

The Dissolution Law

by mia madwyn

The marriage law, challenged.

George

Chapter 1 of 6

The marriage law, challenged.

Author's Note: My utmost respect and admiration go to Jo Rowling for creating the world. My utmost thanks and adoration go to Annie Talbot and GinnyW for beta work extraordinaire.

"I am not a nice man." He had told her that up front. And it wasn't that she hadn't believed him. It was that she hadn't comprehended what "not a nice man" meant.

It was one of many post-war ironies that the Marriage Law had lasted only nine months, nine months during which it had birthed too many horrors. The backlash from angry witches (and more than a few angry wizards) brought a stop to the madness.

That, and the suicides.

But those who had obediently (or in some cases, expediently) married during that nine-month period were stuck. Wizarding England had no divorce and thus it was left to those poor couples to make the best of it.

Or the worst of it.

And none doubted that the worst of the worst was the marriage of Hermione Granger (Best Friend of the Boy Who Lived; Heroine of Hogwarts Battle; Order of Merlin, First Class), to save the undeserving skin of one Severus Snape...(Murderer of Albus Dumbledore; Death Eater; Order of Merlin, Second Class).

And thus, our story begins....

Chapter One

GEORGE

April 15

The knock on the door roused her and for a moment, she wasn't certain where she was. Her desk. Again. Rubbing her inky fingers on her robes, she dug her fingers into the small of her back and groaned. Finally, she flicked her wand at the door. "Come in."

It swung open silently. Even a heavy dungeon door dared not squeak in Severus Snape's domain. The doorway filled with the tall, lean body of a man in elegant black. He stepped through the door, his usually solemn features stretched in a smile that froze when he saw her.

Quickly he crossed the room. "Hermione, are you all right?"

She sat up straighter and smiled softly. "George... of course I am." She winced and dug her fingers in harder. "I just fell asleep and now I have a knot..."

But his expression made it clear. He did not accept her physical state as mere exhaustion and muscle cramps. "Let me," he said, clearly disturbed.

He stepped closer and moved to touch her, but she wrenched herself off the stool and backed away from him, forcing a smile. "No, no, it's all right, really." Struggling to regain control of the situation, she raised her chin and managed to retrieve her professional demeanour from whatever corner of her psyche it had retreated to. "Thank you for coming. I know this is hard."

"Anything for you, love," he said softly.

"Not for me. For history. For the future. We have to make sure people remember, that they never let this happen again," she said forcefully, painfully aware that he was studying the dark shadows under her eyes and the pallor of her skin and reading too much truth there.

"Yes. Indeed we do. But first..." He pulled a tiny nosegay of violets out of his black velvet robes. George had worn nothing but black since Fred's death, a circumstance that made him an eerie reflection of Severus Snape, although George's black set off his colouring and good looks with a stylish flair.

The same could not be said for Severus Snape.

Though there were times...usually times when a camera was nearby to record the moment...when even Snape managed to put forward a devilishly dark aura that some found compelling.

She snapped herself away from such thoughts as the violets touched the palm of her hand and she clutched them in reflex. Flowers. She raised them to her nose and sniffed, and they were sweet, so sweet....

Two courtships...Viktor and Ron...and one so-called marriage...Severus...yet no man had ever given her flowers before. She felt a hollow little lurch where her heart should be, but gave her head a shake and ignored it.

But yes, her fingers clutched the stems of the wee violets and she inhaled them and thought wistfully what a kind husband George would make some lucky witch.

"They need water," he said, then Conjured a tiny crystal vase for them and put it on her desk. She reluctantly released them and watched them levitate into the vase and then the vase fill with water.

"Thank you." She dared not say more. Instead, she drew Albus Dumbledore's Pensieve to the edge of the desk and gestured to it. "Do you know how to use it?"

His features were grave. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes...Were tears glistening at the corners?...and drew a long, silvery thread from his temple to the tip of his wand. One more deft movement, and it spooled into the stone bowl. He stared at it for a moment, and Hermione remained quiet. She'd seen these reactions before, this last second desire to retrieve precious and horrible memories and put them back and not let them see the light of day.

But then he straightened and waved his hand toward it. "Madam History, my memories are yours."

She smiled and cast a stasis spell over them. "It will take me a day to duplicate them and then I'll return them to you. I know how hard..."

"It was hard for everybody."

"But harder for some than others. Believe me, I wouldn't ask this of you if..."

George gestured at the wall of shelves, at the dozens and dozens of glass phials, each filled with similar silvery contents. "We're all doing this for you, Hermione, so you can write the truth, because you're right, it has to be recorded so that the same mistakes don't get made again."

She reached for his hand without thinking, grabbed it and smiled...and then released it just as quickly.

"Hermione." His gaze flickered to the wall and the clock hanging there, and then returned to her. His voice was quiet, his coppery-brown eyes intense. "There are so many things I want to say to you, need to say to you."

"I'm sure I'll have lots of questions once I've seen..."

"That's not what I mean," he growled. "Hermione, you're going to be free again, and I just wanted...needed...you to know..." He didn't finish the statement, but let it hang there, the wanting, the longing.

She was startled, as much by his sentiment as his words. When had this happened? When had George started looking at her this way?

And what did he mean, she was going to be free again?

"No, George. I'll never be free." She moved away from him until she bumped against her desk.

He blinked. "You don't know?"

"Know what?"

"Hermione, when was the last time you read the *Daily Prophet*?"

She shrugged and pointed at the closed door that led to Severus's private quarters, those that were separate from hers. "I don't usually bother. Severus..."

"*Accio Daily Prophet*," George said.

The newspaper slithered its way under the door and into his hand. He didn't even look at it, just studied her face as he handed it to her. And watched....

She looked down at the photograph, at the tall figure in black pulling a blonde woman protectively into his embrace as he scowled at the camera and entered a restaurant.

She caught her breath. "Pansy?"

She hadn't thought anything could hurt, but this did, oh yes, this did.

"Fuck." George snatched the paper out of her hand. "That's not what...I hadn't even seen that, 'Mione. I'm sorry. Believe me I didn't mean..."

She shrugged and laughed nervously. "I've seen those kinds of pictures before. I just hadn't...hadn't ever seen him with Pansy, of all people. Isn't that odd..." she asked, sensing that her laughter was sounding more like hysteria, "that it seems so wrong to think of them together, yet she and I are the same age and..."

"Hermione!" George said firmly and flipped the paper over and handed her the front page headline. "Read *this*. *This* is what I wanted you to see."

"Dissolution Law Enacted!"

After five long years of battles amongst the venerable membership of the Wizengamot, The Dissolution Act of 2004 has been voted into law, allowing the dissolution of any marriage entered into during the nine month period commonly known as the Marriage Law Terrors. Effective on May 1, 2004, any affected witch and wizard wishing to dissolve their marriage may petition the Wizengamot and, if there are no offspring of said marriage, receive a reprieve. For most, the long nightmare is over.

"The law has, in some quarters, been dubbed 'Hermione's Law,' as its passage is largely owed to a campaign staged by influential friends of Hermione (Granger) Snape, Order of Merlin, First Class...."

She stared at the words, hardly daring believe them. Over? It was over?

She sank to the stool and stared at George.

He closed the distance between them, and before she could stop him, his lips were pressed against her forehead and his arms wrapped around her...

And an electric tingling sizzled over her skin.

"No!" She pulled away, but not in time.

"Well, that didn't take long, did it?" a silky voice asked.

Severus stood in the open doorway to his quarters.

"It's not..." she began.

"What it looks like?" He snatched the newspaper from the floor and smirked as it fell open to his own scowling picture. "It never is, is it?"

