

At the Beach

by *chivalric*

Ten years after the war, a man takes a stroll along the beach and meets someone from his past.

The Winegrower

Chapter 1 of 13

Ten years after the war, a man takes a stroll along the beach and meets someone from his past.

A/N: This story is for notsosaintly. Thank you for everything!

Dreamy_Dragon has done the main work on this story *hugs you tightly*

Additionally, I had help from Sampdoria, CharmedForce, Arabella Bloodgood, and sunny33. That only proves that betaing for me is not an easy job. Thank you, ladies!



The Winegrower

Last night, he had dreamed of the Dark Lord and had woken up screaming for the first time in over eight years.

Admittedly, it had been an awful dream full of shadows and fear, full of pain and blood. Luckily, he dreamed this particular dream rarely nowadays. Usually, he slept peacefully; maybe that was the reason that it had been an even scarier experience.

Now, towards the end of the night, he sat on the bedside, tired and tense, and decided that it was time for a break. Quite obviously, he had neglected his needs for too long, had worked too hard. By now, after years on this island, he knew that it never was a good idea to do so.

He needed a holiday. A thorough one, not just a few days away from his vineyard. At least two weeks at the beach. The last time he had been there was... Yes. Nearly a year ago. And as it was autumn, work was easy. He could afford to leave the vines to his men.

Right then. First thing in the morning, he would ask Maria to look after his house. Pedro, her husband, was more than capable of taking care of his precious plants. He could leave for a while, and he would come back refreshed.

Packing didn't take him long. Most of the things he needed were in his hut down at the beach, and although he didn't go there regularly, he always made sure that his second house was in good shape and contained clothes, books, and the basics for a lazy weekend. He could buy everything else he needed at the market. Therefore, he took only the book he was currently reading, a few personal items, and his sunglasses. A few hours, and he would be there the bus would take him to the beach as surely as an Apparition spell, but with less risk of exposure.

His house at the beach was small, but beautiful, and as always he thought, *I should come here more often*, before he went into the bedroom and threw open the shutters towards the ocean. A soft breeze blew in and took away the stale smell that indicated no one had lived here for a while. And after he had lit a candle and placed it under a bowl of scented water, a pleasant fragrance of orange flowers wafted through the two rooms on the lower floor.

Dropping his travelling bag on the bed, he went into the small kitchen and opened the fridge. It was empty, of course, apart from a few bottles of beer and some ice cubes. He'd have to go shopping, but that could wait until after he'd had a swim. In the mountains, where he worked on the fields all day long and made sure the vines got enough water, there was no time for leisure, and there was no ocean, either.

He pulled off his shirt, dropped his shorts, and even took off his sunglasses. Naked he stepped onto the beach, knowing that he'd be alone on his private ground. And even if someone had seen him, it wouldn't have bothered him he looked just like the next man and here, on this island, no one considered nudity special or weird.

The water embraced his body, and for a while he just floated on the waves, every now and then tasting salt on his lips from the spray. After he felt all his muscles relax, he turned and swam in a steady, long-practised rhythm. He loved swimming; he just didn't have time to do it more often.

He swam two miles or more, straight out towards the horizon and with every intention of going on until nightfall. When the sun settled, touching the edge of the ocean, he turned and went back, seeing the beach and his house from the distant and thinking, *I love this life*.

At the market, the women recognised him and greeted him with big smiles, showing equally big gaps in their gums. Childbirth and a hard life had cost them their beauty, but they possessed pride and humour instead and knew that he, the stranger, was one of them, despite the fact that he hadn't been born amongst them.

He bought bread and fruits, little scallops and big king prawns. He bought cocoa beans and milk, and at the end, right before he went home, he bought a bottle of wine. He usually didn't drink, but tonight he felt he could do with a little intoxication, and as he craved a different taste to his own wine, this one would do quite nicely. He would cook, eat, and then sit on the beach and watch the moon rise, thinking of home, which now was high up in the mountains of this island.

The next morning, instead of getting up before sunrise, he slept in. No nightmares had bothered him, and he only woke because he had to go for a piss and because he heard the neighbour come in, presumably leaving fresh rolls on the kitchen table. Chino could come and go as he liked he looked after the house when its owner was up in the hills and he had obviously decided that breakfast would come in handy for a man who had just arrived. The cocoa beans were freshly ground; golden butter accompanied the rolls and fig jam, smelling sweet and tempting.

The deeply tanned, lean, hard-muscled man sat down on his veranda and looked across the ocean, drank his cocoa-laced milk and mused about the past, something he didn't do often. The past, in his opinion, was not worth remembering. It had been dark and cruel, his personal past, and it had nearly cost him his life. Only here, at the beach, he dared to think back, to remember names and faces and events. Occasionally, he wondered if he could have done anything differently, if he could have saved more lives, but he always came to the inevitable conclusion that he had been nothing more than a figure on the chessboard, moved about cruelly and mercilessly by his two masters.

It had taken him years to think back without trembling. Now, sitting on his veranda with his naked feet in the warm sand, he felt not only safe, but also content.

Until about four days later. By then, he had grown a stubble as he had stopped shaving, and he had slept enough and read enough for now. Sand was on his skin and in his very short, still entirely black hair it didn't bother him. As he was on holiday, he didn't wear anything but shorts and sunglasses when outside the house and swam a daily distance that would have brought him round the island by now.

Four days after his arrival, though, he was craving company.

Not Chino. Not Chino's wife, who was nice but as small as a child and wrinkled like a walnut. Not the market women, who all had husbands who wouldn't hesitate to break his skull for messing with them.

No. He wanted someone new, someone who didn't live on the island, someone who didn't know him and wouldn't come back.

A tourist. Once a year, he took a break, and once a year, he chose from the women who came to the island for their holiday. He wanted someone for a few nights, just someone for a little leisurely fun.

So he searched for his shirt and his sunglasses and set off for a walk along the beach to find the little hotel a short mile or two away. Hopefully, there would be a lonely lady who didn't mind his attention, his looks, his accent, or the fact that he was neither a native nor a tourist himself.

The walk was as pleasant as the past few days had been. It was late in the year, and there would be fewer guests at the hotel a good thing because too much choice often caused him to make no choice at all.

During high season, he wouldn't have done this anyway. There was too much competition from the young men who looked for elderly ladies with hungry eyes and a huge purse. Against those youths, a man in the height of his years like him didn't stand a chance.

He didn't look for money; he wanted nothing but pleasure. He looked for a younger woman, but still close to his own age, between thirty-five and forty. Presumably single, but that was not absolutely necessary as long as she matched his preferences. He liked his women small and nicely rounded, he liked them with hair down their backs, and he liked them a little cheeky. Dark-haired, ideally, or a redhead maybe.

Yes. A redhead would certainly do for this year.

Arriving at the small hotel beach, he perceived that there weren't many women around and only two whose looks he liked. One wasn't alone, though, surrounded by a bunch of friends. Although she looked nice and her hair was really long, he decided quickly that it would be too much effort to get through to her.

The other one... Hmm, yes, she was definitely worth a second look. Her hair was chestnut brown, long and curly, and her breasts looked nice and ripe and full in her white bikini top.

He took a step and then another when he saw movement in the corner of his eye: a child, playing in the sand. A woman sat close by, wearing dark sunglasses, a long-sleeved blouse, and long trousers. Not smiling, not laughing, no friends around and no husband, either. Chin length, blond hair. *This is her first day here*, he thought involuntarily and turned away again, wanting to get a bit closer to his original catch.

Only that he couldn't. This woman young, certainly not yet thirty years old attracted his interest. She seemed lonely; the way she wrapped her arms round her thin shoulders, the gentle rocking of her fragile body as if she were cold... It was obvious. She was unhappy.

He never went after blondes. And never after women that young she must be twenty years or more his minor, he guessed. Additionally, she was too thin, nothing but bones, and hadn't he a preference for well-rounded women?

Definitely too young, and her hair was too short, as well. Although she was sitting, she seemed too tall for his liking.

The woman with the curly brown hair got up and he saw that she was exactly what he wanted. Two heads smaller than him, curves in abundance, and now she threw him a curious look. It would be easy to take her into his bed; he knew it the instant she winked at him and shook her bottom on the way to the water.

The other one, the blond one... What was it that attracted his eye? There was something that drew him towards her. Her eyes, maybe, hidden behind the sunglasses? A riddle always piqued his interest, and to be honest, he wanted a challenge more than he wanted an easy shag.

Quickly, born out of instinct, he made a decision: he, the predator, knew that she would be his prey, not the one in the white bikini who now flirted with Raoul, the melon seller.

"Rose! Please don't fall into the water, dear!" the blond woman called.

She hadn't seen him yet, and her concentration was on the little girl anyway. *Perfect*, he thought. *She has a child two, if the boy is hers as well and she is most definitely married. Unhappily married, I would bet my life on it.*

Which certainly would make this a challenge for him. Unhappily married or not, as her children were with her, she would hesitate in surrendering to him.

He took a step to get a better look. She was the only one who was fully dressed; all other women were in bikinis. It nearly seemed as if she wanted to hide her form, her long legs, and her slender arms. To no success: the wind was blowing and pressed the fabric of her clothes against her body. He could see her shape almost as clearly as if she had been naked.

He was at arm's length now and could observe her more closely. Her face was heart-shaped, her hands long and pale, her mouth adorable. Wishing he could see her eyes, he wondered if they were blue or grey.

She seemed oblivious to her surroundings; another hint that she was not looking for an adventure like so many women who came here. The little girl was around five years old; this meant she had married early, becoming pregnant not too soon after she had finished school. He hoped it meant that if she was really in a marriage she didn't enjoy, it wouldn't be too hard to catch her attention.

Usually, he didn't bother to muse about his prey. He saw, chased, and took what he wanted, making the encounter pleasurable for both of them and was happy when the woman of his choice left again after the week or two he could spare.

But she... She looked as if she was not only lonely and unhappy, but desperately trying to figure out where her life had gone wrong, and he wondered why it bothered him to see her like that.

The little girl, Rose, jumped up and down near the water, smiling broadly, and close to falling in every second. She was the older one; her brother was about three years old. Yes, they both belonged to her. The boy had run towards his mother, and she wiped sand off the little one's mouth and gave him a biscuit.

The children were having fun. She wasn't. If he just came up and approached her, he would have lost this game before it had really begun. Over the years, he had learned a lot about women, and he had an idea how to get closer to her. The way into the heart of a lonely, hardened woman was nearly always through her children.

So he turned and went up to the kiosk, bought some sun lotion and went back to the beach, crossed the sand in lazy, long strides so she could see him, watch him, if she liked.

She was startled when his shadow fell on her. Confused and a little angry, she looked up.

"Hola," he said and nodded at her in a friendly way, gesturing towards the little girl. Who wasn't wearing a hat and whose nose was pink already. Honestly, those tourists never learned. "Su hija agarrara una quemadura del sol." Talking Spanish was easier for him after nearly a decade on the island; plus, it usually broke the ice.

Additionally and to explain himself, he held out the tube with the strong sun blocker.

She frowned. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice pleasantly deep and unmistakably tired. "I only speak English, so..."

"Ah." Gracefully, he went down on one knee. "Sorry. Your daughter will get a sunburn in less than half an hour if you don't put sun lotion on her. Your boy as well, of course. And you."

There it was, the indignation he had expected. "I did use lotion!" she said coolly. "Thank you very much."

"You are a tourist," he stated, not at all offended. "You have quite possibly bought sun lotion back home. It isn't strong enough for this climate and not properly waterproof. Use the lotion the natives use. It works better, and your children won't have to suffer."

Getting up in a swift move, he nodded a friendly good-bye and walked away without looking back, hoping with all his might that she would take the bait.

A/N: I do not want to imply that everyone who marries young and has children ends up unhappy. I say it happens often, and it certainly happened here. No offence meant to any of my readers.

I used the following prompt:

50. I want... Vacation!Snake! Put him on holiday -- on a beach, on Antarctica, on a plane (or two, or three)! It can be gen, het, or slash, but I would love to see what would happen if he met someone from his past...

Tessa

Chapter 2 of 13

Ten years after the war, a man takes a stroll along the beach and meets someone from his past.

Tessa

He had only gone a few steps when he heard what he had hoped to hear: She jumped up and followed him. He turned with a raised eyebrow.

Her face was flushed red. In her hand she held the tube with sun lotion. "I apologise," she said. "Really. I was rude, and you were friendly, and... sorry."

He flashed her a smile. "I assume you have had bad experiences with strangers?" Then, as if it was an afterthought, he offered her his hand. "I'm Carlos. I live in a hut a mile or two down the beach, and I didn't mean to offend you."

Behind her, he could see the boy and the girl getting closer to the water. There were shells there and stones, and sometimes, one could see fish. The children clearly hadn't been at the seaside before; they were too curious, and their mother, for the moment, didn't keep an eye on them. Possibly, she assumed her children were too afraid of the water to get close. She stood with her back to them; he could see both children clearly. Naturally, he watched their every step. So did Raoul's son, Pepe, and Carlos was glad this was the case. He didn't need an accident, not now. Besides, he liked children that small. Compared with teenagers, they were easy to handle.

"I'm Tessa," she said just then and took his hand. "No offence taken. It's only... The young men here are very... talkative, and all day I had the feeling they were approaching me. I thought you... I... sorry. Again."

The corner of his mouth twitched she sounded thoroughly earnest, not at all flirtatious or mocking like every other woman he so far had tried to lure into his bed would have sounded. "Apology accepted," he said warmly, then nodded towards the water. She followed his gaze, and her eyes widened in shock when she saw her daughter standing in the waves up to her knees. "Rose!" she exclaimed and wanted to run towards the little girl.

He held her back with a small gesture. "Wait," he said calmly. "Nothing will happen to her. See, the boy over there is having an eye on both your children. His name is Pepe, and this is how it works here everyone makes sure the little ones are safe. If she tries to get further into the water, he'll go after her."

She took a step, then halted. Rose was so clearly having fun in the water, obviously observing the little fish that scurried around her toes. "I didn't expect her to go into the ocean," Tessa murmured. "She's brave, always has been."

It was hard for her not to go to her child, he could see that, but she didn't go to get the child. Clearly calculating that she as well as Pepe could be with Rose in an instant if necessary, she relaxed.

He couldn't help but watch her, seeing her thoughts in the way she tipped her head and in the way she set her mouth. He assumed her eyes were narrowed the dark glasses covered her eyes as well as the expression on her face. He had to admire her for her cool reaction. She might be melancholic, she might look sad, but apparently, there was a logical thinking brain hidden in her head.

He liked strong-headed women. Always had, always would. They were interesting, challenging. Nothing was as boring as a woman who couldn't think on her own.

Perfect, he thought.

Splashing, her girl came back to the shore and she sighed with relief. With a big smile in her face, she ran towards her mother only to get distracted by a shell lying half covered in the sand.

"You should apply some lotion," he reminded her. "And you should teach them how to swim."

She snorted, obviously amused that a stranger told her what to do and how to treat her children. On the other hand, she didn't seem to mind his advice. "Of course I will put some lotion on them I forgot to get some at home and bought mine at the airport. It is out of date anyway. Rose, Hugo, please come here for a moment. But swimming? Aren't they too small?"

Now he was amused at her fast way of talking and the amount of information she packed in a few sentences. Shaking his head, he answered her last question. "Not at all too young. Your daughter will learn how to swim quickly, and your boy will at least be able to stay above the surface long enough for someone to come to his rescue. How long will you stay here?"

For the first time, she nearly smiled. Suddenly, it didn't matter that she was too tall and too thin and so very blond. "Three weeks," she answered. "It's the first holiday we are taking together. They were so curious about flying, but I didn't want to get on a plane before Hugo was three. The flight was tiresome; after all, the children didn't like it too much."

"They will have plenty of time to forget about it," Carlos said.

Again this half-smile. It was appealing, he had to admit. With a content nod, she mused, "It is so very beautiful here that it doesn't even bother me that I don't understand a single word anyone apart from you is saying. I wish I could..." She halted in mid-sentence, turning towards the little girl who came running towards her across the sand. Had the child waited for another moment, she might have said something else, but as it was, he was fine with the information he had got so far.

Getting introduced to Rose and Hugo by their mother, he was pleased by the curious look they gave him. They seemed neither shy nor were they annoying like so many other children he had known. "I'm Carlos," he told them and sincerely shook their hands. Taking the tube out of Tessa's hand, he squeezed a bit of the sun lotion into his palm, dipped his index finger into the warm substance and added one drop to the boy's nose. Hugo giggled when he rubbed the lotion into his skin and didn't seem to mind that the lotion was applied to the rest of his face. Neck, shoulders and arms in a few moments, the child's soft skin was protected. No sunburn would harm the children or their mother he knew from personal experience how good the lotion was. After all, he had made it.

Meanwhile, Tessa had put some lotion on her daughter. With nothing but shorts on, they stormed back to the water, squeaking and laughing and oblivious to the fact that their mum seemed to feel slightly uneasy in the company of the stranger.

He could see it, though, or maybe sense it. Uneasy and at a loss what to say, what to do now. On top of that, she was nervous; to occupy her hands, she dug them deep into the sand, and he smiled.

"Why didn't your husband come along?" he asked and as expected, she flinched and blushed. Her hands stayed hidden in the sand.

"I'm..."

"I know you are married," he interrupted before she could tell him a lie. "You don't wear a ring, but your finger shows clearly that you usually do. Why did you take it off?"

Casually, she looked at her hands, held them both close to her eyes as if she hadn't seen them before. She had beautiful hands, strong with long, slender fingers. Her wrists were small, her nails short and clean apart from some sand grains. No calluses, no bruises, no dirt. The hands of a woman who didn't work hard physically. Only the frown and the tired look around her eyes indicated that she needed her holiday as much as he needed his.

Around the ring finger of her left hand ran a pale shadow. She traced it with one delicate nail. "My husband is at home. He couldn't take time off work, so to speak. Truth is, he didn't want to come. And frankly, I wanted to be on my own. I thought I'd leave home and my life there behind for a while, and that includes my marriage." Shrugging her shoulders, she continued to herself, and clearly not for him to hear, "Don't know why I'm telling you this."

"You need to put some lotion on your skin as well," he said and held out the tube.

That day, as well as the next, he went back to his hut with an extra spring in his step. His mood was usually happy as he enjoyed his life here on the island and deeply loved to work in his vineyard. But the breaks he took once a year from his daily routine meant a lot to him, and that he had found Tessa, although he had been looking for someone else, was as unexpected as it was wonderful.

She was a beautiful woman and didn't know it. Her husband, as nice and friendly and loving as he might be, clearly didn't tell her often enough that she looked stunning even after an exhausting day. The sad look in her eyes spoke volumes; she was not only unhappy with her life, but most certainly with her husband as well. Bad for her, at the moment. Good for him.

Walking along the beach, he imagined her face again, heart-shaped, with full lips and a cheeky little nose. Her eyes, always covered by sun glasses. Pale, like most English women, and then her straight, blond hair. He wondered if it would feel as fine as it looked.

A delicate neck, long arms and legs, a wasp waist. And there was grace in her movement as much as she resembled everything he didn't look for in a woman, he very much loved the way she moved.

He halted for a moment and looked across the ocean, the last two days a pleasant memory in his mind. Yesterday, they had talked, just for an hour or two that first evening, and today, he had returned, bumping into them shortly before Tessa and her children had gone for dinner. For her, it must have seemed like a coincidence. For him, it was like hunting a shy prey, and he enjoyed it tremendously.

Still something bothered him.

The waves rolled towards the beach, a boat sailed back home to the harbour, and yes, there it was: she looked familiar, for some reason. She reminded him of his past, although he was sure he had never met her before. Strangely enough, this didn't bother him, although under normal circumstances, he didn't like to be reminded of the years he hadn't lived on the island. The years he had been someone else, with a different name and a different life.

Her face... Who did she remind him of? Obviously someone not unpleasant, as thinking of her didn't disturb him. Not a fellow Death Eater, not a colleague. Not a victim, either.

He laughed quietly. No, definitely not a victim. She was strong; she would fight. Thinking of her made him wish he could have stayed for another hour in her company.

After a few moments, he gave up his attempts to place her face. It was unimportant. His past was long dead, and most of the people he had known were dead as well. No use to allow the past overwhelming him. The few times it happened whenever he dreamed nasty dreams was too often already. Luckily, there was something else that occupied his thoughts.

Slowly, the sun set. A cool breeze kissed his heated skin and hurried his steps. It was time to get home, into his hut, to a quiet evening and his book he hadn't finished yet.

Maybe, in a few days, he could persuade her to go for a swim with him. She seemed to long for the water, but hadn't gone in yet. *Maybe she can't swim?* he mused, then scolded himself for his impatience. First, she needed to become more comfortable in his presence before he would as much as try to touch her hand, much less to ask her to share an ocean with him.

Carlos shook his head in disbelief. Usually, he went for easier prey. She, Tessa, was everything but easy. She was different, and he liked it.

Of course he would take the sex if he could get it, but the main reason he had chosen her for his game was the intelligence he had seen in her and the melancholy she radiated. A combination he was unable to resist. Of course he would try to lure her into his bed, but his main target was to make her relax and if possible happier than she was now. He wanted to talk to her; he wanted to know her. He wanted to listen to her secrets and her dreams, her fears and her nightmares. This was so much more intimate than sex, and he had found out many years ago that every now and then, he needed a real challenge if he wanted to be happy.

One woman a year. Some landed in his arms, some didn't, but each was wonderful company for as long as it lasted. Tessa, now, Tessa offered more: the challenge he craved.

He hoped Tessa would loosen up. Her children had already taken a liking to him, especially because he had persuaded Rose to come into the water with him today, where he had held his hand under her belly and had taught her how to move her arms and legs. She had been clearly too excited about the swimming lesson to think about the fact that the man who held her wasn't her father. And Carlos had managed not to think about her mother too often whilst making sure the little girl didn't drown.

His hut was cool and quiet when he came home, and he stripped off his clothes and went for a swim. In the ocean, he could leave his thoughts behind as well his dark past. When he was at the beach, he needed the sensation of water around him as much as he needed to breathe.

Afterwards, after he had dried himself and his close-cropped, black hair with a few rubs, he went into the kitchen to prepare dinner. Barefoot, he chopped the garlic and the onions, cleaned the scampi and fried the rice. Cooking was a simple pleasure, and he liked the combination of the different fragrances that wafted through the small house.

Tessa would like it here, he was certain of it. She didn't seem too comfortable at the hotel, although it was not fully booked and few tourists were left at this time of the year. "She prefers her solitude," he told the quiet kitchen, and so he planned to invite her and her children for a day. Here, they could enjoy the privacy of his beach. He would leave them alone if she wished, he would go fishing so she wouldn't feel intimidated.

Sitting on the veranda and watching the sunset once more, eating fried rice with scampi, he wondered if she enjoyed sex or if she was one of the few women he had known who considered physical pleasure a waste of time. The signals he got from her were so very mixed. One moment she was melancholic, the next bold, then angry a heartbeat later. Sometimes, she seemed even unsure of herself, when she lowered her head and tried to hide behind her hair although it was not long enough to do so. Too often, she kept her hands busy with little stones, the sand, or a shell.

Maybe her hands were missing something. It could be something as simple as a piece of jewellery or a cooking spoon, a book even. Or it could be something deeper, something complicated.

Watching the waves washing up on the shore, he half hoped she missed being touched, missed the feeling of skin against her palm. Only half hoped so: it would mean she was a truly lonely woman.

Whatever it was, she needed his attention, no matter if she already knew it or not.

Lessons

Chapter 3 of 13

Ten years after the war, a man takes a stroll along the beach and meets someone from his past.

Lessons

He woke with the sun and had breakfast while leaning naked against the counter in his kitchen. The smell of garlic still hung in the air from the previous night, overlaid with the smells of butter and toast, fruits and hot chocolate. The breeze brought the fragrance of the ocean into the house as well, and Carlos ate quickly so he could continue what he had begun.

Today, he would begin to teach Rose and Hugo how to swim. In addition, he wanted to prove to Tessa that he was neither dangerous nor a bastard. She might have talked to him so far, she might have even opened up a bit, but he knew with certainty that she mistrusted him. On occasions, he had seen her pursing her lips at the sight of him playing ball with Rose and Hugo; once, she had shook her head, had balled her fists as if she wanted to hinder him getting so close to her children. It had hurt him more than he had thought.

Carlos deeply disliked being mistrusted. Before he had come to the island, most people who had known him had mistrusted and even hated him. Being a spy hadn't done anything for his reputation; being cruel, lonely, mistrusting himself had ruined him as much as it had ruined the one friendship he had managed to build up back then. He had been a man with various skills, but none of them had enabled him to open up to others. This had only changed when he had fled his old life, a wounded and broken man with a horrible past and no future at all. He had needed to change in order to survive, and he had managed it only because here, people hadn't known him and thus hadn't had a reason to shun his company. Here he had found friends. Very soon, he had realised that he liked it.

He wanted Tessa to trust him, and he wanted her to look at him without that guarded expression on her beautiful face. He wanted her friendship and he wanted to make her smile.

Draining his cup and putting it into the sink, he put on clothes and his sunglasses, then left the house. He couldn't deny that he longed to see her, that he felt a certain pull towards her. Maybe it was her melancholy, maybe the secrets she kept. "Could be a bit of both," he murmured whilst he strolled along the beach. "Could be as well that she already means more to me than I am willing to admit."

When he reached the beach near her hotel, he saw her sitting on her towel. The children played hide and seek with a few local boys. Tessa, as usual, was covered from head to toes in clothes. When he got closer, when his shadow touched hers, he could smell the faint fragrance of the sun lotion.

He smiled. He liked that something he had made touched her pale, soft skin.

