

I Married a Werewolf: Married to the Order

by Kailin

After being temporarily forced out of our flat, Remus and I try to make the best of a bad situation.

A Change of Clothes

Chapter 1 of 6

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Chapter 1: A Change of Clothes

Monday, March 3, 1997

The wind blasted me head on as I emerged from the Tube station. Combined with the steady cold rain, it threatened to make my three-block walk home a miserable experience, and I hoped Remus had a large pot of something simmering away on the stove. Exactly what didn't matter: coffee, tea, soup, I'd need any or all of them by the time I reached the flat. In no time, my thin scrub pants, extending beneath the bottom of my coat, were soaked. I could feel the wet wicking its way down my socks as well, and I mentally added a dry towel to the list of necessities I required. March, it seemed, was determined to come in like a lion, and I sincerely prayed that it followed the old saying and went out like a docile lamb.

As I turned the corner onto Bannister Row, I had to fiddle with the hood of my coat. A particularly strong gust tore it backwards, and I was in the middle of readjusting it when I spotted the flashing emergency lights ahead.

A lot of flashing emergency lights ahead.

I broke into a hurried walk and finally into a run when I realized that the lights were parked extremely close to my flat. From this distance it was impossible to tell if the emergency vehicles were fire trucks, police cars, ambulances, or a combination of all three. I was concerned, and with good cause.

Ever since Christmastime, I'd become increasingly paranoid. First there'd been the uncomfortable encounter with Lucius Malfoy at Madame Malkin's, during which he'd blatantly leered at me from across the crowded shop. The man's unwanted attentions made my flesh crawl, even more so when I learned who he was and to whom he owed his allegiance.

Then, before the holidays ended, Voldemort made his long-anticipated move--with tragic results.

Remus first told me about the wizarding war last summer, one of the many disclosures which resulted in me becoming the Muggle wife of a werewolf. Voldemort's vendetta against Muggles and Muggle-born wizards began with the July murders of Edward and Constance Creevey, the Muggle parents of two Hogwarts students. August brought

a failed attack on another student's family. At once the Order of the Phoenix redoubled its efforts to glean whatever information it could about future attacks in an effort to prevent them.

It was almost as if Voldemort and his group of cold-blooded assassins knew they were under tight scrutiny, for there was no further activity for months on end. Then, on New Year's Eve, a group of Death Eaters stole inside Hermione Granger's home and murdered her parents while she was tied and gagged and made to watch. Despite the dozens of Order ears attuned to pick up any shred of news, it was too late. By the time Dumbledore got wind of the attack plan, it was a *fait accompli*.

The targeting of Hugh and Helena Granger, Remus told me grimly, was most certainly intended to make an enormous impression on the wizarding world. Their daughter's educational accomplishments and raw talent were well known to anyone with present ties to Hogwarts. For five years, Muggle-born Hermione had easily bested the young pure-blood witches and wizards in all her classes, something that was a continuous thorn in the side of many in Voldemort's circle. And that circle included Lucius Malfoy, who for years had been openly aggrieved that his son Draco was continually outshone by a 'Mudblood'. It was Remus' opinion that Malfoy himself was probably the one pushing for the attack on the Grangers. What better symbol of Voldemort's agenda than to destroy the Muggle family of the brightest witch to come along in a generation?

Hermione's loss saddened me enormously--partly because I'd lost my own parents in an accident ten years earlier and I understood the sheer pain of it, but also because I'd gotten to know her rather well during my engagement to Remus last summer. Almost immediately, Molly and Arthur Weasley volunteered to serve as Hermione's guardians, since the girl's remaining relatives were few and distant. I tentatively suggested to Remus that we might host her at some point during school breaks as well, and he readily agreed.

Then one night it occurred to me: Remus was a wizard married to a Muggle. I could easily be a target myself. My husband was dubious.

"I'm not saying it's outside the realm of possibility," Remus admitted, "but it's just not likely. Death Eaters generally don't care to sully their hands with us half-breeds. That alone probably offers you some protection."

I hated the obnoxious wizarding laws that proclaimed werewolves as 'half-humans', but he had a point. This was one time when prejudice just might work in our favor. I decided to trust Remus' intuition in this matter and deliberately pushed any concerns out of the forefront of my mind. I don't like living in constant fear, starting at every noise and jumping at every shadow.

But now, seeing fire trucks blocking the street ahead, I feared that Remus' confidence was misplaced. I sprinted the last stretch as fast as I could, totally oblivious to the wind and rain.

I arrived at the jumble of trucks, hoses and firemen, out of breath, my heart thudding painfully in my chest. It was our building drawing all the attention, but I couldn't spot any flames. Remus. Where was Remus?

Almost instantly, I heard him calling my name and looked around to see him hurrying toward me. I threw myself gratefully into his arms.

"Kailin!" He held me tight. "What a way to find out! I'm so sorry... I called you at work, but you'd already left. And I tried your mobile phone, but you didn't answer--"

"What happened?" I gasped. "Was it Voldemort? Were we attacked?"

He chuckled softly in my ear.

"Nothing that dramatic, dearest. I'm afraid the downstairs neighbors had a bit of a grease fire, and it went out of control."

I sagged against him, utterly relieved. "Then our flat is all right?" I asked hopefully. I could see now that the first floor windows had been broken out, while ours on the second story were intact.

"I don't know," Remus admitted. "I've been waiting for the firemen to tell me."

All I'd wanted was a hot meal and a hot bath, and now I'd get neither. I joined my husband in staring at the flat and hoping for the best.

Ever since graduating from college, I had avoided putting down roots. It wasn't a question of money, because my income was enough to afford me a nicely furnished place to live.

I simply wasn't interested. My parents were recently deceased, and I still felt the loss keenly. Not only had I lost a mother and father, I'd lost my childhood home as well. No amount of fancy decorating could turn my boxy little apartment into a home. Besides, I worked long hours at my nursing job. The apartment was nothing more than a place to crash.

Then I began working for a traveling nurse agency. I was sent all over the country, which automatically meant short-term stays at residence hotels. I was further than ever from having a real home.

My marriage to Remus marked the first time I had enthusiastically thrown myself into feathering a nest. I was, however, determined to furnish our home nicely and without spending a lot of money. Given the fact that Remus had lived in near-poverty for so long, it seemed totally inappropriate to go on a thoughtless spending spree. I bought things like linens and kitchen items new, then visited flea markets and furniture consignment stores to find the rest. The two of us had a positively delightful time choosing our furnishings, and while they were neither numerous nor costly, they were certainly precious to us. As I stared up at the darkened windows of our home, tears slid down my cheeks, mingling with the water dripping from my sodden hair.

"Kailin..." Remus pulled me tighter. "It'll be all right, darling."

"Would the missus like to sit down in my parlor?" a voice called.

I turned to find the elderly gentleman who lived directly across the street from us, standing on his stoop. We'd done no more than exchange pleasantries on occasion, yet I decided that right now he was my best friend in the whole world. Remus answered for me.

"Yes, please. That's very kind of you." My husband put a firm arm around my shoulders and steered me across the minefield of fire hoses and up the front steps of the man's flat.

"Bit of a shock, I should think," the man said, leading the way into the house. "Coming down the street and finding your home gone."

"We don't know that," Remus put in hastily. "I'm sure there's damage, but we don't know how much yet. The fire was below us, not directly in our flat. Do you have a blanket or a towel? I hate to drip all over your house..."

"Course I do. Wait right there."

The man shuffled away and returned shortly with both blankets and towels. "Name's Donald Mackey," he said. "Seen you often, but never introduced myself."

"Remus Lupin." My husband shook his hand. "And my wife, Kailin."

"How do." Mr. Mackey nodded in my direction. "Can I get you both a spot of tea?"

"That would be wonderful," I said gratefully. "But I hate to inconvenience you, Mr. Mackey."

"No inconvenience at all. I was just going to make some for myself." He shuffled off to the kitchen, leaving Remus and me to dry off. We stood in the small entrance hall, mopping up ourselves as best we could.

"I thought I smelled smoke," Remus told me as he wiped off his face. "But nothing more than a whiff, you know. Then all of a sudden I heard the sirens, and the fire trucks pulled up and they started making everyone evacuate the premises."

A thought struck me. I stopped blotting my hair and stared at him, wide-eyed. The last full moon had been only two days ago...

"What if this had happened at night during the full moon? Or afterwards when you're sleeping? You sleep so soundly, you might never have heard the sirens--" I broke off, unable to finish the thought. The loss of a few household belongings suddenly dropped a few notches on the list of Things That Mattered.

"But it didn't," Remus reminded me quietly, holding my eyes steady with his own, urging me back to calmness.

I took a deep breath and nodded. We continued our drying off in silence, then placing the folded blankets underneath us, took seats in the elderly gentleman's parlor. A television blared noisily at us; a silly game show was in progress.

"I think he must be hard of hearing," Remus said in my ear.

"No kidding. Do you suppose he'd mind if I turned it down?" The question was mere formality. I was already out of my chair, looking for the appropriate dial (it was an old television set) to adjust the volume.

It took several more minutes for Mr. Mackey to appear with the tea tray. Remus spent the time staring out the window towards our home while I nervously fingered my towel and stared unseeingly at the TV.

"Here we go," he called cheerfully as he tottered into the room. "This'll warm you up a bit."

Remus sprang from his seat to take the precariously tilting tray from the man. "Here, let me help."

"Thank you for that, young man. I'm not as steady as I used to be." He gestured toward the coffee table. "Just set it down right there."

Remus did as he was instructed. Mr. Mackey manned the teapot and began to pour, politely inquiring about our preferences for milk or sugar. Soon we were sipping hot tea, feeling the warmth drive out the lingering chills and grateful for it. Remus reprised his story of the fire, then our host began to talk at great length about his dearly departed wife. I didn't know if it was Mr. Mackey's way of distracting us from our woes, or if he was simply glad to have a captive audience for his tales. In any event, I soon began to feel human again, and I stopped listening and started wondering when I'd be able to get into some dry clothes.

I'd just reached the bottom of the cup of tea when there was a knock at the door. It was the fire chief, looking for Remus. Remus stood at once and introduced me.

"Sorry 'bout meeting under these circumstances, ma'am," the fireman said, tipping his hat in my direction.

"Our flat?" I asked, cutting through the formalities at once.

"You're the second story, right? Could have been lots worse. There's smoke damage, of course, but little damage from the water. Lucky you live above and not below. Main problem is that the fire damaged the downstairs kitchen ceiling, which is your kitchen floor. Good chance it would collapse if you walked on it. It's quite unsafe, I'm afraid."

"So we can't go home," I said miserably, and the fire chief chuckled.

"Not unless you want to create a shortcut to the lower level. We'll be letting your landlord know 'bout the damage. I suspect you'll be out for several weeks, longer for the first floor folks."

"But our clothes--" I sputtered, knowing it was useless to protest.

"Best buy a few odds and ends to get you through, ma'am. Be a bit like camping out, but at least you'll have your home back in the end."

I'm not a clothes horse, but I do like to have a change of underwear at regular intervals. I was miserably contemplating the reality of our current situation when I noticed Remus winking at me over the fire chief's shoulder. When the man departed, Remus sidled up to whisper in my ear.

"I'll Apparate into the bedroom after dark and pack us a bag."

Momentary relief flooded over me, then faded.

"And we'll be staying where, exactly?" I whispered back.

"Well, that's not such bad news," Mr. Mackey broke in, reappearing with a plate of cookies. "Biscuits?"

We spent several minutes politely nibbling on stale cookies, then Remus thanked the man for his kindness and announced that we would need to find a place to stay. A flash of consternation crossed the old man's face, as though he thought we might now be expecting him to offer lodging. When we said our good-byes, I thought he looked a bit relieved that his hospitality hadn't backfired on him.

"Where are we going?" I asked Remus curiously as we headed back outside into the cold, damp twilight.

"It's only temporary," he said, and suddenly I knew.

"We're not." I closed my eyes briefly.

"It's there, Kailin. We may as well use it."

I sighed. I really had no choice.

We were going to stay at number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

* * *

I hate number twelve for a variety of reasons. First of all, it's invisible, and I find it hard to grow attached to someplace I can't see. The fact that it's cavernous and spooky and reeks of dark magic isn't very endearing, either. The house is deserted, except for the times when the Order holds its meetings there. It's also the place where I found out that Remus was a werewolf, a night that churned up a wave of despair and caused me to evaluate what in life was truly important. Even Remus isn't fond of the old house. For him, it conjures memories of Sirius Black and reinforces the fact that his good friend is dead and gone.

We had to take the Tube and one bus in order to get to Grimmauld Place. Along the way, we stopped to pick up some fish and chips for dinner. The cold rain hadn't yet abated, and as a result, we were hungry, cold and tired by the time we arrived.

The house wasn't any more inviting than usual, but it did have the advantage of being dry. We took care to tiptoe past the portrait of Mrs. Black; after the past few hours,

the last thing either of us wanted was to deal with a screaming maniac. Remus deposited me in the kitchen while he went about the house turning on the gas lights. It took all my nerve to stay alone in that kitchen, listening to the house creak and groan, trying to reassure myself that this was nothing more than an old, empty building. I nearly jumped out of my skin when Remus reappeared.

"That's it, then," he said, and waved his wand briefly: two bathrobes materialized out of thin air. "Let's get out of these wet clothes and then we can enjoy our meal. I'll use a drying charm on them later."

By this time I felt permanently clammy. My scrub pants were glued to my legs, and my shoes were sodden lumps of leather. I knew that Number Twelve had functioning plumbing, and I prayed that hot water was a real possibility. Right now I would give my eye teeth for a long soak in the tub.

"I don't suppose you could whip up a towel for my hair, could you?" I asked, half-joking.

Seconds later I had the towel in my hands. I love being married to a wizard.

Remus was the first one out of his clothes and into the bathrobe. Putting the two of us together in a room, disrobing, normally doesn't lead to a dinner of cold fish and chips. But these were special circumstances, and before long both of us were wrapped in dry terrycloth and ready to eat. Remus placed a heating charm on the food and we dug in.

"Not the dinner I had in mind," he said ruefully. "I was planning on a nice meatloaf for supper."

"It's not the worst meal I've ever had." I sighed aloud. "I'm just glad you're alive and that we didn't lose everything."

"Do you intend to go in to work tomorrow?"

"No. I think we need a day to regroup. I'll call in as soon as--" I broke off. No telephone had ever graced the rooms of number twelve. "Well, I've got my cell phone in my purse. I'll call after supper."

Funny thing I learned that night: cell phones don't work very well in an extremely magical environment. I had to go outside to place the call. This meant, of course, that Remus needed to accompany me, since I couldn't get back inside without him. And so we stood in a cold drizzle once again, while I called the hospital to let them know I'd be taking tomorrow off. Fortunately, the call didn't take long, and as a result, we didn't get terribly wet this time.

"I'll Apparate to the flat," Remus told me after he saw me back inside the house. "See what I can get out of the closet. I'll bring back as much as I can. Is there anything in particular that you want?"

"Can I come with you?" I asked hopefully. I didn't give a snowball's chance in hell of Remus returning with the right combination of scrubs, casual clothes and underwear, not to mention toiletries and makeup. Besides, I wasn't happy about being left in this house alone.

Remus shook his head. "It wouldn't be safe, Kailin. We don't know for sure that it's safe for even one person in there, and I'd rather it be me if anyone has to find out the hard way."

He had a point. Remus could likely levitate himself or something if the floor started to give way. Still...

"I won't be gone long," he reassured me. "There's nothing here that can hurt you. The house was cleaned out, remember?"

