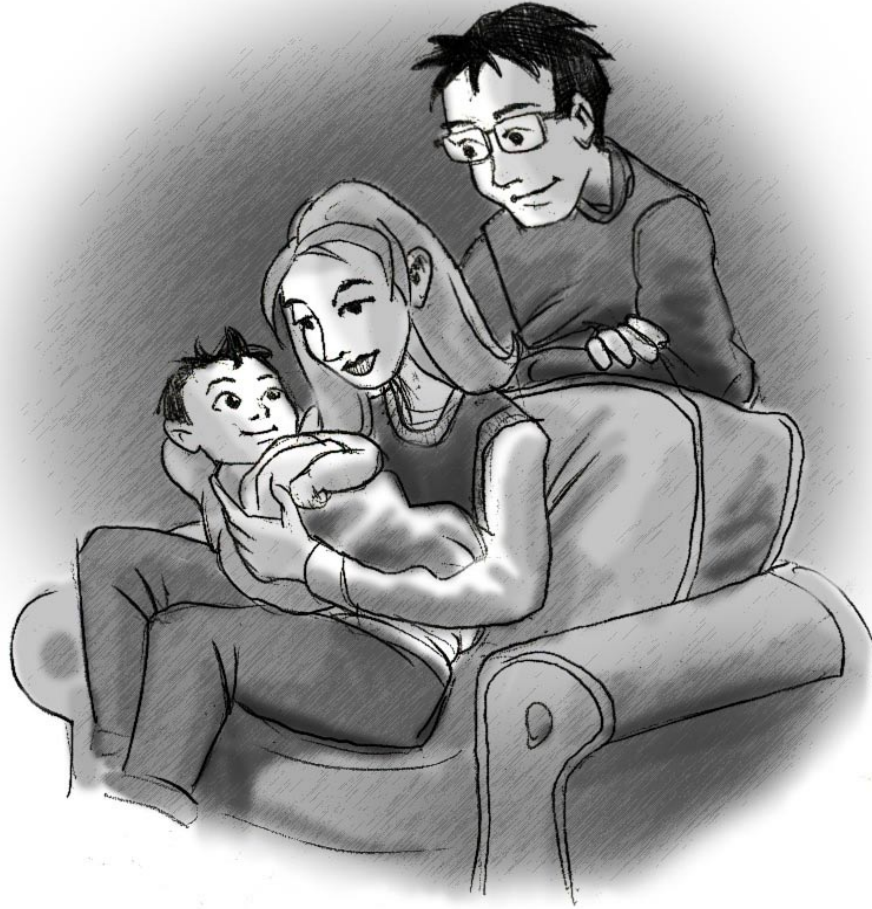


Harry's First Christmas



A Marauders Christmas Story
by G. Norman Lippert

Dedicated to Tom Grey and supportstacie.net

“You have to admit,” the young man said, raising his chin approvingly and looking out over the busy street, “the city is nice at the holidays.”

“You can admit it all you want,” the auburn-haired woman next to him sniffed, stepping over an oily puddle on the footpath. “It won’t make it true. Give me a Christmas in the Berkshire hill country any day. I’ll never be able to feel festive about a Styrofoam snowman impaled on a taxi antenna.”

“The lights are nice,” the man commented, unperturbed. “And the sense of hustle and bustle. It’s like we’re at the North Pole and all the people around are Santa’s elves.”

“I’ve known too many elves to think *that’s* very festive either, James.” She pulled her wool hat down on her brow and shivered. “And how can it be this cold without snowing?”

The man smiled and bumped her playfully with his hip. “Buck up, Lil. It’s the first time we’ve been out of the house alone in months. It might not be an enchanted sleigh ride through a winter wonderland, but it’s still Christmas. And *somebody* I know is going to absolutely adore what’s in this sack here.” The man held up a small white bag with the words *Shugarwhim’s, Diagon Alley* printed on it in dark red letters. The woman smiled a little crookedly and snatched the sack from his hands.

“He’s too young to even know what footie pyjamas are. All he’ll know is that they keep his little toes warm at night.”

