

# Dagger of Doubt

*by Grace has Victory*

Tracey Davies has spent her whole childhood in the shadow of her glamorous brother Roger. Once at Hogwarts, she wants nothing more to do with him. But how easily can she ignore him when everyone loves Roger? Does Tracey have what it takes to survive in Slytherin? And is survival even what matters?

## The Boy who Surpassed

*Chapter 1 of 10*

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**Disclaimer.** JKR owns everything, including the royalties. I own nothing, unless you write me a review.

**Author's Note.** JKR's list of Harry Potter's classmates includes "Davis, Tracey," a Slytherin half-blood. But JKR is often inconsistent about the spelling of minor characters' names, so I felt free to add an E to Tracey's surname. You can decide whether this makes her a canon character or an OC.

*Jealousy injures us with the dagger of self-doubt.*

~ Leslie Grimutter

*I've spent most of my life walking under that hovering cloud, jealousy,*

*whose acid raindrops blurred my vision and burned holes in my heart.*

~ Astrid Alauda

*Jealousy is an awkward homage that inferiority renders to merit.*

~ Madeleine de Puisieux

Chapter One

The Boy who Surpassed

The 1980s

The three candles were burning like stars in the dark room. They lit up the exciting pile of parcels stacked next to the jelly and the balloons hovering over the ice-cream. It was my birthday, and my grandparents and the Muggle neighbours were singing *for me*. Mum moved the birthday cake towards me and led the countdown:

"Three two "

*Huff!* The lights had vanished; the room was pitch-black. Someone had blown out my candles for me.

I wanted to cry.

In the darkness, Dad's voice cut over the giggling. "Oh, Roger, that wasn't funny!" But Dad was talking with a smile in his voice, as if it was funny really, and my cousin Susan was laughing out loud.

The candles sprang to life again; Mum had re-lit them. "There you are, Tracey. This time *you* can do it."

"I'm holding onto Roger," said Dad.

Mum counted down again, and this time I blew. Each candle flickered and died because I had blown on it. But no-one had been singing this time; it didn't seem quite like a birthday. There was a lump in my throat when the kitchen lights switched on. Dad wasn't even looking at the cake; he was grinning at Roger, who was climbing all over his shoulders.

I don't remember what happened after that; I expect Mum cut the cake, and we all ate it. What I most remember is that hollow feeling in my chest, being all alone in that crowd of people, because they were all paying attention to Roger. Even on my third birthday, that hollow feeling wasn't new. I already knew that people would always pay more attention to Roger.

\* \* \* \* \*

My brother Roger arrived in the world eighteen months before I did, which meant he was about eighteen times more important. When Roger started going to the Muggle infants' school down the road, Mum and I went with him nearly every day to help the teacher. Mum listened to readers and repaired books; she organised cake sales; she went on the school excursions and helped out with the art and music lessons. So we knew very well that Roger was learning to read faster than any other child in reception.

"Mrs Davies, he's very clever," said the teacher. "You need to be sure to give him plenty to read."

Mum and Dad couldn't afford to buy books, but they visited the local library at least once a week. Whenever the grandparents came to visit, they set Roger to reading out loud. The teacher gave him plenty, too; if visitors came to her classroom, she was sure to exhibit Roger as her successful student.

"That's an amazing performance for a five-year-old," said Dad. "Roger really is a born Ravenclaw."

What none of them seemed to notice was that I was learning to read too. I wasn't quite as fast as Roger, but I was only three years old! I was left to play with the same wooden letters and flashcards as all the school children, and I learned to put them together to make words as swiftly as any of them. My parents didn't even notice until they overheard me trying to spell out the words on a cereal packet.

"Kell oggs corn flacks. Dad, what are cornflacks?"

"Stupid, they're corn*flakes*," corrected Roger.

"Tracey can read almost as well as Roger," said Dad to Mum. "Fancy that!"

And that was all they ever said about my reading. They just weren't surprised that I could learn as quickly as Roger could.

His drawings were more important than mine, too. When I could only scribble, he drew beautiful battleships and aeroplanes, which Mum proudly stuck on the fridge and showed off to the neighbours.

"He's a true artist," adults said again and again. "I can't believe he's only five years old!"

My first real, recognisable picture was of a dragon. It had a long head with big teeth, four stumpy legs with claws, and a tail that curled around a hoard of diamonds. I coloured it bright red. Dad admired my picture, but Mum looked horrified.

"Mummy, will you put it on the fridge?" I asked.

"Darling, we can't. We can't put pictures of dragons where the neighbours might see them. It's a lovely picture, but I need to take it away."

"You don't like my dragon," I said, my lip trembling.

"Tracey, I "

"Look what I've been drawing!" interrupted Roger, waving around a picture of a cement-mixer flanked by two smiling Muggle builders.

Mum and Dad were immediately distracted by Roger's wonderful artwork. It was such a clever picture and it must go straight on the fridge for everyone to see.

I decided then and there never to draw another picture. I never found out where Mum hid my first real drawing, the beautiful red dragon; I only knew it wasn't good enough to be stuck on the fridge next to Roger's pictures. I was too young to understand that my parents needed to hide all signs of magic from the neighbours, and Mum was far too pure-blooded to know that Muggle children draw pictures of dragons too.

One Christmas Grandma and Grandpa Bones took us to the Magical Menagerie to buy a pet. I held onto their hands chattering away about the animals I admired.

"A Jarvey!" I suggested. "They're so clever. Or a Kneazle? The Puffskein is pretty too. Oh, and look at that Krup..."

"I want a spaniel," said Roger.

The next minute, Grandma and Grandpa bought us a spaniel. They also bought a Puffskein for our pure-blooded cousins in Godric's Hollow, but they just didn't *hear* that I wanted one too.

Roger smirked over the head of his new spaniel and said, "Cheer up, Tracey. If you don't want to share the dog, perhaps they'll buy you a goldfish."

Roger was always a step ahead. When Dad brought home a second-hand Shooting Star, Roger took about ten minutes to fly it up to the roof of the garden shed. Dad laughed and clapped and warned him not to let the neighbours see.

A week later, I flew the Shooting Star up to the chimney-pot. Dad was furious and sent me to my room for the rest of the day "because you know very well that you shouldn't let the neighbours see."

Roger brought a trumpet home from school and soon showed talent. Late at night, I was kept awake by his blasting of *Three Blind Mice* and *Polly Put the Kettle On*. When Roger went out with his friends, I sneaked into his room and opened the trumpet-case. The brass was so shiny that I hesitated to lift it out. But I did lift it out and I took a blow.

Nothing happened. I wasn't strong enough to make any noise at all with Roger's trumpet. So I put it back and tiptoed out. He never knew I had been in his room.

(The bedroom situation was another difficulty between us. Our house had only two bedrooms. When Roger complained that he was too old to share with his little sister, Mum and Dad moved me out to the airing cupboard in the hall. They took out the shelves, put in a window and moved the bathroom wall so that the cupboard was *just* large enough to take a bed. But it was still a cupboard and not a proper bedroom. They could have easily used magic to make the room larger inside than out, but they said we had so many Muggle neighbours that we'd end up being caught. So Roger had a proper bedroom all to himself and I was stuck with a cupboard.)

Anyway, I knew I would never be able to play the trumpet, so I took up the recorder instead. Bad mistake! Roger complained that the sound was "screechy," and Mum told both grandmothers, "Of course, the recorder is a very easy instrument to play."

I handed my recorder back to the school band and said I wanted to play the violin. Roger was even ruder about the violin.

"Whose kneazle are you torturing, Tracey? Your fiddle sounds like a strangled tiger."

Mum said to Aunt Amelia, "Of course, the violin is a very difficult instrument to play well. We can't expect Tracey to sound pleasant overnight."

The next day, Dad took me to Roger's band practice. "Don't they sound fantastic?" he said. "You'd never guess they've only been playing for six months. Those Muggles could be *all* Ravenclaws."

The day after, I handed my violin back to the school band. "I've realised I don't really have time to practise properly. But I'd like to join the choir."

For the first three weeks, school choir was fun. I could sing in tune, and we all sounded very good without needing any out-of-hours practice. Then Roger decided that he wanted to join the choir too.

"Don't!" I begged him. "You have your trumpet and I have the choir."

"And now I have a trumpet *and* the choir," he replied, smirking. "If you want to get away from me so badly, *you* can be the one to leave!"

The boys in the back row all complained that their sisters sang like dying dogs, so Roger complained along with the rest; and they read *Beano* comics and wrote their names on chair-backs more than they sang. Despite this, Roger was chosen to sing the solo at the school concert. Mum, Dad and all the grandparents clapped their hands sore for him. They didn't notice me, invisible with the ordinary choir.

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I don't remember when Roger first did magic. I only remember that he was always casting catchy little spells. Lights flashed, colours changed and music hummed out of nowhere almost as often as Roger laughed.

I do remember Dad asking, "Tracey *has* done magic, hasn't she?"

"Yes, of course," Mum replied. "Twice, no, three times. She once exploded an empty kettle because she was full of magical fury, and she does tend to bounce well when she wants to escape from Roger."

"That's all right, then," said Dad. "I hadn't noticed. So she's a Ravenclaw too? Talking of kettles, shall I make a cup of tea?"

I definitely, definitely remember the day when Roger's Hogwarts letter came. We were playing football down at the local park, rather cross and bored because our parents couldn't afford to take us away on holiday that year, when a great, grey owl swooped down towards us. The Muggle children screamed in terror, and I knew better than to tell them that it was "just an owl". Roger reached out and extracted the scroll from the owl's talons.

"Roger, you are *brave*!" cried the boy next door. "You *ouched* that owl!"

"Why didn't it peck you?" asked the girl across the road.

"I'm surprised it let you," said the boy round the corner. "But why did you pick up that dead mouse it was carrying?"

"That wasn't a mouse; owls hunt at night," Roger reminded them. "It's just a scrap of paper. Bye!"

"Oh. Are you leaving? Aren't you going to show us the owl's scrap of paper?"

"Come on, Roger. Show us the paper!"

Roger grinned, waved and ran off towards home. I pelted after him, knowing what the scroll must be.

"It's arrived!" Roger yelled. "Mum! My Hogwarts letter! Ravenclaw, here I come!"

"Hush - remember the neighbours," Mum reminded him, but she wasn't really annoyed. She was so proud that Roger had been invited to Hogwarts, even though she had expected it all his life. "Oh, this is *wonderful*, Roger. Let's hope it's Ravenclaw for you - but Hufflepuff and Gryffindor are good houses too. Tracey, run down to the corner shop and buy some ice-cream. We must have a celebration tea!"

By the time Dad came home, the tea-table was loaded with ham and salmon rolls, ice cream, lemonade and chocolate cake. It was just like a birthday party. Then we had to tell the story all over again for Dad. *Listen to this - Roger is actually going to Hogwarts!*

Before tea was over, the Floo rattled, and Grand-Aunt Amelia strode into our living room. "The Hogwarts letters have arrived, haven't they?" she announced. "The Diggory boy has one, so I expect Roger's has come too."

Roger waved his parchment in the air. "It's here!" he shouted. "I'm going to Hogwarts!"

Aunt Amelia surveyed him majestically through her monocle. "You have certainly grown, Roger. I think you'd be taller than Cedric Diggory by now. Oh... hello, Tracey. I imagine you're very proud of your brother."

After Roger had whirled through the Floo to show his letter to Grandma and Grandpa Bones, Dad and I went into the kitchen to do the washing up so that Aunt Amelia could discuss the family with Mum.

"Your Roger really is a handsome boy, Pamela." *Chink* went Aunt Amelia's tea-cup. "It strikes me every time I see him."

Mum's cup chinked too. "We can hardly believe it ourselves, Aunt Amelia. It isn't as if Brian or I would win any beauty contests. But Roger really does seem to have inherited the best from both families. The hair and eyes are all Davies, but he definitely has the Bones family's distinguished nose and chin!"

"Roger and Tracey look quite startlingly alike, don't they?" mused Aunt Amelia. "Yes, you could certainly say that Tracey is a very handsome girl. Those wonderful sapphire eyes!"

Handsome?

Roger was handsome, and I looked like Roger, so of course I was handsome too. But somehow I knew it was all wrong for a girl to be called handsome.

I dropped the tea towel and raced upstairs to stare in Mum's full-length mirror. I wasn't tall, but I saw that I had Roger's stocky, well-proportioned frame, just as handsome people did. My face was the same shape as Roger's face too. In fact, we both looked like Aunt Amelia. We had her strong jaw-line and prominent chin; I saw that it was a boy's chin. We had Aunt Amelia's sweeping, slightly turned-up nose, but in my girl's face, Roger's "distinguished" nose looked huge, and its tip looked ~~very~~ turned-up.

"You're 'andsome, Ducky," said the mirror. "Those deep-set, dark-blue eyes and those golden lights in the chestnut curls awful 'andsome they are."

"I want to grow my hair long," I grumbled. The problem was, my hair had had never seemed to grow much past my chin before becoming a complete mess.

"Take my advice, dearie," said the mirror. "The only way to keep that lovely 'air lovely is to keep it short."

"It's nearly as short as a boy's," I whined. "And I have a boy's face, just like Roger's."

"That's what makes you 'andsome, Ducky. Just like Roger."

Aunt Amelia was handsome and she had never married. I knew then why it was bad to be a handsome girl. It meant that I was never, ever going to be pretty.

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Of course we had to make all the fuss of shopping for Roger's school supplies in Diagon Alley. We had to buy the books (second-hand), the uniform (second-hand), the potions kit (brand new) and the wand (very new indeed). The spaniel had recently died, so Roger wanted a new pet; and since we couldn't afford an owl, he had to settle for a baby Puffskein. Puffskeins had been forbidden to us as long as we had lived among Muggles, but of course it would be different at Hogwarts.

There was nothing new for me, not so much as a hair ribbon.

At last Roger's new possessions were packed away in Dad's old school trunk, and we waved him off at King's Cross Station for his journey on the Hogwarts Express. And Roger was gone.

Gone! For two whole years, I was going to be home alone. People would stop comparing me with Roger. Mum and Dad would pay some attention to me.

"Thank goodness our children are growing up," said Mum. "Now that Roger's safely at Hogwarts, it's time I found myself a job."

"But, Mum..." I couldn't contain my dismay. "I'm still at home! I don't go to Hogwarts yet!"

"But you're quite competent to look after yourself for a couple of hours a day," she replied placidly. "You know very well that lots of your friends have working mothers. And you also know that we have bills to pay!"

Mum took only two days to find a full-time clerical post at St Mungo's Hospital. The work sounded boring: writing letters, organising patients' records, filing, a little reception work, a great deal of running around to make coffee for Healers. But Mum and Dad were perfectly happy with the change.

I wasn't. Mum deserted my school, for she no longer had the time to help with excursions and cake stalls. Now that Roger was no longer a pupil there, the school had apparently lost its importance to her. Every day I came home from that Muggle junior school to an empty house. Sometimes Mum left me notes, describing the household tasks she wanted me to finish. Sometimes I was too annoyed to bother doing them; I would go out to play in the street or sit and read.

"Can't Tracey play *inside* the house?" asked Dad. "She isn't safe on the streets."

"Why do we have to live in London?" I grumbled. "I want to go and live in Godric's Hollow or Tinworth. Village families all help each other, so I could play at their houses instead of being home alone or out on the streets."

Dad tried to be patient as he explained. "You know why, Tracey. My parents are getting old and we have to stay near them. Besides, it would be too expensive to move."

Grandma and Grandpa Davies were only about sixty but they had already become ridiculously old, even allowing that they were both Muggles. They were slow-moving, slow-thinking and hard of hearing; no amount of Muggle or magical medicine seemed to unstiffen their joints or unfatten their stomachs. Dad said it was because they had been born in something called a Depression and had had deprived childhoods. For this reason, we all had to live three streets away and always be checking up on them.

"If you want to be around other wizards after school," said Mum, "why don't you Floo over to Susan's house?"

"I did that last week," I said. "I can't do it every day."

The truth was, I could only take so much of playing with my cousin Susan. Her house was much nicer than ours, with a shiny kitchen and a large, flowery garden, and I didn't want to be reminded that in my own poky little house, I didn't even have a proper bedroom. Susan's little brother was well-behaved, so she didn't understand how annoying it was to live with Roger. The adults all admired Susan: she was handy with the sewing machine; she could bake about fifty different kinds of biscuit; and her pristine collections of peg dolls, postcards and sea-shells were all displayed in apple-pie order. She was Aunt Amelia's favourite, and that wasn't fair either.

Susan herself was calm and modest (unlike *certain* of our relatives) and I quite liked her. She didn't seem to know that she was prettier than I was, and she did know that I was better at maths and English.

"I always go to Tracey when I want help with homework," she told the family.

"I expect Susan will be coming here tomorrow," I concluded. "She has a history project due, and I know all about those Muggle railways. I think my teacher will set the same project next month, so I'll take a copy of Susan's to hand in. I'm doing half the work, so that won't be cheating, will it? Mum, can we try to have the house tidy before she comes? I'm so embarrassed that Susan sees the plaster peeling off our ceiling."

Mum sighed. "I've had a long day, Tracey. I'm too tired to cook dinner *and* clean up *and* help you with your homework. If the ceiling matters to you, can't you take a feather duster to it?"

"Mum, it would be much quicker to do it with magic! Can't you teach me one little, tiny spell?"

"Of course I can't. Listen, I'll charm off the plaster-flakes, but you'll have to ask Dad to help with your homework."

Dad had always had a tiring day too. He was a shoefitter at Cobbler's and he spent his days measuring feet and cutting leather. He made a start on helping me with my maths, but after ten minutes, he said the numbers were dancing in front of his eyes.

"Ravenclaws are independent learners," he reminded me. "You're old enough to show some Ravenclaw spirit and think the rest of that maths through for yourself."

I knew I was about to lose his attention for the evening. "Do I have to do it all by myself?"

"Roger hasn't anyone to help him with his homework any more," Mum reminded me. "If you don't want to do homework, why don't you write to your brother?"

"Because Roger doesn't own the world," I muttered to myself, even though I knew he probably did. Even when he was at the other end of the country, I could never escape him, and he was still more important than I was.

"I don't want to be in Ravenclaw," I announced.

Both parents looked surprised. "What made you say that? Our family is always in Ravenclaw."

"Then it's time for a change, isn't it? I am not going to hang around with Roger once I'm at Hogwarts. I'm going to make new friends who couldn't care less about him."

Mum sighed. "We've all had a long day, Tracey. Can't you stop your bickering now that Roger's not even home to provide half the fight? If you don't grow up a bit, they might not bother to send you any Hogwarts letter at all!"

# The Sorting Hat's Verdict

Chapter 2 of 10

You already know where the Sorting Hat placed Tracey, don't you? But she didn't suspect until the moment it happened.  
It was one of those moments that might influence the rest of her life.

## Chapter Two

### The Sorting Hat's Verdict

Sunday 1 September 1991

My Hogwarts letter did come, of course. No-one found it very interesting because they had already had two years to become used to Roger's being a Hogwarts pupil. The relatives didn't clamour at the grate to be let into our house to exclaim over my letter. Aunt Amelia made a Floo call to enquire about it, but Susan's letter had also arrived, so I was sharing the glory with her. There was no fuss about the trip to Diagon Alley to buy my supplies because it was the third year of buying supplies for Roger. Roger was to have his own broomstick this year, and the excitement of finding him a decent second-hand Comet completely distracted Mum and Dad from admiring my new wand.

"Never mind," I muttered. "So long as I'm not in Ravenclaw, I'll make the Hogwarts people notice *me*."

When I finally entered the Great Hall at Hogwarts, I found I didn't want to be noticed. The noticeable people – those with escaped toads or scarred foreheads – were being noticed in a bad way. I wanted to blend into the crowd until I had made a few friends.

Professor McGonagall picked up the Sorting Hat and commanded, "Abbott, Hannah."

Under the gaze of the whole school, Hannah Abbott stumbled forward to the stool and collected the Hat. I had already met Hannah a couple of times, as she was my cousins' cousin. She was nice, and she was allocated to Hufflepuff.

"Bones, Susan."

Susan was the student I knew best, although we were actually only second cousins. I suppose she was nice too, but she was a great deal too admiring towards Roger! She was also sorted into Hufflepuff, and I began to hope. If the Sorting Hat put me in Susan's dormitory, Mum and Dad would be pleased with me, *and* I'd be well away from Roger.

"Boot, Terry."

I didn't know that name at all, and nor, apparently, did the students on each side of me. But the happy-faced Boot boy was sent to Ravenclaw, so I lost interest in him.

Terry Boot was followed by a Brocklehurst and a Brown, then a Bulstrode, which was a name that Aunt Amelia had mentioned. I hadn't heard of Corner; Cornfoot must mean the family from the Diagon Alley toy shop; I might have heard of Crabbe. Finally Professor McGonagall announced:

"Davies, Tracey!"

I took a deep breath and stepped towards the stool. I sat down, lifted the Hat to my head and silently hoped, "Not Ravenclaw, not Ravenclaw!"

"Not Ravenclaw, eh?"

I jumped. The Hat, flopping around my ears, was *talking* to me!

"Are you sure? You could be an academic, you know; it's all there in your head, and Ravenclaw could help you on your way to wisdom, no doubt about that."

"*No!*" My thoughts screamed as loudly as they dared. "*Not* Ravenclaw! I'm not one of those conceited show-offs who walk around as if they've swallowed encyclopaedias. I don't believe in knowing stuff unless it's going to be *useful*. I'm a useful sort of person: I should be in Hufflepuff!"

