

New Beginnings

by magalena

It's nine years post war. Hermione has just had a traumatic break-up with her fiancé, Theodore Nott. Hurt and disillusioned with her life, she retreats to a cottage in rural Ireland that she inherited from a great-aunt. You'll never guess who else has been living a peaceful life in the Muggle world in the same small village for the past eight years.

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Chapter 1 of 12

It's nine years post war. Hermione has just had a traumatic break-up with her fiancé, Theodore Nott. Hurt and disillusioned with her life, she retreats to a cottage in rural Ireland that she inherited from a great-aunt. You'll never guess who else has been living a peaceful life in the Muggle world in the same small village for the past eight years.

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Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter; I make no money here.

AN: This story was a gift for morethansirius in honor of all her contributions to the SS/HG fandom and was posted originally at the morethanmolly comm. on LJ. I post as madeleine on LJ.

Many thanks to my beta dreamy_dragon73 for all her help; she makes it all readable. Thank you also to talesofsnape for the lovely banner.

Hermione, at age twenty-eight, was now officially unemployed and unengaged. Her ex-fiancé had also been her department head at the Ministry, and it was decided by the powers that be that she could hardly keep working for him once she'd broken the engagement. Well, she could hardly be blamed for breaking the engagement after catching him fucking her assistant right in Hermione's office on her very own desk. The sleazy bastard!

So now, she was at a crossroads: where did she go from here? As so often when she needed advice and reassurance, she'd come to her mentor and friend, Minerva McGonagall.

"At least I learned the truth about Theo before the wedding. Thank the gods for that!" exclaimed Hermione vehemently. "When I stormed into his office the next day and threw his ring in his face, he tried to act like it was no big deal and like things should just go on as if nothing had happened. He said that it's common among his peers for husbands to have mistresses or affairs. As if I would stay with the cheating prick after what he'd done."

When she had disabused him of that idea, he'd proceeded to say many cruel and hateful things, telling her that he'd only planned to marry her for her celebrity status in order to help advance his career. And furthermore, he had proceeded to let her know how totally inadequate she was as a woman, as a lover. The things he'd said to her had been so invidiously cruel and hate-filled that she had been eviscerated emotionally by his viciousness. Even now, she couldn't bring herself to repeat the hurtful insults Theo had hurled at her to Minerva or anyone.

"Harry and Ron offered to sort Theo out for me. But I didn't want the boys to risk losing their jobs; Theo's connections at the Ministry run deep, and he could make things difficult for them." And deep down, she had somehow believed some of the awful things he'd said about her; she felt like he had left scars on her heart. "I really believed

myself to be in love with Theo Nott, Minerva. Perhaps, I so desperately wanted someone to love me that I was blind to reality, or maybe he was just that good at subterfuge."

Hermione was the most confident person in the world when it came to her job, research, academics or friends, but she'd never ever been very good at male-female relationships. She did, in fact, feel inadequate, incompetent and now a total failure, so every cruel word out of Theo's mouth only reinforced her own lack of self-worth in the relationship department.

It had started with Viktor back at school. It had been awkward, and when he'd kissed her after the Yule ball, she hadn't felt the excitement her roommates had described when talking about snogging boys. Instead, it had been rather disturbing. It was wet and sloppy, and when his tongue had snaked its way into her mouth, instead of being turned on, she had just felt grossed out.

Then with Ron, it hadn't been bad. It just hadn't been all that exciting, not what she'd been led to believe, at least. She'd craved the closeness that sex had brought, had loved the cuddling afterward, but the actual act just didn't live up to the romance novels. She'd just never understood all the hype about sex. She was actually glad when they decided to break it off and just be friends. She loved Ron much better as a friend than a lover.

She'd had a few short-term boyfriends, but over the last few years, she just hadn't had any permanent relationships until Theo. She thought she'd finally found the real thing: affection, mutual respect, compatibility. She realized only now how horribly wrong she'd been, and that he'd only been playing up to her weaknesses and using her reputation as a springboard to become Minister of Magic.

Minerva's voice pulled her out of her reverie and back to the present.

"I know that right now you are hurting. But perhaps this break-up is the impetus you need to make a fresh start," Minerva said, patting Hermione solicitously. "They do say all things happen for a reason."

Hermione sighed as she stared out of the window of the Headmistress' office. "Maybe you're right, Minerva. But this is one hell of a way for fate to teach me a lesson."

"Tell me the truth, dear. What is it you've always wanted to do? What is that secret dream that you've always kept hidden in the back of your mind? Old dreams never die, my dear, they are just filed away. When the time is right, they can be pulled out and put to use."

Hermione pondered the question for a while. She'd never wanted to do the things a normal little girl did, hadn't wanted to be a nurse or a secretary or a teacher. She'd wanted to be a scientist or an astronaut or an explorer. She'd spent so many hours lost in the pages of books. Suddenly, a smile broke through. "I love books. I've always wanted to write. When I was a little girl, I used to make up stories all the time and dreamed that some day I'd be a writer."

"Well, that sounds perfect for you, dear. Take that dream out and dust it off. You'll never know unless you try."

"Oh, Minerva, thank you! This is brilliant. You've truly given me something to look forward to—a new beginning."

"But how will you manage without the income from your job while you try to establish yourself?" Minerva worried.

No problems there, thanks to Draco Malfoy," responded Hermione with a huge grin as she hurried on to explain. "Zabini is Malfoy's best friend, and Blaise works with Harry and Ron, so he heard first hand about the whole fiasco with Theo. How the higher-ups opted to sack me rather than transfer me to another department or, Merlin forbid, fire Nott instead. Anyway, Blaise was telling Draco about it, and it seems that he, Draco that is, has a huge grudge against Theo for numerous past wrongs, including but not limited to Theo stealing his fiancée Astoria Greengrass from him five years ago. So, he offered to represent me in a suit for unfair dismissal. He got me triple the normal severance package plus a hefty compensation of twenty-five thousand Galleons. By the time he was done, the Ministry didn't know what hit them."

"And how much is left after Mr. Malfoy took his share?" asked Minerva skeptically.

"Amazingly, Draco did it pro bono. Apparently, he wanted to stick it to Nott very badly. When I insisted that I should pay him something, he said to consider it reparations for past misdeeds on his part. The only thing he wanted from me was a favor, for me to set him up on a date with my friend Luna. Seems he's had a thing for her for quite some time and couldn't get her to go out with him."

"Mr. Malfoy and Miss Lovegood? Well, that's an odd couple if I ever heard of one," stated Minerva. "Still, one never knows where one will find love; it grows in the strangest places and between the most unexpected people sometimes."

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Chapter 2 of 12

It's nine years post war. Hermione has just had a traumatic break-up with her fiance, Theodore Nott. Hurt and disillusioned with her life, she retreats to a cottage in rural Ireland that she inherited from a great-aunt. You'll never guess who else has been living a peaceful life in the Muggle world in the same small village for the past eight years.

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Truthfully, with the settlement she'd gotten...thanks to Malfoy...and a little sound investing, she'd never have to work again as long as she lived modestly. But it wasn't in Hermione's nature to simply do nothing. Now that she was excited about the idea of writing, ideas kept popping into her head, and she couldn't wait to get started. But it was hard to get anything done with all the distractions by her friends and family. They were constantly popping in or checking up on her, via owl or Floo or Muggle post. Harry had even sent his Patronus a couple of times just to make sure she was okay. She knew they meant well and they were worried about her, but it was enough to drive her round the bend.

She decided the only way she was going to be able to work on her writing was to get away from it all. She had the perfect excuse to want some time to herself after the fiasco with Theo, and she had the perfect place to go.

She had inherited a cottage in Ireland from her great-aunt Maeve, her father's aunt. Maeve had sadly lost her sweetheart in WWII and never married. She had left

everything to Hermione as her only heir.

Hermione hadn't had a chance to visit since Maeve's death. Her job had kept her too busy, plus Theo had made it clear he had no desire to lower himself to visit some Muggle hovel in the middle of nowhere...much less stay there. Hermione had never found the time to get away on her own whilst she'd been tied to him. But now those ties were well and truly broken, shattered in fact, and she had the freedom to go wherever she chose.

Having shrunk her luggage and supplies and stowed them in her beaded bag, she Apparated to the back garden of the stone cottage she remembered so well. It was fairly isolated, a bit of a hike from the village and no neighbors in sight, so she had no worries of being spotted by a stray Muggle.

With the key in hand, Hermione felt the first bit of real excitement she'd felt in a good long while. Turning the key proved difficult; the lock hadn't been used in quite some time and was perhaps a bit rusty. At first unsure what to do, Hermione suddenly burst out laughing. Was she a witch or what? "*Alohomora*."

The door opened with a flick of her wand. Sometimes, it was hard to forgo the habits of her childhood.

The cottage was just as she remembered; it was small, but it felt cozy rather than cramped. The kitchen was fully equipped with all the modern Muggle appliances and two chairs and a drop-leaf table, which could easily expand to seat six if she had guests and they squeezed in a bit. She pushed through into the front room, where she found a comfy sofa where she could curl up in front of the fireplace. A recliner sat by the window with a reading light nearby. Hermione sat down. Leaning back and closing her eyes, she fondly recalled sitting on Auntie Maeve's lap while being read bedtime stories about goblins and fairies and dragons and witches. Irony to think that all the fantasies of those childhood tales were now part of her real life.

Getting up, Hermione wandered down the hallway to the bedrooms. There was a smaller guestroom on the right with a bathroom across the hall. And at the end of the hallway was Maeve's room...Hermione's now. Taking a deep breath, she pushed the door open and surveyed the room, the queen-sized bed with a colorful 'Rose of Sharon' quilt her aunt had made. A comfy chair with a footstool stood next to the window...another perfect spot to read on lazy sunny mornings. The wall on either side of the window was covered with tall bookcases, and another was filling the space beneath the window. Perhaps she had inherited her love of reading from her aunt. Hermione perused the titles: classics, fantasy, history, mystery, romance, even science fiction; Auntie Maeve had quite an eclectic collection of books. Looking quickly into the master bath, she was pleased to find it bigger than normal with a garden tub and separate shower.

Going back down the hallway and up the narrow stairway, she checked out the first floor. The smaller room on the right hand side was her aunt's sewing room. It looked as if a fabric shop had exploded within; scraps of fabric, ribbons and trim littered every surface. Hermione choked up a bit, seeing Maeve's last project still laid out on the table, looking for all the world as if she had just stepped out and would be back at any moment to finish it up. Hermione turned to the other room as she wiped the tears away, and her heart soared. The view from the windows was just as spectacular as she remembered; the Connemara Mountains to the West and Lough Mask towards the North. She knew in that instant that this was going to be her office. She would put her desk here with her computer and her reference books on the shelves and posters of far-away places on the walls. She could hardly wait to get started.

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A week later, Hermione had not written a single word. She wasn't worried about it though; she'd been very busy. She had gotten Maeve's things all sorted out and herself settled in. She had sorted through and kept most of her aunt's books, including a rather naughty section of erotica hidden away on the very bottom shelf. It kind of squicked her a bit to think of dear Auntie Maeve reading dirty stories, but it was not quite disturbing enough to throw them all away; these were not her mother's sweet, innocent romance novels. She'd boxed up and distributed her aunt's clothes to local charities and had cleaned the cottage from top to bottom. She hadn't the heart to dispose of the quilt that Maeve had been working on, so she had left the sewing room untouched. Perhaps, she would learn how to quilt one day and finish her aunt's last project.

She had set up her work space and managed to get someone out to get the internet connected. Hermione had developed a clever shielding spell outside the room that protected her computer from magical interference. As long as she avoided using magic in close proximity, her computer wouldn't fry. She'd considered having the main fireplace hooked up to the Floo network, but in the end she decided to forgo the convenience of easy communication with her friends in the wizarding world for the sake of her own privacy.

She'd been surprised when Draco called her on her mobile; she hadn't even known he knew how to use one. She had contacted him previously via owl to have him set up local bank accounts. She now had access to Muggle funds as well as at the nearest branch of Gringotts. She'd had to reveal her location to him, which for some reason had seemed to shock him at first, and then caused him to suffer a bout of uncontrolled insane laughter. He'd mentioned that if she happened to drop in at the local pub, the Green Dragon, to be sure to pay his respects to the owner. When she'd attempted to find out what the heck he was going on about, he had hung up on her. Crazy Slytherin!

Hermione hiked the four kilometers into the village and spoke to the local mechanic about coming out and having a look at Aunt Maeve's ancient VW Beetle that was stored out in the shed. Hermione had learned to drive years ago, and although she hadn't used the skill in quite some time, she figured she could manage quite well if she could get the car going. She'd been in Clonbur a couple of times for supplies. Since she couldn't very well shrink her purchases and Disapparate in front of a village full of Muggles, she'd been forced to just buy a few things at a time and walk home carrying her sacks. Having a car at her disposal would make getting around easier.

She decided to stop by the Green Dragon, where she had a delicious bowl of soup for lunch. She was enjoying the human contact and was in no hurry to rush home to her empty cottage, so she just sat for the next couple of hours and enjoyed the ambiance while she conversed with the harried barman. A barman who looked amazingly just like George Weasley. Maybe that's what Draco had meant. Perhaps, he'd passed through, had a drink at the pub and noticed the uncanny resemblance.

"This is probably going to sound like a line, but you look just like someone I know, his name is George," Hermione confided.

"Ach... my boss said the exactly same thing when he first met me. Maybe, I've got a double somewhere, hey?"

"Maybe," she said with a smile. "So you're not the owner then, I take it? Someone I know asked me to relay his regards."

"Me? Oh, no. He's out and about on business today."

"Well, you certainly seem to have a good crowd here, especially for it being the middle of the week."

"We do pick up quite a bit of the sightseers, especially since the boss convinced one of them tour groups to make regular stops here. Show the tourists a real-life Irish pub, you know?"

Hermione nodded, looking around at the quaint surroundings. "Ummhmm, I know what you mean. Well, I'd better be heading home. Could you fix me up with an order of fish and chips for take-away, Padraic? Then I won't have to cook when I get home."

"Sure thing, love, and just call me Paddy, everyone does. Your order'll be up in a flash," he said, going to turn her order in to the kitchen.

As Hermione trudged back home, she wondered if Paddy and his uncanny resemblance to George was the reason Draco had been so insanely amused. But no, he'd specifically said, 'give my regards to the owner.' So how would Draco have any acquaintance with the owner of a Muggle pub? Who was this mysterious man?

tbcc

AN: If you'd like to see an example of Maeve's 'Rose of Sharon' quilt, check here: <http://www.rickrack.com/quilt/wrvb.html>

This is how I picture Bluebell Cottage: <http://i588.photobucket.com/albums/ss323/madeleone/irish%20photos/irishcottage2.jpg>

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Chapter 3 of 12

It's nine years post war. Hermione has just had a traumatic break-up with her fiancé, Theodore Nott. Hurt and disillusioned with her life, she retreats to a cottage in rural Ireland that she inherited from a great-aunt. You'll never guess who else has been living a peaceful life in the Muggle world in the same small village for the past eight years.

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"Oh, Hi, Boss. You made it back, I see. Did you get all your errands taken care of then?"

"Yes, Paddy. How did it go here today? Did the Shamrock Tour bus make the scheduled stop? Any problems I should know about?"

"Yup, everything went fine. Well, except we ran out of the potato soup, but Corrine subbed the chicken rice in, no big deal. The beer order was short a case of Guinness, but we should have enough in stock 'til the next delivery comes through."

"Very good," Russ replied as he began to total up till.

"Oh, yea. There was a cute little English bird askin' about you."

"Me?" He froze, but his face didn't reveal any concern. "Someone was asking for me?"

"Well, not you by name exactly."

Russ relaxed, his grip on the edge of the bar eased.

"She asked about the owner, said someone told her to give you his regards. She thought I might be the owner at first. Oh, funny thing too, boss. When she first saw me, she said I reminded her of a bloke from back home, someone named George. That's that same thing you said when we met, isn't it? Wonder if it could be the same one, do you think? Can't be all that many guys named George wearin' this ugly mug can there?"

"We can only hope not, Paddy," replied Russ grimly. "So...what was she like, this *little bird*?"

Paddy considered carefully. "Well, at first glance, I'd say a plain brown sparrow. But on closer study, I'd say a small hawk or a falcon perhaps."

