

# From a Frog to a Prince

*by cocoachristy*

Second Place Winner for the Anything Goes Challenge's Chaptered Category!  
Hermione comes home to find something she'd never expected. Her life will change--  
hopefully for the better.

## Chapter 1

*Chapter 1 of 13*

Second Place Winner for the Anything Goes Challenge's Chaptered Category! Hermione comes home to find something she'd never expected. Her life will change--hopefully for the better.

**Disclaimer:** All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: Thanks to my wonderful beta...oh no you don't!...I see what you're trying to do! She's anonymous until after voting!

*Cough Southern\_Witch\_69 Cough*



Hermione sat in her window seat in the sitting room, gazing out the window, breathing in the scent of her strong, black tea. She was thinking about Ron and the life they'd shared. She sighed, leaning her head against the cool glass.

Hermione had thought that she'd been content...if not happy...in her marriage until dining with her in-laws the night before. She couldn't say why this particular time had opened her eyes, they'd dined with Harry and Ginny countless other times, but as she and Ron sat with the other couple after dinner, it became painfully clear that there was much lacking in her marriage.

Thinking back to the night before, she remembered how she began to notice the small things, such as once they walked into the living-room, Ginny went and sat directly on her husband's lap, cuddling in the small chair by the fire, while she sat on one end of the couch and Ron on the other end.

The Potters were constantly touching each other, gazing at each other, and finishing each other's sentences while she and her husband barely spoke on the same topic.

It was the hair comment, Hermione decided, that really opened her eyes, however. She'd watched as Harry lovingly stroked his wife's hair and then lifted a bit of it to take a long, appreciative sniff as he proclaimed that Ginny had the most gorgeous hair he'd ever seen.

Ron had snorted as he looked at his own wife, pointed to her hair, and said, "I've bought this one bottle after bottle of Sleekeazy's Hair Potion, and she never bothers to use it. Of course, she doesn't have to look at it though." He snickered then, and Hermione joined in, knowing that he was only trying to joke and not realizing he was hurting her.

That incident caused her to realize that while Harry still treated his wife like a lover, Ron treated her like a sister. As she'd watched the Potters, the thought crossed her mind that they'd make love that night. Then she jolted as she'd remembered that her own husband hadn't touched her in at least six months, and until that moment, she hadn't even given it a thought.

Hermione sighed, breaking out of her thoughts of the night before. Molly had come by earlier to pick up Hugo and Rose. They were going to spend a long weekend with Charlie in Romania. Ron had left for work as soon as the children had left with his mother, absently kissing Hermione on the forehead right before he walked outside to Apparate to the joke shop he now co-owned with his brother George.

It wasn't that she didn't love her husband, she truly did. It was that there was no passion any longer. They were more like housemates than lovers, but that hadn't bothered her until she'd watched Harry and Ginny and witnessed for herself that many years together did not have to equal becoming stale in the passion department.

*Well*, Hermione thought as she sat up in the window seat with a determined air about her. *I am going to fix things in my marriage. Starting right now*

She'd owed the Ministry and told them she needed the day off. She was going to go to the market and purchase all of Ron's favorite dishes, buy some candles, and even a new negligee, and put some spark back into her marriage. Surely they were still attracted to each other!

Humming to herself while her determination built, Hermione quickly got ready. She eyed her bottle of Hair Potion and decided she'd use the whole damned bottle when she got ready that evening if that's what it would take to make Ron notice her as his *wife* and not his *mate*. Perhaps she'd buy some of those bath salts that Ronald liked to smell on her...

It took her hours of shopping to purchase everything she thought she'd need for the evening. Her first stop was the lingerie store, where she'd miraculously found an orange negligee, Ron's favorite color. Well, she conceded, it was more peach than orange, but it would have to be close enough.

She'd purchased candles of different sizes but the same scent so that she wouldn't overpower their bedroom with too many different odors. She'd found her bath salts and several different pairs of skimpy matching bra and panty sets for good measure.

Then she left for the market and bought the things to make Ron's favorite dinner plus the makings for a chocolate cake. Hermione wanted this night to be special... A new beginning of sorts for them, and she was going to do her damndest to make that happen.

After she returned home, she quickly put her groceries away. When she was finished with the groceries, excited with thoughts of their evening ahead, Hermione practically skipped on her way to the bedroom so that she could display her candles in strategic places. She stopped dead in her tracks when she heard female giggling coming from behind the closed bedroom door. *What the...?*

Holding her bag with the candles and lingerie tightly in one arm, Hermione quietly walked to the door and gently pushed it open. The sight before her made her gasp in surprise and drop her bag to cover her mouth with her hands. There was Ron...her husband...in the bed he shared with her with some woman that Hermione couldn't make out. "Ron?"

"Oh fuck!" her husband yelled. "Her-Hermione! What are you doing home this time of day?" Ron dumbly asked as he jumped out of the bed, allowing Hermione to make out Lavender Brown quickly covering herself with the sheet.

As Ron stood facing her, Hermione opened her mouth, but couldn't get the words to form. She looked him up and down, stopping at his penis, which was still glistening from being inside of Lavender.

"Hermione, I can explain..."

Hermione simply turned in the middle of his sentence and headed for the living room, leaving her bag, and the items inside scattered on the floor. She sat heavily on the couch, simply staring at the wall.

After a few moments, she heard the loud pop of Disapparation and knew that Lavender had left. Shortly after, Ron came into the living room wearing only his jeans. Sitting on the table in front of her, her husband took her hand into his. "I'm sorry, Hermione."

Hermione simply looked at him, not saying anything. He squeezed her hand imploringly. "Say something, please."

"What would you have me to say, Ronald?"

Suddenly, Ron stood up and knocked the table over. "Anything! I would have you say anything that showed you have some emotion, that showed me you actually care that you just walked into our bedroom and caught me with another woman!"

"Of course I care!" she yelled back. "What an absurd thing to say!"

"Do you? Do you really? Because the Hermione I know would've burst into the room and demanded an explanation! As it is, you just simply walked off. Would you have even cared if I'd stayed in there with Lavender and finished the job?"

"What's the matter with you? Are you trying to hurt me even more then?"

Ron growled and threw his hands up with exasperation. "I'm trying to get a reaction out of you! Something to show me that you give a damn about me! I want you to get angry, Hermione! Slap me, throw something! Get passionate! I honestly can't remember the last time you've been passionate about anything where I'm concerned."

Hermione winced. "So now you're saying that your affair is *my* fault?"

"No, not entirely. But you have to admit we haven't exactly lived like a husband and wife these past few months. You never touch me anymore, Hermione."

"Me? You've not tried to make love to me *in six months*!"

Ron nodded. "I know. I've purposely done that. Do you want to know why? I'll tell you! Because the last time I touched you...wanted you...you cringed! You actually cringed as if my touch disgusted you! So, I thought, 'I'll not touch her again until she wants me to.' Well, guess what? You haven't wanted me to."

"That's not fair! You don't know what I have or haven't wanted!"

"I know that if you *had* wanted me during those six months, you would've spoken up and said so!" He looked towards the hallway that led to their bedroom and nodded his head in that direction.

"I bet you just realized today how long it's been. What brought it to your attention? Having dinner at Harry and Gin's?" He nodded his own affirmation. "Yeah, I noticed how they acted, too. We haven't been that way in a long time."

Hermione wiped the tears falling from her face and sighed dejectedly. "I know. I took the day off work thinking to correct that tonight. But instead I walk in and find you in our bed with Lavender." She looked up into his eyes. "How long has this been going on?"

Ron shook his head. "We've only... been intimate a couple times, but we've been talking a few weeks." Ron righted the table and sat back down facing Hermione, taking her hand in his once again. "I never meant for you to find out this way."

"But you did mean for me to find out?"

"Eventually, yes. I'm sorry, babe. I need more than a best mate. I need passion, and truthfully, I need to be loved. I'm surprised that you don't."

"Ron," Hermione whispered and threw her arms around him, holding him tightly as she began to sob.

"Hermione?" he questioned, squeezing her back before leaning his head back and looking into her eyes and then at her lips. "What? Do you want to try?"

Hermione let him go, shaking her head. "No. You're right. We're best mates. That's all we've really ever been. Oh, I know there was a time when the two of us had enough passion between us to burn down Hogwarts, but without the love needed to go with it, that kind of passion burns out quickly."

Hermione sniffed and laid her head on Ron's shoulder. "I do think that my reaction to finding the two of you that way is quite telling. My pride is hurt more than anything."

Ron sighed and ran his fingers through his hair, causing Hermione to lift her head. "Do you remember me telling you a few months back that George wanted to open up a shop in New York City?"

"Yes, I remember."

"We've talked about it, and I decided I want to go to America and head that up. We found a great location and a building for sale. I was going to wait until Rose and Hugo went back to Hogwarts next month, but I think under the circumstances, now would be a good time for me to go."

"Now? You mean, you'd just go without saying goodbye to the children, leaving me to explain things? When would you even see our children if you moved there, Ronald Weasley..."

"No! I wouldn't do that to you! It's my fault anyway. I had thought to see them half of the summer and split holidays with you. That's the same as we do now. No, when they get back Monday, I thought we could both sit them down and explain things to them, together. Would that do?"

"Yes, that is what I want. I can see that you've been giving this a lot of thought. This is not entirely your fault. The cheating is, mind. You should've come to me, Ron, before going to another woman, and told me how you were feeling."

"I know it. But I honestly didn't think you'd care. After a couple months went by and we'd practically started living like best mates again, I knew deep down that you were fine with us not having sex. I'm not though, love. I can't live that way."

"Still, you should've come to me. Had you done so earlier, then we may have had a chance!"

"I wonder. It would've likely been like you said, we'd have gotten back on track for a bit, but after some time went by, then we would've fizzled out again. We both deserve better, I think."

"What about Lavender? Do you love her?"

Ron nodded. "I do, yes. She's wanting to come to America with me and give us a fresh start."

"I see."

Ron stood and started pacing. "What do you want me to do? Stay? Go? Do you want to try again? What?"

Hermione stood and walked to the window to look out. "I want you to do what makes you happy."

He walked up to stand behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders, pulling her back against his chest. "We were happy once. If you think that we could be again, I'll stay here and give us another go. I want you to be happy, too."

"Do you love me, Ron?"

"Yes," he told her without hesitation.

"Do you love me the way that Harry loves Ginny?" He started to answer, but she cut him off. "Better yet, do you love me the way that you love her?"

Still standing behind her, he wrapped his arms around her and placed his chin on the top of her head. "We've been together a long time, and you're the mother of my children. If you wanted to give us an honest try, I would stay and try."

"No, I don't think that we'd be happy after this. Like I've said, we would be at first, but after awhile, things would become... stale again. And now that I know you've been with Lavender and that you love her, I think I would always wonder about that and doubt you." She turned and wrapped her arms around his waist, taking a deep breath and inhaling his familiar scent. "I will miss you though."

"Hermione," he said brokenly. "I swear I never meant to hurt you. I almost didn't think that I could. Maybe I did want you to find out, deep down, just to see if it would hurt you."

"Right." She smiled sadly and looked up at him. "It does." Disentangling herself from her husband, she walked into the kitchen to start supper.

"I bought all of this food earlier; there's no need for it to go to waste. I was thinking that we could tell Arthur and Molly when we tell the kids."

"Oh, Mum. I hadn't thought. She'll blow when she finds out about Lavender."

"We're not going to tell any of them about that. There's no need. She was merely a symptom of the problems we've been having. We're simply going to say that we've not been happy for a long time, you and George have this great opportunity, and that you're going to New York to start things up there."

"You're sure?" he asked her, surprised.

"Yes. For one thing, I don't want anyone placing all of the blame on you, and for another, I don't want Rose and Hugo to form a bad opinion of their father right off the bat." She patted his hand. "Don't worry. We'll work it out."

"Suddenly I feel unsure, Hermione," he admitted. "You're too calm about all of this."

"Oh, I hurt. Never doubt that. But I just don't think we could ever work things out after this, and I don't see the need to drag things out. I think it would be better for me to just get on with things. I'd never trust you again, Ronald."

She turned suddenly, throwing the wooden spoon she'd been using and hitting Ron right between the eyes. "Our bed! How could you in our bed?"

"Ouch! Damn it, Hermione! That hurt!"

Finding her anger all of the sudden, Hermione picked up the roast she'd intended to cook and threw that at Ron next. "Here! Go have Lavender cook that for you!"

She started to stomp by Ron, refusing to let him see another tear, but he grabbed her, pulling her tightly to his chest. "Let me go!" she shouted. "I have to go burn those sheets you were fucking that cow on!"

"Mione, stop! I'm an arse, okay? I know that, but are you sure you don't want to try and work things out?"

Just as quickly as her anger flared, it deflated. "No, I don't. I know that I won't ever be able to get past this, Ron. Never. Let me go."

He quickly released her, and she walked into the hallway, picking up the items that she'd dropped on the floor earlier. She heard him step into the hall behind her.

"What's all this?" he asked as he picked up a black, lacy bra and panty set. "Hermione?"

"Nothing! Give that to me!"

Ron looked around, spotting the candles and bath salts that had fallen on the floor. "Oh, God, Hermione. I'm sorry, really! What can I..."

"Nothing! Well, you could go. I want to be alone, if you don't mind. Just pack some of your things and go... where ever, as long as it's not here."

"You're sure?" he asked.

"Absolutely. It's what I want. It's what you want, too, I think. Besides, surely you don't think I'd sleep in the same bed with you, or even the same house, after what I witnessed today, knowing that you're in love with someone else."

"I love you, too," he persisted.

"Right. It's the 'too' that's the problem. I'm going to leave here for about an hour. When I get back, I don't want you to be here." After saying that, she turned and left without a backwards glance.

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Hermione found herself sitting in the Potters' living room again, pouring her heart out. After she'd told them everything, she sniffled and told them, "He's right about the passion part. There's been no passion in our marriage in a long while."

"I'm going to kill that bloody wanker!" Harry said. "How could *hedo this* to you? How dare he go and... and... shag Lavender Brown? And in your marital bed too?"

"Harry, please calm down," Hermione begged. "This is why I wanted to tell you guys today rather than tomorrow with the rest of the family. Well, that and the fact that I want Lavender kept out of it. Tonight, I'm not talking to my in-laws, I'm talking with my friends."

"That's all well and good, Hermione, but why keep Lavender out? Why not let Molly and Arthur know what he's been up to?"

"Because I don't want everyone one blaming Ron. It takes two people to make a marriage, and while he's hurt me terribly by cheating like this, I have my faults, too. Besides, this isn't something I want Rose and Hugo to know. Despite everything, Ron's a great father, and the kids adore him. I don't want that to change."

Before Harry could argue further, his wife spoke. "I agree with Hermione, Harry." At his sharp look, Ginny quickly amended, "Not because he's my brother, but like Hermione said, for Rose and Hugo. If they're ending their marriage anyway, I think we should make things as easy as possible on the kids. Don't you?"

Turning to his friend, Harry asked, "Are you sure?" When Hermione nodded, he asked, "Then, are you sure you two can't work things out? You seem, I dunno, protective of him."

"No, not after this. I'd never trust him. Besides, he admitted that he does love Lavender. He loves us both, and to be honest, I want a husband to love *only me*."

"I don't blame you there," Ginny agreed. "And I know Lavender's always loved him. I just never thought that she'd stoop to such levels!"

Hermione shook her head. "Again, it takes two. However, I wouldn't put it past her to hang out at the shop or to make herself available to Ron, letting him know that when he wants her, all he has to do is snap his fingers." Hermione sighed. "I'm going to go home now and have a soak."

"Harry, please don't hate Ron for this. I don't hate him myself, per se; he's just wounded my pride mainly. With time, I'll get over it. It's just hard losing my husband and best friend at the same time."

"What will you do, Hermione?" Ginny asked.

"Well, I've been thinking. I have six months worth of leave saved up at the Ministry, and I'm going to take it when the kids go back to school and go on holiday. I'm not sure where. After that, who knows?"

"Can you afford that?" Harry asked.

"I can. It's six months with pay. Besides, I've not touched the money I received when my parents died. Add that with what I got after selling their dental practice, and I have enough to last a good while."

"And Ron will have to help," Ginny reminded her.

"Yes, with the kids anyway." Hermione stood. "I'm going home now." She hugged both her friends. "Thanks for listening."

"Anytime," Ginny told her. "You'll always be my sister, you know."

"Exactly," Harry agreed. "We love you."

"I love you guys, too. 'Night."

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Hermione had been happy that Ron had listened to her for once and was gone when she'd returned home. He had left a note, apologizing again for everything, and he'd

changed the sheets on her bed. Hermione had been happy he'd done that so she didn't have to deal with it herself. She didn't know nor did she care what he'd done with the sheets he'd removed, but they weren't anywhere in the house.

She'd filled the tub with hot water, placed her candles all about the bathroom, poured her a glass of red wine, and sank down into the tub and let out a deep breath.

She then let her tears flow freely. She cried for the ending of her marriage, the loss of her husband and one of her best friends, and she cried for the ending of her life as she knew it. Everything was going to be different from now on.

And, she realized with a jolt, once the kids left for Hogwarts, she was going to be completely alone.

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A/N: Hope you guys like my beginning. I chose the first prompt:

Hermione and Ron are married. What would she do if she came home unexpectedly and found him in bed with another woman?

Reviews are welcome.

## Chapter 2

*Chapter 2 of 13*

Hermione comes home to find something she'd never expected. Her life will change--hopefully for the better.

**Disclaimer:** All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: I would like to thank my awesome beta... Again? You've tried to trick me again? Sneaky, you are!

*Cough Southern\_Witch\_69 Cough*



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Hermione sighed heavily and set her bags down with a thump. She was finally here. The past month had been exhausting for her, dealing with her children and her divorce from Ron.

The divorce itself had only taken a month to be final, which surprised Hermione greatly. After seeing a solicitor, both parties agreeing on properties and shared custody of the children, all that needed to be done was the cutting of the binding cords and the signatures of both husband and wife. It was rather anticlimactic.

Rose and Hugo did not take the divorce well, which was not surprising to her. All she could do in that regard was hope that time would heal their wounds because there was no way she'd ever go back to her husband...ex-husband. They were done. Ron didn't want her back at any rate; he and Lavender were planning on getting married with the kids' first visit with him in the States so that they could be a part of the ceremony.

Cringing, she remembered the day that Lavender had come to her job at the Ministry to beg her forgiveness. She'd made a fool of them both, sobbing and blubbering all over Hermione, spouting off her love for Ronald and all that rot.

Hermione had told Lavender that she was welcome to Ron and had even gone so far as to offer her blessings. She'd mainly done that to get the stupid cow out of her office, but once she was off for the day, she went straight to Ron and let him have it. Needless to say, Lavender had never darkened her doorstep again, thank Merlin.

Looking around her villa for the next six months, the ex-Mrs. Weasley was impressed. It was lovely...spacious and bright...with a terrific view of the ocean. Yes, the Wizarding Island on the coast of Palermo, Italy had been an excellent choice.

After she'd spotted the cute little oak antique desk by the bay window, Hermione quickly sat down to jot a few lines to her children to let them know that she'd arrived safely and to reassure them once more. For the mother inside her, her children's insecurity was the very worse part of this mess that was currently her life. She would do just about anything for Rose and Hugo, except stay with a man who'd betrayed her in the worse possible way and that she could no longer trust.

She sighed again. Morose thoughts such as these were going to spoil her good mood, and she'd not been in a mood this good for a long while. It had taken forever to get the image of Ron pumping into Lavender in their *marital* bed out of her thoughts, damned if she'd start thinking of that now that her marriage was completely over! No, this place was too lovely for such dismal thoughts.

After she'd finished both letters, she called her snowy owl to her...a parting gift from the Potters so that she'd keep in touch...and tied them both to her leg. "Please deliver these to Rose and Hugo during their breakfast at Hogwarts in the morning."

Palladium lightly nipped Hermione's knuckle and, with a light hoot, flew gracefully out of the window.

Wanting to get the mundane tasks taken care of, Hermione levitated her bags to the master bedroom and began to put her clothes and toiletries away. The room was as

spacious as the rest of the villa with a huge king-sized bed, a matching dresser, and a chest of drawers, all done in light wood tones to match the wood floors.

After she'd finished that, she quickly went to the market that was in the community to pick up some groceries and essentials. After putting those items away, she decided it was time for fun.

Even though it was the third of September, the weather was a balmy 79 degrees, so Hermione went into the bedroom to slip into her bathing suit so that she could soak up some sun while she read a completely trashy romance novel.

She chuckled to herself as she remembered telling Ginny that she intended to take a lover while she was here. She'd only been with Ron and had often wondered what it would be like to have sex with another man. Although she wasn't absolutely positive that she'd actually take a lover, Ginny had made her swallow the year-long dose of Birth Control Potion that she'd had in her bathroom cabinet, assuring Hermione that she and Harry had decided to have one more child before they stopped.

Looking at herself in the mirror, Hermione thought, *Why not take a lover? Why not do something that will make me happy for once? Ever since I can remember, I've put Ron and the kids first... Now is my time, and I intend to make the most of it!* She'd lost weight this past month, and while she may not have her youthful before-babies-figure back, Hermione thought that she filled her bikini out pretty damned well.

Putting on her wrap, she swallowed her Sun Block Potion, grabbed her novel, and headed for the beach. After she'd found the perfect spot, she settled down in her lounge chair for a nice, long read and, exhausted, mentally and physically, instantly fell asleep.

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Severus Snape stood at his window, tending the herbs that he grew inside. He was a week ahead in his brewing, and he liked it that way. Besides, with Liam gone, there was not much else to do. He missed the bugger when he was away visiting.

He looked up just as a very shapely beach bunny in a black bikini walked outside from the villa next door. *Hmm... Interesting.*

She had her brown hair piled up on top of her head and was carrying some sort of book. When she bent over to spread her towel over her lounge chair, Severus felt a distinct stirring in his loins. He'd always enjoyed a plump arse on a woman.

He folded his arms over his chest and watched as she settled in for her read, but instead of reading, she seemed to be watching the ocean. Or that's what he thought. It was hard to tell with her back to him, but her head was not bent, and the book looked to be lying on her lap.

Perhaps he should go outside and introduce himself. It had been many months since he'd enjoyed the delights that only a woman could offer. Although, with her living next door, there could be a problem if she wanted more than he wanted. A few shags now and then would do him nicely, but that was all. Some women believed that sex equated love, but Severus had no intentions of ever being in another serious relationship again. After the way his past two serious ones had ended, he knew he...and any woman involved with him...would be better off not to even contemplate it.

He chuckled to himself. He knew nothing of this woman! She could be married or attached to someone. He must be in dire straits indeed if one bend and a plump arse had him already shagging his neighbor mentally! He roughly rubbed his face and turned away from the tempting sight out of his window, deciding to have a bite to eat before he finished his potions for the day.

As he brewed, Severus' thoughts inevitably turned to the only two women he'd ever loved. He thought first of Lily and her bright, happy personality. God, how he'd loved her!

She'd been the first true friend he'd ever had, loving him despite his family and lack of money and possessions. Such things never did matter to Lily Evans.

She'd always cared for him...loved him even...and he had to believe she would've ended with him had he not ruined things with her by letting his pride interfere with things.

He remembered how she'd begged him to stay away from the likes of the Lestranges and Malfoys, how she'd tried to tell him that it took all kinds of people and that one race was no better than the other. He'd laughed at her naivety, he remembered, telling her that surely some were better...purer...than others.

She'd looked at him so sadly, tears filling her emerald green eyes and asked if he really and truly believed that, and with the stupidity of youth, he'd admitted that he did, trying to convince her to believe it, too. What he'd done in reality was send her right into James Potter's arms.

Then, he'd done the unthinkable and got her killed. That was something he'd live with for the rest of his life. He shuddered as he remembered seeing her lifeless body lying on the floor, those dead green eyes staring up at him...

He'd gone for years after her death, trying to avenge her and make up for all of his wrong doings, his ill thinking. Of course he'd been wrong and she'd been right! After Lily, there had never been another woman for him until Shannon O'Leary.

What a breath of fresh air she'd been, pulling him out of his severe depression. Shortly after Severus had awoken from Nagini's bite, he'd struggled to gain consciousness, thanking Albus Dumbledore for his foresight. In one of their many talks, Albus had told him to take the Antivenin Potion that would counteract the snake's venom should he be bitten.

When the final battle had started, Albus' portrait had advised him that now was the time to ingest the potion. It had worked, and though he'd been weak, Severus had been able to Apparate to his home at Spinner's End and nurse himself back to health. After speaking with Lucius, among a few others, he'd gone to Italy and had been there ever since.

He remembered how he'd thought of committing suicide at one point, barely having the energy to rise out of bed each morning his depression was so great. Even when he'd learned that he'd been cleared of all charges, there were times that he didn't want to live. It had taken the constant interference from the few friends who had known that he was there to talk him into living again.

Then, eleven years ago, he'd met Shannon as she'd moved into the villa next door that his luscious new neighbor now occupied. It was not love at first sight, but they'd gone out a few times, and then one thing led to another and...