“I wasn’t talking about *him*,” the man, James, replied quietly, putting his arm around the woman, Lily, and snugging her close as they walked. She gave a small sigh and settled next to him.

“I adore him no matter what he wears. But the green will bring out his eyes, don’t you think?”

James rolled his eyes theatrically. “I thought so the last three times you asked, back in the shop. I haven’t changed my mind yet, but I might if you ask once more.”

“It doesn’t hurt you to indulge me, at least while we only have one. Wait until we have a houseful.”

“Like that family back in the sale corner at Shugarwhim’s?” James replied archly. “Don’t even joke about such things. I’ve never seen so much red hair in my life. And I’m pretty sure one of those ‘charming children’ tried to sneak a Zonko’s stink bomb into my coat pocket. Little blighter couldn’t have been more than eight years old.”

“Oh, but did you see the twins? Now that really would be lovely, don’t you think?”

“Now you’re just teasing me. Let’s practice with one baby for a while, *then* we’ll talk about having a baker’s dozen. Fair enough?”

Lily didn’t answer. She allowed the small sack to dangle at her side as she walked, her eyes pensive. James glanced aside at her.

“You’re not still worried, are you?” he asked in a low voice.

Lily shook her head slightly, not exactly in negation, and shrugged. She sighed shallowly and said, “How can I not be?”

James drew a deep breath as they stopped at a busy intersection. A grime covered bus burred by, pulling a plume of exhaust behind it. James turned to look at his wife. “You heard the headmaster, Lil. Even if this prophecy is real, we’re perfectly safe. Like he said, if it ever becomes necessary, we can hide the house, choose a Secret Keeper and lay low until the danger passes. If you can’t trust old Dumbledore to know what he’s talking about, well...”

Lily looked up into James’ eyes, searching them, her brow furrowed very slightly. After a moment, she looked away. “Come on,” she said, pulling him by the hand and stepping off the curb.

They crossed the street and walked awhile in silence. The muggle crowd moved around them like a river around a rock, tense and scowling, lugging packages and hailing taxis. Lily looked up at the windows of the apartments over the busy street. She knew this area relatively well, despite her profession of distaste for the city. One of her best friends from school, Anastacia Troika, now lived in a third floor walk-up on the opposite side of the street. Lily scanned the building and easily found the window of Stacia’s flat; colored light flickered behind the lace curtains. Muggle passersby on the street would have assumed the lights were a telly, but Lily knew better. Stacia liked to decorate her Christmas tree with live Russian flickerbirds, their tiny flashing wings lighting the tree as they built their immaculate little nests in its branches. Lily had helped her erect just such a tree in the Gryffindor girls’ dorm during their third year, until Dumbledore had suggested that the flickerbirds’ colorful flashing wings and tinkling birdsong were proving rather a nuisance to the girls attempting to sleep nearby. Lily had always suspected it had been Christiana Corsica who’d complained to Dumbledore, and not because the tiny birds were keeping her awake at night. Christiana was simply nasty and vain, and she tended to dislike anything that might be considered more beautiful than herself. This, at least, was Lily’s strong conviction, if not an admitted fact. Strangely enough, Christiana now lived in a penthouse on the next corner, along with her creepy twin brother, Chrystophan. Neither of them worked, as far as the old school network of Lily’s friends knew, but the Corsica family was wealthy, and everyone assumed that the penthouse was provided for the twins by their reclusive father.

As she walked alongside James, Lily wondered how many other windows above belonged to wizarding families, or how many of the shops along the busy street were secretly run by witches and wizards. Diagon Alley and its secret surroundings were quite large, and yet Lily knew that many of the shops technically outside of the hidden magical district also kept secret back rooms and upstairs offices, catering to

the thousands of magical folk who travelled through the area each day; the “Diagon Alley run-off”, her father had always affectionately called them. Some of the secret wizarding shops merely sold cheap magical cookery and trinkets, like the dreadful cuckoo clock James had gotten her last year, but some of them dealt in much darker services. For no reason, Lily thought again of the Corsicas and their mysterious penthouse. Was it possible that they were, in fact, engaged in some sort of business, using their conveniently located home as their meeting place? Lily shook her head, smiling a little crookedly. *Just because you don't like her*, she thought to herself, *doesn't give you an excuse to imagine her as the spearhead of some dark conspiracy.*

She decided not even to mention her musings to James. He had outright hated Christiana's Hufflepuff brother, Chrystophan, and would probably have the poor twit mentally convicted and sentenced to Azkaban before they even got back to their front door in Godric's Hollow.

