

I Married a Werewolf: You Can't Go Home Again

by Kailin

When her grandfather falls ill, Kailin has to race to America with Remus and Hermione in tow. And Remus and Hermione each have their secrets...

A Visitor and a Visit

Chapter 1 of 10

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Disclaimer: Gee, I wish. Not a one of 'em's mine. Well... not the ones that count, anyway.

Chapter 1, A Visitor and a Visit: Friday, June 27, 1997

I peered at my watch and took another look out the living room window: Remus and Hermione should be here at any moment, provided that the Hogwarts Express wasn't late although, according to my husband, such a thing had never happened and was unlikely to take place today. The train always departed on time and arrived on time, making it one of the constants of the British wizarding world.

I'd wanted to go to King's Cross with Remus. After all, we had met there exactly a year ago, and I'd been looking forward to reminiscing at the very spot where he had come to my rescue. On the other hand, I saw his point when he refused to take me along: run into Lucius Malfoy, and my cover would be blown. And I was all in favor of Malfoy continuing to believe me dead, burned alive in a house fire he'd set just for the thrill of ridding the world of one more Muggle. While I couldn't imagine Lucius Malfoy as the sort of doting parent who personally met his son's train, I didn't dare risk being seen. He was one nasty piece of work, and I never wanted our paths to cross again. I'd have to wax romantic at King's Cross another time.

Ten months had passed since Malfoy managed to convince the wizarding authorities that he was Voldemort's victim instead of devoted follower. Not a soul in the Order of the Phoenix believed the story that he'd been under the Imperius Curse and thereby forced to take part in the melee at the Ministry of Magic last June. Rather, it was taken as gospel truth that a large sum of money had changed hands somewhere along the line in exchange for his freedom.

In an even more bizarre twist, Lucius Malfoy had become a model citizen ever since his release from Azkaban. He donated money to St. Mungo's Hospital and volunteered to serve in various capacities at the Ministry. Over the past months, he had steadily insinuated himself into positions of influence. While it was clear to me that he was up to no good, many in the wizarding world perceived Malfoy with something akin to sympathy: he'd been hurt by the big bad Dark Lord, and now he was on the side of the right. In short, it was not a good situation.

For me personally, the past year had been the most incredible of my life. I came to Britain a single woman, intent on visiting the sites and learning more about my late British grandmother. What I discovered was that my Grandma Marva McLain had graduated from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in 1941, a fully-fledged and previously unknown to most all of my family witch. Along the way, I'd met Remus Lupin and fallen deeply in love. We'd been married ten months now our wedding falling, coincidentally, on the same day that Lucius Malfoy was released from prison.

A movement outside caught my eye, and I saw Remus and Hermione turn the corner onto Bannister Row. Remus was towing a school trunk and shouldering one tote, while Hermione carried her suitcase. The girl was staring at the ground as they walked, and if the two of them were engaged in conversation, it wasn't obvious. I noticed the slump of her shoulders and fancied I could see a general air of dejection from this distance.

And I wondered if this were such a good idea after all.

It was just six months since Hermione Granger's parents had been cruelly murdered by Death Eaters. Remus and I had gone to the funeral and watched as the girl sat stoically, eschewing the support of several blood relatives to cling to Harry Potter on one side and Ron Weasley on the other. That wasn't surprising; Hermione's Muggle kin had been told that Hugh and Helena Granger were killed by burglars, and only the wizarding contingent at the funeral knew the truth. Clearly, Hermione needed comfort from people who understood what had actually happened.

During the ensuing months, however, Hermione's grief had caused nary a ripple in her grade point average. Some marveled at her resilience and determination; others, such as her Gryffindor mentor Minerva McGonagall, thought she was plunging herself deeper in her studies in order to avoid facing reality. I agreed with Minerva. I'd been a junior in college when my parents died in a car crash not, granted, identical circumstances, but the end result was the same. I knew firsthand how hard it was to face life when one's support system was suddenly gone, to dread the summer vacations and holiday breaks anticipated by everyone else in the world, to wonder who would be there to applaud when I received my diploma.

Back in February, Remus and I intended to offer to host Hermione for a week during Hogwarts' summer break. But then we were forced from our home for a month, and the idea was temporarily shelved. By the time we got around to asking, Arthur and Molly Weasley had already opened their home to Hermione, and I assumed that a week at the Lupins' would pale in comparison to the delights of the Burrow. The Weasley household was chaotic enough that just about anything could be pushed from one's mind while there.

Surprisingly, Hermione chose to begin her summer holiday with us, and I arranged to take a week off work. We had nothing definite planned in the way of entertainment. The full moon was just past, the weather was nice, and I didn't want Hermione to think we'd thoroughly programmed her week with the intent of keeping her from dwelling on her loss.

Out on the sidewalk, Remus glanced up towards our flat and spotted me standing in the window. I smiled and waved. He responded with a half-hearted smile, leaving me to wonder what that could mean. Well, I'd find out soon enough.

"Hello, Hermione," I said as I opened the door for the two of them.

"Kailin!" Hermione threw her arms around me. "So nice to see you again! Thank you so much for having me over."

"Not at all. It's our pleasure." The enthusiastic greeting surprised me. The girl seemed perfectly happy, and I decided that if this was an act, it was pretty convincing. Meanwhile, Remus squeezed by with Hermione's baggage levitating it this time, now that he was out of sight of prying Muggles. "Let me show you to your room," I told her.

I led the way through the living and dining room to the small second bedroom while Hermione offered polite compliments about our flat.

"Thanks. It's not a mansion, but it's just right for the two of us." I suspected that as dentists, Hugh and Helena Granger's home had been considerably larger and quite nicely appointed. On the other hand, in the land of socialized medicine, nothing was certain. "Here we are," I said, ushering her into the spare bedroom.

When extending our invitation, I hadn't mentioned to Hermione that the room where she would be staying was the one where Remus closeted himself during his monthly transformations. Not that it mattered much; I was sure that Hermione, with her fervor for social change within the wizarding world, wouldn't care one whit about that. Besides, Remus always made sure that the room was positively immaculate once he'd rested up.

"This is lovely!" Hermione's eyes darted about, taking in everything. She flopped onto the bed as though exhausted by the trip from Hogwarts.

Lovely? Remus and I exchanged smiles as he deposited her bags on the floor. The flat would never be destined for the glossy pages of some decorating magazine, but we had made it into a cozy home. I was happy there, and Remus, who had spent so many years in a near hand-to-mouth existence, could wax positively poetic about our flat if given the chance.

"Dinner's in about half an hour," I told her.

"Do you need any help?"

"Thanks, but no. Everything's under control. Would you like to wash up before supper?" I asked.

"That would be nice, thank you."

"Bathroom's right across the hall." Which was a rather pointless announcement, as we'd walked right by it just thirty seconds earlier.

"We'll call you," Remus told her and followed me out of the room. The door clicked shut behind us.

I turned to my husband. "Well, she seems all right, doesn't she?"

Remus shook his head. "I'm not sure. I think she puts on a brave front, but I don't know that it goes very deep."

"So how did things go at the station? Was Lucius Malfoy there?"

There was a brief silence as Remus seemed rather interested in the floorboards, then: "He was, in fact. It's a very good thing that you weren't there."

I glanced at Remus and saw the frown on his face. "We're not going to have this discussion again, are we? The one about me spending the war in the States?"

"What? No, because I know you wouldn't pay me a bit of attention."

"You're right." I grinned, aware that flashing my dimples was a sure way to avoid any argument with Remus Lupin. Sure enough: he slid his arms around me and I snuggled into his embrace.

"You're quite good at that, you know," he teased.

"It's a gift." I savored the strength of the arms holding me, the heartbeat so near to my own. How the wizarding world could refer to werewolves as half-human was, quite simply, beyond me.

Remus pushed me back to arm's length, regarding me with the expression of deepest longing that I've come to treasure. "Don't let anyone say you have no magic in you, Mrs. Lupin, for they would be quite wrong," he said softly. "How about we practice some more for having a baby?"

I laughed. "Hold that thought. I have to get supper going."

"What can I do? Set the table?"

"Of course."

Remus' version of setting the table involved a wand and a lot of flying china. I let him get on with it while I saw to the rest of the meal. Hermione's apparent ability to rise above her personal losses was still on my mind, however, and I couldn't help thinking aloud.

"I know that Minerva said Hermione has seemed barely affected by the murders, but seeing it now is really strange. I thought for sure that she'd fall apart without her parents to meet her at the station."

"I know." Remus gave a plate a final spin before dropping it into place. "Bizarre, isn't it? Molly Weasley was there and ready to help if need be, but Hermione flounced off the platform like she was all set for a week in Paris."

I was about to answer when the telephone rang. Putting down the pot that I was holding in mid-air, I reached for the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Is this Kailin Curtis? I mean, Kailin uh Lupin?" a man's voice inquired. A man's voice with an American accent.

"Yes," I said, curious.

"Good, I thought I had the right number. I've never called overseas before. This is your Uncle Roger, Kailin."

"Uncle Roger? Hi, how are you?" I was delighted, but surprised. I'd not heard from my uncle since Grandma Marvy's funeral, and with that realization came a ripple of fear. "Oh! Is something wrong with Billy?"

"Well, sort of. That's why I'm calling. You know he was supposed to have hip replacement surgery next week."

"Yes, I know." My beloved grandfather, Billy Mitchell, had been needing the operation for a long time; the combination of pain and difficulty maneuvering had kept him from attending my wedding the previous August.

"When he went for his pre-op testing today, they found that several of the arteries to his heart are blocked. They took him straight to surgery for a cardiac bypass."

"Oh, no!" I gasped. Marvy had died from a massive heart attack. I couldn't lose Billy, too. "Is he all right?"

"I don't know yet. He's still in the operating room."

"Oh, no!" I repeated, dimly aware now that Remus had stopped what he was doing and was looking at me questioningly. I held my hand over the mouthpiece and whispered, "Grandpa Billy's having heart surgery."

Roger was saying something about what time Billy had been taken to surgery, but my mind was racing as I tried to think. "What did the doctors tell you, Roger? How many arteries? What percent blockage?"

"They said five arteries, but I don't recall exactly what percent each one was blocked. It was pretty bad, since they wouldn't even let him go home to pack a bag."

"Were they were the doctors pretty optimistic, or cautious, or or..." Words failed me. Here I was, a nurse who worked at the London Heart Hospital, unable to phrase a coherent question. The same questions I heard families ask daily.

"They didn't say."

They didn't say. I closed my eyes, grimacing briefly. Some doctors were notorious for promising good results when it was unlikely, while others were all doom and gloom until proven otherwise. I had no idea what was really going on halfway around the world, and Roger Mitchell was no help whatsoever.

"Dad asked me to call you before they took him away," Roger continued. "He wanted to make sure you knew."

A lump formed in my throat. "Was he in a pretty good frame of mind?"

"Well, he was shocked, of course. We all were. But he wanted me to tell you that if anything went wrong, he'd be with Mom and that it'd be okay."

That undid me completely. I sobbed aloud. Remus took the receiver from me while I sank into one of the dining room chairs and cried. I could hear him introducing himself, then taking down Roger's cell phone number and the name of the hospital. By the time I had managed to compose myself, Remus had hung up the phone.

"Roger said he'd call as soon as he knows anything," he said gently, taking the chair next to me and reaching for my hands.

I drew in a long, shuddering breath. "I'm sorry, it's just that I lost Marvy to a heart attack, and now Billy's having a bypass..."

Remus reached up and gently wiped away my tears. "Do you need to be there?" he asked simply.

Be there? In Rockford, Illinois? For one brief moment, my heart soared. Then I remembered our houseguest, and my heart fell with a thud back to its usual position.

"How can I? Hermione's here."

"Oh." Remus looked startled, as if he too had momentarily forgotten that we had company.

We discussed the options, which were few: fly to the States and leave Remus to entertain Hermione for a week, or contact the Weasleys and send her on to the Burrow.

"I suppose we'd better ask her what she wants to do," I said, making a move to stand up.

"Wait a moment," Remus said thoughtfully. "What if..."

"What if what?"

"What if," he said, "we went with you?"

I stared at him blankly and sat back down at once. "You mean we'd all go?"

Remus was still looking thoughtful

"Why not? I don't know about Hermione, but I've never been to America. And we've not had a proper holiday since we were married unless you count the weekend at the hotel while the flat was being repaired."

"Or my unexpected stay at Hogwarts," I added, smiling ruefully. Spending a week recuperating in the hospital wing was not my idea of a good time. Neither, however, was spending a week in a hospital waiting room in Rockford, Illinois. "But what about Hermione? She's a teenage girl. She won't want to spend a week of her vacation hanging around a hospital."

"She and I could do some sightseeing, but surely you won't need to spend every moment at the hospital, will you?"

"No, of course not. Provided Billy's doing okay..." My voice trailed off. "Do you think Hermione would mind?"

"It would certainly be a change of scene for her. Could be just the thing she needs. Besides, I've never met any of your family, the full moon's gone by, and this would be a good time to do it."

He was slowly winning me over. "If we went, how would we get there? I'll fly, of course, but would you and Hermione Apparate?" Apparating even short distances impressed me greatly. I couldn't imagine what it must be like to Apparate across the Atlantic.

Remus grinned and shook his head. "Afraid not, darling. Much as I hate to admit this, I don't have the power to Apparate distances of that sort. The transformation takes too much of my strength. I'd land somewhere in the middle of the ocean. Anyway, Hermione doesn't have her license yet. There are International Grates that you can use for that sort of travel, but the Floo Network is out right now, as you know."

I knew. It was assumed, probably correctly, that the Floo Network was still being monitored. Despite the replacement of Cornelius Fudge with Amelia Bones from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, the Ministry remained in a fair amount of chaos. Bones was trying hard to maintain control, but the increasing number of Death Eater attacks had the wizarding populace on edge. It seemed that every issue of the Daily Prophet contained at least one letter demanding that the woman be replaced with someone who would take decisive action.

"Muggle travel," Remus continued. "We just go to the airport and buy tickets on an airplane. We have the money."

Well, yes, we had the money. The remainder of Marvy's bequest sat in the bank, waiting to be used as a down payment for a house some day. Three plane fares would put a small dent in it, but nothing that was unbearable. Still, I couldn't help but smile at my husband's naïve enthusiasm. Wizards were notoriously unschooled in Muggle methods of transportation. Remus had more experience than most in dealing with the Muggle world, but it was still a bit more complex than simply showing up at the airport and buying a ticket.

"What about passports?" I pointed out. "You don't have one, do you? I don't know about Hermione."

"That's what magic's for," Remus said, a definite twinkle in his eye.

It seemed we were headed for America.

Welcome to the Land of Lincoln

Chapter 2 of 10

When her grandfather falls ill, Kailin has to race to America with Remus and Hermione in tow. And Remus and Hermione each have their secrets...

Chapter 2: Welcome to the Land of Lincoln: Saturday, June 28, 1997

We spent most of the evening making arrangements. The earliest flights out of London were full, but I managed to get space on a British Airways jet leaving just after noon the next day. I rented a car for the drive from Chicago to Rockford and reserved adjoining rooms at a Marriott. That done, I commenced on a frenzy of packing.

I had forgotten the delights of being married to a wizard. Remus watched in amusement as I ran around in circles for five minutes, then intervened and suggested we try a little teamwork. I had no idea what he meant until he pointed his wand at the various clothes I'd strewn about the bedroom, and within seconds they had folded themselves and sat in neat piles in the suitcase.

Hermione took the news of our sudden change of plans in her stride. Her equanimity was a little unnerving, to be honest. Travel to another country rather than spend the week in London? No problem. Throw herself into schoolwork rather than deal with the death of her parents? Sure, why not? Having been in her shoes at one time, I could remember a stretch when I'd been ready to choke anyone who breathed hard in my direction. I supposed it was possible that Hermione might have glided through that stage already, but I doubted it.

Then there was the matter of passports. Remus had no passport, and Hermione's had been misplaced somewhere in the shuffle following her parents' deaths, and as much as I love both my native land and my newly adopted country, neither one will allow us in without passports. I dug mine out and showed it to Remus, and within minutes he had transfigured a couple of playing cards from our desk drawer to look just like the real McCoy.

It was nearly twelve-thirty in the morning before Roger called back, but this time he had relatively good things to report: the surgery had gone smoothly and Billy was holding his own. I exhaled in relief at the news. I told Roger that we would be flying over as soon as we got some sleep. Billy would be pleased, he said.

The flight was like all transcontinental flights, consisting of waiting, sitting, more sitting, more waiting. It's especially hard when your loved one is ill and you want to get there as soon as possible. It strikes you just how big the world is and how far from home you really are. I was too on-edge to concentrate on any one thing; Hermione was engrossed in the in-flight movie while Remus leafed through Muggle magazines and tried to nap. By the time the plane touched down at Chicago O'Hare, I was both tired and anxious.

My anxiety wasn't helped when I realized, while waiting in the rental car queue, that my Illinois driver's license had expired back in January. I hadn't driven since renting a car shortly after I'd arrived in Britain, and it never occurred to me to make sure my license was still valid. Luckily, magic is good for more than transfiguring playing cards into passports. Remus merely winked, held out his hand for the now-defunct laminated card, and headed for the men's room. He returned a few minutes later with my driver's license, which now declared itself to be valid for another two years.

"Very impressive," I murmured as we moved another step closer to the counter. "But what took you so long? British magic harder to use in America?"

"Of course not. I had to go. It was a long flight."

In due time, we were outfitted with a red Jeep Grand Cherokee and pointed towards Rockford, Illinois. The weather was hot, the traffic was heavy, and I hadn't driven for a very long time. It was an odd sensation, crossing from my new life in Britain to the one I'd left behind. As I drove west on Interstate 80 through the heartland of America, my two traveling companions chattered away in their English accents about ways to defeat Voldemort. It was downright eerie.

