



## *The Fire Within*

*Or the story of:*

—A shopping cart—

—A phoenix—

—& A calendar—

Llangollen Market was usually crowded. Narrow aisles of meats and cheeses and eggs and flour were fairly bursting

with mothers and young children.

“Is *all* tomato sauce on sale?” one mother was asking. “Or is it just Barilla? I *do* fancy some pasta! Oh! Mandy! Would you stop that? That’s not our cart!”

“I was thinking a nice casserole,” said another mother, absently disengaging her toddler from some Doritos. “Does that sound good? Broccoli’s on sale. Perhaps I’ll pick some up.”

Miss Francis hurtled recklessly among them, her cart rattling dangerously close to the harried women and gurgling babies. Insolent creatures! Annoying nitwits! Could they *move*? What *were* they thinking? *She* had no need to compare prices! *She* had no need to scold snotty children and stubborn tots!

“Elizabeth! Would you let go of that? You’ve had enough candy!”

“Mama!”

*She* had no need to scrutinize circulars and nutritional labels! So why should *she* be delayed? Why, without them, her shopping would be the work of moments. After all, she knew exactly what she needed. That is, one can of soup, one bag of rice, one tin of salted sardines, a small block of cheese and some tea, preferably the discount variety. Yes, perhaps her shopping was somewhat mundane, the items varying little week to week. Then again, what did it really matter? She had nobody to please but herself.

“Coming through!” Miss Frances yelled, barreling down the aisle. “Would you *move*?”

As she went, surprised shoppers gaped in her wake. But really, the aggravation! Most of the time, she did her shopping very early, long before mothers and children and bumbling bachelors swarmed the village shop. Today, however, some errands had delayed her. As a result, she had been forced to come now, during the early afternoon. And just look at the result! A line that snaked down the produce aisle and into frozen foods!

She irritably took her space at the very end. As she did so, she brushed past a young couple.

“Did you get the honey?” the anxious mother was asking.

“I thought that *you* did!” her husband replied.

“Where’s Marisa?” Mrs. Anxious asked suddenly, her expression turning alarmed.

“What!” Mr. Anxious shot back. “Didn’t *you* have her?”

“Goodness gracious!” Mrs. Anxious cried. “*Marisa!* Marisa!”

With a sigh, Miss Francis hunkered dourly over her cart. As time ticked by, the line inched forward, her impatience moving with it. And then, quite suddenly, there was a shout.

“Mama!” a little girl yelled, hurtling around the corner. And before Miss Francis could do anything to stop it, the little girl smacked directly into Miss Francis and cart.

“You wretch!” Miss Francis hissed between her teeth, watching the little girl bounce dizzily off

“*Mama!*” Marisa cried again, throwing herself at Mrs. Anxious.

“Could you watch her?” Miss Francis snapped, her temper rising even more.

Mrs. Anxious smiled apologetically. “It was an accident.”

“I should think so!” Miss Francis retorted. Then she scowled at the little girl and stormed away, leaving her cart in the aisle. She would just do her shopping later.

“My goodness!” Mrs. Anxious said, frowning at the departing woman. “What’s *her* problem?”

“Oh! That’s just Miss Francis,” another shopper replied, shrugging. “She’s always like that.”

“But *why?*” Mr. Anxious wanted to know, also frowning at Miss Francis.

“Who knows?” the shopper said mildly. “She’s *always* been that way. No husband. No friends. No family. It’s best to leave her be.”

“You don’t say!” Mr. Anxious harrumphed. Then he and Mrs. Anxious returned to Marisa and their cart.

Approaching the doorway, Miss Francis scowled even deeper. Then she burst across the threshold and onto the street.

Autumn had come to Llangollen, a tiny village tucked deep into the Welsh hillside. Knit sweaters and sensible shoes and red cheeks filled the winding roads. Neon flyers advertised a football contest at a local field. Wooden signs boasted Welsh ice cream, a medley of flavors that included honeycomb and strawberry bliss. Fallen leaves clung to the uneven sidewalks and secondhand bookstore.

Miss Francis noticed little of this. Her routine contained little time for football and idle browsing and ice cream. Her temperament afforded even less. As she bustled down the street, however, something odd caught her eye. It seemed that there was a sale at the thrift shop. Dozens of knickknacks and scarves and yellowed books were heaped occupied an outdoor table. And buried amidst the miscellany was, well, a calendar.