"Buenos dias," he said, and she looked up at him, her eyes, as always, hidden behind her sunglasses. But so were his, and he didn't mind. In the end, she would take them off; at least he hoped so.

"Good morning," she replied, her voice tight. From the way she held her head and her body, he could see that she hadn't slept well. Her hands were covered by sand once more. "Carlos. I don't know how to put this, but..." She sighed. Then she crossed her arms over her chest. It was a defensive gesture, and he knew what she would say.

He curved his lips, not mockingly but with genuine sympathy he knew exactly which strings of thoughts she had followed last night. "You are afraid of me, Tessa, are you not?"

She opened her mouth and closed it again. Then nodded, once. She didn't lie. That was good.

"You think I chose you as my prey; you think I consider you vulnerable, and you are afraid that I will hurt you. More, you are terrified that, if you trust me, I will hurt your son and your daughter. You lay awake all night, you couldn't sleep, and you want to tell me to get the hell away from you." Still standing, he considered it a wise move to reduce his height by sitting down next to her in the soft, warm, white sand.

She swallowed hard. "How do you know this?" she asked him, coldness dripping from each word. "I am not your prey. I am no-one's prey, and don't you dare tell me I am easy to read, because I am not. So how come you know all this?"

If he weren't careful now, she would jump up and leave. He didn't want her to, though, and the sudden, unexpected strength of emotions that rushed through him took him totally by surprise. For a moment, he just observed her, took in her defensive posture, her drawn up legs, her set jaws. Every inch of her tall, slender body spoke of the fact that she was a fighter. There was steel in her soft, gentle voice.

He had brought a rucksack, filled with water, two small kickboards, a towel, and some peaches. The latter he took out and offered one to her, simply because he needed some time to find an answer to her accusation. It was not yet ten in the morning, but if the look on her face was anything to go by, she was not only tired, but hungry as well. "Have a peach," he said. "It is not poisoned. And you are easy to read simply because your fears at least partly concern your children."

For several heartbeats, she just looked at him and at the peach as if she feared either of them would bite her. Finally, she took the fruit and brought it slowly to her lips. When she took a bite and the juice ran down her chin, he could barely keep himself from wiping off the drops.

"Delicious," she sighed with delight. "Where did you buy them?"

Carlos relaxed at those words. He assumed that right now, two needs fought in her. The first was the urge to protect her children and, therefore, to stay away from him. The other one was the hope that he was who he claimed to be: a harmless man who was interested in her company and nothing else. "The peaches grow in my back garden," he replied and quirked his lips. "I thought you might like one."

Just as she finished the last bite, rolling the stone between her beautiful fingers, he continued, "And yes, you are prey. My prey. I am very much interested in you, and this is the reason why I know, for example, you have slept poorly and haven't eaten. I can see it because I like you. I assume you fear me because you already know I want

you. It is simple, really. I want to spend time with you, talk to you, be with you. And of course I want you in my bed."

She dropped the stone.

"And you are scared you might give in to me although you are married."

"Who are you?" she said, a rasp in her voice. "How do you... read my mind so easily?"

For some reason, he wanted to tell her the truth, the full truth. Carefully, he said, "Once, my life depended on my ability to read others, to assume correctly what they thought or what they wished for. Back then I used... unfair methods to reach my goal. I didn't with you. I just observe. I guess. I make assumptions and hope I hit the target. Maybe I should apologise. But I have the strong feeling that you would like me to know you. Am I right?"

The sparse nod she gave him spoke more of her hope and loneliness than any words could have done.

Checking that the children couldn't hear his words, he said, "I live in the mountains. Alone. Every now and then, I crave company, and I come to the beach to choose... a companion for a little while. When I saw you, I knew I wanted you."

"Don't say that," she said stiffly. "You don't..."

"I *want* you, Tessa!" Gently, he touched her, brought his hand to her face, and traced one of her eyebrows just above the sunglasses. She seemed too shocked at his words to move, so he continued, "But it is entirely your decision what will happen. I want you in my bed, but if that won't happen, I'll be equally happy to just keep you company, as well as your children. They are adorable, and so are you. Your choice. You now know what I'm after. You. If you think this is too much for you, tell me and I'll leave you alone."

It took her several attempts to answer, and what she said stunned him. He would have expected her to comment on him calling her prey, or scolding him for his blunt words. Instead, she said, "I'm not adorable!" There was a half-bitter, half amused rasp in her voice. "I'm too tall and too thin and far too pale. I'm impolite and I am married and why on earth would a man like you want someone as awkward as me?" She even moved back a bit, and he so very badly wished he could see her eyes to find out if she really meant what she said. Could it be she didn't know how wonderful she was?

Instinctively, he reached out a hand to touch her cheek, to comfort her, to reassure her. Only in the last second did he rein himself in. It was not the time to touch her again; not yet.

The breeze played with the loose strands of her hair; they seemed to call for him, and he wanted to feel their silken smoothness. "You are more than adorable." His voice was firm, and he didn't hide his surprise at her denial. "You are bright and beautiful, and I have no idea why you don't know this. I already suspected that your marriage is... not perfect. Now I know for sure. Your husband should tell you at least every now and then how beautiful you are."

He could nearly see her narrowing her eyes, even behind the dark glasses. Her voice was definitely bitter when she stated, "My husband has more important things to do than telling me sweet lies."

Getting up, he felt sand gush down his legs. He was truly shocked at her words, but right now, he couldn't do anything about it. He neither could prove that he meant what he had said, so instead, he decided that now was a good time to keep a promise he had given. "I'll be in the water with Rose. Yesterday evening I swore an oath to teach her how to swim. In my bag, I have a kickboard for her, and as you will be sitting here, watching us, you can make sure I won't try and eat her up. Is that all right for you, for today?"

Snorting once, as if she couldn't believe she didn't send him away, she nodded and began to build a little sandcastle right in front of her feet.

"No! Not yet! Just once more, Carlos, please!" Rose begged and flung her thin arms round his neck.

"Please, please, please," added Hugo and waded back into the water, right after Carlos had sent him out to get into dry clothes.

Carlos laughed and let Rose slip back into the waves. "Once more. Whilst you swim after the kickboard, I will help your brother to stay above the surface for more than a second. Afterwards, we will get out, you will get dressed, and I will take your mother for a swim. Deal?"

"Deal!" squeaked the little girl and splashed away in the shallow water, parallel to the beach and with the ground only a few feet below. She could have reached it at any time, but was very determined to learn how to swim. Concentrating, she moved her arms and legs the way Carlos had shown for the first time three days ago, and made as much noise as a small rhinoceros, chasing the board.

Hugo smiled a big, happy smile at him when Carlos lifted him up and fell with him backwards into the water. The waves embraced them, and they dunked under, were caught in salty darkness for a moment before they reached the sun and the air again. "Now then, Hugo imagine your legs have turned into frog legs. My hand is under your belly, so swim. I will make sure you don't drown," Carlos encouraged the little boy and was proud that Hugo tried his best.

This here was a first for him. He had never before approached a woman with children his former lovers had arrived on the island either with friends or husbands. To lure a woman away from her spouse was a delicate manoeuvre, and he wasn't successful each time. To talk a woman away from her friends was equally difficult, as he knew the girls talked about him in the evenings when he wasn't around. But to make a woman allow him to be with her children was definitely the most satisfying way to reach his goal. Especially when the children were so open and friendly as those two. They had been delighted at his offer for swimming lessons and had plunged head first into the adventure. Neither child had commented on the fact that he wasn't their father, neither had been bothered that he looked different from the natives as well as from the tourists.

Hugo, curious as he was, had placed his chubby little hand on the bright tattoo on his shoulder. "Nice flower," he had said before he stole the kickboard from his sister and attempted to drown himself.

Checking on the little girl, Carlos had to admit that Rose was a beauty already. Bushy, chestnut-coloured hair, big blue eyes, and a whole universe of freckles supported perfectly the intelligence in her smile and the friendliness of her soul. She was a fast learner and would be able to swim properly by the end of the holiday she was already able to coordinate her movements without any problems. Her interest had been sparked by the silver bracelet Carlos wore around his left wrist. With one fingertip she had traced it, had tried to read the engraved runes and had asked him why he was wearing it. Before he could tell her a lie, she had stated, "My daddy doesn't wear any jewellery," not realising that she had just revealed to her swimming teacher that her father didn't wear a wedding ring, either. "He says it bothers him at work. And Mummy left her ring at home. She wants to become tanned all over."

Carlos didn't answer, sincerely doubting that Tessa's reasoning had been that easy.

The sun would be setting in an hour, and Carlos dragged the two children out of the water back to their towels. Tessa wrapped up Rose, Carlos made sure Hugo was sand-free and dry before he put his shirt and shorts on. With slightly blue lips, both children sat in the still warm sand and watched as Carlos reached out a hand towards their mother.

She looked at him questioningly.

"We will go for a swim, you and I," he stated calmly. "You promised me yesterday. A promise must be kept."

Tessa shook her head and looked away. She wore the big hat again, and every inch of her body apart from face, hands, and feet was covered with fabric. "I don't swim,"

she answered.

Carlos dropped to his knees right before her. "You do, and you promised it."

Tessa blushed.

"Mummy, the water is really warm," Rose said and nudged her mother.

Hugo added earnestly, "Carlos can rescue you if you drown."

Getting up gracefully, Tessa swiped the sand off her trousers. Leaning in close, she whispered, "I look horrible in a swim suit," into his ear. "I'm bony and as white as a fish's belly. Not a pleasant sight. Please, spare me the humiliation."

Carlos touched her for the first time since he had traced her eyebrow. A loose strand of her lanky hair floated in the wind and tickled his cheek. Gently, mockingly, he tucked it behind her ear. "You will stay white if you don't get out of your clothes," he whispered back. "Believe me, I know what I'm talking about. I once was much paler than you are now." Carelessly, he took off his glasses and threw them onto the towel. Squeezing his eyes shut against the sun, he didn't see that she had taken hers off as well.

"I can't," she insisted half-heartedly, but her daughter pushed her onto her bottom and began tugging at her skirt. Hugo, always up to mischief, stole his mother's hat, and after losing a hard fight with Rose for the blouse, Tessa was wearing nothing but a plain black swimsuit. It revealed nothing and hid nothing; she seemed translucent in the evening sun despite the gentle redness that had crept under her skin from head to toes.

He managed not to look at her too closely, guessing she would blush even deeper if he did. For some reason, she covered her body behind wide clothing although she didn't need to. She was tall and very slender, and he wished he had the leisure to devour her with his eyes.

Instead, he held out his hand once more and this time, she took it. They walked down to the water side by side, and he let go of her hand only when she stood waist deep in the waves, shivering.

The perfect moment to look deeply into her eyes. If only she would have looked at him, too.

"Swim with me," he dared her. "Let's see if you can swim at all."

Tessa raised her chin, a strangely familiar gesture. Without the sunglasses, her face was changed, looked different and vulnerable at the same time. As the evening sun was right in front of them, he couldn't figure out her eye colour, though. "Of course I can swim," she snapped and dived in, leaving him behind.

Instantly, he went after her. The water was warm and tender, caressing his skin, easing his mind. He loved the ocean, and he hurried to get after her with a few strong strokes. Under water, he brushed her ankles and came up, swimming slightly behind her and admiring her sparse, precise movements.

The ocean stretched endlessly before them endlessly and invitingly. Involuntarily, he got reminded of the time when he had dived into this ocean for the first time, dreaming of not returning to the beach, of swimming until all strength would leave him, of sinking into the fathomless, black depths. That had been before he had realised that there was a life waiting for him a life so very different from his old one that the prospect of actually living it had been fascinating enough to give it a try.

Maybe she needs a different life as well, he thought. Maybe this is the reason why I have chosen her: because she needs a new life and because I can offer her a way out of her old one.

But this was nonsense, of course. She was just a tourist he wanted in his bed; she would go back to her husband in less than two weeks time.

Dinner and a Walk

Chapter 4 of 13

Ten years after the war, a man takes a stroll along the beach and meets someone from his past.

Dinner and a Walk

They swam until sunset, wordlessly finding their way through the salty water. After a while, Carlos was, as usual, entranced by the combination of salt on his lips and sun on his scalp and water everywhere else. He nearly forgot about Tessa until she was gone.

He stopped in the middle of nowhere, the beach pleasantly far away and the seagulls crying out their lonely songs above. Turning once in a full circle, he still couldn't see her and then decided to float in the water until she had enough of diving. Idly wondering what she was up to, he suddenly felt her strong fingers round his ankle and knew she was underneath him, playing games.

He smiled. One week, and she had given in to his courting. Maybe she didn't know yet, but she was his as surely as the night would be moonless tonight.

A sharp tug, and he was under the water. Sound vanished, vision blurred.

There she was, only a few inches away from him. Their eyes were at level, and like alien fingers, her hair caressed his face. Deliberately, he sunk a bit lower and took her with him, his hands placed firmly on her waist. Without hesitation, she followed him, away from the surface and deeper into the twilight. The sandy bottom shone faintly in the dim light, and the sun, so strong above, hadn't heated up the ocean down here.

She stared at him with wide, water-filled eyes. No sunglasses protected his face he felt strangely naked without them. But for the first time, he could see her face just a bright oval without glasses, too. She had no freckles here, in this twilight zone, no frown, and the melancholic expression was washed from her lips. He had no crooked nose, no wrinkles around his eyes, no scar along his cheekbone. They were different in this other world, in this universe without air to breathe and sounds to hear. Even thinking was unnecessary in the depths of the ocean, wondering who the other one was or hoping that wishes became true. Down here, there was just silence and peace.

She raised a hand, dreamlike and slow, and touched his lips, his cheeks, his short hair. For a brief moment he thought he could see her frown as if she was trying to catch a dwindling memory. Her fingers were cold on his skin, and he reached out for her, wanting to pull her closer, to warm her, hold her, but then the need for air became overwhelming. He struggled, had to get back up although he didn't want to.

She dashed away from him like a scared fish and, with a mermaid's grace, swam back to the beach.

Breaking the surface, gulping in air, Carlos longed for her more than he had longed for any woman in a very long time. He wanted to go after her, catch her, grab her round her slender waist once more and pull her down again into this twilight zone, make love to her down there where neither of them needed to speak, to explain, to reason or to suffer.

Impossible. So he went after her but didn't grab her, swam his erection away without getting closer than ten feet at the most.

Out of breath, she reached the beach and ran for the towel, wrapped the huge, fluffy thing round her fragile body she seemed to dislike so much. Roughly, carelessly, she dried herself with her back to him, ignoring even her children. With haste she put her clothes back on, pinned her wet hair up into a tight knot, and only when she was covered again by garment and hat, she turned and looked at him once more. Through sunglasses, sitting slightly lopsided on her nose.

Hell. He wanted to see her eyes so very badly, not even knowing why he was so eager to at least get their colour. But then, instead of drying himself, he had shoved his glasses onto his nose as well. His eyes were sensitive to the sun, even when it was nearly gone.

"Let's go for dinner," he said, brushing the water out of his hair. It was too short to shake it dry, too short to cover even a small part of his face. He felt open and unguarded, vulnerable for the first time in years when he felt her gaze roam over his body. From head to toes her eyes went, and suddenly, seeing her tipped head, she reminded him of someone from his past again. Someone far away, someone he once had known. It had bothered him before, this feeling that he knew her. Maybe, if she said something now...

No. The memory was still too far away. He was certain now that he knew her, but couldn't put a finger on it; so he let it go again. Eventually, he would remember.

Tessa, though, still stared at him, lost in thoughts. The bright tattoo, covering his right shoulder and his upper arm with some leaves even touching his neck, was part of her interest, the bracelet as well, and his face, most of all. He felt caressed by her inspection, and only high self-control allowed him to keep his growing arousal in check. None of his lovers had ever looked at him so calculating and so interested at the same time, entwined with a strange innocence he found extremely charming.

She didn't seem to know that she had been staring for more than a minute and hadn't replied to his suggestion, either, until Rose tickled her and said, "Mummy, I'm hungry!"

Tessa snapped out of her thoughts and looked at her girl. "Of course, love," she said, apparently confused at the fact that she had lost a tiny bit of her time. "Let's go back to the hotel."

Both children looked equally unhappy. "Can't we go somewhere else? The food is *isbah* in the hotel." Hugo pulled a face, and Rose nodded eagerly.

Tessa sighed. "We can't go anywhere else, as there is no restaurant close by. Come on, I promise..."

Carlos interrupted her, "'Let's go for dinner' meant 'let me invite you for dinner,' Tessa. A friend of mine lives nearby. She has a family the size of a football team, and she is always happy to see me. Four more people won't make a difference to her. See the path that leads to the beach? When we follow it, we will end up at her house. It is a less than fifteen minutes' walk, even with two sleepy children."

"We're not sleepy!" Rose piped up and grabbed both her brother's and her mother's hand. "Come on, Mummy, we are hungry!"

Thoughtfully, Tessa looked at Carlos. Whatever had happened when they'd been swimming, it had changed something between them. He was sure that a day ago she wouldn't have accompanied him. Now, after a brisk nod, she quickly gathered her belongings and just walked ahead, Rose and Hugo hopping happily along.

Carlos put his shirt and shorts on and picked up his own bag. Bottles clinked. Two steps behind her, he soon decided that walking next to her was more to his liking.

"Carlos! Mi niño!" The old woman threw herself into his arms, and he lifted her up a bit, swung her round and put her down on twig-thin feet. She was as dark as an apple seed, her face wrinkled, her eyes bright and alert. A nearly toothless smile spread over her mouth; and Carlos could see Tessa relax at the sight of her. She hadn't shed all her fear yet; she was definitely relieved that he hadn't led her into a dungeon to torture her and her children.

Conchita's hut was anything but a dungeon. It was big, old, filled with half a dozen children, a few more adults, and the smell of food. The table looked as if it would break any moment under its weight, laden as it was with bowls and plates and glasses and bottles. The noise was overwhelming, and Hugo and Rose tried to hide behind their mother.

In vain. Conchita's grandchildren claimed the two little guests as theirs, pulled them along, showed them the litter of kittens in the corner and the bright bird that sat on a stack under the ceiling. A dog came along, sniffed some toes, then collapsed with fatigue in a corner, and Carlos laughed, kissed the old woman's cheek and handed her three bottles from his bag. "Un regalo para tí, nana," he said. "A present for you. I figured you've drunk the last drop a while ago."

Conchita became very silent. She took one bottle and placed it on the table; she handed the two others to a young man, waving him off towards the kitchen. "Your wine, Carlos?" she asked. "You bring me more of your wine?"

"But of course, nana," Carlos answered. "I know you like it, and I owe you a bottle from the last time I came here uninvited. This time, I even bring guests. If you allow, we would like to eat with you."

The old woman hugged him tightly once more, then shoved a chicken off the table and urged them to sit down. Tessa, who was loosening up by the minute in the face of the unceremonious behaviour of everyone and the delighted giggles of her children, cast him a curious smile. "What's so special about the wine?" she whispered into his ear, and he leaned over, close to her.

Smelled her hair and her skin. Felt her breath hitch at the close contact. "I made it," he said. "I told you I have a vineyard, didn't I?"

She shook her head and nodded afterwards, when a young girl offered her freshly baked bread. "I guessed you... well, actually I didn't waste a thought at what you might do for living."

"Carlos," Conchita stated with pride and a heavy accent, "my Carlos makes wine. Best wine of island. Best wine of whole world." With a flick of her hand, she ordered one of her sons to get a special glass for the guest and to pour some of the precious, golden liquid. With something like admiration in his face, he obeyed, placing the glass in front of Tessa.

Hesitantly, she looked at the glass and at the wine inside. "I don't usually drink," she objected. "I am not able to honour this wine, however wonderful it might taste."

"Drink," Carlos said, and "Drink!" the old woman urged.

Tessa took the glass. Brought it to her lips and took a sip.

Her eyes widened when the golden wine touched her lips. She gasped when it ran down her throat, and Carlos knew it just exploded in tiny flames deep down in her stomach. "But..." she managed and looked at him helplessly. "Are you sure this is wine? It tastes like nothing I have ever tried. It is... perfect. Marvellous!"

Conchita laughed, and he bowed his head. "It surely is wine. I make a few crates every year. One or two I sell, the rest I give away to friends. And thank you for the compliment. I am glad you like it."

She took another sip, just enough to cause another explosion. With a delighted sigh, she closed her eyes. "Marvellous," she said again, and then the children laughed as the chicken laid an egg on the table.

They ate, they talked and laughed, and Tessa warmed up amongst those strangers, people she had never seen in her life and never would see again. Hugo and Rose tried everything that was offered, even the hare in garlic oil. They ate the rice and the potato chips, and after two hours, Rose said her first Spanish word.

Tessa didn't talk much, but it was obvious that she enjoyed the company. Sitting close to him, he could feel the heat her body radiated, could see her rosy cheeks, and could smell the faint fragrance of orange petals from her perfume. Of course they both had taken off their sunglasses, but the house was lit by oil lamps and he was not sure if here eyes were grey or brown or black. They could even have been blue. *I will find out*, he thought. *I truly hope I will find out.*

He loved every moment and wished the evening would never end. So far, he had never brought one of his conquests into Conchita's house, and he was surprised how much he enjoyed it. Tessa was so very different, and he found he would love to take her to other places he liked, introduce her to his friends, show her his vineyards. This longing to show her who he was, what he did, and how he spent his time was maybe even stronger than the wish of finding out how her skin felt under his exploring fingertips.

Watching her was a pleasure, hearing her soft, gentle voice made his heart skip a beat, and he smiled at his own foolishness of hoping that for once, things could end differently than with a final "Fare well."

Around eleven at night, Rose fell asleep with the chicken in her arm, followed closely by her little brother. Hugo had found shelter under the table, thumb safely in his mouth, and Carlos shared a glance with Conchita. "May they sleep under your roof for a little while longer, nana?" he asked, and before Tessa could protest, he looked at her, tempting her. "The beach at night is beautiful, and I would like to take you for a walk. Afterwards, I will accompany you back to the hotel. One more hour, Tessa. Please."

Getting up, she knelt down and wiped a curly strand of hair out of the little girl's face. The chicken clucked sleepily, Rose smiled, and Tessa said, "Why not. I haven't walked along the beach so far. Half an hour, Carlos."

He held the door open for her whilst Conchita's daughter clattered with the dishes in the big kitchen. The old woman patted Carlos's cheek and Tessa's arm. "Take your time, niños," she muttered, pushed them out into the dark and firmly closed the door behind them.

The night was warm and tender, the air like the caress of a lover's hand. Tessa exhaled contently. "That was a wonderful evening. Different from most evenings in my life. We don't have guests at home my husband grew up in a big family, and there was a point when I had to end their constant visits to my house. I couldn't stand his mother's hints of proper housekeeping any longer, I couldn't cope with his brother's silly jokes or his father's friendly scolding that I don't raise my children properly only because I think they have their share to do at home."

He nodded once. Her strides grew longer, and they were walking fast now, reaching the beach. There was no moon, and the ocean looked black and forbidding. The wind was strong, the sand nearly cold.

It didn't seem to bother her. She kicked off her shoes and after a few more steps, she stood ankle deep in the water with her back to the beach. The hems of her trousers got wet when she dug her feet into the wet sand, small waves rolling over them. Closing her eyes, she raised her face to the wind and the spray, breathed in deeply and continued, "I was nineteen when I married, right after I had to repeat my last year at school. My husband and I travelled for two years; it was a good time. Then I began to study and became pregnant after a year. Rose was born when I was twenty-three, Hugo when I was twenty-five. I have no job, two children, a house that is too big and more money I could spend in a lifetime. My husband is away most of the year, all around the world, and his friend sees him more often than I do. When he is at home..."

"...it is not the same anymore," he finished her sentence for her. Silently, he had stepped behind her and could have embraced her if he had dared.

She turned and looked at him, and in daylight, he would have been able to see more than dark shadows in her face. The wind ripped at her hair, trying to get it out of its pin cage. Without thinking, he picked one pin and pulled, then a second one, a third until all hair pins were in his hand. Wild and free, her hair stormed around her face, making her look like a teenager.

There it was again, the feeling that he knew her.

"We were friends," she whispered, and for a moment, her words didn't make sense to him. "My husband and I, we were the best friends for years. Then I married him, gave birth to his children, and everything changed. We both wanted children, and we decided to have them early rather than later. He promised to stay at home as long as I needed him after the birth so I could continue studying. Unfortunately, he got a job offer he couldn't refuse. I had to interrupt my study, hoping I could pick it up again a few years later.

"Then Hugo was born, and my husband decided that being in France or Japan or Paraguay was a lot better than being at home. I couldn't go back to university. I didn't look for a job because my husband earns shiploads of money everything I would have earned would have been nothing compared to his income, and I couldn't have got the job I wanted anyway without having finished my study. His mum lets me know on a daily basis that in her opinion, a mother should stay at home anyway. Until recently, I thought we still were friends. But even that changed when he refused to take as much as a week off to come to holiday with us. And I..."

"You don't love him anymore. If you ever did. If it wasn't but a crush. Am I not right?"

After an eternity, she nodded. Then she stepped back and ran through the night, along the beach, and as he couldn't do anything else, he ran after her.

She was fast, but he caught her in the end. Panting, she stood in the waves and stared out into the darkness. He was only inches away, heard her ragged breath, felt more than saw her heaving chest. "I shouldn't be here," he heard her say. "I should be at the hotel, asleep in my bed, not out here with you. Not telling you things too private to tell a stranger."

There was nothing he could reply to that. She was right.

"Why did I tell you all that?" Despair rang in her voice, this wonderful mellow voice, laced with sadness. "Why do you know how I feel; why do you know things no one else knows?"

