

Peccadillo

by pokeystar

Slight offences have a tendency to compound

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Chapter 1 of 1

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You are late.

And it is your husband's fault. Again. You don't ask much. Far too little, by your usual standards. All he has to do is feed the children breakfast and Floo them to school for the day. You write notes to remind him *lovingly* of his parental duties; post lists to the cold box in the kitchen—the one place you are sure he visits on an hourly basis—how could he fail to see them there? He is tired of hearing you go over the routine. He knows it already, even though he sleeps in most mornings when you and the children are up.

He lets them linger in front of the telly as if it is Sunday morning, and you have to hustle them through their morning ablutions. Rose is in tears, Hugo is clingy and whinging, you are furious and Ron is back in bed before the fire flares green.

And now you are peevish, disgruntled and off balance, late for your first board meeting where you will be sworn in as a governor for Hogwarts. Together with Draco Malfoy, who is taking his father's chair, lately vacant due to retirement. He is looking at you with a glint of mild amusement in his eyes, as if he expected to see you this way, huffy and out of sorts.

You straighten your spine, tilt up your chin and raise an eyebrow at him. He winks at you. You blink back in shock and miss the call to order. Your brain catches up in time to hear Headmaster Longbottom's report on the results of the N.E.W.T. exams. You note that Malfoy seems as pleased as you to hear that Teddy Lupin has top marks in ten subjects.

After business is discussed, luncheon—served by the Hogwarts house-elves—is enjoyed, and the governors linger over tea, biscuits and lazy gossip. Neville relays love from Hannah and advice for your neglected herb garden. He gives you a last, long hug before moving on to chat with Herman Tidwinkle, the frail and venerable board chairman.

You play with the shortbread crumbs on your napkin and wonder when you can leave without seeming rude. You cleared your day of appointments for this, but you still have a stack of case files to read through before going home.

"Wrinkly Tidwinkle is having an affair with Longbottom's grandmother," a familiar voice drawls near your ear. Malfoy drops into the chair on your right and slides you a sly look. "Gossip is the chief perk of being a governor, Granger. You really don't want to miss any of it."

You sigh. "I don't pay attention to gossip, Malfoy. And it's Weasley, as you well know, not Granger."

He actually tuts at you. "One wizard's peccadillo is another witch's promotion. And it's Draco, not Malfoy, now that we are governors together." He pours more tea into your cup, adding a splash of milk and a slice of lemon. Just as you like it. "You cost me five Galleons, by the way."

You've been married to Ron for ten years. You have two children together. He still puts sugar in your tea.

"How did I do that?" you ask.

"You didn't mention abolishing the house system once during the meeting," he replies, pouting in an exaggerated way. The pout makes you giggle instead of irritating you. He smiles when you laugh. "Even Longbottom had a Galleon on it, Weasley."

"If you are Draco, then I am Hermione," you say. "And I don't think abolishing the house system is necessarily a good idea."

"Necessarily?" he enquires, his expression now serious. "Just out to excise the *bad* house then? Remove the tumour, preserve the body?"

"I never thought Slytherin was a tumour. But that general perception caused irreparable damage." You nibble absently on a chocolate biscuit. "No surgery. Some physical therapy, maybe."

Draco tilts his head, puzzled.

Something about the tilt of his head encourages you to reveal this part of your agenda. "Would you be opposed to a random sorting? Have each student pull a slip of paper from a hat, re-sorting every couple of years?"

"Intriguing idea. You'd maintain the system, but remove the stigma." He's turning it over in his mind, a bemused smirk on his face.

"That's the intent," you say, looking away from his pursed lips and expensive robes. He smells like limes. "It needs work."

His hand covers yours on the arm of your chair. "We could work on it together."

Your smile is brittle as you withdraw your hand to select another biscuit you are not hungry for.

The house is a complete tip when you arrive home many, many hours later: toys and dirty clothes litter the living room, a collection of take-away containers cover the sofa table with forks and spoons stuck upright in congealing curries, the kitchen sink is full of breakfast dishes and the dining table is blanketed with half-done homework. You check on Hugo and Rose with kisses and whispered love, then finally on Ron, whose snoring could wake the dead. Now that Hugo is five, and attending primary school, Ron is campaigning for another baby.

You are not interested. You are already a mother of three.

You are bone tired and ready for sleep, but you know you will have a dead husband if you go to bed now. Instead, you go downstairs and put your house to rights. Parlay your wrath into a purging tornado of spells. It works on everything except the resentment in your heart and mind. You are tired. Tired of being the good wife, tired of being the good mother. Tired of being you.

The Landau is quietly elegant, understated yet plainly posh. A restaurant you would expect him to patronise. You follow the maître d' through the dazzling wine corridor to the main dining room, taking in the crisp, white linens and polished brass fixtures. He halts in front of a delicate, silk Chinoiserie screen shielding a private table and ushers you around the edge.

"Hermione, you look lovely," Draco says. He devours you with his eyes as the maître d' holds out your seat. "I was pleasantly surprised to get your note."

"Were you?" you ask, opening the menu. You peer over its edge at Draco. He is tipping his head to the side again. Birdlike. A hawk in sparrow feathers. No. A hawk in peacock feathers. "Surprised?" you clarify. Needlessly, you suspect.

He smiles, slow and lazy. "Pleasantly, as I said. I had the impression you didn't care to work with me outside the boardroom."

A waiter comes and you pause to order; your wine glass is filled before he leaves. You drink deeply and meet Draco's eyes over the rim of crystal pressed to your lips.

You remember the soft, warm play of his fingers over yours—the old, dark wood of the chair cool under your palm—and a shiver runs up your spine to heat your neck.

He leans back, and prods you to speak with a wave of his wine glass, not losing a drop. "Do you, Hermione?"

"No, I don't, Draco." It's the first time you say his name with intent, and you savour the feel of it in your mouth, like the wine. Rich and intoxicating. He's staring at your lips, eyes heavy-lidded. "I don't want to *work* with you."

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out an object that makes a metallic thunk as it falls onto the table. A key, with a sterling oval attached. It's engraved in flowing script. The Charlotte Street Hotel. Penthouse suite.

"I don't want to *work* with you either," he says with a smirk.

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A/N:

The Landau ~ actual restaurant in London, about a mile or so from Charing Cross Road (location of The Leaky). Opened in November 2007.

Charlotte Street Hotel ~ actual boutique hotel near the Landau (a ten-minute walk).

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