The Hat seemed to laugh at that. "Oh, no, you don't have an ounce of loyalty. You've some courage of the animal type and a nice thirst to prove yourself, but you're no kind of team player. Well, if you're sure, better be SLYTHERIN!"

As I lifted the brim of the Hat, the first thing I saw was Roger's shocked face. He was sitting there at the Ravenclaw table, white and jaw-dropped, unable to believe that I wouldn't be occupying the seat he had saved for me.

Not allowing myself to be surprised, I replaced the Sorting Hat on the stool and marched past the Ravenclaw table, nodding significantly at my brother as I went. At the Slytherin table I caught up with the huge Crabbe boy who had been sorted just before me. A square-faced Prefect held out a hand to each of us; Crabbe pumped at her right hand, so I awkwardly took the left.

"Congratulations, Vincent and Tracey! Welcome to the greatest house in Hogwarts."

I let myself smile. I was going to belong here, in the house of water and serpents.

Take that, Roger!

Vincent Crabbe only grunted when I tried to speak to him, so I sat quietly at the bench to watch the rest of the Sorting. My parents had asked me to look out for their friends' children, so I noted that boring old Anthony Goldstein was despatched to boring old Ravenclaw. Then another of those large, troll-like boys was sent to our table. He ambled straight past me and took the seat on the other side of Vincent. They grunted at each other in a way that showed they were already old friends and they ignored everyone else. So I ignored them, because Daphne Greengrass, a tall blonde with a dazzling smile, was taking the other seat next to me.

"Nice to meet you," I said, holding out my hand.

She clasped it briefly. "And you, Tracey."

Daphne was a person who bothered to remember names! What an excellent beginning. But I was suddenly shy of her. She looked so confident I could tell she was a pure-blood, and blood mattered in Slytherin.

Dad had asked me to find out "what happened to poor Frank Longbottom's son". I had forgotten why Frank was "poor", but his fat little boy, who didn't look old enough to be at Hogwarts, was dismissed to Gryffindor. Soon after that, a jubilant towhead named Draco Malfoy was sent to join us. Vincent and his friend Gregory shuffled aside on the bench so that he could sit between them, which told me that Draco was more important than they were. Whoever he was, I should take notice of him!

Was there anyone else I should know? I recognised the Patil twins, but neither was sent to our table. Oh, and there was ~~the~~ great Harry Potter. He was so small, and his hair was so messy! Now, surely he would join us in Slytherin? But, no, Potter went to Gryffindor. The Gryffindors were really silly about that; they cheered and stamped their feet and clapped twice as loudly as they had for anyone else. Would the other Slytherins envy his fame? Or would Potter be irrelevant, since he wasn't one of *us*?

Daphne was now paying attention to the new girl on her other side. Pansy Parkinson was petite and fine-boned and she laughed a great deal. Daphne laughed back in a way that showed that they, too, had been friends for a long time. I stared straight ahead, wondering if *everyone* here knew each other.

"Vincent," I said, "will you introduce me to your friends?"

Oh, no! As they were all boys, I should have said, "Will you introduce *them* to *me*?" Vincent simply grunted; he apparently didn't know any better; but Draco snickered because he had noticed my gaffe.

"Don't you know me already?" he asked.

I lifted my chin and tried to hide my Cockney accent. "I think that teacher said you were Draco Malfoy."

"She said right. But it was easy for her; she had a list. Oh, and this is Crabbe and this is Goyle. But I've forgotten *your* name."

"Tracey Davies."

"Well, Tracey Davies, I can't say I know your family, but I expect we'll all be friends around here. If you want to meet the right sorts, you should hang around with me."

The food arrived soon afterwards, and Vincent did nothing but stuff his face all evening. Daphne and Pansy were politer; we did talk about broomsticks (lucky I knew something about flight!) and unicorns (lucky they had never seen one either!). But they were mainly interested in each other. Oh, well. I knew I'd do better saying nothing at all than accidentally saying something Ravenclawish or just plain *Muggle*.

Finally it was time to go down to our dormitories. Several students and not just first-years were yawning frantically, so no-one would notice if I didn't say much. We followed the prefect down two flights of stairs. She left five of us at the dormitory door, and Pansy led the way in. I ran straight to the opposite window, but it didn't open.

"Our course not," said Pansy. "You don't want a flood, do you? This dormitory is under the lake."

Daphne turned on a lamp, and we all blinked at the four-poster beds, at the green velvet hangings, at the long ebony dressing-table that we would share, and at our own faces reflected in the silver-rimmed mirror above it. A fish swam quite close to the round window, and I saw that our view was indeed nothing but water.

A pretty brunette giggled. "Ooooh, a fish! D'you think we'll ever see the Giant Squid through our windows?"

"My brother said he saw it once," claimed an awkward, large-framed girl.

"He was probably exaggerating," said Daphne. "The Squid is shy; it wouldn't swim this close to the buildings."

Pansy enthroned herself on the edge of a four-poster and waved the rest of us to sit around her. "Let's all introduce ourselves and say a little about our families," she said. "You begin, Daphne."

This confirmed that Daphne occupied an unshakeable position as Pansy's second-in-command. If I wanted to fit in, not only must I listen to Pansy, but I must never step on Daphne's toes either.

"My name is Daphne Queenie Greengrass," the blonde recited, "and my father is a Beater with the Falmouth Falcons. The Greengrasses are a very old pure-blood family from Norfolk, while my mother is a descendant of Kalliope Lufkin, the first witch to become Minister for Magic. We are also connected to the Malfoys..."

Whoops! I tried to look impressed, although I still hadn't a clue *why* Draco Malfoy was important.

"... My uncle is married to Draco Malfoy's aunt. All of us have an honourable tradition of belonging to Slytherin House, where my sister Syrinx is the Gobstones Champion."

Daphne turned benevolently to the large, lank-haired girl on my right. "Now it's your turn. I think the Deputy Head mentioned that your name is Millicent."

"Yes, Millicent Bulter, Millicent *Gertrude* Bulstrode." The large girl had a plum accent, but she sounded nervous. "I'm from Aylesbury, where my parents own an antique shop in a Muggle street. They transfigure cheap stuff into Victorian chairs and tables and Georgian silverware, whatever people want. They also stock nose-biting teacups and self-losing key rings and suchlike."

This was all wrong. People didn't *admit* to baiting the Muggles. They didn't even admit to making money off Muggles, not on a first meeting.

Millicent glared at us. "My parents are *good* at it. They can forge hallmarks and do fake ageing on the wood, and the customers never guess that the stuff we sell them isn't genuine. My great-grandfather is Caractacus Burke from Knockturn Alley, and he gives us heaps of his spare stock. We had a chess set that my Muggle grandmother "

Daphne tittered, and Pansy cut in. "Thank you, Millicent! That puts us very nicely in the picture. Let's give someone else a turn!"

She was looking at me, so I swallowed my shaking, plastered on a smile, and swiftly made eye contact with each of them in turn. None of them knew who I was, but it wouldn't help me at all if I mentioned that my father was a Muggle-born or that my parents were poor.

"I'm Tracey Ann Davies and I'm from London." Croydon was an unfashionable borough, so I wouldn't mention it. "My grand-aunt is the Minister for Magical Law

Enforcement her name's Amelia Bones."

Pansy's eyes sparked with interest. One point to me for having a Ministry connection and one more point for dropping the pure-blooded name of Bones!

"Aren't the Boneses something to do with clothes?" asked the brunette.

"Well, yes, my grandparents are tailors. Grandma was born Tabitha Twilfitt "

"*Really?*" Now Daphne was impressed. "Not Twilfitt the dressmaker?"

"I buy *all* my clothes from Twilfitt and Tatting!" giggled the brunette. "It's dead expensive, of course, but so much classier than that Malkin's!"

"That's the one," I agreed. "Grandma is Madam Twilfitt, and Bones's Bespoke Tailoring is the masculine branch of the same company." But tailors, no matter how pure-blooded, didn't compare with the Old Money wizards, so it was time to change the subject. "What else? Well, my interests are Potions, Transfiguration and Arithmancy..." They had no reaction to this either, so I dropped that line and finished brightly with, "And I *adore* cats!"

The final remark made all of them smile.

"I have a cat," said Millicent, although it wasn't her turn to speak.

We all ignored her and looked at the girl on my left. She had long, dark curls and a freckled, babyish face.

"I'm Cecilia Laverne Runcorn." She giggled self-consciously. "Oh dear, what can I say? Daddy works at the Ministry of Magic, and Mummy's oldies are in the perfume business... the Honeysmooches, you know."

We had all patronised Honeysmooch's, so Cecilia was rewarded with knowing smiles.

"Do I know the name Runcorn?" mused Pansy. "Yes, I do! There was an Albert Runcorn who bought property from ~~my~~ father a couple of years back... a very respectable, pure-blooded gentleman."

"Daddy!" exclaimed Cecilia ecstatically. "His new house in Liverpool! Anyway, I play the flute a bit, which pleases my stepfather because he's a dead famous singer. As for my stepmother... Well, she's just famous for being beautiful! Not that I *like* her, but she can be dead useful as my sister and I are both interested in fashion." Another giggle. "And I like cats too!"

Although she clearly hadn't a clue what kind of information would make her popular, Cecilia was saved by sheer luck. Her father was a pure-blood, a Ministry official and a business associate of the Parkinsons. The Honeysmooch connection was simply a bonus.

When the buzz of chatter had died down, Pansy reclaimed the centre stage. "My name is Pansy Morgana Parkinson, and I live in Manchester, where my father owns a real estate business. I am actually related to Daphne, as my mother was born a Greengrass. I am also connected with the Malfoy family... Did you all meet Draco Malfoy earlier? I have known him all my life because my sister is married to his uncle..."

I thought quickly. In a dormitory of five, someone was going to be left out, and Pansy would decide who. Daphne was her best friend; Cecilia and I had managed to fit in; but Millicent had already created the wrong impression. Sooner or later, they would find out that my background was no better than Millicent's, and I had to make myself popular before that happened. If I wanted to keep on fitting in, my best bet was to form an alliance with Cecilia.

"... And my mother took me to buy a very sweet collection of silver brooches, which used to belong to Callisto Gaunt herself," finished Pansy. "Would you like to see them?"

Of course we wanted to see them. Even if we had never heard of Callisto Gaunt, we wouldn't dare refuse such an invitation. In fact, the brooches were very pretty. There were twelve of them, shaped like lizards and salamanders and decorated with emeralds and diamonds.

"They're fakes," said Millicent. "Look, you can tell. Those aren't real diamonds, and "

I was tempted to shove her, but I remembered in time that it would help me if Millicent made a fool of herself.

"They are *gorgeous*," I said, as Millicent blindly continued to explain that they couldn't be more than fifty years old so they were only reproductions and not antiques.

"I love *this* one!" said Cecilia.

"Keep it!" said Pansy. "Why don't you each choose one to keep? We're all going to be friends, so let's start our friendship with a gift."

I knew then that Pansy had not been ripped off. She already knew the brooches were only cheap reproductions; she had deliberately lied about owning "antiques" in order to impress us. She must be displeased that Millicent had called her on it.

I let Daphne choose first, noting that she very deliberately picked out the second-largest. I didn't mind; I was eyeing off one of the smaller ones. As soon as Daphne had made her selection, my hand darted forward, knocking Millicent's out of the way. I let it hover for a second, then stroked a salamander with gleaming emerald eyes.

"Pansy, you're so generous," I said. "But are you *sure* you don't want to keep this one? It's so sweet!"

"I said you could have it," she said airily. "If ever I regret sharing, I know where I can buy more like it."

I picked up the brooch and moved to sit next to Cecilia, taking care not to look at Millicent. I asked Cecilia if she had a cat, and she said she did but it was more her sister's pet. I let her prattle on about her home life while I wondered what we would find to talk about tomorrow.

I had finally left Roger behind. I was in Slytherin.

And I wondered if I had what it would take to survive here.

## The Worst Defeat

If your own Quidditch team isn't playing, does it matter who wins the match? Of course it does. Everything has a political flavour for a Slytherin.

## Chapter Three

### The Worst Defeat

Saturday 27 June 1992

"Tracey, did you hear about Professor Quirrell?" Cecilia giggled as she arranged her robes around herself on the Quidditch stand. "You'll never *guess* what he went and did last night."

"What?" I didn't want to watch this match, which would be yawning hours of Roger showing off that he was Ravenclaw's star Chaser. But no-one was staying indoors on such a warm summer day.

"He *died*!" Cecilia opened a large bag of jelly slugs, took two and then remembered to offer me one. "You wouldn't have thought so, would you? He looked dead healthy yesterday. But last night he took a walk deep into the dark underground of the school and while he was admiring himself in a mirror, he was *attacked*!"

I sucked the syrup out of my slug and let the blackcurrant flavour wash all around my mouth. "What was Quirrell doing looking in the mirror while he was down in the underground?"

Cecilia shrugged. "I always said he was odd, didn't I?" She giggled again. "Just imagine that he was about to die and all he could think about was admiring his reflection! But you'll never guess what it was that attacked him. It was the *last* thing you'd think. Go on, guess!"

"A Nundu?" I hazarded, trying not to mind Cecilia's slowness to make her point. I had brought a red handkerchief, but Roger would never spot it among all these crowds. How could I let him know that I was cheering for Gryffindor? Could I persuade Cecilia to tell him?

"No, it was his turban! I swear it, Tracey that turban of his turned around and attacked him!" She brought out a jade-green comb and began to sweep it through her hair.

"Did his turban strangle him?"

"No, it's even better than that. He was keeping something *alive* inside the cloth, and that... *thing*... is what suddenly went bad on him and attacked."

"I always knew that Quirrell smelled rotten," I said, clutching my red handkerchief.

"Yes, isn't it dead suspicious that he had a stinky head? My grandparents in the perfume business always say that bad smells come from the mouth or armpits or bum. But Professor Quirrell had a stinky back-of-head. We ought to have known there was something dead wrong with a person like that!"

"Oi! You two gas-bags!" grunted Vincent Crabbe from behind us. "Shut up your nattering and give us some of them sweets."

Not wanting to argue with someone as large as Vincent, Cecilia handed over four jelly slugs. Vincent stuffed two in his mouth, passed the other two to Gregory Goyle, stuck out his palm and demanded:

"Forgotten about Malfoy, then?"

"None of your tricks, Vincent!" I interrupted, flicking the red handkerchief at his face. "When Draco arrives, we'll give him his share. But we don't trust *you* to take care of the edibles while we're waiting for him."

"Ace, Tracey!" Cecilia squealed. "You're dead brave to stand up to them like that. You wouldn't even be afraid of the... *thing*... that killed Quirrell."

I wasn't convinced, but of course I didn't say so to Cecilia. There were lots of things that I didn't say to Cecilia. Despite that, being best friends with her hadn't been as difficult as I'd feared, for we never had any trouble thinking up things to talk about. Cecilia never bothered to do any thinking at all and she never put me to the inconvenience of choosing the topic, for she was so good at non-stop prattling that she never noticed if she said exactly the same thing five times over.

"Listen, when the match starts " I began. But I had missed the moment.

"We should have *known* that Quirrell would die!" Cecilia enthused. "That Defence post is jinxed. The teachers there don't last long. Did you ever hear of a single one who survived?"

"I don't think they all *die*," I said cautiously.

"True, some of them just get dead sick. My stepmother remembers one who was stung by a manticores and had yellow stuff dripping all over his body. He had to stay at St Mungo's for "

"Shut it, you two Jarveys!" Draco Malfoy was finally taking his seat behind us. "The match is about to begin so let's watch it in peace. Give me a jelly slug, Cecilia. Hand me your rattle, Crabbe. Tracey, where are your colours?"

"What? Slytherin isn't playing today."

"Quick-witted, aren't we? Exactly. Slytherin isn't playing. So for which team are Slytherins cheering?"

"Er..." As broomsticks bearing red players and blue ones swept down onto the pitch, I suddenly realised what the correct answer was. I forced myself to open my mouth and produce the word, "Ravenclaw?"

Draco paused to relieve Cecilia of another jelly slug. "Correct. If Gryffindor wins this match, Gryffindor wins the Quidditch Cup. If they lose, we get it. There's no way Ravenclaw has a hope of winning the Cup, so we're cheering for Ravenclaw to win this match. But you're all in black, Tracey. Where *are* your colours?"

I flushed and hastily stuffed my red handkerchief up my sleeve.

"We've brought an extra," interposed Daphne, handing me a blue pillow-case. She could spare it easily as she and Pansy had spread a bright blue tablecloth around their school robes, like a giant cloak or outsized banner. "There's so much news that there hasn't been time to *YES, RAVENCLAW!!*"

Looking extremely smug, my brother Roger punched the air from his broomstick, while his boring friends in the Ravenclaw stands hurled their blue banners in a ribbon-dance. I gave my blue pillow-case a token wave.

Draco squinted. "Is there a broomstick missing out there?"

"Of course there is," said Pansy. "Didn't you lot hear? Potter's unconscious in the Hospital Wing, and the Gryffindor goons don't have a reserve. So they're playing this match without a Seeker!"

My heart plummeted. *I hope their Chasers are good*, I thought. It just wasn't fair that Roger should have such an easy victory handed to him.

"What? *Really?*" Pansy, you are better news than the *Daily Prophet*!"

Pansy glowed at Draco's compliment. Before she could say anything else, the crowd erupted into cheers: Lysistrata Fudge had scored another goal for Ravenclaw. Millicent, from Daphne's other side, waved a blue scarf above her head and aimed a kick at a Gryffindor sitting in front of her, so Pansy and Daphne remembered to wave their tablecloth.

"So tell us the rest!" urged Cecilia. "What's wrong with Potter? Is he going to die?"

Pansy shrugged. "I'm surprised you don't know the rest of your own story, Cecilia. Potter was down in the underground when Quirrell died. ~~The~~*thing* that attacked Quirrell nearly got Potter too. I wish it *had* got Potter instead of Quirrell!"

"I don't," said Cecilia with a shudder. "I wish it had got both of them. Quirrell was a rubbish teacher. I hope they find us someone better-looking next year."

"Anyway, Pomfrey thinks Potter probably won't die. But none of you have asked the really important thing yet. Hasn't anyone wondered what Potter and Quirrell were doing down in the underground last night? Bother, Johnson's going to score."

But she didn't. Jeremy Dorny saved the goal, and I shrieked, *'Ye ea esss!* along with the rest.

"Go on, Pansy," I said. "Tell us why Professor Quirrell was wandering around in the middle of the night."

"Because he was a thief! Yes, you heard me right. He was trying to steal something."

"What?" we all chorused. Even the boys were centring more attention on Pansy than on the match.

Pansy paused theatrically, then told us. "The Philosopher's Stone. The magical Stone of boundless wealth and everlasting life! Quirrell somehow found out that there was one hidden in the magic mirror underneath the school and he'd gone there to steal it."

Even Draco was awed by this sensational story. A Stone of boundless wealth and everlasting life would be worth stealing; Quirrell didn't seem quite such a fool for trying his luck.

"Where did the Philosopher's Stone come from?" I asked eagerly. "How did it get inside a mirror?"

Pansy's face hardened. "Obviously," she snapped, "Quirrell didn't *tell* people that he intended to commit a theft. So how should we know where the Stone came from or how Quirrell knew about it?"

Millicent blundered into the conversation. "Then how do we know that ~~it~~*was* a Philosopher's Stone?"

Pansy turned a pitying gaze on her. "Dumbledore frankly *admits* that he picked up the Philosopher's Stone from beside Quirrell's dead body. In other words, he stole it for his own use. Let's not be surprised if Dumbledore lives a very long time."

Draco's eyes shone like diamonds. "Perhaps the old codger will retire now that he doesn't need to work for a living. Perhaps the school governors will give us a decent headmaster next time. Oh... *HOORAY!! Go, Ravenclaw!*"

They all cheered, but my throat was as dry as a desert. The Ravenclaw Beaters were keeping Oliver Wood off his game. It was unfair, unreasonable, outrageous that Roger should be allowed to win at Quidditch so easily.

"What a shot!" exclaimed Draco. "That Chaser knows his game. Anyone remember his name?"

I froze in my seat.

"It's Roger Davies," said Pansy. "Didn't you know? He's our Tracey's brother."

"Good family, Tracey," said Draco. "Any more jelly slugs, Cecilia?"

"No, you had the last one," lied Cecilia. There was one slug left, but it was squashed. As soon as Draco looked away, Cecilia stuffed it into her own mouth. "Whoops cheer again, Tracey!"

Roger had scored *again*, and there was nothing for it but to let Cecilia pull me to my feet and mechanically wave my blue pillow-case above my head.

"What's wrong, Tracey?" asked Daphne. "Aren't you glad that we're winning?"

I felt like screaming that "we" were not winning anything and the whole Ravenclaw team should be shoved down the sewers. But that kind of attitude would kick me to the bottom of the Slytherin pecking-order. If I wanted to keep my friends, I ought to start by smiling at them.

"The exams wore me out," I said. "I ~~er~~ hope the goals keep coming!"

Pansy glanced at me sharply, but before she could think of anything to say, Gryffindor scored. Pansy stood up to lead a cat-call of boos. Most of our classmates followed her example, although Theo Nott remained in his seat looking bored.

"Come *on*, Tracey!" hissed Cecilia. "Don't you care that the evil Gryffindors scored?"