He edged a bit closer, his feet leaving deep tracks in the wet sand. "Most of my life I have spent watching others," he explained, surprised at his words and at his wish to tell her something he had never told anyone before. "I watched, I judged, I used, I manipulated. I was a well-hated man, and I still can read most people like open books. You are hard to read; what I said was nothing but a well-aimed guess. I apologise for having hurt you."

Slowly, she brushed her fingertips along the scar on his cheek. The night was too dark to see the expression on her face, but he hoped there was more than curiosity in her eyes. "You remind me of someone," she stated calmly. "I didn't like him, but I respected him. He's long dead, but since I met you, I find I think about him often. Maybe he what he was, who he was, and what he did is the reason why I trust you, although I shouldn't."

Carefully, he cupped her cheek and was glad she didn't shun away. "I want you to trust me. I want you to like me as well. If I remind you of someone you disliked, I'd rather not have you thinking about him."

She smiled, surprisingly open and unguarded. "He wasn't who he seemed to be. In the end it became clear that he was a good man, a brave man, and a deeply misjudged man. Comparing you with him is nothing you should fear." She placed her own hand over his. Barely audible, she murmured, "I can't do this. I don't want to do this!"

How much he wished he could embrace her, kiss her, smell and taste her. Instead, he put more distance between them, but couldn't bring himself to break the contact with her soft, cool skin. "I don't know if you can do it," he answered and had to clear his throat before he continued, "but I am absolutely certain that you want to do it. You want to be with me; you want to kiss me, and you want to come into my bed. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here. And you wouldn't allow me to touch you." With his free hand, he caught one strand of her hair and wrapped it round his finger like a ring.

"I've never cheated on my husband. I've never even thought about it. It feels lousy, although he cheats on me." Not an outcry. A quiet statement, and the loneliness in her words threatened to break his walls.

Hell, who he was trying to fool? That had happened already. She was in his mind and in his heart, and there was nothing he could do about it.

His hand whispered over her skin when he let go of her; the strand of hair floated in the wind whilst the spindrift wet her trousers. For a long moment, he just looked at her, considering if it wouldn't be better to leave her alone, if he shouldn't find someone else for his pleasure.

Too late. He not only wanted her, he also liked her. A lot. More than he had liked anyone else before. He wanted to see her smile again, and therefore, he needed to make her happy.

Instead of saying something useless, he offered her his hand. And she took it.

Walking back hand in hand to Conchita's house took them more than an hour. It would have been pathetically romantic but for her grip, being hard enough to leave bruises.

Excursion

Chapter 5 of 13

Ten years after the war, a man takes a stroll along the beach and meets someone from his past.

5: Excursion

That night, he didn't sleep well. He tossed and turned. He had dreams which he couldn't remember in the morning. Mumbling in his half-asleep state, he wondered what he should do about Tessa.

In his youth, he had been an awful sleeper. Always alert, always half-dressed, he had considered sleep a waste of time, as he had talking, politeness, personal hygiene, and friendship. Sleep stole away his thoughts; sleep brought unwanted hopes to the surface. He had only learned since coming to the island how wonderful sleep could be and how eye-opening a dream was. He had learned to listen to his body as well as his mind, and if his mind had told him to leave Tessa alone despite his specific wishes to lure her into bed, he would have done so.

Instead, both body and mind searched for her during the night. The bed was suddenly too big, the house too quiet, and when he woke, he wanted nothing more than to have breakfast with her. Unfortunately, it was only half past five in the morning, too early to even think about breakfast. Going back to sleep was equally impossible, so instead, he tidied up. He washed, cleaned, and made the bed. Dusted the shelves, swept the sand off the veranda, even cleaned the windows. When the sun finally rose on the horizon, he considered the possibility to bring her here, to his secluded little bay with the small, lovely beach and the boat that awaited him and any guest he might like to take.

He shaved off his stubble, then went to the market and bought fresh milk, bread, and butter. When he sat on his veranda, drinking his morning cocoa, he was finally awake enough to admit he had fallen in love.

Shit.

This wasn't good. She would leave in two weeks, would take her children and her sadness and her wonderful smile back home to a cheating husband and a life she didn't want to live. She would forget him, would force herself to erase those three weeks on the island from her memory, simply to be able to live her real life without regrets. And he would suffer, as he had once before.

He had no desire to suffer. His life had been bad for a considerable length of time, and he feared that, if he allowed himself more than an erotic adventure, his heart would be broken for good.

The only conclusion that he could come up with was that he would not see her again. He would stay for another week in his hut. He would eat, sleep, and swim, and then he would go back to his mountains and his vineyard and the work that awaited him there. She would vanish from his mind, and she could enjoy her holiday without him offering her something she didn't really want.

He sighed and stretched his long legs, arched his back, tried to relax his cramped muscles. Last night, when they had walked back to Conchita's house, they hadn't talked anymore. Silently, she had wandered beside him, clinging onto his hand as if it were a lifeline. Occasionally, her wide, wet trousers had brushed his bare legs, and every now and then her hair had tickled his arm. He had enjoyed this a lot, despite the hardness of her grip, which was clear proof that she was scared of what might happen between them.

They each had carried a fast asleep child back to the hotel and into their beds. He had placed the little girl onto the mattress and had left quickly so as not to invade her private space more than necessary.

She had held him back with a whispered word, not looking at him. "I don't know if I can do this. But you are right. I want to." And had closed the door into his face.

Hell, he should leave today, go back home to his vines immediately. He could not afford to fall in love. The last time it had happened, he had been barely more than a boy, a teenager with lanky limbs, greasy hair, and the palest skin imaginable. She had been a beauty, red-haired and green-eyed, and Tessa didn't resemble her at all. His first love had been lively and wild, and when she had fallen in love with someone else, he had decided that life was cruel and worthless.

He truly feared something similar would happen again. Tessa, melancholic and lonely, had struck a chord in him he had thought didn't exist anymore. She had pierced his logical, calculating, cold heart, and it was simply impossible that he allowed this to continue.

The problem was that he had no choice anymore. For him, love was the strongest emotion possible, and it already ruled his thoughts. And he would not fight against his

wishes ever again. He had done so far too often in his past

Sternly, he placed his empty mug on the veranda planks and went inside to fill his rucksack. His decision was made. In a day or two, he would bring her and the children here so they could enjoy the privacy of his house and his beach.

And he would go fishing. Alone.

"You are not wearing a hat today." A simple observation, but she blushed at his words.

"I thought... maybe a bit of sun wouldn't do me any harm."

Hugo and Rose grinned widely at their mother's words. After ten days on the island, they had tanned to a golden brown without the slightest hint of a sunburn. "But then you have to take your blouse off as well, Mummy," Hugo said matter-of-factly, and Rose added, "And your trousers, too."

"Now, look," Tessa replied, a tiny smile hiding in the corner of her mouth. "If you two don't behave, I'll send you back to the hotel and you can stay inside all day whilst I enjoy the sun. Without you!"

Both children giggled and vanished to find some shells. Tessa lowered her head and avoided his eyes.

"You will look good with a tan," he said as light-hearted as he could manage. "Am I right that you don't spend much time outside?"

Goodness, he was too curious, and he knew it. But he wanted to know more about her, about her life away from the island, although this was something he wasn't interested in normally. Well, whatever it was that was growing between them, wasn't normal.

"I read whenever I find the time," Tessa answered, walking alongside him on the way to his hut. "Which isn't often, nowadays. I used to read a lot more. I was a bookworm. But our house is far too big for us, and I don't do much else but cook and clean and cook and clean again."

"Pity," he answered. "Somehow, I cannot imagine you as a housewife. A librarian, yes. But not someone who finds pleasure in ironing the tablecloths. You will find a few books at my place take whatever you want. Read all day, if you like. If Hugo and Rose are interested, and if you allow it, I will take them fishing. One day for yourself. If you want."

That made her stop in the middle of her step. "You... are you serious?" There was doubt in her voice. "Do you know when I had an hour to myself the last time, not to talk about a whole day?"

He stole her hand, and his heart skipped a beat when she didn't pull it back. "Everyone needs time for oneself. One goes crazy if there is always someone else around, even a dearly loved child."

She swallowed hard, and out of nowhere, a tear ran down her cheek. One single tear. She didn't even bother to wipe it away. "I'm lost without my books," she whispered. "I have been lost for years. Just that no one understands it. Especially not my husband or my mother-in-law." She swallowed hard. "At least I now know what is wrong with me I'm crazy."

"You are not," he said, barely audible against the sound of the waves caressing the beach. "Take today as an opportunity to figure out what you want. And I will try not to come back too early."

She considered that for a moment. There was no second tear. "Can you cook?" she asked, and he nodded. "Better than the cook in the hotel? As good as Conchita?"

He shook his head ruefully. "No one can cook as good as nana. But I am definitely better than Luciano, who's preparing the meals in your hotel. Why? Would you like to stay for dinner?" Damn. He was unable to keep the hope out of his voice.

And there was her smile again. It was not only wonderful, but a little bit cheeky as well. "A day at your beach, a day with books you can bet you have to cook for us, Carlos."

He sailed out with Rose and Hugo an hour after they had reached his house, after he had shown Tessa the kitchen, the bathroom, and the spare bedroom under the attic. Where his books were stored, all four or five dozen he wanted to keep close wherever he went. Classics, many of them, but a bunch of short-story collections as well as some fantasy stuff. When he saw her eyes widen with delight, he smiled and left her up there, trying to figure out what to read first.

He packed sandwiches, fruits, and water, but instead of going fishing, he would take the children round the island to a waterfall, where they could play pirates or hide and seek or whatever they liked until sunset. On the way back, he would dive for some scallops, and hopefully, Rose and Hugo would be too tired to mind the fact that they were actually served sea food.

His boat was small with only one sail and no motor. Both children got life vests, waved good-bye to their mum, and didn't look back once when he manoeuvred the boat out to the sea. They managed to sit still for one-and-a-half hours before they became restless, and because it was a nice and easy day, he pulled in the sail and handed out the first sandwiches, accompanied by peaches from his yard.

Rose talked a lot, and Hugo nodded eagerly to everything she was saying. Carlos listened and learned. At one point, Rose said, "Grandma always says Mummy should look after us and cook better food and that the kitchen is the most important place in a house, not the library."

And Carlos felt his stupid heart ache at her words.

"Mummy! We had a shower under a waterfall!" Hugo burst with the news, running towards his mum and knocking her off her feet in one go. Rose, for good measure, jumped on top, squealing, "I saw a snake! A big one, Mummy. A snake!"

Tessa, who had waited for them at the beach, laughed, hugged her children tightly and kissed them both about half-a-dozen times before she got to her feet again. Hugo jumped up and she caught him and placed the little boy on her hip. Rose grabbed her mother's hand and nuzzled her face against her arm. It was such an intimate family-reunion that Carlos instinctively drew back, giving them space.

Tessa ignored it completely. Turning towards him, she brushed her fingertips across his cheek; her whole face had lit up at his sight. "A snake?" she teased and raised an eyebrow at him. "You got my children close to a snake?"

His lips quirked at her joy. "A big one. At least ten feet long and thicker than my thigh," he said with deepest conviction. "It chased us, and we had to seek shelter in an old pirate's hut."

"He's lying, Mummy," Rose piped up, nearly too tired to walk.

Tessa pushed the door open with one foot and slumped down with her children onto the old, cosy couch that stood in his small living room. Hugo's eyes had dropped closed for the moment. Rose sat on the floor and hugged her mother's legs. "So did you enjoy the day, then?" she asked, tenderly stroking over her daughter's curly hair.

"And did you drive Carlos crazy with your constant chatter, Rose?"

Rose shook her head. "Will you make dinner, Carlos?" she asked instead of answering her mother's question. "Spaghetti? You promised!"

"And a promise needs to be kept," he said earnestly and vanished towards the kitchen. He needed a moment to recover from what he just had seen.

One day, less than twelve hours, and she had changed. Not into another woman; to him, it seemed he could finally see the woman she really was. The melancholic, serious armour had cracked open, and underneath, her real self appeared: louder, happier, with a sparkling intensity he hadn't expected. *If one day could trigger such a change, how much would a week do? Or a month?*

He shook his head and forced his thoughts on other, safer directions. They might have another ten days or so, but they didn't even have two full weeks, let alone a month.

Carlos was a good cook, but he was used to cooking for himself and maybe one guest, not for two adults and two starving children. He had made too much pasta and not enough sauce, which was fine as the children favoured dry spaghetti anyway. Between bites, the little ones talked, and Tessa listened and laughed and admired their bravery and their adventures. In the candlelight her eyes appeared dark black? Brown? and with a sparkle he hadn't seen there before.

He didn't say much. He just watched her and wished the evening wouldn't end. Hearing her laugh was even better than seeing her smile, and tonight she didn't wear her long trousers and blouse, but a wide skirt and a top that left her arms and shoulders exposed to the warm night air. Her skin wasn't pale in this light; it shone golden whilst his own appeared even darker than usual.

Rose yawned first. Hugo followed after a moment of consideration. Before Carlos could offer to take them home, she looked at him. "Would it be awfully impudent to ask if we could stay the night? There is a big bed in your guest room. The children could sleep there, and we could talk a bit. Would that be all right for you? I fear we are all too tired to walk back to the hotel."

"Cool!" said Hugo and padded upstairs, followed by his sister and Tessa.

"I will just tuck them in," she said over her shoulder. "I would like to sit on your veranda later. Share a glass of your wine. Would that be possible?"

Rarely, he had been at a loss for words, but the turn of events had paralysed his tongue and stultified his mind. So he just nodded, went to clean up the table and wondered what had happened today, what had managed to change her so profoundly. She was so much less shy than only a few short nights ago. When they had left on the boat this morning, he would have sworn she would never ask him to be alone with him, let alone spending the night in his house.

Anticipation bubbled up inside him. She was up to something. Maybe just talking. *Maybe more*, he hoped, took two glasses and uncorked the bottle. The magical fragrance wafted through the night, and he sat down, waiting for her in the darkness and treasuring the possibilities the night might offer.

Conversations in the Dark

Chapter 6 of 13

Ten years after the war, a man takes a stroll along the beach and meets someone from his past.

Conversations in the Dark

It took her more than an hour to get downstairs again, and he had settled on the veranda with a glass of his wine, looking across the quiet sea and waiting for the moon to rise. Waiting for her light footsteps on the wooden staircase, her scent in the dark.

Finally, when she sat in the spare chair next to him, a deep, satisfied sigh emerged from her. Wordlessly, he handed her a glass of wine, and she inhaled deeply before she took the first sip. "This wine is magical. How much do you charge for a bottle? You must make a fortune from it!" For a long moment, she kept the sip in her mouth before swallowing. "It tastes of... I can't describe it. Of honey, black currant and grapes, naturally. Of peaches and smoke. It reminds me of long summer nights, thunderstorms, freedom and... Well, I should stop babbling."

At that, he frowned, a tiny memory stirring somewhere in the back of his head. *Her hair is wrong* the thought came unbidden and irritated him, as he liked her hair the way it was. When she put the glass down and looked at him, his heartbeat momentarily accelerated an extra beat and the thought, the memory, was forgotten. "What has changed?" he asked and was glad that he didn't need to explain himself. She understood what he meant. Even in the darkness, he could see that her cheeks had dimples when she smiled.

"Is it that obvious?" She held his gaze, and he nodded.

"You have changed. Something has changed today, and yes, it is obvious. At least to me," he answered. "You laughed more at dinner than during the past week. You talked a lot. And the faraway look in your eyes is gone. I cannot believe that my books did the change. So what was it? And will it last?"

Now she lowered her eyes, got up and stepped to the balcony handrail. Her long, strong fingers wrapped round the dry, old wood, she stared into the blackness of the ocean. For several minutes neither of them spoke, but Carlos could wait. He had learned to wait early in his life, and sometimes, this ability still came in handy. Instead of asking questions or urging her to speak, he watched her and observed that even her body language had changed: she held herself differently, more relaxed in one way and more erect in another. She seemed to be more sure of herself, and he liked that change. He liked strong women, and she was definitely a lot stronger than she had appeared at first sight.

"I had time to think." She let the words drop into the silence between them. "For the first time in eight years, I had time to think without anyone interrupting me. It was a relief, and it was like someone had switched on the light in my head again." With a swift movement, she sat on the handrail, legs dangling, head tilted.

Ridiculous, but he thought she looked like a schoolgirl.

"When my husband and I kissed for the first time, it seemed right, perfect. I thought he was the one I wanted, not considering that... the circumstances had a lot to do with my decision." A deep breath. Obviously, this was not easy for her. "Times were bad when we fell in love, and a kiss meant a lot more because around us, people were dying. I won't bore you with the details. Only that much: we finished school and married quickly afterwards. We had a nice time for a little while, and everyone was very excited about us being a couple.

"I still believed I loved him when the first problems appeared. We had been best friends; I liked him a lot, but eventually I realised it wasn't enough for a marriage. We couldn't talk, we had the most different interests, his family is quite overwhelming and demanding, and on top of it, he chose a job that took him away from home more than half of the year."

Silently, Carlos refilled her glass.

"I'd always wanted children, and I was very happy when I found out I was pregnant. Then I realised that my husband wouldn't be there to help me with the baby and that there was no way to continue studying without his support. His job always came first. I considered ending the marriage, but decided to stay for the sake of the children. Maybe that was a wrong decision." Silence followed her words. Eventually, she continued, but more hesitant than before. "Well, for a little while R... my husband stayed at home more often, his mother stopped nagging, and I was too busy to regret that university was out of the question now.

"By the time Hugo was born, my mother-in-law had found out that she really liked nagging me, and my husband had found out that he liked an affair every now and then. Not to hurt me he is a nice boy..." She interrupted herself with an exasperated laugh. "Hear that? I still call him a boy. He is twenty-eight, but he is a boy to me. He earns the money, but he does not take on responsibility. He doesn't want to hurt anyone, not on purpose, but he has no idea how to handle me. He wants fun and action, and the idea to stay at home for more than a weekend makes his head dizzy. He is nice and wonderful and lovely. He's the father of my children, and I love him dearly. As a friend. Unfortunately, I cannot leave him. He would get sole custody. I wouldn't be able to raise Rose and Hugo; I couldn't cope with that."

When she looked at him, it was more like looking through him. "Today, in the quiet peace of your house, I found out that I was about to perish between my husband's and his family's and our friends' demands. I don't want to perish. I want to be me again. And so I made some decisions."

He could barely see her face anymore; it was past ten, and the moon was just about to rise. "Which decisions would that be, then?" he asked as casually as possible. Her words had struck him it was rare for a person to show such deep insight in one's own problems, and it was even rarer to talk about it so freely. That she did it made him wish he could take her into his arms and hold her forever.

Usually, he wasn't that emotional.

Tessa slipped down and stepped between his legs, a movement so unexpected he could do nothing but part his knees, allowing her inside his personal space. "I love my children," she whispered. "More than anything. But I have needs as well, and I cannot abandon them completely for their sake. I can't leave their father; but I would like to be with you for the time being. Is that... would that be all right? Do you still want me?"

Uncertainty, laced with shyness. A really intriguing combination, especially because he could hear in her voice that she meant what she had said. She had made a decision today, and it included him.

How he would go on with his life after she was gone, he did not know. But he knew he wanted her more than he had ever wanted a woman before.

His voice would have been hoarse if he had answered her, so he got up and kissed her instead.

He had kissed often in the past ten years, since he had found a home and a life on this island. He had kissed young women and older ones, brunettes and black-haired women and redheads. Women mostly much smaller than him; never anyone as tall as her. He loved to kiss, and he always looked forward to this magical moment when the lips touched for the very first time. To him, a kiss was foreplay as much as main attraction since not all women he had kissed had landed in his bed afterwards.

Tessa's kiss was different. From the moment their lips touched, he was electrified by her taste, her smell, and her warmth. And he could sense her fear, her hope, and a fire burning inside her that surprised him. She had appeared to be a prudish woman, more shy than any other he had ever courted, and now he found out that he had been wrong. She was anything but prudish; nor was her kiss.

She did not hesitate. It seemed that now that she had made her decision, she would stick with it. Her lips parted and welcomed him, soft and warm lips, and a small, hungry tongue. Her hand slipped behind his neck and pulled him down, the other one sneaked up his shirt and whispered over his skin.

It was dark, and his eyes were closed, and he thought she was more real than ever before. Her heart was beating fast. Her breasts, small and with hardened nipples, were pressing against his chest. She had taken the lead, kissed him hard and demanding, as if she hadn't kissed anyone in a very long time. Pulling him backwards until she bumped into the handrail, she managed to sit on it without breaking the kiss.

Both of her hands went to his face, examined it, and he felt exposed to her, naked, although he had all his clothes on. Her fingertips followed his cheekbone, found his eyebrows and finally dug into his short hair. Her legs, a moment ago dangling in empty air, wrapped around his waist. He was caged, imprisoned, in her hands entirely, and he knew in that very moment that next year it would be hard, if not impossible, to find a new love for two or three weeks.

A growl emerged from her throat, and he felt the little hairs on his neck stand up. He wanted this woman in a way he had never wanted anyone else entirely, completely, from head to toes and including her heart and soul. So he melted together with her, pressed his body against hers and hers against his, lifted her up, and carried her into his bedroom.

Lights, candles shone when he placed her in the middle of his bed. She didn't weigh much, and the work in his vineyard, handling the barrels, had made him strong.

Somewhere on the way, she had kicked off her shoes, and now she wore only her skirt and the top. No sunglasses. Her eyes appeared nearly as black as his in the candlelight, and she watched him, waited for his next step.

He undressed whilst standing in front of her, and as slowly as he could master. Usually, he just threw his clothes into the next corner to get into bed as quickly as possible. Tonight, he had the feeling that he should give her every opportunity to revise her decision, to get out of his bedroom if she wanted to. So he unbuttoned his shirt as slowly as possible and realised that he liked her watching him doing so.

One button after another. Slowly, as he had promised himself. Carelessly, the fabric slid to the floor, and the only thing he now wore were his shorts. His erection was clearly visible even in the dim light. His length pressed against the thin fabric, and the touch of it was sweet torture and lustful torment.

Tessa came to him, knelt on the bed, and ran her fingertips over his tattoo. Maybe deliberately, maybe accidentally, her thigh only so slightly brushed across his groin, and he hissed with desire, but didn't move.

"Yellow, orange, and red. Black and green it resembles a flower, doesn't it?" She traced the stalk, the petals, the leaves of his tattoo.

"A sunflower," he said, and yes, his voice was hoarse as expected. Standing still whilst she examined him was new to him. He was surprised how much he enjoyed to be examined.

"I have never seen anything like this. Not that I am familiar with tattoos, but this one looks nearly real. It moves with your breath; it seems as if the flower gets brushed by the wind. It's wonderful, Carlos."

He smiled her poetic words for the tattoo pleased him. "I had it done nine years ago, in a tiny place in Barcelona. I had nothing but a black-and-white sketch, and the artist exceeded even my highest expectations."

Breathing on his skin, inhaling his scent, she kissed the centre of the sunflower. Tasted him, went higher, bit his neck. Found the corner of his mouth and smiled when she

felt his breath hitch. Kissed him again, followed the shape of his body with her hands from shoulders to waist to thighs.

His shorts became too tight now something he needed to change desperately, but not before he had undressed her at least partially. She didn't hinder him when he pulled the ribbon out of her pony tail and slipped his hand under the strap of her top. Slowly, he slid it down her arm, slow enough that she could have stopped him had she wanted to.

Instead, she pulled the top over her head with a surprisingly strong touch of aggressiveness. Naked down to the waist she knelt on the bed, something like defiance and challenge in her eyes. Her shoulder muscles stood out as if she had just mastered not crossing her arms over her chest.

His confusion at her behaviour must have shown in his face. With a bittersweet, sad little smile she said, "My husband... he likes bigger breasts, according to the magazines I found in his drawer. I know I am too skinny and too bony. Too many angles and not enough flesh, as he once phrased it when he was drunk. I'm sorry if you... if you are disappointed as well."

Slowly, he raised his hand and caught her before she could slip away from him. Now he knelt on the bed with her, looked at her, drank her in. "You are beautiful. I have told you that before. I say it again. Beautiful and adorable and marvellous, and your breasts are the perfect size anyone who doesn't see that is an imbecilic idiot."

A genuine, mischievous smile crossed her lips, and she relaxed visibly. Putting her arms round his neck, she said, "Your voice has a sharp edge when you get angry. Usually, it is warm and gentle and even has a slight Spanish accent. Right now, you nearly sounded like the man you remind me of every now and then."

"If he weren't dead, I would have a strong word with him about being in your mind whilst I try to seduce you." Teasingly, he ran his hand down her throat and upper arm, cupping her breasts, squeezing them gently. Massaging them made her whimper, and she allowed him to press her backwards onto the pillows. When he took one of her erect nipples between his teeth, she grabbed hold of the bedpost, arched her back, urged him on. Only moments later, one of her hands landed on his still shorts-covered arse, searched for the hem, and went round to find the buttons.

His turn to whimper. He hadn't been with a woman for a year, but even if he had been sated, satisfied, she would have heated his desire with her demanding fingers, her lovely kisses, and her big, cheeky eyes. *Brown, they are brown*, he observed and wondered why he thought this should bother him.

She found the buttons and undid them, slowly as he had undone the buttons of his shirt earlier on. She teased him, and she knew it she dropped her shyness, and her face was shining with delight as she saw and felt his desire. Her hand, hot and curious, pushed his shorts down he kicked them off and stretched out on the bed, giving her free access to every part of his body she was interested in.

Apparently, she was most interested in his cock, which was more than fine with him. Finding his balls, squeezing them to the edge of pain, she forced another moan out of him before she moved, settled between his legs and closed her lips over his moistened tip.

