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Linda Buckley-Archer

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CHAPTER ONE

The Birthday Treat

**In which Peter looks forward to his birthday
treat and subsequently argues with his father**

It was early morning on Saturday, the sixteenth of December, the first day of the Christmas holidays. In a large house on the edge of London it was beginning to get light. Peter jumped out of bed and stuck his head underneath the curtains to look outside. The sun glowed behind the houses on the other side of Richmond Green and the cloudless sky was palest blue – not even a wisp of a cloud. ‘Yes!’ exclaimed Peter out loud and flung himself as hard as he could onto the mattress to get a good bounce.

Even torrential rain could not have spoiled a day like this, but crisp sunshine was better. When it was actually Peter’s twelfth birthday, back in September, his father had been delayed in Venice on business and could not get back home in time. He postponed the birthday treat again at half-term because of a business trip to New York and had inked it in his diary for the first day of the Christmas holidays. Nowadays it was mostly like this with his father’s promises. They hung, like mirages, shimmering in the future, and the closer you got to them the more you expected them

to disappear. When his mother had gone over to work in the States for the first time and his father was supposed to be making a special effort, he still managed to turn up at Sports Day *after* Peter's big race. There was always another meeting, another client, another urgent matter demanding his attention.

But today was the day: sledging on the dry ski slope, followed by lunch up in town, followed by a Premiership football match – a whole day with his dad, doing his favourite things! And nothing could stop it happening now. The smell of frying bacon and sausages which was drifting up the stairs confirmed it. You never got cooked breakfasts on ordinary days in the Schock household. Peter snuggled back under his stripy duvet, relishing the moment, and pretended to be asleep when the door opened.

'Wake up, Peter, time to wake up.' Margrit was definitely the best in the long line of au pairs his father had employed since his mother had gone to work in Los Angeles. She was German and made brilliant meatballs. Her w's sounded like v's. 'Peter,' Margrit whispered into his ear. 'I know that you are awake. We go on a journey this morning. You must get up now. Your father must speak to you.'

She tickled Peter until he wriggled and his face cracked into a grin. But when his eyes met hers she was not smiling. She looked uncomfortable.

'What journey?' he demanded. 'What do you mean?'

When Margrit did not answer straight away, he shot out of bed and flew down two flights of stairs to confront his father who was cooking eggs in the kitchen. His father was already dressed in smart clothes chosen to impress. One look at his expression and Peter knew.

'It's not happening, is it?'

'I'm sorry, Peter, I really am. I'll make it up to you, I promise. I've just had a phone call. I have to meet the head of the studios who is flying back to the States this afternoon.'

Peter felt numb. This was not possible. Even his father could not do this to him a third time.

'But the good thing is that Margrit can take you up to spend the weekend on her friends' farm in Derbyshire. We'll do this when you get back. I know how disappointed you must be but you've got to understand ... A lot of people's livelihoods depend on this meeting.'

Father and son stood looking at each other over opposite sides of the kitchen table. All the morning's happiness started to seep out of Peter like a puddle onto the kitchen floor. But when his father walked around the table to put a hand on his shoulder, Peter quickly stepped backwards out of reach. The adrenalin rush of sudden fury made his fingers clench and his heart pound. He did not want to be understanding. He did not want to go and visit some strangers with Margrit. He wanted his father to cancel the meeting. He wanted to hammer his fists against his father's chest and tell him never, ever, ever again to break a promise he had made to him.

'I don't know why you bothered having a kid,' he shouted. 'You never want to do anything with me – I just get in the way!'

'If you're going to be like that, there's nothing I can say,' snapped his father. 'You know I'm here for you as much as I can but someone's got to earn the money to pay for all this ...' He gestured vaguely at the gleaming stainless steel kitchen and Margrit who was polishing Peter's shoes. Margrit looked as if she wished she were somewhere else.

'Wait 'til you're a grown-up with responsibilities. You'd do exactly the same if you were in my place.'

‘No, I wouldn’t! If Mum were here she wouldn’t let you do this to me.’

This was a bad move and Peter knew it. But the words slipped out before he could stop them.

‘Don’t you *dare* take that tone with me.’ His father’s voice had become steely with barely controlled rage. ‘How dare you say that when it’s your mother who’s chosen to work on the other side of the planet.’ He picked up the frying pan and shovelled the now overcooked eggs angrily into the bin. ‘You’ll go with Margrit. End of story. And I’ll think about rescheduling your birthday treat *when* and *if* you stop acting like a spoilt brat.’

Peter hurtled upstairs, unable to cope with the feeling of helplessness, the sense of injustice that surged up inside him. When he reached the first-floor landing he turned round and leaned over the banisters.

