

Llansteffan House

by *Celisnebula*

Hermione receives a letter – one that leads to the unexpected.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 2

Hermione receives a letter – one that leads to the unexpected.

I didn't actually receive the letter until three weeks after my Great Aunt Sarah had mailed it. I'd like to blame the British postal system for the lateness but in reality, it was due to my hectic, somewhat horrific life.

She had sent the letter to my Mum's address probably because things sent to me in London often go lost. Mum rang me when it arrived and I said I'd try to make it down to her place by the weekend to pick it up. Three days turned into seven seven days turned into twenty-one...

My life was slowly falling apart around me so a single letter from someone I didn't know wasn't a high priority on my list of things to do. I was too wrapped up in losing my job and learning to be single again all while having a strange mid-life crisis, and I wasn't even in mid-life.

Eventually, I made my way home, though it wasn't because of any letter. I was sitting at the Formica kitchen table my parents had owned for years, absentmindedly stirring a cuppa when Mum shot up and rushed into the other room.

"I'd forgotten all about this," she muttered as she handed the envelope to me.

The envelope was that thick paper that was almost the consistency of parchment the type of paper Muggles used to write on before the telephone replaced written correspondence. The Royal postmark indicated that it came somewhere from the southern Wales region. On the face, written in a careful script with real ink (the sort you'd have to use a quill or at least a fountain pen for), was my name and mum's home address.

Mum suppressed a grimace as I took the butter knife and slit the envelope open. Had she not been as curious as I about the contents of the letter, I'm sure I would've gotten a lecture about using the cutlery in that fashion but I wasn't about to go fishing around the house for a letter opener.

Dearest Hermione,

I trust this letter finds you well and that you are happy in your life in London.

I realize that you may be surprised to hear from me after all this time I sometimes wonder if you even remember me. I think fondly upon the times you visited me as a young child.

I wonder if I might impose on you to come see me sometime soon? I find that time has somehow gotten away from me I am no longer as young as I used to be and thus, as every older person must do, I am attempting to put my affairs in order before my life draws to a close. The more I work at creating some semblance of order to my affairs, the more I find there are some things I feel compelled to share with you the last child of my line.

It is past time for secrets to be told time for some hard truths to come out, and wrongs to be put to right.

Your affectionate aunt,

Sarah Millicent Marie Branson

Llansteffan, Carmarthenshire, Wales SA32 8HG

"I don't remember an Aunt Sarah," I muttered under my breath.

"Surely you do," Mum admonished me. "She lives out in the wilds of Wales, along the coast. A beastly house that's been in your father's family for generations." She paused, picked up the spoon, and stirred her tea. She took a small sip from it before setting the cup down and continuing. "We went there a few times until the practice starting getting busy and we had troubles getting away for a weekend trip."

I shook my head. "I don't not at all."

Mum looked at me over the rim of her cup. "I'm not sure how you could forget, you used to love going there I think it was the proximity of the sea and the fact that you could wander until nearly exhausted in the large garden that drew you."

I nibbled on my lower lip. "What do you suppose she wants to talk about?"

"Don't really know." Mum took another sip of tea. "I guess you'll just have to ask her to find out."

"Do you think I should call her?"

Mum shook her head. "She didn't have a telephone when we used to visit, and I doubt she has one now which is probably why she sent the letter. She's terribly old fashioned about that." She leaned back in the chair. "You're simply going to have to go and visit her find out what all this muss is about. Unless... you don't care about it all." Mum shrugged. "I mean, she is nearly... goodness, nearly a hundred I doubt there's much she could tell you that would have any real significance or have any true bearing in your life."

I narrowed my eyes and pointed the spoon I'd just picked up to re-stir my tea at her. "That didn't work on me when I was ten; I hardly think that will work on me now," I told her with an inelegant sniff.

Mum merely arched her eyebrow at me.

I let out a small groan. "I wouldn't be able to Apparate there; I'd either have to take the train or drive all the way there it would take days."

"And what have you got to do that is so important that you simply can't make the trip?" Mum asked. "Judging by the amount of luggage you brought, and the carrier cage, you're going to be here for awhile... what's stopping you from going to see her?"

"Nothing," I muttered.

"Exactly," she replied smugly. "Besides, as much as I do love you misery... at least your misery, does not love company. You can stay and lick your wounds all you want, but I know you'd be much better off *doing* something. Consider this ... well consider it an adventure."

"I think I had enough adventure to last me a life-time," I mumbled under my breath.

"Really, dear, you shouldn't mutter under your breath," she admonished me. "It's rather unattractive."

I rolled my eyes, but promptly replied, "Yes, Mum," in a clear voice.

I slowly pulled the Virgo Premier onto the overgrown road. I could hear Crookshanks loudly protesting in the confines of his cage from the backseat as the car bounced over a rut. Trees crowded on either side of the small dirt road, slowly crouching into the driving space, obscuring the view in each direction. I slowed the car down to a snail's pace to compensate.

Twenty minutes later, still barely inching along the dirt road, I started to wonder if I was on the right path. I gripped the steering wheel with more force than was necessary, the hard leather biting into the palm of my hand as the car ran over a particularly nasty spot. Crookshanks hissed his displeasure; I felt the need to hiss out myself.

I nibbled on my lower lip as I steered the car as far over to the left as I could, then switched the hazard lights on. I pressed on the clutch, shifted into neutral, and let the car idle as I blindly groped behind the passenger seat for my bag. I pulled it forward and reached into the side pocket. Inside I had a hastily scrawled map composed with the instructions from Mum and the actual road map I'd purchased to augment the hand drawn map.

According to the hand drawn map, Great Aunt Sarah's place should've been right here. The other map, however, indicated I had another twenty-four to thirty kilometers before I actual reached my destination. As I read the map, the weather (which had looked rather dodgy all afternoon) turned rather nasty.

I leaned my head back against the headrest of the car seat and let out the frustrated, pent up breath I'd been holding in. I then arched my back and rolled my shoulders, stretching the protesting, aching muscles. With a sigh, I shifted the car from neutral into first gear.

The sky was turning dangerously dark as the storm picked up in velocity and I wanted no I needed to get to Great Aunt Sarah's place before nightfall. Behind me, Crookshanks let out another disgruntled growl.

"Just a little longer, Crooks," I said wearily. "We're almost there." I eased the car forward, suppressing a wince as the car bounced up and over another hole in the dirt road.

I finally saw a building in the distance thirty minutes later and I can honestly say I was very relieved when I pulled up in front of it fifteen minutes after that. The house looked impressively large and dreary Mum had said Aunt Sarah was a recluse, but I hardly expected this. Vines climbed up the sides of the house, obscuring the slab foundation underneath. In spots, I could barely tell where the house actually existed it seemed as if the entire wooded area was intent on claiming the spot back. It wouldn't have surprised me to discover that in some parts of the house, the roof had collapsed into decline.

But the exterior and really the interior didn't really matter I was here for the week to satisfy my curiosity. And really, at that point in time, nothing else mattered other than getting Crookshanks and myself inside and into something warm. The rain was coming down in violent rivulets of cold.

I parked the car as close to the front walkway as possible and then switched it off. *It would have to rain; so much for my luggage,* I mused, watching the rain pelt against the windshield. I didn't know how much Great Aunt Sarah knew about the Wizarding World, so I didn't reduce anything down it would be strange to come on a visit with no visible luggage.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed open the driver side door and then quickly shut it. Crooks let out a menacing hiss as I opened the passenger door and pulled his travel cage out. I pushed the door closed with my hip and raced to the front stoop and slid the cage underneath the awning, then darted back to the car. I wrenched the boot open, my fingers fumbling with cold, as I grabbed the two suitcases I'd brought. My feet sunk into the muddy drive as I lugged them onto the porch next to Crookshank's cage.

