

The Second Time Around

by cocoachristy

Severus overhears something that causes him to push Hermione away. Can he reel her back in when he realizes he's made an error?

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 2

Severus overhears something that causes him to push Hermione away. Can he reel her back in when he realizes he's made an error?

Disclaimer: All things Harry Potter belong to JKR. I'm making no money from this.

A/N: Many thanks go to my awesome beta, Southern_Witch_69. This fic is for the exchange for the prompt:

3. Hermione left England after the war. She is called back for the reading of Minerva's will and finds out she now shares a house with Snape. Slight angst, humor, ust, romance and a good ending.

Recipient: Isis_and_Neit

I hope this fits all of the requirements! Enjoy!

The Second Time Around

Severus Snape was in a very good mood. Not so rare for him these days. If anyone had bothered to look, they would have seen just a slight bounce in his step as he made his way to the staff room.

School was starting in two weeks, and Headmistress McGonagall wanted to have a brief staff meeting, mainly to introduce the new staff. Severus smiled to himself. Hermione Granger would be a part of the new staff.

They had been together since Christmas, and things couldn't be more perfect for him. He'd never believed in the saying 'perfect for each other' until she came into his life. The Potions master could honestly say that there was not anyone else more suited for him than her.

Things had looked bad for him after the fall of the Dark Lord, mainly due to the death of Albus Dumbledore and his part in that. After a very lengthy trial, both he and Draco Malfoy had been exonerated. However, victory for him had been bitter sweet.

He'd spent a week at his home at Spinner's End succumbing to self-pity laced with bourbon until Minerva McGonagall came and gave him what for, telling him to stuff his self-pity and sober his drunken arse up because she needed a Potions professor and he had one week to return to Hogwarts so that they could ready the school for the next year. Severus chuckled at that memory.

Once he'd returned, he discovered that Hermione Granger would be taking Flitwick's place as Charms professor after studying under him for a year. It didn't matter to him one way or the other, except for even more guilt he'd felt where she was concerned.

Her parents had gone missing when the last days of the battle had heated up, and Severus had no idea what had happened to them. After everything was said and done, they had all searched high and low, every place Severus or Draco could think of, but still nothing.

Severus had no doubt that they were dead, but his Hermione still held out hope that one day they would be discovered. He knew that the hope was much crueler than the truth.

He remembered the night his life had truly begun...when he'd discovered that Hermione was no longer a bothersome student, but a lovely young woman. It had been a few days before school would begin for the first time after the war...

He had been outside walking around the lake, enjoying the slight breeze when Hermione stumbled to the edge of the lake and fell hard to the ground on her bottom. At that time, she'd still been apprenticing under Flitwick.

"Miss Granger? Have you hurt yourself?"

"No, okay here...nothing to see," she told him before she fell into a fit of giggles.

With a stern expression on his face, Severus demanded, "You're drunk! Absolutely pissed!"

"Right in one," Hermione agreed as she lifted her red wine to toast him and then drank straight from the bottle. "Gonna get drunker. Do ya want ta join me then?"

After a long, hard stare, Severus shrugged and sat beside her, accepting the offered bottle and taking a drink. "What's the occasion?"

"Life."

He didn't comment for a while. Life was occasion enough for him to get pissed many times, so who was he to judge? When the guilt of her parents once again consumed him, he simply said, "I'm sorry. This world hasn't been kind to you, has it?"

For some reason, Hermione found that utterly hilarious and fell to her back in gut clenching laughter. "I should say not!" Then she suddenly fell silent.

"It's the not knowing. It drives me insane at times such as these when all is quiet and I've nothing to do."

When she looked up at him, the moonlight made the tears in her eyes that much brighter. He had to turn away. "I should go. I thank you for the drink."

When he started to rise, she grabbed his arm as if panicked. "Please, don't go yet! I... get tired of being alone." She released his hand and sat up, pulling up her knees, placing her forehead on them. "Harry, spends most of his time with Ginny, as he should, and Ron, well, he'd meet me I suppose, but really, he just doesn't understand. Not the most sensitive bloke, Ron."

Severus sat back down. "I don't know what to say to you."

"You don't have to say anything. Just sit with me."

"I suppose even my company is better than being alone?"

Hermione looked up at him then. "What do you mean?" She took another long drink as she looked into his eyes. "I've enjoyed your conversations this past week... when you've deemed me worthy of them."

He snorted. "Sure. Even after all I've done to you. I can see why you would want to spend time with me."

Hermione poured the rest of the liquor on the ground beside her as if it was suddenly making her ill. "What have you done to me specifically?"

He looked at her as though she had lost her senses. "You mean besides my cruelty during your school years? I couldn't find your parents," he whispered softly.

"Did you have a part in taking them?" she silently asked.

"No, of course not!" He'd wondered why she'd never asked him that before, especially after he had been cleared of murdering Albus. She began to rub her temples, and Severus wondered if she was getting a headache.

Looking back towards the lake, she simply said, "Then you've done nothing to me." She shrugged. "I've learned to leave the past in the past; life is too short to do otherwise. I would like for us to be friends, if you'd be agreeable."

And thus began their relationship. He smiled, remembering her shouting as he left their rooms for the staff meeting. "Severus! Tell Minerva I'll be there directly, but for Merlin's sake, don't tell her why I'm late, you cad!"

Just as he approached the door, he heard the middle of an ongoing conversation. The smile immediately left his face.

"...If it weren't for him. I wonder if she feels sorry for the man." This came from Sprout.

"It's likely," Vector agreed. "You know how Granger always had a thing for the underdog and lost causes. Remember the house-elves? That kneazle she rescued? She's a bleeding heart, she is, but this time it's going to personally cost her."

"I know!" Sprout said. "Why, I could hardly believe she turned down that Ministry job as an Unspeakable! Something of that sort would be right up her alley, I say. But she stays here, accepting this job, because she won't leave Snape. And that man, he just selfishly lets her! She's much too brilliant for this place, but he refuses to see it...to let her grow."

"Don't you two have enough to worry on without discussing things that are none of your business?" Minerva demanded, hands on hips. "You know nothing of Hermione or her feelings!"

"We know she's wasting her life," Vector insisted. "If it weren't for Snape, she'd go out and get herself a life!"

"She has a life *with* Severus!"

Both Sprout and Vector snorted. "What kind though?" Sprout asked. "He'll ruin her. Nobody will think she's so great now that she's with him. He only holds her back."

"Severus!" Hermione laughed. "What are you doing standing out here?"

"Nothing," he said shortly. "Let's enter."

By the expression on his face when he'd walked in, Minerva knew that Severus had heard. She knew that those careless, thoughtless, and highly untrue words about

Hermione and her feelings would cause Severus to do something he would later regret. A feeling of dread curled itself in the pit of her stomach, but now was not the time to address it. She'd have to speak with him in private after the meeting.

"Severus, I'd like a word with you after the meeting."

"Of course," he answered blandly, taking his seat and looking straight ahead.

Hermione was confused with his sudden change of mood. "What's the matter, love?"

"We will discuss it later."

