

Breathing Love

by anogete

Spoilers for DH!!! Hermione has problems of her own, but she can't resist trying to track down the man she saw in a small cafe just down the street from her new flat. He couldn't possibly be Severus Snape, could he?

Chapter 1: A Ghost

Chapter 1 of 8

Spoilers for DH!!! Hermione has problems of her own, but she can't resist trying to track down the man she saw in a small cafe just down the street from her new flat. He couldn't possibly be Severus Snape, could he?

CHAPTER 1: A GHOST

She thought about him often. More often than she really should, actually. She had looked down at his lifeless body and glassy eyes nearly five years ago. The ache of remembrance shouldn't feel so raw after all that time had passed, especially considering she had never been close to him.

Hermione pressed her forehead to the pane of glass and watched the rain trickle down the other side of the window. A weak reflection revealed a tear slowly sliding over the slope of her cheek, and she bit her lower lip to hold back the sob welling up in her throat. Her heart felt twisted and tight, making it difficult to breathe properly. Her faint breath cast foggy moisture over the glass in front of her lips before it dissipated into the air.

Once her elation over Harry's victory had wore off, the aftermath of the battle had been horrible. There had been weeks in which all she did was shuffle between funerals and memorial services and homes thick with grief and loss. Then there was the matter of retrieving her parents and recovering their proper memories. Helping them had been so much harder with the weight of the battle and all those who had died resting in her mind.

It wasn't until after everything had calmed, after Kingsley had been officially elected Minister of Magic, after Hogwarts had been repaired, after Minerva McGonagall had been given the position of Headmistress of Hogwarts, after she could fall asleep without tears soaking her pillow, that Harry had shown her the memories. He had returned to Grimmauld Place to live with Kreacher shortly after the battle, and she had met him in the study of the old house, Dumbledore's Pensieve looming on the table between them.

With great care, Harry had tipped a small flask of memories into the Pensieve before looking up to meet Hermione's eyes. "I want someone else to know," Harry had said softly. "You are the only person I thought of who could appreciate this. I don't know if Ron would understand."

Hermione had nodded and stepped forward. "What is it?"

"Snape," had been Harry's only answer.

She had seen it all that evening just before twilight darkened to night. She had witnessed the spotty childhood friendship between Harry's mother and Snape, through their tumultuous years at Hogwarts, through his unfortunate turn to Voldemort and eventual redemption, finally ending in her former Potions master on his knees with tears dripping down his nose. There were also memories of conversations between Snape and Dumbledore in which they discussed Harry's fate. How horrible it must have been for Harry to watch these snippets of Snape's life just minutes before he had walked to his own presumed death.

When Hermione had finally pulled out of the lingering memories, she had stumbled several steps back, disoriented. "I don't know what to say," she had confessed in a low voice.

Harry had shaken his head at her. "I just needed someone else to know. Snape would have given me a year's worth of detentions if I had shown Ron, so you were the logical choice. You'll keep this private?"

Hermione recalled nodding at her best friend, but the rest of that evening when she had returned home was a blur of emotions. For the first time in a month, she had cried herself to sleep, remembering Severus Snape on his knees in Sirius's bedroom with a page of Lily's letter clutched in his shaking hand.

Ever since that night, those Pensieve images had replayed in her mind. He had been a better man than she had imagined possible. Of course, he had had his flaws, but didn't everyone? Perhaps Dumbledore had been right. Perhaps they did sort children into houses too early. Surely his actions had proven Severus Snape to be more suitable to Gryffindor than the more cold-hearted Slytherin.

She had been present for the last moments of his life, had witnessed his death, and had seen his most private and intimate memories from years before. And no matter how painful it was to remember Snape's intense, unrequited love of Lily, his sacrifice and atonement, his overpowering feelings of guilt, his unhappy life in which he was always the odd man out, she still clung to the memories as if they were something precious, a connection to a man she realized she never really knew. Surprisingly, that made the pain all the worse.

Hermione sniffed and brushed the tear from her cheek before pulling away from the cool windowpane. She could think of no better word to apply to Severus Snape than tragic.

She turned around and surveyed the boxes scattered across the floor of her new flat. Harry and Ron had promised to stop by the next day and help her put the place in order, though she warned them to be discreet when Apparating outside the building since it was in a Muggle area of the city. They both seemed confused as to why she had decided to live among Muggles, and Hermione wasn't sure if she could explain her feelings on the subject properly to either of her friends. She had spent so many years beneath the shadow of Voldemort's power and Harry's duty that she felt she needed a break. She would still keep her job at the Ministry, of course, but she would also be able to retain her connection with the Muggle world as well.

Deciding to wait until tomorrow to unpack her books, she shoved some money in her pocket and checked her blotchy face in the mirror before heading out for a cup of coffee. There was a place only a few blocks west. She had seen it when she had toured the flat for the first time.

Hermione pulled the hood of her light coat over her head as she stepped out into the misty rain that had been falling for hours. It wasn't yet eight o'clock, but the sky looked as if it were nearing midnight. The cool air felt good on her flushed face while she hurried down the pavement, looking for the neon sign that denoted the café. Jogging the last few meters to the door, she prepared to duck inside the cozy store. Instead, she stopped and stared through the blurry storefront with absolute shock.

Sitting in the far corner of the small shop was a man who very strongly resembled Severus Snape. His black hair was haphazardly pulled back revealing the harsh lines of his face and hooked nose. He appeared to be dressed in black from head to toe and was hunched over a newspaper resting on the small table. Just as he looked up to scan the windows, Hermione pulled away and slammed her back into the brick wall next door. Her chest heaved with every breath she managed to suck in.

It was impossible. Severus Snape was dead. He had died over five years ago on the dusty floorboards of the Shrieking Shack in Hogsmeade. There was no possible way he could be sitting in a small café blocks from her flat. Trying to still her trembling hands, she pushed off the wall and turned to go home, afraid to even risk another look at what could only be a ghost.

"Hermione. Hermione?" Ron waved his hand in front of his friend's face, forcing her to break away from the window and the view of the street below.

"What?"

"You seem weird. You don't like the new place?"

Hermione shook her head and reined in her wayward thoughts. "The flat is great. I'm just feeling a bit off today."

"Are you sure?" Harry asked, levitating her new bookcase to the far wall.

Frowning, Hermione threw herself into the closest armchair and sighed. "I think I've lost my mind," she muttered.

"Just now figured that out?" Ron said with a barely repressed grin.

"Shut up, Ron," she replied with a slight chuckle. He ducked to avoid the throw pillow she flung in his direction. It sailed above his head and hit Harry square in the chest.

Catching the pillow before it had time to rebound and fall on the floor, Harry tossed it back. "What's going on?"

"I saw something yesterday in the local café. Except, what I saw isn't possible. I think the stress of moving is getting to me."

Ron sat down on the couch. "What did you see?"

She laughed and shook her head. "Nothing. It was nothing."

Harry took a seat next to Ron and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "No matter how silly it is, you know you can tell us."

"Especially if it is bothering you this much," added Ron.

Hermione rubbed her weary eyes. After her sighting the previous night, she hadn't got much sleep. "You'll think I've gone mental."

"Come on, 'Mione."

"Don't call me that, Ronald." Drawing in a deep breath, she continued, "I thought I saw someone we knew, but that's impossible since that person is... dead."

Both boys' faces sobered into a more stern expression. "What do you mean, dead?" Harry asked, watching her from behind the delicate rims of his new glasses.

"Exactly that, Harry. Dead. Deceased. Gone. Departed. No more."

With an admirable show of trying to lighten the mood again, Ron exclaimed, "Blimey, you *are* mental."

"Who was it?" Harry asked, his voice still grave and serious.

Hermione swallowed the lump in her throat brought on by her nerves. This was silly. He was dead. She mistook someone who looked like him. Then again, who looked like *him*? Clearing her throat, she answered Harry's question in a soft voice. "Snape."

Harry and Ron were silent for a long moment, simply staring at her with open mouths and wide eyes. "But he's dead!" Ron said, breaking the spell.

"I know that," she snapped back.

"I saw him die," Harry added.

"I know; I was there."

"So, you must have been mistaken," Ron said.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Well, *obviously*. I'm not saying that Snape is alive. Snape is *dead*. We all saw it. We even went to his funeral and burial. His body is probably lying..." She felt her voice catch and forced back an unexpected sob.

Harry ran a hand roughly through his wild hair. "Actually, Hermione, his body was never recovered."

"What?" Hermione asked, leaning forward in her chair.

"It was while you were away finding your parents," Ron said.

"Well, yes, I know that," she replied. "Everyone assumed that Voldemort had ordered one of the other Death Eaters to remove the body from the Shrieking Shack. They were still looking for it when I left to find my parents. But," she said, carefully watching Harry, "I thought they had found it by the time I returned. There was a funeral, a memorial service." Neither of her friends made any motion to deny her words. "There was a *coffin*. I stood there and watched them lower it into the ground."

"It was just his wand," Harry muttered.

Hermione stood from the chair, looking at her friends with disbelief. "What?"

Ron nodded. "They searched for almost two months, Hermione. Kingsley even appointed a team to find the body, but nothing came up. They even used tracking spells to trace the body from the Shrieking Shack. The trail was cold, not even a hint."

"So," Harry said, "they decided to bury his wand and keep the lack of a body quiet. Kingsley told me before the funeral because I asked to see him...the body...before the burial."

Hermione fell back into the armchair, unable to say anything or get past the shock. She had visited his grave twice a year for five years, believing that it was his final resting place. It was quite a blow to realize she had been misled.

"Don't worry it about, though," Ron added. "We were there when he died. Voldemort probably sent one of the Death Eaters back to the Shrieking Shack to bury Snape's body in the Forbidden Forest while he waited for Harry to surrender that night. There were so many curses and hexes thrown around that night, it was no wonder they couldn't pick up the trail. Too much interference."

"Why wasn't I ever told?" she finally managed to ask.

Harry shook his head and watched her with sad eyes. "We thought you'd insist on finding the body yourself. After I told you what Snape had done for us that night, you were pretty keen on giving him a proper burial and all."

Ron nodded his agreement. "And it'd be useless, Hermione. Mad-Eye was killed months before, and we never found him either."

"I don't...I don't know what to say," Hermione mumbled, glancing out the window again. It was starting to rain after a reasonably sunny morning.

"We're sorry for keeping it from you," Harry said softly. "But he's *dead*, Hermione. We all saw it. That bloody snake bit him, and he bled to death. It would have been impossible for him to survive."

She blew out a shaky breath of air. "I know, Harry. I know. I just saw someone who looked like Snape. It was raining, and I couldn't see all that well through the blurry glass anyway."

All three friends sat in silence, listening to large drops of rain smacking against the window ledge. Finally, Ron stood and brushed imaginary dust from his trousers. "What do you say we get all these books of yours out of the boxes and back on the shelves," he suggested with a forced smile.

"Thank you for seeing me, sir." Hermione extended her hand in greeting.

"Don't you get formal with me, Miss Granger," Kingsley replied with a warm smile, taking her hand and shaking it with enthusiasm. "It's been too long since we last spoke."

"You know me," she said with a smile. "I always get side-tracked with my research."

"How are things in the Improper Use of Magic office?"

"Good, good. We were able to help Robards finally track down Goyle last week. They destroyed his Portkey, and he Apparated to his grandfather's estate. We notified the Aurors on the case as soon as we realized a wanted wizard had Apparated."

Kingsley nodded and gestured to the plush chair in front of his desk. "How can I help you, Hermione? Harry told me you wanted to see me."

"Harry confided in me about Severus Snape's missing body," she said, sitting down and getting directly to the point. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd like a few questions answered. I understand that it is being kept quiet, so I was uncomfortable going to anyone but you with these questions."

Sobering rather quickly, Kingsley gave her a firm nod. "I'll be happy to answer any of your questions, Hermione. However, I don't think I'll be of much help. The team I appointed to find Severus's body was quite unsuccessful."

"Yes, Harry told me as much. They did determine that he was deceased, though?"

Kingsley let out an abrupt bark of laughter tinged with surprise. "I should say so, Hermione. As I recall, they interviewed you, and you assured the investigators that you witnessed Severus Snape's death."

"I meant beyond the eye witness accounts," she replied. "Did they investigate possible methods in which Snape could have survived, though appearing to be dead shortly after Nagini's attack?"

With a flick of his wand at a small speaker on his desk, Kingsley requested that Severus Snape's file be brought to his office. Moments later, it popped into existence in the middle of his desk blotter. "I believe," he said, flipping through the thick stack of parchments, "that they interviewed several Potion masters regarding a possible cure for the snake's venom." He turned the file toward Hermione and pointed at a page. "Here. They were quite thorough in their investigation. They've ruled out every escape or cure. Even if someone had arrived shortly after you left, Severus would have still died, if he wasn't dead already, of course."

