

Shall We Begin Anew?

by Southern_Witch_69

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One

Chapter 1 of 2

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I wrote this for the SSHG Exchange as a gift to purple_dolphin9. I will include her prompt for you at the end.

Traveling as a Muggle had its advantages Hermione supposed as she looked out of the window of the aeroplane as it crept up toward the building. A man wearing a neon orange vest waved his arms about to direct the plane, the large flashlights shining towards the correct path. There was an abrupt stop moments later. Passengers sprang to life, grabbing their carry-on luggage and making way for the exit after the captain's brief welcome announcement. She'd flown from London to Atlanta on a flight that lasted nine hours. Once there, she'd learned that her next flight had been delayed due to horrid weather conditions. However, she'd found a seat and peacefully read her book...or so it looked to passersby anyway. Hermione was quite certain she'd only turned her pages a few times at best. She'd mostly been lost in thought, even after nine hours of doing nothing but thinking before that.

And now here she was in Louisiana. She'd researched a great deal of information on Wizarding schools in the United States. It had come down to Salem's Witches Institute or the New Orleans School of Magic. Both had excellent Charms programs, which was her chosen profession after her job at the Ministry was taken. "Best not go there right now," she mumbled to herself, pushing thoughts of how'd she'd been fired from her mind. Mostly what had won her over to the South was that it had won awards for not only that program but also its Potions program.

She'd always liked Potions and had wanted to excel at it during her years at Hogwarts. When Harry had been doing better than she back in sixth year, Hermione had been utterly jealous. At first she'd thought it only because Professor Slughorn had been so taken with the idea that the famous Chosen One was in his class, but then had come the self-doubt. What if she wasn't as good as she thought? Snape never gave any of them...aside from Malfoy...any recognition, so she'd never suspected that she truly was only mediocre. However, she was put at ease when the truth about Harry's Potions book came to light. He'd been cheating. He hadn't been smarter than she.

How she'd wanted to gain Professor Slughorn's praise anyway. How she'd foolishly hoped that she could one day prove herself to Professor Snape, that he'd maybe have recognition for her. His praise would have meant more because he so rarely gave it to anyone. And then he'd died. She couldn't think of that night without regret and wished she'd done something more than just stand there as he bled to death.

As a hobby, she'd turned the attic of the home she'd shared with Ron and the children into a Potions lab. When she wasn't doing family duties or working, she was up tinkering in her lab. Being ambitious. Creating something nobody had been able to do, even Snape himself.

Hermione smiled for a moment in triumph, and then, ever so slowly, it faded into the pained grimace that her reflection constantly bore in the mirror. It had been her undoing. Had ruined her life.

"Yo, lady," a short, pudgy man called out. "You getting' off dis plane or what?"

"Sorry," she said promptly and scrambled up to fetch her small bag from the compartment overhead. "I just was waiting for everyone to clear off."

"Uh-huh," he replied in a disbelieving tone. "We check the plane for passengers before loading it again, you know."

"Sir, I assure you that I was not trying..."

"To be honest, I don't care, okay? I just want to get this plane cleaned up so I can carry my ass over to the Superdome. It's the last preseason game, and at this time, parking will be hard to come by." He hooked thumb toward the exit. "Thanks for flying Southwest Airlines."

She knew it didn't pay to reply. The rude man wouldn't be interested. She itched to pull her wand for a bit of Charmwork to teach him a lesson, maybe make all the oxygen masks fall down from their tight little compartments, but she dared not. For one reason, she was better than that, though she didn't mind fantasizing about it, and for the second reason, she wasn't quite certain how strict the laws on magic use were in New Orleans. She had been given a large tome that covered laws all over the United States when she'd gained permission to move there for work, and she'd yet to do more than glance at it, figuring she'd have plenty of time to do that once settling in. That alone should speak volumes as to how listless she'd become. When had learning or reading become an inconvenience?

"When Ron took the last bit I had away," she said quietly, trudging up the narrow passage to the exit. She heard the man snort behind her and mutter something that sounded like "crazy" along with a foul word. She shrugged that off as well. Why bother. Let him get on with it and get to his preseason game. Never truly being a sports fan, she wasn't sure what season was about to begin, but the moment she stepped into the baggage claims area, she knew it was nothing other than the American game of football. There were decorations all over. Shaking her head, she pressed through the crowd and waited for her two suitcases to come round to her side.

"Um, excuse me," said an uncertain, feminine voice.

Hermione turned to find a tall, slender lady standing next to her. "Yes?"

"Are you Hermione Granger?" she asked, looking round as if afraid to be overheard.

With a resigned sigh, Hermione nodded. "Yes, yes, I am." What would the girl say? Had news spread this far then? Couldn't she just get away from it all? Why couldn't people leave her alone?

"Awesome. I've already got your other bags Portkeyed to the school." She grinned and held out a hand. "Sam, by the way. I'm your assistant. They sent me over to get you."

"I apologize. I thought..."

Sam waved her hand in dismissal. "Long flight I guess. We'll go this way to the ladies' restroom. The last stall's the one we use to get out of here unseen."

"All right." Hermione followed Sam and watched the exaggerated sway of her narrow body. She wondered if the dark-haired girl was trying to appear more feminine, thinking moving about in such a way helped the fact that she had a slightly boyish frame.

People bustled about around them, most not even glancing in her direction and those who did paid no attention to her whatsoever. This made her brighten a little. Maybe she could find a little peace so that she could deal with her misery in silence. Her mum's face came to mind, and she wished that she could go to her as she had done when a child. How many times had Mum or even Dad held her close and let her know all would be well again? Not this time. How could it? This was no nasty little bugger teasing her about her big teeth or for being smart. Everything was gone: Ron, her children, her home, her job, her work...

Harry.

"Hey, look, are you okay?" Sam asked in concern. "You look like you're about to vomit." She nodded to a nearby stall. "Go for it. We've got time."

Hermione shook her head. "No. I just want to get to the castle."

Sam's eyebrows shot up. "Castle?"

"Sorry! Habit." Hermione flashed a genuine smile as she thought of Hogwarts. "The school I went to and could have taught at is actually a castle."

Nodding, Sam said, "Hogwarts. Read all about it. I want to go there one day. Hell, I want to meet Harry Potter!" She brought a hand up to her mouth. "Ah, fuck, sorry. Didn't mean to bring that up!"

Drawing in a deep breath, Hermione asked, "Do you know then?"

"Yeah. I wasn't going to let on. I'm sorry to mention it, and anyway, I definitely think those prudish idiots should..."

"Do-does everyone know?"

"If they do, and I haven't heard anyone mention it, I'm sure they're just like me and don't care what you're running from."

Running? "I'm not running! I just... Well, maybe I am at that, but only because I have no choice. This will spare my children further humiliation and..." She shrugged and squared her shoulders. "Can we?"

"Yep." Sam looked about for any lingering ladies, then shuffled Hermione into the stall. She pulled out a short, black wand, made of Hermione had no idea what, and tapped the tiles on the wall. Silently, the tiles shifted and a small doorway appeared. "Elevator," Sam explained and walked in.

Once inside, the door closed, and a few different buttons were pressed. They lurched sideways and remained in silence for a while before shifting up and stopping abruptly. When they got out the elevator this time, they were on the backside of a hotel's beautiful, and obviously expensive, marble lobby.

Sam smirked. "I've watched Muggles try to go in there before." She hooked a thumb at the elevator. "They just end up thinking it's broken. Hahahaha!! Suckers!"

Hermione broke into a grin. The girl's enthusiasm was a plus, and she appreciated that Sam didn't seem to judge her about her past nor seem to even care about it.

"Yeah, that looks a bit heavy," Sam mentioned, nodding toward the deceptively small bag that Hermione still pulled at her side. "Bet you have it all stuffed up." She flicked her wand once and then hid it in her sleeve. The bag felt light as a feather.

Grumbling internally, Hermione marveled that she hadn't thought to do that in the first place *God, I need time to clear my head, else I shan't teach anyone a thing except how to be a scatterbrain!*

Suddenly, Sam spun around and put a hand on Hermione's shoulder. "I must warn you about New Orleans before I take you into the streets." There was a long dramatic pause followed by a widening of eyes. "The people here are unlike anything you've ever seen. A nice British girl like yourself," this last spoken in a terrible impersonation of an Englishman, "may not survive."

