

JAMES POTTER
AND THE
CRIMSON THREAD

BY G. NORMAN LIPPERT

LOVINGLY BASED UPON THE WORLDS AND
CHARACTERS OF J. K. ROWLING

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14. THE ELVEN UPRISING

An hour later, still reeling from the dinner conversation, James was surprised to see just what a production the miniature presentation of “The Triumvirate” had turned out to be. The children, with Millie’s help, had raided the attic wardrobes and returned with armloads of colourful old robes, feathered hats, boots, belts, swords and scabbards, ribbons and medals, and various other costuming. A small, makeshift stage had been erected in front of the fire, bordered by actual red velvet curtains hung from an enchanted, floating rod.

Somewhat more disconcerting were the number of people in attendance. Besides the entirety of the family, including many relatives who had arrived only that night, all of the servants were also invited to

watch the performance. Balor the Cyclops was there, towering over everyone else in his intimidating slate grey uniform, his chauffeur's hat still pressed down low onto his huge cranium. James once again wondered how the skinny giant could be a Cyclops. The whole point of being such a creature, he thought, was that Cyclopi had a single giant eye that could see everything, including secrets and trickery. This is why, in ancient history, they had often been employed as bodyguards by wizarding royalty, since no plot or subterfuge escaped their monocular notice. Balor, however, appeared to have two perfectly normal-sized eyes, if solemnly cold and stoic, beneath the black brim of his ever-present cap. He did not sit, but stood stiffly behind the family, his back to a window.

Across from the chauffeur, the Muggle servants lined up behind a buffet table covered with platters of cucumber sandwiches, desserts, cupcakes, a crystal punch bowl, and a very large Christmas pudding, so sticky and redolent with sherry that James could smell it from the stage.

Blake sat behind the table in one of the chairs provided, along with several other servants, cooks, and maids. He caught James' eye and cocked a subtly sardonic eyebrow at him, seeming to refer to the entire room, the stage, the enormous pudding, and the immensely well-dressed finery of the witches and wizards as they settled into their seats. James remembered the smell of cigarettes and beer from the pub that Blake had taken them to the previous night. *Millie calls this 'slumming'*, the young man had said. Clearly, this was the opposite for him, and the irony was palpable. Dismissing James, Blake leaned back and threw his arms around the maids on either side, crossing one polished black shoe over his knee. The older maid elbowed his arm away from her. Topham, who refused to sit, cleared his throat meaningful in Blake's direction. Blake nodded obediently and sat up straight again, as if at attention. Topham accepted this with a satisfied nod, turning his attention back to the room at large.

As the children, along with James and Millie, took the stage, the lights of the room dimmed to shadows and the assembly applauded dutifully. Magical spotlights lit the stage from concealed wands. Most

of the family and guests smiled with indulgent good cheer, the men's cheeks flushed with brandy, the women sitting ramrod straight in their fine dresses, their gloved hands folded atop their knees. As the play began, the servants watched intently, many with brows knitted, themselves unfamiliar with the story, of course, and somewhat befuddled by the children's condensed, meandering version of it.

James and Millie both managed several different roles, as well as performed clumsy but necessary scene and costume changes while an antique, charmed Victrola played accompanying musical overtures. They were just nearing Treus' famous rallying speech, with Edmund standing in his tri-corner feathered cap on the "ship's bow" of the upholstered ottoman, when James, standing at attention behind the ottoman as one of Treus' sailors, saw movement out of the corner of his eye, in the dimness just off-stage.

Beneath the buffet table, half hidden by its draped bunting, a house elf hunkered. James recognized her as the very one that he had seen that morning, outside the dining room door, watching Blake with undisguised contempt. Now, her bulbous eyes were turned up, as if she could see through the bottom of the table to the goods arrayed on its surface.

As James watched, the elf snapped her fingers.

On the table, the enormous Christmas pudding rocked on its platter. Slowly, subtly, the pudding rose an inch off the table, resting on a cushion of magic.

James blinked at the elf, alarm rising in his chest. Her eyes squinted with grim malice as she glanced out over the darkened room, toward the seated guests and family members. The pudding edged across the lip of the table, then floated into the shadows. None of the servants noticed, being too intent on Edmund's rousing speech.

Amazingly, inexplicably, the elf seemed prepared to dump the pudding onto the floor, or worse, onto the very head of someone in the audience. Blake, being seated nearest the pudding, would get the blame. With a start, James understood: the elf intended to sabotage Blake, and all of the Muggle servants by association.

James lifted his wand, drew a breath to call a warning, but the elf saw him. Her gaze sharpened, and she snapped her fingers again. James' wand hand twisted away, pointing toward the opposite wall. He gasped in surprise.

"Sailors and men!" Edmund cried, jabbing his own toy wand toward the ceiling, "forth draw ye wands and wits to fight the violent seas this night!" The family members and guests joined in, jubilantly reciting the famous lines with him: "That by the morn we'll hold our win, or lie in beds of ocean sand: our beaten glory's shrine!"