I raised my hand to knock, but hesitated. The hairs on the back of neck prickled; it felt as if someone were watching me. I quickly scanned the area, my left hand

automatically going to my right forearm where I had my wand hidden. I didn't see anything. I steeled myself and knocked on the wooden door.

I waited a few minutes and knocked again; the wind picked up and I started to shiver. I was beginning to wonder if perhaps I had the wrong location. It would be just my luck to have the wrong place. I knocked one more time for good measure, scanning the area one more time for any clue that would tell me whether this house was inhabited or not.

Just as I was about to trudge Crookshank's cage back to the car, the front door opened. The white head of an elderly lady popped out.

"Can I help you?" she queried in a soft, lilting voice.

"Is this Sarah Branson's address?" I asked. My voice sounded husky with disuse.

Her gaze seemed to sharpen and she opened the door even more revealing the fact that she was heavily leaning on a walker. I stood there while she took her time examining me.

"And who might you be?" she finally asked in a rough, wispy voice.

"Hermione Granger," I replied, giving her what I thought was a winning smile. It probably fell flat. "Are you Aunt Sarah?"

She sucked in a harsh breath and then narrowed her eyes. "Well you were right quick in getting here," she muttered. "Couldn't be bothered a' fore now, but not more'n a wythnos passes and the vultures come a runnin'."

"I'm sorry... what?"

She pinned me with a harsh look. "You heard me. It's *people* like you who make me sick. Couldn't've been bothered when she was alive, but now that she's cocked up her toes, you're all over the place."

"She died?" I felt in shock. "But I... she..." I pulled my purse forward and rummaged around in it for the letter I received. I flashed it at the surly woman. "She just wrote to me... asked me to come here."

Her features softened a bit not enough to be friendly, mind you, but enough not to begrudge me some comfort. She moved back from the door. "Well, don't just stand there gawking, come in. The longer we stand here, the more the heat's escaping."

"Yes, ma'am," I muttered, stuffing the letter into the front pocket of my jeans and grabbing the handle to Crookshanks' cage.

"I hope that animal is well behaved," she said as I hauled the cage into the foyer.

At first glance, the interior of the house was as bad as the exterior. There was clutter everywhere stacks of magazines and newspapers lining the entry way all the way to the ceiling in a manner that seemed to defy gravity.

"Crookshanks is always well behaved," I replied, setting the cage down between two stacks of magazines.

The woman merely sniffed, as if to say she'd believe it when she saw it.

"Well do keep that thing away from me, I'm allergic," she said as I carefully maneuvered my way around her to the front door again and grabbed my suitcases. I set them down next to Crookshanks' cage he let out a disgruntled yowl.

"Shush, Crooks," I told him, pulling off my coat. The woman watched me with a wary expression as if she expected me to shove something into my pockets and walk off with it. I folded my purse up in my coat and placed it on the cage. "So... Ms..."

"Gertrude," she grudgingly supplied. "Just Gertrude."

"You said..." I broke off, not quite sure how to go on.

"Sarah Branson is dead." Her voice was matter of fact as if she hadn't just been admonishing me a few moments before.

"I when? I mean, I knew she was old, but from what my Mum had said, she hadn't been in poor health."

Gertrude shrugged a shoulder. "Not more'n a week, if that." She leaned heavily on her walker and gave me a harsh look. "You didn't waste much time getting here."

"What do you mean by that?"

"'Tis obvious why you're here now," she bit out. She braced each hand on the handles of her walker and braced herself up so she was standing straight and tall. "You couldn't wait to jump on what she had."

I stumbled back from the venom in her voice, catching the edge of my heel on the cat cage. I landed awkwardly. "I I didn't know she had passed," I protested. "I was invited Aunt Sarah... she had some things she wanted to tell me." My fingers fumbled as I reached into my pocket for the letter I'd been sent.

She snatched it out of my hand as soon as I had pulled it free. Her fingers seemed to tighten on the edges of the paper as she read what had been written. "Well, be that as it may, you're here now. You might as well take those right upstairs," she told me, gesturing to my luggage and the cat cage. "No use just leaving them here to clutter up the foyer."

I refrained from making the obvious comment, and merely asked, "What room should I take?"

Gertrude muttered something under her breath that I didn't quite catch all the way. She swung her body around in an amazingly agile manner, given the walker, and pointed down the hallway. "Just take your luggage up those stairs there should be a room or two on the second floor that should work for you. The solicitor was here to make sure everything was in tip shape for the new owner to take over... I guess it doesn't matter what room you take." She leaned heavily on the walker. "I'd show you the way, but those steps are nearly impossible for me to manage these days."

"Yes, Ma'am," I muttered again, adjusting my grip on the suitcase. She turned without another word and started shuffling down the hallway to where I assumed the sitting room was.

"Be right back," I whispered to Crookshanks as I scooted past his cage to the stairway.

The upstairs wasn't as bad as I feared. Actually, given the cluttered state of the foyer and the run-down condition of the outside, I hadn't been expecting much, but I was pleasantly surprised. While the second floor was still cluttered dusty with a faint mildew scent it wasn't as bad as I had anticipated.

I walked down the hall a bit and opened one of the doors to the right. I had to stifle a gasp as I walked in. The room was lovely. A large four poster bed dominated the room. It had a lovely dark blue coverlet with matching pillows on it.

To the far right was a picture window with a rather long vanity lounge placed in front of it. I set my luggage beside the lounge.

I cast a quick, furtive glance around before pulling my wand out.

"Scourgify," I muttered softly, pointing my wand at the bed.

On the far left of the room stood another door, a large wooden wardrobe right next to it. I walked over to the door and pulled it open. This room had a huge, old-fashioned claw foot tub the sort I could practically swim in. I could probably spend hours in that tub.

I headed back downstairs and grabbed Crookshanks' cage. He was restless, moving about inside, which made it nearly impossible for me to carry it.

Once I got to the room I had appropriated for myself, I tried to let him out. He refused to move.

"Oh, come on, Crooks, you've been angling to get out of there for hours," I told him in a scolding tone. He merely stared at me, balefully, from the rear of the cat cage. "Suit yourself," I told him, standing up straight.

As soon as I had moved out of the way, he darted from the cage and out of the opened bedroom door. I tried to chase him, but he reached the stairs, and disappeared into the cluttered mess. I quickly ran down the steps, hoping I could catch him before he got into any mischief.

"I've sent someone for Sarah's solicitor," Gertrude said, startling me. I hadn't heard her behind me as I searched for Crooks (though how I could've missed the sounds of the walker scraping against the bare wood, I don't know).

"Her solicitor?" I asked, somewhat stupidly.

Gertrude pinned me with a hard look. "Of course her solicitor, daft girl. There's loads of paperwork that needs to be done, now that you're here."

I shook my head. "What does my being here have to do with anything I really didn't know her, honestly barely remember her from my childhood."

She let out an audible sigh, as if words would be a wasted effort. She turned and started shuffling down the hallway. "Why don't you move the car around to the side of the house that way we needn't worry about it blocking the front?" she said over her shoulder.

"I yeah..." I stuttered, giving the room a cursory look around as I tried to locate Crookshanks. "I can do that."

Thankfully, in the time I had spent inside the house, the rain had subsided. I climbed into the car, shifted into first gear, and moved the car around the side of the house near what I thought was an old carriage house.

As I walked back around the house along the narrow cobbled path so I wouldn't get too much mud on my shoes, I couldn't help but to notice the different variety of plants that seemed to choke and overwhelm the overgrown garden. It had bits of lovage and knotgrass sprouting out in various areas of the overgrowth, and I was tempted to dig into it to see what other useful plants I might find. I took a few steps towards the garden when out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw a gnome. I quickly turned around, sure that I was wrong gnomes only inhabited magical gardens but whatever I had seen had disappeared.