Russ pinched the bridge of his rather prominent nose and rubbed in between his eyebrows. "I didn't actually mean for you to describe her like a bird. What did she look like...in human terms."

"Oh, sorry, Boss. Well, she was kinda petite-like, you know?" Paddy held his hand up just below his shoulder height. "Smallish build. Wild curly, brown hair and brown eyes too...that's what reminded me of a sparrow first off, don't you see? At first glance she seems a bit plain and all...kinda mousy, but if you take a closer look you see she's not at all. An' her eyes boss, those eyes, Lord have mercy. That's what put me in mind of a falcon, a kestral maybe, like she's smart, really smart, there was a keen knowledge there behind her eyes. But they looked like they've seen great evil or experienced a terrible sorrow."

"It seems you were studying this little bird quite closely, Paddy. Did you happen to get a name by any chance?" asked Russ sardonically.

Shaking his head, Paddy replied, "I didn't catch it, Boss. It was right in the midst of the lunch rush. I felt bad 'cause she remembered my name right along."

Russ snorted and flicked his finger tip against Paddy's name tag, but Paddy blushed and explained, "No, she called me Padraic 'cause when I told her my name I said it proper. Padraic McEvoy. And she remembered it later, but I told her to call me Paddy. So I felt bad that I didn't remember hers. I'm sure I'll find out though when she comes back in."

Russ looked up sharply. "What makes you think she'll be back, Paddy? Wasn't she just traveling through on the tour bus?"

"Oh, no, Boss. Didn't I say that? She was already in here when the bus stopped; she lives here in the village... er well... just outside, that is. She's old Maeve McNamara's niece or great-niece, I guess. She inherited Bluebell Cottage from Maeve or somethin'. So she's livin' not too far from you, up on Witches' Ridge."

"How appropriate," muttered Russ under his breath.

An hour later, after the till was totaled, the floors swept, the bar wiped down and all the set-up done for the next day, Paddy and the night staff went home. Russ sat at the corner of the bar and poured his third shot of Jameson. He sat ruminating, wondering exactly what his next move should be.

He was sure that Paddy's *mysterybird* was Granger. The question was, why? Why was she here? Had she sought him out intentionally for some unknown reason or just to prove she could? Had someone leaked his location? The people who knew where he was numbered fewer than the fingers on one hand. Was it purely coincidence that the spot he had chosen to settle just happened to be the home town of Granger's great-aunt, Maeve?

Should he pack up and run? He didn't want to do that. He'd spent eight years building a life in this place and he liked it here. There were no twinkling Headmasters to command him, no Dark Lords to curse him; it was quiet, boring and comfortable, and he reveled in it. He didn't want to abandon it unless it was a matter of life or death. He pounded back another shot of Jameson; it wasn't Firewhisky, but it would have to do.

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In the end, Russ Spaveene decided not to do anything rash. Better to take a wait-and-see approach. He waited a few days, but Granger didn't show up at the pub again, so he began to think that perhaps she wasn't stalking him. Ironically, he began stalking her instead to find out what she was up to.

He casually asked around to gather information. He mentioned to Mrs. Foy, the old lady who ran the post office, that he'd heard he had a new neighbor and wondered what she knew about her. He actually was a neighbor. Although he did keep rooms above the pub for nights when he worked extremely late, he also rented a small home just over the hill and down the road about a kilometer from Maeve's cottage... well apparently Granger's now. Mrs. Foy loved to gossip and was as old as sin, so she knew everything about everyone in town. She recalled when the girl had been a child and had come visiting with her parents several times. Then, she had actually stayed the

whole summer two times with her Aunt Maeve when she was about ten or eleven. But then, she'd started up at some fancy, exclusive boarding school in Scotland, and her folks had wanted her home in the summers after that, or at least she supposed that was the case.

He talked to young Timothy Murphy, the pimply-faced boy who worked at the grocer's. Tim was more than willing to tell him all about the lovely English lady living at Bluebell Cottage. It seemed strange to hear Granger referred to as a lady when he tended to still think of her as a child. Tim reported that she had come into town every few days for supplies at first, then he had personally delivered her groceries to her doorstep last week. It was quite obvious by Timothy's enthusiasm that he had a schoolboy crush on the girl...the sodding little pervert. It seemed that she had enlisted Shaun O'Brian, the local mechanic, to resurrect Maeve's ancient VW, so she could get around on her own. It appeared that there would be no more visits to Bluebell cottage for young Mr. Murphy, damn his horny little soul to hell.

Russ pulled up to O'Brian's shop in his Audi S4 on the pretense that it was making a strange noise. He felt the car lent an appearance of normalcy to his life; he couldn't very well just pop in and out all the time. And besides, he loved his car. It really wasn't making any unusual sounds, and he usually didn't bring his baby to this backwoods mechanic. He normally took it to the dealer in Galway, but he wanted to pump O'Brian for information. He mentioned that he thought he'd seen old Maeve's VW back on the road and wasn't that odd? O'Brian revealed that he had gotten the beast going for Maeve's niece but not without trying to convince the woman to buy a newer, more reliable vehicle. She'd told him in no uncertain terms that she only needed to travel short distances and didn't have the money to purchase a new car.

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She had come into town again for lunch at the Green Dragon one day, but he'd managed to slip out before she could see him. Then he'd watched her unobserved and noted that she didn't seem particularly upset when Paddy told her that the boss had apparently stepped out. She'd simply replied that she'd try to catch him another day. Was it possible she really was unaware that he was here? That her presence here was mere coincidence?

Once she'd left, he slipped back into his office unobserved and reviewed the information he'd gathered so far. It appeared that her background really did check out: she was Maeve McNamara's great-niece and had inherited Bluebell Cottage. It seemed that she was trying to fit into the local community, walking into the village, having lunch at the pub, buying supplies in local establishments. She could have just as easily Disapparated to a wizarding community, gotten her food stuffs or whatever she needed then popped back in. But then locals would have started gossiping; they did so love to gossip. How was she getting around without transportation? Where was she buying her food if not here? It also seemed she was unwilling or unable to spend money on a better car and had no plans to be driving longer distances; hence she really did plan to stay in the local area.

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A week later, Hermione sat and stared gloomily at her depressingly spectacular views. Her writing debut had not gone as smoothly as she'd expected. She had all sorts of ideas, her novel was all mapped out in her head, but it just wasn't coming together for her. Turning to glare at her blank computer screen, she wanted to scream, she wanted to cry, she wanted to beat it bloody with her fists. She hadn't written anything coherent as of yet. Not one friggin' thing all week. Everything that she had written, although it sounded brilliant in her mind, somehow became pure and utter Thestral crap when it went from her brain through her fingers into the keyboard onto the computer screen. Every morning when she'd read what she'd written the day before, she'd immediately deleted it all. Every morning for the whole fucking week!

It wasn't supposed to be this hard, was it? It really shouldn't be, she was sure of that. She loved to read, always had. She adored stories and had all these marvelous ideas that would make wonderful books, she just knew it, but she just couldn't seem to translate what was in her brain onto the page. In desperation, she'd even tried writing long-hand with quill and parchment, thinking maybe trying to do things the Muggle way on the computer was stifling her creativity. She'd taken long walks through the countryside, she'd taken long soaks in a bubble-filled tub; nothing seemed to help. How could she have writer's block when she hadn't actually written anything yet?

"FUCK! Fuck, fuck, fuckity fuck! Arrghh!"

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When he didn't see her around town for a few more days, he decided to spy on her...he was an ex-spy after all; it was what he was best known for. He Apparated to the woods behind her home, Disillusioned himself and watched the cottage for signs of activity. Before long, he saw her pacing back and forth in front of the windows of one of the upper rooms; she seemed to be talking to someone or perhaps just muttering to herself. Then she sat at the desk for a while, and he realized she was writing on a computer. She must have figured out a way to prevent her magic from interfering with her electronics. After about a quarter hour she stopped, looked over what she'd written then started banging her head on the desk. Really? What was wrong with the girl? Just before he Disapparated, he heard her shout in frustration.

"FUCK! Fuck, fuck, fuckity fuck! Arrghh!"

What on earth was that all about?

tbc

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Chapter 4 of 12

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After a few days with no more signs of Granger coming into Clonbur, he decided to do a little more reconnaissance. He once again arrived in the woods behind her shed and slipped unnoticed around to the back of the cottage. He'd been watching the first floor, expecting her to appear there again like before, but instead he noticed movement on the lower floor towards the back of the house. Suddenly, he realized he was looking right into her bedroom, and his target was coming out of what must obviously be the bathroom. Her hair was tousled and damp, hanging in ringlets over her shoulders. She was wrapped securely in a thick, white towel...securely that was until she dropped the towel and proceeded to walk around her room in the buff.

It was plain to see that Miss Granger was no longer a little girl by any means. He shifted uncomfortably. She had wonderful, womanly curves. As she propped her foot up on the stool and bent to smooth lotion over her legs, he saw the most gorgeous arse he'd seen in quite some time. When she turned around and stretched a bit, he couldn't

help but gasp at the pair of breasts displayed before him. Not huge, just a bit more than a handful, perfect really in his opinion, with lovely light brown nipples that made his mouth water when they puckered in the cool morning air.

Sweet Merlin! What was he thinking; this was Miss Granger, his student...well former student really, but still, he shouldn't be ogling her like this without her permission (as if that would ever happen). And what was the woman thinking! Prancing around in the nude, showing off everything she had to the world. He then looked guiltily around. Her window faced her own very isolated, private back garden, where she obviously didn't expect her perverted old Potions teacher, or anyone else for that matter, to be lurking about, looking into her bedroom window.

He silently slipped away, returning to his own home, where he found himself in need of a bit of relief before he could safely head off to work for the day. A strange thing happened while in pursuit of said release...er...relief. Usually, his fantasies were filled with images of auburn hair and green eyes, but today his treacherous brain kept producing visions of a curly-haired, brown-eyed termagant, kneeling at his feet as he wanked his way to oblivion.

~**~

A week later, she still had been unable to produce anything worth keeping. It was so frustrating. She knew deep down she didn't have to do this. With her settlement from the ministry and her inheritance from Maeve, she could live quite comfortably, if not extravagantly, and not ever have to find another job. But now that she had told everyone she was going to Ireland to settle in and write novels, she'd feel like a failure if she didn't actually do it.

"Maybe I'm just trying too hard." Deciding that maybe what she needed was some distraction, she pulled out the erotic romance from Maeve's collection that she'd started reading the night before and wandered off to distract herself.

Before she could get sufficiently distracted, she was interrupted by two owl posts, one containing her daily paper delivery. The other was Harry and Ginny's owl, Narina, with a letter. The two owls seemed to be battling over who would be the first to make their delivery. Hermione settled it by offering them both owl treats simultaneously and taking the post as they paused to take their rewards.

Hmmm... should she read Harry's letter first or see what sort of garbage the *Prophet* was printing today? She really ought to subscribe to the Dublin wizarding newspaper, *The Morning Sun*; it was a much more reliable source of news and not nearly the gossip rag the *Prophet* had become.

She decided to read Harry's letter first. She only got as far as the first paragraph.

Dear Hermione,

Hopefully Narina will reach you with my letter before you read the news today. Please don't take it to heart. It is the Prophet, after all, so you know no one is going to take this seriously.

Hermione threw Harry's letter down and ripped the *Prophet* out of its wrapper. There on the front page was a picture of Theo with his arm around her bimbo of an ex-secretary, and the glaring headline read: *NOTT HEIR ENGAGED, AGAIN!* In a ridiculous interview, he claimed that he had fallen deeply in love with Trudi after she had offered him solace and comfort when his heart had been broken by his former fiancée, Miss Hermione Granger. Then he'd 'accidentally' let it slip that he had caught his former fiancée in flagrante in his very own office with a well-known female Quidditch star. *"It's no wonder she was never able to maintain a lasting relationship all these years," he said of Miss Granger. "All this time I thought there was something wrong with me, but now I know that she's batting for the other team. It all makes perfect sense."*

"ARRRGGHHHH!" screamed Hermione. "That filthy, no good, lying sack of dragon dung!"

~**~

She hadn't come into the village looking for him. She obviously was not seeking him out. In fact, she probably had no idea he was even here. Guilt had kept him away from observing her for several days, but finally his curiosity got the better of him. He Apparated again to his favorite hiding spot but swore to himself he would not lower himself to being a Peeping Tom. The last time had been an accident. He promised himself if he saw her naked again, he would not look. Well obviously, if he saw her he would have already looked, but after that he would be honorable and turn away. That's what he told himself, anyway.

She wasn't naked, and she wasn't in the bedroom. He didn't know if he was relieved or disappointed. She was in the kitchen today. As he stood watching, two owls approached and landed on her window sill at the same time. They appeared to be jockeying for position to see which would deliver their burden first. Once they'd flown away, he watched as she first opened a letter, but after reading only a short bit, she threw it down on the table to rip the wrapper off the paper. He immediately recognized it as the *Daily Prophet*; he had several months worth of back issues piled up at home. He didn't know why he kept getting the sleazy tabloid, but he hadn't bothered to read it in a long time. He noted that she seemed to be getting very upset by whatever was written in the paper. Before long, he heard her curse.

"ARRRGGHHHH! That filthy, no good, lying sack of dragon dung!"

She appeared furious. He strengthened his Disillusionment Charm and moved in closer, as he wanted to hear what she was saying. As long as he stayed very still, she shouldn't notice the tell-tale shimmer of the charm. She was muttering angry threats. He heard her mention something about hexing someone's bits off and feeding them to the fishes. His hands slipped down to cover his bits. Perhaps, spying on Granger was not such a good idea after all. Now she was feeding her unwitting victim to Acromantulas. She was not someone you wanted to be angry at you; Dolores Umbridge had learned that the hard way back in Hermione's fifth year.

~**~

Hermione was furious. She wanted revenge, retribution. She wanted Theodore Nott's slow and painful death. No, she wanted to hex his bits into tiny little pieces and feed them to the fishes. No, she wanted to tie him to a rope and dangle him over a pit of Acromantulas. No, she could...

She finally called Draco on her mobile. He'd told her that he kept his own on as he had several Muggle-born clients, who traversed both worlds, and he found it an easy means to communicate with them. She told him in no uncertain terms that she wanted to sue the socks off Nott. While Draco sympathized, he advised her against filing a lawsuit. He said it would only put them in the public eye for much longer than if she were to simply ignore it and let it fade away.

"Draco, no! How can I just ignore it? He's made me out to be the evil, cheating witch who broke his poor innocent heart."

"Sometimes you have to choose your battles, Granger. It's not true, so don't let it bother you," he advised. "It's not true, is it?"

"No, Draco, it's not!"

"Damn, Granger, here I was having really hot, girl-on-girl fantasies of you and Cho Chang, and you have to go and ruin it for me," he teased.

"Draco, I don't care about that part. If people believe I'm gay, I just don't care. But he's making up all these horrible lies and using my name in the press to gain sympathy for himself. He'll probably run for Minister and win just on the sympathy vote factor."

"So come back to London and prove him wrong. Hey, I know, we can tell everyone you're in a wild three-way relationship with me and Luna."

Hermione started giggling at his absurd suggestion; it eased the tension of her fury just a bit. "How will that solve anything, Malfoy? After what Nott's said, people would just assume I was after Luna."

"I'm just as pretty as she is." He pouted.

"Maybe prettier... It's going well for you two, then, is it?"

"I don't want to jinx it. But thanks for convincing her to go out with me; I owe you one for that."

"You've helped me so much already. You don't owe me anything, Draco." She paused before continuing, "You honestly don't think there's anything I can do about this mess, then?"

"Not right now. It's really not a wise decision at this time. I honestly think it would make an even bigger mess than this already is. It would just turn into a huge media circus. You've been smeared by Skeeter in the press before, Granger: back in school during the Tri-wizard Tournament with Krum, then again when you broke up with the Weasel. Why does it bother you so much this time?"

"Because he's playing the heartbroken hero in all this, and that'd be my role. For me it was real. I'm the one who found my fiancé fucking my secretary on my desk, and I never even suspected anything was wrong before that very moment. My heart really did break that day, Draco. I loved him."

"After all these years, I thought I'd finally found someone to love; someone who liked all the same things I liked: books and research and intelligent conversation; someone who would love me for me. But that was all a huge lie; he just pretended, so he could ride my celebrity status into an election and straight into the Ministers' office. And then he proceeded to tell me just how frigid I am and how completely inadequate and useless I am as a woman, and that no one would ever want me, could ever want me."

