

Chapter 1 — Home at Last

Controlled chaos, Lindsey thought to herself as her group watched their bus leave. It was June 1st, they had finally returned to Lindsey's ranch home for summer vacation. Lindsey and her family's newly adopted sister, Ashley Stokes-Compton, stood by their large pile of duffle bags, containing their school book and clothes. Their good friends had also gotten off with them, Audrey Lemon and Pam Betts were now living with Lindsey here at her ranch, while the four Whitewater children, Tom, Jim, Amanda, and Fern, lived a few miles from here at their adjoining ranch. Sandy, Tom's fiancé, and her brother, Andy, lived in the small town of Arapahoe, just a few miles further south from the Whitewater ranch. All their bags had been deposited here on Lindsey's doorstep, a veritable mountain of bags lay at their feet.

Lena and Lloyd Compton, her parents, rushed to meet their returning daughters, Lindsey and Ashley, hugging both, as well as Audrey, for whom they were being unofficial foster parents. Running Bear Whitewater, or R. B. for short, and Lucinda Morning Dove, or Luci for short, hugged their four children, as well as Sandy who was about to become their daughter-in-law a few days from now. Tom and Sandy were getting married before heading off to college in Denver. Fred and Polly Betts were also present, since their family was now living here with Lena and Lloyd, and they hugged their daughter Pam.

Adding to the confusion were Amanda's Aunt Monane Tumble and Pam's Aunt Wilma Weltsi, both of whom had come to live with the Compton's for the summer. These two older women were part of the famous Rat Pack, who had been responsible for apprehending the evil wizard, Dominus Malefic, who had waged a campaign of terror across the world some fifteen or more years ago. He'd escaped and was back at it again, murdering and stealing once more. Additionally, two gangly, tall twins, Bill and Ted Weltsi, Wilma's older boys, were also present. Both stood behind the large group and watched the giant confusion before them. Lindsey had no idea why the twins were here, however.

"Lena, you'd best get inside out of this hot sun," Wilma advised.

"Mom, you are so big!" exclaimed Lindsey. Indeed, Lena was nearly nine months pregnant.

Lean smiled, "Tell me something I don't already know!" Everyone chuckled and the young wizards and witches hastily cast their Move Object spells, depositing their many bags either into their rooms or on the floor just inside the front entrance, where the teleport pad was located. R. B. had created a permanent teleport pad between his home and the Compton's home, their children were constantly going back and forth between the two homes. This method ensured a safe, secure travel in these ever growing dark times.

“Okay, kids, let’s get your things over to our ranch and unpacked. You can come back here later on, give Lindsey time to unpack as well,” Luci ordered. Hastily, the Whitewaters obeyed, but it took three turns on the teleport pad for all of them to exit with so many bags.

“Cya in a little while,” Amanda called out as she suddenly disappeared from Lindsey’s front room area, materializing in her own front room.

“Kids, let’s sit in the living room a minute,” Lena suggested. “I’ve got some things to tell you about right away. Polly’s bringing us all a lemonade and sandwiches.” Hastily, everyone found seats on the sofas and couches.

“Bill and Ted are going to be with us all summer and early fall,” Lena explained. “With the baby due in two weeks, I am not going to be able to work the ranch this summer. They’ve graciously volunteered to help out in the fields for me.”

“Perfect for us,” Ted broke in. “We plan to hit the Cassino on Saturday nights. Bill and I have all sorts of schemes to win big. So don’t look for us to be around those times.” Both boys nodded, but Wilma rolled her eyes and shrugged her shoulders.

“Anyway,” Lena continued, “what with having so many others around this summer, Lloyd and I decided to expand the house a bit. We’ve added a side wing for the twins, just off of our bedroom wall. We turned it into a small apartment arrangement, including a tiny kitchen, so they can have their own independence.”

“Yeh, we won’t bother you folks. We promise to keep our stereo down at night,” Ted added. Wilma glared at him, but said nothing.

“Yeh, but if trouble comes, you can count on us,” Bill added, “though it might take us a bit if we are out in the fields.” This appeased Wilma, who ceased glaring at her boys. “Excuse us, we also just got here an hour ago, we need to unpack too. Cya.” The boys left out the front door.

Polly brought in their light lunch and the group rapidly gave an account of all that had gone on at Bradbury’s School of Magic since their Christmas vacation. While Monane and Wilma had been actually involved in protecting the children when they won 1st place at the National Track Meet in May, they were pretending to be Able Monument and Bill West, the Rat Pack members who were pretending to be themselves. Few knew their secret identity. Here at this house, Ashley, Lindsey, and Pam knew it. Amanda and R. B. also knew their secret identity. After all, R. B. was Monane’s brother. Until now, both Wilma and Monane had to pretend to all these others that they only knew what they saw on TV or what they had learned from the girl’s phone calls.

Lloyd, Fred, Lena, and Polly actually greatly desired to know all of the details of that horrible affair. An hour later, their curiosity was finally satisfied. Lindsey now turned it around

and wanted to know how her mother was doing. “When’s the baby due mom? Have they given you a better estimate?”

“Two weeks, dear. If all goes well, you two should have a little brother. When I had my last checkup, the sonagram revealed that it’s going to be a boy. I wanted to be surprised, but I accidentally saw the images. There’s no doubt about it,” she grinned.

“What do you girls think of the name Jonathon Samuel Compton?” Lloyd asked proud as can be. “After my father and yours, Lindsey,” he added.

Lindsey beamed, Samuel Barron, or Rabnor actually, had been Lena’s earlier husband, before he had been assassinated when Lindsey was five. Sam had also been a key member of the famous Rat Pack.

“Cool!” exclaimed Ashley, beating Lindsey.

“I love it!” Lindsey replied. Both proud parents smiled and relaxed. They had hoped their choice of a name would meet with their daughters’ approval. “Well, I guess we better get unpacked and settled in, mom.” All four girls headed to their rooms to begin their unpacking chores. Ashley and Lindsey shared the corner bedroom, while Pam and Audrey shared the end room, so that Audrey could grow her plants in the side walls. A spare bedroom separated them.