I took a step forward, intent on tracking down what I had seen, when I heard a car driving up the gravel way. I quickly made my way towards the front of the house, noting the dark black sedan.

"Surely you're mistaken!" I said in a panicked exhale. "She couldn't have left it *all* to me I didn't even know her." I looked quickly from the solicitor's solemn face to Gertrude's pale one. "You knew," I said in an accusing voice. "You knew she'd done this that's why you were so..."

Gertrude merely shrugged. "Got to admit, your timing does look a might shady."

"I was *invited*," I said, stressing the word invited. "It isn't as if I knew about..."

"There are still some provisions I need to go over with you, Ms Granger," Mr. Markham, the solicitor, said, interrupting me. I got the feeling he wanted to be out of here as quickly as he possibly could.

"Fine," I said in a clipped tone, settling myself back into the chair.

Mr. Markham adjusted his glasses and flipped through the packet of paperwork. "First order, your tenants."

"Tenants... as in plural?" This wasn't looking too pretty. "Just how many tenants are there?"

"Ah I believe " He shuffled through some more pages. "Yes, there are just two, at least currently. At one time there were more."

"Two? And they live *here*? In this house?"

"No or rather not both of them." He glanced up at Gertrude, as if asking for help but she made no comment. "Gertrude has lived here nearly..."

"On nigh of twenty years," she supplied in that whispery voice of hers.

"Quite right," he stated. "The provision in the will states she may continue to live here until such a time that she decides to move, of her own volition, or until her death secure in the knowledge that this is, for all intents and purposes, her home."

"Well, that does seem fair," I muttered under my breath. I sat up straight in my chair. "And the other tenant?"

The solicitor sifted through the packet of paper again before answering. "Your other tenant occupies the carriage house it looks as if he has another two years on his current lease." He glanced up. "I don't think you'll have many problems with the chap he's always paid the rent on time, and while he's entitled to using the kitchen "

"He hasn't yet used it. Though he has taken tea a time or two with us," Gertrude supplied, effectively cutting him off mid-speech.

"I still don't understand why it was all left to me wouldn't it have made more sense to have left it all to Gertrude?"

Gertrude let out a sigh. "You don't understand," she said. "You're the last of the line."

"Even without the will, the property would've gone into intestacy by which you are the closest remaining relation hence you still would have inherited the property," the solicitor supplied. He pulled up a large black leather brief case, clicked the brass clasps open and reached into it. "These are for you." He handed me what looked to be a stack of letters and a journal. On the very top was a rather newer letter with my name scrawled across the top. "Ms. Branson mentioned there were other letters but this is all that she gave me."

The rest of the meeting went by in a blur of legal rhetoric. I paid as much attention to it as I could, given the fact that I had been on the road hours before.

Mr. Markham invited me down to his office to go over any of the paperwork I'd need to take care of at my convenience; he probably wanted me down there first thing in the morning so he could discharge his duty.

Once he had left, Gertrude stated she was tired and wanted to lie down for a while.

I sat in drawing room, staring at the packet of letters. Crookshanks, the wily little beast, jumped up onto my lap. He purred and pushed at the letters with the top of his head. I ran my fingers through his thick fur; somehow the situation felt off, but I couldn't fathom why.

I used my finger to open the top letter with my name on it. The paper was the same paper used as the original note Aunt Sarah had penned to me though this time the writing was shaky and uneven.

Dearest Hermione,

I find myself becoming more cautious as the years go on. I had planned to start this conversation with you in person and who knows, I may have but I feel impelled to write down what I can whilst I may.

This is harder than I thought it would be...

I realize you must not know much about our family's history; I find that younger people these days can seldom be bothered and families do have a way of hiding their secrets, even from one another. Yet, these are things you should be aware of. I... well... I should have mentioned this long before now, in light of your special nature.

According to the journals left by various people, you come by your nature honestly it is a trait that manifests itself every few generations. How true these assertions are, I cannot say. Yet, I can recall some events from my childhood that would suggest they are quite true.

I would suggest that you take the time to read through the various journals in storage throughout the house. You may learn more than I can possibly ever hope to tell you.

This house has been in the family for several generations it has seen the best and the worst aspect of what this family can produce. There are secrets hidden behind some closed doors. If these walls could talk, I'm sure they would have some interesting tales.

Sarah Millicent Marie Branson

I don't know how long I sat, mindlessly stroking Crookshanks' fur, as I stared at the letter. The contents of it flew in the face of everything I *knew* about who I was and where I came from.

It was dark by the time I stumbled back up the stairs, carrying Crookshanks in the crook of my arm. All I could think about was falling into the bed and pretending that this whole day was just some sort of strange dream.

Crooks scrambled out of my arms as I neared the room I had chosen for the night, digging his claws into the flesh of my forearm in his haste to disappear. I clutched at it for a moment, watching as he scrambled down the steps and into the darkness below. I thought about chasing him down, but I was too tired.

I entered the room and fell down onto the bed, fully clothed.

I twisted and turned in the uncomfortable, unfamiliar bed the room felt unnaturally cold. I shifted on the bed again, half rolling over when I caught something out of the corner of my eye. An audible gasp escaped my lips as I quickly sat up. In the corner of the room stood, or rather floated above the floor, a ghost. The short hairs on the back of my neck prickled.

"Hello?" I whispered as the ghost moved forward. The ghost twisted her head, as if in answer to my query, showing me a large port wine stain of the side of its neck. I let out another, hesitant, "Hello?" I could see my breath fogging out before me as the temperature in the room dropped even further.

The ghost simply ignored me. It moved through the bed, and then paused. I swung my legs over the side of the bed and moved out of the way. I watched as it brought a ghostly hand up to its throat and quickly turned around. It felt like I was watching a silent play. The ghost backed up and flung the other hand up, as if to ward off oncoming blows.

A moment later, the ghost fell to the floor. I could only watch in horror as the specter dragged itself to the far wall, its ghostly body turning and twisting in such a way that indicated (at least to me) that it was trying to protect itself. Bright splotches and streaks of red slashed their way across her chest and sides.

It looked as though the ghost reached out and grabbed something, and then suddenly a slender, wand-like apparatus appeared in its hand. The ghost defiantly lifted her chin and snapped the wand in half. Then the ghost's head whipped back, as though something had slapped it hard.

Something or rather someone must have grabbed it by the neck because its hands reached up, clawing and scrapping against whatever was around its throat. The ghost's legs scrambled to find purchase, occasionally lashing out to kick at whatever had it trapped. Finally, the ghostly figure stopped moving; it slumped sideways until it collapsed on the floor and then slowly disintegrated from sight.

I stood there in shock for a few minutes before letting out a shaky breath. It no longer fanned out from my mouth in a cloud of white smoke. When I could move, I reached out and pulled all the blankets from on top of the bed. As used to ghosts as I was, I had no desire to spend the night in a room I knew with absolute certainty was the sight of a murder.

I awoke to Crookshanks trying to sit on my face. Not the most pleasant experience, especially when he was putting his arse right next to my nose. I pushed him off of me, and tried to sit up, wincing as every single muscle seemed to twinge in protest.

I made my way back upstairs, but hesitated just in the doorway. In the brightness of the morning, the room looked much the same as it had the day before, but I couldn't stop seeing the flashing vision of the woman.

It was obvious that this house once held a witch or a wizard or probably both. And given the contents of the letter I read yesterday, chances were they were related to me in some fashion. Which was odd; I spent my entire life believing that I was just a product of random chance, a Muggle-born witch without any magical ties. Now I would have to reassess it all.

