

The Garden

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Note: This story was written prior to the publication of Deathly Hallows. Therefore, it should be considered non-DH compliant and AU.

Chapter One

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Savior of the Wizarding World. Hero of the People. Brave Conqueror of Evil. Bachelor. Professor. The Man Who had nearly Sacrificed All. Overall, the man whom everyone wanted to meet, and each with their own personal agenda. Men wanted to make his acquaintance for political connections, while most women had other intentions. If he wasn't being questioned about the final battle by reporters, he was being propositioned for private meetings, speaking engagements, dinner parties, and all other forms of public appearances. Either way, there was no peace for the most celebrated wizard of the modern era.

Thus the reason for the lavish party being held in his honor. Albus had tried in vain to dissuade the Ministry officials from making a grand spectacle of his defeat of Grindelwald. It was something that had to be done in order for some semblance of peace to once again reign. For him, there had been no question of his duty to the cause of justice, and that was how he viewed his battle with the most evil wizard their world had ever known. Albus had not entered into the battle with the intention of killing the wizard before him, nor all the ones who set out to keep him from this task. There had been many good men and women, both young and old, who had been misled by Grindelwald and many who had been killed on both sides of the fight.

Since the first dark days of Grindelwald's rise to power, Albus had been a vehement opponent to the ideals the wizard wished to impose upon their magical world. Because he was already a respected member of the Hogwarts faculty and held positions on many ministerial committees, the papers were quick to quote him whenever he spoke out against what was happening on a daily basis. But that had never been his goal... to be quoted or even famous for his beliefs. Had they never contacted him regarding his thoughts on such matters or desired to have his opinions on the best ways to handle the uprising, he would have still felt the same way.

And now, it had come to this. The laughter and gaiety from inside the grand hall was almost deafening as the party forged into full swing. No expense had been spared for the event, and the papers all labeled it the party of the century with the most eligible bachelor as the guest of honor. It was enough to embarrass even the most vain of wizards...at least that's how Albus saw things.

Ice sculptures and every delicacy one could imagine lined table after table in the grand ballroom. A large portion of the room had been designated as a dance floor, and the

live band seemed to know every piece of music requested, for the music rarely stopped for any significant length of time. The spirits were free flowing as well, to the delight of many in attendance. Of course, it also meant a few drunken brawls, but those disturbances were quickly ushered outdoors or into unused corridors. Even the chandeliers looked like they had been charmed to cast a particularly enchanting glow about the room. But none of that really interested Albus. He was here simply because he had to be. His mind and his heart were still far away, in a very lonely place where it seemed no one could follow.

Minerva McGonagall, too, had seen her share of battles in her brief time since graduation from Hogwarts. She had always respected Albus Dumbledore on an intellectual level, and as he grew to be the champion of the cause, her interest in him grew. She had even had the pleasure of working closely with him in those final months leading up to the defeat of the madman. They had shared many quiet nights talking of how things should be or lamenting the death of yet another of their comrades. In the end though, despite their obviously growing friendship, he had been pulled away from her by the media, by the Ministry, by Hogwarts, by the world itself even before she could say a proper goodbye.

Tonight, she hoped to at least have a chance to tell him how much she had enjoyed getting to know him better. As simple as it sounded, it was the truth. She had relished every grueling moment spent hiding out, playing the scout, being the one he relied on most heavily. She would surely miss those days, and now that he was even more famous than before, she doubted she would ever get the chance to spend more time in his presence. Unless, of course, it happened to be at a grand party such as this, where they were both surrounded by hundreds of curious onlookers.

These sorts of affairs always bored Minerva to tears. Having never been one to tolerate the social climbers or those willing to say or do anything to impress another, she found it incredibly hard to relax at these functions. To her, everyone seemed to have their own motives and agendas and they invariably brought them to the party. Everyone wanted to see and be seen with just the right person. Personal appearances were a must, and if photographed with the most powerful or the most popular person, one could only hope that the pictures would end up in the *Daily Prophet* the next day. It was the same regardless of the celebration, but tonight was worse.

So many good people had died during the dark years, and yet one man was hailed as the hero. To Minerva, that was wrong, and she knew in her heart that he would feel the same way. In her time spent in his company, he had never once boasted about his accomplishments or his abilities. He was always concerned for the others around him and how their families were faring back home. He silently wept when some evil befell their families, he mourned for them when they died, and he rejoiced when they were victorious in battle. But through it all, he was still the fountainhead for their goals and objectives. And still, despite all of those around him, the gruesome task of casting the fatal spell fell upon his shoulders.

The crowd at this particular ball was almost too large to believe. As she surveyed the room, Minerva surmised that some minor modifications had been made to accommodate everyone and to ensure that no one was turned away. At one point Minerva guessed that there were more people here than at the Hogwarts Quidditch games between Gryffindor and Slytherin. But despite the sea of people and those handsome wizards vying for her attention, Minerva searched for only one man.