"But it isn't nice to ~~that is~~ won't we be in trouble if we get caught out boo-ing?"

"Who'll catch us?" interrupted Daphne scornfully. "Oh. Snape wants us to sit down again. But we aren't *introuble*. I'm sure Snape doesn't *really* mind!"

"I've finished writing our chant," said Blaise Zabini. "We can sing this next time we score." He waved some ripped notepaper in front of Theo's face, then handed it to Draco. Draco guffawed and passed it on to Pansy, who giggled.

I stared in horror at the words. If I didn't chant, they would *know* I wanted Ravenclaw to lose. That was tantamount to saying I cared more about Gryffindor ~~our~~ traditional enemies than about Slytherin. And I couldn't care less about the fools in Gryffindor. I just needed them to win *this* match.

But Sylvia Fawcett scored another goal for Ravenclaw, so I stood up with my housemates and choked out the words.

*We've got one and you've got none! (Losers! Losers!)*

*Fawcett scored another one she knows how to play.*

*Going to score all night! Going to score all day!*

*Eagles fly and Lions die: Fawcett makes them pay!*

"It is going to be all night," I pointed out. "Dunstan isn't going to be in any hurry to touch that Snitch. She'll wait until Ravenclaw have racked up more goals than any Hogwarts team has ever scored before."

"Or until she's hungry," said Pansy.

Cecilia and Daphne didn't seem to hear. Cecilia was leaning across Pansy to whisper, "Tracey's brother is dead fit, isn't he? Jeremy Dorny might be saving a few goals, but it's Roger Davies that my sister fancies."

"And mine," said Daphne, "and Vincent's too. Not that *she* has a chance, with a face like hers! Tracey, do you know if your brother has a girlfriend?"

It wasn't a good moment to tell them how much this subject bored me. I took a deep breath and reminded them, "He's only fourteen. So probably not."

"But does he fancy blondes or brunettes?" persisted Cecilia.

"He prefers having both at the same time," I replied crossly. "Especially flatterers who tell him he's the strongest, handsomest, cleverest, most powerful wizard in history."

"Shut up!" said Draco. "Who cares about his girlfriends? He's about to score again!"

I clenched my fists, willing Roger to miss the goal this time. He feinted, aimed for Oliver Wood's fingers, then suddenly the Quaffle was flying through the far goal-post. The whole stadium exploded with cheers and boos, while the second-year Slytherins joined us in shouting Blaise's chant.

***Eagles win and Lions sin! (Losers! Losers!)***

*Davies chucks them in the bin he can make them pay.*

*Watch those Eagles fight! Watch those Eagles slay!*

*Catch the Snitch and win the pitch! Hip, hip, hip hooray!*

I might as well close my eyes as I would know from the cheers when I had to chant again. I wondered how much Roger would have humiliated the Gryffindors before Barbara Dunstan finally caught the Snitch.

When the cat-calls had stopped, Theo spoke into the silence. "Tracey has a point."

"What?"

"There's nothing to stop the Ravensclaws playing on and on for months making no attempt to catch the Snitch until they've won the Quidditch Cup, the House Cup and every other award Hogwarts can give them, just in Quidditch points."

Vincent screwed up his face, trying to work this out. Gregory didn't bother trying.

"Hooch said she was going to stop the match at five o' clock," said Blaise.

"I'm not waiting that long," said Theo. "We want Ravenclaw to win this battle, but we want Slytherin to win the war. So pick a score. When do we want this Quidditch match to stop? And how are we going to stop it?"

Draco latched on. "Three hundred," he said. "If Ravenclaw stop playing when they have three hundred points, they've thrashed Gryffindor, but we've beaten them to the Cup. But if Ravenclaw reach three-forty, then they'll beat *us* to the Cup."

"How are you going to stop the match if you're not playing?" asked Vincent.

Theo dived under the stand without replying. He emerged two rows behind us, whispering furiously in Terence Higgs's ear. Higgs cackled and nodded, evidently agreeing to whatever Theo was planning.

At Roger's next goal, the other Slytherins became a little more cautious in their cheering. Theo returned, his face expressionless, shaking a blue rattle. Millicent demanded, "Where have you been?" but Theo looked mysterious and wouldn't tell her.

I stopped paying attention. Ravenclaw raked up goal after goal, with Roger scoring two-thirds of them, as Wood didn't seem to be playing properly at all. Scamander and Goldstein made sure the Bludgers were persecuting the Gryffindor Chasers, and if they did contact the Quaffle, Dorny made save after save. But my housemates were no longer urging me to cheer.

"I know it's a bit difficult for Tracey," whispered Daphne. "She's torn between her brother and her house."

"But you don't have to worry." Cecilia patted my arm soothingly. "Your brother's dead brilliant, and Theo has fixed it so that he can't hurt Slytherin."

Finally, *finally*, when Ravenclaw were sitting on a sickeningly stupendous seventeen goals to one, there was a brilliant flash of gold. Something blindingly bright whizzed through the air and almost hurled itself at Barbara Dunstan's cheek. She lifted her hand to find out what had stung her and discovered she was holding the Snitch.

The match was over.

Suddenly Pansy's blue tablecloth had dropped to the ground, and a green one was billowing over her head. Our section of the stadium was a mass of green and silver, and we were singing new words to Blaise's song.

***Lions gnaw and Eagles soar! (Losers! Losers!)***

*Dunstan throws them to the floor she has shown the way!*

*Eagles lose the fight! Eagles lose the day!*

*Grab the Cup and lift it up! Snakes take it away!*

"But I thought you said she wasn't going to catch it?" said Vincent in confusion.

Several other people were confused, including Madam Hooch. "That was a ricochet movement," she said. "Something hit this Snitch and *pushed* it towards Miss Dunstan. But there's nothing visible on the pitch."

"I can find it for you," volunteered Professor Flitwick. "*Accio!* Aaah... something has landed in my hand, but it's invisible. *Apparecium!* It's just a gobstone... a commonplace glass gobstone. I wonder whose fingerprints are on it?"

It was a well-used gobstone on which at least a dozen wizards had left some kind of magical trace, so no-one was ever accused of using it to disrupt a Quidditch match. Flitwick might have been shrewd enough to work out who had laid the guilty charm, but what could he do? Higgs was in his final year, only days away from leaving Hogwarts for good, so there was no point in punishing him. And Ravenclaw *had* been playing with an unfair advantage.

It was Gryffindor's worst defeat for three hundred years, so Slytherin won the Quidditch Cup. But we lost the House Cup because Dumbledore, biased as usual, trumped up some excuse to give extra house points to Potter and his mad friends.

Early on Thursday morning, the exam results were posted. I raced to the exam notice board before breakfast and searched for my name on the list of forty first-years. There! I had come seventh overall. Even the *great* Harry Potter and his annoying friend Weasley, who were tied for fifth place, had only averaged two percent more than I had. Theo, who had managed three percent more than them, was the only Slytherin ahead of me.

"Are you gloating, Tracey?" Draco was standing behind my shoulder. "Will Mummy and Daddy be pleased with your results?"

The list showed that Draco had come eighteenth, just behind Susan Bones. He must be furious that I had done better than he had. Remembering his family's prominent position in magical society, I forced a laugh.

"I can't imagine they'll care. Exams aren't everything."

"Besides," said Draco casually, "your brother has beaten you."

"What?" My eyes pricked as I slowly scanned the third-years' results sheet. It was true. Roger had come second in his year. Unlike the swot who occupied the top place, Roger also had something called a Gardiner Award, which was apparently for "contributions to Quidditch, music, art and good citizenship."

I shrugged and forced the wobble out of my voice. "As I said, our Mum and Dad don't care that much."

But it was a lie. Mum and Dad *would* be pleased with Roger.

And they would know for certain that he had done better than I had.

## Nature's Nobility

*Chapter 4 of 10*

Slytherin's Monster is on the loose, and Tracey's happy schooldays take a darker turn. Much, much darker...

Chapter Four

Nature's Nobility

Friday 30 April 1993

The worst, most unforgivable thing Roger ever did to me was after Easter in my second year at Hogwarts. It happened a few days after Dumbledore had been thrown out of Hogwarts, following a very entertaining Potions lesson.

"I thought Gryffindors were supposed to be brave!" tittered Pansy. "But just look at them today!"

Daphne, Cecilia and I all laughed (Millicent brayed a moment later, after the rest of us had finished). The Gryffindors were huddled around their cauldrons, muttering in scared voices.

"They're dead scared about who Slytherin's Monster is going to attack next," giggled Cecilia.

"I expect it'll be Brown or Thomas," said Daphne. "If they had brains, they'd work that out for themselves."

"If Brown and Thomas had brains, they'd take the next train home," said Pansy. "But they're too stupid to think of that." We all laughed again.

"Could the Monster make a mistake and attack one of us?" asked Cecilia.

"No, silly," chided Pansy. "It's *Slytherin's* Monster. Everyone in Slytherin is safe."

"Besides," said Millicent, "we're all pure-bloods here."

Parvati Patil happened to catch Millicent's eye and frown at her, but when Millicent shoved an elbow into Parvati's ribs, Parvati dropped her eyes like a rabbit and turned back to her cauldron. It was very funny.

Of course, when the bell rang to let us out for break, we were all careful to keep together. We weren't worried about the Monster, but it was the new school rule. Snape was accompanying us to the Charms classroom to spend our so-called "break" until Flitwick arrived.

"I don't know why Snape bothers," hissed Pansy to Draco. "After all, he must know we're safe really."

Draco gave her the thumbs up before turning back to Vincent and Gregory.

"Ooo-oooh," exclaimed Daphne. "It's Tracey's brother!"

I turned my head away from the crowd of fourth-years on their way downstairs. From the corner of my eye, I could still see Pansy's attempt at a slow, seductive smile while Cecilia wriggled and giggled and Millicent ferociously stared. It was Daphne who succeeded best; her eyelash-flutter was so alluring that for a moment it even seemed that Roger was looking at her. They were such fools! Daphne had stopped talking about how her older sister fancied Roger; now that she fancied him herself, her sister was the competition. Really, what did they all see in him! He was just a rough, arrogant boy!

I tried to think of something different to say, something that would cover up my friends' fascinated silence. But before I had time to think properly, Roger's voice sailed clearly over the crowds.

"Olivia, why should I care that your mother's a Muggle-born? So is my father!"

We all froze in our tracks. The Gryffindors were nearly pushing ahead of us, for not one Slytherin was taking a step.

"Don't dawdle!" barked Snape.

We all took a dutiful pace forward. Draco was staring at me, and Pansy gave a nervous laugh.

"Get away with you, Tracey!" exclaimed Cecilia. "Are you really a half-blood?"

I could have twisted Roger's neck round and round in circles until his head was screwed right off! "Of course not," I said. "Both my parents are magical. Which chapter did Flitwick tell us to read?"

"But is your Dad really a Mudblood?"

"Enough chatter!" commanded Snape.

Once we had arrived in the classroom, Pansy rounded on me furiously.

"Tracey, why did you claim to be a pure-blood if you're not one?"

"But I am pure! I told you, my parents are a witch and wizard."

"But... oh, dear..." She began to laugh patronisingly. "Draco, will you please explain the matter to this poor, ignorant little half-blood?"

Draco yawned. "A pure-blood is someone with completely pure *ancestry*. For example, if the great-grandparents of your great-grandparents were all wizards, you'd be a seventh-generation wizard. My ancestors are the Malfoys, the MacDougals, the Blacks and the Rosiers every last one was magical."

"Or to make it simpler," said Pansy, "do you have four magical grandparents? If you do, you're a pure-blood. But if your parents and grandparents are all Muggles, then you're a Mud " Flitwick walked in, and Pansy hastily corrected herself, "a Muggle-born. Everything in between is a half-blood. Do you get it now?"

"Oh. So am I a half-blood?" asked Millicent.

My face burned (I wished I was setting fire to Roger). Daphne patiently explained, "Yes, Millicent. Since you have a Muggle grandmother, you are definitely a half-blood."

"Tracey has a Muggle grandmother *and* a Muggle grandfather," countered Millicent dispassionately.

Cecilia was nearly in tears. "Tracey, you were dead unfair not to tell us!"

Daphne put an arm around Cecilia and spat at me, "Exactly. At least Millicent was honest about who her family are."

"You never asked about my family!" If Cecilia was going to keep blubbing like an idiot, I hoped she would weep enough tears to drown Roger.

"Grandfather Burke married an honest Muggle who knows her place," remarked Millicent. "But Muggle-borns try to live like wizards. They never get it quite right."

Flitwick called the class to order even though it was really too early, so I was saved from having to retort that Millicent was a person who never, ever got it quite right and that Dad was not "like" a wizard, he *was* a wizard. It was a good thing I didn't say anything so foolish, because of course no Slytherin accepts this argument.

I was a Slytherin. I had house pride to consider.

Cecilia sat down next to Millicent for the lesson. When Flitwick told us to practise in pairs, I had to work with Gregory. He was so slow that I nearly cast a Slow Motion Hex on him, just to see how long it would take anyone to notice the difference. *They ought to force Roger to work with Gregory for the next twenty years* I thought. *That would be a fair punishment for his blabbing!*

But I was the one being punished, because Pansy still wasn't letting anyone speak to me when we arrived down in the common room at the end of the afternoon. Pansy plumped herself down on a green sofa, and Daphne sat next to her. Cecilia stared at me for an agonising three seconds before giving in to Daphne's tug on her sleeve and sitting down with them. Millicent didn't even look at me as she chose a green ottoman at Pansy's feet. Pansy took out a bag of mint humbugs and offered them around (Daphne first; Cecilia second; Millicent took the broken one) before beginning a conversation about dress-robos.

"Mummy says I need new ones for the round of summer parties. We've planned out all the designs, but there doesn't seem to be any point in cutting and stitching right now because I'll have grown by the summer."

"I thought Madam Tatting could stitch a little growth-allowance spell into the seams," said Daphne.

"She can, but it's never as precise as made-to-fit, is it? I'm to have one robe in silver, one in turquoise and one in some shade of pink. Mummy tried to talk me into a deep blush-pink, but I'm more a pale salmon-pink person, don't you think?"

"I think blush-pink would suit you, Pansy," I said.

She ignored me completely. "As I said, I'm having *pale* pink, and I can't choose between three frills or five..."

Cecilia firmly turned her head around and stared at Pansy. I knew then there would be no point in trying to join in. It was all Roger's fault! If he had kept his big mouth shut, I'd still have my friends. How could he say such a stupid thing about our Dad when he *knew* everyone was paranoid about Slytherin's Monster? If the Monster came roaring out into the corridor this moment, I'd happily throw Roger in front of it and hope it ate him too!

Well, I had learned one thing. A true "pure-blood" had four magical grandparents or perhaps even more magical ancestors than that. How many Slytherins could honestly claim to be "pure" for seven whole generations (or whatever their sacred number was)? I was good at maths and I knew there had never been enough wizards in Britain to produce even twenty families with seven-generation purity. So unless these very special "pure-bloods" were constantly marrying their first cousins, they must be lying about something!

I found I had drifted up to the bookshelves. The Slytherin common room didn't have walls plastered with dusty book-cases like the pretentious Ravenclaw Tower, but it did have a couple of rows of leather-bound tomes in the far corner. Miserably browsing their thick spines, I saw that we had been provided with a few essential volumes such

as *Quidditch through the Ages*, *A Concise Dictionary of Spells*, *The Atlas to the Wizarding World* and *Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy*.

A genealogy? I angrily tugged the dusty old book off the shelf, wondering whether it would be full of lies about families who wanted to claim blood-purity. When I read that it had been published in 1927, I nearly decided that it was too out of date to be relevant, but then I caught a glimpse of the year "1992". Just last year! What's more, it was under the familiar name of Malfoy.

4. **Linus Douglas Malfoy**, born May 1963, is employed by Gringotts and resides in Gloucestershire. He married July 1986 **Hazel Morgause**, elder daughter of Thamas **Parkinson**, and they have the following issue.

**Daisy Marpessa Malfoy**, born February 1988.

**Marigold Roxana Malfoy**, born April 1990.

**Ivy Albina Malfoy**, born June 1992.

5. **Letitia Rubina Malfoy**, born June 1966, resides in Norfolk. She married July 1985 **Claud Algernon**, younger son of Oliver **Greengrass**, and they have no issue.

Yes! Pansy had told us all about her three nieces (Draco's cousins) and they were definitely named Daisy, Marigold and Ivy. *This must be one of those magically-updating history books*, I reminded myself. Madam Pince had explained how a magical reference book that self-updates every time new facts arise is unable to lie, so perhaps I could trust *Nature's Nobility*.

Hardly knowing why I needed to do it, I pulled a clean exercise book out of my bag and charmed it so that only I could open it. Then I rummaged for an ink-bottle: not the one I used in class, but one that Roger had bought me in Zonko's. (Why did I have to think of Roger at a time like this?) Indigo's Incognito Ink was charmed to be invisible to everyone except the writer. I dipped in my quill, considered a moment, then wrote on the cover:

## TRACEY'S BOOK OF THE DEAD.

Then I turned to the first page and began to take notes.

I read and read *Nature's Nobility*. I learned when wizards had been born and died, where they had lived and worked, whom they had married and divorced, and how many children they had had. I took feverish notes on the Malfoys and the Parkinsons, the Greengrasses and the Runcorns, the Crabbes, the Goyles and the Bulstrodes. There weren't any wizards named Davies, of course, but there were lots and lots of Boneses.

"Tracey, why are you doing your homework on the floor?"

I banged *Nature's Nobility* shut. "Millicent, don't creep up on me like that!"

Millicent dropped heavily to her knees. "Let's see the notebook, then. Oh, it's blank. You need to listen to me, Tracey. I've come to help you."

"Mind your own business!"

She slapped my upper arm, but not spitefully. "Rude! I came to say... Us half-bloods... We need to know our place."

"What place?" I demanded furiously. "We're witches, aren't we? I have more brains than any of those so-very-important pure-bloods!"

"We're half-blood witches," said Millicent. "The pure-bloods won't hurt us. But we have to know our place. It's blood first and money second. We have to respect that. We can use things like muscles and brains and good looks to help ourselves get ahead, but we mustn't pretend they *count*."

She scowled, but I suppose that was her way of smiling, and stomped back to her place on the lowly ottoman. It was only *today* that Millicent had found out she was technically a half-blood, yet she had already adapted to the news! She had known all along that she wasn't as important as Pansy or Daphne, even if she hadn't quite understood why.

*Who made the rules anyway?* I fumed. *We'll see whose place is where!*

We were forced to stay in the common room all weekend, so there was nothing to do except research my classmates' families. *Nature's Nobility* was teaching me that all pure-bloods were related to each other, which meant my pure-blooded classmates were probably related to famous pure-blood criminals. I made a list of events to research in future (if we were ever allowed to use the Hogwarts library again).

1. Read reports of old trials to find out why everyone went to Azkaban.

2. Read newspaper archives to find out if family members were involved in famous scandals (e.g. divorces).

3. Ask Grandma & Grandpa Bones how much they know about other Diagon Alley traders, esp. in Knockturn Alley.
4. Ask all grown-up relatives & friends who bullied them when they were at Hogwarts.
5. Also ask about Hogwarts scandals, e.g. thefts, cheating at exams, famous Quidditch fouls, sex, drugs, expulsions, etc.

Pansy sniggered as she walked past me. "Look at the half-blood! She's been sitting in that corner all day trying to write poetry!"

"She hasn't written much," said Daphne. "She's staring at a blank page."

Cecilia giggled sycophantically, and Millicent, still a step behind, twisted her mouth.

I jumped to my feet. "What about you, Pansy? Have you done any homework yet?"

Cecilia opened her mouth, but Pansy interrupted. "Cecilia, don't speak to that half-blood liar!"

"You can talk, Pansy!" I retorted. "You talk and talk about so-called purity, but how did your father make his money? My grandparents say that most of his real estate is sold to Muggles."

"That's a lie," she said, but she took a step backwards.

"Your father buys up slums very cheap so he can renovate them with magic. Then he sells them very dear to Muggles. Parkinson's Real Estate couldn't exist without its Muggle customers. Does that make it a half-blood business?"

"Rubbish," snapped Pansy, recovering her poise. Although she was the smallest of us in height, her snap was large enough to fill the common room. "Blood-purity means having four magical grandparents, Tracey, and you don't qualify. So don't interfere with what you don't understand."

"Then where does that leave Cecilia?" I retorted. "Is she somehow a pure-blood with a half-blood mother? Tell them, Cecilia. Wasn't your mother's grandfather a squib?"

Cecilia burst into tears and sobbed something incoherent about "thought you were my friend".

"This bickering is spoiling our game!" exclaimed Draco from the boys' table. He paused his shuffle of the Exploding Snap cards. "Why don't you all just write out your pedigrees to the last seven generations? Then you'd know who was the purest."

"Draco Malfoy, your family might have pure blood, but it has dirty actions!" I could hear my voice rising to a near-scream, but it felt good to proclaim a spectacular scandal about a family as important as the Malfoys. "Your aunt is Bellatrix Lestrange, and she's serving a life-sentence in Azkaban. So is her cousin, Sirius Black."

"Sirius Black!" yelled a voice from half-way across the dungeon. "Are we talking about the famous mass-murderer?"

