

# Defamation of Character

*by Looneyluna*

Realizing that the characters of the romance novels his students read in his class are based on himself and other members of the Hogwarts' staff, Severus Snape sets out to find the author.

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## Chapter One

*Chapter 1 of 16*

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### **Defamation of Character**

Disclaimer: Harry Potter belongs to JK Rowling and her lawyers. I promise to put the characters back when I am done playing with them.

Rating: M for sexual content.

Author's Notes: The first five chapters of this story have been beta read by Kathy Rose and Larilee. I owe them greatly.

### Chapter One

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Even though the heat of summer was outside his door, he stoked the fire and gulped his drink. There was so much to burn, so much satisfaction to be reaped from his annual ritual. Although he preferred the cool crisp bite of Autumn the most, Summer was a close second. After all, he was beginning to become bored with initiating first-years into the cruelty of his character. His strategy certainly did pay off. Most students dropped Potions as soon as they could.

With a delirious smirk, Severus Snape tore the pages from the romance book and chuckled as he threw them into the fire. His drunken stupor helped take the edge off his current activity, for he was not in the habit of burning books. But this was the exception to the rule. This contraband had been the bane of his existence for the last school year.

He had made it perfectly clear that any student caught with a copy of *The Darkest Magic* by Perdita Winters would receive a week's detention. Unfortunately, he couldn't expel them, much less flail them and make them read important works of literature or Potions journals.

Instead of studying or bettering themselves, the female students had been content to muddle their brains with putrid romance books and silly gossip magazines. The older students had, undoubtedly influenced by said romance books and raging hormones, made his professional life a living hell. This past school year had been a record. The Potions master of Hogwarts, the greasy git, the bat of the dungeons, had been propositioned by thirty-six students -- and not all of those propositions had been made by female students!

He didn't know which was worse -- the inappropriate propositions or the continued threats on his life.

Severus tore another swath of pages from the book, listening to the startled gasps of the characters on the pages as their fictional universe was decimated. It was a charmed book, one that read to you. He wadded the paper and tossed it into the fire, gaining a perverse sense of pleasure as he listened to the horrified screams.

Tossing what was left of the book onto the stack, he reached for his decanter and poured more firewhisky into his glass.

"...his silken rod deep into her slick channel," a soft voice narrated as the tattered book fell open. "He captured her lips, greedily drinking the husky cries of passion from them."

Looking around the room for the sultry voice, Severus stumbled toward the novel that was open. Bloody, fucking nuisance!

"Breaking the kiss, Cassandra panted helplessly. 'Please, Simon!' she pleaded as she thrust her hips in unison with his, welcoming his possession and needing fulfillment.

"Cassandra," growled Simon. His dark, lank hair caressed her cheek as he nuzzled her hair with his prominent nose. Her sheath was tight and blissful. He could barely move, the ecstasy of claiming this mortal weighing heavily upon his soul."

"What a load of rubbish!" Severus grumbled, dropping to his knees and sorting through the pile.

"The dark wizard was relentless as he thrust into her. Her analytical mind, the logic she had adhered to all her life, had been shattered. Science dictated that there was no such thing as magic, but she could no longer ignore her senses."

The feminine voice continued spewing the character's innermost thoughts. "Simon had shown her a world science could not explain. His black eyes opened and peered into hers. She could feel him, not only intimately imbedded within her body, but in her mind as well.

"Just as he had pierced the veil of her innocence, his thoughts pierced her soul. His desire became hers. The high arch of his brow furrowed in agony. 'Are you certain, Cassandra?' he asked, his husky inflection shaky with lust."

Severus tossed copies of the book over his shoulder and into the fire, trying to locate the offensive material. No wonder their hormones are raging! Dialogue during sex was ridiculous intimate, but ridiculous! The talentless hack was a witch. Of that much he was certain, obviously a witch who had not bothered to research the art of Legilimency.

You don't give your thoughts away. Legilimency is not mind reading! There is no such thing as telepathy.

"Yes," whimpered Cassandra. 'Complete the ritual, Simon.'

"He only hoped his knowledge could bring her back from the brink of the darkness she would face at his hand. Her faith in his abilities was awe-inspiring. He only hoped it wasn't misplaced. This is the battle he had trained for. All of his knowledge of the Dark Arts would be tested and tried.

"As much as it pained him to pull away from her, Simon garnered his strength and shivered as he mourned the loss of her pulsing heat. He had to collect the blood of her innocence. Only that which she sacrificed willingly would release those bound in the web of damnation.

"The evil sorceress' desire for immortality held no boundaries and..."

Grasping the book, Severus slammed it shut and stopped the incessant drivel. For the sake of his sanity and libido, he tossed it into the fire. The voice of the narrator melted, her screams of indignation doing little to douse the problem he now faced.

His erection strained against the confines of his trousers. "Bloody hell!" The images had him rock hard. He couldn't remember the last woman he had bedded, probably a whore from Knockturn Alley. But just the idea of a warm, moist, willing woman underneath him made his Slytherin blood boil.

Frustrated and pissed, he grabbed one of the many copies of *The Darkest Magic* and skimmed the summary of the book.

*Her world was logic and science. It was all she had ever known. Always a science prodigy, Cassandra had immersed herself in her research. When a dark stranger appeared before her and compelled her to take his hand, she did so willingly.*

*Simon Sanders' mission had been so simple kill Cassandra to prevent her mother, the Sorceress, from enslaving all in the magical realm. Cassandra's innocence had touched his dark soul in a way no one else had. Always one with an agenda of his own, Simon decided to save the scientist.*

*In saving her, will he save himself? The magical world..."*

Severus scoffed and tossed the book into the dwindling flames. "A 'hero' with an 'agenda,'" he commented snidely. "He should just bed her, then kill her. At least she would serve some purpose. A Muggle research scientist! Undoubtedly some drab-looking, yet smashingly erotic heroine."

Realizing that he was talking to himself, he toasted the fireplace and drained the amber liquor. He plopped down in his rickety chair and flipped one of the books, one that wasn't charmed, open to a random page and started to read.

*Glaring into his dark, steely eyes, Cassandra struggled against her bindings. "And what do you do while you aren't abducting defenseless mortals?"*

*Simon smirked, his crooked teeth showing. "I teach."*

Severus fell out of his chair, but kept reading.

*She watched him stir something into his cauldron, hatred for him growing. His elegant hands added ingredients, and she couldn't help but admire the ease with which he did so. "You're a teacher!" she exclaimed. "What do you teach? How to Be a Criminal 101?"*

*Sensing her unease, Simon placed the lid on the simmering cauldron and purposely delayed answering. She was afraid. She should be. "Not quite."*

His knuckles turned white as he clutched the book tightly and kept reading.

*Walking around the table, Simon knelt in front of his captive. "I teach my students how to defend themselves against Dark Magic."*

*Cassandra huffed in exasperation. "I don't believe in any of this. You need help. I have friends who can help you."*

*Even after everything she had seen him do, the woman did not believe in magic. He didn't know whether he should pity her or worry about her. Magic existed, whether she believed it or not. With a swift, menacing move, he untied her ankles and forced her knees apart. Pressing intimately against her, he rubbed his prominent nose against her*

cheek. He could feel the moist heat against his cock, even through the layer of their clothing. "Perhaps you're the one who could use the help," he teased.

Looking up, Severus peered into the fire. "Dark, lank hair. Dark, steely eyes. Prominent nose. Teaches." He flipped to the last few pages of the book, searching for some intangible clue as realization dawned upon him.

The old sorcerer limped down the grand corridor of the empty school, leaning heavily on his second-in-command. "She is enchanting, is she not?" he asked the woman next to him.

The woman snorted, half in disgust and half in approval, her Irish brogue thick with annoyance. "One of these days, your meddling will cause more harm than good, Albert."

"Yet you approve, Melinda," Albert chuckled.

Rolling her eyes, Melinda hid a smile behind a cough. "I hardly think staging the Second Coming was worth it!"

"Oh, that!" Albert did not even have the decency to look chagrined. "The end justified the means."

Severus slammed the book shut and dropped it as though it were a viper ready to strike. He climbed into the chair and glared at the pile of books, his drunken stupor losing its oblivious edge. Melinda and Albert! Undoubtedly Minerva and Albus! The similarities were too great to ignore.

The constant interruptions of lovelorn sighs and silly giggles in his classes were not the signs of the apocalypse. Those books! They weren't just some absurd romantic dribble, written by some old-maid spinster.

This book was based on a former student's demented fantasies fantasies that involved him! He could feel the lines in his face tighten as he frowned. "Perdita Winters," he murmured softly, tossing the name around in his head and unable to recall ever teaching a student by that name.

Some student had reaped the ultimate revenge. He was a laughingstock! Stumbling to stand, he knocked the stack over and cursed as two of the talking books fell open and the narrators' voices filled the room.

The flames in the fireplace burned brighter as he fed book after incessant book onto the fire.

"...her slight weight on top of him. He bit his lip and growled as his semi-erect cock nestled against her moist feminine core. All he had to do was shift a little to the right and he would have her, but the desire to taste her overruled his baser instinct. As Simon moved beneath her, Cassandra nuzzled her cheek against the hair on his chest..."

"I do not have a hairy chest!" Severus declared in triumph as he found the offending book and snapped it shut.

"...missed her, the ache in his gut was endless..."

"Perhaps he should eat a decent meal," huffed Severus as he slammed the book shut.

Pacing the length of the room, his rage simmered. He unsheathed his wand, and with a derisive flick of his wrist, Vanished the rest of the rubbish on his floor. If he had to, he would Vanish every copy of the tripe.

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With a determined stride, Severus walked up to the first desk in a long line of cubicles and waited. Aurors milled around the room, conversing with one another and dodging paper airplanes as the correspondences flew about the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Clearing his throat pointedly and glaring at the nearest Auror, who ignored him, he tapped his foot in annoyance.

A blonde head popped over the cubicle wall in surprise. The expression on the Auror's face was one of annoyance. "Somebody will be with you in a moment," the man stated and turned his back to him. "Tonks! It's your turn!"

Severus closed his eyes as the cruel twist of fate presented itself. Fuck! Normally, he was more eloquent, but he was still slightly hung over from last night's bonfire. No matter how hard he tried, he simply could not brew Hang-over Potion while he was hung over. It was one of life's cruel ironies -- that and the fact that a fellow Order member would be taking his complaint.

Nymphadora Tonks leaned back in her chair and glanced down the aisle. Her dark brown eyes twinkled mischievously once she realized who it was. "Wotcher, Snape!"

Ignoring her attempt of a greeting, Severus walked past the front desk and down the aisle of Aurors. "I've come to file a complaint," he said, pushing his way into Tonk's cubicle and noticing the numerous pictures of Remus Lupin dotting the walls. He rolled his eyes. "Is there anyone else who is capable of taking my complaint?"

Unperturbed, Tonks shoved a bunch of paperwork around on her desk and smiled. "This is your lucky day, Snape. It's my day to take complaints."

Pursing his lips, Severus stared at her. At least it wasn't Potter's day to take complaints. Having managed to "save" one of the books, he set it on the table and pushed it across to her with a look of disdain that made him look as though he smelled something distasteful. "I wish to file a complaint against the author of this book. She is willfully endangering the magical community with her fiction and is using Hogwarts' staff as the basis for the characters."

Grinning like a child at Christmastime, Tonks snatched the book up and flipped it over, reading the back. "Bees Knees, Severus! Where'd you get this? Flourish and Blotts has been sold out for weeks. Even Muggle stores are sold out. May I borrow your copy?"

The absurdity of her request floated between them for a slow-motion moment. Snatching the book away, he stood to leave. "I can see this is a complete waste of my time."

Tonks' eyes sent wide with confusion. "You don't have to be an arse about it," she murmured, then quirked her eyebrow. "Why do you want to file a complaint?"

Slamming the blasted book onto the table, Severus leaned forward. "Because I don't see what's so funny or fantastic about being made a laughingstock. I am in no way flattered that some former student has used me for her insipid fantasies."

"Huh?"

The Auror's lack of an intelligent response was even more off-putting based on the fact that she wasn't even looking at him. Instead, she was reading the summary on the back of the book. "I've read bits and pieces of this tripe," he continued, hoping that his words would sink into the former Order member's thought processes. "Do you not find it disconcerting that Ms. Winters has jeopardized the entire Wizarding community for her personal gain?"

"This is great!" exclaimed Tonks. "I wondered when she would write Simon's story. I can hardly wait to read it. He sounds like a right bastard."

Severus slammed his fist on the table. "Are you even listening to me?"

Tonks looked up from the book and smiled. "Yes, and I don't see where you have a valid complaint. The International Statute of Secrecy has cleared Ms. Winters' books as works of fiction. All authors must submit their books to the committee if they are trying to get published for Muggles to read. As far as your charge regarding any similarities..." Tonks giggled. "I've read books one and two, and "

"You mean to tell there are other books?" His jaw ached for he was clenching his jaw tightly.

"Oh yes!" She caressed the book lovingly. "This is the third book in the series. The first one *Eternal Magic*, had Melinda and Albert in it. The second book had Richard and Nadora in it. That's my favorite one. Richard is a werewolf and Nadora is a bounty hunter who is after him. I was wondering when "

Severus started banging on the bell on the desk in indignation. "Are you even listening to me?"

The bell had the desired effect, and the normally affable witch frowned. "Yes," she mumbled.

"Are you planning on arresting the... the... author of this rubbish?"

"Uh, no," she replied. "But I will more than happy to take your complaint."

The nightmare unfolded before him, feeding his foul temper into a seething rage.

"Excuse me, Professor Snape," a confident voice greeted him, and he turned around to see a sharply dressed Percy Weasley standing behind him. "I couldn't help but overhear your distress. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes," snapped Tonks. "You can get lost, sleazy git."

Ignoring the Auror's slight, Percy smiled. "As I was saying... I overheard parts of the conversations, and judging by what I heard, you are not satisfied with the result offered by Tonks."

"Why, you little blighter! Just wait until I tell your father and mother that you're trolling for clients."

At first Severus was puzzled, but then he remembered hearing something about Percy Weasley leaving the Ministry and becoming a barrister. At least the Weasley spawn had stayed true to his ambitions. For that, he respected the thin, freckle-laden, redhead even though he had been a pain in the arse during his tenure as Prefect and Head-Boy.

Percy offered his business card to him. "For your information, Tonks, I was visiting my father, not trolling for clients."

Taking the card from the barrister, Severus flipped it over in his hand. He was obviously not going to get any satisfaction with due process. Why shouldn't he seek legal representation? After all, one could always use a good lawyer on one's side. "I'll contact your office and arrange an appointment, Mr. Weasley."

"There's no need for such formalities, Professor Snape," Percy assured him, motioning him to move toward the lift. "I have two hours available and would be more than honored if you allowed me to assist you."

Sticking her finger down her throat in a juvenile manner, Tonks gagged at the display of grandiose flattery.

With a satisfied smirk, Severus ignored the Auror and followed Percy Weasley.

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"My mother and wife read this rubbish," the redheaded wizard announced, tossing the book onto his grossly ornate desk, and then straightening the papers which had been disturbed.

At the mention of his family life, Severus quirked an eyebrow in silent question. Surely, the ambitious Percy Weasley was not living at home. The thought alone did little to inspire his confidence in the meeting.

"It's a very popular series," Percy stated as he leaned back in his chair. "I think thirty-three percent should be adequate."

Severus nodded for him to go on. "Seeing as you have already determined your fee, what is your plan?"

Percy pressed a button on his desk and spoke into a box on his desk. "Ginny, I need you."

Somehow he kept himself from rolling his eyes. It was almost as though the arrogant prat was playing the part of a lawyer. Severus had half a mind to tell Percy Weasley to sod off and get a respectable career. He watched as Weasley twirled his quill between his thumb and forefinger as though he was unsure what to write.

Heaving a sigh of exasperation, Percy placed his quill in the ink well and stood up. He pushed his spectacles up on his nose and walked to the office door. Opening it, he poked his head out, and all Severus could hear was a murmured plea for his secretary/sister to join them.

As the two Weasley siblings entered the room, Severus groaned.

"...Not your servant, Percy," Ginny Weasley chastised. "Ring that bell one more time and I'll walk. Then you'll have to get a real secretary and Oh! Hello, Professor Snape! What are you doing here?"

What had he been thinking? He needed a real lawyer, not someone playing at being one. "I was just leaving," he said, unraveling his tall, thin frame from the chair.

"P-Professor Snape," stammered Percy nervously and ignored the obvious hint that he had been dismissed. "Please have a seat so that we may discuss the lawsuit against the publishing company."

"What publishing company?" asked Ginny, clearly at a loss.

Reluctantly, he sat down on the edge of the seat. He had not considered Mr. Weasley's idea of suing the publishing company. The pompous prat's suggestion had merit. "Go on."

Taking his place behind his desk like an imperial regent, Percy cleared his throat. "Romance Rabble won't know what hit them. Ginny, take notes... please."

"Romance Rabble?" Ginny asked, twisting a strand of hair around her finger nervously. "What in the name of Merlin are you talking about, Percy?"

Severus sighed.

As if he was trying to brew a complex potion, Percy looked up and stared at his former professor expectantly and blushed. "My apologies, Professor Snape. I only heard part of the conversation at the Ministry. Why were you filing a complaint?"

Severus glared at Percy. "Once again, Gryffindor brashness moves me."

"More importantly, why are you suing Romance Rabble?" asked Ginny, sitting on her brother's desk.

He could not ignore the edge of curiosity in her voice. *She's a former student.* The wheels in his mind started turning and his paranoia reared its ugly head. Was it possible that she had written the atrocity?

Watching her reaction carefully, Severus took the book and handed it to her. "One of my former students has taken it upon herself to make a mockery of my life by casting me as the lead in a romance novel. All year long, students have snickered behind my back."

"And for that you are suing Romance Rabble? And how do you know it's a former student?" she asked quickly.

Severus fingered his wand, tempted to use Legilimency on the youngest Weasley.

"Whether it was malicious intent or delusions of grandeur, this work of fiction is a poorly veiled attack on my character."

Percy watched the exchange with interest.

Picking the book up and giving it a cursory look, Ginny snorted. It was no genteel cough of laughter, but a guttural expulsion of amusement, one that showed her rambunctious upbringing and roots. "I've read this book, and I do not see what you are talking about, Professor Snape. As for delusions of grandeur, perhaps it is you who suffers from the condition."

"Ginny!" It appeared as though Percy would die from embarrassment.

A cruel smirk curled a corner of his lips. "Either way, Miss Weasley, I intend to pursue this matter to the fullest extent of the law."

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TBC

## Chapter Two

*Chapter 2 of 16*

Hermione relaxes until Ginny arrives with news. Severus narrows his search and discovers something unsettling.

Chapter Two

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Listening to the serene waves kiss the shore, Hermione Granger stared at a point on the horizon and willed her creative process to pour forth. But the lure of dusk was just too beautiful to ignore. Besides, she had plenty of time to work. She would be here for an entire month, uninterrupted and unimpeded by friends, family, and unwanted distractions.

Nothing could bother her here. It was impossible. The clean white sands sparkled as the last rays of sunshine surrendered to the rotation of the earth. As the sun set, the torches up and down the walkway lit. That was definitely a cue to go inside. Soon the mosquitoes would start biting.

Picking up her enchanted quill and notes, Hermione uncurled her legs and stood. She stretched, working the last of the kinks of her hectic life out of her shoulders, and started to walk toward the villa.

Now twenty-five, she counted her good fortunes with sincerity and gratitude. Not only had Harry vanquished Voldemort, but her friend had lived to tell about it. Hopefully, Harry would resign his role as hero and relax. Rounding up the Death Eaters was not his job. She was certain that, once he realized, Harry would finally wise up and make things right with Ginny -- one of her best friends and co-conspirators in creativity.

Molly Weasley was her other best friend and co-conspirator in creativity. Not that she had wanted to know all the gory details of her and Arthur's sex life, but the woman had a wealth of information that enhanced the sex scenes in her novels.

Her novels... They had all started out so innocently. As a field journalist for a Muggle magazine, Hermione had toyed with the idea of writing a novel. She'd had no intention of turning it into a series of romance novels. But after being injured on the job and doped up on drugs and potions, that's the way her stories had developed.

Her latest book, *The Darkest Magic*, had been the most difficult to write. All of the books were based on actual people in her life, couples whom she admired and envied. Of course, her first book, *Eternal Magic*, had been pure speculation. It still was speculation.

Although she had remained close to her mentor, Minerva McGonagall would never admit to having a relationship with Albus Dumbledore. The scandal would be too great. A lifetime of wasted opportunities was Professor McGonagall's only real crime that and being way too overprotective of her.

Hermione visited often with the older witch, taking solace in returning to Hogwarts and reveling in any contact with Professor Snape. When Hermione had been recovering from wounds received in the field, she'd been cloistered in Gryffindor Tower under Minerva's watchful gaze.

The Animagus hadn't missed the subtle clues of Hermione's crush on Hogwarts' "unpleasant, unbending Potions master." As Minerva had run interference and had limited her exposure to her former Potions professor, Hermione had done everything she could to run into the surly wizard. After all, he had supplied the potions for her wounds.

It was too bad he did not have a "Get-Over-Your-Silly-School-Girl-Crush" Potion. The man despised her. He had made that perfectly clear with his sneering comments and the "You-are-no-longer-my-student-why-must-I-even-deal-with-you" glare.

Just like Harry, Hermione had become addicted to adrenaline. Her primary profession, that of a freelance journalist, had been very rewarding for her. She had been investigating the claims of a rogue giant in the massive jungles of Asia. The wizarding community of Ping-chu consisted of a rather small population. Although they had adhered to all International Wizarding Secrecy Conventions, there were not enough witches and wizards in the mostly Muggle village to fend the giant off, much less Obliviate all the villagers whenever it decided to pay a visit. So, in a very Harry-like bravado fashion, she went after the giant.

She had woken up two weeks later in the local hospital, lucky to remember who she was, much less be alive, after taking on a giant. Fortunately, the local Auror had found her. Her left leg had been pinned beneath a tree, and she'd had a large goose egg on her forehead. She still walked with a bit of a limp.

Making her way over the white, sandy dune, Hermione could see a shadowy figure pacing the length of the porch. Judging by the silhouette and the fact that only five people knew where she was, it had to be Ginny. Perhaps she was reconsidering the next book. After all, her and Harry's story did not have a happy ending. At that thought, Hermione gave a derisive snort. At least Ginny had "been" with Harry, whereas Professor Snape didn't even know she existed.

Hermione approached the nervous figure and prepared for a brainstorming session. If Ginny didn't want Hermione to write about her and Harry, she would have to consult her notes and pick another couple. Wiping the sand off her feet, she hobbled up the steps. "Hi, Ginny."

"Hermione!" the youngest Weasley shouted breathlessly. "Thank Merlin!" Ginny's hair and eyes were wild, and the soot on one of her shoulders told the story of the many Floo connections she had taken to get to the vacation villa.

"What is it?" asked Hermione, concern for their mutual friends and loved ones growing. "What's wrong?"

Grabbing Hermione by the shoulders, Ginny steered her to the nearest wicker chair. "You had better sit down."

A lump of dread settled in the pit of her stomach. *I will remain calm. I will stay focused. I will stay in control. I will be supportive no matter what.*

"He knows!" blurted Ginny, kneeling in front of her best friend and holding onto her hands for support.

Hermione was puzzled. "I need more of a clue, Ginny," she said with a laugh, trying to lighten the mood. "Who knows, and what does he know?"

"Professor Snape!" Ginny jumped up and started to pace again. "He knows he's Simon! He hired Percy to represent him. He's suing Romance Rabble!"

Ginny's words were surreal, and it took a little time to digest what she had said. Was she asleep? Was she having some bizarre nightmare?

"Did you hear me?" Ginny snapped her fingers.

"Yes," replied Hermione, reality rudely seeping into her vacation-induced euphoria.

"What are you going to do?" Ginny stopped pacing and plopped into the chair opposite Hermione. "Romance Rabble can't afford a lawsuit. We can't even keep up with the demand. *The Darkest Magic* is on back order for four weeks. George and Fred can't keep up. Mum is working on her and Dad's story, which, by the way, I still think is a bad idea."

"You don't have to read it, you know," Hermione mumbled, automatically defending Molly's decision to write about her romance with Arthur.

"So what are you going to do?"

Ginny's question sent a wave of panic through Hermione. Standing, it was her turn to start pacing the length of the porch. "Let me get this straight. Professor Snape 'thinks' he's Simon. How did he find out? Surely he doesn't read 'dirty smut romance novels.'"

"Apparently he does," Ginny retorted.

Hermione gave her a severe look.

"Okay, he doesn't," she rescinded her remark. "Apparently some of his students had copies of the books. He confiscated them. It seems that some of his students have drawn the same conclusion that Simon was modeled after him."

"That isn't a crime," Hermione argued. She could feel the embarrassment in her heated cheeks. Why had she ever listened to Molly and Ginny? How had she let them talk her into writing about her secret now not so secret crush? At least Molly and Ginny had been gracious enough not to tease her about it. Instead, they had fostered her creative effort, demanding that she pair Simon up with someone with a Muggle background. Molly had said it would be cathartic, exorcising Hermione's feelings for Professor Snape. But George and Fred had been relentless, teasing her about the unrequited love.

"I know!" Ginny supplied helpfully. "You could kill Simon off in the next book!"

Hermione winced.

"For that matter, you can kill Harry's character too. Have Voldemort's character win the war. You know, sexy, perverted stuff." Ginny wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

"No!" protested Hermione. "You are sick. If you're having second thoughts, I could always write about Ron and Luna."

"Blech!" Ginny's opinion of reading about any of her family members in a romantic sense was well known. "Poor Luna. Ron's probably a real dud in bed."

"Ginny, will you please focus!" she scolded. "When did Professor Snape hire Percy?"

"Yesterday," came the reply.

"Okay." Hermione sighed, trying to put a plan together. "Whatever you do, don't piss Percy off. He's already fired you twice. You're in the perfect position to spy for us. Here's what I want you to do."

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"I have filed the proper paperwork with the Ministry against Romance Rabble Incorporated," Percy stated with confidence. "We should be hearing from their counsel any day now. In the meantime, I did some investigating and found very little about the company. Apparently the owners are very secretive and like their privacy."

Severus nodded for Percy to continue. "Go on."

"Their company was founded three years ago with the publication of their first book *Eternal Magic*. Unfortunately, their only properties are the series of books, up through *The Darkest Magic*. However, I am confident we will be awarded a substantial amount based on projected sales of the series."

"What about the author?" Severus asked. "I'd like to know who Miss Perdita Winters is so that I may wring her pretty little neck."

Clearing his throat, Percy took a sip of his drink. "It would seem that the author uses a pseudonym."

"And?"

"Well, I have a lead," Percy hedged. "I'm sending my investigator to follow up on it. Unfortunately, the expenses I am incurring will increase the fee and "

"Mr. Weasley, has it not occurred to you that I do not give a damn about money?" Severus snapped. "I'm more interested in locating the author of these bloody books and stopping her from writing this rubbish. I will not endure another school year with impressionable, hormonal students. You can bloody well keep the money. Now what is the lead?"

Percy eyed him shrewdly, undoubtedly wondering if he could get him to sign a contract to that effect. "Well, there is a villa in the Caymans that has been leased to Romance Rabble Incorporated this month. I was going to send my investigator to "

"I will go," he stated softly. "If Perdita Winters is there, then I will have the pleasure of ruining her summer vacation. It's the very least I can do."

--

Floating on the waves, Hermione pondered her predicament. Ginny had returned home, agreeing to be the best spy possible. After all, working for Percy had been one of those things that her friend had been doing off and on ever since graduation. It was a pattern. Percy would either fire her or she would quit. The end was always the same. Percy would beg Ginny to come back to him.

Poor Ginny. She wasn't exactly flighty, but she just hadn't found herself. She had spent so much time mooning over Harry. Their breakup had been anything but amicable. Months before Harry had defeated Voldemort, he had pushed Ginny away. Not easily deterred, Ginny had not given up until she had seen him with another witch.

Of course, Hermione knew that it had been a ploy a ploy to distance himself from most everybody he had ever loved. Stupid git! But Harry had been determined to save the wizarding world. Molly had seen through this ploy too. But the Weasley wizards had seen it differently. They hadn't been able to see past Ginny's tears.

A wave jostled her out of her reverie, and she swam back to shore. It was so quiet. This was the way she preferred it total peace. "I have to figure out how to give Ginny and Harry a happy ending. The readers aren't going to read a tragic romance. I wouldn't read a tragic romance," she mumbled.

The only response came from a lone seagull that had taken up residence along the beach.

"Oh, shut up," she grouched and wrung the water from her hair. "And who asked you anyway? I'm well aware that I am ignoring my own problems."

The bird snapped its beak.

She shooped the bird away. "It's not as though Professor Snape is going to show up on my doorstep."

--

Walking down the gravel road, Severus cast a Cooling Charm on himself. He had his wand and the clothes on his back. It wasn't as though he was staying very long. He pushed some palm fronds out of the way and approached the house. It was a subdued pink with two stories, a wrap-around porch, and so many windows it looked as though the house was made of glass. He could even see bits of the beach and ocean from the road. It was a popular vacation destination for wizarding families.

