



*Safe Word
is
Devil's Snare*

by Shaya Lonnie

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To the people who read this and said, "Thank you for writing an accurate and healthy relationship existing in this lifestyle."

You are the reason I wrote this story.

Safe. Sane. Consensual.

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Chapter 1

September 15th, 2006

Twenty-six years, eleven months, and twenty-eight days.

Hermione had always expected the twenty-seventh year of her life to be phenomenal. She was not entirely certain why the number twenty-seven had struck her, but she could clearly recall being nine-years-old when her teacher at Muggle primary school had asked everyone what they wanted to be when they grew up. At the time, Hermione was struggling between being a dentist—like her parents—or a librarian, because the one at her local library had always been kind to her, and she wore purple-rimmed glasses, and at the time Hermione's favourite colour had been purple. Oddly enough, the books did not even factor into her initial enthusiasm about the job; *that* came later.

When she was placated, as many children are, about her future in books or dentistry, Hermione had firmly said that none of that mattered just now, as there was plenty of time until she was a grown up, which, in her mind, was something that a person became the very moment they turned twenty-seven.

Hermione had been eleven when she found out that she was a witch.

That she had powers and answers that explained everything that was odd about her up to that point. She discovered magic and spells and a lovely fact in that witches and wizards could outlive Muggles by a hundred years or more. Still, twenty-seven stuck in her mind.

She was sixteen the first time someone actively tried to murder her.

While Cedric Diggory was considered the first casualty of the start of the Second Wizarding War, the first battle that had truly taken place between Death Eaters and the Order of the Phoenix—led, interestingly by Dumbledore's Army—had been a year later. Hermione had always been mature for her age, but the moment that Dolohov's curse hit and

the pain began to flood her body, there was a brief voice in the back of her head telling her that she was just a child, and much too young to die.

Hermione came of age, magically, at seventeen.

No longer monitored by the Ministry—who was too busy trying to keep itself together in the wake of the war, ignorant to the infiltration of Voldemort and his kind—she couldn't help but think that in ten years, twenty-seven would come and perhaps then, life would be good.

If she lived that long.

If *any* of them did.

She was a war hero, a Ministry worker, and a wife at twenty-three.

After the war, she was able to put Ron off for a few years with excuses. She needed to find her parents, she needed to graduate Hogwarts, and she needed to establish her career. But then her parents died in Australia due to an accident involving a tropical cyclone and powerlines. Numb from grief, Hermione put all of her focus into her schoolwork and graduated. Determined not to be another person that the war destroyed, she went straight to work at the Ministry, desperate to make a difference.

Perhaps it was the grief, perhaps the thought of romance and fate—if she even believed in such a thing—but Ron's swift proposal came days after her acceptance letter to the Department of Records and Statistics. Numbers were safe. Arithmancy was something that calmed her. It was also, unfortunately, something that Ron would never understand and the very cause of many of their fights in the beginning. Venting to him about her workday was pointless because he would immediately feel inferior and lash out, as he was prone to do. He would tell her about his work as an Auror, priding himself on whichever new Dark wizard he had tracked down. She did not want to hear it. She was trying to put the war behind her, and knowing that her husband was out there, risking his life to chase down the few Death Eaters that had escaped . . . it was like living it all over again.

Things got worse when the Department of Records and Statistics became her cover for the Department of Mysteries. One day she had been a simple Arithmancer, and the next an Unspeakable. Unable to say much about her day—and refusing to lie—Ron grew bitter at

their lack of communication, their lack of romance, and their complete lack of sex drive thanks to exhaustion from his job and stress from hers.

Desperate to save their friendship, they did what Molly Weasley considered the unthinkable.

Hermione signed the divorce papers on the morning of her twenty-fifth birthday.

She and Ron had miraculously remained amicable. It had taken a lot of therapy, too much screaming, and an actual intervention headed up by Ginny and Harry on the eve of their wedding anniversary. Ron and Hermione looked at one another and realised that the love was gone.

"Was it ever there?" he had asked her.

"Of course," she had replied, torn from the guilt of a failed marriage and the relief that she was finally free of it. "But . . . I think we didn't know how to read it properly. Everything was chaotic after the war and we were both desperate for something to hold onto. We were friends, *best* friends, and I loved you. I love you still."

"I love you, too, 'Mione."

She had given him back the ring and he gave her a hug before she packed her bags and moved out of their two-bedroom townhouse in Devon and into a small flat overlooking the Thames. Water was helpful. Water washed the world clean.

Harry and Ginny lasted seven months after Ron and Hermione's divorce was finalised, before they were signing their own.

"Did you know that there was an increase of marriages in the first five years following the war?" she'd asked Harry when they met at the Leaky one evening, a week after Harry and Ginny divorced; a single day after the *Daily Prophet* printed lies about Ginny cheating on Harry with a Chaser from the Montrose Magpies. "It happens sometimes, during wartime. After the end of the last Muggle World War, there was a massive rise in Muggle-born births. Oddly enough, there wasn't so much after the defeat of Grindelwald. Strange that," she said thoughtfully before moving on. "People are so happy that they lived, or perhaps so miserable the ones they loved died, that they lose all sense of rational thinking and they jump right into—"

"Bed with the first person who bats her eyelashes at them?" he asked, looking miserable as he stared down into his glass—butterbeer, because Hannah Abbott had cut him off of firewhisky an hour earlier.

Hermione frowned at him, the same look of reproach that she had used on Harry since they were eleven. "That's not what happened with you and Ginny. You were . . . you were each other's first love. First implies that there will be more."

He nodded. "I just wanted to make her happy. Wanted *everyone* to be so bloody happy," he said and leaned his cheek against the bartop. "Everyone was getting married, weren't they? I remember when Cho married that Carmichael bloke from Ravenclaw," he said. "Padma and Terry were after that, weren't they?"

Hermione nodded, glad he had found a subject off of his divorce. "Ravenclaws led the charge down the aisle," she said with a small laugh. "Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors followed."

"Not all of us." Hannah smirked as she refilled Harry's butterbeer. "But a lot of them did. Susan and Ernie eloped because she didn't have any family to attend her wedding. Justin married a Muggle girl soon after."

Hermione smiled up at Hannah, one of few female friends she had left since she felt torn over Harry and Ginny's divorce. Though sides had not needed to be taken, the fact that Hermione had also divorced Ginny's brother made her feel like their once solid friendship was splintered. Plus, Ginny toured with the Harpies so often and communication failed between the two. Hannah, who was a staple at the Leaky Cauldron and just a quick Floo away, had become a fast friend to both Harry and Hermione—dependable and loyal.

"Why'd *you* never marry?" Harry asked Hannah, one of his eyelids drooping a touch.

She chuckled. "Not everyone was eager to run off and start a family. Some of us were just happy to be alive after everything we'd been through. After Hogwarts . . . it was hard enough to take care of *myself*. I couldn't imagine having to think about another person. There were small handfuls of us singles here and there from each House. I was surprised *you* lot waited as long as you did," she said with a sweet smile. "Live and learn. Don't waste your

time on the past, Harry. You of all people don't need a life full of regrets." She patted him on the shoulder and made her way down the bar.

The Slytherins were mostly set up in arranged marriages following old family traditions. Pansy Parkinson ended up with Blaise Zabini, and the eldest Greengrass girl was sold to some pureblood wizard in France, while the youngest finished Hogwarts, rumoured to be in talks with pairing up with Draco Malfoy—if he ever returned to Britain that is. The last anyone had heard, Malfoy was off the coast of Bermuda, living up the life of a free man with too many Galleons to his name.

"Dumbledore said it was all for love," Harry quietly muttered. "Greatest power. Now it's nothing . . . we're both . . . 'Mione we're both alone."

She smiled sadly at her friend. "It gets better. And we're not alone. We married too young and for the wrong reasons. You and Ginny will be friends again one day."

"I don't know how you and Ron do it."

"It . . . it's not always easy, but . . . and you've got me. And the Weasleys. Sirius, Remus, Neville, Luna, and everyone are still here for you. You are *not* alone."

Harry nodded and sighed. "Divorce sucks."

"At least none of us had children," she pointed out, and Harry shook his head in agreement.

But then again . . . not many people were having children.

It was that very reason that had her sitting next to Harry at the Ministry, four days before her twenty-seventh birthday, nervously thinking about marriage and babies and how it was technically her fault that they were there.

The few couples that managed to get pregnant in the aftermath of the war were producing Squibs.

At first, it seemed like the purebloods were all just up to their old tricks with intermarrying between the families, trying to recover what little money, or prestige that they

could in the aftermath of war and reparations. But when other citizens of Wizarding Britain began having Squibs as well, the Ministry decided to look into it.

"You're the best I've got when it comes to this section of the Department of Mysteries," Kingsley had told her when he asked Hermione to look into the problem. The fact that he'd even spoken aloud about her position as an Unspeakable, something she'd been promoted to during the rockiest year of her marriage, said that the "Squib Problem" was growing into something larger than mere speculation.

Months of overtime, little sleep, thousands of calculations, and a total of three episodes where she had to stay at St. Mungo's due to magical depletion, and Hermione had the answer.

"Sympathetic magic," she said at an Order meeting. "The purebloods are mostly at fault . . . no offense," she muttered when a few members raised their brows at her, Weasleys included. "The inbreeding is a factor, yes, but it's more than that. The Blacks, for instance, still produced magically powerful children, and as much as we all hate to admit, the Malfoys have done the same. But other families have all but died out because of their refusal to widen the search for spouses of lower blood status. It's not the blood that's the problem, it's the magic. Incompatible magic is what creates Squibs. Normally, we're automatically drawn to a magical match, someone with sympathetic magic to our own. It's why people like Molly and Arthur, who fell in love very young and married, have so many children of high magical power and stability. But then you look at other families . . . and you can see patterns."

"Like who?"

"The Notts were one of the families that I studied extensively. Thoros Nott was married four times. His first three marriages documented zero children, and after a number of years the wife usually died of some accident," she said, and there was an echo of scoffs around the room. "But I've actually discovered some evidence that there were viable pregnancies, but there was no magical signature in the children. Squibs. Who knows what happened to them. And then he married Calla Flint. From what I can tell, the pair were magically sympathetic, and they had Theo."

"He was in our year, wasn't he?" Harry asked.

Hermione nodded. "Slytherin. He works with me at the Ministry. He's been helping with the problem, actually. Getting the pureblood families to offer up their histories and details that *I* could never get."

"Why now? Why is this happening to our world now?" Percy questioned.

"Because of the war," Hermione replied. "Statistically, Squibs are being born to pureblood couples paired due to money or blood status, and . . . well . . . our generation. Anyone that was within . . . breeding age from the start of the last war. Minerva gave me the numbers from the Hogwarts books. Teddy will be one of thirty-five children in his Hogwarts class. Victoire, on the other hand, will be one of only twenty students in her year when she attends. That's a significant decrease in what should have actually been a *rise* in births. From what I've gathered, everyone married shortly out of Hogwarts, sticking to their own Houses, within their own year. Most couples we know followed this pattern. Because of the war, we stuck to our own within Hogwarts, segregating to a severity that generations prior to us didn't experience. We were friendly with one another, but . . . when it came time to choose a spouse, we all apparently just . . ."

"Took the easy way out."

"But . . . but we loved each other. It wasn't easy."

"Yes, we did, but . . . but either the couples that married right out of Hogwarts didn't have children, or they've had Squibs. Love isn't the only factor that's normally looked at. Had we not experienced the war, we might have allowed ourselves to intermingle with other Houses at Hogwarts. According to my research, we would have automatically been drawn to partners with sympathetic magic and the rest would develop on its own."

"Why automatically?" Ron asked.

Hermione turned her attention to both Remus and Fleur. "Creature magic," she said the words with kindness, not something everyone else often did. "Werewolves and veela are known to have mates. When they see or meet their mate, the creature within can sense the sympathetic magic and seek them out. It's why Victoire and Teddy displayed accidental magic within that first few months. Their parents were, essentially, perfect matches. The

thing is, it's not specific to magical creatures. It's something inside all of us, but we're just less attuned to it and aren't able to overcome diversions."

"War," Harry said, and Hermione nodded.

She flicked her wand, summoning a large bowl from the corner of the room. Inside the bowl, she placed a stone in the centre. "The water is one person's magic, the stone is another. Typically, there are few distractions in getting the magics to find one another. Usually, distance and time being the major factor," she said and then swished her wand once, whispering, "*Aguamenti*." Water poured from the tip of the wand, straight down splashing against the stone. "The problem comes with war. Magic has a fight or flight response just like our bodies. When we were threatened, our magic stopped seeking out a partner in favour of self-preservation." She stuck her hand in the centre of the stream, creating two separate paths of water, neither of which eventually came in contact with the stone below.

"I checked birth numbers, and the same thing happened during Grindelwald's rise," she told them, drying her hands. "The countries that were most affected by war had lower birth rates the following two decades. Most of those Wizarding communities dissolved over time and were eventually absorbed into larger ones, or they just . . . died out. It's the complete opposite of what usually happens after Muggle wars, but then again . . . Muggles don't need to worry about things like sympathetic magic when choosing a partner for . . . well, procreation."

"Okay," Harry said, nodding. "So this happened when Grindelwald tried to take over and now with our war but . . . how come this didn't happen during the first war when Voldemort was alive?"

Sirius frowned. "It *did* happen, actually. Just not as significantly as this time. Plus, back then, there were a lot more casualties. Very few of our generation survived. Those that did marry were . . . well . . . the ones we knew at least."

Hermione caught the glint in Sirius's eyes. "What do you know?"

He put his hands up in supplication, having been on the receiving end of Hermione's hexes more than once. "It's not an illegal spell . . . per say . . ."

Remus sighed. "*We* know how to find magical matches," he said. "There was a spell Sirius found at the beginning of seventh year. It went through the school faster than gossip. *Optima Profecta*. James finally had Lily agreeing to date him, but casually. She still had serious reservations. So we found this spell and James wanted to use it to prove that they were soul mates."

"That's ridiculous, *Optima Profecta* just means—"

"Best outcome," Sirius interrupted. "Lily caught on, of course. It wasn't like we were trying to trick her. She and James were a match, magically speaking. Other students in our year started using the spell and matching themselves up. Those that survived . . . well . . ." he said and patted Harry on the back. "Created *this* generation."

Kingsley cleared his throat. "Could we . . . that spell . . . we could use it," he said, a smile on his face that unnerved Hermione.

Kingsley returned to the Wizengamot with Hermione's diagnosis and the *Optima Profecta* as an answer to the problem. He proposed a Procreation Bill. Witches and wizards, at their own discretion, would have the opportunity to meet with other volunteers to be tested for potential magical matches, and offered incentives to marry and start families.

Unfortunately, as the months ticked on, the legislation took new form with additions and subtractions as most bills do, and by the time Kingsley got a look at the finalised Procreation Bill, it had turned into a *Marriage Law*, ready to be passed with an unfortunately overwhelming majority.

"I don't have enough sway," he defended at the following Order meeting while Molly Weasley did her best to audibly remind herself that she could not hex the Minister for Magic. "I'm not King of Wizarding Britain. Even the Minister has to submit to the Wizengamot, otherwise I'll just be voted out of office, and they'll put another puppet in my place."

"This is preposterous! They've included *penalties!*" Hermione snapped. "Time in Azkaban? Kingsley, they can't seriously—"

"They can and they will. Unless . . . unless I can convince them that they don't *need* to," Kingsley replied, turning his full attention to Ron, Harry, and Hermione.

Harry groaned, already putting the pieces together.

"What?" Ron said. "Why're you looking at *us*?"

A test and six months.

The generation that had it worst during the height of the war, the ones who were most affected, were sent missives from the Ministry. "Participate voluntarily in our new programme . . ." *or else*. The Wizengamot gave Kingsley six months to demonstrate that the citizens of Britain would "come along quietly" rather than have their hands forced. The last thing they all needed was another uprising. Unfortunately, the programme needed faces. *Trustworthy* faces.

Which was exactly how Hermione found herself sitting in the Ministry, gripping Harry's hand for dear life.

"What if the spell doesn't work?" Harry asked her.

She had her eyes closed, her leg bouncing from anxiety. "It'll work. There's not just one match out there for everyone, despite what veela traditions and trashy werewolf romance stories will tell you. Everyone is matched with everyone else on one level or another. The spell will draw out the visible magic that's sympathetic to our own. Once we're charmed, we'll look around the room and see various levels of light, or auras, around other people. The brighter the light, the more sympathetic your magic."

Harry frowned. "That sounds . . . uncomfortable."

She nodded. "Physical touch will reverse the visual effects. Like turning a light off."

He relaxed a bit and then turned and smirked at her. "They made you work on the spell, didn't they? You added that bit in."

She huffed indignantly. "Where's Ronald? He was supposed to be here twenty minutes ago."

Harry draped an arm over her shoulders. "I asked him and Ginny to come separately. If they're here, they're likely on the other side of the room. I figured that it would be easier

for all of us if we found our potential matches without having to watch as our exes find theirs. Divorced or not, I'll always love Gin in my own way, and you'll love Ron."

Hermione sighed. "Exactly, but I'm not some ridiculously jealous—"

"What if he matches with Lavender?" he interrupted, raising an incredulous eyebrow and having the gall to smirk at her.

She scowled at him. "Point."

Queueing up in groups of ten, the witches and wizards ranging from twenty-five to thirty years of age gathered together and waited for their assigned Ministry official to move quickly down the line, casting the charm.

"Like cattle branding," Hermione muttered bitterly as an unfamiliar face stood in front of her, confirmed her identity, and then tapped her harshly on the top of her head with a wand while muttering the *Optima Profecta* charm.

Hermione kept her eyes closed as she felt the magic of the charm wash over her. Already, even with her eyelids shut, she winced against the brightness of the light coming from all around her.

"Get it over with, Hermione," Harry told her. "Open your eyes. You're . . . this is insane. I've never seen anything . . . Hermione, you need to open your eyes."

"I don't want to," she whispered to herself.

She didn't *want* to open her eyes. She didn't *want* to have her future decided in this moment. She wanted control, and she felt so very out of it right then. She had been through a war, lost her parents, and ended up in a dead-end marriage that she finally felt free of. Now she was expected to jump into another marriage with a man she might not even know.

It's not a law yet, she reminded herself. This is my choice.

With brave determination, ready to face her twenty-seventh year and the future that stood in front of her, Hermione opened her eyes to the glittering brightness in front of her.

Chapter 2

September 15th, 2006

"Oh my god."

Hermione cringed at the bright light standing directly in front of her. Her vision was blurred because of the various levels of shining spots around her. The one currently obscuring her vision, however, was coming from the wizard smiling awkwardly, running a hand through his messy black hair.

"So . . . erm . . . What do we—?"

"Ew," she said.

Harry narrowed his eyes and scoffed, clearly offended. "Thanks a lot, Hermione."

She laughed and then covered her mouth to stifle her automatic giggles. "I'm sorry, Harry, but . . . I mean, I suppose it makes sense. Our magic is supposed to draw us to a sympathetic match naturally, and well . . . we were always a bit close," she said, trying to explain the situation whilst not simultaneously grimacing at the thought of marrying her best friend.