Involuntarily, her feet slowed. It was the sort of thing that a nature society might produce, proudly displaying colorful animals and sweeping landscapes and plunging gorges. But in this case, the creatures and scenery were completely mythical, the animals ranging from unicorns and centaurs to winged monkeys and even a phoenix.

“It’s one of a kind,” the shopkeeper said, walking over. “You seldom see calendars like that,” he said, smiling again.

Miss Francis looked at the man, a wizened thing with brown skin and deep wrinkles and green eyes. “It’s years out of date.”

“It’s a novelty,” the man said.

“It’s useless.”

He laughed. And when he did so, Miss Francis started slightly. For a little man, he had a big laugh. And when he smiled, it lit up his face. What was his name again? She was sure that he had heard it once.

“Well, what about a teapot?” the man asked.

Mr. Jones! That was it. “I do need another teakettle,” Miss Francis mused, taking the little pot in one hand. And now that she looked, price *was* quite reasonable. Within a moment, she had selected the teakettle, a mug and some paperback books. Then she brought everything to the register.

“Will you take the things now?” Mr. Jones asked lightly, carefully placing the teakettle in a cardboard box.

“Could you deliver them?” Miss Francis asked. Her back was hardly what it had once been. Lord knew that her legs and arms would follow next.

“Certainly,” Mr. Jones replied easily. “I’ll send Jamie.” Saying this, he nodded at a blonde schoolboy.

“Very good,” said Miss Francis, digging for her change.

“Where do you live?” Mr. Jones asked.

“Rosehip Cottage.”

He nodded and made a note. “Will there be anything else?” he asked a moment later, looking up. For a moment, just a moment, Miss Francis hesitated. Then she reached for the calendar.

“Just for the novelty,” she said, her words sounding a bit rushed.

Mr. Jones nodded. “Should I put in the bag?”



"I'll take it," Miss Francis said, stopping him before he could.

Mr. Jones nodded again, though now there was a twinkle in his eye. "But of course."

Miss Francis arrived home an hour later. She carefully unpacked the groceries that she had finally bought, having assured herself that Mrs. Anxious and her clan were gone. Then she poured a glass of water and slowly withdrew the yellowed calendar.

"Do you know what this is?" her mother had once asked her, pressing a little pendant into her hand. She had been just a girl of eighteen then, thin, mousy and pale. "It's a phoenix."

"I can see that," Francis had replied, her gaze straight ahead.

In reply, her mother had nodded tiredly. "I want you to have it."

Not without some surprise, Francis had glanced again at the object. It was small enough, a sparkling phoenix made of crystal and a little ruby for the eye. It was suspended on a golden chain. Then she looked away.

"Henry loved phoenixes," Francis said hollowly.

"That's right. And do you know why?"

Francis said nothing. She just stared at the table, the pale checkerboard of winter sunlight. Though it been three weeks since Henry had passed, she had yet to go outside. She wondered whether she would remember what sunlight felt like.

"Do you know why?" her mother tried again.

"Because they burn," said Francis promptly. After all, it was exactly the sort of thing that Henry would have said. He had loved anything and everything that afforded a thrill, whether running or diving or racing or jumping or exploring or climbing.

"Whatever makes my heart race," he had often told her, a grin on his face.

Her reply had always been a frown. "You ought to be careful."

"And *you* ought to *live!*"

"No."

Francis blinked, realizing that her mother was speaking.

"There's more to it than that," Miss Francis said. "Yes, phoenixes *do* burn. But then they always, *always* rise again."

Here and now, Miss Francis rose to get more water. As she did so, she hears a knock at the door.

"Hello!" a voice called.

"Just a minute!" Miss Francis called back, tossing the calendar onto the table. Then she hobbled to the door.

"Are you Mrs. Francis?" Jamie asked when she arrived.

Jamie was just a kid, she saw, a blob of blonde hair, sweet dimples and rosy cheeks. She frowned. "That's *Miss* Francis to you."

Jamie shrugged. "I've got yer things. Where should I put them?"

Miss Francis sighed. "Come in then. I'll show you."

She led him into the kitchen, gesturing toward the table. Even when Jamie had put down the box, however, he stood still and glanced avidly around the room. Noticing this, Miss Francis folded her arms, scowling a bit more. "Do you have enough?" Miss Francis asked presently.

The boy started. "What?"

Miss Francis shrugged, biting back a smile. "I may be a bit *odd*, but I'm no *fool*. You're inside the witch's lair. I'm sure that your friends will be wanting a full report.

