

A Cunning Plan

by marianne le fey

"Can you at least try to look like you're enjoying yourself? This won't work if you look nauseated."

For I have a cunning plan . . .

Chapter 1 of 1

"Can you at least try to look like you're enjoying yourself? This won't work if you look nauseated."

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-X-

"Is he watching?"

"How the hell should I know? He's standing almost directly behind me."

"Well I can't look at him or he'll know what we're doing!"

"What you are doing, Granger. I never agreed to be part of this ridiculous enterprise. Besides, even someone as intellectually moribund as your boyfriend would be unlikely to fall for a ruse as transparent as this."

"Ron isn't my boyfriend, hence the ruse. And it isn't transparent, it's a classic. He needs to realise that I'm off living my life without him and that he has lost his chance for true happiness with a beautiful, self-assured, intelligent witch."

"You forgot modest."

"I'm quoting a magazine article. I would have used illustrative air quotes, but that would mean taking my hands off you, and given my recent luck, that would be the moment he chose to look up."

"Whereas his current view is of you frogmarching me from the building?"

"I'm eager to get you away from prying eyes. No one would think I was capable of manhandling you into the Floo."

"No one is going to believe you want to manhandle me watch where you're going!"

"I can't! I have eyes only for you. You'll have to steer me away from any dangerous obstacles."

She giggled.

"Are you feeling all right?"

"You just said something witty and enchanting."

"I'm quite certain I didn't."

"Hmm? No, he just has to *think* you did. Apparently I never appreciated his sense of humour, so of course, your dry wit appeals to me greatly."

"I'm northern, Hermione. I don't do wit. I'm blunt and acerbic and occasionally well, usually plain rude."

"You're not really getting into the spirit of this, are you?"

"Shocking, isn't it? Look, we're at the Floo now you're going to have to disentangle yourself from me."

"We can't Floo to separate addresses! That would just look silly."

"Because we've managed to be so bloody debonair up 'til now!"

She giggled.

"Stop it, will you? He isn't watching."

"No, that was an actual giggle. We'll just have to Floo together. . ."

"Now what?"

"I can't remember if I've done the washing up or not. Will you promise not to look at anything?"

"Certainly. I'll gladly promise to let you Floo me to a previously unvisited location on short notice with my eyes closed. As I recall, that was the interview answer I gave that secured me a job in Internal Security in the first place."

She giggled.

"Granger, I'm warning you."

"Fifty-seven B, Magnolia Gardens!"

-x-

"When are you going to admit that this isn't working and unhand me?"

"I'm not giving up after the first attempt. Besides, if we stop now, it'll look as if I couldn't keep hold of you, either."

"Having experienced your death grip, I'm amazed Weasley managed to work his way free . . . What?"

"That was unkind."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"I'm not ready for jokes about what happened. Not yet."

"I spoke without thinking. Forgive me?"

"Of course."

"Shall we . . . ?"

"You think I'm being stupid, don't you?"

"Not at all. I think you're a young woman experiencing the end of her first love affair. People often tell you that your first love will feel like the strongest. They neglect to tell you that anything that burns that brightly tends to burn briefly, or that the first time you have your heart broken, it tends to be correspondingly painful."

"Oh."

"That said, I still think there is a fairly large flaw in this plan of yours."

"Yes?"

"Using me in this attempt to make him jealous. You can't truly believe that it will work?"

"That's the beauty of it he's already jealous of you!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Well, I've never been able to talk to him about work even if it wasn't for the wand oath, he still wouldn't be able to understand half of what we do. I tell him about the people I work with, instead."

"I'm the only other person in the department."

"Exactly."

"I doubt he'll be jealous if you've spent the last six months complaining about me."

"I don't complain about you! Well, in fairness, I do, but only when you give me reason to."

"What, then, do you say about me?"

"Hmm? Oh, you know, just things. Like how you've let your hair grow out again, or how your voice is back to how it was. About the time you hexed me into temporary muteness each time I used the word *exponentially*, even though we had that presentation due..."

"You can be immensely irritating."

"And the rude Arithmancy joke you showed me. Although he didn't get it, even after I did the workings."

"I had to explain it to you, as well. How you got through six years in a mixed-sex boarding school with that level of innocence intact, I will never know."

"Apparently, I can go on a bit. Plus, he's still intimidated by you, even now."

"Fascinating."

"I think so. It probably says something about him that he's still frightened of an old school teacher, but I've never really wanted to look into it in too much detail. Anyway, he's bound to be jealous. Eventually."

"So, I'll be escorting you through the Floo until further notice?"