Hermione tried to gauge if the girl was serious when Sam burst into laughter.

"Pahahaha! You should see your face." She gave her shoulder a squeeze. "You'll be fine, but you may see a nice rack or two before we get to the trolley."

"Rack of what?"

Sam brought both hands up to her chest as if about to cup her breasts. "Titties."

Hermione's cheeks reddened. "Right."

"Ah, it's slang. You'll get used to it."

"Right."

"Come on," Sam said, tugging on Hermione's sleeve. "And learn to say more than 'right' if you want to fit in." She paused. "Bunch of chatty ladies at the school."

Great, Hermione thought. Just what she needed...prying, gossipy women. There would be lots of questions then about her life back home. She'd just evade them, stay in her rooms and that would be that. She didn't need friends. When it came down to it, when you truly needed it, friends never really helped in the end.

Harry's face came to mind. How she missed him, but it was better this way. Otherwise, she might have taken him down with her, made him lose his family as well. One of them utterly failing was enough. Besides, at least Harry would be there for her children. That would have to be enough. Not that she wasn't angry with him for what had occurred, but she knew she had herself to blame. She'd done this. She'd brought this on them. If only...

Hermione's eyes widened. Sam was right. She hadn't been prepared. The first thing she saw when exiting the hotel was a man whose face was painted black and gold humping a flower pot while singing some sort of chant at the top of his lungs. Several others in different state of dress...or undress in the case of one woman...were also stomping and singing. All were carrying alcoholic drinks in their hands.

"What is Crunk?" Hermione asked Sam.

"I'll explain later," the girl yelled over the singing. "This way." She quickly led Hermione to the corner where a group of people began to cross over to a median where a red trolley waited.

Not bothering to compete with the goings on around them, Hermione simply remained silent as Sam paid for their ride with a card, chose seats, and then pointed out different places along the ride. There was a particular street that Sam couldn't believe Hermione had never heard of...though to be honest, it did sound vaguely familiar, but she didn't feel the want to rack her brain to remember why. Sam proudly pointed out a cemetery where one of New Orleans' most famous witches had been laid to rest. Marie Laveau, she boasted, had lived as a witch right in the public, going as far as to fabricate the tale of having a look-alike daughter take over her voodoo business to explain her long life. The city had so much history, and Sam didn't mind chatting about it. Unfortunately, it made the ride seem to go on and on until the tracks finally ended abruptly...at another cemetery no less. It was only the twentieth one she'd seen on the stretch of road, she thought dryly.

"It's huge, isn't it?" Sam asked, obviously proud. "Come on."

Hermione slowly followed her assistant across the street and into one of the nearby cemetery entrances. Sam led her through a maze of cement pathways, some in good condition, others mostly chunks of broken stone. They stopped in front of an old, decrepit mausoleum with a rusty gate surrounding it. The faded name etched in the stone was Smith.

With a quick glance around to be sure nobody was about, Sam beckoned Hermione closer. "This is the entrance."

"This?" Hermione asked in wonder. In the brochures and packets she'd received, there was no cemetery, and it definitely wasn't hidden underground. The grounds were huge and sprawling, peppered with different types of trees...all of them large and many with swooping branches that leaned back toward the ground. In fact, she'd envisioned herself perched on one of those whilst reading a book.

"Best disguise ever." Sam turned back to the gate, crossed over, and then disappeared.

"Of course," Hermione said aloud. "Just like Platform nine and three quarters." She followed suit and gasped as she stepped through to the other side. It was as a stark difference from the dreary cemetery. Greenery, trees, students milling about leisurely... Then she saw it, the huge plantation house and outer buildings that made up the New Orleans School of Magic...much more beautiful and quaint than anything shown in the pamphlets.

The house itself was three stories high; its paint looked as fresh and white as the day it had been put on. The way the sun shone from behind the building made it appear to have rays of light shooting out from behind it. Was this a good omen finally? "Wow." There were so many windows along the sides of the house, and a huge doorway stood in the center of the enormous front porch. She smiled as she saw two girls swinging on tires tied to ropes from a tree's thick dangling branch.

"It's such a peaceful place. I mean, right here in the middle of the city, and nobody knows it but we who are privileged!" Sam raised a hand to Hermione. "Give me five, girl!"

Relenting, Hermione gave in to her momentary happiness and slapped her palm against Sam's. "I think I'll like it here... depending on the others. I certainly hope they're like you, Sam. Truly. Thank you."

"No prob." Sam's smile faded as she looked to the roof of the house where there was a flat overhang that was decorated with plants and chairs. A lone solitary figure stood there, his black robes billowing about in the breeze.

Hermione felt the hair on the back of her neck tickle her skin as she got the sensation that something wasn't quite right, and her heart began to beat more quickly. Her arms and even legs filled with goosebumps. "Wh-who is that?" The way his long, black hair moved about in the wind...

Sam sighed. "One of the professors here. He's a quiet man and doesn't mix with us much at all. And when he does..." She shuddered. "Let's just say it's like he sees through you, knows what you're thinking."

When Hermione looked back to try for a better glance, he was gone. "He reminded me...for a moment..." Of what? She waved her hand in dismissal. "What's his name?"

"Seamus Ravenispe. We call him Professor Raven for short." She scrunched her face up. "In fact, haven't even heard anyone call him his full name. Just saw it on his paperwork...accidentally of course, when I was up in the headmistress' office trying to find yours." She smirked. "It made me giggle a little. I thought Raven was a nickname because of all that black he wears and how he kind of floats around like a sneaky bird. You never hear him!"

"I know a Seamus," Hermione said, thinking of her old friend back home. He was one of the few who hadn't said anything ugly to her and supported her actually.

"Must be a popular name back in Britain then. He's one of yours."

"Sorry?"

"Has one of those accents like you. Lucky. I wish I had one. Anyway, heard the librarian say that as a child he lived there but moved off to South America with his family." She wrinkled her eyebrows. "I think they are *friendly*, if you know what I mean."

"If it's any consolation, you do have one... to me. An accent, that is." Hermione smiled kindly, trying to push the man from her mind. It put her at ease to know he hadn't been in England in such a long time. He likely wouldn't know anything about what had transpired with her, which had been all over the papers for months. The *Daily Prophet* the worst of them.

"Ha! Cajun, I guess. Or Creole. Depending who you talk to."

A sudden lull in the conversation gave Hermione the break she needed. "My quarters?"

"Okay. I'll bring you there. Your office is adjoining your classroom. I can take you there next so you can settle in and start changing things to your liking."

"That's fine." Hermione followed Sam to the house, unable to shake the feeling of being watched.

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Much later as she lay in bed staring at the ceiling, she thought of how her evening had progressed. There was no formal dinner as there would have been at Hogwarts, regardless of the amount of students and staff present. Sam said on Saturday evenings, everyone sort of did their own thing but could order anything they wanted and eat in the main dining hall if they chose. Sam obviously had someplace to be, for she didn't even try to talk Hermione out of staying in. The headmistress was away on business and couldn't greet her, so she simply stayed in her rooms to get her things in order, claiming to have jetlag from the long flights.

"Handy excuse, that," she mumbled. She hadn't brought much with her, so her time hadn't been completely occupied. She wished now that she'd taken a stroll through the house to a wing other than the one that held her class and office. It was much larger than it looked from the outside. There weren't nearly the number of students that Hogwarts had, as this was a private institute, but from the size, she could tell there would be sizable classes nonetheless when school reconvened for the autumn session.

"Sod this," she said and got out of bed. She couldn't sleep, and the only thing that going to bed so early had done was burden her with lots of time to think. How she wished she could have Ron sit down for a rational talk! That would never happen. All he'd done when she'd tried it scream at her and call her horrible names. She was certain that he'd been waiting for an excuse to end things with her, and she would have agreed had he only asked. She thought that they were staying together until the children were older. They hadn't ever said that, but it was there in the room with them each time they were together. He had stopped looking at her in *that* way for a long time...since the year after Hugo's birth. At first she thought that it was because it had been harder to lose the weight she'd gained with the pregnancy, much of which she still kept unfortunately. However, now she realized that was when George and Ron had hired Gabrielle to be the spokeswitch for Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes. She'd been widowed and wanted to be closer to her sister for comfort, so to England she'd gone.