As the two of them approached the next corner, a rather thin, unhappy-looking Santa was ringing a bell and extolling anyone who'd listen about the breathtaking deals to be had in the shop behind him. As James and Lily passed him, James hooked Lily's elbow and pulled her sharply around the corner, heading into a narrow side street.

“Where are we going?” Lily asked, frowning at her husband.

“I don't mean to cause you alarm, love, so let's just walk a bit faster and keep a sharp eye out.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“I can't know for sure, but I've been a sneak long enough to recognize sneaking. I think someone is following us.”

Lily drew a sharp breath, but James spoke before she could voice her fear. “Don't worry, Lil, whoever it is, they're no older than we are, and not anywhere as good at tailing people as me and Padfoot. I noticed him when we stopped at the corner a block back. He turned and stared into the window of the shoe shop like he was trying to count the boots.”

“So we should just disappear back home,” Lily breathed urgently. “Why are we leading him into a dark street?”

“Because,” James replied evenly, glancing aside to watch their reflections in a shop window. “I want to see who he is.”

“James, no!” Lily whispered, glancing up at him. “That's daft!”

“Stay behind me,” James said, and Lily was annoyed to realize that her husband was rather enjoying himself. He turned again, suddenly, pulling Lily into a very narrow, dead-end alley. Instantly, he pushed her to the side, up a series of steps and into a dark doorway. He stood in front of her, his wand suddenly protruding from his hand. Deftly, he twirled it in his fingers – a trick he and Sirius had practiced for nearly the entirety of their fifth school term, believing it made them appear dashing and roguish. Lily rolled her eyes.

Footsteps clattered along the footpath outside the alley and a shadow appeared. A moment later, a shape ran around the corner and into the alley. The figure was thin, draped in a long black cloak. The hood had come down, revealing black hair and a long nose. Lily immediately recognized the figure and drew a breath to call out, but James was faster. He leapt down the steps, blocking the mouth of the alley and raising his wand.

“Levicorpus,” he commanded, but his voice was drowned out by the voice of the newcomer, who was a split second faster with his disarming spell. There was a flash and James’ wand spun out of his hand, clattering into a stack of trash cans at the rear of the alley.

“Really, Potter,” the voice of the newcomer drawled, “You should try to learn some new spells.”

“Severus!” Lily cried, moving past James, getting between them. “What are you doing?”

“Not what you are probably thinking, Evans. That ship has sailed. Other than that, I have no need to explain myself.”

“You were following us,” James declared, stepping next to his wife. “Not exactly the sort of behavior one would expect from the next Hogwarts Potions Master.”

“And walking unprotected along busy city streets is not exactly what one might expect of two people who’ve been warned of possible attack.”

James narrowed his eyes. “How would you know about that?”

Snape sighed dramatically. “For a Gryffindor, you are a remarkably suspicious man, Potter. Indeed, as the next Potions Master, I have been invited into certain *confidences*. Let us leave it at that.”

Lily studied Snape’s eyes. “But Severus, why *were* you following us?”

Snape met Lily’s gaze for a moment, and then looked away, lowering his wand. He seemed to struggle with himself for a moment, and then gestured at James, glaring at him. “Because, Evans, this *man* you have attached yourself to is too arrogant and foolish to believe that anyone can touch him. He cannot protect you. And if he won’t fulfill that duty, then *someone* must.”

