

## Return Receipt

"Harry? Harry!" Petunia Dursley hurried into the kitchen of number four, Privet Drive, dropping her two handfuls of forks and spoons onto the table. "Harry James Potter, where are you? This silver won't polish itself!" She waited a moment, then sighed theatrically and poked her head into the living room, where her four-year-old son was watching a cartoon show and systematically emptying a bag of crisps. "Duddykins, have you seen Harry?"

"I made him go outside," Dudley said thickly, swallowing his mouthful and pointing towards the front door. "He wanted some of my crisps and I said he couldn't have any and made him go outside so he couldn't have any."

"Thank you, darling." Petunia strode to the front door and pulled it open. "Harry Potter, you get in—"

The only things in the neatly trimmed front yard were the two small ornamental trees, leafless now that it was November, and the hedges along the front walk. Nor was there a small, black-haired child in oversized clothes anywhere within sight.

Petunia slammed the door and marched down the hallway to the back of the house. The boy must be hiding, trying to get out of his chores. "When I catch you, Harry Potter—" she began, flinging the back door open.

The back yard, too, was completely empty apart from the usual appurtenances. As far as Privet Drive was concerned, there was no such person as Harry Potter.

Forcing down a spurt of panic, Petunia made herself think. There were three possibilities. Either Dudley had misremembered where he had sent his cousin, Harry had sneaked back into the house when Dudley wasn't looking, or...

But the third possibility would create trouble, and thus Petunia discarded it out of hand. Harry created enough trouble simply by existing, heaven knew! He had slipped past her and Dudley somehow, and was hiding within the house. She would find him, and for his punishment, he would have to polish *all* the silver, rather than just the small amount needed for Vernon's business dinner tonight. Perhaps she should send him to bed without his own supper... but no, that might make him cry, and the last thing they needed was a crying child in the house...

After ensuring the preparations for the meal were well in train, Petunia began to search. The rummage through the first floor took her nearly half an hour, and the ground floor longer than that. Vernon arrived home just as she was peering into the last kitchen cabinet.

"What in God's name are you doing down there?" he asked, startling her into banging her head on the inside of the cabinet. "Have you lost something?"

"I suppose you could say that." Petunia pulled herself backwards out of the cabinet, resisting the urge to laugh hysterically. "It's the boy, Vernon. Dudley sent him outside earlier, and now I can't find him anywhere. I even rang Mrs. Figg, to be sure he hadn't run off to her house..."

"Did you look in his cupboard?"

"Oh!" Now Petunia did laugh. Of course, that was where Harry would be. He'd been scolded, he was trying to avoid work, so naturally he retreated to the one spot that was his and his alone. "How silly of me," she said, starting towards the hall. "Whatever would I do without you, Vernon?"

"You'd muddle along somehow, I'm sure." Vernon waved a dismissive hand. "Any woman who could survive having a sister and a brother like yours... or should I say, a sister and an impostor..."

Petunia shuddered. "I've wondered so often what my parents were thinking, to take *him* in," she said. "I mean, he could have been just like that father of his, he could have murdered us all in our beds! If I'd brought a boy home that way—I mean, not that I ever would have, but if I had—" She broke off, unable to articulate the unfairness.

"And then to adopt him, make him one of the family..." Vernon shook his head. "Imagine if we'd treated the boy that way. What sort of lesson would that be for him? To act as though a freak like him is the equal of our Dudders? Better that he learns what he is early."

"Better for everyone," Petunia agreed, and swiftly buried the tiny sprout of dissension, as she always did. Better for everyone if she never even let herself think that her sister's son was different and would always be so, better still for everyone if she ignored the memories of her own desire for that difference, best of all for everyone if all the differences simply went away and the world was normal as it had been in the years before *he* had stolen her sister's heart, or between her sister's (and *his*) departure and the arrival of a bundle on her doorstep...

Vernon pulled back the latch on the cupboard under the stairs. "Boy!" he bellowed. "Get out here!"

There was no response.