Surprised, he forced his eyes open and watched her, only lightly touching her fair hair. One of her hands was on his hip, the other around the base of his shaft. She didn't move much, used only her lips and teeth, and it was pure heaven. There was no possibility of keeping his eyes open he only wanted to feel and to enjoy and, hopefully, to keep control so he wouldn't spill in her mouth.

When she kissed him after an eternity of giving him oral pleasure, he tasted himself none of his former lovers had done this before. It was very strange to savour his own lust strange, but arousing as well. It made him crave for more. For more of her. And as he considered it unfair that she still wore her skirt, he pushed one hand up her leg, taking the fabric along until the skirt lay crumpled around her hips.

"Take it off," she whispered and lifted her bum just long enough for him to get rid of skirt and knickers in one go.

Her skin was warm, but she shivered. Either with lust, or with fear, or maybe with a little bit of both. "Make love to me," another whisper, and he heard no fear in her words, just the need to be with him, to feel him inside her, on top of her, with his arms round her body, and his forehead touching hers.

Spreading her legs, he found her wet curls darker than her hair and her swollen labia. Tentatively, he teased her, dipped his fingertip into her wetness and smiled when she bit her trembling lip, letting no more whimpers escape. "Are you afraid the neighbours would hear you?" he mocked and slipped on top of her. "I have none." His tip just touched her entrance, and a heartbeat later, she had her legs wrapped round his hips.

"Not the neighbours the children," she breathed, and he pushed, slipped smoothly inside her, filled her.

A push and hold. "The walls are thicker than they look," he murmured. Push hold. "Moan and scream. Whatever you wish, Tessa."

Push hold. Faster this time as she pressed herself against him, met his thrusts, welcomed him. Their rhythm adjusted after only a few heartbeats, and he forgot how to think and how to talk, how to reason and how to mock. He just felt her body underneath his, her breath against his ear, heard her gasps and then her soft screams, mingled with his own sounds of lust. He held her as close as possible, felt like becoming united with her, and wished with all his heart this night would never end; that this moment would last forever, this moment so close before both their orgasms.

A second, a blink of an eye before he would have spilled inside her, she interrupted their dance simply by moving against the rhythm. When he thrust, she didn't meet him but moved away. He felt her hands pushing at his shoulders, and he rolled over, taking her with him until she sat on him, his aching, hard length still deep inside her.

She stared at him and rocked her hips, gently, barely visible. Circling, rotating, she watched him, and when she saw him pressing his head deep into the pillow with pleasure, she smiled and increased the speed only so slightly. "Did you really think I would let you off the hook so quickly?" she murmured, her hands resting on his chest. "It's been a while since I have had sex that has been worth mentioning, Carlos. I want this to last as long as possible."

"Precisely my opinion," he managed. Her breasts bounced gently, the nipples hard and rosy in the candlelight. Reaching up, he took them between thumb and index finger, pinching them, teasing them until she yelped.

Gods, how much I love getting fucked, he thought, for the moment denying that this was much more for him than a mere shag. Thinking about the fact that she meant a lot to him, that he had developed deep, very deep, emotions for her. *I will get hurt again* he knew it there and then but ignored this thought, this fear, and just watched their joined bodies and finally came with her, kissing her whilst spending inside her and feeling her orgasm nearly as intensively as his own.

It was long past midnight when they decided that, for a first night together, it had been enough. They had made love again after the first time, and then again once more. Exhausted but ridiculously happy, he had pulled her into his arms, had fished for the bedcover and now bathed in the heat her body radiated.

She, already half asleep, let her fingers wander across his chest. Up to his throat, over his shoulder, and down his left arm her fingertips whispered. Where they stumbled over the bracelet he always wore and never took off. "I like this," she murmured. "It looks good on you. Strange that it is so cool although you are so warm."

"It is always cool," he answered, not willing and not able to tell her more about it. The bracelet was a necessity, and it had unusual powers. She wouldn't understand, and so he forced the subject to change. "I'm very sorry, dear, but I need to get up for a moment. Would you..."

"... let you get out of bed? Only if you promise to check on Rose and Hugo and then come back here immediately." Her voice was sleepy, and she didn't try to hold him back when he slipped out of bed.

Naked, he crossed the room and went to the bathroom, where he relieved himself and washed his hands and his face. The cold water woke him up a bit. He didn't want to doze off yet, wanted to stay awake for another hour at least so he could watch her sleep.

When he went upstairs to make sure the children were fast asleep, he heard a faint sound and flinched. It was a small sound, merely a chirping. A mobile phone. Not his. He didn't have one. Hers.

Maybe just a friend. Or her mother.

That time of the night? he thought. *Highly unlikely.*

Her husband, then.

To hell with those things.

But of course she owned a mobile, and he understood that she hadn't switched it off. Husbands got suspicious when their wives didn't answer the phone, especially if they didn't answer it at two in the morning.

Feeling stupid, standing in a dark room, listening to the breathing of two sleeping children, he went downstairs again and heard her voice, quiet and slightly angry. He had no intention to eavesdrop, but then, he couldn't deny his past. Back then, he had gathered any information to survive. Here, he wanted to know if she was happy to talk to her husband.

"... middle of the night! No, I told you they are asleep. It is not my fault that you didn't remember the time difference between here and Hawaii, Ron. Yes. Ring me tomorrow. Good night!"

He saw her stuffing the phone back into her bag, which lay in the corner of his bedroom. She stared at the bag for a moment, then turned and went back to bed.

That name... and the way she held her head, with her chin up, and an aggressiveness he hadn't seen before. She looked angry and determined...

That frown on her face... No sunglasses covered her eyes, of course not, and without them, her face looked so familiar in this light. He was reminded of Hogwarts' dungeons, of books, of the time when he had been a teacher.

Who did she remind him of?

Ron. Ron who?

Ron the husband, of course.

Then realisation hit him hard. That name, her husband's name, had finally opened the barrier to his memory, the one that had nagged him for over a week now.

Suddenly, he recognised her. She was taller than he remembered her, and the hair was wrong. But the way she moved... yes. Definitely. She had matured, but it was her. No surprise she had looked like a schoolgirl earlier on she had once been a schoolgirl, and not just any schoolgirl, but one he had taught. The brightest witch of her age. Annoying and bothersome and asking endless questions, and had she really married that Weasley boy?

He stared at her, eyes wide and jaw clenched, and he couldn't prevent cold dread from creeping up his spine, forming an icy fist in his stomach. Hermione. This was Hermione Granger, and for one breath-deprived moment, he refused to believe it.

Recognition

Chapter 7 of 13

Ten years after the war, a man takes a stroll along the beach and meets someone from his past.

Recognition

He stood in the doorway, unable to move, rooted to the spot. His mind was a whirling chaos, her name, her real name echoed in his ears as if he had said it aloud, and how the hell could it be her?

That was the moment when she looked up, saw him, and smiled. "There you are. Are the children asleep? Come to bed, please. It's cold without you."

He needed to grab the doorframe for support. Opening his mouth, he found that not a word would come out.

Hermione Granger. *Good gods*, he thought desperately, *how could I not recognise her sooner?*

Eyes wide, she pushed herself back until she touched the bed's headboard she must have sensed that something had changed. Frowning, she looked at him. "Carlos. What's wrong?"

"Everything," he wanted to say and, "I'm sorry," and, "You should have told me." Instead, he took a step towards her, towards his bed where she sat and now pulled at the blanket that covered her breasts. He couldn't have said why he was sorry, only that he had an urge to apologise for not being Carlos, for not always having been a winegrower, for having to hurt her in a moment or two. Because hurt she would be, hurt and shocked and quite possibly disgusted. After all, he had been the terror of her years at Hogwarts. And everyone believed him dead.

Shock didn't last long even after all those years, he was still far too used to secrets getting unravelled. But unlike his reaction in younger years, he didn't become cold and aggressive at the fact that someone had lied to him. Here, he needed to know. Everything. Therefore, he came to the bed, knelt down and took her face between his hands. A tiny, nearly unnoticeable charm tingled at his fingertips; it had been there all the time, but he hadn't felt it until a moment ago.

"*Finite Incantatem*," he whispered, running his hands through her hair. In the wake of his touch and as a result of his spell, the magic melted, and her hair grew longer, darker, and a lot bushier.

She gasped, looking equally horrified at the fact that he had just woven magic and because he had changed her appearance. "How do you... Why do you know... Who are you?"

Stammering, she tried to get away from him, and he let her. There was no use holding someone back who didn't want to stay; he had learned this lesson early in his life. At

the farthest corner of the bed she now sat trembling, white as paper and crumpling the sheet in her fists into sweaty balls.

"I know you," he said quietly. "I know your name or at least knew it some years back. Hermione Granger. The man on the phone was your husband. Ronald Weasley, I assume. I heard you saying his name. I recognised you. You have looked familiar for days. Now I know why." Unhappily, he wiped a tired hand across his face. This night had been wonderful so far, but just a few more words and she would run from him.

Tears born out of bewilderment ran down her face. "Who are you? Why do you know me?" she whispered. Despair and fear laced her questions. Very clearly fear. Hearing it hurt.

He wanted to touch her face, the lips he had kissed only a little while ago. "You know me," he stated. "You have known me since you were eleven years old. I look familiar to you as you looked familiar to me. But ten years is a long time. I guess I changed as much as you did."

And because he couldn't stand seeing her cry and as the bed wasn't that big, he reached out and wiped her tears off with a careful hand.

"You... are a wizard," she began, stating the obvious like so often when she had been a child. It made him smile, although he hated to remember those dark times.

"Yes. And you *know me*. Look at me, Hermione."

She did. Her eyes wandered over his hair, his face, brushed across the scar along his jaw and examined the crooked bridge of his nose. Lingered when she looked into his eyes, those very, very black eyes he usually covered with sunglasses.

Her voice nearly broke when she said, "This is impossible. Simply and absolutely impossible." Hesitantly, and as if to assure herself that he was not a dream, a nightmare, a ghost, she leaned forward and ran a fingertip across his cheek.

He didn't move and didn't flinch from her touch. It was highly unlikely that she would touch him again once she had accepted the truth. "You said it yourself: I reminded you of someone. Of someone from your past. Someone you disliked. I never as much as guessed that I could remind you of myself."

"He is dead." Clear words, spoken to reassure herself. "I saw him die. Harry and Ron saw him die. He is dead, he's buried, and you can't be him." Impatiently, she wiped off some more tears, which constantly ran down her face. "I cannot have fallen in love with my former Potions professor. That would be cruel. Please, Carlos, tell me you are not him!"

He had to close his eyes for a moment, gathering his strength. He would have never expected that it could be so very hard to be recognised. Sometimes, he had hoped he would bump into someone who knew who he had been, who shared a past with him. Sometimes, it was nearly unbearable, not being able to talk to like-minded people. No one here on the island knew that he was a wizard; no one knew he had once been a spy.

She knew. Now. And the knowledge had just destroyed what had begun to grow between them.

Clearing his throat, he said, "My name is not Carlos, and you know it. I don't use magic when I'm at the beach. My house is filled with Muggle books simply because I always chose a Muggle woman to come here with me, and... And I am sorry, Hermione. Had I recognised you, I would have never gone near you."

Her head snapped up, and now she pulled back her hand. "Do you regret it? Do you regret you have met me, have taken me here? Do you consider it a bad decision, now that you know who I am?"

Goodness, but she was as beautiful as a warrior princess when she was angry. Seeing her jumping up and pacing the room stark naked was a most extraordinary sight. Her hair, not enchanted anymore, reached down to her waist and whipped through the air. Her skin was flushed, her teeth and fists clenched. He could do nothing but sit and stare and try to keep his idiotic, aching heart in check.

Furious now, with all tears gone, she rushed over to where he sat on the bed. "How did you survive? And who saved you? Tell me. I want to know. I need to know, and I want you to tell me everything!"

"May I get dressed first?" He couldn't help the sarcasm creeping into his voice.

"Forget it," she snapped and threw one of the pillows towards him. "Talk. Prove that you really are who you claim to be."

That made his lips twitch. He remembered her as a child and as a teenager, naturally, as she and her friends had made his life profoundly complicated. She had been brilliant in every way, and she had never known when to better keep her ever-talking mouth shut. Demanding, short-tempered, tart all those attributes broke free, and he was at the centre of her wrath.

It could be worse, he mused. She could have stormed off ten minutes ago.

"First: you didn't see me die. You saw me fall into a coma from which I didn't wake for three months. I expected the Dark Lord's attempt to kill me. I never went near him without a Bezoar in my pocket. Nagini was his weapon more than once, and I wasn't really that surprised that he used her to finish me off. But in the end, it was Amicus Carrow who found and rescued me. He considered me useful after the Dark Lord's death, apparently hoped I would vouch for him after a year in my employment. The Bezoar neutralised the snake venom; Carrow dragged me to a Muggle hospital, where they took care of the wounds Nagini had ripped."

Her jaw dropped. "A *Muggle* doctor? And they really managed to save your life? I wouldn't have expected that."

He was amused about her consternation. "They are capable of basic medicine," he said with a smirk. "You as a Muggle-born witch should know that."

She pulled a face, but didn't comment on his words.

"When I woke, Amicus told me that I was believed to be dead. His sister had died at the battlefield, and he planned to leave the country before he was found. He advised me to stay dead, and left. I was of no use to him, as I was too weak to even eat on my own for weeks after I'd woken up. I was glad to see him go. He was a cruel man and a lousy teacher, and I wouldn't have known what to do if he had demanded assistance in his plans."

Did he just see pity in her eyes?

"My arm was useless, and I didn't know where to go and what to do. Unable to wield magic, I briefly considered killing myself before I decided that such an act would only be further proof of my pathetic weakness. Therefore, I fled the hospital as soon as I could stand on my legs, left the country and began travelling."

She had stopped pacing and settled on the floor a few feet away from him, hugging a pillow to herself. They possibly made a ridiculous picture, but he didn't care. It was so very good to be able to talk without having to watch his words; it was a relief to tell someone the truth.

"What do you mean, your arm was useless and that you couldn't use magic?" she asked and nodded towards his shoulder. "You seem to be fine. Your shoulder and arm definitely feel all right and look strong and healthy. You just have used magic, finishing the charm on my hair. What was wrong with you?"

He was sitting on the bed, cross-legged; she was sitting on the cold, hard floor and had to look up at him; a disturbing sight, as it reminded him even stronger of their days at school. "Come over here," he begged. "Sit on the bed with me. I don't want you to catch a cold."

"Sure," she grumbled, but did as he suggested. "Your arm? Your magic? Does the tattoo have anything to do with what you are telling me?"

Still insisting, she was. Never gave up. Back then, it had annoyed him. Here, tonight, it was a soothing thought that some things never changed despite time, circumstances, and first impressions.

"Nagini's venom had destroyed muscles and nerves," he explained. "When I woke at the hospital, my arm felt like a dead piece of wood, and it hurt to an extent that I would like to forget. The Muggle doctors didn't know what the problem was, I couldn't tell them, and I feared I would be crippled for a long time. When I tried to use magic at night, when everyone was asleep I found I couldn't. So after I left the hospital, I went to my house at Spinner's End, gathered as many medical potions as possible, and tried to figure out a way to get my strength back and to keep the pain at bay." Tentatively, he flexed the fingers of his right hand, remembering the long months of suffering. "The tattoo is what I came up with. I found the solution in an old book in Hungary, copied the picture, and went to find someone who could tattoo the magic into my shoulder. In combination with the bracelet, it works well. The runes in the jewellery support the magic in the tattoo, the tattoo covers the scars and nullifies the pain. Without either, I would be unable to work or swim or butter my own toast. With them, I can even use magic as long as I don't exaggerate."

She edged a bit closer, and his heart sang. "There should be scars," she murmured, touching the sunflower with a single finger. "I've seen the wounds; they were nasty. But there are no scars. Fascinating." She looked up. "Show me," she demanded. "Take the bracelet off."

"It's not a pleasant sight," he warned her. She just waited, so he murmured an opening spell and let the bracelet drop to the sheets.

Slowly, the bright colours of the sunflower faded. The skin turned lighter, appeared thinner. With every breath he took, his right shoulder became more prominent as the scar worked its way to the surface. Simultaneously, he felt his elbow twitch and his wrist when the first portent of pain shot from fingertips up to his neck.

She placed her hand on his upper arm. "I can feel it; the magic as well as the damage. Had Mr Carrow taken you to St. Mungo's, this might have been preventable. But obviously that was not an option."

He shook his head once and absently circled the pale skin round his wrist where the bracelet usually covered his skin. "By the time he found me, he didn't know I was Dumbledore's man. He considered the Muggle hospital the safest place for me. Despite being a Death Eater, he was not stupid, and at that time he hoped I could help him if only I survived. His grandmother was a Muggle a fact he hid well from the Dark Lord and he knew they would medicate me without questions at the hospital. When it turned out that he was better off without me, he was gone like the wind. Luckily."

She nodded and picked up the bracelet. Turned it in her slender fingers, read the runes her son had seen before her. "Perfect. Absolutely wonderful. What is the effect when you take it off?" She held it out to him.

Gratefully, he took it. "My fingers get numb nearly immediately, and if I don't wear it for more than two or three hours, I can't move my arm anymore," he explained. "For some reason, the pain prevents me from using magic as well, so getting rid of the pain brought my magic back. Both results were... a relief." With a small sigh, he snapped the bracelet closed round his wrist, not telling her how horrible the months had been whilst he had been travelling and searching, seeking out libraries and books. The pain had nearly brought him to his knees, and most times, he had been reading all night through as he had been unable to sleep anyway. He didn't tell her how close he had been to madness at the thought that the pain would stay forever and the prospect of having to live a life without magic. Shaking his head to get rid of the memories, he added, "And of course the bracelet covers the Dark Mark." Turning his wrist, he showed her the black abomination, less prominent on his tanned skin and already fading as the magic began to work.

She ran her fingers across the spot, now unmarked and smooth. Shivers went down his spine, and he decided it was time to change the subject. "Tell me why you call yourself Tessa."

That made her smile. "It's my cousin's name. I always liked it, and when you asked me, it sort of dropped off my lips before I could help it. Everyone has asked me for my name from the minute we had arrived, and I was tired of it. I felt like a stupid tourist, so... well."

"Your hair? Why blond? Why short?"

Another smile. She definitely had relaxed. Hope fluttered in his chest like a caged bird.

"Well, it's quite hot here, and long hair is not too comfortable. As you have found out by yourself." She brushed her palm over his head. "Besides, I wanted something different. I thought the colour would suit me, and brushing this mess of so-called hair costs me at least half an hour every morning. Rose has inherited my hair, and I feel sorry for her, believe me."

Slowly, so very slowly he touched the brown mass. "Stupid woman," he said, affection lacing his words. "Your daughter is a beauty already; I thought so when I first saw her, but assumed she looks more like her dad. Your hair and hers is wonderful. I never go after blond women; they are not my type. Nearly, we didn't even meet. Just because you looked so sad, and because something drew me towards you, I said hello. Not meeting you would have been a tragedy."

"No regrets?" Slowly, she dropped the pillow, sitting before him naked again. "Look at me, now that you know who I am. After my marriage, I grew another few inches, but somehow I didn't put on more flesh. I turned from averagely sized and nicely rounded to tall and scrawny in less than three months. Madam Pomfrey says it happens every now and then and that I should be glad to have the body of a model. Ron was less happy. He prefers the Rubens form in a woman."

Snorting, he threw his pillow aside as well. "Mr Weasley always has been extraordinarily stupid. How on earth could you marry him?" With a fingersnap, he dimmed the light. It was easier to talk about personal matters when one couldn't see every movement in the other one's face.

She lowered her head. "We kissed the night Voldemort died. From then on, everyone assumed we were together. And he was devastated at Fred's death. He leaned on me, needed me, and I didn't have the heart to tell him that I wanted to study at Camelot University rather than travelling the world. We married. He was offered the Goal-Keeper's post on the England Quidditch team." A sigh. "I got pregnant. He kept playing. You know the rest. And now you tell me how we should go on from here."

Surprised, he raised an eyebrow. "Are there options? More than the obvious one that I sleep at the beach whilst you stay with your children for the night, then leave in the morning and never come back?"

Thoughtfully, she put her chin in her hand and let her eyes wander across his body. It felt even more intimate than a touch, and for some reason he remembered that this was exactly what he had been craving: to know her, to find out who she was, and what she dreamed about. To learn about her fears and her hopes. He hadn't expected that there was that much to find out.

Did it really matter that she had been his student once? That a decade ago, he had disliked her, had wished her as far away from him and Hogwarts as possible because she had made spying, his job to bring the Dark Lord down, harder than it already had been? Now, here in his bedroom, she was someone else. She had matured. She was married, had children. She would...

"Definitely more than that one option," she interrupted his thoughts. "I could Obliviate you. I have my wand in that bag, but you don't have yours. One flick, one spell, and you wouldn't remember anything." She held out her hands, palms open. "But you might like to prevent me from doing that."

He closed his fingers round her wrists and pulled her a little closer. Their knees touched, and he couldn't prevent the image of her legs wrapped round his waist from crossing his mind.

"Don't Obliviate me," he said simply. "I don't want to forget you. And yes, my wand is at home in the mountains where I live the better time of the year. Using magic still tires me quickly. I only use my wand for potions making and at the final stage when filling my wine into bottles, adding a bit of... Well. Magic, I suppose."

Her face lit up. "That your wine is magical is obvious even to me. What potions do you make?"

He could smell her scent, warm and flowery. He could hear her breathe and saw the pulse beating in her throat. He would tell her anything if only she stayed for a little while longer.

"Healing Potions, mostly, and extracts that prevent my vines from insects. The sun lotion is my creation as well," he said. "The sun is strong here, and I was burned badly from the moment I sat foot on the island. Conchita told me that even the natives get a sunburn every now and then. And of course I couldn't just heal myself it would have caused too many questions. So I procured a cauldron and began to brew a proper lotion. It is the base of my income. Most tourists find out soon enough after a swim in the ocean that their stuff doesn't work properly."

This time, she laughed. "Always the Potions master." Then she wrapped her arms round his neck. "I could sleep upstairs until morning. We could have breakfast together. You could take all of us to the waterfall Rose was so excited about. Then I could take my children back to the hotel, trying to explain to them why you don't visit us any longer."

She thought about that for a moment with her head tilted and then clearly discarded the idea. "No. Wouldn't work. They like you too much. Therefore, the last possibility is the easiest one, too. Everything stays as it is until our holiday is over."

"Everything?" His words were full of longing. His body reacted to the warmth she radiated, her smell and the sensation of her hair touching his legs.

"I guess I could convince myself that you are nothing but a winegrower, Carlos," she whispered and leaned in to kiss him.

Ten days later, when she and her children sat safely in the plane back to England, his heart hurt so badly that he considered earnestly giving up his life here on the island. To go back, to make it public that he was still alive. To follow her and to tell her that he loved her.

To ruin her marriage. Her life. To take her away from her husband and to separate her from her children. Ron Weasley would go after full custody for Rose and Hugo, and if only because his mother would order him to do so.

He could destroy her simply by following his heart.

He hadn't told her he loved her in the past weeks, and he wouldn't do so now. She had to go back to her real life, to her husband, her family. He was certain she wouldn't forget him. He was equally certain that what she felt for him now would vanish quickly if he pushed into her life. Better to let her go.

He watched the plane disappear. Then he turned and walked back to his hut and from there, went back into his mountains, to his vines, to his life; a changed man, once again.

Decisions

Chapter 8 of 13

Ten years after the war, a man takes a stroll along the beach and meets someone from his past.

Decisions

It was quiet on the plane. Not many people were aboard and no children apart from Rose and Hugo. The stewardess was friendly and relaxed, the sun was already setting, and Hermione thought she would jump out and swim back to the island if nobody knocked her over the head.

Her neck hurt from not turning it, from not staring out of the window, from the strenuous task of keeping it straight instead of bending it and crying bitter, lonely tears.

Rose snuggled up to her from one side, Hugo from the other. She hugged her children, smiled, told them stories and felt her heart break with every mile the plane carried her away from him and back home to Ron.

Him. Carlos. Who wasn't just an ordinary winegrower. Whose name wasn't really Carlos.

Whom she had fallen in love with. After ten years of marriage, two children, a life, a house, a family...

They would never understand. Not Ron, who believed she didn't know about his affairs. Not her children, who loved their dad. Not her mother-in-law, who considered divorce something that happened only to other people. And not Harry, who was Ron's best friend and who had despised...

Him. The man back there on that island she had just left. The man no one would recognise, not in a million years. Whom she hadn't recognised, although she had made love to him.

Hugo was asleep, Rose's eyes were drooping closed. Therefore, Hermione finally gave in and allowed tears to run down her cheeks.

This is impossible, she thought for the umpteenth time. *It cannot be him. I disliked him so much when I was at school. And he hated children* He had been ugly and greasy and pale, he had not talked but snapped and snarled, he had not walked, only stalked. He was dead. She had seen it; she had been there.

Hugo snored quietly, and she smiled, wiping the tears away. It was over. Three weeks, three wonderful, marvellous weeks filled with laughter and joy and remarkable sex. An adventure to be forgotten as soon as possible. It didn't matter who he was now or had been a decade before. All that mattered was that it was over. She would go back home, back to Ron and the ridiculously big house and Molly's nagging and...

A bolt of anger, of hate, really, shot through Hermione. Her eyes narrowed, and her hands clutched the armrests in bitter realisation *If I go back to Ron, nothing will change*. She knew it. She was trapped in a life she didn't want and didn't like, and when, for fuck's sake, had she become so weak and whiny that she didn't even dare to think of changing it?

Housekeeping; washing, cooking, mending, and more washing and cooking.