Jamie turned crimson.

"Well, what do you think?" Miss Francis asked mildly. "Does it meet expectations?"

The boy turned even redder. "It's—"

"Well?"

"It's a bit *dull*."

Miss Francis gave a bark of laughter. "Ha!" she said, nodding with satisfaction. Her cottage *was* fairly dull. There was no clutter. There was no mess. There was no spilled jam on the kitchen rug. There were no newspaper clippings on the fridge. And there were certainly no skulls and boiling cauldrons. Really, Macbeth would have burned with shame!

"Do you want a cup of tea?" Miss Francis asked suddenly, almost without thinking.

Jamie started again. "A cup of—"

"You heard me," Miss Francis snapped. "Do you want a cup of tea?"

"What kind of tea?" Jamie asked warily.

"Twinings."

The boy blinked. And once again, Miss Francis smiled. "I told you. I may be *odd*, but I'm no fool. Everyone knows that Twinings makes the best tea."

The boy still looked uncertain

Besides," she said, smiling slightly. "It'd be quite a story for your friends."

This seemed to do it. After all, how many boys had had tea with crazy Miss Francis? He would be a legend! Temptation quickly won out.

"Okay," Jamie said, sliding into a wooden chair. As he did so, he nearly sat on the yellowed calendar. When he picked it up, a frown filled his face. "Well, what's the point of this?" Jamie asked.

"What do you mean?" Miss Francis replied absently. At the moment, she was struggling to find a second mug. There *had* to be one somewhere!

"Well, the dates are all wrong. It's from thirty years ago."

"You mean *three* years ago," Miss Francis said automatically. She had seen the cover when she bought it. It was from 2006.

Jamie frowned. "No, I mean *thirty* years ago." And he held up the first page.

Miss Francis blinked. Sure enough, the young boy was right. The page was from April. That is, April of 1979. She sucked her teeth.

“Look at this!” Jamie said, peering closer. “You can even tell what date it was. Whoever had the calendar crossed off the first few weeks. So it *seems* to be—”

“April 12,” Miss Francis said hollowly.

Jamie started. “What! How did you know that? You’re across the room.”

Miss Francis shrugged, finally locating a second mug. “Telepathy.”

“What?” Jamie asked, frowning again.

“Magic.”

Jamie beamed. Now *this* was more like it!

“Do you like stories?” Miss Francis asked suddenly, pouring the hot water into a kettle.

“Oh yes!” Jamie said, beaming even wider.

“Good,” Miss Francis said, nodding. “Because I’ve got one to tell.”

“Do you?” Jamie echoed excitedly. “What’s it about?”

“A young witch.”

“Blimey!” Jamie said, his eyes starting to shine. This was getting better and better. “What could she do?”

Miss Francis shrugged. “Tons of things. Cast spells. Make potions. Fly.” She paused. “Bring things to life.”

“Bring things to life!” Jamie repeated. “What sort of things?”

“You’ll have to see.”

“When does it begin?” Jamie asked.

“April 12, 1979.”

“Although she was a young witch, our witch was quite a powerful one. Perhaps her mother was the one to say it best. At the age of four, she fell into a book and, well, never quite came out. She was always, always reading. And every novel that she read made her powers grow.”

“How? What would she do?”

“Well, she would transfix people,” Miss Francis said. “Any visitor was a potential victim. She would spin stories and fables and tales of faraway lands, using an imagination that was endless like the sea.”

“What!” Jamie exclaimed. “Do you mean that she just told *stories*? Stories aren’t *real* magic!”

“Shhhhh!” Miss Francis said.

Jamie quieted.

“Even when the witch was little, she had a certain dream. She wanted to attend witching school. And not *any* witching school would do. She wanted to attend the greatest school of all, the oldest and

hardest in the land. And so she studied for years and years, spending hours doing sums and figures and essays. There was nothing that mattered more.”

“Oh! How horrid!” Jamie cried. “She must have been miserable.”

“But she *wasn't*,” Miss Francis said, smiling slightly. “And the reason was that she had a partner in crime.”

“Who?” Jamie asked.

“Her brother. Some might have thought it strange. How different they were! Henry wanted to climb mountains. She would rather read about them. But at the end of the day, they were thicker than thieves. They played together. They ate together. They created worlds that nobody knew about. And so the years passed.”

“Until—” Jamie prompted.