The loud buzzing broke his thoughts, and he went to pour the potion into phials to ready them for selling. He'd done quite well here selling his Medicinal Potions to the Wizarding hospital. At first, it was merely a way to survive, brewing only the difficult potions such as Wolfsbane, but when the Potions master who'd worked there quit, they'd offered the job to Severus. He'd agreed to do so as long as he could brew from his home.

The rumbling of his stomach reminded him that he'd not eaten since he'd first gone down to brew at lunch. Once he'd finished the bottling, he went upstairs to fix himself a light dinner.

As he walked by the window, he glanced out and noticed his new neighbor was still lying in the same spot in practically the same position. No doubt she'd fallen asleep. Perhaps he'd take her a nice cool drink and find out her circumstances. He briefly wondered if she was hungry and then thought better of it until he found out more about her.

He decided that he'd eat first, and if she was still there when he finished, he'd bring a drink out to her and introduce himself. Nodding, he walked into his kitchen and had leftover spaghetti that he'd cooked the day before.

Deciding he'd procrastinated long enough, he went to look out of his window, and sure enough, the woman was still lying there, although in a slightly different position. He

sighed. He was going to do this; he was actually going to take this woman a drink and actually start a conversation.

Putting ice into a glass, he poured some sparkling water inside with a lemon wedge and a sprig of mint. He ran his fingers through his lank hair as he opened the door and walked out. He paused mid-stride once he'd gotten outside. Something about the woman seemed... familiar. What? He stood a few minutes trying to figure out what it was.

Shaking his head, he continued on. Of course he didn't know her. He didn't know very many people in Italy, and he most definitely would have remembered her.

Once he reached her, he started to speak before he actually looked at her face, as his eyes were occupied on her very nice and ample breasts. "Excuse me; I thought you might be thirsty."

Hermione stretched as she woke, which caused Severus' eyes to remain glued to her chest, and told him, "I am. Thank you." Then she reached for the glass.

Her voice...that accent, that prissy tone...caused his head to snap up, and he nearly dropped the water before she could take the glass. She took a long sip and said, "Mmm, so good! Thank you so much." When she looked up, she *did* drop the glass.

"Professor Snape? Is that really you?" Then she shook her head and closed her eyes. "No, no, it couldn't be. Surely I've slept in the sun too long, and I'm hallucinating..."

When she opened her eyes again, she gasped and jumped up quickly, causing herself to become dizzy. She grabbed his arm for balance, and when he was sure she wasn't going to fall, he took a step back from her.

"Granger," he spat as if her name was a filthy word. "What are you doing here? How did you find me?"

"What am I doing here? What are *you* doing here? I thought...we all thought...that you'd died in the final battle!" Smiling brilliantly, Hermione ran to him before she thought better of it and threw her arms around him in a tight hug, causing her soft breasts to crush against his firm chest. "You're alive! Oh, thank God, you're alive!"

"Figured that out all on your own, did you? Do tell, what was your first clue?" He took her arms and none too gently pushed her away from him. "Kindly unhand me, and please refrain from touching me in such a way in the future. Now, I would like it if you'd answer my questions. How did you find me, and who told you I'd be here?"

She looked hurt, but composed herself before answering his questions. "Nobody told me that you'd be here. I didn't come here looking for you. I came here on an extended holiday."

"So what you're telling me is that it's just my good luck that has brought you here, to this spot, your villa directly beside mine? How... fortuitous for me then. Did you bring your husband and children with you?"

Hermione folded her arms under her breasts, causing them to lift and look even fuller, and that made it very hard for Severus to keep his eyes from straying from her face. "My children are at Hogwarts, and as for Ron, well, we're not married any longer."

Severus snorted. "How surprising. The know-it-all and the brute didn't last. What happened? Did he run off with your ex-boyfriend, Viktor Krum? It seems like I recall Quidditch being the only thing that could hold his interest for very long, and I do know that Viktor played both sides of the pitch, as it were." He looked her up and down. "Perhaps if you had learned the sport..."

"How dare you? I see you're still the same cruel arse you've always been! I see how you survived! You're too mean to die!" Hurt shining in her eyes, she turned her back to him, bent over, and picked up her book and towel, and his loins tightened once more.

He shook his head. This would not do, would not do at all. He *would not* be attracted to this bint!

Once she had her belongings, she turned back to him. "What about you?"

"What about me?" he asked, bringing his attention back to her face.

"Did you ever marry or are you still alone and bitter?"

"I am not married," he informed her without elaborating. His life was none of her business.

She patted her chest with mock surprise. "Not married? Why, I'm all astonishment! How you've remained single all these years is certainly a mystery to me!"

He fought back a grin. Cheeky cow. "As long as I have company of the female persuasion when I require it, I do just fine. Unlike you and your lot, I don't have to be one half of a couple to define myself. I am confident just as I am."

"And so humble, too." She looked around and told him, "I see the ladies all lined up for you!" Hermione sighed, not wanting to argue with him at all. "Professor, do we have to argue? We're neighbors now. Can't we try to get along? I've so many questions..."

"Of course you do. What else would the know-it-all have but questions? Sorry, at this time, I don't feel up to an inquisition."

Hermione smirked. Damned if he didn't look sexy standing there all mad and brooding because she'd found out that he was alive after all. She just knew that had to be the true reason for his hurtful remarks, sort of a defense mechanism. She decided to play with him a bit and hone her flirting skills in case she decided to find a lover after all. "Does that mean I might give you an... *inquisition* later then?"

He raised an eyebrow, shocked at her blatant innuendo. "Be careful what you wish for, Granger. If I took you up on your *offer*, you wouldn't know what hit you."

"Truly? Are your answers that astounding?"

"Let's just say that after the *conversations* you've had with Weasley, any talk with an ounce of intelligence would amaze you."

"Well," she told him, "there have been times when Ron's instinct wasn't half bad. Sometimes instinct works rather well."

He nodded. "That's true. But add instinct with intelligence, and I'd wager you'd do much better than *half bad*."

She shook her head and relaxed her stance. "You know what they say? All talk..."

He straightened to his full height, strangely turned on and forcibly fighting it at the same time. "I can assure you, Granger, I more than talk when...and with whom...I so choose." He looked her up and down again as if he found her lacking in some way. "At this time, I choose talk only."

She nodded. What was beginning to be fun banter was going back to hurtful remarks, something she didn't care for. "All right." She turned to go, wanting to have a small dinner, a long soak, and cool sheets so that she could go to sleep and put this day behind her.

"What are you doing here anyway?" he asked as she began walking back to her villa.

She stopped and looked over her shoulder. "Why, to have a torrid affair after my divorce, of course. What else?"

"Payback, is it? Weasley did stray then?"

Hermione shrugged, turning to face him and spread her arms out to the sides, giving him a clear view of her body. "Apparently, when it comes to me, talk is the order of the day." She dropped her arms and turned back around, heading for her villa once more.

This time, he didn't try to stop her, simply watching the soft sway of her plump little arse as she walked away. He shook his head. The little wanton didn't know how close she'd come to him dragging her to his room and having his wicked way with her. Deciding he wanted to get in one last parting shot, he called out to her just as she'd reached her door. "If an affair...and *only* an affair...is what you're *truly* after, I'll be happy to oblige you by leaving my door unlocked."

She opened her door and looked back at him, smiling sadly. "Thanks, but I'm all talked out for the moment." She thought a moment, then said brazenly, "Though, it could be that I'll be in the mood to... inquisition you at a later date. Keep your options open, Snape. Perhaps I'll surprise you one evening, provided you actually do keep your door unlocked for me." Then she walked inside, shutting the door tightly behind her.

Severus stood staring at her door for a long time, wondering just what exactly he'd gotten himself into. He would be sure to leave his door open for her, deciding it could very well be worth his while to find out.

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A/N: Hmmm. I wonder if Hermione will walk in her sleep later?

Reviews are welcome.

## Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 13

Hermione comes home to find something she'd never expected. Her life will change--hopefully for the better.

**Disclaimer:** All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: ~Shakes head back and forth and folds arms over chest~ Oh, no, you don't! *do* want to thank my totally awesome beta, but she will have to stay anonymous until voting is over!

Cough Southern\_Witch\_69 Cough



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Hermione sat at the vanity in her bedroom, meticulously applying her makeup. It had been one week since she'd ran into her old professor, and she hadn't seen him once since that day. Was he purposely trying to drive her nuts?

She frowned as she thickened her lashes with mascara. With the tan she was getting by making sure she was lying in the sun at least an hour daily, she only needed very little make-up, but she liked to do things to bring out her deep brown eyes. To her, they were her best feature.

She'd mainly been going to the beach daily in hopes that Snape would venture back outside and speak with her, but the man had remained stubbornly inside his villa. She had so many questions! Had the Ministry found out that he was alive? Did Snape know that he'd been fully pardoned? Who all back home knew that he hadn't died?

But mostly, she wanted to know how he'd done it...how he'd kept himself from dying. Harry, Ron and she had stood there and watched him die. It was amazing, really. Then, there was the small matter of the affair...filing...whatever he wanted to call it, that they'd discussed.

He'd told her that he'd leave his door unlocked if she was truly interested in having an affair, but had he meant it? He'd never liked her, she knew, so why would he seriously consider a liaison with her now, especially after their discussion? Well, there was the fact of no-strings sex, but was that enough? With everything that had happened with Ron, Hermione didn't know if she could face a rejection just now.

Hermione sighed, confusion and doubt clouding her mind. She desperately wanted to find out. She'd written to Ginny seeking advice, not revealing her would-be paramour's identity of course. She chuckled, remembering Ginny's response to her question as to whether or not she should take him up on his offer. She'd written, 'Remember the Contraception Potion I talked you into taking before you left? That was for a reason! If you're truly interested, then I have to say go and enjoy!'

Hermione placed her chin on her hand and stared at her reflection in the mirror. Not a beauty, but then, neither was he. Looks were never an issue with her anyway. But were they with *him*? Harry's mum had been beautiful, like Ginny, but other than Lily Evans, Hermione had no clues as to any other women he'd cared for.

She shook her head. He'd offered, so that logically meant that he had to be interested. Straightening up, she decided to go to the market and pick up a few things she needed, and then later... Well, later, she'd see.

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Severus scowled as he placed his items in his cart. He hated shopping for anything other than potions ingredients. Likely because he grew many of them himself and didn't

have to actually purchase that many. With Liam gone for the next few weeks, he didn't need very much, but today, he'd had a craving to have Salmon Primavera for his evening meal.

He rounded the corner to pick out some fresh asparagus when he spotted Granger standing there speaking with some man. Little wanton! He'd watched her daily bouts of sunbathing, willing her to come to him and take him up on his offer, but it'd been a week, and she still hadn't come. She merely went outside everyday, tempting him with her plump little arse. He swore, the first chance he got, he was going to bend her over and... He shook his head. This was not the place for such thoughts.

Now here she was, standing there by the tomatoes, conversing with some man who could barely speak English, telling her she needed to look for the *plump* ones. Severus smirked. The man was likely thinking of her arse, too.

She looked up at him, batting those pretty brown eyes, thanking him for his wonderful advice, as if he'd invented tomatoes! He patiently waited until the man walked away, looking at her over his shoulder with hopeful glances, before he quietly walked up behind her and whispered into her ear, "*Small talk*, Granger? Odd. You strike me as a 'get to the point' conversationalist."

It pleased him to watch her shiver. She slowly turned to look at him and said, "I don't know. A lot of times *small talk* can set the stage for more stimulating...*conversation*. Wouldn't you agree?"

He raised an eyebrow. The woman was damned confusing. Or a damned tease. In which case, it would bode well for him to find out now and save himself the trouble of fooling with her. He couldn't stand when a woman led a man on with no intentions of following through. Watching her reaction, he said, "I've left my door unlocked everyday for a week so that we can test out that very theory, Granger. You've yet to open it."

She shrugged, and he was sure she was trying to be flippant. "Were you serious about that then?"

He stared at her, amazed. *She's uncertain! She thinks I'll reject her! Silly girl.* "Oh, I was absolutely sure," he assured her.

She looked around them a bit and then asked, "Would you care to have a spot of lunch with me?"

Acting on impulse, he told her as he nodded towards his cart, "I've a better idea. Why don't we go back to my villa, and I'll make us lunch. Besides, you need to put your things away. When you're finished, you just come over."

"All right," she said. "That would be lovely. What shall I bring?"

He practically leered at her. "Good conversation," he told her as he walked away to pay for his items. When he took one last glance at her, she was patting her chest with one hand and fanning her face with the other. Yes, he had high hopes that this was going to be a very nice lunch.

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Hermione stood at Snape's door unsure of... so many things that she didn't know where to begin. The first thought invading her mind was could she really go through with this? Because she knew that even though they were actually going to have lunch, if she went through that door, it would also be the start of their fling.

She shuddered, remembering his voice as he'd whispered in her ear. Oh, yes, he definitely knew the effect his voice had on a woman. She wanted him. That, at least, wasn't an issue. And apparently, he wanted her as well, so she couldn't use that as an excuse not to go through with it.

So, the only thing left to do was open the door and walk in. Or should she knock?

Her decision was abruptly taken away from her as Snape jerked the door open. "A man could...*starve* waiting for you to open the door."

So, she thought, they were switching to food innuendos for their banter now. All right, she could do this. She smiled at him and held up a bottle of Chardonnay to go with his salmon dish and two canolis for dessert. "Perhaps this can... what your appetite? For dessert, naturally."

He stood there a moment, looking at her from head to toe as he had on the beach, then as if he'd come to a decision, he opened the door wide. "Come in," he commanded.

Hermione handed him the wine and dessert as she walked in, looking about his villa. It looked the same as hers. She wandered to the long table against the wall lined with pictures, some Muggle, others moving. She picked up a Muggle picture of a small toddler boy with black hair and dark eyes. "Is this you?" she asked with a twinkle in her eyes, sure that it had to be.

Severus looked at the picture of Liam in her hands. "No," he said, but didn't elaborate. When Hermione understood that he wasn't going to offer any more information, she set the picture down, looking at the others.

She picked up another picture, wizard this time, of what had to be a teen-aged Snape with his arm around Lily Evans. Hermione had seen enough pictures to recognize her. She started. Snape actually had a very nice smile, and she realized that this was the first time that she'd ever seen it. *Why, he's happy here*, she thought.

Without mentioning it, she placed it back down and picked up another of a beautiful woman with very long, wavy, strawberry-blonde hair and deep blue eyes, laughing into the camera. *She has freckles on her nose*, Hermione ridiculously thought. She looked up to find Snape watching her closely. She looked back down at the picture. "Friend of yours?" she asked quietly.

"She was. Lunch is ready," he told her, once more not giving away any more details, and she was too scared to ask any more questions about the woman in the picture. Placing the picture gently down, Hermione went to join Severus for lunch.

The salmon and vegetables were cooked to perfection, but Hermione had expected nothing less. The first few minutes were quiet until Hermione couldn't take it any longer. "How did you do it? I'm dying to know."

He didn't pretend to not know what she was asking him about. She wanted to know how he'd survived. "You know what they say about curiosity," he warned.

"Snape," she groaned, *"tell me!"*

He chuckled and wiped his mouth with a white linen napkin. "Still bossy, I see, and full of questions."

"If you don't ask, you won't learn," she prissily informed him. "However, if you don't wish to discuss it, that's fine." She picked up her wine and took a long sip, hardly enjoying the nutty flavor.

"Now you're in a snit. Hardly good to sate your...*hunger*."

"Oh, I'm hardly in a snit," she told him, ignoring his jab. "I'm just curious as to how you survived, that's all. I watched you die, you know. Harry, Ron, and I. We were there."

He folded his arms across his chest and leaned back in his chair. "This is not the type of *lunch conversation* I want to have with you, Granger."

Sighing in defeat, she conceded. "Fine. Another time?"

"Perhaps," he eluded as he placed his napkin in his plate, signaling the meal was at an end. Standing, he offered his hand to her. "Shall I show you the rest of my villa?"

"Don't you want dessert?" she asked, slightly panicked because she knew where this was leading.

"Oh, yes. I most certainly want dessert." He gestured towards the kitchen. "However, we can have your canolis later. Right now, I have ~~an~~ *an* craving for something else. You?"

*Oh, God, I am so in over my head* Hermione thought as she stood, taking his hand.

He led her up the stairs and into his bedroom. "Do you want this, Granger?" he suddenly asked as soon as they'd entered, surprising her.

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"Yes, you are. But I don't want to get started only to have you suddenly stop things. And I also want to make it clear right now that a fling is all that I want at this time. Is this acceptable to you?"

She frowned. His terms sounded so much like a warning, but of what she wasn't sure. "Of course. I hardly want to start a serious relationship so fresh from my divorce." She cringed a little at the word divorce, but continued, "No, I'm not looking for anything other than a fling myself."

"With *me*?" he clarified.

She threw her hands up in the air. "It's *your* bedroom that I'm in, Snape, so, yes, with you. Do you want me to sign a bloody contract?" she asked, aggravated.

"I just want to get everything out in the open now so that there're no doubts or questions later on."

"Understood," she sniped. "A fling only: no commitments, no promises, no strings. Does that ease your mind?"

"Immensely. Now, come here," he said as he held out his arms. "I've been thinking about sinking my teeth into you all week."

She slowly walked to him. Not to seduce, but because she didn't know what to do. With Ron, they'd always gone to bed at night and then went from there. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had sex like this, during the day. Certainly before Rose had come along.

He seemed to have no such worries. Once she got to him, he deftly turned her so that her back was to his front, and he immediately began nibbling the bottom of her neck where her shoulders began, pulling down a strap to her sundress as he feasted.

"Delicious," he murmured, licking down her arm to the inside of her elbow. He then moved to face her, pulling down her other strap. "Let's get you out of this," he purred.

She nodded towards his chest. "You, too. You undress, too."

Ignoring her, he slowly pulled her dress down and was delighted to find that she had only white lacy knickers on underneath. "Had I known what I would find under your dress, we would've skipped lunch all together and gone straight for dessert."

She was standing there in nothing but her knickers and heeled sandals, blushing from head to toe. Trying to cover herself, she defended, "The dress is white with built-in padding and does not require a bra."

He told her, "I'm not complaining nor criticizing. I'm simply enjoying the view." He made a circle with his fingers in the air. "Turn around."

"No!" she told him, horrified. "I will not!"

"Turn," he instructed. "I want to see you."

"Absolutely not!" she said. He started walking towards her, and she started backing away. "I don't think that the playing field is exactly even."

"Oh? How so?" he asked as he continued towards her, backing her to the bed.

"You're still dressed," she simply stated.

"Then come here and undress me," he challenged. "I undressed you, after all."

She was in a dilemma. In order to undress him, she would have to move her hands from the more private parts of her body. Gathering her courage, she slowly made her way to him, determined that she would even the playing field so that she wouldn't feel so self-conscious.

However, once she reached him, he grabbed her and turned her so that her back was to him once more, ripping her knickers off in the process. He groaned very loudly as he ran his hands over her bottom, kneading and caressing.

"Severus!" she gasped out.

He walked her back to the bed and bent her forward, leaning over with her, pumping his hips. The sensation of him being fully dressed, rubbing against her while she was totally naked was surprisingly erotic to Hermione.

"I've wanted to do this from the first time I saw your

arse--covered in nothing but black bikini bottoms--bent over that lounge chair." He deftly unfastened his trousers, freeing himself.

Hermione gasped once more when she felt his hardened cock against her bare bottom. He reached his arm around, stroking her intimately until he was satisfied that she was ready for him.

Putting one of his legs between the both of hers, he widened her stance, and then he took her arms and braced her hands on the bed directly in front of her. Quickly removing a condom from the nightstand by the bed and rolling it on, he cautioned, "Hold on tight," as he entered her from behind with a satisfied groan.

She cried out from the sensation of being filled. It had been so long! He backed out of her slowly and then slowly re-entered her, starting a slow and, to Hermione, tortuous rhythm. He leaned down and licked her spine from top to bottom, making her writhe with pleasure.

When her thrusts started matching his, he reached around her, barely touching her straining and sensitive nipples, causing her to arch her back so that his hand would be more firmly placed on her aching breasts, applying more pressure.

She rose up and turned her head to kiss him, lifting her arms up and around his neck, but he expertly raised his head causing her to kiss his chin instead. Undeterred, she began nibbling his chin.

Severus slowly moved his hands down her torso, caressing as he went, until he reached her lower lips, plumped with desire. He gently massaged her there as he pumped into her, running both of his hands between them, driving her mad with the pace he'd set.

When at last he found her clit, he stroked it ruthlessly until she finally had to remove her hands from around his neck and bunch them on the covers of his bed. Only after she cried out her pleasure did he allow himself release.

He stood there a few moments, gently rubbing her back. Then he pulled out of her, vanished the condom, and cleansed himself. "Thank you," he told her. "That was very nice. I think I'll have a bit of a lie down before enjoying the canoli you brought." He tucked himself back into his pants, kicked off his shoes, and laid down on the bed, facing the wall.

Hermione stood there awkwardly, unsure of what to do, feeling uncertain. Did he want her to join him? He hadn't said. Was she supposed to just climb into bed with him, or did he expect her to leave? What was the correct protocol for a situation such as this?

It wasn't until she heard his soft snores that she sprang into action, grabbing her dress and slipping it back on. She picked up her shoes and quietly walked to the door, gently closing it behind her as she left. She decided she would go back to her own villa, as she didn't feel comfortable staying at his while he was sleeping.

It wasn't until she got back and was thinking about things that she realized how... odd the situation had been. Almost impersonal, if one could apply that word with sex.

She'd immediately written to Ginny of the experience to get her take on things and then, since she was writing, decided to write to her children as well.

When she'd finished her writing, she'd made a light supper of soup and sandwiches, eating as she'd finished the romance novel she'd started that first day she'd seen Severus on the beach.

The book inevitably caused her to think of Severus and what had happened earlier between them. She sat on her sofa, remembering every detail.

He hadn't let her kiss him, nor did he kiss her. He'd stayed completely dressed while she had been completely ~~undressed~~. He'd used a condom, which was odd for a wizard. They were different from Muggles and never caught the sexual diseases that were so carelessly spread. If he had been using it against pregnancy, why not use a charm? Why did he face her away from him?

She felt hurt, but she couldn't completely explain why. She couldn't exactly say that he'd *used* her; she was the one who'd brought up having a fling in the first place, and he'd told her his terms before things had happened, and she'd completely consented. He'd just seemed so... indifferent to her...she supposed that was a fitting word, like it could have been anyone he'd been pounding into, and that would have been just fine.

She shook her head. No, she was just not used to this *type* of relationship, that was all. Well, not even a relationship...a fling really. It was just incredibly hard to separate her feelings from the sex. The only other sexual relationship she'd ever been in had been with Ron, and this was a different thing all together. Rubbing her temples, she rose to go have a bath.

She sighed, sinking further into the tub. She certainly couldn't say that she hadn't been satisfied, Hermione thought. Snape had definitely done that. She was just going to have to get used to not having a certain kind of intimacy, that's all.

Honestly, she was an adult now! Surely she could have this type of an adult affair without feeling too needy for the other aspects of a committed relationship. It wasn't as if she *wanted* to be in a committed relationship at this point anyway.

She needed time to grieve for her marriage and loss of her life as she knew it. The only thing was she hadn't thought of Ronald Weasley one time this week, not since seeing Severus Snape. Odd, that. One would think that she'd hurt, just a little.

When her eyes drifted shut, she reluctantly got out of the bath, not wanting to fall asleep in the tub. She dried herself and walked into her bedroom, getting into the bed completely naked, enjoying the sensation of the cool sheets against her warm skin.

Though it was only half past nine, she went to sleep quickly and dreamt of Potions masters, cauldrons, and detentions.

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A/N: Well, the fling has officially begun!

## Chapter 4

*Chapter 4 of 13*

Hermione comes home to find something she'd never expected. Her life will change--hopefully for the better.

**Disclaimer:** All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: I'm on to you by now! No thanks to my awesome beta until after voting!

*Cough Southern\_Witch\_69 Cough*



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Hermione leaned against her kitchen counter as she swallowed her last antibiotic. It had been three months since she and Severus had started the *fling*, and she'd gotten

a bladder infection. She knew it was because it had been so long since she'd had sex. Even before she'd left Ron, they'd gone six months with no sex.

Severus would've given her a potion to correct her problem, she knew, but Hermione just didn't feel comfortable going to him for something so... private. Instead, she'd gone to the local Muggle Medical Clinic and had gotten five days worth of antibiotics. Same effects, even if the results were somewhat slower.

After that first time they'd had sex, Hermione had not gone back to his villa, deciding that she simply felt too awkward around him. It hadn't been long before he'd come looking for her, asking her where she'd been.

When she'd informed him that she felt like he'd gotten what he'd wanted, he'd looked at her with those cold black eyes and told her, "I thought things were mutual there. We discussed things before anything happened, and I remember asking you straight out if you wanted this. You informed me that you did and that you didn't want a *relationship*."

Then she'd told him how he'd made her feel, cheap and used, and not unlike a prostitute, and he'd told her that she could've stayed, that she was the one who'd decided to leave.