George stood stiffly bristling with suppressed rage. "I hardly think you have a leg to stand on..."

"Oh, calm down, Weasley," Severus said with a bored drawl. "Why should I care what plans my dear wife makes for May 2? It's not as if I don't have plans of my own."

"Severus, we need to talk about this when we're alone," she said quietly, desperately reaching for some semblance of dignity. *"Please."*

"As you wish. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to read my newspaper." He turned with a billow of robes and sailed back to the door, where he paused, then looked back thoughtfully. "You do realise, Weasley, Hermione might not be able to fulfil whatever dreams of family you might harbour. You do realise she's had...difficulties...in that area?"

George had his wand at the ready before Hermione's gasp had sounded. "You never deserved her," he snapped.

"You aren't wizard enough to take me on, Weasley, especially not within my own wards." Severus nodded to Hermione, then dismissed them both with a sniff.

The door closed.

George whirled back to her, reached out for her...

She shook her head. "No, not now, I don't...I don't know what to think, I just need time..." She was babbling, her fingers clutching her robes in a rhythmic panic. "Please...."

He drew in a deep breath, then released it. "Of course. Just know that all you have to do is send for me, and I'll be here."

"Thank you," she said again, and felt like she'd been saying it all morning, on a morning in which she had nothing to be thankful for.

Except, she thought...realising that for once perhaps the *Daily Prophet* had been right...the end of a nightmare.

When George was gone she found herself unable to look at his flowers. She whisked them into a cabinet and turned to face the Pensieve. She calmed herself, retreating to her only solace, her work.

She leaned forward, preparing to witness George's experiences of the Battle of Hogwarts, a day that started with youthful bravado and ended with the death of his brother.

So many people were trusting her to write their stories.

This, at least was something she could do.

Her nose touched the silver and she felt the familiar tug, the falling in, and greeted the carnage with a sense of relief.

How easy it was to dive into the horrors of the past, when she was leaving the present behind.

Lucius

Chapter 2 of 6

The marriage law, challenged.

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LUCIUS

April 22

"I come bearing gifts."

Hermione looked up from her parchment, startled.

The door separating her quarters from Severus' was open for the first time since George had been there, but this time it wasn't Severus standing in the doorway.

She sat up very straight and still.

Lucius Malfoy.

She raised her chin a notch. "Mister Malfoy."

"Please, Lucius."

She didn't respond.

He held up two glass phials in one long-fingered hand, each phial swirling with silver. "Unless your tome has no room for Death Eater memories, of course."

At that, she leapt to her feet. "You...you trust me with them? I don't know how to thank you! Most..." All. "...Death Eaters turned me down." She stopped, frowned. "How complete are they?"

He placed them gently in her hand. "The one with the dark stopper is Narcissa's."

"Narcissa! But...but how did you..."

"We are still on friendly terms, Ms Granger."

"Oh. Well, then."

"Hers includes the night she and her sister extracted the infamous vow from Severus. I'm assuming you still don't have that one."

"He told you?" She averted her eyes. Of all the memories given to her, her own husband's...her mouth twisted at that word...had been withheld.

"And the other contains Draco's. He apologises, but he hasn't really wanted to return to Hogwarts since... well, he sent you the night on the Astronomy Tower, amongst others."

She held the offerings against her breasts, overwhelmed. "Why?" she breathed.

"I believe the operative attitude is, 'never again,' is it not?"

For the first time she turned her face up to his and met his grey eyes, now lined at the corners. First Azkaban and then the fracture of his marriage after the war had taken their toll. Strangely, he seemed more handsome to her now than before. He would have no trouble finding willing witches....

She felt her cheeks flush and looked away. "Let me catalogue these and put them up safely." As an afterthought, "Please, have a seat. That is, unless you were leaving...."

He sank gracefully into the hard-backed chair she kept by the wall for visitors, deliberately uncomfortable to discourage lingering.

She opened a leather-bound notebook and ran her finger down the columns, skipped some pages then found another likely category, and finally decided to start a new section. Yes, there were only two, but perhaps more would come later. She assigned numbers and performed a quick spell that engraved the phials with their new identifications. Finally she placed the phials on the appropriate shelf.

She turned to find Lucius Malfoy staring at her.

She sat on her stool and folded her hands in her lap. "Would you care for tea?"

He shook his head, still silent, still studying her.

She refused to flinch or show any weakness.

"Scorpius...Draco's son...will be starting Hogwarts in nine years. Nine years can be an eternity.... But I fear it won't be long enough for us to secure a more respectable family name for him. Therefore I think, in an uncharacteristic move for Slytherins, we decided to give him the truth. We trust you, Ms Granger. It's that simple."

And they knew her weakness. Think of the innocent boy, Ms Granger, think of what he will read and hear and give him something to cling to, even if it's stretched so tight it no longer resembles truth....

"Why?" she asked, buying time as she considered her response. Her history was not that kind of book, not a glossing of truth to heal wounds but a deliberate revelation of brutal facts.

"We watched what you did for Severus. We saw you treat him with dignity and honour. We believe that is your nature, and perhaps we are self-seeking enough to take advantage of it." The corner of his mouth twitched and belatedly she realised those grey eyes held a distinct twinkle.

"I did what anybody..."

"Nobody."

"...would have done."

"And have paid dearly for it."

"We've all paid dearly for the war."

He nodded and gave a half-shrug. Now he was the one avoiding her eyes.

"Are you certain you wouldn't like a spot of..."

His eyes snapped back to hers. "I'm offering my memories to you." He waited for her to respond, and when she didn't immediately he added, "They will take more than one phial. Many more."

Her breath caught.

He was offering her what Severus refused. The Malfoys...the Malfoys!...were offering her the missing pieces.

"Severus won't be happy when he hears."

He smirked the smirk she'd seen so many times on Draco's features. "Do you think we care? Our relationship with Severus transcends issues of intimidation, I assure you."

"I have a new carton of phials," she said, breathless with anticipation. "Are you sure you don't..."

"Tea would be lovely."

Two hours later, his dark grey robe was folded neatly across the hard-backed chair and he stood beside her at her desk, charming the numbers onto the phials as she created them in her notebook. After she listed the last one, she fell back in awe.

Twenty-seven phials.

Only Harry and Ron had given her more.

Of course, she hadn't viewed these yet, and had no idea exactly what he'd given her. But somehow deep inside she knew he was giving her almost all the missing pieces, those things she couldn't know without cooperation from the other side and...

Twenty-seven phials.

His hand closed over hers. "You're trembling."

She nodded. "I do that sometimes. It's after-effects of Cruciatus."

"I know."

She darted a look up at him. "I'm sorry...I didn't mean to bring up something that would make you uncomfortable."

"You're suffering the after-effects of torture you received in my home from my sister-in-law, and you're apologising for mentioning it?"

"It was a long time ago."

"He never deserved you."

It took a long time to sink in...to realise what he said, what he meant, and that his hand was still closed over hers.

And that the electrical sensations were doing their job.

"Well played, Lucius." Severus stood in the doorway and clapped slowly. "Though, surprising to see you sniffing after my leftovers."

"Yes," Lucius agreed, his tension only evident in the spots of colour high on his cheeks. "It's usually the other way around."

Hermione remained silent. The first pictures she'd seen of her husband with another woman had been Severus and Narcissa entering St Mungo's the day Scorpius Malfoy was born. It was the kind of thing an old friend might do, accompanying her to see her new grandson.

The later pictures of the two of them dining together and, once, huddled together whilst dashing through an icy rain at Christmas time, had looked less platonic.

She took deep breaths to still the electrical sensations dancing across her skin.