A cheer went up throughout the room. Even the Muggle servants grinned and applauded, if a bit bemusedly. James tried to call out a warning as the pudding lofted through the darkness over Mrs. Vandergriff's shoulder, but his own voice was lost in the happy commotion. He struggled to aim his wand, but his arm was wrested firmly away, captured in an invisible vice, pointing in the opposite direction at a high window.

Pointing, in fact, toward Balor, who stood against the glass like a lanky statue.

And suddenly, with perfect clarity, James thought he understood the Cyclops' strange secret.

He stopped resisting the elf's magical influence and pointed his wand at the tall man-shape instead. With a flick of his wrist, he muttered the first incantation he had ever learned: "Wingardium leviosa!"

Balor's chauffer hat popped off his head, freeing the man's wispy white hair in a dandelion-like fluff. More importantly, however, it revealed the huge, closed eye in the centre of the Cyclops' high forehead. Balor's two human eyes snapped shut as the giant Cyclops eye opened, revealing an inky black orb the size of a lemon. The eye swiveled immediately toward the buffet table, homing in on the elf's secret subterfuge.

"STOP!" Balor called, his voice a deep bellow that overrode the happy cheers, cutting through them like a knife. His arm pistoned up, pointing one long, bony finger at the elf beneath the table. Her own

eyes bulged even more prominently in shock as the entire assembly turned to look, to spy her in her hiding place.

But it was too late.

Mrs. Vandergriff's sudden scream of surprise was partially muffled by the splat of the pudding as it dropped onto her, breaking over her head and squelching down her front, onto her lap, and all around the sofa on which she sat.

Mr. Vandergriff leapt to his feet, clapping his hands once so that the overhead chandelier flared instantly aglow, bathing the room with light. Every eye except Balor's swept toward Mrs. Vandergriff as she arose with a choked gasp, flinging gobbets of pudding in all directions. The people seated nearest her gasped and recoiled, eyes wide.

On the makeshift stage, Millie clapped both hands over her mouth, her eyes boggling at her mother's predicament. James at first thought that she was horrified at the sight, but then he saw her shoulders convulse and realized that she was, just barely, restraining a bray of shocked laughter.

Mrs. Vandergriff shook her head, her own eyes blazing. Then, with a decisive jerk, she turned toward the buffet table. The elf had not moved. Her knobby shoulders slumped and her gaze dropped to the floor, but the set of her scowl, defiant and hopeless, did not change.

"Heddlebun," Mrs. Vandergriff called hoarsely, her voice only faintly trembling. "Would you please step out so I can address you properly?"

The elf complied with no hesitation. She seemed to know what was coming. Eyes still on the floor, she sidled from beneath the table and silently approached her mistress.

Mrs. Vandergriff raised her hands and, with as much dignity as she could muster, daintily tugged at the fingertips of her left ivory glove, which was now smeared with chocolate, studded with wet crumbs. She withdrew it, allowed it to dangle in her right hand, and then dropped it into the waiting hands of the elf.

It was Millie's father who spoke next, his voice low. "Heddlebun, I don't know why you've done this. And, quite honestly, I don't believe I care. You've served this family for as long as I can remember. But you are a free elf now. It breaks my heart to say it, but please be off the premises by midnight tonight. Am I understood?"

Heddlebun's voice was small and calm. "Yes, Master."

"I'm not your master anymore," Mr. Vandergriff said. The words seemed to pain him. "Please, take your glove and go."

"Yes, M'lord."

James thought that Heddlebun might offer some explanation for her action, but she did not. Holding the glove draped across her hands as if it were a dead frog, the elf turned and threaded for the door, her large feet making no noise on the carpet. Topham looked down at her, and then away, averting his eyes as if from a rude gesture. Mr. Vandergriff tilted an eye at Balor, who nodded gravely. Without a word, the tall Cyclops retrieved his cap from a nearby chair and moved to follow the elf, apparently to assure that she vacated as ordered. Heddlebun sensed this and paused at the door, waiting for Balor to escort her. She glanced back only once, but not at the Cyclops. Instead, her gaze landed on James, briefly but unmistakably. There was blame in her glare, but it was cold, strangely emotionless.

James couldn't help feeling sorry for the elf, in spite of the mess that she had made. Mr. Vandergriff may not wish for any explanation, but James thought that her intention had been painfully clear. Heddlebun had resorted to one final, desperate measure to regain her duties from the Muggle servants.

Instead, she had lost her service entirely.

Blake, for one, seemed to understand this. He watched the elf go with a placid expression, then looked askance at James. Silently, he mimed wiping a bead of sweat from his brow, and then winked. There was something conspiratorial in the gesture, as if James and Blake had somehow plotted for the elf to be sacked, rather than merely watched it happen. James frowned and shook his head.