Taking a deep breath, I forced myself into the room. Now that I was aware of what had happened, I could protect myself from witnessing the echoes of the past in the future; but I wasn't going to sleep in this room again. I quickly grabbed my suitcases and moved them to the room I spent the remainder of the night before in.

Once there, I opened one of my suitcases, grabbed some clean clothing, and headed to the bathroom. I had always done my best thinking in the tub.

After a long hot shower, followed by a healthy dose of caffeine and some toast, I headed out to the village of Llansteffan. It was picturesque everything I had imagined a small Welsh coastal town to be, complete with a crumbling castle.

Nestled in small alcoves, tucked away from the shiny, pretty tourist attractions lay the magical community it wasn't large, but it was enough for me to get a head start on

the research I was after. It was quite obvious that the ghost in Aunt Sarah's house was not a magical one, else it would've responded when I tried to talk to it the night before. Muggle ghosts were merely echoes of emotion—imprints of someone's spirit, not the actual spirit left behind.

I headed first to the local Muggle library—as far as I knew, every member of the family before me had been Muggle—which means the property hadn't been owned by anyone in the magical community for awhile, if ever. Thus, the local, non-magical library would have the most up-to-date information.

The librarian was a fount of information; apparently the family had a long history of being "cursed", though gossip debated for what. Some said it was because the family was full of witches, another line said it was because the one of the male ancestors insulted a witch by refusing to marry her. I also learned that in every generation there was a property dispute when the newest person (being me) inherited. Something about the property being a part of a dowry—but the dowry had been disputed for generations.

"However," she said on an aside, "it's generally looked upon as utter nonsense. Had it been valid, it would've been settled ages ago, and in their favor. But, I suppose property *is* property, so the issue comes up any time the previous occupant dies."

I thanked her kindly for the information and then headed over to the solicitor's office to finish up the paperwork he had indicated I needed to fill out.

Once I had filled out the required paperwork (in triplicate no less), I asked Mr. Markham about the impending property dispute. He assured me that while a petition had been filed, chances were that it would be dismissed because Aunt Sarah had left a decisive will leaving everything to me.

I wanted to ask about the person, or persons who had filed the petition, but a sense of foreboding stopped me. Under normal circumstances, I would've pushed on—ignoring that sense as superstitious twaddle—yet I couldn't deny that I wasn't ready to face another drama head on. I had enough on my plate as it was.

I made my way to the local pub. It was almost noon, and I found myself famished. I ordered a steak and ale pie then looked for a quiet corner to sit in. I pulled my mobile out as soon as I settled myself in a booth and tried to call my Mum. After listening to me ramble on for nearly a half an hour, she offered to come over and help me sort out the mess I had entangled myself in.

"Who knows," she said. "We could find something interesting in all that clutter you say is there."

"Thanks, Mum," I said softly into the phone. The waitress placed my order in front of me, and I took a deep drink of the ale.

"It is going to be all right, you know that, don't you?"

"I know it just..."

"Feels overwhelming."

"A bit," I sighed, picking at my lunch.

"Well, I'll be there in a week or two—just let me get things sorted at the practice. We can sort everything out once I'm there." She paused for a moment, and I had the mental picture of her cradling the phone between her shoulder and her ear. "I love you."

"I love you too, Mum," I choked out before pressing the end button. I straightened in my seat and gave a covert glance around—it wouldn't do to start crying in public. I slipped the mobile into my back pocket and gave my steak and ale pie proper attention.

I admit I wasn't really paying attention to anything as I walked around the side of the house from where I parked the rental again, through the hodgepodge garden, to the front yard. I was preoccupied with... well I'd like to say with thoughts of what Aunt Sarah had written in her initial note—but in actuality, I was brooding over my own failures. I didn't notice the figure walking through thick overgrowth and up the dirt drive towards the house.

"What are *you* doing here?" he barked. He seemed impossibly large—taller than I remembered. His black attire only highlighted his height.

I instinctively backed up. I was shocked. No one had seen this man in years—not since the night that Voldemort was finally defeated, yet here he was, in the back beyond of Wales, standing no more than ten feet from me.

"This is private property," he continued, moving closer to me—circling in for the kill much like a shark. "And as such, you're trespassing."

"I am not," I protested feebly.

"Oh, yes you are," he replied in a silky tone; his voice still had the deep, deadly resonance that I remembered.

Even though I could feel myself starting to cringe—the heat of embarrassment was probably stamped across my cheeks—I refused to back down. I was no longer an errant student to be chastised for my misdeeds, real or perceived. "You are mistaken," I said, forcing myself to stand up straight. "This may be private property, but I am not trespassing." I stopped and took in a deep breath before continuing. "In fact, the person trespassing is you."

He was so close to me now that I could smell the faint whiff of thyme along with some other plants he must've been collecting. I angled my head up; I refused to look the coward by not staring him straight in the eyes, even if he was encroaching on my personal space.

"I know the owner of this property quite well—I doubt she's given *you* permission to be here," he stated with a sardonic twist of his mouth.

I narrowed my eyes—it sounded almost as if he had known Aunt Sarah. I lifted my chin. "I can assure you, I definitely have permission."

His right eyebrow arched. "Somehow I doubt that, Miss Granger... It is still Miss Granger, isn't it?"

"Why? What have you heard?" I asked with an edge of panic.

He let out a sharp laugh. "I question your integrity and all you're worried about is what I've heard about your wedded state?"

"I... you... but..." I paused and made myself take a deep breath. I still had a bit of trouble coming to grips with my new relationship status—neatly giving Snape the power in this conversation.

"As articulate as ever, I see," he said, easing back a bit.

I snapped my mouth shut, grinding my back molars in frustration. A terrible habit, I know, and had my Mum been there, I'd've been scolded. I slowly counted to ten in my head before responding to his barb. "I needn't worry about *my* integrity," I said through clenched teeth. "That's unassailable."

Snape let out an inelegant snort. "So says the young woman who followed Potter on all his inglorious escapes."

"They weren't dishonorable," I blurted out. "We were doing what was necessary."

"*Really?*" he drawled out. "Somehow I think your definition of necessary vastly differs from mine."

I was about to retort (and trust me, I did have a good one ready) when Gertrude opened the front door and stuck her head out. "Oh, Severus," she said in that whispery voice. "I thought I heard you out there."

I could physically feel his attention shift from me to Gertrude and I let myself relax just a fraction... somehow the idea that they knew each other seemed to be a calming balm on the initial panic I felt.

"Hello, Gertrude," he responded in that deep voice how odd it sounded when not laced with sarcasm or venomous rage.

"Why don'tcha come in I've almost got tea ready."

He turned slightly towards me before answering. "I wouldn't want to impose."

"You're not. Come in and bring the girl," she ordered him. She slowly pulled away from the door and disappeared from sight.

I gave him a triumphant look one that said "See, I'm not trespassing, you bugger" as he turned towards me. Then I flounced past him and up the steps of the porch without another word.

"You are too kind, Severus," she said, slipping the bottle into the front pocket of her cardigan. "I'll be taking some with today's tea I can feel me bones starting to stiffen up." Gripping the handles of the walker firmly, she hoisted herself up from the plushy chair in front of the fireplace. Her gait was uneven as she maneuvered herself towards the kitchen.

"What are you doing?" I hissed at him as soon as Gertrude had made her way out of the drawing room. She was intent on having a "proper" tea hence we were sitting in here, like polite company until it was ready.

Snape eased himself back into the soft upholstery of the drawing room chair, stretching his legs forward. "I'm trying to enjoy a nice afternoon's tea."

"That's not what I mean and you know it," I snapped at him. I pointed an accusing finger at him. "You gave her a *potion*."

"I beg to differ it was a poultice. A damn fine one at that."