Despite knowing that Severus Snape was very dead and had been for years, Hermione's stomach dropped in disappointment. There had been a small glimmer of hope growing in the back of her mind since Harry had confessed that Snape's body was still missing. The evidence and investigation notes in front of her were flawless and detailed. Even Hermione couldn't deny that there was just no possible way Severus Snape could have survived the attack.

Nodding solemnly, Hermione stood to shake Kingsley's hand again. "Thank you for your help."

Kingsley seemed somewhat confused as he wrapped his hand around hers. "Was there something in particular you were looking for? Do you have reason to believe Severus is alive?"

She smiled faintly and shook her head. "No, I think my imagination has run away with me. I appreciate your showing me this file. It means a great deal."

"I had no idea you and Severus were close."

Hermione shook her head again. "Oh, we weren't. I just feel like we were."

Author's Note: First, a huge thank you goes out to moonrevel and JenF for their fantastic beta help and speedy responses. As with all of my stuff, this fic is complete. It will be eight chapters long, and I plan on posting at least one chapter a week. I hope everyone enjoys it and doesn't think I've gone off the deep end by making our dear Severus into a bit of a romantic toward the end of the story. I promise a bit of angst before the confessions of love. ;-)

Chapter 2: I'm Not Crazy

Chapter 2 of 8

Spoilers for DH!!!! Hermione has problems of her own, but she can't resist trying to track down the man she saw in a small cafe just down the street from her new flat. He couldn't possibly be Severus Snape, could he?

CHAPTER 2: I'M NOT CRAZY

It was a Saturday morning, but the sky was dark and threatening more rain. Hermione was sitting in the café, staring at the empty chair where she had caught a glimpse of a very authentic Severus Snape look-alike. She had been eating breakfast there each morning that week on the off chance that the man would appear. If she could see him again and confirm that he was not her former professor, then she could avoid all this emotional turmoil.

The past few nights had been spent thinking of nothing but *him*. She had recalled his memories in detail, remembering the large teardrops that had fallen off the tip of his nose when he had cried in Sirius's old bedroom. His pain had wrenched her heart into tight knots, leaving her falling asleep against a pillow soaked in hot, salty tears. She had spent a solid week after viewing his memories in such a state, but Hermione thought that time had begun to heal those old wounds. Plus, just as she had admitted to Kingsley, she never even knew Severus Snape. Why should his life and death upset her to such an extent?

The teenager manning the register shuffled over to the table beside her and began wiping the crumbs away with a wet cloth. An elderly woman and her daughter usually worked each morning.

"Excuse me," Hermione said softly, lifting a hand to attract the boy's attention.

He turned to her, looking very put out and slightly unhappy. "Yeah?"

"Are you new?"

The boy shook his head and tapped the cloth against his leg, letting the crumbs scatter over the floor. "No, I work in the evenings."

"I moved in down the street not that long ago. I'm actually looking for someone I saw in here one evening."

The boy shrugged. "There are a few regulars in the evenings. Who're you looking for?"

"A man about forty-five years old, shoulder-length black hair, large nose, pale skin, usually wears all black."

"Oh, yeah, him. He's been coming here since I started a year ago, probably even before then."

Hermione gripped the edge of the table and leaned forward. "He comes here often?"

"Every evening at seven o'clock. He usually stays until nine o'clock when we close up. You know him?"

"I wouldn't say that, but I'd like to meet him."

The boy curled his nose up. "He's a lot older than you."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Never mind. Thank you for your help."

She watched as the teenager returned to the bakery case at the back of the store and began rearranging the biscuits on display. Not having an incredibly exciting social life, Hermione had nothing to do on this particular Saturday evening, which meant she could return to meet the mysterious man.

The day dragged, the minutes slowly ticking away, lasting much longer than they ever had before. She returned to the café well before seven o'clock because she found she couldn't wait in her flat much longer. Hermione was aware the excitement she felt was ridiculous, especially when she knew once she got a good look at the man she would realize his nose wasn't as large and his hair not nearly as greasy as her former professor's. Deluding herself into believing that he was alive would certainly be a mistake.

The sulking teenage boy was still behind the counter, staring at the nearly empty coffee pot. Hermione ordered a large cup of hot chocolate from him. "Long day?" she asked, handing him money for her purchase.

"Double shift," he replied. "My aunt is sick and my cousin's away."

"Sorry."

"You're early." He dropped the change into her open hand.

Hermione smiled nervously. "I know."

"He's not a real nice guy. He just reads a lot. Doesn't talk to anybody." The boy cocked his head at her. "You probably won't like him."

"You're probably right," she conceded, taking her hot chocolate and settling into a table in the far corner of room.

She drank half the cup and tapped her fingers along the polished tabletop while she waited for a familiar face to walk in the door. The café was nearly deserted. There were only two other customers...elderly men...at a table by the window. She could overhear them discussing heart medication and anesthesia. Their mumbled conversation was drowned out by the opening of the door and the sound of rain pounding against the pavement outside.

A tall man stepped inside, brushing the water off his coat. Hermione tried to tilt her head and peer beneath the hood, but it was too deep and the dim light the café afforded was of little help. With his head down, he stepped up to the counter and ordered something in a soft murmur. The boy poured tea from a large, metal pot and slid it across the countertop, accepting the man's money in exchange.

Hermione tracked the mysterious man with her eyes, watching him arrange a newspaper and the cup at the same table as that first night she saw him. Turning his back to her, he slipped the still-wet coat off his head and shoulders, letting it slide down to reveal long arms clad in austere black. She mentally compared him to the picture she held in her mind of Severus Snape. His hair was tied back, but it appeared to be about the same length as Snape's had been before his death. His frame was lanky and tall, though he did not hold himself with the same stiff composure as her former professor.

He dropped the coat on the spare chair and turned around. Hermione moved her eyes up the expanse of his chest, covered in a tatty, black button-up shirt. She gasped when she saw his face and found it to be the very same unhappy and sour face of Severus Snape.

"Oh, Merlin..." Hermione muttered under her breath. Her fingers were curled into tight fists in her lap. As impossible as it seemed, she truly believed Severus Snape was sitting just a few yards from her in a small café in a very Muggle part of the city. He was supposed to be *dead*; she had watched him die years before. The very thought made Hermione light-headed, and she lifted her shaky hands to clutch at the table.

He obviously had not seen her yet. She had not changed her appearance drastically in the five intervening years. He would surely recognize her if he lifted his head from that newspaper. What could she do? Should she approach him? Should she leave? Should she contact Harry? Hermione knew she had to do *something*. Forgetting this had ever happened was not an option.

She saw the teenage boy watching her out of the corner of her eye. His sulking attitude had transformed into morbid interest over the drama playing out before him.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione quietly stood and walked over to *his* table. Her pounding heart felt like it was cutting off her windpipe, and all she could think about was Severus Snape telling Albus Dumbledore that he wanted to die after Lily Potter had been killed.

As she stepped over to his table, he looked up and met her gaze. Hermione opened her mouth and said the first thing that came to mind. "I thought you were dead."

The utter shock that ripped apart his carefully constructed façade was remarkable to see. What felt like minutes passed, but it was, most likely, only a couple seconds before he replied, "You must be mistaken." His voice had not changed over the years. It was like a soothing balm to her aching heart. He was alive; she could help him, and things would be better. He deserved that and more.

"Professor, I..."

"I am *not* a professor. You've mistaken me for someone else." He rose from the chair. "Excuse me," he mumbled, avoiding her eyes and practically running out of the café. The small bell over the door chimed at his abrupt exit.

Hermione ran after him, stepping out into the thick sheets of rain. The storm had darkened the sky, and she wasn't able to see far in the downpour. After several minutes of pacing up and down two blocks in each direction, looking for any small sign, she returned to the café.

The two elderly men by the window watched her with curious eyes as she wrung her hair out by the entrance mat and wiped her wet face on her already damp shirt. She wanted to snap at them and tell them to mind their own business, but she held her tongue.

"I told you," the boy said when she returned to the table where Snape had been sitting.

Hermione looked up at him, feeling numb and confused. Severus Snape was *alive*. "What?" she asked, trailing a wet fingertip along the newspaper he had left on the table.

"He's a downright git sometimes. He tips decently, though." The boy paused when Hermione didn't reply. "Do you know him?"

"No," she replied without thought.

The boy shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "It sure sounded like you knew him. You said you thought he was dead."

"I did think that." Hermione shook her head and tore her eyes away from the newspaper to look at the discarded coat. Without hesitation, she snatched it up and checked both pockets for any identification that might tell her where he lived. There was nothing.

"Are you okay?" The boy's voice seemed very far away.

"What? Yes, I'm fine," Hermione answered in an equally distant voice. "Do you know where he lives?"

"No, I don't even know his name."

She nodded and placed the coat back on the chair, turning to leave. "Thank you."

After leaving the café, she spent another hour searching the surrounding neighborhood for any sign of Severus Snape. She found nothing.

Hermione returned home that night feeling confused and anxious. Despite her curiosity about the mysterious customer at the café, she had not truly believed he would be Snape. The Ministry's investigation had convinced her that there was no possible way he could have escaped with his life. She snorted in laughter at herself as she stepped into the shower stall. Who needed the Ministry's files when she had *seen* him die with her own two eyes? Harry and Ron had witnessed it as well. His bright red blood spilling over the dusty floorboards of the Shrieking Shack was an image she had never been able to forget. Nor could she forget the moment when life fled him, leaving only glassy eyes, devoid of everything that had made him who he was.

After her shower, Hermione pulled a small phial out of the medicine cabinet and gulped the liquid down. She had forgotten to take the potion before, and it was not an experience she wanted to repeat. She rinsed the empty glass phial out and sat it with the others beside the sink.

For the first night that week, she went to bed without tears. Her discovery had been so unexpected and surreal; she could think of nothing but finding him again and righting the wrongs.

The following morning, she flooded Harry, who came over to speak with her after detecting the urgency in her voice.

"What's wrong, Hermione?" he asked as soon as he stepped out of her fireplace and brushed the soot from his robes.

"You should sit down for this," she replied, all nervous energy and flailing hands.

Harry took a seat on the edge of the couch, watching his friend with trepidation. "Are you okay?"

She stopped pacing. "Snape is alive," she blurted out, whirling around to gauge his reaction.

For a moment, he was unable to respond. "What?" he finally managed to ask.

"I told you I saw someone who looked like Snape at the café down the street. I went back last night to give myself some peace of mind." She sat in the armchair and pressed her hands together. "Harry, it's him. *Snape*. He's alive. I saw him; I spoke with him."

"Hermione, that's impossible. We saw him die. Kingsley sent out a team of wizards to..."

She waved her hand in the air to dismiss his argument. "I don't care what we saw or what the Ministry's report said. I *saw* him last night, Harry. He was very much alive."

"I don't...well, I don't see how this is possible. Are you sure the man was Snape?"

"Yes!"

"And did he say anything?"

"Yes! I would recognize his voice anywhere."

"But what did he say?"

Hermione stood and began pacing again. "He denied it, of course. But I *know* it was him, Harry. I swear it." She reached the window and turned around to retrace her path to the armchair. "We have to find him. He's obviously been living as a Muggle because his wand is buried at Hogwarts in the coffin."

"Hermione, I don't know about this. Are you sure you weren't mistaken?"

"No, I am not mistaken, Harry!" she snapped, flipping her hair over her shoulder in annoyance. "He must think he'd be thrown in Azkaban if he returned. You'll need to speak to Kingsley and have an official pardon written up before he's able to come back."

"But, Hermione, you don't know where he is."

"Don't worry, I'll find him. He must live close to the café because he can't Apparate without a wand."

Harry shook his head at his friend, watching her manic strides across the room. "Maybe you should take me to the café and let me see before we talk to anyone else about this."

"I'm *not* crazy."

"I know, I know. I just think it would be best to have two witnesses."

She frowned and shoved her fist onto her hips. "You don't believe me."

"Well, it's hard to when I saw him die."

"Fine. We'll go tonight."

Harry sighed and crossed his arms over his chest, leaning back in the chair across from Hermione. "I'm worried about you," he said, giving her a grave look.

"Don't start with me, Harry. I saw him here last night."

Ron was sitting at the head of the table between his two friends. He gently patted Hermione's hand. "You're stressed, what with the new flat, your break-up with Lance, and all that pressure from your new position in Improper Use of Magic. He was probably just some poor bloke who looks like Snape, maybe even related to him."

Hermione snatched her hand away and glanced around the empty café. The place was due to close in a few minutes, and the boy behind the register was giving her curious glances when he thought she wasn't looking. "It isn't stress," she said through clenched teeth. "And I don't give a fig about Lance. I broke up with *him*, if you'll remember. "

Ron shot Harry a meaningful look before turning back to Hermione. "I expect you're still broken up about me, then?" He tried to hide his grin.