Many voices began to speak now, in low, urgent tones. Millie still had her hands clamped over her mouth, but she seemed to have lost the urge to laugh. She swiveled her eyes toward James, speechless at what had transpired.

“I’m fine,” Mrs. Vandergriff stated over the rabble of voices. “I’m fine, truly. It’s nothing that a good tergeo charm won’t fix. I shall summon Gennywik as soon as the play is completed. No, I won’t hear a word of it, Topham. You stay and enjoy the remainder of the performance. It is, I daresay, just coming to the good bit.”

Much to the consternation of her husband and their guests, Mrs. Vandergriff composed herself, brushed futilely at the mess on her shoulders and skirts, and then lowered back to her seat on the sofa, crossing her gloved right hand over her bare left.

There was a long, pregnant pause as the rest of the room stood by awkwardly, unsure how to proceed.

“The Lady has spoken,” Mr. Vandergriff nodded briskly, changing his expression to a determined smile. “And so it shall be. Carry on then, loves! Lights, please.” He clapped his hands again, and the chandelier snuffed itself, plunging the room back into dimness.

On the stage, Edmund still stood atop his ottoman boat, his face blank in the spotlight.

“Shall I...” he asked in a stage whisper, looking around at Millie and James, “shall I begin again?”

“I suggest we skip directly to the fight scene with Donovan,” Millie whispered with a hard glint in her eye, cocking a glance at James. “And do let’s make it a good one.”



James lay in bed that night listening to the low crackle of the fire in the hearth, staring up at the dim shadows of the ceiling. He couldn't sleep. His mind was full of chasing, whirling thoughts: the inexplicable sensation of Petra's kiss during the climactic moment at the theatre; the Black estate and its mysterious, portentous title; the sacking of Heddlebun the elf in favor of paid, human servants.

The latter debacle had led to muttered discussion later that night, with the men gathered secretly in the den for cognac and cigars, discussing a word that James had never heard before.

"It'll come up for vote, this Wexit business. It's inevitable," the Ministry official with pork-chop sideburns said matter-of-factly. "It's the direction of the future. Britain must lead the charge."

Mr. Vandergriff remained unconvinced. "I don't know if it should come to that. It's a monumental step, the entirety of wizarding Britain exiting the Vow of Secrecy. There is no reversing from that decision, should it come to pass."

"And yet, I wonder if there is any hope in fighting it?" Benton suggested, his voice uncharacteristically somber. "You heard what happened at Hogwarts on First Night. A Muggle family actually drove straight into the courtyard, purely by accident. The lot of them wandered into the Great Hall, for heaven's sake. Ask James here, he'll tell you all about it."

James didn't wish to recount the event, and didn't need to. The story had made its way into *the Daily Prophet*, of course, and become national news.

"Mark my words," the Ministry official insisted, raising a single, pudgy finger. "Wexit will come to vote, and it will pass. We cannot wait for the Vow to crumble down around our shoulders. This Elven uprising business is just the start. We must act now to minimize and control the revelation while we still can."

James thought on the man's words in the darkness of his room, unsure what to make of them, unsure if he agreed or not, knowing that Benton was probably right in saying that it didn't really matter; the momentum was begun. The Vow was indeed crumbling.

And what, exactly, was the "Elven uprising"?

A low laugh echoed from beneath the bedroom door, as if from a long way off. James glanced toward the door, saw the narrow band of candlelight beneath it. It was unbroken. No one was moving in the hall outside.

He dismissed the sound, returning reluctantly to his sleepless reverie, but a moment later the sound came again, and this time it was accompanied by a shrill whisper.

After a moment's consideration, James slipped to the floor in his pajamas and padded barefoot to the door. He gripped the brass doorknob and opened the door just enough to peek out.

The hallway was long, decked with gilt-framed portraits, flickering wall-sconces, and low sofas and side tables. At the end nearest the staircase, a figure stood half-hidden within an open bedroom door. It was Millie's room, James recognized, but the figure standing there was not Millie.

Frowning in consternation, he recognized the shape as Blake. The young man was murmuring in a low voice, no longer dressed in his formal coat and tails. Now, he wore a leather jacket and jeans. Millie's voice was thin and secretive, tittering with laughter. James could make out no words. After only a moment, Blake stepped back to make room for Millie. She exited her bedroom dressed in a heavy

jumper and winter hat. Closing her bedroom door with exaggerated care, she bounced lightly on her toes, and then pushed Blake playfully toward the staircase. Together, they crept down and out of sight.

James felt completely stymied. He stared down the now-empty hall feeling a mixture of confusion, jealousy, and surprised spite. What were they up to? Why hadn't she told him about it, much less invited him along?

Wounded resentment arose in place of his confusion, bringing a flush to his cheeks and pressing his lips into a firm line.