"That's beside the point." I shifted forward in my seat. "You know the law as well as I do we aren't supposed to give Muggles anything magical!"

"I suggest you stop talking to me as if I were one of your dunderheaded friends," he said softly. I had to suppress a small shiver as he continued. "I do not, and will not, explain myself to you."

"But " I started to say, only to stop myself when I saw the expression on his face. It was one I remembered quite well.

"Tea's done," Gertrude said, coming back into the drawing room. "Would one of you be kind enough to bring it in here I don't think I can manage."

Snape propped himself up. "Be glad to, Gertrude."

"I thank the day Sarah offered the carriage house to you, Severus," she replied with a small smile.

"Y-you?" I spluttered. He merely ignored me and walked out of the room.

"He's always so helpful," Gertrude continued, as if I had never said a thing. "He some sort of botanist; or is it an herbalist?" She tilted her head, as if trying to think what Snape's actual profession was.

"You're my tenant?" I blurted out as he came back into the room carrying the tea tray.

He set the tray down on the small table beside Gertrude and retook his seat. "Hardly " he started to say.

"Oh, yes," Gertrude replied for him. "He's lived here for ... nearly two years now, isn't it?" She picked up the pot of tea and started pouring cups for everyone like a proper hostess.

"Nearly," he acknowledged, taking the bone china cup from her as she handed it to him.

"You're a botanist, right?" Gertrude asked, handing the next cup of tea to me.

"In a manner," Snape muttered as he brought the cup to his lips.

I gave him a pointed look there were so many things I wanted to ask, but I couldn't with Gertrude there. I think he knew that, because as soon as he had finished his cup of tea, he took his leave. I ended up spending the rest of the afternoon listening as Gertrude reminisced about the things she and Sarah used to do.

I spent the rest of the week in the front portion of the attic. There was no real rhyme or reason to how items were stored there so I started with the nearest trunk. The ones packed with nothing more than clothing I left alone I could sort out what was in them at a later point. I was more interested in the past. The fourth trunk I started on was a treasure trove I found various albums, journals, personal letters and clippings from the newspaper.

I would then spend the evenings, and much of the night in my room reading through what I had found earlier. Yet, for every item I found every interesting tidbit I came across I found myself becoming more and more frustrated. I could find no indication of what Sarah had alluded to in the final letter she had written.

I stumbled, bleary-eyed, into the kitchen in search of some much needed coffee one morning. My back actually my entire body was a massive cramping pain of protest. I felt like something Crookshanks had played with before chewing on half dead. I probably looked it too. I'd spent another weary night reading through the old diary I'd found, only to fall asleep in the chair.

I was rooting around one of the cupboards looking for anything that might resemble caffeine in the drinkable form, when a voice said: "Well aren't *you* just a pleasant sight in the morning."

I'm not ashamed to say that this time I did let out a strangled squeak. "Fucking hell," I bit out to cover the fact that I was beginning to sound like a damn mouse. I gave him what I thought was my best impression of the evil glare. "Don't you have your own place?"

"And miss all of this?" he asked casually. Too casually if you ask me.

I slammed the cupboard door closed. "I don't remember you being a morning person yourself ... so perhaps you should just cut out the evasive side steps and tell me what you want so I can be blissfully miserable alone until I've had some caffeine."

"Breakfast and then permission, since I suppose I need to gain that from you now."

"Permission for what?" I threw the question over my shoulder as I searched through another pantry cupboard.

"I can't very well go about taking plants I need from *your* property without permission, now can I?" he asked in a droll tone. Somehow he had moved beside me and I hadn't even noticed. "Or rather, I could. But I'd rather not have any legal problems."

He moved with economical grace, reaching up into one of the cupboards and pulling out the items for coffee as if he'd been doing it for ages. In a matter of moments, he had handed me a steaming mug.

My disbelief kept me silent... he wanted *my* permission... I couldn't help but wonder if he'd ever really bothered to gain it from anyone before. "Why are you here?" The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

"I don't remember you being this thick as a student, Granger," he said. "I want the ability to take what I need from here."

"Fine," I muttered. "Whatever."

I started feeling closed in. The attic was huge, there were trunks and boxes of items piled everywhere, and I was no closer to learning the truth about either the ghost in the room I occupied or the supposed fact that the family had been magical at one time.

I decided it was high time I explored some of the countryside. I let Gertrude know that I was heading to the castle ruins and then set off. I felt better, out in the fresh air, as I walked through the fields towards the jutting stones clear headed and... freer than I had in awhile. It was as if my whole life had come down to discovering what secrets the house hid.

The castle ruins were impressive. I wandered around the crumbling mass of stone, feeling a reverence I hadn't felt in a long while. If what I had read in those journal and diaries was correct this had once housed my ancestors. I don't know how long I wandered about, poking into different crevices, before it started to sprinkle. I thought about casting an Impervious on myself, but thought better of it I wouldn't be able to explain why I was dry if I were to run into one of the locals.

I trudged on, some unknown force of determination fueling me when I heard a loud crack.

The force of something propelled me forward and I tumbled down. The next thing I remember was someone calling my name.

"Hermione?"

"I'm down here," I said weakly. I could feel the cold, wet mud seeping into the material of my jeans it contrasted with the hot, searing pain I felt in my shoulder. I grabbed at it, applying pressure, and felt warm wetness.

"How badly are you injured?"

"I... I think I may have been shot." I leaned my head against the ground and tried to keep the edging panic at bay.

"Hold on, I'm almost there."

I could hear him crashing through the undergrowth. I tried not to think of how odd it was that he was out here at just the right time. I think I may have fainted, because the next thing I remember was being carefully lifted up. I tried to burrow into the warm of his embrace, deeply inhaling the scent of wintergreen and lavender that clung to him.

"Where's your wand?" he asked sharply.

"How... me?" I asked groggily.

"Do you have your wand?" Snape asked again. I shook my head no. I didn't have the energy to speak. I heard him searching around for it.

"Got it," he said a few minutes later. "All right, hold on then. There's a small gardener's cottage not far from here. I'm going to Apparate us both there."

His arms tightened around me as I felt the familiar cold tingle, followed by the bodily jerk as the Apparation took hold. I shivered a bit as we "popped" back into existence near a small building.

"Only you, and possibly Potter, could infuriate someone enough to try and kill you on your second week here," he said as he kicked open the door. The sound of the wooden door smacking against the wall made me cringe.

"Third," I whispered.

"Third," he conceded, setting me down.

He cast the "Diffindo," and I felt my shirt and the shoulder strap of my bra rip, giving him access to my shoulder.

"Had no idea you wanted to look down my blouse," I gritted out as he pushed me forward.

He merely snorted and said, "Brace yourself this will hurt."

I gasped at the searing pain as he muttered, "Accio," ripping the bullet from my shoulder.

"Shush," he said softly, brushing his long, pale fingers through my hair. "I'm almost done."

I bit my lip, determined to be brave as he said, "Episkey." I felt a searing heat for a brief second followed by an intense cold on my shoulder, causing me to moan.

Finally Snape muttered his final spell, "Ferula," causing my shoulder and arm to be bandaged with a splint. He tugged on it a bit and then smoothed the bandage around until he was satisfied it would cover what was left of my wound.

"You need to get those wet things off," he said, straightening up. He shrugged off his overcoat, revealing the dark black long sleeved shirt with the sleeves rolled up and the dark jeans underneath. He placed the overcoat beside me. "It's not much, but it will at least let you keep some measure of modesty. I'll start a fire, and that should help." He closed the door behind him as he left in search of some burnable wood.

I tried to stand and immediately felt lightheaded, so I was still (more or less) fully clothed when he came back inside. He gave me a pointed look as I struggled to at least take off my shoes.

