

A Fresh Start

by Scarlet Crystal

Susan Murley was an ordinary girl. She enjoyed school, lived with her parents, and had a pet cat named Misty. There was nothing strange about her. At least, that was what she thought. Suddenly, her parents are fighting about a mysterious problem that she doesn't understand. An owl flies through the hall window. Her mother has an important secret to reveal that will change her life forever.

All original Harry Potter characters and related belong to JK Rowling (bless her) and Warner Brothers.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 3

Susan Murley was an ordinary girl. She enjoyed school, lived with her parents, and had a pet cat named Misty. There was nothing strange about her. At least, that was what she thought. Suddenly, her parents are fighting about a mysterious problem that she doesn't understand. An owl flies through the hall window. Her mother has an important secret to reveal that will change her life forever.

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The day was July 18th. I remember it so clearly. Things started out normally, with Mum whistling as she arranged placemats in the kitchen or petting our cat, Misty, while reading the newspaper. I was between summer camps, which my nearly-eleven-year-old-self adored. However, I found ways to amuse myself. I'd get a ball of string and play with Misty or watch Mum go about her daily business. I loved that, just watching her. She'd sit by the window and let beams of sunlight pour through the panes and onto her lap. She'd smile, happy to exist peacefully. Or, almost peacefully.

Unfortunately, there was one thing that nagged at our perfect life together: my father. I hate to say this, but he and Mum didn't always get along. I like to think back to when I was really little, before the fights began. Things were always soft and kind, never harsh and cold the way things got on some days. I blamed it all on the fights. They began one night when I was eight after something strange happened and Misty rose up off the ground a few inches. I had told myself it was a dream, a hallucination. I had looked up that word in the thesaurus. I liked words, and I liked school. My teachers always loved me because I did so well.

But nothing could change the fact that Mum and Dad had gone into the den to chat that same night when I thought I saw Misty hovering above the ground. I sat in the living room, looking at Misty, who seemed completely unaware that anything was wrong. She rubbed her tail against my legs and looked up at me with almost human eyes. That's when I first heard the shouting. First, it was a dull murmur. It was so quiet that I thought maybe it was my stomach. Then, the sound grew louder, and I realized what it really was: Dad yelling at Mum.

I was scared. Misty sensed it, I think, because she jumped into my lap and tried to calm me with a gentle purr. I clutched her gray fur fearfully. Mum and Dad had never shouted before, yet there it was, yelling. It echoed through the house, and my heart shook inside me. After about ten minutes, I became so distressed that I ran upstairs to my room. Mum and Dad must have heard footsteps on the stairs because the yelling stopped. I sat on my bed, leaning against the wall behind it and whimpered. Moments later, my dad slowly turned the door handle and walked in. He looked concerned.

"Susan," he muttered, saying my name carefully like he was afraid I might collapse and begin to sob right then and there. Maybe he had a good reason to be that way. I

certainly felt like collapsing.

"Dad," I said meekly. I could hear a tremor in my tone. He sighed and approached my bed. He looked worn out. I felt sorry for him, even though he had been yelling at Mum. I wondered then why Mum hadn't yelled back.

We looked at each other in silence, unsure of what to say.

"You're... fighting," I mumbled. He could tell I was distressed.

"I know," he agreed, looking ashamed. "But you must remember this: just because Mum and Dad fight doesn't mean they don't love each other. Sometimes people get mad and have to let it out." I nodded and feigned understanding, even though I wasn't completely consoled. I could tell Dad couldn't think of anything else to say. He was forcing himself to accept that I understood, even though he probably wasn't sure about it. He left me with one last apologetic glance. The sound of him shutting my door sent a wave of quiet through the house. Nothing moved, only Misty's tail swinging back and forth on the couch downstairs and my stomach, rising and falling, rising and falling.

That was two years ago. I had been... eight, going on nine, I think. After a week, I was over the shock of hearing my Dad violently yelling at Mum. Of course, I couldn't forget it, but my mind stopped turning my thoughts to it all the time. That only lasted about three weeks. Then the yelling started again. Mum rarely yelled back. I never really figured out why she just took what Dad threw at her. I wanted her to be strong. I wanted to be on her side. She was smart, pretty, and knew how to make somebody feel loved. I wanted to be just like her, and praise from my grandmother that I looked "just like Mary did when she was young" made me swell with pride. I looked like Mum. I was pretty.

I never could fully get past the yelling because just when my wounds had healed, Dad would open up the floor for another bad night, and I'd shake in my shoes. On those nights, I'd toss and turn. It was not a happy time.