He watched as a seagull took to the sky, flying over the house and diving toward him. Reflexively, Severus grasped his wand, but it was too late. The bloody bird had deposited its load on his shoulder. "Morgana's tits!"

The bird flew high and away from him.

Severus stopped and surveyed the mess, quickly casting a Cleansing Charm and scowling toward the beach. He could see a shadow move on the pristine sand. It had feminine curves and errant strands of hair. A blasted column obstructed his view. There was no way he could see who the woman was unless he got closer.

Stepping onto the porch, Severus crept around the corner and slithered against the edge of the house, years of espionage guiding his stealth. The sun was high, casting prisms of light all around and obscuring his view of a group of lounge chairs where he heard a voice.

"...her stubborn chin. James flashed Virginia a mischievous grin.

"Don't even think about it, Porter," the redheaded witch spat, seething with anger as she shoved against the wizard's solid chest."

Severus cringed as he listened to the dictation and watched the enchanted quill scratched along the parchment.

"And just what are you going to do, Virginia? Hex me?" He covered her hand with his and pressed it against his chest.

"She was helpless as she gazed into his green eyes," the dictation went on.

Glaring at the back of her head, he silently cursed the Fates, for he still couldn't make out any features. The sound of the woman's voice struck a chord deep within him. It was so familiar.

"Can you feel what you do to me, Virginia?" murmured James as he captured a silken strand of her hair between his fingertips. "Would it shock you if I moved your hand lower?"

"Scratch that last sentence," the woman huffed in frustration. "Somehow I doubt Harry would ever be that forward."

Pieces clicked together and staggered the normally stoic professor. James Porter? Harry? Virginia... another form of Ginny? That voice! Severus backed away to escape the putrid reality he'd discovered. When he was on the other side of the house, he Apparated to the end of the lane, tossing the name of Hermione Granger around in his head as if it were an obtuse concept.

"That little... witch!" Severus exhaled, forking his fingers through his hair. No only had she modeled the character of Simon after him; she had modeled the heroine after herself!

Years! He had suffered years with Potter, Weasley, and Granger in his class seven years of Miss Granger's annoying thirst for knowledge. That bloody harpy had made his life a living hell for far too long. Yes, he could march right up to her and confront her, but he would gain little satisfaction in doing so. If anything, he needed revenge revenge that would fit the crime!

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TBC

## Chapter Three

*Chapter 3 of 16*

Severus crashes Hermione's vacation

Author's Notes:

What's this? Chapter three? I thought the next chapter was chapter eleven. What's going on?

As any of you following this story have read, chapter five was... downright dodgy, regarding illegal potions and date rape.

After much soul-searching and encouragement from my beta readers, I decided to take the story in a different direction. It took a while for me to realize, and lots of gentle prodding from my beta-reader, Cocoachristy, to realize that what Snape did to Hermione in the previous draft of this story was not at all acceptable.

This story started out as a romantic comedy, and I would like to keep it as such. The previous draft was deviating from that, and I had to reel it in.

I would like to thank my beta-readers, Cocoachristy, SoulBound, and Jen for their long-suffering patience and gentleness. I would also like to extend a deep gratitude for each and every review for this story, especially Southern\_Witch, whose reviews showed me the error of Snape's ways.

I apologize for the confusion and hope that you all will enjoy the new direction the story is headed.

--

### Chapter Three

"I couldn't possibly... I wouldn't dream... What you suggest is most... inappropriate, Professor," Percy Weasley stuttered, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down as he nervously tapped a pen on his desk. "Not to mention illegal."

Glaring at his barrister, Severus leaned forward and scribbled a figure on a piece of parchment and slid it across the desk. Money meant nothing to him. He had more than enough and honestly didn't need the hassle of more.

Percy's eyes widened as he saw the amount of Galleons that his client was offering him to forge court documents. "Professor Snape, I could lose my job if..."

"I am offering you more than you could possibly *aspire* to earn in your entire lifetime, Mr. Weasley," Severus drawled slowly, trying to remain patient. "I just need your expertise to complete the transaction."

The bloody git was still reluctant to commit, judging by the way he kept tapping his pen on his desk. "But, Hermione..."

"Will be taught a very valuable lesson," Severus replied, his manner calm and collected as he pulled the parchment away from Percy and crossed out the amount, adding an even higher number. *Everyone has a price. Who would have thought that garnering cooperation from a Weasley would be so high? But then, Percy Weasley always was the abnormal one in his family. This Weasley actually had ambition.*

Weasley's eyes widened as he looked at the new amount. It was double the last offer. His face turned redder than his hair. "I'll do it," he whispered shakily.

"Very well, then," Severus stated, a malicious grin tugging at the corner of his lips. "I shall, of course, need for you to keep your sister occupied and away from Miss Granger during this time."

"That shouldn't be too much of a problem, sir." Percy loosened the collar of his tailored, navy-blue robe.

"I shall stop by Gringotts on my way home and arrange for half of the funds to be deposited into your account. I expect the documents to be ready for my departure tomorrow morning. You'll receive the other half after I get back."

"Yes, sir." Percy nodded

--

Ignoring the aches in her arms, Hermione trudged along the gravel path toward the villa and mentally ticked off her grocery list one last time. If she needed anything else, she would have to Apparate into town. The sun was setting, and she still wasn't comfortable enough with the area to venture out after dark. She reached the bottom step and adjusted the bags in her arms.

Who was she kidding? It was times like these where magic really was better than the Muggle way. Setting them on the bottom step, Hermione pulled her wand from her sleeve and shrank the groceries to a more manageable size.

She tucked her wand into her sleeve and rubbed her reddened hands together. "I should have done that to begin with." She rolled her eyes *Once a Muggle, always a Muggle.*

Hermione shook her head. She had taken a break from writing to go grocery shopping, hoping that the interruption would jumpstart her muse. Ever since Ginny had stopped by and announced that Snape was on the prowl for the author of *The Darkest Magic*, she had been on edge and unable to concentrate.

Placing her purchases in the palm of her hand, she made her way upstairs and frowned. Lights were on, and she was pretty sure that she hadn't left them on. Making her way up the second flight of stairs, her frown turned into a scowl. A shadow moved from the kitchen into the living room.

"What part of creative solitude don't they understand?" she grouched, wondering which one of the Weasley clan had decided to intrude on her privacy. Whoever it was, she was going to send them packing. She couldn't afford any interruptions. The deadline for the second chapter was tomorrow evening, and she was still editing chapter one for errors.

If anyone had told her that creativity was difficult, she would have given him or her a skeptical look. She had always been the analytical type. Maybe that was her problem now. She had started writing in an effort to alleviate the boredom between freelance assignments. Now, she found herself doing freelance work between books. It just wasn't fair. She really needed to find some kind of happy medium.

Hermione opened the wood gate and stepped onto the front porch. It was a newer villa with a wrap around porch. She could hear the bubbling jets of the hot tub out back and gritted her teeth. "It must be George or Fred. Worst-case scenario... it's both." Either way, they were going to have icicles hanging off their bollocks before she got rid of them.

She edged toward the front door and watched the tall, lanky shadow head toward the back door. "I'll let him...or them...get nice and comfortable. Then I'll freeze his bollocks off." She waited for the shadow to go onto the back porch before entering the villa.

Keeping her groceries small, she placed the entire bag on the counter and waited for Fred or George to get a little more comfortable. She noticed a smooth, black leather travel bag near the door and paused. It seemed too sophisticated for one of the twins.

She snorted. One of them was probably trying to impress some bimbo. Merlin, she hoped she didn't interrupt anything... gross. Hermione shivered. That was all she needed...to see one of the twin's freckled arse as he... "Yuck! Just yuck, Hermione!" she hissed softly. "Don't even go there."

She slid the door open and tiptoed onto the lanai. The setting sun cast a shroud of darkness over the screened porch. It was the perfect time of day for lovers to indulge in this type of decadence. She heaved a small sigh of relief. If she were to catch George or Fred in flagrante delicto, she wouldn't see anything.

Aiming her wand at the relaxed figure, she took a step forward. Whoever was in the hot tub was still unaware of her arrival. He was facing the other direction, watching the last rays of the sun as it slipped over the horizon.



She took another step, then another, somehow managing not to laugh. The noise of bubbling water covered the sound of her approach.

The man stretched and sank below the surface. Hermione edged closer, her heart pounding so fast it felt as though it would jump from her chest.

She blinked, moving a piece of errant hair out of her eyes. Feeling the whoosh of displaced air associated with Apparation, Hermione stepped back with a squeak. Her wand leapt out of her hand, and as she made a grab for it, her hand connected with a solid, wet wall of male chest.

This was definitely not one of the twins.

"Tut, tut, Miss Granger," a familiar, sarcastic snarl whispered against her ear. "It's not nice to sneak up on people, especially when they are enjoying the fruits of your labor."

A shiver crawled over every centimeter of her skin as she placed the voice. "P-Professor Snape!"

"Or shall I call you *Miss Winters*," he sneered in the darkness, his hot breath tickling the hairs on her neck. "Perhaps, under the circumstances, Cassandra would be more appropriate."

Hermione struggled against him, refusing to be intimidated by his words or his presence. Maybe she could Obliviate him. "Let me go, Professor."

"*Lumos*," he whispered, releasing her and stepping back. "I've spent my entire life spying in some capacity or another. Did you really think you could sneak up on me?"

By the light of his wand, Hermione could see that he was practically naked, sans his underpants, which hung low on his hips and left little to her imagination. "I... I..."

"Need a lesson in manners," Severus snapped. He threw her wand in the air and flicked his wand toward it. It vanished.

Hermione's eyes widened. "My wand! Give it back!"

"No," he snarled, walking past her and into the house.

She followed him down the hall, her fists and gut clenched with fear and rage.

By the time they reached the sitting room, he was dry. He reached for his black bag, set it on a table, and opened it. Pulling a pile of papers from its depths, he unfolded them and handed them to her. "If you read over the paperwork carefully, you will see that I own it. It's mine to do with as I see fit. If I wanted to Vanish the bloody thing... Well, consider it Vanished."

"You *can't* do that!" she hissed vehemently. "That's *illegal*! You don't *own* my wand!"

Scratching his chin with one hand, he tapped the thick packet of documents in her hand. "I beg to differ," he sneered, motioning for her to read the material before her. "I own every single piece of furniture, stitch of clothing, dish, and creative idea. I even own *you*. Consider yourself my personal house-elf."

"Oh wait!" he chuckled, his laughter causing her stomach to churn in a most sickening manner. "You can't be a house-elf without magic. Perhaps indentured servant would be a better title for you."

She gaped at him as the nightmare unfolded before her. It wasn't possible. It wasn't probable. It was preposterous! It was a joke. It had to be some elaborate joke, and the only people she knew who would stoop to such lengths...

Well, one of them was standing before her, Polyjuiced to look like Professor Snape. She should be angry with them, but now that she'd figured out their ruse, she was giddy with relief.

Hermione laughed, tossing the paperwork, whatever it was, onto the floor and moving toward George or Fred Weasley. Ginny must have told them about Professor Snape finding out. They had always teased her unmercifully regarding her crush on the *greasy git*. They never could resist taking a prank to extremes. Whichever barmy twin this was, however clever, was going to have the tables turned on him in a most unconventional manner.

"Oh wait!" She mimicked the *Professor's* earlier declaration and slithered toward him seductively. Touching the pale skin of his chest with a delicate caress, she shivered. She should have been grossed out, getting this close to George or Fred, but the look on his face was priceless and well worth the inconvenience.

"I have an even better title for myself," purred Hermione, pressing her lips against the stubborn jaw she'd had naughty dreams about ever since she was of age to have such thoughts. "How about personal *sex slave*?"

She had to hand it to whichever twin she was dealing with. They were impersonating *Professor Snape* wonderfully, down to the menacing scowl and the fantastic back-story. Merlin, she was going to enjoy this. If she were a betting woman, she would put her money on Fred. George was involved with Katie Bell and wouldn't put up with the intimate proximity.

Standing on her tiptoes, Hermione placed her lips against his. She kept the kiss close-mouthed, but felt her stomach flip in excitement *Yuck! How can I be turned on kissing Fred Weasley?*

She stepped back and grabbed his hands, tugging him toward the master bedroom. "Would Master Snape like to adjourn to the bedroom? Would he like to sample his slave?" she giggled, unable to keep a straight face.

Jerking his hand out of hers, her *former professor* stared at her with dark, disbelieving, obsidian eyes. "Are you ill, Miss Granger, or have you just gone completely mad?"

Hermione snorted. If she had been drinking milk, she would undoubtedly have had milk bubbles coming out of her nose. "Oh, Fred! Give it up! I applaud you for your effort, but you can't fool me. I must admit that I'm impressed that you would go to this extreme for a practical joke. I can only imagine how painful it is to Polyjuice into Professor Snape, much less where you got one of his hairs... or *how* you got one of his hairs?"

The half-naked man cleared his throat and crossed his arms over his chest. "You think that I'm Fred Weasley?"

She rolled her eyes and nodded.

"You think *I* am Fred Weasley and that *that* look Polyjuice to be *me*?"

Hermione punched his shoulder and huffed. "Yes, you bloody dolt! Ginny was here three days ago and told me about Professor Snape finding out that I modeled Simon after him. She obviously told you, and you couldn't resist playing this absurd practical joke on me."

She didn't know what to expect, but she wasn't expecting *him* to laugh. The sound unnerved her, and she didn't like that at all.

"I do so admire your imagination," he sneered. "It shall make me a very rich man."

Crossing her arms over her chest, she rocked back onto her heels and nibbled her bottom lip.

"There is a fatal flaw with your summation as to my identity though." He crowded her and backed her against a nearby wall. "You must remember that Polyjuice Potion takes a month to brew...having brewed it yourself. So, if Miss Weasley was here three days ago, how was I, Fred Weasley, able to brew Polyjuice Potion on such short notice?"

"Uh..." stammered Hermione, racking her brain for a sensible answer and trying to ignore the obvious flaw in her logic. "You... you had some already brewed and just needed to... to add the hair."

Snape grinned, Summoning the documents and tapping her cheek with them. "This is a temporary injunction, issued by the Ministry of Magic. It is an injunction against you and your cohorts at Romance Rabble. As of midnight last night, I own all profit from the sales of your book, *The Darkest Magic*, and any other holdings that you may possess. There is also a clause that enables me to oversee the creative process of your next novel and any novel thereafter to ensure that I, or the character of Simon Sanders, do not appear in anymore of your trashy *romance* novels.

"In essence, Miss Granger, I own *you*." He leered, glancing at her lips and pressing his granite hips against her soft tummy. "I hadn't thought about having a personal sex slave. But if you are volunteering for the position, I would be more than happy to accept your offer." He raised a challenging eyebrow. "If nothing else, I can appreciate your imagination where the art of sex is concerned."

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TBC

## Chapter Four

*Chapter 4 of 16*

Hermione realizes a harsh truth.

### Chapter Four

Severus didn't know what to expect, but the smile that graced her lush lips unnerved him. It unnerved him to the point to where he relaxed his guard.

"A glamour, perhaps?" He heard the huskiness of her voice, saw her glance at his lips, and felt himself begin to unwillingly harden.

Hermione shoved him, and he stumbled backwards. "Don't you think you're carrying this a bit far, Fred?"

"I assure you that I am not joking, Miss Granger, nor am I Fred Weasley," replied Severus, rubbing the spot on his shoulder where she had hit him. Her attitude perplexed yet intrigued him. Perhaps she had gotten too much sun.

"Yeah, right," she scoffed, still refusing to believe him. "Your glamour is very good, Fred. Is this a new product for Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes? You've even got Professor Snape's *voice* down. You and George will make a fortune with this!"

Severus placed his hand upon her forehead. "You don't look feverish, nor do you feel feverish. Is it possible that you're suffering from some Muggle malady? Did you Oblivate yourself?"

Hermione laughed again. "You're hilarious, Fred! If I'd Oblivated myself, do you really think I would remember it?"

She circled him, running a hand along the breadth of his shoulders. "So when does the glamour wear off? Do you have a name for the product yet? How much will it cost? Do you realize the ethical implications of such a product? Do you honestly think the Ministry is going to allow you to market it?"

She smacked his shoulder in the same spot she had pushed him earlier. "Oh! I know! You can market ~~to~~ the Ministry! They could probably use it... what with all the rouge Death Eaters still running amok. Are there any flaws? Do you..."

Snatching her wrist and hauling her against him, Severus sealed his lips over Hermione's to stem her incessant words. She gasped in surprise, and he exploited the moment, deepening the kiss and sliding his tongue against hers in silent challenge. Her fingers flexed against his chest. A groan slipped past her lips, and he sipped at the sound greedily.

Things were definitely not going as planned.

Backing her against the nearest wall, Severus plundered her willing lips and nipped the swollen skin until he thought he would come just from the taste of her.

He kissed her to shut her up, not seduce her. But who was seducing whom? Where had his plan gone wrong?

Grinding his hips against her pelvis, Severus felt the stinging bite of her teeth on his bottom lip and pulled away. She kneed him near the groin area... thankfully ~~not~~ the groin... and pushed him away with a violent shove.

"I don't know what you think you're doing, Fred Weasley, but I am not that kind of witch!" she seethed. "And I certainly don't think of you *in that way*. You're like the older brother I'm glad I never had."

Scowling, Severus wiped the blood off his lip with his forearm. "I would hate to think that you would kiss Mr. Weasley in such a manner, much less your brother."

He walked away from her, oblivious to her panicked stare, and gathered his clothes.

--

Hermione watched him walk into the master bedroom, his lithe stride reminding her of a stalking feline, or more appropriately, a slithering snake. Something clicked... something that she did not wish to acknowledge.

Ginny called it her "ostrich" behavior, where Hermione refused to see something for what it was. But when ~~where~~ Fred referred to himself in the third person, something shattered

her hopeful delusion.

The man in the master bedroom...her room...really was Severus Snape!

The room tilted, and she stumbled backwards, tripping over the sleek, travel bag that held the man's possessions. Hermione reached for the bag, the gleam of the silver nameplate catching her eye.

S. S.

"Oh, no!" she whispered, the horror of the last fifteen minutes flashing before her. "This is not happening!"

Epiphanies were always rude awakenings. Why should this one be any different?

"Holy fuck," she whispered shakily, standing and tugging on her sarong. She'd just snogged Severus Snape. She had just...

Her mind worked quickly, like a celestial event streaking across the midnight sky. "I came home and found a half-naked Snape in my hot tub. He Vanished my wand.

"Bloody fuck!" she hissed, wincing as she used the f word for the second time in the past minute. "He Vanished my bloody wand!"

Hermione nudged his travel bag out of the way and started to pace. "That wanking git Vanished my bloody wand! Just who does he think he is? What makes him believe that it would be okay to Vanish my wand...no matter the reason?"

She stopped in the middle of the sitting room and took a deep breath. It did nothing to calm her nerves. Not only was she shaking like a leaf, but she had lost her vocabulary. According to him, he *owned* her wand. How was that possible?

How was she going to do magic without her wand? "Bloody hell!"

She stomped toward the bedroom and flung the door open to find him sitting on the bed, still in his underwear, the documents next to him. "You!" she shouted as she pointed a shaking finger at him.

He straightened.

"You'd better figure out where you've sent my wand! I want it back, and I want it back*now*!" she declared.

Standing to his full height, which was a good head taller than she, he glared down his nose at her. "I see that you have finally regained your senses. I am pleased that my earning potential has not been damaged by your momentary lapse of reason."

Hermione resisted the urge to smack the silly grin off his face. She still had no idea what he was talking about, the embarrassment of the situation settling around her like an oppressive shroud. Oh Merlin! She'd written a book based on a schoolgirl crush... based on him. How was she ever going to live through this experience?

*Focus, Hermione! Get your wand back. Then you can wallow in self-pity.*

"Tell me, Miss Granger," he sneered, seemingly pleased with her discomfort and her lack of manners. "Were you an only child? You certainly are acting like one."

She sputtered, seeing little dots of anger dance before her eyes. Perhaps she had gotten too much sun today. "I don't see what that has to do with anything. If I am not mistaken, you are also an only child!"

Ignoring her outburst, he continued, "I wonder if I shall own your parents, as well." He brushed past her, walked down the hall and into the sitting room, and picked up his bag.

"What!" she shouted, suddenly checking her tone and trying her best to be civil. The poor professor had obviously inhaled too many fumes.

He walked back into the master bedroom and set his bag on the bed. "Do you have any joint assets with your parents?"

She crossed her arms over her chest in the manner of a belligerent child and did not answer him.

"It doesn't really matter," he stated, pulling several sets of clothes out of his bag, none of which were appropriate for the beach. "Once the Wizengamot adjourns in three months time and determines the extent of what you owe me, I'm certain an accurate financial disclosure will be completed."

He moved her clothes to one side in the closet and hung his next to hers, keeping a set out.

"What are you blathering about?" she asked incredulously. "Wizengamot? Assets? Own my parents? Are you feeling well, Professor Snape? Shall I fetch a Healer for you?" It was obvious the man was impaired, for she had no idea what he was going on about.

She had the sneaking suspicion that she didn't even want to know what he was talking about.

Severus sauntered into the master bathroom and placed his black trousers and white shirt on the back of the door. "I'm quite well. Thank you for your concern. As for what I am talking about, read the documents on the bed. If you have any questions, you may contact my barrister, Percy Weasley. For now, I must take a shower."

With a final click of the bathroom door, Severus dismissed her.

Hermione grabbed the roll of parchment, sat down on the bed, and started to read.

--

The bloody chit! His confidence that he would be able to intimidate her with a mere look was quite shaken. He had not intended to kiss the bloody wench, much less continue to feel the effects of the event tingling on his skin. Severus shivered. If he didn't know better, he would think that he was *in* one of her uninspired, insipid romance novels.

He just needed to give her time to stew. It was a strategic retreat. It also gave him the opportunity to take a cold shower.

Phase one of his plan was complete...separate her from her wand so that she could not see through the ruse. With a quick flick of her wrist and a mumbled, "reveal thy secrets," she would have been able to tell that the document was a forgery.

He hadn't anticipated needing a phase two. He hadn't realized that Miss Granger was going to lose what little intelligence she had and rant about *him* being Fred Weasley. He also hadn't anticipated the pang of jealousy he'd felt when she had kissed him. There must be something between her and Fred Weasley to allow such a familiarity.

Stepping into the shower, Severus turned the water on and held his breath. The cold spray against his chest and lower extremities was just what he needed to rid himself of the residue of lustful entanglements that the brief kiss had inspired.

Hermione Granger was not the scrawny schoolgirl he remembered. She wasn't fashionably thin. She was fashionably healthy, judging by the slight pouch he had seen

while she sunbathed and dictated her torrid storyline the other day. A gentle curve of her waist defined the flare of her hips. Her breasts were... Well, they filled out the halter-top she wore very well and left little for his imagination, including the way her nipples hardened after their impromptu snog session.

Nor had he foreseen the desire that afflicted him now. Even under the icy spray, he was still semi-erect. This state was unacceptable. She must have had some magical perfume on that entices lovers to disgrace themselves. Those scents were very popular in tourist traps and tropical destinations such as this. They were similar to lust potions, yet more subtle.

That must be why he had felt the overwhelming desire to back her against the wall and shag her senseless!

Severus leaned against the tiles and shivered. It felt as though ice was flowing through his veins. Shutting the water off, he hurried out of the stall and dried himself off.

--

This had to be some mistake! This couldn't be happening to her! This was some horrible nightmare brought on by too much sun and not enough alcohol! This had to be some elaborate forgery! This had to be a joke!

The temporary injunction confirmed everything he had said and more.

Just then the door to the master bathroom opened, and a composed Professor Snape crossed the threshold. This was the man she had grown accustomed to. He was dressed in black trousers and a white shirt that was buttoned all the way to his neck.

Padding across the carpeted floor in his bare feet, he made his way to the bed and sat down. "By the horrified look on your face and your lack of witty banter, I assume that you have read the injunction."

Hermione threw it at his head, her temper getting the better of her. "An obvious forgery. I don't believe a word of it. Albus Dumbledore would never agree to this, and where was I during the proceedings? Why wasn't I notified so that I might defend myself? Why weren't my business partners notified?"

Severus grinned. She was correct in her assumption regarding Albus. The old goat would undoubtedly rule in Miss Granger's favor, and he just couldn't wait to go through the rigmarole of the Wizengamot legal process. Mr. Weasley's falsified documents were much better than any of the plagiaristic tripe his twin brothers ever submitted in his class. Though the injunction paperwork and all of its contents looked real and made perfect sense to the trained barrister and the knowledgeable layman, it would never pass any magical scrutiny of its contents.

"Believe it or not, Miss Granger," Severus replied slowly, savoring the small victory of seeing her sweat. By the end of his revenge, she would be well over her infatuation of him, and he would be free to deal with any lingering fans who thought of him as that mind-reading twit, *Simon Sanders*.

"I own the majority stock of Romance Rabble and any copies of *The Darkest Magic* that the publishing company is able to produce from this point forward. I certainly shall have a lot of kindling for my fire this winter.

"Not only do I own the stock and the copies; I own the intellectual property rights to any book containing the character that you, without asking permission or regard to my person or profession, so callously modeled after me. In three months time, the Wizengamot shall render its final decision, at which time I am confident that they will award me the intellectual property rights of *all* of your trashy novels."

Severus examined the cuticles on his left hand, seemingly disinterested in the change in Hermione's coloring. Her pallor had been alarming, and he had thought that she might rob him of her reaction by doing something like passing out. Now she was a bright, beet red, seething with anger and frustration. He could almost taste her hatred of him, which was an elixir that he certainly could get used to.

"My novels are not trashy," she growled in warning.

He had to agree with her. They weren't. The sexual content was tastefully done and not too repugnantly flowery for his taste. "I honestly don't know which amuses me more, Miss Granger... the fact that you modeled Simon Sanders after me, or the fact that you modeled Cassandra after yourself."

Standing, he gathered her cold and shaking hands in his. "If I had known that you were secretly enamored of me, I would have... Well, I don't know what I would have done. However, if your desires are such that you wish to exercise them upon me, I would not find your advances unwelcome."

Hermione yanked her hands from his and made a strangled noise of frustration.

He never saw her fist as it connected with his nose. All he saw were the stars that accompanied the pain of cartilage and bone breaking. He fell backwards, his head swimming with the knowledge that he had been accosted by an irate woman whom he had obviously underestimated.

"I would rather make love to a grindy low than you!" Hermione hissed before stalking from the room and leaving him to attend to his injury.

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TBC

Author's Notes: First, I would like to thank my beta readers, Cocoachristy, Soul Bound, and Jen, for their overwhelming and continued support for this story. It takes a set of brass balls to beta read, an even bigger set to weather the storm and hold the author's hand while the creative process births the story.

Secondly, I'd like to thank everyone who has given their opinions over the recent change in direction of this story. Some of you have been supportive of the decision while others are giving it a cautious second-chance. I applaud your decision and hope that you will like it.

While considering the change in the direction, I did contemplate the loss of readers as a possible repercussion. It was not a decision that I made on a whim. It was debated and bandied about for several days. This story started out as a romantic comedy. Somewhere along the way of the original plotline, I got lost. I can only apologize for the inconvenience. I am truly sorry for the shift and to those I have offended, but the greater offense would have been to leave the story as it was. I could not, in good conscience, glorify or minimize date rape.

Some have voiced concern over Snape's current power over Hermione and the current direction of the story, stating that the Wizengamot would never agree to the legality of this plotline. I'm well aware that the Wizengamot would never issue such a silly injunction, but I had to give Severus enough rope in which to hang himself later (wink, wink).

## Chapter Five

What happens when you take a wand away from a magical person? The answer is revealed in this chapter.

## Chapter Five

It was well past midnight by the time Hermione made her way back to the vacation villa. She had nowhere else to go. She had no money and no wand. She had gone to the nearest bank and had tried to withdraw funds to leave, but all of her accounts were frozen, lending further credibility to the story Snape had been pedaling her. He obviously was the bastard Minerva always claimed him to be.

How could this be happening to her? Without her wand, she couldn't Apparate. (Not that she would attempt to Apparate home. It was too far.) She didn't even have any money for a Portkey or an owl. That bloody bastard, whom she had fancied herself in love with all these years, had effectively trapped her in vacation hell.

Never mind the embarrassment over the whole "by the way, I've been in love with you ever since I can remember" situation. She would never survive that humiliation. Merlin, when had her life gone from dull to pathetic?

Sighing, Hermione slid the door open and welcomed the cool breeze of air-conditioning that greeted her arrival. She closed the door behind her and crept into the dining room, where she stopped short.

He was there, sitting at the table, lying in wait for her, and apparently wearing nothing but his black trousers. She couldn't catch her breath; all that smooth skin on display. He looked magnificent, minus his slightly swollen nose.

*Oh Merlin! He isn't wearing a shirt!* her underprivileged hormones screamed.

"Shut up," she hissed softly.

"I beg your pardon," he replied.

Determined to make the best of a horrible situation, Hermione smiled. After all, playing nice was the only way she was going to get out of this without killing him. "Professor Snape... I...I wanted to apologize for my outburst and actions earlier. Nothing is ever accomplished through violence." *Though it sure did feel good.*

"I further wish to convey my... sincerest apologies for..." Hermione paused, trying to focus on what she was supposed to be apologizing for. She hadn't done anything wrong! "Actually, I changed my mind. I don't wish to convey my apologies to you for anything. I've done nothing wrong.