Petunia hurried around the door to her husband's side. Vernon was staring incredulously into the cupboard. It was empty of anything which might

resemble a boy. Lying on the old mattress, near the small box half-filled with folded clothes, was a yellowish envelope, addressed in heavy black handwriting.

*Mrs. Vernon Dursley*

"Mummy!" Dudley came clomping into the hallway, the now-empty crisp bag clutched in one hand. "Mummy, I'm hungry, when's dinner—what's that?" He had spied the letter within the cupboard. "Is it Harry's? Can I have it?"

"Get it out and bring it here, love," Petunia said, fighting to get the words out normally around the lump in her throat. The handwriting looked so familiar... but it couldn't be, it wasn't, she wouldn't allow it to be...

Dudley handed her the letter, and she moved as in a dream back into the kitchen, where she sat shakily down at the kitchen table and slid her finger under the flap. The letter inside was on just as thick and yellow a material as the envelope (*parchment*, her treacherous mind supplied, *they write on parchment, and they use quill pens*) and the handwriting conjured up the deep, precise voice of its writer as clearly as though he were standing before her speaking. She was barely aware of Vernon and Dudley following her into the room, watching her read.

*My dear sister:*

*As you may be aware, yesterday marked the third anniversary of the death of our sister, Lily Evans Potter, and her husband, James Potter. At the time they died, there was a great threat to their son, Harry, and it was decided that he would be safest with Lily's blood kin, namely, you. He was therefore left to your care on this day three years ago. In return for that care, you were promised that magical people would not henceforth "bother" you. This promise has been kept.*

*What I greatly doubt you knew is that an agreement was at that time made between one Albus Dumbledore (whose name I am sure you know as the issuer via letter of the aforementioned promise) and myself. If, at the end of three years, the threat to Harry had been reduced enough that wards of blood magic were no longer necessary to his safety, I would be allowed a chance to speak with Harry alone. In the event he was happy and content living with you, I would take no action. In any other case, I would offer him the chance to leave your home and come with me instead.*

*The threat to Harry being reduced as stated, I fulfilled my part of this agreement today, and what I saw and heard frankly appalled me. Keeping knowledge of magic secret from Harry—though I do not approve of it, I can understand your reasons for it. But telling him that he has no other relatives in the world, that you and Lily were the only children in your family, is not the withholding of knowledge but an outright lie. And denying him even his parents' names and faces? That, Petunia, is nothing more nor less than cruelty.*

*If the tone of this letter has not told you so already, I have taken Harry with me to my home, where he is now under the care of my wife alongside our son, who is only a few weeks older than yours. You will not be troubled with him again. If I thought you cared, I would tell you that he is settling in well and seems happy in his new home.*

*I would have sent restitution for the three years our nephew spent under your roof, Petunia, but judging by the condition of his person and his clothing, you spent nothing on him that could be avoided, and certainly nothing that you will not easily recoup by spending a trifle less on your own spoiled brat. Still, I am sure you will congratulate yourself on your freedom from a drain on your resources you could ill afford. More, you will rejoice at the sure knowledge that this letter is the last word you will ever receive from the magical world.*

*In memory of a time when you felt differently, I remain,*

*Your loving brother,*

*Russell S. Evans*

Petunia let the letter fall into her lap. "He's gone," she said distantly. "He's gone, and he won't be coming back."

An instant of silence greeted this. Then Vernon began to shout questions, while Dudley added to the general confusion by his childish incoherence. Petunia folded the letter up again and slid it back into its envelope while she calmed Dudley down and answered Vernon's questions as best she could without encouraging him to ask more. She would have to polish the silver herself now, she knew, and there wasn't much time.

But behind the part of her which was dealing with her husband and her son, behind the part that was angry about having to undertake the messy and tedious job she had planned to fob off on her nephew, behind even the part which was furious about the peremptory and dismissive tone of the letter, some tiny and unacknowledged core of Petunia Dursley found a moment to feel glad that her sister's son had found a better home than hers, and to wish that her own quest for the talents her sister and her adopted brother had shown in such great measure had not been in vain.

---