Rockford is a little over an hour from Chicago, and I was just beginning to feel comfortable on an interstate again when we arrived. I pulled to a stop in front of our motel and turned off the engine.

"We're here." The announcement was hardly necessary, yet it seemed appropriate, given that we'd come halfway around the world today.

Remus climbed out of the front passenger's seat, stretching in a hurried attempt to work out the kinks of several thousand miles.

"Makes riding a broom look relatively painless by comparison, doesn't it?" he said with a grin.

"I can't wait until I get my Apparition license this summer," Hermione piped up, blinking as she stepped into the bright sunshine. "Floo travel is okay in a pinch, but Apparating is so much nicer."

The Midwest summer heat hit us at once. The thermometer in the Jeep had hovered at ninety during the entire trip, and now, devoid of air conditioning, it felt like it. I'm sure that Remus and Hermione were taken aback, but I'd been through many a Midwestern summer, and with the blast of hot air came a wave of pleasant childhood memories.

"Wow!" Hermione shaded her eyes, peering around. "Is it always this hot here?"

"Only in the summer," I quipped, leading the way into the lobby. It felt like I had been traveling for three days instead of one, and I wanted to change out of my traveling clothes and wash the grime from my face NOW.

We checked in, and I was relieved to find that there were no messages from Roger waiting for me. No news was good news: Billy had evidently made it through the night all right.

In short order, we were ensconced in adjoining rooms on the second floor. I was in the middle of splashing cold water on my face when Hermione knocked on the shared door to say that she'd already scanned the motel map, found the location of the pool, and could she change into her suit and go on down? I assured her that she could indeed head for the pool. She was being a good sport about this whole trip, and I didn't want her to feel obligated to hang around while I made plans to head to the hospital.

I picked up the telephone to dial Uncle Roger's cell phone number, prodding Remus with my foot as I did so. He was stretched out on the bed, looking every bit the victim of too little sleep and too many time zones, and I doubted that I looked much better. The fact that it was late afternoon in Illinois meant that it was midnight in Britain, and we had a ways to go before calling it a day.

"You okay?" I asked as I punched in the numbers.

"Of course. I could jog a mile or two, couldn't you?" Remus rubbed both eyes wearily. "How do you suppose Hermione has the energy to swim?"

"She's a teenage girl. She's not swimming; she's lounging on the side of the pool to improve her tan."

"Hermione? She's probably lounging in the shade, reading. Besides, we're British, remember? 'Pasty' is our normal skin tone," Remus said, yawning widely. "You can't improve what you don't have."

"Good point. That reminds me: we'll need some sunscreen," I said thoughtfully. "You two aren't used to this kind of heat or sun. You'll look like lobsters before the week is out."

"That should be good for undercover work with the Order. I'm sure none of the Death Eaters would notice a bright red werewolf trailing them."

His offhand remark hung in the air. I knew that Remus did a variety of chores for the Order of the Phoenix, most of which were unknown to me. I was not privy to Order business, yet he had assured me that none of his activities were wildly dangerous. Trailing Death Eaters, on the other hand, sounded hazardous.

The sound of electronic ringing in my ear was replaced by some clicks and then, Uncle Roger's voice.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Roger, it's Kailin. We're here, at the Marriott. How's Billy?"

"Doing pretty well, actually. They're planning on moving him out of Intensive Care tomorrow morning if he continues to improve."

That was par for the course, I informed Roger, then told him we'd meet him at the hospital after we had something to eat. As soon as I hung up the phone, however, my mind wandered back to the conversation with Remus.

"Is that what you do?" I asked carefully.

"Is what I do what?" Remus looked puzzled, clearly trying to figure out what I was asking.

"Trailing Death Eaters," I said. "You said a sunburn would be bad cover when you're trailing Death Eaters." The concern must have shown on my face because he broke into a smile and reached for my hand at once.

"It's not exactly like that," he said. "You've been watching too many Muggle spy movies. I what's that?" Remus broke off, listening hard.

It took a moment before I heard the faint tapping noise coming from the window. We looked at each other, then Remus hoisted himself off the bed and went to investigate. He drew back the curtains I'd closed a few minutes earlier.

A large tawny owl was sitting on the ledge, eyeing us impatiently.

"What now? Don't tell me Voldemort decided to make a move the minute I left the country," Remus muttered, trying the window and finding it locked. He reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out his wand.

"Here." I intervened, quickly locating the lock and opening the window manually. The owl hopped inside, offering a leg. "Don't tell me this poor bird flew all the way from Britain," I muttered as my husband detached the message. "And what would it have done if we were in some high rise with windows that you couldn't open?"

Remus ignored me, fishing in his pocket for a Knut and starting to place it in the small pouch on the owl's other leg. The bird frowned, if such a thing is possible, and tried to nip his fingers.

"Well, I'm sorry," he muttered. "I don't know the going rate for post in the States."

He found another Knut and, apparently satisfied this time, the owl allowed him to put the two coins in the pouch. It took wing immediately.

I closed the window, not wanting to allow any more hot air into the room. Remus had already unrolled the parchment and begun to read. Almost at once, his expression changed from curious to concerned.

"What is it?" I asked anxiously. "Is it Voldemort?"

He shook his head. "It's a message from Arthur."

"Is there something wrong with one of the Weasleys? Not Molly..." Now I was worried. Molly had become my best friend in the past year.

"No." Remus sank back down on the edge of the bed. He handed me the note with obvious reluctance. "This requires a bit of explaining, I'm afraid."

I glanced from him to the parchment and began to read.

Remus, I'm terribly sorry to interrupt your holiday, but I thought you should know. Lucius Malfoy is incensed over the incident at King's Cross yesterday. He has registered a complaint against you with the Ministry. I don't know that he intends to press charges, but this could create a sticky situation for you. I just wanted to give you a bit of a heads-up about it and will let you know what develops.

How was the trip in the Muggle aeroplane? I've heard that when they close the door, it's rather like being shut up in a coffin. Is that true?

Regards,

Arthur Weasley

"What incident at King's Cross?" I demanded.

Remus wearily massaged the bridge of his nose with one hand. "It's to do with Lucius Malfoy, I'm afraid."

"What about Malfoy?" I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that had nothing to do with the effects of traveling clear across the Atlantic.

"I told you he was there," Remus reminded me. "What I didn't tell you was that we had a little altercation."

"Altercation!" I blurted, the sinking feeling now flirting with the beginnings of panic. "What happened?"

"Please, Kailin, let me finish," Remus said sharply.

I took a shaky breath and forced myself to sit in the easy chair next to the bed. "I'm sorry. Go ahead."

"To make a long story short, Malfoy spotted me there and deliberately provoked me."

"How?"

"He stood next to me as we waited for the train to pull in, acting the innocent. Then he started making remarks like 'isn't it a blessing that attacks on Muggles are on the increase, perhaps we'll be rid of their kind some day'. Things of that sort."

"And?" I asked warily.

"I started to pull my wand on him." Remus took one look at my horror-stricken face and added, "But Arthur was right there. He stopped me from actually doing any more than that, of course."

"You pulled your wand on him? In public? What did he do?" I had learned early on that wizards were not allowed to use their wands in Muggle public places. And it was never a smart move to threaten Lucius Malfoy. My husband had done this? Remus Lupin, who could always be counted on for clear, rational thought?

Remus didn't speak for a long moment, then he smiled faintly. "Well, he was rather surprised, for starters. I think he caught on about the time Arthur was pinning my arms to my sides and I was calling him a murdering son of a bitch Malfoy, that is, not Arthur."

"You called Lucius Malfoy a murdering son of a bitch?" I said, bemused.

"My God, Kailin, the man stood there, smirking, and all I could think of was how I felt when I came down the lane and saw that cottage burning. I thought I had lost you forever!"

"But he's been trying to pass himself off as a saint lately. Surely saying those things in public wouldn't help his new image."

"No, he wouldn't want to tarnish the new Lucius, would he?" Remus cracked, his smile fading completely. "Nobody else heard him, Kailin. Only Arthur and me."

To tell the truth, now that the moment of surprise was past, I was somewhat impressed. I couldn't help feeling a tiny bit flattered that Remus had defended my honor against the likes of Malfoy. Still...

"What does Arthur mean here..." I pointed to the note, " ...about Malfoy making a complaint about you?"

Remus thought carefully before answering. "It means he's reported me to the Werewolf Registry."

"And that means...?"

"It means I'll probably be classified as an undesirable. That is," he amended, "more undesirable than I am already. Of course, I have so few rights anyway, it's not like they can take away much more."

"Could they make you give up your magic?" I asked, wide-eyed. I'd heard rumors about such a thing. When it came to bigotry, the British wizarding government was nearly unparalleled. There was no telling how low they could stoop.

"Of course not. Where did you ever get that idea?"

"I don't know."

"They can't do that," Remus assured me, stretching out on the bed and staring pensively at the ceiling. "Although they might slap a curfew on me or make me report in to the Registry every month."

I considered this. "You know, at times like this it's really hard for me to remember that Malfoy's going to get his comeuppance some day. If only we'd been able to press charges after the fire."

"It just wasn't possible, Kailin."

"I know." Malfoy had admitted to Severus Snape that he had caused the fire that nearly killed me. But in the end, this confession had yielded nothing more than the satisfaction of knowing who was behind the crime. To accuse Malfoy with that as proof was to expose Snape as a spy for Order. And in this wizarding war, the stakes were much higher than my own injustices.

"Did I hear you mention lunch?" Remus asked, changing the subject. "Or dinner, or whatever mealtime it actually is?"

"Yes, but I have no idea what to eat. I'm not sure I'm actually hungry, but I should eat something, I suppose. Let's go by the pool and check with Hermione first."

And for the moment, thoughts of Lucius Malfoy were pushed aside.

The Second Message

Chapter 3 of 10

When her grandfather falls ill, Kailin has to race to America with Remus and Hermione in tow. And Remus and Hermione each have their secrets...

Chapter 3, The Second Message: Saturday, continued

My memories of Billy Mitchell were of a strong, vibrant man. Seeing him in the ICU, frail and ill and connected to the beeping telemetry equipment, was frightening even though the environment was familiar to me. I'm a nurse and I see sick people all the time, but this was my Grandpa in the bed, and right now my objectivity was gone. I was a worried family member, not a medical professional.

Remus reintroduced himself to Roger, and I was happy to see that the two were beginning to hit it off well. Remus could get along with just about anybody, and Roger was as easygoing as Billy himself. Of course, when I had envisioned taking Remus home to meet my family, it wasn't under these circumstances.

Unless Billy had blabbed, Roger had no idea that Remus was a wizard, much less a werewolf. Such a disclosure was unlikely; even with all the time I'd spent with my grandparents during my childhood, I had no idea that Marvy was a witch until last year. Billy had kept her secret well, and I trusted him to keep ours, too.

I talked to the surgeon, Dr. Stinson, and was relieved to feel an immediate connection there. He was confident instead of cocky and reassuring without being condescending. I think Roger had tipped him off that I was a nurse, because he talked to me as a fellow professional and not a bothersome relative.

Dr. Stinson assured me that Billy should have an uneventful recovery, going home four or five days from now. Even though I work in health care, I never cease to be amazed at how quickly patients are sent home. Here in the States, it's a question of cost. In Britain, it's the lengthy waiting lists for surgeries that dictate length of stay.

According to Roger, Billy had drifted in and out of consciousness most of the day. Now, at eight p.m., he was finally alert enough to realize that I was present.

"Kailin?" he mumbled.

I leaned over to kiss him on the forehead. "Hi, Grandpa. How are you doing?"

"Just dandy," he grunted. "Where am I?"

"You're in the hospital. You had bypass surgery."

"I know that. Am I in England, or are you in Rockford?"

"I'm in Rockford," I said, smiling. "I just had to come to check up on you."

"Good. I need checking up on." Billy glanced toward the window where Remus stood with Roger. "Who are you?"

"I'm Remus." Remus smiled, reaching out to squeeze Billy's hand. "It's an honor to finally meet you, Billy."

"You too, son. You'll have to forgive me if I don't get up."

We all laughed at that. For half an hour, we chatted with and around my grandfather. He soon tired, and when it became obvious that what he needed was less company and more rest, we left for the evening.

By that time, it was the wee hours of the morning in Britain, and both Remus and I were the walking dead. We'd left Hermione back at the hotel, and I assumed that she would have the good sense to climb into bed and begin catching up on her sleep. As we said good night to Roger Mitchell, my only thought was that soon Remus and I could crawl into bed ourselves.

At least that was the plan.

We had been back in our hotel room barely two minutes when there was another tapping at the window. Remus paid the owl, then unrolled the parchment and read while I began to undress.

"Arthur again?" I inquired, tugging off my shoes and tossing them in the corner. When Remus didn't answer, I looked up to find him staring at the letter in his hand. Then he began laughing, a humorless chortle that was more chilling than funny.

"What's the matter?" I was suddenly uneasy. My instincts told me that something was very wrong.

"I can't believe it. Those people at the Ministry are such imbeciles, such such " He broke off, apparently unable to think of any worse names at the moment. "You won't believe this, Kailin. You bloody well won't believe it!"

"Believe what?" I asked breathlessly.

"I've been banned from Britain, that's what!" he spluttered, waving the parchment in the air. "Written off. Deported!"

"What?" I blurted.

"I'm not allowed back into the country!"

"Is this a joke?" My mind groped for footing. "What do you mean you're not allowed back into the country? You can't go home? Why not?"

Remus took a deep breath and massaged the bridge of his nose with two fingers. "Because of my little altercation with Malfoy at King's Cross, it seems."

"Just because you started to pull your wand on Lucius Malfoy, they're not letting you back into Britain? What kind of crazy law is that?"

"There is no crazy law," he spat bitterly. "Malfoy reported me out of pure spite, and the Ministry jumped on it. It's a convenient excuse to get rid of people like me."

"You mean that just because you're a werewolf "

"Of course, because I'm a werewolf. *And* a werewolf who's one of Dumbledore's supporters." Remus sank down onto the edge of the bed, regarding the parchment in his hands with obvious disgust. "Can you believe this? Just wait until the half-humans and the rabble-rousers leave the country, and then forbid them to come back!"

I tried to find my voice. "What are we going to do?"

"I need to get in touch with Dumbledore," Remus said, thinking aloud. He forced a sickly smile onto his face. "Irony, isn't it? I've been trying to talk you into sitting out the war here in America, and now I'm the one who has to stay."

My mind raced to catch up. "But how did they even know you were gone?"

"There's an arrangement with the Muggle Liaison Office. The Ministry can alert the Muggles to search for people they want to track. That's what they did when Sirius escaped from Azkaban. Now they know I've left the country, and they'll know when I go back."

"Can I see the letter?" I asked.

Remus handed it to me without comment. I took it and began to read:

Dear Mr. Lupin:

Pursuant to a complaint leveled against you by Mr. Lucius Malfoy of Wiltshire on June 26, and as we have learned that you have since left the sovereign country of Great Britain, we must ask that you refrain from re-entering the country in the future. This is in accordance with Statute Thirty-Seven B, Laws of Conduct for Half-Breeds.

Please be aware that anti-Apparition wards have been placed to prevent unlawful entry. In addition, your wand activity will be monitored.

Effective immediately, your name has been removed from the rolls of Ministry-sponsored assistance programs. No further payments will be forthcoming.

Wizarding authorities from the United States will be contacting you in the near future. We wish you the best of luck in your new life in the former Colonies.

Sincerely,

Ernest Blandings-Fyfe

Werewolf Registry

Ministry of Magic

"They can't do this," I said blankly, shaking my head.

"Well, they bloody well just did, didn't they?"

We both fell silent.

"What does it mean, 'wand activity will be monitored'?" I asked.

"If I manage to get back into Britain, the Ministry will be alerted the first time I use my wand. They'll know I'm back."

"If you manage to get back?" I felt sick. Remus and I had worked hard at building a life together. I had a job I enjoyed and wasn't eager to leave it. And he was committed to the Order of the Phoenix as long as Voldemort walked the earth. "There'll be some way, won't there?"

"I suppose..."

His half-hearted smile was not at all reassuring. I stared blankly out the window into the dark Illinois night. Remus could usually be counted on for encouragement, not hesitation. "How can we get in touch with Dumbledore?"

"Owl," he said, shrugging. "Trouble is, I have no idea how to find a wizarding post office here, so unless an owl arrives with a message for me, it's not likely that I can get in touch with him right away."

I grasped at possibilities. "What if we bought you a plane ticket under a different name? The Ministry won't know you're back as long as you don't use your wand in Britain, right?"

"Right as long as I'm not spotted and reported by someone. I'd have to stay away from wizarding places, just as you've done. But if I have a new name, I'll need a new passport," Remus continued, thinking aloud.

I nodded wearily. I was tired, so tired. Of all the stupid things to happen. My earlier amusement at Remus' defense of my honor was now long gone. Maybe this would turn out to be a bad dream. Maybe, come morning, this would be a distant memory instead of cold reality.

There was a soft knocking on the door. "Now what?" I muttered viciously.

Remus sighed aloud and rose to his feet. Glancing through the peephole apparently revealed no one familiar, and he cautiously opened the door.

I could see a man standing there. He looked like a refugee from the tropics: his hair was bleached to a nearly white blonde; he wore sunglasses, and a tropical print shirt was tucked into bright orange shorts. A pair of orange flipflops completed the outfit.

"Hey, how's it goin'?" The man stuck out his hand at once. "You Remus Lupin?"

"Who wants to know?" Remus cautiously eyed the man's hand but made no move to shake it.

The man withdrew his hand, stuffing it into his pocket. "I'm Breckinridge, your American wizarding rep. So they kicked you out of England, huh?"