‘I hate you!’

And those were the last words that passed between them.

Peter did not notice his father turning on his heels, wincing visibly. He fled into his bedroom, slamming the door so hard that fragments of gloss paint fell onto the carpet. Peter stood at the foot of his bed, kicking and kicking at the wooden leg until it hurt, holding back the tears, listening to the sound of crunching gravel as his father drove his car up the drive. He refused to give in to his impulse to rush to the window and cry: ‘Dad! Come back!’

CHAPTER TWO

Peter Misses an Important Telephone Call

In which Peter makes the acquaintance of
the Dyer family and a hair-raising encounter
with a Van der Graaf generator triggers
an extraordinary chain of events

Margrit had witnessed many arguments between father and son but had never seen Peter this upset. She had grown very fond of him and did her best to cheer him up. Peter scarcely talked during the long journey up to Derbyshire. He stared out of the car window while Margrit sang German folk songs. He was too preoccupied to notice the hedgerows covered with hoar frost or the cows huddling together for warmth, or the rooks cawing from the tops of giant trees, their nests clearly visible against the pale winter sky. Peter played all the games on Margrit's mobile, his thumbs striking the keys so fast and so hard that she had to ask him to stop before he broke it. London was left far behind and by half past eleven a wilder, rugged landscape announced they were drawing near to the Dyer family's farm.

'I am sure you will like the Dyer children,' Margrit told Peter. 'There are six of them – four girls and two boys. You won't be bored this weekend, that's for sure.'

'No,' said Peter, unconvinced.

'And on the way back I'll take you to Lichfield where I have some friends. Doktor Samuel Johnson was born there.'

'Who?'

'You must know of Doktor Johnson! You are English! He lived in seventeen hundred and something, I think. He's the one who wrote the first ... no, I will not tell you. If you find out by yourself I will give you a present.'

'What sort of present?' asked Peter, with a little more enthusiasm.

'Something that Doktor Johnson would approve of ...'

'So not sweets, then.'

'No!'

The Dyers' stone farmhouse, flanked by a barn on one side and an ancient beech tree on the other, stood huddled at the bottom of a long, deep valley criss-crossed with dry stone walls. A small, fast-flowing stream bubbled alongside the road which led to the house.

'It's in the middle of nowhere,' said Peter. 'What a lonely place! It's ages since we went past the last house – let alone shop. What do you do if you've run out of milk or something?'

'I don't think the Dyers ever have to worry about running out of milk!' said Margrit, pointing to some black and white cows in the distance. 'Besides, you can get just as lonely in the city.'

Margrit parked the car next to a mud-splattered Land Rover and Peter got out and stretched his legs, stiff after the long journey. A biting wind whistled through the few, dry leaves that remained clinging to the beech tree that towered above the house. Otherwise all was silent. Peter shivered, and not just because of the cold. This was his first visit to Derbyshire yet the landscape seemed inexplicably familiar. The skin on the back of his neck began to tingle as if an invisible hand had stroked it.

'Are you okay, Peter?'

'Yeah ... I'm fine.'

Margrit reached over to smooth down his shiny, brown hair, which only ever wanted to stand upright in the mornings.

'You need a haircut.'

'No, I don't. I'm growing it,' he replied, messing it up again.

Margrit smiled. 'You're feeling better.'

At the sound of Margrit's car, the whole Dyer family trooped out into the farmyard to greet them. Margrit was delighted to see her friend, Mrs Dyer, and they flung their arms around each other and talked breathlessly in a mixture of English and German, as though they were making up for lost time.

Mr Dyer shook Peter's hand and made him feel welcome. He was a tall, thin man with coarse, red hair and so many freckles they almost joined up. With him were five children who ranged in size from just above Peter's knees to somewhere below his shoulder. The biggest boy was Sam, next came twin girls, Issy and Alice, and then little Sean. The youngest, Milly, her cheeks glowing in the cold, stood unsteadily at Peter's feet, holding on to his cord trousers at the knees. Soon the sixth and eldest of the Dyer tribe arrived.

Kate was a little taller than Peter and wisps of long red hair flew around her face as she bounded, breathless, into the muddy yard closely followed by a Golden Labrador.

'Katie!' Little Milly and Sean ran excitedly towards their big sister and she lifted them both up high into the air before letting them clamber down her legs to the floor. She knocked Sam's woolly hat off before she noticed that the visitors had already arrived.

'Oh, *meine liebchen*, I can't believe how you've grown. You're

nearly grown-up!' exclaimed Margrit when she saw her. She kissed Kate and gave her a big hug.

