why in any case did he think some political situation was more important than his friends?

* * * * *

"Has Susan gone wandering off *again*?" asked Megan.

"And 'Annah," said Sophie.

The three of us looked at each other across the common room table. It had been just the three of us for several weeks now. Hannah and Susan still sat with us in lessons, but we hardly ever saw them at other times. Even in the dormitory, they seemed to speak mainly to each other.

"What's going on?" I asked. "Hannah's become really quiet." Hannah always used to blurt out exactly what she was thinking; but while there still seemed to be plenty of thoughts flitting through her head, she had lately stopped confiding them.

"There's certainly summut she inn't telling anyone," Sophie agreed. "She ignored us in the courtyard today because she were talking to Cho Chang."

"Susan's changed too," I said. "She seems to be best friends with Padma Patil."

"With Lee Jordan, too," said Megan. "I asked her if they were going out together, but she said no, they were just friends."

"I expect everyone makes new friends now and then," said Sophie sensibly. "Including yer, Sally-Anne!"

I thought yet again about Terry and agreed that the friendship situation had certainly changed.

"So understated!" teased Megan. "Tell us all about it, Sally-Anne. What do you two talk about? You know with your new best friend, Morag MacDougal!"

"Oh." I had never really had a "best friend". Hannah, Susan, Megan, Sophie and I had always been a group, all of us equally close to each of the others. But now Hannah and Susan had mysteriously withdrawn from Megan, Sophie and me. "I hadn't really thought of Morag as a friend. She's been... really nice to me in Potions lessons. But

that's what we talk about potions. She never tells me anything personal."

"And yer've been busy with new interests too," said Sophie. "Are yer going 'omeagain this weekend?"

"I have to," I said. "It's the Muggle half-term, so I can guarantee my stepbrother will be difficult. Mum needs me. We have to put family first, don't we?"

"Before Queen and country?" asked Megan, catching at a Post Office owl that was swooping past us. "Before *Cymbru am byth*? No, no, just kidding! When I do my Welsh-nationalist things, my family does them with me. Look, the owl's for Sally-Anne."

It was from our family solicitor.

Dear Miss Perks,

We refer to your enquiry of 15 October 1995.

According to our files, your only legal guardians are Mr Flavian Ophiuchus Perks (your father) and Mrs Julia Melea Slater (your mother).

Hence the said Mrs Cressida Clematis Perks (your stepmother) has no jurisdiction over you and no legal right to alter the terms of your access arrangements.

If Mrs Perks has an objection to the Wizengamot access ruling, we suggest that she make every effort to settle the matter amicably with her husband (your father) before resorting to legal intervention.

Yours sincerely,

Dempster Wiggleswade,

Solicitor.

* * * * *

Mum's bookshop was very busy in the days before Christmas. I told Ella-Jane and Molly-Rose that they would have to help too. Molly-Rose was delighted, although she spent more time sitting with her nose in one of the books than actually serving customers. It didn't matter too much; she was a good advertisement, so we just found her a cushion and seated her in the bay window.

Ella-Jane hated it. "We have enough books at school! Aren't we allowed to have fun in the holidays?"

Jeremy backed me up. "No. Not if we want to stay together as a family. As long as the ex-spouses keep sending in the bills, we need to keep working in this shop."

Christopher backed Ella-Jane. "Let's sneak off," he told her. "We could go to Brendan's house he has a *Star Wars* video."

Molly-Rose turned a page of her picture book: a prince was riding a black stallion through the hawthorn-hedged countryside in search of his lost princess. In real life, however, I knew that Terry had completely given up on me. He was certainly not going to keep last year's half-promise and take me to another dance!

"Is it true," asked Christopher, "that Sally-Anne doesn't have to go to your Dad's this year?"

Ella-Jane kicked a bookcase. "Whether she goes or stays away, Cressida will be certain to decide that we guessed wrong. She'll complain to the Wizengamot either way."

"And that will cost money!" interrupted Jeremy sharply. "So how about you two unpack that new crate of books without complaining and hope some customer comes in to buy them all?"

After Christmas, my sisters went to Liverpool as usual, but I only knelt by Mum's hearth and called for Dad.

"Sally-Anne! Aren't you coming to stay with us this year?"

"Dad, I don't know what to do. Cressida told me not to come back to your house."

"What? Oh, surely not. I can't imagine she would mean a thing like that! Sally-Anne, if you've had a run-in with Cressida, perhaps you'd be better off keeping away from her until you've both cooled off a little. You know I won't make trouble about it."

"Dad, I know *you* won't fuss. But what if ?" This was really awkward. "Dad, what if Cressida changes her mind or forgets what she said and complains that I broke access?"

"Oh, I'm sure she wouldn't do that," said Dad, glancing down towards the coals. "I know she has a fiery temper, but you must have noticed by now that she has a heart of gold."

I didn't trust myself to say what I really thought about Cressida and gold, so I just said, "Hope to see you soon, Dad. To be honest, Mum still needs me in her bookshop. Happy New Year!"

* * * * *

The bookshop was what I did every day for the rest of the Christmas holidays and then every second or third weekend of the spring term. At times it seemed painfully little, but Mum assured me she was grateful, and I assured her that I was still finishing all my homework. The truth was that I sometimes felt there was too little homework. There were great stretches of time at Hogwarts especially when I stayed there for the weekend when I was tempted to brood: about Terry, about Dad, about Mum, about

Christopher, about money...

If I caught myself brooding, I would do piano practice. But music was an area where students had to be careful. While solo piano practice was allowed, Professor Umbridge absolutely forbade group jam sessions. In fact, Professor Umbridge was reducing Hogwarts to a very unhappy school. The teachers were unhappy because she inspected their lessons, and there were rumours that some of them were going to be sacked.

"Quidditch is no fun when she controls it," complained Zacharias.

"It's difficult to ask a question in class," said Ernie, "when teachers have to be so careful about not discussing anything that might not be related to lessons."

She even discouraged discussing the newspaper. She gave Stephen detention for reading a *Daily Prophet* article about Cornelius Fudge, even though poor, naïve Stephen was only remarking that he did not understand what he was reading. He returned from Umbridge's detention with a swollen right hand, and Morag MacDougal burst into tears when she saw it.

Late in February, Umbridge made up yet another new school rule that no one was allowed to read *The Quibbler*.

"What *is* this quibble thing?" asked Sophie.

"A sensational, pulpy tabloid newspaper," Megan explained to her. "The last edition I saw, some wizard had claimed to fly his broomstick to the moon. No person interested in knowing the real news would *want* to read it. But it's great fun now and then!"

"If Umbridge 'as suddenly taken a dislike to it," said Sophie, "could the latest issue be saying something worthwhile?"

"Only one way to find out, isn't it?" said Megan. "Wayne! Can you hand over your copy of *The Quibbler*?"

"Fat chance that I'd rread that sad rrubbish!" said Wayne facetiously as he handed over a roll of blank paper. "Wait, it's charmed *Licentio Margarritae!* Keep it; I've seen all I do need to read."

Megan's dark eyes grew as round as cauldrons as she scanned down the blank page.

"Does it *say* owt?" asked Sophie.

"What? Oh, it's charmed to look blank to unauthorised people. What was that spell again? *Licentio Sofiae et Sarae!* Can you see it now?"