She could have told him that she'd felt uncomfortable being there while he slept, but what was the point? Looking back, she was beginning to see how easily he'd turned the tables on her, making her feel like she'd overreacted. Severus Snape was a master manipulator, she'd found out.

Coming back to the present, Hermione turned her head to look out of her window, feeling melancholy. She would be going back to London for the Christmas holidays soon. Rose and Hugo would be spending the first week with her up until Christmas day and then going to spend the rest of their holiday with their daddy.

She couldn't wait to see them; she missed her children terribly. It was thinking of Severus that had made her feel so... depressed she supposed. Well, not only thoughts of him, she admitted, but her life in general. It was time to start making some decisions; only she wasn't ready to go back home just yet.

She turned her head to the table and glanced at the letter she'd received from her ex-husband the week before. He and Lavender were going to get married while the kids were with him during Christmas. He'd wanted to let her know in advance to give her ample time to *adjust* to it. She snorted. Lavender hadn't even let the ink dry on the divorce parchments before she'd snagged him up! And it wasn't that she wanted Ron herself, she truly didn't, but that didn't stop the sharp pain right in the center of her heart. She briefly wondered what Ron's family thought of his upcoming marriage, but not enough to owl Molly and find out.

Then there was her job at the Ministry. Her boss had also sent her an owl the week before informing her that if she didn't come back by the New Year, they were going to have to find a replacement for her. The only thing was, Hermione didn't know if she wanted to go back to that job at all. Well, that wasn't entirely true. She knew that she didn't want to go back, but her dilemma was what else would she do? She hadn't even thought about it until now.

There was also the matter of her house. She knew that she did not want to keep it. Ron had signed the house and everything in it over to her when he'd left, and at the time, she'd had no problems with residing there. Also, there was the fact that it had been the only home her children had ever lived in.

But now... things were different. *She* was different now. Her children would be fine if she sold the house, she assured herself. They were only there three months out of the year at any rate, and it would be even less now that they'd be spending part of their holidays and summers with their father.

Financially, she was fine for the moment, but she knew that the money she had would not last forever. So, the logical thing to do would be for her to sell her home. She'd simply have to go through the furnishings and things while she was there over Christmas and keep what she wanted and get rid of what she didn't.

Hermione lowered herself to the floor and put her head in her hands. She needed someone she could talk to. There was always Ginny, but honestly, she was Ron's sister, and even if she did want to speak with her, she'd have to write and then wait for a response. And as far as Harry was concerned, all he talked about was beating Ron to a bloody pulp. She needed... she needed...

And that brought her to the matter most pressing on her mind. Severus Snape. She simply couldn't understand him. He still remained so aloof, so cold. No matter how hard she tried, he wouldn't let her in. She understood that he didn't want to be in a committed relationship, but surely having an affair didn't mean sex only with no conversation or tenderness whatsoever! He had asked her not to sleep with other men while they were... shagging, and he'd promised her the same courtesy, but when it came to personal things, Severus Snape was a closed book.

She generally went over to his place daily and chatted while he brewed his potions. She'd discovered purely by accident that he was HBP Potions, INC. He'd never once mentioned it to her. There was nothing about her life that he didn't know, except that she hadn't mentioned her bladder infection or the two letters she'd received the week before.

Hermione wanted to see how she felt about those things herself before discussing it, but after a week, she'd found that she was still as confused as she'd ever been. Her only problem was that she could tell him about Ron, her job, and even discuss whether or not she should sell her home, but she already knew he wouldn't offer any advice or even give an opinion.

He was utterly frustrating! He'd never mentioned anything personal to her. She still had no idea who the boy in the photograph was, but she highly *suspected* that he was Severus' son. She figured the woman in the photograph must be the boy's mother, and he likely lived with her, but whenever she brought them up, Severus simply ignored her or changed the subject.

The only thing he did share with her was how he'd survived the snakebite, explaining how he and Professor Dumbledore had planned for every occurrence that they could think of, and right before he'd gone into the Shrieking Shack, he'd taken a potion to counteract snakebites at Professor Dumbledore's portrait's insistence.

He'd almost bled to death, however, until Lucius Malfoy had found him when the battle had ended. Lucius had taken him to his home and had called a Healer to go and nurse Severus back to health. So, she knew that at least the Malfoys knew he was alive.

He'd also admitted that the Ministry...more specifically Kingsley Shacklebolt and some of the higher ups...also knew that he was alive. Other than that, he'd told her nothing else of his personal life while she'd prattled on and on about all of hers.

The sex between them had still remained rather detached, but he'd at least stopped wearing a condom. Also, most times they were in his bed with them both undressed...no matter what he'd said, she'd felt cheap that first time with him fully clothed and her completely nude. He'd even stopped using a charm once he'd found out that she was taking a Contraceptive Potion. She'd never spent the night with him, though, and he'd never asked her to.

She'd figured out that the condom, no kissing, and so far, no oral sex, had been the ways that he'd kept his distance from her while still enjoying his...their...little fling. And although he did make sure she was satisfied, her emotional needs were far from being met. Even Ginny thought he was behaving rather oddly, and she'd been all for Hermione having an unattached, no-strings affair.

Hermione sighed and stood to look out of the window once more, watching the sky. There'd be snow in London by now, but here it was 52 degrees. Did she miss the snow? she wondered. Yes, she thought that she did, but not enough to go back any earlier than she absolutely had to. Home had too many things she needed to face and deal with. Here, there was only one, and Hermione thought it was about time that she tried to make some sort of an effort there.

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Severus stood before his cauldron, haphazardly throwing ingredients in. He stopped and took a deep breath. He knew that such methods could be extremely dangerous, so he stopped a moment and then calmly began again.

He was angry and brooding. He missed Liam terribly. This would be his first Christmas without the boy, and he promised himself that it was going to be his last. He should

have never agreed to the extended stay, but he'd felt that he owed it to the O'Learys to have some extra time with the boy before he had to start school.

Then there was Granger, always on his mind, though he didn't want her there. He'd done what he swore he'd never do again. He'd become *involved* with her. Oh, he doubted very seriously that she'd see it that way, but that was how it was. He let the bloody chit come over here every day!

She'd come down to his lab as well, invading his workspace, helping him with potions, babbling on about her children, her life, and trying to get him to open up about his. He tried his best to ignore her requests, but it was becoming harder and harder to do, so in turn, he became more detached and distant. Or he'd tried to, he admitted.

He looked over at a workbench and shuddered as he remembered taking her there, wanting her even now. It had been rough and fast, and when she'd cried out his name, he thought he'd explode from the inside out.

There were also times when she'd brought him treats when she'd made things for her children, different types of plants and herbs, and, sometimes, flowers for certain potions. It was almost as if she were courting him, had that idea not been so absurd. He'd never once given her anything, not even a small token of any kind.

Oh, but he'd wanted to. When he'd been Christmas shopping for Liam, he'd seen a dozen things that brought her to his mind, but he'd ruthlessly shut down those thoughts.

The last time they were having sex, he'd made the mistake of looking down into her expressive eyes, so full of him, and had to fight the urge to demand that she tell him she was his. He wanted to possess her, own her... belong to her. He wanted them to belong to each other, and that was something he *would not* tolerate, not after the way things had ended with both Lily and Shannon. No, he was going to have to end their little affair and do it before she left for the holidays.

Though she'd not told him of her plans, he had no doubt that she'd be going home to visit with her children for Christmas. Perhaps if he ended things before she left, then she would stay home and not return back here to taunt him. Out of sight, out of mind; he had to believe that! There was nothing else for it; things had gone too far already. Severus didn't doubt that he'd hurt her, but he was sure the pain of ending things wouldn't last long for Granger. No, she'd be fine just as he would, Severus persuaded himself.

He was torn from his thoughts when he heard, "Severus? Are you home?"

"Down here," he answered.

He watched as she walked down his stairs into his workroom, looking lovely as she always did. He scowled at her. She was carrying a tray of something that smelt delectable. "What do you need?"

Hermione tilted her head to the side, looking at him, confused. "Need? Nothing. I've just come to see you, that's all. Here, I've brought you some leftover fudge that I made for the children."

Severus slammed down his stirring rod and glared at her. "I didn't ask you for any fudge!"

"No, you didn't. But then again, why would you? You had no idea I'd be making it. What's gotten into you?"

"Not a thing. I'm just working now, and I don't have time to entertain you. I never requested you to come here every day, Granger." He kept telling himself to end it now, but somehow, he couldn't form the words, so he decided he'd just be nasty to her and see if she would do it for him.

"*Entertain* me? When have you ever entertained me, Severus?" She threw the tray down on an empty workstation, and he had to turn away from the hurt expression on her face. "I just wanted to see you, that's all. I'm leaving in a couple of days for home to visit with the kids over Christmas break."

"Yes, I figured that you would." They stood a few moments in silence, and he knew that she was waiting for him to ask her when she'd return. He refused to.

She sighed. "I plan on returning Christmas night as the children will leave to be with Ron." He simply nodded. "He's, ah... Ron, that is, he's marrying Lavender over Christmas while the children will be there."

Severus did look at her then, wanting to see in her eyes how she felt about Weasley getting remarried. He shrugged defensively when he realized that she was hurt, fighting the tightening of his own chest. "That would be the practical thing for him to do, though I can't see why he'd willingly tie himself down again so fresh from his last marriage."

Hermione shook her head. "I also received a letter from the Ministry letting me know that if I'm not back at work after the New Year, they would have to replace me."

Again, he said nothing. If he gave her an opinion, then he would have to be involved in her life in a way that he couldn't allow himself, though he wanted to tell her not to go back permanently.

"Severus!" she said, exasperated. "Did you hear me?"

He sneered. "Of course I heard you! What do you want me to do about it, Granger?"

She gritted her teeth, and he prepared himself for her to end things. "My. Name. Is. Hermione! Stop calling me Granger to make this little fling less personal for you! It doesn't change the fact that you *fuck* me almost every day!"

"That'll do," he warned as he walked to her. "You're mad because I won't tell you what I think you should do with your ~~life~~*Hermione*, but that's just it. It's your life. You will decide what you decide. I should have no bearing on your decisions, as they've nothing to do with me."

Hermione pressed her hands to her stomach as if she were going to be sick. "You don't care, do you? I could leave right now and never return, and it wouldn't even matter to you, would it?" When the first tear fell, she brushed it angrily away.

"I would miss *fucking* you," he told her crudely, hoping she would go and end his wanting.

She raised her hand to slap him, and he grabbed her wrist, pulling her body close to his. He couldn't do it. He wasn't ready yet for her to end things, though he despised himself for needing her. He grabbed the back of her head, and with his lips merely inches from hers, he whispered, "What do you want me to say? That'd I'd miss *you*?" He inched closer to her mouth, and her eyes fluttered closed as she licked her lips right before parting them.

He wanted...damn it, needed...to see the expression in her eyes when he took her lips for the first time. "Open your eyes, and look at me, Hermione." When she obeyed him, he moved his lips even closer to hers, enjoying her breath on his face. "Damn you, I..."

"Severus! Surprise!" Severus practically flung Hermione from him as Narcissa Malfoy descended the stairs, prattling on.

"I know that I'm not supposed to be here until next week, but Lucius and I couldn't stand the thought of your being here alone for Christmas! Not with Liam away! Lucius will be here later tonight; he's got some Ministry business to finish up. You do remember telling me that we could have our annual New Year's Eve bash here this year, don't you? I'm so looking forward to..."

Severus folded his arms over his chest as Narcissa discovered that he was not alone. He'd forgotten about that blasted party! Merlin's hairy balls! He nodded once, a severe expression on his face. "Narcissa. You're welcome, as always."

Ignoring Severus, Narcissa turned to Hermione. "I know you, don't I?"

"Yes, Mrs. Malfoy. I'm Hermione Weasley, though you'd likely remember me as Hermione Granger."

Narcissa clapped once. "Right! Granger! How are you, dear?"

Hermione looked at Narcissa with wide, shocked eyes that almost caused Severus to grin. She likely didn't know that the amount of help that Potter, Weasley, and she had given Draco in the final battle would forever put her in the Malfoys' good graces, if not Draco's.

"Er... Fine, thank you. I hope that you and Mr. Malfoy are well."

"Oh, we're just fine! And your husband? Forgive me; I can't recall his name..."

"Ronald Weasley, though he's no longer my husband. We're lately divorced."

"Oh, I see. How dreadful for you," Narcissa said almost sincerely, but Severus noted the gleam in her eyes and decided to stop her before she got started.

"Not when you consider that she walked into her home and found him in her bed with another woman," Severus informed Narcissa.

"Severus!" Narcissa scolded. "What a thing to say! Don't embarrass her like that!"

"It's perfectly fine," Hermione said, though the quivering in her voice gave her true emotions away and caused Severus to turn to watch her.

"He's right. I did find Ron in our bed with another woman, but really, that was merely the last straw. We had our share of problems." Turning to Severus, she said, "You'll excuse me, won't you? I have some packing to do before I leave, and you'll want to visit with your friends, of course."

"Oh, don't go, Mrs. Weasley. Stay and dine with us! With Liam gone..."

"She can't stay, Cissy, she's packing to do," Severus interrupted in a tone that let the two women in the room know that he had no intentions of dining with Hermione nor discussing Liam.

Hermione smiled at Narcissa. "Please, call me Hermione. And Severus is right; I really do need to go. I thank you for the offer though. Another time, perhaps?"

"Count on it," Narcissa said and had Severus raising his eyebrow in her direction.

"Good night," Hermione said to them both and hurried out of the room.

Once Narcissa heard the front door close, she rounded on Severus. Before she could speak, Severus held up his hand to stop her. "No. I will not discuss her with you, so don't ask me."

"But, Severus! She's lovely! She would be perfect for..."

"I told you no, Cissy. Now, I need to finish my brewing for the night, and then I will take you out to dinner. Please feel free to go upstairs and freshen up."

Narcissa simply smiled and nodded. "All right, Severus. I do have a party to start planning for, after all. I will busy myself with that until you're ready to go."

Severus shook his head as she walked up the stairs. "No doubt planning *something*, that one. I won't have a moment's peace while she's here."

He walked to his cauldron and looked down into his ruined potion. Sighing, he vanished the contents and thought about Hermione and the fact that he'd almost kissed her before Cissy had walked in and stopped their little tête-à-tête. He could at least be glad for small favors. It would not do at all for him to kiss her.

He was convinced now more than ever that he was going to have to end things with her. Just as soon as she got back from seeing her kids and the Malfoys left. He would end things then.

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A/N: Well, it looks like both Hermione and Severus have some decisions to make.

## Chapter 5

*Chapter 5 of 13*

Hermione comes home to find something she'd never expected. Her life will change--hopefully for the better.

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A/N: \*Looks left and right\* "Hey, beta,*Cough* Southern\_Witch\_69 *Cough*, I wanted to thank you for your awesomeness, and..." \*Turns to scowl\* "Stop eavesdropping! Betas are anonymous until after voting!"



Hermione sat in the bedroom that she'd shared with Ron, weary to the bone. She'd been going through their...her...things the past few days, deciding what she did and did not want to keep. Rose and Hugo had left four days ago to spend a week with their father, and she'd been sorting out her belongings since they'd gone. She was going back to Italy in the morning.

Oddly enough, George and Angelina wanted to buy her home. She'd had mixed feelings about that, but decided in the long run that it was better to go ahead with it. She wanted this house sold as soon as possible and her past put behind her. Ron was certainly moving ahead.

And however odd it may feel to her, at least the home would still be in the family so that Rose and Hugo would be able to visit if they wanted to. She sighed, remembering how they'd argued with her when she'd first told them of her plans to sell, but in the end, they'd both agreed with her.

Hermione gently rubbed her temples, trying to alleviate some of the tension there. If she were to be honest with herself, it wasn't truly thoughts of Ron and her marriage that had her weary; it was thoughts of Severus Snape. What exactly would she be returning to tomorrow?

If it hadn't been for the interrupted visit, Hermione would think that she wouldn't be returning to much of anything, but she desperately wondered what he'd been about to say to her before Narcissa Malfoy burst into the room. Her heart began to pound just remembering the look in his eyes when he'd almost kissed her.

She shivered and stood up to go make herself some tea. She had to admit, up until that moment, he hadn't shown any kind of romantic feelings towards her. The fact that she kept going back to him amazed her really, but she knew that there were some serious feelings on her part, that she was coming to... care for him more than what was wise, and she couldn't seem to make herself stay away.

And the thing was, she convinced herself, even though he didn't really show much affection, there were those odd moments: a lingering look, a touch, a sense of wanting from him. Yes, she'd felt all of those things radiate from him, and it made her want to comfort, to sooth, to... *love*?

Did she *love* him? She shook her head in rapt denial. It would be very unwise to fall in love with a man such as Severus Snape. She took a long, appreciative sip of her tea and decided to look at the facts and reason things out.

Did she look forward to seeing him? Yes, she always looked forward to their visits, whether they were sexual or not. Did she miss him when they weren't together? That was a definite yes. As a matter of fact, she missed him so much right now that she could hardly think of anything else, especially now that the kids had gone to Ron's. Did she have trouble eating, sleeping? Sighing, she rinsed her cup and put it away. Yes, she did. And when she was able to sleep, she dreamt of him.

That proved a few things to her. First and foremost, love is blind. How could she have fallen for a man who treated her as he did? That question brought her to the other fact. Hermione Weasley was not cut out for a no strings, keep it light, unemotional affair. She'd always ruled with her heart, her emotions, so why would she think that things would be different now? Sitting down in her kitchen chair, she thought despairingly, *You've done it now, you idiot! What am I going to do*

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Severus was in his lab, as he had been since six o'clock that morning, brewing potions that he knew would be in high demand after New Year, Sober Up being one of the most purchased. Cissy would not stop badgering him, and he had to get away from her and her incessant questions...and Lucius, smiling smugly at him the entire time.

He missed Hermione, and that angered him. He should've been done with her the moment he'd realized who she was. If she were here, he thought, she'd be in the lab with him, chatting away, talking of useless things, helping him brew and bottle his potions. She may have brought him a plant he'd mentioned needing or a snack...which he could use right now...and then once the brewing was complete, they'd use the unoccupied work bench for more pleasurable activities.

He growled. Missing her only proved that he'd have to end it. Now, while it had been over a week since he'd touched her, smelt her, lost himself inside of her... NO! He would not allow those thoughts to linger. Damn it! He'd almost *kissed* her, for Christ's sake. Kissing was so much more intimate and something he never allowed before during his liaisons with women. Yes, oh yes, he'd developed feelings for *that* woman. Useless, unwanted feelings.

"Severus? Are you *still* brewing?" Narcissa wanted to know as she all but glided into his lab. "You've been at this all morning. It's time for a break. I need to go to the market for a few things, and I'd like for you to accompany me."

Severus sighed, agitated. "You've a husband to do those mundane things, Narcissa. I'm not married for a reason."

Pouting prettily, she told him, "I know, it's because you're too surly! Besides, Lucius is on a Floo Call that is of vital importance, or so he told me."

"Mmm. Right. That's what I'd tell you as well, were it me. I don't want to go out."

"Am I that horrid that no one wants to be around me?"

"No, it's not you; it's me. I'm not great company. Perhaps I should stay at a hotel tonight while you have your little shindig? I wouldn't want to embarrass you in my... surly state."

Narcissa placed her hands on her hips, scowling. "You will do nothing of the sort, Severus Snape! Now, I've had enough! You're going to the market with me, and then we're stopping at that robes shop I spotted while we were buying Christmas presents and getting yourself a new robe."

Severus snorted. "I don't need a new robe, woman! What I need is to be left in peace."

Softening her voice, Narcissa walked to Severus and rubbed his arm in a comforting gesture. "She'll be back today."

Severus jerked back as if she'd slapped him. "I'm sure I have no idea of whom you're referring to. Now, if you're ready, I'll go with you to the market, but I warn you, Cissy, no robes!"

Chuckling, Narcissa muttered under her breath, "We'll just see about that."

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Hermione experienced a sense of déjà vu standing in front of Severus' door, afraid to knock. Had the Malfoys not been there, she would have poked her head in and called out to him.

She sighed, uncertain. Would he resent her for coming over while his friends were there? Was Narcissa decorating for the party they were going to have in a few hours? Jeez, what was she doing here? She started to turn and go when the door was suddenly opened. "Miss Granger," Lucius greeted. "Do come in."

Stuck, Hermione smiled and walked in past Malfoy. When she noticed nobody in the house, she asked, "Is Severus downstairs brewing? I've brought him this plant."

Holding back a chuckle at her obvious discomfort, Lucius told her, "He and my wife have gone to the market and to run a few errands. They should be back any moment now. Can I offer you something to drink?"

"Oh, no, thank you. I'll just leave this here for him and go."

"Nonsense. It'll only take a moment. Have a seat."

"No, really, Mr. Malfoy." She sighed. He was already pouring her a cup of tea.

"Did you have a nice trip?" he asked, and Hermione could tell that he was trying to keep her here until Severus returned. She felt awkward enough and simply wanted to leave the plant there and go. What was she thinking?

"Yes, I did, thank you. I really need to go though; I have some errands of my own that need taking care of. I'm sorry I missed Severus. Would you mind telling him that..."

"...Bought out the entire shop, woman! I told you that I didn't want any new robes!" Severus complained as they walked in the door, holding several bags. "Lucius, your wife is impossible!"

"Yes," he agreed, "but absolutely exquisite. Severus, you have a guest."

Severus turned and locked eyes with Hermione, standing there holding some sort of plant he'd never seen before. Before he could speak, Narcissa clapped her hands together once.

"Hermione, dear! How wonderful to see you! Severus and I were just out getting some last minute things for the party," she explained, trying to break up some of the tension that had suddenly thickened the room.

"Hello," Hermione said quietly. Holding out the plant towards Severus, she told him, "I brought this back for you. I ran into Neville at Flourish and Blotts, and he told me about this new breed of plant that he'd started, and I thought that maybe you could play with it and see if it has any uses." Realizing that she'd been babbling, she quickly stopped talking.

Severus said nothing, nor did he move to take the plant. After several uncomfortable moments, Lucius walked up to Hermione, took the plant from her and set it on the table. "That's very nice of you to think of Severus like that. Narcissa?"

"Oh, yes, very nice indeed. Say, if you don't have any plans tonight, why don't you come to my party? I daresay, you'll know most of the people here and likely have worked with a lot of them. What do you say?"

"She can't," Severus spoke for the first time after seeing *her*, "she has other plans."

Lifting her chin and refusing to be intimidated, she told everyone, "Actually, I don't have plans."

Looking at her pointedly, Severus said, "Then I have plans tonight that don't include *you*."

"Severus!" Narcissa said, horrified. "What's wrong with you?" Turning to Hermione, she said, "Of course your welcome to stop by tonight. Don't let this sourpuss spoil your evening! Lucius and I would love for you to come."

Defeated, Hermione told her, "It's all right. I thank you for the invitation, but I think I'll pass." Turning to go, she looked over her shoulder. "Severus, might I have just a moment of your time? At my condo?"

"I hardly think we need to have a private conversation."

"Oh? Fine, I'll just say what I have to say now then," she said as she turned back into the room. If he wanted to talk in front of Lucius and Narcissa, then so be it, but she *would* have her say.

"No, that's not necessary." Turning to his friends, he told them, "I'll only be a moment."

"Take your time," Narcissa said as he slammed out the door.

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Once outside, he whirled on her. "How dare you? Just who in the hell do you think you are?"

She said nothing, simply kept walking to her condo with him following behind her, cussing as they walked. Once inside, she calmly turned to face him, but still said nothing, waiting.

Severus paced and watched her, waiting for her to speak. Finally, patience wearing thin, he said, "Well, you got what you wanted. I'm here, alone with you, so talk. Say your piece and be done with it."

Clearing her throat, she said, "I've been gone a week, Severus, and this is how you treat me the first time you see me?"

"What did you want me to do, rush into your arms? You act as if it's been a year."

"A simple hello would have sufficed. Perhaps, 'How was your trip? How are your children?' Or even, 'Did you have a nice Christmas?' Lucius Malfoy treated me better than you did! Did you even notice that I was gone?"

He sneered at her, hating the fact that he had wanted to rush into her arms and kiss her. Deciding to start the breaking things off process, he said, "Honestly, I've been too busy entertaining my friends to notice your absence, although certain aspects were indeed noticed."

"Don't be crude!" Shaking her head, Hermione said, "I just cannot do this any longer. I'm not cut out for the kind of affair you want. Actually, I'm not even sure you can call what's been going on between us an affair. I don't like it, Severus."

"You could have fooled me."

"Stop with your insults and *talk* to me, damn it! I don't understand why you don't want me to come to the party tonight. Can you at least explain that?"

It angered him that he wanted to soothe the hurt in her voice away, so he spoke harshly. "Why would I? There will be all sorts of people there, so we wouldn't have any time alone."

"So? Do you think I'd be hanging all over you? That your dirty little secret would come out? I can mingle, Severus, and I don't have to be right at your side every time we're together."

