

Bundle of Joy

by LadyTuesday

Winner for the Anything Goes Challenge Chaptered Category! Seeking: An intelligent, capable wizard amenable to assisting a bright, independent, magically-formidable single witch in the conception of a child. Insemination only: no sexual congress; non-negotiable. Dignity and discretion of utmost importance. Neither monetary nor emotional support needed for or during the birth and life of child. Further contact will be established following receipt of preliminary letter of interest. Address all inquiries by owl to Joy Bundle, Box # 1086, Hogsmeade Village .

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A Dream of a Duo

Chapter 1 of 15

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Chapter One – A Dream of a Duo

Wanted:

No. She bit her lip and scribbled out the word.

Seeking:

There, that was better. Less ... cheap. It made what she was doing seem less tawdry, somehow.

Seeking: An intelligent, capable wizard willing to donate—

No, that's not right at all. Again, her quill traced several lines over the final word. "Donate" just wasn't right; this wasn't a fundraiser or benefit luncheon, after all.

Seeking: An intelligent, capable wizard amenable to assisting a bright, independent, magically-formidable single witch—

Did that make her sound like a harridan? A militant lesbian? Or perhaps just desperate and pathetic? No help for it, she supposed, as it was more or less the truth in either case. ... Except for the lesbian part.

Seeking: An intelligent, capable wizard amenable to assisting a bright, independent, magically-formidable single witch in the conception of a child.

Her quill paused for a long moment as she considered what to write next. She needed to get this correct, leaving the ad intriguing enough to get responses but assuring that there were no misconceptions as to what she wanted and what she expected.

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There. The penname she had decided upon was slightly ridiculous, but anonymity was key. She had no intention of revealing her identity to any of the candidates who showed interest, even the future 'father.' Arrangements had already been discussed with St. Mungo's as to retaining the necessary materials that could be donated without her present. She would simply report to the hospital within the days following the donation to be inseminated. It was all logically reasoned and well-planned. The whole ad – the whole situation – was well thought out; she had governed it entirely with her rather formidable mind. She paused just a moment before adding one last statement that revealed her soft heart.

Help a strong and kind woman finally have her heart's wish and her life's joy.

He laughed aloud, startling several of his colleagues, as he finished reading the small advertisement tucked away at the corner of the penultimate page of the *Daily Prophet*. Shaking his head, he folded the paper in half to better see the ad and propped it against his morning coffee. *Amazing*, he thought sardonically. *People will advertise for anything these days. Even sperm, apparently.* To his never-ending abhorrence, the magical population (and, he suspected, the Muggle one as well) seemed to have no qualms broadcasting their most private desires and activities in the most disgustingly public forums. The witch was advertising in the newspaper for a child, for Merlin's sake! Unless she was so grotesquely deformed that she couldn't be seen in public, he was reasonably certain that whoever this exceedingly uncreative witch was – *Joy Bundle?! How much more plebeian could the woman be?* – she must certainly have at least one male acquaintance that would be willing to sacrifice some sperm on the altar of friendship, loyalty, and loneliness. Though, he supposed the witch might get more responses if she were to offer carnal indulgences or, at the very least, money as a trade for the potential offspring. He shook his head again as he rose from the table, leaving his breakfast mostly uneaten. With far too much to do today, he couldn't afford to waste time lolling about, considering the mating habits of some female dunderhead desperately seeking spawn.

She sighed as she sorted through the seemingly endless flood of post weighing down her dining room table. Her little cottage was normally neat as a pin – she couldn't think amidst too much clutter – but the entire room was covered in stacks of opened envelopes and unfurled rolls of parchment, piles of letters, and a tin bucket containing the scorched remains of several Howlers. That was something she certainly hadn't expected. Nonplussed when the first one arrived (she'd not had any recent disagreements with any of her friends, so she couldn't imagine why she'd be getting a Howler), she'd opened it immediately, out of sheer curiosity. It had been the last she'd actually bothered to open. The high-pitched wail of a witch she'd never even met filled her house, berating her about demeaning wizarding society by stooping so low as to not only raise a child alone but to cheapen marital relations by seeking to do so out of wedlock ... or, for that matter, even out of monogamy. She had taken all of the harsh criticism with a surprising amount of good humor, given how ridiculous the argument was. Muggles raised children as single parents all the time; surely the wizarding world couldn't be so very different? Apparently it could. She'd known that the wizarding world was more rooted in tradition and older practices, but she hadn't counted on how desperately some people would cleave to them. She'd gotten no less than ten Howlers a day since that first one, but after that experience, she'd merely conjured a bucket that wouldn't catch fire and placed a few containment charms on and around it. Her owl knew enough to drop any Howlers in the bucket immediately and to avoid flying over it while exiting. She barely even noticed when the messages burst into flame and shrieked their contents; that noise-reduction charm she'd found had been as good as gold.

But she sighed heavily as she thumbed through the day's post and sorted it into appropriate piles. The first pile was the largest, and contained letters that were no more than thinly-veiled solicitations for sex, insisting that if she just gave them the chance, they were certain she'd be satisfied enough to continue trying 'the old-fashioned way.' Each and every one of those letters would receive a scathing Howler in response. The second pile was only slightly smaller and had been reserved for those that had been immediately rejected. Most of those were men who had answered reasonably earnestly, but just didn't appeal to her enough to be an automatic yes. She hadn't discarded any of them – fearing that there might not be any that appealed to her standards, and then where would she be? – but she had resolved quite firmly not to resort to those choices unless she found no suitable candidates. The third pile, containing the inquiries of men that she felt had enough potential to contact for further information, was woefully small. Only two letters. True, the advertisement had only been out a week, but she'd hoped that there would be more respectable inquiries than that. She'd thought she'd been enticing in the ad, not to mention that she'd quelled what she assumed would be the largest worries of men willing to donate sperm: there would be no bothersome requests of either money or emotional support and no required involvement in the life of the child. She would raise the child alone, simply needing help to make the child in the first place. So why had there been so few responses from genuinely interested, intelligent men? Sighing, she could only come to one conclusion: it had to be the lack of sex. Flipping a long lock out of her eyes, she loaded her quill with ink and began penning the first of what promised to be a long string of Howlers.

Seated at his desk, he flicked his wand towards the lamps lining the walls. The night had crept in while he was buried under the stack of work in front of him, and all of a sudden he found his eyes straining to read the parchment currently in front of his nose. He was getting far too old to be working in dim light; he would simply need to charm the lamps to light automatically when the sun began to set. Aging was a hellish process, and he certainly didn't care for the effects. True, he'd survived two wars, and at the forefront to boot, but where his age had never affected him before, now it slammed into him full force. The thirteen and a half years that had passed since the last war ended had seemed like thirty, and he hated that the old axiom occurred to him, but it suddenly rang far too true: you're not getting any younger. He set the parchment he'd been slaving over down on top of the pile of far too many others and gave it up as a bad job; he'd never get the rest done tonight. Rising from his desk, he stretched his lanky form and left his office to head towards home.

The castle was quiet these days. With the Christmas holidays just started, he had plenty of peace from the usual racket that clogged the corridors and seemed to bang down his doors. Now, his footsteps echoed loudly in the empty hallway. A wave of his hand released the wards on his chambers; he slipped inside gratefully. Essays could wait. He was going to sit in front of the fire with the good bottle of Ogden's that Minerva had given him last Christmas and dive happily into a wonderfully familiar novel that he'd been using as a stress reliever since youth. Picking up the book as he passed the bookshelf, he scowled down at the cover. It wasn't the book that earned his ire, but the state that the book was in. Each time he read it, he barely noticed its disrepair; he'd refused to get a new copy over the years, as this one was so well loved, having been dog-eared to his favorite passages and chapters, shoved into far too many knapsacks or underneath his pillow as a student. But now he really looked at the book: its cover was bent or torn in several places, the binding had been repaired with Spellotape far too many times, the author's name rubbed off by the presence and constant motion of his long fingers swiping across the cover as he read. He sighed as he opened the cover and checked the publication date. It was nearly forty years old now. Forty! He still remembered the day that he'd purchased it, just after his first year at Hogwarts, and yet, to the students who roamed the halls now, it would be a classic, an antique. Like him. He dropped heavily into his wingback.

He certainly felt antique these days. He'd spent most of his life teaching lessons he had to water down to children he despised, and what did he have to show for it? The

only thing of value in his life was the Order of Merlin (Second Class; damn them for not giving the credit due to him because of his shady past), and that currently had pride of place on his mantle, flanked by a few awards he'd won for outstanding achievement in research of his field. But he didn't have anything, hadn't accomplished anything that would outlast him when he died. Which he so nearly had, thirteen and a half years ago. And who would have mourned him, had he died? He had no wife (that had been determined at school), few friends (and most of them were colleagues), no children He'd never even believed he'd wanted children, as he despised them so while teaching; but if he'd had a loving woman by his side, would things have been different? Would he still loathe them so? Perhaps not. Perhaps all he would have needed to care for children was the right witch. He took a long slug of the Firewhiskey. There was no sense in waxing maudlin about children now. Even should he have a sudden change of heart and decide to become nurturing, he had no woman in his life, and even if he did, all the women of his age were most likely unable to bear his child. Another extended gulp from his tumbler. His head dropped backward, heavy with drink, his blurry eyes staring up at the ceiling as he fingered the book still clutched in his left hand. No woman would have him, let alone agree to have his child, and even if she did, she'd have aged past child-bearing years.

And then slowly, slowly, as if the idea had crept into his head up from his stomach where the Firewhiskey sloshed about, his addled brain remembered the newspaper advert. A woman looking for a child. True, she was an anonymous woman looking to have and raise the child by herself, but still It would give him the chance to leave some sort of legacy, whatever it may be. And perhaps he could even persuade the woman to let him have a hand in his child's life, once it arrived, even if it was simply to meet the child once. Possessed of a sudden fervor to see the idea through, he staggered up from his chair and into the bathroom. His eyes watered and blurred for a moment, aggravated by the bright light shining from the mirror as he reached into the cabinet to retrieve a Sober-Up potion. It wasn't often that he became inebriated, but he detested being unprepared for the situation. He threw the potion down his throat and staggered back into the main room, where the day's *Prophet* still sat on his personal escritoire. Scanning the second-to-last page quickly, he found the advert and ripped it from the paper. Propping it up in front of him against his inkwell, he gazed at it a long moment before pulling out a sheet of his finest parchment and choosing a sharp nib for his quill. He paused, quill hovering over the ink, collecting his thoughts.

Help a strong and kind woman finally have her heart's wish and her life's joy, her last line had said. He was not kind, but he was strong and intelligent and capable, just as she had requested. And her wish coinciding with his nostalgia just seemed too serendipitous to be ignored. He began to write.

She nearly clawed her hair out in frustration as she went over the last carefully worded Howler. This particular wizard had made the (vastly incorrect) assumption that not only could she be persuaded into sexual intercourse to conceive the child but the fact that she wanted to have a baby meant that they could engage as often as they please and not be forced to use any protection of any kind. He seemed to think it some kind of carefree joyride! Tapping the parchment with her wand, she muttered the incantation that would activate the charm and contain her angry voice within. Her Howler would ensure that his ears would be ringing for at least twenty-four hours. She growled loudly and flicked her wand at the teapot sitting opposite her, fragrant steam pouring from the spout almost immediately. She had finally reached the end of the stack. Just when she had lifted her teacup to her lips, so looking forward to the blessed relief of the hot liquid, a loud tapping made the window behind her shudder. Typically, she kept the pane up so that Aida could zoom in and out as she pleased, but the pounding rain had induced her to close it. As soon as she lifted the window, Aida dashed inside with an annoyed shriek, the characteristic train-whistle sounding noise unique to her breed. Clutched between her feet was a tightly rolled letter on what appeared to be a single sheet of very elegant parchment. Patting down her ruffled and clearly indignant pet, she fed the Great Sooty Owl from the scraps left on her dinner plate, and cooed reassuring words and praise to her before releasing her to fly back to the village post office owlery. Native to Australia, Aida had been a souvenir of her parents' most recent trip; a sleek black owl with large, piercing eyes and a haunting call, Aida earned her name (that of an Egyptian princess from the opera), but she also stood out quite a lot. Masking the presence of her owl was one of the main reasons she'd decided to buy the cottage in Hogsmeade. Once Aida had flown off, she picked up the parchment the bird had left behind. A strange and inexplicable sense of anticipation gripping her, she opened the missive with shaking fingers and read.

Madam, (Presently, I refuse to address you as "Joy" as it is clearly not your actual name)

I am writing today in response to your advertisement in the Daily Prophet on Monday last. I must admit that at first I approached the request with no little amount of skepticism – wondering, quite understandably, what sort of woman would advertise for a baby? – but found myself increasingly intrigued by the concept the longer I considered it. So I address this letter to you as a statement of my own personal interest. As for presenting myself as a reasonable candidate for your consideration, I offer the following facts:

~ While I am above the societally normative age at which most people contemplate reproduction (being nearly fifty-two years of age), I am in demonstrably impeccable health and have all the wisdom that my age implies.

~ I am a veteran (from the 'front lines' as it were) of both of the long wars against the Dark Lord, at great risk to my health and both my mental and personal well-being. I believe this speaks well of my intelligence and capability as a wizard.

~ I am neither married nor emotionally involved with any other person, eliminating any potentially problematic social repercussions of fathering a child out of wedlock with an undisclosed mother.

These facts I present to you, Madam, for your consideration of my qualifications to father your future child. In the interest of ease and anonymity, I have also taken the liberty of hiring a box in Hogsmeade Central Post, so that we may converse easily and quickly. As I gained some little notoriety during the wars, I am certain you will understand my need for a nom de plume. This, I'm sure, also facilitates our correspondence with "dignity and discretion," as you requested in your advert. You may address any correspondence to me at box # 2134.

In anticipation of your prompt reply, I am

Yours, etc,

Tobias Reynard

For a long while, she just stared at the letter; parts of it made her want to burst out laughing (the dry recitation of his 'qualifications' as a sperm donor), and parts of it made her want to slap him soundly (his neat dismissal of her penname, and his questioning her reasons and morals). And yet, something in the odd letter appealed to her. The slanted, spiky writing seemed somewhat familiar, but not as much as the wry, witty tone of voice. Something told her that she was acquainted with the writer, but she was certain that no one she knew would answer such an advert, especially not with an earnest interest. This had, after all, been part of the reason she decided to seek a donor in this manner. No one she knew would ever believe that she would do something this ostentatious or risky. It gave her the freedom to seek her life the way she chose, knowing that no one would stop her because no one would know it was her. After her pregnancy became apparent, she'd be branded some sort of "fallen woman," as they say, but she had dealt with worse names than that. If Hester Prynne could do it, so could she. She read through the letter again.

Well. Whoever wrote the odd if not straightforward epistle definitely deserved further conversation, if for no other reason than entertainment value. She pulled out the sheet of questions that she had prepared for this stage of the production, penning a short letter to accompany it. With a tiny smile and a quick flourish of her wand, then her quill, she folded the sheet and addressed it carefully: *Mr. Tobias Reynard, box #2134, Hogsmeade Village.*

This should be interesting.

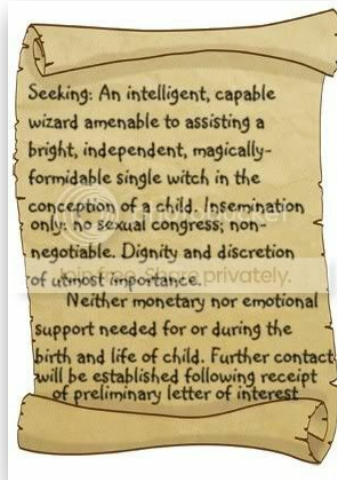
Many thanks to the lovely ladies that beta for me, my good friends Erin, Emily, Maggie (Maggiferous here at TPP), and Lindsay. This idea popped into my head as soon as I read the challenge and I just went, "Oh, how fun!" I hope you agree.

This is a response to number #56 of the Anything Goes challenge: "She wants to have a baby. She's interviewing potential fathers. Who is she? Why is she resorting to this method? What questions is she asking in order to choose a father for her unborn child? Who shows up? Who does she choose? What happens next? She can be anybody."

Oh, and now that the challenge is over, I can release this:



HURRAY! I WON FIRST PLACE!!! Thank you SO much to everyone who has read and voted for me. And for those of you reading for the first time, I hope you enjoy it just as much as all of you wonderful people who thought I deserved first place. Oh, and as part of my prize, I was given this lovely piece of fan art:



What a perfect representation of Hermione's advert!

HUGS EVERYBODY

I was a One Once, But Now I'm a We

Chapter 2 of 15

Seeking: An intelligent, capable wizard amenable to assisting a bright, independent, magically-formidable single witch in the conception of a child. Insemination only: no sexual congress; non-negotiable. Dignity and discretion of utmost importance. Neither monetary nor emotional support needed for or during the birth and life of child. Further contact will be established following receipt of preliminary letter of interest. Address all inquiries by owl to Joy Bundle, Box # 1086, Hogsmeade Village .

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This took a tad longer than I wanted, but I hope you have as much fun with it as I did. The identities of Joy and Tobias are revealed in this chapter (not to each other, but to you). Also, you'll note that I actually tried to start with canon-accuracy (unlike my usual fair) and branch out into what one of my betas referred to as "much more real-world." I hope you enjoy.



"Tobias,"

Thank you for your letter regarding my advert in the Daily Prophet. Before I decide to proceed in an arrangement with you – for which, I am certain we can draft up a contract with mutually satisfying stipulations – I would like to put some questions to you, to ascertain the suitability of such an arrangement between us. I have included a list of questions which I require satisfactory answers to before moving forward. If you would be so good as to answer them and return them with all possible haste, I would be very grateful to receive your responses.

Before you peruse my questions, however, I would like to address the points you made in your last letter:

- Let me first say that I find it somewhat ridiculous and more than a little hypocritical that you chose to ignore my alias, as you not only acknowledged the need for a 'nom de plume', but created one for your own anonymity. Physician, heal thyself.

- As to your "demonstrably" good health, I appreciate that you have offered your word; however, I will request that I receive a clean bill of health from Healer Levy at St. Mungo's. I mean this as no disrespect to you, simply an assurance that any future child of mine will be in as excellent health as it is in my power to ensure them to be. I'm sure you understand that, in this day and age, we cannot be too careful.

- Your age is completely immaterial to me. In good faith, I will tell you that I am just past the age of thirty-two (this past September), in excellent health, and well within the 'societally normative age' of reproduction. As I said, your age is completely immaterial to me, so long as you are in good reproductive health.

- I'm actually quite relieved and pleased to hear that you are not emotionally or legally attached to anyone, as it would be quite a lot more complicated were you to be so constrained. That is not to say that it would be impossible, merely more sensitive and potentially disastrous.

Again, I appreciate your forthright reply to my letter, and I will certainly consider you as a candidate for fathering my future child. I look forward to your answers to the enclosed questionnaire.

Best,

Joy Bundle

Tuesday, 20 December

"Joy,"

An exam? You sent me an EXAM? Perhaps I should have referred to you as "Curse"? Honestly, woman, why on Earth would a man who is only serving the purpose of anonymously fathering your child need to answer questions regarding elementary Transfiguration, Potions, and Arithmancy in order to provide you with sperm? I must simply conclude that you are mentally unstable. Under no circumstances will my intelligence or pride be subject to your ridiculous benchmarks. Contact me again when you have regained your sanity.

Tobias

Tuesday, December the 20th, 2011

Tobias,

Stop whinging like a first-year.

Best,

Joy

Wednesday, 21 December

Joy,

Cease your denigrating attempts to cuckold me.

Indignantly,

Tobias

Friday, December the 23rd, 2011

Tobias,

Thank you for your kind letters regarding my questionnaire. As a result of your previous response, I can only conclude that you are either unable to answer the questions I have provided or are rather insecure about your intellect. Accordingly, I have enclosed another exam, this one much more difficult than the last. I have the desire (and right) to quality-control the men who could be the father of my future child; as such, I wish to ensure that their intelligence matches mine, in concordance with my rigorous standards.

If you still wish to participate in our possible arrangement, I highly suggest that you complete and return the test by next Friday at midnight. I will inform you as to the status of your eligibility once I have looked over your answers.

Happy Christmas,

Joy

Monday, 26 December

Joy,

You, Madam, are certifiably insane. You remind me far too much of a young lady I once knew who took a rather sickening amount of pride in being self-confident to a fault and intellectually overzealous to the point of lunacy. Despite the highly insulting nature of your request, I have decided to be the more mature of the two of us – which wasn't much of an effort, given your last few correspondences – and actually answer the damn questionnaire. In honor of the memory of my insufferable former acquaintance, I have penned the answers to be as long-winded as I could possibly manage. I hope it takes you until New Year's to mark.

Defiantly,

Tobias

Tuesday, December the 27th, 2011

Tobias,

I thoroughly enjoyed reading your answers to my exam. I know that you probably assume that I am either teasing you or being facetious to raise your temper, but in earnest, I am not. It is rare that I receive intellectual stimulation to my level of comprehension (which, I suppose, could be part of why I am addressing conception in this manner), so I found it a rare treat to read the thought processes of someone so intelligent. Though I know that it is a bit too early to be one-hundred percent certain, I believe that you will make a very suitable candidate for an arrangement.

Before we begin those preliminary stages, however, I hope it is not too much to ask you to discuss some of the answers you penned? As I said, I don't often get the sort of challenge you provided me, especially not in a Ministry job, so I would very much enjoy conversing, if only for a little while, to discuss your answers. I realize that given the nature of our possible future arrangement that such a conversation may be awkward, so please do not feel obligated to indulge me.

Regardless of your desire, or lack thereof, for conversation, please send to me in your next correspondence a list of any requirements, stipulations, concerns, etc., that you may have regarding the arrangement, so that I may begin to draw up a contract, of sorts.

Best,

Joy

Severus stared at the most recently letter he'd received from "Joy." He had thoroughly enjoyed the banter of the earlier letters, despite his caustic replies, but this latest one had hit him closer to the heart than he'd imagined. This letter was not from the pen of the fastidious but spunky woman who'd been daring enough to send a test reminiscent of his O.W.L.s to an anonymous wizard who was, in essence, no more than a rented pair of testicles that she would use to achieve her maternal ends. The words in front of him screamed of a very intelligent but very lonely woman so desperate for company of her intellectual stature that she would seek it from a complete stranger. A stranger who would impregnate her and then vanish from her life. This woman had sat down during the Christmas season to beg to discuss Potions with a stranger via parchment. As he stared down at the letter, his brows pulled together tightly, creating a long line of tension between them. He had a very disconcerting feeling that despite their twenty-year difference in age, this woman was very much like him. Only a short glance around his very quiet, very empty dungeon chambers gave him the answer he needed regarding her 'indulgence.' In a move that he felt was completely against his better judgment, Severus picked up his quill and, instead of writing a short, succinct list of his stipulations, began to compose a detailed discussion of his views on the latest advancements in Potions research that she had referenced on her 'test.'

Tuesday, 27 December

Joy,

I confess myself quite surprised that the questions you sent were just as much of a test of your own mental acuity as mine. Although I find the method in which you approached this a bit bizarre (you could simply have inquired as to my intellectual and professional pursuits), I am pleased that my answers have intrigued you. Though, my pride obligates me to mention that I do still find it insulting to be given a test, as if I am an insolent first-year in detention.

Regardless, I've no objection to discussing the recent theories that I had addressed in my answers. It is not often that I find a conversation partner who has any interest in Potions, let alone has read extensively enough to be well-versed on the effect of physics on advanced potion making. It is not terribly well-known in the wizarding world, but I believe if you are familiar with Heisenberg's Principle of Uncertainty, you'll find that Rondat's study on the effects of physical phenomena on temperamental brewing allows for the possibility that—

Hermione stared at the letter with a dropped jaw, born of pleasant surprise. The wizard, whomever he was, had been barbed and sarcastic in those first few letters, and she found herself completely baffled that it had amused her. It certainly felt liberating and youthful to be able to banter with someone who could stand up to her intellectually. This letter, though, had been very different. True, the natural dry sarcasm that seemed bone-deep in Tobias infused the entire letter, but the pages and pages and pages covered with his spiky, scrawling script were filled with intelligent, thought-provoking discussion on everything from Potions theories and physics to animagi Transfiguration and magical creatures. He had even made a joking reference to one of her favorite classic films from the 1940's. She had smiled, puzzled over dilemmas, even laughed out loud as she read the letter over again. It felt like talking to a friend. Which, she found, she'd been lacking in quantity lately. Strangely, she hadn't felt the lack of it until she'd begun to read this letter from Tobias and felt she wasn't lacking anymore.

A thick grin crossed her face as she pulled out a large sheaf of parchment. By the end of the evening, she'd gone through two different quill nibs and a half bottle of ink.

Friday, 30 December

Joy,

I'm quite surprised to find that only a few weeks have gone by since our first correspondence. Perhaps it has been the regularity of our letters, perhaps it is that my career has picked up speed again, but it seems that I have known you for much longer than I actually have. Being a naturally reticent and private man, I find it strange to know that I talk to you – so to speak – more in a few days than I do to most of my colleagues in an entire month. And, depending on the colleague, sometimes more than a month. Some people are simply intolerable idiots. I'm sure you sympathize, given what I know about your intellect and the stories you've told me about your colleagues. How in the world does someone with short-term memory loss from spell damage manages to hold down a career working with record-keeping? Perhaps your superior (ha!) should be terminated. Permanently. I should arrange it, I'm sure ...

But as amusing as it is to verbally abuse your colleagues and mine, I should return to the original point of this letter. It occurs to me that the idea of a "contract" being drafted between us in regards to the arrangement that first prompted our correspondence got lost when we began letter-writing for intellectual pursuits. As such, we should most likely return to the issue at least for a little while, as I'm certain you would like to proceed with the insemination process as soon as possible. Perhaps you should send me a list of your expectations, and I shall review them and address anything that concerns me. I shall respond with any stipulations of my own immediately.

Before we discuss those details, however, I'd like to take a moment to address something that has ... been on my mind since we first began this process: I would like to thank you. It seems bizarre, I know, to thank a woman who's merely using me as a sperm donor, but I feel it must be said. As my fifty-second birthday approaches (this

coming Monday), I had previously found myself increasingly dismayed that I have made no lasting impression on the world that will outlive me when I pass. Aside, I suppose, from the memories I have imparted to those I have worked with, but they are most certainly not an accurate impression of the man I am. Or, at least, of the man that I believe that I am at the core. So when the opportunity to assist you presented itself, it seemed to me to be a perfect opportunity. Even knowing that the child will never become acquainted with his (or her) father, a part of me will continue; more than that, though, this child will have a chance to rise above my mistakes and be a better person than I ever could. And that, Joy, is an invaluable gift.

I'm not certain what it is that makes me so maudlin as I pen this letter, but I can't seem to shake the feeling Quick! Send a reply saying something inane, so that I may ruthlessly trounce you and regain my status as a heartless bastard.

In anticipation of my regained brutality,

Tobias

Hermione sat fingering the letter she'd just received. The days when she saw the tawny owl from Hogmeade's post office winging its way past Aida's perch to deposit the day's takings in the post box at the front of her cottage, she felt as if she could fly off to the letter writer, so giddy was she at the arrival. Reading what Tobias had to say, whether the deep and serious intellectual discussions or the amusing recitations of his frustrated dealings with his colleagues, always made her feel as if he were right there next to her, sharing a cup of tea or warming the forest green plush cushions of her couch. Apparating onto the front stoop of her cottage and seeing the parchment wedged inside the mouth of the little box shaped like an otter cleared away whatever fuzzy gloom or frustration had accumulated over the course of the day, and she had made it a ritual that she always sat at the dining room table with a cup of peach tea to read his letters, just as she had the first day she received one. Her hand traced over the script fondly, her heart picking up just a bit as she gazed down at his signature.

This was a very dangerous thing she was doing.

The man was merely a sperm donor. Hermione had to keep telling herself that every time she received a letter from him. He wasn't really a friend, and he wasn't really the boyfriend that she missed having and secretly craved. He was an anonymous man – a man whose real name was still a mystery to her – who was going to give her a child and then vanish from her life. She couldn't keep doing this to herself. Every letter, she would tell herself to pull back, to calm down, to bring it back to a professional coolness and not let this get any more out of hand than it already had. This was about getting her dream of having a baby of her own, not flirting with a man she didn't even know. She told herself that very strictly every letter. It had long since stopped working. Because she did know him. Whether his name was Tobias or Henry or Jerry or Elliott didn't matter. She knew him, and he knew her, more than anyone had known her in quite a long time. Harry and Ron were still a part of her life; she went to Sunday dinners here and there, spent holidays with the now-gigantic Weasley clan or the ever-expanding Potter family. But with James and Al and now little Lily, Harry and Ginny were constantly buried under a mountain of nappies and childcare, and after what had happened with Ron, she didn't feel comfortable being with him and Lavender for all that long a time before she needed to make her excuses and head home. That was the only thing she hadn't told Tobias, her one big shame. Her one big secret. She was a thirty-two-year-old divorcee in a world that barely believed divorce existed.

Ron had proposed to Hermione so soon after the war that she had accepted joyously and without thought. Riding high on relief and adrenaline and bright, rosy dreams of the future, they had planned their wedding believing that the forever brand of love was in their grasp. And it had been, for a time. Her life with Ron had never been unpleasant, really, but it had never been exactly what she wanted. It had taken two years for the 'honeymoon' to end, four for the marriage to crumble. Her twenty-fourth birthday party had been the beginning of the end. A huge celebration had been thrown, with all of their friends from Hogwarts attending to help Hermione celebrate the occasion. Food and drink had been passed liberally at the Burrow, another one of Molly's fantastic soirees. But Ron had lost his head with drink, it seemed. She had come across him rather loudly disparaging their private bedroom life with Harry, Neville, Seamus and a crowd of other equally inebriated young men. When she had pulled him aside and demanded he stop revealing their personal details, he had called her a prude. She had slapped him. He didn't come home that night. Or any of the next two nights following. She had received an owl by the end of the week from Molly, saying that he'd spent those days at the Burrow, and she was terribly sorry that she hadn't owled Hermione earlier; she'd assumed Ron had let her know. Hermione had not cried. She merely owled Molly to thank her and told Ron not to rush; she could take care of the flat herself. In the days following Molly's owl, Hermione had simply started putting belongings in boxes. It hadn't occurred to her right away what it was she was doing – preparing and packing up her life; at first, she had told herself that she was just getting rid of the clutter. Miscellaneous things laying around the flat that they didn't really need or use anymore, so she packed them away. Two weeks later, after thirteen solid nights of sleeping next to Ron as if he were her brother, it occurred to her that the only items packed were her own. And that Ron had not made one single comment about the boxes. Then she counted the words they had said to each other in the past two weeks; she was brought to tears when she realized that she *could* count the words. Fifty-eight. Their thirteen-year friendship and four year marriage had been reduced to fifty-eight words in two weeks, thirteen of which had been "Goodnight," and twelve of which had been "G'morning" (she didn't really count it as two separate words, as he never bothered to enunciate clearly). It was then that she knew it was over.

The conversation they'd had that ended their marriage was surprisingly calm, given Ron's natural temper. He had listened quietly as she had said that they were in a downturn, that the fight they'd had on her birthday wasn't the beginning of the issue, it was simply the mirror that had been held up in front of their faces so that they could see the problem. He'd nodded silently as she'd said that really they made better friends than they did a couple, that though they loved each other, they weren't really meant to be married. The way their life had gone the last few weeks was testament to that. He'd just nodded and quietly agreed that she was probably right. In a fit of pique and anguish that he couldn't think of something more potent to say – even if he chose to fight with her, it would be easier than this bland acceptance, as if their love had meant nothing at all – she yelled at him, demanding he must have *some* distinct feelings. He let a single tear slide down his cheek as he hoarsely declared that he'd always loved her and probably always would, but that he didn't think it was enough anymore. And then he'd just let her go.

Getting up from the table that very minute (she didn't think she could stand to sit there in the resigned quiet any longer), Hermione had shrunk the boxes she'd packed, stowed them in her old school trunk, and left. Unable to bear the thought of living with her parents like a child, Hermione had gone directly to Harry and Ginny's house in Godric's Hollow, tearfully begging them to use their guestroom for a little while. They'd welcomed her in as happily as could be imagined under the circumstances, but it was clear to Hermione that the situation could not last long. Ginny had just discovered her first pregnancy – little James was on his way! Would she please be his godmother? – so her days there were numbered. She didn't want to overtax them anyway. The divorce papers came to her two days later, at work; she had locked herself in the loo and cried for nearly an hour. Six months later, she read about Ron and Lavender's engagement in the *Daily Prophet*. No one, not even Ginny or Molly, had bothered to owl her to tell her the news. That was the day she stopped crying herself to sleep every night; she went out that very afternoon on her lunch hour and put a down payment on the little cottage she'd found. The rest, as they say, was history.

The nearly six years she'd spent here had been happy enough ... never truly unhappy, at any rate. But her life was emptier than she wanted it to be. Being divorced in the wizarding world was practically worthy of the scarlet letter – she didn't know of any other people who were divorced, beside her and Ron – so dates were fairly thin on the ground for Hermione. Add to that her status as a war heroine, which seemed to be more intimidating than attractive to most men, and her rather formidable intellect, and her status as a love pariah was complete. So she poured herself into her work and charitable volunteering, picked up a few new hobbies (her knitting had improved greatly, and she now knew how to crochet, cross-stitch, AND play the piano), and became an excellent and involved godmother; her life felt busy again. Busy, yes, but still not full. She needed someone to love, she decided, and as men were not immediately accessible, it seemed that the easiest and most sensible thing was to go on to her dream of motherhood. No sense in waiting her whole life for a love partner that may never show up. Being a single mother as well as a divorcee would basically guarantee spinsterhood in addition to motherhood, but she was strong enough for it. Hermione Granger and her child would get through just fine. And now, it actually seemed like it would become a reality.

The only sticky wicket that cropped up was that she was falling in love with the anonymous father.

Saturday, January the 7th, 2012

Tobias,

Forgive me; I have been quite remiss in addressing the issue of the contract. I seem to have gotten so carried away with our intellectual delights that I've completely forgotten your whole purpose for indulging me for so long. You are too good, putting up with my prattle week after week.

Included below is the list of my expectations. You may note that they have changed somewhat from my initial advert (nothing drastic, I promise!), but I have confidence that you will not object so much as to conclude the arrangement. Please feel free to include any concerns, amendments or other additions you may have, so that I may deal with them without delay.

A contract between the party of the first part, being hereafter known by the alias Joy Bundle, and the party of the second part, referred to by the alias Tobias Reynard, concerning the exchange of private services for the conception of a child.

Joy Bundle states that, in exchange for semen (for means of reproduction) provided by Tobias Reynard, she:

- Retains the right to request written proof of a clean bill of health for Mr. Reynard, the physical examination to be conducted by Ms. Bundle's personal care attendant, Healer Euterpe Levy of St. Mungo's Hospital of Magical Maladies in London, UK. The results shall be submitted under the previously-stated alias, Tobias Reynard.
- Retains the right to continue contact with Mr. Reynard until successful conception of a child has been verified by Healer Levy.
- Retains the right to request subsequent donations of semen from Mr. Reynard if initial samples are not deemed viable or do not result in conception.
- Will submit written verification to Mr. Reynard, via Healer Levy, that Ms. Bundle is not currently using any form of contraception or any other methods that would prevent successful conception.
- Agrees that all donations of semen will be channeled specifically through Healer Levy at St. Mungo's and that all donations will be strictly anonymous.
- Agrees not to seek any immediate or future monetary compensation in exchange for the semen or for the child resulting after successful conception.
- Agrees not to seek any immediate or future monetary compensation to provide for the life of the child resulting after successful conception.
- Will seek no direct contact with Mr. Reynard that is not first solicited by him or agents of his choosing regarding the child in question or other matters.
- Will seek no direct contact between Mr. Reynard and herself, or Mr. Reynard and the child in question, unless first solicited by Mr. Reynard or agents of his choosing.

If these stipulations meet with your approval, let me know, and I will have it printed into a signable document that will keep the signatures visible only to Healer Levy, who will be conducting all of the physical examinations and my insemination. If you have any concerns, additions, etc., I will, of course, review and add them as necessary.

Oh, and if you really feel the need for something to criticize me for (I don't mind your sarcasm, but if you feel it gives you power, far be it from me to deny you), how's this: I've already started knitting a baby blanket. Is it too early to make it red and gold? I feel undeniably certain that you were not a Gryffindor, so I'm sure this will give you plenty of ammunition.

Yours,

Joy

PS – You're very sweet to offer to kill my supervisor. As soon as I come up with a fool-proof plan, I'll owl you.