He sat alone in the warm night air. The bench was weathered and worn, mirroring the way he felt inside. Through years of blistering heat and torrential rains though, the sturdy wooden seat still managed to provide rest and comfort, though showing slight signs of age... again drawing similarities between the man and the seat upon which he rested. Off in the distance, night birds could be heard singing with voices as pure as any mountain stream. Their melody was sweeter than any music filtering through the air from the party inside. The stars above twinkled as they did most evenings, and the sliver of a moon added the final touch for a peaceful evening.

The gardens in which he sought his quiet moments from the crowds were magnificent. Flowers of every conceivable shade and type blossomed, mingling to create a rich fragrance almost too sweet to be true. The delicate petals danced carelessly in the slight breeze as they waited for the first dewdrops to quench their thirst. It was in this setting that she found him.

Albus sat all alone, his head buried in his hands. She stood back for several moments, not wishing to intrude upon his quiet moment. Maybe part of her feared he might be waiting for someone, a woman perhaps, with which to share the romantic setting, but none came. A long sigh escaped his lips and her heart broke a little. She could feel his pain and sorrow, even from this distance, and her feet moved on instinct, being directed by her heart.

Without a word being spoken, Minerva sat down beside him and tenderly brushed his hair away from his face as she leaned closer to him. Beneath her fingertips, she could feel the slight trembling of his body, and she suddenly felt protectiveness for him. Had anyone dared to enter the garden, she would have gladly chased them away so he could have a few moments to himself to deal with his emotions free from the prying eyes of others.

Without waiting for him to acknowledge her presence, Minerva directed him into her arms and he went willingly. She cradled his head to her chest as her hands rubbed soothingly up and down his back as she gently rocked him back and forth while they sat upon the bench under the stars. Years later, she would look back on this moment and wonder from where she had drawn the nerve to make such a bold move. But Albus would always remind her that she was born into the noble House of Gryffindor and had never been one to stand by while someone suffered.

At first, he was startled by the sensation of a woman's delicate fingers smoothing back his hair and her arms wrapping around him. His mind raced with the thought of lurking photographers or of a woman merely out to make a name for herself or scheming to catch him in a compromising position. But one scent of her light perfume, and all his fears vanished and all his walls collapsed. He knew those arms, that fragrance, that familiar warmth, and they belonged to Minerva.

He had never met anyone quite like her. From the moment she had entered his life, he had been fascinated. Her thirst for knowledge seemed to be matched only by his own, and her interests extended well beyond the academic world to those of Quidditch, music, the arts, and even Muggles. It was so easy to share things with her, knowing she would give him an honest appraisal of his plans regardless of whether they were good or bad. She made him laugh, and in time, he learned how to rile her spirits or challenge her in new ways. Getting to know her had been a bright spot in the dark days, and when the war was over, he assumed she would be off to bigger and better things. After all, in his opinion, she deserved them all... only the very best for his Tabby, as he had nicknamed her during their first mission together.

But the recent separation from her had left a hole in Albus' life. It was only after the recent onslaught of people surrounded him that he came to realize just how lonely his days were without her wit and charm. On more than one occasion, he had seriously contemplated contacting her, but he had stopped himself before sending the owls. The rational side of his mind constantly reminded him that he was so much older and she had so much left to experience in life. He had no business even dreaming of a more involved relationship with her, yet his heart told him otherwise.

And yet, in his darkest hour, she was here and of her own accord. The one woman in the entire world who had a chance of understanding his feelings and not condemning him for them had found him in his secret garden. But above all, she offered him the one thing no other woman could... a strong shoulder upon which to cry and the ability to lighten his burden.

"They celebrate me for killing," he spoke softly. His voice trembled slightly as he uttered his first words to Minerva. "Many men and women, in fact, but I had no choice, yet they insist on labeling me a hero. I don't feel like a hero."

Minerva remained silent as he spoke, only tightening her arms around him and running her hand soothingly through his long auburn hair. After several moments, she felt him beginning to relax in her embrace, and her words came out softly, barely above a whisper. "They're foolish to believe that this is over and that all is right with the world. We suffer because we know better. Your heart is grieved because it is you who has suffered the most. They see only the short-term effects but we're different. You and I both know that many innocent lives were lost, and in some ways, you blame yourself for not bringing this to a close much sooner. But you should not dwell on things you cannot change."

She placed her fingers beneath his chin and forced him to look into her face for the first time since she sat with him. There were warm tears brimming in his eyes, and he was willing them not to fall. But one look into Minerva's innocent and understanding face shattered his façade, and he dared to let go. The tears being held timidly at bay were released, and Minerva was there to catch them all as they fell, like the rose that catches the summer raindrops. She watched him with sympathetic eyes, and soon her own emerald colored eyes were filling with tears as she wiped away his.

"You understand me better than anyone I've ever met and I've missed you so much." There was a sadness in his eyes, but as his tears dried, that look was replaced by something else, something that Minerva dared not believe. "How did you know where to find me?"

For a split second, Minerva had no answer. She was still trying to wrap her mind around the fact that he had missed her, perhaps as much as she had missed him. "... I

don't know to be honest. I was looking for you for most of the evening to tell you...well never mind that now. What matters is that I did find you, and I'm certainly glad I did." She smiled and loosened her grip on his, letting her hands fall into her lap but never taking her eyes from his. "I've missed you too. I wanted to write but I knew you would be too busy for a silly letter from me." Her eyes darted down to her lap, for fear of what she might see in his eyes.