"You've no place there tonight. But more simply put, I just don't want you there. Perhaps afterwards..." he said, letting that hang, hating the look in her eyes.

"Excuse me? You're saying that you want me to come over *after* the party? And what? Get you off?"

He shrugged, glad that her hurt was turning towards anger. "As you said earlier, it has been a week."

Her eyes widened, and she fought off the tears. "I don't understand you!"

"What, did you think that we'd have a few shags and then I'd fall head over hills in love with you?" He snorted. "Don't be ridiculous."

"No, I didn't think that you'd fall in love with me, but *bid* think that perhaps you'd show some compassion, some feelings."

"Not bloody likely," he lied, telling himself that this was what he wanted. She'd end things, and that would be that. He could continue things as they were before she'd so rudely interrupted his life.

Putting her hand over her mouth, Hermione asked, "What are you, a robot? Have you no feelings? Why must you treat me no better than you would a prostitute?"

He looked her up and down. "Well, you'd barely been here a month when you started coming over." He conveniently forgot that he'd basically pushed her into it. "You say you hate the way I treat you, and yet you still come, begging for more, almost daily. What else would I equate you with?"

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Severus regretted them. But he could see by the look on her face that they were words that would not be easily taken back.

Rubbing her hand over her heart, Hermione simply said, "Oh, God. Ouch. Direct hit." His eyes were drawn to her hand as he watched her rubbing her chest as if trying to ease the pain away. He looked back into her eyes as she went on. "As I've said, I can't...don't want...to do this anymore. You've made your feelings perfectly clear, and now, let me make mine clear. I will not be a convenient fuck for you, Severus Snape. You know the way out."

"Hermione..." He had no idea what he wanted to say, but he didn't get the chance to say anything.

"GO! I don't want you here! Get out!" She had to get him out before the tears started. She pointed to the door. "I mean it Severus, go. It's over."

He turned to leave, realizing immediately the huge mistake he'd just made. He thought he'd feel relief, but instead, he felt panic. Shaking it off, he stopped at the door. "It's not over until I say it's over." Then he quietly shut the door behind him.

As soon as he closed the door, he heard her let out the sobs that she'd been so desperately holding in. He wanted to rush back inside, take her into his arms and tell her he hadn't meant it. Not any of it. But now was not the time.

For one thing, he knew that it was too soon, that he'd hurt her too badly. For another, he had this bloody party to get through. After that, he'd come back here and talk to her. He understood that he was going to have to open up to her and talk of his past for her to be able to understand and hopefully forgive him.

He roughly rubbed his hands over his face. All he had to do was get through the next few hours. He could do this.

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As soon as he'd shut the door, Hermione fell to the floor, sobbing. It wasn't just that he didn't love her, although that hurt badly enough, it was what he thought of her. She'd completely opened herself up to him, and he'd equated her to a prostitute.

Ron had accused her of being cold, and with Severus she'd been the complete opposite. For some reason, it had been easy with him. Perhaps she'd read too much into what she'd thought those looks meant and had seen only what she'd wanted to see.

She stood shakily and walked upstairs into her bedroom. Lying on the bed, she tried to decide what she wanted to do now. It seemed useless to stay here. Sighing, she rolled to her side and stared out of the window, watching the waves roll. She was just so tired.

Her last thought as the waves lulled her to sleep was that she hadn't unpacked her trunk yet.

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A/N: I wonder if Severus can fix the mess he's created.

## Chapter 6

*Chapter 6 of 13*

Hermione comes home to find something she'd never expected. Her life will change--hopefully for the better.

**Disclaimer:** All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: You're right! I've forgotten to thank my beta *Cough* Southern\_Witch\_69 *Cough*... Oh, you've got to be kidding me! No, no, no! No thanks to my awesome beta until after voting! Jeez!



Severus looked around his condo at all of the unwanted people flanking his home. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so anxious for a bloody party to end! He desperately needed to speak with Hermione, to make her understand... What? Hell, he didn't understand himself.

He only knew that he'd fucked things up, in a major way. Now, he needed to figure out how to fix them, only he couldn't think for people constantly speaking to him. Usually, he somewhat enjoyed Narcissa's gatherings, but tonight, he wanted everyone to leave so that he could *think*!

He couldn't ignore these people as he longed to do. He had Liam to think of. The boy would be starting school in September, and he needed to speak with his son and make some very tough decisions as to where that would be. Sighing, he looked down at the whiskey in his hand and knocked it back, swallowing it all in one gulp. Perhaps getting pissed would make him feel better.

He'd gone to Ireland Christmas day and visited the boy against Narcissa and Lucius' protests. Though he'd promised himself that he wouldn't, Severus just couldn't let the day pass without seeing his son. He'd not spent a Christmas without him since he'd been born, and he'd be damned if he'd start now.

The O'Learys had not been happy with his unexpected visit, and it had made Liam uncomfortable, though he was visibly glad to see his father. They'd spent the day together, and right before Severus had left, his son had hugged him fiercely and told him he missed him and would be glad when he got back home. This appeased Severus some, but it also made it harder to keep his promise and leave the boy there.

Shrugging off thoughts that were making his mood even darker, Severus grabbed another drink and made his way to the balcony. He could see Hermione's balcony from his, and he hoped to catch a glimpse of her.

He cringed when he remembered the harsh, hurtful things he'd said to her earlier. He'd been cowardly enough to make her want to break things off, but he knew that he'd gone too far with her. He certainly didn't think of her the way he'd told her he did.

He'd simply gotten caught up in the moment and then went too far to stop. The regret was instant, but Severus feared the effect was permanent. No! He would not allow it to be. He'd win her back. Somehow. As he walked outside, he took a deep breath and looked over at Hermione's balcony.

It was rather disappointing to find it empty, but the light in her condo gave him hope that she'd not gone back to London. He would go to her right now and...

"Severus Snape! How *are* you?"

Severus turned to see who was speaking to him and smiled a genuine smile at his former classmate, not noticing that Hermione had stepped onto her balcony. "Vivian! I didn't realize you were here. How's William?"

Her face twisted. "I've no idea. At the moment, he's off on holiday with his mistress." She mock toasted Severus. "Isn't love grand?"

Severus frowned and laid a hand briefly on top of the one she had resting on the railing. "I'm sorry. I had no idea."

"No, of course you didn't. He's hidden it well for years, but for some reason he finally decided he was tired of hiding. Likely *she* was tired of it. He's asked me for a divorce."

Hearing that made Severus think of Hermione. Shaking off thoughts of her for the moment, he said, "Well, it's certainly his loss."

Vivian smiled up at Severus and flirtatiously batted her eyes. "How sweet of you to say so. I've had to get a job, and Lucius was kind enough to hire me in his department. That's how I came to be here tonight. I had no idea it was your home until Narcissa told me. When I found out, I just had to find you and say hello."

"I'm glad that you did," he told her.

She ran her finger up and down his arm, trying once more to get him to look at her as something other than an old friend. "What are you doing out here all by yourself? Why don't you come back inside? I've not had a dance all evening."

Oblivious, he said, "I wanted some fresh air. I like it fine right where I am."

She pouted, looking up into his eyes. Suddenly, she smiled brightly. "Okay, I can compromise. Dancing out here could be romantic."

Finally, the warning bells sounded inside Severus' head as he realized that she'd been not so subtly flirting with him. "Vivian, I thank you for the offer, but I'm not in the position for a romantic dance on the balcony."

"Why not?" she insisted. "New Year's is the perfect time for it and for new beginnings. I was always attracted to you, you know. But you? You only had eyes for Lily Evans back then, and by the time she'd gotten with James Potter, it was too late for us. I was with William. Now we're both single, consenting adults..."

"That's just it, Vivian. Though I'm flattered by your offer, I'm not single."

Determined, she glanced down at his finger. "I don't see a ring, so therefore, you're single, eh?"

"No, I'm not. Though I may not be married at the moment, I am very much taken." God, he hoped that was the case and he hadn't lost Hermione.

"Where is she tonight then? It seems odd that she wouldn't want to spend New Year's Eve with you, especially while you're helping host a party. Does ~~ss~~he know that she's not single?" Vivian taunted.

Severus raised an eyebrow, taking into account the amount of alcohol that his friend had likely consumed. "She was unavoidably detained. I will see her tomorrow, and we will make up for being separated tonight."

Knowing when to back off and accept defeat, Vivian nodded. "She's lucky. Perhaps one day our timing won't be off, and we can have that wild fling I've always wanted to have!"

Chuckling, relieved that she'd not caused a scene or seemed hurt, he told her, "You, my dear, are incorrigible."

Smiling mischievously, she told him, "Oh, I'm definitely that!" Leaning up to lightly kiss his lips, she told him, "I think that I'll go back inside and find myself a dance partner."

Smiling, he told her, "Enjoy your evening." Severus watched Vivian walk back inside, shaking his head slightly. When he looked over at Hermione's balcony again, he was pleasantly surprised to see her standing there, even though she seemed to be glaring at him.

Unsure, he lifted his glass to toast her and gave her a small wave, but he was deflated when she slammed her wine glass on the railing and walked back inside. Sighing, he propped one foot on the railing and leaned over, deciding to keep watch in case she decided to come back outside.

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Hermione had been walking around from room to room, trying to decide what she wanted to do. Things were certainly over between Severus and her. It saddened and relieved her some at the same time. He hadn't treated her properly, and today she'd realized just how far she'd let things go.

It wasn't like her, and it made her not like herself. But when she thought of certain things, certain needs...not all sexual...that had radiated from them both, she shuddered. She wasn't crazy! She knew that he'd felt *something*. She snorted. "Yes. Disgust is what he felt."

As she walked into the kitchen to pour herself a glass of wine, she glanced down at the photograph she'd left lying on the table. Lavender had taken it upon herself to send Hermione a wedding picture of her and Ron with Rose and Hugo. Picking it up, she studied it. Her Rose looked so grown and lovely in the new robes her father had bought for her.

Smiling, she looked at her son. He looked bored and kept slipping a finger under the collar of his new robes, fidgeting and looking around. Ron looked embarrassed and slightly apologetic.

Lavender, however, looked smug. Hermione shook her head. The new Mrs. Weasley was rather pretty in her wedding attire, but apparently, she still felt she needed to 'stake her territory' where Hermione was concerned. Hermione snorted once more. "She definitely doesn't need to worry about me."

Looking around, Hermione took her glass of wine and decided to go outside on her balcony for a bit. She'd finally made her decision. She was going back to London in the morning. Though she loved Italy, it would be too hard to remain here with Severus living next door. She wanted to enjoy the view one last time.

As soon as she walked outside, her eyes were uncontrollably drawn to his balcony, and she drew in a sharp breath as she watched him speaking with some woman. "Wow," she said, hurt, "he's never once smiled at me like that. Like he was glad to see me. I'd give anything for an Extendable Ear right now!"

The more she watched the two, the madder she got. It had only been a few hours since he'd left her, vowing it wasn't over until he decided it would be, and here he was, snuggling up to someone else! "Now I see why he was so adamant I didn't come to the party! I wonder what he'd do if I walked over there right now?"

She watched as the woman blatantly flirted with her man, and she had to fight the urge to hex the hair off of her head. *He* was obviously enjoying the encounter. "Hold on! Did he purposely go to his balcony to ensure that I'd see them? Is this his way of telling me it's over now? Couldn't let me end it this afternoon, could you? Had to get in one last dig, did you, Severus? You bloody tosser!"

Her heart sped up when that... that.. Scarlet Woman reached up to kiss him. "Oh, he can kiss *her*, but *my* lips are too tainted? Not good enough for you, am I, Severus? Well, that's fine!"

She started to go inside when he suddenly caught her eye. When he lifted his glass and waved, that was the last straw for her. "Oh, you arse. Yes, I saw you. Thank you. Well, I don't need you!"

Slamming her glass down on the railing, she went inside to change clothes. She decided she was going to go out after all. Why should she be at home and lonely tonight? *He* certainly wasn't. Remembering a bar she'd seen not far from there, she decided that tonight was a night for her little black dress. Severus Snape be damned.

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Severus was just about to go back in when he noticed Hermione coming back outside. She'd turned her outside light on, and it made her very easy to see.

He did a double take as he noticed the little black dress and strappy sandals she had changed in to. She'd done something to her hair and had applied more makeup than was usual for her. He stared at her, gobsmacked. "What the fuck? Where does she think she's going dressed like that?"

Just then, she happened to look up at him. Picking up the glass that she'd left outside, she lifted it to him and smiled. Blowing him a kiss, she lifted her wand and Disapparated.

Just as Severus was about to follow her, Lucius walked outside and lit a cigar, putting the rest back in his pocket when Severus shook his head at an offer of one. "Looks like your lady friend has plans for the evening. She looked delectable, eh?"

Severus turned his glare on his friend. "She's not my lady friend. If she were, she'd be here," Severus informed him, pretending not to care one way or the other.

"Indeed," Lucius agreed, puffing his cigar. "At any rate, she looked like a woman on the prowl." Wanting to see what type of reaction Severus would have, he said, "Looks like some bloke is going to get very lucky tonight."

Years of spying helped Severus school his expressions and temper, not wanting to give Lucius the satisfaction of seeing that what she did mattered to him. "Could be. It's no longer my concern. We ended our little liaison earlier today."

"Too right," Lucius agreed easily. Putting out his cigar, he said, "Smart of you, ending things before she could get delusions of grandeur. Let's go back inside and join the rest. Cissy's been asking for you."

Seeing that he had no other choice, Severus followed Lucius back inside. As soon as they entered, Narcissa pounced, grabbing Severus by the arm. "I absolutely insist on dancing with you!"

"Narcissa, really. I'm in no mood."

"Just one," she coaxed. "Come now, it wouldn't kill you."

Sighing, he told her, "Fine. But I'm holding you to just one."

As they swayed to the music, it occurred to Severus that he'd never held Hermione in his arms this way. He'd never done anything even remotely romantic or, hell, even considerate. What in the world was wrong with him?

Hermione had been nothing but warm and loving, and he'd pushed her away with both arms. Shaking his head, he realized that he'd been sabotaging things purposely with her. Likely due to the guilt he'd felt over the loss of Shannon.

"Severus," Narcissa said, sighing as she interrupted his thoughts. "What's the matter with you?" she asked, not realizing she was echoing his earlier thoughts to himself. "Go next door and get your girl. Kiss her at midnight, and for heaven's sake, be happy."

"Cissy, I'm saying this with the utter most love for you. Mind your own business."

"But I can't stand seeing you so miserable! Liam will be starting Hogwarts in September..."

"That has not been decided."

"And then where will you be? Alone with your cauldrons and stirring rods, that's where!" she continued as if he'd not interrupted her.

"Could be I enjoy my cauldrons and stirring rods."

"Severus..."

"Enough. Find your husband. I'm not in the mood right now," he told her as he nudged her towards Lucius.

After a while, he stood in a corner, brooding. She'd been gone an hour. Where was she? It was nearly eleven thirty! There was nothing else for it; he was going to have to go find her.

Making a discreet exit, Severus snuck outside and began his search.

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Severus was exhausted and furious. He was just about to enter his third bar. It wasn't sleazy by any means, but neither was it as upscale as the previous two. And furthermore, this was most definitely a Muggle bar. "She damn well better be here," he mumbled to himself.

The first thing he heard when he walked in was some bint singing highly off key on some sort of stage. "Merlin, save me." It was obvious to him the woman was drunk, yet the patrons there were cheering her on as if they loved it.

Determinedly turning his face from the stage, he began to scan the tables. His eyes narrowed dangerously when he spotted her, snuggled up to some man. Lucius' earlier words of some bloke getting lucky tonight haunted him as he made his way towards their table.

He stopped walking, taken aback when he took his eyes off of Hermione long enough to look at her companion. Long, straight, black hair, dark eyes, and a slightly big nose. *Oh no, dear one. You will not settle for a substitute of me tonight. You will be leaving with the real thing*

Once he reached their table, Severus pulled himself up to his full height. Holding a hand out, he said, "Let's go, Hermione."

Hermione turned and scowled at Severus. "No thanks." Turning to the man she'd been snuggled up with, she asked, "What was your name? Bob? Ted?"

"Um, it's Anthony."

Smiling beautifully at him as if he'd solved a complex problem, she turned back to Severus, smile immediately fading. "Er... Bob here's taking me home."

"Anthony!"

"Right," Hermione nodded in agreement.

"No," Severus said, "he's not."

"What do you care?" she demanded. "Where's your little tart?"

"Tart? I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"Really? Man, you do toss the women away if you can't remember your snogging partner from your balcony."

"Vivian? It's not what you.... Look. We'll discuss this at home. Let's go. Now, Hermione."

"NO!"

"Listen," Anthony said. "I don't want to be in the middle of some lover's spat. I think I'll go."

"Wise," Severus agreed, but Hermione grabbed his arm to stop him.

"We're not lovers. You've no need to go."

"We most certainly are," Severus disagreed.

Hermione snorted. "You have to actually make love to be lovers." Turning to Anthony, she said, "Severus and I? We merely fucked."

"That's it!" Severus said, enraged. "You're obviously too far in your cups. We're going." Not waiting for an answer, he merely lifted her into his arms, walked outside behind a dumpster, and Apparated them back to her condo.

"What's your problem?" she asked, stumbling when he set her down.

"You dare ask? Just what did you think you were doing with that man?"

"That is absolutely none of your business!" Hermione yelled, losing her lovely buzz.

"There's where you're wrong, Hermione."

"What do you want from me?" She threw up her hands in exasperation. "It doesn't matter. I've nothing left to give you at any rate."

"Don't say that."

"I want you to leave," she said as she began walking up the stairs to her bedroom. Thinking that he'd left, she kicked off her shoes and slipped out of her dress. She jumped when she turned and found him staring at her.

He was momentarily speechless as he looked at her in her black bra and knickers. Coming to his senses when she hurriedly put on a robe, he told her, "I'm not leaving until you listen to me."

"Why should I after the way you've treated me? You don't talk of yourself. As a matter of fact, anything personal concerning you or your family is off limits. You never come here; I always have to come to you." Laughing, she said, "You barely even look at me during sex! You take my from behind most of the time!"

"It's not because I don't want to see your face! It's because I love your arse so much," he evaded.

"Pathetic."

"Hermione, listen. I..."

"Who is she?"

"No one of consequence! I'm trying to tell you..."

"No one of consequence? And here I thought it was only me that you hated. It must be all women."

Getting agitated, he said, "I do not hate women! I certainly don't hate you! Actually, I wanted to..."

"You kissed her," she whispered. Deflated, Hermione sat on the bed and put her head in her hands.

"What are you on about?"

She looked up into his eyes, and he saw the hurt in hers. "Never, not once have you ever kissed me, Severus. I've longed for a kiss, and you deftly evaded me each and every time. Yet, this other woman was special enough, worthy enough, for you to kiss her. Please go."

"Bugger this," he said. If she wouldn't listen to the words, he'd show her. Walking to her, he grabbed both of her arms and pulled her into a standing position.

Enjoying the surprised expression on her face, he ran his fingers through her hair, pulling the pins she'd so carefully placed loose, loving the way her hair fell over her shoulders and down her back.

Lowering his head slowly, he traced her lips with his tongue. When she gasped, he gently kissed her, exploring her mouth with his tongue, pleased when she finally began kissing him back.

Wanting to take the time to savor her, he slowly removed her robe. He stopped kissing her so that he could look her up and down. "Lovely," he murmured and smiled at her surprised expression.

Reaching behind her, Severus unfastened her bra and watched it fall to the floor. Taking the time to enjoy her breasts, he laved one nipple with his tongue while gently tugging the other with his fingers.

After a bit, he slowly licked the underside of her breast, shuddering as she moaned in pleasure. Kneeling slowly and kissing every inch of her skin as he went, he pulled her knickers down, and she stepped out of them.

Looking up at her smugly, he immediately began using his mouth on her, enjoying the way she grabbed his hair and opened her legs wider to give him easier access. He traced all around her, teasing her mercilessly, dipping his tongue in and out of her, until he finally heard the words he longed to hear. "Severus, please."

He began sucking on her tiny bundle of nerves as he moved his fingers in and out of her until she exploded, calling his name. Satisfied, he quickly stood and undressed, lying on the bed with her.

He took her mouth again, this time more urgently as he slipped inside of her. They both groaned in pleasure. "Open your eyes!" he demanded. "Look at me, and say my name." He damn well wanted her to know whom she was making love with. Not some man from a bar, but Severus Snape.

Helpless to do otherwise, she looked at him. The intense look he gave her as he rocked her deeply caused her to start tightening around him, calling, "Severus!" as she came.

Hearing her call to him, he emptied himself inside of her. He lay on top of her a few moments, his forehead resting on her shoulder, getting his breath back. When he rose up to speak to her, he found her sound asleep.

Chuckling, he used his wand to clean them both. He lay there watching her sleep a few moments, then reluctantly got out of the bed and dressed. He didn't want to leave her, but he had guests to see to.

"I'll be back first thing in the morning. I promise," he told her sleeping form. "As soon as Lucius and Narcissa leave, I'm coming back, and we're talking things out. I think this proves that it's not over."

\*\*\*

Severus thought the Malfoys would never leave! Narcissa kept prattling on about the party and wanting to discuss this and that. Thank God she'd never noticed that he'd left. It was going on ten o'clock before he could make his way to Hermione's condo.

Once he got there, a foreboding feeling came upon him. The door was wide open, and there was an unfamiliar woman inside cleaning. "Excuse me," he said. "Could you please tell me where Miss Granger is?"

"She's gone, sir," the woman informed him.

"Gone? What do you mean *gone*?"

"Madam packed all of her belongings and left early this morning. She never said where she was going, only that she wouldn't be coming back. Please, pardon me. I have to finish cleaning here within the hour to ready the place for the new couple moving in."

"Of course," he said offhandedly. *Gone? She can't be gone! Not after last night...*

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A/N: Well, well. I wonder where Hermione is off to.

Reviews are welcome.

## Chapter 7

After a few months pass, Hermione and Severus meet again.

**Disclaimer:** All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: I can't believe you guys! This is what, the 7th chapter? You should know by now that my awesome beta, *Cough Southern\_Witch\_69 Cough*, has to remain anonymous until after voting!



Hermione sat on the stool behind the counter, looking around at the displays. She still couldn't believe that she'd bought Flourish and Blotts when she'd been home for Christmas! But when she'd walked by the store and had seen the for sale sign in the window, it had seemed like fate to her. Now, she could only be glad that she'd done it.

It had been five months since she'd come home for good. Her kids had come home from Hogwarts yesterday, and tomorrow they were going with Molly, Arthur, and their Potter cousins to spend a week with Charlie in Romania. Then from there, they were going on to Ron's to spend half of the summer. They'd all decided it would be easier for them to spend the first part of the summer with Ron and Lavender and the latter part with her so that they'd be home when it was time to get ready for Hogwarts in September.

The flat above the bookstore was crowded with all three of them there, but Hermione hadn't had time to look for a new home while implementing the changes she wanted done for the store, so she'd decided to wait until after Rose and Hugo went back to school.

The bookstore had kept her busy, giving her little or no time to think about *him* while she worked, except at night when she lay in bed and closed her eyes. That last night they'd spent together, he'd seemed like he wanted to make things up to her. But when she'd awakened alone, Hermione knew that it must have been wishful thinking on her part.

No matter...she wouldn't let it matter...she had her children and, now, a business doing something that she absolutely loved.

She'd added a small tea parlor, getting the idea from a Muggle bookstore she'd gone into once. She served several different teas, scones and the like. At first, Hermione had had a few doubts, but now she saw that she'd made the right decision. Business was booming, and it was only June.

Right now, she was putting together packages for back to school. Years one through five would be standard for all students, so she'd asked Minerva, the Headmistress of Hogwarts, to give her a list of the books that the teachers would be using this year as soon as she had it so that Hermione could purchase the books and put them all together. After thinking long and hard and remembering school shopping with the Weasleys, Hermione decided she would also put together a few used book packages as well.

Rose and Hugo were both there, helping her clean and move some things around. Rose also, Hermione had discovered, enjoyed working the counter behind the new tea parlor. There was a new girl starting there tomorrow after Rose left, but for now, her daughter was in heaven, trying out her flirting skills on what looked to be a young Seamus Finnegan.

Hermione started to rise when the bell over the door sounded. Turning her attention to the door, she smiled when Harry, Ginny, and their three children walked into the store. "Hello! What brings you here?"

"We've come to see how you're doing," Harry told her.

Hermione sighed. "Stop fussing over me, Harry. I'm fine."

"You're not fine, Hermione! I wish you'd at least tell me who..."

"Harry James Potter," his wife warned, "stop badgering Hermione this instant. You promised if we stopped by that you'd behave!"

"Um, Aunt Hermione?" James interrupted, always uneasy when his mum used that particular voice. "Is Hugo here?"

Hermione smiled down at her nephew. "Yes, he's in the back sorting through some books for me. Why don't you three go on back for a visit, or if you like, you can go see Rose and have some tea and scones."

"Thanks!" they said in unison, James running back to see Hugo and the other two running off to see Rose.