Kate blushed which caused Peter to smirk. He knew just what it felt like when grown-ups you could scarcely remember insisted on making personal remarks and kissing you. And you weren't supposed to wipe your cheek on your sleeve immediately afterwards, either.

Why, thought Kate, is that boy pulling such a stupid face at me? Her expression changed into a lop-sided frown. Margrit introduced them to each other.

'Hello, Kate,' said Peter.

'Hello,' she replied, warily, taking in his designer jeans and expensive trainers, suddenly conscious of her own muddy ones. 'How long are you here for?'

All the children were very proud and excited about a new-born calf and insisted that Peter should see her. The twins dragged him forcibly across the farmyard. The barn was dark and smelled of warm straw and milk and cow flesh. The black and white heifer was less than three hours old and for a few moments everyone stood in solemn silence, suddenly conscious of the miracle of life. She lay close to her exhausted mother in a pool of weak light cast by a bare electric bulb. She peered at them through long black eyelashes.

'Isn't she the most beautiful calf you've ever seen?' asked Alice.

'It's the first calf I've ever seen,' admitted Peter. 'I mean, I've seen pictures ... but it's not the same ...'

'Mummy's going to call her Einstein,' said Issy, Alice's twin sister.

'What's the mother cow called?' asked Peter.

'Erasmus Darwin,' called out several voices.

'I see,' said Peter, who did not.

'It's a family tradition,' explained Kate. 'Naming cows after scientists and astronomers, I mean.' She pointed towards a young calf in the adjoining stall. 'That's Galileo. She's three weeks old ... Erasmus Darwin was a famous scientist, in case you didn't know ...'

'Yeah, I know,' said Peter, a little too quickly.

It was Kate's turn to smirk.

Little Sean reached out his hand for the calf to suck. Galileo swallowed his chubby arm practically up to the elbow, sucking noisily. He squealed with pleasure.

Peter watched from the edge of the human circle. He wanted to join in but was unsure whether he wanted such close contact with the animal. All of a sudden he felt his arm being pulled towards the calf. It was Kate.

'You're a real townie, aren't you? Don't be scared. It's not as if she's got sharp teeth or anything. Her tongue feels like sandpaper.'

Peter pulled back his hand. 'No, thanks.'

Kate grabbed it again and held his clenched fingers near to the calf's wet nose. Peter looked round at Margrit for moral support. She was laughing! Peter flashed her a furious look. The calf licked his knuckles – her tongue really did feel like sandpaper.

'Kate likes to be in charge,' said Margrit. 'Isn't that right, Sam?'

Sam started to chant, 'Bossy pants, bossy pants, Katie is a bossy pants!' and the little ones started to giggle.

Kate shoved him with her elbow. 'Shut up, Sam.'

'Nobody tells me what to do,' retorted Peter, instantly wishing he had been cool enough just to shrug his shoulders.

'Well, we can all see that,' said Kate, releasing his wrist.

When they stepped back out into the chilly farmyard, blinking in the wintry sunshine, Mr Dyer was getting into the Land Rover.

'Where are you going, Dad? I thought you were going to take us to Dovedale this afternoon.'

'I'll only be gone twenty minutes, nosy. I'll be back in time for lunch. Tim's gone away for the weekend. I promised to adjust the new generator on his blasted anti-gravity machine. I'll never hear the end of it if I forget to do it.'

Kate suddenly turned to Peter, an excited gleam in her eye.

'Have you ever seen a Van der Graaf generator?'

'A what?'

'You'll see.' Kate turned back to her father, 'Can you take Peter and me with you? We could show Peter our party piece ...'

'I don't see why not ... but we musn't be long.'

'Can I bring Molly?' asked Kate.

'As long as you tie her up outside – we'll only be there a couple of minutes anyway. Run along and tell your mother we'll be back in time for lunch, will you?'

Peter got into the back of the old Land Rover and squeezed in between a child's car seat and Molly, who stretched herself out on a red tartan rug covered in golden hairs. There were empty drinks cartons and comics and a bag of animal feed tucked underneath the front seat. Peter thought of his father's spotless car with its leather upholstery and how he wasn't even allowed to suck a sweet in it ... Molly rested her head on her paws and looked up quizzically at Peter. He met the animal's kindly, thoughtful gaze and patted her head. Alone with his thoughts, Peter suddenly felt sad and lonely. Today could have turned out so differently.

If Mr Dyer had checked his rear-view mirror as the Land Rover juddered noisily down the uneven drive, he would have seen his wife running and calling after him, a mobile phone in her hand.

However, he did not, and soon his wife had to give up the chase.

'I'm so sorry,' she panted into the receiver. 'You've just missed Peter but I'm expecting them all back at about one o' clock. Can I take a message?'