"He told me that he had to force himself every time he ever touched me, every time he lowered himself to rut with a filthy... That hurts, it hurts so much... How could I have been so stupid, so clueless, so totally wrong about someone. I'll never be able to trust another man as long as I live. And now that he's screwed up his free ride into politics, he's going to get there anyway by dragging my name through the mud." She snorted. "That's funny, isn't it, Draco? He's dragging the Mudblood through the mud."

"Hermione, please... stop... Don't say that."

He'd never called her Hermione before, ever. She tried to quell her tears, knowing that Draco could hear the stifled sobs on the other end of the line.

"Listen, we're going to make him pay for this. We'll get him back for what he's been doing. I don't know how or when, but we will. We'll find a way, I promise you that."

"Thanks, Draco. You grew up to be not such a prat, after all. I'm going to let you go for now. Give my love to Luna, all right?" She disconnected and turned her mobile off before he could say anything else. She was so angry, she hurled it with all her might straight through the open window out into the yard.

"Well," she said aloud to herself, "Nothing better to do for it than go get drunk." Grabbing the keys to the bug, she headed for the Green Dragon.

~**~

He'd watched as she rifled through a ratty, beaded bag and pulled out a Muggle mobile phone. She paced back and forth as she dialed, then put the phone down on the table and turned the speaker phone on high volume, so she could pace and talk and wave her arms around at the same time. It didn't take long to figure out that she was talking to Draco Malfoy, who apparently was her lawyer. Before long the whole sordid story unfolded.

A tale of lies, betrayal, deceit, unfaithfulness and cruelty. All things he could readily understand, probably more so than most.

As she disconnected the call, she threw the phone out of the window in a fit of pique, declaring she was going to get drunk. Luckily for him, she didn't actually watch the phone after she threw it, or she would have noticed that it bounced off an invisible chest, causing a sharp grunt of pain before it fell to the ground. Damn, the girl had a strong arm on her, that was certain. He'd most likely have a bruise there tomorrow.

He decided to go home and read some of those *Prophets* he had stacked up in his closet. With that information, it shouldn't be too hard to figure out the rest of the story. If there were any details he couldn't surmise, he would place a Floo call to his blasted godson to get the rest of the story. She didn't seem determined to Disapparate off to murder Theodore Nott, and he knew she wouldn't be going too far in that old rattletrap of a car. He knew he'd be able to find her at his own pub before the night was over; it was the only one around.

tbc

5

Chapter 5 of 12

It's nine years post war. Hermione has just had a traumatic break-up with her fiancé, Theodore Nott. Hurt and disillusioned with her life, she retreats to a cottage in rural Ireland that she inherited from a great-aunt. You'll never guess who else has been living a peaceful life in the Muggle world in the same small village for the past eight years.

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter, I make no money here.

Many thanks to my beta dreamy_dragon73 for all her help; she made it all readable.

Instead of sitting at the bar as she usually did, Hermione sat at a table in a dark little corner. The pub was not nearly as busy as during the day; there was mostly a local crowd present. Paddy was working and tried to draw her into conversation. She politely rebuffed his attention and ordered a Powers Gold Label on the rocks, then sat, sipping her drink and ignoring the crowd around her.

After a while, a few local musicians gathered to play and sing. Someone approached her table and asked her to dance, but with a cold look, she just shook her head.

At one point after a few hours, Paddy came and talked to her quietly, "Hermione, darlin', don't you think you've had enough now?"

"Am I causing a problem, Paddy?"

"Well no, you're not, but I've not seen you like this before...so quiet and all. It's not like you, and you're startin' to worry me."

She looked him in the eye and replied, "You don't honestly know me well enough to know what I'm like. Now, if I'm not causing a problem, then just bring me another bloody drink and stay out of my business."

By the time Russ entered the bar, she'd been there drinking for several hours. She wasn't slamming back the whiskey in a rush toward drunken insensibility; it was more of a steady, strategic march into heavenly numbness. As the evening wore on, she became increasingly morose. She didn't interact with anyone around her; she just sipped each drink slowly, then ordered another as she gazed unseeingly straight ahead, lost in her own thoughts. She was diligently working her way towards self-oblivion.

Oblivion. She snorted inelegantly and giggled to herself. That was what she needed, to be obliterated...er...obliterated...er...blitzed! She chuckled to herself. Yup, that was it blitzed...that's exactly what she was...blitzed.

Paddy conferred with Russ about Hermione as she weaved her way back from the loo. While she wasn't a stumbling, falling-down drunk, she was far from steady. She plopped back down on her chair, finished the drink in front of her and promptly laid her head on the table.

"How much has she had to drink tonight?" asked Russ in quiet tones, not wanting to draw her attention to him as she still didn't know he was here. He then swore under his breath when he was told.

"But I've been waterin' 'em down a bit for the last hour or so. I know I shouldn't have, and it's not somethin' I'd ever do ordinarily, Boss. She didn't seem to notice the difference in the drinks, though."

"It's all right, Paddy. This is a special case." Most of the patrons had left already, and the bar was closing in half an hour. "Just let her sit there, I'll make sure she gets home."

"Do you think that's wise, Boss? She's never even met you, after all."

"Actually, we do know each other quite well...from England. It's been a long time since we've seen each other, though."

Paddy gave his boss a calculating look. He'd had the feeling the boss had been avoiding the girl. It couldn't have been coincidence that he'd just happened to be out every single time she'd come into the pub. It seemed like he'd finally decided to face up to whatever he'd been avoiding. "Well, then all right, if you're sure."

Russ nodded, then proceeded to tally the till as Paddy wiped up the bar and swept the floor. Once everyone had left, he sat and stared at the girl. "Oh, Miss Granger, what am I going to do with you?"

He approached her table and, reaching down lightly, brushed the hair back from her face. She looked like she was sleeping peacefully. He lightly nudged her; after working in the pub for eight years, he'd learned not to make any quick moves with a drunk. "Miss Granger... Miss Granger... Hermione!"

Her head jerked up and her eyes popped open, then she squinted up at him. "Perfessor Snape?!?"

In addition to being drunk, she looked very confused. "What're you doin' here?" Then she gasped. "Am I... dead?"

He wanted to laugh, but he didn't. "No, you're not dead, and neither am I."

"Oh, good. Tha's good." She looked around and seemed to take note that they were alone in the pub. "Good. Yer'... yer' jus' the person I need."

"How so, Miss Granger?"

She rubbed her hands over her face. "I... I gotta wand here... somewhere..."

She proceeded to search her person for said wand, patting her sleeves, her pockets, even looking down inside the front of her shirt. Then she paused to pull her shirt away and look again as if she had perhaps missed it the first time. Severus rolled his eyes. She grabbed her purse to look in there.

"Why exactly do you need your wand, Miss Granger?"

"I had a great idea earlier, a really good one. Really, really good. I need someone to obliterate... obliverate... err... you know what I mean!" she said jabbing her finger at her head.

"Oh goodie, here it is," she cried, pulling her wand from her purse. Sparks flew from the tip, and Severus grabbed it before she could manage to do something stupid.

"Hey, tha's mine!"

He gently pulled her up onto her feet. "Can you stand?"

"No, wait. Gimme back my wand. I need it back... I got some stuff I wanna forget." She lunged forward, trying to get her wand from his grasp.

"Yes, don't we all," he replied, holding it out of her reach while batting her hands away. "Stop that. Stop. I mean it."

She finally gave up and just leaned heavily into him.

"I'm going to Apparate you home now. Hold onto me. Can you do that, Hermione?" he asked.

She nodded and wrapped her arms tightly around his waist.

~**~

An instant later, they were standing at the back door of Bluebell Cottage. He immediately sensed what was going to happen and turned her away, supporting her around the waist and pulling her hair back from her face just a split second before she vomited all over the ground.

"Ewwwww!" She stood up, turned to face him and her eyes rolled back in her head as she passed out cold.

He managed to grab her and hike her up into his arms before she slid to the ground. Too bad he didn't have any sober-up potion on him. Using wandless magic, he opened her back door and carried her into the house. He headed down the hall to her bedroom; a silent spell folded her covers back, and he laid her gently on the bed.

"What am I to do with you, woman?" Sighing, he gently removed her shoes and socks. Suddenly, he sensed a movement in the doorway behind him. Snapping his wand from his sleeve, he spun around into a defensive crouch...only to be stopped by a quickly thrown shield and a shout.

"Stop, Professor. It's me." The invisibility cloak was opened to reveal...

"Mr. Potter."

He shook his head. "It's Harry, sir. Just Harry. I've been waiting here. I was told that Hermione might be in trouble. I saw you bringing her home."

He walked around Severus to approach the bed. Looking down at Hermione, he shook his head. Opening a dresser drawer as if he were quite familiar with the location of her nightclothes, he pulled out a modest nightgown. Then, he pulled the covers up over his friend to her neck and gently Divesto'd her clothes. Using magic, with her still

completely covered, he put the nightgown on her. Leaning down, he kissed her forehead.

"Harry?" she mumbled. "Izzzat you?"

"Yes, I'm right here, love. You're okay, just go to sleep now."

"Hmmm... All right."

As he motioned for Snape to leave, she called out to Harry again, "Harry? I had the strangest dream. Professor Snape was in it...he was alive, and he was going to Oblivate me."

Harry looked sharply at Snape, who shook his head in response. "It's all right now, love. Just go to sleep. Good night"

"Mmmm... goodnight, Harry. Love you."

"Love you, too."

Harry carefully shut the door and cast a spell so their conversation wouldn't disturb her. He had an idea it might be getting a little loud.

Snape felt an unwarranted surge of anger and an unexplainable urge to punch Potter in the face as he stalked down the hallway before turning to snarl, "Well, that was quite the cozy little scene. You certainly seemed to know your way around her bedroom, and for a married man you seemed very friendly there, Potter...maybe a bit more than friendly."

Before he could utter another word, Harry's wand was pointing at the dead center of his chest. "Don't you dare insult her. Yes, she's my friend...one of my closest. In fact, she is the one person, the *only* person who stood by me through everything. *Everything*." He swallowed. "I do love her, she's my family. If I'd ever had a sister I couldn't have loved her any more than I love Hermione. So I will not allow you or anyone else to cast aspersions on her."

Snape carefully raised his hand and with one finger gently moved the tip of Harry's wand aside. "My sincerest apology, Mr. Potter," he stated sardonically. "It is apparent that I may have spoken out of turn. I really don't know what could have come over me."

Harry sighed and holstered his wand. "No need to be sarcastic, sir. And I told you in there: it's just Harry. And what do you prefer now... Mr. Snape or Mr. Spaveene... Severus or Russ?"

"Hm... and I had actually convinced myself that Miss Granger had not come here to expose me."

"Oh, she didn't tell me about you. I'm sure Hermione had no idea you were here and still wouldn't if you hadn't revealed yourself to her tonight. Although, I'm sure she would have figured it out eventually. In a village this size, she couldn't have gone forever without spotting you."

"Then how..?"

"I've known you were here for quite some time... What *should* I call you?"

"In private, Severus is fine I suppose."

"All right, Severus. I've known that you were here for about the last six years."

Severus looked shocked. "How? And if you knew, why did you not release that information to the press or come here to confront me?"

"How? I'm an Auror, and a damn good one, if I do say so myself. The mystery of what happened to Professor Snape's body after the final battle plagued me for months. I couldn't stand not knowing. I believed you might have survived, I hoped so. It took me nearly three years, but I finally tracked you down. Plus, why would I want to expose you? You aren't wanted for anything back there. You've been cleared of any wrong-doing; in fact you're considered a hero. Honestly, I admire you; you're the bravest man I've ever known, and I say that with complete sincerity. That the war was won was more due to your efforts than any other single person's, more than Dumbledore's, more than mine. After all you have been through, if this is where you choose to live, why would I stop you?"

Looking about the peaceful cottage of Hermione's Muggle aunt, Harry said, "I can't help but feel a bit envious. I married a witch, and her whole family is part of the wizarding world. If not for that fact, I myself might have chosen this. Living in the Muggle world is not the nightmare most wizards assume it would be. Oh, my childhood was horrible, but not everyone is the Dursleys. And even though you live here in a Muggle village, I am fairly sure you haven't given up your magic entirely, am I right?"

At Severus' nod of agreement, he continued, "So you do still use magic privately and probably even visit the magical world on occasion...incognito in your case, I'm sure. I do have one question, though: of all the places you could have chosen, why this place, why Ireland?"

Severus seemed to ponder his answer for a moment, then replied seriously, "No snakes."

Harry burst out laughing, and suddenly Severus was laughing too. "In all the years I've known you, Severus, I've never seen you laugh. It's good to see that you've been able to find that part of yourself here in your new life.

"I think in the long run Hermione might actually be happier here, too, if she decided to stay. I remember her telling me about coming here during her childhood; she had very fond memories of it." He sighed. "Maybe that's why the Muggle world doesn't really seem half bad in comparison.

"You know coming to Hogwarts was a very difficult transition for her, it was a struggle to fit in from the very beginning. She was just a young girl thrust into an alien world where the customs were totally different, trying to fit into a place where a large portion of the population didn't really want or accept her. The only thing she had going for her was her incredible intellect, and she was mocked even for that. Then she was forced through her friendship with me to battle an inconceivable evil because she never would have abandoned me, you know. She would have died first; that's just who she is.

"Did you know she used a complex memory charm on her own parents and relocated them to Australia for the duration of the war to protect them?"

Severus shook his head.

"Well, she did. Then, after the war when she restored their memories, they weren't very happy about the whole thing. It's been years, and they've just recently started to reconcile. She nearly lost her family as a result of it all, even though she probably saved their lives. So even after being a driving force in beating Voldemort and saving our world, even now nearly a decade later, things haven't changed all that much, have they? She's still not accepted, not really.

"You probably don't realize it, but she's had a very tough time of it lately."

"I know more than you think," replied Severus. "When I realized that she was living here, I of course suspected that she might be a threat to me. So I did a bit of investigating of my own."

tbc

AN: Just wanted to mention, my beta pointed out that she had previously read a similar comment about Snape's choice to move to Ireland due to the lack of snakes, in a fic by dickgloucester titled: A Fresh Start. I haven't read Dickie's fic yet. I just thought this was a funny comment due to Severus' obvious aversion to snakes and Ireland's

reputation for not having any.

6

Chapter 6 of 12

It's nine years post war. Hermione has just had a traumatic break-up with her fiance, Theodore Nott. Hurt and disillusioned with her life, she retreats to a cottage in rural Ireland that she inherited from a great-aunt. You'll never guess who else has been living a peaceful life in the Muggle world in the same small village for the past eight years.

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AN: Many thanks to my beta, dreamy_dragon73, for all her help; she makes it all readable.

Severus explained what he knew and how he'd learned it, purposely leaving out the part of being a peeper of course, as he was quite sure that Harry would not appreciate that particular piece of information at all. "After overhearing the conversation with Miss Granger and Draco via her speaker phone, I returned home and Flooed Draco myself. He refused to tell me anything, citing client confidentiality. He did seem worried however, and asked me to keep an eye on her."

"That's why I'm here," responded Harry. "Draco actually came to my home, and while he refused to reveal any details to me either, he did voice a good bit of concern and suggested that it might be prudent for me to check up on Hermione's well-being. This is Draco Malfoy we're talking about, and while things have changed a good deal since the war, we aren't exactly friends. So when he comes to me and tells me he's worried about the welfare of his client and my best friend, I take it quite seriously. Hermione is not by nature one to drown her sorrows in drink, so it's obvious to me that she was extremely upset about the article in the *Prophet*."

"I believe there was a much deeper cause to her distress; the interview posted in that rag was merely the catalyst." At Harry's puzzled look, Severus proceeded to repeat practically verbatim the contents of the overheard conversation. He, after all, felt no compunction to honor any code of confidentiality. He felt that Harry, as Hermione's self-proclaimed brother, was entitled to know the kinds of things her ex had used to hurt and mangle her self-esteem.

"That bloody tosser! I knew there was more to it all, things that she wasn't telling me! I'm going to kill him."

"Which is precisely why she didn't tell you, I'm sure. While doing great bodily harm to Mr. Nott would indeed be extremely satisfying, you losing your job or ending up in Azkaban would do Miss Granger no favors."