"I've Old Ogden's if you decide you want something stronger when you're through here," Severus said blandly, and withdrew.

Lucius slid his hand under her mass of tangled hair and ran his knuckles up and down her neck. The tingles followed. She jerked away, but he stopped her, held her neck still, leaned forward and murmured, "He has a magical tracer on you."

She nodded jerkily.

"But he has none."

She didn't respond.

"Why did you allow it?"

"It seemed appropriate at the time." She pulled away from him. "It still does." And then, she couldn't resist asking, "Why did you touch me again if you knew?"

"So he'd know." He ran his knuckle over the sharp ridge of her cheekbone but this time when she flinched away, he dropped his hand to his side. "Someone needs to take care of you, Hermione."

"I take care of myself."

The look of disdain he ran from her toes to the top of her head spoke volumes. "A day at a spa would do you wonders."

This time she was the one who expressed disdain. "Spas."

"At the very least, a thorough massage," he announced briskly. "You'd be surprised how much difference it can make."

"I'm not Narcissa."

"Indeed you're not."

"My mother didn't go to spas. Massages were things she and my father gave one another; they didn't pay strangers for them."

He cleared his throat. "My offer to send you for a massage might be considered questionable. Any offer to give you one myself surely would be."

She looked up. "I didn't realise you were offering. I'm sorry; I shouldn't have been so dismissive. But the answer is still, thank you, but no." She began moving his phials to the shelf with Narcissa's and Draco's. "It will take me a few days, possibly a week, to make this many copies. I'll owl you when they're ready for you to retrieve." And then, in a move as calculated as it was genuine, she whirled and took one of his hands in both of hers and squeezed it. It felt odd. Not just the tingles, but also the fact that she was holding Lucius Malfoy's hand.

She met his amused eyes and said simply, "Thank you."

At which point he lifted her hands to his lips and kissed her knuckles.

This time she jerked away.

"There was a time," he said quietly, "that he had honour. I don't know what changed him."

"There was a time when you had none," she replied. "What changed you?"

She turned away then and leaned forward on her desk, suddenly overwhelmed and tired. So much had happened, and she was so confused by it all. When she looked up, he was gone.

He had not gone back to Severus. Her door to the corridor was left ajar, and she heard his footsteps retreating down the dungeon corridor.

She braced herself against her desk and stared at the other door, the one where Severus had loomed. Her hands still tingled from Lucius Malfoy's touch.

Severus did not return.

Neville

Chapter 3 of 6

The marriage law, challenged.

May 1

She lowered her face and felt the familiar and welcoming freefall, but this time she was afraid.

He looked so old.

And the house...that miserable house...and that miserable rat of a man.

Was it any wonder Severus looked so old that summer?

But she... she looked beautiful. Even in her distress. Especially in her distress.

He pressed wine into her hand, and when she spilled it, his eyes lingered on the damp fabric that clung to her breasts and was it any wonder at all that he made that Vow?

But Hermione must clear her head of her own thoughts and pay attention to what was playing out before her.

His black eyes were fixed on Narcissa's tear-filled blue ones as she continued to clutch his hand.

"Certainly, Narcissa, I shall make the Unbreakable Vow," he said quietly.

Hermione had saved these until the last...Narcissa's and Draco's memories.

They seemed pure betrayal to her, to sneak into her husband's memories through a side door, a door she should never have been given entrance to.

But she had to see; she had to understand if she were ever to be able to finish her work.

And so, eyes burning, she watched it play out: the Vow that ultimately ruined his life, for it was this Vow for which he would not be forgiven, no matter what death-moment revelations he'd shared with The Boy Who Lived.

Was it any wonder he didn't want her mucking around in his memories, after the circus that surrounded that fiasco?

But guilt didn't stop her.

Decency didn't stop her.

She had to see.

She had to know.

And as he spoke his last, "I will," she felt a sickening lurch in her stomach.

"I will," he had said at their marriage, and it had been false, whilst this one had been true.

Oh, the irony of that...

An iron hand closed over her shoulder.

She felt herself flying backward, flying up, leaving the dark, miserable house and people in their never ending dance of Unbreakable horror.

Gasping, she came up out of the Pensieve like one drowning and heaved in great gulps of air. Pain knifed between her shoulders and down her spine and up her neck and stretched around the dome of her skull and dug into her eye sockets like claws.

The hand on her shoulder tightened and for one wild moment she thought he'd found her like this, that he knew what she was doing, which of his secrets she'd stolen.

But the wall of a body that stood behind her was not her husband's wiry frame. The large hand with long, dirt-stained fingers gripping her shoulder wasn't his.

The electric tingles that radiated from his touch proved that if nothing else had.

"Neville," she moaned, clutching her head. "What are you doing?"

"What are *you* doing?" he tossed back at her, his rugged face lined with concern.

She eased away from his grip, wincing. "Trying to finish. I have so little time."

"Have you forgot what day it is? Everyone will be waiting for you at number twelve."

"I'm sure they'll have a splendid time without me." She winced and rubbed the back of her neck.

"How many hours have you spent in that Pensieve today?"

She slid her eyes sideways, refusing to meet his gaze. This was too much like the old arguments she'd had with Severus, back when he still attempted to stop her from doing her research. "I need to finish."

"You're finished for the day," he announced firmly, and the idea of Neville being firm was bizarre but sweet. "If I don't take you there's no telling who will come after you, and no telling what will happen if he makes his presence known." He jerked his head at the door to Severus's quarters.

She rubbed her shoulder free of the tingles, suddenly uneasy. "All right. I'll go."

"Maybe you should take a potion for your pain."

She glanced again at the closed door. "I'll be fine."

Neville looked doubtful, but then smiled. "I brought you something."

He gestured to a worktable beneath the cabinets that housed the Pensieve memories. Or rather, he gestured to the large bouquet of flowers that sat atop it.

Hermione walked slowly toward them, bracing herself for the scent. She hadn't realised until her quarters were first suffused with the sugary sweet smell of violets and then the heavily erotic smell of Malfoy roses that perhaps she didn't actually like gifts of flowers.

But these were different. Each sturdy stem was topped with a single bushy blossom...an overblown array of long slender petals the colour of toffee, each ending in a feathery splash. They were floral pom-poms, an explosion of petals that smelled like sunshine and spice.

She bent over one of them and inhaled. "Lovely," she said. "Although the colour is a bit strange. Do people really like brown flowers?"

"It's a Hermione Mum," he said, watching her closely.

Hermione... Mum.

Oh, how those two words together hurt.

She smiled at him, forcing all the warmth she held in her heart for this man into her eyes, her smile. "Neville," she said softly.

He blushed. "The first time I ever saw you, your hair was the colour of toffee and your eyes like treacle."

"I have never been that sweet," she corrected him.

He just shook his head and smiled.

She plucked one of the chrysanthemums from its tall, simple vase and twirled it under her nose. "I don't know what to say. It's so beautiful, and I'm honoured."

"You're beautiful, and it's no more than you deserve."

For one frozen moment she thought he was going to kiss her, and she couldn't let him. Oh, no. She couldn't let him do that. She winced and rubbed the side of her neck. "I need to change but if you'll come back in..." She thought of what she had to do and finally said, "an hour?"

"I need to clean up, too. I'll let them know we're coming."

"Thank you."

When he was gone she stuck the blossom back with the others and stared blindly at nothing.

XX

It didn't take her long to use a cleansing spell and put on clean robes.

She hadn't done anything special to her hair nor had she done any kind of makeup spells in years.

She watched her mantle clock, watched the seconds tick by, and finally when a single bong told her it was half six, she smoothed her hands on her robes and went to Severus's door.

It opened before her.