“That’s it,” James said quietly. “I’ve heard enough. Come on, Lil,”

“Severus,” Lily said quietly, taking a step closer to the dark figure. “What do you know about this? You know more than you are letting on, don’t you? I can tell.”

“Lil, you can’t trust him,” James said, tugging on her elbow. “For all we know, he’s in it waist deep with those who are against us.”

Snape looked away again. “Go,” he said hollowly. “The longer you stand here, the more dangerous it is.”

James turned to Lily, meeting her eyes. “Wait here. I’ll be right back.” She nodded slightly, her brow furrowed. James looked up at Snape, but the dark-haired man was still looking away, refusing to meet James’ eyes. James shook his head in disgust and stalked past him, heading toward the trash cans at the back of the alley. As he looked for his wand, he could hear Lily and Snape talking in low voices. Snape was certainly a greasy git, but in spite of everything, James was quite certain he was harmless. He swore as he bent, searching between the rusty cans for his wand among the rubbish. He finally found it wedged into a corner atop a moldy newspaper. He grabbed it and wiped it on his jeans as he walked back toward the mouth of the alley. He stopped suddenly and looked up, examining the buildings on either side of him. Slowly, he turned and looked back toward the dead end. A smile came over his face.

“I knew this alley looked familiar,” he said to himself. He’d have to tell Sirius about it when he got back to the house. How long ago had it been since that fateful night? Four, five years? Impossible. Sirius would likely laugh and ask if his motorbike tracks were still burnt onto the pavement. Remus wouldn’t be amused, though. He was the superstitious sort; probably, it was part of what he called his “curse”. Being

cornered in the same alley by the Muggle police at one time and Snivellus at another was the sort of cosmic coincidence that Remus would find “portentous”. James decided he’d tell him anyway.

“Let’s go, Lil,” he said, approaching her and keeping his back to Snape. “The others will be waiting. Last time we left the baby with Remus and Pettigrew, they tried to feed him a bowl of mashed Every Flavour Beans.”

“James,” Lily said quietly, her eyes still on Snape. “Severus has nowhere to go for Christmas.”

James stopped and looked at her. “You can’t be serious,” he muttered. “You really can’t.”

“I am, you great brute. And I know you’ll do the right thing.”

James drew a huge sigh and looked over his shoulder. Snape had pocketed his wand and raised his hood again. As James watched, Snape walked past him, heading out onto the street.

“Hey, Severus,” James called, struggling to keep his voice even. “Er, sorry about trying to jinx you. Maybe you really were just trying to help. Maybe you’ll let me repay you by coming over to our place for dinner tonight, eh? Lil made a duck, and Sirius, Remus and Peter will be there. It’ll be like old times.”

“Old times,” Snape scoffed, not quite turning back. He sighed. “You really don’t know who you are up against, do you? You’d invite me back to your home, show me exactly where you live, despite everything the headmaster has told you. Is that right?”

“Well,” James replied, his face darkening a bit. “If you’re trying to tell me you aren’t trustworthy after all,”

“I’m trying to tell you that *no* one is trustworthy, Potter. Not now. You have Dumbledore, and you have your circle. Let us hope that you have chosen your friends well, although I have my doubts. But you must understand that those who are seeking you will stop at nothing. They will not think twice about killing or torturing. Until you grasp the very real peril you are in, you will continue to make it easy for those who seek to destroy you. This may be your last warning.”

“How do you know so much,” James said, narrowing his eyes and stepping out onto the street to face Snape. “Dumbledore didn’t say anything about killing. He just told us about a prophecy that could cause He Who Must Not Be Named and his worthless cronies to be interested in our son, and warned us to watch out and be careful. He told us he’d warn us if the danger ever became grave. Why should we believe you?”

“*Where* do you think the headmaster gets what little information he has, Potter?” Snape suddenly hissed, moving toward James so that they were nearly nose to nose in the darkness. “These are awful times, times that require the sorts of risks and sacrifices that a person like *you* couldn’t begin to comprehend. *Some* of us are willing to venture into the shadows on behalf of ingrates like you. *Some* of us are willing to take upon ourselves the responsibilities others *shirk*. And why do we do it? Well...”