"Well then, just what would you suggest, Professor? That we just let him get away with it, hurting people willy-nilly, let him become Minister of Magic and run the whole fucking show?"

"No, Mr. Potter... Harry. I do suggest, however, that you start thinking less like a brash, charge-in-without-a-plan Gryffindor and start thinking more like a set-the-trap-and-give-the-bloody-twit-his-just-dues Slytherin," Severus responded with an evil smirk and a gleam in his eye.

"Oh, yeah, I'm beginning to like the way you think, Severus," Harry responded with a grin. "What's the plan?"

"What is the one thing that Mr. Nott appears to desire above all else?"

"He wants to be Minister."

"Precisely. We are going to make sure he does not win the election. Not only that. By the time we're done with the little prick, he won't have a reputation left to stand on. I suggest a meeting of the minds for a planning session. Myself of course, you, Mr. Weasley, Ronald that is; George's devious mind might be an advantage as well. I think Draco would be more than willing, perhaps Mr. Zabini? I believe Mr. Longbottom is quite fond of Miss Granger, he could be of help also."

"Do we include Hermione or do we do it on our own?"

"Hmmm... I am unsure; you know her better than anyone. Would she approve, or would she try to dissuade us from our goal?"

"Hard to say. She might try to stop us, worried that we'd get caught or get in trouble, and then she'd feel it was her fault. On the other hand, she might savor the satisfaction of doing it herself."

"Let's keep that option open then, why don't we? We'll start our plans and decide later whether to include her in the final stage."

"Sir... err... Severus, can I ask you something?" Without waiting for an answer, Harry asked, "Why are you doing this? I mean, why do you care? Nott was one of your Slytherins, after all."

Severus considered the question before he replied, "Our Miss Granger is fortunate that she got free before he had a chance to lure her irretrievably into an unbreakable, magically binding marriage contract. If his reaction to her thwarting of his plans is any indication, their marriage would have been fraught with verbal and psychological abuse at the very least; and considering what I know of that family's history, it undoubtedly would have led eventually to physical abuse. No one deserves that kind of treatment, that kind of life. No one. Mr. Nott has been a pompous little pureblood prick since he was a firstie, and I will be more than happy to see him get his just dues."

"Secondly, I myself have personally experienced living with lies, betrayal and deceit. I find I have developed a grudging admiration for the girl. I want to see her vindicated."

~**~

Hermione awoke the next morning with an awful taste in her mouth, a splitting headache and a fuzzy memory of getting wasted at the Green Dragon. She'd been rude to Paddy and had a vague image of being brought home by the heretofore absent pub owner, who had morphed into a Snape look-alike. Maybe this town was on some kind of weird vortex which caused people to look like other people? Paddy like George, Mr. Spaveene like Snape... maybe there was a dotty confectioner who looked like Dumbledore, or a resident harridan who looked like Molly Weasley?

She recalled being tucked into bed by Harry and telling him about her strange dream of asking Snape to Obliviate her. But why Harry had been here, she had no idea. Had he been part of the dream as well? Hermione rolled over in her bed and froze as her eyes zeroed in on a little blue bottle on her bedside table; her hand was shaking as she reached out to grab it. She noted the label: *Hangover Relief Potion: one full dose*. "What the hell!" It wasn't the blue bottle or what was in it that had her spooked. It

was the handwriting: *his* handwriting. Snape's.

"Oh good, you're awake finally. It's about time." Harry stood grinning in her bedroom doorway.

Holding up the bottle, she demanded sharply, "What the hell is this?"

With a frown, Harry took the bottle. "It's hangover potion. See, it says so right here," he replied, pointing to the label and speaking as if he were talking to a small child. "I thought you'd be needing a dose this morning."

Hermione snatched the bottle back out of his hand and pointed at the very same label. "This is Snape's handwriting, Harry.*Snape's*!" She squinted closely at the bottom of the label. "And the bottling date reads just six months ago."

"Oh, umm... well... Hermione, you see... that is, I..."

"Oh, sweet Merlin. It wasn't a dream, was it? He's alive. He's really alive."

"Yes. Yes, he is. He's alive, and he's been living here in the Muggle world for the past eight years."

"Eight years. Why that's amazing." Hermione popped the cork out of the bottle and downed the potion in one gulp. "So it really was him who brought me home. Oh my gosh, I practically vomited on his shoes. How embarrassing."

As the hangover potion kicked in, Hermione chattered on, "I'll bet you were shocked to see him, weren't you, Harry? What did you say to him? What did he say to you?"

Looking up, she noticed that Harry seemed a little nervous, and she began to suspect all was not as it seemed. "So... were you shocked, Harry?"

His eyes met hers guiltily.

"Harry Potter, how long have you known?"

"Well... errr... I may have... that is. I guess I might have known for the past six years."

"Excuse me?"

"Six years, okay? I've known he was alive and living here in Clonbur for six years."

"You've known for six years, and you never told me?" she asked, sounding hurt.

"Hermione, please. It wasn't my story to tell, was it? Once I knew all that he'd done, it haunted me not knowing what happened to him after the final battle. I tracked him down on my own, but once I found out he was alive and safe, living in the Muggle world, I was satisfied with that. I figured if and when he was ready for our world to know, then he'd let them know. He didn't even know I knew until last night. I had no idea that your Aunt Maeve's home was here as well, though. If I had realized that, I would have given you some warning, I swear."

"So you knew for six years. You kept this enormous secret completely to yourself and you told no one, absolutely no one?" He shook his head. "Not Ron?" He shook his head again. "Not even Ginny?" A third time he shook his head.

Hermione jumped up and threw her arms around him. "Oh, Harry. I think that's absolutely brilliant. I'm so proud of you. It was truly the honorable thing to do."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. "I thought you were going to be furious with me. Women! I still can't figure you out; a guy never knows what to expect!"

~ **~

Harry stayed and fixed Hermione breakfast, which she was able to enjoy, thanks to the potion she'd taken. Hermione didn't cook much for herself and would have made do with a slice of toast and a cup of tea. Not that she couldn't cook, she just didn't like to and so avoided it whenever possible.

They made small talk for a while. Harry brought her up to date on the latest Weasley news, they speculated about Draco and Luna as a couple, and Hermione told him the news from Hogwarts she'd read in the latest letter from Minerva.

To the relief of both, they were able to avoid the subject of the *Prophet* article and Theo Nott entirely.

Finally, Harry asked her about her writing. "So how's it going; got the world's next great novel banged out yet?"

"Well, not quite, but it's going great. Fine... er... fantastic, that is. Really, really well. Peachy, in fact."

"You haven't written anything, have you?" Harry asked knowingly.

"Not one bloody word," Hermione sighed. "It's so much harder than I'd ever dreamed it would be."

"You said yourself you don't really *have* to work for a while, you can get by. Maybe, you should just take some time off, just enjoy yourself here. Besides, maybe being a writer isn't what you're meant to do."

"But, Harry, it seems so perfect. I love books," she protested.

"Yeah, well, Ron loves food, but he's no chef."

Hermione giggled. "Well, you're spot on there."

Harry thought for a minute, then suggested, "You know, they say you should write what you know best; you were always great at researching stuff. Maybe you should put those skills to work. Find a topic that interests you, research the hell out of it, then write your book about that. But do it in your own time, love. You're not on any deadline."

"Thanks, Harry," she replied, giving him a hug as he prepared to leave. "That does seem like a really good idea. I'll think about it. And thanks for showing up here last night. I know you were worried about me. I'll be good; I promise: no more drunken binges."

tbc

It's nine years post war. Hermione has just had a traumatic break-up with her fiancé, Theodore Nott. Hurt and disillusioned with her life, she retreats to a cottage in rural Ireland that she inherited from a great-aunt. You'll never guess who else has been living a peaceful life in the Muggle world in the same small village for the past eight years.

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After Harry left, Hermione sat outside on a garden bench thinking about everything that had happened. The viciousness of Theo's lies had stunned her. It still shocked her that he could be so cruel, even after he had proven his very nature by the things he had said to her that day he'd broken her heart. She felt nothing, numb inside. Dead.

Maybe, she'd not really loved him after all, she thought; possibly, she'd just wanted so very badly to be in love with someone, anyone, that she'd manufactured it all. Perhaps, there was no such thing as love, really. Oh, she loved Harry and Ron, her parents, her friends; but that romantic, sappy, happily-ever-after kind of love you read about in books, maybe it didn't exist. Or maybe it only happened so very rarely that it was an impossible dream for the average person like her. With a sigh, she rose and went back into her cottage.

~**~

Severus swore as his car bottomed out on the rough, rutted drive going up the hill to Bluebell Cottage. Damn, but he'd told Maeve years back that she should have something done about the nearly impassable lane she'd called a driveway. But in those last years, when she was still driving, the old lady hadn't cared a bit and had just bounced and scraped her way up and down the hill without a care to her old car. It had only gotten worse since she'd been gone and no one had been using the drive; the rain and weather had taken a toll as well. He made a mental note to himself that next time he'd drive home and Apparate to Hermione's house rather than risk his precious car.

He'd waited three days but had not heard anything from Hermione. No sign of her in town, no posts by owl or Muggle means to acknowledge his presence in Clonbur. He knew it wasn't a case of her not remembering due to her intoxicated state because Harry had dropped by on his way home to tell Severus that Hermione knew the truth about him.

It appeared that she was avoiding him for whatever reason. Maybe, she was embarrassed by her behavior; maybe, she was depressed by her circumstances; maybe, she just didn't give a damn whether he was dead or alive. But he couldn't believe that; her curiosity as to what had become of him after the final battle should have brought forth questions aplenty. At any rate, he'd decided to take the unicorn by the horn and just come up to her home to see her. No more skulking around, peeping through windows for him. Only, he hadn't planned on tearing off the undercarriage of his bloody car in the process! As an excuse for his visit...not that he needed one, mind you...he'd brought take-away from the pub for dinner. She could consider it a peace offering or a house warming or whatever.

He noticed upon approaching her door that there were much stronger wards in place than there had been three days ago, either due to Potter or herself. He knocked on the door, but there was no answer. Maybe, he shouldn't have waited three days. Could she have left, gone back to England? He kept knocking until he was virtually pounding on the door. He'd just decided to start dismantling her wards when the door was opened a bit, and she peeked out at him through the crack before throwing it open.

"Oh hello, Professor! Come in, won't you."

"Miss Granger, I have been out here knocking on your door for ten minutes or more. Could you not hear me?"

"Sorry, I was upstairs in my office. I have the room heavily warded to keep magic from interfering with my electronic equipment. Unfortunately due to that, when I'm in there, I can't feel the shift of the wards down here. I had some music on, and I really didn't hear you knocking until it got louder. Sorry, sir."

He handed her the bag of food. "No need to stand on formalities. I'm no longer your professor or any kind of authority over you. You may call me Severus, at least in private, or Russ if at the pub or elsewhere in public."

"What's this?" she asked, looking into the sack. "Oh, take-away. Brilliant! I hadn't even realized it was time for supper. Thank you, Severus. Oh, and you may call me Hermione," she added with a shy smile. "You're going to stay and help me eat it, aren't you?"

She led him to her cozy kitchen and set out place-mats, plates and silverware before divvying up the pot roast smothered in onions with baby carrots and new potatoes. She reached into the cupboard for some wine glasses.

"I have a nice Cabernet that would go well with the roast beef, would you like a glass?" she asked, then handed him the bottle to open. "I promise it won't be like the other night, I rarely drink like that. I don't want you to think I've turned into a complete boozier," she teased.

They had a lovely dinner, and she did indeed have an unending number of questions. How had he survived Nagini's bite? How had he recovered? Why had he chosen to leave the wizarding world in spite of the fact he'd been cleared of any charges? Why was he running a pub instead of brewing potions? Why was he living here of all places?

They chatted easily all through supper. Hermione was surprised at how easy it was to converse with him. She smacked herself in the forehead when she realized that his alias was an anagram of his name, and she hadn't even spotted it.

"I can't believe it, and I'm supposed to be the brightest witch of my age: I must be slipping." She laughed. "So, Severus, you've lived here in the village for eight years, did you know my Aunt Maeve at all? You must have, considering what a small place it is."

"Yes, quite well, in fact. We were neighbors after all."

"What? Neighbors? You're joking."

"No, not at all." He told her of the small house he rented, which was just down the road. "I'd often stop in to check on her. Sometimes, I'd bring dinner from the pub and eat with her right here in this very kitchen. She was a feisty old biddy, but she had a heart of gold. She reminded me a bit of Minerva to tell you the truth."

"Be careful, or I'll tell Minerva you said that. We keep in touch you know," Hermione said teasingly. Then, she laid her hand over Severus' wrist and squeezed it gently. "Seriously though, thank you for being here, for befriending an old lady. I feel bad that I wasn't here for her. My parents stayed in Australia after the war, and I was all she had left. I should have been here and I wasn't. Circumstances kept me away, but that's no excuse. I should have made more of an effort, and I'm sorry now that I didn't."

Severus placed his other hand over hers. "Try not to feel guilty, Hermione. Maeve wouldn't want you to. She spoke of you often you know. Funny thing is she never called you by name, or I might have made the connection; she always referred to you as 'my niece' or 'Lambie'."

"That was always her nickname for me; it was kind of a family joke." Hermione responded with a sentimental smile at the memory. "When I was little, she always called me lambie-pie. When I got older, she just shortened it to Lambie."

They settled with a second glass of wine in front of the fireplace and continued their conversation. Severus asked her what she had done after the war, so she told him about her parents, her job, her friends. She didn't mention Theo directly, but just that she'd recently had a bad break-up and had decided to leave her job and take some time off here at Bluebell Cottage. She told him how she'd wanted to write, but it just didn't seem to be happening, so she'd been doing a bit of research as Harry had suggested and thought something might come of that eventually.

Finally, Hermione mentioned what had happened three days earlier. "I wanted to thank you for bringing me home safely the other night, Severus, and taking care of me. I'm sorry you had to see me like that. It's rather embarrassing now. Remember I told you I'd recently had a bad break-up?"

He nodded.

"Well, I'd read some things in the *Prophet* about him, and it upset me greatly."

"Hermione, I know all about the *Prophet* article and Mr. Nott's interview."

She covered her face with her hands. "Oh, sweet mother of Merlin, what must you think of me. I swear to you it isn't true, Severus, none of it! I would never be unfaithful to someone I was involved with...engaged to." She seemed more concerned he would think her an adulterer than with Nott's aspersions on her sexual preferences.

He pulled her hands away and looked into her tear-filled eyes. "I know it isn't true, my dear. Believe me, I am well aware of Mr. Nott's character and what he is capable of. Plus, I spoke with Harry. He was here when I brought you home. If I were to believe anyone's version of events it would be yours, I assure you." He handed her a hanky. "Now, do not waste another tear on that cad. He isn't worth it. And do not shut yourself up here all alone. Do your research if you must, but come and interact with the rest of the world. Paddy misses your visits to the Green Dragon; he thinks you're staying away because you're angry with him. Stop by and see him, won't you?"

"I will. And thank you for everything, Severus."

She stood on the front step and waved as he drove, slowly and ever so carefully down her rutted lane. And somehow, she felt better than she had in a very long time.

tbc

8

Chapter 8 of 12

It's nine years post war. Hermione has just had a traumatic break-up with her fiancé, Theodore Nott. Hurt and disillusioned with her life, she retreats to a cottage in rural Ireland that she inherited from a great-aunt. You'll never guess who else has been living a peaceful life in the Muggle world in the same small village for the past eight years.

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It seemed to Hermione that over the next couple of weeks she never went more than two or three days without running into Severus...or him stopping by her home. She'd thought that the first visit was merely something of a fluke; that he had stopped by just to satisfy his curiosity as to whether or not she was some kind of lush after her drunken display.

But that did not seem to be the case. Over the course of the next month, his visits occurred with a gradual increase in frequency until he was there, not only on a daily basis, but several times a day. Sometimes he came by in the evening for dinner, sometimes later at night for a glass of wine and some conversation. Sometimes after the lunch crowd cleared out when he was on his way home, he stopped for tea, or sometimes in the morning when he was on his way to the pub he'd stop in for coffee. Sometimes he stopped by, and they just sat in companionable silence, each reading a book or magazine article. After the first few weeks, he also began inviting her to his home as well. Knowing that she did not enjoy cooking and he did, he often invited her for dinner or lunch or just for tea.