Suddenly there was a deadly silence. Every single Slytherin seemed struck dumb with awe because I had dared to expose the Malfoys. Draco himself was springing to his feet, his wand drawn dangerously as he called, "*Silencio!*"

I smiled triumphantly, but my smile faded when I realised that every housemate was staring at us, yet nobody was sharing my triumph. The Slytherins were not admiring, but *angry*, because exposing the Malfoys was far more serious than embarrassing the small-fry Parkinsons.

I tried to gasp out words, but my vocal cords were dead. Draco's Silencing Charm had exterminated my voice.

"Davies, you have gone too far," said Draco. "You are a half-blood. Your father is an imposter and your mother is of no importance in our community. We welcomed you like a friend and we have always treated you like an equal, even though not one of us has the tarnish of a Mudblood parent, and some of us are from very old families indeed. Yet you *will not* understand the difference in your status."

For a moment, it seemed that our audience would applaud. I could have sliced off Roger's head and thrown it to them to use as a Quaffle!

"And how do you repay us for this privilege?" Draco continued. "As soon as we discover your lies, you turn against us like an enemy! So it's your own fault that you no longer have friends here. Crabbe, deal the cards again. We don't speak to Davies any more."

The boys turned their backs and sorted through their cards. The girls were lined up in a furious procession: Millicent was scowling; Cecilia was sobbing on Daphne's shoulder; Pansy was flushed as scarlet as a Gryffindor banner, which made her face look like a pug's.

"She said " Daphne began.

"Never mind what she said," said Pansy, her voice as hard as a diamond. "We didn't hear it, remember? She no longer exists. As I was saying, Daphne, the sky-blue satin wasn't my kind of robe, but it was the exact colour of your eyes. If you can talk your mother into shelling out the Galleons, I can ask Madam Tatting to place it on reserve for you..."

A strange thought darted into my head: *Why do I want to talk to these boring people?* I pushed that alien thought away. *I want to talk to them because they're the only friends I have!* I reminded myself. *I wanted to be in Slytherin, and I'd be perfectly happy here if only Roger hadn't interfered with my friends.*

I soon discovered that there was another good use for *Tracey's Book of the Dead*. I turned to a clean page and listed as many ways as I could think of to kill Roger.

## Owl Post

- Which would make you most miserable?
- (A) Living in a castle guarded by Dementors.
  - (B) Being ostracised by all your friends at once.
  - (C) Detention with Snape for something you didn't do.
  - (D) An interfering sibling who tried to fix up your problems.
- What an easy question. After all, D is for Davies.

## Chapter Five

### Owl Post

Thursday 3 - Friday 4 March 1994

BANG!

Suddenly, where there had been a cauldron, there was simply a bubbling mass of dark, treacly liquid. I was frozen for an instant before I remembered to jump up onto a chair, only a second before the ruined potion could splash my legs. Blaise and Theo were not so quick; they both yelped in pain.

"What abysmal fool," hissed Snape, "was so idiotic as to add the bromine before stirring the moonstone powder? Zabini, can you count up to two?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then why were there three of you crowding around that ruined cauldron? Miss Davies, did I give you permission to work in threes?"

This was typical of Snape. Draco always commandeered both Vincent and Gregory to his cauldron, but Snape never said a word about it because Draco was his favourite. Since a student who worked alone never had time to finish a Potions practical, and the girls still weren't speaking to me, that forced me to team up with Blaise and Theo. Snape tolerated Theo, but he had no time for Blaise or me, so he used our working in a trio as an excuse to give us detention.

"It's Davies's fault," muttered Blaise. "Get her to replace your cauldron, Nott."

*What?* I seethed as I swept the mop over the spillage. *I did try to stir the moonstone powder first, but Blaise was too quick with pouring in the bromine. Besides, his mother's rolling in Galleons: why can't she be the one to pay for her son's mistake?*

"Father was going to buy me a new cauldron anyway," Theo hissed back. "The real problem is that this year I had a clean record until you two went and landed me in detention. I've a good mind to make you serve it for me!"

Obviously that was not possible, so at four o'clock all three of us slunk back down to the dungeons. Waiting for us with a grim non-welcome were Snape and... oh, no...

Roger.

My heart sank to my shoe-buckles. I usually managed to avoid Roger at Hogwarts, but now he and a couple of classmates also had detention with Snape!

"Hello there," he said with a stupid grin. "Girls, this is my little sister Tracey. Tracey, these beautiful young ladies are Miss Olivia Goldstein and Miss Yvonne Rivers."

They smiled and I scowled.

After a pause Roger asked me, "Aren't you going to introduce your friends?"

"Davies has no friends," interrupted Blaise quickly. "If you really want the names of her victims, I'm Zabini and this is Nott. We are definitely not her friends."

Yvonne Rivers gasped. Roger began, "Look here " but then Snape opened his mouth and we all fell silent.

"You know what you have to do. Third-years mix a usable Photopergaz Potion. Fifth-years brew an Invigoration Draught. I require six individual efforts, brewed without conferring, and nobody leaves until I am satisfied."

Snape had done me a favour. It was bad enough to have to work in the same room as Roger without having him prying into why I was a social failure. But even he had better sense than to chatter on while Snape was sitting in front of us.

For weeks after I had confronted Pansy in the common room, her little coterie had pushed me away, splayed my quills, hidden my books, stolen my sweets and whispered about "the upstart fraud". After a day or two, I had taken refuge in the dusky study corner of the dungeon, refusing to speak to any of them even if they spoke to me first. They could jolly well apologise if they wanted my attention, and of course the word "sorry" wasn't in Pansy's vocabulary. I had spent the summer holidays exploring Diagon Alley (pretending to my family that I was meeting friends there I really did meet up with Susan Bones a couple of times) and finding out all kinds of useful information to write in my *Book of the Dead*.

I had hoped it would all blow over once we started third year. On the first day, Cecilia had greeted me shyly, so I had made a great fuss of seeing her again and pretending that last term had never happened. But then Pansy had waltzed in and demanded to know why Cecilia was speaking to a Mudwallower. Cecilia had burst into tears and fled, but she had kept away from me after that. She sat next to me in Divination because we were the only Slytherins in the class, but she always darted such sad, reproachful glances at me that I wouldn't speak to her even then. I wouldn't speak to any of them. They didn't deserve it.

That third year at Hogwarts had been miserable, what with Dementors guarding every exit and Roger showing off about being Quidditch Captain, so I had been spending every spare minute on homework, hoping that at least I could beat Roger academically. It was so unfair that I was now serving detention because of Blaise's mistake! I jabbed my spatula down in my cauldron, pouring all my anger into the Photopergaz Potion.

However, by a quarter to six, it was obvious who was a competent potioneer. I was pouring a perfect red-brown Photopergaz Potion into the laboratory flask. Blaise had apparently had not learned from his mistake, as his potion was nearly black and far too viscous, but Theo's was fine. Roger's Invigoration Draught was a pretty crimson colour, but it was too translucent; Olivia Goldstein's draught had a mysterious opaque quality that was so obviously right. Yvonne Rivers had managed to curdle her brew, and we knew even before Snape descended on us that she was in trouble.

"Nott and Miss Goldstein, you may leave. Next time, get it right on the first attempt. Miss Rivers and Zabini, you can get rid of this muck and start all over again. Davies, that will prove a somewhat feeble Invigoration Draught, but rather than wasting any more valuable unicorn horn on a third attempt, you may sit here and write a report on your mistakes. Miss Davies, while you have produced a usable Photopergaz Potion, I have rarely seen such an appalling mess on the benches. You are to sweep up before you leave."

I couldn't believe it! Snape knew very well that I was a neat worker; most of the mess was on Roger's bench. But apparently it was my job to clean it up. Snape went out to check supplies in his private store, so Blaise and Yvonne risked a hushed conversation. I ignored them.

Next to me, Roger put down his quill. "Tracey," he said, "what did that boy Zabini mean by saying that you had no friends?"

Flushing, I swept Roger's spilt charcoal into the dustpan and tried to sound casual. "That's just Zabini. He didn't want to admit that this detention was his fault, so he's been blaming me for it."

Roger checked that Blaise and Yvonne could not hear us before pointing out, "That other boy Nott didn't say anything to stand up for you."

*Get lost, Roger,* I thought. *I don't want you meddling in my affairs.* But I didn't dare run out of the dungeon without Snape's permission, so I shrugged. "Theo's all right. He's just about my best friend." This was actually true. Since Theo didn't care what anyone else thought, he had never sneered at or ostracised me, even when Draco had called him a "scumsucker" for keeping quiet. But Theo didn't care what I thought either, so he had never shown me any actual friendship.

Roger frowned. "Do you have a best friend who lets other people insult you in public? Then what are your worst friends like? What happened to that group of girls who used to go everywhere with you? Lately I've only ever seen you skulking around alone."

"Roger, I do *not* skulk! How *dare* you spy on my private life!" I hurled a couple of spare blocks of charcoal into his cauldron, just to destroy some small thing that was his. "Why does it matter to you who my friends are?"

"Calm down; I only do it to keep an eye on you. Mum and Dad have been worried. They think your letters have sounded lonely. So tell me about your friends."

"It's all your fault!" I hissed. I could have screamed, but that would have pulled Snape back into the classroom. Instead, I lit a white fire under Roger's cauldron, hoping I could melt the charcoal into the lead. "I lost my friends on the day they found out that Dad's a Muggle-born. *You* told them that."

"Did I? I don't remember. Sorry." He put on a fake-kindly grin. "By the way, that fire is way too hot. If this were a Muggle laboratory, you'd be just about burning it down by now. But never mind; you don't want friends like that anyway."

"How do you know what my friends are like?" I asked coldly. I slammed my crusher down into the cauldron, muttering the squashing spell from the last Transfiguration lesson: "*Premo! Premo!*"

"I told you, I keep an eye on you. I've often ended up sitting quite close to your group over dinner, you know. What I've noticed about the Slytherin girls is that they all seem very fond of gossip and scandals. They just can't wait to pass on the bad news about other people."

If the lake had burst in through the dungeon roof and drowned us all, I would have been grateful to it. Had Mum and Dad ~~asked~~ Roger to invade my life and rip open my secrets? I couldn't let Roger get away with being so smugly *right*, so I snapped at him, "You're wrong. The girls hate bad news. When I reminded them of a few home-truths about their own families, they " I broke off in horror. "*Premissimo!*"

I had just presented Roger with a tad too much information about why I was unpopular. What catalyst could I add to my molten charcoal to draw out all the impurities before I crushed down all the chemical structures to annihilation, making the concoction pure and intense like my anger? I stormed off to the cupboard to pull out castor oil and hurled rather too much into the cauldron.

Roger grinned triumphantly. (*So he's more popular than I am! Everyone knows that already!*) "Talk about naïve! The only useful thing you can do with other people's dirty secrets is *threaten* to tell the world. Once you've *actually* told, they just get angry and then you have no more bargaining power."

"They insulted our family first," I protested.

"Yes, you might have been justified, but you weren't exactly wise, were you? The girls want gossip about *their* people, not about themselves. Listen, Tracey. If you want to make friends with people, you have to be, well, friendly. Do something nice for the girls if you want them to like you."

"Nice? You mean be their *slave*? Run around polishing their boots and doing their homework for them? *Premissimo, Prem* "

"Your classmates didn't quite strike me as the academic types. What actually interests them? Is it clothes? You really should stop mucking around with Snape's ingredients and clean up properly; at this rate, you'll only land another detention."

Snape walked back in at that moment, so I became very busy with extinguishing the white-hot fire and chilling down my fake-potion. Little glassy specks had appeared in my satisfyingly useless mess, and I knew I had to get rid of it all before Snape noticed.

That was the end of the conversation with Roger. But it wasn't the end of Roger's interfering with my friends. *Thenext morning* you wouldn't have thought birds could fly so fast an owl dropped a scroll into my bacon. It was from Grandma Bones.

My dear Tracey,

I am so sorry to hear from dear Roger that you are having a little tiff with your friends. When I was your age, I had a friend who didn't speak to me for a whole week, and I think I cried every single day!

Tracey, let me give you some helpful advice. First, don't bear a grudge, but be the first to smile and forgive. Don't even wait for your little friends to speak to you first just approach them in a pleasant way anyway.

Second, go out of your way to be kind. The first minute a classmate accepts your sympathetic advances, slip her one of these little tickets. I'll let you into a secret: they once helped your own mother over a difficult patch at school.

Don't be disheartened, my dear, for these things do blow over. I do hope it clears up quickly for you.

With love from

Grandma x x x

My heart turned over at the "little tickets". They were stiff, cream-coloured cards, inscribed with Grandma's slanting cursive.

## This voucher entitles

### Miss Cecilia Runcorn

to a free robe-fitting

and a free set of house-robos

at Twilfitt & Tatting, Fine Dressmakers

Roger had even blabbed my friends' names, for the first four were personalised; Grandma had also slipped in a couple of blanks in case, I suppose, I felt like making new friends.

Grandma was trying to help, but she just didn't understand that people like Pansy can't be "bought" with silly little favours. I was on the point of tearing the vouchers to shreds when Daphne's sarcastic moan sailed over the marmalade.

"You know what *my* Mum says about new clothes. 'Syrinx's old rags are quite good enough for you, dear, and when you've finished ripping holes in them, you can pass them down to Astoria.' Anyone would think my parents didn't have a Knut! But whenever darling little Rhoda starts pouting and whining that she needs new robes, my parents will mysteriously manage to afford all the togs that they could never quite buy for me."

"It's a dirty great shame!" chimed in Cecilia. "I get our Ursula's cast-offs too. Pansy, you're dead lucky not to have an older sister at home."

"The *best* families buy new clothes for every daughter no matter how many girls live at home," Pansy reminded them. "Perhaps we could start a campaign to blackmail those mean-spirited parents "

In a flash, I remembered Roger's words about threats and bargaining power. Blackmail! *Idid* have something that all the girls wanted, and it wasn't Grandma's vouchers. My *Book of the Dead* contained everything I would ever need to blackmail each one of them! It had been stupid to shout their dirty secrets to the whole common room. It would be cleverer to whisper those secrets, make my housemates afraid that I *might* start shouting, and then they would bargain desperately for my silence.

"I never get nice clothes," said Millicent, unaware she was interrupting. "I have only brothers."

I slid off my chair and tapped Millicent on the shoulder. She scowled, about to remind me that we weren't on speaking terms.

"Millicent, here's your chance," I whispered, slipping her a voucher. "I only have a few of these, so they're only for my closest friends. It's time you had some pretty robes, isn't it?"

Alarmed by the strange phrase "closest friends", Millicent stared at the voucher. "Is it really a free robe, or is it buy one and then get one free?"

"It's really a free robe."

At these magic words, Cecilia whirled around. "What? Who's giving away free dress-robos?"

"Not dress-robos," said Millicent flatly. "Just ordinary house-robos. They are only for Tracey's closest friends."

"Cecilia," I interjected, "wouldn't you like some new house-robos?"

Cecilia hesitated, throwing a covert glance at Pansy, who was puffing up with indignation. Daphne was watching Pansy. But Cecilia loved clothes, and she had forgotten why she was supposed to hate me. Before Pansy had time to object out loud, I handed over a voucher, and Cecilia took it.

"Really free!" she exulted. "Our Ursula will be *green* with envy!"

"My grandmother is Tabitha Twilfitt of Twilfitt and Tattings," I reminded them. "I'm sure we all have a few useful relatives here and there. Why don't we pool our resources and think up ways we can all help each other? Cecilia's grandparents do perfume, and Millicent's aunt runs that beauty parlour. Let's say we wanted something else..." I looked casually at Daphne. "Say, a bargain on woollen rugs or peaches in January or even um a prophecy or a memory help from an Unspeakable... Do we know anyone who could help us there?"

Daphne's clear milk-and-roses complexion flushed much rosier. "Point taken, Tracey! I've never hidden the fact that my mother's mother works for Woolman's and my father's parents are greengrocers! They might even donate rugs and peaches if we asked them nicely." She frowned and stared down at her coffee cup, displeased that I had revealed what commonplace tradeswizards her grandparents were and terrified of what I might say next.

"So which of us knows an Unspeakable?" asked Millicent.

I shrugged. "I don't know; that was just an example." But Daphne, still nervously jiggling her cup, knew that I was lying. Her grand-uncle was the disgraced Unspeakable Augustus Rookwood, a Death Eater who was now locked away in Azkaban. I looked pointedly at Daphne, opened my mouth and asked, "Would you like some free, tailor-made house-robos, Daphne?"

She pulled herself together and said stiffly, "Thank you. That would be lovely."

I snapped my mouth shut as she meekly accepted the voucher. She knew that I was telling her! *won't talk about your Uncle Augustus if you let me be your friend again.*

Pansy stared in horror, unable to believe Daphne's defection.

I held a voucher just out of her reach. "Of course, Pansy's mother knows all kinds of useful people at the Witches' Institute," I said.

"Of course she does! Mummy's best friend is Mrs Fudge!"

"What else? Aurors... genetiwitches... Quidditch tickets... sailing... No, that's too obscure. There wouldn't be wizards who built boats, would there?"

Pansy blanched as white as a sheet as she gasped out, "Not any more! I think there were some boat-wizards once, but they went out of business years ago!"

I casually dropped the voucher onto Pansy's plate. She was related to Cynbal and Cyneward Avery, who had been forced to stop their boat-building hobby when it was exposed as a screen for their Death Eater activities. Cynbal had died in Azkaban, but his son Cyneward had been acquitted because he had pleaded acting under Imperius, an excuse that no-one had ever really believed.

Pansy grabbed at the voucher and choked out, "You guessed right about one thing, Tracey Mummy's Cousin Rufus is the Head Auror. And if ever we do want to watch his son Brutus playing Quidditch, he probably can get us good seats. But it won't be free tickets he's only my second cousin."

That day the girls let me sit with them in every lesson. Pansy kept close to me; Daphne gave me sweets and lent me quills; Cecilia chose me for her partner; and Millicent was grumpy about once again being relegated to the bottom of the pecking-order. Draco Malfoy glared at us furiously, and I knew I had to do something about him before he persuaded Pansy to break friends with me again. So I approached him with a sweet smile at the end of Transfiguration.

"Draco, lend me your eagle-feather quill."

He ignored me.

"Draco, if you don't listen to what I have to tell you, I'll tell it to the whole common room instead!"

He still seemed to ignore me, but he hung back as Vincent and Gregory marched out of the classroom. "What makes you think you're worth my time?"

"You give Potter your time and you don't even like him. So from now on, you can give me your time too. I don't really want to borrow your quill; I just want you to stop interfering between me and my friends. If you don't interfere with me, I won't make any trouble for you."

"And if I don't care about your petty trouble-making?"

"Then I'll tell Blaise and Pansy and the rest that your father was a Death Eater."

Draco shuddered violently before trying to bluff. "They won't believe you because it isn't true."

"They'll believe the trial records which anyone can read in the Hogwarts Library. Draco, shall we carry on this childish competition of telling everyone else who has the worst family? Or shall we be friends?"

He slammed down the eagle-feather quill. "Fine. You can keep it. I can always buy new luxury quills, which your father certainly can't afford. We'll all mind our own business and *then* we'll see how stupid half-bloods look when they try to mix with persons of breeding."

He stalked out of the Transfiguration classroom, leaving me miserably and furiously on the verge of tears. I had bought my friends back. But I hadn't been able to do it on my own. I owed it all to Roger's advice and interference. Wouldn't he ever leave me alone?

## The Yule Ball

*Chapter 6 of 10*

Tracey and friends are looking forward to the Yule Ball.

Chapter Six

The Yule Ball

Sunday 11 Sunday 25 December 1994

"I'll be Hogwarts champion in the Triwizard Tournament," boasted Roger. "I just need to find a trick to cheat the age barrier."

Well, ha, ha, ha, Roger! Harry Potter managed to outsmart the age barrier, but my very clever brother never did. He was stuck with being just an ordinary Hogwarts student, cheering from the sidelines like the rest of us. So much for his showing off!

A few weeks later, Roger was being all patronising about the Yule Ball. Cecilia, just like every girl in the school, was speculating about who would be her dance-partner. Roger happened to pass us in the corridor as she was speaking and he immediately decided to give us the benefit of his wisdom.

"Don't worry about finding partners," he reassured us. "Someone will be sure to invite each one of you."

"Cheek," complained Daphne. "He didn't actually invite any of us himself."

"Roger's never sincere," I reminded her. "He really means he *doesn't* think we'll be invited." *After all, I'm handsome.* The dreadful thought wouldn't go away. *Roger knows the boys won't ask me. And he just has to rub it in while my friends are listening!*

Pansy was going to the ball with Draco, of course, and Daphne and Cecilia were both too pretty to have any reason to worry. But what if I had to spend the Yule Ball discussing the Quidditch scores with Millicent? I was brooding on this humiliating vision when Blaise Zabini's voice floated across the common room.

"I expect Tracey has been driven to Confundus by now," Blaise was saying. "That tornado of invitations whirling around her head would be enough to confuse anyone."

"What?" asked Cecilia. "No, Tracey isn't confused. No-one has invited her to the Yule Ball yet."

*Thanks a heap, Cecilia,* I thought. *So generous of you to remind the boys how unpopular I am!*

"Oh, I can't believe that," said Blaise. "Tracey's face is sunshine. If she doesn't have a partner yet, she is a cruel refuser!"

*Blaise Zabini fancies me?* I thought. *But he's never taken any notice of me before!* Of course, it's never too late to change that. I plastered on a smile and announced, "I haven't told Cecilia everything yet!"