This new ranch house, designed and modeled after R. B.’s home, was forty by twenty on the outside. Its walls were three feet thick, earthen walls. Their roof sloped back and met the ground at the rear and now sod grew thick all over the roof. It was an energy efficient home, cool in the summers and warm in the winters, with nearly no heating or cooling needed. A set of solar panels on the roof generated electricity to run all of their appliances. Their two water wells had been expanded to three. One provided the irrigation needed for the three mile in diameter crop circles. One provided water to the large barn, where their many horses and farm animals were kept. One provided their household water needs.

Inside, the space was magically enlarged to two hundred feet by one hundred feet. Here at the rear were five large bathrooms paralleling down a small hall the six bedrooms. Besides the huge kitchen, pantry, and enormous diningroom, they had three very large studies and two even larger workrooms. Up front, the enormous front room doubled as their dance floor, while the somewhat smaller family room held their entertainment center.

Lindsey finally finished unpacking, though Ashley, who had no arms, was only about half done. Pam stuck her head in their room, “I’ve worked out a schedule, Lindsey. The big wedding is only forty-eight hours away now! We have to get ready in a hurry, you know. Then, on the 11th we have to go to Denver to pick up our foreign exchange students. I’ve put in the 14th as being the baby’s due date, though that can change at any moment. Gosh, I hope she doesn’t have it at the same time as the wedding or when we have to go to Denver!” As usual, Pam was organizing

things properly.

Lindsey didn't get the chance to reply. Just at that moment, a Message appeared in front of all four girls.

You've got to come over real soon! Guess what dad's made us? A large pond! Now we can go swimming, fishing, and ice skating in the winter time! You've got to see it! A.

The four girls stared at each other. "Wow! Super cool!" Pam exclaimed.

"Neat'o!" Audrey added.

"Come on! Let's go see it," Lindsey added. Ashley forgot about the rest of her unpacking and the four dashed to the front room's teleport station. Lindsey called out, "Back in a bit! Gotta go see their new pond!" Lena, Polly, and Wilma all grinned.

"Told you," Polly whispered. She'd just won their wager over how long it would be before the four dashed over to the Whitewater's to see the pond. "Were we ever like that?" she asked jovially.

"Oh no!" exclaimed Wilma, pretending to be deadly serious. All three women cracked up and roared with laughter.

Amanda was waiting for them and hurried them outside to see. Tom, Jim, and Fern were standing on the small dock that stretched out some twenty-five feet over the clear, blue waters. Monane, Luci, and R. B. stood near the shore, watching the excitement of their children. "It's huge," Amanda explained, though she need not have, they could see that it was several hundred feet across.

What also got their attention was the second building that now stood next to R. B.'s sod home. "Dad's build a new underground home for others who may need a safe sanctuary later on. He decided we needed a better water supply, though I don't understand that part," Amanda explained.

As they passed by R. B., he said calmly, "My latest digging invention, I seemed to have gotten a bit carried away with using it." Luci chuckled. She had had to stop him playing with it, otherwise, he'd have made five ponds!

"Hi! This is so cool, darn shame that I have to leave in a few days," Tom lamented. He added quickly, "We're holding the wedding ceremony here by the dock. You can come by tomorrow and help us set up the huge tent, if you like."

"Way cool!" Pam exclaimed. "You must be a little upset that you are now moving away, though, I know I would be." She sympathized with Tom.

“Yes, no kidding. Ah well, Sandy and I are ready to move to the big city, Denver. Still, why couldn’t he have made it six years ago? Nevertheless, Sandy and I can use it when we come back for visits. Next summer, we hope to spend all summer here, probably Christmas vacations too. We’ll make good use of it, Pam. Guess you can really have fun this summer.” She grinned.

“Oh, Lindsey, you’ve just got to see my new dress for the wedding!” Amanda suddenly remembered. All six girls were going to be Sandy’s bridesmaids. However, only Fern had met her maid of honor, Adel Softwood, also an Arapaho. Jim felt left out as the six girls raced back into the house. He had hoped to snuggle a bit with Ashley, after all this pond was the greatest invention of his dad’s yet, in his opinion. He didn’t see what the fuss over the sky blue dresses was all about anyway.

After many oh’s and ah’s, Lindsey realized that Lena probably had their dresses waiting for them to try on as well. Not long after admiring Fern and Amanda’s new dresses, the four dashed back home.

Lena, looking at her watch, commented, “Right on time.” Polly and Wilma chuckled.

“What do you mean, mom?” asked Lindsey, who had dashed into their livingroom, followed by Pam, Ashley, and Audrey. She’d overheard her mother’s comment.

“I gave you about ten minutes before you all would come dashing back here wondering about your new bridesmaids gowns. I was right,” Lena answered with a teasing smirk. Lindsey faked a shocked surprise, but all four began giggling. “This way, they are in the workroom.”

They dashed down the hall ahead of the three women. “Oh my! Beautiful! Incredible, perfect mom!” Lindsey declared as she saw the four gowns waiting for them. Each had matching sky blue heels as well, but only about an inch high. The next two hours were spent with last minute adjustments. All four girls had grown significantly since Christmas, as expected by Polly and Lena, the two dressmakers.

As the dinner hour approached, Fred Betts took Pam aside for a long chat. “I’m taking the next two days off from work, Pam, so I can attend the wedding, providing some security for R. B. Will you please raise your right hand and repeat after me?” Pam had no idea what her father wanted, but did as he said. To her utter amazement, he swore her in as an official deputy in the Department of Magical Misuse!

“There, now it is official. You have complete access to our servers, Pam. No more needing to, well you know what I mean. No one can ever question your accesses of our databases. If you need to check on fingerprints, you have complete access to the UFDB.” This was the Unified Fingerprint Data Base. Flabbergasted beyond works, Pam could only hug her father tightly.