Black and red letters sprang into our line of vision; I didn't understand how we hadn't spotted them earlier. Across a grinning portrait of Harry Potter, a red headline screeched:

HARRY POTTER SPEAKS OUT AT LAST:

THE TRUTH ABOUT HE WHO MUST NOT BE NAMED

AND THE NIGHT I SAW HIM RETURN.

We soaked in the words. According to *The Quibbler*, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had returned last June—eight months ago. He had plundered a grave, ordered a minion to mutilate himself and assaulted Harry Potter as part of the Dark spell that had resuscitated him. He had murdered Cedric Diggory and tried to murder Harry Potter. He had summoned a gang of Death Eaters, and Harry Potter claimed to know their names: Lucius Malfoy, Valerian Crabbe, Gordius Goyle, Titus Nott, Walden Macnair, Augustus Rookwood, Cynbal Avery...

"Do you think Harry Potter's telling the truth?" asked Megan.

"E inn't *lying*," said Sophie.

"But..." I said slowly. "Harry couldn't be mistaken about anything as detailed and specific as this. You can make a mistake about a dream or something you only half-saw or something that someone else told you. But not about something you saw for yourself in that much detail."

Megan made a grab for the newssheet. "So do you think this is the *truth*?"

"I suppose it could all be a total fiction," said Sophie. "It's possible that this Madam Skeeter is the one 'oo's lying—that she never interviewed 'Arry at all."

But none of us believed that; Harry was making no attempt to deny the interview.

"Do you *want* You-Know-Who to be back?" demanded Megan.

"What does *wanting* 'ave to do with it?" asked Sophie. "We should think about whether our families are safe."

I shivered. "It looks as if they aren't safe. But I don't see what we *can* do about it. We're still at school. There isn't anything we could do to fight off a powerful Dark wizard."

* * * * *

Things at school were bad enough because Professor Umbridge was continuing her campaign to make the whole world miserable. She sacked poor, silly Professor Trelawney and she was rude and critical to kindly, blundering Hagrid. Detentions increased, and Filch cackled about his hopes of reintroducing "real" punishments. Then in the final week of term, Umbridge manipulated things so that she replaced Dumbledore as head teacher!

"How did the munting old hag *manage* et?" asked Wayne. "She couldn't have convinced them that *Dumbledorre* was incompetent or corrupt, isn't it?"

"Don't assume she needed a *just* cause," said Megan.

"Or even a believable one," said Sophie.

"Where *is* Dumbledore?" wondered Stephen. "Professor Trelawney still lives up in her tower, but Dumbledore has simply... gone!"

Professor Umbridge selected a coterie of her favourite students (mainly Slytherins) to be her spies. She didn't call them spies, of course: she called them the "Inquisitorial Squad". But Justin told us that the Inquisition had been the name of a gang of Spanish bullies who had spied on ordinary people, hoping to find excuses to torture them to death. We all thought it was a very good name for Umbridge's pets. Malfoy reported Justin for a uniform infraction on the first day, and Justin spent all evening in one of those unspeakable detentions. The next day, Millicent Bulstrode reported Hannah for patrolling the corridors after hours. Since Hannah was on legitimate prefect duty, she was "only" given a dungeon-detention with Snape, but a misconduct was still recorded on her annual report.

Then Ursula reported Ella-Jane for drawing a caricature of "Umbitch" on the toilet walls. Ella-Jane burst out of Umbridge's office at dinner time with both hands swollen. Scratched in dried blood on the back of each hand was the slogan: "I must respect my elders."

"Ella-Jane, what did she *do* to you? How do those detentions work?"

"Never mind!" Ella-Jane made a brave imitation of suppressing a sob. "She'll never do it again. I'll *make sure* of it. Once all the parents know about this, her career will be *finished*."

Ella-Jane pelted off down the corridor and hammered on Professor McGonagall's office door. McGonagall seemed quite sympathetic to Ella-Jane's story, but all she said was: "I can only advise you, Miss Perks, to keep your mind on your studies. It's most unwise to insult people deliberately."

I couldn't meet Professor McGonagall's eye; I might have guessed that she, Sprout and Flitwick were all powerless before the might of the Ministry's High Inquisitor.

Ella-Jane was not deterred. "Then let me use your fireplace, Professor. I'm going to tell my parents."

"Miss Perks, I'm sure you know that the fireplaces are being watched."

"I'm going to Floo my parents anyway." Ella-Jane marched right into the office and grabbed a handful of Floo powder. Professor McGonagall shrugged and allowed her to get on with it.

Dad sounded sympathetic. "Oh, come, the Hogwarts staff must know that this kind of brutality isn't on! Today's the last day of term, isn't it? When you come home tomorrow, we'll report it to the Aurors."

"Aurors are no good. They obey the Wizengamot, and the Wizengamot lets Umbitch do anything."

"Well, we'll give it a try. Now, about the holidays... Is your Mum still busy in her shop? It might be a good idea if Sally-Anne went to help her. Cressida says we're rather busy this Easter and can't afford the luxury of too many bodies in the house."

A lump swelled in my throat as Dad winked at me and then vanished from the fireplace. I hardly saw as Ella-Jane threw a second handful of McGonagall's Floo powder into the fire and called for Mum.

Mum was a little less sympathetic, but more helpful. "Ella-Jane, what *possessed* you to be so defiant towards that horrible woman? No, of course she shouldn't have hexed you like that, but drawing rude pictures was *asking* for trouble. Next time you face an injustice, how about you try the kind of negotiation that actually has a reasonable chance of improving the situation instead of just making the spiteful person angrier? Yes, yes, I'll come up to Hogwarts and demand her side of the story. No, you don't have to go back to school if we can't sort it out..."

So once again, I spent the whole holiday with Mum. She did go up to Hogwarts to reason with Professor Umbridge, but the "reasonable negotiation" was not a success.

"She was utterly intractable!" Mum complained. "She said that students who dislike punishments ought to be careful to behave well. When I questioned the legality of her methods, she waved around some Wizengamot dispensation that apparently gives her the right to do whatever she likes, and her ears were completely closed to anything I could say about proportion. Sally-Anne, I was really frightened for the three of you."

My heart leapt with hope as I turned over the cod filets. "Mum, would it be better if we *didn't* go back to Hogwarts?"

"I told Professor Umbridge I was removing you, but she *laughed* at me and claimed that wizarding law requires children under sixteen to be at school. When I pointed out that 'school' need not mean 'Hogwarts', she gave that stupid simper and told me, 'Once at Hogwarts, always at Hogwarts. If any Sorted child leaves my tender care at Hogwarts before her O.W.L. exams, you may be sure I'll send the Snatchers around.' Heaven knows who or what these *Snatchers* might be; I didn't wait to find out!"

I stirred the cheese sauce and poured it into the serving jug. "Mum... Do you think the Snatchers could be Death Eater-type people?"

"Whatever makes you say that, Sally-Anne?"

"There are rumours at school that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back. Umbitch punishes people who talk about it, but the rumours don't go away."

Mum looked even wearier. "Yes, I've heard the rumours. I lie awake at night, worrying about what would happen to Raymond, the boys and my mother if it turned out to be true. But no one ever offers any proof."

"Well, these Snatchers..."