"I know." I scowled. "It still gives me the creeps. I don't suppose I could wait outside for you?"

Remus laughed. "You've only just dried out. Anyway, you've seen the neighborhood around here. It's more dangerous outside than in."

Except that the dangers outside were familiar to me. I nodded reluctantly.

"I'd love a hot bath. Any chance you could fire up the hot water heater?"

"Good idea. Just save some hot water for me, will you?"

I grinned. "What's it worth to you?"

"At this point, quite a bit." Remus headed off at once to light a fire under the hot water heater while I bagged what was left of supper to go in the trash.

"How long until the water's hot enough, do you think?" I asked when he returned.

"I put a spell on the water itself, so it's already hot," he told me, reaching for his coat.

I threw my arms around him at once. "I knew there was a good reason I married you," I said irreverently.

Remus burst out laughing. "And all this time I thought it was for my fortune," he teased, kissing me goodbye.

I gave him an unnecessary plea to be careful, then ran lightly up the stairs. Without preamble, I headed straight into the bathroom, opened the taps, and five minutes later was gratefully sinking into the depths of the tub. Whether it was Remus' work or the bewitched workings of the taps, the hot water was liberally laced with perfumed bubbles, and I was able to relax for a while and forget that I'd been forced out of my nice home into this bizarre place.

I was to the point of contemplating getting out and drying off when I heard the front door open. Good, I thought; Remus was back in one piece and sooner than I'd anticipated.

I climbed out of the tub and was in the midst of vigorously toweling dry when I realized that Remus hadn't announced his presence. *What if, I thought with a sudden chill, it's not Remus?* I threw on the conjured bathrobe, painfully aware that conjured items don't last forever, and thinking that I might be opening the door to God-knows-who just about the time the robe vanished into thin air. My mouth was dry as I inched over to the door.

I heard footsteps coming up the stairs, footsteps that sounded very much like they were made by someone other than my husband.

I backed silently away from the door. The prudent thing to do would be to stay right here until Remus returned. But the last thing I wanted was to be trapped in this room with nowhere to run. And this tiled sanctuary held absolutely nothing in the way of weaponry. I scanned the room frantically, finding nothing more menacing than an ancient long-handled bath brush. It would be no defense whatsoever against anyone who might be creeping around number twelve. Still, I felt the need to have a something in my hand, useless or not.

I crept back to the door, listening hard. If the visitor wasn't Remus, perhaps he or she had gone up to the next floor, bypassing me entirely. But no: I heard a floorboard creak somewhere down the hall. My heart pounding, I summoned my courage and opened the door a crack, bath brush at the ready.

I had only the briefest glimpse of a man's figure spinning my way.

"*Expelliarmus!*"

There was a brief flash of light. I shrieked and toppled backwards against the wall as the bath brush flew out of my hand and clattered to the floor. An instant later, I realized I was staring straight into Mad-Eye Moody's determined, contorted face.

I was not surprised at all to discover that my legs would no longer support me. I sank to the floor, gasping for air as waves of relief and excess adrenaline washed over me.

"Oh. Sorry, girlie," Moody grunted. He pocketed his wand at once, walked into the room and extended a hand to help me up.

I really wanted to just sit there for a few moments until I stopped shaking, but instead accepted his offer to help me to my feet.

"God in heaven, Mad-Eye, did you have to scare the daylights out of me like that?" I croaked.

"How'd I know you weren't a Death Eater?" he demanded irately. "An' what're you doing here, anyway? House is lit up like a Christmas tree. Where's Lupin?"

I explained briefly about the fire at the flat. Moody snorted and turned back into the hall.

"Could be an attack," he said bluntly. "I'm surprised you didn't contact the Order."

"It was just a grease fire," I assured him. "And it wasn't even in our flat."

"That's just what they'd want you to think."

I was about to point out that if Death Eaters were truly interested in attacking, they'd start a fire in our flat and not on the floor below it, when I realized that Moody was picking up a duffel bag.

"What are you doing here?" I asked curiously.

"Overheard a couple of 'em planning a meeting," he said. "They spotted me, an' I thought I'd best lay up here for a while in case they got ideas."

Could Death Eaters have followed him here? I was on the verge of genuine concern when I remembered that Moody had a history of seeing danger where none existed. According to Remus, discerning the genuine threats from Mad-Eye's imaginary ones could keep a witch or wizard busy full-time.

"If I were you," Moody continued, his back to me, "I'd find your clothes. That robe's beginning to go a tad transparent, girl..."

I remembered Mad-Eye's magical eye at the same time I felt the robe start to dissipate, and I hurled the bathroom door shut. By the time Remus returned ten minutes later, I was fully dressed in my now-dry scrubs and waiting in the kitchen.

"Thought you'd still be soaking in the tub," he said, heaving my large suitcase onto the table.

I explained about Mad-Eye's presence while I inspected the bag's contents. There seemed to be, thank goodness, enough of the things I needed instead of the mismatches I'd feared. Except there were...

"No pajamas?" I looked at my husband questioningly.

"Oh. Sorry." Remus looked blank for a moment, then smiled mischievously. "Not really necessary though, are they?"

"Creep," I muttered, sliding my arms around his waist and cozying up to his chest.

"Mmmm," Remus mumbled into my hair as he pulled me close. "You're nice and warm. It's devilishly nasty out there tonight."

"Go take a bath," I said, releasing him. "It feels fabulous. Where's your bag?"

"In the hall. I'll take the two upstairs and say hello to Mad-Eye, and then it's definitely my turn for the tub. You get ready for bed."

"That won't take long," I pointed out sarcastically, and Remus shot me a wickedly suggestive smile as he headed out of the room.

The enormous bedroom we chose was evidently number twelve's master suite. While Remus soaked in the tub, I made up the massive, ornate bed with sheets and blankets that I found in the closet. I knew I should be grateful that we had a warm, dry place to stay, and free of charge at that. But it wasn't home, and I felt sure that the next few weeks would feel like one long, enforced exile. I would take our plain little flat any day over the decaying opulence of this house.

Fifteen minutes later, Remus extinguished the gaslights and crawled under the covers next to me. He smelled of the same scented bubbles that I'd enjoyed earlier, and I inhaled deeply.

"You smell good," I murmured. "Enjoy the bath?"

"A hot bath on a cold night has to be one of life's finer pleasures. I think I'll live."

I heard the sound of Mad-Eye Moody stumping down the hall and past our door to the next one. The door opened briefly, squeaked shut. Everyone was evidently turning in for the night.

"Remus..."

"Hmm?"

"How in the world does a magical eye work?"

"Magic," Remus mumbled in my ear.

Ask a silly question, get a silly answer. "But it's so bizarre. He can actually see out the back of his head?"

There was a soft chuckle in the dark. "Effective deterrent to any misbehavior, isn't it?"

"Is it true that he can see through walls?"

"Yes, although he has to do it purposefully. It would drive you crazy if you saw that way all the time."

"Makes sense." My questions answered, I closed my eyes and snuggled closer to my husband for warmth. I didn't think any more about Mad-Eye Moody, but evidently Remus did. We were in the heat of passion when, quite suddenly, he groaned aloud in frustration and rolled onto his back.

"What's wrong?" I was startled by the abrupt change in direction.

"I can't do it," he said miserably. "I keep thinking of Moody. He's right next door, for Merlin's sake. I'm sure he's not deliberately looking through the bloody wall, but--I mean--what if he was?"

I wanted to laugh, but quickly thought better of it. I've learned over the years that laughter, no matter how appropriate, is never a good idea whenever the fragile male ego hangs in the balance.

"It's okay." I tried to be reassuring.

"Sorry. This is silly, I know." Remus closed his eyes and massaged the bridge of his nose.

"It's all right. It's been a long day. We're both exhausted."

"True." There was a long pause and then, "How long did you say he's staying?"

"He didn't specify exactly. He just said 'a while'."

"Oh." The unhappy note in Remus' voice was hard to miss.

"We could move to another room," I said, reaching to throw back the covers.

Remus caught my hand and held it. "Tomorrow," he said regretfully. "Let's get some sleep."

Settling In

Chapter 2 of 6

After being temporarily forced out of our flat, Remus and I try to make the best of a bad situation.

Chapter 2: Settling In

Saturday, March 8

"Happy weekend," I said, pulling up a chair to the kitchen table. "Sleep all right?"

"Like the proverbial log. You?" Remus turned from the stove to hand me a plate laden with a couple of eggs and a slab of ham.

"Me, too. Didn't I hear you up and about awful early, though?"

"That would be Mad-Eye. He was up at the crack of dawn. Left the house before I even got to the shower."

"He went home?" I asked hopefully.

"No," Remus said flatly, turning off the gas burners before bringing his own plate over to the table. "He said he was going off for his 'morning constitutional'. In other words, he's making the rounds of his sources."

"You mean he's actually missing a meal?" I joked.

Remus snorted at this. Alastor Moody, who was apparently no closer to moving back home now than the day he'd arrived, had made a habit of helping himself to our food all week. He also seemed to think that fate was downright kind by providing a couple of cooks for his stay.

Then there was the intimacy issue. In the five days we'd been at Grimmauld Place, Remus and I had yet to complete marital relations successfully. My husband was not taking it well. By his own admission, he'd had nothing resembling an active sex life until meeting me ("Werewolves aren't the hottest dates in town, Kailin."), and to have it thwarted by the presence of Mad-Eye Moody in the same house was a particularly low blow.

It was, I admit, partially my fault. The day after we moved in, Remus and I relocated our sleeping quarters to a bedroom farther from where Mad-Eye slept. Things went smoothly when we climbed into bed that night: he kissed me tenderly, and I responded with a flare of passion. Then a fit of coughing from down the hall reminded us that we weren't alone at number twelve. I remembered the previous night's fiasco and did the worst thing possible, the thing I had sworn not to do: I started giggling. I couldn't help it. The thought of the wildly colorful ex-Auror watching the antics on our side of the bedroom wall with the help of his magical eye was simply too much to contemplate.

And since then, any attempt to have sex under the roof at number twelve had met with the same ridiculous results. In short, we would both be relieved when Moody finally left.

"I thought I'd contact Mr. Najib today," Remus said now. "See how repairs are progressing at the flat."

"Good idea. I wouldn't get your hopes up, though." I suspected that my husband had little experience with Muggle construction projects. Everything I've ever heard about them is that the time required for completion invariably runs over the original estimate, not to mention what happens to the costs. At least we didn't have to pay to have the flat repaired.

"Well, for your sake, I hope we're home before the next full moon."

"Me? Why me?" I asked blankly.

"Think, dear heart. If I'm incapacitated, how will you get in and out of this house?"

My jaw dropped as I contemplated this unhappy bit of reality. Without Remus, I was unable to so much as see number twelve, let alone get inside the place. The thought sent me racing immediately for my purse. I returned to the kitchen moments later, digging around in my bag until I produced the small calendar I carried with me.

"Let's see," I said, running my finger down the page for March. "The next full moon is on the--"

"--twenty-ninth, yes, I know. If we're not home by then, you'll need to make other arrangements for that night."

I sighed. The twenty-ninth was a work night. But, I told myself, that might not be so bad. If I had to stay at a hotel, I could at least find one that was close to my job. Number twelve, while being a free refuge, had the distinct disadvantage of being a long way from the London Heart Hospital. We'd chosen our flat because it was near the Tube

and made for an easy commute, plus it was also in a nice neighborhood. Grimmauld Place was neither. It took a good forty minutes longer to get to and from work now, a waste of time both before work, when I was keen on grabbing a few more minutes' sleep, and after work, when I was bone weary and wanted to crash and burn at the earliest opportunity.

"Say," I said, still looking at the calendar, "our monthly anniversary is coming up soon."

"Oh?" Remus grinned. "What do you have in mind for this month?"

"I don't know. I'll have to think about it." I know that it's one of those goofy newlywed things, but every month since our wedding I had celebrated the anniversary by cooking a romantic meal. One month I'd done Italian, another Chinese, but always something different. It had developed into a fine tradition.

"Why don't we eat out this time?" he suggested. "You don't want to deal with that on top of everything else."

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I'm sure I'll be able to come up with something. I just want to keep everything as normal as possible."

I would have to start planning now. My primary concern was not the menu, but the monstrous oven that sat behind me. It was a ghastly thing that belched fire every time I tried to light it. It's not even a case of the stove being magical versus Muggle. The oven was purely temperamental and more than a little evil. I'd burned a pot and singed a few arm hairs during the past week, with the result that Remus was now doing most of the cooking.

"What about Mad-Eye?" he reminded me. "Are you going to invite him?"

"Hell will freeze," I said loftily. I had no intention of entertaining a third party at our anniversary dinner.

"We've got what, another week?" Remus mused. "Well, if he's not gone by then, I'll tell him flat out to get lost that night."

I dug into my eggs and ham. "What say we get out of this house today?"

"Absolutely. Did you have something in mind?"

"I wouldn't mind a bit of shopping. I could use a few odds and ends: toiletries, a couple pairs of socks." Despite Remus' best intentions, I didn't have enough of what I needed to get by during our exile.

"Might as well buy a pair of pajamas while you're at it," Remus grunted sourly.

"You know that we'll laugh about this someday," I reminded him, grinning.

"Promise?"

The weather was sunny but cold, almost a mockery of the fact that spring was only two weeks away. Still, our day turned out quite enjoyable. We shopped for essentials, had a lovely lunch, then made the rounds of a few antique stores.

When we arrived back at Grimmauld Place, I put my purchases away, save for one: an oversized sweatshirt, adorned with a picture of two handsome timber wolves, that had caught my eye. Ordinarily I wouldn't have looked twice at it, let alone bought it. But now I was now married to a man who turned into a wolf on a regular basis, and it seemed a nice connection. As Remus had been elsewhere in the store at the time, he hadn't seen it yet. I donned it immediately and went downstairs to show him.

"What do you think?" I asked, pirouetting casually in front of him.

The smile I'd been expecting failed to appear.

"Where did you find that?" he asked, staring at the shirt.

"That shop on Willett where we got the socks."

"I didn't know that you were fond of wolves," Remus said coolly.

"Well, I'm not really. There's only one wolf that I care about," I said with a mischievous grin. "Do you like it?"

"In a word, no. You said that when you stayed at the Weasleys', you looked through some of their books and textbooks."

"Yes, but--"

"Then you saw pictures of werewolves. We don't look like that and you know it. We're not fluffy and cute."

"I didn't say you were," I began, but Remus wasn't through.

"I turn into a monster every month. Why would you possibly want to celebrate that?"

"I'm not celebrating it. I just thought..." I could tell by the look on my husband's face that no explanation was apparently good enough. At once I headed back toward the stairs. "Sorry," I muttered. "I'll take it off."

I returned to our bedroom and pulled off the shirt, tossing it into a wad in the corner. So, cute, fluffy wolves were out, were they? Yes, I'd seen pictures of werewolves, and no, they were not adorable. The way Remus acted, I thought viciously, you would think that I'd bought it just to taunt him about his condition. I stood in the middle of the floor, arms akimbo and thoroughly annoyed, looking about for the shirt I'd worn shopping.

A moment later, I heard footsteps. Remus knocked lightly on the doorframe.

"May I come in?"

"Of course you can come in. It's your room, too," I said crossly. Where was the stupid shirt?

He walked in, hands in his pockets. "I owe you an explanation, Kailin. I was rather rude just now, and I'm sorry for that."

I shrugged. "Don't worry about it. It's just a shirt. I thought I'd show my support for werewolves, that's all. I didn't mean anything by it, but if you don't like it, I won't wear it."

"But that's just it, don't you see? You're not showing your support for werewolves by wearing that thing."