At last, she whispered, “Thanks dad!” He smiled and held his daughter tightly.

Just after the large group finished their supper, the telephone rang. Lloyd took the call. Of course, everyone tried to listen in to figure out who was calling. Rarely did the phone ever ring around here. With everyone except Lena being a wizard or witch, no one needed to use the norm phone system. Lloyd motioned for Lena to come to the phone. He whispered to her, keeping the others in mystery. Lindsey strained to hear, but decided against casting an eavesdropping spell.

Lena nodded yes, and shortly thereafter, Lloyd hung up. “Well, who was it? What was that all about? More trouble?” asked Fred, worried that Dominus had caused yet more deaths.

“Sort of, Fred. Looks like we will have more company over the summer,” Lloyd explained. “It was Doctor Blackburn.”

“Oh no! Monique’s not hurt again is she?” Pam gushed, suddenly terribly worried.

“No, no,” Lloyd hastened to calm her fears. “Monique is having a bad reaction to living in their house. She took such a horrid beating there over the holidays. Psychological, he presumes. He has asked us if it would be all right for Monique to spend the summer here with us. It seems that they have been getting other threats while you kids were off at school and Henry is worried about his family.”

“We’ve asked them all to come down here and spend the summer with us,” Lena added. “So for tonight, we’ll put Monique and her sister, Ellie, up in the spare bedroom. Lloyd, you can fix up one of the study rooms for Lottie and Henry. I think that R. B. will put them up in his spare new home that he’s just built, once the big wedding is over. I hope this is all right with Pam and the rest of you.”

“Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” exclaimed Pam, wild with anticipation of spending the whole summer with Monique. “Is she in pain? Do we need to go help her with things? I wondered how she would feel going back to her home to live. She was nearly killed in her own front room, you know.”

“Henry has it under control, he said,” Lloyd said sympathetically. “Perhaps you can lend a hand getting their rooms ready. I don’t want Lena over-exerting herself or little Jonathon may arrive earlier than expected.” He grinned at Lena, who tried to make light of his pronouncement, though Lindsey could see that she was very grateful for his insistence that she take it easy.

Around eight, the magical alarm sounded in a monotone voice, “Blackburn’s are arriving.” Pam dashed to the front door to meet them, followed by everyone else. They had all worked hard fixing up the nearly unused study behind their bedrooms for the parents. The spare bedroom required nothing, it was already to go. Lena was prepared for the arrival of their foreign exchange students in eleven days.

When Pam opened the door, it was a very subdued family that met her eyes. Monique was actually crying, she did not have on her trademark cherry red lipstick. In fact, she wore none at all, highly unusual for this Red Hall girl, who was now entering her sixth year, as Pam was entering her fourth. “I’m so sorry,” Monique wailed as she saw Pam. “I’m a complete basket case now.” Pam just pulled her inside and forced her head onto Pam’s shoulder, patting her gently on her back.

“It’s okay, Monique, come, I’ll take to your room, it’s right beside mine,” Pam whispered and led her down the long hall.

Lottie and Ellie followed her inside, Doctor Blackburn lugged a number of suitcases inside. Lindsey saw that Ellie looked very frightened, Lottie’s face showed definite signs of stress. Henry had bags under his eyes.

“What’s this world coming too?” Lottie said, as she shook hands with Lena. “I cannot begin to thank you for putting us up, and you so close to your time. I’m so sorry that we are coming barging in on you like this.”

“It’s okay, really it is Lottie. Come on in. Lloyd and the others have fixed up one of our spare study room for your bedroom. Ellie can sleep in our spare bedroom with her sister. It’s no trouble at all,” Lena answered her.

Lloyd and Fred helped Henry with the many suitcases. “So good of you to open your home to us. I really was at my wits end, you know. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate this, Lloyd. Monique’s face is still not fully healed, she’s terribly sensitive to heat and cold. Today, we got another threatening phone call, unfortunately, Monique answered it. She nearly had a psychotic break afterwards. Even Ellie is scared. Lottie has fielded dozens of threatening calls during the spring, I know it has upset her too, but she’s said nothing about it.”

Fred replied, “There just are not enough Security Forces to provide all the protection that we need, I am so sorry, Henry. I did my best to get more into your hospital, but there’s just none to be had any more. I’ve put in a request to perhaps station some from other states out here in Colorado, but no luck with getting it approved yet. I’ll keep trying, Henry.”

“Thanks, Fred. At least Greeley Hospital is secure now. That’s something, really, the whole staff there is most appreciative of that!” Fred smiled.

Since only Monique had been here before, Lena and Lloyd took the three others on a grand tour of their home. All three were most impressed with the spaciousness and comforts of this home. Just as they finished their tour, R. B. and Luci appeared in the front room. They had insisted the children remain home, under the watchful eyes of Monane. They discussed the situation and offered them their new home, promising that it would be ready for them on the 5th, after the many wedding guests had left. Early morning tomorrow, they would get a tour of their

new home before the hectic wedding's last minute preparations got underway.

Meanwhile, in Monique's new bedroom, Pam had her sit down on the bed and she sat beside her dear friend, still holding her in her arms. "Tell me about it," Pam asked softly.

Sometimes crying, sometimes shaking like a leaf in a summer's breeze, Monique told her about how fearful she was just being in her own home. Then came that nasty man's voice on the phone, threatening her and Ellie. "I don't know what happened, Pam. I just broke down, I snapped, somehow. I am so scared, terrified, really, like the spell you learned this past year. I, I can't bear to live there anymore! I'm a total basket case!" She began crying and sobbing once more. Pam continued to hold her tightly, but said nothing. What could she say anyway?

When she calmed down, Pam said, "You are safe here, Monique. No one's going to hurt you while you are here." Monique finally stopped shaking and realized Pam spoke the truth. Here, she felt safe. She, at last, hugged Pam. Just then, Ellie knocked and joined them.

Monique calmed down and said, "Sis, we need to unpack a bit and take a bath before we turn in," Monique advised her sister. "We should be safe here."