Leaving the bedroom door ajar, he retreated to the enormous wardrobe, yanked out his coat, pocketed his wand, shoved his bare feet into his trainers, and crept quickly out into the hall, closing his own door as quietly as possible.

Blake and Millie were in the main entrance hall when he spied them again from the shadows of the landing. They were still whispering as Blake swung open the front door, heavy but silent on its well-oiled hinges. Cold air carried a raft of snowflakes into the entryway. They alit on Millie's hair and hat as she followed the young man outside. With a faint clunk, the door closed behind them.

James trotted lightly down the steps, the confused umbrage in his chest heating into a boiling cauldron. A set of tall windows stood on either side of the front doors, each glazed with silvery frost. Leaning so close that his breath fogged the glass, James peered out.

An automobile stood on the curving drive, its exhaust pattering white breath as Blake opened the passenger door for Millie. The car was not new, but it was low and muscular, clearly immaculately cared for, shining a deep midnight blue, with fat racing tyres. Blake closed Millie's door quietly, then rounded the front of the car swiftly, drawing a hand lovingly across the bonnet before dropping into the driver's seat. A moment later, as the door swung shut, the car surged forward, crunching on the snow.

James could scarcely believe what he was seeing. She was sneaking out again, and this time without telling even him! Would she and Blake go to the same place that they had all gone the previous

night? Why were they driving Blake's fancy sports car this time? What was Blake's intention with the rich blonde witch? Worse, what was *her* intention with *him*?

If only there was a way to find out.

James cast anxiously around the entry hall. A large coatroom stood on one side. On the other was a narrow door, closed but unlocked. For lack of any better idea, James took a lunging step forward and grasped the handle, yanking the door open.

It was a utility closet. A vacuum cleaner stood in the centre, surrounded by shelves of cleaning supplies, folded serving towels, feather dusters, spray-cans of furniture polish, a rack of hanging black coats for the servants to wear when greeting guests in bad weather, and a leaning collection of mops and brooms.

James began to close the door in frustration, and then stopped, his eye catching on the brooms.

Was it possible? He scanned the wooden handles. One of them was more curved than the others, dull with age but polished a deep chestnut, with a small brass plate screwed to one side of the handle. On the plate, curlicue letters spelled: *WoodSprite '75*.

James had never heard of a broom called a WoodSprite. He didn't even know which century the "75" referred to. He only knew, with immense relief, that the Vandergriffs had consigned someone's ancient broom to the servants for mere sweeping. He grabbed it, yanked it from its fellows with a clatter, and leapt for the front door.

It was bitterly cold outside, with fresh snowflakes falling silently through the dome of interwoven trees that canopied the Vandergriff's peninsula estate. James barely felt the wintry air as he tugged the door closed behind him and straddled the antique broom.

The taillights of Blake's car were mere red pinpricks in the distance, obscured by the falling snow. They brightened momentarily as James watched, showing a tap of the car's brakes. Then, the vehicle turned off the tree-lined drive, accelerated, and vanished into the Muggle neighborhood beyond.

James kicked off from the mansion's portico and drove the broom forward as fast as it would go. The WoodSprite felt like a Flobberworm compared to his own ThunderStreak, yet James knew that it would be plenty fast enough to catch up to Blake's car and keep pace with it. If, that was, he could overtake them before losing them in the warren of neighborhoods beyond the shore road.

Snowflakes streamed past, stinging James' cheeks and blurring his vision, but he only squinted and pressed onward, swooping low along the narrow drive, feeling the pulse of the trees as they rushed overhead. The fringe of forest began to close ahead of him as he watched, hiding the Vandergriff's drive from the cul-de-sac beyond. James hunkered low and drew in his elbows, and still he had to slalom dangerously through the contracting trees, bursting out of them only a moment before they twined firmly together, completely blocking the drive.

With a kick and a swerve, James angled upward, above the glow of the streetlamps, and sped into the night, following the boulevard below.

Blake's car was no longer in sight.

Angry panic throttled James' thoughts, but he merely leaned lower over the broom and pressed onward, glaring down at the snowy, illuminated road below. At the junction, he glanced frantically from right to left. There, much further away than he expected, was the same pair of taillights just turning right, passing behind a grand house. James kicked forward again in pursuit.

Soon enough, he caught up to the car, slowed, and followed it more sedately, staying well above the light of the streets below, watching as the car ambled through more junctions, tooled past flashing traffic lights, and eventually made its way into a nearby town, where it began to cruise the streets in a seemingly random, meandering path.

This went on for some time.

James pressed higher as he flew over apartment complexes, churches, office buildings, and parking garages. Snow gathered in his

hair and eyelashes. He grew cold, and then began to shiver so hard that his hands shook on the broom handle. And still, far below, the sleek blue car drove on. It never really arrived anywhere, although it slowed often, pausing longer than necessary at stop signs and intersections, random corners and parks. Several times it pulled off to the side of the road and stopped entirely. And yet, as James watched, Millie and Blake never got out to approach any of the establishments they parked near. The car doors never even opened. Minutes would creep by as James shivered violently far overhead, chilled and crusted with snow, and then, invariably, the car would pull forward again, merge onto the street, and continue placidly on.