"Now you're just being ridiculous. Breaking it off with you was the best thing I've done in my life, Ronald."

He clutched at his chest. "Ouch, 'Mione. I try to cheer you up, and you end up ripping me apart."

She looked down at her lap and tried to stifle the chuckle bubbling up out of her throat. "Oh, please. You were so happy I broke it off that you almost kissed me."

"I always told Ron you were too smart for him," Harry said, smiling at them both.

"Harry, that's mean."

"But true!" Ron added, laughing.

The conversation died out and slowly the smiles faded from all three faces. The boy whom Hermione had spoken to before was shuffling around, wiping the counter and turning off the appliances and lights.

"He's not coming," she whispered, staring out the storefront windows.

"You probably scared him, Hermione," Ron teased. "You ran up to him and told him that you thought he was your dead professor."

"It was Snape." Her voice was firm and confident.

"Hermione, please just sleep on this for a few nights. Ron is right; you're stressed out and seeing things that aren't there. Snape is dead."

She opened her mouth to argue with Harry, but his worried expression stopped her short. "Fine," she said in a soft voice.

Author's Note: If you were among the first few people to read the first chapter, you missed a note I added after the chapter had been posted for several hours. This story ignores the epilogue of DH. I hate it, and I don't want to deal with it. It screws up my happy ending. So, exercise your right to denial and pretend like you never read the epilogue. I know I do.

Anyway, thank you to moonrevel and JenF for their wonderful beta abilities.

Chapter 3: John

Chapter 3 of 8

Spoilers for DH!!!! Hermione has problems of her own, but she can't resist trying to track down the man she saw in a small cafe just down the street from her new flat. He couldn't possibly be Severus Snape, could he?

CHAPTER 3: JOHN

Hermione went to the café each evening to watch for Snape, but he was nowhere to be found. Obviously, her encounter with him over a week before had made him reconsider where he spent the early evening hours. She spent too much time pacing the streets in the neighborhood, hoping she might run into him. Hermione constructed elaborate scenarios in her head about how that second meeting would go, but they never came to pass.

Her dreams of Snape had returned to plague her each night. She found that the tears she had shed for him years before had not dried up, though she never actually suspected they had. That morning she had shot out of bed at five o'clock to Snape's voice echoing in her mind. *And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?* Her face had been wet with tears she didn't remember crying.

Instead of going directly into work, like she had on so many other early mornings, Hermione detoured to the café when it opened at six o'clock. She stood in the queue behind two men in business suits and stared at Snape's empty chair. When she shuffled to the front to stand before the display case of sweets, she saw the older woman who she knew worked each morning and who also owned the shop.

"Good morning," the woman said, greeting her with a friendly smile. "How can I help you?"

"Tea, please."

As the woman turned around to retrieve a cup, Hermione cleared her throat and spoke up again. "The boy who works in the evenings is your nephew?"

"Yes." The woman returned with a full cup. "He wasn't rude, was he? I told his mother he needs to learn some manners."

"Oh, no, he was very helpful. I was looking for a man who frequents this café, and he was able to point me in the right direction. You wouldn't happen to know a man with shoulder-length black hair and a large nose, would you?"

"John?"

Hermione furrowed her brow. "John?"

"I've done my share of evening shifts, especially before my nephew started working here. You're talking about the man in black with the angry scowl, right?"

"Yes," Hermione said, her heart thumping wildly in her chest.

The woman shook her head and settled her fists against each hip, her elbows sticking out to either side. "He's quite the piece of work, that one. Took me nearly a year to get him to tell me his name, even after I drove him to the hospital."

Hermione tried to contain her shock. "You took him to the hospital?"

"It happened a month after he started coming in here. I remember the night very clearly because it all seemed so odd. He was sitting just there," the woman said, pointing to the table Hermione had begun to consider Snape's table. "I turned around to brew another pot of coffee when I heard a crash. I found him on the floor beside his chair, curled up on himself and shaking. He spilled his tea everywhere, all over the newspaper he was reading and his shirt."

The woman shook her head in remembrance. "It looked like a seizure, but just as I picked up the phone to call for an ambulance, he came out of it and told me not to do anything. Of course, I was frightened that he was hurt, so I insisted he go to the hospital. It was a slow night, and I closed the shop early to drive him to accident and emergency. Even though he was weak as a newborn, the doctor said that he couldn't find anything wrong with him. They released him, John being crabby all the way, arguing with the nurses and demanding that they leave him be. I drove him back to his flat late that night."

"His flat?" Hermione's voice was merely a croak.

"Do you know John?" the woman asked.

"Somewhat," Hermione replied.

"Somewhat?"

"I knew him several years ago. He was a professor of mine."

"A professor?" The woman smiled. "I knew it! He denied it, but he has the look of a teacher about him. You know, one of those strict ones who give detentions for sneezing in class."

Hermione laughed in spite of her rolling, nervous stomach. "Yes, Professor... John did like to give detentions." She paused and leaned across the counter. "Do you think you might be able to show me where he lives? I've wanted to speak with him for so very long. Any help you can give me would be appreciated so much."

"Well, the old bat never made me swear an oath to keep his lair hidden, so I suppose it won't do any harm to show you the way. I've got to work this morning, but if you'd

like to meet me here at four o'clock this afternoon, we can pay him a visit."

"You have no idea how much I appreciate this," Hermione said, barely able to breathe around the anticipation already licking at the edges of her sanity.

It didn't matter that Margaret called Severus Snape 'John.' The physical description matched, and people in hiding...or thought to be dead...were known to take pseudonyms to protect their true identity.

Hermione barely made it through her workday. Several co-workers were startled when she informed them that she planned to leave work early for personal reasons. They had never known Hermione Granger to leave her office before seven o'clock.

Now, she stood beside Margaret in front of an old wooden door. The splendor of the wood had been covered in a thick, white paint that was peeling in the damp air of the building. A weak ray of sunlight shone through the dusty window at the end of the hall, casting a sickly glow over the worn floor tiles.

"It's a filthy place to live," Margaret muttered as she rapped on the door twice.

Hermione had to agree. The building was in poor condition, and she couldn't imagine what sort of shape the flats themselves were in. However, her mind wasn't exactly on the dingy tile beneath her feet, but the man behind the door in front of her.

Margaret knocked again, and just as she lifted her hand for a third knock, the door opened to reveal Snape, his hair loose and brushing his shoulders. He wore a white button-up shirt with black trousers. His eyes cut from Margaret to Hermione.

"Get out," he said, moving to slam the door in her face.

Margaret gasped and put her hand on the door. "This nice young lady has come to speak with you, John. She says she was a student of yours."

"She's not student of mine. I don't know her."

Hermione stepped forward into the doorway. "You can't fool me, sir. I know it's you." She lifted her eyes to look defiantly into his.

"As I told you before, you must be mistaking me for someone else." The conviction behind his voice made Hermione's confidence falter. What if she was mistaken? What if he was just someone with a remarkable resemblance to Snape?

She visibly shook her head to clear the doubts. "Harry told everyone about your help...that you were with us all along," she murmured, stepping closer to him, invading his personal space.

It was he who faltered this time, taking a step away from her. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do!" she cried, tears of frustration rimming her eyes. "You're Severus Snape, and you helped us defeat Voldemort because you were in love with Lily."

"What?" He closed the scant distance between them, towering over her with anger crackling in the air around him. "What did you say?"

"I...I said that you helped us..."

"Who told you about Lily?"

Hermione stepped back out of his doorway and into the hall. "Harry. He showed me the memories."

His lips pressed tightly together, and his face drained of color. He looked at her with rage and betrayal in his eyes. "Get out of my sight, Miss Granger." His voice was low and venomous, worse than any threat he had thrown out in class. Before she knew what had happened, the door was slammed soundly in her face.

The air glistened with dust motes, and the hall was uncomfortably silent.

"Well, that was rude," Margaret said, curling her fingers into the apron she was still wearing.

"I'm used to it," Hermione replied.

"At least he knew your name. He did say it at the end there before he shut the door on us."

"Yes, I suppose that's something." Hermione felt numb.

Margaret cocked her head. "His name isn't John, then?"

"No, but that doesn't matter."

"And who are Lily and Voldemort?"

"They're dead, both of them." Finally, she turned from the door and stared at the faded wallpaper along the opposite wall.

"This all sounds very complicated." Margaret paused, assessing Hermione before continuing. "I must be getting home, my dear. Are you sure you'll be fine?"

"I'm going to stay here for a bit."

"Is that wise? He seems to be in a right snit about your showing up here."

"This is something I need to do. Thank you for your help, Margaret."

The woman nodded and hesitantly tottered down the hall toward the staircase. Hermione blew out a shaky breath of air and leaned against the wall beside his door.

He was bound to come out eventually. She could sit in the hall until he emerged, even if it meant she'd sleep in the hallway outside his flat. Seeing his face and hearing his voice again brought back the memories in the Pensieve. Tears always followed them, and she silently cried outside his door, her fat tears splattering against the dirty tiles.

How could he be so passionate, yet be so unbearably cruel and downright cold? She realized she had romanticized him in these years after Voldemort's death. She had modified her memories of a callous and demanding professor to include hints of his hidden, private self as seen through those memories in Harry's possession.

She shouldn't have said anything about them. Harry was right; Snape would have been...in fact, was...furious they had been shared without his permission. She could understand why, seeing as how the memories were deeply private and exposing. She decided she needed to stay if only to apologize to him.

Leaning her back against the wall, she pulled her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around her legs. How *did* he survive, she wondered. That night had been like a nightmare, but she distinctly remembered seeing him die, the bright blood gushing out of his neck in rhythm with his heart, the beats of it becoming less and less pronounced. She had cried afterward when she remembered it, even before she had been shown his story, his private thoughts.

Hermione closed her eyes and began to make a mental list of possible ways he could have avoided death. The list was short, and none of the possibilities seemed feasible.

Author's Note: Thank you to moonrevel and JenF for their fantastic beta skills. And thank you to everyone who has left encouragement in the form of reviews. I really do appreciate it. And I promise to reveal Severus's secrets in the next chapter. I swear. ;-)

Chapter 4: An Inquisition

Chapter 4 of 8

Spoilers for DH!!! Hermione has problems of her own, but she can't resist trying to track down the man she saw in a small cafe just down the street from her new flat. He couldn't possibly be Severus Snape, could he?

CHAPTER 4: AN INQUISITION

Hermione woke to someone standing over her. She was lying directly in front of Snape's door with her hands beneath her cheek like a makeshift pillow. At first, she did not remember where she was, but when she finally opened to her eyes and peered up, the sour countenance of her former professor reminded her quickly.

"You slept out here all night." It wasn't a question, but a statement of fact. She couldn't detect whether he was surprised or simply annoyed.

Sitting up, Hermione looked him in the eye. "I did. Sir, I want to apologize for my... insensitivity. The memories you gave to Harry were private. I shouldn't have watched them."

He waved a pale hand in the air. "What's done is done. I don't wish to converse on it further, Miss Granger. Now, if you'll kindly remove yourself from my doorstep... I have a job, and I'm very nearly late for it."

Hermione pushed her hair back and looked up at him. His clothes were old and coming apart at the seams. She doubted they would last much longer than a few months. "I thought we could talk," she said softly.

"I have nothing to say to you," he replied, looking down his long nose at her.

"I have questions."

"What makes you think I have answers?"

"I thought you were dead."

He raised a brow. "You were obviously mistaken."

"How?"

"That's another thing I have no interest in discussing."

Finally, Hermione stood and brushed the dust from her trousers and shirt. "Please," she begged. They watched each other in silence for several moments, Snape's hand poised on the doorknob, ready to close and lock the door. "You've been on my mind for almost five years. I need to know. I can't even sleep through the night anymore."

Snape's stiff posture faltered, as did his inscrutable face. Pulling himself back together, he said, "You're delirious, Miss Granger. Perhaps you should try sleeping in your bed instead of in my hallway."

"Sir, I..."

"I don't care to hear your explanations," he said, cutting her off. "However, I'm in a bit of a bind here. You see, I can't afford to move from place to place with you and whoever else wants to berate me tagging along. Therefore, I would greatly appreciate your keeping my whereabouts confidential, especially from your little friend Mr. Potter."

"I can't..."

"In exchange, I will tell you my story to appease your curiosity. However, you must swear to me...perhaps I'll even require an Unbreakable Vow...that you will never tell anyone I am alive."

Hermione stared into the black depths of his eyes. He looked quite serious, even a bit desperate. Unbidden, an image of Snape kneeling on Sirius's floor in tears flashed across her mind. "I...I think that's agreeable, Professor." She wiped her sweaty palms on her trousers. "When?"