Mum sighed and pulled the plates out of the cupboard. "Sally-Anne, it makes no difference whether they are Death Eaters or just Ministry busybodies. The point is that you girls have to return to Hogwarts and make the best of the bad situation. But if the worst is true... if You-Know-Who *is* back... there's nothing we can do about it. The best way we can protect the Muggles in our family is to keep a low profile and stay out of trouble. Just concentrate on your studies... and try to take care of your sisters."

Back to the Kitchen

Chapter 12 of 14

When she had done her work, she used to go to the chimney corner and sit down there in the cinders and ashes.
(Grimm)

The poor girl bore it all patiently and dared not tell her father, who would have scolded her, for his wife governed him entirely. (Perrault)

CHAPTER TWELVE

Back to the Kitchen

My ears seemed to be turning around on hinges and the drums were taut with pain. The swishing noise in my head was drowning out the sound of Professor Umbitch telling us to turn to chapter thirty-one without talking. I dared not look at Sophie, whose hands were pressed to the sides of her head.

Just when the battering against my eardrums was unbearable, when Hannah was almost squeaking with pain, there was a deafening *POP!* that the whole Defence class must have heard, and warm pus gushed out of both my ears.

It was bright purple and it splashed onto Slinkhard's boring textbook, leaving fluorescent stains. It kept on pouring out like purple soup, gill after gill of it, until I felt guilty for the mess I was making of the Hogwarts desk.

"Professor Umbridge!" Megan's hand had shot into the air, so that purple pus was pouring from her ear to her sleeve. "Professor, I feel sick! I need to leave at once!"

Hannah and Sophie jumped to their feet without awaiting permission. "We're making a mess, Professor! We need to go!"

Umbitch frowned and pointed her tiny wand at us. "I am not allowing this! You will resume your seats!"

"Sorry, Professor!" said Susan, clapping a handkerchief to her own purple ears. "Let's go!"

I followed Susan to the door, while Umbitch shrieked, "Detention, all five of you! You're in detention!"

Once we were out in the corridor, Megan handed out the Anti-Pastilles, although we could hardly swallow them for giggling. The swimming moisture in my ears abruptly dried, and my head felt normal again.

"*Tergeo*," I said, to clear up the mess. "Do we have to attend that detention?"

"Of course not," said Sophie. "She can't *make* us."

"Besides, she won't even remember our little prank," said Megan. "My sister's class has a more exciting plan for this afternoon a plan that involves Cornish Pixies."

We ran downstairs, on the way narrowly escaping a shower of brass clankers thrown by Peeves.

"Megan, 'oo gave yer them Pus-Pouring Pastilles?" asked Sophie.

"My brother gave me a new Skiving Snackbox. He works in Diagon Alley so he can visit Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes at any time."

"What shall we do to Umbitch tomorrow?" I asked. It felt wonderful to *bedoing* something about that ghastly woman.

Hannah and Susan exchanged a glance.

"What?" I demanded.

Hannah and Susan had returned to us as mysteriously as they had left; once again, the five of us were always together. It annoyed me to see any sign that the two of them still shared some kind of secret that excluded the rest of us.

"Yes, what?" echoed Megan.

"I expect we can think of a new trick," said Susan. "But that isn't really the point, is it?"

"What inn't?" asked Sophie. "Surely yer want to get rid of Umbitch!"

"Of course we want her to go," said Hannah. There she went again, speaking for the two of them! "But she's well small fry, isn't she?"

"*Small fry*?" I exclaimed in dismay. "After what she did to Dumbledore? To Trelawney? To the students in her appalling detentions? *Ta*ll of us, in the way she destroys the Hogwarts culture?"

"It's all bad, and we want her to go," said Susan calmly. "But she'll definitely go, since Defence teachers never last long around here. After she's gone, though, we'll still have to deal with You-Know-Who."

"Oh," said Megan. "So do you think do you*really* think that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back?"

"Of course he is," said Hannah. "You don't think Harry's gone mad, do you?"

"That's what Terry Boot told me," I remembered. "That homework club of Ron Weasley's... Did that have something to do with You-Know-Who?"

"Yes," said Susan. "Although it was actually more Harry's club than Ron's. We all decided that it made no sense at all to have You-Know-Who back among us and not be ready for him!"

So Hannah and Susan were members of this mysterious club, and that was their secret! "What do you *do* at this club?" I asked.

"Nothing," said Susan glumly. "Umbitch found out about it, so we don't meet any more."

"Oh." I opened my Herbology textbook. Something seemed to shimmer in my brain, but I pushed it away; it was probably just the remains of the Pus-Pouring Pastille. "Let's revise chapter eight."

It would only hurt Susan's feelings if I told her that she had just confirmed my own thoughts. However much I hated the news that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was back, what on earth could a group of teenagers do to fight him? It sounded as if Harry's friends hadn't even managed to stand up to a "small fry" enemy like Professor Umbitch.

* * * * *

On the first day of June, a white owl dropped a message on my breakfast plate.

Dear Sally-Anne,

Xavier coaxed this cute avian out of us in Diagon Alley last week. Her name is Snowflake and we're all quite in love with her!

Well, we need your help. Don't worry; it isn't too serious. But Xavier's string of illnesses has finally turned into full-blown spattergroit, and he is feeling miserable. Cressida is frantic, as work doesn't really allow her to take time off. Her shop has only just got going, and if she leaves it at this stage, everything

we've worked for will collapse.

We're wondering if you could come home for a couple of weeks. We really need someone to keep house and nurse Xavier, but of course we can't ask Ursula or Cecilia so close to their exams...

Go to Dad's house! And apparently at Cressida's request!

I knew what Mum would say. "But Sally-Anne's O.W.L.s are at the same time as Cecilia's. She can't possibly leave Hogwarts during her revision period. I'd rather come and nurse Xavier myself!"

I decided at once not to tell Mum. I would fit my revision in somehow, but I couldn't afford to lose this chance: ~~had~~ to go to Dad's house and become a member of his family again.

Professor Sprout was displeased too, but teachers rarely refused a request from parents. "I just hope your parents do give you some revision time," she said as she signed my leave of absence permit.

"They will!" I promised untruthfully. "They want me to do well in the O.W.L.s."

What Cressida actually said when I arrived in her grate was, "There you are at last! You can start by making up this prescription from Bobbin's and while you're at it, you can bring back the groceries from Diagon Alley."

Dad hugged me and seemed on the point of saying he was glad I was there. But Cressida interrupted.

"Xavier is not to be left alone in the house, so you'll need to run all the errands while Flavian or I is home. Then you can make a start on the cooking, but don't forget to leave yourself time for the laundry. Xavier will need a lavender-oil sponge-bath at six o' clock."

Xavier was lying fretfully in bed. He complained that he was too hot, but he accepted the sponge-bath without trying to be rude to me.

"It's boring being sick," he grumbled. "Mummy and Daddy are always busy now they have this shop. Will you take me to Knockturn Alley to visit their shop, Sally-Anne?"

Knockturn Alley? I stifled my gasp of horror. "Of course not. You can't go anywhere until you're well again."

"Oh. Are you going to look after me?"

"I'll read you a story." I picked up *The Treasure-Seekers*, which Molly-Rose had left behind years ago and which no one had opened since. "This is about Muggle children. You need to listen out for the joke, because the boy telling the story isn't as clever as he thinks he is."

"Everyone knows that Muggles are berks." Xavier shifted on his pillows without saying that he didn't want the story, so I began to read.

