

Every Day Is Saturday

by *TeddyRadiator*

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Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 2

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This little story was written for the Inaugural SSHG_Promptfest 2013, based on a prompt from an_oesis: *One day in their life together. Apprentice and master, man and wife, unlikely flatmates, or maybe just colleagues twenty four hours in their world..*

Many thanks as always to the breathtaking stgulik, for her beta work and friendship. A good beta is essential, but a beta like stgulik is a gift of the gods.

They say the honeymoon's over when you no longer feel you have to hold back farting in the presence of your lover. If that were the case, their honeymoon would have been over roughly two and a half years before it actually happened. At the time, Hermione swore it was her leg sliding over his sheets. And Severus was intelligent enough to humour his lover, even though he knew she was lying between her teeth. She quickly stopped making up excuses and rarely apologised, but he knew that some things in a marriage are just forgiven, and this was one of those.

Severus Snape woke the way he had awoken since the last of his boyhood was burned away in a haze of Firewhiskey and singed flesh: wary, watchful, expecting the worst even as his dreams unraveled and dissipated like smoke over ice. His nerve endings jangled into consciousness, just as they did after the night he received his Dark Mark. It was no longer strictly necessary, but it was one thing to remind his body that the Dark Lord (Tom Riddle, Tom *Riddle*) was dead and he was not, and quite another to relax an almost life-long practice of waking up to a constant stream of bad news, uninspired breakfasts and the grinding of his teeth, greeting a new day at Hogwarts.

The fact that he was still alive and enjoying himself was the reason he snapped instantly into wakefulness every morning. It was that split-second of fear, then the realisation that he was not worm food, and that all that had happened in the past five years hadn't been some wonderfully strange erotic dream with benefits. He was his own man now, which was something he had never been before he decided to become someone's husband. He had certainly not had the best role model for most of his parents' train wreck of a marriage, but his swotty little fart machine of a wife had decent provenance, as they say. Their marriage, as she was fond of saying, had good bones.

Now, he was older, possibly wiser, and much happier. And the reason for that was the warm, sexually deviant bundle of hair and soft rounded curves he woke up nestled against: Hermione Granger-Snape, his second life, his second skin, his second chance. She managed to make him laugh, furious, horny and breakfast on a daily basis, sometimes all at once, and he had never had so much fun in his entire life.

Just thinking about her reminded him of the morning wand nudging between the delectable, plump globes of her heart-shaped bottom. She often fretted that she would be like her mother and turn into a dumpling with middle-age spread, and he declared more than once that he'd leave her if she went to fat... a dire warning that fooled no one. He had never bothered to hide just how much he adored her rounded, marshmallow-soft flesh.

He had always been a bag full of sharp angles and jutting corners; cut-glass cheekbones, granite outcroppings of hips, bony knees and crane-like elbows. She was like a lovely inviting pillow, and he couldn't get enough of her; he feasted on her like a starving man. He marveled how he ever managed without her, and smiled inwardly when he recalled how he came to know the woman behind his memories of the know-it-all little brat she'd been as a student.

After his recovery from Nagini's attack, Severus fully expected to make the move from Hogwarts' most despised Headmaster to Azkaban's most despised inmate, but the fates yet again aligned him with a Potter to be indebted unto. When the newly appointed Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, made restitution noises, Harry Potter jumped into the fray with both left feet and started blabbing to anyone who would listen about Severus' little dying confession.

Years later, Severus would still feel acid worming a hole in his stomach every time Lily Evans Potter was mentioned. It was not that he had stopped loving her; but he had stopped mourning her, which was infinitely more worrisome to him in the ensuing months after the war.

Lily had been the impetus to keep going when the only future he could see beyond the Dark Lord was a long dirt nap. Every morning, as he fastened each button of his robes, he whispered, "For Lily...for Lily...for Lily..." Every move was an act of tribute, every lesson taught was a sonnet to his dedication to her memory. He could not eat a meal without thinking of her. He could not sleep without dreaming of her. And on the nights near the end, when exhaustion and fear and hopeless resignation pushed even Lily out of his thoughts, he would feel sick with remorse for not reminding himself that he was in eternal mourning for her.

The very moment he'd awakened in St. Mungo's with the biggest sore throat in history and the knowledge that he was a free man and the Dark Lord was gone, Severus tried to summon his dog-like devotion for Lily to reassure himself that all 'this' was not a dream. She had, after all, become his compass, his beacon for what he'd fought so long to achieve. He had caused her death; she would be his life's cause.

To his dismay, he couldn't do it. The feeling of loss and heartache that had daily pressed on his heart was gone...he found he could no longer summon the energy to self-flagellate using her memory as his whip. That had profoundly disturbed his internal gyroscope; it upset the balance of his life. He was not used to not feeling remorse. What was he supposed to do with himself now that he had no desire to grieve anymore? How was he supposed to define himself, if not as the moral of his own story?

He asked Potter for his memories back, thinking that would restore the balance, but even they no longer held sway to his yearning soul. Thinking he was still suffering from curse work, he approached Madam Pomfrey, the only Healer whom he'd ever trusted. She ran every test known to Wizardkind and a few she'd made up just for him. Alas, a lingering curse as an easy answer was not to be found. Poppy patted his shoulder in her typical brisk, kind way and declared, "I'm sorry, Severus, but you are suffering from nothing more dangerous than post-war ennui."

He snorted, unsatisfied with the results. "That is not how it feels to me," he protested petulantly.

She put a motherly arm around him. "Severus, you're a complex soul. You have a good heart, but you've had a lot of bad experiences, which led to bad motivations and bad choices. But that does not make you a bad man. You don't have to mourn for what you've lost any more, dear. It's high time you learned to celebrate what you have."

He scoffed at her and left. He didn't know how to celebrate. He had never associated life with anything but Lily. Lily was remorse, guilt, punishment, redemption, anguish, loss, duty. He couldn't associate Lily with celebration; it felt sacrilegious. He felt bad that he no longer felt bad. His lack of guilt made him feel guilty.

As the months wore on, his confusion became denial, which burned away to resentment, then morphed into anger. If Lily Evans was the light of his life, why was every emotion he associated with her guaranteed to make him suffer? Even Severus knew that was severely fucked up.

Eventually, the anger mellowed into something that felt like acceptance. One evening, after a day of hiking in the woods looking for potions ingredients, he stopped by a small anonymous pub, and enjoyed a very nice lamb stew and a pint. Sitting among the cheery locals, enjoying his meal, he realised he'd not thought of Lily at all that day. And he didn't feel guilty about it.

He cried a little that night; not because he'd lost Lily, but because he'd learned to live without her. He wept for all that had past, and for all that he'd let go, and woke up the next day a man with a future that was now his and his alone to discover.