"Return here at six o'clock this evening. Bring *no one*. If you disobey, I'll leave, and I assure you, you'll never see me again."

"I thought you did not have the means to move from place to place."

"I'll find the means if you insist on disrupting my current life with the one I've left behind," he replied with anger in his voice.

She frowned. "And how am I to know you'll return?"

"I'll return, Miss Granger. I know you have no reason to do so, but trust me; I'll return."

She gave him a soft smile. "I have every reason to trust you, Professor. And I do...trust you, that is."

He turned his back on her and locked the door with a simple key. No more charms and wards for Severus Snape; he had been reduced to the Muggle method of keeping his privacy and possessions safe. "Six o'clock," he reminded her as he swept down the hall.

Hermione smiled when he turned the corner. If he had been wearing robes, they would have swished and taken up the entire width of the hallway. She never thought she'd see the day when the sight warmed her heart.

The mediwitch waved her wand over Hermione's leg, moving up her body to check the girl's stomach, chest, neck, arms, and head.

"Has it slowed any?" Hermione asked, lifting her head to see the mediwitch's face.

She shook her head, flashing Hermione a sorry smile. "No change."

Sighing, Hermione dropped her head back onto the examination table. "We've been increasing my dosage every few months. The increase in potency should have an effect on my blood. It should be *stopping* this."

"Healer Gnecco has authorized another dosage increase. It should make you feel a bit better."

Hermione sat up. "I'm almost at the dosage limit, Lavender. Two more increases, and they won't be able to help me. My blood will just thicken until my heart can't pump it anymore."

"Hermione, they're going to figure something out," Lavender Brown said, placing both her hands on her friend's shoulders.

"It's been five years, and no one knows what to do. We're just prolonging this." Hermione blinked back the tears and tried to calm her trembling voice.

"It's going to be okay, I swear." Lavender wrapped her arms around Hermione, hugging her tightly. "There might be another potion we can try. Have you spoken to any Muggle doctors? Maybe they can help."

"No, they can't help. It's that damn curse, Lav. I'm going to die of it eventually. It seems like it might be sooner instead of later, now."

Lavender reluctantly released Hermione and pulled seven phials from her apron pocket. "Here's your supply for the next two weeks. Healer Gnecco will be seeing you for your next appointment." Both the girls looked at each other, neither saying a word. Finally, Lavender spoke up. "Why don't you stick around for a few more minutes until my shift is finished? We can get some early dinner together."

"I can't. I have to meet someone at six o'clock."

"A date?" Lavender asked with a smile.

Hermione snorted. "Not at all. More like an inquisition."

He answered the door as soon as she knocked. Hermione watched him step aside and wait, impatiently, for her to invite herself in. With a deep, calming breath, she stepped over the threshold into his flat, scanning the bare walls of cracked paint and the sparse furnishings. The kitchen was to her left, but the counters were devoid anything but a loaf of bread. The living room held only an old, green couch with worn cushions and a stiff-backed, wooden chair pushed up against a small card table.

Her heels clicked against the floorboards as she crossed the quiet, and nearly empty, room. "How long have you lived here?"

"Over four years," he replied. She was surprised he answered her question without any fuss or dramatics.

"I can't believe you're alive." Hermione turned around to look at him as he closed the door. "Really alive," she repeated, wonder creeping into her soft voice.

"I assure you, you won't find it such a mystery after I tip my hand, Miss Granger. I was simply prepared. Anyone with an iota of sense would have done the same, seeing as how the Dark Lord had become rather unstable toward the end." He crossed the room and pulled the wooden chair out to place it in front of the couch.

Hermione sat down on the sickly green cushions and noticed, for the first time, the teetering pile of books stacked by the far end of the couch. They were in sorry shape, some even falling apart at the binding. He had obviously read them all many times over. "Thank you for seeing me. I haven't told anyone."

"I appreciate that." His dark gaze fell over her, and she nearly swooned under his close scrutiny and unusually kind voice.

She pulled her wand out. Snape's eyes immediately went to the thin stick of vine wood, watching it with a sort of hunger. "I'll make the Unbreakable Vow."

He turned his eyes back to her face. "You kept Mr. Potter's secrets all these years; I'm sure you are capable of keeping mine."

"You mean you don't want me to take the Vow?"

He shook his head once. "Your word is enough. I've had more than my fill of Unbreakable Vows for a lifetime."

Hermione blushed, embarrassed that she had been so callous as to bring up such a sensitive subject with him. Of course he was haunted by Dumbledore's murder. How could he not be, even this many years after the deed?

"I have your word," Snape said, interrupting her thoughts, "that you will not go blabbing my whereabouts to anyone, especially Potter and Weasley?"

She nodded eagerly, unable to take her eyes off him. He was *alive*.

"I forbid you to even hint about my being alive."

"I promise."

"Very well. Where would you like me to start?"

Hermione shifted on the lumpy couch. "I was there when...in the Shrieking Shack when Nagini..."

He interrupted her awkward mumblings with, "When the Dark Lord fed me to his snake."

"Yes."

Snape lifted his right leg and rested its ankle on his left knee before crossing his arms over his chest. Despite the tatty clothes, he still looked intimidating. "I don't know if the fate of Charity Burbage has come to light, but she was given to Nagini several months before the battle at Hogwarts. That was but one of the many occasions when the Dark Lord utilized Nagini as a way of punishment or as a dealer of death. My position was tenuous at all times due to the thin line I walked as a spy. The Dark Lord favored me as a close advisor, but many of the Death Eaters coveted my position, whispering doubts in his ear.

"After Dumbledore's death, I attempted to safeguard my position and life in order to assist Mr. Potter. Nagini was a concern. I suspected the Dark Lord would use her to make an example of me should I be outed as a spy. Therefore, I spent the summer after your sixth year developing a potion to counteract the potent venom."

Hermione's eyes widened. "How brilliant!"

He dismissed her praise with a wave of his hand. "It was all theoretical because I very well couldn't test it on myself, or anyone else for that matter. My foremost concern was ensuring the potion would remain in my bloodstream for an extended length of time without side effects. That took much longer than developing the antivenin. Again, there was no opportunity to test it. I drank a phial of the foul concoction once a week when I had perfected it to the best of my ability."

"I heard your encounter with Voldemort that night. I couldn't see anything, but you sounded so convincing. Voldemort never suspected your duplicity or that you had developed a potion to live through Nagini's bite."

Snape snorted. "If I was convincing, it can in no way be attributed to my acting skills. With the upheaval at Hogwarts and the constant requests for my presence by the Dark Lord, I had not taken the potion in over ten days when I found Nagini wrapped around my body. There were too many other things to worry about at that time. Nagini seemed a distant threat."

"But it still worked."

"Yes, in a rather belated way."

"Which explains why I thought you died after you gave Harry the memories," Hermione said, leaning forward in her excitement over the tale.

Snape's face darkened at the mention of the memories. He remained silent for several long moments, and Hermione mentally berated herself for bringing the sore subject up again. "What you saw was the venom paralyzing my body. Had I stayed that way, I would have quickly bled to death."

Her eyes flicked down to his collar. Two scars started an inch below his ear to continue down his neck and beneath his shirt. They were ragged and had faded to a dull pink. When she looked back up to meet his gaze, she saw him watching her with curious eyes. "I had Muggle doctors clean and close the wounds," he explained.

"At any rate," Snape continued, "you left before the antivenin took effect. I can only assume my lack of attention in taking it on a regular basis diminished its effectiveness only slightly because I regained my ability to move within seconds of your departure."

"Where did you go? How did you escape?"

"I Apparated to an alley in Muggle London with a wand I had stolen off a Death Eater's body. I discarded the wand in the alley and left mine at the Shrieking Shack. Of course, I splinched myself." He carefully rolled up his left shirtsleeve to show an indentation in his arm. It had cut into the Dark Mark and left the snake with only half a head. "Fitting place to splinch, don't you think?" he asked, his voice dry. "There's also a spot on my leg and a piece of my ear, if you hadn't noticed."

Hermione's eyes automatically went to his ear and saw the crescent-shape missing from the top edge. As far as wounds went, it was a minor one, hardly even noticeable, yet her heart ached for him. She knew it was the memories. Snape could never be the stern Potions professor in her eyes now that she knew he had a heart and had given that heart so completely once before.

His voice knocked her out of her contemplations. "I walked a mile to a hospital. By the time I got there, I was dehydrated and nearly dead from blood loss. I told them I had been stabbed by a mugger; they believed me."

"Why didn't you try to heal yourself with the wand before you left it?"

"The magic could be traced. My magical signature might have lingered long enough for a smart Auror to track me down or, at the very least, recognize that I had left Hogsmeade alive."

"But you Disapparated."

"Disapparation is difficult to track. It doesn't leave such a strong resonance as a specific charm, especially a healing one that would have had to be quite powerful to staunch the blood pouring from my neck."

Hermione was struck with how matter-of-factly he relayed the events of that night. He seemed numb to it. Of course, she had been numb to her own pain, had been denying it or ignoring it since that night...since that curse bounced off the shattered armor and hit her leg. Perhaps it was perspective, she thought. She couldn't hurt for herself, but she had never ceased to hurt for him, even when she thought he was dead. To a certain extent, she had been using him, putting her pain and frustration into his story so she did not have to feel it on her own behalf.

"Why didn't you come back to help us?" she asked, meeting his black eyes again.

Snape was silent, his stare unyielding. Finally, he spoke up. "You said Potter allowed you to view the memories...*my* memories. I gave him more than he needed." He looked down at his lap. "I gave him more than I *intended*. However, the important piece of information was Dumbledore's explanation of what Potter was to do in order to defeat the Dark Lord."

She watched him cast his eyes around the floor, obviously uncomfortable with discussing what he had assumed was Harry's slaughter at the hands of the Dark Lord. "I had spent so many years working to protect him," he continued, "that it was rather difficult for me to condone what I knew must happen. Potter is a Gryffindor through and through, and I had no doubt he would follow through with Albus's plan, nor any doubt that he would defeat the Dark Lord in death. I did not care to watch..."

Hermione had been staring at the floor, but she lifted her eyes up when he trailed off. She caught the nervous bob of his Adam's apple before he continued with, "I did not care to watch *her* son die. It made me feel like a failure."

"But Harry lived, Professor," Hermione said.

"Yes, I'm aware of that. When they released me from the clinic, I sought out a magical household and stole the *Daily Prophet* from their owl. I stole several more over the following month so I could read about the defeat, the survivors, and the departed."

"Harry spoke well of you to everyone who would listen, and that was most of the wizarding world. You must have read it in the *Prophet*. Why didn't you return?"

"Mr. Potter does not need me. I serve him better in death than I ever did in life."

Hermione blinked back the tears welling up in her eyes. "He misses you, I think. Now that he knows, he misses you."

"He has a full life in front of him and has no need of my direction any longer. He seems capable enough on his own."

"I missed you."

His eyes snapped up to meet Hermione's. "Don't be dramatic, Miss Granger."

"I've cried for you so many times, Professor."

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I don't need your pity."

Hermione couldn't stop the tear from tipping over her lower eyelid and sliding down her cheek. "After Harry told us about you, I thought you deserved more than what you got. Later, when he showed me the memories you gave to him, I *knew* you deserved more. Thinking of the hand you were dealt made my heart burn; it made me angry..."

and sad."

She sniffed and watched him look at her with soft, dark eyes. "How much did he show you?"

"All of them...beginning when you were a child and ending when you left to send your Patronus to Harry."

"Why you?"

"Me?"

"Why did Potter show them to you? Or has he bandied about my memories and shown them to mass audiences to clear my name?"

Hermione frowned at the bitterness in his voice. "He only showed them to me. Harry has *never* shown them to anyone else. I didn't even know he had kept them until months after the war ended." She sniffed again, wiping the salty tears from her flushed face. "He told me he had to show them to someone else. He said that you would have given him a year's worth of detentions if he showed them to Ron." She laughed weakly at the joke.

"And again, I ask, why you?" His voice was softer now, not casting off the old hatred or anger. He seemed genuinely curious as he waited for her answer.

She brushed away another tear. "Because he knew I would appreciate you even more after seeing the memories."

"And do you?"

"I haven't stopped thinking about you since," she answered honestly.

Snape didn't immediately respond. He simply sat in his stiff chair and stared at the girl sitting on his couch, weeping for him. Hermione sniffed again and inhaled a shaky breath of air.

"Don't fancy me some Heathcliff, Miss Granger, and Lily was no Catherine. Don't romanticize it into some fictional tale of love and loss so you can feel something beyond surface gratitude and pity for your old professor. I'm no tragic fictional character to pine away after. I'm simply a man whose life has been one rather large mistake."