She hated it. And it was simply impossible to go on like that. He hadn't recognised her! He had not seen who she was, and that was possibly the most shocking thing at all. A different haircut and colour shouldn't have changed her that much. And it wasn't because she had children, either.

It was because she wasn't herself anymore.

She had stopped being herself years ago. Slowly, surely, she had turned into someone she didn't recognise when she looked into a mirror. No wonder he hadn't, either.

Gently, carefully, Hermione stroked along Rose's back and pushed a stray lock out of Hugo's face. Both children were sleeping fast now, feet on the seats next to them, and Hermione shook her head when the stewardess offered her dinner. She loved her children so very much and would have died for them, killed for them without a second thought.

What if she went back to the island, what if she refused to pick up the threads of her real life again? Wouldn't she deprive her children of a mother who was happy? Hermione was pretty sure that if she continued with her life exactly as it had been before her holiday, she would change even more, would become depressive, unfriendly, and unfair.

Bad for her; worse for her children.

"I cannot leave Ron. Not now, whilst the children are this young," she whispered. "Molly would get them out of my reach for good, and I can't let that happen."

Her jaws were set and her eyes sparkled. "But I can change a few things."

Raising her chin, she silently charmed her ticket so that it said 'Destination: Sydney' instead of London. It wouldn't be easy, but with a bit of magic no one would become suspicious. Pity that Apparating with two small children was too dangerous. But then, her parents lived in Australia, and she hadn't seen them in years. Rose and Hugo would be delighted, Ron was in Hawaii for another month anyway, and besides...

Her mother would understand.

"You have met someone."

It wasn't a question but a statement, and Hermione couldn't help smiling at her mother's words. Yes, she had, and no, she hadn't told her mum yet. It was just that her mum seemed to know and was tired of waiting for her daughter to spill the news.

Hermione, standing in the kitchen doing the washing up, nodded briskly. "I have. And I really don't know how you know it."

Her mother, a good-looking, slender woman in her mid fifties, picked up the next cup to dry it. "It is obvious, honey. You are glowing. You can barely keep your mouth shut. You smile all day long, and sometimes, you stare into your tea as if you're trying to read the future from the leaves. So tell me who is it? Someone I know?"

It wasn't easy not to break things when confronted with such a direct question, Hermione had to admit and sat on the small table in the corner. Listening, she heard her children who were in the garden playing ping-pong with their grandfather. Through the window, she could even see them they were quite busy and would leave their mother alone for a little while longer.

Hermione poured herself and her mother a cup of tea. "No, no one you know. No one anyone knows," she summarised, unwilling to tell even her mother about the true identity of the man she had fallen in love with. "A winegrower. Someone I met on holiday. And it is serious. Unfortunately."

Her mother wrapped her hands round the cup. It wasn't cold in the kitchen, but she seemed to find comfort in the warmed porcelain. Quietly, she mused, "I don't know if I should be happy for you or warn you. A holiday fling is rarely lasting. But you are so happy. I haven't seen you so content in years. Would you... do you mind telling me what you will do?"

Now that was the main question, wasn't it? Hermione had thought about that question more or less constantly since she had left him. "I can't leave Ron," she stated as calmly as possible. "In the wizarding world, it is always the family with the magical background that gets custody over the children. The Weasleys have magic in their family for centuries; I have not. Molly would fight with claws and teeth to get sole custody for Ron, and she would win. It doesn't matter that Ron is barely home and that he probably wouldn't mind me having Rose and Hugo. He does what his mum says. Therefore, my children would grow up under Molly's wings. That is impossible; I won't let it happen. I have to wait until both Hugo and Rose are at Hogwarts."

"I see," her mother said comprehendingly.

Hermione flashed her a small smile. "But that's not the point. I will change a few things in my life. I will definitely get a job, and I will send Rose to primary school and Hugo to infant school. Eventually, they will go to Hogwarts, but until then I will not allow Ron or Molly or anyone else to tell me that I shouldn't do *this* and must do *that* instead." Draining her tea, she shook her head, already knowing Molly's reaction to the idea that Hugo and Rose would be exposed to the Muggle world.

"I thought Molly and Arthur were thrilled by Muggle inventions?" Caroline Granger asked mildly.

Hermione snorted. "Arthur is. Molly is, too, as long as not too many Muggle artefacts are stored in her garden shed. But in her opinion, the children should stay at home until it is time to go to Hogwarts. She thinks I should teach them how to read and how to write, and that the rest they can and will learn at Hogwarts. She taught all her children at home and thinks this is the only way. I hereby decide to disagree, and Ron isn't home often enough to be granted an opinion."

That made her mother chuckle. "It might seem unbelievable, but I had about the same problem when you were born, dear. Eighties or not, we lived in a small village," she mused. "My neighbours were scandalised that I stayed at home for only a year, then went back working at the surgery with your dad. I can't even remember how often I heard 'Children should be with their mother, not in daycare' whispered behind my back. I think it is a good idea to send Rose and Hugo to school. They will benefit from the contact with the Muggle world."

Hermione took another sip of her tea. "And what about the fact that I cheated on Ron? Doesn't that bother you? I mean, I never even dreamed about adultery, but..."

"You can't help falling in love, dear," her mother stated matter-of-factly. "And don't you deny it. You are very much in love with this winegrower. Describe him to me, will you? I'm curious about the man who has made my daughter so happy."

Restlessly, Hermione turned the cup between her hands. That her skin was slightly tanned was strange, that her hair looked the same tangled mass than ever a relief. Carlos had liked her hair so much better the way it was, had buried his hands and his nose in it, had stroked it and played with the long strands whilst they had been lying in bed together. "Happy," she said absently. "I thought I had forgotten how 'happy' actually feels. Had someone told me ten years ago that I would dislike being with Ron one day, I would have laughed. When I went on holiday, I hoped for three nice, uneventful weeks with my children. And then I bumped into Carlos."

"Ah. Carlos." Her mother smiled. "Spanish?"

"No. English. But he has been living on the island for nearly a decade. He's a wizard. I found out only about a week ago. He's tall and slim, he's deeply tanned, has short black hair and black eyes. And he's tattooed. A sunflower on his right shoulder."

"Definitely not son-in-law-material," her mother commented dryly. "How old is he?"

"Not really my age. About... twenty years older than I. Which doesn't really matter in our world. Wizards live a lot longer than Muggles as you know."

Caroline stared at her daughter. "This man seems to be... quite a change, compared to Ron. I know you don't love your husband anymore, Hermione, but this Carlos..."

"... is different. I know that. And as I said, I won't see him again. He took us to the airport and turned away without good-bye. We had a beautiful time, but it's over. It was nothing but a holiday affair."

"Of course, dear. Which is the reason for the tears running down your cheek."

"Damn," Hermione cursed, wiping her eyes dry. "I feel like a teenager again, freshly in love with all the ups and downs. Only that I am a married woman with a possibility next to zero of ever seeing Carlos again." A glance out of the window confirmed her guess: Hugo was hungry, and Rose was pulling her grandfather back into the house. "Any ideas, Mum? I'd be grateful for some advice."

Caroline took both their cups to the sink. "Figure something out, dear," she said. "You are said to be bright. I know you are. If you want to see him again, find a way to do so without Ron and the Weasleys knowing."

Molly Weasley wasn't the problem, and Ron wasn't, either. As usual, he wasn't home when Hermione arrived late at night, two weeks after she had planned to be home. Staying with her parents had proven to be a good decision; she had talked both to her mother and her father, both had embraced her and accepted her decision and encouraged her to do something to change the situation she was in.

"Talk to Ron," her father had advised, and "Do what you think is the best for you and the children," had come from her mother.

Coming home after sunset had the benefit that the house was quiet and dark. It was easier as she didn't see her home in bright daylight, didn't see everything she had bought in ten years' time. She lit one candle and told Rose and Hugo to go to bed immediately; she dumped her bags without bothering to unpack them, and when her children were fast asleep, she poured herself a glass of wine and settled on the stairs to the garden.

No ocean to listen to, no veranda, no sand, and no one sitting next to her, his fingers entwined with hers. No one she could share the silent moments before moonrise with; no one who knew what she thought even if she was quiet.

She sighed. Carlos wasn't here, which was one half of the problem. That his name wasn't Carlos the other half.

That she missed him so much shocked her. "Severus," she whispered into the darkness, and it sounded so wrong. "Carlos." Much better. "I wish you were here. I don't know how this could have happened..."

That was the question, wasn't it? How it had happened. How it had been possible to fall in love with someone she had believed dead, with someone who had terrified her when she was a child. To fall in love with *him*.

How she would manage to get over him was the next question. "I don't want to get over you," she stated to the night, the stars, and believed for a short, ridiculously romantic moment that he would be sitting in front of his house, looking at the stars like she did, thinking of her, like she thought of him, and missing her as badly, heart-wrenchingly like she missed him.

"Since when have you been stupid, Hermione?" she asked herself. "He said it once a year, he goes and seeks company, and this year, he found me. Next year, he will find someone else. Next year, he will have forgotten me. I am one amongst many. Nothing special."

If only she could believe it. It would have made things easier for her had she truly believed she meant nothing to him. But the way he had looked at her, mainly when he thought she wasn't realising it. So... longingly. As if she was the one he always had dreamed of. As if he wanted to say something, but didn't dare to.

Something stupid like 'I love you'.

Bugger. *That* made it really hard for her to get on with her life.

Tired and emotionally upset, she got up and stretched her back. It had been a long journey, and tomorrow she would have to announce a few decisions. Her children already looked forward to going to the local schools. Molly, Arthur, and Ron would be a different matter.

Molly and Arthur considered her a bad mother, but that was nothing new. Ron didn't really care what she did as long as she thought it was good for Hugo and Rose.

George Weasley, on the other hand, was speechless with joy when she told him. In the past years, after Fred's death, she had taken on the habit of visiting him in his shop in Diagon Alley about once a month. The children loved him, he spoiled them, and she had found it surprisingly easy to talk to him. He was the only one in the Weasley family who had a vague idea of her non-existing life with Ron. Actually, he had predicted it: "As soon as he is on the England's Quidditch team, he'll be gone, Hermione. He loves you, but he loves Quidditch more."

Back then, she hadn't believed it. Back then, freshly married, Ron had been depending on her, on her strength and her ability to make him get over Fred's death. It had looked good for them, even though she hadn't been able to concentrate on her studies as fully as she'd wanted to.

She didn't have to believe it anymore. She knew it was true. Her marriage was only an empty shell, and it must have shown clearly on her face because George, lounging on her couch in her overly large sitting room, barked out a dry laugh. "I've rarely seen you so unhappy, Hermione. I mean, I know you are unhappy, but usually you hide it behind a smile. What happened?"

"I happen to have woken up, George," she replied sadly. "I had time to think whilst on holiday. And I don't want to go on like this. Not working, not studying, not doing anything but raising my children is driving me mad." Restlessly, she got up and then, out of nowhere, she had an idea. A crazy, wild, utterly impossible idea. It took her breath away, and she stared at George for a moment, knowing that he didn't only sell joke items in his shop. For good customers, he organised everything they craved for, as long as it wasn't too illegal. Hard to get, though, was not only acceptable, but preferable for him to jump into action.

"I would like to offer you a glass of wine, George."

George grinned. "This time of day? But then, it's past lunch time, so fine by me. I hope it's not the dreadful stuff Ronnykins likes to drink." Stretching his legs, he looked most interested in anything his sister-in-law had to offer.

Hermione was already back from her room where she had hidden the bottle of Carlos's wine. She had found it in her luggage only two days ago when she had taken out all the clothes and toys. Covered by a stasis field, the bottle was in perfect condition. Now, she uncorked it and poured the golden, sparkling liquid into a crystal glass. *Style where style is needed*, she thought, and this wine needed the best glass she owned.

George, loving wine and knowing a good deal about it, took an expectant sip, kept it in his mouth for a moment, swallowed... and nearly dropped the glass. Disbelieving, he stared at the wine, then at Hermione. Another sip; the same reaction.

"Like it?" Hermione couldn't prevent the question from slipping out, although it was very obvious that George considered the wine drinkable.

"Impossible!"

"What is?"

"That you have this wine! I only had a glass once, a few years ago when I was invited to a customer's house. A very wealthy, awfully rich customer. He treated the bottle like his own child, he poured me a tiny sipglass, and he said he'd commit murder for another bottle. Where the hell did you get that one from?"

Hermione, all of a sudden, felt a warmth bubbling up in her, making her happy beyond reason. Carlos's wine, famous and treasured! "I only have that one bottle," she confessed, ignoring George's initial question. "However, I might be persuaded to give it to you if you want it. Under one condition."

Carefully, George put the glass on the table, eyeing it with a predatory sparkle in his eyes. "Which condition?" he asked. "I'm willing to pay you nearly everything for the rest of that wine, open bottle or not. If I could give as much as half a glass of this wine to the customer I mentioned... Wow. I don't even dare to think of the benefit it would give me!"

"I don't want money," Hermione stated, a plan forming in her mind. "And maybe just maybe I can organise a few more bottles sealed ones, naturally every year. My condition, though, is a contract with you. I'm good at finding unusual things. I know you always have trouble finding the rarer books. And some of the potions you need require travelling. You don't like to travel. I do. I want a job."

George narrowed his eyes. "Mum would kill me," he mused. "Ron would kill me, too he would need to be home more often, you are aware of that? And you would need to be gone for two or three weeks at a time, several times a year. Angelina hates that, which is the reason why I like to stay at home."

"Ron needs to look after Hugo and Rose more often anyway." Hermione's voice was hard when she said that. "They will forget how he looks if he continues to be absent much longer. And I don't care if Molly and Ron would kill you. I not only want a job, I need one!"

George got up and pulled her to her feet. They were nearly of the same height. "You can't have a job at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes," he said. "But if you can organise as much as another bottle of this wine, I will make you my partner. Deal?"

"Deal!" Hermione breathed, then hugged him tightly and tried not to break his ribs whilst doing so.

This evening, when Hugo and Rose were tugged into their beds, Hermione sat down to write a letter.

A Letter and a Meeting

Chapter 9 of 13

Ten years after the war, a man takes a stroll along the beach and meets someone from his past.

A Letter and a Meeting

Dear Sir,

Due to unusual circumstances, I came across a bottle of wine which is said to have been made by you. One of my customers is craving this wine, and I promised my business partner, George Weasley, that I would do everything in my power to acquire another bottle. I would like to meet with you in a week's time to discuss conditions of a possible contract. I will arrive at 5:30 p.m. For a description of the meeting place, please see below.