Remus was not interested. "It's very late. I suggest you come back tomorrow."

Frowning, Breckinridge pulled the sunglasses down on his nose and peered at his watch. "It's not even ten p.m. yet."

"And it's four a.m. in Britain. My wife and I have been up nearly twenty-four hours, so if you don't mind..."

"Oh, yeah, that jet lag thing. Well, I won't keep you long. May I come in?" Evidently the man was not to be dissuaded.

"Fine," Remus said listlessly. "You can have five minutes, Mr. Breckinridge."

"Five minutes is plenty. And call me Breck. Everybody does." He moved past Remus into the room and stood regarding me. "You're Mrs. Lupin?"

"Yes," I said uneasily, rising from my spot on the bed.

"Glad to meet you. So," Breck said, turning back to Remus, "why were you tossed out of Britain?"

"I don't know that it's any of your business."

"Ah, but it is my business. I work for the Relocation Office." With that, he whipped a business card out of his shirt pocket and handed it to Remus. Remus glanced at it and handed it to me.

D. Breckinridge, Relocation Specialist

Office of Wizarding Relocation, a division of the American Wizarding Congress

"You're with the American Ministry of Magic?" Remus asked.

"Yeah. It's called the American Congress of Wizards here. Our office was notified this afternoon..." Breckinridge paused to pluck a slip of paper from his pocket and read it, "...by your Ministry that you have been 'officially banned from re-entering the state of Great Britain'. Furthermore, they identify you as a werewolf and a political dissident. Is that correct?"

Remus chuckled mirthlessly. "If that's what they choose to call me, it is."

Breckinridge shrugged. "Makes me no matter. I'm just here to help you get settled in the States."

Remus gave the man a withering look. "Thank you, but let me make myself plain, Mr. Breckinridge: I don't intend to settle in the States. My wife and I are here to visit her relatives, and then we'll be returning to Britain."

The man looked appraisingly at me once more. "You from here?" he asked, surprised.

"Yes," I said.

"Oh." His sunglasses were on the verge of sliding off his nose; now he pulled them off completely and perched them atop the bleached blonde hair. "Look, Mr. Lupin, just out of curiosity, how exactly do you plan to get back into Britain? They'll be watching the plane reservations, you know. Can't you just Apparate back? Oh, wait... Werewolf, you said. Takes too much energy, doesn't it? Too bad, that would be your best bet."

"You're correct about Apparating," Remus said, "but "

Breckinridge interrupted. "Have you thought about flying into France, say, and Apparating from there? It wouldn't be as taxing."

My husband's patience was clearly being tried. "There's an Apparition ban against me as well, you see."

"Oh." Breck looked nonplussed. "Bummer. Say, you all have a mess over there with some dark wizard, don't you? A real piece of work, from what I hear. They pop up every so often, don't they? You folks involved with that?"

"I am," Remus said quietly. "Involved with opposing him, that is."

Breck rested his hands on his hips and stared at the two of us intently. "So if you're trying to get rid of the guy, how come they tossed you out? Seems like the powers that be would welcome all the help they can get."

"The powers that be don't know which end is up right now," Remus retorted, his expression grim. "The Ministry spent a year denying that Voldemort was back, and now that they know the truth, things are in chaos. There's not much confidence in the new Minister, so there's no telling what will happen next."

Breckinridge shook his head. "And I thought our politics sucked big time."

"I think politics are politics no matter where you're from," I put in.

"You a witch, Mrs. Lupin?"

"No," I said, wondering if he would ask me to leave the room now that he knew. Rather lamely, I added, "But my grandmother was."

"She from the Chicago area?" Breckinridge wanted to know.

"No, Britain. But she came here after she married." My curiosity was piqued. "Are there many wizards in this area?"

"Quite a few, although we always keep a pretty low profile. Other than that curse on the Cubs, there aren't a lot of security breaches."

"Cubs?" Remus frowned.

Breck grinned. "Boy," he said, pulling a handful of brochures out of his lurid floral pocket, "you really aren't from here, are you? Look, here's the information you'll need about settling down in this area: wizarding businesses, neighborhoods with other wizarding families, job opportunities, that kind of thing."

Remus made no move to take the pamphlets. "I told you. We're not staying."

"Well, even if you don't stay, they could be helpful while you're here."

A sideways glance at my husband showed that he still wasn't keen on the idea. I held out my hand, a polite smile on my face. "I'll take them."

Breck seemed pleased that I was cooperating, even if Remus was not. "There's some good information in there," he said as he handed me the brochures. "You'll get a lot out of it."

"I'm sure we will. Thank you."

There was a brief silence. I'd expected Breck to turn for the door, but he hadn't budged. And Remus now had a scowl on his face.

For the first time, Breckinridge looked uncomfortable. "Hell, I really hate this, because you all seem like nice people. The thing is, I'm not just here to introduce myself and help you get settled in."

I started to ask what his true purpose was, but Remus interrupted me.

"Would you be looking for this, by any chance?" he asked coldly, holding out his wand.

"Yeah, I'm afraid I would." Almost regretfully, Breck took the wand and pocketed it.

I blinked, confused by this last chain of events. "Why do you need his wand?"

"They're not stupid, Kailin," Remus said quietly. "I've been tossed out because I'm supposedly a danger to society. They're not going to allow me to wreak havoc here."

"But but "

"I'm really sorry," Breck said, and he looked like he meant it. If it's any consolation, we'll return your wand in six months if you keep your nose clean."

"What's to stop him from buying a new wand?" I blurted.

"He'll be identified in all the wand shops."

"What's to stop me from buying him a new wand?"

Breck was already shaking his head. "I don't know of any place that would sell a wand to a Muggle."

I wasn't ready to give up the fight. "We have a young witch with us, a student. Couldn't she buy one?"

"How old?"

"How old is Hermione?" I turned to Remus. "Sixteen, right?"

Remus was nodding, but at the same time, Breckinridge was shaking his head. "She has to have parental consent."

"But her parents are dead."

"Are you her legal guardians?"

"Well, no, but "

"I'm sorry," Breck repeated unhappily. "Really, I am. I know you don't want to hear this, folks, but your best bet is to stay here for six months, let the hotheads in your Ministry chill out for a bit, and then get your wand back and head home somehow."

Remus looked utterly frustrated. "Look, Breck," he said, stressing the nickname the man insisted we use, "we can't stay here for six months. I have friends who are depending on me to help in the battle. My wife has a job that she needs to get back to. And we have a minor traveling with us who needs to be back at school on September first."

"This is a free country, Mr. Lupin. We're rather fond of allowing political dissension here, and nobody cares if you're a werewolf as long as you take your Wolfsbane and stay indoors on the full moon. You just can't have your wand back for six months, okay?"

"Fine," Remus said dully. "I'll look over your information, and I'm truly pleased to hear that Americans are so enlightened when it comes to their werewolves. It's just that come Friday, my wife and I will be returning to Britain one way or another."

With that, Breck spread his hands in a gesture of defeat. "Okay, I give up. Have it your way. But if you end up staying here longer than you think, give me a call. My number's on the card your wife's holding."

I glanced at the business card atop the pile of brochures. "Is this your office phone?" I asked.

"Cell. You can reach me anytime, anywhere. I'm the rep for the greater Chicago area," the man said, standing. Remus and I stood up as well.

I re-read the card: D. Breckinridge. "What does the 'D' stand for?"

The man turned pink. "Dillard," he said in a low voice, as though he was afraid the walls might hear. "That's why I go by 'Breck'. 'Dillard' just doesn't quite match my image, you know?"

I would have laughed, but my sense of humor had fled.

Sunday: Reeling

Chapter 4 of 10

When her grandfather falls ill, Kailin has to race to America with Remus and Hermione in tow. And Remus and Hermione each have their secrets...

I thought I should write a brief note of explanation re: the 'Cubs curse' in the previous chapter. This is primarily aimed at those of you who are not baseball savvy (read: not American). The Chicago Cubs are a baseball team who, years ago, were cursed by an irate fan. I think it had something to do with the fan not being able to bring his goat to the game. Since then, the Cubs have been perennial also-rans. Anyway, when I set the story in the greater Chicago area, the idea of making the Cubs 'curse' a true wizard's curse was just too much to pass up.

Chapter 4, Sunday: Reeling

It wasn't what you would call a good night. After the lights were out, I spent a long time staring at the ceiling while Remus tossed and turned for what seemed like hours. I finally drifted off, but awoke around two a.m. to find him standing at the window, staring at nothing. At one point, as I drifted in and out of sleep, I thought I heard the shower running. When the wakeup call jerked me straight from dreams into full alertness, Remus was already sitting up in bed, looking as though he'd been on a weeklong bender.

"Are you all right?" I asked, absolutely hating the idea of leaving him to spend the day at the hospital.

"Never better," he said dryly. "Can't you tell?"

I took my shower and dressed, and when I came back into the room, Remus had made a pot of coffee with the hotel room courtesy coffeepot and was gripping a cup as though it were a lifeline.

"They don't give you nearly enough coffee grounds," he remarked. "Think I'll drop a note of complaint to the management."

"I don't think there are enough coffee grounds in the whole city of Rockford to help you this morning," I retorted, sincerely meaning every word.

A smirk. "Tell me about it."

"Just how much sleep *did* you get last night?"

"I don't know. An hour. Maybe. And it wasn't exactly restful, either. Would you mind terribly if I didn't go with you this morning?" Remus asked hopefully. "I feel horrible."

"You don't look too good, either. Lie down," I ordered. Remus stared at me as though I'd lost my mind.

"It's no good, Kailin. There's no point in trying to sleep now. I'll have my days and nights so mixed up I won't be able to think straight."

"I'm not sure you're able to think straight as it is. Lie down."

Remus sighed, put down the coffee cup, and flopped onto the bed.

"On your stomach, R.J.," I called over my shoulder as I went to retrieve the little bottle of complimentary hand lotion from the sink.

One thing on my agenda, providing I ever had the time for it, was to take a massage class. Early on in our marriage, I had noticed that Remus limped around like a cripple following his werewolf transformations. It was inevitable, he told me; you couldn't change from human to animal to human again without hurting like hell afterwards. I had begun giving him backrubs as soon as he grudgingly agreed to company again. Sometimes the backrubs led to other fun and games if he wasn't too exhausted, but more often they were simply a relaxing way for us to reconnect after the full moon was past.

I returned with the lotion, knelt next to Remus on the bed, and greased up. I'm no masseuse, but even I could tell that there wasn't a loose muscle anywhere on his long frame. I rubbed and pushed and pummeled, while Remus grunted his appreciation of my efforts. The tension was slowly ebbing away; at one point, he muttered something under his breath that sounded very much like a heartfelt expletive.

"What did you say?" I inquired. Remus rarely cursed.

There was a brief silence, and then, "I said 'goddamn it'."

I blinked. "Did I hurt you? I'm sorry."

"Of course not, Kailin." Another silence. "I'm just so angry."

"You should be," I said softly. My normally affable husband was accustomed to suppressing his fury and had done so for years. Spending most of your life dealing with the fact that you are a social outcast must be horrendous, and I suspect that Remus has done a better job of it than most. Yet no matter how well-adjusted you are, there has to be that kernel of anger lying buried and dormant until the Lucius Malfoys of the world come along and provoke it into flat-out rage.

I continued to rub Remus' back. Several more minutes went by, and I noticed that his breathing became slower and deeper, the grunts fewer and fewer. Eventually I noticed a tiny bead of drool at the corner of his mouth; his eyelids seemed glued shut and his facial muscles, slack. As quietly as I could, I crawled off the bed and pulled the sheet lightly over him. He didn't stir, and I decided that Remus Lupin would be asleep for a very long time if left undisturbed.

Which reminded me... I placed the Do Not Disturb sign on the outside of our door, then tapped lightly on the adjoining door to Hermione's room. She opened it shortly, and at once I put my fingers to my lips.

"Can I come in?" I whispered.

Bleary-eyed, her curls standing every which way, Hermione nodded and stepped back to allow me access. With the door shut behind me, I finally spoke.

"Sorry to wake you," I began.

"Not at all. I was already up," Hermione insisted, yawning. "What time did you get in last night?"

"About ten, I think."

"How is your grandfather?"

"He's doing splendidly," I told her. "I'll be going over there shortly, but Remus is still in bed."

"In bed? Is he all right?"

"Frankly, no." I told her about the Ministry owl and the ban on Remus' re-entry into Britain. Hermione gasped aloud, horrified.

"Oh, no! What you going to do?"

"I don't know," I said, "but if any owls come by today, hang onto one so we can get a message to Dumbledore."

"Malfoy... He was the one behind my parents'... uhm..." She gulped, a stricken look suddenly crossing her face.

I nodded. "I know. Look, could you let Remus sleep this morning? You can order room service and charge it to the room, or go down to the restaurant or the pool or whatever you want to do; I just want him to get some rest."

"Of course, Kailin."

I gave the name of the hospital and my cell phone number to Hermione, then left through her room.

* * *

Hospitals come alive very early in the morning. Doctors usually start their rounds by six or seven so they can see their patients before office hours. Therefore it wasn't unreasonable to assume that Billy had already been moved from the ICU to his room. Normal visiting hours wouldn't start until noonish, but I wanted to get there early to help with Billy's care and free his nurse up for other patients. It was the sort of gesture I would have appreciated, had I been his nurse.

As I suspected, Billy was already in his new room and staring at a breakfast tray when I arrived.

"Hey, handsome," I teased, walking into the room and putting down my purse on the windowsill. "Looks like you lost half your IV lines and gained a plate of rubber eggs."

My grandfather waved a piece of toast at me rather weakly. "Good morning, honey. Want some?"

I grinned, leaning over to kiss him on the cheek before settling into a chair. "I believe they meant for you to eat it," I pointed out.

Billy put down the toast, inhaled deeply, and leaned back against the pillow. "It smells good, but I'm already full and I only ate three bites."

"Don't worry. The appetite comes back. Have you had your bath yet?"

"No. They just moved me in here a little bit ago."

"Good. I'll help out, then." I paused, regarding Billy Mitchell in all seriousness. "How are you feeling, Grandpa?"

"Like I've been hit by a truck. 'Course I've never been hit by a truck before, but I bet this is what it'd feel like. Damnedest thing: I never had so much as a twinge in my chest before now, but the doctor wanted me to have a stress test before he operated on my hip, and here I am."

"And it's a good thing he did, too."

"Did Remus come with you?"

"Not this morning. He'll be here later on, I think."

"Oh." Billy wrinkled his nose, deep in thought. "Did I meet him last night?"

"You did."

"Oh. Yesterday's kind of a blur. Did I like him?"

I laughed. "It seemed like it," I said.

Billy picked up his fork and poked listlessly at the scrambled eggs, which were beginning to crust over by now. "I suppose you're going to tell me I have to eat this so I can get well."

"That's the official line," I agreed.

"Humph." He tugged the napkin from where it had been tucked inside the neck of his hospital gown and tossed it on the breakfast tray. "I think I'm done."

I tried to coax Billy into a few more bites of toast, but I might as well have asked him to drop to the floor and give me fifty. His nurse came in moments later. I introduced myself, and as I suspected, she jumped at the chance to let me provide Billy's morning care while she saw to her other patients.

"You work at a hospital in England? Really?" she asked, intrigued. "I'd like to hear more about it. When I get a few minutes, maybe we can chat. Are you going to be here for a while?"

"This morning for sure, and later on today," I assured her. "And I'll be here until this cranky old geezer goes home."

"I'm not cranky," Billy muttered. "I may be a geezer, but I'm not cranky."

"First sign of recovery," the nurse said, "is when the sense of humor comes back."

She left to attend to her other duties, and I began to fill a basin with water for Billy's bath. He looked at the basin when I placed it next to the bed, clearly distrustful.

"I don't want a bath," he muttered. "I don't have the strength."

"Trust me on this one. You may not want one, but you need it, and you'll feel a whole lot better afterwards."

"You're not planning on washing *everything*, are you?"

"Frankly, no. This is a participation sport. You get to help out."

"Good. I'm not sure I would have even let your grandmother do this," he added.

I laughed and said nothing, still collecting bath supplies.

"You know," Billy continued, "that it would have been okay if I hadn't pulled through, right? Because I would have been with Marva."

"I know." My eyes filled abruptly. "I'm just not ready to let her have you yet, Grandpa."

Billy's own eyes became teary. "Yeah," he said gruffly. "Well, on with the bath."

Half an hour later, Billy was bathed and feeling better, although he was loathe to admit it. With the help of his nurse, I moved him to the bedside chair and bustled about, making his bed.

"So how is it?" he demanded when the nurse left.

"How is what, Grandpa?"

"Being married to one of them wizards."

"Just fine," I lied. I'm a bad liar. I must have 'guilt' written in capital letters all over my face, because I can't carry off a fib worth a darn.

Billy looked at me sharply. "What's wrong? Is there a problem between you and Remus?"

"No," I said quickly, shaking my head for emphasis. "No, nothing like that." I glanced around to make sure the door was mostly closed and that no lights indicated an intercom system which might be on. "It's the wizarding officials in Britain. They're trying to make life difficult for him."

"Marva used to say that the wizards liked to put idiots in positions of power. Something like that still going on?"

I burst out laughing in spite of myself. "Something exactly like that."

"Does it have to do with that wolf business?"

I had not told Billy about Remus' lycanthropy until we'd been married more than a month. Our courtship and subsequent marriage had taken place so quickly that there had never been a good time to broach the subject. A transatlantic phone call probably isn't the best way to announce that someone's a werewolf, but it seemed a better choice than putting the news in a letter. Letters allow no immediate feedback for either party, and I wanted to be able to reassure Billy on this topic at once. As it turned out, Billy's

reaction, bless him, was both reassuring and endearing.

"A werewolf?" he'd echoed last summer.