When Hermione turned back, she noticed Harry eyeing her critically. "Really, Harry. You've no need to keep checking on me like this."

"So you say," he told her. "You were a complete mess when you got back! And then when you'd found out that..."

"Stop it!" Hermione said. "Must we go into it every single time?"

"No, not if you'd tell me who it is!"

Hermione laughed. "Always the hero." She leaned over and patted his cheek. "I love that about you, honestly, but I'm big enough to fight my own battles now."

"And we will respect that," Ginny added for her husband's benefit. "Why don't you come over for supper tomorrow evening when the kids leave?"

"Thank you, but I think I'll have a soak once they go and I finish up here. Perhaps Saturday?"

Harry threw his hands in the air and growled in frustration. "Damn it, you two! How can you stand there having a chat when so much is going on? Hermione, your problem is a serious one."

Folding her arms over her chest and sitting back down on the stool she kept behind the counter, Hermione said, "I'm fully aware of my ~~problem~~ and the seriousness of it. When the kids leave tomorrow, I plan to take care of a few things. Until I have, Harry, I don't want to talk about it. I mean it!" she said when he'd started to speak.

Harry sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "Okay. I'm sorry. I can't help but worrying about you, though."

Hermione smiled. "And I love you for it."

Just then the bell sounded, and Hermione smiled and started to rise to greet the new customer. When she saw who it was, her eyes widened, the smile quickly left her face, and she slowly sat back down on the stool and pulled it as close to the counter as she could. Severus Snape had just walked into her bookstore.

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Severus was not in the best of moods. He and Liam had discussed things thoroughly and decided that he'd attend Hogwarts. Liam wanted to attend the same school as Scorpius. Even though they were not the same age, Liam told his father that at least there would be someone that he knew.

So, he'd sold his condo in Italy and came back home two months ago. There had been so much to do. He had to get a business license to sell his products here, find a house with a room or a basement suitable for a laboratory, and most importantly, purchase a wand for his son.

He'd been staying with Lucius and Narcissa, and the woman was going to drive him insane. She wouldn't stop talking about Hermione Granger. He'd finally told her that if she didn't stop, he and Liam were going to go to the Leaky Cauldron until he found a home for them.

He couldn't get Hermione out of his mind, and Narcissa constantly mentioning her didn't help matters. He cringed every time he thought of their time together and the way he'd treated her. But not that last night. Then, he'd opened himself completely to her. Well, he adjusted his thinking, not so much with words, per se, but with actions.

It was like a fist to his heart when he'd gone back to find that she'd gone. He'd spent the first month brooding and blaming her and then the second trying to forget her. It wasn't working, so he went to Ireland to pick up his son. He wanted to make some decisions and get on with things, but mostly, he'd missed Liam terribly. It was a few months early, but he couldn't help it. Besides, Liam wanted to come back home.

The O'Learys were not pleased, but they didn't argue. They could tell that the boy was not happy there. With promises to keep in touch, Liam had gone back home with his father.

When he'd finally found the home he wanted to purchase in England, he'd been relieved. It was quite a bit larger than what he'd originally wanted or even needed, but the price was too good to pass up. The family that had lived there had been killed by Death Eaters in the living room, and for that reason, nobody wanted to purchase the mansion. It had stood empty for years, so Severus had been able to purchase it for a song.

Besides the master bedroom, there were four others: three baths, a large kitchen and living area, a formal dining room that Severus doubted would ever be put to use, and a basement big enough to make *and* store his products.

Today, he'd wanted to take Liam with him to purchase furniture, but Narcissa had caught him right before he'd left. When she'd found out where he was going, she'd asked if he wouldn't mind stopping by the bookstore and picking up a book she'd ordered that had just come in.

Of course he'd told her that he would. It would only take a few moments of his time, and despite her constant nagging, the Malfoys had been good to him and Liam.

He was surprised when he walked into the store. It had certainly changed over the years. He took a moment to walk around a bit and noticed that an area that served tea had been added. Shaking his head, he started toward the counter to ask after the book and stopped dead in his tracks. There sat Hermione.

For a moment, it was as if time had stood still. He couldn't move, couldn't speak. Then suddenly, Liam grabbed his robe sleeve and tugged. "Dad! May I go to the counter for some tea and scones?"

"Yes," Severus replied automatically, still never taking his eyes off of Hermione. He hadn't prepared himself to see her so soon. Suddenly, a familiar voice broke through his thoughts.

"Professor! How are you? What brings you and Liam here?"

Severus watched as Hermione cut her gaze from him to Harry.

"You're not surprised? You knew he was alive...all these years...and never said one single word to me? You know his ~~son~~?"

"Um..." Harry started, seemingly confused. Then his eyes focused as if a light suddenly turned on inside his head. "Hold on! When did ~~you~~ find out? You never said anything before, and it's only been a few months since you got back from... Italy! Where Professor Snape has been living!"

Annoyed, Severus began to clap very slowly. "Very good, Potter. Tell me, what else can you deduce from this little scene?"

Suddenly, there was a loud crash from the back that caused Hermione to automatically jump up from her stool and turn her attention to the noise.

"We're alright!" Hugo yelled from the back. "A box of books just toppled over, Mum. We'll pick them up."

Letting out a loud breath, Hermione said, "Fine, Hugo, but please be more careful with my stock!" As she rested her hand on her stomach, she realized her mistake. Very carefully, she turned her gaze back to Severus to find him staring at her belly, horrified. Then suddenly, he whipped his eyes back to hers.

"Something you need to tell me, Hermione?"

She shook her head, not knowing what to say or where to begin. "It's not what it looks like."

"Oh? Then you're not pregnant? Put on a few stones, have you?"

"Hold on!" Harry yelled. "It's you! You're the one that's done this to her!"

"Merlin, Harry! Surely you've figured that much out!" Ginny said as she shook her head. "Come on, we've got to finish packing for the kids' trip."

"No, I don't want to go just yet. I want a word with the professor here."

"Harry," Hermione said patiently. "Please go. I need to speak with Severus."

"We're going, and if it's okay, since it's so close to closing, we'll just take Rose and Hugo with us to eat supper and play Quidditch for a few hours."

"I would appreciate it, thank you."

After everyone had left and Severus had gotten Liam settled on a sofa with a book, he purposefully walked back to the counter. "I have to assume that the baby you're carrying is mine. Please, correct me if I'm mistaken."

"You're not mistaken."

"I see. And just when were you planning on letting me in on the fact that I'm to be a father again?"

"Dad? Can we get Aunt Cissy's book and go? My stomach hurts," Liam said.

Hermione reached under the counter and lifted a book wrapped in brown paper. "Here is the book Mrs. Malfoy ordered. It's paid for."

Severus pointed between himself and Hermione. "We're not finished. Not by a long shot."

He walked over to his son, took his hand, and very calmly left the store.

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Hermione had not been in her flat thirty minutes when she heard an angry pounding on her door. Thinking it was Harry, she yelled, "Hold your Thestrals! I'm coming!"

When she got to the door and threw it open, she was very surprised to see Severus. "What are you doing here? Where's your son?"

"My son is with the Malfoys, and I've come to discuss things with you. How dare you keep this from me?"

Hermione put her hands on her hips. "I was going to tell you! Rose and Hugo are leaving tomorrow with the Weasleys to visit Charlie, and I was going to owl you that letter!" she yelled, pointing to the letter that lay on the table.

He snarled. "Right. And how do I know that you didn't rush up here and write that?"

Hermione shrugged. "You don't. And frankly, Severus, I don't care if you believe me or not."

"You would dare speak to me like this after keeping the fact that you're going to have my baby from me? Let me tell you this, *you will not* keep my child from me!"

"I have no intentions of keeping this child from you. But I want to make this perfectly clear to you, Severus. *You will not* come here, into my home, and try to take things over. I'll be more than happy to set up some sort of visitation..."

"*Visitation*? I think not. I will have a very active roll in the raising of this child."

"I will be the primary parent, not you! Do you think after I've gotten to know you the way I have I would trust you to have a large influence over this baby? If that's what you think, you're sadly mistaken."

"Are you saying that I've not done a good job raising my son?" he asked in a deceptively low voice.

Hermione snorted. "How the hell would I know that? You've never spoken of your son...or anything else remotely personal...to me before. All I have to go by is the way that you've treated me, and let me tell you, on that respect, you've fallen very short."

Severus took a deep breath as if trying to get some sort of control. "I will admit I have not behaved admirably towards you as of late, Hermione, but that has nothing to do with this. On this, let me be perfectly clear. I plan on taking my responsibility very seriously and having a significant part of this child's life."

"Well, let me make something perfectly clear to you! I won't have my baby going back and forth from here to Italy!"

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Is that so? I see Rose and Hugo have no problems going back and forth from here to America."

"That's true, but you have to consider their ages and the fact that they've been with Ron since they were born. ~~He~~*knows* them and has helped raise them. So, their situations are entirely different."

"Well then, let me ease your mind. I no longer live in Italy. I've come home. Liam will begin Hogwarts in the fall. And have no doubts, I will be there when this child is born and have a very active part of his life there after."

"You surprise me. I would think that you would want to spend as little time as possible with this baby."

"Then you don't know me very well."

Hermione threw her hands up. "Exactly! I don't know you well at all, and what I do know does not impress me. So, until I do know you a little better, you will not be alone with this child."

"You think you can speak it and it will be? This child is as much mine as yours, and I will not be forced out of his life. That's something that you'd better learn, Hermione."

"Don't you dare threaten me, Severus Snape!" Hermione walked up to him and poked him in the chest with her finger. "I will not allow you to bully your way into my life or my child's life!"

"*Our* child. And I think it only fair to tell you that I won't be bullied out of this child's life!"

She pointed to the door. "Get out! Get out of here! I cannot reason with you!"

"Oh, I'll go," he told her. "But know this: I am going to see my barrister the first thing in the morning and will establish my parental rights now. You won't keep me from my child, Hermione."

"I don't want to keep you from this baby, Severus."

"Yes, you do. You want to punish me for the way I've treated you. And I will admit that I've treated you badly. But you will not use this child to punish me, Hermione. It's not fair. Neither to me nor the child."

She had gone pale. "You actually think that I'd use this baby in such a way? How horrid do you think I am?"

"I would say vindictive."

"You can go to hell! Leave!" She couldn't help it; the tears began to flow.

He nodded once and walked to the door. "Expect the papers, Hermione."

"GO!"

Once he'd left, she slammed the door. She would not have that man take over her life that way. Not hers and not her child's!

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A/N: Well, well. The tables have turned now, eh?

## Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 13

Hermione comes home to find something she'd never expected. Her life will change--hopefully for the better.

**Disclaimer:** All things Harry Potter Belong to JKR.

A/N: Okay, you've worn me down. I would like to thank my awesome beta. *Cough* Southern\_Witch\_69 *Cough* \*Laughs uncontrollably\* I got you!



Severus stood in the doorway of the study and watched as Narcissa paced, sipping her wine, and Lucius sat at his desk reading the *Prophet* while having a brandy. He'd just gotten Liam back into bed, and now he wanted a *word* with his... *friends*.

After a moment, he quietly said, "Narcissa," and had the pleasure of watching her topple her glass of wine.

"Severus! I didn't hear you come down. Is Liam feeling better? The poor dear has been up and down since you brought him home and put him to bed."

"Yes. He merely has a stomachache. I've a potion for that. You seem jumpy. I've a potion for that as well. Shall I have the elf fetch it for you?"

"Oh, no, no." She waved that suggestion away with a flick of her hand. "I'm fine. I was actually just wondering if you had the time to pick up my book today before Liam started feeling poorly."

Severus reached inside his robe and pulled out a brown, wrapped package. "Yes. Here you go," he told her as he walked to the bar to pour himself a drink.

He glanced at Lucius, who had not said a word, and noticed the amused expression on his face as he watched his wife. *So, they both knew all along and never said a word. Didn't see fit to warn me.* His hand tightened around his glass as he took a sip of his drink to try and calm himself.

Narcissa let out a low growl, and Severus turned to her with a raised eyebrow. "What was that, Cissy? I'm afraid I didn't hear you."

"Nothing, just clearing my throat. Um..."

Through his anger, Severus was becoming slightly amused at his old friend. He couldn't remember ever seeing Narcissa Black Malfoy at a loss for words. He decided to let her suffer, the conniving witch.

"Yes? What is it, Cissy?"

Narcissa looked helplessly at Lucius. He slightly shook his head. Severus smirked. She'd not find any help there. Likely, Lucius didn't want to become involved. Wise choice.

She walked to the sofa and sat, patting the seat beside her and motioned for Severus to join her. "Come sit and tell me about your day. Was it productive?"

"Actually, no, it wasn't."

"Oh?" she asked nonchalantly as she patted his hand. "What happened?"

"Well, as you know, I'd wanted to take Liam to pick out the furniture for his bedroom, but after we'd gone to the bookstore, we were unable to finish the furniture hunt."

"I'm sorry, Severus. Was there any... particular reason?"

*Oh, you little she-devil.* "Yes." He watched her face light with anticipation. He delightedly burst her happy little bubble. "Liam's stomachache started right after, and I needed to get him home."

Severus wanted to laugh at the confused expression that flittered across her face. "But... but you went out alone again after dropping him off. You were gone quite a while, Severus."

"Yes, I did. I went to the Leaky Cauldron for a few drinks and met up with an old... friend, of sorts. She and I had a lot of catching up we...me especially *needed* to do."

He watched, enjoying the show, as Narcissa jumped to her feet and put her hands on her hips. Lucius simply buried his head behind his paper. *Coward*, Severus thought.

"You mean to tell me, Severus Snape, that you came here, put your *sick* son into bed, and then went back out to meet up with some... some... *lady* of the evening?"

"Problem, Cissy? You didn't seem to mind earlier when I told you that I had something I needed to take care of. As I recall, you all but pushed me out of the manor, telling me that Liam would be fine. You assured me that having had a son yourself, you could very well handle a little stomachache."

She began tapping her foot, and Severus hid a smile by taking a sip of his drink. "Well, if I had known you were leaving to meet up with some hussy..."

Severus set his drink down with a snap, cutting off the rest of her reply. "And just where did you think I was going, Narcissa?" It pleased him to watch the color drain from her face.

"Nowhere in particular, Severus," she said as she went to sit in the chair by the fire.

"Really? Then why were you fine when I left, never once asking me where I was going, and now that you've found out where I went, you seem upset?"

"He's on to you, love," Lucius spoke for the first time. "I think it's time to come clean."

She sighed heavily. "Obviously, you would have seen Hermione Granger when you picked up my book."

"What of it?" he asked, keeping the little game going a few moments longer. "Any dealings I had with her ended five months ago when she left Italy without a word to me. Though I will admit, I was surprised to see her there. Tsk, tsk. You should have told me, Cissy, *dear*."

Narrowing her eyes, Narcissa asked, "Well? What was your reaction when you saw her?"

Cocking his head to the side, Severus asked, "What should it have been?"

"For heaven's sake, Severus!" Narcissa jumped up and began to pace once more. "Don't tell me you didn't notice her belly!"

Severus stood as well and crossed his arms over his chest. "She was sitting on a stool behind the counter. I didn't see her belly. And as I had Liam with me, I wasn't in the mood for *polite* conversation. Tell me, what is so special about her belly?"

"Oh, well, hum. Nothing, nothing at all. I just thought that, well, you know, not having seen her for five months, and with the abrupt way things ended, that perhaps, just maybe, the two of you would have some catching up to do."

"You're babbling, Cissy. And I had *Liam* with me. I should have been warned!" Suddenly unable to contain his anger, he kicked the table over. "Damn you!" Looking at Lucius, he said, "Damn you both! How dare you keep from me that she is carrying my child?"

"Oh, Severus, we just thought..."

"Not we," Lucius corrected. "You. You thought. I wanted to tell him as soon as you'd discovered it."

Turning to Narcissa, Severus asked, "How could you, Cissy?" He didn't quite hide the hurt in his voice and eyes. "That's my *child*. I should have been told the moment you knew."

Deflated, Narcissa sat back down in her chair. "I wanted to give her the chance to tell you herself. Besides, I wasn't even certain that the baby was yours. I can't believe that she'd keep something like that from you if it were. And then when you'd been here a couple months without mentioning it, I realized that you still didn't know. So, I sent you there to pick up my book, knowing that you'd see..."

"I see. She claims that she was going to tell me, via letter, but I don't believe her. I should've been informed straight away. And I would have thought, Cissy, that you wouldn't have sent me in there...unprepared...with Liam."

"No, you're right. I apologize for that. I admit I wasn't thinking there. But, Severus, you needed to see her, to speak with her."

"Oh, I spoke with her all right. I told her that I'm going to see a barrister to ensure my rights as a father."

"You didn't!" Narcissa said, shocked. "Severus, that's not the way to handle things at this point! Pregnant women don't need to be stressed that way!"

Severus shrugged. Bending down to right the table he'd kicked over, he told her, "I will tell you what I told her. *Will* be involved in my child's life."

"Of course you will," Narcissa soothed. "I never thought otherwise. But, Severus, you don't need to rush off and begin a court battle at this point. It could cause you not to have a child to fight about at all in the long run if she's too terribly stressed."

He held up a hand. "Enough. I will handle things my way. And from now on? Keep out of my business!"

As he strode out of the room, he heard Lucius mutter, "I told you that sending him to her store unprepared was a bad idea, my love."

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The next morning, as soon as she'd sent Rose and Hugo off with their grandparents, Hermione headed to Harry and Ginny's, knowing that their kids were with hers. It would be the perfect time to talk.

She stood, tapping her foot impatiently as she waited for someone to open the door. Once the door opened, Hermione smiled because it was Ginny. "Hello, Ginny."

"Hermione! Come in!"

As she was walking in, Hermione asked, "Is Harry home? I thought that since today is Sunday, he'd possibly be off work." The fact that it was Sunday had calmed her a bit. Severus wouldn't be able to go see his barrister today, as he'd threatened.

"Sure, let me get him. Have a seat, and I'll brew us some tea."

Instead of sitting, Hermione walked over to the fireplace to look at the pictures displayed on the mantel. She smiled at the one of her, Ron, and Harry, arms flung around each other. She missed those days. Though they weren't uncomplicated, they were special. Suddenly, she missed Ron terribly. Not Ron her husband, but Ron her friend. She sighed at the ache in her chest.

She turned when she heard Harry walk into the room.

"All right, Hermione?" Harry asked worriedly.

"Not really. Harry, I want to know why you never told me that Severus is still alive."

"Because I was asked not to tell anyone." He walked to her and put his hands on her rigid shoulders. "He wanted a chance to start over, go somewhere where he's not known. I didn't think you would care so much."

"Of course I would care! There at the end, I thought a lot of him! I thought we told each other everything, Harry." And that was what stung the most. Harry had kept such a monumental secret from her.

Harry pointedly looked down at her stomach. "Apparently not. Why didn't *you* tell me he was still alive when you'd gotten back from Italy?"

She huffed and stepped away from him. "It's not the same! Besides, you already knew that he was alive!"

"True," he agreed, walking to her once more, but not touching her, "but you didn't know that. You had an affair with the man, for Christ's sake, and are having a baby with him! I begged you to tell me who the father was, and you refused!" Harry said, his anger starting to build.

"Yes, but I didn't tell you because you wanted to run to Italy and confront him. You purposely didn't tell me about Severus. Deliberately hid it from me. Did you tell Ginny? She seemed to have known." Then a horrifying thought occurred to her. "Did *Ron* know?"

"No, I never told Ron." At her bland stare, he said, "Now, Hermione, Ginny's my wife. A husband and wife shouldn't keep things from one another. Not if they want a strong marriage."

"Apparently," she said, looking back at the picture of the three of them sadly.

"Bloody hell, Hermione! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to bring up bad memories."

"Think nothing of it. It's fine." She smiled, pointing to the picture. "Besides, those memories aren't sad."

Looking at her stomach once more, he gently asked, "What will you do now?"

Hermione turned to speak just as Ginny walked back into the room with tea and biscuits. "I'm just going to leave this here, and then I'll go and let you two talk in private."

"There's no need," Hermione told her, grinning. "I'd rather Harry not bugger things up when he tells you what I've said. After all, he tells you everything."

Hermione and Ginny both laughed when Harry blushed. "Thanks, Hermione. I'd rather hear it from you, too. What *will* you do now?"

Hermione took a cup of tea and sat down, taking a sip. Nibbling on a biscuit, she said, "Severus came to my flat last night after I'd closed. He's threatened to go see a barrister."

"What?" Harry demanded, setting the cup of tea he'd started to drink down on the table. "He thinks that he's going to take this baby from you? How dare he?"

"No, nothing like that. He claims he just wants to establish his parental rights."

Confused, Ginny asked, "Well, why would he need to do that? Of course you'd let him see the baby, have a part in raising him."

Hermione shrugged. "I'm not so sure. I don't really know him that well, certainly not well enough to just hand my baby over to him for overnight visits."

"Hmm. You certainly knew him well enough to create a baby with him, but now you're saying not well enough to share the baby? Are you sure that's the problem?"

"Ginny!" Harry said, appalled that his wife would suggest such a thing. "How could you say that?"

"Quite easily, Harry." She turned to Hermione. "You have no qualms about sharing Rose and Hugo with Ron."

"I know that," Hermione snapped, frustrated that Ginny had repeated the same thing Severus had said. "But they have grown up with Ron, they know their father."

"Exactly. And if you let it, this baby will know his father, too." Gently, Ginny laid her hand over Hermione's and rubbed. "Is he really that bad? He seems great with Liam, from what I've seen."

Irritated, Hermione rose and crossed to the window. "I just don't know. I've never even met Liam. That's part of the problem. We...or he rather...never spoke of anything personal. And part of that is my fault for just accepting things. But let me tell you, when it comes to my child, I won't be so accepting."

"Then you need to get to know him."

Hermione nodded. "Normally, I would agree. But you didn't see him when he left yesterday. I don't know if he'd be willing to try now. He thinks I never intended to tell him about the baby."

"Did you?" Harry asked.

"Yes. I'd written a letter I had planned on sending today, once Rose and Hugo left with Molly and Arthur. I didn't know how he'd react, and I wanted the kids away in case there was a confrontation."

"That's reasonable," Ginny told her. "What did the professor say when you told him that?"

"He didn't believe me. And that's part of the reason he's so very angry." She rubbed her eyes, fighting the beginnings of a headache.

"Do you have a plan?" Harry demanded. "You can't just let him come here and dictate how things are going to be. Why don't you just let me talk to him, 'Mione?"

Hermione cocked her eyebrow. "You mean so that *you* can dictate to him how things are going to be? No, Harry, I will handle things with Severus myself, my way." She patted his cheek. "But I do love you for wanting to help me. I need to go. I'm tired."

"Yes, you need to rest and try not to stress over things," Ginny said. "If you need anything, anything at all, don't hesitate to Floo or owl us. We love you."

Hermione hugged Harry and then Ginny. "Thanks. I'll talk to you later."

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Almost a week had passed, and Hermione still had not heard anything from Severus or his barrister. Waiting for the wand to strike was causing her sleepless nights and loss of appetite.

She sighed as she closed the store for the day. Business had been good, and for that, she was grateful. She loved being surrounded by all of those books. As a matter of fact, she had one in her hands now.

When she walked inside, she thought about heating some soup, but tiredness suddenly over-took her, and she opted for a shower instead. Once she got out, she would make a light snack and snuggle in her bed with her book, she decided. She just didn't have the energy for anything more.

The first thing she did was check her mail by the window. She smiled at the letter from Rose and Hugo. There was an impressive picture of a Chinese Fireball breathing fire. And though it was a different type, the dragon made her think of Norbert and Hagrid. Chuckling, she sat down and read the letter.

The kids were having a lot of fun, and she was grateful for that. One less thing she needed to worry about. They were even excited about visiting their father and working in his shop. Her chest tightened when she thought of it because it made her think of Severus and wonder when he was going to strike.

A knock on her door pulled her out of her musings. She placed her photograph down and walked to the door, cautiously opening it. She only sighed when she saw Severus standing on the other side.

They both stood there a few moments saying nothing when suddenly an aroma caused Hermione to look down and see the bags in his hands.

"Hungry?" he asked, raising the bags a bit higher.

"What are you on about, Severus?"

Not waiting for her to invite him in, he walked past her and into her kitchen. Setting the bags on the table, he turned to look at her. "Plates? Silverware? Tea?"

"What are you up to? What's all this?" she asked him, moving her arm in a sweeping motion towards the table.

"Dinner. Please, have a seat."

"Dinner? Have a seat? How dare you think that you can just come here with food and expect me just to welcome you? Have you completely forgotten what happened the last time we were together? The threats you made? Now you think you can just show up and all will be forgiven?"

"Hermione," he said gently, "I admit that I was somewhat rash the last time we spoke. I was taken completely off guard. I've had the chance to think things through. I admit that a lot of what you said makes sense. We *should* get to know each other better. Or rather, I should let you get to know me better. I thought before barristers were brought in, we'd give dinner and conversation a shot. What say you?"

Not answering him, Hermione went to the cabinets. After getting the plates, silverware, and setting two pumpkin juices on the table, Hermione sat across from him, jiggling her leg in a nervous shake. She was extremely curious to hear what he had to say.