"Okay," he replied, nodding his head along with her in agreement. "Should we . . ." Harry gestured between them with two fingers, pursing his lips in a kissing motion that had her nearly in giggles again. He sighed in frustration. "Look . . . I mean, technically we *are* a match. Should we at least . . ." he said but could not bring himself to finish the sentence.

Hermione frowned and threw the poor man a bone. "Harry, picture me naked, right now."

His eyes widened and he shook his head, reaching out to touch Hermione's shoulder, using the action to deactivate the revealed charm between them. "Look, all better," he said happily. "And now we can pretend that never happened."

She smiled and reached out to hug him. After a moment, when she realised he was not letting go, she sighed and whispered, "Are you ready to look at other people?"

"I see Ginny and Ron," he answered.

Hermione swallowed hard, refusing to release him. "And?"

Harry leant his head against hers. "Nothing. Er . . . There's this . . . glittering bit about her, but . . . I see more around total strangers than around Gin. We really weren't properly compatible, were we?"

Finally letting him go, Hermione smiled up at her friend, cupping his cheek in her hand. "I promise you, we'll be okay," she said. "Just . . . don't do anything reckless and run off with a complete stranger without at least learning her name. Please."

He squeezed her hand. "Name *then* proposal, got it," he said with a smirk and ducked when she moved to smack his arm, turning to walk off in the direction of a cluster of girls Hermione vaguely recognised from Hogwarts.

Turning, Hermione stared across the room where she spotted Ron and Ginny. The tall, ginger Auror was biting his fingernails, a habit that Hermione remembered cringing at during the few years that they were married. She felt a strange sense of longing at the sight of her friend-turned-husband-turned-friend again, and she was not in the slightest bit surprised at the minimal light shining off of his figure. He looked up, caught her staring at him, and took a moment to let his gaze run over her body, searching the same way she had done moments earlier to him. After a moment, his shoulders slumped forward and he sighed, looking up at her face. He gave her a small sad smile and then shrugged.

She smiled back in understanding. Neither had expected anything, but to have it confirmed was almost bittersweet.

Ginny had her arms wrapped around her defensively, looking as much out of place as anyone else. *The Daily Prophet* had run an article that very morning, speculating on the potential new bride of Harry Potter. Since their wedding, whenever Harry was mentioned in the press, so was Ginny. Reporters made guesses as to the character of Harry's *perfect* mate, constantly comparing their opinions to Ginny as though she were the lowest bar to set the standard for the future wife of Wizarding Britain's Saviour. Hermione was glad to see that the little redhead was doing her best to hold her head high in the face of public scrutiny.

She appeared, however, to be scanning the room until she reached a point and her eyes widened. Ginny turned and looked at Ron—blissfully ignorant of her presence beside him—and then made a run for it.

Hermione tried to look for whomever it was that Ginny had spotted, but another blinding light in front of her made it difficult to see. Almost forgetting why she was there, Hermione was about to tell the shining ray in front of her to please move when suddenly her throat closed up in nervous anticipation and she looked up.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," she whispered, horrified.

The man turned, widening his silver eyes in her direction. "Granger?"

"Malfoy."

They stared in complete silence at one another until Hermione finally cleared her throat. "You umm . . . you're back from . . . the Bahamas, was it?"

"Greece. Last stop at least before coming home," he stiffly replied, raising his chin defiantly as though she were an Auror questioning him about his latest whereabouts and whether or not he was currently harbouring Muggle slaves in his attic. "And you're . . . weren't you married to the weasel?"

She pursed her lips in annoyance and her nostrils flared. "Divorced."

Malfoy smirked. "Good for you. Now," he said, straightening his robes, "if it's all the same to you, I'd like to go ahead and pretend that this," he said and motioned between them, "was as *dull* of a conversation as humanly possible."

She rolled her eyes. "Subtle."

He shrugged his shoulders but somehow managed to look graceful in the movement. "I'm only here for appearance's sake. Malfoys have to play nice with the Ministry now. A part of me wondered if I'd be enlightened to the presence of any magical equal," he said and then paused, "that was *appropriate* for me," he added, looking at her. "But all I'm met with here is Muggle-borns and half-bloods."

With narrowed eyes, Hermione turned up her chin at him. "Still too good for the likes of us?"

He scoffed, offended by the accusation, actually waving away her comment like a bad smell. "I'll have you know, I had a Muggle girlfriend of three years while I was away."

"Then why aren't you marrying *her*?"

"The same reason I'm pretending that I'm not magically matched with you or anyone else that's not a pureblood here. How do you think my parents would treat any beloved spouse that stepped foot through my front door if they don't have a family tapestry as long and clean as my own?" He raised a pale, slender brow in question and smirked when she broke eye contact first. "I love my parents, Granger, despite their beliefs, but I also plan on learning to love a wife, and I won't be put in a position to choose one over the other. That's not fair to anyone involved."

Hermione actually did frown, feeling somewhat sad for the man. "Most especially not fair to you."

"Don't worry about me, Granger," he said with a devious grin as his gaze settled on someone across the room. "I just found my ticket out of here."

She looked up, following his line of sight to see Astoria Greengrass leaning against the back wall near the door, nervously looking around the room with an expression on her face that said she was worried. "There were rumours that the two of you were already arranged to be married, you know."

"That is incredibly convenient," Malfoy replied as he adjusted the collar of his robes. "I get to skip out on the Ministry bullshit while still accepting the incentives, please my parents, and have a pretty wife of my very own. Take care of yourself, Granger."

She cringed at his unconcerned way of talking about the Marriage Law and watched as he turned his back to her. "Hey Malfoy," she called after him. "How . . . how bright is she?"

He raised a brow. "Bright? The little sparkle magic, you mean? Does that even matter? You don't really believe in all of this perfect match nonsense, do you?"

She shook her head and sighed, watching as the blond Slytherin walked away, offering his arm to Astoria, who took it with what looked like an exhale of immense relief.

Hermione made her way back to her seat to watch the others. Socialising was never something that came naturally to her, and she knew that while some of the people in the room had been friendly, others—like Marietta Edgecombe who was presently glaring daggers at her—were less so.

The lights shined and sparkled around several wizards. Jimmy Peakes had a decent shimmer about him, as did Zacharias Smith, but she remembered not liking Smith at all when they were in school together. Her only interactions with Jimmy had been at Harry's bed in the Hospital Wing following Quidditch matches during their sixth year when the boy had taken up position as a Beater on the Gryffindor team.

Another familiar face appeared in her vision; Cormac McLaggen—*thank Merlin*—did not have even the slightest aura around his person, and he looked properly upset about that too when he made eye contact with Hermione.

When she spotted Ron again, he was smiling warmly and shoving his hands into his pockets, and awkward habit that Hermione knew was a tell that he actually liked someone. The witch he was speaking to was Mandy Brocklehurst. Despite feeling a small pang of jealousy and the aching leftovers of what was a doomed marriage, Hermione smiled at her ex-husband.

When couples began filing out of the room, hand in hand, she watched as Ron and Mandy left through the exit standing quite close to one another and giggling. Ginny was actively speaking with a wizard who had his Quidditch jersey-clad back turned to Hermione. Harry, in an amusing twist, was sitting along the back wall and smiling brighter than Hermione had seen in years, and staring into Hannah's face while she giggled about something, a blush coming to her cheeks.

"Worth it," Hermione whispered to herself and then stood up, deciding that she'd had enough. Not everyone needed to participate in the programme, just enough people to let the Wizengamot know that forcing a Marriage Law on the community was unnecessary. She did not have to be involved. Turning, she stumbled into a large wall of wizard and looked up at the—thankfully non-shimmering—man that stood a good foot taller than her. "Umm . . . pardon me," she mumbled.

"Hello, Hermione," a smaller voice spoke from behind the man.

"Luna?"

The petite blonde stepped out from under the arm of the wizard with a happy smile on her face. "Oh, you've not found him yet," she said. "Don't worry. Fashionably late is on time in some cultures. Have you met Marcus?" she asked, gesturing to the wall. "We're going to be married."

Hermione blinked and looked up at the man who grinned at her. The daughter of dentists fought not to grimace as she recognised him. "Flint," she said tersely. "You're going to marry my friend?" she asked, arms folded across her chest as if she was preparing to add, *and over my dead body.*

"Pretty little thing," Marcus said, his smug grin softening as he turned his attention to Luna. "Like a faerie."

Luna beamed up at him. "We elected not to turn off the glowing effect," she said.

Hermione blinked. That was her part of the spell and *she'd* spent weeks weaving it into the charm. Luna elected to turn it off? "What . . . er . . . I suppose that could be useful . . . if you lose him in the dark. I guess I'll leave all the happy couples to it," she added, giving Luna a quick hug.

When she moved to pull away from the blonde, Luna hung on tight and whispered, "It's not time yet," and then waited an extra thirty seconds before releasing Hermione. "There. Now you're all ready."

Frowning, Hermione forced an awkward smile before turning and heading for the door back inside the Ministry, thinking that she could get a head start on the next week's workload. She stopped every few steps, casually tapping every man within reach as lightly as possible to turn off the charm. She stretched out of her way to brush her fingertips against Jimmy Peakes's shoulder and was not looking when a Ministry official behind her was scolding a participant for showing up late.

"You're lucky I'm still here to perform the charm, young man."

"I wasn't even in country," the man quietly replied, "I had to get an International Portkey and they were late with the—"

"Optima Perfecta!"

"Ow . . . you're not even going to warn me when, okay. Well, that's . . . a bit brighter than I thought it would—oof!"

Hermione felt the impact of someone running headlong into her. Tipping backward, she braced herself for impact with the floor only to never reach it. Cringing, she slowly opened her eyes only to be overwhelmed by the bright shimmering light in front of her—brighter than Harry or Malfoy by far—engulfing the man who had somehow become accidental attacker and saviour all within the space of five seconds.

"I'm so sorry," he said, his tone one of embarrassed sincerity. "I . . . this is . . . are they all supposed to be so bright? I can barely see and . . . Hermione, is that . . . is that you?"

She squinted through the light, letting her eyes adjust when the breath was almost knocked out of her.

"Neville?"

Chapter 3

September 15th, 2006

Hermione smiled awkwardly across the table at Neville, who ran the pad of his thumb up and down the handle of the coffee mug in front of him, a nervous tick, she assumed. It was relaxing, to think he was just as anxious about this as she was.

"I thought you'd moved to Belfast," she blurted out once the Muggle waitress brought over the pastries they had ordered and refilled their cups with coffee.

Neville grinned at her, the most boyish thing left on the man who had allowed war, time, and the Auror Department to sculpt him into a formidable looking—and painfully handsome—man. "Berlin, actually," he said. "I was transferred with my partner four years ago. Antonin Dolohov and the Lestrangle brothers were spotted in a Wizarding village near Lichtenrade so we took the first International Portkey out before they moved and our trail went cold. We caught Rabastan within the week," he said, looking rather proud of the fact, "but Rodolphus and Dolohov escaped to another borough and since we were already there . . . decided to put down some roots until we found the other two."

"How did you like it there?" she asked, bringing her cup to her lips and watching as he picked apart the poorly made pastry on his plate, every so often bringing his fingers to his lips to lick away crumbs.

"It was grand," he replied happily. "I missed home, of course. Missed Gran, my parents, and all my friends. But there was this little restaurant around the corner from my flat that sold lemon cream cake. I about ate my weight in the stuff once a week."

Hermione scoffed. "Yes, clearly," she said sarcastically, her eyes lingering on the way that his shirt clung tightly to his chest and abdomen. When he actually blushed at her none-too-subtle compliment, Hermione chuckled under her breath. "So umm . . . Antonin Dolohov was sent back to Britain two years ago. I was at his trial."

Neville nodded, losing the boyish smile, replacing it with a furrowed brow and a stern look in his eyes. "Wish I could have been. I know you've got a scar from him, Department of Mysteries, right?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"He gave *me* a few as well over the years," he said, scratching at his left shoulder where she assumed a scar rested beneath the fabric. "Nothing as serious as . . ." He looked up, his gaze drawn to her ribcage where Dolohov had hit her. Neville swallowed and then cleared his throat, bringing his focus back to his food. "I actually . . . it doesn't seem right to say it but, I thought of you when we took him down. I remembered seeing you there, unconscious and—"

"Are you trying to say that you took down a Death Eater to avenge me?" Hermione asked in a teasing voice, smiling when Neville laughed at the suggestion. She could finally see him, her old Housemate and friend there, hidden beneath the rough and toned exterior of the man sitting in front of her.

"That would be rather dramatic of me, wouldn't it?"

"Depends," she said. "Did you scream, 'This is for Hermione!' before you Stunned him?"

Neville let out a loud laugh and threw his head back. A few other patrons in the small Muggle coffee shop turned and scowled in his direction. He offered an apologetic look to each of them and then turned his attention back to Hermione, speaking in a softer tone. "Might have yelled something more like, 'Hey you, drop your wand and . . .'"

Hermione blinked, waiting for him to continue. When he did not, she prompted, "And?"

"And nothing, that's when he started sending curses at me and I was too busy fighting back to think to say anything clever. Never been good at the saying clever things part of the job."

Hermione laughed, but covered her mouth, trying to keep quiet. "And Rodolphus?"

The humour faded instantly. "Dead," Neville replied.

Remembering Ron's first kill on the job and the nightmares that had followed it, Hermione frowned and reached out, automatically taking Neville's hand in hers. "Did—"

"Accidental," he said quickly, refusing to release her hand. He took two of her fingers in his, rubbing the pad of his thumb down her knuckles in a soothing gesture. "Rebounded Reducto. Force sent him into a wall that crumbled down on top of him."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know you wanted . . . well, justice for your parents."

Neville shook his head. "And send him back to Azkaban with his brother? Rabastan's still there and it doesn't much feel like justice. Those brothers had been driven mad long ago. Rabastan likely doesn't even know why he's being punished anymore. Imprisoning Rabastan and Dolohov in Azkaban isn't justice for anyone. It's protecting everyone else from them without turning ourselves into murderers. Whatever they really were was already killed a long time ago by Riddle and Dementors."

She nodded in understanding. She had recalled more than one night out with Harry and Ron after a mission was completed. In the beginning, they celebrated the capture of former Death Eaters and other Dark wizards eager to rise in the wake of Tom Riddle. Every capture was like a won game of chess for Ron; Quidditch for Harry. Over time—and thanks to the occasional visit to Azkaban to work on various cases—Ron and Harry became numb to the glory of their jobs. Lost in the lack of overall victory since more Dark wizards just popped up when they took one down.

After a few minutes of awkward silence, she squeezed Neville's hand and pulled her fingers away, drinking down the rest of her coffee. "That took a serious turn."

He frowned, wincing awkwardly. "Sorry."

"No, it's fine. Sometimes, you have to talk about it. Plus, it's your job."

"Not for long. I joined the Aurors to track down the Lestranges. I've done that."

Her brows raised, Hermione was caught off guard by the declaration. Most Aurors joined and then either died on the job or stayed until they were too old to physically handle the demands. "What are your plans now?"

He sat back in his chair, scratching at the several days old stubble on his chin. "Professor Sprout's made me an offer a few times to take over for her at Hogwarts."

Eyes wide, Hermione grinned. "That's brilliant! You would be such a good teacher, Neville!"

He smiled shyly. "I'm . . . it's kind of her to think of me for the job. And it would certainly be relaxing to get back in the greenhouses. I'm thinking on it. Might want to just have some time first, you know? Especially since the year has already started for the students up there. I want to see my mum and dad, and Gran's got plans of her own," he added with a very subtle roll of his eyes.

"Such as?"

He looked up, meeting her gaze and crookedly smiled at her. "Well, I suppose it has a lot to do with the pretty lights I saw circling all over you earlier," he said, gesturing around her body with his index finger.

Cheeks suddenly pink, Hermione looked down, having almost forgotten that they were not just two friends catching up after a few years apart. "Oh . . . Oh," she said in understanding, looking back up at him. "She wants you to—"

Neville nodded. "Carry on the name . . . all that . . . and such . . ." he mumbled, drilling his fingers against the table nervously.

She frowned, noticing the gesture. "But *you* don't . . .?"

He looked up. "Do *you*?"

"Ron and I were . . ." she blurted out and then bit her lower lip, "I mean, of course you know, you were at our wedding. But we divorced some time ago. A lot's changed."

He smiled softly at her. "You haven't. You're still Hermione. Hermione with a bit of a glow about her."

She let out a short laugh. "A *bit*?"

Neville smiled and reached out, taking her hand again, though he looked like he had to summon the courage to do so. Hermione allowed it, letting the strange warm feeling flow through her veins when she relaxed a little, opening herself up to allow her magic to reach out and touch his, something she'd learned working in the Department of Mysteries. The reaction was instantaneous. The warmth between their skin turned electric. Instead of a

static pinch, it was a buzzing vibration that flowed up her arm and across her shoulder blades before zipping down her spine.

"That means something, I take it?" Neville asked, his mouth open and eyes dilated, clearly having felt the same thing. "I didn't get a good look at anyone else since there weren't many when I showed up but . . . I was given the basics. Brighter the light the—"

"Better the match. Yes," Hermione said, letting go of his hand to get a better hold of her senses. "It umm . . . Sympathetic magic and . . . Evidently, we're drawn to one another."

Neville licked his lips and smiled, rubbing his fingers together in the aftermath of the magical vibration. "Well, I've always know that I was drawn to you," he said, not catching the way that Hermione blushed again at the declaration. "I know right now it's an incentive program, but Harry sent a letter a few weeks back, venting about the whole thing. Might have mentioned some things that the Minister let slip. Plus, Gran's on the Wizengamot holding the Longbottom seat. She says they're pushing for the law. I umm . . . I figured that you being there meant that . . ." he said, finally looking back up at her, "but I don't want to presume, and . . . I mean, I *did* come back to participate but—"

"Yes," Hermione blurted out. "I mean . . . I was *going* to participate. It . . . it seemed only right and I didn't want . . . but I wasn't going to because my options weren't—"

Neville's hopeful expression deflated. "Oh."

"No, no!" Hermione quickly said in a panic. "They weren't, as in . . . past tense. They *are* looking . . . a little brighter."

"Oh. Oh." He swallowed hard and took a breath. "Really? You'd . . . consider?"

Hermione chewed on her bottom lip and then after another moment of silence she let out a heavy exhale. "Oh for Merlin's sake, we're twenty-six; we should not be bumbling about like fourth years before the Yule Ball."

He laughed softly. "I wasn't *that* bad when I asked you to go with me, was I?"

She smiled at the memory. "Had Viktor not asked me first, I probably would have said yes. And you were loads better than Ronald. Fitting, I suppose," she said, her smile

fading. "I married him and that didn't work out too well but . . . if umm . . . if we go through with this—"

Eyes suddenly wide as though he'd recalled something important, Neville cleared his throat. "Don't make any decisions right away, Hermione. We . . . we need to get to know one another again first. I mean . . . there are things you need to . . . and not much time. Wow. I'm sorry," he muttered, scrubbing his hands down his face in frustration. "I didn't expect it to be you and . . . and that's not a bad thing," he assured her. "I'm, pleased, rather . . . *very* pleased. But if we do this . . . it would be dishonest of me not to disclose a few things about my umm . . ."

"Past? Relationships and such?" she asked.

Neville winced and looked up at her from beneath heavy brows. "Something like that."

