

## Love and Joy

The young woman sat alone by the weak light of her Christmas tree, arms wrapped around her legs, fighting not to cry. The season of hope and cheer had never seemed so empty.

*When I think how much they always loved Christmas, how Mum would write up her shopping lists a month in advance and be cooking and baking for days, how Dad would sing those horrible joking carols he loved so much and make us both chase him around the house to get him to stop—when I keep expecting that, and I keep coming home to empty rooms, cold and darkness, to them being gone and never coming back—*

She dropped her face onto her knees and let her few, silent tears flow. Crying aloud would only wake her baby sister, and this was the first Christmas where the little girl was old enough to be excited. Neenie deserved tomorrow to be a happy day, even with the devastation which had struck the Granger household midway through this year.

*All she knows is that Mummy and Daddy have gone away, and she barely remembers them at this point anyway. Before too long, this will just be the way things are for her. Just the two of us, Neenie and Danger.*

Gertrude Granger, Danger to her friends, smiled a bit as she dried her eyes. *Though make that three, when Harry's here. Which he probably will be all day tomorrow. His aunt won't want him underfoot, not with all she has to do, entertaining her husband's work friends and people he wants to impress. Under her breath, she sighed. Now if I could just convince myself I'm wrong about what it means that he was terrified of my going to get the decorations from the cupboard under the stairs...*

But she knew she wasn't wrong, and she also knew she could do very little about it. Her neighbors' nephew showed no visible signs of abuse or neglect, other than being skinny for his age and dressed in nothing but his cousin's oversized cast-offs, so despite her near-certainty about what his aunt and uncle inflicted upon him on a daily basis, with that same aunt and uncle Harry Potter would remain.

*Except when I have him. But I can't take him much more often than I do. I have to keep enough hours at work to pay my bills, or I risk losing custody of Hermione, and I'd never get her back if that happened—*

Another bout of tears overcame Danger as her imagination painted the picture of her sister shrieking her name from the arms of a tired-faced woman who was carrying her relentlessly away.

She wound her arms around her face and fought for silence, sobbing in harsh, throat-tearing gasps, clenching her teeth so hard her jaws hurt.

*It isn't supposed to be like this, she snarled silently at the universe, daring someone, anyone, to step forth and prove her wrong. What had my parents ever done, what have I ever done, Neenie and Harry are just babies, they can't have done anything—why us, why this, why now? Where's our peace on earth, our hope for a better tomorrow? Where are our glad tidings and great joy? Answer me, damn it, someone answer me—*

"You don't have to shout," said a quiet voice beside her.

Danger's head snapped up so fast she heard her shoulders pop.

The red-haired woman sitting beside her, green eyes gleaming with a smile, was no one she had ever met before, though a sense of familiarity hovered about her. Chasing this down, however, took second place in Danger's mind to the observation of the other strange thing about her visitor.

Namely, the soft corona of light radiating from her, casting contrasting shadows to those made by the lights on the Christmas tree.

"Aren't you supposed to say 'Fear not'?" Danger heard herself inquiring in tones remarkably like her normal ones.

"Are you afraid?" the woman countered.

"No." The word came automatically, but on a closer self-examination Danger realized it was true.

*Which makes no sense. Ordinary people do not arrive unexpectedly in one's living room at midnight on Christmas Eve shining like they've had a massage with candle-flames. But I can't exactly tell myself I ought to be frightened when I'm not!*

"Well, then. Wasted effort on my part. Besides, it wouldn't be strictly accurate. But that's neither here nor there." The woman waved away all such petty concerns. "You have questions. So do many people, but you happened to ask yours at one of the few times of the year when those of us who are, shall we say, differently alive, are permitted to answer. Occasionally, even, to supply what's wanted. But there are rules."

"Of course there are rules." Danger pulled a tissue from her trouser pocket and dabbed at her cheeks. "What are they?"

"Fairly simple, in this case." The woman lifted her hands to her face and blew into the palms of her hands, first one, then the other. Tiny scenes formed in each, like a snow globe without the globe, or the snow. "You wanted peace and hope. Glad tidings of great joy. I can give that to you. Wind back half a year of time, change a single afternoon, and..."

Danger clamped her mouth shut over a cry of disbelief as she saw the images cradled within the woman's left hand. Perfect in miniature, David and Rose Granger greeted their daughters with

embraces and laughter on Christmas morning, David lifting Hermione high into the air to blow a kiss to the angel atop the tree, Rose pressing Danger into service to bring the special Christmas breakfast in from the kitchen.