“Until it ended.”

“How?”

“Well, it was quite sudden. The young witch had just turned eighteen. It was the dead of winter. Her applications to witching schools were already mailed. She and her mother were reading by the hearth, each lost in their books.”

“What about Henry?” Jamie asked. “Where was *he*?”

“He was meant to be visiting a friend that day. He had originally wanted to do a climb that day, going up a nearby mountain that he had never quite conquered. But when the weather took a turn for the worse, he had said that he would see a friend instead. So the day trickled by.

“At first, nothing seemed to be a miss. But when dinnertime came and went, still without bringing any Henry, the young witch and her mother started to grow worried. They gave the friend a call and lo! They realized that Henry had never seen his mate at all.”

“Did he go to the mountain?” Jamie asked.

Miss Francis nodded. “He certainly had. The mother instantly phoned her friends, organizing them to search the hills. All through the night, they shone torches into the storm and called his name, the young witch going with them. They walked through the snow and wind and ice. But with every hour, their hopes grew dimmer.”

“Why didn't the witch use magic?” Jamie demanded. “If she was so powerful—”

“She tried,” Miss Francis said softly. “But, well, her magic wasn't strong enough.” And that was the truth. After all, no amount of imagination could make the snow stop. No amount of storytelling could bring Henry appear again.

“Did they find him?” Jamie asked.

Miss Francis nodded. “They did. They found him the next day.” She paused. “But the next day was far too late.”

“Do you mean that he was dead?”

“I do.”

“Well, what did her parents do?”

“Her parents offered to help. They went to see the witch. They sat on her bed. They said that they would all get through this. They said that they would get through this together.”

“What did the young witch do?”

“She never said a word.”

Miss Francis took a sip of tea. Jamie did the same, though his face was pale. “What happened on April 12?” he asked curiously.

“Well, April 12 was when the young witch heard from the witching schools that she’d applied to.”

“Did she get into the one that she wanted?”

“She got into four schools. Many of them were brilliant.”

Jamie was persistent. “But did she get into the one that she wanted?”

Miss Francis paused briefly. Then she sighed. “No one knows.”

“What do you mean?” Jamie asked.

“She never opened that letter.” She had sat at the kitchen table. She had stirred her cereal. She stared at the letter. She had fingered the necklace around her neck, the tiny phoenix that her mother had given her.

“Open it,” her mother had said.

“Why bother?” she had replied.

What could witching school really do for her now? She now knew that she would never be powerful enough. She could spin endless stories about faraway lands and magical kingdoms. But what could she do against reality? Not a thing.

“She said hateful things to them,” Miss Francis went on. “She said anything and everything that would hurt her parents. She tried to make her insides outside. She tried to make the whole world into what she felt, cold, lost and afraid. Then she stood up and left.”

“Where did she go?” Jamie asked.

At that moment, the clock struck six o’clock.

“Heavens!” Jamie said, jumping up. “It’s supertime!”

Miss Francis nodded. “Then you’d better go.”

Jamie nodded reluctantly. But when he reached the door, he stopped. “Could I—” He paused for a moment. “Could I, well, come back sometime? To hear the rest?”

At this, Miss Francis smiled. “One o’clock tomorrow.”

And little Jamie scampered away.

When the boy returned, he brought friends.

“Who’s this?” Miss Francis demanded irritably. “I said that *you* could come. I never said anything about an entourage.”

“These are my mates,” Jamie said stubbornly, matching her glare for glare. “This is Danny Striker,” he said, indicating a boy with ginger hair and crooked teeth. “And this is Harry Humphreys,” he said, nodding at a boy with black hair, a protruding collarbone and breath like something had died.

“Can we please stay?” Harry implored.

“You don’t know the first bit,” Miss Francis griped.

“But we do!” Danny protested. “Jamie told us.”

When Miss Francis glanced at Jamie, the boy nodded, looking more stubborn than ever. She sighed. “Well, I haven’t got enough tea.”

“Oh, we don’t mind!” Harry cried instantly. And so Miss Francis nodded grudgingly.

“Very well then. Have a seat.”

“Where do we start today?” Jamie asked eagerly, settling into his chair.

“You tell me,” Miss Francis said, glancing at the calendar. “What does the next page say?”

Jamie flipped it open. “It’s from September.”

“What’s the year?” Mrs. Francis asked. But she already knew.

“1982.”