"It's you who have done the unimaginable!" she ranted, taking a step toward him and getting a small satisfaction when he flinched. "I don't know why you would think I would model one of my characters after *you*, but you are sorely mistaken. Any similarities are purely coincidental."

He slid something across the table and sat back in his chair, ignoring her brief tirade. Her eyes widened as she recognized her red notebook. She snatched it and hugged it to her chest as though she was protecting her babe from the hideous monster before her.

"How could you?" she seethed in outrage. "My notebook! How dare you touch *my* notebook? Regardless of what you might think, everything that's mine *does not* belong to you!"

Severus stood, unperturbed over her distress. "I've made several edits and cannot even begin to tell you how disturbed I am over the main characters in your latest book. I've had to put up with Potter for seven years. And I've also made notes regarding your outlines for the books after that.

"Please, for Merlin's sake and my sanity, tell me that you *are not* actually considering modeling a character after Ronald Weasley." He gathered a blue notebook and walked into the kitchen area, strategically placing as much distance between them as possible.

Flipping through her pages, she made little strangled noises of disgust as she saw just how much *editing* Severus Snape had done. Her manuscript was covered in red ink, destroyed and utterly ruined, the familiar scrawl of her Potions assignments splattered like blood on the pages.

*Splattered like blood on the pages?* That was actually quite good. She would definitely have to work that in somewhere into one of her books.

Hermione opened the notebook to the last clear page and quickly scribbled the thought down. She was always scribbling things down. Writing was her life.

The blue notebook in her nemesis' hand jerked and fluttered open to a seemingly blank page. He looked at it, an amused, yet somewhat concerned, expression crossing his face. "Splattered like blood on the pages?" he asked. "Are you planning an attempt on my life?"

Hermione covered the distance between them, snatching his notebook from him and hastily thumbing through it. "You've copied my notebook!" she shouted, her cheeks ruddy with temper.

"You bastard! You smarmy, righteous, self-centered bastard!" she yelled, wishing for her wand to hex the smug, satisfied grin on his face.

"Thank you for the compliments," he retorted drolly. "There is no need to get upset, Miss Granger. I was merely protecting my investment."

Mentioning the temporary injunction fed her rage. Hermione stalked into the kitchen and poked him in the chest, the impact driving him backwards a step or two. "You don't own me!" she replied, her voice quivering with rage.

"You don't own this." She shook her notebook in the air and poked him again. "That *injunction* is a forgery, and *you* are a fraud, Professor Snape.

"Once I get back to London, I will have you brought up on charges for this. There is no way the Wizengamot would make such a ruling, and I will see you in Azkaban for what you have done." Hermione moved to poke him again, but he caught her hand in his and pulled her off balance and against him, effectively trapping her hands against his chest.

"If you think for one moment that I am going to allow you to physically assault me again, you are sorely mistaken," he growled, quickly glancing at her wet, plump lips. "I have already suffered one injury, and I shan't allow another. As for the injunction... I assure you it is quite real. Once I provided proof to the Wizengamot that you maliciously set out to ruin my career, they had no choice but to honor my request for immediate restitution."

She tried to pull away from him, but in her current position, all she could do was turn her head.

"I assure you that my claim is quite real, Miss Granger. I could have *you* arrested for the attack on my person, but you would be useless to me incarcerated." His breath was hot against her cheek.

Hatred and silence descended between them, neither of them willing to cede to the other.

Hermione could feel the sting of tears and winced as she realized they were inevitable. She shuddered, keeping her eyes slammed shut to stem the flow. Would her

humiliation never end?

"What do you want from me?" she whispered shakily.

Tears? Merlin preserve him!

He was used to tears. He actually thrived on his ability to make students cry. It was a gift, really. It wasn't so much that he enjoyed other people's pain. It was just that he was a miserable sot and misery loved company.

Then why did he feel badly for the Muggle-born witch?

He should take pride in his accomplishment. He had set out to discourage her obvious infatuation with him, and he was succeeding spectacularly judging by the look of dark hatred in her eyes.

Miss Granger wasn't stupid, nor was she a coward. She was wavering, her distress manifesting in the form of frustrated tears.

Not that she was acknowledging his "rights" to her intellectual property, but she looked defeated, her head hung low, her loose hair forming a honeyed curtain around her face.

Severus shook his head, admonishing his thoughts. The next thing he knew he was going to start writing sonnets to the bloody chit.

"I just don't understand..." she sniffled, her voice belying her exhaustion.

"I have charmed the notebooks," he stated. "I shall be able to see whatever you write, and you will be able to view the edits I make in your notebook."

Hermione stiffened in his arms, yet didn't make an effort to pull away. There were no more tears and no more sniffles.

He sighed, inhaling her feminine fragrance and cursing the sharp twist of desire that clenched in his gut. He could try reasoning away the obvious truth, but lying to himself served no purpose. Hermione wasn't wearing any of the tawdry scents vacationers buy while on holiday. He couldn't blame the subtleties of attraction on that. Perhaps he should just shag her and get it over with. He could always Obliviate her later.

A sharp pain traveled up his leg as she dug the heel of her sandal into the top of his foot. She went lax in his arms, becoming dead weight and twisting away from him as he released her. He limped away in an effort of self-preservation, but he didn't get very far.

Hermione accosted him with the red notebook, smacking him in the back of his head and cursing. "You sanctimonious arse!"

He blocked the notebook and withdrew his wand, but she kept hitting him, and he couldn't get a clean shot.

"...Touch my stuff!"

Severus dodged another swing at his head and winced as she made contact with his shoulder. He really should have paid more attention to the self-defense course in Muggle Studies. Miss Granger was proving to be more dangerous without her wand than with.

She pummeled him with the notebook, backing him against the cupboards. "Give me my wand, you bastard!"

As she pulled back to strike him again, he Stupefied her. Unconscious, she fell forward and into his arms.

Somehow, Severus resisted the urge to just drop her and let her sleep on the kitchen floor for the night. It would serve the bloody hag right! But his conscience, what little there was of it, would not allow that. Instead, he floated her body into the guest room and deposited her onto the bed, deciding not to Rennervate her until morning.

Perhaps he should tie her up for good measure. Sighing, he shut the door with a soft click and made his way toward the master bedroom. Her things were everywhere. Yes, he should be a gentleman and take the guest room, but that would only take away from his hastily constructed plot for revenge and the farce that he really did own her.

The blasted witch certainly wasn't making things easy for him. He had, of course, expected some resistance, but not violent resistance. First, she had broken his nose, and then accosted him with her notebook. At least he had escaped the second attack unscathed.

Severus plopped down onto the bed and closed his eyes, Floo-lag finally catching up with him. Hermione Granger was Stunned. It wasn't like she could Rennervate herself and come after him. However, it would wear off sooner or later.

"*Petrificus Totalus*," he murmured with a slight wand movement. "That should hold you until I wake up."

--

Hermione seethed two days later after having finally been Rennervated. To find that she had lost two days of her vacation had made her realize something.

Severus Snape was a coldhearted bastard that no one cared for, for a reason. Everyone hated him, including herself. If there was a fan club of who hated Severus Snape more, she would be president!

After he had Rennervated her, she had made the big mistake of trying to jump on him and steal his wand. He had cast the Body-Binding Curse on her and had calmly leaned over and placed a punishing kiss upon her lips.

*"I apologize for keeping you Stunned for two days. I was suffering the effects of Floo-lag and forgot about you."*

Some apology! She hadn't been able to respond to him. All she had been able to do was watch him as he paced back and forth and set the terms of their "truce."

He had released her from the curse long enough for her to agree to the terms. After all, she couldn't very well fight back. He had a wand. She didn't.

And then she remembered.

She didn't have to fight back. Ginny would be arriving today to collect chapters one and two of the new book. Chapter one was basically done, but she hadn't even started on chapter two. Once Ginny arrived, Severus Snape was going to get his comeuppance.

Staring at the blank page, Hermione tapped her fingers of the armrest of the lounge chair by the pool. She took a deep breath and tried to connect with her creative processes. She closed her eyes and tried to block out the unpleasant memories of the past three days.

After several minutes of trying to banish Severus Snape from her thoughts, she gave up and slammed the notebook shut.

She couldn't believe it. The bloody git had cast the Killing Curse on her muse. It was dead... a rotting corpse that smelled horribly in the back corner of her mind.

Oh Gods! What was she to do?

She had set James and Virginia up so carefully in the last book. Her fans were expecting the next book to be about James and Virginia!

Her heart raced, and she started to sweat. A panic attack would not do! She didn't have the time. She had to keep it together. There was no way she was going to let Severus Snape win. His ridiculous ruse was just that... a ruse.

She may be wandless, but she still had her wits! She would prevail! She would get even! She would go to Harry as soon as this nightmare was over and learn how to Apparate without her wand.

The inner cogs of her ever-ticking mind turned at a maddening pace. Her embarrassment over the last few days had simmered into outright hatred. Any illusions over loving the un-lovable had been put to a quick death. Her former professor was obviously out for revenge. Minerva had always warned her about how petty he could be.

Hermione smiled and opened her notebook. Closing her eyes, she tapped into her Molly muse. If Severus Snape thought he was going to ~~edit~~ her notebooks and demean her work, she would give him something worth reading. It obviously wouldn't be fit to print, but what she was about to write certainly would make him squirm.

She started writing, choosing the first person perspective to personalize *his* reading "enjoyment." All she had to do was wait until Ginny arrived. In the meantime, her nemesis was in for several cold showers.

--

"I've got to go, Percy!" Ginny repeated, gathering her bag and heading toward the door. She had been trying to leave her stupid git of a brother for several hours now, but he had kept coming up with things that he "just had to get done" prior to her departure. At this rate, she was going to miss the Portkey.

"But, but..." stammered Percy. "I need you to..."

"I don't bloody well care! You can magic your own legal drafts," she growled, mentally ticking off what she needed to pack for her trip. Who was she kidding? She was definitely going to miss the Portkey.

"Ginny!"

She turned in a huff, the red light of a Stunner hitting her square in the chest.

"I'm sorry, Ginny," Percy mumbled, rushing forward to catch his sister. He caught her with a huff. "I just can't let you go. Professor Snape paid me too much money for you to go mucking up his plan... whatever it may be."

He hefted her unconscious form against the wall, stepped back, and pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket. "Mum's going to kill me."

--

TBC

Author's Notes: As always, I must thank my beta-readers who provide the spit and polish for my average punctuation and grammar. Jen provides the gentle push that spurs the creative process. Cocoachristy is spot on when it comes to finishing my incomplete thoughts. Soul Bound is the comma-Nazi. They are awesome and deserve a round of applause.

Thanks to all who have reviewed. Most support the new direction of the story. Some don't. I respect each and everyone's opinion, though I have not answered all of them. At this time, I am unable to do so.

In fact, I am having surgery on Friday and must postpone the story. On the bright side, I will be off work for three weeks and will be able to focus on the development of the story. I can't promise that I will update, but I will try. At this time, I am not sure how I am going to be able to type with a cast on my hand.

As for this latest chapter, I have to say this. I am much happier with this "wandless" Hermione than I was with the "forgetful" Hermione. I am especially enjoying the way she has dealt with Snape, and I promise that it will only get better from here.

## Chapter Six

*Chapter 6 of 16*

Hermione sets out to torment Severus, but she only torments herself.

Chapter Six

Hermione cracked her knuckles. She knew it was a disgusting habit, but it helped with the creative process. Biting the inside of her cheek, she stared at the ocean and let the lull of the waves soothe her worries. She harnessed her Cassandra muse and put pen to paper.

*Our honeymoon in the tropics is paradise. Actually, I think it's paradise. I wouldn't know since Simon hasn't let me out of bed long enough to explore. My husband is still upset over everything that happened. I, for one, owe his grandfather, Albert, my eternal gratitude. Without his meddling, Simon never would have been assigned to protect me.*

Happy with the ease in which she was penning the long overdue epilogue to *The Darkest Magic*, she giggled with giddy enthusiasm. She was going to make the sleazy bastard rue the day he showed up in her hot tub.

*"Come back inside, my love," Simon murmurs against my neck, startling me as he sidles up to me and wraps his arms lovingly around my waist. His hands make quick work of the sash, and my robe spills open.*

*I gasp. "Have you lost all sense? Someone could see!" I pull my robe closed, trying to discourage him. The balcony is high, and the wind is warm off the ocean, but it does not negate the fact that anyone could come along and see my husband making love to me.*

He growls, grinding his erection against my buttocks. "The sun has yet to rise, Cassandra. No one can see us," he reasons with me.

"Absolutely not," I groan in protest as he swipes his tongue against my earlobe. He is incorrigible. He knows what that does to me. I feel the fire spread through me as he nibbles on my tender flesh. .

"I need you, Cassandra," he murmurs huskily.

I turn in his embrace, and we kiss. My tongue sweeps into his open mouth, surprising him with my boldness. My hands mold his shoulders, and then his torso. Rubbing myself against his pale, almost hairless chest, I smile as I remind myself that I must get him into the sun, for he is in desperate need of some color.

--

The blue notebook fluttered open, capturing Severus' attention. "It's about time the bloody wench started writing," he growled, as he started to read.

"Simon and Cassandra," he huffed, rolling his eyes. "Why is she writing about those two again? I thought that piece of literary trash was complete. Honeymoon? Disgusting tripe."

Severus continued to read. Unlike *The Darkest Magic*, what she had written was from Cassandra's point of view and in the first person.

His eyebrows rose. "Sex on a balcony?" He looked out the glass doors and eyed the wraparound porch. "That certainly does have potential."

Severus took a sip of his tea as his eyes glided over the page. *..Rubbing myself against his pale, almost hairless chest.* He choked on his tea, tears burning his eyes as he coughed and sputtered.

"Hairless chest!" he gasped, remembering his initial outrage over the similarities between himself and Simon Sanders... Remembering that Simon had a hairy chest and not a hairless one. In awed frustration, Severus watched as the words appeared on the page with an easy flow.

*Simon pushes down on my shoulders. He is the only man I have ever...or shall ever...bed. I may not feel completely secure in my own sexuality, but I know what he wants. I've read about it in those magazines I found in my Aunt Edna's attic so many summers ago. I lick my lips in anticipation as I kneel in front of him.*

*He is unashamed of his own nakedness. My gaze can do nothing but linger on his erect manhood. It is a mere breath away from my face, the tip weeping with a clear drop of excitement. He brushes my hair to the side and tilts my lips toward him. The expression in his eyes is one of dark hunger*

*Tentatively, I touch the mushroomed cap of his sex with my tongue. I know not what to expect, for I am a novice.*

*He inhales sharply as though I've hurt him, but he groans and takes hold of his member and rubs the tip against my cheek. "Please," he hisses, moving the rigid flesh toward my eager lips.*

His eyes were dry. He couldn't blink. His cock grew thicker and heavier as she continued writing.

*Granting his request, my hand covers his, and we stoke the embers of his desire in unison. As the silken flesh slips past my full lips and into my mouth, his hands find their way to the tangles of my hair. He tastes of the earth, warm and full of life.*

*His rod of flesh twitches in the cavern of my mouth, and he whimpers, emboldening me to create a cadence of ecstasy to lure him closer to completion.*

Severus groaned, unable to resist the picture she had painted with her words. He rubbed himself through the fabric of his trousers as he unconsciously widened his legs, forgetting the past few days and his attempts to intimidate and dissuade her.

*Twisting my hair between his fingers, Simon takes control. He holds my head and pushes his needy member further into my mouth. I hollow my cheeks, providing more suction. After all, that is what it says to do in the book.*

*With a harsh growl, he relinquishes his hold on my head, granting me the freedom to pull away. But I continue, determined to finish this delectable treat. Within the breath of a moment, his salty essence splashes onto my tongue.*

Severus blinked rapidly and waited for more to appear on the page. When he realized there was no more, he slammed the notebook shut and stood up, intent on either killing her or making her finish the scene.

As he reached the door, the cold touch of reason returned to him and he groaned. "Merlin, how could I have been so daft?"

He hobbled out onto the porch and looked over the railing at the bloody bane of his existence. Hermione Granger was a seductress. She may not have touched him... well, other than breaking his nose and accosting him with the notebook... but she certainly thought she knew exactly how to manipulate him.

Ignoring the torment of his arousal, Severus walked into the sitting room, grabbed the blue notebook, and started editing.

--

Lounging by the pool after a quick dip, Hermione rubbed her hair dry with a towel and sighed. She was quite pleased with the scene she had managed to complete. Her tormenter should *really* enjoy the bloody thing.

Her notebook leapt from the small table next to her chair and fluttered in front of her.

"What the..." she gasped, suddenly remembering that he had charmed it. The pages fluttered as if someone opened them. When she saw the touch of red ink against the paper, she hissed in outrage.

*A note from your editor:*

*First of all, I thought your novel was about Virginia and James. Secondly, I can see who you are writing about, but am baffled as to why you would include this scene in your current novel. Why is this scene written in the first person, present tense when the rest of the book is written in the third person, past tense? I am no literary expert, but if you intend to include this scene, you need to fix it.*

*I, for one, do enjoy the first person, present tense of the scene. It lends a personal touch to your narrative. If you were to go back and rewrite *The Darkest Magic* I would be more than happy to give you some insight as to what Simon is thinking... seeing as you did model him after me.*

Slamming the notebook shut, Hermione resisted the urge to toss it into the pool. That bloody, pig-headed, self-righteous bastard! Who the hell does he think he is?

Closing her eyes, she envisioned shoving the tool of her trade up his tight arse but quickly shook the thought from her head. Not only would that be a messy endeavor, it would be nearly impossible as well. Unfortunately, she couldn't go on accosting him. He had magic; she didn't. Although that would soon be remedied as soon as Ginny



arrived.

Hermione took a shaky breath and decided to ignore his edits. "Personal touch," she grumbled. "I'll show him personal touch."

She opened the notebook and found even more "editor notes."

*...Hairless chest? I thought Mr. Sanders had a hairy chest.*

Growling, Hermione began to write.

--

Severus paused as he added more notes to further antagonize Miss Granger. He was surprised when more of the tawdry scene began to appear on the pages.

*I stand, unprepared as my husband crushes me against him and begins to kiss me passionately. His tongue swoops into my mouth. He groans as he tastes himself upon my lips.*

*"Cassandra," he pants, pressing his fingers against the juncture of my thighs. He finds me wet and needy. Just as he begins to pleasure me, he withdraws. I watch in awe and slight disappointment as he brings his fingers to his lips, licks the moisture from them, and mutters something.*

*I do not understand. Maybe it's an incantation.*

*Simon grins, his opaque eyes staring into mine.*

*Then I feel it... the glide of a tongue caressing my most intimate area.*

*I jump in surprise, and my husband laughs. "Let the spell run its course. I promise you won't be disappointed."*

*All I can do is groan and squirm. He turns me in his embrace and nibbles the sensitive slope of my neck. I can feel his recently-sated manhood against my bum.*

*"Watch the sunrise, my love," he murmurs, brushing the back of his palm against one of my breasts.*

*I whimper as he seduces me with his words and his magic. God, I love magic! "Simon," I cry.*

*He grinds against me. "Just imagine, Cassandra," he whispers. "Imagine what it would feel like if I were inside you right now."*

*I moan, awash in decadent pleasure. I lean forward and widen my stance, forgetting my earlier protestations. I am on fire. My husband's lurid imagination has corrupted me.*

"His lurid imagination!" Severus scoffed. "More like the lurid imagination of the author!"

"Tut, tut, Young One," Simon chastises playfully. "I couldn't possibly take advantage of my wife in such a manner."

*Moisture coats my thighs as I welcome another orgasmic wave. "You had better... shag... me... if you... know what's... good for you."*

*Lifting my robe, Simon nudges my legs farther apart. I grasp the ledge and wallow in bliss as my husband slides into me.*

Severus slammed the notebook shut and conceded defeat. He could feel the heat in his cheeks, though why he should be embarrassed he didn't know. After all, it was Hermione Granger's deluded fantasies he had just read, not his own. Her personal prose was a bit on the insipidly romantic side. But it certainly did garner his lustful attentions.

Like most men, he was more a visual connoisseur than a literal one. However, the picture that she had painted was one that he had no difficulties imagining as he stared out over the ocean.

Shaking his head, he had to remind himself why he was here. He needed to dissuade his former student's crush. He needed to destroy any fanciful notions she may have construed about his character. He could not have her filling his students' minds with nonsensical romanticism. His job was difficult enough without having to fend off unwanted advances.

He must remain firm in his convictions. He could not relent, nor could he start to appreciate Miss Granger's obvious attempts to strike back at him, no matter how much she seemed to think he deserved it. She had started this whole mess, after all, by writing that idiotic book and using him as the main character. It was time to let Miss Granger see just whom she was fanaticizing of! He had set out to seek a revenge that would be worthy of his Slytherin nature. He sighed. Then why did it feel as though it were beginning to unravel?

The truth of the matter was... he didn't really have much of a plan, other than making Miss Granger miserable.

Erect and uncomfortable, he walked toward the master bathroom and flicked his wand at the shower, turning the cold water onto full blast. Damned if he would lower himself to masturbation on the words of some romance writer! He hadn't anticipated Granger's vengeful quill, or her rather detailed imagination. Once he was finished with his cold shower, he would finish editing her newest entry and think of a different tactic.

--

As Hermione penned the last bit of the scene between her beloved characters, a tidal wave of embarrassment overwhelmed her. She looked down at the page and no longer saw the angry, red scrawl of editor notes mucking up her creative processes.

What she had written was a poorly disguised attempt at seduction! She had opened up the floodgate of her frustration and had let it all pour out.

Hastily, she scribbled over what she had written. Why... why didn't she just write him a personal note, detailing what she would like for him to do to her, or better yet, what she would like to do to him? What on earth had possessed her to write about Simon and Cassandra?

Good gods, she was pathetic! Here she was, regretting her brash Gryffindor behavior and wishing that the sun would melt her into an oblivious puddle so that she would not have to suffer her former professor's snide comments...or worse, seeing him face-to-face. In setting out to "punish" him, she had only humiliated herself further.

Glaring at the horizon, she cursed under her breath. Where was Ginny, and what was taking her so long?

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TBC

Author's Notes...First, I must apologize for the delay in posting. My surgery...went well, but unlike the last surgery, I was unable to type after wards. I now have voice

recognition software thanks to my wonderful, supportive husband. It is a slow process. Luckily, I got the majority of this chapter written prior to the surgery.

Secondly, I would like to thank my beta readers. Jen is my cheerleader, constantly poking and prodding me to do my best. CocoaChristy is my mind reader, polishing my sentences and completing my thoughts. Soul Bound is my comma Nazi. She is currently on vacation, so if there are any commas out of place, it's my fault. Beta reading is a thankless job. If you feel the need to leave feedback, please thank my beta readers. Without them, this story would not be written.

## Chapter Seven

*Chapter 7 of 16*

A turning point in the relationship.

### Chapter Seven

She had to find the blasted bastard's wand. It was the night of the full moon, and the light shone brightly through the windows, marking her path as she moved. The old floorboards in the villa creaked under her feet and she froze. Hermione had waited too long to back out now.

Her tormentor snored softly as he slept, and she took another step forward. Ginny never had arrived. Thoughts of what the petty, vengeful man could have done to her friend ran rampant through her head.

Ginny *never* missed a deadline.

Hermione just needed to get his wand from him. Then she would be able to... Do what exactly? Hex him? Tie him up, pour chocolate sauce all over him, and lick it from his body?

Hermione wrinkled her nose in reluctant disappointment. The man wasn't interested. Hell, he hadn't even finished editing her last scene. Of course, she had taken great pains to scribble the whole thing out. But it stung her feminine pride that he hadn't thrown open the proverbial door and ravished her until she was breathless.

She pondered just how horrible her existence had become since his arrival. Her working vacation was utterly ruined. She should just go home, but she couldn't allow herself to be defeated at the hands of the overbearing... Slytherin. *Merlin's beard, Hermione! You aren't some second-year pining over house points!*

Creeping forward, Hermione held her breath and felt along the nightstand for the slim piece of wood that would give her some measure of control over her recently pathetic life. Of course, his wand wasn't there. Why would anything be that simple? She hadn't really expected to find it that easily.

She exhaled slowly, unable to hold her breath any longer. She just needed to get his wand and get away. No matter how much he deserved to suffer, she wasn't like him. She wouldn't be able to hurt him any more than she already had... not really. She had, after all, broken his nose and accosted him with her notebook.

Severus eyed the skulking shadow above him and shifted in his "sleep." He had just been nodding off when the creaking floorboards woke him. Judging by Miss Granger's carriage, she did not intend to wake him up. He grinned, silently amused. He was surprised that she hadn't tried to steal his wand last night. Of course, she had been hexed and unable to move.

He watched as she patted the top of the nightstand. Her movements were frantic, and she sighed in frustration. As if he would keep his wand in such an exposed and open place! He'd never trusted anyone and always slept with his wand safely tucked under his pillow.

She opened the small drawer, felt inside, and sighed again.

It was difficult, lying there and trying not to laugh. His laughter faded as she leaned over him. She smelled clean, the gentle floral scent of her lotion tickling his senses. The subtlety of the aroma hit him like a brick, and he could not help his basic response, especially after reading her blasted sex scene earlier. Shagging like a hormonal teenager was not high up on his list of priorities, even when he had been a randy teenager. He had spent most of his adulthood staying alive and spying for the Order.

She patted the bedding next to his arm and whimpered, which only caused his arousal to grow. He would love to hear her whimper beneath him as he buried himself within her.

Merlin's beard! He was beginning to sound like her bloody novel!

"Come on," she whispered. "Where is it?"

A mischievous spark ignited within him, and he rolled toward her. She jumped back with a startled gasp. He made a snoring noise for good measure, hoping she did not lose her nerve.

She growled, softly stomping her foot and stepping forward. She reached over him and continued to pat the bedding. Snaking his hand around her waist, he pulled her down and smothered her protest with his lips.

Hermione's heart hammered in her chest; the adrenaline of the moment sending a rush through her that frightened and enthralled her. It wasn't a forceful kiss. It would actually be quite enjoyable if it weren't for the humiliation of being caught. She tried to pull away, but she was in an awkward position and found it impossible to do so without actually touching any of his intimate parts.

She squirmed on top of him, moving against his obvious interest. Hermione groaned. He tasted like mint. She groaned louder when he cupped her breast through the cotton material of her T-shirt. She would pay the price of humiliation once he actually woke up. She would certainly never live this down.

Managing to keep her wits about her, she slid her hand beneath his pillow and felt for his wand. The movement left her vulnerable, and he took greater liberties. She didn't know how it had happened, but she was straddling him now. His hand caught her wrist, lacing his fingers around her rapid pulse. She broke the kiss, which was a Herculean effort. She couldn't help the whimper that escaped as he nuzzled her neck.

He was definitely awake.

That's when she felt it. Not the evidence of his arousal against the inside of her thigh, but the brush of cool wood against her fingertips. She clutched the handle of his wand, or at least what she thought was the handle of his wand. He growled, trying to stop her. She didn't have a very good grasp on it. It was a struggle just trying to stay on top of him.

As she managed to pull the wand out from underneath his pillow, she panicked, muttering the first spell that came to her mind. *Obliviate!*"

She didn't see the flash of light, nor did she feel the sting that went along with a magical spell. The man beneath her groaned, and she crawled off him.

"Oh my God! Oh my God!" Hermione wailed.

Severus shuddered. He had known that she wished him ill will, but he never would have thought she would try to Obliviate him. Thankfully, try was the operative word. She had actually Obliviated his pillow.

"Oh my God! I can't believe it!" she cried. "I can't believe I actually *Obliviated* him!"

Severus snorted, unable to believe his luck. The barmy chit actually thought she had *Obliviated* him. He heard his wand clatter to the hardwood floor and watched as she ran out of the room.

This was too good to be true. He had come here for revenge. He had come here to show her that he was an insufferable bastard. He didn't have much of a plan, other than to make her miserable. Even in his wildest dreams, he could not have foreseen this. Hermione Granger actually thought she had Obliviated him. This was the golden opportunity to patch up his hastily constructed plan.

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She must have run around the porch three times before she realized that she could not undo what she had done. Breathless, she made the long trek down the hall and pushed the bedroom door open slowly.

"P-Professor S-Snape?"

The only answer she received was a soft groan. She could see his wand on the floor, the moonlight spotlighting the instrument of magic and her crime. How was she ever going to explain this? She had Obliviated Professor Snape. Only Obliviators were licensed to use that curse. Not that others didn't use it illegally, but she couldn't fathom trying to explain the gaps in his memories. *Sorry, Professor Dumbledore, but you'll have to find another Potions master because this one doesn't remember his topic.* On the bright side, there would be no more embarrassment and no more lawsuits.

Severus groaned again.

"Professor Snape?" Picking his wand up off of the floor, Hermione shook the bed. "Are you okay?"

"W-Where am I?" he stammered, playing confused.

She cringed and turned the light on.

Blinking, he sat up. The light covers fell about his waist, revealing the dark patch of hair that traveled below the blanket.

"Do you remember who you are?" she asked hopefully, setting his wand on the nightstand.

He scratched his chest. "Of course I know who I am," he answered irritably.

"Thank the heavens," she sighed and sat next to him on the bed.