Sunday, 8 January

JB,

Very busy week upcoming; lots to get done. No time for a long letter now. Will review contract as soon as I am able.

What sort of woman knits a blanket for a baby she doesn't have with a man she hasn't met? You must be a Gryffindor. More insults soon.

TR

Severus stared at the short missive for a moment before handing it over to Radames and sending him on towards Hogsmeade. It was the first time he'd flat-out lied to Joy. His week was completely empty, aside from the typical hall patrols and one detention on Wednesday night which he was certain would be completely brainless for him. The simple truth of it was that he just didn't want to review her contract right now. He was stalling for time, and he knew it. It was lowering to admit, but there it was. He was stalling. Something inside of him just didn't want to apply thought to the contract because it would mean that the conception process would move along as soon as they'd sign it, and then his time with Joy would be over. She'd made that fairly clear. She'd stated plainly that she would "seek no direct contact with Mr. Reynard" once she had the child she wanted. A large portion of him was unreasonably angry at this, at being treated like the hired help, until he realized that was exactly what he was. But the bigger part of him wanted to believe, stupid as it was, that Joy still wanted talk to him. Still had interest in him. He wanted to believe, foolish as it was in his increasing age, that he mattered to someone, even if it was a witch he'd never met who would have a child of his that he'd never see. One long-fingered hand strayed back to the parchment on his desk, the one bearing her neat script. Yours, her closing had said. He certainly hadn't missed that change of salutation. Down in his chest, something ached; the cynic in him sneered and said that it had been a flippant whim. No woman would have him; hadn't Joy made that clear in her contract? Not daring to write the same as she (what if it had just been a thoughtless statement?), he had left his letter without a closing.

Yours.

A fool living in his brain wished it were true, that this high-spirited young witch who sent him amusing letters written in an elegant hand that didn't fit her practical personality was really promising more to him than just a future of silence. Something seemed to be leaking from his eyes; he swiped at it with the hand not currently curled around his tumbler of Firewhiskey. Bloody birthday was making him too damn sentimental.

A/N - a note and mid-stream edit here: I've gotten a few reviews remarking that I have made mistakes with Severus's and Hermione's ages and I wanted to address it, in case anyone else was tempted to do so. To set the record straight:

In Severus's case, I'm sorry to say that's not so. His age is, indeed, 51 in December of 2011. His birthday has been stated as January 9th for several years, but it is only with the advent of book 7 that we find out what year. Lily's grave said that she was born on January 24, 1960. This would have made her almost 21 at the time of her death, on October 31, 1980. Since Severus was in the same year as Lily (as evidenced by The Prince's Tale) it is reasonable to assume, even if we're not implicitly told, that his birthday is January 9, 1960, as he is effectively the same age as Lily. As such, in December of 2011, when the story starts, it would be just before his fifty-second birthday on January 9, 2012.

As far as Hermione is concerned, I hang my head in shame and admit that everyone who pointed out the flaw in her age is 100% correct. I had been basing my calculations off the birth year of both Harry and Ron, being 1980. Unfortunately, I failed to account for the fact that she was born in September of the PREVIOUS year, 1979, making her just past her thirty-second birthday in December of 2011. I thank everyone who pointed it out, and I have made the necessary changes.

Normally I'd let such nit-picky details slide, but I do appreciate that everyone is reading so closely! Thanks again to all my reviewers and readers. I'm thrilled you're enjoying it as much as I am!

And Baby's Bound to Keep Me Warm

Chapter 3 of 15

Seeking: An intelligent, capable wizard amenable to assisting a bright, independent, magically-formidable single witch in the conception of a child. Insemination only: no sexual congress; non-negotiable. Dignity and discretion of utmost importance. Neither monetary nor emotional support needed for or during the birth and life of child. Further contact will be established following receipt of preliminary letter of interest. Address all inquiries by owl to Joy Bundle, Box # 1086, Hogsmeade Village .

A response to #56 of the Anything Goes challenge: "She wants to have a baby. She's interviewing potential fathers. Who is she? Why is she resorting to this method? What questions is she asking in order to choose a father for her unborn child? Who shows up? Who does she choose? What happens next? She can be anybody."



Chapter Three – And Baby's Bound To Keep Me Warm

Severus woke up on the morning of his birthday with a splitting headache and a firm scowl set upon his face. He had sat up for far too much of the night, rereading Joy's contract and drinking himself boneless. Fifty-two. He was fifty-two now. As of 1:47am this morning, he was another year older; another year towards death, with nothing to show for it but a bad reputation, two Wizengamot trials for treason, and cheeky letters from a woman whom he'd begun to have a frightening amount of regard for; a woman he didn't even *really* know. A woman who only needed him for his ability to spawn.

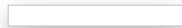
"This is a sick way to live," he said, to his haggard reflection. There were far too many steel grey strands showing through the ebony hair for him to be indulging in such juvenile behavior.

"I agree, old man," said the mirror. "But that's what you get for drowning yourself in drink. You might want to think about sprucing yourself up a bit, and taking a potion or five."

Severus pointed his wand half-heartedly at the mirror. "I could easily Stun you, you know," he growled.

"Oh, that's rich," the mirror retorted. "Go ahead and Stun me; I'd be happy to let you go out in public with bits of parchment stuck to your neck."

And so he did have parchment on his neck. Wobbly fingers reached up and plucked the ripped scrap from the juncture where his shoulder met his throat. Why in the bloody hell did he have parchment stuck to his neck? Had he taken that damn letter to bed with him? At this point, anything was possible, as he didn't remember anything after sitting at his desk with Joy's letter. He looked down at the scrap of parchment in his hands and sighed heavily.



Whether he'd chosen that particular piece of parchment to tear from her letter and take to bed with him or whether Fate simply hated him enough to have that particular piece tear off by accident, Severus couldn't say. A blaze of anger rose up in him as he felt his heart squeeze at the sight of her signature. He had gone through this long ago. Most of the last year of the war blurred together in his memory, but he could still quite clearly recall falling to his knees in the childhood bedroom of his worst enemy, sobbing over a letter written decades ago, by the last woman he dared to care for on any level. Severus Snape was a fool. As he stood staring at that delicately scripted section of Joy's writing, his mind played a horrible trick on him, superimposing Lily otop of this woman. Is that how this would all end? With Severus alone and miserable yet again, having her flit off to raise a child with another man? A child that should be his?

Imagining the shadowy figure that he had put together in his head of what Joy looked like, he pictured her with another man, laughing and swinging his child between them. The image made another feeling wave up his body, even more powerfully than before. He just barely made it to the loo before the contents of his stomach made a grand reentrance into the world. Leaning his sweaty forehead against the rim of the bowl, he gave in and let it all come.

"Happy birthday, old man," said the mirror.

Looking about as hale and hearty as he felt, Severus stalked to the head table and applied his attention to his breakfast, burying his protuberant nose in the *Daily Prophet* waiting for him on his chair. Though he didn't look up, he could feel the eyes of his coworkers on him, clearly debating the safety of greeting him this morning. Severus didn't typically take his birthdays with good grace, preferring them to be soundly ignored, and this morning was no exception. The only people who'd ever had the chutzpah to wish him happy returns were Dumbledore, who had special dispensation from his ire, Minerva, who was usually tactful enough not to mention it in front of others, and Hagrid, who was blissfully oblivious to Severus's seething. But Hagrid was busy discussing Quidditch with Rolanda Hooch, and Minerva, with a quiet sigh, seemed to have decided that speech was not wise. There was a pause in conversation as the staff stared at him, gaping at his (even more) pale appearance; he looked up for just a moment, and everyone quickly reapplied themselves to their plates and conversations. Trying to keep himself to himself as much as possible this morning, he didn't even look up when the mail winged its way into the hall, until a tawny owl dropped a large, rather lumpy package onto his plate.

Every face at the staff table was once again turned in his direction. Severus received so few packages – he didn't have any family or loved ones to send him things – that most of the staff couldn't remember him ever getting one, and the frequent letters he had been receiving recently had been so quickly pocketed that no one had the opportunity to ask about them. And now, here was this package. Severus gritted his teeth. Clearly everyone was waiting for him to open it. Severus was torn: if he did open

the package at the table, the entire staff and a good portion of students would be watching him do it; if he didn't open the package at the table, he'd have to make his way out of the hall with it, and that would be even more conspicuous than simply opening it at the table and risking nosy gossipers. What in the devil was in it, anyway? Any potions ingredients he required were ordered in bulk and delivered by a courier straight to the dungeons, given the temperamental nature of most ingredients. And he hadn't ordered anything else, so he was flummoxed as to the contents. He turned the package over, absent-mindedly handing a slice of bacon to the owl that normally brought his letters from the post office in Hogsmeade. Severus's stomach dropped away as he recognized the handwriting on the front of the crisp brown packing paper; it was *her* handwriting.

Mr. T. Reynard

Box #2134

Hogsmeade Village

Oh, dear God, she'd sent him a ... something. Severus tried valiantly to mask the shaking in his fingers as he inserted one into the seam of the wrapping and pulled the package open. He almost laughed as the contents tumbled out across the table; the only thing that stopped him was the conscious awareness of the gawking eyes. Though he itched to touch the gifts that lay across the table and his lap, he restrained himself, opening the folded letter lying atop the pile.

Monday, January the 9th, 2012

Dear Tobias,

Happy Birthday! I told you in one of my previous letters that you'd regret telling me your birth date ... Here's the proof of it! Well, I know it's probably strange for me to send gifts to you, but I couldn't resist, especially when you told me how much you despise birthdays. I'd apologize for trying to convert you to a birthday enthusiast, but I wouldn't mean it. I'll make a celebrant out of you yet!

I hope you enjoy the books as much as I believe you will. Included is a copy of Heisenberg's *The Physical Principles of the Quantum Theory* (you said that you didn't own a copy ... now you do!), and another fascinating work by Heisenberg called *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science*. And because I just can't resist contributing to intellectual obsessions (I have many myself), I couldn't refrain from getting you the three anthologies of Rondat's studies on high-temper brewing. ... Looking back, I wonder if I haven't overloaded you with books. I often forget that not everyone suffers from bibliophilia as I do. In any case, I hope you enjoy these; I can't wait to hear your thoughts!

Yours,

Joy

PS – I truly hope you like the last present that I included. I didn't have any idea of your favorite color; this was just a hunch. I made it myself (had to hurry, too ... I just found out about your birthday a week ago!)

PPS – I hope you're not allergic to Alpaca. I didn't want to ask and ruin the surprise.

Severus fingered the soft length of knitted yarn in his hand, glancing down at it with a tiny smile when he finished the letter. Joy had knitted him an entire afghan. For all she knew, he lived in a tropical climate where he never wore anything heavier than cotton, and yet, she had knit him a blanket that was nearly as long as he was and warmer than the comforter currently on his bed. The innocent assumptions of her gift choice proved unexpectedly endearing. As he stared down at it, he noticed how fine the stitches were, how intricate the lattice-work pattern of the silver silk threads scattered through the deep green of the Alpaca wool, so dark it was nearly black; this was not a piece made by charmed knitting needles. The crafting charms he'd seen were good but were no substitute for skilled fingers; she must have done this entire piece by hand, and it must have taken her absolutely every spare second of the last week. The woman had knit him a very intricate blanket that screamed of Slytherin House and she didn't even know it. He chuckled to himself, tangling the long tips of his fingers within the open work that made up the hem. Only just reining in the instinct to bury his nose in the material to inhale her scent – something he had wondered about but had not yet had the chance to experience – Severus settled for absent-mindedly stroking a corner against the sensitive skin at the inside of his wrist.

"My goodness, Severus!" Filius called out from a few seats away. "Looks like someone's given quite a lot of time and thought to celebrating your special day, old man!"

Severus glared at his diminutive colleague, but with a pile of books tumbling across his place setting and a soft, fuzzy blanket dangling over his lap, the effect was somewhat diminished.

"I didn't realize you had such a doting benefactor, Severus," Minerva said, fighting the quirk at the corners of her lips. "Tell me, who has sent you such lovely gifts?"

All eyes were certainly on him now. A light blush was painting his sallow cheeks, he knew it, but rather than allowing himself to be embarrassed, he embraced the unique chance to shock and intrigue his (rather gossipy) colleagues.

"My—" He stopped. The pause seemed purposeful but was, in fact, a chance for Severus to search for the correct way to describe Joy. "A lady friend of mine. She remembered my birthday."

Nearly all his colleagues gaped openly at him as a slow smirk crossed his hawk-like features. While Minerva stared at him, her mouth working like a landed cod, and Filius sputtered with an astonished look on his face, Hagrid roared with laughter.

Clapping him hard between the shoulders, Rolanda Hooch said, "Snape, you old dog, I never knew you had it in you!"

The smirk deepened. "I have a private life just as much as the rest of you. Did you assume I was a monk?"

"No," she said, laughing. "I assumed you were gay."

"What?" he practically shouted, which only caused her to laugh louder.

Smirking now, Minerva quipped, "Well, you *did* spend quite a lot of time with Albus over the years—"

Severus sputtered, which caused a riot of chuckles to race up and down the staff table. With as much dignity as he could muster, Severus drew his wand, pleased that both Minerva and Rolanda jerked away as if they expected him to start hexing. In actuality, he simply reduced the gifts to a size that would fit in his pocket and strode from the Great Hall, bat-like robes flapping behind him. He didn't have to take this abuse! He would sequester himself within his dungeon chambers, where he could relax ... and bury his nose in the soft mound of delicate wool.

"All right, who is he?"

Hermione's head whipped up as she stashed Tobias's letter into the book she'd been pretending to read. A gently smiling Ginny Potter plunked down into the seat across from Hermione, wiping some crumbs from the last patron's lunch onto the floor before leaning over the table to gaze at her friend. The glance she cast Hermione's hastily-stowed letter was lightning quick, but Hermione caught the curious look.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked innocently, aware that her cheeks were reddening just a tad. "Who is who?"

"Hermione, you were staring blankly at whatever you were reading, smiling as if you'd just had a Cheering Charm cast on you, and you may actually have been humming to yourself. People only do that sort of thing if they're smitten."

"Don't be ridiculous," she retorted quickly. A bit too quickly, obviously, as Ginny simply smirked. Hermione cleared her throat and attempted to regain some control over the conversation. "What brings you all the way out to the Ministry today? Aren't you usually practicing out in Holy Head on Thursdays?"

"Had to file an incident report for something that happened at our last away match," Ginny said. Ginny plucked up a carrot from her friend's lunch tray, snapped the end off in her teeth, and pointed the remainder at Hermione accusingly. "And don't think you can sidetrack me that easily. I'm not my prat brother, you know."

"Isn't that why I like you so much?" Hermione asked, sweetly.

A full laugh left the redhead. Nature seemed to invert itself for Ginny Potter: she'd only gotten lovelier with age. The figure that had, in school days, been whippet-slim and toned was now lush and curvy with the advent of child-bearing. Being a professional athlete had kept Ginny in shape and being a mother had kept her feminine. Hermione's mismatched features seemed unspeakably plain compared to her friend's. She absent-mindedly pulled her cardigan closer around her work robes.

"So honestly, Hermione, who is he? You're doing all those silly, brainless things people do when they really fancy someone, and seeing as how you didn't even do that with Ron, I figure it must be pretty serious."

Hermione caught the inside of her right cheek between her teeth and bit down, an age-old nervous habit that no longer even occurred to her while in process. Until this moment, staring back at her only real girlfriend, Hermione hadn't realized how very much she wanted to tell someone about Tobias. Someone who would listen and understand how much she enjoyed his conversation, how she felt as if he were really there talking to her when she read his letters, how much she wanted his friendship. How lonely she was. How sad she would be that the pregnancy – the thing she wanted so much it pained her – would be the end of something that had made her the happiest she'd been in years. Somehow, Hermione believed that Ginny would understand. Perhaps it was wishful thinking or perhaps it was the truth, but Hermione really believed that Ginny would.

Well, Hermione thought, *you can tell her the truth without telling her every detail*. "He's just ... a new friend."

One of Ginny's thin, arched eyebrows shot up to her hairline. "No offense, love," she said gently, "but you don't go anywhere or do all that much that would allow you to meet new people. At least, I highly doubt you'd be this giddy about someone you met at one of those War Orphan Relief Project committee meetings."

"I ... put a personal advert in the *Prophet*," said Hermione.

Far from the cringing or critical response Hermione had expected, Ginny's face pinched in sadness, and she laid her small hand over the one Hermione was currently using to clutch the spine of her book. "Are you really that lonely?"

"Yes," Hermione said simply.

Ginny bit her lip and fought the tears welling just above her eyelashes. "Love, I'm so sorry," she began. "Harry and I, we haven't been attentive enough; we've just been terrible friends, not having you over, and—"

"Gin," Hermione said with a small smile, "it's all right. Really, it's fine. You and Harry are busy; you have a family and very active careers." Ginny opened her mouth to protest, but Hermione held up a hand. "Besides," she said overtop of the beginning of Ginny's sentence, "that's not what I meant. Not that I don't adore you and Harry and all, but it's ... it's just not ... not really—"

"The kind of company you're lonely for?" Ginny said, a small smile on her lips and her face sympathetic.

Hermione heaved a sigh of relief. Not that Harry and Ron weren't spectacular, but it *was* nice to have a mate who was a girl and would understand these kinds of feelings. She never should have doubted that Ginny would understand.

"Exactly," Hermione said. "It's just been so long since I had that sort of companionship, that I just wanted ... I don't know; affection maybe?" It wasn't exactly a lie, but this was the furthest she'd stretched the truth so far.

"So who is he?" Ginny asked, and now her face was lit with interest.

"Just a pen friend, right now," Hermione answered. She avoided Ginny's gaze as she spoke. "I placed the advert in the *Prophet*, he was interested in what I was looking for, so we've been talking for a few weeks now." Hermione clutched the letter as she talked; something about it calmed her, as if she were holding Tobias himself.

"Yes, but who *is* he?"

"I don't know, actually," Hermione said with an apologetic smile. "We decided that it was best to stay anonymous and use a penname just for now. In case it ... doesn't work out."

Ginny nodded, her face an obvious show of interest in this shadowy new man in her friend's life. "Probably best," Ginny said thoughtfully. "I mean, he may be good conversation, but really, you never know who answers these things, do you?"

And therein lies the problem, Hermione thought wryly. "Right," was all she said.

Ginny was quiet for a long moment as she and Hermione both nibbled on the carrots and bag of crisps that Hermione was finishing from her lunch. After some obvious thought, Ginny asked, "You really care for him, don't you?"

"I—" Hermione had a denial on the tip of her tongue, something to lighten the mood and keep her friend away from pesky questions that could lead to trouble, but she found herself both excited by the prospect of discussing Tobias with someone else and completely weary of the endless secrecy. "Yes. Yes, I really do."

Again, Ginny's face coated with concern as she put out her hand and clasped Hermione's. "And how does he feel about you?"

Hermione sighed. "I don't know. Our letters back and forth are lively and exciting, and he's so intelligent and witty and brusque and," Hermione broke off to snicker, "dastardly." At her friend's disbelieving look, she laughed harder. "I know that's a silly word, but sometimes he just seems like the villain from a melodrama. But in a good way." Hermione let another sigh escape her. "It's just so wonderful to talk to someone the way he and I talk. And I'm just so confused."

To her horror, a few tears leaked from Hermione's eyes. Sniffing, she wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her old jumper.

"Hermione," Ginny said, all seriousness. "I know that you're a grown woman and you can take care of yourself, but I'm worried about you, love. You obviously have feelings for this man, strong ones, and yet, you don't even know who he is, let alone how he feels about you. I'm just afraid that you might be getting in too deep."

A nearly-hysterical laugh escaped. "You don't know the half of it," said Hermione.

"Tell me, then. Tell me all of it."

Something about Ginny's part-quizzical, part-worried look ambushed Hermione and she just couldn't stop herself. She had to tell someone the truth – someone who would attempt to understand and at least *try* not to interfere.

"All right then," Hermione said, heaving a great breath. "But before I do, you have to assure me that you recognize that this is my life, my choice, and you'll have to promise you won't try to get in the way or stop me."

Something very like panic stole behind Ginny's eyes, but she capped it almost immediately. The stony, determined look that Hermione had last seen at Dumbledore's funeral all those years ago settled on Ginny Potter's freckled, heart-shaped face.

"You have my word," she said firmly.

Nodding, Hermione took Ginny's hands. "The advert that I said I placed in the *Prophet*," Ginny nodded when Hermione paused, "wasn't for a pen friend."

Ginny said nothing, simply nodded for Hermione to go on.

"It wasn't for a pen friend or a date or even a lover."

Hermione had just primed herself to blurt out what she'd done when the color slipped from Ginny's face. "Oh, Hermione ... oh, love, tell me that wasn't you. Tell me it wasn't you who advertised for ... for ..."

"For a baby?"

"For a gigolo!" Ginny said, clearly horrified.

"Gin, for God's sake, lower your voice," Hermione hissed, looking around the canteen swiftly. "I wasn't advertising for sex. In fact, I specifically said *no* sex. I just want a baby."

Ginny put her hands to both of Hermione's cheeks. "But, love, there *has* to be a better way of going about this. It's just so unwise. What do you even know about this man? It could even be unhealthy!"

"No, no," Hermione said, now eager to convince her friend. She had to have *someone* on her side. "I've got it all worked out. You see, in the Muggle world, there are these things called sperm banks—"

"Ugh," Ginny said. "That sounds disgusting."

Hermione glared, but continued. "—so I've modeled it after what they do. I've worked it all out with St. Mungo's: Tobias," Ginny flinched at the name, "has to have a physical with Healer Levy to prove that he's in top health. Then he ... donates," Ginny cringed, "anonymously at the hospital, they run all the necessary tests to ensure that everything is as it should be, and I get inseminated the next day. He and I are drawing up a contract to make sure there are no misunderstandings; I'm asking nothing from him once the pregnancy is viable, and he is donating of his own free will. I'm thinking of giving him some sort of monetary compensation, but I haven't worked out a sum yet."

The explanation was sound and accurate, but something about it felt so hollow to Hermione. To hear her relationship with Tobias summed up in such empty words — especially by Hermione herself — left a bad taste in her mouth and a dull ache somewhere in her chest. Ginny seemed to sense that something was amiss with Hermione because she stayed silent for a long few minutes afterwards, just studying Hermione's face.

Eventually, she said, "And you'll just be able to walk away with the baby, will you? No muss, no fuss, no attachments, emotional or otherwise?"

Hermione studied the pitted table top. "Yes," she whispered.

After a beat, Ginny answered, "Liar."

"I know," she answered, a watery smile on her face. "I'm rubbish at it; always have been."

Hermione looked up when Ginny brushed the tears off her face with her thumb. She gripped Hermione's hand tightly.

"You'll be a great mum. Just," Ginny hesitated, squeezed harder, "just be careful, will you? It can turn you inside out, if you let it."

Hermione knew that she didn't mean the pregnancy. Her heart ached dully again, but she smiled. Holding onto her friend's hand in the middle of a canteen in the Ministry of Magic, Hermione knew that she had at least one person on her side.

Why Keep It Mum

Chapter 4 of 15

Seeking: An intelligent, capable wizard amenable to assisting a bright, independent, magically-formidable single witch in the conception of a child. Insemination only: no sexual congress; non-negotiable. Dignity and discretion of utmost importance. Neither monetary nor emotional support needed for or during the birth and life of child. Further contact will be established following receipt of preliminary letter of interest. Address all inquiries by owl to Joy Bundle, Box # 1086, Hogsmeade Village .

A response to #56 of the Anything Goes challenge: "She wants to have a baby. She's interviewing potential fathers. Who is she? Why is she resorting to this method? What questions is she asking in order to choose a father for her unborn child? Who shows up? Who does she choose? What happens next? She can be anybody."

A/N - Thank you all so much for your wonderful reviews! I can't tell you how much they mean to me. This little ditty started out to be just a thing I did for fun, but it is rapidly becoming one of my favorite things to work on. I really hope you've enjoyed the ride as much as I have. And though I do hate feeling like a pimp, it IS what I've written this piece for, so here I go: Vote for me! I'm not 100% sure I remember when voting begins, but please keep this lovely little piece in your mind when you vote for the Anything Goes challenge awards. Thanks and enjoy!

>>> a late add-in by me, now that voting is over:



Thank you ALL! You made this piece number one!

Chapter Four Why Keep It Mum

Severus sat at the large mahogany desk that occupied the vast amount of the sitting room in his personal chambers. He stared down at the two items clutched in either one of his long-fingered hands, just above the smooth, uncluttered desktop. In one hand, he held a signed contract. In the other, a single brown hair threaded itself between the pads of his index finger and thumb. Both things could be either his salvation or his utter damnation. Gingerly laying the thread of hair on his desk, he turned his attention to the contract. Radames, the barn owl he frequently borrowed from the school owlery to run interference between his box in Hogsmeade post office and himself, had brought it this morning. He seemed to sense Severus's anxiety, hopping around the tray of owl treats nervously, shifting from foot to foot as Severus attempted to loosen the red ribbon bearing the seal of St. Mungo's that had been used to attach the thick envelope to Radames's leg. Much as he expected, the envelope contained an official copy of the contract between himself and Joy, with Healer Levy's signature between them like a chain link. He knew that the original was kept under the security of confidential record archives at St. Mungo's and that Joy could no more see his real signature than he could hers. Instead of her legal name, he simply saw the smooth, loopy "Joy" that she usually used to close their letters. He supposed that she merely saw his own nom de plume in his spiky scrawl. Severus grimaced down at the signature. In a moment of sheer impatience and curiosity earlier, he had tried every revealing charm he knew, trying to force the name into existence. It resisted him completely, but he hadn't expected otherwise. Part of him cursed himself for not attempting it before Healer Levy had signed it to make it official, but Severus had a hunch that Joy's spell-work would have had no more holes than St. Mungo's. He sighed again.

This was getting very dangerous.

Severus had started to get to a point where he just *had* to know who she was. However, aside from the five-minute lapse this afternoon, he had staunchly refused to betray her trust. Joy had been nothing but thorough this entire process. Aside from the betrayal of her age and the small fact that she worked at the Ministry, she'd given him no identifying information. True, he could make a few guesses from these facts, but they were mostly inconclusive. Hundreds of people worked in the Ministry, and as he hadn't the foggiest idea what she did (her interests were so varied, it could be anything from clerical work to being an Unspeakable), he couldn't really narrow it down. And as to her age, knowing the year she graduated didn't help much more. Having turned thirty-two just this past September, she would have graduated in 1997, the year of the last war. True, that class was more pertinent to him than any other, but could he really guess at her identity? Nearly two-hundred students graduated from Hogwarts every year and only twenty or thirty of them took Potions that entire time... her knowledge of Rondat's theories suggested that she was one of them, but it could simply be a hobby. And she had made a hint that she was a Gryffindor more than a hint, if he was honest but was this a clue, or simply a detail she'd used to throw him off? Or was she simply a Ravenclaw who'd longed to be something that sounded more impressive? It was the baby's sorting that she'd been talking about, not her own, so could he really be sure?

Aside from those tiny details which he found riddled with holes, she'd given no other crumb of obvious identification. Which was odd to think about because surely he knew her far better than he'd ever known anyone in his life. Even Lily. His eyebrows pinched together at that thought, but it was true. He'd known Lily, watched her obsessively, hungered for her for as long as he'd known her, but she'd only opened the doors to her heart so far. Once Severus had been sorted into Slytherin and she into Gryffindor, things between them had changed forever. Sweet as she was, good as she was, she couldn't help tar him with the same brush as all the other Slytherins and, as they had offered him the only whole-hearted acceptance he'd ever known, he'd blindly run towards it, which had taken him away from Lily. But now, forty years later, Joy's letters, sweetness, and almost childlike enthusiasm and good will had given him the chance to be the man that his youth had never afforded him. He could be Severus, unencumbered by doubt and prejudice and obsessive love and, most of all, insecurity. She didn't know him so she wouldn't judge him. There on those pages was the Severus Snape he never thought he'd have the chance to be. And here on this contract, he'd signed away his chance to continue to be that man. In a few weeks (at best), she would need him no longer, and the unshackled Severus Snape would curl back into the shadows again. His chest ached; he wanted no, needed a way to hold onto her. It was like losing Lily all over again, and Severus wasn't sure he could stand that. He needed to know who she was; it seemed terribly important now, as if his own identity would slip away with her if he didn't find out. Which brought him back, with a crashing thud, to the other item on his desk.

The single hair was all he had of her, and it shone up from the surface of the desk, golden against the dark wood. One hair, but it was all he really needed. She had been so careful over the course of the last several weeks. He recognized the telltale signs of someone who'd done thorough banishing charms the lack of any smell to the parchment but that of the paper itself; thorough erasing charms no errant finger prints from holding the paper as she wrote; and pinpoint accurate summoning charms ... with only one failure. When he had first received her afghan, which now draped invitingly over the back of his couch, he'd buried his nose in it, hoping to pick up some faint whiff of her scent. He'd been disappointed, but after her letters, this was unsurprising. What did surprise him, though, was the glint of a single hair caught in the weave of the wool. The one brown hair he'd found was the only thing on the blanket that could identify her, and somehow he knew that despite the fact that it would have been excruciatingly difficult to remove every single hair among a blanket made up of yarn woven from hair (granted, it was animal hair, but hair nonetheless) that Joy would be annoyed that she had missed that one. Severus fingers touched the hair. It was really all he needed to find out who she was. A dozen or so potion tests popped into his mind, let alone the fifty-seven different charms he could recall that could be done on this one strand. All of them would tell him who she was. But here he was, six hours after the arrival of the contract and two weeks after he had found the hair on the blanket, and he just couldn't bring himself to perform any one of those tests. Not one charm would leave his lips. Anything more than thirteen years ago and the Severus Snape that had died on the floor of the Shrieking Shack would have performed those tests the first instant the hair had hit his hand. The Severus Snape that had woken up on that same dusty floor, covered in venom and blood and loomed over by none other than Apprentice Healer Euterpe Levy who was spooning potion after potion between his lips and murmuring words of comfort between spells, couldn't bring himself to do it. Joy had entrusted him with her anonymity; he couldn't bring himself to willfully steal it from her.

As Severus sat staring at the single golden strand, he couldn't decide if this made him honorable or weak.

Tuesday, January the 24th, 2012

Tobias,

Thank you for reviewing and signing the contract so promptly. I received my official copy from St. Mungo's yesterday morning; I'm assuming you have as well. What a treat it is to deal with someone who is responsible enough to work on things in a timely fashion. I assure you, that doesn't happen much in my line of work.

Now that the contract has been taken care of, we are set to get off and running with the process itself. I've Flooed Healer Levy, and she has confirmed that she is open for appointments for much of the rest of the week and the entirety of next week for your physical. She has assured me that she is willing to work around your schedule if you are not able to make it to St. Mungo's during typical business hours. Once she has completed a formal Bill of Health (as per the contract), she will inform you of where and when to report to donate the semen. Again, as per our contract, Healer Levy will provide you with documentation that I am not currently taking any contraceptives of any kind. Once the insemination has taken place, I will keep you abreast of the results of the efforts.

Hermione scowled down at the letter she'd just written. It all seemed so stilted and formal, not like her at all, and certainly nothing bearing any resemblance to the

correspondence she usually enjoyed with Tobias. The wording of the whole letter made it seem as if it were just ... a business transaction. With a lurch of her stomach, Hermione realized that for the first time since they started corresponding, that this was what the letters were supposed to be like. Her lunch threatened to repeat on her, but she took a deep breath and tried to continue writing as normally as possible.

Once the insemination has taken place, I will keep you abreast of the results of the efforts. These things sometimes take several efforts, so we may have to be in contact for some time longer. I hope that isn't a terrible inconvenience to you.

Thank you again for all your lovely letters and for the many chats we've had. I've enjoyed them so much and I want you to know that I will cherish them for as long as my memory stays with me.

"If that isn't a 'goodbye forever'," Severus said bitterly as he read, "I'm a Crumple-Horned Snorkack."

When he read her last lines, though, the furrows in his brow smoothed as his scowl turned to a moue of surprise.

Perhaps it's my sentimentality getting the better of me (as usual), but I wonder if you might indulge me yet again for something that will satisfy both my curiosity and my heart, which seems to currently have the structural integrity of a flobberworm: would you be willing to consider giving me a physical description of yourself? You don't have to be very specific, if it makes you uncomfortable or if you feel it reveals too much of your identity, but ... I can't help but wish that if someday I have a child with features or mannerisms or gestures unlike my own, I mightn't be able to say to him or her, "You get that from your father."

Is that silly of me?

Yours,

Joy

Severus felt certain as he read this last paragraph that his heart ached so much that it truly must be trying to exit his chest. This tiny connection, this marginal admittance that she would be amendable to admitting his existence to their child, taught him to hope for the future. She not only wanted to remember him, to keep him as a presence in her future, she wanted the child to know of his or her father. A strange urge compelled him to clap his left hand over his heart and rub at his chest, as if the clutching of his long fingers in his shirt could steady his heart beat as he hastily scribbled a response to her letter.

Tuesday, 24 January

Joy,

It is not a silly thing to want a child to know their true self. Despite the unconventional nature of our arrangement, I will be just as much a part of this child as you are. As such, there will, I'm sure, be questions that can't be answered simply by looking at you or into a mirror. If you ever look into your child's eyes and see something different than your own, you'll know that I linger there.

In the simplest terms, I am:

More than usually tall. I've been told that I tend to loom, but I prefer to see it as a dignified use of my extraordinary vantage point. By looming.

I'm of rather a wiry build. In my teenage years, I was rather gangly, so if the child turns out to be a son, beware of a high potential for gawkiness.

I am, have always been, and most likely always will be of a rather pale complexion. This tends to provide quite an interesting jolt for my visage, as I am also very dark of hair and eye.

More than one person of my acquaintance has told me that I have a very angular face; one lady even went so far as to call it "hawk-like."

Severus smiled as he penned that line. What he hadn't said was that the phrase, taken out of context here to be used as a compliment, had actually been extracted from a conversation that he had overheard while patrolling the halls some years ago. Potter and some of his brain-dead cronies had made several colorful remarks about his nose, and the Granger girl had actually had the temerity to defend him, likening his features to the bird of prey. The gesture had turned into a fool's errand, as it only spurred the boys to make jokes about his 'beak,' but the strangely kind description had stayed with him. It sounded like something Joy would say, if she actually knew his appearance.

This is a bare description for an entire human being, I know, but it is accurate enough.

Lifting his quill from the page, Severus gulped heavily and wondered if he had the courage to ask for reciprocation. Watching how his hand shook, he growled at himself and forced it back to the page. "Brave enough to defy Voldemort, you can certainly ask for this," Severus spat to himself.

And your appearance? I shall not be raising a child with a stranger's face, true, but turnabout is fair play

Inquisitive ... and impatient as always,

Tobias

Severus restrained himself from tapping his foot edgily, but it was a near thing. He sat in the small room obviously set aside for health physicals, his long legs just touching the floor as they dangled from the high table. Both his pride and his temper were smarting from the earlier encounter with the receptionist. She had done an obvious, visible double-take as he'd strode into the antechamber of Healer Levy's office, gawking at him and cowering as if Satan himself had popped up and demanded her soul. The twit had actually stammered twice on the "p" before she'd gotten his title out and stumbled over the "s" nearly as much.

"Professor Snape," she said with horrified awe. She'd eventually managed to string those two words together at the same time. "What are you doing here?"

He raised an eyebrow at her and used his best leer. "As much tact and grasp of the obvious as your school days, Watkins," he snapped. "My business here is no concern of yours. Where is Healer Levy?"

"Ah," she said for a moment and then seemed to recover herself. "Oh. Healer Levy, of course."

Glancing down at her desk, the young woman shuffled a few pages of the appointment book that very quietly said, "One o'clock appointment in progress. Estimated time of arrival: fourteen and one-half minutes."

Delilah Watkins looked up at him nervously then back down at the appointment book, as if he were going to scold one or the both of them for Healer Levy's preoccupation. "She's currently in with a patient, Professor," Delilah managed.

"So I heard." His scowl deepened.

"You can, erm," Delilah looked around helplessly then, upon spotting an open door behind her, collected herself a bit. "You can either take a seat here in the waiting room or I could set you up in one of the exam rooms."

Only a split-second's consideration went into his decision. "An exam room will be sufficient," he bit off. He could only imagine what calamity would befall him, were someone he was acquainted with to see him here. He hadn't taken the time to think up an alibi, and he hadn't the energy to do so in the next fourteen minutes.

Nodding eagerly, the young woman had bolted up from behind her desk and showed him to the only one of four doors behind her that stood open. After a quick blurb about dressing down to his underthings which had caused her to blush herself nearly purple under his stare she had dashed away, obviously in a rush to be as far away from Snape and his underthings as possible. This suited Severus just fine. She had closed the door behind him, and he had perched himself on the edge of the exam table, still fully clothed. Not even Albus Dumbledore and a stack of Galleons the size of Hogwarts could have convinced him to sit unclothed to await someone else.