So he decided to leave the UK, reasoning that a change was as good as a rest. The plan was to go abroad for several years; using Minerva's excellent recommendations, he would broaden his horizons by studying in Hong Kong, Peru and Delhi.

Hong Kong alone cured him of that idea. After months of chopping up noxious ingredients like a skivvy and sitting at the feet of pompous, overblown Masters professing to know more than he did, when in fact he could outbrew the lot of them, he was soon bored off his tits. The exotic locale disagreed with both his temperament and his digestive system.

Grumbling, he suffered the multiple Portkeys back to Britain. He was a Manc boy; he supposed he was too British to ever feel at home anywhere else. Besides, he couldn't get decent fish and chips in Hong Kong for toffee.

The Ministry, that pantheon to 'Absence makes the heart grow fonder,' was thrilled to get its remaining War Hero chick back into the nest and promptly offered him a position in the Unspeakables Department. He showed up for work, looked at strange, cryptic memos, offered plausible-sounding postulations to a lot of nodding, pensive-looking, beard-stroking officials who, like him, pretended to understand what the hell was going on.

Except for a brief, youthful stint in shoplifting, it was the easiest job he'd ever had. And he got paid a bomb for it.

The female situation wasn't too bad, either. It was amazing how women who'd called him the Greasy Git of the Dungeons suddenly found him fascinating. The tortured, mysterious spy come in from the cold. They all played by the same rules; he gave them the billow and the voice and all the things they said made him irresistible, but in the end, he found them all searching him for something they couldn't find. Most of them eventually turned away, puzzled. He wasn't sure what they were looking for, and he wasn't sure why they couldn't find it.

After a particularly strained blind date with a lovely witch from Beauxbatons, who thanked him and Floo'd away before he could even ask for a second date, it finally occurred to him that it wasn't that they *couldn't* find something; it was what they *found* that bothered them.

It didn't matter if they shared a history with him or not. It didn't matter that he was the hero with the mesmeric voice and the billowing robes. They didn't like the man that was left when the robes were still, and the silence stretched between them. Heroic he might be, but he still wore the same, unattractive face he was born with. He was still the greasy git, and no amount of legend was going to change that.

And so Severus settled back into his default setting; he treated everyone as he wanted to be treated...he left them the hell alone. Then one day, his annoying ex-student sailed back into his life, and to his dying breath he marveled how they managed not to get one another killed.

Being a Ministry worker was not much different than being a Hogwarts Professor...long bouts of total boredom and frustration punctuated with the occasional accomplishment which no one actually noticed or appreciated. At least the hours were better, Severus told himself.

Well, sometimes. Occasionally, he would be called upon to assist the Aurory with some delicate matter involving dark magic or suspected Death Eater activity. He didn't have the heart to tell them the Death Eaters were as defunct as the dodo, and anyway it broke the tedium for an hour or so.

One rainy Saturday morning, he found himself in an Auror stakeout in the overgrown gardens of Malfoy Manor, where his old friend Lucius waited with complete Pureblood aplomb to help catch a thief and an extortionist. The petty criminal had bumbled his way into the manor through sheer dumb luck. He had stolen a valuable trinket of Lucius', which contained a bit more dark magic than was proper, then had the stupidity to attempt to blackmail Malfoy Senior by threatening to report it to the Ministry as an illegal artifact.

That the artifact in question was, in fact, highly illegal, seemed a moot issue. Lucius had grown the good sense to register it as being of important historical significance, and deeded it to the Ministry anyway. Still, it was the principal of the thing. "When an imbecile like this invades my home, the time for being a good citizen is past," Malfoy had fumed to Severus the evening before. "I am a Sytherin, and an ex-Death Eater. And as such, I shall behave like one."

As soon as the extortionist had named his terms (a moronically small amount of Galleons which Lucius could have paid out of Draco's school pocket money), Lucius immediately notified Draco, who in turn had a quiet word with his close (and growing ever closer) friend Harry Potter. Harry, the Head Auror, took over the investigation with more discretion than Severus would have ever given him credit for. It seemed Harry had a vested interest in keeping both Draco and his father out of any unflattering spotlight. He intended to catch the blackmailer so red-handed he'd look as if he'd been dipped in paint.

"I want to keep this as clean as possible," Potter said quietly to his team. "No unnecessary wetworks, people. The MLE will have my head if this goes off the rails." Severus looked around at the grim faces of the three Aurors, huddled under a water-repelling charm, and thought of Malfoy, warm and snug in his manse, blithely waiting for chummy to show up and demand his blood money. Severus stifled a laugh, renewed his warming charm, and was about to ask who'd brought tea when a commotion sounded behind him.

"Johansen, let me through, you pillock!" Hermione Granger forcefully pushed her way past the resentful and uneasy Aurors, and marched up to their leader, who looked not at all glad to see her.

"Harry Potter, you've got some nerve..." Her hissed words were drowned in a sea of "Shh!"s and "Shaddup, Granger!"s and "Aw, fuck's sake, not her!"s.

"And you lot can fucking well fuck off as well," she snarled.

Bemused, Severus stood slightly apart from the group as Madam Secretary for Magical Law Enforcement turned to her next opponent, her lifelong friend, Harry Potter. "Harry, you were supposed to inform me regarding the deployment of this operation. Ordinance Eighteen-Stroke-Oh-Bee-Nine-Tiwaz-Alpha-Hash-Hagalaz clearly states that a Ministry Secretary must be present during incidences where Dark and-or Dubious Origin Magic or the Performance of same may be possibly used in the discharging of Ministerial duties..."

"Merlin's nads, Granger," drawled Severus, "did you memorise the entire Big Book of Ministry Bullshit?"

She whirled on him, her amber eyes flashing, loaded for bear, ready to pounce. When she realised who'd spoken, she drew herself up with immense dignity. "Mr. Snape," she said with a sniff.

"Secretary Granger," he replied, the very Voice of Gravititas.

She awarded him a tight smile before dropping it like a hot potato and turning her guns back on Potter. "Oh, I see. Snape here gets a shout-out, but you don't bother to inform me?" she growled.

Potter looked nervously from his friend to Severus and back. He smiled weakly. "Well, you see, erm, Hermione, he, uh, well, he's acquainted with Malfoy Manor and he's got connections..."

"And I've got dimples on my arse, and don't let's talk about who's better acquainted with Malfoy Manor, you prat!"

Severus noted with delight that she was working herself into a right state. The three Aurors shifted uneasily.