Snape rose and walked to the door. He opened it and stood silently, his eyes downcast, waiting for Hermione to leave. She bit her lower lip, trying to stifle a sob. "Sir..." she whispered.

"I think it would be best if you leave," he replied, not daring to look up at her.

Hermione nodded and gathered her bag. The walk to the door felt like miles. Her heels clicked loudly, echoing through the empty room. "I..."

"Leave," he repeated in a soft voice.

"I won't tell anyone. I promise," she said as she passed by him to step over the threshold into the hall.

All she heard before the door shut was a murmured, "Thank you."

Author's Note: Thank you to moonrevel and JenF for their fantastic beta skills. And thank you to everyone who has been supportive by leaving reviews. I appreciate each and every one of them. Just a reminder to those who didn't see the notes earlier: (1) this story is complete and will be eight chapters, (2) and I'm completely ignoring the epilogue of DH (because it sucks).

Chapter 5: Teacher's Pet

Chapter 5 of 8

Spoilers for DH!!!! Hermione has problems of her own, but she can't resist trying to track down the man she saw in a small cafe just down the street from her new flat. He couldn't possibly be Severus Snape, could he?

CHAPTER 5: TEACHER'S PET

Hermione called in sick to work. After the evening with Snape, hearing about his life in the aftermath, she couldn't possibly sit at her desk and pretend as if the world still revolved in the same way as it had the day before. Just thinking about moving on and slipping back into her routines made her feel like she was suffocating.

Instead, Hermione stayed in bed most of the day. When she finally let her feet hit the floor, it was to rummage through her bookshelves. She ran her index finger along the spines of her beloved books, stopping every so often to pull out a volume and place it on the floor at her feet. Once she had finished, she boxed the twenty-three books up and shrunk the box to fit into her pocket.

At five o'clock, she trotted down the stairs to stand on the pavement in the misty rain. Slowly, she made her way down the street to the café, wondering if he would show up at seven o'clock and determined, if he didn't, to pay him a visit at his flat.

The boy was scuffing his shoes on the floor when she walked in. Hermione realized she didn't even know his name. She asked while he poured her a cup of coffee, and he told her his name was Robbie. He asked about the man she got into a row with a few days before, but she brushed off the question and took a seat at Snape's table.

The clock by the door read six fifty-eight when he walked in the door. She watched his step falter just the slightest bit when he saw her sitting at his table. Hermione heard Robbie make a sound of surprise, but he covered it up well when Snape stepped forward to place his order and pay for his coffee.

"Miss Granger," Snape said, sitting down across from her a moment later.

"I don't mean to intrude..."

"Yes, you do," he replied.

Hermione smiled and watched him through her lowered eyelashes. "Fine, I do. Margaret said that she took you to the hospital shortly after you moved here. Why?"

"How should I know why she felt the need to take me to the hospital?"

"I meant, what was wrong with you? Why did you have a seizure?"

"I was still sick from the venom. It happened every so often; my body would convulse and shake. It's been three years since that last occurred." Snape took a sip of his coffee before putting it down on the table and turning the cup in circles with his elegant fingers. "Did you have more questions with which to assail me?"

"I'd be happy to hear anything you'd like to discuss, but I suspect that wouldn't be much."

"I knew there was some reason you were my star pupil."

"Was I?"

Snape snorted. "Don't act coy. You know very well you were my best pupil."

"So, it isn't too late to make a try for the coveted title of teacher's pet?"

He took another drink while Hermione clenched her hands tightly together in her lap. "So, you brought me an apple or some such clichéd nonsense?" he muttered.

"It's not an apple," she replied, placing the small box on the table between them.

He peered at the miniature cardboard box and raised a single brow. "A box. How touching."

"It's filled with books."

This time both his brows rose. "Very tiny books?"

She leaned across the table, only inches from his face. "You know good and well that I shrunk them."

"And you seem to have forgotten that I don't have a wand."

Hermione sat back in her seat. "Oh," she mumbled, cutting her eyes back to the box on the tabletop. She had, indeed, forgotten that the man who had been so good at spell casting was unable to perform the simplest magic now. "Stay here. Don't move."

Jumping out of her chair, she snatched the box from the table and ran out of the door. After finding an empty alley nearby, she enlarged the box and the books inside. With no small amount of effort, she managed to carry the heavy thing back to the café.

All eyes turned to her when she came back, waddling under the weight of the box. "These are for you," she said, dropping the overloaded box back onto the table.

"You could use some lessons in subtlety, Miss Granger," Snape whispered, glancing around at the other patrons watching them.

Hermione shrugged and sat down again. "They're yours. I thought you might like something else to read. I didn't include *Wuthering Heights* in there. I never liked Heathcliff anyway. I thought he was a selfish arse."

Snape dropped his eyes to the floor and chuckled. "Touché, Miss Granger."

She did not try to go back to his flat again, but she did make it a habit of going to the café each night at seven o'clock. Mostly, they sat in silence, drinking coffee or tea and sharing a newspaper. Sometimes, Hermione would pry information out of Snape.

She learned that he was working at a bakery in a small market not far from his flat. One day, she left her office early to go to the market while he was working. She bought two biscuits from the bakery just so she could see him kneading dough through the slightly ajar door of the preparation area in the back. He happened to glance up and catch her watching him, but the only indication that he knew her was a slight lift of his right brow before he turned back to his work, a dusting of flour settling across his right cheek. Hermione waited outside for an hour. When he punched his timecard and walked out the door, she handed him one of the biscuits she had bought. He accepted it without hesitation, and they both sat on a bench down the block to enjoy the sweets together.

She looked forward to seeing him each day after work. And he seemed to enjoy her company as well. That is until Hermione did something terribly rash.

In hindsight, she recognized her presumption, but her intentions had been nothing but the best.

Her bi-weekly appointment with Healer Gnecco went terribly. He confirmed what Lavender had told Hermione two weeks previously. Her condition was not improving, and he was unsure of how to proceed. The blood-thinning potion was her only hope, and its effectiveness was diminishing as the curse in her body fought against it. She was nearly at the maximum dosage possible. Once her body acclimated to the highest dosage, she would die.

Unhappy and feeling ill, she Apparated to Hogsmeade and slowly walked to Hogwarts. She knew where she was going, though she did not want to admit it to herself. After a great deal of strolling over the lush lawns, she stopped at the far end of the grounds, just beyond the Quidditch field. A small slab of marble denoted his grave. It didn't stir as much emotion in her when she knew he was very much alive and living in a flat not far from hers.

Pulling out her wand, Hermione gave it a decisive flick and murmured the incantation. Immediately, the ground broke apart and the soil shifted to reveal the coffin caked in dirt. "*Accio Severus Snape's wand!*"

The lid of the coffin flew up to reveal the untouched white satin lining within. His wand flipped end over end through the air until it slapped into her outstretched palm. Before leaving, she put the burial place back to rights, ensuring no one would suspect it had been opened with a simple charm to grow the grass over the bare earth.

Hermione met him that night as usual and spent the evening with him in murmured conversation over coffee and one of the books she had given him. It was a volume of Lord Byron's poetry. She could smell the musty odor of the book as he flipped the thin pages to find a particular poem for her to read.

Watching his pale hand smooth the pages and search for the correct piece brought back her memories of his memories...the ones he was still unhappy she had been privy to years ago. She saw him standing on that grassy hilltop in the dark, looking at Dumbledore's imposing form.

"Keep her...them...safe. Please."

"And what will you give in return, Severus?"

"In...in return? Anything."

She focused her gaze back on the man sitting across from her. She could see his dark eyes darting across the page beneath long lashes. His skin was pale, almost sickly looking, but he still took her breath away. Perhaps it was because she knew the depths to which he could love, his undying passion and loyalty. There was no doubt

Severus Snape could be as deceptive and self-serving as the best...or worst...of the Slytherins, but there was also that bald devotion and courage that belonged to no other house but Gryffindor. The Headmaster had confessed to thinking they sorted children into houses too early at Hogwarts. Where would Snape, this enigma of a man, fall if he had been sorted at eighteen instead of eleven?

She jerked her mind back to the present when he slid the book across the table and pointed at a poem near the bottom of the page. *Translation of a Romaic Love Song*. She read the poem, paying it little attention, her thoughts on the man watching her through his lashes.

In flattering dreams I deem'd thee mine;

Now hope, and he who hoped, decline;

Like melting wax, or withering flower,

I feel my passion and thy power.

Her mind stuck on the stanza halfway through the poem, unable to read any further.

"It was my favorite poem when I was younger," Snape murmured, thinking she had finished reading it by then.

Of course it would be his favorite. His entire life circled back to the same desire...to be loved by someone, to belong to someone, to have someone belong to him. He had made mistakes, of that there was no doubt, but he had paid his dues and made his amends many times over. Surely he deserved such a simple thing, a thing most people had an abundance of throughout their lives. She had been loved by her parents, and then by her friends. Occasionally, a romantic relationship would provide her with that same lightness of heart. She wondered if Severus Snape, who seemed to desire it the most of anyone in the world, had ever felt loved.

Blinking back the tears, she pushed the book away and tried to force a smile. "It's very beautiful," she said in a thick voice. A traitorous tear caught in her lashes, and she knew he could see it when she looked up at him.

Snape watched her silently. His expression was grave, yet somehow very curious, even hesitant. He opened his mouth as if to ask a question, but seemed to decide against it, pressing his lips tightly together.

"I have something for you," Hermione said, brushing away the tear. "I can't give it to you here, though." She leaned across the table and whispered, "Muggles and all," as a way of explanation.

Looking somewhat confused, he nodded once and stood to leave. She followed behind. They usually parted at the door, Hermione going left, Snape going right. This time he waited for her to lead the way. She turned right, indicating that they should go to his flat. Meanwhile, his wand seemed to burn in her sleeve. She had secured it there with her own wand until the right moment came to present him with it.

They made the short walk in silence. A flash of lightening in the distance foretold the coming of another storm, and the clap of thunder that followed made her jerk. She tried to cover her nerves with a slight stumble, but she knew she couldn't fool him.

Finally, they arrived at his flat. He unlocked the door and led the way in, flipping on the lamp sitting on the only table in the room. Hermione stood by the door, wringing her hands.

"What's the problem?" he asked, looking up from the dusty lampshade to watch her.

Hermione dipped the fingers of her right hand under her left sleeve and slid his wand out of the elastic bands she had sewn into her shirts to hold her wand. The ebony wood felt slightly heavier than her wand. "I retrieved this for you."

He remained rooted to the floor, his eyes alternating between the wand in her hand and her face. "Where did you get this?" he asked.

"The Ministry couldn't find your body, but they did find your wand. They buried it in an empty coffin on Hogwarts' grounds. I visited your plot twice a year...the anniversary of your death and Christmas...but it wasn't until recently that Harry told me they never found your body. The Ministry kept it all very hush-hush. They didn't want to appear incompetent," Hermione said, rolling her eyes.

"And you thought I would want the wand?"

She nodded, stepping forward to hold it out to him. "Yes, it's your wand. You should have it back."

Snape turned his back on her and walked over to the only window in the flat. "I don't want it."

Hermione followed him across the room. "I assure you, I was very careful. No one saw me take it, and I closed the grave properly to ensure any passers-by wouldn't suspect it had been opened."

"That isn't the point, Miss Granger. I thought I made myself clear when we first spoke. I do not have any desire to return to the wizarding world. Therefore, I do not need, nor do I want, that wand."

"But, sir..."

He turned around, a dark storm building in his eyes. "I said, *I don't want it*. How is that unclear to you?"

She took a step back, surprised at his harsh voice. He hadn't spoken to her in such a tone since the afternoon she paid him a visit to demand an explanation of how he survived. "But you're a wizard..."

"I'm nothing of the sort; I've given all that up."

"But you can't!"

His lips pressed together in a thin, angry line. "I can, and I have. I don't ever want to see that wand again. Get it out of my sight."

Snape strode heavily to the door and opened it. Hermione hung her head, trying to hold back the tears of disappointment and frustration. Why did he have to make everything so difficult? With a fortifying, deep breath, she shoved the wand back up her sleeve and walked past him into the hall. When she turned around to say goodnight, she found the door shut in her face.

Hermione placed a hand on the flaking paint of the door. She had thought he would be happy to be reunited with his wand. Apparently, she had been terribly wrong.

If he was upset with her, then there was a very good chance he would avoid the café and refuse to talk to her. She felt as if she needed to set things right between them before the wound festered. Settling onto the hallway floor, she reverted to her old tactic of sleeping outside his door. He would have to speak with her when he left for work in the morning.