"Yes, Grandpa."

"Marvy talked about them once. Are you in any danger?"

"No, Grandpa. He's perfectly human ninety-nine percent of the time, and there's a medicine he takes during the full moon to make him harmless." 'Harmless' wasn't exactly the best choice of words, but for my current purposes, it would have to do.

"Does he bay at the moon like they do in the movies? If you bring him here to visit, he's not going to sit in the middle of a cornfield and howl, is he?"

I grinned broadly. "No, Grandpa. He just locks himself up in the spare bedroom and goes to sleep."

"Those wizards and their magic. Damnedest things I ever heard of."

And that had been that. Billy hadn't brought up the subject again until today.

"It's partially because of that," I admitted now. "They're horribly prejudiced against werewolves. Now they've discovered that Remus left the country and they've forbidden him to come back. And to make matters worse, the American wizarding rep came to the hotel last night and took his wand away, because he's supposedly a dangerous dissident."

Billy looked thoughtful. "You mean you two might have to stay here?"

"You sound way too happy about that."

"Well, it wouldn't break my heart."

I sighed. "I know, Grandpa. To be honest, I don't know what we're going to do. Remus barely slept at all last night, and I didn't do much better. We're too tired to figure anything out right now."

"Would it help if he could use Marva's wand?"

I stared at my grandfather, my pulse quickening. "I thought you told me last year that you hadn't seen it in years."

"Well, that's true. I haven't seen it in years. But if you wanted to search the house, you could."

It was the first ray of hope in the past twelve hours. I didn't want to get my hopes up. Surely if the wand was easily accessible, Billy would have seen it. On the other hand, it was possible for something to lie about for so long that it went unnoticed after a while.

The nurse returned just then. We marched Billy around the hospital room for a bit of exercise, and he complained bitterly the entire time.

"I thought I was supposed to get my rest," he grumbled.

"You'll be ready for a rest after this," the nurse informed him.

She was right, of course. It was only ten-thirty a.m., but Billy was exhausted from all the morning's activities and ready to go back to bed. I helped tuck him under the sheets and was settling down to read the newspaper when Uncle Roger walked in.

"Well, this is a fine sight," he said. "Here I was expecting you to be running down the hall today, Dad."

"I just did," Billy muttered darkly. "You missed it. Come back tomorrow."

I explained to Roger that Billy had had a busy morning and was ready for some down time.

"Wish I could have some down time like that," Roger teased. "Breakfast in bed, a bath and a walk with a pretty woman, nothing to do but watch the TV..."

"No, you don't. Listen, why don't you two run off for a while? I could use the peace and quiet."

Roger looked a bit put out at being asked to leave when he'd only just arrived, but I took his arm and steered him out of the room. "We'll go get a cup of coffee," I said, and five minutes later, we were settled at a cafeteria table, nursing steaming Styrofoam cups of coffee.

Of all my uncles, I was closest to Roger Mitchell. He had come along barely a year before my mother Louise was born, and the two of them had an exceptionally strong bond. Plus, Roger had remained in the greater Chicago area, while uncles Frank and Martin were scattered about the rest of the country. He had never married, and it hit him hard when my parents were killed in the car accident, and again when Marvy died. Then I went off to Britain, and I think it struck Roger as another desertion of some sort.

"I'm glad you were able to come back for this, Kailin," he told me. "It means a lot to Dad. And to me, for that matter."

"I know. I really wanted to be here, Roger," I said.

"And Remus seems like a really nice guy. What is it again that he does?"

This was the sticky part. I had overheard Remus giving Roger the standard, vague information last night, and now I repeated it. "He's self-employed. Right now, he does defense consulting for a group in Britain."

"Ah." Roger Mitchell nodded sagely, as though that explained everything. I hid a smile and sipped my coffee. "Dad told me that Remus and Mom went to the same secondary school in England," he continued.

I nodded. I had no idea what, if anything, Marvy had told him about her past, and I wondered now just how much Roger knew about his mother's background. "Roger, did Marvy ever talk much about her life in Britain?"

"Not a lot, why?"

"I was just curious."

"I think she told me some stories, but I've forgotten a lot of them. Was there anything in particular you wanted to know?"

Yes. Do you know where her wand is? I tried hard to think of some way to get the information I wanted without opening the proverbial can of worms. "Did she keep any keepsakes from when she was growing up?"

Roger frowned, looking puzzled. "Well, I think Mom had a trunk of stuff up in the attic. You might want to look for it while you're here."

"A trunk? Really?" I sat up straighter.

"You'll need to take it downstairs, though," Roger said. "It'll be hotter than hell in that attic. Which reminds me: I need to talk to Dad about getting some repairs done on the house. He's let things slide since Mom died. Of course, that's the way it is with old houses, always something going wrong."

I didn't hear the rest of Uncle Roger's tirade about the problems with old houses. My mind was on Marvy's trunk.

The Trunk

Chapter 5 of 10

When her grandfather falls ill, Kailin has to race to America with Remus and Hermione in tow. And Remus and Hermione each have their secrets...

Chapter 5

Sunday, continued: The Trunk

I was driving back to the hotel for lunch when my cell phone rang. Remus was on the other end, his voice thick with the gravelly texture of the newly awakened.

"Good morning," he said. "Or is it good afternoon?"

"It's on the verge of 'good afternoon'. How are you, love?"

"Better, thanks to you. How's Billy?"

"Doing well. In fact, I'm almost to the hotel; I thought I'd come back and see how you were doing, then we can make plans from there. And guess what? I was just having coffee with Roger, and he mentioned that there's a trunk in Billy's attic which belonged to Marvy. I was thinking that just maybe her wand is in it."

There was a brief silence. "Didn't you tell me a long time ago that her wand hadn't been seen for years?"

"Well, yes," I admitted. "But maybe the reason is that it's locked away in that trunk."

"Don't get too excited, Kailin. For all you know, the trunk could be full of recipes or dress patterns or something."

"Maybe." So much for passing along good news, I thought. I had forgotten that Remus Lupin was a master at not getting one's hopes up. His history was one of assuming the worst as a means of self-preservation.

I thought about Marvy the rest of the way to the hotel. For the past year, I'd entertained the notion that my deceased grandmother had been looking out for me. After all, it was her monetary bequest which led to my trip to Britain, which led to my hiking holiday in the Yorkshire Dales, which led me to bump into Remus Lupin in King's Cross Station. Surely it wasn't unreasonable to believe that Marvy was watching out for me now, was it? Could her trunk hold the solution to our current dilemma?

Finding the wand would solve a mountain of problems. I could buy a plane ticket for Remus under an alias, then he could use the wand to alter his already transfigured passport and identification to the new name. The only other option, and a rather expensive one at that, was for me to fly back to Britain, ask someone from the Order of the Phoenix to buy him a new wand, then bring it back myself. It was a solution, but not the one I wanted.

By the time I got back to the hotel, Remus had showered and shaved and looked like a new man.

"It's a good thing," I told him as he slid his arms around me and pulled me close in greeting. "If Billy saw you looking like you did this morning, he'd think I had married a zombie."

"I doubt it," Remus murmured in my ear. "Zombies look much worse."

Was he teasing? I didn't ask. Very little surprises me anymore about the wizarding world, but there are some things I just don't want to know.

Hermione seemed in good humor. She had spent the morning at the pool, she said, and had the pink of a near sunburn to prove it. I reminded myself to pick up some sunscreen today at the earliest opportunity.

We ate at the hotel restaurant, and I filled in Hermione about my conversation with Billy and Roger. Remus sat listening, still in his skeptic mode. When I finally paused for air, he spoke up.

"How are we going to get into Billy's house, Kailin? Do you have a key? Without a wand, I can't unlock the door, you know."

My heart dropped. In all my excitement over the trunk, I didn't have the good sense to ask Roger for a house key.

"I suppose we could stop back by the hospital on the way," I said, thoroughly annoyed with myself and with Remus for pointing out a flaw in my plan. I didn't want to make this extra stop. I wanted to go directly to Billy's house, find the trunk and, along with it, the wand. The answer to our problems was tantalizingly close.

Hermione sighed aloud. "Oh, I wish I had brought my wand with me. I can't believe I left it behind."

"You had no idea you'd need it," Remus reminded her.

I nodded agreement. Once the decision had been made to come to the States, Friday night's preparations were rather frantic. My mind had been on Billy, of course. Hermione had problems of her own.

"I don't really have a lot of suitable summer wear," she had said, her brow furrowed with worry.

"We can buy some things once we get there," I replied absently.

"I meant that all I have is that enormous trunk. Do you have a smaller bag of some sort that I could borrow? The school trunk is great for transporting two terms' worth of stuff to Hogwarts, but I certainly don't need it for week's holiday. Besides," Hermione added with a giggle, "it would look rather out of place in the cargo hold of a Muggle airplane, don't you think?"

She had a good point. Remus loaned her the backpack I'd used during my single days touring Britain.

"This should do," he told her. "You won't need robes and the like. You'd still be considered an underage witch in the States. I believe you come of age at eighteen there, not seventeen."

And so, Hermione had left behind robes, wand, and ninety-five percent of her belongings at the London flat.

"Are you planning to go this afternoon and search for Marvy's trunk?" Remus' voice tugged me back to the present.

"Sure, why not?" I enthused. "I'll call Roger. He'll still be at the hospital. I can get his key." I pulled out my cell phone at once and dialed Roger's number.

Roger, too, seemed a little doubtful. "I didn't realize that you were that interested in looking for Mom's trunk that you wanted to go right away," he said, clearly wondering why I was so desperate to dig into an old trunk. "Sure, come on by and pick up the key. And don't forget to turn up the AC as soon as you get in the house. It'll be blistering hot in there."

Remus, Hermione and I finished our lunch and drove to the hospital. I double parked and left them in the car while I ran inside to find Roger and get his house key. He gave me a parting reminder about turning up the air conditioning, and then we were off.

My heart lurched as I turned the Jeep onto the quiet, tree-lined street where Billy lived, where I'd spent so many happy summers with my grandparents. There were so many good memories, so many happy memories, and I hoped that some day, when Remus and I had children, they would have similar reminders of a happy childhood.

But as we progressed down the block, my elation faded a little. The houses were older in this part of town, and there was just the faintest hint of shabbiness now. Roger had mentioned repairs Billy needed to make, and from the looks of it, many of his neighbors were in the same boat. Well, I told myself, that wasn't so surprising: older people on fixed incomes couldn't afford costly home repairs. These houses weren't slums, they were just - lovingly worn, I decided. Still, when I'd parked the car and we mounted the steps to the front door, I was acutely aware that all of my beloved memories had taken place twenty years ago.

My grandparents' house was eerily quiet with the heaviness that's present when the occupants aren't home. It was also hot and stuffy, and I headed immediately for the thermostat in the hall while Remus and Hermione looked about the living room.

"That'll cool it off down here," I said, joining them. "But it'll be hotter still in the attic."

"Let's give the place a few minutes to cool down," Remus said, picking up a dusty, framed picture from its spot on a bookcase shelf. "Is this Billy and Marvy? The only picture I've seen of her is the one from the Hogwarts yearbook you showed me at the Weasleys'."

I crossed to his side and glanced at the picture. "Yes," I said, smiling fondly. "You know, I should probably see about taking a few pictures back with me."

"Now?" Remus looked mildly alarmed.

"No," I laughed. "Before we go back to Britain, I mean. I'll ask Billy which ones I can take." As he placed the picture back on the shelf, I noticed several photograph albums among the stacks of books and pulled one out to look at it. "Oh, look, here's a picture of Roger and my mom..."

While the house cooled off, the three of us settled on the sofa to leaf through the album. But my eagerness to find the trunk finally overcame my desire to reminisce, and after fifteen minutes or so, I climbed to my feet, tugged Remus by the hand, and suggested that we get on with the task at hand.

The word 'hot' didn't adequately describe the attic. There was no air conditioning up there, of course, and the vaulted space felt like an oven. I found a light switch, but the feeble glare of one naked bulb hardly touched the dark recesses of the room. Worse still, the attic was positively crammed with stuff.

The three of us looked at each other, obviously thinking the same thing: how in the world were we going to find Marvy's trunk before we keeled over from the heat?

"Well," I ventured, "where do you suppose we should start?"

Remus was dismayed. "I don't know, Kailin. This is almost as bad as the attic at number twelve."

At least this house didn't have the portrait of a screaming maniac on the wall... Aloud, I said, "Roger said it was a trunk. Most of this stuff is boxes, so all we have to do is look for a trunk."

"True."

We moved pile upon pile of boxes and crates and bags. There was fifty years of accumulated debris crammed up here, and we were each sweating heavily after only a few minutes. I wished that I had unlimited time to investigate everything in the attic: there were probably tons of fascinating things to be found, but not with Remus and Hermione along, and not in these temperatures. Reluctantly, I forced myself to focus on the one thing we were after. Finally, it was Hermione who stumbled onto the old-fashioned trunk buried in a corner of the room.

"It's heavy," I said, excitement rising within me. Without thinking, I said, "Remus, can you -?"

Remus started to whip out his wand, then remembered at once. He grimaced, then wiped the sweat off his forehead with one forearm. "You take one end, I'll take the other?"

"Of course. Sorry," I muttered. "I didn't think."

It was devilishly hard to carry the trunk slowly and carefully down the attic steps when all we wanted was to race back into the air conditioning as quickly as possible. Finally, we got it down to the second floor and stopped there.

"Do you want to take it all the way downstairs?" he panted, clearly hoping that I had no such thing in mind.

"No. This is fine." I hadn't intended to dump it in the middle of the second floor hallway, but I wasn't about to suggest moving the trunk one more step.

We gathered around the trunk as though it were a religious relic, then looked at each other.

"Go ahead, Kailin," Remus urged. "It was your grandmother's. You open it."

I reached for the latches and pulled.

Nothing happened.

I tried again, then finally peered at the latches to see if they were caught on something or possibly rusted shut. They almost, I thought, looked decorative instead of functional. Was the trunk locked in a different way? Over my mounting frustration, I heard Hermione sigh behind me.

"I was afraid of this," she said. "I think it's magically sealed, Kailin."

"Magically sealed?" I echoed, as Remus nudged me aside to have a look at the latches.

"It's the same thing I do to the door of the spare bedroom when I shut myself in for the full moon," he explained, poking the latches and finding them immovable. "Hermione's right, Kailin. Without a wand, there's no way to open it."

"But..." I stammered, "how could Marvy seal it shut if her wand's inside?" This wasn't how it was supposed to go. Right now, the trunk should be open, the wand on top, and our problems would be over.

"This means that her wand's not in there," Remus said, trying to burst my bubble as gently as possible.

I was too disappointed to speak. I'd been so sure....

"I'm thirsty," Hermione said suddenly. "Would it be all right if I got a glass of water in the kitchen?"

"Of course," I said briskly, getting to my feet. "Tell you what: let's leave the trunk here, go downstairs, and get something to drink. I'm thirsty, too."

I led the way, grateful that Remus was being much too nice to say 'I told you so.' I would have put good money on the odds of Marvy's wand being there, and now I was angry with myself for having been so hopelessly optimistic.

"You know," Remus offered as we clattered down the stairway, "there could easily be another trunk up in the attic. It's simply too hot to spend much time up there, Kailin."

I nodded, suddenly anxious to be by myself. "I know. Look, why don't you two sit down in the living room, and I'll get the drinks. Does anybody want soft drinks if there are any in the fridge, or just water?"

"Water," Remus and Hermione chorused together, and as they headed for the living room, I turned toward the kitchen. I didn't want anyone trying to make me feel better; right now I wanted to spend a few minutes being just plain mad at myself.

I knew where Billy's drinking glasses were without even having to think about it. I took three out of the cabinet and turned on the faucet, filling them while inwardly I beseeched my dead grandmother for help. *Where is it, Marvy? Where's your wand? We really, really need it...*

My solitude was short-lived: the door swung open and Remus walked in.

"Need a hand?" he inquired solicitously.

"Sure," I lied, opening the freezer door and pulling out an ice cube tray. I handed it to Remus, and as he twisted it to free up some cubes, I was deep in thought. So Marvy's wand wasn't in the trunk. It had to be somewhere in the house, and I decided that I wasn't going to go down without a fight. "Is there," I asked, "a way to detect a magical object like a wand?"

"What?" Remus looked up, puzzled.

I hesitated, trying to be sure of what I was asking. "Can you - I don't know - sense it, somehow?"

He understood finally, and shook his head. "If we were talking about some sort of powerful magical object, it might be remotely possible. But a wand in itself has no magic to speak of; it's just a conduit for the wizard to focus his powers."

"Oh." Foiled at every turn.

"Kailin..." Remus stopped putting ice cubes in the glasses, wiped off one hand on his pants leg, and reached out to caress my cheek. "We've barely been here twenty-four hours..."

"But if there's a chance..." I persisted stubbornly.

He sighed. "You always want to fix things, darling: for me, for Billy, for Hermione. Some things can't be fixed, at least not the way you want it to happen."

I caught my breath, startled. Of all the nerve! Was that what he thought?

Remus must have seen the flash of shock in my eyes, for he immediately picked up two of the glasses and headed for the living room, leaving me to stew. Well, he was wrong, I thought viciously. Of course I couldn't fix things for Billy; I just wanted to be here with him. And of course I couldn't fix Hermione's problems; I could only empathize. And fix Remus' problems? What a ridiculous thought! I was a Muggle, and could only approach things from a Muggle viewpoint; the wizarding world would have to fix itself, regardless.

I took a hefty swig of water from the remaining glass, nursing my righteous anger. Fine, I thought; if he didn't want the help, so be it. So what if we wasted money on an extra airfare so I could fly back to England and fetch a wand for him? So what if the additional time for that little jaunt meant I would lose a few more days' pay? Easy for him to say; after all, he wasn't the primary breadwinner in the family.

