The Return

by CeleryThesis

Summary

Lily Evans Potter sacrificed herself for her son, and her love saved him and then the world. Except, she never died. With romanticism and cynicism, Albus Dumbledore plotted to keep James and Lily alive. Harry didn’t need that sacrifice to live; conventional defense against the dark arts would do. He just needs to believe in that sacrifice. Dumbledore is confident in his ability to persuade.

Severus Snape lived his life with one glimmer to cleave to: in the summer of 1975 he loved Lily Evans, and she loved him back. It is what helps him sleep during the worst nights. It is what motivates him to refuse to die for the cause.

It is not until his early forties that finally another glimmer arrives and changes his life into one he truly wants for the first time since he was fifteen. But that spark of Lily that kept him alive throughout the years will not be extinguished easily, especially because Lily never died.

Notes

This work would not exist without my dear Marriage1988. The original idea was hers, and she entrusted me with it. I began writing this story in February of this year, and she has held my hand and offered nothing but encouragement the entire way. She has talked me down again and again when I was stuck and frustrated. I cannot begin to thank her for allowing me to use her idea, but most of all for her friendship.

Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter; whoever finds one finds a treasure.
Sirach 6:14
Prologue

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Prologue

October 30, 1981

The old wizard sat behind his desk, waiting to hear the little family ascend the stairs just outside his door. The desk was ancient and resembled the bow of a ship. On its starboard corner were two phials. Professor Slughorn had brewed an effective polyjuice; the old wizard had tested it on himself. It was active for six hours, and safe for three successive re-dosings. He had not been overly confident in the old Potion Master’s skill, but he had been pleasantly surprised. The potions just needed a hair from each adult to be complete.

He had been over the details with the couple. He had several sets of instructions in sealed envelopes. With the help of Professor Vector, who didn’t know the specifics of the project she was collaborating on with her boss, he had tried to predict every scenario, including a quick resolution to the struggle, in which the couple would be instructed to come home immediately. He was not an optimist, however.

Only the three adults present in the room that day would know the details of his plan. Minerva would probably kill him if she had any idea. The Aurors would be obliviated if they survived. He wished he could obliviate the couple as well, but he had assured them of their reunion with their son as a reward. It wouldn’t do to eliminate their chief motivation.

On his closest shelf, there was a three-volume set of parchment filled with arithmancy tables that had necessitated all of this. The extensive work contained several conclusions:

1. This was an existential struggle.
2. The baby would grow to be the person upon whom survival rests.
3. The baby’s genetics were favorable.
4. The baby would not accomplish what he needed to being raised in a stable, loving home.
5. The person the baby grew into must believe that love triumphs over hate and that good triumphs over evil.
6. This person must be willing to sacrifice his life to save the rest of the society.
7. An example of this sacrifice would be his core truth.

The old wizard saw clearly that current events were hurtling toward the sacrifice of the baby’s parents. A more ruthless man would have watched it play out, he thought. It was fate, all he had to do was stay out of the way.

He’d had too much affection for the couple, he knew it. SHE had been one of his favorite students from the moment she arrived to be sorted. HE embodied the best of their house. He was effortlessly handsome, charming, intelligent, but not intimidatingly so. He had a well-honed sense of humor. He made everyone around him feel privileged to know him. Most everyone, anyway.

The old wizard had attended their wedding, and he had felt a pang he would deny to his grave and into his life as a portrait. James Potter was as beautiful as any creature had ever been that day. It was impossible to send him to almost certain death.

Instead, he had hand-picked two of the best fighters in the ranks of the Aurors. Lutrell and May were their names, and they were ready for the confrontation that would occur in the next twenty-four hours. There was a new cot in the nursery, charmed to deflect all curses on to the person
casting them.

He heard footsteps and the baby, who was fussing as his mother tried to soothe him.

“It’s okay, Darling Boy. Everything is going to be just fine.”

The voice was not at all convincing, nor was the appearance of the little family as they stepped into the room. The parents looked both terrified and devastated. The baby…looked like a baby. It was hard to see this little blob and imagine that the world depended on him.

“James, Lily, Harry,” the old wizard said quietly. “Please come in.”
They only stayed in the flat in wizarding Manhattan for three months. She couldn’t step outside without feeling assaulted by noise, by people, by the constant streaking of buses and cars and taxis.

James felt they should give it six months and then see how they adjusted. She told him she wasn’t sure she would last six months. She spent every lunch hour researching nearby villages at the public library down the street from the agency.

She wanted no part of the wizarding community. She had no choice at work, but away from it, she just wanted to disappear into Muggle—No-Maj—society.

She had loved their home in Godric’s Hollow. James had worked out of London, she had too, before Harry was born, and they had relished leaving the city at night and returning to their little haven. Their neighbors were mostly older, and they had all doted on Harry. She would bring him to the little commons and set him on a blanket when he was a tiny infant, and then again when the weather was warmer just before his first birthday, and he would draw a small crowd of admirers.

She had been happy every day. She knew everyone’s names. In the long, cold winter, they would spend each afternoon at a neighbor’s house or hosting someone in their own home, sipping tea and watching what marvelous new trick Harry could do.

She had been appalled by the flat arranged for them in New York. It was close to the top of the tallest building Lily had ever been in. Two of the walls were glass, making her feel terrifyingly exposed.

James had been understanding and had come home from work the first week, bursting with news of the perfect village for them, a place called New Hope in a state nearby.

“That name, Lils, it has to be a sign.”

He had still been wearing his glamour, which made his dark brown hair much lighter, as light as it could be and not look jarring with his dark eyes, which couldn’t be changed. His features were fuzzy when he was wearing it. His nose was larger and rounder, he no longer had an angled chin, and he was slightly pudgy.

She always rid herself of her own glammour the moment she darkened the front door. Her changed hair was very light, and her face looked disconcertingly like that of her husband’s, as if he were her brother. She couldn’t stand it. She tapped her nose three times to prompt him.

“Oh, yes,” he laughed. “I can’t believe you don’t fancy dough boy,” he laughed. She didn’t. She hadn’t laughed in weeks.
They had visited the village the next Saturday. It was remarkably like Godric’s Hollow, and therefore she didn’t think she could stand it.

“I can’t…with neighbors, James. I can’t make friends right now. I can’t play gobstones at the pub. I just want to disappear.”

“We’re fairly hidden where we are.”

“I want to disappear without being afraid of something bursting through that glass.”

James worked at the Central Ministry in the department of Auror. Back home, he had risen quickly to the top of the ranks. Here, by design, he was a lowly clerk, Edward Frazier, immigrant from the UK, married to Stella, looking for a fresh start after the death of his parents and his wife’s parents.

That bit was true enough. Fleamont and Euphemia Potter had died of the dragon pox just before Harry was born. Her own parents had gone as well: her mother of colon cancer weeks before her seventeenth birthday; her father a year later of heart disease, disappointment, and grief.

Lily as Stella Frazier, worked in an auxiliary building three blocks away in the arithmancy department. She had a vendetta against the art, but it never noticed as she plotted the lines all day long on an increasingly formidable stack of parchment.

So far, her markings hadn’t forced any mothers to give up their babies. She was running options on the price of wool, on the life expectancy of wizards who never marry, on how much the Dragot would fetch against the Galleon in a year, in ten, in a hundred.

She had thought about being a healer once. That’s what she had been working toward before Harry was born. They had been careless with contraception charms. She knew about the potion, and she knew she was supposed to take it, but James didn’t care. He wanted a house full of children and didn’t mind starting early. They cast the charms at her prompting when she thought about it, but she sometimes didn’t, and then Harry was on his way.

She revised her plans to put off her career until the baby and perhaps more babies were at school. Who could have predicted that the situation would become so dire so quickly?

She would have never pictured herself childless, sitting in an office in New York, writing line after line with endless possibilities of life. If she had any sense of humour left, she would have found it amusing.

She had taken one arithmancy class at school, during sixth year, and had made good marks, but she had always made good marks. Professor Vector had asked her in front of the class if she was planning to pursue it at NEWT level, and she had declined with a giggle. Why on earth would she ever need this?

Severus Snape had taken to ignoring her at this point in their association, but her reaction to the professor’s inquiry had drawn his silent ire in the form of a disgusted glare from across the classroom. Well, fuck him anyway. Impressing him was the least of her concerns.

She now found she had a real aptitude for it. She had finished her training program that was supposed to last a month in only a few days and had already been promoted from line writing to basic analysis.

James had been the ambitious one at home. He had become a top Auror soon after training and had been in the front of the fight with the new threat. Here, though, he seemed perfectly content to write reports at his desk.
That had been explicitly in his dossier. He could make friends at work, but he could not advance into the ranks of Auror there. It was too risky that someone might ask how he became so proficient and start asking questions at the London office. He had complied without protest.

Stella Frazier played her part at work, and saved her rebellion for home.

The glamours were trivial. She had reinvented herself before, anyway. After years of being disgusted by James and his band of Marauders—people who felt the need to name their clique, could they be any more insufferable? Sometime during the autumn of sixth year, James had become so much more charming than she had ever given him credit for in the past. Her mother was dying at home, and she had desperately needed a friend. None of her Gryffindor girls had really understood. He shouldn’t have either, but he had come down to the common room one night on his way to sneak into the kitchens, and had found her curled up in front of the fire, crying her eyes out.

Who would have known that the infuriating boy of her earlier years could be so compassionate? It hadn’t been anything he had said; he had just listened. He hadn’t touched her that first night until the end when she had felt ridiculous, suddenly unburdening herself on James Potter, of all people, and had hastily stood up and started to apologize. He had taken her hand, ever so gently.

“Please, Evans, that’s what we’re here for. We’re supposed to be friends.”

She had gone through classes that day, not thinking about anything other than trying to make it through a school day with no sleep. Then at dinner, he had been up the table from her, with his mates, as always, but she had really looked at him in profile, and she noticed how handsome he was. He looked like a man, really, although still boyish in his energy, but not the clown he had been for so many years.

He had caught her looking, and his face had opened into a broad smile. Somehow that had been the start of it. After years of dismissing him disdainfully, she was now afraid she wasn’t good enough for him; that she wasn’t the sort of witch that would be an acceptable partner for James of the lauded Potters.

She wasn’t the poorest of Cokeworth, Severus Snape probably was close, but she might have been the second poorest student at Hogwarts behind him. She had left her Mancunian accent at home and had imitated her peers’ manners sufficiently. No one had ever found her out, but she feared she would now be out of her depth. She had become a master of transfiguration, turning her meager wardrobe into something much nicer.

Nothing was declared, but they sat together at meals, held hands in the corridors, lingered in the common room every night. She cheered Gryffindor quidditch in a way she never had before, with scarf and hat and everything.

Two weeks after he found her crying, and after a particularly heroic snitch grabbing, during a wild bash in the common room, he had pulled her toward him and kissed her sweetly. She’d had three butter beers and a shot of fire whiskey and lost her head, pulling him against her and snogging him like the proper Cokeworth bird she was, until she regained her senses, pushed him away, and covered her mouth in horror.

“Don’t stop, Evans,” he murmured in her ear. “Don’t you ever stop!”

She kissed him again but remembered her manners, it was a lesson she would follow from then on. He never seemed to notice.

Her mum took an awful turn just before the Christmas hols and died during the break. She wanted
to owl James, but she was afraid he would show up for the funeral and see her town and her house. She hadn’t spoken to Severus since the Mudblood incident the previous spring. He was there with a bunch of sad looking flowers. She was touched despite it all, but she had retreated to her room after the funeral and holed up in there until he left.

She returned to school, and James grieved with her. They were inseparable the rest of the year. He invited her to come home with him for the summer, but she couldn’t leave her dad alone. They owled every day, though.

They were head girl and boy their seventh year, and it seemed as if their story had been written for them. He asked her to marry him at dinner in the Great Hall after she had finished her last NEWT, and then took her in his arms and swung her around and around when she said yes.

This time, she did go with him to his family house. The second day there, while they were supposed to be on a walk in the village, he took her to the little guest cottage on the estate and carried her to the rather charming bed with musty mattress.

She knew it was his first time. He had been a champion snogger, and perhaps a bit more, though he had been too much of a gentleman to speak of that to her. He had never pressured her in any way; he had never even put his hands on the front of her jumper although she had longed for him to. He thought, of course, it was her first time as well. It was not.

_Her_ first time had been during a summer afternoon between fourth year and fifth year, in the attic bedroom of Severus Snape after a week of escalated kissing, groping, and frottage in his dilapidated house.

His mother was practically comatose at the kitchen table every day, with a cigarette that turned to ash in the tray and drinking something while staring blankly out the kitchen window.

If she noticed her son and a girl enter the house and head upstairs every afternoon, she didn't say anything about it.

Lily hadn’t seen him around the first week back from school after fourth year. Life was so different at school. A clean break was perhaps best. They weren't kids anymore. She minded the children up the street every morning for a small bit of money to bring home and otherwise she was reading and listening to the radio in her room or watching the telly with her mum and dad after dinner.

Tunie dragged her to town one night, though; there was some boy, of course. She didn't want to go alone, and then abandoned her little sister immediately after the bloke draped his arm around her shoulder. Lily saw Severus in the outdoor crowd, smoking and leaning against the wall. As off-putting as his appearance was at school...he was cool here. There was no denying it. He had on a black Pink Floyd t-shirt and ragged jeans that looked effortlessly perfect. He caught her eye as he was taking a loooooong drag. At school, he would have looked away immediately, but now he held her gaze. _You comin' over? Cause I don't care either way._

Of course she was. She didn't waste time with inner debate. She joined him against the wall. He kept his head front now but wordlessly handed her his fag. She inhaled; she had smoked before, but
not for a while; it came right back.

By the time she should be getting home, she had drunk three cans of beer and was floating around the commons.

"I have to go," she told him. They had hardly exchanged a word, but they had stuck together all night.

"Walk you?"

"Thanks, Sev."

She hoped he would take her hand, and he did. It sent a little thrill up her and she did a little shuffle before she could stop herself.

It would have been enough, but at the end of her block he spun them into the little alleyway against a wall and put his mouth on hers. She had never kissed anyone, but it was clear he had. He pressed on her teeth with his tongue, and she opened her mouth tentatively; his tongue began dancing with hers. It was mesmerizing and she was lost and quite over her head immediately.

She began to feel a pulling from her core that was soon a full-blown ache. Her knickers were suddenly quite wet. She pressed herself against him, and he grasped her around the waist so tightly. She could feel hardness between them, and instead of repulsing her, which her previous experience with catching hints of the male member had, she suddenly wanted to thrust her hands down his trousers.

"I have to go," she broke away from him insistently.

"Whatever, Evans," he sighed and leaned back against the wall. He was still there when she groped at her front door, letting herself back in the house.

She went to her job promptly the next morning, but she could not escape thoughts of him. When the mum returned home from her morning working the till at the little bakery in town, Lily decided to take a walk into Cokeworth instead of going straight home.

She had just about given up on casually bumping into him somewhere when she saw a group of
kids she recognized from town and from the previous night. He was on the periphery and left the
group to cross the street in her direction as soon as he saw her.

“Evans,” he said coolly. He was smoking and held it out to her.

“I hate to keep nicking your fags,” she said and instantly was afraid he would take it as
commentary of his economic station.

“No worries. I wash glasses at the pub every night. At least one drunk git leaves half a pack.”

“I mind children in the morning,” she said and then felt like a fool again.

“That’s cool. Books and such are twice as dear for fifth year.”

“That’s what I heard.”

“You wanna listen to some records? I don’t have to be at the pub until eight.”

“We have dinner at six.”

He squinted at her and smoked his fag.

“I could come over until then.”

“Cool.”

“Are your parents home?” She had only ever seen Mrs. Snape their first year before they boarded
the Express for school. Since then, he had always arrived alone.

“My mum is, but she won’t care. My dad isn’t home,” he said, clearly finished with that topic.

“Okay.”

He led the way, not holding her hand in the daylight. She felt nervous and a bit foolish, and at one
point considered bolting for the safety of home. She didn’t, though. Last night had been too
intriguing.

His room was up a little staircase from the second floor. It was small and under an eve, so most of
it had a ceiling too low to comfortably stand. He had an iron framed bed that looked as if he had
expanded it from a single—it wasn’t completely symmetrical. She wanted to draw her wand and
fix it, but she didn’t want to embarrass him.

He went straight to the corner anyway, where he had a stack of albums and a very old fashioned yet
not charming record player.

“What do you like?”

“I like everything.”

He snorted and held up _Led Zeppelin III._

“Yes,” she said. He put on the album, not terribly loud in deference to his mum, she supposed, and
Jimmy Page’s guitar began to wail as he opened a window and lit another cigarette. She wasn’t
sure what to do, and it must have reflected on her face because he jerked his head to the side to
invite her to sit beside him.
It was the summer of cigarettes and Zeppelin and his room. A week and a half later, she was on her back on his bed with him looming over her. She was familiar enough by then with his cock, but it still seemed impossibly large to be pushing into her. He had sheathed it in a Muggle condom, for which she was grateful, and he had already made her come with his mouth, her fifth orgasm of the week. She was a woman of the world, and she was going to take that cock inside her.

He proceeded ever so slowly. She was still very wet from their earlier activities and it felt rather squishy until he hit resistance from the beginning. He looked up at her.

“You sure, Evans?”

“Yes, Sev, it’s okay. Just do it.”

She saw him breathe and then push in. It was more painful than she had anticipated, and she steadied herself by concentrating on his face. He had shut his eyes and looked blissful. She opened her legs wider and propped herself higher on her elbows so she could kiss him.

“You okay?” he whispered.

“I’m fine, it’s lovely,” she lied just a bit. She was hoping he would get on with it both because it was uncomfortable but also because she was curious as to what would happen next.

He sped up his movements and very soon he was showing signs of coming undone. She had stroked him to completion several times, which had made her feel quite powerful, and she had been brave enough the day before to put her mouth on it. He had pulled out before he came, which had made her both grateful and slightly disappointed.

She could tell when he came because he would moan low and quietly. This time he seemed especially effected and almost wailed. It was quite flattering. He lowered himself and embraced her for a few moments before he pulled out and tied off the condom.

“No contraceptive charm?” she asked.

“Magic in the summer, Evans?”

“You expanded your bed.” Its lopsidedness still bothered her.

“Nobody cares that I made my dodgy bed bigger. Don’t think the Ministry would be too pleased to find Gryffindor Princess being deflowered in this dump.”

“I’m not,” she took a drag from his cigarette, “Gryffindor Princess.”

“You are. It’s okay. I don’t hold it against you.” He chuckled at his own weak wit.

She had spent most afternoons there for the rest of the summer. They didn’t always shag, but they did often enough. They decided mutually that it would be a bad idea to try to carry on at school, so they took a hiatus until the Christmas hols.

Cokeworth was significantly more depressing in the winter. The Snape house was as well with its inadequate heat. That didn’t stop her from sneaking away whenever possible to crawl into his bed with him. She noticed he had fixed it and transfigured his bed clothes softer and more luxurious. Their charms and transfiguration education had become much more rigorous in their fifth year.

The freedom of summer was not there, but she found those afternoons comforting, nonetheless. The last time they were together, his father had come home drunk bellowing BOY up the stairs as
he staggered. They were mid act. Sev stopped immediately and bolted straight for the window, grabbed his wand from the side of the bed and thrust it at the pane, which opened. Naked with a condom falling off him, he quickly transfigured the drain pipe into steps.

She was stunned and motionless. He picked up her clothes for her. She could hear the father stumbling on the steps.

“You must leave; please, Lily!” he was on the verge of panic. She threw her clothes on and her shoes untied as he practically carried her out the window.

“Go!”

It was the last time they were together, really in any sense. It was the last time she’d had sex.

A year and a half later, the man who would soon be her husband was carrying her supposedly pure self to a bed in this cottage. She decided to just let him lead, and she would put herself in an innocent state of mind and just follow. They weren’t wearing robes; she was wearing a casual dress with a cardigan on top, he a cotton shirt and trousers. He drew his wand and hovered over her with it, magically removing her clothes down to her Muggle-esque bra and knickers.

“How does this work, then?” he chuckled, baffled by the wires and clasps of her bra. She reached around and unhooked it, leaving it for him to remove, which he did.

“Oh, Lily,” he said with just the right amount of reverence. She had been too nervous to feel much of anything up to this point, but as he took her breasts in his hands, her body started to respond, to her great relief. She wanted his shirt off and decided it wasn’t too forward to remove it. That increased their pace. He was fumbling with his placket, and she let him, assuming that’s what he would expect. He was wearing traditional wizarding trousers and not Muggle underpants. Snape had always been dressed as a Muggle when they reached this point, so this really was new to her.

He left his trousers on and started tugging at the elastic of her knickers. She lifted her hips and let him remove them, and then he seemed somewhat overwhelmed. She brought his mouth down and kissed him, and that seemed to help. He put a tentative hand between her legs and started exploring with his fingers.

He really hasn’t done this before, she thought, and it made her want to make this as special as possible for him. She moaned encouragingly, and he finally removed his trousers.

“How are your charms, Miss Evans?” he said with a sweet grin.

“Not as charming as your charms, Mr. Potter,” she teased him.

“Cheeky witch,” he said lovingly, and her heart swelled. She reached beside the bed for her wand and performed the female charm on herself. Her insides fluttered as it took effect.

“Do you…?”

“I think I can manage,” he said and whispered the incantation that sounded right to Lily. “Are you okay with this? Are you ready?” he asked her shakily.

She wasn’t sure, and not at all for the reason he thought. She had a flash of him entering her, finding her cavernous and then shouting *Impostor! Fraud!* As she scrambled for her clothes.

“I’m ready, James,” she whispered.
“I love you, Lils,” he said as he positioned himself.

“I love you, too. It’s okay.”

With her pronouncement, he started to slide in. It was the first time she had felt a cock entering her without a condom, and that was a pleasant discovery. He felt different immediately, and she banished all thoughts but of him from her mind.

She was focused on the foot-board, charmed so that an image of lavender, lilac, and green hydrangeas were embedded in the wood as he entered her completely and then let out a great breath. He moved tentatively inside her with a grimace on his face and then came with a high-pitched wail.

“Oh, gods, Lily, I’m sorry,” he muttered as he collapsed on top of her.

“No, James, don’t be.” She pulled his face up and kissed him.

They had plenty of time to improve; he now wanted to do it all the time, and by the end of the summer, they were becoming quite adept at satisfying each other. She was still careful; she was afraid he would bolt if she suddenly took his dick into her mouth, but they worked their way through their new vocabulary. By the time they were married, she was much less inhibited. It was a happy aspect of a very happy marriage. He never asked her if she’d had previous experience; he clearly assumed she hadn’t.

It was a highly successful ruse in quite a line of them. This current one wouldn’t be more difficult. She wasn’t chatty at work and had no desire to make friends outside it. When she rejected his suggestion of the wizarding village New Hope in Pennsylvania, she took on the task of finding something herself. Through her research, she narrowed it down to two possibilities, both in New Jersey. Chester was more convenient to the city, but Lambertville seemed closer to what she was looking for, and with wizarding travel, negligible distance was not a challenge.

James agreed to go with her on Saturday to visit both. As she suspected Lambertville was the right choice. They found a realtor that day, and started looking at houses. By the end of their second month in the U.S., they had used their generous allowance (blood money it surely was) and purchased a two-bedroom duplex on Delaware Avenue.

Lily was wary about neighbors, but the people who owned the other side ran a busy furniture shop downtown and were hardly there. The was a huge oak tree that separated the property in front, flower beds that lined the front of the house and a large enough patch for a garden in the back, which was divided by a wooden fence. They had a lovely willow tree on their side. James agreed without argument, and Lily felt like smiling for the first time in months. She could practically obliviate Manhattan when they were at home.

She shopped, cooked, and cleaned the house like a Muggle. She had never perfected household charms, anyway. Their house in Godric’s Hollow had been fully magical, and she had made it a goal to learn how to run it the proper wizarding way, but she had left before starting the project. James was the more interested and adventurous cook, and now that she was working full time, she didn’t even feel guilty about letting him do it. This house wasn’t even connected to the floo network although James started making plans immediately to do so.

“Why do we need it? We can apparate by the tree in the back.”

“What if someone needs to reach us after work hours? I don’t think I’m allowed to live away from the network,” he bluffed.
"Nonsense, James. There are owls, and if some really needed you, they could apparate."

"Sometimes difficult to a strange place."

They compromised by establishing a portkey in the backyard. James was doing a lot of compromising. It was March before she could even fall asleep without crying. One day, though, he took off work at noon and made her a fantastic dinner and pudding, and she remembered everything she thought was adorable about the man. He carried her up the stairs and into their bed, and she let him make love to her for the first time since early summer—since arithmancy ruined their lives.

After they had been in their little house a year, he started talking about more children.

"I miss him. Lils, so much. I think we would feel less empty."

"How could we do it? How could we bring another baby here to this world after what happened?"

She wouldn’t hear of it.

Dumbledore sent them photos of Harry twice a year, at Christmas and just after his birthday. His second Christmas looked terribly joyful. He was wearing a paper crown and clutching a sugar quill in his pudgy hand. Lily kissed that little hand on the photo; how could she not? It made her consumed with thoughts about the family he had now. The image only showed him. She pictured him with older parents and a houseful of siblings—a reason right there not to have more, he would have his fill.

On his second birthday, he was perched on an enchanted winged wooden horse that was hovering inches from the ground. Harry laughed and laughed. She slept with it under her pillow until she was afraid it would disintegrate. No, there was no need for more children. James accepted her edict in the present but brought the subject back up every six months or so.

"Lily, we will see him again. In the meantime, we could have one we could help shape. We could send him to school here, Muggle school, if you wish. We could just be like every other family."

"We will NEVER be that."

She had started taking the potion their first month in the U.S., months before she needed it. She set contraceptive charms, too, every time he had that look in his eye.

He stayed a clerk as she advanced through the ranks of the arithmancy department. There wasn’t a Department of Secrets here, at least not one she knew of. As far she was aware, the arithmancy department was the sole home of official conjecture. She calculated the odds of the success of the new Minister, of the new Headmistress at Ilvermorny, about whether to give a financial incentive to wizard couples who had a third child or more. (Probably a flop, could go either way, YES!)

She appreciated the impersonal nature of the craft. She didn’t care if witches had more babies; the lines showed it was a good idea. It was something of a comfort to imagine her old professors just playing out the lines and not purposefully trying to ruin her life.

James joined the amateur quidditch league in New Hope, and she even accompanied him to games on most weekends, especially when he promised her dinner at one of the lovely restaurants there. She found a wand and accessory shop called Sev & Co. that she used every excuse to visit.

She wondered about Severus occasionally. Dumbledore had spoken cryptically of a spy that had provided the information that she and James were in mortal danger, referring to him as “our
Slytherin friend,” with a knowing look directed right at Lily. As Professor Slughorn was as unlikely a spy as Mrs. Thatcher was useful ally to the Cokeworth community, Sev was a sure bet. They had such scant news of the UK in the wizarding paper here. She knew that she and James were thought dead. She knew that the dark lord had supposedly been killed although prevailing wisdom when one read between the lines was that he wasn’t all that dead. Surely that’s what Dumbledore believed, and that was why they had to be separated from Harry—he hadn’t yet fulfilled his ultimate mission.

She would wander the aisles of the little shop, holding an amber owl on a silver chain or an apple tree hair clip and wonder about Severus.

She never had bought the Death Eater story. For one, it was hard for her to imagine him a true believer of anything. He had a terrible life at home and one that wasn’t so much better at school. It was hardly surprising that he would fall into the crowd he did. Revealing and terrorizing Muggles, though? It seemed highly unlikely.

She could have forgiven him then and maintained some modicum of friendship, and then she wouldn’t have to think about him now. She had been so afraid that James would find out about her Snape summer…and Christmas. It was so much easier to pretend he no longer existed. Now it stabbed at her sometimes. Was what he said in a moment of abject humiliation so awful as to destroy everything between them? Could she have allowed him to apologize then, or the night he had refused to leave the entrance to Gryffindor Tower until she sent one of her friends down to tell him off, or at least that Thursday night he appeared at the house after her mum had died. She could have forgiven him.

After a typical New Hope quidditch Saturday, she was having dinner with James and his team. Most of the couples both played although there were a few stray spouses here and there. They often retreated to a cozy tavern that had an extensive drink and food menu. A wizarding couple, Max and Iola Bruning were the proprietors. They had seven young children, stair-steps, and Lily suspected Max and Iola would be Stella and Edward’s best friends if Lily was open enough to be real friends with anyone.

James…Edward did this so naturally, it made it easy for her to be his quiet wife on the periphery. She had bought herself a butterfly charm on a silver chain at Sev & Co that day and she was gripping it in one palm, enjoying the little points of pain as the metal stabbed into her hand while she drank her pint and tuned out the post-game analysis. James caught her eye and winked across the table, and she smiled at him. Edward wore big, unfashionable glasses, but his eyes were as they always were.

The New Hope Nifflers had won, and the party went later than usual. James took her under his arm as they prepared to apparate back to their little yard. They had never been caught by their neighbors peering out of windows, but she had an obliviation spell ready to go just in case. He side-apparated her and nuzzled into her neck in the process, pressing his mouth happily into it, announcing his intentions for them when they returned home.

Since she fell out of her stupor, she enjoyed sex with him. It let her mind travel for a few minutes at least. She cupped his arse as they reached their destination by their willow tree. She immediately removed her glamour, and flipped her red hair dramatically to remind him to remove his, too. In an instant, James was back, and desire bubbled forth from her core. She put her arms around him and snogged him before they entered the house. She gripped the back of his head and assaulted him with her tongue.

“Lils,” he sighed happily.
They stumbled up to their bedroom, and she dropped her clothes on the floor, scampering to the bed. She was naked but left the new butterfly charm on. He swept her into his arms and then pressed her to the bed. She was ready for him, and she wasted no time, taking his hardening cock into her hand and lightly squeezing the shaft before dancing his fingers around the head, teasing him and smiling into his mouth.

“All right then, Witch, is that how it is?” He growled and spread her thighs with his hands and impaled her.

“Uhhhh,” she moaned and arched her back. “Yes, like that.” He was thrusting as if he meant to drive her into the bed.

“Flip over,” he commanded, and she almost came right then. He didn’t always play this way with her; he tended to prefer sweet love making to his precious wife, but sometimes he would oblige her the way she had grown to desire it most. “On your knees.”

“Ugggnnnnnnnnhhhhhh,” she moaned low again, as he took her from behind. His bollocks were hitting her in just the right place, and she managed to hold off her orgasm for whole minutes before the hard thrusts were too much.

“Yes, FUCK!” she said as she came and then collapsed on the bed. He pulled out and came all over her arse and lower back, the finale she loved the most.

“Thank you!” she said, and kissed him as soon as he joined her on the bed.

“Yes, dear. Thank you,” he said in his typical James endearing tone.

She had flipped over to her back before he could cast a cleansing charm. She liked to feel the sticky evidence for as long as possible.

They had found the bed frame in a little antique shop here in town. It was painted a light green, distressed in a deliberate way. The artist had somehow affixed images of hydrangeas on the headboard, and it made Lily gasp when she saw it in the shop.

“Look,” she had whispered. She shouldn’t call him by his name in public, even Muggle public, but calling him Edward always sounded ridiculous.

“Yeah?”

“Do you remember? The bed in the cottage?”

He still looked confused.

“At the estate. At the Potter…”

“Oh, yes,” he waggled his eyebrows.

“The bed is almost the same; not charmed, of course.”

“Oh, yeah. That was my Auntie Louise’s bed. She was a bit of a wood sprite. BUT,” he wrapped his arm around her waist and brought her right to him. “It was perfect for a deflowering,” he kissed her mouth and laughed heartily at his own joke.

“Charming,” she said, keeping her chuckle inside. “I love it. It’s perfect.”

They explained their lack of transportation to the proprietor, using their familiar cover story. It was
fine; the store had a truck. They purchased a mattress and by the next day, they had set up their new bedroom.

Lily sighed and ran her fingers over the flowers.

It was August, and Harry had just turned nine. They had received their bi-annual photo. Harry had celebrated his birthday at a quidditch match. He had a pair of omnioculars in one hand and a cone of candy floss in the other. He looked more like James every year, and this was the first time they had seen him wearing glasses. Lily mounted the photos in a special book she kept under the mattress and took out several times a week to savour. This would have to keep her until Christmas when the next one would arrive.

James didn’t like to talk about Harry much. It didn’t serve a constructive purpose in his mind and just made him sad. In times like these, though, when he was happy and sated, she could sometimes engage him.

“What did you do for your ninth birthday?” she asked quietly.

“Quite like Harry. Quidditch with my mates, Mum and dad let them all stay the night, and we built a bonfire and slept in the cottage. You?”

Lily’s birthdays had been the same every year while she was at home: she could invite three school friends over for cake. She would spend the week before making decorations. The girls would bring their dolls and exchange doll clothes. Lily’s mother was an excellent seamstress, and sent Lily’s friends home with a new dress for their dolls. It was her favorite day of the year.

The countdown to Hogwarts was now at two years. There was no sign of the return of the Dark Lord, but Lily didn’t doubt it was coming. She didn’t have enough information to run her own arithmancy lines, but she trusted Professor Vector. She looked for deeper meanings in the ones she worked on: patterns of bad weather, school enrollment, the wizard financial markets. Nothing had emerged yet.

Life proceeded. They worked. They maintained their routines at home. She tried to keep her despair in check. Dumbledore had insured money would never be an issue. James had organized holidays to Hawaii, Southern California, Miami, and San Francisco. They had passports but were leery to use them. They stuck with American destinations.

Lily started a new photo album. Stella and Edward with the Golden Gate Bridge in the background. Stella on the beach with flowers in her hair. In front of Niagara Falls. Edward in Boston wearing a baseball cap.

On work days, Lily explored Manhattan on her lunch hour. She would transfigure her robes into a sundress and denim jacket and little black Mary Jane slippers and smoke a cigarette in the most populated areas of the park. On Fridays, there was often music blaring as people dreamed that the next few hours would pass quickly and the weekend would begin.

The park was dirty and crowded and bursting with life. It was a more fortunate Cokeworth on a gigantic scale. One Friday lunch, a song that almost made Lily drop her bottle of juice brayed from a large radio set on the curb.

*Don’t start that talking; I could talk all night*

*My mind was sleepwalking; while I’m putting the world to rights*
Call careers information; have you got yourself an occupation?

Immediately she was in the house on Spinner’s End in the bed with him, post coital cigarettes hanging from their mouths as they sang along. Elvis Costello was their winter, their Christmas soundtrack. He had the window cracked just a bit against the smoke, and the air was frigid outside, but he had cast a warming charm.

And I would rather be anywhere else than here today!

He sang it out plaintively in that low voice an octave under Elvis. She had punched him lightly in the arm in protest.

“Anywhere else but here?” she had chided.

“You can come with me,” he conceded.

“Where would you go?”

“Not picky. Johannesburg would be fine, thanks.”

“You’ll be away, back at school, soon enough,” she had said.

“Yes. Without you in my bed,” he had kissed her just then. He wasn’t much for romantic displays. The gesture made her snuggle in closer beside him.

“But summer will be here soon; and in two and a half years you can leave for good. What will you do?”

“So many things.”

“University?”

“Perhaps. Go away, though. From here. You, Lily?”

He almost never called her by her given name. She was always Evans, and he was always Sev.

“London, I think. Healing, perhaps. The Ministry.” She longed to bring order to chaos in some capacity.

“The Ministry,” he had said with a sneer. “Not enough Galleons in the world.”

“So…what?”

“Potions, yeah?”

Sev was best in their year by far although he was only perfunctorily recognized by his head of house.

Then they were out of school, and because of the estrangement, she had no idea what he was doing or if he had gone away. James had started working as an Auror in September after their seventh
year and had come home breathless with news for her.

“Snape has taken the mark!”

How do you know?” she was skeptical. Sev had hung around those thugs, but she couldn’t fathom he actually believed any of it,

“Intelligence, Lils,” James had said as if she were a small child. He had slid a photo across the table of Lucius Malfoy with his arm around Sev’s shoulder. Lucius was smirking at the camera and was holding up Sev’s branded left arm. Sev himself had a blank expression. Her heart sank.

“I’m supposed to find out all you know about him; his home, his life; his mum and dad…”

“I don’t know any of that,” she was breathing steadily.

“But you were mates back then…”

“Not really, James. We lived on opposite ends of town.”

“You were always taking up for the git!”

“I wasn’t always. Just when it was an unfair fight…”

“Oh, not this again, Lils. You have to admit we were right.”

“I have to admit nothing,” she had said but with a flirty smile and great relief the crisis had passed.

She realized she was slumped in her seat at the fountain with no idea how long she had been there lost in thought. The radio was now blaring a song she didn’t recognize. She checked her watch and saw she would have to run not to be late back to work.

She couldn’t evict him from her thoughts, though. Where was he now? She hoped he had chucked the spy life and lived far away from the Ministry and from the potential re-emergence of the Dark Lord. She hoped he lived in a happier place than Johannesburg. Geneva, perhaps, or Cairo, or Sydney.

Time passed. Stella and Edward worked. They lived in their little duplex in their little village. They traveled in the summers to Seattle and then Anchorage. To Atlanta and Savannah. To Texas, Austin and San Antonio, which Lily fell in love with. She added a picture of Stella and Edward in front of the Alamo and one of them drinking Margaritas on the River Walk.

Harry turned eleven. Dumbledore sent a picture of him with his Hogwarts letter in his hand in front of a massive cake shaped like an owl. Lily began scouring the newspaper more vigilantly than ever. There was no news until the very end of the school year. The Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher had died under suspicious circumstances. Of course, there was no mention of Harry.

The summer between his second and third year was the first time something of real interest appeared. The name Sirius Black practically leaped off the page at her. She read the article, her face not betraying the horror in print. She tucked it into her bag and worked the rest of her shift with steady hands and eyes. No one would realize that her world had crashed around her ankles.

She apparated home to the willow; the neighbors were at their cabin in the Finger Lakes. James was always home first; his job had strict hours and ended promptly at five. She often had to stay
when she was working on a project. She sometimes lost track of time. She had left hastily that day, but James was already in the kitchen scrutinizing the pantry.

“Paltry choices tonight, Lils. Fancy a takeaway?” he said before he saw her white face. They were both still in glamours, a rarity at home for her at least. “What is it, Lily?”

She handed him the paper, and he read the headline with an agonized gasping wail.

“No. Not possible,” he whispered as he read the story. “Cannot be, Lily. Cannot be.”

She said nothing but collapsed into a chair at the kitchen table.

“He would never, Lily. I don’t know what happened that led to…this,” he placed the newspaper on the counter, “But he would never, and he did not.”

“So, what do you think?”

“I have no idea. How would I know? It could be anything, but it isn’t that.”

“He’s been in prison all this time…”

“But he’s not now. If he can just hold on until…” It was not something they had a good label for. “If he can hold on until we get back, we can find out what happened.”

“It says he killed Peter.”

“He would never, Lils. Wormtail was like our little brother.”

She took her glamour off, and he followed. “I’m not terribly hungry.”

“Nor I, but I feel we should go drink a pint and spit in the face of this lunacy.”

There was a cozy tavern in town that had a wide selection of beer and great sandwiches. Perhaps she was hungrier than she thought. She put her cloak back on.

That was the last mention of Sirius Black in the American paper. Harry turned twelve. He was clutching a broom—Lily was terrible with identifying makes and models, but James said it was the best one. His hair was just as long as it had been when she had… Since the last time she had seen him in person. He looked content, as always.

They followed the Quidditch world cup in the summer of 1995 closely, trying to catch a glimpse of people they knew, and especially of Harry. They never saw him, but he turned fourteen, and their birthday picture showed him in a Team Ireland jumper. For the first time ever, there were other people in the photo, a red-haired boy, and a girl with wildly curly brown hair. Dumbledore had written on the back *Harry with mates.*

“That must be Molly and Arthur’s Ronald, yes?” she had asked James breathlessly as she studied the photo.

Baby Ronald had been born months before Harry. Lily had met Molly at a Ministry holiday party when she had to duck into the loo because she was missing her baby and her milk had come down. Molly was already pumping in the special little room, and they had begun to talk. Molly had already been out of school when Lily had started, but only by a few years. She showed pictures of her large brood of adorable red headed boys.

“I think there’s another, as well,” Molly had confided with a hand on her belly. “Hadn’t planned on
one so soon, but plans aren’t my strong suit by a mile,” she said with a smile. Lily had shown her a picture of baby Harry and commented that the boys would be in the same class.

They hadn’t seen each other again, but Lily had read of the birth of the daughter just before things had become dire.

“Must be; looks just like Arthur. The girl, though, I can’t place,” James said.

“I like her,” Lily asserted. “I like her face.” The girl had a determined look but also a warm smile that showed a mouth full of prominent teeth.

“They look like happy, normal kids,” James said, and it was true. Whatever was going to happen had clearly not affected her boy yet. As anxious as she was to see him, it was a relief that he would have school years untainted by the coming storm.

The Christmas picture was just of Harry in an obviously handmade jumper featuring a large, golden snitch. It was James’s greatest present since they found out Harry was on the way fifteen years before at Christmas.

“He’s a seeker! He has to be!”

“How could one argue with such irrefutable proof?” Lily teased him.

“It would be a waste of time. And his…caregiver,” Lily knew he had stopped himself from saying *mother*, “is clearly no slouch at the domestic charms.”

“No,” she whispered and tried to choke back tears that were suddenly right there.

“Lils,” James had said soothingly.

“No, you’re exactly right. He’s so lucky to have had such good care.”

“He would have had the best if not for…” James so rarely questioned their fate. Lily had changed the subject and brought out the Christmas pudding.

She continued to scour the papers, not sure if she wanted to find something or not. In June, a shocking report appeared that a student had been killed in the Triwizard Tournament. The death was presented as a tragic accident. No other students were mentioned in the coverage. It was concerning, though. Lily hadn’t remembered an incidence of student deaths except for Moaning Myrtle years before she was in school. Perhaps they were due? She shuddered.

Harry’s fifteen-year-old birthday picture featured him with his two friends again, this time around a large, wooden table. There was a massive orange cat on the mantel behind the three. They all looked older—perhaps even more than could be explained by a year’s growth and maturity, but Lily brushed aside a little fear that bubbled up.

“That room looks so familiar,” James had commented. He had carried the picture around for a week, not letting her file it in the book with the others. He had it propped at the kitchen sink and would stare at it when they were doing the washing up after dinner. It finally hit him.

“That’s Grimmauld Place! That’s the Black House!”

She grabbed the picture and looked. She had only been to the Black family house once when the parents were out of town and Sirius had thrown a party to the disgust of the portraits and especially the house elf.
“I think you’re right.”

“I am. I would know that mantel anywhere. That’s how I figured it out. I kept looking at that cat…”

“What do you think it means? Why are they in the Black House? What is Dumbledore trying to tell us?”

“Isn’t it obvious? He’s trying to assure us that Sirius is innocent!”

“Maybe so,” Lily said. James finally relinquished the photo so she could file it away.

And then aside from the biannual pictures, none of which included intriguing clues, there was silence.

“It’s good news,” James assured her. “Lots of stories in the paper means things have become bad over there. We’re not ready for that yet.”

She thought of Harry throughout the school year, his fifth. As spring arrived, she couldn’t help speculating about how he would do on his OWLs. She had done well on hers, but she had studied obsessively; James’s had been just short of a disaster. She hoped Harry would be somewhere in the middle.

She couldn’t think of OWLs without recalling the awful incident. She could remember the smallest detail from that day. They had sat for their Defense Against the Dark Arts exam just prior. She had been three rows back and one over from Sev, which had given her a perfect view. He looked unkempt, as if he had been studying all night and into the morning before he arrived. He had quietly written page after page in his linear style; the ink from his quill was a rich dark black, something different from the usual student ink and unique to him—most likely brewed himself.

They were so careful at school; terrified they would be caught breaking a rule and expelled. They would look at each other, though, more frequently as the year waned and summer was closer. She imagined that he thought of their encounters as often as she did. One would catch the other staring in class or in the Great Hall, and they would share a smile and then look away. She was so looking forward to going home and earning more money and spending the rest of the time with him. Her mother hadn’t received her awful news yet; she would in a few weeks, but fifth year Lily was ignorant of this.

She had written her own answers confidently enough on her exam paper and then looked up as time was called. He was writing his last word. She watched him as they turned in their papers and filed out. He headed straight for a tree to sit under, and that was when she saw he had attracted unwanted attention.

She had watched in horror as the events unfolded; as he was humiliated. She waited too long to intervene. He was already suspended when she rushed in, all wrong she knew now. If she had only stopped it before that horrible curse that exposed him, she felt sure she could have prevented the rest.

The image of him in his embarrassingly shabby pants hanging upside down with his equally worn boots flailing in the air, robe covering all but the dark eyes and greasy hair as Sirius and James made sport of him. Her reaction to his epithet had been motivated as much by shame as by hurt. She had always had too quick a temper.

Her mother’s diagnosis had come the second day she was home. The rest of the summer was spent
either at work or in hospital waiting rooms and wards. She kept her child-minding job; her family needed every pence.

She saw Sev once that summer, in the town square leaning against a wall observing the scene. She had turned her face away, avoiding an awkward interaction. The next time she saw him was boarding the train that September. He looked at her as she found her group of Gryffindor girls. She had turned her face away again.

Having no news and no evidence of Harry’s existence save the photos was agonizing. By the winter of 1997, she was afraid she was going to crawl out of her skin. Work was the same, the village was grey and cold, quidditch season and escapes to New Hope were months away.

They weren’t even half-way done with February, and she was ready to climb the walls.

James had a plan.

“New Orleans, Lily! It’s their festival next week. We could leave tonight and spend the weekend and then through Wednesday. We have loads of holiday time. Just send an owl tonight, and it will be waiting for the poor suckers Monday morning. We won’t even tell them where we’ve gone; we’ll just call it a needed break.”

She was not much for spontaneity, but something about that James Potter charm got her once again.

“What is the weather in New Orleans?”

“Warmer than here,” he had had assured. “We’ll go?” he asked as if he were a little boy pleading with his Dad to take him to the quidditch.

“Why not? I hear the food is something else down there.”

“And the drinks!”

“And of course the drinks.”

They threw some clothes into a bag, looked up port key schedules and fees in a large bound book they used for their travels, and then left from the willow outside to a little office in Philadelphia and then took a portkey to the streets of Wizarding New Orleans. They booked the last hotel room—the little wizard proprietor explained that they let them out to Non-Mag for Mardi Gras, the name of their festival.

Lily would have preferred to stay in the Muggle area, that’s where she planned to spend most of her time, in the neighborhood called the French Quarter, but the Wizarding section was close—just across a large park, and the room was nice enough. She dragged James immediately where the action was. The streets were teeming, and the sights were something to behold. Bright costumes, loud, eclectic music, people of all types carrying on in front of all. She loved it. They bought food from a street vendor and had a full cup all night. Someone dumped a whole cup of red drink on James and he jovially bought a shirt with the name of a local college from a vendor with a cart full of shirts. The good times rolled. The party started to break up in the wee hours of the morning, and they wistfully began their walk back to the hotel.

“Let’s sleep until noon, and then come back out!” she was saying, holding his hand as they crossed Rampart Street.
She heard a noise and turned in time to see a large brown car too fast and too close.

And then there was black.

Chapter End Notes

Magic is often either limited to fast transportation or is an afterthought in my stories, but Evans and Sev listening to Elvis Costello’s *Oliver’s Army* five years before it was recorded is an impressive magical feat.
Chapter Two: Kendrah Johnson

Chapter Summary

Aside from moving the plot along, this chapter delves into a question I’ve had since reading the series: what happens when an intelligent Muggle who does not believe in the supernatural in any form is confronted with aspects of wizarding society.

Kendrah is a New Orleans Police Department Detective who picks up a call that will change her life.

This chapter starts where the last left off: February 1997, which in context of canon is Harry’s sixth year.

Chapter Two

Kendrah Johnson

Just three minutes before they got the call, Kevin said it. “Slow night for Mardi Gras, Kendrah.”

She had turned to him in disbelief as he took his next swig of coffee and then realized what he said.

“Oh shit, Kendrah, sorry.”

She just shook her head sadly and waited—not for long.

Hit and run possible multiple fatalities on Rampart and St. Ann.

Kendrah picked up the receiver and acknowledged that she and Detective Connell were responding.

“Kevin,” she shook her head again.

“I know,” he refilled his cup and grabbed the keys. He brushed his scant blond hair in place with his fingers and put his jacket back on as she grabbed her blazer and their work bag. He was the driver, but she was the unofficial boss of the partnership.

She would never tell him, but she wasn’t completely upset that they had picked this up. They were scheduled to be off in half an hour. It had been a slow, boring night, and she hadn’t been looking forward to returning home to her condo alone in the dark. Her husband Marcus was on tour, and the place was so quiet and empty. This way, she could still sleep all day but in the light after having accomplished something, at least there was hope. And she didn’t believe in the quiet night superstition, anyway. Kevin was fun to poke, though.

They buckled up in their assigned Oldsmobile and headed out. She was listening to the patrol team on the scene over the radio. One victim was DOA, the other seemed not far behind. She hoped
they could get there before death or ambulance. Kevin stopped at a yellow light, and her eyes bugged.

“Kevin.”

“Sorry.”

“Drive with a purpose, man.”

“I know, I know.”

She knew one of the reasons for her successful partnership was that Kevin would never use his police lights to speed through an intersection unless there was a true emergency, and she would never expect him to. They arrived in minutes anyway.

The whole block was already taped and lit. The ambulance was still there, and she jumped out of the car to see the live victim before it took off.

There were police personnel all over the scene and four paramedics working on the person wearing a skirt. Kendrah assumed nothing with this first glance although she recognized the skirt as coming from Target. She had looked at it last week but ultimately declined, hoping it would soon go on sale.

She moved around to the head, pulling out her newest toy, a digital camera. She had her old Polaroid model in her bag and would snap a few with that, but the digital was a miracle with its ability to capture detail.

The victim was indeed a woman with blood pouring out of every orifice of her face. This did not look hopeful. Kendrah craned the camera over her head and behind the back of the paramedic and took four shots. She walked the length of the stretcher and took more. She then pulled out the old camera and took some with it, shaking them to develop although she doubted it had any effect.

She heard Kevin being briefed in the background. She wasn’t focusing on the words, but Kevin was as careful a note-taker as he was a driver. She knew he would have a thorough story for her. She saw the other victim under a tarp on the other side of the street, and she loped across to get out of the way of the work being done in front of the ambulance.

She crouched beside the body at the end with the head and peeled back the tarp. It was a man, who initially looked to be in better shape than the female. There was no blood visible on his face, but the back of the head was a different story.

The man had a full face with square, unfashionable glasses—what they called math nerd glasses in junior high—and sandy blond hair. Kendrah took shots of the head from all angles with the digital before switching again to the Polaroid and then removing the rest of the tarp so she could look at the whole body.

He was wearing khaki pants that looked homemade, almost like a costume, and a Tulane t-shirt that appeared to be brand new. She took more shots as Kevin approached.

“Can’t find IDs on either of them. Can’t find anything except cash in the male’s pocket, and both had sticks tucked into slots under their clothes.”

“Sticks? Stick slots?”

“Yeah, sticks. They’re over here.”
Kendra re-covered the body with the tarp and followed Kevin to a little investigation table the patrolmen on the scene usually set up before the detectives arrived. Sure enough, there were polished sticks, a little less than a foot long lying side by side. Kendrah donned latex gloves immediately and picked one up. It had a bit of weight to it. She tossed it lightly in her hand.

“Ren Faire?” Kevin suggested.

“Very high quality Ren Faire. Expensive props.” Kendrah thought back to the pants on the male victim. Having been in a relationship with an actor for five years had given her some exposure to costumes and props. She had never seen something like this. Both sticks had worn ends that looked like they had been gripped for years. She photographed them, taking her time to cover all angles.

“Wands,” Kevin said aloud.

She stayed quiet. There was always an explanation for these things, and she felt it was a waste of time to speculate at this stage.

“How much cash?”

“Just under seventy-five.”

The ambulance rolled out then with the female victim inside.

“What do they have on the vehicle?”

“Almost nothing. Dark sedan. Only witness is incapacitated.”

Kendrah glanced over to a disheveled man with a police blanket around his shoulders.

“He call it in?” she asked skeptically.

“No, he ran to the Shell,” Kevin pointed to a gas station. “The attendant called it in. The witness has only said ‘dark car.’ They showed him pictures and he identified four makes of sedan from a ’76 Ford to a ’93 Buick.”

“Lovely,” Kendrah muttered. She retrieved her laptop from their cruiser and began to hook the camera to it via a cable. She enlarged the downloaded images and started looking at the female victim. Underneath the blood, she was a pale blonde. Her eyes were closed. She was wearing a pink V-neck t-shirt with her grey knit skirt that hit at her knees. She was wearing tan, low-heeled strappy sandals that were good for walking but still fashionable.

“They favor each other. No rings?”

“Butterfly charm on a silver chain on her. No other jewelry.”

“They look Mormon,” she said to herself. The LDS church owned the condo next door to Kendrah and Marcus. Their neighbors were a series of Mormon missionaries working in New Orleans. All those boys had a look about them that these two shared.

She approached the body again. She put on a new pair of gloves before she gently raised the t-shirt and looked at the closure of the trousers. They had a button fly, but not straight down the front. The buttons were in a sickle shape from the left hip to the crotch. She started unbuttoning and found that not only was he not wearing temple garments, he didn’t have traditional underwear of any kind. There was some kind of underpants situation, but it was attached to the trousers in a style she had never seen before. She buttoned him back up against very dark pubic hair for a blond.
“No IDs, no car keys, no jewelry save a necklace…no hotel key cards?” she called across to Kevin.

“Just the cash.”

Every scene she had been called to in her two years as a detective had come with some oddities. This was odd. She cleared her mind; it wouldn’t help to be frustrated. Follow the procedure. Something will turn up. Something always turns up.

Kevin was dutifully checking in with the patrol. He slapped the officer on the arm collegially and then joined Kendrah at the trunk of the Olds where she was staring at the laptop again.

“Do they need anything from us now?” she asked.

“Nope,” he said. “We only have,” he checked his watch, “forty-five minutes anyway.”

They were close to running up against the maximum number of hours their union allowed them to be on the clock for their shift. The sun was coming up, glistening over the river. They had time to make it back to the station and fill out the most basic paper work before they would have to hand it over to the day shift.

She unhooked the camera and stored the cable so it would be ready for the next time. She did a quick check of the bag to make sure she wasn’t leaving her tools at the scene. They waved to patrolmen and both buckled themselves into the cruiser before Kevin pulled out.

“This is weird, Kendrah.”

“It’s always weird.”

“It’s weirder.”

She smiled but tried to hide it and then sighed with enough force to keep him from expressing more unhelpful thoughts.

She had been the youngest woman ever to pass the detective’s exam—she’d done it at age twenty-three. She had taken the exam the day she was eligible after her mandatory six months on patrol. She never saw her scores as they were confidential. All the candidates knew was whether they passed or failed. She was thrilled when she got the call and arrived ready to go at her new post, only to be met with suspicion from her fellow detectives. She was an African-American woman, a double affirmative action whammy. And she had been foisted on them.

Her lieutenant kept his opinions to himself, thank goodness. He assigned her to Kevin, whose long-time partner had recently retired. She soon found out why the lieutenant had matched them—Kevin was an utter sweetheart, who seemed as happy with her as he would be with any new detective on the job.

She proved herself slowly in the department. She never made trouble. She closed her cases efficiently without being obnoxiously precocious. Soon her colleagues were patting themselves on the back for being so open-minded in accepting her into their unit. They called the Connell and Johnson partnership The Ks. Besides Kevin, she was cordial but not familiar with them.

Kevin, however, wormed his way into her life. He and his dear wife Patty loved musicals, and couldn’t believe their fortune that they now had a connection into the theatre world.

“Marcus Johnson is your boyfriend?” Kevin had practically squealed when Kendrah nee Lewis had put a photo of them on her desk.
“Yeah?”

“Oh, his Javert was the highlight of *Les Mis* last year!” Kevin had said with awe.

*It was* true.

When Marcus had proposed the next year, he had conspired with Kevin to infiltrate the cop bar where she rarely hung out. (Kevin had cajoled her for weeks to show up.) With his actor buddies, Marcus had serenaded her with a rendition of *Gee, Officer Krupke* that ended with Marcus down on his knee. Kevin had cried more than she did.

They arrived back at the station and hurried to their shared work space. Kevin filled out the forms while she transferred the photos from her laptop to the shared file on her computer so her colleagues could access them if they took the time, which she doubted they would. She turned over the Polaroid shots to clip to the packet, and they were at the clock with moments to spare.

“See ya in twelve hours,” Kevin said warily.

“See ya, Kevin.”

She drove the seven miles to the condo in Metairie listening to music and singing along. She had to put work in its proper box in her brain if she wanted to sleep at all. She would take the box down that evening in the shower. It was amazing how many cases she had solved in her shower after sleeping with the box out of the way.

She dropped her keys on the table and fixed herself a bowl of frosted flakes, the ideal meal before passing out for seven hours. She stripped to her underwear in the living room and tossed her work slacks and blouse through the kitchen into a basket in the adjoining laundry room, cheering her perimeter shot. *Three points for Johnson!* She walked to her bedroom and put on the navy sweats and Tulane tee waiting for her at the foot of the bed. *Looks like the male vic’s. Not identical,* she thought and then shoved it into the box. She shuffled that box right back on the shelf and then threaded her bra through her sleeve out of long-time dorm living habit.

She slumped on the bed carefully with her cereal and flipped on the TV. By the end of the *Today Show*, the bowl was empty and on the bedside table and she was sound asleep.

She clocked in precisely at 7:00 P.M. Kevin was already there and listening to a briefing by the day team. They had canvassed the French Quarter and surrounding area all day for anyone who had seen the couple.

“She still alive?” Kendrah interrupted the narrative.

“Yeah, unconscious.” Her colleague continued his story. No sightings by any hotel clerks. That was obviously disappointing. There had been a few positive IDs in the quarter, though. The most promising being the guy who ran the t-shirt stand where the male victim had purchased his Tulane shirt.

Kendrah grabbed that report. The vendor reported that male vic had bought the shirt because he had been hit with a flying drink. He had paid in cash, thrown his own stained shirt in the trash, and donned the new. He had said, *Cheers, Mate* in a “different” accent and then walked away.

“Different?” Kendrah said trying to keep the frustration out of her voice.
“It was the only way he could describe it. Believe me, I tried.”

“Did you find the shirt in the trash?”

“No, it had been emptied.”

“Did you…”

“Did I go through a mountain of Mardi Gras garbage?”

Kevin diffused the tension while Kendrah tried to focus on the paperwork. The other team left before she expressed her opinion about the quality of their work.

“Hospital or morgue first?” Kevin redirected the conversation to a more productive line.

“Hospital,” she sighed.

“Patty made chicken and dumplings for lunch,” he said as they gathered the bag and keys.

“Bless Patty.” Kevin’s wife fed them every shift. Kendrah and Marcus took them to dinner once a month to pay them back although they always tried to pay themselves.

Kendrah looked at the hospital information so they could bolt from the car to the ICU. She called ahead on her cell phone to alert the unit of their arrival. There was a section of parking set aside for police vehicles, and she pictured them on the elevator, striding down the hall. Kevin was quiet in deference to her whirring mind.

They were met outside the door by the attending on call.

“Her injuries are primarily internal, and we were able to repair much of the damage. She did hit her head on impact, but the injuries there don’t look dire. We will know more if she wakes up.”

“If?”

“She should already be awake. We can’t get much of a response.”

“May we see her?”

The young doctor opened the door to the observation room and held it open for them.

The young woman on the bed had her head turned to the left. There were no bandages on the head, just long, red hair.

Kendrah halted in her tracks. She walked over to the side of the bed and crouched down beside the woman’s face. “Can you move her head so it’s facing up?” she called to the doctor. She heard a sigh, but the man complied, brushing Kendrah out of the way. The face was in the bright light.

“This isn’t her,” Kendrah said, placing the investigation bag on the tray table by the bed and pulling out the packet. The Polaroids were still attached.

“I’ll get the laptop,” Kevin said, already halfway out the door.

“The woman at the scene was blond with a wide nose; she has red hair and a narrow nose.” This woman was extremely pretty. The woman at the scene had been unremarkable, even taking into account the injuries. Kendrah held the Polaroid next to the woman’s cheek for comparison and looked at the doctor.
“I don’t know what to tell you. This is the woman I had in surgery for two hours this morning.”

Kendrah noticed for the first time the doctor looked exhausted.

She looked back down at her paperwork for the logging of the effects: pink t-shirt, grey skirt, tan sandals, pink underpants, beige bra, butterfly charm on a silver chain, all currently sitting in the evidence room. Kendrah lay both hands flat on the table and closed her eyes for a moment. She opened them again to look at the fingerprint card. The tech had arrived early that afternoon.

“Are you sure this is the woman you worked on? You remember the red hair? You remember her,” she thrust both hands at the woman’s head, “and not her?” she handed the Polaroid to the doctor.

“I remember the red hair,” he said, annoyance clear in his tone.

Kendrah shook her head and took herself back to the moments she was by the woman’s side. Her memory was consistent with the photo. What else was there? She heard Kevin re-enter with the computer. He wasted no time opening it and logging in. She crossed the room to him and clicked on the photo icon. Immediately thumbnail sized shots filled the screen. She chose a close-up of the head and clicked and then motioned for the doctor to look.

“I don’t know what to tell ya,” he said.

Kendrah chose a wider shot to look at. The clothes matched her memory and the log. She looked at the left hand in the photo and then walked with the computer to the bed again and looked at the hand with the IV needle taped to it. The nails were identical, down to ragged, chipped polish on the left middle finger, probably from impact on the asphalt.

She stared at the image again, starting from the head and sweeping down the body and then back up. She paused at the elbow. There was a gloved hand tying a latex band around it.

“Was it Laurie at the scene last night?” she asked Kevin though she was already looking through the contacts on her phone for Laurie in forensics.

“It was,” Kevin confirmed.

Kendrah tapped the contact and brought the phone to her ear.

“Forensic Unit, Laurie.”

“Laurie, Detectives Johnson and Connell. We are at Tulane ICU with the Ramparts and St. Ann hit and run. We need you to come here and collect another sample, please. Right now.”

She waited for confirmation and then hung up. “You wait for her?” she asked Kevin. “Call Bilodeau and explain we need a rush DNA.”

Kevin nodded. They both knew their lieutenant would approve the test. If this was the wrong person somehow, there would be a huge scandal in the middle of Mardi Gras.

“I’m going to head to the morgue.”

Kevin started to hand over the keys.

“You keep the car. It’s only a few blocks. Join me as soon as you talk to Laurie and get the okay on the DNA rush.”

She left Kevin his copy of the report and took the rest of the bag and laptop. She organized the file
in her brain as she strode up the street. It was uphill, and she was not in the best shape of her life, but she made good time. She opened the double glass doors with both hands and waved with one hand and touched the badge on her hip with the other at the receptionist behind the little window, not breaking a stride. She heard a buzz and slammed through the heavy wooden door to the hall that led to the morgue.

After five minutes wasted talking her way to the correct room, she was standing by the metal drawer as the attendant pulled the lever and brought out the tray. The man was naked with dark pubic hair. Instead of a pudgy face and light hair, he was boyishly handsome with a strong chin and stately nose. He had dark brown hair with one lock covering the forehead.

Kendrah sighed deeply and pulled out the cellphone again. Kevin answered immediately.

“Tell Laurie as soon as she is done there to meet me at the morgue.”

**Two Years Later**

Kevin had set up their table under the largest oak tree in the expansive lawn of the extended care center in Metairie. They each had a chair. Kevin was finishing a report on an armed robbery in a convenience store they had closed the day before. Kendrah was filing evidence and photos into a program on the laptop. When they returned to the station, she could download it and send it to the central database. It seemed as if there were upgrades every month, but aside from the time she had to spend in training for them, they did help efficiency most of the time.

Julie was seated on her walker. She didn’t really need it to get around, but it was security for her, and Kevin had installed a little tray on a hinge, so when she sat, she had a small desk in front of her. Across her chest, she wore a cloth bag with a long strap that held her pens, her latest journal, and her sunscreen that Kevin used, too, when the shade of the tree shifted.

They worked out here on their lunch hour when the weather was nice. Kendrah would pick up Julie from the day room while Kevin set the table and chairs. The center was nice enough—it certainly could be worse—but it was depressing. Most of the residents were old and in the throes of dementia. The younger residents didn’t have a whole lot to do with Julie because she was nonverbal and tended to walk away in the middle of meals or activities or conversations.

Her face would light up when Kendrah arrived and again when they had made their way to their tree and she spotted Kevin and again when Patty or Marcus or both would show up to share lunch. It was enough to keep them coming back whenever they could.

Julie had been *Jane* in the hospital, but that was such a reminder of their failure to learn anything in the case, Kendrah had renamed her. She looked a bit like the actress Julianne Moore, with her red hair and intensely beautiful green eyes, and she also looked like someone who would be called Julie. Kevin agreed enthusiastically. They had her name changed from Jane Doe to Julie Doe. The medical professionals followed suit.

DNA tests had confirmed that she and the male were the same victims at the scene. Kendrah had practically hurt her brain trying to formulate every scenario that could explain how their appearances changed from the street that night to the hospital and morgue twelve hours later. She had never found a witness who saw anything. She eventually attributed it to poor lighting and an optical illusion. One of her professor contacts at Tulane showed her examples of photographed
items that had appeared to be dramatically different colors in various light.

Julie had good teeth with no evidence of dentistry or orthodontia. She had been pregnant and had given birth, but not in the past few years. She was between the ages of twenty-eight and forty at the time of the accident, but they thought she was likely around thirty-five, which would put her birth year at 1962.

Based on the male victim’s use of the phrase *cheers, mate* and that he was uncircumcised led to the theory that they were from elsewhere: the UK and Australia were the top candidates. Kendrah refused to put much credence in it. There were plenty of intact Americans who put on goofy accents. But she widened her missing persons search to the UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, though the last one was at Kevin’s insistence and under some duress. She never had any hits.

The staff at the center reported that Julie had an odd effect on the electricity in her vicinity. When she was especially tired, the lights in her room sometimes went out on their own. When she was in a loud space, the volume of the TV or DVD player would lower without anyone touching it. The staff had all sorts of theories. Kendrah dismissed any reports of it, though. It had never happened in her presence, and she had too much real mystery to resort to supernatural nonsense.

The police department had commissioned an artist to draw two sketches of the male, one from looking at the body, which was eventually cremated, and one using Kendrah’s digitals. Julie never reacted in any way to either. Every time she achieved a milestone of alertness or physical progress, Kendrah would bring out the sketches. Julie would look at them for a moment and then glance to Kendrah for a hint of how she was supposed to respond.

Julie also didn’t have any reaction to the stick found tucked into her skirt that first night, or to similar one tucked into the trousers of the male. She would look at the stick and sometimes touch it and then would be lost in her own thoughts again.

She wore the butterfly charm; Kendrah couldn’t justify holding it. Julie hadn’t acted as if she recognized it, but she did have a habit of clutching it in her fist, sometimes so hard it would leave marks.

Kendrah had taken those odd trousers to the costume mistress at the New Orleans Rep, and while she recognized the fine workmanship, she couldn’t give insight to the origin. The sticks, pants, cash, various expert reports, and Julie’s clothes were kept in an evidence box Kendrah and Kevin were given permission to maintain in their station.