She looked at him for a few more moments, wondering why he wouldn't look her in the eye. Shrugging it off for the moment, she turned her full attention to Minerva. They'd most definitely talk later.

~~~~~

Severus waited until the last lingering person had gone before he turned towards his boss. "What can I do for you, Minerva?"

"You can pay no attention to what those two biddies were saying. They know nothing of your relationship with Hermione."

"Did you know the Ministry had offered her a job?" When she said nothing, his voice rose, but he wasn't quite yelling. "Well? Did you?"

"Yes, I did. What of it? She doesn't want to work for the Ministry."

Severus laughed bitterly. "Right. She'd rather work here...teaching dunderheads all day long and being cooped up with me."

Even though she noted the sarcasm, Minerva beamed as if he'd just completed the most difficult Transfiguration assignment she'd ever assigned. "Exactly!"

"Come off it! She never even mentioned it to me. Not a word."

"Really, Severus, there was no need to. You'd only react badly to something that was a moot point. She'd never even considered it."

"When did she get the offer?"

Minerva looked down and then back up. Defeated, she told him. "The first of the year."

"You mean to tell me that she's known for seven months and has never uttered one word to me?"

Minerva was beginning to panic. He was becoming angrier, not calming as she'd intended. "As I've told you, there was no need for her to say anything. She didn't want the job, Severus."

"An ambitious woman like her? Full of intelligence and ideas? I should have been told!" he yelled, slamming his fist on the table.

"Severus, please listen to reason. She..."

"Enough, Minerva."

"What are you going to do?"

"Make the decision easy for her by taking one of the reasons away. We've run our course at any rate, and you'd better not whisper a word of this to her."

"Severus, please..." Her pleas sounded on deaf ears as he turned and walked out the door, slamming it in his wake.

~~~~~

Hermione was sitting on the couch reading his latest Potions journal when Severus walked in. "Severus! Did you read this article by..."

"We need to talk, Hermione."

Her stomach dropped as her brow furrowed. "All right," she said calmly as she placed the journal on the table and turned to face him. "What is it?"

"This isn't working for me any longer. It's time to move on," he said.

"This?"

He moved his hand back and forth between them. "You and me. I think our time together has run its course, Hermione. I want you to gather your things and go back to your own rooms."

"No, I'll not. Not without a tangible reason." She stood, placing her hands on her hips. "You seemed just fine with the course our relationship was on this morning."

"The reason is that I'm finished with you." Severus knew in order to get her to go, he'd have to be cruel. His heart bled as he looked at her coldly. All he had to do was keep reminding himself this was for her...he couldn't think of his own feelings.

"Finished with me? Just like that," she asked as she snapped her fingers. "No."

"I've never really been a one woman man, Hermione. You're crowding me. I need space."

"What are you on about? What's changed since you left this morning?"

"Nothing, really. I've been feeling this way for some time now." Severus turned from her, and her bright brown eyes filled with tears.

"There's someone else," she stated blandly.

"Not yet," he told her as her words caused inspiration. "But I do have my eye on someone. We've talked, and she's interested. I have ~~not~~ cheated on you," he said as he faced her. He'd not have her thinking that. "So, I'm letting you know now."

Her chin trembled, but she stuck it out. "You would throw what we have away for some one-night stand?"

It was time for the final twist of the knife that he'd stabbed through her heart; the one he knew would push her away. Grinning cockily, he told her, "Well, hopefully we'll have more than one night together."

"You bastard," she whispered under her breath.

"I've never said otherwise. I'll go so that you can gather your belongings."

"You love me, Severus. I know it. You can say what you will, but I see it when I look in your eyes. When you hold me...love me."

"Like every other woman, you see what you wish to."

She looked down as if she couldn't look at him any longer. "So, this is it?" Hermione raised her hands in the air and dropped them back to her sides. "You've decided you're finished with me, and I have no say in the matter?"

"There's nothing for you to say. It's over."

"Fine! I won't beg you! I'll go, but know this. You've just thrown away someone who loves you unconditionally. Warm yourself with that during the night after you've tossed your other woman aside...or she tosses you."

"It wouldn't matter to me, Hermione. I'd only find another to replace her."

"You can be alone the rest of your life if that's what you want, Severus, but I don't intend to be! I want a family, marriage, and children."

"Oh," he drawled, "I don't plan on being alone, per se."

"I don't consider moving from one woman to the next sharing your life with someone. Make no mistake, I love you, and it's you that I want, but I can't make you want me back. Someone else will..."

He turned and walked out without a backward glance, unable to listen to any more.

~~~~~

The next week, Hermione left London for the Charms position at the Salem Institute in America, unable to face seeing Severus Snape everyday. It had been three years since then, and Hermione was content if not happy.

Hermione walked into her flat...no, apartment; it's apartment here...and dropped her mail on the small table by the door. She'd had a trying day.

She was very glad that today had ended this school year, more than ready for the summer to begin. It seemed that the closer to the end of term, the rowdier the students became. *Lord, I hope we were never that bad* she thought, though she knew that Harry, Ron and she were probably much worse.

Sighing with fatigue, she walked into her small kitchen to study the contents of her pantry *Not much to eat in here*. She immediately brightened when she found a can of soup.

Hermione poured the soup into a bowl and used her wand to heat it. She placed it on her kitchen table and then went to get her mail. She'd go through it while she ate, Hermione decided, so that she could soak in the tub when she finished.

She started to pick up the copy of the *Daily Prophet* she continued to get, but the formal envelope on Hogwarts-like stationary caught her eye. *What in the world?*

Her hands began to tremble. She'd kept in touch with Ron, Harry, and Ginny. Occasionally, Minerva would drop her a line. But nobody had ever sent her anything so... formal.

She immediately thought of her parents. *No, if they'd been found, I would be getting a letter from the Ministry...not Hogwarts. Is Minerva trying to offer me the Charms position again? No, she'd never used this sort of stationary before, except when sending Hogwarts acceptance letters for first years.*

She started to open it when a knock sounded on her door. Hermione laid the letter back on the table and tried to run her fingers through her tangled mass of curls.

When she got to the door, she flung it open in an irritated manner, already knowing who was on the other side. "Yes, Daniel, what can I do for you?"

"What do you mean?" he asked. "We have a date tonight!"

"No," she said angrily, "we do not. You asked, and I turned you down. Again."

"Why do you keep avoiding the inevitable? I want you."

Hermione rolled her eyes. She looked at Daniel. He was an extremely good-looking wizard with dark, curly hair, big baby-blue eyes, and a wonderful body. She had no doubt that most times all he had to do was crook his finger to have women running to him. Likely that was why he was still after her for the past year; she didn't come running.

Hermione had only dated a few men since moving to Salem, and only one had been a serious relationship. At first, it was because she wasn't over *him*. And now, well, she just didn't have the inclination. Right now, her mind was on her teaching. *He* was just a memory she kept in the deepest part of her heart.

"Daniel, I'm not going to go on a date with you. You're wasting your time sniffing around me."

Fire lit his eyes as he narrowed them. "Why don't you just admit that you're a lesbian? Otherwise, someone like you would never turn down someone like me."

*Oh. My. God.* "Excuse me? Someone like *me*? I think you'd better explain that, Daniel."

"Well," he said, looking her up and down, "you're not exactly the Playwizard type, are you?"

Hermione folded her arms over her chest and raised an eyebrow. "No, I'm not indeed. So why don't you BUGGER OFF?" She slammed the door in his face and started back to the kitchen.

She ranted to herself all the way back to the kitchen. "Sodding imbecile! Just who does he think he is? Bloody wanker! Like he's doing me a favor! I should've hexed his arse into next week!"

Hermione stopped her ranting and took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. Once she'd sat back down at her kitchen table, she discovered she'd lost her appetite. Once again, the Hogwarts letter caught her attention. Not knowing why the ball of dread had landed in her stomach, Hermione picked up the letter and opened it. She'd been mistaken; it wasn't from Hogwarts, but some barrister.

She let out a cry of distress and placed her hand over her mouth, reading aloud the one sentence that jumped out at her.

*"Regret to inform you that Minerva McGonagall, Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry has died of Dragon Pox..."*

"NO!" She dropped the letter. Hermione couldn't stop the flood of tears...didn't try to. "But I thought that there's a cure for dragon pox?" She picked the letter up once more, continuing to read as she wiped her tears.

*...New variation of this disease with no known cure. Your presence is requested for the reading of her will...*

She placed the letter back down, leaned back in her chair, and closed her eyes. She'd not been back to London in three years, except for the birth of her god-daughter, Lillian Molly Potter, and even then, she'd only been there for two days.

*Minerva...* Hermione thought, as she continued to silently cry. Minerva had been like a second mum to her after her own had gone missing. She really had no choice. Hermione Granger was going to have to go back to London... and Hogwarts.