She pouted, and Blaise pounced.

"You see, she's a sunshine-face! That smile would melt the snow. Tracey, don't keep me on tenterhooks. Are you going to the Yule Ball?"

"Maybe." I didn't need to force my smile; his eyes were boring into mine and the difficulty was how to suppress my grin.

"You'll come with me, won't you? Please?"

"Blaise, I've never heard you speak so poetically before. Have you been hiding your talents?"

"Tracey, your lightest glance inspires a volume of poetry!"

I blushed and tried to simmer like the other girls. "Blaise, I didn't know you cared."

"Of course I find it difficult to look on the human face of Beauty and carry out a natural conversation. Can you blame me for being a little shy of you? But the suspense is tearing me apart won't you answer my question?"

"About the ball? Blaise, I should be delighted to go with you." I nodded significantly at Cecilia, only to find that I was looking at an empty chair. Cecilia had wandered over to the other side of the dungeon and she hadn't even heard Blaise invite me to the ball! Never mind. She had heard him call me a "sunshine-face". She had seen that boys *did* like handsome girls.

Take that, Roger!

I almost wished I would accidentally run into Roger, just for the satisfaction of telling him that his pity wasn't needed. "I have been invited to the ball," I imagined myself telling him. "Yes, Daphne and Cecilia are still looking, but I am going to the Yule Ball with Blaise Zabini, whom everyone agrees is the handsomest boy in fourth year."

But somehow, the imaginary dialogue never progressed because, even in my imagination, Roger was never interested.

For the next few days I walked around in a happy daydream. I had a dance-partner just like all the pretty girls, and perhaps my dance-partner would even become my boyfriend. After all, Blaise had called me the "human face of beauty". I was obviously beautiful to *him*!

As usual, it was the Ravenclaws who ruined everything. Millicent nearly crashed into a group of them on our way down to lunch. She stood back, waiting for them to apologise, but the Ravenclaw girls ignored us completely and continued their pretentious chattering among themselves.

Su Li was asking, "Is everyone so worried about clashing colours? Padma, did you bother to check whether your dress-robos will clash with Michael's?"

"But I'm not going with Michael," Padma Patil exclaimed. "We've broken up didn't you know? I'm going to the Yule Ball with Blaise Zabini!"

What?

"What?" asked Su. "Are you sure? Zabini asked me on Monday, and I accepted him."

"He asked me on Tuesday," said Padma. "Did you *definitely* accept him, Su? In a way he *couldn't* misunderstand?"

"Definitely," said Su. "I had no reason to refuse him, had I? This is ridiculous it's such bad manners to change his mind like that without even telling me. Are you *sure* he clearly, unequivocally asked you?"

"Absolutely. In fact," said Padma, "he asked me twice. So does he intend to take both of us? I'd say it was a misunderstanding, but of course you can never trust a Slytherin. There he is let's go and ask what he's playing at."

Su caught her friend's arm. "No, let's not. We'll look stupid if we cause a scene. If there's an innocent explanation, we can sort it out next Herbology lesson, when we've cooled off. And if Zabini really did ask both of us at once well, we'll make sure he doesn't go with either of us, won't we?"

Padma relaxed and then shrugged.

I didn't listen to whatever anti-Slytherin prejudices they spouted next. Blaise had invited me to the ball on Sunday, Su Li on Monday and Padma Patil on Tuesday! What was going *on*? I charged up to the Slytherin table and slammed my hands down onto Blaise's shoulders, forcing him to break off his conversation with Theo abruptly.

"Blaise, are we still going to the Yule Ball together?"

He reached for a ham sandwich. "What ball? Oh, that one. Davies, I haven't yet decided whether I'm going at all. But surely you don't think *you* have a chance of being my partner?"

"Blaise, you've already asked me, and I've accepted! Have you changed your mind?"

"I never asked you, Davies. Don't make a fool of yourself."

Theo was grinning, but it was the wrong time to involve him with the mess. I turned my head so that only Blaise could hear me. "Blaise Zabini, if you turn up at the Yule Ball with anyone but me on your arm, I will shout to every guest at the ball how your mother makes her living!"

"What?" He seemed so innocently surprised that I was the one taken aback. "But *l'ya* doesn't 'make a living'. She's independently wealthy; we've never made any secret of that."

"Twenty years ago," I reminded him firmly, "your mother was working as a model. Would you like me to show you some of her photo-shoots? I've found several old *Playwizard* centrefolds where your mother was posing nude."

"That was certainly not my mother," he said airily. "Save your petty blackmails for people who actually have something to hide."

He jerked his head at Theo, and they both marched away from the table only a little faster than usual. I wondered if Blaise really would manage to convince Draco and the rest that he had no connection with the long-lashed Yoruba beauty in my incriminating photographs.

Roger had been devastatingly correct. Blaise had only invited me to the ball *for a joke*. He had had no intention of really dancing with me. And I had fallen for his cheap flattery! I should have *known* it was only a joke. I slumped into the seat that Theo had vacated, trying to shut out my nightmare visions of Roger's mocking laugh. The Ravenclaw girls would gossip, and soon everyone would find out whom Blaise had fooled. Roger would laugh at me. Then he would write home and ask Mum and Dad to pity me, because I was *handsome* and would never have a boyfriend...

While I was despondently wondering whether the nude mother trick might after all pressure Blaise into reconsidering, Michael Corner and Zacharias Smith came to sit next to me. I tried to ignore them; I definitely didn't want any more Ravenclaws in my life today. They asked questions, and I don't remember what I answered. I didn't even realise that I had told them far too much about my problem until Smith informed me, "Zabini has a bet about how many girls he can persuade to accompany him to the ball. You've just won him a Galleon from Malfoy."

What! Well, that certainly fitted with what I already knew. But I didn't need to have it discussed in front of Ravenclaws, who would only go blabbing to Roger. So I protested and remonstrated, hoping to make myself so disagreeable that the boys would buzz off and leave me alone. I successfully irritated Corner; he made some excuse about finishing his homework and ran off. But Smith didn't seem to be at all provoke-able. No matter what I said, he didn't seem to want to leave.

"It's useless to try to punish Zabini," he said to me. "If you do find a way to annoy him, he'll take revenge."

"You weren't listening," I grumbled. "I'm not trying to *punish* Blaise; I want to persuade him to keep his promise and take me to the ball after all. I didn't say I'd *actually* show people the rude pictures of his mother; I said Blaise might oblige me if he *thought* I'd show them."

"Oh, do not waste your time," said Smith. "If you're wanting embarrassing stories about Zabini's mother, I can give you a much bigger laugh than a couple of nude photographs. Did you know that she's my aunt?"

"What? That's right, *Nature's Nobility* does say that one of her husbands one of *hermany* husbands was named Smith. Was he related to you?"

"Yes, Edom Smith was my father's brother. He worked in our family business until the day he won fifty thousand Galleons on the lottery. Such a huge win was broadcast all over the *Daily Prophet*, and of course he was bombarded with congratulatory owls from single witches who suddenly wanted to meet him. But the only one of these admirers whom he actually met in the flesh was Alansasa Zabini, a widow with a baby. I'm expecting she used some Voodoo charm to prevent her rivals from ever reaching our front door."

"Did she use a love potion on your uncle?"

"We'll never be able to prove that. I can only tell you that Uncle Edom loaded Alansasa Zabini with diamonds and married her within a month. After that our family hardly ever saw him. Two years later, he suddenly and mysteriously died. He was a healthy wizard of thirty-two who did not drink or smoke and had always been unusually cautious, so I'm not believing that he died from illness or accident. The fifty thousand Galleons were all settled on Alansasa and Blaise, of course; nobody named Smith ever saw a Knut of it."

"Wasn't Alansasa named Smith by then?" I objected logically.

"Not for long. Within a year, she'd married a ruby merchant named Khan."

"So do you think... Smith, were *all* her husbands wealthy? Did *she* kill them?"

"We cannot prove anything," he repeated. "For all I know, Alansasa had maybe fallen foul of surviving Death Eaters, and it could be they who have persecuted her husbands. Or perhaps it's some Voodoo curse from her family in Nigeria. Whatever the reason, a lot of healthy young people who knew Alansasa have ended up dead. I'd stay away from the mother *and* the son if I were you."

I shivered. "And to think I nearly let Blaise Zabini take me to the ball!"

"I'm not thinking anything so horrible. You'd be better off going with me."

"Yes, I would," I agreed. Now I came to think of it, going with Smith might be quite fun. We'd certainly find things to talk about. But I wasn't going to risk being jilted again, so I reminded him, "Aren't you meant to be going with Parvati Patil?"

"I can get out of that."

"Well, mind you do!" I snapped. "Do it quickly, before I promise to go with someone else. Until you officially get rid of Parvati Patil, I'm officially free to go with anyone who asks me!"

I wondered if it had been a good idea to snap at Smith; after all, he was helping me out of a hole. But he didn't seem to be thinking of that, for he simply assured me that he would definitely get rid of Parvati Patil *today* and would I please not give anyone else a definite promise before at least tomorrow.

So that is how it happened that on Christmas night I sailed into the Yule Ball on the arm of Zacharias Smith, my sort-of boyfriend. I was wearing an old scarlet dress-robe of Mum's that Grandma Bones had altered to fit me. I didn't want to listen to my classmates boasting about how their robes were new, so I was quite glad when Zacharias suggested we go and sit with his Hufflepuff friends. I should be proud to have him as my escort, shouldn't I? He was tall and fair, and you could probably describe his nose as "distinguished". He was wearing a blue-and-green tartan, which might be a sign that he belonged to an illustrious Highland clan.

"It's just the Smith family tartan," he told me. "Everybody named Smith is allowed to wear it, even non-clansmen like me."

"Oh. But aren't you Scottish?"

"I'm a Lowlander so the Highlanders do not count that. But the tartan is better than wearing black all the time, the way I usually have to at home."

Draco was swaggering past us completely shrouded in black satin so I nodded fervently. "Why do they make you wear black at home?"

"My grandfather owns the wizarding funeral parlour. In the undertaking business, we have to wear black to look the part."

"Really? Is your funeral place one of those old family businesses where the whole family has worked for generations?"

"It is. My father's expecting me to work for Smith's as soon as I leave Hogwarts. But I'll maybe surprise him and choose something else because I'd rather not spend my whole life working around death. What about you how do your parents earn their living?"

By now I was used to covering up how unambitious my parents were, and the misleading information tripped off my tongue. "Mum's at St Mungo's and Dad's a cordwainer." This line had convinced Cecilia that my mother was a Healer and my father was a master shoemaker; I had never needed to confess that Mum only worked in administration and Dad was still a mere journeyman.

But Zacharias was sharper than Cecilia. "I think I've met your father. Is he the Brian Davies who works for Cobbler's? He knows his trade; he gave me a good fit. I knew you were from a useful sort of family, Tracey. I cannot stand people who show off their money or brains but never contribute anything useful to our community."

*Hufflepuffs are so refreshing!* I thought as Zacharias and I sat down at one of the dining tables. *They don't care how ordinary anyone is; they admire straightforward hard work and effort more than talent or status!*

I was all set to have a very jolly time with Zacharias's friends when I happened to glance up at the Triwizard champions on the dais. Oh, no! I could not believe my eyes. Enthroned right there in the seat of honour was *my brother Roger!*

How had *he* managed to wrangle the place at the centre of everyone's attention? He wasn't a champion and he certainly wasn't a judge. He had no right at all to buzz around Fleur Delacour like a mad fly swimming in honey. Delacour could have had any boy from any of the three schools as her partner: whatever had possessed her to choose Roger?

Zacharias was in fact saying something about the champions' table so I exclaimed, "Those people up on the top table who think they're so important because a champion invites them to the ball!"

Zacharias shrugged. "Why not let them show off a bit, if it's making them happy?"

"Because people ought to *do* something for themselves instead of relying on reflected glory and accidents of birth, that's why!" I complained.

The lunatic Ravenclaw next to me serenely reminded us, "The Goblet of Fire did choose Fleur out of all the Beauxbatons students."

This point about the Goblet explained Delacour, who had done something to earn her glory, but it definitely didn't explain Roger. "But it didn't choose *my brother*!" I gasped, fighting off tears. "Why does *he* think he deserves a spot up there with the people who matter?"

"I'm expecting that Fleur thought he was pretty," said Zacharias. "It makes *her* look good to have him hovering over her."

*Pretty!* I felt a rush of gratitude towards Zacharias. *Ha ha ha, Roger, you're pretty!* Perhaps no-one would ever call me that, but someone *had* said it about Roger, and it was far worse for a boy to be pretty than for a girl to be handsome. Roger wasn't clever or athletic or admirable... just pretty.

Zacharias was the best escort a girl could have! For a moment, I wished he was my real boyfriend, whatever that meant. He was smarter than all the Ravenclaws put together and he had a great deal more sense than most of the Slytherins. We laughed at the same things and we hated the same annoyances. Not even Roger could upset me very much as long as I had Zacharias next to me to call him "pretty".

I smiled triumphantly at the Slytherins three tables away. Pansy and Draco were too busy leading the conversation to notice, but Cecilia waved at me.

"Malfoy looks like a vicar at a funeral," observed Zacharias, "and Parkinson looks like a meringue!"

Vincent, Gregory and Millicent were shovelling in the food; none of them had a partner. Theo was over-familiarly stroking Cecilia's rib-cage but he wasn't actually looking at her. Daphne was whispering to Blaise, but how could she be happy about an escort who had tried to invite just about every girl in the year before settling on her? On the next table, Cecilia's sister was sucking the face off a Quidditch Chaser, which was very bad manners in public, and Daphne's sister was looking thoroughly disenchanted with the Durmstrang boy who kept grabbing her hand. Nearer to us, Susan Bones was chatting happily with that very posh Muggle-born, but she had already told me that they were just friends. There didn't seem to be one couple at the feast who were happier than Zacharias and me!

Our cheerful mood lasted all through the meal, right up until the dinner plates vanished and the Weird Sisters began playing the first waltz. The dancing was about to begin. And who had the privilege of opening the dance? The Triwizard champions! I knew, a fraction before it happened, which couple would be first on the dance floor.

Roger glided into the arena holding Delacour in his arms as if the whole hall belonged only to him. He had been practising his waltz step and so his dancing was flawless. I could *feel* the gasps of admiration for his performance, could *smell* that every eye was upon them. People couldn't help staring at the Veela-girl, of course, but she was locked so tightly in Roger's embrace that even the men were staring at him too. That was what he wanted, wasn't it? To be in the centre of everyone's attention that was what Roger always wanted and always got.

I couldn't tear my eyes away. Someone's camera flashed, and I knew the photographs would find their way to Mum, Dad and all the relations. Everyone would say, yet again, how well Roger had done. They would be asking about his Veela girlfriend for months to come, but they wouldn't even remember whether or not I had been there, let alone whether I had brought an escort or known how to waltz.

With a tug at my arm, Zacharias whooped, "This is us, Tracey!" and pulled me into the dance. Suddenly his arms were clamped around me and I could smell the sweat under his robes. It ought to have been a happy moment; I was finally dancing with Zacharias Smith.

But all I could think about was Roger flawlessly waltzing with Fleur Delacour, the most important couple at the Yule Ball. I had been sorted into a different house, where I had my own friends and my own interests, yet I was still living in Roger's shadow. I would never escape very far away from Roger as long as he was still at Hogwarts.

## The Hogwarts High Inquisitor

Chapter 7 of 10

When there are appearances to keep up and scores to settle, Tracey might just have to sacrifice the Hogwarts gamekeeper. Talking of sacrifice, what was that about school rules?

WARNING. Higher rating on this chapter.

Chapter Seven

The Hogwarts High Inquisitor

Tuesday 7 Wednesday 15 November 1995

As we stepped out onto the courtyard, a snowball soared in a perfect arc and landed splat in Pansy's face.

"Who did that to my friend?" roared Millicent. "You Roger Davies don't just stand there laughing..." Millicent lowered her head and charged through the snow towards the knot of laughing Ravenclaws.

Instead of jumping out of the way, Roger stood his ground and deflected Millicent's charge with a fancy twist of his elbow. She rolled over in the snow, howling with rage. He held out his hand to pull her to her feet, but Millicent was too heavy even for a self-styled superwizard like my brother.

"Take a joke," he told her. "Yesterday it was *your* brother who threw snowballs at Tracey, but she didn't howl like a demented Erumpent. Tracey laughed it off even while you and Parkinson were laughing *at* her."

No. Roger ought to know better than to retaliate against an important person like Pansy! Hands on hips, I announced, "Roger, you don't need to fight my battles for me. If you think revenge "

"Revenge? Oh, lighten up, sister mine! It's all *a joke*!"

*Splat!* Millicent had thrown a snowball square into Roger's face, and was now hurtling her spare ammunition at his giggling group of friends.

Roger wiped his face with a grin. "See? All a joke. Have you heard the news? Hagrid's back. He gave us a great lesson yesterday."

I stared. "*Hagrid?*"

"We don't support Hagrid," said Millicent bluntly. "He's a bad teacher and he's half a giant. His creatures always cause injuries."

Roger looked surprised. "Well, you should have seen the injuries when Kettleburn was the teacher! Hagrid might not take the most professional approach, but he does know his stuff and he does care about students. You couldn't honestly say as much for *some* of the staff at this school."

All the girls were clustering around Millicent now, so I nudged Pansy and whispered, "Watch my brother damn himself!"

"Which staff, Davies?" asked Pansy. "Which of our wonderful staff isn't good enough for your Hagrid-loving, snowball-shoving tastes?"

Roger shrugged. "Since you ask, I must say that Trelawney doesn't seem to understand a word she's talking about, and I wouldn't present any Compassion Awards to Snape or Binns. As for the Toad Lady, she *really* lowers the tone of Hogwarts!"

Daphne was too shocked to join Pansy's titter. I tried not to think that Umbridge*did* look like a toad; people who wanted to get anywhere in life had to suck up to people like her. Could I goad Roger into talking his way to a detention?

I asked, "Why are you studying Defence if you hate the teacher so much?"

Roger shrugged again. "Who can predict who'll turn up to teach Defence around here? The last two teachers were fine; but I don't rely on teachers to sit my exams for me."

I was definitely not going to continue with Defence next year! I wasn't going to continue *any* of the stupid subjects that Roger had chosen. He was busy with Astronomy and Arithmancy, which he claimed would help him with predicting Quidditch outcomes, and with History of Magic, which apparently fulfilled his "cultural cravings". He had even joined Madam Hooch's special flying squad because he thought he had a future in professional Quidditch. He wasn't learning anything useful from any of it; and unlike Roger I was a *useful* sort of person.

As Roger followed his girlfriends indoors, Pansy exclaimed, "How... stupid! If Roger Davies wants to get anywhere in life, he should be sucking up to people like Professor Umbridge. The minute anyone tells her what he said, he'll have *no* chance of a job in the Ministry."

"Let's tell!" said Daphne eagerly. "He'll get detention one of those Magic Quill detentions!"

They were all looking at me, so I was forced to remind them, "No-o-o. His friends witnessed everything, and they'll claim that he didn't say anything. He insulted some 'toad lady', but that isn't a real name, so we can't prove he meant a particular person. Let's not get ourselves into trouble for tattling; let's do something positive to make ourselves Umbridge's favourite students."

"Ooooooh, *what?*" asked Cecilia admiringly.

Quick, a plan! I was the clever one; now it was time to put my brain in action. "Hagrid," I decided. That would show Roger that who counted around Hogwarts! "Professor Umbridge hates half-humans, so she'll be grateful for an excuse to get rid of Hagrid. Let's find her one."

Pansy squealed. "Tracey, you have *brains*! And it will be so easy. Look at the way his vicious hippogriff injured poor Draco last year... and that nasty little Niffler scratched me..."

I let Pansy rattle on, but I knew we would never get rid of Hagrid just because of his dangerous monsters. Even when the Wizengamot had tried to execute the wild Hippogriff, they hadn't talked about firing Hagrid, so they wouldn't care about Fire-Crab burns and Flobberworm-bites (Pansy hadn't even visited Pomfrey over that Niffler-scratch). Most of the "safety risks" in Hagrid's lessons were no worse than, say, having to boil reactive ingredients for Snape or trim Venomous Tentacles for Sprout. If we were actually to get rid of him, I would have to think up something completely different.

Suddenly the idea jumped up in my mind, fully-grown. Ha! It's not for nothing that I'm as bright as a diamond! I knew exactly what I was going to do, and it would show Roger that professionalism *did* matter. I didn't pay attention in Transfiguration. I let Cecilia Splinch our newt in five different directions before I remembered that we were supposed to be Vanishing it, and when I did half-heartedly wave my wand, all I managed to do was split the tail in half.

"You're not *helping*, Tracey," she wailed.

"I'm busy with our plan," I told her. "Get Millicent to help you with the exercises."

In the end, Pansy generously lent us her Auto-Answer Quill, which meant that Cecilia could answer the Transfiguration questions in a handwriting that looked like mine while I was free to do the brain-work.

"We'll have to work as a team if we're serious about exposing Hagrid," I warned my friends. "Millicent, you have a good broom, don't you?"

"It's a Cleansweep Ten," she confirmed.

"We'll need you to help with the dangerous part of the operation," I said.

"I don't like danger!"

"It will be less dangerous for you because you're our best flier. The most dangerous part is the risk of interference from teachers. But that won't be such a risk if we have Pansy as our look-out."