"It was a Muggle store, Remus," I pointed out. "They didn't have any shirts with pictures of werewolves on them." I finally spotted my old shirt and plucked it from under the bag with my other purchases.

"Sit down." Remus took the shirt from my hands and gestured toward the bed.

The last thing I wanted was a lecture with me clad only in a bra and blue jeans. "But--"

"Sit," he ordered, and this time I dropped gracelessly onto the edge of the bed. "You think that just because we have the Wolfsbane Potion now, it's no problem. All I have to do is drink it, lock myself in the spare room for the night, sleep it off for a day, and life is just fine."

"Well, that's what you do, isn't it?" I pointed out.

"That's what it looks like to you. It's a bit different from my side of the locked door. It's not as easy as all that. The Wolfsbane Potion has changed my life all right, but do you realize that it was created primarily as a means of protection for the rest of the world? They didn't go looking for something to help werewolves. They wanted something that would protect the wizarding populace. The fact that it makes our lives easier is simply a byproduct. No one cares if we're happy as long as they're safe from what we can do to them.

"And yes, the transformation isn't as bad with the potion as it was without it, but it's still excruciatingly painful. You have no idea how hard I work at not making any noise when I transform. It would be a lot easier to scream and moan and groan, but I'd just as soon you not have to hear it. And," Remus added as an afterthought, "I suppose it's my way of trying not to give in to the beast until I bloody well have to."

A chill crept down my back. I hadn't known what precipitated the development of the Wolfsbane Potion, but it made perfect sense, given what I'd learned about the wizarding world and its prejudices. As for the transformation itself, I suspected that I was indeed guilty of dismissing what Hermione Granger had told me once was 'positively horrifying'.

I had willingly married Remus because the thirty-six hours he spent closeted away were, in fact, completely uneventful.

Uneventful for *me*. A lump rose in my throat.

"I know it's only one night out of twenty-eight," he went on, "but I'm still trapped in another body, and there's nothing I can ever do about it. And as much as I would like to pick up where I left off as soon as I change back, the only choice I have is to crawl into bed and wait. I'm still trapped, only in my own body this time.

"All the fluffy, pretty wolves in the world have absolutely nothing to do with me. Nothing," Remus said, looking at me so directly that it made me want to squirm. "I know you didn't intend it as demeaning or insulting, but stuff like that shirt trivializes what I go through each month. And I hope you didn't spend a lot on it, because I'd really prefer that you not wear it anymore."

I nodded, my vision obscured by a sudden film of tears. "I'm sorry," I said, my voice tremulous. "I won't."

He put an arm around me and pulled me close. "Now I've made you cry," he said, sighing. "I didn't mean to do that, dear heart."

"I know," I said, swiping at a lone tear that coursed down my cheek. "I do love you all month, you know, not just most of the month."

"You have no idea what a glorious thing that is for me," Remus murmured.

"I was thinking earlier," I sniffled. "I think that we're both outsiders in the wizarding world."

"In what way?"

"Well, you're a werewolf and I'm a Muggle, and we'll always be looked down on just because of who we are."

He chuckled. "I do believe you're right."

"I'm always right," I teased, my equilibrium returning. "Well, maybe not always. But usually."

Remus laughed then and tilted my chin up to kiss me.

I reached up to caress his cheek. A year ago, I'd only just arrived in Britain and Remus Lupin was still three months into my future. I loved him dearly, and while there was no doubt in my mind that we were meant to be together, there was still the fact that we had much to learn about one another. There were so many missteps along the path...

Remus pulled me closer, his hands sliding along my back with only the bra strap to stop them. Yes, I thought, my mind reacting to the heat building up within me. *Please...* He began to deepen the kiss and--

Mrs. Black's portrait screeched from the front hall.

"Get out of my home, you vile, deformed man, you enemy of wizardkind, you evil!"

"Shut UP, you old bat!" Moody thundered.

There was the sound of the heavy drapes being flung back over the portrait. The noise abruptly stopped, followed by the step-stump of Mad-Eye's footfalls on the stairway.

Remus groaned aloud and flung himself backwards onto the bed.

Saturday, March 15

I surveyed the dining room table: candles lit, places set (two: Moody had finally cleared out day before yesterday), and a bottle of wine chilled and waiting. It was perfect.

"Spaghetti's ready," Remus announced, carrying a steaming bowl into the room.

"Great. I'll get the salad."

We'd compromised on the dinner. Since Remus was the only one of us who could manage the temperamental oven, he volunteered to cook the main course. The salad, having absolutely no connection whatsoever to the stove, became my responsibility. It would not be the fanciest dinner we'd had to celebrate our anniversary, but I was sure it would be one of the most memorable, given our circumstances.

I brought the salad bowl and bread basket in from the kitchen just as Remus was opening the bottle of wine. What invariably took me several minutes of fiddling with the corkscrew took him only three seconds with a wand.

"You never fail to amaze me," I told him as I took my seat. "Who knew magic could be so useful?"

Remus poised the bottle over my glass. "And to think that I spent seven years at Hogwarts just for this."

Soon both glasses were filled, and Remus, sitting across the table from me, solemnly raised his in the air.

"To us," he said. "To the past seven months and all the happiness they've brought."

"To us," I echoed. "To learning to adapt and grow and put up with the curves life throws us."

"Amen." Remus took a drink, and I did the same.

And then we heard the front door creak open.

"What now?" Remus said wearily, putting his glass down and climbing to his feet. "I swear, if that's Mad-Eye again..."

He left the rest of the sentence dangling as he headed for the front hall. I followed, wondering who or what was there.

A man and woman were standing just beneath Mrs. Black's portrait, locked in a passionate embrace. From the frenzied groping that was taking place, I could tell that they'd been desperate for this moment of privacy when they could let their hormones soar. Little did they know that their hormones were about to be grounded.

Remus cleared his throat loudly. There was a shriek, and Nymphadora Tonks leapt guiltily backwards. I recognized the man as Connor Bones, a fellow Auror and rather new recruit to the Order of the Phoenix. Both were red-cheeked and flustered and desperately trying to look wholly innocent. Meanwhile, the curtains shrouding the portrait of Mrs. Black flew open, and the elderly woman in the painting started spewing a stream of invectives that would have made a sailor blush. It took the three of them-- Remus, Tonks, and Connor--to wrench the curtains closed so that quiet could reign once more.

"Might I ask what you're doing here?" Remus asked the pair pleasantly.

"Remus! Kailin!" Tonks sounded as though she could think of nothing finer than discovering the two of us there. "What a surprise! I--we--didn't expect anyone to be here tonight."

"Obviously."

"Hello, Lupin. Mrs. Lupin." Bones eyed us uneasily. "Dora and I are on the way to the theater."

"So you thought you'd stop by here for a quick shag before curtain time?" Remus asked conversationally.

The expressions on the couple's faces told me that he'd hit the bull's eye.

Remus turned to Tonks. "And the problem with your flat is...?"

"My roommate's sick with a cold," Tonks said lamely. "I ran into Mad-Eye this morning, and he said that he'd moved back home, so we thought--that is, I thought--that no one would be here."

"Didn't Mad-Eye mention that we're living here until our flat's repaired?" I asked.

"Well, no," Tonks said.

Remus sighed, running a hand through his hair in frustration. I understood what he was thinking. Moody was well-known for disclosing only parts of a story ("Never tell anyone more than they need to know. Gives you a bit of leverage which you might be needin' some day."), and I could easily picture the scene which would take place sometime later when Remus confronted him.

"But why didn't you tell them that we were staying here, Mad-Eye?"

"Didn't ask me that, now did they?"

There was an uncomfortable pause. Tonks and Bones were looking at us as though they hoped we'd abandon the premises, while Remus and I expected that they'd turn around at once and leave. Instead, no one moved. When the silence was on the verge of becoming ridiculous, I cursed inwardly: I would have to act the gracious hostess.

"Have you eaten?" I asked. "We were just sitting down."

"Actually, no." Tonks' eyes lit up. "We'd planned to, but we just didn't get around to it. What're you having?"

Connor was blushing again, and I had a good idea why they didn't get around to it. Remus, I noted, was scowling at this latest turn of events.

"Spaghetti," he muttered. "I'll get more plates."

"I'll get the wine glasses," I said, pretending that I couldn't be more pleased.

"Ooh, wine!" Tonks exclaimed. "You two celebrating something?"

We didn't answer. Remus and I exchanged dark glances and headed towards the kitchen. Once there, we busied ourselves collecting more plates and silverware and glasses.

"Why did you ask them to stay?" he hissed to me.

"Technically, I didn't. I just asked if they had eaten."

"Well, that turned out brilliantly, didn't it?"

"What was I supposed to do?" I demanded in a low voice. "You could have told them to leave, you know."

"Or we could have just gone out to dinner like I'd originally suggested," Remus said icily.

I was startled into silence by the amount of anger in his tone. Glancing sideways at him, I saw only an unreadable mask of resignation on my husband's face.

Dinner was less than comfortable. The four of us ate in silence for the most part. Tonks regarded the two of us surreptitiously, it having finally dawned on her that she'd interrupted something personal and important. Connor Bones was busy concentrating on his plate.

The couple finally departed after I'd assured them half a dozen times that they really didn't need to help us clean up. Remus normally does the dishes; I find it a luxury to sit back and relax after a long day, and besides, dishwashing isn't as big a production for a wizard as it is for the rest of us mortals. Tonight, however, I could tell that Remus was still tight-lipped and tense, and I suspected that he'd just as soon hurl the plates across the room as wash them. I offered to help.

"No need. I'm fine here." Remus said flatly.

I doubted that. He was, I noticed, washing the pots and pans the Muggle way instead of using magic. It was apparently therapeutic, almost as if he could scour our problems away just by scraping off bits of gooey pasta.

"I think they felt a little guilty about showing up here," I ventured.

"They should. I hope they feel wretched."

"Are you sure I can't get a dish towel and help you?"

An indifferent shrug. "Suit yourself."

I found a dishtowel and began drying dishes. We worked in silence, a silence that got heavier and heavier as the minutes ticked by.

"Are you alright?" I asked finally.

"Just fine."

"You're acting like this evening is my fault somehow," I pointed out.

"Don't be silly, Kailin. It's not your fault."

"Then what's the problem? I'm not any happier that Tonks showed up than you are, but at least I'm not sulking about it."

Remus threw the dish sponge into the soapy water. "The problem is that I'm tired of being here, all right?" he snapped. "I hate it."

"But it's only temporary," I pointed out, feeling a bit ridiculous to be the one defending the Black house given how much I disliked the place.

"It doesn't feel temporary. It feels just like my usual luck, and I'm sick of it, that's all."

"Your 'usual luck'? What do you mean?"

Remus gripped the edges of the sink with both hands. "For the last seven months, I've been happier than I ever thought possible. I had you and a home and a little money in the bank for a change. I actually had a normal life, but now it's like a distant memory. This is the way my life used to be, and I hate it. I hate having no privacy, I hate having no sex, and I hate living in this house!"

I wanted to point out that we'd made up for at least one of those deficiencies as soon as Moody left the premises, but I let it lie. The strength of Remus' feelings surprised me. I'd been too busy despising the big old relic of a house to see my husband's discontent. Just because he'd suggested staying here didn't mean he was happy about it.

"I didn't realize that you felt so strongly," I said.

"You don't know it used to be. I let people use me because there was no reason not to. Extra shift? Ask Remus, he'll do it. Need to impose on someone? How about Remus? He doesn't have a life. He doesn't care. Well, I *do* have a life now, and I *do* care." Remus stopped to draw breath, and when he spoke, his voice was considerably quieter. "I'm sorry, Kailin. I didn't intend to take it out on you. It's just very frustrating for me right now."

I nodded. "It's hard," I said, thinking aloud. "It's hard being here and dealing with everything... I think we're both stressed out."

"You have to understand that for a very long time, misfortune was rather my lot in life. I was accustomed to it, but now that I've had a chance to see what life can be like..." Remus' voice trailed off.

"Pack a bag," I said abruptly.

"What?"

"Pack a bag. We're going to stay somewhere else tonight." I put down the dish towel and tugged on his hand, determined now.

"Somewhere else? Where?" he asked, puzzled.

"Someplace fancy."

"We can't afford to stay at a fancy hotel." Remus was looking at me as though I'd lost my mind. "That's why we're here in the first place, remember?"

"We couldn't afford to stay at a fancy hotel for several weeks," I corrected. "We can certainly spend a day or two at one, and frankly, I think we deserve it."

For the first time in days, the gleam in my husband's eyes was back.

* * *

It's amazing what a Jacuzzi tub and a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door can do for your outlook on life. It was nearly midnight by the time Remus and I got to our room at the Rembrandt Hotel, and I was sure that neither of us would want to do more than crash in the bed until morning. But that was before we discovered the phone number for 24 hour room service and the extra-large tub with the pulsating jets. Before long, we were ensconced in the throbbing water and toasting our seven-month anniversary with a nicely chilled champagne. It might not be the home-cooked meal I'd intended, but we were celebrating in a fashion far superior to that available at number twelve.

I fingered the rim of the champagne glass and studied my husband. Remus was lying with his head thrown back on the edge of the tub, eyes closed, jaw slack with an expression of unmistakable relief on his face. "Feeling better?" I teased, poking him underwater with my foot.

"You have no idea," he mumbled, not bothering to open his eyes. "I rather like this. I don't suppose your salary would cover it if we lived here?"

"Not even close."

"Wonderful things, these tubs."

"Do wizards have anything similar?"

"Not that I know of, although the prefects' bathtub at Hogwarts is quite nice. There must be some sort of spell to churn up the water in a plain bathtub, but I'm not sure how you'd go about charming it to provide all these wonderful jets." Remus shifted his body slightly to come in closer contact with one of the 'wonderful jets'. The expression on his face was one of pure bliss.

"Why don't you invent one, then? All the wealthy wizards will buy them, and we'll get rich, and then we can afford one for ourselves. Where shall we put it? What about the Riviera, or Costa del Sol? Or maybe our own Greek isle?"

"Any place where we have some privacy," Remus said.

A/N: I love Tonks, I really do. But remember that I originally wrote this before HBP, when I had no idea that JKR was going to be so generous as to give Remus an actual love life.

Happy Hour with Minerva

Chapter 3 of 6

After being temporarily forced out of our flat, Remus and I try to make the best of a bad situation.

Chapter 3: Happy Hour with Minerva

March 19-20, 1997

Our stay at the Rembrandt was a lovely respite from our exile.

On Saturday we visited some of the tourist sites near the hotel. It was a happy reminder of our first dates when Remus had looked for low-cost ways to entertain me. I don't know if it was because Remus and I were away from Grimmauld Place or simply well-rested for a change, but our attitude did a remarkable turnabout. All in all, it was one of the nicest days I've ever known. And that night we once again enjoyed the Jacuzzi, the room service, and the king-sized bed.

Sunday morning we slept late and ate a late breakfast. I called Mr. Najib and was heartened to learn that we could expect to return to our flat in another week, provided that all went according to schedule and the contractors didn't run into any hitches. He could have left off the last part of the sentence as far as I was concerned; any qualifier probably meant we could figure on two more weeks instead of one.

And when check-out time came, we reluctantly packed our bags and returned to number twelve. At least, I reminded Remus, the end was in sight.

The old house was no more welcoming than ever, but we were both determined to preserve our newfound good mood.

It lasted until Tuesday night.

We'd decided to eat out that night for the simple reason that the larder was basically bare. Upon returning home, Remus could tell something was amiss as soon as we stepped through the door. He stopped abruptly, sniffing the air suspiciously.