With best regards,

Hermione Granger-Weasley

~~~~~

Stunned, Severus Snape, in the last years better known as Carlos, read the words over and over again. A big, grey owl had delivered the letter about an hour ago, but hadn't waited for an answer. Therefore, he had no way to deny her the meeting as he didn't own an owl and would have to go to the mainland to find someone who did.

Besides, he didn't want to cancel the meeting. She had been cheeky enough to describe his hut at the beach as a meeting point, and he guessed she would Apparate there. Given the formal tone of the letter, he very much doubted that the children would be with her. Therefore, this was about wine and not at all about the two of them.

Maybe.

Carlos placed the parchment on his worktable in front of him, smoothed it out with his flat hand, and allowed himself to think of her for the first time in a month for the first time since she had left.

He remembered her. Her hair, soft and long on his pillow, whilst she slept in his arms. The gentle rising of her chest and the soft moans caused by pleasant dreams. Her lean figure: the small waist and long, slender hands. The sight of the sun behind her and her eyes, big and brown, with a sparkle of mischief every now and then when she was about to say something to amuse him, or shortly before she would push him overboard, backwards into the water. Her voice, warm and rough at the same time.

Of course he remembered her legs around his waist, her mouth on his and the feeling of being inside her, coming inside her.

He had deprived himself of those memories simply because it hurt too much to remember them. Although he had known that he had fallen in love with her, the strength of his feelings came as a shock for him. More often than not, he found himself staring off into nothing, neglecting his tasks, and abandoning his duties. Sometimes at night, he sat on his veranda, looking at the stars and imagining she would do the same. Pathetic, really, but he couldn't help it.

Damn shit that he loved a woman he couldn't have.

And now, there was this letter.

At first, he had refused to open it, fearing someone had finally found him, accusing him of murdering friends and relatives, of being a traitor, a Death Eater, and the Dark Lord's most devoted follower.

After a few minutes, he realised that, if someone who hated him had found him and knew who he was, this someone wouldn't write a letter to warn him. So he had unrolled the parchment, had read the words and now couldn't believe it was from her.

And what the hell for? Wine? A contract? Unlikely, but then, she wrote she was partners with George Weasley, the owner of that joke shop in Diagon Alley. If this was true, she didn't need the wine. If she didn't need the wine, why write?

Carlos sat until midnight and tried to solve the riddle of the letter. Maria placed bread and olives on the table, but didn't disturb him otherwise. Pedro poured him a glass of single malt whisky without a word. Both didn't try to interrupt his thoughts they knew it was useless.

When the moon set in the small hours of the morning, he went to bed and dreamed of her. Tessa. In his dreams, she always was Tessa, married to a faceless man, and not to someone he once had taught. In his dreams, she was willing to give up everything to live with a winegrower who once had been her Potions teacher.

\*\*\*\*\*

The week passed slowly. Carlos had to force himself to care for his vines. For the first time since he had come to the mountains, he wondered if it had been the right decision to stay here. Maybe he should have gone back to Hogwarts after the Dark Lord's death. Maybe fleeing, leaving the ruins of his life behind, was what a coward would have done. But at the time, facing the outcome of two decades of spying, accepting a trial and quite possibly a sentence in Azkaban had proven to be too much for him he had left, had become someone else, someone unknown.

On the other hand, Tessa had told him one quiet night that he had been honoured with an Order of Merlin, Second Class, because Potter had told everyone about his real motives. The whole world knew about Severus Snape's secret love for Lily Evans, his failures, his traitorous ways concerning the prophecy. Everyone knew he hadn't been a double but a triple spy. That he had been Dumbledore's man all his life, and that he had killed the old wizard not out of hate, but because it had been necessary.

Carlos absently dropped the pruners to the wet ground. It had rained the previous night, and it was important to cut down the old branches. Usually, it didn't take him that long to do it, but today, Pedro had already come twice to check on him, concern written all over his leathery old face and clearly wondering where his employer was and what was taking him so long. He couldn't know that the tall, silent man was thinking about the past and, by doing so, opening up old wounds.

Killing Dumbledore had been hard; ruling the school afterwards, pretending he was unimpressed by the Carrows' cruelty, faking disinterest in the students' pleas for help, had been even harder. For nearly a year after he'd fled, Carlos had been plagued by nightmares of dying children, accompanied by their very real cries when Amycus or Alecto used them as guinea pigs for their games.

Being killed by the Dark Lord had come as a relief, really. He had been certain that he wouldn't survive the final battle; he even had suspected Nagini being the weapon. Her attack had come fast, and her bite had hurt worse than anything else that came before. Still, he had been able to pass on the memories that were so very important to Potter's success. The faces of the three youths, terrified and pale with shock, occasionally drifted through his dreams even ten years after that horrible night.

Carlos smiled when he realised that he had dreamed *of her* every now and then. In his dreams, her face was white as a ghost's; her voice, speaking words he couldn't understand, was a child's voice. As a student, she had been so very annoying and yet so very brilliant. Pity he hadn't been able to give her credit for her answers, each one correct and each one already showing that she would turn into a most remarkable witch.

He had changed in the past years, he knew that. Even his fear of snakes had subsided on the island, simply because the damn things were everywhere. Small ones and big ones, most of them harmless and only a few poisonous. The one at his feet, for example, would make him sick if it bit him, so he silently took a step back and let it pass before he gave up on cutting his vines and went back into the house. He needed a shower. He needed to think of something other than the past.

Anything but her.

\*\*\*\*\*

Not thinking of her proved to be impossible. She was in his head day and night. Not even Lily had managed that, as there had been other things to occupy his mind: school, lessons, teachers, his difficult relationship with his mum, and even Potter and his gang. Tessa, though, was always there, right in front of his inner eye.

He couldn't think of her as Hermione and definitely not as Mrs Granger-Weasley. Sometimes, when he couldn't hinder it, her name escaped from his lips, and it was always the name she had given him when he had first met her, before he knew who she really was.

Tessa.

Damn it. He shouldn't meet her. He should stay in his mountains, with his vines and with Pedro and Maria. Tessa didn't know where he lived; she would stay at the house at the beach for an hour or two, realise he wouldn't come, and finally leave again.

But he knew she wouldn't give up. As his student, there had always been a question lingering on her lips, she never had been satisfied with easy answers, and he couldn't imagine that that had changed. Besides, she was a witch, and she probably would use a location spell to find him. His house in the mountains was warded against coincidental trespassing, even if someone with magical powers happened to pass by. The wards wouldn't fool someone determined to find him, though. Moreover, she could always ask where he lived. It was no secret amongst the ones who knew him, and he wouldn't put it beside her to seek out Conchita to get his address.

It was late, and with a sigh, Carlos admitted that he had made a mess out of his dinner. "Not only too salty but burned as well," he muttered and heard Maria's giggles. He had the strong feeling that she knew why he was so absent-minded but didn't dare to scold her. *She knows me too well*, he thought. *How could I allow anyone to get that close to me?*

Well, that was obvious, wasn't it? He had opened up to the people around him because if he hadn't, he would have died of loneliness. After Lily had died or after she had fallen in love with James, and he had abandoned her, to be truthful he hadn't allowed anyone to come near him again. He had fought alone, only lead by Dumbledore's decisions and plans. He had ignored his own needs, the needs that every human being had: to find a companion, to have friends, to enjoy love and to experience emotions other than hate and despair. Only when he had been close to death, bitten and half crippled by a giant snake, had he realised that he didn't want to die.

The consequence was a change in his appearance as well as in his behaviour. He had cut his hair; he had found himself work outside in the sun; he had taken on swimming as a method to train the muscles in his injured shoulder. He had also opened up to strangers. Pedro and Maria, Chino, Conchita friends, people who cared for him, people who liked him as he was.

But he had never allowed a woman to creep into his heart. Not after Lily. Losing her had torn him apart. Seeing her kissing James Potter had shattered his hopes so entirely that he had believed love to be a waste of time. Having been the reason for her death... Carlos shook his head and shoved the rest of his burned, salty dinner away with disgust. That was a path he wouldn't take today, thinking of Lily and why she had died. Once, it had been too painful. Now, it was a bitter and sad subject he had no intention to muse about.

Doing the washing up allowed him to calm his thoughts and make up his mind. He would go and meet Tessa. He would find out what she wanted, and he would guard his heart against the sight of her. The best thing to do was to assume she was here for business. Wine was what she wanted, so it would be wine she'd get. He could do with an extra bit of income, and it was impossible to sell the wine himself. The people on the island didn't have the money to buy expensive wine, and on the mainland, someone might recognise him. With an agent, though, a distributor like George Weasley and his shop, he could stay hidden and still sell his wine.

*Perfect plan*, he thought, satisfied, and went to bed.

\*\*\*\*\*

Two days later, the day she would arrive, Carlos was up at five in the morning, unable to eat, unable to sit still, unable to read or to do anything useful whatsoever. After two hours of getting in Maria's way, she kicked him out of the house and told him to go for a walk or to dig a new vegetable patch. She specifically forbade him to milk the goats or groom the horses, to go anywhere near the vines or even the chickens. "You make them nervous," she clarified at his thunderous expression. "You make *me* nervous. Best if you went to the beach to go for a swim, Carlos. Now!"

Angry at the fact that she was right, he packed his bag, then walked through the hills for an hour, chasing rabbits, and carefully avoiding bumping into Pedro. He didn't

need another scolding, and when the sun was high up in the sky, Carlos walked to the village three miles away, took the bus to the beach, and wondered why he was feeling like a doomed man on the way to the gallows. "She's just another summer fling," he murmured, quietly enough that the man sitting next to him didn't wake up. "I'm not in love with her. And she just wants a bottle of my wine. Actually, I should have sent Chino to meet her. He's better with contracts than I am."

"Hmmm?" the man next to him mumbled and shoved his body round in his sleep. His head rested on Carlos's shoulder, and on his lap he held a big, beautiful goose. The bus was packed. Another hour, and they would be at the beach.

"Nothing," Carlos assured the sleeping man. "Sleep on."

The man didn't wake until the bus came to a screeching halt, hugged his goose, and went to the market to sell it. Carlos, feeling by now as if he had walked all the way from the mountains, shouldered his bag and headed for his hut. It was another two hours by foot, but he didn't mind it was only one o'clock, he wasn't hungry, and he hoped walking would clear his head a bit.

Unfortunately, his hut looked exactly as he had left it. Inside, he thought he could smell her perfume in the air, could hear her laughter, could see the wet footprints of the children on the light planks. Sand was everywhere, and underneath the bed he found a ribbon that once, only a little while back, had held back Tessa's hair.

Goodness, he would have never believed he could miss anyone so very much.

Three o'clock in the afternoon, and he couldn't think of anything else but how the sunlight had reflected on Tessa's wild locks. This had never happened before once the ladies were gone, they were not part of his life or his dreams anymore. He enjoyed their company for as long as it lasted, and that was all. He held the memory of each of them dear, but he didn't feel like he was split in half without them.

Swimming was possibly a bad idea. It was very likely that he would drown, simply because he'd forget to move his arms and legs whilst thinking of her. Therefore, he went to the beach and began scrubbing the shells off his boat; work he hated to do under any other circumstances. Today, he welcomed the chore. It was hard, dirty work, and if he didn't concentrate, he would cut off his fingers with the sharp knife he used.

Of course he forgot the time in the end. He was just wiping his sweaty face, looking at the sun, and calculating the time when he heard the sharp crack of her Apparating. Irritated, he turned round, not believing he had spent more than two hours removing the shells off his boat.

But there she was. A moment ago, the beach had been empty, and now she was there. He could hardly believe how unspectacular her arrival was. He didn't Apparate, himself, anymore. It was unnecessary as the island was small; it was dangerous, as someone could become suspicious. In addition, it was tiring for him due to his injury, so usually, he took the bus or walked. He had nearly forgotten that it was a common way to travel in the wizarding world unless small children were involved.

Slowly, he dropped the knife and knelt down to wash his hands in the salty water. With every breath he took, with every heartbeat, he drank her in.

He didn't like what he saw. She was dressed as a businesswoman, with a blazer, elegant trousers, high heels, and even a pearl necklace on. A small handbag hung over her shoulder. The professional, dark blue fabric of her suit was an ugly contrast to the sand-swept veranda, and why the hell didn't she at least say hello?

Hesitantly, he wiped his hands dry on his shorts. It had been hot, so he had taken his shirt off. He was in the water up to his knees, sweat dripped off his temples, and he was anything but clean. He couldn't have made a worse impression. Closing his eyes for a moment, he gritted his teeth, waiting for her to frown, to wrinkle her nose, or any of the other small, but nevertheless so very important signs of her disgust at his sight.

She took a step, then halted.

*I wouldn't be surprised if she left without a word,* he thought, but then decided that he wouldn't make it that easy for her. She would at least look into his eyes before she turned and fled.

She dropped her handbag. A moment later, her blazer, impeccable and undoubtedly expensive, fell into the sand. Her hands came up to free her hair: a moment ago tamed in a tight bun and now nothing but a wild, chestnut-coloured mass cascading down her back.

Her shoes kicked off. Barefoot like himself now, she took a step towards him, whirling up sand. The white blouse was swept away by the wind when she let it slip over her shoulders, revealing a thin, cream coloured top. This was not a businesswoman anymore, and there was no disgust in her face. Only the same longing look he remembered so well.

He could just stare and get closer, step by step, disbelieving, but full of silly hope that this wasn't just another dream.

"Carlos," she said when he was only a foot away, and he caught her in his arms, pressed her body against his, felt her hair, her heartbeat and her smooth cheek pressed against his.

Hastily, she continued, "I will need a bottle of your wine, like I said in my letter. I have one week to finish the bargain. Ron is looking after the children, and he laughed his head off when he saw me in those clothes, but it had to look real. Everyone thinks you are a ninety-year old Spanish Muggle. Sorry for that." She took a breath. "I missed you!" she added, and he felt her lips at the corner of his mouth

"I missed you, too," he murmured in her hair and wasn't too surprised that his throat was tight with emotion. "Gods, you have no idea how much I missed you."

## Castles Built on Sand

*Chapter 10 of 13*

Ten years after the war, a man takes a stroll along the beach and meets someone from his past.

### Castles Built on Sand

□

He kissed her gently as if she was made of glass or gossamer. Deep down in his heart he feared that every moment she might vanish, that he would wake in his bed with nothing but air in his arms. It had happened too often in the past months; he didn't dare to trust his own eyes, his own senses, which told him she was very real. Warm and soft, her hands explored his naked back, slipping under the hem of his shorts whilst her tongue was in his mouth, dancing, teasing, and challenging him for more.



One push and they were in the water. Her trousers got wet, so she took them off, peeling the soaked fabric off her long, slender legs. She was naked before he realised she intended to take him here, now, on his beach, in the spindrift, but of course he didn't mind. On the contrary, making love in broad daylight under the open sky, not caring if anyone saw them, not thinking of possible consequences like upset neighbours or curious passers-by, was one of his most secret fantasies. Living out this fantasy with her of all women made him hard fast, and he picked her up and laid her on the sand where waves washed over them. "I didn't dare to hope you would come back," he whispered hoarsely, his left hand brushing over her skin up to her breasts.

"Then you are stupid," she replied and arched her back into his touch. "I told you I've fallen in love with you. I just needed a while to figure out how to get back here without raising suspicion." Her mouth on his neck, her hands on his arse, their legs entwined. Waves washed over them, sand was everywhere; and she tasted of salt and seaweed of perfume and orange juice when he kissed her. His erection was pressed against her belly, and for a tiny moment he had to smile, thinking of the fact that, some ten years back, no one would have ever dared to call him stupid.

But then, some ten years back he had been a different man. Darker despite his paleness, more bitter and nearly broken from the horrible life he had lived. "I apologise," he replied and parted her legs; an easy task because she very clearly wanted him. She pressed the whole length of her body against his, shivering under his touch as well as from the cool water. Her legs went round his waist, and gods, had it felt that good last time to enter her, to push inside her, to feel her warm, wet, welcoming tightness around him?

The sun burned down on them whilst they made love on his beach, his shorts drowned in the ocean and her clothes shed all over the place. They didn't care that they were loud, that he rasped her name when he came, or that she yelled out her lust and her climax. Maybe someone saw them, maybe not. Possibly they were heard, but so what? This was his house, his part of the beach, and she was his as well, at least for now, for the moment, and nothing counted but the desire in her brown eyes, uncovered by sunglasses, and the smile that told him she was really, really happy to see him.

\*\*\*\*\*

Afterwards, they lay in the spindrift, allowed the waves to wash them clean, and just held each other tight. Some seagulls observed them; one had landed on his boat and eyed them suspiciously. But the two humans didn't look as if they would jump up any moment, so the seagull picked at the shells and stayed for another little while.

Her wet, sandy hair stuck to her shoulders and her small, wonderful breasts. "You look like a mermaid," he said. "Did you say you have one week? And what bargain were you talking about? Why the business clothes, and how are Rose and Hugo?" He couldn't restrain himself from asking all the questions that jumped to his mind.

Her hand cupped his cheek, and she just looked at him, her head resting on his left arm. His right leg pinned her down; teasingly, her free hand danced over the small of his back. "You didn't really listen to me earlier on," she accused him. "But I guess I didn't really make much sense, either. I will explain everything, I promise. Yes, I have one week. Officially, I am here to persuade you to part with a bottle of your wine from the stories I've been telling, everyone believes that you are a hard nut to break when it comes down to parting with your wine. Once you've signed the contract, you will make a fortune by the way. As I am George's partner and responsible for the wine, we will be able to see each other more or less regularly and Carlos? I'm starving! Can we go inside and have something to eat?"

"Hmmm," he rumbled. "I guess I will have some fish. Mermaid, by the looks of it. Best enjoyed raw." His teeth nibbled at her earlobe, and then he trailed kisses down to her throat. His cock twitched at the combined sensations of water, sand, and skin.

Laughing, she pushed him over and got on top of him. Water dripped from her hair into his face, and it was impossible not to think of the first time they had made love in his bed. Not to think of her riding him.

"And a winegrower for dessert," she teased and moved her hips in a most sensuous, wanton way. "But if we don't go inside right now, I fear we won't make it to dinner for at least another hour."

"True." He had to agree. "But maybe we could have a shower before I start cooking?" That she was sitting on him with spread legs didn't help his growing erection at all, so he pulled her down, kissed her and rolled into deeper water with her a moment later. A wave washed over their faces. Coughing and laughing, they gasped for air, the sexual tension turning into a game, into the simple joy of playing with each other, chasing each other, trying to duck the other under water. Only when the sun went down, when it became chilly, they gave up and finally went inside, still naked and definitely very hungry. Each step left heaps of sand on the floor, and they decided not to shower together. They were sensible and just washed sand and salt off separately or at least, that was the plan until she squeezed shower gel into her hands and began massaging it onto her breasts.

"Too delicious to be resisted," he stated and joined her.

Dinner was about two hours late.

\*\*\*\*\*

Finally, they sat at his table, opposite each other, and both not really concentrating on the meal he had provided. Cooking had been surprisingly hard, he had discovered, because whenever he turned, she was there, watching him. Whenever his back was to her, he could feel her eyes roaming over his body, and it tickled, sort of, heated his skin, and caused him to add too much pepper to the tomatoes. She wore nothing but one of his shirts, which barely covered her thighs. Her hair was carelessly braided into a ponytail, there was not a bit of make-up left on her face, and she looked like sixteen, not twenty-eight. Every now and then, she took some cheese from the plate in front of her and nibbled at it.

He loved every moment, especially because she didn't stop talking. She brought him up to date with gossip and facts, told him about marriages and children that had been born since the day he had vanished, who had perished, and who was the talk of the town. She told him about Harry and Ginny, of course, and that the boy's second son was named after him and Albus. This made him shiver for a moment thinking about the old man he had been forced to kill and remembering the boy who had won against all odds the final duel with the Dark Lord.

"I didn't want to upset you," she said gently. "I thought you would like to know that your name was cleared, that most people honour what you did. Not the Death Eaters, of course, but everyone you taught. Even Draco admits that you were... marvellous."

He grunted disdainfully, grateful that she had made him smile again. "Now that's what I dream of in sleepless nights: Malfoy thinking of me with tears in his eyes."

Chuckling, she changed the subject. "Now, about your wine. I need one more bottle. Is that possible?"

"Of course." Chopping onions whilst she watched was quite a difficult task. "You can have a whole crate. Do you really want a contract with me? What for?"

Laughing, she got up, wrapped her arms round his waist, and kissed his upper arm. "Your wine is famous in the wizarding world," she said. "Everyone who drinks it sort of becomes addicted. George had once tasted a sip, and when I offered him a glass a little while back, he nearly had a heart attack. Lucius Malfoy is willing to pay more for a bottle of your wine than he would pay for a new broom. A crate would make George famous. It's implausible to give him the Grail after only one meeting with the ancient winegrower, though. I will need to bargain with you again for each single bottle. Like this, George will get rich, you will have a large and regular income, and I have the freedom to see you whenever possible."

"And therefore, you invented a ninety-year old Muggle, wrote a letter, let everyone believe you were on a business trip and Apparated to the Island." Dry words; only affection and the way he looked at her made it clear that he very, very much appreciated her actions.

One last nuzzle, one last kiss, and she sat down again. "I just wanted a job; George offered me more. I wanted to see you again. I found a way to make it possible. I am here, Carlos, and I can stay for a week. After this week, I'll have to go back, but if you like I can arrange regular visits."

Carefully, he put the knife onto the counter. "Leaving your husband is not an option, I understand?" he asked, voice carefully controlled so none of his hopes and fears shone through too obviously.

She only shook her head. "Not before both Rose and Hugo are at Hogwarts. He would try to get them out of my reach completely Molly would, anyway and I can't risk not seeing them on a daily basis whilst they are so young. But as soon as they are out of the house, living and learning at Hogwarts, I will leave Ron, no matter whether you'll still want to see me by then."

He served dinner and sat down opposite her. Candles burned, and outside the ocean rumbled its lullaby. For a long moment, he took in her posture shoulders hunched as if she was cold, frowning, fists balled and had to smile without really wanting to. "I think the prospect that you will leave Mr Weasley eventually will have to do for the moment," he said lightly. "You definitely have to do what is in Rose and Hugo's best interest. They can't grow up without you."

Pulling her plate closer, she took the fork and stabbed at a piece of chicken. "You know our world. The children stay with the one with a magical background, no matter who actually raises them. Ron is a Quidditch hero everyone loves him, the newspaper paints him as the perfect father, and his parents as honoured war heroes. Moreover, Ron is so filthy rich that each judge would consider him the better option. Molly would argue that Rose and Hugo must grow up in a wizarding family, not with a single, Muggle-born mother. Ron would get sole custody, I'm certain of it. I would see my children twice a year for a weekend if things went really wrong. I don't want to risk it."

A small, nearly invisible smile quirked his lips. "If I had I children, I would do the same. You will get your contract. You are welcome in my house whenever you can steal some time; and yes, I am very certain I will still want to see you in eight years. Didn't I tell you that I have fallen in love with you?"

Sometimes, it was surprisingly easy to say something important. Even when it was between two bites of chicken curry.

She choked on her sip of water, began to cough and wheeze, and he had to get up to slap her back. Tears were running down her face, but her eyes were sparkling. When she was finally able to speak again, she just said, "I knew it! I knew you loved me; and when I talked to my mum about you, I remembered how you looked at me, late at night. You could have said so! I would have written the first letter from the plane!"

Time to tidy up the table. Even after all those years and his experience with women, it was not easy for him to talk about feelings. "I have told you now," he managed after several minutes. "And I will tell you again. Don't ask me how it happened, but I fell in love with you. Waiting for you today, the past week since I got your owl was a living nightmare. Imagining not seeing you again is equally impossible. I will take what I get as long as I see you every now and then."

The moon was up and shone through the kitchen windows. The sand glittered in millions of silvery lights, and he wondered if he would ever be able to look at her without wanting to kiss her.

He hoped not.

Carefully, she folded the wet cloth and put it on the counter. Slowly, she said, "I love you, Severus. I know who you are. I know who you have been, and I still love you. That I can't be with you the way we both want grieves me, and I don't want you to think you are... well... a holiday affair. Just a fling. You are more. It happened fast; I think of you constantly, and if you want if you like, I would love to give this a chance. A real one. Please?"

"Don't call me by that name." He knew he pleaded, but the name brought memories he had buried many long years ago and didn't want to revive.

"Carlos. Please?"

She looked so damn lost and so beautiful and, yes, he had feared in the darkest hours of the night that she was just using him to bring some adventure back into her boring life. "Loving me won't be easy," he said calmly. "Nor being with me. No one must find out that I am alive. I cannot go back to London or to Hogwarts. I don't want to be part of the wizarding world anymore. You would have to meet a ghost, a rumour. You will always need an excuse to come here. I do love you. I do want you. The rest is up to you."

"Good," she said with a sigh of joy. "I can deal with the rest. Now can we go to bed? Or do you need something else tidied up?"

"Not at the moment." With a swift movement, he picked her up and carried her into his bedroom, stunned that she, of all the people in the world, was in his arms.

\*\*\*\*\*

Admittedly, one week was a damn short time to be with someone you love and who would go back to her husband and children so very soon. Equally awful was the fact that he couldn't stop himself from thinking about her life away from him. He wondered if she still slept with Ron Weasley, and if she did whether she enjoyed it. He pondered if she would begin to love her life again, now that she had changed her view on some things. If she loved her life would she decide to come back to him for a second time? Would she consider it wise to risk her marriage for a man who had been officially dead for a decade?

But then he woke in the middle of the night and found her cradled in his arms, one leg thrown over his hip, one hand shoved under his neck. She held him tightly at night and occasionally murmured his name in her sleep his new name, not his real one. It made him smile, hearing a name he had chosen out of sheer need to be called by something no one would recognise. He had read it on a poster, which had advertised, 'Carlos, the Marvellous Torero', and back then, the choice had brought a smile to his face.

He had come to this island nearly nine years ago: lost, forlorn and seeking a home more than safety, more than money, more than friends. He had looked for a place to stay, a place to hide from the world and his past. By then, he had managed to get his strength back and had decided he wanted to live.

And she against all odds, she had decided that she wanted to be with him, at least partly.

Therefore, in the middle of the night, when he couldn't sleep but didn't want to wake her up, he decided that he would believe her and trust her. He had learned to trust in the past years. He had managed to find not only a home but friends as well, people who liked him, people who welcomed him into their homes. Not only Conchita, although she was the most important one. Others as well, and yes, he would trust Tessa to come back again.

"Carlos," she mumbled in his ear, and he felt a cool, overwhelming shiver run down his spine. Her lips brushed his earlobe, and her free hand slipped across his chest. It was as if she was trying to reassure herself that he was still where he had been when she'd fallen asleep next to her, in her arms.

"I'm here," he whispered into the darkness of her hair. "Sleep on, love."

\*\*\*\*\*

They didn't do much but eat, sleep, swim, and make love. A lot of the latter, he had to admit, and not that much of the former. Sometimes, they skipped breakfast for an extra hour in bed, or lunch, or even both.

Making love to her was... different. Wonderful, marvellous, and more intense than lovemaking had ever been for him. During his time as a spy and teacher at Hogwarts, there hadn't been women in his life. The occasional shag with a nameless and faceless whore and once or twice an interlude with a female Death Eater. That had been all. He hadn't had the time for sex during those years, and he had considered it a waste of time anyway.

When he had come to the island, he had found the house in the mountains and a way to earn his living. He had realised that he cared for the vines around his house, and the next logical step had been to find out how to actually make wine out of the sweet grapes that grew in abundance up and down the hills.

After the wine, the tourists had entered his life, and he had loved being with every one of them. Obviously, not lacking experience, he had expected lovemaking with Tessa to be no different.

How wrong he had been.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked, smiling at him. The grapefruit she had been about to eat lay forgotten on the kitchen counter. "There is that look in your eyes you always look at me like that when you are about to grab me and drag me into your bedroom. Let me tell you that I need to eat something first. And you promised to take the boat and catch a lobster."

He grinned. "Did I now?" he asked. "Actually, I was thinking about prawns and oysters. I always get carried away thinking about prawns and oysters." Leaning over, he placed a light kiss on her exposed neck and was delighted to see that she blushed. She still wasn't used to his attention. It was clear she hadn't been the centre of a man's life for many years, and he loved to make her blush.

Suddenly, she turned and embraced him. "I have to leave tomorrow." Her words were barely audible as she spoke them with her mouth close to his neck. "I don't want to, but I have to. Can we talk about the future?"

Despite her height, she was as light as a feather, and he lifted her onto the counter without effort. Immediately, she wrapped her legs round his hips. The moment of asking her if she would come back had come, and he found he dreaded her answer.

"We can talk about whatever you like," he said as casually as possible. "Prawns. Oysters. The bedroom. Or the future. What would you like to happen in the future?"

Silence was the reply whilst she looked at him intently as if trying to read his thoughts. Finally, she said, "I want to come back in two months. Before Christmas. I will bring Hugo and Rose if you don't mind, that is because I can't force Ron to look after them too often. He doesn't care what I do as long as his Quidditch career doesn't get endangered. So... would you... do you think...?"