Ron had always thought Fleur and her sister to be beautiful, but when he mentioned her more and more, she thought it was the part Veela that had him thinking of the woman. Now she suspected he and Gabrielle had been lovers the last few years. He wouldn't admit it, and Harry didn't believe it, not at first, but it was all too coincidental.

One week after he forced her out of the home they'd made together with their children, Gabby had moved in. The story Ron told the paper was that his heart had been broken, and when he'd gone in to work and Gabrielle turned around to wish him a good morning, he'd fallen in love instantly. And being she was already so close to his family and children, he knew she would be the positive female influence his children needed.

The betrayal hurt. More than she'd wanted to admit. Still did. She decided to leave the country without a fight not long after Harry told her that Gabrielle knew too much about Ron to have learned it that fast. He'd also come to agree with her suspicions, but there was nothing for it. By that time, her children had been receiving horrible Howlers from people who 'couldn't believe any child would stand by such a horrible mother and publicly show disdain for someone as wonderful as Gabrielle' and other similar messages.

Leaving would save her children further heartache and humiliation. She'd tried to explain her intentions to them and that she wasn't abandoning them as Rose seemed to think, but it was hard to say all that she needed to say with a Ministry-appointed mediator sitting with them. When she'd left that day, she'd nearly walked into Molly Weasley as she left the building. The woman had sneered at her hatefully and muttered, "Good riddance to bad rubbish," hurting Hermione terribly.

Hermione looked out the open window and appreciated the sight before her. The grounds didn't have a grand lake, but it had a lovely pond. It looked quite inviting. Deciding to have a walk, she quickly slipped on her comfortable flat shoes, not bothering to change out the pyjamas she had on. No one would likely be out for a stroll at that time of night anyway...not that she cared what they thought of her appearance at this point.

The hallways and main corridor were vacant as she expected, and the night was deliciously peaceful outside, so she was quite surprised to hear a quiet, male voice greet her from the darkness just moments after she seated herself on a stone bench next to the pond.

Startled, she pulled out her wand without thinking. "Show yourself."

A dark silhouette stepped into view. "You needn't hex me. I, too, am simply trying to enjoy a peaceful walk in the moonlight."

Something stirred in her chest. There was something familiar about him. She wished she could see his face instead of only shadows. "I apologize. I'm new here."

"Yes. The new Charms professor." His words were abrupt.

"And you are?"

"They call me Raven."

Of course. That's what it was. The man from earlier. She should have known. His robes were again swaying in the breeze. "I saw you earlier."

"Indeed you did."

"Your voice..."

"Yes?"

Each word he spoke was annunciated clearly, silkily. She thought then of Professor Snape. His voice had been something many of the older female students had talked about. When she was younger, she couldn't understand why they would swoon over something like that when someone like Gilderoy Lockhart was about, but with age, she knew, had felt the shivers run down her spine as he'd glided up and spoke, making even insults sound appealing...occasionally anyway.

"I once had a... friend. He's...well, maybe since you're British." She swallowed nervously. Would he ask her questions?

He moved into view now and stood with the moon shining behind his back. She could see that his arms were crossed in front of him as he watched her. "I don't consider myself that anymore; it's been many years since I left."

Hermione suddenly longed to be home. What was she thinking to come here to bloody America? England would always be home to her. She didn't want to end up like Professor Raven, forgetting that part of him. Her children... Sighing, she stood. "I should go."

"You've only just got here."

She wondered if he was talking about her jaunt down to the pond or her move to America. Was it as Sam had said, that this man could almost read what was on her mind?  
"It feels as if I've intruded on your walk, sir."

"Nonsense."

Moving to the side to make her way around him and to backtrack to the house, she was able to take in more of his features. "Good Lord..."

"Yes?"

She shook her head to dismiss the notion that she'd found a doppelganger of her long dead professor. If she didn't know better, this man could be Snape's brother. Come to that, maybe the bloke was a cousin. The similarities in appearance, voice and manner were uncanny.

"As I said... you remind me of someone."

"Someone dear to you?"

"Yes," she said simply and moved past him. "Good night, sir."

"Why are you here?"

"Pardon?"

"Don't play coy with me. How did you find out?"

"Excuse me?" Her brow furrowed. What was he on about? "I saw it from my window and thought I'd like to sit here. I don't see why..."

"Are you saying..." There was a long pause. "Good night, Miss Granger."

This gave her pause. "He used to call me that. Say my name that way." Hermione turned around. "May I ask a question?"

"You just did."

She wished she could see his face more clearly. She'd wager there was a smirk playing about his lips. "A different one then."

"I reserve the right to not answer it of course."

"Of course." She stepped closer. "Are you related to someone named Severus Snape?"

An owl hooted in the distance. The tree branches creaked above them as they swayed. Something in the pond splashed once... twice...

"Who?" came his reply finally.

Her shoulders slumped slightly. For a moment she'd felt as if there might be a connection, something that would make her miserable exile a little appealing, make her long less for home. "He was a man who lost his life in the war against Voldemort."

Raven sucked in a breath.

"Ah, so you may not consider yourself British any longer," Hermione began, "but you know that name. How could the world not?"

"As you said, how could anyone not know of him or his actions."

Suddenly angry, mostly with herself, Hermione said, "It's a shame that anyone could know Voldemort's name and not Severus Snape's! If it weren't for him, all would have been lost." She shook her head. "Sorry. I didn't mean to strike out just then." With a small nod, she backed away. "I will leave you in peace."

Raven said nothing as she walked away, which she greatly appreciated.

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The next day was filled with Hermione getting her classroom decorated and trying to work up a syllabus that covered more information...and more efficiently...than the one previously used by the former Charms teacher. She'd still not seen the headmistress, and it was late in the afternoon by the time she realized she'd not eaten yet that day and went to find the kitchen to see what she could order.

As luck would have it, she bumped into Sam as she searched it out. The night before she'd been treated to food in her rooms by Buck, a kind house elf who'd been sent to see if she needed anything.

"Oh, good!" she said. "I'm famished and realized I have no idea where the kitchen is."

Sam laughed. "You need only call out for your elf or head to the dining room and call out what you'd like once you seat yourself."

"Well, I thought I'd get it on my own. I don't like to use the house elves if I don't have to."

"Ah, yes, I remember that about you."

Hermione stiffened. "It feels strange to have someone know so much about me, yet I know nothing of them in return."

Shrugging, Sam said, "I made it a point to know everything about you when I learned you'd come here since I'm the certified Charms professor's assistant."

"Thank you for not holding anything against me."

"After the last professor, it's a breath of fresh air to have someone open minded, able to let loose, able to show compassion."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, she disliked homosexuals for one. Thinks them against God."

"That's ridiculous," Hermione said in shock. "You'd think that being a witch, she'd realize... Wait, are you a lesbian? I don't mean to pry, but it seems like an important subject to you."

Sam laughed. "Professor Granger," she extended her hand as if meeting Hermione for the first time, "I am Sammy Ockmond, born as a male in body but female in mind."

Hermione blinked. Sam was a man. How could she not have known? "I am so sorry. I thought... I thought you were a woman."

"Everyone does unless I tell them. It's how I present myself because it's who I am. When she found out, she felt I'd betrayed her. Wanted me fired." She pretended to

punch Hermione on the arm. "Don't look like you've just walked in front of a trolley. It's all right. Trust me. I'm just glad that even knowing, you still accept me."

"Of course I do."

"Exactly. I knew you would. Now... about that food."

"Is that why she's gone?"

"Yep. I was here before her, always did a good job, and the headmistress wasn't having it. Told her to chill out or get on her way. Guess she got on, didn't she?"

Hermione watched Sam covertly as they made their way to the kitchen and realized that she'd been utterly clueless. When had she become so unobservant? How could something obvious be right there under her nose and she not see it? This would never have happened before...

"This is it." Sam motioned towards a large, floor-length mirror. "Any staff member or student with clearance can get in by simply walking through."