Not noticing his tone, Hermione nodded her head and continued on. "That's probably wise for both of us. Put all the cards on the table. I mean, you know most of my issues. I briefly dated Viktor, married Ron and was faithful to him for years, and then . . . well, after the divorce I had a bit of a . . . well . . ." She pursed her lips and fidgeted with the frayed edges of her napkin. "I'm not very proud of myself for my actions," she said very quietly.

"Why?"

"I . . . I had a few one-night stands."

"Were you hurt?" Neville asked immediately, struck with what Hermione noticed was a confidence that had not been there before. She shook her head and he continued, "Were you safe?" She nodded. "Did you cause physical or emotional damage to anyone else?"

Blinking, Hermione scoffed. "What? No . . . and yes, I mean. Yes, safe, but . . . well, it was hardly *proper*."

Neville dramatically rolled his eyes. "You're a grown woman who was exercising freedom over her life and her body, taking what she wanted for herself, likely for the first time in . . . a very long time. Am I right?" he asked, a demanding tone to his otherwise level

voice that sent a shiver down her spine. Drawn in by his sudden boldness and self-assurance, Hermione silently nodded. "Then what do you have to be ashamed of?"

"Oh. I . . . I guess I never thought of it like that," she said, brows furrowed as she contemplated his words. "My conscience has evidently taken on the form of Molly, if I'm being honest."

Neville chuckled. "Don't get me wrong, my gran's as old-fashioned as ever, which is why I don't tell her anything about my love life. A bit nosy, that one," he said with an affectionate tone. "She wouldn't understand. Nor would I want her to," he added under his breath.

"So you've . . ."

"Been with others?" he asked with a smirk. "Of course. Quite a few, if we're giving full disclosure, which, I intend to do. There are parts of my life that . . ." he began to say but then paused and looked down, noticing that he'd picked apart the pastry on his plate into pieces that could no longer be considered food. Clearing his throat again, Neville asked, "How long before we need to make a decision?"

"Umm . . . the charm can be repeated, of course, and they're scheduling another session next week for those who were unable to attend or didn't find matches today."

He nodded and thought for a moment. "So if you say no to me, *you* can try again?" he asked. "I won't . . . I won't have ruined your chances?"

Confused, Hermione stared at him. "You're my *best* match, Neville," she spoke slowly, something she subconsciously did when she talked to Harry and Ron about things like arithmancy or advanced rune translations. "The only others even *close* to you were Harry and . . . and someone I wouldn't consider for all the incentives in the world," she said with a laugh, thinking of Malfoy. "If anything, *I'm* the one likely holding you back seeing that you didn't even really have a chance to look at anyone else."

Neville smiled hesitantly at her. "If you'll give me a week, I'll . . . we'll get reacquainted and then I'll give you a choice. You have a *choice*," he reiterated in that same self-assured tone that had her raising a brow in intrigue. "You can say no. I won't . . . I won't hold you to anything, I swear it. But regardless of what you decide, I will need from you . . ."

Hermione swallowed nervously, licking her lips. "What? What do you need?" she asked in a low whisper.

Neville raised his focus back to her, letting their eyes connect once again before he said, "Discretion."

Chapter 4

September 15th, 2006

"Neville?" Harry asked for the third time as he and Hermione sat on either end of her sofa, each with a butterbeer in hand.

He had come straight over the second that she had opened the Floo, letting him know that she'd made it home. He, himself, had spent the day getting to know Hannah outside of a bartender and drinker who used to be schoolmates kind of relationship. Harry had stepped through her fireplace with a goofy grin on his face and Hermione hated to take it away but she needed to talk to someone.

"How bright was the charm around Hannah?"

Harry smiled again. "Pretty bright. A few other witches were close. None that I knew, though," he said with a small frown. "I'd rather go into this with someone I know. You get what I mean, right?"

She chuckled. "I do. Neville was bright, Harry. I couldn't even see beyond him. I tripped and he caught me and the charm took forever to fade. It should have faded instantly. Or maybe I didn't want it to," she admitted quietly. "I wish I could put a calculation to it. A number that would tell me something."

"It sounds like he's perfect for you."

"Neville, though?" she asked. "Our magic should have drawn us to one another, especially if it's as strong as the charm indicated." She began picking at the label on her bottle in frustration. "Why not before? Why only now?"

Harry frowned and sat up. "Are you regretting marrying Ron?" When she did not answer right away, his mouth fell open. "You *are*," he accused, eyes wide. "You're thinking that if you and Neville had gotten together back at Hogwarts, you'd have never married Ron."

She wiped away a traitorous tear. "Like you're not thinking that had you maybe been Sorted into Hufflepuff, you might have ended up with Hannah and not Ginny?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of had I not been the bloody Boy Who Lived, maybe I might have found Hannah earlier. Had there not been a war or . . . Hermione, what's done is done," he said, putting his empty bottle down on the table and reaching out to take hers away from her. "We're still on good terms with Ron and Ginny, at least as good as can be, and now we have a chance. A fresh start. You were the one who did the work on this charm. You said it was a proper match, right? Magically sympathetic."

Hermione nodded.

"Then why are you so focused on what *could* have been?"

She shrugged. "I just don't understand."

Harry sighed. "Maybe you were drawn to each other but you didn't even notice. I mean," he paused and then laughed. "Hermione, who was your first friend at Hogwarts?"

She looked up, confused. "You and Ron. After the troll."

He raised an eyebrow and grinned at her. "Oh really? What was the first thing that you said to either of us?"

Pausing, she thought back to the train. She remembered meeting them and being excited to see Harry Potter, having just read about him in several books. Ron had been a prat at the time, though she hadn't acted much better, having tried to overcompensate for being Muggle-born by acting like the know-it-all that Professor Snape would later call her. "I think I came into your carriage and proceeded to tease Ron about that silly spell that Fred and George convinced him was real," she finally said.

Harry shook his head. "Why did you come into our carriage?"

"I don't know, Harry," she snapped in frustration. "I was eleven and excited about going to Hogwarts. I can hardly remember sitting down much that first train ride. I could barely sit still. The people who were in my own compartment kept rolling their eyes at me because I was going on about *Hogwarts, A History*, and then—" She abruptly stopped talking and her eyes widened.

Harry's grin widened. "And then?"

"Neville," she whispered. "He asked if there was any room and the other kids said no, but I told him he could sit beside me. Then he lost his toad—"

"And you walked up and down the aisles helping him look for it," Harry said with a happy grin.

"Neville was my first friend," she whispered, emotion building up inside of her. "We got in the boat with you and Ron and he held my hand so I didn't fall over."

While Hermione sat, dumbstruck, Harry stood and walked to the kitchen to fetch another butterbeer for each of them. He popped the cap off of Hermione's and stuck it in her hands, though she appeared to not notice it. "You know, now that I think about it, you were often paired with Neville in class. Potions, especially. You were always trying to help him out. And then you were both terrified of flying. I always thought it strange that you didn't like Quidditch as much, but always seemed to date Quidditch players. But you always did sit next to Neville in the stands during games."

Almost as though she felt she needed to defend herself, Hermione blurted out, "Well, you and Ron were usually playing and . . ."

"Course, the war happened and you were always running around with me and Ron, getting into trouble. Neville wasn't always much up for trouble. Remember first year when we ran off to find the stone and—"

"And I petrified him!" Hermione bellowed miserably, putting down her butterbeer and covering her face. "Gods, I still feel bad about that. Harry, I petrified my future husband when I was twelve!"

He laughed and patted her on the shoulder. "Hermione, you did much worse things to Ron and you married him as well. So," he said, sitting back. "You're going to do it then? You're going to marry Neville?"

She sighed and shrugged. "I don't know. If we have to go along with this insane plan to prevent a full law going into place . . . Neville doesn't seem so interested. He was . . . He says we should take a week to get to know one another." She paused, remembering Neville's suspicious request for discretion. She remained silent, reaching out to take a long sip of her butterbeer.

Harry sat up. "How about we all go out for drinks tomorrow?" he suggested. "It'll be casual and we'll maybe hit the Three Broomsticks instead of the Leaky so Hannah doesn't feel like she's just at work."

Hermione raised a brow. "Define: all?"

"Ron and Mandy, too," he said. "Ginny can't come because Harpies have a training session tomorrow. But Mandy and Neville will both need to get used to the fact that you and Ron are still friends, right? This is a perfect chance for everyone to get to know one another, break the ice a bit, and feel out the situation. Better than one on one, right?"

Hesitantly, Hermione nodded.

September 16th, 2006

One on one, Hermione was thinking, might have been a better idea.

Mandy, Ron's match, was perfectly friendly to Hermione. Unlike the other couples, Ron hadn't waited very long before putting a ring on the Ravenclaw's finger, stating that since they didn't really have much of a choice in whether or not to get married if the Ministry had their way, there was no point in just waiting around. Hermione had smiled politely, grateful that Ron had enough tact to not use the same ring that he had given Hermione years earlier.

Hannah and Harry showed up soon after and Hermione hugged her friends tightly, stating how pleased she was that Hannah was a match for Harry. "He's not looked this happy in so long."

Hannah laughed. "Oh, that's just because he thinks he's now got discounts on butterbeer and firewhisky," she teased. "And I may have let him think that I'm the one who does all the fry ups at work. Maybe his real magical match is Tom," she teased.

Harry laughed and Ron hugged his friend in congratulations. "Good pairing," he said. "I was sad that you and my sister couldn't make it work, but you're my best mate, and you

happy is all that matters. All right, first round is on me while we wait for Hermione's mystery bloke!"

Neville walked through the door while Hermione was still nursing her first mug of butterbeer, though Ron and Harry had both moved onto a third round with a firewhisky shot in between to celebrate friendship and new beginnings.

"Bloody hell!" Ron said, standing up to greet Neville. "When'd you get back in, mate?"

Neville chuckled and embraced his slightly inebriated friend. "Just yesterday. Finished everything with the Lestrage case and, well, you know my gran. Wanted me back in as quick as possible to deal with this Ministry program."

"Come have a drink with us," Ron said. "Did you get your charm done already? Who's the lucky girl?"

Neville turned and smiled at Hermione, who blushed in response before scooting in further into the booth, offering him a space beside her. "We're still deciding," Neville said. "But, if I'm very, very lucky, Hermione will say yes when I ask her to marry me next week."

Hannah choked on her drink. "Nev—*Neville* is your . . . ?" she asked wide-eyed, looking back and forth between Hermione and Neville. "I mean that's . . . That's great?" she said. "Not a question. Sorry. That's great. That's . . . I did not see . . ."

Hermione and Harry both raised a brow at Hannah, who turned her attention back to her mug of butterbeer. Neville let out a sigh. "Hannah and I dated, briefly," he said. "I think she's trying to avoid anything awkward." He pinned the Hufflepuff with a pleading look and she blushed under his gaze. "That's not going to be weird, is it?" he asked, looking at Harry and Hermione.

Hermione shook her head. "Considering Harry and I were each married to other people before this, I doubt either of us would have any right to have a problem with the fact that the two of you dated," she said, reaching out and taking Neville's hand.

Harry nodded his head and put an arm around Hannah's shoulders. "Hermione's right. We're all adults here."

Everyone smiled, except Ron. "You're going to marry Hermione?" he asked, eyes narrowed.

The witch in question huffed and offered an apologetic look to Mandy. "As Neville just said, Ronald, we're taking the week to discuss things. But yes, Neville was my match."

"Neville?" he asked sceptically. "I would've figured bloody Nott or some other swot like Boot or Macmillan."

Neville laughed. "Well, I'll admit I wasn't exactly in the race to keep up with Hermione in school. You calling me stupid, mate?" he asked in a friendly tone, trying to keep things jovial.

"No; just didn't think it was going to be one of my friends marrying my ex-wife," he said bitterly and then stood up, making his way to the bar for a refill.

Harry and Hermione both sighed. "Mandy," Hermione said. "Please don't take anything he says today very seriously. Well, he's not thinking clearly and our past is a bit . . . complicated." She reached out, taking Mandy's hand in a friendly gesture, completely missing the way that Neville and Hannah's eyes briefly met before looking away again.

The other witch shook her head. "It's fine, Hermione. My parents split and remarried other people when I was six. I know that things can be complicated with exes, and I don't foresee a problem. This is all new and not exactly a normal situation. We'll all make the best of it," she said with a smile and Hermione visibly relaxed.

Mandy lasted another hour before she had to leave for work at St. Mungo's where she was Healer in the children's ward. Suddenly the fifth wheel, Ron ordered up another round of firewhisky despite Hermione's attempts to stop him which only ended with him muttering, "Not *my* wife anymore. Can't boss me about."

"Maybe we should call it a night," Neville suggested when Ron accidentally knocked his water—that Hermione had ordered for him—over. "Mate, I know this is awkward, but we'll all get through this."

Ron scoffed. "If yer wantin' to call it early so you can sneak off with 'Mione to . . . Yer in fer a shocker. She don't exactly kiss on the first date if you know what I mean."

Eyes wide, Hermione reached for her wand in anger but Neville grabbed her hand. He leant in and whispered, "He doesn't have a very good excuse for his behaviour, but he's not in his right mind just now. You're still friends. Let me take care of this?" he asked.

Frowning, she simply nodded, knowing that Neville was right. If Hermione was left to deal with Ronald, she would be sending him home injured.

Neville stood and reached over, grabbing Ron by the arm. "Come have a walk with me, mate. Get some fresh air." They made it near the door before Ron was fully leaning on Neville for support. Neville propped Ron up against the wall. "Look, I get it, this is awkward," he said. "But you can't say things like that about Hermione. Not now. Not ever again."

Ron scoffed. "You her defender now? Bloody charm said you were a match and now . . . I was her husband for years and I got nothing. All we did was row because our magic wasn't right or some shit. But you're going to just . . . You were my *friend*, Neville. Friends don't marry their friend's ex-wives."

Neville sighed in frustration and put a hand on Ron's shoulder, gripping it a little harder than normal, drawing the redhead's attention. "Look, you are my friend. Which is why in fourth year when I was in love with Hermione, I stood back and waited for weeks giving you the chance to ask her before I did. It was why when I figured out that she was in love with you, I didn't do anything about it. For years. And now I'm going to ask you to respect me and Hermione. You had your chance, and it didn't work out. It was no one's fault."

Ron swallowed down and looked at the ground bitterly. "Sure felt like my fault."

"It wasn't. But you're still friends and you can keep being friends if you sober up and walk back to that table and apologise to Hermione," Neville said. "I can see if Rosmerta has some Sober Up if you need it. If not, I'll expect you to do without. But you will apologise to her. Hermione's your friend, and she deserves better than that."

Slowly, Ron nodded his head. "Sorry, Nev . . . I . . . I don't know why I got like that. Just . . . I'm sorry."

"It's okay. It's weird, I know. But, and I'm saying this because you're my friend, you will not ever," Neville began, his eyes narrowing and his shoulders squaring as he spoke quietly to Ron, " *ever* speak about Hermione like that again. She doesn't need me fighting her battles for her, but I will because she doesn't deserve that. Not from you. Not from anyone. She may be your ex-wife, but she'll likely be my wife very soon. I won't stand for that."

Ron and Neville returned and the redhead apologised profusely. Hermione, shocked with how quickly her ex-husband had calmed down, swallowed down her own anger and forgave him. Harry escorted Ron home through the Floo after kissing Hannah on the cheek and making plans to meet up the following day.

"Well, that was . . . interesting," Hermione said, still a bit embarrassed.

Hannah smiled at her. "We've all got histories," she said. "Everything will work out right in the end. Nothing to be worried about."

With a sigh of relief, Hermione hugged Hannah in gratitude and then turned her attention to Neville. "So, umm, lunch tomorrow?"

"How about dinner?" he countered. "I'd like to take you someplace nice."

Grinning, she teasingly punched him in the arm. "If I didn't know any better Neville Longbottom, I would think you were trying to seduce me."

"Trying," he muttered with a small grin of his own. "Goodnight, Hermione."

The brunette vanished through the Floo and Neville let out a long sigh of relief. Hannah approached and put a hand on his shoulder. "Thank you," he said. "For being—"

"Discrete?" she said with a soft laugh. "You and Hermione . . . She doesn't know, I take it?"

He shook his head. "We just found out yesterday and I . . . It's not exactly something you tell someone up front."

She turned a stern look on him. "You are going to tell her, right? I mean, it's not exactly something you spring on a girl on her wedding night. Til death do us part and oh, by the way, your new husband would really like it if you bent over and let him—"

"Thanks, Hannah!" Neville said, turning around to stare at her. After a split second, they both laughed and then Neville groaned and leant his head on a nearby wall. "Of course I'm going to tell her. That's why I suggested waiting a week until we decide anything."

"We?" Hannah asked. "Unless you plan on changing for her then—" Her mouth fell open in shock. "You are. You're considering it, aren't you?"

He shrugged. "I like her, Hannah. Always have."

She frowned. "Don't change who you are for anyone, Neville. If she wants you, she'll accept every part of you. I just wanted something a little less . . . intense," she said and then slapped his arm when he had the nerve to chuckle at her. "Something calm and—"

"Normal?"

She rolled her eyes. "You're perfectly normal. If anyone can handle it, it'll be Hermione," she said encouragingly.

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I hope so."

"Rip it off," she advised him. "Like a plaster. Don't spend the week letting her fall for you only to spring it on her just before she needs to choose."

Chapter 5

September 17th, 2006

What exactly did a person wear on a date with a man they were technically being legally required to marry in a not-so-subtle Ministry move? Hermione knew what she had worn on dates out with other men since she'd divorced. For the men that she wanted to go home with, she wore the black dress with the shorter hem and the lace back. It required her to go without a bra and was the most obvious thing she owned when paired with shoes that Ginny had referred to as "fuck me heels".

When she was going on a date with someone she saw potential in, an actual future partner perhaps, she wore the longer red dress with the white, button up cardigan and her red ballet flats.

Neville was a potential future partner. Very near future, in fact. But his voice was husky when he flirted with her, and he had zero problems with her short-lived sexual promiscuity, implying a bit of his own in the process. And Hermione had not been able to get rid of the image of him rubbing his chin stubble against her inner thigh the very moment that her mind had conjured it during a pleasant daydream.

In frustration, she grabbed the black dress *and* the ballet flats.

She met him outside of the Dragon's Den, the fanciest new restaurant in Diagon Alley. He wore comfortable-looking dress robes, but nothing that looked either too casual or overly fancy. She smiled at the sight of him. "How are you able to just . . . look like you're so comfortable in your own skin?" she asked him.

Neville laughed nervously. "Do I? I don't feel like I do," he admitted. "One too many growth spurts in school had me a bit of a disadvantage when it came to adjusting to anything."

"You've grown since school," she commented.

He smiled. "So've you. But you're still just as beautiful as you ever were, Hermione."

She blushed and smiled back at him. "Beautiful? Maybe fourth year. Two tonnes of Sleakeazy's and a pretty dress."

Neville shook his head and reached out, touching one of her wayward curls. "I've always preferred this," he said. "It's . . . wild."

She licked her lips. "You like wild?" she asked and then widened her eyes when he swallowed hard. "Oh wow. I didn't . . . That was a bit forward," she said and then laughed awkwardly. "I don't know how to act around you. You're my friend so do I . . . I don't know, act normal? But then there's our situation, so do I flirt or act . . . insane?"