"Pam, I am scared too, so is mom," Ellie ventured. "I only know Grade 1 spells. I can't even protect myself."

"Hey, don't make less of yourself, Ellie," Pam countered. "Look, Lindsey only knew Grade 1 spells when she had to face Dominus and Rubius in that cabin. Remember, they even had her mouth sewn shut and her hands cut off. So don't ever think that you can't do anything because you only know Grade 1 spells!" Ellie brightened up considerably, even managing a fleeting smile. "I'll let you two unpack and take a bath. I ought to take one too. We've five bathrooms on this end and one way up front."

By ten that night, everyone had retired for the night. Monique and Ellie fell into a deep sleep almost at once. Pam stared at her ceiling for a time, worrying about Monique, before she too fell asleep.

Ashley finally had time to relax, until now, she had so little private time for herself. As she lay there listening to the steady breathing of her sleeping sister, Ashley's emotional troubles finally boiled over. Yes, she had much to ponder, Tom and Sandy would be getting married in two days, her mother would be having a baby any day now, and in ten days, she would be going to Denver to meet her foreign exchange students.

This was not her worries at all. Here she was sleeping in her own bed, but now she was somehow vastly different than when she had first come here last summer. Last fall, she thought nothing about having no arms, she was antagonistic and easily fought back against any conceived

insult towards herself. At that time, she had completely accepted herself as she was. Now, something had changed, she was sitting on grief that she did not know existed. She now wanted arms, she wanted to be like everyone else, she did not want to be so different, so helpless, so dependent on others. Worse, she now thought of herself now as a worthless cripple, something that she had never done before. It didn't matter the slightest to her that others thought very highly of her, she knew the only thing that did matter was her own opinion of herself.

Then, there was Jim. Her heart continued to skip a beat every time she saw him. Though he doted on her, she could not imagine why he did so. If she were he, she certainly would be completely revolted by her sight. Ashley knew that she was a complete mess, but while at school, what with all the school work and so many roommates, she had no private time. Now, it swelled to the forefront, threatening to completely overwhelm her. She longed to talk to her new mother about it, but Lena was going to have a baby. She'd have little time for Ashley. The mere thought of the infant brought on more surges of helplessness in her mind. How could she do anything to help with a baby? She had no arms and now in her mind, that was everything.

Tears began flowing down her face. At last, afraid that she might wake up Lindsey, she got up and stole out of their bedroom on her tip-toes. She just couldn't face Lindsey right now. What could she possibly say to her? How could she possibly explain what she was feeling? The house was totally quiet. Ashley silently walked down to the kitchen, tears still flowing down her cheeks. She felt around for her tall stool and sat down, not even attempting to cast her Light spell. She thought of getting a glass of milk from the fridge, but decided against it. She could not lift the pitcher and would have to get the glass with her feet and open the door with her foot. Just now, the thought of using a Levitate spell and her feet only brought on more tears.

A bit later, she heard soft footsteps coming and tried in vain to halt her tears, hoping that whoever was coming might not see her. Lena turned on the dim night light. "Oh, I see you can't sleep either. Me, I have to go pee every forty-five minutes, it seems. I just get comfortable and I have to go badly. Ah well, only a few more days of this and it will be over. Dear, what's the matter?" She spied the wet cheeks. Ashley said nothing, she couldn't speak. If she tried, it would all come out. She valiantly tried to hold it all inside of herself.

"There, there, I suspected something was wrong, dear, when I saw you get off of the bus today. So much was going on then, I couldn't ask you about it, besides, it should just be the two of us talking. Come on, let's go sit in the front room. No one will hear us, just you and me. I do need to sit down. Jonathon is quite heavy now." Ashley managed a slight smile and followed Lena into the front room, where she turned on a nightlight only, just enough so each could see the other. Lena had her sit down on the sofa and promptly sat beside her, cradling her in her arms. She kissed her daughter on her head softly and said, "Tell me all about it, please."

Ashley was short, though she had grown three inches since Christmas. Thin and wiry, she had the looks of a teen fashion model, with hazel eyes and short, light brown hair that she had allowed to grow this past term. Soft natural curls fell to her shoulders. Lena, in contrast, had just

turned forty. She had blue eyes and long brown hair, tied back in a pony tail usually. Her frame was well muscled, she'd worked her ranch all her adult life. As she listened to her new daughter, she rubbed her hands slowly over the teen's back, providing the motherly support that Ashley had never had.

"Something's happened to me. I'm all screwed up. I mean I am so different now than I was this time last year. Like I used to be perfectly happy with myself, the way I am, nothing can be done about it anyway. I just forced myself to find alternate ways to do things with my feet. That's all gone now, I don't know how or why, but it is! I feel like a hopeless cripple, mom. I just want to be normal, like all the other kids. I know I can't but I can't help it any more, I can't hide it from myself. I don't want to be like me, I want to have arms just like everyone else!"

"Well, I don't think that anyone on earth *wants* to be like you are, without arms, Ashley. Something has happened to you, hasn't it? I know everyone thinks very highly of you, you've earned the total respect of so many people in so many places I can't name them all just now. Yet, that is not the problems is it, dear? You've lost your own self-respect, haven't you?"

Ashley stopped sobbing and looked up at her mother. "You, you understand! I have. I mean I've lost count of the number of times others have said that to me — you know, like Ashley you are the greatest, but I don't care about what they think anymore. I care about myself and I don't like myself anymore. I can't *do* anything. How am I ever going to *hold* my little brother? I mean, Lindsey and I worked on changing her doll's diapers, I can do that. But I want to hold him, *hug* him. I want to hold Jim too," she admitted. Lena smiled, realizing that there was a whole lot more to all this.

"When did you first notice that you began to feel this way, that you had to have arms to be happy with yourself?" Lena asked. "I find that it is helpful to find when one first had such ideas, such notions."

"Well, I had it on the bus coming home today. I imagined you had Jonathon and I couldn't even hold him."

"Good, but is this the first time you had these feelings about yourself?"

