

## A LITTLE MAGIC

**F**ive people proved to be far too many to fit inside a wardrobe.

‘Remind me again why we had to bookwander from in here?’ Tilly asked, face squished uncomfortably close to her grandad’s shoulder.

‘As I rather think you know,’ he replied, ‘we don’t *technically* have to bookwander from inside a wardrobe – but it adds effect, don’t you think?’ But he sounded decidedly less sure than when he’d first suggested the idea half an hour ago.

‘I mean, if the effect you’re going for is a much closer relationship with each other and our personal hygiene choices, then, yes, it does add effect,’ Oskar said, voice muffled by Grandma’s scarf, which was



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simultaneously tickling his nose and getting fluff in his mouth every time he spoke.

‘I bet the Pevensies didn’t have to deal with this,’ Tilly said.

‘Yes, but they were emptying straight out the other side of their wardrobe,’ Grandma said. ‘Which does rather give them an advantage.’

‘Yes, yes, okay,’ Grandad admitted. ‘It has become abundantly clear that my attempts at a little poetry and whimsy weren’t entirely thought through.’ He shuffled his way back towards the door and shoved it open. Tilly, her best friend Oskar, her two grandparents and her mother all fell gasping into the cinnamon-scented air of the bookshop.

‘I mean, it isn’t even a wardrobe,’ Oskar complained. ‘It’s a stock cupboard.’

‘Honestly,’ Grandad huffed. ‘I was just trying to add a sense of adventure. Mirror the journey into Narnia, have some fun. Goodness knows we could all do with a generous dollop of fun at the moment. A little magic.’





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‘It’s already literally magic,’ Tilly pointed out.

‘I’m wasted on this family, I truly am,’ Grandad said. ‘Shall we try again from out here? We’ve still got an hour or so before we need to go to the Underlibrary for the Inking Ceremony.’

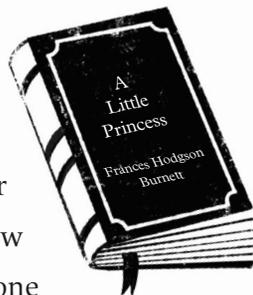
‘Actually, Dad, I think I might pass on this one,’ Tilly’s mum, Bea, said quietly, smoothing down her crumpled clothes. ‘The shop is so busy before Christmas, and I’m sure an extra pair of hands wouldn’t go amiss. You know how it is . . .’ She tailed off, smiled wanly, and headed out to Pages & Co., the bookshop the Pages family lived in and owned. Tilly sagged a little.

‘She hasn’t bookwandered once since we got back from *A Little Princess*,’ Tilly said, trying not to sound petulant.

‘I know, sweetheart, but try not to worry,’ Grandad said. ‘I’m sure she’ll get back into it soon enough. It’s no surprise after being trapped inside one story for nearly twelve years. Imagine how frightening that must have been for her.’ As always, when he thought about his daughter being imprisoned inside

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a tampered-with copy of *A Little Princess*, a look of distress swept across his face. 'But we've got her back for good,' he went on. 'And now that we know Enoch Chalk was the one who trapped her, he won't be able to get away with anything like that ever again.'



'If he's ever found,' Tilly pointed out.

'Did Amelia manage to find out anything about the book he escaped from before she was fired?' Oskar asked.

'Amelia wasn't fired,' Grandad said. 'She was asked to step back from her position as Head Librarian at the Underlibrary, while the situation is investigated properly.'

'I mean, that sounds a lot like getting fired to me,' Oskar said under his breath.

'And, in answer to your question: no, frustratingly not,' Grandma said. 'She barely had any time before the Bookbinders started poisoning the other librarians' views about her capabilities. They'd been looking

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for a reason to get rid of her as soon as she was first given the job, and her handling of Chalk was merely an excuse. Those hardliners, with their silly self-important – not to mention self-appointed – name, blustering around pretending they were focused on anything other than their own power and influence.’ Grandad laid a hand on Grandma’s arm and she took a deep breath. ‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘Now is not the time, and here is not the place.’

‘Should I know who the Bookbinders are?’ Oskar said, and Tilly was glad, not for the first time, that he didn’t mind asking about what he didn’t know.