Pansy objected. "I don't see why I should do the tag-along part. I'm not your house-elf!"

"There's no 'must'," I told her. "I only meant that you might be kind enough to volunteer as our respectable front. You're a prefect, so teachers will believe that you have some good reason to be hanging around there."

"Hanging around where?" asked Daphne.

"Ravenclaw Tower. That's where our daring quest to upgrade Hogwarts begins."

After a very entertaining lesson with Hagrid (which Umbridge attended, making it quite clear that she disapproved of him) and the standard sparkly stuff with Flitwick, we swarmed outside to the west wing of the castle. Dusk was falling, which meant that not many people were about, but it wasn't too dark to make us look odd for mucking around in the snow.

"This snow is dead cold," complained Cecilia. "It's all inside my shoes."

"*Thermo*. There, I've cleared you a nice green patch. You need to build a snowman or something anything that looks as if being out here is normal. Millicent, do you have your broom? Right, let's get on it, then. Hold it steady; whatever I'm doing behind you, we need to keep still in the air. Remember, Pansy if anyone asks, we're just practising for Quidditch."

Millicent kicked us off in a plumb-vertical line, but my stomach lurched. I hadn't been on a broomstick since the end of first year. I heard Pansy decide they would build a caricature of Hagrid before their voices were lost to the whistling wind. We whizzed through the freezing air in a rigid line that didn't look at all like Quidditch practice, but if I begged Millicent to behave more naturally, she might sulk and bump me right off, so I just had to hold onto her and hope for the best. Down below... I whipped my head back upwards again; I felt sick when I looked down, and I couldn't risk toppling off. Some first-years had seemed to be asking about Pansy's snowman, but I mustn't worry about them; I must concentrate on staying astride the broom.

We were level with the base of the round tower. "Slow down," I said. "We're aiming for the fifth-floor dormitories."

Millicent obligingly slowed the Cleansweep, but now we were travelling jerkily, her concentration broken every time she counted out loud. I clutched at her, and finally we reached the lancet windows of the seventh-year dormitory. I turned my head carefully and looked in. A house-elf was laying freshly-ironed pyjamas on the blue-curtained beds, and a trumpet had been carelessly flung into the furthest trunk; this was definitely Roger's dormitory.

Fortunately, house-elves are quick. In the short time before this one Disapparated, I reminded myself to work fast before another witness entered. As soon as it was safe, I held out my wand and fixed my eyes on Roger's trunk.

"Accio!"

Nothing happened. Bother. I *knew* Roger had smuggled a crate of Firewhisky in from Hogsmeade last month, but he had obviously drunk the whole lot already. So the easy version of my plan wouldn't work. Never mind, there was Plan B. I stopped thinking about the Firewhisky crate and focussed instead on the books stacked beside his bed. I could see the one I wanted; he had owned it for years; but of course it might not be so easy to steal out of a Hogwarts dormitory.

"Accio!"

The thin, red-spined paperback lifted itself out of the stack and flew into my hand. Trust Roger not to place a Staying Charm on his books! I knew he put anti-theft charms on his broom, his clothes, his trumpet, his art supplies, even his shaving cologne... but of course he would forget to protect a cheap little paperback. Roger was careless like that.

I shoved the book down the front of my robe and gasped, "Down, Millicent!"

She unbraked so fast that we nearly crashed. I landed in the snow, only to be pulled to my feet by Hagrid himself. He had huge purple bruises all over his face.

"Yer wanna be careful, flyin' up so high if yer not used to it," he told us. "No bones broken, Miss Bulstrode? Good. What were yer playin' at, flyin' around in the dark?"

"A bet," I said glibly. "Millicent bet me I couldn't stay on a broom up to the top of the Tower and down again. I think she won."

Hagrid apparently believed me; he turned his attention to Pansy's snowman. "I'm taller'n that," he said with a wink. "But not a bad likeness. P'raps yer should finish it tomorrow. It's gettin' very cold an' dark out here."

We took his advice, slightly surprised that he had swallowed both our cover stories so easily. Down in our dormitory, I displayed Roger's book, which was called *the Domestic Potioneer*.

"He only bought it because it had a recipe for mixing oil-paints out of fresh vegetables," I said. "But *I* know it has something else... Here we are... the brewing section."

"Why did we go to all that fuss to steal it?" asked Cecilia. "Why didn't you just ask your brother if you could borrow it?"

My mouth dropped open, too aghast at the thought of asking Roger for any kind of favour to remember the obvious reason.

"Use your brain," said Daphne. "We can't *gotelling* people about our secret plan."

"We can brew our own Firewhisky," I interrupted. "We'll need malt... and yeast... and lots of sugar..."

"I can send Hoots to Hogsmeade for those things," said Pansy. "None of them looks suspicious on its own."

"Better make it Diagon Alley," I said. "We don't want Hogsmeade traders connecting this order with Hogwarts students. Perhaps we should buy the malt separately."

"Daphne can send Toots for that," said Pansy.

By the next morning, we had our supplies, and we spent the lunch break setting up our spare cauldrons in our bathroom. The distilling process would take four days, so the major problem was to keep spies out of dormitory. Slytherin girls from other years were not absolutely forbidden to visit our sanctuary, and if one of Daphne's sisters chose to snoop, we could be in big trouble. Cecilia wanted to write a crude notice for our front door:

***Keep Out. Secret Ladies' Business in Progress. ASTORIA this means YOU!***

But, as Pansy pointed out, this was simply inviting curiosity at a time when we wanted to avoid outsiders' attention.

"Astoria isn't really the problem anyway," said Daphne. "She's the one who stole Arnold Bulstrode's Exploding Snap cards the ones with the rude pictures on them and turned them in to Filch."

"Good, let's tell Arnold!" interrupted Millicent. "He'll bash her to a pulp!"

"No, let's *not*," said Daphne crossly. "Don't you understand anything, Millicent? Astoria knows that *I* might tell Arnold, and we have to leave her worrying about it until after we've finished getting rid of Hagrid. Rhoda's not a problem either. She's too stupid to recognise alcohol if it's brewing under her nose she'd believe us if we said it was the laundry. The person who worries me is Syrinx. She knows I borrowed her emerald earbobs at Hallowe'en, so she might tell on us just out of spite."

"Give her some of the Firewhisky," suggested Cecilia. "That's what I'm going to do for Ursula she can't tell on us if she's drinking it herself."

Daphne laughed bitterly. "That might work with *your* sister, but Syrinx is just about the meanest person on this planet. She'd thank us nicely for the present and then take it straight to Snape."

"Exactly," I said. "And it isn't just the *human* nuisance that's a problem. How are we going to keep the house-elves away? Whatever we do is going to look suspicious. I think we're going to have to guard our bathroom *in person*."

"What, miss two days of lessons?"

"Yes." I looked around at them defiantly. "We'll take turns, with a different excuse each. My Muggle grandfather is going to die in about five minutes, so I'm too upset to come to lessons this afternoon. Flitwick will understand that. Tomorrow Millicent is going to run out of clean underwear, so because she's too big to borrow anyone else's, she'll be spending the morning doing her own laundry."

"Snape will say I ought to have come to Potions anyway!"

"So what if he does? You'll get the detention *after* we've finished our brew. Cecilia is going to suffer food-poisoning over lunch so she'll spend tomorrow afternoon sleeping off her vomiting. On Friday Daphne will rescue Toots from a near-drowning accident and spend the morning nursing him in our dormitory. Pansy has free periods on Friday afternoon, so she'll manage to watch the brew without actually missing a lesson. For the rest of the time, we'll make sure we always have at least one of us there to tell intruders that we're not in the mood for guests this week."

After they had all left me grieving for my newly-deceased grandparent, I checked on the cauldrons, then began to scrub at the shower recess. This really was a nuisance! I had to keep thinking about the look on Roger's face when Hagrid finally left (to say nothing of the gratitude I would receive from Draco) to keep myself motivated.

*Crack!* A house-elf had arrived.

"Hello," I said. "I know you usually do this job, but can you leave this bathroom to us for a couple of days?"

"Miss Davies should not be dirtying her hands in lesson time."

Bother, it knew my name. "I *am* doing lessons," I said, cheerfully nodding at our arrangement of cauldrons without a care in the world. "This is a Potions project for Professor Snape. I have to watch it all day. But it's really important that nobody else touches it."

The house-elf wrinkled its nose dubiously. "It doesn't smell good to Cuby."

"Potions often stink," I agreed. "The fumes might not be safe for someone as small as you. I'm not really sure. Anyway, to keep you *and* our project safe, we honestly don't mind doing our own cleaning for a couple of days. Here... You came to take our towels, didn't you?" I handed her a pile of them.

"Miss Davies is considerate!" said the elf. "Cuby does not like that potion, no, not at all."

I didn't really trust the elves to remain idle: Cecilia reported the next day that one of them did run a mop all over the bathroom. However, it scrupulously avoided touching the cauldrons, so they had evidently learned not to interfere there.

By Sunday afternoon, we were ready to pour the Firewhisky into bottles, which I had transfigured out of pebbles.

"It'll be raw," said Pansy disdainfully. "Isn't Firewhisky meant to mature for years before you actually drink it?"

"We weren't aiming for quality," I reminded her. "Think of this brew as, er, medicinal. Now, we have to get rid of ~~all~~ our distilling equipment. There can't be any evidence of what we were doing."

On Tuesday afternoon, we settled our five bottles of very potent home-brewed Firewhisky in a plain brown sack, and I slid on top of them a gift card on which I had written

*Welcome home, Hagrid! with love from all your admirers.*

I had borrowed Pansy's Auto-Answer Quill to produce a handwriting like Madame Maxime's, but it didn't matter if Hagrid knew the bottles weren't from her. He would never work out which student had done it.

"It's better not to be seen, but if anyone does spot us, we're just checking whether Hagrid's pumpkins have survived the snow," I reminded the girls again. "I'll only take a second. I just put the bottles down, and then we walk off to Care of Magical Creatures in the Forest."

After all the elaborate alibis of the last week, it was ridiculously easy for the girls to crowd around the pumpkin patch in a way that hid me. A couple of other fifth-years did pass us as I set the brown sack outside Hagrid's back door, but none of them took any notice. We trudged through the snow to Hagrid's lesson, and we weren't even the last to arrive.

The lesson was boring because we didn't actually see any magical creatures at all: Hagrid was conveniently claiming to show us invisible beasts. Theo pretended he could see whatever-they-were but Theo always does have to claim he's one better than the rest of us.

"It'll be so much more interesting tomorrow!" Cecilia giggled.

"Now we need a witness," I said. "Professor Umbridge will be busy, so let's invite Filch to tattle about Hagrid. I'll do the talking, Cecilia; you just laugh and agree with whatever I say. But wait until Filch can hear us!"

When we clattered back into the Entrance Hall, snow all over our shoes, Filch came storming out of his office, mop aloft and bucket angrily swinging.

"I don't think they were joking," I announced to the air. "I think they meant it. They *are* going to set the trees on fire."

Filch's eyebrows lifted while Cecilia giggled dutifully.

"In period five tomorrow on the edge of the Forbidden Forest," I declared. "I'm nearly sure they do have the fireworks and they *are* planning to set the trees alight, probably before Hagrid even arrives."

Cecilia laughed more loudly, and I shepherded her down the dungeon staircase.

"Well done," I told her. "Now we don't have to do anything else. Now we can sit back and watch the show!"

Cecilia took me literally and remarked, "Sitting down out there will be dead cold."

Sure enough, when we arrived at Care of Magical Creatures the next day, Filch was waiting for us. He ordered three of the Gryffindors to turn their pockets inside-out and he emptied Gregory's schoolbag into the snow, but he didn't find anything except Finnigan's Dung Bombs before Hagrid came lurching towards us.

Hagrid was a dream come true! His face was all shades of green, yellow and purple, as if he had been fighting off a very vicious Hippogriff. Perhaps his invisible horses had turned on him. Or perhaps it had all been a very complex accident, for he staggered and swayed and nearly tripped over just in the short walk to join the class.

"Afternoon, all," he said. "Today we're talkin' about feedin'..."

"Merlin, but our groundsman's been drinking!" cried Draco to Blaise.

Hagrid swayed and then steadied himself; I could smell the Firewhisky on his breath.

"Thestrals appreciate a hot mash." Hagrid was speaking more carefully than usual so he wouldn't slur his words.

"Hagrid, you're drunk!" Pansy did not trouble to keep her tone low. "Filch, he can hardly stand up straight. Go and tell Professor Umbridge that this man is unfit to teach us!"

"I fell over," said Hagrid with dignity. "No time to see Madam Pomfrey, so I'm limpin' a bit fer now. But I can teach yer same as always, Miss Parkinson."

Cecilia nearly hugged me when Filch cackled, "I don't think Dumbledore will like to hear that his staff drink on the job! And Professor Umbridge~~definitely~~ won't like it, not with her report to the Ministry due. So tell us, Hagrid, did you or did you not drink something stronger than Butterbeer today?"

"Yes, I took a glass!" Hagrid's voice boomed over the cackles and sniggers. "I'm not denyin' that.*One* glass, *after* I fell, but I stopped soon as I realised there was somethin' wrong with the drink. It definitely isn' real Ogden's."

Still cackling, Filch asked permission to search Hagrid's hut. None of us could pay attention to Hagrid's instructions on how to mix a Thestral-mash even though he was speaking quite clearly he was obviously telling the truth about "only one drink".

"...And look what I've found!" When Filch finally returned, holding a familiar bottle aloft, every eye was on him. "Dear, dear, dear, Hagrid, how would this little receptacle come to be full of something very like Firewhisky?"

"Present," said Hagrid calmly. "Students gave it to me."

"Oho, *did* they now? Ve-ery interesting, given that it's *against the rules* for students to bring alcohol into school. So just who gave you this very nice and illegal present?"

Cecilia stiffened next to me. I ignored her, glad we had covered our tracks well.

"Dunno," said Hagrid. "It was anonymous."

"Think, Hagrid. You're in plenty of trouble, so which student do you think was trying to make the trouble for you?"

Hagrid's eye flickered very briefly over Draco, Vincent and Gregory. "No-one," he said firmly. "It was kin'ly meant. A present. And I'm sorry if yer think I shouldn' have a drink over lunch, but I can still teach. Dean, will yer come and add the bran ter the trough?"

"Ooooh, we *have* him!" squealed Pansy as Filch tramped off again.

Our joy lasted all through the afternoon until half way through dinner. But by the time I was soaking up my gravy in the last bite of dumpling, I could not ignore the rumours that we didn't "have" Hagrid at all. Umbridge had been so delighted by the news that Hagrid had been caught drunk on duty that she had insisted Pomfrey examine him immediately. Pomfrey had very quickly confirmed that Hagrid *had* suffered some kind of falling accident that he *wascovered* in week-old bruises and that his tottering gait was not connected with his single shot of highly-suspect spirits. Snape had demanded to analyse the liquor, but Hagrid had already tossed it down the sink, so Umbridge couldn't even prove that he stored illegal drugs in his hut. Everyone knew he drank, yet no-one could prove that he drank to excess, or even that he had *ever* arrived in class under the influence.

We hadn't achieved anything. We had tipped off Umbridge with one more reason to get rid of Hagrid, but she didn't even know which students to thank.

So I was totally unprepared for Draco's reaction down in the dungeon. When he sauntered past our sofa, he gave my arm a condescending tap.

"You've done well, Tracey. Pansy told me how you set up the whole operation. That's the kind of house loyalty that Slytherin deserves."

"Er, thanks."

"Too bad that the great oaf bluffed his way out of it," Draco continued. "But Umbridge won't forget that Hagrid~~was~~ caught drunk. It'll strengthen whatever case we mount against him next."

"And you gave us all a jolly good laugh," Pansy added, clutching at Daphne as she relived the humour. "Oh, it was worth it just for the laugh! Tracey, you're so clever!"

"Would you by any chance have any of that little home-brew left over?" asked Draco.

To my surprise, Cecilia cut through my apology. "Yes! Yes, my sister has some! Ursula, it's time to bring out the~~demonade~~."

Cecilia had really done it! She had sneaked off half our supplies as a present to her sister!

Ursula Runcorn brought out a glass gallon bottle, and Syrinx Greengrass followed with a tray of gill-goblets, while Pansy reminded everyone who would listen that it was my birthday. Millicent and her brother shoved out of our rapidly-growing circle everyone who wasn't in fifth or seventh year. Syrinx poured the first *lemonade* for me, but it seemed wise to pass the glass on to Draco.

"Happy birthday to our brilliant Tracey," he said. "Let's all toast to Slytherin!"

## Advanced Potion-Making

### Chapter 8 of 10

Roger has left Hogwarts so Tracey finally has her school life to herself. She won't allow a little problem like the war to spoil her best year ever. After all, she's now completely in control of events around her. Isn't she?

#### Chapter Eight

#### Advanced Potion-Making

Monday 2 September 1996

Mum's dreadful words rang in my ears as I boarded the Hogwarts Express for sixth year. "We're so proud of Tracey," she had told her parents. "Her OWLs are just as good as Roger's."

*What?* I had scored three O grades, four Es and three As. Roger had only managed *three* Es and *four* As. But Dad had not corrected Mum. Neither of them had noticed that I had done *better* than Roger.

They hadn't even commented on how Roger's academic performance had slipped after his OWLs. He had been so over-confident about his natural brain-power that he had devoted his last two years at Hogwarts to playing Quidditch, chasing girls, painting, chasing girls, playing his trumpet and chasing girls. His NEWTs had been one O, two Es and two As, which was respectable but not exactly brilliant. If I reached my goal of three Os and two Es, Mum and Dad would *have* to see that I could surpass Roger!

The best part about sixth year was knowing that Roger had finally left Hogwarts. He wasn't sitting in the Great Hall, smirking at me through the welcoming feast. He wasn't lurking in the corridors, waiting to bump into me just when I wanted my friends to myself. He wasn't showing off on the Quidditch pitch, inviting everyone to exclaim over how Tracey must admire her talented brother. Roger had left school, and nobody would ever again think of me as Roger's little sister. *Roger had gone.*

\* \* \* \* \*

On the first morning of term, I told Professor McGonagall that I wished to study Potions, Transfiguration, Divination, Charms and Herbology, which she permitted without a murmur. She took much longer to sort out the other girls, whose OWL results weren't good enough to allow their first choices, but eventually we could compare our new timetables. No two of us had managed to select the same subjects.

"It's going to be Trelawney again for Divination," sighed Cecilia. "Tracey, do you think she *drinks*? She smells of sherry, and Firenze smells of... ummm... hormones!"

"I hate Herbology," remarked Millicent, shoving at a second-year who was blocking our pathway.

Daphne was wailing, "Astronomy! If I'd known she'd force me to take a stupid subject like Astronomy, I'd have failed the OWL on purpose!"

"She'd still force you," said Pansy. "She wouldn't let me into the Arithmancy NEWT class because she said it was more important to repeat my Transfiguration OWL. Tracey, you've given yourself *hours* of study. Why do you want that many NEWTs in such difficult subjects?"

I shrugged. "Who needs an excuse to excel?"

"Yes, but what about after Hogwarts?" persisted Cecilia. "What are you actually going *todo*?"

I was going to show Mum and Dad that I had the highest NEWT scores our family had ever seen! And after that I would... Well, Cecilia had a point (for a change). After I'd finally shown Mum and Dad my brilliant NEWT results, I'd go out to begin my brilliant career. And I was definitely not going to waste my life in professional sport. Unlike Roger, I was going to do something *serious*.

It would be impressive to enter the Ministry of Magic, but Roger had never taken any notice of politics. He'd just say, "Boring! Rather you than me!"

Sometimes I quite fancied myself as a businesswitch, but Roger had no sense of enterprise either. Dad had once asked if Roger would try to set himself up as an independent artist, and Roger had only replied, "No fear! Most small businesses fail." I couldn't risk failing and then having to listen to Roger's "I told you so."

There were secure jobs in long-established large firms like Spencer's Alimentation or Cloaca Harington, but they would condemn me to a career of living in my employer's shadow. People wouldn't even notice that I existed, and I'd had quite enough of that! Besides, most of those jobs were extremely boring.

Occasionally a small business would advertise a more interesting post; Dad claimed to be really interested in designing shoes. But if I relied on a cottage industry to sponsor me, the pay would be lousy, and I couldn't start out earning less than Roger.

So I had no idea what my "serious" career would look like.

\* \* \* \* \*

Down in the dungeon common room that evening, Millicent ordered a group of third-years off the two best sofas, and Cecilia announced that her sister was working in Honeysmooches' perfumery.

"She's dead chuffed to work there. At first she just wanted to get married, but her fellow wouldn't oblige. So Granddad made her an apprentice. But it's all turned out right, because our Ursula's found that she actually enjoys bubbling up all that smelly stuff, so she's not scared of working after all."

"It's a suitable job for her," Pansy conceded. "Tracey, tell us about your brother. What's Roger doing with his life?"

"Nothing much. How was your sister's wedding, Daphne?"

"I'll show you *all* about Syrinx's wedding when the photos arrive. But Tracey's just being modest, Pansy. If you followed the Quidditch, you'd know that Roger is an absolute *hero* on the pitch."

"He's only a reserve," I muttered. It was all wrong that the conversation was centring on Roger on our *firstday*!

"Only!" exclaimed Daphne. "Listen, Pansy. Roger Davies has a contract with the Caerphilly Catapults. He has played three matches, and my Dad couldn't believe he was a rookie. Besides, everyone knows that the Caerphilly Keeper is about to retire, so of course Roger's going to replace him."