Something out of the corner of his eye caught his attention, and Severus, who was the only one facing east of the manor, caught a glint of light that could only be produced by magic. "While I'm sure we could spend this lovely Saturday morning extolling the virtues of said dimples, Miss Granger, I think we should be focusing on the job at hand," Severus replied, pleased at how louche and indifferent he could still sound through suppressed laughter. He nodded toward the gate. "I believe our perpetrator has arrived."

All heads swung in time to see the dispersing puff of dust near the Manor gates. The thief/blackmailer, who pompously called himself Son of Tom, Disappeared and Disillusioned himself at the same time.

From their own Disillusioned vantage point in the garden, Potter gave the signal. As one, the Auror team swung out in a dragnet formation and moved silently toward the manor, leaving Severus alone with a still-fuming Hermione Granger.

Not fully understanding why he felt the need to explain, Severus said quietly, "In all fairness to Mr. Potter, I came purely as a favour to Lucius. Technically, I'm not really supposed to be here."

To his surprise, Granger sighed and looked suspiciously guilty. "Well, between you and me, technically I'm not supposed to be here, either. But I know Harry. If he thinks anyone he loves is threatened, he has a tendency to shoot first and ask questions later. I don't want him to get in trouble, and we need to make sure this Son of Tom can't get off on a technicality. He's caused a lot of embarrassment for the Ministry. People are wondering why a petty burglary is receiving such high profile casework by the Head of the Auror Department."

Severus regarded the young woman with a patented Relentless Stare. "So the rumours about Mr. Potter and Draco-?"

"Are true. He and Ginny have discussed everything. The boys aren't old enough to understand, and the last thing anyone wants is a scandal. They do love one another, but obviously they will have to make some big decisions soon." Her large, amber eyes were grave with concern. "And I know Harry. If this so-called Son of Tom tries to hurt either Malfoy, Harry won't hesitate to put him down." She made a 'what-can-you-do' gesture with one hand. "They may be fathers themselves, but Harry and Ron can be about as reasonable as twelve-year-olds when provoked. I want a live berk to question, not some oily spot on Malfoy's carpet." She winced at her final words, and her voice faltered curiously. Severus was about to ask why, when he suddenly recalled Lucius' mention of an incident involving her before the final battle.

Clearing his throat, he replied, "I take it, then, that Ordinance Eighteen-Stroke-Oh-Be-Mine-TisWaz-Heavenly-Hash-Haagan-Daz..."

"...is just some bollocks I made up, as well you know." She gave him a rueful smile. "Do you honestly think Harry bothers to read regulations?"

"Based on his track record at school, I agree it would be a stretch." He fought the urge to move closer to her. She smelled divine.

"And there you have it," she said with a smirk that looked suspiciously like one of his. "Sometimes it pays to be the swot. You can convince your friends of just about anything if you say it with enough authority."

Severus allowed himself a brief smile, just as the almost-silent pops of Apparation told them the Aurors were closing the net. "Then Secretary Granger, I suggest we proceed. Someone has to make sure the imbecile doesn't get his arse blown off."

She nodded, then looked at him keenly. "Wait. Were you referring to Son of Tom, or Harry?"

Severus looked down his nose at her. "I know the interior of the Manor quite well, Miss Granger, and the wards will recognise you more readily if you are in my proximity. May I?" He held out his arm.

She looked up at him in surprise, her expressive, warm eyes alert and crackling with intelligence. Sensing the challenge in his voice, she stepped into his arms expectantly.

"I'll hold you to that answer," she warned.

And I'd love to hold you to something else altogether, Granger Severus thought, as his hands encircled her waist and brought her flush against his body. She felt incredibly warm and solid and comfortable against him, as if she spent time in his arms every day. The look of absolute trust in her eyes only added to the pre-battle ambience. Before he could say something he would have to get drunk to forget later on, he turned them, and they Apparated with barely a sound.

The first thing Severus realised when they Disapparated into the sitting room was that something wasn't quite right.

From a distance, they heard a voice shout, "Stunners only! I mean it! The man who brings anyone down with an Unforgivable will answer to me!"

"Bloody Gryffindor idiot!" Severus hissed to himself. The smell of ozone hung in the air, and they could hear the sounds of battle a few doors away. With a quick glance at one another, he and Hermione stealthily made their way down the hall. Severus noted approvingly that she was keeping close to the wall, treading cautiously, wand in battle-ready position. She'd always taken good notes in DADA.

He remembered she could also hex like a bitch when properly provoked. And, according to Draco, she had a mean left hook in the bargain.

They turned the corner and saw at once that Son of Tom was not alone. He'd brought a welcoming committee with him. Dueling with Potter's Aurors and the Malfoys were four big, burly wizards who didn't look like they had much to lose. They were shabby and strong and incongruously out of place in the dainty drawing room. From where he stood, Severus realised the Aurors were struggling; they'd not anticipated this kind of resistance, and quite frankly, neither had he. Perhaps they'd all underestimated this so-called Son of Tom.

Severus quickly Disillusioned himself again and slipped into the room just as one of the henchmen got in a shot to Draco. The young man cried out and clutched his arm in pain, his face creased in agony. Distracted, Harry looked toward the falling man, and Severus cursed. *Bloody Potter!* "Watch your back!"

A barrage of hexes flew through the room, but Potter remained low, moving swiftly over to his fallen lover. Lucius, who had ever been a ruthless duelist, was holding his own, but he was tiring of simple stunning spells and *Stupefys*. Now that his son had been injured by these invaders, his patience and concern would soon collide. Severus knew once Lucius slipped the lead, he would start in on the hard stuff. Then Granger might just get that oily spot on the carpet she'd fretted about.

Son of Tom, a tall, dark-haired wizard with flashing, sapphire eyes, roared, "I warned you, Malfoy! You were supposed to be alone!"

"So were you, you toadying bastard of a reptile," Lucius hissed in return. "Wizards like you give Tom Riddle a bad name!"

Severus and Hermione had the advantage, and at his signal, they roared, *Stupefy!* in unison. Two of the accomplices were blown backward into a Louis XIV desk, reducing it to splinters. The resulting crash was deafening, and everyone in the room froze in complete, stunned silence.

"That was my mother's," Lucius announced with cold, incredulous accusation.

"I think the gloves are officially off now," Severus said quietly.

"Right," Hermione answered.

"In three, two..."

Severus' hex caught one of the henchmen, who went down screaming, clutching at his chest. Hermione's silent spell bound another in a giant, sticky web, which she hurled at the wall. The man struggled upside down in vain. A third was all but eviscerated by Lucius' *Sectumsempra*, and one of the Aurors managed to get to the fourth before Lucius' *Crucio* had any real time to bed into him properly. Even so, the man had already soiled himself and broken his wrist before it was cancelled.