"No, I felt like this at the Nationals when the bombs went off. Even though I was morphed into Cho Lin and had arms, I could not do anything. I just stared at the horrid scene. Hank had to teleport us home, I couldn't do anything at all.

"I see. That was an awful time for sure, dear, but is this the first time you felt like this?"

"Well, no. When we all went off to rescue Alister, when he was tied to the rock in the sea, we all landed on these huge boulders. I could barely stand up. Jim had to hold me to keep me from falling! Then, we got attacked, and I had an awful time without arms, I kept nearly falling

off the boulder into the sea. I am nothing but a horrible liability to others, mom.”

“Yes, I can see how that must have been, but is this the very first time that you had these feelings of inadequacy?”

Ashley thought for a moment. “No, no, when we were all kidnaped by Dominus and taken into that rundown house. He cut off Lindsey’s arms, blinded her, made Pam into an idiot. I could only stand there and vomit! I was so utterly helpless. They all said so too, the Death Stalkers and Dominus. They thought I was a pitiful thing, totally useless, pathetic. I did too, I wanted to help them somehow, someway, but I could not even help either of them to go pee! I couldn’t get their panties down, mom. And I couldn’t even help Lindsey walk to the bathroom when she was blinded! See, I am so utterly useless!”

“Yes, that must have been absolutely horrid for you, Ashley, just awful, unable to even do the simplest thing for Lindsey when she desperately needed it. I can understand you fully. Yet, is this the earliest time that you had these feelings, dear?” Lena continued to probe. She was certainly getting an earful.

Ashley thought back on the last year. Suddenly, she brightened up, “No! No, the first time was way back at the beginning of the fall term, right after Dominus began running for President. We were learning the Morph Oneself into Another spell! That’s when it started. I remember now. I changed into Lindsey! There I was looking just like her and I had arms!”

“Ah, I see. What happened there?” Lena asked her daughter, relieved that she had cheered up considerably.

“God! I’ve never used that spell, only casting it to get a pass on Spell Casting! I stood there and had arms, real arms, I could feel things, they were real! Yet, I didn’t know what to *do* with them! I could not cast any spells, I didn’t know how to hold a wand in my hand nor how to use them. I stood there like a total *idiot*. I felt so strange, you know. Here I finally had arms, but found I had no idea how to actually use them. I mean I’ve obviously seen everyone else using their arms, but I never had them and still don’t know how to really use them. This sounds crazy, doesn’t it, mom.”

“Not at all, dear. Suddenly you find you have the arms that you’ve never had as long as you can remember. That must have been quite a shock. It’s kind of like riding horses, I can relate to that. I mean you’ve seen others riding for years and years, but you’ve never even touched a horse. Then all at once you find yourself sitting on a horse and you have no idea what to do. It boils down to a simple matter of education, dear, that’s all,” Lena replied.

She then added, “I have an idea. Why don’t you do your spell thing and experiment with using arms, see if that’s what you really want, kind of get used to having them. I don’t know

anything about this magic stuff. In the world that I know, honestly, there is no way to get new arms, real ones, I mean. Some do have prosthetic limbs, but I don't know anything about that either, and that's probably not what you would want anyway. I will check with the others as see if there is any thing in the magical world that could get you real arms. How's that? We both will do some research."

"Cool, mom. I feel so much better now. I've not told anyone else about how I have been feeling though. The trouble with that spell is that I take on the appearance of the other person. If I morphed into Lindsey or Pam, it would just be *too* embarrassing."

"Well, why not change into one of the other girls from your school, one who is not here with us?" Ashley grinned, she'd not thought of that. Greatly relieved, she headed back to bed.

"I feel so silly, so stupid," Monique explained over the breakfast table. She still wore no makeup yet, her face was still just too sensitive. Monique, now seventeen, was a gorgeous blonde, her straight hair falling to her shoulders. She had deep blue eyes and a well-formed body, all the right curves in the right places. Yes, she was a knock-out. "I ought to have gotten control of myself."

"I don't think you were being silly or stupid," Pam came to her defense immediately, flashing a smile, which prominently displayed the wide gap between her two overly large front teeth. Pam was a rather homily young girl, with short black hair and an oval face which only exacerbated her appearance. Pam, normally very shy and retiring, openly defended her best friend. "After all, you were nearly killed in your own front room and now others are calling you up threatening your life again. There's nothing silly about that!"

"I agree with her, Monique," Lindsey added, tossing her long brown hair back over her ear. It had threatened to fall into her bowl of cereal. "We'd all rather you and your family be safe and secure than have to go to the hospital again or worse."

"They are right, I can feel it," Audrey added her opinion. She was an average looking brunette, short and curly, but with sad looking blue eyes. However, she had an uncanny carving ability, bringing out incredible animals from what appeared to be ordinary blocks of wood.

"Well, I do need to get to the hospital," Henry spoke up. "Lottie, why don't you head to our house and pack up more things that we will need and bring them here. Let the girls do all the unpacking and arranging here on this end. I know that the rest of you are going to have your hands full with all the advance preparations for Tom and Sandy's wedding tomorrow." Everyone agreed and the two teleported back to Greeley.

Fred and Lloyd went over to the Whitewater ranch to help setup the heavy tent and arrange the heavier items. The kids promised to join them after they finished the many chores

around the ranch. Secretly, Lloyd was glad to be relieved of those duties, if only for the summer.

As Ashley was heading outside to see if there was anything she could do to help, Lena said, “Oh, nearly forgot. Ashley, we’ve invited your grandparents to come for the wedding. We thought that they would really love to see you all dolled up in your new fancy dress.” That brought a big smile to the young girl. “Should be here around suppertime.”