"Now what?" he muttered.

I sniffed also, but could not detect anything. Another thing I've discovered after being married to a werewolf for the past seven months: Remus' sense of smell, even when he's not in wolf form, is much keener than mine.

"I don't smell anything," I began, but he was already clattering downstairs toward the kitchen.

I followed, and when Remus halted abruptly in the kitchen doorway, I had to put on the brakes to avoid running into him. Peering over his shoulder, I could see Severus Snape look up from a cauldron, a scowl on his face.

"Severus, what in the name of Merlin do you think you're doing?" Remus demanded.

"What does it look like I'm doing, Lupin? I should think it would have penetrated even your sad little wolf brain that I'm working on a potion. Or did you bother to pay any attention to that part of your education?" The Potions master's eyes flickered in my direction briefly, then he refocused his attention on the cauldron once more.

Snape may be a trusted member of the Order of the Phoenix, but he generally acts as though he approves of no one and tolerates them even less. I know that he still carries a grudge against Remus for a schoolboy incident, which automatically makes me guilty by association. I have never bothered to be anything other than coolly polite towards him, since friendly overtures are an exercise in futility. It reminds me of the old saying about trying to teach a pig to sing: it gets you nowhere and ultimately annoys the pig.

"Something wrong with your Potions dungeon at Hogwarts, that you had to come all the way to London?" Remus ignored the nasty comments.

"If you paid the least attention to the news," Snape said coldly, "you would know about the Ministry inspection."

"What inspection?"

"The Ministry inspection of Hogwarts. There are rumors circulating that some at the school are loyal to Voldemort."

"Of course there are. At least half your own house, I should say."

"Let me finish," Snape snapped. "Rumors are circulating which, if one were to believe them, would indicate that some students are being actively recruited to support the Dark Lord."

"Surely they don't expect to uncover Dark activities in the middle of the Great Hall," Remus pointed out.

"I said to let me finish," seethed Snape. "The point is that a number of parents are panicked nearly to the point of withdrawing their precious offspring from the school. The inspection is merely a show to alleviate their concerns."

"That still doesn't explain why you're here."

Snape's eyes narrowed dangerously. "I don't need to explain myself to you, Lupin. Let's just say that I've been ordered to brew this potion for... a certain gathering. Needless to say, it would not be well-received by the new Minister were I to be discovered brewing it under Dumbledore's nose."

There was a barely perceptible pause before Remus spoke. "What do you mean, 'the new Minister'?"

"Oh," drawled Snape in mock surprise, "you didn't know? Then again, if you can't be bothered to pay attention to current events, it's little wonder that you are completely clueless."

"Who's the new Minister for Magic?" I broke in, thoroughly annoyed by Snape's habit of viciously baiting Remus at every opportunity. Not only was it rude, it was totally unwarranted. My husband read the *Prophet* religiously, but since returning from the Rembrandt, had failed to keep up with the daily wizarding news.

Snape shot me a look of pure dislike, and I wondered, not for the first time, why he was considered an asset to the Order.

"Amelia Bones," he announced and returned his attention to the potion he was brewing.

Remus assessed this information. "I don't suppose you're going to share any details with me?"

"I'm not your valet. Go get your own copy of the *Daily Prophet* and read it like everybody else."

I could almost feel the waves of dislike pulsating from my husband. "Are you going to be long here?"

"Not if you go away and let me finish. I have an early class in the morning. Gryffindor N.E.W.T. level," Snape added, in the same tone one might use to mention human waste products.

"Just make sure you clean up before you go," Remus snapped. "I don't want to come down for breakfast and find your filthy cauldrons lying about."

He walked out before Snape could retort, taking the steps with a distinctly heavy tread while I followed behind. So much for the nice relaxing hotel stay.

"Is he ever polite?" I said sarcastically as we marched upstairs.

Remus snorted. "I don't believe the word is in his vocabulary. This has gone on for years, and I suspect it always will. To Severus Snape, carrying a grudge is an art form."

"What do you think this means, about a new Minister of Magic? I wonder what happened to Fudge."

"I have no idea, although it should have happened a long time ago. Amelia's a good person. She's not in the Order, but then I doubt she's on Voldemort's side, either. Her brother was in the Order during the first war. Killed by Death Eaters."

When we reached the front parlor, I started to sit down and make myself comfortable. Remus, however, hesitated in the doorway.

"What's wrong?"

"I think I'm going to go out and try to find a copy of the *Evening Prophet*. See what's going on. Maybe contact someone from the Order and get their take on it."

"You'll be a while, then?" I'm accustomed to being alone when Remus is away on Order business, but while I have utter faith in my husband's wizarding skills, there's still a war raging and he's still a target. I'm not excessively fond of him being gone.

"Possibly. Look, why don't you get to bed early? You have to work in the morning."

"I might as well. It's not like I'll kill time by chatting up Snape."

"Now that would be an act of pure desperation," Remus chuckled.

"No kidding." I reached for my husband's hand. "This'll all be over soon, remember?"

"Right." He sighed audibly. "We'll be back in the flat. I just wish the rest of it was over: the war, Voldemort, all of that. I'm tired of it, Kailin. It's barely started, and I'm already tired of it. I want a normal life--well, as normal a life as I can have, given the circumstances. Children, a mortgage, holidays. The things people take for granted."

"I know."

Remus raised my hand to his lips and kissed it. "Get some sleep. I'll try not to be too long."

When I awoke early the next morning, it was to an empty bed. For a brief moment, I was seized by the sudden fear that something had happened to my husband. I ran to the bedroom door and threw it open, listening for some indication that Remus was about. It was with relief that I heard the banging of pots from the kitchen.

Unless, of course, it was Severus Snape, still usurping our living space.

I grabbed my robe and hurtled down the two flights of stairs, my concern for my husband outweighing the possible mortification of running into Snape while still clad in my dressing gown.

Remus was in the midst of lighting a burner on the evil stove, and he looked up in surprise at my abrupt entrance. "Good morning. Something wrong?"

"No," I said, heaving a sigh of relief. "I was just making sure it was you and not Snape down here."

Remus chuckled. He was dressed, I noted, but his hair was tousled from sleep and he still sported a day's growth of beard. "When I got back--it was around midnight, I think--he was already gone. Do you want breakfast first or a shower?"

"Shower," I said, and started back up the stairs at once. I showered quickly and donned my scrubs, and when I returned to the kitchen, there was a plate of scrambled eggs and sausages awaiting me.

I sat down at the table while Remus poured coffee into our cups. "So what did you find out last night?" I asked.

"Well," he began, taking his seat, "you know that people have been demanding Fudge's resignation ever since it was proven that Voldemort's back."

I nodded. I, too, had read the editorials in the *Daily Prophet*. The general consensus was that Cornelius Fudge was a bungling idiot whose incompetence had jeopardized the wizarding world for the better part of a year.

"On one hand," Remus continued, "booting him out of office is a good thing. But on the other hand, there hasn't been a favorite waiting in the wings. Everyone wants him replaced, but no one in their right mind would be after the job when it means tackling Voldemort and his bunch."

I knew that, too. Even the Order seemed to have no clear favorite candidate to endorse--not that they could openly endorse anybody, of course. "So what about this Bones woman?"

"Amelia's a good person, no doubt about it. But she's only taken on the position until a permanent replacement can be appointed. And that's one of the worst things that could happen."

"Think about it: if you were on Voldemort's side, which would you rather face: a solid, united front or a chaotic mess where no one wants to be in charge?"

"Good point," I said.

"I'm afraid that all the political posturing is just going to open the door for the wrong people to get into positions of power."

"Who are the wrong people?"

Remus took a sip of coffee and smiled wryly. "Anybody who's not on our side."

I thought about that while I finished my breakfast. Then a glance at my watch told me that time was running short, so I scooted back from the table and carried my dishes to the sink. Remus was rummaging in the pantry for something, and my mind was on collecting my coat and bag and heading off to work. As I turned towards the stairway, something under the table caught my eye. I bent down for a closer look.

It was a large, blackened iron spoon of some sort, evidently kicked into the shadows against one of the table legs. It seemed to be coated with a gooey substance of some sort, and I realized that it must have been part of Snape's potions paraphernalia from last night. Well, I thought, at least it hadn't drawn ants yet, although all it would take was one warm day and then they'd likely be out in force. Holding the spoon distastefully between thumb and forefinger, I carried it to the sink.

"What's that?" Remus asked, emerging from the pantry with a handful of potatoes.

"Something Snape left behind, I guess." I dropped it into the sink and turned on the faucet, just as I heard Remus shouting.

"Kailin! Wait!"

As soon as the water hit the gelatinous mass on the spoon, thick clouds of purple smoke billowed up in a rush towards the ceiling. I stumbled backwards, choking on the rancid fumes as the purple clouds spread out rapidly, seeking exit from the confines of the room.

Dropping the potatoes at once, Remus grabbed my arm and dragged me up the stairs. I coughed and gagged the entire way while my eyes began to water as if I'd been swimming in raw onions. When we reached the entrance hall, the curtains shrouding the portrait of Mrs. Black flew open and the usual caterwauling began.

"Damn it!" Remus seethed, pushing me towards the next flight of stairs. "Go on up!" he ordered. "Wash your face off with cold water. Lots of cold water!"

I turned back briefly. Remus was muttering various oaths about Snape's parentage while he wrestled with the drapes. It occurred to me that I'd heard him curse more in the past several weeks than in the entire time we'd been married.

"What was on that spoon?" I gasped.

"I'm not sure, but it obviously doesn't mix with water. Go wash your face. *Now.*"

I didn't argue. I ran straight for the bathroom and splashed copious amounts of water on my face. It took several minutes for my eyes to stop streaming and burning, but finally I could see and breathe easily once more.

I expected to find the hall filled with the purple smoke, but there was none. When I passed the bedroom door, I discovered my husband throwing clothes from a bureau drawer into the bags we'd just unpacked from our weekend trip. I stared at him, wondering what bizarre turn my life was taking now.

"What are you doing?"

"Repacking. We're getting out of here."

"Why? Is that purple stuff toxic or something?" I envisioned my lungs being eaten up from the inside out.

"The gas has dissipated, but the house is going to stink for a good while, and if we stay here, everything we own is going to reek along with it. I tell you, Kailin, if I wasn't committed to the Order, I'd chuck the whole thing right now and Apparate us to the States. You'd like to visit your Grandad, wouldn't you?" Remus, usually the epitome of patience, had a dangerous glint in his eyes that I'd never seen before.

"You're joking, right?" I asked cautiously.

"Not by much. I've had it with this place and I'm not taking it anymore."

"What about work? Are we coming back here tonight?" I began yanking things from the hangers in the wardrobe and hastily tried to fold them, doing a less than tidy job of it.

"I'll meet you at the hospital when you get off," Remus said, "and no, we're not coming back here. I'll see what accommodations I can work out while you're gone today."

I rounded up our odds and ends from the bathroom while Remus opened all the bureau drawers and checked under the bed for stray belongings. An odor was starting to penetrate the upper floors of number twelve, a stink when went beyond repulsive. If I'd been asked to imagine the stench of a dozen rotting corpses, it might have come close to what now permeated the old Black house.

Three minutes later, we were closing the front door behind us.

"How are your eyes?" Remus questioned as we hurried down the block.

"Fine, I think." I stared at my husband as if seeing him for the first time today. "You didn't shave."

"I didn't exactly take the time for it," he said, finally flashing a smile.

"I'm really sorry," I said miserably. "I saw the spoon under the table and thought I should rinse it off."

"You did what anybody would have done, Kailin."

"Do you know what he was making?"

"No. The thing is, a number of potions react to water, so it's never safe to clean something until you know for certain what you're dealing with."

"What about the bags? Do you want me to take my suitcase along to the hospital?"

"No, I'll take care of it. Morning," Remus said to the garbage man picking a trash bin off the sidewalk and emptying it into his truck.

"Morning." The man nodded to us, then, looking a bit startled as we went past, wrinkled his nose.

"Do you suppose we smell?" I muttered.

"There's probably a bit of odor clinging to our clothes."

"Great," I said gloomily. "It must be bad if the garbage man thinks so."

"On the brighter side," Remus pointed out, "you may end up with an entire bus all to yourself this morning."

But if there was any odor left by the time I boarded my bus, nobody seemed to think it was extraordinary. And no one at work appeared to notice anything, although I still couldn't get the smell out of my mind--or my nostrils.

The day was thankfully uneventful. When I left the hospital at three-thirty, I found Remus waiting by a lamppost. The sky had turned gray and the wind had a cold edge to it, and he looked as though he'd been waiting long enough to get thoroughly chilled.

"Hi," I told him. "Been here long?"

He kissed me briefly. "About five minutes. Nasty afternoon, isn't it?"

"I should say so." I pulled my coat more tightly around me. "Where are we going?"

"I've booked us a room at the Leaky Cauldron. Minerva McGonagall is going to meet us there, by the way."

"Minerva? Why?" It was unlike the stern professor to leave Hogwarts on a school night.

"She's going to bring me up to speed on what's going on."

We arrived at the Tube station in short order, and minutes later, were on a train headed for Charing Cross and the wizarding tavern. I'd been to the Leaky Cauldron on several occasions, but had never seen it as packed as it was tonight.

"Why is it so crowded?" I practically had to speak straight into Remus' ear in order to be heard.

"Spring Equinox," he told me as we fought our way to a table. "First day of spring."

"Oh. So it's a festival or something?" One thing I'd learned so far was that witches and wizards took their change of seasons quite seriously.

"An excuse to go out and get drunk, more like," Remus replied.

It certainly seemed so. The place was loud and boisterous, and looking around at the raucous crowd, I couldn't imagine how Remus and Minerva would be able to hold a quiet conversation. "How in the world can you talk in here? Wouldn't you rather meet in our room?"

"No one would suspect us of discussing anything of worth in all this noise. Frankly, I think it would attract more suspicion if we tried to chat quietly in a corner somewhere."

We'd been sitting for a few minutes, nursing our butterbeers, when Minerva McGonagall arrived. She stood regally in the doorway, scanning the crowd as if looking over a group of unruly students to determine who deserved a detention. Apparently I wasn't alone in thinking this; quite a few patrons of the Leaky Cauldron must have been taught by her in the past, because the noise level subsided almost instantly.

"Professor McGonagall!" One of the bartenders hurried to her side, eager to please. "How are you? Such a pleasure to see you again. What can I get for you?"

Her voice carried easily in the quieted room. "I'm meeting someone, Elliot. Have you seen--ah, there he is. Could you bring me a butterbeer, please?"

Minerva wove her way around the tables toward us with practiced air. In her wake, there were murmurs of "Hello, Professor McGonagall", "Nice to see you, Professor", "Hope things are well at Hogwarts, Professor".

"Hello, Minerva." Remus rose to his feet as she approached.

"Remus, Kailin. Good to see the both of you." She sat in the chair that Remus had pulled out for her, and the noise level rose once more.

"You certainly know how to make an entrance," I commented, smiling.

"Mercy, I do, don't I?" The woman arched an eyebrow. "I had no idea that I terrified that many people," she said calmly, shedding her outer cloak and draping it over the back of her chair. "Dreadful evening, isn't it? It's hard to believe that it's spring."

I sympathized. I hadn't yet removed my coat, but had settled for draping it over my shoulders. Not only was I chilled by the walk from the Tube station, the coat also disguised the fact that I was still clad in my hospital scrubs.

The bartender arrived at our table with a Butterbeer and made a great show of wiping off the bottle and opening it for her. "Here you go, Professor."