*It could all be just a bad dream. Biting her lip, she fought to keep herself from reaching for the moving picture, from trying to snatch at it, fall into it, and have that life for her own again. To wake up on Christmas morning and have everything be all right, to know that Neenie will have everything she should, to be free to build a real life of my own—*

"Or." The woman gestured with her right hand, drawing Danger's eyes to it. "You could choose, instead, to give those things to others. Peace and joy. Hope and gladness."

Unwillingly, Danger tore her eyes away from the Christmas she'd wanted, and saw instead the one she knew she would have. The few gifts under the tree, meager though they were, still seemed satisfactory when invested with the glee of a pair of toddlers who were allowed, just this once, to rip through paper and tear open boxes—

*Which they then proceed to play with. She didn't bother to hide her chuckle as her picture-self skillfully mediated a dispute between the two, taking away the box they'd decided to tug-of-war to pieces and providing two others of precisely equal size, which Neenie proceeded to climb inside and Harry to clamber on top of. All right, so I'd give them happiness this Christmas, and it's true enough that if Mum and Dad were still alive we'd probably never have met Harry, but—*

The scene flickered, and Danger caught her breath. The room she saw now was still decorated for Christmas, but it was definitely not her familiar living room.

*Not unless it's somehow sprouted a working fireplace and a piano!*

Harry and Neenie, a year older, were shrieking with laughter as they alternately pursued and were pursued by an enormous, shaggy-furred black dog, Harry taking a moment out of the chase to ask a question of the woman and man sitting on a couch nearby. Their faces were indistinct to Danger's eyes, their voices silent in her ears, but the tenderness with which the woman answered Harry's question, the love in the man's careless ruffle of his eternally messy hair, could have been no clearer were every detail as crisp and perfect as a photograph.

*I knew it, I just knew a little boy like Harry couldn't be that alone, that unwanted! Danger scrubbed her knuckles against her knees, a grin of triumph pulling at her mouth. These people are out there somewhere. All I have to do is find them. And once I have, once he goes to them, I can get back on my feet with Neenie, and we'll keep them in touch, they'll stay friends—*

She sighed a little, shaking her head. *Only if I ask for Mum and Dad back, they won't. They'll never even have met. Not unless I can remember all of this somehow, and I don't think it works like that...*

The scene flickered again, clearing to show another Christmas, the very next if Danger were any judge. Harry and Neenie clustered eagerly around a different man (she might not be able to see

faces, but general outlines were clear enough, and the shoulders on this fellow would have made two of the other), who held in his arms, as carefully as though his burden might break—

"Oh," Danger breathed, reaching out but stopping just short of the image of the sleeping baby. "She's *beautiful* ."

Within the picture, Hermione cradled the baby's tiny brown hand within her own larger, paler one, and looked up with shining eyes, her face saying much the same thing Danger had just voiced aloud.

*It would be good for her, to have someone who looked up to her. But Mum and Dad were already on the older side for having a baby, so unless I found someone pretty quickly, she'd be an only child. She wouldn't even have Harry there, to challenge her to try new things, to teach her how to get along with others.*

Flicker, and a scene as different from the others as day from night. A little boy sat alone by a fireplace, watching the snow falling outside his window. His hair was as fair as Harry's was dark, and his face showed a discontent entirely at odds with the mound of wrapped packages stacked against his bed. Danger frowned in confusion, trying to understand—

Flicker, and the next Christmas, with the fair-haired boy added to the joyful chaos of the mingled household, trying things like stirring cake batter or hanging Christmas ornaments with a tentative air which told Danger it was his first time doing any of it. Harry and Neenie competed with great assurance to show him how things should be done, and the baby of the previous year, now a little girl old enough to walk (or rather run) and talk (usually at the top of her lungs), made herself the most cheerful kind of nuisance in existence.

*How strange. I wonder who they are? They do look happy, though, and it's hard to have a good Christmas if the rest of the year's been horrid...*

The flickering speeded up, hurrying forward through the years. Danger watched hungrily as her baby sister and the little boy she'd come to love, along with the other two children who'd joined their lives, grew older and more assured, opened gift after gift with rejoicing, turned eager eyes on their siblings and parents as the gifts they had given in their turns were examined. At last, a scene, frozen in time, blinked into view with a clarity which told her it would likely be the last.

Harry, now a sturdily-built young man instead of a boy, stood beside the Christmas tree, raising a glass as though to propose a toast. His stance, his smile, everything about him bespoke assurance and strength, the courage to face whatever came to him. Hermione sat beside him, her face in the first blush of her young womanhood fulfilling the promise of loveliness Danger saw in her now, her eyes looking into the future clear and unafraid. She held her own glass in her left hand, on which glinted a ring featuring a single clear stone, small but prettily set.