Severus grabbed Hermione, flipping her down on the mattress and crawling on top of her. "And you, my dear Miss Granger, have been a very naughty student."

"What the..." she gasped, suddenly surprised when he pinned her beneath him and kissed her.

His tongue slid past the seam of her lips, a delicate invitation of more to come. She was soft, and he was hard, his response to her surprising him. Even more surprising was her response to him. She returned his kiss with an unexpected fervor, one that made his blood simmer with lust.

He knew that it was wrong, but he'd never been known for his moral fortitude. She had come to him, dressed in knickers and a T-shirt with some Muggle musical group on it. It was little defense against his lecherous intentions...lecherous intentions that were spurred on by her earlier literary endeavor.

Sliding his hand beneath her T-shirt, he skimmed his fingertips along her rib cage. Hermione groaned, deepening the kiss in desperation. He moved his hand up beneath her right breast, molding the flesh and damning himself. He had to have her. Reluctantly breaking the kiss, he pulled the cloth of her T-shirt out of his way and his lips found the taut peak of her nipple.

She arched her back in shameless invitation. She couldn't help herself as she yielded to his touch. Why was she letting him do this to her?

"Because you want him. You have always wanted him," a small voice reminded her. Simon was her fantasy. She had done little to conceal the true identity of the character. Had she secretly been hoping that he would find out? She was, after all, about as subtle as a Gryffindor could be, which wasn't saying much. This was wrong. She knew it was wrong. By all rights, she should hate him.

She wanted to push him away, but was weary to do so because she had Obliviated him. She needed to ascertain how much damage she had inflicted and why he was suddenly kissing her as if his life depended on it when he didn't remember where he was or why he was here. Gods... what he was doing felt so good. Jolts of pleasure streamed from her breast to her feminine core. This was it. This is what Molly always helped to write about... This was desire in its most raw form.

She trembled beneath him as he twirled his tongue around the sensitive peak. Then he switched to the other one. She had been kissed, but never like this. Her experiences with Ron had been fumbling attempts at best. She would be lying to herself if she said she didn't want Severus Snape. Why start lying to herself now?

The man was naked, rubbing up against the moist center of her knickers. That is when the reality set in. She couldn't let this continue.

He pushed her and pushed her, and in doing so, he punished himself. He wanted to see how far she was willing to go. All he had to do was remove her knickers, and he could sate the lust that she had awakened. This was wrong on so many levels, but he didn't give a Kneazles' furry arse.

Severus could feel how wet she was, even through the cloth of her knickers.

"We've got to stop," she panted.

He shifted, kissing his way to her neck, and then to her lips. "Why, luv? Isn't this what a summer tryst is all about? I want you. You obviously want me." He thrust against her for emphasis, saying the ghastly romantic words that her characters in her books would say. With any luck, she would throw her reservations out the window and give him what he wanted.

She could feel him rubbing against the hidden bundle of nerves. It felt good. The splendor threatened to overwhelm her. His words barely registered through the haze of desire. He thought this was a fling. Oh gods, she was in trouble.

"This..." she panted breathlessly, pushing against his shoulder, "isn't a summer tryst."

"Of course not, luv," he chuckled, showing his crooked teeth. "We'll carry on after the summer. We'll have a fall wedding. Minerva will be thrilled. "

Merlin's hairy balls! What had she done? From what she had read about the Obliviate Curse, the recipient was bound to be confused. But this was ridiculous! She had reduced Severus Snape into a blithering idiot! He was proposing marriage! This was a nightmare!

She shoved against his shoulder with more vigor. "Stop! You have really got to stop. This is all a big misunderstanding."

Reluctantly, Severus rolled off Hermione and propped his head on his hand. "What misunderstanding?"

Shoving her T-shirt down, Hermione sat up and righted the duvet to reduce temptation. "This isn't a summer tryst, and you and I are *not* about to be married." She crawled off the bed with a huff.

"Besides, you don't... love me, and I certainly don't love you."

"What's love got to do with it?" he scoffed, cringing inwardly. Perhaps, he had carried this particular ruse too far. At this point, he just couldn't resist. Her cheeks were flushed with passion, which led him to wonder what the rest of her looked like. "I am fond of you, and you are obviously fond of me. Other marriages have been entered into based on less."

She started to pace, the stress of the last few days apparent on her youthful features. She slapped her thigh. "Don't you think this is a little strange? Think about what you're saying. You are proposing marriage... to me... Hermione Granger! You do remember who I am, don't you? You're not fond of me...you don't even like me! I'm Harry's friend... Harry Potter."

Severus reached for her, managing to grasp her hand in his. "A most unfortunate relationship," he stated. "But I won't hold that against you."

Hermione pulled her hand away with a frustrated hiss. "This must be some kind of punishment... a punishment from the heavens. Would you just listen to yourself? Listen to reason. You hate me, and I *loathe* you.

"You are suing me. I modeled a character in one of my novels after you. You came to the island to make my life a living hell, which you are doing a splendid job of, by the way. You have totally destroyed any creative processes that I could have hoped to tap into during my vacation. You Vanished my wand, and I have been a veritable prisoner here.

"I had no choice," she continued to confess. "I was trying to take your wand from you while you slept. We struggled. I... Obliviated you because that was the first thing I could think of. You... apparently have some memory loss. In fact, you are under the impression... Well, you are under the impression that we are lovers."

Severus scowled. Leave it up to a Gryffindor to ruin the game with blatant honesty. He had intended to have some fun. He was going to toy with her. In the very least, he was going to squelch the pesky, if not irritable, attraction he found himself reluctantly admitting to. Now, he could do one of two things. He could tell the truth or he could move forward and hope and that he did not get tripped up in his own lies.

Pulling the sheet around his waist and tucking it into place, he rolled off the bed and stood up. "Then you admit it," he stated, gingerly picking up his wand. "You admit that you modeled the character after me."

Hermione gasped, taking a step backwards.

"Do you admit that you purposely set out to ruin me?"

"You bastard!" hissed Hermione as she realized the depth of his deception.

Pointing his wand at her, he took a step forward. "Be careful, Miss Granger, or you shall become a 'veritable prisoner' here."

Clenching her hands into fists of rage, Hermione growled at him.

Severus held his wand in a defensive posture. "Tut tut, Miss Granger. We shall have no more physical violence."

She stood perfectly still as he circled her.

"Your quill has caused damage you can never imagine," he whispered behind her. "I cannot tell you how many of those silly *romance* novels I confiscated from my students. Imagine my surprise when I realized why they were laughing at me behind my back."

Tilting her chin up in defiance, Hermione smiled. "I am sure there are a multitude of reasons to laugh *at you* behind your back without trying to blame my book."

He stepped in front of her, his wand at his side. Flicking it, he Transfigured the bed sheet into trousers that covered him modestly. The venom in her voice told him everything he needed to know. Her statement was designed to cut to the bone, and it certainly did leave an impact. Severus continued to circle her, pondering his next move.

He wanted her, and he wouldn't ignore the attraction any longer. It was a bitter truth to have to admit.

He had been incensed when he had discovered the truth. Finding out that Hermione Granger had penned that romance novel had been a fortuitous stroke of luck. Or so he thought. He had found himself facing another summer alone. There was nothing worse than a bored Slytherin, and she had given him the perfect excuse to remove himself from the doldrums of summer.

"I enjoyed your little exercise this morning," he admitted huskily. "I find it interesting that you selected the characters that you modeled after you and me. It was a most... arousing, if not enlightening, endeavor."

Her shame held no limits. It cut into the edge of her anger and caused her to freeze.

"It made me wonder if you were trying to seduce me," he whispered, stepping behind her and using his wand to move her errant curls off her neck. A seduction was afoot, one that would ease the ache within his gut. He would use everything within his power to rid himself of this unfortunate complication.

Pressing his lips against the delicate shell of her ear, Severus crossed the threshold into insanity. "Here's your chance, Miss Granger. Finish what you started. Seduce me."

His hand rested on her hip as the heat of his lips scorched her neck. She closed her eyes, wanting to forget his deceitful ways. She felt the gentle sway of magic behind her and started. Only his hand on her hip kept her from bolting. When she looked down at his other hand, she gasped. His palm was flat, her wand resting on it.

"This is a peace offering," he murmured, flicking his tongue against her earlobe.

It felt like a dream, a wondrous dream that her fantasies played into. She reached for her wand and gathered the wooden shaft as if it were delicate porcelain. Raw desire. Lust. That is all this was. Morality danced on the precipice. He was the devil, the man who she had built her romantic fantasies around.

She could feel the hard press of his masculinity against her bum. His hand caressed the soft skin of her stomach, causing her to clench her thighs together.

"Make love to me... and I will forgive your debt," he breathed against her cheek.

Hermione tensed, his words reminding her of the hatred and deceit. It only intensified with the knowledge that he would use her feelings for him in such a way. He must truly hate her indeed to knowingly crush her heart like this with obvious... pleasure. Summoning a resolve that she did not know she was capable of, she stepped out of his embrace and turned around. She lifted her wand, pointing it between his surprised eyes. "I will see you in court."

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TBC

Author's Notes: Special thanks to all who have reviewed. A very, very special thank you to me beta readers who provide the spit and polish for my bad grammar and horrible sentence structure. I love you all!

## Chapter Eight

*Chapter 8 of 16*

Hermione gets a lawyer. Snape schemes.

### Chapter Eight

Hermione sighed as she stared at the blank page. Trying to write was useless now because the threat of a major lawsuit was hanging over her head. Not that she cared about money, but stress was stress, no matter how it presented itself.

It had been a month since her "daring" escape from the bastard's evil clutches. Having Apparated to the local wizarding authorities, she had insisted that her former professor had held her against her wishes. By the time she and the local equivalent of Aurors had arrived, Snape was gone. He had left no trace and no evidence behind. He'd even taken the enchanted notebooks.

Incensed, Hermione had returned to England to file a report with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Of course, without proof and with Percy Weasley as his alibi, the charges had been dropped.

No one believed her!

Not even Ginny believed her. In fact, Ginny didn't even remember her impromptu visit to inform Hermione about Snape's lawsuit against Romance Rabble. After talking with her, Hermione had begun to doubt her own sanity. Maybe Snape slipped her a Forgetfulness Draught. She certainly wouldn't put it past him.

An owl pecked at her window, destroying any concentration she may have hoped to tap into.

Grinding her teeth, Hermione slammed the notebook shut and opened the window. The owl hopped onto the ledge and held its leg out. She untied the parchment and handed the animal a treat. Satisfied, it took flight and left her to read the message.

Unrolling the paper, Hermione noticed that it was heavy and had probably cost a bundle to send via owl. The top of the document caught her eye *Law Office of Percy Weasley, Esquire*.

Her blood began to boil as she unfurled the long document. She scanned it, unconsciously holding her breath as she did so. Tears welled in her eyes as she read the terms and conditions of the bloody bastard's suit. She felt herself become physically ill and was sure that had she eaten something that didn't agree with her. A date that was a week from the current day was listed as the appearance before the Wizengamot. Underneath it was more legal jargon, a notice of copies that had been sent to all shareholders of Romance Rabble, and an invitation to settle out of court.

Her fiery temper got the better of her, and she crumpled the summons in her hand, somehow resisting the urge to rip it to shreds first. Hermione dropped it onto the ground and looked about her modest flat. Everything she had ever worked for and most of the books she had ever aspired to own were neatly lined on the shelves. Her collection was quite impressive by any means. Silent tears of frustration fell to the floor. Dread coiled within her stomach.

*Molly...*

How would this impact Molly, whose own contributions to her creative endeavors were too enormous to comprehend? The Weasley family matriarch would be devastated. First of all, her spawn... er... son was representing the greasy git. Secondly, the bad press would undoubtedly cause a drop in sales. Molly wasn't ambitious. She didn't aspire to great wealth, but Molly had so wanted to buy Arthur something nice for their wedding anniversary.

*Ginny...*

She had no idea how the lawsuit would affect her redheaded friend. Like her mother, she had didn't put much value on material possessions. However, Hermione had become privy to Ginny's grand scheme to remodel the Burrow for her parents' anniversary with her share of the profits.

*Fred and George...*

She didn't even want to be in the same country when they received their summons. They would probably start scheming of ways to off their ne'er-do-well brother, which she would wholeheartedly support.

Picking up the parchment, she began to unfold it. Now was not a good time to fall apart. She wondered if Snape's offer was still good *Make love to me, and I will forgive your debt*.

Hermione shuddered in remembrance, cursing her traitorous body as it throbbed with unresolved lustful intentions for her former professor. She shook her head, mentally chastising the mere entertainment of the thought. There was no bloody way she would prostitute herself for Severus Snape, not even with a ten-foot pole.

Any romantic notions she may have had about him were dead and buried. He was definitely not the man she had imagined him to be. He was a vain, pompous, arrogant, self-centered bastard. What had she ever seen in him?

She sat at her writing desk and picked up her quill. Before putting pen to paper, she contemplated her next move. What was she going to do? How was she going to dissuade Snape? How was she going to protect the ones that she loved?

Multiple questions turned to mush in her overtaxed brain, and she growled. One thing was for certain; she needed to get a lawyer... one with fewer scruples than Percy Weasley.

"Please follow me, Miss Granger," the buxom secretary said with a plastic smile.

Picking a speck of lint off her robe, Hermione did as she was told. She clutched the document in her hand and prayed that the lawyer would take the case. Percy may be an arse, but he was well respected in his field, and the first lawyer she had contacted had laughed in her face.

The secretary opened a door and escorted her to an ornate, cluttered desk. The entire office was a study in organized chaos. Law books were shelved along the wall, and a fine sheen of dust covered them. Filing cabinets that looked like they were overflowing with paperwork lined the other wall. The sinking suspicion that she had made yet another mistake stirred in her gut. The dust on the law books was testament that her former classmate had never adopted proper study habits.

"Mr. Malfoy will be with you shortly," the blonde woman informed Hermione, her eyes raking up and down the potential client's figure as if assessing her worth.

Hermione watched her leave. That's when she saw the portrait of Draco's father on the opposite wall by the door. That alone should have changed her mind and made her leave. Lucius' sneer in the portrait sent a chill down her spine.

Before she could act on the instinct to flee, there was a loud pop behind her. With a gasp, she turned. She didn't know who was more surprised, herself or Draco Malfoy.

"You're my three o'clock appointment?" he asked, barely containing the contempt in his voice.

Hermione took a step forward, and Draco took a habitual step back. "Trust me," she retorted. "I wouldn't be here unless you were the last barrister on the planet that wasn't afraid of Percy Weasley."

"But I'm not the last barrister on the planet," he reminded her. "I don't know why anyone would be afraid of that sniveling git."

Heaving a sigh of exasperation, Hermione sat in the ornate chair across from his desk. As much as she would like to hex Malfoy for the hell of it, she resisted. He really was the last barrister in London. At least he was the only one capable of meeting Percy on common ground. Of course the irony of the situation did not escape her. It was almost laughable, and she catalogued it in the depths of her creative processes to use in one of her books. "I'm being sued."

Draco snorted and covered his mouth.

"I'm glad you find this so amusing," she huffed, tossing the document onto his desk. She wasn't going to let him get the better of her. She wasn't going to let the pettiness of their past taint this exchange. Unlike the man before her, she had matured. Draco looked like a party-boy who had stayed up all night. He looked scruffy, his hair longer like his incarcerated father's. He supported several days' growth of whiskers and reeked of tobacco. His eyes were bloodshot, and he looked like hell.

Sitting in his chair, Draco pulled it up to the desk and started perusing the legal document. His eyes widened in surprise. Hermione could tell he was trying to contain his laughter by the way his lips trembled.

"I haven't spoken with my business partners yet. I thought it best to speak to you first to see if you would be interested in taking the case...or if you even thought you could win." Hermione worried the folds of her robe with her fingertips. If Malfoy didn't take the case, she didn't know what she was going to do.

Setting the parchment down, Draco leaned back in his chair and folded his fingers together. He seemed lost in thought to her, almost comical, seeing as she had always considered him to be as deep as a puddle.

She waited for his response, tapping her fingers on the polished wood of the arm of the chair.

"I'm at a loss for words, Mud..." He stopped himself before finishing the epithet. "...Granger. I had no idea you were the author of the *Magic* series. My wife is a huge fan."

Hermione smiled nervously. "How is Pansy?"

"I wouldn't know, seeing as she left me after reading your latest book."

Hermione cringed. "That's absurd! It's fiction!"

So much for the last barrister in London...

Draco shrugged his shoulders. "I can see why Professor Snape is so irritated. I must admit that I did not make the connection until just now. It boggles the mind. It's actually quite... repulsive. I never realized you had a thing for him."

She blushed. Would her embarrassment never end? She bit her bottom lip and waited for Draco to speak his peace. Snape was not the only person in her last book that had she modeled one of her characters after. She had modeled the villain after Draco.

"You have some nerve, Granger," he stated, his cheeks flushing with anger. "Pansy left me." He opened a drawer, pulled something out, and threw it on top of his desk. "She left me because of this."

Looking down, Hermione saw a dog-tagged copy of *The Darkest Magic*.

"Thanks to you, my wife thinks I'm the devil incarnate. Thanks to you, she has filed for divorce. Thanks to you, she is in hiding, convinced that I mean to sacrifice our baby to You-Know-Who."

She felt her world collapse around her. Malfoy's pain was tangible and pure. In his eyes, she could see his love for his wife. She could see the anguish in his eyes...eyes that she had always thought of as cruel. She had come to him for help. She had come to him for a chance to fight against Snape's wild allegations. What she had found wounded her already-fragile creativity.

Whereas she had cast Snape in the role of hero, she had vilified Draco. *Write what you know*, Molly had always encouraged her. Instead, Hermione had written who she knew, changing the names of the guiltless and the guilty in what she had viewed as a harmless pursuit. Only now, she realized, it wasn't harmless.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, reaching for the scroll and readying herself to leave.

Draco snatched the scroll away from her, his gray, cold eyes boring into hers. "I'll take the case on three conditions."

She blinked and nodded.

"You must make your identity public," he stated. "And I want twenty thousand Galleons upfront."

Hermione heaved a sigh of relief, missing the fact that he still had one more condition to go. Other than going public with her identity, twenty thousand Galleons was quite reasonable. "Okay."

Draco rubbed his hands together. "That's not all, Granger."

Hermione swallowed the lump in her throat.

"You must write a sequel to *The Darkest Magic*. In the sequel, you *will* redeem the character of Drago Mallistoi..."

"But he's the villain!" Hermione gasped.

Draco quirked an elegant eyebrow and leaned forward. "I don't care how you do it, Granger. I don't care if your writing borders on the edge of insanity. You will write the sequel, and you will redeem my character in the eyes of my wife."

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Staring out the dirty window, Severus watched the rain pound against the glass. The weather was a mirror for his mood. Several weeks had passed since he had abandoned his initial plan. Mentally, he scoffed. It hadn't been much of a plan to begin with. It had taken him those weeks to come to an unsettling realization.

He wanted Hermione Granger.

She had woven a web of seduction around his starved libido that he found himself reluctant to relinquish. Upon his return, he had tried to exorcise Miss Granger from his mind, but the whores of Knockturn Alley had proven to be poor substitutes for the real thing.

He had let the petty, vindictive side of his coldhearted nature control him. He had been incensed upon finding out the truth...that she was Perdita Winters. Realizing that his students were laughing *at him* had brought forth a flood of unpleasant memories, and memories that he had successfully buried beneath the armor of sarcasm in spite. A psychoanalyst would have a field day with him. Of course, he didn't know any psychoanalysts.

Instead, he had Albus Dumbledore.

Who had he wronged in a previous life? Why did the Fates conspire against him?

Even though Hogwarts' headmaster wore spectacles, he was not blind. He was worse than Fluffy, the three-headed dog that had guarded the Sorcerer's Stone. The man was relentless, constantly pestering him and asking after his health. Severus didn't know how Albus knew about his trip to the tropics. He also didn't know how he knew whom he was with. The old wizard was about as subtle as a Hippogriff in a Cauldron Shop.

Severus didn't know which was worse...what Albus had said, or that he had actually listened to what Albus had said.

Severus had been a blind fool. According to Albus, Hermione Granger had feelings for him. It was a concept he still had difficulty believing, but it was there in black-and-white. The proof of her infatuation with him jumped from the pages of *The Darkest Magic*.

In true Slytherin fashion, he spurned intimacy but took advantage of sexual release whenever it presented itself. The young Gryffindor had sensual potential, a potential that he was all too eager to exploit. But first he needed to get close to her again. He needed to engage her. He needed her to give him a second chance, so he had proceeded with the lawsuit against Romance Rabble.

Knowing Miss Granger as he did, he would play to her protective sensibilities. Most likely, she would try to protect her loved ones. In doing so, he would make a bargain that she could not refuse.

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TBC

Author's Notes I would love to respond to all feedback, but my ability to type is hampered by the slow recovery of my dominant hand. I got my cast off and my stitches out today. I have another three weeks to go of "not using" the hand. Anyway, I just wanted to thank everyone who has wished for my speedy recovery. I could use more wishes because I am getting really irritated with the voice recognition software. Lastly, I must throw flowers at my beta-readers' feet. They are all goddesses to me.

## The Deal!

*Chapter 9 of 16*

Hermione and Severus sit down with their barristers.

### Chapter Nine

Severus took a sip of water and set it onto the table, his dark gaze never leaving that of the woman's before him. Not that he needed any more proof, but Hermione Granger had certainly grown up. Her womanly curves were emblazoned in his memories. Was it odd that he found contentment in her mere presence even after all they'd been through? Of course, he would definitely find more if he could grind himself into her softness. That is what he wanted, after all.

He shook his head and tried to stay on task. Losing focus now was not an option. This was the day he made his offer. It was a crucial time in the negotiations. It really was too bad that she hadn't taken his first offer. They could have dispensed with the barristers and the unpleasantness.

In a way, he was actually relieved that she hadn't. Halfheartedly, he listened to the two barristers bicker between themselves.

"Prove it!" Draco Malfoy demanded. His voice was calm, and the declaration was soft. He was self-assured and righteous, which was frightening. *Righteous* Malfoy was normally a dead Malfoy. If Lucius were dead, he would undoubtedly roll over in his grave.

Inwardly, Severus snorted. He had been surprised to see Malfoy representing Hermione and her cohorts, who were blessedly absent from the proceedings.

"Prove it, Weasley!" the blond wizard repeated, his tone even and steady compared to the redhead's blustery complexion. "The burden of proof lies at your feet. You

cannot prove that Miss Granger purposefully set out to ruin the professor's teaching career, or even that it was indeed the professor she modeled Simon's character after, and I fail to see how it *has* ruined his teaching career. From what I understand, Professor Snape is planning on going back to Hogwarts to teach Potions."

"I have more proof than you realize, Malfoy," Percy retorted vehemently.

Malfoy shoved a document across the large table. "Any resemblance in my client's novel to actual people, living or dead, is pure coincidence. You have to establish motive and malice. I am, quite frankly, amazed that you would waste the time and effort to proceed; however, in view of your client's... feelings, I have been authorized to offer him ten thousand Galleons for any pain and suffering that he may have incurred due to the unfortunate similarities between his person and that of any of the characters in Miss Granger's work of *fiction*."

He didn't know how he did it, but Severus managed to smother a grin. Malfoy had obviously not read the book; otherwise he would be suing Hermione too.

"Tell me something, Mr. Malfoy." Severus leaned forward and looked into Draco's determined gaze. "Have you read any of her books? Did you know that the villain's name is Drago Mallistoi and that the character has pale blond hair and cold gray eyes?"

Draco smiled. He pulled his copy of *The Darkest Magic* out and tossed it onto the table. "It is a work of fiction. Any similarities are purely coincidental, and yes, I have read it." He shrugged his shoulders, seemingly unimpressed.

Hermione cringed. She had never been very good at poker, but Malfoy was playing the game like a pro. She hadn't slept well ever since she'd returned from vacation, and her stomach protested any bit of nourishment. If she were the kind of woman who slept around, she would have easily accepted Snape's original offer and been done with the drama.

It was bad enough that it had come to this. The press was waiting outside, and her "dirty, little secret" would soon be revealed. In all honesty, she didn't want to be known as a romance novelist. She would have to kiss her investigative journalism career away and reveal herself as Perdita Winters. It was a small price to pay for the mayhem her latest book had caused. Not only was Severus incensed but Draco had also suffered horribly.

The logical part of her argued that Pansy's flight was not her fault, but Draco's pain was too palpable to ignore. She couldn't stop the guilt that had kept her awake for the past two days.

"Ten thousand Galleons is a fair offer," Draco continued, his inflection matter-of-fact and bored. "Especially since you have no evidence. Can you honestly sit there and tell me that you have proof my client deliberately set out to malign Professor Snape's character?"

Percy's face was redder than his hair as he shuffled papers and prepared to leave. The breakdown of negotiations was apparent on the barrister's face, and Hermione's heart sank. She could see the trial now. She would never live through the embarrassment. Knowing Percy as she did, he would undoubtedly put her on the stand and ask her whether or not she loved Severus Snape. He would probably insist that she take Veritas serum. Or he would insinuate that she was Snape's jilted lover. Her stomach churned in protest even as her fingers itched to jot down her thoughts. Somewhere, somehow, she was going to have to include a scene like that in one of her novels.

"This meeting was a waste of time," Percy hissed. "We have plenty of evidence, and we will not hesitate to present it in court. Good day!"

Severus arched a raven eyebrow. His barrister was acting like a belligerent child. *Sit down, Mr. Weasley. I am not finished.*"

Percy did as he was told, somehow managing to maintain a shred of dignity and a spec of professionalism.

Though he was looking at Hermione, Severus addressed Draco. "I have no need of funds. Your offer would seem generous if the character's close resemblance to me was simply a matter of *coincidence*. The press is outside, and I would hate to leave the negotiations without settling the matter. I have a counter proposal..."

"Professor...!" Percy protested sharply.

"I have a counter proposal!" He turned his menacing gaze on Percy and silently dared the lawyer to interfere. "In lieu of monetary recompense, I suggest indentured servitude. I am in need of assistance for the remainder of the summer. If Miss Granger agrees to my terms, she will come to Hogwarts and work off her debt to the value of ten thousand Galleons."

Hermione jumped out of her seat and slammed her palm onto the table. "I will never agree! I refused you at the villa, and I am refusing you now. I am not a prostitute!"

"I meant *lab assistant*, Miss Granger, not whore," he replied calmly. "You can work off your debt during the day, helping me to replenish the stores of potions that the school normally requires me to make, freeing me up to attend to my personal research. Surely you haven't forgotten how to brew medicinal potions."

Her eyes flashed, her anger radiating off of her. He couldn't help his reaction as he shifted in his seat. Her passion is what drew him to her in the first place. He had gotten a taste of it, and now he wanted more. He wanted her. He wanted to bathe in her passionate nature, the one she shared with the rest of the world through her torrid romance books.

She was a true Gryffindor. Here he was, backing her into a corner, and she was determined to fight her way out. She was not unintelligent. She knew what he wanted from her. Though he could use the help, his true motivations were anything but honorable. She would never fall for such an obvious ruse. If he didn't think of something quickly, he was going to lose this chance.

"You are un-bloody-believable!" she seethed. "You were trying to get into my knickers the entire time at the villa! Am I to believe that you have had some charitable change of heart? Am I to believe that you even have a heart?"

He drew breath to answer her but caught himself. "I don't know what you are referring to, Miss Granger. I filed the suit against you in the hopes that you would learn a valuable lesson. Your pen is mightier than any Unforgivable Curse. Two of my fifth-year students failed due to the nonsensical ramblings of your imagination. I had to send three of my sixth-year students to the headmaster for inappropriate behavior, and I shan't mention where I found a seventh-year student." He raised a challenging eyebrow.

She could feel the blood boil beneath her skin and Draco's and Percy's curious stares. "Why didn't you just come to me? Why didn't you just come to me with your concerns? Why ruin my vacation? Why go through all the trouble of tracking me down... just to ruin my life?"

His opaque eyes glazed over, and his jaw was set. He was not going to discuss their private "history" and incriminate himself, though he wanted to take her into his arms and comfort her distress. "It is a most generous offer, Miss Granger. I will require that you work eight hours a day. You will have weekends off. Take it or leave it."

--

Folding a gray t-shirt, Hermione placed it into her suitcase. She had dropped Crookshanks off with Ginny, and she was almost finished packing.

Draco watched as she went back and forth from the chest of drawers to her suitcase. "Are you sure you're going to be all right?"

She paused in her task. Why wouldn't she be all right? She felt like she was strung out, twisted like a pretzel. Her secret was out, and the media were having a field day. She was getting ready to enter Snape's domain and become his indentured servant. Her professional life was ruined. Her investigative journalism career was over. It wasn't really a question of her livelihood. She was a best-selling author. Money wasn't really a concern, but her reputation was in ruins. Not even the *Daily Prophet* would take her seriously now. She shook her head. They let Rita Skeeter write for them, but not her. She sighed. She may have a shot writing for the *Quibbler*, but even that was beginning to look dubious.



"I'll be fine," she assured Draco, who stood by the door with his arms crossed over his chest. If anyone had told her that she would actually be civil to Draco Malfoy anytime during the course of her lifetime, she would have laughed in their faces. He looked haggard... way worse than she felt.