James tried very hard not to imagine what Millie and Blake were doing in the car during those parked minutes. In his mind, he heard Scorpius Malfoy sneering at him: “You really aren’t *that* thick, are you, Potter?”

Finally, after what felt like hours, numb with cold and miserable with sick jealousy, James realized he was following the blue car back into the shoreline neighborhood overlooking the sea. He followed more closely now, caring less if he was seen, wanting only to be back indoors, to shake the crusted snow from his hair, and wallow in the stew of confused, indignant anger that now filled him from head to toe.

The car’s headlights illuminated the cul-de-sac guardrail, but only for a moment. With a silent shimmy, the guardrail shot upwards and transformed into the wrought-iron gate of Blackbrier Quoit. The blue car surged through, and James swooped to follow.

He considered whether he should confront them right then and there, as they emerged in front of the mansion. It would be perversely satisfying, he knew, but it would also mean admitting that he had jealously followed them, and been miserably frozen and humiliated in the act. He decided, with some reluctance, to hang back, to swoop up toward the interlaced dome of bare branches high overhead, watching down silently as the car angled onto the curving drive, glinting in the glow of the mansion’s entry.

Some tiny, timid part of him suggested that he should be grateful for this night. He had already decided to break up with Millie once the holiday was over, hadn't he? He had only to come up with a good reason. This made things all the simpler, didn't it?

And yet this voice was drowned out by the boiling, affronted rage in his chest, almost but not quite concealing the ocean of wounded pride beneath.

The car's engine idled, but the doors still did not open for several minutes. James' fury grew with the intensity of his discomfort. The snow was thinner here as it filtered through the dome of trees, but the air was nearly arctic with cold. James' breath fogged the air, shivering violently. His hands were numb on the WoodSprite's handle.

Finally, both of the car doors swung open. Blake and Millie stepped out into the dim glow of the portico lamps, looked at each other over the car's roof, and then moved to meet at the rear. Blake took Millie's hands briefly, and then turned to the car. He opened the boot, swung up the lid, and withdrew something from inside. It was small and squarish, a gift of some kind. James nearly vibrated with rage as he watched the young man offer it to Millie. She accepted it, looked at it, and then threw her arms up around his neck, still holding the square object in one hand. She hugged him, and then, as James observed with a wave of blinding, affronted rage, she kissed him.

The boot lid banged shut suddenly, slamming so hard that it rocked the car and sent echoes across the snowy garden.

Blake and Millie both jumped back from the car, startled.

James saw this with some satisfaction before realizing that his wand was in his fist, aimed at the car. His knuckles were white, squeezing hard enough to make the tendons stand out on the back of his hand.

A light popped on in an upstairs window of the mansion. Below, Blake saw this and swore urgently under his breath.

"Hide!" Millie rasped, and yanked her wand from a pocket. She waved it at the car and muttered a brief spell. The car wavered, and then took on the ephemeral color and texture of the snowy drive

beneath it, effectively vanishing from view. James marveled reluctantly. He himself had never perfected the Disillusionment spell.

Millie ducked behind a stone balustrade at the base of the steps at the exact same moment that the curtains of the lit upstairs window twitched aside. A silhouetted figure appeared, peering down through the glass. From his angle high above, James could see that it was Mathilda, Millie's older sister. She gazed this way and that, her suspicious eyes narrowed. Then, apparently seeing nothing out of order, she withdrew.

Far below, Millie peered up from behind the balustrade. Next to her, a shadow moved. Blake was hiding there with her.

James fumed furiously. Wand still in hand, he flicked it and muttered a spell of his own.

A snowball arose spinning from a drift near the steps. It hovered for a moment, and then arced up to the lit window, bashing against the glass with an audible rattle.

"What the bloody...!" Blake hissed, standing up to look around, annoyed and confused. Millie pulled him back down, but peered up herself, her eyes squinting. She was quicker, and knew what to look for. After only a moment, she glanced up toward the tree canopy just as James summoned another snowball.

"*James?!*" she called up in a harsh whisper.

James flicked his wand. The snowball arced toward Mathilda's window and bashed itself to powder.

Blake followed Millie's gaze, spying James overhead. "It's your *boyfriend?*" he asked, annoyance and amusement mingling in his voice.

"James!" Millie rasped again, stepping out from the shadows. "Come down here! What in purple blazes are you doing!?"

James firmed his jaw and heaved a deep sigh. Resignedly, he swooped down and jumped to the top portico step as Millie ran up to join him.

"What are you *doing?*" she demanded again, so angrily that James' own rage was dampened momentarily.

