

Parting Gift

by *kellychambliss*

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Chapter 1

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October, 1979

It was five o'clock on the dot when the staff room wards registered the presence of an outside visitor.

"That'll be your beau, then, Minerva, I expect," said Aurora, with an amused glance at Septima, her usual partner in collegial crime. "Like clockwork, your Mr Urquart."

"It's a quality from which others of us could benefit, Aurora," Minerva said pointedly, folding her copy of the *Daily Prophet* and rising. Enough was enough. Septima Vector and Aurora Sinistra were perfectly acceptable, even pleasant, co-workers most of the time, but they became positively giddy at the notion that an older man like Elphinstone could be interested in romance. Really, it was time those two grew up.

Elph, of course, found the whole situation vastly entertaining. He swept into the staff room with a theatrical swirl of his cape and bent low over her hand. "Minerva, my dearest, you look ravishing," he said, despite the fact that she was wearing her ordinary teaching robes. Then, with a flick of his wand, he filled her arms with more roses than she could hold.

"Stop it," Minerva hissed, pursing her lips sternly. Elph winked at her and Levitated four red flowers from the dozens now spilling onto the floor.

"Roses for love," he said, bowing low again as he presented one stem each to Aurora and Septima and to Minerva's good friends Poppy Pomfrey and Pomona Sprout. Septima giggled; Pomona beamed.

"Thank you, Mr Urquart," Aurora said. "I hope she says 'yes' this time."

"Ah, Miss Aurora, were she to do so, she would make me the happiest of men," Elph said, pressing his hand over his heart and looking soulfully at Minerva. "I live in never-ending hope."

Poppy began to cough, and in the general back-pounding and water-fetching that followed, Minerva deposited her armload of roses next to Pomona's chair and Summoned her cloak.

"I don't know why Minerva won't have him," she heard Septima say as she grabbed Elph's elbow and pulled him out of the room. "She's not getting any younger, and he's such a sweet old duffer. . ."

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Once in the corridor, Elph doubled over with laughter, and Minerva shook her head, smiling.

"You just love winding them up," she accused him as they headed out of the castle.

"I do, I admit it," Elph said, wiping his eyes. "They're lovely young women, your Aurora and Septima, but they are so earnest and so... well, young."

"That's not a crime," Minerva said, hooking her arm through his.

"No, of course not. But what's the point of being old, my dear, if you can't have some sport with the young?"

Minerva laughed. "I thought the point of being old was being wise."

"That's just a myth we old people use to get respect. Believe me, the real point of being old is the chance to plague youngsters."

"You might want to restrain yourself a bit next time, though, or Poppy is going to spoil it all by laughing. A healer can pretend to have only so many coughing fits."

"Good point. But that's one of the things I want to talk with you about, Minerva: I'm afraid there isn't going to be a next time."

Minerva stopped short and stared at him. "What's wrong?" she demanded, fear turning her voice sharp. "You're not ill?"

They were on the path to Hogsmeade, and the setting sun cast a halo around Elph, highlighting his freshly-cut hair and reminding her of the natty, vigorous boss she'd first met in the department of Magical Law Enforcement, all those years ago. He looked healthy and fit still, but...

"No, no, my dear, nothing like that," Elph assured her, and Minerva nearly let her shoulders sag in relief. "I'll tell you all about it. Shall we repair to that most romantic of twee-shops, Madam Puddifoot's? Don't forget that I also need to make my annual proposal of marriage."

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"It's not that I haven't found our arrangement delightful," Elph said, once they were seated in the tea shop, a pot of fragrant Assam and a plate of pastries between them. "You're one of my dearest friends, Minerva, and if nothing else, our little plan allows me to spend more time with you than I'd be able to normally, as busy as we both are."

Minerva stirred her tea... black, with lemon and one sugar lump... and cocked an eyebrow at him. "You know I always enjoy seeing you, Elph."

"Oh, well, naturally," he said, deadpan. "After all, I'm such a sweet old duffer."

"So some people seem to think. And yes, our 'arrangement,' as you call it, has been quite successful. So why does it sound as if you are planning to end it?"

Elph put down his cup. "It's time. We both know that the fiction of my deathless, unrequited passion for you has enabled me to have much more of a life with Cyril than I could have managed otherwise. When I'm so obviously pining for my darling stern woman from the north, who could suspect me of being in love with a man?"

"Pervert," said Minerva, and Elph chuckled.

"Takes one to know one, pervertess," he said. "How is dear Millie?"

"She's fine. Don't change the subject. What were you saying about its being time to end our fiction?"

"Cyril is retiring at the end of the year."

"So soon?"