"Yes," he said simply.

\*\*\*\*\*

She did come back in November with her children, and for a full fortnight. Ron hadn't even asked where she was going, only too happy that she was not asking him to baby-sit again. Molly, believing she had booked a hotel in the Caribbean, pursed her lips as expected and said something like, "Decadence, to go on holiday twice a year," but Hermione ignored her.

George was thrilled. He was the only one who knew she was going on a business trip, trying to purchase not only one but two bottles of the precious wine. "And if you have to shag the old sod, don't come back with at least one bottle and the promise that you'll get more next year!" he said encouragingly, and Hermione nearly choked on her biscuit at his careless words.

"I'll try my best," she finally managed. "Do you think I should offer him one of my children if he demands that as his price?"

George grinned maliciously. "You know the answer to that, partner. We need this bottle. I have already promised it to the Minister's nephew. Come back without it, and I end up in Azkaban. And you can always have another child."

Hermione snorted and hit him hard across the head with a newspaper. "Hardly, idiot. Not with Ron sleeping in the guestroom the few times he's home."

That shut up George at least for a moment. "Just bring the bottle back, and I won't tell my mum that you are taking her grandchildren into the care of an ancient Muggle monster."

"That's blackmail," Hermione replied, leaving to pack her suitcase and tell her children that this time they would take a Portkey.

The two weeks in November turned out to be more beautiful than she would have ever expected. The weather was nasty, the wind cold, and the rain constant. The vines, nothing more than dry branches against a grey sky, looked dead and definitely incapable of ever growing leaves again.

Maria grumbled at her sight, and Pedro pressed a glass of hot whiskey into her hand the moment Carlos opened the door to his house in the mountains. "Ola," the old man said. Hugo and Rose stared at him with wide eyes, both giggling nervously. Then Rose saw the huge dog lying on the kitchen floor, Hugo detected a book on a table and biscuits next to them, and both children disappeared in different directions.

"That was easy," Hermione said, surprised. "I would have thought they'd need at least a few hours to feel at home."

Carlos took her bag out of her hand. He didn't touch her, and only looked at her out of the corner of his eyes. "This is a welcoming house," he said quietly. "It took me a while to realise it, but eventually I figured out that living in the dungeons, surrounded by stone walls several feet thick, away from other people and doing nothing but planning the death of the Dark Lord, crippled my soul. This house was a ruin when I found it; much like myself, actually. I repaired it with my own hands and Pedro's help. I made it my home. Now it is yours, too, and although the children can't know about it, it is theirs as well. They feel it. They know they are welcome here."

One quick look; Hermione saw that Hugo was eagerly trying to read the huge volume, and Rose was busy stroking the dog. Hermione's hand briefly touched his. "Show me the bedrooms, Carlos."

"Let's go upstairs. There's a big bedroom for the three of you. Come along. Maria will look after the children. If you aren't careful, Pedro will take them outside to help him clean out the chicken coop."

The staircase was creaky, and from the upper floor it was easy to look downstairs over the handrail it was not a big, but an open house, and they both had a quick check if either child still was where it had been only a moment ago. When that was confirmed, Carlos opened a high, wooden door, revealing a room with one window, looking out onto the east. The morning sun would wake them. If it shone, that was. Two beds a big one and a smaller one were inside, clearly made by the hand of a very skilled carpenter. The walls were white, and in a corner stood a wardrobe. More than enough space for Rose and Hugo. It was quiet up here and warm. "It's beautiful," she said.

Silently, Carlos closed the door behind them and sneaked his arms around her waist. "A week ago, the chicken lived in here. But I thought you'd rather come to the mountains than staying in the hut at the beach, so I threw them out and made this room habitable. They were quite annoyed with me. So was Maria, as she has to go outside now to gather the eggs."

"I'll do it as long as we're here," she replied with a snigger. "And next week, you can bring the chicken back up. I bet they will be grateful for beds." His hands, seeping warmth even through her layers of clothes, made it hard to think. "Can I see your room, too, Carlos?"

Faintly, she could hear Rose talking to Maria. The little girl chatted merrily in English, the old woman answered equally merrily in Spanish. When she stepped out into the hall, Hermione could see her son still sitting in the chair, carefully turning one page after the other.

Carlos took her hand and led her across the hall to a smaller room. This one was packed with books no Muggle books, for a change and the bed was covered by a big, colourful plaid. A desk stood in the corner, nearly breaking under the mass of parchment, quills, and inkbottles. "My room. And yours, too." There was no question in his words.

With a smile, she brushed across the plaid. "I love this. Like the rainbow, it contains all colours. No favourites. Not just red and gold or green and silver."

Slowly, he bent and kissed her neck, brushing her hair out of the way before doing so. "Do you think the children will sleep early tonight?"

"If you feed them properly, if you play with them for at least two hours, and if you allow them to ride the donkey," she answered, turned, and folded her hands behind his neck. "You do have a donkey, don't you?"

"I do. A donkey, two horses, a cow, several chicken and geese, a couple of sheep, a dog that is too big and cats that are too cheeky. Hugo and Rose will be busy. And very

tired at night, believe me."

She pecked a kiss onto his lips. A small, nearly innocent kiss, but it made butterflies beat their wings in her stomach. This tall, dark man, this stranger, made her feel like a teenager freshly in love, and she cherished every second she was near him. "Carlos," she whispered. "Tell me you are happy that we are here."

He looked at her for a very long moment. "I don't want you anywhere else, Tessa," he replied. Gently, he kissed her, and she couldn't help that the grip of her arms became stronger with every breath she took. She hugged him so hard she feared she would break his ribs; she kissed his face and his neck, his lips, the short stubbles near his temple. "Love you," she whispered.

"Love you, too," he whispered back, and then they shot apart because Rose was calling for her mum, and they had to go downstairs, listening to stories about dogs and chicken and donkeys, and Hugo wanted to know what there would be for dinner, and Tessa just felt as if she had finally come home.

\*\*\*\*\*

When the two weeks were over, they left, and in February, Hermione went to Switzerland, searching for a very old painting with the title "Touch the Dark". George hadn't been able to find it despite quite a lot of effort he'd put into the search. "It's an erotic picture, Hermione. All arms and legs and mouths and it's said whoever looks at it will get hard immediately. Draco Malfoy is willing to pay more for it than you'd ever believe."

"Heard about it," Hermione nodded. Hugo and Rose were in school, and she was just about to compose an advert for her house in the *Daily Prophet*. She wanted to sell it it was too big, it was far too close to The Burrow, and as Ron hadn't objected, she wanted to get rid of it as soon as possible. "Homoerotic, twenty times twenty-five inches, about two hundred and fifty years old. Didn't know Draco's gay."

George chuckled. "As gay as they come. The picture means a lot to him. But Angelina will go nuts if I disappear again last time, I was gone for a full three months. Please, Hermione. Have mercy on me. Find the damn thing."

"What about Rose and Hugo?" she asked, adding the words, 'charming' and 'spacious' to her advert. "Ron is in Madrid. My parents are on a cruise. And Molly..."

"Mum would go nuts, too," George interrupted her dryly. "She'll ramble all day long that only a bad mother leaves her children alone for longer than three seconds. Let them stay with us, babe. Angelina will be thrilled to have them it will do my son a world of good, playing with your little monsters."

Hermione looked at him. He sat in her kitchen, and in half an hour, he would open the shop. It was Monday morning, packing wouldn't take her long, finding the picture would not be as hard as George thought, and maybe, she could steal half a day to visit Carlos.

The prospect made her blush, and quickly, she got up and washed out her cup. "Deal," she said over her shoulder. "I'll try my best. There's a shabby little shop in Latvia I visited once or twice when I was younger. They might know where to find it."

George beamed. "Why I am not surprised? I bet you'll have the painting in less than a day, spending the rest of the week in a nice hotel, enjoying the children-free time."

"Damn you, Weasley," she replied lightly. "You just know me too well."

\*\*\*\*\*

Finding the painting took her three days, and when she had it stored safely in her bag, she didn't even bother to send an owl but Apparated directly to Carlos's island. Finding him, though, wasn't as easy as she had thought, and eventually, she went out to the vineyard, yelling his name until he came running towards her, hugging her, lifting her up, and kissing her until she couldn't breathe anymore.

Two days in February, just two short days. She arrived Wednesday evening and had to leave Friday afternoon. "Come back soon," Carlos said, holding her close. "Promise me to come back as soon as you can."

"In April," she whispered hoarsely, trying not to cry. I promise, I'll come back in April."

In April, she came back for a weekend, and she managed five days in early June. Each night, she fell asleep in Carlos's arms, happy and sad at the same time. Happy, of course, because she was here; sad, because she knew she couldn't stay.

\*\*\*\*\*

Selling the house was easy, and the children loved the new place she'd found. Even Ron didn't grumble any longer as he had realised that his wife was less snappy and smiled more often since they had moved.

"I like it when you smile, Mummy," Rose said one morning, drinking her orange juice. "You smile a lot since we live here."

"I like it here," Hermione said and thought, *She's bright, my little girl.* "Less time wasted on cleaning up things."

Hugo giggled. "Can we have a donkey, Mummy? Like the one Carlos has?"

The kitchen was empty when he asked that his father wasn't home, as usual. "The donkey wouldn't like it here, hon," Hermione replied gently. "We'll visit the donkey in the summer holidays. That all right for you?"

Hugo nodded. For some reason, neither child ever mentioned Carlos when anyone could hear them not in front of their grandparents, not in front of George, not in front of their friends. It seemed as if they knew that the existence of Carlos was a secret that mustn't be revealed, although Hermione had never told them not to talk about him.

In the summer, Hermione spent three weeks on the island with Hugo and Rose, who were thrilled to see Carlos. They stayed in the hut at the beach, and Carlos took the children and their mum sailing and fishing and taught them how to dive. Rose helped him clean the boat; Hugo learned how to cook. In autumn, when they came to the mountains again, he showed them his vines and the cellar with the barrels, and he even bought a second donkey so both of them could go for rides up the hills.

When the children were around, they kept their love a secret. Never a kiss when they could be seen, never even a shared glance or a secret smile. Every morning, she sneaked back from his room into Rose's and Hugo's room, pretending she had slept there all night. She didn't like it, nor did Carlos, but this was how it worked for the time being.

\*\*\*\*\*

"One and a half years ago, I found you," Carlos said one morning whilst lying in bed with her, and she was delighted to see nothing but happiness in his face about this fact.

"Do I assume correctly you won't search for a tourist next summer?" she asked, running her fingers from his collarbone down to the belly button. She couldn't help a small tremble creeping into her voice.

Gently, he kissed her. "No tourists, Tessa. Never again. You know that."

Yes, she knew it. She could see it in his eyes, she felt it in his touch and heard it in his voice. Leaving him broke her heart every time; coming back to him mended it as surely.

Her parents, whom she visited on a regular basis, saw the difference in her. "You are happy," her mother said as she hugged her one morning in spring. "Your children are happy, too. It is such an obvious change I can't believe I and your dad are the only ones seeing it."

Hermione cast her a smile. "George might get suspicious soon. He knows me well; we are not just partners, we are friends."

"Let him get suspicious. You might consider telling him the truth, though, love. If you really plan to get divorced once Rose and Hugo are at Hogwarts, you'll need someone you can trust anyway. Or do you plan to give up your partnership with George once you don't need him as an excuse anymore to disappear every now and then?"

"Mum!"

Her mother laughed. "I thought not. And no, we don't mind taking Rose and Hugo in for a couple of days. Go and kiss your Carlos, dear. Kiss him and hold him and be glad you've found him."

So, she did. She kissed Carlos, hugged him and told him she loved him. Seven weeks each year she did so and at the few additional weekends she could steal away from home. "I'll move to the island as soon as I can," she assured him two years after they'd met. "I'll divorce Ron, and then I will vanish. Naturally, George will know how to contact me as I will stay partners with him someone has to sell your wine after all, and if I refused to do it, he would turn over every stone on earth to find you. Can't risk that."

"Of course not. He would get a heart-attack, seeing me," Carlos agreed. "On the other hand, one Weasley less in the world. Not that dreadful a prospect." He chuckled dryly.

Laughing, she threw a roll at him. "Hugo and Rose can come here during the summer hols. I'll hunt down the potions and books for George, but for most of the year, there will be you and me and no one else."

"Pedro and Maria," he corrected her. "I can't fire them. They are in their seventies, and Conchita would fry me over a small fire if I told them to find another employer."

"Wouldn't want that," she assured him with a grin. "A fight with Conchita huh! Will we visit her tonight?"

"She'll come and get us if we don't turn up voluntarily."

\*\*\*\*\*

They talked, planned, hoped, and wished, and maybe everything would have turned out just as expected if fate hadn't had other plans. Right before her April trip, nearly three years after they had met and only half a day before she would have left to see him again after two long months at home in a too cold, too lonely country, she deduced that there was a reason for her morning sickness, a reason for her extremely sensitive nose, for her back-ache and her disgust at the sight of food.

Pregnant. She was bloody *pregnant!*

---

A/N: The wonderful banner was made for my by beweasley2. Thanks, dear, I absolutely love it!

## Complications and Solutions

Chapter 11 of 13

Ten years after the war, a man takes a stroll along the beach and meets someone from his past.

### Complications and Solutions

*I can't be pregnant!* The thought shot through her head like a thunderbolt. She hadn't slept with Ron in years; they didn't even share the same bedroom anymore. How the hell could she be pregnant without having slept...

Oh.

Damn.

The glass in her hand fell and shattered on the floor; the orange juice seeped into the carpet and left ugly stains on the wooden planks. Yet, Hermione was unaware of it. With her mouth hanging open, she stared at her hands, turned them in the morning light that shone in through the kitchen window, and wondered how she could have been so stupid.

Not Ron's child. Of course not. The marriage with Ron only existed on parchment, and even if she had still slept with him, she would have never risked a new pregnancy.

This was not her husband's child.

"Carlos," she rasped and sunk onto one of the chairs that stood round the table. "I'm pregnant with your child and now what? Damn!"

This would not just complicate things, it would completely destroy her secret life. It very possibly would destroy their love as it would bring him into focus. The world would learn that he was still alive, he whom she called Carlos, but whose real name was Severus Snape. They would drag him away from his island; they would question him, and he would be on the front page of every newspaper... His life would be over. A life he loved and didn't want to give up.

She didn't want him to suffer. She wanted him where he was, she wanted to be with him without anyone knowing, she wanted...

She wanted him. Which meant she couldn't have the child.

Without a second thought, she vanished the Portkey an old magazine from the kitchen counter. She wouldn't go. Not today. She needed to find out first what to do, and she needed to find a way to tell him afterwards.

\*\*\*\*\*

It was evening when Hermione finally thought of the most obvious question. The day had been nauseatingly long, she felt unwell, was sweating with every movement, and in the back of her head the thought 'Tell him' nagged constantly.

She wouldn't, though. She would solve the problem so they could continue their lives. A potion, a few days in bed, and that tiny little seed would never have the chance to become a baby. At the moment, it was not bigger than a wheat grain; at the moment, it was absolutely ridiculous to call it a child.

For the first time since she lived here, the house was too small for her. Pacing like a caged animal, she fled into the park only to find it impossible to be near other people, to hear them talk, to witness them laugh. Running seemed a sensible thing to do, but then she got sick again, threw up the orange she had eaten earlier, and finally found a bench under a huge birch, the branches hiding her from curious eyes.

"I can't be pregnant," she told the bench. "I use a long-term contraception spell. It is impossible that I carry his child. Anyone's child. How the hell could this be happening anyway?"

There it was, the main question; along with it came the realisation that she couldn't abort his child. About a year ago, after a long day with Hugo and Rose, he had admitted to her that one of his biggest regrets was the fact that he would never have children of his own. So how could she even think of killing this one, this little seed inside her that was about to become Carlos's son or daughter?

Wiping the tears off her face, she got up, her mind clear and determined for the first time since the morning. It was mandatory to find out why she was pregnant. Afterwards she could think of a way to solve the problem. Until then, it was impossible to leave, to see him, or even to write to him.

Thinking of him made her legs wobbly. He would be waiting at the beach as he always did. The bus would have been long gone, the sun would be already setting, and by now he would fear something was wrong.

He would fear she wouldn't come. She knew him well by now, and was certain that he would not think she had abandoned him. Instead, he would wonder if an accident had hindered her from coming, if something was wrong with the children, or if Ron might have found out. Worrying, waiting, thinking she gave him two days, maybe three, before he would come looking for her despite the danger of being recognised.

"Well, I have to hurry, then," she said and left to go to the library. She needed some books about contraception spells and what could prevent them from working.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the end, the answer was so easy she would have laughed hadn't the subject been so grave. It was the tattoo, his sunflower, which had caused the pregnancy. Designed to outbalance the negative effects from Nagini's bite, it guaranteed Carlos a life without pain. Unfortunately, the magic that was woven into the flower was strong enough to influence the magic of her contraception spell as well, at least when she was close enough to it. Which was nearly always the case when she was on the island, even when they didn't make love. They kissed, they cuddled, they slept front to back the only surprise was that it had taken so long for her to become pregnant.

Fine. That clarified the 'how' but not the 'now what'. The answer to her question didn't help her to make a decision, it didn't support her initial plan to abort the child, it only made it clear that she had to leave the library, now, immediately. She needed to go as it was late, more than twenty hours after she should have left.

Leaving the library was not easy, though. She had copies of the pages where the magic of the tattoo was described, she had her notebook where she had written down a few dates, she had the result of a test that showed that she was a bit over four months pregnant. It had happened last year in November, she had proof of it.

Still, she couldn't help but wonder how to tell him. Or what he was going to say, once she did.

\*\*\*\*\*

Gods, how much he hated to wait, although waiting had been something he had done on a regular basis whilst spying for Dumbledore. He had waited for people to make mistakes, he had waited for deaths to happen and catastrophes to appear. He had waited for students, for the Dark Lord, and for the day he would have to kill Hogwarts' Headmaster. For years, he had awaited his own death; still, waiting wasn't something he did easily or with a calm heart.

Once, he had waited for Lily, and when she had come, she had told him she didn't want to see him again.

Now he waited for Tessa and feared she would tell him the same. She was so young and beautiful, and if she stayed with him it might end in tears for her. Eventually, someone would find out where she was by following her when she claimed to be on a business trip. Then they would find him; they would realise she had been having an affair with a former Death Eater, with someone who was supposed to have been dead for over a decade, with a murderer, a spy.

*No surprise she didn't come*, he mused, managing not to put too much bitterness in the thought.

On the other hand... Her letters, the letters she sent on a weekly, sometimes even a daily basis, spoke of love and longing *I miss you*, she wrote, always. *I love you, and I miss you, and I wish I could come and see you*. Never had there been a reason for him to believe she didn't mean what she said, never the slightest doubt that she would leave him.

Until today. The time when she usually arrived had come and gone, noon passed by, and the evening as well. The moon rose above the ocean, and still no sign of her. The one time she had been late so far she had sent him an owl to tell him she wouldn't be able to leave in time.

Not so today. Not a word, no owl in sight, and now he sat at the beach, his hands dug deep in the sand, and stared out into the night, wondering what had gone wrong.

It took him a while to think of an accident as a reason or a problem with Rose or Hugo. The idea that the children could be ill caused cold fear to creep up his spine. If the children were ill, really ill, it meant that she was fine. It meant she had not planned to be late.

He was disgusted with himself for the hope that bubbled up inside him. To hell with love; to hell with these emotions he couldn't control and which messed up his life. To hell with her and his fear that it could be her who was ill, her who was unconscious at St. Mungo's, her who could be dead.

Around midnight, he decided he would check on her in the morning. She would never stay away without a reason, and whatever that reason was, he needed to find out. If she had given her marriage a new chance, he wanted to know. If she was ill or even dead, he needed to know. If she had left him, she would have to tell him in person.

Whilst he was there he could have a look at his house at Spinner's End and pick up a few books he had forgotten when he had fled the country. Yes. Good plan. First her, and then home. Someone would probably recognise him and blame him for a father's or brother's death, for the murder of a friend, for not saving a sister or a cousin. That was all fine as well. He had had a few good years. This was as good a time as any to face his past.

He was just about to get up and go inside when the small hairs at the back of his neck stood up: magic was at work. Someone had just Apparated.

\*\*\*\*\*

She couldn't see in the darkness, but she didn't cast *aLumos*. Carlos, her love, her life, rarely used magic if he could help it, and she accepted his wish to remain as Muggle as everyone else on the island. When Apparating or Disapparating, he always made sure no one was around who could see her, and she only hoped that he didn't have company by now as she was so very late.

Her eyes adjusted slowly, and only because the moon was so bright that it cast grey shadows on the sand, did she see him standing a few feet away, tall and silent, and

apparently not at all surprised to see her at this time of night. In one hand was her wand; she vanished it with a flick to the safe place where she always kept it when she was here. In her other hand she held a bundle of parchment and her notebook. She hadn't bothered to bring her bag; she hadn't thought to put a jacket on. She had left London without going home, had left straight from the library, and she shivered in the cold.

Two steps, and she stood in front of him. One thrust, and he had no other choice but to take the bundle she held out to him. "You need to read that," she said. "And then we need to talk."

"Tessa."

Why did he sound so... small? Why did she have the sudden feeling that he had been close to doing something stupid? All right, she was late, but that certainly was no reason...

How would she have reacted if she had had to wait for him, and he would have been late for nearly a day?

It was a horrible thought. She knew he loved her, but if he'd let her wait for so long without explanation, she would have possibly imagined he'd found a nice dark-haired girl with proper curves. "Carlos, love," she began, then just embraced him.

His arms around her she hadn't known how much she had missed him until the moment when she felt his lean, wiry body pressed against hers, when she smelled his fragrance of earth, wine, and wood. She felt him shiver, and his embrace became stronger, pressed the air out of her lungs, took her breath away. A moment later, he lifted her up and swung her around, her parchments and notes landing in the sand. On her lips she tasted the salt that was in the air, on her cheek she felt his stubbles, and then she got dizzy with happiness, fatigue, and fear of what she had to tell him.

Carefully, he put her back on her feet as if fearing to break her, or that she'd fly away with the cold spring wind. "Where have you been?" he asked, his mouth close to her ear. "I was worried; I wondered if..."

He didn't have to finish the sentence. She understood without him spelling it out that she had been wrong in her assumption that he was entirely sure of her. He had wondered if she had left him, if she had decided not to come back at all. Even two small months could be a long time, letters shared or not. Two months without seeing each other, without talking, without waking up next to him. Hadn't she feared for herself that he would meet someone else, that he would get tired of waiting for her?

She took his hand and pulled him towards the dark house. One candle burned in the kitchen window, and suddenly, she longed for something to eat, for a sandwich and a mug of milk. "Let's go inside, Carlos. I have to tell you some news, and I can't do it whilst my feet are freezing."

They went inside, and he lit some more candles. In the golden light she couldn't see too much of his expression, especially not because he was busying himself preparing a late-night snack for her. The milk simmered in a pot on the stove, she wore a blanket round her shoulders, and she definitely couldn't stop staring at him. Would he be happy at her news or angry? Would he want her to abort his child, or would he consider an adoption perhaps? Obviously, she couldn't raise the child as she couldn't answer the question about the circumstances of the child's conception. This child, if it would be born, would never know its natural father or mother.

Horrible thought.

Carlos turned, placed a mug and a tuna sandwich in front of her. He watched her eat in silence, didn't disturb her thoughts, waited patiently until the last bite had vanished into her mouth. Then he said, "You look different. There is a glow on you I haven't seen before. Even in this light it is obvious. Will you tell me what happened, and why you were late?"

No use playing games here. No use trying to tell him anything slowly and bit by bit. "I'm pregnant, Carlos. And I need to know what you think about it. I considered an abortion..." Her voice faltered when she saw his face, the hurt in his eyes, the way he clenched his teeth. Admittedly, she had hoped he would show a little joy at least.

"Rose and Hugo will be thrilled to have another sister or brother," he said sternly. "So will your husband and the rest of your family. Another pillar for your marriage, Hermione. I am grateful, though, that you came to tell me in person."

For a moment, she was dumbstruck. The coldness in his words as well as the fact that he called her by her real name was terrifying. Then she understood and wondered how a man so intelligent as him could be so totally, completely nuts. "It's yours, Carlos," she said, placing a hand on her still flat belly. "This child is your child. I'm pregnant from you. I haven't slept with Ron in years. We had stopped sleeping in the same bedroom even before I met you. Rose and Hugo will never know that they have a sister, if we decide that I should indeed give birth to her. Nor will Ron or Molly or anyone else."

Funny to see how he opened and closed his mouth for several times without getting a single word out. Steadying himself against the counter, he stared at her as if she were a ghost. "But... you..." he finally stammered, then sat heavily on one of the chairs.

She laughed tightly. "Of course I used a contraception spell. But the magic of your tattoo interfered with it. It took me all day and half the evening to confirm it, which is the reason why I am late. I was in the library. Evidence is outside, covered by sand. I copied everything so you wouldn't think I made it up."

"Pregnant? You... really?" Wide-eyed, he stared at her as if he was seeing her for the very first time. There was no coldness left in his voice only hope.

Now she dared to smile. He looked like a man who had just learned his deepest wish had come true. Both his hands were grabbing the table, and he didn't seem to be breathing.

"Really. With your daughter. She will be born at the end of July or early August if everything goes well. I... I assume you don't want me to have an... abortion?"

He just shook his head, obviously unable to speak.

"Then we need to find foster parents for her. I will put a glamour on me so no one will realise that I'm pregnant. Everything else I haven't thought about yet."

Again, he shook his head. "No foster parents. No adoption," he croaked. "I want... I couldn't..."

It nearly broke her heart to see him struggle for words, to hear him try to say "my daughter" or "my child". It was no surprise, though, to find out that the thought of giving their child away to strangers was a thought unbearable to him.

The chair clattered to the floor when he got up too quickly, rounding the table to pull her to her feet. Hesitantly, he put one of his big hands on her belly, tenderly as if he could already feel the life growing inside her. "You... want this child? My child?"

Had she really considered an abortion? Had she really doubted his joy at the news? Because now she couldn't believe it anymore, hearing the hope in his voice when he asked those questions. "Yes," she said. "I can't imagine not having her. But there is no way..."

"A glamour is a perfect idea." His words were fast and determined. "You will come here for the birth. Conchita's daughter Carmen is a midwife, she delivers most babies on the island, and with a bit of magic, I will be able to make sure nothing goes wrong without Carmen realising it. Hugo and Rose will be at your parents' house this summer?"

Now it was her turn to just nod. "But... I can't take her back home. And someone has to raise her. Someone..."

For the first time in more than an hour, he smiled. "This is the twenty-first century, Tessa. Have you never heard of single fathers, beloved?"

# Born on an Island

Chapter 12 of 13

Ten years after the war, a man takes a stroll along the beach and meets someone from his past.

## Born on an Island

On the seventh of August, a little girl was born at six forty-nine in the morning, precisely one week after her mother had arrived on the island. The previous night, Tessa hadn't eaten too much and had gone to bed early, but around eleven, she got sick. Sneaking to the toilet, she threw up what was in her stomach and was just about to go back to bed when she realised she still felt awful. In order not to wake Carlos, she settled in the living room, lit a candle, and began reading the book she had found in his collection *Rosemary's Baby*, morbidly enough.

Time ticked by, the book didn't make too much sense, and she continued to be sick. There was nothing she could spit out anymore, but her stomach insisted on staying upset, and reading, to be honest, became hard to concentrate on.

At ten to two, she finally came to the conclusion that she would have a baby soon. "You seem to be different, dear," she whispered and placed a hand on her now visible belly. "Neither your brother nor your sister left any doubts in me that they wanted to be born. Whereas you... well. Your father is a Slytherin, so why am I surprised that you try to hide your true intentions?"

Silently, she went into the bedroom and woke the father in question, which wasn't easy as he had worked hard all day a new field had to be prepared for young vines, and he had been knackered when he had come in for dinner. Snoring slightly, he refused to as much as move his head at her attempts to wake him.

"Carlos!" After the third attempt, she nearly shouted and shook his shoulder until he finally opened one sleepy eye.

"Hmm?"

"Go and get Carmen, would you?"

"What for? She's asleep. So am I."

"Well, I can try to give birth to your daughter on my own if you want to go back to dreamland, but I doubt you'd be too happy about it if something went wrong." Chuckling, she pecked a kiss on his stubbly cheek when the first hard contraction made her hiss with pain.

That was all it needed. He was awake in an instant and helped her to get into bed. Pulling on shorts, he was out of the bedroom and the house in no time, getting Carmen, who slept in the guesthouse since her arrival two days ago.

Strange how time meddled with the brain during birth. The thought of hours of pain once more had been horrifying when Tessa had been thinking about it beforehand. Both Rose and Hugo had been born at St. Mungo's, with lots of Healers at hand, and there hadn't been pain. Her daughter, Carlos's daughter, would have to be born without magical help besides a very small monitoring charm to make sure the heartbeat didn't go down. Otherwise, Carmen would become suspicious if she didn't scream at least a bit. But now the child was on the way, it seemed as if a second took hours and hours only lasted a heartbeat. Screaming came as naturally as blinking her eyes, sound and light took on an eerie, unnatural quality, and it was actually absolutely ridiculous that new life came into the world in such a messy way.