She entered his living quarters and saw the official document...its white surface almost blinding in the shadowy room. All official Ministry documents were on expensive white parchment almost as white as snow.

She lifted her eyes and saw him standing by the fireplace, a glass of Firewhisky in his hand, watching her.

"Hello, Severus."

"Hermione."

He was dressed elegantly. He clearly was going out afterward to celebrate. He looked younger than he'd looked in the Pensieve when he'd made the horrible vow, and seeing that, she felt it all worthwhile.

She felt an odd little twist in her heart but it was quickly replaced with a short burst of joy. Was this how it felt to be a mum when all was said and done? This strange mix of pain and joy when you watched those you'd loved spring forward into the air, filling their lungs with freedom?

She smiled. "Where do I sign?"

"Under my name."

She walked to the table and read the document. It was simple and straightforward. Because they were married under the now-defunct Marriage Law and because they had no children they were dissolving their marriage.

She leaned over and signed her name carefully under his, the last time she would sign, "Hermione Granger Snape."

She had barely replaced his quill in its stand when the document quivered, rose from the surface of the table, and then disappeared.

Startled, her eyes met his. "That's it, then. It's finished."

"Indeed."

She smiled again, and this time she felt warmth spread through her. "Be happy, Severus."

He scowled at her.

"And find someone. If it's Pansy, that would be quite wonderful. You could have babies. You need babies. You need someone to love...."

And with that, she crossed the room and pressed a quick kiss on his cheek, and then turned and left him alone with his Firewhisky and his thoughts, and she hoped, someone he could finally love awaiting him.

XX

She re-entered her own quarters...for how long?...and found Neville waiting, startled to see her emerge from Severus's quarters. He scowled. "Is everything all right?"

"It's over," she said. "We signed the form and it's over."

"Good," he said fiercely. "That man is evil."

"Neville..."

"I know what you say, what you think, but I was here that year. It doesn't matter that he claims he protected us from the worst of it. What he allowed...only someone evil would take the Dark Mark, Hermione, and only someone evil would allow the things he allowed."

It was an old argument and she couldn't bring herself to get caught up in it again. "It was a hard year for all of us."

Neville made as if to reach for her, but she carefully avoided noticing and went to retrieve her cloak from a hook on the wall.

But that strange feeling in her heart...that new happiness...felt all too brittle, all too easily overwhelmed by other feelings if she wasn't careful.

She didn't want to give up her happiness so quickly.

She turned back to him. "Neville, now that you've been rid of your memories for a couple of years... what is it like? Do you remember anything at all?"

His face clouded a bit. "I remember it, but from a very far distance. I don't have nightmares anymore." He looked at his feet. "You must think I'm a coward, not to take them back."

She touched his arm. "No, never." She'd seen his memories of that night, of the snake, of the gore and horror that came before the glory. Who could blame this gentle hero for not wanting those images fresh in his mind every time he closed his eyes? "In fact..."

She noticed him staring at her hand as it trembled on his arm.

"Perhaps... perhaps I'd like to be a bit of a coward, too. Would you help me? I don't trust myself with a wand right now."

He stroked her hair out of her face. "Anything. You know that, Hermione."

"I think I'd like to let go of some of my memories, too," she said softly. She reached for an empty phial and placed it on the worktable beside them, then lifted her face to his.

He whispered the incantation and when the tip of his wand touched her forehead it felt cool and clean and wonderful. When the first memory pulled free, she felt a momentary lift of her spirits and knew she was doing the right thing. "Two more," she said, and twice more he pulled long, long strings of silver from her mind and carefully put them in the phial.

Only when they were gone did she feel a sudden lurch, a sudden emptiness that longed to be filled.

Of course it did. It needed to be filled with new memories, good memories, memories that didn't pierce her heart.

She stoppered the bottle and placed it carefully on the nearest shelf. She'd find a better place for it when she returned.

It wasn't until she'd once again placed her hand on his arm that she realised.

The tingles were gone.

Ron

Chapter 4 of 6

The marriage law, challenged.

RON

May 1, cont'd

They Apparated to number twelve, Grimmauld Place separately. Hermione had gone too long without male contact to suddenly feel comfortable with Neville's arm around her shoulder, as he seemed prone to try before she stepped neatly away.

But when she entered the hall (with a quick glance at the empty spot on the wall where old Mrs Black had been) she found herself immediately smothered in a tight embrace, then lifted and whirled.

She laughed at the sheer audacity of it, and at the sudden rush of freedom from the magical tracer. What else could she do but laugh, after all? Ronald Weasley was a force of nature and no amount of distancing herself would work where he was concerned. A board to the head, maybe, but nothing so subtle as stepping neatly away.

She looked up into his eyes, so blue and so true, and whispered, "I need you tonight. Don't leave me. Please."

His forehead furrowed as he lowered her back to the floor. He flickered his eyes over her shoulder at Neville then met her gaze again. He leaned close and whispered, "What do you need? Long lost lover or best friend?"

"How about long lost friend?"

"Well, then. I know just how to take care of my friend on a day like today." He grinned and dragged her into the kitchen.

"Come on!" he shouted. "Let's get 'Mione drunk!"

The impact on the room was immediate. More faces than she could have imagined turned to her, most with delight.

Except for George, who stood up and said, "See here, Ron..."

And Neville, behind them, who said urgently, "I don't think that's such a good..."

And...Merlin's beard...Lucius Malfoy, who simply watched from his place in the back corner...Severus's old place...with one eyebrow raised in disdain. "Not the best idea I've heard," he said blandly.

Ron let out a low whistle as Hermione found herself swept into Ginny's arms. After Ginny had kissed her on both cheeks and hugged her again, Hermione finally could pull away, chafing her arms, and found Ron at her side, muttering, "So that's how it is?"

She shot him a questioning look.

"They're already lined up for a shot at you?"

Ron had never been nearly as slow as people thought.

"I hope not," she answered without much hope at all.

"Oi," he said thoughtfully. "I never would have thought George... not that I have a problem with that," he quickly added. "And you...are you interested?"

"No," she said softly. "Not in any of them."

"I'm yours for the night." He pulled her closer and dragged her to a bench at the table, one with room for both of them to sit side by side, and she found herself leaning into his body as the room filled with more people. More people who wanted to hug her and congratulate her. And of course, celebrate the victory that everyone present had a part in. She couldn't begrudge them that.

She leaned in close to Ron. "Lucius Malfoy?" she asked softly.

"The Galleons that greased the palms," he replied with a shrug. "Not that George wouldn't have done it in a heartbeat, but Malfoy pointed out his money has been dirtying up Ministry pockets for decades, no sense in dragging the Weasley name into it."

And then champagne glasses were passed around. One was shoved into her hand and she stared blankly at it. Never had champagne been on the menu at number twelve.

A quick glance up at Lucius and she felt a half smile form on her face in response to his. Of course there would be champagne.

And then Harry, sweet Harry, was behind her, pulling her to her feet. With Ron on one side and Harry on the other, glasses were raised, and Harry shouted, "To Hermione!"

The resulting cheer was deafening, and she smiled through her tears, because it was real, it was all real, everything she'd longed for, after so many years.

"Aren't you going to join us?" Harry asked.

She looked from her untouched glass to the friendly faces waiting expectantly, and whispered, "Absent friends." She drank deeply, then sneezed as the bubbles tickled her throat and nose.

"Absent friends." The response was quieter this time, and she felt a little sorry for ruining their mood, but she couldn't help it, seeing everyone gathered together again was having an unsettling affect on her. It was as if she saw the others...other faces half-formed, the way it had once been. Fred and Tonks and Remus and...

"Speech!" Neville called out.