After what felt like hours, the door opened again, and a petite woman with a pointed, elfin face and a wealth of sleek brown hair pinned in a knot at the crown of her head entered and smiled at him. She closed the door behind her promptly, but not as if she was in a rush. When she turned back to him, he rose from the table and returned her cheery smile with a bland nod of acknowledgement.

"Professor Snape," she said in a warm, low-pitched voice in direct contrast with her tiny frame.

She extended a small hand for him to shake, which he accepted briefly, before settling himself back onto the exam table. Without further ado, Euterpe Levy settled herself behind the small rolling table, in an office chair that rolled a bit as she sat, after which she tapped an applewood wand on the table, producing a small file folder containing the words "Fertility Treatments Bundle/Reynard." A tiny sigh of relief escaped him as he realized that all records would be conducted under his alias, not just converted or spelled to reveal only his fake name. If Healer Levy noticed the exhalation, she made no sign of such, simply opened the file, extracted an empty rubric of some kind and withdrew a Muggle pencil from somewhere in the knot of hair at the back of her head. She quickly stowed her wand in that same location, giving her the look of a lopsided Geisha. He couldn't help a tiny smile.

"I know," she said with a laugh. "Extremely dangerous, that, pointing a wand down the back of my neck, but it's a terrible habit to break, and it IS a rather handy usage for all this hair. I never have to carry a purse or holster for it! Now, Professor," she said, holding the pencil over the rubric, "I'm going to have to ask you a few questions before we get started with the physical exam."

Severus grimaced at the mention of the physical, but nodded shortly, crossing his arms over his chest. "Proceed," he said.

She smiled again, a cheery sparkle in her bright violet eyes. "First of all, are you currently taking any potions or Muggle medications?"

"No."

"Any treatments for any ongoing health problems?"

"No."

"Any lingering effects of previous curses, hexes, spell work, or injuries suffered during the war?"

Severus's face went stony before he uttered a decidedly clipped, "No."

While she dropped her eyes to scribble a few symbols that must be some sort of shorthand, Healer Levy said, "I ask everyone that question, sir. Just so you know." He *hmmphed* but said nothing, so she continued in a warm voice, "It's more common than you'd think for people to still be suffering from lingering problems from all those years ago. Did you know they've recently linked the uncharacteristic rise in arthritis among both triptagenarians *and* pentagenarians to an overexposure to Cruciatus during the Final Battle? Seems that those age groups were the most likely to be involved in the battle, as they were either students then or parents of students, so they suffered the most backlash."

Severus took a deep breath and tried not to censure the woman's happy chatter. He knew she was simply trying to make the process friendlier, but he wanted nothing more than to just have it over with. "You don't say," Severus responded.

He knew that she caught the frosty tone to his voice, but her expression didn't falter. After a few more innocuous questions about his health, she stood up and withdrew her wand.

"All right, Professor," she said and gestured for him to stand. "Now comes the fun part..."

He scowled at her and a mischievous glint lit her eyes.

"Well, it's fun for me, anyhow," she said, laughing as his expression darkened. Holding her wand over each hand, one at a time, Healer Levy said, "*Ablutium*."

Severus recognized the sanitizing charm and although he was grateful for her attention to detail, it reminded him more forcefully of their purpose here.

"If you would please remove your robes and any garments beneath; I need you in nothing but your skin."

Severus's teeth clenched, and he favored the pint-sized little demon with a particularly scathing glare before she pointed her wand at the wall and extended a privacy screen. She hummed the entire time he was divesting himself of clothing, and he could nearly hear the smirk in her tuneless warbling. Just as he turned to face the screen, fighting a flush of embarrassment for being naked as an infant, her shadow flicked its wand towards the wall across from him.

"There's a paper gown for you to put on," she said lightly. "You can wear that for the beginning of the exam. Have a seat on the table once you've got it on."

A beat of silence went by as he donned the gown. After a moment, he said, "Did you purposely wait that long just to make me sweat over it?"

He had just placed his scantily-concealed bum on the paper lined table when she flicked her wand, whisking away the screen.

"Of course," she said gaily. She smiled again in the face of his scowl since it had much less venom this time. "Was it a Slytherin-worthy effort, sir?"

"For a Hufflepuff," he said, smirking.

He stayed silent for a while as Healer Levy lit her wand and peered into his ears, eyes, and throat, and then said, "You needn't call me sir, Healer Levy. You must be thirty-five by now; I haven't been your professor for quite some time and you're not *that* much younger than I."

"I'm actually forty-two, Professor, but you're kind to forget that." She cast a few charms to amplify his heart beat and listen to his lungs. "Besides, I wouldn't know what to say if I didn't call you sir or Professor."

"You could try my name."

"Shall I call you Severus, then, or Tobias?"

Severus froze in the act of standing. Not only was it the first direct reference to the situation at hand, it felt unspeakably cruel for some reason. Because he could think of

nothing else to do, he simply finished standing and stared at a fixed point on the wall without answering.

"Severus it is," Healer Levy said quietly. One small hand went to his arm in a very gentle touch that Severus might have almost considered sympathetic, had she not followed it by saying, "Well, since we're on a first name basis, I suppose it's time for me to ask you to get naked so I can handle your bits."

He glared at her, but she just smiled, so he sniffed imperiously and folded his arms across his chest.

"I was just trying to loosen you up, Severus. You looked so uncomfortable. It won't hurt, I promise."

"This whole process is highly undignified," he said loftily, but deigned to uncross his arms and stand still while she Banished his paper gown.

"Perhaps," she said, suddenly serious, "but it's extremely important. Not just for her health, but the baby's too. And yours as well. I noticed on my records that you haven't had a formal physical since the last time you came here to be treated with antivenin twelve years ago. With everything you've been through, sir, I'd hate to think of some sort of silent disease taking you out. You deserve better than that."

Stunned, Severus could only mumble, "Thank you. That is ... kind of you to say."

Discomfited by the sudden look of shining admiration and pride in her eyes, Severus resumed his rapt examination of the wall above her head. He gasped a bit as he felt one of her small hands press down on his lower abdomen, the other pushing a firm, supportive pressure against his lower back.

"A deep breath, please," she said, her eyes intent on his stomach, and when he complied, "Good. Another. Good." Healer Levy dropped to her knees in front of him, and with another cheeky smile as she gazed up at him, she gave a low whistle. "My goodness."

A quick glance down at her and he couldn't help but ask, "What is it?"

"Well, sir, it's just a shame you aren't doing this the usual way. If she had the view I have, maybe she'd change her mind about..."

"Miss Stanhope!" Severus shouted without thinking.

The small woman burst into a peal of musical laughter and said, "I haven't been a Stanhope for nearly twenty years now, Severus. And I've been a Healer for twenty-three, which I'm sure you'll remember."

"You weren't this forward when you were a Stanhope."

"Not to you," she said cheekily. "I was terrified beyond my wits in your class."

"And a damn sight more respectful as a result!"

"Shall I go back to calling you sir, then?"

He narrowed his eyes at her, but let it go without comment just to get the damn thing over faster. She ran the usual battery of tests on his lower half that he remembered despising at Hogwarts, but was thoroughly grateful that, despite her cheek, Healer Levy was both gentler and more relaxing to his nerves than Poppy Pomfrey. Especially as he didn't have to eat breakfast across the table from her every morning, knowing that she'd traversed the less scenic vistas on his body, unlike he suffered with Poppy Pomfrey. Eventually, Healer Levy moved to the small sink in the corner to wash her hands. As she did so, she turned her head to talk to him.

"Now that we've got that done, there's just one last thing I need to get before I can Floo Joy with a clean bill of health. I'm going to need a semen sample, so we can run a diagnostic to get sperm count. Men of your age," she ignored his indignant grumble as he replaced his clothing, "run the risk of having lower sperm counts, especially if they've had repeated spell injuries and use of Unforgivables in their past, which I'm sure you have. We can get a sample for the BoH, I can run the diagnostic, and you can schedule an appointment with Delilah to come back for your donation."

A heavy sigh escaped him as he withdrew his wand from an inner pocket and wordlessly used it to rebutton his robes. "Can't I get this out of the way all at once?" He shuddered to think of wording his follow-up appointment with the idiot at the front desk.

Healer Levy looked genuinely surprised. "I wasn't aware you were in such a hurry to get on with it," she answered. Before he could reply, she said, "Of course, if you have the time, you can provide the full amount necessary and I'll just run the diagnostic on the whole sample. You can wait for the results and then you won't have to come back again."

He nodded shortly and fought the rising blush that he knew was on his cheeks.

"Well," Healer Levy said, and for a moment, Severus could see a strange sadness in her face. She twirled her wand in the air, and a small rack of test tubes about as thick around as his wand deposited itself on the rolling table. "When you're ready to begin, just tap it with your wand and say, *'Expletum'*. It'll fill each test tube in turn, at the appropriate time. Please see if you can manage to fill all four; it'll decrease the likelihood of having to come back to make more donations. You may transfigure the furniture or room however you see fit."

"Thank you," he said, acutely uncomfortable.

The instant Healer Levy opened the door, a sleek black owl swooped into the room, dropped a small envelope in Severus's lap, then circled for a moment and winged its way out again. He barely had to look at it before recognizing Joy's writing addressing the missive to Tobias. Healer Levy's eyes held on the handwriting for just a moment before rising to Severus's face. She looked at him silently.

"I tried to stop her, Terri," Delilah's voice called from the other room, "but she was fairly insistent."

Healer Levy watched Severus stow the letter in his pocket, calling "That's fine, Lil," to her secretary and nodding to him as she moved to the door. "Call me whenever you're ready, Professor. Take your time."

She had closed the door nearly all the way before Severus said, "Euterpe?"

The door opened again, showing her small face bearing a raised eyebrow and a curious expression. "Yes, Severus?"

His face pinched a tad in discomfort, but he couldn't control his curiosity. "Were you surprised when you saw who Tobias was?"

A full-throated laugh left her. "Could have knocked me over with a Jobberknoll feather. Funny how fate works these things out, isn't it?"

"Yes, funny. And do you," he started, but had to stop and clear his throat. "Now knowing who the father of this child is, do you ... that is, do you believe ... do you think..."

"She'll be a wonderful parent, Professor," Healer Levy said quietly. Just before she shut the door, she peered around it to give him a thoughtful look. Then, she said, "So will you."

Too stunned to respond, Severus watched the door long after it closed, his hand clasped over the pocket holding Joy's most recent letter.

A/N Well, I hope you enjoyed this installment. I thoroughly enjoyed Severus's little trip to the hospital. Oh, just for reference:

Expletum: to fill up; to satisfy; to quench; to appease.

Also, a word of warning: the next chapter will have some adult content, so the rating will jump. If you're squicked by adult content, you might want to either skim the next chapter or skip it completely. Though why you'd want to skip the fun part, I'll never know. ^_^ The next few chapters are already written so, aside from the hiatus for the voting process, the rest of this fic should barrel right along.

By the way... vote for me, vote for me, vote for me!!!!

Thanks for all the lovely reviews and encouragement!

And What I Feel, I Must Reveal

Chapter 5 of 15

Winner for the Anything Goes Challenge Chaptered Category! Seeking: An intelligent, capable wizard amenable to assisting a bright, independent, magically-formidable single witch in the conception of a child. Insemination only: no sexual congress; non-negotiable. Dignity and discretion of utmost importance. Neither monetary nor emotional support needed for or during the birth and life of child. Further contact will be established following receipt of preliminary letter of interest. Address all inquiries by owl to Joy Bundle, Box # 1086, Hogsmeade Village.

A/N – What can I say to start this chapter other than, "WOW!"



I'm touched, humbled, exhilarated, and any number of a thousand other feelings. My most humble and grateful thanks to you all ... you made me number one in the chaptered category! I haven't been with TPP that long, but I'm incredibly touched and happy that my welcome into the fold has been so thorough and enthusiastic; I got second-place with my first challenge entry and now this! *hugs everybody*

Okay, now that my gushing is finished, some notes on the chapter itself: there is some smuttiness ahead. As such, I'll issue a warning that if you don't like sexual content – in this case, descriptions of masturbation, etc – please steer clear. I don't want to offend anyone. Though, I happen to think that's the best part. *smirk* Anyway, read on! Oh, and thank you all for your wonderful reviews (wink wink, nudge nudge).

~~ ** Lady Tuesday ** ~~

Chapter Five – And What I Feel, I Must Reveal

Severus was dreadfully uncomfortable. That's all there was to it. Here he sat, in a little sterile room in St. Mungo's, too anxious and embarrassed to even think about doing what had to be done. Twenty minutes had passed, and he'd only been able to calm himself enough to stop pacing and sit down. Perhaps Healer Levy was right about transfiguring the furniture; it stood to reason that if he felt more comfortable in his surroundings, he'd feel more at ease with Dear God, what had he gotten himself into? Sitting in an exam room in St. Mungo's, masturbating into test tubes? Was he out of his mind?

"This isn't helping," he said to himself, scrubbing hands through his hair and across his face. "You're just making yourself worse by working it over like this."

Perhaps reading Joy's letter would help him calm down enough to get a handle on the situation. Digging into the pocket in his robes where he'd stowed the epistle, Severus unfolded the parchment with twitching fingers.

Thursday, January the 26th, 2012

Tobias,

I suppose turnabout is fair play, though I will admit that it makes me slightly nervous to reveal what I look like. Not that I don't trust you, of course, but my physical appearance has historically been both unremarkable and a source of great angst in my life (especially with those of the male gender). But you were good enough to share with me, so I will return the favor, dubious as it is.

I am:

- Of a slightly greater height than the average female. I stand approximately 170 cm tall (UK average, of course, being 163 cm).

- Of a rather pale complexion as well. Years of spending all my time buried between book pages instead of out playing Quidditch or sunbathing like most other teenagers, I suppose.

- In possession of rather bland features, in that my hair and eyes are both a somewhat unremarkable, medium shade of brown. My hair extends to just past my shoulder blades and is curly.

Severus noticed a small inkblot just before this last word. For some reason, she'd hesitated before stating her hair was curly. Perhaps she was insecure about it? The stick straight styles of his Hogwarts years must have been popular during her formative years as well.

- Somewhat unbalanced, physically. I got both my father's trim hips and my mother's small shoulders, so I don't really have much curve to me, as lots of other women do. Naturally, this fact, compounded with the fact that I also received my mother's small(ish) breasts, made for a decided amount of teasing as an adolescent, as well as far too many jokes about being flat-chested. Children are so cruel.

As you said, it's hard to sum up a person in such bare details, but that is me, in my simplest form.

Yours,

Joy

PS – Healer Levy informed me that you have an appointment with her today. I warn you, she's rather forward, with more than the usual amount of cheek.

Severus scoffed loudly. "An understatement if I've ever heard one," he muttered.

I find that I enjoy this about her – I always respect people who speak their mind, as you well know – but it may be off-putting to someone who is unfamiliar with her candor.

There was a large break in her writing, as if she had carefully considered her next phrase before penning it. At least an inch down the parchment from her post-script, Joy had written:

This means the world to me. Good luck.

After a long moment of staring down at it, Severus gently placed the page on top of the rolling table. Joy's letter had done the opposite of calm him down, but not in an unpleasant way. Her self-deprecating description of her appearance and her earnest, careful entreaty at the end had only made him want to help her more. No longer nervous, Severus was determined to offer this sweet, enthusiastic, intelligent woman everything he could towards having the child she obviously wanted so desperately.

With a firm nod, he stood and regarded the room. Healer Levy was quite right in that he should transfigure the furniture to make his surroundings more comfortable, so Severus systematically worked his way around the small chamber, changing this as he saw fit. The walls dimmed in color, darkening with the charm until they were a rich crimson. The exam table became a low fainting couch in plush black leather, the rolling table changing into a mahogany end piece. A flick of his wrist and the candle sconces around the room dimmed to barely a hush of light. Severus pointed his wand at the small rack of test tubes, and with a grimace, said, "*Expletum*." Satisfied that his charm was good, Severus removed his outer robes and settled on the chaise in just his shirtsleeves and a trim pair of black linen trousers. He slowed his breathing as he lay – something he'd become quite good at during the war; it helped mask any signs of nervousness or lying – and stretched out, trying to get comfortable. The trick, for him, would be thinking of a powerful enough mental image to initiate a response. Severus let his mind wander as he lay there in the small, warm room, waiting for something to occur to him as a potential arousal tool. Usually when he pleased himself, he was in such hurry that he would simply call to mind the most recent concept or event that had given him an erection, knowing it as a "sure thing," and let his imagination do the rest. Now, his mind was strangely blank.

As his eyes drifted shut, an image slowly drifted up behind the lids. He thought of Joy, little wonder, but this time, the shadowy concept of her that his own mind had put together was being filled in by the details she had given him. A tall woman – at least, relatively speaking; nothing to his own towering height – materialized there, swathed in the peacock blue robes that most Ministry departments chose as uniform. He imagined her to wear sensible, low-heeled shoes, as Joy was far too practical for the spiked, arthritis-inducing abominations favored by most women these days. A tumble of medium brown curls spilled over slim shoulders, shot through with highlights of golden strands like that of the one he currently kept in his top desk drawer. Her face was strangely out of focus in his mind; not absent and not featureless, merely blurred enough that the individual features had no distinct characteristics.

In his mind, Joy walked towards him in this very room, her slim hands waving across the front of her body, a charm causing her robes to open at the front and reveal her undergarments. His Joy slipped out of the robes completely as she walked, bending next to remove her shoes, which provided him with a wide view of her décolletage, displayed above the coffee-colored brassiere. Straightening, he imagined her stopping just in front of him – in a bizarre sequence where he could see his own lower half, as if she were really here in this room with him. Her erect nipples were just visible through the material of her bra. Severus's breathing sped, and his pulse began to race as his dream Joy made to reach around her back for the clasp of her brassiere, the arch of her back making the small, high breasts seem to leap towards him. He could see his own hands extend and curl long fingers around the peak of her nipples, pushing against the silky material. His whole body ached in longing as the bra fluttered away from her body, leaving his hands to pull delicately at the rose-tipped breasts heaving in front of him. A low, throaty exhalation of voice rang in his ears as he imagined her moan from the attentions he paid her.

In the warmth of the exam room and the growing warmth of his body, Severus opened the buttons of his white linen shirt and released the buttoned front of his trousers. With a gruff exhalation of voice, he slid his fingers beneath his undergarments and curled them around his growing erection, squeezing his eyes shut as he let his mind play out the dream. In his head, Joy knelt before him in nothing but a pair of coffee-colored knickers. Joy's 'intentions' became clear nearly immediate as he watched her small hands flying across the fastenings of his dark trousers. Normally, the act that she had begun to initiate repulsed Severus; after all this time, he still found it far too reminiscent of his foolish early days within the ranks of Voldemort when he had been drunk with power and determined to pay back any woman who dared to pull a disgusted face in his direction in the most subjugating way possible. No woman had laid lips below his waist since, as the gesture always made him nearly ill with guilt. But oh, how his skin warmed and his penis went rigid beneath his hand as Severus imagined himself lifting slim hips to allow her to tug away the offending trousers.

In his head, the golden tumble of her curls cascaded across his stomach and Severus nearly believed he could feel the tickle of it as his hands skimmed his erection. He groaned out, far louder than he'd intended, as he pictured Joy taking him into her mouth. The hand at his erection fairly flew across his skin as he stroked himself roughly, imagining the warm, wet cavern of her mouth and how intently she pulled him into ecstasy between her lips. Much sooner than he would really care to admit, Severus felt his breath catch as his orgasm ripped through him. At the last moment before his climax struck, sudden and laser-keen as a bolt of lightning, Joy flipped her head up and pinned him with warm, intense mahogany colored eyes.

For the first time, and only for a split second, her face was clear and distinct. In that crystalline second, Severus nearly thought that he recognized this face with its pale, peachy skin, slim nose and wide, thin mouth. Before he could hold onto the image, his orgasm was upon him, and whatever visage his strange moment of clarity had given Joy fizzled away, unnoticed. His slim hips spasmed and twitched as the ebbs of it began to die away. As if through a haze, he tilted his head sideways to regard the table next to him and the four thin vials; only one of them had filled completely and the next was not even half full. Healer Levy had specifically requested that he try his best to fill all four. He took a deep breath at the idea of climaxing at least twice more in reasonably rapid succession, but his pride refused to let him back down. He would simply have to think long and hard – he gulped at his own word choice – for more 'material' to continue his fantasies. Closing his eyes, he imagined pulling the nearly naked Joy into his lap to remunerate for her attentions.

His whole lower half seemed to twitch in anticipation. Perhaps this wouldn't be all that difficult after all.

Hermione sat at her desk, staring at the note that had just dropped through her office fireplace. One hand's fingernails tapped nervously on the desk as she read it a third time.

Hermione,

I'm sorry that I don't have time to stop in and tell you this myself, but the plan has changed a bit ... Don't fret, nothing bad, just something I hadn't counted on. Tobias is here with me right now, just finished his physical exam. I have to say, he really didn't appreciate the more intimate aspects of the physical, but I guess that's just one of the perks of my job. The unexpected part was that, rather than give me a small semen sample for diagnostics now and schedule a second appointment to donate to the rest, he elected to stay long enough to give a full specimen now. As such, he's busy "at work," and I've finished up the remainder of the Bill of Health paperwork, which I've copied and included here. Assuming that all goes well with his sample (I'll owl/Floo you as soon as I've run a diagnostic), you should be able to schedule an appointment for our first round of insemination attempts later this week.

By the way ... it's not any of my business, really, but I've known you for nearly a decade now, so I don't mind giving a final parting thought: without revealing anything that would break Healer-Patient confidentiality, I can tell you that it's a damn shame that you're not getting the baser benefits of his part in this process. God bless men like Tobias! Wahoo!

You'll hear from me as soon as I have the full sample.

Cheers (and try to stay calm),

E. S. L.

Euterpe S. Levy

Head Healer, Women's Health Division

St. Mungo's Hospital, London

Hermione shook her head as she finished reading the note. Portions of the letter had made her feel calmer about the situation at hand, but most of it had made her feel infinitely worse. She had in her hand Tobias's clean Bill of Health, it's true, but she was inexplicably unnerved and more than a little upset that he had chosen to stay at the hospital and immediately donate the full amount needed for a four month run of insemination attempts. This was clear proof that he wanted to combine his visits to St. Mungo's so that he might get this business over with as soon as possible. Well aware that this had been the initial plan, Hermione couldn't explain the ache in her chest as she realized that Tobias wanted to speed her on her way, but the pain was acute and confusing. He had seemed so touched by the fact that she'd asked for his physical description. Tobias had given it without hesitation and even asked for hers in return. Perhaps that was the problem; maybe he had read her physical description and realized that she was less than he had expected? A wriggling coil of nervousness wound through her belly.

No. She was being silly. First of all, she'd hardly been explicit in her description; secondly, Tobias was not that shallow. Certainly, Hermione was just unnerved and insecure about giving away any amount of her security blanket of anonymity. That, and she was more than likely mentally avoiding the last part of the letter. The part that had not only amused her but embarrassed, unnerved and intrigued her all at once. Despite the fact that Euterpe had not been terribly explicit – the law, not to mention good sense, would have prevented her from speaking more directly – Hermione was positive that she had gleaned the correct meaning from the Healer's ribald closing paragraph. Apparently, the unexpectedly candid and cheeky Healer had been duly impressed with Tobias's ... anatomy. A deep red flush rose on Hermione's cheek, causing her to swivel her chair away from the open door of her office. As long as Hermione had known Euterpe Levy – they'd met at a War Orphan benefit early in her career at the Ministry and Hermione secured her as a personal health consultant the very next day – she'd always enjoyed the witch's candor and teenage mischievousness. The strange thing, though, was that however frank and cheeky Euterpe was, she'd never devalued serious situations by making light of them. She'd simply use humor and good-natured jabs to relax her patient. And yet, here she was making rather impertinent statements about Tobias's genitalia. A helpless laugh escaped her for a moment; she couldn't imagine that Tobias had cared for that one bit.

Come to think of it, Hermione realized that this entire process – the physical part, not the letter writing – must be excruciating for someone as private as Tobias. He was being marched out, put on display, and then treated like a milk cow. A deep furrow appeared between her brows as she considered this. A part of her felt almost as if she should apologize to Tobias for abusing their friendship this way, but the mass majority of her reminded her – loudly – that this was the reason their 'friendship' had started in the first place: they had struck up a pen-friendship *despite* the fact that he was going to masturbate into a test tube so she could get pregnant.

At that thought, Hermione's reddened cheeks flamed to life again, and she snatched Euterpe's letter off her desk. "He's *'busy at work,'*" she muttered, reading aloud. "Dear God ..."

He's ... *busy*. Right now. Tobias was, most likely even now while she sat her contemplating it, in a room in St. Mungo's ... *masturbating*. Suddenly, the room seemed to close in around Hermione, and she could barely breathe. Her heart raced. Right now, Tobias was halfway across the city; he was probably physically closer to her at this moment than he had been yet. And he was probably masturbating right now. This very moment. Hermione's whole body seemed to have spontaneously turned to jelly. A sudden impulse rose up in her, and for the first time in quite a while, Hermione didn't fight the urge she was now experiencing. Rocketing out of her chair, Hermione strode across her office and swung the door open with such force that the knob banged into the wall.

The graying, round woman at the desk just outside looked up, surprised. "Are you all right, Hermione?" she asked. "You look a tad peaky. Have you eaten yet today?"

"Uh, no," she said. "I mean, yes. No."

She scrubbed her hands across her face and tried to clear the fog from her brain. The secretary just waited patiently, a motherly look of concern on her face.

"Yes, I'm fine," Hermione said. "No, I haven't eaten." She looked quickly at her watch and held back a swear word. "I know it's late, Adah, but I'm just famished and I haven't eaten lunch. Would you mind if I Apparated home to take a long break?"

"You certainly don't have to ask my permission," Adah answered. "It's your office. And really, you should just take the rest of the afternoon off." When Hermione started to protest, Adah reached out a warm hand and clasped the top of her arm.

"You work too hard, dear," she said. "One afternoon to yourself won't muck things up too much. I can handle everything here."

"And then some," Hermione agreed with a smile. Knowing that if she hesitated any longer she'd talk herself out of an afternoon playing hooky, Hermione went back into her office and grabbed her cloak and purse from the peg behind the door, drawing her wand as she did.

"See you tomorrow morning, Adah," she said, waving behind her as she strode out the door and towards the lift.

Hermione stumbled as she hit her front stoop. Usually accurate to the centimeter in her Apparition, the lack of balance showed Hermione just how much her previous train of thought had discombobulated her. On wobbly legs, Hermione waved her wand to take down her wards and crossed straight through the entranceway to the stairs, dropping her cloak and bag as she went and barely noticing the disruption of her usually tidy décor. The instant Hermione entered her bedroom, she collapsed on the bed and stared at the ceiling, a hand over her heart as she tried to process the feelings running through her. The idea that at that very moment Tobias could be sitting in a darkened room stroking himself had shocked her nerves with strange electricity and caused her blood to pound against the walls of her veins. Even sitting, her knees wobbled, and her legs felt the urge to twitch.

What was wrong with her? Her body certainly seemed as if it was betraying all good sense and patently ignoring the fact that she was no longer a hormone-swamped teenager. Despite the fact that she was over thirty, despite the undeniable fact that she had only the dimmest notion of what the man looked like, Hermione found herself drowning in giddy lust at the idea that somewhere in London the man that she loved was stroking himself in pleasure. For her.

In a manner of speaking.

What is he thinking of? she wondered as she scooted back to prop herself up against the pillows. *Previous liaisons? A scene from a dirty film or book?* He didn't seem the type to fall for typical erotica or pornography, and she had a feeling that someone as rigidly principled as Tobias was would hardly resort to stroking himself and thinking of a past shag when providing semen for someone else to get pregnant. So what did that leave? Could he possibly be thinking of her? Feeling her whole lower body start to tingle, Hermione sat up against the headboard and hugged her arms around her knees. Would Tobias think of her? Perhaps the letter No, that was silly. He wouldn't really get sexual pleasure out of just a bare description of her physical features. But then again, she had lain awake last night for a long while, only to dream of a tall, dark-haired man with an angular face who watched her silently from the shadows once she did fall asleep. And oddly, the feeling of being watched had comforted and excited her. So perhaps he had been as affected by her description as she had by his.

Hermione's eyes dropped shut. For a long moment, there was only blackness behind her eyes, but soon enough, she had a startlingly distinct picture behind her eyes. She was walking towards a man seated in shadows. She walked slowly, sauntering seductively, keeping eye contact with the man in the chair. His long legs stretched out in

front of him negligently, his elbows resting against the arm rests as the long-fingered hands draped across his lap. His facial features were cast into shadow, the light providing only a highlight of his high cheekbones and strong jaw. Even though she couldn't see them, though, she felt his eyes upon her. Unable to resist the tension whip-sharp in the air, she raised her hand and silently said the charms to release the clasps on her robes. They dropped to the floor in a hushed rustle of raw silk.

Hermione rocked back against the headboard of the bed, her curls tumbling down across her shoulders. As she squeezed her eyes tighter closed, her fingers waved across her front (just as in her dream), causing her robes to drop away. Her skin prickling in the cold air, she ran her fingers across the hardened tips of her breasts and shivered in anticipation. Once again swathed in her dream, Hermione bent to remove her shoes; she could feel the heat of Tobias's eyes on her chest, so she angled forward to give him an expansive view of her modest décolletage. She watched from behind a curtain of curls as he shifted uncomfortably in his chair, then sat up rigidly. Certain that she'd tortured him enough, Hermione closed the rest of the distance between her and Tobias, reaching around her back for the clasp of her brassiere, the arch of her back thrusting her breasts nearer to his hands. Tobias extended his long, leanly muscled arms and curled slim fingers around the hardened peak of her nipples. Thankful that she was alone in her bedroom (which she'd made sure to safeguard with strong Silencing Charms), Hermione let her head drop back and a full-throated moan escaped her mouth. Without further need for 'foreplay,' Hermione lowered her chilled fingers and pushed aside the coffee-colored cotton of her knickers. Her chest heaved as she threaded her fingers between her legs, stroking at the thrumming center of her pleasure as she pictured Tobias bending to wrap his lips around her aching nipples. After only a few moments of taking her pleasure from Tobias's ready attentions, the Hermione in her dreams lowered herself to the floor between his legs with a sultry smile that should have scorched for all its intensity.

Disconnectedly, Hermione wondered at the path her little fantasy had taken. Normally of the impression that male oral sex fantasies were degrading to women – this fact being aggravated by Ron's previous entitlement complex that he deserved oral sex to be given whether he reciprocated or not – Hermione had never found any particular pleasure in erotica or films that featured this act. And yet, it thrilled her to watch her own body kneel in front of Tobias's lanky form. The muscles in his legs were clearly bowstring taught as her small hands flew across the fastenings of his dark trousers. Oh, her skin definitely warmed and that thrumming apex of her body slickened her fingers as she watched, as if she were not even the person piloting this fantasy.

In her head, she could hear Tobias moan; his hips jerked and she could nearly feel the silky, searing skin of his erection as she slid her mouth around him. Strangled noises that were nearly sobs left Hermione's mouth as she stroked herself roughly, imagining the hot skin of him in her mouth, the strong fingers knotted in her hair or tugging at her nipples. He twitched and jumped as she pulled him back and forth between her lips. When she felt his muscles bunch in anticipation of his climax, Hermione imagined threading a hand into her knickers, stroking herself, already wet, as she let her mouth sing across his skin. At the last moment before her climax struck, Tobias's head tilted down chin to chest, and she gazed up to lock onto his ebony eyes.

For the first time, and only for a split second, his face was clear and distinct. In that crystalline second, Hermione so nearly recognized the face, with its pale, ghost-white skin, strong jaw and large, prominent nose. Before she could hold onto the image, her body stiffened and a powerful jolt of electric pleasure shot through her, sizzling her nerve endings and chasing away the vision of Tobias's face. Hermione lay quiet and unmovable for quite a long time, not even able to remove her fingers from the tingling slick folds of skin at the top of her thighs. Her chest heaved; her pulse raced. And she refused flatly to allow herself to analyze this act or its motivation, for fear that whatever she might discover would scare her away from this whole situation completely.

A/N - Aha, the plot thickens. I hope you enjoyed the smut, as there is an entire chapter's worth that will be coming soon. No pun intended. Okay, a little pun intended. Anyway, stay tuned. As I said in the last chapter's A/N, the next few chapters are already written, so I won't make you wait in agony ... too long. ^_^

It's More than I Can Keep Inside

Chapter 6 of 15

Winner for the Anything Goes Challenge Chaptered Category!*Seeking: An intelligent, capable wizard amenable to assisting a bright, independent, magically-formidable single witch in the conception of a child. Insemination only: no sexual congress; non-negotiable. Dignity and discretion of utmost importance. Neither monetary nor emotional support needed for or during the birth and life of child. Further contact will be established following receipt of preliminary letter of interest. Address all inquiries by owl to Joy Bundle, Box # 1086, Hogsmeade Village.*

A/N - I know it's been a bit longer than I'd hoped since I updated, but RL is VERY busy for me right now, as the college I work for is gearing up for spring. Anyway, I hope you enjoy this chapter ... I have a hunch you will. *smiles cryptically*

Thank you for all of the amazing reviews! Keep them coming; I love to hear your thoughts!

~~ ** Lady Tuesday ** ~~

Chapter Six – It's More Than I Can Keep Inside

Hermione sat still on the uncomfortable chair, staring into space and largely unaware that a small stream of tears was trickling down from her right eye, racing towards her jawbone. She sniffled once but never wiped at the tears. After a long moment, she looked up at the petite woman talking, shaking her head as she tried to focus on the rest of her sentence.

“—happens to everyone, Hermione,” Euterpe was saying, “not just people going through artificial insemination. In fact, it's often even less successful the 'old fashioned way.’”

One small-boned hand descended to Hermione's shoulder; she barely felt it there until the Healer clasped a bracing grip on her.

“The important thing is to not let it get you down.” Healer Levy's smile was full of hope. “It's only the first try, after all. Even natural conception only has, at best, a fifteen-percent chance of success on every try. Chin up, Hermione. We'll keep trying.”

Hermione nodded, feeling slightly numb. Healer Levy handed her a tissue, which she used to dab at her nose and eyes, then crumpled in her fist. She wasn't crying because she was sad. She wasn't even crying because she'd lost hope, though the excuse was sickeningly convenient. When Euterpe had told her that the first round of insemination had not resulted in successful implantation, Hermione was disappointed, of course, but she felt a roiling illness slosh through her stomach as she realized that a part of her had jumped in happiness. No baby meant she could still legally and rightfully talk to Tobias. Another wave of tears swamped her as she felt that spark of hope glimmer in her just from thinking about talking to him again. The chance of a baby was why she had contacted him in the first place; what sort of human was she that so much of her hoped it would fail, just to keep him in her life?

"There, there, sweetheart," Healer Levy said soothingly, stroking her back as she leaned over with the force of her resumed sobbing. "It's all right, Hermione. We'll get it next time. There'll be a baby soon."

Her sobs increased. The reassurance from Healer Levy felt like a death sentence.

14/02/12

Just heard from St. Mungo's. First round of insemination failed. Will try again soon. More news to follow when available.

Severus stared at the painfully short missive on the table in front of him. No word for weeks, and now this: a minute recitation of failure and a weak promise of more "news." She hadn't even signed her name. She hadn't even written *his* name. Unable to account for the sudden silence that followed the letter containing her physical description, Severus had waited, baffled, as days went by without so much as a scrap of paper from Joy. Days had stretched into weeks with no communication. And now this: a tiny, two-inch piece of paper barely big enough to write that she wasn't pregnant. Nothing on this paper contained even a hint of the woman he'd come to care for, and he couldn't help thinking that he'd been a fool to hope

The message couldn't have been clearer: now that she had what she needed from him, the niceties were unnecessary and he'd been demoted to his rightful place as a common gigolo. Fury welled up in his throat, and he found that he could no longer stand to look at her handwriting. Crumpling the tiny note in his large fist, Severus jerked his seat back from the Head Table and strode away. Every eye seemed to follow him, watching in curious fear as Professor Snape stalked away from the breakfast table, his knuckles white and his face a thundercloud.

"Happy Valentine's Day," he growled. His thick-soled black boots seemed to pummel the flagstones as he stomped back to the dungeons.