"Yes, it's rather earlier than he'd originally planned, but we've talked it over, and as I say, we think the time is right. I've been retired from MLE for two years now, and Cyril and I have decided that it's time we started living a little... traveling, seeing the world, being together without worrying about people talking and speculating." Elph took Minerva's hands and squeezed them. "We're tired of hiding, and even with the cover story of my romance with you, there's still been a lot of hiding. As you well know yourself, of course."

"I do," Minerva agreed, squeezing back. She certainly did know. The wizarding world was not ready for men who loved men or for women who loved women, and if she had not (to her own surprise) found herself to be one of those women-loving women, she was honest enough to admit to she might have been one of the people voicing disapproval.

It took time to change attitudes that had endured for centuries, and meanwhile, couples like Elph and Cyril and like her and Millie had to find other ways to live and love safely. Hiding and subterfuge were part of the price. Hence the long-term fake romance.

Elph selected a raspberry jelly star from the cake plate and beamed at it before taking a large bite. "I can't resist these," he confided, when he could speak again. "Now, the thing is this, Minerva: Cyril and I are leaving England."

"Leaving England! Do you mean... for good? Where will you go?"

"Probably for good, yes. We have no family left, nothing to keep us here. And there are places in the world... even wizarding places... where men like Cyril and me can live more openly. In America, for example: San Francisco. We thought we'd start there, maybe for a year or two, and then... who knows? Wherever the wind and a good broom take us."

"Is this anything to do with the war?" Minerva couldn't help asking. So far, they'd managed to keep that painful topic at bay in the interests of a pleasant evening, but the threat of You-Know-Who... or "Voldemort," as Albus would insist on saying... and his thuggish Death Eaters was never far away.

"No, not really, except in the sense that both Cyril and I will be glad to escape it. We've done enough fighting. Oh, certainly, if I hear anything among foreign wizards that I think the Ministry ought to know, I'll get in touch with MLE, but no... this is just something we want to do for ourselves."

"So I will never see you again?" Minerva tried to cover her sinking sense of loss with a note of exasperation, but she was sure Elph saw through her.

"On the contrary," he said, looking directly at her. The glint in his eye was one Minerva knew well: it usually meant he was about to do something daring. Just as during their days at MLE, the sight made her both wary and interested at once.

He smirked. "In fact, you might see more of me than ever before. One way or another."

"What do you mean? Tell me the whole story. In detail, if you please," she added. Elph was slippery when he wanted to be... a great deal like Albus in that respect. It was always best to pin him down as precisely as possible. Being enigmatic was all very well (if a bit hard on one's friends), but a little clarity never hurt anyone.

Elph was grinning widely now. "I'll tell you this much," he said. "You will be one of the few people in this country who will know where I've gone. And when. As far as anyone else will be aware, I could still be here. Hear me? I could still be here. Do you understand?"

"No."

"You will, eventually. Here, this might help ... I want to give you something. A parting gift."

He waved his wand, and an elaborately-wrapped box hovered in the air before her. It was covered in white paper that shimmered with flickering golden stars; festoons of red satin ribbon cascaded down the sides.

There was an audible gasp from Madam Puddifoot, who was approaching to refill their teapot herself; she took a keen interest in Elph's romantic suit and always contrived to drop by their table. A few years earlier, she'd urged Minerva to continue to turn Elph down. "He's so good to you," she'd said. "I'm sure he must give you lovely presents and things. But once he's caught you, he'll lose interest. Mark my words. Keep him on the hook, and who knows what you might get?"

Elph had been delighted when Minerva had repeated this piece of sage advice, and now he took advantage of Madam P's presence to proclaim loudly, "the most expensive item to be had on the rue St-Honoré, dearest Minerva. I went to Paris to choose it myself."

Madam P raised a knowing eyebrow at Minerva and mouthed, "see?" as she waved her wand to fill the pot and then moved majestically away. The other shop patrons were unabashedly staring.

Minerva knew that the package contained nothing from Paris; despite what Madam Puddifoot chose to think, she and Elph never gave each other extravagant gifts. The gaudy wrapping was just Elph's joke. She snatched the box and held it on her lap, away from the curious eyes. "Honestly. You'd think no one had ever seen a gift before. What is it really, Elph?"

"Oh, nothing exotic, of course. Just a little something that I hope you will use to remember me. Now, promise you won't open it until you get my owl saying that Cy and I have made it to San Francisco."

"Oh, for heaven's ... "

"I'm serious. Promise me."

Minerva nodded. "Very well. You have my word."

Elph nodded in return. "Thank you," he said, and took another jelly star.

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The night was starry and crisp, and they took their time walking back to Hogwarts.