"I'll take care of the papers." He stifled a yawn and scratched his chin. "It's almost a pity that it didn't go to court. I would have been interested in seeing what kind *proof* Weasley had. Of course, it really wouldn't have made any difference. There was no way they could have shown intent to defame Professor Snape's character."

A pang of guilt stabbed through her chest. She owed Draco more than she could fathom. He had gotten Molly, Ginny, and the twins off the hook with his calm demeanor and skill. If anyone should be suing her, it should be him. She hadn't really done much to disguise the character of Drago Mallistoi. To her, he was the epitome of evil. He was the bully, the brute of Hogwarts, and the bane of Harry's, Ron's and her existence.

His pale blond hair was slicked back in a manner that probably took him all of two minutes to accomplish. His elegant suit reeked of money, but his good looks and clothes did little to disguise his distress over his missing wife.

She walked up to him and touched his shoulder, a small measure of comfort, but a token between formerly bitter enemies nonetheless. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

Draco tensed, craning his neck and looking at her hand.

"You must love Pansy very much. I didn't realize..." Hermione removed her hand. "I'm just... sorry."

"She's due in a couple of weeks. I don't know where she is," Draco murmured softly. "She has broken all ties with her family. She is untraceable. It's as if she has vanished. The authorities are of no use." His words were thick with emotion.

Hermione stepped back, inspiration for Drago's redemption coming to life within her. "That's it!" she declared, scurrying toward her bag and digging through it for her notebook and quill. Once she retrieved the tools of her trade, she started writing.

"Uh... what's it?" Draco asked softly.

Hermione's quill flew over the parchment in her notebook. "Your heroine's name is Rose. She has been abducted by the Dark Sorcerer's evil minions. What color are Pansy's eyes? I can't remember."

"Brown," he answered quickly, realizing that his client was having some sort of creative fit.

Twirling the quill between her fingers, Hermione closed her eyes. "Does she have any uncles?"

"No, not that I am aware of. Why?"

Hermione's eyes popped open, and she jotted down a note. "Evil uncle... in league with Dark Sorcerer... abducts Rose to fulfill prophecy. Since the Sorcerer's powers have been depleted and his body destroyed, he'll need a new body. Rose is pregnant, her husband killed in a tragic accident. Drago is actually an imbedded spy, and..."

"I think you're getting me confused with Snape, which is quite unnerving. I still don't see what the attraction is. Quite frankly, I don't want to know, but as your lawyer, I must caution you against..."

"He wasn't the only spy in the war. Spies. Wars. That's public domain," Hermione hissed, pinching the bridge of her nose and trying to stave off a headache. With little to eat and poor sleep habits, the oncoming headache was going to be a big one, and she wanted to get the main plot hashed out before she went to bed.

Draco clamped his mouth shut and waited patiently for his client to finish her rant.

"Her abduction and her husband's murder will have to take place near the end of her first trimester." Hermione brushed her hair out of the way and kept writing.

"I thought you said her husband was in an accident."

"Don't bother me with details. I'm trying to get the main storyline written down. I'll worry about details later."

Draco conjured a chair and sat down.

"Yes, yes." The only sound in the room was the frantic scratching of her quill against the parchment. "Her husband's murder will be disguised as an accident. She will be abducted near the beginning of her second trimester, that way she and Drago will have time to get to know one another. She will have to go into premature labor, but not too premature because I want the baby to survive. Her premature labor will expose Drago's true allegiances as he spirits her away..."

"Wow! I think this might actually work!" Hermione giggled excitedly.

--

Severus paced the length of his office and waited. He hovered around the fireplace, not for warmth, but in anticipation. Hermione would arrive soon, per their agreement. He had to give her credit. She had negotiated the details of her indentured servitude with a poise that was uncommon in most Gryffindors.

To be honest, he didn't have much of the plan...just like when he showed up during her vacation...and he was becoming irritated over the fact that Hermione seemed to hold sway over his scheming Slytherin nature. He had been so focused on getting her into *his* domain that he hadn't thought past that. During the negotiations, she had thought of everything. During the times she was not working for him, she would be sequestered in Gryffindor tower, which presented him with the difficulty of getting around Minerva.

He didn't know what it was about her that held him back. The dark part of his soul demanded immediate action, but she appealed to something within him that had long been ignored, and he hadn't quite figured that out. Merlin knew that he had the means at his disposal to do what he wanted with her. He held the patents on lust potions that were illegal in wizarding Britain. He could drug her, have his way with her, and modify her memories.

So, why didn't he?

He wanted more than that, he admitted. He had tasted her aphrodisiac-like passion, a passion that he would likely never tire of, and he wanted more. He was out of his element, not just physically, but emotionally as well. Intimacy was not one of his strengths.

It wasn't as though he wanted a committed relationship with her. He just needed a sexual one. He would shag the young Gryffindor senseless and exorcise those demons, and then he could forget her and get on with his life. That would be the end of Hermione Granger. There was only one small complication to his plan...

She wanted nothing to do with him.

He needed to woo her, but he hadn't a clue as to how to go about that. He needed help. He needed advice, but from whom?

Minerva was most likely to advise him to stay as far away from Hermione as possible. For some odd reason, the deputy headmistress did not approve of him. He couldn't ask Albus either. After all, his love life, or lack thereof, was even more pathetic than his own.

*Love life? Wooing?*

Having dealt in lies and deceit his entire life, he had difficulty recognizing the truth whenever it decided to present itself. The manifestation of physical ills...insomnia and loss of appetite...was off-putting to say the least. He had ignored the symptoms for the last few weeks, convinced that he may have picked up some exotic bug while in the tropics.

Crossing his office with purposeful strides, he entered the lavatory and looked into the mirror. What he saw made his stomach do an odd flip. Though he looked the same on the outside...shoulder length, stringy black hair, crooked nose and teeth...he didn't recognize the look in his eyes. He shook his head and wanted to retch.

"I don't believe this," he murmured to his reflection. "You're in love with Hermione Granger."

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TBC

Author's Notes: My poor beta-reader, Jen. She is my cheerleader. She is the one who pats my shoulder and tells me it's okay if I trash a chapter I'm almost finished with and start from scratch. She deserves a friggin' medal! Then there is Coccoachristy, who has been dealing with real life issues. I can't thank her enough for polishing and completing my thoughts. It's a tough job, and I am ever so grateful that you can do it.

Thanks to everyone for the well wishes regarding my health! I wish I could say the crisis is over, but it isn't. I have now entered the "pain-management" phase of my incredibly long recovery. I have also had new issues arise, but shan't bore you with the laundry list of garbage that has been placed before me. In closing, I have only one thing to say... Getting old sucks eggs!

P. S. There is some good news. Chapter ten is practically finished, and the muse is hopping up and down and dedicated to finishing this story prior to book seven. Wish us luck!

## Chapter Ten

*Chapter 10 of 16*

Hermione discovers the truth.

### Chapter Ten

A week of her indentured servitude had passed with little fanfare and almost no sign of her tormentor. Aside from greeting her, Severus Snape had made himself so scarce that she hadn't seen him. It was as though he was sequestered himself. There was planning to do; always a list of potions that she needed to brew. She spent her days brewing and her nights writing.

Still unable to sleep, Hermione was halfway through the book that would hopefully redeem Draco Malfoy in the eyes of his wife. Maybe it was the insomnia. Maybe it was the stress. Either way, her creative juices were flowing, and she was not going to look a gift Hippogriff in the mouth.

There had been numerous requests for interviews since she had been revealed as Perdita Winters, but she honored the agreement, granting only one interview with *The Quibbler*. She only hoped that that interview reached Pansy. According to Draco, she was due in the next few weeks. He was beside himself with worry, and she couldn't blame him or help the guilty pang that settled in her stomach whenever she was around him.

Of course it wasn't her fault. At least that is what she kept telling herself. Hormones and magic were a dangerous mix. Pregnant witches were a dangerous breed, and magical hormones were monitored daily... or they were supposed to be. Like Draco, she had hired a private investigator to find her, but so far the search had come up empty-handed.

It was actually dumb luck and bad timing. Pansy's pregnancy hormones combined with her overactive imagination...

Heaving a heavy sigh, Hermione stared out the window of Gryffindor tower. The treetops of the Forbidden Forest swayed in the distance, and the light of the full moon danced over the grounds. She could see Hagrid's hut from her window and felt a pang of remorse that she had not been to visit him yet, but her time was devoted to serving out her sentence and working on her next novel.

As if bidden by her thoughts, the giant came out of his hut and made his way across the lawn toward the castle. He was not alone.

Hermione squinted, trying to determine who was with Hagrid. Whoever it was wore a black cape and kept their head covered. The person held their stomach as if they had eaten too much. If they had eaten too much at Hagrid's, they would undoubtedly have a stomachache later.

As Hagrid and his guest neared the castle, Hermione opened her window to get a better look. His guest turned toward the tower, and the moonlight illuminated her face.

"Pansy!" she gasped, almost falling out of the window in her effort to gain a better glimpse. "Pansy!" she yelled, her voice echoing against the stone walls of the courtyard below.

The woman yelped and ran into the castle.

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"Why do I get the feeling that you aren't being totally honest with me?" Arthur Weasley asked Severus before downing the rest of his Firewhisky.

Severus cringed. Having spent the last week with the Weasley patriarch had been a painful, yet necessary evil. He hadn't spent every moment of every day with him, but he had spent enough time around Arthur to gain a new respect for the man.

After the shocking realization that he was in love with Hermione Granger, Severus had made it a point to stay as far away from her as possible. Yes, he wanted to shag the witch senseless, but there was no point complicating his life, much less hers. In an effort to gather some semblance of control over his life, he had sought council with the only married male member of the Order.

Arthur was happily married. Happily. Married. Not two words one usually finds in the same sentence. It wasn't as though he was looking for ways to propose to Hermione. He merely wished to approach her in a non-threatening manner, which was difficult for him to do since he had done nothing *but* bully her from the moment they had met.

Draining his third Firewhisky, Severus set his glass on the table and looked at Arthur. "You are correct," he replied, his words slightly slurred. "I haven't been very forthcoming."

Arthur nodded. "I see," he said. "Who is she? You haven't been asking me about my courtship with Molly for the heck of it."

Severus poured another shot of Firewhisky and downed it quickly for courage. It was the cowardly way to deal with the interpersonal aspects of his life, but it seemed to work. "Hermione Granger."

The older wizard's slight intake of breath spoke volumes. His wife had obviously confided in him, but of course, Molly only knew half the story. "If you... care for Hermione, then why are you suing her?"

Toasting to nothing in particular, Severus pursed his lips. "The lawsuit has been dropped. Hermione is...helping me brew potions for the Hospital Wing. That was the deal. Instead of monetary compensation she was to be *my* indentured servant for the summer and help me replenish the supplies."

He sighed and tossed another shot of Firewhisky back. "It's a stupid ruse. She is intelligent and beautiful. I don't know what I was thinking. I had thought that if I got her to come to Hogwarts, I could have a chance with her, but it is unlikely that she will forgive me for..." He clamped his lips shut and started to hum the last part.

"I'm sorry," Arthur said, slurring the second word a bit as he cupped a hand to his ear, for he was pissed as well. "I didn't catch that last part."

Severus closed his eyes and wished for oblivion to consume him, but he knew he would never escape his troubles that way. He grabbed the bottle of Firewhisky and poured his new "friend" more to drink. "When I found out that she had written that... book, I confronted her. I... caused her great distress, and I doubt that she will forgive me anytime soon."

Arthur snorted, giving away that he actually knew more than he was letting on. He had listened to Molly lament about Hermione's woes, but he had thought that his wife had been exaggerating. "Do you mean to sit there and tell me that you actually went to the villa and held Hermione against her will."

Severus shook his head. "I never held her against her will." He defended himself with a hefty sigh. "She was free to leave at any time. I disarmed her... took her wand away. She broke my nose!"

Arthur stared at him, his eyes wide with shock. "What were you thinking?"

Contemplating his answer carefully, Severus fingered his wand nervously. He might possibly have to Obliviate Arthur. "I was furious... at first. I wasn't thinking at all. I wanted to strike out. She... she was making fun of me at my expense. She was mocking me behind my back... Did she really think she was going to get away with it?"

"That's preposterous!" Arthur whispered. "You didn't really think..."

"Please let me finish," Severus replied. "Like I said. I wasn't thinking. I was out of control and... Well, I've never been out of control before. Do you think I would have lasted as long as I did spying if I could not control myself? It was quite unnerving and quite unexpected. I wish I had never read the bloody book. I wish I had never found out who the author was. Life would be so much simpler..."

"I can assure you that Hermione wasn't making fun of you at your expense," Arthur informed him quickly. "You must realize that... she... uh... cares for you. I am often present during her and Molly's brainstorm sessions. In fact, I remember with astute clarity that Hermione would often slip and refer to the character in question as Severus."

The truth of the matter was that somewhere between revenge and resolution, he had discovered that Hermione cared for him. At least, she *had* cared for him. His behavior had probably ruined any chances that he may have had, had he approached her in a more conventional manner.

"It doesn't matter," Severus murmured, swirling the amber liquid in his glass. "She is a Gryffindor through and through. She will never forgive me."

Arthur set his glass down and frowned. "I would take offense to that generalization, but I understand where you are coming from. Molly is not quick to forgive either."

Silence loomed between the two wizards as they contemplated the conversation. Severus cleared his throat. "How do you make amends whenever you *wrong* your wife?"

Arthur clucked his tongue. "Have you apologized?"

Resting his head on his hand, Severus pushed the Firewhisky away and blinked.

"I take it by your silence that you have yet to apologize to her." Arthur shook his head in astonishment.

Severus was unable to meet the other wizard's gaze, ashamed by his petty weaknesses. He hated apologizing. It wasn't as though he was never wrong. Apologizing was a sign of weakness, and they were pointless. Wounded feelings were not his concern, and if he had to apologize to appease someone's wounded feelings... He would rather cast the Killing Curse on them and put them out of their pathetic misery.

"Please tell me that you apologized to her." Arthur hiccupped.

Severus stiffened. "I have not."

Arthur regarded him, his warm eyes measuring him. Befriending Arthur Weasley had seemed like a good idea at the time, but now he wasn't so sure. Having realized that he required assistance, Severus had sought him out. He was, after all, in a healthy, well-adjusted relationship. Is this not what Severus wanted with Hermione?

The drunken haze of Firewhisky prevented him from answering his own question.

Leaning back in his chair, Arthur shook his head. "You might want to start with an apology."

--

Hermione ran down the stairs to the main entrance, the shuffling sound of her slippers echoing in the hall. She reached the bottom of the stairs and stopped short. Dumbledore sat in what she assumed was a conjured chair in the middle of the grand entrance, sipping tea.

"Is there something I can help you with, Miss Granger?" he asked.

"I saw Pansy," she replied breathlessly. "I needed to talk to her. I needed to..."

"She's resting." Albus stood and Vanished his chair and tea. "She is... ill."

"Is something wrong with the baby?" Tears welled in her eyes, and she took a step backwards. If something happened to Pansy and Draco's baby because of her... "Where is she? I need to see her."

Resting his hand on her shoulder, he tried to comfort her. "The babies are fine. Mrs. Malfoy came to Hogwarts, seeking sanctuary. Poppy is monitoring the pregnancy and..."

"Babies?" The tears fell freely now.

"Mrs. Malfoy is having twins," Dumbledore chuckled, quickly conjuring a chair for Hermione to sit in. "You look pale. Why don't you have a seat?"

Hermione tried speaking, but no words would come out.

The headmaster patted her hand reassuringly. "Pregnancy hormones and magic are a very dangerous mix. Pansy is afraid of Draco right now. Even though I know that Draco would never do the things she has accused him of, I felt it safer for her and the babies to play along with her delusions and paranoia. She'll be fine after the babies are born."

He tapped his chin with his finger. "If I recall correctly, Molly Weasley had this problem when she was pregnant with George and Fred. Either way, Pansy will be right as rain once she has the babies. Well... providing she doesn't have any complications."

She plopped into the chair that he offered to her and buried her head in her hands. "It's all my fault. She thinks Draco is... evil... because of what I've written."

"Actually," Dumbledore murmured, "Draco's personal history affected her more. His father is a convicted Death Eater."

"But my book..."

"Is a work of fiction," he interceded. "Anyone who has difficulty separating fact from fiction requires professional help. I understand that Severus may fall into that category."

Hermione stopped blaming herself and froze. "W-What do you mean?"

Looking away guiltily, Albus cleared his throat. "I owe you an apology. I had no idea that Severus was going to be so daft and frustrating. I'm sorry he ruined your vacation. I was really looking forward to reading Harry and Ginny's book."

"You knew about the villa?" Her voice was a whisper, even though in her head it was an angry shout.

"Well, I knew where he was," he admitted. "I didn't know what he was up to. The island authorities contacted me about the charges you made against Severus. I, of course, vouched for his whereabouts at that time. I..."

"I was beginning to think I had imagined the whole thing, and here you were covering for him?" This time her voice did get louder.

Dumbledore sighed as if there was more to his confession. "That... isn't all, I'm afraid."

She folded her arms across her chest and glared at the headmaster, waiting for him to continue.

"They say that confession is good for the soul..." He gave her a nervous smile, which made him look youthful. "I planted the book. I planted it everywhere. I gave it to his students. I had to get him to read it. I had to get him to realize that you had feelings for him. I didn't realize it would take so long for him to finally get around to reading it."

"I had hoped that he would have realized what the book was...a declaration of your feelings for him."

Her cheeks burned with embarrassment and anger.

"I should have realized that he would see it as an attack on his character." Dumbledore fiddled with his beard. "Severus is so used to dealing with absolutes that he seems to get carried away. Sirius and James bullied him horribly. Even before he came to Hogwarts, he was bullied at home. He..."

The colossal door in the main entrance creaked open, cutting off the headmaster's confession. She could feel her heart pounding and her temperature rising as anger flashed through her system. Severus and Arthur Weasley staggered into the hall and stopped. Actually, *they* didn't stagger. It was more like Arthur staggered while dragging Severus behind him.

Albus rushed toward them. "*Mobilicorpus!*"

"Put me down," Severus growled. "I can walk! I'm not so pissed that I can't walk."

Albus released the spell, and Severus fell to the floor with an unceremonious plop.

Arthur winced, feeling his newfound "friend's" pain. "You'll be fine once you get some Sober Up Potion. Oh... hello... Hermione."

Hermione stared at the spectacle, and Severus' bleary gazed locked with hers.

"Just the person I needed to see," he mumbled, clutching Dumbledore's sleeve and pulling himself up and onto his knees. "I wanted to apologize for... everything."

Hermione grimaced. "Severus Snape was obviously pissed beyond reason. She didn't know whether to be angry or amused."

Releasing the headmaster's robe, Severus edged toward Hermione on his knees. "I'm an arse. I'm an insensitive arse, and I overreacted."

Albus looked at Arthur. "I get the impression that this is more than the Firewhisky talking."

Shrugging his shoulders, Arthur snorted. "I slipped him some Veritasium. You were right, Albus. He's been glowering at me all week long, asking me about Molly. I just couldn't take it any more. I followed your orders. I listened to him, and I gave him advice. I have gone above and beyond my duty as a member of the Order and respectfully resign."

"Severus, I hope you find the happiness you deserve." Arthur staggered toward the entrance and hiccupped loudly.

Edging closer to Hermione, Severus ignored his friend's exit and grabbed her robe. "I'm sorry. I apologize for 'ruining your life.' I apologize for my behavior at the villa. I'm sorry that Percy Obliviated his sister. I'm sorry I'm such an arse. Oh wait, I believe I've already covered that."

Hermione looked at Albus pleadingly as she was pulled down to Severus' level. The stone floor was cold, even through the material of her jeans. Severus cupped her cheeks with his hands and gently forced her to look at him. "Please..." His breath was minty fresh, as though he had eaten a whole pack of breath mints to disguise the fact that he had been drinking.

"Please forgive me." His black eyes were wide. "Please tell me I still have a chance with you."

"I..." *don't know what to say.* "Professor Dumbledore?" she asked pleadingly before she said something stupid. Scenes like this normally wrote themselves.

"I think it's time we help him to the dungeons," Albus stated softly.

--

Severus clung to the beautiful figment of his imagination, unwilling to relinquish hold of her silken curls. He was in his bed, and she was over him.

"You've got to let go of my hair," she whispered, her fingers wrapping around his.

"Are you going to be all right, Miss Granger?" Albus asked from the doorway. "Should I send for a house-elf?"

Severus scowled. He finally had Hermione in his bed. Why was he hearing Albus' voice in the distance? The bloody meddler! Why couldn't he leave well enough alone?

"I'll be fine, Professor," she replied, her breath brushing against his cheek as she leaned over him and tried to free her hair.

"Very well," Albus replied. "I shall retire for the evening. Call Dobby if you need anything."

Severus growled. Why was Albus still here? He had something important that he wanted to tell Hermione, but he was having a difficult time remembering what it was. Blasted Firewhisky!

"Would you be kind enough to set out a Hangover Potion for tomorrow morning?" he asked with a frustrated huff, knowing that wasn't what he wanted to ask her.

"Of course," she replied, her words a little on the breathless side as she continued to try to free her hair.

As she freed the sections of hair, he wound more though his fingers. "I love your hair." He inhaled and kissed some strands. "I especially love the smell of the beach in your hair."

Hermione froze above him, her hips and back protesting the unnatural angle as she hovered over him. What was she doing here? She should have let the headmaster deal with him.

Severus shuddered beneath her. "I close my eyes and imagine burying my face in your hair as I 'slide into you.'"

Her eyes widened, and she felt the answering call of his drunken seduction melt her insides.

"You never did finish writing that scene between Simon and Cassandra," he murmured, his voice a low purr. He abandoned her hair and touched her cheek. "I would bury my cock inside you until I could go no further. I would feel the aftershocks of your previous orgasms surrounding my flesh and would sell my soul to remain thusly. I would smell the ocean breeze in your hair."

Hermione would have twisted away from him in an effort to escape, but the deep timbre of his voice enchanted her so that she couldn't move; could barely breathe.

"I would wrap my arms around you, cradling your stomach with one hand and your breasts with the other."

She whimpered, the liquid ache between her thighs betraying her resolve.

"I would be buried balls deep where I belong. I would nibble on your neck and tell you that I love you."

The admission was like cold water on a raging flame, stealing the life of the fire, but not quite extinguishing it. Grasping hold of her last shred of sanity, Hermione backed away, but he grabbed hold of her wrist.

"I love you," he repeated solemnly. "That's what I wanted to tell you."

After having been shattered into what felt like ten million pieces by him, she didn't trust him and redoubled her efforts to extract herself from his bed.

"I want you," he rasped, pulling her hand against his aching cock.

She gasped, flexing her fingers along the cloth-covered ridge of his arousal. Her body betrayed her. She wanted to take him inside her and realize what it felt to make love to the man she loved.

"Ease my agony, my love," Severus pleaded.

Her stomach churned. This must be another one of his jokes or mechanizations.

He turned them over, and she yelped in surprise. He whispered kisses along her jaw and cheek before claiming her lips. It was a slow, possessive kiss. Sliding tongue against sliding tongue. Captured sighs and anguished groans.

"Please, Hermione," he panted against her lips, rocking his body into hers. They were still clothed, and the frustration mounted. "Forgive me. I love you."

Unchecked tears fell. How could she trust the words she would die to hear from him, whispered in a drunken, deceitful stupor. Severus Snape would no more love her than he would love...

"Veritaserum!" Hermione shuddered beneath him. "Arthur said that he had given you Truth Serum. Is this true?"

He shook his head as if trying to clear it and answered the question truthfully. "I don't know."

Hermione bit her bottom lip, weary and afraid. "Do you love me?" she asked him, the words barely a whisper. Almost a dreamlike quality.

"Yes," he answered, the raw honesty in his opaque eyes luring her into the trap that she found herself in. "I love you."

Hermione moved beneath him, reaching into her jeans pocket and removing her wand. She Vanished their clothing and trembled. "Prove it."

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TBC

Author's Notes...I can't thank my beta readers enough. Words cannot express my gratitude. The question remains... will they or won't they?

## Chapter Eleven

*Chapter 11 of 16*

Pansy gives birth.

## Chapter Eleven

Chopping the lavender for the Calming Draught, Hermione checked the bubbling brew and gained a new appreciation for the Potions master's position at Hogwarts. Other than the occasional fantasy of him swooping into her room and ravaging her, she had never given much thought to what he did during the summer. Now she knew.

She set the knife down and scooped the chopped lavender up. She really needed to stop thinking about Severus all together. If she managed that, she would not be reminded of the embarrassment of last night. Her cheeks flushed bright red just thinking about it. She had Vanished their clothes and had offered herself to him.

It was a bold, yet foolish move. She cringed in remembrance.

*"Prove it." She shivered beneath him, feeling the heat of his flesh against hers.*

*He groaned, the sound an almost anguished cry as he buried his face against her neck. She wiggled beneath him, trying to deepen the contact, trying to take him into her body. She knew no shame. Her anger, though still prevalent, was overcome with desire. She would deal with the guilt in the morning but live in the now.*

*The feel of his mouth against her neck heightened the eroticism. He nipped the delicate flesh, his breath harsh and raspy. She arched into him, offering herself like a pagan sacrifice.*

*"...Don't deserve you," he hissed, thrusting against her and hitting her inner thigh.*

*He was right. He didn't deserve her. It wasn't that she was conceited, but she was still angry with him. He had treated her deplorably, and his drunken confession did little to endear him to her. Actually, it did, but she wasn't going to let it deter the moment.*

*She shifted beneath him, and he gave another strangled groan. With that groan, his weight settled upon hers.*

It had taken her a full minute before realizing that he had passed out. It had taken her another five minutes to get out from underneath him.

She hoped he stayed away from her. After all, he had done a splendid job of doing that since her arrival. She was still trying to sort through the implications of what he'd said last night. Then there was the matter of trying to find Pansy. Yes, Dumbledore had pleaded with Hermione to leave Pansy alone, but her guilt would never allow such a luxury.

She was so confused. She didn't know what to do. On one hand, she wanted to track Severus down and force herself on him. On the other hand, she wanted to run away. Not a very Gryffindor thing to do, but it was her gut instinct. Somehow the idea of Severus Snape being in love with her seemed like a bad idea.

"You may want to remove the cauldron from the flame and let the Calming Draught cool before adding the lavender, lest you melt the cauldron."

Startled out of her reverie, she lost her grip on the lavender and dropped it all over the place, some of it landing in the boiling brew. His prediction rang true, and the potion started to hiss, melting the pewter cauldron and spilling its contents onto the table and floor.

Weaving his way across the room, Severus Vanished the mess and scowled. The scent of lavender and Hermione tickled his senses...senses that were hyperaware due to his unfortunate drinking binge last night.

"I'm s-sorry," she stuttered, brushing the remnants of lavender from her robe and avoiding his gaze.

Her unwillingness to look at him sealed his fate. He, unfortunately, wasn't blessed with the ability to forget a drunken stupor. Last night's events played in his mind with embarrassing clarity. His scowl deepened, and he turned to leave.

She had offered him paradise, and he had passed out. It wasn't so much that he cared what she thought of him. He'd never put much stock in others' opinions, but his pride was definitely wounded. He had confessed everything, and judging by the blush of her cheeks and inability to meet his gaze, she wished he hadn't.

"You're free to leave, Miss Granger," he stated softly and made for the door. "I am releasing you from the contract."

"Why?"

How should he respond? Should he use a cliché? Was he letting her go in the hopes that she came back? Did he dare to think that she could ever forgive him? "You have fulfilled your end of the bargain."

She unfurled the list of potions he had given her. "But the list... it isn't completed. What about your research?"

*A façade. A convenient lie to lure you here.* He wanted to reply. He turned. "Shall I send for a house-elf? Do you need help packing?"

Setting the list on the table, Hermione eyed him skeptically. "Is this some sort of trick?"

Indecision and mistrust watered her chocolate gaze. He closed the distance between them but stopped short of touching her. He shook his head, wondering how long Dumbledore and Weasley had been spiking his meals with Veritaserum. The stark truth was a bitter pill to swallow. He was in love with her and had treated her abysmally. He deserved to be lashed for his behavior. His guilt certainly wasn't enough recompense.

"I assure you," he murmured softly, unable to tear his gaze from hers. "It is no trick." He gathered her hands in his. "My... behavior was deplorable. I can make no excuses for it. I shall have Mr. Weasley contact Mr. Malfroy about your expenses and..."

"But I..."

There was a whoosh of air, a soft pop, and Dobby materialized between them. His bat-like ears trembled, and he squeaked. "Needs you, he does. The headmaster needs you." He glanced nervously at Hermione. "The babies..." He bit his lip to keep from saying anything else.

Severus stared down his nose at the shorter creature. "What are you talking about?"

"Is Pansy in labor?" asked Hermione.

Dobby squeaked again and hid behind Severus' robes, much to the Potion master's chagrin and frustration.

"It's okay, Dobby." She moved around Severus and tried to calm the house-elf's nerves. "I know about Pansy."

Severus turned and tried to dislodge the blasted creature. It probably looked like some deranged comic routine, for he kept turning in circles. In doing so, Hermione kept walking around him.

"Secret," Dobby mumbled. "No good at secrets. Dobby no good with secrets."

With a Herculean effort, Severus managed to grab Dobby's shirt and lift him. "What is it, Dobby? What's wrong?"