Severus turned to Hermione, ostensibly to make sure she was not going to start berating Lucius, but his words died in his throat. Hermione wasn't looking at him at all. She was staring toward the ruined desk, her eyes wide and blank with fear. Severus turned and found himself face-to-face with the gloating, wild-eyed, partially decomposed, animated corpse of Bellatrix Lestrange.

The so-called Son of Tom screamed like a girly. "What is she doing here? She's supposed to be dead!" He grabbed Potter and tried to hide behind him. "Keep that crazy bitch away from me!"

In the pandemonium, Hermione stood stock-still, her face drained of colour, as Bellatrix stalked toward her with obvious glee. She was brandishing a knife, from which dark, brownish blood dripped. "Oooh, is the ickle Mudblood all scared?" she cooed obscenely. Her tongue was like a serpent's, forked and flickering, scenting the air. Hermione made a whimpering noise in her throat as Bella advanced on her. "Perhaps I need to carve some more fun shapes into her ickle armikins!" The dead woman chortled, and her laughter made the temperature in the room drop ten degrees.

Son of Tom moaned, and clutched onto Potter. "You're supposed to protect us from maniacs like her!" he screamed, and it was then that Severus saw the dark stain spreading on the front of Son of Tom's robes.

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Lucius spat, his arm around Draco. "It's a Boggart, you clod-hopping yokel! How on earth did you rub two brain cells together and actually break into this house?"

Malfoy bellowed a thunderous *"STUPEFY!"* just as Harry hit the man with a *Petrificus Totalus*, and Son of Tom dropped like a sack of shit. Harry and Lucius rushed to Draco and left Severus to his own devices.

Even though Severus knew Lucius was right, and the Boggart was feeding off Hermione's greatest fears, Bellatrix's maniacal laughter had the same paralysing affect on him as the others. He watched in a kind of sick trance as the long-dead witch stalked across the room toward Hermione, trailing mud and Merlin knew what else, her expression changing to something so repulsive as to be demonic. Hermione's wand dropped from her nerveless fingers. "Help me," she whispered, and her pitiful plea brought Severus to his senses.

"Shit!" Severus cursed. Pointing his wand at the leering Bellatrix, he bellowed, *Ridikkulus!* She shrieked in unholy fury, then shrunk down to a Lego figurine, waving around a plastic club. Furious, she ran screaming from the room, squeaking in a high-pitched voice.

"You're getting old and out of shape, old man," Severus muttered to himself. He turned to Hermione. With a rueful laugh, he said, "Merlin, you'd never know I was a Death Eater sometimes. It's just a Boggart, Granger..." He stopped, and something inside him quaked. Hermione was on her knees, whimpering, rocking back and forth. Blood was seeping from a wound on her inner arm, which she cradled to her chest. Her wand lay forgotten on the floor beside her.

"Oh, Gods, please don't, not again," she whispered, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Please, don't, please..."

Severus knelt beside her, and put a hand on her shoulder. He could feel her trembling like an aspen. Close to her ear, he said quietly, "Granger, it's not real."

She nodded frantically. "I know, I know!" She shook her head so vehemently her tears splashed onto Severus' cheek. She took a deep breath, rolling her eyes. "Oh, great, this is great! Making a fool out of myself in front of you and Malfoy and the ferret..."

"Steady on, Granger. It's my arm that's out of commission, not my ears," Draco shot back, and thankfully Hermione laughed, albeit shakily.

She glanced at Severus. "I really made a fool of myself, didn't I?"

Severus sighed and pulled at his ear. Shrugging, he answered, "As someone who's made a career out of making a fool of himself, I can assure you that you will survive it,

Hermione."

She looked at him in surprise, and he thought it might be the first time he'd actually ever called her by her given name. Softly, she babbled, "You've never looked foolish. At least, I've never seen you look foolish. You're a hero. Look at all you've done! Remember at the Whomping Willow, in our third year? You were so brave..."

Severus snorted. "Oh, yes, very brave. I was almost too unnerved to use *Riddikulus*. At least you had the excuse that it was feeding from your worst fear. I merely detested the crazy bitch."

Instead of laughing, or looking shocked at his crude language, she replied, in a voice so small he could barely hear her, "She tortured me in this room," and pulled back her bloody sleeve. It took all his discipline not to recoil in horror at the word "Mudblood" crudely carved across her inner arm. A drop of dark blood oozed from the 'd.' "It still bleeds when I'm really upset."

Severus casually placed his own arm over hers to conceal it from the other men, who were starting to throw curious glances their way. He gently rubbed her shoulder to get her attention. "Look, Granger, I could really use a cup of tea. Why don't we let the professionals clean this up? My treat." he peered closer to make sure she was listening. "You will *not* fall apart on me here, Granger. Are you or are you not a Gryffindor, witch?"

"Yes. Yes, I am," she answered, with growing conviction. He patted her hand and unobtrusively rolled down her sleeve.

"Good girl. Now pull yourself together and we'll get out of here." He rose and walked over to Lucius, who was helping Harry pull Draco to his feet.

"I think we'll be off, unless you require further assistance," he said, and noted with some small satisfaction the perspiration dampening the older man's hairline. He could never recall having seen Lucius break a sweat before.

His practiced nonchalance, however, was still firmly in place. "I'm sure we'll manage, old man, but thank you. It's been quite entertaining..."

From behind, they heard a scuffle and a yelp of surprised anger. While that idiot Potter had been canoodling with his new amour, he accidentally allowed Son of Tom to struggle free from the Petrificus. The intruder seized his opportunity, grabbed Hermione's wand, and yanked her to her feet by her hair. She cried out in alarm and pain as the man throttled her, forcing her to become a human shield for him.

He began backing out of the room. "Now I'm going to walk out of here, and you're going to let me."

White with anger, Potter advanced toward him. "You know I can't do that, you little piece of..."

Son of Tom jabbed Hermione in the throat with her own wand. "You will unless you want her dead, Potter," he growled, his voice menacing and low.

"Leave her here," Harry Potter said, sounding calm and reasonable. "Don't make things worse by taking a hostage..."

"Hostage? Grand idea, Auror! Now, why didn't I think of that?" His lips curled into a sneer, showing a flash of white teeth. "Perhaps this little lady and I can have a bit of fun while you sit around trying to figure out how badly you screwed this up, Potter!"

To make his point, he yanked on Hermione's hair, causing her to cry out. He took another step back toward the exit, forcing Hermione to stagger back with him. She grappled with his arm to prevent him from choking her further.

A sick feeling of panic caught Severus in his gut, and for a moment, he thought he might throw up. The other men in the room froze, uncertain. He saw Lucius reach for Draco, his face grave. He turned and watched as the Aurors trained their wands on the four henchmen. Potter was ahead and to the left of him; he could not see the man's expression, but he knew it mirrored his own.