"Thank you."

"I'm gonna find a brownie I think." She laughed. "Come on."

The kitchen was huge, everything from top to bottom had been polished to the point of shining, and she was pleasantly surprised to see both house elves and humans bustling about. "Brilliant," she said, moving to accept a glass of iced tea. "I prefer hot, but it's not bad," she told Sam when the kind lady had moved away.

"Everyone loves this down here in Louisiana. Best drink ever." Sam sat at an island counter and tapped her fingers. "Think I'll have a ham and cheese po-boy...pickles, mustard, lettuce, tomatoes, and ketchup." She snickered and added, "And a brownie."

"I'd like some Cottage Pie, I think."

Sam looked at her peculiarly. "I want to change my order. I'll have some of what she's having."

Hermione was pleased and, for the first time, felt like she might have a real friend again. "Thank you for being so nice to me."

"Do you need to talk?" Sam asked seriously.

"What the papers said about me," Hermione began, "wasn't true."

"I did read that you denied what they accused you of. Your ex-husband... what an asshole."

"A right arse indeed. I can't believe he turned his back on me like that, wouldn't even let me explain."

"I don't understand why they didn't just give you Veritaserum or... something. You know, find out the truth."

"They did. It didn't work in my favor."

"But..." Sam was obviously confused.

Hermione shook her head. "I will tell you one day. I don't want to get into it right now." What could she say? That she'd created something so unique, so powerful, so undetectable, that her brilliance had worked against her in the end. *Ah... Harry, if only you'd been smarter.*

"Okay." It was a simple word, but it meant so much.

No prying. No expectations.

The rest of the day passed quickly after lunch. Hermione finally met with the headmistress to go over all that was needed. The woman was quite large and had a kind countenance; however, Hermione knew the witch wasn't to be trifled with and took her duties as head of the school very seriously. It was no wonder the previous Charms professor hadn't lasted.

Touching only briefly on her past, Headmistress Simmons welcomed her and told her that what had happened there could stay there as far as she was concerned, as everyone had the right to privacy, but if Hermione ever wanted to sit down for a few cups of coffee and tell her all about her time in the war against the Dark Lord Voldemort, she'd be quite interested.

Professor Raven hadn't been about all day, and Hermione found herself stopping to think of him several times. She'd hoped to see him in the bright light of day to see if there truly was a resemblance to Professor Snape or if she'd been allowing the moonlight to play with her mind the night before. And why was it that for a single moment he'd seemed annoyed that she'd gone down to the pond when he'd seemed amiable before that?

Hermione found herself looking out her window again later that night and saw him out near the pond. She longed to go to him, but she refrained, not wanting to intrude. A few times, it almost seemed as though he'd turn around and gaze up towards her window. Was he expecting her to return? Maybe he thought she owed him a further apology for her outburst.

Maybe she did at that. As she put on her cloak, she thought about how pathetic she actually was. Her longing for home, for some piece of it, had her running out in the middle of the night to pester a man she'd only just met. He might not consider himself British, but he was all the same, and even more, he reminded her of the bravest man, aside from Harry, that she ever knew. *Harry wasn't very brave in all of this, was he?* she thought snidely. "Stop," she told herself. "I did this."

Her trek out to the pond was short and went unnoticed by anyone. Raven was standing there with his back to her, his arms crossed in front of his chest as he gazed out over the calm water. He spoke first.

"I wondered if you'd come."

She stopped at his side and mirrored his stance. "I nearly didn't."

"You've been looking out your window for the past thirty minutes."

"Sorry."

There was a long silence, though she didn't feel uncomfortable. Instead, she enjoyed the presence at her side and felt as if she could draw strength from him.

"You want to say something," Raven said finally.

"I... Why is it that you haven't been at the house all day? I saw everyone but you."

"Maybe I don't go out during the day."

She knew full well that he did, having seen him in the daylight as he stood on the roof when she'd arrived. "But you teach classes here."

"I do."

"At night only then?"

"Perhaps."

She smiled despite his maddening evasiveness. "Are you a vampire?"

"Would you fear me?" His silken voice spoke of warning.

Hermione's smile faded as she turned to gaze up at him. Would she? It felt as if she should, and yet... "Should I?"

"Perhaps."

A moment. "Are you?"

"No."

She moved to sit on the bench she'd used the night before. "Would you join me?"

"Should I?" he asked, turning toward her.

"Perhaps."

Raven sat next to her and gazed at her. "What are you expecting?"

"Sorry?"

"What do you want from me?"

"I thought... I don't know."

"Miss Granger, if you insist on watching me, following me about, then I should know why." When she said nothing, he said, "I am not your *old friend*."

"He wasn't my friend."

"No? But you claimed so, spoke so vehemently in his defense, said he was dear to you. I surely thought he was someone quite close."

"He never let anyone close. Actually, he was one of my professors at Hogwarts. All the time we knew him, we had no idea who he really was. Sometimes what a person shows isn't what he truly is."

"Could one say the same about you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Tell me about the end of your marriage."

Hermione froze. "You know... But you cut ties with our world!"

"Only what's been said in the *Prophet*. Just because I don't go there or speak to anyone from there doesn't mean I don't still get a copy of the paper to read."

She stood abruptly. "Rita Skeeter isn't above printing lies!"

"I gathered," he replied drolly. "Sit down. Spare me your dramatics."

Hermione remained standing. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"After you ran off, you mean? We spoke all of what, two minutes?"

"It's very private."

At this he stood, towering over her. "Don't speak to me about privacy! It's all I want from *your* lot, and yet here you are!" He began to pace. "I thought you knew, had purposely come here, but then I realized you had no bloody idea!"

"What are you on about?"

Raven flicked his wand and whispered, "*Lumos*."

His face fully came into view for the first time. Raven had black hair that fell about his face in thick curtains, layered to flip out here and curve in there. It reminded her even more of Professor Snape, but his face was wrong. He had nearly the same eyes, not as black. His nose wasn't hooked at all. His cheekbones were wrong. And yet...

"Well?"

"I am still confused."

"Daft."

"Pardon me! Need you be so rude? You're speaking in riddles."

"*Finite Incantatem*," he said as he pointed his wand at his body. Raven's features began to change.

"Oh my God. It can't be!" Hermione backed away from him.

"Why ever not?" said a man who could be no other than Severus Snape.

"I saw him die! How dare you use what I told you against me, to play tricks!" Hermione tripped as she turned to flee and rolled into the pond with a splash.

He stepped forward and outstretched a hand to help her up. She refused him. "Live in your little ball of denial, Miss Granger, but know this, you will say nothing to any of them about my true identity unless you want the world to know where you've come to hide." He left her lying in the mud and strode back toward the house, disappearing in darkness.

"Severus Snape is alive," she whispered aloud as if to make it real. She knew there was something familiar about him, had even thought he resembled Professor Snape,

but she'd never in her wildest dreams imagined this possibility. She'd seen him die! Had given Harry a flask to collect his memories moments before he'd taken his last breath.

Two

Chapter 2 of 2

Hermione is forced to make a decision that takes her from England to America after she loses all she cares about. She begins a new life at a Wizarding school there only to meet the mysterious Professor Raven, who seems so familiar to her for some reason...

The next few days passed quickly. More students getting situated in their dorms before the classes began for the year. Hermione, being an advisor to those who intended to choose a field that involved Charms usage, had to meet with many of them. She'd seen Snape, no, Raven, a few times, mostly during meals and once in the library, and he'd not even glanced her way. Sam had been at her side nearly the entire time, which helped to keep her mind occupied.

But at night, she'd lain awake for hours thinking. Of him. How he'd survived. How he'd faked his burial. She caught sight of herself in the mirror and frowned. Her hair had partially fallen out of the clip she'd had it pulled up with, and there were dark circles under her eyes. Long days and sleepless nights should be things she'd got used to by this point. It was then she realized that she'd not been thinking of Ron lately.

For the first time in five days, she went to her window and pulled back the curtain to look out at the pond. There was a full moon tonight, so if he was there, she would be able to see him...unless he purposely clung to the shadows out of sight.