"Thank you, Elliot," Minerva said and, as the man moved away, muttered, "Lazy little Hufflepuff, never did apply himself..."

Remus and I exchanged grins. "Thanks for coming," he told her. "I appreciate it. I'm afraid I was rather out of touch the past few days."

"It was my fault," I put in. "We'd had it with the Black place, and I suggested that we spend the weekend at a hotel."

"Good for you," Minerva said briskly. "How are repairs going on your flat?"

"I've got my fingers crossed for the end of the week."

"Excellent. After all, you two need your privacy. So, Remus, how much do you know?"

"Just what I read in the *Prophet* this morning," Remus said quietly. "And I talked to Arabella last night."

"The move to depose Fudge didn't reach a head until yesterday morning, and then it all happened quite quickly. It wouldn't surprise me if a lot of people still don't know about it if they don't take the paper or listen to the wireless."

We drank our butterbeer and munched on the peanuts Elliot brought around. Minerva did most of the talking, interspersing banal chatter with developments Remus needed to know about. I quickly ceased worrying about being overheard. The crowd was in a celebratory mood, and anybody trying to listen in to what was being said at our table would have had to sit on McGonagall's lap to catch any snippets of conversation.

Remus and Minerva were still talking when I drained the last of my butterbeer. It was time, I decided, to find our room and change clothes. I was tired of wearing my coat in an effort to hide my Muggleness; the room was too warm for it. "If you'll excuse me for a few minutes," I said, climbing to my feet, "I'm going slip into something more comfortable. Remus, do you have the room key?"

"You're staying here?" Minerva asked, surprised.

"There was a bit of a problem with the ventilation at Grimmauld Place this morning," Remus told her as he handed me a skeleton key bearing the number five. "We had to make alternate plans."

"You should have said something. I have a cousin who lives in Kent, outside of Gravesend. She's out of the country right now, and her cottage is empty. You could have stayed there. I wish I'd thought of it when you were first put out of your flat. You could have stayed there instead of headquarters."

I groaned inwardly. A cottage in Kent sounded a lot nicer than number twelve, although the commute would have been horrendous.

"Believe me," I said, "the next time we're forced from our home, we'll give you a call."

"Just take the stairs in the hallway," Remus said to me, nodding toward the rear entrance to the pub.

"Great. I'll be right back." I squeezed through the crowd and into a wide corridor. There were several private dining rooms here, where the celebrations were much more subdued. A large fireplace at the far end of the hall erupted with green flames at regular intervals as new arrivals came to join the party. Meanwhile, a queue was forming

for people who wanted to exit via the Floo.

I spotted the stairway and headed directly for it. It was amazing, I thought: I had no idea what was legally required in Britain, but in the States, there would need to be a handicapped accessible lift in order to comply with the law. Providing it was a Muggle establishment, of course. I grinned to myself, thinking how I'd started using Britishisms such as 'lift' instead of elevator. Next thing I knew, I'd be speaking with an accent and--

I collided directly with the man as soon as I stepped off the final stair. The impact sent me staggering backward a step, and strong hands reached to grab my shoulders.

"I'm dreadfully sorry," I began.

"In a hurry, are we?"

I caught my breath as I stared into steely gray eyes in a pale face, framed by long blond hair.

My brain works wonderfully fast in a medical emergency. I function on autopilot when a patient's heart stops, anticipating the orders flying from all directions as doctors try to resuscitate him or her. It's something on which I pride myself. However, give me a social situation where I am at a disadvantage in almost every possible way, and my mind draws the biggest blank you could ever hope to see. And that's what my brain was doing as I found myself looking into Lucius Malfoy's arrogantly aristocratic face. Maybe, I thought wildly, he wouldn't remember me from the brief encounter at Madam Malkin's.

That hope died when Malfoy's eyes lit with recognition. "Well, well," he drawled. "I believe we've met before."

"Excuse me?" I tried to play innocent, but already my heart was thumping so hard I could feel it.

"We've met before," he repeated silkily.

"Have we?" I managed, absolutely hating the fact that I'd been caught off-guard. We hadn't exactly met, and he knew it. He'd merely seen me in Madam Malkin's shop at Christmastime. Had, without saying a word, flat-out undressed me with his eyes from twelve feet away. Had made it quite clear what he wanted of me without even opening his mouth. I didn't even know his identity until I'd described him later to Remus.

"Diagon Alley, during the holidays."

"Oh, yes," was the best I could come up with, along with the faintest shred of a polite smile. "Nice to see you. Now if you could excuse me--"

"I assure you," Malfoy continued, not swayed by my attempted escape, "that I would never forget a woman as beautiful as yourself. I don't believe we were properly introduced. Lucius Malfoy."

I stared at the extended hand, knowing he expected me to take it and act grateful for the gesture, all the while thinking that it had been responsible for the deaths of Hermione Granger's parents. Finally, just before my hesitation turned into blatant rudeness, I tentatively took his hand.

The effort dislodged the coat draped over my shoulders, and it fell to the floor. Immediately, Malfoy played the gentleman and retrieved it for me. As he straightened up, his eyes raked over me, taking in the scrubs, the trainers, the hospital ID badge.

"What's this? Kailin... Lupin," Malfoy read, making the two words convey a sense of menace so great that I wanted to deny my own name. "You are... a Muggle?"

I was sure that he intended to wash his hand at the earliest opportunity. "I am," I answered pleasantly, as though he'd just bestowed a vast compliment upon me.

"I see." The lofty, superior smile tightened perceptibly. "Lupin... Where do I know... Ah, yes. The werewolf that Dumbledore inflicted upon those poor children at Hogwarts."

"Remus Lupin is my husband," I said, not knowing how much information to volunteer. This was a very powerful man, and saying the wrong thing could make matters much worse.

An eyebrow arched. "You're an American," he mused softly. "An American and a Muggle, married to a werewolf. What a fascinating combination."

"If you say so."

"So," Malfoy continued, "you are a Muggle, and yet as I recall, at Madam Malkin's you were dressed as a witch."

"It was a very pretty robe," I said in my own defense. "I thought I would try it on."

"Posing as a witch or wizard is illegal, Mrs. Lupin. Did you know that?"

"I was a customer, Mr. Malfoy. I wasn't posing as anything."

The gray eyes were studying me, calculating, plotting. Then Malfoy glanced down at my coat, which he still had not offered to me.

"Could I have my coat, please?" I asked nervously.

"Of course. Please," he held up a hand, "allow me." Malfoy held up the coat, obviously intending that I should take advantage of his assistance. I wasn't particularly happy about the idea. It meant turning my back on him.

"Thank you." My voice was barely above a whisper.

I turned away from him, and Malfoy lifted the garment slightly to ease it onto my shoulders.

Suddenly, strong hands gripped my upper arms and I was pulled back tightly against him. A voice whispered in my ear.

"You should be very careful, my dear. Associating with werewolves can be... deadly."

The Cottage

After being temporarily forced out of our flat, Remus and I try to make the best of a bad situation.

Chapter 4: The Cottage

March 20, 1997

I jerked away from the strong hands and turned to face Lucius Malfoy, tugging the edges of my coat tightly in front of me. "Don't touch me," I snapped, teeth clenched.

Anger flitted briefly across Malfoy's face, followed by a smirk that told me I was less than nothing. "Do not think for one moment," he hissed, pressing closely toward me once more, "that Muggles or Muggle-lovers will be tolerated in our world when the Dark Lord comes to power."

Looking back now, I honestly don't know what possessed me. The urge to take the moral high ground comes to me at odd times, and this was definitely one of them.

"If I were you, Mr. Malfoy, I would look for a better group of friends. You and your bigoted acquaintances are nothing more than anachronisms whose time has come and gone. Now get out of my face," I snarled.

And with that, I pushed past Malfoy and marched back down the stairs. I wasn't about to go on to my room, since the last thing I wanted was for Lucius Malfoy to know that Remus and I were staying in room five. More than anything right now, I was desperate for the safety of my husband's company.

I've never been so happy to be in a huge a crowd in my life. By the time I reached our table, my heart was pounding and my legs were shaking.

"Back so soon? I thought you were going to " Remus broke off in mid-sentence. "What's wrong?"

"Lucius Malfoy," I gasped, and virtually fell back into my seat. "He was upstairs and I ran right into him."

"Did he recognize you?"

"He not only recognized me, he saw my scrubs and my name tag, too. So now he knows my name, he knows that I'm a Muggle, and he knows where I work."

Remus frowned. "I don't like this at all."

"It gets worse," I said miserably. "I'm afraid I smarted off to him." Resisting the urge to kick myself, I told Minerva how Malfoy had unnerved me three months earlier in Madame Malkin's shop, then described the brief encounter upstairs. By the time I finished, Minerva was gazing at me with a mixture of shock and admiration. Remus looked merely stunned.

"What a brave thing to do," McGonagall said, her eyes shining. "Are you all right, my dear?"

"Just great," I said with a ghost of a smile. "I just told a Death Eater to get out of my face. What in the world was I thinking?"

Remus raised an eyebrow. "You're lucky he didn't hex you to Bristol and back."

It wasn't a comforting thought. "He wouldn't try anything, would he? After all, he'd have to dirty his hands with a nasty Muggle."

McGonagall opened her mouth to speak, but hesitated as though struggling with herself. She smiled and reached over to pat my arm. "I'm sure he has greater enemies with which to concern himself, Kailin."

It was some consolation, although I could envision my career going straight down the tubes as I fled from job to job, hospital to hospital, stalked by a vengeful Lucius Malfoy. "Tell me, is it true that it's illegal to pose as a witch or wizard?"

Remus frowned. "True, I believe. Why do you ask?"

My heart sank. "Malfoy hinted that when I tried on a robe in Madame Malkin's, I was posing as a witch."

McGonagall snorted. "Not likely. If you actually bought a robe and a wand and tried to pass yourself off as a witch in order to be employed in the wizarding world, you could be prosecuted. He was merely trying to frighten you."

"Well, it worked. The last thing he said was that 'associating with a werewolf could be deadly.'"

"Dragged me into it, did he?" Remus chuckled mirthlessly. "How nice of him."

Eventually, the conversation moved back towards issues of the Order, but my mind remained on Malfoy and what this latest encounter might mean. Remus kept his arm firmly around my shoulder, and although I tried to relax, it was a mostly useless endeavor.

Finally, Minerva rose to go. "I shouldn't be absent from supper," she said. "I'm afraid that would be rather noticeable, what with the inspectors about."

"I appreciate you taking an hour out of your busy schedule," Remus told her. "I know it was an inconvenience for you to come all the way to London."

McGonagall held up a hand. "Nonsense. I'm just glad you and Kailin had a nice few days away from everything."

Remus offered to see her off, and so we fought our way through the press of witches and wizards to the corridor beyond. I eyed the crowd uneasily the entire way, looking for the arrogant sneer, the long blonde hair. But Lucius Malfoy was nowhere to be seen.

"We're safe here, aren't we?" I asked Remus. "In our room, I mean?"

"I should think so," he reassured me. "I can't imagine otherwise."

Minerva overheard us. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to stay at my sister's place?"

My eyes lit up, and I turned to Remus at once. "Could we?" I pleaded. "I know we're probably safe, but I really think I'd rather not be here anymore."

Remus looked a bit distressed, and I didn't blame him. Thanks to my big mouth, we'd have to uproot ourselves once more. Besides, being cowed by something is rather unusual for me, and he had never seen me uncertain and nervous like this. There was little else he could do but humor me.

"Well, yes, of course, Kailin."

I breathed a sigh of relief.

Minerva gave us directions to Miranda McGonagall's cottage on Westwich Lane outside Gravesend, Kent, along with a spell to unlock the door, then took the Floo Network back to Hogwarts. Remus canceled our room at the Leaky Cauldron, and we headed out into the late afternoon.

* * *

It was a lengthy trip. First we had to get from Charing Cross to the train station with our bags, then endure an hour's ride to Gravesend. Once in Gravesend, we hailed a cab, and then spent the better part of an hour in the gathering dusk, hunting for a remote road. The cab driver was more than happy to dump us off in the dark middle of nowhere. We stood there in the chilly night, hungry, tired, and miserable.

I'd already realized that I had been foolish in insisting that we leave the Leaky Cauldron, that revelation occurring to me somewhere on the train ride to Kent. Remus was being terribly nice about it, considering. But now I had to contemplate getting back to London in the morning for work, and it wasn't a pleasant thought. God alone knew how I'd get back into Gravesend, what time the morning train left, or at what ungodly hour I'd have to get up in order to accomplish it all.

In short, I wanted to sit down in the middle of the road and die.

"Remember, we'll look back at this someday and laugh," Remus said carefully, apparently sensing that I was ready to explode.

My response was to burst into tears. It was *that* time of the month, on top of everything else.

Remus put down the suitcases and pulled me into his arms. I was pretty sure that this was one of those times when marriage vows about 'for better or worse' applied, and the thought that I'd dragged him into this fiasco made me feel even more wretched. To his credit, Remus didn't tell me to buck up or stop sniveling, but simply held me tightly, rocked me gently, and murmured soft reassurances in my ear.

"How could I have been so dumb as to smart off to Lucius Malfoy? And you could have told me how stupid I was being," I managed after several long minutes. "You should have said 'forget it, we're staying right here at the Leaky Cauldron!'"

"It doesn't matter, dearest. We're here. Let's find the cottage and get settled in, shall we?"

"But how do we know this is the right road?" I asked dubiously. There were no road signs, no indications that we were even in the correct spot.

"The sign," Remus said simply. "Look."

I looked up. There was indeed a road sign which read 'Westwich Lane', although I could have sworn it hadn't been there when we stepped out of the taxi.

"It wasn't there before," I blurted.

"It's Muggle-warded, just like the Leaky Cauldron," Remus told me as he released me from his arms.

Sure enough, the sign faded from view. I sighed.

"You people," I muttered, "can be absolutely infuriating at times, do you know that?"

Remus chuckled. "Just what we tend to say about Muggles." He hoisted the bags and started off.

In the one piece of luck we'd had all evening, the cottage was only a half-mile off the main road. It was small, constructed of stone, and if I had to guess by looks alone, probably held no more than four or five rooms.

Remus murmured the spell to unlock the front door, and we walked inside.

"Lumos," he said, and his wand-light illuminated what was evidently the parlor.

I looked around while Remus lit candles and set about starting a fire in the fireplace.

"Look at these," I said, eyeing a dozen pictures lining the fireplace mantle.

According to the photographs, Miranda McGonagall was the spitting image of her older sister. She was also a canine enthusiast, as evidenced by the fact that there was a different large dog in every picture.

This was borne out when we investigated the kitchen. There were a dozen large food and water bowls on the floor, empty now but lined up and waiting. Hefty leather leashes hung from pegs near the kitchen door, along with a variety of doggie bandanas and rain slickers. The kitchen door itself sported one of those flaps which allowed dogs free access to the outside. From the size of the flap as well as the rest of the gear, it was obvious that Miranda liked her puppies big.

"Well," said Remus, looking around at the assortment of canine accessories, "Minerva did say that Miranda was a bit dog-crazy."

"Surely she doesn't have all those dogs with her, does she?" Of course were the animals here right now, we would most certainly be on the bottom of a heap of slobbering, tail-wagging fur.

"I believe so."

"Out of the country? How?" I asked, astonished. "Aren't there quarantine laws and such?"

"Not for wizards. I mean, there are regulations regarding dangerous beasts, but not run of the mill house pets or familiars."

It figured. I wandered through the rest of the cottage, which turned out to consist of the parlor and dining room, one bedroom, and the kitchen and bath. It was smaller than our flat, and I wondered how one woman managed to share her living space with what must be an entire pack of dogs. A tickle made my nose quiver suddenly, and I erupted with a massive sneeze.