~~~~~

Severus sat at the desk in his office, thinking of all the details he needed to see to. He couldn't move. After seeing the children off safely, he hurried back to his office to make a list.

Both the quill and parchment lay on the table untouched. Severus simply couldn't believe that Minerva was gone. "Bloody sodding dragon pox! A new variation!" Sighing, Severus rose to pace, unable to sit still.

When he'd discovered that St. Mungo's did not have a potion to help his long-time friend, the Potions master had begun working tirelessly to create an antidote himself. His efforts proved fruitless, however, as she'd died. She was the third to die in the past month of this mysterious variation.

He sat back down and put his head in his hands. Minerva had been his last *true* friend. Oh, he had acquaintances, but nothing solid. *Hermione...* The name popped into his mind unsolicited and unwanted. *Will she be here? Will she come to say goodbye to an old friend?* Part of him hoped that she would, and part of him hoped that she wouldn't.

He'd thought for a long time that Hermione had married Viktor Krum and was working in some Ministry job. He'd picked up the *Daily Prophet* one morning, and the headline had been **Bulgarian Quidditch Star Viktor Krum Marries** He'd immediately set the paper down and left it.

Knowing that his Hermione...no, not *his*...had left the country, he could only surmise that it had been her who Viktor had married. She'd warned him; he had to give her that. She'd made it no secret she wanted marriage and children.

He'd always known that the Bulgarian had never stopped wanting her because Severus had read the letters that Krum had written her right after the war had ended, begging her back.

Severus would never allow anyone to speak of her. Whenever Minerva brought her up, he simply told her to change the subject or he was leaving. He had to survive, damn it! Then one morning when Minerva had had enough, she'd simply told him that Hermione was not married to Viktor and that she would be much obliged if he would stop moping about the castle and scaring the children to tears.

