

Certainty

by TeaOli

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Her first year in London had been full of doubt before he'd come along and widened her limited circle.

Tom always seemed nice enough. Charming and unfailingly polite. And he was generous; the handful of times she'd accepted his invitations to dine, he'd always chosen restaurants above her meagre means.

She gave up protesting the expense the third time, when he said, "Think nothing of it! A Ministry girl deserves a good meal, same as everyone." As always, his magnetic smile and insouciant demeanour had allayed any qualms she might have had about taking advantage. That *he* certainly never tried to take advantage was a thing for which she was certainly grateful.

But despite all those points in his favour, she knew it wouldn't – couldn't – become anything more than it was. Handsome as he was, he wasn't her Dougal.

"You made the right choice," he told her as they sipped coffee one night following another excellent meal. "It wouldn't have lasted. It never does with Muggles."

Minerva felt herself bristling, and she stiffened in the chair across from him, hoping her displeasure wasn't as baldly plain as it felt.

"They blame it on us," he went on, "but it's really because they fear us. They always end up trying to leave once they learn the truth."

"My father is a Muggle," she said evenly.

"So was mine."

"Da hasn't left Mam yet, and there are three of us to prove he's not afraid."

He laughed at that. It wasn't cruel or mocking, either. Anyone half listening would have thought she must have just shared the most amusing anecdote.

"No," he said. "I suppose they don't *always* leave. Some are too scared to go, and others are too afraid not to leave. Others still want to prove – to themselves, most likely – they aren't frightened. Even so, courage and bravado are very different things."

Placing her cup on the table, Minerva leant forward and offered him a soft smile. "Surely you aren't so cynical as to completely discount love as reason enough to stay?"

He returned the smile, but the expression didn't reach his eyes.

"Love?" This time, his laugh was bitter. "There is no such thing between wizard and Muggle. Only power and weakness. We possess the one, and they either fear or envy what we have. It wouldn't have lasted with your farmer, and it's better you realise that before you spend the rest of your life regretting debasing yourself for someone not

worthy of you.”

All at once, she saw him far more clearly. It wasn't only that he wasn't Dougal that made her hesitate. Tom wasn't at all the sort of man she wanted spend any more of her life with.

She pushed back her chair and stood.

“Thank you for dinner, Mr Riddle,” she murmured. “No need to get up. I'll see myself home.”

A/N: This originally appeared at HPCon_Envy as a response to bambu345's prompt: "...would you care to try Tom Riddle and Minerva McGonagall? While they were in school, perhaps, or just after.”

Thanks, bambu, for the challenging prompt, and thanks to linlawless for reading this through and catching my pesky missing words.