

Redemption on the Installment Plan – VII

by Amita

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Chapter 1 of 1

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“What can I do for you?”

“I need to finish filling out these forms, and only your department has the information. I’ve asked everyone else, and they’re too busy.”

“Can I see them?” asked Hermione.

The information the clerk needed was in the central filing cabinet. Hermione asked the Department Head for the key and asked the clerk if he could spend the afternoon copying the data as she retrieved it from the files. He readily agreed. He had spent a week locating the right department.

The other members of her department shot her murderous looks for her overzealous attitude. After the clerk left, the Department Head remarked that since she was so eager to work for another department, she might consider moving there – or possibly she fancied the clerk.

The distracting work with the clerk hadn’t lasted nearly long enough. Alone in her office, Hermione was sinking back into a blue funk as she imagined the gay time Severus was having with Andy, aided and abetted by Lucius and Cissy.

“What’s Lucius doing?” asked Andy.

“He’s making a slide wand,” said Cissy.

“?”

“We went into ordinary Prague for a concert when we were on the continent, and a virtuoso played ‘Flight of the Bumblebee’ on a trombone.”

“And Lucius was impressed.”

“He’s certain the musician was a wizard in disguise and he had hexed the notes into a brass tube before pumping them out on stage.”

“Don’t tell me.”

“Yes, he’s loaded a rod with spells, but he needs to find a good lubricant for the slide.”

“I’m all in favor of getting a rod wet and slick and its pumping in and out to produce a magic melody.”

"We've got to find a young man for you, Andy."

"I hope you don't mind attending with me? I hate going alone, and you were such good company over the holidays. Of course, I'll understand if some lucky lad has already asked or if you think appearing with an older woman will dash your chances of having fun."

"I think our going together is a good idea," Hermione had told Andy.

The older woman appeared wearing a simple ivory dress suggesting dignity modulated with moderation and innocence tempered with knowledge while its flowing pleated skirt flattered her grace and figure. Hermione groaned inwardly. So much for hours spent on her own toilet and ensemble. The final insult was that Andy hadn't even bothered to accessorize.

It was a buffet organized by Molly Weasley and Cissy Malfoy who had become enthusiastic about a primary school for wizards. Those two and Andy and even Severus had been prompting Hermione to supply them with information on the non-wizard primary schools. *Once a bookworm, always a bookworm*, thought Hermione. Hovering in the background was Cormac McGlaggen. Hermione supposed his influential family would smooth the way in return for a profitable piece of the action.

Andy and Hermione were at a table with their Champagne and scallops when Andy admired several wizards and confided, "We could ride them at a gallop until they pop like a shaken bottle of butterbeer," a sentiment that had Hermione feeling moist. She surreptitiously checked her lap to see if she had spilled her drink while Andy glanced around the room and said, "Don't you just love the look on their faces when we do that to them?"

Hermione filed the thought away for future reference.

Andy waved at two wizards who entered. "Look, it's Cormmy and Sevvie."

Cormmy and Sevvie? thought Hermione. Hermione studied Cormac's perfect complement to Andy's apparel: a purple cape over a beige jacket that interrupted the eye on its way to a embroidered lime-green waistcoat accented by a white shirt adorned by a turquoise cravat and supported by navy trousers with light blue stripes that ran down the leg to tan boots matching the jacket and custom supplied with two-inch heels and silver buckles. Hermione didn't know Cormac had it in him. He swept off the crown of creation, a wide-brimmed lavender hat with a pink feather, and bowed towards Andy and Hermione.

"Let's gallop across the room and return their greeting," said Hermione. Andy gave her a lovely smile.

Andy was asking Cormac about his family's interest in primary schools. Hermione thought Severus gave her an appreciative glance – *Don't be foolish girl*, she told herself – before asking how her day went. Before she could think better of it, Hermione was telling him about helping a fellow clerk and her Department Head acting like a curmudgeon. While Severus was nodding sympathetically, she remembered her manners and informed him the Champagne and seafood appetizers were excellent.

"I think I'll go straight to the claret and small sausages," he said. "I've been trying to balance the books for a week."

"I'm good at accounts," she announced.

After he was seated, Severus asked if Hermione if she ever considered the consequences of being too helpful. She asked if that was what happened this afternoon at work. He replied that the main concern of any administrator was to increase the size of her department, and in order to do that, they had to be overworked. Yes, the clerk would tell others how helpful Hermione had been, but then the Department Head would have to listen to remarks about how her staff had free time on its hands. Now, the Head would have to think of projects to keep every one busy.

Hermione bit her lower lip.

"The poor lady will bust her brain, and it'll be your fault," said Severus with a straight face.

"I'm willing to chip in for flowers," said Hermione.

"You've a good heart," he said. "And you're dressed well for this evening."

"You don't need to flatter me to make me feel better," she said.

"It's not flattery; it's a compliment. You're helping make this evening a success," he said.

"You mean like Andy?" asked Hermione.

They looked to where Andy was standing close to Cormac with her hand on his upper arm.

"She's after success with a capital S," said Severus.

Hermione saw no hint of jealousy as Severus tucked into a stuffed mushroom. Hope rose within her – more than she knew was wise since she still had to get even for his neglecting her in favor of Andy at the shop, but her careful rationing of emotions was cut short by a thought. Cormmie and Sevvie weren't taking turns with Andy, were they? The fork fell from her nerveless fingers and clattered to the floor.