Hermione stared out the window long after Aida disappeared from sight. The note she had written was just plain awful. She knew that the brusque, cold, and concise wording would be jarring and perhaps even rude to Tobias compared to her usual effusive and bubbly narrative, but she just couldn't force any other words out of her quill. It had been over a week since she'd visited St. Mungo's and even that much explanation had felt like an unscalable hurdle. She'd been a wreck since that day. Getting practically nothing done at work, Hermione had spent most of the last two weeks trying to pick up a quill and failing. Fifteen letters to Tobias had been started and then tossed into the fire in her office the two days following the insemination, nine the next week, and not a single damn one ever got written in full, aside from that horrible piece of garbage she'd just sent winging his way. Try as she might, she just couldn't seem to make herself carry on with normal conversation as if the whole issue of the insemination and pregnancy weren't the Damocles's sword dangling over them. Not since the afternoon she'd come home and thought of him as she touched herself – even now, a muted thrum of excitement rang through her at the memory – had she been able to think about him and force herself to act as if nothing out of the ordinary was at risk.

Hermione curled into a ball on her couch. Unable to concentrate even long enough to go through her morning hygienic routine, she'd called off of work. Considering what day it was, she knew she'd never be able to function. And here was the proof of it: for the fourth time in an hour, Hermione dissolved into hiccupping sobs. Her whole life seemed to be unraveling and all because of what she felt for Tobias. And after the letter she'd sent him, he'd probably never want to speak to her again. Hermione reached out a hand, laying her warm palm against the cold window pane.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Tobias," she whispered brokenly. A fresh wave of sobs plagued her, and she wished stupidly that Crookshanks was still alive so she could cuddle against his warm, familiar bulk. She needed to know that *someone* loved her.

"So, how do you feel today?"

Hermione looked up at Healer Levy and smiled weakly. The fact that she was smiling at all was an improvement, but she knew she still had far to go. "I'm all right," she mumbled.

Euterpe Levy raised a slim eyebrow and stared back at her, the petite face blank of expression. "How do you *feel* today?"

"Have it your way," Hermione snapped. "I feel absolutely bloody awful. I want to tear out my hair or destroy something or climb the bloody walls. Is that better?"

The Healer's face softened. "If that's what you're really feeling, then yes, it's better."

Euterpe heaved a sigh and wheeled her rolling chair closer to the table Hermione sat on. "I know that it's a hard loss to suffer, losing this chance, but I promise you, we'll keep trying. It's not over yet. Far from it."

Hermione started to say that it wasn't just the baby that was bothering her, but stopped, nodding. "So what now? Where do we go from here?"

"We try another round when you're ready, and this time, I'm going to give you a fertility potion. It's mostly just hormones," Euterpe replied, in answer to Hermione's cautious expression, "but also throws in a few things like iron, Vitamins C and E, and L-Arginine. It's been known to increase fertility in women who had previously failed with in-vitro fertilization."

Hermione nodded. "And how soon can we try the insemination again?"

Strangely, Healer Levy stood up, pointed her wand at a patch of ceiling that appeared utterly unremarkable, then tapped her chest. When she sat, she scooted so close to Hermione that their legs interlocked and angled herself so that her back was towards the direction of the patch of ceiling. Hermione noticed that when she spoke, she was making gestures and movements that mimicked a physical exam, despite the fact that she wasn't actually touching her.

"For the safety of the Healers here," she said, making various hand gestures that Hermione couldn't help but find distracting, "there is a surveillance spell operating from a terminal in each exam room. Don't worry, they're not video feeds," she said as Hermione's face melted into panic. "It's more a monitor of things that indicate physical or emotional distress: ambient temperature in the room, static electricity, body temperature What I'm really blocking, though, is their ability to screen my voice. My spell blocks the sound vibrations from leaving a three meter radius from my body. That's why I came so much closer and also sound as if I'm inside a tin can."

Hermione smiled and gestured for her to continue.

Euterpe's face pinched a bit. "All right, we usually don't do this, but I know that your situation is ... different. There's a battery of potions we have at our disposal that, when taken in proper succession and at the proper time, can speed a woman through an entire month's menstrual cycle in the span of a week. You take one potion for each day of the menstrual month, so you end up taking them every six hours for a week. It provides you the hormones you need for each day of a menstrual cycle and pushes you through that day in six hours."

"Wow," Hermione said, processing the information. "So, this would help my process how?"

"I had you come here today because, according to my charts, you should be starting your menses tomorrow; is that correct?" Hermione nodded. "Which means, if we

started you on the potions today, it would speed you through the next two weeks so that—”

“—I’d be ovulating by Friday evening, which means I could have another fertility treatment by the weekend,” Hermione said, with no little bit of awe in her voice.

“Exactly,” Healer Levy said, tapping her nose.

“So why don’t you usually do this process?”

A wry smile topped the Healer’s lips. “Because the days you spend on the potion feel like the absolute worst hell of your life. You’re going through a month’s worth of hormones in a week. Which means that if you would like to go through with this option, I highly suggest that you take the next two days off from work. And spell-guard anything in your house that’s easily broken, torn, stained or emotionally scarred.”

Hermione laughed. And it felt very, very good to laugh. “Let’s do it,” she said.

Healer Levy stood and released the blocking charms on herself and the monitor, striding from the room with a promise to return soon. As soon as the small woman left, Hermione heaved a deep sigh. This was what she wanted. It was. A baby of her own, to love and raise and teach and guide. Someone she could give all the love that was inside her with no outlet. Strangely, she had to keep telling herself that this baby was what she wanted; her heart kept insisting that she wanted something—some *one* else.

Shortly, Healer Levy returned as promised with a small case of clinking bottles. Without ceremony, she handed Hermione the first in the case, a bottle the size of a cordial glass, full of a gelatinous pink liquid that reminded her of a Muggle indigestion remedy. With a flick of her wrist, Euterpe indicated that she drink the potion immediately, so Hermione placed the rim to her lips and tilted her head back, allowing the oddly warm sweet liquid to roll across her tongue and down her throat. An ominous rumble escaped her stomach as the potion settled there, but Healer Levy smiled, as if this was exactly what she’d expected.

“Okay, so the potion is on its way to doing its job,” Euterpe said, a laugh leaving her at the sight of Hermione’s scared expression. “Don’t worry, it contains an anti-nauseant, just in case.”

After a long pause, Hermione looked up into her Healer friend’s warm eyes. “Do you think I’m doing the right thing?” Euterpe smiled, so Hermione continued. “I know, you probably don’t get that question much.”

“More than you’d think,” she said enigmatically. She heaved a deep sigh. “I can’t tell you whether it’s the right thing, Hermione; I can only say that you’re going about this the best way you know how. I can’t fault you for that.”

Hermione nodded, glad for the honest answer, even if it was slightly unfulfilling.

“I can tell you one thing,” she said with a cryptic smile. She was quiet for a long moment as she handed Hermione the case of potions.

“Yes?” Hermione prompted, desperate to hear the end of her thought.

Euterpe gazed at her with a soft and yet assessing look. “You chose the right man. He’s a good man.”

Hermione nodded, smiling and blushing just a bit. “Yes, I got quite lucky.”

“You have no idea just how right you are.”

Stunned, Hermione gaped at her.

“He’s a good man,” the petite witch repeated. “And he’ll make a wonderful father.”

“Yes, I think he—” Hermione started. When she realized what had Euterpe had said and what she so nearly answered, she screeched to a halt, a hand flying up to her open lips.

Euterpe Levy merely favored her with a beaming smile and closed the door behind her before Hermione had the chance to say anything else.

“For the last time, Mr. Potter, go away.”

The wooden stool groaned until the weight of a sudden, forceful swivel that brought Severus back to face the polished surface of the bar. For the last four hours, at least, he’d been trying to drink himself blind, but these damn young pups kept getting in the way. It was bad enough that Seamus Finnegan was now the damn barkeep here and, as such, had to witness his haggard and embarrassing state, but now Harry Bloody Potter was the latest in the line of people sent to keep him quiet and chivvy him home.

“I can’t do that, Professor,” Harry said, his voice starting to show signs of irritation. “I need to do my job.” When he earned a steely glare from the thoroughly inebriated former Headmaster, Harry added quietly, “I just want to make sure you’re all right.”

“I just want to finish a damn drink in peace,” he muttered, slapping his open palm against the bar next to a mostly empty pint glass.

Upon lifting his palm, a silver Sickle warm from his pocket graced the counter, and Seamus scowled but picked it up and hesitantly made to refill his glass. Though Severus couldn’t see the gesture outright, he saw Potter’s reflection in the window behind the bar as it offered Finnegan a stern glance and a minor shake of his head. The young barkeep had the nerve to pause and then say, “Perhaps I could tempt you into accepting a cup of coffee, sir? Or perhaps some Butterbeer?”

Severus growled, low in his throat. “Don’t try to ‘handle’ me, Finnegan. Just because I’m not your professor anymore doesn’t mean I couldn’t teach you a few things.”

“At this point, *Professor*, you’d be lucky to teach him your full name,” Potter spat, finally showing his frustration.

Severus stood up now, trying to rain down his imperious and intimidating presence; the effect was sadly diminished by the wavers his body made as it reassessed his balance every few seconds. Harry wasn’t the least bit intimidated, anyhow; as Head of the Auror Department, he’d seen far scarier things than an angry drunk, even if that drunk did happen to be a man who used to terrify him out of his trainers.

“Now listen here, Potter,” Severus tried to say, but before he’d uttered the second syllable, the holly wand was jammed unceremoniously into his chest.

“Word has it, Professor,” Harry snapped, “that I’m the fifth Auror tonight to try to get you to preserve your dignity and head back to Hogwarts for the rest of the evening. I’m also damn well going to be the last.”

Severus tried to take a threatening step forward, but the point of Potter’s wand just set him off balance, and he tumbled backwards onto the bar, sending the stool clattering to the floor.

“Now,” Harry said calmly, “I’m going to enlighten you as to what’s going to happen right now. First, you’re going to pick up that stool and set it right. Secondly, you’re going to apologize to Seamus for causing such a ruckus here tonight, and you’re going to pay him quite a bit extra for the three waitresses you insulted, fourteen patrons you’ve scared away, the Auror in the back room with a bloody nose, and the one in St. Mungo’s with the antennae on his unmentionables.” Severus started to object, but the wand poked hard into the hollow of his throat this time.

"Next," Harry said sternly, "you're going to go into that bathroom and throw some cold water on your face to help spruce yourself up a tad, because there's no way I'm taking you back to that school while you're behaving like a rebellious teenager and looking like something that was stuck to the floor."

Severus's eyes nearly turned red with indignance. "How dare you—!" He barely remembered drawing his own wand, but suddenly, there it was in front of the nosepiece of Harry's glasses.

"Don't make me hex you, Severus," Harry said, his voice a low, cold parallel of his own. "I don't want to, but I won't hesitate if you give me a reason."

The green eyes watching him steadily hadn't changed much in thirteen years. They held a great deal more wisdom now, more sadness, but essentially they were still the same. Clear and green and intense, just like Lily's had been.

"Lily," Severus whispered, and the word itself seemed to cause him to crumple. He hadn't even thought about her since he'd realized his feelings for Joy. Now, he couldn't help the comparisons that washed over him, and the weight of it bent him. For the first time in thirteen years, he felt like he might snap.

Without another word, Snape shuffled away towards the loo at the back, leaving a stunned Harry, relieved Seamus, and thoroughly baffled patronage of the Hog's Head staring after him. Wordlessly, Harry moved to the overturned stool, righted it, and plopped down with a heavy sigh. Catching Seamus's eye, he tapped the rim of Snape's pint glass and Seamus filled it without a word. Gulping down the room-temperature lager without thought of his reasonably low tolerance for alcohol, Harry rolled his shoulders and tried not to lose the emotional control that years of work as an Auror had given him. He felt so very old tonight. Thirty-one certainly wasn't ancient, but Harry'd seen more than his fair share of disgrace, ugliness, and unhappiness, both in his youth and in his work as an adult. He thanked God every day for Ginny and Ron and Hermione, convinced that they were the only things that had ever kept him young and grounded and happy. But seeing Snape tonight, so angry and belligerent and so thoroughly, grotesquely drunk ... it was more than just upsetting or aging; it hurt him. It hurt him to see a man who had willingly suffered so much destroying himself so keenly. Harry almost felt embarrassed at the display, and even more so that he had to be the one to confront him. In retrospect, though, better him than someone who wouldn't have been have so understanding and probably would have taken him away in a Body-Bind to burn off the alcohol in a holding cell. Harry polished off the rest of the beer and stood, stretching his aching limbs.

More disturbing was the fact that this behavior from Snape was totally uncharacteristic. Even in the days before the war, he'd always been ruthlessly controlled, whip-lash cruel and endlessly harsh, but never reckless. The sight of the man who'd saved his life numerous times drowning in drink and misery made him want to vomit.

"So what do you suppose his problem is?" Seamus asked on a low whisper, leaning over the bar as he wiped glasses.

Harry sighed. "I was sort of hoping you'd tell me."

Seamus's face puckered thoughtfully for a moment. "Well, I've seen this sort of behavior a million times, Harry, and if it were anyone but Severus Snape, I'd tell you I knew exactly what it was."

Looking up at a sudden noise, Harry and Seamus watched as Severus strode forth from the door to the loos, scrubbing at his wet face with his thin fingers and looking as if he'd aged at least ten years in the last few hours.

"He's not so very different from anyone else, Seamus," Harry said quietly. Quickly, on a hushed voice, Harry asked, "So what do you think it is that's got him acting this way?"

Seamus straightened and favored Harry with a rueful if not somewhat sad smile. "What is it always, when a bloke drinks himself a fool? Especially on Valentine's Day."

Harry couldn't help the shock on his face as Snape strode up to him. The looming professor's face was defiant and pinched in anger, but the eyes had glazed over. Strangely, he didn't shrug off Harry's grip as one hand curled around Snape's upper arm to lead him out of the pub with a quiet, "Come on, Professor; let's get you home."

Harry threw one final look to Seamus, who shrugged and nodded. Harry couldn't help but think Seamus was right, however odd it seemed: Severus Snape was in love.

"So do you want to tell me who she is?"

"Go to hell."

Even Harry was surprised when a laugh slipped out from between his lips. "I guess that's a no."

"That's a 'mind your own damn business,' actually," Severus snapped.

The longer he walked, the more he regained his balance, but the ground still chased out from under him every now and then. As another one of those attacks of vertigo came upon him, he felt the ground rushing upwards until Potter threw his arms around Severus's back to keep him from tumbling face first into the gravel walkway. Harry had decided that it was in Snape's best interest to keep him walking rather than using a spell to transport him, thinking that the cold air and stretch of time would help sober him up; what he hadn't counted on was the sheer magnitude of his drunkenness meant that Harry had become a human crutch.

"Honestly, Professor, it might do you some good to talk about it," Harry said. "And besides, it's not as if you're fooling anyone. Only a woman would have someone like you making such a bloody arse of himself."

Snape scowled down at the young man propping him up. "You're not doing much to garner any confidences, Mr. Potter."

"Well, you're not exactly doing a ton to garner my sympathy, Professor," Harry said with a slick smirk.

After a moment of silence, Harry tried again. "Look, Professor, after the dust from the battle settled and we found out you were still alive, I tried the best I could to make amends and to instill some sort of peace between us. You accepted, and you told me that all you wanted was to be left alone so you could lead a quiet life. We honored that. Hermione, Ron, and I only contacted you long enough to say a respectful, polite thank you, and then we left you the hell alone to continue terrorizing firsties for the better part of twelve years.

"For whatever reason, Fate has shoved us back into the same space on a night where you are obviously in need of one hell of an understanding ear. Whether you want to take advantage of it or not is your choice, but I try not to ignore what seems like providence when it's pushing so hard. If you want to tell me what's going on, I'll listen; if not, I'll drop you off at Hogwarts, and we can meet again in another seven or eight years when my oldest son is expelled from your Potions class for doing something stupid."

Completely unexpectedly, like a rolling potion, a hearty laugh bubbled out of Severus's throat. Swaying a bit from the drink, Severus leaned harder onto Harry's throat and chuckled until his eyes watered. After getting over the initial shock of hearing Severus Snape laugh, Harry joined in, his higher, tenor voice carrying into the trees over Snape's low baritone. Snape motioned for Harry to stop and let him sit, so after conjuring a bench in the snow and easing the taller and considerably heavier professor to its seat, Harry perched at the other end, regarding him curiously.

For a moment, neither man said a word, just listened to the various sounds of night creatures in the foliage around them. Snape sighed heavily, a long, gruff exhalation of breath.

"She's gotten bored with me, I think," Snape said suddenly, as if this statement were the middle of a conversation rather than the beginning of one.

"Bored?" Harry asked. He wanted desperately to ask whom he meant, but knew that asking too much too soon would scare him off.

Snape nodded. "I believe so. Though I can't understand how it happened. Or even when. Our correspondences have always been pleasant. More than pleasant," he admitted, a light blush painting his sallow cheeks. He stared off into the forest, away from Harry's eyes. "Her letters have been ... a light to me. Here," he pressed a hand to his heart. "Incandescent. She burns so brightly that I feel lit just knowing her."

Harry held his breath, fearful that even the sound of exhalation would break the mood. Or the man.

"It seems like more than just a few months that we've been writing; just a collection of weeks since I read that stupid article, but I know her better than anyone I've ever known before. And she knows me deeper than anyone ever has. Even Lily." This statement brought Snape's gaze back to Harry. "Lily couldn't see past this." He tugged up his shirtsleeve to show the Dark Mark, still branding his skin, though faded with age.

"Even before I was a Death Eater," Snape said, "Lily couldn't see past where I was headed, the choices she was convinced I would make. So I had no choice but to make them. Without her with me, what choice did I have? Do you see?"

Harry nodded, but he wasn't sure he did understand.

"With Joy, though, I could start all over again. Clean parchment, new quill. I wasn't the exacting Potions master or the feared Professor or the cold and calculating Death Eater. Just me: the man inside the branded skin." His face was smooth in calmness for a moment before his heavy brows drew together. "But it's not enough. Tobias isn't enough. She only wanted him for what he could give her, and now she's gone. Or, at least, she will be soon enough."

Harry let the silence ring for a long while as he collected his thoughts. "You know, Professor," he said slowly, "if she's as wonderful as you say she is, I doubt she'd let it come to that. If she's that type of person, she would only care about the man you are, not what you can give her. She'd love you for what you *make* her."

Severus squeezed his eyes shut, fighting the horrifying reality of tears. "Then I suppose that she isn't the woman I thought her to be."

"No!" Harry said, grabbing Snape's shoulders and turning him to look Harry in the eye. "No, that's not what I meant. I meant that she probably thinks a lot more of you than you believe she does; she's probably just uncertain of what *you* think of *her*. Have you told her how you feel?"

Harry's stomach lurched when a tear slid from beneath the thin black lashes and chased away down Snape's bony face. The stalwart professor shook his head.

"She needs to know," Harry said. "Professor, she needs to know. She's probably just waiting for you to say so."

"I can't do that," Snape said, turning away again.

"Why not?"

Snape hitched to his feet and swiped a scratchy sleeve across his eyes. "Because she's gone now. It's too late."

"That's not true," Harry said. He chased after his former professor as the long-legged strides took them back towards Hogwarts. "You love her, don't you?"

Snape didn't speak, but the determination on his face as he walked spoke volumes.

"Then it's never too late," Harry said. "It can't be."

When Snape didn't answer, Harry grabbed his arm to hold him back. A rueful smirk appeared on the hawk-like face. "Spoken like a true Gryffindor," he said, pulling his arm free of Harry's grip. "I'm not a Gryffindor, Mr. Potter."

He didn't turn around as he strode through the gates. Eventually, Harry heard him call over his shoulder.

"If you ever speak of this evening to anyone, the former Miss Weasley will have to bury you in a hundred different locations. One for each piece."

Harry found himself laughing as he walked a few feet from the gate and Apparated home to the former Miss Weasley.

Spring swept in early that year. Severus couldn't help thinking that it was quite warm for mid-March. He felt marginally cheered by the fact that he no longer needed to wear the layer of wool pants beneath his robes down in the dungeons and that the air was balmy to the point that his gloves proved unnecessary at the last Quidditch match. Greenery was bursting to life outside the castle, and inside, the yearly frenzy of hormones, snogging, and pairing off into couples was just beginning to show its head. The melting snow seemed to be uncovering layers of romance. It made he want to vomit. And throw things.

Another ten-word missive had arrived from Joy three weeks ago, explaining that the second round of insemination (surprise!) had failed. He'd been in a towering temper for nearly a fortnight, rendering even teachers unsafe from his ire. Eventually, Minerva had pulled him aside and very calmly explained that he was not allowed to give Hagrid detention for having bad taste in wine. She had then proceeded to quite impertinently suggest that he needed a vacation. Though he'd roared at her to nose out, he'd spent the last six days quite comfortably holed up in his dungeon chambers, alternately cursing the world and hiding from it between the pages of Rondat's anthologies. And whenever the anthologies started to remind him of Joy (every hour or so), he'd have a tumbler of Firewhiskey and returned to cursing the world. He felt like his old self again.

And that was the worst part of the whole situation.

Potter had invited him over for dinner no less than twelve times in the last month, receiving increasingly terse decline notes in response. The most recent – sent just this morning – reminded Potter that he'd 'been quite satisfied with the past decade's agreement to tactfully ignore each other's existences' and wouldn't he be kind enough to bugger the hell off. Potter had simply replied with a note saying, "I'll try again next week."

Severus grumbled loudly, causing a few nearby second-years to jump anxiously in their seats. Minerva scowled at him from the other side of the Great Hall, casting a quick eye over all the students currently engaged with silent work for Homework Club, and then strode swiftly to where he stood.

"For Merlin's sake, Severus," she spat in a harsh whisper. "If you can't be polite enough to be silent in your emotional musings, then taking your moody, reclusive bum back to the dungeons to stew!"

Taking her at her word, Snape favored the Headmistress with an icy glare before turning on his heel and heading back to his chambers. Most of the walk there was a blur of annoyance and tension, but when he opened his chamber door, he started violently. Perched on the back of his desk chair was an owl, though not the usual owl, Radames, that brought his mail from Hogsmeade. This bird was sleek and dark and had the regal bearing of a Queen who knew that she would be instantly admired and praised for her beauty. She – he was strangely certain it was a she – tilted her head and regarded him intently as he crossed the room to her. Clutched in one set of talons was what must be a letter, though the scroll was thick enough to be an issue of the *Prophet*.

"Hello there," Severus said tentatively as he approached the chair. "You're someone new. You couldn't have just left this on the desk?"

She clicked her beak and hopped the short distance to his desk, dropping the post on his blotter. Bending over, she tapped it several times with her beak.

"Thank you," he said, amused and intrigued by the bird's nearly prescient attitude.

Grabbing an owl treat from a jar on the sill, he tossed it onto the desk next to her. No sense taking the chance that she'd bite him if he came any closer. Strangely, the bird

ignored the treat, and rather than flying off now that her duty was complete, she bent again to tap the scroll with her beak, this time insistently enough to put a few small pock marks in the parchment.

"Tenacious, aren't you?" he chortled. "It must be important then?"

Her feathers ruffled and she hopped side to side as he sat down and picked up the tightly furled parchment.

"All right, then," he said, and reached into his desk drawer for a pair of silver-framed reading glasses. "Let me see ..."

The glasses slid from his hand and clattered to the floor when he turned the scroll and saw the writing on the outside.

Mr. Tobias Reynard

That was all. No box number in Hogsmeade. Just the name. And even if the alias hadn't told him immediately who the sender was, the handwriting would have, even through the strange splotches of water damage throughout his name. Studying her writing for a moment, barely believing that she'd actually written him a good length letter again, Severus was struck with a sudden realization of what he saw.

"You're her owl, aren't you? She didn't bother going through Hogsmeade; she wanted you to bring it straight to me, didn't she?"

This time, the sleek ebony owl didn't bother to tap the parchment: She hopped right up onto Severus's arm and pecked hard at his hand. Swearing profusely, Severus shook her off rather more roughly than was good manners, he was sure.

"All right, you mangy beast! I'll read the bloody thing."

When Severus unfurled the letter, its parchment dropped down the desk, over his lap and far away across the floor. With a horrible sense of foreboding, he began to read the mammoth length of parchment dappled with what he could only assume was water. Or tears.

Monday, March the 19th, 2012

Dear Tobias,

I'm not so sure I even have the right to say that to you anymore. How you must hate me. After months of lovely letters – letters that have lit every day I have received them – I have left you with practically nothing but a handful of words and no respect for the dear, dear friendship we have built between us. I have used you so abominably these last few weeks, and the only excuse I have is that I didn't know what to say. How angry you must be with me. Even if you never speak to me again ...well, write to me, I mean of course ... I hope you will at least find it in your heart to read this letter, as I hope to explain at least some part of what I have felt and what I have done.

I'm so afraid, Tobias. Everything about our situation now frightens me. I've waited until I'm over thirty to even try to get pregnant and in such a situation But I'm getting ahead of myself. I need to explain to you everything that makes my situation what it is. No more concealment, no more lies. You deserve that much.

I'm divorced. My ex-husband and I met as children on the train to Hogwarts before our first year. For the first few years of school, we were fast friends, together with another young man we all met very early on. We were inseparable, the three of us, and after a few years of being 'one of the guys,' I began to fancy myself in love with my future husband. He being of a very different constitution and manner than I, we fought often, but in what all who knew us considered to be a good-natured sort of way. I should have known it for what it was. As seventh years, we had a very unique and stressful position in the final battle with Lord Voldemort, and when everything was all over and we all had the option of just living for the first time ever, we were all overcome with giddy excitement and drunk on freedom. Our marriage didn't take very long to dissolve. I'm not sure I could stand to go into all the details of the degeneration of the situation now – I find myself far too distraught – but if you decide to continue our friendship, merely ask and I will give you any detail you seek. Suffice it to say, my ex-husband ended up remarried and up to his neck in children and I ended up a social pariah with a talent for knitting and a very old half-Kneazle for company.

The seven and a half years since my divorce haven't been unhappy, per se, simply quiet and somewhat lonely. I've picked up and perfected numerous hobbies and gone out on a handful of dates, but not a damn thing has actually fulfilled me in the way I'd hoped my life would be at this point. That's when I posted the advert. I figured, why wait for a man who may not ever come? Why should I sacrifice the dream of having a child simply because my husband grew out of me?

And then came you. Everything I was looking for, and yet, at the same time, nothing I asked for. Strange, that. What I wanted was a baby with no strings attached and what I got was an amazing, spell-binding (forgive the pun), totally unexpected friendship with a man more complex and intriguing than I've ever had the pleasure of meeting before. Even though we've never really met. And I just got carried away on what your correspondences have done for me. I feel alive again. More alive than I have since that dizzy-drunk year after the war; only this time, I have the wisdom and maturity to see my path ahead. And for a long time now, it's seemed like the original idea of the baby has barely even mattered. Which terrifies me, Tobias.

I do want a baby. I do. So much. But I don't just want a baby. I want your baby. Perhaps I'm laying my hand out too far, showing too much, revealing too much, but you deserve to know the truth. I want to have your child. And now that I know exactly what I want, it seems to be the one thing that Fate won't let me have.

Two rounds of insemination have failed and that after Healer Levy gave me a whole slew of potions basically designed to ensure conception. And to add insult to injury, she even said that your sperm count was above average, especially for someone your age. So it must be me. My body is failing me, somehow. And failing you, too. What if it never works? What if I can never have a baby? The thought scares me more than I want to acknowledge.

I just didn't know how to tell you all this. I'm terrified and confused and sad ... and yet, every time I think of you, I can't stop myself from smiling. I hadn't the foggiest idea how to put it all down on paper, and I was terribly afraid that if I did, I'd lose you all together. I didn't think I was strong enough to stand it.

And yet, now I feel like that's what's happened. I've lost you. And it's all my own damn fault. For being too cautious, for not telling you how I've felt all this time ... I feel like this is what I deserve for treating you so awfully.

I hope you can forgive me. And even if you can't, I hope you can accept this explanation and a heartfelt apology for what you've gone through.

Yours always,

Joy

Monday, 19 March

Joy,

I barely know where to begin. I suppose the best place to start would be that which is foremost in my mind, so thence I go:

You owe me no apology, Madam. I admit, I was both confused and angered by your silence of late, but I am and always have been of a rather resentful and implacable nature; you know this. After reading your letter, I can only feel guilty for being content in my anger and confusion. True, you did not set pen to paper, but neither did I. I was content to merely marinate in my resentment and anger, convinced that you had decided yourself done with me. Bored, even.

Further than that, I have no words to express my sorrow for your heartache. I have come to feel for you a closeness the likes of which I have not known for many, many years. Perhaps ever. If you are brave enough to show your hand, what sort of gentleman would I be to hold mine close to the vest? By the way, I can nearly hear your laughter at my referring to myself as a gentleman. It is highly offensive and I will scold you for it later. As I was saying, I am profoundly sorry for your heartache; I don't believe I've ever known anyone less deserving of sorrow. Your former husband is a fool of the most lamentable kind, and I hope, from this day forward, that you never spend another moment feeling the loss of his company.

But let me clear the record on one point:

Your body is NOT failing you. A woman of any age who is in respectable health has only a ten-percent chance, fifteen at best, of conceiving. Two failed attempts at conception are not a death knell for your reproductive chances. I have to wonder, though ... since you mentioned Fate, perhaps I'm not out of line to mention ...

Perhaps it is the situation that is precipitating the failure ...? You said that you wanted to have my child. (And believe me, I'm more flattered than words can say, and a thousand other emotions occur to me that barely be named.) Perhaps the problem is that, in our current arrangement, it doesn't feel like my child ...? While at the outset, and perhaps with any other man, the clinical and detached method of conception would have worked, but considering the change in our situation and the growth of our ... whatever you want to call this thing between us, perhaps it is that somewhere inside, your body has decided that it is not personal enough. That it wouldn't be my child, that it would only be yours. I know that someday everything grounded and logical in me will gasp in horror at that mess of emotional rot that I've just spouted, but at the moment, I can't be bothered to care. And, more than that, I actually believe it.

So, with a leap of blind faith and complete terror, I propose the following: I believe we should meet, face to face, and try to conceive this baby together.

Yours,

Tobias

If Hermione had believed that the fear she'd felt writing the last letter to Tobias was the greatest she'd felt since battle, she was most unfortunately deceiving herself. As she read Tobias's response, her hands shook so badly she could barely hold the parchment covered in his spiky scrawl. When she swiped them across her sweaty forehead, she nearly believed she would faint. A thousand emotions and fears and anxieties darted through her mind: had he really forgiven her? Was he earnest in his assessment of their situation? Had he admitted that he loved her, subtly, in those lines about their friendship?

Could she really agree to have sex with someone she'd never actually met? More than that ... could she really bring herself to meet him in person, exposing her feelings to the open air where he'd be there to face him?

When she thought of what she'd be risking to meet him and compared it to what she'd lose if she didn't, only four words were enough to pen her answer, so that's all she wrote.

Where should we meet?

Tell Old Man Worry To Go Climb a Tree

Chapter 7 of 15

Winner for the Anything Goes Challenge Chaptered Category! *Seeking: An intelligent, capable wizard amenable to assisting a bright, independent, magically-formidable single witch in the conception of a child. Insemination only: no sexual congress; non-negotiable. Dignity and discretion of utmost importance. Neither monetary nor emotional support needed for or during the birth and life of child. Further contact will be established following receipt of preliminary letter of interest. Address all inquiries by owl to Joy Bundle, Box # 1086, Hogsmeade Village.*

A/N - Okay, so real life and the holidays caught me with my pants down, and this chapter took longer than I wanted. I'm sorry. I hope you'll all forgive me. Also, I hope all my Christian friends had a lovely Christmas, my Jewish friends had a very happy Hanukkah, and my Wiccan friends had a very Blessed Yule. And to all of you who fit in none of those categories, I hope you're keep safe and happy this winter. I should have the next chapter out ASAP.

Enjoy!

~~ ** Lady Tuesday ** ~~

Chapter Seven – Tell Old Man Worry To Go Climb A Tree

Hermione strode to and fro across her bedroom, pacing like a caged lioness and tapping the butt of her wand nervously on the heel of her off hand. When she heard a sudden burst of noise from the main room downstairs, then a muffled clattering of high heels on her hardwood floors, Hermione doubled the speed of her wand tapping, and her pacing changed to anxious shifting from foot to foot in front of her wardrobes.

Ginny's voice drifted up the open stairwell from the sitting room. "Hermione?"

"Up here," she called back, staring into her wardrobe with a frown.

The redhead lightly ascended the stairs and walked down the corridor swiftly, her face pinched with anxiety as she poked her head around the doorjamb.

"What is it, love? What's the emergency?"

Ginny's eyes took in the sight of Hermione practically dancing in front of her open closets in nothing but a white brassiere and vanilla half-slip, half her robes strewn across the normally tidy bed and pin-neat room.

"Uh oh," she said, an ominous feeling settling in her chest. "You've got an important meeting?"

Somehow she knew that wasn't it. Hermione had more business attire than she did casual wear and had never before shown any sort of indecision regarding picking out a suit or robes. The fact that she was gazing into the closet as if she were looking beyond the veil and gesturing with her wand so absently that it was emitting sparks she didn't even notice didn't bode well for either of them. Predictably, Hermione shook her head at Ginny's question, but instead of answering, she began pacing again, helplessly looking from Ginny to the closet.

"An impromptu trial this evening?"

Working for the Office for the Regulation and Restriction of Magical Creatures meant that it wasn't that far out of the ordinary that she was called in as an expert witness on evening hearings. Hermione gave another head shake, but this time she stopped and gaped at Ginny, working her mouth silently for a moment before she managed to croak out a response.

"I'm meeting Tobias tonight," she said. Her voice cracked at the end, and when Ginny's eyebrows arched in surprise, Hermione nearly burst into anxious tears. "I don't know what to do, Gin! I want to meet him, I really do, but I'm absolutely terrified to show up."

Hermione dropped to the edge of the bed facing her wardrobe and buried her curl-ridden head in cold, shaking hands. Ginny strode into the room purposefully, pulling off her cloak and draping it over the head of the bed. Gingerly, she sat herself next to Hermione and began running a hand in soothing circles across her back.

"So you decided to meet in person, then?" Ginny said quietly. Hermione nodded. "I thought you'd lost touch."

Her voice came out muffled from underneath the cloud of curls separating them. "Once the whole insemination process began, I didn't know what to say. I didn't want him to think I could only talk about the potential baby, but I couldn't really force myself to go on as if nothing had happened." Ginny nodded sympathetically, but stayed quiet as Hermione sniffled and regrouped.

"The first two rounds of insemination didn't work, and I was just so worked up about it that I wrote a huge letter about Ron and the divorce and how I've started to want to ... well, to have *his* child, not just a child. I told him all the feelings I'd been having lately and ... well, I said a lot, you know, and—"

"Did the letter say that you're in love with him?"

"Almost but no," Hermione said hurriedly, a desperate quality to her voice. "I didn't think it was the right time to—" She screeched to a halt, flipped up her head and glared at Ginny. "That was a dirty trick."

Ginny offered her a weak smile. "I know. I'd apologize, but I wouldn't mean it." When Hermione just scowled further, Ginny chuckled a bit, even though it was a somewhat sad sound. "Sweetheart, you're obviously in love with him. You're just too terrified to admit it to yourself."

"And why shouldn't I be?" she asked desperately. "We've only known each other for four months, and I don't even know what he looks like! I don't even know his *real name*. How can you be in love with someone you've never met? He could be a mass murderer for all I know, someone who has been acting a part, just to lure me in!"

Ginny pursed her lips. "Now you're just being silly, dear. Do you think he'd really have gone through all the indignity of donating sperm if he was play-acting? He could have just tracked one of your letters, if he were that desperate." Ginny let another beat of silence go by. "I think you're just scared to love somebody again. Scared to love someone who you're not certain loves you back."

"Of course I am," Hermione said. She fidgeted with the hem of her slip a moment and then looked up at Ginny miserably. "Do you know why we've agreed to meet face-to-face tonight?"

Ginny shook her head.

"We're going to meet each other to ... try to conceive the baby in the normal way."

Ginny's jaw dropped. Attempting speech a few times and failing, Ginny eventually rose from the bed and strode over to the closets. The few non-business robes that Hermione had in her closet were unembellished and in classy but neutral colors.

"Well, I suppose we'd better go to my house then," she said, tossing Hermione a set of robes that she'd obviously had on earlier.

"Your house?" Hermione asked as if she didn't understand the words.

Ginny nodded firmly. "No wonder you're nervous about tonight, love. Not a single one of your outfits says, 'Buy me a nice dinner and then shag me senseless.'"

Hermione laughed weakly, but just stared down at the work robes balled up in her lap. "I'm not sure I can do this, Ginny," she said without looking at her friend.