I moved to the kitchen window and stared out at the back yard, furious with my husband and with life in general.

As a child, I had spent a lot of time in Marvy and Billy's back yard. There was the large oak tree where I'd sat in the shade with Marvy and listened to her stories about growing up in Britain. I'd played with my dolls out there while Marvy puttered around in the garden which was her pride and joy. The flower beds were always a riot of color as the lovingly tended blooms flourished under her green thumb.

My anger changed to shock as the reality of what I was seeing sank in.

The beautiful garden was no more. There were still flowers, but what was left was severely overgrown and choked by weeds. If the house had felt neglected, the garden appeared positively derelict. I put the glass on the counter, unlocked the back door, and ran down the five steps to the yard.

Before I knew what I was doing, I had dropped to my knees and had begun pulling weeds out by the handful. In seconds, my eyes had blurred, and moments later, tears were streaming down my cheeks as I blindly tore away at the overgrowth.

Suddenly, strong hands grasped me by the shoulders and pulled me backwards. I found myself in Remus' arms, sobbing into his shoulder as if my heart would break.

"Kailin," he murmured, "it's all right, dearest."

"No, it's not," I cried. "This was her garden. She loved her garden. It was beautiful, and look at it now! It's not fair!"

"No, darling. It's not fair."

"I miss her so much, Remus!"

"I know."

"I know I want to fix things!" I wailed. "But I can't do magic like you. It's the only thing I can do!"

"Sssh..." He held me, stroking my hair and rocking me gently until I cried myself out.

"Marvy would have loved you, you know," I said finally, miserably.

"I'm sure I would have loved her, too," Remus assured me.

"I just knew the wand would be here," I blurted.

"I know, darling."

As long as I was emptying my heart, I thought, I might as well drag up the other issue which had dogged me for months. "And I want to have a baby, and I can't because of stupid Voldemort!" I blubbered.

Even as I said it I realized how ridiculous it sounded, and a burble of laughter escaped from my throat. Remus, I realized, was chuckling as well.

"Now that," I said, drawing in a long, shaky breath, "has to be one of the dumbest things I've ever said."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Remus teased, "although it's fairly high on the list."

I heard footsteps in the grass behind us and looked up to see Hermione coming toward us, a glass of water in her hand.

"Here, Kailin," she ventured timidly. "Are you all right?"

I nodded. Remus thanked Hermione, took the glass from her, and gave it to me.

The water felt deliciously cool against my throat. I gulped down most of it, then handed the glass back.

"Thank you," I said, beginning to feel more than a little foolish. "I think I'm okay now."

"Why don't we go back inside where it's more comfortable?" Remus suggested.

I nodded, allowing him to help me upright. "I suppose I should get back to the hospital soon and see how Billy's doing."

"There's no rush. Roger would have called you if there was a problem."

I was in no mood to argue.

We settled down on the sofa again and Remus picked up the photograph album once more. He soon had me smiling over the family pictures, although inwardly I felt as drained as though I'd emptied out my very soul. After a short time, he went back upstairs to check the trunk one more time. I appreciated the effort, although I knew that the results would be no different this time than last.

And when he reappeared, shaking his head regretfully, I didn't feel the searing disappointment as I had before.

A Runny-Nosed Little Twit

Chapter 6 of 10

When her grandfather falls ill, Kailin has to race to America with Remus and Hermione in tow. And Remus and Hermione each have their secrets...

Chapter 6

Sunday, continued: A Runny-Nosed Little Twit

At Remus' insistence, we went back to the hotel so I could take a nap. I tried to protest, but found I lacked the energy to make a fuss about anything just now.

"Don't tell me you're not exhausted," he said, pointing to the bed with an air of finality not unlike my own this morning. Remus' version of therapy came in the form of foot rubs, and before long I was out cold. By the time I awoke, it was early evening.

We went to the hospital, arriving just as his nurse was putting Billy back to bed after a twenty-foot forced march down the hall. The Billy Mitchell of this evening was a stronger and louder version of the man I'd bathed this morning. If the cursing was any indication, he was feeling much improved.

"Damn hospitals!" he muttered weakly. "They take away your clothes and your food, cut your chest open, and then expect you to exercise and be happy about it!"

I grinned at the nurse, who surely faced this abuse on a daily basis and looked utterly unfazed by it. In my own job at London Heart Hospital, I worked in the Post-Anesthesia Suite, a fancy term for the Recovery Room. The patients there are either unconscious or next to it, and therefore unable to vent their outrage yet.

His nurse laughed aloud as she left the room. "You should be proud of yourself, Mr. Mitchell. I bet you'll be ready for forty feet tomorrow."

Billy sighed and sank back on the pillow.

I approached the bed and leaned over to kiss my grandfather on the cheek. "You look even better than this morning, Grandpa."

"Wish I felt better," he grumbled.

"That'll come. I brought Remus and Hermione tonight," I said, motioning to the two of them behind me.

"Good to see you again, Billy," Remus said, stepping forward. "You're definitely looking much improved."

"Thanks." Billy was suddenly sheepish. "You'll have to forgive me, son. Last night was kind of a blur, and I don't remember you so well."

"Then I get to make a good first impression all over again," Remus said with a wink, and my heart swelled with appreciation for this man I'd married.

"And this," I said, motioning for Hermione to come forward, "is Hermione Granger, Billy."

Hermione smiled politely. "How do you do, Mr. Mitchell?"

"I've been better," Billy said, startled.

"I'm sure you'll be up and about in no time," Hermione continued.

Billy didn't answer immediately. Then his eyes became moist, and his voice cracked when he spoke. "I'm sure I will," he managed.

Hermione looked at me questioningly, but I had no answers to give her.

"Grandpa," I began, but Billy held up one hand while he dabbed furiously at his eyes with the other.

"I'm sorry. You'll have to forgive me. It's just hearing your lovely accent. It reminds me so much of my wife."

I understood immediately. No wonder Billy had reacted this way: he'd heard Hermione and thought of Marvy.

I felt for him, but during the brief time we'd been on U.S. soil, I'd run the gauntlet of emotions myself and wasn't ready to take on one more round. I squeezed Billy's hand. "Did you see the doctor this afternoon, Grandpa?" I asked, deftly changing the subject.

"Yeah, he stopped in," Billy said, sniffing briefly and wiping his eyes one last time. "Said I could go home by Friday if I keep my nose clean. How about you all take a seat? I hate lying here and having people stand and stare at me."

He had a point. The three of us settled ourselves on the various chairs surrounding the hospital bed.

"So," he continued, "I know you didn't come all the way from England just to visit me or the fabulous Holiday Inn in Rockford, Illinois. What else do you plan on doing?"

"It's the Marriott," I corrected with a smile. "And now that you're on the mend, we'll be going into Chicago to see some of the sights."

"Good for you," Billy said. "Now, what's this business about the wizards in England not letting you back in the country, Remus?"

Remus and Hermione automatically glanced around to make sure the door was closed, while I double-checked the intercom light over the bed. Then Remus explained the story in detail. By the time he finished, Billy was shaking his head.

"Idiots," he muttered. "I'm real sorry about this. If you hadn't come here on account of me, this would never have happened."

I was indignant. "Grandpa, don't say that!"

"Well," he argued, "am I wrong?"

"This is not your fault," Remus said firmly. "I'm here because Kailin needed me to be here. Even if I had known the flight manifests were being monitored, I wouldn't have chosen differently."

Hermione looked thoughtful. "I wonder how long they've been doing that. Of course, wizards don't use Muggle transportation all that often, even if they're traveling out of the country."

"You don't suppose they've bugged your phone, do you?" Billy asked. "Maybe they overheard you making your plane reservations."

It was a chilling thought. I looked to Remus for his opinion, but he was already shaking his head.

"That's not something wizards would do. They just don't tinker with Muggle electronic things," he said, then added, "except for Arthur Weasley, of course."

Billy grunted as he tried to readjust his position under the covers, and I leaned forward to help him. "So they want to get rid of you because you're a werewolf, huh? Kailie says that when the moon's full, you just take some medicine and go to bed. How's that supposed to hurt anybody?"

Remus swiveled his head to look at me as I resumed my seat. From the expression on his face, I could see that my abbreviated summary of Wolfsbane Potion and Its Applications had amused him.

"Well, that's the gist of it," I muttered to him. "And just so you know, I was a bit more thorough than that."

The corners of his mouth twitched, and I grinned in response.

I knew full well that lycanthropy was not a laughing matter, that point having been driven home with the Great Wolf Shirt Incident in March. But last month, I spotted an item in a catalog and simply had to have it. Remus was puzzled when the box arrived and I'd whisked it away without opening it.

The following week, when the moon was full, I hung my new purchase on the door of the spare bedroom before Remus locked himself in for the full moon.

"What's this?" Remus halted in his tracks when he spotted the plaque hanging there.

"Read it," I said primly. "It should be self-explanatory."

He approached the door and peered at the plaque, reading it aloud. "Nobody gets in to see the Wizard, not nobody, not nohow." There was a pause, then: "What?"

"The Wizard of Oz," I said, all innocence. "It seemed applicable. After all, you're a wizard, and no one should get in to see you when the moon is full."

I wasn't at all sure Remus caught the humor, but moments later I heard him laughing behind the now-closed door. "You're crazy," he called to me.

"Crazy in love," I retorted, tapping the door with the fingertips of one hand. "Rest well, R.J."

"The only reason that werewolves could be considered dangerous in this day and age," Remus said now, turning back to Billy, "is because the Ministry of Magic works to keep us impoverished and desperate. Some are driven to extreme measures just to stay alive."

"What a stupid system," Billy muttered. "And since when is it a crime for you to disagree with the people in office?"

"It's a crime if the people in office are on Voldemort's side," Hermione pointed out indignantly.

"Voldemort?"

"The Dark wizard. The one who's trying to seize power," I reminded Billy. The list of things I'd been slow to tell Billy about included the wizarding war; I think I'd broken that little tidbit about two weeks after I told him about Remus' lycanthropy.

"Yeah, I know." Billy was puzzling over something. "Wasn't he the one causing all that ruckus a few years back? Marva would get letters every so often from an old school chum of hers, telling about it."

"Back in the late seventies and early eighties," Hermione added helpfully.

"Oh. Yeah, time flies like that, doesn't it?"

I sat up straighter in my chair suddenly. "Remus, Marvy graduated from Hogwarts in 1941. What year did Tom Riddle graduate?"

"Nineteen forty-five," Remus stated, and my eyes grew huge.

"They might have known each other!" I said.

"I suppose it's possible, although it's not at all unusual to be unfamiliar with students from other houses, especially if they're not around your year."

Hermione was nodding. "He's right. You tend to hang around with a certain group and not interact much. Except for when we formed the D.A. last year: I really got to know a lot of people I didn't know before. It was quite nice."

Meanwhile, Billy was muttering. I strained to hear. "What's that, Grandpa?"

"Tom Riddle... I know that name." Billy was frowning. "Who is he?"

"That's Lord Voldemort's real name," Hermione told him.

"So Marva went to school with this Dark Lord guy who was really Tom Riddle?"

"Apparently."

"Excuse me, Billy," Remus interrupted, "but how have you heard the name Tom Riddle?"

Billy stared the ceiling for inspiration, his brows furrowed. "If I remember correctly, Marva had a distant cousin Leona or Lenora, or something like that who was a few years behind her at that school of yours. They sent letters back and forth to each other for a spell after we got married. Apparently Leona was crazy about this Tom Riddle guy, but Marva couldn't stand him. One day, she was real tickled when she got Leona's letter, 'cause come to find out, she and Riddle had a fight and he told her to get lost. I only remember the name Riddle because Marva used to say it was a riddle what Leona saw in him."

My jaw dropped. One of my distant relatives had wanted to date Lord Voldemort? Hermione was looking at Billy in awe, and Remus had a bemused expression on his face.

"In fact," Billy continued, "as I recall, Marva said that Tom Riddle was a runny-nosed little twit who'd sooner pull wings off flies than be nice to anybody. She couldn't figure out why Leona thought he was such hot stuff."

The thought of Voldemort being described as a 'runny-nosed little twit' plunged us all into an abrupt silence.

"Well," Remus managed finally, "I think he had a way about him."

"Did she use those exact words to describe him?" I asked, amused.

"Oh, I don't know," Billy shrugged. "Something to that effect."

"Did she say anything else?" Hermione asked eagerly. She was evidently looking for something, some clue missed in Britain, that might give the Order an edge in their struggle.

"I don't know," Billy repeated, a grimace of discomfort on his face.

"Are you okay, Grandpa?" I wanted to know.

"Yeah, but I'm gonna need a pain pill soon, I think," he muttered.

"We should be going," I said. "Let you get your rest."

Billy made a face. "I'll rest when I'm dead. Listen, you all start your sightseeing tomorrow and forget about me. I'm fine here. You don't want to sit in a hospital room and listen to me whine. Anyway, Roger'll be stopping by."

"I know. But I think I can spare a few minutes to drop by and listen to the whining," I said dryly, reaching out to pat his arm. The mention of Roger reminded me of the fruitless trip to his house, and now I was curious. "Grandpa, Roger mentioned that there was a trunk of Marvy's in your attic. I know you said that you hadn't seen Marvy's wand in a long time, but I thought maybe it was in the trunk, so we went to your house."

"Don't tell me you were silly enough to go up in that blast furnace of an attic," Billy said, appalled. "Not to mention that there's enough stuff up there to keep a junkman happy for years."

I smiled wanly. "You're not kidding, and yeah, we were silly enough. And we found the trunk, but it was locked."

"Couldn't you pry it open or something?"

"It was magically sealed," Remus explained.

"Oh. Well, you're welcome to hack it open, if that's what you want. I doubt that the trunk itself is worth anything, so I wouldn't worry about damaging it."

I could picture the three of us heaving axes at Marvy's trunk, along with the caption When Wizards Become Desperate.

"I don't think that would work," I said, although I wasn't quite sure why I thought that.

Remus was nodding agreement. "It's probably charmed so that it's unbreakable as well."

I already knew what Billy's answer would be, but I had to ask the question. "Are you sure that you haven't seen the wand anywhere, Grandpa?"

Billy looked mystified. "No, sweetie, I'm sorry. Not for years and years. Why do you want it so badly? Oh, of course: you said they took your wand away, Remus."

I nodded. "If we had a wand, we could change the passport and ID and get him back into Britain under a different name," I reminded Billy.

"I wish I could help," Billy said regretfully. "You're welcome to search the house all you want, honey."

"We might do that."

"Speaking of the house, how is it? When I went for that stress test, I didn't know I wouldn't be going home afterwards. There's no telling what shape it's in."

"It's fine," I assured him, trying not to think of the overgrown garden, the dust, the general unkemptness.

"Roger's been talking about getting a repairman in there. There's a lot of things that need fixing. Of course, some of them have been going on for ages."

"That happens with an old house." Remus was sympathetic. "Seems like there's always something that needs to be repaired."

"You're not kidding. I had to get a plumber in just last month to fix a leaky sink in the bathroom. Plus there's always water gets in the basement if it rains hard. And the windows leak cold air pretty bad in the winter. And some of 'em are sticky, you can't hardly raise them, while others slide shut as soon as you open them. We thought about getting those vinyl replacement windows one time, and I wish we had now. The cost seemed too high back then, but at least it'd be one less thing to worry about."

This was a good place to end the visit, I decided. Billy was tired and hurting, and the rest of us were still out of kilter from jet lag. I made sure that his nurse brought in some pain medication, then we said our goodbyes.

It had been a hell of a day, and I was glad it was finally over.

Seeing the Sights

Chapter 7 of 10

When her grandfather falls ill, Kailin has to race to America with Remus and Hermione in tow. And Remus and Hermione each have their secrets...

Chapter 7

Monday and Tuesday: Seeing the Sights

The observation deck of the John Hancock Building, at ninety-four floors, isn't the place to be if you're not fond of heights. For that reason, Hermione and I stood a respectful foot or two away from the windows, while Remus was virtually nose to nose with the glass.

"Incredible view, isn't it?" he enthused, looking down at the expanse of big city and the vastness of Lake Michigan.

"Just out of curiosity," I said, glancing around to make sure we weren't being overheard, "how high can you fly on broomsticks? This high? Higher?"

Remus looked as though the question had never occurred to him.

"I don't know that anybody's ever really measured the distance. What do you think, Hermione? Have you ever run across it in any of your books?"

The girl shivered slightly. "I've never checked," she said. "Brooms aren't my preferred mode of transportation, to be honest."

Remus grinned. "Whatever happened to Gryffindor bravery?"

"I can be perfectly brave on the ground, thank you."

I laughed. Laughing felt good. Wandering around like a carefree tourist felt good.

After one last fruitless session of brainstorming, Remus and I had decided to temporarily shelve the problem of getting him back into Britain and enjoy the trip instead. While I intended to take Billy up on his offer to search the house for Marvy's wand, right now everything else was on the back burner. I still held out hope that Marvy was looking out for us and some way around the problem would present itself at the right time. Sometimes the answers aren't staring you in the face; sometimes you just have to wait for them.

It was another hot day, and our immediate priority was to get Remus some summer clothes. The plan, which had made perfect sense back in our London flat, was for him to transfigure his regular clothing into something cooler and more comfortable once we arrived. But then Dillard Breckinridge showed up before Remus had the opportunity to make any wardrobe alterations, and now he was stuck with London-weight shirts, sweaters and trousers.

A trip to Marshall Field's yielded the necessary items. I wish I could have seen the look on my face when Remus emerged from the dressing room, clad in his new Muggle summer clothes; I don't know how werewolves normally dress in the States, but I imagine he'd create a sensation in Britain if he walked down Diagon Alley in his blue polo shirt and khaki shorts.