At that moment, Hermione lifted her gaze to Severus'. The paralysis she'd suffered from the Boggart had dissipated, and Severus felt a chill run down his spine.

Whatever she had needed to snap herself out of her panic, she had most certainly found it.

Even as she was being forced to walk backward, she looked straight at Severus and mouthed *Get Ready!* Just as Son of Tom reached the door, Hermione jumped, using his arm as a lever, and came down on his foot with all the force in her body. There was a sickening crunch, and Son of Tom bellowed in pain and surprise. He staggered back, his hold still on her neck, and lost his balance. The two of them fell backward with a crash, knocking them both breathless.

Even as Hermione struggled from her upturned-turtle position, she was fighting like the lioness she was. She wriggled out of his grasp, and spun round, throwing a punch with the added leverage. Every man in the room winced and hissed as her fist made solid, pinpoint-accurate contact with Son's bollocks. He screamed like a banshee.

The room exploded into action, but Son of Tom was too busy clutching his crushed testicles and howling to really notice anything. Blindly, he kicked out, catching Hermione on the side of the head with a glancing blow. She slumped to the ground as Severus shouted, "*Accio* Hermione!"

Years later, he would still marvel at the sight of a face full of Hermione Granger barreling at him at top speed, and the skill and deftness with which she landed in his arms. Pulling her behind the destroyed table, amidst the flying hexes, curses and jinxes, he cried, "Are you injured?"

She shook her head, still dazed but otherwise lucid. "I don't think so, but I..."

"Hold that thought!" he answered, just as Son of Tom, outmanoevered and outnumbered, decided to cut his losses and Apparate.

A volley of spells and hexes roared from several male throats, nearly reducing the room to ruins. Potter's *Incarcerous* was the final deciding factor. As black, snake-like ropes flew from his wand and bound the large wizard, Severus caught him with a *Reducto* which knocked Son off balance. He crashed unceremoniously to the ground for what Severus was determined would be the final time, and as he fell, the air moved around him unnaturally.

Potter glanced around as if confirming he wasn't the only one who had noticed the shimmer. "What do we think, people? Glamour?" he asked.

"I think so," Severus replied, and Lucius, Draco and Hermione all nodded in unison.

Pointing at the thief's face, Harry intoned, "*Finite Incantatem!*"

The shimmering features of Son of Tom swirled away like smoke. When it cleared, the tall wizard with the brilliant blue eyes was gone, and in his place wallowed a squirrely little oik with thinning, pinkish-brown hair and watery grey eyes. He sat up, blinking owlishly at the group surrounding him.

Lucius grunted. "Cousin Brambleby?"

"*Cousin* Brambleby? This dicksplash is your cousin?" Hermione demanded. When no one answered, she looked at Severus and pursed her lips together, her eyes snapping with suppressed laughter.

"Brambleby?" Severus sneered, pronouncing each syllable like a Bludger to the head. "Aren't you the little scrote whose head was flushed down the loo by his housemates so many times, Moaning Myrtle filed a complaint with Mr. Filch?"

Hermione's eyes widened, and her control slipped a little further. With sickening Gryffindor earnestness, she replied, "Oh, now that you mention it, I do believe it is, Mr.

Snape! I'm sure I read about that incident in *Hogwarts: A History*..."

"You never!" Brambleby, who reminded Severus uncomfortably of Wormtail at his most unctuously despicable, squawked in protest.

"They named you heir to the Throne of Slytherin, and don't deny it, you little cockroach..."

"But why would you..." Hermione stopped, and shook her head. She looked first at Harry, then at Severus, then threw up her hands in defeat. "You know, I really don't need to know why you blackmailed your own relatives, Mr. Brambleby. The fact is, I think the surreal factor has just tipped from questionable to full-on tasteless. I have run out of shit to give in any official capacity."

"I agree." Severus had had about as much melodrama as he was prepared to suffer sober. Besides, he really, really wanted a chance to talk to Hermione Granger. Alone. He turned to Lucius. "I think you and Mr. Potter can take *that*..." He sneered in the direction of Malfoy's cousin... "from here. I am going to escort Secretary Granger somewhere she and I can get a cup of tea. Oh, stop looking like your pet pygmy puff just died, Potter! She'll file her report in triplicate tomorrow," he added stormily, as Potter opened his mouth to protest.

Smirking, Severus turned back to Hermione, and offered his arm. "I happen to know the perfect place. A bit of a dive, but the liquid refreshment is second to none."

A tiny, pleased smile pinked the corners of her mouth as she drew close and she folded her hands over his arm. He studied her hands for a moment. They were tiny and warm, and looked at home on his sleeve. Before he could stop himself, he added, "You just beat the shite out of a wizard twice your size with your bare hands, you little brawler. Remind me never to get on your bad side."

Her eyes flew open wide, and the smile threatened to take over her face completely. Severus suddenly felt absurdly proud of her; checking his internal monitor, he realised he was a bit pleased with himself as well.

Lucius, who had been watching their little exchange, gave Severus a smug look that set his teeth on edge. "Quite. In fact, Severus, I suggest you start currying favour with Miss Granger as quickly as possible." He cocked a superior eyebrow from Severus to Hermione, and she blushed. Severus gave him a warning look, which he shrugged away with Gallic, angelic insouciance.

His embarrassment rising, Severus looked down at his soon-to-be drinking companion. "Shall we, Miss Granger?"

She gave his arm a conspiratorial squeeze. "I'll be in touch, Harry," she said over her shoulder, and they were gone.

To Be Continued...

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 2

Snape finally found the strength to go on without Lily, but what really is there left to do? Life can turn on a sixpence, even on a dead ordinary, rainy Saturday...

Part Two - May I just say that the characters in this story are the property of JK Rowling, and that I make no money from this story. I just make friends and hopefully people smile from it.

They Apparated just outside his house at Spinner's End, and Severus allowed himself the indulgence of holding her a second longer than strictly necessary. Instead of pushing him away, she relaxed against him for a second longer than strictly expected. "Thank you," she said, looking strangely uncertain. Her bravado and snark seemed to diminish with each passing second. It took a long time to compose herself enough to look up at him. When she finally did, and stepped back, she brushed her tangled nest of hair from her face. Severus sighed inwardly. *Time for my brush-off as well.* He decided to put her out of his misery.

He pointedly looked down at the stubby front garden. "Well, since it appears you are none the worse for wear, and I have matters to attend..."

"Oh. I see," she replied, looking disappointed and hurt. Her expression grew shuttered, and she turned away. "Sorry, but when you mentioned tea, you invited me to join you. But if you've changed your mind..."