He began placing food on their plates, still not saying anything. She started rolling her fingers on the table in time with her leg, and he gently put a hand over hers.

She looked up at him, gobsmacked. He'd never touched her in such a way before, and it was confusing her.

He sighed and placed the serving spoon back on the table. Clearing his throat and taking a sip of his drink, he said, "I met Lily when we were kids, before we even started Hogwarts."

Hermione straightened and listened intently. She understood he was about to get very personal with her. She didn't want to miss a word.

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A/N: Hmm, starting with Lily. Tales of Shannon and Liam can't be far away!

## Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 13

Hermione comes home to find something she'd never expected. Her life will change--hopefully for the better.

**Disclaimer:** All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: You've left me to choice. My awesome beta's *Cough* Southern\_Witch\_69 *Cough* in hiding until after voting. You lot are too sneaky...



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Severus watched her face intently, wanting her to say something, anything, as she solemnly watched him. It was not usual for her to be so quiet. Nerves on edge, he continued.

"I knew right away that Lily was like me. Meaning, I knew that she was a witch. Of course *she* didn't have a clue." He chuckled a bit, remembering. He looked at her once more.

"I'm sure that you know most of it. I won't bore you with the details."

"You're not boring me, Severus," she quietly told him as she played with the food on her plate. "And though I may know certain facts, I certainly don't know your thoughts and feelings."

He nodded and then pointed at her food. "Eat," he ordered. "It's not doing you any good sitting on your plate."

Hermione took a small bite and motioned with her fork. "Please, continue."

He watched her a moment to make sure she continued to eat and then went on. "I spent as much time with her as possible, every free moment that I had. My home life was... less than stellar, and she was the only bright spot in my day. She looked forward to seeing me as well."

"It sounds like the two of you were very close."

"Yes, we became so," he agreed. "The only blight in those days was her horrid sister. How those two came from the same parents is beyond me. Her sister knew that she was different...special...and she was rife with jealousy."

"Yes, Petunia Dursley always treated Harry with contempt. Well, they all did, actually. And though he'd never let on, it hurt him."

Severus shrugged, never taking his eyes off her face. He wanted to touch her, to hold her, and he knew that she'd never allow him to. It was too soon. Had he thought she was fragile? Just one of the many times he'd been mistaken about her.

Because this was important, he truly wanted her to understand, and as he thought back, his excuses and explanations sounded so very pitiful in his head. He couldn't help it; the truth was all that he had, so he continued telling her what she claimed she wanted to know.

"When we started Hogwarts, we still remained close those first couple of years. We were both devastated when we were sorted in different Houses. But like I said, at first, that really didn't matter."

"As I got older, I started befriending some of the other Slytherins, grateful that they'd wanted to be friends with me at all. As you could imagine, I was awkward and surly with it. My motto was: 'Never let anyone...except Lily...get too close,' or 'Hurt them before they hurt you.'"

"Mmm. Much as it is now, eh?"

His eyes flew to hers, and he slowly nodded. "I had not realized it, but that does seem accurate. I'll apologize that you have first hand knowledge of that. At any rate, I suppose I began to change, and Lily noticed it. Began to complain about how I was behaving. Soon, we stopped spending so much time together."

"Is that when she turned to James?"

"No, she still despised him at that point. I was extremely jealous of him, regardless of her constantly trying to reassure me. I never believed that she, or anyone, would choose someone like me over someone like Potter. And that, combined with my new *friends*, tore us apart."

Hermione nodded. "I can well imagine. My first year, everyone hated me, even my own Housemates. When Harry and Ron saved me from that troll my first year and then offered me friendship, I jumped at the chance. The only difference is that you had Lily, whereas I had no one."

He nodded. "Yes. I think what the breaking point truly was for Lily and I was one day, Potter and his groupies were being overly nasty to me. I'm sure that it was because he was trying to impress Lily. He'd embarrassed me so badly, not only in front of Lily but in front of so many people, that when she tried to take up for me, I was even more embarrassed, and I called her Mudblood."

"Oh, Severus..."

"She played it off," he continued as if she'd not spoken, "but I could see the hurt in her eyes. Knowing that it was me who'd put it there, and that it was Potter who'd defended her, was a slice in my heart. I went to her afterwards, practically camping at the Gryffindor entrance until she agreed to see me, and apologized, tried to explain, but things were never the same after that."

"Sometimes people do or say something so hurtful, it's very hard to take back. Especially when you were growing apart to begin with," Hermione said.

Because he was finished eating, Severus rose from the table and walked to her stove without commenting. Lifting the tea pot, he looked at her and raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Go ahead. None for me, thanks. I'm just going to have a spot of warm milk. We can sit on the sofa now, if you'd like."

Without waiting for him to answer her, she turned and walked to the sofa, forgetting to get her milk. Or perhaps, Severus thought, she wanted him to make it for her. Pouring some in a glass, he used his wand and warmed the milk, just as his tea was ready to brew.

After he'd given Hermione her milk and gotten settled, Severus took a long sip of his tea, again, watching her face intently. He sighed. She looked so solemn, so unlike herself. "So tell me," he said, "how did the pregnancy happen? I know you were taking contraceptive potion."

Taking a sip, Hermione looked at him from over the top of her glass. "I'd gotten a bladder infection and had to take antibiotics. Apparently, they affected my potion."

"Damn it, Hermione!" Severus bellowed as he slammed his cup on the table, miraculously without breaking it. "If you'd needed a potion, why did you not come to me?"

Hermione laughed. "Come to you? Seriously, Severus, I couldn't come to you with anything. Why would that be any different?"

"You know very well that I would have given you a potion for your infection. The very idea that you took *Muggle* products when I was *right there*... I'm rather surprised the medication worked at all."

"Don't be ridiculous. By the time that I'd gotten the infection, I'd learned that the only thing you wanted from me was sex. No conversation, no dating, nothing like that. Besides, I didn't feel comfortable coming to you for that." She stiffened. "If you're this upset about the baby, don't be. I can manage by myself."

Her accusations about the way he'd treated her, though they were true, stung. She'd thought exactly what he'd wanted her to think, but knowing it now...hearing her say the words out loud...hurt him. "Have no worries, Hermione, I want to be...*will* be...a part of this baby's life." He needed her to understand that now.

"However, let me get this straight. You felt comfortable fuc...er...making love with me, but not coming to me for a potion?" He refused to call what had been between them the ugly term that almost slipped out of his mouth. If he wanted her, and he did, he was going to have to start acting accordingly.

"Not comfortable being with you, no, but I wanted you. I kept thinking, 'He'll change. Eventually, he'll want more from me than sex.'" She shook her head in denial. "Dangerous thoughts for a woman, thinking a man will change, I know. But there were times when you'd look at me a certain way, or hold me so possessively, and I'd foolishly think that meant you were coming around."

"Not foolish, Hermione. I had feelings for you, and I still do. I was fighting them."

"I have to wonder why you fought them when it was so obvious that I wanted you so badly. At any rate, I'd like for you to continue with your story, if you don't mind."

Wanted. Past tense. Well, they'd see about that. Severus wanted them to be a family. He wanted Liam to meet her and her children. Actually, he needed to meet them as well. Severus knew that he'd messed up, but surely if she cared for him, she would at least consider..."

"Severus? Severus? SEVERUS!"

"What? There's no need to yell so!"

"You're daydreaming. Look, if you don't want to talk to me about this anymore, don't. I'm rather surprised that you've told me this much."

"Woolgathering. And, yes, I'll continue. I told you I would, and I will."

Finishing her milk, Hermione placed her glass on the table beside the cup that Severus nearly broke and gestured for him to continue as she lay back on the couch. Severus slid further down to give her room to put her feet up on the couch.

He placed a pillow under her feet. "You look tired," Severus observed, sounding concerned.

"Yes, I am. It's hard to sleep and eat when you're constantly looking over your shoulder to see if a barrister is going to hand you papers at any moment."

"I apologize for the way I handled that. But, Hermione, you have to understand the position I was in and how it looked."

She shrugged. "It's in the past. Go on, please," she said with a yawn.

"As I've said, after the Mudblood incident, things were never really the same for us. I was suddenly beginning to get more friends in Slytherin, and Lily had whole-heartedly disapproved. I remember the day Narcissa Black came to me and asked if I'd meet her betrothed that weekend in Hogsmeade.

"Though he was in his seventh year when I began at Hogwarts, one does not forget Lucius Malfoy. Naturally, I agreed, flattered that he'd asked to see me, specifically. During that meeting, Lucius told me of a great wizard with *exceptional* values. He wanted to meet with me, wanted me to join his followers."

"You joined the Dark Lord while still in school?" Hermione asked, gobsmacked. She knew that Draco Malfoy had, but she thought that was something rarely done.

"No, but I did meet with him. Soon after, I started sneaking out through the Room of Requirement with Narcissa, Bella, and a few others to attend meetings. Lily knew I was up to something, and she tried one last time to stop me, but by that time, I didn't want to be stopped, you see. I felt powerful, wanted. Loved, even. And because I'd never really thought that I had a chance with Lily, I threw her friendship over."

"Had she been your..." Hermione moved her hand in a circle, trying to think of an appropriate word. "You know, your... lover?"

"No. One of my many regrets. I wanted that girl so badly. I loved her with the passion only a teenager can have, and without realizing it at the time, I sabotaged my own happiness. There at the end, the more I wanted her, the crueler I was to her.

"When I'd realized that I'd really lost her, that she was going to marry James Potter, that's when I'd truly decided to join the Dark Lord. I received my Dark Mark the day she got married. All I could think was that those friends stood by me while she didn't."

"Which is exactly what Voldemort and his followers wanted you to think."

"Oh, yes. The Dark Lord was most excellent in mind games. When he'd give his speeches, he could actually make you believe he was sincere, that ~~were~~ superior. It's when he not only wanted to get the *lesser, undeserving* ones out of Hogwarts but when he also wanted to kill them and rule the entire wizarding world that I began to realize that he was actually quite mad."

"Then why didn't you leave, Severus?"

"Oh, I wanted to. He would have likely tortured and killed me if I'd tried, but at the time, it wouldn't have mattered to me. But you see, by then I had acquired another master, one just as frightening as the Dark Lord."

"Dumbledore." It was not a question.

"Yes, Dumbledore. You see, I had heard a prophecy that concerned the Dark Lord, and at the time that I heard it, I was still trying to please him and keep in his good graces. It wasn't until later that I'd learned my mistake. It could have been about one of two families. The Longbottoms or the Potters, and where Lily was concerned, I wasn't taking any chances."

"You still loved her, even after everything that had happened," Hermione murmured.

Severus nodded. "I've always loved her. So I went to the only person I could think of that would be powerful enough to go against the Dark Lord, the only man the Dark Lord ever feared. Albus Dumbledore. When I told him my dilemma, he found a way to turn the situation to his advantage, and in my desire to protect Lily, I agreed. I would have done anything for her."

"Even if it meant protecting your nemesis in the process."

"Even so. In the end, it didn't matter. He killed her anyway, and I vowed to protect her son for failing her so badly. Oh, how I wanted the Dark Lord to be dead after what had happened that Halloween night! But I knew in my soul that he wasn't. All of the Death Eaters knew."

"How horrid for you! Always wondering, always waiting..."

"For *me*? No, I'd chosen that life, and I had to live with it. Lily, however, did not. And she'd tried with all that she had to steer me away from it as well, but I couldn't be swayed. In the end, Albus insisted that I work at Hogwarts, so that he could keep an eye on me, I'm sure. And when the Dark Lord returned in your fourth year, my spying duties resumed."

Hermione nodded. Rising, she stretched and raised her arms over her head. "Sorry, I need the loo." Patting her tummy, she said, "Jr. here is sleeping on my bladder."

"Not at all," Severus told her. "Can I fix you a snack? You didn't really eat much supper."

"No, thank you. Right now, I'm honestly more tired than hungry. I'm taking my Prenatal Potion, so we're getting all the nutrients that we need. I'll be right back," she said before he could disagree.

Severus stood and stretched as well. He'd thought that talking about Lily with Hermione would be hard, but in an odd sort of way, he only felt relief. She didn't seem to judge him nor pity him, and he was thankful for that.

He thought of her lying on the couch, watching him intently as he talked of Lily and his early Death Eater days. He'd never talk to her...or anyone...about the things he'd done while he had been a Death Eater. But he really didn't think that she'd ask.

He turned when he heard her washing her hands and coming back into the room. "All right?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Would you like more tea?"

"No. Hermione? I was wondering. When do your children come back from holiday?"

"Why?" she asked suspiciously.

Raising an eyebrow, he asked, "Don't you think it would be prudent for your children to meet the father of their sibling? I know I would like to arrange a meeting between you and Liam. And also with Liam, Rose and Hugo."

"Don't you think that's rushing things a bit?"

"No, I don't. You've only four months to go, Hermione. Avoiding things won't stop them. I'm here, and I plan on helping you raise our child."

"It's too soon. I don't know anything at all about your son."

"Precisely, which is why I want you to meet him. Don't worry; I plan on telling you about him before hand." He motioned to the couch. "Have a seat, and I'll continue."

He watched her as she lay back down on the couch, still looking somewhat pale, and suddenly got an idea. "You know, I think I will have some more tea. And if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to fix myself a light snack."

"Not at all. But I'll fix it for you."

"No, you rest. I'll only be a moment, if you don't mind me puttering around in your kitchen."

She smiled. "Putter away."

He left her lying on the couch and started towards the kitchen. On his way, he spotted the table full of dirty dishes. Thinking that he didn't want to leave her a huge mess to clean in the morning, he gathered them up and took them into the kitchen.

After he'd washed, dried, and put the dishes away, Severus found cheese and apples. After arranging them on a tray with some crackers, he brewed his tea and warmed another glass of milk for Hermione.

Lifting it, he started back towards the couch. "Now Shannon, Liam's mother, she was some, but not all together, different from Lily."

He sat the tray down on the table and turned to look at her. She was sound asleep. Severus shook his head. Picking up the throw from the back of the couch, he covered her with it.

Deciding that he didn't want to leave, he sat down at the other end of the couch, placed a Stasis Spell on the cheese tray, and settled down. He laid his head on the back of the couch and stretched his legs in front of him, crossing his feet.

He turned his head and looked at her, longing to lift her and carry her to the bedroom. Not for sex, though that would be nice too, but just to hold her. *She'd never allow it* he thought, then grudgingly, *and rightfully so*.

*Ah, well. I will talk to her of my past, answer any questions she may have, and then hopefully we can move forward. Together*Smiling at the thought, Severus drifted off to sleep.

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A/N: Up next, Shannon and Liam!

## Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 13

Hermione comes home to find something she'd never expected. Her life will change--hopefully for the better.

**Disclaimer:** All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: Hey! Stop trying to look through that keyhole! You'll never find my awesome beta! *Cough* Southern\_Witch\_69 *Cough* Not until after voting!



---

Hermione stretched and yawned, feeling rested and much better. Something had woken her, and she looked about the room, disoriented. She wasn't surprised to find herself sleeping on the couch. No, what surprised her was to find that Severus had stayed with her. Suddenly, she heard a hissing noise coming from the direction of her fireplace.

"Hermione? Hermione Jane Weasley! Come here this instant."

Hermione groaned. *Ron*. Carefully rising so that she wouldn't wake Severus, she walked to the fireplace and knelt down.

"What?" she asked irritably. "I was sleeping." Then suddenly, she gasped. "Ron, the kids. Are they okay? Has something happened?"

"No. Calm down, Hermione! I just wanted to ask you something. Rose and Hugo tell me that you're pregnant and that you're not saying who the father is."

Hermione narrowed her eyes, a sign she was becoming angry, Ron knew. "I certainly don't see how anything to do with my personal life is any of your business." Actually, Hermione was rather surprised that his family hadn't told him by now.

"See, that's where you're wrong. Anything that reflects badly on you will reflect badly on my children. What were you thinking? All you had to do to prevent a pregnancy was swallow a potion, for Merlin's sake!"

Hermione leaned forward. "Reflects badly on the children? You mean, unlike an extra-marital affair would?"

"Right. Well, at least I could hide that. You can't hide a huge belly, Hermione. Who is the father?"

"None of your damned business!" she yelled, forgetting she was trying not to wake Severus. "Just who in the hell do you think you are? You can't just pop in here at seven in the morning and demand things from me! Hold on," Hermione said as a thought popped into her head. "You stayed up until two just so you could speak with me about this?"

"Yes, I did. I have to wonder what you're thinking of, Hermione, and what's wrong with you. Does the man who put you in this condition even know that you're carrying his child?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, he does. I will not discuss this with you, Ronald. As I've said, it's none of your business. Besides, that's Molly Weasley, and perhaps Lavender Brown, talking...not you. What? Your mum was afraid to ask me these things herself?"

"Lavender *Weasley*! And anything to do with my children is my business! They're worried about you!"

"There's no reason for them to be, and I'll absolutely speak with them about my situation when they come home. But what I refuse to do is speak with *you* about it!"

"What will people say?" he asked as if she'd not said anything at all. "Rose and Hugo will be teased about having a bastard brother or sister."

"That'll do, Weasley," Severus said in a low, threatening growl. "I won't allow you to call my child a bastard."

"*Snape's child?*" Ron looked to Hermione for confirmation, but her eyes were on Snape. "What the bloody hell is he doing there this early? As a matter of fact, what is he doing over there at all? Are you telling me that you're actually pregnant with Snape's baby?"

"At the moment, getting ready for a spot of breakfast," Severus answered only the first question before Hermione could speak.

"Hermione?" Ron asked. "Honestly, what's going on?"

Hermione rose, turning back to the fireplace. "Go to bed, Ron. I'm not discussing this with you now." As Hermione walked away, following Severus into the kitchen, she heard Ron yell, "This is *not* over!"

"Do you mind if I prepare us something to eat?" he asked her.

"No, you go ahead. I have to admit, I was surprised when I woke and found that you were still here."

He looked over his shoulder at her. "We weren't finished with our conversation. What are you going to do about your ex?"

"Do? Nothing. This situation does not concern him in the least."

"We agree there, but I don't think he'll give up. He's like a hippogriff with a ferret."

Hermione shrugged. "I can deal with Ron. I've been doing it for years. He likely wouldn't even have bothered contacting me about this at all...or perhaps through owl only...if his mum hadn't harped about it. And as far as my children, well, they were perfectly fine until they'd gone on holiday with their grandparents."

"Yes, I can see that woman going on and on. Still, I think it's a good idea that he knows. As a matter of fact, I don't think the fact that it's my child should be kept secret any longer now that I know," he told her as he fluffed the eggs.

"I see," she said as she watched him cook, deciding not to comment any further until they'd decided what exactly they were going to do.

"You enjoy that," she said, remembering the lunch he'd cooked for them the first time they'd been together.

"What? Cooking? Yes, somewhat. I've learned to perfect my skills over the years cooking for Liam."

"Speaking of Liam..."

When she hesitated, Severus turned completely around and looked at her, gesturing for her to continue.

"Where is his mother, Ireland?" she asked.

"No," he answered quietly as he turned to put the eggs onto plates. After setting Hermione's in front of her, he sat down and looked at her.

Suddenly, Hermione was very nervous. Severus had had a child with this woman, so she must have meant a great deal to him at one point. But if that was the case, where was she? Was Liam the product of a one night stand? Of a situation similar to the one that herself and Severus had been in? She rose and put the kettle on. "You forgot the tea."

"Yes."

She could feel his eyes boring into her back as she prepared the tea. The thing was, she didn't know if she wanted to hear this story or not. Of course, she wanted to know Severus' past, but she couldn't imagine leaving her children for *any* reason. What kind of woman was Liam's mother? Why had she left, leaving Severus to raise the child alone? Well, there was only one way to find out.

After setting the tea on the table, Hermione took her seat and looked directly into Severus' eyes. "Where is she then?"

Severus picked up his cup and took a long drink of the tea, slightly burning his tongue. "I am going to tell you of Shannon, how we met and things about her before I get into where she is now."

Hermione nodded, taking a bite of her eggs. She sensed his urgency of wanting her to know the details. "All right."

"When I first met Shannon O'Leary, she was living in the same condo that you did." Severus smiled slightly. "She was young and full of life. A painter."

"Those paintings in your condo?"

"Yes, she'd painted them. She was very talented. After living beside her for about a month, she came over to my condo one day, out of the blue, asking to paint me." Severus chuckled at that memory. "I, of course, slammed the door in her face."

"Of course."

"At first I'd thought that she'd merely recognized me and, in turn, wanted recognition for herself, but that was not the case. She kept stopping by from time to time, and I kept telling her no until one day, she'd brought a painting to me that she'd done. It was me all right, with the deepest scowl I'd ever seen.

"She'd saucily informed me, 'Here's your portrait, you rotten bugger! It's the way I see you every time we speak.' Well, that had earned her tea in my kitchen."

Hermione smiled. "I'd like to see that painting."

"I still have it. Anyway, she got into the habit of coming for tea everyday, and we'd talk and talk. I'd learned that she had two older brothers, but that she was a Squib, and her parents, though they'd tried to hide it, were ashamed of her. So, due to that, she'd left Ireland."

"How terrible for her!"

"Yes. She didn't leave Ireland on good terms with her family and hadn't spoken with them in years. It pained her, but she tried to act as if it didn't matter to her. Sometimes I'd encourage her to owl them, but for the most part, I left it alone. At the time, it was really none of my concern, and she didn't really seek my advice in the matter."

So he'd been someone whom Shannon could not only talk with but also count on to try and help her. Hermione couldn't count the times that she'd actually wanted his advice but to no avail.

"Well, as you can imagine, our relationship progressed."

"You fell in love with her?"

"Not at first. At first, I fell into lust with her. How could I not? She possessed such a... zest for life, despite her family problems. I don't think she even minded the fact she'd been a Squib.

"I remember the day she burst into my lab and exclaimed, 'Severus! I'm pregnant!' She was so happy and proud."

"How did you feel about it?" Hermione was starting to feel jealous, and it was making her uncomfortable. She didn't even feel like this when she'd walked in on her husband in her bed with another woman.

"Everything you can imagine. Gobsnacked, thrown, angry because I'd never wanted a child, and just a small, tiny bit in awe. But Shannon? She was thrilled from the beginning."

That surprised Hermione. How could someone so thrilled about having a baby completely abandon it? She just couldn't make any sense of what Severus was telling her.

"What did you do?"

"We eloped," he said with a chuckle.

"You *married* her?" Now Hermione was completely confounded. If they'd married, then what had happened?*He speaks of her so fondly, whether he realizes it or not.*

"Oh, yes, Shannon had gone to our local library to research potential elopement places, something you'd be familiar with," he teased without noticing she frowned at the comparison. "She found a little chapel in Rome and made all the arrangements. We went one weekend, got married, and took a two-day tour."

Hermione could picture it so perfectly, except that it didn't sound like *her* Severus at all. *Her* Severus was cold-hearted, distant, and cutting. *Shannon's* Severus sounded fun-loving and attentive. Hermione sighed and shook her head.

"Sounds romantic."

"It shouldn't have been for what we could afford, but we made it memorable."

"Lovely for you then." Hermione rose and started putting the dishes in the sink, trying to hide how hurt hearing about his life with Shannon made her.

"Hermione, you don't have to do that now, do you?"

"I can do this and hear about Liam's mum at the same time." She refused to call Shannon his wife. It made her feel as if she'd been no better than Lavender. Only, Shannon wasn't in the picture any longer, was she? *Did they divorce?* His words broke through her musings.

"As soon as we'd gotten back, she moved into my condo and got permission from the owner to paint the nursery. She'd painted both wizard and Muggle fairytales throughout the walls. It was wonderful. Liam never did want paint over them as he got older."

Hermione turned to look at him. "I don't understand any of this, Severus. You sound as if you loved her. If that's the case, then where..."

He held up a hand to stop her question. "Patience."

Hermione simply turned back to the dishes. "All right. Continue, please."

"She did all of the typical things pregnant women do, I suppose. Nursery and clothes shopping, things of that nature. She insisted that I attend every doctor's appointment with her, but that wasn't a hardship on me.

"The pregnancy wasn't hard on her at all. If anything, it made her seem more vibrant. She never got sick, and when her belly got big, she was overjoyed."

"Wow, what a saint," Hermione said sarcastically. "Did she knit booties and blankets, too?"

Merely raising an eyebrow at her sarcastic tone, he told her, "She tried. That didn't turn out very well."

"Oh, you mean there was something that she didn't excel at?"

"Careful. Your green is showing."

"Just finish." Hermione was getting upset. *Damn hormones.* She'd wanted him to talk about his past, but she'd had no idea that he'd go into this much detail. Not sure how much more she could take, she told him when he only stared at her, "I said finish it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Positive? I don't want hearing about this to upset you. I'm only trying to paint you a picture of my life with her," he confirmed once more. When she nodded that she still wanted to hear, he continued, "Her labor was rather difficult because of her small frame, and lengthy with it, but after seventeen hours, Liam John Snape yelled his way into the world. John is her father's name."