Author's Note: A huge thank you to moonrevel and JenF for being fantastic betas. The bit of a poem in this chapter is, as the text indicated, taken from a poem by Byron

Chapter 6: Fritz's Blood Thinner

Chapter 6 of 8

Spoilers for DH!!! Hermione has problems of her own, but she can't resist trying to track down the man she saw in a small cafe just down the street from her new flat. He couldn't possibly be Severus Snape, could he?

CHAPTER 6: FRITZ'S BLOOD THINNER

She woke, expecting to find herself on the filthy floor outside of Snape's flat. Instead, she was settled deeply into the lumpy cushions of his green couch with a thin blanket thrown over her. Hermione blinked at the weak sunlight filtering through the grimy window across the room. Her chest hurt, the dull pain clouding her brain, making it difficult to sort through the events of the previous night. She found that she had been massaging her breastbone with her fingertips.

Sitting upright, she nearly swooned. The potion. She had forgotten to take her potion last night before she fell asleep.

"Oh, Merlin..." Hermione muttered under her breath, fishing in the pocket of her jeans for the small phial she carried with her for emergencies. She fumbled the stopper out of it and immediately gulped the foul liquid down her throat. Within a few seconds, she felt the dull pain dissipate, allowing her to breathe easily again.

"What was that?"

Hermione jumped at his low voice. She had been so confused after awakening that she had not seen him sitting in the chair across from her.

"Just vitamins," she lied, placing the phial on the couch beside her, trying to appear nonchalant and comfortable. "How did I get here?"

"I found you asleep on my doorstep again. I carried you inside shortly before midnight."

"Oh."

He raised a brow at her. "I'd appreciate it if you'd refrain from sleeping there. The neighbors may begin wagging their tongues about my odd guests."

"I wanted to apologize. For last night."

He waved away her apology. "You were not thinking. I understand."

"I just... I wish you'd come back to the wizarding world with me," she whispered, pulling the blanket around her. The room wasn't cold, but she needed the comfort.

Snape shook his head, a wry smile edging the corners of his lips up. "I'm a former Death Eater with no friends or relatives. What good would my coming back do?"

"It would make me happy," she answered simply.

"And why, exactly, would that make you happy?"

"Our time together lately has made me happy," Hermione insisted. "It makes me very happy, but I feel like you are denying a part of yourself when you insist on living life as a Muggle." She paused for a moment before continuing, "Harry has ensured that your name was cleared in the aftermath. Everyone knows what you did. We all know the war would have been lost had it not been for you." She paused again and shifted her eyes away, peering out the window at the dull, gray clouds in the sky. Finally, she looked at him and said, "And we're friends... of a sort, I suppose. I mean, I want to be your friend, if you're agreeable to that."

He looked back at her with solemn, gentle eyes. Had he been anyone else, she would have said he was on the verge of tears. But Severus Snape didn't cry, did he? Her mind returned to the memories. Of course he did. He had cried more than his fair share of tears.

"Tell me what you just drank, Hermione," he finally said in a kind, yet firm, voice.

She stood up and folded the blanket he had covered her with the previous night. "I told you; it was a potion of vitamins. I thought I might be coming down with something, so I've been taking them the past few days."

Snape tilted his head. "Why are you lying to me?"

"I...I'm not." In a fit of panic, she threw the blanket on the arm of the couch, grabbed her handbag, and ran out.

He watched the door click shut behind her retreating form before looking down to see his wand roll lazily across the floor. It must have fallen out of her sleeve in her rush to the door. It slowed to a crawl before stopping, its tip pointed at the couch. He looked up and saw the light refractions glint through the thick glass of the phial she had also forgotten.

After going home for a shower and change of clothes, Hermione found she was late for work. She stayed later than she had been to make up for her tardiness. A few minutes after seven o'clock, she stepped into the café, relieved to find Snape reading a novel at his usual table. The daily newspaper was folded up beneath the book.

"I'm sorry I left so quickly. I was late for work," she said, sitting down across from him.

Snape lifted his gaze from the novel to watch her. There was something in his eyes she couldn't place, something she didn't think she had seen in him before. Marking his page, he closed the book and rested his hands on top of it.

His odd behavior made her nervous. "I'm just going to go get a cup of coffee." Hermione placed her hands on the tabletop to push herself out of the chair. Before she could completely stand, Snape locked a long-fingered hand around her wrist. His grip was firm, but not painful.

"We need to talk," he said.

"What's wrong?"

"This," Snape replied, producing one of her empty phials from his pocket. He sat it down on the table beside her hand. Hermione sank back into her seat, staring at the phial.

"I...I told you...I told you it's just vitamins."

"Is that what you tell Potter and Weasley?"

"Yes, because it is the truth."

"Don't think I'm as moronic as those two, *Hermione*. The phial contained a powerful blood-thinning potion. Alfred Fritz's mixture, to be exact. It was developed over three hundred years ago by a prominent Potions master. Because of its potency, it is rarely used." He paused and let go of her wrist. "I would like to know why you are taking it."

"I have heart problems."

"Don't lie, Hermione. Heart problems can be solved with a much less potent and less expensive brew. What is wrong with your blood?"

She frowned, floundering for an acceptable excuse. "Wait," she said, narrowing her eyes at the man across from her. "How do you know what was in the phial? You'd need to perform a test with your wand to..."

Hermione trailed off when she saw him lift his sleeve to reveal his wand. "You left it this morning in your rush to get out of my flat. I put it to good use."

"I thought you didn't want it back."

"I plan on returning it to you as soon as you begin telling me the truth. What is wrong with you?"

"Only four people at St. Mungo's know," she said, dropping her chin to her chest.

"Then I'll make the fifth."

Hermione sighed and willed the waterworks out of her eyes. "Promise you won't repeat this."

"Who would I repeat it to? You're the only one I've spoken to since... the battle."

She laced her fingers together on the tabletop. "It was a curse. Just before we saw you in the Shrieking Shack, we encountered several Death Eaters in the halls of Hogwarts. One of them...I don't know who...threw the curse at me. It missed and bounced off a piece of armor lying in the hall. The remaining curse glanced off my leg." Hermione bent over and lifted the leg of her jeans just enough for Snape to see the starburst of angry red on her outer calf.

"It hurt for a moment, but afterward I felt no different. It wasn't until the next day that I began having chest pains. Harry and Ron were busy cleaning up the mess at Hogwarts, so I went to St. Mungo's on my own."

"*Cruento Profundus*." Snape looked sick, his face paler than usual.

Hermione's eyes widened. "Yes, that was the curse. How did you know?"

"It was a favorite among the Death Eaters. Within a minute, it coagulates the victim's blood until their heart cannot pump it without serious damage to the tissue."

She nodded. "That's what the Healers surmised as well. Nothing they gave me worked but Fritz's Blood Thinner. I was put on the lowest dosage possible, and it worked well for three months. When I started having chest pains and shortness of breath again, they raised the dosage. Every three to five months, they increase the dosage because my body and the curse have adjusted to the old dosage."

"This was an extremely high dosage," Snape said, gesturing to the phial on the table.

"I know. I've been taking it for two months. There are only two levels left."

"And then?"

She shrugged. "There is nothing else that can be done. Healer Gnecco has researched the curse and condition extensively. He can find nothing to permanently solve my problem."

Snape was silent, staring at her with a blank face and tumultuous eyes. "You're dying." His voice was flat and unemotional.

"Aren't we all?" Hermione replied with a soft smile.

Her flippancy seemed to anger him. "Don't play coy with me, Hermione. This is a serious matter."

"Don't worry about me, Professor. I'll be fine."

He scowled and slammed a hand down on the book in front of him. "Stop calling me 'professor,' Hermione."

His outburst made her jump back in her seat. All eyes in the café turned to regard the arguing pair. "What shall I call you, then?"

"Snape. Snape is fine. I would like to talk to this Healer at St. Mungo's, the one treating you."

She lifted her brows. "Of course, but don't you think it would be rather odd since you're supposed to be dead?"

Snape crossed his arms over his chest and looked away, obviously irritated. "I'll write him a missive, which you will deliver to him. He obviously isn't trying hard enough if he cannot cure your affliction."

His concern touched her, even if his volatile mood made her somewhat uncomfortable. She looked down to see his fingers clenched so tightly around the book that his knuckles were white and small blue veins were standing out on the back of his hand.

"Can we talk about something else?" she asked, watching him closely.

He looked up at her, his face paler than usual and his blank expression looking quite strained. "I'm not in the mood. I shall see you tomorrow."

Hermione watched as he gathered the book and newspaper and swept out the front door onto the sidewalk outside. She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. She felt like crying, but couldn't manage to conjure the tears.

"Dad said he saw you in Misuse of Muggle Artifacts last week," Ron said, sucking his noodles off awkwardly held chopsticks.

"We confiscated a Muggle radio modified to pick up wizarding stations," she explained, pushing the remains of her dinner toward Ron so he could finish it for her. She smiled when Harry did the same. Ron liked to eat for three.

"Did you ever see the man in the café?" Harry asked.

Hermione's eyes widened. "What man?"

"The Snape look-alike. Did you see him again?"

She felt her stomach flip-flop and thought her food might come crawling back up her esophagus. "Oh, *that*. No, I was probably just seeing things that night. You know how it goes. Poor fellow most likely thought I was crazy." She tried to force a smile, but it looked more like a grimace.

"Crazy is one of your more endearing qualities, 'Mione," Ron said with a half-full mouth of food.

Sensing a safe path of conversation, Hermione looked at Harry. "I don't know why I ever broke up with Ron, here. He's just so well-mannered."

Harry laughed and clapped Ron on the back. "You hear her, mate? You'll never get a steady girl if you don't learn how to eat with your mouth closed."

Ron swallowed the food and snorted. "Who says I want a steady girl?"

Harry and Hermione laughed. Hermione's mirth was mainly due to her escape from the close call with Harry. She had promised Snape that she would not tell anyone about his whereabouts, nor admit to anyone that she knew he was alive. It was difficult to lie to her two best friends, but she did not intend to ever bring Snape's confidence in her into doubt.

It had been four days since the evening when he had discovered her secret. They had not discussed her condition since, and any time Hermione brought it up, Snape dismissed it with a terse word or two. Things were different between them. He seemed much more distant and preoccupied. They no longer sipped coffee and made quiet conversation over poetry or current events. Everything seemed so forced and uncomfortable. She desperately wanted things to go back to the way they had been before.

She watched Ron shove the last of her rice into his mouth. He mumbled something around the rice about cleaning up. Grabbing all of the Chinese take-out containers, he carried them into the kitchen. She turned her head to see Harry watching her with his soft, green eyes.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded. "Sure."

"You just seem... worried."

"It's nothing. Probably stress from work."

"Hey!" Ron called from the kitchen. He stepped back into the living room where Hermione and Harry were sitting on the floor around the coffee table. "I've got a hot date tomorrow. I'm going to take some of Hermione's vitamins for, you know, stamina." He smiled, wagging his eyebrows, and waved the phial filled with bright orange potion in the air.

"Ron, no!" Hermione yelled, jumping up from her spot on the floor.

"Lay off, 'Mione. It's just vitamins." Ron pulled the stopper out and poured the contents down his throat in one go.

Hermione stumbled forward and knocked the phial out of his hand, but it was too late. He had already drunk the entire thing.

"Harry, we need to get him to St. Mungo's," she said, trying to suppress the hysteria in her voice.

Harry stood up and grabbed her by the shoulders. "Hermione, it was just your vitamins. He's fine."

"Actually, I'm feeling a bit dizzy," Ron admitted, placing a hand on the wall to stabilize himself.

"It's not vitamins; it's blood thinner. He could die," she said, grabbing Ron's arm and looking at Harry. "I'll meet you at St. Mungo's." She pulled her Ron closer to her and Disapparated with a crack.

Hermione stumbled into the Apparition room of St. Mungo's with Ron leaning heavily on her. Harry appeared a moment later, taking his friend's other arm and helping Hermione lead him into the admittance area.

A mediwitch rushed over when she saw Ron hanging between Hermione and Harry. "What's happened?"

"He's accidentally taken a blood thinner." Hermione fumbled in her pocket and produced a phial of her potion. "This," she said, shoving it into the mediwitch's hands.

Within moments, a Healer was called, and Ron was taken to a room. Hermione tried to still her shaking hands as she sat down on an uncomfortable wooden chair in the waiting room.

"What are you doing with blood thinner?"

Hermione looked up into Harry's face and started crying. She felt Harry's arms wrap around her and heard him whisper soothing words in her ear.

After she calmed herself, Hermione sniffed and pulled away to look at her friend. She knew she had to tell him the entire story, but she dreaded it.

By the time they were called back to Ron's room to see him, Hermione had confessed everything to Harry. She sat in the corner of the hospital room and listened to Harry repeat the tale to Ron, who seemed to be nearly back to good health.