Shocked, he blurted quickly, "I haven't! I did. It's just that..." She gave him a wary look, and defeated, he added, "Fuck's sake, Granger, I'm a hopeless mess at this sort of thing. You're going to have to get used to it if you're going to put up with me."

He froze, horrified at what he'd just said, and yet he knew as sure as Galleons were gold he was prepared at that precise moment to do anything, up to and including making a fool of himself yet again, to keep her from leaving. *Come back*, he prayed. *Don't make me beg, Hermione, because I'm fairly certain I will at this point.*

And, as if the gods truly did answer prayers, Hermione gave him a smile that made the sun look like a lazy git, and said, "You know, I have a feeling putting up with you might be fun. Hard work, but fun."

He felt his knees grow weak. "You have no idea."

"My aunt and uncle had a place similar to this."

"They have my condolences."

They decided that a cup of tea was indeed the first order of business, and Severus had led her into his front room, where they waited for the kettle to boil. Strictly speaking, he could have boiled the water magically, of course, but that would have only speeded up a process he was in no hurry to expedite. Hermione seemed content for the moment to 'put up with him,' and it was pleasant having company who was neither trying to kill him nor turning up their nose at his tatty old Muggle house.

Hermione gave him a look he could only describe as wistful. "Seriously, they owned a two-up, two-down just like this. In Didsbury."

"Oh, the posh part of town," he smirked.

The kettle whistled, and Severus excused himself to make tea. He returned to find Hermione looking around his bookshelves as if touring a museum, not his grotty little end of terrace. Nervously, he gabbled, "I would advise you not to look too closely. The place is mostly held up with patching charms, bad memories and sheer pig-headedness." He held out the crazed mug. "Your tea, Madam Secretary."

She nodded her thanks, and continued looking around. "Have you always lived in Manchester?"

"My dad's family have. He and my mother moved to this house shortly after I was born." He grimaced. "This part of town was always considered the least desirable. It's not called 'Shitter's End' for nothing." His mood soured as he looked morosely around the dingy front room. "I keep saying I'll do something with the place, but it's never seemed worth the effort..."

She shook her head. "Oh, I wouldn't go so far as to say that, Severus. You were smarter than you realise, keeping all the original features like the hardwood floors and the sash windows. Those are the things people want now." She gave the room an appraising look.

"These old houses all have good bones, you know. Nice sized rooms, high ceilings. I bet you could get a decent price if you decided to sell. Retro is in."

"You'll pardon me if I remain unconvinced. I've lived here for almost forty-five years, and Spinner's End has never been 'in'."

She huffed a silent laugh, then gave her tea a tentative sip. "Oh, this is wonderful," she sighed contentedly. She gave him a sideways glance. "But then again, I expect nothing less from a Potions Master."

He accepted the compliment with a slight bow. "Naturally. Tea is one of the first brews I ever concocted. My mother always said a cup of tea always tastes better when someone else makes it for you."

Hermione laughed. "I think there's something to that! I used to love the way the house-elves made tea at Hogwarts. I know, I'm not supposed to admit that," she added, rolling her lovely eyes. "But I'm sure you'll keep my secret."

"My word of honour as a Slytherin," he purred, ignoring her skeptical smirk. Discretion being the better part of valour, he hastily changed the subject. "Elf-made tea was my go-to balm for comforting first years."

She smiled, her eyes lighting up in surprise. "You'll forgive me for saying so, but I'm having a hard time picturing Severus Snape handing a homesick eleven-year-old a cup of tea and saying, 'There, there, dear'."

He uttered a harsh bark of laughter. "I'll have you know I was considered a very good Head of House in that respect. A cup of tea, a hanky to dry their eyes, a lullaby to soothe them." He leaned toward her conspiratorially. "The occasional bribe to keep it to themselves, followed by the gentle threat of a beneficent *Obliviate*."

She chuckled. "At least you didn't let something like petty morals get in the way of administering comfort." She mimicked a lisping, gormless first year. "'Thank you for the tea and sympathy. What did you say your name was again?'"

"And they say rewards are few and far between in teaching. Another young mind warped for life. You're welcome."

Her laughter was a lovely thing. Severus leaned back and took a sip from his own mug. He was pleased with himself. He was enjoying her company; it was comfortable, effortless. She seemed as content as he to rest in the silence and drink her tea. He cast about for something to say to keep her from simply finishing her brew and leaving. He had to give her a reason to stay; otherwise it would be only a matter of minutes before she sat the mug down on his chipped coffee table and started her goodbyes.

"I suppose I could scare up some biscuits to go with your tea," he said, and mentally rolled his eyes. He sounded like Filius Flitwick, for Merlin's sake.

Instead of laughing at him, she reached over and squeezed his knee companionably. "Grand idea. You made the tea, I'll go fetch the bickies."

"They're in the Quality Street tin on top of the fridge."

"Of course they are," she replied with a mischievous grin, and headed toward the kitchen. Severus closed his eyes. His leg tingled pleasantly where she'd touched him, and he cursed himself for allowing his thoughts to take a downward drift.

"Holy hell!"

He sprang from his seat, wand at the ready, and flew into the kitchen, expecting to find her cowering under the influence of another Boggart. Instead, he found Hermione turning in circles in the kitchen, looking around in surprised delight.

"What the fuck?" he blurted, looking around, trying to discover what was sending her into raptures. She was pointing at the cabinets.

"Severus, you have an English Rose kitchen!" She exclaimed excitedly, almost clapping her hands in excitement. "These are like gold dust now. People are paying a fortune to have these restored and fitted in their kitchens. Pardon the pun, but you really are sitting on a potential money spinner."

Severus looked around his dead ordinary kitchen, with its aluminium countertops and curved drawers. To him it was nothing special, just his mother's old kitchen. It was a little battered now, but still solid. Like all things people grow up with, it was neither offending nor pleasing to him. It was just drawers, cabinets and countertops. His dad had hated it. "Bloody tin kitchen," he'd said, every time his beer can clanged on the metal surface.

"But Mum loved it," he murmured softly, marveling at a forgotten memory.

"Pardon?" Hermione was looking at him quizzically, and he realised he'd spoken aloud. He bit his lip, remembering the countless times he'd watched Eileen peeling potatoes on the gleaming counter, or making him a sandwich for lunch, or pouring him a glass of milk with that extra spoonful of Nesquik he received as reward for being a good boy. In those days, she kept it spotless and gleaming, as if she expected company every day. None ever came.