‘They are a nonsense!’ Grandad said. ‘A group of librarians who push for stricter rules and for more control for the Underlibrary over the lives of bookwanderers. They rallied around Chalk – although they must be red-faced now everyone knows he was a renegade Source character. But embarrassment often pushes people several more steps down the path towards hatred, and I worry that their championing



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of a colleague who proved to be fictional is fuel for their witch hunt for Amelia.'

'A nonsense they may be,' Grandma said. 'But they're bringing an alarming number of librarians over to their ways of thinking. People are worried about how the role of the Underlibrary is evolving, and fear is another thing that pulls people towards hatred.'

'Aren't the librarians worried about where Chalk is?' Oskar said. 'Isn't it dangerous for him to be out there somewhere?'

'I think they're torn between concern about what he is up to, and wanting to sweep it under the carpet so the other Underlibraries don't find out.'

'The other Underlibraries?' Oskar asked. 'In other countries, you mean?'

'Yes,' Grandad said. 'There are Underlibraries in most countries, although not all of them have Source Libraries. But I think that's enough politics for now; we have a long afternoon ahead of us, which will likely be even more draining than an eternal winter ruled over by an evil queen. Let's have something to eat.'





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A lunch of scrambled eggs and sliced avocado on hot buttered bagels passed in tentative silence. Although they initially tried to maintain conversation, Grandma and Grandad were firmly inside their own heads, and a vague sense of impending doom hung over the table. The squeak of knives on plates and the sound of the dishwasher whirring in the background was all that could be heard for some time.

‘Is it really that bad?’ Oskar asked nervously, trying to break the silence. ‘I feel like we’re about to go to a funeral.’

‘Well, it’s certainly a funeral for our dear Amelia’s career,’ Grandad grumped. ‘Not to mention potentially the death of the future of British bookwandering as we know it.’

‘That does sound *quite* bad, then,’ Oskar said.

‘Come now, Archie,’ Grandma said. ‘Leaving aside our personal sadness for Amelia, this is not quite so dramatic as all of that. Bookwandering will continue,



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the British Underlibrary will continue. These things come in waves. You know that there was always going to be pushback against Amelia's approach – those old-fashioned cronies were always angry that someone with more forward-facing ideas got the Librarian job when several of them had been hankering after it. Life will go on as usual, it always does.'

'Until, of course, it doesn't,' Grandad said ominously. Grandma gave him a stern 'not in front of the children' look and he harrumphed, pushing his chair back with a squeal. He sullenly dumped his dirty plate by the sink, and turned to leave – before heading back sheepishly and washing it up carefully without making eye contact with anyone.

Once the rest of the lunch things had been cleared away, and everyone had checked for crumbs on their smart clothes, they traipsed out of Pages & Co., leaving Bea in charge for the afternoon.

'Are you sure you two want to come?' Grandad checked.

'Yes,' Oskar and Tilly chorused, not sure there'd

ever be a bookwandering scenario that they would choose to miss out on.

‘I haven’t explicitly checked with the Underlibrary that you’re allowed,’ he said, as if that thought had just occurred to him. ‘But they’re hardly going to turn you away if you’re already there, are they?’ he concluded, more to himself than anyone else.

‘I know it’s sad for Amelia,’ Tilly said. ‘But I do want to see what happens when a new Librarian is chosen.’

‘You said there was a vote?’ Oskar asked.

‘Yes,’ Grandma said. ‘Anyone who wants to put themselves forward for the position can make their case, and then it’s up to the other librarians to choose who they think is most suited for the role.’

‘So you were voted for?’ Tilly asked her grandad.

‘He won over thirteen other candidates!’ Grandma said proudly.

‘How many are there this time?’ Oskar asked.

‘Only three, I believe,’ Grandma said. ‘It would seem the situation with Chalk has rather cooled some people’s ambitions. Who would want to be in charge



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of that mess? So I believe there's Ebenezer Okparanta – who's worked at the Underlibrary since time began as far as I know, and a woman, Catherine Caraway, who's a bit of a wild card . . .'

'And then there's Melville Underwood,' Grandad said. 'He's an interesting character. Disappeared for decades with his sister, Decima, not long after I started working at the Underlibrary, and no one thought we'd ever see them again. They used to run fairytale tours for bookwanderers, and all sorts can go on in those stories. But he emerged again a couple of weeks ago, completely out of the blue, and without his sister. I'm sure he'll talk about his triumphant return in his speech, but he's a bit untested for the job. I'd put money on them electing Ebenezer. He's the safe bet, and I'm not sure this is the time for surprises.'