Snape faltered, glancing aside at Lily, who was watching, her eyes wide. He took a step backwards and turned away. “It hardly matters. All that matters is that you heed the warnings you’ve received, Potter. All that matters is that you understand what you are facing. After that, your fate is in your hands.”

James studied the other man, his eyes still narrowed. Finally, he stepped back and took Lily by the elbow. “Happy Christmas to you, too, Severus,” he said.

A moment later, a loud crack echoed down the length of the deserted alley. Snape looked up and saw that Potter and Lily were gone, disappeared back to their home. Sloppy and careless, but Snape was not surprised. He shook his head very slowly, angry and confused at the contrasting emotions that warred in his

heart. He had taken a monstrous risk in following them, watching out for them, but he couldn't seem to help himself. Perhaps it was time for another conversation with the headmaster. Not yet, but soon. He wouldn't tell Dumbledore everything; just enough to protect Lily. Let the Deathaters have James, but not her. It was risky, but Snape was getting rather used to risk. What was the worst that could happen? If he got found out, the Dark Lord would merely kill him. In some ways, Snape thought, that might even be a relief.

Thinking that, he turned and began to walk back along the street, heading nowhere in particular.

There was no snow at Godric's Hollow either.

Peter Pettigrew heard the alarm go off in the kitchen and jumped, nearly dropping the book he'd been flipping through.

"That's yours, Wormtail," Remus said, "I basted the thing last time. Better get in there before that bloody clock goes off again and wakes up the baby."

"I'm going," Pettigrew grouched, clambering to his feet and crossing the parlor. It was too hot in the house, especially in the kitchen, and it made him grumpy. Ever since he'd perfected his animagus abilities, he'd found that normal household temperatures always felt stuffy. In his rat form, he longed for the cool passages between the walls, the musty corners of basements, the scampering freedom of drafty attics. Pettigrew had never admitted it to anyone else, but his rat persona seemed to have leaked over into his human form. Someday, he thought, he'd turn into a rat and just stay that way. Life was easy as a rat. None of the competitions and jealousies of the human world. Just sleeping and eating, scampering and squeaking.

In the kitchen, he opened the oven and looked in at the huge golden bird. It appeared done to him, but what did he know? He tried to remember what Lily had said before she'd left, but she'd said so much that it had been easy to tune her out. Was he supposed to turn the duck and change the baby, or was it the other way around?

Over the stove, a large cuckoo clock suddenly struck, making the alarm sound that had disturbed Pettigrew when he'd still been in the parlor. The cuckoo popped out of its doors, bobbing in the air in front of Pettigrew's face. The wooden wings unfolded and the head cocked up, opening its beak.

"Roast Duck with Orange Sauce!" the cuckoo sang out. "Twenty minutes left to cook. Time to baste! Time to baste! Nobody likes dry poultry!"

"How do they feel about flash-fried cuckoo bird?" Pettigrew growled, producing his wand.

The cuckoo cocked its head at Pettigrew. “No need to get huffy about it,” it scolded, and then retracted back into its house, snapping its doors shut before Pettigrew could respond.

Pettigrew basted the bird a little haphazardly, not exactly sure how he was meant to use the odd tubular device with the rubber bulb on the end. Damned Muggle kitchen. James had vowed to update the place when he and Lily had moved in, but he was so busy now, what with the baby and Lily and his nice little life out here in the middle of nowhere. Pettigrew hated the country. He had grown up in London, and had loved every bit of it. He’d also grown up rather well-off. Not rich, of course, at least compared to Sirius, but they’d at least had a properly magical kitchen. He closed the stove door a bit noisily.

Remus called from the parlor, “That duck putting up a fight in there?”

“Sorry,” Pettigrew called back quickly. “It slipped. Greasy fingers from this basting thing.”

“Well, keep it down. If you wake the baby, there’ll be diapers to change.”

“All right, Remus.”