Yes, Hermione will be here. It's not her nature to do otherwise. I will just have to deal with it... It will only be for a day. How hard can that be?

~~~~~

Severus sat in his chair, facing forward, back straight. The crowd was starting to gather, and he didn't wish to see or speak with anyone. The sooner this was over, the better.

He heard Potter and his wife speaking to Weasley, reminiscing about Minerva and her classes. Severus almost smiled remembering her lessons himself *Damn it, Minerva! I am going to miss you, you old tabby!*

Severus was thrown from his thoughts when he heard, "Hermione!" from Mrs. Potter's mouth. He couldn't control himself; he had to look. Just a glimpse.

No, his heart didn't stop when his Hermione walked into the room. It started. He hadn't realized until that moment how hollow his chest had been.

Hermione stopped mid-stride and looked directly into his eyes. He felt the sting like a curse to his solar plexus. It seemed like hours had passed, but it had only been seconds. Severus cocked an eyebrow, willing her to speak to him. Of course, she refused. She walked straight to where her friends were sitting and took her seat, but she kept glancing at him as if she still cared. *She couldn't possibly. Could she? Curious...*

"If I can have everyone's attention please?" the barrister said from the front of the room.

Hermione immediately turned her attention to the front of the room without sparing Severus another look once the barrister started speaking. On the inside, he was dying a slow death. On the outside, he was calm, cool, and collected.

Severus had been so busy watching and contemplating Hermione the last thirty minutes that he just heard the ending of what the barrister was saying. "...Severus Snape and Hermione Granger for the duration of three months. If they fail to meet these regulations, the house will be donated to the Ministry of Magic."

Hermione jumped to her feet, face full of fury. "What? That's utterly ridiculous! I can't stay here three months! I don't even live in this country any longer!"

"Be that as it may, Miss Granger, the specifications of this will are quite clear. Either you do as instructed or the house is turned over to the Ministry," the barrister informed her.

"So what? I don't live here any longer, as I've said, so the house is of no use to me." She shut her eyes tightly, like she'd hurt herself by saying that. "No, I didn't mean that as it sounded."

"Let me be sure I understand you, Stanly," Severus interrupted, looking at the barrister and making sure to not look at...her. "Minerva has left her home to Ms... Granger and me, but we have to live there together for three months to claim it?"

"Yes, that's it exactly, Severus. Many years ago, an old relation of some sort of Minerva's wanted his daughter to wed someone not of her choosing. To ensure she stayed put, as this one had a habit of running away, he'd made a contract with the Ministry. The young girl loved the house, you see, as this was her heritage, and this kept her there."

"Well then," Hermione asked, confused, "who did Minerva live there with?"

Both Stanly and Severus gave her a pitying look. "Why, Albus of course!" Stanly told her. "Who else?"

"But... they weren't married for heaven's sake!" Hermione protested.

Chuckling, Severus finally spoke to her. "I don't recall the contract saying anything of marriage. Stanly?"

"No, it doesn't. Back when the contract was originally written, folks never even considered living together without marriage. So at that time, it was a moot point."

Hermione sat, and Severus watched her wilt. This angered him for no obvious reason. He had no right to expect her to suddenly feel as he did, but he expected it nonetheless. "I suppose you wouldn't care that a home that has been in Minerva's family for at least two centuries is turned over to those bureaucratic wankers?" *Of course*

*not...she is one of those bureaucratic wankers!*

"I never said that," Hermione snapped back. "How dare you assume my feelings? But I can't just pack up and move back here. I have duties, obligations!"

"Duties," Severus said as if it was a dirty word. "Things more important than this, I suppose."

"That's not entirely fair, Snape! It's not as if *you* would have to change much! When the new school year starts, you can just Floo or even Apparate to work. It would be a bit much for me to do so. And I do have a life and other obligations...in another country, no less."

"So you're saying that because Minerva's wishes inconvenience you, there will be no compromising, no bending. Tsk. Tsk. I expected more from you."

"Now just a minute, Snape!" Ron stood as he yelled. Hermione held up a hand to stop his outburst.

"Perhaps it would be wise for you not to expect anything from me. I do so hate to... disappoint you," she told him sarcastically.

"Hmm. How very trite of you, my dear. What of the house-elves? She had twenty at my last count."

Hermione went white. She hadn't even thought of that. "We'll send them here!"

"Sorry, Miss Granger, that won't be possible," Stanly told her. "Unless you live in the house with Severus for three months, they won't be your property to send here. They will belong to the Ministry, where they'll be given out to the workers there."

"Oh, my God." Hermione sat back down, rubbing her eyes with the thumb and forefinger of her left hand, remembering the way that Lucius Malfoy had treated Dobby. She sighed heavily. "All right. I'll need to make some arrangements. When do I have to move in?"

"You have one week from the time of death," Stanly said in his matter of fact voice. "That leaves you four days, Miss Granger."

She growled, deep and low, a sign that those close to her, including Severus, knew that she was becoming increasingly angrier. "Why did you not inform me before now? Do you not understand my predicament, sir? I cannot just up and... leave my life with only four days notice!" She flung her hands up and then dropped them ceremoniously.

"Well, pardon me! I certainly couldn't go against the law and just let you know everything, young woman! I had procedures to follow! I had to read this will in front of all present. There was absolutely no *legal* way I could have informed you before now!"

"All right, all right," she said wearily. "Don't get your panties in a twist!"

Harry snapped his head in her direction. "Huh? What was that?"

Hermione waved him away. "Nothing... Some saying I picked up in America."

*America?* Severus thought. He was happy to have won the argument at first, but now that the situation was becoming real, he realized that he was going to have to live in the same house with her for three months. He shuddered.

Because Severus had worked himself to a state, his voice was very sharp when he asked, "I suppose you won't be living there alone?" He had no illusions. Someone like Hermione would certainly have a lover. She'd made it clear she didn't intend to be alone, and he did recall those two busy bodies...Sprout and Vector...talking about some bloke she'd seemed to be serious about.

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "Of course not! You'll be there, won't you?"

"Who else besides me?" he asked her through gritted teeth.

She looked genuinely confused. He had to hand it to her; she must be brilliant as an unspeakable. "Um... I'm not bringing anyone else, Snape. I just need to go and take care of some business, gather some personal things, stuff like that. What's it to you then?" she asked him, irritated.

"Not a damn thing." He rose, turning to Stanly. "If that will be all, I need to make a few arrangements myself."

"Certainly, I will speak with you later, Severus."

He left, slamming the door in his wake. *Bloody little twit! What kind of a woman calls her man 'business to take care of'? Apparently, I am well rid of her! 'I'm not bringing anyone else, Snape...what's it to you then?' Humph!*

He slammed into his room and slumped into a chair. Laying his head back, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. *And why the hell would I still want her so badly that I physically ache?*

## Chapter Two

### Chapter 2 of 2

Severus overhears something that causes him to push Hermione away. Can he reel her back in when he realizes he's made an error?

Hermione sat in the Potter's living room, holding her god-daughter that she had only seen once, except through pictures. "I can't believe how much she's grown! I love the photos you send of her, but I have to say, they don't do her justice. She looks just like you, Ginny! And what a friendly girl you are," Hermione said, turning her attention to Lillian as the baby half babbled and half spoke to her.

Ginny smiled at her daughter. "Yes. I wanted her to have clear green eyes, though. But her hazel ones are beautiful."

"I like the mix," Harry added. "It's a perfect mixture of the two of us."

"Yes," Hermione agreed, glad she'd been able to hide her envy. Seeing Severus today at Hogwarts, and then later at the funeral, shook her more than she'd wanted to admit. Suddenly, Ron walked in, very much at home.

"Unca Won!" Lily exclaimed, holding up her arms for him. He was her favorite man, besides her daddy. "Bwoom!"

"Ssh, kid," Ron said in an exaggerated whisper. "You're going to get me into trouble with your mum," he told her as he lifted her and kissed her mouth noisily. "Okay, Hermione?"

Hermione shrugged. "Not really, but I don't think it's quite hit me. The funeral was lovely...or as lovely as a funeral can be. I'm glad it was the same as Professor Dumbledore's."

"It's what she wanted," Harry said. "About her will..."

"Don't start," Hermione told him. "I went to have a look, and it's a huge place. Plenty of avoidance room."

"Do you think that matters to a wanker like Snape?" Ron demanded. "He's used you before, you know, when you were vulnerable and such. I say he has no scruples and will do it again."

Embarrassed, Hermione told him, "Things have changed, Ron. I know how he feels now. Besides, I'm a big girl...I can handle myself. I know that he fooled me right and proper, but don't worry. It won't happen again."

"Not just you," Ginny said. "We all thought that the two of you would be married. Him breaking things off with you seemed to come out of the blue."

Hermione shrugged, not wanting to dwell on it. "It was a long time ago. I'm well over it now," she lied. "Besides, three months isn't truly that long."

"Long enough," Harry commented. "Hermione, we know you, so we know that you really loved the wanker. Hell, you left London when he dumped you. You're vulnerable to him."

Throwing up her hands in frustration, Hermione asked, "What do you want me to do? The will made things very clear! I don't have a choice in the matter!"

"There's always a choice," Ron said loudly, scaring his niece. "Forget the stupid house-elves, Hermione!"

Ginny turned to Ron and took her baby, setting her on the floor so that she could play with the wooden spoon and pots she so loved. "Ron," Ginny said as she laid a hand on her brother's arm, "you know it's more than just the house-elves. It's the house as well."

"Yes," Hermione said. "I loved Minerva, Ron. I can't let her property be given to the Ministry that way. She would absolutely hate that."

Harry smiled. "Yeah, she would. But, Hermione, it's *Snape*! You still have feelings for him...I can see it, though for the life of me I can't figure out why!"

"Listen, guys, I don't want to talk about this any longer, okay? I can't change it, and right now, I want to spend my time getting to know my god-daughter better."

"But, Hermione," Ron persisted, "I just don't want to see you hurt like that again. I mean, you didn't just leave London...you left *us*. I've really enjoyed having you back here, even under these sad circumstances."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "We understand why you felt you had to go, somewhat, but did you have to cut yourself off from all of us, too?"

"Yes, I did," Hermione told them. "Don't you see? I couldn't have stood it otherwise. I couldn't have born it if I had stayed, nor could I have born it if I didn't make a clean break. As much as I love all of you, and I do love you guys so much, I had to distance myself from everything to make a go of it there. If I hadn't, I never would have made it on my own."

"Not entirely on your own," Ginny teased, wanting to lighten the tension. "You did date and have at least one relationship that I'm aware of. So, you can tell Snape to bugger off...you don't care about him or what he does!"

Hermione chose not to comment on that. *Severus* certainly looked liked he couldn't care less about her, but she knew one thing. Seeing him today only reopened all of those doors she thought she'd closed tightly. She was not over him...not by a long shot.