By the end of the chapter, Xavier had forgotten to feel sorry for himself, although he remembered again when I closed the book. He was annoyed that I had to serve dinner, but he didn't criticise me. In fact, without Ursula and Cecilia around to remind him how bossy and selfish I was, he seemed quite glad of my company.

I knew this because Xavier demanded a *great* deal of my company. It took us only two days to finish *The Treasure-Seekers*, by which time we had also worn out the charms on a pack of Exploding Snap cards and exhausted five of the craft kits left over from Cecilia's childhood collection. I was rather surprised that Xavier wanted to make paper fairies and glass jewellery, but he was very proud of his handiwork.

"Costume is important," he told me firmly. "When I grow up, I want to be an actor like Daddy. Let's make the papier mâché insects next time."

Fortunately Xavier spent long tracts of the day sleeping off his illness, so there was still time to manage the housework. It wasn't too hard to fit the cooking and laundry around Xavier's sleep. What drained away my spare time was the cleaning.

Cressida had been a reasonably efficient housewife back in the days when she had wanted to impress her own mother and her gaggle of pure-blood friends and when she had been at home two or three days a week. Now that she spent sixty hours a week in her mysterious shop, she did *nothing* around the house. Dad spent perhaps thirty hours helping in the shop, but he did very little at home, because it wasn't a husband's job to do housework. So I was presented with a house that had spiders in the bath, mud-stains on the carpets and mould in the froster-box. There were clothes and parchments all over the place, exactly as Jeremy had described the Buftons' house; dirty cooking pots always overflowed in the kitchen sink; and no one ever cleaned up after Snowflake.

I bought all Mum's favourite household cleaners in Diagon Alley and I used all her best household charms (because who would know that no adults were home?). By the end of the third day, the house was clean. This gave Cressida plenty of new complaints.

"Sally-Anne, where did you put the apothecary's bill?"

"I paid it yesterday, Cressida."

"Then why in Salazar's name didn't you file the receipt in the second left-hand drawer? Oh, *where* is my black silk petticoat?"

"I've dry-cleaned it, Cressida. It's in your bedroom chest."

"You had no business to put it in the chest when it belongs in the wardrobe! Sally-Anne, what's that *smell*? There all over the occasional tables and mantelpiece."

"It's beeswax polish, Cressida."

"You've used *what*? I never waste my Sickles on that trash! We use linseed polish in this house. You should have asked if you weren't sure. Put that book away; you don't have time for reading."

I grabbed the book, but not before Cressida had seen the title: *Intermediate Transfiguration*.

"You don't have time for book-learning," she repeated. "Your priority is nursing your sick brother while your parents earn the money to feed you."

Dad had just walked in so I was brave enough to remind them both, "It's only a few days until my O.W.L.s, so I need to fit in some revision."

"Liar!" hissed Cressida. "You do *not* have O.W.L.s this month. Don't you remember, Flavian? Professor Sprout reported that Sally-Anne's work was only fourteen Sickles to the Galleon and she would have to delay her exams."

That was rubbish! No one had suggested that Cecilia delay her exams, even though she admitted that she only expected to pass three of them.

"Oh. That's right." Dad chanced a glance at Cressida, as if he was not quite certain which of us was telling the truth. "I expect Sally-Anne does have some homework, though. Since Xavier's asleep, why don't we test her on Transfiguration?"

"Because homework is not her priority right now!" Cressida snapped. "If there is one thing that I've tried to impress ~~on~~*all* our children, Flavian, it's family values. Family *must* come first. I'm amazed that Sally-Anne still questions that!"

So I knew that Cressida did not want me to sit my O.W.L.s. As she was determined not to let me do better than Cecilia, she would keep me in her house until the exams were over. It had nothing to do with Xavier's illness.

* * * * *

Two days later, Dad sat down at the kitchen table while I was laundering the curtains.

"Let's have a cup of tea," he said. "Listen, Sally-Anne. I'm sorry Cressida got mixed up about your exams. She did have a chat with Professor Sprout about your progress last Easter and she really did come away with the impression that your O.W.L.s had been postponed."

I wasn't sure what to say, so I just rubbed at a stain with Bundimun secretion.

"I've checked it up with your mother, and Julia told me that was ~~er~~ a mistake. So we'll try to get you back to Hogwarts if we can." He poured the tea.

"Dad, how long do you think Xavier will be ill? His spots look worse, not better."

"That's the way it is with spattergroit. The Healer has predicted another three weeks in bed but no long-term damage."

"Dad, I don't *have* three weeks. The exams start in just ten days! Are you *sure* I'll be back at Hogwarts by then?"

Dad stirred in the sugar and didn't look at me. "Nearly sure. But just say we can't spare you by that time... Well, it's no big deal, is it? You can re-sit your O.W.L.s next year. And many a pretty witch has survived with no O.W.L.s at all."

"Dad!" I could feel the colour draining from my face. Not every successful wizard was fully qualified; those with "alternative" talents often managed quite well without N.E.W.T.s. But it was impossible to succeed in a real career without a single O.W.L. I had a good chance of passing all nine exams if only I could finish my revision; and I didn't want to spend another year at Hogwarts when Mum needed me to be at home with her *now*.

"It's true," he repeated. "The right wizard won't care whether you're *requalified* to be his wife; he'll love you for yourself. And you still play the piano, don't you? I'd say you could make a career out of that. I could take you round the Muggle pubs to accompany my singing."

But I didn't want to spend the rest of my life tinkling on pub pianos. I wanted a proper job, one that provided a necessary service to the community, and I wanted proper qualifications on a real O.W.L. certificate. Dad *must* see how important that was.

Before I could put any of this into words, a wail from upstairs called, "Sally-Anne!"

We both raced upstairs to find out what Xavier wanted.

* * * * *

To his credit, Dad did try to sneak around Cressida. She was not home very much (although there were two further occasions when she snapped at me to put a textbook away), and whenever Dad was home without her, he shared caring for Xavier. Since the house was now tidy, I did manage to study for three or four hours a day, which pleased Dad; but I could imagine that Ernie and Susan, safe at Hogwarts, were managing double that amount!

My real problem was not whether I could pass the exams, but whether I would have a chance to sit them at all. The fireplace was blocked whenever Cressida was out, so "running away" was not an option, even if I could be cruel enough to abandon Xavier. Xavier was neither better nor worse, so I wondered if Cressida's mother would be willing to come and nurse him.

"I doubt it," said Dad absently. "Madam Honeysmooch has a full-time job, you know. The truth is, Sally-Anne, that Cressida's heart is set on you. She knows you're the best nurse and housekeeper in the whole family and she really appreciates your talents."

I wondered what Cressida had really said. But pleading that Xavier was better, or that someone else could nurse him, would not help my case in the slightest.

I would have to sneak out under Cressida's nose *somehow*.

On Sunday evening, I packed my trunk with my school books neatly stacked at the top, said goodbye to a drowsy Xavier and crept downstairs. I placed a note to Dad on the kitchen table and reached for the Floo jar.

Empty!

But it had been full this morning, so Cressida must have interfered. I shook at the jar, hoping there was enough around the edges to make the trip to Hogsmeade.

"Don't bother." Cressida was suddenly looming in the kitchen door. "The Floo is staying blocked. Flavian knows you might try to avoid your responsibilities, so we're prepared."

I turned around, although there was no point. My stepmother had a glittering triumph in her eyes. Even if she never saw me again, she would always know she had won this final, sweet victory, for she could destroy my future and still make Dad believe she had done it all for my own good.