But he didn't hide. He was right where he'd stood the last time, and at that moment, he turned to look up at her window for a moment before moving to sit on the bench. She took that as an invitation and started her walk out to meet him, pulling her hair back up in her clip as she did so.

"So," he said softly, "you've finally digested what you now know and are ready to ask your usual hundred questions."

"Did my questions always bother you so much?"

"Yes."

She sat next to him. "Then let's play a game. We each get three questions and honest answers... each night."

"Miss Granger..."

"Call me Hermione. Please."

"Very well, Hermione, but I insist on two. Three may be a bit much at once."

"All right. Shall I go first?"

"No, you shan't." He smirked. "You can start by answering what I'd asked the other night."

"The end of my marriage," she said in resignation. "Of course."

"Your idea, this question and answer game."

"Ron sought to end our marriage when witness accounts of me being unfaithful surfaced. There were even memories that were submitted as evidence against me to be considered as if they were photographs, as there were no true pictures."

"You spoke of lies written by Skeeter. It sounds as though you deny the accusations."

"Is this your second question?"

"Well, your first answer is unsatisfactory."

"But it was an answer all the same."

"Very well. Let me rephrase my second question."

"All right."

"When these false accusations came about, *pictures* included, how is it that you were unable to prove yourself? Where the hell was Potter...after you stood by him all those years at that!"

"Careful," Hermione said with a rueful smile. "You almost sound indignant on my behalf."

He arched an eyebrow. "Well?"

"I will give you an answer as soon as you answer something for me."

"Go on then. I suppose it's only fair."

"How did you survive? I was there in the end."

"I'd actually been taking antivenin... just in case. You saw me nearly die. When they came back for me, they saw this, gave me Blood-Replenishing Potion, and secreted me away."

"Who are 'they'?"

"Is that your second question?"

Hermione frowned. "I suppose it is."

"Lucius, Narcissa, and Draco."

"What! And they never told anyone? That's horrible! So many people would have..."

"I have my reasons." His voice was clipped.

"Everyone knows you were a good man."

"That has nothing to do with it," he replied. "And you've used up your two questions for this night."

"Fine. Tomorrow night then for that. As for why I couldn't prove my innocence, well, it's complicated."

"I have time."

"The picture-style memories that were semi-published (brought forth for anyone in the courtroom to have a look at) and the eyewitness accounts, those were not faked. There was no set up. They were not of me, but of someone in disguise as me. I couldn't prove it wasn't me because it was something I created that when drunk disallowed detection in every aspect: be it Veritaserum, memory viewing of the taker or the giver of the potion, traces of it in your body go undetected, and so on."

"What did you create? New Polyjuice?"

She arched an eyebrow. "That will be a question for tomorrow night."

Snape snorted. "The Malfoys have always been my friends, even in dark times. They came to take me off because they didn't want anyone to destroy my body before it was properly buried. You saw what a couple of Death Eaters got done to them before the Aurors came in to put a halt on outraged parents' actions." He shrugged. "By the time I healed up and they realized, and the world, that I was Albus' man all along, I wanted a new life. Someplace else so I could reinvent myself. I could finally be my own man...no arsehole father ruling over me, no Dark Lord, no Dumbledore. So far, it's been peaceful enough."

"You sound as though there is longing in your voice."

"I admit that at times I do get lonely. Not that I am not accustomed to being alone, but I do miss home, having people who truly know me by my birth name."

"I'm sorry." Hermione meant it and understood completely. "It's a very hard decision to leave everything you know."

"Indeed."

"Ever since I had the Polyjuice mishap back in my second year, and then later when Barty Crouch, Jr. paraded about as Moody all those months, I've been obsessed with a better Polyjuice Potion. When we went in to Gringotts Polyjuiced as Death Eaters, even with the longer lasting potion you'd created, we ended up being detected. It only made me want to be the one to create something to get through any detection, including those at Gringotts."

"Why?"

"For the accomplishment, the challenge. I couldn't get funding at work, as it wasn't my department, so I did it at home in my spare time. I planned to show my work to the Ministry and have them buy the rights to it." She shrugged. "There's still the need for espionage at times, you know."

Snape nodded. "Of course."

"Well, it works. I got someone to test it for me. Unfortunately, I let him use my hair, not seeing the harm of him being me for a bit." She wiped a stray tear from her eye. "Sadly, he didn't make the best choices that night. I couldn't prove it wasn't me. No matter what I did or said, it came back that the person was me, not anyone else. I did have notes on a possible reversal potion that I'd been toying with, but conveniently, they disappeared. I expect the enchantment mixed with it had something to do with that...made it vanish so as to make sure the truth remained hidden."

"That's a dangerous potion," he said, though she detected a hint of appreciation in his voice.

"How many times I wished you had lived, that we could have been friends or colleagues, that I could have shared this with you."

"And the person who did this? Why didn't he or she come forward? Was it sabotage?"

This time Hermione could no longer hold back her sorrow. Many tears began to glide down her cheeks, and she knew the loud, heart-wrenching sobs would follow. "N-not tonight," she said, rising to hurry away. She felt his eyes on her the entire time.

~~~~~

The next few days saw Hermione avoiding Severus in the evenings. She wanted to confide in him, but she didn't want to hear the snide remarks that were sure to come with the answers to his questions. Maybe the question game wasn't very smart after all. She'd simply wanted answers to her questions but didn't want to give any.

No. That wasn't true. She wanted to talk. Wanted to tell someone the full truth. Someone who would believe her, would commiserate with her, would understand. Severus Snape knew how it felt to be an outsider, disliked, but would he have compassion for her problem or would the dark sarcasm she remembered so well make an appearance.

An owl flew in her open window and dropped a single sheet of parchment at her feet before flying back out.

The spiky scrawl on the paper simply read: *It was Potter, wasn't it? Come to me. I am at our usual spot.*

"What are you playing at, Professor?" she asked aloud.

Reluctantly, she made her way out onto the grounds, uncertain what to expect. "Professor."

"Severus," he replied, sliding over in invitation. "You afforded me the courtesy of using your given name."

"Look, I..."

"I may look the same to you, but things are different now," he said, interrupting her. "It feels as though I am a changed man. Oh, I still feel the same about most things, but I don't have to project myself in a certain way. If I don't like your hair," he smirked and glanced at her messy bun, "I don't have to be ugly about it. Not that I had to before, but it's who I was supposed to be."

"Playing the part," she commented.

"Yes."

"Do you dislike my hair?" she asked, small smile.

"It suits you."

"Thanks." Her smile faltered. "Hang on. Is that good or bad?"

"You decide," he replied slyly.

"So you are saying that you don't have to shut yourself away. *You* can come out."

"Yes. It seems that I am still a man who enjoys solitude; however, I do crave company at times and wouldn't be opposed to having a friend."

"Me?"

"I think so."

This made Hermione smile brightly. "I'd like that."

"Besides, it wouldn't be the first time a woman has need of my shoulder thanks to a rotter named Potter."

"Oh! Really, Severus," she said, shaking her head. "If I couldn't tell you'd just made a joke, I might be offended."

"Did I?" he asked, placing a hand on his chin as if pondering the answer.

"You did indeed." She reached over without thinking and took his hand in hers to squeeze it. He looked as though he might pull it back but then relaxed, allowing her to grasp it. "I am happy to have made a friend here."

He gave her a true smile. "I confess it's a plus to have someone English."

They sat in companionable silence for several minutes, just watching the small waves lap the shore. Hermione was happy that the grounds were charmed so that there was no humidity, no overbearing heat, and no mosquitoes. She definitely appreciated the magical breeze they'd created to sweep over the grounds. It made the state's climate easier to adjust to. It was something they'd made sure to print in the brochures; obviously, it had been a deterrent for some in the past.

"I suppose I'll go up. With the first day of classes starting on Monday, I still have much to prepare," Severus said.

"But... didn't you want to talk about Harry?"

He stood. "Not until you're ready." Severus took a couple of steps back. "I just didn't want you to keep avoiding me."

With that, he strode off towards the house, and her mind could only acknowledge that he truly was a changed man... and she liked it.

~~~~~

The next night, it was Hermione who got to the pond first. As she waited, she went over all the things she intended to tell him. She was only a little nervous, for she trusted him now, knew he'd not berate her or ridicule her actions.