Neville laughed softly. "Please be yourself," he requested. "Just do whatever comes naturally."

"None of this is natural," she said with a frown. "We're being forced by the Ministry to—"

"No one forces me to do anything," Neville said firmly. "I'm here with you because you are a beautiful woman who I've fancied for quite a few years. If the Ministry put out a statement tomorrow saying they were retracting everything they've said about the potential marriage law, I would still be here, pleading with you to give me a chance, Hermione."

She nodded and tried to breathe out all of the tension.

Neville sighed, noting the stiffness of her shoulders and the way she was holding herself. "You're right, this is weird," he muttered. "How about honesty. Full disclosure, right?" he suggested and then cleared his throat. "I umm . . . The first time I ever wanked to the image of a girl at Hogwarts, it was to you," he blurted out. Both of their faces immediately turned dark red and Hermione's mouth fell open as her eyes widened. Too far gone, Neville looked briefly mortified that he had just said the first thing that came to his mind in order to break the tension, and he laughed nervously, throwing caution to the wind. "It was . . . umm, third year, and you were . . . Your hair was a bit . . ." he said and made a gesturing motion to her locks. "Potions. Remember, Snape said I had to feed mine to my toad, and you helped me through it. Got in quite a bit of trouble, if I remember."

Gobsmacked, Hermione just nodded.

"So . . ." Neville said, shoving his hands into his pockets and rocking back and forth on his heels.

"You're so handsome it's taking quite a bit of effort not to just climb you like a tree," she said quickly, and a bit quieter than he'd done. She still blushed and cleared her throat. "But you're just . . . I mean you must know how you look," she said, and then gestured to him, her fingers accidentally brushing up against his stomach.

She made a frustrated whine at the touch before pulling her hand away. Neville quickly captured it and brought it back, placing her palm down flat against his abdomen. "Sweet Circe," she whispered on the end of a heavy exhale, pressing her hand harder against him and letting her fingers trace the lines beneath the fabric.

"Sexual tension is evident," Neville said softly. "Now *that's* out of the way, maybe we can find some middle ground between friends and—"

"Spouses?" she asked, cringing at the word.

"Lovers?" he suggested casually and Hermione subconsciously gripped his robes tight in hand. He tried not to laugh as he pried her fingers off of him, taking her hand within his instead. "Dinner? We're going to be late for our reservation."

Blinking, Hermione shook herself out of the spell she had slipped into, and looked to the front of the restaurant. "Dinner. Yes. Dinner is good."

An hour into dinner and they would both relaxed significantly. A glass of wine and decent meal mixed with pleasant conversation about the good times they remembered before the war took a turn for the worse, and Neville and Hermione had not stopped smiling.

Halfway through their dessert, Neville slipped into the booth on her side instead of sitting across from her. "It'll give me an excuse to feed you bites of my lemon cake," he said, earning a chuckle from Hermione. It turned out, however, that she hated lemon cake, and Neville was not exactly pleased with the dark chocolate mousse that she had ordered. They

ate their desserts peacefully, occasionally offering a small smile to the other in between bites. At one point in the evening, he reached beneath the table and let his fingers draw small circles on her knee.

Hermione let out a shaky breath and finished her glass of wine before looking over at him, summoning her Gryffindor courage—with hope that he was doing the same—and asked, "Do you want to get out of here?" When he did not instantly respond, she clarified. "We could go back to my place."

Suddenly looking anxious, Neville pulled his hand away from her leg. "I think it would be better if we went to *mine*."

"I thought you would live in some large house or manor or something," Hermione admitted. "Some coworkers of mine were called out to Longbottom Keep a few months back because your grandmother requested some help with your library."

Neville nodded, closing the door to his flat behind her. "I don't like the big place. She keeps it because it's in the family, but I prefer to be on my own. As for my inheritance," he said with a shrug. "I hope you weren't planning on marrying a rich man and running off to The Bahamas," he teased. "I live off of what I earn plus significant savings that I've put together myself. The money my parents left me went into a separate account once I left Hogwarts. I use it and the interest to pay for their care at St. Mungo's, plus whatever I can do to add to the hospital's research departments."

Hermione shook her head and smiled. "Integrity too," she said, walking around the flat, looking at the recently unpacked photographs he had sitting out on a small dining room table, one of which included her along with several other members of Dumbledore's Army. "Is there anything wrong with you, Neville? Because right now, you're looking quite . . . good."

He frowned. "There might be a few things about me you'll have a general . . . dislike for," he said, swallowing down his nerves.

"I find that hard to believe," she said as she pulled a few books out of some boxes near the bookshelf, examining his collection of herbology tomes. "Do you plan on planting a garden? I know it's a small place, but you've got a terrace."

He nodded. "Already sent an owl to Professor Sprout asking if she has any seedlings she'd be willing to part with."

Hermione laughed. "You still call her Professor Sprout? Professor McGonagall broke me of the habit a few years back when she refused to respond to my owls unless I called her Minerva. Took me forever to do so, and I think I almost threw up the first time I said it to her in person."

He chuckled and moved to stand beside her. "Hermione, what do you want? Out of marriage?"

She frowned instantly and looked away from him. "Not what I had. Ron and I fought, constantly. He didn't understand my work and instead of asking questions, or just listening, he would get angry because I made him feel stupid. Plus, he hated that I couldn't tell him everything due to the nature of what I do at the Ministry. And I didn't like his job because I always worried and the Aurors—"

"I'm leaving them," Neville said. "I'm done with that work."

She smiled softly. "I'm glad. It's an honourable job, but I didn't like being left behind and not being able to know when he was in danger. Not being able to help. What if you accept Professor Sprout's offer?" she asked. "What would happen to us?"

Neville scratched at his chin. "It's not unheard of for Professors to be married."

She nodded. "Minerva had a house in Hogsmeade when she was married."

"We could do that," he suggested. "I love the village and it would be convenient. You wouldn't have to leave your job since the Ministry is just a Floo away."

"Kids?" Hermione blurted out. "What about . . . umm . . ."

"Well," Neville began with a chuckle, "the Ministry is kind of taking that out of our hands, aren't they?"

She frowned. "Neville, between Dolohov and Bellatrix and what they did, I . . . It might not be—"

"Okay," he said, showing no other emotions other than acceptance. "If we can't then we can't. That wouldn't mean anything to me, Hermione. But what about the Ministry?"

She blinked. "What about the . . .? Neville, you're the scion of your House. Last living heir. You need a—"

"That's my *House's* problem then, isn't it?" he said, slightly bitter. "I don't care about blood. When it's something we want to think about, we'll figure it out. I'm more worried about the Ministry trying to take you away from me if we don't start breeding for their bloody program."

She looked down. "I don't know."

He sighed. "I still say yes."

Making eye contact with him, Hermione frowned. "You'll fight them *with* me?"

"With you, for you," he said and then nodded. "Yeah. I'll do that. This was their idea, putting people together. I'm ready to jump headfirst into this and let *them* worry about the consequences when they happen. And there will be consequences," his fingers brushed against her cheek, "I'm willing to make a lot of consequences for them."

She grinned at his bold determination and stood up on the tips of her toes—wishing that she'd worn the fuck me heels as they offered her an extra three inches of height—and brushed her lips against his. They were softer than she had thought, and she reached up to touch his cheek, feeling the scratchy stubble beneath her fingertips. When he breathed out through his nose, she could smell spearmint and she could not help but smile against him. Her lips parted and she ran the tip of her tongue against the seam of his mouth, eager to delve inside.

Suddenly, Neville pulled away and sighed, looking devastatingly torn.

"I'm sorry," she flushed, mortified. "I assumed . . . And because you said earlier that—"

"Hermione, please don't . . . This isn't . . . You've done *nothing* wrong," he promised. "Trust me when I say that there's nothing in the world that I wouldn't love more than to take you and . . ." He looked up at her, eyes dark, chest heaving as he fought to control his

breath, hands shaking. "But, I don't want to get involved with you physically without explaining everything."

Hermione snorted, offended. "I think I know how it works, Neville."

He sighed again and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Come with me," he said and reached a hand out to her.

Suddenly worried, Hermione took his hand and followed him down the long hallway toward what she assumed was his bedroom. Most of his things still had not been unpacked, but the bed was made. Large, covered in what looked like soft sheets and a thick, heavy blue comforter. The round iron bars that made up the head and footboard swirled and intertwined, creating intricate patterns drawing her attention. At the foot of the bed, instead of a Hogwarts trunk—which was where she kept hers—was a small bench with a velvet covering that looked similar to what used to sit in front of her grandmother's piano when she was a girl.

She stepped further into the room, running her fingers over the velvet, when her eyes were drawn to the iron bars of the footboard where two round chained loops hung from the top, about two feet apart. She reached up and touched them curiously. As though she were putting the pieces together, Hermione knelt on the bench, which offered her a perfect angle to reach up, aligning her hands—or more accurately wrists—to the chained loops.

She sucked in a breath of complete understanding, knowing now why Neville had been so nervous about getting physical with her, why he was so emphatic about her having a choice in marriage. She looked over her shoulder to where Neville stood, anxiously in the doorway, hands shoved back in his pockets. He appeared torn. Breathing heavy, his eyes lingered on her position, lips parted as he his gaze raked over her. But his posture was defensive, as though he were waiting to step back, to allow her a quick escape.

A thousand different thoughts flew through her mind as she brought her focus back to the chained loops which looked like they'd fit rope quite well.

Swallowing hard, Hermione finally spoke. "I don't know if I'd like restraint," she said. "After the war . . . I don't know how I would react to not being able to move."

Neville cleared his throat. "I umm . . . I would . . . There would be a safe word. And nothing would ever be done without your permission."

"Is this . . ." She turned to look at him. "Is *this* what you were worried about? That you were a little—"

"Not a *little*," he clarified immediately so as not to mislead her. "I've been trained. It's . . . It's almost exclusive. Before the marriage law, I only . . . I didn't know what it was at first." He moved to sit down on the bed. "Luna was my first, you know," he said. "She was . . . She liked things and I wanted to make her happy. But I found I liked them too. We didn't work as a couple so—"

"Hannah," Hermione whispered.

Neville cleared his throat. "She was willing to try but . . . it wasn't for her."

Trying to process all of the information, Hermione stepped off of the bench and moved away from the bed. "What else?" she asked.

Without a word, Neville flicked his wand and the top of the bench flew back, opening up a trunk beneath it. There, set out in several rows, were tools in what was clearly a toy box. A neatly folded silk ribbon, several leather straps wound in small circles and bound with wire, small metal clamps with diamonds hanging off the ends like earrings, and several items that she'd only seen at hen parties, though one of which looked similar to something she herself actually owned, and that Ron used to complain about.

She reached out and pulled on the drawer and it opened out, revealing another layer beneath. There she saw a folded leather belt, a wooden paddle that looked like a hairbrush without the bristles, and a riding crop. Her hand reached out, almost on its own, and ran her fingers over the riding crop. She looked up to notice that Neville's breathing had increased.

"Why?" she asked curiously. "I mean . . . why does it—?"

"Arouse me?" he asked. "Pain and pleasure aren't so different. It's primal, and I like the control," he admitted. "I didn't have much of it growing up. I like tools. I like when I held the Sword of Gryffindor, I felt powerful. But not in an arrogant way. It felt like I finally had the power to not be a victim. To not let others suffer. I could do something."

She pulled the crop out and held the handle. "But you would . . . You would hurt me with this?"

He shook his head. "No. Not . . . Not really," he stood up, taking the crop from her. "Hurt and harm are very different things. And I would *never* harm you. It's different. It's not like regular pain. It's . . . Have you ever been so caught up in passion that you pull hair and leave scratch marks down someone's back?"

She could not help but smirk a little at that. "Rarely."

He chuckled. "That's sad news, Miss Granger," he said in a suddenly husky voice and had her breath catching in her throat. "I would . . ." He took a hesitant step forward, slipping into the self-assured Neville that she had seen glimpses of previously. He leaned down and brushed his nose against her jawline, inhaling deeply as he put one gentle hand on her waist, letting the other run the edge of the leather crop up her bare arm. "I would *love* for you to dig your nails into my skin."

She closed her eyes and shivered at the feel of his breath against her ear. "Would you?" she asked. "Why?"

"Because," he said, his lips touching her earlobe. "It would mean that I drove you to that point. When pleasure doesn't know how to escape the body, so it thrashes inside of it, violently, begging for release."

Hermione pulled away, slightly dazed, needing to remind herself that this was still indeed Neville. The same Neville who'd lost his toad when they were eleven. Who had struggled for years to overcome his fear of one particular professor. Who had fought beside her bravely in the Department of Mysteries, and on top of the Astronomy Tower. Neville, who had become a General in the absence of Harry, during that last horrid year of the war. Neville, who'd slain Nagini.

Breathing just as hard as he was, and before she could think on the matter another moment more, she found herself asking, "What's the safe word?"

Neville grinned, elated. "Devil's Snare."

Chapter 6

September 17th, 2006

She couldn't help but grin. "Devil's snare?" she asked with a small laugh of approval. Of course it would be devil's snare. The safe word spoken while she eyed the leather crop still in his hands was a sweet reminder that this man was not a stranger, he was Neville.

And Neville had grown up.

He shrugged, slightly awkward in his posture, though the muscles of his forearms were tight as he gripped the handle of the crop, letting the feel of the leather soothe him in what Hermione assumed was a comfort zone that he hadn't shared with many people—at least, people that knew *both* sides of who he was. "Seemed appropriate. Plus, it's easy to remember and you're not likely to say it during . . . Well, in the bedroom."

She raised a brow and the corner of her lip turned up. "Only the bedroom?"

He brought his gaze back to her face, his eyes slightly widened in amusement. "You're pretty good at the flirting thing, you know?"

She let out a soft laugh and bit her lower lip. "I'm overcompensating right now, I think."

He nodded in understanding and set the crop back down on the open bench. "Are you freaked out?"

She shook her head. "More curious. Intrigued," she answered, licking her lips with an old familiar glint in her eyes. "I mean, if you really think about it, there's an entire subculture within the Muggle world when it comes to sexual exploration, I just never even thought about it being magically applicable. The potential really is staggering. Certain spells could be modified and . . . What?" she asked, when he grinned brightly at her.

"You . . ." Neville reached up and touched his knuckles softly against her cheek. "You haven't changed much. It's comforting."

Smiling, Hermione looked down, shyly. "You apparently changed quite a bit," she said, swallowing down a plethora of questions. "At least with . . . So, Luna?"

Neville winced, then smiled, and then avoided her gaze as he scratched the back of his neck. "She is a girl who knows *exactly* what she wants and is not afraid to say it," he said with a short laugh.

Hermione recalled the way that the little blonde had practically pulled her new Slytherin fiancé around by an invisible leash during the Ministry charming session. "Her match was Marcus Flint."

Neville looked up, surprised. "The big Slytherin? Played Quidditch?" he asked and Hermione nodded. "That's . . . interesting."

"He looked smitten with her."

"She'll have him kissing her feet by the end of the week," he declared. "It's hard to say no to Luna."

She raised a slender brow. "You never did, I take it?"

He laughed loudly. "Oh, I *did*. Everyone has hard limits, even me."

Her eyes were drawn back to the open bench and the leather crop that hung over the edge. From the angle on the bed, she could see light reflecting off of metal, and the shimmer of glass. "Should we talk about . . . ?"

He reached out and took her hand within both of his. "This isn't . . . This isn't how I normally do things," he said and rubbed the empty spot on her ring finger, staring at it contemplatively.

She nodded in understanding. Hermione imagined that Neville met up with like-minded individuals that shared his interests, nothing serious, just play. Only now, thanks to plummeting magical births and a Ministry of Magic that couldn't keep their noses out of people's bedrooms, Neville was forced to manoeuvre around his usual way of going about things; adding marriage to the list. "Sounds so official. 'Normally do things.' More like a business arrangement than a relationship."

"I don't really have relationships," he told her. "Not after Hannah, not *really*. Luna rather made me interested in . . . a more, aggressive, dominant part of myself. She helped give me the confidence to ask, *demand*, what I wanted."

Hermione swallowed at the way the word demand fell from his lips; his tone was firm and his voice low and almost smoky. She wondered what it had been like that last year of the war for Neville. Or for the people he commanded within the Room of Requirement. It had not just been hiding away. Dumbledore's Army had developed an underground resistance, creating anarchy within Hogwarts to strike back at the Carrows. Hermione wondered if he had demanded then as well. If he had given orders with that same tone of voice.

Firm. Demanding.

"I *had* to, honestly," he continued, either unaware or ignoring the way that Hermione shifted beside him, crossing and uncrossing her legs. "For as much as she speaks between the lines, Luna can't *read* between them very well," he said with a throaty chuckle. "Either that or she purposely tried to get me to be more vocal. Hannah didn't want that. It was fun for her, from time to time, but she just wanted—"

"Normal?" Hermione questioned.

Neville frowned. "It's not for everyone."

Feeling guilty for her poor choice of word, Hermione tried to recover quickly. "You said you were trained?"

He looked up and smiled at the way her eyes lit up when she asked questions. "You're right about the Muggle world. There was this place in Berlin, a club of sorts. We passed by it one time while casing a warehouse nearby. I went back on my own time and met a few people. Mistress Liese had a preference for British boys and she took a fancy." He smirked and colour invaded his cheeks. "I told her about my experiences and she agreed to train me. It wasn't . . . I mean, I still had work and a life, but it was educational. I met a few people, but I could never connect. Not really. Not with a Muggle. Don't get me wrong," he said quickly, looking as though he was hoping to not offend her, "I've nothing against Muggles but, forming a relationship with one is one thing and then adding this on top of that? It's . . . It's easier with someone magical. I don't like secrets."

She smiled and squeezed his hand. "I understand. After everything we've been through, I think we deserve something easy. That's one of the reasons I think it was so rough. Everything with Ron. It felt like we'd won some great victory and, shouldn't we have been rewarded for that? Instead, it just all felt like more work."

He hesitated only briefly before reaching up and tucking a curl of her hair behind her ear, letting the tip of his finger run back down her neck. "You deserve all the rewards," he said. "I . . . It's not just about . . . well, sex, you know? It's . . ." He pulled his hand away from her and sighed, running his fingers through his hair in frustration. "I'm normally a lot more well-spoken in these situations, for the record. You, however, have a way of—"

She grinned, reaching out and touching the top button of his shirt. "I like that I can affect you. It's . . . nice."

He exhaled and leant toward her, foreheads nearly touching. "I want to show you everything," he whispered.

"What if I had run away?" she asked. "You gave me the chance, I saw you."

"I would have let you go."

She blinked, shocked. "That's it?"

He chuckled. "And then I might have sent an owl the following morning begging you to reconsider and I'd probably toss all of my things into the fire as a grand romantic gesture."

Her eyes widened. "You would give up . . ." She looked back to the bench, no longer able to see the contents within from the way she leant in toward Neville. "I'm glad you didn't have to," she said and turned her head back to find him staring into her eyes with a heat that was almost intimidating.

The last time she had been with a man, was a Muggle she'd casually dated after a few dates with co-workers from the Ministry did not work out. Caleb had been kind and thoughtful, and there was passion, certainly. She had not told many of her friends about her former Muggle boyfriend, as he had not lasted long, but she'd invited him back to her flat after the second date, barely able to make it through the door without tearing his clothes off

of him. With Neville, she almost felt like she needed to ask permission before doing anything.