"Say something!" she snapped.

"Yes, Cressida."

For some reason, that was enough.

After she had flounced out, I dropped down at the kitchen table, more defeated than I had felt on the night of the Yule Ball. I did not try to suppress the tears that welled up in my eyes. I thought of Mum, who couldn't do anything now that she had annoyed Professor Umbitch. I thought wildly of Terry and prayed desperately to his God. I thought of Aunt Odette, who was now on tour in Germany and would certainly not bail me out this time. I thought of Dad and tried to believe that he still intended to be a good father.

I thought of Xavier and wondered what it really meant to put family first.

* * * * *

Early next morning, a Ministry owl swooped through the kitchen window and dropped a scroll into Cressida's breakfast plate. She broke the seal, scanned the message and

turned deathly pale.

"Flavian, he says he's coming here. *Today!*"

Dad glanced lazily at the scroll. "If it upsets you, then don't be home. Sally-Anne can give your excuses."

"No!" Cressida's gasp was half-strangled. "I'm not having her poking her grubby fingers into... Sally-Anne!"

I looked up from the teapot, hardly daring to breathe.

"Sally-Anne, I want you out of this house before the clock strikes nine!"

Dad looked worried. "Love, are you sure that Xavier...?"

"Claptrap! Xavier will be fine! Sally-Anne, organise Xavier and bring him through the Floo to my parents' house. Oh..*Accio*." The spare packet of Floo powder sailed down from wherever she had hidden it, and she pointed her wand at the fireplace. "*Licentio Sarae et Zaviera*. Then make yourself scarce." Cressida flung her letter onto the floor and Disapparated.

I could not imagine which mysterious person was having such a powerful effect on my stepmother, but the situation evidently made sense to Dad. He shrugged, picked up the letter, smiled at me apologetically and Disapparated after her.

It was a quarter to nine. If I hurried with Xavier, it was still *just* possible that I could arrive at Hogwarts in time for today's Charms exam. I washed the dishes (using magic because this was an emergency) and flew upstairs to rouse Xavier.

He was cross and spotty. "I don't *want* to go to Granny's house! The Mediwitch said I was to stay in bed!"

"You can go back to bed at Granny's, but we can't leave you all alone in the house. Here, put on your dressing-gown. I'm taking you through the Floo... *Ohw/ho's* banging on the door at this time?"

"Perhaps it's the Muggle postman." Xavier's face brightened. "Do you think he has a present for me, Sally-Anne?"

"Never mind, your mother said I was to bring you quickly." I grabbed Xavier's arm as he swayed down the stairs, but he shook me off impatiently and, at a second thundering rap at the front door, he acted on instinct and raced forward to answer it.

He stopped dead in his tracks at the sight of the tall, muscular wizard with black, curly hair who was frowning from the front porch.

"It's Mr Runcorn! Sally-Anne, it's Ursula and Cecilia's Dad!"

I hardly needed to be told because the grim-faced visitor looked so much like Ursula. So the person who was so terrifying Cressida was her ex-husband!

"Where's Cressida?" the stranger demanded.

"Gone out, Mr Runcorn. Can I help?"

"Let me in." He shoved past us in the narrow hall. "You're that half-blood brat, aren't you? You can make yourself useful go and fetch my daughters' possessions."

Xavier jumped back, clinging to my hand and communicating so much terror that I most absurdly found myself sympathising with Cressida. She had told me not to involve myself with this situation. But when I considered the possibility of defying Mr Runcorn, I felt my feet welding to the floor while cold tingles ran down my spine.

He impatiently rustled a cream-coloured parchment under my nose. "Look! I have a Wizengamot custody ruling! Cressida's disgusting little shop makes her an unfit guardian, and my daughters are moving in with me. So you can pack the young ladies' trunks and bring them downstairs."

This was ridiculous. Ursula was already eighteen, so there couldn't possibly be a Wizengamot custody ruling about her. "We can't help you today, Mr Runcorn," I said, "for we are just about to go out. Perhaps you "

"Zip it!" He pointed his wand at me, and something silver sparked out of it. Although it was not a real spell, Xavier shrieked. "Miss Perks, do you understand who I am? I am a very important employee at the Ministry of Magic and I speak to Minister Fudge every day. Whereas your father is a no-mark and your mother is an outright Muggle. Since you've been using under-age magic in this house, you would be very well advised to do exactly as I instruct you."

I didn't know whether he was deliberately lying about Mum or whether it was Cressida who had lied to him. How many more lies were being packed into his story? Xavier whimpered as my hand tightened around his, and I edged around the stairs towards the kitchen. It seemed outrageous to leave a man like Runcorn to rampage through Dad's house, but I knew I had to get Xavier away from him.

"Your name is Perks, isn't it?" sneered Mr Runcorn. "That isn't a name that Fudge will recognise. If I say you're a Muggle-born, that is how the Ministry will perceive you. So read the signs of the times, Miss Perks. Read the newspapers. When I tell a Mudblood "

This was too much! An image of Terry exploded in my mind as I pushed Xavier behind me and declared, "We're leaving!"

"Ha!" Mr Runcorn pointed his wand at the stairs and ordered, '*Reducto*!'

The six lowest steps crumbled into dust. Xavier whimpered, and I pushed him backwards another couple of steps.

"*That* is what I do to Mudbloods or equivalent who disobey their betters. Now are you going to show me where Ursula and Cecilia keep their possessions?"

"Upstairs," I admitted.

Mr Runcorn stared at me for a second. Then he turned back to the stairs to repair them.

In that split second, I pushed Xavier beyond the stairs, through the kitchen door and into the fireplace. Then I grabbed a handful of Floo powder, jumped in beside him, and cried, "Lothario Honeysmooch's house!"

The last thing we saw through the emerald flames was the furious face of Albert Runcorn at the kitchen door.

Known by a Shoe

Chapter 13 of 14

The king's son had it proclaimed, by sound of trumpet, that he would marry her whose foot this slipper would just fit. They began to try it on the princesses, then the duchesses and all the court, but in vain; it was brought to the two sisters, who did all they possibly could to force their foot into the slipper, but they did not succeed... He had Cinderella sit down, and, putting the slipper to her foot, he found that it went on very easily, fitting her as if it had been made of wax. (Perrault)

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Known by a Shoe

I was late for the exam, of course. After I had delivered Xavier to Cressida, made Dad understand that he had an intruder in his house but *thatdould not* spare the time to give evidence to the Aurors, and negotiated with Madam Honeysmooch to use her Floo again, I still had to run all the way from Hogsmeade to Hogwarts. My heart was hammering against my ribs and I was in pain from trying to breathe evenly as I read the notice on the door to the Great Hall:

SILENCE

Examination in Progress.

I turned the doorknob as slowly as I could, trying to force away the image of Albert Runcorn destroying Dad's stairs, and saw my seventy-eight classmates geometrically arranged in rows, all of them identically frowning at the exam booklets on their desks.

Professor Flitwick flew down the hall to meet me. "Come in, Miss Perks!" he whispered. "Your mother owled to explain that you might be delayed. I'm so glad that you've made it anyway! Sit down here..." He indicated the lone empty desk, directly behind Blaise Zabini, with the only unopened exam scroll. "And take this quill. I'm sorry the exam board won't let you make up the time you've missed, but do your best anyway. Good luck!"