"Of course you can," Ginny answered. "I know it's been a while, but it's just like riding a broom. Only most men never get that hard, need to be polished far more often, and certainly can't fly all night."

A full, throaty laugh floated out of Hermione as she stood up and slipped the robes on. "You remember that I hate flying, don't you?"

Ginny favored her with a lopsided smirk. "Don't be silly, darling. According to Ron, you can ride like a professional Seeker."

"Ginny!" Hermione shrieked as her friend bounded down the stairs, chuckling and calling for Hermione to hurry up. Hermione took a quick glance at herself in the mirror on the back of her bedroom door. She looked anxious, wary, but her skin was clear, her figure much more womanly and rounded than it had ever been (probably the hormones Euterpe had given her), and she was in the hands of the only woman to ever help her tame her mop of curls. Perhaps she'd do all right after all.

"Go get 'em, dearie," the mirror said to Hermione.

"You know, I think I just might." With one last look at herself, she smirked and pushed up her cleavage.

"Tallyho!" cried the mirror as she trotted out the door.

Severus's head swam as he walked in the crisp air; new spring was just around the corner, but the rain drops on the leaves of grass glittered in a way that warned of frost overnight. Woozy with nerves, he stumbled a few times, nearly as unsteady as he had been last month when he'd made this walk with Potter. A scowl touched his face and his heavy brows drew together. He'd certainly not meant to say so much to the little prat, but had felt oddly relieved at the lessening of the burden he'd carried with his feelings for Joy. Shaking his head, Severus was forced to admit that he did have the most abominable timing; he barely ever drank, let alone enough to get intoxicated, and the one time he chose to, his witness and unlikely confidante had to be Harry Bloody Potter. Fate was a cruel mistress who seemed to have decided that Severus Snape was her favorite bull's-eye.

And yet, if he had to be fair (which he didn't usually bother to be), Potter had been surprisingly helpful and astonishingly devoid of judgment or mockery. Perhaps the arrogant little berk had matured in the last decade. Grudgingly, Severus admitted that it must be so, as he recalled that the former bane of his existence had been recently promoted to the Head of the Auror department. He still didn't care to be indebted to someone so poised to embarrass him, especially as that someone was also positioned well to have him heaved into Azkaban, should he so choose. It would do Severus quite well to remember that a former Death Eater, traitor and murderer should not associate too closely with anyone in the Ministry's employ; he could never trust the confidence not to backfire.

Unwittingly, his consciousness took a strange side step: Joy worked at the Ministry. He found himself nearly terrified to realize that he'd never trusted someone more in his life. Despite the passionate and thoroughly obsessive love he'd felt for Lily, Severus wasn't entirely sure how much he'd ever trusted her. Or anyone, for that matter. The contemplation of Lily no longer caused a sick swoop in his stomach, so he allowed himself to consider it: if he had really trusted Lily, wouldn't he have believed wholeheartedly that she wouldn't betray him for Potter? Wouldn't he have counted her on his side despite who his other friends were? More to that, wouldn't *she* have refrained from judging him, had she been quite the peerlessly benevolent and compassionate soul he'd always imagined her to be? Not one single ounce of judgment had ever come from Joy. True, Joy didn't know his true identity, but would she have agreed to meet him tonight if she didn't trust him implicitly? Her response to his note had come so quickly that she must have penned it the instant she finished reading his letter. That *had* to mean that she trusted him, didn't it?

Severus huffed out a long breath that caused Minerva McGonagall to turn and regard him with a curious expression as they walked next to each other.

"Something wrong, Severus?"

He shook his head, moodily peering at the large, amorphous mob of students ahead of them, all clamoring to get to Hogsmeade.

"Well, of course there is, considering what's going on today," Minerva said, a tiny smirk on her face.

"What do you mean?" Severus asked, his voice very nearly avoiding panic.

Despite the fact that Severus had an astonishingly tight rein on his emotions, Minerva had known him long enough – over forty years, when one considered his time as a student – to see the signs of distress in his stern face and bottomless eyes.

When the stoic Head of Gryffindor answered, she did so cautiously. "I meant, of course, that you had to chaperone the Hogsmeade trip because the Deputy Headmaster covered your shift on the Valentine's Day ball. I had a feeling you'd be a towering thundercloud today."

"Oh, yes," he answered distractedly. "Not exactly my favorite duty, chaperoning these foolish outings. Damn sight better than that disgraceful mass of floating hearts and glitter that Filius has the nerve to call a 'ball,' though. Hormonal feeding frenzy is more like it. You know, I think he's getting worse than Albus with all his frippery."

Minerva laughed. "I suppose he is, but it's hard not to want to celebrate, after so many years of dark days and fear."

"The war ended thirteen years ago, Minerva," Severus snapped. "Fourteen this May. The novelty has officially worn off."

Rather than rise to the bait of his distracting argument, Minerva narrowed her eyes at the sharp face of her colleague as they walked. "What's wrong, Severus? And don't try to distract me again. I'm not Rolanda; one well-placed subject change doesn't dissuade me."

Severus sighed and directed his eyes out towards the students rambling ahead, even though he could feel the heat of her eyes on his face. "I have an arrangement to meet someone this evening. I am," he stopped to grimace, "anxious regarding the outcome."

Unaccountably, Minerva smiled. "You have a date?"

His head whipped around, and Severus pinned his colleague with an icy glare. "No," he said sharply. "I despise that insipid word; never use it again." Minerva raised her hands in surrender and Severus continued. "I have agreed to rendezvous," Minerva suppressed a grin, "with a lady friend of mine that I've yet to meet in person, for dinner and the possibility of conversation and company afterwards."

"Company," Minerva said dubiously, unable to control a small giggle under his scathing glower. "It's a date, Severus. I'm sorry, but however you like to rationalize it to yourself, dinner, conversation, and the possibility of adult activity afterwards is a date."

Unable to stand the amusement in her eyes at his discomfort, Severus scanned the horizon, just starting to be populated with the rooftops of Hogsmeade. They walked in silence for a moment before Minerva suddenly spoke, barely loud enough to be heard over the rustle of their cloaks.

"You're scared out of your wits, aren't you?"

He nodded. Minerva stopped abruptly and placed one thin, gloved hand on his upper arm. Wordlessly, he turned to face her. The face of his colleague, far more wrinkled and far less stern than it had been when he'd met her forty years ago, softened with both compassion and affection. The hand she had placed on his bicep closed more tightly, and her eyes were warm but unyielding.

"Don't be, Severus," she said, her voice steady. "Whoever she is, she'd be a fool not to enjoy your company."

Discomfited by the sudden show of affection, he scoffed roughly. "I'm not exactly a cultured dining companion or thrilling conversationalist, Minerva. Perhaps you haven't noticed my anti-social nature over the years."

"That's a polite way of putting it," she said jovially as they resumed their walk. "I would have said 'positively acidic.'"

Severus laughed heartily. "And that's polite as well," he answered.

"But you're wrong about the conversation," Minerva said, undeterred. "You're quite interesting when you're not sniping or hollering."

"Which would be when?"

Minerva screwed up her face in mock contemplation. "When you're asleep?" she asked innocently.

A lopsided grin quirked his thin lips.

"Honestly, Severus," Minerva said, "I'm sure that whoever this lady friend is," she started to say, but then trailed off and reassessed her statement. "The 'lady friend' ... is she the one that sent you the birthday gifts?"

Severus stiffened. "Yes."

Minerva smiled slowly, deliberately, a cat who'd found a way into the mouse's den. "Oh, Severus," she said, enjoying every syllable. "I doubt you'll have any trouble winning her affections this evening."

Genuinely surprised, Severus couldn't stop himself asking, "Why do you say that?"

"I don't know how a veteran spy could be so thick," she muttered. "Do you men never think about a woman's motives?"

"The point, Minerva," Severus said, irritation creeping into her voice.

"Women are more practical creatures than you imagine, my dear. She wouldn't have gone to the trouble of using her own two hands to *make* you a blanket unless she wanted to join you underneath it."

In the moment of stunned silence, Minerva strode ahead, clapping her hands and calling something to the students about when and where to report at the end of the afternoon. When most of them had dispersed, she turned back to Snape, a grin on her face.

"I'll tell Pomona to take the late night rounds, Severus," she said. "Don't hurry back."

With a flourish of her cape, McGonagall spun away from him and headed off towards the Three Broomsticks, merrily humming some Highland tune he didn't recognize.

"What about this one?"

Ginny held up a set of red dress robes with a wide, scooped neckline and a scandalously high slit up the right side and laid it against her front. Hermione looked at the robes for only a moment before wrinkling her nose in distaste. "Too slutty."

"Okay, how about those?" Ginny pointed towards a set of boat-necked dark blue robes she'd worn to a winter wedding last year.

"Not slutty enough," Hermione said decisively.

"You know," Ginny said with a scowl, her arms akimbo, "for someone who's so boring in her choices of attire, you're awfully picky about my wardrobe."

"I'm sorry, Gin. I just need something ... perfect."

Ginny laughed. "Well, if that's all. Do you have any suggestions that might help us find something?"

Hermione started to shake her head, but suddenly remembered the item she had tucked away in her purse. Earlier in the week, when Tobias had owled her with the specifics of where and when to meet him, he'd sent her a small, carefully wrapped box along with his letter. '*To help me know you,*' was all he'd written on the slip of parchment inside. When she'd moved the piece of parchment, there'd been an absolutely lovely, just-opened bloom of a Roaring Tiger Lily. Now, Hermione removed the box from her cloak pocket and handed it over to Ginny.

"Wow," Ginny marveled, turning the vivid black and orange striped blossom over in her palm. When she moved it so that the flower's face looked up into her smiling gaze, the flower gave a small growl, its petals contracting and widening just like an animal's mouth. "These are really rare, Roaring Tiger Lilies. I wonder where he got it from?"

Hermione blushed and shrugged, though she'd wondered the same thing herself. "A personal garden?"

Ginny smiled. "I doubt it. If I remember correctly, they only grow naturally in Sumatra. I can't imagine anyone would want to put as much effort into atmospheric control as that would require just for a personal garden."

"He does have quite an extensive knowledge of Potions; perhaps he works for an apothecary that has access to a hothouse?" Hermione suggested.

"Hmmm," Ginny said thoughtfully. Without seeming to come up with any conclusive answer, she just said, "Maybe." After another quick moment of considering the blossom, Ginny looked back up at Hermione and smiled. "You know, I think I may have just the thing."

Handing the bloom to Hermione, Ginny heaved herself into the back of her closet until only a trail of her hair and her toned calves showed outside of the folds of robes. Eventually Ginny resurfaced, clutching a spring green set of dress robes that looked as if they'd never been worn. Catching her train of thought, Ginny nodded.

"Harry bought them last year," she said with a wry smile. "God love him, he does dote on me, but he has absolutely no sense about what colors flatter. The tone of this green is far too citrusy for my pink complexion, but you ..."

Ginny held the robes up under Hermione's chin. With a satisfied nod, she continued, "Yes, I think those will be beautiful. Your skin tone is neutral enough to pull off the yellowy greens. Go on," she nudged Hermione towards the attached bathroom with the flat of the hanger, "give them a try."

Obediently, Hermione took the hanger and shuffled into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. The color would be quite fetching on her, she thought, but she had some doubts as to the style. The robes were ankle-length and made of several layers of some floaty material that was sheer on the topmost drape; the whole of the set of robes was simple and unadorned, the skirt dancing away from a ruched empire waist, where the top came up in a plunging halter. Hermione smiled at the satiny feel of the two triangles of green material that slid across her chest as she tied the strap behind her neck, but she almost had a heart attack when she turned to view the back.

"Ginny!" she cried, scandalized. "I can't wear this!"

Ginny opened the bathroom door and strode in without any further ado. "Why not?"

Hermione turned to show her friend the back of the robes. "There's barely any fabric back there; I'm nearly naked from my neck all the way to my waist!"

Ginny smirked and leaned against the doorjamb. "I know, dear. You have a lovely back, why not show it off?"

"Because it's a first date," Hermione said, scowling in obvious indignance.

"Where you've previously agreed to shag," Ginny responded slyly. "It's not as if you're giving the wrong message. If anything, you're giving exactly the right message."

Hermione glowered at her, but turned back to the mirror. This time she fidgeted with the neckline. "I can't wear a bra."

"What are you trying to hold up?"

When Hermione growled low in her throat, Ginny threw up in her hands in mock surrender. "Honestly, Hermione, I don't see what you're so upset about. These robes are perfect for you. I couldn't pull them off, but you can."

Hermione narrowed her eyes skeptically, so Ginny walked around to lace her arms around Hermione from the back, lightly touching each section of Hermione's body as she talked about it. "First of all, the empire waist shows how tiny you are around the rib cage, and the A-line covers the fact that you've not got much hip. You've got a lovely slim back, which he'll only get flashes of, so it's a nice tease effect. Most importantly, *only* a person with small breasts could pull off this dress as well as you."

Pleased by the praise, Hermione said, "Really?"

Ginny nodded firmly. "With no room for a proper bra, someone who needed oodles of breast support would hang down to her knees in a halter; you'll do lovely with it because yours stay in place without extra encouragement."

"That's the most diplomatic way of saying 'your tits are tiny' that I've ever heard," Hermione chortled.

Undeterred, Ginny smiled and added, "They're not tiny. Plus, the deep V will force him to look right down your top."

Hermione laughed and lightly slapped at the hands Ginny had placed at her shoulders. Ginny squeezed tighter for a moment, and then pointed her to a small vanity stool at the counter in front of the mirror.

"Sit," she said, rubbing her hands in glee. "Now, I get to do your hair and make-up, and we can do justice to that gorgeous flower. I think that the robes and flower and your hair will all set each other off so nicely that I'd be surprised if you make it through the entrée course."

"Isn't there a charm for this?" Hermione said, grimacing.

Ginny scowled, brandishing the eyeliner like a wand. "Yes, there is," she snarled, "but it looks like utter crap. The line is either far too thick or far too thin; you can always tell who spells their make-up on, trust me. Now for God's sake, sit still! You'd think I was stretching you out on the rack for all the whinging you're doing."

Hermione glared but didn't flinch away when Ginny came near with the black pencil again. Laying a finger to her friend's temple and gently pulling the skin taut with her ring finger, Ginny smoothed a thin, even line into Hermione's lashes, then repeated the process on the other side. After sweeping on a warm vanilla shade over her lids and picking up the color of the robes with a small accent of green, Ginny handed Hermione a thin tube of lipstick. Without question, Hermione leaned towards the mirror to apply it, flinching only slightly when she realized that it wasn't the neutral pink or shimmery copper she was used to, but instead a vibrant red.

"I look like a prostitute," she said unhappily as she sat back to assess the effect.

Ginny exhaled heavily. "Red lipstick doesn't make you a prostitute," she said huffily. "When did you get to be so stuffy?"

Bristling, Hermione sat up straight and glared at Ginny. "I am *not* stuffy."

"Struck a nerve, have I?"

Hermione faced the mirror moodily as Ginny moved behind her. Both women gauged Hermione's appearance; the longer she looked, the more Hermione's face began to shift from annoyance to anxiety.

"What if he doesn't like me?" she asked, barely whispering.

"Of course he will," Ginny said, hugging around Hermione's shoulders. "He'd be mad not to. Besides, wasn't he the one who suggested this meeting?"

"Well, yes," she admitted. "But what if I'm not pretty enough?"

"Don't be stupid," Ginny said bracingly. "You're lovely. And he's the one who suggested the shagging, so he must be gagging for it."

Hermione smiled. She had to admit that because of Ginny's lovely work with her hair and make-up, combined with the fetching green robes, she did look quite well. If she wanted to be truthful, she looked better than she'd looked in years. The vibrant red at her lips made her flush with pleasure; her rampant curls had managed to be draped at the back of her head, in what Ginny referred to as "an artfully wild tumble"; and the bright, cheery green of the robes gave her skin the warm, healthy glow of youth. She was really quite satisfied, all in all.

Reaching up to clasp her friend's hand at her shoulder, Hermione allowed herself a moment of nostalgia. "Thank you, Ginny," she said, batting her eyelashes to keep the welling tears from falling. "I really appreciate it. Ever since Ron, I haven't been able to—"

Ginny squeezed her shoulder. "I know."

Hermione sniffled but continued determinedly. "It really means a lot to me that you're helping. I know you don't really approve of the way I'm going about all this, but ... but it's not just the baby anymore. It's him, too. I can't tell you how much it means that you're helping with that as well. I've always been rubbish at this end of relationships."

Ginny laughed. "Don't you know you're like my sister? Whatever happened with Ron, that won't ever change. Now," she said, bringing Hermione to her feet and propelling her towards the door, "you get out there and knock his socks off. And hopefully his pants as well."

"Ginny!" Hermione cried, but ended in laughter.

With her friend waving merrily at the front door of the house in Godric's Hollow, Hermione took a deep breath, spun on the spot, and Disapparated away with a small pop.

Reminding himself to take deep breaths, Severus wrapped a hand around the base of his water glass and raised it to his lips, drinking like a man dying of thirst. He'd considered getting a harder drink but feared the nerves would keep him from monitoring the amount he consumed, and the last thing he wanted was to face Joy inebriated. Not only would he be horrified at the idea of making a fool of himself, he wanted to remember every last second of the evening, especially if it did not end the way he hoped. If the night went sour, this may be his one and only chance to brand her into his memory. His fingers tapped on the table top. Obviously, in the last thirteen years of peace, he'd gotten lazy and completely slipped in his ability to rein in the more observable signs of nervousness. At least, he admitted, the seating that he'd received would shield their meeting from prying eyes.

Severus had chosen the restaurant at which he waited after an excruciating back-and-forth conversation with himself. At first, he'd debated asking her to meet him at a well-known location such as the Leaky Cauldron or the Three Broomsticks, but had discarded the idea almost immediately. Regardless of whomever she turned out to be, he was certain to attract attention, and he could never predict whether it would be positive or negative; that certainly wasn't the sort of risk he wanted to take on this all-important meeting. Next, he'd considered asking her to meet him at a location in Muggle London; again, he cast it away almost immediately. If she wasn't a Muggle-born or of mixed parentage, the lack of magical amenities might disorient her. He didn't really feel that Joy would be that easily influenced, but again, he hadn't wanted to take a chance. Just as he'd been about to suggest taking dinner in a private room hired from the Leaky Cauldron – far too suggestive, but it was the only option he could think of – he'd remembered Aurora Sinistra mentioning this place. Over breakfast a few weeks ago, the Astronomy professor had mentioned that former Hufflepuff Hannah Abbott Longbottom had decided to branch out from simply being proprietress of the Leaky Cauldron and try her hand at being a restaurateur here in Hogsmeade so that she could be closer to her husband, the hapless if well-meaning new Herbology professor, Neville Longbottom.

Hannah had responded to Severus's original owl request with surprising speed and courtesy. She expressed that she'd be happy to reserve him a table for two and had the means of providing him as much privacy as desired: she'd reserved him what she called "the crow's nest." Her restaurant had a Mediterranean theme to it, so there was a vaguely nautical element to the décor in an understated and pleasing way. The crow's nest, as it had been dubbed, was an alcove large enough for a secluded table for two situated on a balcony that spanned the entire circumference of the round building. A curving staircase ascended up the middle of the main floor, leading to Hannah's office immediately opposite the top. If one continued on the curved walkway, however, the perspective was akin to being in a viewing gallery: a person could gaze down at the patrons below, even when seated at the table on the opposite end from Hannah's office, but a very clever charm of some kind made it so that only someone at the very base of the stairs could look up into the area above. The 'nest' itself was surrounded on three sides by a large bay window, looking out over the rooftops of Hogsmeade and, in the distance, the twinkling lights of Hogwarts. It was perfect for his purposes, both sentimental and private.

When he'd entered that evening, Hannah had greeted him. The meeting was not without a few moments of walleed stares from the hostess – a Ravenclaw from a few years ago who'd never quite gotten over his blustering, apparently – but all in all, the process had been swift and painless. He'd noticed Hannah throwing him an acutely assessing glance for a moment or two, but she'd seated him immediately and informed him that they would be attended by a house elf rather than the normal wait staff so that the service would be quick and intimate. He'd offered the young woman sincere thanks before she strode into her office for what he imagined must be paperwork.

The last thirty minutes had been agonizing. He'd purposely arrived early so he could be first at the table. Uncertain that he could stand the feeling of being led to her like a lamb to slaughter, Severus turned up long before she was due to arrive. Purposely, he'd angled his chair away from the staircase, so as to avoid being teased with bits and pieces of Joy's appearance as she came to him. *But then again*, he thought as he drank yet another of the self-filling glasses of water, *at this point, just the sight of a corner of her robes would ease the tension.*

As if his thoughts had acted as a summoning charm on their subject, Severus heard the clack of heels against the staircase behind him. Seized with a feeling of

anticipation so close to panic that he could barely tell them apart, Severus sat up rigidly in his chair and resisted the urge to pant.

"Just over there, Miss," Severus heard the hostess say. He strained his ears, but couldn't tell if Joy had made a response. The heels clacked again, coming steadily nearer until, with a rustle that was nearly a stumble, they stopped. Barely daring to breathe, Severus waited.

Hermione felt her stomach turn over at least four times as she rounded the walkway to approach the table. Nearly sick with worry and excitement and a thousand other emotions, she strained into the dim light to see if she could catch a glimpse of Tobias. His front half was turned into the light from the bay windows, throwing his figure into relief. She couldn't help but walk slowly, drinking in the site of the broad, powerful shoulders, long arms that curved in front of him, the clean line of the ebony robes he wore. A long tail of straight dark hair was gathered at the nape of a slim neck, tied back with a green ribbon. She nearly laughed. They matched.

Unable to further prolong the inevitable, Hermione finished the walk and stood behind his chair. All rational thought went out of her head, to be replaced with a giddy excitement so thorough that she had to close her eyes, as it made her potently dizzy.

"Tobias?"

He was silent for so long a moment that she knew a moment of sudden terror. Then, warm and rich in the charged air, she heard his voice.

"Joy?"

It was a single word pushed out on a ragged whisper, but it seemed like a song. A symphony, even. Her heart soared. Her throat closed.

"Yes," she managed shakily, her voice no louder than his. Nearly faint with anticipation – why hadn't he turned to look at her yet? – her eyes fluttered shut again as she laid a hand upon his shoulder. It was firm and warm beneath her grip.

Severus reached up and laid his unsteady fingers atop hers. The silken skin beneath his grip trembled just a tad. He took a slow, deep breath. This was the last moment of calm before the whole of his life would shift. When her fingers squeezed tighter to his shoulder, he was possessed of a wave of serenity and nearly giddy happiness. He turned in his chair. When Hermione heard the rustle of movement, she snapped open her eyes, her heart thumping with exhilaration.

The cloak looped over Hermione's arm dropped heavily to the floor as she stared uncomprehendingly at the all-too-familiar face. Severus Snape's features dropped in open shock.

"You!" Hermione gasped out.

"It can't be," he managed.

Hermione's fingernails dug into the heavy wool beneath them.

And everything changed.

A/N - *ducks under her desk and covers her head* Oh, please, please **PLEASE** don't kill me. I know that was pretty much the vilest cliffie ever, but please don't kill me. It all had to do with pacing. There was a LOT I needed to get through in the next chapter, and if I hadn't broken here, it would have lasted forever.

On the up note, however, the next chapter is already done, so hopefully it'll be posted within a week or so, once everyone's had a chance to read this one ^_^.

Please review (even if it's to flay me alive for the cliffhanger)!

A/N version 2.0 - A late add A/N: The next chapter is currently in the queue, which is fairly large. Hopefully the amazing admins here will be able to work through it in a reasonable amount of time; my guess is about a week. So hold tight, everybody; the next installment is coming as quickly as possible! Love and hugs and nakey Snapes to everybody!

Sticking Together, and Ain't We Got Fun

Chapter 8 of 15

Winner for the Anything Goes Challenge Chaptered Category! *Seeking: An intelligent, capable wizard amenable to assisting a bright, independent, magically-formidable single witch in the conception of a child. Insemination only: no sexual congress; non-negotiable. Dignity and discretion of utmost importance. Neither monetary nor emotional support needed for or during the birth and life of child. Further contact will be established following receipt of preliminary letter of interest. Address all inquiries by owl to Joy Bundle, Box # 1086, Hogsmeade Village.*

A/N - You asked for it; you got it! I wanted to post this chapter at lightning speed (or, as 'lightning' a speed as 50 stories in the queue permits) because 1) it was already done and I can't WAIT for you to see what happens, and 2) I thought everyone might just kill me if I didn't. That cliffie really was evil; I fully admit it. I've been a bad, bad author, and may potentially need to be spanked. ^_^

Anyway, I can't possibly express all my thanks for your many reviews. You guys are the BEST. First of all, the fact that there have been over 100 reviews for the previous chapter in just over a week boggles my mind. This piece started out to be a little fluffy bit of nothing that I did just for fun, but it's become probably my favorite piece for me to work on. I'm thrilled and touched more than you can imagine that everyone has loved it so much. Again, my most humble and grateful thanks for your reviews, your praise, and most of all, your dedication to my story.

wipes eyes Okay, now that I'm done gushing ... on with the show!

~~ ** Lady Tuesday ** ~~

PS - Moderate naughtiness ahead in this chapter. And the word "penis." *snickers* Penis penis penis. *ahem* Yes. Chapter.

Chapter Eight – Sticking Together, and Ain't We Got Fun

"Oh, my God. I just can't ... Oh, my God."

"If I—"

"—I never thought—I mean, I suppose I might have considered—but I didn't really think it was possible that—with all the magical people in Britain—"

"Would you—?"

"—and it seemed absolutely preposterous that you, of all people, would be—"

Severus sighed and massaged his temples with his fingertips as Granger stood next to him, looking anywhere except at him, and gesticulating wildly with her fluttering hands. "If you would just—" he began, but she was still careening along at full tilt autowitter.

"—retrospect, it should have been *completely* obvious, but I never—"

"For God's sake, Granger," he boomed. "Get a hold of yourself!"

Hermione jolted ramrod straight and, after a moment to take a deep breath, backed away from him a few steps to drop unceremoniously into the vacant seat across the table.

"You were babbling," Severus said in a much quieter, calmer voice.

Hermione brought one hand to her mouth and unconsciously started chewing on her right thumbnail. "I do that when I'm nervous," she said weakly.

"So I've noticed," Snape answered dryly.

Eyes darting to and from his face, Hermione fidgeted first with her nails, then her robes, then her nails again before settling on rearranging her silverware. Strangely, suddenly, she laughed.

"I can't believe that shouting business still works." A small smile worked its way onto her lips without her even realizing it.

One corner of Severus's mouth quirked up just the slightest bit. "It's been working for over thirty years, Miss Granger. I highly doubt one bout of surprise, however dramatic, would change that. Besides, you've been preconditioned to respond."

With uncomfortable speed, the student-teacher dynamic rushed at the two of them, making both Hermione and Severus shift uncomfortably in their seats and avoid each other's gaze.

Nearly stifled by the unnerving silence, Hermione broke the tension in the only way she knew: talking. "I just can't believe it's you. I mean, it's dreadfully obvious now; I should have realized, but"

She trailed into silence when he looked up at her. Hermione never really realized that her former professor's eyes were so expressive. So sad. Maybe they hadn't always been, though. Perhaps this was a development of thirteen years of emotional disguise being unnecessary coupled with recovery, piled on top of seventeen years of sorrow and hardship, piled on top of a difficult and unloving childhood. An uncomfortable tightness seized Hermione's throat.

"It should have connected," she said. Her voice gained speed as she continued, nervously twisting her cloth napkin. "It should have registered. I mean, on a level, I suppose it did, but it should have been incontrovertible: the knowledge of potions, the position in the war, the acidic wit, the underlying melancholy." She looked down at her hands when his gaze hardened. "You referred to Voldemort as 'the Dark Lord' in your first letter, now that I think about it. Only Death Eaters ever used that term. Hell, I even thought I recognized your handwriting, though I couldn't put my finger on to whom exactly it belonged. But I just didn't think it would be someone I knew. All I knew for a fact was your age, but I never really troubled myself to do the math. I didn't really want to, I think. I just can't believe that Tobias is you. That you're him. I just—"

"Miss Granger, calm yourself," he said. His voice was firm, but there wasn't any of his trademark venom in it.

Hermione cocked her head to one side and regarded him thoughtfully. "Why aren't you more surprised? Aren't you surprised at all?"

Severus let his face slip into the familiar lines of a sneer. "Far more than I should be," he said. Before he spoke again, he sighed, and his face relaxed. "You say you didn't do the math? I did. I knew how old 'Joy' was; I knew that she was from that all important year." A self-deprecating laugh fell from him, strangely loud above the background din from the restaurant below. "I knew that Joy was the same age as Harry Bloody Potter. I even think that a very large part of me knew it was you." Hermione looked up at him in shock; this time it was Severus who looked away. "I just didn't want to admit to myself that Joy was none other than the Insufferable Know-It-All because of what Joy became to me."

Unable to stop herself, Hermione pulled her chair in closer, leaned over the table, and angled her head to catch his gaze. "What?" she whispered. "What did Joy become?"

Severus turned his head from the view out the bay window. The bright moonlight illuminated the right half of his face, making his pale skin glimmer with the silvery tones, a stark contrast to the warming golden hue that the restaurant's candle sconces gave the other half. His dark eyes, now liquid pools of onyx, seemed almost pleading.

"Redemption," he said quietly, spreading his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Joy was a fresh start. A horrible cliché, I know," he added brusquely, "but a truth, nonetheless. She was the first keenly intelligent, compassionate, and strong woman who wouldn't criticize, didn't try to change me. She didn't balk at my gruffness, didn't condemn me for being an elitist or a hermit. She wouldn't judge me for the shadow over my past because she didn't know it existed. Tobias didn't exist before that first letter, so he could be anything I wanted him to be. He could become everything I wanted to be but couldn't quite manage."

Hermione had to turn away and bat her eyelashes several times to keep the tears that had welled in her eyes from falling. When she looked back, Snape had turned his face towards the window again, gazing out into the night and seeming not to see.

She had just opened her mouth to respond when he said, "Miss Granger, if my identity has changed your mind about this *arrangement*, you are free to leave."

Shaking her head as if to clear cobwebs from her ears, Hermione only managed to say, "What?"

He turned back to her. "Knowing Tobias's true identity must have altered your stance in this situation. I can't say that it hasn't startled me, but my desire to continue is unchanged. If, however, you do not wish to stay, you may leave now and we will never speak of this again. I will not hold it against you."

Stunned, Hermione allowed her mouth to drop open, and she could only stare at him stupidly for a few seconds. A part of her – small, but present – *did* want to run. That tiny, uncertain part of her that superimposed her unforgiving, cruel, judgmental professor overtop of this quiet, stoic man in front of her said that he would only measure her and find her wanting from the rosy ideal he'd gained of 'Joy.' But that voice couldn't make Hermione believe it. The past had come and gone; Hermione couldn't bring herself to lash him with it or punish him for it, not after most of the world had already done so for the vast majority of his pre-war life. Not now that she'd had thirteen years of adulthood to reflect on it. On him. Tobias Reynard or Severus Snape, the man inside was still the same: the man who had risked his life time and time again just to honor a woman he loved unconditionally for over twenty years. The man who had called her his redemption.

"You know," she started unsteadily, "I felt the same way about Tobias." When he looked at her with anxious curiosity, she gave him a watery smile and clarified. "He was a clean slate. Someone who wouldn't tell me that I was insane for wanting to have a child on my own, that I was too independent for my own good, that I am too bossy to have friends. He wasn't someone who'd say I was too plain to attract a fellow or too smart to make a man feel good enough." Snape grumbled something at that last comment, and though she didn't hear what he said, she smiled at the innate defensiveness on her behalf. "Tobias never pigeon-holed me as just 'Harry Potter's best friend'

or 'the female half of the Gryffindor trio' or 'the swotty, insufferable know-it-all'. In fact, I think that Tobias is the first person who's ever *enjoyed* that aspect of me. Severus Snape included."

His lopsided smirk resurfaced for a moment, a familiar expression etched into the deep lines of his sharply angular face. Far from the bat that most people likened him to, Hermione had always thought he looked like a bird of prey: sharply analytical, brutally keen, predatory. A hawk on the wing.

"Hawk-like," Hermione whispered in awe as the thought occurred to her. "All those years ago, I called your face 'hawk-like.' When Harry and Ron were picking on you, that's what I said. You quoted me in one of your letters. You remembered that from all those years ago."

Discomfort replaced amusement. "It was an uncommonly kind description of my features," he said. "It stayed with me."

"I'm glad," Hermione said.

When she spoke, the tentative grin grew into a smile that bloomed across her crimson lips and pinkened cheeks, setting a light dancing in her eyes. Strangely, under her smile, Severus felt the damning importance he'd placed on his identity wash away. Despite the confused muddle of emotions constricting his chest, a tiny spark of hope struck in the depths of his heart.

"Then you do not wish to leave?" he asked.

Hermione's stomach fluttered oddly, as if something was trying to escape. Taking a breath to steady her, she sat up straighter in her chair and looked down at her lap. "No," she said, blushing. "No, I don't want to leave. Do you?"

A long breath pulled in through his nostrils, Severus closed his eyes and let calm move through him. Joy wouldn't leave, not yet. Joy would stay. *Hermione* would stay.

"No," he answered. "I would like to stay and have dinner with you."

She didn't miss the fact that he hadn't mentioned what would happen afterwards, but that was something they would deal with in an hour or two. "I would like that."

An intriguing mixture of discomfort and something almost like politeness crossed his face, and she couldn't help but quirk a questioning grin at him.

"I," he started, but paused to clear his throat before continuing. "I took the liberty of ordering a bottle of the wine that you mentioned was your favorite. I hope that is not too forward of me."

Hermione smiled. It seemed that he was trying to make an effort at chivalry for 'Joy.' Whether that was a façade for her benefit or he simply found it uncomfortable to be 'outed' as a gentleman in front of someone formerly terrified of him, she wasn't sure, but whatever the reason, Hermione found it incurably funny.

"How lovely!" she said, trying not to giggle. "That's very thoughtful of you."

A thin paint of blush stole across his hollow cheeks, and his face twisted as he fought a scowl. Tapping his wand against the empty ice bucket set in the alcove next to their table, Severus nodded as the chilled bottle appeared. Another tap and the cork popped away, allowing him to pour a glass of the light white wine for each.

As Hermione accepted the glass, she leaned towards him with an eager smile. "So you have to tell me," she said in a rush. "What did you think of Rondat's findings on the dragon blood infusion?"

A helpless laugh left Severus before he breathed a shaky sigh of relief. A little of the tension slipped away as he leaned in as well, offering her a mischievous smirk. "Absolute bloody rubbish," he said, pointing his wine glass at her for emphasis. "And let me tell you why ..."

"Do you think she knows that it's him?"

Harry looked at his watch, then back up at his wife. "If she didn't before, she must by now."

Ginny's brows pulled together, creating a ripple in the pale skin of her forehead. "Poor Hermione."

"What do you mean, 'poor Hermione'?" Harry asked, unable to help the hint of indignance in his voice.

In the back of his mind, a dim recognition of the juxtaposition of attitudes occurred to him: what a strange progress life had taken, when he saw himself defending the man that he'd have sworn bloodlust against for most of his younger life. He and Ginny had gone round in a hell of a row when she'd finally told him the whole story about Hermione and 'Joy' and the artificial insemination. Harry hadn't been able to decide whom he was more livid with: Hermione, for concealing such a momentous decision in her life from him, or Ginny, for willfully abetting his exclusion without consideration of his feelings on the subject. When they'd finally had all their shouting out and Ginny pointed out that this reaction was exactly why Hermione hadn't told him, Harry had taken a good long time out on his broom to clear his anger and rearrange his thoughts. Like a Bludger hurtling from nowhere, he made the connection between Hermione's letter writing and Snape's mention of 'Tobias' on Valentine's Day. He'd nearly killed himself in his hurry to get back to Godric's Hollow and tell Ginny about his revelation. The two of them had been on tenterhooks since dinner, wondering what would become of the pair and their tenuous relationship this evening.

Ginny's face pinched as she tried to gauge her husband's reaction. "Well, it's Snape, isn't it? I mean, I know that he did lots of very heroic and selfless things during the war, but—"

"But what?" Harry spat. "The man is a hero, and he deserves some happiness!"

Waiting patiently for Harry's angry sputtering to die out, Ginny folded her hands in her lap and watched her husband. Mature and grow as he had over the course of thirteen years, Harry still had moments where the boy she'd fallen in love with popped his head back up, as short-tempered and indignant and maddening and wonderful as he'd been when she'd met him twenty years ago.