Miss Francis nodded. “1982 was a few years after she left home. She was traveling the world then, fleeing from place to place, country to country. And then, well, she met someone. It was the sort of romance that you see on television, the kind that happens quite suddenly. There were walks and long trips to the market. There were movies and wine and dancing.”

“Did they get engaged?” Daniel Striker asked.

“They certainly did,” Miss Francis said. “In fact, they moved in together. They got a little house with a sunroom and loads of bookshelves. For the witch, it was like the sun had come out.”

“And *then*—” Jamie prompted.

“And then a familiar feeling returned. It was a feeling of snow and wind and winter weather. It was the sight of the mountain that night. It was the sense that no magic would ever be enough. And so she started to cry. She cried during the night. She cried during the day. She cried rivers of tears. Her fiancé had no idea what to do. He tried to comfort her. He tried to help her. But, well, nothing worked.”

There had been a night on the bathroom floor. As usual, she was dissolved in sobs. The bathroom light shone brightly on the white porcelain and shag rug.

“What is it?” her fiancé had asked, kneeling beside her. “Let me help you.” And he held out his hand.

She had looked at him then. Even through the tears, she had looked at his hand. She had looked at the promise. And then, well, a spark went out. And she had looked away.

“And so she left. Just before daybreak, even while he slept, she packed her bag and left.”

“Where did she go?” Harry asked.

“She traveled more. She traveled for years and years and years. She grew up. She grew old. She saw things and learned things and did things. But she never once did she look back.”

“Did she fall in love again?” Harry wanted to know.

“She never tried.”

“Did she see her parents?” asked Daniel.

“Not once.”

“Did she practice magic?” asked Jamie.

“Never. By then, she was convinced that it was gone forever.”

“*Was* it?” Daniel asked curiously.

“What did it matter?” Miss Francis replied. “She never tried.”

The boys nodded. “So what sorts of adventures did she have?” Jamie asked, his eyes widening a bit.

“Well, she fought dragons in the Himalayas. She swam across Loch Ness and had tea with the legendary beast. She went diving in the Caribbean. She watched lambing in New Zealand. She traveled everywhere and anywhere. And all the while, she never saw a thing.”

The next day was Saturday. The knock came at twelve fifty-nine. As she had expected, Jamie and Harry and Danny stood in front. Behind them, however, she saw the larger figures of Mr. Humphreys and Mrs. Humphreys and Mrs. Striker. And behind *them*, she saw the smiling face of Mr. Jones.

“What are you doing here?” Miss Francis asked in shock

The adults shifted guilty. Then they said as one—“We wanted to hear the next bit.”

Miss Francis sighed. “I’ll put the kettle on.” As she did so, Mrs. Striker set something on the table.

“What’s that?” Miss Francis demanded.

“Twinings,” Mrs. Striker said, sounding almost guilty.

“Why’d you bring that?” Miss Francis asked.

“Danny said that you mightn’t have enough.”

When the tea was brewed, they sat at the table, Mr. Jones dragging a chair from the study.

“Are there enough seats?” Miss Francis asked gruffly. Her kitchen had never held this many people.

Mr. Jones smiled. “If I stand.”

“I wasn’t expecting company,” she said, sounding irritated.

“Nobody was complaining.”

“What’s next?” Danny demanded eagerly, bored with the pleasantries.

Miss Francis glanced at the calendar. “You tell me.”

Jamie opened the calendar, his expression eager.

“Let me guess,” Miss Francis said, taking a sip of tea. “October of 1989.”

“That’s right!” Jamie said.

“What happened then?” Harry Humphreys asked.

“In that year, the witch arrived in a small town. She was done travelling then. She had seen and heard enough. She was tired. So she bought a little house and took her possessions, everything that had ever meant anything to her, to the charity shop. She was starting anew.”

“Did it work?” Danny wanted to know.

“For a bit, it did. She got a job. She built a life. And although she had abandoned some dreams, others had been kept alive. She started to make friends. For the witch, the sun came out again.”

“And *then*—” Jamie said, knowing how this went.

“And then a local woman decided to throw a party. It would be quite the event! Anyone and everyone would be coming. But as the party approached, the old panic returned. Although it was early fall, she was convinced that the snows had come. She felt the icy flakes dusting her skin, icicles clinging to her bedpost. At dawn, she would awake bathed in sweat.”

“Did she tell her friends?” Jamie asked.