Still gasping to draw breath, I opened the scroll and saw that the first question was about *Wingardium Leviosa*. I could pass this exam! I forced myself to stop worrying about what might happen to Cecilia and began to write.

I didn't quite finish the paper, but I felt sure that I had at least managed an Acceptable, which was more than I had dared to hope yesterday! However, my stomach was churning and I didn't want any lunch. I fled up two flights of stairs and down a corridor, hardly knowing where I wanted to go until I flung open the archaic door to the school chapel. I knew I would not be disturbed in here; as chapel had been optional since 1692, very few students still chose to enter. Alone on the altar steps, surrounded by the Gothic arches and Victorian stained-glass windows, I sobbed helplessly without understanding what the problem was.

That man!

Albert Runcorn *hated* Muggle-borns. He would slaughter someone like Terry as soon as look at him. He even despised commonplace half-bloods like me. He assumed the Ministry was all-powerful and that he, the Ministry official, could treat other people in any way he liked.

Had Albert divorced Cressida because of her infidelity or because of her Squib grandfather? Had Cressida been unfaithful to Albert because she loved Dad or had she simply fallen into the arms of the nearest man *after* Albert had rejected her? Cressida was snobbish and self-centred, but she only abused people when there was a definite benefit to herself. I couldn't imagine her committing an ideological murder: she would be too busy adjusting her make-up.

But I could imagine Albert Runcorn committing murder.

Mr Runcorn did not seem to know that You-Know-Who was back. But how long would that last? Everyone at Hogwarts now assumed that Harry Potter's story was true. It was only a matter of time before the Ministry of Magic faced reality. What would Mr Runcorn do once he knew that a powerful Dark wizard was supporting his hatred?

In the last war, Muggles had been slaughtered for fun. People like Raymond, Jeremy, Christopher, Grandma Flourish and Grandpa Perks would all be helpless. Muggle-borns like Sophie would be special targets far more hated than mere Muggles and a schoolgirl would have no hope against an institution of fully-qualified wizards. I myself would be powerless if a man like Runcorn turned against me. If he decided that I was in his way, I would probably vanish.

No one was safe.

Then, all unbidden, an image of Terry floated into my mind. Terry was a Muggle-born and Terry was independent enough to annoy a pitiless bureaucracy. Yet Terry was far safer than Sophie or me.

Terry had joined Harry Potter's Defence club. Harry had formed the club *because* He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was back; and whatever might help an ordinary wizard against a powerfully evil one, Harry Potter was as likely as anyone to know about it. Terry was as well-prepared as any of us to face evil magic.

If I had learned some Defence, I too might know what to do about Albert Runcorn and worse.

I dried my tears and drew a deep breath, forcing myself to be calm because I knew I had something to say to God. I didn't understand why I was still trembling. It wasn't fear at least, not fear of Dark magic.

"I've always tried to be a good person," I told God. I felt silly; the silent words were running away from me until I wondered if God had really heard. I tried again, this time in the lowest whisper. "I think You know that. My family has a few problems, but I've always tried to hold us together. I've helped Mum, looked after my sisters, and put up with any amount of rubbish to try to make this stepfamily thing work."

Despite the roses and candles on the altar, God seemed a very long way off. I ploughed on. "But I realise I've made a mistake, God. I've been behaving as if family is the *only* thing that matters. I haven't thought about the wider community at all."

Suddenly I lost control of the dialogue. Overwhelming images of my family life were flooding out my mind: showing off my cooking; arranging a place to put every item in the house; organising my sisters to follow my tidy-up plan; nursing Xavier; chasing lawyers for Christopher; tidying away Ella-Jane's mischief to protect her from Cressida; calculating Mum's budget... Sally-Anne needed an orderly environment. Sally-Anne needed to be competent. Sally-Anne needed everyone to need her.

How much of this had been about helping my family? And how much had simply been *forme*?

Had I ever really put "family first" at all?

I had used family (or *me*) as an excuse to avoid thinking about Lord Voldemort. I had ignored the signs of the times and pretended that I had no duty to anyone or anything outside my family (*me*). I had a sharp vision of Terry Boot's blue eyes, and almost heard him saying, "You don't do homework every evening, do you?"

Family wasn't the real reason I had ignored my civic responsibilities.

The real reason was *me*.

I was frightened of Voldemort being back, so terrified that I had refused to believe it. Even after I couldn't help knowing that Harry Potter was right, that Voldemort really was back, I had made myself believe that there was nothing I could do about it. I had thought non-stop about family (*me*) so that I didn't have to think about a defence strategy.

Yet a defence strategy was one thing that really would help the Muggles in my family.

I averted my eyes from the dazzle of sunlight through the stained glass. I couldn't look at anything. I had entered the chapel to talk to God, for I had always assumed that God was love and He listened to decent people. But I knew now that I had been so self-centred and self-deceived for so long that He couldn't be pleased with me. How would I ever dare speak to God again?

In the deafening silence of my own empty mind, a memory stirred, the memory of a confident voice reading archaic words.

"I said, 'I will confess

my transgressions to the LORD.'

Then Thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin.."

My heart stopped. No matter how bad the truth about myself might be, hiding from that truth was even worse. After I had faced up to it, God would certainly listen.

No wonder Terry laughed so much!

"I'm sorry," I said out loud. "This time, I will not let my fears defeat me."

The next second, the chapel door was opening. *Calm down!* I reminded myself. *It won't be the Death Eaters today!* Of course not. It was only Susan.

"*There* you are, Sally-Anne! Hannah and I have been looking for you everywhere. Are you all right? You do look sick."

"I'm better now," I told her. "Susan, why were you looking for me?"

"Did you lose track of time?" She sat down beside me. "We worried when you didn't turn up for the Charms practical. Are you ~~you~~*really* all right?"

"What?" I glanced at my watch, dimly aware that she was right about time. "Susan, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to worry you. What about ~~you~~? Was your prac all right?"

"Mine was fine, although Hannah panicked a bit. They were testing us in alphabetical order, so we two came to look for you as soon as they had finished with us. Sally-Anne, I know you've had a few problems at home, but don't you *want* to have a try at this exam? If you go down now, you might be just on time."

I nodded without knowing what I was saying. Of course I didn't want to miss the exam, so I followed Susan downstairs, across the Entrance Hall and into the ante-room. It was nearly empty. Only Lisa Turpin, Ron Weasley and Blaise Zabini were still waiting, and I only had a second to take my place behind Zabini (he gave me a superior sneer, but Ron offered a thumbs-up, and Lisa smiled sympathetically) before the door opened again to admit Professor McGonagall.

"Miss Turpin, the examiners are ready for you. Weasley... Zabini... Now, Miss Bones, where did you find Miss Perks?"

"She was feeling sick up in the chapel, Professor. But I didn't say a word to her about the exam questions."

Professor McGonagall nodded. "I shall have to cross-check that story before your exam results can be validated, Miss Perks. But for now, you had better enter the Great Hall and go to Professor Marchbanks."

Sliding my wand into my hand, I followed Ron into the hall. The ancient examiner smiled intelligently and said, "Good afternoon, Miss Perks. Let me see your Summoning Charm."