A part of her wondered if he knew the effect he had on her, and if he liked it. "I umm . . . I don't think I know what to do anymore," she admitted nervously. "I feel like I'm completely out of my element."

He leant in, kissed her cheek sweetly, and then pulled her hands back into his much larger ones. "We're not going to . . . Not *that*," he said and gestured to the bench, "not tonight and not until you're ready."

Shocked that she was mildly disappointed, Hermione tried to collect herself. "Well, don't leave me waiting too long," she said with a small laugh. "Curiosity killed the cat, you know."

He grinned and leant forward, brushing his nose against her jaw and throat. "You smell good," he whispered and Hermione sucked in a sharp breath, letting it out in short bursts accompanied by a timid mewl that she was unable to quiet. "The wine you drank . . . Are you sober?" he asked. "I normally don't permit alcohol."

She snorted indelicately. "*Permit?*"

He pulled away far enough to look at her but still close enough to invade her personal space. Reaching out, he took her chin between his thumb and forefinger, directing her where to look, which was straight into his eyes. "I like to be completely in control of my mind and body and I expect my partner to be able to consent without . . . lubrication," he said with a crooked and teasing grin.

Hermione's lips parted as a shiver ran down her spine and heat pooled between her thighs. "Oh . . ." she squeaked, "I think lubrication is not an issue here."

When they kissed this time, Neville initiated, pressing his lips hard against her own. His mouth was firm and his tongue instantaneously demanding, giving her no time to prepare for his advances. Despite the hardness of his lips, his hands were soft as they touched her chin, her cheeks, traced down over her shoulders, and against the skin of her arms, down to lace his fingers with hers.

He tasted like sin and magic.

She could hardly pause to think, to remember that this man was the same little boy who had been so terrified of a professor that he'd needed to dress up a boggart in his grandmother's fancy old robes and a handbag in order to conquer his fear. When his lips broke away from her mouth to latch onto the crook of her neck, Hermione imagined that *this* Neville would have no problem staring down a surly Professor Snape; he would laugh in the wake of billowing black robes.

His hair smelled like clean soap and subtle cologne and fresh upturned earth—like Hogwarts in the springtime. Everything about his scent and taste was crisp and sharp, but his body was soft and hard at the same time as she ran her hands down the planes of his chest and abdomen, earning a groan for her efforts.

"Are you certain?" he asked, a concerned look in his eyes as he pulled back from her, cupping her face in his hands gently.

She nodded quickly, hands shaking in desperation. It had been too long and his mouth and his magic tasted just so good. "Yes."

As though it was instinctual, Neville's stare hardened slightly as he asked, "Yes, what?"

Hermione's eyes widened slightly, shocked and thrilled by the firm tone. Her heart rate accelerated and she saw the momentary hesitation in his stare as though he'd noticed how he'd forgotten himself and was thinking about backing up and apologising but had decided to test the waters first.

Not knowing exactly how to answer, Hermione took a guess and whispered, "Yes, Sir."

He dove forward, kissing her again, letting his tongue sweep into her mouth in the process. He pushed her back until she was flat against the mattress, parallel to the iron bars that made up the footboard. The bottom half of her calves hung off the edge of the bed and she tried to kick off her ballet flats but struggled when he found the clasp of her dress and began pulling it down her shoulders, baring her skin to his eyes. He stopped just short of revealing her breasts, placing a soft kiss on the top of each mound before turning his attention to her fidgeting feet.

Neville gently pulled her flats off, kissing the inside of her ankles as he parted her legs and positioned himself between them. Kneeling on the bed and looking down at Hermione, he began to unbutton his shirt.

Her eyes momentarily glazed as he bared his chest to her.

He looked chiselled. Cut from marble—no—sculpted from clay with bare hands. Soft wet clay pushed and formed and shaped with imperfect indentations in all the right places. The lines of his throat were covered in the same scratchy stubble as his cheeks and chin, but the hair on the rest of his body was softer, spread out evenly over his chest before descending south, scattered over his stomach and growing coarser against his trousers and belt.

He was muscled, but not overly so. There were not hard lines moulded around bulk, formed by years of Quidditch or excessive working out. His body was built by hard work and determination. Made from running after Dark wizards and Death Eaters, from duelling. His arms, however, made her fantasise about a future where they had a large garden, and she would watch him from the porch, sipping lemonade from a glass as he carried massive bags of soil from one end of the yard to the other.

He was achingly beautiful in the most perfectly rugged way, and Hermione thought that perhaps every young boy should be a bit awkward in their youth if the end results were anything *close* to this. A part of her almost felt annoyed until she remembered that she—and no one else from this point forward—would be allowed to touch him.

As he removed his trousers, Hermione lost the ability to look at his thighs and everything else because she'd sat up, reaching for him, running her mouth against his sternum, and kissing down the lines in his stomach, grateful that he was so much taller than she was. When he pushed her back on the bed and settled between her thighs, she gasped, having expected to feel the fabric of his trousers, but instead was met with hot, hard flesh.

Tugging her dress further down, he bared her breasts and exhaled at the sight of them, licking his lips before leaning down and running his tongue over the peak of one and then the other. He took one nipple in his mouth and then lightly bit down on it. Hermione moaned and arched her back, eager for more as she cried out, "Neville!"

Instead of granting her more, he released her from his teeth and placed a soft kiss on her breast instead. Shaking with a mixture of frustration and anticipation, Hermione looked down at him and saw no sign of the awkward boy she had known, nor was there any hint of hesitation in his eyes. Neville was where he was strongest, where he belonged: between her thighs and hovering above her needy body, and he knew it.

"Please . . ." she begged, never recalling the word having left her mouth with any other man, at least not with the sincerity she used with it now.

He smirked, a look that she almost found irritating had the sparkle in his eyes not been so endearing. "I could make you come just like this," he said, running a thumb over her nipple.

Against her better judgement, she scoffed.

Neville raised a daring eyebrow as though he had been challenged.

Hermione gulped at that eyebrow. "You're not . . . You're not just being overly confident and exaggerating, are you?"

He grinned and leant down, kissing her sweetly. "Another time," he whispered against her mouth as his fingers pressed into her hips, pushing the lacy fabric of her knickers down her thighs.

"Say it again," he whispered and she felt something hot and thick pressed against her centre.

It took her a moment to catch his meaning until she nodded her head and moaned, "Yes."

Neville briefly lost the dominant stare when he thrust his cock inside of her. Her eyes fluttered and then rolled at the feeling of being so incredibly filled, and when she refocused her attention on his face, she saw elation there.

He looked like Harry with a freshly caught Snitch in his hands, Remus smelling freshly baked chocolate biscuits, Sirius after the first sip of a finely aged firewhisky, and Ron on Christmas morning. Mostly, he looked like Neville. Not Neville the Auror, or Neville the future Hogwarts Professor—who happened to own what looked like a flogger and several things she was certain would be inside of her at some point in the near future—no, he

looked like Neville, the boy who defeated his boggart when he was thirteen. Neville, whose Patronus nearly dwarfed everyone else's when properly cast. Neville, with the Sword of Gryffindor in hand.

He looked happy . . . and magnificent.

"I've wanted to . . . For so . . ." he mumbled before pulling out once and pushing back in again, both of them moaning in response.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and held her tightly against his chest as he rolled to the side, flipping them over. Hermione whimpered loudly at the new and deeper angle from on top of him, bracing her hands against his chest. He pulled at her black dress, which had been shoved around her middle like a belt, and yanked it up and over her head, tossing it over the iron footboard.

Neville's large hands roamed up her stomach and over her breasts then back down again to settle at her hips. The feel of him was enticing, electric, and worshipful, and it seemed he couldn't stop touching her. When she rocked her hips back and forth, he held onto her, taking over her movements by pushing and pulling on her waist, leveraging his own hips and thrusting up into her as she moved.

She felt small in his hands and vulnerable against his strength and it was shockingly relaxing to be so . . . delicate.

A coiled and heated spring inside of her twisted and twisted and shook, vibrating its need to release. Unable to find it herself, Hermione fumbled for something to grab onto. Remembering his comments earlier, she dug her fingernails into the skin of his chest. When he hissed in pleasure, dilated eyes meeting her own, she grinned and scratched deeper.

He smirked in reply, almost unaffected, and answered her challenge by pinching her clit with pressure just short of painful.

Her eyes widened and she fell forward, legs unable to support her as he continued to thrust through her very obvious, and nearly instantaneous climax. She cried out and made a number of other groans and whimpers that she could not hear herself since blood was pounding in her ears, blocking out all noise. When sound returned to her, Neville was

growling her name as his body shook erratically beneath her until he finally stilled, and they both collapsed in a pile of sheets and sweat, panting heavily.

He pushed her damp hair from her face and kissed her forehead with such tenderness she could have cried, having long since forgotten what it had felt like to be treasured. Neville held her close to his chest and ignored the fact that his semen began to leak out of her and onto his thigh when his cock softened and slipped from her cunt. Hermione thought about being embarrassed and almost moved to shift away, but he held her tighter and she realised that, all things considered, it was likely one of the least extreme things that had ever happened to him.

"That was . . . Wow," she said when she finally caught her breath. "And that was without any of your . . . things," she added, lazily gesturing in the direction of the bench.

Neville laughed and kissed her temple and then her cheek, using his knuckles beneath her chin to angle her face so that he could taste her lips again. "You were amazing. *Are* amazing. Are you sure that charm worked right? It feels like this is just too good to be true."

She smiled. "Positive," she said and then kissed him again as though she had been doing it for years. "And if I weren't positive, I would lie because after *that* . . . I don't think I'd like to let you go anytime soon, Neville."

Chapter 7

September 18th, 2006

Hermione opened her eyes to the smell of coffee, and she let it wash over her like a warm blanket. The *actual* blanket around her was not the quilt she usually woke up wrapped in and she looked down, peering beneath the fabric to find herself completely naked. Remembering everything from the evening before, Hermione brightly blushed and then covered her face with her hands. She'd had sex. She'd had amazing, unbelievable sex.

With Neville Longbottom.

"I had sex with Neville," she quietly squeaked to herself.

"Any regrets?"

She pulled her hands down from her face and stared up at the doorway to the bedroom, brown eyes wide at the sight of Neville standing there, a cup of coffee in each hand. She might have been able to brush him off and collect herself quickly, but the small fact that he was shirtless and wearing blue, low hanging pyjamas had her searching for words with her mouth hanging open.

"What?" she finally asked. "No. No regrets. No. No."

He lifted a dark brow. "That's a lot of no's," he pointed out.

Smiling, embarrassed, Hermione tried to recover by clearing her throat and softly muttering, "I recall a lot of yes's being uttered last night."

Neville laughed and stepped closer to the bed, placing a cup of coffee beside her on the table before taking a long drink from his own mug as he sat on the edge of the bed, not reacting when she bunched her legs up to make room for him. "Sorry," he muttered after swallowing. "I haven't had much time to shop, so coffee's all I've got in the flat. Otherwise, I would have put something together."

Raising an incredulous eyebrow, Hermione smirked. "You cook?" she asked. "I seem to remember you having a bit of trouble with a cauldron or two."

Snorting, Neville shook his head and then ran a hand through his sleep-mussed hair. "I've gotten a bit better at brewing," he told her. "Of course, I only do it if there's an emergency and the shops are closed. And usually with someone supervising," he added with a crooked grin that widened when she laughed. "Ingredients, now I've always been good at those. I can plant it, grow it, harvest it and slice and chop however you need . . . but—"

"Apply heat?" she offered.

Neville grimaced. "Apply heat and . . . well . . ." He pursed his lips and made an explosion sound effect. "I'm fairly good at assembling salads," he said with a small chuckle.

It was the thought, Hermione told herself, as she stared at the man in front of her.

The moment she had seen Ron and Neville together in Hogsmeade, she knew that she could not ever compare them. It would not be fair to Neville to have to follow in Ron's marital footsteps, and anything that he did good would only make Ron look terrible as a husband, and Hermione knew she could not do that. Ron was still her friend. Her friend that she was married to for several years, and who never even offered to make breakfast after a night of amazing sex. Not once.

Washing the thoughts from her mind, she simply smiled at Neville and tried to fill the growing awkward silence with noise. "I could . . . I'm good at breakfast," she said. "Not much else, though. I work long hours and generally get takeaway for dinner. But breakfast . . . I can do breakfast. I've got food at my place if you're interested?"

He leant forward and pushed the hair from her face with one hand, setting down his coffee cup with the other before scooting closer to her. "You're not going to run out of here screaming?" he asked. "A good night's sleep didn't give you time to think with a clear head about your options?"

Her gaze briefly flickered to the space at the foot of the bed where she knew Neville's bench and hidden trunk rested. She smiled nervously and then shook her head. "No regrets," she echoed her earlier statement. "My offer of breakfast only lasts so long."

He grinned. "I gladly accept."

Hermione nodded, smiled, and then fidgeted beneath the blanket. "Could you umm . . . I need to get dressed."

Neville paused, as if contemplating his words very carefully, a slight glint in his eyes. He looked down at her blanket-covered body as though he could see through the fabric. "Are you already shy?" he questioned teasingly and, before she had a chance to respond, he leant forward and kissed her forehead before standing. "I'll dress in the bathroom," he said, flicking his wand at the closet nearby and summoning his clothing.

"What happens now?" she asked him as she stood in her kitchen, doing her best to flip fried eggs in a pan the way that she'd seen her mother do when she was a little girl. Years of flicking her wand had retrained her wrist on how to work certain movements, and more often than not, her yolks broke as a result.

Neville perused her collection of herbology books from a nearby shelf—one of six in the flat—and smiled when he landed on one that he had not yet purchased himself. "You've got the new edition of *Poisoned Plants for Potions*, brilliant. I've been meaning to get this."

"No use in buying it," she told him. "I suppose at some point soon everything that mine is yours as well as the reverse."

"S'pose so," he said thoughtfully, flipping through the book for a moment before putting it back on the shelf in the exact place he'd found it. Smiling up at her when she approached him with two plates, Neville took one from her and made his way to the table, tucking in to eat. "This looks great, Hermione. Thank you."

She sat down beside him at the small table, one that she had bought to replace the large dining room table she'd shared with Ron when they had been married. So large because of all the children they'd one day have, large for his family who stopped by on a constant basis. Hermione loved the Weasleys still with all her heart, but she treasured the hell out of her small table. "So, what happens now?" she repeated her question from earlier.

Neville looked up after swallowing a bite. "Now? Umm . . ." He paused, wiping his mouth with a cloth napkin that did not match the one on Hermione's lap. "Did you . . .? I said I would give you a week."

She shook her head, brushing his words off as though they were mindless formalities that she could read later in a contract. "I don't need it. I agreed to participate in the programme long before I knew you'd be my match."

"That's fine; I did the same, but now you know *I'm* a match."

She shrugged. "I don't see why my decision should change. We talked about this last night."

"True, but last night was . . . It was . . ." He looked flustered for a moment, and Hermione smiled at the endearing sight, but her heart fluttered when that adorably bumbling gave way to subtle confidence and he raised his gaze to meet hers. "It was unbelievable," he said and then hesitated again. "But also . . . not something I generally . . . You saw my things; you saw only a *fraction* of what I'm—"

"Am I supposed to be afraid of you?" she asked, laughing.

Neville looked up at her in shock, having clearly assumed her laughter was mocking, but then his expression softened as she smiled, her teasing evident. He smirked at her in reply. "Most women do have the *courtesy* of at least being intimidated."

"I'm not most women, and maybe you need to try harder?"

He lifted a brow as his smirk developed into a sly grin. "Is that a request? It might be something I'd be willing to consider if you're . . . good."

Drumming her fingers on the table, she looked at their half-eaten breakfasts, trying to decide whether to provoke him further or pour ice water on the conversation so as to finish their meal. He licked his lips and made the decision for her. "So you make *all* the decisions then?" she asked, only slightly irritated by the question and the likely answer. "Always?"

"About this? Always."

"Do *I* never get to be the boss of *you*?" she asked, attempting flirtation but her voice broke over the question, concern apparent in the way that she tried to hide her trembling. She was not intimidated, not by any man, least of all Neville Longbottom—no matter how soft his chest hair was—and she was not afraid of the future or choices that she was making, but the lack of control he was implying she would have was unnerving at best.

Neville caught the worry in her voice and pushed his chair back from the table, folding his napkin before placing it over his plate, clearly finished. "Can I ask you something?" he started, quickly adding, "And please believe me that I mean no offence."

Hermione sighed. "That's a relief," she said sarcastically, lacing her fingers in her lap.

He stood from his seat and tucked the chair back beneath the table, moving in front of Hermione. She looked up at him, craning her neck to make eye contact until he knelt before her on both knees. A pleading position, she noted. Not something someone of his claimed dominant nature would do. He took both of her hands in his and then kissed the tips of her fingers and Hermione wondered how, even as he knelt in front of her, she felt like he was in charge of the moment, directing it with every breath. "Hermione, I hold you in nothing but the greatest respect, I always have. You were my friend, someone I admired for many years. Aren't you just a bit tired of having to be the boss?"

She swallowed down hard, breathing slow and deep in order to avoid the way that she knew her body tightened at the prospect of not being the boss. She had been that way ever since she could remember. When she was in Primary school with Muggle children, and then when she had gone off to Hogwarts. It had been the contributing factor to her lack of friends—except apparently Neville—until Ron and Harry and a Mountain Troll changed everything. It was not the management of others that she thrived on, however.

"I like control," she whispered softly.

"Do you *like* it or *need* it?"

Not truly knowing the different at this stage of her life, Hermione offered, "Both?"

"Why couldn't you give up that control to someone you trusted? Ron or even Harry?"

Breaking the tension in her shoulders, Hermione let out a loud laugh. "Are you joking? Ron needed me to remind him to do his homework since first year. And are we talking about *Harry Potter*? About so tall," she said, pulling one hand away from his and raising it in the air, "with black hair and a penchant for almost getting himself killed once or twice a year because he rarely thinks before doing just about anything?"

Neville smiled and nodded. "Fair point," he said and then retook her hand, pressing his lips to her knuckles as he breathed against them in deep thought, as though they were his

own. "Do you trust *me*?" he asked after a long silence. "Let me clarify," he added quickly. "Do you trust *me* . . . with anything that doesn't involve a cauldron?"

She smirked at his joke and then nodded after thinking about his question. "Yes, I suppose so." Neville had rarely done anything reckless growing up. It was his *bravery* and *loyalty* that defined him as a Gryffindor.

"How do you think it would feel to let go of that control, that tension, with just one person? One person with which you can be vulnerable. Not because you're weak and need protecting," he quickly said, "but because you need a break, you need to feel small and fragile," he whispered, kissing her fingers again and then rubbing the stubble of his cheek against them like a cat, "without worrying that no one will catch you if you fall."

Breathing deep, Hermione slowly exhaled before admitting, "That sounds . . . frightening, if I'm being perfectly honest. But . . ." She nervously bit her lip.

Neville looked up at her, eyes sparkling. "You're still interested."

"It sounds like a challenge," she said with an almost shy smile.

"You never did like to be told you couldn't do something."