"Do you mind awfully?"

"Will I be confronted by the sight of your underwear drying on the radiators again?"

-X-

"Crooks! Crookshanks! I do apologise he's never normally this friendly. Crooks, get down!"

"Leave him; he's not doing any harm."

-X-

"Is he here?"

"Of course he's here. The boy seems to spend his entire working day in the foyer. Now what was that?"

"A deep, throaty laugh?"

"I think I preferred it when you were giggling."

"Ugh! I'm useless at this!"

"Agreed, but as this is hardly a talent worth nurturing, I shouldn't be too upset about it."

Whoosh!

"Right, I'll see you tomorrow then. Bright and early."

"Yes."

"Well, good night then."

"Hmm? Yes, good night."

-X-

"Granger? Granger! There had better be a bloody good reason why you aren't in yet you're not even dressed!"

"I I can't go in today . . . I'm I'm not well."

"Do you need anything? Stand back I'm coming through."

"No, really, there's no nee..."

"Now what's all this oh."

Sniff.

"Are you alright? What's happened? Has *he* done something?"

"No nothing like that. He hasn't done a thing. He hasn't even looked at me. He d-d-doesn't c-care about me at all!"

"Granger..."

"I know you think I'm being stupid, even if you're too nice to say so. It was stupid to think he'd believe anyone else could be interested in me in a million years."

"Granger..."

"He probably thinks you feel sorry for me. Oh God, you *do* feel sorry for me, don't you? I've just messed everything up!"

"Hermione, listen to me. You are going to get dressed, tidy your face, and come with me to work. You're going to walk through the foyer with your head held high, and if by any chance Mr Weasley happens to be there, you are going to look him straight in the eye, smile, and wish him good morning. Do you understand?"

"Yes?"

"Good. Now here, blow your nose. No, no you keep it. You will walk into the Ministry as if you own the place, and then you will march to the office with all possible haste and explain to Postlethwaite why the projections are missing from the Yardley report."

"The Yardley *shit*! I mean, sugar! Oh, Severus, I'm so sorry! I've got them here in my bag. I completely forgot about getting in early this morning!"

"Never mind all that you go and get dressed. I'll get the kettle on and find something to feed to your cat. If we can leave within the next half hour, we should still have time to get everything submitted. Now hurry up."

"Yes, *sir*."

-X-

"I can't look has he seen us?"

"Of course he's seen us; we're the only other people here."

"What do I do? I think I'm going to be sick!"

"No, you aren't take my hand. That's it you're going to walk straight to the lifts. You are going to smile. You're a confident, beautiful witch, remember?"

"You forgot the air quotes."

"Come on!"

"Shit, shit, shit . . . Good morning, Ronald!"

"Mi'?? Good, umm, *good morning?*"

"Come on, Hermione, you've already made us late. Mr Weasley."

"Snape."

-X-

"He thinks it might even involve a bit of fieldwork, which would be amazing!"

"Trust me, fieldwork tends to be anything but. It will be dull, tedious, and most likely raining."

"It's all about gaining experience, though, isn't it? Honestly, I didn't think that Postlethwaite would feel..*oh*."

"What?"

"He saw us coming out of the Floo together!"

"Who, *Postlethwaite?*"

"Ron!"

"Yes? I thought us Flooing together was part of your plan?"

"But he saw us coming out of the Floo together, first thing in the morning! He's going to think we spent the night together!"

"Ah."

"Especially that early he'll think we were trying to sneak in before everyone else began to arrive!"

"I think it's a bit too late to start worrying about your reputation. Half the Ministry has seen us leaving together."

"No I mean, what if Postlethwaite had seen us? Isn't there some kind of rule against relationships between colleagues?"

"Technically."

"Severus! I could have got you into trouble! I still might! Crappity-crap!"

"Crappity what?"

"Why didn't you stop me? You knew this was stupid!"

"Granger..."

"Fucksticks!"

"Fu Hermione, calm down."

"How can I calm down? I might have lost us both our jobs!"

"Hermione! Sit down, will you? You're giving me a headache. Now, while inter-personnel relationships are technically frowned upon, the Ministry is the largest single employer in our world. It's nearly as big a matchmaking machine as Hogwarts. And, while I agree this was a rather silly plan, I didn't stop you because it seemed like a fairly harmless way to teach a silly young man a lesson. And even the irritation of having you pretend to giggle was preferable to having you pretend that you weren't crying."

"Really?"

"Truly. Look, it's been a long day. We put in an early start how about finishing up here and heading home? Have a bath, read a book. Things will seem a bit clearer tomorrow."