About a year after the accident, Julie started writing her lines anytime there was a writing utensil and paper within her reach. Kendrah brought her a black and white covered journal and a box of pencils and felt-tip pens. Julie filled pages and pages of multiple journals with symbols Kendrah had never seen before intermixed with numbers. Kendrah took a crack at decoding it and got exactly nowhere. She took a sample to a linguist at Tulane and then one at Louisiana State University up the road in Baton Rouge, and neither professor could detect a pattern. The woman at LSU recommended a colleague at Columbia who specialized in ancient symbols. Kendrah boxed up the samples and sent it to New York. Six weeks later, she received a two-page letter translating a few of the symbols: tree, sheep, some kind of currency, boy, but she was unable to decode the pattern. She used the phrase *manifestation of mental illness*. Kendrah had sighed heavily and placed the document in the box.

The case was still open.
“Marcus!” Kevin called out across the grounds. Kendrah looked up from the computer to see her husband approaching with a cardboard tray of coffees. A smile spread over her face that matched the one on Marcus’s. He was between shows for another three weeks, and she had enjoyed every minute of his break. She lived for them.

“Hey, y’all!” he called back. Marcus was big and broad, and as he had been told hundreds of times, looked more like a linebacker than singer, actor, and dancer. He had been a football player until his tenth-grade English teacher had persuaded him to audition for the school production of Oklahoma! He had been cast as Judd, and his voice had brought down the house. That had been it for football. He had gone to university on a theatre scholarship instead.

Marcus put the tray down on the table before engaging in the elaborate hand-shake ritual he performed with Kevin every time they saw each other. He moved to Julie, patting her shoulder. Julie reached her hand up to cover his and beamed. Marcus then leaned across the space to meet Kendrah and kiss her mouth. Their sunglasses bumped.

“Where’s Patty?” he asked.

“She’s at the dentist, so I have the sandwiches. She’ll be here in a few minutes with cookies from Antoine’s.”

Marcus rubbed his hands together, and Kevin produced the insulated bag that held lunch for the group. Kendrah moved her chair so she was by Julie, who could feed herself, but tended to get distracted easily. Kendrah suspected she didn’t get that much attention at her meals at the center—she was extremely thin—so she made sure Julie ate as much as possible during their lunches.

She had brought Julie home to Easter dinner that first year. Julie had just been moved from the rehab center to her current residence. Mama had been skeptical of the whole thing.

“She has people, and you are not it,” Mama had said in her usual blunt tone.

“She does have people, but I can’t find them,” Kendrah said, equally blunt and insufferably stubborn. Julie was not interacting much at all then, but she ate a small plate of food and appealed to Mama’s protective nature.

Since then, Julie was expected at all the big family dinners and some Sunday dinners after church as well. Kendrah got used to picking her up, helping her into the car, and spending time with her silent companion. If she couldn’t figure out where Julie belonged, she could at least make her life better.

Patty had made a smorgasbord of sandwiches, quartered so everyone could sample each kind. There were peanut butter and strawberry jam, egg salad, tuna, and salami and provolone. Julie was partial to the egg salad. She was not a fan of peanut butter, so Kendrah didn’t put one on her plate. She liked fruit in bite sizes. She would stare a whole banana, apple, or orange, but if it was cubed, she would eat it. She loved the coffee and sweets the best, and her face lit up again when classic brunette southern belle Patty was spotted walking toward them with her usual huge smile and her white box from Antoine’s.

“Hi, y’all! How are the sandwiches?”

“Masterpiece, Patty,” Marcus said, and helped himself to three more quarters.

Kevin readied Patty’s chair and started fixing her a plate. Patty taught fourth grade, but she had taken the day off for the dentist and bonus lunch with the gang. During school vacation in the
summer, she was out here with them every day.

“Julie, Darlin’ how are you today?” Patty said as she passed her two lemon cookies covered in confectioners’ sugar and wrapped in a pretty, pink napkin from the bakery.

Julie smiled and brought the cookies to her face to inhale them before she put them on her tray and took delicate bites between sips of the black coffee that she favored.

“Marcus, Kevin told me you are starrin’ in Pippin next! I cannot wait! I’ve already purchased tickets for two shows. And it’s tourin’?”

“Yeah. We play three weeks here then on to Biloxi, Mobile, Birmingham, and Atlanta. If it’s successful, they are going to try to book in the Carolinas before we head home.”

Kevin shot a sympathetic glance to Kendrah. She was proud of her husband’s triumphs, but missed him terribly when he was on the road.

Patty started singing and of course Marcus couldn’t resist joining in.

Join us........ Leave your fields to flower
Join us........ Leave your cheese to sour
Join us........ Come and waste an hour or two
Doo-dle-ee-do

Kendrah looked at Julie, with a smile and a mild eyeroll, as if to say what are we going to do with them? But Julie was paying no attention. She was gazing at the tree above them with a smile. She looked thousands of miles away. Kevin and Kendrah, wary of the time, and that it was a workday, AND that their lunch hour had ended ten minutes ago, started cleaning up the refuse and preparing to leave. Their spouses were in denial.

Journey....... Journey to a spot ex-citing, mystic and exotic
Journey....... Through our anecdotic revue
We’ve got magic to do....... Just for you
We've got miracle plays to play
We've got parts to perform.... Hearts to warm
Kings and things to take by storm
As we go along our way!

Julie let out a loud peal of laughter. Kendrah turned, expecting to see her reacting to Marcus’s natural hamminess, but Julie was still paying no attention. Kendrah had heard her laugh before, but never the full, throaty guffaw she was currently displaying.
“Well, somethin’ sure tickled her funny bone,” Kevin said sincerely.

“Snape!” Julie said. “Severus Snape!”

Kendrah whipped her head around. “What’s Snape?”

“Julie?” Kevin said. Both partners had dropped their occupations and were crouching on either side of Julie’s walker.

“Why do you call me Julie?” she said clearly in what Kendrah recognized as some kind of British accent.

“Because we don’t know your real name,” Kendrah said quietly, trying to keep her emotions in check. “Do you know your name?”

The woman they called Julie looked at her as if Kendrah was not so bright. “Of course! It’s Lily. Lily Judith Evans.”
Chapter Three: Lily Judith Evans

Chapter Summary

Four months later...

Chapter Three

Lily Judith Evans

Lily’s verbal emergence was the biggest lead they’d had in the case since day one, but it came with a new set of challenges. For one, Lily no longer met the requirements to stay at the long-term care facility. While this was personal progress, it left her with limited options. Lily thought it was 1971, and that she was eleven years old living with her parents, Lawrence and Pamela, and her sister Petunia in Cokeworth, England. She thought she was a few months away from going to a special boarding school for young witches and wizards.

Kendrah, Kevin, Marcus, and Patty were her friends that she had no problem fitting into her schema, but she didn’t share how these Louisianans from thirty years in the future were part of her life. She seemed to just accept it.

The only facility where Lily was eligible to live was the state school in Monroe. Kendrah took Lily there for a visit on her day off. They lasted twenty minutes. Kendrah supposed it was adequate for those without other options, but it was not for Lily.

_I will figure something out_ was her mantra for the four-and-a-half-hour drive home. They stopped at Popeyes for fried chicken and red beans and rice when they were half way home. Lily smiled across the table at her.

“You will figure something out, Kendrah,” she said.

Kendrah wondered how many times she had repeated the phrase out loud.

“You’re right.”

She had already researched every possible connection in Cokeworth. Not only could she not find a Lily Judith Evans born there on January 20, 1960, she could find no trace of anyone in the Evans family. She had asked Lily to sketch a map of Cokeworth from her memory, and Kendrah had seen that it was a near perfect representation of the town circa 1970.

The bakery where Pamela worked had been gone for many years. The pub was gone. The shops were gone. Lily’s primary school was gone. They weren’t just gone from 1997 when Lily had been hit, they had been gone since the mid-eighties.

That made sense—Lily thought it was the early seventies, so it wasn’t surprising that the town aligned with her timeline. What Kendrah couldn’t explain was how this person knew everything about a place that had no record of her ever living there. Lily knew her address, and Kendrah
confirmed the house had existed. (It had been razed in 1985.) She also found the record of its owners going back to the 1920s when it was built. No one named Evans was on the list, and it was never a rental property. Nothing about this case was ever easy.

A linguist from Tulane confirmed that Lily had a typical accent for the area. Kendrah formed a phone relationship with the Cokeworth police and the registry office. Both were sympathetic and sounded as if they were intrigued by the case, but neither was terribly helpful beyond confirming that the town existed.

She sent photos of Lily and the sketches of the male victim, and left more contact information for herself than was probably necessary.

A possible solution to their immediate problem sprouted and took hold in Kendrah’s brain when they were an hour out of Metairie. Marcus was still on the road with Pippin, and she was so alone in that condo. They had a second bedroom that they just used for storage. Lily had two more nights she could stay at the center, and Kendrah wasn’t going to mention it to her until she had spoken to Marcus, but she knew he would agree. She breathed deeply for the first time all day.

Lily was chatting about her favorite subject.

“It’s June twenty-second?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“June has thirty days. July and August thirty-one. Sixty-one plus eight. Sixty-nine days, Kendrah!”

“That’s right, Lily.”

Kendrah had no idea what would happen when September first arrived and the Hogwarts Express did not, but she figured they would solve that one when they got there.

For Lily’s part, she and her friend Severus Snape had planned it all out. They would need to make a trip to Diagon Alley (Kevin adored that part. Diagonally! Get it? She is so clever!) for robes and books that the first years needed. They would go to Olivander’s for their wands. This part was obviously interesting. Kendrah didn’t really believe a word of it, but if that trip ever took place in Lily’s mind, you better believe those sticks were getting trotted out again.

Kendrah pulled up to the center, and before she could finish parking Lily was out of the door. She had relied on others for basic care for so long, she had asserted her independence in a big way since she had started speaking in late February.

“Thanks, Kendrah for the ride and for lunch. It was dead sound. Will I see you tomorrow?”

“Yes, Lily.”

Kendrah waited until the woman was safely inside before she punched Marcus’s number into her cell.

Everything moved so quickly after that. Kevin and Patty came over that night to help clear out the spare room. Kendrah and Marcus hadn’t collected many things over the years, so it was just a few boxes that dated back to their college days. Her brother Edwin was on the way with her childhood bedroom furniture.
Mama had been predictably appalled by the idea.

“She is not your child.”

“She is my friend.” And she was the closest Kendrah would come to having a child anyway. When she was a sophomore at Tulane, she’d had a hysterectomy after increasingly serious uterine fibroids and endometriosis.

It had been a double tragedy for Mama. Not only was her only daughter going to be unable to have grandbabies, she had also given up her then career goal of being an attorney. While she was laid up in bed after the surgery, Kendrah had become obsessed with *Homicide: Life on the Streets*. She realized she didn’t want to be D.A. Danvers, she wanted to be Detective Frank Pendleton. She had kept her double-major of history and philosophy, but instead of applying to law school her senior year, two weeks before graduation, she started as a patrolman for the New Orleans Police.

Patty had grabbed the vacuum while Kevin and Kendrah started installing shelves when Edwin arrived. Along with the bed and chest of drawers, Mama had included a box of linens and Kendrah’s quilt that had covered her bed in high school. Kendrah noticed immediately that it was all freshly laundered. Mama talked a good game, but when it came down to it…

Kendrah and Kevin had the night shift the next day, so they had time to pack up Lily at the center and move her. Patty was waiting at the condo with a welcome home breakfast of beignets and black coffee.

“Lily are you ready to see your new room?” Kendrah had said as they packed up her few possessions. Lily’s alternative take on reality meant that they didn’t have to offer too many details. Lily would process information however it fit into her world.

“Yes! Of course, it’s just until September first,” she reminded Kendrah.

“Yes,” Kendrah said. They carried out four boxes, said goodbye to a few staff members and residents and left the center for good in Kevin and Patty’s Ford Explorer.

Patty welcomed Lily in to the condo with a hug.

“Lily, go see your beautiful new room, and then come on out because I have amazing news for you!” Patty said. Her brother had a popular frozen yogurt shop in Metairie, and he had agreed to give Lily a trial part-time job.

Lily dropped the box she was carrying on her bed and went straight for the window, opening the curtains and peering out to the parking lot and the back of a Sonic.

“Oh, it’s beautiful,” she gasped.

“Come in for donuts,” Kendrah said.

“We found a job for you!” Patty exclaimed.

“You did? That’s wonderful!” Lily squealed. “Books and robes and school fees are right dear, and Mum and Dad…they do their best, but the mills aren’t producing what they once did, you know. I don’t know how Severus is going to make it,” she said in a low voice indicating she was saying this in confidence. “His mother…she just isn’t well, and his father drinks too much and almost never has work. Do you have a job for Severus, too?” she asked hopefully.

“We’ll see what we can do,” Patty assured her.
“This is a code of secrecy situation,” Kendrah said seriously. They had warned Lily that she should not speak of Hogwarts or of being a witch at the center. It was all fine, Lily had assured them. Severus had told her all about the code of secrecy with Muggles.

“Oh, of course!” Lily had assured them.

Lily did very well at the job. Patty, Marcus, or Kendrah dropped her off and picked her up when they could, but Lily learned the bus schedule and bought a pass so she could easily get herself to and from the shop that was about two miles from the condo. Kendrah helped her set up a bank account, which was difficult with her lack of documentation, but they had grown accustomed to navigating life being classified a Jane Doe.

Marcus returned home from tour and they settled into their three-member family. They were all nervous as September first approached. Lily had made a gigantic calendar for her room and marked each passing day with a big, red X.

The first was a Wednesday, and they planned a big family dinner. Severus had told Lily what to expect for the menu the first night at school, so Patty was making a roast chicken, mashed potatoes, and pumpkin pie. She had even come up with an orange concoction she called pumpkin juice, though it tasted more like cantaloupe.

Kevin and Kendrah had worked day shift that day, and they had no idea what they would be facing. Lily had been nothing but cheerful from the beginning of her awakening, and they were afraid that was about to come to an end.

They shouldn’t have worried.

Lily met them at the door with a huge smile.

“Congratulations, Kendrah! Gryffindor! We will be together and Patty, too!” she couldn’t contain her glee and she swept up Kendrah and Patty in a three woman hug.

Kendrah wasn’t overly fond of physical contact, but she made an exception.

“Gryffindor, nice!” she said.

“Kevin and I are Hufflepuff,” Marcus said, trying to sound as serious as possible.

“Hufflepuff, huh?” Kevin said. “Well, it could have been worse.”

“Oh, just wait,” Patty said.

“Severus is Slytherin,” Lily said, her eyes suddenly filling with deep concern. “Of course that’s what he wanted because of his Mum, but I just knew the hat would put him in Ravenclaw or Gryffindor. He’s the smartest bloke I know, and so brave. I met the most awful toe-rags on the train, and of course they are Gryffindor,” she said with a long sigh. “Nothing can ever be easy, can it?”

“Slytherins—they’re very clever, right? Severus will be okay, and it might be nice to have friends in other…” Kendrah tried, but her Hogwarts lingo was failing her.

“Houses, yes.”

“Houses. Lily, have you seen your wand?” Kendrah brought out the sticks for about the twentieth time in their association. The one belonging to the male was in her left hand, and the one that had
been found on Lily was in her right. She opened both palms. Lily took one glance and snatched the stick from Kendrah’s right hand.

“Oh, thank you! I couldn’t figure out where it had gone.”

“What will you do with it?” Kevin asked.

“Nothing yet, but tomorrow we start Charms and Potions and Transfiguration,” her eyes became very wide at the pronouncement, “So soon we will be able to do so much! But now,” she looked at all of them in turn with wise eyes and a peaceful smile, “Now, it is time to tuck-in!”

Lily kept them updated throughout the year of how their classes were going. How Severus was struggling to fit in at Slytherin, and how awful that Sirius Black and James Potter were.

“UGH! Do they have to ruin every class?” Lily would vent to Kendrah and Patty.

“Boys!” Patty offered.

“Not every boy, though. Kevin and Marcus are so lovely, and Severus does the best he can. It’s just those two, and the way they have Remus and Peter at their beck and call!”

Kendrah had been working on a theory that the male victim was Severus Snape. He didn’t look exactly like what Lily described, but he did have dark hair, and the difference between eleven and mid-thirties could sometimes be vast. She knew she had to bring out the drawings again, but she was dreading it. If it was Severus, Lily would have lost her best friend, and if it wasn’t Severus, Kendrah was afraid that this whole world had been created in Lily’s mind and would get her no closer to finding Lily’s home and people.

She decided to wait for a Saturday afternoon when they were both off work. Kendrah had fixed them a simple lunch and although her heart was beating rapidly, she calmly put the drawings on the table.

“Do either of these men look like anyone you know, Lily?”

She picked up the sketch based on the man from the scene first. “No.” She put it down and picked up the one that depicted the man from the morgue. “Ugh!” she said immediately. “He’s looks like a VERY OLD James Potter!”

“James? Really? Not Severus?”

Lily laughed. “No, silly. Severus has long black hair and a looooooong nose. This looks like the git’s father.”

“Have you seen James Potter’s father?”

“No,” Lily said patiently. “He looks like what I think James’s father would look like, if he favoured his son.”

Kendrah’s mind reeled. What was Lily doing at Mardi Gras twenty-five years from her Hogwarts world with that toe rag James?

As the school year progressed, Kendrah had more and more names to add to her search. She was
only half convinced that any of these people actually existed, but it was also hard for her to imagine that Lily had made it all up from nothing. The kitten incident was the turning point.

Kendrah returned home from a long day shift. Marcus had a rehearsal in the morning, but he had been home the rest of the day, and Lily had the day off from the yogurt shop. Kendrah walked in the door to their living room and was hit by plaintive kitten mewing from a tiny black and white creature curled up in a ball on the sofa, and Marcus looking at her with huge eyes.

“Welcome to insanity!” he said with careful diction.

“Where’s Lily?” Kendrah asked.

“Oh, Lily?” Marcus called.

“Yes,” Lily said innocently, coming in from her room. “Kendrah! Did you meet Holis?” Lily squealed and went straight to the kitten.

“Holis,” Marcus said in a voice that revealed his deep struggle to maintain composure. “Short for Holstein. Remember our Moo Cow Creamer?”

Lily had picked up Holis and was trying to hand it to Kendrah, who registered her reaction clearly on her face.

“Oh, do you not like kittens?” Lily said, full of concern.

“Not especially.”

“You know, I’m okay with a kitten,” Marcus said. “Lily, if you want a kitten, I will take you to the SPCA, and we will pick you out a kitten. But I don’t think I can live with creepy Moo Cow Creamer Kitty.”

“Would one of you please, tell me what this is…” Kendrah started.

“She MADE kitty. She made him with your favorite creamer and her wand.” Marcus’s eyes had reached full bug-out.

Kendrah breathed in an out while she looked at her husband, her roommate, and the kitten.

“Heavens, Kendrah, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize it was your favorite. Professor McGonagall was teaching us…where were you, by the way? Why weren’t you in Transfiguration?”

“I had patrol,” Kendrah offered in the short hand with which she communicated about her job to Lily.

“Patrol? Really first-years don’t have patrol, and not during class,” she looked at Kendrah with a baffled expression.

Kendrah tried again. “I wasn’t feeling well so I went to see…you know in the hospital…” She had all this down in a file on her computer, but it was such nonsense and so hard to remember.

“Madam Pomfrey in the hospital wing?”

“Exactly.”

“Are you feeling better?” Lily asked with obvious concern.
“Oh, yes. Transfiguration?”

“Yes! Professor McGonagall passed out the pieces of china, but I had no idea I got your favorite. I will turn it back.” She placed the kitten on the table, focused intently, raised her wand, said some unintelligible words very carefully, and with a puff of smoke, the kitten disappeared and the creamer sat on the table.

“WHOA!” Marcus screamed in a pitch his bass register usually couldn’t reach.

“Oh my god!” Kendrah gasped. “What the…"

“Not bad for our first lesson with live animals, right? Marcus, Hufflepuffs have Transfiguration tomorrow, so you will have your turn.”

“What did we just see?” Kendrah asked.

“That’s some David Copperfield level shit,” Marcus said.

“That’s it, right? It was a trick. There’s a cat around here somewhere.”

“Kitty, kitty, kitty?” Marcus called in a wavering voice.

“Do you want the cat? Because I thought…” Lily looked so confused and a bit hurt.

“No, let’s keep the creamer. So, I missed class, Lily. Catch me up.” Kendrah sat at the table.

“Right. So, let’s find a piece you won’t be sad to see go.” Lily walked into the galley kitchen. “This Pippin shot glass, Marcus? We have ten.”

“That’s fine,” Marcus said, joining her at the table. Lily brought the glass over.

“So. You have to concentrate. The kitten is obviously a more complicated structure than the glass, right? So you concentrate on the glass, but you already think kitten. Point your wand at the glass. See the kitten.” She stared deeply at the glass. “You move your wand firmly and decisively and utter the incantation confidently.”

She flicked her wand firmly and decisively and said, “Cat poculum!”

There was another small puff of smoke and a white kitten on the table.

“Pippy!” Lily cried with glee and scooped up the kitten.

Marcus was muttering incoherent syllables, almost in tears.

Kendrah had attended St. Augustine Catholic Church her entire life. Every Sunday that she was not on a shift, she was at Mass next to Mama. Mama did not believe in Saturday Mass. Kendrah had sung the songs, listened to the liturgy, and watched the priest transfigure the Eucharist thousands of times in her life. Since she had been fifteen years old, she had not believed that anything was happening to the host and the wine. She was thoroughly and completely agnostic, not just about the rites of the Catholic church, but about every hint of the supernatural.

And yet.

And yet, that shot glass was now a kitten.

“Wow, Lily. That’s amazing,” Kendrah said with a light tone. “Will you restore the glass and then
show me what else you can do with your wand?”

“We can’t keep him?” Lily mock pouted and turned the kitten over. “Her?”

“Like Marcus said, we can pick out a cat at the animal shelter, okay? We’ll go tomorrow. Let’s put the glass back.”

Lily complied, and Kendrah placed the shot glass back in the cupboard with shaking hands.

“What else have you learned?”

Lily said a word, flicked her wand, and the light went out. She quickly brought it back. She walked to the counter where Marcus had placed a pair of sunglasses he broke. Lily fixed them with her wand.

“I can do a bit more. Just simple stuff, really. We’ll be learning more and more this year.”

Kendrah walked over to the sofa and beckoned Lily to follow.

“Who wants burgers and slushies?” Marcus said, grabbing his keys. Kendrah could tell he needed to get the hell out of Dodge for at least a few minutes.

“Cherry lime!” Lily said. “And cheeseburger.”

“Coke and same,” Kendrah told him. “Thanks,” she said and tried to convey she meant it for more than just fetching dinner.

“Alright,” Marcus said and shut the front door behind him.

It’s real. It’s real. It’s real. It was clanging in her brain and preventing useful thought. She breathed and held it down.

“Lily, when did you realize you were a witch?” Kendrah chided herself for not asking this sooner, but before this evening, she had thought it was just something in Lily’s head.

“I was at the park, and I was jumping out of the tree—to too high, you see, and Tunie was so scared. But I didn’t fall; I just floated to the ground.” She put her arms out and looked to the ceiling with a delighted expression. “Sev was there. He had been watching us, and he told me that I could do that because I was a witch.” She raised her eyebrows and smiled at Kendrah.

“And you did magic at home with Mum and Dad and Tunie? They did magic, too?”

“Nooooo. They’re Muggles.”

“So you are the only witch in your family? What about Severus?”

“His mum is a witch, and his dad is a Muggle. He’s half-blood.”

Since September, Lily’s accent had changed. She sounded less like the working-class girl that she was and that the linguist had confirmed her accent indicated. She now said the word “half” like someone on Masterpiece Theater would.

“And James? Peter? Sirius?”

“They have wizard and witch parents. They are pure blood. That’s the most common.”
“So you are rare?”

“Rare…maybe not. But not as common.”

“Muggle blood?”

“Muggle born,” Lily corrected. “There is an awful word for it, Mudblood,” she whispered the last word. “But that is like calling someone here a…”

“Yeah, okay,” Kendrah interrupted. Her brain was whirring, but it was placing all the information in order. A thought had taken hold. The code of silence that kept Lily quiet at work surely existed. That was why she could find nothing in her searches. “Witches and wizards…they are human, correct?”

“Yes?”

“And they make mistakes?”

“Of course, Kendrah. You know that. I make mistakes all the time.”

Every day, her capacity to research via the Internet was improving. Compared to the time of the accident, it had increased exponentially. Even from last March, when she’d had to send away for her map of Cokeworth, now it was online along with hundreds of tools and leads.

Witches and wizards made mistakes. Someone would eventually. Someone would slip up, maybe just for a minute, and she would find it.
Chapter Four: Summer of 1975/Summer of 2004

Chapter Summary

Three years later...

Chapter Four

Summer of 1975/Summer of 2004

30 June 1975

You, dear journal, were the first thing I spotted when I returned to my room last night with my Hogwarts trunk that was heavier from London to Cokeworth than I had ever noticed it being before.

There you were on my desk with your lovely Muggley fountain pen chum beside. A forgotten Christmas prezzie from Nana Gwen. I suppose I didn’t think I would need you at school, but it is so nice to have you here for the summer.

Have you noticed the changes in this house, or were they so gradual they escaped attention, and it is only because I have been away since very early January that I am shocked at the State of Things.

Dad looks years older. The lines of his face are deeper and more pronounced. His hair, already scant, is barely there and so white. It seems a miracle he has a job still at all, but the sackings of so many on his crew has obviously taken a toll.

Mum is a shadow person as well. I’m not surprised she didn’t send a letter declaring her reduction of hours at the bakery. This situation, though, has landed me with a bit of luck. Her co-worker can no longer afford full-time nursery for her two and four-year-old girls on her part-time hours. I am to mind the children every morning this summer. I should be able to afford all my books and kit for fifth year. (My fees are gratis due to our “situation,” as it were.)

I plan to visit the library tomorrow to stock up on reading materials for the afternoon. Tunie is being insufferable already. It is not my fault that I get to be away for the year. (It IS my great fortune; however, I am quite well-aware of that.) I would feel badly for her if she wasn’t such a bloody cow all the time. It would be nice to have sisterly moments of happiness as we used to, but perhaps that is too much to ask. She also has a job working in an office typing and answering the phones. It’s better than what both Mum and Dad have. She shouldn’t be so miserable.

I start my job in the morning, so I should get some rest. I hope this is the beginning of a lovely friendship, dear journal.

2 July 1975
Dear, dear journal, I have just come home from the most remarkable night. Tunie has hardly spoken to me since I’ve been home from school, but after tea tonight, she was all over me to come out with her. She met a boy on her lunch hour apparently. He told her everyone would be in the square tonight, and of course she couldn’t go alone, so please, please, Lily, won’t you come?

Between staying home with Mum and Dad and watching “The Good Old Days” on telly or having a potential adventure with Tunie, it wasn’t a terribly hard choice. I am a Gryffindor, after all.

Tunie dropped me approximately thirty seconds after our arrival at the square, but it turned out to be okay because, guess who was there? None other than Severus Snape, looking not at all the sad sack he often does at school. (Forgive me, but it’s true. So dour and superior with his snakey mates.)

He was—dare I say it—cool in his jeans and Pink Floyd t-shirt. If he could pull off that air at school, he was would be swarmed with girls. He saw me and beckoned me over with neither word nor gesture. He handed me a beer and then a smoke, and we held up a wall for a lot of the night. Occasionally, he would brush against me when we were fetching more drinks. (There was an empty tea tin to drop in a quid to pay for the drinks, and I spent the whole of my wages. Although it was a spectacular night, this must stop! I must save. Lily, you MUST.)

When it was late, and I began to fear that Mum and Dad would worry, I finally spoke to him to tell him I must leave. He said, “Walk you?” in that voice that has become ever so deep and lovely, and I felt my knees go a bit wobbly. (It’s TRUE.) I said, “Sure,” or something equally brilliant, and we started off. After we had turned the corner, he took my hand, and we chatted a bit about exams and such until we were half a block away from home when he grabbed me and led me behind a retaining wall, and we started snogging.

I’m sure I don’t the words to describe this. It was like nothing I have ever felt before, and I want to do it again very soon!

Perhaps this will be quite a summer.

I should sleep now and hope for entertaining dreams.

6 July, 1975

Oh, journal so much to tell and so much I should never write down, but I must tell someone or I shall burst.

Severus—Sev, as he is to me now—is a fascinating creature beyond my imagination. This boy, whom I see every day at school with his long face and his long nose and his unkempt hair is quite something.

Last summer when I was organizing my sock drawer and playing with my dolls when no one was around, Sev was having a life. He is no innocent, let me tell you. He had a girlfriend—a woman really, a seventeen-year-old, who was quite worldly and introduced him to all sorts of things. No blushing virgin, our Sev.

I made this discovery in his bed.

Now, just wait a bloody minute! Whilst I imagine, I will have some experience myself before the summer is over, I am still pathetically innocent…well, in most things.
Sev has a job at the pub most nights. That Tunie dragged me to town on his night off must be serendipity, wouldn’t you agree? He washes glasses and helps the drunks home for wages and the occasional tip. He goes in at four-thirty, which only gives us about a three-hour window between my job and his.

We have taken to spending it in his attic room on his bed. We smoke and talk and listen to music. We start on opposite sides of his rather uneven bed, but as the afternoon wanes, we draw closer and closer. We stop talking. We gaze at each other. And then we snog. Yesterday, he brushed his hand under my shirt and rested it on the side between the waistband of my shorts and my bra. He didn’t try to move it up though I would have let him.

Today, I asked him if he had ever done this with another girl. He hesitated and then told me about last summer and Joy. (That’s her name; how perfect.) He spoke low and didn’t look at me, as if he were confessing something although, my journal, I must admit that it was thrilling to hear. He didn’t share graphic details, but even so, when we arrived at the snogging part of the afternoon, I was quite taken away with those thoughts.

This time, when he slipped a hand under my shirt, I pressed my body against his, rather awkwardly as we sat side-by-side on the bed, but he received the message and moved his hand lower, almost touching my bum and pulling me closer. Going on nothing but instinct, I brazenly swung my outside leg across him and before I could stop and think, I was straddling him.

He moaned so low, it made me bump myself against him and that amazing bulge at his center that I can’t stop thinking about. He gripped me tightly at both hips, his hands under my shirt again, and crossing my arms in front on me, I removed my shirt with one swoop.

His eyes grew huge, and he said, “Lily,” not Evans, which made me smile, and he put his arms around my back where my bra hooks and brought me so close into him there was no space between us. I moaned this time because there was that aching that has been plaguing me lately, not just between my legs, where it starts, but all the way up to my belly. I ground myself against him, trying to find some relief.

“Lily, stop. EVANS, stop. You’re going to make me…I’m going to come in my pants if you don’t stop.”

That I had this kind of power made me want to grind myself harder against him, but I didn’t. I eased off so I was sitting more on his lap, still straddling. He breathed in and out and raised his hands behind me, fumbling with the bra strap. He got a look of deep concentration on his face as he pulled it in and successfully released the hooks.

As an afterthought, he looked at me and said, “Okay?” I nodded and he let the two sides go and then brought the straps down my arms.

Journal, I find my breasts to be odd looking. They grew rather significantly in the last year and although they’re still not terribly big, they are awkward and saggy, and not the least bit alluring. Sev looked at them as if they were a fine reward. He took one in each hand and buried his face in them before taking one in turn and kissing and then sucking…journal, I had NO idea. There is a direct connection between them and…other parts.

I took off his shirt as well, only fair, and then there was this appealing little trail that led straight to his belt buckle. How could I resist?

Within moments we were both naked on the bed, and I had no idea what to do next, so Sev took over. We lay facing each other and started snogging again. Without thinking about it, I draped my
leg over his hip. He put his hand down and with his fingers explored and touched me everywhere I was aching. While he did that, he started rutting into my hip. I put my own hand down and gripped his length, warm and SO large—you have no idea. He moved in my hand; I really didn’t have to do anything. He touched me in the same rhythm as he was moving, and he continued faster and faster, and I felt something approaching that I had never felt before, but I knew instantly what it was and then my nerves exploded around his hand, my whole body lit up bright white, and I cried out, and then HE cried out and spilled himself over my hip and hand.

He collapsed into my mouth, and we snogged slowly as we were trying to breathe again. The record ran out, and I sat up and reached for my clothes. We both dressed again, and then he lit two cigarettes, and we smoked them until it was time for him to leave for work.

Journal, I want to spend the rest of the summer in that attic with that boy.

On a different, rather confusing note, I saw my bank statement today. I have so much money! I should transfer some to Mum and Dad because, Holy Merlin, I am rich. How have I accumulated so much through two weeks of childcare? I spent the first three days’ wages on beer! I am afraid I will be responsible for my school fees after all. There are aspects of my life that don’t always make sense. I suppose that is the nature of the magical world.

2004

School was finally dismissed. It was always a relief when they could suspend the Hogwarts game for two months. Lily still had her job at the yogurt place, and she also worked at the library as a shelving clerk three mornings a week. She was the master of Jefferson Transit.

Kendrah and Kevin had drawn a string of murder cases, unrelated, but the victims were all African-American young men in the city. They had closed each one, but there wasn’t a sense of accomplishment—just more depressing statistics and more incarcerations. Taking killers off the street wasn’t even rewarding as there were always more, and the conditions that were accelerating the killings never got better.

Marcus was gone for the summer in a rather triumphant tour of Show Boat. There were whispers it might be picked up for revival in New York. This would be the culmination of a dream for Marcus. Kendrah would be thrilled for him, but she also would be miserable without him for months and months.

Lily was keeping a journal now, and it led to more confusion and inner unrest for Kendrah. Lily was perfectly capable of holding down her jobs and surviving life under the code of secrecy. But her journal revealed her to be totally ensconced in her 1975 life. There were only hints of her reality in the pages of her journal.

Kendrah felt bad about reading it in the first place. It had started in the middle of an arithmancy notebook. Suddenly, Lily’s lines had turned into a narrative. Kendrah should have put it down immediately, but she was drawn into Lily’s world.

They had been exploring arithmancy together since the beginning of the school year. Lily had stopped writing those endless lines after her awakening, but suddenly at the beginning of her fourth year at Hogwarts, they were back. She would sit at the kitchen table for hours hunching over the notebooks again.
Kendrah had been shocked to see it. She still had Lily’s books from four years ago when the linguist at Columbia had suggested they were evidence of mental illness.

“What is that, Lily?”

“Our Arithmancy homework, of course!” *What’s the matter with you* was implied.

“Oh, yes. I’m so confused about it. Could you help me?” Lily was endlessly helpful. Kendrah wondered if she had been a teacher at some point or perhaps a doting mother. Those thoughts always came with a sharp pang. *I will find them.*

The summer before, Google had introduced the alert feature. Kendrah had immediately set alerts for myriad people: Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Petunia Evans, Sirius Black, Albus Dumbledore, and about a hundred more. Every time she opened her email at work, she had a tiny bubble of hope that this would be the day. It hadn’t been so far.

“It’s a silly assignment—quidditch odds. Vector is trying to engage the students I suppose. Rather insulting, really.”

Kendrah was not certain exactly what quidditch was besides a sport played on brooms that Lily found a colossal waste of time.

“You use the symbols for the four houses, see?” She pointed out four symbols on her page. Kendrah could pick out the lion, snake, eagle, and badger in pictograph form. “You add the numbers and symbols of the better players for each.” Lily brushed her finger along the line so Kendrah could follow. She couldn’t, of course, it looked like a series of random letters, numbers, and symbols. She nodded her head as though she could.

“And then you just let the lines play out.”

Letting the lines play out involved several more pages of letters, numbers and symbols. At the very end was a number and the snake symbol.

“So…Slytherin has the best odds of winning the cup, as you can see. Won’t Severus be pleased?” She smiled and rolled her eyes.

“The purpose is to calculate probability?”

“The probability of varied future outcomes based on known quantities. I thought Vector was fairly clear Wednesday?” Lily gave Kendrah a puzzled look.

“I’m sure she was. I must have day dreamed that one away.” Kendrah had never day dreamed a moment in her academic life. “Do you remember much from when you lived at the center?”

“M-hmm,” Lily said suddenly very absorbed in her journal. She never talked about her life before she moved in the condo.

“You used to write arithmancy lines then,” Kendrah said quietly. “May I show them to you?” Her heart was beating fast. If this really was a predictive tool, there is no telling what the lines would reveal.

“Okay,” Lily said, not looking up.

Kendrah went to her bedroom closet to retrieve a box. She brought it down and removed three notebooks from it. She carried them back to the kitchen table and opened one beside Lily, who
glanced over and then took the book in front of her. She made a face.

“None of this makes sense. Are you sure I did this? I didn’t know about Arithmancy until this week.”

“Maybe it was someone else. You don’t recognize any of it?”

Lily made another face. “Not really. Some of the symbols, sure, but I don’t know the pattern of the numbers and letters. This is very complex. We just started.”

“Of course. I’ll put them up.”

Lily went back to her homework.

Arithmancy became the focus of Lily’s non-working life. The lines became more intricate as the year progressed. Kendrah was skeptical of it as a predictive tool, but she was keeping an open mind. The test came in January.

Marcus had to decide between staying in New Orleans and working on the Rep’s production of *Smokey Joe’s Café*, or taking a job in a touring company of *Show Boat*. The director of the touring show was one he loved to work with, but Kendrah was looking forward to having him home for the summer. Arithmancy to the rescue.

Lily filled up five journal pages before she presented her report.

“Marcus, you will have a fine summer here with *Smokey Joes’s*, but *Show Boat* will advance your career…and these lines,” she pointed out a piece of dense arithmancy on half a page, “indicate that it will advance your career like nothing since your first *Les Mis* tour.”

Kendrah grumbled, but Marcus had been leaning that way already. She prepared herself to be a theatre widow for months.

Then there was the *Grand Master Cluck* case.

The chicken restaurant had been robbed, and the manager murdered. There was a fuzzy video of the crime, but no good suspects, and no tips that had paid off. Kendrah and Kevin had a theory that one of the employees was responsible, if not the actual shooter, the one who had coordinated the event.

The shooter had angled his body perfectly so his face was totally hidden from the camera that was inside a ceiling panel. They had investigated several former employees and had come up with nothing, but there were two current employees that raised questions.

As an act of desperation, Kendrah and Kevin had brought the evidence box to the condo with a bakery bag and bitter coffee for Lily. Kendrah had written a dossier of every fact they knew about the case. Lily spent an entire Saturday and most of a journal writing line after line. She had a suspect by three-thirty.

Kevin and Kendrah honed in on the man. They couldn’t take Lily’s work to a judge, of course, but after a week of intense scrutiny, they got a confession. They took Lily to dinner at Coquette to thank her. Kendrah’s mind reeled with the possibilities of arithmancy as an investigative tool.

By the summer, they hadn’t landed another overly tricky case. Lily still practiced her lines, though. She considered the popularity of new yogurt flavors and flavor and topping combinations. She reorganized the library so the space was used more efficiently. (The library manager told her
thanks, but no thanks.) When she wasn’t writing those lines, she was chronicling her sexual awakening with Severus Snape in his attic bedroom, or sneaking a cigarette in the back of the Sonic across the parking lot. Lily tried to play off her smelly clothes as the fault of smoking coworkers, but Kendrah was on to her.

Kendrah read the entries guiltily—Lily tended to leave them lying out when she left for work. Kendrah reacted with equal parts amazement and horror. She had been nowhere near a boy’s bed at fifteen. She hadn’t been in one until she met Marcus, two years into her career. She hadn’t kissed a boy until college.

12 July 1975

Journal, how can I be expected to complete such mundane tasks that my current life requires when so much has changed, especially how much I have changed. My mind can’t put these events into neat, ordered boxes as has been my practice my whole life.

There was not one bit of magic that we practiced in that room this afternoon, but it was the most magical experience of my life. [beside this line was a series of peace symbols, hearts, and daisies.]

It has been a week since we were first naked on his bed. I have been bolder and bolder, and even after everything, I still blush a little, journal. Do people really do these things? Do Mum and Dad, Professor McGonagall, Flitwick, the Headmaster, Professor Slughorn (Oh, surely NOT!) engage in such wanton behaviors?

If you had told me, dear journal, only months ago, that I would have someone’s manhood in my hand…in my mouth, I would have thought you quite mad, and yet I have, and today even more. Today he filled me so completely…I didn’t think it was possible, really. To look at it stretched from his body…how could it begin to?

But it did.

The act itself…if I am being perfectly candid, I didn’t find it as rapturous as when he put his mouth and tongue on me. (He did. I couldn’t believe it. I had heard some whispers, but never, NEVER did I think a boy, a man, would consider doing something so…I mean…But he did, and even though he had elicited the same response with his fingers before, it had been nothing like that tongue on the spot that I don’t have a name for. (Not true. Sev told me what it was called, but I haven’t heard of the word before, so I am going to wait to research it at the library before I commit it to journal.)

As an aside, I am at the library for hours. I think I must be losing track of time, which is disconcerting. I work in the morning, I spend the afternoons with Sev, and yet I have these hours at the library with a book cart. I know what to do with it, but it makes me wonder how many hours are in a day? I fill cups with ice cream, which they call yoghurt, I mind the Jennings girls, I spend time at the library, I lie in Sev’s bed, I sleep in my room at Mum and Dad’s and Kendrah and Marcus’s. I sit at Kendrah’s table and work on arithmancy. I wake up and am filled with profound sadness...loss, and I can’t catch a glimpse at what I am sad about, only that it is there and so real, and I know I have dreamed about it, but the details are gone when I wake up. And all of this takes place in a twenty-four-hour day. It must be some magical time element that I will learn, perhaps next year.

But I digress, my journal. All of this led to today. I knew it would be when I woke this morning.
While I fixed the porridge for the girls and then cleaned out the soft-serve machine, all I could think was what would happen in the attic.

I am so lucky that Sev was with me. He thought of everything. He had condoms—I had only ever seen used ones in the fields before today. I know the contraception charms, and he does too, but he was afraid our activities would be traced. He had just made me come with his mouth, and I was in that hazy space wherein nothing or no one could bother me, and it was room for just us. He entered me very slowly. It was a bit painful, but I must admit, I was preoccupied in amazement that he could do this—that he could fit. It didn’t last long, which I think embarrassed him, but to be perfectly candid, I was ready for it to be over; not because I didn’t like it, but it felt odd, and I wasn’t sure how to react.

Severus said that it gets better with practice. It is already so lovely, but I look forward to my return tomorrow and then again and again.

I’ve brought music home from the library: Led Zeppelin, David Bowie, The Rolling Stones. I listen to it while I write and as I fall asleep. Sometimes I fall asleep in my bed at Kendrah’s, and then as soon as I close my eyes, I am in his bed, and Brown Sugar is playing or Since I’ve Been Loving You, which is our song. Severus put the needle down on it as he retrieved the box of condoms from his trunk, and it played as he took me.

Enough for now, dear journal, but I will return soon.

1 August 1975

I had my monthly this week, so instead of our typical afternoon activities, Sev and I spent most of time next to each other in bed smoking, listening to music, and chronicling the injustices of our world.

And an undeniable injustice is embodied in his pitiful house. Setting aside the sad, silent mum, I have never been in a structure quite like this one on Spinner’s End. It’s sturdy enough with its stone casings, but it feels as if we could have been transported back a hundred years with no change in form or function. Sev is clearly mortified by the lack of lavatory facilities and always insists I use the loo before I arrive, as if I would collapse and die if I had to use his outdoor privy. (While I have no desire to test this, I am certain I would not.) The kitchen is little more than an ancient cooker and cooling cupboard. A single light bulb hangs from a string in the center of the room.

Both sets of stairs are rickety, but my feet are lighter on the second one because the destination is near. At the top of the miserable structure is my favorite space in the world. He has made it thus: his poorly transfigured bed, a small rug made of rags, his set of shelves with his books, records, and record player, the little china plate he nicked from the Great Hall, and that we stub out our smokes on, the ancient, wavy window he covered with a shabby pillowcase that dances in the breeze all afternoon. That is where my best hours are. And that is where we take on the problems of our worlds.

We both agree the house system at school is bollocks. Why should a hat determine who one’s friends are? One’s destiny? Make no mistake; it does. The ambitions of students are heavily influenced by where they were sorted.

We’ve been sharing house secrets, too, and it is so delicious to hear what happens in the dungeons.
As annoying as I find some of my fellow Gryffindors, the Slytherins seem down-right diabolical. Severus feels on edge all the time. No wonder he adopts such a closed-off persona at school.

He is not that, dear journal. He is lovely and warm and so, so funny. He has held me in his arms all week and never put other activities on the table. We get to snogging, though, and I become so heated that I take him in my mouth and explore him thoroughly with my hands. He often finishes on my hand or close to my mouth—he has pulled away most times although I would be fine with him finishing…coming in my mouth. (I confess: I enjoy it when it spills on me. He wipes my arm or hip or chest or lips thoroughly with his shirt, but the smell lingers until my next shower and the feelings last even longer.)

We both read the Muggle papers. Dad leaves ours on the table after breakfast, and I take it with me to the Jennings, and Sev takes one home with him each night from the pub. We talk about the strikes and rumours of strikes. About our ineffectual government—our two worlds collide here. We talk about international events. The war in Vietnam is finally ending. America’s politics make ours seem almost quaint. Surely they or the Soviets or both will end the world soon anyway.

And none of this seems insurmountable when I am lying against him in his bed. Yes, dear journal, our love will thwart nuclear holocaust. Ha! Ha! What silliness. It’s so easy to slip into that kind of magical thinking when I am with him in that room.

School is closer every day, and while it is a relief in some ways to escape the real Cokeworth misery, nothing will be the same. We’ve already discussed that we won’t be able to carry on at school. Neither of us can risk expulsion that such a rule infraction could impose. We have decided to work on legilimency this year so we can communicate with no one finding out.

But there are four weeks left, and I am done with this monthly business for the remainder, and I plan to waste not a moment.

2004

Kendrah hadn’t seen Marcus since June. She was planning a trip to Chicago in two weeks to visit him; Lily would stay with Kevin and Patty. She was perfectly capable of staying by herself, but Kendrah hated to think of her being lonely. Lily loved the Connells.

Kendrah blamed her marital absence on continuing to read the journal. She felt like a pervert, but she felt something.

August fifteenth was such a typical, miserable New Orleans summer night. It was humid and boiling, and Kendrah had given up the hair game, securing it in a bun at the back of her head with all tendrils gelled flat. She had already sweated through one outfit at Mass next to Mama for the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin. Kendrah’s faith had been reignited after the night of the shot glass kitten and the proof that there is magic. If there were magic in that context, then perhaps… She wasn’t there yet, but she had a mustard seed’s worth.

She sweated through her sensible blouse on the walk from the parking lot to her desk. She usually hoped they would land a case because it made the time go faster, but tonight she would be perfectly happy to spend the hours at her desk, with an air-conditioning vent directly above her head working on paper-work all night.
Kevin was already there with a massive Sonic cup of sweet tea and one with extra ice for her as well.

“Kevin, I adore you.”

“Feelin’s mutual, Darlin’” he said, already engrossed in reports from last night’s shift.

Kendrah took a long pull from the tea as she started the computer. Her NOPD email account showed four new, and she clicked with an eye on the lunch basket that smelled very much like Patty’s famous spaghetti. She glanced at the screen and almost dropped her tea.

Google alert: a house purchased, 331 Greenings Court, on 30 July 2004, by Severus Snape and Hermione Granger.

“Kevin!” she gasped.
Part Two: Severus and Hermione: Chapter One: Severus Snape

Chapter Summary

Part Two takes place from the summer of 2001 to the summer of 2004.

Part Two

Severus and Hermione

Chapter One

Severus Snape

Professor Snape had doggedly tried to avoid attending this fundraiser.

“I must account for the inventory of the Potions materials.”

“You have all summer,” the Headmistress said.

“Poppy’s stores are depleted.”

“You have all summer.”

“I must see to the house.”

“You have all summer; you can leave from the venue.”

“I am trying to cut down on my alcohol consumption.”

“Nonsense. And you don’t have to drink.”

“Red meat.”

“The salad bar is the best part. Gird yourself, Severus. You must attend.”

I don’t have to like it.

It was a ludicrous event. For the last three years, an old wizarding restaurant popular in the 1970s recreated their dining room and menu for one night to benefit the school. It had started only a few months after the last battle when the castle was still in ruins and funds were tight. He had missed the first one—he had still been convalescing—but McGonagall had insisted he attend the subsequent events.

The place was called Saladin’s and it was thoroughly doused in Middle Eastern Crusades era
kitsch. The walls were painted as if patrons were sitting on the banks of the Sea of Marmara. Turkish music was piped in. The menu—far from authentic; Snape had traveled the area extensively—including kebabs and rice, sickeningly sweet sweets and a ridiculously anachronistic salad bar featuring baby prawns—PRAWNS!

The patrons sat on cushions on the floor with gauzy drapes surrounding the parties. The wait-staff wore enormous trousers gathered at the ankles with flowy blouses and giant cummerbunds like genies.

The whole scene was ridiculous and the food mediocre. Snape had no nostalgia for the place; his family couldn’t afford to eat there in the 70s, and even if they could have, surely they would have been more discerning. He would have been, anyway.

The faculty were supposed to dress in theme, but that, he flat out refused. Let Filius look like a Sultan, let Sybil look like she belonged in a harem. He was there under duress in his typical work black wool trousers, white oxford cloth button-down, and his weekend black robe.

One hour. That was the length of time he would allow himself to be press-ganged into this by Minerva McGonagall. He would not sit; he would not eat. He would drink. Surely she hadn’t bought his story about cutting back. He sat next to her at meals in the Great Hall; it had been the weakest of his excuses.

He had a glass of fire whiskey and then one of disappointingly timid red wine.

He had put in his time and was preparing to make his exit when he saw Hermione Granger in her healer’s robes come in late from the rainy night. There was a long hallway from front door to dining room in in the converted space, and Snape angled himself so he could see her without being seen.

She was wearing her full St. Mungo’s treatment kit. She had been a healer since about six months after the war ended. She had thrown herself into training, spending most of her time in the wards with the most damaged patients and specializing in trauma.

He had not run into her during his brief stay as a patient, thank Merlin. It was humiliating enough that she had sat in the shack with him holding his hand and his throat until help arrived. He had taken precautions for months as he sensed the war was reaching its inevitable conclusion. The Dark Lord had grown so attached to his snake that Snape had suspected it was his intended end. Weeks of dosing himself with anti-venom and blood coagulant had chiefly saved his life, but he supposed Granger had played her part, too. He was happy she had never coaxed him into having a conversation about any of these events.

She drew her wand and transfigured her healing garb to a “robe” that looked more like a cocktail dress, a dark-pink sheath that ended at her knees. Her sturdy shoes became matching pink heels. She shook out her hair, pinned to her head, and then took a compact out of her small, beaded bag and checked her reflection. She grimaced and pinned the top section of hair back and applied lipstick before depositing it and her wand back in the bag. She raised her shoulders with a visible breath as if she were giving herself an internal pep-talk and then proceeded down the hall.

Snape waited a second too long to move to avoid detection.

“Oh, Professor, thank Merlin. I was hoping there would be someone to talk to at this thing. Do you have a…tent yet?”

They had become kindred spirits on the war-hero cocktail and lecture circuit over the last three
years. Weasley soaked up every bit of praise and every moment of attention. Potter had been famous his whole life, even if he didn’t realize it until he entered school. He’d had enough years of the treatment, though, for it to become just another part of his day. Snape and Granger didn’t enjoy it by any measure.

They were expected to be at events at least once a quarter, and he and Granger had settled into a pattern of doing the absolute minimum of hand-shaking before they retreated to the corner with a drink.

She was out-going and friendly enough, but she was no fan of the Ministry and hated to appear supportive of the current regime. He just hated people.

She had changed since her student days to the extent that he sometimes forgot that bit of their past. She was cynical about most things magic and Ministry though not bitter, and never toward anything having to do with her profession. She was witty and quick and the perfect companion at these insufferable events although he suspected she was unaware of his opinion about this.

She was standing there at the end of the hall with one hand lightly on his arm, looking at him with those lovely amber eyes hopefully. The correct answer to her question was of course, *No, I was just leaving.* His brain sent the message to his mouth.

“*No, I just arrived. I was steeling myself.*” *Oh, for the love of Agatha the Aggrieved.*

“*Ugh, me, too. I haaaaaaaaate this one. So…icky with the Middle Eastern…appropriation.*”

He snorted. “You are meeting the Weasleys in their…caravan?”

“No,” she said without explanation.

*That* was interesting. As far as Snape knew, She and Weasley were an item and had been since the end of the war. At those events, Weasley would work the room all evening and then come around to fetch Granger at the end of the night. They would always leave together. She referred to herself and Weasley using first person plural pronouns. They seemed a couple.

They had reached the edge of the dining room with all the gauzy tents.

Granger sighed, “Could we please find something out of the way?”

He started walking the perimeter of the room, as close to the wall as possible, He heard her heels clicking behind him.

“Abutting the wall so we don’t have to sit up?”

He had already considered that. The tents in the back were occupied, but there was a family with very young children who were gathering their possessions, preparing to leave.

“That’s perfect…we can leave their plates there and people looking for a tent will think it’s fully occupied.”

He was impressed with her scheming mind. They waited until the family had left the tent and then scooted in and settled on cushions against the wall.

Granger sighed heavily as she sat. “Sorry,” she said. “I’m coming off three straight day shifts.”

He wasn’t sure what to say about that, but he was saved by a waiter in full Arabian gear and make-
“Tarib!” he said in an appalling accent. Snape rolled his eyes. “Let me clear all of this…”

“I think they’re coming back,” Hermione said quickly.

“Ah,” he said. “You will need to buy raffle tickets before you visit the salad bar,” he said.

*Extortion.* Snape reached into his lapel for a galleon, and Granger was rooting through the beaded bag with a similar expression on her face.

They turned over their money, and the waiter handed each a line of tickets. “Drinks,” he pointed to a corner. “Salad bar,” he continued the routine. “Cake,” he sighed. “And I will bring your main in twenty minutes or so. Enjoy your salads,” he made a hasty exit.

“Brown face is a new and impressively appalling touch,” Granger said as she started hauling herself back up.

He snorted. “Must we?”

“The salad bar is by far the best part…and drinks.” She offered a hand, and he looked at it for a moment before he rose without assistance.

“I’m not that old,” he said.

“I wasn’t…” she looked at him, seemingly a bit mortified but then laughed when she realized he wasn’t really offended. “Fine. You can help me up next time.”

She led the way to the salad bar. It consisted of anemic lettuce, pink tomato wedges, baby prawns and a gelatinous cream and bleu cheese concoction to dump on top. He shuddered.

“Oh, get over it,” she handed him a plate, and filled hers. He put a little bit of lettuce and tomato, and then she put a big scoop of prawns and cream on his.

“I BEG your…”

“Trust me on this one.”

They took more than their share of the round bread at the end of the table and then carried their salad plates by the wine table and picked up glasses of the generically bland, disconcertingly light red wine and then back to the gauzy tent.

“Ugh, the logistics of this make NO sense,” Granger said as she attempted to sit on her cushion with her hands full. She finally just put her plate and glass on the floor. He followed her method.

“And the first raffle winner is…” A booming voice sounded from the front of the room.

She grabbed her line of tickets and his and squinted at the numbers. “Anything from 4126 to 4142, and we win.”

“4128!” the voice called out.

“That’s me!” she squealed and had to scramble up from the cushion yet again. “Hope it’s something good!”

The curtains prohibited him from seeing to the front of the room where there was a line of raffle
prizes, most of which were bottles of fire whiskey. While she was gone, he took a tentative bite of his salad. Instead of revolting, the bleu cheese and prawn combination was rather delicious, certainly better than what he remembered of the main course last year. He had finished his salad, was wishing he had filled his plate more completely; was even contemplating licking the remaining bleu cheese on his plate, AND giving her salad the eye when she pulled the curtains open dramatically. She had a triumphant look on her face, and a bottle of much better wine and two glasses in her hands.

“Réserve Clvfis, 1991!”

It was a shockingly high-end choice for this event, but he wasn’t complaining. “Oh, well done!” he declared.

She drew her wand showily, circled her wrist tightly around the neck of the bottle three times clockwise, one counter-clockwise and was rewarded by a deep pop. They both moaned quietly. She handed him the bottle so he could do the pouring honours.

“They tried to give me apple flavoured Old Ogdens, but I told them I was the first winner, so I got to choose my prize.”

“Good point!” he said. They touched glasses and he smelled the wine before he took a long drink. “Oh, Merlin.”

“Hermione is fine,” she laughed after she took own long drink.

“Oh, Hermione, then. Thank you.”

“Of course. I’m just glad I have someone to share it with who would appreciate it.”

He wondered again what had happened with Weasley. He hadn’t seen the whole group here tonight, just the stray one at the drink table or salad bar, but he could hear them in their large, raucous tent, and he knew that Hermione could, too.

“You liked the salad,” she said wryly, looking at his plate.

“The prawns ARE ridiculous, especially in this context.”

“Granted,” she said and took a big bite of her own salad. She rolled her eyes back in pleasure. “Plans for the summer?” she said in between bites.

“I have to restock the hospital stores. There are other projects.” He needed to do something about his hovel of a house. He had added a lav upstairs and down the first summer it was in his possession, but he had done little else to the wreck over the years.

“Other mysterious projects?”

“My house needs attention.”

“You’re in Salford?”

“Cokeworth.”

“Ooooh, prices on the rise there. Will you sell?”

He snorted. “What on earth do you know about…”
“I like to read the real estate pages. I love it when someone sells an old house and makes a bundle. That’s a hot area.”

“I don’t think any property within a hearty stone’s throw of my house could ever be described as ‘hot.’ My house is on Spinner’s End, which is the least desirable address on the island, I would guess. AND, even if it were a commodity, I wouldn’t sell it to the soulless few that would want to turn it into a gym or a coffee chain. I plan to work on the structural…challenges.”

“You will stay there…for the whole summer?”

“Where else would I go?”

“Anywhere.”

“I usually travel in late July,” he said feeling pleasantly loose for the first time in months. His glass was waning, and she poured some more wine for them both, leaving the bottle by him as an unspoken invitation to drink as much as he liked.

The waiter interrupted them with heaping plates of rather grey looking kebabs on a bed of an unidentified grain product that looked less edible than last year’s rice.

Hermione thanked him and then shuddered when he left. “That dark make-up is really…offensive. I wonder if we should put a bug in Professor…Headmistress McGonagall’s ear. And would it kill them to include a veg or two on this?”

“And the next winner is…4139!” The announcer had called about six others while they had chatted.

“That’s you! Pick something good!” she encouraged him.

He crawled to his feet, wary that they were now asleep and finding that they were tingly but still okay. He walked to the front. There were two choices left: Ogden’s Fire Ball, which was a revolting cinnamon concoction, and a metal lamp base looking structure with tubes coming out of the top.

“I’ll take the hookah,” he said.

“Good choice, professor,” the caller said and handed him the contraption and two cans of tobacco. He returned to the tent and repeated her routine with the reveal.

“YES!” she cried. “Do you know how it works?” She took their untouched dinner plates and stacked them in the corner.

“Don’t think it’s terribly complicated.” He hoped not, anyway. He found the slot in the base for the tobacco. He lit the coals with his wand. “Water?”

Hermione handed him a pitcher the departing family had left. He poured it slowly into the bowl and the hookah began to smoke. He cast a cleaning spell on the mouth pieces, just to be safe, and handed her one. She inhaled tentatively and then blew the smoke out and smiled.

“I feel like the Chesh…” she shook her head dismissively.

“Cheshire Cat.”

She smiled appropriately wide. “Yes. You know the reference.”
“Of course.”

“That’s so lovely, I can’t even tell you.” She sipped her wine and took another drag from the hookah, and he did, too. They ate some of the bread off the salad plates in lieu of the revolting dinner. It was terribly pleasant.

“It wouldn’t be so bad if a coffee chain wanted your house, would it? Do you feel protective of it?”

He scoffed. “No. It’s a hovel, and if someone wanted to tear it down, the world would be better. But as it is my residence for about a quarter of every year…”

“Why is it? Your residence. You could live wherever you wanted, right?”

She was leaned against the back wall, alternating sipping from her wine glass, nibbling on the bread, and pulling smoke from her mouth piece. He kept looking at her pretty little mouth. He would finally have a decent wank tonight when he returned home. He sighed in anticipation.

“The whole area has a larger meaning than my dodgy house. The town is this country’s shame whether they cover it coffee bars and discount shops or not. To sell it to that fate would be to erase its history.” And he would no longer own his only relic of the time in his life when for a few weeks, he was happy.

His miserable parents were long since gone, but he had never moved into their larger bedroom. He looked forward all school year to returning to Spinner’s End and sleeping in that attic room in the same bed he had shared with her.

“Tell me about it,” Hermione said, and he had to keep himself from sputtering. She can’t read your thoughts.

“You couldn’t imagine.”

“Try.”

He sighed, pushing aside his brief reverie and returning to the subject at hand. “We were thrown away the first moment we were no longer needed and immediately forgotten by the government and by society. By everyone. Hopeless. Useless. Worthless.”

“That’s truly shameful, and I agree with you completely, but today…Prime Minister Blair is…”

“Blair is no different and no better…”

“That is simply not true,” she said flatly, but she was grinning. She is enjoying this.

“Kowtowing to the queen and the palace corgis,” he said with disgust.

“He is not like that! He puts up a fight!”

“Bollocks he does. He probably walks them for her.”

“He does not!” She was trying valiantly to keep an air of indignation and not laugh. She reached across him for the wine bottle, and he caught her arm and pulled it toward him. The rest of her followed, and the next moment she was sitting on his lap.

She brushed a lock of hair that had fallen forward on his face, and he kissed her mouth, fully expecting her to recoil but unable to stop himself.
She didn’t recoil. She ran her fingers lightly all over his face and kissed him back, and then she stopped and looked at the flap of the tent. “We should take this elsewhere,” she breathed quietly against his mouth.

“You’re not otherwise engaged?” he asked quietly.

“Would I be sitting on you and snogging you if I were?” She broke away from his mouth—he had made a serious tactical error here. She sounded slightly insulted.

“Of course not, sorry. I just thought you and Weasley…”

“We were; we have been. We’re not anymore.”

He drew her back to him and resumed where they had left off, and she joined him again.

“Where should we go?” he asked with his forehead against hers.

“We could go to mine. I’m not connected to floo, so we would have to…”

He stood and offered her a hand, which she took without hesitation, He snagged the hookah and put it under his arm so he could grab her wine bottle as well; they had only drunk about half of it. “Should we sneak out the back?” he asked.

“I don’t care who sees us, do you?”

“Not a bit.”

She hooked her hand under his arm, and they walked quickly to the exit. As soon as they had cleared the building, she gathered him up as much as she could with their size difference and side-apparated them away.

They landed in an alley in what he guessed was North London, near the hospital, but on the Muggle side. She took his free hand and led him to the street.

“It’s just down the street from here.”

It was a fashionable area with older homes. “You own one of these?”

“No,” she laughed. “I rent an upstairs studio in one.”

She led him around the side of one of the houses, through a wooden gate and to the back of the house where there was a concrete block of stairs to the top of the house.

“Such an eyesore, but convenient to have my own entrance,” she said and started climbing the stairs. At the top, she glanced around and then took out her wand and muttered at the door. It fell open with a click, and her enormous, orange cat—or whatever it was—stuck its head out.

“Hello, Crooks, we have company,” she said as she guided the beast back into the door with her foot and then beckoned Snape to follow her in. The cat trotted into the kitchen area with a haughty air.

“Let me feed him really quickly, and then he’ll leave us alone.” She placed her bag on the table and followed her beast.

He clicked on a lamp and glanced around the space. Her bed, a four-poster with soft, inviting linens filled a good portion of it. The walls were lined with bookshelves and filled to the top. She
had a few framed photographs in front of the books; one was of herself as a young teenager with two adults that must be her parents. She looked like both. There was one of Hermione and Luna Lovegood. They were wearing formal robes and had flowers in their hair. It looked like a shot from Potter’s wedding, which had been covered extensively in the Prophet.

There was one of her with Frank, Alice, and Neville Longbottom. Hermione had pioneered a treatment for magical folk with brain injuries. She had discovered that it wasn’t the curses that had kept Frank and Alice in the altered state, but that the curses had overloaded their magical cores. Once the cores were reset, the witch or wizard recovered. The Longbottoms had left the hospital healed two years ago.

There was also a picture of Hermione and Sirius Black, whom she had similarly healed from the coma he had been in since the night of the battle at the Ministry. The photo had been taken recently, and the two of them looked cozy with the sides of their heads pressed together, and although it didn’t show in the picture, they must have had their arms around each other. Snape suddenly felt very foolish and turned around to pick up his hookah from the table and head home.

She was right there will a glass of wine for him in a small jam jar. She clinked her glass with his and then kissed him lightly on the mouth and smiled.

“It’s tiny, but it’s home.”

“Do you have photos of all your patients?” he tried to keep the venom level low.

“Just the ones who are friends?” she said with an up-tick and a confused tone. Her eyes swept around the room and lit on the picture of herself and Black. She started to giggle. “My lovah, Sirrrrrius Blaaaaaaack,” she said in an affected voice as if she were reading an epic ballad. “You silly man,” she said and put her arms around his neck and kissed him with a huge smile on her face. He would have been offended and left except her voice was filled with affection, and she was so lovely kissing him. So instead, he reached around and started to unzip her dress.

She growled and downed her small glass of wine and smacked it down on the lamp table. He did the same and then started to ease the straps of her sleeveless dress down her arms. It fell to the floor to reveal a flesh coloured bra and white cotton knickers.

She stepped out of the dress and her shoes and then crossed her arms in front of herself in a bit of a panic. “I transfigured the dress from my work clothes right before I entered the party.”

He didn’t reveal that he had watched her.

“I didn’t transfigure these,” she said, and he realized she was talking about her underwear, as if he would be put-off by the sexiest vision he’d had in…years.

He swept her up in his arms and smothered her mouth to stop her from continuing the explanation. He placed his hands under her arse and drew her up so she wrapped her legs around his waist. He kept one hand supporting her and the other, he caressed her curls. He walked them to her bed and sank down as she started removing layers of his clothes. His robe hit the floor, and she stated furiously on the buttons of his shirt. He whispered an incantation, and they fell open. She whisked it away from his body, and left him with just a white vest tucked in to his trousers.

Then she was unbuckling him, and he was divesting her of her knickers, and they were kissing in the interim; all of it miraculously unselfconsciously, which was so far from his typical experience. He unhooked her bra and then stood up so his trousers fell, and she put her hand into his pants as he shucked the bra to the floor.
“Damn, Severus!” she exclaimed as she gripped his cock, which had been on alert since about fifteen minutes before he kissed her in the tent and was now straining almost painfully. “Aren’t I the lucky one?” she said as she pushed his boxers down and then straddled him on the bed. “Is this alright?” she said, as she rose slightly so her center was pressed against his cock.

“Just…wait a moment.” He caught his breath and eased her back on his lap where he could put his hand on her. She was hot and already slick. That was a good sign. “Contraception?” he said.

“Potion,” she gasped as he moved his fingers around, feeling for her clitoris. He found it, and she pitched her head back.

“Do you brew it yourself?”

“St. Mungo’s. Used it for years without issue. Severus, fuck!” she moaned as he moved his finger from the opening of her cunt, and then brought it forward again. He didn’t trust potions brewed by others, but he trusted her. He added brewing some for her to his mental to-do list before she rose again and sank down on his cock.

“Merlin, Granger…Hermione,” he moaned, as his world turned to hot liquid. He gripped her arse and started guiding her up and down on him. Her tits were small and perfect little peaches in his face, and he took one of them in his mouth, immediately causing its nipple to harden against his tongue.