~~~~~

Severus sat in the library of the home he would occupy for the next few months. Thinking of...*her*. She was due today. He'd already claimed the bedroom he wanted; first come, first serve, he said. He slightly jolted when he saw her all but fall out of the Floo, and then he scowled. "Must you be so loud and messy, Ms. Granger?"

"Sorry!" she said, blushing slightly. "I never have gotten the hang of those blasted things!" she said as she jerked her thumb towards the fireplace. "I see you've settled in."

"Yes, no point in wasting time."

"Too right. Um, I've been thinking..."

"There's a surprise," he commented sarcastically, taking his bad mood out on her because he considered it her fault.

"That we should set up some ground rules," she went on as if he hadn't spoken.

"Rules? What sort? We're both adults here, Hermione. And never fear, I don't have any plans to accost you whilst you sleep."

"I never thought that you did, Snape," she told him irritably. "I realize we're both adults; that's why I want to set up some rules. I don't want to walk in, say here or the sitting room, and find you... In flagrante delicto with some woman. I would, of course, show you the same respect."

What the fuck? The same respect? "Do you and your boyfriend have these same rules set up? How does that work for you then?"

"*Boyfriend*? What are you on about? I don't have a boyfriend at the moment! And if I did, it wouldn't be any concern of yours," she told him defensively.

He rose and slowly walked to her. "You expect me to believe that you're not tied to someone?"

Hermione furrowed her brow, as Severus knew she did when trying to solve a complex problem. "No. I'm not tied to anyone. Why did you think that I was?"

"Well, I'd heard from the Hogwarts gossip line that you were involved, and I knew that you'd left London after we'd... Well, after. You made it perfectly clear that you intended to marry, so I assumed that you would have someone significant in your life." His heart was beating so frantically that Severus was surprised it didn't pop out of his chest.

"No, there's no one at the present time, although I do live in America. Or I did. I lost my job when I asked for an extended leave because the institute had set up a summer program that all professors were required to work at least one month of." She sighed. "After our time here is up, it looks like I'll be job hunting."

Institute? "Couldn't you just transfer to the Ministry of Magic here? Surely they would allow that. I would imagine your record is exemplarily, not to mention the fact that the Ministry here wanted you to begin with."

"I don't understand what you mean. I work at the Salem Institute teaching Charms. Why did you think I worked for the Ministry?" she wondered aloud.

His face was suddenly filled with fury. "You mean to tell me that when I...when you left Hogwarts...you didn't take the Unspeakable job the Ministry offered you? That you wasted that opportunity? Are you quite daft?"

"How did you know about that, Severus?" she asked, forgetting at the time that she meant to call him Snape.

"It doesn't matter how. What I want to know at the moment is why? That job was perfect for you, yet you threw it away! I gave you the perfect opportunity to accept it when you were no longer living at Hogwarts!"

She fisted her hands on her hips. 'I was perfect for *you*, and you threw what we had away! I never wanted a Ministry job! If I had, I would have taken it, regardless of where I lived. I've known that I wanted to teach since helping Ron and Harry, not to mention the others I tutored, during school."

He turned from her then, defeated. What had he done? "You mean to say that you're not in a relationship? That you're working at some school teaching Charms as you would have done at Hogwarts?"

"Yes. Severus..." She was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Severus! It's me, Carmella! I'm just dying to see your new place, love!"

Severus visibly cringed. Carmella was the cousin of Narcissa Malfoy who had moved to London about a year ago. Not knowing anyone, Cissy had set her up with Severus. Over the past year he'd escorted her to a few functions and, when they'd both wanted it, spent a few nights with her. She, of course, had met others since moving here, and that was just fine with Severus.

He had only invited her here now to throw her in Hermione's face. From the expression on his ex-lover's face, it looked as if his ploy had worked, and she was indeed upset. He sighed, wanting to curse fate and timing. If he had known that Hermione wasn't with another man... *What was she going to say just now?*

"Oh," Hermione said, "I see that you have company. I'll just go and unpack my things..." She looked around the room as if she couldn't find the door to leave. "I don't suppose it matters which room I take. Of course I imagine you've set yours up," she said, repeating her earlier statement.

Severus' heart ached as she rambled on. He knew she only did that when very upset or very nervous. She was undoubtedly both at the moment, and it was his fault. "I wish to..."

"There you are!" Carmella walked into the room, full of beauty and grace, with a bit of flair thrown in, and kissed Severus hard and possessively on the mouth. "Oh, this is so lovely, Severus! Your fondest wish as well, I suspect! All of these books!"

Carmella cast a dismissive glance at Hermione Granger, who she knew, thanks to her dear cousin, was an ex of her Severus'. She'd let him dally long enough, she decided. It was time for them to commit to each other. Some jumped up Mudblood was not going to waltz back in here and take what was hers!

Severus looked at Carmella. Her long golden hair was styled flawlessly. Her perfect body was poured into deep green robes the same color as her eyes, a fact he was sure she had purposely known and worked on, and she looked exquisite. Too perfect, in fact. Not real. Nothing compared to Hermione, who stood there, still as a statue, pain reflecting in her eyes.

"Hermione, this is Carmella Smithe. Carmella, Hermione Granger." Severus introduced them, not sure of what else to say.

"Charmed," Carmella said.

Hermione didn't reply to Carmella. Instead, she looked at Severus. "I'll just get out of your way. I need to pick a room and settle in." She then turned to Severus'... friend. "It was nice to meet you," Hermione said as she walked out of the room.

"Mousy little thing, isn't she?"

"Indeed not. That 'mousy little thing,' as you put it, stood side-by-side with Harry Potter during the last battle and put down a few Death Eaters herself. There's nothing mousy about her," he told her defensively.

Carmella raised both eyebrows. "Well, well. I can add her to the short list of things that you're passionate about."

"Don't be ridiculous, Carmella. What nonsense. I was just merely correcting you. I must apologize for inviting you over. I'm afraid I wouldn't be good company today. I shall owl you later in the week."

"You would dismiss me because *she* was upset?" Carmella asked, enraged. "How dare you?"

"I dare because I am more tired than I expected to be, and I don't want company just now," he told her. "It has nothing to do with Hermione." She was beginning to irritate him, and he suddenly remembered why he hadn't been out with her in quite awhile.

"I would think that I am more than mere company, Severus."

He inclined his head. "You take too much for granted then, it seems. We are not a couple, nor are we lovers really. Now, I am tired, and I wish you to leave. Please, let's not surrender to dramatics," he said quickly because he knew the extent of her temper.

"Fine," she snapped. "Have it your way." Carmella walked to the door, determined to make a grand exit. Unable to help herself, she stopped at the door. "You're making a mistake," she warned him without looking back.

"I *made* a mistake, a grievous one, but it's one I hope to eventually correct." He watched her walk out and only felt relief.

Once Carmella had left, Severus made his way to Hermione's bedroom and quietly opened the door. He wanted to speak with her, force her to finish their earlier conversation, but when he peeked in, he found her curled up on the bed sleeping.