“What am *I* doing?” he rallied, standing up straight and hefting the WoodSprite between them like a shield. “What are *you* doing? Sneaking out and... and... and... *getting on with... with...!*” He flapped a hand vaguely, disgustedly in Blake’s direction. For his own part, Blake stood in the shadows at the bottom of the steps, arms crossed, a look of weary impatience on his face.

For a moment, Millie appeared angrily confused. And then an expression of dawning realization descended over her face. Her eyes narrowed. In a low voice, she seethed, “You think I was *copping off* with him?!”

“Well!” James blinked, and faltered slightly. “Well, weren’t you?”

“James!” she hissed, her face going livid. “He’s almost ten years older than me! He’s a university student, studying industrial design and engineering! I’ve been begging him *for months* to teach me what he’s learning! We spent the night driving around looking at *architecture!* Look!”

She thrust an object toward him. It was the squarish gift that Blake had just given her. James recoiled slightly, then glanced down at it, saw that it was a fat book, and read the cover: *HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURAL DRAFTING & DESIGN, Volume 1.*

“But,” James said, still staring at the book’s cover. “But, but... you *kissed* him!” He glanced up at her in time to see her eyes roll in angry impatience.

“I kissed him on the *cheek!* He’s like a brother to me! You really think I would... I would...” She turned her head to look down at Blake, so fast that her blonde hair flung out beneath her hat. “Do you *really* think I would betray you like that? With *him!*?”

“Hey, now,” Blake said, managing to look affronted.

James was about to respond when the unmistakable sound of an opening door interrupted him. Blake leapt out of sight behind the balustrade again as a band of light spread down the steps, brightly illuminating Millie and James.

“*Well,*” a voice called, and James was not at all surprised to hear a nasty smile in it. “What do we have here? Out for a romantic evening stroll, are we? Mother and Father will be just *thrilled* to know that you two are so... *engaged.*”

Millie didn't even look toward the door. Her eyes locked onto James' with a degree of furious pleading that took him a split-second to decipher. It wasn't the fact that she'd snuck out for the night with Blake, a servant, that she was suddenly terrified of having discovered. It was that she'd been out with him *studying Muggle architecture.*

James needed barely a second to decide what he had to do.

“Yes,” he said, not breaking eye contact with Millie. “And it was all my idea.”

Millie's eyes widened another fraction, but she managed, miraculously, not to gasp.

James finally looked up at Mathilda, not thinking, merely allowing instinct to take over. “I love this girl, you see. Millie,” he looked down at her again, at her speechless, bulging eyes. “I'm completely smitten by you. I can't be without you. I've brought you out here this night, under this moon, to tell you that.”

He glanced upwards hopefully, tried to locate the moon through the lacework of trees and the pall of drifting snow. No moon was visible at all. Mathilda, fortunately, seemed oblivious of this fact.

“Really, now,” she stated flatly, cocking her head and placing one fist against her hip, causing her night robes to sway.

“But it's too soon for you, Millie,” James went on loudly, interrupting, marveling slightly at his own inspired temerity. Fleetingly, he wondered if he was channeling Zane Walker. “I fear that you're not ready to respond to my... er... romantic overtures. Go, Millie. Go!”

He dropped his eyes and flung the WoodSprite down the steps. It clattered nonsensically, and James noticed, with a moment of distraction, that while Blake's car was disillusioned to invisibility, it still pattered a dancing puff of visible smoke from its idling tailpipe. “GO!” James cried again, raising his voice and throwing an arm over

his eyes in a burst of hysterical inspiration. “Go to your sister. I will await you. And when the time comes—indeed, *if* it ever comes—that you are ready to love me as I love you...”

His motivation faltered. He glanced aside with one eye toward Millie, who was staring at him with undisguised, gape-jawed amazement. He glared at her meaningfully, and then flicked his eyes toward the open doorway and the suspiciously watching Mathilda. *GO*, he mouthed.

Millie blinked rapidly, and then seemed to recover herself. Her experience with the Hufflepuppet Pals took over, and she replied, “Yes, I must leave you, James. It’s too soon for me. But... but...”

“But I will await your word,” James encouraged, nodding, urging her away with his eyes. “And your love! Never fear! Never doubt!”

Millie backed up the steps slowly, somewhat awkwardly, toward the waiting shape of Mathilda, who watched the scene with narrowed eyes and thin lips. When Millie reached her sister, moved into the warmth of the open door, she spun on her heel and threw her arms around the taller woman.

“Oh, Mattie,” she cried, her voice muffled against her sister’s thin breast.

Mathilda looked down at Millie in surprise, her eyes still narrowed, her brows high on her forehead. Then, tentatively, she put her arms around her. It was an awkward gesture, like a stork attempting a card trick, but apparently genuine enough. She patted Millie’s shoulder and the back of her head, and then raised her gaze to James, her lips pursed.