"I need help," I said sheepishly.

"Of course you do," he replied in a dry tone as he bent down in front of the fireplace. I watched as he stuck his wand up the chimney and muttered a Banishing Charm.

"Why didn't you Apparate us all the way home?"

Snape casted a disbelieving look at me over his shoulder. "Someone just shot at you don't you think the first place they'll look for you is there?"

"It could've been a poacher," I said defensively, watching him place the kindling all around the wood.

"You have the survival instincts of a toddler," he said with a distinct sneer. "It's a wonder you, Potter and Weasley survived long enough to defeat Voldemort." He stood up and cast an "Incendio" towards the fireplace, starting a cheery little blaze.

I lifted my chin and gave him a haughty glare. "I'd rather not believe that everyone is out for whatever they can get."

He moved towards me with a lanky, almost feral grace. "Your naivety astounds me."

I shivered a bit. "And yet, here you are, helping me."

"What makes you think I don't have an ulterior motive?" he asked, looming over me.

"Ha," I snorted. I felt bedraggled and downtrodden. I saw the muscles tighten in his jaw as he reached for me, those long, white fingers working the clasp of my wet jeans.

"I normally ask for dinner first," I quipped, trying to lighten the situation. I swallowed hard, suddenly feeling very unsure of myself. He gently tugged the jeans down my hips, easing them down my legs. Despite my levity I hadn't felt this aroused in a long time.

"You found me found me and saved me. Just as you have always done." I raised my head and looked him directly in the eye. "You're not as cold and calculating as you wish everyone else to believe."

I felt like a nervous swirling mass of emotions my shoulder throbbed, my head ached, and all I could think of was that if I didn't do something, I'd end up regretting it for the rest of my life. Gathering up my nerve, I leaned forward. I could feel his surprise as I touched his face with my right hand.

"You saved my life," I said in a husky whisper. "And I I want to..." I pressed my lips to his, trying to put all of my appreciation for everything he had done into that one kiss. His lips were surprisingly warm and lush.

He radiated heat and strength and I wanted to wrap myself around him. I felt his breath quickening as I slanted my face, pressing the kiss harder. Yet, he did not respond. I felt a twinge of disappointment sure that I had made of fool out of myself.

Severus there was no way I could think of him as Snape any longer seemed to recollect himself he pulled back from me, and shook his head once, firmly. I made a move to shift away when suddenly his right arm snaked around my waist.

"You little fool," he whispered against my lips before capturing them with his own. This wasn't like the tepid little kiss I had initiated. This kiss was like plunging into a tempestuous sea it felt as if I had been struck by lightning; electrical shocks ran up and down my nerves.

I moaned, skimming my right hand up his arm and over his chest. I could feel the beating of his heart underneath my palm as I pressed it against his chest.

"Please," I whispered frantically, afraid he was going to end this delicious torment. I needn't have worried. He ran a fingertip across what was left of my bra, lightly touching each nipple as they strained against the lace inset.

I cupped him through the material of his pants, rubbing the tip of my index finger against the thick crown of his cock. He groaned in appreciation. I shifted my left arm and had to bite back a gasp as searing pain speared through my shoulder.

"We shouldn't," he said in a guttural tone. "We'll undo all my hard work."

"I don't care," I whispered, letting my fingers trace the length of his erection. His nostrils flared, his chest expanded as I made an upwards stroke. I looked up and met his intense gaze. He made no move to help or to hinder me it was as if he were waiting to see how far I would take it.

Emboldened, I tried to unclasp the button of his trousers. And failed miserably. "Help me."

I raised my head and our eyes met. His features were filled with blatant doubt as if he couldn't fathom why this was happening. I think it was the first time I'd ever seen him hesitate in any endeavor. I reached up and brushed a wayward lock of dark hair from his forehead.

"Please?" I asked in a husky voice.

He gave a short nod and pulled back. I held my breath as he slowly lowered his trousers down, freeing his erection. I couldn't resist the urge to touch it. I trailed my hand down its impressive length; he sucked in a gasping breath and I reveled in how powerful that made me feel.

Severus pressed a hot kiss against my mouth then trailed kisses along my cheek. His teeth nibbled at my ear lobe and I shivered in pleasure, placing hot kisses against his neck. He moaned hotly as I bit his shoulder; my hand moved slowly back and forth over the rigid length of his cock.

He eased me back, trailing kisses down my throat and along my chest until his mouth hovered over my left nipple. He circled my nipple three times with his tongue before he drew it into his mouth.

Severus released my left nipple and turned his attention to the right; I gasped out as his teeth grazed the sensitive bud. His hand dipped between my legs, sliding against the skin of my vulva. I gasped in pleasure as his fingers brushed against my clit, causing me to clench my muscles.

I made a sound of disappointment when he started to kiss his way down my body; I no longer had a hold of that lovely cock. He let out a seductive chuckle above my belly button.

I impulsively squeezed my knees together when he tried to gently push them apart. "Severus," I gasped out. "I don't... I've never..."

"Patience, Granger," he told me, easing his frame between my thighs. "This is the best part."

"But... I " My words were cut off by the ragged moan I made as his fingers pulled me open and his torturous rapturous tongue slid against my clitoris.

I felt awkward and strange; the outraged part of me wanted to yank him away. The exhibitionist in me won as his tongue changed from slow, leisurely licks to intense, probing sucks. I shuddered in pleasure feeling my inner muscles clamp.

My head fell back as a ripple of pleasure spiked through me. Severus used his fingers, pushing gently into me as his tongue teased my clit. He sucked forcefully on my clit and I came, my thighs clamping tightly around his head. I think I may have screamed his name.

As soon as my thighs had loosened, Severus moved up, hovering over me as he positioned himself between my opened legs. I let out an audible sigh of relief as he sank into my body. I gripped his shoulder with my right hand, my nails digging into his flesh as I tried to stop myself from moving too much.

I wanted to drag him down and take him fully into me, but it seemed he was determined to make sure I didn't injure myself further so he moved at a maddeningly slow pace, keeping the full weight of his body off me.

I tried to angle my hips, trying to urge him faster; he grabbed my hips to keep me still. I could see the tension in his shoulders as he tried to maintain control over himself. How I longed to make that control shatter.

I shifted a bit, not much as he had a tight hold on my hips, just enough to change the angle as he thrust into me. I felt my body shudder.

Severus was sweating, his jaw clenched as he gritted his teeth against the compulsion to go where I was taking him. I moved a bit more and felt a spasm of intense pleasure; I felt every bit of him inside of me as my muscles clenched in anticipation.

"Severus!" I screamed as my orgasm hit. I arched fully up against him, unheeding of my shoulder, needing to feel all of him. His fingers bit into my hips as he plunged forcefully into me, his body finally catching the rhythm I wanted.

We moved in tandem, a flurry of limbs and angles straining against one another. I arched against him racing towards another orgasm; I shattered, taking him over the edge with me.

Snape insisted that I stay in that little ramshackle cottage for a few days long enough for him to grudgingly concede that perhaps he'd been a bit hasty in his assumption that someone was actively trying to kill me. He of course, could come and go as he pleased but I was stuck here; eating bits of whatever he decided to bring back for me.

I could say that we spent the time being productive and in a sense, it would be true, just... productive on a physical level. I had never been so well sated.

We talked about the ghost I had witnessed the first night, about the frustratingly vague letter Sarah had left me, and about how utterly overwhelmed I felt.

He listened without judgment and without adding his own personal thoughts on what he believed I should do. Which was rather freeing. No one had really actually listened to me that way before allowed me to work out what I needed to without interjecting their ideas into what I needed, should or had to do.

"It was gallant of him to go after you," Gertrude told me, handing me a cup of tea. It seemed she viewed tea as the elixir for all the world's troubles. "I don't know if I'd have the fortitude to do it, had I been in his position."