She wanted to crawl under a rock when they both turned to her with expressions of betrayal and worry.

Author's Notes: I'm sorry for the delay in posting this chapter. I hope to have the remaining two chapters up soon. I'd offer an explanation of why I'm so late, but it really doesn't matter. Suffice it to say that health problems in my family and my SO's family have eaten up my time. Thank you to moonrevel and JenF for being wonderful people and betas!

Chapter 7: Anything

Chapter 7 of 8

Spoilers for DH!!! Hermione has problems of her own, but she can't resist trying to track down the man she saw in a small cafe just down the street from her new flat. He couldn't possibly be Severus Snape, could he?

CHAPTER 7: ANYTHING

Hermione slid into the seat across from Snape. He looked up at her, relief written across his face. It was like he had just stabbed her in the heart. *He* had been worried for *her* when she didn't show up at the café the previous day? Hermione felt an overwhelming urge to kiss him. Instead, she said, "I'm sorry."

"You look upset. You weren't ill, were you?" His black eyes scrutinized her, taking in every detail of her appearance.

"No, I wasn't ill. Ron drank one of my phials of Fritz's Blood Thinner."

"And is he well?"

"Yes, he's fine now."

Snape closed the book he had been reading. "Did you finally tell them the truth?"

"Yes," she said in a voice thick with unshed tears.

Hermione dropped her head to stare down at her lap while Snape watched her. She couldn't bear his intense gaze, yet almost cried out in distress when he stood to leave. His hand appeared in her line of sight, and she looked up to see him towering above her.

"I'd like to show you something," he said softly. "Will you come with me?"

"Of course," Hermione agreed, slipping her hand into his. He led her out of the café and gently pulled her down the street to his flat. All she could do was relish the giddy feeling she got from holding his hand. Tears were now the furthest thing from her mind.

Snape didn't release his hold on her until they arrived at his door. Slowly, he unlocked the flat and turned the knob. Hermione stepped into the dark room and waited for her eyes to adjust while Snape strode across the bare floorboards to turn on the single lamp across the room. He turned around, walked into the small kitchen, and hit a switch by the refrigerator.

The yellow light shown down upon an old cauldron. Several books and ingredients in different levels of preparation lay strewn about the counter.

"What is this?" Hermione asked, stepping into the kitchen to look down into the bubbling cauldron.

"I hope it is your cure," Snape replied from over her shoulder.

Hermione spun around to face him, realizing he was only inches from her body. "I...how did you...I mean, why are you doing this?"

"That's not important. The potion will be ready to test tomorrow morning."

"Is it a blood thinner?"

Snape shook his head once. A strand of hair fell out of the twine tying it back, and he absently tucked it behind an ear. "It should counteract the curse itself, not the symptoms. It was what I intended to write Healer Gnecco about, but I do not trust the staff at St. Mungo's to properly prepare such a delicate brew. I can make no promises, but I have hope it will work."

"How did you pay for this? These ingredients were expensive. Let me repay you."

"There is no need."

"But..."

He scowled at her. "I sold my mother's wedding ring. It provided me with more than enough money to purchase everything I needed."

"Weren't you seen?"

"I paid a young boy in Knockturn Alley to procure the items for me. He had no idea who I was."

"You shouldn't have done this."

Snape frowned down at her, but the stern look never reached his eyes. "I won't watch you die, Hermione. If that means I'll have to reenter the wizarding world, then so be it."

"But your mother's ring...you shouldn't have sold it."

"It meant little to me. To be perfectly honest, *you* mean more to me than that ring ever has."

Hermione reached behind her to grasp the counter for support. "I...I don't know what to say," she said in a breathy voice.

Snape tilted his head as he watched her. "A simple thank you would suffice."

He looked so vulnerable and accessible in that moment that she could not contain herself. Hermione lunged forward and wrapped her arms tightly around his neck. "Thank you, thank you, thank you," she murmured into his ear while she stood on the tips of her toes.

Snape's initial tension melted, and he leaned into her embrace, wrapping his arms around her. She sighed when she felt his fingertips press into the flesh of her back. They stood like that in the kitchen for several minutes, wrapped in each other's arms.

Hermione pulled back slightly and felt Snape's arms tighten around her waist. "You are definitely the most amazing person I have ever met," she whispered, pressing a kiss on his cheek, daringly close to the corner of his mouth. She let her lips linger on his warm flesh, her breath coming out in small puffs across his face.

Slowly, Snape turned his head to lightly brush his lips over hers. When she did not resist, he kissed her, his entire body trembling with restraint. She accepted and returned

the kiss with eager lips, cradling his face in her hands.

Abruptly, he broke away, forcefully pushing Hermione back. "I shouldn't be doing this."

"Why?" Hermione was breathless from the kiss, her world slightly askew from his passion.

Snape ran a hand roughly through his hair, pulling it out of the low ponytail. "I...I just shouldn't. I'm taking advantage of your friendship."

"You'd only be taking advantage if you were using me as a replacement for someone else," she murmured, afraid to say the words aloud and unsure of what his reaction would be.

His eyes locked with hers, his shock quite evident.

"I saw all the memories. I know about Lily," she explained. She knew he was aware of that fact, but he had never actually acknowledged it to her.

"You are not Lily," he said.

"No, I'm not."

"Your hair is the wrong color, and it is far too unruly. Your eyes are brown, not green." He stepped forward and brushed a single fingertip down her nose. "Your nose is the wrong shape...turned up a bit too much at the end. Your lips," he said, running that same finger over his bottom lip, "are too full. And your hips are too slender." One corner of his mouth turned upward as he looked down at the ground between them. "And your feet are much too large. Lily had very small feet."

Hermione tried to smile at him. "Thanks," she said in a dry voice.

"You're bossy, demanding, and so very persistent. Lily was kind and gentle and patient."

"Are you trying to run me out of your house?"

Snape chuckled and stepped into her body, pressing her back against the edge of the counter. "And yet... And yet, I still feel drawn to you." His eyes were dark and shining with light that went beyond the reflection of the sallow illumination of the fluorescent bulbs overhead.

She swallowed and placed her hands on his chest. Beneath the shirt, his skin felt like it might be on fire.

"You and Lily are alike in so many ways, yet always by different methods. And yet, you are nothing like her. Nothing at all."

"What are you trying to say?" Her voice was rough and unsure.

"All my life I measured any woman I met by Lily. None of them came close to being her, and I found I still lived in her shadow, even fifteen years after her death. No one could be her, so I couldn't be with anyone."

Hermione tried to pull away from him.

"Please let me finish," he whispered, blocking her escape. Once she turned her gaze back up to him, he continued. "You are *nothing* like her, and I *love* it." He lifted a hand to cradle her jaw in his palm, absently rubbing his thumb gently over her cheek. "Do you remember that day you came to the market and bought biscuits? You waited for my shift to end so we could eat the sweets on the bench outside."

Hermione nodded, watching him with a sense of awe, her stomach performing acrobatics just beneath her skin.

"I don't ever think I've felt happier than that day, at least not in the last twenty-five years. I felt like we were friends."

"We were...I mean, *we are*."

"I've not had many friends, as I'm sure you know. As someone I care about, I could not watch you die. You're a much better person than I will ever be, and I assure you, I would take that curse out of you and into myself if it would save you."

Hermione swallowed the lump forming in her throat and blinked away the tears. "I wouldn't let you do that because I care too much about you," she whispered, fondling one of the buttons on his shirt.

"After that day...the day we had the biscuits...I no longer thought about Lily while we were together. She began to feel like a distant part of my past, and I thought dwelling in the past would be silly when I have a beautiful, intelligent young woman in front of me. Sometimes you would look at me and smile, and I would feel like I'd lose my mind for you. 'Lily, who?' I'd think."

Hermione chuckled and pressed her forehead against his collarbone. Her wet eyes deposited little spots of moisture on his black shirt.

"I'm very well aware that you are not Lily, Hermione. I would never use you as her replacement, especially since you'd be so abysmal at it."

Playfully, she pulled away and punched his shoulder. "Prat."

Snape caught her fist and pulled it up to his mouth, kissing the back of her hand. "I *have* lost my mind," he murmured. "I've turned into a simpering fool."

"I think you're quite charming."

He smiled. "Shall I quote you poetry, now? Just to debase myself a bit more? Some Byron, perhaps? *'Oh! By my soul, I see thee yet, with eyes so languid, breast so fair, and lips, though silent, breathing love.'*"

When he opened his mouth to continue, he found he could not utter a word. Hermione's lips pressed against his, her tongue flicking timidly over his own tongue. Snape groaned and wrapped his arms around her again, pulling her against him and lifting her onto the counter.

"The ingredients," she mumbled against his mouth.

"What?" he asked, pulling back.

She laughed and shifted beneath his hands. "I'm sitting on something that very strongly resembles a Bezoar, though I can't say for sure."

Snape grabbed her around the waist and lifted her off the counter. His hands moved up to tangle in her hair as they kissed again. She felt light-headed and giddy with happiness as he ran his hands reverently over her body, tracing the curves beneath her bland Muggle attire.

"You should go before I do something you'll regret," he whispered in her ear.

"At this moment, I don't think you could possibly do anything I'd regret," she teased, sliding a hand down his abdomen to brush against the front of his trousers.

"Hermione," he warned, grabbing her hand and turning it away.

"Do you have a bed, or will we have to do this on the couch?"

His dark eyes flashed at her as he used his grip on her wrist to pull her into his body. "I didn't make my bed this morning. I'm quite ashamed." His voice was like molten lava running into her ear and down her neck.

"Making one's bed is a waste of time," Hermione said with a wink. "All your hard work is ruined at the end of the day when you have to crawl into bed to sleep or..."

"Or?" he asked with a devilish grin, pushing her toward the bedroom.

"Oh, you know..." She laughed as her back hit the closed bedroom door.

He reached around and turned the knob. They tumbled into the room. In the passionate rush to the bed, Hermione did note that his bedroom was as empty as his living room. There was only a small twin bed and a nightstand. His hands were pulling the hem of her shirt up her stomach and chest. She lifted her hands to allow him to take it off. Her jeans were discarded while she unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it to the side. Hermione fumbled with the clasp on his trousers while he did the same with the clasp on her bra. Eventually, they both succeeded and tossed the garments by the foot of the bed.

She squealed with surprise when he pushed her on the bed and followed her down on the thin mattress. "You're beautiful. I don't know what to do with you," Snape whispered in her ear.

"Make love to me," she replied, pressing her hips up into his. Taking advantage of the position, Snape hooked his fingertips into her knickers and dragged them over her raised hips and down her bare legs. Meanwhile, Hermione was concentrating on removing Snape's boxers. When he could wait for her no longer, he helped slide them down his narrow hips.

Before Hermione could even catch a glimpse of his naked body, he settled between her thighs. "Hermione..." he whispered, positioning himself at her entrance.

"Sev...Severus," Hermione cried out as he slid into her heat.

She clung to his arms and shoulders as he moved above her, filling her again and again. Her head was thrown back against the pillow, and his lips were pressed against the elegant column of her throat. His husky breath in her ear and the grinding of his hips into her own sent her flying into shuddering ecstasy. She faintly heard his soft, mumbled words.

"I'll do anything for you. Anything you want, Hermione."

Anything. The word held such weight when he used it. He had promised Dumbledore anything for Lily Potter's safety, and Hermione had known just how far that anything had extended. He'd nearly lost his life because of that promise. She was overwhelmed at the thought of him making a similar promise to her. Hermione looked up into his eyes as he lifted his face from her neck and realized what he had just said and how desperate he had sounded.

"Come for me," she whispered.

"Anything," he agreed, tensing in her arms as he spilled himself within her heat.

Hermione stroked the muscles in his back as he quivered from the release. She vowed that she would never use Severus like everyone else had, even if he had promised her anything.

Author's Note: Thank you to moonrevel and JenF for being amazing betas. The quote is Lord Byron (again) and is taken from 'Remind Me, Remind Me Not'.

Chapter 8: Returning

Chapter 8 of 8

Spoilers for DH!!! Hermione has problems of her own, but she can't resist trying to track down the man she saw in a small cafe just down the street from her new flat. He couldn't possibly be Severus Snape, could he?

CHAPTER 8: RETURNING

Hermione couldn't breathe. Her chest felt compressed and shot with pain. She whimpered and rolled over in bed, realizing when she nearly hit the floor that she was not in her own bed. That was secondary to the pain in her chest. She moaned and pressed a hand to the valley between her breasts in an effort to hold back the stabbing pain.

Suddenly, someone was there, helping her sit and pouring something that tasted like mint down her throat. She sputtered and coughed. "Drink it, Hermione," he whispered.