This was lovely, and he could have done it for hours because she wasn’t hitting places that would make him lose control. They stayed like that for a while, kissing and exploring with their hands until he couldn’t stand it and quickly flipped her to her back and fucked her hard with five quick thrusts before he realized his mistake.

He pulled out before he exploded and ruined the whole thing. He hadn’t been with a woman for almost a year, and he hadn’t even properly wanked in at least a week. He silently cursed every student and the whole Hogwarts faculty for being so demanding on his time and patience at the end of the school year. Then he sent a silent thank you to Minerva for insisting he attend the event before he sunk down between her knees and spread her thighs with his hand.

He kissed down her belly, through her pretty, trimmed pubic hair and arrived at his destination by laying his tongue so it covered her to the top.

“Yes, Severus,” she said with a tone of absolute delight. “Yes, please!”

Not a problem. He explored her with his mouth and fingers She tasted complex and delicious, very much like the wine they had drunk. She was very responsive and seemed to quite enjoy it when he added an extra finger inside her but kept his tongue stationed above. Her moans became louder and louder as he found the right places inside and out.

“I’m going to come, Severus,” she said with that delightful laugh that had quickly become his favorite sound. “Oh! My! God!” she cried out as her muscles went slack around him. Her orgasm silenced her for a few seconds, and then she pulled him up.

“That was amazing, thank you,” she said, and he responded by kissing her and getting ready to finish himself, which he knew was imminent. He positioned himself and then thrust once, twice, three times, and that was all he had left as he plunged as deeply into her as he could and came long and hard with a week’s worth of pent up tension. He groaned throughout and then collapsed beside her on the bed.
She immediately covered him comfortingly with her body. He drew his want to clean her up because he was embarrassed at the volume he had left in her.

“You don’t need to do that,” she said. “I like it.” She reached for her knickers and slid them back on and settled in bed against him.

He put his wand away and wrapped his arms around her more tightly. She seemed completely relaxed, and it was difficult for him not to lose himself here, too. Her breathing became very even, and he felt her drift off on his chest. As gently as he could, he repositioned them so that she was on her side, and he was behind her. He started reaching for his clothes on his side of the bed.

This was his typical routine. In the summer, he would hit the pubs, trying to find a Muggle woman who wanted a summer fling with no commitment. Some years he was luckier than others, but if he found one that wanted more, he moved on immediately.

“Oh, stay,” she said sleepily and then turned around to face him. The bed clothes were gathered at her waist, and she looked gorgeous in the low light with her curls draped over her breasts. “There is a fantastic breakfast place down the street, and I was looking forward to not having to go alone in the morning.”

This was not to be the typical summer fling.

He dropped his boxers again and settled back into the bed. She reached for his right arm and pulled it around her settling it atop her breasts. She snuggled back against him. “Thank you,” she whispered, and he could feel her drifting off again.

This he hadn’t done in so many years, and never for a whole night. Two or three times he and Lily had drifted off in the late afternoon, and then they would wake with a start and throw on clothes so she wouldn’t be late for dinner at her house and he for his shift at the pub.

He settled in to find sleep. For his whole adult life he had fallen asleep the same way: imagining scenarios in which Lily and he had found a life together.

During that Dumbledore encounter when the old man had realized the depths of Snape’s feelings for Lily Evans, he had said something that had altered the scenarios and had given Snape the most agonizing atom of hope.

“Severus, after all this time?”

“Always.”

Dumbledore had looked at him as if he had never really known Snape, and Snape had looked back at him defiantly.

“Perhaps, Severus…”

“Perhaps what, Dumbledore?” He could suddenly feel his blood coursing through his veins though he didn’t know why.

The old wizard just shook his head dismissively, but Snape had never been able to let it go. *Perhaps what?*

Scenarios he had never allowed himself began to form. What if she had survived? It was both ridiculous and impossible, but that didn’t stop him. What if she was in Australia or Russia or South Africa or Brazil? What if something had happened. He now had at least ten possible scenes,
fleshed out in his mind that would end in not only their reunion but her realization that she had always loved him and still did.

He thought about this every night as he tried to sleep, both in his quarters in the dungeon and his attic bedroom on Spinner’s End.

That night, though, he drifted off with thoughts only of the witch in his arms.
Hermione awoke to light streaming in from her large window and kisses against her neck. “Mmmmmnm,” she smiled and stretched herself back against him. “Don’t stop.”

“Wasn’t planning to,” he murmured, and his voice again went right to her core and she felt herself pool hot liquid.

Oh, yes. She turned in the bed and pressed herself against him, his cock already hard on her lower belly. She took it in her hand for a moment before he rolled on top of her and reached down to pull off her knickers. She lifted her hips to help his effort. He dropped her underwear to the floor and felt her before he slid back in.

“Good morning,” she said with the smile she’d had since she had spotted him last night. She had hoped to see him, but she’d had a feeling that he would do anything to get out of that horror show. This had all worked out so perfectly, she was half convinced she would wake from a dream alone in her bed. It felt real, though, as kissed her and stroked her hair all the while moving in her languidly as fit Sunday morning. She sighed happily and started running her hands down his back to his lovely, firm arse and back up. She could feel his scars, badges of honour that they were. She felt herself falling quickly into a state that she suspected was inappropriately intimate for their hours long attachment.

She reached around his leg to cup his bollocks, which he responded to with a low moan and then slipped out of her and made his way down her body with his mouth.

She relaxed her head on the pillow and spread her legs for him as he went back to work. She had somehow landed a man who was a pussy eating enthusiast. It’s not that she had never experienced cunnilingus, but she had rarely done so without a clear air of ambivalence by the giver. She again wondered if she were dreaming. Please let me never wake up. His tongue remembered exactly the spot, and in moments she was trying to control herself from coming immediately. It felt too good, and she wanted to enjoy it for a few more moments.

He wound his fingers inside her, though, and that was it. She tried to relax completely and to feel every nerve. It was even better than last night.

“Oh, you darling man!” she laughed, and he started kissing his way back up her body. “I’m not sure what I did to deserve…” he had reached her mouth and covered it with his. She tasted her own richness, and she let her tongue roam all around his mouth.

“Hush, woman,” he said and then entered her again, filling her completely. Last night, she had been stunned and just let him achieve his own orgasm. This morning, she realized she was good for another and put her hand down.

He raised his upper body and placed one of her legs on his shoulder. “Show me,” he said, and that voice was almost enough by itself. She rubbed circles on and around her clitoris the way she did
when she was alone, and he placed his hand on top of hers, learning her routine.

“Yes,” she moaned. “Fuck me hard!”

“Are you close?” he gasped.”

“Yes!”

He drove in about four times before she came on his hand and cock. She felt him join her, and he moaned deep and low and then rolled off her and covered his face with his arm as he had done last night. She followed him again, wrapping herself around him, waiting for a sign he didn’t like it, but he wrapped his arm around her again. They were silent except for the sound of her kissing his chest gently as she continued to come down.

“Time?” she yawned.

He stretched to the side and his wand. “8:45.”

“That’s nice.” She snuggled back in.

“What are your plans for the day? Beyond breakfast.”

She wondered if he was trying to make an escape again, but she tried to keep that out of her voice. “Nothing, really. I start my night shift schedule at 6:00. You?”

“Home. I will be back at school in the morning.”

“Stores?” She yawned again.

“I would like to finish this week and leave Scotland until late August if possible.”

She nodded. His stomach growled. “Shower and then breakfast? I don’t think either of us ate much last night.”

He sat up in bed and reached for his clothes and wand, and she heard him cast a cleansing charm. She rose and stretched and then walked to her small linen closet in the corner of the room to find them both towels.

“I need the loo first,” he said, and she opened the bathroom door for him. She walked into the kitchen with the towel wrapped around her to feed Crooks, who looked at her with mild disgust.

“Hey, boy,” she said, ignoring his disdain. She opened a can of food, quickly cleaned his dry food bowl and water bowl, and left Crooks as happy as he was capable of being.

Severus had emerged from the bathroom and had wrapped a towel around his waist so she could use the facilities before their shower. She did so quickly, and then began to regulate the water before she opened the door.

She hadn’t planned on washing her hair, but it reeked of kebab and hookah, so she started on that while he used the soap, so the conditioner would have time to set. She had her eyes closed against the suds running into them which saved her the embarrassment of where to look. She wanted to inspect him thoroughly—she was already quite enamoured with the parts she had seen. She worked the shampoo into her thick hair and then rinsed it out under the spray and moved so he wouldn’t be cold. At least her time with Ron had left her some experience in shared shower etiquette.

She worked the conditioner into her hair standing at the back of the large tub that also served as the
shower. He had his back to her, and she could see the scars she had felt before. They were faded, but still obvious. Her own scars were on the front of her body—she hardly ever thought of them anymore, but being with a new person made her slightly self-conscious. They hadn’t established what kind of shower it was to be, but she couldn’t resist touching his shoulders and kissing him between his shoulder blades.

He turned and handed her the soap. He picked up the shampoo bottle. “May I?”

“Of course.” She washed herself with the soap and watched him work the shampoo into his hair and then stand under the spray to rinse it. She had noticed immediately after the war that he had become fastidious about his appearance, which had often been neglected during her student days. His hair was slightly shorter although still hit at his shoulders, but it was no longer greasy and unkempt.

She knew through deduction that he was forty-one. He was thin and fit compared to the average man his age, in her experience as a healer. He had scant body hair, save a dark thatch of pubic hair, and a line that rose to his belly. His cock was large using any measure, and she couldn’t resist taking it into her hand and cupping his bollocks with the other as the water streamed down her body and the suds pooled on the floor of the tub. He finished rinsing himself, and then in one continuous motion, removed her hands, walked her to the back wall. He placed her hands behind her, braced against the wall, and lowered himself. He propped one of her legs on the ledge of the tub before settling his mouth back on her cunt.

She leaned back against the wall and watched his head move up and down. He spread her out with his fingers and let his tongue explore her everywhere. She was on the edge very fast, and she wanted to come as quickly as possible in deference to his knees although he seemed content. She put one hand down to guide him slightly to the left, and then came as soon as he moved his tongue there.

“Oh, fuck, Severus!” she cried out, and put her hands gently on the side of his face to bring him back up and kissed him hungrily. “My turn,” she said, preparing to kneel, but he stopped her.

“Later,” he whispered and guided her head under the spray to wash out the conditioner. “If I don’t get that breakfast you promised soon, I will likely pass out.”

She laughed and finished her hair quickly. He stepped out and wrapped the towel around his waist again. She turned off the water and did a quick dry of her hair. She would have to wear it up as she didn’t want to have to take the time to go through the drying, straightening, and styling routine, but it was a small sacrifice. She wound it in a knot at the back of her head and left the bathroom to dress.

He was already in his trousers and white shirt. She found some clean underwear and a black and white striped cotton sheath dress that she pulled on. She added an unbuttoned white shirt and red canvas shoes with thick soles.

“Ready?” she said cheerily.

It was a beautiful July day, sunny and almost warm. She took his hand as they walked silently. They reached the little café at the end of two blocks. It was crowded with a short wait, but the hostess served them coffee immediately.

“Not tea?” she said, blowing on the steaming cup.

“I wouldn’t turn it down, but I drink it all school year. I like coffee in the summer, You?”
“I started drinking it for night-shifts and realized I preferred it.”

They both took it black. Before the end of their first cups, a waitress was shuffling them to a table in the corner.

“Know what you want?”

“Full-English, bangers,” he said.

She ordered American style pancakes and rashers; Sunday was the day she ate what she wanted.

The waitress refilled their coffee cups and hurried off.

They stared at each other. Hermione wondered who would start. She had so many questions. She had one ready to go when he spoke up.

“You have no photos of the Weasleys in your flat.”

“I have some, but they’re put away for now. I am persona non grata at the moment. Harry and I are fine. Charlie and George probably don’t care, but none of the rest of them are currently really speaking to me.”

“Because?”

“I suppose I ruined the plan to marry Ronald and have children at school at the same time as the potential cousins.”

“Were you planning to marry?”

“Not formally.”

It had certainly been understood though. She had broken up with Ron in May, right after Remembrance Day. She had realized after she had spent the evening with Snape at the Ministry bar while Ron worked the entire Grand Foyer that it was a bad sign she hadn’t enjoyed an evening as much since the last time she was with Snape at one of these things.

She had begun to feel as if this were the ultimate trade off: if she wanted to be a part of the family —and realistically it was currently her only option for one—she was only accepted under specific conditions. Her parents were oblivious and would remain so at least in the immediate future. She could agree to the plan, or she could be totally alone.

She would be permitted to work, but she must value her role as wife and mother above it. She must be willing to start a family by her mid-twenties. She would be acknowledged as smart and ambitious, but those weren’t qualities that were highly valued for women. In return, she would have love and security. She would be part of an established tribe who would always look after her.

If she had been completely besotted with Ron, she suspected she should have accepted the conditions. But she looked forward every quarter to drinking good wine in a corner with Professor Snape while they bantered about everything in and out of the room. He had brushed her arm while asking if she wanted another drink while he fetched his own, and she had felt an electric current shoot through her. She had broken up with Ron by the end of the week.

“I work three days on, three nights on, and then three days off. I have a full week off every three months. I was starting to dread my time off because I would have to spend time with my boyfriend. That…doesn’t bode well.” That was true as well, though certainly not the immediate catalyst for
the break up. She was quite sure that her breakfast companion was not ready to hear that she had altered the course of her life because he had touched her arm.

“Hmmmm,” he said without offering an opinion.

“What about you?” she asked as an opening question.

“I don’t have a boyfriend.”

She smirked at him, and just then, the waitress was there with the food. They dove in silently for a few moments.

“Maybe not a boyfriend, but you are clearly no novice.” She thought back to his face pressed between her legs and was immediately aroused again.

“Did you think I would be?” he said, sounding slightly offended.

“I had no idea. I suspected not,” She answered honestly. “So, no girlfriend, either?”

“No.”

“But someone…someones?”

“Not in a while.”

“Have you ever been in love?”

He looked up from his food. He brought the coffee cup to his lips and took a sip before replacing it carefully. “Have you?” he asked, and she thought about pressing him but was certain it would be a waste of time.

“I don’t think so. I loved Ron, but…not enough.”

“Is he the only?”

“He’s the only other man I’ve ever been with. Have you been with anyone long-term?”

“No.”

“Short term?”

He shrugged noncommittally.

“Anyone I know?”

“No.”

“You are very good, Severus. I want to finish my pancakes and rip your clothes off again,” she laughed at her own silliness. He tended to cause her say more than was prudent while revealing little himself. It was both frustrating and exciting.

“That sounds pleasant enough,” he said neutrally as he dipped his toast into his egg and scraped his plate with it.

“Pleasant, yes. So veddy pleasant,” she said in her queenie voice, which made him grin.

“You have a lovely smile, Severus.”
“Bollocks. My teeth are awful.”

“I’m not an idol flatterer.” She had eaten all her breakfast that she could. After a final scrape, his plate was empty. “Trade?”

“Are you sure?”

She switched their plates, and he quickly finished hers as well. The waitress laid their ticket on the table, and he reached for it against her protest. He pulled some quid from his pocket, and she wondered if he carried it regularly or if he had transfigured it silently.

They started the walk home and passed a small some of everything shop.

“Can we duck in here?” he asked.

“Sure.”

She suspected he was going to pick up condoms, as he seemed dubious about her hospital brewed potion, but he went straight for the cigarette counter and bought a red box from America. He pocketed them and then took her hand as they exited the shop.

“You may not smoke those in my flat,” she said.

“What? Are you serious?”

“Completely. I will not have my books, clothes, and hair smell like a pub, thank you very much.”

“I’m to be relegated to the steps?”

“Mid-way down at least. Don’t try me, Severus. I will chuck you straight out.”

“Yes, yes,” he sighed and followed her up the steps.

“Aren’t you going to smoke?”

“Not yet,” he said, and enveloped her from behind as she opened the door with her wand. Crooks was waiting once again.

“Hello, boy. You are not going to want to follow us.” The creature’s tail stood on end as he walked back into the kitchen.

She walked them to the bed and then flipped them around so she could push him down lightly onto the mattress. She straddled his body, and started slowly unbuttoning his shirt, kissing his chest and nipples as she went. She removed the shirt and then started on his belt and the fastenings of his trousers. His cock was already mostly hard, and she put down his bottom layers before she took it in her mouth, so she could feel him grow even harder. Ron had tended to give a running commentary during moments like these and offer enthusiastic suggestions. She appreciated the quiet, but she missed the feedback. She looked up at him after she took his bollocks into her hand and started massaging them. His head was pitched back. She took his whole length into her mouth and let her throat relax so she could accommodate him. He gave a loud groan.

“Hermione,” he gasped. “Come up here; I want to see you.” She released him and crawled up. He reached under her skirt, so she let the over-shirt fall off and then pulled her dress over her head. They took a moment to remove their shoes and her knickers, and then he brought her back on top of him, so she was straddling him again, and she lowered herself onto his cock.
“Yes,” he hissed. “Ride me.”

She did, starting slowly. He brought her down close to him and unhooked her bra and took it off and then kept one hand on her hips and another on one breast and then the other. They looked at each other in the eyes throughout. She felt so at home, as if she had reached the end of a journey and struggle, and that everything was now going to be fine.

Hermione had worked nonstop since the end of the war. She had immediately volunteered at St. Mungo’s with all the injured, and had been accepted by September into the healer training program. She had been allowed to skip her NEWT year, which made her try even harder to prove she belonged there. She had earned full healer credentials by October 1998.

She had worked fifteen hour days, learning all aspects of the profession, and had been drawn to the serious cases on the ward with the Longbottoms, Professor Lockhart, and Sirius Black. She had requested to be assigned that ward as soon as her training was complete, and began spending every moment she could researching possible treatments for them. Through study and observation, she began to suspect that it wasn’t the initial event that had caused them to reach the altered state, but something interfering with their magical cores. By the summer of 1999, she began experimental treatment on Professor Lockhart, who was the least damaged. By mid-July, she had restored him to his former state.

It took a few weeks, but he regained the memories of not just his life before that day in the Chamber of Secrets, but also his time in the hospital. He could recall details that only he could and was his old, obnoxious self by the time he left at the end of July.

By the end of August, she had used the treatments on all the patients in the ward. Frank and Alice went home to Neville and Augusta, and Sirius moved back in to Grimmauld Place with Harry and Ron.

Ginny had moved in after she finished school; the wedding was that summer. People moved in and out of the Black house all the time. Luna stayed there when she was in town, Seamus and Dean were there off and on. Neville stayed frequently as the joy of having three concerned and extremely involved parents began to wear thin.

Hermione became the chief healer for the most difficult cases. She studied Muggle medical text books and read every magical case-study and historical literature she could find. Healing was her life. She stayed at Grimmauld Place for eighteen months, but she couldn’t stand the constant activity. She found the attic studio and moved just before Christmas 1999. Ron though she was being ridiculous and a killjoy, but she and Crooks were greatly relieved.

Ron became an Auror and played semi-professional quidditch and put up with her career, assuming that in a few years she would take a sabbatical and start a family with him. Harry and Ginny were certainly headed down that path.

Hermione was challenged at work and looked forward to swiping her wand at the entrance panel every day. It was enough, she had decided. She could be happy doing this her whole life. She realized she was marking her ridiculous war hero commitments down on her date book, not because she had any love for the Ministry and the responsibilities her status brought, but that her friend Professor Snape made her laugh more in two hours than she did in the interim months.

So here he was in her bed this July Sunday, his face portraying deep, satisfying pleasure as she rose and fell with his hands on her hips and breasts. She realized that this is what she wanted for good. That he would make her happy in and out of her bed. That this relationship of fourteen hours was what she had wanted since she had any understanding of such things.
She lowered her body so it was pressed against his below and wrapped her arms around him and kissed him tenderly on the side of his face. “Please, Severus, please,” she whispered in his ear.

“All right,” he said back.

Love me. It rang freely in her head and she practically had to seal her mouth shut to prevent it from escaping.

“This! All of this!” She gasped.

He raised his head to look at her, and she silently pleaded with him to feel the same way. He put his arms around her middle back and rolled them forcefully so he was on top, and then dove in to kiss her mouth and then the side of her face and neck. He gripped her hand and made love to her, which was different than anything she had experienced before.

He murmured her name again and again as they moved. Hermione, Hermione, Hermione, and as they both reached the top of the climb, he put his hand down and sent her over, following right with her. She had tears that had been welling up and they spilled over as he collapsed on top of her instead of sliding immediately off. He continued to kiss her and whisper her name in her ear before he finally disentangled, rolled over, and sat up in bed.

“You’re sure I can’t smoke in here?” he said, which made her laugh, relieved that he had not sneaked into her head.

“Absolutely not! To the stairs with you, and you had better dress first, as the neighbors are likely working in the garden.”

He grumbled loudly as he dressed, but his face betrayed him as more relaxed and content than she had ever seen him. She put her underwear and dress back on and switched on the coffee pot while he visited the loo.

She followed him out the door with their coffee mugs, and he settled on a step half-way down the staircase before he beat the box of cigarettes against the heel of his hand. Crooks had come out with them, and he was walking up and down the stairs rubbing him massive tail against them each time he passed. Severus removed the plastic from the box before he took out a cigarette, checked for on-lookers, and lit it in his mouth with his wand. He inhaled deeply and offered it to her.

“No thanks.”

He drank from the mug. “Good coffee.”

“Thanks. The secret is measuring.”

“For many things.”

They sat quietly with their sides pressed against each other, knees up with their feet resting on the next step. He finished his smoke and crushed it, placing the butt beside him.

“Three night shifts?”

“Yes.”

“Sunday night, Monday night, Tuesday night,” he recited.

“Yes.”
“Will you sleep all day Wednesday?”

“I try not to. It’s easier to get back on day schedule if I don’t.”

“You go back to days..?”

“Sunday.”

“I’ll be back Wednesday,” he said.

“Yes?”

“Yes. Every dwelling needs a convenient and comfortable outdoor space. We’ll expand the landing…” he indicated the top of the cement staircase, “add a table and chairs, three or four strings of lights. Some plants. Maybe a chaise lounge. It would be nice to finish out here occasionally, so I could smoke without having to dress.”

“You are going to be naked on my new porch?”

“What better use for concealment charms? I assume your landlord wouldn’t approve of any of it.”

“No. Are you moving in?”

“No, woman. I have a house. I’ll be here on days off.”

“I have a week off in nine days.”

“I leave for Spain on the sixteenth.”

“That sounds like heaven.”

“You could join me.” He didn’t look at her as he spoke. He was smoking and staring into the next yard. She pressed against his side.

“Yes, I think I would like to.” She took his mug in for a refill, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw him run his hand down Crooks from head to tail as the creature descended the stairs again.
They returned from Galicia and settled into a routine. At first, they stayed apart while Hermione was working. Then Severus started to stay at her flat after day shifts, leaving for home when she left for work at five-thirty in the morning. By mid-August, Severus was only sleeping at his house during the three night-shift days.

He had completed the porch project during the days off at the very beginning, and they spent most of their time in the little concealed space. She had appalling taste in music—a sacrilege in his opinion—so he was slowly introducing her to the canon, starting slowly with accessible choices before he moved on to the more complex.

She had good food instincts though not much practical experience as a cook, so they were working through that, too, preparing meals together and learning each other’s tastes.

They had rented a tiny cottage in Spain. They had walked everywhere and had shopped for fresh ingredients every day to prepare in the little outdoors kitchen which featured an open-fire cooker. They adapted to the Spanish schedule easily, spending all afternoon in bed, reading and not reading, and then walking to town in the evenings to see the people and sites.

The bed in the cottage was small, not quite standard-sized. They had each brought a library with them, but she kept nicking from his stack.

“Oooooooh, I’ve wanted to read this.” She pulled an old treatise on Goblin Rebellion on 1247. “It’s out of print and un-lendable, and I haven’t had the time to sit at the library.”

“Be careful with it,” he admonished her halfheartedly.

“Oh course!” She pecked his mouth with hers and settled in to the bottom corner of the bed, against the wall. He took the top with the headboard for back support, and they read for hours. Every twenty pages or so, she would stop to express her thoughts on whatever she was reading. She tended to chatter more than he ever thought would be agreeable to him in a companion, but he shocked himself by finding it rather comforting.

The first night they had met, he had been three drinks in before she had arrived at the event, and it had loosened his tongue beyond what he thought was appropriate behaviour. Somehow she had not found it off-putting, nor did she seem to mind his more reserved true self. So she would read and chat, and he would read and listen, and perhaps offer a syllable or two in response or perhaps he would tune her out and continue reading his own book. She would figure this out eventually, and she would laugh and settle back into her own reading.

After a while, she would start caressing his foot, tucked in at her hip or resting at her upper arm.
She would rub slow circles on his ankle or calf, working her hand gradually to his knee and then beyond. Or perhaps he would be more direct and take the book from her hands before he settled his face between her legs.

It had been the best seven consecutive days in his life—at least in the last twenty-five years. He was fearful that just like that summer, this one would end and never be repeated.

He thought of his summer with Lily more than ever as he worked on the house in Cokeworth. Spinner’s End had been a blight twenty years before, but it was emerging from the ashes. It was a narrow, brick-paved lane, with hovels piled against each other. The Snape residence had been the very worst on the block, shabbier and darker. The neighbors used to sneer over the walls that separated the gardens. Young Severus had been baffled by this. They had outdoor privies, too, and often drunken patriarchs, as well. The downstairs held a tiny, dark sitting room, and a slightly larger kitchen with the first floor’s only window. Upstairs there was his parents’ bedroom and a rickety staircase that led to his little attic room.

He started his renovations there, keeping the spirit of the original and just updating and improving. He replaced the mattress and chose higher-quality bedding. He refinished the wood and repainted the walls. He added real curtains and replaced the rug but found one similarly rustic in style. He would not bring Hermione here. Her flat was their space, not this, but he was almost as happy here alone that summer on nights she worked than he had been when he lay there with Lily. He would smoke and listen to his old records and ruminate on his life.

He was still incredulous that Lily was ever there at all. That night on the commons when he spotted her with her sister, he had almost gone home, afraid she would snub him and ruin his rare night off from the pub. Instead, she had pleaded with him via glance to rescue her from being alone in the crowd. Instead, she had pleaded with him via glance to rescue her from being alone in the crowd.

He had hardly spoken to her since the summer before, and even that had been rather perfunctory. They had no longer played at the park at age fourteen, and he had been taken under the wing—to his great shock—of a group of older kids. He had spent summer nights at Joy’s house while her mum was at working the night shift in the hospital laundry. He failed miserably at being anything other than a fourteen-year-old sexual naïf. She had been patient, though, instructing him how to pleasure her, and not ridiculing him for coming as soon as they tried intercourse.

He had been chuffed to return to school. His fellow Slytherins as a group were so privileged. They had traveled, had eaten the best meals, wore the finest robes, but no one in his class had experienced what he had that summer, and he doubted if any of them could survive in Cokeworth with his parents and his house. He didn’t brag about his conquest, but having had it had allowed him to sail through the year a head above the rest.

He saw Lily frequently during their fourth year; they had several classes together. She always acknowledged him, but it had become cursory, and he suspected it would end soon. Their lives in both homes were different. Gryffindor seemed like it was much less cut-throat than Slytherin, and while her family was far from wealthy, she had a mother who prepared food every day for the family, and a father who didn’t spend more time at the pub than he did at home.

Therefore, it was nothing short of miraculous that she stood next to him all night, drinking and smoking with him. He was shocked when she walked with him and held his hand. It had emboldened him to attempt to kiss her, convinced she would politely decline but equally convinced he would hate himself if he didn’t at least try.

She had kissed him, though, thoroughly and passionately. She had ground herself against his
embarrassingly obvious cock. She had seemed as aroused as he did although he doubted that was possible.

And the next day, she had willingly…eagerly gone home with him, past his poor, silent mum, up the stairs to his attic. He had tried so hard to appear calm. He had put on the Led Zeppelin record and smoked on the bed, but he was quite visibly shaking. If she hadn’t been so self-possessed, they would have never done anything.

And just talking to her would have been enough. Discovering that she felt she had to hide her intelligence to fully be accepted into Gryffindor culture. She told him how insecure she was coming from their town. He didn’t have it easy in the dungeon, but the Gryffindor Tower sounded so much worse.

But they didn’t just talk. They became champion level snoggers. She let him remove their clothes. She let him see and touch her everywhere. She had the same basic equipment that Joy had, of course, but there were so many differences as well. He knew this with blokes in the communal showers at school, but he could fully explore her in daylight.

She seemed to love his hands and mouth on her, and wanted to examine him as well. He wouldn’t have believed it possible if someone had told him at the end of fourth year what his summer would entail. It had made him hope, though, and that was truly crushing. He had finished that summer thinking that his whole life could be that wonderful—ridiculous, deluded fool that he was.

Instead it had been nearly twenty-five years of never ending misery. The last time he was with Lily, his father had come home drunk while they were in the act. Snape just managed to get Lily out of there before Toby burst through the door and beat him senseless. He had a broken nose, two black eyes, and broken ribs when he returned to school a few hours early, going straight to Madam Pomfrey for healing before the rest of the school arrived and witnessed his humiliation.

He had bided his time for the second two terms, wishing every day summer would arrive, and he could try to resume with Lily. They still didn’t speak or even think of risking meeting during school, but they looked at each other across the Great Hall and in class.

He studied harder those terms than he ever had. If he were going to be worthy enough to spend his life with her, he would have to have an honorable career. OWLS were looming, and he was determined to run the table with marks of Outstanding.

He almost made it. He had mostly ignored the idiotic Gryffindors that tried to bother him, but he had seen James Potter staring at him several times in the last few weeks when Severus and Lily were had exchanged smiles in Potions or at meals. Black had started in on him as soon as Severus had written the last word of his Defense OWL.

He had stayed up most of the night reading his notes and writing practice responses. He had planned to stay awake until the exam and then collapse afterward, but at some point, he had fallen asleep on his book. He awoke way too late with no time to shower, and in one of the most idiotic acts of his life, he had thrown his robe on over just his underwear, his shabbiest pair at that.

And then the inevitable humiliation came because it just had to, and he could not have reacted worse, and he ruined the only good aspect of his life.

He earned all Os on his OWLs except for Divination, and who the hell cared about that anyway? But he was miserable then and for the last two years of school. He made poor choice after bad decision, which had culminated in Lily’s death and Snape being stuck in a job he hated and a life he despised.
He was determined to live through the war and fulfill his mission. His inner life, in which he was somewhere in the world working happily with Lily by his side and in his bed—he had multiple story lines fully fleshed out in his head he could access in a second—prevented him from taking his life several times, but especially that last awful year.

After the defeat of the Dark Lord, he had been determined to live the rest of his life on his own terms, and then he found himself still stuck in the Hogwarts rut during the year and trying to piece together a life in this hovel, augmented with travel and strange women in the summer. It was so pathetic he tried not to think of it. It made him realize he probably would have never had that life with Lily under any circumstances anyway. He was neither worthy nor capable. And then…

The record ended on the turntable, and he smoked the end of the cigarette, tamped it out on his mother’s ubiquitous ashtray, and rolled off the bed with a smile that had become immutable on his face. This was the last night of Hermione’s three-night swing. Tomorrow morning, he was going to meet her for breakfast, and then they were headed southwest for a two-day last hurrah at the shore before he had to report back to school.

It was clear by mid-September that their plan to see each other only when their days off aligned would not work. He had spent too many years alone; he was finished with that. It made his whole existence happier when they ate meals together and slept in the same bed. They resumed their summer schedule of only being apart on night-shifts, but instead of living in Hermione’s flat, they spent most nights in Severus’s quarters in the dungeon.

He would sit at the high table for meals but wait and eat with her later. Hermione seemed to find it a pleasant enough place to spend her days off, especially when the weather was terrible outside. She could research in his quarters or office, and access to lab space was ideal.

He was teaching fourth year potions one afternoon in October when Crooks sauntered into the classroom from Snape’s office door that he had left open just a crack. Snape had been in the middle of chastising a whole table for improper stirring cadence when the beast leaped to his desk and rubbed against Snape’s torso with his nose in the air. He then swished his tail insistently in front of Snape’s face.

The professor took his hand and ran it from rump to tip of the tail. Satisfied, Crooks jumped down from the table and made rounds up and down the stairs inspecting each aisle before returning to the office haughtily.

The students looked at their professor with mouths agape, but he just continued with the lesson. They seemed to be waiting for him to lose his temper with the cat or with them. They were correct that he was trying to keep under control; he was using all his power not to break out in a wide grin.

Hermione didn’t make a show of herself when she was at school, and every one of his colleagues asked what had happened to him over the summer. Was he wearing a glamour? Had he perfected a youth potion? HAD HE MET SOMEONE?

He answered honestly. No, he hadn’t met anyone. Minerva finally called him into her office.

“You cannot possibly be reprimanding me for being too happy,” he said and tried to resurrect his old, faithful, dour expression but failed.

“I’m not reprimanding you, I want to know who it is, so I can thank her…or him.”
Dumbledore’s portrait had snorted at that.

“It is not a secret, Minerva, but I will not sit here and listen to a lecture on why I am not good enough for her.”

“Silly boy, if anything she isn’t good enough for you. Now, tell me who it is.”

He let out a sigh of the truly put upon. “Hermione Granger.”

Minerva’s eyes had become wide for a fraction for a second before she retained her former expression.

“Oh, Severus, what joyous news,” the old wizard behind her head said from his frame.

“Yes. Indeed it is.” There appeared to be a tear collecting in the Headmistress’s left eye. “That is truly wonderful, Professor Snape. Please let Ms. Granger know she is welcome here any time.”

“I thought I saw her kneazle the other day,” Dumbledore said.

“Crookshanks is here? I must pay a call,” Minerva said.

Severus gave her a halfhearted withering look. He returned to his quarters after a third of a glass of wine and enough time put in at dinner in the Great Hall. He hoped the snakes would save their crises for night-shift evenings and practically bounded down to the dungeon.

She was waiting there for him with their dinners under metal covers and a bottle of red wine she had picked up in town.

“Crooks, your friend Minerva requested a meeting,” Severus said as he grasped Hermione by the waist and brought her close to him. She was wearing her work robes and looked weary, but kissed him enthusiastically.

He wasn’t as hungry for dinner as he had been just a few minutes ago.

The old cat sauntered out, and Severus hit a stasis charm on the dinner before leading Hermione to the couch in the sitting room and removing her outer robe.

She wore cotton medical trousers and a matching top that could be laundered or thrown away if she was bled on or worse, but they were clean that evening—not that it would have stopped him. He left the top on for now and pulled off her bottom layers, trousers and knickers in one go. He settled her on the couch, so she was reclined on the side with her back supported. She gazed at him with a huge smile, and let him sink to the floor before her without comment.

He placed one of her legs draping over the couch, leaving her open to him and dove in. She moaned appreciatively. She never seemed to grasp that this was one of his favorite activities and not a chore.

She was wet after just a few passes with his tongue and fingers, and he decided to make this a spectacle rather than a warm-up. He swirled his tongue around her little clitoris and then started kissing her lightly all around as he followed up with his fingers. She guessed his intentions and relaxed her whole body, caressing his head when she could reach it, and sighing happily throughout.

It had become his favorite piece of geography, and he explored the whole area thoroughly letting his tongue linger outside and then probing deeper, avoiding places that would send her over too
quickly. Her sighs turned to moans, so he began to play to the crescendo, each moment going a bit closer to reaching his goal. When he was nearing the final act, he heard soft feet behind him, and turned his head a quarter to see Crooks looking utterly disgusted and his cat companion Minerva as horrified as a cat face can portray. Minnie turned immediately and bolted back out, but Crooks raised the cat equivalent of an eyebrow, and sauntered away slowly.

“Severus?” Hermione panted, seemingly unaware of their momentary visitors.

“Sorry,” he said and conducted the closing movement with gusto. Her whole lower half shook and she practically screamed as she came on his mouth and fingers. He planted soft kisses on her thighs while she recovered. After a few moments, she pulled him up and ravished him with kisses.

“Please tell me Crooks was alone,” she whispered.

“Uh…”

“Don’t tell me; don’t tell me,” she said as she was digging through his robes to release his insistent cock.

“I won’t say a word.”

She had found it and was flipping them around so she could sit on him and impale herself on his lap. She sank down on him, and his world went warm and fuzzy and safe. She moved up and down while nuzzling her face into his neck whispering thank you, thank you, thank you.

He had been fairly for gone before the feline interruption, and he found himself right back there. After a few minutes of her riding him, he flipped her over and drove in. She seemed satisfied from her orgasm and concentrated on his, so he allowed himself to just pursue his own climax. They had not been together in three days, and he had tried to hold off on wanking so this would be something spectacular. He felt himself hurtling toward it and settled into it, wanting to enjoy every cell in his body as he filled her with his release.

“Oh fuck, Hermione, Witch, oh, fuck me.” He whispered incoherently, and he heard that delightful giggle.

Hermione

Every mid-December since the war there had been a reception and dinner honoring the Order of the Phoenix at the Ministry. It was always the worst night of the worst week, when she was ready for a break from work. Professor Snape and the other Hogwarts faculty were in the middle of exams, and almost no one wanted another commitment.

She had just finished a night-shift stretch and had forced herself to stay awake all day, looking forward to returning to the dungeon and sleeping until at least lunch the next day, feeling a bit sorry for Severus and his eight o’clock breakfast in the Great Hall, but not that sorry.

She had worked steadily at the hospital on witches and wizards whose injuries and conditions had affected their magic. There had been a steady stream of cases, both from those who had been injured recently and years in the past. She was just starting to study the treatment of squibs, and had been working with some newborns with the condition recently.
The day of the Order party, she showered at her flat and then put on deep olive robes she hadn’t chosen specifically in honour of her Slytherin boyfriend, but she would be happy to go with it. The robes were long enough that she wore her worn-in Converse instead of dress shoes. Her hair looked better than she could have hoped, long, thick, and curly, but not frizzy. She spent and extra moment with her makeup and was satisfied with the results.

Harry had flooed her at the hospital the day before asking if she would like to meet him for a drink before the dinner began. Ginny was out of town with her quidditch team, so Hermione could avoid that bit of awkwardness though she was sure there would be Weasleys aplenty.

She apparated from the bottom of her staircase to the point at the Ministry, and entered the foyer, spotting Harry right off. Sirius was at his side. Oh lovely.

Severus and Sirius had managed to be civil in each other’s presence at these things, largely by ignoring the other. She could only imagine the reaction, though, when Severus arrived with the rest of the Hogwarts’ faculty to find her cozying up to Sirius Black.

Harry and Sirius waved her over to the bar and greeted her with embraces.

“Hermione, you look ravishing,” Sirius said and signaled the bartender over.

“Oh, thanks,” she said, a bit embarrassed by his gaze.

“What will you have?” the little elf behind the bar squeaked.

“I’ll take a glass of red,” she said. The wine selection at the Ministry bar tended to be perfunctory.

The Grand Foyer was still mostly filled with people leaving from work.

“Did you come straight from the office?” she asked Harry, who worked as an Auror in the building.

“Yeah. They let me out early for this, but I just stayed.”

“As a wizard of leisure, my schedule was open,” Sirius added.

Before his recovery, Sirius was considered terminal. Harry had been appointed his executor and had been awarded legal rights to his house and property. Ginny had moved in full-time after their wedding, which was about a month before Hermione had restored Sirius.

Sirius had kept the house in Harry’s name and spent his time finding causes in which to invest his family’s money. His top investment priority were organizations that his parents would find appalling. He seemed happy to share his house with Harry, Ginny, Ron, and whoever else needed a place to stay.

Hermione had always liked Sirius although he had exasperated her before his injury. He brought out the absolute worst judgement in Harry and Ron and made her job as protector of the common sense significantly more difficult. But she had realized that being imprisoned all those years had left him not much older than they were emotionally. She’d had a bit of a crush on him when she was fifteen and starting to realise what the fuss was about. She’d had her first sexual dream that summer at Grimmauld Place. Sirius had seduced her in the library, of course, and then had stolen her away to his room where he had taken her passionately in his bed.

She had woken panting and aching, and she had put a tentative hand in her knickers as Ginny slept in the next bed, thankfully with her back to Hermione. It had only taken a few swirls around a spot she was only vaguely aware of until that morning before she had given herself an object lesson of
exactly what the fuss was about. She had skulked quietly red-faced to the shower and stood under the spray before she let her face settle into a wide smile. *Well, that answers some questions.*

Those feelings of fancy had bubbled up a little bit after she had helped restore Sirius. He was still very good looking, better every day after his recovery, and he was as charming and flirtatious as he had been when she was a teenager. She had already found a companion, though, in Severus at these ghastly parties, and Sirius was not a rival there. He did look quite handsome that night in his more casual than was appropriate robes.

The elf brought Hermione her wine, and she clinked glasses with the men before she took a sustaining drink.

“So…” Harry started. “Tell us about your boyfriend.”

Sirius gave him a withering look.

“Oy, I am tired of listening to the gossip; I want to hear it from her.”

“What have you heard?” Hermione asked.

“That you’re practically living in the dungeon with Snape.”

“I practically live at the hospital, you know that.”

“So you’re not…”

She sighed. “He can’t leave during the week. We spend our weekends off here at my flat. Is that what you want to know?”

“How…how did you…how are you in a relationship with Snape?”

“Harry isn’t very observant,” Sirius commented.

“Yeah, I saw you standing with him at these things. I thought you were doing one for the team and keeping him occupied.”

“Oh, Harry, really!” she chided him.

“You were with Ron all that time.”

“Is that what this chiefly concerns? That I am not with Ron any longer? And let me assure you there was no overlap, Harry Potter, you can just…” Hermione felt the colour rise in her cheeks.

“No, Hermione, of course not.” Harry sighed. “And it’s not about you breaking up with Ron. Not for me. I knew that you two probably wouldn’t last. I can’t speak for Molly and Ginny, but that’s not what it is for me. I admire the man, but…”

“If you took the time to really get to know him, you might understand better.”

“I say if Hermione is happy with Snape, who are we to question it?” Sirius spoke up. “That being said if the git ever hurts you…”

She saw Severus enter the foyer with the Headmistress. Hermione blushed immediately. She was still unable to look Professor McGonagall in the eye since the cat incident. “There he is. If you want to speak to him later, please find us. I don’t want to ambush him right now.” She took her drink and gave Harry and Sirius a parting look. *Don’t try me, gentlemen.*
Severus’s eyes were narrow as she approached, but she ignored it and brushed his mouth with a kiss. “I didn’t know Sirius would be here. I thought I was just meeting Harry.”

“How was it?” he said levelly. The waiter elves had begun to bring drinks around on trays and Severus grabbed a glass of fire whiskey. The Grand Foyer looked ridiculous as every bough of holly, red ribbon and sprig of mistletoe in the country had apparently been commissioned to jolly the place up.

“It was fine. Sirius was surprisingly mature.”

Severus snorted.

“I’m not suggesting that you will be best mates,” she assured him. “Civility is sufficient.”

“You look beautiful,” he said. “Is that civil enough?”

“Quite.”

Sirius and Severus avoided each other for the rest of the evening, but Harry shook his hand on the way out and wished him a happy Christmas.

Severus had only two more days of classes before his holidays began, so he was in a light enough mood to be reasonably cordial.

Hermione was on a work stint until Christmas Day when she would be off for a week. He split his time between Cokeworth and her London flat as they had in summer. When she returned from her last night-shift at six on Christmas morning, she could see the lights as soon as she entered the gate. She started up the stairs, still physically tired but with a lighter spirit.

Severus had decorated the porch with Christmas lights and had placed a small, lit tree in the corner. The table was steaming with coffee and breakfast, and the whole space was warmed to be comfortable. Severus looked sleepy but happy in a tight black jumper, denims and worn black Converse low-tops.

“Happy Christmas,” he said and kissed her mouth lightly.

“Happy Christmas, Severus.” She took a cup of coffee from him and sunk into one of the chairs. It was her first Christmas not spent at the Burrow since the year in Godric’s Hollow. She wasn’t missing the crowd, but being without her parents was hard. She wrapped her colourful scarf around her neck. It had been a quiet night at the hospital. She was treating a newborn whose magic output was registering at squib levels. She had been working with a treatment for it for months, and the baby, a sweet girl named Camille, was showing signs of progress. Her family was taking her home for the week to resume treatment when Hermione returned to work.

She was still in her hospital gear; the comfortable cotton trousers had become her favorite apparel anyway. Her hair was in two plaits tied with plaid Christmas ribbon. Severus took one of the plaits in his fingers and tugged lightly. “Are you hungry?”

“Starving. This looks delicious.”

He let her sink back into the chair with the coffee while he dished up her plate.

“It’s awfully early, Severus. When did you wake up?”

“I never slept. We can stay in bed all day.”
She smiled at him over her mug. Breakfast, bath, bed, sounded like the best Christmas in years. She reached into her worn bag that she toted back and forth to work and pulled out his prezzies she had wrapped during the quiet hours that usually accompanied the night-shift.

The first was a better bottle of red wine than they had ever drunk together. She had paid way too much for it, but he had everything he needed, really, and she wanted to indulge him. She had also bought a bottle of way too expensive whiskey she had saved for his birthday in a couple weeks.

The wine was wrapped in festive paper, and the shape gave its contents away. “Oooh, I hope it’s a new cauldron,” he said eagerly, making her giggle. He unwrapped the bottle and his eyes popped a little before he maintained his studied composure. “That’s rather a treat, Miss Granger.”

“Bought with the assumption that you will share,” she said and handed him the next box, a set of appealingly bohemian wine glasses. They used the school issued goblets in the dungeon, and she thought he could use some of his own. He liked those as well.

“The last is rather silly, but I couldn’t resist,” she said, and handed him a small bundle.

He unwrapped it carefully and held it out. It was a vintage Led Zepelin concert t-shirt from their 1975 tour. It had a quote on the back she had read and made her think of her time with him in the last few months:

And so today,

My world it smiles,

Your hand in mine,

We walk the miles.

Thanks to you,

It will be done,

For you to me

Are the only one.

His eyes changed again, but this time she couldn’t read the thoughts behind them as she had with the wine.

“You don’t have to…” she started apologizing for the gift. His face indicated that she had made a misstep.

“No.” His face shifted and he smiled. “Thank you, Hermione,” he said. He placed it on the table in front of him and ran his fingers over it. “I would have committed unspeakable acts to have had it when I was fifteen,” he said and she smiled broadly. He reached under the tree for a parcel he had concealed. It was unwrapped and she gasped as he handed it over.

The fine leather of the messenger bag was as soft as kitten’s fur on her fingers. “Oh, Severus.”

“You certainly needed a new one. Look inside.”

She opened the bag. There was an artisan quality coffee mug in deep rust. She took it out and beamed at him. There was a small cloth at the bottom of the bag. She held it in her hand and slowly unwrapped the object inside. It was a single, delicate pearl on a platinum chain. It was the
most elegant and beautiful piece of jewelry she had ever owned. She bounded towards him, 
embracing him and then kissing his mouth.

“Thank you, Severus, for all of it! Put the necklace on me?”

He reached around and secured the clasp. “Thank you. Now, let’s eat and then retire.”

She could think of no better plan.

**Severus**

The end of the school year in late June 2002 also marked a year he had been together with Hermione. They scheduled a two-week holiday to Spain, and he experienced the most decadent fortnight of his life.

He returned to the reality of the house in Cokeworth that still only had his attic room in any sort of presentable stage. He vowed to be more productive this summer. This was aided by Hermione working extra shifts at the hospital to make up for her time off.

She had urged him to let her assist him in his renovations to the place, but he had refused. She was not a part of his Cokeworth world. She had taken possession of the rest of his life, but not that.

He had packed away his Lily memories, both real and fantasy. Cokeworth was the only place he took them out now, and he was unwilling to give them up entirely. He decided to tackle the sitting room and kitchen that summer. The door to his parents’ bedroom had been closed for twenty years now, and he had no desire to open it yet.

He purchased new Muggle appliances for the kitchen, hoping they would provide some inspiration, and that seemed to do the trick. He replaced the floor and counter-tops, painted the cupboards, woodwork, and walls, and had curtains made. It gave him the motivation to update the sitting room.

By the time Hermione was finished with her work marathon in early August, Severus had put in enough time to assuage a year’s worth of guilt. He camped out on her porch for the whole afternoon of her last day shift, listening to music, nursing a scotch, and smoking Marlboro reds. He had the makings for a simple dinner in the kitchen and then planned to be in bed with her for about twelve hours.

He heard the gate open about fifteen minutes after he expected her and saw the top of her head as she started trudging up the stairs. She had pinned her braids to her head, as it was one of the hottest days of the year. She looked up to smile at him, and he saw immediately that her face was extensively bruised.

“What happened to you?” he jumped from the chair and met her half-way down the stairs.

“I’m fine.” She was slightly slumped with her bag slung across one shoulder. She was always tired after a long stint of work.

“You are NOT fine.” He removed her bag and placed it at the top of the stairs and sat her down immediately on the concrete steps to examine her face. Her nose was swollen, and she had two black eyes with a cut above her left eyebrow.
“Who did this to you?”

“An eight-year-old.” She sighed. “He fell off a broom three days ago. His parents should have never let him…but they feel terrible. Anyway, he was unconscious for the first two days as we treated his head injury, and of course his core is damaged and needs to be reset, but he’s been difficult to control since he regained consciousness. Physically, he’s fine. They’re going to take him home while I’m off, and then I will try again when I return in three days. I hope his parents survive until then. I got on the wrong side of his elbow.”

That was clearly an understatement. He was examining the swollen, discoloured flesh around her eye sockets while she spoke. The gash above her eyebrow was closed, but the bruising around her left eye extended all the way up.

“Why didn’t they heal you at the hospital?” he said with incredulity mixed with anger.

“They did, Severus. You should have seen me before.”

“They used healing salve on you?”

“Yes. It was completely black and blue before.”

He grabbed her bag and then took her hand and led her into the flat and to the kitchen. She had two tall stools on the opposite side of the counter, and he had her sit on one while he poured her a short scotch over ice.

“Drink this and when you are not drinking, rest it on your left eye. I will be right back.”

He went for a box he kept under her bed that had his stash of household potions. He had put it there the same weekend he had brought a spare toothbrush for the bathroom and several changes of underwear, socks, and t-shirts for his assigned drawer. He brought the box back to the kitchen area and laid it on the counter.

“How much pain are you in?”

“A little. Not much.”

He brought a phial out and put two drops in her drink. He dug in the bottom for his bruise treatment.

“Take a few more sips before I begin. It shouldn’t hurt much, but it looks terribly tender.”

She obliged with the scotch and looked more exhausted than ever.

“I worked in the garden today. The squash and tomatoes are finally ready to eat, and I bought a chicken breast to split. If you are especially good, there is a berry tart as well,” he chatted at her, hoping to keep her mind off the pain.

She leaned over in her stool and kissed his mouth gently. “Thank you, Severus.”

“Don’t mention it. I plan to heal you, put you in the bath, and then take you to bed for the foreseeable future.

“That sounds terribly nice.”

“Good. One more sip,” he said as he walked to the sink and scrubbed his hands.
She drained her drink, and he returned to his stool and leaned in again to gently examine the area around her eyes with his hands. He put his wand up gently and whispered an incantation that helped with inflammation. He rubbed some salve on the ends of his fingers until it was smooth and ready to apply and then started spreading it on her skin as gently as possible. She flinched when he touched the area above her eyebrow, so he backed off a bit and barely touched her as he slowly spread the salve.

“I should be able to do this,” she chastised herself.

“Of course you could, but I can see it better.”

The swelling began to dissipate immediately, and the colour started fading as well. The wound above her eye sealed into a small white line. “There we go,” he said with deep satisfaction. “Now, let me get you into the bath, and you can soak while I fix the dinner. Refill your scotch.”

He could hear her trudge along behind him. He reached the bathroom and started filling the tub. He found the tea and rose bath oil she liked to use in the summer and added it to the water. She was still fully dressed in her work clothes and examining her face closely in the mirror.

“Severus, what did you do? This is completely healed!”

“I don’t know what they are using…”

“Nothing like this! You know, people talk all the time about the potions Madam Pomfrey gave them at school and complain that nothing works as well.”

Hermione had started taking only potions he brewed over the months of their relationship. She now took his contraceptive potion every month and stocked his headache and cold remedies, too.

“You brew them all?” she said.

“I do.”

He watched her breathe in and out and then squint her newly healed eyes at him,

“Hmmmmm,” she said and brought her top over her head leaving her in a lacy, pink bra that was not even trying to hide her little rosebud nipples. She took off her elastic waistband trousers and striped cotton knickers, stepping out of the whole business along with her shoes. She unhooked her bra, clearly deep in thought, and completely unaware of the effect that her actions were having on him. She sunk into the tub and closed her eyes, exhaling deeply. “Severus, you mentioned dinner.”

“Yes.” He reluctantly returned to the kitchen.

**Hermione**

She had taken the whole week of Christmas off as she wanted it to be perfect. He had to remain at school until Christmas Eve this year because more Slytherins were staying over for the holiday than students from any other house. She had prepared a traditional Christmas dinner that night; they could eat leftovers and just loaf on the actual day. They had both been busier than ever that term and hadn’t had sufficient time to spend together.
She had bought a small tree that she decorated with strings of lights and ornaments she had saved from the home where she grew up. These items had lived in a box she had not opened since she sold the family home after her parents were safely oblivious in Australia, and the war was over. She had anticipated that it would be difficult to see the old decorations, but opening that box and holding them in her hand had brought forth joyful memories of the Christmases of her childhood.

She had put a festive cloth on the table and lit candles. The dinner smelled delicious, and she had a favorite bottle of wine for them. She checked her reflection in the mirror one last time before she heard his feet on the stairs. She was wearing a new, black velvet robe that was cut low in the front and hugged her curves. Her hair was down, straightened and put in tame curls. The effort symbolized how important the night was for her, and she hoped he would see that and accept her gifts.

She finally heard the door open, and she walked quickly to the table where he was taking off his snowy boots.

“Happy Christmas, Severus!” she said and pressed herself against him.

“Happy Christmas, Hermione. What’s all this?”

“I thought we could celebrate tonight and relax tomorrow.”

“That sounds fine,” he deadpanned, but she could tell he was happy with the plan. She uncorked the wine and poured glasses for each. “Should I put on some Christmas music?”

“Please don’t.”

“All right. Let me bring out the food.”

They took their time and enjoyed all the traditional dishes, including pudding that contained four quid and two galleons, which she let him pocket. He had reached that stuffed, satisfied state that usually called for one more drink and a cigarette on the porch. She sprang into action before he could retire that way.

She quickly sent the dessert dishes into the kitchen to pile in the sink with their dinner counterparts, and reached under the tree, producing a large stack of documents with a package on top. She plopped down the whole thing in front of him.

“What’s…?” He started reading. “Johns Hopkins, 1999, Smoking and Cancers Unrelated to the Lungs…”

“That one is from America.”

“Really?” he said with an obvious edge. “NHS 2001, recent one, Smokers Lung, Tumors and Treatment. Healer Granger, this is so subtle, whatever is your point?”

“Open the package.”

He unwrapped the cardboard box and stared at it. “Nicotine gum.”

“There are two studies in the pile that show just how effective it can be.” She leaned over the table to thumb through the stack.

“Granger,” he said, obviously to get her to stop.
“Yes?”

“Thank you. I will try.”

“It’s just because I care about you and want you to…”

“I know. Thank you.”

She breathed. If he thought that would be his challenge of the evening…

She brought up a medium-sized velvet bag, the type in which whiskey is sometimes encased. He reached in and pulled out a stack of paper galleons; large bills in the amount of fifteen thousand, to be exact.

He had been brewing constantly since the summer, usually late at night after he had completed his school responsibilities. She had convinced him to give samples of a few of his potions to the hospital director of clinical practices after he had healed her injuries. The director had agreed enthusiastically to try his healing potions and salves, as soon as he could produce enough for the stores. He had tried to hire Snape outright, the response to which from her boyfriend was an emphatic, “NO.”

His products had been an unqualified success, and the hospital wanted to try the rest of his potions that he produced for the Hogwarts’s hospital wing each year. It was becoming too much work for him. Hermione was spending every day off helping him brew and package the potions. He had hired two former students to come to the school on the weekends and help. He had hardly left the dungeon in months.

“This is not a gift. It’s an investment.”

They had designed the packages together; black phials and canisters with silver labels: SNAPE boldly on the front and the dosing instructions on the back. They were packed into brown, cardboard crates, shrunk, and shipped to St. Mungo’s every Sunday night.

“Where…?”

“I invested some money after I sold my family’s house. My parents have enough now; their practice there is thriving. We make enough with as much as we work…this leaves us a decent travel and wine fund.”

“Hermione, I can’t…”

“You CAN, Severus. With as much as the hospital is paying you, this is enough to buy a space in London and hang up your teacher’s robe at the end of the terms. Unless you want to stay in the…”

“You know I don’t, but…”

“It can be OUR business. I want it to be. I still have work to do at the hospital; you can hire a big enough staff that we don’t have to work all the time. We can expand into apothecaries. Stop me when you hear something you don’t like.”

He looked overwhelmed, but he said nothing.

“Perhaps I can cut back to part-time eventually and brew beside you.”

He left the money on the table and grabbed her into his arms. I love you. He didn’t say it, but that’s
what she heard.
Chapter Four: Severus and Hermione II

Chapter Four

Severus and Hermione II

Severus

With very little fanfare but extreme precision on multiple pages of schedules and diagrams she had crafted, they had packed a quarter-century of his life in the dungeon into cardboard cartons and labeled them with his bold, black script.

He tried to resist thoughts that he had become another project for her, akin to freeing house elves in her school days or finding a treatment for squibs now. *Look at that sad sack. Let’s get him into an occupation away from the classroom and out of that dungeon.* He felt he knew her well enough to realize he was not an object of pity for her, but could one ever be sure? She bounded into the lab space, and he chased away those thoughts. She was drinking wine out of the bottle—it had been a long day. She had put her curls on top of her head so it resembled a waterfall. She was wearing shorts and a tight, pink vest with tiny straps that looked more like a camisole.

“Look at that sad sack. Let’s get him into an occupation away from the classroom and out of that dungeon.” He felt he knew her well enough to realize he was not an object of pity for her, but could one ever be sure? She bounded into the lab space, and he chased away those thoughts. She was drinking wine out of the bottle—it had been a long day. She had put her curls on top of her head so it resembled a waterfall. She was wearing shorts and a tight, pink vest with tiny straps that looked more like a camisole.

“I think that’s it, Severus! I left a few items on the desk in the classroom. I didn’t know if they were yours or something to leave for the next Potions Master. Otherwise…” She held up the wine bottle triumphantly.

He strode over and took it from her, taking a healthy swig. She hopped on to the lab table behind her and then hooked his hip with her foot, drawing him closer. The bottle was almost empty, and he could tell she had grown more than a bit tipsy. He finished off the wine and smacked the bottle down before letting her pull him in so her legs were wrapped around his waist.

She covered his mouth with hers, leading with her tongue, in the sloppy way she did when she’d had a bit more than was prudent to drink. He had no objections to this. Her arse in those shorts had been distracting him for hours. He reached behind her to palm it, and she moved forward to rub herself against his stiffening cock.

“This is a fantastic height, Severus, and we’ve never done it in the lab before.”

He grabbed her by the hips and set her down on the ground so he could unbutton and shove down the shorts and knickers, which she immediately stepped out of. She hopped back up and then placed his hand between her legs.

“Miss Granger! What have you been doing?” She was practically dripping.

“Thinking about you and this,” she unbuttoned his placket and brought out his cock. “Right now, Severus,” she pleaded, and he thrust in her. The counter was slightly too low to maintain a good rhythm, so he raised it slightly until they were perfectly aligned. “Fuck, yes!” she gasped.

He palmed one of her breasts, and could feel the lace cups of her bra, which excited him further in some teenage boy throw-back fantasy that appeared out of nowhere occasionally.
She had finished a string of night shifts, and he hadn’t seen her in a week. They had worked all day in the dungeon, and he wondered if she was exhausted. He pushed it to the back of his mind.

“When did you last wank?” he gasped in her ear.

She laughed. “The truth or what you want to hear?”

“What I want to…uuuhhhhh!”

She had clamped down on his cock mid-sentence. “I wanked in the loo half-way through the shift last night thinking about you!”

“And the truth?” he gasped.

“Four night-shifts in a row, Severus. I’m lucky to be conscious.”

He laughed and then sucked his fingers and laid them down flat on her clitoris. He felt the need to push this along, so he could settle her into bed. She flung her head back and then wrapped her arms tightly around him so she could move against his hand. “I’m going to come really hard,” she practically wailed.

“Yes, Hermione, come right now for me, I’m right there,” he answered, and he felt her tip over the edge. He thrust fast, six or seven times before he growled through his own orgasm and then gripped her around the back, holding her very close and kissing the side of her neck. “Let’s go fall in bed. We can send the cartons after breakfast and still have time to set up the space and move my things to the flat.”

“Yes, please.” Exhaustion had clearly caught up with her, and he suspected she could fall asleep right there on the counter with his cock still half in her. He let her go for a moment to re-fasten his trousers and then wrapped her legs around him tightly and carried her to his quarters. She snuggled into the blankets and fell asleep, naked from the waist down. He unhooked her bra and slid it out of the vest so she wouldn’t wake with angry red marks. He found a clean pair of knickers for her and she woke for a moment to lift her hips as he brought them up. She did not like to sleep naked. He took a moment to strip down to his pants and then joined her in the bed, taking her into his arms and placing his face on her warm neck.

He didn’t even want a cigarette; it had turned out to be more of a habit than addiction. He had chewed his gum dutifully in January, and then declared himself free of it and of smoking in February. The only time he thought about it was when they were walking in Muggle London and he smelled smoke on the streets. If he could resist it that summer in his Cokeworth bed, he would consider himself a nonsmoker.

His thoughts returned to the earlier stream. After they had been together for two years, and after she had invested her money in the business, he was still waiting for her to decide she had made a terrible mistake and leave. The way she looked at him sometimes...it resembled what he would assume was love, but his rational self put little credence in it.

Still, she was lovely and sexy and by far the best thing that had happened to him since his school days. He appreciated it, whatever it was.

He was even leaving the dungeon for good. Their business was thriving. He had a staff of fifteen ready to start in their new warehouse space in wizarding London. He had contracts with St. Mungo’s and Hogwarts, and a plan to expand to apothecaries by the end of summer. It was successful beyond his imagination. She had spent all her nonworking hours in the dungeon since
Christmas brewing with him to keep up with their orders, and now they had lured some of his best students over the years to come work for him.

When they spoke of the two-year anniversary, he had apologized that they were too busy with the business and the move to the warehouse to make their annual trip to Spain. She had looked at him as if he were mental.

“Of course we can’t leave right now. This is so much more exciting, anyway!”

She was the one who found the space. George Weasley had alerted her to a charms company that was going out of business, and she had swept in with the deposit out of her own savings that day before arriving breathlessly in the dungeon to report back.

He had already given Minerva his notice before Hermione had found the space. She had seemed a bit sad but probably mostly relieved that she could now hire a less problematic Potions Master.

He planned to split his time between Hermione’s studio flat and his house in Cokeworth. This was the first summer since the end of the war that he was working full-time. The Dark Lord had made sure he was occupied during those school breaks of the bad years. Despite his schedule, though, this was the summer he was going to open that door, excavate his parents’ bedroom, perform an exorcism if necessary, and make it livable. He was probably within six months of being chucked out of Hermione’s, and he was determined to make that house truly his.

He settled in the bed and tried to allow sleep to take over. His Lily fantasies, which had returned a few months into his relationship with Hermione, were there again like old friends to help him. That night he pictured her in the new space, leaning over the label station.

“So heavy and black, Sev! People are using your potions to try to feel better. Maybe something lighter in the design?”

“Lily, I can only be who I am.”

She walked over and embraced him, kissing him with a big smile on her face.

“You’re not so dark.”

He timed his breath with Hermione’s and drifted off.

**One Year Later: Summer of 2004**

**Hermione**

She saw him through the front window, bounding up the street, rushing to be on time for their appointment. This was the one. It was big enough, but not too big. It was in a Muggle neighborhood, but on the edges of the wizarding area, close to both St. Mungo’s and SNAPE.

In the first year at the warehouse, both his staff and orders had doubled. She went in occasionally when a huge order coincided with her day off, but she had become most often the silent partner. He even took weekends off now when she had them, and closed the warehouse every Sunday.

They had outgrown her flat, and it was causing him to retreat too often to Cokeworth. She had sat
him down three months ago and proposed that they find a house to buy together. He didn’t have to sell his house—that would be ideal, but he wasn’t ready—however, they needed a place that was both of theirs or they would regress—to what, she wasn’t sure.

She saw him lope up the steps, and she walked over to meet him at the door. It was a townhouse, a narrow three-story with enough space for about one and a half rooms per floor. They would have neighbors on either side, but no one above or below them.

He was wearing his self-imposed work uniform: dark wool trousers, a starched white oxford cloth shirt, his hair pulled back into a tight bunch at the base of his scalp. He topped it with a formal black robe for business meetings, and a black brewer’s robe for every day. He had transfigured his robe into a familiar black jacket to walk the Muggle streets. He looked younger than he was; he had turned forty-four in January.

“Agent’s not here yet,” she said as he entered and pulled her close to his body. She kissed his mouth, and he let her go to look around the place.

She was wearing her healer’s garb as usual; not much transfiguration was required to turn her clothes into an outfit that resembled what a Muggle doctor would wear. She had finally cut her hair so it rested on her shoulders, long enough to pull back when she treated patients, but not so long that she was tempted to wear it in plaits, which made her look like a trainee when she was head of her department.

She had found this place in the *Guardian* notices the day it went on the market. She had bought a cell phone and a card to load minutes on it just for this quest and had phoned their agent immediately. Even if they made an offer, it could be months of wrangling before they could sign for it, but it looked perfect in print, and it was living up to its billing so far.

“How did you get in?” he rumbled at her.

“It wasn’t warded.”

“How are you going to explain that to the agent?”

She could tell he was impressed, and she grinned at him. “She could have been on time. Come see the kitchen.”

They did a quick tour before the very confused agent arrived. There was a bedroom on the second and third floors that would be perfect for them to sleep in and have office space. There was a lovely large lav on the second next to the room they would claim as a bedroom, and a much smaller one plus a bonus space up top perfect for his music collection. The kitchen had a small laundry area in the back with new Muggle machines. Given his workplace, a home lab was not necessary. There was a shared garden and a little private deck they could hit with charms to make almost invisible and sound-proof. He was smiling as the agent tried to regain her bearings with her stealthy clients. They were ready to make an offer.

Hermione had spent the last two months trying to Mugglize their finances. She’d had to do a bit of that before she sold her parents’ house, but nothing like this with extensive work and tax histories that had to be converted. His house ownership in the Muggle sphere helped, and Bill Weasley was a financial charm expert, but the amount of paperwork and legal documents to be created was daunting. She had achieved it, she hoped, but she wouldn’t feel easy until the sale was final. She had been pondering a joint business plan with Bill to offer their services, but she suspected there weren’t enough witches and wizards who wanted to live with a foot in both worlds to make it profitable.
They propped themselves up at the kitchen counter to begin on the offer paperwork. Hermione had given the agent all the financial papers before she had found this place in the newspaper, and the agent had told them that everything looked fine. They made a full-price offer. Hermione’s wages increased every year, and between SNAPE and his savings, they could afford to buy a larger place than this in a nicer neighborhood, but this was good enough for them. They were both financially cautious anyway.

She felt they were reaching a crossroads when he kept spending his time in Cokeworth working on the house but refusing to let her see his progress. She had sussed out that the property was larger than her flat, which seemed smaller every time one of them brought in a new book or record.

“You would hate it there, Hermione. It is depressing and awful, and not part of our life!”

“I want to be in your whole life, and not just the London bit, Severus.”