During the long afternoon, the girls helped set up chairs and tables for the wedding. They were expecting around fifty guests all told. The chapel area had to be fancied up, including the arrangement of the flowers. A reception would be held immediately afterwards. Polly, Lena, and Luci had already baked a dozen pies, while R. B. had laid in a large stock of drinks and ice cream. This afternoon, Polly baked the wedding cake, while Lena saw to its decoration. The kids were kept busy carrying out plates, silverware, cups, and table cloths. By dinner time, everyone was quite pooped, but all was in readiness for the big day tomorrow. In the morning, last minute arrangements would be needed, but the real work was done.

Supper at the Compton’s was purposely going to be late tonight, so that Ashley’s grandparents, Samson and Bertha could join them, along with Henry, whose shift at the hospital was not over until six. Samson and Bertha arrived about a half hour before dinner. He was now sixty-seven, with short white and very thinning hair, a protruding belly. He’d shaved of his moustache, however. Bertha, a year younger, also had short white hair and a heavily wrinkled face, but Ashley noticed right away that her arthritic hands were giving her more trouble than over the Christmas holidays.

She had them get comfortable in the large living room, all three sitting on the new couch. However, Pam, Audrey, Lindsey, Ellie, and Monique were also chatting with them as well, having been run out of the kitchen for snitching pieces of the turkey off the huge platter. “Dear, we were going through all of your dad’s old things, you know, cleaning house,” Samson explained. “We came across this journal of your fathers. We don’t understand much of it, but we figured you might like to browse through it. Bertha sorted out hundreds of old photos of Joshua and made you this album of memories, well, our memories anyway.”

“Fantastic! Thank you. I have so very few pictures of mom and dad,” Ashley gushed her enthusiasm. Pam and Monique took the journal and began leafing through it, while the others crowded around Ashley, Lindsey flipping the pages, as Bertha gave a running commentary on them. The half hour passed rapidly.

The monotonous voice announced, “Doctor Henry Blackburn is arriving.” Monique and Ellie went to the front door to welcome their dad home at last. “Hi kids, all settled in now?” he asked, smelling of hospital detergents, as he always did when he finally came home each night.

Ellie answered before Monique could, “Oh yes. Mom’s brought all my stuff and Moni’s

too. We are all set. We have your room fixed up pretty good too, dad. Come on and I'll show you." She tugged on his arm.

"Time for that later," Lena called out, "Dinner's ready." She also introduced Ashley's grandparents to Henry, as they all headed for the huge dining room. After a very filling supper, Lena ordered Ashley to take her grandparents into the livingroom and tell them all about her school year. Lena knew that both were keenly interested in hearing about Ashley's adventures. They'd seen them win 1st place at the National Track Meet and had been petrified watching the explosion and aftermath. Lena's call telling them that Ashley was unharmed greatly relieved them. Those three disappeared into the spacious living room.

While the adults relaxed with tea and coffee, the kids began their clean up duties. Tonight, Lindsey took Ashley's place on the tall stool and did the Clean spells, while the others cleared the table and put the clean dishes away. Monique made countless trips back and forth and began overhearing Lena's conversation with her dad.

"Henry, I admit that I know nothing about the world of magic, but it's about Ashley. She really ought to have arms. I'm afraid that she's finally reached that point where she has admitted really wanting them and needing them. I know that Lindsey hands were somehow regrown, an incredible miracle, way beyond my comprehension, but is there anything that can be done for Ashley?"

"We work with potions, Lena. For them to work their miracles, something must remain of the lost appendage. Naturally, I read over Doctor Caterwall's report in the Medical Journal of Colorado, in which he described what he had done. It seems that on the surface, Lindsey had no hands, but in fact, underneath the skin, she had tiny formations of her hands. I believe that he said they were about an eighth of an inch in size. More like a tiny bump. Thus, he was able to get the potions to work their magic. They can also work if someone has just suffered an amputation, as in the second case with her," he explained as simply as he could.

"I admit that I've taken an interest in Ashley. I took the liberty of obtaining a copy of her medical records from Chicago General last December. Based on those records, when she was two and a half, the stumps had not healed properly and the doctor was forced to remove them completely, ball and all, though her lymph nodes remain intact. I examined the after-surgery x-rays and can vouch for her situation. I'm afraid our potions would most likely do nothing for her, since nothing at all remains of either arm. I'm sorry, Lena. Magical medicine also has its limitations too." He seemed sincerely sad about it as well.

"Thanks, Henry. I would be shirking my duties as her mother if I didn't explore all avenues. She's now beginning to really feel the trauma and hardship of a life without them," Lena explained.

Monique relayed what Lena had said about Ashley to the others and what her father's

reply had been. “So that’s what has been bothering Ashley all these months!” Lindsey exclaimed. “I knew something was very wrong. I saw that she had been crying all night once, her pillow was wet as we got up and her eyes were red.”

“When she came, she was so feisty, so, well you know what I mean,” Pam said. “Maybe she had all of that hurt and sense of loss deeply hidden all these years, buried and dormant. After all, she’s been bounced around from foster home to foster home, with no real love in her life.”

“She’s had to be fiercely independent just like I have been,” Audrey added. “Until now, I’ve always had to look out for me, because no one else was. She probably never had the luxury of just relaxing and enjoying life. I’ve never been so happy as I am here, Lindsey. You all are just the greatest!”

“Psychological and physical trauma,” Monique added. “She’s undoubtedly suffered heavily in both areas.” Suddenly, her face flushed. “Kind of like I have,” she admitted. “We must do something to help her. I know what dad is saying about healing potions and that I already knew from potion making class. Say, I remember something from one of my theory classes. Pam, I think that there is some other way to re-grow lost limbs. We’ve got to find it.”

“Well, the dishes are done,” Pam replied, “let’s duck into my room and see what we can find.” The two headed towards Pam’s room, but Monique stopped at her new room instead.

“Here’s all my notes. I used to have them arranged nicely, but that was before the hasty move. Look for Alteration Theory III, it has to be here somewhere,” Monique exclaimed, going through stacks of notebooks. Pam set Ashley’s father’s journal down and began searching through another stack.

“Is this it?” Pam asked. It was. Monique began leafing through the pages of her notebook. Pam marveled at Monique’s perfectly formed letters, she had an eloquent handwriting indeed.