"Has it ever occurred to you that he mightn't want to be a hero?" Ginny asked quietly. "And besides, sacrificing himself for the war and for your mum doesn't change the fact that he was absolutely beastly to us in school."

"Yes, but he—"

"It doesn't change it, Harry," she repeated in a firm voice. "Yes, he did lots of wonderful things, yes, he suffered a great deal ... but he did lots of horrible things too, and he could have behaved far better towards us than he did. And before you rush to his defense again," Ginny added, raising her hand to stem the flow of his words, "you should stop to consider that I'm only thinking of Hermione. I don't want her to get hurt."

Harry digested this for a moment. "And you're so sure he's going to hurt her?"

"Isn't he?"

Again, Harry pondered his wife's response carefully before forming his own. "I don't think so, Gin. I know that he was horrid to us – if anybody knows, it's me; you should realize that – but you didn't see him on Valentine's Day, love." Harry sighed heavily. "It's not the first time I've seen a man out of his head over a woman. It's not even the first time I've seen him out of his head over a woman. And to be honest, Ginny, I really think that what he feels for her is"

Harry had to stop and plant himself on the sofa next to his wife. Searching his mind for the words, he picked up Ginny's small hand, so much less fragile than it seemed, and stroked his thumb over the back before looking up into her warm brown eyes, fixed on his face with a wary cast to them.

"I can't say that it's stronger than what I saw in him for my mum," Harry said slowly. "But it's ... more. I don't know how to say it better than that. There's more there. Maybe because of who Hermione is, maybe because she returns his feelings," Harry had guessed on this, but the look of surprise on Ginny's face told him that his instincts were good, "but there's definitely more. And he was suffering like hell, thinking he'd lost her."

They were silent for a long time. Ginny leaned against Harry and let him pull her further up onto the sofa and into his lap, cradling her head in the hollow of his throat as she listened to the heavy, steady thudding of his heart.

"You think he loves her?" she asked, her voice muffled by his robes.

"I really do," Harry answered. Ginny murmured a hum of acknowledgement and pressed a kiss into Harry's chest. After a long moment, Harry couldn't help the smirk that tugged at his lips. "He loves her, God help him. Poor *Snape*."

Ginny's hand slapped out a stinging little smack against his shoulder, but she chuckled and shook her head.

"Poor *Snape*," she chortled before pressing her lips to Harry's.

The evening had been slow to start. For a half hour or so, the long pauses and strange tension between the blocks of conversation felt stifling, but the longer they had talked, the more the feeling of a teacher-pupil relationship fizzled and faded away. Over the progress of the three courses they enjoyed, they had talked about everything from potions experiments and theoretical study to current advancements in protective spells to a societal shift toward mixed blood marriages. With a rueful smile as she sipped her wine, Hermione believed that all they would need to cover would be literature, the fine arts, and religion. After that, they'd have nothing to talk about.

Though, if she were honest with herself, that was completely untrue. Even after all their letters, no matter what subject had been brought up, the two of them seemed to have more than enough fodder for discussion, especially when their opinions diverged, which was fairly often. *Snape* seemed to always fall to the practical side of an argument on ethics, whereas Hermione nearly always took the emotional. In an odd juxtaposition, he seemed to favor instinct and intuition in real-life application of knowledge, where Hermione fell back on age-old knowledge learned in a book or classroom. Those sorts of differences had always caused endless chafing between Ron and Hermione, but strangely, they seemed to amuse and intrigue *Snape*. He was a much changed man, these twelve years since she'd spoken to him last. He no longer seemed ruthless and cruel, but a man tempered by experience and sadness. And, oddly, it seemed that freedom from the life of a spy had shackled him with even more loneliness and detachment. Having cultivated such distance from everyone in his life over the vast majority of his adulthood, he seemed completely adrift even now that he no longer survived on such detachment. The smiles he favored her with over the course of the evening seemed rusty, as if unused for a great period of time, and Hermione felt herself curiously warmed at being bestowed such a rare gift.

As they picked at the remains of a lovely dessert (hers was a delicate cheesecake), Hermione found herself nearly tingling with anticipation every time he gave her one of those lopsided grins. At one point, he'd brushed the length of her calf when stretching out his long legs, and Hermione felt the contact zing through her with an electric charge. Blushing, she dropped her gaze to her plate and tried to refocus on the conversation. She blurted out some question about something vaguely related to the war. If she came up with something controversial enough, it would focus her attention and stop her from dwelling on the casual touches with which he'd favored her in the last few minutes. It would stop her imagining what might come after dessert. With a jolt, Hermione realized that she'd been drifting and that *Snape* had stopped talking to gaze at her quizzically.

"What are you smiling at?" he asked, his heavy brows pulling together.

"Nothing," she hastily replied. "I'm sorry. Go ahead. What were you saying?"

His lips pursed, distinct unhappiness and suspicion etched in his features. "You had asked about the physical therapy for the nerve damage done during Nagini's attack."

"And you were avoiding the answer," Hermione stated, regarding him with an assessing eye.

Severus cleared his throat and just barely resisted the urge to tug up his collar. The large, jagged scars from where Nagini's fangs had torn his neck open had faded over time, but when his collar was lowered, they were still a vicious and ever-present reminder of everything he'd brought upon himself in his rash teenage years. As was the faded grey Dark Mark forever burned on his forearm. Moody had been right all those years ago: some marks never come off.

"It's not something I talk about," Severus said in a clipped voice. "For obvious reasons."

"Not ever?" Hermione asked. When he shook his head, she regarded him thoughtfully. "You don't find that odd?"

"Odd?" *Snape* parroted. "You find it odd that I wouldn't want to talk about the method of my own death?"

Hermione scowled. "You didn't die."

"Au contraire," he said with a familiar sneer. "My body was so weakened by blood loss that the first spell Healer Levy used on me actually stopped my heart. For approximately thirty-six seconds, I was legally dead."

"But you're alive now," Hermione said. "You have been for thirteen years."

"A technicality," Severus answered in a whip-quick response. She made to continue the discussion, but he tilted his head to one side and narrowed his eyes, assessing her face. Before she could get more than a word out, he anticipated her.

"Granger—" he started.

"Hermione."

He actually blinked at the interruption. "What?"

"Hermione," she said. "My name is Hermione."

"Of course it is," he growled in response.

"You've called me 'Miss Granger' all night. I give you a measure of leeway, as you and I didn't talk for the six years that I was Mrs. Weasley, but I can only assume that you keep calling me Miss Granger because it's more personal, and therefore more uncomfortable, if you call me by my first name."

She smirked, but he wasn't going to allow her to beat him at this game.

"Don't try that ploy on me, *Hermione*." He said her name very deliberately. "I invented it. I know that you're trying to distract either me or yourself from the 800-pound hippogriff in the room. It won't work."

Hermione blushed, dropping her eyes to her empty wine glass.

"I know that you're not actually interested in the exact antivenin that Levy used on me or why I don't talk about the attack," she tried to refute him, but he continued smoothly, "so I must assume that you're simply avoiding the underlying topic. I will reiterate my statement from earlier this evening: if you have changed your mind about completing the arrangement," he cleared his throat momentarily, "don't bother with this nonsense. Just get up now and leave; we won't speak of it again and you can go about this process in whatever fashion you see fit."

The moment of silence between them stretched out long and tense. Feeling the anxious tension change to exhilaration, Hermione pulled her chair around the table in front of the windows. She needed to be near him. Her breathing sped just feeling the touch of his robes against her knees. Eventually, Severus screwed up his courage to lay his cards on the table.

"I know how Tobias feels about Joy," he said softly. "The man sitting at this table is the very same man from those letters, but what you see before you, I'm sure, is not at all what you pictured. His—" Severus stopped, gulped hard before continuing. "—*my* feelings and desires are unchanged, but if my identity has changed your mind—"

She reached across the scant distance between them to put a hand to his lips and said, "You're right. You're not what I pictured when I imagined Tobias. You're more."

Raising the Eyebrow of Skepticism (as she'd mentally dubbed it in her school days), Severus stared at her in disbelief. She wasn't dissuaded.

"I know how Joy feels about Tobias." Puzzled, he didn't try to respond, but Hermione found that she couldn't remove her fingers from his lips. Instead, they seemed to have grown a will independent of her own, her fingertips sweeping across his lips in a caress.

"My agreement to be here was based on my feelings for him, not on the face he wears."

At these words, Severus grimaced and started to pull away, but she held him still with a hand on his other cheek.

"After all you know about Joy, the *real* me that appeared in those letters, did you really think that the addition of this face—" She ran a finger down his nose, causing his features to drop in surprise. "—to the mind and heart of the man she knows would actually change her mind?"

Snape sneered. "This face isn't—"

Possessed of a sudden need to convince him, Hermione took her chance without stopping for second guesses. Lurching up out of her chair, she leaned across the table and crushed her lips to his. Stunned, Severus merely sat still as Hermione's warm, satin skin caressed his. His head spun. He was as giddy and nervous as a teenager. He barely knew what to do. Suddenly, Hermione rocketed back away from him, seemingly realizing herself with an abrupt joggle. Her hand flew to her mouth, covering her lips as they dropped into a moue of surprise.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly, her voice raspy. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

Her voice died off as Severus raised a hand from its position on the white table cloth. He moved slowly, as if wading through warm honey, raising the long, slender hand and moving it toward her with excruciating care. He gave her plenty of time to back away in fear. When she did not, he laced his slim fingers around the back of her neck and drew her towards him once more. Abandoning the jumps of nerves in her stomach, Hermione let herself be reeled into his embrace, relishing the feel of the stiff robes as they scratched against her bare shoulders and throat. His face hovered over hers for a moment, and she was certain that he'd be able to see the way her pulse hammered in her throat, his breath coming in warm puffs against her cheek. The ebony eyes locked onto her brown ones before he touched his lips to hers.

The caress was so soft for the first few moments that she was barely sure he had kissed her at all. As the moment of contact lengthened, Hermione sighed against his lips, sliding her hands up his arms to where they came to rest at his broad shoulders. This seemed to be all the encouragement Severus needed, for when she clutched at the stiff wool there, he laced his other arm around her back and pressed Hermione against his chest, a low rumble of voice rolling through the lean planes of muscle. Severus's stern face turned to one side as he changed the angle of the kiss, drawing Hermione's mouth open so that his tongue slipped effortlessly between her lips to deepen the kiss. Hermione's heart thudded wildly within her, seemingly vibrating with excitement as she slid her tongue against his. Her head spinning, she could only barely grasp how surreal the whole situation was: here she sat, in a restaurant owned by one of her grammar school friends, snogging her most unpleasant teacher after finding out he'd anonymously agreed to make her pregnant. It was like the plot of a badly written romance novel. And yet, as strong fingertips kneaded at her neck and tripped lightly up the skin of her bare back, making her shiver, she couldn't think of a single moment since the war ended that she felt so alive and aroused and utterly, utterly correct.

Severus reminded himself over and over again not to hold her too tightly. Far too many years of misery and insecurity and celibacy (dear God, it had been so many years) made him want to crush her against him and cover every last centimeter of her body with his mouth. The warm, slippery slide of her tongue inside his mouth, so gloriously enthusiastic and searching, electrified him, making him fight to control tremors of exhilaration. And in the back of his mind, he couldn't help musing on how strange this situation was. He was snogging Hermione Granger, for pity's sake. Hermione Fucking Granger. The formerly swotty, bossy, impertinent Know-It-All who couldn't help but foist her self-importance on everyone within a fifty kilometer radius writhed in his arms, little moans and groans of pleasure humming in her throat. The deeper he angled the kiss, the more she pressed against him, seemingly unable to control herself, and Severus couldn't help but think that his own vaunted self-control wouldn't last all that very much longer. Hermione shivered in pleasure as he drew the tips of his fingers up the satiny skin of her back, enchantingly bare, and he found that he had to pull his mouth away from hers and bury his face in the curls dangling at the side of her neck, unable to stifle a groan of mingled frustration and pleasure. Emboldened by the relative privacy of their location, Severus brought his hand up and ran the knuckle of his index finger down into the valley of the V neckline, curling the tip of his finger into her robes to stroke at the sensitive skin not covered by the floaty green material where her chest began to swell with the curve of her breast. Her breath caught and then rushed in loudly as she gasped at the feel of his lips tugging at the tender skin behind her ear.

Unable to help herself, Hermione dug her fingernails into the heavy robes at his shoulders. She'd swear on any holy book someone offered her that she could feel the vibrations of his muffled groan all the way from the patch of her neck he was currently kissing to her nipples, peaked and prominent now, straight to the scorching electricity surging through her belly at the apex of her thighs.

"Severus," she mumbled against the dark curtain of his hair. "Severus..."

A jump of excitement shot through him; it was the first time she'd used his given name. Instead of answering, he chased the line of her slender throat with his tongue.

"Do you believe me now?" she asked.

He'd obviously lost his head with swift and dizzying arousal because the face he turned up to meet hers was puzzled.

"Do you believe me that Hermione Granger wants Severus Snape just as much as Joy wanted Tobias?"

Before he could open his mouth to speak, Severus felt Hermione's hand alight high upon his thigh, squeezing down against the hard muscle beneath until the backs of her fingers brushed against his straining erection. She leaned in so close that her breath was hot and moist upon his ear.

"Because you could take me somewhere private if you need more convincing," she murmured in a throaty, sultry whisper.

Being a man who could never be mistaken for a fool, Severus immediately dug a pouch of money from his robe pockets, deposited nearly twice the required amount of Galleons on the table and left his chair before Hermione could even rise from hers. The instant she was armed with her winter cloak against the cold of the settling evening dampness, Severus's fingers were around her wrist, tugging her from the crow's nest and down the staircase, into the crowded din of the restaurant below. Hermione dimly realized that a few people had acknowledged their presence, calling out their names or muttering about either of them, but Severus had not slowed his pace a jaunt. The determined look on his face as he navigated a winding path between tables towards the exit was so reminiscent of his familiar scowl as a teacher that Hermione was left with no doubt that his expression was the reason they were able to leave so expediently.

The chill of the early spring evening shot through the folds of her semi-open cloak, making her gasp in shock as it set her skin humming and tickled at her already sensitized breasts. She found herself overwhelmed with sensation and didn't fight instinct: she tugged at the wrist still in Snape's grasp, yanking him back to face her so

that she could mold herself against his hard chest again. Taken completely by surprise, Severus didn't even have a chance to protest when Hermione's mouth pressed against his, heedless of the publicity of their location or the amused cheers and applause around them. Her tongue threaded between his lips and he allowed her to drink of him momentarily, but pulled away to pant out breaths.

"Are you mad?" he said brokenly, his hands weaving their way beneath her cloak to play against her skin. "We're in the middle of a public street populated by people who all know who we are." Despite his words, he couldn't stop touching her.

"I don't care," she said quickly, a heady and mischievous smile leaping to her lips. She quivered against his cool fingertips. "I don't give one good God damn who sees us. I don't have anything to hide; I'm not ashamed."

As if to prove it, she grinned up into his startled face and moved closer to him, lacing a hand in between them, camouflaged by the heavy drape of their cloaks. When Severus felt her fingers smooth across the front of his robes, seeking out and gently squeezing the hot, hard rising of his erection, he couldn't help a harsh inhalation of surprise.

"Horrible, brazen woman," he muttered, but his thin lips quirked upwards at the end. Charged with energy, Severus caught her in his arms and strode forward a few steps, pinning Hermione with her back against the stone façade of the restaurant.

His lips were on her again, and Hermione felt as if she were being drunk down in slow, agonizingly patient gulps, as if she were an exquisite wine that would drug his senses but never quite quench his thirst. Winding her arms around the broad planes of his shoulders, Hermione couldn't keep from wriggling against him, the thrumming energy inside her refusing to remain still. She brought up one leg and threaded it in between his long limbs, allowing her to stroke at the hard rising of his erection as well as pressing the aching core of her body against his thigh. Her hands clutched at the long tail of his hair and pulled him closer, closer.

Severus felt as if he may actually combust. The heat of her body against him seemed overwhelming, and oh God, it had been so long since a willing woman had been in his arms. And this was not just any willing woman; *this* woman stood here kissing and clawing at him because she wanted him. Not his social position within the Death Eaters, not the strength of his magic, not his protection or his coin. Him. She wanted *him*. And that was the sexiest bit of all. Feeling the ache of restraint acutely as she rubbed her knee back and forth against his engorged penis, Severus pulled away from her suddenly and tried to clamp down on whatever self-control he had left. Looking down at the hard glint of lust in her warm, cinnamon eyes and the crimson plumpness of kiss-swollen lips, it wasn't easy. Again, he grasped her wrist and tugged her away.

"We need to get out of here," he managed in a gravelly voice. "Now. We need to leave now."

This time, she didn't fight him as he pulled her away from the restaurant. "Where are we going?"

The look he gave her lasted only mere moments, but the force of the heat in it caused her heart to stumble over itself as it thumped in her chest.

"Somewhere I can ravish you so thoroughly that you won't want to let me out of bed for a month," he answered before speeding along down High Street and towards a familiar path leading away from the village.

After a moment, it occurred to her where the path led; she yanked at his wrist as he pulled her along. "Severus," she asked, panic beginning to slip into her voice. "Severus, where are you taking me?"

"My chambers, naturally," he answered without slowing.

Now, the anxiety was evident. She tugged at his grip with both hands. "No. Please, no," she said, her voice breaking at the end. "Not Hogwarts. We can't go to Hogwarts."

Severus stopped abruptly, and turned to look her in the face. Hermione looked so discomfited, he half expected her to turn and run or shatter into a thousand pieces. "Why not?"

"I just couldn't ... you know," she said nervously. "Not there. It would be too strange. Being back at Hogwarts would be like being a pupil again and going to your chambers in the dungeon ... I'd feel like I was being called down for a very strange, very inappropriate detention. I just don't think I could—" She broke off and gazed around her, looking anywhere but at his face.

He eliminated the distance between them quickly and picked up her hand. Closing his long fingers around her smaller ones, he squeezed her palm gently. "Very well, then," he said in a steady voice. She exhaled almost immediately, her relief plain on her face. "Apparate us anywhere you like. The location is of little matter to me, as long as there is at least one comfortable surface to be had."

A bright blush painted her cheeks but she smiled, a tad unsteadily, and dropped her eyes. "My house will do then?" she asked shyly.

He nodded. "I would very much like to see it."

Raising her eyes to his and shivering as his free hand stroked the hollow of her neck, Hermione took a deep breath then turned on the spot, Disapparating them away towards home.

A/N - for those of you with weak constitutions for smut, be warned: graphic naughtiness ensues in chapter nine. *ponders* You know, given my penchant for smut, I'm surprised I restrained myself this long. In any case, the next chapter will earn an NC-17 rating. Consider yourself warned! ^_^

So Much Together You'd Think We Were One

Chapter 9 of 15

Winner for the Anything Goes Challenge Chaptered Category! *Seeking: An intelligent, capable wizard amenable to assisting a bright, independent, magically-formidable single witch in the conception of a child. Insemination only: no sexual congress; non-negotiable. Dignity and discretion of utmost importance. Neither monetary nor emotional support needed for or during the birth and life of child. Further contact will be established following receipt of preliminary letter of interest. Address all inquiries by owl to Joy Bundle, Box # 1086, Hogsmeade Village.*

A/N - Okay, so, now that you're all salivating, here is the promised smut! I hope that it's so steamy it fogs your computer screen! Thank you all for being patient so that I

could get this just right. Also, again, thank you all for the amazing reviews. The numbers have been staggering as well as the fantastic support.

It can now be reliably reported that this fic will be complete in eleven chapters. As amused as I am to say that this fic ends with Chapter Eleven (yay for tasteless bankruptcy jokes), I'm going to be very sad to see it go. In any case, I just thought I'd let you all know that this little ditty will be complete in the not-too-distant future. I hope you're enjoying the ride because Severus and Hermione sure will in this chapter. *points to drastic jump to an NC-17 rating* Mwuahahaha.

Love and snuggles,

~~ ** Lady Tuesday ** ~~

Chapter Nine – So Much Together, You'd Think We Were One

The keys in Hermione's hands rattled loudly as her fingers fumbled from cold and nerves. She dropped the ring twice as she tried to insert a key in the lock only to realize that it was the wrong one. He was standing so near. Too near. She felt the heat of his body all around her as if it were a palpable force, and the rhythmic puffs of his breath ruffled the top most curls at the back of her head.

"Steady," he murmured near her ear.

She jumped at the sound, so close to her skin, and couldn't help the way her pulse began to race as his long hand slid down her forearm to curl over hers. He took hold of the ring of keys and unlocked the door as he wrapped around her.

"The charms," he muttered, rousing her from the moment of pleasant torpor as she absorbed his presence. "Release the charms on the door."

She mumbled a few words, and the telltale fizzle of her wards coming down admitted them into the house. The minute he pushed open the front door, she stumbled across the threshold, suddenly compelled to move away from him. He followed her wordlessly as if nothing was amiss. Perhaps he didn't realize anything was. Unable to explain her sudden anxiety, Hermione crossed from the hall into the sitting room swiftly, strode across the room, and gripped the mantelpiece so tightly that the knuckles of both hands whitened with the strain. She stared hard at the scatter of framed photos from various stages of her life, listening to the slow echo of his boots as he crossed from the front hall into the sitting room. He seemed to be taking in the surroundings, untroubled by the dim lighting. She heard him stop near the faded wingback under the long, goose-necked lamp, her favorite reading spot. Still, she couldn't bring herself to look at him.

"Despite our actions just now," he said softly, but it made her jump anyway, "my offer to abandon this plan still stands."

He didn't move any closer.

"No," Hermione made herself say. "No, I want to. I do. I just—" She couldn't force the right words from her mouth, but he seemed content to wait. "It's just strange, you know? Now that it's all so real, it's a bit much to swallow."

"Well, you can ease your mind on that point. I haven't asked you to swallow anything just yet."

Hearing the smirk in his voice, Hermione laughed, but it was a weak sound, and she still couldn't bring herself to face him. She stiffened as she heard him approach her, her body leaping with excitement as she felt the warmth of him at her back.

His voice, when it came, was soft in volume, but silky with promise. "I know it's overwhelming," he murmured soothingly against her temple. Somehow he managed to be so close and yet not touch her. "It is for me as well. You are the last person I would have suspected to make such a connection with. But the fact is that it exists, and it is far more than just the agreement regarding a child now. Meeting in person has obviously only confirmed that. But I will reiterate my point: if it is my identity that bothers you—"

"I don't want to quit," she insisted firmly.

"—but you'd still like to stay the course," he said as calmly as if she hadn't spoken, "there are ... measures that could be taken to ease your anxiety."

"What do you mean, 'measures'?" she asked, perplexed.

"There are ways to disguise things," he said quietly. "To change the face, the voice ..."

The offer of a spell or potion to change his appearance hung in the air, and though he seemed completely willing, Hermione could hear the telltale contradiction in his voice. A hardness crept into the deep, rich baritone, and sadness, too. Perhaps even disappointment. Her heart wrenched. Somewhere inside, Hermione's instinct and her heart told her brain to shut up.

"I don't want you to change yourself," she said. "It's not that it's you. I mean, you, the man. It's just ... bizarre. Almost farcical. Thinking of being seduced by Professor Snape." She gave an unsteady laugh. "I'm sure there are plenty of Slytherin girls who would have come up with some strange fantasy on that level, but ... I don't know, it's just a very quick and dizzying shift of perception. It's not that I'm not attracted to you, because I am. Good Lord, I'm—"

"Do you want me?"

His voice was suddenly gruff near her ear. The sensation of the usually smooth tones being worked over with sandpaper, roughness from arousal and impatience, sent lightning through her blood.

"Very much," she managed.

She felt him angle his chin to move away the curls at her neck, and Hermione drew in breath sharply as his lips touched against the tender column of her neck. His long, slender fingers moved to her throat, unclasping her cloak and pushing it off her shoulders, all the while keeping in constant contact with her singing skin. The heavy item dropped to the floor, unnoticed, as he caught her earlobe in his teeth just for a moment.

"Then forget Professor Snape," he said. "Forget Miss Granger. Think only of Joy and Tobias."

His fingers traced her exposed collarbone momentarily before they skimmed over her shoulders and down her arms.

"Think of Hermione and Severus."

He dipped into the hollow of her elbows for far too short a time before moving down to stretch his arms out over hers, his big hands covering her fingers that were still cool from the journey outside. He braced his feet on either side of hers and wrapped his much larger frame around her, giving her the sensation of being utterly and deliciously trapped.

"And think of how much those two people are going to enjoy themselves trying to make a baby. We are the sort of people to be completely thorough, after all."

Hermione started to laugh again, but the sound quickly morphed into a hum of pleasure as Severus drew her hands up from the mantle and brought them over her head, arching backwards until they laced around his neck, surrendering the sensitive underside of her arms to his touch. She expected his fingers to be cold; after all, he was tall and long-limbed, and that usually lent itself to poor circulation, even if one hadn't spent nearly forty years living in a dungeon. But the hands that caressed her so smoothly, so sure of themselves, were warm and lithe. Hermione shivered with pleasure as he moved from her forearms to the underside of her upper arms, brushing against her armpits just long enough to get her to giggle and squirm with pleasure. Her nipples hardened to aching points, a result of his attentions and the stark contrast between his searing body heat and the coolness of the room around them. A loud gasp left her when one hand moved from her arm to let his fingertips dance a circle around the peaked rise of her nipple, the other hand flattening against her ribcage to press her back against his body.

"God, Severus," she exclaimed hoarsely. "Oh, God, please don't stop."

He pulled at the delicate bud of her nipple through the light fabric of her robes, chuckling into her ear. "Madam," he said with a low rumble of laughter that tingled against her back, "there aren't enough Galleons in the world to convince me to stop now."

She nearly wept with pleasure, closing her fists around the tail of hair at the back of his head and pulling unconsciously. The hand at her stomach clenched a hold on her robes, sliding the silky material against her skin as his left hand slid underneath the triangle of green to cup and squeeze her left breast. A wordless exclamation left her, and Hermione arched her back unconsciously, crushing her chest harder against the maddeningly patient movements of his hand. Severus groaned loudly, barely able to stand the feeling of her firm, round bottom pressing against his aching erection. She murmured an impassioned cry of encouragement as he kneaded her breast, undulating against the hardened length of him.

"Tell me what you feel," he said, his voice a cross between a plea and a command.

"Fevered," she gabbled hurriedly. "Desperate."

"Desperate for what?" he asked. He tipped his head down and nipped at her bare shoulder.

"You!" She felt nearly mad with wanting now, her blood hot, her body screaming. "Oh, you."

He smirked, unable to resist the amusement in reducing the most talkative woman he knew to one or two word answers. "Where do you want me?"

She grabbed his hand on her stomach and pushed it lower until his fingers chafed her robes against the thrumming spot at the center of her legs. "Here," she said. "I want you here. And everywhere."

Severus pushed his fingers tighter against her body and feeling her quaver with need. "It aches here?"

"Yes," she moaned.

"You feel empty?"

She could only nod as he swirled his fingers against her body and pressed his stiff erection closer against her backside. Severus grasped handfuls of her robes and tugged upwards until the material pooled over his forearm and he felt the warm, smooth skin of her thigh. Heedless of her pleas and insistent attempts to tug his hand to where it could do her some good, he used just the tip of his index finger to draw aimless circles across her inner thigh.

"So you want me to fill that space? Fill you? Thrust inside you until our bodies are so tight against each other that it feels as if we are one person?"

Hermione's head spun so quickly and so thoroughly that she wavered under the force of the sensation. When she'd regained some sense of equilibrium, she whirled around inside the cage of his arms, letting him thread his hand back into the folds of her skirt.

"Yes, yes!" she said as the movement of his fingers traversed the damp cotton covering the apex of her thighs. "For God's sake, Severus, stop teasing me and just take me!"

Finding herself unaccountably electrified by the new debauched dimension to the familiar smirk painting its way across his sharp features, Hermione tugged at both of his shoulders and demanded, "Kiss me."

He took her at her word. Severus descended immediately to crush his lips to hers, his tongue sliding into the wet satin of her mouth and inflaming her desire as he explored there. She pulled at him again, desperate to bring them closer – she seemed to believe they could not get close enough unless they occupied the same body – and grappled with every ounce of self-control she had not to just insist that he strip himself bare and take her right there on the rag rug covering her sitting room floor. But she needed to make this respectable. If they might only have one chance together, she needed to draw out the pleasure as much as she could manage; she needed to give herself something to live on for the rest of her days. He swallowed her groan of anticipation as his fingers pushed aside the troublesome cotton knickers; he only manage to stroke against her heated flesh for a moment or two before she tore her lips from his and pushed her small hands against the hard planes of his chest.

She wriggled against the maddening touch between her legs, but forced herself to speak. "Faster," she said. When he increased the speed of his writhing fingers, she shook her head and gulped out words. "No, no-oh! No, I mean, if you're going to do that we're going to have to move towards the bedroom much faster."

He chuckled and allowed her to tear at the neckline of his robes, accidentally popping off just as many buttons as she was freeing from their holes. Severus withdrew his fingers from her body only because the walk from the sitting room and up the staircase towards her bed would be much more awkward if he didn't. A silky smirk on his face, he leaned over and let his lips brush her ear.

"I'll race you to the bedroom," he whispered.

A mischievous grin lit her face. "I'll win," she chortled. "You don't know where it is."

With a throaty laugh, she spun gracefully and bolted from the room as quickly as a leggy colt. He took off after her, a little wobbly with excitement. An easy chuckle, so foreign to him, left his throat as she dashed up the stairs, throwing a challenging glance back at him from half-way up the case. In her haste and carelessness, Hermione's shoe stamped down on the hem of her robes, hooking it on the stairs; with a clumsy jerk of surprise, she spun backwards to face him and slipped, bumping her bum on the stair. As the slick material skidded along, she slid down a few steps, knocking into him before he had a chance to readjust his position. Severus tumbled forward, sprawling across Hermione and jarring his knees as he fell. Her body pinned underneath his weight, he quickly brought a hand to Hermione's face, trying to assess her for damage.

"Are you all right?" he asked hurriedly. "Did you hit your head? Are you hurt?"

Her eyes danced as she laughed and clapped a hand across her forehead. "Only my arse," she said merrily as she cupped his chin. "Which is what I feel like right about now. You?"

"My knees," he said, a wry smile on his lips. "But that's unsurprising for an old man taking a fall."

"You're not old," she said, suddenly serious. Her cinnamon eyes smoldered as they scanned his face.

"Admit it: I'm absolutely ancient," he said roughly, shaken by the sudden scorch of her gaze. A hoarse exhalation left him as Severus felt one small hand thread between their bodies and close around his erection, her grasp unfulfilling due to the layers of clothing between them.

"All evidence to the contrary, Professor," she muttered, her voice low and throaty.

Hermione palmed his erection and stroked him a few times, feeling her energy surge as his body twitched above her. She took his lips again and bullied them into a searching kiss which caused him to use one of the hands he'd been using as a prop on the stairs to thread back under her robes and knickers, fondling the slick, heated skin at the meeting of her thighs. Overcome with sensation, Hermione moaned into his mouth, rocking her hips against his fingers. Propriety be damned, she couldn't wait any longer. Determined, Hermione worked both her hands in between their bodies and began pressing them to the front of his robes, wordlessly reciting a charm to release the fastenings. When her hands hit his bare skin, he wrenched his lips away from hers, though he didn't stop his touch between her legs. He seemed incapable of resisting.

"What are you doing?" he asked. His normally smooth voice had turned to gravel.

"I want you," she said simply. "Here. Right now. I can't wait any longer. Take me now."

Surprisingly, he smiled. "This is hardly a proper venue for lovemaking, Hermione."

Her face twisted with impatience. "Oh, to hell with lovemaking. I'm going to burst if you don't fuck me this instant! We can do it the nice way next time."

His face had dropped slack with surprise at her use of vulgarity but quickly returned to the lecherous grin. "Next time?" he asked, allowing her hands to push aside his robes and stroke his turgid penis. "What a felicitous surprise. I wasn't aware there was going to be a next time."

"At this point, I'd like to 'next-time' you until you aren't able to walk," she quipped. "Now for God's sake—"

Severus quickly braced himself on a lower stair and, with one quick slide of his hands, spread her thighs, positioning the head of his erection in the warm, slick cradle of her flesh.

"Bugger!" Hermione exclaimed before she realized it.

"Quite," Severus responded with a grin.

Before she had time to answer his statement, Severus thrust into her waiting body. A long, low moan left Hermione, and she clutched at his shoulders, urging him on. Bracing a hand on the stair above her head, Severus drew back until he nearly left her body completely, causing her to whimper before he plunged back into her body in a long, slow slide. As Severus's hips set an increasingly quick rhythm, Hermione felt overtaken by the demands of her body. She arched up against him, the wiry scratch of his pubic hair setting the thrumming center of her body tingling as he thrust against her, creating a wonderfully hedonistic counterpoint to the satiny feel of her robes sliding across her heated skin. Severus pushed aside her neckline and took one of Hermione's stiff nipples into his mouth, causing her to groan and clench her inner muscles around his impossibly hard penis.

"Merlin," he muttered against her skin. "Fuck ... sweet, so sweet ... so tight ..."

His hips jerked against her erratically, and Hermione felt herself losing control as he did. His thrusts became uneven and heavy, pounding her into the hard stairs beneath, but she didn't give a fig. All that mattered was the feel of being surrounded by him, inside and out, and that glorious winding, twisting tension building in her belly. She brought up one leg and laced it into his robes, curling her calf around his hip to press her heel into the low curve of his bum. With a light pressure against the clenching muscles in his arse, she pushed him deeper into her body and angled her hips upwards. On those last few thrusts, he struck that place deep within her body that drew strangled moans from her. Undone, Hermione cried out as her climax seized her and wrung sensation from every nerve ending. Feeling her inner muscles clamp around him, Severus called out her name on a hoarse groan as he lost himself within her.

When the paroxysms of his body slowed to a halt, Severus dropped down above her, his knees and forearms braced on the stairs at her shoulders and just below her hips. Still joined together, they both sat quietly as their breathing slowed. Eventually, through the quiet broken only by the rustle of their collective inhalations and exhalations, Hermione started to giggle. Severus looked down into her pinkening face and raised one heavy, dark brow. This gesture only seemed to incite more hilarity, causing her to burst into full-voiced guffawing.

"What in the world could possibly be so funny at such a moment?"

Hermione could only get a grip on her laughter long enough to choke out a single phrase. "I just shagged Professor Snape."

Following this pronouncement, she dissolved into helpless howls of laughter. Severus, however, scowled down at her.

"Miss Granger," he said, adopting his most disapproving, teacherly tone of voice, "I find this mirth regarding our sexual congress highly offensive, especially considering the indelicate position we are still occupying. I insist you cease at once."

Hermione laughed again, cupping his face with both hands and pressing her lips to his in an affectionate and amused kiss. She felt his lips turn up in a smile against hers, and when she opened her mouth and slid her tongue against his bottom lip, she felt his body stir inside hers. Kissing him deeply for a few moments and feeling the excitement that he awoke in her, she was sorry to break away from him again.

"I'm sorry," she said, grinning into his slightly bemused expression. "I just can't help but find it funny that after all this time, after all that's happened, I end up being frantically shagged by my meanest professor on the stairs of my house as if we're both randy teenagers."

Severus smirked but did not respond, merely sat back and allowed her to scramble up from the stairs. As soon as she stood, her face pinched, and she rubbed at her lower back. It seemed to take ages for Severus to be able to force his knees to support him upright after all that business on the staircase. He winced and groaned as pain shot through his joints, feeling the strain of supporting him in such an ungainly position. Severus heard the merriment in Hermione's voice as she called over her shoulder.

"I'd offer you a pain potion," she said, "but they dull all your senses, and I have every intention of following through on my promise of next-timing you until you're unable to move."

"That mightn't take all that much right now," he said exasperatedly, massaging his sore knees.

When she turned around, Hermione's heart stumbled over itself for a moment. Gazing down at him as he straightened up, she couldn't resist a smile. "Well, there's a pretty picture," she said, chuckling.

Perhaps not a pretty one, but one she was likely to remember for a good long time: her former Professor, in all his imposing and stoic glory, stood on her stair with his trademark black robes gaping from neck to toes, giving her a wide slash of his pale skin. Her gaze traveled from the open collar from which his long, slim neck rose; down across his chest, dotted liberally with dark hair that had just begun to streak with steel gray; and over the fleece of ebony hair that trailed from just below his navel to the pale skin surrounding the base of his shaft. Wanting to take in the sight fully, she pushed her eyes past his groin to his powerful legs, down to where his feet were still clad in the heavy-looking dragon hide boots she'd seen him wear every day since she was eleven. Under her assessing and obviously pleased gaze, Severus's chest began to rise and fall with deeper breaths and his erection twitched with new life.