Hermione shook herself back into the present. "I don't have words..."

"That's a bloody first," Ron said, giving her shoulders a squeeze.

She laughed along with everyone else. "It's just that without you...all of you...this horrible, horrible wrong wouldn't have been righted. I have no way to repay you, but you must know that what you have done was important, and maybe the last tragedy of the war can now be put behind us."

"He never deserved you," Kingsley said flatly, and the general murmur of agreement that followed pierced right through her.

"No," Hermione responded. "He deserved much better."

"Are you insane?" Harry demanded.

Ron simply gaped at her.

"He always deserved much better. He deserved better than being locked in Azkaban for months awaiting a trial that never should have happened. He deserved better than to be locked up in a cold cell while the wizarding world celebrated...celebrated a victory that never could have been won without him."

"That much may be true..." Ron said, as the rest of the room remained frozen. "But once you stepped forward..."

"Once I stepped forward and claimed him like a slave on the auction block, you mean? Once I used a loophole in the Marriage Law to get him out of that place, he was supposed to lick my boots in gratitude?"

"Yes." The voice was cool and icy from the back corner of the room, and she didn't even have to look to see that it was Lucius. "He should have done that, and more, every

day for the rest of his life."

There was a strange roaring in her head. Something familiar and threatening. She tried to shut it out, tried to focus on the words being spoken, and suddenly it seemed vital, so vital, that she make them understand. "I have the best of friends," she said softly. "You have given me all I ever wanted... Severus's freedom."

"Forgive us if we don't see it exactly that way," George snapped.

And then the champagne flute slipped from her fingers and hit the floor with a wet crash. She felt her legs giving way, and felt Ron and Harry catching her before she, too, fell, and felt herself being eased down onto the bench, while somewhere over her head she hear Ron's voice, distant and urgent, saying, "Mum?"

And then she was pressed against Molly's full breasts as the older woman stroked her hair, peered into her eyes, made soothing noises. Molly. Molly would understand. "It...it wasn't his fault," she said. "He didn't really hate me. He just hated...hated being shackled to me, hated having yet another master when he'd only just escaped two others..."

"Of course, dear," Molly said, stroking her cheek, and then, to someone else, "She's freezing. Fetch a blanket."

She reached for Molly's hand and clung to it, peering desperately into the faded blue eyes. "It wasn't his fault. They mustn't hate him so. It wasn't... wasn't his fault."

"Of course it wasn't, it wasn't anybody's fault, was it?" Molly smoothed her hair out of her face and leaned closer to tuck a soft blanket around her. "Her pulse is racing..."

And she realised that maybe, maybe Molly was the one. Maybe Molly was the one who would understand. Molly, who had told her so many years before that she and Ron would be a terrible match. Molly, who recognised that truth long before Hermione had, and saved them all so much heartache. Molly, who seemed to carry all the wisdom of the ages in her sad eyes since the last battle, since Fred's death.

Hermione blinked back tears and smiled, and this smile felt fuller, more real. "I was so young. I thought he would love me. I thought...I thought I could be Lily...."

"Oh, my," Molly clutched her fiercely and Hermione wanted to cling to the warmth, the softness, but her arms didn't seem to want to move. "Oh, my," Molly repeated. "My dear girl, you mean, you really loved him?"

"Can you believe I was so foolish? But it's all over now. He's finally free...."

The faces were going in and out of focus... all the faces over Molly's round shoulder. And the roar...the roar in her ears...odd how the room could be so silent, and yet roar....

"St Mungo's..." Was that Molly's shrill voice, or Ron's, or...?

Her last thought before she let herself sink into the darkness was relief that at least they didn't know the truth, that she loved him still.

And the roar swelled and she knew it for what it was....

And the carnage and screams overtook her.

Severus

Chapter 5 of 6

The marriage law, challenged.

Severus

May 1 (cont'd)

Severus strode up the path from the Apparation point to the entrance of the castle, rubbing a bit of lipstick from his mouth with a sigh of distaste.

He didn't expect to have a welcoming party to greet him, but it seemed for all the world as if he did.

"Headmistress," he said as he entered the door, allowing his glance to drag from her to the three men behind her, "and my ex-wife's paramours? To what do I owe such pleasure?"

"We aren't..." Neville protested.

"She would never..." George snapped.

"Charming, as always," Lucius drawled.

But the tension radiating from the three caught his attention as no words could.

"Severus, it seems that the castle has already rearranged itself and has closed off the external entrance from Hermione's quarters to the corridor. We need to access her room through yours."

"I think not," he snapped, and walked past the four of them toward the dank, dungeon stairway. "Whatever she needs, she can collect but I won't have a parade of spectators through my quarters."

"Severus, she is ill. She is in a very bad way, and the Healers..."

He stopped and whisked into a turn to face her again. "What do you mean, ill?"

"She's in the Janus Thickey Ward at St Mungo's," Minerva said, her voice strained.

"Incredible." He stared at them all in disbelief. "I have her for five years without managing to break her, and you lot do it in five hours?"

"The Healers," Minerva began again, "diagnosed her with a severe case of Pensieve poisoning but even after they treated it she still..."

"Are the lunatics in charge of triage, now? Hermione isn't some lust-driven teenaged wizard who..."

"Oh, Merlin's beard, Severus, Pensieve poisoning isn't just the realm of wizards with a stash of memory porn," Minerva replied crisply. "And as your superior, I require you to let me into Hermione's quarters to retrieve the Pensieve..."

"Over my dead body."

"Which could easily be arranged," Lucius purred.

Severus felt a tendril of rage curling deep in his stomach as he headed down the dark stairway, leaving them to follow or, preferably, break their necks in an attempt to match his pace.

He was inside with a tumbler of Firewhisky in his hand before the others caught up, his mind racing. Lucius entered first, possibly because he felt himself immune to Severus' moods, but if such was the case, he was going to find himself humiliatingly wrong.

Minerva followed, then Neville, and George Weasley entered last, his black velvet cloak hanging elegantly from his narrow shoulders.

"They will not get Albus' Pensieve. He left it to me and too many people have used it without reaction for it to be the source of any malady. As for the Pensieve poisoning, that would be a convenient excuse to let all of you off the hook, but it bears no resemblance to the truth," he sneered, then sailed briskly across the room to the door that had separated their worlds for five years. He didn't even slow his pace; it opened when he approached and allowed him entrance...as it always had.

When the others had joined him he gestured at the walls of memories with the tumbler of whisky, and watched their faces as they studied the array of phials, all meticulously labelled and shelved.

"And you dare ask what put her in the Janus Thickey Ward? How about every nightmare each of you so kindly shared with her? Nightmares that she not only viewed, but relived over and over again as she pursued her inept attempt at changing the future by writing her ridiculous book? As if people will ever change. As if the future can ever be different from the past. But you all encouraged her and fed her with the narcotic of your memories, and now you wonder why she's in St Mungo's?"

He tossed back his drink and slammed the tumbler down on the nearest work surface. "Go back and tell the Healer that she doesn't have any malignant reaction from the Pensieve itself. She's simply suffering the guilt and agony of carrying the nightmares of the wizarding world on her shoulders, and if you find a way to cure that, you will have cured Hermione Granger."

"You miserable bastard," George muttered. "Her work is *important*..."

"And it's destroyed her mind. Quel surprise." Severus sniffed.

"But you can't be right," Neville said. "Tonight she removed her worst memories. Before the party at number twelve...she removed them. She should be happier, not..."

"Insane?" Severus offered helpfully.

Longbottom paled and Severus belatedly remembered his parents.

But Longbottom merely walked across the room to an unmarked phial. He lifted it hesitantly. "These... these might tell them something. These might be a clue."