"I don't understand."

She gave me a pitying look. "You've been down to the village, you know about the petition."

"Yes but what does that have to do with Severus?"

"He's spent the last four years trying to convince your Aunt Sarah to sell him back this property; said he's been trying to recoup his family heritage." She paused for a moment. "I actually thought she had come to the decision to sell him the property, but then she died."

"And he's behind the petition?"

She shrugged. "Seems like the most likely person, doesn't it?"

"I thought you liked him?"

"Oh, I do he's a kind man, underneath that harsh exterior."

"So then why are you telling me all of this?"

"You wear your emotions on your sleeve."

"Damn it, Hermione! I didn't shoot you," he said savagely. "What sort of man do you take me for?"

"One that does what he thinks is necessary," I replied quietly.

"And by that definition, you think I'd do that to you?" He bit off and turned from me.

"I don't know, Severus. I " I broke off, struggling to keep the tears at bay. "That's part of the problem. I don't really know anything about you. I know the sort of person who I thought you were when I was younger you'd stomp around Hogwarts, snapping and growling at anyone who had the bad luck of being in your way. You you were ruthless." I shook my head. "I can remember the way you'd tear us to shreds if we so much as looked at you the wrong way; you belittled me and other students to the point of tears and yet... you saved us. Saved me." I let out a sigh. "So, I don't know if I think you'd do that. How could I? But... can you deny that you want all of this?"

"I hardly think I need to resort to killing you for it." His voice was low and hard as steel. "When fucking you brainless is a much better alternative."

I let out a strangled gasp as his verbal barb struck home. "I think you should go."

And then, without another word, he was gone.

I let out a gust of exhaled breath, slowly sinking down onto the steps. I rested my head against the handrail, the smooth wood cool against my flushed skin. That had not gone as well as I expected. I blinked back the tears, and looked up at the moon; it hung just above the tree line, a large romantic picture that seemed to mock my stupidity. My heart seemed to tighten in my chest. I knew I should get up. I couldn't just sit here all night like some lovelorn teenager, but I didn't trust my legs to hold me up.

"Thank you for seeing me on such short notice," I said, sliding past Mr. Markham to enter his small office. "There were just a few things I wanted clarification on."

"Of course, Ms Granger, if you would have a seat."

I sat in one of the paisley padded chairs in front of a monstrosity large oak desk that overwhelmed the tiny space. Markham moved around to the other side and sat down. He pulled open a drawer and pulled out some paperwork.

"Now, what can I do for you today?" he asked, flipping through the folder of papers on his desk.

"I'd like to know a few things, if I may?" I asked, leaning forward. "The first has to do with the petition I'd like to know who filed it this time and where progress is at on it."

He looked up from the paperwork, giving me a measured look. "I can't really say at this time, Ms Granger."

"You can't tell me what? Who filed the petition? Or where it's at?" I asked incredulously. "I do believe I have the right to that information."

He merely shrugged. "You do, but I haven't got that information."

"How long were you my aunt's solicitor?" I asked, pinning him with a scathing look.

"I fail to see the relevance of that, *Ms Granger*."

"And that," I said. "Is exactly why you're fired." I didn't give him a chance to argue; I simply stood up and strode to the door. I distinctly remember grasping the handle with my hand before I felt a sharp, stinging blow at the back of my head.

Chapter One

Chapter 2 of 2

Hermione receives a letter – one that leads to the unexpected.

I awoke in a dark, dingy space; I could feel the wet dirt under my fingers. My head throbbed painfully. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I could faintly see the outline of stairs and a door not far from where I lay.

I automatically reached for my wand but it had been taken.

I forced myself to stand, my senses swimming as I tried to make my way up the steps to the door. It wouldn't budge. I kicked at it, tried to shove at it with my shoulder, all to no avail. I was well and truly stuck.

Hours, or was it days, later I could hear someone fumbling with the latch. I rushed up the narrow stairway to the door, hoping that I'd be able to find some way to scramble out. I let out a strangled gasp when I saw Severus in the doorway. I felt flooded with dread as I saw that he was nearly unconscious.

Severus was pushed forward, the force of the blow pitching him into me. The door slammed closed behind him as we toppled down the stairs into the blackness below. I landed painfully on my knees and tried to brace myself with my hands, only to feel another streak of pain shoot through my shoulder and back as Severus fell on top of me and stayed there, his full weight crushing me into the floor.

"Severus," I groaned out, trying to push against his unmoving form. I tried to wiggle out from underneath him, crying out: "Severus!" in the hopes that I would get some response from him.

He mumbled something incoherently and then slowly rolled off me, landing on the cellar floor. I scooted closer to him, tentatively reaching out with my hand to touch his forehead.

"Severus," I said softly, brushing his hair away from his forehead with the back of my hand. "Are you hurt?"

"My head," he mumbled. He groaned again and tried to sit up. "How about you?" he asked, trying to catch his breath.

"I was fine until you landed on me," I retorted, trying (badly I admit) to inject some levity into our dire situation.

Severus let out a snort and tried to rise up on his elbows. "To the point, as always."

"This wasn't what I wanted," I said, pulling away from him. "I thought..." I paused, listening to the sounds of his ragged breathing in the darkness for a moment before continuing. "Well, it doesn't really matter what I thought."

I stood up and tried to move away, but I ended up bumping into him. He grabbed onto me, his arms wrapping around my waist to keep me from falling as I stumbled. I stilled unsure of what to do. I wanted to hug him tight to me, but I didn't think I had the right to not after I had chased him away.

I rested my head on his chest and sighed. "I'm sorry," I said softly. I could feel his body tense up and I braced myself for the rejection I knew was coming.

"You should've trusted me," he said gruffly.

"I know," I said miserably. "But..." I shook my head. There really was no justification for what I had done. I couldn't help it, I buried my face even further into his chest; tears weren't far behind.

I let out a started gasp when Severus leaned down and kissed the top of my forehead tenderly. His lips brushed over my eyebrows as he lightly whispered, "Next time, you'll know better."

I had to choke back the tears as he tilted my head up; instead of kissing me on the mouth as I had imagined, his lips caught the tip of my nose.

I hugged him tight and lifted my face again, my lips meeting his; an intense surge of happiness suffused me as he returned my kiss. He cradled the back of my head as his tongue slid along the seam of my lips. My knees fairly buckled as he swirled his tongue around and against mine. I moaned against his mouth as his kiss became demanding.

My fingers felt clumsy as I started to pull at his clothing; the buttons seemed to take forever. Impatient, I pulled his shirt tail out of his trousers and slipped my hands inside. Severus moaned against my mouth as my cold fingers teased his nipples.

He quickly unbuttoned his shirt for me and then slowly unbuttoned my own. His fingers traced the top lace of my bra, causing me to shiver in anticipation as he pulled the shirt down my arms.

Severus bent his head down, capturing one of my puckered nipples with his mouth. His hands slipped behind me, as his fingers worked the clasps of my bra. One hand stayed on my back as the other pulled the bra away from my body. I cried out in pleasure, grasping his hair and pulling him tightly to me as his teeth lightly grazed my nipple.

The hand on my back slowly moved down, sliding under the material of my jeans, until I could feel him stroking the curve of my bottom. Somehow I managed to pry off my shoes as his other hand freed the button of my pants.

I slid my hands down the hard contours of his back, letting out a whine of frustration when I couldn't (again) seem to manage the clasp of his trousers.

"Hurry," I demanded, pulling back. I balanced myself on one foot, then the other as I struggled to pull off the remainder of my clothes. He was elegant in his own movements, quickly shedding his own clothes in a graceful motion that left me fairly envious.