He wouldn’t let her in, and he wouldn’t sell it or even talk to her about it.

Since it was the one aspect of their financial lives that was completely centered in the Muggle realm, she finally obtained the papers on the house as she was working on her project. It was bigger than her flat, but not as much as she would have guesses. As she suspected, though, it was worth considerably more than Snape had ever let on. It was in an emerging area, and his neighbors on both sides had already sold, their houses, which were now being turned into upstairs and downstairs flats. There was a house on the block that had been converted into a café. She didn’t bring it up again, but it was always there like a sore in her mouth that her tongue would occasionally poke.

They filled out offer paperwork with their agent, who made them leave first so she could double and triple check to make sure the door was locked.

Hermione couldn’t contain her excitement as they walked down the street that would hopefully be theirs soon. She tucked her hand under his elbow and practically skipped. “Celebrate at Saigon?” Their favorite Thai place (inexplicably named, although they did a decent pho and bahn mi) was just two blocks away.

“Sounds good,” he answered, not unpleasantly although he didn’t seem as giddy as she was. (She had to admit, that would be a feat.) He drew her in more closely and planted a kiss on the top of her head, making her smile even wider.

She had been waiting until they had settled on the new flat before she told him about a work trip to New York late that summer. She was going to ask him to go with her, but she had been waiting for the right moment.

They rounded the corner and the smell of Saigon hit their noses immediately. Hermione’s stomach growled in response. She had been tense about the meeting with the agent and hadn’t eaten much that day.

He pushed open the door and let her pass before him. Their usual table, a small, high round one with tall stools was available and she hopped up on one. The place was casually run, and Severus left to grab bottles of beer and put in their order at the little window. He returned with two green bottles, and clinked them against each other before he slid one over. It was cold, bitter, and perfect as it slid down her throat.

“Thank you, by the way,” he said after a healthy drink of his own, “for putting all the work in.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a little red box that he pushed across the table to her. “Next
week will be three years.”

“Next week, yes, so no fair doing this early with me unprepared.” A familiar panic rose in her before she could tamp it down. You haven’t failed a test. It will be fine. She opened the box to find a yellow gold H pendant on a gold chain. It was exactly her style to wear every day, and yellow gold was everywhere lately. It was the perfect gift. And yet…she would have been thrilled to receive something slightly more…sentimental. She certainly wasn’t expecting a proposal; she knew him well enough to know that would only happen after months of discussion, but perhaps an H AND an S. It would have made her summer.

She clasped the chain around her neck and leaned over to kiss him just as the owner was bringing the green curry and pad thai. They moved both plates to the center of the table to allow each to scrape half on each other’s. The owner returned with two more beers, and Hermione was already about five bites into the delicious food.

“How does your August look?” she asked Severus after they had eaten in silence for about five minutes. Neither had mentioned making the Spain trip again this summer. Hermione hadn’t considered it because she couldn’t imagine him allowing himself that degree of idleness any more.

“Orders continue to increase. Why?” He looked up from his food at her.

“I have been asked to present my research and methods in New York at the American Ministry.”

She had been working with babies diagnosed as squibs for three years now, and had developed a successful method of resetting their magical core, like the treatment of traumatized witches and wizards. She had begun expanding the ages of squibs she would treat and had great success with patients under ten. She had just started working with older subjects and wasn’t successful yet, so she was working to develop a new treatment.

The paper in question, though, was about her work with newborns. Her treatment had eliminated the squib population under eighteen months. She was cautiously optimistic of long-term success without knowing if they would continue to thrive as little witches and wizards as they matured.

Other wizarding societies had begun to express interest in her method, and the American Ministry had asked her to present her research and work with some healers at the wizarding hospital in New York.

“That’s fantastic, Hermione.” He sounded genuinely proud of her, and it made her feel warm inside.

“Thank you. I am scheduled to be there from Thursday the twelfth through Tuesday the seventeenth. I thought you might like to join me Wednesday, and we could stay a couple days, maybe come home Friday?” She didn’t know why she was so nervous asking him, but she realized an outright no would be less painful than to watch him try to figure a way out diplomatically.

“I’m certain I could arrange some things,” he said.

“So you think…”

“I’ve never been to New York, and we haven’t been away in too long. Sorry about that, by the way.”

“No…I didn’t expect we would with the business…”

“But now they must learn to do without me there occasionally.”
“Well, that’s great news!” She chided herself for being worried about this in the first place.

“How long will it take for our offer to be entertained?” He asked. “Will we be in the new house by August?”

The communal aspect of that sentence gave her a little thrill. “I do hope so. I would love to be settled before we leave.”

He rose from his stool to pay the tab, and she pocketed the little red box. She loved her new necklace, and her momentary disappointment seemed rather silly considering how the rest of the evening played out.

“Home then?” He put his jacket on and headed for the door.

“Yes, let’s.”

Severus

He apparated into the art deco foyer of the American Ministry. It was so grand, much larger and more impressive than its London counterpart. The witches and wizards here were crossing the halls with a purpose, wearing bright, summer robes, and he felt quite out of place in his traditional black.

He planted himself in a corner and hoped he was unobtrusive and unnoticed. The stereotype of American magical folk was that they were loud and full of themselves. He couldn’t judge the latter just by standing there, but they did seem overly friendly, and yes, loud compared to Brits.

He saw a large group descend a grand, moving staircase in the middle of the foyer, and Hermione’s curly head was in the middle of it all. She had cut her long hair a few months ago, which made her look older and more professional. He thought she was a knock-out either way, but he missed her braids that always ended in a curl at the bottom. She was dressed more professionally than she did for her work in the trenches in the hospital. She was commanding the attention of all around her. It all combined for a highly impressive picture, and he was suddenly quite viscerally proud of her.

She spotted him in his corner, and her face lit up. He did not know what to make of that. His instincts immediately told him not to trust it, but his brain or whatever controlled his reaction process was immediately happy.

“Severus!” she called out, and he put a hand up in greeting. Soon the whole group was headed his way.

“This is my…”

He was very interested in how she would complete that sentence. She did pause noticeably.

“Boyfriend…partner, Severus Snape. He is the owner and chief brewer of SNAPE, which is the brand of the best healing potions in the UK. I’m not just bragging. St. Mungo’s doesn’t even brew in-house anymore, and it’s the top selling brand at the apothecaries.”

He could feel himself blush brightly as she foisted herself against his person. He wrapped his arms around her, and then they disengaged so she could introduce the other healers individually. He shook about ten hands, and then they began the ritual of thanking Hermione and bidding her
farewell until next time, which seemed not just a pleasantry, but that they wanted her back soon. In about ten minutes, the group had disbursed, and she let out a long sigh.

“That seems like it went well?” he said. They had spoken via floo yesterday at the warehouse, but she hadn’t had much time for details beyond his travel arrangements.

“I think so. I taught the procedure, but they don’t feel confident yet to try it on patients without me there. A team of them will visit St. Mungo’s in a couple of weeks, and I will give them more intense training.” She sighed again. “It’s been long hours every day; I’m so glad you’re here, and we can move on to the fun part of the trip.”

“Do you need to go back to your quarters?”

“No, I have everything here,” she patted her leather bag that was always strapped around her shoulder when they weren’t at home. She was a master of shrinking charms.

They were staying in a Muggle hotel about ten blocks from the wizarding section close to Central Park. It was frightfully expensive, and he had started to balk, but they hadn’t had a holiday in two years, and it wasn’t as if they didn’t have the money. SNAPE had become more successful than he would have thought possible, and she made very good wages, and earned every knut.

She wound her fingers through his as they took off through the city. They had transfigured their clothes as soon as they left the American Ministry. He was now wearing dark denim trousers, a black V-neck t-shirt, and a light black cotton jacket. She was in a skirt and matching jacket that looked uncomfortable.

New York had an energy he hadn’t experienced before. It was loud and brash, and there were so many interesting sites that it was hard to take it all in. There were small shops everywhere, and food being sold on the streets, pubs, or bars, he supposed, restaurants, and people of every variety one could imagine. It wasn’t that London lacked diversity, but this was in a category all its own.

There were yellow cabs everywhere and people shouting, and it was very hot. He was nervous to cross the streets, but the way she gripped his arm when they did, betrayed that she was terrified, so he attempted to play it off as if he were fully confident. He palmed the pocket of his trousers for the fifth time to feel the outline of the Muggle credit card he would use to pay for the room. They had applied for it and started using it here and there a few months ago to try and establish a credit history beyond what she could charm.

“How is the house? How’s the new bed?”

She had left two days after they had finished moving in. He had painted every night after work and had been slowly unpacking the kitchen and their books. They still had months-worth of work when they returned.

“The bed is fine. The house is tiresome.”

“Not already!”

“Quite. I have paint in places I can’t even reach.”

“Poor Severus. Well, let’s not think of it except in anticipation of how lovely it will be when we are finished. I’ll throw myself in as soon as we return. The bed, though?”

They had bought new bedroom furniture for the new home, and the mattress was much nicer than either of them had ever owned.
“Empty.” It was like sleeping on a cloud, but he was looking forward to sharing it.

She placed her hand flat on his arm to stop him in his tracks and then stood on her toes to kiss him. There were grumbles behind them for slowing traffic, so they resumed their pace, but he squeezed her hand as they walked on.

The hotel was in the middle of a block, and he would have missed it if he weren’t keeping his eyes peeled. They disentangled from the crowd and entered the lobby. There was an impressive looking bar on one side and a counter with several computers and an impatient looking woman behind it.

“Checking in?” she barked at them across the room.

Hermione bristled visibly beside him. She did not want to appear intimidated by the New Yorkers. Not to be outdone, he strode forward, palming the card in his pocket once again.

“Yes. Snape, Severus.” He said louder than he usually spoke as he approached the counter. The woman, clearly not offended by his tone, started clacking away on the computer in front of her. He had no idea why she had to write what seemed like four paragraphs, but finally he spoke.

“Severus Snape and…Her…me…one…ee? Granger,” she said more confidently. “Four nights, checking out the twelfth. Visa on the registration?” She called out. He handed it to her, and she ran it in through a machine and handed it back, staring at him as they waited for it to go through. He knew it was fine; he had paid the bills in full as soon as they arrived, but he found himself sweating more than he had in the heat. The machine started to whir, and white paper rolled out with words and figures printed on it. She pulled out a small map and used the back of a Muggle pen to point the way. “You are on the fifth floor. You turn left from the elevator. Ice is here. Fitness room is on the ground floor below us. Housekeeping will be in by eleven, MARK THE DOOR if you don’t want to be interrupted. Sign here. Enjoy your stay.” She whipped the pen around and de-capped it in one motion, and shoved it at him with a slip of paper that had the room details on it and the total he didn’t want to dwell on.

He signed hesitatingly. At first no ink appeared, and he examined the pen. Trying to play this off naturally, he returned it to the page and thought a spell in his head that would produce ink on the page. His name flowed smoothly out, and he slid the paper and pen back across the counter at the woman, who was already clacking away and not paying him a bit of attention.

Hermione let out a breath, and took his hand as they walked toward the elevator.

“Nice signature,” she whispered as the contraption dinged.

“Like that?”

“Indeed. I missed you this week,” she said, and he believed her though it was baffling to him. The elevator stopped at the fifth floor, and they took a left. They reached their door, and he inserted the key before he charmed it open with a click.

The room was small but not dreary. The street sounds came in clearly, and it was rather nice to know exactly where one was.

“I am drenched. Shower?” she asked with a wide smile in her voice. She didn’t wait for a response before she started stripping off her high-heeled shoes and then navy jacket and skirt, white blouse, and sheer stockings. It did seem miserable attire for August in this place. He shucked onto the bed his jacket that he should have skipped, and then she approached in her pink knickers and bra and pulled his t-shirt over his head and then started in on the buttons of his placket.
When he was down to his pants, she took his hand again and led him to the bathroom, where she turned on the water. They were waylaid for a few minutes trying to determine how to regulate the temperature, and then, when the water was pleasantly cool, she took his pants down with a grin. He stepped over the ledge of the tub and into the shower as she unhooked her bra and stepped out of her knickers.

She joined him in the shower and immediately and thoroughly kissed him as if she had wanted to from the moment she saw him at the Ministry. She pressed herself against him, held his face in her hands, and snogged him enthusiastically. They still had sex fairly often, at least twice a week, but they rarely took the time to go beyond satisfying each other. Their schedules didn’t always correspond. He had worked twelve-hour days for the last year trying to make the business successful.

To take time off for this holiday, he had brewed his orders weeks in advance. His staff could probably handle it, but he didn’t trust them fully yet. He still brewed most everything he sent out himself although he had made each of them complete a test-brew before he hired them. He hoped to take a step back eventually, but he didn’t feel ready yet.

He was currently feeling very good, though, about taking this trip with her. She lowered herself to her knees and took his cock into her mouth where it became fully hard in moments. He couldn’t remember the last time she had done this, and he braced himself against the back of the shower and relaxed as much as he could to fully enjoy the attention. She looked like a nymph with the water running off her as her head bobbed before him. She used her tongue and hands, and very quickly she had him on the edge of climax.

“Hermione, I’m going to come in…” he tried to warn her.

“I want you to!” she gasped and sucked his whole cock into her mouth, which was all he could handle. He exploded down the back of her throat with a guttural cry. She swallowed it all and then rose to her feet. He swept her up and attacked her mouth while she reached around him for a tiny bar of soap that she then rubbed all over them and let the spray rinse them before he practically carried her to the bed and laid her out before him.

This was still one of his favorite activities, and he was confident that it was hers, too. He took the time they didn’t usually have to warm her up by starting at her thighs and patiently kissing them thoroughly while he reached up and wound his fingers around her nipples, still hard from the shower. She was practically wailing by the time he had kissed his way to her folds. He began to spread his tongue on her carefully, listening to her responses and backing off when she sounded too desperate.

“Ugh, Severus, don’t make me beg!”

“I have no idea what you mean, Witch.” He inserted a finger and found her delightfully wet, so he added another and was rewarded with a deep moan as he simultaneously licked around and on her clitoris.

“Yes! Thank you!” she gasped and took his head in her hands to hold him fast. He took pity on her and swirled his tongue in earnest knowing it would get her there very quickly. She immediately began shaking and calling for him, and soon she was sprawling on the bed in a satisfied heap.

“Thank you,” she said sincerely, which made him feel like he should be making this more of a priority in their lives.

“Thank you,” he said and moved so he was lying beside her on the bed. He had the very rare urge
for a cigarette and attributed it sex in the late afternoon.

He used his wand to play some music, and they lay on the bed watching the sky turn to early evening.

He thought she might have drifted off, but finally she said, “I found a place for dinner you will love.”

Half an hour later, they were strolling along the streets leisurely hand in hand. She was wearing a floral print dress he had never seen before. She was so pretty to him anyway, and this was just beyond. He was so filled with affection for her that he almost lost his head and declared it, but he stopped himself just in time.

The restaurant was a tiny Italian place with only ten or so tables. They ate angel hair pasta that was supposed to be the first course but between that dish and the salads, bread, and a bolder Chianti, both were perfectly satisfied.

The next two days followed just as pleasantly. They found all varieties of places to eat. They bought sandwiches bigger than their heads and ate off them for a whole day. They saw a play in a theatre and one at the park. They made love three times a day at least, and spent every afternoon in bed napping between every flavour of debauchery.

On their last night, they returned to that Italian restaurant that had been their favorite of the trip. They ordered the same meal, but this time shared a decadent dessert that tasted like custard and coffee, and was probably the most delicious food experience of Severus’s life.

They took the long way back to the hotel, strolling along the sidewalk that abutted the park, trying to take in every last New York moment. They reached an area where a fountain had clearly been, but now it was used for people to sit and watch the crowds go by. A blues guitarist was warming up, leaving his case open for donations. He had plugged his guitar into an amplifier and was playing familiar riffs. Severus took Hermione’s hand, wondering if it were possible to be happier than he was in that moment. They took a seat on the edge of the fountain to enjoy the music.

The guitarist segued into his first song with long, sustained chords, and Severus recognized the Led Zeppelin cover immediately. Suddenly he was back in his attic room that summer, trying to roll on a condom with shaking hands as the same song wailed from his little, cheap record player.

“Drag, drag, drag,” the guitarist sang into the night.

Evans had invited him to continue, wordlessly, by opening her knees wider, and by looking right into his eyes. *Please, Sev, I want this.*

He had pushed in carefully, and she had winced noticeably, but insisted he continue. He hadn’t lasted but a few strokes anyway, but then he had held her and tried not to cry into her hair, he loved her so much. She had stroked his back and then thanked him. *Thanked him.* He had made her come again with his fingers, and then they had smoked naked on the bed until it was time for him to dress for work, and for her to leave for dinner with her parents.

“She said and smiled before he kissed her goodbye.

“Lily,” she had giggled.

“Evans,” he had corrected himself, and he had swatted her lightly on the rear end as she left before him out the door.
His thoughts were interrupted by Hermione’s applause as the guitarist finished his song.

“Do you have some dollars, Severus, that we can give him? I left the last of mine for the tip.”

He reached into his pocket and found a five dollar note. The man on the bill stared at him warily. “Ready?” He tried to erase his earlier reverie.

“If you are,” she said.

He dropped the money into the case as they left. She took his hand for the walk back.

The next day was confusion with packing and checkout, and arriving at the point on time to take the portkey back to the British Ministry. They apparated from there to a secluded point down the street from their house. He was exhausted and grumpy, dreading the return to work the next day. She was quiet, probably sensing his mood.

He unlocked the door with his wand. There was a pile of Muggle post in the box. It was surely for the old owners, and he grumbled about the hassle of continuing to forward their travel magazines and credit card bills.

Hermione grabbed the stack and took it to the table, where they had a cardboard box to collect it. She dropped them one by one. He walked to the kitchen to pour himself a glass of water.

“Severus?”

He turned to see her examining one of the envelopes closely.

“You have post from the New Orleans Police Department.”
Part Three: The Return
Chapter One: Kendrah and Severus

Kendrah sat with Kevin just inside the little bar in the neighborhood just north of the French Quarter. The bar had a street view, and it was too oppressively hot to wait outside. She didn’t know the time variances of portkey travel. Severus Snape had told her to expect him at four, and she and Kevin had arrived at three-thirty. She was sipping a cup of surprisingly good coffee for a place that looked like it might be shut down by the health department any day. Kevin was sticking to iced tea, but Kendrah didn’t give up her afternoon coffee, even during the dog days.

Since they had discovered Lily’s talents, Kendrah and Kevin had speculated about whether New Orleans had a wizarding section, and if so, where it was. Kendrah had maintained that it was probably around this neighborhood since that seemed to be where Lily and the male victim were heading the night they were hit. When Severus Snape had disclosed where he would arrive via portkey, she had wanted to ask an additional twenty or so questions, but she suspected they would not be well-received.

Mr. Snape had been highly suspicious of her from their initial contact. He had called her at work after receiving her letter, and clearly thought she was running a scam to…she had no idea. Get him to vacation in New Orleans? Take Lily off their hands?

“The woman you refer to has been dead since 1981,” he had said in distinctively low and rich British accented voice. He had conveyed an impress amount of disdain with just a few words.

“As I stated in the letter, the subject claims her name is Lily Evans, and she speaks of you as if you were friends. She is from Cokeworth, and she believes that she is a student at Hogwarts School.”

There had been silence on the other end.

“Could I send you a picture?” Kendrah had suggested.

That had set off rounds of negotiations. He had a phone but no computer and didn’t seem to fully understand the Internet. His girlfriend/roommate/partner—he had been unclear about the relationship—had an email address, and he had put her on the phone.

“I can email you a photo of Lily and one of a drawing of the unidentified male victim? I could wait on the line until you open the file and look at the photos.”

“Well…we don’t have a computer here at home or at either of our workplaces. I only used email when we were trying to buy our house, and I used it at the library…”

The woman sounded apologetic and very young on the phone.

“Could you go to the library and call me back?”
“It’s closed right now.”

Kendrah had sighed deeply, but plastered a smile on her face so her tone stayed friendly. “I will give you a number you can call twenty-four hours a day and reach me. Don’t worry about the time difference.”

“The woman…that you think is Lily Potter…is she okay?” the young British woman had asked.

Kendrah had learned to listen more than she spoke in investigations, but her eyebrows had shot up at the mention of the name Potter. “We know her as Lily Evans, not Potter. Why do you refer to her as such?”

“Potter is her married name.”

“Her husband is?”

“Well…he was James Potter.”

It wasn’t a complete shock. Kendrah had suspected that Lily’s relationship with James had changed since Lily thought the drawing looked like an adult James, but to hear it made her take a breath.

“We all thought they both died in October 1981. But…is she?” the woman on the phone continued. “Is she okay?”

“She is not in danger,” Kendrah replied, giving her standard police response that was honest but revealed little.

“And James is…”

“James is not here,” Kendrah said.

The young woman ended the call, promising to get back with Kendrah as soon as the library opened.

Her phone had rung at three-thirty the next morning. Severus Snape was on the line.

“Have you looked at the photo and drawing?” Kendrah had asked, trying to pull herself out of sleep.

“I am looking at them now.”

“What do you think?”

She had sent a picture of Lily from the time she was Julie and a bit younger, hoping that placing her as close to the time Mr. Snape knew her would elicit the most accurate assessment.

“I have not seen her since she was twenty-one, twenty-three years ago. I couldn’t possibly give a positive identification.”

“No, of course not. Does it look enough like her, and the drawing enough like James Potter for you to suspect that is who is here?”

“James Potter is there? Lily Evans…Potter is there? Are they alive? Can you not ask them?” There was an undertone to his voice that was clearly anguish.

“The male subject is not alive. Both were in a hit and run accident in February 1997. The female
subject was unconscious and then semi-conscious for two years. When she started speaking again, she identified herself as Lily Judith Evans and believed herself to be eleven years old.”

There was a long pause, but Kendrah could still hear breathing, so she gave it a moment. “Does she still think she’s eleven?” Snape had said finally.

“No, that was four years ago. Now she thinks she’s fifteen, in Cokeworth, England, and that she’s spending the summer babysitting in the mornings and in the attic room at her friend Severus’s house in the afternoons.”

There was another prolonged silence, but this one made Kendrah smirk a tiny bit as she sat up in bed and turned on the lamp.

“Is she in an institution?” the voice was very quiet.

“No. She was until she started speaking. She has lived with me and my husband since.” Kendrah sighed. “I have been working on her case, Mr. Snape, since the night of the accident. But she has become a…she is like a family member at this point. She is happy here. She works and has friends, and we will make sure she is taken care of, but she has another life somewhere and perhaps a child…”

“How do you know that?” he asked.

“She had extensive medical exams when she was injured. She does have a child?”

“Her son is an adult now,” Snape had said.

“So you see why we want to find out where she belongs.”

It was then that Snape had agreed to meet. He called her back several hours later with his travel plans for that afternoon—night where he was.

At 4:02, they saw a man who had to be Severus Snape walking toward the bar. He was wearing a black suit and had shoulder length black hair. It was over a hundred degrees outside, but he seemed perfectly cool and appeared to be traveling with his own atmosphere, given the way the tail of his coat moved as if there was a breeze in the stifling humidity.

“I want to stand by him.” Kevin remarked before draining his tea.

Kendrah hopped up and met him at the door.

Severus

The weekend in New York had been as humid as any days he had ever experienced, but this New Orleans weather was on a different scale of miserable. He had already transfigured his robes into a suit, and he cast a cooling spell around him as soon as he left the little run-down hotel that served as the portkey station. The wizard at the desk had pointed him in the right direction, but he had poured over maps for the last hour and had a good idea where he was supposed to meet this Muggle constable.

He was just crossing the street when he saw a woman emerge from the bar. She was not in
uniform, but her title was detective, so plain clothes didn’t surprise him. She was black, and she was small and compact with her hair pulled back severely against her head, without a tendril out of place. She wore trousers and a white sleeveless blouse that managed to look both cool and professional. Her mouth was a perfect straight line. If Minerva was of African descent, he thought.

“Severus Snape?” she called out in a booming voice.

“Yes,” he tried to match her command and failed.

“It’s him,” she said to someone inside the bar. A man who appeared to be twenty years older than the woman emerged. He looked as if he could be a long lost Weasley. He had light skin and gingery hair. He was wearing a loose-fitting rumpled suit. His white shirt was unbuttoned at the top, and his tie hung slightly loose at the knot. “Mr. Snape,” the woman held out her hand and shook his firmly. “I’m Kendrah Johnson; this is my partner Kevin Connell.”

“Mr. Snape,” Connell had a warm voice that matched his expression. Johnson was clearly the boss of the two.

“We are going to my condo so I can show you some items and ask some questions; Lily will be home from work around six-thirty, so that should give us some time. She doesn’t know you are coming, so we need to handle that.”

“Your home?” It was more intimate than he was comfortable with.

“It will be easier and more comfortable for Lily. She has not been to our office before.”

He said nothing as the two prepared to climb into the enormous car parked on the side of the road. Johnson squinted her eyes at him when he didn’t immediately climb into the back seat.

“This is our work vehicle. Detective Connell is an excellent driver.”

“And feel free to call me Kevin.”

Snape noticed that Johnson did not make a similar offer, and neither did he. There was no need for that level of intimacy. He recognized the work dynamic between the partners, though, having played many rounds of this with Filius and Pomona when they were investigating petty offenses at school. He and Minerva would always be paired with a less intimidating colleague for best results.

The car seemed even larger on the inside. It had leather seats, and as soon as Connell started the ignition, a blast of cold air started circulating throughout. Severus noticed that Johnson immediately turned a vent directly on herself and tried to subtly twist her body for it to hit her armpits. He supposed one had to do what one must in a climate like this.

“So, you’re a Hogwarts grad?” The driver asked congenially. Snape kept his mouth closed.

“Slytherin, correct?” Johnson said. “Lily sorted me into Gryffindor.”

“Hufflepuff here,” Connell said, and Severus couldn’t hold back a snort.

“Lily thinks we are witches and wizards, Kevin and I and our spouses. She doesn’t talk about it with Muggles,” Johnson said. Severus suspected she could have been a Slytherin although perhaps he was reading the natural craftiness of detectives.

“Have you seen her…” he didn’t know how ask the question and not reveal too much.
“Do magic? Yes. But again, she is very careful in Muggle spaces. Growing up in a Muggle home made her quite aware of this.”

“You’re not, though…magical?” He thought of course they weren’t, but this conversation was the strangest he’d had in a while, perhaps ever.

“No, we’re not. Lily thinks we are her fellow students, though, and so we have been introduced to transfiguration and charms…a little potions. We started arithmancy this year.”

“You said she was between fourth and fifth year—or that she thinks she is?” He was trying to work all of this out and still maintain some skepticism so he could stay on guard.

“Yes.”

“We didn’t start arithmancy until sixth year.”

“Hmm,” Johnson seemed to be storing mental notes. “Before she started speaking and while she was at the care center, she used to fill up whole notebooks with numbers and symbols that we couldn’t decode. Then when we started arithmancy, it was similar although not as complicated. What do you know about her adult life? Did she have a job that involved arithmancy?”

Detective Johnson was serious and all-business in tone, but she was clearly invested in this case and Lily herself.

“I don’t know much about her life. I didn’t see her…corpse when she died, but people I trust did. She was killed protecting her child.”

“Except, apparently, she wasn’t. Can you think of an explanation? Magical, I mean.”

“There is no cheating death.”

“But any spells…potions?”

“Perhaps. I couldn’t speculate.” He had run every scenario in his head for years. He had several theories.

She was quiet for a few blocks. They left the downtown area and entered a large road filled completely with cars.

“Sorry about traffic. Bad time of day,” Connell said.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, and then Johnson resumed the questions.

“The night of the hit and run, Lily and the male looked different than they did a few hours later. They had blond hair and light skin and resembled each other. The next time we saw them, Lily was a redhead and the male had dark hair and much sharper features.”

“They were probably wearing glamours—charmed disguises.”

“I have asked Lily hypotheticals trying to find out the answer to this, but she never had an idea.”

“It is not something taught in the first years of school.”

“They could magically alter their appearances, and then these glamours could…wear off because of unconsciousness or death?”
“The spells last a certain length of time, typically twelve hours. If they were not re-cast, they would expire, and the witch or wizard would retain the natural appearance.”

Johnson glanced at Connell and then began a new subject.

“Lily’s son?” She turned back to face him.

Snape waited for her to continue. She tried to outlast him, but she wouldn’t. After about a minute, she gave in. “He’s well? Does he know about any of this?”

“I don’t know about any of this,” he retorted then sighed. If this was true, he was going to have to involve Potter eventually. “He’s fine. Married. A child on the way…”

“Lily’s going to be a grandma!” Connell burst out in pure delight, and Snape noticed Johnson was considerably more reticent. This is going to be fraught. She could have said it out loud, and so could have Snape.

“He and his…in-laws are on holiday in New Zealand for the month.”

Neither he nor Hermione had slept a moment since they had read Detective Johnson’s letter. Hermione had wanted to contact Potter immediately, but Snape had talked her out of it. He didn’t believe any of it until he spoke with Johnson on the phone, and even then, he had serious doubts.

When he found out that this woman claiming to be Lily thought herself to be fifteen and knew about their summer in Cokeworth, his mind started churning. Perhaps it was Petunia. He hadn’t seen her in years. Perhaps it was another girl from their year—someone who had heard Lily’s stories. The appearance would not be difficult to mimic. Hermione was convinced it was Lily as soon as she saw photo. One cannot fake eyes. He knew that, too, but he was still skeptical.

“I should go, too.” Hermione had insisted. “It sounds like clear magical delusion, and not even a serious case. Certainly nothing like Frank and Alice. Or Sirius.”

He had refused. She had those Americans healers coming to the hospital, and if it were a hoax, it would be such a waste of time. It was hard enough to be away from SNAPE again after their holiday to New York.

“If it is true,” Hermione had said, “Harry will be furious we didn’t contact him immediately, Severus.” She had her head in her hands. She had never regained a true friendship with Weasley, but Potter was as close as a brother. He couldn’t consider that right then, though.

He had felt the tension creep up again to its highest level, settling in his neck and shoulders and making his stomach churn.

No, she couldn’t come yet, and no, they couldn’t tell Potter yet. He wasn’t sure what hurdle he would have to clear to believe any of this, but he certainly wasn’t there yet.

If it were true, it was he that the police had contacted, not Potter. He would have to share this eventually with Hermione and Potter, but that did not have to be today.

As they put more distance between them and the city, the traffic started to thin and the car was hurtling down the road. He almost never traveled this way, and it was one more disconcerting aspect of this whole bizarre episode.

“Almost there,” Johnson said, as if she could read his thoughts. “We should have time to talk for an hour or so before Lily is home.”
“She drives herself?” he said incredulously.

“No, she usually takes the bus,” Connell explained. “My wife is going to pick her up tonight. Lily works at the yogurt shop my brother-in-law owns.”

“She works at a dairy?” The question was out of his mouth before he could stop it. Do not engage them.

“It’s like an ice cream place,” Johnson said tersely.

“She’s worked there for four years or so. She has a library job, too. She shelves books. She’s so smart, Mr. Snape,” Connell said with obvious affection. “She’s underemployed, but she thinks she’s a kid, and that would present some problems. She has been doing some freelance…”

Johnson’s head whipped towards him, and he stopped talking immediately. That was intriguing. Snape kept his follow-up questions to himself.

Connell exited the major road onto a smaller one that led to an area with rows and rows of flats interspersed with shops of all kinds and restaurants.

“This is Metairie, where we all live,” Connell informed him. Snape had been trying to place his accent. He was far from an expert of American dialects, but both Connell and Johnson spoke differently than other Americans from the South he had heard. It sounded like a hybrid of southern drawl and the way people had spoken in New York, except with hard rrrrrrrrrrs in some words like Mehtahrrrrrrrrreeee.

He wondered if the woman in question really was Lily, how she had ended up here of all places on earth. If she and Potter had been part of the wizarding community here, why had they left her in the care of these Muggles?

Connell pulled into a carpark in front of a row of flats. The grounds were covered in plants and trees that looked to be suffering under the prodigious heat. Johnson was out of the car in a flash and bounding up the steps before Snape had figured out how to unbuckle himself. Connell moved more leisurely.

“I gave up trying to keep up with Kendrah years ago,” he chuckled.

Snape preferred the Kendrah pace and had almost caught up to her as she unlocked the door and stepped inside and then stood in front of the open door as if to welcome him. He wasn’t wearing his billowing robe, but he tried to emulate its command as he swept in.

Kendrah

Despite his uncooperativeness and reticence, Kendrah did not dislike Severus Snape. He was guarded, but that was to be expected. He seemed to be simultaneously outraged, inconvenienced, dubious, skeptical in the extreme, and yet concerned and devoted. He reminded her of Mama.

He had entered her home as if he owned it, but she sensed overcompensation.

“Water, lemonade, iced tea, iced coffee, hot beverage, something stronger?” she rattled off, to regain control of this room. She strode to the table that was her home workspace as well as where
they all ate. She had laid out the evidence before she met Kevin that day to drive to the meeting place. She pulled a chair out for Snape, and he sat. His eyes were pouring over the items. He ignored her question.

“Water for me,” Kevin called out from the door. Kendrah walked to the kitchen, allowing Snape to continue to look at the evidence. She put three glasses of water and ice on the counter that separated the kitchen from the little area with the table and then swung back around so she could hand him specific pieces.

“These are the clothes they were wearing that night,” she indicated a pile. “Hers were all from Target, down to the underwear. You don’t have Target in the UK.” His face remained fixed in its unreadable, neutral expression. “He was wearing this t-shirt he had bought in the French Quarter that day—we have a witness—and these.” She picked up the folded trousers and shook them out, with her hands at the top. “They are not machine made, and they have this crescent-shaped button-fly and a built-in under-garment.” She turned the pants partially out to show him. “Are you familiar with the style?”

“They are wizard-tailored trousers. Standard wear.”

“He told the vendor he bought the shirt because the one he was wearing had been hit with a flying drink. We never found the original shirt. What would he wear with these?”

“I wouldn’t have any idea.”

“What would you wear with these?”

“I wouldn’t wear them,” he sneered at the khaki pants.

Kendrah sighed internally but tried to conceal it. She pulled two pages from a file on the table.

“These are drawings of the two victims that night.”

“You have photographs?”

“We do; they’re graphic.”

“I would like to see them.”

Kendrah pulled the photos from the same file. “The male’s eyes were dark brown. I retracted his eyelids to check but didn’t photograph it. The female’s eyes remained closed at the scene.” She let Snape study the photos. “You mentioned disguises you called glamours?”

“I couldn’t tell from these,” he said, continuing with the disgusted tone.

“The hit and run occurred at the end of our shift,” she indicated Kevin. “When we arrived at the hospital approximately thirteen hours later, the appearance of the female victim had changed.” She pulled the next photo one from that day. His eyebrows shot up before he could control them. Bingo. “We then went to the morgue and found the male victim had changed in appearance as well.” She handed him another photo. This time he kept his reaction covered.

“These were found on the victims that night. He had a built-in pocket in his trousers for it; she had a small elastic band sewn into the waistband of her skirt.” Kendrah opened a plastic box and produced the two wooden sticks. Lily kept hers by her bedside table now, but Kendrah had retrieved it and put it with the other one for the sake of the show. She placed both in front of Snape. He touched Lily’s immediately.
“Do you recognize it?” Kendrah asked softly.

“Yes.”

“The other?”

Snape’s mouth twisted in disgust. It seemed as if he recognized it as well. *Not a fan of James Potter.*

“I would have no idea.”

*Bullshit.*

“Lily talks about James Potter like he is not her friend. When did that change?”

“I don’t know.”

“When did they marry?”

“Some time after we were out of school.”

“Were they a romantic couple while they were in school?”

“I have no idea.”

He was so filled with pain it was practically oozing from his pores, but she realized he would was not going to speak of it or offer any help with these questions. She wanted to ask him how he viewed that summer romance she had been following in the journal; what had gone wrong, and how Lily had ended up with James Potter, but it would be a waste of time.

“Mr. Snape, do you think our male victim is James Potter? I’m not asking for scientific certainty, just your gut opinion.”

She expected him to repeat his mantra again.

“It would appear to be so.”

She nodded her head, hiding the relief she felt. She had been worried that he would refuse to speak with Lily and hurt her as a result. He was at least accepting that this wasn’t a complete fabrication.

“Does she not use her wand?” Snape had been clutching it since Kendrah presented it to him.

“She does, but she leaves it here when she’s at work. She doesn’t do a lot with it except for school work.”

“How is she able to work under this degree of delusion?”

Kendrah sighed, letting her wall drop a bit as he had. “I’m not sure. She refers to feeling like she lives in two worlds, but only in her journal. She manages quite well at work.”

“She shares her journal with you?”

“No, and I probably shouldn’t have read it. The line between friend and investigative officer gets blurred sometimes.”

“The arithmancy?” Kevin suggested quietly to move them away from that subject. Snape sat up
straighter in his seat at the word.

Kendrah retrieved one and handed one of Lily’s pre-verbal journals to him. “She recognizes it now, but it’s too advanced for her to read as fourth year.”

“This is beyond my…” He became distracted looking at the lines in the journal.

“About her thinking it was a fourth-year class—perhaps it bled through because it’s significant.”

“She had a talent for it but wasn’t terribly interested at the time.”

“You were friends during sixth year?”

“We had the class together. The professor encouraged her; Evans…was…casually dismissive about the field of study.”

Question evaded, then.

“Lily will be home in ten minutes,” Kevin said, glancing at his phone. “Would either of you care for a drink? I think I might raid Marcus’s whiskey collection.”

“My husband. He’s out of town,” she explained to Snape. “I could open a bottle of wine if you would prefer.”

Snape shook his head. She wasn’t planning to drink either, but Kevin poured himself a glass.

“Perhaps you should wait in her room until I speak with her?” Kendrah suggested. “I suspect she will be thrilled to see you, but I would like to prepare her. I didn’t mention anything this morning.”

Without a word, Snape stood and looked toward the entrance to the part of the condo with the bedrooms.

“How through here, and bring her wand, she keeps it by her bed.”

Snape followed her, gripping the wand as if he were afraid he would drop it. She led him into the cheery bedroom. The bed was still covered with Kendrah’s quilt from her high school era bedroom. The walls were decorated with Lily’s drawings—mostly the Hogwarts grounds—and photos of her with Kendrah and Kevin’s families. Snape was immediately drawn to a drawing of a lake with trees surrounding it. He placed one finger on it. He moved on to a picture of Lily and Marcus after one his performances and seemed to be studying it.

“My husband is an actor. That was The Lion King.”

He looked baffled.

“It’s musical; the characters are animals.”

Snape continued to look at the photo. Lily had her arms wrapped around Marcus with her face pressed against his and looked positively gleeful, which was not rare for her. “I’ll come get you, okay? As soon as she gets here.”

She wasn’t sure Snape heard her as he had no reaction, but she left him there to prepare for Lily.

Chapter End Notes
Kendrah's first sighting of Severus is a small homage to Dickens's description of Jacob Marley in stave one of *A Christmas Carol*. 
Chapter Two: Severus

Chapter Two

Severus

It was Lily. Every picture on her bedroom wall revealed it. He gripped her wand tightly in his hand. Johnson had instructed him in her own unambiguous way that he should place it on the nightstand. He was contemplating that when he saw the journal there by the lamp.

*Leave it alone. Leave it alone. Leave it alone.*

He picked it up and placed her wand next to his in the slot at his hip, under his jacket. They used to lay their wands next to each other on the little crate by his bed that he used as a table in his room.

He started thumbing through the journal. There were many pages of arithmancy mixed in with many pages of looping script he remembered from their school days. They were journal entries, all dated from the summer of 1975. He flipped to the last page, which had yesterday’s day and month.

22 August 1975

The writing was so familiar, neat, and what he would classify after twenty years of reading student work, feminine.

*Put it down.*

He began to read.

*One more week of summer until our return to school. This is the part of the break that I am usually counting the days, and for many reasons I am this year too, but d.j., you know there is a very good reason I don’t want to go back.*

*Sev and I have already discussed that we won’t be able to have contact at school. It would cause problems for us both, and if we were to give into temptation and be caught somewhere at school, we could both be expelled. Neither of us can risk it.*

*So I must savour every moment we have left. He drifted off to sleep yesterday afternoon, and I spent twenty minutes tracing my finger up and down his chest, memorizing every inch. I could map every hair, every little mark, every rib that protrudes too much, every muscle on his left arm. (His right was wrapped around me.) Finally, I was bored and moved my hand down, which woke him up promptly, and given his expression, pleasantly.*

The entry ended there. He pictured her writing the words in the bed he was facing, and growing too tired, placing it on the table to continue in the next night.

He searched his memory for the afternoon she described. He thought he could catalogue every encounter, but he couldn’t place that one. Perhaps her memory was different or altered, or perhaps it was a day he just remembered differently. He wanted to read every word, but he heard Johnson and Connell walk to the front door, and then voices filled the space. He replaced the journal on the
table without a sound and then laid her wand beside it. He silently walked to the door so he could hear as much as possible.

“Good day?” he heard Johnson say.

“Fine; I was surprised Patty was there to pick me up.”

That voice. It was unmistakable. Her accent had changed again; it was more American in a way that was like the police officers, but in tone and timbre it was just the same. He put his hand on the doorframe to steady himself. He could pick that voice out of a thousand.

“And Kevin is here for dinner,” she sounded pleased at the discovery. “Patty made fried chicken.”

Severus was on the verge of not being able to stand.

“Yes, and there is another guest, too, Lily,” Johnson said so gently, her former police detective tone completely gone.

“Marcus is home!” Lily sounded thrilled.

“No, not Marcus. Severus is here.”

“Severus? Sev? He’s here for dinner?” She sounded gleeful.

He steeled himself against tears that were threatening to burst out.

YOU WILL NOT!

He was sucking in air as deeply as he could and trying using every mental technique to stay in control. His pulse returned to normal. The hint of tears was gone. He plastered a neutral expression on his face.

“Severus?” Johnson called, as if he were her friend, too. He strode out of the room as cocksure as he could muster and entered the living space by the table that was now clear of the items Johnson had shown him earlier.

“Sev!”

He looked across the room at the woman with that voice. She was the same size as the last time he had seen her. Her red hair was in a bunch at the top of her head, and she held a red cap in her hand. She was wearing a short-sleeved cotton shirt that had a cow with a big, red bow between its ears and the word *Marley’s* in large block letters on the front. She wore tight denim trousers that were cuffed and ended at her knees and red canvas plimsolls. This forty-four-year-old woman was dressed like an American teenager. She sprang toward him and threw her arms around his neck.

“Lily,” he managed to say, but barely.

She detached herself and gave him a slightly confused look. “Lily?” She mimicked his tone.

“Evans,” he corrected himself, which made her laugh. She planted herself next to him, her front at his side. She took one of his hands and wound her fingers through just like they used to do and sighed deeply.

“Sev, you look old. So do I. Why are you wearing that?”

He said the first thought that came to his mind to explain his attire. “I had to go into town.
Mum…” he said it quietly, so only she could hear,

She nodded her head, saving him from having to elaborate. She put a finger on the side of his left eye. “Lines. I have them, too.” She turned her face up to his and then brushed his mouth with hers.

He felt the need to grip on to her tightly so he could stand upright. Evans was pressed against him and kissing him. It was not possible.

“Lily, darlin’, would you help me get the rest of the food out of the car?”

There was another woman in the room, a petite brunette in a knee-length skirt and sleeveless blouse like Johnson’s.

“Mr. Snape, eh, Severus,” Connell said, changing tactics after a look from his partner. “This is my wife, Patty. Patty, Severus Snape.”

“Severus, I have been just dyin’ to meet you. Lily talks aboucha all the time.” The small woman bolted forth with her hand extended. He shook it, and she placed her other one on top. She looked him in the eyes and breathed in and out in an instructive way. “It’s okay,” she mouthed. He commanded his face—horrified with what it must be showing to elicit that reaction—back to its neutral position.

“Come on, Lil,” The woman squeezed his hand and looked at him closely again and then turned back to Lily.

The two women left out the door, and Connell moved toward him quickly. “You lost all your color, Mr. Snape. You should sit down.” Johnson was on his other side and gripped his arm.

He jerked it away, harder than he really wanted to. “Sorry,” he addressed Johnson. “I am fine.” He wasn’t quite fine, though, and he took a seat at the table.

“How about that whiskey?” Connell said.

Snape gave him a slight nod.

“Positive identification,” Johnson said. He didn’t deny it. “You have a girlfriend, is that correct? Ms. Granger?”

“Yes.”

“It’s going to be difficult with Lily; we will try to run interference with her.”

“My…partner, Ms. Granger may be able to help her. She is a healer. She specializes in this sort of case—it’s not uncommon for us, for magical folk, to be in this kind of state after an injury. I will speak with her soon,” he managed to say.

Hermione had sent him with the mobile. She was going to purchase another one as soon as the shops opened in the morning and planned to contact him immediately.

Connell’s wife and Lily came back through the door, laden with containers. Connell and Johnson snapped to. Connell handed him a short glass of amber liquid, and Snape took a drink, blessing it as it went down. Johnson and Connell brought out cloths and plates and cutlery as Lily and Mrs. Connell opened containers.

“Kevin got out Marcus’s whiskey,” Lily said in mock scolding.
“Do you want some?” Kevin asked her, but she made a face that communicated clearly she did not.

“Wine, Lily?” Kendrah asked.

“Lemonade, please. It is soooooo hot today; it’s still hot!”

This set off a five-minute discussion of the weather, which gave Snape a moment to regain his bearings. Finally, Lily tried to draw him in.

“This is not the kind of weather we used to have at home, is it, Sev?”

“No.”

“We are lucky if we have one or two lovely days each month in the summer. Spring and Autumn are so nice here. And the winters are hardly anything. The Scottish winters are miserable.”

She spoke in and out of time and place. The rest of the group seemed used to it, but it was glaring to Snape.

The food was fried chicken pieces that the whole group was eating out of their hands. He tried to follow. It was warm and probably delicious given the faces of the others, but he was having trouble tasting anything aside from the whiskey. There were also cold dishes, a potato one with vegetables and pickles that he was loathed to try although he didn’t want to be impolite. There was cold cabbage, carrots and red onion in a vinegar sauce that wasn’t terrible, and there were large, white buns with a texture like that of scones. The others, including Lily who was acting as if all this food was familiar, were splitting the buns, slathering them with butter, and then pouring honey on top. He was not at all hungry, he realized, but he hadn’t eaten a decent-sized meal since they had been in New York however many hours ago. He felt that the bread might be the easiest to digest of this food, so he ate one between sips of whiskey.

He tried not to stare at Lily, but it was difficult. She looked very much like an older version of her fifteen-year-old self but acted the same although clearly less burdened. Her family situation wasn’t as awful as his, but she was certainly not privileged. This current Lily had a blitheness of spirit that the earlier version lacked. It was charming, but it reminded him of how much he loved the original.

He wondered what she had been like before the accident. There were so many questions that were piling into his head. The table had grown quiet, he realized.

“Marley’s and library tomorrow, Lily?” Mrs. Connell asked to break the silence.

“Yes, double-shift Friday. Sev, you are at the pub? You’re not working tonight?”

He didn’t know how to answer.

“We will drop him off there when we leave,” Connell said. Apparently, the sleeping arrangements had been discussed, which made him feel, to his horror, conflicted.

She thinks we’re fifteen, and anyway, you are not single.

Lily started clearing the table unprompted. Her hand lingered on his shoulder as she reached for his plate.

“You didn’t eat much, Sev, are you not hungry?”

“Not especially. It was quite good,” he said to Mrs. Connell.
“Perhaps not what you’re used to; it’s okay,” Mrs. Connell said soothingly. “Peach pie for dessert, and we brought some Marley’s to put on top.”

Suddenly there was activity everywhere. They were storing food and stacking dishes in the sink, rinsing them. Johnson was cutting the pie, and Lily was topping each with a scoop of something that resembled vanilla ice cream but wasn’t. She didn’t use any magic in the kitchen, he noticed. Soon they were all seated again at the table and eating the pie and yogurt, neither one was bad. He didn’t dare have another drink before he talked to Hermione.

The conversation drifted to September and the coming school year. They all played along with Lily that they were looking forward to returning. He wondered if this placating her helped, but he supposed it was the kindest option.

“Well, we need to be getting on home,” Connell said after he had taken his last bite of pie.

“Patty, that dinner was amazing, thank you so much,” Johnson said, as they began the process again of table clearing and washing up. For people who didn’t use charms they could certainly complete tasks efficiently.

Hermione occasionally cleaned the Muggle way. She said it helped her clear her head and think fondly of her childhood. He had snorted at the idea, but witnessing this display, it made more sense.

The Connells started making their slow departure.

“Detective Johnson, could I speak with you a moment?” he asked before he was swept out the door.

“You can call her Kendrah,” Lily laughed.

“Kendrah,” he repeated.

“Sure, Severus,” Johnson said with a glance at Lily. “I’ll be right back. Find something on TV.”

Lily scurried around to him just as he was at the door. “Goodnight,” she went in to kiss him on the mouth, and he turned his head so she got his cheek instead, but he allowed himself to embrace her and did not want to let go.

“Oh, okay,” Johnson said, and he broke away. Lily turned back to the sitting area and picked up a little black box that she pointed at the television. Johnson put her hand on his upper arm and gently pushed him out the door.

She gave him a look that communicated feeling overwhelmed.

Indeed.

“I will speak to Ms. Granger sometime tonight and make arrangements for her to travel here. When Lily is restored, it will be as if she is back at the time of the accident, but she will retain the memories she has had since.”

Johnson nodded without revealing her feelings on the matter.

“You and you colleagues have done more than…” He found it hard to express what he was feeling. “My previous experience with law enforcement did not lead me to be terribly optimistic about this…situation, but…”
“She has become a part of our family, as you can see. However, she we always knew she had another place she belonged and people of her own. I know you will want to take her back, and she will most likely want to go back...if she can be restored.”

He nodded. “Thank you, Detective Johnson.” He turned to walk to the car. The Connells were in another vehicle, one that resembled a small lorry. He climbed into the backseat.

“Kendrah’ll drive the cruiser into work tomorrow; we thought we’d take the Explorer,” Connell said and seemed to think that Snape understood any of that. He didn’t ask for clarification. They had the radio turned to twangy music he didn’t recognize, but he hoped it would eliminate the need for conversation.

The drive to the Connells’ house was only about five minutes but the area changed once they turned off the major road. Instead of rows of flats, their neighborhood was filled with huge, residential lots behind extensive grounds. The Connell’s home would take at least a third of his street in London. There was a long parking lane beside the house that Mrs. Connell pulled into. They entered the house under a covered area on the side. There was an entry way that led to a large kitchen from which he could see a vast expanse of living space broken up for different uses: a dining area, a sitting area, a more informal spot lined with bookshelves. He wondered if they lived here by themselves, and Connell acted as if he had heard those thoughts.

“Our kids are grown. The grandbabies come over and stay some with Patty during the week in the summer, but it’s probably too much just for us.”

“Hush, Kevin,” Mrs. Connell said. “Severus, do you have a change of clothes or anything to sleep in? I can round up something of Kevin’s.”

He had minimized his things into a small case in the pocket of his trousers. “I have what I need, thank you.”

“You don’t have to go to bed yet; Kendrah and I have a shift at seven, so we retire early,” Connell said.

“Lily is supposed to work tomorrow, but we can call her out if you want to us to,” Mrs. Connell offered.

“That won’t be necessary. I will try to arrange for the healer to be here tomorrow, and then we can proceed.” He felt another pang of guilt referring to Hermione as the healer. And the guilt kept coming in waves as he wondered what Lily was doing and wishing he could have stayed in the flat with her and just talked or listen to her talk all night instead of being ushered to this foreign house with these strange people.

The sitting room was filled with photographs, several of Kendrah and her husband; a few with Lily. Mrs. Connell showed him to the guest room that was slightly smaller than the whole ground floor of his house, larger if one counted the attached lav.

He removed his clothes and stood under the shower head until the water ran cold. He dried himself with an enormous towel and then changed into clean underwear and a cotton shirt, leaving his trousers within reach in case he needed to bolt from this place.

He pulled out the mobile and placed it by his head on the pillow. He didn’t think his mind would slow enough for sleep to come, but he hadn’t had more than a few moments since they returned from New York, and his body took over. He drifted off thinking about the lab and warehouse and
hoping he would still have a business if he were ever able to return home.

His next conscious thought was the phone chirping next to his head. He fumbled with it, and for moments was afraid he would be unable to answer and not be able to call back. Finally, he could mash the correct button.

“Severus?”

“Hermione. Thank Merlin.”

“Were you asleep? I’m sorry. What time is…”

“I’m fine. It’s her.”

He heard Hermione gasp before speaking. “No doubt?”

“None. She was with Potter. He is dead. She has been here since February ’97. I can hardly… ’97, Hermione. Before…”

“Before Dumbledore… Do you think he knew?”

“I would imagine he knew something. She has no memory of anything beyond our fourth year.” Beyond that summer anyway, though he couldn’t begin to delve into those details at the moment. He had never spoken in any kind of specifics with Hermione about his friendship with Lily and had never even hinted that it had been at all more serious. He would have to now, he realized. His head started pounding immediately, and his chest felt tight.

“She thinks she’s fifteen and it’s…what year?”

“1975.”

“Wow. Should I make arrangements to come?”

“As soon as possible, ideally this morning. I took the portkey into a small hotel in the wizard section downtown. I am staying in a suburb, I think. I can get into town in the morning, though, and meet you. Lily is working two jobs tomorrow, but you could begin to treat her in the evening.”

“Severus, slow down. I can’t understand half of what you are saying. Lily is there with the police woman and has a job?”

“She has two jobs. The woman…detective is her friend and lets Lily live in her flat. There are other people involved. Lily seems quite content…” he sighed. It was all still so shocking and he was still so exhausted. “But she should be restored, yes?”

“Of course! She must be reunited with Harry. He will be thrilled, and the new baby will be here soon!”

Hermione was not conflicted at all. There was another wave of guilt. He put his hand to his forehead.

“I’m sorry to call you out here when you have so much going on at work.”

“Severus, you cannot be serious. Of course I’m going to be there. We must heal her and bring her back. Can you imagine what that’s going to be like? For everyone, I mean. Everyone thinks she’s dead. And…ooooooh, Harry. I am so happy for him!”
He could hear her start to cry.

“Thank you, Hermione, for all of this. Do you think you could be here by ten A.M. New Orleans time? That would be four P.M. London time.”

“Yes, that’s perfect. That gives me six hours to make arrangements here.”

“Please don’t tell Potter yet, Hermione.” He could hear his desperation coming through his words.

“No, I’ll wait until I treat her. Hopefully Harry will be so overcome with happiness that he will forgive me.”

He gave her specific instructions of the portkey she should take and that he would be there in the hotel when she arrived. They hung up, and he contemplated trying to go back to sleep, realizing quickly it was a lost cause. He showered again, cleaned his clothes, and dressed. He quietly went downstairs just before five and found a room with full bookshelves. He took a novel off a shelf and began reading about a solicitor in Mississippi who was trying to win compensation for his clients who had been poisoned in an environmental incident.

At six-thirty, he heard someone come downstairs, so he replaced the book on the shelf and joined Mrs. Connell in the kitchen. She foisted coffee on him, which turned out to be excellent, and then set to work preparing breakfast and packing a lunch for her husband and his partner.

“Marcus and I are the support team,” she said. He wondered if she worked outside the home, but didn’t want to be overly familiar.

“I am meeting Ms. Granger, the healer, at ten,” he told her to inform her of his departure.

“Would you like me to run you into the city? She is arriving in Tremé as well?”

“Yes, she is, the same place. Thank you, but I can travel there easily. I will leave from your garden in the back, if that’s acceptable to you. It won’t damage anything.”

“That’s fine. My little human brain has a hard time comprehending all this, though I have spent enough time with Lily not to doubt it.”

“There is no reason you should understand it.” He struggled to find words to express what he wanted to her. “Your compassion to her, Mrs. Connell, is admirable. There are few interactions witches and wizards have had with non-magical folk that have been so…positive.”

“You give us too much credit. Our friend needed a little help, and we did what we could. She’s a lovely person and has been a blessing to us. I’m not sure my brother will be able to run the yogurt shop without her, but like Kendrah says, she should be with her people. What is her son like?”

Snape swallowed his coffee. “Her son is lauded in our society. He is considered…he is a hero.”

“Why? What did he do?”

“We had a war a few years ago. He was the seminal figure.”

“Really?!” Her neat little eyebrows shot up. “He is…how old? Young to be a war hero. She must have had him young.”

“He is…he recently turned twenty-four. He was seventeen during the chief events.”

“She’s forty-four, so twenty when she had him. Is that young to have a child in your society?”
“It varies. It’s not unusual.”

She was frying rashers of bacon, and she started cracking eggs into the cast-iron skillet. He realized he was starving. Pieces of bread went into slots on a machine on her counter. Connell joined them in the kitchen just as his wife was beginning to plate breakfast. He kissed her lightly on the mouth.

“Thank you, dear.”

Severus accepted his own full plate with much gratitude. There was a collection of jams on the table, and he selected a lovely looking orange marmalade.

“When will Lily be finished with work today?” he asked the couple.

“She has library this morning and yogurt this afternoon. She should be done by six-thirty again. Will that be enough time?”

“I will consult with Healer Granger today. We might wait until morning.”

“I will call both works and tell them she won’t be in tomorrow,” Mrs. Connell said.

“Thank you.”

He tried, awkwardly, to help with the washing up after Connell left for work, but Mrs. Connell shooed him away.

“I believe I will go ahead and travel into town, so I can look around before Healer Granger arrives.”

“Absolutely. Do you have Kendrah’s number so you can communicate with her about plans for tonight and tomorrow.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“You and Ms. Granger are welcome to stay here tonight as well. She is your…you are together, correct?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

She showed him the way into the large back garden. He stepped out and found a suitable place under a large, spreading tree and then began the apparition spell.

He landed in the hotel lobby, empty save the little wizard he had seen the day before.

“Mr. Snape?” he said.

“I am meeting someone taking a portkey from London at ten,” he informed the wizard.

“I’ll be here,” he said, returning to the parchment on the high desk.

Snape stepped out into the already hot morning though not so hot he needed a cooling charm yet. There was a wizarding café next door, a library, apothecary, wand shop, what looked like a government office, and several taverns on the street. There was a lot of activity. The magical folk looked like their counterparts in New York with colourful, though more casual robes. He took a turn around the block and then settled at the café with a cup of coffee. He wished he had asked Mrs. Connell to borrow that book. He was already on chapter five. He decided to buy a pen and journal to keep notes in and give him some occupation in situations like this, if only to reduce the awkwardness. He walked over to the apothecary and made his purchase and then returned to the
café to use the public floo.

“Mr. Snape?” His second in command at SNAPE, Hyacinth Beatty, answered from the warehouse floo.

“Sorry I had to leave with so little notice.”

“It has been no problem, Sir. Everything is swimming along. Miss you of course,” she added.

*I’m sure.*

“I won’t be back for several days. If I can’t be home by Monday, I will arrange for the brews. You are all capable of it.”

“Yes, Sir. Thank you. Don’t worry about SNAPE, Sir.”

“No. Thank you.”

There were no visible uncontrolled fires or other damage, so that was reassuring.

At nine forty-five, he went back to the hotel to wait for Hermione. It was deserted and quiet until five after ten, when there was a crack and she appeared in the lobby holding a small garden spade. He strode to her and took her into his arms.

“Severus,” she said, sounding mildly surprised. They had seen each other the day before. This display was rather silly, but he felt himself regain his bearings with her pressed against him.

He kissed her mouth and then let her go.

“Do I turn this in…?” She held up the spade.

“To the desk. Would you like to walk around the city? I haven’t had a chance yet, and Lily won’t be home from work until early this evening.”

“What are her jobs? She must be able to function quite…”

“Oh, yes. She was always responsible; older than her chronological age.” He paused a moment at the irony. “She works at some kind of ice cream shop. We ate it with pudding yesterday; they call it yoghurt.”

“Frozen yoghurt. It is rather like soft-serve ice cream.”

“She also works as a clerk at the library.”

“She manages while thinking she’s at school?”

“No one grasps how exactly, but she does. She seems to be living alternate existences without it concerning her for the most part.”

“It will be a challenging recovery, not from the treatment, but because of how much her life will change. She will have plenty of support, though.” Hermione seemed to be trying to convince herself.

They were walking through an enormous park on the way to the French Quarter.

“This weather,” Hermione muttered.
Snape cast a cooling charm on them. He paused when they reached Ramparts to cross.

“This was where they were hit by the car. Not here exactly, down that block, I think.” He could see the petrol station mentioned in Johnson’s report. “They were leaving the French Quarter in the middle of the night. It was during a festival.”

“Mardi Gras.”

“Yes.”

“So they were tourists?”

“That is the theory. Detective Johnson did not investigate the wizarding community here, but surely someone would have come forward if they were locals. Can you imagine if an incident had happed at home?”

“They would have been in our control and everyone else would have been obliviated within hours.”

“Yes, so I surmise no one in the community recognized them. They had glamours during the time of the accident, but the detectives ran both sets of sketches in the press and on posters for months after.”

“None of it makes sense. We should be careful about demanding too much information from her at first.”

“Of course.”

They had crossed into the French Quarter and were strolling along. It was becoming hotter by the moment and again oppressively humid, but the residents and business owners clearly took great care to have thriving plants hanging from every surface, dripping with water from long hose nozzles. They made it down to the river just before noon and decided to stop in a sidewalk café for something to eat. Hermione was chatting about work and the upcoming visit, and Snape was growing more tense knowing the subject he must broach.

They ordered sandwiches and cold tea with lemon, which was better than he would have imagined.

“Did she react to you as her friend? Had your…falling out happened already? How did she greet you?”

The time had come.

“We were still friends after fourth year. The…incident happened after OWLs.”

“That’s right,” she said, mostly to herself.

“We had been friends since before we started school.”

Hermione nodded, encouraging him to go on. He had said almost nothing about his past, and she had always been very careful not to pry.

“When we finally arrived first year, we were significantly different from the other students. There were a few other Muggle-borns, and half-bloods were quite uncommon at the time, but I wasn’t the only one. However, no one came from a place like Muggle Cokeworth. Lily wasn’t as desperately poor as we were, but her family was not at all well off. The other Muggle-borns were without exception posh. And the wizarding poor were like the Weasleys. Second-hand robes but never a
day without good-sized meals.” He paused to wipe some crumbs off the table. There was extreme poverty in the magical world, but none of those families were sending their children to Hogwarts.

“You and Lily had a common bond, despite the sorting…”

“Yes. We gave each other a wide berth at school for that reason, but when we returned home, we tended to pick up where we had left off, at least in the first years. It did change when we were older. We weren’t meeting in the park every afternoon in the summer. After third year, I don’t think I saw her more than two or three times. I had Muggle friends as did she, and they were different crowds. The next summer, though, we were at the same gathering at the very beginning of the break.”

“And you were friends that summer. The critical summer; where she thinks she is now?”

“Yes. We were friends. We were more than that. We were lovers that summer,” he said quietly.

The shock painted her face bright scarlet. Her mouth fell open before she shut her jaw and breathed visibly.

“Lovers? You were fifteen!”

“Yes?”

“You were having sex when you were fifteen? I thought you lost your virginity during the Death Eater days.”

“I never said that.”

“You led me to believe it.”

“Did I?”

Perhaps I assumed it. You’ve never said anything about any of it, Severus.” She sounded terribly hurt.

“I’m sorry. I should have. I hate talking about those times because they were mostly awful. That summer is the only happy memory I have for most of the first part of my life. The way I grew up, people didn’t save themselves for the future. I had started shagging a girl the summer before. Lily and I were best friends during our summer, but we spent most of the time in my bed.”

“You had sex when you were fourteen, and you didn’t think that was something to discuss with me? I have told you everything about my life, and…I realize I know nothing about yours.”

“That is not true. You know…”

“I know the parts you’ve allowed me to.”

He did not have a retort for that. He had kept a lot of his life for himself because he didn’t know when this would be over, when she would leave. It would be so much more painful if he had allowed her in more deeply. This was not something he could speak of in that moment.

“You are right, Hermione. I am sorry.”

She sighed. “This has all happened so quickly. It’s still hard for me to fathom that she’s alive. I had no idea you two were so close. That makes your…break up…was it a break up?”
She looked devastated, but she was making such an effort to support him. He felt another wave of guilt. “In a sense. We were not together at school; we almost never spoke unless it was in class, and even then, very rarely. We had been in my room over Christmas and my father had almost walked in on us, but I got her out in time. Those two terms, we would communicate via look. It was understood that we would make a plan that summer to finish school, know what we wanted to do, and get the hell out of Cokeworth as soon as possible.”

“So that does make the way she…left you more awful. You apologized?”

“I did, but she was rightfully hurt. She was coming to my rescue, and I was humiliated, and I took it out on her. She had every right…”

“No, that was petty. Small of her…” She was angry on his behalf, he realized.

“No, Hermione. It was all just terrible timing. They found out her mother was terminally ill that summer, and then she started in with Potter in the autumn term. I was mortified and handled it poorly. I don’t blame her.”

She sighed. “It is so hot.” She sounded exhausted. He subtly put his wand on the table and intensified the cooling charm around them.

“We could go back to Metairie and make a plan for tonight. I was over at the flat where she lives last night. I bought a journal to take notes in.”

She smiled as if she found that charming.

“They have this miraculous innovation called air conditioning, and the other detective’s wife makes a fantastic cup of coffee.”

“That sounds lovely,” she said quietly.

He glanced at the bill and left twenty-five dollars in the fake leather folder. They strolled away from the café to find a good apparition alley.

Half an hour later, they were seated at the Connell’s large table, under an air conditioning vent, each with a large mug of coffee, a plate of peach pie and some Marley’s frozen yoghurt.

“This may be the best thing I’ve ever tasted,” she said. “Sorry Nana and Molly.”

“Perhaps we have a new business idea for when we return.”

“I don’t think it’s ever hot enough at home to truly appreciate this.”

“You don’t think Marley’s Hogsmeade would be a smash?”

“Not in during the times of the year when students would be there. Marley’s Diagon, perhaps.”

He smiled and opened the journal. “I know generally how the procedure works, but would you talk me through it?”

“Yes.” She took a fortifying gulp from the mug. “We should start in the morning. It will be better if she is well-rested and relaxed and hasn’t eaten anything for twelve hours. She will still probably vomit; they almost always do.”

He gave her a rather horrified look.
“Don’t worry; I know how to handle it, and I doubt the police detectives will be shocked. She should wear her pajamas because I will need access to her spine, but she won’t need to undress. She might also pass out when her core is reset, and pajamas will be most comfortable.”

He nodded and wrote down the points, mostly to keep his hands busy.

“When I have finished, I will wake her up as gently as possible. It will probably be a traumatic experience. She will most likely think she is back at the moment when the incident occurred. It would be helpful to have the person she is most comfortable with be there to talk her through. That would be you?”

“No. That would probably be Detective Johnson…Kendrah. Maybe Mrs. Connell, but I think Johnson is the…right choice.”

“I will need to speak with her…Detective Johnson about what to expect. I have never coordinated the procedure with Muggles, so…”

“Not your average Muggles. Johnson is a Gryffindor.”

“Well, that is helpful,” she said with a little smile.

Mrs. Connell came in from the garden with a basket full of vegetables. “Woooooo, it’s a hot one. I thought we could have some squash, tomatoes, and cucumbers with the pork chops tonight.”

“That sounds wonderful, thank you!” Hermione said.

“Of course, dear.”

“Do you cook for Detective Johnson every night?”