* * * * *

The O.W.L.s were fine after all. There were no more confusing thoughts in my mind. I didn't even think very much about the Death Eaters. I was concentrating completely on my last-minute revision. While I knew I hadn't scored any Outstandings, I was sure I had at least nine Acceptables. As soon as the History of Magic exam was over (deadly dull, but no trick questions), I walked out of Hogwarts and took the Hogsmeade Floo back to Hereford.

Mum couldn't stop hugging me. She was tearful, although she had known for ten days that I had escaped from Cressida.

"I'm sure the Wizengamot would consider her behaviour child abuse!" she said. "It will take time to push the case through, but I think we finally have enough evidence to prevent her ever seeing you again."

"Mum, I think you're more upset than I am. It's all right. I've escaped and I can probably avoid ever going back there. I'm not returning to Hogwarts next year, so I'll have time to meet Dad in public places instead of in his house. And I *will* keep an eye on Ella-Jane and Molly-Rose so that we can act quickly if Cressida does anything to them."

But Mum was still weepy. "First Cressida, then this Umbridge woman, now the Death Eaters! Am I ever going to be able to take care of my family?"

I said, "I'm sure there's something we can do about the Death Eaters."

"What?"

"You-Know-Who is back, Mum. It's useless to deny it. We just have to be ready."

Mum stopped crying. "I do know that really," she said. "Of course he's back. But I don't know what anyone can do about it. I mean, I know I should tighten the security on this house, but it'll cost money and I suppose I was... afraid of admitting that we needed to do it."

For some inexpressible reason, Mum and I suddenly seemed far too alike in all the wrong ways. I had promised God that I would face my fears, but I hadn't expected the first challenge to come from my own Mum! I reminded myself just how alike we were and forced myself to speak gently. "I know you've been busy, Mum, but I'm home now. We can call the Securities people tomorrow, and I'll show them round while you're in the shop."

She nodded. "I'm so sorry to burden you with grown-up problems, Sally-Anne. But that really might be the best way."

"We must also practise defensive spells."

"My parents can lend us some books about that. I know they also have a few about the history of the last war, although I've never bothered to read them. But ~~we~~*should* read them, so that we can recognise Death Eater tactics when we meet them again."

"And we can contact Professor Dumbledore." Suddenly I knew we were on the right track. "Umbitch will be gone by next week, so I expect Dumbledore will return to Hogwarts. If we tell him that we are... on *his* side... he'll tell us what to do. Not only how to protect ourselves, but how to save innocent people and how to stand up to You-Know-Who."

Mum smiled ruefully. "I know Professor Dumbledore used to have a kind of reserve army when I was young," she said. "They saved hundreds of lives and restrained scores of Death Eaters. I'm afraid I never bothered with it because I was too busy following my own ambitions... collecting books for my parents' shop... playing the piano... haunting the theatre... looking for a man who would give me a family..."

"We'll do it differently this time," I said. "We'll put private life on hold while we work out exactly what Dumbledore wants us to do. Oh... there's someone in the Floo."

Although Mum did not light fires in summer, her hearth was nevertheless full of green flames, and soon Cecilia's head appeared in the middle of them.

"Sally-Anne, where *are* you?" she complained. "I've asked *everyone* why you aren't still at school!"

I knelt down and peered into the Slytherin common room. "Hello. Professor Sprout knows that I'm at my mother's house." It would be more tactful not to ask Cecilia about her exams, so I tried, "How is Xavier?"

"Flavian owed this morning to say he's getting better. But never mind Xavier." She giggled self-consciously. "Do you know what's happened *to*me? I have a boyfriend!"

She waited for me to ask who it was, so I did.

"Blaise Zabini!" She was giggling so hard that I could hardly make out her words. "There, aren't you jealous? Well *aren't* you? Listen, do you remember the Yule Ball? Blaise asked you to be his partner, and Mummy threatened to marmalise you! But you ended up going with that Muggle-born because Blaise binbagged you and invited me." She giggled again. "But I had already accepted Theodore, so Blaise had to take Daphne. Anyway, Blaise Zabini has finally made up his mind and he loves *me*. So admit it, Sally-Anne. You're jealous! ... Well, *say* something!"

I tried to smile. "I hope you'll be happy. Do you have any special plans for the summer?"

She switched off her giggle. "Sally-Anne Perks, that was *vicious*! You know very well that I'm going to have an abominable summer. I'll be trapped inside Daddy's house, babysitting my snotty little half-sisters and playing dogsbody to Lady Muck my stepmother, and I won't see Mummy or Flavian until Christmas. You shouldn't grudge me my tiny corner of happiness with Blaise. In fact, you should be grateful. Blaise is a very wealthy pure-blood, and now that You-Know-Who is back, we'll need all our pure-blood connections."

"I don't see how connections will protect us against Dark wizards. Surely defensive magic would help us fight "

Cecilia almost choked with rage. "Fight! Defend ourselves! Against *You-Know-Who*? Sally-Anne, you are a *binhead*! The Dark Lord is going to win this war, and the people who'll survive it will be his mates. If you do *one thing* to oppose him if you *dare* put our family in such danger and when I'm so miserable about this awful summer "

Now I was angry too. "If you don't like Mr Runcorn's plans for your summer," I said coldly, "then take some initiative and run away from home. It isn't exactly important compared with the need to fight off the Death Eaters. I will certainly not be befriending You-Know-Who!"

At that moment there was some jostling in the hearth. Someone pushed Cecilia aside with an unceremonious, "It's my turn now, darling!" and I was face to face with Blaise Zabini.

"All this politics," he said, with a slight flutter of his long eyelashes. "It wastes a lovely evening. Sally-Anne, have you perchance lost a shoe?" He opened his palm to display my crystal dancing-shoe.

"Where did you find that?"

"I picked it up ages ago, after some school dance or other. Cecilia's been begging me to make her a present of it, but I've told her we need to find the real owner. And when all's said and done, what's the point of keeping only *one* of the pair? Someone has jinxed this shoe properly. It's too large for Millicent, too small for Pansy, too narrow for Daphne and too wide for Tracey. Ursula nearly broke her toes trying to cram them in, and poor Cecilia ended up with a bleeding heel. *It is* yours, isn't it, Sally-Anne? Good, I'll owl it to you. Cecilia, you don't mind lending Snowflake, do you?"

Cecilia's jealous gasp made it clear that she *did* mind sharing both our brother's owl and her boyfriend's attention.

Zabini grinned triumphantly and vanished from the flames.

There was one last task for the day. I sat down at the kitchen table to write to Terry Boot. I blotted three or four drafts before I worked out what I wanted to say. After that the words flowed easily.

Dear Terry,

I don't expect an answer to this letter. I'm only writing to tell you that you were right. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named obviously is back, and I ought to have realised that. I am so sorry that I did not believe it. Even if I wasn't able to read the signs of the times, I know now that I should have trusted your judgment.

To be honest, I have understood ever since February that I ought to do something about it. I tried to believe that there was nothing I could do, but I was deceiving myself.

My attitude has changed now. I won't be returning to Hogwarts next year, but being outside the safety of school walls actually puts me in a far more strategic position to oppose You-Know-Who. I want you to know that our family is on Professor Dumbledore's side, and we will give him whatever help we can.

Thank you for your right-thinking example. I hope you will be happy.

Best wishes,

Sally-Anne.

By the time I had completed the fair copy, Xavier's owl was swooping through our window, clutching in her talon a sparkle of glass. She dropped it high over the hard floor, and it bounced up into my hand. Yes! Although my foot had grown, my glass shoe still fitted perfectly.