Across from them, the fair-haired young man had his glass lifted in one hand, while the other slipped behind the back of the dark girl to tweak one of her braids. From the look caught in her silvery eyes, she was well aware of what he was doing, and already had her revenge in mind. Her

face rang faintly familiar to Danger, but she set the recognition aside in favor of looking at the rest of the picture, for behind the four children sat the adults of the home, two men, two women. Their faces remained indistinct, but the sets of their shoulders, the tilts of their heads, left no doubt of the joy they took in their children, the pride they felt in seeing what they had accomplished, the love and hope and peace which pervaded and surrounded the household.

"Is this..." she started to say, and coughed when the words caught in her throat. "Is this certain?" she asked once her voice was clear again. "Will it happen, if I make this choice?"

"The only certainty I offer is this." The woman blew on her two scenes, making both vanish. "That once you have chosen one of these possibilities, the other *cannot* happen as you saw it here. So. Will you choose peace and hope and joy for yourself, with the restoration of your parents, to love you and your sister once more, to free you from a burden you never expected to bear? Or will you choose the other path, and bring peace and hope and joy to two children you already love and two more you have never met?"

"That's not entirely fair." Danger folded her hands across her knee, hoping to keep her fingers interlaced tightly enough that their trembling wouldn't show. "Hermione will get just as much happiness from getting Mum and Dad back as I would. And they'd see there was something odd at the Dursleys' the same way I did, and probably offer to do the same thing, especially once they're working again and I don't have to..."

*Though can I be sure of that?* Her thoughts wove and twined around one another with the rapidity of thread through her mother's sure fingers. *Dad was a stickler for keeping ourselves to ourselves and thanking the neighbors to do the same. And Mum wouldn't go against him, not unless she was certain something was wrong, and the Dursleys take good care not to let it be seen what they're doing to Harry. Unless someone got up close and personal with him, like me, they'd probably have got away with it for a long time, especially if they could convince him that he deserved it and no one would ever listen to him or help him.*

*As for Hermione, I can't fault how Dad and Mum would love her, but would they know what to do with her? She wants to learn so much it almost frightens me sometimes, and that's wonderful, but it could also turn her inward, give her a hard time understanding anything she can't find in a book, unless someone pushes her to go out and meet other human beings. Which I don't know if they would think to do. The thought pained her, but that didn't make it less true. They were both so easy and friendly with people that it'd never occur to them that she could be anything else.*

*And then there's the part of it that's all about me.* Pressing her thumbs against her lips, Danger took her desires ruthlessly to their logical conclusion. *Having my parents back would mean, at least on the surface, that I could go back to being nothing but their older daughter. They would take all the heavy loads, make all the hard decisions, so I wouldn't have to. So I could be a girl in a woman's body for just a little while longer.*

*But even if I chose that, even if it could happen, isn't it already too late?*

"When I was a child," she murmured half-aloud, "I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I

thought as a child. But when I became an adult, I put away childish things." Looking up at her visitor's softly-lit, serenely smiling face, she squared her shoulders. "I thank you for the choice," she said. "But it really isn't one, not for me. Not tonight." Her eyes burned, but she held her voice steady. "I choose them. Hermione, and Harry, and that other boy and girl, whoever they are. Peace and joy for them are the gladdest tidings I could ever hope for."

The other woman's smile blazed up. "You have chosen well," she said, and blew across both palms, summoning back the final scene around the Christmas tree, but shifting the focus from the children to the adults. The blurring around their faces and forms cleared away one by one, starting with the broader-shouldered man, whose handsome, laughing features made Danger blink. She knew she'd seen him somewhere before, but—

Then the woman beside him was revealed, and Danger stifled a cry of wonder in the side of her hand as her earlier half-recognition of the dark girl still sitting with her siblings around the tree solidified. "Aletha," she breathed, feeling her heart lift as she looked from the face of her friend to that of the girl who was surely her daughter, and then back to the gray-eyed man who must be the child's father, Aletha's husband—

*And he's in my dreams!* Danger squeezed her hands together as the recollection struck. *The dreams about the man who looks like Harry and the woman who's got his eyes, he's the best friend, the one who got caught in the middle of that trap, the one everyone thinks went over to the bad! So then the other man ought to be—*

She exhaled a breath of satisfaction when the mist cleared from the figure of the slenderer man to show that he was, indeed, an older version of the boy with the sandy hair about whose life she had learned so much through her dreams. "You'd better be worthy of him, whoever you are," she muttered towards the indistinct female form by his side. "Not that anyone could be..."