The house-elf squirmed. "The Malfoy heirs..."

"Where is she, Dobby?" Hermione asked. "It's okay. I know about Pansy," she repeated reassuringly.

"I'm glad somebody does," Severus groused softly, setting Dobby down in the hopes that the house-elf would calm down and be able to communicate effectively.

"Is she in the Hospital Wing?"

Dobby made a sound of distress, which confirmed the accuracy of Hermione's guess, and she ran out of the room. The house-elf disappeared, and Severus was left wondering what crisis would arise next.

--

Hermione ran toward the Hospital Wing and stumbled as the stone beneath her feet buckled and lurched. A woman wailed, and a vicious breeze swept down the hallway and knocked her backwards. The ceiling cracked above her, and she covered her head as dust rained down upon her.

"Take my hand!" Severus shouted over the howling wind. He pulled her to her feet and guided her through the corridor. As they neared the Hospital Wing, the wind died down, and a baby cried.

"I don't think the school can take much more, Albus!" Minerva declared. "It wasn't designed to withstand..."

"I'm well aware of what the school can and can't do, Minerva," the Headmaster returned, his voice calm as he cooed to the baby in his arms. He walked away from the scene and smiled at Severus.

Pansy whimpered behind a privacy screen. "My baby."

"Pansy," Madam Pomfrey murmured. "The baby is fine. Severus is on his way..."

An unearthly scream electrified the air around them. "No! Not him! He's a Death Eater! He'll take my baby!"

Hermione stepped in front of Severus, watching the shadows dance behind the privacy screen.

"Ther' now," Hagrid said. "Don't be ridiculous, Pansy. Professor Snape's a hero. 'E's a lot like that ther' character in yer romance book... What's 'is name? Sanderson? Professor Snape is a good man. 'E'll look after yer babe."

"You have to focus, Pansy," Poppy insisted. "Your other baby is on the way."

Pansy gave a strangled groan.

"Merlin preserve us!" Minerva prayed as the windows creaked and the floor buckled.

Dumbledore staggered toward Severus and Hermione, clasping the newborn to his chest. "They are a little early, Severus. Poppy feels that they could use a Strengthening Solution, but she wasn't sure if it was safe for newborns."

Stepping forward, Severus moved the blanket aside and touched the baby's head. Something twisted in Hermione's gut... a mixture of elation and grief. Elation over the birth of Draco's children. Grief over the likelihood that she would probably never have her own children, not that she was in a hurry to do so.

"The potion would need to be diluted in breast milk."

Pansy howled in pain as Poppy and Hagrid encouraged her to push. Hermione took a step toward the privacy curtain, but Dumbledore held the fussing first-born out to her. "I am afraid that I am not soft enough for this young man. Would you hold him, Miss Granger?"

She held her arms out and sighed as the tiny bundle was handed over to her. He had been cleaned and smelled of powder. There were fine tufts of white-blond hair on his head, a typical Malfoy trait. Instinctively, he burrowed against her chest to nurse. "Has she named him?"

Dumbledore grasped her elbow and walked her away from the privacy curtain. "Not yet. I was hoping that Mrs. Malfoy would be in a better frame of mind once she delivered. Only Hagrid seems to be able to calm her."

"But Dra..."

"Don't even think his name," he cautioned. "Her natural magic has manifested, and her hearing is very sensitive."

Voices increased into shouts of encouragement and pain, and Hermione winced. Guilt pierced her very soul. Draco should be here to witness the birth of his children. A howling wind whipped into the room, and Severus stepped in front of her to shield her and the babe.

"Push!" Poppy shouted.

"Tha's the girl, Pansy!" declared Hagrid.

The wind died down as quickly as it had started, and another baby cried, announcing its arrival to the world.

--

Hogwarts castle groaned in protest as the army of house-elves hurled magic along the ceilings and halls nearest the Hospital Wing. Pansy and the twins had been moved to Hagrid's hut, and everyone else had been evacuated from the castle and relocated to the Three Broomsticks.

Two days had passed, and mother and twins were doing well thanks to the Strengthening Solution. Thankfully, she was recovering and had even agreed to allow Hermione to visit.

Hermione had been tempted to Owl Draco, but had decided against it due to the fragile nature of magical pregnancy hormones. The damage to Hogwarts was testament to the destructive nature of... nature, and she didn't want to exacerbate Pansy's condition. But now that she had delivered the twins, she had calmed down considerably and had even asked after Draco.

Apparently, even Hagrid was a fan of her books. He had encouraged Hermione to come for a visit and bring her new manuscript. She had stayed up the entire night, polishing the final draft and felt a sense of pride over the accomplishment. Her fans would probably be disappointed that the next installment was not about James and Virginia, but desperate times called for desperate measures. Besides, she had included a couple of scenes in the book that included lots of bickering between those two. She had even managed to include a scene near the end of the book between Cassandra and Simon.

Kicking the mud off her boots, she knocked on the door.

"I bet that's 'er," Hagrid's booming voice and footsteps sounded from inside.

Plastering a nervous smile on her face, Hermione grasped the manuscript tightly and hoped that this worked. The door opened, and the familiar earthy smell of Hagrid's abode greeted her senses.

"Ello 'Mione," the half-giant greeted with a warm smile. "We've been waitin' fer you."

Entering the hut, her gaze clashed with Severus'. "What are you doing here?"

"Professor Snape was just telling me about Draco's heroics during the war," Pansy announced from across the room.

Draco? Heroic? If hiding was heroic...

Severus grasped her elbow and brushed a kiss against her cheek. "Just play along, my dear."

She didn't know which affected her more, his voice or the endearment. He guided her toward a seat next to Pansy. Before she could sit down, he sat down and pulled her onto his lap. Heat infused every cell of her body, and she squirmed, almost dropping the manuscript.

His arm wrapped around her waist and stilled her movements. "I was just telling her about Draco's deeds during the war. Is that the manuscript?" He laid his hand over hers and shifted beneath her.

"I do believe it is." Hagrid stomped toward her and reached for the package of papers. "Pansy's right anxious to read it. She adored yer last book."

The new mother giggled nervously, shifting one of her babies in her arms. "I just didn't realize you were the author, Hermione!" she whispered excitedly. "I've read the entire series."

Pansy looked down, intently studying a spec of lint on her lap. "I..." she sniffed, her voice trembling with emotion. "I miss Draco. I... don't know what I was thinking?"

"Where is he? I know he misses you. Has anyone Owled him?" Hermione asked quickly, needing resolution as much as her former classmate.

There was a loud, resounding crack outside, and the hut shuddered.

"It's okay, Pansy." Hagrid knelt next to the young Slytherin and patted her thigh. He gave Hermione a panicked glance. "We'll Owl Draco when yer ready. Not a moment sooner."

Severus' arm tightened around her, and he whispered against her ear. "Mrs. Malfoy is suffering from postpartum depression. The mood swings and hormones aren't as bad as her pregnancy, but they are still dangerous, nonetheless. You may want to censor any mention of contacting her husband while around her."

Hermione nodded, shivering as the back of his hand brushed the swell of her breast.

"I believe we have overstayed our welcome," Severus announced suddenly. "Why don't you leave the manuscript with Hagrid for Mrs. Malfoy to read later? I could escort you back to the inn."

Hermione handed the manuscript to Hagrid and stood. She felt strange, all hot and tingly, as if she'd been drinking. Feeling the way she did, she entertained the thought of dragging Severus into the Forbidden Forest and having her wicked way with him.

Grasping her elbow, Severus ushered her toward the door. "Enjoy the manuscript, Mrs. Malfoy."

Hermione gapped as she was ushered out of the hut and into the garden. "But, but... What have you done? What did you tell her? Draco hid during the war. He did nothing."

"Will you please keep your voice down," he admonished, still guiding her over the rocky terrain along the edge of the Forbidden Forest. "I stopped by to give her the Strengthening Solution. Though she is no longer pregnant and at the mercy of unpredictable magical hormones, she is still a witch in the throes of postpartum depression.

"Unlike St. Mungo's, Hogwarts is not warded to endure the kind of magic that spike during labor and delivery. I was merely protecting the grounds and Hagrid's hut from certain destruction should Mrs. Malfoy become upset again." He came across the remnants of an old wall and hopped to the grass below. Turning, he held his arms out to help her down.

Hermione walked along the edge and glared at him. For every step she took forward, he took two. He smirked as she tried to refuse his help. She was angry with him, and it gave him hope. She knew the truth...a truth that he had barely accepted himself...and she was still angry with him. She was justified in her anger. Yes, he had apologized. Yes, he had confessed, but he had been pissed, and he owed her more than that.

Her reaction inspired his pursuit. He had been prepared to let her go two days ago, but he didn't possess the generosity of spirit to do the right thing. Irony twisted in his gut. Love was indeed, unpredictable.

"I wish you had said something sooner. Given me some clue that you were going to talk to Pansy about Draco. We both know Draco did nothing during the war."

"And in doing nothing, he was heroic," Severus stated. "He could have followed his father's teachings."

"But what I've written..."

"Is undoubtedly brilliant, entertaining, and a complete work of fiction. Mrs. Malfoy may be emotional, but she isn't daft." He kept stepping after her, intent on helping her down.

She stopped, hands on her hips and an incredulous look on her face. "*Frontlashy* to brilliant and entertaining," she said, her inflection dripping with acidic sarcasm. "I'd take that as a compliment, but I know how insincere it was, and I... I don't appreciate it."

"*Locomotor Mortis*," he murmured softly, quickly tucking his wand back into his sleeve and preparing to catch her. Her arms flailed as she tried to maintain her balance.

Realizing that her momentum forward was against her, she bent forward and clasped his shoulder. He clasped her waist, and she hopped down, but instead of releasing the Leg-Locker Curse, he helped her lean against the damp earth and pressed himself against her, capturing her lips.

The kiss was possessive and predatory. His skilled lips made demands of her novice ones, and someone groaned as the exploration deepened. His stance widened, and she felt the evidence of his arousal against her belly. A lecherous desire pierced her lustful fantasies, and she clutched his clothing and pulled him closer.

Breaking the kiss, Severus trailed his lips along her jaw and cupped the weight of her breasts in his hands. "Though I would normally shy away from the genre you write in, I have read the entire series and... found them to be entertaining works of fiction."

His thumbs moved over her nipples, coaxing the passionate response he knew he would receive. "Accept the compliment for what it is, a sincere attempt toward reconciliation."



"I...love you," he admitted, barely a whisper that threatened to be carried away on the soft summer breeze. "I was unable to prove it" the other night, but I certainly am capable of proving it now."

--

TBC

Author's Notes...Yes, I am an evil cliff-hanging wench! No matter how much I wanted Severus and Hermione to "get physical," I just couldn't do it. Drunken sex is not fun and is often disappointing. I needed to resolve Pansy and Draco's storyline before I could move forward with Severus and Hermione.

My wonderful beta-readers have had some real life issues and were unable to read over this, so please excuse any mistakes and typos.

Thanks to all who have reviewed. They are greatly appreciated.

## Chapter Twelve

*Chapter 12 of 16*

Christmas at Hogwarts...

### Chapter Twelve

The smile on her face was a plastic one as she signed another autograph for an excited fan. Though there was some disappointment on their behalf that Virginia and James' book had been delayed, they were ecstatic over the redemption of Drago Mallastoi.

It had been five months since the birth of Draco and Pansy's twins. Thankfully, they were back together and happily caring for their two boys. Five months of tweaking the rough draft until it was perfect. Five months of ignoring the fact that Severus was ignoring her. Five months of remembering how it felt to have him so close, yet not close enough. Five months of dreams that had never become a reality, the result of the numerous times she had fallen victim to his seductions.

Unfortunately, the seductions never panned out. He never "proved" anything. It was like the Fates were having a great laugh at her expense. She ached to have him, even at the expense of her pride. A new year had started at Hogwarts. Christmastime was fast approaching, and she was on a book-signing tour.

Severus' drunken confession hadn't amounted to much, other than Molly's punishment of Percy. The little blighter was lucky that no one had turned him in for ethics violation.

"I just love the book, Miss Granger," a young witch squealed before her. "It was a total surprise. There were no hints, no foreshadowing of Drago's true allegiances. I think I like him better than I like Simon."

Hermione grinned. *That's because Drago was originally intended to be an antagonist.* "I'm so glad you like it." She scribbled her name into the inside front cover and handed the book back to the fan.

The book was a smashing success. During the time that it had taken her to polish it, she had added several scenes between Virginia and James. She had even had a scene in the book with Cassandra and Simon.

She continued, her responses automated and practiced. She had removed the scene between Cassandra and Simon. It wasn't essential to the plot, nor was it conducive to her sanity. She had resigned herself to the fact that Severus was not Simon or any other romantic hero for that matter. Things were obviously not going to work out for them. *He* had made that perfectly clear.

For some odd reason Severus found it acceptable to snog her senseless whenever he saw fit. He was often highhanded and rude about his wants and desires. She was sick and tired of the way he treated her... or more appropriately, how he wasn't treating her. If he walked through the door, she would treat him as a casual acquaintance. She was done pining for a man who said he loved her, yet did nothing about it. That was actually worse than not ever hearing that he did love her. It was as though he didn't want to love her. And that hurt worst of all.

How was she going to write another book? How was she going to write romance when her own romantic love life was beyond repair? Why did she even care? His behavior was contemptuous, and it was beyond reproach. The list of offenses was almost too long to recount. She should never forgive him.

"Good afternoon, Miss Granger. Would you please inscribe the first book to Minerva and the second one to me?"

Hermione looked up, the twinkling eyes of Albus Dumbledore shining down at her. "Professor Dumbledore!" she jumped out of her chair, rounded the table, and hugged him. "It's so good to see you."

The witches and wizards in queue shifted uneasily, reminding Hermione that she had work to do.

"Minerva and I are very excited about your new book," he said. "In fact, we would be delighted if you would come for a visit during the Christmas hols."

Hermione's smile faded. "I don't think that would be such a good idea. Professor Snape..."

"Is in Romania, collecting dragon blood from Charley Weasley," he supplied quickly. "You needn't worry about running into him... until Christmas day," he added under his breath.

--

Waiting for the stairs to meet with the landing she was standing on, Hermione inhaled and closed her eyes. Nothing beat Hogwarts during Christmas time. She had only spent one Christmas at Hogwarts when she was a student. The scent of evergreen trees wafted through the halls and lured her toward the Great Hall.

This is exactly what she had needed. She needed to get away from the monotony of her life. She needed to take a break from the creative processes. They had become too stressful. Virginia and James' book was still on the back burner, and it wasn't going anywhere. It would help if Harry and Ginny worked things out, but it was looking as though they never would. If she read another piece of fan mail that begged and pleaded for a publication date, she was going to scream. She had received a letter from

Draco and Pansy with an updated picture of the twins, who were the spitting image of their father. She had also received several offers of freelance work. Her investigative days might be over, but she could still write feature articles and such. Overall, she would count her blessings and ignore the ever-present ache that had taken up residence in her heart.

Merlin, she was pathetic. Part of her wished that the invitation to Hogwarts was a ruse to throw her into Severus' path, but the Potions master really was in Romania. Though Minerva and Albus occupied her time splendidly, she couldn't help but wonder what she would have done had Severus been in residence. She knew one thing for sure...

If the opportunity had presented itself, she wouldn't put up with his high-handed *manhandling*. Instead, she would be the one in control. Closing her eyes, she envisioned him tied that the large, bed that would be forever ingrained upon her memory. He would be at her mercy... a mercy that was basically laughable due to the fact that she was pretty inexperienced and wouldn't know what to do with him once she had him.

--

Unfolding his napkin, Severus mumbled a salutation to the Charms professor and started to eat his late breakfast. He was a creature of habit. Even though he had samples to collect in Romania, he had made it a point to come back to Hogwarts for Christmas. It wasn't that he was a sentimental lout, but he didn't care for being alone, and Hogwarts was the only family that he had.

"Happy Christmas, Severus," Albus greeted him in his usual jovial manner.

"Headmaster." Severus acknowledged with a tilt of his head. "Happy Christmas."

"Happy Christmas," Minerva said with a relaxed smile, sitting on the other side of Albus.

He mumbled a quick response and started cutting his sausage. He speared a piece and started to lift it to his mouth when he glanced toward the entrance. "What *is* he doing here?" he asked, already knowing the answer to the ridiculous question. He had purposefully arranged to be away from Hogwarts during the holidays. But somehow, he knew Dumbledore would try his hand at matchmaking again. He would have glared at the Headmaster, but he found himself unwilling to look away from Hermione.

"I invited her," Minerva retorted, a small smile gracing her lips. "And if you do anything to hurt her, I will Transfigure you into a cross between a jackass and a toad. I'm tired of seeing you mope about."

Severus would have fallen out of his chair if he weren't firmly entrenched upon it. He could see the determined tilt of her chin as her gaze met his, the challenging glint flashing brightly across the room. He had lost track of the time since he and Hermione had parted ways...five months, two weeks, three days, sixteen hours, and some odd minutes.

He had almost "proven" himself to her not far from Hagrid's hut, in plain view of the castle for anyone to see. Thankfully, he had been able to reel his passionate desires in and escort her back to the Three Broomsticks with some dignity intact. The walk had been fraught with sexual tension. She had been his for the taking, but providence had seen fit to interfere with their intentions. Minerva had pulled him aside and had discouraged his "dishonorable" behavior.

Though he had never allowed anyone to dictate or influence his actions, he had heeded Minerva's warnings and had left Hermione at her bedroom door. Afterwards, he had left for Spinner's End, having convinced himself that she was better off without him and that her feelings for him were merely infatuation.

"Don't look so surprised, Severus," the deputy head mistress purred, humor dancing in her voice. "You may want to close your mouth while you're at it."

Albus snorted in his cup.

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Was Minerva actually sanctioning a union between himself and Hermione? Would he finally realize the dreams that had haunted him for the past five months, two weeks, three days, sixteen hours, and some odd minutes? Had the Fates finally smiled upon him?

"Happy Christmas, Severus," Hermione greeted him as she sat on the other side of Minerva.

*She said my name, not Professor or Professor Snape.* Hope simmered to life within him.

"Happy Christmas, Miss... er... Hermione," he replied, mentally kicking himself for the crack in his voice. What was it about the woman that turned him into a hormonal lunatic? He'd never been any good at interpersonal relationships. Having read her novels, he had gained a perspective that he wasn't sure he wanted. He could never measure up to her expectations.

"I understand you were recently in Romania, collecting dragon's blood. Did you happen to see Charlie Weasley while you were there?" Smalltalk had never been her forte, and she cringed inwardly. Romance novels were easy. Reality was hard. She wanted to smack him, yet she wanted to drape herself over his lap, snog him senseless, and demand that he make love to her. Maybe he had lied. Perhaps he had built up a resistance to Truth Serum. What if he didn't love her? What if it was just another example of his cunning and cruelty?

"Yes," he replied softly, leaning forward to look past Albus and Minerva. "I arrived this morning."

Hermione gave an awkward smile. "I'm flooing to London today to visit my parents. *Would you like to accompany me? We could go up to my room, and I could tie you to my frilly pink duvet and molest you?* Heat bloomed in her neck and cheeks, and she looked away.

"But you'll be back this evening to exchange gifts," Minerva insisted, grasping her hand and tugging on it as if she wouldn't let her go if she refused.

Hermione nodded, wishing the floor would swallow her, for the last thing she wanted to do was come back to Hogwarts. If she didn't know better, she would think that Minerva was trying to play matchmaker. "Perhaps we should exchange gifts now. My parents..."

"Nonsense!" Minerva gasped. "I'll go fetch them myself. They shall be my guests as well."

"But they..."

"I shan't hear another word, Hermione," the older witch chastised. "Your schedule permitted you to remain for another week, and another week you shall." Her voice rose to a pitch that echoed throughout the Great Hall.

--

Severus checked the contents of his valise and snapped it shut. He didn't know what to think of Minerva's matchmaking attempts. They were, quite frankly, frightening. He had a strange vision of the deputy headmistress as a master puppeteer, moving puppets around a large theater. No matter her intentions, he was not about to go along with them. Judging by Hermione's countenance, she had not been pleased with the not-so-subtle maneuverings as well.

The very least he could do was retreat to Spinner's End and let her enjoy Christmas evening in peace.

A soft knock on the door broke his concentration. "Enter!" he barked, wondering which of the meddling fools had dared to enter his domain.

Yielding to his magical command, the door to his quarters opened with a slow creak. Light spilled into his sitting room from the torches that illuminated the hall outside,

lovingly hugging the feminine curves of a witch that was much too young for him.

"Hermione!" His voice cracked as he realized who it was. "What are you doing here?"

Stepping inside, she looked around nervously. What could she possibly say to him? *I was strolling through the dungeons and thought I would stop by.* The truth was even more embarrassing. Should she tell him the truth? *I just spoke to Minerva, who said you were probably packing your bags...*

He nudged a black bag underneath a table with his booted foot. "Hermione?"

Her heart sank. There was no other way to describe. No amount of prose could do the sensation justice. Though she could feel the pounding in her chest, it felt like it was in her stomach. The evidence of his intentions sat beneath the table. He was leaving. He would rather leave than spend time with her.

She'd had enough of his high-handed ways. He thought he knew better. He thought she would be better off without him, according to Minerva. His handling of their "affair" had come to an end. She would take control and...

Hermione took a brash step forward and pushed him backwards toward a fainting couch.

"Hermione?" His obsidian eyes bore into hers. "Are you all right?"

"I've never been better," she replied, standing on her tiptoes and placing a chaste kiss upon his lips. "I want you."

He grabbed her wrists. "Hermione, I don't think..."

"Don't... think." His Adam's apple bobbed. She could feel his resistance but wasn't deterred. She would have this much. She deserved this much. Yes, sex didn't equal love, but she would take what she could get. She would live what she wrote, or more appropriately what Molly wrote.

Running her tongue along the seam of his lips, she continued pushing him toward the fainting couch. She had always enjoyed the scenes where the hero and heroine never made it to the bed, but she had always viewed them with a skeptical eye and couldn't help but wonder how uncomfortable having sex on the floor really was. She hadn't really thought the seduction through and was improvising. The couch would have to do. His grip on her wrists loosed and he growled. Or was that a whimper?

*She* controlled the kiss, swiping her tongue past his lips invitingly. *She* was the one with the power. She kept moving him toward the couch, brushing against him and breathing against his lips. Black fire danced in his gaze, and it gave her hope. Her body ached. Her nipples hardened, and her gut and nether-regions throbbed.

Removing her wrists from his softened grasp, she pulled her jumper over her head and was rewarded by a strangled gasp.

His cock strained against his trousers. He watched as she bared herself to him, the dark rose of her nipples straining against the lace constraints of her bra. He could come now and be replete. The blush that covered her chest, neck, and cheeks heightened his arousal. Uncertainty flickered in her chocolate gaze, and he covered her hands with his.

"May I?" He brushed her hands out of the way, barely recognizing his own voice. Cupping the weight of her lace-covered breasts in his palms, he closed his eyes. "I don't..." His protestations were smothered by an aggressive, almost desperate kiss. He tasted her determination and inhaled her feminine musk.

Honorable intentions melted. He plucked her nipples through the lace, dragging her backwards toward the nearest piece of furniture. He would be damned if their first time was going to be on the cold stone floor. And their first time was definitely at hand. It was happening now. He didn't care if Minerva jumped through the Floo and started beating him over the head with a broom.

He fingered the clasp between her ample breasts and made quick work of it, peeling the lace away slowly. No matter how much he wanted to drape her over the chaise lounge and fuck her until she screamed his name, he wouldn't. Unable to resist temptation, he scooped down and took one of her nipples between greedy lips. He flicked the tip with her tongue and felt her shudder. She was as lost as he was, awash in the sensual flood. She threaded her fingers into his hair and held his head. He drew sharply, earning a startled gasp.

Little spikes of desire spread through her, shooting between her legs as her body recognized the inevitable. She felt herself spiraling out of control. Severus moved his hands beneath her skirt and cupped her arse as he continued lavishing her aching nipples with attentive swipes. Her world tilted, and she felt the velvet material of the couch on her bare back.

It was just like it was in her books... point A to point B in one fell swoop. Thankfully, he had taken over because she was over thinking the logistics of getting him to the couch.

Severus made quick work of her skirt, Vanishing it with a flick of his wand.

She looked utterly ruined. Decadence incarnate. The embodiment of lust. Severus shook his head and licked his lips. He stepped back and disrobed, never taking his eyes off hers. The delicate fragrance of her feminine musk hardened his cock painfully. He removed his shirt, and her hungry gaze swept over his chest in appreciation. He undid his trousers and stepped out of them, the look in her eyes burning his soul.

He covered her body with his, the temptation to drive in to her almost overwhelming him. She reached for him, opening her thighs to receive him.

"Please," she implored.

Severus kissed her, his hands roaming her body, one of them sliding between her legs and testing her readiness. Her satin core squeezed his lone finger, and she squirmed beneath him, taking him deeper. He added another finger and circled his thumb around her clitoris. She arched again, pulling him deeper, and he touched the proof of her innocence.

He left her lips, licking a path along her jaw, neck, and breasts. She shifted beneath him, and he scissored his fingers in an effort to ease his passage. He laved her stomach with heated swirls of his tongue, moving lower to feast on the creamy musk that he knew awaited him. He bowed his head and rubbed his chin along the tight, guarding curls. Her legs trembled around him.

Intoxicated with her scent, Severus spread her lips and licked the dewy bud that quivered between the folds. This woman... *His woman* would know pleasure.

She had come undone. In control one moment, blissfully relinquishing herself into his keep the next. He devoured her, thrusting his wicked fingers in tandem to his tongue. Desire spread through her, curling in her crotch and into her gut. She clenched around his fingers, the spiral winding tighter. His possessive growl pushed her over the edge, and the spiral snapped.

The grip of her core around his fingers decimated the remnants of his control, and he rose above her. Gripping her hips with one hand, he grasped his cock with the other and positioned himself. He breached her innocence quickly and stilled within her.

The flash of pain encroached upon the pleasure, and he kissed her tears away. "Am I destined to always hurt you?" he rasped, holding himself above her.

Sighing, Hermione shifted beneath him and cupped his cheek, recalling a conversation that she'd had with Minerva when she had arrived.

*"Severus feels that you're better off without him," Minerva said, slightly breathless as they climbed the stairs.*

"Did he say that?" Hermione asked.

The older witch paused on the landing. "Not in so many words."

The pulse of aftershocks nearly undid him. He had tasted her tears, and started to withdraw, but she locked her ankles behind his arse. She moved beneath him, pulling him deeper, a smile spreading across her face.

"So much better than books," she purred breathlessly, easing his guilty conscience.

Capturing her lips, he began to move within her. The silken clasp of her sheath was a fiery haven. His cock swelled, and he ground his pelvis against her clitoris. She groaned her approval, her tight grip shuddering blissfully around him. He didn't know which was more erotic, watching her orgasm or feeling it around his cock.

Clasping her hips tightly, Severus pounded into her and emptied himself within the confines of her welcoming heat.

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TBC

Author's Notes No, I'm not ending the story there. They still have issues they must work through. I hope that I am forgiven for the cliffhangers after this chapter. If there are any mistakes, please feel free to point them out. Anyway, the next chapter should be the last.

## Chapter Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 16

Time marches on...

Chapter Thirteen

Staring at the majesty of the mountains surrounding her, Hermione sipped her tea and leaned back in the rocking chair. She studied the peaks and valleys of the Blue Ridge Mountains, trying to draw inspiration from her surroundings. Not that the mountains surrounding Hogwarts weren't grand, but she didn't want to chance running into Severus... for as long as she lived.

She inhaled, trying to take in as much fresh air as possible before her lungs burst. A mountain setting was just what the doctor had ordered, figuratively speaking of course. She wasn't ill. She was quite well. A successful author. Her feature articles for *The Quibbler* had boosted sales by over one hundred and fifty percent and had made the *Daily Prophet* look like last week's fish and chips wrapping. She did miss investigative work though. But, she was content.

She had her career and... *no love life to speak of* a tiny, internal voice mumbled miserably.

"Hush!" seethed Hermione. "I shan't think about *him*." She shuddered as she continued lying to herself. It was six months today that she had walked out of Severus' life. What would have happened if she had stayed?

That was a question best left unanswered, for she knew exactly what would have happened. She would have forsaken her dignity for meaningless sex. She had done the right thing. She had left Severus Snape's bed before the sun had risen. Though painful, it had been the right thing to do. It didn't matter that he had loved her. What mattered was that he hadn't *wanted* to love her.

She had left him, leaving behind the illusion that making love to him had meant little more to her than a one-night stand. When she had woken, embarrassment swamped her, causing her to panic and run. It wasn't a very Gryffindor thing to do, but what's done is done.

In the end, the truth had slapped her upside the head. As each day passed, turning into weeks and the weeks into months, she was reminded that Severus didn't want to love her. She had hoped that making love to him would make him want to love her, but that was like tossing a Knut in a wishing well. There was no tidy, happily-ever-after ending for them. This wasn't one of her romance novels. Too much had transpired between them to be neatly wrapped up in four hundred pages or less.

"I *am* content."

Hermione frowned, no longer able to believe the words. "Devastated and hurt, the hero comes crawling back to the heroine on bended knee, begging for forgiveness and sweeping the heroine away. Yeah," she scoffed mockingly, "right."