Mrs. Connell laughed. “No, she’s fully capable of feeding herself and Lily. Her husband does most of the cooking when he is in town. But with Lily’s situation likely to change, we want to spend as much time as possible with her. I fix them lunch because they would just eat junk if I didn’t.”

“Do you work outside the home?” Hermione asked. Severus leaned in to hear.

“I’m a teacher, so I have my summers off.”

“Severus was a teacher for many years.”

“Really? What did you teach?”

“Potions at Hogwarts. He was tough,” Hermione said with clear pride.

“Potions? They finally gave ol’ Slughorn the boot?”

Both he and Hermione snorted.

“He was ready to retire, and I needed a job,” Snape said.

“I didn’t like the way Lily spoke of Slughorn. He sounded like a creep.”

“He thought she was brilliant. She is,” he said. “What do you teach?”

“Fourth grade. Nine and ten-year-olds. They are still very sweet at that age, but they can also work independently.”
They volunteered their services as prep cooks, and the dinner was ready in about half an hour. They loaded it into her vehicle and set off for the yoghurt shop.

“They know she won’t be available to work tomorrow?” And perhaps not again.

“I told Larry to take her off the schedule.”

The shop was in the car park of a large group of other shops. It looked packed with people. They waited about five minutes, and then Lily came bounding out in khaki shorts, Marley’s t-shirt and red cap. She waved gleefully when she saw Snape in the back seat.

“Sev! Hello, Patty, thanks for the ride. Tyrell is going to think I’m sick.”

“Tyrell is the bus driver who usually takes Lily home,” Patty explained as she pulled her large Ford out.

“Hi! I’m Lily.” She twisted around from the front seat and extended her hand to Hermione who seemed overwhelmed by the scene.

“This is Hermione Granger. She is a healer,” Patty said.

“Hello, Lily,” Hermione managed.

“A healer?” Lily seemed very excited to hear this. “Do you work at St. Mungo’s?”

“I do, on the magical maladies ward.”

“I’ve thought of being a healer,” she said. “What was the training like?”

Snape remembered that she had mentioned that summer being interested in healing; maybe working at the Ministry. He had been appalled at the thought.

“My case was a bit different; there was a great need for healers when I started, so my training was accelerated. The trainees I work with now generally do two years as apprentices. It’s all very hands-on.”

“What kinds of maladies do you treat?”

“I specialize in those that have damaged the magical core.”

“Healer Granger is working on treatment of young squibs,” he said.

“But please call me Hermione. Yes, that has been my focus lately. I still treat other types of cases, though, when they come in.”

“So there’s hope for Filch?” Patty called out from the front seat.

“Not yet. We don’t have an effective treatment for adult squibs. That’s the next challenge.”

“Her treatment has eliminated the condition in infants, and she is working on children as old as ten. She was just in New York with some American healers teaching them…”

“New York?” Lily said. “Marcus is in New York. His show is in previews. He’ll be back though, to start fifth year?” she asked Mrs. Connell.

“I don’t know Lily. If the show is picked up, he might have to be there a while.”
The way they switched back and forth between existences was so odd. Lily flipped a dial at the front of the car and music started playing, the same soft twang as he heard the night before.

“May I switch it to ninety-five-seven, Patty?”

“Of course.”

Lily flipped the dial again and then Led Zeppelin filled the car.

_Gotta whole lotta love…_

“So,” she said quietly, reached her arm behind her and wiggled her fingers, inviting him to take her hand.

Hermione’s eyes grew huge as if she could not believe what she was seeing. He shot her an apologetic look and grasped Lily’s hand.

“Lily, I’m not sure that’s safe. If I were to stop suddenly, I’m afraid your arm might rip off,” Mrs. Connell said.

“Hermione is a healer, so it would be fine,” Lily laughed, but she withdrew her hand.

“So, we are fully playing into the delusion,” Hermione muttered under her breath at him.

As if he had a choice. He could hurt her terribly or he could play along until she was healed. It wasn’t difficult. He ignored the comment.

“Sorry,” Hermione muttered.

He shook his head and then took her hand for a moment and squeezed it. She squeezed back and then let it drop.

They pulled into the car park and saw the police work vehicle already there. He was weary and ready for this part to be over. He longed to return to London and the business, and if Lily could come back restored, that would be wonderful, but he would settle for normal existence as well. Perhaps she would stay like this. She was happy here. He imagined these people would remain with her. She would hate him in nine months, and he could put it out of his head. Potter could visit her.

He sighed heavily and exited the car, going around to the back to carry in the food. Mrs. Connell met him while Hermione and Lily walked to the door.

“She’s putting you in a tough spot. Let’s make in an early night. You and Hermione come back with us, and then we’ll be ready to be back early tomorrow,” she said quietly.

He nodded in response and took the carton of food wrapped in an insulated blanket.

They entered the flat, and found Johnson, Connell, Lily and Hermione scurrying to set the table. He went through the motions and then sat with them at the table, but he could hardly taste any of it. Lily held court, babbling on about returning to school in a few days. He had to restrain himself from crying out.

_None of this is real!_

He could feel his body in active survival mode as it had been during the bad years before the war. It came back to him instantly, the desperate exhaustion, the overwhelming anguish, the sense that
nothing he would do would be right or helpful or productive. He swallowed a bite of squash and tried to direct his feelings with it, but of course that was futile. He threw Mrs. Connell a weary look.

“I hate to break up the party before dessert,” she said, already gathering the dishes around her, “But the heat has done something to me today. I think I must get home.”

Her husband snapped to immediately and began to gather items around him as well.

“We still have pie,” Johnson said, but she was clearly exhausted as well.

“Oh, don’t go yet. Sev, I was hoping we could take our Marley’s to the porch,” she mimed putting a cigarette in her fingers in a way she clearly felt was subtle, but that elicited snorts from every person at the table.

“I’ll be back in the morning, Lily.”

“Hermione told me about some healing she does that I would like to see,” Johnson said as she took Lily’s plate to the kitchen. “Would you be willing to be the subject in the demonstration?”

“Yeah, but I want to see it too, so after me, will you practice on Sev so I can watch?”

“That would be fine,” he said, and Hermione nodded.

“It won’t hurt?” Lily turned to Hermione.

Hermione looked obviously uncomfortable with the question. “Nothing scary,” she said. “And you won’t remember it all later.”

“Sounds rather serious,” Lily said, an edge of hesitation in her tone.

Hermione touched her arm, “I won’t do anything you don’t want me, too.”

“No, it’s fine. We haven’t had much on healing,” she turned to Johnson and Mrs. Connell for corroboration, and they nodded along. “Sounds fascinating, really.”

“We will be back at seven-thirty?” Mrs. Connell asked the room.

“Better before breakfast or even the first cup of tea,” Hermione said.

“Seven-thirty, then,” Johnson confirmed.

Lily was beside him and had wrapped her arms around his middle, and he responded by resting his left arm around her as casually as possible. She turned her head up for a kiss, and he dropped his to brush against her lips, feeling his face redden as Hermione turned her face away.

“Goodnight,” he told her quietly and disentangled himself. He nodded to Johnson as they turned to leave.

Connell let out a long breath as soon as the door was closed, but he remained quiet. They piled into the Explorer and Connell turned the air on immediately. Hermione sat turned away from him in the back seat. Mrs. Connell switched the radio from the loud rock to softer country they had listed to the night before.

“Hermione,” he said quietly.
“I know, I’m fine, It’s just…”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, there’s no need; It’s just odd to see and…” she stopped and whipped around her head as if she were putting it all away. “It will be over tomorrow.”

He reached out for her hand, and she took it eagerly. It was different than that awful time. He had someone. It would change. They would take Lily back, and she would be swamped with family, and he wouldn’t be so responsible. He could go back to his life and work and home.

It was early for bed, but neither felt like reading. They took a shower that was overlapped rather than shared. She kissed his shoulder blade on the left side of his back before she stepped out and wrapped herself in a large towel,retreating to the bedroom while he showered.

He put on clean sleep clothes and crawled in bed beside her. She was on London time still and half asleep already as she rolled into his arm and rested her head on his chest. Soon she was breathing in and out, clearly gone. He wrapped her damp curls around his fingers until he joined her.

Lily was hungry and irritable when they arrived at the flat the next morning. Hermione was dressed in her work robe that looked like Muggle doctor garb at a glance. Johnson had the large bowl and damp cloths that Hermione had requested. Lily felt ridiculous still in her pajamas and was beginning to protest.

“Please, Lily, do this for us. I really want to observe the procedure,” Johnson said quietly. It was clear that Lily would not begrudge her friend. She followed Hermione back into the bedroom and allowed the healer to place her on the bed. Hermione instructed Johnson and Mrs. Connell to be close with the bowl and small towels.

“Lily, you will probably vomit; that’s what the bowl is for. Lean into Kendrah and Patty any time you are feeling weak.”

“What…what is the purpose of this?”

It was against everything Hermione valued to lie to a patient, and she didn’t.

“This procedure is for witches and wizards who have suffered trauma that has…changed their mental state and perhaps their magical abilities.”

“But since I haven’t…”

“It will not harm you, Lily,” Hermione said and took her hand gently.

“Please, Lily,” Mrs. Connell said, clearly trying to keep her emotions in check.

“Okaaaaaay,” Lily said, impatient and annoyed.

Hermione climbed on the bed behind Lily, and Johnson and Mrs. Connell sat on either side of her. Hermione raised Lily’s top in the back, making sure her front remained covered. Snape looked away immediately despite the effort. He moved so he was behind Hermione and could observe her without being in Lily’s line of vision.

Hermione was running her wand up Lily’s spine slowly, whispering incantations. When she
reached the neck, she repeated the process down to her hips. “Bowl ready,” she said quietly, and then forcefully called out the incantation in Latin. Snape picked out the word *reditus*—return—but that was the only one he understood.

Lily cried out and vomited into the bowl. There was very little there, but she retched painfully and began to sob. Mrs. Connell whispered to her soothingly and patted her face with the cloth as Johnson held back Lily’s hair.

“She will probably pass out…” Hermione started to say as Lily slumped against Johnson. They started to move her to lie on the bed.

“Kevin, Severus, why don’t you wait in the other room for a minute,” Mrs. Connell said.

Snape realized Lily had wet herself. He was mortified for her.

“Come on, Mr. Snape, let’s get some coffee,” Connell said, and Snape followed.

The detective tried to chat, but Snape tuned him out. When Hermione called him back in, Lily was clean and settled on the changed bed and looked to be sleeping.

Hermione was gently running her wand over Lily’s body and head, and ignored his return to the room. After a few minutes, she stood up straight. “It’s time to wake her up. Let’s get her back into a sitting position, and Kendrah and Patty, sit next to her like you were before. She will most likely be in a state of panic when she awakens, so be careful with her.

They pulled Lily, who remained unconscious, so that she was sitting up on the bed. Hermione stood directly in front and repeated the loud incantation. When she was finished, she said quite forcefully, “Lily, wake up!”

Lily’s eyes flew open and immediately she tried to bolt from the bed. Johnson and Mrs. Connell held on tightly to each shoulder and held her arms.

“JAMES!” Lily shrieked and the glass in the windows shook with the force of her voice.
Chapter Three: Severus and Lily

Chapter Three

Severus and Lily

Severus

Lily sobbed and repeated his name again and again, “James, James, James, James.” Johnson was embracing her against her chest as a mother would an inconsolable child.

“Kendrah!” Lily wailed.

“Yes, Lily?” Johnson held her shoulders out so she could see Lily’s face. She wiped the tears that were streaming down Lily’s cheeks. “Yes?”

“He’s gone. James is gone, isn’t he? He’s dead!” Her wracking sobs resumed, and Johnson again took Lily into her arms. She didn’t answer, and Snape realized her silence was confirmation to Lily.

“How many years? How many years has he been gone? This is…2000?”

“2004,” Johnson said quietly.

“August? Seven and a half years? Where is…Is Harry? The war? Is it done? Dumbledore? Can I go…Can I go back? Severus?” She was looking around the room wildly, and her eyes landed on him. “Severus! What happened with…” She seemed unable to stay on track with one thought. She extended her hand toward him, and he approached the bed. Mrs. Connell rose to let him have her spot. “What happened, Severus, with Harry?”

“He is fine. The war is over, Lily.”

“Harry is fine? He’s alive and…”

“Yes. He’s on holiday at the moment, but he will be back in London soon, and you can see him.”

“He’s…how old is he? 2004…he’s…”

“He’s twenty-four.”

She continued to look around the room, and she stopped on Hermione.

“I know you,” Lily said quietly. “I know you,” she added with more certainty. “You were in the photo with Harry at Sirius’s…You’re Harry’s friend.”

“Yes, Mrs. Potter. I am Hermione Granger.” Hermione crossed the room and knelt in from of Lily.

“You healed me.”

“Yes.”
“This was all…you are here…you came here to heal me.” She looked at Severus and then back to Hermione.

“Yes, Lily. I contacted them in hopes they could help you,” Kendrah said, still at her side.

Lily nodded; she seemed overwhelmed.

“You saw a photograph of Harry and me?” Hermione said gently, clearly trying to start on establishing some facts.

“Yes. Of Harry and you and another boy…a boy I thought was someone I knew from when he was a baby…Molly Weasley’s son.”

“Ronald Weasley, yes. The three of us were friends at school.” Hermione spoke in a soothing tone as she ran through a gentle examination of Lily’s pulse, heartbeat, and breathing cadence.

Snape used every bit of discipline he had not to snort at Hermione’s narrative. It really wasn’t an appropriate time.

“How did you see this photo? How are you…” He picked up the questioning. He knew he was rushing this and probably putting too much pressure on her, but he couldn’t wait any longer.

“Headmaster Dumbledore sent photos twice a year. This one was after Harry’s fifth year.”

“Evans, we all thought you were dead! Where have you been?” he continued.

“Dumbledore didn’t tell you all of this?”

“The Headmaster died in…” Hermione paused, and her face looked like it did when she was mentally figuring.


“Dumbledore suspected we would die and sent us away a few days before. He replaced us with polyjuiced Aurors. Do you think they died?”

“I have no idea of anything,” he sighed.

“But wait,” Hermione in an alarmed tone that sounded exactly as she did in her student days when she thought someone was wrong and she was right. “The whole war hinged…the whole reason Harry survived was because your love saved him. Because love triumphs over hate. Light defeats dark!” She was on the verge of bursting into tears.

Snape felt a sense of glee that this ridiculous twee bubble he had always sneered was about to pop, and then immediately realized once again what an awful person he was and had always been.

“Sounds very Dumbledore,” Lily sighed. “He had choreographed the entire night, and had planned to cast every conceivable protective charm around Harry. For reasons he did not divulge, Harry had to survive without James and me for everything to play out the way the old man thought it should.” She looked directly at Snape. “And it sounds as if it did.” She slumped against him.

“Every piece,” he said with a bitter edge. “You have been here since?”

“Here in America, yes. We were just on holiday in New Orleans. We worked in New York at the
American Ministry and lived in New Jersey. My house!” She gripped his arm. “All my… everything is in my house. All my Harry photos. All of James’s things.”

“Lily, we will figure this all out,” Johnson attempted to reassure her. “New York and New Jersey? I sent pictures all over, but of course had no contacts with the witches…wizards.”

“Of course, you are Muggles,” she covered her face in her hands. “I have broken every measure of statutes.”

“It’s not a problem, Lily,” he assured her.

“What you must think of me,” she addressed this to Johnson and the Connells.

“We love you, Lily, and we only wanted what was best for you. We would never divulge…” Mrs. Connell began.

“No one would believe us if we tried. Anyway, Lily, you are more than a witch or a subject to us. You know that,” Johnson said soothingly on her other side. Lily turned away from Severus to her friend and hugged her.

He waited as long as he could before he resumed his interrogation. “The American ministry?”

She sighed. “Yes. Glamours, fake names, you can imagine, I did arithmancy and James worked as a clerk in the Aurors office. We lived close to a wizarding community in Pennsylvania. James joined a quidditch league,” she laughed bitterly. “We waited for news of Harry so we could return. We took little holidays to pass the time. James would sense that I was losing hope, and we would go to Florida or Texas or San Francisco.”

“Or Mardi Gras,” Johnson said.

“Or Mardi Gras.” Lily started crying softly again, clearly thinking of her husband. She breathed in and out hard a few times and then looked again to Hermione, who had moved the desk in the corner and was looking quite pale. “Tell me about Harry. He’s on holiday with the family?”

“Yes…”

Lily didn’t wait for more. “That’s what helped me to survive, thinking about Harry and his siblings and all the happy times. They’re in New Zealand? What are his parents like?” Her eyes were huge and lit with happiness for the first time since she had emerged into reality.

“Well…err,” Hermione began.

“He is with his wife’s family. He’s married to Ginny Weasley, Molly’s youngest. What did Dumbledore tell you about his childhood?” Snape plunged in.

“Nothing, but he sent these pictures, and it was easy to fill in the gaps…why? What are you not saying?” He saw her happiness give way to fear.

“Your sister and her husband raised him before Hogwarts,” he said as gently as he could.

“What? Petunia?” she sighed. “He looked wonderful in those photos; she must have done well by him.”

He looked over at Hermione’s stricken face.

“Should we continue this over breakfast?” Connell suggested lightly, obviously reading the room.
“Yeah, let’s give Lily a chance to dress, and we can talk over coffee.” Mrs. Connell stood.

“Kendrah, Patty, stay with me?” Lily asked.

The women made reassuring noises as he filed out with Hermione and Connell. As soon as they were out of the short hall and into the kitchen area, Hermione collapsed against him, crying softly. He sighed heavily and put his arms around her.

“How will we tell her?” She whispered.

Lily

She grabbed on to her friends’ hands for support. “How is this...How did this...He’s gone, Kendrah, how many times did you show me those sketches. I must have known somehow because I know he’s gone. I’ve known...I’ve had these...surges of grief...Where is he?” She was trying to keep under control. She already felt calmer with Severus and the healer out of the room.

“He was cremated, Lily,” Kendrah said softly. “We kept his ashes for you. I have them here. We are just learning some of the basic facts from Severus. We only had theories before, and of course Severus could only tell us so much.”

She was looking through her clothes that were completely inappropriate for a woman in her...forties. She had missed seven birthdays. She had just turned thirty-seven before the...before it happened. She looked at her racks of clothes, completely overwhelmed. Kendrah handed her some jeans and a plain black t-shirt. She wasn’t wearing a bra, but she stripped her pajama top. Patty handed one to her. Lily realized she was wearing different bottoms and knickers than she had put on the night before, but she didn’t want to ask about it.

“How did you find Severus?”

“I had a Google alert on him. He bought a property in London, and it showed up in the paper. I wrote him a letter, and he called me back. Hermione had an email address and we sent them pictures of you. That was...two days ago? Three?”

She ran a brush through her hair and spotted her journal on the nightstand. She put it in the drawer and tied on her Keds. Her hands were shaking. She had so many questions zooming around in her mind. As soon as her shoes were secured, she bolted out of the bedroom to join the group in the kitchen.

“Sev, is she your daughter...” she turned to the healer, “I’m sorry, I have forgotten your name. Who is her mother? I had no idea...”

“No!” the girl said.

“No, Evans,” Sev said.

“Is she your ward?”

“No. Hermione is my...”

“Partner...girlfriend,” the girl said.
Lily grabbed for the back of a chair as she felt the air leave her body. “She’s a child,” she managed to choke out. The girl, who had been leaning against Severus as Lily entered, immediately stood up straight.

“I am twenty-four, almost twenty-five…” she said with an edge of anger in her voice.

“She’s Harry’s friend!”

“He’s an adult, too. He’s an Auror and married with a baby on the way!” Hermione sputtered.

“A baby?” Lily wasn’t sure if she could stand properly.

“I am sorry that this…” Severus began and then looked at her and stopped. “Could we sit and begin again?”

Lily slumped at the table.

“It’s all shocking; I’m sorry,” Hermione said. “Harry will be so thrilled to see you, though. It’s all he’s ever wanted.”

“I imagine he wanted to meet his father,” she retorted to the young woman, who apparently knew her son better than she did. Of course she does. You don’t know him at all. She could no longer hold back tears.

“He will be so happy you are alive. He loves you and his father so much. He will be thrilled.” The girl had a mothering quality that Lily found irritating and then immediately felt ashamed for the reaction.

Kendrah came behind her with a tissue and put a soft hand on her shoulder. Patty handed her coffee. She could smell the breakfast Kevin was preparing although she wasn’t sure if she would be able to eat. These were the people she wanted to mother her.

“How did you?” she indicated Severus and Hermione and then turned to address Sev specifically. “Where were you…what did you do all for these…years?”

“I taught Potions at school. I took over for Slughorn.”

“He was a spy for the Order of the Phoenix…do you know what…?” the girl asked her.

“Yes,” she answered curtly.

“He risked his life to be a spy when Vol…Riddle returned. He almost died in the war.”

She loves him.

“You were her teacher? Harry’s teacher?” she asked Severus.

“Yes.”

“But we weren’t together for years after that! He was alone for years!” the girl said, with what sounded to Lily as an accusatory tone.

“She’s a child.”

“Hermione,” Severus said softly. “She is not a child. She is a healer…”

“She’s Harry’s friend!”

“He’s an adult, too. He’s an Auror and married with a baby on the way!” Hermione sputtered.

“A baby?” Lily wasn’t sure if she could stand properly.

“I am sorry that this…” Severus began and then looked at her and stopped. “Could we sit and begin again?”

Lily slumped at the table.

“It’s all shocking; I’m sorry,” Hermione said. “Harry will be so thrilled to see you, though. It’s all he’s ever wanted.”

“I imagine he wanted to meet his father,” she retorted to the young woman, who apparently knew her son better than she did. Of course she does. You don’t know him at all. She could no longer hold back tears.

“He will be so happy you are alive. He loves you and his father so much. He will be thrilled.” The girl had a mothering quality that Lily found irritating and then immediately felt ashamed for the reaction.

Kendrah came behind her with a tissue and put a soft hand on her shoulder. Patty handed her coffee. She could smell the breakfast Kevin was preparing although she wasn’t sure if she would be able to eat. These were the people she wanted to mother her.

“How did you?” she indicated Severus and Hermione and then turned to address Sev specifically. “Where were you…what did you do all for these…years?”

“I taught Potions at school. I took over for Slughorn.”

“He was a spy for the Order of the Phoenix…do you know what…?” the girl asked her.

“Yes,” she answered curtly.

“She loves him.

“You were her teacher? Harry’s teacher?” she asked Severus.

“Yes.”

“But we weren’t together for years after that! He was alone for years!” the girl said, with what sounded to Lily as an accusatory tone.

“She’s a child.”

“Hermione,” Severus said quietly.
She was furious, Lily could tell. “Gryffindor?” Lily said to Severus, finding this situation slightly humourous, despite it all.

“Naturally,” Severus said with a tiny smirk.

“And Harry, too?”

“Of course.” He took a visible breath. “Everyone suffered. Things are better now. Perhaps we should decide what you want to do?”

“I want to see Harry.”

“They will be back from New Zealand this week. There’s no reason, though, that you couldn’t travel there.”

Her mind whirled for a moment, and then she began to form a list of necessary action.

“I need to go to my house in New Jersey. I have no idea if…I have some things there I would like to save if possible. I should check in with the American Ministry I suppose, and then I could travel back to the UK in time for Harry’s return. Does he know…anything about this?”

“No. We have only known a few days, and we didn’t want to contact him until…until Severus had arrived here and seen you.”

Lily nodded. It was somewhat comforting that Harry was still leading his normal life and not in turmoil over this yet. She had an urge just then to send the witch and wizard away and continue her life there. It would be so much easier for him. She shook it off.

“I will have to go back for work today,” Hermione said. “You could take her to her house and to New York and then travel back,” she said to Severus. He nodded. Lily could tell she was still angry.

“You worked in the city, Lily?” Patty asked. “What was that like?”

She turned to her friend, relieved to move on from the tension with Severus and Hermione. The group was sitting at the table and starting to pass eggs, bacon, and toast that Kevin had dutifully prepared.

“It was overwhelming at first. That is why James and I,” she had to take a breath to continue without breaking down, “That’s why we bought a house in New Jersey. But eventually, I started enjoying the city. Where I worked was on the edge of the wizarding section, and I would explore the city or eat my lunch in the park during breaks.”

She realized how many times she had thought of Severus when she was there, wondering if he would ever show up on the streets. The city reminded her of him despite never having visited it together. Her New York thoughts had always been mixed with Severus thoughts. She grabbed her butterfly charm and squeezed it against her hand.

“You were at Hogwarts all this time,” she turned to Severus. “I pictured you far away.”

He shook his head. Hermione was looking at him protectively, and Lily felt guilty about interrogating them.

“Thank you, Healer Granger, for being willing to travel here and to help me,” she said. The young woman’s face changed in an instant.
“Mrs. Potter, I would do anything to help you. Harry is more than a school friend; he’s like family.”

“Please call me Lily.” *Mrs. Potter was James’s mother.*

“Yes, and call me Hermione.”

“It’s rather impressive that you are so accomplished at…” she stopped herself before she made another reference to Hermione’s age.

“The war forced us all to grow up very quickly. I started working at St. Mungo’s immediately after, and I stayed on for training. “

“The war…what were the…whom did we lose?”

Severus and Hermione exchanged an apprehensive look.

“Just tell me,” she was losing patience with the reticence to let her know anything.

“Lupin was killed,” Severus said. Lily felt a pang to her heart as she brought her hand to her mouth. “He had married, Nymphadora Tonks, did you know her?”

Lily shook her head.

“They both died. One of Molly and Arthur’s sons, Fred. Dumbledore the year before.”

“And you almost died?” Lily asked Severus. He conceded with his eyes. “You recovered then? You look very well now,” she said.

“You said I looked old,” he responded with a little smile.

“You look older; I haven’t seen you in….” Again, they had hit on an awkward topic. Kendrah was looking very curious across the table. “I hadn’t seen you in years. Thank you for coming to the house after Mum died; I’m sorry I didn’t speak to you. It meant a lot to me. I’m sorry for everything, Sev.”

“Nonsense. What I said was unforgivable.”

Lily noticed Hermione quite obviously disagreed with him.

“No, it wasn’t. I was stubborn, and I regretted it, almost immediately, actually. I forgave you years ago.”

Kendrah looked as if she would like to pull out her notebook. Lily wondered if she would have the opportunity to tell her the whole story.

“Thank you, too,” She turned to Kendrah. “Thank all of you, Kendrah, Patty, Kevin, I should be in an institution somewhere. I can’t believe you would take me in, a stranger, and do all of this for me.”

Patty was out of her seat and in her arms, and Kendrah had moved behind them with her hands on Lily’s shoulders.

“It’s not going to be the same without you, Lil,” Kevin said. “We expect you back to visit.”

“And you must come to…wherever I end up in the UK.”
“We wouldn’t be able to see Hogwarts, isn’t that right?” Kevin asked.

Lily squeezed Patty and then patted Kendrah’s hand, and the women took their seats again.

“Probably not, but you can see everything else. I’ll take you everywhere. I had wonderful friends where James and I lived in Godric’s Hollow. Where the Weasleys live is lovely—does Harry live close to them with his wife?”

“Harry is in London at Grimmauld Place,” Hermione said.

“Sirius! What happened with Sirius? We read he had betrayed us, which James never believed, and then we read it was Peter, and we didn’t have further news. Sirius was exonerated?”

“He was. He was gravely injured two years before the war, but he’s better now. He’s fine,” Hermione said.

“Thanks to Hermione,” Severus added with a tone and expression that left little doubt about his feeling of Sirius Black. That relationship clearly hadn’t improved much. Lily was suddenly anxious to see Sirius. He would be the one person left with whom she could talk about James.

They rose to begin the cleaning process. Hermione was anxious to leave. Lily was feeling very nervous about it and about the impending reunion with Harry at the same time desperate to see him.

She spent the next hour going through her belongings, trying to determine what to take with her. All the photographs, her journal, her favorite Marley’s t-shirt, her jeans and skirts, her least worn tennis shoes. She doubted she would wear her shorts outside Louisiana. She had a collection of t-shirts from Marcus’s shows she couldn’t part with.

Hermione was an expert at shrinking charms, and Lily could fit it all in her purse along with her toiletries. Hermione seemed to be good at everything. It gave Lily a pang of jealousy followed quickly by angry annoyance. She felt James’s death like an old wound that still ached but wasn’t fresh, a similar ache to the one she felt again over her parents, who had been alive in her mind for the past few years. She felt a strong physical attraction to Sev, as it had been so real only hours before.

While Lily was going through items in the utility room, Kendrah came in quietly with a lovely pewter coloured urn.

“This has James, Lily,” she said quietly and handed it to her.

All the feelings bubbled out, and she cried against her best friend’s shoulder.

“I am so sorry. I am so, so sorry.” Kendrah repeated again and again.

Lily straightened up and clasp the urn to her chest. “I don’t want to shrink this.”

“No. I will ship it to you. We do that sometimes; the department knows just how.”

She nodded and tried to clean off her face. Kendrah reached for a soft towel.

“You don’t have to go yet. We could figure something out here.”

“I do have to. I wish I could stay, but I have to find out about my house, and I have to get back to Harry.”
“I know.”

She collected her things from the laundry and carried the urn discretely to Kendrah’s room. She did not want to have a conversation about it with anyone else. When she returned to table, Kendrah was on her laptop setting up an email account for her. Lily had one at the library and used it primarily to chat with Marcus when he was away. They were afraid that her library account would be deleted when she was no longer an employee.

Lily went through the kitchen cupboards to see the items she had bought over the years. She and Kendrah loved to browse yard sales on Saturday mornings, and Lily had established a small depression glass collection she thought her mother would find beautiful. Kendrah came in as she was putting them back on the shelves.

“Keep them. They will just make me sad. I’ll never give them to Mum.” She took the other woman’s arms in each of her hands and made Kendrah look at her. “Thank you,” she whispered and let fresh tears fall down her face.

“This is too fast; this is not what I intended…” Kendrah’s voice hitched. “I swear to Merlin, Lily, if you make me cry. I do not cry.”

“I know you don’t.” She was still holding both arms, and they were looking each other in the eyes. “I have to go. I will come back. I will bring Harry and his family. I’m going to be a grandmother!” Her voice hitched up. “I have another chance with Harry, and it’s only because of you, Kendrah.”

Kendrah squeezed her neck the way Mama did, which made Lily sob again. “I won’t have a chance to say goodbye to Mama or the family or Marcus.”

“I’ll tell them you are coming back. Now go. Severus and Hermione are ready. Good luck with the house. Let me know as soon as you are close to a computer. I’ll probably have a case for you to look at before you make it back to the UK.”

Lily nodded. She swept Patty and Kevin into a hug, and strapped her bag against her chest.

“I would be happy to drive you downtown,” Kevin said for the fourth time.

“No, we can apparate in moments,” Severus said. “Thank you,” he said quietly and reserved. Hermione shook each hand.

Lily led them to a common courtyard with a gazebo that hid the overgrown back fence—the ideal place to depart.

Severus insisted she side-apparate, as she hadn’t done it solo in over seven years. He pressed her close to him with his arm. She suddenly realized she had hung on him—kissed him, in front of Hermione before she had been restored. She felt more amusement about this than guilt. She clung to Severus as they whooshed away to the lobby of the hotel she had stayed in with James years ago.

The little wizard at the high front desk was the same one who had been working then. He glanced up at their arrival before becoming engrossed in the parchment in front of him again.

She snorted in angry frustration and drew her wand. Using an incantation she hadn’t in so long, she set her old glamour. “Hello?!” she called to him. He looked up from the parchment, and his eyes widened before he could control it. “Yes, it’s me. I don’t suppose you still have my things?”

He started working again. “I have no idea what you’re taking about.
“Bollocks. Why didn’t you try to help me and my husband? You must have known…”

“We don’t deal with no-mag police,” he said curtly.

“You could have done something.”

“I did keep a bag,” he said and disappeared. He reappeared moments later with her old valise. “Money still in it. Dollars and Dragots; you can check.”

“Oh, I will.” She opened the bag and immediately saw James’s pajamas. She snapped it closed. “It’s there. Hermione, would you…”

Hermione was staring at Lily’s transformation but turned to glare at the wizard for good measure and shrank the valise so it would fit in Lily’s purse.

“I need to take a portkey to New Hope, Pennsylvania,” she told the wizard with as much composure as she could fake.

“There’s a new one,” he muttered under his breath. He had the same accent as her friends, but instead of finding it comforting, it just made her angrier.

“It isn’t. We took a portkey from there when we arrived.” He muttered unintelligibly.


“Two,” she said through her teeth. “One to London.”

“That will be…” He was clearly calculating in his head. “Two hundred and fifty Dragots. We don’t take dollars.”

“Highway robbery,” she sighed. Severus shot her a look. She supposed it was an expression she had picked up from Kevin. She pulled the valise back out and didn’t look at any contents except the money pouch they had used when travelling. She counted out three tiny bills and placed them on the counter.

“I can’t take it in that size,” he said, quite affronted.

“Merlin’s beard,” Hermione hissed at the wizard and restored the money to its actual size.

He placed the garden spade on the counter and said, “London,” as if they were all quite stupid.

They started to prepare for departure. Severus took Hermione in his arms and then brushed her hair gently away from her face and kissed her mouth lightly. Lily tried to look away but couldn’t. They weren’t paying her attention anyway.

“Thank you,” he whispered to her.

“Of course. I will stop in Snape as soon as I arrive.” Lily had no idea what this meant.

He closed his eyes and lowered his forehead so it was touching hers in response. “I will see you soon.” They kissed again, and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and stood on her toes. Lily felt another wave of sadness. Not jealousy. Sadness. James.

Hermione disappeared with the spade, and Severus turned to Lily, taking in the glamour finally.
His eyes betrayed nothing. She extended her hand.

“Stella Frazier.”

He handed her the beer bottle instead of shaking her hand. “Are you ready, Mrs. Frazier?”

“Sure.”

They gripped the bottle and were on their way. It took about two minutes to reach their destination, the wizarding tavern where Stella and Edward had spent many evenings.

Iola Bruning was sitting at a table with parchment spread out before her. Lily realized for the first time all day that it was Sunday. The tavern was open for travel, but probably wouldn’t see regular patrons until early afternoon. Her goal of discovering what had become of her house and belongings today vanished. She put her hand to her head and sighed.

“Stella?”

“Hi, Iola,” she said quietly. The woman was stumbling to rise from the chair and see her. She looked significantly older than the last time Lily had been here.

“Where have you…we’ve been looking for you and Edward…are you alright?” The woman stammered.

“Edward and I were in an accident in New Orleans. He was killed.” Lily steeled herself to tell this story a thousand times.

“Oh, no!” Iola wrapped her arms around Lily. They had never been great friends, more James’s friends, as was the case with all her peers here, but they had spent countless afternoons and evenings together. Iola’s emotion made Lily tear up, too.

“It happened when we were there just a day…in ‘97. I have been…not well sense. Not aware, I was healed, though.”

“They sent out posters to every community.”

“The no-mag police responded first, and the New Orleans wizarding community declined to become involved.”

“That’s horrible.”

“They…the police took good care of me. I was lucky.” She realized Severus was standing quietly beside her. “This is my friend Severus. From home; from England. They found him, and that’s how I was healed.”

Iola reached her hand toward Severus. “Iola Bruning, great to meet you.”

“Severus Snape.”

“This is going to be huge news, Stella. The Ministry…it was front page news for weeks when you disappeared.”

“I will go see them tomorrow. I need to find my things in Lambertville first…”

“We took care of it the best we could. The financial part is under the no-mag system, but we stored your belongings.”
“Oh, Iola. Thank you.” She felt a flood of relief.

“Stella, I am so glad you are here and…well. I am so sorry about Edward. Let me put these things away, and I will take you to the storage place. Will you and…”

“Severus,” Lily provided.

“Severus, sorry, will you stay with us?”

Iola and Max had seven children when she and James had left for New Orleans; the youngest was a newborn. There was still a portable cot set up in the dining room, and Lily could see the fuzzy head of a sleeping baby.

“No, Iola, thank you. We won’t put you out, and I would like to try to stay anonymous as much as possible until I straighten our situation out. We will find something in the no-mag section.”

“It’s no trouble…but I understand. Let me call Anna down to watch Fergus, and we’ll go.” She made a rapid movement with her wrist, and a wisp of grey smoke snaked out and headed up the stairs.

“Fergus, then?” Lily said and walked quietly to the cot. “That makes?”

“Eleven and the end of the line, Johnny willing.”

Lily smiled at the reference to American wizarding mythology. It was all coming back. “Anna was just a wee thing when we left.”

“She’s twelve, and one of the few with any sense.”

Iola instructed her daughter, who looked very much like her older siblings. The three adults apparated to an outside facility where Lily had never been. Kendrah and Marcus had a small storage space where they kept extra furniture, items from their school days, and much of Marcus’s theatre mementos. This was not dissimilar. Iola whispered an incantation and opened the lock.

The door swung open, and Lily saw the hydrangea bed frame first. She felt as if she had been hit in the belly and bent at the waist as she absorbed the blow. Severus put a steadying arm around her. She looked over the mass of tables, chairs, wardrobes, rugs, bookshelves, and stacks of boxes. Amid the overwhelming thoughts, a stray one popped to the fore: Hermione could make a killing with her shrinking charm prowess. She shook that off and began to look through boxes, searching for one that had items from the bedroom.

Most of them contained kitchen items; she and James had bought almost nothing decorative for the house. They hardly even bought books but relied on the wizarding libraries in the city and in New Hope. There had always been a prevailing sense that this life was temporary, that it wasn’t their real life. They were in a holding pattern until the real life could resume. It reduced the number of boxes to examine.

Five boxes in, she considered using accio, but it was cathartic seeing these things and thinking about James using them. He tended to use kitchen charms, while she typically used the Muggle methods of her childhood. To see the various tools side-by-side brought back the better memories of their existence.

It was hot in the little room. Severus cast a cooling charm, which helped, but sweat was streaming down the back of her neck. She palmed the pocket of her jeans and felt the familiar outline of a hair tie. She dug in and retrieved it, and then realized she was tying back the wispy blonde hair instead
of the thicker red. The tie was too big, but she made do.

She turned to a stack of smaller boxes in the corner. She chose the top one removed the lid. She saw the powder blue cover first thing, and her heart started beating faster. She pulled out the album, and the red covered one was just underneath. She closed the lid and set it aside, wishing her luck would hold. The second box contained James’s papers, charmed to reflect his identity for their existence in America, and the small collection of mementos he had brought with them: a few photos from his childhood and school days, his Gringotts records in Edward’s name, his parents’ documents. She picked up a photo of the Marauders. She dismissed Peter immediately, not even glancing at him. Sirius was laughing wickedly, Remus smiling shyly and peering up from his hooded eyelids, James…James with that twisted grin that could often convince her of anything. She snapped the box shut and found a similar one with her documents underneath. She pulled the light green headboard from the stack of furniture and put it aside with the boxes and albums.

“These are what I wanted. She was balancing the boxes and albums in her arms. “These are the only things I need from here, really. Could you use any of it?” she asked Iola.

“We could always do with some more bedroom furniture. We could pay you…”

“Nonsense. Keep what you want; sell the rest. The clothes are worthless. I’ll come back before we leave for home and get rid of them.”

“If you really don’t want any of it, I’ll donate it to Witches’ Relief.”

“Perfect. Thank you, Iola.” She hugged that other witch, for the second time that day and probably the second time ever.

“I won’t tell anyone but Max that you are here.”

“I appreciate it. I imagine the story will be out tomorrow, but it will be easier to accomplish what we need to if we don’t draw attention.” Lily felt a moment of guilt that when the story did come out, Iola would learn about the glamours and the false names. She made a mental note to write her a letter explaining everything later.

Severus set a quick shrinking charm on the boxes and headboard, less artfully than Hermione—the boxes were slightly cockeyed—but effectively. She stowed the small items in her purse and carried the albums.

“What did you pay for the space over the years?” she asked Iola.

“It was donated.”

“Thank you again.”

Iola asked again if they would stay at the tavern, and Lily declined politely. She and Severus started walking toward the Muggle section of the town. She was hugging the albums closely to her chest. Severus walked silently beside her. He was wearing the same clothes he had been since she had seen him—had it only been two days? That didn’t seem possible.

There was a large park that bordered the wizarding and no-mag streets. It was hot for this area although nothing like New Orleans, and there was no one about. Lily saw a picnic table and bolted for it. She put the red album aside for the moment and opened the blue. Harry’s second Christmas and birthday pictures were on the first page. Baby Harry waved his chubby fist at her as he had done so many times before.
“There you are, Love,” she whispered to the moving image.

She turned the pages, taking in each photo and giving Severus a running commentary. “They had ponies for his third birthday. That Christmas he received his little broom. Look at his cake there!”

Severus stayed silent, which started to annoy her. She looked up to see him positively stricken.

“What?” she said impatiently.

“It’s fraud, Lily.”

**Severus**

She was angry at his reaction, and he wished he could have played it off better, but he couldn’t stand it.

“None of it happened,” he said.

It was disconcerting having this conversation with her when she looked like a stranger, but her eyes were the same.

“I’m sorry.”

“No! How do you know?” Angry tears sprang up. She was yelling. He looked around to make sure no one was around. “I don’t care who hears! How do you know?”

“The Dursleys were not kind to him. They kept him…they made his sleep in a small space under the stairs until Dumbledore put a stop to it. He was…under-nourished when he arrived at school.”

She was practically hyper-ventilating.

“It was better after that, but he had to stay with them for a part of every summer there, and they never treated him well.” He felt a pang of guilt about his own treatment of Potter.

“Why didn’t Dumbledore rescue him?”

“He thought the boy…Harry needed to stay with a blood relative to be safe. I have no idea, though, Lily. I have no idea what he was thinking about any of it.”

“Arithmanic bollocks, all of it.” She said. “None of this is real?” She started flipping through pages, and Snape looked at them as they passed. He stopped her on the second picture Harry and his friends.

“This may not be real, but it is a fair representation. Granger and Weasley were his best friends, and he spent a lot of the later summers at the Black house. We had Order meetings there.”

“Hermione looks really young here. This is my lasting image of Harry. I suppose he’s an adult, too? He looks like a man?”

“He looks like his father.” *With kinder eyes.*

“He always did,” she sighed. “I suppose if I had known the truth, nothing would have kept me
away.”

“The old man realized that, of course.”

“And he is dead and gone and accountable to no one?”

“You can take it up with the portrait when we get back.” He would have to broach all sorts of uncomfortable subjects before that happened, Dumbledore’s death chief among them.

She pulled her wand and dispensed with her glamour, and it was comforting to have her back as herself. “Let’s go find some rooms and somewhere to drink.” She swept up her photo albums and walked angrily through the park towards the road.

An hour later, they were at an outside table at a pub. She had reserved them two rooms at a travel inn. His room was small but clean. He changed his clothes to denims and black t-shirt with The Clash printed on the front. He transfigured his boots to Converse low-tops so he wouldn’t look so out of place.

The pub was half open-air for the summer, he assumed. He could see where it could be enclosed. Evans ordered Dutch Muggle beer and a pack of cigarettes in that lovely red box, which she threw to the center of the table with a box of matches printed with the name of the pub.

“You can get you folks some burgers? Sandwiches? We do a good club. Shad is the special,” the waitress called from across the empty space.

“One cheeseburger, one club, one shad, and we’ll split a basket of fries,” Evans said as if she ordered here every day. “Rage makes me hungry apparently,” she said as she tore the plastic off the box and pulled out a cigarette, which she pounded into her mouth with one motion as she lit a match in another. She took a deep drag and blew out smoke angrily. “I swallowed every image. Of course he was happy! He had parents and siblings—oh yes, I created a family of siblings for him. Have a cigarette, Sev,” she instructed. “How could I have been so stupid?”

He thought for a moment about declining the cigarette, but he didn’t want to disappoint her further, even in a tiny way. He pulled one out of the box slowly. The smell of the smoke from hers had already enticed him.

Hello, old friend.

He put it to his mouth and lit the match, pointing it to the fag. It caught immediately and he sucked it in. Oh, Merlin.

He blew it out slowly away from her. There were several groups of people milling in, and the waitress turned on the large television to a sporting event—the American game that was like cricket, though even that he was not familiar with. The male patrons were all wearing the same type of caps the players were. The sound was down on the telly, and inoffensive rock music was playing. He drained his beer as the waitress brought a tray of their food.

“You want another? I could bring you a pitcher; it’s cheaper.”

“Yes, thank you,” Lily answered her. She was dividing the food between the two plates, adding a generous dollop of ketchup to hers. She offered the bottle to him, and he shook his head to decline.

“You are very American,” he commented.

“Thank you although you clearly mean it as an insult.”

“Not at all.” He took a bite of the item on his plate that resembled cod; he couldn’t remember what she had called it. It was mushy and foul tasting, and he wanted to spit it out, but maintained a modicum of manners. “What in the bloody hell is that?” he asked in outrage.
Lily laughed, and it was the first time he had seen a spark of joy in her eyes since she had been healed. “It’s shad. You don’t like it?

“It’s bloody horrible! It’s an outrage to fish.”

“I would say it is an acquired taste.” She took a bite. “It’s pretty bad. It’s famous around here. I don’t think the New Orleans folks would tolerate it, either.”

The game on the telly stretched on for hours, and throughout, they sipped beer from the never-ending pitcher, and she asked him question after question. He had plenty of his own. How did you end up with Potter? Why did you allow Dumbledore to do this? Did you ever consider finding me? I would have tried to help. I would have tried anything. He let her continue to interrogate him.

“You were a teacher, Sev? Are a teacher still?”

“No. I have a healing potions business now.”

“Since?”

“Two and a half years.”

“You taught for how long?”

“Twenty years.” Nineteen.

“Twenty years! I can’t picture it,” she looked at him through squinted eyes as if she was attempting it. “Did you like it?”

“No.”

“No. I can’t imagine that you did. Were the students awful?”

“Quite.”

“Hold on. If you taught Potions…Slughorn retired?”

He nodded.

“Who was head of Slytherin…Sev, were you head of your house?” she gasped.

“I was.”

“Oh, Merlin!” she laughed. “Oh, I really can’t imagine. You had to show up in colours for the quidditch and talk the girls through their first periods and…”

As if those examples were his biggest challenges at that job. He scowled at her menacingly, but he was quite happy she was finding it amusing.

“And you were a spy the whole time?”

“Sounds more intriguing than it was.” At least most of the time. “He did not come back in a fully corporeal sense until…”94.”

“And Harry was in the middle of it from then on?”

Oh, Lily. He was unsure how much to say as it was not really his story to tell. “He was a part of it
“from the day he arrived at school.”

“As an eleven-year-old? Barely eleven?” The outrage was back.

“Dumbledore would argue that there was a force in play that could not be deterred.”

“Would you argue that?” she asked accusingly.

“I could question his methods but not the outcome.”

“What utter bollocks,” she sneered at him and smoked in silence for a few minutes.

He studied the game being played. The one who threw the ball would hurl his entire body with it. It was a dance he performed again and again. Sometimes, he would get into another rhythm with a player to his left, and he would alternate throwing the ball towards the man with the bat and throwing to his left, at which time, the player there for the opposite team would scamper back to the white shape on the ground.

“What was he like?” She broke his reverie.

“Pardon?”

“Harry. What was he like as a student?”

Oh dear. “His strengths lay in Defense against the Dark Arts.”

“And Potions?”

“I taught Defense for one year, his sixth year.”

“And Potions?”

“He didn’t seem to care for it.”

“Severus! Tell me what it was like teaching my son!”

He sighed. There was no way to come out ahead on this one. “There were most likely three teachers he cared for less than me. Perhaps four,” he added, thinking about Trelawney. “They included two frauds, a psychopath, and a defense teacher who had the partially incarnate Dark Lord attached to the back of his head.”

“And he didn’t like you because?”

“I don’t know, Evans.” He stalled by inhaling deeply on his third or fourth cigarette. “It was a bad match for a hundred reasons. We get on suitably now.” Not completely true. Potter tended to be ingratiating, and Snape tried to ignore him as much as possible.

“You can be a right bastard, Sev.”

“Obviously.”

“And you were a bastard to him, weren’t you?”

“He tried my patience.” On his best days.

“How did it…how are you able to get on now?”
Hermione. Although, of course it was not just that. He hated this topic. “He realized at the end of the war that we had always been on the same side.”

“You had to keep up the spy front while he was in school?”

“Yes.”

“And the Slytherin-Gryffindor conflict couldn’t have helped.”

“No.”

“What was he like in school?”

Insufferable. “He was good at quidditch. The seeker. He had a pack of friends; not just Granger and Weasley, but many others. He was a natural leader.” Impetuous, disrespectful, and cocky.

“Dumbledore championed him.” Almost to his death.

“Dumbledore always favored the Gryffindors,” she said sympathetically, which made him feel guilty for his evasions.

“Of course. I didn’t cloak myself in glory in the way I attempted to teach him.” Bullied him. “As head of Slytherin, I had students in my charge who made his life difficult, students whose parents were Death Eaters, whom I had to placate.”

“Yes,” she said, with more grace and understanding than he could ever deserve.

“I could have done better. I could have let him know privately that I wasn’t completely unsympathetic with him, but it was easier to play a consistent role.”

“Did you ever see Petunia and Vernon?”

“No.”

“I will track them down,” she said through her teeth.

“I wouldn’t blame you. I suspect Potter…Harry will discourage you from that, though. He seems to have put those experiences behind him. As far as I know he has a cordial relationship with his cousin.”

“Dudley?” she laughed.

“Yes. There was an understanding between them in the latter years of the war. The Durselys were in great danger and had to go into hiding. I think Potter has left them there. And…” he poured another half pint of beer in his glass. “The Weasleys practically adopted him. That seemed to go a long way towards his need to be nurtured.”

“And he married the daughter? Were they together at school?”

“I believe so.”

“He and Hermione never?”

“No. She was with Weasley…Ronald for a while after the war.”

“But you snatched her away. She was your student, too?”
The tone of disapproval was clear. I will not defend myself.

“Yes.”

“How did she do in school?”

“How do you think?”

“Brilliant; best at everything.”

“Aside from divination, yes.”

“A girl after your own heart, then,” she said, rather generously.

“I suppose. In any case, we became friends after the war.”

“And then more than friends?” she fished shamelessly.

“Yes.”

“She loves you, Sev.”

“How do you know?”

“The way she talks about you, the way she looks at you, the way she defends you…”

“She will grow tired of the whole business.”

“Do you think the age difference is inappropriate?”

“No, but she will find someone younger and more suitable,” worthy of her, “and that will be it.”

“Do you want children?”

“No.”

“Did you ever?”

With you. “It’s not something I ever gave serious thought to. Did you consider having more children—when you were here?”

“James wanted to, but I couldn’t do it. Not after the first disaster. I couldn’t call myself a mother after what I did.”

“What you did?”

“Abandoning him.”

“You had no choice! You could have stayed and died and become a martyr as we all thought. Would have that been better?”

“Perhaps.”

“You will change your mind when you meet him again,” he said.

Her eyes filled with tears, and she took his hand across the table.
“I hope so,” she whispered.

The team the other patrons favoured apparently did something spectacular as they leaped from their seats and put their hands in the air en masse. They slapped each other’s hands and called for more beer. Severus focused on the telly to help relieve the tension at his table. The player in question had hit the ball so far that it had reached the crowd. The program replayed the scene of a fan catching it out of a group of outstretched hands and then thrusting his fist with the ball ensconced and then turning to kiss the young woman next to him.

“Have you ever seen a baseball game?” Lily asked.

“No.”

She refilled both glasses before lighting another cigarette.

“When was the last time you drank?” he asked her, wary of the amount they had both already consumed.

“Kendrah and I enjoy some wine while we watch our programs in the evening.”

“Did you ever wonder how it was okay that your fifteen-year-old self was allowed to drink?”

“Not really. It was just one more confusing piece. The smoking, though, I had to sneak. I was always very careful with my money, but I did buy cigarettes to keep in my locker at Marley’s. Kendrah asked me all the time why my clothes reeked of smoke, and I always blamed the coworkers.” She twisted her mouth to convey amused guilt, and looked exactly as she had twenty-eight years before. He had to practically restrain himself from kissing her. “So you are a non-smoker now?”

“How can you tell?”

“You looked at the pack of cigarettes as if they were a temptress.”

He chuckled. “I smoked too much during the war. After that, I enjoyed the occasional fag.”

“And then?”

He inhaled deeply. “The health hazards were pointed out to me.”

“By your girlfriend, the healer?”

He took a drink and then another drag and looked her in the eye.

“Yes, let’s chat some more about Miss Granger,” she teased him.

He had that delightfully fuzzy feeling in his gut that indicated he was exactly as drunk as he needed to be without serious consequences, but she seemed slightly beyond that point.

“Let’s not.”

“Please, let’s. Did you fancy her as a student?”

He snorted. “No.”

“Never?”
“No.”

“So you have successfully divorced the girl you shag from the girl you started teaching when she was eleven?”

“Evans.”

“What? Is that an impertinent question? I think it is a relevant one.”

“It’s not impertinent. Just…disappointing.”

“That I could think so little of you?”

He tamped out the end of his cigarette and kept his eyes down.

“Sev, I am sorry,” and she seemed sincere. “Tell me how it happened.”

“No great mystery except why she ever decided to be with me. We both had to attend these ghastly parties. I began to…not dread them so much because…I knew she would be there. Potter and Weasley…danced the way they were expected to. Miss Granger and I hid in a corner and drank red wine unless we were required to do otherwise.”

“How did Harry ‘dance’?”

“He was a natural at being recognized, I suppose. He was kind; put people at ease. Weasley was a little rooster, but Potter was gracious.”

Her eyes lit up in pleasure. “So, Miss Granger…”

“We didn’t discuss our personal lives in detail, but it was clear she was with Weasley, and then she wasn’t.”

“And you made a move—good for you.”

“Yes, well…”

“And you live together in London?”

“We do. But I also still have the house on Spinners’ End…”

“You do?” she squealed. “What is Cokeworth like now?”

“You wouldn’t recognize it. Your whole side of town was razed and rebuilt. They are doing the same slowly on my side, but I won’t sell.”

“Why not, Sev? You hated that house.”

He couldn’t tell her the truth, so he lit another cigarette.

“I can’t believe you still have it. I can’t wait to see it. Do you and Hermione stay there often?”

“Not Hermione. It’s too far out of her experience.”

“Yeah? Wizarding royalty?”

“No,” he chuckled. “Both parents were dentists. London suburb.”
“She’s Muggle born?” Lily practically spit her beer across the table.

He sighed audibly. *Why does everyone read so much into this?* “It has nothing to do with anything. Our backgrounds couldn’t be more different.”

“Ahh, Sev.” She said in an irritatingly placating tone.

_Oh, fuck off._ His thought jarred him back to the present. He was at this table in America drinking beer and smoking and looking at Lily. She was right there. An overwhelming force hit him, and he wasn’t sure if he would collapse into sobs or start dancing. With a shaking hand, he bought himself a moment by emptying the pitcher into her glass and then his.

“This will have to be it for me,” she said, and he could hear a slight slur to her words. The game had ended, and the sun was setting in front of them. He drained his beer and pulled out his billfold. “No, Sev, let me.”

“You paid for the rooms, you will put too much on your card.”

“It’s a debit card; it withdraws it from my bank account.”

“Really? That’s…”

“Not a feature of Gringotts yet?”

“Shockingly, no. I assume you have money in a wizarding bank here, too?”

“We did. I imagine it’s still there. I will have to work it out tomorrow. Money for our house, money in the bank here and in Louisiana. I’m rich, Sev.” She showed no joy in the declaration. “I would deposit my check at home…well, in Metairie, and I would stare at the balance and think, ‘This is it. Mum and Dad will never have to worry again, and then I would sleep and, I don’t know…reset or something, and pick up with the same feelings. And here I am with more money than I could spend in a lifetime, and no Mum. No Dad.’”

“Bitch of a sister, though.”

She cackled and slapped his upper arm. “Yes, quite.”

She waved the waitress over and presented her card. He finished his cigarette as they settled up. She swayed a bit, rising from her chair, and he stood carefully and offered an arm. She took it and then leaned much of her weight into his side.

It was a few blocks back to the hotel, and they walked in comfortable silence. The weather was glorious compared to Louisiana, and London most of the time. There was a breeze and the full moon was just appearing.

*I could stay here forever.*

But soon they were at the door to her room. They could access it from a large carpark. Lily reached for her key and struggled a bit. He was about to discretely pull his wand when it clicked. She let her hand drop from the door and froze for a moment. Then she turned to face him and embraced him with her arms around his neck. He hesitated a moment, and then wrapped his arms around her back as well.

“Goodnight, Evans,” he whispered.
She rose slightly on the balls of her feet and kissed him softly on the mouth. “Goodnight, Sev.”
Chapter Four: Lily and Severus

Chapter Four

Lily and Severus

Lily

Lily awoke to darkness. Her stomach lurched, and she sprang for the toilet, stubbing her toe on the foot of the bed on the way. She cried out inwardly, scared to open her mouth before she was safely in the lav. She made it to the tile floor and slid the rest of the way, not able to raise the seat before throwing up into the bowl.

She sank to the tile and stayed there for minutes, unsure if she would need it again soon. Finally, she staggered up and rinsed her face and mouth in the sink before slumping back to bed on her aching toe. She saw the albums on the table and curled up in a fetal position on the bed, allowing herself to sob.

Grief over James, regret about Harry, and anger at her years of delusion poured out. How could she have been so trusting and stupid? In equal measure, she wanted to interrogate Dumbledore and was happy he was dead.

She rose to retrieve her albums and that photo of the Marauders from the box. She folded the right fourth of the photo to effectively erase Peter and affixed the print to the first page of the red album. She regretted that all the photos were of Edward and not the authentic James although the eyes were all him. Her memories of those holidays came flooding back. The hotel rooms, the meals, the other people. They typically, though not always, stayed in the wizarding sections but were never shy about venturing elsewhere. He usually allowed her to set the agenda according to what was comfortable to her. She stroked his face in each photo before returning to the one truly of him standing with his friends.

Her next conscious thought was at sunrise. The curtains were open a crack, and the light was streaming in. She thought she might be sick again, and rose carefully, in case she needed to bolt for the toilet. She felt miserable, but not desperately sick. She showered and then contemplated her wardrobe options. She wished she had thought to grab a robe from the storage unit, but she hadn’t even wanted to think about that the day before. She looked at her things Kendrah and Patty had helped her pack and that Severus had restored to actual size before they had gone to the bar. Just thinking about the beer and the smells there almost made her want to retch again.

She picked out a skirt, a plain white t-shirt, and a jacket, and then grabbed her wand. It had been a long time, but she had been adept at transfiguration at one point. She whispered the incantation and struck her wand decisively. The skirt lengthened. She tried it on, and it fell mid-calf. The shirt was trickier; she wanted to transform the front into buttons and the knit into broadcloth. The texture turned out to be more of a hybrid, but not terrible. The robe she had done before back in the days of school fees and money for little else. It emerged with straight seams and a decent flow. She was rather proud of herself. With another spell and flick of her wand, it was a cranberry coloured light cardigan sweater to wear until the trip to the ministry.
She overcompensated for the hangover by taking extra time with her hair—thick, red and HERS—and carefully applying makeup, including her favorite plummy lipstick. She and Kendrah did a Target haul once a month—Kendrah called it their therapy—and they would spend at least half an hour on the makeup aisles. The final piece was transfiguring a pair of ballet flats that were not quite appropriate into moderately high-heeled black leather pumps. She slipped them on and breathed in and out to ward off nausea before exiting the room and locking it behind her.

Severus was seated on a lawn chair that was propped against the side of the building. He was fully dressed in his black attire, modified slightly for the Muggle world. His hair was still damp and pulled back into a bunch at the nape of his neck. It was only then that she remembered that she had kissed him at the end of the night, and she wanted to sink into the ground.

He looked over at her with no reaction except to rise from the chair and walk over to her, his hands searching for something in the side pocket of his coat. He pulled a phial and handed it to her.

“For hangovers,” he informed her.

“Is it that obvious?”

“The walls are thin.”

It made her want to be sick again, but she swallowed the contents and waited for them to take effect. The phial in her hand was black with the word SNAPE in bold, block print. “Very nice,” she commented as she handed it back to him. He blushed so very slightly and took it back without a word.

She felt the nausea and headache alleviate almost instantly. “VERY nice,” she reiterated.

“Is there a place around here to get a fry up and a decent cup of tea?”

“Not really and marginal,” she answered. “There is...at least there was a decent diner in Lambertville. The menu and tea are American but not awful. Probably best to stick to coffee, I found. The best place to get tea in Metairie is Starbucks, and there should be one on every corner or so.”

“Coffee will be fine.”

“I’m not completely sure if we can apparate safely to Lambertville—we had a spot in the backyard. There is an alleyway not far from downtown we can try. Can you handle minor obliviation? I’m not sure my skills are quite up...”

“Yes.”

She grabbed on to him and couldn’t help but inhale his scent. Soap, something clean and woodsy she couldn’t identify, not a hint of cigarette smoke. She was already craving one and realized she wouldn’t make it through the morning without a pack. She concentrated on the task at hand, the first time in many years. She put that behind her, though and confidently went through the rhythm.

With a whirring sensation she wasn’t quite ready for, they landed safely in the blessedly empty alley.

“The diner is just up the road if it’s still there.” They were in the back of a petrol station, a convenience store, as her Louisiana friends would say, and she ducked in quickly for a pack of Marlboro reds. “Do you want anything?” she asked before she paid the total.
He seemed a bit impatient for his coffee and breakfast, so she took his hand decisively and guided him down the street. When they were about a block and a half away, she saw the diner sign and some customers exiting. “There it is, Sneddon’s.”

He plucked his hand from hers but let her continue to lead.

There was a decent sized crowd for a Monday, but there was a small table available. She sat across from him at the booth and pushed a menu his way. Very soon a waitress appeared and addressed them in that accent for which Lily had a surprising amount of nostalgia. She had noticed it on the waitress at the bar the night before, too.

“Coffee?”

“Two black,” she said.

“Know whatcha want?”

“Give us a minute,” she said. Sev was pouring over the menu, looking overwhelmed.

“Keep it simple,” she suggested. “Eggs, rashers, toast…”

“What are home fries?”

“They’re like chips, a bit thicker. Gorgeous.”

There was scrapple on the menu, and she had a pang for James, who had always pretended to like it despite never being able to eat an entire portion.

They ordered their two egg breakfasts, over medium, at her direction, rashers for one, sausage links for the other, intending to share. The coffee was great, and they sat in silence until the food arrived and they had taken a few bites.

“I keep trying to prioritize what I will do in what order when we get back. Hermione said Harry is back today?”

“Yes.”

“I may want to confront the old bastard before I see Harry.” The anger had returned in a wave as she was speaking. “Tell me how he died.”

“I killed him.”

She had seen enough television programs to avoid spewing her coffee across the table. It was too much of a cliché for that moment. “Severus?!?” she gasped, trying to keep her voice down.

“Under his direction,” he added. “He had been cursed and was dying, slowly, he staged his ‘murder’ to protect a student who had been ordered to do it by the Dark…Riddle. I completed the deed in front of witnesses. It made my cover more believable.”

“What witnesses?”

“Ones on both sides.”

“Harry?”
“Naturally,” he said bitterly.

“So he thought you were a Death Eater…”

“Until the last day of the war.”

She shook her head. It was hard to be incredulous after everything she knew, but she was managing it. “Have you spoken to the portrait?”

“Yes.”

“When? How often?”

“I was headmaster that last year…under Riddle’s direction. Dumbledore was there in the office most of the time.”

“You didn’t stay on as headmaster, then?”

“No,” he said as if she were mental.

“Who is?”

“Minerva.”

“Minerva, he says as if they were friends.”

He ate a bite of toast and took a long drink of coffee.

“You are friends.”

“Former colleagues.”

“Friendly ones. Your life, Sev. I just would have never guessed. And now business owner. And you live in Cokeworth part time.” She shook her head. “Your parents?”

“Departed long since.”

“I’m sorry.”

He shrugged and kept his eyes down. She reached across the table to touch his arm. “No, I really am, Severus. What happened?”

He was frozen for a moment than then relaxed slightly. He didn’t move his arm. She could feel the muscles unclench under his sleeve.

“My father was stumbling home drunk and was hit by a lorry. My mother died at home not long after.” He gently pulled his arm away and drained his coffee cup. The attentive waitress was there in moments to refill it.

“Did you find her?” she asked, as soon as the server had stepped away.

“No. A neighbor.”

“When was this…when did it happen?”

“Years ago. Not long after you…” he shook his head and his eyes widened and then settled back in their usual half-closed setting. “Not long after you left.”
She realized the weight of that statement. He had thought she died. All these years, he had thought of her as dead, and his parents’ deaths had come right after. She couldn’t hold herself back. She rose from her side of the booth and joined him on his. He was startled at first, and there was hardly room for them both as he was once again frozen in place with the whole side of her body pressed against his. He recovered and scooted over to accommodate her.

She embraced him as well as she could from beside him and whispered in his ear, “Sev, I am so, so sorry.”

“Nonsense.” He stiffened at her outward display of affection. “They were never…it wasn’t much of a loss.”

She scooted back over to her side. She had eaten about half her breakfast, but she was no longer hungry, and it looked congealed and unappetizing. He had eaten most of his. She reached into her purse for her card. “I’m going to go smoke and set the glamour before we go to the bank.”

“I have this.”

“No, Sev…”

“YES.”

She gave him a little smile and closed her purse. “I’ll be just outside.” He nodded.

She walked up the block and opened the box of Marlboros. The smell they emitted when she flipped the box lid began to calm her stomach. It wasn’t the hangover or the breakfast that was making it unsettled; her stomach was knotted up with stress. She hadn’t felt that sensation much in the past few years, but she recognized it from her daily routine living here and working in Manhattan. She would usually settle down as soon as she was sitting behind her desk and starting on her lines of arithmancy to transpose or analyze, but that knotty stomach had been a daily companion. She inhaled on the tip of the cigarette deeply and held it in her lungs before she blew it all out.

She had given up smoking after that last summer in Cokeworth when her mother was so ill. She had rarely smoked while she lived here. Walking the streets of the city usually gave her enough of the second-hand experience that she hadn’t felt compelled to smoke herself. Sometimes, though, she would smell beer and cigarettes together, or see someone at an outdoor café table with a drink in one hand and a smoke in the other and need one right then. There was always one to bum with a cordial light, as well that made her feel more a part of a community than working for the American ministry ever did.

It wasn’t until her second teenage rebellion in Metairie that she had become a real smoker again, right on cue when she turned fifteen and started—in her mind she now realized—carrying on with Sev.

She was standing on the corner of a street and alleyway, legs crossed at the ankle, leaning against the bricks. Visibility was limited from the street, so she ducked into a little niche in the alley and set her glamour. She drew a sliver clasp from her purse and tied back the wispy blonde hair that no longer hung in thick locks down her shoulders. She had always been somewhat vain and had strongly resented the glamour throughout the years, but she felt it intensely now. She made a face of irritation and then finished her cigarette back in sight of the diner. When it had diminished to the filter, she stubbed it out with her toe of her shoe. Sev emerged from the belled door just then.

He glanced her way as if she were a stranger, then recognition lit his face, then clear
disappointment followed quickly by a wash of relief before he could control it back into neutral.

*Exactly.*

She held the box out to him in offering. “We have time.”

He shook his head to decline, and she felt a pang of rejection. “The bank is a few blocks,” she said and took off in that direction. She heard his boots behind her. She checked her purse again for her Stella Frazier identification as well as her Jane Doe hospital records. She was not optimistic that this could be settled neatly today. She and James had paid for the house outright with their spoils of the scheme. She had studied Muggle—No Maj—financing laws and procedures before they had sat down with the officials at the bank. James had used a confundus charm at one point, but they’d had few problems. They paid their taxes to both Caesars, on time, in full, to avoid scrutiny the whole time they had lived here.