"Kailin." Remus appeared suddenly in the doorway, looking concerned. "Don't tell me that you're allergic to dogs."

"I'm not," I said. "I've never had a problem with animal allergies."

"Of course," Remus said, eyeing the sofa which was liberally covered with dog hair, "I doubt that you've stayed in a kennel before."

"Could be dust as well, if the place hasn't been lived in for a while."

We unpacked our bags while I sneezed and my nasal passages swelled to massive proportions. In the space of ten minutes, I was feeling miserable.

"I don't know what to do about tomorrow," I said dispiritedly. "I'll have to call in sick, I suppose which is just as well, given that it'll probably take forever to get back into the city. I don't suppose you could just hang onto me and Apparate into London."

"Not safely," Remus said regretfully.

I sighed. "I think I'll go to bed."

"What about food? You haven't eaten anything. I found a block of cheese in the ice box."

"You go ahead. I'm not hungry." I went into the bedroom and started piling up pillows in Miranda's bed, certain that the only way I could sleep was sitting up. Remus came in moments later.

"What if," he said, "I Apparated into Gravesend and bought you something for your nose?"

I considered this. By this time, I would kill for a decongestant.

"Would you?" I said pleadingly. 'I'd really, really appreciate it.'

"No problem. You know, maybe it would help if we opened some of these windows and aired the place out."

The two of us went from room to room, unlocking the windows and flinging them open. It was looking like I would have to choose between freezing and asphyxiation. Right now, freezing was the better option.

Remus regarded me sympathetically as he put his coat back on. "Tell me what you need," he said. "You mentioned a decon-something-or-another?"

"A decongestant." I named a few over the counter brands, then made sure that he had enough Muggle money.

Five minutes later, Remus was gone and I was under the covers.

* * *

I didn't expect to fall asleep, at least not before Remus returned, but somehow I did. I guess when you're tired enough, even little things like not breathing don't get in the way of dropping off.

I dreamed that I was shackled, standing in the middle of Diagon Alley while Lucius Malfoy denounced me as an impostor and demanded that I be killed. I begged him to see reason until I was blue in the face: I wasn't an impostor, I was Remus Lupin's wife, and I had every right to be in Diagon Alley with my husband. But it was too late; the crowd was jeering at me, even Remus' friends from the Order. Someone picked up a rock and threw it at me. I ducked, and the rock hit the wall of the building behind me with a resounding bang.

The bangs continued as I jolted into abrupt wakefulness. They weren't caused by rocks, I realized, but by the windows of the cottage slamming shut.

"Remus?" I called out. I'd evidently fallen asleep, and Remus must have returned and was now closing the windows. I could indeed breathe easier, but I'd still welcome whatever medicine he'd bought for me.

There was no answer.

"Remus?" I called again, louder this time.

Still no answer.

A feeling of sudden dread swept over me, and my mouth went instantly, completely dry. I forced myself to climb out of the bed, feeling my way in the blackness toward the bedroom door. I opened it, my heart pounding furiously.

"Remus?" It was more whimper than cry.

In a moment of instant clarity, I knew for a fact that I was in danger and that I had to get out of this house.

I stumbled into the parlor, not bothering to search for shoes or coat despite the fact that I was clad only in a tee-shirt and underwear. Escape was my priority. The remnants of a fire still burned in the fireplace, shedding scant amounts of light which made it easier to see. I reached the front door, turned the lock, and pulled.

The door didn't move.

Had I turned the lock in the wrong direction? At once I twisted it the opposite way, but again, the door didn't budge. Cold fingers of fear clutched at my stomach as I tried again and again, but with the results always the same.

I ran for the kitchen, back into the darkness once more. Feeling my way past the stove, I found the kitchen door and tried over and over to open it. But just as had been the case with the front door, the back door seemed sealed shut.

I was trapped.

The windows, then. Swallowing back imminent panic, I stumbled toward the kitchen window I'd seen earlier. And like the doors, the window remained as firmly closed as though it was nailed shut. I raced back to the bedroom, going from one window to the next, turning the window locks every which way with no luck at all.

And then I saw the glow from the parlor.

I opened the bedroom door once more: flames were everywhere, and I knew instantly that this was no accident. There had been a fireplace screen in place, and no hot coal had popped out to start the conflagration. I heard myself screaming then, a howl of frustration from the depths of my soul.

Maybe, I thought, just maybe I could break a window with one of the enormous, heavy dog bowls. It was a glimmer of hope, possibly the only one I had. At once I grabbed a sheet from the bed and used it to cover my mouth and nose before sprinting back into the kitchen. Smoke was spreading everywhere now and flames roared up behind me.

As soon as I reached the kitchen, I fell to my knees and fumbled around for one of the dog bowls. My hands closed around one of them almost at once. I stumbled to my feet, got a good grip on the bowl, and hurled it in the direction of the window. The bowl simply bounced off the glass, clattered to the floor, and shattered. I stared at the intact window, stunned. Picking up another bowl, and another, and another, I threw them each in turn at the glass, and still the glass remained unbroken, while the floor became covered with pottery shards.

I sank to the floor amidst the bowl remnants and screamed out in pure rage. This was a trap, set purposefully to guarantee that I would meet my death. An image of Lucius Malfoy's smirking face came to mind. Damn him! Somehow, some way, he'd overheard when we made the arrangements with Minerva.

I huddled on the floor and sobbed. I didn't want to burn to death. Burns were the most horrific injury the body could sustain, and I had seen the physical and psychological damage, the prolonged recovery. I prayed to God that I would die of smoke inhalation before the flames reached me.

Remus. What would happen to Remus? I couldn't imagine the depth of his grief when he would return to find the cottage in flames. We had an entire future ahead of us, and now it was gone. The list of things we would never have was long: our own home, children, growing old together... I'd wanted so badly to give Remus a son some day, a little one to rock and hold while we compared body parts and wondered whose nose, whose eyes, whose toes... Why, why, why? my mind screamed silently and endlessly.

And yet, I knew why. It was because I was a Muggle.

Crying, gasping, coughing, I lay on the floor and prayed for a miracle.

God, I didn't want to die.

And then I heard it. Why the simple sound of a dog barking penetrated my hysteria, I couldn't imagine. But it did, and I opened my eyes and lifted my head and saw my miracle, in the light of the approaching flames.

Smoke was lazily curling and moving, filtering outside around the edges of the dog flap.

The dog barked once more.

Was it possible that Lucius Malfoy didn't know anything about Muggle dog doors? I lunged toward it, and amazingly, astonishingly, it opened with no resistance whatsoever. I thanked God that Minerva's sister preferred big dogs and not toy poodles.

It was a tight squeeze, and almost immediately it felt like my skin was being peeled away. I pushed with my feet and pulled with my hands, grunting, tugging, doing all in my power to get through. It seemed like an eternity until my torso cleared the door. Finally, I dragged my legs out. I was through barely, but through.

For a long moment I lay in the cold night, gulping in the fresh air as if it were the sweetest thing I'd ever tasted. Then I remembered that pyromaniacs (the Muggle ones, at least) were known to hang around to watch the results of their handiwork and that Malfoy might be watching me even now. He was probably arrogant enough to assume that his plan couldn't fail and didn't stick around to see the results, but I wasn't willing to take the chance. Empowered by a second wind, I struggled to my feet and ran away from the burning house as fast as I could.

I wanted to look back at the cottage, yet I was terrified that when I did I would see Malfoy in pursuit. Finally, curiosity got the better of me and I threw a quick glance over my shoulder. I could spot no one behind me, but what I did see made my blood run cold: shimmering in the sky above the burning house was the hideous green outline of a skull. I'd been involved with the wizarding world long enough to know exactly what that meant.

Eventually, my second wind deserted me. By that time, I was fumbling my way through woods with no idea how long I'd run or how far. I was gasping, breathless; I could barely feel my feet, which was just as well as they were probably cut and bloodied. Finally, a stray tree root tripped me up and I fell in a heap on the ground, a sharp pain streaking through my ankle. I had to keep going, I had to get farther away, but when I tried to get to my feet, exhaustion caught up with me. I fell back down and lay there, staring at the black maze of tree branches above me. A horrible thought struck me: I'd escaped one death trap only to face death from hypothermia.

Hysterical laughter welled up from deep within me and I was helpless to stop it. How could I have been so stupid? I curled into a ball to conserve body heat as best I could, but I began to shiver almost immediately. I had to stay awake, I reminded myself. Had to sing, recite poetry, talk to the trees, whatever it took to stay conscious. Had to stay awake, had to try...

Suddenly, I heard the dog barking again, furiously and quite nearby this time. Had it followed me? If Malfoy heard the commotion and discovered me, I was done for.

"No, please," I mumbled. "Don't bark. He'll hear. You don't understand. Don't bark..."

Suddenly there was another noise, that of a person crashing through the underbrush.

It was too late. Lucius Malfoy had found me. I closed my eyes and sank into an endless blackness.

In Poppy's Care

Chapter 5 of 6

After being temporarily forced out of our flat, Remus and I try to make the best of a bad situation.

Chapter 5: In Poppy's Care

March 21-23, 1997

I opened my eyes to find the light from a wand aimed at my face. Instantly I raised an arm to block the bright glare, catching a brief glimpse of the wand holder in the process. But instead of Lucius Malfoy's triumphant leer, I found Remus' pale, frightened face hovering over me. I tried to speak, but my voice wasn't cooperating. A sort of croak emerged; it was the best I could do.

"It's all right, Kailin. You're safe!" Remus tore off his jacket and spread it over me, throwing a quick glance over his shoulder. "Tonks! Over here!"

The wand-light flashed upwards, and gold sparks flew into the air. Then Remus turned the light back on me, searching for any apparent injuries and brushing the hair out of my face. I'm sure I looked a sight, blackened with soot and mud and God knows what else.

"We've got to get you out of here," Remus said, his expression grim. "Where are you hurt?"

"Ankle," I mumbled. "I think I broke it. I don't know what else."

He picked me up as though I weighed nothing and began to trudge through the trees. I groaned aloud; the multitude of aches and pains told me that more than a broken ankle was involved. But then the warmth of his body began to penetrate my thin tee-shirt, bringing the sensation of life seeping back into me.

"Warm," I gasped.

"What?"

"Warm," I repeated. "Feels good..."

"Hold on, Kailin. Don't you dare die on me!"

I heard footsteps, and when I opened my eyes again I saw a second lit wand bobbing toward us. Tonks appeared moments later. "Oh, no! Is she all right, Remus?"

"She's hurt. We've got to get help."

"St. Mungo's?"

"Don't be ridiculous. You know what'll likely happen if I take her there. We've got to go to a Muggle hospital."

I wanted to ask how they intended to call an ambulance, but my brain and mouth still seemed disconnected somehow. I contented myself with listening in on the conversation.

"Here, cover her with my cloak. It's bigger than your jacket..."

Suddenly there was something heavy wrapped around me, forming a cozy cocoon that felt wonderful. "Why are you here, Tonks?" I asked drowsily.

Nymphadora Tonks' heart-shaped face wavered in the dim light, but I was sure that I saw her wink. "Just fancied a walk in the woods. Naw, just joking. It was my turn to be on call tonight. Wasn't that was a major stroke of luck!"

Whatever... The warmth beginning to flow through my body was the ultimate relaxant. I closed my eyes and let myself drift away. The rest was a blur of voices and impressions.

"You can't take her on the Knight Bus, can you?"

"I can and I will. I'd like to see them stop me. She's hurt and she needs help."

"I'd avoid St. Mungo's at all costs. They'll want to Obliviate her, you know."

"What'll you tell them at a Muggle hospital?"

"...Portkey to Hogwarts?"

"Hang on, Kailin."

Once again, the world went black.

* * *

The mingled smell of antiseptic and pharmaceuticals was a terribly familiar one. I opened my eyes and tried to make sense of my surroundings.

Bright sunlight greeted me as I gingerly lifted my head and looked about. I was obviously in a hospital ward somewhere, swaddled tightly under a crisply starched sheet and warm woolen blanket. A series of old-fashioned, wheeled white screens shielded me from seeing beyond the immediate vicinity, while above me a vaulted ceiling soared into the distance. To my right, Remus was sprawled face down on the bed next to mine, fully clothed and looking exhausted. From the quiet, rhythmic rise and fall of his back, I guessed that he must be sound asleep.

"Hello there." A woman in an outmoded nurse's uniform appeared around the edge of the screen. "Kailin, is it?"

I nodded.

"I'm Poppy Pomfrey, the matron here at Hogwarts. I'm quite pleased to make your acquaintance, although the circumstances are rather unfortunate," she said, clucking her tongue.

"I'm at Hogwarts?" I was stunned. How had I gotten from Kent to the northern reaches of Scotland?

"You are," the woman affirmed.

"How did I get here?" My mind was trying hard to wrap itself around the improbability of the situation.

"Magic. You needed care, and the most reasonable solution at the time was to transport you here."

"Oh." I gave up my efforts at logic and turned my head to glance at my husband. "Is he all right?"

"He's fine," Madam Pomfrey told me. "Completely worn out, but fine."

"He looks like he could sleep for a year."

Poppy gazed at him fondly. "We go way back, Remus and me. He was a regular patient of mine every month while at school, did he ever tell you?"

"Yes. He was terribly disappointed that you couldn't make it to our wedding."

"I was abroad at the time, visiting my son. Believe me when I say that I would have been there if I could. Remus Lupin means that much to me."

I tentatively flexed muscles and wiggled extremities. "How am I?"

"Quite well, considering."

"Which means what?"

"You have a sprained ankle, a number of scrapes and cuts, a broken collarbone, and mild lung irritation. It could have been much worse."

"I'm not burned?" I held my breath, waiting to hear her answer.

Poppy shook her head. "Nothing worse than you'd get from sunbathing too long on the beach. You are a very lucky young woman."

Sweet relief washed over me. Madam Pomfrey continued.

"I understand that you are in Muggle medicine."

"Yes."

"Then let me share with you what I've done. I've mended your collarbone with an incantation, although it'll be a bit tender in that area for a while. I used salves and ointments for your scrapes and burns and a potion for your lungs. The sprained ankle, however, will take a while. I could have mended it in second if it had been broken, but I'm afraid soft tissue injuries heal only when they're ready."

I nodded. What she said about sprains was true: they took a long time to heal. Magic might be able to fix fractures, I thought, but it couldn't take care of everything. It was an oddly comforting thought.

"Could I have a drink of water, please?" I requested.

"Of course." Poppy moved to my bedside table and poured a glass from a stoneware pitcher. She helped me sit up a bit. I could see what she meant about the collarbone area being a bit tender and gulped the water down greedily.

"What time is it?"

"Eight o'clock."

My brain awoke fully with a jolt. "In the morning?" I yelped, struggling to sit up all the way. At once every cell in my body screamed out in protest. I groaned and sagged back onto the pillow.

"Here, now!" Madam Pomfrey scolded, bustling around the bed, replacing the covers. "You'll need to lie quietly for several days if you want to heal properly!"

"But I need to call work and let them know I'm here. I mean, I have to tell them that I'm hurt and won't be in for a while."

"I'm sure Remus can take care of that when he wakes," Poppy said sternly, fixing me with a look that she probably used to reduce students to a state of quivering submission. I decided abruptly that she wasn't as friendly as she first appeared. In fact, I thought she looked rather like the sort who would keep her bedpans in a refrigerator.

"Remus is awake," a sleepy voice said, and I glanced over to see my husband swinging his legs over the side of the next bed and running a hand through tousled hair, looking anxious. "What's wrong?"