Standing in the kitchen, Pettigrew fumed to himself. He was angry a lot these days, and he never really understood why. Remus, Sirius and James were his best friends, and yet more often than not, he found himself wanting to snap at them rather than laugh with them. He *didn’t* snap at them, of course, but that only made things worse. The ingratiating agreeability he heard in his own voice disgusted him. *Shut up, Remus*, he wanted to call. *Don’t order me around. What do you know? Sitting there all self-righteous and full of yourself. Who’s the werewolf in this room? Is it me? No, I’m the one who spent years learning how to achieve my animagus form so as to run along with you when you change, keeping you safe from the world, and the world safe from you. Is this how you show gratitude? Ordering me around like some kind of mentally deficient house elf?*

Pettigrew moved to the kitchen window, looking through his own reflection at the moon beyond the spindly trees. He sighed, calming himself. Of course that wasn’t what Remus thought. Remus had shown gratitude many times. They all treated Pettigrew very well, most of the time, didn’t they? In the window, his reflection nodded slowly. But Pettigrew knew the truth. None of them admitted it, but they all knew he was the odd man out. He was never as confident or carefree as they were. He tried so hard to be like them, to move through life like they did, with their face to the wind, a glint in their eye, and never a look back. Deep down, however, Pettigrew knew that what was bravery in them was affectation in him. That which was nobility in James, Remus and Sirius was cowardice in him. And alongside this knowledge, Pettigrew’s greatest fear was that someday the rest of them would see him for what he really was: a rat in human form, and not the other way around.

Last week, Sirius had taken Pettigrew aside. He’d been piloting that ridiculous motorbike of his, and had offered to take Pettigrew for a ride on it, so that they could talk in private. Pettigrew was afraid of the bike, and his fear made him hate it. He’d stammered something about needing to get back to his flat, and Sirius had waved it off with that carefree, effortless ease, as if the whole world could be put on hold with a mere gesture of his hand. And perhaps, Pettigrew had thought jealously, for Sirius that was even true.

“James and Lily are eventually going to need a Secret Keeper,” Sirius had said quietly, straddling his bike and looking out over the length of the avenue out front. “I was thinking about who might be best for that job, Wormtail. I was thinking of suggesting it be you. What do you say?”

Pettigrew knew most people would be flattered by that suggestion. It was a great honour, wasn’t it? But Pettigrew did not feel honour. He felt anger and shame. Sirius was not asking him because he was the

most trustworthy or honourable. That was a laugh. Sirius was suggesting him, Wormtail, because everyone knew he was harmless. Others might have the strength or the audacity or the sheer nerve to commit betrayal, but not Pettigrew. He was a rat, which is really, when you get right down to it, just a great fat mouse. Pettigrew would make a good Secret Keeper, not because he was the best man, but because he was the weakest and most timid. He'd never betray the Potters because, quite simply, he just didn't have the nerve.

Last week had been a full moon. As usual, the four of them had transformed together, bolting off through the back garden and out into the nearby wood: Remus, the Wolf; James, the Stag; Sirius, the Dog; and trailing behind, scampering to keep up, as always, Pettigrew, the rat. By the time they had entered the arms of the wood, Wormtail had found himself further behind than usual. Perhaps the others were running faster, caring less about waiting for the rat to keep up, or perhaps Wormtail himself had simply abandoned the chase. Perhaps—although if this was true, Wormtail himself was barely aware of it—he had lagged behind simply to see if the others would notice his absence. If that had been his motivation, then he had been sorely disappointed; within seconds, the noise of his friends' trotting footsteps had been utterly lost in the dense chorus of the night.

But Wormtail had not gone *completely* ignored. Someone had indeed found him.

In the kitchen, staring through his own reflection, Pettigrew could barely remember it. Often, his memories of the times he spent as a rat were fuzzy, but this memory had the distinct feeling of something purposely clouded, perhaps even partially obliterated. It circled his head like a cloud of gnats, never settling. There had been men, all in black, moving secretly through the forest, searching for something. One of them had discovered Wormtail, had recognized him for what he was, and they had fallen eagerly upon him. Wormtail had been terrified; he was about to be killed, and in his rat form. But then, one of the figures had spoken to him, softly, soothingly, silkily. As a rat, Wormtail had to concentrate to grasp the meanings of the words, but he understood them well enough to know one thing: this man was evil, perhaps the worst kind of evil imaginable. And yet, tantalizingly, this man saw something valuable in Wormtail.