“Ah here it is, Professor Arthur Thornby mentioned this only once in passing. I think in answer to someone’s question. Quote: Another way to heal is by use of a Ring of Regeneration, which also regrows lost appendages, however, such rings are extremely rare and costly. It is a Grade 9 spell that is in operation, I don’t know of any living wizard or witch who can cast the spell. Unquote. That’s it, we need a Ring of Regeneration for Ashley,” Monique proudly stated.

Pam raced to her room and brought her computer back. Both girls began typing away, searching for information on said rings. Monique went in search of how said rings operated, while Pam looked for their availability. “Gosh, MagAmazon lists only one such ring! Guess what they want for it?” Pam said.

“Fifty thousand?” Monique guessed.

“Try four times that! Two hundred thousand dollars! Incredible,” Pam replied. Monique’s eyes rolled.

“What’s two hundred thousand dollars?” the voice of Aunt Wilma broke in on the two. She had just passed their door and was intrigued by such a heady sum.

“Hi, we were looking for ways to get Ashley’s arms re-grown. Doctor Blackburn says that potions will not work, since she’s got nothing of them left and it was so long ago that she lost them. Monique has just found that Professor Arthur mentioned that a Ring of Regeneration would re-grow lost limbs. I found one so far, on MagAmazon, but they want two hundred thousand dollars for it.”

“Yes, they are very rare, Pam,” her aunt replied. “A Grade 9 spell, if I remember right.”

“Yes, I looked that up,” Monique assured her.

“I had forgotten all about that, but now that you have reminded me, I seem to recall that Sam once mentioned that he was going to acquire one for us as a safety measure, back in the days when we were so active. I wonder where Lindsey is at?” Aunt Wilma very nearly spilled the beans on her secret identity to Monique. She hastily wandered off looking for Lindsey.

“What’s she mean?” asked Monique, slightly confused.

“She knew Sam Rabnor when they were at Bradbury’s ages ago, at least a decade ago. I’m surprised she even remembers it. Ah well, I guess we ought to keep our eyes open for such a ring, but at a lower cost.”

“True, that is a whole lot of money for one ring,” Monique agreed. The amount was beyond anything she could imagine.

“Say, let’s look at this journal some more. It’s incredibly interesting, I haven’t deciphered much of it yet. I think it is in some kind of code,” Pam ventured. The two began pouring over the handwritten pages again.

“Ah, there you are,” Fred Betts interrupted them. “I am going to bed early tonight. I’m on security duty at the wedding tomorrow. You two should get some sleep as well.”

“Say dad, we’ve been looking at this journal that belonged to Ashley’s dad, Joshua Stokes. We think a lot of it is in some kind of code, but do you have any idea what this means? It’s at the top of over half of the pages. ORD442.”

Fred, who was half asleep, suddenly perked up. “Let me see that!” Pam handed it to him. “Damn, it must be. Pam, don’t let this out of your sight! That is a secret code used by the

Department of Security! Here, let me at your computer.” Pam got out of the way, both girls looked over his shoulders, however, as he typed away. Suddenly, they saw the home page appear for the Denver Department of Security. He typed in Betts and then entered his invisible password, but Pam already knew what it was, “Pamela.” She smiled, her father had no idea how to make a secure password.

She did not expect to see the page that he next brought up, though. Covert Agent Code Prefixes. He scrolled down the page. “There, Pam, ORD is the prefix of the Chicago based agents. What you have there is a Chicago Department of Security Covert Agent Identifier. Now, let’s see what that leads us to, shall we?” Fred was quite excited, forgetting entirely about sleeping.

Soon the entrance page for the Chicago Department of Security appeared, a moment later Fred entered the site and did a look up on that id number. He did not expect the screen that next appeared! It read: Top Security Clearance Level 9 Required — enter login. “Whoa, this is highly unusual! Level 9 just to view these records? What is going on here?” He re-entered his clearance codes, Pam assumed that her dad must have at least Level 9. After all, he had just been appointed head of the entire High Plains Department of Magical Misuse, she filed away this bit of useful information.

Up came the page, with a picture of Joshua Stokes. “That’s him, dad. Ashley has a photo of him in her locket that Bertha gave her.” Three sets of eyes read the page. “Deep Undercover Agent Joshua Stokes. Current assignment: Investigation of the Simon Mac Fluide Enterprises. Code A1256 reported.”

“What’s that mean, dad?” Pam asked.

“Don’t know,” Fred replied, opening another window and doing a search on his own website for that code. “Ah, Industrial Irregularities that may bring federal criminal charges. It looks like Joshua was a deep undercover agent for the Chicago Department of Security. Look at the rest of it. No final report was ever given by Joshua. It reports the details of his death. See, accidental death. Steel cables broke sending a load of I-beams flying off the semi into his car, just like Ashley says. It shows a picture of the truck driver, John Bell. Accidental Death is listed as the termination cause. Investigation is still pending.”

Pam’s face went white. “Dad, that face! I’ve seen it before! Move over!” Fred, taken by surprise, traded places with his daughter, watching her open a new browser window and hastily entering her new triple secure server in his computer lab. He smiled, knowing that he’d really given her a highly useful Christmas present with that server. Pam pulled up her files on known Death Stalkers and began scrolling the many pictures she had been slowly assembling from every known source that she had come across in her browsing.

“There, dad! I knew I’d seen those eyes before. That truck driver isn’t John Bell, it’s Fenwick Arnold, one of the Death Stalkers who was never apprehended when Dominus was captured fifteen years ago!”

“I bet that was not an accident at all!” Monique finally spoke what she had been feeling all along.

Fred looked at her and his eyes opened wide. “I will bet anything that you are one hundred percent right about that! Ashley’s folks were murdered, a staged accident. Poor thing lost her arms there as well. I guess when they made that log entry so long ago, no one recognized Fenwick. I can see how they could reach the conclusion of accidental death. Perhaps you two should show this to Ashley and her grandparents.” Pam started to dash off to find them and then returned, her father handed her the computer. “Take this with you,” he teased.