Hermione chuckled, pulling her hands away from him so that she could run her fingers through his hair. "How would that work then? Isn't that the point? You telling me what to do?"

Neville shook his head and quietly laughed, eyes closed. Hermione frowned at his answer, wondering how she had misunderstood. He eventually opened his eyes and smiled sweetly at her. "Is the great Hermione Granger too stubborn, unwilling, or incapable of submitting?"

Her eyes flashed. "Now it sounds like a dare."

Neville's throat bobbed when he swallowed, licking his lips. "What if it sounded like a command?"

She stared at him, refusing to break eye contact, even as his fingers danced over the hemline of the cotton shorts she'd changed into the second they'd come through the Floo. His knuckles brushed against the skin of her thigh but she refused to show that he was

succeeding in reigniting the teasing fire she would feel the night before. "You're testing me, aren't you?"

He knelt lower, pressing his lips against her knee. "Do you want me to?"

She thought about the question for a full minute, listening to the clock on the wall tick each second away. Neville kept his mouth on her skin and his focus on her face, unwavering as he patiently waited for her answer, which was an astounding, "Yes."

He pressed an identical kiss to her opposite knee before placing his palms down on the tops of her thighs and sitting up a bit straighter, pushing his hands forward until just the tip of his fingers dipped beneath her shorts. "The knickers you're wearing, what colour are they?"

She bit her lower lip and then smirked. "Black."

His fingers drifted higher up her thighs and her eyelids fell shut. "How long have you had them?"

Confused by the question, she blinked and looked down. "What? I . . . umm . . ." Again, his fingers inched higher until the tips of them brushed against the lace outline of her knickers.

"Who bought them?"

"I did."

His gaze darkened and she gasped at the sight even as his hands turned around and skimmed the inside of her shorts until reaching the top edge, gripping them and pulling down. Hermione lifted her bum so that he could remove the fabric, letting the shorts slide down her legs, revealing the black lace knickers to his sight.

"Who did you buy them for?" he asked again. "For Ron maybe?" Her eyes widened and she stiffened at the question, shocked at the truth behind the assumption. "Maybe they've been sitting in your dresser for a very long time. Maybe you wore them once or twice, an attempt to reignite something you knew wasn't meant to be. Because Hermione Granger doesn't give up without a fight."

Blinking away tears of frustration at the memory that wanted to come against her will, Hermione struggled to accept that, somehow, he'd complimented her and it was only her *own* concerns over her failed marriage that were provoking the inferior feeling inside of her.

He ran his thumb along the edge of the knickers as he spoke, softly, perhaps the way some people would do to plants they carefully tended. "And they've been sitting in that dresser for a long time, waiting. How many other pair do you have?" he asked, looking back up at her. "Red? White? Lace? Satin? How many knickers do you own, have you worn for or with the intent for another person to see them?"

Her mouth fell open and she thought of her dresser, bras on the left and knickers on the right, each pair folded meticulously and arranged by colour. "I . . . all . . . I suppose," she admitted with a shrug remembering how she'd thrown away most after her divorce—along with half of her wardrobe—and then gone on a shopping spree to replace everything with the intent on exploring her sexuality with whomever she chose.

Neville nodded and then stood, turning around to take off his robes, revealing the plain, worn trousers and simple faded button-down shirt beneath. He took his wand in hand and then, without pausing to even look at her, bent back down and grabbed the band of her knickers, whispering, "*Diffindo*."

Hermione gasped as Neville cut through the fabric, allowing it to spring across her skin, baring her to him before he did the exact same thing to the other side.

"If we do this . . . If you truly, *honestly* want to do this," he clarified as he pulled on the black fabric, lifting her legs with one strong arm in the process before settling her back in the chair once more, "then the only thing that you wear, are knickers that you've bought for *me* to see." His hands rubbed softly against her thighs and watched as she slowly relaxed against his touch. When she let out a soft breath, Neville parted her thighs, never taking his focus off of her eyes in the process, even as he ran his thumb down the damp seam of her centre. "The only things that touch your cunt are things that *I* touch you with, or things meant for *me* to see."

Lips parted and panting, lost in the confidence in his eyes and the way that his words and touch made her squirm in ways she hadn't in years, having, as Neville so easily pointed out, been the boss of everyone else for just too damn long.

He pulled his hand from her and then leant forward, whispering in her ear. "Go and get your knickers."

"N-now?"

He nodded, setting the sliced black pair in his hands on the table next to their breakfast. "Get them all. Every last pair, and cut them the way I've done with these."

She tried to act calm and reasonable, like a grown woman and not a child running down the stairs on Christmas morning, but there was a small skip in her step as she sauntered down the hallway, completely aware that his gaze was on her swaying, naked arse.

Reaching her bedroom, she rushed to her dresser, tipping over the framed photographs of her parents and one of her, Harry, and Ron when they were thirteen. "Don't judge me," she muttered before opening the drawer and digging through rows of cotton, satin, silk, and lace.

She returned with a small armful of sliced fabric, still bare from the waist down—though she couldn't help but wonder what he would have done had she come back wearing another pair—and dropped the knickers into a pile on the table, pushing aside her breakfast plate to make room. Without speaking, Neville took up two pairs and began tying the ends together into small tight knots.

"What are you doing?"

"Making a rope," he replied. "You said you're afraid of being tied up?"

Her breath hitched in an unpleasant way and she took a step back, folding her hands and resting them in front of her, subconsciously shielding her naked body from his view. "Yes," she muttered, the scar on her forearm itching as an old memory resurfaced and the unpleasant feeling of being unable to escape.

He looked up, catching her movement and the way that her posture changed. "Is that a fear you eventually want to conquer?" he asked, his tone soft. "If it is, I want to help you.

If it's something you don't want to try, I'd like you to tell me right now. Don't be shy about saying no; I want to know the honest truth, Hermione. I won't be upset by it."

She thought for a long moment, embarrassed about her reaction, especially considering he did not appear to judge her for it. Memories from war haunted everyone, but Hermione hated hers. When she had been sent to the Department of Mysteries for her first day as an Unspeakable, she had requested a full tour, purposely storming through the room where Dolohov had tried to murder her.

"I don't want to be afraid of *anything*," she admitted.

He smiled, a smile full of pride and excitement and Hermione felt something warm blossom in her chest. She liked that smile. That smile that made her feel the same way as when she received a promotion at her job, or the way that Hogwarts professors would commend her for excellent charm work, or a well-written essay. Like she had done something exceptionally correct and was able to then bask in the praise of it all.

"I'm going to tie your arms up, looped just there in the ceiling, you see?" he said, flicking his wand at a light fixture and transfiguring it into an iron hook. "I'm going to tie your wrists together and lock you to the ceiling so your body is stretched out in front of me." He took her hands within his own, being gentle with her wrists as he put her palms against one another, wrapping the homemade rope around and around, knotting the end. "How does that feel?"

Smiling nervously, she nodded. "All right."

"And then I'm going to put your wand in your hand."

She blinked, confused. "Why my wand?"

He let go of her hands but not the rope, as though it were a leash, and reached up to affectionately touch her cheek, a gentle look in his eyes. "Because this is something you're not initially comfortable with, and even though you know the safe word," he said and then raised his eyes until she nodded and repeated *Devil's snare*, "we've not played like this before. I want you to know that while you can trust me to stop at *any* time, you also have the ability to escape on your own. It takes time to build trust, and I know that."

At her nod, Neville used his wand to loop the rope through the hook in the ceiling, pulling it tight and raising her arms above her head, tying her in place before reaching up and putting her wand in hand, aiming it straight up at the rope so that she could cut herself free if she became afraid. "If you get uncomfortable, however, I would like you to try and tell me before you resort to letting yourself out. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said, her heart racing in anticipation. Neville paused, looked at her, and then she felt a stinging slap across her arse. "Ah!"

He grinned at her reaction. "Yes, what?"

She opened her dilated eyes and stared at him. "Yes, sir."

Chapter 8

September 18th, 2006

Neville stared at her and tried to control his own breathing, even as she was clearly focusing hers. When he had told his grandmother that he would return to Britain and participate in the program before an actual marriage law forced his hand, he *knew* he would have to give all of this up. He would get rid of his things and somehow try to put back in the box the person that he'd become over the years, lock him away and move through the rest of his life as a more nervous, pent-up version of himself.

And then Hermione had brightly fallen into his arms, blinding out the rest of the world the way she always seemed to do, only this time apparently on accident. And not only was she interested in him, in marrying him and kissing him and letting him love every inch of her . . . but her interest and curiosity and trust was . . . it was overwhelming.

"You're safe," he said gently to reassure her, and he smiled brightly when she let out a soft little breath and let a portion of her body sag in relief. Her fingers still twitched around her wand, as if she was waiting for things to get too intense and free herself, and he did not blame her. However, he prided himself on women never *needing* to use their safe word, not because they couldn't, but because he paid close enough attention to know what was too far, and he tried so very hard to never cross that line.

"*Why would you want me to hurt you?*" he'd asked Luna during their very short lived affair, the first time she'd asked him to spank her. He had loved Luna, or at least, what he thought had been love at the time in the aftermath of war and thanking the gods that he was alive. "*I . . . I'd rather . . .*" he said, stumbling over his words as usual.

Luna had smiled serenely at him and whispered. "*Worship?*" she asked and when he'd nodded, she kissed him, touched him and said, "*Pain can be worship.*"

Pain would come later, when she was ready for it—when she *desired* it—but right then, Neville stared at Hermione's body with complete reverence. She looked, he thought,

like a pale, pink daffodil ready to bloom. Arms stretched tight above her head into the stem of the rope that bound her to the ceiling, and the rest of her splayed out, soft petals, needing to be woken up by the kiss of the sun.

He pressed his lips against her belly and let his hands run down the outside of her thighs before bringing them back to slowly unbutton her blouse, gently parting the fabric to reveal her breasts, each tipped with a dusky peak that pebbled when touched.

Neville was completely silent as his fingertips danced lightly over her skin, running up her arms and back down her ribcage, up her sternum and dipping softly against the hollow of her throat before very gently wrapping his large hand around her neck. She let out a tiny gasp at that, and he looked up at her hands, gauging her reaction, to see that her fingers *hadn't* tightened around her wand in fear, instead, there was a deep pink colour working its way up her chest and neck, to settle in her cheeks.

One hand remained still gently on her throat, something he'd had done to him before. Outside of situations like this, such a movement was a threat, but *this* . . . for some strange reason, with the right person, had invoked a possessive feeling, and oddly enough . . . safety. A silent, physical communication that said, "*I'm here, I'm strong, you're safe.*"

"You're safe," he whispered again and kissed between her breasts while his free hand roamed the rest of her body. Down her stomach and against the line where hip met thigh, and back around the curve of her arse.

Hermione had anticipated being strung up and devoured, tied so that she couldn't react forcefully while Neville did . . . who knew what to her. But *this*? She had not been expecting this. She hadn't expected soft and light and something so physically unintrusive while somehow emotionally left her feeling raw and exposed.

"What are you doing?" she finally pleaded, a part of her desperate for him to do something and get it over with . . . the anticipation, the not knowing, was killing her and she'd long forgotten her worries about the rope around her wrists, her brain working overtime to come up with a list of things he might have been planning.

Neville smiled and kissed her collarbone. "Right now, I'm testing myself," he admitted, hand still on her throat—feeling her pulse race—though his fingers occasionally

moved to touch her jaw and chin. "Seeing how long I can worship you like this, without giving in and . . . gods, Hermione . . . the things I want to do to you—*with* you—*for* you."

"Do them!" she pleaded, pressing her thighs together and tilting her hips toward him.

He smiled and brushed the pad of his thumb against her lips. "Patience," he said.

She narrowed her eyes and opened her mouth, wrapping her lips around his thumb. Very briefly, his confident mask broke at the unexpected action and she watched as his breathing became heavy. Feeling smug, Hermione moved to suck further down the digit, but he pulled it away from her mouth, having recovered.

"Tease," he called her, chuckling before taking a nipple into his mouth and earning the sweetest gasp from her. He put his hands firmly on her hips to hold her in place. She wriggled and wriggled against him, oftentimes trying to lift her legs to wrap around his waist or rub against the bulge in his trousers that she *knew* was there, but he held back, not allowing her to feel *exactly* what she was doing to him, just by existing as a living piece of perfected art.

Art that tasted soft and sweet and *fucking sublime*.

Her skin was overheating, limbs shaking with desperate need, something that she had not felt to quite such an extent before. Normally, passion and sex with a partner was frantic kissing and desperation to get clothes off in order to find release. Sometimes the men were eager to prove their prowess by seeing how fast they could make her come, other times she sadly went without. But this prolonging of what she hoped was the inevitable was turning her into a shivering mess.

"Please," she finally begged when he gently bit down on her nipple.

Neville looked up at her, apparently happy with her word choice. He kissed her softly on the lips, a kiss filled with affection and praise. "Spread your legs, sweetheart," he said.

When she did, instead of undressing himself to thrust inside of her, instead of angling his fingers do the same, Neville cupped her with the palm of his hand, pressing it against her cunt without taking his gaze off of her eyes. "Can you handle this?" he asked her, the confident grin gone. "A life filled with this . . . edge? Can you accept a marriage essentially forced on you by the Ministry, to a man who won't let you come without permission? To

someone who wants to string you up just to stare at your body? To someone who wants to watch you squirm and beg and . . . and to see what pretty colours he can turn your arse?"

With a small glare, Hermione tried to angle herself to push harder against his hand when she said. "My choice. I won't let the Ministry tell me who I'm allowed to . . . or . . . and yes, yes, I can . . ." she said but then hesitated. "Is it all this? *Just* this?"

Neville frowned. "No," he said. "It's amazing sex without abandon, but it's having a lie in on Sundays, and breakfast together around the table. Really unfortunate dinners with my gran and too many visits to St. Mungo's," he sadly admitted. "I'll melt a few cauldrons, you'll lose your temper, and very often things you say will go right over my head. But we'll try. It could be . . . it could be good. It could be planting a garden together and . . . it could be so much more. I want to take care of you, Hermione. You deserve to be taken care of."

Having spent the majority of her life taking care of everyone else, a part of her worried that perhaps Neville wasn't up to the job, all things considered. "Do I . . . do I get to take care of *you* as well?" she asked, trying to be subtle about the small request for power.

"What makes you think you're not already?" he asked with a smile and slipped a single finger inside of her. Her back arched and she moaned loudly and he allowed for her to wrap her legs around him as he slowly worked her, watching her begin to rise and fall with every beckon of his finger.

Eyes closed and her head thrown back, Hermione whimpered, "Yes . . . yes, I want it. I want it all."

Neville paused his movements until she twisted her hips in protest and he resumed, an awestruck smile on his face. "All of it?"

She nodded and then looked down at him. "But especially the garden," she said with a small chuckle that turned into a wanton moan.

Neville grinned at her and removed his hand, using his now soaking fingers to undo his buckle. At the sound, Hermione groaned and said, "Oh, thank Merlin," but the words barely left her tongue before he was kissing her hard and deep and lining himself up against her, eager to provide them both with the relief they so craved.

"Hermione?"

Stilling both of their movements, Neville tore away from Hermione's mouth at the sound of another voice, eyes wide. "Is your Floo locked?" he whispered.

Hermione gasped. "Oh shit."

"Hermione, are you home?"

Neville's face paled other than his suddenly bright red cheeks. "Hannah?" he quietly asked Hermione, who was frozen solid against him.

"Oh shit, oh shit!"

"I'll get rid of her," he said, pulling away from Hermione's legs and yanking his trousers back up around his hips, wincing as he tucked his erection away before pulling up the zipper and buckling his belt.

"Hurry before she walks in!" Hermione hissed.

Neville looked at her, slightly narrowed his gaze and swatted her on the arse. "Bossy," he said with a smirk before rushing out of the kitchen and down the hall, into the—thankfully secluded—living room, where Hannah stood in front of the fireplace.

"Hannah," he greeted, slightly out of breath. "Morning."

Hannah's blue eyes widened in surprise at seeing Neville. "What are you . . . I was calling Hermione and . . . she didn't answer the fire-call so I was worried and . . . what's going on?"

"What?" Neville asked. "Nothing's going . . . what're you . . . I mean, it's just—"

"Merlin, I hope you never had to go undercover," Hannah said teasingly, folding her arms across her chest in amusement at the way Neville stumbled over his words, running a hand through his hair in the awkward way that was a tell that he was embarrassed or hiding something, usually both. "You're at Hermione's flat unusually early."

At his ex's smirk, Neville huffed. "Yeah? Did you know that Hermione's got restricted Floo access? She told me last night on our date when I offered to pick her up. I know for a fact that the only places that have direct access for Floo transport to this flat, are her office at the Ministry, the Burrow, and Grimmauld Place."

Hannah's cheeks turned pink and she narrowed her eyes at Neville. "So what?"

He laughed. "So don't go trying to take the piss with me when you've likely got a naked Harry Potter on the other side of that fireplace."

She scrunched up her nose in protest, more than likely at being found out, and let out a long sigh. "Fine. Harry sent me over. He got called in for something to do with work and . . . wait, where *is* Hermione?"

Neville cleared his throat. "She's just a bit—"

"Tied up at the moment?" Hannah offered and when Neville's eyes widened, she leant forward and slapped him on the shoulder. "Are you having a laugh? Neville Longbottom, you just left her there?!"

He tried to duck her repetitive smacks, objecting the whole time. "'Course not . . . I didn't just . . . bloody hell, Hannah, stop hitting me!"

"Why not?" she said. "You might like it!"

Neville could not stop himself from laughing as he stepped back, putting a large chair between himself and the hotheaded Hufflepuff. "Hermione's fine, I swear it. C'mon, Hannah, you know me better than that."

She sighed and nodded. "Fine, you're right. I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I just didn't think that Hermione would be so . . . well . . . open to your—"

"Private business?" Neville suggested.

She held her hands up in supplication. "Fine, fine. But I do need you to at least give her a message from Harry for me."

"No need," Hermione said as she walked in, fully dressed and hands freed from their previous binding. Her hair was a bit of a sweaty mess, but other than that, she looked perfectly normal. "Morning, Hannah, would you like some coffee? Tea?"

Hannah smiled at her friend and shook her head. "I'm fine, thanks. Harry got called in for some work thing and wanted to see if you'd be willing to change your birthday plans from tomorrow to tonight."

"Should be fine." Hermione nodded and moved to stand beside Neville, who wrapped an arm around her shoulders and tucked her into his side as though were the most natural thing in the world.

Hannah smiled at the couple. "Good, I'll let him know. And, for the record, I think the pair of you are a right proper match."

Blushing a touch, Hermione smiled and looked up at Neville who appeared as though Hannah's words were praise he was desperately in need of. She reached out and squeezed his hand. "Thank you, Hannah. I'm glad for you and Harry as well. Are you coming to dinner tonight then? Still at the Lucky Leprechaun?"

Hannah nodded. "We'll see you there at half six?" she asked before getting confirmation and stepping through the Floo, vanishing in a swirl of green flames.

Hermione let out a sigh of relief. "She knows, doesn't she?"

Neville nervously bit the side of his cheek. "Yeah."

She groaned slightly and then turned to face him. "Well, it's all done now."

He pressed his forehead against hers and then reached down, pulling her hands into his own and bringing her wrists to his mouth. "I'm so sorry you had to get yourself down. Please, please forgive me."