The bank had moved to a new location a year or two before they had left on their New Orleans holiday, and Lily was relieved to turn a corner and find the branch still there. She quickened her pace, already brisk, and she could hear him match her steps. She pushed through the heavy door and was met by a whoosh of frigid air conditioning and that universal bank smell.

She stopped inside the door and surveyed the layout. There was a line of tellers behind a counter on the back wall. There was a woman at a desk across the room to her left. She turned to the woman. “May I speak to a banker?”

Thirty minutes later she left with detailed instructions of how to transfer her money from the sale of the house to her bank. She didn’t do it directly there because the records for Lily Evans and Stella Frazier did not match, and she hadn’t had enough time to think through all the charming that would be required. This way, she could go through the American ministry and then put it in the Potter Gringotts account.

She had accomplished the task with a brief confundus charm, ability to play the game, and most likely because she wasn’t desperate for the money. Severus had remained outside and was sipping on a take away coffee with one in his hand for her.

“On to the ministry, then,” she proclaimed.

*Severus*

They apparated into a corner of a train station and immediately he had to obliviate a mendicant who appeared ready to go into cardiac arrest.

“Sorry,” she muttered as she made her way through a dark corridor into a bustling main terminal filled with commuters and tourists. She briskly took a staircase up, the only hindrance of two steps at a time were those heels. They were out on the streets of Midtown Manhattan.

He had been there less than a week before, and he was able to recall the route to the ministry. He caught up with her and took the lead, and she grasped for his hand as he passed her. The streets were packed as they had been before when he was with Hermione, so he didn’t reject her hand.

They walked the ten blocks to the wizarding section. As soon as they crossed the street, he dropped her hand and transfigured his jacket into a robe. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her do the
same; her sweater became a long robe of the same bright colour.

“Do you want to come in with me?” she asked.

“I don’t think I would be helpful.”

She nodded and they continued to walk silently. When they reached the massive doors of the ministry, she turned to face him and held out her wand. “I have five of eleven.”

He nodded.

“Meet me back here at two?”

“Yes.”

“Wish me luck.”

“Yes,”

She looked at him and then hitched up her shoulders in what looked like determination and opened one of the large doors. As soon as she had disappeared behind it, he continued through the rest of the wizarding streets, out the other side, immediately converting the robe back to a jacket. He planned the walk the whole of the park in the three hours he had and try to straighten his mind back out.

He had woken to the sound of her running to the lav to vomit. He had taken a potion to set his system right before he had gone to sleep, and he had felt guilty that he had neglected to provide one for her. After she had kissed him, though, he did not feel further contact was appropriate. He had heard her sob in the night for a quarter hour before she started whimpering quietly and then there had been silence.

He had just become used to her as a woman child in her American jeans and sneakers, when she had emerged this morning, tiffed to rival any Malfoy. He had stared at her as they walked through the town in New Jersey from shop to diner to bank, her tight skirt skimming her arse, her long legs extended by those ridiculous shoes, her hair shining in the morning light. He had always thought she was beautiful, but this… And she was holding his hand.

It had been a relief when she donned the glamour as he could finally think rationally.

He crossed the street to begin his journey around the park. He was thoroughly besotted with this city. It was the only place he had ever been where no one gave him a second look. There were so many examples of every brand of humanity, he could be completely anonymous. He imagined living there, having a warehouse for the business, crossing these streets every day. He imagined living here with Lily, of having escaped here with her years ago, leaving their son in the care of…

He aborted that train of thought quickly. In that scenario, he was dead and cremated in New Orleans.

His life with Lily had been so much a part of his psyche, he felt obligated to edit with what had turned out to be the facts. What if…what if he had been sent here…it couldn’t have been by Dumbledore, it would have had to have been one of the potions masters he studied under and spent a few summers working with before the second Potter era at school and the return of the Dark Lord.

So…a potions master, Wiley, he was erratic enough, Wiley sent him to New York to…collaborate
with a potions master here. Snape had taken an afternoon off to see the city and bumped into…It would have been in the late 80s, he supposed. They were twenty-seven, twenty-eight…he bumped into Lily, here.

Wearing a glamour, you pillock.

But he’s not wearing a glamour, and it is in the park, not in the wizarding section. Still, she’s wearing a glamour, and she recognizes him.

Sev?

That voice is unmistakable, but he’s never seen this woman before.

It’s me; it’s Evans.

She grips her hip over her skirt where she keeps her wand. The glamour falls off, and it’s all he can do to keep from collapsing at her feet.

Shhhh. Let’s go over here by this fountain. Just act naturally, no one will notice us. What are you doing here, Sev?

And they find a convenient place and have sex for the rest of the afternoon, and she leaves Potter and they have a flat here he visits on all school breaks and every summer and…

He made it to the outer edge of the park and turned right towards the river.

Old simpering fool.

There was a long metal guard rail between the park and the edge of the water. The sun was directly overhead, and the day had become uncomfortably hot. Despite this, the path was full of runners and cyclists. He crossed safely to face the river. He removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. He had pulled his hair back this morning, a good choice considering the heat. He watched the ferries cross for a few moments and looked at the bridges with the vehicle traffic on top and trains below. When he felt cooler, he continued his walk. There was a vendor selling water in plastic bottles, and he purchased one. The cold water down his throat was the balm he needed to continue.

He walked the backside of the park and back to the familiar streets. It was fifteen of two when he arrived back at the imposing doors of the Ministry. He was contemplating whether to enter, when an elf appeared by his side.

“Mr. Severus Snape?” the elf, who was wearing a robe over a starched shirt and trousers, squeaked.

“Yes.”

“Message for you.”

The elf handed him a bit of parchment, which he unfolded and read.

Sev,

I am still attending to business here. There have been some delays although now we are beginning to be productive. Will you please meet me here at five o’clock?

Sorry.

Lily E.P.
He pinched the bridge of his nose for a moment then drew his wand and propped the parchment on the brick surface of the building.

Fine.

S.S.

He folded the parchment again and handed it back to the elf. “Thank you.”

“Yes sir,” he squeaked and disappeared with a pop.

His legs were not up for a marathon walk again. He headed back out for the Muggle streets and transfigured his robe again to its jacket form. As soon as he was out of the wizarding area, he stopped in the first shop and bought a pack of cigarettes, and then continued to one of several outdoor cafés he had passed earlier. He had seen patrons sitting at the tables smoking and drinking pints, and it seemed a delightful way to spend the afternoon.

Two o’clock was not a rush, apparently; he sat at the best table on a corner café with a view of three streets. The waiter brought him his pint, a menu, an ash tray, and a box of matches, and told him to take his time.

He draped his jacket on the back of the chair and settled in, rolling up his sleeves to his elbow. He opened the package, lit the first cigarette, and tossed the matches and red box on the table as he inhaled. A man with dark skin and hair was walking past just then and gave a casual nod. Enjoy it, man. He proceeded to. The beer was better than what they had drunk at the pub the afternoon and evening before, and he savoured the rich, bitter taste, and allowed his thoughts to roam.

Sixth year, after the Christmas hols and her mother’s death, it was obvious that Lily and Potter were together. They were not hiding it. Potter walked around with her pressed against his side and his arm draped across her shoulder. Potter had always called her Evans as they all did, but suddenly it Lils from him all the time. It made Snape shudder.

She showed an aptitude for arithmancy that year, which Professor Vector noted, and Evans had responded with that vapid laugh that had become something that had characterized a certain type of female student. It had made Snape want to hurl his book across the room.

He had spent all his years at school to that point trying to avoid the draw of the darker elements of his house. For the first three years, it had been out of fear, which had morphed into disgust by fourth year, and then during fifth year, he had only cared about achievement and being worthy of her, and then… What was left to compel him to resist?

He had started drinking more that winter. No one acknowledged his seventeenth birthday until late in the night. He thought he might get a smile or wink from her that day, but she pointedly and obviously ignored him. His dorm mates gave him a bottle of cheap fire whiskey. He drank at least half of it and was sick all night. With shaking hands e brewed his first healing potions the next day during the time Slughorn set aside for students to have access to the Potions lab. Unsurprisingly, he was the only student to use it regularly.

The next time he was invited to partake “with the blokes,” he supplied them all with medicinal
potions that made the next day more pleasant. He became a part of that scene, which led to invitations outside of school, which led to a formal introduction to Lucius Malfoy.

Malfoy had been a sixth year when Snape arrived at Hogwarts, and Snape had tried to be invisible whenever that particular rooster was about. Now Snape and his potions had Malfoy’s attention. And what else did Snape have? He continued to excel in school, but there wasn’t anything compelling him along a straight path. He left school after sixth year determined to make as much money as possible so he could afford some decent clothes for once in his life and not stand out as the house pauper. The summer before, he had lost his job at the pub due to his father’s behaviour. He had found a job on a road crew close to the city and had worked as many hours as his boss would allow. He took a spare bed with a workmate any time he could finagle it to spend as little time as possible at the house on Spinner’s End.

He was startled out of his reverie when the cell phone in his jacket pocket buzzed. The ringer was turned off. He didn’t want to look at the number; there was only one person that would be calling him, and he didn’t want to speak with her just then. He pushed it from his mind.

The waiter returned to his table. “Could I bring you something to eat?”

“Bread?”

“Yes. Perhaps some cheese? We do a small tray with cheese, grapes, and olives.”

“Thank you.”

“Another?” the waiter picked up his empty pint glass.

“Yes.”

It had all proceeded naturally. He had studied during his seventh year as much as he ever had. There were only a handful of students preparing to take the full battery of NEWTs as he was. Evans was one, of course, but they gave each other a wide berth. Each weekend, he was invited to stay at the Malfoy estate or a similar residence belonging to one of his fellow Slytherins. He didn’t dwell on politics. They liked him because his potions were high quality and he could drink with the best of them. He was quiet as he always had been, but he learned to time a rare quip that gave him a reputation for wit.

Malfoy invited him to his wedding over the Christmas break Snape’s seventh year. He had always been mediocre at transfiguration, but he worked on his attire for weeks, mostly just hoping to be able to fade into the background. That was where he had met Riddle for the first time. Professor Slughorn had introduced Snape as my best Potions student in a generation. Riddle had smiled, but his eyes had bored into Snape’s. Please do send me a sample of your work.

Snape had brushed it off as flattery at the time, but two weeks later, he had been invited to a small gathering at Lucius’s new wing at the estate. Riddle had again pressed Snape for samples. Snape had brought a variety of offerings for the guests, but Riddle had ended up with all of them. From that night on, Snape had been invited to more gatherings of the inner circle.

The waiter brought the cheese assortment and bread. Snape’s stomach growled as he cut a slice of
bread and spread on it a thin layer of butter.

At school, he only had a sneer for Lily. It was easy to give and less painful, too. You made your choice; enjoy it, Love. He smashed his NEWTs; Riddle, or the Malfoys, or both arranged for him to be an apprentice to a Potions Master in Bucharest for the next year. He invested in a set of robes, all black, that allowed him fake confidence and pose as assured. He had been back in England for a gathering when the Potter wedding was splashed across the Prophet. He had tried to dismiss it, but the photos stabbed him in the gut, and he didn’t even look at Potter.

She was wearing an ivory robe with fluted sleeves. Her hair fell in thick red curls on her breasts. She had a wreath of delicate violet and ivory flowers on her head. She was beaming into the camera and waving to the guests. There were thin ribbons on the back of the wreath that were fluttering around her head. He had drunk to the point of passing out that night and chosen not to take any potions then or the next day when he was miserable for hours.

He banished her from his mind from that day on. He never thought of her at all, not when he was present for the drafting of resolutions on the Muggle Problem, not when Malfoy or one of the other blokes foisted a woman for him to spend the evening with, not when Riddle would speak to him one-on-one, discussing the potion needs of the movement. He effectively erased her until the night he heard the prophesy. Then she came charging back and took over everything for the next twenty years.

He finished the second beer. He was drinking judiciously, not wanting to be sloppy drunk in the middle of the afternoon, pacing himself. He lit another cigarette and checked his wand. He still had an hour before it was time to meet her at the ministry. The waiter came to inquire about his beer; Snape requested a water and tried a slice of cheese on the bread this time. The waiter offered coffee and a copy of the day’s New York Times, and Snape accepted both gratefully. He glanced at the front page: it was devoted entirely to the upcoming U.S. election, and skipped to the crossword. As he shouldn’t use his wand to fill in the squares, he flagged the waiter, who brought a pencil without having to be asked.

Snape spent the next forty-five minutes completing the puzzle; it was not terribly challenging although he was worthless with American Muggle sports. He left cash on the table, including a generous tip, and nodded to the waiter in thanks before he left. He put on his jacket again and strode away toward the ministry. This time, he didn’t bother with a robe. Not everyone was wearing one, and he didn’t plan to stay long.

In fact, he spotted her, walking glamour free toward him before he was half way to the ministry. She saw him and smiled, and with a flick of her wand, her robe was once again a cardigan. He hair was the same length it had been in that old wedding photo, and the light was similar, too, making her face appear luminous.

“Sev!”

He stopped where he was and she loped toward him in excitement. When she reached him, she put her hands on his shoulder and bent one knee so that her heeled foot rose behind her as if she wanted him to lift her and spin her around. He froze. She pressed her torso into his and kissed his cheek and then took his hand and resumed her pace.

“I am starving! There is a place to get pizza—really the only food I dream about from here—it’s
across town; we could get a taxi?”

He nodded, unable to speak as she led the way and then as soon as they were in Muggle territory, lifted her hand. A yellow cab pulled over immediately. “Bruno’s Lower East?” she asked the driver, who nodded. “Come on,” she said and pulled him in. They were seated and driving along the streets like a cannon ball in moments.

“That went well?” he asked to divert his mind from his present peril.

She made a face to confirm and then some, clearly not wanting to get into the details with the driver, who was honking and yelling out the window as they sped along, sometimes taking a corner from the middle lane.

It’s been an interesting life.

But seeing the city at this speed was exhilarating, he had to admit. Before long, the driver screeched to a halt, and Lily pulled some cash out of her purse for him. “Thank you!” she shouted as they exited quickly. She retook his hand with one of hers and pointed at the other, leading him about half a block to the restaurant. There were empty, high tables outside.

The accompanying stools were high as well, and he took in the neighborhood as he hoisted himself up with as much dignity as he could manage. This was clearly a business district with men and women dressed to the nines walking at a break-neck pace, yelling into their mobile phones with briefcases hitting their thighs as they moved.

“Perfect,” she said as she swung onto a stool and dug into the purse again, this time for her cigarettes. She pulled two, and he retrieved his box of matches from earlier and lit hers and then the one she handed him. “Wore you down,” she said with a twinkle in her eye.

“Shocking,” he rolled his eyes in response and handed her back the cigarette, letting his hand linger on hers for a moment.

“We should get a bottle of wine—celebrate!” she said as she pulled a narrow menu from between a serviette dispenser and a jar of pepper flakes. She perused with one finger as he tried to read it upside down. “No Moscato,” she said with a pout. “Kendrah’s and my favorite. It’s like six dollars at Langenstien’s,” she pouted.

“No, I would think not,” he sneered.

“Snob. Always were,” she passed him the list.

“That is categorically not true…” He ventured away from the Cab Sav he would normally order. “How about this Merlot?”

“Fine.”

A harried, old waitress, tiny, with pinned up gingery hair appeared and took their order without a change of expression.

“This Merlot,” he said, pointing to the listing.

“And two plain slices, please,” Evans added.

The waitress scribbled something and left without a word.
“Such a dear,” Evans laughed. “I miss New Yorkers.”

“I can see why.”

“So, yes, thanks for asking, it was a success at the ministry,” she chided him with a smile.

“Yes?”

“Yes. I was passed up the ranks until finally the Under Minister had an idea about who I was and what I was talking about. They called in my boss from the arithmancy department. They pulled our files.”

And just after that mention of the first person plural pronoun, the waitress returned with a bottle and two glasses. In three motions, she had removed the top foil and uncorked the bottle with a pop. She dispensed with any ritual and poured two glasses half way. “Pizza will be out in a sec,” she said and turned to go.

Evans picked up her glass and moved it towards his. He picked it up and complied, clinking it against hers. “Cheers,” she said. He just drank his. It was fine. He put it down and refilled both, close to the top.

“Thanks. So, they pulled the file, and there it was: correspondence from Dumbledore dating back to October 1981. They notified him when we went missing, but then he DIED,” she said pointing at Snape with the hand that held her glass, “and they weren’t sure what to do. They contacted all the wizarding communities and eventually gave up. BUT, they saved everything for us, froze the funds in the bank here, and helped me transfer it all AND the No Maj…Muggle…account all in the Gringotts, so yes, success.”

“Cheers.”

“They are even holding off on the story in the press for forty-eight hours to give me a chance to get home and see Harry first. Decent of them.”

“Indeed.”

“Would never get that treatment from the Prophet.”

“No.”

“I thought we could travel back first thing in the morning? It’s the middle of the night? Unless you need to get back sooner?”

Go back right now. “Morning is fine. Portkey?”

“From New Hope, I was thinking. We have the rooms for another night.”

“Fine.”

She smiled and blew out some smoke toward the street. She was reclined on the stool slightly, and looked graceful against all odds in the awkward seat. She had one leg crossed and was swinging her free leg slightly.

They finished their cigarettes just as waitress brought two huge slices of pizza. Evans pulled a stack of serviettes from the container and demonstrated how to handle the slice, folding it in her hand before she took a bite. She rolled her eyes in pleasure, and he followed her lead. It was
He wasn’t terribly hungry, but he ate a few bites before he concentrated on the wine, which tasted better with every glass. The world grew delightfully fuzzy as she held court, telling about the characters who had populated her day. She smiled constantly and used his name. *Sev, Sev, Sev.* It fell soft on his ears.

He didn’t bother keeping up his end of the conversation; she filled both roles more than adequately. And she was clearly in a better mood than the interrogator from the night before. That swinging free leg found a home on one of the rungs of his stool and then inched its way up slowly until it was abutting his leg. She would occasionally tap his thigh with the toe of her shoe for emphasis. He had finished all the pizza he cared to eat and meticulously wiped the grease from his fingers with a serviette. He took a sip of wine and placed his other hand lightly on top of that foot. Her face didn’t react, but the foot stilled for a moment, and then bore in at his thigh.

The fuzziness to a distinct turn. His groin, which had not been asleep for any of today, was quickly becoming the center of his world. His cock was already at the party, but now blood rushed to it and away from his brain.

The leg at his side was uncovered; no stockings or tights. His fingers explored the foot, paying special attention to the ankle. He traced a light circle around it again and again. He looked at her mouth as he did so, sometimes glancing up at her eyes that were beginning to register pleasure. He drank the wine and filled the glasses with the last of it.

She had grown quiet and was now just drinking and smiling at him.

“What?” he finally said, softly.

She shook her head, smiling all the while.

“Nothing?”

She shook her head again.

“You, Sev,” she said, hardly audibly. “I can’t believe you’re here. I can’t believe we’re here. Go back in time. Go back twenty-nine years.”

He didn’t have to; he was already there.

“Tell yourself we’re here.”

_We made it out. We survived. We’re here. She’s right here._

“Are you ready?” she said, so quietly.

“Yes.”

They both reached for cash and each left bills on the table that would more than cover their tab and tip. She swung off the stool; he disembarked carefully. He was self-conscious about his erection, no billowing robe to cover it, but her eyes were up at the street ahead. She took his hand again and wound her fingers through his, and they joined the crowd on the street, except they weren’t rushing and barking into mobile phones. They were walking, hand in hand, hips bumping together repeatedly.

“An alley?” she said. He was looking for one, too. After about three blocks, there was a perfect one
with a corner that was shielded from the street. She pulled him in, and they were in their own little crevice, the noise from the street still booming and adding to the perception that they were hiding in plain view.

She pressed her body fully against his; there was no hiding his indiscretion now. Perhaps it emboldened them because in a moment, their mouths were pressed together and their tongues were seeking the other’s out.

He wrapped his arms firmly around her back, pulling her even closer. She hitched her tight skirt a bit and wrapped one leg around him, so her groin met his.

“Fuck, Evans,” he moaned in her mouth.

“Yes!” she responded breathily. Her fingers were working on his placket, and in moments, she had plunged her hand into them and was wrapping it around his cock. “Is this for me?” she said and squeezed it.

“Fuck!” he cried out, and she slapped her hand over his mouth, as if they could be heard through the din. He nipped her hand with his teeth. “Of course,” he gasped, trying to regain some control, some composure, just a bit of the upper hand here. He put his hand down to her leg that was hitched up, ran his fingers up, under her skirt, over a thigh he could clearly see in his mind and to the elastic leg of her knickers.

She whimpered, which encouraged him to go beyond the barrier to smooth folds and wetness. He swirled his fingers, mimicking his earlier motions on her ankle.

“Are you going to fuck me in this alley?” she gasped.

“No.” He removed his hand from inside her knickers and swept her fully into his arms before he apparated them to the backside of the inn, wand at the ready in case they were not alone. It was deserted, and it was jarring to arrive from the middle of the city to this quiet place. They froze for a moment, staring at each other, and then he grabbed her hand and led her to his door, fumbling for his key and then giving in and using his wand. The door opened with a creaking noise, and she walked in first. He closed the door behind them, and she was already on the bed, reaching out to him.

He joined her. His placket was still undone, and he let his trousers fall off as she pulled her skirt up and kickers down.

“Do you have condoms, Sev?”

“No.” he used a charm quickly on her and then on him and felt the tingle that indicated it had worked.

“Thank you,” she said and pulled him down.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes!”

He placed his hands on her hips and plunged into her. His world was hot and liquid. She was so tight and felt just the same as she had then.

“Oh, yes!” she gasped, and he began to move, too quickly he realized and slowed down and then slid out of her and down the bed, spreading her legs wide with his hands and ravaging her with his
mouth and tongue. Her pubic hair was trimmed well back and looked different than it had then, but her essence was the same, and his tongue found her sweet, little clitoris that it had longed for all these years. Her abandoned knickers were beside them, and he clutched at them; he wasn’t sure why, but they felt perfect in his hand as he licked and sucked at her. She had placed her feet, still in those shoes, on either of his shoulders, and the heels were poking his chest every time he moved his head. She was calling out both his name and nonsense syllables and her voice was rising higher and higher.

“Fuck me right now, Sev, I’m about to come,” she gasped and he rose to her in an instant and plunged in again, using a hand on her clit so he could rock her over the edge. She came with a wail and lost herself for a moment as he pounded in her again and again until he came, too, hard and fast. He buried himself, cock and chest and head in her as he came and then came down. He felt her pull his hair out of its band and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and they were truly one person on the bed.

Her mouth found his, and they were kissing, more gently than before, and she was brushing his hair back with her fingers. He kissed her mouth and sat up, retying his hair back. He walked from the bed, naked from the waist down, feeling awkward in his shirt and jacket. He unbuttoned the shirt as he walked to the sink where there were two water glasses, which he filled. He finished removing the jacket and shirt and walked back to the bed with the water, not feeling ashamed of his nakedness. She saw him and unbuttoned her own blouse, removed it, and then reached behind herself to unclasp her lacy bra. He groaned again when she revealed her breasts. They were not the same as a fifteen-year-old girl’s, but they were womanly and irresistibly sexy. She was naked except a butterfly charm necklace that she had worn since he had seen her two days ago, and that she tended to grasp when she was nervous. It was nestled undisturbed just above her breasts.

He handed her a glass of water, and then went into his bag to retrieve some potions, a light sleep aid and one to prevent hangovers. He handed the phials to her and took some himself before climbing back into the bed beside her.

They didn’t speak, and he felt his mind drift off…

He woke to a hint of light from the window. Dawn was early here, but they had slept at least ten hours. His head was resting at her shoulder and one hand grazing her breast. He kissed the shoulder and she stirred. He swirled his fingers around her nipple and watched it harden. He couldn’t keep his mouth off it another moment, so he shifted above her and took it between his lips. Her hands reached up to the back of his head, and she arched her back in pleasure. He sucked languidly and then switched to the other. She moaned and reached down for his cock, which was fully awake and ready.

He sucked once more on the nipple in his mouth and then let it go, kissing the underside of each breast before he inched his way down to take her in his mouth again. He could smell and taste himself from the night before, which always got him going again. She seemed half way there already, writhing beneath him and saying his name. He could see better now than in the twilight of last night, and he loved everything about her. Her smooth legs, and her toes, each painted bright pink, the scant freckles on her legs, the sparse ginger bush just above her little pink button. She was perfection. He worshipped her with his tongue and felt her begin to shake.

Suddenly she was flipping over on her knees, with her little, tight arse in the air. They had never fucked like that in his bed, but it was clear what she wanted. He rose to his knees and entered her from behind.

“Fuck me hard,” she commanded.
He gripped on to her hips and did so, pounding in her. It was undoubtedly sexually satisfying, but it felt ever so slightly off. His mind wandered. He had fucked Hermione like this in New York. It wasn’t something they did often, but occasionally he would flip her over and make her come with his fingers while he fucked her deeply like this. She would come and her knees would start to give, and then they would collapse, and he would come inside her, lying on her back, and she would invariably succumb to a fit of giggles over the awkwardness of their splayed bodies, and he would chuckle, too, and want to kiss every inch of her back as he came down from his orgasm.

This was different. Evans was shouting at him to fuck her, which he already was. He drove in harder, on the verge of what he would consider too hard. “Yes!” she wailed. “Yes, like that! I’m going to come so hard,” she gasped before he could reach his hand around her hip. “I’m going to come when you do, Sev. Pull out and come on my back,” she cried out.

“The charms are still…”

“Come on my fucking arse, Sev, augh, I can’t hold on much longer. Fuck me hard and come on my arse!”

He put his hands back on her hips and went as far in as he could go. “Gods,” he gasped. He pounded in and out three more times until he was about to explode. “I am going to come on your arse,” he cried and pulled out just in time cover her backside as he rode out the waves of sensation.

She moaned for about thirty seconds and then collapsed, panting on the bed. He moved to his side, resting on his elbow and with his finger, lightly painted his seed on her bum and lower back.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Spread it all around.”

It was just this side of being...not quite to his tastes. A bit foreign and not as comforting as the rest of the encounter had been. A pang of bad feeling hit him, and he chased it away. She snapped out of it anyway and rolled over, kissing him on the mouth.

“Shower?” she whispered.

“Yes.” He rose and took her hand, leading the way. They had never showered together before; his house didn’t have one when he was growing up. He had never showed at all until he started at Hogwarts. She used his soap and shampoo. He finished washing his hair and body and wrapped a towel around his waist and then shaved at the sink as she finished up. She borrowed his razor and shaved her legs, which didn’t seem to need it. He drew his wand and dried his hair, securing it back in the band.

She borrowed some sleep pants and a shirt to return to her room to dress and pack. She had her clothes and shoes from the night before in her hand and prepared to leave barefoot.

“This can be it, Sev. We don’t even have to mention it. I won’t mention it.” She kissed his mouth softly and left before he could say anything.

They didn’t mention it when they left, dressed to travel. They didn’t mention it in the tavern in the wizarding streets where Iola fed them coffee and toast before they took off. They didn’t mention it when they arrived at the little travel office in London down the street from the Ministry, nor on the short walk to the Hermione and Severus’s house.
Chapter Five: Hermione

Chapter Notes

This chapter takes place in London during the same time frame as the last two chapters.

Chapter Five

Hermione

It was three o’clock Sunday afternoon when she arrived back at the little travel office. SNAPE was closed until the morning, but she felt she should stop by St. Mungo’s before she headed home. She didn’t have any active cases, but she needed to start preparing for the visit from the American healers. She also craved something so normal as working in her office on a Sunday evening. If she arrived and had a handful of new patients, she would relish the opportunity to throw herself into work that had no bearing on her personal life.

The ward was quiet, though, not even a little squib born while she was away. She tackled the inbox on her desk and left within an hour, picking up an Indian takeaway for home.

She hadn’t completely unpacked from New York, so she started there. She took advantage of the empty house to play the music she loved, the pop music of her childhood, without having to endure withering sighs. She started the laundry, and then stripped down to one of Severus’s t-shirts and her knickers to eat and go through owls and Muggle mail, which was mostly bills.

She paid the ones due within the next two weeks, and put the rest on the desk they were planning to use for home business. She wasn’t terribly hungry, so she stowed the rest of her dinner and scrubbed down the kitchen that was already clean. She didn’t think she would be able to sleep for hours, so she decided to look for a project.

Severus had completed a good deal of work the week she was in New York. Many of the boxes were unpacked. There was a bathroom on third floor, though, that was untouched. He had laid out paint cans and supplies up there. She put down a drop cloth and decided to see if she could knock the project out. She assumed the smaller can with the white paint was for the wood and the larger can of…some shade of dark green that she would never choose was for the walls.

She poured some of the white paint into a pan and chose a brush. She had never come close to perfecting domestic charms. Severus painted in a hybrid style: brush in one hand and wand in the other to ensure straight lines. She plopped down on the floor and started with the baseboard.

Severus was much better at this. He should be for as many hours he had put in working on his house. She sighed. She really did not want to give in to the resentment that had been bubbling inside her for the last day and a half. It would help if she had someone to confide in. She would speak to Harry tomorrow about his mum, and no one could stop her, but he didn’t need to hear her personal grievances.
The wood in the bathroom had been painted a sickly pink, and the white was an instant improvement. It was hot up there on the third floor, and sweat was trickling down her neck below where she had pinned up her hair. Instead of being soothing, the whole project was bringing her anger to the surface: cathartic but painful.

His revelation that he and Lily had been in a relationship...had fucked when they were teenagers was particularly galling to her. Not that she begrudged him a teenage romance, but why had he kept it a secret? There were hundreds of times he could have divulged that to her over the years. She knew he had only brought it up when they were in New Orleans because Lily was stuck in exactly that era, and he was afraid she was going to snog him on the couch in front of Hermione.

She had made it around the perimeter of the room, including the bit behind the toilet that was nearly impossible to reach. She would need to do a second coat as the pink was peeking through in a few places. She stood and began on the built-in cupboards.

Why heal her at all? Why not just bring her back as-is? She’s obviously industrious. She would be an asset at SNAPE. They could get a flat together and pretend it’s 1975 all the time. Harry wouldn’t get his mum back, but hey, at least you could relive your childhood sex romps.

She was reaching to the top of the cupboard and was suddenly afraid she might pass out. She put down the pan and brush and slunk downstairs carefully against the rails to get some ice and water. She stood in front of the open freezer and let an ice cube melt down her face before she poured herself a large tumbler of cold water and trudged back up to continue the job with the brush.

She started on the more delicate lattice work. She should not judge a woman who had just been healed and hit with the reality of her dead husband and...however many years of wasted life. Still...Lily was snide...dismissive...dishonest about her motives. All that concern about Hermione’s age and the appropriateness of their relationship when she really just wanted to poke at them. At least that’s how it seemed.

What gives you the right to judge, Lily Potter? You made such good choices?

She felt instantly guilty for directing her inner rant at Lily rather than Severus, who seemed more than willing to join in on the mocking of all things Hermione deemed right.

Yeah, I’m a Gryffindor. I’m the Gryffindor who healed you, and who gave YOU the money to start your business.

And there were the angry tears right on cue. She put the brush down again; there was no way she could see well enough for this job.

They had seemed so...cozy this morning, like a little club of two old lovers and the ridiculous, naïve baby that could never understand the way things really were. She scoffed through tears, remembering that she and Severus had become friends discussing aspects of the government and culture they found abhorrent.

I wasn’t so ridiculous then. Just because I believed the core “truth” of the story...but that’s rubbish. Love is bollocks, and there’s never been starker proof.

She picked up the paint brush in a fury and started on the lattice again. She lost her footing and fell forward, and the brush smacked her in the middle of the stomach...the middle of Severus’s Pink Floyd t-shirt. She placed the brush in the pan quickly and tore the shirt off, thrusting it into the sink, trying to remove the paint while she still had a chance. She was filling the sink with cold
water and caught her reflection in the mirror. In her bra and knickers, her soft midsection was on full display, as was the lump of flesh on her back below her bra. She shuddered and wrung the shirt out quickly.

Crooks was pacing in the doorway and gazing at her with aloof detachment.

“What are you looking at?” she raised her voice at the creature, who gave her head toss of disgust before sauntering off.

She wrapped the shirt in a cloth and carried it downstairs to douse with stain remover and throw in the wash before the paint could set.

“Crooks! Come down. I’m sorry.” She put a saucer of whole milk by his food dish.

She walked the stairs to their room where she found a plain white t-shirt that he wouldn’t care if it were splattered. She passed Crooks on the way back up. “Sorry, Boy.” He sniffed at her and continued down towards his treat.

Hermione was not a bit tired and was determined to finish the job before she went to bed. She picked up the brush and finished the detail work on the cabinet before brushing on a coat to the both sides of the built-in.

She longed to phone her mother. They had been gone from her for seven years now, and she had finally stopped thinking about them every day. She saw them twice a year when she traveled to Melbourne to have her teeth cleaned and examined at Wilkins’ Dentistry. She had made up a cover story that the couple bought about why she was traveling to Australia—a gran in nursing care and a standing dental appointment enabling her to take the time off work. They were friendly; she pushed ever so slightly for more each time. Now she arranged her appointments just before lunch to give her an excuse to take them out. They had a lovely flat and two budgies that they doted over. They seemed to like the rather eccentric young British doctor they saw in May and November.

Her mother had no memory of Hermione’s romantic troubles that she heard about plenty during the Hogwarts years. Hermione especially cherished the long weekend in October during sixth year in which she had tumbled through the door and practically started sobbing in her mother’s lap.

She couldn’t turn a corner at school without seeing Ron and Lavender gazing at each other or play-fighting, or just full-on snogging. It wasn’t even that she begrudged their happiness—it was just… would there ever be anyone whom she cared about that would also be interested in her? The Viktor incident had been flattering, but there was never a spark on her end…probably because of Ron. It had always been Ron. And then Ron had fallen for Lavender.

Her mother had scooped her up onto the couch and arranged her so Hermione’s head was in her lap. This was incredibly silly for a seventeen-year-old, but it had been enourmously comforting. Her mother had gently separated every curl on her head with her familiar fingers while quietly reassuring her daughter.

Yes, there is someone who will love you. How could there not be, darling girl? You are so, so special. It doesn’t surprise me that teenage boys don’t know what to do with you. You are complex. You are high quality. You are a treasure, Hermione. You will be someone’s treasure.

When Ron had come around, she desperately wanted to share her joy with her mother. It was a year before she had decided to establish a relationship with her parents, and then when she did, she gushed about her lovely detective boyfriend who wanted to get married.
Of course, it didn’t take too long before there were deadlines and ultimatums and it all turned to rubbish. Again, she wasn’t good enough for someone to love her the way she was. The Wilkins had clucked their disapproval at her young man and assured her there was someone out there just for her, in significantly less personal terms than her mother’s previous speech. Still, it had helped.

She brushed a last swath of paint on the cupboards and stood back to admire the work. Not terrible; likely very nice with a second coat.

The ladder was propped against the wall of the bedroom on the third floor, so she retrieved it to paint the crown molding.

She wondered where Lily would live. Surely Grimmauld Place at least in the short term. Perhaps she would stay here, though, for the first few nights until she became reacquainted with Harry. Hermione’s bed from her old flat was in the third-floor room, and Hermione made a mental note to put bedclothes on it when she finished the painting. She knocked out the last of the wood quickly and climbed down to clean her brush and put a coat of green on the walls.

The colour was so dark, it would look black in low light. *Lovely, Severus. Who wouldn’t want a Slytherin bath?*

The walls she was covering were white, so at least the green took easily. She wondered if the sample dried lighter than this depressing swamp. Was he planning on black bath linens? For the hundredth time, she speculated what the Cokeworth house looked like. She’s had hints over the years when he came home with light blue or white or yellow paint in spots he couldn’t reach, like between his shoulder blades. *Could you not satisfy your dungeon longings in your own house?*

She sighed as she cleaned up after her project. She doubted she would be able to work on it further before Lily and Severus arrived, and she felt she needed to make it into a working bathroom.

As much as she told herself and him that the situation surrounding the Cokeworth house did not bother her…it bothered her. It was troubling. He was not only her partner in the business but in life as well. They owned this place together. They had each put an equal amount in for the down payment. They were planning on splitting the mortgage payments each month. And yet he had this other property she was excluded from.

She could not find the sheets for her old bed in any cupboard. There were still boxes on each level to unpack, so she started on the top floor. All of them contained his old records and books and her school memorabilia.

She went downstairs to the floor with their bed and bath. She vaguely remembered packing the linens in her flat and felt she was on the right track with these boxes. They had clearly been shrunk by her, as they had equal corners and sides, she thought snidely. Sure enough, she found the linens she needed right off, as well as towels for the bath up there that would lighten the mood from set for an exorcism to at least Durmstrang common room.

The paint was still damp, so she made the bed and folded the towels on top. She went searching for some soap, shampoo, and other toiletries, as well as a soft blanket. By the time the boxes had been properly shrunk and stowed and the room was at least acceptably guest ready, it was almost three-thirty, and her wand would chime in an hour and a half.

She slunk down to their room and curled up on the bed, covering herself with a quilt her grandmother had made for her before she went to Hogwarts for the first time. She felt the sway of Crooks joining her on the bed. He circled a few times and nestled in by her feet, his usual spot. Severus tried to give the impression that this was not his ideal, but she had caught the blokes too
many times taking an afternoon kip together for her to take the protests seriously. She was out in
moments.

She overslept her wand, of course, and her morning became a comedy of stunts, tripping over her
boots, spilling the tea, searching for her bag. She had told the assistant healers in the unit the night
before she would be a bit late anyway, but this was ridiculous. She needed to stop in at SNAPE,
and she found the staff there harried and anxious about when the boss would return.

Hyacinth was flipping papers with nervous energy. “We’re okay, Hermione, everything is fine,
but…there are orders that we need to ship next week that aren’t brewed, and I don’t know whether
to start…”

“He will be back soon. Give him until Wednesday, okay? If he’s not back by then, I will come and
help with the orders.”

“Thank you. I just…”

“I know. He’s very particular, but this will be fine. Thank you for doing such a good job
maintaining the place while he’s away.” It wasn’t idle flattery; it looked as clean and in order as
Severus insisted on when he was there.

She flooed to St. Mungo’s from the warehouse and was happy to learn that no new cases had
appeared overnight. She sat at her desk and pulled out parchment and quill.

Dear Harry and Ginny,

I hope you had a lovely time in New Zealand. I can’t wait to hear about it. I know it is a lot to ask,
but could you please come over to the new house tonight? I will pick up some food for tea. There
is something I must discuss with you as soon as possible. It’s nothing bad, I promise, but it is rather
urgent.

Can’t wait to see you!

Fondly,

Hermione

She sealed it with her wax stamp and walked briskly to the Mungo’s owlery. She beckoned a lovely
brown barn owl and held a biscuit in her hand. While the owl enjoyed its treat, she secured the
rolled letter to its left leg. “Number Twelve Grimmauld Place,” she told the owl, and it took off out
the window and in to the city.

After a day of charting on parchment and preparing for the upcoming visit, Hermione left work
about an hour sooner than she usually would. She stopped by Saigon and picked up pad Thai and
two varieties of curry. If Severus and Lily had arrived today, (she had checked her mobile no fewer
than fifteen times throughout the day) she would have plenty of food. She stopped by the shops to
pick up beer and a bottle of wine and then back-tracked to the wizarding section to pick up
pumpkin juice for Ginny.

She was the first to the house and spent a few minutes making the sitting room cleaner than it
already was and setting out plates and serving utensils. Another check of the phone, and she
couldn’t stand it any longer. She called him. It rang four times and went to voice mail.

“Hello, Severus. Hope all is going well with you and Lily? Any idea when you will be back? No pressure. Hey, Harry and Ginny are coming for dinner, and I am going to tell them about Lily. I just think… I can’t keep it from him any longer, Severus. I’m sorry if this makes you angry. Call me in the next few minutes if you have a major objection. Okay. Well, I miss you. Can’t wait to see you. Painted third floor bath last night… Okay. Bye.”

Just as she clicked off she heard the voices outside. “Hey, ‘Mione, is this the right one?”

She scooted towards the door and let in her guests.

“Hey!” She hugged a very tanned Harry and then stood back to take in Ginny, who had popped dramatically since the last time she saw them in late June. “Ooooooooh, Ginny, you look fantastic!”

“Ugh; I’m big as the Burrow.” Ginny looked well rested and had hundreds more freckles.

“Nonsense. Come in!”

“This is a fabulous house, ‘Mione,” Ginny breathed.

“Thanks. The location was perfect; we couldn’t pass it up. Beer, Harry? I have pumpkin juice, Ginny, or if you want wine…”

“Beer is great, cheers,” Harry said.

“Just water with ice, if you have it.” Ginny began the feat of sitting on the couch.

“Glass, Harry?” Hermione called from the kitchen.

“Bottle’s fine.”

She popped the top of two beers and carried them in with Ginny’s ice water.

“So, do you want to fix plates? I have Thai.”

“Don’t prolong the mystery. Are you up the duff?” Ginny sounded slightly put out about being summoned.

“NO! Oh, Merlin, no! Is that what… no. It’s much more… well, let me just begin. When we returned from New York last week, Severus had a letter from the New Orleans police. From America.”

“Is Snape in jail?” Ginny squealed, seemingly more amused than concerned.

Ugh. Hermione sighed deeply. “No. The letter was from a detective asking him if he knew someone named Lily Evans.”

“What?” Harry gasped.

Hermione got up to find the letter, chiding herself for not preparing better. It was at the top of the desk drawer, and she pulled it out and then returned and handed it to Harry.

“Just that. Do you know someone named Lily Evans? Contact us here.”
“What did you do?”

“We contacted them. Severus was skeptical…”

“Why did they contact him anyway and not…and not me?”

“Harry, I’ll get to that; there’s a very good reason for that. We called them. I have a mobile, you know, from our house search.” She pulled it out as an exhibit and both Potters looked at her with impatience. “Sorry. We called them, and well, she, Kendrah Johnson, the detective—that’s very much like an Auror…”

“I know, Hermione!” Harry said, thrusting his hands in the air.

“Well, but Ginny…Anyway, we called Detective Johnson, and she said that a woman who called herself Lily Evans was there in New Orleans.”

“A scam,” Harry said in a disgusted tone.

“That’s what Severus thought, but the detective knew about Hogwarts—this was…she is a Muggle, Detective Johnson. So Severus thought it was probably a highly targeted scam—like someone who went to school with them. The detective offered to send some photos over the Internet. When we saw them…Severus called her back.”

“They looked like…” Harry was sitting on the edge of the couch.

“They looked enough like her. That phone call…I don’t know exactly what Detective Johnson told Severus, but whatever it was, it was enough to make him go down there.”

“To New Orleans?” Ginny gasped.

“Yes. The next time I heard from Severus, he was convinced it was your mum. She had been injured seven years before and she was not in her right mind. I joined them there on Saturday, and I was able to treat her.”

“WAIT! What, Hermione? You’ve seen my mum? How? How is any of this…”

“I know, Harry. It’s hard to even… But it’s her. Dumbledore sent them away, both of them, Lily and James…”

“My dad!” Harry’s face lit up and Hermione felt crushed to have to continue this.

“James isn’t…James died in the accident that hurt Lily, Harry. I am so, so sorry.”

Harry tore from the couch. “None of this is real,” he hissed through his teeth.

Ginny tried to follow him, but she was stuck. Hermione offered a hand, and Ginny brushed her off. “Harry, I can’t… What the hell, Hermione?”

“If this is really my mum. If my dad was alive but is now dead…why didn’t you tell me as soon as you found out? Why the FUCK did SNAPE know? Why did they contact Snape?”

“Because Lily was thrown back in time, mentally. She was living in her head at the time when they were friends. Close friends.” She couldn’t bear to tell the other part of the story just then, and she didn’t think Harry would take it well anyway. “Detective Johnson and her colleagues, they have been taking care of Lily since the accident in 1997. Lily lived at the detective’s home, and there were others involved as well. The whole time, though, the detective was trying to find Lily’s
relatives or a friend. There are ways of searching people now on the Internet, but because of our secrecy code, none of that goes through. The detective…Kendrah…she figured out years ago that Lily was from Cokeworth, but there were no records of her or her family ever living there. We apparently wiped out all traces of them! It wasn’t until Severus and I bought this place that we showed up in Muggle public records, and Kendrah’s search hit on Severus before our Ministry had a chance to vanish it, I guess.”

Harry looked at her as if she had lost her mind.

“I know, I know. But I was able to bring Lily back, mentally, like we did for Sirius, and she wanted to find you right then…”

“Why didn’t she?”

“Because you were in New Zealand. We convinced her to wait until you were back, and I’m sorry if that was the wrong choice. She and James had worked at the American ministry since Dumbledore sent them away, and they had a house there in New York or New Jersey or something. I think…Pennsylvania…anyway, she was going to see about their house and check in with the ministry there, and then they will be back.”

“Hermione! None of that is true! They died…Lily, his mum died to save him! That’s how he was saved! The scar!” Ginny had hurtled herself up off the couch and was holding the front lock of Harry’s hair back to show the scar.

As if I’ve never seen that. “I am just telling you what I know,” Hermione said, as calmly as she could manage. “From what Lily said, it was arithmancy that Dumbledore relied on…” Harry swung his head wildly to face her.

“Rubbish!” he yelled.

“I know, Harry. I know.” Hermione’s exhaustion hit her hard, and she sat on the couch and put her head in her hands. “I know,” she whispered.

Harry came back and sat next to her. “’Mione. You wouldn’t be saying this unless you believed it.”

“No. And I know it sounds utterly ridiculous. But I saw her. I spoke to her. I healed her. She will be here, if not tonight, I’m sure tomorrow.” Please, Severus. “She loves you so much, Harry. Dumbledore lied to her; she thought you had a happy childhood with new parents and siblings. She thought she was doing the only thing that would keep you alive. She was living to be reunited, she and your father…”

“So how was he killed in…where did he die? Where was she?”

“New Orleans. They were on holiday at Mardi Gras…”

“They were on holiday? What the actual…? Holiday?” His voice rose in pitch to match his outrage.

“Yes, Harry. What do you expect? They lived for how many years waiting for Dumbledore to call them back here because the war was over. I understand how shocking this is. They were hit by a car. Your dad was killed instantly, and your mum was unconscious for months, and then she had a limited capacity. When she began to speak again, she thought she was eleven and had just received her Hogwarts letter. That was four years ago.”

“So none of it was true?” Ginny was across the room at the table having her own scene.
“A lot of it was true. Harry, your parents loved you more than anything. And now you can have a second chance with your mum. Just in time for the baby. Come back tomorrow. She can tell you everything better than I can. Come back tomorrow. I’ll put this food away, and we’ll all have it together.”

“I’m bringing Sirius,” Harry said defiantly.

_Merlin, give me strength._

“He deserves to be a part of this. He will want to…” Harry was trying not to sob. Ginny rushed to him and embraced him.

“Of course, bring Sirius. That is no problem.” _Oh my god. This is going to be f*cked beyond all recognition._ “We all have bigger things to worry about now.” _Must pick up vats of calming potion._ “Do you want to take some of this food home? Do you have anything in the house to eat?”

Ginny looked at her as if Hermione had asked if she were going to give birth to a cat instead of a baby.

“We have food,” she said brusquely.

“I’m sorry. I hope you will forgive…”

Harry stopped and turned and took Hermione into his arms. “’Mione,” he whispered in her ear. “Thank you. It’s just a shock. Thank you for telling me. We’ll be back tomorrow.” He kissed her cheek.

Ginny was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. She looked at Hermione impatiently. “No one blames you, Hermione,” she said, rather caustically.

“Good night. See you tomorrow.” Hermione stood wearily on the porch and watched them leave.

She closed the door and then walked straight to the couch and collapsed on it. She had sobs that she had been holding in her stomach and she let them out, shoulders shaking. _STOP THIS! It’s good news; it’s fantastic. Harry has his mum back. It’s a miracle, you pathetic mess!_ 

Crooks, who had been stalking the scene on the outside, sticking to the kitchen and dining room, walked over and put his head next to hers and purrrrrred.

“I know, I know. You want some dinner boy?”

Crooks just looked at her.

“I’m okay. Come on.” She dragged herself up and to the kitchen. She made sure his bowls were cleaned and filled and gave him another milk treat. She put the food containers into the empty fridge and eyed Severus’s whiskey on the counter and then thought better of it. “Enjoy your dinner. I am going to take a shower and go to bed. See you upstairs?”

Crooks was already tucked in, but he lifted one ear in response. Hermione tried to shut her brain down in the shower, but thoughts were whirring like a newspaper press. _Extra! Hermione Granger Has Fucked Up Everything Beyond even what SHE Was Seemingly Capable._

Severus had dreamless sleep he took when he had a nightmare. She had only touched the stuff a few times since the war, usually because she was on cusp of a breakthrough at work and couldn’t slow her mind down enough to get the sleep she would need. There were three phials of it in the
little cupboard above the sink. Hermione took it down and swallowed the contents in one gulp.

She spent just enough time for clean knickers and another of his soft shirts before she crawled into bed and sank into oblivion for ten hours.

She woke up five minutes before her wand sounded. Crooks was curled up against her belly. She kissed his furry face and then climbed out of bed.

*You can do this.*

She dressed and headed to work.
Chapter Six

Hermione and Severus and Lily and Harry and Ginny and Sirius

Hermione

She felt a stir as she turned the corner to her block. She had considered stopping by SNAPE before heading home, but she spoke to Hyacinth via floo, and all seemed well. If Severus did not come home today, she would go in tomorrow and work. This was her last day shift in the rotation; in twenty-four hours, she would begin her series of night shifts.

She thought she was probably just happy to be home and feeling better about the gathering tonight. If Severus and Lily were not there yet, she could use Sirius as her shield against Ginny. If Severus was there, she planned to plant herself on his person and leave the talking to others.

The door was charmed but unlocked when she arrived up the steps; a tell-tale sign that Severus was home. A powerful wave of relief hit her so hard, she almost sunk down to sit on the steps. Instead, she gripped the shoulder strap of her bag and entered the house.

Lily was leaning against the doorway to the kitchen casually, balancing on one foot, with the other wrapped around the back of her leg. She was wearing high-heeled shoes that hurt Hermione’s feet just looking at them. She had on a dark denim shirt dress with a belt at the waist that made her look tiny and delicate. Her red hair was out of its ponytail and draped her shoulder blades. She looked like a completely different person than the woman who had bounded out of the yoghurt shop…four days ago?

Severus was not visible, but the smells from the kitchen indicated he was cooking with garlic. The music was turned up loud, as he tended to do during housework. Mick Jagger was wailing from the kitchen.

_The flood is threat'n ing _
_My very life today!_

“Hello!” she called out. She put her bag on the chair of the desk. Lily turned three-quarters in the doorway to face her, with part of her body toward the kitchen.

“How was work?” she called out over the music.

“Productive, thanks,” she said as she walked toward the kitchen, hoping to be met by Severus. When she reached the door, however, his face was still over a steaming pot. “Hi,” she called out. Lily moved then to allow Hermione to enter. Severus continued to look as if he were brewing the elixir of life and should NOT be disturbed over what was clearly a pot of boiling water awaiting pasta. When she was close enough to reach out and touch his arm, he finally looked up.

“Hi,” he said quietly. She fell into him, and he wrapped his arms around her lower back.

“So glad you’re home,” she exhaled into his chest. When she breathed in again, he smelled distinctly of cigarette smoke, but there were a lot of smokers in New York.
“Yes.”

“I have Thai takeout from last night, but this smells delicious. Clam sauce?” It was a specialty.

“Yes.”

“Did you get my message?” she was still attached to him. He had taken back one arm to stir his pot.

“No.”

“I called yesterday, around this time. I was trying to tell you…I talked to Harry.”

Severus stopped stirring.

“What?” Lily said, clearly in tune with their scene. She flicked her wand to turn down the music.

IT’S JUST A SHOT away.

“I called Severus yesterday to tell him I was seeing Harry last night…that I was going to tell him you were alive…that you would be arriving soon.”

Lily looked down for half a second and then was right back with Hermione.

“You saw him? What did you say? What did he say?” She looked as if she would shed her skin any moment.

“He was shocked, but so happy, of course. He and Ginny are coming over tonight. They are bringing Sirius.” She braced herself for the storm that did not come.

“I suspect so,” he said and resumed his cooking.

“When will they be here?” Lily’s voice had raised at least an octave in pitch.

“Probably about an hour. Harry went back to work today after his vacation.”

“Sev said he is an Auror? What does his wife do?”

“Yes. He always wanted to be an Auror…or quidditch, you know. Ginny isn’t working at the moment. The baby is due next month. She taught flying at primary school and played quidditch semi-professionally before.”

“Do you have pictures…photos of them?”

“I do…we haven’t finished unpacking, but I will go up and see that I can find…”

“Oh, no, Hermione, don’t worry about it now. I will see them soon.”

“Did everything go smoothly with your house and the ministry?”

“Without a hitch, really,” Lily said and took a sip of wine. “Shockingly.”

“What did the American ministry…well, what was their reaction?”

“They were pleased to see me.”

Illuminating. She poured her own glass from the bottle Lily had opened. It was sweet and too mild for her taste, but she saw another on the counter that was more to her liking. Severus had a glass as
well, and Hermione knew this was not his preference at all. Upon further inspection, she found a wide selection of beverages both from the Muggle shops and wizarding. Something for every taste.

“You were anticipating a gathering,” she said to Severus and she drank some more wine and made a subtle face to him, conveying her opinion about it. He didn’t react.

“Yes,” Lily said. “We were hoping there would be.”

That we was a little stab right in her gut. How ridiculous. “What needs to be done?” she addressed this to Severus. “I’ll find the table linens,” she answered her own question.

“They’re in a box by the laundry, I think,” he answered.

She walked to the little attached room and realized his Pink Floyd shirt was still in the washer. She moved it to the dryer and hit the knob. “I painted the top bathroom last night and made the bed for Lily,” she called to Severus. “You’re welcome to stay here,” she said to Lily, afraid her statement was presumptuous.

“Thanks,” Lily replied.

Hermione looked at the boxes and tried to remember packing that part of her flat. She had a memory of Crooks walking across the table as she folded the cloth and pictured the box that was there. She pulled it out and brought it to the dining area. They hadn’t bought a proper dining table yet, so she expanded the one for the flat and then found a cloth to expand as well.

Severus had unpacked the kitchen, so she just needed to count plates and start setting them.

“Let me help,” Lily said.

Leave me alone and go away. “Sure, thank you.” Hermione pulled the plastic, slotted bin that housed the utensils and handed it to her. “Six, right?”

“Three of us and three of them.”

“Better set out extra, just in case.”

“Who all would be extra?” Lily asked.

“The Weasleys travel in packs. But…I have a feeling it will probably just be us.”

“What about Ronald?”

Hermione turned to look at her at the sound of Ron’s name.

“I doubt he will come.”

“Did he and Harry have a falling out? You three were best mates in school, yes?”

Hermione thought about Dumbledore’s deceit, and felt bad for Lily and guilty for being so hostile, at least in her head. “Yes. Harry and Ron are still very close. Ron is an Auror, too. He lived with Harry and Ginny before he was married. Ron and I had a falling out. It’s getting better, but I doubt he would come here unless I asked directly.”

“Oh no, what happened?”

They were folding napkins and chatting like girlfriends. Hermione tried not to give her a side-eye.
“We were involved...we were romantically involved during and after the war, for a couple years. Then we broke up, and it was difficult between us.”

“Did you break up because you started seeing Severus?”

Hermione glanced into the kitchen to see if he was listening to this. Nothing indicated that he was, not that it would change her answer. “No. Ronald wanted to marry right away and start a family, and that wasn’t conducive to my career. We tried to work it out, but it became clear it was better to end it.”

“Ron didn’t see it that way?”

“Not at first, but eventually. He’s married now. His wife just found out she’s pregnant. Did you know Susan was pregnant?” she called to Severus.

“Who?”

“Susan Weasley…Bones.”

“No.”

“So no Ron and Susan?” Lily said.

“Probably not.”

“What did your friends think when you came around with Sev?”

Hermione sighed. There was no way of winning this conversation. “They were surprised at first. Everyone has accepted it now.”

“I can imagine…that it was surprising.”

“Yes.” She acquiesced. It was easier that way. “I’m going to take a shower and change before the people arrive. There are three cartons from Saigon in the fridge if we need to expand the offerings,” she said to Severus before she headed upstairs. Crooks was crouched on the landing, giving her a look she couldn’t interpret. “Severus will fill up your dishes if you go on down,” she said and scratched his head on her way up.

She stripped off her work clothes and took her curls down from the band that was holding the top half back. She looked at herself in the mirror. I did put on makeup this morning. She showered and washed her hair without letting her mind wander too much. She rinsed off and then wrapped herself in the big bath towel.

She stood in front of her closet. She couldn’t compare to Ms. form-fitting denim dress, but she had a nice enough black one that went to her knees and gave her the appearance of a bit of cleavage. She pulled it on and zipped up the back with her wand. She charm-dried her hair and applied some Sleek-Eez. She reapplied makeup and put in her single pearl necklace that Severus had given her on their first Christmas. She had some pretty silver sandals still in the bag from New York. She applied some sparkly nail lacquer with her wand to her toes. She looked at herself in the full-length mirror and sighed.

The table was ready, and the downstairs now smelled of curry. Hermione walked into the kitchen where Severus was trying to manage five pots and Lily was leaning against a cupboard. Hermione stacked some serving dishes on the counter, just as Severus was draining pasta.
“I don’t think this rice will reheat well,” he grumbled.

“No, just put some in each dish.”

“This was intended for last night’s dinner?”

“Yes. In all the excitement…”

“What time do you think, Hermione?” Lily sounded anxious.

“In between six-thirty and seven would be my guess.” The wands showed six-eighteen. Hermione noticed that the bottle was empty, so she opened a better one and poured a glass. “Lily?”

“Better not.”

Severus put a stasis on the food and leaned against the sink, looking harried. Hermione poured him a glass and handed it to him.

They stood around the kitchen looking at each other.

*This is going to be fantastic.*

At six twenty-seven, the door buzzed.

“Oh my goodness!” Lily said, sounding very much like Patty Connell.

She wasn’t sure if she should get the door, but Hermione snapped to, placing her wine glass on the table and heading for the entry. Lily stayed back a bit, and Severus was hovering at the kitchen door.

“Come in,” Hermione said.

“Are they here?” It was James’s voice.

“Harry!” she couldn’t hold herself back. She bolted for the door as a clone of James in his early twenties walked through. “Oh, Harry, I’m so sorry…I’m…” words were eaten by sobs.

“Mum?” he said.

She could hardly stand up straight.

“Oh, Merlin! Lils!” cried an old man behind him. He stepped around Harry and the very pregnant wife and took Lily into his arms. “Oh, Lils,” he started crying, too. “I can’t believe it. I can’t believe it. You’re here! You’re right here! Let me look at you.” He held his arms out and stood away from her for a moment and then enveloped her again. “Oh, Lils.”

“Sirius,” she cried on his shoulder.

“Harry told me about James.”
“I’m so sorry,” she sobbed.

“He was hit?”

“We were hit by a car years ago. I was incapacitated until a few days ago—I didn’t know when it was or that…or anything.”

“I know.” He backed up and took her hands in his. “I was unconscious for four years. Hermione healed me, too.”

“Yes,” Lily breathed.

“Mum?” Harry was still standing beside them, but Lily was afraid of smothering him; of demanding more than he was ready for. She had already decided to let him set the pace. She dropped Sirius’s hands and offered hers to Harry. He looked at her for a moment and then at her hands and then took them. “Mum?”

“Yes, my sweet boy.” The words came out before she could stop them. But they were not the wrong choice. He brought her close, and she put her arms around him and laid her head on his chest with her ear to his heart, which was beating wildly. “I’m here now. I am so, so sorry Harry. I shouldn’t have let them…”

“Shhhhh,” he said, comforting her.

It emboldened her. She dried her eyes on her sleeve and stepped back, placing her hands on his shoulders and rising on her toes to kiss his cheek. “What a man you are, Harry. Your dad would be beaming with pride. And this is your wife?”

“Yes, this is Ginny,” he said.

She turned her attention to the pretty redhead. “I’m Lily Potter; I am so happy to meet you and oh…” she couldn’t help but swoon over the pregnancy. She refrained from touching, though. “When are you due, Ginny?”

“Seven weeks. October. It’s…it’s lovely to meet you, Mrs. Potter.”

“Oh, please, call me Lily.”

Ginny smiled.

“Have a seat, and I’ll bring out drinks,” the ever-helpful Hermione called from the dining room. She had expanded the sitting area with enough couches and chairs for all, making it look three times as large as it had when Lily and Severus had arrived that afternoon. The girl and her charms. “Beer, Harry? Wine, Lily?” “Fire whiskey, Sirius?” “Ginny…whatever you want.”

A chorus of *that’s fine; sounds good* rang out. “I’ll have water,” Ginny said.

Hermione bustled back into the kitchen.

“Come on, Sev, join us,” Lily called out, but he followed Hermione. It was incredibly awkward suddenly in the sitting room, and Lily hoped the drinks were quick so people would both have something to occupy their hands and they all might be lubricated toward easier discussion.

“You’ve been in America all this time?” Sirius said, bless him.

“Yes. New York/New Jersey area before the accident and New Orleans since.”
“New Orleans is supposed to have an amazing wizard culture,” Ginny offered.

“Great quidditch team,” said Harry.

“I wouldn’t know. I lived in a Muggle area the whole time. No-Maj. That’s what…”

“That’s what they call Muggles in America, yeah,” Harry said a bit eagerly, and Lily’s heart broke again.

Hermione arrived with drinks levitated around her. She passed them out and then took her own and sat on a high stool in the periphery.

“Professor Snape, join us?” Harry said with an uptick, seeming uncomfortable speaking to Sev.

He appeared with a stool and a small glass of whiskey and sat beside Hermione.

“This is a great house,” Sirius addressed them, though not by name.

“Thank you,” Hermione said from her perch.

Severus was sitting with his eyes downcast. Lily longed to help him but didn’t know how without making him feel more uncomfortable. She took a generous drink of wine.

“Lils, what did you do all those years?” Sirius still sounded incredulous.

“Before the accident, I worked at the American ministry in arithmancy. I just wrote the lines at first, and then I was an analyst. James worked in the law enforcement office, like Auror, but he had a desk job. We weren’t supposed to draw attention to ourselves. Then after the accident in Louisiana, after I could speak, I worked at a yoghurt shop and at a library.” The group was staring at her. She wondered if she had said the wrong thing. She looked for help in every face, but they just stared back at her. They seemed both uncomfortable and uncertain.

“Evans…Lily adapted very well to the lives she was forced to live,” Severus said, as if to dare someone to contradict him. Sirius scoffed, but Harry and Ginny tripped over themselves making supportive declarations.

“Of course!”

“Had to do what…”

“Oh, yes.”

“Arithmancy, Lils?” Sirius scoffed.

“I know. It’s what got me in this mess in the first place, you know, arithmancy.”

“Hermione was saying?” Harry asked, clearly seeking an explanation that would make sense.

“Right before we left, when you were almost fifteen months, Harry, Dumbledore explained that the arithmantic calculations made it clear that our side would win only because of you. And there were certain conditions that should be followed for you to be successful. One of them was you growing up without us.”

“And you believed him?” Ginny spoke up.

“Of course she did,” Harry said.
“Yes,” Hermione said on top of him.

“Best not disobey the great wizard,” Sirius scoffed. “Sorry, Lils, I’m just surprised James would go along with that shite.”

“Shows how little you know of any of it,” Sev responded through gritted teeth.

“You didn’t say no to him, Sirius,” Harry said.

“And if you did, he found a way for it to work the way he wanted, anyway,” Sev said in a steely voice.

Ginny sighed impatiently with meaning Lily didn’t understand, but it was clear Sirius did. There was a dynamic that divided the people in the room with Harry, Hermione, and Severus on one side and Ginny and Sirius on the other.

“We trusted him. It was probably misplaced, but we did, we were younger than you are now, Harry, though it doesn’t excuse what happened to you as a result.”

“I don’t blame you, Mum,” Harry said, and he seemed as if he were about to cry.

“I think I’ll put the food out,” Hermione said. “Everyone can tuck in, and we don’t have to sit around the table—people can just eat wherever.”

Harry was suddenly right next to Lily as she stood. “Could we just find some place to talk? Just for a few minutes,” he said quietly to her as the rest of the group started moving to the dining room.

“Yes,” she gripped his wrist with her hand—she was afraid grabbing his hand the way she would have the last time they were together would infantilize him. She led his up the stairs to the third-floor landing and sat on the top step. “Is this alright?”

He nodded and sat with his big feet two steps below. She couldn’t stop staring at him. He had been wearing a robe when they arrived, but he had hung it up to reveal khaki trousers and a blue oxford cloth shirt. He was dressed like the typical young man who would come in to Marley’s after work or on his lunch hour. Going only on appearances, wizarding culture had changed quite a bit since she left.

“What was your life like with Dad in America? What was he like there?”

“Your father kept us going, Harry. He was so optimistic that we would be reunited. He tried to do everything he could to make me happy. He didn’t think we would make the time pass any faster by being miserable, so he tried to do the things he loved like quidditch. He took me everywhere on holiday, too. I have photos, but they show us in glamours.”

“You have them?”

“Yes, wait here.” She rose and went to the room where she had placed her bag. She found her albums quickly and restored them to their correct size. She handed him the red one. “This is our travel book. And this,” she indicated the blue one on her lap, “Is the one with the photos of you Dumbledore sent through the years.”

He fingered the red one for a moment and then gripped the blue, pulled it over to himself and opened it. He gasped at the site of the first page.

“Your first Christmas. Your second birthday.” She pointed out the photos.
He turned the page and then started to laugh. “This is a lovely childhood! Ponies…” He turned the page. “Cake.” He was chuckling rather than being furious.

“I had no idea, Harry. Dumbledore led me to believe you were with a wonderful family. I didn’t know you were with Petunia and Vernon. When I find her…”

“Oh, don’t bother. I’ve made peace with it. They ended up losing everything. Dudley and I are even on semi-friendly terms—we’re perfectly cordial though don’t speak often. This though,” he continued flipping pages. “This is quite a childhood. Quidditch World Cup! I did go in 1994 with the Weasleys. This one is close.” He pointed to the photo with him wearing the Ireland jersey. “I’m a bit fuller here, and I don’t think I owned that shirt. Oh, look there’s Ron and ‘Mione at Grimmauld! That one is probably real—summer before fifth year.”

“Yes,” she breathed.

“Did you recognize the house? Did Dad?”

“He did. It convinced him that what we had read about Sirius wasn’t true.”

“You did hear things? Did Dumbledore write of them?”

“No, we had to rely on the American wizarding press. The coverage of things at home was very limited.”

Harry had picked up the red album and opened it. She had forgotten the picture of the Marauders was tucked inside. He took it at once.

“I haven’t seen this one. Dad looks great there…and Professor Lupin.”

“Sirius has changed quite a bit.”

“He was in Azkaban for eleven years and then unconscious for another three.” He was defensive.

“It wasn’t a criticism,” she said gently.

“You look nothing like yourselves,” he said flipping through the book.

“That was rather the point.”

“If the story had broken…”

“I suppose it would have all been meaningless. The great sacrifice and that.” She felt tears welling up. “I would have done it, Harry. I would have died for you.”

“I know, Mum.”

“I can’t change not being there when you needed a mother, but I want to do whatever you need me to do now.”

“That’s brilliant.”