'No, I need to speak to him,' replied Peter's father. 'I'm afraid we had a bit of a row this morning. I just wanted to talk to him, put matters right ... I'll try again later.'

The laboratory where Kate's father worked was only a short distance away by car, at the top of the valley set in a small forest of pine trees. An inconspicuous sign at the beginning of the long drive announced: NCRDM – ALL VISISTORS MUST REPORT TO SECURITY. Soon several high-tech buildings, apparently constructed entirely from glass and invisible from the road, came into view. Two security guards waved them through with a smile and a friendly word. They addressed Kate's father as Dr Dyer. What is this place? wondered Peter. What does Kate's dad do?

Dr Dyer parked next to a long, three-storey building surrounded by fir trees. The frosty grass was littered with thousands of pine cones.

'Sit!' commanded Kate. 'Stay! Good dog.' Molly sat down obediently on the grass next to a door labelled: Dr A. Dyer & Dr T. M. Williamson – Department of Cosmology. Kate's father keyed in a security code on a metal number pad and the sleek, electronic door swooshed open. 'Welcome, Dr Dyer,' said a robotic voice.

'Poor Kate wishes she had one of these doors to keep the rabble out of her bedroom,' remarked Dr Dyer, amused at the expression of awe on Peter's face. 'NASA – the American Space Agency – helps fund our research. We might not have discovered anything yet but we have fabulous doors!'

They went into Dr Dyer's laboratory and Kate opened a window so she could keep an eye on Molly outside. There were papers everywhere – stacked on tables, in boxes on the floor, balanced on the windowsills – and there were *four* computers. But what immediately caught Peter's eye were the photographs. On every wall there were beautiful images of a blue earth seen from space, of planets and their moons and distant galaxies like jewels laid out on black velvet ... Mathematical formulae were scrawled in green ink on two large whiteboards. Peter felt Kate nudging his elbow and he turned to look at her. She had a grin on her face and was indicating her father with a nod of her head. Dr Dyer stood lost in thought in front of one of the formulae. He had such a vacant look on his face it made Peter want to laugh. Suddenly Dr Dyer leaned forward, rubbed out something illegible with his forefinger, and scribbled something equally illegible in its place.

Kate cleared her throat.

'Right,' said Dr Dyer, oblivious of being the focus of attention. 'I had better see to Tim's generator before it goes out of my head. There's not a great deal to see but you're welcome to come along.'

Peter and Kate followed Dr Dyer. They went down a long corridor and then descended a steep flight of stairs to the basement. Dr Dyer opened a door and they entered a large, cool room. Down here the windows were above eye level and it felt gloomy compared to the ground floor. Kate and Peter watched as Dr Dyer approached a machine in the centre of the room. It was about the height and width of a man. The base of the machine consisted of a grey, metal cube which displayed a series of digital readouts. Above it there was something that looked like an oversized, streamlined light bulb made of highly polished, silvery metal. Metal brackets fixed it firmly to the base and to the walls of a perspex box which encased it.

'Here it is,' said Dr Dyer. 'Here's Tim's precious machine that's eating half our budget.'

'What is it?' asked Peter.

'It's *supposed* to generate tiny amounts of anti-gravity – which it hasn't yet managed to do ...'

'I think it's lovely,' said Kate. 'It looks like a sculpture, like something you'd see in Tate Modern – a giant, elongated tear ...'

'Mmm ...'

'It sounds like a fridge,' said Peter.

'Well, it is in a way – though not so useful, if you ask me. It's the compressor that you can hear. There's liquid helium in there keeping it at absolute zero. Unless, of course, it's the nuclear generator that's humming but I doubt that ...'

Peter took a step backwards in alarm.

'Shouldn't we be wearing spacesuits or something this close to one of those things?'

Dr Dyer laughed. 'No ... it's encased in a triple layer of lead and steel. In theory a generator like this could run safely for hundreds of years unless you do something stupid like dropping it – but even then it's got an inbuilt fail-safe. It'll only work if it's on the level.'

Dr Dyer then took out a piece of paper from his pocket, peered at it and crouched down to look at one of the digital readouts.

'What does he want me to turn it up to?'

He looked at the paper again.

'Six point seven seven megawatts,' he repeated to himself as he turned a knob and checked the digital display. 'Temperature: minus two hundred and seventy-three centigrade – yes; speed: three thousand rpm – yes; vacuum: one hundred per cent. Good, good. Mission accomplished. Let's go, I'm starving ...'

*

Back in his office, Peter asked Dr Dyer if he was interested in anti-gravity, too.