An owl screeched in the distance, rescuing her from her melancholy thoughts. "You really need to stop living in a fantasy realm, Hermione. Relationships or lack thereof do not follow a set pattern of nonsensical notions.

"Romance is dead. It isn't like Severus will Apparate into your bedroom and witch-nap you."

The owl landed on the railing and dropped its overly large package, hopping excitedly as it waited for its treat.

This one owl, with markings similar to Hedwig's, was a veritable mystery in her life. Most owls were redirected to Molly and Ginny. They handled all the fan mail, but this owl could not be redirected. *And* it was untraceable so she couldn't even respond to the author of the letters to let her/him know that she could not possibly use any of her/his material.

Dicta-quill-written chapters had kept arriving once a month for the past six months. The plot was non-existent. The hero was a nasty troll, and the heroine was stubbornly flawless. She honestly didn't know if it was supposed to be a romance novel or a comedy. To be honest, the plot did not appeal to her, though it did have some humorous parts.

"This should be chapter six." She handed the owl a treat, and it hooted softly in agreement. Untying the string that bound the brown wrapper around it, she sighed. "What the hell! I might as well read it. It will be good for a laugh."

The package seemed larger than usual, and as she tore the wrapper away, Hermione could see why. Instead of the pages of a manuscript, there was a red notebook and

a note. She opened the note with shaky hands.

*Dearest Hermione,*

*I hardly know where to begin. I hope this letter finds you in good health. I have enclosed your notebook that I absconded with so long ago. It is unlikely that I shall ever be able to offer you enough recompense for my behavior toward you. I had hoped that you would be able to forgive me with the passage of time, but I see now that is not to be. I wish you the best in all your future endeavors.*

*Yours,*

*Severus*

She flipped the letter over, expecting there to be more... hoping for there to be more. Nothing. She picked up her old notebook and thumbed through it, noticing that the pages were crisp, yet slightly worn. She came to the last entry, a scene between Cassandra and Simon...a scene that she had wanted desperately to realize.

She was such a "cowardly lion." Simon was Severus, but Cassandra was somebody else. If she were truly Cassandra, she would have tied Severus to the nearest bed and made him love her. Cassandra would not have given up so easily. She wouldn't have been satisfied until Simon wrote love sonnets for her.

*But Simon wanted to love Cassandra,* a reasonable voice reminded her.

"You can't make someone love you," agreed Hermione.

*Actually, you can,* the voice encouraged. *Love potions are illegal for a reason.*

"Are you suggesting that I spike his pumpkin juice with a Love Potion?" she mumbled the question softly.

Thankfully, her conscience didn't reply. She flipped to a blank page and jotted the question down, turning her frustration and pity-party into a creative exercise.

*Requited Love*

*by*

*Hermione J. Granger*

*The young witch splintered into two.*

*Would she ever be whole again? Most likely not...*

*Even as she rested on top of her lover, still intimately connected with him, she felt that pain of truth keenly.*

*"I love you," he had blurted, though the look in his eyes had told a different story. It was as though she could read his mind. He would sell his soul to not love her. Love was a burden. It was a curse.*

The notebook lurched in her lap as if a pair of ghostly hands had taken hold of it. She held onto it and watched in fascinated horror when bright red script started overwriting the beginning of her scene.

The title and first three paragraphs were left alone, but the third paragraph looked like it was bleeding. The red lettering appeared with broad, assured strokes. *"I love you!" he declared, the look in his eyes shuttered and unsure. If she could read his mind, she would find fear...a mindless, paralyzing fear. His love for her was no burden. Nor was it a curse.*

Hermione stared at the edits in shock, suddenly remembering the blue notebook and the enchantment. Staring at the page, shock turned to fascinated hope. Seconds turned into minutes, the rustle of the wind through the trees her only companion.

She must have fallen asleep. This must be a dream.

The other author added more. *His love for her terrified him. He had never imagined that love was so potent.* The last sentence was written slowly, each letter methodically written, forming the words that Hermione had difficulty understanding.

The other author continued. *He had lost her once. Could he gather the courage and convince her of his sincerity? Could he ever earn her forgiveness?*

Hermione read the last two paragraphs again and again, twisting the words around in her head and looking for hidden meanings. Then she looked up, searching for practical jokes or hidden cameras, the dream-like quality melting as she realized that she was indeed awake and alone. More words appeared.

*He knew he didn't deserve her, but his parsimonious nature overruled his good intentions.*

"Parsimonious?" Hermione sniggered. She struck the word with a bold flourish and a note. "Selfish is more like it," she murmured shakily.

--

Hope flourished in his decrepit heart when he saw her response. It wasn't exactly "I love you and forgive you," but he would take what he would get. She had responded. He circled her suggestion and added one of his own. *Agreed... I am a selfish bastard.*

Time seemed to slow to a crawl as he waited for a response, but there was none. The least she could do is agree with him. Months... He had wasted months without her, taking Minerva and Albus' advice and giving her time and space.

The ache in his chest still had yet to abate. When he had woken alone, he had stared at the indentation in her pillow.

He should have known. Even buried within her, there had been something in her eyes... something within her that she had held back. Distrust. He had convinced himself that she had loved him enough to forgive him. He had convinced himself that they would overcome his original cruelty, and he had been willing to exploit her feelings to appease his own.

But it hadn't worked. He had woken up alone.

It was a bitter potion to swallow. She may have loved him, but she certainly hadn't trusted him. It was unlikely that she ever would. After all, he had plotted to discredit her... to destroy her infatuation with him.

Had he succeeded?

Resentful rage had flared to life within him. He had set out to find Hermione, but had run into Minerva and Albus instead. They had convinced him to give her time, but he

hadn't really listened to them. Instead, he had picked up his quill and started writing.

At first, he had written for therapeutic purposes. Once he had written the first chapter of *their* story, he'd sent it to her. It wasn't as though he had chronicled their relationship. He had buried their true identities beneath layers of purple prose that even he had difficulty discerning between fiction and reality.

He had lost count of how many times he'd entertained the idea of witch-napping her, but if he'd learned anything about Hermione Granger, he'd learned that she didn't respond well to being bullied.

Another school year had passed, another group of blithering idiots fostered. Throughout the months, he had plotted and schemed ways to win her, none of which would have worked, for they were convoluted and manipulative. He had resigned himself to the inevitable.

He still owed her an apology, one that wasn't influenced by Truth Serum or Firewhisky, but one that...

*Severus?* Her elegant handwriting was a sight for his sore eyes.

Seagulls and crashing waves sounded in the distance. He had returned to the scene of the crime. Dipping the tip of his quill into the ink well, he responded *Yes*.

--

Deep down, she'd known who had been sending the speckled owl with the horrendous chapters, but she had ignored it and had buried it. *Severus...* The confirmation shattered her serenity. She didn't know what she was angrier about...the fact that *Severus* was a world-class arse, or the fact that it had taken him so long to contact her. Part of her wanted to slam the notebook down and cast it into the lush bushes that surrounded the property. The other part, the one that had pined for the dark-haired wizard for the last several months, kept staring at the page.

Then there was a part of her that wanted to slam the notebook shut, find *Severus*, and smack him upside the head with it.

"That's just great!" she exclaimed, her writing instrument poised over the paper. "I'm going crazy. I have three voices in my head arguing over what to do!"

--

What could he say? He'd lost count of the times he'd lain in bed devising elaborate plans to get her back. Most of the plans revolved around using the Obliviate Charm on her and starting from scratch. *That*, of course, was totally unacceptable... convenient, but unacceptable.

Several minutes had passed since his last entry. Certain that Hermione had recognized the red notebook on sight, he grew nervous. (She was an over-intelligent witch and had undoubtedly figured out what he was up to by now.) Closing his eyes, he sought his *spy*, Silvan, his white-speckled owl. Hopefully, the bird was still with Hermione.

He centered himself, struggling to push aside his anxiety. It was now or never. He had to make his move. He had to make his motives known. He felt like the Grand Wizard Tulane at the Battle of Stonehenge. If he failed to win Hermione now, all was lost to him.

Chanting, *Severus* connected with his owl and saw what Silvan saw. Owl-vision was quite disconcerting, seeing as they saw things in such a different manner. Silvan was a hyper owl and, as usual, was hopping up and down and hooting for treats. He could only see through Silvan, not listen. He willed the animal to turn its head, for all he saw was the wall of the log cabin Hermione currently called home.

As if Silvan had read his thoughts, the owl turned. The vision that greeted him stole his breath away. He was no angel. He'd been spying on Hermione through Silvan ever since he'd sent the owl with the first few chapters. It was his insurance policy. He couldn't very well stand aside and let some other wizard woo her.

Woo her?

What had ever happened to that plan?

*It was a victim of cowardice*, a caustic voice reminded him none-so-gently.

*Severus* winced. The witch that he spied upon deserved so much more than what he had to offer. The irony of his situation twisted in his gut like a rusted knife. He had read all of her books, which made romance seem... well, romantic. Ha! It was anything but! Romance was nothing more than a bloody battle.

She sat there, talking animatedly at the notebook.

--

"Yes?" Hermione hissed, somehow resisting the urge to rip the page out of the book. "Is that all you have to say?" She felt cheated. "This isn't the way it's supposed to happen. You were supposed to show up, toss me over your shoulder, take me somewhere... *anywhere*... and make passionate love to me! You were supposed to become an Alpha male and make demands of me that, although I didn't like them, agreed to reluctantly. That's the way it works in romance books!"

"Are you here to ruin yet another vacation? Where have you been? What do you want?" she asked, running her hand along the page and tracing the one-word response as if she were touching him. Realizing she was lovingly stroking the page, she shook her hand and smacked the armrest of the chair she was sitting in.

*Be careful*, red ink scrawled beneath his earlier response. *You wouldn't want to hurt the chair*.

--

*Severus* grinned, wondering how long it would take her to realize he was spying on her. Fortunately for him, Silvan was standing still and staring at her with his unblinking gaze. He watched as she leaned forward and scribbled hastily in the notebook.

*Where are you? What do you want?* Her letters displayed her frustration. There were brood loops in her handwriting.

*I am far away*, he replied quickly, knowingly goading her. He couldn't resist. An ocean did not separate them, but distance did. Instead of brewing for the summer, he had taken time away from his duties and had set out to apologize and hopefully ensnare his lover. Somehow, he reasoned, it was imperative they come full circle. So, he had chosen to return to the vacation villa that she had visited last summer.

*I see*. He could feel her anger radiate off the page. *What do you want?* she repeated the question.

"You," he replied softly. *I must speak with you. I hope that you will grant me the courtesy of an audience. The last page in your notebook is a Portkey. It is set to depart in one hour.*

--

Hermione slammed the notebook shut. "Of all the nerve!" Suddenly, poisoning *Severus* and Love Potion and smacking him upside the head with the notebook didn't seem like such a bad idea after all.

TBC

Author's Notes So, I lied. This isn't the last chapter. Please except my apologies for the lack of update, but real life issues have seriously cut into my writing time. I cannot thank Jen enough for helping me through this story. Please, please, please! I am begging everyone who reviews this chapter to make sure the reviews are spoiler-free. I am halfway through Deathly Hallows. I do know how it ends because I cheated and read the epilogue. Unlike my sister, I cannot read a seven hundred fifty-nine-page book in three hours. Sniff! Anyway, I know who lives and who dies. As for any characters that you see living in this story, I am well aware that it is AU and non-canon. I consider fanfiction, by its very nature, to be an alternative universe to canon. It's fun to take characters out of their element and play with them. Any hoo! The next chapter is really the last. Thank you so much for reading. God bless!

## Chapter Fourteen

Chapter 14 of 16

Time goes on as Hermione tries to write her next novel. Severus spoils another vacation.

### Chapter Fourteen

She didn't know what to expect upon her arrival, but another letter wasn't it. Not only was she disappointed over the letter, she had arrived in a very familiar place: her vacation villa from last summer. Mentally, she started calculating the distance between the villa and the cabin in the mountains and winced as she realized that she would not be able to safely Apparate should the need arise. Her excitement over seeing him did little to dull her anger. It galled her that she was actually excited about seeing him. As long as she kept reminding herself that this was not some sappy scene from one of her silly books, she would be okay.

"Remember," she chided herself, "you're here to hear what he has to say, then leave. Just remember what he has done to your creative processes. Draco and Pansy's book was a fluke...a shiny crown on a stalled career." Ever since Romance Rabble had published Drago's story, the pressure to write the next story had mounted.

She didn't know what it was, but she just couldn't do it. She'd spent the last week staring at a blank page. She couldn't write anymore. No matter how hard she tried to write Harry and Ginny's book she just hadn't been able to muster the words. She was dead in the water, unable to string together two paragraphs that made any sense. She spent most of her time hoping and praying for inspiration to strike. It was as elusive as the Crumple-Horned Snorkack. The clamor to write her next book had torn her into knots.

Perhaps it was her own bitter disappointments of romance that were clogging her pipes. If that was the case, then the arrival of Severus Snape signaled the nails being driven into the coffin of her writing career.

Hermione opened the letter, telling herself that she would scan the contents and feed it to her enchanted shredder later. She didn't want to give him the satisfaction of reading such baited tripe, but she couldn't resist. After all, curiosity killed the cat.

*Dear Hermione,*

*I'm outside.*

*Yours,*

*Severus*

She didn't flip the letter over to look for more. If she had figured anything out by now, it was that Severus was a man of few words. "Just remember," she murmured softly, "this isn't some fluff-filled reunion scene. You've come to listen to what he has to say and that's that. You shall return to the cabin and write like mad. Now that you have your notebook back, writing Harry and Ginny's story should be a snap." She snapped her fingers for emphasis, but the dread was already spreading.

The irony of her current situation did not escape her. She had been working on Harry and Ginny's book last year when Severus had arrived, insisting that the Wizengamot had frozen all of her assets due to the lawsuit he had filed against her.

She should have known better. She should have realized that he hadn't had a legal leg to stand on, but he had gotten the upper hand, and she hadn't been able to do much other than break his nose.

Hermione smirked as she remembered the shocked expression on his face. He'd probably never been sucker-punched before. She clutched her wand in her fist, determined not to lose it this time. *Really, Hermione. Stop being so paranoid. You only wish Severus would disarm you and have his wicked way with you. He obviously isn't interested in a long-term, intimate relationship. Don't you think he would have tracked you down sooner rather than later?*

Shaking that annoying inner voice out of her head, she made her way outside. The sun was dipping low in the horizon, the author in her inwardly chuckling at the apropos setting. Sunset signaled the end of the day, why not the end of a relationship as well? *It isn't like you ever had a relationship with Severus. You shagged him. He shagged you. It was a one-night stand and a learning experience. Nothing more. Nothing less.*

She walked past the pool and down the trail toward the beach, her annoyance over the whole "cat-and mouse" game growing stronger with each step. She was winded by the time she made her way over the dune and stopped dead in her tracks.

The view was breathtaking. Soft waves caressed the shore as if commanded to do so in a rhythm that soothed the scene. Fairies flitted along the walkway, chattering excitedly. Beneath a gazebo, a small banquet. The lighting was exquisite, illuminating the intent with shattering clarity. Next to the banquet were two emerald green chaise lounges. Beyond the sofas stood Severus, his back ramrod straight, as though he were facing a firing squad.

Hermione didn't know whether to be insulted or flattered. He'd obviously gone through a lot of trouble to plan this seduction, even going so far as to import the fairies from Europe.

For the sake of her sanity, she would go with insulted.

"You have some nerve!" she hissed, stomping up the steps of the gazebo. "Do you take some kind of perverse pleasure in ruining my vacations? Have you no other

hobbies? Do I need to take out a restraining order?"

He turned around at the sound of her voice. He was dressed differently and looked uncomfortable. Instead of wizarding robes, he wore gray trousers and a black, button-down shirt. His ebony hair was pulled back, held at his nape with a scrap of black material that blended with the color of his hair. His feet were bare and covered with sand...almost as if she had interrupted his enjoyment of walking barefoot in the sand.

There was something there. Something shocking about his feet. She couldn't take her eyes off of them. They were pale, paler than the rest of him. It was almost as if this was the first time he'd dare to run around barefoot. He curled his toes, and she looked up. He was looking down at his feet too, seemingly disappointed that he'd allowed her to catch him during such an unguarded moment.

"My apologies, Hermione," he stated, magically summoning his shoes and sitting to put them on. "It would seem that I lost track of the time. I am glad that you came."

She assumed a defensive posture, her arms crossed over her chest. "Of course, I came. I came to hear what you had to say. Then I shall be leaving."

Seemingly unperturbed by her tenacious behavior, he finished his task and took a step toward her only to be stopped when she raised her wand. "What do you want?" she asked quickly, the soft quality of her voice betraying her emotional state.

There was no answer, and a grin spread across his lips. "Isn't it obvious?" he answered her question with a question, which further proved that the man was out to drive her insane. Standing, he brushed past her and attended the banquet like a valiant host, lifting serving lids and stirring contents. Once finished, he set the lids to the side and, gazing at her as though she were on the menu, pulled a chair out for her. "Please... sit."

*Insulted, Hermione! Stay insulted,* her internal voice commanded. "Could you not find a suitable whore in Knockturn Alley to attend to your needs, Severus?" She cringed as soon as the words left her mouth. They were harsh and bitter. *But justified! After all, he is trying to seduce you.*

Severus held onto the back of her chair, her words hitting their intended target. "I have no need of pale imitations," he retorted, his voice like velvet. He really couldn't blame her for her reaction. He had, after all, planned a seduction, but it wasn't a seduction of carnal design. It was one that was intended to last.

"Smooth answer," replied the young, distrusting witch, "but I shan't demean myself for food and spirits. I made lo...h-had sex with you once. It was enough."

Ignoring the slip of her tongue, Severus abandoned his effort of gentlemanly manners. He released the back of her chair and busied himself with pouring the wine. He'd squelched the Slytherin voice within his head that had encouraged him to spike the wine with a Love Potion.

The disdain in her gaze would have frozen a lesser man in his tracks. "If you think I'm going to eat or drink any of this, you are sadly mistaken." She waved her wand over the scrumptious banquet for emphasis. "There's no telling what kind of potions you have spiked them with."

Severus smirked, amused that she could tap into his inherent personality so well. "The though had crossed my mind, but I thought it best to win your affections the... natural way," he replied casually, sitting down, carving the roasted pork, and placing a serving on her plate and his.

"Win my affections?" she asked, striving to maintain some semblance of conviction in her tone. *Stay on task, Hermione. This is not a cheesy reunion scene. Don't let him close again. It will only hurt when he gets a bur up his arse and decides that he doesn't want you again.*

"The *natural* way?" Her stomach growled in protest. She'd been in the mountains for a week, and her diet had consisted of cookies, ice cream, and potato chips, washed down with unhealthy doses of soda.

Writer's block sucked! Not only was her diet exceedingly unhealthy, but she felt like a raving lunatic.

Unfolding his napkin and setting it in his lap, Severus gathered his utensils and started cutting his food. Hermione threw her hands into the air. "You're barmy!" she announced, her voice echoing against the ceiling.

Her resolve wavered as wicked visions of her sex-deprived imagination danced before her eyes. She watched in fascinated horror as he lifted a piece of pork to his lips and smiled. If she didn't know better she would have sworn that he kissed it prior to placing it in his mouth and chewing the tender morsel. He swallowed, her gaze riveted to the bob of his Adam's apple. Then he licked his lips.

She swayed on her feet and took a step back. She was on fire. All she knew was the torturous desire to have him. "This is ridiculous," she whispered, her inflection betraying her wavering conviction. "I'm leaving." Hermione turned on her heel and stomped toward the stairs only to be stopped by an invisible barrier. Her determination was such that the momentum she had gathered caused her to ricochet off the magical boundary and land on her bum.

"Are you all right?" Severus asked, grasping her elbow and helping her to her feet.

Hermione wrenched her elbow from his hand as soon as she was steady. "You are un-bloody believable!"

"I am guiltless, I assure you," he replied. "It would seem that the fairies have misunderstood my instructions."

Brushing her bottom off, Hermione walked toward the stairs again, this time cautiously. "And just what were your instructions, Severus? 'Help me witch-nap Hermione Granger, and I shall reward you handsomely?'" She bit her lip as soon as the words left her mouth. Isn't that what she had just been hoping for earlier?

Crossing his arms over his chest, Severus shrugged. "I instructed them not to let anyone except you into the gazebo until the matter was resolved."

Hermione poked the barrier and received another shock. She shook her finger. "You blithering idiot! Firstly, I have a difficult time believing that you ever wanted to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts. Even a first-year knows not to interact with fairies, much less make deals with them. Please tell me you didn't do anything foolish like promise them the soul of my... er... *your* first born child."

Severus cleared his throat to keep from laughing. He would never admit that he wasn't *totally* blameless for her current confinement. He had worded his instructions to the fairy queen as such to gain these exact results. He had anticipated Hermione's stubbornness and reluctance. He had always viewed the descriptions of Hogwarts' houses as biased and had lobbied to have "stubborn" added to the House of Gryffindor. He had not, however, anticipated her venomous sarcasm or prickly countenance. But he would not let either dissuade him. He had come too far to turn back now.

"Secondly," she continued, her voice dripping with outrage, "fairies are literal creatures. Did you happen to specify which 'matter' needed to be resolved?"

Severus didn't reply. She needn't know that the "matter" was as simple as a kiss and that one kiss would release them both. Nor did Hermione need to know that the fairy queen was fulfilling her end of a bargain that he'd struck with her long ago. They were quite safe from the soul-snatching creatures. Yes, his plan was deceitful and manipulative, but he knew of no other way of procuring what he desired most.

He'd spent the last few hours grasping for a hold on hope, doubts over his current plan nipping at his conscience. There were so many reasons why he should leave this woman alone, but he couldn't think of any right now.

He had missed her. Dare he hope that she had missed him? How could he ever earn her forgiveness, much less her trust? He clung to the hope that he could. Her most recent entry in her notebook gave him hope. The few paragraphs that she had written certainly did explain why she'd left his bed Christmas night, but he needed to be sure.

"Well?" With her arms crossed over her chest and her toe tapping, she looked like an ill-tempered nymph.



"No, I did not," he replied sharply. "I didn't feel as though the fairy queen needed to know the nature of our business. You know what horrible gossips fairies can be. They are worse than the castle portraits."

Hermione rolled her eyes, stormed to the table, and sat down. Grabbing her napkin, she snapped it into her lap, picked her utensils up, and glared at him. "I assume we are to dine. Are you just going to stand there and watch me eat?"

Ah, yes. One of his lover's most endearing qualities...her candor. In true fashion, Hermione was trying to resolve the problem at hand as quickly and as painlessly as possible. "But what about the potions I may have poisoned your food and wine with?" asked Severus, finding it difficult to keep the amusement out of his voice.

Glaring at him, she switched the plates and goblets. "Somehow I doubt you would poison yourself."

Doing his best to school his bemused features, he sat across from her and picked the glass of wine up. "You are, of course, assuming that the 'matter' is that we dine together."

She took a sip of wine, relishing the giddy warmth that spread through her. She had resigned herself to total lunacy the moment she held onto the Portkey that brought her here. "If the 'matter' is sexual intercourse, it would appear that we shall be trapped here for all eternity."

Humor danced in the ebony light of his eyes, which served to infuriate her further. *Yes, Hermione. Infuriated is good. Stay with infuriated.*

*But I want him*, her libido whined.

*You can't have him*, logic affirmed.

"Eternity is an interesting concept," murmured Severus, taking a sip of his wine and setting the glass down. She could tell that he was trying to bait her, for what purpose other than meaningless sex, she didn't know. She stabbed a piece of meat and popped it into her mouth. The delicate blend of spices and wine enticed her taste buds, and she closed her eyes and enjoyed the flavors.

While she had her eyes closed, Severus Summoned her notebook from across the room. It was time to face the truth. He flipped to the last entry, turned it around, and slid it across the table.

He took a deep breath and read the lines he had memorized. *"Even as she rested on top of her lover, still intimately connected with him, she felt that pain of truth keenly.*

*'I love you,' he had blurted, though the look in his eyes had told a different story. It was as though she could read his mind. He would sell his soul not to love her. Love was a burden. It was a curse."*

Her eyes flew open.

"Is that why you left?" he asked. There was no accusation in his tone, only hopeful curiosity. He gave her no time to respond and continued with his theory. "Do you think you would sell my soul not to love *you*?"

"Stop," she whispered her response, unable to believe what he was saying. His words chipped away at her fixed intentions. She didn't think she could survive another round of disappointment. Disappointment led to bitterness.

"I would sell my soul for your forgiveness," he said, grasping one of her hands and brushing a gentle kiss against her knuckles. "I would sell my soul for an eternity in your arms."

Yanking her hand out of his, she jumped out of her chair and backed away. She had to get away from him. This wasn't right. She wrote romance novels. She didn't live them.

Severus followed her, spinning her around before she reached the enchanted barrier that held both of them captive. Tears swam in her eyes. Touching his forehead to hers, he sighed. "I wish you could forgive me," he whispered against her lips, releasing the fairies from their obligation and freeing her.

There was something in his voice, a catch that was unmistakable. The melting sensation Molly always talks about whenever she's around Arthur consumed her. "Why are you doing this to me?" Her voice sounded like a whimper.

"Loving you?" he questioned, rubbing his hands up and down her arms and causing her to shiver. He pressed his lips to hers again, this time with firm intent. The kiss was quick and undemanding.

Hermione shuddered, unable to stop from leaning into his embrace. "This isn't a scene from a romance book, Severus. This doesn't change the fact that you don't want to love me," she said softly.

"Look at this." She motioned toward the setting. "Listen to yourself," she instructed, needing him to bring her back to reality before she did something silly again. "This isn't you. You abhor nonsensical romanticism. You don't even like what I write. Face reality. A relationship between us would never work."

His fingers flexed on her shoulders, and a spark of anger flashed in his eyes. "I never would have thought you a coward, Hermione."

She tried to pull away, but he held onto her, determined to make her see him for what he was. Cupping her chin in his palm, he forced her to look into his eyes. "You write of love, yet you know nothing about it..."

"There's more to relationships than love and sex," she countered. "Communication, compromise, trust..."

"And that is the crux of the matter," Severus acknowledged as his frustration grew. He pulled her against him, aligning her body with his. "You cannot forgive me; therefore, you cannot trust me."

Hermione shook her head. His words intoxicated her, chipping away at her determination to resist him. Her hands settled on his chest, and to her horror, started unbuttoning his shirt. His breath tickled her ear as his tongue lavished her earlobe with erotic attention. "Of... c-course I can forgive you," she stammered.

Another button came undone, and she felt her blouse loosening as he worked the material from her body. "I don't see why we can't be friends," she announced, barely able to catch her breath as he nibbled a path along the column of her throat.

"And what if I want more than friendship?" he asked, maneuvering his thigh between her legs and rubbing her readied sex through the layers of fabric. He captured her lips and swallowed her reply. Pushing his tongue past her lips, he tormented her with passion.

*Sex isn't love*, her voice of logic shouted over the rush of blood that tried to consume her. Hermione tore her lips away from his and groaned as he nipped the flesh of her jaw and neck. "Stop," she panted. "Please don't."

The hand that cupped her arse moved to the small of her back. His thigh fell away from the apex of her thighs. His breathing was ragged, and he trembled.

"Sex isn't love," she stated, repeating the mantra to herself in an effort to regain control.

He bowed his head, his frustration etched in the lines of his face. When he looked up, she could see the determined look in his gaze. "Some define it as a physical manifestation of love, but others confuse it with lust. I can assure you that I am not confused. I am a patient man and will wait as long as it takes for you to accept the inevitable."

Making certain she was steady of her feet, Severus backed away. Releasing her hand, he turned and walked away.

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TBC

Author's Note...The good news is that the next chapter is almost done. The bad news is that *this* isn't the last chapter. Special thanks goes to Jen for proofreading this silly story and riding me to finish it.

## Chapter Fifteen

*Chapter 15 of 16*

The dance continues...

Chapter Fifteen...

Hermione stared at the clean sheet of paper and resisted the urge to just doodle on the page. What was the use? She'd been staring at it for half an hour, hoping for inspiration to strike. She felt her deadline approaching. Ginny and Molly would understand, but Fred and George would nag her incessantly, and she doubted that Molly would take too kindly to her killing the twins.

Her stomach growled, a victim of neglect. She still had yet to do any substantial grocery shopping, and the bite of roasted pork she'd had last night had done little to tide her over.

The telltale popping sound of Apparition destroyed what little concentration she had, and she pitied whichever Weasley had dared to interrupt her creative solitude. Hopefully, it was one of the twins. That way she'd be rid of one of them by the time her deadline rolled around.

She closed the notebook, disgusted with herself. Even after reviewing the notes for Harry and Ginny, she was still having a difficult time getting a grasp on it. She'd changed the outline so many times she didn't even recognize the characters.

A soft knock on the door ended her pity-party, and she stood to answer it. She'd been expecting a Weasley, not a single-red-rose-toting ex-Professor. "Oh... hello." He swooped down, and she stepped aside to allow him admittance. She really had little choice. It was either stand still and let him kiss her or let him in.

"Are you all right?" he asked, stepping into the spacious living area and twirling the red rose between his fingers. "You opened your notebook half an hour ago, and you haven't written a thing."

"Are you spying on me?" She placed a hand on her hip in typical Molly-is-annoyed fashion.