The counter had been his dressing table during his childhood. He would sit perched on the edge while his mother tied his shoes, and they would giggle because the steel surface was cold on his backside. He frowned. No, that wasn't the reason; it wasn't the cold that made him giggle. It was Eileen, who would hug him and tickle him. "This is the best place for hugs and tickles!" she would say, placing a zerbort on his neck, and he would laugh and laugh and...

During the good years, when the mills were running steady and his dad was *their* head of house and acted like one, there would be baskets of Christmas fruit and nuts and candy perched on the side of the breakfast nook, their bright colours reflected in the counter's mirror-like surface. He remembered little Muggle rituals, like being allowed to fill the tea dispenser so he could collect the little cards hiding at the bottom of the empty tea boxes. Eileen kept the cards wrapped in an elastic band in one of the drawers. She would let him play with them in the summer, when it was too hot and the air too foul to play outside. He would come inside on summer days and lay his cheek against the metal countertop, the only really cool place in the house.

There had been good times, before his dad had become unemployed and drunk and his mother had faded and become colourless and transparent. He'd known love here; not often, and not enough, but it was there, nevertheless. Strange that he'd pushed those feelings away, until all that was left of Spinner's End stood as a monument to his guilt and self-pity and darkness. There *had* been happy memories here; but the unhappy ones had always seemed more relevant, demanded more attention.

Looking around the dingy room with its wheezing fridge and battered hob, Severus said almost to himself, "My mother loved this kitchen. She once told me it was the reason she wanted this particular house in the first place. The previous owners had installed it back in the fifties, when Spinner's End was still flush and the mills were

running. He shook his head sadly. "I'd forgotten how much she cared for it. It was the only thing she could brag about in this hole. 'It's not much, but it has an English Rose kitchen,' she would say." For a moment, he felt like crying. "It was the only thing she was ever really proud of."

A gentle hand touched his cheek, and he turned to find Hermione's face very close to his. Her eyes were tender, and her expression kind and caring without a touch of pity. "I'm quite sure it wasn't the only thing," she said softly.

He looked down, allowing his hair to cover his features while he got himself under control. In a few soft words, the wicked girl had managed to pulp his heart into mush; he ought to hex her for that.

Then he thought he should probably kiss her first. Without pausing to consider his course of action, he drew her into his arms, and her hands slid up his chest to rest lightly on his shoulders.

He weighed his options, and decided to go with the safest. "There's a decent chippy a block from here. Reagan's. I could buy us dinner, if you don't mind eating here."

She smiled and nestled closer, until he could feel her warm breasts pressing against his chest. "I'll spring for the mushy peas."

He laughed and hugged her even closer. She hummed in his ear, and stiffened. "Oh, shit!"

He pulled back, wondering how he'd possibly ruined the moment just by holding her. "Wha..."

"Oh, Severus, I'm so sorry!" She babbled a hasty spell, and he caught the coppery whiff of blood. "I've only gone and bled all over your shirt."

"Where are you hurt?" he said, his voice sounding gruff and harsh with concern.

Hermione looked disgusted. "It's the damn scar! I thought it had stopped bleeding. I've smeared it all over you." Sure enough, there was a red streak which ran down the side of his shirt. Her *Tergeo* was ineffective. "Dammit! I'll have it specially cleaned for you..."

"Don't be daft! It's only a shirt, Hermione. I'm much more concerned about your scar. Hold still!" he admonished, as she tried to cover up the mess on her arm. Severus finally made her sit down, and pushed her shirt sleeve up enough to see where the blood was coming from.

"You say it always bleeds, even after all this time?"

She nodded. "Whenever I'm very stressed or upset, yes."

"Why haven't you had a Healer mend it? I'm sure Poppy would be happy to help."

She looked up at him guiltily. "I'm not sure I want to."

He frowned. "I'm not sure I follow you."

"I'm not sure I can explain it. I'm not sure it makes sense to me, either."

He made her look at him, and in her eyes he saw the return of the absolute trust that had given him pause in Malfoy's garden. "Try me."

For a moment, she was silent. "After we were captured and brought to Malfoy Manor, and Bellatrix Lestrange did this," she waved in the direction of her arm, "we escaped to Shell Cottage. Just as Dobby rescued me from that hideous Lestrange woman, she killed him. With the same knife that did this. He died in Harry's arms. I know everyone laughed at me about the House-elves, but dammit..." she looked upward, blinking furiously. "I saw one die to save my life."

She lowered her head, and together they looked at her scar. The jagged letters stood out from her otherwise flawless skin. Even after all the subsequent years, it still looked angry and puckered, as if healed only recently. Hermione continued, "Fleur Weasley tried to heal it, but it wouldn't close completely. She accused me of not *allowing* it to close properly. Looking back, I think she might've been right."

To his surprise, she reached out to him and touched the side of his neck, where his own battle scar lay hidden beneath his high collar. "I saw this happen, you know. We had to watch while that vile creature almost tore out your throat, and we couldn't do anything to stop it. That's the first time it started bleeding on its own. I kept telling myself, 'Why should I heal when I couldn't save Dobby, or Professor Snape?'"

Severus looked at the sorrow in her eyes. "Hermione," he began, and stopped. How could he tell her the truth? "What happened to the elf *and* me, was beyond your control. Don't feel guilty about me. I've eaten enough remorse for the two of us." He pointed to his own scar. "If this taught me anything, it's that I have permission to forgive myself. Now if I can learn to let it go, you must, as well."

He took her arm between his palms, reveling in the silky feel of her peachy flesh, and urged, "Please, let it happen. Let me do this." She nodded hesitantly. He concentrated for a moment and closed his eyes. Almost without conscious thought, he began to chant. It was a low, soft song, called forth from his deepest magic, the magic of his physical being. It sang forth from his cells, his DNA, his genetic tattoo. Magic of bone and flesh and blood and muscle coalesced and grew in power and strength. He sang to coax the magic encased in the very fibres of his tissues, using his voice as a carrier.

As he called forth his healing, he felt her skin respond to it. The scars began to fade, and lost their fresh, raw look. She had done it. She had forgiven herself, and allowed him to heal her. And the old scar deep within him faded, allowing him to heal as well.

Drained, he looked up at her, and the tears of release and self-forgiveness sparkling in her eyes spoke to his magic. "Thank you," she whispered, her face alight with joy. "You are amazing." She took his hands in hers, and kissed them reverently.

Then she took his head in her hands, and kissed him.

Severus felt his breath catch, and she pulled away, her soft, plump bottom lip caressing his. Before she opened her eyes he was dragging her in his arms, returning the kiss, trying to be gentle and not scare the poor girl, but she was so warm and her mouth was sweet with tea and honey and tears, and when her arms slipped around his shoulders he melted against her without a struggle.