This time it was Albus' arm that wrapped around her and pulled her against his body. "I wrote you letters, so many that I cannot recall the number. But they're still sitting on my desk in my study. I never sent them because I wasn't sure how you would feel now that the war is over."

Minerva looked up at him, her face clearly showing her surprise. His eyes, which had been dark and gloomy, were now bright and twinkling, reminding her of the stars above.

"I would have been honored to have received a letter from you. In fact, I would have cherished every word of it and wasted no time in replying. I've missed seeing you, talking with you, just being near you. But I also understand that you could never look at me as anything but a friend or a young girl. I've wished many times that I were older so that I might have a chance at catching your eye."

As blue eyes locked with green ones, Albus leaned in closer and closer until their noses were barely touching. He could feel her warm breath across his face, and the hairs of his beard caused her lip to twitch slightly. When he saw her instinctively moisten her lips and swallow, his heart nearly burst with happiness. It took an eternity to close the distance between them but when their lips touched, all measures of time could have stopped forever.

Soft lips pressed against Minerva's as her heart beat wildly in her chest. The gentle insistence of his probing tongue only heightened her senses as her body flushed. Her arms slid up his strong arms and wrapped around his neck as she buried her hands in his locks of hair, pulling him closer and closer to her. A soft moan escaped her lips as his hands slid across her waist and splayed across her back.

Neither was sure of just how long the kiss had lasted, only that they needed more. But as Minerva leaned in for yet another kiss, Albus stopped her with a finger to her lips and a question. "Why, Minerva?" was his simple query. Nothing more or less, just a simple question with no explanations. Though she knew exactly what he meant.

"Because I see you as a man, not as my hero. Because I know you have faults, and I love you despite them. Because I understand that I need you, and I'd move heaven and earth to see you happy. But most of all... because I love you as I have never loved another."

What happened next has long been a debate in the Dumbledore household. Albus swears he did not Apparate them from the garden to a much more secluded location, as does Minerva. But nevertheless, it happened. The party was long forgotten, as were the guests there to celebrate Albus the Hero. But the night passed enjoyably for Albus the Man as he took his time in discovering the unending delights of being with the woman whom he loved and who loved him unconditionally in return. After a proper courtship and a romantic proposal, the two were wed in a very private ceremony attended only by the closest of family and friends.

Through the years, Albus and Minerva had to weather many storms. The papers, and even the Ministry, now regarded his opinion as gospel and sought his advice on nearly everything. Minerva often joked that the Minister of Magic wouldn't even change his socks without prior approval of one Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, and that always earned her a playful scowl from her husband. Within a few years of the defeat of Grindelwald, Albus was appointed Headmaster of Hogwarts and Minerva was added to the teaching staff, much to the pleasure of both. Their days and years passed with much happiness and an ever-deepening love, yet the world around them began to grow dark once more.

"I thought I might find you here," she announced softly. "When I noticed you were missing, this was the first place I looked."

Albus looked up and into his wife's lovely face. "Do you hear that? They're already celebrating him as a hero, and he's not even old enough to understand what any of it means. They'll destroy him, Min."

"And that's why we have to protect him, sweetheart. We will see to it that he has a proper upbringing and that his head isn't filled with notions of heroism or grandeur. We owe that to Lily and James for all that they've sacrificed." Minerva snuggled into Albus arms and kissed his cheek softly as she rested her head on his chest.

"We can't keep him in the wizarding world, Tabby. He has to live as a Muggle until the time is right. It's the only way to protect him fully from our world." Minerva's tears slowly fell down her cheeks, both at the thought of sending Harry away and for the loss of her friends. "You know it has to be this way. It's hard enough being a man under these circumstances but a boy..."

Minerva knew, in her heart, that Albus was right. She could see the pain and anguish clearly in his eyes. It was hard on him, but clearly it was harder on him. "I know," she answered with a heavy heart. "Who better to understand his plight than you, my love? While I may not agree with it on the surface, I do believe you are doing what is best for him in the long run. And if you think it is right, then I will not fight you on it. You will have my unwavering support, just as you always have."

He leaned down and kissed her softly on the lips, tasting her salty tears as he felt a burden being lifted from his shoulders. No matter how large or small his problems, Minerva always had a way of making them seem less cumbersome. It was only one of her many talents where he was concerned.

"Come, let's go inside. It's getting a bit chilly, and I'd like to spend my time with you and forget about all of this for a while."

"I'll draw us a bath while you turn down the bed." She stood up and pulled him from the seat and into her arms. "We'll get through this together, just like always. I love you because you are a man and not my hero. I love you because you have faults, and I admire you despite of them. I'd move heaven and earth to see that twinkle in your eyes, and I love you because you love the world around you."

He smiled as he cradled her face in his large hands as fireworks went off in the nearby village, no doubt from the parties celebrating the defeat of Voldemort. "I'm so thankful you found me at my weakest moment and showed me how to love and be loved in the secret garden."

The End