Severus rubbed the back of his neck, trying to fight the tension that had gathered there. *Why didn't she take the Ministry job? How could she continue teaching when...* He sighed, suddenly tired himself. He smiled. *What would she do if I climbed into that bed with her?* His smile faded almost as instantly as it had appeared. He had no right. He'd left her.

~~~~~

Hermione woke, feeling worse than she had when she'd fallen asleep. She looked at the antique grandfather clock in the corner. Seven! Rushing to the window, she threw open the curtains to see if it was morning or evening. *Evening. Thank God!*



Deciding a shower was the first order of business, she got out her habitual shorts and a tank top and headed for the bathroom. When she'd finished, Hermione walked downstairs in search of food, as she was starving. She supposed that Severus and *Carmella* had gone out.

As she passed the library, Hermione heard the rustle of a paper. She peeked in the door and saw Severus sitting in a chair reading what she assumed was the *Daily Prophet*. Leaning against the door jam, the Charms professor thought, *I wonder what he would do if I walked in there, sat by his feet, and put my head in his lap as I used to do when we were together at Hogwarts? That always led to some very interesting... situations.*

She shook her head to try and rid herself of those sorts of thoughts and cleared her throat. When Severus turned, Hermione smiled at him, unable to get those happier memories from her mind.

He raised an inquisitive eyebrow as he looked her up and down. His gaze lingered at her thighs and then her breasts, longer than the rest of her before he finally asked, "Yes? Is there... something I can do for you?"

*Merlin!* "I was just wondering if you're hungry. I'm starved myself."

He stood and walked over to her, standing as close as possible without actually touching her. "Let's see what we can do then to satiate your hunger."

Hermione couldn't help it; she shuddered. *Oh my!* "Um... Where is your... lady friend?"

"She left," he simply answered as he started for the kitchen with her following behind him. "I found I wasn't in the mood for company after all."

"Oh. Well then, I'm sorry I disturbed you, Severus. I can raid the kitchen on my own...you don't have to bother with me. I can call on a house-elf to show me where everything is."

He stopped suddenly and turned to face her. She ran into him, and he had to grab her to keep her from stumbling. "It's not a problem," he told her with his arms still around her. "I find I am quite famished as well."

Trembling, she took a deliberate step back. It had been so long since she'd been in any man's...*this* man's...arms. It would bode well for her to remind herself that they didn't want the same things out of life. She wanted marriage and a family. He wanted... Well, she didn't know what he wanted exactly, but she did know it wasn't the same thing she did.

Smiling, she asked, "Do you still like grilled cheese and tomato soup?"

He took a deliberate step forward, as if he was enjoying the cat and mouse game that they seemed to be playing. "I do. You will find *Hermione*, that my tastes haven't changed. I still have the same... appetite that I had before."

*Oh. My. God. Is he doing this to me on purpose? Yes, of course he is. But what of Carmella?* Then she remembered what he'd told her when he'd broke things off with her. *'I've never really been a one woman man, Hermione. You're crowding me. I need space.'*

"It seems to me," she said more coldly than she intended, "that your *appetite* changes quite often."

He rubbed down her arm with one finger and watched as the goose bumps followed his touch. "Perhaps they have before, but I'm finding myself craving the things I originally... loved." He looked up and into her eyes. "I've found that my palate has accustomed itself to one... dish, you see."

Hermione put both hands on his chest and gently pushed him back. "You're crowding me, Snape. I want to eat, grab a book, and go read in my bed. You're welcome to join me of course."

Severus cocked his head to the side. "Oh, I would love to join you, my dear, but in that case, you can just skip the book."

She crossed her arms under her breasts, not realizing how that pushed them up and out with her nipples slightly showing through the fabric. "I meant that you could join me for dinner! *Only* dinner!"

He let his gaze wonder to her lovely breasts and purposely licked his lips before looking back to her face. "More's the pity," he said as he turned once more and walked into the kitchen to find grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup set out on the table for them.

"It would seem the house-elves heard your request," he told her as he swept his arm toward the table.

Hermione was grateful. She sat down and hastily ate her meal, wanting to get back to her room so that she could think things through. She knew one thing for sure *this is going to be one long, hot summer!*

~~~~~

Severus stood in the impromptu Potions lab he'd set up in the basement of the house. One month had already passed since he and Hermione had moved in here, and two more people had died from dragon pox. He was so close to finding a cure...

He dragged a frustrated hand through his greasy hair while he paced. It wasn't only the antidote that was keeping him frustrated! Damn Hermione Granger, and while he was at it, damn Minerva McGonagall! Putting them together in this house. That blasted woman had known better than anyone how he felt about Hermione!

Hermione... Well, she had kept him at arm's length since his attempt at seduction. He knew she had her reasons, but still. He'd broken things off with Carmella. He laughed bitterly. There wasn't really much to break off because the last few months they'd barely spoken, much less gone out. Carmella had only been persistent with him and demanding a commitment because she knew Hermione was living here with him, and the woman hated to lose at anything.

Hermione, he thought angrily. He had so many conflicting emotions when it came to that witch. On one hand, he wanted to hold her and bury himself into her, hear her screaming his name and watch her eyes glaze as she surrendered to him.

On the other, he wanted to frantically pound into her roughly, punish her for making him ache during the night, knowing she was only a few doors down from him. She ran around the house in those little shorts and skimpy tank tops, nipples proudly sticking out. It was for his torment...he knew that it was!

"Enough!" he yelled into the room. "I have got to put her out of my mind and work on this potion!"