She smiled. "I'm a little bit more impatient than you give me credit for," she said with a small laugh, watching curiously as he gently rubbed her wrists, which weren't even very sore, placing the occasional kiss to her fingertips. "I'm fine," she assured him. "A bit frustrated but . . . nothing I assume you can't make up for later?"

He kissed both of her palms and nodded his head. "Of course, but . . . you're certain you're all right? I need you to . . . honesty is a very big deal to me. It's . . . kind of a line that can never be crossed. You can't lie to me or keep secrets. Not about . . . about this," he said. "I won't hold you to having your own privacy about the rest of our lives, but . . . your safety, physically, mentally, and emotionally is . . . it's my job to make sure you feel safe with me. Always."

She smiled, touched and relieved by his words. "I'm good," she promised. "In fact . . . I'm feeling a bit of catharsis after freeing myself from that rope. Thank you," she said and leant up on her toes to kiss his mouth. "I thought that . . . I thought I'd be scared. And I wasn't."

Neville pulled her into his arms and held her close against his chest, pressing a kiss to the top of her head and fighting the urge to whisper, "Me too."

Chapter 9

September 18th, 2006

After another twenty minutes of simple snogging on the sofa in her living room, Hermione said goodbye to Neville, who insisted that he needed to go and find her a decent birthday present—regardless of her objections—and left her to get ready for her birthday dinner at the Lucky Leprechaun.

She met up with Neville outside the small pub hours later, and couldn't help but grin a little when his gaze moved up and then back down her body. The simple red dress—the one she'd ignored in favour of black for their date—fit just right and looked modest compared to some of the things she had seen other women walk in wearing. Despite the conservative length of the hemline, Hermione caught that glint in Neville's eyes that made her blush.

"You look beautiful, Hermione," he said sweetly before kissing her cheek.

She sighed happily at the contact, the strange affection settling into her skin comfortably. It was one thing to be kissed upon greeting by a stranger, or a random date—those she usually brushed off with mild irritation as though they were pests invading her personal space. But Neville she knew, and she couldn't help but smile over the fact that the once shy boy she'd grown up with had the confidence to kiss her cheek in public, to stare at her as if she was his, and to . . . well, perhaps she *was* his, wasn't she? Oddly, the thought was not unwelcome, especially since the Muggle jeans he was wearing fit him just so very nicely.

"And *you* . . ." She began and then laughed, pushing his chest. "You know what you look like, so I'll not be stroking your ego this evening."

He laughed with her but did not disagree with her statement. She figured he knew how women saw him these days, though he did have the grace to humbly blush about it.

Neville captured her hand that was against his sternum and held her there, lacing their fingers together, staring at one another with glimmers of flirtation and memories of how they'd spent the evening before as well as the morning that followed.

He stepped into her space when a group of pub patrons pushed him from behind, trying to get through the door that he was blocking. Hermione scowled at them, but Neville brushed them off, using it as an excuse to be closer to her. "Can I ask a question?" he whispered in her ear. "Did you go shopping before you came here?"

Raising a confused brow, Hermione pursed her lips. "No. I stayed in my flat after you left."

He grinned, letting his hot breath ghost over the shell of her ear, sending chills down her spine. "Then what, may I ask, are you wearing underneath that dress?"

Her cheeks reddened and she swallowed hard, closing her eyes when his hands found her hips. "Neville, we're in public."

"And?"

Her face grew hot and her pulse raced in excitement at the words he *wasn't* saying in reply. "And . . . and nothing," she finally answered quietly. "You made it perfectly clear that I wasn't permitted to wear anything that wasn't explicitly for you. Besides, I would have had to disassemble a perfectly good rope in order to repair some knickers," she added with a small laugh.

He pulled back from her and, instead of the heated expression she would assume he would be wearing, Neville was simply smiling at her, his eyes filled with affection. "I have three gifts for you because I couldn't decide," he told her and then reached into the pocket of the robes he wore over his clothing, pulling out a small box with a bow fixed to the top with spellotape.

She smirked, removing the bow and sticking it to his shirt so that she could look inside the box. "Tulip bulbs," she said softly.

"I hate the idea of cutting flowers just to watch them die in a vase," he told her. "It's different if you're using them for something like a potion, but I'd rather . . . I thought we could start up a collection. Something for the garden that I promised you."

She smiled brightly and then looked up at him, noticing he appeared a bit anxious over how his present would be received. "I love it," she said. "I would have expected nothing less from you, Neville. However . . . tulips . . ." She lightly bit down on her bottom lip. "Do you know what they say about tulips?"

He nodded. "All purebloods are taught the meaning of flowers. Just in case we accidentally offend someone or their family when . . . well, when courting," he said. "The Ministry, I suppose, is putting a stop to that but . . . well, I still know what they mean."

"I wonder if there's symbolism in the fact that we have to plant them and wait for them to blossom?"

He leant in close and brushed his lips over hers, whispering, "I don't think we have to wait very long," before kissing her harder, cupping her jaw with one hand and her lower back with the other.

Hermione melted into the kiss, very nearly missing the sound of a throat being cleared.

"Well," Harry said as he approached his friends, Hannah at his side with her hand looped through his arm, "I guess I'm glad to see the two of you getting along so well?"

Hermione pulled away from Neville and smirked, glancing over his shoulder to see her best friend grinning at her as though he'd just caught her with her hand in the biscuit tin. "Yes," she said, trying to save face, "I've half a mind to send the Ministry a thank you letter."

"Don't get too crazy," Hannah said with a laugh. "C'mon, let's go find a table."

Harry led Hannah inside while Hermione hesitated, tugging on Neville's sleeve to stop him from following their friends too closely. "So . . . not that I'm a materialistic person but . . . what are the other two presents?"

His sweet smile was immediately replaced with a heated grin. "Well, for the second gift, you have a choice."

"Do I?"

He nodded. "Absolutely." He leant in, kissing just below her ear and whispered, "I can give you a proper birthday spanking later . . . or if you'd like, I'll finger you under the table in between drinks and dinner."

Hermione made a choking sound that came out like a squeak, shocked and flooded with questions, ideas, and images of Neville's apparent interest in exhibitionism. Unable to properly articulate that she would be unable to keep a straight face in front of their friends, she held up one finger, indicating that she'd prefer the first option.

Once they were settled comfortably in a small booth in the back of the pub, Hermione smiled as she watched Harry drape an arm over Hannah's shoulders, looking more bright and hopeful than he had in months. When Neville mimicked Harry's movements, she leant against him and drank in his warmth, wondering if everyone was able to see a similar brightness in her own eyes.

"So why the small birthday dinner?" Neville curiously asked. "I expected to see a whole room full of people in here waiting for you."

She winced and then let out an exhaustive sigh. "It's my birthday gift from Ronald. The first year after we were married was the first time that I'd actually had a birthday when I wasn't working or at Hogwarts. Molly went way above and beyond and just . . . it was overwhelming," she explained, pausing only when the waitress brought their drinks. "So many Weasleys and . . . I hated it but I couldn't tell *her* that, now could I? So, every year since then, my birthday gift from Ronald was that he would run interference with his mother to prevent a large celebration, spread the well wishes out during the week, and allow me and Harry to have time to ourselves without feeling like we were extensions of Weasleys."

Neville smiled crookedly. "He still does it now that you're not married?" he asked in a tone that expressed admiration for his friend and former Housemate.

Hermione chuckled and sipped at her glass of wine. "Are you offering to take up the job of Molly distracter?"

Laughing, Neville shook his head and focused all of his attention on his pint. "I don't think I'm well equipped," he admitted, taking a long drink before looking around the pub as though he expected more people to arrive at any moment. "What about everyone else?"

"Sirius isn't allowed in most pubs and Remus hates crowds," Harry said. "As for the rest of our friends, they pretty much understand that Hermione likes to keep it quiet. Every now and then, Tonks will try to convince her to go pub hopping, but she never takes her up on it."

"Well, I can do my best to guard you from large crowds of people throwing birthday gifts at you . . . but . . ." Neville said, turning his focus on Hermione, his expression turning to one of guilt. "I wasn't able to completely dissuade my grandmother."

The colour drained from Hermione's face. She had nearly forgotten all about the infamous Augusta Longbottom. "Your grandmother?" she squeaked.

"She wants to meet you."

"She's *met* me!" she said, her tone a bit louder than she would intended. "We fought side by side in the final battle."

He offered her an apologetic smile. "She wants to meet you not covered in blood and Fiendfyre soot?"

Harry snorted into his pint glass and nearly choked on his beer. Hannah, used to men incapable of holding their drink—or properly drinking it—passed him a napkin and swiftly wiped the spilt beer from the tabletop without so much as glancing at it, her focus completely on her fellow witch. "She's really not that bad, Hermione. I think Augusta will like you."

Hermione's eyes widened. "You call her *Augusta*?"

Hannah blushed and looked down at her cocktail, quietly muttering, "Not to her face."

Taking a long drink, Hermione swallowed the liquid and her nerves and then turned to Neville. "When?"

His eyebrows raised, surprised. "Next week? Dinner?" he suggested. "Turns out the thing that Harry needs to do with work is something I need to do as well. A few loose ends with the Lestrage case. I'll be gone just a few days."

Her jaw fell open, having almost forgotten that until he officially retired, Neville was still an Auror. Not just any Auror or one that constantly got pushed behind a desk like Harry, but someone who had spent years in the field. "Nothing dangerous?" she asked.

Harry scoffed. "'Course not, 'Mione. All paperwork and shaking hands with Aurors and Department Heads from other Ministries. You know Kingsley never lets me do the fun stuff these days."

She turned and frowned at him and his definition of fun. "That's because you're going to be promoted soon and he's put too much effort into shaping you to take over the D.L.M.E., Harry. You'll be the youngest Head Auror in history."

"Youngest *Seeker*, youngest *Auror*," Neville said with a grin as he looked across the table at his friend. "I'm not even twelve hours older than him, you know? He gets all the good stuff."

Harry laughed loudly. "Yep. Quidditch, jobs, completely *unwanted* fame."

Neville raised his glass. "Chosen One. Such a life," he said sarcastically and grinned when Harry raised his own pint glass in toast.

"Could have been you," Harry pointed out.

Neville scoffed. "Thank Merlin that it wasn't!"

Harry smiled and drank while both women rolled their eyes. Eventually he sighed and looked up, his fingers trailing over Hannah's shoulder. "The fans eventually got better."

"Got *prettier*, you mean," Neville corrected.

Harry nodded, his smile widening when Hannah laced her fingers through his. "I think we both did pretty well on that front, Nev."

Neville turned and smiled at Hermione. "Lucky us."

Dinner came and went and they talked about everything from Neville's future position at Hogwarts and Harry's eventual promotion, to Hannah's desire to take over the Leaky completely from Tom, who wanted to retire to the country for some peace and quiet.

Hermione, as per usual due to the restrictions of her job as an Unspeakable, said little of her work.

When the meal was finished and the plates cleared away, Hannah ordered everyone another round of drinks, and Harry removed a small wrapped gift from his pocket. "Hermione, happy birthday."

"You got her a book?" Hannah asked with a smile when Hermione tore into the wrapping. "Predictable."

"I'll put more effort into getting *you* things, I swear," he told her. "Hermione gives me a list of books that she wants at the beginning of every year. She swears that she won't buy them for herself, and it's my job to spread them out during the year to people who don't know what to buy her for birthdays and Christmas."

At Neville and Hannah's amused looks, Hermione shrugged. "I thought it was practical. And it stopped Tonks and Fleur from sending me outfits I would *never* wear in public."

Hannah cleared her throat and then passed over a small box with a little red bow on the top. "Well, it's not a book, but . . . happy birthday, Hermione."

Hermione opened the box and smiled. "This is lovely," she said as she looked over the Mangled Matilda's Kit for Magical Maladies. "I'd actually run out of most of these things."

Hannah beamed brightly. "I remember you said something a few weeks back when you'd come in just after work complaining that the dittany they had at your office had expired and you were out at home."

Grinning at the useful gift, Hermione dug around, examining all the potions and pastes. "Oh, I didn't know that the kits came with . . . did Fred and George sell the rights to their Bruise Removal Paste?"

Harry frowned. "No, I don't think so."

Hannah cleared her throat. "Oh that's just something I threw in as an extra. There's some Murtlap Essence in there as well. You can never have too much on hand, you know."

Though she wanted to smile appreciatively, Hermione couldn't help but notice the way that Neville's cheeks had reddened and Hannah suddenly looked particularly smug for the humble Hufflepuff that she usually was.

"Hannah! You're awful!" Hermione said as she stepped into the bathroom, followed behind by her giggling friend. "I thought Hufflepuffs were supposed to be kinder."

"We're also known for being fun," Hannah said with a bright smile that lacked the glint of mischief that usually came after a prank. Well acquainted with Fred, George, and Sirius, Hermione was quite used to spotting the signs of a devious plot. "And funny. Did you see Neville's face? My gods, I will carry that image around in my head until I die!" Hannah declared. When Hermione did not laugh along with her, she stopped giggling and reached out for her friend, her bright blue eyes suddenly wide with worry. "Oh, I'm sorry, Hermione. Are you really upset?"

Hermione pursed her lips. "No. Honestly . . . it's quite a bit less embarrassing than a few things that Fred and George have done over the years. Or Sirius for that matter. But Harry—"

"Wouldn't know a thing about you and Neville and your private business if he was hit over the head with it," Hannah insisted.

Hermione paused and then rolled her eyes in amusement, quietly adding, "Or his arse."

Both witches laughed and Hannah reached out, hugging her friend close. "See? You're perfect for Neville."

Hermione let out a suddenly shaky exhale. "You think so?"

"At first . . . I don't know," Hannah admitted. "I mean . . . and I hope you don't mind me speaking freely . . ."

"Of course not."

"It was fun for me, at first, but I think . . . I think I always knew that it was just a passing fancy. When you and Neville were matched? I was confused. You'd always seemed like such a . . . well, an independent, strong witch," she said, frowning as she clearly tried to focus on her word choices. "I was worried he'd tell you his secret and you'd bash him in the head."

Hermione looked down, contemplating Hannah's words. "I don't think . . . I think I can *still* be those things," she said, struggling to say them confidently, though the sex part of her relationship with Neville—unconventional or not—had her less concerned than meeting Augusta Longbottom did. "I don't know. It's . . . strange. New and exciting."

Despite the clear smile on Hermione's face, Hannah looked concerned. "It won't be new forever. This isn't just an experiment for him. And this isn't a normal relationship. Ministry mandated soon enough."

Hermione nodded and then sighed, turning to look in the mirror, which immediately pointed out that the bags under her eyes, were showing. Glaring at the condescending reflection, Hermione couldn't help but begrudgingly agree with it. "Being strong is . . . it can be so very exhausting. I have to admit, I was curious at first, but . . . the more . . . I think I *like* the idea of being able to not be in control at the end of the day," she confessed. "To let someone else worry about certain things, you know? With Ron . . . it was such *work*. We had love and passion for a time, yes, but . . . I felt like I never measured up. Like I had to just try so hard and it was never enough. He's a good man but . . . if he was ever grateful for anything I did, it . . . it didn't feel like it was enough. Which wasn't fair to him."

Hannah twisted a strand of hair in her fingers as she listened to her friend, pausing her concentration only once when the hair got caught in her bracelet and she struggled to both pull it out while still listening intently to Hermione. "Neville's good at appreciation. And attention."

Hermione smiled and reached out, helping Hannah free herself from the tangled mess. "Is it weird for you?" she asked.

"Mmm . . . No," the blonde replied after a moment of thought. "I've had a handful of lovers and Harry knows that. We had a big long talk about my past and about his marriage to

Ginny. We got into a few details, though I kept quite a bit out of mine since I didn't want to betray your trust."

Having worried about that without knowing it, Hermione sighed in relief. "I appreciate that, Hannah."

"If you ever need to talk to anyone, Hermione, I'm here. About absolutely anything. Hufflepuffs are loyal, you know."

Hermione snorted. "And you clearly have no shame."

Hannah smiled innocently and shrugged. "Ravenclaws were always studying, and you Gryffindors were causing trouble with Slytherins. We got bored and no one really paid us much attention. We had to get a little creative."

Lifting a curious brow, Hermione muttered, "Dare I ask?"

"Nothing you won't find out soon enough," Hannah said, reaching into Hermione's purse and pulling out the kit she'd given as a gift, digging through it until she found the Bruise Removal Paste. "Neville could have made a lovely Badger."

Hermione smirked and then looked over the small contained in Hannah's hands. "Bruise Removal Paste? Really? Will it . . . will it hurt that bad?"

Hannah looked up at Hermione, confused. "Oh . . . no the paste is for . . . well, your neck and other parts that might show," she said, opening up the container and putting a small dab of the paste on her finger. She turned Hermione to face the mirror and pulled back her collar revealing a developing bite mark. Hermione gasped at the sight of it, clearly having missed it earlier when getting ready. "Don't worry," Hannah said. "Harry didn't see. I just know what to look for." She rubbed the paste on Hermione's neck with a little grin, giggling when Hermione continued blushing. "There! All better. Now . . . the Murtlap Essence you're going to love. Hurt isn't quite the word I'd call it."

Nervous and remembering Neville's offer of birthday gifts and the choice she'd made. "What *would* you call it?"

Thinking about it for a moment, Hannah smiled sympathetically. "Well . . . sharp and stinging and then burning and then . . . not hurting at all?" she said with a silly grin on her face and Hermione felt her cheeks warm up again. As the pair left the bathroom, Hannah

looped her arm through Hermione's and sighed. "Sitting can be a bitch the following day, though."

Chapter 10

September 18th, 2006

"Should I . . . ?" Hermione said nervously when she stepped into her flat, followed shortly behind by Neville who closed the Floo at her silent request. She put down her bag that contained her new gifts, her mind lingering on the Bruise Removal Paste and Murtlap Essence within Hannah's lovely present. "Should I . . . go and . . ." She gestured to her bedroom, hand shaking.

Neville frowned and stepped closer, taking the hand into both of his and bringing it to his lips. "No," he said. "Can we . . . can we talk?"

Nodding, Hermione sat down on the sofa facing him. They sat in silence for a full minute before she looked up at him and realised he was waiting for her to calm down. He rubbed small circles on her palm that she found relaxing, and when she finally had settled, she let out an exhale and asked, "Will it hurt?"

Fully expecting the question, Neville gave her a sympathetic smile. "Not if you don't want it to."

Brows furrowed, she almost laughed. "Why would I *want* to be hurt?"

"There are different kinds of pain. They . . . pain can make things, pleasurable things, a bit more intense. But you know all this," he said. "We've talked a bit and I know you've already started researching," he said with a raised brow and Hermione rolled her eyes but nodded in confirmation. "So let's talk about everything. All your questions."

"What is the process? What happens?" she blurted out immediately.

"For . . . for when I spank you?" he asked. At her nod, he cleared his throat. "It umm . . . depends on the situation, play or punishment."

She scoffed. "You'd punish me? For what?"

"Breaking rules," he told her. "Rules that we set together. Rules that you want me to enforce to . . . well, for any number of reasons. I imagine, knowing you the way I do . . . er . . . did . . . that you'll want them there for something to accomplish. For praise." At her less than subtle expression of disbelief, he smiled. "Hermione, please be honest. What was your favourite part of Hogwarts? Aside from learning the magic."