"Are you sure?" Danger's visitor inquired, and twitched a finger.

Danger would have gasped, except that the muscles across her chest clamped down hard in shock as she recognized what she now saw.

The full-figured woman sitting next to her dream man, smiling as she accepted from him a carefully measured glass of wine, wore her brown curls long and unabashedly rampant, the few strands of silver among them seeming an ornament rather than a mark of age or decay. Her oval face with its regular features held a few lines of pain and worry, but far more of laughter and happiness, and her brown eyes looked upon the world with clarity and kindness.

"But," Danger managed to say after several breathless seconds. "But—that's *me!* "

"Did you think choosing happiness for others meant you would have none for yourself?" The other woman smiled, parting her hands to dismiss the scene. "You will suffer great pain and terrible loss through this choice, but so you have already done, and fought through it to live another day. And if you persevere, if you remain strong to meet all your trials, hope and joy will come to you indeed, in greater measure than you can yet understand."

"Hope and joy." Danger pressed the heels of her hands against her hipbones, trying to keep herself under control. "And peace?"

"In the end, yes. Even peace." The woman nodded. "And if you had chosen the other way—or do you not wish to know?"

"I'm allowed?" Danger frowned, surprised. "I thought I wouldn't be."

"You will remember little of this night, so I see no harm in telling the truth." The woman cupped her hands again and blew into them, conjuring up a springtime scene where Harry and Hermione chased one another around a swingset, while Danger herself read on a bench nearby, calling to the children when they got too rambunctious. "You would have remembered enough to suggest to your parents that your sister befriend the Dursleys' nephew, and the friendship would have blossomed. Until the Ides of March, when those who wish Harry harm would have found him with you, away from his usual protections."

"Someone does want to hurt him, then." Danger shivered. "I thought there had to be, but I didn't—oh!" She gasped as a man wearing long robes materialized at the edge of the playground, a man with a long sweep of silver-blond hair and a cruel smirk on his face as he pointed a slender wooden stick towards the children. "No, oh, no—"

The Danger within the picture wasted no time on exclamations, instead diving towards the children, interposing her body between them and the beam of sickly gray light which shot from the man's magic wand, as it must be. One sliver of the light slipped between Danger's chest and her arm to strike Hermione; all the rest vanished into Danger's own body, convulsing her in agony.

The man cursed and started forward, beginning to speak more words, but noises from nearby brought his head around, his face twisted in fury. He turned in place and vanished a few seconds before a number of other people in robes similar to his own came bolting up, some reaching for the children, others bending over Danger.

"His curse was one of time," said the woman as the scene dissipated. "Impossible to reverse if properly cast, as this one was. Your sister aged a year in the minute after it struck her, and your own age advanced so far that you died within the hour." Her face was grave. "Your parents accepted the only help that could be given to them—the changing of your sister's official documents to reflect a birthdate one year earlier, and relocation to a place where no one knew them—and Harry was returned to his relations with a warning not to allow anyone else to mind him."

"Oh, God." Danger pressed her hands against her face, shuddering, then looked up. "But it won't happen now. It can't. Not like that."

"No," the woman agreed. "Your choice has ended that possibility forever."

"Good." Danger paused as an oddity about the scene occurred to her. "That man looked familiar. Almost like..." She stopped, allowing her mind to sort through all she'd seen. "Does he have a son,

maybe?" she asked casually. "About the same age as Harry?"

"He does." The woman smiled. "And true justice will be served, both for what he would have done and what he will now do. Any triumph he may find will be short-lived, and the end of his striving will be pain and horror, and the destruction of all he desires. As for you..." She opened her hands as though they held a book. "One good quotation deserves another. Weeping may endure for a night, but joy shall come in the morning."

"Glad tidings indeed." Danger gazed up at the Christmas tree, at the angel which sat atop it. "Are you *sure* you're not..."

The woman shook her head, chuckling. "A halo wouldn't fit me very well," she said. "And I understand wings are a nuisance. Be well, Danger. And never give up hope." She grinned. "Not that you'll want to."

One final time, she blew across her hands, and Danger felt a wave of tiredness wash over her, carrying her off to the unpredictable world of her dreams.

*Or was all of this just a dream instead?*

*I wish I knew...*

On the very edge of sleep, she heard a woman's voice singing softly.

Love and joy come to you,  
And to you good wassail too,  
And God bless you and send you a Happy New Year,  
And God send you a Happy New Year.