Minerva was not one for sentimental leave-takings, but the departure of Elphinstone Urquart from her life was not to be taken lightly. They had shared much over the years, and she valued his support and acceptance more than she could put into words.

So as the castle came into view, she put a hand on his arm to stop him. "I'll miss you, Elph," she said.

She should have known that he'd not settle for a simple goodbye. He pulled her into a bear hug that rivaled Hagrid's and lifted her off the ground for a moment before putting her down and stepping back.

"I'll miss the hell out of you, too, Min."

"You know I'm happy for you, you and Cyril. Do give him my regards. And I have some homework to assign you," she added with mock sternness, hoping he wouldn't notice the catch in her voice.

"Assign away, Professor," Elph said, saluting.

"You and Cyril have the best life together that you possibly can, do I make myself clear? Be an example for the rest of us."

"We'll do our damndest, don't you worry. But you never know ... big changes might be coming for you, too. You and Millie might even get married some day."

Minerva snorted. "And You-Know-Who might sprout wings and start to fly without a broom."

"He just might, at that," Elph laughed. Then he sobered and put his hands on her shoulders. "In a different life, my dear Minerva," he said, looking down at her solemnly, "I would have been proud to court you. Millie is a lucky woman."

He brushed his lips lightly against her forehead, and the *crack* of Apparition echoed in the trees.

Elphinstone Urquart was gone.

But not before Minerva had once again seen that daring glint in his eye.

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## **Two Weeks Later**

An owl had arrived at her office window about an hour before dinner. Certain that the bird was bringing the announcement of Elph and Cyril's safe arrival in America, Minerva hastened to open the casement.

She was growing rather curious about Elph's mysterious package.

But the message was from Millie ... "News worth celebrating! Short notice, I know, but can you meet me at the Copper Kettle tonight eight-ish?"

Minerva had quickly notified Albus that she would not be at the High Table that evening, and now here she was, seated in the quiet Muggle restaurant that she and Millie used for special occasions. It was far from any Wizarding establishments, and even if anyone had recognised them, what would they have seen? Merely two middle-aged career women sharing a meal.

Still, it would have been nice not to have to be so careful all the time, and Minerva allowed herself a moment's fleeting envy for Elph and his Cyril, brave enough to risk life in a new land as a designated couple. She had no desire to move to America or anywhere else, but she wished she and Millie could. . .

Stop it, she told herself firmly. No good ever came of repining. She might not be able to live completely openly, but she had the support of dear friends like Poppy and Pomona, she had work she loved and a partner ditto ... and that much good fortune should be enough for anyone.

A slight commotion at the door distracted her, and there was Millie, smiling broadly and bustling towards the table.

Millicent Bagnold was a short, stocky woman with curly brown hair and mischievous dark eyes, and Minerva's heart always did a little flutter when she saw her lover. She'd been attracted to Millie almost as soon as she'd met her at the Ministry, when Minerva had been the newest member of MLE, and Millie had been only a clerk to one of the Minister's junior secretaries.

But Millie's ambition had been as boundless as her energy. "I'll be Minister myself someday, you'll see," she regularly promised Minerva, and Minerva didn't doubt her,

especially as promotion followed promotion, and "Millicent Bagnold, Ministry spokeswoman" became a familiar presence in the pages of the *Daily Prophet*.

Millie slid into the chair opposite Minerva, fairly bouncing with excitement. "Champagne, please, Walt," she said to their usual waiter. "The best bottle you have that won't bankrupt me."

Minerva raised an eyebrow. Champagne. On a work night. The "good news" must be spectacular, then.

Walt hurried away, and Millie began unwinding her long Muggle muffler, grinning all the while.

"I've done it, Min," she said breathlessly. "I've finally built enough of a support coalition, and they'll put me up for Minister as soon as Minchum retires at the first of the year."

"Millie!" Minerva felt breathless in her turn. "Why, that's wonderful! But how ... ?"

"You might well ask! You know I thought I'd need at least one more cycle before I had the necessary votes, but Gladstone Willets came to my office this afternoon and said that he and Velda Grean ... you remember her, from the Department of Mysteries? Well, Glad said they were going to back me instead of Basil Jorkins. So that gives me my majority!"

"That's wonderful," Minerva said again, and it was. Millie had worked for this moment for nearly a quarter of a century, and Minerva couldn't have been more pleased for her. For herself, though, the news was slightly bittersweet. She and Millie saw so little of each other as it was, and now. . .

A similar thought seemed to occur to Millie, for her beaming face dimmed a bit. "Of course, it will mean a lot more hours at the Ministry ... "

Minerva couldn't help laughing. "Any more hours at the Ministry, and you might as well simply move in."