"Merlin," Hermione said with a grin. "I wish I still talked to some of those girls from Hogwarts. Wouldn't they be interested to hear the details of what I'm seeing right now? Come to think of it, perhaps I'll draft a letter. My owl could use the exercise."

"You wouldn't," Severus hissed, his eyes narrowing.

Something in the way he swayed a bit, betraying the bunching of his muscles, told Hermione's instincts just what he was going to do. She shrieked in equal parts of alarm and amusement, managing to turn and gather her robes before fleeing from Severus as he roared a sort of battle cry and took off after her. The bellow turned to laughter as he chased her into the bedroom, slamming the door behind them decisively.

Hermione woke in the blanket obscurity of the midnight hours, her body cramped and oddly weighty. For a moment, panic gripped Hermione, as she seemed paralyzed along the right side of her body. Then slowly, slowly, she came to the realization of her situation: she was, in fact, covered by another body. It had been so very long since she'd experienced waking entangled with another person that she'd forgotten how strange the sensation could be when disoriented from sleep. Severus Snape's long, lean body draped across her, his thickly-muscled leg twined over one of her legs and underneath the other, one slender arm heavy on her abdomen, and his dark head pillowed on her breast. Straining her neck upwards to assess the room without waking him, she took in the sight of a maelstrom of clothing pieces strewn about her floor, his undershorts hanging – inexplicably – from the knob of her closet door. Even stranger, his wand lay quiescent, sticking out of the pocket of his robes which he'd discarded

on the back of her vanity chair. Somehow, she'd imagined that even in an intimate situation such as this, he'd have kept it closer at hand. She couldn't decide whether this leniency was due to a relaxation of his guard or a display of trust in her. She smiled, hoping it was the latter.

They hadn't really had a chance to discuss the possible future of their relationship over the course of the evening that had followed their break-neck coupling on the stairs. In fact, they really hadn't discussed much of anything. The two successive shags they'd had following the bout on the stairs really hadn't been any less feverish. They had heaved at each other's clothes and fallen into bed with voices full of equal parts of laughter and moaning. Hermione had found that her former professor was not just passionate in his convictions or biases; on the third encounter, when he'd entered her from behind, she'd had to brace her arms against the headboard just to keep from travelling across the bed, so forceful were his thrusts.

A large part of Hermione was still decidedly flabbergasted about the revelations of the evening. In the quiet moments she spent in the dark, she contemplated the complete absurdity of the fact that her letters had led her to someone no more than five minutes from her front door who had been in her life in one way or another since she was eleven. The idea that the man behind those lovely letters was the same man who'd once made her cry with a four word sentence still struck her as almost impossible to comprehend, but Hermione firmly resolved that the past was just that and that he seemed more and more to be the man of her future. He certainly proved to be an enthusiastic and generous lover, reveling in and plying her body in a way no one ever had. Ron had never been a bad lover, really; he'd been warm and sweet, surprisingly gentle. But he had never quite been able to pluck her nerves like harp strings in the six years of their marriage. Severus had done so within the first six minutes. And on and off over the course of nearly three hours. They'd stopped having at each other long enough to ransack her pantry just after midnight, and had another lovely little tryst before collapsing into sleep around two o'clock. She hadn't the foggiest idea what time it was now, but the last few hours had certainly been well spent. When Hermione had mockingly complained that they were going to ruin their chances of conception by doing it too much, Severus had merely smirked and insisted that they needed to "make sure it takes." Though her thighs ached from the contact, the memory of the delights he followed that remark with brought a smug grin to her face and a delicious tingle to her belly. Unfortunately, that tingle quickly developed into something much more basic.

A low whimpering sound left him when she disentangled herself to relieve her vengeful bladder. As she slid from the bed, she felt his hand close around her wrist, which caused her to mutter a swear word. She hadn't wanted to wake him. But when she looked over to his face, she realized that he must have done so reflexively, as his eyes were still closed and all his other muscles lay slack, indicating slumber. A little quirk to the edges of her lips, she bent down and kissed his fingers, which released their hold on her wrist. Something in her chest warmed and twisted at the simple, unconscious gesture.

Her trip to the loo was as fast as she could make it, not just because she wished to get back to bed but because the tile floor was absolutely frigid on her bare feet, and the fact that she wore not a stitch of clothing didn't help matters. The instant she stretched out under the sheets again, she found herself reeled in against Severus's body. Much to her surprise, he once again took a submissive position in slumber, curling his long body around hers and nuzzling his protuberant nose against her breast and the warm hollow of her throat. With a smile, Hermione wrapped one arm beneath his head, cradling it in the pocket of her shoulder, and used her left hand to gently push back the descending strands of ebony hair that slipped across his face. A shiver slipped through his body before he settled into deeper sleep, his heavy, regular breathing puffing into the valley between her breasts. Murmuring a warming charm on the duvet, Hermione yawned and slid into the dark recesses of sleep.

Wakefulness battered against Hermione's mind as sensation slowly caressed her skin. She didn't want to wake up, but life seemed determined not to allow her to laze in obliviousness. Awash in moody grey pre-dawn, the features of Hermione's bedroom were much more distinct to her tired eyes than the last time she opened them. Ebony filaments tickled against her arm; eventually, she registered the soft touch of lips on the pulse point at her wrist. She turned her head and looked down to where the dark head was bent over her arm, the soft lips travelling up to stop at her elbow. She couldn't bring herself to move, languishing in the gentle, pleasant sensation.

"Severus?" Hermione asked, her voice broken and raspy from sleepiness. "What are you doing?"

He didn't speak, simply continued up the winding path of her arm to the wing of her collarbone. When he paused there, her breath skipped in and out of her on a hiccup as the plush tip of his tongue darted out to trace the contour of her shoulder. Severus flattened his mouth against the column of her throat, sucking and gently nibbling; she found that she could move after all, lacing her arms around his broad shoulders as he covered her body with his own. His kisses became more urgent, seeking more as he crossed to the other side of her throat and skimmed down her body to suckle at her breast.

"Severus," she said, "you can't possibly still be gagging for it. We've shagged more tonight than either of us has done in at least five years. What are you doing?"

Again, he said nothing. Hermione tried to pursue it further, but found herself lost in the silky-smooth warmth of his mouth as it slid down her stomach, stopping to dart his tongue into the hollow of her navel before slicking a wet path to the triangle of curls low on her body. Her hips levered off the bed, and she clasped eager fingers in the thin strands of his hair as she felt the flat of his tongue slide a long, slow caress across the outer folds at the top of her thighs. A low moan left her as her fingers dug into his scalp.

Her response spurred him to more acute action. She felt the brush of his arms under her legs, and the long, slender fingers curled across the tops of her thighs, spreading her wide open to his gaze. A rumble of pleasure from his deep voice set the bed springs humming just before his tongue dipped back into the center of her sex. Hermione clutched at him, unable to stop a keen of delight from leaving her lips, and she rocked against him, his tongue unbearably, deliciously rough against the aching peak of her pleasure. Her panting voice seemed to scour her throat, but she didn't bother to contain it; her cries electrified him. With every vocalization, his tongue worked harder against her, followed by a plunge of two of his fingers into her body and a brush of just the tip of his nose, cold from the air, against the skin of her belly.

Severus groaned as her climax shot through her and she bucked against his face. It took Hermione a long moment to clear through the daze of her orgasm. When she did, she realized that Severus was panting against her inner thigh as if he'd run a mile at top speed, and the noise that had left him was not one of pleasure or sexual anticipation, but something dreadfully close to pain.

"Severus?" she queried, her voice nearly breaking from sorrow and fear.

He looked up at her only briefly, but in the moment between when he caught her eyes with his dark-eyed gaze and when he hid his face against her thigh again, something intense and almost agonized shot from him, straight to her heart. She gasped with the sudden shock of emotion. Cupping her hands around his face, she drew him up so that his body covered hers with its warmth and she could gaze into the bottomless black of his eyes.

"What's the matter?"

He tried to bury his face in the cloud of curls beside her face, but she fought him, forcing him to keep his gaze steady on hers. For a long moment, she thought he might dissolve into tears.

"I ... I... can't," he said brokenly.

"Can't what?"

He clenched his eyes shut, his whole face screwing up with the effort, before he opened them again to gaze at her.

"I'm not sure I can go on like this anymore," he said.

She didn't speak, couldn't speak, as she stroked her thumbs against his high, prominent cheekbones.

"I've been alone for so much of my life. At first because I didn't want to need people, then because Lily ..." He broke a moment, regrouped. "Because she couldn't find it in her to really see me. I couldn't bear to be without her, but she couldn't stand who I had become, so she just threw me out with the day's dust bin leavings. After that, I ... I *had* to be alone. I couldn't risk getting too close. And after a while, I didn't want to let anyone in. It was a hassle, it was too dangerous, it was too ... intimate. I cultivated seventeen years of segregation and convinced myself that it was best."

Hermione tried to pull him in close to her in an embrace, but he resisted. Severus turned his face from her, staring blankly into the space beyond her bed, but she clung to him, wordlessly pleading for him to unburden himself. She laid a few kisses against his shoulders and his chest, but it was the one long kiss that she pressed against his neck, acknowledging and tenderly covering the jagged scars from the bite that nearly killed him, that had him lower himself down to touch her again, laying his forehead against hers. He cleared his throat a few times. Suddenly, she felt him move against her, pushing her thighs open with his knees. As the blunt head of Severus's erection skimmed between her thighs, she lifted her hips, guiding him into her depths. When he buried himself to the hilt inside her, one of his hands came up and stroked at her face.

"I wanted to die, thirteen years ago," he said gruffly. "I lay on that cold, dusty floor and prayed that I would bleed out. After everything I'd done, everything I'd been, I wanted to have my last moments blinded with pain and then be given an abrupt shove into blackness." He was silent for a long moment. "You were the one who sent for the Healers, weren't you?"

Hermione jumped a bit in surprise. She'd never had any intention of him knowing that she'd sent the frantic Floo message to St. Mungo's in the early minutes of the celebration following Voldemort's downfall. Horrified to realize that no one had thought of him before then, Hermione had nearly been sick with shame as she knelt on the hearthstones of the Gryffindor common room and sobbed out a distress call. In that moment so many years ago, she had known that even if it was idiotic to think he might be alive, she—*they* owed it to him to at least try. Pinned by the force of his gaze, she nodded.

"You saved my life. Granted, Euterpe did her fair share," he grinned weakly at Hermione's watery laughter, "but it was you, really. You brought me back to life. Then and now." His smile faltered. "Don't cry."

She was struck by his last whispered statement. Hermione hadn't realized that tears had started to trickle down the sides of her face until he reached up to brush them away. He laughed a little, his voice sounding almost as if it were rusty.

"I never thought I'd care if the Insufferable Know-It-All cried, but I don't think I could stand your tears just now," said Severus. After a long breath, Severus laid his face cheek-to-cheek with Hermione's and began to roll his hips slowly, moving in gentle thrusts within her body.

"For thirteen years, I've been content to just sink back into my old life. I didn't let anything change. I didn't *make* anything change. I'd only been half living until I got your letters. And now.... Now"

Unable to stand the anxiety of waiting for him to search for the correct words, Hermione clutched at the back of his head and drew him in for a kiss. His tongue searched her mouth, not in the reckless fervor of their previous encounters, but gingerly, as if he thought too harsh a movement might shatter her. Or, she thought, as if she might vanish beneath him.

He tore his lips away. "I can't be that man anymore, Hermione. I can't. He was cold and cruel, and he lived for no one but himself and a woman who never really loved him."

As the words tumbled from him, his body thrummed with something he could barely stand to feel. He couldn't have named it if he tried; he only knew that it came from her somehow, and he never wanted to be without it again. Severus thrust deeper into her body, faster, faster. Hermione was kissing his mouth, his cheeks, his throat. She wrapped her legs around his hips and pulled him closer. Pulled him in until he felt as if he could melt inside of her.

"You are everything good and bright inside me," he said raggedly. He shook his head, as if the right words had gotten stuck somewhere between his brain and his mouth. "You're breath. You're life—"

"I love you, too, Severus," Hermione exclaimed breathily. "I love you, too."

Severus's momentum broke. His chest hitched and a short burst of sound, almost a sob, left him. He buried his face in her curls, and for one horrifying instant, Hermione thought she'd misread what he'd been trying to say. And then she felt the wetness against her ear. Felt the undeniable warm trickle of what could only be tears. His hips moved against hers again, and after a few erratic thrusts, Severus exploded with warmth and sensation and light, spilling himself within her. Giving himself only a moment to steady his breathing, he made to roll away from Hermione, but her small hands clamped a vice grip on his shoulders.

"Don't!" she cried. "Don't go!"

Severus nuzzled his nose against her ear, hushing her in soothing tones. "Just let me take care of you," he whispered.

Without really separating their bodies, he worked a hand in between them to flatten along her stomach. His fingers searched in the slick folds just above where they were still joined and stroked at her until his kisses were swallowing her strangled cries of pleasure. When her peak hit, Hermione felt as if she had jumped into an ocean as warm as bathwater, one long, rolling wave of pleasure. And of Severus.

Nothing Can Stop Us, So Nobody Try

Chapter 10 of 15

Winner for the Anything Goes Challenge Chaptered Category! *Seeking: An intelligent, capable wizard amenable to assisting a bright, independent, magically-formidable single witch in the conception of a child. Insemination only: no sexual congress; non-negotiable. Dignity and discretion of utmost importance. Neither monetary nor emotional support needed for or during the birth and life of child. Further contact will be established following receipt of preliminary letter of interest. Address all inquiries by owl to Joy Bundle, Box # 1086, Hogsmeade Village.*

A/N – I have to admit, I'm really pretty sad to have to post this chapter. As I mentioned in the previous chapter's A/N, this fic will end with Chapter Eleven (bwuahahaha; bankruptcy. Or something). I'm going to miss it a lot, but I hope you enjoy the end of the ride, both in this penultimate chapter and in the final one. Thank you again for all your support, well wishes, and reviews.

~~ ** Lady Tuesday ** ~~

Chapter Ten – Nothing Can Stop Us, So Nobody Try

Despite the fact that he'd only slept for maybe a collective three hours the entire night, Severus's eyes snapped open the instant that full dawn stole through the curtains of Hermione's bedroom. He felt unspeakably strange. Lying in bed naked with a woman he loved, a woman who'd admitted she loved him back ... it was like an excerpt from someone else's life. Women didn't love Severus Snape, not romantically, at least. And certainly not a woman who'd hated him as a child. The idea was laughable. Given to

an odd fit of humor, Severus did laugh quietly. It just didn't seem possible. None of it.

And yet, here he was. Here *she* was. Severus shifted as slowly and gently as possible, trying to move so that he could look at her face. Hermione's pale skin was warm and just the slightest bit rosy, probably from proximity and body heat. Her lips curled up in a tiny smile as she slept, light puffs of air hitting his face as she exhaled. His heart squeezed. Just looking at her made him feel something he wasn't entirely sure he'd ever felt before: happiness. Complete and total happiness. Happy. Such a soft word for such a harsh man. The word didn't seem to fit Severus Snape. He normally loathed the word; it was too simplistic to describe anyone who wasn't a child or an absolute moron. And yet

Regardless of his reluctance to leave the circle of her arms, the soft hills of her bare breasts, Severus slid from bed and stretched in the cold morning air. Well acquainted with the chill, he didn't shiver, but simply hurried to don his robes. Much as he'd like to do so, he couldn't linger here all day. He'd need to get back to Hogwarts before breakfast if he could manage; the tongue-flappers would have a field day if he was missed, as he was certain that Minerva wouldn't resist the urge to share such a tasty little tidbit of gossip. Severus's sigh was loud in the small, still room. Looking back to where Hermione still lie sleeping, he felt a strong tug of temptation urging him to just ignore the possible scandal, take off his robes, and climb right back into bed with her. But he couldn't. There was far too much to do today. Never inclined to be the sort of person who sat on a mental or emotional epiphany, Severus fully believed that now was time to act. But first, he would soak up the atmosphere for just one more moment.

Unable to help himself, Severus silently moved back to the bed. Severus found himself gripped with such a strange stir of emotions as he looked down at Hermione's sleeping form. His head spun with the muddle of it: confusion, happiness, desire, panic ... they all seemed to swirl within him. His Joy now extended all the way back to childhood. A childhood, in fact, that he not only knew of, but had participated in profoundly. The fact that his Joy had been a champion of the war made him strangely proud, but the fact that she was also the best friend of an entire lineage's worth of anger and bad blood in his heart panicked him more than he had allowed himself to contemplate the previous night. She wasn't Joy anymore. Well, to be fair, she wasn't just Joy anymore. She was Hermione Jean Granger, formerly Weasley. Was all of the difficulty and tumult and emotional upheaval that was sure to come from a relationship between them really worth what he would get in return?

Fear flooded his throat, but Severus didn't have to think about the answer to that question. Instead, he knew exactly what to do. Spurred into action, Severus hurried around the room to collect his belongings. There was much to be done. He considered leaving a note to explain things to Hermione, but discarded the idea. With any luck, it would all become clear soon enough.

As he made to step out the doorway, he heard a small noise, like the indignant growl of a cat. Glancing around the floor for her old half-Kneazle – was he young enough to still be alive? – Severus saw nothing at first, until his eyes hit the small orange blossom laying on the floor. The Roaring Tiger Lily that he'd procured from Longbottom must have fallen out of her hair in the process of the night; it had let out a growl when he'd trod on one of the petals. Severus bent and rescued the blossom from the floor, saying a quick charm in his head to restore the petals to their original luster. Swiftly moving to the bed, Severus dropped the bloom on the pillow next to Hermione's open palm just before he strode out of the bedroom, silently descending the stairs before purposefully Disapparating away into the cool Scottish morning.

A brusque hammering on the front door of number 37, Godric's Hollow was met by a few loud shrieks of young voices from somewhere in the house, the clatter of someone stumbling through the front room towards the door, and the raucous barking of an obviously agitated dog. After a few moments where no one answered, Severus raised his fist to knock again, but before he could, the door swung open to reveal a much disheveled Harry Potter, clad in flannel lounge pants and a mismatched t-shirt, a small child with black hair and wide green eyes dangling from his shoulders. Potter adjusted his glasses, sitting crookedly on his face, and blinked rapidly as his eyes adjusted to the bright light. When the sight in front of him registered completely, his mouth dropped open in surprise. Just as he was about to speak, the vocal dog shot around his legs and nearly knocked Potter off balance as he clutched at the beast's collar in an effort to restrain him.

"No, Padfoot, heel!" Potter practically shouted. "Bad dog, Padfoot! Bad!"

Severus raised an eyebrow wordlessly and glanced from the dog's big, dark head back to Potter's bright green eyes. He had the nerve to smirk and shrug.

"It seemed an appropriate name," he replied to the unspoken question. Turning from Severus for a moment, Harry bent to set the child still clinging to his shoulders on wobbly legs. Ruffling the mop of dark waves, Harry directed his son, "Al, why don't you take Padfoot into the kitchen and help Mummy with breakfast while I talk to my friend, huh?"

Reining in the instinct to scoff at the word 'friend,' Severus merely stared down his nose at the apparently fearless child who made no show of intimidation at his usually peerless, innate authority. Narrowing his eyes, he attempted to scare the child into compliance, but the little monster seemed undeterred.

Instead, the child thrust a small, chubby finger towards Severus and said, "That's the big-nose man in your picture book."

"Al!" Potter hissed, risking a glance at Snape. "That's not nice, calling people names."

"But it *is* him!" squeaked the little boy. "It's the big-nose teacher man in the hospital bed that they gave a medal to in the newspaper. I recognize his big nose from the picture." The miniature demon directed a skeptical look at Severus. "Daddy says you're a hero, Mister Teacher, but I think you're just a scary man with a big nose."

"I think you may be smarter than your daddy," Severus said, his face stony.

The little boy stuck out his tongue. "Meany!"

"Albus Severus Potter, that is enough!" Harry said sternly. "Apologize to Professor Snape and then go into the kitchen for breakfast or there won't be any flying lessons for a month!"

Finally abashed, the child issued a quick apology before dashing off into the sitting room, dragging the much larger dog. When Harry finally looked back at Severus, he was met with a strange expression.

"Is something wrong, Professor?" Harry asked, a tad uncertain.

"The child's name," he said unsteadily. "Why did you do that?"

Harry's cheeks painted with a light blush. "I didn't realize you didn't know. Nothing in my life goes without publication in every major newspaper," Harry said with a rueful grimace, "so I assumed you knew."

"I didn't."

"I would have asked permission, but you'd said you wanted to be left alone. Plus, I didn't think you'd agree. So I did it anyway." When Severus narrowed his eyes, Harry spread his hands in a yielding gesture. "It was supposed to be an honor. For Al. To be named after two very powerful, very brave Headmasters of Hogwarts Plus, I felt you deserved to be remembered."

"Dubious Order of Merlin awards aside, you don't believe that my continuing legacy of terror is enough?"

"You deserved to be remembered in a *positive* way. Remembered as the brave, talented, selfless," Severus scoffed, and Harry's face hardened as he glared back, "if not thoroughly unpleasant man that you are. Besides, there were a good, solid eight months where no one thought you would live. True, it was long before Al was born, but—" Harry shrugged. "It seemed like the right thing to do."

Severus nodded, unsettled but unwilling to show it. Potter's child bearing his name, even buried in the middle, seemed a strange farce on some level; a descendant of his most hated enemy bearing his name as a tribute was almost obscene. But, grotesquely, Severus was touched, though he'd agree to be dressed in a tutu to perform Swan

Lake before admitting it. Attempting to regain some control over the situation, Severus cleared his throat and made to speak, but Potter intercepted him.

"Not that it's not a joy to see you, as always," Harry said with a smirk, "but if I may be so rude: what the hell are you doing at my house at seven o'clock in the morning on a Sunday? Or, for that matter, at all?"

Severus' jaw clenched. "Did you know it was me?"

Harry stared back at the tall, scowling man on his doorstep without changing expressions. "It's early, Severus. You're going to have to be a bit more specific."

"That she was writing to," he snapped. "Did you know it was me that she was writing to? When we talked on Valentine's Day—"

Harry sighed heavily and moved back away from the doorway. "I think you'd better come inside."

Severus grappled with his discomfort and better judgment for a moment. He'd wanted this to be a quick visit, one where he would simply verify that Potter hadn't intervened or meddled somehow, and then he'd be on his way. But something in him tickled with curiosity as well as apprehension. As such, Severus restrained a sigh and allowed Potter to usher him into the small but obviously well-loved home. He stood uncomfortably on the doormat for a moment while Harry closed the door and reset several wards – the usual protection spells, plus several very strong ones for privacy that Potter explained with a shrug and a wry, "the burden of being famous, I guess" – then waved a hand to lead him out of the front hallway and into the house. They traversed a small corridor that held doors opening into a cluttered but homey sitting room and a big, noisy kitchen. The latter room echoed with the chatter of children's voices, the barking of the big black dog, and the clangor of pots and pans clearly being used to make breakfast for the Potter family. From the recesses of the kitchen, a high, rich voice called out, still a little ragged from sleep.

"Harry, love? Who was at the—?"

Ginny Potter's voice trailed into silence as she appeared in the doorway and caught sight of her husband followed by her former professor. She stared, wall-eyed, for a moment, and then clutched at the dressing gown hanging from her shoulders, covering up a thin, flowered nightgown.

"Professor Snape," Ginny said lightly, trying to cover her surprise with a tone of warmth. "I didn't expect to see you so early on a Sunday morning. Welcome to our home."

"Mrs. Potter," he acknowledged stiffly, unsure of what he should say to her.

He tried not to grimace; this sort of situation was exactly why he preferred to scare away all his former pupils: he had no idea how to rid his head of the image of a child in school robes when looking at the very well-developed, attractive young wife in front of him. Add to that the uncanny resemblance to Lily, and it all made for an extremely uncomfortable moment of silence.

She snorted a bit at his stilted greeting but smiled nonetheless. "It's nice to see you looking so well, Professor. You must have had quite a good night's sleep."

With one glance, he could tell that the little chit was trying to roust a reaction out of him to gauge how the previous evening had proceeded. Silently applauding her pluck, Severus smoothed his face into placid lines, threw up his best mental shields, and answered, "Thank you for your kind words, Mrs. Potter. I've been enjoying excellent health lately."

"That's good news," she said with a smile, but he could see her frustration just behind the almond-shaped brown eyes. "Would you like to join us for breakfast?"

"That's kind of you," he said, "but I have pressing matters to discuss with your husband."

At that moment, Harry leaned around Severus to place a kiss on Ginny's cheek. Obviously concerned at his serious expression, she started to speak, but he held her off with a soft, "We'll be in the library. No interruptions, all right?"

Ginny nodded, glancing from her husband to the stoic professor, then turned and made her way back to the throng of children and animals. Harry waved Severus on towards a room at the back of the house. When Severus entered the doorway, his jaw dropped just a bit in surprise. Clearly under the influence of several very well-placed Expansion Charms, the room boasted of slanting twelve-foot ceilings that were brushed by numerous bookshelves. A library to say the least. Severus had no doubt that this was not only a reading room, but a chamber devoted to practical application of Potter's work as an Auror, as there was little furniture, all of which had been positioned around the edges and corners of the room, and very plush floors, making it possible for spell practice without injury. Tucked away in a corner, almost as if both the object and the owner were ashamed of its presence, was a leaded-glass cabinet filled with a few medals, Potter's Order of Merlin awards, and (strangely) the open halves of a broken Snitch.

Severus remembered with an abrupt jolt that Potter was watching his assessment of the room, so he pulled together his thoughts, strengthened his Occlumency, and took one of a pair of leather wingbacks in front of an empty fireplace at the far end of the room. Harry joined him wordlessly, his brows pulled together as he took a few deep breaths. Severus crossed one leg over the other and bided his time, all his demeanor masking the urgency shaking his nerves.

"First of all, Severus," Harry started, ignoring the man's scowl at his casual use of the given name, "I'll state right away that I had no idea whom Hermione was writing to until last night, once your dinner was already underway. I made the connection while on a little joy ride, and I shared my thoughts with Ginny immediately afterwards, but I didn't have any clue who she was writing to before last night. In fact, I didn't even know she was writing to anyone until last night."

Severus nodded but said nothing.

"You have to understand my concern, Severus," Harry said uneasily.

The young man's face pinched in unhappiness and worry, and for a moment, Severus saw the eleven-year-old that Potter must have been all those years ago – scared, uncertain, friendless – that he had never bothered to acknowledge.

"You have to understand how worried I am for Hermione," he continued. "Aside from my family, she and Ron are the most important people in the world to me. She's a strong woman and an even stronger witch, but she has the softest, most compassionate heart I've ever seen on anyone. It would be so easy to trample her. I ought to know," he admitted, a sardonic smile on his lips, "I've done it myself often enough in twenty years."

"Potter, whatever you think—"

"Please," he said, holding up a hand. "Please, let me finish."

Clenching his jaw, Severus gestured for him to continue.

"I won't tell you that if you hurt her, I'll hurt you. I think that goes without saying. But to be frank, I don't think you'll hurt her. Not on purpose. It's the on-accident that I'm worried about."

Severus stayed quiet for a moment, pondering his response. "I'm not sure I know what you mean."

Harry sighed, running his hands through his unruly black locks. "If things went well last night – and I won't presume to ask if they did, that's not my business," Harry added quickly. "If they went well, you'd better be in it for the haul, Severus. Hermione isn't the sort who loves short-term. And if you're not in it for the long haul, then you'd better get out now, before anyone gets any more hurt than they already are. Especially if there's a child involved, now or in the future." Harry's voice dropped to a near-whisper before he said, "I don't think she could take it if it all crumbled beneath her again. It would kill her."

The two men were quiet for a long time, simply looking at each other. Every now and then, when green eyes locked on black ones, Severus felt a blunt banging on the wall

he'd erected around his mind. Gradually, the banging dulled to a soft, elusive stroke, searching for chinks in the armor. When the tendril found none, a low chuckle left Harry, and he sat back in his chair.

"You never change," he said with a smile.

"You do, it seems," Severus answered, allowing a small quirk to the tip of his lips. "In skill if not in subtlety, at least."

Harry laughed at the back-handed compliment, and dropped a mock half-bow. His face slid into seriousness again for a moment. "Do I need to worry, Professor?"

"Back to honorifics, are we?" Severus quipped. His face turned serious. "There is always something to worry about, Mr. Potter."

"Harry," the younger man said, warmth in his voice but his face unsmiling.

"Harry," Severus repeated, as if the word were a foreign language.

After a moment of silence where Potter stared into the empty space ahead of him, Severus dared to say, "Harry?"

When the younger man's head rose, Severus trained his eyes on the ones so like Lily's. And let open a chink in the armor. He watched Potter jerk back with the force of the sudden flash of memory. The idea hadn't been premeditated, and Severus nearly shuddered with the embarrassment of showing Potter that tender moment when Hermione had admitted her feelings for him, but it was the closest that Severus could come to a tacit concession of what he was going to do. When the green eyes cleared, they were steady as he regarded the man who had once loved his mother.

"It won't be easy."

"Most likely the hardest thing you've ever done," Harry acknowledged, nodding. "Is it worth it?"

"Need you even ask?" Severus said.

Eventually, Harry rose from the chair and escorted his former professor to the front door.

Struck by a sudden fit of humor, Severus's lips turned up at the edges. "So this wasn't why you were so adamant to invite me to dinner?"

Harry chuckled and shook his head. "No, I just thought that if this Joy person actually had chucked you, you would be vulnerable enough that you wouldn't hex my bollocks off for making a social invitation."

Severus actually allowed himself to laugh as he strode up to the door. "Nothing if not an opportunist, aren't you?"

When Severus crossed the threshold, he was surprised to see Potter's hand extended to him. A bit baffled, he took it and allowed the younger man to shake his hand.

His face a study of blank calmness, Harry said, "Good luck, Severus. You'll need it."

With a swift nod, Severus stepped off the front stoop, turned on the spot, and Disapparated.

As soon as the Potions professor was gone, Harry became aware of Ginny behind him. He sighed as she wrapped her arms around his middle, stroking her hands across the soft cotton t-shirt covering his lightly-muscled chest.

"Did he say—?"

"Nope," Harry answered.

"So you don't know what happened?"

"Oh, I do," he said.

"Did they—?"

"Yep."

"And did she tell him—?"

"She most certainly did."

Ginny scowled against her husband's back, but placed a kiss between his shoulder blades. "And is he going to—?"

"I have no idea."

Harry didn't feel great about lying to Ginny. Fairly certain he knew exactly what Severus Snape was about to do, something stopped Harry from telling her, as if just talking about it aloud would change everything.

A most unwelcome cold draft stole underneath the covers, shaking Hermione from sleep. She wanted so much to just lie here for the entire day, lounging in the warmth, both literal and figurative, that she got from being near her new paramour. It was certainly strange, thinking of her former professor as both her love and her lover, but something inside Hermione felt as if it had clicked into place last night. She felt like the whole of her life prior to that moment had been a peg that fit into the hole in her heart, but was just small enough that it didn't quite touch the edges, no matter how she slid things around. Being with him last night, she felt ... locked into place, as if everything she'd always wanted could truly begin now. It was a peculiar feeling, but she found herself completely warmed by it. And by him. Hermione scooted across the bed, in search of heat from his long, lanky body.

But no matter where she moved, she couldn't find him. For a long moment, Hermione was thoroughly baffled, her sleep-addled mind not really comprehending what it absorbed: Severus was not in bed. She sat up slowly, drawing the comforter up with her, and peered around the room, blinking as her eyes adjusted to the watery light spilling in around her drawn curtains. Uncertain as to what she had expected to find, Hermione became increasingly anxious as she looked around her bedroom. Not only was Severus Snape not here, neither were his possessions. The dark robes, long, smooth wand, the big, clunky boots (that he somehow managed to tromp around in and still be silent as a shadow) ... they were all gone. Severus had gotten up, gotten dressed, and never wakened her. A frown pulling brows together, Hermione stretched out to snatch her wand off the nightstand.

"*Homenum Revelio*," she said in a shaky voice.

Nothing. He was gone.

Hermione's hand shook around her Vinewood wand, and she found herself fighting back an alarming feeling of sudden sickness in her throat. He was gone. He was gone and he hadn't told her he was leaving. Her breathing started to race as she scrambled from the bed and heaved on the first pair of knickers that hit her fingers from her wardrobe. Throwing on a set of dove grey casual robes, Hermione dashed from the bedroom, wand in hand, and chased down the stairs. She stalked from room to room in

a panic, searching every inch of her tiny cottage with her eyes and casting Revealing Charms every few steps. No matter what she did, no matter what charms she used, no matter how many times she looked, she couldn't deny the sinking of her stomach as she realized that he was, indeed, gone.

Walking back up the stairs in a daze, Hermione tried to tell herself that he had just stepped out for a copy of the *Prophet* or to get breakfast from Hogsmeade. She picked at her robes and assured herself that he must have just gone out into town for a moment to bring back some delight or other to surprise her with. He hadn't gone, not really. She started repeating it over and over. He hadn't gone. He'd be back. He hadn't gone. Her wobbly knees buckled a bit, and she stopped her ascent. Plunking down on the stairs with an audible thud, she leaned her head against the wall and stared at the back of her red front door. He'd be back.

Only, an hour and a half went by with no movement from the front door, no tell-tale pop of Apparition. Two hours. Then three. Hermione couldn't fight it anymore. He'd gone. She couldn't understand why she felt so panicked; she wasn't his keeper, and they hadn't agreed to any long term arrangement of any kind. But those moments in the pre-dawn where he had made love to her so passionately, hot tears that he tried to restrain trickling down her neck, she'd clung to him and to the promise of his love that hung in the air. The promise of the future. And yet, as she moved back to the bedroom like a zombie, she realized that the promise she'd returned hadn't been given in the first place: he'd never said he loved her. Oh, certainly, his words had implied the fact, but he'd made no declaration, she had simply assumed the intent of his words and offered her own. Perhaps, she thought, stomach plummeting into her feet, she'd completely misinterpreted the meaning of the tears. Perhaps they were tears of grief. Perhaps he'd known he couldn't seek a future with her

Shaky limbs no longer agreed to support Hermione. She toppled backwards onto her bed, sprawled out at first, then curling into a fetal position as the horrifying reality set upon her. It was all too much for him; he had left because he couldn't stand to face her with a goodbye. He'd never really declared any deeper emotion, but he clearly didn't want to hurt her, so he'd gotten up and left to spare her the embarrassment of facing him. The sheet beneath Hermione's cheek was curiously wet. She pushed herself to a half-sitting position to reach for a tissue from her nightstand when she saw it: a crumpled collection of orange and black petals lying on her pillow. She'd removed the Roaring Tiger Lily from her hair as she'd discarded her robes the previous night, placing it on the seat of her vanity chair so it wouldn't get destroyed in their haste. The fact that it had moved from chair to pillow could only mean that Severus had picked it up and placed it there. With a blow like a troll's club, Hermione realized that he'd left it for her in lieu of a parting note. He'd given it to her so he could recognize her, but now, it seemed to shout that he'd thought better of the recognition. He couldn't handle knowing that Joy Bundle was Hermione Granger.

Trying not to sob, Hermione stumbled down the stairs and into her sitting room, heaving a rather larger than necessary handful of Floo powder into the hearth. When the green flames shot up, Hermione shouted the location of her best friends in a breaking voice, then heaved her head through to the other side.

"Harry? Ginny!" she cried. "Please, please! Harry? Ginny? Somebody! Please, I need you!"

Almost immediately, her flame-haired figure of her best girlfriend skidded into the kitchen, dropping to her knees and clutching at the rug. "What is it, darling?" Ginny asked hurriedly. "What's wrong?"

Hermione tried to answer but could only dissolve into hiccupping sobs.

"Steady on, love. Tell me what's—"

Hermione could only sob louder, so Ginny nodded.

"All right," Ginny said in a bracing voice. "Back up; I'm coming through."

Following her friend's instructions wordlessly, Hermione scrambled back away from the hearth and curled up against the nearby rocker. Almost immediately, Ginny Potter appeared on the hearth rug, brushing at her robes momentarily, until she saw Hermione's state and instantly dropped to the floor to throw her arms around her friend's heaving shoulders.

"Okay," Ginny said in the soothing voice she usually reserved for her children. "Okay. I think you'd better start from the beginning."

The diminutive black-haired Healer stalked through the halls of St. Mungo's with fury clearly written on her face, so much so that despite her size, she left a wake of cringing, terrified people hopping out of her way as she passed. When she finally reached the waiting room that she'd been directed to, she was sorely tempted to shout but managed to rein in the instinct. Barely. And only because there were at least fifteen other people to witness the tirade. Incensed, she strode up to the dour man who stood as she approached, scowling down at her from an impressive height. Unfortunately, his advantage showed no visible effect on the target of his glare.