His mouth caught mine as soon as his clothes were gone. My knees buckled and we sunk to the ground neither of us caring that it was only dirt. I pushed at him, urging him to roll onto his back, probably surprising him when I straddled him.

I leaned forward and kissed him. I could feel the length of him sliding against me. I arched my hips, completely in control. His hands gripped my hips as I slowly gyrated

above him, reveling in the feel of him hard and hot against me. He let out a harsh breath as I shifted my body, slowly impaling myself on his cock.

Severus relaxed his grip on my hips, sliding his hands up to cup my breasts. I arched, taking him fully into me as he pinched each nipple. I moved upwards, my thighs tensing as I slowly proceeded to ride him. His hips bucked upwards each time I moved down.

His fingers pulled on my nipples as I moved, the spiking pleasure causing me to arch against him faster. I ground my hips against his each downward stroke, feeling him thrust up into me.

One of his hands slipped down between us; I felt his finger press against my clit. I screamed as the orgasm hit, feeling Severus thrust deeply into me one more time as his own overtook him.

I collapsed into a sated heap on his chest. His arms wrapped around me. Even though we were locked in an impossible situation, I felt safe.

Severus nudged me. I heard the latch on the cellar door squeak as someone tried to open it. I quickly sorted myself out and tried to put myself in a better position. We had decided to try and overtake the next person who checked on us.

"Hermione?"

"Mum?" I quickly climbed the steps towards the door. "Severus... wait."

"Oh, thank God," she said, stepping into the cellar. "I've been looking all over for you." I grabbed her around the waist and hugged her tightly.

Severus stepped onto the first step, saying: "We really need to get out of here before "

He was cut off by someone exclaiming, "Mrs. Granger!"

"I've found her, Harry," Mum said over her shoulder.

"Harry?" I squealed, peering around Mum's figure. "What...?"

"Could we please leave this wretched place before you have to know each detail, Hermione?" Severus asked.

I reached back and grabbed his hand. "You're not going anywhere, right?"

He gave me a measured look, as if weighing his words before he answered me.

"I'm not letting you go that easily," I told him. I clung to him as we staggered out of the darkness. I buried my head against his shoulder in an effort to shield my eyes from the sunlight that was streaming in from the holes in the roof.

When my eyes had adjusted, I took a look around. I could see the worried expressions of my Mum, Harry, Ron and some others they weren't really paying attention to us. I also saw the crumpled figure of my former solicitor. I couldn't find it in me to be worried over his health.

"We're in the stables," Severus muttered against my ear.

"I didn't know there were any stables," I said softly.

"Hermione," Mum said, pinning me with a look. "I think you both need some food you've been missing for about two days."

My stomach grumbled at the mention of food. I wanted to ask how they had found us but thought better of it. "It looks as if they have everything covered," I said, nodding over to where my Mum stood, giving Harry and the others instructions. "Do you think they'd notice if we disappeared?" I asked Severus. "I'd kill for a bath... and to brush my teeth. I feel so grubby."

"And you need me to do that?"

"Need? No. Want? Yes."

I was just stepping out of the bathtub when I heard footsteps in the room next to me. I figured Severus had changed his mind about waiting until I was done. I briskly towed my hair, calling out: "Severus?" as I entered the room.

"You," Gertrude snarled maliciously.

"Gertrude?" I asked bewildered.

"You officious busybody," she spat out, leaning heavily on her walker. "Meddling in things that aren't any of your business. I should've done away with the both of you sooner."

"Why...? What did Severus do?"

"He was trying to get your aunt to sell him this house!" she snapped. "This is *my* house! My family paid dearly for it!"

"Your family...?" I began, and then it made sense. "This room you know about this room!"

Gertrude nodded. "Of course I do! If that stupid little Mudblood had known her true place, it would've never happened. But no she had to incite trouble, and of course, my uncle had no choice but to remedy the situation as he did." Gertrude's face twisted with rage. "The house was a part of the dowry! It was ours! But the Muggle *government* said otherwise."

"But I've never seen you do any magic..." I said. My brain quickly reeling I wonder if she might be a Squib, it would explain so much.

"I debased myself for years allowing that... that *Muggle* to think I was her friend. And for what? For her to leave this house to another grasping Mudblood?!" She continued on as if I hadn't said a thing.

"But... Mr. Markham..." I ventured, edging my way to the door.

"My son was supposed to fix those stupid documents to reflect the home's true ownership."

"He's your son?" I squeaked. I narrowed my eyes. "Did you kill my aunt?"

"Ha, nothing so common as that." She had inched closer to me as we spoke, almost but not quite without my noticing. But I wasn't too worried; she was an old woman, constrained by a walker, so I figured I could get all the information I needed from her and still escape relatively unscathed. So when she launched herself at me, teeth bared in a snarling grimace, it took me by surprise.

We toppled over, with her landing on top of me, her clawed hands around my neck before I even realized it. She was stronger than I had expected. I couldn't catch my breath as she squeezed, and everything started to spin. I kicked out, trying to dislodge her as little white specks of light burst in front of my eyes.

Suddenly, I heard hissing. Crookshanks launched himself at Gertrude, catching her unawares. I lashed out with my hands and feet as Crookshanks scratched and clawed at her. I scrambled away, rushing to the edge of the stairs.

Gertrude had subdued Crookshanks, tossing him against the wall as if he were nothing more than a scrap of trash. She lunged towards me just as I twisted away. She lingered there, unbalanced on the edge. Crookshanks rushed over, winding himself between her legs. I could see her eyes widen in fear as she realized what was happening.

She tripped over backwards, tumbling down the stairs until she landed on the hardwood floor below. I could hear her neck snap as she landed. Crookshanks, with his natural agility, had moved himself out of harm's way before Gertrude made her descent, and now sat down on the top step. I swear he had a pleased expression on his little cat face.

I crumpled, clutching the terrycloth towel around me, staring down at Gertrude's form in horror. I don't know how long I sat there.

"Are you sure this is what you want to do, Hermione?" Harry asked me a few days later. I looked over to where Severus stood, talking with my Mum.

"Yeah... I think so."

"But, it's daft! He's... well... so old."

I shrugged. "So?"

Harry scratched the back of his neck. "And, it's... it just is weird."

"It's what I want to do."

"What about him?"

Severus glanced over at me and caught my eye. We stared at one another for a moment before he turned back to speak to my Mum.

"Dunno but... be happy for me, can you do that?"

Author's Notes:

I first have to thank dickgloucester for her prompts. I can honestly say I had the hardest time trying to choose what I was going to do. Every time I tried to start something though, I kept coming back to this prompt. I only hope I did it justice with my meager offering.

Original Prompt:

How about a spine-chilling ghost story? A really scary one, with Severus and Hermione joining forces to solve the mystery/get rid of the ghosts? Will it be at Hogwarts or elsewhere? I'm afraid this is a very unspecific prompt, but I leave it to the author to scare me. You may amuse me at the same time, but make me tremble, make me bite my fingernails, make me fear for their safety. But I insist upon a happy ending. I'm just pathetic like that.

Second, I have to thank my beta(s), Sarah (who graciously allowed me to use her name) and Mollyssister for the last minute look over. Your help, as always, was invaluable. Whatever I have would not be even half as good as it currently is without their input.

Finally, thanks to the sshg_exchange mods; as always this is a pleasure to take part in!

Wythnos - the Welsh term for a week (or rather eight nights).

Llansteffan, Carmarthenshire, Wales is a *real* place. Though with the exception of the ruins I mentioned, the descriptions of the place are purely fictional.

Inspiration for "Sarah's" house came from this lovely website:

<http://www.welshruins.co.uk/>

It is full of some wonderful abandoned homes in Wales. One day, I'll have enough money to go there and poke around in those places.