Severus flew across the room and snatched the phial from his hand. "You will not take her memories for a collection of half-baked quacks to stick their sleazy fingers and minds into!"

"Severus," Minerva said, "Neville is right. They might be significant, and quite frankly after what you've put that poor girl through over the past five years I have no interest in your opinion on the matter!"

"Ah, but it's more than an opinion. These are my quarters. Everything in here...every phial, every scrap of parchment, every quill...was provided by me. The very memories in this phial..." He broke off.

"Most likely include you, and you don't want anyone to see them, even if they save Hermione's sanity," Lucius finished for him. "Quel surprise."

Severus clenched his hand around the narrow neck of the clear decanter and ground his teeth. "Get the hell out of my quarters. I will observe them, and if I find anything that would be even remotely helpful in my ex-wife's treatment I can assure you that I will take care of the matter."

The three men all bristled but Minerva put out a calming hand. "We will be in my office. I expect to see you there in half an hour."

Severus merely sneered in her direction as they all made their exits back through his quarters. Only when the door was closed and warded behind them did he finally turn his attention to the swirling mists....

He walked slowly back into her laboratory and carefully poured the contents into the heavy, old Pensieve. He braced his hands on the edge of the table, his heart pounding. He didn't want to do this, didn't want to see whatever nightmares she'd felt it necessary to unload so she could step forward into her future.

How in fucking hell had she stepped forward and fallen?

He inhaled a shallow breath and leaned forward until the tip of his long nose and finally his face entered the Pensieve's shallow surface...

And landed in St Mungo's.

Not the Janus Thickey Ward, but the Creature-Induced Injury ward, a dark corner with a dingy curtain separating it from the rest of the area. A bed he knew all too well, though never from this vantage point.

It was his own body in the bed.

And beside it, a silent, thin Hermione Granger looking impossibly young and lost, clenching and unclenching her fingers as she chewed her lower lip.

He wanted to vomit. Of course this would be her worst memory...saving his miserable life and in turn, ruining her own. He wanted to wrench himself out of it, to toss the entire contents of the Pensieve into the fire, but he couldn't tear himself away as she stood slowly and crossed the floor slowly, fearfully, and finally reached out and smoothed his hair out of his face. She dragged her fingers softly down the side of his face, and he wished he'd been awake to kick her away. Seeing her fondling him in such a manner was enough to make him roar with anger....

And then she leaned closer and began murmuring into his ear, and he strained closer himself, listening, trying to hear....

"Please, Professor... don't leave. It's over now. It's all over." Plaintively, she pleaded, and then...he couldn't restrain his own gasp...she lifted herself onto the bed beside him and draped herself around him, her tears streaking her cheeks. "Come back to us, sir. Please... come back to..." She placed a hand on his chest...his heart...and finally whispered so softly he almost didn't catch it, "...me."

Softly, she stroked his hair, his cheek, even the long bridge of his nose. She murmured soft words into his ear and tucked one leg over his, whispering soft nothings the like of which he hadn't heard since he was barely more than an infant and his mother still rocked him when he cried.

And then... she slept.

Incredibly, that was it. This impossibly crystalline image...he'd never seen one so sharp and clear...remained unchanging for several minutes. He managed to pull himself out mentally long enough to give his wand a whirl, and the memory sped up, but other than to settle herself more comfortably or...when he himself stirred or even moaned...whisper more gentle, soothing words...there was nothing more but a long night of her body curled protectively against his.

He felt cold. And angry. And sick. Because deep within him was a memory of his own; he'd heard those words, that voice, in disjointed dreams, and sometimes heard them still. And now he knew why.

He gave his wand a sharper whirl and watched the scene change only slightly...when he rolled sideways, and she curled against his body and pulled his arm around her and...he would never have allowed it, never have allowed such a thing had he been aware, but she'd been there and she'd taken this from him when he was too weak to stop her...

And it ended.

And before he could bring himself to stand and withdraw from more, it was night again, another night, another bed.

This time it was Hermione's narrow bed in the adjoining cell that served as her bedroom. The bed where he had joined her once a week for over two years, as long as their relations had been required and monitored by the Ministry. The bed where he had made sure that their "relations" had been fast and clinical, before disappearing to his own wide bed and deep mattress and soft pillows, to rid himself of her smell and sounds by casting a cleansing spell and then drinking a dose of Dreamless Sleep.

Only...oh, yes, wasn't this rich? She couldn't remember all the times he'd kept their interactions clean and neat and quick and instead, she singled out that one night when he'd been drinking, when he'd stumbled into her room because the fucking ring was buzzing, warning that two hours remained before they would be officially on the record as Recalcitrants. So he'd found his way to her bed and...

She opened her arms to him.

He caught his breath. This was not one of the memories he nurtured, not one he allowed himself to revisit, and having been inebriated his own images were not sharp and clear like these. There was no missing the soft, hesitant way she welcomed him, the smile. He was drunk and practically falling onto the bed, and she was smiling at him?

She spread her legs and helped him...guided him in. Her ring must be threatening her, too, of course. But he couldn't tear his eyes away from his own face, from the expression of divine anguish as she fitted him into her and found a pace.

Nor was the expression on her face that of a woman simply doing her duty. It was the expression of a woman who welcomed the long, hard thrust with a gasp of surprised pleasure. Her mouth fell open and her eyes fluttered shut, and she dug her fingers into his buttocks and clenched harder, harder.

And he hated himself, because he felt himself growing hard just watching.

And when, in the memory, he had spent himself, and when he fell heavily across her body, she had carefully worked her way into his embrace and nestled under his arm. She had pulled the sheets and blanket snugly around them and curled against him.

And once again, the remainder of the memory was simply... sleeping. The occasional movement, most often Hermione awakening to touch him, to stroke his shoulder or rub her leg against his as if only to reassure herself that he was really there....

These were the memories she rid herself of, the memories she shed because she could no longer live with them.

How badly he must have hurt her for these to be the memories she wanted to rid herself of forever.

He knew, of course, knew he hurt her; he had done it deliberately and with malice aforethought. Nothing was left to chance; if he was out with another woman, it was because he knew cameras would be near. There wasn't a humiliation or an insult that he hadn't managed to perpetrate with the knowledge that she and world would know.

And now that it had done its job, he felt hollow and cold.

His head was spinning at the thought when the third memory began.

Another hospital room, but this time it was Hermione in the bed looking pale and wasted, shadows like bruises beneath her eyes, her slender fingers clenched tightly in the sheets that covered her thin frame. "I'm sorry..." she whispered, her voice hoarse and weak.

He stood stiffly beside her, staring over her head at the wall. "There is nothing for which you should be sorry," he said, his voice cool and distant. "Some women simply were not made to carry a pregnancy and there's nothing you could have done to change it."

"But next time..." she began.

"No," he said. "The Healers are turning in a medical request to the Ministry that we no longer be forced to carry out this travesty. Three miscarriages in two years are sufficient to remove the enforcement stipulation from our marriage, which I am sure you will agree is a result to be desired."

She choked on her tears and he turned his face away from her. "I'm sure this is difficult, but in time you'll be relieved," he had said firmly, already moving toward the door.

"Severus!"

He stopped, and finally, turned his head slowly to meet her eyes.

"Please... stay."

His eyes shuttered, he had given his head a slight shake. "I don't think that would be wise," he had said, and then continued out the door....

Well. No questioning why she'd want to forget that memory, he thought, his gut clenching even more stridently as he prepared himself to leave these wretched memories, once and for all...

Except something strange was happening. He remembered that night clearly, remembered returning to his quarters to finish off a bottle of Old Ogden's in silent "celebration" that their forced conjugal relations were over.