"About time you—" he started, but the tip of an applewood wand jammed into his sternum stopped the rest of his sentence. He glared at it momentarily, then up the wand and arm to its owner's face.

"What in the bloody hell do you think you're doing, charging in here like this?" Healer Levy spat in an enraged whisper. "I ought to hex off whatever sticks out the farthest. I'll start with your nose and work south."

A smirk quirked one side of his lips; despite the fact that Euterpe was obviously irate, he couldn't help but be amused at her pluck. Not just anyone would dare to say such words to Severus Snape.

"It is a matter of extreme importance," he said imperiously.

"Importance?" she cried. "Importance! You insulted three secretaries, hexed five orderlies, and terrified two apprentice Healers sufficiently enough that they pulled me away from an incredibly difficult and delicate surgery just to find out what the hell you want. Unless your situation involves imminent death or dismemberment, I'll thank you to wait your turn just like everyone else! Or I'll ensure that your situation *does* involve both death *and* dismemberment."

Supremely unfazed by her tirade, Severus wrapped a long-fingered hand around Euterpe's upper arm. "I need to speak with you. Now. It is a matter of extreme importance."

"Severus, you're not bleeding or visibly hurt so you can damn well wait."

"I've already waited over an hour!"

Euterpe's hands went to her hips as she jammed her wand into the bun at the back of her head. "Well, this is a busy hospital, Professor, and you're not the only person who needs to see me today. And, as I said, since you're not bleeding or visibly damaged, you're low on the priority list."

Severus gritted his teeth and threw a glance towards the clock just behind her head. It had already been four hours since he'd left Hermione's cottage, between his visit to the Potters, breakfast at Hogwarts, and the long, tense hour in the waiting room here. He couldn't afford to waste any more time.

"Please," he ground out through gritted teeth. "Please, I need to speak with you."

Something of the desperation he was trying to stifle must have showed in his tone because the furrows of displeasure in Euterpe Levy's brows smoothed just the slightest bit. She whirled around and started to walk back to her office, making a swift gesture for him to follow. He trailed along after her at a short but safe distance — honestly, he didn't trust her patience to hold — and walked in silence. When they finally reached the little office, barely bigger than a cubby within the branch of the hospital dedicated to Obstetrics and Gynecology, she seated herself behind the desk and glared at him until he lowered his long frame into the chair on the other side.

"Talk," she said in a clipped voice. "And it had better not be a waste of my time."

It took Severus a few moments and a few deep breaths to marshal his courage before he spoke. "I need to know if you gave her anything," he said quickly. "Before we met. If you gave her something that changed the way she feels about things. Did you give her anything?"

Healer Levy raised a slim eyebrow and looked almost – but not quite – amused. "That's the closest I've ever seen you come to babbling."

He scowled, which only increased the amusement on her face.

"You're going to have to clarify that for me, Severus. And I did tell you not to waste my time."

He restrained a growl. "Hermione. I want to know if you gave Hermione anything that would alter her perception or feelings in regards to her situation. Anything that would make her more likely to feel something for Tobias."

Healer Levy's features dropped in shock. "Are you suggesting that I drugged her with some sort of emotion-altering potion because I knew who Tobias was?"

"Did you?"

For a moment, Euterpe was both surprised and insulted that he would make such an accusation to both her character as a person and her integrity as a Healer, but then she saw the glint of something behind his eyes. It was miniscule, barely noticeable, but she'd seen it in the eyes of countless patients: desperation. Unmitigated fear. So she calmed herself a bit before responding.

"Are you really so suspicious, Severus?" she said, folding her hands across her desk. "You know me as a Healer; what would make you think I would meddle in the lives of my patients? It's not only illegal and grounds for termination, it's unethical in the extreme."

He almost smiled; whether she was honestly curious about his motives or whether she had tried to out-Slytherin a Slytherin, it would have made him smile had he not been so fraught.

"Did you?" he repeated.

She sighed. "No, I didn't. I wouldn't. Aside from everything else that's wrong with that accusation, it's not my place, Severus."

He nodded, but still seemed unsatisfied, so she went on.

"I gave her hormones to help with implantation after the first round of treatment failed. And," she admitted, surprised that she was doing so, "I'll confess that I did lace the hormones with a potion for clear vision. Figuratively speaking, of course," when he raised an eyebrow. "I don't find that to be overstepping my boundaries as a Healer, as Hermione was very emotionally conflicted about the whole insemination and single-parenthood process."

"And the 'clear vision,' as you put it, had nothing to do with the fact that you knew who the donor was? You didn't try to alter her perception of me at all? Or maybe this potion for 'clear vision' was to encourage her to give up the insemination process?"

"No," Euterpe said firmly. "And if I had given her something on that score, it would have been to give her a great big shove *towards* you, you big lout! Why do you think I told you that you'd make a good parent? I also told Hermione that she picked a good man, and that you'd make a wonderful father. I didn't need to give her a potion to make her care for you, Severus; she quite obviously already did. But clearly you two needed a good swift kick to get you both to get off your arses to work up the courage to meet each other!" After a moment to calm her anger again, she added, "Did she say or do something to cause this suspicion, Severus?"

Severus shifted in his chair, trying to decide how much to tell the petite Healer.

"Severus," she repeated softly. "What happened to give you this suspicion?"

Eventually, he sighed heavily. "She said something ..."

"Something to make you think she was not herself?"

Unable to word it, he simply nodded.

"What was it?" After a long pause with no answer, Euterpe left her chair, rounded the desk and knelt at his feet to gaze up into the black eyes that had been avoiding hers. "Severus, what did she say?"

"Well," he started, then cleared his throat. "We decided to meet in person last night—"

"I know."

"And we met for—you know?" Severus asked, surprised.

Euterpe nodded, patted his knee, then sat in the chair opposite him. "Yes, I do. Hermione owed me to tell me that you two were going to meet face-to-face because she thought I should be kept abreast of ... possible physical developments."

Severus couldn't help the scowl on his face, nor the light blush that painted his sallow cheeks. He most certainly did not appreciate his sexual encounters – in this case, a theoretical sexual encounter – being broadcast to the world at large.

"Yes, well," he said, but reined in his anger. "We did meet last night and things ... escalated."

"The two of you made love, then?"

Shifting in his chair, Severus clenched his fists and tried not to growl at the woman. "We did," he said curtly. "And in a fit of emotion, she said ... that is to say, she admitted ___"

"That she loves you?"

Severus grimaced into the younger woman's smiling, hopeful face, then had to look away. "She was simply overwhelmed by hormones and the heat of the moment," he said gruffly.

"Oh, Severus, don't be stupid," she said with a laugh. "Any fool could see she was in love with you just by looking at her face when she talked about you."

"Really?"

If he had looked into it far enough, Severus would have been disgusted with the fact that he sounded like nothing so much as a nervous teenager. But, he supposed, in essence that's what he was: a man on the precipice of his first real love. It was petrifying.

"Yes, really," Euterpe said with a smile. "Now, the real question is: did you say it back?"

Here, Severus's brows drew together. "I ... It is a hard thing for me to say, Euterpe," he said uncomfortably, "for reasons you couldn't possibly understand. It is fraught with complications."

"Bollocks on complications," she said with a snort. "You're scared. That's really what this is about. She loves you, you love her, and that absolutely terrifies you." He started to rebut, but she spoke over him. "You didn't say it back, did you?"

"It is too soon to be declaring—"

"Did you even talk about it before you left?"

"I didn't want to wake her—"

"Why are men so bloody thick?" Healer Levy said with a grimace. She scooted her chair close, taking up Severus's big hand in both of her own and ignoring the look of panic on his face. "If you didn't say it back and you left this morning without addressing the topic, she's going to think you don't love her."

"Hermione is far too practical—"

"Practical, my arse," she bit off. "She's very smart and very strong, but she also cries every time someone she loves has a fight. She's a very intelligent but very emotional woman, Severus. Trust me on this: if you didn't say it and you didn't talk about it, she's going to think you left because you don't love her."

Again he tried to interrupt, but she just clutched his hand and stared him down.

"You *need* to trust me on this. If you love her at all, if you don't want to lose her, you need to get your skinny bum out of my office and back to her doorstep. Preferably with some kind of flowers, candy, or jewelry and the best declaration of undying love you can come up with. Now, before it's too late."

The little woman yanked him from his chair with surprising strength and heaved him towards the door.

"Shoo!" she cried, waving her hands in a dismissing gesture as he stared at her in confusion. "Go! Remember: flowers, candy, jewelry, and/or begging. And don't forget the love part! That part is *crucial*. And tell Hermione to owl me to set up a pregnancy test!"

The last sentence was issued at a bellow as Severus stalked away from her down the hall. He screeched to a halt, his shoulders hunching as he cringed. At least twenty people had stopped to gape and snicker. Realizing at last that Healer Levy was most likely correct in her urgency, Severus decided that it was much too late for pride. He started to run towards the safe points for Disapparating.

He stumbled a bit as he hit her front stoop with a muted crack. Too hasty, Severus, far too hasty. The last errand he'd made had taken him longer than he wanted, and after talking to Euterpe, he couldn't shake the feeling of a clock ticking over his head. Severus took a few steadying breaths as he stood on her stair, gathering the courage to knock. Before he could get that far, however, he heard a strange noise coming from the room just beyond the front windows, as if someone were skinning a cat. Immediately alert, Severus drew his wand and placed it against the cool wood of the front door, wordlessly casting a surveillance spell. The noises and voices inside the cottage echoed in his ears as if he were a spider in the walls of the cottage.

She was crying. Sobbing if he wanted to be more right about it. He could hear the rustle of robes against the corduroy cushions of her sofa as whoever was in the room with her patted and hugged her. Hermione's voice was broken and raw from the crying that she'd clearly been partaking of for quite some time now. Severus's heart dropped into his dragon-hide boots. He was too late.

"A-and," Hermione stuttered as she tried to pull herself together, "then he ... he said that I am b-breath and I-I-life and ... and I don't know, Gin—"

"Ah," Severus said to himself, "Potter." He shook his head; he might have known that it would be this Potter if not the other.

"—I don't know what made me say it, but it just tumbled out."

Ginny waited a beat of silence before asking, "That you love him?"

Hermione must have nodded, for Severus caught the light scrape of her face against the other woman's robes. "I did. I said, 'I love you, too.' I said it, fool that I am."

"Why is that foolish?" Potter said soothingly.

He heard the rustle of Hermione sitting up to look her companion in the face. "Why? Because he never said it first!"

"So?" Ginny asked. "So you said it first; big deal! Why does that mean he's not coming back?"

"Don't you get it, Ginny? It's not about pride or the order in which we declare things," Hermione said, her voice slightly hysterical. "I said, 'I love you, too.' Too. I assumed that he loved me when he never said he did!" A loud snuffle and the rough drag of her nose across her sleeve made Severus cringe. "He never said he loved me, Gin. And the tears ... he cried against my shoulder as he It was all just too much for him. He's gone, Gin, and I've done it to myself. If I were Severus Snape, I would probably do the same thing. Why would he want to tangle himself up with the insufferable, Know-It-All best friend of his worst enemy? God, Ginny, it's ludicrous to think it would work. He probably just didn't have the heart to tell me to my face."

Hermione broke into ragged sobs again with Ginny shushing her with murmured words of comfort and soothingly hugs. Severus couldn't stand to hear any more. With wobbly steps, he took himself away from her front door. What had he done to her? A shaking hand ran through his hair. He'd convinced himself that morning that he'd be able to make the necessary errands and return before she awoke, but looking back, he'd seen that it was the coward's way: he'd wanted to face anyone but her to get confirmation of her love. He had been too terrified that she'd say it wasn't real. But ... he did love her. He did. Whatever other stupid complications arose, whoever they'd been in the past, he loved her in spite of it all. And if now wasn't the time for him to seize the opportunity to do something about it, then he'd never be able to look at himself in the mirror again. He had to fix this. Now. And he knew just how to do it.

An hour later, Hermione sat huddled on her couch, curled in the blanket that she'd made to match the one she'd sent to Tobias. Severus, her mind corrected. Severus. Just thinking his name made her start to snuffle again, but she resisted the urge to cry, as her red-rimmed eyes still stung from chafing and puffiness. Sipping at the peach tea Ginny had warmed for her just before she left, Hermione took deep, steadying breaths and tried to think of something else. With a sudden squawk like a startled goose, Hermione brushed at the tea she'd spilled across her front and looked up to see that the frantic rapping noise that had frightened her came from a large owl hulking on the sill just outside the window she sat near, tapping its beak to the glass. The bird had a long scroll tied to his leg. Puzzled, she set her tea on the nearby end table and leaned over to open the window and admit the bird. No sooner was the letter free from his leg than the bird soared back out the window and away from her cottage. Hermione gazed down at the clearly lengthy letter in confusion and then, when she recognized the handwriting, nearly bobbed the scroll into her tea. Ripping open the seal, Hermione watched disconnectedly as trembling hands unfurled the parchment; she felt her heart drop into her stomach as she read the first line.

My dearest Hermione, Beloved, Joy of my shadowed life,

Her hungry eyes devoured the pages of spiky script as fast as her brain could process the words. When she reached the end, she rocketed up from the couch with a squeak of distress and ran to the entryway. Wrenching open the door hard enough to send it banging against the wall, tears cascaded down her cheeks as laughter bubbled from her throat. She threw herself into his arms.

A/N – So what would my fics be without an evil cliffie? At least this time, you have an inkling of where it's going Stay tuned for the eleventh and final chapter.

Look at My Baby and Me

Chapter 11 of 15

Winner for the Anything Goes Challenge Chaptered Category!

Seeking: An intelligent, capable wizard amenable to assisting a bright, independent, magically-formidable single witch in the conception of a child. Insemination only: no sexual congress; non-negotiable. Dignity and discretion of utmost importance. Neither monetary nor emotional support needed for or during the birth and life of child. Further contact will be established following receipt of preliminary letter of interest. Address all inquiries by owl to Joy Bundle, Box # 1086, Hogsmeade Village.

A/N By now, my faithful readers, you should know how much I adore this story and how very sad I am to let it go. I also know that I've told you many, many times how grateful I am for all your reviews, your support, your enthusiasm, and your pleas for "more chapters, more chapters!" Let me express to you again just how much I appreciate all your feedback and comments, your well-wishes, and your investment in my story. *sappy music in background* I haven't been with TPP for very long, and I'm constantly amazed and overwhelmed at the reception I've gotten here. Someday I'll get off my big butt and join the chat so I can actually TALK to you wonderful people. But, I digress...

This is the final chapter of this fic, and while I'm sad to see it go, I think you'll agree with me (by the end) that it's the right place to leave it. I sincerely hope you've enjoyed this journey; I know I have. I also hope that you'll join me on my other fics, as I'll be updating those more frequently now, and hopefully starting some new ones. Again, thank you all from the bottom of my heart for all your support!

bows

~~ ** Lady Tuesday ** ~~

PS In case you've been wondering and/or in case any of you are musical theatre fans (like me!), the chapter titles are lyrics of the song Me and My Baby from Chicago.

Chapter Eleven Look at My Baby and Me

25 March 2012

My dearest Hermione, Beloved, Joy of my shadowed life,

Somehow I've found myself here again, scrawling my thoughts and feelings to you via the page instead of my own lips. I'm sorry to say that this seems to be so much easier for me. I'm not a declamatory man ... well, at least, not in terms of emotion. So forgive me for taking the coward's way once again, using ink, parchment, and owl to convey my feelings to you instead of my voice, my face, my body. Despite my ineptitude in those dramatic romantic gestures that all women seem to desire whether they believe so or not I hope that the unspoken romance of a letter of this nature will help carry the day, because I intend for this missive to leave you in no doubt of all the secret corners of my heart. Something I've never shared with another living soul.

So let me be rightly understood:

If the seas flowed with ink and the entire sky was made of parchment, I could not begin to write my love for you. Somehow, you have bewitched me. A terrible pun, I know, but I have a feeling you could use a thorough smile at the moment. I find myself enchanted by you, dearest, loveliest Hermione. For a man who has lived the vast majority of his life in dark and shadow, I find myself gratefully inflamed by your brightness. You have captivated me with your sweetness, your wit, the boundless compassion that tempers your formidable intelligence. You are a profound and amazing woman, and I find myself ... woefully inadequate to deserve your love, and yet, you've bestowed it upon me with no conditions and no hesitations. I may be the luckiest man alive. What a bizarre change of Fate to find that I am fancying myself most fortunate, instead of lamenting my position as Fortune's perpetual fool.

I wish I could say that there won't be complications in a relationship between the two of us, but the lie would sit bitter upon my tongue despite years of practice in subterfuge. In fact, given our respective histories as well as our history together, I'm sure that a relationship between Hermione Granger, formerly Weasley (what in God's name were you thinking, marrying that addle-brained simpleton?), and the cruel Potions master, former Death-Eater and sullied murderer, is absolutely rife with conflicts, complications, and the potential for disaster. I cannot promise you that I will never hurt your feelings, as I have the unique capability of running roughshod over nearly everyone I've ever known. I cannot promise you that it won't be awkward as ass at the beginning, as I'm sure it will be. People can't have the shared past that you and I do and not have awkward moments as we adjust to a different way of thinking and operating our lives. I also can't promise you that I won't be stubborn as a bear yanked from hibernation when you attempt to draw me out of my carefully crafted life of seclusion (inevitable, given your youthful vigor, especially in contrast to my curmudgeonly reclusiveness).

But before my cheerful side runs away with me, let me tell you what I can promise you:

-- I can promise you that I will never flag in my devotion to you. Knowing what you do of my past, you cannot help but doubt that I would abandon a woman I love.

-- I can promise you that I will always respect and honor you as the gifted, brilliant, formidable witch and woman that you are. Whatever my thoughts were about you as a child and burgeoning witch, I assure you that they have been tempered by years of wisdom, humility, and the growing knowledge I have of the woman you've become.

-- I can promise you that now that you have my love, you will never want for affection ever again. I cannot always express it in such grand and dramatic ways as the average man, but you will always have it.

-- I can promise you that whenever we manage to successfully complete the "arrangement" that brought us together, our child will want for nothing. I will never be a perfect man so I cannot pretend I will be a perfect father, but I can promise you that I will give the child everything that it is in my power to give.

I suppose that now that these wishes, desires, and emotions have been laid bare, all I can do is throw myself at your feet and hope that you will accept me, faults and all. I left you this morning not because I wavered in my love for you, light of my heart, but because I am so unaccustomed to receiving love that the idea of suddenly having it heaped upon my shoulders by such an unlikely benefactor was disorienting and overwhelming. And terrifying. But I can only hope that this letter will go a distance towards restoring your faith in me, and, I must confess, buying my way back into your good graces with the time-honored and sickeningly romantic gesture of a love letter.

Accept me, my love. Look into your heart, forgive my boorishness, my gruffness, my acidic personality, my unforgivably dark past, my certainly tumultuous future, and throw open your arms to me. I beg you, redeem my faults with your goodness and give meaning to my lost existence.

Devotedly,

Severus

PS Assuming that I have hit the mark and succeeded in bringing you to the happy tears that I'm reasonably certain should be coating your face by now, would you please come open your door? It's bloody cold outside, and I have no desire to continue loitering on your front steps. People will think I'm stalking you, and I doubt I'll be able to retain my intimidation factor if this carries on much longer.

Severus stood on the small concrete square that was her modest stoop, trying not to wring his hands in nervousness. When he'd sat down at the large mahogany desk in his chambers, he'd been driven by determination and purpose and, yes, love. He'd been so certain that this letter would do the trick, that she'd only needed to be left with no doubt as to the strength and permanence of his affections, and then all would be well. The longer he stood, though, the more anxious he became. Surely this was taking longer than it should? Could she really read this slowly? Or perhaps his effort had been too little, too late? He scrubbed a long-fingered hand, pink and chill from the wind, across the sharp features of his face, praying that he had not lost yet another chance for happiness. He was certain that human beings only got so many, and people such as him had surely used most of them up by making bad choices in youth? He shifted from foot to foot and tried to keep himself from losing hope and leaving. Perhaps it made him a fool, but he'd stand here on this tiny little porch until next Tuesday if there was even the slightest chance that she would come let him in.

The letter dropped from Hermione's fingers as they nearly went numb from shock. She'd been so lonely for so long, hoping, wishing, praying for the sort of emotion that had just been delivered to her that she could barely process it all. A man loved her, and it was not just any man, but a man renowned for being stoic, unfeeling, and cruel. Yet the length of parchment that tumbled from her tingling fingers to the rug beneath her couch had been filled with words of such tenderness and vulnerability that part of her mind could barely believe it was the same man who'd belittled her for six years. She had loved Tobias knowing only the information he'd chosen to share with her in his letters, and that was only a piece, really. Now that she knew the whole of him, she could only love him more. Tobias had been a man worthy of her love, and she couldn't help but think that despite all of his failings, Severus Snape was even more so. So how could she possibly deny him love when he deserved it so much and begged for it so prettily?

Her throat closed around a squeak of distress as the words of the post script sunk into her consciousness. Rising on wobbling legs, Hermione dashed to her front entryway, knocking over a table of knick knacks and a magazine rack full of back issues of *Transfiguration Today*. Wrenching open the door hard enough to send it banging against the wall, tears cascaded down her cheeks as laughter bubbled from her throat. Disregarding the fact that he hadn't really registered her intention, she threw herself into his arms.

Severus let out a guttural "oof!" as something solid and curly pelted against his chest. It had taken him a moment to realize that the door had even opened, and when it had, his bushy-haired paramour had flown through it. A few seconds passed as she clutched at his shoulder and made a strange burbling sound, halfway between a laugh and a sob. Suddenly, sense returned to him; Severus wrapped his arms around her smaller frame and crushed her to his chest, burying his protuberant nose in the huge tuft of curls that spilled across his shoulders and throat. Hermione clawed at the stiff woolen sleeves of his robes, muttering something unintelligible and sniffing in a way that unattractively resembled snorting. He pressed a kiss onto the top of her head; she couldn't be more perfect than she was right now, clinging to him and crying. Severus deliberately lightened his grip on her, allowing his hands to roam through the hellacious riot of spirals that had plagued his cauldrons and classrooms.

"I'm sorry," he rasped out eventually. "I shouldn't have left. I'm so sorry..."

She pulled back quickly and stifled his apologies with her lips. He let her kiss him for only a moment before wrenching away.

"I'm sorry," he started again.

"Severus, don't," Hermione said through a watery smile. "You don't have to..."

"Yes," he said gruffly. "Yes, I do. Please, let me say my peace."

Hermione untangled herself from his arms, dragged the sleeve of her robes across her eyes and nose watching him cringe as she did so and then looked at him expectantly. Severus had to clear his throat twice before he could speak.

"I shouldn't have left," he said. "In my head, I convinced myself that I had to perform these little errands before I could return to you, but what it really amounted to was that once the idea of loving you," he cleared his throat again, apparently discomfited just by saying the words aloud, "loving Hermione Granger, really sunk in, I was absolutely terrified."

"I know," Hermione said gently, taking his hand in hers.

"I don't think you do," Severus answered, but squeezed her hand gently. "Don't get me wrong, I don't doubt that this is just as daunting for you as it is for me, but I'm reasonably certain that you have experience being in love. I most certainly do not."

Hermione couldn't help her features screwing up in confusion. "But you ... you loved Lily...?"

Severus nodded. "I did. But being in love requires reciprocation; to be *in* love, one's love must be returned. Otherwise, it's just you loving. I've never ... I've never had anyone love me before."

"Severus," Hermione said brokenly, raising his hand to brush his knobby knuckles against her cheek.

He spread out his long fingers to cup the warm, smooth skin of her face. Unable to stop himself, he just had to touch her, as if the contact itself were a drug.

"I loved Lily with everything in me, but it created a void because I never got anything back. It ate me alive, Hermione. Ate at me until I was nothing but a hollow shell of a man who couldn't help but be consumed by anger and fear and hatred. With you, I feel ... full. That sounds stupid," he said hurriedly, a blush painting his sallow cheeks.

"No," Hermione said, pulling him closer. "No, it doesn't. I know exactly what you mean." After a moment of silence where he simply held her in his arms, she put on her

most serious face and gazed up into his eyes.

"I have to point out a flaw in one former statement, though: I'm 100% aware of how scared you are; after all, if finding yourself to be in love with Severus Snape isn't the most terrifying thing one can experience, I don't know what is."

Severus scowled down at her with a fixed, steely glare, his signature raised eyebrow sliding into place. He made a huff of indignance as she rose onto her tiptoes and placed her lips against his, but eventually softened his mouth as he reached down and clutched at her behind, pulling her closer. When her tongue slipped past his lips, he even smiled. He let her tongue chase around his mouth languidly for a long few minutes before he pulled back to gaze at her face, eyes pleasantly glazed, cheeks rosy from excitement and the cold.

"You'll have me, then?"

Hermione gave a merry chuckle. "I suppose I'll have to. Who else would want me, after all?"

His thin lips drew into a long line, and he scowled again. "Ah, so I'm a consolation prize then?"

"Prize?" Hermione asked in a thickly incredulous voice. "You're no more or less than a millstone round my neck."

Severus couldn't help but break into a chuckle and kiss her again.

"What about me?" Hermione asked. "Will you have me?"

"I suppose I'll have to," Severus mimicked with a lopsided grin. "Especially if I ever want to have sex again. Who else would want me?"

"Speaking of ..."

Hermione grinned so sleekly that Severus felt a throb of heat shoot straight to his groin. With a deliciously wicked light in her eyes, Hermione clasped the front of his robes in one hand and dragged him backwards into the cottage.

"We have to make sure that it 'takes,'" she said, just before setting upon him.

A long while later, Severus sighed quietly as Hermione shifted against him. She had draped the upper half of her body across his chest and tucked her head beneath his chin, every now and then pressing absent kisses into the fuzz of hair scattered across his sternum. Severus wondered if he'd ever stop thinking how strange it felt, how wonderfully strange, to linger in bed, nude and lazily entwined with a lover. Some deeply buried and disgustingly romantic part of him hoped that he never became accustomed to it so that he might always appreciate the gift that was her presence.

"Oh!" Severus exclaimed suddenly, and made to leave the bed.

He smiled as he heard her grumble in annoyance as he left the circle of her arms and padded across the room, unabashed as his nakedness. Rummaging in his robes momentarily, Severus scowled down at the black wool, unable to recall where he'd stuffed the box he'd charmed to be small enough to fit in a pocket on his way back from his last errand.

"Severus, what are you doing?" Hermione asked, sitting up in bed and drawing the sheet over her chest.

"Looking for something."

With a little curl to her lips, Hermione inquired, "Why didn't you just Summon it?"

Severus straightened up at this comment, turning back to her with a smirk. "And where, exactly, do you believe I have my wand hidden?" he asked, gesturing to his naked body.

"Nowhere I want to know about," she quipped.

Snorting with laughter, Severus reapplied himself to the task for a few moments when his fingers bumped against the corner of a box buried in the pocket of his traveling cloak. When he pulled the small box free, he extricated his wand from his robes, tapping it and muttering, "*Engorgio*." Immediately, the box sprung back to its original size, occupying most of his long, slender hand. For a moment, Severus knew a squirming moment of apprehension. What if she didn't like it? What if, upon hearing its story, she found it strange or undesirable? He wasn't entirely sure what that would mean, but he wasn't certain it would be a good sign. Feeling her questioning gaze on him, Severus took both the box and his wand back to the bed, laying his wand on the nightstand before climbing into bed next to Hermione. As he leaned back against the headboard, Severus felt a smile touch his lips; Hermione snuggled close to him and drew the covers up over the two of them as he placed the box on his lap.

"I visited Healer Levy this afternoon while I was out..."

"You went to see Euterpe?" Hermione asked. "Why?"

Severus shifted uncomfortably and cleared his throat. "I wanted to make sure that ... that the insemination process hadn't been compromised."

"What do you...?"

Severus cut her off gently before she could pursue it further. "And while I was there, she told me that when I came back to you to declare my love as she insisted I do, quite rightly that I was required to bring either candy, flowers, jewelry, or some combination of the three."

A musical laugh tumbled out of Hermione. "Oh, Severus, you didn't have to do that."

He smirked. "Good. I didn't." Hermione's face pinched just a tiny bit in indignance, causing him to laugh before speaking again. "Our relationship is too unique for something so mundane as jewelry." After only a moment's hesitation, Severus handed her the box covered in worn blue velvet.

Hermione gazed up into his face briefly before running her hands over the soft surface. "What is it?" she whispered.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "A puppy. But I haven't poked holes in, so..."

She swatted him, chuckling, then looked from Severus's face back to the box. Part of her wanted not to open it at all, just hold onto this first gift between them. But eventually her curiosity overtook her and she gently lifted the lid. Nestled in a cushioned lining of soft satin was a silver inkwell and nibbed pen, etched all over with swirling, looping vines and, in delicate detail at the top of the pen, an open tiger lily. The pieces were obviously antique at a guess, she'd say at least a hundred years old, if not more and more than a little tarnished, but Hermione could tell that when cleaned, they would be absolutely stunning. Removing both pieces from the box, Hermione turned them over in her hands before gazing up into Severus's face with a look of stunned questioning.

"They belonged to my mother," he said quietly, picking up the pen in his long fingers. His face pinched as he spoke, but he continued talking. "I'm sure that Potter has shared with you what he knows of my childhood..."

He didn't look up to see her nod sadly, but kept speaking.

"...so I'm sure you know that my parents My father came to loathe all things magic, including my mother and, eventually, me."

Hermione's hand touched his wrist, clasping gently as he turned the pen over in his fingers, but she doubted he even felt it.

"In the times back before everything went wrong, however, I understand that he found her quite charming. My mother told me that when they first came together, he regarded her and by extension, the entire wizarding world as something of a fairy tale. This set was something he'd given her as an engagement present. She told me that he had said he didn't know what else to get for a woman who could conjure anything she wanted out of thin air, but he knew that witches wrote on parchment like in the old days. So he scrounged around until he found this set in an antique store. She told me that he saved money for nearly a month to give it to her, probably because it was cheaper than buying a ring.

"My mother loved these things; she wrote to her family nearly every day, and as time wore on, it's one of the few things, I believe, that still made her happy." Severus took a deep breath as he tried to explain the next piece. "The first time my father ever struck her, it was because she had written to my Aunt Daphne to seek help about his drinking problem. I suppose it seemed only right to him that he pick up the pen since it was the instrument of her offense, and when he slapped the back of his hand across her face, the sharp edge of the nib sliced open her cheek."

Hermione gasped loudly, clasping one hand across her mouth and clutching the inkwell in the other.

"She was still a witch then, of course, so the scar was spelled away, but the pen and inkwell vanished from her desk after that. More than being afraid of it as a weapon, I think she didn't want the things she loved so much to be tainted by any more unhappiness. I never saw her use these again, but more than once I caught her sitting on the floor of her closet with the open box in her hand, just stroking her fingers over the carvings."

At this point, Severus had finally mustered the courage to look up into Hermione's face. Tears streaked down her cheeks, but she managed a watery smile as his eyes caught hers. Gently, he reached over and set the pen in the little swooping arm at the side of the inkwell and traced his fingertips lightly up her wrist.

"I know that this isn't the happiest present to give someone," he started, talking over top of her mumble of thanks, "but I thought it would be right for you and right for us. Letter writing brought me to you, and perhaps now you can redeem this treasure of my mother's the way you have done for me."

Unable to form whatever might be appropriate words, Hermione simply leaned over and pressed her lips to Severus's, uncaring that they shook with the trembling, gulping breaths as she fought a tsunami of emotion. When it became clear that she had no intention of ceasing the kiss, Severus briefly fumbled for his wand and levitated the silver antiques over to her vanity table before covering her body with his.

Severus tore into his breakfast as if he hadn't eaten in weeks. He couldn't quite account for his disproportionate increase in appetite these last few days; he hadn't gained all that much weight in fact, he was reasonably certain he'd even lost a pound or two and yet, he found himself practically ravenous all the time. A normal breakfast for Severus usually consisted of two slices of dry toast and two or three cups of strong black coffee; nothing like the healthy portion of pancakes that he was currently devouring. It seemed that getting out of the dungeons now and then did wonders for one's appetite. His fork paused as a thick smirk coated his face. Perhaps it was the appetite for one's partner begetting activities that perked up one's appetite for food. The smirk dissolved into an actual grin. He shook out the morning edition of the *Daily Prophet* with his left hand, picking up his fork and resuming his feast with the other.

As the breakfast hour went by, Severus couldn't help noticing that everyone else seemed to be noticing *him*. When he asked for a second helping of pancakes, Pomona Sprout stared blankly at him for a good solid fifteen seconds before passing him the platter; Filius's mouth dropped open when Severus thanked the little wizard for offering him a refill to his coffee. The cherry on the morning, however, occurred when he complimented one of Minerva's prefects on a particularly well-executed version of Veritaserum: the witch had been so surprised that her hand dropped slack halfway to her mouth, and an entire cup's worth of tea sloshed down the front of her robes without her noticing. Stunning the entire table into silence, Severus chuckled roundly, whipped his wand towards Minerva to clean her robes, and then nodded at her genially before going back to his paper. Uncaring that the entirety of the staff seemed to be gaping at him like a cauldron full of landed codfish, Severus simply allowed the corners of his mouth to quirk up just the tiniest bit as he read on.

Approximately fifteen minutes before breakfast was due to end, a high shriek, like that of a train whistle, echoed through the vaulted ceilings of the Great Hall. Looking up, Severus was surprised to see Hermione's sleek black owl swooping towards him, alighting on the table and staring up at him pointedly. With a strange sense of premonition, Severus reached out and relieved the bird of its burden, which turned out to be quite small indeed. The roll of parchment was miniscule, in fact; from the outside, he'd have wagered that it was barely big enough to house three words. His curiosity piqued, he unrolled it. He had been wrong: it held only two words, written in a rather shaky version of Hermione's usually steady hand.

It took.

For a moment, Severus was completely flummoxed by the message. Then, with a shot that literally set him back in his chair, he realized that she'd told him the previous evening that she'd scheduled an appointment with Healer Levy this morning for a pregnancy test. *It took.* She...they were going to have a baby.

Some inarticulate noise escaped him as he allowed his head to drop back against the headrest of his chair. The noise turned into a laugh. Now even more certain that the entire staff was gaping at him, Severus allowed himself to laugh again before resuming his voracious consumption of pancakes. This time, however, he didn't hide behind his newspaper, but stared out across the masses of students in front of him and felt amusement bubble in his chest as they, too, grew increasingly uneasy at the sight of a smile on the Potions professor's face.

"What's the good news, Severus?" he heard Flitwick ask.

Severus looked down the table at his colleague with a pleased but vacant smile, unable to wrap his tongue around any coherent words.

"It must be good news," Filius said jovially, "from that look on your face."

After a moment, Severus regained his verbal capabilities, and with it, his desire to shock his colleagues out of their knickers. His lips turned up in a slick grin.

"It seems," he said slowly, "that I am going to be a father."

Severus heard a confused but happy mix of general congratulations from teachers, culminating in Hagrid loudly bellowing, "Who's the lucky lady, then?"

Severus felt as if the entire Great Hall or, at the very least, the front third that was within earshot of the head table had stopped every atom from moving as they awaited his answer. When the silence was so drawn out that he thought that eternal busybody Poppy Pomfrey might actually suffer cardiac arrest, Severus slipped a smirk on his face and answered.

"Miss Hermione Granger."

The staff table descended into complete chaos. Somewhere within the din, he heard Rolanda Hooch thumping Minerva on the back to stop her choking on her biscuits, and Irma Pince telling Aurora Sinistra that she'd always thought Hermione "needed someone with a bit more brains than that Weasley boy." Amid the chaos, Severus returned to his coffee, gazing out over the students once more. For the first time in his life, the sight gave him pleasure. Somewhere among the throng of young bodies, he almost thought he could see a little first year wandering between tables with straight ebony hair and warm, cinnamon eyes.

For the first time in longer than he could remember, Severus silently sent up a prayer: Please be a girl; please/lease be a girl. He knew just what to name her.

~~ ** Fin ** ~~

End fic A/N So there it is, loves: the end. But it's actually more of a beginning, isn't it? ^_^

Now, maybe I'll regret this, and maybe I'm opening some major floodgates here, but ... I do have an outline of a sequel in mind. It will probably be 95% fluff, and probably would only be a few chapters, but you never know. If you have genuine interest in seeing a sequel, please let me know. Also, if you don't think a sequel is necessary, please feel free to share that opinion as well. I'd love to hear from you all. Thank you again!

Mr.

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Mr.

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Mr.

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Mr.

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