He strode back to the makeshift lab table and began working with his calculations once more.

~~~~~

Hermione sat in the library, pretending to read. She was highly frustrated. She wanted Severus Snape with an almost uncontrollable passion *How can I make him want me? What more can I do?*

She'd thought many times of just going into his room while he was sleeping...soundly she was sure...and climbing into his bed with him. She wondered what he would do if

she did. She snorted. "Likely kick me out, considering he has that Carmella cow."

She took a strand of hair and twirled it around her finger, thinking of what else she could do. Then it hit her *Dear Lord! I am sitting here contemplating how I can take Severus from another when that is exactly what happened to us when we were together! How could I behave this way? No, it's not right. Even if I wanted to be that way...he doesn't want me.*

She jumped when she heard a loud and impatient knock on the door. "I'm coming; I'm coming! Jeez!"

"Hermione! It's Harry! Open up; it's an emergency!"

Hermione looked down at her clothes and winced. "Come in, Harry. I'll be right down!" She ran up the stairs just as the door opened.

"Well, well, Potter. To what do we owe the honor of your presence?" Severus drawled out. He'd come upstairs when he'd heard the frantic knocking.

"Snape!" Harry said with obvious relief. "Thank God you're here, too. Hermione! Could you come down now? I only want to say this once, and I have to hurry!"

Hermione ran down the stairs and couldn't help but smirk when Severus looked at her with narrowed eyes. She'd thrown on her jean capris and a blue button up shirt that she'd left unbuttoned,

over her white tank top, which she'd put over her bra.

"Harry, what is it? Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes! I'm fine. It's Lily!" He turned to Severus. "She's got dragon pox. Help her...please!"

Face expressionless, Severus turned to Hermione. "I've almost completed the antidote. I was working on the final calculations just now. I could use some help."

"Anything, Severus, anything at all that you need." Tears filled Hermione's eyes. "Harry..." She walked to him and put her arms around him, holding him tightly. "Where is she? Where's Ginny?"

"Gin's at St. Mungo's with Lily. I'm going there now. Just come as soon as you can."

"How long has the child been infected, Potter?" Severus asked.

"A couple of days now. At first we weren't sure what she had, and as soon as we knew... Well, I have to get back. Will you help?"

"Of course," Hermione answered for both herself and Severus "Go, Harry. Be with your family. We'll be there as soon as we can."

As soon as he left, Hermione turned to Severus. "Severus, we have to try." She looked at him with pleading eyes, wringing her hands. This angered him.

"What? Do you think I won't help that child? Do you think that I'm as heartless as that? Well, fuck you, Hermione!" He turned to walk back to the basement.

"Severus! Wait! You've misunderstood me! I didn't mean it that way. Let me help you."

He didn't answer her, but he also didn't stop her when she entered behind him. "What can I do?" she wanted to know.

Glaring at her, he said, "Start the base. I think after working with this a bit more, I will have it figured out." He completely turned his back to her. She had hurt him more than he wanted her to know by her utter lack of faith in him. *She must truly think me a monster.*

He stiffened when he felt a small hand on his arm. Severus still refused to look at her. "I'm so sorry, Severus. I didn't mean that I thought you would refuse. I was scared. Please don't stay angry with me." Her voice hitched, and she turned away, removing her hand from his arm.

It soon became too much, so she let the tears fall as she began the base for the potion. Between her conflicting feelings concerning Severus and her god-daughter having the same disease that killed Minerva, Hermione didn't think she could take any more. Once the base was started, she laid her head on the table and gave in to her tears.

Hermione didn't move when she felt Severus' hands on her shoulders, gently rubbing. "I'm sorry."

She only shook her head. "I can't lose her too, Severus. I've lost almost every person I've ever cared about. Mum and dad, Minerva, you. I just couldn't take it if..."

"Ssh, we won't let anything happen to her. I've been working on this potion a month now. I am almost positive that it will work. And you haven't lost me, Hermione. I'm right here."

"Yes, you're here, but you may as well be a thousand miles away. I can't..." Her words were cut off by the bell sounding that the base was ready. "Better get started. I want to get this to Lillian as soon as we can."

"Yes, as do I. I only wish we had time to test it. I hate giving this to her without making sure it will work without any harmful effects."

"Maybe one of the infected adults in St. Mungo's will agree to test it first. We can explain to them that we think we have the cure, but it's not been tested. I imagine that plenty will be willing because they will die otherwise."

"That's actually a good idea, Hermione. I will contact St. Mungo's now and Stanley. We will need legal papers signed in case anything goes wrong, saying that they were informed of the situation and agreed to it anyway."

"Yes," she said as she beamed at him. "I hadn't thought of that! Severus, do you really think that this will work? Do you think that Lily can be cured?"

"Yes, I do. We'll test it to be sure, but I have a good feeling about this." After saying that, Severus did something he hadn't done in a very long time. He placed his arms around Hermione and hugged her tightly. "I won't let you down."

"I believe you, Severus. I believe *in* you." She hugged him back and took in his scent. She had missed it so much.

He framed her face in his hands and kissed her lightly. "We will talk when all of this is over."

"Yes, I want to. I miss you, Severus. I miss your friendship."

"I am going to see Stanley, and then I'll meet you at St. Mungo's."

"Okay. While I'm there, I will talk to some of the patients and see who wants to try the potion. Is that okay?"

He smiled. "Yes, it is. I will see you soon." He kissed her lightly once more and left. Hermione rushed out to go to St. Mungo's.

~~~~~

Hermione was sitting in the Potters' sitting room once more, holding Lily tightly to her. She couldn't believe that another month had already gone by. It seemed like only yesterday since they'd almost lost Lily. Hermione sighed. It was odd knowing this was the last month she would have to live in the house with Severus.

Lily patted Hermione's cheeks and batted her eyes. "Bwoom! Unca Won!"

Hermione had to laugh. "Your uncle Ron is not here, and your aunt Hermione doesn't ride on brooms."

Lily poked her bottom lip out in an adorable pout. "Wanna ride bwoom." She folded her arms across her chest and stuck her chin out.

"You're like your mummy, eh? You know what you want and are determined to have it."

"Why settle for something you don't want?" Ginny asked as she came into the room with tea and cakes.

"Mummy! Cake!" Lily squealed as she lifted her arms for cake.

"In that case," Hermione said, "I will set you down. I don't want to be covered in chocolate!"

Ginny sat and served the tea. Once they were settled, she asked, "How's it going, Hermione? You're down to the last month now. Are you ready to leave and get back to America?"

Hesitating for only a second, Hermione decided to confide somewhat in Ginny. "No, not really. I think I want to stay here."

"Oh, thank God!" Ginny said with obvious pleasure. "Harry and I...Ron as well...wanted you to stay so badly, but we wanted you to do what you felt was right for you. What will you do?"

"Well, I've spoken with the new Headmaster at Hogwarts, and they do happen to need a new Charms professor. It seems the one that they had came into a sudden monetary inheritance. He's going to travel around the world, I'm told."

"Wow, that's... odd actually." Ginny laughed. "You don't hear of that happening often, you know."

"Yes, I know! Especially in the wizarding world. Severus thought it was a bit odd, too, but he is happy I am coming back."

"*Severus*? That sounds interesting. How are you two getting on these days?"

"Much better," Hermione told her. "We're friends again. I've missed him, you know."

"Hermione, be careful, yeah? The last time you were... tangled up with him, he devastated you. I just don't want you to be hurt. You've almost come to the terms of the will, so hang in there."

"We're just friends, Gin, but I will admit...to you...I'm still in love with him. I don't think I'll ever stop loving him. That part hurts because I don't think he feels the same. So, I'll have to settle for friendship. Don't worry; I'll be okay. I promise," Hermione insisted at Ginny's bland look.

"I know how it hurts to be so in love with someone who doesn't return your feelings, and I know how badly you took it when Professor Snape broke things off with you. Just... watch after yourself."

"Ginny, you are married to Harry. *He does* love you. So much. You know this."

"Yes, now. But, Hermione, he didn't always. *You* know that...even better than I do. He went through so much at such a young age. And there were plenty of other girls." Ginny smiled. "We both know that. I broke my heart over Harry plenty of times. The only thing I can say about you and the professor is this. If you want him, talk to him. Perhaps he just needed time like Harry did."

"I agree. We were supposed to talk after everything calmed down with Lillian and the other infected patients." Hermione looked at her god-daughter, who had fallen asleep on the floor, and smiled. "But when the antidote was a success, we didn't have the time really. Severus is finding he doesn't care for fame, although he doesn't mind the fortune."

Ginny laughed. "Who can blame him? Will he go back to teaching when the new school term starts?"

"Yes. He wouldn't know how to do anything else, and though he complains, he wouldn't want to."