As I tied my letter to Snowflake's claw, I hoped Terry wouldn't think I was demanding his attention. I truly didn't require an answer. I only wanted him to know that he had been the right friend for me at the right time.

We were at war. People were going to die. Neutrality was an illusion, for the only two kinds of people left in the world were those who opposed Voldemort and those who made room for him. Every thoughtless indifference or acquiescence or compliance to Voldemort was an act of support for his agenda. The only people who were truly opposing him were those who resisted him actively.

I might never see Terry again, but it didn't matter. I stood holding the shoe, staring after the white owl's path across the darkening sky, as she bore northwards the news that I had chosen the right side on the war.

Happily Ever After

Chapter 14 of 14

... And they all lived happily ever after. But what does this really mean?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Happily Ever After

Terry received Sally-Anne's letter that evening, several hours before Lord Voldemort's return was publicly acknowledged by Minister Fudge. If Terry did not reply, that was probably because he knew that owl service was insecure – a factor that Sally-Anne only realised later.

Sally-Anne officially spent the year 1996-7 working in her mother's bookshop, and together they did indeed build up a modestly profitable business. The shop provided a convincing front for the family's undercover activities. While Sally-Anne was still not allowed to do magic out of school, her work in the shop gave her mother time to front down Dementors. It became quite well known that the unseasonably cheerful atmosphere that so often invaded the western Midlands was due to a bushy-tailed squirrel Patronus; but the Death Eaters never traced the squirrel to Julia Slater.

This was just as well, for the Slater home was a hive of rebellion. The Order of the Phoenix sometimes had wind of whom the Death Eaters planned to attack next, and nine times in as many months, they whisked a family of Diagon Alley traders into hiding before the Death Eaters arrived. Although the shops were forlornly boarded up, the proprietors found a safe refuge in Sally-Anne's house until they could escape abroad.

Raymond Slater never complained about the risks to his family. "It's all of us against this No-Name-Wizard, whether we're magical or not," he said more than once. "I'm glad we managed to save Mr Hopkins and Madam Bones. Sally-Anne couldn't ever again have looked Wayne or Susan in the eye if we'd refused to do that much."

In the summer of 1997, the Ministry decreed that all school-aged wizards must return to Hogwarts, so Sally-Anne began her N.E.W.T. courses after all. She was now a year behind Hannah, Susan and Megan, but they were always together outside of lessons. As a grim and constant reminder of the war, none of them heard from Sophie, who had been captured by the Snatchers.

Sally-Anne covertly defied the Carrows from the first by refusing to "mean it" when she pretended to cast the Cruciatus curse. When she heard that Neville Longbottom was openly disobeying them, she was one of the first to seek him out and volunteer to join the resuscitated Dumbledore's Army. She was personally responsible for destroying all of Alecto Carrow's third-year teaching notes and she became adept at all manner of Unlocking and Releasing Charms when it came to rescuing victims. But it was her sister Ella-Jane who excelled at sneaking Billywigs and Doxies into Professor Snape's office, while Molly-Rose specialised in daubing seditious graffiti on the walls.

All three Perks sisters were among those who fled to the Room of Requirement in the final few days of Voldemort's rule, and Sally-Anne remained to fight in the Battle of Hogwarts.

After the war, Sophie was released from the Snatchers' dungeon, only to find that the Death Eaters had destroyed her whole family. In a matter of weeks, she married Ernie Macmillan and went to work for Woolman's, the wizarding textile industry. The other girls had an easier time. Susan was able to work for her mother, who returned from exile within days and resumed her architecture business. Megan put in the winning bid for Florean Fortescue's old ice cream parlour and resuscitated it under the new name of *Y Draig Rhudd*. Hannah cooked and managed in The Leaky Cauldron, where she was so efficient that old Tom soon passed the business on to her. They were all settled in their new lives by the time Sally-Anne finished her N.E.W.T.s.

Sally-Anne continued to spend many hours a week in her mother's bookshop, which was recommended in all the education supplements, but in her spare time she experimented with mixing various cleaning agents. She soon developed a whole range of new and highly efficient household cleaners, polishes and disinfectants, which she was able to market both to Skweekerkleen's and – under discreetly altered labels – to a few Muggle outlets, which brought in money for the wizarding economy.

Sally-Anne's siblings and step-siblings all lived happily ever after. Ella-Jane became a private investigator and devoted her life to snooping around pure-blood divorces and frauds. She successfully avoided men until the age of twenty-nine, when she married a Muggle R.A.F. officer; they named their children Leon and Boadicea. Molly-Rose worked as an editor for WhizzHard Publishing. She eventually pulled her nose out of the books for long enough to marry Luke Brocklehurst (the same Cousin Luke who had attended Cressida's Christmas party), and their children were Paracelsus and Hypatia.

Xavier's thespian pretensions were even less successful than his father's; in the end he had to marry Mr Parkinson's granddaughter in exchange for a job in Parkinson's Real Estate – and the less said about that firm, the better. Flavian Perks never did much work, but Cressida's shop in Knockturn Alley was a sensational success. In case you were wondering, she sold erotic aids.

The Honeysmooches set up Ursula as a partner in their perfume business, and with this financial security, she was able to entice Adrian Pucey into marrying her. They had two sons. Cecilia made a nuisance of herself around the Witches' Institute for several months after failing her N.E.W.T.s, and when that became boring, she and her friend Pansy Parkinson set up a small business selling cosmetics and colour analysis. Cecilia married Stan Shunpike (poor Stan!), and they had two daughters.

The legal wrangling about Christopher Slater's custody arrangements stopped on his sixteenth birthday, but the financial strain of paying off the lawyers' debts lasted several years longer. Fortunately, Raymond was promoted to middle management at the metalworks. It would appear that neither he nor Julia resented the pressures of parenthood, because after their own offspring were off their hands, they took in a long string of foster children. Christopher became a computer salesman and never told his Muggle relations that his stepfamily were witches. But Jeremy, who trained as a civil engineer, met a number of Sally-Anne's wizarding friends, and in due course he married the locospector Mary Fenwick.

Terry Boot remained on cordial terms with Sally-Anne for as long as their paths naturally crossed, but they did not try to be close friends again. He passed all his N.E.W.T.s on the first attempt and was able to train as a healer; but instead of working for St Mungo's, he joined a Muggle medical mission in Burkina Faso.

Sally-Anne was married at the age of twenty-two to the mysterious S. Capper. She had already met him at Hogwarts, of course; and she met him again during the war, because he was apprenticed to the securities expert who set up and maintained all the advanced securities on the Slaters' home. But it was only after Sally-Anne was properly launched as a successful businesswoman that the time became right for her to identify Simon Capper as her soulmate. They had four children. Ella-Jane and Molly-Rose both complained about the Cappers' boring choice of names (Edward, Geoffrey, William and Rosamund), but Sally-Anne said that she preferred names that did not draw attention to themselves in the "real world".

The enchanted glass shoes were not wasted, because Simon took Sally-Anne dancing on many a Saturday night, right up until the year when their daughter took the shoes with her to Hogwarts. Aunt Odette said that the three charms would not be compromised because the moral ownership had been properly transferred in a free donation.

You might be wondering whether anything further ever happened between Sally-Anne and God. As the answer to that question is not part of this story, the reader may decide.

THE END