"Maybe you're right."

"I usually am."

"Thank you."

"Whatever for?"

-X-

"You look tired."

"Thanks a bunch!"

"Come on, I'll walk you to the Floo. Make sure you have a proper dinner tonight, alright? While wasting away might be very romantic, I'm afraid the bony look just doesn't suit you."

"You're a fine one to talk, Severus Snape! Goodness, it's busy, isn't it? Are those honestly gold lamé robes over by the fountain? And that's a rather excessive public display of affection going on next to the Floos."

"Keep walking."

"What? Oh. . ."

Whoosh!

"Sit down, you've gone a funny colour. You're not going to cry, are you?*Crookshanks! Come and see to your mistress!*" "I'll put the kettle on, shall I?"

"What's he doing with *her*?"

"Has it occurred to you that maybe he is attempting to make you jealous?"

"What?"

"It's hardly a complicated plan. Even your former beau is capable such a basic ruse."

"You think *he's* trying to make *me* jealous?"

"I might be wildly overestimating his reasoning abilities, but it does seem likely."

"Oh. Do you think Helen knows?"

"That it's all a game? Perhaps not. I certainly can't imagine Miss Pringle being quite so enthusiastic if she believed that Mr Weasley wasn't genuine in his affections."

"The poor girl! What a horrible thing to do! You really think that he's pretending? And that she doesn't know?"

"She looked like she thought it was real. At least you had the good grace to let me know you were using me."

"Me? I. I suppose you're right, I'm behaving just as badly, aren't I? I'm so sorry! I never should have dragged you into all this."

"You had your heart broken. The wish for revenge is only natural."

"I didn't want revenge. I wanted him to want me back."

"As you say."

"Oh, God. I'm an awful person, aren't I?"

"Hardly. Although perhaps rather unworthy of you, you're still young enough to play these games."

"I don't think I want to anymore."

"I'll leave you be."

"Wait! I. I feel terrible about. About this. Can't I at least buy you a drink or something and apologise properly?"

"Hermione..."

"Please?"

"Fine, but only if you eat something."

-X-

"... Actually, I wanted to travel for a bit first, but the idea of a gap year seems completely alien to most wizards, and Ron had been offered a place with Harry in the Auror training program, and then this position came up, and everything just seemed to fall into place. After struggling against the tide for so long, it just seemed sort of nice to go with the flow."

"You mean you settled."

"No! I just ... chose to take an easier, but no less fulfilling path."

"You settled."

"On some things, maybe. I love my job. I hate to think I could have lost out on an opportunity like this! And it means I can afford my own place, even if it is a one bed flat. That's something I'd find very hard to give up."

"Which leaves?"

"Ron. The thing I settled on was Ron."

"But you were happy?"

"Yes, of course. At first. Even then, it just felt as if we were supposed to be together. I just assumed it was meant to be forever."

"And now?"

"I don't know."

"How's your lasagne?"

"Hmm? Oh, it's lovely. Tell me, Snape, if your first love is the fiercest, what comes next?"

"I'm not really the person to ask. But I believe that what follows, though it might not burn as brightly, is a steadier flame."

"Huh."

-X-

"Honestly, are you determined to trip me up?"

"He likes you. It's your fault for letting him sit on your lap."

"I didn't realise he shed quite so dramatically."

"You can't help it, can you, Crooks? Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Are you asking me or the cat?"

"I'll put the kettle on, shall I?"

"Actually, I ought to get going. Will you be all right?"

"Yes, actually. I think I'll be fine."

"Good night, then."

"Good night, Severus."

-x-

"*Hermione, wait!*"

"Oh, wonderful."

"I wonder what he wants."

"Isn't it obvious? Your plan has borne fruit, and Mr Weasley is heading this way to inform you that he made a mistake in leaving you. He probably has ideas of rescuing you from whatever nefarious plans I have in store for you."

"Oh. What should I do?"

"Hermione, wait! Don't go!"

"Hello, Ron."

"Hermione, I need to talk to you!"

Whoosh!

"Can this wait? Only I have plans. Nefarious ones."

"Nef whatever I have to talk to you now before this goes any further. You don't want to be with Snape; you want to be with me. I know you've only been trying to make me jealous, but I can't bear to see you letting him touch you."

"*Letting him touch me?*"

"I know you think you've got to respect him because of all he did during the war, but you don't. He's a creep, Hermione. He's probably still obsessed with Harry's mum."

"Oh."

"You don't have to pretend anymore. I get it you miss me. Well, I miss you too. I'm willing to take you back."