"We don't 'know' that," I corrected. "Is Syrinx going to work now that she's married?"

"Will Mrs Marcus Flint need to work for her living?" Daphne gave a deliberate laugh. "Of course not. Syrinx will be kept busy furnishing and decorating their new home. Tracey, I don't understand why you're so pessimistic about Roger. He's very popular with the fan-girls; his manager would be mad to ignore such talent."

I snorted. "Roger's *too* popular with the fan-girls, if you ask me! I'm sick of hearing what Quidditch professionals get up to after matches."

Daphne blushed, which made me wonder if her father behaved as immaturely as Roger did after playing Quidditch. "Tracey, you make them sound like criminals!"

Cecilia, who didn't understand why the conversation felt so uncomfortable but was nevertheless struggling to change the subject, interjected, "Ooooh, talking of criminals... Tracey, hasn't there been a funeral in your family?"

"Yes," I said, relaxing at the safer new topic. "The Death Eaters killed my Aunt Amelia."

"Was it *very* nasty?" Millicent asked with a gloating satisfaction. "I heard they cut her up and threw her entrails all over the wallpaper."

"And they pasted her fingers and toes on the front door in the shape of a skull." I shivered a little, about to remark on how disgusting it had been and perhaps express some pious hope that "they" would catch You-Know-Who and stop the war soon.

But suddenly, from the other end of the dungeon, I caught Draco Malfoy's eye. I remembered that Draco, Vincent, Gregory and Theo all came from Death Eater families. If Pansy reported that I had a grudge against Death Eaters, I would seriously antagonise Draco. I'd be stupid to annoy my friends just over politics.

"But it isn't all bad," I finished. "Aunt Amelia left me ten thousand Galleons. My money troubles are over."

Cecilia's eyes danced, all thoughts of politics forgotten. "Tracey, you're on the pig's back! How many dress-robos is that?"

"Ten thousand isn't about dress-robos," said Daphne. "It's about choosing the tiara to wear with them."

Millicent shook her head firmly. "Invest it, Tracey. You can buy a two-bedroom flat with that much money. Start yourself out for life. I know would."

"Millicent, you're such a spoilsport!" chided Pansy. "Tracey's too young to settle down. She'll want to tour the world and see life. Tracey, would you take ~~me~~ travelling with you?"

The discussion of what to do with my inheritance lasted us until bedtime. I hadn't yet given much thought to the money; as I didn't know how Roger was wasting his share, I had no idea what I should do with mine.

\* \* \* \* \*

Potions was completely different now that Professor Slughorn was our teacher. In the first place, Slughorn didn't speak as if we were all too stupid to learn to brew. In the second place, Snape had focused on his special victims, while Slughorn was only interested in his special favourites. In the third place, the students had changed.

In our very first lesson, Theo ignored Blaise and came to work next to me. He took no notice of Blaise or Draco; even when they asked to borrow his scale-weights, he shoved them over without a word.

I stared in fascination. Blaise and Theo had always been best friends. But it was obvious that Blaise was now more interested in Draco.

Slughorn stopped to chat with Blaise in low, genial tones that I couldn't overhear. But he just nodded at the rest of us before walking over to the Ravenclaws to enthuse about Morag MacDougal's great-grandmother. Draco looked appalled at such disrespect.

Once Slughorn was safely at the far end exclaiming over the sainted Potter's (non-existent) talent, I whispered, "Draco, I'm amazed Slughorn can't be politer to you. I'd heard that he adores pure, old families like the Malfoys."

"But he's an idiot with politics," drawled Draco. "When the new regime triumphs, Slughorn will be a nobody."

"Seriously?" I stared down at my valerian roots, speaking quietly so that the Ravenclaws didn't overhear. "Doesn't he like Death Eaters?"

"To express the matter in your usual blunt words," concurred Draco. "Slughorn has no understanding of who's going to win this war, let alone what will happen to the losers."

I shivered before I could brace myself, then staunchly informed him, "I've no intention of backing the losers. It should be obvious, shouldn't it? The Dark Lord can't lose."

"It's obvious to anyone who reads the newspapers," said Draco. "Pass the knife-sharpener."

"I'm looking forward to the brave new world," I lied. What advantages was the Dark Lord offering again? "We'll finally be free to take our proper place in the world and the great wizarding traditions will be preserved. Draco, do you think the Dark Lord already has a special position planned for you?"

"He might have." Draco's smug confidence told me that he already knew exactly what privileges You-Know-Who had planned for him.

But before I could ask him any more about it, I saw that Michael Corner and Terry Boot were twisting around across the dungeon to watch us. They couldn't hear us, but I squirmed simply because they could see us. If people like Corner and Boot overheard anything at all, they would only use it as an excuse to go spreading prejudices against Slytherin. Ravenclaws are terrible gossips. I looked away and whispered to the boys, "Slughorn isn't the only one around here who's naïve about politics."

Draco didn't reply, but Blaise gave me a lazy grin and a thumbs-up. Theo wrinkled his nose in disgust before turning his back on us without a word. He really had changed. Didn't he care about his old friends any more?

When Slughorn finally called time up, I had a smooth purple brew in my cauldron, but I knew I was nowhere near winning the day's prize. Across the aisle, Su Li was grimacing ruefully at me; her potion was the correct pale colour but it smelled of poison.

"I'm glad we have two years to learn all this," she confided. "That was so much harder than anything we had to do for OWLs. I'd be in pieces if we still had Snape up there inspecting us!"

"It was a tough potion," I sympathised blandly.

"But you can write off to that brilliant brother of yours whenever you need help," she said. "I wish I had a brother or sister. Anyway, what's Roger up to nowadays? Is it true that he's playing for the Caerphilly Catapults?"

I don't even remember what I said next, but I hope it was something about sheer luck.

Su nodded. "It's so nice to hear that a few people *are* still lucky. That won't happen much more until they defeat You-Know-Who."

What should I say while Draco was listening? "You sound pretty pessimistic."

"Aren't we all? My parents have had to close their restaurant before the Death Eaters destroyed it wholesale. Michael's mother lost her job for discussing the newspapers in her coffee break, and Mandy's uncle has just spent six months in Azkaban for something he did under Imperius. As for the Muggle-borns "

She bit off her words as Ernie Macmillan sharply tapped her shoulder.

"I think you have a point, Su." I kept my tone neutral. "People who resist the Death Eaters are going to suffer for a long time to come. We'll ~~er~~ have to help each other all we can."

"Let's clean our benches together, Su," Macmillan interrupted. He was more or less in Potter's gang, so of course he was prejudiced against me. Su followed him without a word, apparently still assuming that I agreed with her. Well, I hadn't exactly disagreed, any more than I had disagreed with Draco.

"You take after your brother, don't you?" Blaise's voice was invading my space.

"No, I do *not*. I'm not at all like my brother." Why did only children always assume that having siblings must be wonderful?

"Yes, you are. Roger Davies never cared about politics either. He would just agree with whoever was in front of him and cast his vote in all directions at once. Like you. You really couldn't care less who wins this war, could you?"

I was about to snap that of course I cared, that unlike my stupid brother I completely supported the Dark Lord, when I realised that I had no idea what Blaise truly believed. He spat out all the correct Death Eater ideology when Draco was around, but did he really *believe* it? Or was he just sucking up to a prominent Death-Eater family? Either way, if I disagreed with Blaise's real opinion, he might find a way to make trouble for me.

"I am not like Roger!" I repeated. Since Blaise was quite correct that Roger didn't believe in anything much, I must establish quickly that I was different. So how was I

different? What did I believe in? "He... I... Roger... Well, I'm just totally unlike him!"

The lesson was over, so I raced for the door, choking back the tears. Blaise's words were disturbing, and I was furious that someone had yet again forced me to think about Roger. He was supposed to be out of Hogwarts, and people here weren't supposed to be interested in him any more. Why was Roger's reputation still following me?

*And what if I had become like him?*

I needed a good sulk.

\* \* \* \* \*

I liked to shut myself up in the broom cupboard in the Entrance Hall. But when I flung open the door, I saw that someone else was also having a good sulk. Susan Bones was curled up on the shelf, her white face showing me that she was celebrating the world's greatest pity-party.

My fingers twitched towards my wand. This was *my* broom cupboard, and Susan could take her misery elsewhere! But I controlled myself, because I didn't want Susan tattling to our relatives that I'd hexed her. So I left the door open, shoved some brushes and buckets to the floor and sat down on the shelf beside her.

"What's up?"

Susan scrambled to sit upright. "Tracey! What are you doing here?"

"Perhaps I just like sitting around in cupboards talking to Filch's mops. What's your excuse? You look properly dismal."

Susan pulled out a handkerchief and wiped her eyes. "Sorry, I'm letting it get on top of me. I can't stop thinking about Aunt Amelia... wondering how much it hurt... how long it took... what would make anyone *do* that to a good person like her."

"Um." I wasn't sure what to say, but Susan wasn't really looking at me anyway. "It was nasty."

"I've been having flashbacks during classes... remembering that they did the same sort of thing to Uncle Derek's family... Dad won't *ever tell* me how my grandparents died, so I have nightmares that whatever happened to them was something worse still."

"No, it wasn't," I interrupted. Susan's murdered grandfather had been my grandfather's brother, so I knew all about it. "You-Know-Who gave Grand-Uncle Edgar a simple Avada Kedavra. He was in no pain at all."

"Really?" Susan paused, for the first time looking less gloomy and more human. "Then why has it always been so hush-hush? Why can I know that they cut Uncle Derek to pieces but not that his parents were simply death-cursed?"

"The house-elf claimed that there was a bit of psychological torture," I recalled. "You-Know-Who put the Imperius on Aunt Iphigenia and made her Crucio her cat until it burst open. Then he put the Imperius on Uncle Edgar and made him put the Killing Curse on Aunt Iphigenia. Then he finished off Uncle Edgar. All right, the cat was tortured, but your grandparents had no pain."

"No *pain*!" Susan sprang to her feet, now even whiter and thoroughly shocked. "Tracey, *ispain* the worst thing that can happen to people? Was my grandfather forced to kill my grandmother after watching her being forced to torture their cat?" She drew a deep, shuddering breath and forced herself to address me calmly. "Thank you for telling me. I'm glad someone was finally brave enough to give me the information. But ohhhhh... I'm not surprised Dad never wanted me to know about it!"

I wanted to run away so that I didn't have to watch Susan tearing herself up over all those dead people who couldn't come back. But it was as if a Sticking Hex had rooted me to my seat on the cupboard shelf. I squirmed while trying to think up a way to distract her.

"Cheer up," I said. "Those older people had to die sometime. And it isn't all bad for those of us who are left."

"What?"

"It isn't all bad," I repeated. "For example... Have you thought yet what you're going to do with your legacy from Aunt Amelia?"

Susan froze like a statue and stared down at me. For the first time since I had opened the cupboard door, she seemed to be really paying attention. She was hanging on my words, so I finally had the chance to boost her spirits.

"Aunt Amelia left each of us ten thousand Galleons," I reminded her. "That's the price of a small flat. Or a large investment portfolio. Or the stock for a medium-sized Diagon Alley shop. Or a diamond tiara. What are you going to do with yours?"

The colour raced back into Susan's cheeks, and before I had time to suggest another happy thought, she had flushed a bright, choleric crimson.

"*Not another word*," she hissed. "How *dare* you talk like that about Aunt Amelia?"

I actually flinched. I had never seen Susan angry before. "It's just a fact," I said. "Aunt Amelia would have wanted us to be happy."

"Aunt Amelia wanted us to oppose evil," she retorted. "She spent her whole life opposing evil, and that's why evil people murdered her. How *dare* you suggest that any good can come out of murder?"

The cupboard door was still wide open; I stood up to leave.

"You don't care, do you?" Susan demanded. "Slytherin has done you no good at all, Tracey Ann Davies. You've become just like your Slytherin friends opportunistic, self-centred and callous and you don't even understand what you've become!"

I reached the doorway, hoping Susan would stop ranting once I had my back to her.

"I only hope you'll come to your senses before you really hurt anyone. Because that's what'll happen if you don't grow up, Tracey you'll end up hurting someone you love."

I raced out, across the Entrance Hall and through the door to the dungeon stairs. Susan's words made no sense at all.

After all, there *wasn't* anyone whom I loved.

# The Dark Lord Ascending

Chapter 9 of 10

The war is raging, and the Death Eaters are poised to strike.

Chapter Nine

The Dark Lord Ascending

Sunday 13 Monday 14 July 1997

The Parkinsons' garden at the fashionable end of Manchester was floodlit with Chinese lanterns that each flashed a different colour and wafted down a different perfume. While the hired goblin quintet played violins and flutes, Daphne snuggled into Blaise's arms in a slow waltz. Pansy's covert glances at Draco revealed that she would have liked to waltz too, but her duties as our hostess did not allow it. It was her seventeenth birthday, and the evening was too warm and bright to permit an indoor celebration.

Vincent and Gregory were stuffing their faces with chicken drumsticks and cream horns at the buffet, and Millicent was exchanging coins with Montague and Warrington in a card game that looked decidedly illegal. But most of the other guests were tapping our feet to the music, hoping to attract a dance-partner. For the first time, I didn't feel frumpish, because I had been able to afford real dress-robos skirts and sleeves of violet and purple taffeta billowing out of a silver bodice that shimmered with (fake) diamonds. I had even had the cash to lend Cecilia the last ten Galleons on the price of her robes. In her confection of white lace and pink roses and with a crown of rosebuds in her dark curls, Cecilia still looked unfairly pretty, but I finally felt I could stand next to her without being invisible.

"Theo isn't here," she remarked, scanning the guests. "I think Pansy didn't invite him. He's been dead weird for months."

"Theo doesn't care," I said. "He must have noticed that no-one invites him anywhere any more, but he simply doesn't care."

"Lots of people think Blaise broke friends with Theo," Cecilia chattered on. It was the three hundredth time she had discussed the story, but the topic was as fresh as newsprint in her mind. "They keep asking me if it was because Blaise wanted to be best friends with Draco instead, and I have to keep on explaining that it's the other way round. It was Theo who didn't want to be friends with Draco any more, and when Blaise tried to stay friends with both of them, Theo dumped Blaise as well. He's mad. We all need our friends in wartime, and Draco's dead important among the Death Eaters. Do you know what Pansy told me? She thought about holding her birthday party at Malfoy Manor, but there wasn't space because the whole manor is being used for Top Secret Business."

Draco turned around. "Cecilia!" he admonished her tolerantly. "It is *secret* business!"

She giggled. "But we're all friends here, Draco. Besides, you've never said what these secret people ~~do~~o."

"They do the Dark Lord's work. And that's all any of you needs to know for now. In two or three weeks, it won't be so secret, and you'll all know a great deal more."

"But tell us, Draco," Cecilia persisted. "Did you really watch Snape kill Dumbledore? Were you actually a witness?"

"Of course I was. I was standing *inches* away when Snape shot out the Killing Curse." Draco swaggered. "If Snape hadn't been so quick, *he* would have been the witness, because I was literally a second away from killing the old codger myself."

"Oooo-oooooh, *Draco*," sighed Pansy, just as if she hadn't heard the story before. "Won't you be in terrible trouble if they find out that you nearly did a killing?"

"Who are 'they'?" scoffed Draco. "I promise you, the Dark Lord is very pleased with both Snape and me, so why should we care what anyone else thinks? The Ministry of Magic counts for nothing. It won't *dare* hunt down anyone whom You-Know-Who is protecting."

A cold shiver ran down my spine. Draco seemed so *sure* that the Death Eaters were more powerful than the Ministry of Magic. I plastered on my tell-me-more-good-news face.

"Pansy, if you want to liven up your birthday party with a small titbit of insider's news..." Draco held out his arm nonchalantly, and Pansy clung to it eagerly. They knew very well that we were all listening now.

"Is it about Potter?" she prompted.

"I said it was *small* news. It's about old Gallus Cobbler from that downmarket shoe shop in Diagon Alley."

*Dad's employer!* I held my mask stiff and steady, but suddenly my bones were cold all over.

Draco boasted on. "The old fool has been chattering to his customers about how Mudbloods are our equals, and it has come to the Dark Lord's ears. We've decided to make an example of old Cobbler, so that's the target of our next raid. In two more days, Cobbler's Cordwainery just won't *be* there any more."

Dad!!

How fast can I escape from this party and warn Dad not to go to work on Tuesday?

Millicent thumped Draco's free arm. "That was a stupid thing to tell us, Draco. What if one of us decides to warn the old man?"

"So what if the old fool does escape with his life? He's small fry, and nothing can save his shop. But I don't think anyone here will be dense enough to betray our trust. After all, anyone who deliberately sabotages a Death Eater raid is just pleading to be the next victim. And who here cares about Gallus Cobbler?"

I tried to creep backwards into the shadow of a large beech tree. I had my Apparition Licence. I could be home in one minute if I could only be sure that no-one would miss me. But suddenly the Chinese lanterns were blasting all over my face, and Draco was looking straight at me.

"Tracey cares," said Millicent. "Her father works at Cobbler's. It will take her about one minute to Apparate home and warn Mr Davies not to go to work on Tuesday."

*Thanks a bunch, Millicent. You're always so aggressive in forcing the obvious down our throats.*

"I don't think so." Draco nearly yawned. "Tracey has always been very sensible about supporting the people who matter. She won't let that Mudblood father of hers compromise her loyalty to the Dark Lord. Will you, Tracey?"

I couldn't keep the polite mask on my face any longer; I knew I looked as appalled as I felt.

"Will you, Tracey?" Draco repeated.

Somehow, Millicent was standing on my left and Gregory was on my right. I couldn't see Vincent, but I realised he was behind me. I'd be stupid ~~to~~*admit* that I couldn't care less about the Dark Lord. My head jerked in a very nondescript gesture.

"Tracey wants to survive," Draco confirmed. "She won't tell her father about the raid on Cobbler's because, if he did mysteriously survive it, the Death Eaters would only return and destroy the whole Davies family. Tracey herself would be dead within a day. You see, Tracey once did something very foolish something that seriously compromised her loyalty to our cause."

"What?" I found my voice. "That's absolutely ridiculous! I've always been a staunch supporter of the Dark Lord and completely faithful to my friends in Slytherin House! When did I ever compromise my loyalty?"

"About four years ago." Draco drew something out of his robe pocket. It was a small, grey exercise book with frighteningly familiar dog-eared corners. He held it up so that everyone in the floodlit garden could read the title:

## TRACEY'S BOOK OF THE DEAD.

"It's an interesting little diary," he informed the party guests. "It's full of libels a surprisingly spiteful collection, given its author claims to be our friend."

Was Draco bluffing or had he actually *read* my stupid little collection of temper-tantrums? I frantically searched my memory for some reassurance that I had protected my indiscreet words with Invisible Ink or a Sealing Charm. But I knew with a dreadful certainty that any naïve charms I might have cast in second year could easily be broken by an adult wizard. Draco would have read my petulant emoting.

"Of course," Draco continued, "these notes were written a very long time ago. Tracey has probably changed. I expect she's very grateful for this golden opportunity to prove her loyalty to the Dark Lord. All she has to do is keep silent and none of us will ever doubt her loyalty again. If Tracey keeps quiet for the next two days, I'll rip up this silly book and forget all about it."

*And what will happen if I do decide to warn Dad?*

There was no need to ask. *Tracey's Book of the Dead* would end up in the hands of some Death Eater, and that would be the end of Mum and me as well as Dad.

Draco shoved the book back into his pocket and drew Pansy into a ballroom hold. That was the end of his public speech, but as they both swayed past me, he spoke out of the corner of his mouth.

"Tracey, don't bother mentioning the raid on Cobbler's to the Auror Department. Cecilia's father works at the Ministry of Magic, and he has already warned the Aurors that you're a madwoman. He'll block any application from any member of your family. Just stay out of politics and you'll probably stay alive."

Pansy giggled into the shoulder of Draco's dress-robos.

I rounded furiously on Cecilia. "Did you *know* about all this? How dare your father plot to kill mine!"

Cecilia's eyes welled with tears. "Tracey, I don't know what Draco's friends told Daddy! I didn't know about all this until a minute ago. You know I don't speak to my father!"

"Well, you can start speaking to him now. You can tell him that the Death Eaters are planning to murder innocent people and that he has to make the Aurors stop it."

"I *can't*, Tracey. Don't you understand? Daddy supports the Dark Lord and he'll be dead chuffed about the raid on Cobbler's. If you complain, he'll be *more* likely to send the Death Eaters to attack you next. In a few more days, You-Know-Who will have control of the Ministry, and it's dead dangerous to interfere with his actions."

"So are you going to leave my father to die? Cecilia, I thought you were my friend!"

"I am, Tracey, but I have to think of Mummy! If her little shop in Knockturn Alley was ever reported to the Aurors or to the Death Eaters; it doesn't matter which she'd land in Azkaban. Daddy hates Mummy and he *will* report her if we annoy him. Oh, it's dead mean of you not to understand that!"

Cecilia probably sobbed her way through the rest of the party, but I took no interest. I danced once with Arnold Bulstrode and once with Miles Bletchley, but my feet were only tapping out my impatience to escape. I mouthed the words of "Happy Birthday" to Pansy, but my voice was soundless, and I watched Pansy open her presents without noticing what was inside them. I gazed at the sunset with one eye on my watch, calculating how many minutes it would be before I could go home. But in the end, it was nearly midnight before I was kissing and congratulating Pansy, assuring her that I'd had a wonderful evening at her lovely party and that we must meet up for tea or shopping next week.