He seemed to simply enjoy her companionship, and she wondered if he had been starving for company, or if it was because they had a shared past. Maybe, he just liked being around another magical being after living amongst Muggles for so long.

After several weeks of Severus's companionship, she found herself somewhat at loose ends when he announced that he needed to go away for a few days to take care of some personal business. Suddenly, her little home seemed very empty; she felt bereft for some reason. She hadn't been bothered by being alone before, in fact she had reveled in her solitude. She wandered about from room to room but couldn't seem to find anything to occupy her mind. She spent more time in Clonbur, bothering Paddy at the pub, walking the country trails or haunting the small local gift shop that carried a nice selection of books. Before Severus had inched his way into her consciousness, she hadn't felt so needy and alone.

Hermione found herself inexplicably drawn to Maeve's sewing room. All the unfinished bits and scraps of fabric seemed to call to her; it was like a puzzle begging to be solved. She discovered the unfinished quilt when unfolded was beautiful...more than beautiful even, it fascinated her. Shades of greens and purples from pale to dark, in different patterns and textures. They were arranged artfully in tiny scraps with even tinier stitches to form a gorgeous star-burst, and the surrounding parts of the quilt had a feathery type pattern stitched into the solid white fabric. She felt like she was somehow closer to the old lady in that room, almost as if she could feel her in there.

Hermione Apparated to a library in Galway to look for books on quilting. She started checking out on-line resources of informational books on the history and how-to of the craft. She found herself wanting to, needing to, complete Maeve's last project, but she didn't want it to be ruined by an amateurish effort on her part. She could probably have incorporated magic into the finishing, but that seemed wrong somehow and an offense to all of her aunt's hard work.

She started by using the simplest how-to book and making a simple quilt block out of some of the scrap fabric. Hermione had no idea if she would be able to master it; the craftiest thing she had ever done to date was knit hats and socks for house-elves who didn't want them. The first block, while not nearly as intricate a design as Maeve's final quilt, was not that bad. So she made another and another and another. Soon, she had twelve blocks, each in a different pattern but all with similar colors; thus her first 'sampler quilt' was born. And the beginning of her newest obsession... err... project.

~**~

The personal business Severus was on actually consisted of 'the meeting of the minds' he had discussed briefly with Potter... er... Harry. They met with their co-conspirators at number 12, Grimmauld Place, which Harry still owned and maintained, although he and Ginny did not live there. They had settled into a comfortable home in Godric's Hollow. Harry had chosen that location as it somehow made him feel closer to his parents and his 'heritage'. Ginny had agreed because it gave her more of a feeling of independence and autonomy than if they'd settled near the Burrow or even at Grimmauld Place, where her mother had ruled domestically during the days it was occupied by the Order.

Severus, Harry and Draco were the only ones who knew the depth of the wounds Theo had inflicted upon Hermione, but didn't think it necessary to reveal all the brutal details to the rest. Just the fact that he was behaving in a cruel and hurtful manner and deserved to be taught a lesson was enough.

Ron and George were both more than willing to join the cause, anxious to avenge Hermione. Draco was more than happy to assist with the plotting, but as Hermione's attorney he needed to be extremely careful of being linked to any activity that might incriminate him. This also applied to Harry, Ron and Blaise as Aurors. Neville happily joined the group. Besides wanting to hurt Nott for what he'd done to Hermione, he'd been a bit bored in the years since the war and felt this akin to their adventures as part of the DA.

A surprise addition to their group was Gregory Goyle, who had come with Neville. Greg's sister, Gwendolyn, was a teacher at Hogwarts and was now Neville's fiancée. Through this relationship, Neville had gotten to know Greg pretty well and knew that Greg felt he owed Hermione a great deal.

Neville explained. "You all know Greg spent two years in Azkaban for his involvement during that last year in the Young Death Eaters' group. But what you don't know is that when he got out he was down on his luck, nowhere to live, no job...he was destitute, living on the streets."

Draco came forward and clapped him on the back. "Greg, you should have come to me; I would have gladly helped you."

"That's right, man," agreed Blaise. "We have to stick together, you know."

"Awww... guys. I was embarrassed, I guess. I didn't want anyone to know how bad things were. I tried hard to find a job but no one wanted to hire me because of my past. I'd fallen about as low as anyone can go when Granger found me behind a sandwich shop in Diagon Alley." Greg hung his head in shame. "I was going through the garbage cans, looking for food."

There was silence in the group; no one knew what to say. "Those days are done now, G," Neville assured his future brother-in-law.

"Thanks to Hermione," replied Greg. "She saw me there and came over and talked to me. She tried to get me to go inside with her, but I wouldn't. I'd been sleeping in alleys, my clothes were dirty, I just couldn't go in. She told me to stay there, and said if I didn't she'd hunt me down and hex me," he said with a grin. "She's one scary witch!"

"Oi, I've been saying that for years, mate," agreed Ron.

"She came out with a sack of sandwiches and gave me enough money for a room. Told me to get cleaned up because she was taking me on a job interview the next day. She even bought me new robes to wear."

"I got the job but I couldn't keep it. The other workers didn't like me because of me being an ex-Death Eater; they did things to make me look bad and set me up to get in trouble. But Hermione wouldn't give up on me; she talked to Professor McGonagall and got me Hagrid's old job as Keeper of the Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. He moved to France, you know, to marry Madame Maxime, and the new Care of Magical Creatures teacher didn't want to do that part of the job. I love my job. After two years of being cooped up in Azkaban I really appreciate being outside, working with my hands."

"Did you know about any of this?" Ron asked Harry.

"Not a clue," replied Harry.

"She told me not to mention it, said that she wasn't doing it for recognition, it was just the right thing to do. It made me feel real bad about the way we used to treat her back at school."

"He knows all about the shit that Nott pulled on Hermione. I figured if anyone deserved to be in on all this it's Greg," explained Neville.

"I want to help," said Greg defensively, as if afraid they would send him away.

"Your assistance is most appreciated, Mr. Goyle," assured Severus.

And so the conspiracy was born. A true blend of Gryffindor/Slytherin co-operation. First, they determined that they had to find someone to run for the post of Minister of Magic against Nott. They all felt the obvious choice was Harry. As the hero of the wizarding world, The Boy Who Lived Twice, he was assured to win the election. Nott wouldn't even have a chance against Harry.

Harry had other ideas. He didn't want to be Minister...not now, not ever. As much as he loved Hermione and wanted to get Nott, he refused the challenge.

Surprisingly, the next suggestion came from Severus. "Mr. Longbottom would be an excellent choice."

Knowing Snape's opinion of Neville while a student at Hogwarts, the entire group merely stared at him in disbelief. Neville himself was shocked at the suggestion. "Me?" he squeaked. "Why on earth would you think that?"

Severus studied him seriously. "Because, Neville, you are a well respected member of the Hogwarts staff; you are at the top of your field. I may have been living in the Muggle world for the past eight years, but I have kept up with the professional journals. I've read your articles in *The Herbologist Monthly* regarding your theories and how they apply to growing more potent potions ingredients."

"You come from a well known Pureblood background, not that I am purporting that the candidate must be a Pureblood, mind you. Your parents were heroes of the First Voldemort War. At the final battle you did something few others have ever dared and lived to tell the tale. You stood up to the Dark Lord; you openly defied him. Aside from Harry, I think you would be the next best candidate."

"I'm flattered, sir. But like Harry, it is an honor that I must decline. I'm happy doing what I do; I really have no interest in politics."

They tossed out and eliminated a few names before Ron spoke. "I think we've all been overlooking another obvious choice."

The entire crowd looked at him expectantly. "Well, Snape, of course." He turned to look at the man in question. "Certainly you see it, don't you, Severus? Other than Harry, you are probably the most notable hero. You'd be a sure winner."

"Are you insane! I killed Albus Dumbledore. They would never elect me."

Harry answered first. "I think they would, Severus. I tried to tell you before, but I don't think you really believed me: in our world you are a hero. You left by choice, but you could return in glory. People would vote for you; you'd win by a landslide."

Everyone started talking at once before Draco finally got everyone's attention by pounding his glass on the table. "Listen, everyone. We can't all talk at once. I think the main question is not whether or not Severus would win, but rather whether he would even want to. He left the wizarding world for a reason; he'd spent years doing the bidding of two masters, he wanted a simpler life, and he's found that." Turning to Severus, he laid a hand on his shoulder and said, "Severus, I agree. There's not one iota

of doubt in my mind that you could win against Nott. But is that the life you want? To be Minister of Magic, constantly in the public eye, at the beck and call of the populace?"

"Honestly, no. I've no interest in the glory or politics. So we are back to square one."

Finally, Greg spoke up. "I don't think it can be anyone in this room."

All eyes turned to him. "Don't you see, it can't be anyone directly involved in our plan. Otherwise, there's always the chance it could get out, and then there'd be a big scandal."

They all nodded, of course he was right.

"I think... Oh, never mind," Greg said. He knew that usually people didn't want to hear what he had to say. He'd never been very smart.

"No, Greg," said Blaise to his former housemate. "Say what you think. So far you're the only one of us who's come up with a good point."

"Well... I think a really good candidate would be Mr. Weasley. Ron and George's dad I mean. He's worked at the Ministry for years, so he's already in politics in a way, I guess. Plus, he fought against V... Vol... Voldemort, his whole family did, with the Order of the Phoenix. His son-in-law is Harry Potter, who would, of course, campaign for him. He'd have the support of Headmistress McGonagall as well as a lot of the other teachers at Hogwarts."

They were all looking at him like they couldn't believe it. "I'm sorry," he said. "I should have just kept my mouth shut."

"No, mate!" exclaimed George as he clapped Goyle on the back. "That's brilliant, that is!"

"Do you think he'd do it?" asked Blaise.

"I think maybe," replied Ron. "If we present it the right way. He can't be any part of the rest of this though, Greg's right about that. I mean Dad knows what happened to Hermione with Nott, so it would be natural that we would want to thwart his bid for Minister, just based on principle, knowing what a slimy bastard Nott is. But he can't know about anything else we plan to do to get revenge on Nott. If my father agrees to run it has to be on his own merits and not as any part of the rest of this."

"Agreed, that's a given," said Draco. "Let's proceed with this part of the plan first. Our first priority is to find a candidate to oppose Nott. Once we're sure of that, we'll start working on our 'expose Theo Nott as the piece of crap that he really is' campaign."

The group agreed, and so ended the first 'meeting of the minds'.

tbc

AN:

To see Aunt Maeve's unfinished quilt go here: <http://s588.photobucket.com/albums/ss323/madeleine/quilt%20pics/quilt2.jpg>

And Hermione's sampler quilt: <http://www.somersetpatchwork.com.au/patterns/l-cottage-sampler.jpg>

And if you just want to drool over gorgeous hand crafted quilts go here: <http://www.amishcountrylanes.com/Pages/hs4436.shtml?AppPatchCombo>

go to the top of the list on the left hand side and click on tour. You will be able to view over 1000 beautiful quilts.

9

Chapter 9 of 12

It's nine years post war. Hermione has just had a traumatic break-up with her fiancé, Theodore Nott. Hurt and disillusioned with her life, she retreats to a cottage in rural Ireland that she inherited from a great-aunt. You'll never guess who else has been living a peaceful life in the Muggle world in the same small village for the past eight years.

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After everyone had left, Harry stopped Severus at the door. "Severus, a word before you leave?"

"Certainly, what is it?"

Harry hesitated, unsure how to broach the subject he had on his mind. "Hermione has sent me several notes over the last few weeks." He looked pointedly at Severus but did not get any sort of response other than a questioning stare.

"And?"

"Well..." He paused, unsure how to tactfully express his concerns. "She seems... um... happy."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"No, not at all. I am glad to see her happy. But..." *Gods, I'm botching this up*, thought Harry. "I can't help but notice... that is... according to her letters... Well, it sounds to me like you two are spending a lot of time together. An awful lot of time."

"Ahhh..." Severus stated knowingly. "And you disapprove, I take it. Of us spending time together?"

"No, that's not it at all." Harry rushed to interject. "I'm just worried about her, that's all."

"Worried that she's spending too much time with me. The greasy git, the Death Eater, the..."

"Don't try to put words in my mouth! That isn't what I'm saying at all. I'm getting a feeling from her notes that she's becoming very attached to you. I don't know if that's good for her. You know it hasn't been all that long since she broke up with Nott."

Severus frowned and looked as if he were trying to decipher Harry's true meaning.

"I'm just saying she's still vulnerable. Everyone thinks she's unbreakable, hard as nails, impervious. Well, she's not; she bruises just like the rest of us. And she's been through a terrible ordeal these past couple of months."

"I'm not good enough for her. That's what you think, isn't it?"

"Oh, for the love of Merlin, Severus. It's not about you! I'm worried about her. Just the tone of her notes tells me she's falling for you. If you want to know the truth, I think you two would be perfect for each other; you have so much in common it's scary. I admire you, I told you that already, and I meant it. But I love her like family, you already know that, and I don't want to see her get hurt again."

"What I want to know is if I am misreading the situation? Is it just friendship between you, or could it be more? I'm just trying to say... if you don't care for her... I just... shit! I'm fucking this up." Harry smacked his hand against the wall in frustration. "I don't know how you feel about her. Just... just don't use her, don't be with her because it's convenient. Hermione doesn't do casual. When she falls for someone, she falls hard. If you don't think you might be able to feel the same way, then don't lead her on. After everything she's been through, it'd be too cruel."

Severus didn't quite know what to say. He had been spending an unusual amount of time with the girl...it was true. He really hadn't planned it that way, but they did seem to have a great deal of common likes and had slipped into this easy routine of being together. He enjoyed their discussions, her quick mind, her keen intelligence. He even liked to tease her a bit, get her riled and see that temper fire to life before soothing her ruffled feathers. But honestly, he knew that things had been changing between them...heating up...before his departure.

It was true, he did like being with the witch, but perhaps as Harry said it was because it was convenient to be with her; she was the only witch he'd socialized with in years. He'd been around Muggles for so long that he had really enjoyed being with someone magical like himself for a change. But the last thing he wanted to do was hurt her; he'd seen how devastated she'd been by Nott's actions. He certainly didn't want to be the next one to cause her pain.

"I'll take what you've suggested into serious consideration, Harry," Severus stated earnestly, then Disapparated without another word.

Harry swore under his breath. "I think I just fucked that up royally," he muttered just before he left for home himself.

~**~

Hermione could hardly wait to see Severus. He'd been gone four days, and it seemed like weeks. She missed him. She was surprised how much. The minutes seemed to drag without the prospect of Severus dropping in for a cuppa or a visit. Plus, before he'd gone away, in those last few days, there had been a subtle shift in their relationship.

One night, when he'd gotten up to leave, she'd walked him to the door as she always did. It had seemed the most natural thing in the world to lean in and kiss his cheek. He in turn had given her a little hug and gone on his way. A couple of days later, he had cooked dinner for her, and as she took her leave, it seemed almost instinctive to brush a kiss across his lips. She swore she felt a spark when he'd taken her hand in his and squeezed it affectionately. The subtle signs of affection had continued: a touch on the back, a pat on the shoulder, a gentle hug, a peck on the cheek.

That final morning, he'd stopped for coffee and scones before he left on his trip. She had walked with him to the bottom of the hill, where he had parked his car rather than drive it up the bumpy lane that masqueraded as her driveway. He hadn't said where he was going, only that he had some personal business to take care of and would be gone for three or four days, five at the longest.

"Well, goodbye then, Severus. Have a safe trip. I'll miss you while you're gone."

"You'll miss my cooking," he teased.

"Well that too," she replied with a grin. "I *can* cook you know... I just don't like it."

"You just don't like it."

She laughed as he echoed her last four words at exactly the same time she did. She'd never quite figured out how what happened next happened. She leaned forward to give him a little buss on the lips. Suddenly, before she knew it, the fingers of one of his hands were tangled in her hair while his other arm was wrapped around her body, pulling her tightly to him, and somehow her hands ended up on his arse, clutching him. And he was kissing her, or maybe she was the one kissing him.

At any rate, they were kissing each other wildly. Then somehow, she got turned around, and he had her pinned against the car with his knee between her thighs and one of her legs practically wrapped around his hip. She could feel his erection pressing into her. If a carload of teenagers hadn't driven by on the narrow road, honking and whistling at the display, she probably would have shagged him right there against the car in broad daylight. Then, roughly, he shoved her away, saying gruffly, "I have to go." He got in the car and drove away without another word.