“How could she? What would she say? When the day of the party arrived, she refused to go inside. She sat on the back porch, hearing the talking and laughter inside. And when one of her friends came to find her, she just ducked her head.”

“What’s wrong?” her friend had asked, sitting beside her.

At first, Francis had said nothing.

“Just tell me,” her friend had said.

*Still* Francis had said nothing.

Her friend had extended a hand then, nodding at the house. “Stand up. Come inside. Have some punch. Millie’s just made a new batch.”

For a moment, she had looked at the outstretched hand. She had looked at the slender fingers and rings and blue veins. And then she had shaken her head. Instead, she said things. She said vile things. She said hateful things. She made her insides outside. She tried to turn the world into what she felt, cold, scared and lost. Then she had stood up and left.

“What did her friends do?” Harry asked. “What did her friends do after that?”

“They gave up. The witch returned to her house and she closed the gate, seldom opening it for anyone. She built defenses and thorns and briars and gorse. She built a castle of books and locked herself inside. She grew old, so very old. By the town, she was seen less and less. And all the while—”

“What?” Jamie asked breathlessly. “*What?*”

“She never told anyone her secret.”

“And what was her secret?” Mr. Humphreys demanded. He, too, had been lost in the tale. But Miss Francis just shook her head, sealing her lips. “That’s all for today.”

“But what *was* it?” Mrs. Striker echoed. “Come now! Don’t leave us there. What was her secret?”

But Mr. Jones seemed to know. “That she wasn’t a witch at all.”

Following this, a soft silence fell. And when the others were gone, Mr. Jones stayed behind. Although his skin was brown and wrinkled, Miss Francis noticed that his posture was straight. And when he smiled, there was that sparkle in his eye.

“Do you need help with anything?” he asked casually, wandering toward the sink.

Just then, she was washing the mugs and the teapot. So while she washed, he dried. When they were done, she looked at the sink. Then she said impulsively—“I’d like to show you something.”

Without asking any questions, he followed. Miss Francis took him through the garden and the wooden arbor. In a moment, they reached a little shed. And when she opened it, Mr. Jones saw that it was filled with books. He turned around and around admiringly. “This is amazing.”

She nodded. The castle *was* quite amazing. That is, this castle of books. But seeing his admiration of it made it even more amazing.

“Could I borrow some?” Mr. Jones asked.

She nodded again. “I’ve got plenty.”

He smiled. “I can see that.”

“What are you doing tomorrow night?” Miss Francis asked, even more impulsively.

He shrugged. “Nothing much. Looking at the tele.”

“I’m having a bit of a party,” Miss Francis said hurriedly. “You should come.”

“*Are* you?” Mr. Jones asked in surprise.

Miss Francis nodded, now more sure than ever. “That’s right.”

He smiled again. “I’d be happy to. Should I bring anything?”

“Not a thing.”

She went to the store quite early the next day, long before mothers and children and bumbling bachelors swarmed the shop. But today, her shopping cart was *filled* with items, paper cups and bowls and plates and blocks of cheese and fruit and chocolate chunks and little invitations.

Jamie delivered the invitations. Having spent the whole summer working for his grandpa, little Jamie Jones knew nearly everyone in town. And so, in just a few hours, the work was easily done. Returning to Rosehip Cottage, Miss Francis put away the groceries and turned on the stove. She readied the cutting board and vegetables. She opened the packages of biscuits and crackers. She made a cauldron of rainbow punch, making sure to put some plastic spiders and cobwebs around it.

She was working so quickly that she barely noticed anything. But shortly before the part started, two things caught her eye. The first was the calendar. Suddenly filled with curiosity, she quickly walked to it and threw it open.

It was from 2006. Like she had thought the first day, every page was from 2006. Seeing this, she laughed. And then she turned her attention to the second object. Oddly enough, it was



a small box that she had never seen before. How had it gotten there? Was it a mistake? But when she looked closer, she saw that her name was scrawled across the top. With a smile, she recognized the sloping hand of Mr. Jones.

A moment later, she had removed the lid. And when she did so, a tiny pendant fell into her hand. It was a pendant that she knew quite well, a miniature phoenix made of crystal and a little ruby for the eye. Seeing it, she caught her breath. Then, fingers shaking only a little, she fastened the golden chain around her neck.

Years had passed. Some ships had sailed. Some never would. But all of that mattered quite little now. What mattered was that there was soup on the stove. What mattered was today. What mattered was that it would soon be evening. And like a phoenix, she, too, would rise again.