"Work," I said worriedly. "I have to let them know that I won't be in."

"Oh." Remus visibly sagged with relief. "Is that all?"

"Is that all? They can fire me if I don't call in. In fact, I'll need a doctor's note if I'm off for a week or more!"

He yawned and moved from his bed to perch on the edge of mine. "I'll take care of it, dearest. You just relax."

"Listen to your husband, even if you won't listen to me," Poppy said, nodding stern agreement. "I'll be back shortly. I need to fetch another dose of the Aeration Elixir."

I sighed, resigning myself to the fact that I was unable to do anything else at the moment. Could it be possible that this had all started less than twelve hours ago? It seemed a lifetime.

"I thought I was going to die," I said as Madam Pomfrey's footsteps disappeared into the distance. At once, my throat constricted and hot tears pricked my eyes. I worked one arm out from under the covers and reached for my husband.

Remus took my hand and enclosed it firmly in his own. I suspected that his smile was meant to be encouraging, but it was a pale imitation of the real thing. "I thought I'd lost you," he murmured.

I was unable to respond as tears began to trickle down my cheeks. Remus wiped them away, first with a tender hand, then with the corner of the bed sheet. Words were unnecessary. It was enough that we were alive and together.

Finally, Remus spoke up. "Can you tell me about it?"

I nodded, trying valiantly to contain my emotions. "I fell asleep, and suddenly there were all these banging noises."

"Banging noises?"

"The cottage windows. They were slamming shut. Remember how we opened them all before you left?"

Remus nodded, and I went on.

"There was something I don't know, something evil that you could almost feel. I tried to get out of the house but when I tried the front door, it seemed like it was sealed shut. No matter which way I turned the lock, it wouldn't budge. And then the fire started and I tried opening the windows to climb out, but they wouldn't open either. I even tried to break the glass with those dog dishes, but they just bounced off."

"Those bowls that were lined up in the kitchen?" Remus' eyes widened in amazement. "They were enormous. They should have easily shattered the glass."

"They didn't," I said, grimacing. "They just bounced off and broke into pieces."

Remus frowned. "I wonder... Some variant of the Imperturbable charm, I suppose. Go on. How did you manage to get out?"

"The dog flap."

"The what?"

"The silly dog flap," I repeated with a weak smile. "I was on the kitchen floor and I heard a dog bark. I don't know why it caught my attention, but it did. When I looked up, I could see smoke slipping out the cracks around the dog door. I lunged for it and managed to squeeze myself through. I guess that's when I cracked my collarbone; I thought I felt something snap just then."

"You heard a dog bark?" Remus ignored my collarbone and backtracked to the barking dog. He looked startled by this revelation.

"Yes. Why? Is that important?" The point was that I'd been able to escape through the flap. Remus was looking as bewildered as if I'd told him aliens had transported me to safety.

A myriad of emotions sped across my husband's face. He drew a deep, shaky breath. "It's just that well, when I got back to the cottage, I saw the fire and the Dark Mark..."

"Yes?"

Remus made a helpless motion with his hands. "I was screaming, I think. I don't recall much from that moment, to be honest. All I knew was that flames were shooting through the roof and that you were inside. I sent a message off to the Aurors, and just then I heard a dog barking at me."

I was missing something here. "You heard the dog, too?"

"I heard *and* saw the dog. It was off to the side of the cottage." He hesitated. "You're going to think I'm mad, Kailin, but I could swear that it was Padfoot. Sirius in his animagi form."

I stared at him, a shiver coursing down my spine. Remus continued, looking almost apologetic for asking me to believe such a thing.

"It he," he amended, "was barking like mad, clearly trying to get me to follow him. If it had been any other dog, I wouldn't have turned away from the cottage, but "

"He led you to me?" I ventured breathlessly.

Remus nodded slowly. "I'm sure of it."

I thought about this. In a world where magical things were commonplace, who was I to say that Sirius Black hadn't come back to lead the wife of his good friend to safety?

"So Sirius saved my life," I whispered.

Remus' eyes were moist. Wordlessly, I gripped my husband's hand.

* * *

Madam Pomfrey brought me a cup of broth not too long after. It smelled and tasted heavenly, but Remus had merely rolled his eyes in contempt.

"Do you know how much of that stuff I've drunk in this very place? Enough to float a navy. And I don't ever recall thinking of it as 'heavenly'."

"I don't care. It tastes great to me," I said, clutching the cup with both hands.

"Would you like some too, Remus?" Madam Pomfrey inquired, having overheard only half of the conversation.

"No, thank you, Poppy. I've had my share," he said politely.

She chuckled and patted him on the shoulder. "After Kailin's finished with her broth, I'm going to move her to one of the private rooms so she can be undisturbed."

Remus smiled. "One of 'my rooms'?"

"Yes, indeed."

"So she can be undisturbed or undetected?" he wanted to know.

Poppy eyed him shrewdly. "A bit of both. We're fortunate that there hasn't been a parade of students by this morning, with all their minor complaints about upset stomachs and whatnot."

Fifteen minutes later, I was barely resettled into a sunny private room when there were footsteps and voices outside.

"Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall are here to see you," Madam Pomfrey told me. "Are you up to it? I'd prefer that you take a nap, you know."

"I'll nap later," I promised her. "Please send them in."

Remus rose from his bedside chair to greet the pair as they entered in a flurry of robes. Albus Dumbledore always looked impressive; his garb automatically conveyed a sense of grandeur while the true indicator of authority was radiated by the man himself. Some months ago, when Remus had told me Dumbledore's age, I'd been floored. Minerva, meanwhile, looked distressed, and I suddenly remembered that her sister had lost her home because of me.

"Ah..." A warm smile spread over Dumbledore's face. "I'm delighted to see you awake and doing so well, Kailin."

"Hello, Professor Dumbledore. Thank you for your hospitality."

"Not at all," he said, waving his hand dismissively. "I'm delighted that we were able to be of assistance. Bringing you here actually solved a host of problems for us. How are you feeling?"

"Fine. Well, not so fine, but better." I wondered about the 'host of problems', but didn't ask. I turned my attention to Minerva. "Professor McGonagall, I'm so terribly sorry. Your sister's house "

"Kailin, don't even dream of apologizing," she said, her Scottish accent more pronounced than usual. "I'm more sorry than I can say. To think that I nearly sent you to your death!"

"But if it had been any other house, I probably wouldn't have survived."

"What do you mean?"

Remus explained about my escape through the dog door. By the time he finished, McGonagall was shaking her head in amazement.

"Miranda and all her dogs! I've never approved of her menagerie, but it looks as though for once they served a purpose."

"But her home is gone," I protested.

Minerva shrugged. "As long as her precious dogs weren't involved, I'm sure she'll be quite all right. She often talked about doing a major renovation on the place anyway. What disturbs me more is that someone in the Leaky Cauldron overheard me directing you to her cottage last night."

"Do you think they might have overheard your private conversation with Remus?" I asked, wondering if their discussion about the affairs of the Order had also reached unwelcome ears.

McGonagall shook her head. "It did occur to me when I first learned of the fire, but it was far too noisy in the pub proper. I'm sure no one overheard that part."

Remus agreed. "We discussed the cottage when you were leaving, Minerva. It was quieter out by the Floo grates, although I didn't notice anyone lurking nearby."

"And Malfoy wasn't around," I put in. "Believe me, I was on the lookout for him. It had to be him, though. I'm sure of it."

"Ah, yes. Mr. Malfoy..." Dumbledore's voice was much softer now. "On the way here, Professor McGonagall explained about your encounters with him. Tell me, Kailin, did he threaten to harm you?"

"Not exactly, although he told me that associating with werewolves could be deadly. I suppose you could take that as a threat. And in hindsight, I probably shouldn't have mouthed off to him." Dumbledore raised an eyebrow at this, and I went on. "I called him a nasty bigot and told him to get out of my face."

Professor Dumbledore chuckled in delight. "How wonderful! I wish I could do the same. Unfortunately I spend far too much time dancing on political eggshells a sad requirement of being Headmaster, I'm afraid. Kailin, Remus, I've read the report that Nymphadora Tonks is submitting this morning. You'll be pleased to know that what reaches her supervisor, and eventually the *Daily Prophet*, will not give any specifics of the case."

"Good," I said, relieved. The fact that Tonks, the responding Auror, was a member of the Order meant that the official report would be spun in our favor.

"Thank you, Albus," Remus said earnestly.

Albus nodded acknowledgement. "I will ask Severus Snape to use his contacts to determine if Malfoy was indeed responsible, and if anyone else was involved. Right now,

he is of the opinion that whoever started the fire probably acted alone and not under the direction of Lord Voldemort. In other words, it looks less like an organized Death Eater attack than an act of pure spite.

"It's a miracle you survived, Kailin. It does, however, raise one more issue. Providing Malfoy did it and let's assume that he did, for the sake of argument he doubtless believes you to be dead. Therefore, it won't do for you or Remus to parade around Hogwarts in plain view while you're recuperating here. Remus does not look the part of a grieving husband, and you, my dear, look far too alive."

I smiled at the comment. Dumbledore continued.

"Your meals will be sent up, of course. If there's anything you might want from the Library to pass the time, Remus, I'll see that Madam Pince brings it by. I'm truly sorry to have to confine you like this, but as you know, there are students here with close ties to Voldemort's followers Malfoy's own son, among them. We must be cautious."

As Dumbledore and McGonagall turned to go, I remembered the one thing we hadn't mentioned about last night, and I glanced up at my husband. "Did you want to tell them about the dog?"

"Dog?" Minerva echoed.

Remus shook his head, a slight smile on his face. "It's nothing important."

"Then I'll talk more with you two after Severus has something to report," Albus said. "Meanwhile, just rest and recuperate. You're safe here."

I turned to Remus when the pair had left. "Why didn't you tell them that you think Sirius saved my life?"

Remus squeezed my hand. "It's neither here nor there, dearest. In the long run, all it amounts to is that you claim you heard a dog and I say I saw Padfoot. Frankly, I think it's very private and very special. I may tell Dumbledore about it someday, but not now."

"Do you think he wouldn't believe you?" I asked curiously.

"Oh, I'm certain he'd believe me. I just don't know that I'm ready to share the secret."

* * *

The *Daily Prophet* carried the story of the fire, although it was little more than a brief blurb:

Death Eaters (followers of He-Who-We-Wish-Had-Not-Returned) were apparently responsible for a fire last night at a cottage outside Gravesend, Kent, according to a report filed by Aurors this morning. The cottage belongs to Miss Miranda McGonagall, who is out of the country at the present time. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement would neither confirm nor deny the rumor that a Muggle woman died in the fire.

I mended under Madam Pomfrey's excellent ministrations while Remus caught up on his rest and relaxation. That first day, Poppy spent much time plying me with potions and salves and insisting that I sleep. It was the exact opposite of the trend in Muggle medicine, where we launch people out of bed at the earliest opportunity in order to keep the insurance companies happy. I enjoyed playing the role of pampered patient until the second day, when I'd had my fill of sleep and was dying to know what was involved in wizarding healing procedures.

I devoured every textbook that Poppy owned, finding one more fascinating than the next. Many of the modern Muggle drugs had their basis in the herbs and preparations used in medicinal potions. And what Muggles lacked when it came to magic, we made up for with our array of technology. Still, both boiled down to skilled practitioners caring for those in need. Interestingly enough, we had more in common than I'd expected.

On the third day, Severus Snape stood with Dumbledore at the foot of my bed, regarding me with the same disinterest that he always displayed in my presence. He had spoken with Lucius Malfoy the night before, he said, and in the course of the conversation Malfoy mentioned that he'd had a 'bit of fun' Thursday night. A large snifter of brandy later, it was revealed that in a fit of pique, he had set fire to a house where a Muggle woman was staying, ridding the world of another piece of filth and proclaiming Voldemort's superiority by displaying the Dark Mark in the sky. What puzzled him, however, was that the act hadn't garnered much press in the *Daily Prophet*.

"I suggested to him that perhaps the remoteness of the house was to blame," Snape said, his face expressionless. "Without witnesses, his grand gesture went unnoticed. And if there is anything Malfoy despises, it's going unnoticed."

I suppose that meant that if Lucius Malfoy ever tried to come after me again, he'd do so in the middle of Trafalgar Square. Remus thanked Snape for his inquiries on my behalf, and Snape responded that it was no more than he would do for anybody in the Order. Given the poorly concealed loathing he generally displayed toward my husband, it was probably the closest the two would ever come to a cordial relationship.

"Professor Snape," I said, stopping the man as he turned to leave.

"Yes?"

"Thank you," I said simply, holding his eyes with my own. I would no longer wonder why the Order kept him around.

Snape merely nodded acknowledgement before turning on his heel and departing.

I glanced around at Remus and Dumbledore. For two men who had just heard a virtual confession from Lucius Malfoy albeit secondhand they didn't seem very happy.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "This is good news, isn't it? We thought Malfoy had attacked the cottage, and now we know."

Remus perched on the side of the bed and reached for my hand. "I'm afraid that's as far as it can go, Kailin," he said gently.

"What do you mean?" I didn't like the sound of this.

"If you accuse Lucius Malfoy of attempted murder," Dumbledore told me, "you will be discredited at once. The sad reality of the situation is that no one will listen to a Muggle who is married to a werewolf, regardless of the truth. Besides, while the Ministry may have awakened to the realities of Voldemort's return, the money in Malfoy's pocket still speaks louder. He's publicly proclaiming to be on the side of the greater good these days, and people believe him."

"But we have proof. Snape said "

"You cannot prosecute, Kailin. To do so exposes Severus as a spy and I will not allow that to happen." Dumbledore sighed, as though a great weight had settled upon him.

I turned to my husband, hoping against hope for some kind of support. But Remus' expression told me what I feared.

"He's right, Kailin. We can't prosecute Malfoy based on what Snape told us."

His words fell into a pool of silence.

So this was it? I was attacked and very nearly killed, and there wasn't a damned thing I could do about it? I wanted to scream out at the injustice of it all, but I suspected that what was happening to me had already been repeated numerous times in the wizarding world. This was what it meant to be a Muggle married to a wizard. What

Dumbledore didn't come right out and say was that the Order of the Phoenix had to be preserved at all possible cost. It never occurred to me that it would happen at my expense.

"What if Malfoy finds out I'm alive? Do you think he'll try again?" I asked Dumbledore numbly. The Headmaster regarded me gravely over his half-moon glasses.

"Lucius Malfoy is neither stupid nor careless. I doubt that he would be willing to pursue a vendetta against you, particularly if Voldemort was not behind it to begin with. On the other hand, he would certainly not be pleased if this particular failure was flaunted before him.

"Remus is relegated to the fringes of the wizarding world because of what he is. That is unfortunate, but in this instance it works in your favor. If he does not draw attention to himself and he normally does not then he will not draw attention to you. I suggest that you refrain from going with him to Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade, on the off-chance that you might be spotted by Malfoy."

I was relieved. I enjoyed Diagon Alley, and had hoped to visit Hogsmeade someday, but I would readily give these up if it meant my survival. "So I don't need to go into hiding or quit my job."

"Not at all."

Remus took a deep breath. "You should go back to the States until all this is over, Kailin. I won't have you in danger at every turn."

"I'm not leaving you," I said immediately.

"It's the only safe course," he answered sharply.

"Safer for me, maybe," I burst out. "What about you?"

"I can take care of myself. I used to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, remember?"

"So it's fine for you to worry about me, but I'm not allowed to worry about you?" I asked heatedly.