"Don't laugh," Millie said. "The main conference room at the Ministry converts into a little flat for the Minister's convenience if he or she wants to stay overnight. I'll be given the activation spell as one of the perks of office." She gave Minerva a wink and a little smirk. "Supposedly, there's even a secret entryway, left over from the days of the womanizing Archer Evermonde. You can sneak in the way his mistresses used to do."

"Mistress of the Minister of Magic," Minerva said. "My highest ambition."

Millie snickered, then sighed. "Actually, you'll probably have to steer well clear of the place. It's warded, of course, but I'm not sure I'd trust the interior security. You know how the Ministry is ... such a political hotbed, dozens of people always keeping their eye on the main chance. We can't risk anyone learning about us."

"I know that."

"Oh, Min." Millie's normally-dancing eyes were somber. "I'm sorry. I know how much I'll be asking of you. We'll have to be even more discreet than we've been before, and then there's the thestral under the carpet that you're being too diplomatic to mention: the war. . ."

The war. True, Minerva hadn't mentioned it, but she'd hardly felt that she needed to. Neither of them could really forget it, not for long.

"I know the dangers, Millie," she said. "You'll be a target. You-Know-Who might not kill you, but he'll no doubt try to have you Imperiused. You'll need to be very careful. And you can't afford to be vulnerable through me, too. I understand."

Millie reached over and clasped her hand; there really wasn't much else to say.

Walt chose that moment to return with the champagne. He set up an ice bucket, popped the cork, and soon two chilled, bubbling flutes sat shimmering on the table.

Minerva firmly put all thoughts of the war and danger out of her mind. This was a celebration, and her Millie deserved it.

"To Millicent Bagnold," she said, raising her glass and quoting from what would be Millie's oath of office. "Minister and 'preserver of the inalienable rights of wizardkind.'"

Her irrepressible good humour restored, Millie laughed and raised her glass in return. "And to our inalienable right to a good party."

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After dinner, they Apparated to Millie's flat.

"How about a massage?" Millie suggested. "Or maybe a nice hot bath?"

Minerva shook her head regretfully. "I'd love to stay," she said. "But I wouldn't feel right about leaving the students during the middle of the week. What about Saturday? I can arrange for Pomona to monitor my House. . ."

"Minerva McGonagall! I don't care if it is a Wednesday, and you have classes tomorrow. I'm spending this red-letter night in bed with the woman I love."

In her head, Minerva could hear Elphinstone's voice ... "it's time we started living a little" ... and she took Millie into her arms.

"All right, yes," she said. "Let's go to Hogwarts."

They Floo'd directly into Minerva's bedroom and wasted no time repairing to the bed with its soft eiderdown. Millie's lips had just found that delicious sensitive spot behind Min's ear when they heard a peremptory banging on the window.

Millie groaned. "Not an owl at this hour. Please don't let it be from the Ministry."

Minerva *Accio'd* her dressing gown and got up. "Just because one receives a message doesn't mean one has to answer it immediately," she said, soon sending the owl on its way and unfurling the parchment it had delivered.

"You're saved," she told Millie. "Not the Ministry. It's from Elphinstone. He and Cyril have found a flat ... no, an *apartment*, he says ... in San Francisco and so far are having a wonderful time."

Millie sat up, interested. "Does this mean you can open his package now? Oh, do, Min; I'm dying to see what it is."

They curled up together under the duvet, and Minerva tapped the gift with her wand. The paper and ribbon slid off, revealing a carved wooden box. When Minerva touched it, Elph's voice filled the room.

"When this you see, remember me," he said. "And should you need more, there's plenty where this came from. Use it well, my dear friend. Keep in touch. Be happy."

The carved lid opened of its own accord.

"What the. . .?" said Millie, looking at the silvery contents. "It looks like. . .some kind of fur?"

Minerva peered. "It's hair," she said finally. "Elph's hair, if I'm not mistaken. I noticed when I last saw him that he'd had his hair cut very short."

"Hair?" Millie turned to stare incredulously at Minerva. "Elphinstone Urquart sent you his hair as a remembrance? Is he losing his mind? I mean, he's always been a little. . ." She leant forward, wagging her fingers, and Minerva had to look away from the distraction of her creamy bosom. "What on earth was he thinking?"

"I believe," Minerva said slowly, "that he was thinking of us. He's offering us a way to live together. Openly."

"Now I think *you're* losing your mind," said Millie, dropping a kiss on Minerva's bare shoulder. "How would his hair help us. . . oooh, wait! I see now. Of course. Of course!"