“Ashley! Look what your dad’s journal has led us to find! Dad’s been helping me. See this code here at the top of many pages? It’s his Chicago Department of Security Covert Agent Identifier! Your dad was a deep undercover agent! And it wasn’t an accident either. Here, look at the police report and take a good look at the face of the man, who was driving the semi!” Pam barely could stand giving Ashley and her grandparents time to look at the face, before switching windows.

“Now look at this face,” she switched to her image. “That’s Fenwick Arnold, one of the Death Stalkers who was never apprehended! Your mom and dad were murdered by a Death Stalker. That was no traffic accident! He was doing an undercover investigation of the Simon Mac Fluide Enterprises just before he was murdered! I bet this journal will tell us loads of secret information that your dad uncovered!”

Ashley’s face went white. “You mean. . . I’ve no arms because of . . . Mom and dad were murdered. . .”

“Well, we never knew he was a secret agent, did we Bertha?” Samson broke in, adding, “Well, this makes everything make more sense. We never understood how a wizard could possibly have been in such a car accident, what with all the spells we know. Why it seemed utterly impossible.”

Bertha began crying, “Now it makes sense. Joshua was going after very evil men and was killed for it. I know it hurts, but I feel so much better about it now. Joshua was such a good boy.” She wiped her nose on her handkerchief.

By now, everyone in the household had heard the news, crowding around Pam’s computer to see the images and reports. “Oh Ashley!” Lindsey exclaimed and began hugging her sister tightly. They shared an even tighter bond now, Death Stalkers had killed both their fathers, though Ashley bore an even heavier burden from that slaying.

The group chatted over this amazing and startling discovery for a while, before Fred yawned heavily. “We’d better get to bed, gang. Big day tomorrow.” Reluctantly, everyone agreed. As they all began heading for their rooms, Wilma flashed Ashley and Lindsey a signal to stay.

When the three were finally alone, Wilma said softly, “Ashley, we have some news for you. Monique and Pam discovered another way that can be used to give you back your arms. It’s a rare Ring of Regeneration, which Monique and I believe will do the trick. Pam found one on the Net for around two hundred thousand dollars, the spell it holds is a Grade 9 spell.” Ashley’s face went from one of hopefulness to total downcast, she had ten thousand dollars from her mother, barely five percent of what was needed.

“However, Sam Barron acquired a Ring of Regeneration, though Monane and I did not know he had actually gotten it. He spoke of trying to find one on several occasions. Lindsey and I checked her list of items that Sam left her in the Secure Vault in Denver. Good old Sam, he must have found one. Lindsey has just such a ring, Ashley!”

Ashley’s face lit up, her eyes radiated joy. “Wow! Lindsey!” She really didn’t know what to say or how to respond.

Wilma did. “Ashley, this is a very, very heavy decision you must face. You have grown up without arms, learning alternative ways to do things. If you decide to regenerate your arms right now, you will have an awful lot of re-learning to do very quickly. Lena told me a little bit about how terribly hard a time you had when you used the Morph spell and became Lindsey and Cho Lin who have arms. Indeed, you will have a very rough time trying to re-learn all of your spell casting skills, to say nothing of everything else. It may take you many months to get up to the skill level you have right now with your feet. I’m not sure that you would be fully ready by the time you need to go back to school. Please consider carefully this decision. When and if you decide to use this ring, I and Monane will take Lindsey to retrieve the ring from her Secure Vault. As long as we have the ring, Ashley, we can regenerate your arms at any time for you. I would advise that you plan to allow a good deal of time to get adjusted to life with arms, however. I just want you to be very sure that this is something that you really want.”

“I understand, Wilma. I have to confess something to both of you. I’ve been, well, just plain bullheaded and stupid. Here I have been learning all these incredible magical spells and have been totally unwilling to use any of them to help me do the normal things in life. I mean, I can actually cast Levitate like Lindsey does, silently and without my wand. Yet, I still let her cast her spell on my food tray. I could Morph and get some hands to help me dress or any number of other things, but I haven’t. I’ve been really stupid about it all. I’ve had this crazy notion that my spells are only to be used to attack the enemy, never to just help me do things that others normally do in life. You can kick my butt if you like. I’ve been an idiot about it.”

Both smiled along with Ashley, as she sheepishly revealed what Lindsey had suspected

all along. She continued, “I really do see what you mean about needing time to learn and adapt to having arms and hands, Wilma. I’ve Morphed into Lindsey and Cho Lin. There I was with hands and continued to try to pick up Cho Lin’s wand for her with my feet! I’ve never wanted to admit this, but if I did suddenly have arms and hands, I really don’t know how to use them. That sounds silly, doesn’t it?”

“No, dear child, it most certainly does not. I think we are all in agreement that if you want your arms back, you should have them. Only the timing of their regeneration remains the main issue. I certainly would not want you to return to Bradbury’s and not be able to continue with your fourth year courses.”

Lindsey added, “God, no one would want to sit through Professor Janice’s Grade 0 and 1 spell casting class again!” Ashley and Lindsey both giggled.

“Yeh, I need enough time to learn. How long would I need, do you suppose?” Ashley asked the most important question that she needed to have answered. Unfortunately, neither Wilma nor Ashley had an answer.

“Best thing I can think of, Ashley, is why not try Morphing into someone with arms and then experimenting for your self? That way, you might get a real feel for how long it might take you to learn another way of doing everything that you do,” Wilma advised her.

“I should, Wilma. Honestly, that’s the only way I am really going to know if I really want them back and how awful of a time I will have adjusting to them. I do so darn many things you know. I’d have to relearn how to shoot pool, even!” With that decided, the three then headed for bed themselves. For the first time in months, Ashley slept soundly and totally at peace with herself. She could have arms and hands, she could be “normal.” But did she really and truly want that? How long would it take? Would she be forced to give up something in return, like her terrific skill in pool?