"Ah, look who's come out early tonight."

"Hello, Severus," she said, patting the bench. "I want to say some things please."

"Very well."

"When you wrote to me that you knew it was Harry I'd entrusted with my creation, I was relieved that you'd guessed, that I didn't have to come out and say it." She sighed. "I still want to explain what happened. I'm ready to do so."

"All right, Hermione."

The way he looked at her, the way he spoke her name, she felt the first stirring of something more in her stomach... a small tingle, a sensation. This confused her a little, but she plowed on with her words.

"As I said earlier, I wanted to perfect Polyjuice Potion, having experience with it, knowing what it lacked... It was because of you mostly."

"Me? How so?"

"Well, look at all you had to endure, playing that role all those years."

"I didn't need Polyjuice for that, Hermione. In the beginning, I was that bitter, cynical man, angry that Potter had taken the only woman I'd ever cared for, that my own stupidity had turned her against me, and when the need called for me to embellish that part of myself, I gladly accepted that role."

"Maybe that's not what I meant. For people who couldn't mask their true allegiance like you could. People like Ron, Harry, and me who needed to badly but could only use what was available." She leaned forward so that her elbows rested on her thighs and didn't look at him as she spoke. "You are an Occlumens, you can hide your thoughts. Not everyone can do it. Harry learned to do so."

At this, Severus snorted.

"He's much better now." She gave him a sideways glance and appreciated the smile on his lips. "I never could do it, not really. So... I found a way to include that in my Polyjuice."

Severus sucked in a breath. "You mean to say..."

"Yes. I could take the potion, become someone else and lie to the best Legilimens around, and he would never know the difference...without even trying to hide the truth in my mind. This also means that Veritaserum doesn't force the truth out."

"But after..."

"No, the enchantment I used with the ingredients void it even after. Harry took the potion, went about as me, and neither of us could tell the truth about it when it counted. I can tell you now; rather like a he said, she said type of thing, but I can't prove it. When we were together, in the same room, all that came out was that he'd never taken the potion, but yes, he knew I was experimenting with making some, and that it was Hermione Granger who stole into his bedroom and began to make love to his drunken wife."

Severus' eyes bulged. "What the fuck was that idiot thinking?"

"Apparently that it would be hot to make love to his wife as a woman, but he didn't realize, even though I emphatically told him, that if anyone saw him, there was no way to explain he wasn't him. He was supposed to stay at my house while Ron and the kids were at the Burrow for a sleepover night of games with George's and Bill's families to see how long it took to wear off, but Molly Flooed nearly seven hours in to see if I had seen Harry because Ginny had come home after having too many pints at a Hen party for Parvati, so naturally, he'd hurried home to help her and to be sure the kids didn't need anything."

"I thought Miss Patil married long ago to a Slytherin Draco had said."

"Oh, that didn't last. Neither did her next marriage." Hermione waved a hand in dismissal. "Anyway, Harry told Molly to go on home that he'd sent me over to help out until he could get there. Molly did leave... for a little while."

"No, you don't mean to say..."

"Yes. Harry helped Ginny undress, never could hold her liquor that one, and apparently, she was quite oblivious, letting him do whatever he wanted, and he says he couldn't help himself...the thought of his wife with another woman and even better if *he* were the woman."

"But to use your body, betray your trust that way."

Hermione nodded and wiped away a few tears that had fallen. "I was so angry and hurt, but I can understand on some level."

"So, I expect Molly returned to catch him in the act."

"He said she went mad, hexing and screaming. That sort of brought Ginny around, and then she began crying, vomiting... It was horrible." She sighed. "They Flooed Ron, and Harry fled to where I'd gone...Muggle library just to be sure we weren't both at the same place you see."

"And?"

"After I made sense of what he was saying...and Transfigured something other than underclothes for him to wear...we tried to Apparate together to show them it wasn't me."

"I surmise it didn't work."

"Of course not. My wandwork at its best... wouldn't allow the real me to be in the same place as the Polyjuiced me in the presence of anyone, else it would give him away." She shrugged. "The ultimate spy weapon."

"How is it that you can tell me the truth though?"

"I can say it all I want, but I can't prove it. Harry can't back me up. For all you know, I may be lying, telling you a fantastic story."

"May I look?"

Hermione frowned. "I suppose... as long as you don't go where you shouldn't be."

"I apologize. I shouldn't have requested such a thing."

"No, really. I can understand the curiosity." She touched his face, turning it so that he could gaze into her eyes. "Look. I will try to think only of giving Harry the potion."

"Legilimens," he said smoothly, delving into her mind.

Hermione showed Potter a phial and laughed as she drank it quickly. Potter shrugged as nothing happened and yawned, stretching his arms. "Think I'll take a nap while you mess with that," he said.

"Go on. I'll keep working on this."

"Right then. Wake me if Molly Floos me. She's watching the kids while Gin's out tonight."

"Sure."

The scene began to change. Severus should have left her mind but was mesmerized with what he saw.

Hermione, Potter, and Weasley were at a grave...the one they believed him to be buried in, thanks to Lucius' trickery. She was crying while Weasley awkwardly patted her on the shoulder and Potter, also looking stricken, held her hand.

He pulled away. "S-sorry." His voice was tight, emotional.

"So am I. Couldn't stop myself from thinking it."

Severus coughed to clear his throat. "So it makes a false memory. Doesn't show Potter having anything to do with it at all, even setting up an alibi for him should you try to bring his part to light."

"You got it."

"What happened? After you realized you couldn't both Apparate to his home?"

"It took eight more hours for it to wear off finally, and when we both returned together, as ourselves, the damage had been done. And he couldn't tell them the truth. The only thing that would leave his mouth is, 'Hermione had been there.' They insisted that I'd gone to him, held him captive to try to convince him to be on my side and beg forgiveness. Do you know that had a lot to do with why I lost my job at the Ministry? Harry refused to press charges and plainly said he'd not been held against his will, so they couldn't charge me, but just the circumstances, Percy and Mr. Weasley being higher ranking employees, and that I'd accosted the great Harry Potter's wife; well, you can guess..."

"Miss Granger...Hermione...I am very sorry you had to endure this alone." This time, he reached out to take her hand, which she accepted with ease. "Your brilliance has been your undoing. Such a thing is a tragedy."

"My brilliance forced me to leave all I ever knew while your brilliance enabled you to have that freedom. What a pair we are."

"But a pair nonetheless." He didn't release her hand as he spoke. "When I found out you were coming here, I imagined having to Oblivate you, thinking you were coming here for your own purpose...maybe even to out me or badger me to return home. Then I saw into your assistant's mind that you were leaving because of home problems...he thought of the newspaper articles often, and I could see them clearly each time I delved into his mind."

"She."

"Sorry?"

"Sam is a woman in here," she said, touching her heart.

"I concede. You are right. *Her* thoughts prompted me to purchase a single paper to read for myself. Apparently, it was older news by then and nothing complete as what you are saying now was in there."

"No, they tried to hush things up because of the Weasleys and Harry. All that was ever said was that I denied any wrongdoing, claiming there was an imposter, but with eyewitness accounts...Ron, Molly, Ginny...what could I do? They just reported that I'd tried to seduce Harry's wife. Then, naturally, other stories surfaced about lesbian affairs I'd had with others, all rubbish! Just slugs trying to get some piece of fame and a payout to go away."

"Again, I loathe this for you."

"Thank you, Severus. You don't know how good it feels to be able to talk to someone. Someone who knows them all, someone who can actually see the possibility of such a potion. Do you know the Ministry wouldn't buy it, nor would they look at my research? When I finally got through to Kingsley, I realized that my work would end up being lost if I gave it over. They'd keep it for themselves to use, and I would never get cleared."

"I... One day, we will find a way to clear your name."

Hermione smiled ruefully. "I've thought the same thing, but it seems so hopeless. I've been trying to recreate my notes, but I can't even pull the proper memories out to view them."

"Nothing is hopeless. Not anymore." Here he smirked. "You didn't have me before. Imagine what our brilliance combined can yield."