Him. Her former professor, turned friend, turned lover. She did as she was told and managed to swallow through the aching in her chest and body.

"Where is your potion?" His face was inches from her own when she finally opened her eyes. Had she not been in such a state, she would have laughed at his tousled hair.

"My jeans...in the pocket."

He left her for a moment, and she rolled over onto her side, curling up in a tight ball. Her potion. Stupid. She had forgotten to take the blood thinner last night before she went to bed. She had been distracted by him and his unchecked passion.

Snape's hands unfolded her body and lifted her into a sitting position again. He placed the cool lip of the phial against her mouth and poured the second potion down her throat. Within seconds, she felt better. Hermione tried to smile at Snape as he hovered over her, concern etched into his face.

"Was the first potion the cure?" she asked.

He nodded and pushed her hair back from her face. "Yes, however, it may take time for it to have any effect. As I said before, it is not a blood thinner."

Hermione stared into his eyes before leaning forward to pull him into an embrace. "Thank you," she whispered.

Somehow, he managed to push her back into the narrow bed and lie down beside her. She sighed against his bare chest as he tangled his fingers into her hair. "Hermione... I apologize for last night." His voice was soft and hesitant.

"Why are you apologizing?" she asked, her lips brushing across his smooth skin as she spoke.

His voice rumbled in his chest. "I let my desire for you get the better of me. I do not want to destroy our friendship; it means a great deal to me."

"Nothing has been destroyed, Severus." She pressed herself closer to his body, sliding a leg over his and placing a hand over his heart.

He was silent for several moments, his breath even and deep. Suddenly, she felt his fingertips trail down her spine, drawing a shudder of pleasure from her body. "You're naked," he whispered, a smile evident on his face, though she could not see it with her face nuzzled against his chest.

"Mmm..." Hermione giggled and darted her tongue out to lick his warm skin.

He responded by sliding his hand down and squeezing her backside. Hermione squealed and looked up into his face. His black eyes looked eager and filled with desire.

"I want you to come back with me," she said.

"To your flat?"

"To our world...the wizarding world."

"Hermione..."

She pressed her fingertips against his lips. "Please. I feel like I'm living a double life. I want you to be a part of everything, not just evenings after seven o'clock."

"They think I'm dead," he murmured around her fingers.

"We'll show them you aren't."

"Hermione, that isn't my life anymore."

She pulled back from his tight embrace. "Now you're the one who is lying. You've been using your wand *and* brewing potions in the last few days. How is that not part of your life?"

He sighed. "I did that for you."

"Then do this for me."

He watched her in silence. The only sound was the morning traffic on the street outside his window.

"Do you remember what you said last night?" she asked in a small voice.

Snape nodded.

"You said you would do anything for me."

He nodded again.

"I'm not going to make you return. I'm not going to hold that promise over your head like Dumbledore did, but I do want you to be part of my life." Hermione sighed heavily. "Ultimately, it's your choice. If you decide you'd rather live as a Muggle, then I'll still come see you everyday. I'd just prefer if I didn't have to hide what we have."

"And what do we have?"

She looked away shyly. "Amazing sex?"

Her attempt at levity made him laugh.

"More than that," she added, her expression melting into something more serious. "I just don't know if I'm ready to admit to it."

Deftly, he pulled her over to rest on top of his body, her legs sliding to either side of his hips. The white sheet that had hidden her body from him slithered down her back to pool on his thighs. "I concede defeat," he whispered, running his hands over her exposed flesh, lingering on the swell of her breasts and the gentle curve of her hips. "I'll return. I'll keep my wand. I'll stomach the dirty looks from the populous. I'll even be nice to Harry bloody Potter." He lifted his eyes from her body to her face. "If," he amended, "you allow me the pleasure of seeing you like this each morning."

She blushed, her hands resting on his bare chest. "I'll be late for work each morning, then."

"You can afford to be; they'd never sack you."

Hermione's laugh turned into a gasp of surprise when he raised his hips and pressed his insistent erection into her backside. "Your boxers are in the way," she whispered, leaning down and pressing her breasts against him. She laughed again when he struggled beneath her, trying to get the garment off so he could indulge in her flesh.

Severus was sitting on her bed, waiting for her to retrieve him. Harry and Ron had just arrived by Floo. They had been working, but her urgent call made them come running, especially since she had not answered their Floo calls after the incident in the hospital. They were sitting on the couch beneath her eastern window, the sunshine revealing all the dust motes floating around their heads.

"Are you okay, Hermione?" Harry asked, watching his friend pace the floor in front of them. "If this is about the curse, don't worry. Ron and I are going to help you. We'll fix this."

"This isn't about the curse, Harry." She took a steadying breath before continuing. "Remember a few weeks ago when I told you I saw Professor Snape in the café down the street?"

Harry and Ron gave each other a meaningful look before turning back to Hermione. "Yes," they both said.

"I know I told you that I must have been imagining it, that I had mistaken someone else for Severus."

"Severus?" Ron asked, curling his nose up at her choice of name.

Hermione brushed away his question. "I lied to you about that. He's alive, and I can prove it."

"Hermione, this is insane," Harry said. "We saw him die."

"He escaped, Harry. He had developed an antivenin and escaped after we left the Shrieking Shack."

"And what's this evidence you have?" Ron asked.

Hermione wrung her hands as she crossed the room and opened her bedroom door. "Severus?"

Before he even saw Snape, Harry jumped out of his seat. He crashed back onto the couch when his former professor emerged from Hermione's bedroom.

"Blimey..." Ron muttered, his eyes wide and disbelieving.

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley." Snape inclined his head slightly in their direction.

"This isn't possible," Harry said, standing back up and walking over to Snape. "It's someone who's tricked you, Hermione. Polyjuice or something." He pulled his wand out and pointed it at Snape.

"Harry, stop!" Hermione jumped between the two men. "Don't you trust me? I know for a fact this is Severus Snape, so put your wand away right now."

"Bloody hell..." Ron said, still sitting on the couch in shock.

"Hermione," Snape said, gently curling his fingers over her shoulder. She stepped aside to allow him a chance to speak. "What will convince you, Mr. Potter? Shall I recount the memories I gave to you before the venom paralyzed me momentarily?"

"All right," Harry said, "tell me... tell me how I found the Sword of Gryffindor."

"You were camping in the forest. I left the Sword in the bottom of a small pond and sent my Patronus, a doe, to guide you to the location. Had I known the danger of your wearing the bloody locket while going after the Sword, I would have done something to stop you. You were nearly strangled to death by the chain until Mr. Weasley stepped in to pull you out and retrieve the Sword himself."

Harry's mouth opened and closed, no sound issuing from it. "I...how...how did you survive?"

"Sit down, Mr. Potter. I believe I should explain myself."

Hermione closed her eyes and rested her head on the flat pillow beneath her head. Lavender Brown was standing over her with her wand out, ready to perform the bi-weekly exam. It was the first time she had been to St. Mungo's after taking Snape's potion.

She had wanted Severus to come to the appointment with her, but only a few people knew he was alive. The only other person they told was Minerva, who was making plans to offer Severus his position of Potion master back. Severus had spent the past week assuring Hermione that he would officially return to the wizarding world once they knew the status of her health.

Lavender gasped.

"What?" Hermione asked, opening her eyes.

"Something must be wrong with my wand," Lavender said, shaking it back and forth. "Let me find Healer Gnecco."

Hermione chewed on her bottom lip and waited in silence. A moment later, Harry and Ron rushed into the room, skidding to a stop before the exam table.

"Why didn't you tell us your appointment was today?" Ron asked, bending over and sucking in air.

"I don't need someone to hold my hand, Ronald. How did you know I was here?"

"Snape told us," Ron answered rather loudly.

"Shhh!" Harry and Hermione shushed him, and Harry clapped his friend on the back of the head.

Ron shrugged. "Sorry," he mumbled.

"He said that if he couldn't be with you, then we should come," Harry whispered.

Healer Gnecco and Lavender swept back into the room. "I don't understand it. I tried the charm twice," Lavender told him as they approached the exam table.

"The same one we have been using on her from the beginning?" the man asked, looking down at the angry red starburst on Hermione's calf.

Lavender made a sound of annoyance. "Well, of course! What other charm would I use?"

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked, lifting her head from the pillow.

"Please lie back down, Miss Granger. I'm just going to check the status of your illness. Have you noticed any increased symptoms since your last visit?"

"No. Why?" Hermione's voice was strained and panicked.

"What's going on?" Harry asked.

"Please stand aside, Mr. Potter." The tip of Healer Gnecco's wand glowed blue as he swept it over her leg and up her torso. "This can't be," he murmured under his breath.

"What? What is it?" Hermione asked, lifting her head so she could see his wand.

Harry threw himself over her, pulling her into a hug. Suddenly, Ron was on the other side of the table, hugging her as well. "It's gone!" Harry exclaimed.

"The old bat's potion must have worked after all!" Ron said, squeezing her so hard she could barely breath.

"Shh!" Harry hissed, punching Ron's shoulder and throwing a look at Lavender and Healer Gnecco.

Ron released Hermione. "This secrets thing is for the birds," he muttered.

Snape was sitting in an armchair in her flat when she got home. He had obviously been staring at the door in anticipation of her arrival. "Hey," she said, throwing her bag on the table by the entrance.

"Don't play with me, Hermione. What were the results?" He stood from the chair and crossed the room.

"You sent Harry and Ron," she replied.

He scowled at her. "Yes, I sent them."

"Why?"

"I didn't want you to hear the results alone. Hermione, tell me. I'm losing my mind."

Finally, she let the grin she had been holding back break across her face. "Your potion worked; they found no residual traces of the curse in my body. I have a few bottles of Fritz's Blood Thinner, but Healer Gnecco suspects I won't need it any longer."

She stumbled back several steps at the force with which Severus threw himself at her. His arms wrapped tightly around her, and he captured her mouth in a deep kiss when she looked up at him in surprise. "I was worried," he replied after pulling away from her swollen lips.

Hermione playfully pushed his shoulder. "I don't know why you would be; you're the one who developed the potion, after all. You're many things, but you are *not* modest about how brilliant you are."

Stepping around him, she kicked her shoes off. Severus's shoes were sitting beneath the table by the door. She smiled at the sight. He had been practically living in her flat for a week. After he told Harry and Ron his story, Hermione talked him into moving his meager possessions into her place so he could reacquaint himself with the wizarding world. In reality, they both knew he had moved in with her so they could sleep in the same bed.

"Thank you for sending Harry and Ron to see me," she said, turning around to find him standing over her.

"They suspect something between us."

Hermione nodded. "I know. I've been waiting for you to tell them that you're shagging their best friend."

He grinned and shook his head. "I shall relish the astonishment in Mr. Potter's eyes when I confess." Pausing, he glanced down at her discarded shoes. "You took your shoes off. Does that mean you're not returning to work this afternoon?"

She smiled at the glimmer of mischief in his eyes. "Did you have plans?" she asked.

"A celebration, perhaps? I hear the Healer has given you a clean bill of health."

Hermione giggled as Severus stalked her across the floor of her flat, pushing her through the bedroom door. She fell onto the mattress and watched him slowly unbutton his shirt, never taking his eyes off of her prone body. He looked so happy and carefree that it was difficult to reconcile the man in front of her with her surly Potions professor from years ago. Although, his lowered guard did allow her to see glimpses of the boy and man in the memories Harry had returned to their rightful owner.

"I want to arrange an interview for you with the *Daily Prophet*," she said, staring at his pale chest as he revealed it.

"Why?"

"So we don't have to go around and tell everyone individually."

He pulled his shirt off and climbed over her, bracing his hands on either side of her head. "You're determined to paint me as some sort of tragic hero. Aren't you afraid all the witches with a penchant for a tortured soul will come flocking to my doorstep?"

Hermione slid her hand down to unzip his trousers. "No, because you'll also be telling the *Prophet* about your wonderful girlfriend."

Snake's hips jerked when she slipped her hand inside his boxers. "Girlfriend?" he asked, grunting with pleasure.

"Me, silly," she replied, giving him a petulant look before wrapping her fingers around his shaft.

"We need a better plan to deter those rabid witches. Shall I confess to some unfortunate protégé of Rita Skeeter's that I am madly in love with Harry Potter's best friend?"

Hermione's heart skipped a beat, but she tried to play it cool. "Ron? You're madly in love with Ron?"

"You..." he growled, pinning her to the bed with a demanding kiss. "I'm madly in love with you, you silly girl."

She smiled, her hand still buried inside his boxers, stroking him. Hermione couldn't recall ever being so happy and fulfilled. "I love you, too," she whispered.

THE END

Author's Note: Sorry for the delay in getting this chapter up! Hope everyone enjoyed the fic. A huge thank you to moonrevel and JenF for their assistance as betas!