Naturally that was all she'd been able to think about for the last four days, replaying those last five minutes over and over in her head. She could hardly wait for his return, to pick up where they'd left off so abruptly just a few days earlier. The wait was agonizing. She spent the whole afternoon accomplishing nothing because, every few minutes, she had to walk over to look out of the window or step outside or walk down the lane and back.

Bluebell Cottage sat up on a ridge, Witches' Ridge, the locals called it...ironically enough. From her front door, she could see down the lane all the way to the winding road that ran from the village and out past Severus' home. She just happened to be standing out front when she saw his car coming down the road from the village. She knew he wouldn't be able to see her, but she stood waiting anyway...only to see his car flash by the end of her lane, right on past towards his house.

She had thought he would want to stop in to see her as soon as he got home. It was a little disappointing, but she told herself he probably wanted to get home, unpack, settle a bit, maybe take a shower or have a bite to eat before he came over. So she waited and waited and waited. The minutes slid by agonizingly slowly, turning into hours, and still Severus didn't come to see her. Several times, she almost decided to Apparate to his house, but something held her back. The longer the night stretched out, the more uncertain her feelings were. By bedtime, she had a sinking, dreadfully sick feeling in the pit of her stomach and somehow knew that he wasn't coming...not tonight and maybe never. Somehow she just knew.

~**~

He knew he should have stopped and talked to her; it would have been the right thing to do, but after Harry's admonitions he just couldn't bring himself to face her tonight. Instead he sat in his house in the dark, wondering where things had gone wrong.

She had offered him friendship, something he'd had little enough of in the course of his life. But was Harry right? Were her feelings of friendship developing into something deeper? Was she 'falling for him' as Harry had claimed? Was he ready for that? Was he even capable of that?

He didn't know what had come over him that last morning. The thought of being separated from her, even for just a few days, had made him want to hold her to him, keep her, mark her. He'd practically forced himself on her. If that carload of teenagers hadn't sped by right at that moment, he might have taken her right there at the edge of the road in broad daylight up against his car! Did that mean he had feelings other than friendship, or did it simply mean he was desperate to get his needy cock inside her

warm welcoming body? Was she just a convenient source of relief for him as Potter had suggested? Comfortable? Didn't she deserve more than that? Didn't she deserve someone who was truly capable of love?

It wasn't as if Severus hadn't been with a woman in the last eight years. He had. Muggles mostly, but there had never ever been even the tiniest hint of a relationship or any true emotion involved. Usually, when he felt the urge, he connected with some tourist just passing through who was looking for a good time with no strings attached. If it happened to be the off-season for tourists in the area, he would take a couple days off and head to Dublin, Cork or Galway and pick up some single woman on the prowl for a one- or two-night-stand, nothing more.

Maybe, her reaction to him, her attraction, was some sort of rebound from her break-up with Nott. As for himself, he honestly didn't know what he felt about Hermione. But it was true that they had been spending an inordinate amount of time together. He decided that he needed to take a step back, ease away. He'd only see her when there were other people around ...that would be safe. But he would definitely stop going to the cottage, and he wouldn't invite her here for dinner...maybe a lunch at O'Malley's restaurant. Friends did that, didn't they? Of course, that would be okay.

He just had to readjust his thinking, explain to her why it wasn't a good idea for them to spend so much time together. She'd understand. It made sense, it was logical. In spite of what Harry had said, they weren't right for each other at all. Yes, she'd understand that, he was sure.

~**~

When Severus showed up at her door in the morning, her heart leaped and for a brief instant, she thought how silly she'd been the night before and believed that everything was going to be all right. But when he refused to come in, her heart plummeted and that sickly tight feeling was back in her tummy...like she'd just swallowed one of Hagrid's rock cakes whole.

"I really can't come in. I'm running late. After being gone for so long, I have a lot of work to catch up on, the books, ordering supplies for the month and such." He seemed nervous, awkward, standing there...not at all like the take-charge man she knew.

"Oh, of course, I understand. You must have so much to catch up on."

"Well, I really needed to talk to you, though. I had quite a bit of time to think while I was gone, and I came to the realization that I have been taking up way too much of your time. You have so much you want to accomplish, your research, your writing... You need to be getting on with your life, and I have been tying you down. Selfish of me really, I apologize for that."

Hermione was silent through most of his explanation. He kept talking, but she couldn't have said what it was he'd said; she simply nodded and smiled stupidly as if she, of course, understood and agreed with everything he was saying.

"I know I have been monopolizing too much of your time. I would like to remain friends, of course, as I have come to value your friendship above all else," he concluded and awkwardly stood in her doorway, not knowing what else to say.

"Yes, well thanks so much for stopping then, Severus. I appreciate you taking the time to come by and explain all this to me," she stated politely, as if she were speaking to a stranger. "I guess you'd better hurry on to the pub since you have so very much to catch up on." And before he could say another word, she quietly shut the door in his face, and he felt her wards spring into place. The look in her eyes, right before the door closed on him, had felt like an arrow piercing his chest. He briefly felt the urge to pound madly on the wood, to tear her wards down one by one and rip the door off the hinges with his bare hands, to take back every stupid, bloody thing he'd just said. Instead, he told himself it really was all in her best interest, after all, and turned and walked away.

After firmly closing the door and throwing her wards up, she spun, her back pressed tightly against the wood while trying desperately not to cry. She slid down the door until she was huddled on the floor; her head rested on her knees, which were pulled to her chest, and her arms wrapped around her shins. She'd thought that Theodore Nott had broken her heart, but now she realized she'd been angry, furious, incensed at Nott. Embarrassed and hurt, yes, but she hadn't felt nearly as desolate and bereft, nor as inconsolably grief-stricken as she felt right at this very moment in time.

tbc

10

Chapter 10 of 12

It's nine years post war. Hermione has just had a traumatic break-up with her fiancé, Theodore Nott. Hurt and disillusioned with her life, she retreats to a cottage in rural Ireland that she inherited from a great-aunt. You'll never guess who else has been living a peaceful life in the Muggle world in the same small village for the past eight years.

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. I make no money here.

Many thanks to my beta, dreamy_dragon73, for all her help; she makes it all readable.

Severus strode silently down the lane to his car and drove to the pub, where he grunted at Paddy and Corrine's welcoming greeting and proceeded to lock himself up in his office for the remainder of the morning. He didn't come out until well into the afternoon, even though the work that had piled up in his absence had been dispensed within the first two hours.

The rest of the time had been spent in contemplation until he had managed to convince himself that he had done the right thing. He'd been damaged by his long-held obsession with Lily Evans. He didn't think he was emotionally able to invest himself in a serious relationship...even now all these years later...and probably never would. As Harry had said, it was unfair of him to lead Hermione on, no matter how enjoyable he found her company. He'd only done what needed to be done.

~**~

Hermione spent an hour on the floor, leaning against her front door before she finally dragged herself to her feet, wandered into her bedroom and crawled under the covers. She spent another two hours there, staring sightlessly at the ceiling, feeling sorry for herself before the anger set in. Then, she dragged herself out of bed and into the shower.

By the time she had dressed and finished her first cup of coffee, she was in high dudgeon. Fuck them! She thought. Fuck them all! Snape and Nott and all the other nameless faceless fiancés, boyfriends, dates and 'friends' who had rejected her over the years. Who needed them? Not her, she decided, not Hermione Granger. She was

going to live her life on her own terms. She had plenty of good role models of strong, independent women: her mum, Aunt Maeve, Minerva, Molly Weasley. She'd use those examples and make a life for herself; she didn't need a man to have a meaningful life.

Then with a sigh, she deflated as she thought that no, she didn't *need* a man. But still, it would be nice to have one.

~**~

Three days went by with Severus planning what he would say to Hermione when he saw her before he realized that three days had gone by, and he hadn't seen her. Another four days went by, and he began to worry. Was she all right? She hated to cook, was she eating at all? Was she secluded up at her cottage, ignoring the rest of the world? Should he go up there? Had she left Ireland? Should he contact Harry? Should he mind his own business?

While he was ruminating over these questions, Severus wondered if Paddy had seen her. "Have you seen Hermione at all in the last week, Paddy?" he asked, trying to appear casual.

"Oh sure, Boss, she comes in every couple of days. Saw her at the post office on Monday and over at O'Malley's restaurant the day before yesterday, havin' lunch, and then she was in he..." Paddy suddenly seemed terribly busy, scrubbing the same spot on the bar.

"What? She was in where? In here? When?"

"Well... yeah, Boss. But she only comes in here when..." There was an awkward pause.

"When what, Paddy?"

"When she's sure you're not around. She only comes in here when she knows you aren't workin'. Like on the days you're here for the evening shift and come in late, then she'll come in early for lunch. And when you're here early and go home later in the afternoon, then she comes in for a late dinner."

"So, she's been avoiding me."

Paddy snorted. "I suppose that's true. But it looks to me like you've been avoidin' her as well, haven't you? I couldn't help but notice that ever since you came back from your trip things have changed between you. Now, I don't know what happened, and I don't really care 'cause I'm sure not goin' to be takin' sides."

Severus sighed. "I don't expect you to take sides, Paddy. Things *have* changed between us. But that doesn't mean I don't worry about her. I'm glad to know that she has been around and not holed up at Bluebell Cottage, isolating herself."

"Well, if you're so darned worried about her, then why don't you go talk to the girl?"

"Because there's nothing else to say."

"Couple of eejits, if you ask me," Paddy mumbled under his breath and went back to scrubbing the bar.

~**~

A week had gone by since that awful day when Severus had informed her he was... he was... he was what? Breaking up with her? They hadn't really been a couple, so could they have a break-up? She didn't think so. And yet they'd spent so much time together over the last six weeks that was what it felt like. Oh, he'd said he wanted to stay friends, but guys always said that, and they never meant it...not really. It was just something they said to girls to make themselves feel better while they stomped all over their feelings.

She'd been actively avoiding him, even though she knew that eventually they were bound to run into each other. She missed him though, missed having him around to talk to, to debate with, to tease, to cook for her. She hadn't realized how un-lonely she'd felt when he was around.

But enough of feeling sorry for herself, she scolded as she opened the *Daily Prophet* to discover that Mr. Weasley was running for Minister of Magic. This was wonderful news! She wondered why Harry had never mentioned that his father-in-law was considering running for the office. Mr. Weasley would make an excellent Minister. Of course, at this point she'd be happy to see anyone run if they could destroy Theodore Nott's chances. Hell, she'd vote for Voldemort himself if he could beat Theo. Well perhaps, that was stretching it a bit...but not by much.

~**~

In an attempt to keep herself busy and her mind off Severus, Hermione had begun doing some research in earnest. The first project had become close to her heart. While teaching herself to quilt in order to finish Maeve's beautiful final project, she had become fascinated with the craft. She'd begun doing extensive research on the history of quilting, how long the craft had existed, materials used in different parts of the world, and how the styles and patterns varied. It wasn't likely to become a hot bestseller, but it was a topic she found interesting, and there was a market for crafting books...especially in the Muggle world. As Harry had suggested, maybe writing fiction wasn't her strong point...research was, though. When she thought of how she had over-researched every assignment she'd ever been given at Hogwarts, she believed, perhaps, she'd found her niche.

The second project was quite personal. Draco had hinted that eventually they would find a way to get even with Nott somehow, and that had gotten Hermione thinking. Theo had hurt her, but she didn't think his attitude towards her was just because she was a Muggle-born. She thought deep down he had a disdain for women in general. She'd remembered Draco saying how Nott had stolen his ex-fiancée, Astoria Greengrass, then had dumped and publicly humiliated her. She also remembered an assistant at the Ministry he'd fired, claiming the girl had been stalking him. Knowing what she did now, Hermione figured that there was probably more to that story than met the eye. And there was probably a whole list of other women scorned by Theodore Nott. There was a Muggle saying about women scorned, and Hermione had a plan. Theodore Nott would rue the day he'd messed around with her!

~**~

Five days after the announcement in the *Prophet* about Arthur throwing his hat into the ring for the election for Minister, Severus got an owl from Harry. Now that they had a candidate to run against Nott, the group wanted another meeting to make further plans.

Knowing that it might be difficult for Severus to get away so soon after his last trip, Harry suggested that the group come there. He proposed either Severus' home or the pub, whichever was acceptable to him. Ginny wanted to visit Hermione, so that would keep her out of their hair.

Severus grunted, no worry of that. Hermione hadn't been in his hair, in his house or anywhere near him since that fateful day nearly two weeks earlier when he'd tried to do what he thought was the right thing. He was now having doubts. He'd thought they could somehow maintain their friendship, which he had come to value. But apparently, Hermione seemed to have other ideas as she had gone out of her way to avoid any contact with him ever since.

Although wild hippogriffs could not drag this confession out of him, he missed the blasted girl. He'd spent eight years building himself a solitary, ordinary, boring kind of life, and he'd been happy with it. Ecstatic. After just a few paltry weeks of having her in his life, being without her company now had him feeling wretched.

He grabbed a quill and parchment and quickly scratched out a reply to Harry.

HP:

Probably best to come to the house; don't know if my pub or my patrons could survive an invasion of wizards.

No worries about Granger getting in the way; haven't seen her for two weeks.

Come Friday evening around 7 pm.

SS

~**~

On Friday evening, Ginny showed up on Hermione's doorstep, not with Harry, as Hermione had expected, but with Luna.

"Harry and Draco said they are working on a project together, and they needed Snape's expertise," Ginny explained, and she and Luna stepped into the quaint little cottage. "They'll be around later."

Hermione looked shocked. "Harry told you about Severus?"

"Yes, but don't worry, he had Snape's permission. And I promised not to tell anyone, Wizard's oath of honor. Luna here already knew. It seems she saw him when he was visiting the Malfoys a couple of weeks ago."

"Oh yes," said Luna. "I heard the whole story. How the Malfoys saved Professor Snape after the final battle and spirited him off to their home in Tuscany. It took him nearly a year to recover. Mr. Malfoy offered to set him up in a potions business, or whatever he might want to do, but Draco said the professor just wanted to go away somewhere quiet and start a new life. So they helped him purchase the pub here."

"They thought he'd stay a year or two, then get tired of living alone amongst Muggles and come back to England. But apparently, he's happy here."

"Soooo?" Ginny asked, turning to her friend.

"Soooo? What?" Hermione replied.

"So how is it going with Snape? From your owl posts, it sounded like you two were getting pretty friendly." She wagged her eyebrows at her friend. "Then there was hardly any news from you for the past couple of weeks. I figured maybe you two were shackled up here, going at it like niffles."

"It's over," Hermione informed her friend bluntly.

"Over? What does that mean? How can it be over? It had barely started. How does it move right to over?"

"I. Don't. Know," declared Hermione, throwing herself into a heap on the couch in frustration. "We saw each other every day for weeks, towards the end several times a day. We got along well; we enjoyed each other's company; he was affectionate in a slowly developing kind of way. He cooked for me."

"He cooked?" Luna and Ginny gasped simultaneously, clearly awed by this revelation.

Hermione nodded. "He's a wonderful cook. And he likes doing it. No complaining of, 'Oh ~~dd~~ have to cook again? Isn't it *your* turn today?' I didn't even have to ask him, he would just do it, willingly."

"That makes sense, being a Potions master. All that chopping and slicing and dicing, it has to come in handy for something," agreed Luna.

"So, tell us what happened. How can it be over?" Ginny demanded.

Hermione explained everything that had happened: getting drunk, him bringing her home. How he showed up with dinner, and things just sort of progressed until they were spending part of every day together. She described what she had taken for gradual signs of affection. "And then about two weeks ago, he had to go away on some kind of personal business. Apparently that's when he saw the Malfoys. Just before he left, we were saying goodbye, and I don't know quite how it happened, but I... err... that is, he... I mean we..."

"Oh, my sweet Merlin! Hermione, you had sex with Snape!" Ginny squealed.

"No! Circe, no. It was just a kiss. But, oh sweet mother of Merlin, what a kiss! I wanted to after that... have sex with him, that is; it was so hot! I think at that point, I probably would have done almost anything he wanted. It's all I thought about for the whole four days he was gone: him coming back so I could kiss him some more."

"So why didn't you?" asked Luna, staring at Hermione.