Severus stopped talking, and when Hermione turned to look at him, he was staring off into space with a pained expression on his face. Hermione realized that this was the part where she would learn what had ended their marriage.

She left the dishes to dry and walked back to the table to sit back down. As much as hearing the first part hurt her, she intuitively knew that what he was about to tell her was going to hurt him so much more.

He took a deep breath and continued. "When Liam was about six weeks old, Shannon wanted her parents to know of him. I encouraged her to write to them, but she thought, justifiably, that telling your family that you'd gotten married and had a child deserved a face to face consultation."

"Yes, I can see that."

"She booked a flight to Ireland. I'd tried talking her into letting me get her a Portkey, but she refused. I honestly think that was some form of rebellion on her part because of her being a Squib. She did as little magical things as possible."

He stood and walked to the kitchen window, gazing out. "The day she left, Liam and I had just gotten in from our daily walk, and I flipped on the telly she'd insisted that we get as I was walking through to grab a bottle for his lunch. It was all over the news."

Hermione braced herself for what he was about to say.

"The plane hadn't been in the air an hour when it had crashed; no survivors. I didn't believe it, of course. I flooded Narcissa, and she immediately came to stay with the baby while I made an illegal Portkey to take me directly to where she was. I didn't trust myself enough to try to Apparate."

Hermione stood and walked to him, gently rubbing his back. "I'm so very sorry, Severus."

"I won't go into the details of what I found at the site of the crash, but suffice it to say that she hadn't survived. Wanting to honor her last wishes, I took Liam and went to the O'Learys' a couple of days before her funeral."

He rubbed his hands roughly over his face, and Hermione thought that he looked incredibly tired. "They were heart-broken, needless to say. They came for the funeral and have kept in touch with Liam ever since then."

"Well, at least they got to meet their grandson. That was very noble of you, Severus."

"No, it wasn't. I did it for Shannon and Shannon alone. It was the least I could do for her."

"No, you're doing the least you could do for her now. You've been doing it the past eleven years. You're raising your son with love while honoring his mother."

"He's been everything to me. He's a lot like her in some ways, but also reserved like me. I'm proud of him."

Hermione smiled. "It shows."

"Hermione," he said softly and took her hand into his. "I'll not love our child any less."

She squeezed his hand. "I believe you, Severus. So, I've come to a decision."

"Yes?" he asked, moving just a bit closer to her, watching her lips as she spoke.

Hermione took a step back. She couldn't think with him looking at her like *that*. Before she even knew what was happening, he licked his lips, and her nipples tightened and tingled in response.

She took another step back, needing the distance. "I'm willing to go see the barrister with you as soon as you can get an appointment."

"I was hoping that you'd... Wait! What did you just say?"

Hermione cocked her head to the side. "I said I'm willing to go see the barrister with you. You know, to draw up visitation papers and things of that sort."

"That's what you want? Exchanging our child every other weekend and a few days during the week?"

"Well, I don't see any other alternative since I'm not willing to part with my baby much longer than that! It's going to be hard enough as it is with me breast feeding."

"You don't see any other alternative? What about us becoming a family, Hermione?"

"You mean get married?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean."

"Are you mad? Do you think I would marry you...or want you to marry me...just because I'm pregnant? I can't honestly believe that you actually love me. Besides, it's over between us, Severus. I can't continue on with the way things were. You hurt me too badly."

"I wouldn't want things to be the way they were before! Don't you believe in second chances?"

"Second chances? I gave you dozens of second chances! You threw each and every one back in my face."

"You're right. I did," he agreed. "And I'm sorry for that. Sorrier than you'll ever know. But I'm asking you to give me a second chance now that I truly want one. Now that so much is at stake."

"It's not just us, Severus. We've children to consider." She laid a hand protectively over her stomach. "I'm glad that you've confided in me about Lily and Shannon, and truly, it does help me to understand you better, but I still say it does not excuse the way you've treated me."

He raised an eyebrow and folded his arms across his chest. "I wasn't looking for an excuse. Don't you see? I've loved two women before you and both have died. Tragically."

"Yes, that's true. And though it's extremely sad and wasteful, that was still not a good enough reason for you to treat me so cruelly at times."

"I wanted to spare us both the heartache."

She sighed. "Well, you only succeeded in increasing mine. And to be perfectly honest, I don't see how hurting me spared you any heartache either. I've got to open my

shop, Severus, and I need a shower. Would you like to make an appointment or shall I?"

"We'll discuss this tonight over dinner."

"No, we won't."

"I'd like to take you out."

"No."

"Say, around sevenish?"

"Severus! I'm not going out to dinner with you!"

He walked over to her, grabbed her shoulders, pulled her to him, and kissed her thoroughly. "Goodbye, love. I'll see you this evening." Then he walked out of her flat without waiting for a response.

Hermione shook her head. No, she'd not go to dinner with him. She just couldn't put herself through that again, however badly part of her wanted to believe him.

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A/N: A battle of wills begins!

## Chapter 11

*Chapter 11 of 13*

Hermione comes home to find something she'd never expected. Her life will change--hopefully for the better.

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A/N: Beta, *Cough* Southern\_Witch\_69 *Cough*, what do you mean you're tired of hiding? You know we can't reveal your identity! The mods at Potter\_Place would kill us! You get back in that room and hide until after voting!



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Severus was sitting at the dinner table with the Malfoys, watching his son whisper excitedly to Scorpius. He'd given his permission for Liam to accompany the Malfoys on holiday. He would be gone for two weeks, but for once, Severus didn't mind the separation.

He was going to focus all of his attention on getting Hermione Granger back.

He remembered taking Liam back to her flat for dinner the day he'd told her about Shannon, and she hadn't been there. No doubt staying away because she knew that he'd be coming. As far as Severus could tell, Liam was somewhat disappointed, but not overly.

After that, Severus had realized that it was going to take more than merely baring his soul to her. He understood that she'd thought that he'd only wanted to be with her because of the baby, but that simply was not the case. He was in love with her. Now, all he had to do was convince her, and convince her that she loved him in turn.

He inwardly cringed when he thought of the things he'd said and done when they'd been in Italy. It had all started well enough. He'd wanted her sexually, and she had wanted him, but he'd also wanted it to end there. When it didn't, when he'd started having true feelings for her, he became... abrasive, wanting her to end things. But why?

Because he was scared, and being scared angered him. It was easier to blame her than to face his own short-comings, so that's what he'd done. But to what end? She was now expecting his child and wanted them to have weekend exchanges. No. Looking at Liam, he knew he'd never be able to bear that. He had no idea how Weasley did, nor did he care. He only knew that he would not submit them all to that.

He wondered if Hermione had ever been romanced. He doubted it. *He'd* certainly never done so, and he knew that it was highly unlikely that Weasley had. Dear Lord. That he knew of, he and Weasley were the only serious relationships that Hermione had been in. In his mind, Krum didn't count. It hadn't been truly serious as far as he knew. She'd only been fourteen at that time.

Wasn't that great? In both relationships, she'd been treated like shite. And boy did it grate that he'd been no better than a Weasley. Actually, he'd been worse because Weasley didn't start out acting like a git as he had.

Well, he'd correct that. He may have started out a git, but damned if that would continue. Thinking about it, he couldn't blame Hermione for refusing him. He sighed heavily.

"All right, Severus?"

Severus snapped out of his revive and looked at Lucius. "Perfectly so, Lucius. Just running a mental list of all the things I have to do tomorrow." Looking at his son, he asked, "Liam, are you sure that is the bedroom suite you want? I plan to pick it up tomorrow after you're gone."

"Yes, Dad. I've told you a hundred times!" Liam complained.

Narcissa chuckled. "Liam, your father just wants to make absolutely certain because you'll have that suite for a very long time."

"I know. Thank you, Dad. It really is the one I want. I like it the best out of all the ones we've looked out."

"All right. Are you all packed? Have you everything you'll need for your trip?"

"Yes, I think so. Would you check with me after dinner?"

Severus smiled. His son was so grown one moment, and so young still the next. He would miss him terribly when he went to Hogwarts in a few months. "Yes, I will."

"Severus?" Narcissa asked. "What will you do while we're gone?"

Severus looked at his meddlesome friend. She'd been after him to go to Hermione every day since she'd learned how he'd felt about the baby. "I have a house to set up. I'll be purchasing furniture and things like that."

"It's too bad I won't be here to help you. I think that every home needs a woman's touch. Perhaps your... friend, Hermione Granger, would help you."

"Must you start that tonight, Cissy?"

"Now, don't fuss, Severus! I just want to see you happy, that's all."

"What would really make me happy is if you'd mind your own business. I've run my life on my own just fine the past decade or so, and I can continue to do so without any meddling from you."

"I see," she said in a hurt tone, and Severus sighed.

"I'm sorry. That was harsh. I appreciate the fact that you want to see me happy and settled, and I love you for worrying about Liam and me. However, I'm ~~not~~ happy. Your version of happiness and mine are different. Did you ever take that into consideration?" Damned if he let on how much he wanted to marry Hermione. Cissy would be all over that one, possibly going to visit Hermione herself!

Lucius patted his wife's hand and then gently wrapped his fingers around hers. "Of course marital bliss is her form of happiness, and if you'd ever find the right one, you would recognize it."

"My dad was happily married! Right, Dad? My mum made you happy; didn't she?" Liam asked, sounding unsure.

Severus gave the elder Malfoys a sharp look. "Absolutely. We were very happy, son."

Narcissa turned to Liam. "Oh, Liam, Uncle Lucius and I didn't mean to imply otherwise. We know that your father was very happy with your mother. We just want him to find that again, and for you to have a mummy."

Liam shrugged, but Severus could tell that the subject was making him very uncomfortable. "If you're finished, we can to check your trunk."

Liam nodded and put his napkin into his plate. "I'm finished."

They both stood and walked out of the room, all eyes following them as they left.

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Once they'd entered Liam's room and checked his trunk, Severus sat down on the bed with his son. "Liam, do you remember me speaking with you about Hermione Granger?"

Liam nodded. "She's the one that you're going to have the baby with; the one from the book store."

"That's right." Severus took a big breath for courage. He needed his son to understand that though he wanted to marry Hermione, no one would ever take his mother's place.

"I love her, son, and I hope to convince her to marry me. That does not, however, in any way, diminish the love I had for your mother."

Liam nodded. "Does she love you?"

"I think that she does."

"So, it's me then? She doesn't want to marry you because you have a son?"

Severus was shocked. He'd had no idea the boy thought such a thing. "Why on earth would you think that? I've told you that she has two children as well. It's certainly not because of you!"

"Because that night we were going to eat dinner with her. You said that you'd been there speaking with her that morning and told her that we would be back for dinner, but when we got there, she was gone. I thought it was because she didn't want to see *me*."

Dear Lord! Had the boy been thinking that all this time? "No, son, it was because she didn't want to see ~~me~~ *you*. Remember I told you that she'd spent a few months in Italy while you were in Ireland?" Liam nodded, looking down at his shoes.

"When she was there, I behaved badly towards her, and for that reason, she doesn't trust me. It has nothing to do with *you*. She'd even told me that morning before I'd left her flat that she didn't want to go to dinner with me."

When Liam looked up at his father, he had tears in his eyes. "Are you sure? I wouldn't want to be the cause of you not getting married and being happy."

Severus took his son into his arms. "Oh yes, very sure. Hermione would love you as much as I do. And Liam, I'm happy now with you."

"Okay," Liam said after a few moments of cuddling. "I think I am going to have a bath and go to bed. Scorpius said we were going to leave early."

"All right. Do you want me to come back in later and tuck you in? Perhaps read you a story?"

Liam nodded as he headed for the loo. "Yes, I would. I'd like that a lot."

"Then I'll be back in about an hour," Severus assured him as he walked towards the door. Once he was in the hall, he put his face in his hands, shaking his head. He

never wanted his son to feel like he was the cause of any unhappiness again, and he would see to it that he didn't!

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Hermione sat on her stool behind the counter, sulking, though she would never admit that she was. "So much for Severus wanting us to be a big, happy family," she muttered to herself.

She knew that she'd been gone the night that he'd told her he wanted to have dinner, but honestly, she wasn't ready after all the emotional turmoil they'd had. She'd needed time to think things through. After the way he'd treated her, she felt that he owed her that much.

But the thing was, she'd not heard from him since. He'd not even owed her to ask after the baby, and Hermione found that odd, considering how adamant he'd been about being a part of his life. She shrugged. "Perhaps now that he's thought on it, he's decided that he doesn't want to be a part of our lives after all."

She reread the letter from Rose and Hugo for the hundredth time. If they were as concerned as Ron had said, they sure had a funny way of showing it. But still, she would talk to them about things once they got home. She didn't want them to be worried or confused. She wondered if Severus had spoken to Liam about things.

Hermione's heart leapt when the door opened as it had been doing for the past two days, annoying her even further. When she saw who'd entered, she was disappointed and happy at the same time.

"Neville! So good to see you! How have you been?"

"Really good. Hannah's expecting!"

"Oh, Neville, how wonderful!" Hermione stood to come around the counter and give her long time friend a hug.

"Whoa! Looks like she's not the only one." Neville gently pushed her an arm's length away, looking her up and down, and then got a confused expression on his face. "I thought that Ron... I mean to say that... He and Lavender... Didn't they?"

Hermione smiled when he stuttered and rubbed his arm. "It's not Ron's baby, Neville."

"Oh," Neville said, blushing crimson. "Sorry! I just assumed. I had no idea you were even seeing anyone! Anyway, how are Rose and Hugo? Looking forward to starting Hogwarts?"

"Doubtful just now," she told him. "They're in America with Ron and Lavender."

"I bet that's fun for them," he told her, a little sarcastically. "I swear, Hermione, I have to wonder at Ron. Lavender Brown?" He shuddered. "I would have that cow killed within a week."

Hermione laughed, appreciating her old school mate. "I thought on it a time or two myself, but I say let him have her. They deserve one another."

"That's low," he said as he laughed. "But accurate."

She kissed his cheek, enjoying his blush for having said such a thing. "You were always very sweet to me, Neville, and I've always been thankful for it. What else is Hannah up to these days besides carrying on the Longbottom name?"

"She's the landlady over at the Leaky Cauldron, didn't you know?"

"You know, I had heard that. I think I will go visit her one day this week. We should all get together. I miss everyone!" She hugged him. "I'm so happy you stopped by today."

"Anyway," he said, clearing his throat. "I came by to see if you have that new Herbology book, Life-threatening Underwater Plants, and also to see the shop since you've taken over. Sorry I haven't stopped by before now."

Hermione smiled. It was so like Neville not to pry her with uncomfortable questions. "No worries! Hmm, I might have a copy or two," she teased, placing her arm through his and walking over to the Herbology section with him to find it. They both turned when they heard the door open.

Hermione's mouth dropped open at the gigantic arrangement of flowers and the huge box of Honeyduke's finest. "Miss? Where can I put this?" the delivery boy asked, barely balancing his load.

"Oh, pardon me! One moment," Hermione said, walking back and clearing off the counter. "Set them down here." She opened the register to give the boy a tip, but he politely refused.

"The tip has been taken care of." He bowed slightly. "Have a nice day."

"Now that's impressive," Neville said, looking over the expansive flower arrangement. "And somewhat odd."

"Why odd?" Hermione asked, taking an appreciative sniff. "You think no one would send me candy and flowers?"

"No, it's not that at all! It's just, well, red roses represent passionate love, and white tulips represent forgiveness." When she only stared at him, he chuckled sheepishly. Holding his hand up, he said, "Sorry, occupational hazard. Whoever sent those to you likely just liked the way they looked together. Say, here's the card. See who they're from."

Hermione took the card and opened it, angling it in a way so that Neville wouldn't be able to read it. It simply said: Love, Severus.

"Well, don't keep me in suspense! Who are they from?"

"The baby's father," she told him without giving him a name.

"I see," he said. Eyeing the candy, he told her, "You know, that's not a bad idea. I think I'll stop and pick Hannah some up on the way home. Here, let me pay for this book."

"Oh, yes," Hermione said, having completely forgotten about the book Neville wanted to buy. As he was walking out, she said, "Give my love to Hannah!"

"Will do," he said and closed the door.

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Hermione was so startled to see Severus leaning against her door when she got home that she almost dropped her flowers. "Severus! You scared me to death!"

"So sorry," he said, chuckling. "Here, let me get those while you get the door." When she opened the door, he followed her inside.

"What are you doing here, Severus?" Hermione knew that she sounded petulant, but she didn't care. To her aggravation, she'd been thinking about him all day and even

more so since she'd received the candy and flowers. It made her mad at herself that she'd wanted to see him so badly and now, here he was, the pain in her arse.

"I've come to take you to dinner."

She looked around. "Is Liam with you?" She thought she saw a flicker in his eyes, but it was gone too quickly to be sure.

"No, he left on holiday with the Malfoys. I want to take you to dinner, Hermione, and talk."

"We can talk here, if you truly want to."

He raised an eyebrow. "Something amiss? Of course I truly want to."

She shrugged, trying to be nonchalant, but the gesture was too jerky to pull it off. "No, nothing. I just don't feel like going out, that's all."

He studied her, and she became uncomfortable. After a few moments, he said, "You need to eat, don't you? Going out would save you the trouble of preparing a meal."

Hermione took the vase from him and placed it on a table. "Just say what you've come to say, Severus," she told him wearily.

"Must you be so crass? How many times do I need to apologize to you before you believe that I'm sincere?" he asked, becoming agitated.

She turned to him, putting her hands on her hips. *I'm crass? Me?* Well, you know what? Actions speak louder than words, and so far? You've been no action. You come here, you tell me that you want us to be a family, and then I don't hear from you for days! How am I supposed to interpret that, Severus?"

"After our last talk when I insisted that you go to dinner with Liam and me, I realized that perhaps I was pushing you too far. When we got here and you were gone, I'd thought that you'd needed some time to think things through. Was I incorrect?"

She shrugged and turned away without answering him. Of course that had been exactly what she'd needed, but he didn't have to know that. "You told me that you wanted us to be a family," she reminded him again. "Because of the baby?"

"Not entirely."

"Entirely?"

"The baby is a part of it, but, Hermione, I wanted you back before I'd learned that you were expecting my child."

"Why?"

Severus rubbed his temples and went to sit on the couch. He wanted to explain things to her, and he wanted to do it right. "The last night that you were in Italy on New Year's Eve? I'd come to the realization that I was tired of sabotaging my life. I wanted you, and for some reason, you wanted me. I'd realized that I'd been denying us both. I'd wanted to start things over with you. Perhaps not marriage so soon, but I've no doubt we would have headed in that direction even without the pregnancy."

"You mean while you were kissing another woman on your balcony? Is that when you realized this?"

"You never did let me explain that! I wanted to discuss Vivian with you also that night, but you would never let me get a word in edgewise."

"You're blaming me? Oh, yes. I could see talk is what you had on your mind. Coming into that bar and carrying me off like some caveman staking your claim."

"You were about to make a huge mistake, Hermione! What did you want me to do, sit back and let you make it?"

"You mean bigger than the one I'd already made with you?"

"Dear God," he said as a thought came to him. "Do you realize this baby could have been another man's? What was his name?"

*No, this baby never would have been his because I never would have slept with him, or anyone else! Only you!* Bob, I think... No! Don't try to distract me. That is completely beside the point. I don't even know why you came looking for me in the first place!"

"Don't you? Well, if you'll sit down and speak with me, truly have a civilized conversation, I'll tell you. I want to talk to you, Hermione, and explain things, but only if you want to hear it."

Hermione nodded. She wanted to hear his explanation more than not. She had a very big decision to make and some very thick scars on her heart that needed healing. "I would like to hear it. Let me put on some tea, and then we'll talk."

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A/N: Well, at least she's willing to listen now.

## Chapter 12

*Chapter 12 of 13*

Hermione comes home to find something she'd never expected. Her life will change--hopefully for the better.

**Disclaimer:** All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: Notes? You guys are slipping notes under the door? What, am I going to have to get a guard now? \*Sighs\* I am going to see if Fluffy is available! You know my awesome beta *Cough* Southern\_Witch\_69 *Cough* has to remain anonymous until after voting!



Hermione came back into the room with a tea tray and two enormous ham sandwiches. "I wasn't sure if you're hungry or not, but I'm famished."

Eyeing the sandwich, he told her, "I could eat."

They ate in silence for a bit, and then Severus began, "I have not remained celibate since the death of my wife. There have been a few liaisons here and there."

"I didn't assume that you had. Though, to be honest, I did wonder how you ever maintained a relationship."

He snorted. "Hermione, I didn't have what you call *relationships*. I had... encounters." He smirked at her. "Flings, if you will. Until you."

"You call what we had a relationship? Or even a fling? If that's the case, it was all one-sided, wasn't it? You never put much effort into it."

"Don't you see? What we had was precariously close to what I'd had with Shannon."

"You're comparing what we have," she pointed her finger between herself and Severus, "to what you had with Shannon? Humph!" Hermione crossed her arms over her chest and turned her head away from him. "Not even close! Our *liaison*, as you put it, was not even close to being comparable to what you had with her!"

He laid a calming hand on top her fluttering one. "I know that I treated Shannon so much better than I've treated you, Hermione. But that was before. I'm asking for a chance to prove to you that I love you. I won't lie to you and say that I love you more than I did her, or even Lily, because I loved them both a great deal. But I can honestly say that I love you no less."

She shook her head. "I'm not sure I can handle your kind of love. It's not just me taking the risk now, Severus. I've already had one broken home. I don't care to have another."

His nostrils flared. "Do not equate our situation to the one you had with Weasley!"

Hermione turned on the couch so that she was facing Severus. "I just don't understand how you can sit there and say that you loved me when I remember how you treated me in Italy."

"You still don't see, do you?" He pinched the bridge of his nose, thinking of what he wanted to say. "When I began to see that I was feeling for you the same way I'd felt for Shannon, I panicked. I didn't *want* to feel that again. Because I loved you, I couldn't leave you, so I treated you badly, hoping you'd leave me and take the matter out of my hands."

Hermione stared at him for a long moment. "I see. Well, it worked like a charm, eh?" Then a thought occurred to her. "Survivor's guilt. You felt guilty having happiness because Shannon, and even Lily, had died..."

"Yes, that's part of it. It felt as if I'd betrayed them somehow by falling in love with another woman and having that type of happiness. Knowing that if things continued to progress between us, that you'd be in the very least be around Liam, and of course, he'd love you as well. That hurt me."

"Severus, loving one person does not diminish the love you felt, or even still feel, for another person. I could never take Shannon's place in her son's heart, or yours, for that matter. Nor would I wish to."

Severus leaned back and raised an eyebrow at her. "You mean to say that when Weasley married Miss Brown, you had no worries or fears of your children caring for her too much when they visited them?"

Hermione blushed. "Well, at first maybe. But then I began to realize how silly I was being! *I'm* their mum, not *her*. It makes all the difference in the world."

"Yes, I believe you." He scooted to the edge of the couch and took both her hands in his, staring earnestly into her cautious eyes. "Give me...us...another chance, Hermione. Don't let us waste this opportunity for a life together because I've been an arse and worse. Forgive me."

"I don't know what to say to you. I want to give you another chance, but... it's really rather hard to trust you now. I do believe that you're sincere in your apology, and I think that I can forgive you. But the trouble is, I don't know if I can forget the way you've treated me."

"I'm not even asking you to forget it. I'm asking you to try and get past it. I can't promise to never hurt you again because that would be a lie. I'm sure down the road there will be times when we'll hurt each other. I can promise to never *purposely* hurt you and certainly to never cheat on you."

"If I could just be absolutely certain you truly wanted me and didn't just want to get back together because of the baby! I don't want you to be with me, definitely not marry me, because you think it would be the honorable thing to do. Trust me; it would benefit the baby and the children more if we didn't get married solely because of this baby."

Severus stood and began to pace. "Damn it, Hermione! What else can I say to you to make you believe that I love you and want to marry you ~~for~~ you?"

"YOU CALLED ME A WHORE!" she yelled, tears streaming silently down her face. "More, you humiliated me and ridiculed what I felt for you. Oh, how badly I wanted you, wanted what you're offering me now." She wiped the tears from her face with the back of her hand. "And if you didn't mean what you said, you did a damn fine job of convincing me."

Severus winced. He felt the crack in his heart split wide open upon seeing the damage he'd done. He walked to her, reaching his hand out. "Hermione, I would be lying if I said I never meant to hurt you because we both know that I did. I meant to hurt you, but I never, at any time, meant the things that I said to you then. If you'd just..."

They both jumped when someone banged loudly on the door. "Excuse me," she said flatly, controlling her tears as she walked to the door to open it.

"Ron!" she said, and suddenly, Hermione didn't see her ex-husband standing in front of her, but her best mate. She threw herself into his arms and sobbed on his chest. "Ron."

"Hey, hey," he said, rubbing her back, clumsily trying to comfort her. "What's all this? Hermione? Are you all right, love?"

"I'm so glad to see you!" she told him. Then suddenly, she stepped back and out of his arms, sniffing. "Why am I seeing you?"