This new life took its time to come into the world, and she clung to Carlos's hands as if they were a lifeline, nearly breaking some bones. Screaming like a banshee and wishing this night would never end at the same time, Tessa gave birth to her daughter shortly after sunrise. The baby was tiny and dirty, covered in blood, and owned a shock of raven black hair. Ugly, red, screaming like her mum had screamed, the baby became quiet the moment Carmen put her on Tessa's belly, the moment she heard her mother's heartbeat again.

Severus Snape, who was called Carlos by everyone including the woman who loved him, knelt down next to mother and baby. With one fingertip, he brushed over the child's wet hair, along the tiny shoulder down towards the hand when she moved her arm and grabbed her father's finger, holding on tightly. "Hello, Luca," he whispered.

Hermione Granger-Weasley, who preferred to be called Tessa by everyone who didn't know who she really was and especially by the man she loved, smiled at the sight. Carlos though, who had been silent all night long, had held his love's hand, and had made sure mother and baby were safe during the birth, couldn't help the tears that were streaming down his face.

\*\*\*\*\*

The months before hadn't been easy for Hermione. In spring when she had told Carlos, happiness had washed through her like a tide at his idea to leave their child in his care. "Are you certain?" she had asked, repeatedly, because she needed him to say it again and again that yes, he would raise their daughter, and no, he wouldn't allow strangers to take care of her.

"It will be hard for you, Tessa. You won't see her for months after she's born, and I won't even try to imagine how you will feel. If you want, I will come back to England so you can see her more often. If you wish, I will even come out of hiding, move back to Spinner's End, so you can visit us openly."

Lying in his arms, she was deeply moved by this offer as she knew how much it had cost him to make it. But she shook her head. "Impossible, love. The moment the world learns you are still alive, you will be in danger. There are Death Eaters still on the run, and I think many of them would try to kill you for your betrayal. Besides, what would be the reason for me visiting you? As a student, I disliked you, we never had a personal relationship, and it would cause suspicions and rumours if I were to be seen in your house. Questions would appear whether I am Luca's mother, especially because I couldn't keep my fingers off her." Comfortably, she edged a little closer. His hand was resting on her belly, and their daughter kicked happily at the gentle weight. "I need you here," she continued. "I need to know you are safe, and I need to be able to come home to you and her at least every now and then until Rose and Hugo are at school."

He wasn't convinced. "You think you will be able to leave her here with me and go back home a week or two after she's been born?" Doubt rang in his voice, and she had to swallow once or twice before she could answer.

"Don't make me cry," she managed, breathing in the fragrance of his skin. He smelled of soap and shampoo, with a more earthy smell of herbs, autumn leaves, and honey beneath. She loved how he smelled, even when he came fresh from the vineyard, sweaty and covered in dirt. "To leave our daughter with you is not the perfect solution, but one I can live with. I thought I had to give her up, to see her raised by strangers, to never witness how she grows." Placing a kiss at the sunflower tattoo, she subtly wiped off a tear that threatened to run down her cheek. For some reason, the last conversation with Ron jumped into her mind, shortly before she had left to see Carlos.

\*\*\*\*\*



Ron had been at home for a long weekend, which had surprised her as much as him, apparently. She hadn't seen him for nearly three weeks he had been playing in Hungary and he had obviously been uncomfortable of spending time in his house, with his wife and children. In the mornings, he had slept in until noon, then had got up and gone to the pub for a quick pint. In the afternoons, he had often taken Rose and Hugo to his parents' house where he had shown them moves on the broom or chased Pixies in the garden with their help. He was fond of them, that much was obvious, but he wasn't even a weekend-dad. He was like an eccentric uncle who popped in every now and then, heaps of presents in his luggage, turning the household and the daily routing upside down until he was gone again. Both children loved him with all their might, and he loved them... Still, she wished their relationship were as uncomplicated as it had been before they had married. She missed the easy friendship with him, especially as their unhappy marriage had affected her friendship with Harry as well. She knew the two men talked about her, she was certain Harry was very aware of the fact that his two best friends didn't share a bed anymore, and when she met him for a coffee somewhere in town, talk didn't come easily.

The morning when she had been preparing to leave, knowing Ron would be at home for another week, looking after the children, had been odd. She had been so happy from the moment she had woken up, the morning sickness had finally ceased for good, and she had looked forward to breakfast with Rose and Hugo.

"You're looking different, 'Mione," Ron had munched when he had spotted her on the staircase. "Sort of... No. Can't put my finger on it. You ok?"

Rose had looked up and eyed her mum suspiciously. "You are looking beautiful, Mummy," she had said with dignity, a spoonful of cornflakes halfway to her mouth.

Hermione had smiled, but her stomach had coiled at the fact that both her husband and her daughter had looked at her so eagerly. She had known the glamour was perfect Carlos had helped her adjust it, and she had used it on a daily basis for more than two months. Still, with two pairs of eyes focussed on her, she had felt naked and exposed and had wondered if Ron could just see through the glamour that had made her look nearly as slender as usual. Hopefully, he wouldn't try to hug her that would have been a problem. But then, he never did. "Thank you, honey," she had said towards her daughter, who had luckily concentrated on her cornflakes again. "What do you mean with 'different', Ron? When I looked into the mirror this morning, I saw nothing out of the ordinary."

Ron had smiled weakly and tipped his head. "You look... Damn. Sorry, didn't want to freak you out. Is it your haircut? Or... No! That's it. You look a bit podgy, Hermione. Better think about a diet, dear." With a grin, he had shoved the last bite of his heavily buttered toast into his mouth and got up.

Speechless, Hermione had stared after him, frowning and wondering why his careless words hurt that much. She knew of his occasional affairs with big girls with lots of bum and bosom. His mocking hint of her going on a diet, although she must look, in his eyes, as scrawny as a scarecrow, had been more of an insult than anything else.

Rose had looked up once more and seen her mother still standing in the doorway. "I can make you tea, Mummy," she had said quietly and got up to snuggle against her. "You are not podgy. You are warm and soft and Daddy is not nice. I will slap him."

"Do that, honey," she had answered with a sigh and kissed her daughter's bushy hair. Truly, sometimes she wished she could just tell them, could tell everybody that she loved another man, that she was pregnant with that man's child, that she would leave her husband and this house and England altogether.

Well. Molly, if no one else, would slaughter her on the spot. Not worth risking it.

\*\*\*\*\*

"I wish I could tell them," she now murmured and turned in Carlos's arms, pressing her forehead against his. "I wish I could walk into Diagon Alley, and everyone knew that I am pregnant and whose child I am carrying. I don't want to hide this, Carlos. I want this child, and I love you."

She felt him suppressing a sigh and knew he had hoped she would say this, just once more. "Idle wishes, beloved," he grumbled, and she smiled at his attempt to make her discomfort cease. "And besides, no one would believe you anyway. You would end up at St. Mungo's, locked away for claiming you've seen me alive. Claiming the fearful bat of the dungeons to be your lover, although I've been officially dead for a decade would do the trick quite nicely."

"Quite a few claim to have seen you, love," she murmured, sleep tiptoeing closer and making her eyelids heavy. In his arms, in this house in the mountains, she never had problems to sleep. "I even heard rumours that you are working as a fry cook in a diner in Arizona. Being a winegrower on a tiny island, brown as an apple seed and with spiky short hair is just as likely."

"I prefer the winegrower-story," he whispered and pulled the blanket over her body.

\*\*\*\*\*

After she'd come back from her visit, she saw Ron only occasionally and was glad about it. Thankfully, Molly wasn't a guest in her house often, either since the children were at school in the morning, and therefore there was no reason for her mother-in-law to check if she treated Rose and Hugo properly. Only George came by on a regular basis, sometimes with his new-born daughter Roxanne, trying to persuade her to seek out the "ancient Muggle" again as he put it.

"I'd love to, but I can't take the children out of school, George," she replied, temptation building up in her. Seeing Carlos sooner than planned... "Sorry. Can't do it, and you know it. How do you manage to sell those bottles so quickly, George? I mean, it's just wine!"

George grinned most evilly. "It's pure magic, and the French Ministre de Magie just asked me for a bottle. I told him maybe in September, and he nearly fainted with anticipation. Additionally, I had a customer this morning, one with curiously long fangs. He growled a bit and then told me he would consider ordering the Wolfsbane potion ingredients solely from my shop if I managed to sell his alpha wolf this wine. I agreed, and now I'm in grave need for not one but two bottles as you see."

Chuckling, Hermione managed not to brush her hand across her belly. Her daughter was awake and in the mood for sports, it seemed, as she danced around with a vengeance. "I'll see what I can do. I will be back in the middle of August, and unless Carlos has decided he doesn't want to sell me another bottle, I will bring you what you crave."

"Carlos, eh? What happened to "the old goat" you called him last time we talked about him?"

Hermione couldn't help it she blushed furiously, which made George completely suspicious. "Red as a tomato," he stated mischievously. "Don't tell me Carlos isn't really ninety." He leaned in closer, looking at her directly. "You have an affair with him, don't you?"

"You said I should sleep with him if he weren't willing to part with a bottle of his wine," Hermione replied weakly. "I just followed your advice. Sort of." Suddenly, she needed to sit down. "Shit. I didn't want to tell you that. No one knows, no one must know, and please, George, if Ron finds out, he'll divorce me, and I'll lose the children!"

For a moment, George seemed to be speechless, but then he reached out and brushed his palm over her cheek in a tender, understanding gesture. "Your secret is safe with me," he said earnestly. "I know Ron cheats on you repeatedly. Actually, I am surprised it took you so long to find at least some happiness with someone else. I won't tell a thing, Hermione, I promise. And besides, if I did, my mum as well as my stupid little brother would tear me to pieces for having known something they didn't."

Hermione closed her eyes for a brief second. She had known George was a friend, but she hadn't expected that much support. "It's not what you think," she explained, desperate to make at least one person understand why she had done what she had done. "It is not just an affair. It is more. Much more. Ron had his flings. They don't mean anything to him, I know that. In a way, he still loves me, I guess. He loves the children, too. But I... I just fell in love with someone else!"

"With Carlos, the winegrower," George mocked. "So that's how you stumbled across the wine you met the one who makes it."

"During the summer hols a couple of years ago." With a sigh, Hermione put her chin into her hand, staring into the distance. "I didn't plan this, George. It just happened. Being your partner allows me to see him every now and then. I would divorce Ron, if I could. But you know your mother better than I do. She wouldn't let me keep Rose and Hugo, she would bribe the judge if she had to, and I couldn't live without them."

George got up and poured himself a large glass of water. "No need to tell me that. I couldn't live without Fred and Roxanne. So what's the plan then you wait until the little

ones are at Hogwarts and then drop the bomb?"

Hermione grinned somewhat sadly. "Something along those lines, yes. I will never tell anyone that there is another man in my life, not even after I am divorced. Carlos prefers to stay... hidden. Not only because otherwise, the whole world would run to his island, pestering him for his wine, but because he wants to live in peace, as well. His past has been tumultuous, to say the least. He won't be seen in Diagon Alley, and I think that's for the best."

"He's a wizard?" George asked casually.

For a small moment, Hermione considered to tell him the truth, the full truth of who Carlos really was. Only in the last second, she decided that it would be massively unfair to put such a burden on his shoulders. Maybe he could accept that she loved a man other than Ron; that she loved Severus Snape was a completely different matter. "His skills are limited," she therefore answered, not exactly lying, but not telling the truth, either. "He can use magic on a basic level, but he hates doing it and prefers the Muggle way."

"And he can make wine," George said, a slightly dreamlike expression on his face. "He's the man who can give you two bottles or two crates, if you asked him nicely, and that at any given day of the year. No need to bargain with him. Just send him an owl and... Oh." A thought had struck him. "Ah. I mean, no, of course not. You need to bargain. Long and complicated bargains. In person."

"Exactly," Hermione replied, relieved that now George knew at least a small bit of her secret. Absently, she put a hand on her belly. "I can promise you the two bottles for the werewolf and that other bloke, though. No worries that you wake up with your head bitten off or something equally nasty."

George gave her a quick hug. "Who cares about wine? It's just wonderful to see you happy," he whispered in her ear.

\*\*\*\*\*

Months later and back on the island, the lovely mid-summer evening had wiped wine and bottles and George Weasley or anyone else back in England entirely out of her mind. Right now, she didn't worry about Ron or Molly finding out, or whether she would eventually tell her mother that she had three, not only two, grandchildren. Right now, she couldn't get enough of the sight in front of her.

She sat on the veranda, a glass of ice-cold lemonade in one hand and a book in the other. The content of the novel was not what occupied her presently, though. It was the fact that her baby daughter had just fallen asleep in the crook of her father's arms, after he had fed her and hummed to her, one of her hands safely clutched around his index finger.

From the moment she had been born, Luca had searched for her father's hand, wanted to be held by him, opened her eyes when he came into the room. As she was still weakened from the birth, Tessa was more than glad that she didn't have to get up to change nappies, to prepare the bottle, to make sure her daughter was sleeping safely in her cradle. All she had to do was to watch the two of them getting closer by the minute.

When Rose had been born, Ron had been thrilled and had bought Hermione the biggest diamond ring he could find. He had stayed at home for a week and had visited her in St. Mungo's every day. When she had come home, he had decorated the child's room, had bought a cradle, and had gone to France to play a Quidditch game.

Same with Hugo.

Carlos was different well, as if she hadn't known that before. But that he was so very obviously totally entranced with his daughter surprised her. She had never seen a man tending to a newborn baby, had somehow thought they were frightened to drop the little, fragile body. Ron had played with Rose and Hugo since they had been old enough to walk and talk but not before. He had eyed them suspiciously, had barely touched them, had never offered to push the pram of either his son or daughter.

Carlos had taken Luca from Carmen's arms and had washed her himself, had put a nappy on her and then carried her through the house right after the birth. His grip on her was firm and strong, and she so very obviously liked being with her dad that Tessa could only smile when she saw them together.

"Don't you want to put her to bed?" she now asked and wasn't surprised when he shook his head.

"Not yet," he said quietly, rocking the girl gently in his arms. "I like her being here with us."

"You spoil her. As soon as I'm gone, you won't find the time to carry her around all day." A hint of sadness laced her words as she knew they were true. Both Rose and Hugo had spent a considerable time of the day in their cradles, simply because she hadn't been able to take them with her once Ron had left the house to play Quidditch again.

But Carlos just shot her one of his lovely, challenging smiles and kissed the baby in his arms right on the nose. "Vines are patient," he said. "I will find the time. A child that small can't be spoiled. All she wants is to be near us. Nothing wrong with this in my opinion." Getting up slowly so as not to wake Luca, he pushed his chair next to Tessa's and sat close enough to put his arms round her shoulder.

With a sigh, she leaned into his touch and closed her eyes, wishing this day would never end, wishing she could stay, wishing with all her might she wouldn't have to go back to England. A certain amount of guilt came with this thought. Rose and Hugo waited for her, and although she missed them terribly, she wondered sometimes if she really could see this through, or if it wouldn't be the better decision to divorce Ron now, thus allowing him to let Molly raise her children. Her husband would never give up playing Quidditch, she knew that. Hugo and Rose would grow up at The Burrow, raised by their grandparents.

Impossible. The thought itself was unbearable.

Luca struggled in her sleep. Carlos bent and kissed her forehead, brushing his lips across the soft, feathery black hair. She smiled. Her little fists opened a bit, just long enough for her father to reach out a finger so she could grab it. "Did I tell you recently that I love you?" he asked, looking down at the woman in his arms.

"No, not that I remember." He had, of course, repeatedly. Still, she couldn't get enough of him saying it.

"I love you, Tessa." He slipped down a bit, legs stretched out. Luca in his right arm, Tessa snuggled up to his left side, he let his head drop back to the back of the chair and closed his eyes. "I never expected that amount of happiness," he confessed. "I would have never believed a child especially not a child I fathered would make me feel so... complete."

"Wait until she's able to walk, and you have to run after her," Tessa mocked, trying to keep her voice in check. Why, oh why did this man always find words that made her heart ache with love? Why, oh why had she not found him earlier? He had taught her, for Merlin's sake, taught her for six long years several times a week, and still she hadn't managed to see further than his crooked nose and his greasy hair and his nasty snarl.

But then, he'd been another man back then, and she'd been only a schoolgirl, heavily in love with her best friend. Snape the teacher, Snape the spy, Snape the traitor the simple thought of him being more than that would have been revolting during her school days. She knew that she loved Carlos as surely as she'd known back then that she'd love Ron forever.

Strange, how life could change one's opinions in just a few years.

Gently, she kissed Carlos's cheek, then the tiny fist of her sleeping daughter. He would be the perfect father: loving, caring, devoted to his daughter. In her mind she could see him carrying her around, singing her to sleep, feeding her, and teaching her to walk and to talk and how to use a wand. He would take her to his vineyards, showing her how to pick the grapes, and how to avoid snakes. If she fell ill, he would make her better; if she hurt herself, he would make sure she healed as quickly as possible.

Luca would be safe with him. No one would know who she was; no one would as much as suspect that she was the daughter of one of the most skilled men in the

wizarding world. "Eventually, I will have to tell my parents about her," she said quietly.

"Eventually, you will have to tell Rose and Hugo that they have a little sister," he countered equally quietly. "And I think you should bring your parents to the house at the beach sooner rather than later. Invite them."

"They would want to meet you, too," she pointed out and watched her little daughter smile in her sleep. Apparently, the little girl had a nice dream.

Tessa had to suppress some tears at the thought that she would have to leave soon. Carlos would raise her daughter their daughter, she had to remind herself whilst she would be caught in a marriage she didn't want but couldn't end, either. Ron would never consider a divorce no matter how many Quidditch groupies he shagged. Being married to her was convenient, it was easy, and it guaranteed him a home whenever he needed one.

Carlos turned to her. He must have sensed her inner turmoil as he got up and put Luca into her cradle. With a swift move, he pulled Tessa up and into his arms. "All will be well in the end," he assured her. "Luca is safe with me. Tell George that I will need more persuasion to part with my wine, so you can come here more often. He'll understand. Bring your parents. Bring Rose and Hugo whenever possible. I like them very much, you know that. We can spend a weekend in the hut at the beach every now and then, so they won't forget how I look."

Just talking about the future eased the pain in her heart. It sounded so easy when he said it as if it were the most normal thing in the world that a mother left her newborn child with the father not to see it again for several weeks, if not months.

Maybe, she should pop round her parents' place before she went back home. A chat with her mum seemed to be due.

And so, she left another ten days later, left the island, the man she loved, and the daughter she had just borne, to pick up her other life again. Pretending she had done nothing more than talk another two bottles of the most expensive wine in the wizarding world out of an old Muggle.

---

The reference to Snape being a fry cook in a diner in Arizona is taken out of the story "Snape: The Home Fries Nazi" by pir8fancier, featuring Severus Snape and Harry Potter. It can be found at OWL under this link:

<http://owl.tauri.org/stories.php?psid=2818>

## Epilogue

### *Chapter 13 of 13*

Ten years after the war, a man takes a stroll along the beach and meets someone from his past.

### Epilogue

"Daddy? Is Mummy coming today?"

"Yes, love. You know she will. She promised it, and she always keeps her promises."

"But, Daddy, when will she be here?" The little girl hopped up and down like a bunny, unable to sit still, unable to keep her mouth shut, unable not to ask the same question over and over again: "Is Mummy coming today?"

Her daddy, though, was unimpressed by her babbling. Slowly, carefully, he tended to the vines, took one plant after the other in his strong, dark hands and cut off what needed to be cut off. It seemed he wasn't that interested in the fact that Mummy would be here soon.

"Daddy?"

"Hmmm?"

"Do you miss Mummy?"

That made him look at her, and for a moment, Luca was surprised to see his eyes glare with something she didn't understand. It wasn't anger nor sadness nor pain. She knew all those emotions. So maybe it was... love? She was certain that Daddy loved Mummy, even when she wasn't here with them.

"I do, honey. Very much. I miss her every day she isn't here, I miss her at night, when she doesn't sleep in our bed. But behaving like a crazy pixie doesn't make her arrive any sooner."

When he turned his back to the vines, Luca stuck her tongue out at him. Really, sometimes Daddy behaved like Mr Valdez, her Spanish teacher. "Mummy, Mummy, Mummy," she hummed only a moment later. She never could be grumbly with Daddy; she loved him far too much, and after all, missing Mummy was horrible enough to forgive him his slight scolding.

Luca, who was now nearly six years old, tall and tanned like her dad, with black hair and dark brown eyes, suddenly stopped in the middle of her tracks. There had been something... a tingle in the air, an inaudible sound, and now the small hairs at the back of her neck stood up.

Shivering, she perceived goosebumps along her bare arms. It was a hot day today it was her birthday in a week's time so there shouldn't be a reason for her to feel cold.

Her daddy felt it, too. Not even bothering to put his tools back into the box, he just dropped the scissors he had used and turned, striding with long legs towards the house. Barefoot like his daughter, his steps were silent on the soft ground, and he reached out without looking, waiting for Luca to take his hand.

Fast, half running, they went back to the house, as there was magic in the air, magic that indicated someone had arrived.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Mummy, Mummy, Mummy's here!* Luca thought and ran faster, as fast as she could, and ignored that the path was steep and that her lungs were already burning. She couldn't wait to see her mother, hadn't seen her for far too long, and maybe, this time she would stay. She'd promised that one day, she wouldn't leave, wouldn't go back, and if only Luca could believe it, life would be a lot easier.

Mummy never stayed. Not for long, anyway. Three weeks at the most before she had to go back to her other family, her other children. Before she went back to *England* and *London* and *Rose* and *Hugo*. Who were Luca's half-sister and half-brother, but whom she didn't know in person.

She had seen pictures of them, of course. As long as she could think back, Luca knew that her mummy had a second life, a secret one, one she couldn't share, and one she couldn't take her little daughter to. Daddy was part of this secret life, in a way, as he went to the hut at the beach every now and then without her to see Mummy's other children. Luca was jealous when that happened, but she understood that Daddy liked Rose and Hugo, as well.

Still, it was very strange that he knew those other children, knew them since even before she, Luca, had been born. Rose looked like Mummy with hair as bushy and brown as Mummy's and with the same heart-shaped face. Only her eyes were blue. "She's got her father's eyes, Luca," her father had answered when she had asked why Rose's eyes weren't brown.

"Aren't you Rose's daddy?" Luca remembered this question clearly because Mummy and Daddy had shared one of those looks that told her that there was more than they were willing to say. And her daddy had just shaken his head and had said, "No, I'm not."

Hugo, her big brother, had blue eyes as well, but his hair was nearly red. On each and every picture, he smiled, and often, he had a book in his hand, as well. Luca assumed that he not only had inherited his father's eyes but his hair as well, and when she had asked Mummy, she had nodded once but refused to answer more questions. "He looks like his daddy as you look like yours," had been her final words, and that had been fine with Luca.

In Luca's opinion, Mummy's secret life was interesting and annoying at the same time. Sometimes, she was glad that she was not an only child, that she had siblings she surely would meet eventually. She daydreamed that one day, Mummy would take her by the hand and bring her to this ominous London, to the house she lived in and maybe even to her sister's and brother's grandparents, the ones who lived in a house with pixies and who had a clock with seven hands hanging on the kitchen wall.

On other days, most days actually, she couldn't imagine leaving Daddy. And that Daddy would have to stay behind if she went and had a look at Mummy's *England* was crystal clear to her. She knew Daddy was only safe on the island because before he had become her daddy he had been a different man, one with enemies. If he left the island, maybe someone would recognise him and put him into prison. True, a few times a year, Daddy went to the hut at the beach without her to meet Rose and Hugo, but that was different. At those times, she was allowed to stay with Conchita, who looked after her and cooked for her and let her play all day long instead of tending to her tasks. Who would look after Daddy if she went to London was the question. Maria and Pedro didn't really count, Mummy wouldn't be here either... No. She couldn't go and leave Daddy behind. London would have to wait for another little while.

The hut at the beach, though, sort of belonged to her, and she considered it massively unfair that Daddy went there without her, even if it was only every now and then. How often had she begged to come, to meet Rose and Hugo, too, but Daddy had never allowed it. "They don't know about you yet, love," he had said, and that bit she didn't entirely understand. She knew about them, so how could it be that they didn't know about her? However, Daddy had promised her that one day, she would meet them.

Nearly, nearly they were at the house now. Daddy picked her up and carried her, held her safely in his strong arms as if she didn't weigh more than a basket of grapes. He wasn't out of breath like she was. He just ran. He wanted to see Mummy as badly as she did, that much was clear.

When they reached the garden, Daddy put her down and went to the pump. "Come on, Luca, we need to wash first, or Mummy will be covered in dirt the moment we hug her," he said, and she giggled.

Truly, Daddy was dirty. His hands were black, his feet, too, and sweat was running down his forehead and chest. Working in the vineyard all day meant getting dirty, she knew and looked down at her shorts and her t-shirt. Earth and grass, leaves, and there was a drop of blood from the scratch on her hand. Washing was a good idea, she decided.

Cold, ice cold was their water. Daddy pumped it up, and it splashed on the dry ground before she first put her hands, then her feet under the beam. A piece of soap lay on top of the pump, and Daddy forced her to use it. "Make yourself presentable, young lady," he said, then added, "at least as much as possible. You need a bath, but that can wait until later."

She watched him whilst he held his head under the water, fiercely brushing the dirt off his hands and face. He had taken his shirt off, and Luca saw the muscles playing under his skin. A few leaves from the tattoo could be seen, although he was bent over, and again she thought how wonderfully real the flower looked. The bracelet sparkled in the sun, and of course she knew why the tattoo was there to cover a scar and to ease the pain Daddy would otherwise suffer from. She knew that he was a wizard and once had been badly wounded. She knew as well that Mummy was a witch, and that she would be a witch one day, too. Occasionally, tiny stars sparkled from her fingers when she was tired or scared, and once when she had been very angry, when she had thrown a tantrum really, things had fallen over without her touching them. When that had happened, Daddy had taken her on his lap and calmed her down, had dried her tears caused by outrage, and explained why it was dangerous to give in to anger. "I lost a friend because I insulted her, and I did that because I was angry," he had told her, and that had been the end of her tantrums. The thought of losing her friend just because she couldn't control herself was terrible. Moreover, she nearly always listened to her daddy, and she knew he only told her off because he loved her.

"We are not really clean, are we, Daddy?" she now asked, and he looked at her and then at himself and laughed his deep, wonderful laughter. Carelessly, he wiped off his hands on his trousers, leaving wet stripes at the back of them. Then he took a towel and dried her face, gently and carefully. Her hair, nearly as short as Daddy's hair and equally black, got one last rub, and then he took her hand once more. "Definitely not. But it will have to do for the time being."

The coolness of the house embraced her, and in the air she could smell perfume. "Mummy!" she called, and "Tessa?" her father added, a hint of surprise in his voice. She could understand why: usually, Mummy came running towards them as fast as they ran to meet her. She didn't go into the house and hide; at least she waited in the garden, inspecting her herbs.

Voices in the living room, easily to be heard in the silent house. Not only Mummy's voice, two more voices as well. The voices of children.

Suddenly, Daddy's hand around hers tightened. Only for a second and not hard enough to hurt but definitely strong enough to startle her. Without hesitation, he crossed the hall, pushed the door to the living room open and stopped. And stared not only at the woman who stood there but at the two children as well as if he never had seen children in his life before.

"Carlos!" Rose was the first who reacted and simply flung herself into his arms. Because this was Rose; it could be no one else, so much did she look like Mummy when Mummy had been a little girl. Luca had a picture book in her room from Mummy's days at that school, Hogwarts, and Rose looked exactly like those pictures. Only that she didn't wear robes but shorts and a t-shirt, and her hair was bound in a long plait. Luca looked at her and considered her beautiful.

And she hugged her daddy. Now that was... odd, sort of. On the other hand, Conchita's grandchildren hugged Daddy as well, especially when he had a basket of Maria's home-made biscuits with him. Many people liked Daddy, so why not her, too?

The boy Hugo, it must be Hugo came closer as well, the familiar big smile in his face. He grinned when Daddy hugged him, and then, suddenly, she was the centre of attention.

"So, you are our little sister then?" Hugo said, and Luca hadn't known she could blush that deeply. Her tongue refused to function at all although everyone knew she could babble all day long if necessary and so she just nodded.

Luckily, Mummy rescued her by sweeping her off her feet, embracing her and kissing her and holding her tight enough to press the air out of her lungs. "Hi, mouse," Mummy whispered in her ear, and that was all Luca needed to feel like herself again.

"Hi, Mummy," she said in her mother's hair. "I missed you so much, and Daddy missed you, too. Will you stay this time? Longer than just a little while?"

Mummy and Daddy looked at each other. Luca knew that they would talk for hours tonight, but for the moment, everything seemed fine. Daddy didn't ask all the questions he so clearly wanted to ask. Luca could see it in his eyes that he was surprised by Mummy bringing her other children. He just took one step towards Mummy, cupped her

chin, and raised an eyebrow.

"I promised you, didn't I?" Mummy whispered. "And a promise must be kept. We were divorced a week ago. Hugo will go to Hogwarts this year. Therefore, this time, I will stay."

---

Thank you for staying with me until the end, and hugs to anyone who has left or will leave a review. I cherish every single one. They are the visible proof that this story got read despite the fact that might be a bit of an unusual way to bring those two together.

An abundance of hugs to Dreamy\_Dragon, who helped me tremendously with comments and gerunds and feedback and all. She's not only the best alpha and beta reader I know in fandom, she's a friend as well, although I don't even know her in person. Yet!

Many thanks to my other helpers, too: Arabella Bloodgood, Sampdoria, and CharmedForce. Wouldn't know what to do without you, my dears.

And last, hugs and thanks to notsosaintly. She found the last remaining mistakes, she didn't let me down, although she has enough other things to do, and she triggered the idea to this story in the first place. I wrote this fic for you, dear, and I do hope very much you liked it.