She hugged him fiercely, not caring that he'd stiffened, not caring when her body began shaking with loud, powerful sobs. She was not alone. She had Severus Snape. One day she might be able to explain the truth to her children, sod the rest! Just so Rose and Hugo knew she would never have hurt them that way, that she only left because she had no choice. Her sobs subsided several minutes later, but she remained wrapped in his arms, enjoying the way he now ran his fingers through her hair, which she'd wore down for a change and had taken care to make sure it was presentable.

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With the start of the new school year, Hermione had very little time for herself as she adjusted to the new routine of classes, advising students, and grading assignments, but she'd still met with Severus each night even if only for a few minutes. They had conversed about some of the things she'd told him, but he never pried. Instead, he started telling her more about how he'd become Raven, what he liked about the new persona, what he missed.

Hermione found herself heading to the library to check out a few books that she needed for her research on revealing enchantments when she heard Severus' silky voice.

"Good afternoon," he said.

She turned in the direction of his voice to greet him back but realized he wasn't talking to her. And he was glamourous.

"Professor Raven! Where have you been?" said a tall woman with long, red hair. The lady reached out and rubbed his arm affectionately as one might when greeting a lover. "I've been lonely these past couple of weeks."

"I've been preoccupied; however, I've made time for you now, haven't I?"

The lady laughed. Hermione hated the sound.

"Well," she said, "it's a little early, but you know you're always welcome, although I'd prefer you come after hours."

"No one is about," Severus replied smoothly, reaching out to open the door and gesturing for his companion to enter.

"Come on then. We can make it a quick one."

Hermione stood rooted to the spot in the hallway, still staring at the door they'd gone into. She couldn't help the disappointment she felt and didn't move until she heard Sam's laughter from behind her.

"Saw that? Hahahaha. Told you they were doing it. Saw him sneak out of here late nights many times," Sam said cheerfully. Her grin disappeared when she saw Hermione's expression. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm fine," Hermione said as she spun on her heel and hurried away.

Sam chased behind her. "You are not fine. Damn it! Stop!"

"What do you want?" Hermione's voice was clipped, and she was quite certain she was holding back more tears. Why would seeing Snape go off with that woman make her feel as much pain as seeing her ex-husband walk off with another woman? Or, worse, actually.

"Shit, do you have a thing for Professor Raven?" Sam's eyes were wide. "I barely see the two of you talk at meals... How did that happen?"

"I do not," Hermione replied indignantly.

"Uh, yeah, I think you do. What's going on here?" Sam's brow furrowed in thought. "I don't get it. Is it because he's British?"

Hermione shook her head. "Just leave off."

"No, I won't."

"You have no right to stick your nose in my business!"

Sam looked as if she'd been slapped. "I think of you as a friend. You deal with enough alone already. Just wanted to help, but fine. I'll mind my own business~~Professor~~." The stung girl strode off, leaving a regretful Hermione behind without a backward glance.

That night Hermione didn't go down to meet Severus, and she didn't reply to the invitation his owl sent.

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A week later on an early Saturday morning, Hermione ventured down to the pond just before dawn and sat on the bench she used to share with Severus. When she'd seen Sam again after their talk in the hall, the girl acted as though nothing had been amiss, for which Hermione was grateful. One day soon, she would speak with Sam and let her know more of the truth about her past. She'd been a good friend and deserved that much.

"You look lovely... the way the sun's first rays are coming up over the horizon and coloring your long locks just so."

Severus.

Slowly, Hermione turned around. "What are you doing here this early?"

"Still trying to avoid me then?"

"Yes," she said simply and turned away.

"Why? What have I done to deserve this treatment?"

"Ha! That's the rich part about it. You've done nothing wrong. It's me."

"Ah, the it's not you, it's me ploy. That's something I've heard a few times before." He sat next to her. "And it's rubbish. I demand your honesty."

"It doesn't matter."

"It matters to me."

"Indeed?"

"Yes."

What did she have to lose? *So much*, a voice whispered.

"I saw you the other day with the librarian."

"So?"

"So... she's tall, beautiful, and a redhead. Everything you like in a woman, I imagine."

"Hermione, Amber is a friend."

"I know she is. Sam told me." She crossed her arms over her chest. "And you deserve friends, even those sorts. It's me I'm angry with."

He arched an eyebrow. "Go on."

"These past few weeks, getting to know you, being closer to you, feeling like I finally had someone I can trust on my side, I didn't realize what I felt, but when I saw you with her, heard the exchange, it hurt, and that's when I knew that at some point, I'd started falling for you."

Severus remained quiet and turned to gaze out at the pond, the artificial breeze blowing his hair about. Hermione sucked in a breath of air as she realized how magnificent the man truly was. How had she not thought him attractive? She supposed it had to do with him being a professor and much older, but now, being colleagues so many years later, they were equals. She'd aged, but he looked the same, timeless.

"Say something," she finally said, hating the silence.

"Amber has a love for Exploding Snap, so I play a few games with her, and in return, she plays three card brag with me." He shrugged. "We play for books, not money."

"But..."

"You should have talked to me. I had no idea what had gone wrong. I, too, have been enjoying your company. Yes, she has lovely, straight, long, red hair, but if you are thinking that I think of Lily when I am with her, you are wrong. Over time, tastes change. Now, it appears that I rather like messy brown hair that falls out of hair clips in just a way that makes me want to reach out and curl it about my fingers." He rose and straightened out his robes as if they were wrinkled. "Going forward, I expect only straightforward actions from you. Never do this again."

"I feel foolish." Hermione's cheeks heated, and she knew they were red. "I'm sorry. I just... I thought why would you bother with me if you had someone like that, and then I realized I had no right to even hope that you might... you know, want me in the first place."

He extended a hand. "Let's have breakfast together in the dining room."

As they walked to the house, she noticed that he hadn't replaced his glamour. "You aren't Raven."

"I thought maybe it was time to show myself."

Hermione frowned. "Are you certain? You've been going on about how you enjoy being Raven. Why the sudden desire to become Severus Snape again?"

"I've always Severus Snape, Hermione, and part Raven. I just never had this opportunity before." He paused. "On second thought..." He waved his wand and replaced his glamour. "Maybe I'm not ready at that."

She simply nodded and didn't release his hand as they entered the house, nor when they walked into the dining room. Those who noticed seemed surprised, then pleased. Sam's eyebrows wagged up and down, and her grin never left her face throughout the meal.

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Three months later, Hermione stood at the window facing the pond in her room, waiting for Severus to return. He'd decided that as a Christmas gift, not only to her but to himself, he'd return to England and declare himself alive and well. He'd asked that she not go, and she was hurt at first, but then she appreciated his request. She wasn't ready to face anyone there. Not yet. He sent a letter to let her know he was back in New Orleans but had a stop to make before returning home. That had been over an hour.

She sighed and made to turn away from the window, but then she saw him striding up towards the house. Reminding herself of an overexcited schoolgirl, she began waving from the window, bouncing up and down as she did so. He gave her a single wave in return and, with a loud crack, he Apparated into her room.

"Hello," he greeted, opening his arms to her.

She went to him and held him tight. "Only a few days, but how I missed you, how I worried something would go wrong. If you hadn't sent word that all was going well that second day, I might have gone there to be sure they didn't toss you into Azkaban!"

Severus placed a single kiss atop her head and pulled back to look her, expression quite serious. "We need to talk."

"I'm worried again."

"You needn't worry, but I may have overstepped my bounds."

Hermione pulled away from him and sat on a nearby chaise. "All right."

Severus went to her and knelt before her taking her hands in his. "I confess there was another reason for going to England."

"Oh no! You didn't hurt Ron, did you?"

"Would you care if I had?" he asked, eyebrow arched.

"Only if it hurt my children and their care. Otherwise, not really."

"I didn't hurt Weasley, not physically, but I did make things known."

"What things?"

"Things such as his longtime affair with his assistant, his other extramarital activities, the fact that he paid two women to claim they'd had sexual relationships with you after what happened with Ginevra..."

"What! He wouldn't... couldn't."

"He did and has admitted to it all. As well as hiding your notes on the possible reversal spell for the potion. It wasn't the magic. It was Weasley."