"Er... Well, I thought that after the other day it'd be best if we talked face to face." He looked down at her belly and cringed.

She walked over to a table and grabbed a tissue, loudly blowing her nose. "No."

"Now you listen to me, 'Mione," Ron said, not realizing that Severus was there. "You may not want to talk about your... situation, but like I've told you already, if it involves my children, then it involves me."

"Rose and Hugo were both just fine until they left here with *your mother*."

"Snape? How? Why? We watched him die!"

"Obviously not," Severus said and smiled with delight as Ron jumped at the sound of his voice. "And really, Weasley, there's nothing to discuss. The baby is on its way."

"It seems like you ought to do something about it, Snape, and not leave her in the lurch like this. Having a bastard baby," Ron said sadly, shaking his head.

"Now see here, boy!" Severus said, walking towards Ron.

"Stop, Severus," Hermione said calmly, putting her hands on his chest to stop him. "He isn't being cruel purposely. Listen, I really want to speak with Ron. Alone."

Severus' face was a blank mask, hiding how much her words had hurt him. "All right. A word, please, in private."

Hermione walked with him out the door and lightly closed it behind her. "Yes?"

He reached out and rubbed her cheek with his hand. "First, let me tell you that I love you, though I can see that you have a hard time believing me. I want to marry you. Not because of the baby, but because of you. The two of us are traditional creatures, Hermione, and though the pregnancy may have sped up the process, had you taken me back marriage would have been inevitable.

"However, I don't want to pressure you. You know my thoughts and wishes. Please let me know what you decide." He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. "Here's my new address. Come anytime."

Hermione looked down at the paper he'd given her. It looked to be a copy of an invoice for bedroom furniture. Suddenly, her heart was beating too quickly, and she felt afraid. "Severus, wait. I..."

"Hermione!" Ron bellowed from inside. "Are you coming?"

"Go," he whispered as he bent down to lightly brush his lips with hers. Then he turned abruptly and left quickly.

Hermione lifted her finger and touched her lip. She had a sinking feeling in her heart, and she knew that only Severus would make it go away. Sighing, she turned to go back inside her flat, dreading the inevitable argument ahead.

Despite herself, she smiled seeing Ron there, remembering a time when they had been inseparable. "Seriously, what are you doing here, Ron?"

"To be honest, I'm worried about you. After talking with Mum, I couldn't get your situation off of my mind. Where did you even see Snape? How long have you known that he's alive?"

"He was living in Italy in the condo beside the one I'd rented. I didn't know he was still alive until I'd seen him there."

"I don't know what to make of all this. Are you really okay?"

"I don't know," Hermione admitted. "My life is in such confusion right now, but physically, I'm great. He wants to marry me," she blurted out. "He says that he loves me."

"And what? You don't want him? You'll make a baby with him, but you won't marry him?"

Hermione laughed. In some ways, Ron was still so old fashioned. "It's not that exactly. There are just a lot of circumstances, and I have a lot of doubts."

"I don't doubt that. Hell, we thought he was dead." Ron still couldn't get over the fact that Severus was alive. He looked into his ex-wife's eyes. "Do you love him, 'Mione?"

"With all my heart," she told him, deciding to keep the fact that Harry had known that Severus was alive all along.

Ron sighed. "Greasy git! He used you then, didn't he? Took advantage of you after our divorce in your vulnerable state. Well, I won't have it! Harry and I'll take care of this; don't you worry."

"What? No! It's not like that at all! He didn't take advantage of me. I just told you that he says that he loves me and wants to marry me."

"Then what's the problem?" Ron wondered, confused.

"Sit down Ron, and I'll get you a sandwich," Hermione said, knowing her ex-husband's appetite, "and talk to you."

As Ron ate, Hermione talked to him of her time in Italy, skipping over a lot of the way Severus had treated her, but not completely. Then she filled him in on the bare essentials of Shannon, not bothering to speak about Harry's mum.

"Much as I hate to say this," Ron said with his mouth full, "it sounds like he does love you. He's had a rough time, losing his wife that way, having to raise a son on his own."

Hermione stared at her ex-husband, gobsmacked. She thought for sure that Ron would tell her to stay away from Severus. "You're taking ~~his~~ *his* side?"

Ron took a drink of his pumpkin fizz and wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his robe. "I never liked Snape, that's no secret. But Harry always seemed to think highly of him after we'd thought that he'd died and gave Harry all of those memories. He can't be all bad, spying for the Order and all like he did."

"But what about the way he treated me? The things that he said to me? Do you honestly think that I could trust him again after all of that. My God, he hurt me so badly there at the end! I mean, he'd hurt me throughout, but there at the end, he had been so cruel."

"If he was so bad, then why did you keep going back to him, Hermione? Besides, he's ~~always~~ *always* had a cruel streak in him. You know that. Remember your teeth incident in our what? Third year? Fourth? He was always calling you a silly little girl or know-it-all."

"It was our fourth year, and yes, I do remember it," she snapped. "I kept going back because though he was often cruel, there were times when he'd look at me, hold me a certain way, or say something that would lead me to believe that... I don't know. That he truly cared somehow."

Ron placed his empty glass on the table beside his plate and looked at her long and hard. Finally he said, "We've...Harry and I...always trusted your instincts. We may not have always agreed with you, that broom that Sirius sent Harry comes to mind," he said as he chuckled, "but you've been right a lot more than you've been wrong."

"I know, but Ron, so much more is at stake here than just my heart," she told him as she gently rubbed her belly. "And not just this baby either, but Rose and Hugo as well. They've already been through one broken home. And then there's Liam to consider. I just don't know."

"There're no guarantees in things like this, Hermione."

"Exactly!" she said. "You and I, we loved each other. A lot. And look at where we ended."

Ron nodded. "I know, and I've thought on it more than I can say. Do you know what I think? I think that though we did love each other a great deal," he grabbed both of her hands and squeezed them, "ours was not the passionate kind that a husband and wife are supposed to have. Not to say that making love with you wasn't great," he quickly amended, "but I don't know..."

She smiled. After having been with Severus, she knew exactly what he was trying to say. "There was no desperation to be together. No, 'Oh, my God, I have to have you now!'"

"Yes," he sighed with relief. "Exactly. 'Mione, there are no guarantees. You know that! Sometimes you have to take a chance. It sounds like he truly wants you. Obviously, you want him. I can't see you living your life on might-have-beens."

Hermione stood and went to Ron, wrapping her arms around him from behind in a tight hug. "Thank you, Ron. You can go home now. I'm perfectly fine."

He turned and hugged her back just as tight. "You'll always be my best mate, you know. I'm always here if you need me. No matter how awkward the situation is," he joked. "Harry, too, for that matter."

"I know. Thank you. I'm glad that you're happy now, Ron. Go on, now. I don't want Lavender to give you a hard time about being here. Don't argue," she said when he started to speak. "I know her well. I shared a dorm with her for six years, remember?"

He lifted her chin and very lightly kissed her lips. "Love you."

She sighed and laid her head on his chest. He did love her, she had no doubt. "Love you, too. Give my babies a kiss from me when you get home."

"I will. Tell me what you decided where Snape is concerned before I go."

"I still haven't made a decision there. But when I do, well, you won't be the first to know, but I will tell you at some point."

"Fair enough."

After he'd gone, Hermione went to have a bath and go to bed. She was suddenly extremely exhausted. She knew she had some important decisions to make, but tomorrow was soon enough.

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Hermione sat at the counter, watching people browse through her rows of books. It had been a week since she'd seen Severus. He'd been frustratingly true to his word and not contacted her once.

Even though she knew it was cowardly, she had wanted him to come back to her flat and take the decision out of her hands. She knew that it wasn't fair, but it didn't matter. Apparently, that was not going to be the case.

He'd plainly told her to come to him. But she was still so unsure. At one time she'd thought that being in love should be easy, but then she'd thought of Ron. It was very easy to love him...she always had...and look where that had gotten her. But then, he'd been right. Theirs had not been the desperate, I've got to have you, sort of love. It was the comfortable kind.

As the day went by and she rung up sales, she tried to weigh the pros and cons of life with and without being married to Severus. Could she do it on her own? Most definitely. Did she want to? That was the kicker.

She started as the girl who worked the counter at her tea parlor placed a hand on her arm. "Hermione? It's time to close up. Actually, it's about fifteen minutes past."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" She looked around her empty store and wondered how that had happened. "Go ahead and head home, Emma. I'll finish up here."

"If you're sure? It's just that I have a date tonight, and I wanted to get ready."

Hermione smiled. "Not at all. Have fun."

After Emma had left, Hermione went about the rows, making sure things were in place. When that was complete, she walked upstairs to her flat, planning on a bite to eat.

Once she got there, however, she'd completely lost her appetite. Even though she had no idea what to say, Hermione couldn't stand it any longer; she had to go see Severus. Now.

She pulled out the invoice that he'd given her out of her pocket, where she always kept it, and quickly Apparated to the address. Not wasting any time, she began pounding on the door.

It took a few moments, and she didn't stop pounding until he flung the door open, irritation written all over his face. "What?" he shouted before looking to see who was there.

"Severus," Hermione said.

He scowled at her with obvious anger. "Decided to grace me with your presence, have you?"

Suddenly, Hermione was even more nervous. "Yes. I wanted to talk to you."

"Talk."

She looked around her. "Out here? Can't I come in?"

"If you wish," he said as if it didn't matter to him one way or the other.

His indifference hurt her. Did he still want her? "Are you sure? If you're busy..."

"Of course I'm busy," he snapped impatiently. "I'm trying to get my house set up before my son gets back next week, and I've potions brewing."

Her heart fell. She actually felt it fall to her belly with a loud thud. "Oh, I see. All right. I'll go. Just Floo me if and when you have a moment to spare." She could feel the

tears pooling in her eyes. Damn hormones!

"You're here now." He stepped back so that she could come in. "Say what you've came to say."

She took a deep breath and looked deeply into his eyes. "I've made a decision..."

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A/N: So close!

## Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 13

Hermione comes home to find something she'd never expected. Her life will change--hopefully for the better.

**Disclaimer:** All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: Now the windows? Trying to peek in, are you? You people will do*anything*! Sigh! \*Goes to buy some blinds\**Cough* Southern\_Witch\_69 *Cough*



Severus stood with his arms folded across his chest and his legs spread apart as if preparing for battle, watching her nervously pace his livingroom, looking at the pictures he'd placed about. After a few moments, he said, "I thought you said that you came here to talk to me. So far, you've said nothing."

She jumped at the sound of his voice and turned to face him. "I'm debating it now. You act as if you don't want me here."

He looked her up and down, pausing only at her belly. When he reached her face, he shrugged. "Perhaps I don't. But the fact is, you're here. You said something about having made a decision?"

Hermione shook her head. "I don't want to talk to you while you're in this sort of mood. I've done nothing to deserve this sort of treatment."

Severus walked over to his brandy and poured himself a drink. "Then I don't suppose that we'll ever speak. I'm afraid I'll likely be in this mood around you for quite some time."

"Why?"

"Why? *Why*? You have to ask?"

"I'm afraid so, Severus. What has happened between the last time I saw you and now to make you act this way towards me? It's getting rather old."

Severus swirled his brandy around in his glass and took a sip, watching her over the rim. "You took your sweet time getting here, didn't you? Did you enjoy keeping me out of sorts? Was that your way of paying me back for the way I acted in Italy?" He watched as the nervous expression slowly faded from her face and anger took its place.

She immediately stopped pacing, placing her fists on her hips. "Excuse me?"

"Just get on with it, Hermione," he said, agitated. "Say what you've come to say and then go. I've things I need to do."

"No, I don't want to talk to you while you're acting like this. How dare you accuse me of some sort of ~~q~~payback! That's your way, Severus, not mine! What's gotten into you? Last week you were telling me that you love me and want a life with me...want to *marry* me...and now you act as if you can't stand the sight of me. I want to know what's changed!"

"You tell me."

She growled in frustration. "How can I tell *you*? I have no idea what Flobberworm has crawled up your arse, but I do know that I will not be the brunt of your foul mood!"

"Well then let me enlighten you!" he yelled, the thin thread of his anger snapping as he slammed his empty glass on the table. "I come to you, pour my heart out at your feet, and you dismiss me for *Weasley*! Weasley, who...in case you've forgotten...cheated on you in your own home! I go, mind, without a word of protest, reassuring you in fact by reminding you once more before I leave that I love and want you, and what do you do? NOTHING! You couldn't be arsed to say you feel the same, go to hell, or anything."

"Then as if all that isn't bad enough, you keep me waiting here *anentire week* without one word! Not one word from you, Hermione! I've never poured my heart out easily, and now I know why."

Hermione took a deep breath for calmness before speaking. She could see that he thought she was here to reject him. "I needed the time to think. I don't think that you understand just how deeply you hurt me in Italy, Severus. And just to make it clear, taking time to think was in no way trying to pay you back. I wanted no, needed to think things through. It had been clear to me that I loved you, Severus, but that was the easy part. I had to feel that I could trust you now as well. You should know me well enough by now to know that."

"And it took you the better part of five days?" he asked, walking back to lean against the front door to put some more distance between them. God how he wanted to touch her, even after everything.

"Five *days*? Humph! I'd say five days sure as hell beats five *months*!"

"When you'd left Italy, you hadn't poured your heart out to me! As a matter of fact, you'd ended things with me. I had no way of knowing, not really, if you still truly wanted me. I specifically told you that I love you!" He waved his hand in the air. "At this point, none of that matters. Just say your piece and be done with it."

"Apparently you don't care to hear what I have to say, so I'll go." She did not want to confess her feelings while he was so angry.

She started to walk past him, and he grabbed her arms, spun her around, and gently pressed her to the door, placing a hand on either side of her head, boxing her in.

"What did you decide?" He couldn't control himself; he leaned in and took a long, appreciative sniff of her neck, nibbling as he did. He couldn't continue arguing with her over his hurt feelings. He wanted her too badly. And really, why was he fighting with her when he wanted to prove to her that he loved and wanted her? Wanted to marry her?

He had to bury his hurt feelings and show her that she wouldn't be wrong to trust him. She loved him; he had to believe that. When she'd first gotten there, he'd been sure that she was going to tell him to bugger off. Now, he wasn't so sure that had been her intention at all.

"I... I... Severus," she whispered.

"Yes?" he asked, working his way to her ear. He hadn't wanted to do this now, but it had been so long since he'd touched her this way, and their emotions were running high. Besides, the fact that she hadn't refused him straight away gave him some hope. "Your decision?"

She placed her hands on his chest, gently pushing him back. "I can't think when you do that!" She scowled at his smug look. Then, giving in, she laid her forehead on his chest, weary of arguing. She was ready to begin her life, and to do that, they had to start over. "I do love you, and I want to marry you, if the offer still stands."

Severus cleared his throat, trying to compose himself. "You're sure?"

She nodded. "Yes. Very sure. I wasn't at first. I needed time to sort through my feelings, your feelings, and to take into consideration our children's feelings. I simply had to decide what I wanted more, Severus, a life with you or a life without you." She smiled up at him as if she knew a secret that he didn't. "Besides, someone recently told me there are no guarantees in life."

He placed his hand under her chin and lifted her head so that he could look into her eyes. "Of course the offer still stands. I love you. And I will make you one guarantee. I will never hurt you again as I did in Italy." He lowered his head and began kissing her. Gently at first, and then with more vigor. "God, I've missed you!"

"Yes," she agreed. "I've missed you, too. Especially with these raging hormones!" she nervously laughed.

Severus placed his arm under her knees and lifted her, intent on taking her to the couch. He raised an eyebrow. "Gained a stone or two, have you?"

She gasped and then playfully smacked his arm. "Not the right thing to say at this moment."

Saying nothing more, he walked her to the couch and tenderly laid her down. He brushed the hair away from her face. "I want you, but if you'd rather, I can wait."

In answer, she pulled him down to her and kissed him. "I don't want to wait. But with my size, wouldn't the bedroom be more comfortable?"

"My bedroom furniture is being delivered tomorrow," he informed her as he kissed his way down her throat and onto her collarbone.

Breathing heavily, she began to unbutton his robes. "But the invoice?"

"Liam's furniture. I wouldn't feel right making love to you on my son's bed." He took out his wand and enlarged the couch to make her more comfortable. "Better?" When she nodded, he laid his wand on the table and continued.

"Mmm," she moaned as he took off her shirt and bra and suckled her breast. "Oh, God, don't stop."

"I've no plans to stop." Suddenly emotions took them over, and neither could speak. They began undressing each other in a frenzy of movement.

Once they were both undressed, he started kissing her again, working her clit with his finger and thumb.

Her hips started pumping, and she groaned. "I'm ready. I'm ready for you, Severus. Now."

He rose to his knees, lifted her hips and slowly entered her, enjoying the feeling of being inside of her again. He teased her nipples as he told her, "Before long, I won't be able to enter you this way." He rubbed her belly for emphasis.

She couldn't speak. The feeling was overtaking her, and she moved as fast as their position and her size would allow. "So close," she murmured.

Because it had been awhile and he was close himself, Severus once again started working her clit and groaned deeply when he felt her tighten around him.

After she'd come down, he began pumping faster, searching for his own release. It didn't take him long to find it. Once he'd finished, his first instinct was to collapse on top of her, but at the last moment he held himself in check.

Breathing heavily, she said, "This position is beginning to hurt my back."

"Right," he said and quickly moved, grabbing his wand to clean them both. "While you were thinking, did you decide when and where you'd like to be married?"

"No, I hadn't gotten that far yet. I don't want to do anything until we've met each other's children, and they've met each other."

"Yes, that's sensible." He looked at her belly, considering. "I want us married before the baby comes."

"I agree with you there. We don't have a lot of time, but enough, I think."

"Gretna Green?" he hopefully asked.

"You mean elope?" She folded her arms across her chest and raised an eyebrow. "No, I don't think so! The Ministry?"

"I didn't mean elopement, per se. I wanted the children with us." She simply shook her head no. "I don't want to get married at the ministry, Hermione. The church?"

"No," she patted her belly. "Not the church; I wouldn't feel right. We don't have to decide right this minute, do we? Besides, I'd like a tour of what will be my new home."

"Hold on," he whispered. "I think I've got an idea. There's a little garden out back. It needs some work mind, but I think... Yes, I think it might just do the trick."

"Oh?" she asked, intrigued. "Show me!"

After looking at it, inch by inch Severus thought, she turned to him beaming. "Oh, Severus, I love it! We can ask Neville to come and help spruce things up a bit."

"Longbottom? Really, Hermione. I don't think I'd want Longbottom using his wand anywhere near my home."

"Come now, Severus. You know that he's brilliant with this sort of thing. And would have likely done better in Potions had you not frightened him half to death."

"Right. We'd likely all have been blown to smithereens." He looked into her smiling eyes. "Happy?"

"Yes, actually, I am, and at peace now that we've settled things between us."

"Yes. When would you like to start moving you and the kids in?"

She raised an eyebrow. "After the wedding, of course. We've impressionable children to consider, you know."

Severus sighed. "I thought you'd say as much. Come, let me show you the rest of our home. We'll furnish the rest of it together, and Rose and Hugo will pick out their own bedroom furniture as Liam did."

"Sounds lovely," she said as she took his hand and started her tour.

\*\*\*Epilogue\*\*\*

Rose sat on the sofa in the lounge, studying her Charms book. Her mother had been in labor going on six hours now, and she knew the boys would be getting restless soon.

Looking over, she studied them both. Hugo was playing a game of Exploding Snap alone, and Liam was reading some sort of book. She sighed. Her brother hadn't really tried to get on with Liam. Not that he'd been mean, he'd just not made any sort of effort, or accepted any efforts made by their step-brother.

Rose knew that it was because Hugo had been jealous of their mum showing Liam so much attention. Not that she'd neglected either her brother or her, Rose thought. Hugo just didn't appreciate the fact that there was another boy, around his age, who shared her affections.

When Hugo sighed of boredom, Rose stood. "Would the two of you like to join me for tea?" she asked.

Liam looked at Hugo, then back at Rose. "I would. How about you, Hugo?"

Rose smiled at the struggle on her brother's face. He really wanted to hate Liam on principle, but it was hard for him to. "I guess. I was hoping to hear something by now though. Don't you think it's been a very long time, Rose?"

"Yes, it's been quite long. But I think that's normal."

Suddenly, Harry and Ginny came briskly down the hall. "Rose, we got here as soon as we could," Ginny said. "It was nice of the Headmistress to allow you three to be here."

"Professor McGonagall said that because this happened on a Saturday, and a Hogsmeade weekend, she would make an exception. But we have to be back by six tomorrow evening."

"Makes sense," Ginny agreed.

Harry knelt in front of Hugo. "All right?"

Hugo shrugged, glanced quickly at Liam, and then looked at his uncle. "She's been in there six hours, Uncle Harry."

Harry understood that his nephew didn't want his new step-brother to see that he was worried about his mum. He looked over at Liam, and Liam said, "It does seem really long. Do you think things are going okay? Surely my dad would let us know if anything is wrong."

Ginny smiled. "Six hours might seem like a terribly long time, but it's not really. It took me twelve hours with Lily, you know."

"Twelve hours!" Hugo and Liam both yelled at the same time and then instinctively smiled at each other.

"Liam and I were going to get some tea," Hugo said and watched his step-brother smile.

"Yes, would any of you like some?" Liam asked.

Before any of them could answer, Severus came bursting out of the delivery room.

"How's Mum?"

"Is the baby here?"

"What did she have?"

Severus held up a hand to stop the horde of questions being hurled at him. "Hermione is fine, and so is the baby." He looked at the Potters and then turned to the children. "You've a baby sister."

"A sister!" Rose exclaimed! "I wanted a sister!"

"You would," Hugo said and Liam smiled.

"What's her name, Dad?" Liam asked.

"We've decided on Chloe Jane Snape," he proudly told them.

Rose placed a hand on his arm. "Can we see them? Chloe and Mum?"

Severus smiled down at his step-daughter who looked so much like her mother. "Yes, in a bit. They're cleaning them up just now."

Harry slapped Severus on the back, startling him. "Well done, man."

"Thank you," Severus said formally. It was still odd for him to associate with the Potters, considering that Weasley was Harry's best mate. Harry had told him numerous times that Ron made his choice with Lavender, and he'd fully expected that Hermione would get on with her life.

A loud bang had all heads turning towards Hugo and Liam. "Oops," Liam said, slightly embarrassed, holding a blackened card in his hand. "Looks like Hugo wins this round."

Rose smiled at her two brothers, both so like their own father. She wondered what Chloe would look like, if she would have bits of them all.

She sat, waiting to be allowed inside her mum's room, and watched everyone. Severus, his tension slowly fading around her aunt and uncle, and Liam and Hugo, speaking more than they ever had to one another, and thought, *This is my family*.

Her heart felt a slight pang at the thought of her daddy, but she pushed it out. He and Lavender were her family, too. She suddenly thought of her grandparents and wondered if she should let them know about Chloe.

Before she could ask, the doors opened and the mediwitch informed them that they could see Hermione and the baby now. Rose, Hugo, and Liam quickly walked through the door.

"Mum!" Hugo said as soon as he walked in the room.

Hermione smiled, looking at all three of the children. "Come and see your baby sister," she told them all.

They tentatively walked to her bed, gathered close and looked down at the tiny pink bundle in their mother's arms. "She's so small," Liam said, gently running a finger down the baby's cheek.

Hugo gathered closer and studied her. "What color are her eyes, Mum?"

"They're blue for now. We'll see if that changes." Hermione looked at her eldest daughter. "Rose?"

Rose simply nodded, tears in her eyes. "She's beautiful." She turned to Severus and surprised him and Hermione by giving him a fierce hug.

Severus patted her back and then put his arm around her shoulder. "She is that," he said proudly. "Like her mother." Then he took his eyes off of his wife and daughter and turned to Rose. "Like you."

Hugo put his finger down his throat and fake gagged himself. "Rose? Beautiful?"

Everyone laughed, and then Harry surprised Severus by saying, "Okay, you three. We're going to stop by your grandparents' house and let them know about Chloe, and then you guys are bunking with us tonight. Lily will love that. I'm afraid that until she starts Hogwarts next year, she's going to be hell to live with."

Hermione smiled. "You're sure?"

"Absolutely," Ginny assured her.

When Liam started to step back, Hugo gently grabbed his arm. "It's fun at my aunt and uncle's house. We can sneak in James' room and check out all the neat stuff he has in there."

Rose smiled, feeling proud of her brother. Finally, he was making the effort that Liam had been trying to make all along. "That's right," Rose agreed. "And Grandmum will have cookies and hot cocoa for us."

Liam looked at his father, feeling unsure. "If you think it's all right."

"It's absolutely all right," he assured him.

After everyone had cleared out of the room, Severus walked over to sit on the bed with his wife and daughter. "She really is very lovely," he told her.

"Yes," Hermione agreed. "All of our children are."

"Happy in our little fairytale?" he asked.

"Definitely," Hermione told him. "Especially now that you've turned from a frog to a prince!"

Severus leaned in and kissed her. All was right in his world now.

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A/N: There you have it. I hope you enjoyed!