Dumbledore, who was looking as though he wanted to put both of us in detention, held up a hand at once. "I'm not suggesting that anyone should go anywhere. Remus, you and Kailin will need to discuss this in private, and at a lower volume, I might add."

That was enough to silence us. Madam Pomfrey, I noted, had poked her head around the corner to glare at us disapprovingly.

Remus and I discussed our situation, as well as our options, all that day. The one thing we could readily agree on was that any official legal action against Malfoy was out of the question. We could not undermine the Order. Besides, we had neither the resources nor the stamina to undertake such an endeavor. I accepted the fact that when justice finally came, it would be at the hands of the Order of the Phoenix and not the wizarding courts.

As for the other issue remaining in Britain or returning to the States Remus and I were in flat disagreement. He still held that I should leave the country, while I was determined to stay. Neither of us would budge on our positions, and the debate ended in a stalemate. I wouldn't have put it past him to Apparate me to the foot of the Statue of Liberty and leave me there.

And he knew I would be on the first plane back.

Starting Over

Chapter 6 of 6

After being temporarily forced out of our flat, Remus and I try to make the best of a bad situation.

Chapter 6: Starting Over

By Monday morning, I was in a dismal mood. Madam Pomfrey's textbooks no longer enthralled me, and I could add boredom to my list of complaints. Physically, I was improved to the point where I no longer needed to remain in bed. Emotionally, I was miserable. The primary reason was the inability to prosecute Lucius Malfoy for attempted murder, even though I knew the reasoning behind our inaction. It was Remus' calm acceptance of the situation that made me even angrier.

"You act as though it's perfectly fine that we can do nothing about it," I complained.

"That's not true," Remus countered. "I hate this as much as you do. I'd like to see Malfoy hang for what he did."

"You don't act like it," I muttered.

"What do you want me to do?" Remus asked wearily. "Go after him myself? End up in Azkaban for murder?"

"No, of course not. But do you have to be so maddeningly complacent about the whole thing?"

Remus sighed. "You need to understand something, Kailin: as a werewolf, I've been impotent under the law most of my life. The idea that I could lodge a complaint, have the complaint addressed by the wizarding legal system, and actually have it decided in my favor, has never been a remote possibility. This is no different."

I closed my eyes and leaned back in the bed, digesting Remus' words. The remains of our breakfast, as well as the morning's edition of the *Daily Prophet*, sat on a tray table in front of us. A headline read: 'Malfoy Donation Will Allow New Wing at St. Mungo's to Open'.

"I'm sorry," I said, utterly defeated. "I don't blame you for anything. I'm just bored and tired of being here."

"I know, dearest." Remus reached for my hand and squeezed gently.

"Do wizards really hang murderers?" I asked after a moment.

A smile played around the corners of my husband's lips. "No," he admitted. "I'm afraid that I've seen too many Muggle Western flicks."

I couldn't help but laugh at that.

"Look," Remus said, standing abruptly. "This is ridiculous. I'm going to see Mr. Najib today. See if there's any chance at all we can move home."

"We can always hope," I said wryly. Remus had checked on the status of the flat two days ago. The answer was an apologetic 'not yet'. "How will you get out of the school without being seen by someone?"

"All you need are the right connections." Remus peered out the door into the main ward to make sure that Madame Pomfrey was alone. "Poppy?"

I could hear the woman's starched apron rustling down the ward toward us. Finally, she appeared in the door of my room. "What is it?"

"Could you summon Harry Potter for me, please?" Remus asked politely.

Poppy was instantly suspicious. "No one is supposed to know you are here," she pointed out stiffly.

"Albus didn't say that, exactly. He said only that we shouldn't be seen by others."

"And how is that different?"

"Just do it, please? For old times' sake?"

The woman still looked suspicious, but there was a twinkle in her eye. She turned on her heel and left, and five minutes later she was back, with Harry Potter in tow.

"Professor?" The boy's jaw dropped when he saw the two of us in the private room. "What are you and Kailin doing here?"

"Come in, Harry," Remus said, closing the door behind him. Madam Pomfrey sniffed loudly in disapproval, then there was the sound of her retreating footsteps.

He explained briefly about the fire at the cottage. Harry's eyebrows shot up.

"That was you? Hermione saw the article in the paper, but we didn't realize that you were involved. Didn't it say a Muggle died?"

"It said a Muggle was rumored to have died. Kailin was hurt, but she made it out alive."

"Wow!" Harry looked impressed. "Do they know who did it?"

Remus hesitated, evidently debating with himself before answering. "Lucius Malfoy," he said, and immediately held up a hand as Harry's expression turned stormy. "You need to keep this under your hat, Harry. No one is to know that Kailin was involved in the fire, or even that we're here at Hogwarts."

"Of course, Professor. Can I tell Ron and Hermione, though?"

"I suppose, but it can go no further than that. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Harry," I interrupted, "how is Hermione doing?"

"Since her parents died, you mean? She's doing okay."

"Really?" I was skeptical. I knew from personal experience that 'doing okay' was very much a relative term.

"Well..." Harry said, shrugging his shoulders. "I honestly don't know, Kailin. She studies as hard as ever and says that her parents would want her to do that, but it's a little weird. She says she refuses to dwell on what happened, but it kind of seems like she's trying to forget about it."

I nodded. I felt badly for the girl, but I was sure that Minerva McGonagall was keeping a close eye on her. On the other hand, Minerva was hardly the maternal type.

"What are you going to do about Malfoy?" Harry asked, turning to Remus.

Remus and I exchanged glances. "For now, nothing. The reason I asked Madam Pomfrey to call you, Harry, is that I need your help. Since Kailin and I are temporarily in hiding here, we aren't free to walk around the castle. I need to go into London today to check on repairs to our flat, but as you know, you can't Apparate in or out of Hogwarts."

"I know. Hermione keeps reminding me."

"What I need is to get out of the castle without being seen."

A grin spread over Harry's face. "I believe I can help you there."

Remus grinned and clapped him on the shoulder. "Good boy. I was sure you could."

Harry left, promising to be right back.

"What in the world was that all about?" I asked, bemused.

"You'll see," Remus said smugly and refused to tell me anymore.

A few minutes later, Harry returned and passed a package through the door. "Here you go, Professor. Good luck."

Remus winked at him and shut the door so that we were alone once more.

"What's that?" I asked, watching him intently.

"Let me show you." He opened the package and shook out a silvery cloth that looked like flowing liquid. Chuckling, he held it up in the air.

I still had no idea what was going on until Remus wrapped the cloth around him. When his body disappeared, I began to get a glimmer of what he had in mind.

"What is that?" Fascinated, I hobbled out of bed, toward the spot where Remus had stood just a moment earlier.

"An Invisibility Cloak. This belonged to James Potter. We got a lot of use out of it while we were at school." Remus peeled the cloak away from his head, an impish grin on his face.

It was terribly disconcerting to see my husband's head floating in mid-air. "Can I try it? Would it work on me?" I asked, wide-eyed.

"I don't see why not," Remus said, swinging the cloak off his shoulders and around mine.

I looked down to find that my body was completely gone. I started giggling, my bad mood forgotten. "This is bizarre!"

"It's an odd sensation, isn't it?"

"I'll say." I was busy admiring my reflection, or lack thereof, in the small mirror above the sink. "So you'll use this to sneak out of the castle?"

Remus nodded. "Classes are in session, so it's not likely that I'll run into anybody on my way out. Still, it pays to be careful. I'll be back as soon as I can. Is there anything I can bring you?"

"Some clothes?" I asked hopefully. "I hate to ask, because it means you'll have to go shopping."

Everything we'd brought with us from Grimmauld Place had burned in the fire. My only recourse was a lost-and-found box that Poppy assured me should contain something in my size.

"Anything in particular?"

"Just some sweats," I said. "And maybe some cheap shoes of some sort."

"Done. May I have the cloak back now?"

"Oh. Sorry..." Sheepishly, I unwound myself and handed it back to him.

Remus kissed me lightly. "Now that we have the cloak, what say we take a little tour of Hogwarts tonight? You need to see where your Grandmum and I spent our formative years."

"I'd love that!" I said, my eyes shining. "But can we do that? Can we both fit under there?"

"You'd be amazed how many people can fit under this thing."

It was mid-afternoon when Remus returned. I'd fallen asleep after lunch and didn't wake until I felt him kiss me gently on the cheek.

"Hi," I murmured, rolling onto my back and stretching hugely. "I didn't plan to fall asleep."

"You're still catching up," he said, dropping a bag onto the bed.

"Mmm." I sat up, blinking in the afternoon light. "How's the outside world?"

"Still there, believe it or not." Remus told me, dropping into the bedside chair.

I reached for the bag of clothing and pulled out a set of navy sweats and some clogs. Immediately, a frown creased my forehead. True, I hadn't specified colors or styles, but these looked exactly like some clothes that I already owned.

Startled, my head snapped upright. "These are mine!" I gasped. "You got them from the flat!"

My husband grinned broadly. "I did, in fact."

"Does this mean we can go home?"

"Tomorrow," Remus said, looking quite pleased with himself. "Mr. Najib says that the work is complete, but the insurance company won't allow anyone to move back in until tomorrow. Something about an effective date for insurance to start."

"We're really going home!" It hardly seemed possible.

The change in fortune was enough to put thoughts of Lucius Malfoy and justice behind me. In the morning, Remus told me, we would go into Hogsmeade and catch the Hogwarts Express back to London.

"Hogsmeade?" My face fell. "But I'm not supposed to go into Hogsmeade."

"We have the Invisibility Cloak, remember? I know it won't be exactly comfortable, but you can wear that into town, and on the train. There aren't many passengers on the Express when the students aren't coming or going."

At that point, I would have ridden on top of the train if I thought it would get me back home.

We spent the rest of the day making plans. Late in the evening, when the student curfew went into effect, Remus pulled out the Invisibility Cloak once more.

Madam Pomfrey didn't exactly approve of our scheme, but as we were adults, there wasn't a lot she could do to stop us. Still, she was smiling as we began to wrap the Invisibility Cloak around us at the door to the Hospital Wing.

"You look like a couple of first years, up to no good," she said, arms crossed sternly across her chest.

"I'll have you know I was up to no good all seven years," Remus told her indignantly as he pulled the cloak over our heads.

"I thought as much," she murmured, opening the door for us. "Be careful, you two."

And so we prowled the darkened halls of Hogwarts, Remus providing me with a hushed travelogue as we went. The dormitories were not accessible to us, of course, and my only regret was that I couldn't see where Marvy had lived long before my mother was a twinkle in her eye. We saw the Great Hall, the library, and several of the classrooms. I detected a faint, wistful note in Remus' voice when he showed me the classroom where he'd taught Defense against the Dark Arts, and I wondered if someday he would want to return here to teach once more.

My eyes went wide as saucers when I saw a ghost floating through a wall, and Remus told me that this was a routine event here. But the truly suspenseful part of our tour came when he spotted the caretaker, Filch, and his skeletal cat coming our way. We stood pressed against the wall, breathing silently as the pair passed, and I had the distinct feeling that my husband had done this on more than one occasion.

The next morning, we ate a leisurely breakfast and prepared to leave Hogwarts. Poppy Pomfrey suggested that I stay off my ankle for the rest of the week, then presented me with the excused absence note I'd need in order to return to work. It was written in quill pen on heavy parchment, and even as I thanked her for it, I wondered how in the world I'd explain it to my boss. I supposed I could say that my doctor had a latent interest in calligraphy and old writing materials or something.

At any rate, our exile was over.

* * *

The flat looked the same as it did the day we left it. It should have been a comforting thought, but it wasn't. Here, nothing had changed, while in the space of four weeks' time, my life had changed dramatically.

"It looks very, very good to me," the Indian landlord said cheerfully in his lightly accented voice. "Does it look good to you, Mrs. Lupin?"

I smiled. "It looks great, Mr. Najib."

"The workmen did a good job, yes? You can dance on this floor, and it is as solid as the Rock of Gibraltar. You see, Mr. Lupin?"

Remus nodded reassuringly. "Excellent workmanship," he agreed.

"And there is no smell of the smoke or fire from downstairs," the animated Mr. Najib went on. "Very good, eh?"

Remus and I exchanged grins. Little did Mr. Najib know that after his professional cleaners had left, a number of magical spells had thoroughly eliminated any odors left by the grease fire. I don't think I could have lived in the flat again if there'd been even the faintest odor of lingering smoke. I had my experience at Miranda McGonagall's cottage to thank for that.

"I welcome you home then," Mr. Najib went on, thrusting a potted geranium into my hand. "It is a nice spring day outside. You open the windows and enjoy."

"We will," I said politely. If there was one thing I would never again take for granted, it was an open window.

As the door closed behind the landlord, Remus took the geranium from my hands and set it down. Then he pulled me into a tight embrace there in the middle of the kitchen.

"We're home, dearest," he murmured. "Finally."

"Finally..." I sighed the word.

"It was nice of Najib to give us an extra month's free rent, considering everything we've been through."

"Uh-huh."

"Are you all right?" Remus inquired. "You're very quiet. I rather expected you to be bouncing from room to room."

"I can't bounce on the ankle yet. Poppy won't let me." I tried to make a joke out of it. "I'm fine, really. It's just that everything in here is just as we left it. But I'm not."

"Of course you're not."

I snuggled deeper into my husband's shoulder, grateful for his steadying presence. Life went on, and the most important thing was that Remus and I were together, alive and well.

"I have reached a decision about one thing," I said softly.

"You've come to your senses and decided to sit out the war in the States?"

"No, and this is even less sensible than staying." I took a deep breath. "I want to have a baby."

Startled, Remus held me at arm's length. "We've talked about this before," he said carefully. "We decided that it would make sense to wait until the war's over, as I recall."

"I know," I said nervously. "But I don't want to wait until the war is over. I want to have a baby now."

"Now?" My husband's smile was a tad forced. "I believe it takes nine months, unless the laws of nature have changed recently."

"I'm not joking about this, Remus. I had a lot of time to think, back there in the hospital wing."

He frowned, obviously certain that I had lost my mind. "Why do you want to have a baby now?"

I tried to marshal all the arguments I'd stored up. "We don't know when the war will be over, for one thing. It could be next week or next year or ten years from now. But the real reason is that I want to do something positive, to create life in the middle of death, if you will. I want to make sure there'll be a Lupin at Hogwarts in eleven years," I added lamely, hoping the last bit would score the winning point for my side.

"I want that too," Remus said hoarsely, "but if something happens to me, then you're left alone with a child to raise."

"And if something happens to me," I retorted, "you'll be the one left alone with a child to raise."

"And what if, God forbid, something happens to both of us?"

I had no answer for that. Remus released my arms and walked over to the kitchen counter. He leaned back against it, crossing his arms across his chest.

"Is this going to be another of those issues like you going back to America?" he asked quietly.

"I suppose. I don't know." I ran both hands through my hair in frustration. "I just want you to think about it, all right? I'd like us to have a baby as a deliberate act of faith, Remus. In spite of everything that's happening. Because life goes on, Voldemort or no Voldemort. Lucius Malfoy or no Lucius Malfoy."

My husband studied me carefully. "We'll think about it, but let's take a bit of time, shall we? Tomorrow there could be another Death Eater attack somewhere, and you might change your mind."

"Or you could change your mind," I pointed out hopefully.

"What makes you think I'm disagreeing with you?"

I gaped at him. "You mean you think we should have a child now?"

"I don't know. I see the wisdom of what you're saying, but part of me wants to follow the most cautious route at all costs. Let's just take the time to be settled back in for a while."

"We could practice," I said demurely.

Remus grinned.

"Lots of practice."