"This is a little tricky without a wand," he muttered to me. "I've always adjusted the clothes myself if things didn't fit quite right."

"It looks like they fit," I said, trying to keep a straight face. "Do you want me to find some different sizes for you?"

"No, I think these'll do. I'm just accustomed to adjusting them a bit."

"I think we've found our secret weapon," I murmured to Hermione as Remus went back into the dressing room. "All we have to do is dress everyone in the Order like that and Voldemort will laugh himself to death."

Hermione dissolved into a fit of the giggles.

We strolled down Michigan Avenue, doing more window shopping than the real thing. I found a few items for the flat; too bulky to carry back, I arranged for them to be shipped to Britain. They would arrive shortly after we returned home presuming we returned home, of course.

Hermione's attention was caught by one of the teen clothing stores, and Remus and I trailed inside in her wake. She browsed briefly, selected a few summer items, and looked around for the dressing room. A smiling saleslady pointed the way, then glanced in my direction.

"Would you like to go along to help your daughter?" the woman offered.

Before I could answer, Hermione stopped in her tracks and turned around.

"She's not my mother," she said, sharply enough that the saleslady was left with no doubt that the two of us were unrelated.

I managed a gracious smile and told Hermione that Remus and I would wait outside. Hermione, I was sure, had not intended to be rude to me, yet that's exactly how her retort came across. Remus had the same impression.

"Well," he said as we walked back onto the sidewalk, "that certainly came out of nowhere, didn't it?"

"I think the saleswoman caught her off guard." I shook my head. "It's just not possible that she's gone through all the stages of grief yet. She's still keeping it bottled in, isn't she?"

Remus, meanwhile, had spotted the display windows of the next shop and was tugging me by the hand to have a look. I glanced up and caught a glimpse of the marquee: Tiffany's.

"Remus," I said warningly, "don't start."

"Start what?" he said lightly.

"Your 'Kailin Should Have a Nice Wedding Ring' thing."

Remus ignored me. "Now that," he said, pointing to an elegant diamond ring in the window, "is what I would buy you if I could."

"And why would I need that?" I asked rhetorically.

"I didn't say you needed it. But you certainly deserve it." He paused. "I just wish I could buy my wife a diamond like every other man," he finished softly.

"In the first place," I pointed out, "not every man buys diamonds for his wife. And in the second place, it couldn't take the place of a family heirloom like this." I fingered the thin, simple band on my left hand.

"Family heirloom, yeah," Remus said, the lines around his mouth deepening.

I knew what he was thinking: that even though my wedding ring had passed down through several generations of his family, it would never be regarded as a fabulous piece of antique jewelry. The ring was plain and worn and did nothing more than convey the message that I was married. Though we lived comfortably enough on my salary and his dole, Remus still felt the sting of not being able to afford a nice ring of my own choosing.

We'd had this conversation more than once. I was in no way a jewelry fiend and asked positively nothing of him in the way of gifts; it was merely the idea that he couldn't buy it that troubled him. And now that the Ministry had cut off his monthly dole as part of the deportation, it was even less likely that there were any diamonds in my future.

"Okay," I said, willing to play the good sport. "Let's pretend we just won the lottery. What would you buy me?"

"Oh." Remus looked surprised when I didn't continue my usual practice of denying the need for expensive gifts. "Uh... well... that one for sure." He nodded toward the ring that had initially caught his eye. "And maybe those earrings to go with it."

"As long as they're gold and not silver," I reminded him. "I'd hate to have you nibble on my ear and have your lips swell up to the size of dinner plates."

I'd always heard stories of silver bullets being used to kill werewolves. On one of our first dates, long before I knew of Remus' lycanthropy, I discovered that he was hypersensitive to the metal when a silver pitcher rubbed against an open wound on his hand. It wasn't until March, when I was closeted with Poppy Pomfrey for the better part of a week, that I discovered more about werewolves and silver intolerance. There was nothing magical about silver bullets, silver knives, or silver anything, I learned. Poppy explained what happened when a werewolf was exposed to the metal, and I translated it at once into Muggle medical terms. What she was describing was a full-blown anaphylactic reaction.

"Lips the size of dinner plates," Remus mused now. "That would be a sight."

I laughed. "I used to have a pair of silver earrings, you know," I told him.

"What happened to them? I never saw you wear them."

"You happened to them. I threw them out. I wanted you more than the earrings."

Remus chuckled at this news. "I don't know, maybe the earrings were a better deal. At least you could take those back to Britain."

We were supposed to avoid this subject, yet it was a good thing if we could laugh about it. "Hey, that's it! You could transfigure yourself into a pair of earrings. Oh, wait I forgot. No wand."

"Bloody hell. I was sure you were onto something."

We were both laughing now. For a few more minutes we studied the jewelry in Tiffany's windows, and finally Hermione emerged from the clothing store with a bag of purchases. The girl spotted us at once and hurried over.

"There you are," she said breathlessly.

"Did your things fit?" I asked politely.

"They did quite nicely, in fact." Hermione hesitated, dragging her eyes up to meet mine. "Kailin, I'm really, really sorry. What I said back there about you not being my mother... It came out rather badly. I wasn't trying to be a prat, really I wasn't."

"I know," I said, nodding. "And you're forgiven. Say, anybody for a boat ride on the Chicago River?"

The sightseeing boat tour gave us a chance to rest our tired feet before hiking back to the car and fighting the rush hour traffic out of town. By the time we made it back to Rockford, I had to head straight for the hospital after dropping off Remus and Hermione.

Once more, I found Billy in improved condition. Roger was there, and the three of us had a pleasant visit. But by the time visiting hours were over, I was more than grateful to leave the hospital and head back to the hotel. I don't know why I allow myself to be convinced that there are more than twenty-four hours in the day, but it was becoming a habit. At least, I thought, I had the foresight to leave two days at the end of the week where I'd have nothing to do but crash before returning to work on Monday.

Remus was stretched out on the bed, reading this morning's newspaper, while through the adjoining door I saw Hermione on her bed, her nose in a book. She looked up

long enough to inquire what adventures I had planned for us tomorrow. Adventures? I nearly groaned aloud. Staying in bed all day sounded like a better idea to me, but I told her that we could take in some museums. We were discussing which ones to visit when Remus called our attention to an article in the paper.

"Did you read this?" he asked me.

"I barely had time to glance at the headlines this morning," I said. "Why? What is it?"

"The headline reads 'More Unexplained Murders in Britain'." Remus glanced over the top of the paper at us, then continued reading. *The discovery of two bodies near the village of Little Hangleton brings to six the number of unsolved murders in the vicinity over the past week. In all cases, there was no readily apparent cause of death, nor does there seem to be a connection between them. According to some residents, flashes of green light have recently been reported in the vicinity, but police have declined to say whether this phenomenon might be connected to the deaths.*"

Hermione looked stricken. "Voldemort," she whispered. "Little Hangleton... That's where he's from, isn't it?"

Remus nodded, frowning. "Well," he said wearily, "at least we know he hasn't been sitting on his arse while we're away."

"Let me see," I said, reaching for the newspaper and scanning the article for myself.

How odd, I thought, to be sitting here in the middle of the United States and have Voldemort intrude. I was struck immediately by how small the article was; it was nothing more than column filler, while it would have been a screaming headline in the *Daily Prophet*. Voldemort was literally a world away, and the thought was very, very comforting.

"I wonder..." Remus had climbed to his feet and was rummaging through his suitcase. He finally pulled out one of the brochures that Dillard Breckinridge had given him. "What say we take a little trip into the American wizarding world tomorrow? I'd like to find a newsstand."

Instead of heading for a museum the next morning, the three of us drove to Navy Pier. According to Breckinridge's information, a bookshop called Spellbound was the portal to the Greater Chicago wizarding shopping district. Just as with the Leaky Cauldron, Remus and Hermione could spot the shop door in the midst of the busy Muggle shops. I would have walked right past it.

The bookshop was large, and I heard Hermione gasp in pleasure at the array of shelves and their contents. It seemed that American wizards had taken a page from the newer Muggle bookstores, what with comfortable seating, refreshments and a vast selection of reading material, and I said as much to Remus. Remus looked at me in amusement and posited the notion that perhaps the wizards had come up with the idea first. That silenced me for a while.

While Remus made a beeline for the periodicals and newspapers, Hermione headed for a large section entitled 'Study Aids'. I settled for walking about, looking at the patrons. American wizards, I decided, looked quite different from British wizards. There were a few traditional robes and pointed hats in view, but not many. Was that due to the warmer climate here, or just a different culture? Also missing were any grizzled, menacing types along the lines of Mad-Eye Moody. This place reminded me of a college bookstore more than anything, with all varieties of casual and offbeat dress, full of people who felt no need to march to the latest dictates of style.

"Here's this morning's edition of the British daily, sir," I heard a young man say to Remus, handing him a rolled paper. I wandered back to rejoin my husband.

"Here," Remus said, indicating a table where we could sit together and read.

* MUGGLE DEATHS EVIDENCE OF FRESH DARK LORD ACTIVITY *

The deaths of two Muggles near Little Hangleton on Wednesday has been attributed to Lord-We-All-Know-Who, according to a Ministry of Magic spokeswizard. Along with four deaths last weekend, this constitutes the largest outbreak of Dark homicidal activity since last winter.

A spokeswizard for Madam Amelia Bones, embattled Minister of Magic, insists that Aurors are working around the clock to protect the wizarding populace. Still, many are voicing their concerns regarding Bones' leadership during these times of crisis and uncertainty.

"I don't think the Minister has any concept of the fear that's out there," stated Mrs. Coralee Benchaven of Leeds. "Now that she's taken ill, we don't need someone pretending to be in charge. We want action, not a lot of words."

Her words were echoed by...

"Taken ill?" Remus repeated suddenly, a frown on his face. "What's that about?"

I continued to read while he went back to find the man at the front desk.

"Excuse me," I heard him say, "but do you happen to have any back issues of the *Daily Prophet*? Anything from the past few days?"

It was several minutes before Remus returned to the table, clutching two more editions of the newspaper. Sunday's paper contained the headline he was looking for:

* MINISTER BONES' CONDITION WORSENS *

Minister of Magic, Amelia Bones, who was taken ill while at work in her office on Saturday morning, has been moved to a private ward at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies. While it was initially believed that her ailment was minor, her condition has steadily worsened, and Healers felt it would be safest for her to be under twenty-four hour observation.

Madam Bones' newly-appointed Special Assistant, Lucius Malfoy, stated that business would continue as usual. "Madam Bones is fortunate to have a highly qualified team of advisors in place. We will do all in our power to ensure that there will be no lapse in leadership." In addition...

Remus exhaled heavily and leaned back into his chair. "Malfoy," he muttered.

I took the paper from him and continued the article, hoping to perhaps find a medical clue to Amelia Bones' ailment. But there was none, and when I finished reading I looked up to find my husband looking equal parts furious and despondent.

"What did you find?" Hermione turned up, carrying a large tome entitled *Acing the Test: You Can Pass Each and Every Time*

Without saying a word, Remus showed her the article. Her face paled.

"So," she said grimly. "What a coincidence that Madam Bones happens to fall ill just as Malfoy is named a Special Assistant."

"How?" I asked, my voice hushed. "Do you think she could have been poisoned?"

"Possibly," Remus said. "Or perhaps under the Imperius Curse."

"You know," said Hermione, "we should try to owl Professor Dumbledore or Mr. Weasley, now that we know how to gain access to the wizarding world here. I'm sure the

messages are still being censored, of course, but we could at least tell them where we are and what we know."

Remus and I exchanged exasperated glances. We'd been desperate to find an owl the other day, to let the Order know of his plight. Dillard Breckinridge had literally handed us the answer, and in our exhaustion and despair we'd overlooked it.

The wizarding post office was about a block down the shopping strip. According to the sign above the door, this was the Main Branch for the Chicago Area Wizarding Mail Services. One look made me wonder just how Muggles like myself could fail to notice the hundreds of owls flying about, yet I knew if I asked Remus I'd get the same answer I always got ("It's magic"), so I kept my questions to myself. Obviously however they did it, it worked, because I grew up outside Chicago and never once heard a news report about owls taking over Navy Pier.

After debating who should receive our message, Remus dashed off the briefest of notes to Arthur Weasley, then showed it to Hermione and me for approval.

Having a great time, except have been banned from returning to Britain and had my wand confiscated. Rest of party will return as scheduled. Hope to talk with you soon.

Well, I thought, that summed it up in a nutshell.

"With luck," Remus said, "it'll be intercepted and read. If I do find a way back, I don't intend to broadcast it."

That taken care of, we left the wizarding street behind and returned to Muggle Chicago to take in the museums. We were all deep in thought, however, preoccupied with the events taking place several thousand miles away.

Changing of the Guard

Chapter 8 of 10

When her grandfather falls ill, Kailin has to race to America with Remus and Hermione in tow. And Remus and Hermione each have their secrets...

Chapter 8

Wednesday: Changing of the Guard

We returned to Spellbound the next morning. Remus and Hermione were intent on keeping up with the latest news from the wizarding world now that Voldemort was on the move, and I didn't mind the diversion. The one downside to surviving Lucius Malfoy's attack on my life was that I could no longer go with Remus to the quaint shops in Diagon Alley. I found Spellbound, along with the other wizarding shops we visited, to be more modern, more Americanized, yet every bit as fascinating as their British counterparts.

The man at the counter must have seen us coming.

"Did you want the British daily again, sir?" he asked Remus politely.

"Yes, if you please," Remus said, fishing in his pocket for change. He carried the rolled up newspaper the man gave him to the table as he had done yesterday, and Hermione and I sat down on either side of him to have a look.

It wasn't difficult to read the headlines. They were big, they were black, and they screamed the news:

*** BONES DIES; MALFOY ASSUMES TEMPORARY CONTROL ***

Promises Order and Safety to Fearful Citizens Until Permanent Replacement Can Be Found

I gasped aloud. Hermione moaned, "Oh, no," and I heard Remus mutter, "Bloody hell, we've lost the Ministry!" under his breath.

The two of them practically had their noses touching the newspaper, poring over the details. I did not. I didn't need to, because as far as I was concerned, it made no difference.

A Death Eater was in control of the Ministry of Magic.

We'd known that Remus, assuming we got him back into the country, could no longer show his face in wizarding locales any more than I could. But now that he'd made the mistake of threatening the pro tem Minister of Magic... In fact, if word got out that he was even back in Britain...

A thrill of fear and panic shot down my spine. I stood up abruptly, gasped "I'll wait for you outside," and fled the bookshop.

Once among the early morning throng of Muggles on Navy Pier, I found a bench and sat down, utterly sick at heart. Why was nothing easy anymore? This trip was supposed to be a no-brainer: visit Billy and introduce Remus to some of my family. Instead, it was turning out to be one major upheaval after another.

My eyes filled with tears, which I quickly wiped away. I was tired of crying, tired of events spiraling out of control. And so I swallowed the lump in my throat and concentrated on the sidewalk at my feet while furiously blinking back the tears. It took several minutes until my vision was no longer blurry. I tried to relax and look like any other tired tourist taking a break, but my arms and legs seemed all gangly.

Finally I gave up and went back to huddling tensely on the bench. A glance around at the stores told me that the entrance to Spellbound was now invisible to me, a Muggle, but I didn't care. Remus or Hermione would be out in a few minutes, and right now I was more than a little disgruntled with the wizarding world.

I had to admit that Remus had been right in dragging his feet several months ago, when I'd been gung-ho to start a family. How in the world could we make plans for a baby under these circumstances? I recalled the vivid image of Lucius Malfoy, sneering at me in the Leaky Cauldron, warning me that associating with werewolves could be dangerous. The man had tried to kill me just for the fun of it, and now, somehow, he was the acting Minister of Magic. While the general public was worrying about Voldemort, one of his Death Eaters had slipped in to take control of the British wizarding populace.

I wondered what would happen to the dedicated people in the Order of the Phoenix. And what of Remus, when we returned to Britain? All it would take was one Ministry official to recognize him, and my husband would be worse than banned from the country. Malfoy would likely see to it that Remus was tortured and carted off to Azkaban.

"Kailin?"

It was Remus, hurrying toward me. He sat down next to me, put an arm around my shoulder and pulled me close. "Are you all right? No, I can see you're not, you're white as a ghost."

"We can't go back," I said, my voice slightly unsteady. "He'll kill you."

"Who? Malfoy, you mean?"

"Of course, Malfoy."

"I can take care of myself. I used to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, remember?" Remus reminded me, a reassuring smile on his face.

"That doesn't mean a whole lot if the Minister of Magic wants you dead, does it?" I snapped. "We can't go back to England. It's not safe. We can stay here. I'll renew my Illinois nursing license and get a job, and we can live at Billy's until we can afford a place of our own."

"Kailin..." Remus took my hands and gripped them tightly, willing me to look him in the eye. "Of course it's not safe. It hasn't been safe for the past two years. The only difference is that now we know who's truly in charge at the Ministry instead of wondering. It doesn't matter who's named to the post now; he or she will be Malfoy's puppet, irregardless."

"If you want to stay here, out of harm's way, I'd be delighted. You've had one brush too many with Malfoy, and I don't want you anywhere near him."

"Me? I'm not worried about me. I'm worried about you!" I thought back to our wedding; it was a wizarding ceremony rather than Muggle, but it still had some version of the 'for better or worse' vow in it. And I wondered how many newlyweds had to face homicidal maniacs in their first year of marriage.

Beside me, Remus took a deep breath. "Kailin, you know that I'm not a highly visible member of the wizarding community. I'm not Albus Dumbledore. For all intents and purposes, I live as a Muggle. I generally have to go out of my way to be noticed, and that's saying something for a werewolf."