"You are unappreciated, are you not?" the silky voice breathed to the rat. "I see it, I sense it. Your 'friends', *they* do not grasp your true potential. Oh, but I do. Yes, I see you for who you *really* are, my friend. I can use a wizard like you. You will seek me out, and I will help you achieve greatness. You, my rat-like friend, may prove to be far more important than any of your 'friends' have ever imagined. You desire this, don't you. Yes... yes, you do... more than anything... more than *anything*..."

"Torture him," one of the other shapes had suggested. "Make him show us now, this night. We know they live in the area."

"So hasty," the silky voice chided, smiling. "So eager, Lucius, and yet so clumsy. You lack *finesse*. This one may be worth more than you know. For his part, we shall watch... and wait."

The words maddened Wormtail, like an itch in the center of his brain. They terrified him, and he feared he would be killed even still. But then, suddenly, the figures had gone, vanished in swirls of black smoke, their search abandoned, called off.

Pettigrew thought he knew who that figure in the wood had been. He thought he knew what they'd been searching for. He'd never seek that horrible voice out, of course. Never. Despite everything, Pettigrew would never – *could* never – betray his friends.

But *Wormtail*, on the other hand...

Just then the front door opened, pushing a breath of cold air through the small cottage. Lily's voice came in with it.

"He's just misunderstood, James," she was saying. "And perhaps he *is* right about you. You are being remarkably suspicious."

"Who's misunderstood?" Remus said, closing his book and looking up.

"We ran into Snivellus back outside Diagon Alley. I'll tell you all about it when Padfoot gets back. I want to see both of your faces at the same time when I tell you what he said. Where is he, by the way?"

"Went for a run around the street's back gardens," Remus replied, rolling his eyes. "He's not much of a reader, you know. He got fidgety about an hour after you left, although he'll probably be back any moment now."

"How's my duck?" Lily asked, striding toward the kitchen and passing Pettigrew as he came out.

"Ask the cuckoo bird if you want to know for sure," he replied. "But I'd say we can eat anytime."

"Uh oh," Remus said, standing. "Someone knows you're home."

"He must have heard the door," James said, glancing up the narrow stairs toward the sound of a baby's lusty wail.

"I'll get him," Lily announced, reappearing through the kitchen doorway.

"Oh, no you won't," James said, turning quickly up the steps. "He'll need changed first, and that means Papa time. You get that bird out of the oven, then he's all yours."

Remus smiled, "What a good father,"

"Oh, if we were Muggles he'd no sooner change a diaper than sit through an opera," Lily said, rolling her eyes and producing her wand. "Hagrid gave us one of those novelty diaper cleaning pots in the shape of an Octogator, and the two of them laugh like loons every time the diaper pops back out of its mouth all clean and warm."

"Sounds like fun," Pettigrew commented, plopping onto the sofa.

"Need any help in there?" Remus called, approaching the kitchen doorway.

"I think I can manage levitating a duck out of the—no, wait!"

There was the sound of a slamming door and a clatter of paws on tile. Remus stepped skillfully out of the way as a black shape rocketed past, streaking through the parlor and up the stairs, trailing a pall of cold outside air.

"Sirius!" Lily called angrily. "You almost made me drop the—and look at the muddy mess you've made of my kitchen floor!"

"I'll handle it," Remus said, stifling a smile. He produced his wand and stepped into the kitchen.

Pettigrew sat on the sofa and listened to the sounds of the house; Remus and Lily chatting in the kitchen, Sirius and James laughing upstairs. After a minute, the two men clumped down the steps, Sirius in the lead, dressed in black pants and a snug black tee shirt with the word STYX inexplicably printed across the front in white letters, and James following with the baby cradled in his arms.