Finally, *finally*, I could Apparate into my own living room in Croydon, into a dark and silent house where my unsuspecting parents lay asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

I couldn't sleep, of course. Staying out of politics was all very well, but this bunch of politicians had decided to murder Dad just because he worked for Gallus Cobbler! So of course I would warn Dad not to go to work, but then the politicians would only come round to our house to murder him, and Mum and me as well. So I had to make sure we were all hiding somewhere else by then.

But where could anyone go where the Death Eaters would never find them?

And *how long* would we have to stay hidden? Months? Years? Forever?

My head ached. Blast Roger and his stupid blabbing that Dad was a Muggle-born! If the Death Eaters hadn't known that little detail, they would have just killed old Cobbler and not *cared* if Dad escaped.

The Aurors were supposed to protect us from criminals, but if I appealed to the Auror Office, Albert Runcorn would report to You-Know-Who's gang that the whole Davies family needed to be eliminated. Since the Aurors were too much afraid of the Death Eaters to stand up to them, they were a waste of time.

Where did I go to find people who were not afraid of the Death Eaters?

Dumbledore had never been afraid of anyone, but Dumbledore was dead. Harry Potter was supposed to be leading the resistance against Him-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, but Potter and I weren't exactly on speaking terms. I sat down on the threadbare sofa, trying to think of some member of Potter's mob who was not a snooty anti-Slytherin. I ran my exhausted mind through the register of students in our year... in the year above and in the year below... I had to recite the whole list twice before I recalled a person who *might*, just possibly, be willing and able to help my family.

Susan Bones was something of a Potter-lover, and her family had always proudly opposed Dark magic. Her Muggle-born mother, my Aunt Angela, had mysteriously disappeared a few months ago, but Susan hadn't seemed at all upset about it. Susan might... she *must*... know how to rescue people from the Death Eaters.

I jumped to my feet. I wasn't really supposed to Apparate into a Muggle area, but it was still dark outside, so who would ever know? I focused determinedly on Susan's front porch and deliberated my way there. As the Bones household seemed very asleep, I crept around to their back garden and sat on Susan's creaky old swing to continue my nerve-wracking wait through the night.

The swing was creakier than I remembered. I swung high and loudly, daring the world to ask why I was trespassing. When the sun rose, my creaks scared off the wakening blackbirds. As they fluttered away, an upper window flew open.

"What's going on out there?" called Susan's voice. "Tracey! What are you doing in our garden at five o' clock in the morning?"

"I've come to see you, of course! Let me in, Susan it's chilly, and your swing is giving me splinters. Besides, this is an emergency."

When my hands were wrapped around a cup of tea in Susan's kitchen, I explained about the plan to raid Cobbler's. Susan listened very quietly, without interrupting, until I had finished explaining why the Aurors could not help us.

"So you see why I'm depending on you, Susan," I finished. "You know Harry Potter. You must know of a way to hide Dad."

Susan became even quieter.

"You will help us, won't you?" I coaxed.

Susan poured me another cup of tea. "I would help you *if* I thought that Uncle Brian was really in any danger."

"I've just told you "

"But, Tracey, why should I believe what *you* tell me? You're Draco Malfoy's friend, and you admit that his house is full of Death Eaters. Perhaps they're tricking you. Or perhaps you're even their spy. They might be using your father as bait because their real target is *my* father or some kind of secret information about, um, Harry Potter."

I was shocked. "Susan, how could you even *think* I might be in league with people like that? You've known me all your life. I can't *stand* Death Eaters, and you ought to know it. I just want to rescue Dad and Mum and myself before the Death Eaters blow up Cobbler's."

"That is exactly my point," said Susan levelly. "I've known you all my life, Tracey, and you've never given me any reason to trust you. If I did have some kind of secret information, I wouldn't trust you to *keep* it secret. Now you've asked me to rescue your parents, but you don't say anything about saving Mr and Madam Cobbler or their apprentice or even your own brother. If you don't care about saving four innocent lives, why should I believe that those lives are at risk?"

"What?" I felt the blood drain out of my face. "I didn't say *I wanted* those other people to die! Save them too, if it makes you happy I just, um, didn't want to burden you with a too-complicated task."

Susan remained quiet.

What had I said wrong? She seemed less convinced than ever.

As a whole minute ticked by, I prompted, "My *Dad*, Susan."

Finally she spoke. "Tracey, it's possible that I know someone who might help your father, but I can't discuss it with you. There are too many *other* lives at risk. If this murderous plot is real, and if you want to stop it, then send your brother to me. I'll discuss it with Roger."

"*What?*" This was the most ridiculous event of the ridiculous last twelve hours. "Would you really trust Roger where you don't trust me? But Roger's a fool a pretty-boy a show-off the king of his own world with no interest in anyone else! How can you possibly trust him with other people's lives?"

She removed my empty teacup. "That's the deal, Tracey. If you seriously have seven innocent lives to save, you can send Roger to me, and I'll see what I can do."

"I hate my brother! And he won't listen to me anyway."

"It's up to you. What do you want more to save your father or to carry on hating your brother?" She glanced out of the window. "The milkman's just leaving. You can safely Disapparate as soon as you're out of his line of sight."

Susan's mouth and mind seemed firmly closed, so there was nothing I could do except Apparate home.

How could she trust Roger?

And how on earth could she think of trusting him when she didn't trust *me*?

When had Roger ever shown that he cared about Mum and Dad? When had he ever kept a secret? When had he ever supported Harry Potter? When had he ever taken a stand against You-Know-Who?

Susan was absurdly selfish to insist that I negotiate with Roger. She knew I didn't speak to him. Why should I change my habits just to please *her* whims? She had no right to play such petty games at such a desperate time. I had a good mind to sit and home and do nothing at all. *Then* she'd see she shouldn't have manipulated me!

She would also see that Dad was dead.

If I didn't beg favours from Roger, I would as good as murder Dad. And *wasn't* a Death Eater; I *wouldn't* commit a murder; and I shouldn't be forced to run to Roger to prove it. It was the *wrong time* to prate about weighing my father's life against the everyday irritations of living with Roger.

But today was the only time I would ever have.

Today was the day I had to decide whether or not Roger would needle me into allowing a murder.

Furious and nauseated, I cursed Susan's officious interference and Apparated to the Caerphilly Quidditch practice pitch.

\* \* \* \* \*

Roger was lounging against the changing-room wall, his arm draped around a dark-eyed Welsh girl whose robes were half undone. How could he do this outdoors in front of his whole team!

"Roger," I gasped, "we need to talk."

The girl giggled and snuggled up to him.

"Push off, Gwen," he told her lazily. "My sister has something urgent to say."

Gwen pouted and expressed doubt that I was really Roger's sister, but she tripped off around the corner of the changing hut.

"So tell me, Trace. You look properly shaken up."

Didn't he even understand how much I'd always despised him? How would I make him understand this crisis?

"Roger," I blurted out, "they want to kill Dad!"

"What?" He sat up straight and became perfectly serious.

I was so choked with the effort of speaking normally to him that I could hardly produce the words. "Death Eaters," I said. "Raid on Cobbler's Cordwainery tomorrow! If they don't find Dad there, they'll come to Croydon looking for our whole family. Need to get out!"

"Leave Britain, you mean?" He tried to pull me over to sit down next to him, but I resisted. "Have we become targets? No, don't bother telling me how we managed to annoy You-Know-Who. Whatever his insane reasons, we need to make a plan to get out."

I drew in a deep, steady breath. "Susan Bones," I told him. "She knows what to do but urgghhh she didn't believe me. Go tell her it's real persuade her to help "

Oddly enough, Roger believed me immediately. He didn't waste time asking how I knew about the raid or why Susan hadn't believed my story. He simply took my arm and Apparated both of us straight back to Susan's house.

## The Flawless Plan

*Chapter 10 of 10*

If you were Tracey, what would you do with the rest of your life? Perhaps you have noticed that the answer has already been handed to her. But Tracey is about to be very, very surprised.

Chapter Ten

The Flawless Plan

Monday 14 July 1997 Saturday 16 May 1998

Susan was resolute about not including me in the escape plans. She made me sit on her garden swing while she sent owls and talked through the Floo, even though (Roger later said) it was all done in code, so even if I had been a spy, I couldn't have understood a word. Then she showed me a photograph of a strange bedroom, apparently built under the eaves of an attic.

"Can you memorise that picture?" she asked. "Good. You need to Apparate to that place. No, *can't* tell you where it is or who lives there. But they're expecting you."

I only hoped I had a clear enough idea of "destination" to make the journey to such a vaguely-defined place. But I certainly had the determination to stay alive, so I placed my whole mind on the blandly nondescript bedroom and soon felt the constricting disembodiment of Apparition. When I opened my eyes, the strange attic was all around me.

"So you made it," said Ernie Macmillan of all people! "You'll have to stay up here for a while, but we promise we'll get you out as fast as we can."

Macmillan wouldn't tell me any more about the escape plan than Susan had as if my own escape were none of my business! I wondered what Susan was telling Roger. I had to sit up in Macmillan's attic, browsing through clothes, books, quills and photographs that apparently belonged to his absent brother, for hour after hour while the world happened around me. One of the Macmillans was always in the room to check that I didn't double-cross them and escape, but they wouldn't give me any news about my parents or the Death Eaters.

More than twenty-four hours later, the monotony was broken by a loud *pop*! A bald, black Auror had Apparated into the attic.

"Good morning, Miss Davies," he said. "I've brought you a Portkey."

"Who are you?"

"It's all over," he said. "Cobbler's Cordwainery was destroyed an hour ago, but there was no-one inside. The Death Eaters blame you for Mr Cobbler's escape, so they are now hunting you down. You have no time to lose. Take this Portkey."

He held out a black cloth, careful not to touch the flat stone in its centre.

The instant I took the stone, something hooked around my navel and I was thrown into a whirling blackness. It seemed a very, very long way further than any Portkey ought to take anyone before I collapsed onto hard floor tiles, and Dad was helping me up.

"You made it," he said. "We were worried."

"Where are we, Dad?"

Before he could answer, Mum flung her arms around me and squeezed me breathless. "Tracey, you're safe!" she sobbed. "You've been so brave and clever in rescuing so many people! We're so proud of you and Roger!"

\* \* \* \* \*

It turned out that we were in a small villa in Portugal. Aunt Angela had bought it after her own escape, and we all lived there with her for the next ten months.

The escape plan had really been very efficient, considering how many people needed to be organised so secretly. Susan had gone to Cobbler's in person to tell the staff that they were in danger, and Dad and the apprentice had agreed to Apparate to safe houses immediately (Dad to Michael Corner's; the apprentice to Justin Finch-Fletchley's). But Mr and Madam Cobbler said they couldn't close the shop before evening as this would arouse suspicion. So Susan went to St Mungo's to warn Mum (who was assigned to hide at Hannah Abbott's house), then sent Roger off to Anthony Goldstein's.

The apprentice wasn't a specific target, so it had been safe for him to spend a week at the Finch-Fletchleys' and then pretend he had been on his summer holidays. But the rest of us had needed to leave Britain. Susan's Auror friend couldn't make more than two International Portkeys without inviting awkward questions, so Mr Abbott had hired

a Muggle motor boat to ferry Mum to Porto. Dean Thomas had constructed magically-forged passports so that the Cobblers could travel through the Channel Tunnel on the Muggle train. They had arrived in Paris several hours before the Death Eaters exploded their shop. The Goldsteins had put Roger on a Muggle aeroplane, which had been a terribly extravagant way to travel; Roger said the aeroplane wasn't nearly as exciting as a broomstick.

The Auror with the Portkey had gone to Dad yesterday, but he came to me last of all. It didn't seem to matter what I said or how I behaved; Susan and her friends simply hadn't trusted me not to double-cross them.

Aunt Angela didn't ask any questions; we lived at her expense for weeks and weeks. After a while, Dad started to make shoes, which he was able to sell to Muggle tourists. Roger found part-time work in a Muggle café, but he seemed to spend a lot of time on the beach, showing off on a Muggle surfboard and chatting up Muggle girls in bikinis. Mum did paperwork for Aunt Angela, who was trying to continue her interior design business in Portugal despite not speaking the language. She said it wasn't too hard to find customers because so many British expatriates were building retirement villas in Porto, but she had to be careful to leave any spellwork undetectable.

After a few days of acclimatising to the Portuguese sunshine, I didn't know what to do with myself. Susan's horrible words kept haunting me *What do you want more to save your father or to carry on hating your brother?* I had proved that saving my father was more important to me than hating my brother because *had* debased myself in front of Roger rather than leave Dad to die, so why did I keep thinking about Susan's harsh accusation?

I couldn't push away the inkling that it was because I had considered, just for one moment, leaving Dad to die in order to spite Susan.

I was forced to remember that I had even considered letting *myself* be killed rather than beg for Roger's mercy.

If I could entertain such wild caprices, it made Roger far too important. He was more important to me than Mum or Dad, or even than my own life. And Roger had no right to be the most important person in my life!

These hauntings were so disturbing that I retreated into books. I read a great deal during that sunny Portuguese summer. How could Susan claim I was selfish when the very last thing I wanted to think about was myself? I wanted to think about ideas and puzzles, not people. Fortunately, Aunt Angela was always exchanging books with her new Muggle friends, so there were always new ideas pouring into the house.

"Always so quiet and good nowadays!" joked Roger as he once again barged through the veranda colonnades and into my personal space. "You're turning into a bookworm."

"I am not!" I slammed the book to the paving stones. And it was a book I really wanted to read. There, it had happened again! Roger had the power to stop me doing what I wanted. "You don't change at all, Roger. You smell of perfume, so you've been chasing girls again."

He grinned. "I've been selling ice cream to girls. There has to be service with a smile, doesn't there?"

There had probably been more than smiles in Roger's service, but I couldn't be bothered arguing. Roger was as annoying as ever, but he seemed quite unable to take offence at anything I said. How had Roger ended up controlling my life when all I really wanted was a Roger-free zone?

I had given up art, music and flying because of Roger.

I had been sorted into Slytherin because of Roger, and because of being in Slytherin, I had made friends with all those violent boys and boring girls.

Because of my friends, I had paid lip-service to the ideology of pure-blood superiority and Potter-hostility, and that was why Susan didn't trust me.

Because of my attempts to play the Slytherin game to be *unlike* Roger our family had become Death Eater targets.

And still Roger could end my enjoyment of an ordinary thing like reading by daring me to prove that I wasn't a bookworm. Bookworm or not, I simply wanted to read *this* book at *this* time. It was a Muggle chemistry book, and I was really interested in how Muggle chemistry compared with magical Potions. It wasn't *fair* to let Roger disrupt that.

I picked up the book and determinedly re-focused on chemistry.

All at once, where I thought there was an empty space in my mind, I suddenly located *it*. The theory in the chemistry book was floodlit by a memory a memory that *shouldn't* have been about Roger.

What had really happened on that long-ago day in Snape's dungeon when I had been so angry with Roger that I hadn't noticed what was in my cauldron? Once again, I had been giving all my attention to Roger, and I just hadn't noticed *it*. Once again, Roger had been powerful enough to distract me from what I had really wanted to do.

He wasn't going to distract me today! I turned back to the previous page and re-read it slowly. Could *it* be true? If so, why hadn't anyone else ever noticed?

But I already knew why I was the first to put this particular puzzle together. All this exotic theory about atomic structure and covalent bonding was quite different from the Hogwarts approach to Potions. Understanding these Muggle theories required as strong a background in Transfiguration as in Potions, and not many wizards had advanced skills in both subjects. Of the few who had, most were too isolated to bother to read Muggle textbooks. If there ever had been any other wizard who had noticed *it*, it would have been some eccentric scholar who had never published or exploited the discovery.

But there seemed no doubt about *it*. It was real. I knew it could be done, because I had already once done it. I could have long since confirmed *it* if I hadn't been thinking so much about Roger.

So I *would not* think about Roger now. This was *my* project. I summoned a notepad and feverishly scribbled down everything I could remember about what I had tossed into my cauldron on that angry day nearly four years ago. What had been the vital catalyst, the secret component that would prove to be my very own Philosopher's Stone?

Half an hour later, I entered the villa's kitchen. "Aunt Angela," I said, "I need to borrow a cauldron."

\* \* \* \* \*

Plenty of other people have written about how Harry Potter defeated the Dark Lord, so I can't be bothered repeating the story here. The war ended; most of the surviving Death Eaters were captured; and it was safe for the exiles to return to Britain.

Within days of You-Know-Who's death, Aunt Angela leased her villa to Swedish holiday-makers; I packed up my cauldron and potion box; and we all took an International Portkey home to London. Aunt Angela's shop in Diagon Alley had been wrecked, but she could afford to hire a new one and re-open her interior design business without a hitch. Dad helped Mr Cobbler to rebuild the old shoe shop, then they ordered in a load of Spanish leather and returned to cutting out shoes. Mum reclaimed her job at St Mungo's. Roger went back to the Caerphilly Catapults, only to find that their Keeper had been killed in the war and so he was warmly invited to fill the vacancy. Roger is always so lucky!

As for me, I returned to Hogwarts. I thought I might as well attempt my NEWT exams, although I was quite nervous about all the changes to the school. Gaping holes leered at me where once there had been solid walls, and the gargoyles flanking the staffroom door had been smashed. I knew classmates would be missing from the Slytherin dungeon, for Vincent had died, Draco had fought on the wrong side, and Pansy had thoroughly embarrassed herself by being publicly practical at a moment when she ought to have been brave.

I didn't even know the current password; but I only had to wait ten minutes before someone opened the dungeon door. As soon as I entered, Cecilia squealed and dropped her cards so that she could race to fling her arms around me.

"Tracey, you're alive! Why didn't you answer my owls?"

I explained that I had been Unsearchable, surprised to learn that the frivolous Cecilia had bothered to write. She really had been a better friend to me than I had ever noticed. I had only allied with her out of convenience, and she had often bored me silly, yet she was the one person in Slytherin who actually liked me, and she had been as loyal to me as the other girls had allowed. I decided on the spot to give her a present.

"Look, I made you something while I was in Portugal."

Cecilia squealed so delightedly over the trinket that I brought out of my pocket that I wished I really had created it especially for her. "Tracey, it's dead gorgeous! It just matches that lizard-brooch that Pansy gave me on our first day at Hogwarts and now I have a lizard-bracelet to remind me of our last few days! Did you really make this all by yourself? You're dead clever! I'm so glad you've come back to school I thought you never would!"

"I'm going to have a try at the exams next month," I said. "I was very busy with Potions and Transfiguration in Portugal. But I'm probably going to fail Herbology and Charms even after Susan sent me the right books, I didn't read them much." By "fail" I meant "do worse than Roger". I really must stop this habit of letting Roger set my standards for me!

"I'll tutor you," said an unexpected voice behind me.

"What? Theo!" I blurted out. "You've changed! You never help anyone!"

"I think the war has changed all of us," said Theo. "Never helping anyone else never did me any good. Let's sit at a table and study properly. Cecilia, are you joining us?"

"Not likely! You're dead mean to force Tracey to study on her first night back!" Cecilia skipped back to her card-game, fingering her lizard bracelet as she went, and I settled at a study-table next to Theo.

"That bracelet was a cunning piece of Transfiguration," he said. "Did you use a Protean Charm on a template?"

"No, I need you to teach me how to do a Protean. I just, um, saw the lizard in my mind. Look, you can have this one." I pulled another ornament out of my pocket, this time a gentlewizard's cloak-fastener, elaborately shaped like a Celtic knot and studded with flashing diamonds. "Keep it, or sell it if you need the money. I want you to have it because, um..." I looked away, embarrassed.

"Actually *I do* need money," said Theo. "My father will never be out of Azkaban, and all his assets are frozen as long as he lives. So I have to make my own way in the world."

"In that case..." Since Theo had proved that he knew when to keep his mouth shut, it would be safe to tell him the truth. I whispered, "As I was saying, Theo, I want you to have this brooch because you never cared what anyone else thought, even when everyone else was flattering and lying. But don't be cheated when you sell it the silver is just a cheap alloy but *those diamonds are real*"

Astonished, he began to ask, "Can you afford to give me ?"

I stopped him. "So now you have a little financial backing, what are you going to do after your NEWTs?"

"Study at some Muggle university. Learn engineering or perhaps history and do something useful with my knowledge. What about you, Tracey? Do you have a plan for your future?"

"Yes, I'm going to make more of these diamonds." I brought the last bauble out of my pocket, a pair of diamond earrings. "I think I'll give these to Susan Bones; she's my cousin and she organised my escape. But the next lot I make I'm going to sell at a profit."

Theo stared. "Can you *make* diamonds? I thought they had to be mined."

"I spent my exile learning how to make diamonds. I combine charcoal with a few cheap catalysts and then use my own special formula to Transfigure it into genuine diamonds. I'm becoming more efficient all the time, so I'll soon be able to set up shop and become a diamond merchant."

I knew Mum and Dad would be proud that I'd chosen such an original and skilled career, even though they wouldn't care much about the profit aspect. I did wonder briefly what Roger would think, but fortunately I had not the least idea. Nowadays I wasted far less time thinking about Roger. Instead, I contemplated the lovely diamonds that were growing in the bottom of my cauldron. One day soon, I was going to be very, very rich.

THE END