I couldn't disagree with that. "I know that, but..." I stopped, frustrated. "I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you," I managed finally.

"And I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you. We're in this together, right?"

I bit my lip: the lump in my throat was back. "That's well and good, but I'd rather be in it together from a safe distance."

Remus burst out laughing then, and I found myself joining in, despite my worries. He pulled me into his embrace. I allowed myself the luxury of burying my head in his shoulder for a few moments and blocking out the world. I knew that I was doing what Marvy had called 'borrowing trouble', giving credence to fears which might never happen. The problem was that these fears had a face: long, thin, cold gray eyes, streaming blonde hair...

"I'm sorry," I sighed wearily, eventually disentangling myself to lean back on the bench. "I didn't plan to start blubbering again. It's just the whole idea of Malfoy being in control, I guess."

"But you blubber so beautifully," Remus said in all seriousness.

"That's because I'm getting lots of practice at it," I pointed out.

"Just be glad you're not married to one of Malfoy's real enemies."

I think that's what finally got through to me. No doubt any number of people, all of whom had run-ins with Lucius Malfoy in the past, were quaking with fear today. And Remus was right: we did live lower and lower beneath the radar these days, and while Malfoy had doubtless instigated the deportation purely out of spite, the man surely had bigger fish to fry.

"What else did the article say?" I asked.

"It said that Amelia Bones' death would be investigated, although I'm quite sure they'll find no evidence connecting it with Malfoy. He's not that stupid. And it went on about how he was supposedly controlled by Voldemort last year but he's now a reformed man."

"How can people believe all that?" I burst out indignantly. "I can't imagine that the general population of wizards can't see through that pack of lies."

Remus stared off at the crowds on Navy Pier, deep in thought. "I think that we all have the tendency to want to see the best of people. Usually, that's not a problem."

It was true, I thought. We judged people as innocent, truly wanting to believe they were good-hearted and well-meaning, and were shocked and stunned whenever we were proven wrong.

"Malfoy snuck in through the back door when no one was looking," I said glumly.

"Do you know," Remus mused, "that one time back in school - when my friends learned to Transform into animals to keep me company every month - Peter told me that a rat can squeeze through a hole the size of a Galleon. So even if you think your house is secure and in order, there's always a chance that a rat might sneak in."

By the time Hermione wandered outside looking for us a few minutes later, I was calmly resigned to the latest news. Remus and I were holding hands and watching the pedestrian traffic as if our biggest concern was where to have lunch.

"Well," she said, plopping down beside us, "what do you think?"

"I think," Remus said firmly, "that it's time for us to forget about Lucius Malfoy for a while. Kailin, why don't you show us another fine museum? Art this time, do you think?"

The Art Institute of Chicago sounded like a good idea, I had to admit. Quiet and probably less crowded than other places we could go. And it was someplace where the beautiful won out over evil. We could all use a good dose of that right now.

"Art it is," I said.

We walked through gallery after gallery, refreshing our souls and tiring our feet once more. I've always enjoyed art museums, although I'm not one to linger and study the works for great periods of time. This can pose a problem if I'm with someone who prefers to dissect each painting along the way, but fortunately Remus and Hermione seemed to be of like mind and we made good progress.

"Are there artists in the wizarding world?" I asked as Remus and I paused to admire a Monet. "I've don't think I've ever heard anyone mention wizard art galleries and such."

Remus made a wry face. "There are very few artists among witches and wizards," he admitted. "I think our art leans toward practical things such as textiles and wizarding objects. Other than portraits, most wizards are too impatient for something as time-consuming as painting just for the sake of making a pretty picture. That's one area where Muggles have us at a disadvantage, I think."

I was still mulling that over in my mind when I realized that Hermione was nowhere in sight. "Where's Hermione?"

"Wandered off to the next gallery, I think."

He had barely completed the sentence when Hermione appeared in the doorway leading to the adjoining gallery. She was pale and breathing hard.

"Hermione?" Remus hurried toward her. "What's wrong? Are you all right?"

"I - I don't feel well," she mumbled, stumbling forward. "I'd like to go back to the hotel."

He put a steadying arm around Hermione's shoulders and steered her toward one of the benches in the middle of the gallery. "Here, why don't you sit down?"

A museum guard spotted us and came over at once. "Do you folks need some help?"

"The young lady's not feeling well," I told him. "Could you possibly get us a glass of water?"

He nodded and moved off, looking a little concerned that she might be ill enough to do something as drastic as throwing up in the midst of all these valuable works of art. Meanwhile, I was feeling Hermione's forehead, hunting for a fever or some other clue as to what was bothering her.

"Did this just start all of a sudden?" I asked.

Hermione nodded, although - and I wondered if I were imagining things - she seemed to be avoiding my eyes.

"Are you nauseated?"

"A bit."

"Dizzy?"

"A little."

"Here, put your head down between your legs. That'll help the dizziness go away."

She shook her head. I tried another tack. "Any stomach cramping?"

"No."

I hesitated, lowering my voice. "Is it that time of the month?"

Hermione shook her head once more.

I gave up, reminded of the admonition we'd received a hundred times in nursing school: NURSES DON'T DIAGNOSE. It was just as well, since I was getting nowhere with my questioning.

The guard returned shortly with a cup of water. Remus thanked him while Hermione gulped it down.

"Does she need to lie down for a while?" he wanted to know. "There's an office where she could rest."

But Hermione was already shaking her head. "Thank you, but I'll be fine," she said faintly.

The guard nodded and moved off. Another minute or two passed while we sat there, then Hermione announced that she would like to visit the Ladies' Room to wash her face.

"I'll go with you," I told her. "Are you all right to walk?"

Hermione nodded, shrugging off my assistance as I reached out to help her up.

The rest room wasn't far; we'd passed it on the way to the last gallery. Once there, Hermione splashed copious amounts of water on her face while I made use of the other facilities.

"You know," I said as I joined her at the sink afterwards, "it could have been whatever you had for breakfast." I reached for the soap dispenser and began to wash my hands. "Did you have one of those banana muffins, or -"

"It wasn't breakfast," Hermione said wearily, blotting at her face with a paper towel. She stared at her reflection in the mirror, and I noted that despite the healthy beginnings of a tan, she was pale beneath it all. Then: "There was a painting in that other gallery."

I waited.

"My parents have - had - a copy of it hanging in their clinic waiting room."

"Oh." The pieces fell into place. "I see."

"I thought - well, I thought it should be no big deal, just ignore it and walk on -"

"- but you couldn't," I said. I turned around and leaned against the sink. "Things sort of jump out at you when you least expect it," I said quietly. "You think you're going along quite nicely, and suddenly something like this happens."

Hermione took a deep breath. "I think I'm much better now," she blurted, tucking her unruly hair behind her ears and starting for the door.

I stared, momentarily at a loss for words. "Well, let's find Remus and we can head back to the hotel."

"Actually, I think we can carry on here. Like I said, I'm feeling much better." Hermione flung the rest room door open and walked out, leaving me gaping behind her.

I found Remus waiting in the hallway, a puzzled look on his face as he watched Hermione march back into one of the galleries.

"Do I need to get her a Soothing potion? I spotted a pharmacy in the same block as Spellbound."

I shook my head. "Apparently not."

"What happened?"

I explained about the painting here and the print in Hermione's parents' dental office. Remus merely nodded.

"Of course. It makes sense."

"But what doesn't make sense is how she's behaving now," I said in a low voice. "She was upset about seeing the painting. Very upset. I made a comment about how you think you're handling loss well until it backhands you out of the blue one day, and suddenly it was like she hauled herself up by the bootstraps and put on her happy mask again."

Remus arched an eyebrow. "She didn't want to hear what you had to say."

I nodded agreement. "It's as if what happened to her parents isn't real as long as she doesn't acknowledge it."

"I don't know what we can do to help her, Kailin," Remus said pensively. "But we can certainly let Arthur and Molly know what's going on when they come to collect her."

'We'? I let that pass, thinking that it was entirely probable that I would be the one doing all the talking when the Weasleys came to pick up Hermione a couple of days from now. The other part of 'we' would likely still be in the United States.

"I suggested we go back to the hotel," I continued, "but she insists that she's fine and wants to keep on going."

"Well, I'm not sure I want to keep on going," Remus retorted. "I could do with a nice lunch and a quiet afternoon."

"I'm with you," I agreed.

We found Hermione and convinced her to leave the art museum for a meal and an afternoon swim. The drive back to Rockford was a rather quiet one.

The red message light on the motel room phone was blinking when we got back. Uncle Roger had called to say that Billy would be released from the hospital tomorrow morning. The problem, he said, was that there was a business meeting in Milwaukee which he, Roger, couldn't possibly cancel. Any chance I could take Billy home and get him settled? He would be by after work to check on him.

I called Roger back at once and assured him that I would be more than happy to help out tomorrow. And as for tonight's plans, I told him that we were all exhausted and would not be going to the hospital. Remus, overhearing from across the room, looked happily appreciative of that idea.

We spent the afternoon at the hotel pool, getting gloriously waterlogged and sunburned in spite of the sun block I finally remembered to buy. And despite the day's rocky start, we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves.

Hide in Plain Sight

Chapter 9 of 10

When her grandfather falls ill, Kailin has to race to America with Remus and Hermione in tow. And Remus and Hermione each have their secrets...

Chapter 9

Thursday: Hide in Plain Sight

Remus and I both awoke early, each apparently thinking the same thing.

"We need to talk," he said resignedly, and I nodded agreement. There was only so long we could put off having this conversation. "You and Hermione leave tomorrow evening, and unless things change dramatically, I won't be going along."

I reached for one of his hands and curled my fingers around his. "I don't want to leave you," I murmured.

"I don't particularly want to be left," Remus said, smiling wryly at me as he squeezed my hand in return. "But there are worse things."

I was silent. My husband's life had been far from easy, and for him, being delayed in another country probably fell under the category of Minor Setback.

"As long as Billy doesn't mind having me about," Remus continued, "it'll be fine. It's not like I'm left homeless. Besides, you'll be returning shortly with a new wand for me. Or maybe we'll get an owl from Arthur today and find out that the Order's worked out a different plan."

"I was sure we'd hear from them last night," I said ruefully.

"Frankly, I'm not surprised that we didn't. I suspect that the Order has had to convene an emergency meeting, what with Malfoy's grab for power. A lot of what we do presupposed Amelia Bones being in charge, and now many of our plans will have to be revamped."

I stared at the ceiling of the motel room, trying not to feel totally disheartened. "Do you suppose things will ever quiet down?"

Remus rolled onto his side and reached out to caress my cheek. "Now, now, whatever happened to Kailin 'I-Crave-Excitement' Lupin?" he chided teasingly.

"She died in a fire three months ago," I grumbled.

"So who's left, if she's gone?"

"Kailin 'I-Want-To-Have-a-Quiet-Life-and-Babies-and-an-Ivy-covered-Cottage' Lupin," I blurted.

Remus studied me intently, the teasing gone. "Good thing you have a husband who wants the exact same thing."

I looked into the depths of his eyes, overwhelmed again by the realization that we were fighting together, for the same goals, the same end. I loved this man so much.

And I wasn't at all surprised when the gentle kisses that followed flared into a flame of passion.

* * *

As eager as hospitals are to ship people out in order to hold down costs, it's still like pulling teeth to actually get out the door with the patient and his belongings and his medications and so forth. There's a lot of paperwork involved (all of which basically absolves the hospital of guilt by saying the patient is your problem now, not theirs), so it was noon by the time Billy was loaded in the Jeep and we were ready to roll.

Billy was in outrageously good humor at being sprung. It was lunchtime, he said as we pulled away from the hospital, and could we possibly stop somewhere and get a real meal on the way home? Hermione, I noticed in the rearview mirror, looked a bit alarmed. I'm sure she assumed that Billy was terribly frail, ready to totter into the house and collapse back into bed.

"Are you sure you're up to that, Grandpa?" I asked as we waited out a red light.

"Well, yeah. I mean, I'll probably want a nap later on this afternoon, but it's awfully good to be outside again. It doesn't have to be a four course dinner," he added wistfully.

I couldn't say no. We stopped at a family restaurant that wasn't too crowded. I pulled up to the door, and Remus helped Billy out and into the building. Our waitress found my grandfather to be the cutest thing she'd ever laid eyes on, and as a result, we were served quickly and efficiently.

Billy then destroyed the rest of Hermione's assumptions by ordering an indecent amount of food. I knew full well he wouldn't be able to eat that much, and in fact, he couldn't. After only a few bites, he was already looking sorrowfully at his jumbo burger and fries.

"I may have overestimated," he admitted with obvious reluctance.

And I wasn't at all surprised when Billy began fidgeting, even though the rest of us were only halfway done with our own meals. His grand idea had been nipped in the bud, and now he was tiring rapidly.

"Are you okay, Grandpa?" I asked solicitously.

"Yeah, just a little tired."

"We'll head on home then," I said, putting down my fork.

"No, no, you go ahead and finish your food."

Remus glanced at Hermione and myself, then shook his head. "We're not all that hungry, Billy. Kailin's right. Why don't we get you home?"

Before Billy could protest again, I had tossed the tip on the table, picked up the bill and headed for the cash register.

We arrived at the house ten minutes later. It was once again stuffy and hot, and Hermione went in search of the thermostat this time while I settled Billy into his favorite armchair.

"I feel like an old man," he muttered viciously.

"Next week you'll be out running circles around the block," Remus promised, trying to cheer him.

"Grandpa," I said, "Remus and I need to ask you something. Since he doesn't have a wand anymore, he's more or less stuck here until I can bring one back for him. Would it be all right if he stays here with you for a few days?"

Billy looked confused. "I thought that was the plan. I just assumed that if he couldn't go back, he'd be staying here."

Remus and I exchanged glances. "We didn't want to assume or impose," he told Billy. "And it really shouldn't be for more than a few days."

"Hell's bells, you think I'd object to that?"

I grinned. "I was pretty sure you wouldn't, Grandpa, but after all this/s your house."

Billy made a face. "Yeah, well, such as it is. Sorry I don't have a pool or a sauna like at your hotel, Remus."

Remus smiled at him. "I dare say I'll live."

"When Roger asks why Remus is still here," I said, thinking of the conversation Remus and I had earlier, "just tell him that there's a bit of a snafu with his passport."

"Yeah, I suppose Roger'll be by later on, won't he?" Billy recalled.

I suddenly remembered that we had unfinished business on the second floor. "You know what," I said to my husband, "we left that trunk sitting in the middle of the upstairs hall the other day. Do you think we could wrestle it back up to the attic?"

Remus nodded, looking resigned. The trunk was heavy and the attic was hot, but we couldn't very well leave the thing sitting where it was - especially if Roger was coming over.

"You mean you're going up in that hot attic again?" Billy demanded.

I turned to my grandfather, who was gazing at Remus and me as though we had nary a brain between us.

"Just to take the trunk back up, Grandpa," I assured him. "It won't take long."

"Well, if you'll give me a few minutes to rest up, I could help."

"You'll do no such thing. Ready?" I turned to Remus.

"Ready for what?" Hermione had stopped in the bathroom after adjusting the thermostat and just now came into the living room.

"We're going to take the trunk back upstairs," Remus told her.

"I'll help," she said at once.

"We'll be right back," I said to Billy.

"Well," he said grumpily, "if you're going to be up there any length of time, be sure to open a window so you don't die of the heat. Oh, you know what... One of those windows doesn't go up at all. The other one goes up, but it doesn't stay up. Your grandmother used to have to prop it open with a stick. Blasted old houses... The sooner I can get a contractor in here, the better off I'll be."

We were halfway up the stairs to the second floor when it struck me. I stopped dead in my tracks. Hermione nearly collided with me.

"What's wrong?" Remus looked around to see why we had paused.

"Remus!" My eyes were huge.

He frowned. "What?"

"I wonder... Oh, it couldn't possibly be, that's too simple," I muttered, taking the rest of the steps two at a time.

"What couldn't?" he persisted, following me past the trunk to where the pull rope for the attic door hung from the ceiling.

"The stick!" Hermione cried, suddenly catching on.

Remus helped me haul down the attic stairs, but the expression on his face was notably wary. "Kailin, you were so disappointed last time. Don't go getting your hopes up again."

"Why not?" I demanded as a gust of escaping hot air flooded down the steps. "What other hope do we have? Tomorrow I have to go back to England without you. I might as well hope."

Resigned, Remus waved his hand toward the steps. "Let's have a look."

The attic seemed even hotter than the first time we were there. I found the lone light switch and flipped it on, shedding pools of brightness here and there on the piles of boxes and bags. There were only two windows, both grimy with years of dirt, and I immediately headed for the nearest one.

I had to bat a host of cobwebs away before I could unlock the window. It didn't open, despite my best efforts.

"Must be the other one," I said, stumbling across the space to the only other window in the attic. There was an equally appalling number of cobwebs there, and I quickly brushed them away, unlocked the window, and wiped the sticky webs on my shirt.

The sash creaked and groaned as I tugged it upwards. I released it, and it hung there for a fraction of a second before plummeting back down.

"Okay," I said, more determined than ever. "Where would it be? She wanted to hold up the window, so it would have to be nearby..."

Remus, meanwhile, stepped next to me and began to examine in and around the window frame. There was nothing lying between the window and the screen, nothing on the sill, nothing on the floor nearby. He reached up to feel above the window frame.

"Huh," he grunted.

"What is it?" Hermione wanted to know.

I wanted to know, too. I wasn't sure if Remus had uttered an exclamation of surprise or pain. It could have been a splinter or a spider bite or -

And then I caught sight of something falling, something that clattered loudly on the floor. Remus bent over to retrieve it. A smile played on his lips as he waved what was unmistakably a wizard's wand, causing a burst of golden sparks to fly from the end of it.

"Your magic wand, madame," he said, handing it to me with a bow and a flourish.