"I have no idea," said Hermione with a sigh. "Even though I spent four days thinking about finishing that kiss, apparently, he spent four days figuring out how to shove me out of his life. I guess he didn't feel the same things I felt. Maybe, he was disgusted by me, by my reaction to the kiss. Maybe, he thought I came on too strong, too aggressive." She rubbed her hands over face and lamented, "Maybe, Nott's lies have some basis in truth. I just don't seem to be attractive to men, at least not over the long haul. I somehow drive them away eventually...every single time. I don't mean to, it just happens. Maybe I do bat for the other team."

Luna studied her closely for a moment, then leaned in and kissed her soundly on the lips.

"Luna, ewwww! What the hell was that?" shrieked Hermione, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. Ginny just stared wide-eyed and snickered nervously.

"Just checking," responded Luna, seriously. "Did you like that? Do you want to do it again?"

"No! I'm sorry, Luna. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but no I don't."

"Oh, okay. Then I guess you probably don't...bat for the other team, that is."

"Do you?" asked Ginny, curiously.

"Oh no, I like boys mostly. But I just wanted to help Hermione decide how she felt."

All three stared at each other for a moment; Ginny started chuckling first, then Luna snorted and Hermione giggled. In an instant, they were all laughing so hard they couldn't stop. Finally, they all sagged together on the couch in a tangle of arms and legs, each holding her stomach because they'd laughed so hard it ached.

Suddenly, Ginny sat straight up and asked Hermione, "When exactly was it that Snape backed off so suddenly?"

"Two weeks ago, right after he came home from his trip back to England. Why?"

Ginny gulped. "I think I might have an idea what could have happened."

Hermione looked her in the eye. "So, spill it."

"Harry."

"I don't get it, what's Harry got to do with it?"

"A little over two weeks ago Harry was all worried about your notes, about how much time you were spending with Snape. He kept saying that he was worried you might get hurt again, and that he didn't think Snape would ever commit to a woman, based on his past history.

"Hermione, I think he must have confronted Snape."

Hermione stood up abruptly. "Where is he, Gin? Where is he right now? Because I'm going to kill Harry Potter!"

tbc

11

Chapter 11 of 12

It's nine years post war. Hermione has just had a traumatic break-up with her fiancé, Theodore Nott. Hurt and disillusioned with her life, she retreats to a cottage in rural Ireland that she inherited from a great-aunt. You'll never guess who else has been living a peaceful life in the Muggle world in the same small village for the past eight years.

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The meeting at Severus' home had thus far produced no solid plan for dealing with Nott. Ron and Blaise wanted to find just cause of his wrong doing and arrest him, but Draco theorized that if Nott had actually done anything illegal he surely would have effectively covered his tracks. Draco was sure he could find some Dark spells or curses in the Manor's extensive library that would suit the situation. Greg wanted to lure him down some back alley and beat the crap out of him. Neville swore he knew of some exotic plants that could be used in untraceable poisons. Harry just wanted to Crucio the bastard. This surprisingly left George and Severus as the voices of reason to try to keep the rest of the group in line.

Severus was beginning to think that perhaps he and Harry should have just plotted Nott's come-uppance on their own. They would have been better off without so many helpers mucking everything up. Too many cooks spoiled the broth, or in this case, too many wizards ruined the plotting. A lesson he should have learned during his days as a spy in the Death Eaters' camp. Whenever the Dark Lord had not been present to issue direct orders, the rest of the crowd would spend hours hashing and rehashing various plots and accomplishing next to nothing.

George was trying to mediate between two groups. Harry, Neville and Greg who preferred a solution that involved flat-out pain and torment. Ron, Blaise and Draco wanted a more subtle, indirect method of revenge. It was in the midst of this row that the alarm that was keyed to his wards sounded. The silence that enshrouded the group was immediate as they all looked at each other in concern.

Then came the sound of furious pounding on Severus' door. "Harry Potter! I know you're in there. You get your interfering arse out here right now, or I swear I'll take these wards apart one by one." More pounding ensued. "Harry James Potter!"

"Oh, shit, it's Hermione!" exclaimed Harry.

"Obviously," drawled Severus. "Everyone stay here," he commanded before he stalked to the door.

~*~

It had taken Hermione fifteen minutes to convince Ginny that she wasn't actually going to kill Gin's husband and her own best friend. But she was not going to let this stand without sorting it all out.

"I can't believe he would interfere in my life like this. How dare he?"

"Hermione, you know he meant well. Harry loves you; he would never hurt you intentionally." Ginny tried to calm her friend.

"But to go to Severus and warn him off? Would he do that to Ron? I don't think so, and if he felt there was a problem, he should have come to me, not Severus. I just can't believe he would do this."

"Maybe Harry was influenced by the Screeching Skarsiziams," contemplated Luna.

Ginny and Hermione both looked at the blonde in disbelief. Hermione opened her mouth to speak but then thought better of questioning Luna and just said nothing.

Luna looked at her friends and stated emphatically, "What? It's entirely possible. They were at the very peak of their season and extremely potent two weeks ago."

~*~

Hermione left the girls at the cottage and Apparated into the village; something she would ordinarily never do, but in her opinion these were extenuating circumstances. She popped in behind O'Brian's repair shop as she knew it was closed and was located on a little, out-of-the-way side street where she was unlikely to be noticed. From there, she hurried over to the Green Dragon, which was extremely busy. Friday and Saturday were the busiest nights of the week, and Severus was always at work on these nights.

Entering the busy pub, she looked around but saw no sign of Severus, Draco or Harry. She did see Paddy though and made a beeline to the bar to interrogate her friend.

"Where's Russ, Paddy? I need to speak to him."

"Hey, Hermione! Now you wanna' talk to the boss, huh? After two whole weeks of avoidin' him at every turn? I don't know what's up between the two of you, deary, but I'm knowin' I don't want to be caught in the middle of it all."

"I'll try not to let that happen, Paddy. Actually I'm looking for another friend of mine. He was supposed to meet Russ tonight, and I know that he's always here on Friday nights."

"Ah, yeah. But he took tonight off and got the O'Reilly twins to help out. Oh hey! I met yer' friend George, by the way. You were right there is a remarkable resemblance. He's a bit taller than me, and I'm a wee bit better looking of course," he said with a cheeky grin.

"What... Wait. George Weasley was in here? Tonight?" Hermione was stunned. What was George doing here in the Green Dragon?

"Yea, he came in with a tall blond bloke and another fella' with dark hair and a funny scar on his forehead."

"That's my friend, the dark-haired bloke. Where did they go?"

"Boss took 'em all up to his place, said they had some business to discuss."

"Thanks, Paddy," she replied, brushing his cheek with a kiss. "I owe you one."

Rushing back to her hiding spot behind O'Brian's, she Apparated to Severus' home and marched up to the door. She could feel the wards twitch and knew that whoever was inside would now be aware of her presence, but by this point she was too upset to care.

She pounded furiously on the door. "Harry Potter! I know you're in there. You get your interfering arse out here right now, or I swear I'll take these wards apart one by one." She pounded on the door even harder. "Harry James Potter!"

Within a few seconds the door was flung open, and Hermione was face to face with Severus Snape.

"Severus." Her voice was soft, nearly a whisper. She reached out tentatively, fingers almost touching him, but then fisted her hand and jerked it back. She clutched it to her chest as if burned.

"Hermione."

She swallowed, then chewed on her bottom lip, something she did whenever she was nervous.

"I need to talk to Harry. I know he's here so don't bother denying it."

"We are in the middle of something, can it not wait?" he asked.

"No. I have something I need to ask him; it's very important to me. I need to see him right now. Please?" she stated, her eyes on her feet. It hurt too much to be this close to him and yet feel so isolated at the same time. She couldn't look at him and risk that her eyes might fill with tears.

He sighed. "Very well, wait here. I'll get him."

That hurt. *I'm not even welcome in his home anymore*, she thought. *Maybe it wasn't Harry's doing after all, maybe he truly just wanted to be shed of me.*

Harry appeared at the door, and Hermione drew him outside a few feet away, not noticing that the door remained slightly ajar.

Harry looked nervous. "Hermione, what's wrong? I was going to come over to your cottage later. Didn't Gin tell you that? Couldn't this, whatever it's about, couldn't it wait until later?"

"Truthfully, Harry, I suppose it could have, but Gin put an idea in my head, and I had to find out if it was true." She clutched his wrist. "Two weeks ago, did you say something to Severus, Harry?"

"What do you mean?"

"Must I spell it out for you? Did you warn him off, tell him to not to see me anymore?"

"No, I did not," Harry responded. And it was the truth. He hadn't actually ordered Severus to stay away from his friend, he'd merely advised him to think about the situation.

"Oh." Hermione's heart fell. She felt devastated, so it was Severus' own decision and not Harry's demands. It must be something to do with her. He just didn't want her. Why was it no one ever really wanted her?

Harry could almost see the gears turning in her complex brain. Without needing Legilimency, he knew exactly what she was thinking. Knowing she was going to blame herself, he reluctantly admitted his actions. "I didn't out and out tell him to stay away from you. But I guess, I may have advised him to reconsider the situation. I told him you didn't deserve to be hurt again; that I thought you were starting to fall for him, and that if he didn't think he could return your feelings, then he should probably step back."

"Harry! How could you?" she cried.

"I was trying to protect you," he shouted right back at her.

"I didn't ask for your protection," she exclaimed.

"It doesn't matter if you asked or not. I needed to protect you."

"It's not your place. You're acting like you're my father or something!"

"No, I'm not your father. But I am your family. Maybe not by birth or by blood, but I am in here." Harry pounded his chest. "And I couldn't just stand by and see you get your heart broken again. I just couldn't."

"Oh, Harry," she said softly, hugging him quickly before pushing him away. "I know, it's true. You are my family, but you can't wrap me up in cotton wool and keep me safe from all the bad things that can happen in the world, love. Sometimes people have to risk being hurt if they want to have any chance at all of finding happiness."

"But don't you see, Hermione? I blame myself," he cried. "That whole mess with Nott, I should have protected you in the first place. I had a bad feeling when you started out with him; I knew he was a bad choice, wrong for you in so many ways. The smarmy, lying bastard. But I said nothing. I did nothing. And look what happened."

With a sigh, she replied, "I probably wouldn't have listened anyway, Harry. I was so tired of being alone, of being lonely all the time. I just wanted so much to have someone of my own, and Theo played into that. It's like he sensed my weaknesses and preyed on them. I was a complete fool, but that certainly wasn't your fault."

Harry held her close for a moment. "You're no fool, Hermione. Nott is just a master of deception."

"And is that what your opinion of Severus is, too, Harry? That he's just out to trick me, use me, deceive me?"

"No, not really. Personally, I've actually begun to like Severus, but realistically I just don't know, Hermione. I don't think he would set out to hurt you intentionally, but I do think he's an emotionally damaged man. You're not the type to do casual, and I just don't know if he'd ever be able to make a commitment. He devoted his life for so many years to my mother's memory, but I'm not so sure that that's a good thing. Was it out of love or of obsession? As far as I know he's never been in any other kind of long-term relationship. He's forty-seven years old and has never settled down; I don't know if he is capable of having a relationship with anyone, Hermione."

"As for whether what he felt for your mum was love or obsession, I don't know, perhaps a little of both. I think a great deal of it goes back to the fact that he held himself responsible for revealing the prophecy to Voldemort. He felt guilty that by doing so he may have inadvertently been a factor in her death. You should know better than anyone how that feels, Harry. It wasn't your fault that Sirius died at the Department of Mysteries that night, but I know you've always blamed yourself anyway.

"As far as a commitment goes, Severus and I were just starting out. After this whole fiasco with Nott, I'm certainly not looking to jump into anything permanent right away. It will be a very long time before I feel safe committing myself to anyone, so I'm really not ready for any kind of promises at this point in time. I would like a chance at least to find out where it might end up, though. And, Harry, you don't have to be in a romantic relationship with someone to be hurt by them. Being with Severus made me happy, and it hurt me horribly when he told me he didn't want to be around me anymore."

"I didn't mean for you to be hurt. I'm sorry for interfering, love. I thought at the time I was protecting you or at least trying to."

She playfully punched him in the arm. "I'll forgive you this time, because best friends are hard to come by, but don't let it happen again, Potter," she teased. "Will you ask Severus if he'll talk to me for a couple of minutes?"

"Come in and ask him yourself."

"No. I'm not taking anything for granted. It's entirely possible that he really doesn't want to be around me. That it was his own decision and not based on anything you said at all."

Hermione sat down on a bench to wait for Severus.

Harry entered the house to find Severus just inside the front door, which was standing ajar. "Spy much, Severus?" The man had the grace to look abashed.

"She wants to talk to you," continued Harry. "I'm sorry for interfering between you two. I've been instructed to mind my own business. But then, I suppose you already knew that," he concluded before sweeping past Severus to enter the other room.

Hermione stood as Severus approached. "Harry said you wanted to talk to me?" he said.

Hermione looked up at him, unsure how to proceed. Finally, she decided the best approach was to just take the plunge. Like jumping into a cold lake rather than wading in inch by agonizing inch. "I have one question to ask you, Severus."

"All right."

She took her lead from Luna's actions and without warning, she reached for him. Her fingers threaded through his hair, and she pulled him down to kiss him deeply, her tongue lightly teasing at his lips until they opened to let her in, tracing across his teeth and dueling with his tongue. One hand dropped down to grasp his arse as she clasped him close to her. His arms seemed to wrap of their own accord around her body, holding her tightly to him as though he feared she might try to escape. When they finally broke apart, they were both panting.

Hermione stepped back and asked bluntly, "Are you repelled?"

"What...?"

"Are you revolted? Was that disgusting to you?"

Severus had no idea what she was talking about. "Are you... insane?" he asked, sounding puzzled.

"I need to know if me kissing you like that... if you found that distasteful?"

"Of course not! What kind of question is that?" he asked.

"Well, the last time I kissed you like that, you came back four days later and told me you didn't want to be around me anymore. I was afraid maybe it wasn't because of what Harry said at all. I was afraid that maybe you found me to be... undesirable."

"Undesirable? Sweet Merlin, you are insane. Come here, you crazy woman, I'll show you how undesirable I think you are," he said as he pulled her in close and kissed her thoroughly. Pulling back a bit, he whispered in her ear, "I cannot believe you thought I didn't want you. Walking away was the hardest thing I've ever had to do, but I had convinced myself that I was doing what was in your best interest."

"Oh, Severus. You and Harry are a pair, both of you trying to protect me from reality. Let me decide for myself what is in my best interest. You know, when I learned the truth about Theo, I thought that my heart was broken, but what I felt that day was absolutely nothing compared to the day you walked away from my cottage and out of my life. You removed yourself from my life, supposedly to prevent me from being hurt, but I hurt a hundred times worse when I thought that you didn't want me."

"I'm sorry for that, Hermione. Come inside and let me make it up to you now," he insisted, taking her hand and pulling her through the front door.

Entering the living room, Hermione stopped short. "What on earth is going on here?" she asked, shocked by the grinning faces and the seven pair of eyes staring at them.

"Oh, shit, I forgot."

~*~

Severus had been so wrapped up in the thought of making things right with Hermione that he really had completely forgotten that his home was filled to the brim with a scheming throng of Slytherins and Gryffindors.

tbc

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. I make no money here.

Many thanks to my beta, dreamy_dragon73, for all her help; she makes it all readable.

"I don't understand; why are you all here in Severus' house?" asked Hermione. "Severus? Harry? Somebody say something!"

For a split second there was total silence, and then everyone tried to talk at the same time. It was total chaos. This went on for a full minute or two before Hermione shouted, "Stop! Stop, I can't decipher anything anyone is saying. One at a time." She looked around the room. "Draco, you first. Explain," she demanded.

"Well, Hermione, Severus and Harry had an idea. Remember I told you that we'd find a way to get even with Nott? I promised. Well, they had the same idea, and they decided to recruit some assistance. So when they asked me, I agreed to help, and it's the same with everyone here."

Hermione was totally dumbfounded. She felt a little shaky and actually swayed on her feet. Severus and George, who were the closest to her, both reached out to support her. All it took was a sharp look from Severus for George to drop his hands away with a cheeky grin and waggle his eyebrows at his former Potions teacher. Severus put his arm around her shoulder and tucked her close to his side for support.

Suddenly, her brain connected all the dots and she gasped, "Oh, my word, *this* is why Mr. Weasley suddenly decided to run for Minister, isn't it? It was you. You set it all up."