She took him into her arms, and he held her tight for a few moments. She swayed just a little, just as she had when he was a baby. “Are you hungry?”

“Starved. I haven’t eaten much since Hermione told us.”
“Come on, let’s go fix plates.”

He laughed. “You have an interesting accent, Mum.”

“Yes?”

“You sound very American, but not like the American wizards I know, more like the American president.”

“He’s from Texas; it’s just west of Louisiana. People there always thought my accent was classy; I hated to tell them that I was just a chavy girl from Cokeworth.”

“Neither you or Snape sound like that.”

“He never has; I guess because of his mum. I did though, until I changed it at school.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to fit in.”

They arrived down the stairs to find the other four eating in uncomfortable silence. Only Sirius seemed oblivious to the tension. Hermione was picking at her food looking sad, as she had since she had arrived home from work. Severus was drinking his whiskey and ignoring his food. Ginny looked physically uncomfortable and was staring at them as they came down the stairs. Sirius was shoveling food into his mouth.

“This looks really good,” Harry said as he approached the table. “I was thinking about the Thai we missed out on all day. Professor, did you make the pasta?”

“Yes, it’s fantastic,” Hermione answered. She snapped to and was playing the cheery hostess alongside Harry’s gracious guest.

“Does Sev do most of the cooking, Hermione?” Lily asked.

“Yes, he’s an excellent cook.”

“Cheers, Snape,” Sirius called out. “This curry is gorgeous.”

“That’s the takeaway,” said Sev through gritted teeth.

“Thanks for picking it up!”

Lily took her plate over to the couch to sit by Ginny. She hadn’t eaten anything but toast and tea at Iola’s tavern that morning before they left. She tried each dish; the pasta was perfectly cooked and the clam flavor came through just the right amount. She closed her eyes and then took a sip of wine. “Magnificent, Sev.” The red curry was pungent and spicy, the green curry was cooler and richer, the pad Thai hit every flavor.

“Oh, this is good! My friend Kendrah and I get Thai sometimes on Friday night, and we have a decent place in Metairie, but nothing like this. Our place is in one-half of a laundromat, so one time when Kendrah’s machine broke, we killed two birds with one stone. They have board games too, so we drank beer all night and played scrabble and ate curry, and when the laundry was finally done, we were too drunk to fold or drive! We had to call our friend Kevin to come pick us up and help carry the laundry in. We did the hangover fold in the morning, and all week we smelled like curry.”
“What’s a laundromat?” Ginny asked, sounding as if she were pointing out how odd Lily was rather than really wanting to know. Lily ignored the tone.

“It’s a place with rows of washers and dryers. You feed it quarters…coins…and you do laundry.”

“We have them here, Gin,” Hermione said. “Launderettes.”

“Of course—launderettes,” Lily said. “Sev, do you remember the little old man who ran the Chesham Road launderette? Ollie?”

“Billy.”

“Billy, of course. He was a tiny thing, came up to about my shoulder.”

“We suspected he was a squib,” he said without a hint of a smile.

“That’s right!” She laughed. “He would look at us with this longing and always ask pointed questions about how school was.”

“How much time did you spend at the launderette together?” Harry asked. Sirius looked up from his food for the first time since she sat down.

“Once a week each summer, we would do our families’ wash. Sev always had coins from working at the pub. I would buy the cigarettes. We could smoke in there—that’s worse than curry!”

“Everyone smoked, so it did not make a difference,” Sev added.

“Did you ever take James to Cokeworth?” Sirius asked pointedly.

“No. My parents were both gone before I was out of school. There was no point.”

Severus was at least outwardly ignoring the bait.

“What were they like, your parents? Aunt Petunia rarely spoke of them.” Harry asked.

“They were lovely people. Hard working. Great parents.”

“What did they think when you turned out to be a witch?” Harry continued.

“They didn’t understand fully, but they were very happy that I had the opportunity to go to school. Petunia was extremely jealous—how could she not have been? Cokeworth was dying; there were few decent jobs; the schools were poor. She was lucky that Vernon took her out of there.”

“So they weren’t anti-magic like Petunia?”

“No. I’m so sorry, Harry.”

“Oh, no, Mum, it’s fine. I was just curious.”

Ginny grumbled under her breath beside her. Lily turned to her. “I was so happy to hear that your parents took in Harry and loved him. That’s what I dreamed for him—a big family.”

“Not quite the same, of course, as growing up with your own parents,” Ginny said and looked Lily in the eye.

“No, of course not.”
“We did okay, didn’t we, Gin? And ‘Mione was there a lot of the time, too,” Harry was going back to the table to refill his plate, and she decided to follow him.

“Yeah, Sev said your parents are Muggles,” she said to Hermione. “How did they react to your being a witch?”

“Like yours. They had a limited understanding but were supportive.”

“What do they think of Severus?” She glanced at him with a smile, but he had closed his eyes and looked slightly pained.

“I had to send them away during the war, and I obliviated them because I knew they would refuse to stay away if they thought I was in danger, and they would have been killed.”

Lily wasn’t sure what Hermione’s intention was with her words, but she felt as if her guts had been sliced open. “I see.”

“They clean her teeth, though, twice a year in Australia. You’ve told them about your boyfriend, yeah?” Harry said, oblivious to any subtext.

“Yes. They are very kind about listening to my tales.”

Lily took a little more of the green curry and pasta though she had lost her appetite. She returned to the couch where Ginny had moved as close to the arm as was possible. Lily had plenty of room.

“I’m sorry there’s nothing for pudding. I could put some tea on; there’s biscuits.”

“Sounds good,” Sirius said. He had refilled his plate.

Hermione retreated to the kitchen and Severus followed. Lily turned to Harry. “Tell me about your job.”

“Standard stuff, really. Not much excitement in a while.”

“No lingering war issues…war criminals?”

“Just Snape,” Sirius laughed.

“Stop that,” Harry said quietly, but firmly. “He’s not. He wasn’t even arrested, He was a spy the whole time and not everyone could look past it, but he was never in legal jeopardy. No, we have the typical issues with mostly petty crimes.”

“Kendrah and Kevin are homicide detectives. I helped them on cases with arithmancy. Well, one case, but they caught the guy. That was just recently, so if I had stayed…” She stopped mid-sentence and wanted to choke herself. “Which, of course, I am so happy not to have had to do.”

“These Muggles know you are a witch?” Ginny said, sounding horrified.

“They found out while I was not in my right head. But they are my dearest…they care for me and wouldn’t do anything to hurt me or us.”

“You helped catch a murderer, Mum? That’s brilliant,” Harry said. “We haven’t had a murder in years, thank Merlin. Are you interested in the office of Auror for work?”

“Do they need an arithmancer? I am out of practice on the serious stuff. No, I don’t know what I want to do yet.”
“We don’t have an arithmancer, but we consult with one at the Ministry sometimes.”

“I need to go there tomorrow. The American press are holding off on printing the story for another twenty-four hours, so I need to see what I can do to be classified as a living person again.”

“Merlin, it is going to be a big story, I hadn’t thought about that,” Sirius said. “How will you arrive without being mobbed; you look the same, Lils.”

“You are kind.” She drew her wand and set her glamour.

“Tea,” Hermione called, bringing out the tray with cups and biscuits. She stumbled slightly but recovered. “Oh! Sorry wasn’t expecting…” she was looking at Lily.

Lily raised her wand and restored her appearance.

“That’s how you looked in America?” Sirius asked.

“Until the accident.”

“And James?”

“Similar.”

“I could have been walking down the street and not even seen you!”

“We would have seen you, though.” She took a cup from the tray and took a sip. “Oh my goodness,” she took another sip and closed her eyes. “Hermione, that’s the best tea I’ve had since…forever.”

“Severus brewed it, actually.”

They consumed the tea and biscuits, and Ginny started signaling clearly that she was ready to leave.

“Lils, you’re coming with us? You’re staying at the house?” Sirius asked as Ginny handed out robes from the coat tree. Ginny froze and shot him an exasperated look. Lily felt a stinging blow and then looked away as to not acknowledge it. She was dying for a cigarette anyway, and it would be much easier here.

“My things are already here in the spare bedroom,” she said breezily.

“Mum, are you sure?” Harry said, and she had to will herself not to start crying.

“Oh, yes. I would love to see Grimmauld again, though.”

“I don’t have to work tomorrow until afternoon. Could I take you to the Ministry? Nine sound okay?”

“Yes, that’s wonderful Harry. Should I meet you there?”

“No, I will come around here, and we’ll go together.”

She took him in for an embrace, and she whispered, “Thank you,” in his ear. She kissed him on the side of the face and squeezed him again before letting go.

By the time the guests were out the door, Severus and Hermione had finished tidying the kitchen.
And it now looked practically sterile.

“May I smoke in the garden?” she asked.

“Oh, yes,” Hermione answered. “Would you like another cup?”

“I had better not. I will let myself in quietly.” She tried to catch Sev’s eye in case he wanted to smoke with her, but he was carefully avoiding it. “Well, goodnight, if I don’t see you again before you go to bed.”

“Goodnight,” Hermione returned. Severus was already heading up the stairs.
Part Four: The Reckoning: Chapter One: Later that Night

Chapter Notes

Part four begins with a whisper. The chapter some have been anticipating and dreading will be next. I will post it Friday morning in Kendrah and Kevin's time zone.

Part Four: The Reckoning

Chapter One: Later that Night

Lily

She crushed the butt of the cigarette onto a saucer that she had brought out with her and lit the next one. She practiced with her wand, a skill that had lain dormant for years. She produced a large enough spark to ignite the end, and she breathed in as deep as she could.

The garden had a string of lights overhead. The previous owners had dug out some beds that were overgrown now. She could picture Sev tearing out the roots with a spade, his shirt off and wearing a large-brimmed hat. Hermione would have drawn up intricate plans for the beds, and was at the little table plotting how much sun each plant needed and placing them accordingly.

It was chilly, and her warming spell was weak. She needed more practice to retain her previous skills. There was a time when she was as good as anyone in her year. During the New York years, she had avoided simple magic when she could, resentful of the whole business. Living without it most of the time, though, had made her appreciate its value. At dinner, everyone else in attendance had cast spells and charms without even thinking about it. It had been both jarring and challenging.

Sev had stopped looking at her about thirty minutes before Hermione had arrived home from work. She suspected being in their house had shaken him into confronting what they had done and the potential consequences. She had to be patient with him. She sensed that pushing for more would be the wrong approach. She would bide her time.

Far more worrisome was the palpable dislike emanating from Harry’s wife. Harry had been so lovely and was everything she had dreamed for him to be. Lily would have to be careful there, too. Perhaps she could become reacquainted with Molly and work from there. This would all be so much easier if James were here. She allowed herself to wallow in self-pity for the rest of the cigarette, but then changed her mind-set before she lit the next one.

She began a mental list of items to accomplish. She needed to find a job independent of all these people. She suspected that Sev would put her to work at his company, and Harry had already suggested an in to the Auror office. She wanted to find her own work. She had been in school and then with James and then being taken care of by the folks in Louisiana her whole life, and she needed to be completely independent. She would make it the focus of her coming interaction with the Ministry: I need a position in your Department of Arithmancy. You owe me.
Hermione’s cat, or whatever it was, was stalking the garden and looking at her suspiciously. She made a noise that called the cats at the Connell’s house, and the creature gave her a disgusted sneer.

“I like you,” she said with a chuckle. The light in the bedroom on the second floor went out. Lily finished her smoke and stubbed it out. She took in the saucer with her and dumped the ashes in the bin and washed it out. She crept up the stairs, trying not to hear any noises on her way, but it was silent throughout the house.

**Severus**

Hermione pushed passed him into their bedroom and collapsed on the bed with her arms and legs splayed as if she were exhausted. His bag from the trip was still in the corner, and he began to unpack it. Most of the clothes needed washing, and he sorted them out in the basket.

“Everything you have reeks of smoke. That can’t be just New York.”

“No.”

“Severus,” she said wearily. “Is this a backslide, or are you a smoker again?”

“Neither.”

“Just a small dalliance, then?”

His hands continued working the items in his bag, but his insides were flooded with guilt and remorse of the pain he would cause her.

She sat up on the bed. “Tell me about it, the trip, not the smoking. Is it right what she said? She accomplished all of it? The house, the ministry?”

“Apparently. I didn’t accompany her inside for any of it except for looking through her belongings in storage.”

“And where are they now?”

“She left most of it. She wanted her photos and her school items, but she left the rest.” That headboard had to be a relic of her marriage.

“I’m going to take your laundry down. Sorry, it just smells really…”

“I’ll do it.” He picked up the basket and headed down the stairs. When he reached the kitchen, he could see Lily from the window, and another wave of guilt hit him. He put the clothes in the machine and wondered if he had supported Hermione’s decision to use the Muggle variety of laundry appliances because of memories of those afternoons at the launderette with Lily. He hadn’t thought about that in years, but when she mentioned it, it all came back, the cigarette smoke and little squibby Billy and folding his mother’s sad house dresses but not really caring because Lily was there with the Evans’s wash, too.

He had a strong urge to join Lily in the garden, not for the cigarette; he really didn’t want or need one, but to watch her smoke and listen to her talk about the dinner. She was visibly shivering, and
he could at least take a robe out to put around her shoulders.

He added the powder and set the machine, leaving the basket in front of the dryer. The same routine, just interrupted by the Hogwarts years when all his laundry was washed, dried, folded and put back by the elves so stealthily, he rarely realized the process was happening.

He diverted his head this time when he passed the kitchen window and returned upstairs. He’d had a shower that morning, but he felt he needed another before he climbed into their bed. Hermione was already changed and tucked in, reading by lamplight at the side of the bed. He went to the bureau for a clean shirt and underwear and retreated to the bath, closing the door behind him.

They hadn’t lived here long enough for it to feel anything like home, and he struggled to regulate the water in the shower before he settled in under the spray. Hermione had already unpacked his toiletries, and he washed his hair and used bar soap on his body, scrubbing from head to toe.

He hoped she wouldn’t want to have sex; he couldn’t face it with Lily in the house and after what he had done. The last time they’d had sex, he and Hermione, was in New York on their holiday before any of this had happened.

They never refused each other, and he didn’t want to start tonight, so he made a show of being exhausted, yawning obviously, climbing into bed wearily, and wrapping up in the quilt as if he would drop off in a moment. She didn’t respond the way she would if she wanted sex, but she cuddled up beside him and put her head on his chest.

“I start nights tomorrow. I could go in with you to the warehouse in the morning,” she said quietly.

“No need. I stopped by and spoke to Hyacinth when we arrived; everything is ready to go.”

“What did Lily think of the operation?” Hermione yawned in the middle of her sentence.

“Not sure.”

“I don’t mind going with you. It might be nice. We could have lunch.”

“Take the time to be ready for the American healers. Meet me for lunch.”

“That sounds lovely.” She brushed his mouth with hers. “Night, Severus,” she said and snuggled in closer. In a moment, her breathing was steady, and she had drifted off. He was not so lucky, and his mind was still whirring when he heard Lily creep up the stairs to their spare bedroom, and he was still awake when his wand began to chirp softly at five to alert him to the start of his work day.

**Ginny**

They apparated home individually. She sometimes side-apparated with Harry when she was feeling especially affectionate.

“Probably best to go at this alone,” she said and rubbed her belly. Both were more than able to apparate safely, pregnancy or not, but it was easier than discussing it in the Granger/Snape garden. They arrived at Grimmauld moments later. Sirius was going on and on and on.

“I just can’t believe it.” Again and again and again. She had a headache, but the best potion hadn’t
been deemed safe for expecting mothers. *What’s the worst that could happen, and is that worse than dying of migraine?* She sighed heavily and took the safer, less effective potion. She filled her water glass and trudged up the stairs.

She could at least wear the one garment that didn’t make her feel like her skin might peel off. It was an old quidditch jersey that had been sent in error to the team, and would have fit a Madame Maxine-sized player if they’d had one, which they didn’t. Ginny had taken it home when it was about to be thrown in the bin—growing up the Burrow way had made her frugal to a fault. She figured if nothing else, she could cut it up for cleaning rags.

She had tried it on in June when her abdomen had obviously popped, just to see how it would fit; she had worn little else at home since. It was soft and draped over her skin without pressing more weight against her. She took everything off save her knickers and donned the jersey, letting out a relieved sigh as the material fell against her. She sat in the armchair in the corner with the footstool charmed the perfect height for elevating her swollen feet. She reclined her head, closed her eyes and sipped her water slowly, concentrating on the defeating the pain in her head.

She could hear Sirius going on downstairs, “I just can’t believe it!” and Harry’s laughter. “Deminox,” she whispered, and the lights in the room dimmed enough to not hurt her head further or cause Harry to trip when he came up.

She wasn’t exhausted; she had slept for most of the afternoon. Harry had worked a day shift, and Sirius had left before lunch to have a sandwich and card game at the pub. She had been off work since the school year ended in late June and had endured a lot of Sirius time, so she had used the empty house to its full advantage.

When they married, too young in everyone’s well-shared opinion, Ginny had just finished her seventh year, and it had been *their* house. Yes, there had always been traffic in and out; people staying a week or two. Ron was a permanent fixture for years, and Hermione, too, until she decided they were all too much. Ron stayed with her in her flat when she wasn’t working, but she worked most of the time. Then when she chucked him aside he was back and morose for a summer until he started up with Susan. She had a lovely family home that had been left to her, and Ron moved in there soon into the relationship.

There was usually some weekend guest or two, but it was fundamentally their house. If they wanted to expand the garden for a half-pitch, or shut off the third floor to save on heating, Kreature was the only other being with an opinion, and Ginny had plenty of practice ignoring him.

Then a year after the wedding, the healing miracle had happened and it was no longer their house. Sirius had been more than generous with the financial arrangement. Ownership would transfer to them upon Sirius’s death. He certainly never mentioned charging rent, and he paid for the upkeep and more than his share of food and incidentals. Her (petty, selfish) problem was that she had never envisioned them with a permanent roommate. She wanted a house just for them.

She had been happy enough teaching physical education and beginning flying at the wizarding primary, St. George’s, just a block from the Ministry. She wasn’t considering going back until this baby and perhaps others were in school. The days in this house stretched out in front of her. *There is always the Burrow.* Molly would be happy to have her there with the baby. She knew Fleur and her two were there often. Now with Susan expecting, perhaps they could make a nursery school out of it.

And then there was the other grandmother to consider, though Lily certainly didn’t *look* like a grandmother. She must be in her mid-forties. She had the body of someone at least twenty years younger, and nothing about her seemed maternal, expect perhaps the way she hung on Harry.
Snape, Hermione, and especially Harry had fallen all over themselves to explain why it was perfectly natural for a mother to abandon her fifteen-month-old baby because Dumbledore said so. How could any reasonable parent stay away for years, happily living life, working, taking holidays, while the child went through every horror imaginable?

Ginny’s baby wasn’t even born yet, and she knew she would never make that choice. Lily and James had sacrificed the life of their son for their own security; she couldn’t see beyond that. It was miraculous that Harry survived the war. It would have been a more fitting result for the other Mrs. Potter if he hadn’t, she thought, and then was horrified that she allowed her mind to go there. Her head pounded again. She took a drink from the water and breathed deeply to try to control the pain. When the sharpness subsided, she sipped her water and held her hand to the part of her head that ached the worst. She could hear Harry saying goodnight and preparing to go up. He was chuckling on the stairs, but opened the door very quietly.

“You’re up,” he whispered.

“Yes.”

“Feeling any better?”

“I suppose. Can’t take anything decent.”

“Six more weeks.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Come here.” Harry sat on the bed with his back against the headboard and spread his legs wide so she could rest against him. She hoisted herself from the armchair and walked painfully on her swollen feet to the bed. He helped her climb in and she settled against him, resting her back against his chest.

“You seem happy,” she said quietly with affection.

“You don’t.”

“It’s hard for me to wrap my head around it. Hearing it from Hermione last night and the Snape connection… I have been stewing about it all day with you at work.”

“Sorry.”

His right leg was bent beside her, supporting her hip, and she wrapped her arm around it and kissed his kneecap. “It’s as if we found out that you know who was actually okay and Dumbledore was the villain…”

“That’s NOT…”

“I know Harry; it’s a bad analogy. I meant…the fundamental fact of the struggle has been changed by this, yeah? It wasn’t so…neatly arranged, I suppose. Good and evil…”

“That’s not true, Ginny.”

“But love and ultimate sacrifice…”
“Is still what we believed and still is what fueled us to win the war.”

“We were just a bit delusional, though. Does it matter in the end? Maybe not, but it’s hard for me to put it all back in its place, you know?”

“I can’t see it as a bad thing that she is alive,” he said. He had become very still behind her.

“No, of course not. I’m just an old grump. A huge, bloated, old grump, who doesn’t like change.”

“You’re not that old,” he said, and she laughed and smacked him good on the side of his thigh. She twisted around so that’s he could put her arms around his shoulders and the side of her head against his chest.

“Did you see how she looked at Snape and talked as if they were best mates?” she commented.

“We knew something was between them.”

“We knew he carried a torch for her; we had no idea that it was some mutual…”

“We don’t know that. She’s just grateful that he fetched her and brought her back.”

“She should be grateful to Hermione,” she grumbled.

“Oh, so now you are the Hermione Granger defender? That’s a lovely switch, Miss Weasley.”

“Mrs. Potter if you don’t mind.” A Braxton Hicks contraction hit and her belly jutted out like a massive stone in his hands.

“Blimey, Mrs. Potter, what do you have in here?”

“Feels like Hagrid presently.”

“Well, that would be a surprise.”

She grabbed her wand from the side-table and flicked it at him. His shirt, trousers, and socks left his body and flew over to the arm chair, landing in a neatly folded pile. She pulled back the bed clothes and started to crawl in.

“My charming wife,” he said, and followed her into the bed.

“Rub my back until I fall asleep?” She said with a long yawn,

“Of course,” he kissed her cheek and snuggled in behind her.

**Kendrah**

They started their shift at their desks at the station. They had one current open case, and she was perusing some progress made by the detectives on the day shift. Looked like she and Kevin would be putting in some surveillance outside an apartment complex that night.

She was also trying to close Lily’s Jane Doe case, but she was lacking every vital identification document. She pulled up her email.
Hey Lily,

Hope you’re settling in.

She wasn’t sure how to proceed. *Just fax me your new ID.* She rolled her eyes.

Miss you. Hope to hear from you soon. Going to spend the next seven hours in the cruiser with Kevin.

K

She closed out the box and turned back to the work on her desk. She had been feeling extremely uneasy about the way she had let Lily go the Sunday before. It had been such a long search; she had let her detective side get the better of her. Case closed. Have a nice life. She had sent Lily out with virtual strangers, perhaps not Severus, but even that seemed not straight-forward.

There had obviously been a decisive falling out between them while they were still in school. Lily hadn’t left the UK for New York until several years after that. Kendrah had released her to someone she hadn’t had contact with since the late 70s.

She was concerned with Lily’s demeanor that morning. She still seemed very much like the fifteen-year-old girl they loved, and she was having to take in so much—the death of her husband, her old boyfriend (not that old since she had written in her journal only a few hours before she was healed) and his current girlfriend. Lily has been awful to Hermione, exactly like a jealous teenager and not a forty-something year old woman who should have been able to read the situation better.

Kendrah wished she would have sent Severus and Hermione on their way and taken Lily to New Jersey herself. She had regretted not acting more strongly about five minutes after they left and she and Patty started the debrief of how uncomfortable the morning had been and how they wished they had given Lily more time to adjust to her new mental state. Kendrah had her chin in her hand and was staring into the captain’s office, lost in her thoughts.

“Patty made cold sandwiches so the cruiser won’t stink. Oatmeal cookies, too,” Kevin said, bringing her back to the present. He had talked it through with Patty and her that morning, too. *We had to let her go with her own people. She will be fine. Give her a few days, and you will see. She will be fine.* He was trying to convince himself as well, but he was probably right.

“That’s great, Kevin, Thanks.”

“When is Marcus coming home?”

“Six weeks. I’m going to Chicago to meet him for Labor Day weekend, and he’ll be home early October.”
“Patty was takin’ about how nice it was for the spare bedroom to be used. You know, she would love it if you slept over. You could take your coffee on the back porch with us.”

“Kevin.”

“Kendrah, there’s no reason for you to be by yourself all the time.”

“Patty goes back for meetings tomorrow, and Walter and Josie are spending the next few nights with y’all while Samantha and Brooks are in Mexico.” There was a stream of grandkids at the Connell's all summer long.

“I’m just saying we have plenty of room whenever you want to come over.”

“Thank you,” she said and tried to engross herself in the case file.

“Next time you email her, tell her I miss her, too.”

Sirius

He sat in front of the fire with his second whiskey. He had dug out his old photos and school things and was staring at a picture of Prongs and Lily taken after the quidditch championship seventh year. They were in the Gryffindor common room, and James had his arm around her neck. He was shouting the Gryffindor yell at the camera and Lily kept scrunching her nose again and again.

“I just can’t believe it,” he said aloud with a laugh.
Lily apparated into an alley and gave an appalled cat a defiant look before she headed down the street. It was already cold, and she pulled her coat around her. She would work on some knitting this weekend; she would make a colourful scarf and hat in a complementary colour, she thought. It was still in the nineties in Louisiana now in late September.

The house came into view, and she was surprised all over again about how lovely it was and how charming this part of town was now. The last time she was here, it had been a depressing row of broken down brick structures, with the Snape residence being the worst on the block.

Now it was a mixed neighborhood with shops and residences, mostly flats but a few single occupancy houses like the Snape’s. There was a little café next door where she could take her new laptop and use the WIFI. The residents of the flats appeared to be ten years younger on average than she was, but this was a hopeful sign of the vitality of the neighborhood, she thought. You could barely see the line of row houses, as so many had been knocked down. The Snape house now possessed a charm it had never had in the past.

Sev had performed miracles with the house itself. She would not have recognized it in a photo if she were not standing in the old neighborhood. The ramshackle exterior was repaired with the brick face washed clean. Every single brick was in place; the three windows were painted a lovely sky blue and the glass shined behind lace curtains. The lot was tiny, but he had planted an ash tree with a small landscaped bed in the front, and there was a garden with two seasonal beds and a table and two chairs in the back.

She walked up the steps and unwarded the door quietly. It opened with a click into the small entry way and sitting room. There was no dining area, but he had expanded the kitchen slightly to fit a larger table. Lily could picture Eileen Snape at the old one with her cigarette and ashtray, but the whole room now was light and airy. He had placed the table under the house’s one downstairs window. They used the appliances magically most often, but they could easily be used the Muggle way, and she sometimes did so, especially when attempting to prepare her Louisiana favorites.

She hung up her coat on the tree in the corner and went upstairs to change out of her work clothes and in to jeans and a jumper. The three room second floor was completely renovated, too. The elder Snapes’ room was redone and quite lovely in shades of light green and white. She stayed in the attic room, of course. It remained true to its old style—not much furniture besides the bed and trunk, the record player in the corner, handmade, multi-colour rag rug, the huge window she had once had to climb out of. He had added a small wardrobe with a drawer at the bottom and there was a nightstand and lamp, so light now no longer provided by a single light bulb on a string.

The feeling was still the same in there. She could crack the window to smoke and feel like she had been transported back in time.
She hung her work clothes neatly and returned downstairs.

It was only half past five, so she decided to get a cup of tea at the café and check her email. She grabbed her leather computer bag and headed next door.

“Hiya, Lily!” the waitress greeted her as she entered.

“Hi, Martha,” she called back. It was not unusual for her to be here twice a day. She settled in to a small side table, perfect for one, and pulled out her laptop.

Martha brought her tea and setup. “Anything to eat?”

“No thank you.” She’s had a large lunch at the Ministry that day. Harry was on days that week, and they had eaten together every day. She always ate heartier with Harry and Ron, perhaps trying to keep up. It had been tense at the first few days with Harry after word was out that Sev had moved out of the house he had bought with Hermione. He had tried to make small talk, but it was stilted and so much different than it had been that first night.

“Harry, you can talk to me about anything,” she had told him.

He had changed the subject, but when Ron left, Harry had confronted her. “People are saying that you are having an affair with Professor Snape.”

“It’s not an affair, Harry.”

“But you are with him? You are living in his house?”

“I’m renting his house. He is my oldest friend, Harry. I loved him, you know, when we were kids.”

“I knew he loved you, but I didn’t know… Were you…involved?”

“In a manner of speaking, when we were teenagers. In the summers, you know? We were there for each other. Then we had those awful times, and we lost contact, but I always cared for him.”

“What did Dad think of that?”

“Your father grew up a lot at the end of school and after. It wasn’t an issue between us,” it slipped out of her mouth and across the table as easily as it ever did.

“Sirius and Professor Snape still have…tension.”

“They should get over it.”

“Hermione is devastated.”

“I’m sorry about that. I didn’t ask him to leave her, if that’s what…”

“No. It’s just…she healed you and then, well, you know.”

Then she got her heart broken for her trouble. “I am very grateful to her,” she said. “I’m sorry if I have disappointed you.”

“No. I feel caught in the middle, but…”

“Please don’t. She’s your dear friend. I don’t know what will become of me and Sev. It might be just a close friendship, too.”
“Fair enough, Mum.”

And that had been the end of it.

She planned on half a sandwich and apple later that night. There was some lovely leftover roast from Sunday dinner at the Burrow and at least one barm in the larder. She would cut it in half in case Sev came over that night and hadn’t yet eaten.

She opened the computer and sipped the tea while it came alive. She had three new emails: one from Patty, one from Kendrah, and an iTunes add. She deleted the latter and clicked on Patty’s.

School was trying; she had a difficult class this year. Everything else was great. She and Kevin were going to Memphis to see Marcus one last time before Showboat closed.

Lily fantasized for a moment about taking a Portkey and surprising all three, then dismissed it. She had to focus on her life here.

The grandchildren were well; all settling into school. She asked about Harry and Ginny and teased her about her upcoming status change into grandma. Lily smiled at that. She hoped she would be able to bring the family there someday to meet her friends. She wrote back a quick note and then moved on to Kendrah’s.

While she always kept it light with Patty, it was with Kendrah to whom she told the ways things really were. She read through Kendrah’s message: difficult cases, missing Marcus terribly, Mama’s new kitten with a series of adorable photos, a new sandwich place in town, and the service at Marley’s had taken a steep decline. Lily grinned widely and hit the reply key.

K,

Job is still good; I am picking up new techniques and remembering the old ones from before. They mostly have me on mundane questions for now: best ways to roll out new Ministry programs and public relations projects. I hope to be assigned the weightier items soon. With the press coverage of my return, I am lucky to have a steady job at all, I suppose. That has calmed down, thank goodness.

I love little Teddy—how did he (she?) get his/her name? Is Mama snuggling him/her like a teddy bear? I find that hard to picture. ;)

Just four weeks now until Marcus is home—you can make it, K. Just think of the reunion, now with no annoying house mates. (I think back to those times I was shuffled off to the Connells’ for the weekend, completely oblivious. HA!)

My own situation—oh dear, K, I suspect it will blow up in my face. I am paying him rent; I insisted, and I am paying market value—depositing it directly into his account. As for the rest—we shall see.

Wish I was there to share a muffaletta and straighten them back up at Marley’s. I miss you.

L
She closed the computer and drank her tea. This was not how she pictured her life all those years. She and James would be here together. Harry would be fine and still young enough for them to be his parents in a real sense, at least for a while. They would try for another baby perhaps. They would settle in Godric’s Hollow, maybe even the same house.

Instead she was here alone, having lost all that time and still rattled and unsure what to make of the time she was not fully aware. Harry was completely grown and settled into his life—a life in which she had no clear role. She was back in Cokeworth with Sev on most nights. She would not have believed it.

The sun was settling brilliantly orange. It was such a beautiful time of year here, she had forgotten, and it was so much less depressing now. Martha signaled to her for a refill, and she shook her head, no. It was going to be dark soon, and she would rather be home before it was black.

She left some change on the table and put the laptop back in the bag, reminding herself to put it on the charger when she was home.

As soon as she had her electronics settled, she went to the kitchen to make her sandwich and took it with apple and half glass of Riesling into the sitting room. She had abandoned her quest to find something to read among the shelves of potion theory and the rare spy novel and had picked up a Doris Lessing book in the shops in town. The tales of the wife and mistress of a ne'er-do-well communist had filled the hours here.

She drained the wine quickly but chose a water glass instead of a refill. About eight, she rose from the couch, did the simple washing up in the kitchen, and took the book upstairs. She cleaned her teeth, flossing between them to remove the bits of apple. There had not been a bath up here in 1975. Sev had always reminded her to use the loo before they arrived to avoid having need of the privy in the back garden.

Now there was a charming little bath with shower and toilet and sink in white and green to match the large bedroom they didn’t use.

She pulled her hair back into a messy ponytail and hung up her jeans and jumper. It was slightly chilly in the room, so she added flannel pajama bottoms to her usual routine, knickers and an old t-shirt.

She was settling in with her book when she heard him arrive. She sat up in bed to wait for him; he made a trip into the kitchen, hung up his robe or jacket, visited the little loo off the kitchen, another modern addition. She heard a glass on the counter and then his footsteps on the stairs.

“Hi,” she said, as he entered through the door, dressed in his work clothes and carrying a whiskey.

He nodded and sat on the edge of the bed, suspending his glass in the air as he removed his boots.

“I left you half a barm.”

“I ate at the warehouse.”

“Yeah? Dinner service now?” She said it lightly.

“The staffroom is stocked.”

“Productive day?”

“Reasonably. You?”
“Yes. Did you put up the sandwich; I’ll take it to work tomorrow,” she swung her legs out of bed.

“I put it up.”

“Thanks. Music?”

He walked over to the record player and flipped through the collection, housed in six wooden crates. He held up Miles Davis in Europe.

“Great,” she said.

He dropped the needle and the mellow trumpet sounded. The perfect song for the time of year and for them in this room thirty years later. She sighed with contentment and couldn’t help but grin then stifled it. He was not quite ready to grin.

They sat in silence on opposite ends of the bed. She stretched her foot out to rub against his outer thigh, and he placed his hand on it lightly and caressed it while he finished his whiskey.

“Are the stores restored?” she asked with a little giggle for her poor attempt at wit.

“Nearly,” he gave her a small, rather affectionate eye-roll.

His time away had resulted on SNAPE being low on inventory. He would not allow them to be late with orders, so he had worked many nights there; had spent many nights there. The situation seemed to be close to resolved. He hardly spoke of it, but he had been here every night that week.

He had moved his things out of the house soon after they arrived back, but he hadn’t brought them here. She had already asked if she could stay. It was just before the publicity storm, and her need to be away from London while it played out. Gradually, bits of clothing, toiletries, records, books, and other things were arriving at the house. She suspected he would be moved in by Christmas. It was with that thought that she crawled over to him, gently took the glass from his hand, and shot the rest down in one gulp. She sent the glass over to the bedside table with a simple spell and curled up on his lap, finding his mouth with hers.

She pulled her hair down and shook it out so it tumbled on to her shoulders, and he removed her shirt and guided them back to the top of the bed. When she was reclined and he was hovering over her, he stood. “I’ll be back shortly.” And he was gone, and she felt a bit silly, topless in her pj bottoms waiting for him. She heard him brush his teeth and then he was back, clothes gone except underwear, and he climbed into bed with her.

Miles was still playing, a bit frantically, and she used it as her tempo cue. She was on a SNAPE brewed potion, so there was no need for charms, and in moments, they had shed the rest of their clothes and she was straddling him, preparing to sink down on him.

“Is this okay?”

He didn’t answer but guided himself in. Both exhaled as she stretched to accommodate him. She leaned in to kiss him, and he met her, gripping her around her waist. He kept one hand at the base of her spine, guiding her up and down as she fucked him slowly. It wasn’t getting her anywhere yet, but she enjoyed the power and closeness. The admiration was there in his eyes illuminated by the tiny lamp and the street lights below.

She traced his nipples with her fingers and then ran them down his sides. His ribs were as prominent as they had been thirty years ago. He had lost weight since they had returned; he had been quite slim in America, but the stress of it all had obviously affected him. She needed to learn
to cook well; she didn’t anticipate she could drag him to the Burrow.

Perhaps he sensed that she was drifting away; he grasped her hips and flipped them over so he was on top. He started thrusting hard, the way she liked it, but she wasn’t quite there yet. She put a hand to rub herself in time with his rhythm and caught up quickly. Unintentionally, they tripped over the edge at the same time, rather separately. She realized it as she was just beginning to come, and she gripped his backside to bring him in harder; he was coming silently himself.

She kissed him, and he shifted off her and to his side of the bed, which had been her side before, but when she moved in, she had chosen the side closest to the lamp. She would have slid over if he had asked, but she supposed since she was paying rent, she had the right to that side of the bed.

They slipped out and dressed silently. She wasn’t ready for sleep yet, so she opened her book again.

“Is it good?” he asked.

“Yes, very. She has moved the setting to Africa, colonialism. Fascinating.”

He picked up a book of his own and was still reading when she drifted off. She woke up at first light, as she always did, and was alone in the bed.

She showered and dressed for work, packed her lunch and had a cup of tea before she apparated back to London. She was the first one to arrive at the two-room Department of Arithmancy in the far northeast corner of the seventh floor.

**Severus**

He apparated outside the warehouse at four-thirty. It was still black outside and silent. He dropped the wards and entered. He had been the last to leave the night before, and it was comforting that everything was exactly how he left it.

The October orders had all been filled, and they would spend the last week working on inventory and trying to anticipate what they would need for the winter. He had been working fifteen-hour days lately, and they were significantly ahead of schedule.

He walked up the stairs to the small quarters he had outfitted for himself. There was a single bed, low to the floor, a wardrobe that held most of his clothes and a small lav with toilet, sink, and tiny shower. He stripped and turned on the water.

He could move his things into the house and shower there, he thought. He didn’t want to wake her, but she seemed a heavy enough sleeper. He could sleep in one place for the first time in years.

He should refuse her rent payments, ridiculous for several reasons. He was her landlord? It was absurd. He needed to sit down and resolve what to do with his finances and his life. Hermione was selling the house and insisting on giving back his share. He wasn’t sure what to do about her portion of the business. She hadn’t mentioned it. The whole subject of Hermione was horrifying, and he avoided thinking of her if he could. *It’s September nineteenth.* His insides ripped open again.

They were supposed to have lunch that day…three weeks ago? Could it have been only three
weeks? It was the day after the dinner with Lily and the Potters and Black. He had not slept that night, trying to decide what he should do. He trudged in to work and buried himself in the week that he had missed. At eleven, he sent an owl to Hermione, telling her that he was too busy to leave work for lunch. She was back on nights starting at six, and that would give him extra time to figure something out.

It was just after noon, and he was quality testing individual phials of decongestant for an order that needed to be shipped by the end of the day. Karina, who handled the front door and most correspondence, appeared at the entrance to the part of the lab he had cordoned off for his work space.

“There’s a Ms. Evans to see you,” she said. Karina was just out of school and seemed to have no idea who Ms. Evans was.

Lily was behind her. He motioned to her to step in and nodded to Karina.

“Thank you,” Lily said pointedly to the assistant.

“You’ve been to the Ministry?” He ignored her exasperated tone.

“They agreed to hold off with the Prophet if we would do a press conference tomorrow morning.” She was slightly out of breath, which seemed more from excitement than physical exertion.

“What happened, Evans? Did you speak to the Minister?”

“Yes, of course. They were floored. All of them, including Shacklebolt. I went through the whole story again. Harry was there; he was splendid.”

He kept his face neutral.

“They brought it the portrait. Dumbledore. He explained everything from his end. Harry kept his temper for the most part. I didn’t do as well.”

“How did he explain the photos?”

“Would it have helped, Lily, if you had known what Heddy was experiencing?” Her Dumbledore was posh and filtered through obvious loathing. “Perhaps I was wrong, but I didn’t think knowing what he had to endure would be conducive to you or James.” He seemed most broken up about James’s death. He asked about you. ‘Severus found you?’ As if that was the most shocking part of the story.” She said the last bit with palpable disgust.

“Are they going to prop him up for the press conference?”

She snorted. “No. They do want you, though. And Hermione.”

His stomach fell to the floor. “She works tonight—all night, and then she has another night shift.”

“They are going to do it early. I told them we would be there—you, me, Hermione, and Harry. It was the only way not to be mobbed today.”

“I have to work. I can’t leave…”

“Please, Sev. If we don’t do it this way, you know that they will find a way to have the story. They will come here. They will follow you and Hermione. Please, let’s just get it done, so we can resume our lives.”
“What time?”

“Eight A.M. Will you ask Hermione?”

“I probably won’t see her before she leaves for work. I have…” He motioned with his arms the scale of his tasks. “I’ll send an owl.”

“May I stay here until you finish? I can’t go out until after the press conference, and I don’t really have anywhere else to go.”

“Yes.” He pulled out parchment and scrawled a note to Hermione. “Give this to Karina to send. Please.”

Lily trotted back out of the space and he tried to resume his task. She returned in moments.

“Is there something I could do to help?”

“No. I must do this properly.”

She pulled a stool from the space next to his and sat quietly while he worked. He was self-conscious at first, but he settled back in to his routine. Her presence was comforting, at least in a small way. Occasionally, his eyes would fall on her, and he would have a jolt. Evans is sitting right there. I could reach out my hand and touch her.

After seven, when everyone else had left and Hermione had been at work for an hour, he finally packed up the crate and left it on Karina’s desk for her to ship in the morning.

“Have you eaten today?” he asked Evans.

“I had tea with Harry before the meeting.”

“Sorry.”

“No; I could have found something. I’m not terribly hungry.”

“There are leftovers; we could pick up something else.”

“Leftovers are fine. I don’t think…I don’t think I should stay with you and Hermione. It’s not…it doesn’t feel right.” This came gushing out. “I would ask Harry to stay with him, but I don’t think his wife would appreciate that at all. I want to find my own place.”

“You can’t do that tonight.”

“There is your house,” she looked at him as if she were scared to see his reaction.

“You want to stay there?”

“I will pay you.”

“That’s not what I meant. Obviously.”

“Yes, I want to stay there. I am dying to see it, to go back there. Harry has convinced me not to contact Petunia,” she said the name as if it were laced with glass shards, “But I want to go back home.”

“I thought home was Godric’s Hollow.”
“Well, I can’t show up there tonight. Is there a place to eat in Cokeworth?”

“Yes.”

“I could gather my things from your house and then we could go? Please, Sev.”

As if he could refuse her. They went back to the house. The note he had sent Hermione was on the desk they planned to keep up with their home records. She had placed on top of it a Gryffindor paperweight that featured a lion wearing a crown and a red and gold scarf. It annoyed him before he remembered he did not currently have the right to be annoyed. She had scrawled the word Seriously?! In red ink from an angry wand at the bottom. The next time he saw her would be at the press conference. He had no doubt a representative from Shacklebolt’s office at the Ministry would be waiting for her at the end of her shift to make sure she attended.

He went to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water from a pitcher charmed to stay cold. Before he finished, Evans had gathered her belongings and had walked back downstairs. “Would you like something to drink before we go?” he asked her.

“No, thank you.”

He cleaned his glass and placed it back on the shelf. He took her to the garden in back where they could apparate to the alley in Cokeworth up the street from Spinner’s End. They were there in a spin and pop.

“Oh my goodness, Sev! I wouldn’t recognize it!” She was already half way down the street. “This is amazing!”

The awe went on as he showed her the house, downstairs and up. He had added the lavs to her great relief, and he felt a long-buried thread of shame that he had used an outdoors privy until his first year at school.

When she saw the attic room, she dropped her bag and fell into him, putting her arms around him. She started sobbing into his chest. He tried to comfort her while being baffled as to the cause of the display.

“I’m sorry. It all hits me sometimes. I can’t believe I’m here. You fixed your bed,” she said with a little laugh, wiping her eyes.

“Pardon?”

“It was so lopsided. You were rubbish at transfiguration.”

“It was just after fourth year! I improved, obviously. Not everyone was Minerva McGonagall’s pet.”

“It looks lovely now. It all does. You have performed a miracle. May I stay here? It feels the most like home.”

He couldn’t say no after that. They ate their dinner at the café next door, and then retreated to the house, up to the attic as they had so many times before. He put on a record—not Led Zeppelin, it would make them too self-conscious—jazz this time, and he made love to her as he had dreamed of for years. The room’s only light was the dusky sky, and they fell asleep afterwards, entwined.

He woke at four and left for the house to lie in the bed lest Hermione know the truth. She didn’t appear wearily at 6:15 as she always did after the night shift, so she had been strongly advised to
stay for the press conference. He showered and changed for work where he planned to go immediately after this production at the Ministry ended.

He was the last of the principals to arrive. Evans and Potter were sipping tea and whispering in the corner. Evans smiled at him for a moment before returning to the conversation with her son. Hermione looked put out and exhausted, still in her work clothes. She saw him and crossed the small holding room to meet him, collapsing the weight of her upper body into his chest.

“Tell me this won’t take long;” she said and then rose on the balls of her feet to kiss him. “I miss you. I suppose I won’t see you for another forty-eight hours?”

“I am criminally behind.”

“I know, I know. You’re going in Saturday?”

“I must.”

“Sunday then. I’ll see you Sunday? You’ll be home all day? I won’t have to be back at work until Wednesday day shift. I’ll stay up Sunday if you will be at home.” She did that sometimes; postponing sleep after the last night shift so they could spend the day together. She would typically last until around four in the afternoon when she would pass out, and he would carry her to bed.

“I will be at home.” It would be Sunday then. His heart fell lower.

A Ministry official whisked them to the ballroom where a small crowd was gathered. There was a large table set up n the front. He found his name placard next to Hermione, and they took their seats. The crowd became silent as Lily entered the space. Kingsley Shacklebolt was the first to speak.

He started to summarize Lily’s story, starting with a statement he read from Dumbledore, which was breathtakingly self-serving. Shacklebolt then laid out the facts as he knew them and implored the press to behave responsibly. Snape kept his face stony but inwardly rolled his eyes in a way he hadn’t since he was seated at the head table in the Great Hall.

Lily spoke next, breathlessly as she did when she was excited; exactly the way she had when they were fifteen. She spoke effusively about her Muggle friends in New Orleans and how they had helped her during the lost years and then pivoted to him and to Hermione.

“Severus Snape has been my friend since we were eleven years old, before we started school. When he was contacted by my friends in America, of course he was skeptical, but he left his business to investigate even if there was only a slight chance it was me. He then arranged for Healer Granger to come to New Orleans and restore me. I do not have adequate words to express the gratitude I have for these two.” She paused and glanced over to their end of the table before taking a deep breath and resuming her narrative. “And finally, before the accident that took the life of my beloved husband James, we had no greater dream than to be reunited with our son.” She was tearing up, and Potter put his arm around her protectively.

She was too overwhelmed to continue, so Potter picked up the mantle and told them all how thrilled he was that his mother was alive, and then in the way he had perfected, he ordered the press to respect the family’s privacy, in a tone so charming it was easy to miss the unspoken threat.

Shacklebolt then asked Snape and Hermione if they had a statement and both declined. He opened the floor with questions. The first few indicated how stunned they all were by the news, but slowly they started trying to pin down details.
Why had Lily and James complied with Dumbledore’s plan?

How had Harry survived the attack when he was a baby?

How had Lily and James stayed anonymous in America?

What were they doing in New Orleans?

Why had the authorities there contacted Snape instead of…well, anyone else?

“Severus, would you like to take that one?” Shacklebolt asked him.

“No.”

Lily chimed in, “I was in an altered state when I was there. I had no memories past those I had when I was fifteen. Severus was my closest friend during that time of my life. He had bought a house here, and it made it into the Muggle press.”

He couldn’t look over at Hermione to see how she was reacting to being cut out of the process of buying that house.

Lily continued. “My friend in New Orleans had a way of searching—it’s Muggle technology through the computer, if anyone wants more details, I would be happy to speak with you later—his name showed up on her search before it was vanished. Someone must have been having a slow day here,” she smiled at the Minister, who did not react, “And I would like to thank them sincerely.”

There were some gasps from the crowd and a follow-up question about what was being done about the security breach in New Orleans. Lily turned instantly steely.

“Let me be perfectly clear. The four Muggles who know the totality of my nature are my dearest friends, the people who saved me, the people I consider my second family. They are not to be contacted. As a Muggle-born witch, I am intimately familiar with the laws regarding the secrecy act and the class of protected Muggles. They are in that category and will be left alone.”

Shacklebolt spoke up again. “I will reinforce what Mrs. Potter has said. No one should attempt to contact her friends in New Orleans. We will not be releasing their names. Mrs. Potter is in daily contact with them and will know immediately if someone contacts them.”

A reporter broke the tension that had arisen by asking Hermione a question about the healing. She sighed, betraying exhaustion, and then answered. “Mrs. Potter was not catatonic, as most of the other patients I have treated using this procedure have been. That presented some challenges, but gave her an excellent prognosis. There were no significant complications, and she was able to be restored to full cognition.” She took a drink from the glass in front of her and looked down, indicating that she was finished.

Lily spoke up again. “I cannot begin to express my gratitude for the care I received from Healer Granger.”

No one asked about the relationship between Hermione and Harry or between Hermione and Snape, but he knew that would be covered extensively in the stories to be written. He felt pressure in the front of his head deepen to pain.

Mercifully, Shacklebolt closed the conference, and Snape rose immediately to leave for the warehouse.
“Severus, wait,” Hermione said.

“I have to go.”

“Just wait,” she said with an edge to her voice. “Go back to the holding room with me for just a moment.” She picked up her bag and left the room the way they had arrived. He followed her.

“What is wrong?” she said with concern when they were back in the original room.

“Nothing. Headache. Sorry.”

“Oh,” she said with sympathy and with an obvious strain of relief. “Take something as soon as you get to work. I just wanted to say that I’m sorry there’s no food in the house. You have picked up something for Lily and you to eat?”

“Lily is not staying at the house any longer.”

“Did she pick up her things?”

“Yesterday.”

“Oh. Okay. She and Harry were here together when I arrived.” She obviously assumed Lily was staying at Grimmauld. Snape didn’t correct her. Coward. “Anyway…I probably won’t make anything tonight before I have to go back. But Sunday, let’s do a shop. Maybe we can get away for a few hours? Maybe stay in bed mostly.” She gave him her little smile she used when she was trying to be suggestive. “I just want a day with you.”

“I’ll be there Sunday,” he managed to say before he left without speaking to anyone. How could he not choose exactly the plan she had laid out? But he had already chosen. He had chosen the minute he realized that the woman in New Orleans was Lily, and he had chosen when he thought about nothing but taking her to bed while they were away. He had made his choice.

He arrived at work and refused himself a headache potion. He deserved the pain and decided it would keep him mentally sharp. By two, he had to relent before he collapsed. He took the potion with a strong cup of coffee and smoked a cigarette in shaking hands on the roof of the warehouse. There was some condensed soup in the staff room, and he ate that quickly before he went back to work. He continued at his station until eleven when he fell on to his mattress. He was back at work at seven on Saturday morning. He wouldn’t allow himself to go back to Cokeworth with Evans until he had told Hermione.

He finally caught up with everything by four o’clock. He stopped in a deafening Chinese place where he could eat and drink and not think and then arrived at the house two hours after Hermione had left for work.

He didn’t think he would be able to sleep. He was dreading his task for the next day, but he fell on to the bed and soon he was out and sleeping more soundly than he had in weeks.

He woke to her climbing into bed with him. It was daylight already. She had pressed her body against his back, her arm reaching around him. He was still partially asleep, but an alarm bell was going off. He turned in the bed to face her. She had showered and was wearing knickers and a t-shirt she had shrunk so it hardly covered her. She smiled and dipped her head over to kiss his mouth. He moved from the bed quickly.

“Severus?” she said in a confused tone.
He grabbed his wand from the nightstand and charmed her shirt to fully cover herself, and she yelped, “What are you doing?”

He backed up into a corner. He was wearing pants and a t-shirt and he wrapped his dressing gown around him and sank into the arm chair in the corner.

“Severus!” she said, shocked and hurt.

“I’m sorry, Hermione.”

“What? For what?” she was beginning to sound panicked.

“I am going to be with her. I have been with her. I can’t be here.” As he was saying the words, he was wondering if he should try to call them back and to forget all of it.

“You’re with her? With Lily? What do you mean…You are sleeping with her?”

“Yes.”

“Here?”

“No.”

“Where? At Grimmauld?” Her sense of betrayal had just widened. She was gasping and large tears had gathered at the corner of her eyes.

“At my house.”

Hermione had her hand over her mouth and stared at him for a moment. “When…when did you do this? When did you decide to…”

“I didn’t decide. It just is.”

“Bollocks, Severus. You did decide. Was it the moment you saw her? You sent for me to heal her, and you were already out the door, yeah?”

He said nothing. He had no defense.

“Do you hate it here? We didn’t have to buy the house.” She was clearly trying to keep those tears at bay, and she seemed to be waging an internal war between grief and rage.

“It has nothing to do with that. I have dreamed of her being alive since it happened, since she left. I can’t…how could I?”

She grabbed some clothes from the wardrobe and scurried into the bathroom, leaving the door open so they could continue while she dressed. “I knew I wasn’t enough or the right one; I’ve known that. It’s been clear. But, I don’t know,” she said with a suppressed sob. “I felt like if we hung in there, you would wake up one day and decide that I was okay, you know, that you could live with it. I was delusional, but my heart was in the right place.” She let go of her composure with that.

“If anything, Hermione, I am unworthy and always have been…”

“No. Really. You were what I wanted.” She emerged from the bathroom fully dressed but hair disheveled and chest wracking. “We’re not doing the shop today,” she said. She was leaning against the bedroom wall, and she slid down and sat on the floor. “Not sure what I’ll do.” Her knees were bent, and she put her head between them.
He was paralyzed on the chair. There was nothing he could do; nothing he could say. The only option that appealed to him was to apparate back to work. He considered it.

“Are we selling the house? I suppose we should sell the house.”

“You should stay in the house if you want it.” Please take it.

“I don’t want to live in our home alone. It wasn’t about a new house. I’ll list it on Monday. Perhaps my flat is still available. You will live in Cokeworth? It must be a dream come true.”

He put his head down.

“Please go. I will box up your things and send them to the warehouse or your home. Just let me know.”

“Hermione.” He felt on the verge of losing control of his emotions.

“Please go. Please.” She was still leaning against the wall, now in a little ball with her face hidden.

He had quickly packed a bag and left. Crookshanks had glared at him on his way out. Twenty-four hours later, his possessions arrived at work in small boxes, packed efficiently and labeled in bold, black ink. He moved the rest of his music and a few articles of clothing into the attic room but left most of it at the warehouse.

He stepped out of the shower and dried off, surveying the depressing little room. He dressed for work and climbed down the stairs to the staff room. He brewed a pot of tea and then took it back up to the roof with his cigarettes. It was rainy and chilly. He thought of Hermione’s schedule and had no idea if it were a night or day shift or if she was off for her birthday. He took a long drag and exhaled, watching the smoke fill the dawn.

Ridiculous. It’s everything you ever wanted. Move your fucking things into your house with her and start your life.

He took a last drag and flicked the glowing butt off the edge of the building.
Chapter Three: Hermione

Chapter Summary

This chapter begins three months after the events of the previous chapter.

Chapter Three

Hermione

She worked the night shift on Christmas Eve and had another one the night of Christmas. She had tried to arrange her schedule in the past few years to end her night shifts on Christmas morning and have the next few days off, but there was no reason to do that this year. She had celebrated her Christmas with Luna, Xenophilius, and Luna’s boyfriend Rolf at Ottery Saint Catchpole the Friday before. Hermione had brought a Yule Log she bought at the Muggle bakery for what she hoped would be a fun twist; the Lovegoods acted as if they had no idea what to do with it. Luna suggested transfiguring it into a hat.

Luna and Rolf were based in South America and only in the country for a few days, and Hermione was working most of them, but she enjoyed the time she could spend with her friend.

She had gone to lunch with Harry and exchanged gifts. Hermione had made a little Father Christmas sack for baby James and included tokens for the Weasleys, bookmarks she had transfigured from postcards she had bought in Australia.

He invited her to Christmas at the Burrow, of course, and Boxing Day at Grimmauld. She hadn’t been in years. It had been awkward after she and Ron had broken up, of course Severus had no interest in going, and now, she couldn’t face any of them. She knew Severus wouldn’t be there, but surely Lily would, and between Lily’s chipper obliviousness, and the pitying looks from some Weasleys and smug ones from others, it would just be too much. Sirius had been her savior throughout the few weeks after James’s birth when she felt she needed to be at Grimmauld for Harry, but it was awkward with him now, too.

Ginny was treating her better than she had in years, but Hermione had no desire to bond over their mutual distaste for Mrs. Potter. It was all too depressing. Sirius, though, would pour her a drink and stick by her side, ignoring her emotional distress she was trying so hard to hide, but they had mucked that up, too. Her work schedule was a blessing.

She had sent a collection of premium biscuits—all her parents’ old favorites—to Wilkins’ Dental and would no doubt soon receive a slightly baffled thank you note in return. She had traveled there in November for her biannual cleaning and had poured her heart out to them at lunch. They were kind but seemed uncomfortable; exactly how they would have been before if a virtual stranger had insisted on being that familiar. That their reaction was comforting showed Hermione how truly love starved she was.

She found her solace in her work as she always had. The American healers had arrived in the middle of her crisis, but they never knew. Her ward was slow at St. Mungo’s, so the administrator
allowed her to go back to New York and help them set up a treatment program there. That took up
the rest of her September. She rewrote updated treatment protocol to keep busy and sent out a call
for Squibs who were older teenagers and young adults to start working on procedures to help them.
She stopped short of actively hoping for a new trauma case.

She put the house on the market the Monday after he left, and it sold in two weeks. She contacted
her old landlord. Her old flat wasn’t available, but there was one down the street she could have.
She had already packed his things and sent them to SNAPE. She packed her own and Crooks and
returned to the renting life. The available flat was smaller than the old one, but it was brighter with
more windows and was more expensive.

The first time she saw Severus was at the mortgage office where they met to complete the sale. He
looked the same as he always had; she was a mess. She had lost a stone because she kept forgetting
to eat, and when she did remember, food tasted terrible. None of her clothes fit. She had dark
circles under her eyes. Her hair looked and felt duller and flatter. She intended to attempt an above
it all vibe, but she didn’t have the energy. He hardly looked at her anyway. They received back
exactly what they had contributed—it was even. They sold for a slight profit but it was eaten by
the closing costs.

They signed their names and were ushered out. She planned on walking out the door and back to
work without speaking or even looking at him, but he called her name quietly once they were on
the street.

“What?” she turned around. The word came out hostile although she was far sadder by then than
she was angry. “What?” she said again with an attempt to soften her tone.

“I will buy you out of the business. I can do it today if you like.”

She had not even thought of this. She had never worked full time at SNAPE, but she had brewed
alongside him in the early months. She had helped design the logo. She had found the warehouse
and helped him move in. SNAPE was theirs.

“Why would I want that?” she whispered, realizing she was going to cry if she said anything else.

“I thought you would rather be finished with all of it.”

“I wouldn’t.” Please don’t cry. “It’s…” her rogue bottom lip was trembling. She stood up straighter
and refused to give into it. “It’s my company, too. I expect to see sales figures at the end of the
month.” The end of the fiscal year was in a week. She hadn’t seen a balance sheet in a while; since
he had hired a full staff there had been little need of her in the day to day running. “Please send it to
my office when it’s ready.” She nodded at him once and turned on her heel, feeling moderately
satisfied.

She would have been happy for that to be her last encounter with him, but Ginny had gone into
labour in the middle of the night in late October, and Harry had wanted his mum there. Hermione
knew the Cokeworth address, and she had set out to fetch Lily and bring her to hospital to witness
that blessed event.

She had tried Severus first on his cellphone, which went straight to voicemail, probably not even
charged. So she had apparated there in the streets in the middle of the night, hoping to be
unobserved. She walked down Spinner’s End, for the first time ever, trying to find address
numbers by the street lamp light.

His house was humble in size but very pretty with a large tree in front and fresh paint on the
window sills. It had been warded completely—she thought she might be able to get through them having known him so long, but they were all foreign to her. She resorted to pounding on the door knowing he was a light sleeper.

She heard no noise from inside but sensed he was behind the door as the wards slightly shifted. “It’s Hermione,” she said, and there was a slight disturbance in the air as he lifted the rest of the them. He opened the door and stood in the doorway in his dressing gown, clearly annoyed, but he stayed silent.

“Ginny is having the baby. Harry wants her there,” she said rather petulantly in response to his annoyance. She crossed her arms in front of her and looked at him with his bare feet and disheveled hair. She had seen him hundreds of times like this, but not since that morning he left. She was slightly chuffed that she had the upper-hand just by being dressed.

He stepped aside. “Come in,” he said quietly.

“She asleep?”

He didn’t answer the question. “I will tell her,” he said and headed up the stairs.

There was a lamp on in the sitting room, and she took it all in. He had done a masterful job with the built-in bookcases and the small furnishings. There was a laptop plugged into the wall and sitting on a small table by the couch. That was clearly not Severus’s. The books on the shelves were his, though. She was reading the titles—she only recognized as few of them—when she heard a squeal from upstairs. She rolled her eyes involuntarily.

Severus descended the stairs again and walked silently into the kitchen. She heard him turn the water on and then put the kettle on the hob. She walked in to find a small but lovely space that had obviously been completely updated.

She would have thought that it would be painful to see his belongings in this place, but she didn’t recognize anything. There were two mugs she had never seen before drying by the sink. He pulled out three more like them and placed tea in a pot by the cooker. It was worse, she realized to see no evidence that she had ever been a part of his life, and if she had, it certainly wasn’t here.

“Your house is beautiful, Severus,” she said, biting down the bitterness.

He poured the boiling water into the pot. “Thank you. Are you working tonight?”

She glanced down at her healer’s robes. “Yes. It’s been very slow lately. They called me to come down when Ginny and Harry arrived.”

“Sev!” Lily called across the house excitedly. “Are you ready? Are you coming with me?” She bounded into the kitchen, dressed and hair perfectly in place. She saw Hermione and stopped short. “Oh! Hi. Are you… You came to tell me about the baby,” she said as if she were processing it all as she spoke. “I suppose I thought…never mind.” She turned to Severus. “Are you going to…well, of course you aren’t, Sev.” She laughed too loudly. Severus poured milk into the cups and then poured the tea. “Yes. I should calm down a moment.” Lily took a cup and sat at the little table.

“I should go ahead and get back,” Hermione said as Severus handed her a cup. “St. Mungo’s. Fourth floor,” she said to Lily. She handed the cup back to Severus and turned to go.

“Thanks, Hermione, I’ll see you there in just a few…” Hermione was out the door and down the street to the apparition alley.
Ginny was still in early stages when Hermione arrived back at hospital. Harry was standing in her doorway, and an impressive collection of Weasleys were gathering in the hallway lobby outside Ginny’s room. Hermione put her hand on Harry’s back gently. “Your mum is on her way”

“Thank you,” Harry said quietly and turned to look her in the eyes.

She smiled and made a small noise to convey that she would do anything for him, and he squeezed her hand to say he knew that. “How is she doing?” she asked.

“The healer-midwife thinks it will be hours still. She’s not happy,” he said, indicating Ginny.

Hermione glanced in the room to see Ginny pitched over on the bed to one side. Molly was sitting beside her, rubbing her back.

“Shouldn’t you be doing that?”

“She kicked me out. I’m waiting here until she does the same to Molly. We’ll shift it out for the duration.”

Hermione squeezed his upper arm. “I’m going to head back to the tenth floor. It’s deadly quiet, though, so I will be back down before the big event. If things progress rapidly, get me on the floo.”

She just made it back to her office and shut the door before she collapsed in tears for the first time in days—she had been doing so well—and then furiously dried her eyes with the backs of her hand. That fucking house. She grabbed the parchment she had been working on and forcefully sat behind her desk. She breathed in and out to clear her mind and focused on the squib issue. She had successfully treated patients no older than ten using a charm based protocol, like the one she used to reset the magical cores in the cases like Sirius’s and the Longbottoms. She had assembled her group of young adult squibs that were willing to be subjects in her experiments. So far, charms had been completely unsuccessful, and she had been unable to reset their cores, if they even had them. (All subjects were pure bloods.) Magical healing was frustratingly metaphysical for Hermione, and on some days, she felt as if she were supposed to be a brain surgeon but was trapped in an absurd alternate reality.

She had moved on to searching for chemical differences between witches and wizards and squibs. She had not trained in the field, and was attempting to educate herself using literature both from the magical healing world and Muggle science. It wasn’t as if she had something better to do.

The next time she looked up from her work, two hours had passed. Harry hadn’t contacted her yet, but she decided to go down anyway. She let the assistant in charge of the ward know where she would be and rode the hospital elevator to the fourth floor.

Very little had changed since she left. Molly was with Ginny; Harry was leaning against the door. The rest of the Weasleys were sitting in little groups in the hallway lobby. Lily had joined them and was standing next to Harry with her hand on his shoulder. Hermione scanned the room for the best place for her to be. The brothers and Susan were sitting in a group in the corner. Ron had been friendlier since Severus had left her, but she sensed an edge of satisfaction in that friendliness. She wasn’t sure she was reading his reaction correctly, but she wasn’t up for it that night. Arthur and Sirius had their own group, with an extra chair that was probably Molly’s when she wasn’t having her shift at Ginny’s bedside. Hermione walked over to them and sat.

“Progress?”

“Presumably. We’re a bit in the dark out here. Know more when Molly gets kicked out.” Arthur
said and Hermione nodded. Sirius pulled a flask from the inside of his robe and offered it to her.

“Thank you; I am on duty upstairs.” Hermione told him as she declined.

“Slow down here, too,” he grumbled good naturally.

“First one usually is. Bill took most of two days,” Arthur added.

“Have you ever…?” Sirius indicated Ginny’s room.

No, I’ve never had a baby. “Been a midwife? Once right after the final battle when it was chaotic around here and once during formal training.” There was a high-pitched cry from Ginny’s room.

“That sounds promising,” Harry quickly went into the room as Molly scooted out. Lily intercepted her, and the two women then walked over.

“Oh, hello Hermione,” Lily said in a friendly tone.

It was Hermione’s third night shift, and she was exhausted. She was out of patience and low on inhibitions. She clamped her mouth shut and nodded. She felt Sirius’s hand on her knee. He squeezed it softly. “Hey,” she managed to say.

“Won’t be long now. The midwife is in there preparing everything,” Molly sad excitedly. Hermione could hear the healer giving instructions and Ginny vocalizing as the pain escalated.

The groups in the hall stopped talking. Everyone was sitting forward in anticipation. They could hear Harry’s supportive voice gradually rise in pitch as things progressed.

“That’s it, Gin. You are doing so well. It’s almost here.”

There was another wail from Ginny and then the unmistakable cry of a newborn, and the celebration began in the hallway with hugs and tears. Molly and Lily were still holding on to each other when Harry emerged at the doorway. “It’s a boy!” he called out. “He’s big and healthy and fantastic. James Remus.”

Lily started sobbing at the declaration, and Hermione’s heart thawed a degree or so. She had known that James was the name they had picked for a boy, but the second name was a surprise. Sirius was trying not to tear up beside her, and she moved her chair over so she could embrace him.

She waited until Harry brought out the little bundle, so she could congratulate him and call in to Ginny. James did look very healthy and had a tuft of unruly black hair already. She kissed Harry on the cheek, and then returned to work to finish her shift.