School started again. My grades kept up, though my teachers noted on my evaluation cards that I seemed quieter and less enthusiastic. Mum assured them that nothing was wrong; they didn't need to worry about my home life. It was around then that I started to be curious about what Dad felt the need to yell so often over. Oftentimes, I'd hear the yelling and be tempted to go downstairs and listen. One step towards the door and I would freeze in my tracks. I stopped there and convinced myself that I didn't want to know or that it was adult business I wouldn't understand.

There's that word again. Understand.

Time went on, and the yelling didn't stop. Sure, sometimes Dad went for over two months without a bad night, but that wasn't often enough to make a difference. I never became immune to the horrible sound raking through the air. It tore at me, and I couldn't defend myself. That's why I yearned for the ends of the fights for more reason than one. Mum would come in. Sometimes I cried, but others I only whimpered like I was still eight years old. She sat with me and stroked my hair. I felt comforted, but nothing could erase all the damage Dad had caused.

As I got older, I started to see things in my father that made me like him even less. He was cold-hearted, not the way I remembered him from my early childhood. He worked long days and found excuses to go away on long trips. Sometimes he'd come home drunk; I could smell it on his good-night kiss. Twice he didn't come home for a whole weekend, but refused to tell Mum where he had been. The worst thing was when he made Mum cry. "Susan needs a father, not a drunk coward," she had said to him. He'd smelled that night. He only laughed, bellowed something about "I'll teach you!" and pushed Mum, hard. I gasped, and he looked at me. Unfazed, he bellowed, "Go to your room, you little freak!"

But two summers later, it was that fateful July 18th of the year I was ten years old. Dad was arriving home from one of his trips that night, so Mum was cleaning the house, getting everything nice and ready for him. I helped where I could, mostly keeping Misty out of the way and picking up her balls of string. Then, something unremarkable happened: the mail arrived.

Little did I know that the night of July 18th would be the worst of all.

Chapter One: The Hall Window

Chapter 2 of 3

Susan's journey continues.

Mum went out to get the mail. "Go take a bath," she said.

"Okay!" I said, happy to do whatever she wanted me to do. I loved Mum so much. I skipped upstairs. That was when I heard it.

Hooting.

I nearly fell back down the stairs. Something was hooting outside! I went to the hall window. A gasp escaped me as I took in the sight of the window. Outside was a large brown owl, sitting on Mum's flowerbed and looking right at me. I was immediately curious as to why there was a large beaked creature at our window. I approached it, not minding too much that it was there. I liked animals, and so did Mum. Besides, I had seen several other owls flying around our neighbourhood before, even though they weren't supposed to live in our area.

It had sharp eyes, staring at me severely. I moved eagerly but carefully towards it, not too afraid because there was a window between us. Soon, I was standing right before it. It looked me in the eye and hooted, softly this time. I looked back at it. Feeling amazed, I pressed my pale face against the glass, my palms and nose making little clouds on its surface. Suddenly, the owl stuck out its leg. I jerked myself back, away from the window, and grabbed at the door handle to my room, which was close behind my on my right. It pecked the window impatiently with its beak. Wondering why it was behaving so strangely, I let go of the handle and moved slowly back towards the creature.

Finally, I had the sense to look at its outstretched leg. Clutched in its talons was a parchment envelope. All I could see on it was a dark red seal of sorts with a strange H encrusted into it. Suddenly, a weird urge came over me. I wanted to open that window. I knew I shouldn't. Only Misty was allowed in the house; other animals were restricted to the backyard. However, I couldn't overpower the strong feeling of desire to wrench it open. I stared at the window, contemplating, when suddenly it flew open, as if it had waited long enough and finally opened itself as if it had read my mind. I let out a shriek. The owl flew into the hall and into my room, just as if windows normally opened themselves just like that.

"Susan? Is everything all right?" Mum said from downstairs. Acting on a whim, I called out to her.

"Come quick!" I said, fully knowing that I would get in trouble for letting an animal in the house. But an owl! It was in my room, and I wanted to get a closer look. I dashed into my room and saw it sitting, appearing to be bored, on top of my dresser. Soon, Mum was beside me. I beckoned for her to come into my room and shut the door behind her as soon as she had obeyed.

"What is it?" she said, looking at me confusedly. I pointed soundlessly at the dresser. She followed my finger with her eyes. The owl looked at her and hooted.