She clapped her hands, and Minerva chuckled. "I knew we wouldn't have to wait long for that Ravenclaw brain of yours to kick in," she said. "Elph's hair, plus a little polyjuice potion, and presto! Minerva and Millicent, two women in dangerous love, become Minerva and Elphinstone, sedate and acceptable opposite-sex couple."

There was a moment of silence as they pondered this rather momentous idea. The implications were enormous. Could they manage such a transformation, and would they want to? How would it feel, Minerva wondered, to see Millie's eyes looking out of Elph's face? And what about. . . well, more intimate elements. . . ?

Millie's thoughts seemed to be running along the same lines. "What about sex?" she demanded. "I've always wanted to know what sex felt like for a man. But. . . do you think you could do it, Min? Basically have sex with Elph? Oh, it wouldn't really be Elph, of course, but. . . well, you know what I mean."

Minerva knew. She considered. "It would be. . . intriguing," she allowed finally. "Once in a while, perhaps."

"That's right," Millie nodded. "I wouldn't have to be Elph all the time, obviously. I can't be; I'll have the Ministry to run. But now that I think about it, it would be very convenient sometimes, to have another identity to escape to."

"You could be Elph in public with me, and yourself at the Ministry and when we were home alone," Minerva agreed. "We'd have to plan our schedule very carefully, though, and brew different strengths of the potion, depending on how long we needed it to last. But it certainly could be done."

"Yes. It could be done." Millie leant back into the pillows and began to stroke Minerva's long hair absently. It felt lovely, like being petted in her cat form, and Minerva gave herself the luxury of a long stretch.

Suddenly Millie sat up and flung her arms around Minerva. "Min! We could even get married if we wanted to! Have a little rose-covered cottage and all the clichés! No one would be surprised; they'd just think that Elph finally wore you down and you accepted him. They'll think it's romantic."

"If they don't think he's a creepy stalker," Minerva said wryly. "But you're probably right. I'm sure Aurora and Septima would be beside themselves. So would my brothers." Malcolm and Robert had always viewed her single life with disapproval.

"We'd let a few people know the truth," Millie continued, kissing Minerva's cheek. "The ones who know now. My sister. Poppy and Pomona. Albus."

"Mmmm." Minerva turned and deepened the kiss, and for a while, they put all thoughts of Elphinstone aside. Only when they were finally lying quiet together, sweaty and sated, did Millie return to the implications of Elphinstone's gift.

"What it we got tired of it, Min?" she asked.

"Tired of living together in wedded bliss? Of being with each other?"

Millie gave Minerva's shoulder a little slap. "Of course not, goosey! Tired of the whole business, I mean ... the potion, and the schedules, and seeing Elph naked, and oh. . . just all of it. In a lot of ways, we'd still be hiding, you know. . . just with a lot more complications."

"Well," said Minerva, "if we did decide we'd had enough, we could always arrange for Elph to have a little accident of some kind. Where no one would have to see the body except Poppy or Albus."

"Kill him off! That's an excellent idea! How tragic it would be. You'd be a grieving widow, Min, and as your good friend, I could come stay with you. As a comfort."

"Indeed. I'm sure I would need a great deal of comfort."

"But how would we dispatch him?"

"Plenty of ways, I'd think. No doubt Poppy could come up with something. Or Pomona. For such a kind and cheerful person, Pomona takes an unusual interest in malicious plants."

"Oh, yes!" Millie was enjoying herself. "Maybe a venomous tentacula. They're actually rather pretty, in a deadly-vine sort of way. Pomona could detoxify it and drape it around me, I mean, around Elph. Just in case we needed a photograph or something as proof. I'd like to be an artistic corpse."

"We have plenty of time to think about it," Minerva said, wandering out the candles and muttering a spell to bank the fire. "To think about all of it."

"Mmmmm," agreed Millie, beginning to sound sleepy.

Minerva turned and spooned herself behind her love, wrapping an arm around her waist and entwining their legs.

"Vine practice," she whispered. "You'll need a lot of it, so we'll need a lot of nights together. Corpse art doesn't just happen, you know. "

Millie replied by threading their fingers together, and hand-in-hand, they slept.

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**Notes:** According to the Pottermore backstory for Minerva, she works for at time at the Ministry in London, in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. She marries her much-older boss, Elphinstone Urquart, sometime in the early 1980s. Three years later, he dies in a tragic accident with a venomous tentacula.

Again according to Pottermore, Millicent Bagnold served as Minister of Magic from 1980 to 1990. On 1 November, 1981, the day after Voldemort's first defeat, she responded to concerns about celebratory violations of the Statute of Secrecy by famously declaring, "I assert our inalienable right to party."