She walked most of the way home, conflicted, as she often was lately. She was so happy for Harry and Ginny and their sweet little boy. She was happy for Ron, and glad it was Susan and not her beside him, just beginning to have a small, rounded belly. She hadn’t wanted a baby when she was with Severus, so it wasn’t some latent maternal urge. It’s not like he would have been with her at hospital counting down the moments. He would have been in bed. He would have listened to all her stories and rubbed her back on those third night shift mornings until she fell asleep. He would be back after work that night with dinner plans either at home or at one of their favorite places, and they would swap work stories, and she might even get him to laugh with the scene in that hospital hallway and Molly and Harry shuffling in and out.

She trudged up the stairs to the new flat; Crooks waiting for her at the door. Whom does one have to kill to have some food around here? You? He swished his tail in disgust and headed for the kitchen.
“Sorry, boy.” She had fed him and passed out. When she woke, she wasn’t as sad. The days worked like that.

The next few weeks, she spent more time at Grimmauld then she had since the time she was with Ron. She preferred to be there while Lily was at work, but she also wanted to see Harry, so Lily was often unavoidable. She chided herself to get over it, but there was still a stab to the heart each time. Ginny was still being nice to her, and James was the most precious baby Hermione had ever seen. When Lily or Molly wasn’t there with grandmother dibs, Hermione loved to sit on the couch and hold him and coo ridiculous love declarations in his ears.

She spent more concentrated time with Sirius than she ever had, and he made her laugh genuinely for the first time in weeks. One night, he offered to walk her home, and while she didn’t need him to, it was a kind gesture that she wouldn’t turn down. When they were at the building with her flat, he pulled her close to him and kissed her mouth.

It felt warm and interesting and she let her mind go wild for a moment. *It would be so nice to forget all this for an evening. It would be so nice to be loved and to fall asleep with someone, with him, even.*

He opened his mouth, and she felt his tongue on her lips and she suddenly realized that she was not ready for this, and even if she were, it would not be with Sirius. She had put her hand on his shoulder gently and backed away.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“I’ll help you forget him.”

“No, Sirius, thank you. It’s not…I’m not…”

He nodded and stepped back.

“Please, Sirius. I need you as my friend.”

“Of course, Granger,” he had said, but it had been awkward between them since then. She might have been persuaded by Harry or Arthur to join them for holiday plans, but now between Lily and Sirius and Ron, it was just too much. Perhaps in a few years, everyone would have moved on, and she could join them. Until then, she would be the hero and work the holiday shifts no one else wanted.

She sat on the top of the steps that Christmas morning with a warming charm about her, thinking of those happy Christmases of her childhood before her world collapsed, and then those last few happy Christmases during which she had felt that she had finally received her life back. She thought of the space that Severus had created on her old landing and the Christmas mornings they had spent there with the little lit tree in the corner.

She could feel Crooks’s impatience behind her door, so she rose and let herself in, giving him his food, a Christmas treat of fresh tuna she had bought him in the market. She made herself a cup of tea and decided to go back outside on the steps. It was cold, but not uncomfortable with a charm, and it made her head feel clear. Through the bare trees, she could see lighted rooms and houses that morning, and it made her feel slightly better about sleeping off Christmas day and returning to work that evening.

She smelled it before she saw anything. The odor of those American cigarettes was imprinted in her brain. Her eyes followed where the scent originated, and she saw a dark figure, whose face was
obscured, but who had that ember in his hand and mouth and smoke in a cloud about his head.

“You can come up,” she called down.

He hardly moved except to continue to smoke. She finished her cup and rose on the stairs. “Happy Christmas, Severus.” She turned and opened her door and walked through.
Lily

She arrived at work just after six each morning to ensure she would be finished by three. She was the fourth member of a three-person team. They clearly felt as if it had worked fine without her all those years. Agatha was the chief arithmancer; Nancy and Hugh were her assistants. Agatha had been in the department for sixty years and there were worlds of advancements that had passed her by. Lily did her best not to threaten the woman, but she was faster with keener analysis from her very first day on the job. Lily worked subtly to win over Nancy and Hugh without making enemies. No one objected to her slightly unorthodox hours.

That January day she had eaten lunch with Harry and then finished her analysis on the post-war birthrate: stabilizing with positive trends ahead. She would write the report first thing in the morning and move on to her next assignment.

She left work for Grimmauld Place as was her habit. She spent her late afternoons holding James while Ginny had some quiet time. Her daughter-in-law had not really warmed to her, but she did not complain when Lily arrived at the time of day when James was usually fussy and Ginny at her wits’ end. Sirius was rarely there, as he escaped to the pub just before lunch and almost never returned before Lily left. Harry had to work until six, so Lily was Ginny’s best option for a break.

She tapped on the door quietly in case James was sleeping. This was almost never the case, but she was sensitive to Ginny’s expectations. At some point, perhaps they would allow her to take the wards down herself and come in quietly, but that would take more time and trust. Kreacher opened the door and let her in, hmphed with disgust and mumbled as he returned to his quarters in the attic.

“Dirty Mudblood to sully the baby.”

“Thank you, Kreacher. Have a nice afternoon.”

Ginny and James were in the “playroom,” a repurposed space off the kitchen that was the warmest spot in the house during winter. It had been some sort of large pantry when the house was first constructed, and then had been a storage area for years until Harry and Sirius refurbished it. James was not doing too much playing yet, but he did like to stretch out on his belly on a blanket and chew on the foot of his favorite stuffed toy—an animal that resembled an aardvark.

Ginny was sitting on the couch above him reading a Quidditch magazine. She glanced up when Lily entered, and for about half a second, a look of relief passed over her eyes before she settled back into indifference.

“How are you two?” Lily cooed in her James voice. She lowered herself to the floor to sit beside the baby and pat his back. She couldn’t resist lowering her face and planting a kiss on his
delightfully round cheek.

“Same as always.”

“Sirius gone?”

“Of course.” His daily hours at the pub were ostensibly to give Ginny her space, but really, he was uncomfortable around babies. He had been the same when Harry was little. He talked a good game of his godson, but he had only started spending time with them after Harry’s first birthday. He was no help in this situation.

“Take a break,” Lily urged gently.

“He’ll fuss,” Ginny said wearily.

“That’s okay. I’ll walk with him.”

Ginny rose from her seat, and immediately James began to whimper. Lily stood up from the floor and scooped up James in her arms to begin their tour of the house and grounds.

She sat all day, so walking James around the house, up and down the stairs, and even in the garden with a decent warming charm was something she looked forward to. It was impossible not to draw comparisons between this baby and Harry, as they were practically identical, and anyway, they were the only two babies Lily had spent extensive time with. Harry had been easier going in temperament, if Lily recalled correctly, but perhaps it only seemed that way because Lily had such a large group of neighborhood friends that helped her. Ginny clearly felt isolated in this neighborhood. Molly was there sometimes, but she had other grandbabies that required her attention, too.

While Lily and James made the rounds, Ginny would shower and then return to the kitchen to oversee dinner. Kreacher did most of the preparation, so Ginny was able to drink a cup of tea and read undisturbed. James settled down quickly that day, so their walk was a pleasure. Lily whispered stories about his grandfather and the Potter family as they walked up and down. Some days, she told him about Cokeworth and her own family, and her best friend Sev, sparing many details, of course. Some days she told him all about her friends in Louisiana, especially about her friend Marcus and the musicals he had been in. She would sing him songs from those shows; James loved the Lion King especially.

Around five, Lily would go back to the kitchen and ask permission to bathe James and put him in clean pajamas. Most of the time, Ginny would decline, and Lily would hand him over and see herself out, leaving before she irritated her daughter-in-law too much. Harry arrived home at six, and Lily was almost always gone by then.

The little house on Spinner’s End had become a home. Sev had done so much work on it, it required few little touches. She transfigured the kitchen curtains into ones that allowed more morning light. She found a more luxurious duvet cover for the bed and a colourful rug for the sitting room. She had added WIFI without telling him in advance; she decided the apology might go better than the initial discussion. She was right; he never mentioned it.

She volunteered at the Cokeworth community center on Saturdays. There was a program for senior citizens, and she enjoyed chatting with the folks, some of whom had been her parents’ friends. They had all been thoroughly obliviated during the time she and James had fled the UK. But she could still have a conversation about old Cokeworth there.
This night, a Thursday, she stopped in the café for a cup of tea and chat with Martha before the dinner crowd came in. Martha was also a grandmother and on the young side to be one, and they showed each other pictures and shared the latest fantastic accomplishments of the grandbabies. Lily had a mobile phone she used primarily for James photography to share with Martha, the folks at the community center, and especially her friends via email.

After she finished her tea, she would go home and cook something or heat something up for dinner. James had been the cook of the family, and so had Marcus. When it was just Lily and Kendrah, they muddled through, picking up takeout or most often, relying on the generosity of Mama or Patty. But Lily felt it was past time for her to learn to feed herself. In the last few months, she had learned to prepare four different meals, each that she would eat on for three days and then cook the next one in the rotation.

That night she prepared spaghetti Bolognese, mostly from scratch. She used tinned tomatoes, but it was February after all. She put some frozen veg on to boil. She used charms interspersed with some techniques she could recall from watching her own mum when Lily was a child. In thirty minutes, she had a pleasing dinner that smelled great. She made a plate and stored the leftovers for the next two nights.

She ate alone at the kitchen table in front of her laptop. She and Kendrah had a daily email that they copied Patty in on, although she rarely hopped in on the conversation with much more than a few words. She was having an exhausting school year.

Kendrah and Kevin had been working a missing persons case in which they had few leads and a mountain of pressure to solve. The subject was a white high school senior from Metarie, Emma Owen. She had seemingly vanished off the face of the earth, leaving her car, purse, and cell phone in Heritage Park on the bank of the Mississippi River. The first week had been squandered by bad police work and the assumption she had run off somewhere. Then it was transferred to Kendrah and Kevin, and they were left with a whole lot of nothing, save frantic parents, a scared community, and national news that had another pretty young blonde to splash across the airwaves.

Lily had been running some arithmancy to try to help with the investigation, but the detectives had so little to go one, it was tough to find meaningful results. She had spent a good deal of time lately looking at computer programming models and trying to determine if she could write an arithmancy code.

She passed some work she had done on the case—the lines showed a trend that indicated a low probability the victim was still alive, which she knew Kendrah and Kevin already strongly suspected. Lily then turned to the joyful, her new photos of James and her spag bol recipe.

She finished the last of her dinner and washed up the kitchen, leaving it sparkling and retired to the sitting room to read for a while until bed. She had reached the stage of withdrawal that this was the only time she really wanted a cigarette, but she resisted. There were none in the house anyway. She had smoked her last one the day before James was born. Sometimes Sev would come home smelling of them, but not in the last few weeks, she realized as she tamped down the urge. Perhaps he had made a resolution.

She had always enjoyed the telly at Kendrah’s, but she felt no pull to purchase one for here. She occasionally watched a movie on her laptop on a cold Sunday when she wasn’t invited to the Burrow for dinner.

At nine-thirty, she walked upstairs and started her bedtime rituals. She was climbing into bed when she heard him arrive through the front door. He came immediately up the stairs and greeted her
with a nod and a monosyllabic grunt.

“Sev,” she said, pleased he was here. More nights than not lately he had spent at the warehouse. He went straight for the music and put on a quiet jazz album.

“Do you eat?” she teased him pointedly. “I don’t think I have seen you eat in…I don’t even know.”

“We ate together at the café on Sunday,” he said, sitting on the edge of the bed to remove his boots.

“Here, though. When was the last time you ate here?”

“I just finished work,” he said wearily. “I ate there.”

“What? A tin of sardines? Concentrated soup?” He said nothing, and she knew she was right. “There is a lovely batch of spaghetti Bolognese waiting for you in the fridge,” she pouted. He touched her ankle through the blankets in response.

“At least take some to work tomorrow to heat up. I’m getting really good at cooking charms.”

“I will, thank you.” He left his clothes folded neatly on the chair in the corner and joined her in bed. He opened his arm, and she met him in the middle, settling in under it. This was the time when she would usually initiate conversation, that lately had been a one-way operation. She thought about starting along that path tonight, but she doubted he was interested in baby James or news of the investigation in New Orleans. He was mostly likely to respond when she spoke of her work, but she was too tired to start on that. Just as her eyes were closing, she raised her chin and kissed him, but she was too close to sleep for anything else.

“Night, Sev,” she muttered.

“Night, Evans,” she heard as she drifted off.

She was alone in bed when her wand went off at five. She showered and dressed and prepared some tea and toast. The food she had stored remained in the refrigerator, undisturbed.

**Hermione**

After staying away for the awkward holidays, Hermione met up with Harry for a drink after work on a Friday in January. It was brutally cold but growing slightly lighter each day in the afternoon, a nice reminder that winter would not last forever. They met in a Muggle pub for the anonymity and especially to not risk running into Sirius, whom Hermione was still avoiding.

“Baby? Wife? Mother? House? Roommate?” Hermione said as they settled into a table. He ordered a pint whilst she asked for red wine and considered asking for two right off.

“All fine. James has decided sleep is beneath him, but we’re hoping he changes his mind soon.”

“Uff,” she said in sympathy.

“Sirius has been moping more than ever. You sure you don’t…”

“Oh, yes, I am quite sure. I am staying away from maudlin forty-somethings at the moment.”
Harry clinked his glass against hers. “Cheers.”

“And your mum?”

“Fine. She doesn’t share about her personal life for which I am grateful. I think she is happy with her job and with James.”

“And you.”

“Yes. We have lunch most days. Still getting to know each other, but it’s good. She’s bloody brilliant. I guess I knew that; people always said, but speaking with her… I can barely understand what she does in her job, and she works with the police in America, too.”

“Does she?” Hermione struggled with not outright despising the woman for what she deemed were selfish reasons. It was mildly charming that she was still close with her friends in Louisiana. Hermione gave herself a mental point for conceding that.

“It’s still all so…I used to seek out the Headmaster’s portrait when I had a tough case, or needed to talk to someone with some distance, you know?”

Hermione nodded.

“But lately, since this all happened, I can’t face him. It’s not that I’m shocked at the level of manipulation…”

“I am, Harry,” she retorted. “Yes, we knew he was capable of questionable choices, but this…to create this whole mythology and know that it would be successful. I have never been cynical.”

“No, but we are now. How could we not be?”

“It doesn’t change her love for you.”

“I know. She can’t think about my childhood or Aunt Petunia without rage. I know she loves me, and she did sacrifice. I don’t think it was a terribly happy life for her although it sounds as if my dad really tried.”

Hermione tried to separate Harry’s mum from the woman who upturned her life. “I think she did everything she could for you and for society. She and your dad could have taken you and run, and none of us would be alive now.”

He nodded. “Anyway, none of it is easy.”

She clinked his glass again and smiled more broadly than she had in quite a while.

“There she is,” Harry said with a smile just for her, and she couldn’t resist standing and planting a kiss on his cheek. They moved on to James’s latest tricks and her work challenges, although she went light on the details. They left after the one drink; Harry was expected home, but promised to meet up again soon.

Four months into her squib project, Hermione had learned the following: squibs did have magical cores, they also had chemical differences from witches and wizards, and she had no idea how to activate the core and modify the chemistry so the magic would flow naturally. She began a two-fold plan. She needed to devise a charm to jump the magical core into action and work on a potion therapy protocol. She stayed in her office for a few weeks. There had been no new trauma cases in six months. There had been two squib newborns. She taught her staff the procedure, so they could
implement it when she wasn’t on the unit. They had treated the babies successfully.

In mid-February, it dawned on her that she was the co-owner of a medicinal potions company. She applied for a limited sabbatical—she would return to St. Mungo’s if a new trauma patient arrived—and informed Severus Snape via owl that she would need a workspace in the warehouse. He had responded almost immediately.

H.G.,

Why? What do you need? Demands at the lab are an all-time high.

S.S.

The irritation was dripping off the page. It made her snort in laughter.

S.S. (seriously?)

I need to work on potion treatment in conjunction with my squib treatment. I’m taking a sabbatical from the hospital. Why do you care? I will be happy to expand the lab for extra space if necessary. Just let me know. You utter wanker.

Cheers,

Hermione (H.G.)

She only thought the last line and sent it straight away. Again, she did not have to wait for a response.

H.G.,

We are not set up to support a full-scale research project. I am sorry.

S.S.

“Oh, fuck you!” she said aloud but with a large grin. She was feeling better about whole of her life than she had in months.

Severus,

We will be now. I will be there Thursday. Tomorrow is my last day shift. (Severus, I promise I will not be in your way. We can have a board meeting to discuss this, or you can just let me go to work.
If we do have the meeting, could we have it at the new Chinese place on Sutton? I’ve heard it’s fantastic.

Hermione

She didn’t hear back. On Wednesday afternoon, she packed the materials she would need into a wooden box and shrunk it to fit in the pocket of her cloak. She stopped off at the hair salon on her way home. She had neglected the nest around her head for too long. If she combed it out, it would be half-way down her back, and her old plaits had reappeared. She wanted to start her new work challenge with a professional look. She had it cut in subtle layers and highlighted. After she had established her groove at the warehouse, perhaps it would be time to get out there and try to meet someone, if not for a relationship, then just for some fun companionship that wasn’t tied to her little incestuous world.

She fed herself and Crooks and slept very well, rising early and eating breakfast with a light heart. She packed a lunch and left the flat with her leather bag across her chest, heading for work in her regular clothes for the first time in her career. She had a crisp, black, lab robe she had transfigured with the SNAPE logo over her left breast, folded away in the bag with her tiny wooden work crate. She arrived at the warehouse, apparating from the closest wizarding neighborhood from her flat at seven-thirty sharp.

She breezed through the door and greeted Karina, who looked at her with confusion.

“T’m going to be working in the lab for the foreseeable future. I will find my way back,” she said and didn’t wait for permission.

There was only one person in there, anyway, his head bent over a cauldron, stirring in a cadence.

“Good morning!” she called out cheerily. “Ready for me, or should I carve out my own space?”

He held up his index finger and kept stirring methodically. Then he pulled his wand and hit a stasis and finally looked up. “I believe you have an unrealistic picture of what goes on here.” He said in a low voice. It was hard to keep back a flood of affection for his blatant insecurity/almost panic that he was trying to hide. Oh, you little lamb.

“I need to brew a potion. Is that not done here?” she said it lightly with no sarcasm and an affectionate tone that should have been much harder to achieve. “I don’t know what I am doing, completely; I will need your help, at least in a limited way. I need to run some tests. I have a group of squibs that have been working with me. They are…they are more than willing to be test subjects. If we are successful, it will have a worldwide market. If I fail to find a treatment, I can try something else. I don’t see the downside.”

He stared at her with a stubborn expression.

“You will have to do better than that, Severus. Please tell me what about experimenting to find the best technique, composition…to find a treatment here is so contrary to the mission of this place? To what is most important to you?” She stared back at him, trying to make her mouth stay in a straight line, but this was all so ridiculous. She could practically hear his thoughts. He was already compiling ingredients. She couldn’t hold back her smile, and she felt the curve of her lips spring up.

He turned back to his cauldron abruptly.
“That’s what I thought. I need your help, Severus. I have thought about this for weeks, and I have some ideas, but my knowledge pales to yours, obviously. Can I take this space?” She indicated a swath of lab table that was just to his right.

“We use that for testing the potions that staff brews. It is convenient for me to have it close.”

“How much space does that require?"

He took the few steps between them and ran the side of his hand to indicate the boundary of the test space.

“Fine. I will begin here.” She unpacked her bag, laying its contents on the counter and pulling on her lab robe. “Isn’t it smart?” she asked, smile growing involuntarily.

He snorted in reply.

She expanded her crate and began pulling out her parchment. “I wrote a concise memo about the condition and my blood analysis. Do you have time to look over it? I have charm work I can do until you are ready to meet and discuss a research plan.”

“I have hours of brewing today.”

“Hours…like four hours? Twelve hours?”

“Until lunch at least.”

“That’s great, then. You can read the memo after lunch. Do you usually eat here or go out?”

“Here.”

There was a staff room in the back. She had stocked it initially when they were moving into the space. “That’s fine. I brought my cup and my lunch.” She held up her container and the mug he had given her for Christmas three years ago. He saw it and there was a tiny flinch of his left eye; she doubted anyone else would have detected it. She turned and walked to the staff room.

It was immaculate and well stocked. The rest of the staff were arriving and stowing their lunches and various items. She knew only a few of them, and none of them well, but she greeted each one by name and introduced herself to the ones she didn’t know.

There were quarters he had used occasionally in the first months of occupying the warehouse. He only stayed here when she was on night shifts, which gave him a good excuse to work late. The quarters were up a staircase, hidden in a supply closet off the staff room. She opened the door and began to climb the stairs and was stunned when she reached the top. The simple bed was made but looked well used. There was a stack of books and journals on the nightstand. His extra pair of boots and his converse trainers were partially under the bed. There was a small wardrobe in the corner, and she opened it to find a rack of button down shirts, wool trousers, and work robes. It was identical to the wardrobe he kept during their years-long cohabitation.

She stepped into the tiny lav. The smell of soap and hot water lingered slightly. His toothbrush was wet by the sink. His shower items were in a small rack hanging on the faucet of the shower. A damp towel was stretched across a rod affixed to the wall.

She covered her face with her hand but giggled through it.
Severus

He arranged his work days so in the morning, he brewed and inspected the products to be shipped, and in the afternoons and through the early evening, he worked on her project with her. She left promptly at seven, declaring a new focus on “work/life balance” that made him want to hurl his afternoon tea into the nearest cauldron. What life was she out there having?

His behavior at Christmas was utterly humiliating. He didn’t know what he was thinking. He had not expected her to be there. Evans was occupied for a week with Potter/Weasley/Black family business, and he was not participating in THAT in any way. He should have gone back to Cokeworth after work and had a Christmas Day lie in. It was how he had celebrated for years in the bad days. He would put in his time at the Great Hall and probably put in an obligatory appearance at Malfoy Manor, but the great majority of his holiday had been spent catching up on sleep. He should have done that. Instead, he had chosen to practically stalk the woman. Not practically. He had stalked her. And she had seen him.

He hated the house on Spinner’s End. He could not have predicted that turn of events. Years of pining for her in his bed. She was in his bed now, every night save the very few she spent at Grimmauld after watching the baby while his parents went out. She was right there, and he couldn’t stand being in that house more than a few hours.

He sensed it hurt her, though surely indifference was close. He couldn’t speak of it, of course. What would he say? “You know, spending time in the place of horrors isn’t as fantastic as I imagined it to be. Sorry.” It had been different somehow when he would spend summers there, when it was still a hovel, and he was completely alone. There were ghosts, but they stayed away. Now, he could hardly lie in that bed without thinking of the bastard due to come home at any moment and beat the lights out of him.

The summer of 1976 was ever present. Severus had avoided coming home at first, persuading Slughorn to let him stay at school and help put up the lab for some Flourish and Blots credit to use for the next term. That had lasted four days. He thought of going to the Headmaster and appealing for some summer work; the old man owed him one after the werewolf incident. He couldn’t swallow his pride enough, though. He was home by the second week of July. He reported immediately to the pub. Thomas, the owner, put him to work that day. Snape worked as many hours as he could, and it seemed as if he could pass the summer with decent wages and little time to think, when his father ruined it all.

Tobias Snape had been a day laborer with whatever mining outfit would employ him. He would work for a pittance, so finding someone to hire him was rarely a problem. Keeping the job had always been the challenge. Still, he had managed throughout the years. Something had changed, though, between summers that year. Tobias was drinking all the time and had become unemployable.

He took to hanging around the pub, screaming at Severus through the swinging door to the kitchen where his son stayed out of view. Thomas would throw him out, but he would not stay gone. Severus could no longer make his rounds, picking up empties and helping with refills. He could stay at the sink, but Thomas needed someone who could work the whole pub.

“I’m sorry, Severus,” he had said. “I wish I could keep ya. Old Toby will keep coming back, and I can’t have that.”

“He will come whether I’m there or not!” Snape had pleaded with his boss.

“No, he gives up when you’re not here. I am sorry.”
Snape had gone to every business in town trying to find anything. The mines had been bad the year before; now they were practically deserted, and everyone was looking for work. He finally found a situation in road repair, almost in Manchester. He couldn’t afford bus fare, but he could usually find a farmer heading to town and hitch on the back of the lorry. He couldn’t apparate yet although he considered learning on his own and then explaining his dilemma to the Ministry when he was caught. He couldn’t risk that kind of controversy, though.

Part of him was tempted to chuck the whole thing, drop out of school, move to the city and away from his parents and not look back. A few days on the road crew, though, convinced him that school was essential. He could endure anything temporarily. Evans was gone, but perhaps he could scrape together an acceptable life if he continued to excel in school.

He didn’t have another option than to return home after his day of work. He was tempted to sleep in the garden, but his father would find him there on his way to the privy. Sometimes, he was fortunate enough to sneak to his room and sleep the whole night. More frequently, though, Toby would find him in bed and start wailing on his head before Snape was fully awake.

He had grown five inches that year, and could have defended himself forcefully. He was reluctant to do so, though, preferring to shield his head, curl up into a ball, and pretend none of it was happening. Toby would usually fall over and pass out after a few badly thrown punches anyway.

One night in August, Severus had returned from a long day, filthy and exhausted. They ate fairly well on the crew, and all he wanted to do was clean himself and pass out on his bed until it was time to get up for his next shift. They had an iron tub that he had used his entire life for bathing. During the winters of his childhood, his mother would drag it in the kitchen and fill it with enough boiling water that he wouldn’t freeze. Otherwise, he took a cold bath, filling the tub from the garden spigot. The sun was just about to disappear completely; one of the last long days of the year. It was chilly and he braced himself to shiver through his quick wash. He removed his work clothes and with a bar of lye soap that lived on the ledge of the kitchen window, he was sitting in the tub, scrubbing both himself and his clothing, planning to lay it outside overnight and apply a quick drying charm in the morning before he dressed again.

He was working on the armpit of his shirt when Toby staggered out and began yelling and throwing blows aimed for Severus’s head. Severus had no more tolerance for any of it. Months of frustration, rage, and grief came pouring out of him. In moments, he was out of the tub and had his father pinned to the brick exterior of the back of the hovel with his hand around his father’s throat and his wand in his other hand touching his father’s cheek. Toby’s stringy, black hair had fallen over his face, which was turning purple and his eyes were bulging out of the sockets. Severus put his face inches from his father’s.

“Leave me alone. Leave me alone, or I will ensure you do,” he hissed through his teeth. He let go of his father’s neck with a jerk, and Toby staggered and then fell on the ground. Severus stood over him, naked but unconcerned about it and glared down at him.

His father was muttering something that sounded like poncey school. “Do not trouble yourself about my life. I will not be back here.”

“Break your mother’s heart,” Toby muttered.

“I’m not capable of breaking it more completely than it already has been.” He dumped the water out of the tub, and it pooled around his father, who was so inebriated he could not get out of the way. The monster of his life was so pathetic, he lost all power immediately. Severus shook his head, almost in disbelief. He left his clothes to dry and his father to wallow and walked into the house and up the stairs to his room with his head held high.
It could have been a moment of triumph. It wasn’t. Although he never spent more than a week at the house from that time until after his parents’ deaths, he was there parts of each break. As his involvement in the world of the Death Eaters increased, he had less reason to return, but he always did to see his mother stare and his father stagger, both gasping towards demise.

He worked two more weeks with the road crew and made twice as much as he would have in the pub. On the Thursday before he was to leave for London to ride the train back to school, he was making tea in the kitchen before work as he did each morning. Eileen had already descended the steps in her ghostly gait. She had stopped speaking sometime in the spring of his fourth year. He wasn’t sure exactly what had happened, but he had seen and heard enough over the years to guess. He placed a cup in front of her. She stared for a moment before bringing it to her almost invisible lips. Just then, the face of a large barn owl appeared at the window. Severus opened it, and the owl landed on the interior ledge and sat there with two scrolls attached to its claws. Severus untied the one labeled STS carefully, his heart in his throat. His mother had risen from the chair and fetched a stale biscuit for the bird, who took it with a sniff.

He stared at the LJE scroll still tied to the claw. The owl ate the biscuit in two gulps and flew off without a second look at the hovel. Snape unfurled the small parchment and looked down the list. Os in everything except divination, for which he received an E. He placed the parchment in front of his mother wordlessly. She rolled it back up without glancing at it.

He hadn’t realized that Evans was going through her own hell that summer. He knew nothing of it at all until he read the obituary in the newspaper at the pub over the Christmas holidays. He had bought some awful looking flowers and showed up at her house. Petunia had refused to let him in, but Mr. Evans, who had no idea who he was, had taken the flowers and kindly accepted bumbling condolences.

Evans and Potter were always together from that autumn on. It was perhaps the worst outcome imaginable, death included. He revised that opinion when she actually died—at least when he thought she had.

He was still stunned sometimes when he awoke and she was there beside him quite alive. And then he was stunned that her presence in that bed in that house did not fill him with instant joy. She was essentially the same person that he had loved in absentia all those years. She was as beautiful, adventurous, and forward as she had been. She was also hidden under more layers than he could ever uncover. He had no idea what the real Lily Evans Potter was.

He began pining for the hours between one and seven that he worked with Hermione. Of course, he was reminded of the time before the warehouse when they were spending every spare moment she wasn’t at the hospital and he wasn’t teaching brewing, designing, packaging, and shipping. Hermione had set up the first balance sheet in a small journal, and he had kept it until he had run out of lines and pages. He had finally purchased SNAPE’s first official ledger, but the original journal with contact information of all the first customers was in that journal in a box in his work space.

It was clear she had moved on as she bounded out of the warehouse every night a few minutes before seven. There was a part of him that was glad. He couldn’t think about the events of that time only six months ago without shame. Potter had come to see him a week or two after Snape had left the new house. He was sure that Potter was there to lambaste him for debasing his mother, but the controlled rant had been on Hermione’s behalf.

“Do you know how you have devastated her…sir?”

The one student in twenty years with the nerve to stand up to him in the dungeon had been
excessively deferential since the end of the war. Snape would have preferred it if Potter had punched him in the nose and gone on his way.

He had informed Potter curtly that he did not discuss personal matters during business hours, cribbing from Dickens and fully understanding the significance. If he were to have to face his regrets on his deathbed, so be it.

He’d had another chance for a cathartic beating just before Christmas. Hyacinth and Karina had planned a staff party at the pub for a Friday night. He had intended to skip it, but Hyacinth had implored him that it would be great for morale if he would just stop in for a pint and pass out the bonuses himself. He had begrudgingly agreed and had shown up with the envelopes intending to drink one pint and go back to the warehouse.

The women had made quite a fuss, though, with food and décor. They had put each employee’s name in fancy writing on their bonus envelopes and dressed the table with evergreen garland and Christmas ribbon. It was rather lovely and understated in a way Dumbledore had never chosen at those staff Christmases. He was proud of the effort they had made.

He hadn’t eaten outside the staff room in a few weeks, and he decided not to turn down a meal, especially since he was paying for it all. He was finishing up a surprisingly good roast dinner when his spy senses started alerting him that danger was near. He scanned the pub and saw Black staring at him from a bar stool. He turned back to his table but it was too late, the oaf was approaching.

He stood and mumbled, “Happy Christmas” to the bunch and headed for the door. He did not want to stage the coming scene in front of his employees. He walked over to Black, staring at him.

“Outside,” he hissed and turned toward the door, exiting without flourish. He walked behind the pub, and Black followed, as Snape intended. They were alone and unobserved.

“Coward,” Black spat at him.

Guilty. “Hardly. What do you want, Black?” he said with as much steel as he could manage.

“You are a bastard.”

“And?” He left his whole person open to Black. Do your worst.

Well, not exactly. Snape was certain that Black would not cast an unforgivable, and he didn’t think he could withstand another round of cruelties, but he relished the thought of a good hex just then. A sting or a slice would be just the thing. He held his wand in the defensive position; it felt so odd after all these years, but it was just a pose. He welcomed what was to come.

Black had his wand pointed and seemed to be working something out. Must I prompt you? COME ON!

Then Black slumped his shoulders and brought his wand to his side, turned and apparated away. Snape stayed in the back in the freezing cold that was better than nothing. After a few minutes, he returned to the pub in time for the pudding.

He assigned two employees to work with them in the afternoons, chopping, measuring, crushing, and portioning the elements from the stores while he did the brewing and she prepared the tests. She was attempting to strengthen the magic reserves in the squibs so their cores could function the way the cores of witches and wizards did. She had come into the process having researched treatment for magical maladies that had depleted the reserves and was trying to develop
her own protocol for the population for whom potions would not have the same effects as they did for magically functional people. The new potions had to be more diluted and introduced gradually or they would be toxic to the squibs.

It took them a week to brew samples she determined would be safe. She had originally planned to treat her group at the hospital but then decided it would be more efficient to conduct the tests at the warehouse where he could be present as well. They all arrived on a Thursday afternoon, most looking as if they were doing this on their lunch hour. He recognized two children of Death Eaters in the group of fourteen; silently, they all agreed not to acknowledge this.

She had already taken baseline tests, so she administered the potions and then in the space she had expanded for the purpose, ran them through very basic tests of magic using wands she had purchased at Ollivander’s. None of subjects had enough magic to register any results yet.

She spent the next day, Friday, perched on a stool just a few feet to his right, composing her reports for the first treatment. She was absorbed in her work, but every so often she would lift her head and start consulting with him about this or that, exactly how she had done throughout the time they had been together. At six-thirty, she hopped off the stool and clacked down on her little heels.

“Friday, and I am finished. I think I will call it a week,” she said cheerily. “Have a great weekend, Severus!” She hung her work robe on the tree and then turned to him. “Should I take this home to clean? Leave it out?” They had elves on the payroll—that was nonnegotiable from day one—and they took care of nightly cleaning and various other chores.

“Yes, leave it,” he choked out.

“Alright then, cheers!” she said and clicked her way out with that leather bag strapped to her having no idea the misery she was leaving in her wake.

Lily

In late March, there was finally a lead in the Emma Owen case. By the time her car had been found, her phone was dead and none of her data could be retrieved as if it had been completely wiped. Kendrah and Kevin had been working with an IT professional to try to recover something from that phone. In April, they had a break-through with her voice mail. The hours leading up to her disappearance, she had three angry messages from her stepfather, accusing Emma of being a terrible daughter. No one in the family had ever spoken of conflict the day before the disappearance. Kendrah sent Lily an audio file, and Lily could finally add to her lines. It was now overwhelmingly likely that Emma had come to a bad end, and that all investigative effort should be put towards the family. Of course Kendrah and Kevin knew that as soon as they had heard the message, but it gave Lily a chance to do preliminary work before they started focusing on specific family members.

Lily’s days followed a consistent pattern: work, time with James, home working on her Louisiana project. She was cooking and chatting with Kendrah via instant messenger when she heard Sev walk in the front door. She hadn’t seen him in two weeks. She had already decided to go to that warehouse this weekend if he didn’t emerge. She met him in the sitting room.

“Sev! There you are! Just in time, too, dinner is almost finished.”
He looked as if he were walking to his execution. “I just came over to discuss…”

“Nonsense. I made vegetarian korma. It’s delicious, and I’m not letting you leave until you have had two portions.” She took him by the hand and led him to the kitchen table where he sat down with a thud.

“You’ve been busy?” She lifted the lid on the pot of rice and steam filled the space in front of her. She closed her eyes and inhaled.

“Yes.”

“Harry said Hermione is working out of the warehouse?” She put servings of rice on two places and placed the pot back on the stove. She reached for the other one with the korma.

“Yes.”

“Making progress, then?” She served up the dish on top of the rice and garnished the plates with some chopped coriander.

“Pardon?”

“On the project. Something with squibs, treatment of squibs?” She brought the plates over and laid one down in front of him. The kettle clicked off and she poured two cups of tea.

“Yes. She is. It’s her project.”

“You’re not involved?”

“Marginally. Thank you.” He picked up a fork and began poking his dinner. She poured a bit of milk in each cup and sat with him. “Bon appetit.”

“Thank you,” he repeated. He took a tentative bite; it was still steaming hot. “This is…delicious.”

“See, you’ve been missing out,” she said lightly. He was engrossed in his food and wouldn’t look at her.

She kept up the conversation for both throughout the meal, and then carried their plates to the sink. She run hot water over them and reached into the cupboard for the Old Ogden’s and two glasses and returned to the table. She poured into both glasses, sending his over. He drank a hearty swig of whiskey and began the task he had obviously come here to complete.

“Evans…Lily, I am putting the house on the market.”

“No, Sev!” This was so much worse than the impending break-up she figured was coming.

“Wait…Evans…you have paid rent for eight months…would you be interested in buying the place? I would apply those…”

“YES!” she leaped from her seat and threw her arms around him. He stiffened dramatically, but she didn’t care. She planted a kiss on his cheek and sat back down. “Yes! I would love to buy it. I love this house!”

He looked stunned.

“You don’t love this house,” she said.
“I don’t. It is just…” He stopped and took another drink and looked at her.

“You will not be living here?” she said it lightly and tried to keep the hurt out of her voice.

“No.”

She waited for him to continue. She gave him minutes. She finally spoke up. “I’m not going to do this part for you, Sev.” She said quietly and realized there were tears right there. “You are my best friend. My oldest friend. You need to talk to me,” she said, and she felt the tears start to fall.

“For years, Evans….For years you were what I lived for. You kept me alive. I imagined you and me together, and it was the only pleasant bit of my existence. During the awful time, I would think of us and imagine us alive together…happy.”

“I am here,” she said though it came out a squeak.

“I know. But…”

“You don’t really love me.”

“I do…I always will.”

“You love her.”

“Yes.”

“She is too young for you.” Anger was right there, just under sadness.

“Perhaps.”

“It’s not appropriate.”

And there was his anger, which made hers pale. “You are wrong. She will most likely never allow me back, but it was the most appropriate bit of my life. I had a chance…” He let his head fall again. She reached out to pour more whiskey in his glass, but he put his hand over it. “It is over, but I can’t be here. I was not…I am not the right person for you.”

“I don’t think that.”

“Come on, Evans.”

“I will miss you being around here,” she tried to growl suggestively through her tears but sounding ridiculous. His mouth moved to a tiny smile. “Thank you for selling me the house. We should continue this formally?”

“Yes.”

She reached across the table for his hand and he took it. “Still my oldest friend.”

“Yes.”

Hermione
The project proceeded without incident for eight weeks. Every Thursday afternoon, her group would arrive at the warehouse and take the current potion, each week slightly stronger. She would give them a battery of simple tests, and every week, they showed signs of increasing magical capacity.

During the eighth Thursday, everything seemed to go according to plan. They took the new potion...and then nothing. No improvement from any of them, and most regressed. She maintained a cheerful, professional demeanor until they left. She usually waited until Friday to start charting the results, but with a growing sense of alarm she started to look at everything at once.

“Calm down.”

“What?” She looked up to see Severus beside her.

“Do not panic. We will find it.”

The staff they used had already gone home, and she looked at their work space, completely overwhelmed. She should have prepared for failure, but she had assumed everything would behave the way it was supposed to. Work was the part of her life that was supposed to be easy.

“There is obviously something not correct about the potion, or the time-lapse, or the efficacy of the treatment protocol. We will find it,” he said calmly, perusing the book in which they recorded the formulas. “Re-brew faction P,” he said pointing to the formula they had used the week before. “Call them back in, and test them again to determine if it is still effective. If it is, we will recalculate faction Q.” He flipped the page to the work from this week.

“And if it’s not?”

He looked at her the way a professor would look at his not so bright pupil.

“Then it’s back to the beginning,” she sighed.

“You thought this was going to be simple,” he said with a sneer.

“I fucking did not!” she said. Does that even make sense? She was shaking with anger. Fine. Let him have it. “What do you know of what I do? Of anything that I do? Do you think I woke up one morning and had healing protocol reveal itself to me? Do you know how many hours I put into this project before I contacted you? How much work went into the procedure that healed her? What has ever been simple, Severus? What in my life has ever been simple? Go fuck yourself, you condescending arsehole!”

She turned to the shelves they had installed to keep their pertinent ingredients for this project. She grabbed a burdock root and started slicing in perfect, thin portions right into her thumb.

“God DAMN it!” She grabbed her left hand in her right one, but blood was already dripping down her arm.

“Keep it up,” he demonstrated holding his right hand next to his cheek with his left. He started walking briskly toward the staff room. He looked back to see her; she was standing stunned, wondering if she should go with him. “Hermione, come on,” he said and put his arm around her shoulder, gently guiding her through the staff room and upstairs to his quarters. She went along with him and felt her heart rise into her throat.

Stop that! You will only be hurt again. You are finally okay. You are finally closer to being okay. She was yelling inside her head. “No healing potions downstairs?” she said with a little laugh
to cover her inner crisis.

“None that are not packaged to ship.” He walked to the bathroom and pulled a phial from the 
cupboard above the sink. “Come on, let’s wash it first,” he said quietly.

She stepped in gingerly and he reached for her left hand. She had sliced off the tip of her thumb. He 
looked at it closely. “Drink this first,” he instructed. “It will…”

“I know what it’s for, Severus. I did brew these…”

“Yes.” It was hardly more than a breath. She drank the potion that would both stop the bleeding 
and numb the wound. He took her hand again and rubbed it gently with a wet cloth. Then so 
carefully, he opened another bottle and softly brushed the healing salve over the end of her thumb. 
It was still numb, so she couldn’t feel the flesh restore itself, but she watched, and it was no less a 
miracle than it ever was. She gasped before she could stop it, and he looked up. He held her left 
hand at cheek level, and with his other hand, brushed the curls from the right side of her face. He 
did not smell of cigarettes; he hadn’t for weeks.

“Okay?” he whispered.

“Yes,” she said, barely audibly. The voice in her head had retreated. She looked in his eyes.

“I am so sorry, Hermione,” he whispered.

“I know.”

He brought his face in to hers and kissed her mouth.

Chapter End Notes

Computer issues this morning delayed posting--thank goodness for OneDrive; I had to 
default to a version from three days ago, so I was revising quickly this morning and no 
doubt have some problems here and there. PLEASE feel free to help me edit.
Chapter Five: The Return

Chapter Five

The Return

He woke to Karina rushing up the stairs calling his name.

“Mr. Snape? Are you well? Jasper Eustis from university is on the floo…OH! I’m so sorry, Mr. Snape…Healer Granger.”

Snape sat up in the small bed. Hermione was sleeping on the outside in her knickers and a vest of his that had risen up to expose half her belly in the night. He was in his pants only, but at least he was shielded.

“I’ll tell him you will floo him,” Karina called now, back at the bottom of the stairs after a quick retreat.

“Yes,” he said, but not loud enough for her to hear. The story would already be all over the staff room.

Hermione groaned sleepily and stretched and then snuggled back in beside him with her eyes still closed but a wide grin on her face.

“Good morning,” he whispered, and lay back down beside her.

She craned over and kissed his mouth, smiled, and immediately fell back asleep.

It must be after eight, probably closer to nine judging by the light streaming in from the little window near the warehouse ceiling. He had not slept like that in months.

He had healed her thumb the evening before, and he had intended to go back down to the lab and finish the potion, and letting the experience be a brick in the foundation he was trying to build, but then he had to kiss her; it was beyond rationality just then. He had put his mouth on hers, and she had not recoiled. She kissed him back and had put her arms around his shoulders and brought him in so close there wasn’t space between them.

Then she had pulled off his robe and started unbuttoning his shirt, and he had returned to rational thought and figured she was randy, and he was there, and he would not turn it down, but then he saw tears in her eyes.

“Hermione, I’m sorry. We don’t have to…” He was brushing the tears off her face with his thumbs.

“You don’t want…” she looked rejected again.

“NO! I mean, yes, I do want, very much.”

He held her and kissed her and then started to undress her, slowly. She wore a navy dress under her robe. It fit perfectly and showed her curves that he wanted to ravish. He took the zip down slowly and let the dress fall to the floor.
“I didn’t think anyone would see these,” she said, apologizing for her underwear.

“Gorgeous,” he whispered in her ear as he unhooked her bra and took it off. She had lost some weight, and he felt guilty about that on top of everything. He vowed internally to cook every night if she allowed him back. He had missed it so much.

He grasped her firmly around her back and brought her close to him feeling her breasts against him again, perfectly at the bottom of his rib-cage. He groaned, trying not to become overwhelmed by emotion. He decided he couldn’t wait another minute to spread her out on the bed and taste her again, so he walked her backward and laid her down gently and peeled her knickers off.

“Yes,” she whispered and spread her knees in anticipation, which made him smile more broadly than he had in many weeks.

“My favorite,” he said before diving in, clutching her thighs and letting his mouth roam the familiar path. He reached up and grasped her nipple and rolled it firmly in his fingers to the same cadence of his tongue. Everything was as he remembered it and he shifted back and forth with his tongue between her clitoris and cunt, worshiping her as she writhed beneath his mouth.

“Right there. Make me come, Severus. It has been so long. Make me come so hard. Can you feel how much I want you? Make me come and then fuck me!”

His cock was straining against his trousers painfully already, and with that pronouncement, he could feel it start to leak.

“Fuck, yes,” he whispered and impaled her with two fingers while he swirled his tongue against her clit.

That was all it took. She wailed his name and clamped his head between her thighs as she came for what seemed like minutes. She released his head, and he wasted no time freeing himself from his trousers and pants. He did not fully undress, he just shoved them down and crawled up the bed in about two motions and hovered above her.

“Okay?” he gasped.

“Yes! Please!”

He thrust forward and let out a long moan, louder than he had been in bed, probably ever. She immediately wrapped her legs around him, bringing him as close as he could be and still have room to move within her. He licked his fingers and brought his hand down so he could use the rhythm and counter in two ways, but she flinched, still too sensitive from her orgasm. He slowed down, willing himself to be patient until she was ready again. Soon, she was thrusting against him, and he put his fingers back and began to fuck her again. All of this had left him on the edge, and he was feeling a buildup like he had not in a very long time. He worked her clit with a dedicated purpose until she started moaning and rambling incoherently, and then he let it all out, pounding into her as she came and finding his own release as well with a roar and then the most intense orgasm of his life.

He was panting as he came down and collapsed beside her on the narrow bed. He thought she was, too, until he looked over and realized she was sobbing, very quietly hitching her shoulders up and down. “Hermione,” he said with anguish.

“I can’t… I can’t do this again, Severus. If this is only tonight, you must tell me now before…”

“No,” he said desperately and he enveloped her with his arms. “No. I want to come home. I don’t
want to leave again.”

“Home? It’s late for that.” She was still crying but the sobs were starting to wane.

“Where you are. And Crooks. Home.”

She swatted his shoulder and pushed him away from her and almost off the bed. “Crooks?” But she was laughing.

“I have missed that wretch.”

“I don’t think it’s mutual.” She pulled him back over, though, and kissed him on the mouth. “You want to be back?”

“More than anything.”

“Hmmm.” She sat up and started looking for her knickers in the bed clothes. He pulled up his own, now in a crumpled mess by his ankles and hopped out of bed to retrieved hers from where he had dropped them at the foot and handed them to her. She pulled them on while still sitting on the bed and then crawled over him, finding his old vest in the trunk that he used as a bureau. She held it up to ask permission. He nodded and she put it on over her head. “We left the potion ingredients,” she said.

“Do you want to brew it tonight?”

“No, but we shouldn’t leave them out. And speaking of Crooks…” She fumbled with her robe and pulled out her mobile. She typed a rapid clip. “Texting my downstairs neighbor to feed him. She looks after him when I work nights.”

“You are staying here tonight?” He was dreadfully hopeful.

“Oh, yes, I have much to say.” She whipped her hair around and started down the stairs. He couldn’t even dread the coming storm, he was so light-hearted.

He put on his pants and a t-shirt and bounded downstairs behind her. They stowed their work for the next day and then walked back to the staff room to scrounge up a dinner. After minor deliberation, they sat at the round table with tinned tuna on toast and plenty of tea: mugs and a full pot in addition. Hermione found a box of biscuits in the back of the cupboard, and he slightly guiltily enjoyed the view of her arse as she stretched to the recesses of the shelf to retrieve it.

They ate in blessed silence for ten minutes or so, and then she sighed deeply. “I meant what I said. I can’t endure this again. If you are not sure you want to be with me, I cannot do it, Severus. I know it’s a lot of pressure…”

“I am. Sure.”

“Because I feel like…I’m not sure I am enough for you. I can’t compete with your Great Love. I can’t compete with her. I don’t look that good at twenty-five; I am sure not going to look like that in my forties…”

“You are beautiful.”

“Not like that.”

“You are more beautiful to me than…and it was not about the way anyone looked… I can’t give a
pat answer to this, except to say it was an unforgivable mistake.”

“Just, please explain it to me. I need to understand it.”

He doubted it was possible to put it in to words sufficiently. “I am selling her my house.”

Hermione’s eyes widened immediately and she put down her biscuit. “Really?” she said, sounding more intrigued than hopeful.

“Yes, we’ve already signed the papers. I will take you there and let you see the back of it where the privy was. I will try to explain what it was like… That she didn’t care about that… when we were young, that summer, that she cared about me, despite it all, it’s not something I can express except to say it became everything for me. Everything that was good about my life—aside from school and marks and that, but that was never difficult—people were always the hardest part of my life, and she didn’t seem to see that. She walked up those stairs like it was any other place. She did not act shocked that we had to piss outside. She was the one bit of loveliness—the only one I had until you were deluded enough…”

“Severus!” she said sharply.

“It’s true…”

“It is NOT. I was never deluded. I ended it with Ronald—I never told you because I was always terrified that it would put you off—I ended it with him because I enjoyed spending time with you exponentially more than him!”

He took her hand and kissed it. “Thank you. But before that night, memories of her and my own wild thoughts were the only pleasant parts of any day.”

“Wild thoughts?”

“Whole stories of us, of Lily and me, I created. Living all over the world with her. Being far away from the hell. She was always there. I couldn’t have slept, let alone cast a Patronus without the ridiculous stories.”

“I do it, too.” She said it quietly but she looked right at him. “In my head, my parents are fully restored and I’m… I’m married to you,” she looked down; she looked ashamed. “Married to you and in our house, and my parents are still in Australia because it is so amazing down there, and they are perfectly happy, Severus, you have no idea, and that has been my thoughts every night since Saladin. I have loved you since that night. I know, I know, you don’t have to say it…”

“I love you, too. I love you more than…”

“I cannot believe that, Severus. How could I believe that when…”

“I know I have been such a bastard, and I am so sorry. I love you.” She scoffed again. “Let me finish. I love you more than I have ever loved anyone. That’s all I can say about it. I made a mistake I will not try to justify. I do not deserve your forgiveness. I do not deserve to have you, but if I have the chance, I will love you for the rest of my life and be thankful every day that you could forgive me.”

Suddenly she was in his lap with her arms around his neck. “Of course I forgive you, you infuriating man. How could I not?”

And then he was sobbing like a deranged child into her chest, trying to get control of himself.
again. He had sobbed like that one other time in his life, he realized. He had planted himself in front of the entrance of Gryffindor Tower, refusing to move until Evans would come down and talk to him, would listen to his apology, would forgive him. Her friend came down eventually and told him not to bother and not to come around ever again. He had walked stiff-backed to the dungeon and to his dormitory bathroom. It was late at night and no one was in there. Still, he chose the farthest stall and cast a silencing charm before he turned the water on as high as it would go, sank to the floor fully clothed, and sobbed.

She was rocking him in a way he was certain no one had ever done before. She had brought his face from her chest with her hands and was kissing his tears on both cheeks. He captured her mouth with his and grasped her firmly around him. He stood up with her still on his lap, and she wrapped her legs firmly around his waist as he walked them back upstairs, laid her gently on the bed, and made love to her. They were slow at first. He was balanced on his elbows above her and he grasped her hand in his, and then brushed her curls from her face. They kissed as he moved in and out languidly. She was caressing his back with her fingertips. When he would hit the hilt of her, her breasts would bounce up to his chest, and that was beginning to propel him faster. He put his fingers in her mouth to suck and then reached down to swirl them around her clitoris. Her reaction was immediate; those caressing fingers moved down to grab his arse to push him in deeper.

He took her whole right breast into his mouth, pressing the nipple with his tongue and then sucking hard and was rewarded with her crying out and beginning to writhe beneath him. She clinched her inner walls around his cock, and he almost came right then, but he wanted to wait for her and let her trip him over the edge. He sucked again and bore down on her clit as he thrust hard, and that was enough. He felt her go, and he was right behind. Just before he released himself into her, he moved his mouth to hers and kissed her as he came. She had her leg wrapped around him, holding him as close to her as possible. He rode out the orgasm kissing her in time and then continued as he came down.

“I love you, Hermione,” he whispered.

The room was dark except for a sliver of moonlight from the tiny window above, but he could see her smile. She didn’t respond in words but brought him in close again and kissed him on the side of the face.

Even in the wake of that passion, she could not be expected to sleep without her knickers. She had climbed out from under him and put them on, along with his vest. Providentially, he did also, or the wake-up call from Karina would have been that much more embarrassing. He was already cringing at the dinner refuse they had left in the staff room.

She slept through it all; he wondered how much good sleep she’d had lately; his had been abysmal.

“Heard you, Love, wake up,” he whispered.

She groaned and clinched her eyes shut, burying herself back into the blankets and then peeked out at him with one eye.

“Did you hear Karina?”

She shook her head.

“It’s late.”

She nodded and stretched.
“I am getting in the shower…”

“I’m behind you,” she said groggily.

And she was, he turned as she entered behind the curtain and greeted him by snogging him senseless.

“Stop, stop, I don’t have time, and if you continue, I won’t be able to stop.”

“I know. I don’t want to get my hair wet anyway,” she said, and as soon as she turned to grab the soap, he smacked her arse playfully.

“Ooooh, Professor, I don’t believe we have that kind of time,” she smirked at him.

It was hard to shave and clean his teeth because of the ridiculous grin that had taken over his face. “Stop that!” he told his reflection, but it was in vain. She beat him downstairs and handed him a cup of coffee as he entered his station.

They worked out the day, trying not to laugh. One would smile and touch the other, and then they would both be distracted. They re-brewed the potion, making modifications and arranged for the test group to return on Monday.

They spent the weekend moving him into her flat. It was even smaller than the first one but lovelier with larger windows and cleaner lines. She had made an outdoors space by expanding the landing at the top of the stairs. He worked to make it cozier, more like the one they’d had. She shelved their favorite books, and minimized the others so they would all fit.

He carefully avoided making any comments about the size until he lost his head in very early September, four months after their reunion, when he expressed regrets about not having such a fantastic laundry area as they did at the house. She was apparently lying in wait and pounced with ferocity. He took it all; he deserved it. He heard about painting and packing and his records and books and the beautiful kitchen and garden, and yes, those laundry machines. When she paused to shake her head again, he dared respond.

“We could start looking again.”

“Severus Snape, I will buy a house with you when we are married for twenty years with five children and not one day before. You will have to endure the proximity! I will not even think…”

“Is that what you want?”

“Pardon?”

“You want to get married and have five children?”

“NO! Why would you say that?”

“You said…”

“HYPERBOLE, Professor Snape! Have you heard of it?”

“You don’t want to get married?” He said it quietly. If the answer was no, he could live with it. He didn’t want to pin hopes on this.
She looked at him to determine if he were taking the piss. “I might marry you. Maybe. If you were willing to do it in Australia. I could be persuaded.”

“Hmmmm. And children?”

“Not five. Not four. One. Maybe two.”

“That would require a house.”

Crooks picked that moment to saunter across the room and give him a withering look that made all others he had issued at Snape look loving.

“Do you really want to marry me, or are you simply looking out for your future real estate holdings?” she said without the hint of a smile.

“Surely it could be both?” he said as deadpanned as he could.

“Too soon.” She flounced away from him, but he caught her and held her to himself. She put up the allusion of a struggle and then settled in against his chest. “What are you cooking for dinner?”

“I bought a fish and a bottle of pinot grigio…”

“That will do.” She detached herself and followed Crooks into the kitchen to fetch his dinner, and Snape looked for a record to put on.

“So much Bob Dylan. When did that happen?” he called to her.

“Angsty music for angsty days. Your Elvis Costello I never returned to you got quite a bit of play as well.”

“Which one should I play, which Dylan?”

“Blood on the Tracks is great.”

He took it out of its jacket and on to the turntable. The guitar started wailing immediately. He walked in the kitchen to cook. There had been a small, fresh sea bass at the market and he had bought tiny potatoes and summer squash, a whole branch of thyme, and two lemons. He had a dark chocolate tart hidden in the refrigerator for afters.

“Really?” he asked in an incredulous tone regarding the music as he began to prepare the fish.

“You don’t like Bob Dylan?”

“I like what little I know of him. I am surprised YOU like him.”

“Dark night of the soul music, Severus.” She softened the blow by walking right behind him as he cleaned the fish with his wand. She wrapped her arms around his waist and stood on her toes so that she could kiss the side of his face.

“I have had my share, but without Dylan. What was I thinking?”

“No idea.” She pulled the chilled bottle of wine and opened it showily with her wand. She poured into two glasses she had given him for Christmas that first year. Those had been packed into one of the many cartons she shipped to the warehouse this time last year. He had avoided most of them but had opened the one containing the wine glasses in search of a can opener. He had pulled them out and then wrapped them immediately back, unable to look at them.
The oven was very hot, and put the seasoned fish in. The potatoes were boiling while he sliced the squash thin and then put it in a hot pan with olive oil, garlic and herbs.

“Are you going to mash those?” she indicated at the potatoes from her place across the kitchen, where she leaned against the counter, sipping her wine.

“Let me cook this dinner, Witch!”

She closed her eyes and smiled. They’d had a glorious summer, growing plants in the shared garden, escaping to the shore when possible, reading for hours in bed. Much of what they had was still there, but he was trying to repair the damage he had inflicted brick by brick. He wasn’t sure if he could ever make up for the degree to which he had hurt her. It was a miracle she had accepted him back. She had become his primary focus, something he realized he should have done years ago.

Her squib project had brought mixed results. She had been able to reset the magical cores of slightly more than half the group, but all of those had low magical output. They were grateful, and the rest continued the potions protocol hoping to build up their stores enough to qualify for the next round.

She was back full-time at St. Mungo’s, and he missed her at the warehouse. She was at a crossroads in her career, and he had blatantly suggested that she come to work full time in research at SNAPE, but she was primarily a healer and had missed it during the months at the warehouse. Her schedule was back; night shifts had never seemed so painful.

She was at the start of a week off, though, and he had taken the week as well. It was going rather perfectly, he thought as he mashed the potatoes, pulled the fish out and put their dinners on plates.

She had lit some unscented candles for the tables and had a bunch of lilacs spilling out of a jar beside them. They toasted their meal and tucked in, too hungry to chat for the first bit, then sitting back in their chairs with the last of the bottle and gorgeous tart telling recent work stories. He caught her up on the SNAPE personnel drama that was making it tempting to ban the staff from dating each other.

“That is slightly hypocritical, don’t you think?” she laughed.

“It certainly would not apply to the owners.”

“I would advise against it anyway.”

“Duly noted.”

She had never been lovelier than she was just then, through the candle light, with her brown curls around her face. She was wearing tight jeans and a floral patterned sleeveless top, and he was moments from carrying her to bed. He wasn’t quite ready to move yet, though. He reached out for her hand and pulled her to him so she fell onto his lap. She took him in her arms and they swayed to sounds from the record player.

And if I pass this way again, you can rest assured
I'll always do my best for her, on that I give my word
In a world of steel-eyed death, and men who are fighting to be warm
Come in, she said
I'll give ya shelter from the storm
At that moment, Lily was walking through the streets of downtown Memphis, Tennessee. She had taken a Portkey to a wizarding tavern, and was on her way to meet a group of Mormon missionaries she had met hours before online. She saw the group of young people down the block. There was a large van with an attached trailer they were loading with cases of bottled water. She broke into a jog to catch up to them.

“Lily Potter, I’m the one…”

A young man put down his case of water and extended his hand. “Mrs. Potter, yes. I can’t believe you were able to arrive so fast from London.”

“I needed to be here,” she said trying to be friendly while evading him. She picked up a case from the stack and handed it to the young man who was standing at the end of the trailer.

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

She hadn’t been Ma’am ed since her last shift at Marley’s. She smiled at him. “Thank you for letting me ride along.”

“Oh, sure. Cade said you have friends down there?”

“Family, really. Two of them are police officers and haven’t been home since the storm hit. I’m meeting the other two, the spouses, in Baton Rouge where they were exiled.” She smiled.

“Y’all gonna ambush in team support?”

“Exactly.”

“Us, too.”

They finished loading the trailer and piled in the van. There were ten young men and Lily. They had agreed to stop in Baton Rouge on the way. She had found them through the Google search, “I need to get to New Orleans today,” and found a discussion on the church’s website.

She had last spoken to Kendrah on Friday over the phone. She had been holding out hope that the storm would bypass them, but Marcus had driven Mama to Bosier City to stay with Kendrah’s brother and family, and they had done the best to secure her house. Marcus and Patty had agreed to stay with Marcus’s family in Baton Rouge as well, closer, though, so they could come back as quickly as possible.

She was texting back and forth with Patty. Kendrah and Kevin were urging them to stay away, but they hadn’t had any sleep or a decent meal in forty-eight hours, and Patty and Marcus were finished taking no for an answer.

The boys—men she supposed, but they seemed years younger than Harry, listened to inoffensive pop music and spent their time strategizing what they would do when they arrived. They were staying at a Latter-day Saints church in Metairie, and at least there, Lily could be helpful with directions to the nearest Wal-Mart, Target, and of course Marley’s.

After a while, she put in headphones and turned to face the window to immerse herself in her own thoughts for the drive. She could only stay two weeks although she planned to come back if they needed her. Her grandmother duties weighed on her, and she hated to miss a moment. James was not walking yet, but he was close. Harry had taken his first steps three weeks before they had been separated.
She had bought the house on Spinner’s End and had immediately began to convert Sev’s parents’ room into one for James to play in and even sleep over occasionally. She still slept in the attic room, now hers with her own music and books. Harry and Sirius had come over a few Saturdays to help her convert the second-floor bedroom, but she had done most of the work herself. They had expanded the window, so it was light and looked out on the streets. Young people had moved into the converted flats, and there was always activity outside with runners and cyclists and people returning from work in the city.

She had transfigured a rug to cover the whole floor so James could play comfortably and found toys that reminded her of her own childhood and Harry’s first year. She invited Sirius and the various Weasleys and of course Harry, Ginny, and James to the house throughout the summer. She started reaching out to her Godric’s Hollow friends, and took Harry and his family there to meet them.

She had been consulting with a professor at the wizarding university about using a computer to write arithmancy lines, and they had collaborated on a program that she was testing at work under the direction of her boss’s boss. This had made her noticeably less popular at the office, but she didn’t spend much time there anyway. It wasn’t wired for Muggle technology, so Lily did most of her work at home.

She had used the new program all summer with the Emma Owen case, in which the step-brother had emerged as the primary suspect, and on other cases Kendrah and Kevin sent her. She and Kendrah began to tentatively discuss plans for a private investigation business to pursue on the side and perhaps full-time when Kevin retired in a few years. Lily could work from Cokeworth.

They pulled into the Wal-Mart parking lot in South Baton Rouge six hours after they had left Memphis. Lily saw Marcus first, towering over the truck and then Patty next to him as they drove up in the van.

“There they are,” she told Benny, the driver. “Right there by the white Explorer.” She tried to keep her emotions in check as Benny pulled up beside them. One of the boys popped the door of the van and let Lily out. She bounded down the step and into a three-way embrace. None of them could speak at first as every sort of emotion poured out: relief, gratitude, frustration, fear, grief. None of it needed to be spoken.

They finally broke apart, and Marcus began to express doubt that they would be able to make it in to downtown New Orleans where Kendrah and Kevin were working.

“Would you like to follow us into the city? We’re pretty good at talking our way in to places, and we have a trailer full of supplies,” the boys had kept a respectful distance during the reunion but had started to gather around them.

Lily noticed that the Explored was packed with food, water, and all manner of supplies as well.

“What if we became honorary Mormons?” Marcus asked.

“Of course,” Benny laughed.

Lily rode with Marcus and Patty behind the van into the city, which looked started looking like a war zone about ten miles out. They made it through the first check-point after Patty showed Kevin’s NOPD credentials. The precinct parking permit helped as well.

“Metairie is fine; hardly any water. If I must, I am going to physically put them in the back of the truck and take them home for twelve hours,” Patty said through gritted teeth as they approached
another check-point.

“I will help you,” Marcus said.

There were two coolers of fried chicken, bologna sandwiches, and fruit in the back and another of bottled ice tea and water. They considered passing some out to the crew, but Marcus knew one of the officers, so they were waved through. Once they made it downtown, it was more of a free for-all.

“Kevin’s last text said they were close to the park,” Patty said as she turned on to a deserted street in the Central City area. The streets were not flooded, but it was clear they recently had been.

“Turn right on MLK,” Marcus said.

They made the turn and immediately saw more people and blocks of barricades. Lily started scanning the crowd and her eyes finally lit on an image.

She was wearing a patrolman’s uniform. Her hair was pulled back, but a lot was escaping the hair tie and sticking up from her head. She was in an intense conversation with a man who seemed determined to get by her and into the blocked street.

“There’s Kendrah,” Lily gasped at the same time Marcus said, “Hey!” and Patty said, “There they are!”

Patty parked the Explorer and they leaped out. Kendrah saw Marcus first and called out, “I TOLD y’all NOT to come!” in an exhausted, exasperated voice. But then she saw Lily, who ran into her arms. She stopped talking and just let her friend hold her.

Patty and Marcus immediately unloaded the food and water. They had packed a folding table that they set up and began passing out food supplies. Patty had formula and diapers and small packages of animal crackers and hundreds of bottles of water. The LDS boys followed suit and set up their own mobile relief station, taking the pressure off the police officers at least for a few moments. Kevin’s uniform was soaked, and he took a minute to wipe off his brow and plaster his hair back on his head. Lily stood with Kendrah in her arms, tears flowing down both faces.

'Twas in another lifetime, one of toil and blood
When blackness was a virtue the road was full of mud
I came in from the wilderness, a creature void of form
Come in, she said
I'll give ya shelter from the storm

Marriage and I have been surprised and thrilled with the response the story has received in comments. Thank you sincerely, all of you.

This project began last winter in the comment section of another work, and continued in hundreds of emails between Marriage and me. The original idea she presented to me included:
- James and Lily being replaced by Aurors at the last minute and escaping their fate
- James dying while they were hiding
- Lily being away for years after the war; not reentering the picture until Harry is married and starting a family with Ginny
- Meanwhile, Severus and Hermione are in a serious relationship; married or engaged (maybe with kids)
- Lily returning with a very limited understanding of what has transpired during the war
- Lily clinging to Severus because he is the most familiar aspect of this world to her; they had been in a sexual relationship as teenagers
- Severus is unfaithful to Hermione with Lily
- Sirius lives
- Lily having an uncomfortable relationship with Harry
- Smoking as a symbol
- Hermione’s capacity to forgive him leads to…
- HEA for Severus and Hermione—not a half-hearted reunion, but real reconciliation and a stronger relationship at the end

Marriage was unfailing supportive as I worked through the elements and gave me complete freedom to craft the story (you want to create a whole world of Muggle friends for Lily—go for it!) while keeping me on track with the major themes. There were times that it was tempting to let Severus off the hook by making Hermione more flawed or making Severus and Hermione’s reunion more ambiguous, but Marriage gently brought me back to why the original elements were vital.

I intended to write the Lily/Harry relationship faithful to the prompt, but I couldn’t make it work, so I shifted that over to Ginny. Sirius originally had a greater role, but the drama was so immense on its own. He shifted into an important background player. (thepurplewomat’s fantastic story Surprise was on the right track with the original idea.)

The story ends with Lily in the arms of her friend. I hope everyone is lucky enough to have a Kendrah/Marriage1988 in your life.

Cel/CT <3

Works inspired by this one: **Living Well is the Best Revenge** by LionsAndTigers

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!