Severus shoved the rose at her as if it would protect him. The fragrance of the bloom tickled her senses. "What do you think?" he returned, moving away and observing her new surroundings.

Of course he was. Spying is what he did best. It was in his nature. She should be angry with him, but she wasn't. After all, she didn't punish Crookshanks when he left the fruits of his hunt on her front step. It was his nature to hunt. She couldn't reprimand Severus for spying on her.

"Perhaps a restraining order isn't such a bad idea after all," she murmured defiantly.

Ignoring her comment, Severus moved about the room, fingering the dormant fireplace mantle as if checking for dust. Her traitorous libido couldn't help but notice how handsome he looked in the trousers and shirt he wore.

"Shush," she whispered softly.

"I didn't say anything," he replied, his opaque gaze capturing her cinnamon one.

"Never mind." She cleared her throat and moved toward her worktable. Actually it wasn't her worktable. It was more along the lines of a torture device. She'd lost count of how many times she'd banged her head on the blasted thing.

"You never answered my question. Are you all right?" Severus rested his arm on the mantle and waited for her answer.

The heat of tears prickled her eyes, and she blinked rapidly to stem the embarrassing flow. As if things couldn't get any worse. Now she was going to cry in front of Severus. She didn't know what was wrong with her. Perhaps it was the note of concern in his voice. Maybe it was her low blood sugar. Perhaps she was pre-menstrual.

Throwing her hands into the air, she sobbed. "I've lost it! I've been here for over a week, and I haven't written a bloody thing!" She grabbed hold of the notebook and shook it. "I thought *this* might help. It had my original outline in it, after all. But I've changed the outline of the story so much that I hardly recognize the characters anymore.

"It's pointless!" she wailed. "I'm washed out! I have permanent writer's block! What am I going to do? Fred and George have already started developing the ad campaign for this book! Molly and Ginny are waiting to proof the first three chapters, and I haven't even finished the first!" Tears of frustration flowed freely down her cheeks, tears that he dabbed at with his handkerchief.

Embarrassed, Hermione snatched the handkerchief out of his hand, quickly thanking him, and finished wiping her tears away. Her stomach growled. She hiccupped and tried to compose herself.

Severus gently extracted the notebook out of her hand and started to thumb through it. As he read over the pages, he walked into the sitting room and sat down. It took him a few minutes to get a grasp on what she was struggling with. The material was, of course, repugnant to him, seeing as the character was based on Potter, but he set his prejudice aside and attempted to help her. (Though he did have an exact copy of her notebook, he had not bothered to read this particular section.)

Hermione studied him as he read. He was dressed in trousers and a shirt that was buttoned up all the way. He looked uncomfortable. Why was he bothering with Muggle clothing? She'd grown so accustomed to seeing him in wizarding robes that she considered his current wardrobe as somewhat intrusive; however, he was handsome nonetheless. She shook the thoughts away, but new ones quickly followed.

He wasn't classically handsome. If she were to self-analyze her crush on him, she would have to admit to being a charisma junkie. He cut a dark figure... a mysterious figure... a dangerous figure. He was taboo on so many levels...older man, former professor, ex-spy, surly bastard.

She wanted him. It was just too bad that she couldn't keep him.

She had adopted an ostrich-like attitude regarding last night and his current presence. As far as she was concerned, last night didn't happen. The fact that he was sitting in front of her, cradling her notebook in his lap was a fluke, a nice fluke, but a fluke nonetheless. The clearing of his throat interrupted her musings.

"Is it possible that you are having difficulty with this story due to the fact that Potter and Miss Weasley are... not together anymore?" he asked, looking up from the notes and fixing her with a pointed stare.

The question was like being knocked upside the head, for it had been a neglected whisper in her mind for so long that she had literally forgotten about it. She jumped up and started pacing.

"If you approach your... method logically, you've written about Draco and Pansy, us, Lupin and Tonks, and Albus and Minerva... all couples who are together in one form or the other." Severus started reading again.

"But Professor McGonagall and Professor Dumbledore..."

"Don't let their public or professional image dissuade you," Severus stated knowingly. "There are rumors that float between the portraits that they are secretly engaged. Of course, that rumor has been circulating ever since I attended Hogwarts."

"Really?" she gasped.

He nodded, abandoning her notes and watching her pace.

She stopped as if struck by inspiration. She strategically placed as much distance as she could between them. "We aren't together. I wrote *The Darkest Magic* well before... well... you know."

Setting the notebook down, Severus stood and stalked her. Hermione could see his intentions and countered his moves. She was not going to let him disrupt her head-in-the-sand attitude. For the first time since she'd arrived, she felt the familiar tingle of inspiration. She was on the verge of a breakthrough, and she couldn't let anything or anyone sidetrack her.

"Though I am not blameless for our... rocky beginning, I do not feel that I have done anything... morally reprehensible in my pursuit of you."

She chuckled mirthlessly. "Somehow you associated with the concept of morality strikes me as odd. Not to mention the fact that you really shouldn't 'pursue' me. I'm not interested in a relationship... with anyone at this time." He continued to advance, and she raised her hand, hopeful that would discourage him.

Mindful that nothing ever stopped him, she turned her back on him and held the rose up to her nose. "Thank you for the rose. It's lovely."

She felt the heat from his body before she felt the contact. Severus ignored personal boundaries and embraced her from behind. The feel of his maleness against her arse made her gasp. Pushing her hair to the side, he pressed his lips against her neck. "It isn't as lovely as you."

*Don't turn around!* the voice of sanity shouted.

*Turn around! Turn around!* her libido begged.

The rasp of his tongue against her skin sent a shiver racing through her body. He cupped her belly and gathered the material of her shirt as though it had a mind of its own. She was determined to resist him, like James' determination to resist Virginia.

Hermione stiffened in surprise. Creative revelations were rare, and this one was no exception. The idea was like a wildfire during a drought, spreading with the help of dry kindling and favorable winds.

Harry had pushed Ginny away for her own good. In true Ginny fashion, Ginny had pursued Harry. Ginny had asked that Hermione not include *that* part of her and Harry's relationship on the book, but how could she not?

Ginny had known all along that people would find the real inspiration for Hermione's novels. She'd known that people would draw comparisons and didn't want to come across as desperate. That was it! In honoring Ginny's request, she had smothered the muse. The muse wanted the truth. It craved the excitement and the difference of this book.

"That's it!" she crowed, smacking Severus' hand down and forcing her way out of his embrace.

"That's it!" she repeated, practically jumping up and down as a hopeful surge of creativity pumped through her veins. "All this time, I've been wracking my brain, trying to make this book different? Instead of the hero pursuing the heroine, why not have the heroine pursue the hero!"

"I wish," Severus grumbled beneath his breath.

Ignoring his reply and sidestepping his next attempt to corner her, she rushed to the table and shuffled her papers around. She sat down, grabbed a quill and dipped it into the well. There was something about the therapeutic scratch of the quill on paper that calmed her nerves.

Severus scowled at the obvious dismissal. Her epiphany had swept her away, and he had the feeling that if he tried to seduce her now, he would undoubtedly be hexed beyond even his wildest imaginings. His ego was seriously damaged. It was as though she had forgotten he was even there.

Tapping his finger to his chin, he walked into the small kitchen and perused the cabinets for something to eat. The first cabinet he opened contained a half-eaten box of cookies and an almost empty bag of potato chips. The second and third cabinet contained nothing. He opened the refrigerator and found three diet drinks that looked about as appealing as troll droppings. He was almost afraid to open the freezer. There was no telling what wasn't there... something edible... something nutritious. Closing the freezer door after finding the remnants of a chocolate bar and ice cream, he turned to study his lover.

Hermione continued to ignore him, seemingly lost in thought as she scribbled hurriedly. She wrote like she was afraid she would forget something. Perhaps she would benefit from a Pensieve. He noticed the dark circles beneath her eyes and the way she bit her bottom lip in concentration. She looked like she'd lost weight.

His scowl turned into furious displeasure as realization dawned on him. She'd obviously been neglecting herself. Why hadn't he noticed earlier? He circled her, wanting to get her attention and chastise her for such foolishness, but she was oblivious to his presence.

She was a well-to-do witch, for Merlin's sake! She certainly could afford a house-elf. He shook his head and tsked. So, this is what his life was going to be like...left to his own devices for hours on end while she wrote her next great novel.

It was definitely something he could get used to. He smirked and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "I'll be back."

She waved her hand as if trying to wave off a fly and mumbled to herself.

Severus stepped back and Disapparated.

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Sometime during her creative burst, she'd put her head down to nap. She'd lost count of the times she'd woken with paper and drool stuck to her cheek. But there was no paper or drool. She was in bed, fully clothed. She was even under the covers.

"That's odd," she said. "I don't normally pull the covers down."

Her stomach growling was the only answer she received. Sitting up, she inhaled and smelled... breakfast! She tossed the blanket off and followed the scent. It was divine. It must be a dream. She still had yet to go grocery shopping, the week of waiting for inspiration to strike having prevented such a necessary trip.

She drew up short once she saw what awaited her.

The table was covered with a variety of dishes, impossible for just one person to eat. She would have licked her lips expectantly, but the effect was ruined by a certain someone whom she had chosen to ignore sitting at the head of the table. He was thumbing through her notebook, his pen hovering over the pages.

Her pleasant, lazy-morning dream had turned into a rip-roaring nightmare. She must have made some kind of noise, probably a strangled growl of disbelief. He looked up and smiled.

"Good morning, Hermione," he greeted her. "Or should I say almost noon?" He closed the notebook. "If you wish to wait for lunch, I'm sure the house-elf will be along shortly."

She edge closer to him. Once she was in range, she grabbed her notebook, walked to the other end of the table, and sat down. Glaring at him, she piled the multitude of breakfast offerings onto her plate.

It was like being back at Hogwarts!

"I took the liberty of editing what you wrote yesterday," he said, taking a sip of his drink. "It's not much as there were very few errors to correct. I shan't meddle with the content of the story, and you'll probably have to get someone else to edit any intimate scenes between James and Virginia. Just knowing who the characters are based on makes me uneasy... even a bit nauseous."

She almost choked on her eggs. Of all the audacity! Of all the nerve! Her eyes watered as she continued to cough. She washed her food down with some juice and set her utensils down. She stared at him, trying to figure him out. Why was he still here? He was a long way from Hogwarts. Surely he had better things to do than come half way around the world for sex.

Oh wait! That's right! He wants *her*, not some "pale imitation." Taking a deep, somewhat-calming breath, she cleared her throat. "Thank you for the food. You should know that I have no intentions of changing my mind. So, I think it best if you leave. I haven't the time or the patience to deal with distractions right now. I've been trying to write this particular story for well over a year now, and I've finally gotten the break that I needed."

Hermione held her breath and waited, not knowing what to expect next. She watched her former lover carefully. He wiped his mouth with his napkin and placed it on the table. She jumped when he stood, but she stayed where she was. She folded her hands in her lap and looked straight ahead. She didn't know how she had managed when he stopped right next to her and brushed her hair away from her cheek.

His lips were warm against her skin, and she felt a spike of desire lance through her.

"Absence makes the heart grow fonder," he whispered and stepped back. "Once I return, I shall woo you in a manner befitting my regard." Before she could respond, he Disapparated.

There were multiple pops of Apparition, but she soon realized that it wasn't Severus returning, but that of the breakfast food leaving the table, only to be replaced with lunch.

She nibbled on the inside of her cheek and sighed, disappointment slowly creeping into her bright outlook.

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TBC

Author's Notes: Dang it! I swear the story is complete. I had to split the last chapter into two because it was just too big. Please accept my apologies for the delay. Son started school, and my hands are pitching a fit because I've been typing too much. Who knew second grade homework was going to be so difficult? Thanks to all who have left reviews. Words cannot express my appreciation.

## Chapter Sixteen

*Chapter 16 of 16*

Hermione finishes her book and realizes a welcome truth.

Chapter Sixteen

"I can't believe you did it!" Ginny exclaimed, shaking the manuscript in front of her. "Mum and I came to check on you, hoping for the first three chapters, but you finished the whole bloody thing! And! It's brilliant!"

Hermione smiled nervously, thankful that Ginny not only liked the book but also approved of the book.

"The sex scenes are lovely, dear," Molly added, already mentally calculating some minor edits.

"Mum!" Ginny moaned in embarrassment. After all, the heroine in the book was modeled after her.

Hermione smothered a grin.

"Well, they are," Molly scoffed. "You could learn a few things from this book, Ginny."

"Mum! Molly!" gasped the two younger witches together.

Molly shook her head. "Not the *sex scenes*. I was talking about the way Virginia wins James. I just adore how aggressive Virginia is. James never had a chance against her. I'm just saying that you could take a few lessons out of this book and go after Harry. He would never know what hit him."

If Ginny's fair complexion didn't lend to the illusion that she was perpetually red, she would have looked as though she were having a stroke right then due to the rampant blush that consumed her cheeks.

Seeking to diffuse the escalating argument between mother and daughter, Hermione patted Ginny on the arm. "I hope you don't mind that I... ended the book the way I did. I just couldn't bring myself to not have a happy ending."

Ginny looked shocked. "Merlin's balls, Hermione! That would be the end of your career and the series if you didn't have the hero and heroine get together by the end of the book. I don't mind at all."

"I am curious though," Molly interjected. "What reference material did you use for the sex scenes? I must say that I wasn't really looking forward to writing *those* scenes for *this* book, but they are very well written and technically flawless. Only a few minor edits shall be needed."

"Mum!" Ginny shrank in her seat. "If it's any consolation, I didn't want *you* to write *those* scenes either."

Hermione cleared her throat. "I... uh... used my own personal experience along with my imagination and the *Kama Sutra*."

Ginny looked at Hermione imploringly, mouthing a big "thank you."

Molly clapped excitedly, her eyes bright with hope. "I knew you and Severus would finally see the light. Where is he? Was he everything you thought he would be?"

"Mum!" Ginny jumped out of her seat as Hermione buried her face in her hands. "It's time to leave. Hermione has to polish her rough draft and start thinking about the next book."

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Charming her clothes so that they folded and placed themselves into her suitcase neatly, Hermione sighed. Tomorrow she would be off on another grand adventure!

*Who am I kidding?* There was nothing grand or exciting about writing feature articles for a cooking magazine. She craved the unknown. She craved the adrenaline of investigative journalism.

She sighed again, only this time more dramatically.

Before Molly and Ginny had left, they had decided that Perdita Winters deserved a much-needed vacation. It was, of course, decided that way because Hermione asked for a break. Besides, Molly was almost finished with her book, and Romance Rabble needed new authors. Whereas Hermione's series were contemporary romance, Molly's were historical romance.

Now that she had an ungodly amount of time on her hands, she wasn't quite sure what to do with it. Seeing that her clothes had packed themselves accordingly, she pointed her wand at her quills and parchment. Just as she was getting ready to charm them, the pile shifted.

She nibbled her bottom lip and pushed the papers aside, picking up the notebook that had conveniently revealed itself. She flipped through the pages and paused when she reached the last entry...*Unrequited Love*.

"Blech! What was I thinking?" She tore the page out of the notebook and was getting ready to crumple it when she noticed that it wasn't the last page in the notebook that had writing on it.

The next page was not in her handwriting. It was Severus'.

*I left you today, letting the fickle hands of fate decide our destiny. I am optimistic you will realize the depth of my feelings for you soon. Though it took Arthur Weasley spiking my drink with Veritasium... Well, the only regret I have is the way I treated you. You deserve so much better than me. I had convinced myself of that. I embraced the lie, hopeful that it would ease the ache of loneliness that haunts me now.*

Hermione turned the page and continued to read, almost disappointed to see a different entry from the previous one.

*I have passed the second day away from you much like the first, writing in this charmed book, hopeful that you are reading, but realizing that is unlikely.*

*I saw a little girl running along the beach today. She had wavy, brown hair and deep chocolate eyes. I found myself contemplating your childhood prior to your admittance to Hogwarts. I must admit that I am certain you were as precocious then as when you first arrived at Hogwarts.*

Hermione shuddered in remembrance. She'd had a flat chest and buckteeth. Of course, first-year girls weren't supposed to be developed, but she remembered being envious of Lavender Brown.

*I wonder what our future holds? I know that I have my work cut out for me. I fostered distrust between us when I realized what you had written. Instead of seeing the truth in the Darkest Magic, I saw only ridicule. I should have realized that you lack a malicious nature. You are light and goodness, whereas I am darkness and secrets.*

*You deserve to be courted, and that is what I intend to do. I shall shower you with my affections. My relentless nature shall prevail.*

Hermione nibbled her bottom lip and swallowed, shivering and hopeful.

*I dreamt of you tonight, seductress of my soul. I seldom remember my dreams, but I shall retire this one into my Pensieve. I want you beyond even your wildest imaginings, but I shan't sully my letters to you with my lustful thoughts.*

Feeling the blush crawl up her neck and into her cheeks, she turned pages and started skimming through the entries to see how many there were. "Absence makes the heart grow fonder," she whispered softly, feeling her heart flutter as she recalled his last words to her. That had been almost a month ago.

She kept skimming the pages, quickly realizing that there was an entry for each day. They weren't words of poetry or romantic ramblings. They were truthful, heartfelt observations, and her hardened heart cracked with each page she read.

*Please don't be angry with me, but I sent Silvan to look in on you today. You haven't written anything in the notebook for two weeks now. I did not want to anger you any*

further than I already had. We watched you, envious every time you laughed at something you had written... Wishing you were as unguarded with me as you are with your imaginary characters.

She would have bristled at his admission, but it made little difference now. Lost in her imagination, she'd lost track of the time, aching with the knowledge that she'd chased him away. Isn't that what she had wanted? Hadn't she chosen the coward's way, refusing to risk her heart for fear that he would break it?

Holding the book to her chest, she stared out the window. Now that the book was done, things were so much clearer...like the incomplete feeling that gnawed in her stomach and reminded her that he had taken her with him. Severus was gone, and it was unlikely that he would come back.

Wiping the tears away, she flipped to the last entry and skipped to the last sentence. It was a minor character flaw, but she always read the end of a book first. She read the last sentence out loud.

"Please forgive me, but I've only one choice left. I must end my agony." She slammed the notebook shut, her heart pounding. Did he mean to harm himself? She had to do something. She had to find him before it was too late.

"I was feeling rather melancholy when I wrote that."

Hermione jumped. "Bloody hell!" she exclaimed, swallowing hard to see if her stomach would go back to where it belonged. "You scared me," she chastised, thrilled that he was standing before her and not... harmed.

Severus approached her slowly. Hermione, still trying to calm down from the initial scare, smiled and welcomed the invasion of her personal space.

"My apologies, Hermione," he replied softly, his eyes scraping over her figure from the toes of her shoes to the top of her head. "I did not mean to startle you." He brushed his knuckles against her cheek and tilted her head.

Hermione held her breath. She really should turn away, but her mind was actually in agreement with her heart. She remembered his parting words "*Absence makes the heart grow fonder*." Even though she would deny that hers had grown fonder until her dying day, she couldn't stop herself now if she wanted.

His lips hovered over hers, his breath caressing the sensitive flesh. "But I do intend to end my agony," he whispered. His eyes lowered, and his lips brushed against hers. "Even if I have to tie you to the bed to do so."

He smothered her pitiful protest with determined efficiency, palming the fleshy cheeks of her arse and pulling her against him. His tongue dueled masterfully with hers. She was starved for him. Somewhere in the back of her mind, the minuscule vestiges of her resolve vanished. He loved her. Perhaps... just maybe, he'd grown used to the idea and wanted to love her.

Severus broke the kiss and nibbled a path along her jaw and neck while working the buttons of her blouse free.

"Just sex," she spoke out loud, reasoning that she could settle for what he had to offer.

Severus gave a throaty growl and shoved her blouse and front-hook bra out of his way. "Keep deluding yourself, Hermione," he rasped against the puckered flesh of one nipple, "and I shall make good on my threat and tie you to the bed post."

The fabric of her clothing trapped her arms. Between each nip and lick, Severus whispered words of love. She closed her eyes and thrust her hips against him. Her world upended, and she found herself lying on the bed, her luggage mysteriously Vanished. She tried to twist free of her blouse and bra, but the bloody cloth conspired against her. Shamelessly, she lifted her hips and assisted Severus in removing her shoes, pants and knickers.

"More than just sex, my dearest witch. So much more. I could cast a Fertility Charm and bind you to me through a child, but I am a selfish man, and I shan't share you," he growled.

Instead of sinking into her fiery heat, he kneeled on the floor, clasped her thighs and pulled her to the edge of the bed. There was no gentle seduction, only desperate need. He nipped her inner thigh, intent on punishing her with pleasure. "Say the words, my love."

Confusion marred her brow, and she struggled to sit up, the embarrassment of their positioning too much for her inexperienced mind to comprehend. Fingers probed through her wiry curls, finding the slickness that had pooled there upon the heated kiss. "Severus, please..."

He opened her, revealing the sweet pearl that shimmered with passion. Dipping his head, he swiped his tongue across the jewel. "The words, Hermione," he growled, his breath hot against her.

She whimpered, her legs trembling as he held them in his grasp. "... I don't know what you mean."

He flicked his tongue into the dewy folds and circled her clitoris, slowly torturing her. "You're an intelligent witch, Hermione. Figure it out," he murmured against her flesh, unable to deny himself the delicious taste of her.

Arching into his intimate exploration, she keened and blurted the first thing that came to her mind. "I love you!"

"Close," he whispered, parting her tight folds and indulging his fantasies. Greedily lapping her clit, he speared his fingers past the resistance and searched her depths for the spot that would bring her to task. He curled his fingers upward and wanted nothing more than to replace his fingers with his aching cock. "Tell me..." he husked between lapping her flesh. "Tell me who loves you... who wants to love you forever."

His torture of her senses was complete. She would deny him nothing. She twisted and moaned. She was so close, and she was certain he could feel it, for each time she approached nirvana, he switched the rhythm and denied her peace.

He kept talking to her through the lavish licks. "It's me, Hermione." Lick. "I'm the one who will love you until the end of days." Kiss. "Even then, I shall love you." Nibble. "My heart is yours." Suck. "Why do you treat it so poorly?"

Tears trekked down her cheeks. Words she longed to hear spoken in the lustful heat of passion.

"I love you," he murmured, giving in to her stubbornness and redoubling his efforts. He was caught in the grips of the fever and had to have her. Thrusting his fingers in tandem with his tongue, he reveled when he felt the cavern of her heat milking his digits in blissful abandon.

Hermione panted, shuddering in the aftermath of the bliss that had consumed her. She felt like a puddle, waiting to rematerialize into her old self. Severus stood, Vanished his clothes and climbed her body, settling his weight between her thighs. She felt the hard evidence of his arousal press against her stomach.

His lips hovered over hers, glistening with her juices. His eyes were dark and fathomless *My heart is yours. Why do you treat it so poorly?* Pain reflected in his gaze. Pain she had caused. He turned his head and continued to hover there.

How could she have been so blind? So stupid? She kicked herself. The truth shimmered in his eyes. Kissing his cheek, she caressed him.

He ground his teeth and held his breath.

"You love me," she stated an obvious fact, and he nodded, no longer trusting his own voice.

"You... want to love me," she whispered against his cheek, finally ridding herself of her blouse and bra and trying rather clumsily to guide him to her.

"You not only have my heart but my soul as well," he returned slowly, savoring the words.

"Show me." She hooked her ankle around his calf and rubbed her damp heat against the weeping tip of his need expectantly.

Grasping her hips, Severus pushed his way into her silk heat. Though he was desperate, he kept the rhythm slow and deep, grinding his pelvis against her already sensitive clitoris.

Hermione pulled him down for a kiss, pushing her tongue past his lips. Her heart soared as all of her doubts vanished. She tore her mouth away from his and chanted in time with each thrust... each measured, calculated thrust... each thrust that spoke of eternity with this man. The orgasm that consumed her started deep, and her womb clenched.

Severus threw his head back and groaned, and she felt him pulse within the clenching heat of her body. She watched him come, the warm jets of semen connecting him to her in a primal way. This was love. This was intimacy in its most raw form. Severus Snape, her lover, open and trusting her with his heart and soul. Spent, he fell to her side and gathered her close.

"Stay," he murmured drowsily, burrowing his nose into her hair.

She squeaked in protest when a velvety rope tied her ankle to his wrist. "What the..."

"In case you were thinking of leaving me while I slept," he chuckled, tugging on the leash with intent. "Perhaps... tomorrow, we shall go on our first date so that I may woo you properly."

Her heart soared. Writing romance had not prepared her for the realities of intimacy and love. She rubbed the rope and smiled at her inspiration, her exhausted imagination springing to life with new stories and characters.

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Epilogue...

Hermione braced herself as she heard the heavy oak door of her and Severus' dungeons abode slam shut. She still didn't know how he had talked her into moving into the dungeons at Hogwarts all those years ago, but she was glad that she had. The dungeons had provided just the right ambiance to write her latest book--*Cursed Magic*. It was, in her opinion, her favorite book. It was based loosely on the beginning of their courtship.

She chewed the inside of her cheek nervously and waited for her husband to approach her with his opinion. It had been two weeks since the release of her book, and she had been on tour promoting it. She fluffed the emerald green chemise that hugged her breasts and hips and tried to relax against the pillows.

The door to their bedroom creaked open slowly, her pulse pounding through her veins. He stood there, his gaze ravenously taking in every detail. She licked her lips subconsciously, and he closed the door behind him. He was dressed in his teaching robes, his hair damp from potion fumes. She didn't know which suspense was worse...the fact that they had been separated for two weeks and that they were most likely going to be spending the next few days in bed together, or his opinion of the book.

Unlike her other novels, she had not let him read or contribute to her latest book. She had wanted it to be a surprise. She cleared her throat. "Well?" she asked, barely recognizing her own voice, for it was laced with desire.

Stopping at the foot of the bed, Severus crossed his arms over his chest and glared at her. "You turned me into a troll," he stated simply, his voice managing to pull off the offended, yet highly aroused quality very well.

Hermione jumped up onto her knees and prepared to argue her decision to embellish their courtship in such a fantastical manner. "But I made you into *cute* troll."

His right eyebrow lifted offensively. "Cute? Troll?" he bit off. "Perhaps I should remind you that trolls are behemoth, slobbering, mountains of... of... of... stupidity."

She rebuffed him with a cross between a snort and a laugh. "You weren't a mountain troll. You were a forest troll."

Severus rolled his eyes.

"You were an enchanted troll," Hermione continued. "Cursed by the evil warlock you had apprenticed under and..."

"You needn't retell the story to me, Hermione. I did *read* the bloody book." He shed his robe and started unsnapping the buttons of his shirt, the gleam in his eyes telling her that even his foul mood over the subject matter of her latest novel would not ruin the seduction.

She smiled, knowingly leaning forward and gifting her husband with an enticing view of her cleavage. "But you were hot by the end of the book. The young, bookish witch found a way to end the curse and..."

Severus flicked his wand, and a magical gag silenced her. She squeaked in protest and tugged on the offending material with both her hands. Before she could crawl away or get the gag off, her husband tackled her and insinuated himself between her creamy thighs. His hot breath brushed her cheek. "You said you were going to write *our* story. Though I saw various elements of *us* in that... that... fairy tale..."

"Is that how you really think of me?" he asked softly, nuzzling her cheek. She could hear the hurt in his voice and stiffened beneath him.

"Uf cor naw!" she protested through the gag, raising her hand to stroke a dark lock of his hair. "I wuff yu!"

Severus removed the gag and sealed his lips over hers, smothering any further comments or declarations. He broke the kiss and panted, "The troll was horrible, I..."

"You *were* horrible to me!" Hermione reminded him, running her hands over his pale chest. "But the troll is a work of fiction. It is not how I view you at all. It is how I viewed your actions. That is what I based him on."

He nibbled her collarbone and groaned, rolling onto his back. He covered his eyes with his arm, the length of the day taking its toll. "But I *nev*~~er~~ *touched* your bloody cat."

Hermione chuckled as he referenced the part in her book where the troll took a bite out of the heroine's cat. She straddled her husband and smiled. "Crookshanks would most likely take a bite out of you before you got too close to him."

His hands traveled up and down her silk-clad thighs. Ebony eyes gleamed, a small smile gracing the edge of his pouting frown. It was then that she realized he was teasing her and slapped his chest lightly. "You cad!"

Realizing that his acting abilities were not up to par, he threw his head back and laughed.

"And here I was thinking that I had offended you!" she railed, getting ready to smack him again.

He caught her arms and gave her a stern look. Lifting her fingers to his mouth, he started licking them. As he licked her fingers, his grin grew. "I am satisfied that you changed enough of the truth to protect the innocent... and the guilty."

Smirking, she moved her hips in an upward, inviting thrust. "You might as well get used to it, for you are the inspiration for all my heroes."

Severus groaned, silencing her with a kiss.

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FIN

Author's Notes...Firstly, I have to thank every one who beta read or encouraged the writing process. You all know who you are! Secondly, I'd like to thank the administrators of The Petulant Poetess for all of their hard work in keeping the queues moving along. Thirdly, I must thank everyone who took the time to review. I hope that you all have enjoyed the ride.

Additional Note...This last chapter was not edited by a beta reader. If you see any mistakes, please drop me a review or an email. I try to be as grammatically correct as possible. God bless!