"*Oh.*"

"We can be together again. Mum and Dad'll be thrilled. If I have a word with your boss, I'm sure we can make sure that Snape leaves you alone."

"Ron..."

"You can move into the flat. Pets aren't allowed, but the cat can stay at the Burrow, and I know George would be..."

"RON!"

"Yes?"

"Much as I appreciate your concern, I'm afraid I just can't talk now can it wait until tomorrow? I have plans with Severus tonight."

"Really? 'Cos he's gone."

"Gone?"

"He took the Floo before I got here. Merlin, do you think I'd insult a Death Eater to his face? He's a nasty piece of work."

"Oh, Ron, you idiot!"

"What? Follow him if it means that much to you. Surely you know where he lives by now? Or hasn't he bothered to invite you back yet? Hermione?"

-x-

"Crooks! Is he here?"

"?"

"Oh, Crooks, it was awful! Ron chose today of all days to come storming over to offeroffer! to take me back."

"Mrrrww!"

"I know, right? When I finally managed to shut him up, Snape had gone! I've no idea where he lives!"

-x-

"Mmmphhh huuhhh mrrrhhh!"

"Who's there?"

"Mphmmmm!"

"Granger? Is that you? Hang on, I'll release the wards..."

"Whoah!"

"What on earth are you doing in my Floo, woman? And where did you find this address?"

"I found it in your records..."

"Those are restricted!"

"Not to members of the Security Office. When you didn't come in today, I thought maybe something was wrong."

"I'm taking annual leave. I told you about it last week."

"No, you didn't."

"I'm fairly certain I did."

"Oh. So, there's nothing wrong?"

"Well, there wasn't until an intruder tripped every ward in the house. It's going to take me most of the day to get everything reset. You could have just owled, you know."

"I was worried."

"Evidently, else you simply could have asked Postlethwaite where I was, rather than attempting to storm in here."

"It's just that Ron interrupted the other night and we never got to go for that drink."

"I take it he wants you back?"

"So he said."

"Well, there we have it; your cunning plan worked. You should write in to *Witch Weekly* they'll probably publish your letter."

"Actually, I read it in *Glamour*, but that's not important. I want you to know that I'm not going to go back out with him."

"I see."

"I just wanted him to want me. I don't really want to get back with him. There was a reason things didn't work out between us; I was just too stubborn to admit it. Trying to make him jealous was just silly and childish, and I don't want to be those things. I want to be confident, self-assured and intelligent, only without the quotation marks."

"You forgot beautiful."

"I'm being serious here!"

"So am I. Although, in all honesty, if all the beautiful, intelligent witches were as confident as you wish to be, no wizard would ever stand a chance. You'd be ruling the world right now, rather than worrying about whether a boy likes you or not. Why are you staring?"

"I'm sorry. For a moment, it sounded as if you were calling me beautiful."

"And you wouldn't feel the need to fish for compliments. Of course you're beautiful, you ridiculous girl."

"What?"

"I called you ridiculous. Now stop staring and get back to work before anyone notices that you're missing."

"I..."

"I'll meet you at the Floos at five. If you still want to go for that drink, that is?"

"I..."

"I'll see you later, then."

-x-x-x-

"Are we still on for tonight?"

"I'm certainly not expecting any better offers. Should I come back to yours?"

"No if we go there, Crookshanks will just try to monopolise you again, and I want you all to myself tonight."

"It's hardly my fault that the furry pest has taken such a liking to me. He simply has good taste."

"You spoil him rotten!"

"Well, it is rather a novel experience, being purred at every time I enter a room."

"I'm sure I could be persuaded to purr for you . . ."

"Gracious, but you've got an awful lot better at innuendo. You're hardly even blushing."

"Thank you. So, yours?"

"We might as well. Despite repeated attempts, I can't seem to get the wards to keep you out."

"So, you're stuck with me?"

"You do have a remarkably firm grip."

"Again, thank you."

"My, my. Again, remarkable progress at innuendo."

"I didn't you shouldn't oh, shut up!"

"You are remarkably lovely when you blush."

"Until about twenty seconds ago, I was thinking how lovely you are, all the time."

"Thank goodness I shattered that particular delusion. Now go home, make my apologies to Crookshanks, and be at mine by seven."

"You're rather bossy today."

"Considering how many times I've let you manhandle me through the foyer, I can't help but feel it's my turn to be dictatorial."

"That seems fair."

"No quips about manhandling me? I'm almost disappointed. Now put those files down I'm going to give you a kiss."

-X-