"We put the idea to Dad," confirmed Ron. "We figured the first thing we needed to do was make damned sure that Nott didn't get into the Minister's office."

"With a little convincing, and Draco offering the initial financial backing to get his campaign started, he agreed to run." George took up the telling. "But, of course he doesn't have any connection with the rest of this business. It wouldn't do for it to get out that the future Minister of Magic was involved in something shady."

"The rest of what business? What else exactly is it you're all up to?" Hermione asked.

"We're going to make Nott sorry for the way he treated you, Hermione, for the lies he told, and we're going to make sure he doesn't hurt anyone else from here on out." Greg awkwardly patted her shoulder while explaining their purpose.

Hermione was astounded that all eight of these men were taking on something of this magnitude for her. "You're all doing this for me? But why?"

"Oh it's not *all* for you, sweetheart," drawled Zabini, sauntering closer. "I know my friend Draco here wouldn't mind a little revenge for himself and the whole Greengrass incident. Me, personally, I just flat out never liked Theo Nott; he's a racist, sexist pig. He gives the noble house of Sytherin a bad name." He sidled even closer to where she stood. While Severus was distracted by something Harry was saying, Blaise continued in a low voice. "I don't mind taking on the project for you either though, Granger," he said as he leaned in close to steal a kiss; he always had been a tease.

Severus jerked Hermione back to his side and gave Blaise a glare that could have melted a cast iron cauldron. "Mr. Zabini, I will remind you to mind your manners and keep your hands and your lips off Miss Granger."

Blaise just grinned. "Severus, I've wanted to do that ever since sixth year but never had the nerve. From the way things are shaping up here, it looked to me like I'd never get another shot at collecting that kiss. I had to take what I could while I had the chance."

Ignoring Blaise's antics, Harry explained to Hermione. "It's been a group effort, love," he said, waving his hand around at everyone else in the room. "Nott needs to be taken down, and we've all decided that we're just the bunch to do it."

"This is just unbelievable," gasped Hermione, tears starting to form in her eyes.

"It's like the DA," said Neville. "We're working behind the scenes to fight for the right thing, for justice. Only instead of Dumbledore's Army, I guess now we're Hermione's Army."

"That's right," echoed Greg. "Hermione's Army, that's us!"

Hermione could no longer keep her emotions in check. She turned quickly to Severus, burying her face in his shoulder, trying to hold back the sobs. She hated for anyone to see her cry.

"Hermione, what is it?" Severus murmured, concerned.

"Make them go, Severus, please," she whispered into his neck. She couldn't believe these sweet, wonderful men were willing to do this for her; it was just too much to comprehend. "I can't deal with it all right now, I'm so overwhelmed. Please, make them leave; they can go to my house. They can come back tomorrow and plot all they like."

Severus held her close and waved the rest off with one arm. "Our lady is feeling a bit emotional right now, boys. Come back tomorrow. She says we can plot all we want then."

"Harry, Draco, pick up your girls from Bluebell Cottage and take the whole group down to the pub. Tell Paddy I said the first round is on the house." Turning to the rest of the group he added, "That's the first round only, gentlemen and remember this *is* a Muggle establishment. There will be no wands, no magic and no stories of your days at Hogwarts. Anyone wanting to stay, there are three rooms above the pub, which are at your disposal. See you all tomorrow, gentlemen."

As they trooped out, they all gave Hermione a pat on the shoulder or squeezed her arm in support. Ron kissed the top of her head as did Harry, who murmured to Severus in passing, "She hates for anyone to see her cry."

At that Hermione took a half-hearted swing at Harry, with her face still buried against Severus and unable to hold back any longer the sobs that shook her body.

"I can't be... be... believe th... that all of you would d... do... some... something like this f... fo... for me!" she wailed.

Not knowing what else to do, he swung her up in his arms and carried her over to his comfy chair and sat with her cuddled on his lap. He let her cry herself out, holding her and shushing her while murmuring and crooning silly nonsense words.

She never in million years would have guessed that Severus Snape could be so tender and kind. She cried herself out and actually dozed off for a bit, and still he held her tenderly. When she woke up a little bit later, Severus was stroking her hair and twirling one of her curls around his finger.

"Oh, hello," he said. "Are you awake now?"

"I'm so sorry, " she apologized.

"For what?"

"Well, for having a total emotional meltdown on you."

"I expect it was a long time in the making. It's probably a good thing to get it all out," he said. "Do you feel better now?"

"Yes, I guess. I haven't really cried since it all began. Not even when I caught Theo with Trudi in my office that day. Oh, a little tear here and there but not really a good brain numbing breakdown. I wanted to cry even more two weeks ago when you told me I needed to move on with my life. But I wouldn't allow it. I told myself that you weren't worth it."

"Most likely you were right," he agreed.

"No. That's not true, I think you are most definitely worth it." She paused a moment before she could continue. "I can't believe that you and Harry started all of this for me, to take down Theo for me. You're like my knights in armor, all of you. I'm so touched by it all."

Her eyes were tearing up again. "There, there," he admonished. "Don't go and start up the waterworks again. Once I can stand, but twice is too much." He reached into his robes and pulled out a pristine handkerchief. "Here, dry your eyes. Good. Now blow your nose. There now, wipe your nose again, especially there by your mouth."

"Why? Is there something there?" She asked, scrubbing vigorously over her lips.

"Because," he explained with a sly smile. "I intend to kiss you, you silly witch."

"Oh, Severus!" she exclaimed with a happy sigh.

He didn't reply, just gathered her in his arms and proceeded to kiss her most thoroughly indeed.

~*~

One thing led to another, and although Severus wanted to proceed slowly, Hermione convinced him otherwise. She told him with her kisses and soft caresses and with her words that she didn't want or expect commitments or promises right now. She just wanted to be with him. She'd thought of nothing else after their first kiss two weeks earlier.

But by the time they were cuddled in his big, comfortable bed, she was getting a bit nervous. "Severus, there is something you should know before we proceed."

"What is that, Hermione?" he asked as he nuzzled her neck, amazed at how soft her skin felt there, right below her earlobe, just by her jawline.

"Severus, please" she sighed. "You're distracting me. I need to tell you that... well that. I'm not... that is to say. This is very..."

"Hermione, just tell me whatever it is you have to say," he murmured as he stroked his hand lightly over her shoulder and down her arm.

"Well, all right then. What I need you to know is that I'm not very good at this."

"Not good at what?" he asked.

"This!" she waved her hand back and forth between them. "This! This! Oh, bugger! It's SEX! I'm not very good at sex, never have been. It wasn't just with Nott, although he was the first one to call me a frigid bitch. But... it's just never been all that spectacular for me ever or not even really good for the most part... rather dismal in fact... and... and... I just don't want to be a disappointment to you," she explained. "I want you so much, but I'm terrified it will end up like it always has. I think there's something wrong with me," she admitted in a sad little whisper.

"Oh, for the love of Merlin. I think the crazy witch is back, and she's here in my bed. There isn't anything wrong with you." He gave her a tight squeeze, wondering if maybe they should have taken things a bit slower as he had originally suggested. "Tell me truthfully now, why is it that you think you're bad at it?"

"Well, I don't know, it all starts out fine. It feels nice for a while; I get excited; it's enjoyable; but then after a while the feeling just fades away, and by that time I'm just glad when he finishes. Then afterward, I usually just feel bad about the whole thing."

"That doesn't sound like your fault at all...inattentive partners if you ask me." He paused before continuing, "How do I ask this delicately? Hermione, you do know what... that is to say... well, you... you have had an orgasm before, haven't you?"

"Well, of course I have, Severus," she answered quickly. Then, almost as an afterthought, she added, "Oh, wait. Did you mean when I wasn't alone? Like actually with someone else?"

With a low sexy chuckle that sent shivers up and down her spine, he pulled her close. "Oh, Hermione, I am positive there is nothing wrong with you. The lovers you've had must have been very bad teachers indeed as well as extremely inconsiderate and selfish. I, however, am an excellent teacher, as you very well know."

He kissed her deeply then, taking his time to draw it out. He nibbled his way down her neck and back up to suck on that spot he had discovered earlier just beneath her earlobe until she shivered and moaned his name, "Oh... Severus."

He finally pulled back to look down into her eyes. "And, as you are about to learn, I am an extremely considerate lover. Now let us begin your first lesson. For right now, this first time is going to be all about you, so I want you to just enjoy. But do pay attention, sweet, for I may test you later," Severus said with a teasing smile. He then proceeded to kiss his way ever so slowly down her body as his hands swept gently over her, stroking, caressing; his lips kissing, licking, sucking, tasting. He was utterly meticulous in teaching her body to sing.

Before the night was over, Hermione was thoroughly convinced that she wasn't really bad at sex at all. In fact she was quite spectacularly good at it. Severus enthusiastically agreed.

By the time the group returned the next day to continue their plotting, Hermione had spent the early morning hours trying to make up for lost time and for nine years of bad sex.

"Oh, dear, I'm afraid I may have created an insatiable monster," Severus teased. "Oh, what the hell, I guess I'll just have to bear the burden," he concluded with a satisfied,

if somewhat exhausted, smile.

~**~

It seemed the group had done some brainstorming after the pub had closed and had come up with some very creative ideas. At this point, Hermione revealed that she had been working on her own project to exact revenge as well. She had been able to identify no fewer than seven women Nott had abused, humiliated, or hurt in one way or another. Many of whom were quite enthusiastic about the chance to get even with one Mr. Theodore Amadeus Nott.

In the end, Hermione insisted that other than the plotting and setting-up, she didn't want any of the men involved in the actual execution of the plan.

"I'm serious. I won't have any one of you risking yourselves over this. What we are planning may not be technically illegal, but it is highly questionable. Harry, Ron and Blaise, as Aurors you are employees of the Ministry, you must protect yourselves. I won't have you losing your jobs or worse over this. Draco, the same goes for you. As a lawyer, my lawyer in particular, you can't be exposed as a conspirator. Besides, if things go pear-shaped I may have need of your professional services," she stated with a grin.

There were some objections, but Hermione emphatically over-ruled them all. "No, I mean it. I would rather let Theo get off scot-free than risk any one of you. Neville, as a Hogwarts teacher you must remain above reproach; and, Greg, there is no way in hell I will let you take any risk that might send you back to Azkaban. George, if we want Arthur to succeed in his quest to become Minister then we certainly cannot have a member of his own family involved in a potential scandal."

Severus laid a hand on her shoulder. "Surely you can find no objections to my participation, my dear. None of your reasons apply to me."

Laying her hand on his, she replied, "I don't know, Severus. I'm really not sure it's a good idea. You've spent eight years creating a life for yourself totally separate from the wizarding world. I don't want to have you risk your anonymity by being involved in my little acts of vengeance."

"And I will not allow you to go into this unassisted. Remaining anonymous means little to me if you are at risk."

"I won't be acting completely on my own, you know. At least four of the seven women I've been in touch with have expressed a desire to become involved. More than a desire really. They seemed enthusiastic about the whole idea. Although, of course at the time I spoke with each of them there was no definite plan in place, just a general idea. I think they will approve though. I plan to run it by them as soon as possible. I find it deliciously apropos that Theo's downfall should come from those of us he has hurt and scorned."

Thus the group departed with their plan in place and its enactment assured.

~**~

Six months later at Bluebell Cottage, Hermione sat down to her morning cup of tea and slice of toast. It was one of Severus' mornings at the pub, so no home cooked breakfast for her. She had become accustomed to having Severus pamper her both with his cooking and in the bedroom or the living room or her office or in the garden or... well just about anywhere. By the same token, Severus had come to treasure having Hermione's support and affection.

While no proper commitments had been spoken, Severus' rented house sat empty for the most part as he spent nearly all of his free time with Hermione at the cottage. Hermione had finished *The History of Quilting Around the World* and found a Muggle publisher for it. She was toying with an idea for her next project, writing a wizarding history of the Voldemort Wars. She had ample source material at her beck and call, after all.

Severus had had enough years of peril and espionage to last a lifetime, and he was now quite content to run the Green Dragon and come home to nights spent wrapped in Hermione's embrace. It was a new beginning for them, and for the first time in years both could say they were truly happy.

~**~

She opened her copy of the *Daily Prophet*, which Harry had sent her via Floo, so she wouldn't have to wait for the much slower owl delivery. The headline made her heart soar: **ARTHUR WEASLEY ELECTED MINISTER OF MAGIC!**

Hermione eagerly spread the paper out and began to read.

Weasley wins election in an unprecedented landslide victory over opponent Theodore Nott. The article went on to enumerate Arthur's history at the Ministry of Magic. His role with the Order of the Phoenix in the war against Voldemort was detailed as well as a mention of his numerous family and their goings-on

Hermione's eyes dropped down to an article about the opponent and suppositions as to how a candidate who had originally come out so strongly in the lead had failed so spectacularly. Normally not one to gloat, in this case she was willing to make an exception

Mr. Nott's campaign has been besieged of late by rumors of extremely questionable activities as well as recent innuendo regarding practices verging on the Dark Arts. There were interviews with past business contacts, former housemates and teachers from Hogwarts' days and several of Nott's past amours. Hermione's inclusion on this list was a simple note that she had 'no comment'. Others, however, had made various accusations ranging from questionable business practices and possible embezzlement to infidelity, verbal and physical abuse, to requests for unsavory 'sexual favors' involving partners not human.

The article even mentioned incriminating pictures. This reporter personally has seen photos of Mr. Nott, taken by a reputable photographer who shall remain nameless. These pictures are not suitable for publication in a family friendly newspaper, but I can attest that they show an unhealthy and unnatural affinity for goats. A practice most strongly frowned upon throughout the wizarding world.

Further evidence of Mr. Nott's depraved practices is a complaint filed with the MLE by Mr. Aberforth Dumbledore, respectable owner of the Hog's Head in Hogsmeade. Mr. Dumbledore's complaint claims that after a night spent drinking in his pub, Nott had abused several of Dumbledore's goats, which he keeps as part of his side business of Bezoar sales. This reporter has confirmed that Mr. Dumbledore's Bezoar business is the largest in wizarding Britain. Mr. Dumbledore is quoted as saying, "My herd had been so traumatized by all of this that I have been unable to harvest a decent Bezoar in weeks." Rumor has it the price of Bezoars will soar due to this shortage.

Mr. Nott was unavailable for comment.

She smiled in satisfaction. The plot had played out slowly over the last weeks and months to completion shortly before the election, just as they had planned. A comment dropped here, a whisper of impropriety there, a snippet of gossip passed on by one of Nott's former employees, schoolmates or lovers. Quiet investigations by Blaise and Ron had revealed some actual questions of misappropriation of campaign funds. Draco had made sure that evidence was brought to the attention of those who would be the most interested in pursuing prosecution. Neville had gotten the chance to use his obscure ingredients, but instead of poison he and Severus had brewed an untraceable knock-out draught that one of the ladies had slipped into Nott's drink at the Hog's Head. Severus and Greg, who had insisted on helping despite Hermione's protests, had then artfully arranged Theo among the goats with his trousers around his ankles. George had then leaked information to Skeeter's favorite photographer that there was a scandalous photo-op behind the pub. Harry had gleefully written up Abe's complaint and then had the satisfaction of personally locking Nott up, even if only for a night until his lawyer came and got him out. Skeeter had written the scathing expose that had guaranteed Arthur's landslide victory.

It had been a long, slow but ultimately satisfying process as Theo's once successful campaign had spiraled out of control. His prestigious job was flushed down the toilet, and he now faced prosecution for charges of possible embezzlement and fraud; plus he had been exposed to total public humiliation.

It just didn't get much better than this. Hermione closed the paper with a smile of satisfaction. "Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned. Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned," she said, quoting the lines from a Muggle play. "Vengeance is mine, sayeth Hermione."

the end.

AN: "Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned / Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned." The quote used in the conclusion has been attributed by many to William Shakespeare, it actually comes from a play called the "The Mourning Bride" (1697) by William Congreve.

Many thanks to my wonderful beta, dreamy_dragon73. She has been most helpful to me in this endeavor not only by correcting my horrendous comma abuse, but also patiently pointing out the times when my POV changes when it shouldn't, and just making it all flow more smoothly. She also offered helpful advice on British terminology and knowledge. Without her I would have never known that: British and Irish cottages don't have porches, the upstairs is actually the 'first floor' and bread and butter is not served with dinner, along with a whole myriad of other things. Thanks so much, Dreamy!