But in Hermione's memory...his movements were jerky, and...

He returned.

He'd never seen such an odd Pensieve memory, and he'd seen many that had been damaged in storage. But this one was a strange combination of jerky, vague movements and clear images.

He watched the memory, stunned, as he crossed back to the bed and pulled her into his arms, and held her while she wept.

It was as if two images were overlaid, the image of her body, shuddering on the bed, and her body in his arms as he held her tightly, his head bent over hers as she clung to him, sobs wracking through her.

His hands stroked her hair, his lips traced her wet cheeks, and he even conjured up a handkerchief and pressed it into her hand, all the time whispering the same soft nothings into her ears that she'd used on him, the words sounding alien when spoken in his voice, ridiculous and tender words he had never uttered in his life.

And then when he thought it couldn't get worse, he watched himself lay her back down, and then join her, pulling her against him and holding her close, whispering and murmuring into her ear as she lay staring blindly at nothing, and finally, slept....

And this memory that was not a memory ended as the others had, with two bodies coiled together and simply... sleeping.

Sleeping.

Together.

And it hit him hard in the solar plexus, what he was witnessing.

In their entire marriage...their entire acquaintance...they had never shared a bed for an entire night, and he would have sworn to that if asked. But she knew different. She had stayed with him in the hospital when he teetered on the edge of death from snakebite, pleading with him to live. She had held him close when he was drunk, not allowing him to leave her. And then, on this night of what felt suddenly to be his worst betrayal, this night when he had left her alone in her grief and pain...

She had built a detailed fantasy in which he had returned.

Impossible.

He'd never heard of such a thing, a Pensieve memory that wasn't true to the actual events lived.

But... she'd done it. She'd created a fantasy so detailed and revisited it so often, it had superimposed itself over the actual night when she'd lain alone, weeping, in her hospital bed.

A collection of three nights in his arms.

And she had watched them, over and over and over again, until they were diamond-edged in their clarity.

These weren't her worse memories.

They were her best.

He yanked himself free and stood gasping.

He couldn't bring himself to think, to consider what any of this really and truly meant except...

She was in the Janus Thickey Ward drowning in the horrors of everyone's worst memories.

And she no longer had her treasured memories and fantasy to sustain her.

Moments later he was in Minerva's office, not waiting for niceties but snarling, "I will take these to her. I will give them back to her myself. And if any of you try to stop me..."

"But the Healers," Minerva said. "They should examine them first and decide whether..."

"Hermione will not thank you if you let the Healers delve into her memories," Severus said, his voice a low, silky threat.

"He's right," Neville said. "He's right. She wouldn't want that."

"But they won't let you," George said. "You have no right to..."

"Have the early copies of the *Daily Prophet* arrived?" Lucius cut in. "If not, they can't stop him. They surely can't know about the dissolution. As her husband, he would have the authority."

Severus stepped into the Floo. "St Mungo's."

Hermione

Chapter 6 of 6

The marriage law, challenged.

HERMIONE

May 2 (early hours)

Her son...she had a son, a beautiful son with platinum hair and icy grey eyes and he was in the midst of all this carnage, this stench, this horror of shouts and screams and...

Merlin, no, Merlin, no...not Fred, not Fred, not Fred, not her other half, not her laughter and her heart and her soul...no, this was not Fred, this head with the gash in the red hair and the blue eyes staring flat and mirthless and skin pasty and white and...

This wasn't fair. She wasn't the Chosen One, the Boy Who Lived, and she'd never been brave, had never been strong, and she'd given everything, more than everything and here she was and yes, he'd told her to do this, to do this thing, and she'd thought she could do it, but the snake... how could she kill it, how could she...and she swung and the weight of the sword tore at her joints and the force of the blow as it broke through skin and meat and struck, then severed, the bone shuddered through her and she screamed her victory but it tasted like terror...

Icy cold fingertips trailed down her temples.

Something cold and liquid entered and poured into her, and even though she felt it settling straight into what might be her brain, her entire body trembled as the coolness spread through her.

She tried to open her eyes, but couldn't, but it was all right because the cold hands touched her, soothed her, and...

She caught her breath in a gulp that was partly a cry of relief and partly a sob.

Behind her closed eyes, she saw the hospital bed, and this time the memory of pain and loss was vague and unformed, but the feel of his body against hers, his arms embracing her, his breath on her neck and his voice in her ear... they were all *real*.

She sank more deeply into them, wrapped herself in them, and waited for dawn.

#

She was cold, so cold. She opened her eyes to darkness and felt bereft, like something vital was missing.

This was not her bed. She reached blindly toward the night table, and her fingers grasped the wand. A wand. *No* wand.

Just a stick. A dead, dead stick.

She jerked upright in the bed, frantic, and saw him, a slight silhouette against the dim light coming in from the window. Slight, dim, but unmistakably him.

"Severus?" she asked, her voice quavering in the cold, dark room. Her fingers clenched around the useless piece of wood.

"Do you know where you are?" he asked, his voice strained and hoarse.

A calm seeped into her, despite her near panic. "No."

"You're in St Mungo's."

Suddenly, she understood the stick in her hand, and she hurled it at the floor. The Janus Thickey Ward, where the patients were given faux wands to hold, to make them feel more secure....

"Severus?" This time there was no hiding the panic. She tried to stand, but he crossed the room quickly and his hands closed on her shoulders, and she felt the reaction lurch through her, his touch, oh, god...his touch...

"Pensieve poisoning," he announced crisply. "And are we at all surprised?"

But his voice didn't hold the acid edge she would have expected.

"I want to go..." she began desperately, and then broke off before the word *home*. Where? Where could she go?

And suddenly it was too much for her, too much to bear, and she felt tears flowing down her face and great hiccupping sobs tore through her and...

He dropped his hands from her shoulders and stepped back.

Oh, god.

She pressed her fingers to her lips, grateful for the inky darkness.

"Before we continue, there are certain facts of which I think you should be aware." His voice was tightly contained.

She sat silently, refusing to answer, refusing to let her own voice betray her.

"Narcissa..." The word hung there between them for an impossible length of time, before he finally continued, as emotionless and distant as if he were discussing some long-forgotten Quidditch match. "Pansy. The others. Were not what they seemed."

But that...that pulled a reaction from her that she couldn't restrain. "What...what do you mean?" she demanded. "Pansy... you saw her tonight, didn't you? You went out with her to celebrate..."

She felt the very air freeze between them as he went rigid. "And how would you know that?"

"Because I smell her perfume on you, and I smell Lady Ambrosia, the lip colour all the fashionable witches are wearing these days." Lip colour, the fragrance of which could only be scenting the air if he'd... kissed her. She took in the slowest breath possible, biting on her fingers, willing herself to hold it in for just a little longer.

"Indeed." He cleared his throat. "However, it's not what you might think, and I believe it's only fair to let you know that it never was. Hermione, my actions with other witches..."

No, no, no, I don't want to hear!

"...were only as frequent and public as necessary to give your friends the ammunition to free you and, by so doing, free me."

She sat frozen. He couldn't be saying...no, not that, surely not that. "But you and Pansy..."

"Are mere friends. And I might add, she is a friend to you, as well, as she made herself part of public scandal to further my efforts to dissolve our ridiculous... situation."

"You said...you said you had plans for May 2, for tomorrow, and I thought you and Pansy were going to..." Again, she couldn't bring herself to finish the thought, to bring the pain crashing down on her again.

"Don't be absurd. Why would I exchange one marriage for another?"

Something tight and hard clamped on her heart. "But you could still have a future with her, if you give it time, and a family and..."