‘Only indirectly,’ continued Dr Dyer, ‘dark matter is more my line ...’

‘Dark matter?’

‘Dad,’ interrupted Kate, ‘please don’t give him a lecture! You said we could do our party piece!’

Dr Dyer gave Kate a severe look and continued. Kate sighed.

‘People who spend a lot of time looking at space are no longer in any doubt that the stars and the galaxies just don’t move in the way we’d expect. We suspect that something we can’t see and don’t understand is having an effect on the movement of the stars.

‘Imagine, for instance, that it’s the January sales in Oxford Street and you’re walking through huge crowds of people. There’s no way you could walk in a straight line, is there? You’d get pushed and shoved and you’d have to weave in and out to avoid bumping into everyone else. Now just suppose that everyone else suddenly became *invisible*. The heaving masses would still be there, walking along and jostling you, but you couldn’t *see* them. Now imagine that there were some people watching you from the top of a double-decker bus, what would they think?’

‘That I was mad – or drunk, I guess ...’ said Peter.

‘I agree ... but if the people on the bus observed you very closely, and they decided that you were neither mad nor drunk, how would they explain it? Can you see that they could conclude that you were moving in that peculiar way because of some invisible force? In other words they could guess at the existence of the crowd because of the way *you* were reacting to it. Does that make sense?’

‘I think so.’

‘Well, we now believe that, just as the crowds in Oxford Street

would alter how you moved, an invisible, mysterious force is having an affect on the movement of the stars. We think it makes up over ninety per cent of our universe and astronomers call it *dark matter*.'

'Wow,' said Peter. 'What do you think it is? Is it here all around us?' he asked, grabbing fistfuls of air and staring at his empty hands.

'I wish I knew!' laughed Dr Dyer. 'But, believe me, this is the most exciting time to be alive in the history of science. By the time you and Kate are old and wrinkly, we will have discovered truly amazing things. Who knows, you might be part of it!'

A whirring, clicking sound made Peter turn to look at Kate. She was cranking around a handle attached to a shiny metal dome for all she was worth. She paused to catch her breath.

'Do you think that's enough, Dad?'

'Okay, okay, Kate, let's do the Van der Graff thing ... Peter – see what happens when you put your hands on the metal dome.'

Peter walked over and did what he was told. Gingerly, he put his hands on the shiny dome. A moment later he felt a bizarre, prickling sensation in his scalp and he heard Kate screaming with laughter. He reached up to pat his normally floppy, brown hair – it was standing on end! Kate was making so much noise that Molly got up on her hind legs and rested her jaw on the window to see what all the fuss was about.

'My turn!' cried Kate. Dr Dyer took her place and Kate put her palms on the dome. Kate's bright red hair, which reached almost down to her waist, started to float gently upwards. Now Dr Dyer increased his speed. He cranked the handle round so fast that his hands were one big blur. And as the static electricity flowed into her, Kate's hair rose half a metre above her head until it was perfectly vertical. It was as if she had been hung upside down –

except that she was the right way up. Kate made her eyes roll upwards to complete the effect and Peter and her father doubled up with laughter. Molly, on the other hand, did not think this was remotely amusing. She was baring her teeth and growling menacingly. Suddenly she leaped through the open window. In one bound she was in front of the Van der Graaf generator, ready to attack. Kate immediately took one hand off the dome.

'It's all right, Molly, I'm okay ...' With one hand still on the generator, she reached towards the Golden Labrador.

'Don't touch her!' cried Dr Dyer, just too late. The static electricity flowing from the Van der Graaf generator through Kate's fingers set every hair on Molly's golden coat on end. The poor animal whimpered in fright and she shot like a bullet out of the laboratory door into the corridor before anyone could grab hold of her.

'Quick! Don't let her get away,' shouted Dr Dyer. 'Heaven knows what mischief she could find to do in this place ...'

He raced towards the door and in his haste tripped over a box of printer paper. He fell badly and clutched at his knee, wincing in pain. Peter and Kate rushed to help him.

'Don't worry about me – get that dog!'

They tore after Molly, hearing the clatter of her claws as she skidded on the grey lino. As he ran, Peter watched Kate's red hair in front of him, swishing from side to side as if in slow motion, and every so often he caught a glimpse of Molly's solid form accelerating in front of them. He was dimly aware of hurtling along the long corridor and then down the basement stairs and through a half-open door, aware of just trying to keep up with Kate until, from one second to the next, the course of his life changed, and he charged slap bang into ... nothing. The world dissolved for Peter.

All sensation ceased. No pain. No noise. No heat. No great light.
None of the things you might think would accompany such a
momentous event – just an instantaneous, inexplicable, cavernous
NOTHING.