I took it gingerly, almost unwilling to believe it was real, that we'd actually found it. Marvy's wand. The part of her life that I'd never known about until last year, there in my hands. She'd given it all up for Billy, and ultimately, her children.

"I can't believe it," I murmured.

"I can't believe she used her wand to prop open a window," Hermione said, looking somewhat aghast at the notion of using a magical object in that manner.

Remus brushed a stray lock of hair from my sweaty forehead and kissed me there gently. "We need to go back downstairs before we suffocate, dearest."

I nodded vigorously. "Here," I said, handing the wand back to him. "You'd better hang onto it for safekeeping."

With a smile, Remus slipped the wand into his pocket and motioned for me to take the lead back down the attic stairs.

"Wait..." I went back to the window and locked it, then turned off the light before heading downstairs.

Hermione was standing by the trunk when I reached the second floor hall. "I suppose it'll be easier to get it back into the attic now. Or did you want to try to open it now that you have the wand?"

I exchanged glances with Remus. "Let's open it," I said. "Except let's take it downstairs so we can open it with Billy."

Remus levitated the trunk easily, and we maneuvered it down to the living room. From his easy chair, Billy stared at us dumbly.

"Is that it?" he asked.

"Your wife's wand, sir," Remus said, handing it to Billy once the trunk was on the floor.

Billy took it gingerly, studying it. Then his eyes welled up with tears and he began to sob.

"It's okay, Grandpa," I said, my throat tightening. I knelt down and hugged him; he clung to me, still overcome.

"I miss her so much, Kailin," he choked out.

"I know, Grandpa, I know. So do I." Tears streamed down my own cheeks as I knelt there.

Moments later, Remus placed a gentle hand on my shoulder. I looked up and saw Hermione coming into the living room with a box of tissues in her hand. Still sniffing, I climbed to my feet and took a seat on the sofa. I took a tissue, and Billy did the same.

"Thank you, Hermione," he managed weakly, handing the wand back to Remus. "Here, son. You need this more than I do."

"Thank you, Billy," Remus said, a quick smile flitting across his features. "I'll take good care of it."

Billy sniffed, readjusting his position in his chair. He cleared his throat loudly. "I know you will. Just use it to take good care of these two," he added, gesturing to me and Hermione.

"I swear it."

"But where'd you find it? Up in the attic?"

I nodded. "It was the stick Marvy used to prop open the window. When you mentioned that, it occurred to me that just maybe she'd used her wand to hold the window up."

"I'll be darned." Billy shook his head in disbelief. "It was there all the time."

"Grandpa, would you like to have a look inside the trunk? We can, now that we have the wand."

"I'd love to," Billy said brusquely, finally able to master his emotions.

Remus waved the wand, and with a simple "Alohomora!", the trunk lid unlocked itself. He gently opened it all the way.

The first layer of the trunk's contents was comprised of clothes, classic styles from the 'Forties: dresses, blouses, skirts, even shoes. Some bore the labels of British manufacturers, while others appeared hand-sewn. It suddenly struck me what I was seeing.

"It's her trousseau," I murmured, running my hand over a handsome green tweed suit.

"Her what?" Hermione echoed.

"Her trousseau," I repeated softly. "A bride's wardrobe. Women used to build up a wardrobe before they were married, so clothing purchases wouldn't be a drain on finances."

"You mean, a drain on the husband's income," Remus corrected with a wicked grin. I fixed him with an evil glare.

"I believe I phrased it more politely," I said primly. Behind me, Billy chuckled.

Beneath the trousseau were several of Marvy's nursing uniforms, still crackling with starch. And beneath that...

"Her Hogwarts robes!" Hermione exclaimed in excitement and reached in to unfold a black robe with the Hufflepuff crest upon it. She held it up in front of her, modeling the robe for all of us.

"It looks odd to see you with Hufflepuff robes," Remus told her.

"Feels odd, too. Hmm... I think the robes then were a bit heavier than ours are now."

"Damn workmanship and materials aren't what they used to be," Billy grunted.

There were spell books, potions texts, a charred metal cauldron, a much-used mortar and pestle. A diploma acknowledging Marva McLain as an official graduate of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Class of 1941. Another diploma from the Bromwell Regional Hospital and Home, certifying that Marva McLain had completed the course of study required for the title of Nursing Sister. And lastly, what looked like a series of diaries.

"You should read them, Grandpa." I held them out to Billy, but he was shaking his head.

"You take 'em, honey. In fact, you can take all this stuff, if you can get it on the plane. It's no good to me, I'll just cry over it. You're married to a wizard, so I think that it's rightfully yours."

I glanced at Remus. He nodded, placing a gentle hand on Billy's arm at once.

"We'll take good care of it all, Billy. We won't be able to take it all back at once, but I'm sure we can arrange to have it shipped."

"Sounds good." Billy scowled at the floor.

Remus eyed him in concern. "We won't do anything with the contents without talking to you first," he began.

"It's not that. It's just that now I'm home, and you all are leaving," Billy grumbled.

"Not until tomorrow evening, Grandpa," I said. "We'll be able to see you tomorrow before we go."

"I know. I just wish I'd been well, and we could have had a good visit instead of you having to see me in the hospital."

I smiled, reaching out to hug my grandfather. "Well, when you get your hip fixed, you'll be able to come see us."

"I don't know," Billy said worriedly. "I still don't have a passport."

Remus chuckled. "If that's all you need, no problem. I don't have a passport either, but I used magic to make one. If nothing else, I'll make one for you and mail it."

Billy shook his head, a weary smile flitting over his face. "Kailin, sometimes I have to wonder if your grandma isn't looking out for you somehow."

"Grandpa," I said fervently, "I know she is."

Not With A Bang, But A Whimper

Chapter 10 of 10

When her grandfather falls ill, Kailin has to race to America with Remus and Hermione in tow. And Remus and Hermione each have their secrets...

Chapter 10

Saturday: Not With a Bang, But a Whimper

As a general rule, I don't like to be proven wrong. The way I see it, the fact that I'm an intelligent female automatically puts me in the category of 'Usually Right', and I'm proud of it. But on occasion, I'm grateful if events show that I'm actually, albeit uncharacteristically, in error.

Such was the case with our return to Britain.

I was prepared for the worst. I was ready for Death Eaters to leap from behind pillars at Heathrow, eager to seize my husband and drag him before Lucius Malfoy. I expected to see Ministry Officials coming at us from all directions, not fooled in the least by the fact that I had canceled the plane reservation for 'Remus Lupin' and made a new one for 'Raymond Wolfe'. Somehow, I thought, our luck wouldn't hold: Malfoy would learn that Remus was back, and there would be hell to pay.

Apparently I've watched far too many spy movies in my life, for as it turned out, we straggled off the plane and through Customs with no problems whatsoever, just three weary travelers in a terminal full of other weary travelers. Certainly the CIA would have had no trouble uncovering the Lupin-Wolfe connection, but I think I gave Lucius Malfoy and his cronies far more credit than they deserved.

By the time it was mid-morning in London, we were back at the flat and happy to be there.

None of us had slept much on the flight, but there were more pressing concerns. Remus wanted to inspect the flat from top to bottom, looking for any clues to indicate that someone from the Ministry had searched the place. I unpacked the suitcases and began making piles of laundry to be done. Hermione decided to search for a news broadcast on the television, curious to see if any more unexplained murders had been reported.

I was in the midst of putting some unworn socks back in the dresser when Remus appeared at the bedroom door, looking worried.

"Kailin? Can you come out here for a minute? It's Hermione. She's terribly upset."

"What's wrong?" I asked, but Remus merely shook his head. Frowning, I shoved the dresser drawer closed and went into the living room.

Hermione was curled into a ball on the floor, her shoulders heaving with sobs.

"Hermione?" I knelt down next to her and put an arm around her trembling shoulders. "What's wrong, sweetie?"

"That!" she wailed from beneath a curtain of hair, waving a hand in the direction of the television.

I looked up, expecting to see a newscaster standing amid a pile of bodies or the wreckage of a building. Instead, I was met by...

...a cartoon.

And I understood at once.

"Remus," I said quietly, "can you turn off the television, please?"

"Of course." Still mystified, he stepped forward to press the power button.

"Thanks, love. And could you get a cold, wet washcloth from the bathroom for me? Hermione, let's get you to your room. You'll feel better there." I got to my feet and tugged the crying girl upright. She offered no resistance whatsoever.

I steered Hermione to the spare room and made her stretch out on the bed at once. Remus appeared moments later, a washcloth soaked in cold water in his hand.

"Here you go," he said, the question mark remaining in his voice.

"Thanks," I said, and smiled at him apologetically. "Give us a couple of minutes?"

Remus nodded and left the room. I sat down on the edge of the bed next to Hermione and began to wipe her face with the cold cloth.

The girl shuddered visibly, the very picture of abject misery. "I'm so terribly sorry, Kailin. It's just that I can't take it anymore. It hurts so much, I don't know what to do. When I saw that on TV..."

"I understand. What you're feeling is perfectly normal and perfectly all right."

We sat in silence for a while. I continued to dab at her face, her neck, her arms. Slowly, gradually, Hermione's sobs turned into whimpers, and the whimpers gave way to sighs.

"Why me?" she pleaded softly. "I mean, I know why - because I'm a Muggle-born and smart and all, but - why did it have to ~~be~~ me?"

I pushed the hair away from her face. Remus, I noted with a glance toward the doorway, was standing there watching us. "The answer, my dear, isn't a good one," I told her. "The answer, Hermione, is 'why *not* you?' There's nothing you did wrong, nothing your parents did wrong. Evil reached out and touched you and your family. It reaches out to touch all of us, and usually it only grazes us, but sometimes it hits head on and knocks us flat. And the only way to fight it is to get back on your feet and keep going."

Minutes passed. Hermione rolled onto her side to stare out the window. She swiped at her eyes with a sleeve.

"I wish - sometimes I wish - that I hadn't been born with magical powers."

"Do you think that would have prevented your parents' death?"

"I like to think it would," Hermione said in a small voice.

"What would you have done? Gone to a Muggle school? College, someday?"

"I suppose."

"Did you ever want a Muggle career? Before you found out you were a witch, that is?" I inquired.

"Oh... I thought about a few things, but never anything very serious. When I found out - about the magic, that is - I figured that was why no regular careers had ever caught my attention very seriously."

"Maybe you would have been a dentist like your parents," I offered.

"No!" Hermione blurted, utterly horrified by the idea.

I burst out laughing at her reaction, and she couldn't help but join in.

"I'm sorry," Hermione managed after a moment, "that sounded terrible, didn't it? But the truth is, I never wanted to be a dentist," she confided. "It's awful, putting your hands in people's mouths like that. I don't know how my parents could stand it."

I grinned. "I know what you mean. People wonder how I can be a nurse, but I don't know how anyone can do dentistry."

"I suppose I'm better off as a witch," she admitted, sniffing.

"You have family, don't you?" I asked, thinking back to the Grangers' funeral. "Aunts and uncles? Have you heard from them much?"

The bushy head shook. "Oh, I got a letter or two, asking how I was doing. But neither of them ever knew I was a witch, or even that I attend Hogwarts."

"That must make things pretty difficult."

Hermione flopped onto her back to study the ceiling. Her face was blotchy and red, her eyelids swollen. "It's awful, really. They're my closest relatives, and I have nothing in common with them. That's the worst part about being Muggle-born. It's terribly hard for your family to relate to you. I felt rather lonely anyway, but now... I feel so alone, Kailin. It was awful, walking through the airport today and seeing all those happy reunions as people greeted each other."

I honestly hadn't noticed. I'd been too busy worrying about whether Remus would be met with a welcoming committee of Death Eaters to spot either the reunions or Hermione's discomfort. Come to think of it, though, she'd been rather quiet on the taxi ride to the flat.

"Did you feel this way when your parents died?" Hermione asked me earnestly. "Because sometimes I think I'm going crazy. I mean, I know I'm not all alone in the world, but that's the way it feels."

In my case, my uncles had rallied around me - initially, at least, until they had gone back to their lives. But I had Billy and Marvy, and that had made me feel less orphaned. I knew what Hermione meant, however.

"You feel like you don't belong to anyone anymore," I said, remembering. "People still care about you, but nobody will ever care again like your parents did."

Hermione nodded vigorously, fresh tears spilling over, and I was unable to prevent my own eyes welling up at the memory.

"I think," I continued, wiping my cheeks with one hand, "that I also felt alone because nobody else had experienced what I was going through. It's normal for your parents to precede you in what's usually a natural death. But to have both of them snatched away so quickly... People tend to look at you like you're some sort of scary creature. You frighten them because they're reminded how fragile life is and how they could have easily been in your shoes."

"That's it exactly," Hermione said hoarsely. "It was like my relatives didn't even want to come near me, that if they got too close they'd catch what I had. And they didn't even know the truth. They didn't know it was Death Eaters. They thought it was just a stupid intruder."

"How about at school?" I asked. "Have Harry and Ron been able to help you?"

A snuffle and a nod. "They've been magnificent. And Professor McGonagall and Professor Dumbledore. But others...they think they have to say something comforting, and then they end up saying absolutely the worst things. Usually, they try to make me feel better by telling me how Harry and I are in the same boat now, because he lost his parents and now I've lost mine, so isn't it lucky he's my friend. Except Harry never knew his parents, not really. He didn't have them for sixteen years, like I did."

I smiled ruefully. "I know. Unfortunately, there are tons of people like that. Hang on to Harry and Ron, Hermione. Good friends don't feel compelled to spout platitudes. They're just there for you."

"Like you and Remus."

I smiled and brushed one last curly lock out of her face. We sat in companionable silence for a while. Finally, Hermione spoke, her voice so soft I could barely hear her.

"I'm so tired of trying to be brave, Kailin. Like if I let my guard down for a moment, the pain will take over and I'll never be all right."

I regarded her with a mixture of admiration and sympathy. Keeping her grief at bay for six months had to require tremendous force of will. It also meant the recovery process had been significantly delayed.

"I think you just managed to get over the hump," I assured her.

A smile threatened the corners of Hermione's mouth. She put her hands behind her head and contemplated the ceiling once more. "I hate Lucius Malfoy," she said, in the closest she'd sounded to normal for a good while. "I wish I could curse him to hell and back."

I snorted. "Join the queue. So do I."

She looked at me curiously for a moment, then remembered. "That's right. I'm so sorry, I nearly forgot about the fire."

"Wish I could," I said. "You know we couldn't prosecute, right?"

The girl nodded. I continued, gazing out the window at the bright summer day beyond.

"Sometimes I fantasize about Malfoy being killed, usually by Remus during a big battle. But it's okay with me if an Auror takes him out. Just so sooner or later, the man ends up getting what he deserves."

"Maybe Harry or Ron will take him down some day," Hermione speculated. "They want to be Aurors, you know. On the other hand, that's a long time to wait. I'd prefer sooner over later."

I smiled. "I know. To be honest, I'd be happy just to ram my knee into his groin with as much force as humanly possible."

Hermione actually giggled.

Remus took that as his cue that it was safe to come in. He strolled in, hands in his pockets. "Everything all right? Must be if I hear you ladies threatening Lucius Malfoy's manhood."

I grinned at him. "Would you like in on the action?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure there'll be much left of him after you two get through."

"We can only hope," I said, rising from the bed.

Arthur Weasley wasn't scheduled to collect Hermione until he finished his day at the Ministry. By popular vote, Remus, Hermione and I opted to have a light lunch and then take a much-needed nap. By the time I'd put away the lunch dishes and crawled under the covers next to my husband, he was bursting with curiosity as to what caused Hermione's long-awaited breakdown.

"Only a Muggle could have solved that mystery," I said loftily.

"You're gloating," he said accusingly as he tugged me closer to him. "What was it?"

"Deer."

"I love you too, darling, but what was it?"

I laughed. "Deer. The animals. Hermione was flipping through the TV channels and ran across the movie Bambi."

Remus looked at me suspiciously in the dimmed bedroom light, evidently wondering if I was putting him on. "And?"

"It's a charming, classic story about a fawn growing up. Eventually the fawn, who's named Bambi, is orphaned when his mother is killed by a hunter. It's a terribly sad scene when Bambi is calling for his mother. I cried buckets when I saw it as a child."

"Oh." Bewildered, my husband gave up and decided to chalk the whole thing up to feminine emotions.

By the time Arthur arrived at five, all three of us had managed to sleep for a while and felt one hundred percent better for it. His eyes lit up as soon as he saw Remus.

"So, you made it back after all!" he cried, pumping my husband's hand vigorously. "Well done! How did you manage it? Dumbledore's been furious about this whole business, I can tell you!"

Remus gave him the brief version of how we'd located Marvy's wand, along with yesterday's switch in plane reservations and passports. I smiled inwardly; as a bit of a treat, I had splurged on a First Class ticket for passenger 'Raymond Wolfe'. And so, while Hermione and I sat crammed in Economy, munching peanuts, Remus was stretched out in a leather seat, eating hors d'oeuvres and sipping champagne.

"So what's the latest news?" Remus asked, a worried frown creasing his forehead. "We managed to get hold of the Daily Prophet and stay abreast of things."

"You know about Amelia Bones, then?" Arthur asked, sobering. "A few of us from the Order met briefly, but Dumbledore wants a meeting with all hands tomorrow night. Can you make it?"

"Of course. I'll be there."

And so, here we were, right back in the thick of it. A day ago, we'd driven past cornfields in middle America, without a Dark Lord or Death Eater in sight. Now we had to watch our backs at every turn, guard our conversations, worry about being spotted by people who were the very essence of evil.

At least Remus and I would face it together. Marvy was surely watching out for me - for us - and I wondered if her benevolent protection could thwart even Lord Voldemort.

I supposed we would find out.