I braced myself for a gasp or a reprimand, but none came. She only walked over to the dresser and reached for the envelope. I was shocked; I stood rooted to the spot, unable to decide on how to react. The owl took off and began to fly in lazy circles around my room, looking as though it was waiting for Mum to open the envelope. She looked at it and turned it over. Reading the address, she looked at me quickly, and seemed to beam with pride momentarily. Then, the owl let out an annoyed hoot and pulled her focus back to it.

"Let him out," she said. I blinked. "Do it, love. Before he gets fidgety." I mutely strode over to the door to the hall and let the bird out. He flew out the door and out the window and on to some faraway destination. I went back to my room, but Mum was leaving already through the door, so we nearly collided. Her face was unreadable.

"What is that?" I asked, meaning the envelope. Mum seemed to consider for a moment.

"I'll tell you after dinner," she said finally and left me standing there, nearly bursting with curiosity.

Dad came home, looking sober, and I was glad to see him. Sort of. He was tired and hungry, so Mum put dinner on the table surprisingly quickly and we ate. She looked uncomfortable, so I didn't feel right. Dad didn't seem to notice. I felt it then. He didn't know his own family. He chatted away about Business and Progress, and I tuned out, pondering the envelope. I was dying to know what it meant. I was patient, though, and decided not to bring it up until after dinner.

We didn't have dessert, so I just helped Mum clear the plates away as Dad sat back to relax for a moment. We were putting away the milk when I finally couldn't wait any longer. "Mum?" I said, trying to sound nonchalant. "Can you tell me about the envelope now?" I looked at her out of the corner of my eye. She shut the refrigerator, then turned to me.

"I need to talk with your father first, but when I finish, I promise I will tell you all about it," she said, looking sincere. I nodded, wondering if she was putting it off or if she really needed to talk to him. Still, I had faith in her. Mum didn't break promises. She gave me a quick hug and went back into the kitchen.

So I took Misty up to my room and pulled out a book. It had a smooth, green cover, and smelled like new pages. I opened it up and began to read, rubbing Misty's neck and taking in the words. It took me a few moments to realize that something was wrong.

Dad was starting to shout. I soon found out that he was bellowing so loudly that I could hear part of what he was saying. It was one of the worst of their fights. I tried to ignore it and go on reading, but I couldn't. Dad's voice carried easily up the stairs and into my room. "She's not going anywhere!" he exclaimed. "I won't let you cart her off to some madhouse! You and your freak community can stay away from her!" There was a short pause. Mum must have spoken because Dad started up again: "I don't care if she's your daughter, too! She'll be raised like a normal girl in my house. Here!"

I felt awful. They were fighting about me... Was it the envelope? I was pulled from my thoughts by a sound I didn't hear much. Mum was yelling back. I didn't have to go downstairs to hear her, either. She seemed really mad. Furious, in fact.

"Susan is my daughter! Every woman in my family for centuries has gone to this school. It's a tradition, and whether you like it or not, she's going!" Mum said, hatred in her voice.

"I don't care about your stupid family! I never liked them all that much from the start. I had a hunch that they weren't normal, and look! I was right." Dad seemed almost triumphant. My insides churned, waiting for Mum's response.

"If you don't want her to go, you'll just have to leave because she's going," Mum said, this time just loud enough for me to hear. All was silent for a minute. Then Dad spoke, his voice venomous, saying, "Maybe... maybe I will." Moments later, I heard the front door slam. The sound of a car being started sounded outside my window. Slowly, it became quieter and quieter until I could no longer hear the engine.

I was frozen, mid-word, mid-pet, for a long time. I hardly dared to breathe. Dad was gone. It didn't really sink in until Mum trudged into my room, looking sadder than I had ever seen her before. The envelope was clutched in her right hand. For a moment, I only felt upset, but then all my curiosity rushed back to me, and my gaze fixed on the envelope. That strange seal marked with an H looked so official. I could only wonder what it meant.

"Do you still want to talk about the letter?" Mum asked me. I didn't have any doubt.

"Please, Mum," I said, trying not to sound too eager. She sighed and looked at me. She seemed suddenly heavy with the night's events. However, she made an effort to shake it off and composed herself. I waited, giving her a moment. I could feel my heart pounding. Suddenly, I didn't feel so eager anymore. Whatever that strange envelope was caused Dad to leave the house and made Mum upset. I didn't miss him, but the months of sadness welled up inside me, and I wanted to cry. Before I could tell Mum I had changed my mind and didn't want it anymore, she turned over the envelope and handed it to me. I looked down at it, half expecting it to explode at any moment.