Emotion, thick and overpowering, threatened to envelope Hermione; her breath came in shallow, fast pants. "Can't breathe."

Severus leaned forward and kissed her soundly on the lips, shocking her. She pressed her lips back against his and deepened their kiss, bringing her hands up to cup his face tenderly. Affection with Severus was always something to be cherished, but at this moment, she needed it badly...needed him. She tried to pull him closer, wanting to initiate something they'd yet to partake in, but he pulled back, holding her hands in his own.

"I need you to read something for me."

A copy of the *Daily Prophet* was pulled from his pocket.

Ron had made the first page, as had Gabrielle. The picture showed Gabrielle trying to hide her face from the photographer while Ron, looking afraid and outraged at the same time, tried to wave the person off, obviously not wanting to comment.

Hermione took the newspaper from Severus and opened it up.

## THE TRUTH ABOUT HERMIONE GRANGER: WHAT HER HUSBAND AND HIS TART DIDN'T WANT YOU TO KNOW

"Severus?"

"Go on, read," he said, moving to stand, arms crossed in front of his chest, almost as if he expected her to attack him.

"What have you done?"

"Our research has proved fruitful... finally." He nodded to the paper. "Please, Hermione, I cannot bear the suspense as to what your reaction will be, and I would rather you read it than to hear it from me first. I think Skeeter has a way with words at times."

Hermione looked down and began reading what would change her life...again.

*Dearest Readers, I must say that I've really outdone myself this time. I, Rita Skeeter, author and reporter extraordinaire, have landed a pair of stories so monumental, my name will go down in history as one of the greats...not that it won't already due to my wonderful work on the Albus Dumbledore book... I digress.*

*Severus Snape, war hero, mentor of Harry Potter, right hand man of Albus Dumbledore, spy against the late Dark Lord, thought to have died the night said Dark Lord was defeated by our very own Chosen One, is alive and well and making a living teaching Potions in America! He contacted me personally, not trusting any inferior reporter to do his story justice, and wants me to give you even more news!*

*Here is where I am forced, I mean to say, prepared to make a sincere apology to Hermione Granger for the stories I've posted about her for the past year when her supposed transgressions came to light. Even I can get caught up in wanting to give the public truthful news and make mistakes. You heard that right. Hermione Granger is innocent of all charges her former husband, Ronald Weasley, brought out against her publicly in his bid for a divorce, costing our war heroine her job, her family, her friends, her home, and her children.*

*Miss Granger has proclaimed her innocence this entire time, that it was another who was Polyjuiced as her who'd done it, but she'd always refused to say who and had no proof to back her claims up. It seems Miss Granger, as per one Minister Kingsley Shacklebolt, had been working on a top secret potion in her spare time that would aid the Ministry in ways unseen before.*

*"Imagine being able to put a spy in someone's inner circle and nothing would betray them...not the word of another, not Legilimency, not memory taking, not even their own words," said the Minister. "Hermione Granger created that. Men like Severus Snape could have used that in the war against Voldemort, not that someone as clever as he needed it. It's just unfortunate the test subject made a poor error in judgment that evening while still in Hermione's form...they'd used her hair in the potion by the way. We are now willing to negotiate in a possible purchase if she is still interested."*

*I asked the Minister who it was that had taken the potion, but he refused to tell me. However, Severus Snape had no qualms. Harry Potter himself took the potion; ever Miss Granger's staunchest supporter, he found himself in a position that nothing he could do would help her. He could only deny any part in what happened, thanks to a bit of brilliant spellwork on her part.*

*"Bloody horrible," Mr. Potter said when asked how he felt about his part in things. "I took the potion, knew the risks, had to go home to help my inebriated wife, and I did something thoughtless, careless. I'm ashamed of what I did, but I am even more disappointed at what I've cost Hermione."*

*I asked him if she'd forgiven him.*

*"Of course. She's the forgiving sort, thankfully, because I love her and don't know if I could live with myself otherwise. She was right glad at least I would be here to keep an eye on the children for her. Which I have been, and that's why when Severus Snape approached me, explained there was a way to reverse the enchantment Hermione put on the potion...she's brilliant but scary, that one, always has been...I did what it took to bring the truth out."*

*Potter's wife was with him. She took his hand and said, "I am so sorry for what my family and I have done and said to her. I just thought..."*

*She began tearing up before she could finish, but we all know what she wanted to say. She'd thought Miss Granger had tried to have sex with her! Molly Weasley had no comment about all this, even though we now know that her son, Ronald Weasley, has been having an affair with Gabrielle Delacour for years now. Even more, he took advantage of the situation by getting rid of the proof by destroying some of her potion and enchantment notes that might have helped clear her name.*

*It was lucky for Hermione Granger that she happened upon Severus Snape, Potions Master, when she did. Together, they worked to create the spell that would shed light on what's been done. All they'd done had been fruitless until Mr. Snape had the idea to approach Weasley himself. Being a practiced Legilimens, it was easy to reach in and see for himself what had transpired. It's a shame nobody from the Ministry thought to do this before now. How thoughtless! What a bunch of bumbling fools to not fully question everyone, even the accuser!*

*As far as the children, the Potters have opened their home to them until the courts decide what to do with their father and his new wife, who still have legal custody of them, for their parts in this debacle. The children live at Hogwarts, naturally, but can use the Potters' home as a place to stay while in England. I am quite certain they'll be visiting their mum during summer vacation however.*

*Little Rose sent a single message with Mr. Snape, which I happened to overhear by complete accident while examining a cloak closet. She said, "Please tell Mum we never liked Gabrielle no matter what Grandma said. We miss her every day and want to see her soon. We believed her the whole time; it's why we didn't want her to leave. Uncle Harry always told us good things and told us to not give up."*

*Touching, is it not? Turn to page four for more about Severus Snape...*

Hermione could read no more. "They believed in me, never stopped loving me," she said happily, tears lining her face.

"They each wrote a letter to you," Severus said, placing two small envelopes in her hands. When she didn't speak, he said, "If I couldn't find the missing piece of the puzzle in Weasley's mind, I was prepared to claim that it was I who had sabotaged you and had accosted Potter's wife."

"Severus..." Her voice was a whisper. "Why?"

"Because, Hermione, I don't think you deserve this. You're withering away here. I had to do something to help the woman I have fallen in love with. What sort of man would I be otherwise?"

"So I was right."

"About?"

"You're feeling the same way I am...love."

He nodded. "I take it you aren't angry with me?"

"You cleared my name! Never." She stood and went to him and pulled him close, taking care not to drop her children's letters. "We were so close to the answer, and you took such a great personal risk to do this. I can't tell you how much I appreciate this, appreciate you."

His answer was a light kiss on her lips, and then he remained silent as she hungrily read her letters. Once done, to lighten her now saddened mood, he said, "I suppose I should let everyone here know that I am truly not Seamus Ravenispe."

"I'm shocked they bought that last name. Couldn't you use your name to come up with anything better?"

"I stole that from the Dark Lord," he said with a smirk.

Hermione grinned. "I am Severus Snape turned to *that*." She shrugged. "The Raven part does suit you." She ran a hand down the front of his robes. A wicked grin graced her face.

"Why do you look like the witch who stole the golden cauldron?"

"Seamus Ravenispe could have been Seamus Penis-rave."

Red splotches colored his cheeks. "Professor Granger!" Then he gave her an equally devilish look. "Perhaps later you may finally get a chance to rave about *that* indeed."

It was Hermione's turn to blush. She curled her arm around his and let him lead her to the doorway. There was so much more to talk about, details she wanted about his trip, what he'd learned, how he'd been able to reverse the spell, Harry's part in it, but that would all wait. For now, she would go with him to the staff room to explain the truth. Then... yes, she'd definitely explore the other letters he'd fashioned his name with.

*The End*

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SW's Notes: I want to thank my recipient for the interesting choice of prompts. I can only hope I've created something she will enjoy.

Original Prompt: Hermione goes to America to teach at a magical school (you can choose what and where). She is runs into Severus who is using an assumed name to teach potions at the same school. He's worried she's going to turn him in or tell someone where he is. She's hiding from her past with Ron and his leaving her and taking their kids from her. Would love to see a happy ending with SS/HG finding love.