“You Potters,” she said with a curt shake of her head. “Much too brash for polite society. It seems that you’ve bruised poor Millicent’s sensitivities. I do hope you’ve learned an important lesson.”

James still couldn’t tell if the older woman was being quite serious or if she was, perhaps, goading him. He didn’t really care. He simply nodded in dejection and dropped his eyes, hoping that Mathilda wouldn’t hear the gentle putter of the idling car, or notice its phantom

exhaust, or wonder, for that matter, why James had been holding one of the servants' castoff, antique brooms.

A moment later, thankfully, the women's footsteps retreated back inside the house and the door swung slowly closed, cutting off the band of golden light from inside.

Without raising his head, James flicked his eyes up in time to see the door snick shut. He listened for the bolt to shunt into place. When it didn't, he assumed that he was still allowed inside, nominally.

"Now *that*," Blake sighed calmly, emerging from his hiding place, "is what I call a royal cock-up."

"Shut up," James muttered blandly. He retreated partway down the steps, retrieved the old broom from the shadows, brushed off the snow, and climbed dejectedly back up toward the front door.

Blake spoke again, this time in a voice both taut and smug, freezing James in his tracks. "I would have won her anyway, you know. Even if you hadn't proved yourself to be a jealous, clumsy little berk. Just so you know. I didn't need your help." He was smiling as he spoke.

James didn't look back at the older man, but his mind whirled, clouded with impotent rage, choked with jealousy. He could think of nothing to say. No comeback came to mind, no retort or pithy, withering insult. He considered using his wand to curse the arrogant Muggle git, or, failing that, to hurl himself down the steps and knock the bastard down. But even this impulse was overcome by numbing weariness and cold.

Instead, he simply pocketed his wand and said the only thing that came to mind.

"Good luck driving home in your invisible car."

And he opened the mansion's door, felt the push of warm air against his cheeks, stepped inside, and shot the bolt behind him. Through the window beside the door, he briefly saw Blake at the bottom of the steps, the grin gone from his face, groping blindly, clumsily for his precious car.

The women had already gone upstairs to their bedrooms. James was quite glad.



The train ride back to Hogsmeade was awkward. James found that he missed seeing his family over the break, and took some minor, jealous solace in Albus' and Rose's retelling of the holiday back home and at the Burrow. He avoided Millie, who rode in a different compartment some way up the train, but knew that he had to talk to her eventually. They had hardly spoken since leaving Blackbrier Quoit in the back of the family's limousine, and when they did it was for mere practical necessity. They both seemed to know that it was over between them. All that remained was the actual breaking up, which James sensed (with no small foreboding) was his responsibility. He didn't want to do it. He wished it could merely be over without any of the messy, awkward, official stuff. But she seemed to be in prim waiting mode, knowing it was coming, expecting it, even reveling in a sort of perverse anticipation.

Rose had no patience for James' predicament. "You're just a typical boy. All eager as beavers when it comes to the snogging, but

thick as paving stones when it comes to talking about feelings like *actual* human beings. Next thing, you'll be blaming her just for *having* feelings, like it's some sort of female curse or something, while you act all high and mighty about being an emotionally constipated, coddled, stuck up little mummy's boy!"

"Things not going so well between you and Scorpius again, eh?" James nodded wisely.

"Shut up."

"I thought you two were back together again after he bought you that necklace for Christmas?"

Rose's lips tightened and her eyes narrowed. "His *mum* bought it and gave it to him to give to me. She even wrapped it and signed his name to the card. He says Christmas gifts are 'the woman's responsibility'." She glared aside at James accusingly, her eyes nearly sparking.

"Don't look at me," James said, raising both hands. "I didn't even buy Millie any Christmas gift." He realized, a moment too late, that this didn't really make his case.

Rose crossed her arms like a shield and nodded once, firmly. "No wonder Millie's had it with you. You go find her right now and set her free of you. There are probably *dozens* of better boyfriends on the train right this very moment. *Hundreds!*"

James stood up and backed away, afraid to say another word.

He found Ralph in the corridor before he found Millie's compartment.

"What are you up and about for?" the bigger boy asked, clearly disgruntled.

James didn't have it in him to be annoyed at Ralph's tone. He slumped and leaned against a window. "Looking for Millie. It's over between us. I just need to pound the final nail in the coffin."

"Oh," Ralph said, taken aback. "Well. Sorry, then. What happened? Holiday a disaster?"

James shrugged. "I bodged it all up. It's me, not her."

“People always *say* that,” Ralph frowned. “But in your case, I think you may be right.”

“Thanks, Ralph.”

Ralph shrugged his huge shoulders. “So, you wouldn’t mind if I asked her out, maybe?”

James glanced at Ralph in surprise. “Seriously? You’re interested?”

“I dunno,” Ralph sighed, not meeting James’ eyes. “She’s pretty enough. Rich, too, from what I hear.”