"Open it," she said. Mum's voice was just louder than a whisper. I felt torn. What did this all mean? It was too much at once. Still, I knew that I would have to open it eventually, so I fingered the seal and slowly worked the envelope open. Wondering if I would be chastised for being so suspicious, I lifted the flap of parchment and reached inside. I quickly looked up at Mum and caught her eye. I could tell she was sending all of her strength to me. If only I'd known how much change that envelope would bring.

Truth Takes Time

Chapter 3 of 3

Susan's journey continues.

Taking a deep breath, I pulled the thick wad of papers out of the envelope. Mum pulled herself closer to me on the bed so that we were sitting side by side, looking down at the first paper. It was a piece of thick parchment with black, curvy letters dancing across the page. It looked so official that I paused for a moment to admire the writer's penmanship. Mum pulled me out of my daydream after a moment, saying, "Susan? Is something wrong?" I looked at her quickly and shook my head.

"No. I was just..." I trailed off and began to read.

'HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore

(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizard\$

Dear Ms. Murley,

We are please to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31st.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall,

Deputy Headmistress'

"Witchcraft," I said quietly. "Wizardry." The realization that I was not a normal girl was beginning to sink in. Misty crawled onto my lap and began to purr contentedly.

Mum seemed to be searching for what to say. Fear crawled into me. Was this why Dad had left?

"Mum. Why did Dad leave?" I said, trying to keep my voice steady. I think she knew I wasn't just asking why he left, but why he always yelled. Why me?

"I don't know if you remember this," she started carefully, trying to approach the topic nicely, "but when you were around seven or eight years old, Misty came off the ground all by herself?"

"Actually, yes," I said timidly. Mum seemed saddened by this.

"I see," she said, sighing heavily. "Well, your father didn't know up until then about... about me. I'm a witch, and so are you, Susan. He wouldn't accept that, and so he got angry." I shifted uncomfortably.

"Was that why he always yelled?" I said, afraid of the answer. Mum looked at my letter and then at me.

"Yes," she said. "He never got used to it. I tried to talk to him, but he never wanted to listen. It's made us grow apart." I could hear the hurt in her voice.

"Did you ever tell him about this before?" I asked, holding up the papers, feeling upset. Mum had made Dad leave. He probably hated me now.

"I was afraid to tell him," Mum said. "And look what happened when I did!" I knew she meant Dad leaving. Resentment crept in, but not towards Dad. It was towards that school. It had made my life hard, and I was not about to just forget what had happened to me and Mum because of it.

"I'm not sure I want to go," I said softly. Mum looked at me, surprised.

"Why not?"

It was my turn to be surprised. Why didn't she understand? "It made Dad leave us," I said a little too loudly.

"I know that, but that's not the only reason," she said exasperatedly. I paused in my anger.

"There was more?" I felt embarrassed for jumping to conclusions.

"Well, ever since I told him, your father has been, well, less close to me. And you. He's been..." she stopped, apparently unable to go on.

"What happened?" I asked, horrified. Mum looked pained.

"He's been with other women," she said in a rush. I gasped, bringing a hand up to my mouth. My dad was unfaithful! I had always been taught that people who did that were bad people. That meant my father was bad. I could feel tears welling up under the surface. Poor Mum must have gone through so much. My anger faded and pity took its place. I felt so sorry. I took one look at Mum and saw years of unhappiness surfacing. I immediately threw my arms around her like I always did after Dad yelled. I knew at once that I didn't hate magic and Hogwarts anymore. I hated Dad. He had made Mum, who I loved dearly, unhappy.

"I'm so sorry!" I whispered. A tear or two escaped from my eyes. Mum remained strong, however, and kept the tears inside. I marveled at how brave she was.

"But back to your letter," she said, a small smile appearing on her face.

"Right," I said, wiping away my stray tears and setting the first piece of paper down on the bed. There were a few other pages, so I skimmed over the next one. It was a list of supplies I'd need, like my uniform, books, and so on. At the bottom of the page was a capitalized note that read, "PARENTS ARE REMINDED THAT FIRST YEARS ARE NOT ALLOWED THEIR OWN BROOMSTICKS." A little above that was a small note that said, "Students may also bring an owl OR a cat OR a toad." I looked at Misty, who was swishing her tail back and forth.

"Can I take Misty with me?" I asked hopefully. Mum looked at me, glowing with pride.

"Then you really do want to go to Hogwarts?" she asked. I nodded and grinned. She pulled me into a hug.

"Oh, I'm so proud of you, Susan!" she mumbled into my auburn hair. I closed my eyes and let her warmth flow over me. My mother was the best Mum in the whole world.