"Speaking of gifts," Sirius said, "I left a little present in your neighbor lady's back garden."

"Sirius!" Lily scolded again from the kitchen.

"What? It was a garden gnome! Not a real one, of course. Just one of those little statues. I thought she liked that kind of thing?"

“You keep pulling stunts like that, I won’t let you keep a change of clothes here in my house,” Lily called, only slightly mollified.

“Nice garden gnome, too,” Sirius muttered, leaning towards James. “Got it from that obnoxious old bloke at the end of the street.”

“All changed and happy,” James said, placing the baby in Pettigrew’s arms and throwing himself onto a nearby chair. Pettigrew held the baby awkwardly and tried to smile down at him. In his clumsy embrace, the baby squirmed and stared up at him. Ponderously, the small figure sucked at his lips and clutched Pettigrew’s pinky in his tiny fist.

“There he is,” Lily cooed, appearing through the kitchen door and wiping her hands on a dishtowel. “There’s my little Harry. Were your uncles good to you?”

“As good as such a handsome sleeping baby needs,” Remus said, joining Lily and looking down at the bundle in Pettigrew’s arms. Pettigrew looked up at them and smiled sheepishly.

“Everyone says he has Lil’s eyes,” James commented, smiling at his son, “but the rest of his rugged good looks are pure Potter.”

“I don’t know,” Sirius said, seating himself on the sofa next to Pettigrew and leaning over the baby. “He’s a little plain. Needs a little something. A birthmark, or a tattoo, like his Godfather Sirius. Something distinctive.”

“Just be quiet, you,” Lily said, scooping the baby up and cradling him affectionately. “He’s perfect, from head to toe. Aren’t you? Yes, you are. My perfect little Harry. Are you hungry? Hmm?”

Harry squealed a happy baby sound and stretched in his mother’s arms. He was too young to know it, but he was content. All was well with the world. All around were comforting faces and loving sounds. It was warm and wonderful in the cottage that was his world, and his belly was soon to be full. Time didn’t mean anything to such a tiny baby, and that was good. All that mattered was the moment, and the moment, while it lasted, before the world changed once again, was absolutely perfect. As far as baby Harry was concerned, the moment could last forever.

As Lily fed her son, while the duck sat cooling atop the kitchen stove, waiting, as was tradition, for Remus to carve it, she thought back over the evening. It was, indeed, hard not to worry. As unthinkable as it was, there were people out there, led by the awful Dark Lord, who apparently wished to bring harm to her perfect little baby. With the help of the Order, they had cast disillusionment charms over the cottage, but they were far from perfect. Before long, they’d have to take more drastic measures, or Lily would find it hard to sleep at night. Thus, despite James’ disdain for the poor, misunderstood Severus, she was secretly glad that he was apparently watching over them. He was a confused and unhappy man, and Lily felt bad about everything that had (and had not) transpired between them, but she trusted him. No matter what or who he was involved with – and Lily truly did not want to know the details of any such involvements—she knew he would never allow anything terrible to happen to her or her son.

“If you really do care about me,” she’d whispered to him in the alley, as James had gone to search for his wand, “then you’ll remember this.”

And she’d opened the white sack, pulled out the tiny pyjamas. She’d held them out to Severus, as if she’d wanted him to touch them. He had not.

“You’ll remember that this is what I care for most in all the world,” she’d whispered, studying his face, his black eyes. “You can hate the choices I’ve made, but don’t hate what I love. Use what you know to protect him. You don’t owe me anything, but if you ever really cared for me, turn that care over to him. He may need it more than I ever did. Please, Severus.”

Severus hadn’t answered, but he hadn’t needed to. Lily had put the small pyjamas back into their sack as James had returned, and Severus had watched, his eyes inscrutable. He wasn’t perfect, but he cared, even if he hated himself for doing so.

Severus would do what he could. It might be small comfort, but for now, that was enough.

Baby Harry beamed up at his mother, happy and content. It was his first Christmas, and it was good.

Outside, silently and perfectly, snow began to fall.

The End