"So, you'll be at Hogwarts together again?" Ginny looked at her and wiggled both eyebrows, and it reminded Hermione of the twins.

"Well, not together. I mean, I will have my rooms, he will have his." Hermione frowned. How odd it would be not to live with him after all this time, especially at Hogwarts.

Ginny laid her hand over her friends when she noted the troubled expression on Hermione's face. "Talk to him."

Hermione smiled. "We'll see."

~~~~~

Hermione walked into the house to find Severus sleeping on the couch in the library. She walked to him and gently brushed the hair off of his face. She startled when his hand jerked out and grabbed her wrist. "Taking advantage of me while I sleep, are you?"

Hermione blushed. "No! I was just... I mean, I thought you were..." She sighed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

He gave her wrist a tug and had her tumbling on top of him. "Why don't you join me?"

Hermione was torn. She wanted him so badly, but what of Carmella? She decided to be honest. "What of your..." Well, what did she call her? Girlfriend? Lover? Lady friend?

When the pause went on too long, he asked, "My?"

"Carmella. What of her?"

Severus put both arms around her. "We broke things off a few weeks ago. Had I known that was one of the things holding you back, I would've told you sooner."

"Of course it was holding me back! I know how it feels..." Hermione could've happily bitten off her tongue. She hadn't meant to bring up the past; she only wanted to start over.

"I want to confess something to you, Hermione. It is going to anger you, but I want you to know." He tightened his grip so that she couldn't move off of him, as he knew she would once he told her the truth.

"There never was anyone else for me after I was with you. There never was another woman."

She stiffened. "What? You're lying! Don't lie; there's no need to! I don't want to talk of the past, just the future."

"Without the truth of the past, we have no future!" When she tried to rise, he flipped them so that he was on top of her, holding her in place.

"I lied to you then so that you would go."

"You wanted to be rid of me so badly that you lied about having another woman? Damn it, Severus! Let me go!"

"No! I won't willingly let you go again, ever. I wanted you to have the future I thought I was holding you back from! I thought you wouldn't take that blasted Ministry job because of me. I..." He stopped. He'd never spoken the words out loud to her, though he'd felt them for a long time.

Hermione didn't speak. Not because she was waiting for an expression of love. It was because she knew that speaking when her anger was so riled would be a horrendous mistake.

Severus sighed, correctly judging her mood. He decided to come clean with the rest of it and let the chips fall where they may. He'd already lost her once through lies. He didn't have her now to lose her through the truth. "I loved you enough to want you to be happy, even if your happiness didn't involve me."

Hermione was fuming after that statement. She took a deep breath. "Do you know how miserable I have been without you for the past three years? How I've longed for you, especially these past three months living here? Oh, how I've dreamed of hearing you say that you love me, and this is how you tell me? Resignedly?"

"I don't know what else to say to you. I can't change the past, Hermione. I will admit I should have handled the entire situation differently."

"How magnanimous of you," she bit out sarcastically.

He chose to ignore her sarcasm. "Hermione, the past is done. I want to know if there is a future for us."

She wanted to rant and rave, but to what end? She wanted him back and loved him as she never had any other. For some reason, she thought of her parents, remembering the night when she'd finally accepted the fact that they were dead. Hermione had thought that the hole in her heart would never be filled. Only one person could, and he was right here, confessing his love. "God, I hope so! I do love you, you git. Just promise me you'll never lie to me again...that we will talk things out!"

He hugged her closer to him and kissed her. The gentleness he was showing soon became desperation. He'd wanted her for so long, and his feelings had only intensified while living here with her.

"Severus," Hermione moaned in his ear, a sound that caused his cock to answer her before he could utter a sound. The intensity made them both tremble.

"I want you. God, Hermione, let me have you."

"Yes, we'll have each other," she agreed, pulling out her wand to quickly rid them of their clothes. "Don't, *kiss*, "try," *kiss*, "to make," *kiss*, "it special. Just hurry, Severus. Hurry and love me."

"I already do," he said as he slipped into her welcoming wetness and held still, reveling in being one with her once again.

Hermione began to shudder and, when she couldn't take any more, began to frantically pump her hips. "Oh, God, I've missed this. I've missed ~~you~~!"

"Don't think I didn't notice that you said you missed me second after making love," he teased between pants and then groaned when he felt her tighten around him and send him blissfully over the edge.

They lay on the couch, happily sated and in each other's arms. As an afterthought, Severus grabbed the throw on the back and covered them. He had no intentions of moving for a long while.

"Finally!" A familiar voice said from over the fireplace. "I thought you two would never cover yourselves!"

"Minerva?" they both yelled at the same time.

"Yes, Minerva. And..."

"Albus!" came a cheery voice from the same direction.

When Severus and Hermione looked up, there was a lovely portrait of the both of them that had not been visible until now. "What is going on here?" Severus demanded as he pulled the throw tighter around himself and Hermione.

Albus laughed. "We thought the two of you would never get to this point while living here!"

"Shagging?" Hermione asked, shocked. "You... spied on us?"

"Certainly not!" Minerva humphed. "We know the valor of discretion, Hermione. We thought you would never admit your love for one another!"

"That is why the portrait is visible to you now, you see," Albus happily explained. "That was all it would take for the two of you to be able to see us. We're happy that you finally did."

"Well, I for one would be happier if I were... more presentable," Severus complained.

Hermione ignored him and asked, "Minerva, why did you choose Severus and me to live here? You knew we'd broken up."

"Because I knew you both still loved each other, and I hoped that living here together would get the two of you to see it, among other things."

"Well, I can't be mad at you for that...it worked! But, Merlin, your ancestor was a hard man making that stipulation for the inheritance of this house..." Hermione stopped. If a portrait could blush, both Minerva and Albus were both doing so.

"What?" Severus asked, also seeing the ashamed look on both faces.

"Well, you see," Minerva started.

"We sort of skimmed the truth a bit there," Albus finished.

"Sort of?" Severus asked.

"There was no stipulation!" Minerva admitted. "It was the only way we could think of to get the two of you together. When it became apparent that I was not going to make it, I spoke with Albus' portrait at Hogwarts, and we came up with this plan."

"And what a brilliant plan it was! Why, just look at the two of you!" Albus said, pleased with himself.

Hermione had to smile. "I have to say, if I wasn't so happy right now, I'd lock the two of you in the attic."

"I still may!" Severus said.

"Oh?" Hermione turned to him. "You don't like the way things turned out then?"

"I do. I don't appreciate the meddling. But," he continued somewhat louder before she could interrupt, "I concede the point that we likely wouldn't have made it to this point without them, so I will allow them to stay put."

"So, you won't sell my home?" Minerva asked hopefully.

Severus softened. "No, we won't, Minerva. We'll live here during the holidays and summers. The children will love it here, I expect."

"Children?" Hermione asked.

"You've said from the start you wanted a husband and family. Have you changed your mind?" Severus inquired.

"Well, no, but, I didn't think..."

"Marry me, Hermione. Make a family with me."

"Yes," she agreed, her eyes filling with happy tears. "I'd love to!"

They began to kiss, never noticing the portrait dimming as the couple inside smiled the smug smile of a job well done.

*The End*

---