He lifted her and placed her on the kitchen counter, and damn, if it wasn't the perfect height for this, too. "I'm beginning to see the benefits of this kitchen," he whispered against her mouth.

"Told you," she answered, sliding her tongue between his lips. He fit perfectly between her thighs, and as he slanted his mouth against hers, she wrapped her legs around his waist and he nearly moaned the house down. They kissed like wild teenagers, like porn stars, like two people who had spent a long time looking for something and were pretty sure they'd just found it.

He reluctantly broke the kiss, afraid that he would pass out from lack of oxygen. Hermione made a soft sound of disappointment, but when she opened her heavy-lidded eyes, a lazy grin of pleasure spread over her face. She stroked his oily hair, and ran her fingertips over the planes of his cheekbones, his brow, across his lips. "You know," she said huskily, "with your hair all mussed and your face all flushed and your mouth wet and swollen like that, you're sex on cracker, Severus."

He was too far gone to do more than laugh breathlessly. Dazedly, he watched as she slipped from the counter and took his hand. "Now, where's this Reagan's?" She pressed her body to his, breast to ankle. "I've got a feeling I'm going to need some sustenance, and I *know* you are."

"Am I?" he drawled, unable to keep the foolish, undignified smile from playing across his lips.

With a quick kiss, she pulled him toward the door. "Oh, yes. And I'll skip the mushy peas, if you don't mind. They give me awful wind."

They sat on his battered sofa side by side as they ate their cod and chips, which were just as good as he'd boasted, and washed it down with Boddington's, straight from the can. They propped their feet on the coffee table, and watched Muggle telly... some silly thing in which celebrities danced for points. They gradually drew closer, until Hermione was leaning against his shoulder, and when he moved to put his arm around her, she snuggled against his slender chest as naturally as if she did it every day. When the telly grew too tedious, they shut it off and talked. And talked, and argued, and debated, and laughed, and kissed. And talked some more.

At three a.m., when he looked down to ask her a question, he was answered with a soft snore. He levitated her upstairs, and they slept companionably side by side in his boyhood bed, until she woke him in the grey hours of Sunday morning, playing the Trumpet Voluntary with her bottom. When he accused her of farting him awake, she loudly and vehemently declared it was just his imagination.

He teased her mercilessly until she rolled over on top of him. From there, she tickled him until they switched places again, and he pinned her down.

Later, after a light breakfast of tea and toast, she told him she had always loved the sound of his voice, and he whispered something in her ear that drove all the teasing mirth from her face, and replaced it with smoldering, melting arousal. He was barely aware of what he said to her as they undressed one another right there at the kitchen counter and in the end it didn't matter.

As her eyes roamed over his naked body, her slow, pleased smile returned. "Gods, Severus. You are gorgeous," she said.

"You can't possibly mean that," he said, wanting to believe her.

"Can't I?" she purred, and knelt down. She placed a single kiss on the head of his raging erection, then proceeded to blow the top of his head off.

"You mean it," he moaned, as his head lit up. "Oh gods, you mean it," he howled, and his body burst into a thousand stars.

When he could think again, he pulled her onto her feet and into his arms. "Of course I do," she gasped between his feverish kisses.

Her moan of delight turned into a squeal as he lifted her back onto the cold kitchen surface, and buried his face between her silky thighs, proving just how beautiful she was to him.

They decided to take the Hermione and Severus Show back up to his bedroom, to try it horizontally, and found it was an even bigger hit. It was then he discovered she actually *did* have dimples on her delectable arse. He kissed each in turn, and she giggled, a sound which turned his groin into molten iron. He was delighted to discover that Hermione was inventive, kinky, up for anything, and very vocal.

She also had a deliciously dirty mind, which resulted in the sharing and performing of several fantasies. And she wasn't shy about asking for seconds.

Later, spooned against her in his tangled sheets, a thoroughly shagged-out Severus sighed contentedly, and rubbed his sleepy old feller between the velvety cheeks of her luscious bum. He knew an erection was a physical impossibility at that precise moment, but a wizard could plan.

Apropos of nothing, Hermione declared, "I'm going to say something positively Hufflepuffian, and you must promise not to laugh."

"The very fact you've asked me to make such a promise is a clear indication that I will be unlikely to keep it," he answered pleasantly, twirling her wild hair in his fingers. "Have your say," he added diffidently, but he could feel his stomach knot. "Go on," he urged, unable to keep the harshness from leeching into his voice.

"I like you."

He turned her until she was facing him. "You...*like* me?"

She nodded. "Uh huh. I like you a lot. And what's more, I like this bed, and I like you in it. And I like this house, and I like you in it."

"Are you trying to tell me you just want me for my English Rose kitchen?"

"No. Well, yes. I like your kitchen. But most of all, I like you in it."

"So you've said."

"Do you like me?"

"When you aren't talking Hufflepuffian twaddle, yes."

"This isn't twaddle, you prat! I'm trying to make a point."

"Ah, well, that's a mercy anyhow." He was still taken by surprise when she assaulted his ribs, and she still squealed when he pinned her down. He wanted to tease her, but looking down at her pretty face, lying on his lonely sheets, he recalled the previous night, when she had allowed him to heal her, and in turn, heal his own scarred heart.

He stroked her cheek, and added softly, "Yes, I like you, witch. I like you in this house. I like you in this bed, and I'm starting to suspect that I'm not going to like my house or my bed if you aren't in it."

She held him very tenderly, and in the silence, their lovemaking was slow and unbearably erotic.

Two weeks later, she moved in, and two months later, he was repainting the kitchen. Two years later, they married.

Severus faced his mirror, patiently fastening the myriad buttons of his heavy, formal wedding robes. Pushing each button through its hole in a rhythm of muscle memory long embedded in his subconscious, his old litany came to him unbidden: "For Lily...for Lily...for Lily..."

He had not thought of her in over a year. His hands faltered, and dropped to his sides. He stared hard into the thin, sallow face looking back at him.

"Oh, Lily," he whispered, his chest tightening, "I told myself I could never last a day without you. That I would never be happy without you."

He closed his eyes and pictured the woman waiting for him, and smiled. "What a load of bollocks."

After the mead and elf-made wine was drunk, the couple toasted, the guests departed, and it was just the two of them, he impatiently unfastened all those damn buttons, wanting to be as close to her as he could as fast as he could, before she came to her senses and changed her mind. As each button slipped free, his heart sang, "Hurry, hurry, hurry."

Hermione stilled his stumbling fingers, and undressed him, one button at a time. He gradually relaxed beneath her moving hands, and waited in quiet, still contentment. She undressed him with a kiss and a whispered pledge for each and every button.

~Mischief Managed~