James blew out a breath, half-laughing. “Rich doesn’t begin to cover it. They’re the most confusing people I’ve ever met. They’re like the Progressive Element, but dipped in candy, and with all the nastiness sucked out.”

“What do you mean?” Ralph seemed genuinely interested.

“Well, for starters, they’re proud of being anti-purebloods. And they do all this stuff that seems all generous and forward thinking, like hiring Muggle servants instead of using house elves...”

Ralph nodded consideringly. “Your Aunt Hermione would approve.”

“I guess she would,” James admitted, frowning. “But they don’t seem to consider any of the consequences of their choices. The house elves are all desperate for their work back. They don’t feel set free, they feel abandoned and useless. And there’s something else. Millie’s family really are nice, and they take great pains, most of them, not to judge anybody, no matter who they are or what they do. But the moment their own daughter wants to study something other than how to be a rich wizarding aristocrat, they think it’s beneath her station and not good enough for her.”

Ralph looked mildly perplexed. “What sort of thing does Millie want to study?”

James shook his head tiredly. “Architecture, of all things. Like, the maths and designs of buildings and stuff. I don’t really understand it. But her parents, they call that ‘Dwarf work’.”

“Well, it is, innit?”

“That doesn’t mean witches or wizards can’t do it, though.”

Ralph sighed briskly and nodded. He reached and clapped James on the shoulder. “Well, good for you for calling an end to it when the time came.”

“I don’t *want* to do it,” James bristled slightly. “I’d avoid the bloody hell out of it if I could.”

“I’m sure everything will work itself out,” Ralph said, glancing about the corridor. “I better get back to work, though. Being Head Boy is harder than I ever expected. Somebody’s been setting off dungbombs but nobody will tell me who’s responsible. I’ve gone up and down the train twice now, trying to sniff them out.”

James nodded at his friend’s distracted earnestness. “Yeah, well, happy hunting, Ralphinator.”

Ralph stood and squared his shoulders importantly. “Let me know if you hear anything. Or, er, smell anything.”

With that, he stumped away, glancing into compartments as he went.

James watched him go, then, reluctantly, pushed away from the wall, resuming his half-hearted search for Millie.

He passed the Cart Lady and bought a box of Pumpkin Pasties from her, munching them as he went on. A little later, he saw his cousins Louis and Dominique, and barely avoided getting pulled into an argument between them over whose new Christmas socks were the best.

“I’d love to settle this for you,” he said soberly, backing away, “but honestly, I’m afraid I couldn’t possibly bring myself to give a toss.”

He bumped into someone in the corridor and turned, relieved for the interruption.

It was Millie.

“You *could’ve* had the decency to tell me yourself!” she seethed. Her cheeks were livid pink with rage.

“What...?” James recoiled. “I don’t—”

“I had no idea what a little blab you were!” she shook her head violently, her voice climbing to a shrill hiss. “So my family is a bunch of pompous hypocrites who don’t think about the consequences of their actions, eh?”

“What...?” James spluttered. “I mean... what? Who said...?”

“I got your *message* from Ralph Deedle,” Millie said, dropping her voice again to a near whisper. “He told me you were ending it with me, and then he said he thought it was really cool that I wanted to study architecture. I cannot *believe* you told him that!” She raised her hand to poke James in the chest, and then seemed to think better of it, as if she couldn’t bring herself even to touch him. He saw, with real dismay, that she was deeply and sincerely hurt. “I trusted you, James! I’m just... I don’t even have the words...!”

James was shaking his head. “But I didn’t... I only said...” He struggled to rally his thoughts in the face of her wounded rage. “I was coming to tell you myself. I only just ran into Ralph and... and I told him...”

“You told him everything,” she said resolutely. “And sent him to be your errand boy. Well, all I can say, James, is that your message is received.”

There were tears standing in her eyes now. Tears of hurt as well as righteous anger. James was dumbfounded by them. “Millie, look. I don’t... we don’t have to end it like this. Maybe...”

“Don’t say another word, James,” Millie said, shaking her head again so that her blonde hair swung about her face. She swiped angrily at her tears and refused to look at him again. Composing herself with an effort of will, she added in an admirably even voice, “And to think, my father really liked you, too. Even Grandmother Eunace. How disappointed they’ll be.”

Leaving her words hanging unanswered in the air, she turned on her heel and stalked away, holding her head up, settling back into the practiced composure of her upbringing and heritage.

James opened his mouth to call after her, but realized he had no other words to offer. It wasn’t that he had too little to say, but too

much. And she no longer wanted to hear it. Helplessly, he watched her march away until she passed through the partition between carriages, slamming the sliding door as she went.



NEXT CHAPTER:

ODIN-VANN'S NEW GROOVE!

RALPH'S NEW NAME!

JAMES FINALLY OPENS HIS CHRISTMAS GIFT...