"For Merlin's sake, Hermione," he snapped. "Did you honestly believe I wanted *children*?"

"You need somebody to love you, and somebody to love, and if you won't let anybody else in, surely you couldn't deny your own child." It was the one thought that had given her hope.

The silence stretched between them.

"You're telling me...you never cared for them, never intended to...to care for them."

His silence was her answer.

"They never asked me," she whispered into the darkness. "They never once asked me, 'Hermione, is this what you want? Will this make you happy?' They thought because I was unhappy, that by getting me away from you, they could fix it. They could fix me... but they never asked. And even though it was like a knife twisting in me, I accepted it because I knew deep down, I knew I deserved that pain, and what's more, it was almost poetic, being forced to end it because they knew best, since I forced you to marry me because I knew best. And of course...I could see you, I could see you when you left the castle on those nights and when you returned, and I could see the pictures in the *Prophet* and...and you were supposed to be happy. You were supposed to be free and happy...but...you never intended to be happy, you held me up as a pathetic object of ridicule to free yourself from me for...for *nothing*?"

And before he could answer, she flung herself across the small space that separated them, let all her pain and emptiness erupt in hot, molten rage, and attacked him.

"Bastard!" she hissed. "You couldn't wait...you had to come here and stand over me and taunt me and..."

His strong hands closed on her wrists, and he wrestled her back to the bed, but not before she felt the satisfying contact of fingernails against skin, not before she felt him flinch and heard him hiss at the contact, and she wanted more, *more*. How dare he come here to gloat and to finish the job he'd already begun of ripping her heart from her breast and...

"Hermione!" How long had he been calling her name? How long had he stood there, supporting her as she gasped and heaved against his chest, wanting to destroy him, wanting him to...

She wrenched herself away.

"Get out," she said, her voice a low growl. "Leave."

"I understand," he said slowly, "but you need to know the totality of what brought you here."

"Pensieve poisoning," she spat. "Which will no longer be an issue, as I have all but finished the book."

"And a rather... foolhardy decision to rid yourself of memories that seem to be the only thing that were keeping you in balance."

His words were ice in her veins. The Pensieve she'd left out, the memories.

"You... you saw."

He didn't answer.

"Who else?"

"No one. That's why I'm here, to return them to you and..." This time it was he who seemed unable to complete his thought.

She remembered coming out of the nightmares; she remembered his voice, his touch, his body curled against her back, and almost reeled under the recognition that she had them back, her memories, her precious memories.

Unless.

"Did you... whisper to me?" she finally asked, finding herself unwilling to ask the rest.*Did you hold me? Did you comfort me?* Because the answer was, of course, no, never, never did he and never would he; it was just the memory, the fantasy she'd concocted...the fantasy he'd witnessed.

"No," he said. "It would have been unconscionable, after all that I put you through, to take such a liberty when you were unable to reject it."

It hadn't been real.

She hadn't suffered the ultimate indignity of his pity, the one thing he'd never shown her, even when everyone else had. At least she still had that thread to cling to, to get her through this.

"I asked you to leave," she said softly.

"I..." His voice was choked.

How odd. Somewhere in the dizziness that threatened to overwhelm her, she was able to register that thought. How odd. He sounded as if he were choking.

"Hermione..."

How very, very odd.

"If it would bring you any comfort... I can take you away from here. I have a small cottage on the coast of Cornwall...."

Of course. A rugged, rocky coast, battered by gales swept in off the Channel.*How fitting*, some distant voice remarked in her mind.

"For tonight... or as long as you wish."

It sounded cold and lonely.

She had been cold and lonely for too long.

She shook her head in the darkness.

"The bed is... larger than the one in your cell. More suitable for..."

For what? Surely he wasn't suggesting...

He cleared his throat, and it was a harsh sound in the night. "I am not a man who cuddles, Hermione. It's not in my nature. But if it brought you any comfort, I would be willing to... hold you, until you slept."

And there it was.

The pity.

Her humiliation was complete.

"That will not be necessary." And this time it was her voice that was cold and clipped, and she felt a surge of relief and pride and was able to continue. "I'm quite sure I can sleep without you, Severus. I've done it for five long years, after all."

"Where will you go?"

Well, there was a question, wasn't it? "I have the best of friends," she said for the second time on this nightmare night.

"Indeed."

Silence was her weapon. The longer she sat, still and silent in the darkness, the less reason he would have to stay. And so she embraced the silence and wrapped it around her like a quilt, waiting, waiting for him to leave....

She sensed rather than saw his hand as it reached toward her face and then stopped short and dropped to his side. He then turned, his strides long and purposeful, and he was at the door, and he was opening the door, and she only needed to hold out moments longer, only moments...

"Hermione," he said, and she held back the sob that threatened.

"Hermione, I couldn't let myself want you. I couldn't let them win. It was never about you. It was about them."

She dropped her head and took in a slow shuddering breath, fighting for calm.

"It was never that I didn't... want you."

"But you hated them more." She felt a twisted pain knife through her. "So... they won."

She knew this moment, she'd seen it more times than time itself could tell, this moment when he left her and she begged him to stay and he left her anyway and...

And this time, she would not beg.

"Leave," she said again.

"Hermione..."

"Leave."

She heard his footsteps, felt his approach, felt his hands close on her shoulders an instant even before they touched her. And she had lied, because she did beg; she begged with all her heart, even as her body sang at his touch. "Go..."

And, oh...oh, God, her fantasy had not prepared her for this, had not come close to the feel of one strong, long-fingered hand cupping the back of her head and pressing her cheek to his chest as she wept, of his other hand trembling against her back, stroking, rubbing, clutching and pulling her tighter against his body.

"Don't," she pleaded, "don't do this, not now, not now." Because whatever she might have wanted before, she now knew this was a memory she wouldn't survive.

"When else?" he asked, his face buried in her hair. And then, "You weren't supposed to break. They were supposed to catch you. *You weren't supposed to break.* I thought...I thought they would know how to make you happy again."

She didn't have an answer. How little they knew of each other, that they could be so wrong about each other.

"I have a cottage on the coast of Cornwall..."

I have a heart that may not survive you....

He dropped to his knees, and the word, the single word, "Please..." pierced right through her.

As much as she had refused to beg, she couldn't let this happen, she couldn't stand the thought of this proud man, who should never have to kneel again, kneeling before her and begging, and so, when he opened his mouth and drew in breath again, she did the only thing she could to stop him from speaking. She kissed him.

And her heart shattered.

And his arms, his strength, were all that sustained her.

And they were enough.

#

It was one of many post-war ironies that, the morning after the Dissolution Law went into effect and the most infamous marriage of all was dissolved, Severus Snape (Murderer of Albus Dumbledore; Death Eater; Order of Merlin, Second Class) and Hermione Granger (Best Friend of the Boy Who Lived; Heroine of Hogwarts Battle; Order of Merlin, First Class) disappeared from the public eye and retired to Cornwall.

Hermione Granger did not reappear upon the publication of her book (which was revered by scholars and met with consternation by those not prepared for its harsh realities, but in the final analysis, was considered a key force in the healing process of wizarding England).

Severus Snape did not concern himself with the future of wizarding England and its young, nor with the needs of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry when it was suddenly without a Potions master, being more concerned with the healing of Hermione Granger.

They did not remarry.

They had no children.

They found neither circumstance detrimental to their happiness.

For yes, they were happy, and their passion ran swift and deep, protected from the elements by the thick walls and thatched roof of their snug cottage overlooking the rocky coast and oft-churning sea. And long after her nightmares had slowed and finally ceased, Severus still held Hermione as she slept.

The Ministry did not win.

~fin~