She thought for a moment. "The . . . the friendships and—"

"I meant actual classes."

Pursing her lips, she quietly said, "Learning," she began but then stopped and cringed before admitting, "Being . . . being right and getting perfect scores."

He smiled. "And your job?"

She scoffed. "My job is . . . difficult. The things I'm required to do, to research, are messy and nothing ever comes out right the way it should because . . . well, things I'm not allowed to tell you," she said, thinking of about fifty different secrecy oaths she'd undergone when accepting the position. "And my co-workers are always on their own timetables and projects and my boss is . . . a prat," she said bitterly. "I love my work, I do, but it would be much more worthwhile I think if I got solid results from things, or got to choose my own projects."

"If you felt accomplished?" he suggested. "Like you'd done something good every day."

She nodded, catching his meaning. "So rules that we set together, that you enforce and . . . and do I get a shiny gold star when I behave properly?" she asked, a teasing smirk on her lips.

Neville moved closer to her, reaching up and brushing the pad of his thumb over her lips. "When you accomplish goals that we set and rules that you follow, I'll give you anything you desire. And if you break those rules, I'll punish you in a way that we both agree on. Something . . . It's hard to describe. I'm not very good at this," he said with a sigh. "It's different with you. You're going to be my . . ."

She smiled. "I think . . . I think you're doing just fine. If it makes you feel better, your worries kind of make me feel a bit at ease. I'd probably be annoyed if you just had a perfect answer for everything."

"I'm certainly not perfect." He kissed her hand. "It's different with you," he repeated. "You've never done this and . . . with the marriage law—"

"Not a law yet."

"—I don't want to screw this up, Hermione. If you don't want this . . ."

"I want to *try*," she admitted. "I want to . . . *you* want this, and if we're going to make this work, it's not fair of me to ask you to give up something that's become . . . a part of you. I'm willing to try. Maybe just . . . take it one step at a time?"

He nodded, taking in a long breath and regaining that look of composure that he'd had earlier. "Communication is the most important thing, Hermione. If you want me to stop . . . you say the safe word, and I stop *immediately*, no questions asked. You won't hurt my feelings, I will not be angry or disappointed with you. But . . . I'll insist that we talk. Make sure that I know exactly what went wrong and if I did something that . . . I will never do anything to purposely harm you. Physically or . . . or otherwise." He reached up, cupping her cheek with his hand and smiled when she leant into the touch.

She turned, nuzzling his palm and inhaling his scent. "I want to try," she repeated. "Can we . . . you said that for my birthday—"

"Stand up," he ordered her in a flirtatious tone, one much less demanding than when he'd demanded she cut apart all of her knickers.

When she did as she was told, Neville positioned her in front of him, hands on her hips. He pressed his forehead against her belly and breathed hot against the flowing material of her dress, down against the apex of her thighs that immediately clenched together. His hands ran down the outside of her legs, gently raking over the material before reaching the hem. Fingertips touching her skin, Hermione's heart began racing in excitement and anticipation, still needy from earlier that morning when Hannah had interrupted them.

Neville dragged his hands back up her thighs, pressing against her skin. Up and over her hips, letting his thumbs move over the delicate lines between her legs and pelvis before

he cupped her bare arse with both palms and pulled her closer against him. "How old are you, Hermione?" he asked her softly.

She swallowed. "Twenty . . . twenty-seven," she said, remembering how she'd always hoped it would be her perfect number. *So far so good*, she thought.

"What do you think I'm going to do?" he asked and then suddenly she was lifted into his arms and pulled onto the sofa with him, cradled against his chest. One large arm wrapped around her back, holding her still and safe, while the other continued to rub her bare behind, first one cheek, then the other, occasionally letting his fingers lightly tease the small gap between her thighs.

"You're . . . you're going to spank me."

Neville nodded. "One for each year," he said, lifting her dress up over her backside and adjusting her into a sitting position so that he could pull it over her head, smiling at the way that her curls fought against their need to escape the fabric.

Completely naked, Hermione reached out to touch the buttons of his shirt, but Neville stopped her. "Later," he said, and then slowly adjusted her in his lap, flipping her over until the tops of her thighs pressed against his leg. He placed a pillow beneath her head and then traced a finger down her spine, whispering words like "beautiful" and "perfect" over and over again, leaving both hot and cold in the wake of his touch. "I want you to count with me, sweetheart, can you do that?"

She made a scoffing noise and, mid-eye roll, felt a sting on her arse that followed swiftly behind a loud *SMACK!* She squeaked out a noise of complaint, wondering briefly what she had willingly walked into, and had half a mind to stand up and walk away from the mild humiliation of it all. But Neville caressed the spot that he'd hit with a gentle hand, his other affectionately tucking a curl behind her ear.

Hermione took a breath and whispered, "One."

SMACK!

"Two."

SMACK!

"Three."

He continued to bring the flat of his palm down hard against her skin in repetitive motions, only seeming to stop to wait for her to count, occasionally to lovingly stroke her skin in soothing gestures. When he reached ten, Hermione's skin turned from warm to burning hot, and with every smack came a whimper. It hurt, like Hannah had said, but not in a way she'd expected. The sting of the slap was sharp and cold, but then the pain spread out into warmth, swiftly moving through her body, tightening in response to the pain but then relaxing almost immediately when he rubbed the quickly reddening skin on her arse, or ran his hand gently between her shoulder blades as though he were preparing to massage out the tension that was oddly, and rapidly, dissipating.

SMACK!

"Eleven," she whispered, shocked at how breathy her voice sounded.

SMACK!

"Twelve," she said, shivering when she felt a hardness press against her belly. At thirteen, she wiggled in his lap and earned a delicious groan in reply as well as a slight thrusting of his hips before fourteen came down hard against her skin, almost bringing tears to her eyes due to the unexpected nature. She briefly thought about telling him to stop, saying that fourteen was enough . . . but she was stubborn, and the pain was swiftly fading into something else, something that she was decidedly curious about. If she called out the safe word now, he would stop *everything*; he said that he would, and she trusted him at his word. But she didn't *want* him to stop. Not when she was so close to . . . to finding out what was at the end of all of this.

Research, she thought as she moaned, "Seventeen," shaking when he stopped to adjust her body in his arms, rubbing one hand over her skin and leaning forward to drop a kiss to the back of her neck.

"So good," Neville whispered in her ear, his tone one of control with a lingering want in the back of his throat. "You're *so* good."

SMACK!

She pressed her thighs tight together in excited anticipation of another hit as she groaned out her replied counting, rubbing her skin against skin and, when his hand came

down on twenty, her body slumped forward like a cat stretching out with her behind in the air. Delirious over the suddenly exquisite feelings, she was half tempted to affectionately rub her cheek against his thigh.

At twenty-three, Neville stopped and rubbed her tender skin once more, but then he paused and reached back, rubbing his fingers against her centre, and groaning with what he found there. "Do you like this?" he whispered in her ear, lightly brushing the tips of his fingers against her wetness.

Hermione whimpered and muttered out a shaky, "Ob-vi-ous-ly."

Two more smacks came down, one right after the other and she had to quickly count out, "Twenty-four! Twenty-five!" But then he stopped. One hand rested on her arse and the other on her lower back, Neville stilled completely and Hermione waited for twenty-six and the inevitable twenty-seven to come.

But they didn't.

Her heart beat fast as endorphins and adrenaline coursed through her body. She could feel her magic at the tips of her fingers. Hermione wiggled against him, a silent way of telling him that she was ready for more, *eager* for more, desperate to finish it and find out what came next. When he still would not move, she turned her head to look up at him, and found him smiling down at her, his eyes filled with affection and pride.

"We're not . . . that was only twenty-five," she told him, shocked to find that she sounded as though she were pouting. "You said twenty-seven."

He lifted a brow. "Do you *want* me to spank you twice more?"

She blinked in brief confusion until she realised what he was doing. Giving *her* the choice. Letting her participate in what had felt, so far, as something being done *to* her rather than done *with* her. She thought about his question and then smiled. "Yes, please."

Her eyes rolled in pleasure when he reached the final smack and she shouted, "Twenty-seven!"

But then he leant forward and rocked his hips against her, letting her feel the hard length of him against her stomach. He whispered, his breath hot in her ear, "Can you take another five . . . just for me?"

Overwhelmed with a smug pride over having reached the numbered goal and finding an aching bliss in the act, Hermione grinned at the gravel in his voice, feeling empowered that somehow, she'd driven him into a bit of a state as well. Always an overachiever, Hermione nodded while saying, "Yes," and then cried out as the five final smacks came down hard and fast and then suddenly he'd lifted her, flipped her over and back into his arms.

"You did so well," he told her before he kissed her, firm and deep but not hard. Limp hands pressed against his chest and she sighed into his mouth just before he pulled away and kissed her forehead and cheeks, whispering, "You're perfect. So perfect," and kissing her mouth again.

He adjusted her legs in his arms and slipped two fingers inside of her, working her expertly. He touched all the right places, listening to her breathing to establish the perfect rhythm that had her breaking apart in his arms within minutes, shattering to pieces of unexplained bliss, and crying out her pleasure against his mouth because Neville could not stop kissing her.

Dizzy and exhausted, she leant against his chest as he carried her in his arms to her bedroom, flicking his wand at her bag to *Accio* the Murtlap Essence. He set her down on the soft, cool sheets and snuggled in beside her after undressing, pressing his warm body against hers before applying some of the paste to the red skin of her arse, all the while whispering praise and affection. She moaned blissfully as he tended to her, and he smiled as he watched the colour in her skin begin to shift from bright red to a paler tone.

"Are you in pain?" he asked.

"Mm mm," she mumbled, shaking her head lazily from side to side as she snuggled her face into a pillow. "So good."

"I was thinking the same thing," he said with a smile, putting the lid back on the container and setting the Murtlap Essence aside before pulling Hermione into his arms. "You did so well. Thank you, Hermione."

Eyes still closed, she reached between their bodies and grasped his length. "What about—"

"No," he told her, kissing her temple. "I want *this* right now," he said, stroking his fingers down her back and smiling when she rested her head against his chest. "I want this. Just this."

Chapter 11

September 19th, 2006

Neville opened his eyes to the sound of scratching. Turning over in bed—*Hermione's* bed, he noted with a happy smile—he spotted the witch sitting up, surrounded by at least five different pillows that had been shaped into a makeshift desk, at which she was writing, an old eagle quill in hand.

"Hermione?"

She bit the left corner of her bottom lip in consternation before tapping her quill against the parchment in her hand. "So . . . rules."

He blinked in confusion and then rubbed his eyes. "What time is it?" he mumbled, reaching for his wand to cast a *Tempus*. Shocked by the incredibly late—technically early—hour, he yawned and sat up. "Why aren't you sleeping?"

"Can't sleep; I'm wide awake," she said on the end of a yawn of her own.

He smirked. "Clearly."

She yawned again and then added something to the parchment, scribbling away with heavy-lidded eyes. "I work too much and I can't say no when my boss asks me to stay. I . . . I don't want to spend my whole life locked away in the Department of Mysteries."

Neville sat up and, with a permissive nod from the witch, took the parchment from her and smiled affectionately at the very detailed list of rules that she had made for herself. Despite his exhaustion, Neville warmed to the fact that she was embracing this so openly, and he wasn't about to shut her out over the fact that he was tired. "Will it hurt your job in the long run if you say no?"

She frowned, clearly not a fan of the idea, though torn about it. "I think I need to stand up for myself and that if I don't, then he'll just walk all over me for my whole career. I know I don't want that."

Neville nodded in understanding. He'd met her boss once, though at the time, he'd only been introduced as the Head of the D.O.M. Unspeakables, after all, were not supposed to be known. Hermione was a special case considering she was famous and it seemed asinine that a witch of her potential would just end up at a simple desk job where she occasionally slipped into the Department of Mysteries. The Head of the D.O.M., a wizard with a nasally voice who thought far too much about himself, had been assigned to help Neville and his partner test out new Tracking Charms in an attempt to locate the Lestrangle brothers and Dolohov. In the end, the Tracking Charms had failed, and the Unspeakable had blamed the Aurors for the failure. Neville definitely wanted Hermione to be able to stand up to that git.

"I stress about it and then I don't sleep and—"

"Do you want a bedtime?" he asked with a small grin.

"A what?" She blinked at him and then rolled her eyes. "Be serious."

Taking a chance, he leant forward and kissed her neck, earning a pretty sound from her in reply. "I could make it very tempting."

She let out a breath of relief and then relaxed into the pillows behind her, allowing him to kiss and nibble on her skin. "Do I really have to call you 'Sir'?"

He shrugged. It had never really been a big deal for him with previous partners; he just found that for some of them it was an easy trigger that allowed them to step into a submissive headspace with ease. While titles were fun, he did prefer to hear Hermione call out his name instead. "Do you really not want to?"

"What will *you* call *me*?"

Perfection, Neville thought to himself and then answered, "Sweetheart . . . beautiful . . ." and after several heartbeats, he added, "love."

He pulled the quill from her fingers, setting it on the bedside table along with the list. She cuddled up against him when he started running his fingers through her hair, stopping to gently rub at her temples, easing the tension from her head.

"How come . . . how come you didn't want me to do anything to you?" she nervously asked.

"Because it wasn't about me," he replied, shifting slightly when the memory of spanking her came rushing to the forefront of his mind. It felt like a miracle, that she had been so receptive to his ideas, and so responsive to his touches, soft *and* hard.

"But *you* didn't get anything out of tonight."

Neville laughed. "Are you taking the . . . ? Hermione . . . you have no idea how much pleasure I got out of tonight." He remembered the sound of her voice getting breathier as she counted, the way she wiggled her hips in response to his smacks, and how silky and wet she was when he touched her. It was a rush, an ego boost the likes of which he hadn't felt since arresting his first Death Eater, and beheading a Horcrux before that. "Just because I didn't . . . just because I didn't come doesn't mean anything."

When she did not reply, he continued. "Do you know what I feel like when I work with plants? The hard work and effort . . . *digging* my fingers into the soil," he said and moved one hand from her hair, trailing it down her shoulders and side, eventually resting it in the small crevice between her hip and thigh, letting his fingers lightly dance on her skin, "and planting and culling and tending . . . and then one day, a flower just . . . opens. Bursts in the sunlight and it's alive and it's colourful and *I* did that."

She sighed happily, pressing into his touch. "Like a potion. You take all the right ingredients and slowly put them together, adding just the right amount of heat and suddenly it's something magical."

He snorted at the comparison. "I would *not* know how that feels," he said, and she laughed and slapped his chest. "Watching you . . . *bloom* . . ." he whispered in her ear, "made me very happy tonight. It makes me very happy to take care of you. Even, maybe especially, when you don't think you need it." He kissed the side of her neck again and then mumbled, "What else?"

"Hmm?"

"What else do you want? I'll give you anything."

Hermione frowned. "I want . . . I want this to work out."

He sat up straight and adjusted their bodies so that he could look into her eyes. When he did, he saw anxiety there, written as clear as day. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head and then sighed in exasperation. "I felt like a failure. I know that it was partly the magic but . . . after the war, everything happened so fast, and my marriage to Ron . . . I fought so hard to just keep it afloat and it was so . . . so much work. I yelled so often and I was embarrassed that I'd turned into someone I didn't like with him. I felt like . . . like a replacement for his mother. I don't want to be that way again."

Neville assured himself that *their* marriage—should she agree to it—would be nothing like the one she had with Ron. While he was still friends with the bloke, Neville knew he was so very little like his former Housemate other than their current profession. He had faith that he could make Hermione happy, mostly because he knew that he would put every last bit of himself into making sure that happened, even if he had to sacrifice things he enjoyed to do it. She deserved it.

"What can I do?" he asked, wanting to get her opinion.

"Not let me turn into that?" she suggested. "I don't even know how."

"Don't keep things from me," he ordered. "That's *my* rule. You can have your secrets, of course, but . . . if you're upset with me about absolutely anything, tell me. If you want to be left alone for any reason, tell me. If you need me to do something for you, even if you don't know what that is, tell me, and I will . . . I'll do anything."

She looked at him, as though she were trying to gauge whether or not he was telling the truth or if he was making promises that he had no intention of following up on. She smiled at him eventually, and Neville relaxed. "Do you have any other rules?" she asked.

He nodded and thought back to previous partners. Most had very different needs and he adjusted the rules to fit them. One witch had been desperate for submission, and he'd fitted her rules into that. Calling him "Sir" and asking for permission for just about everything when they were together. Another partner had wanted structure, and so Neville used the Protean Charm on a parchment and checked in with her throughout the day. If she'd accomplished her goals, she was rewarded, and if not, punished.

Hermione, however, was different. She was a warrior. She was fire and lightning and she was just so very stubborn about certain things. "No one speaks ill of you. Not even yourself," he said, recalling how she'd blushed and looked awkward when they had met for

their date, as well as outside the pub for her birthday. She was not comfortable with herself, and considering how beautiful she was, Neville was determined to make sure she grew to be relaxed in her own skin. "If we do this, then I'm yours and you're mine and we belong to one another. I take care of you and that includes how others speak to you. I want everyone to know how beautiful you are. And then envy the hell out of me because I'm a lucky bastard."

She blushed prettily and Neville regretted having this conversation in the dim light because he wanted to see the colour on her cheeks clearly.

"This feels too good to be true," she whispered.

"Well, I am trying awful hard here," he said with a teasing laugh.

She frowned. "When will the bottom fall out?"

He leant in and kissed her softly, chastely. "Likely when I forget the rinse the bathroom sink after shaving, or bring mud into the house and stain the carpet. I'm generally not in a good mood after visiting my parents, if they've had a bad day, I'm not . . ." He frowned as he remembered a list of things he needed to do the next time he went to St. Mungo's. Clearing his throat, he continued, "And you still have to have dinner with my gran."

Hermione nodded and then bit at her lip before blurting out, "I still have nightmares sometimes. And I work too much and I stress too much and . . . the Weasleys might make things incredibly uncomfortable. I might not be able to have children and—"

"I don't—"

"I know you said it doesn't matter, but that might change and—"

"We'll figure it out," he promised, taking her hands in his.

She smiled softly. "Neville? I'm glad it was you."

He searched her eyes for honesty, for doubt. The bits that he thought he found there were normal and shockingly had nothing to do with certain aspects of his life. Just as she'd said, she was nervous about it all going tits up. Worried about how he would react to her issues or the fact that they might not be able to have children, and that she worked too much and was a general ball of stress most of the time.

He swallowed nervously and turned over, reaching for his robes which had ended up on the floor beside the bed. Rifling through the pockets, he sighed heavily and then turned back around. "It's officially your birthday. Do you . . . do you want your third present?" His fingers fidgeted with the small black box. "I don't want you to . . . you still have the rest of the week, and I will hold nothing against you, I swear it. If you want to go through another matching, then this will just be one amazing week that we shared together."

Hermione stared at his hand. "Is that . . .?"

Neville opened it, revealing the small ring, a pearl nestled with diamonds on a goblin-forged band of gold. "It was my mother's."

Hermione exhaled shakily and then whispered, "Yes."

Neville's eyes widened in shock and he stuttered over her name. "H-Hermione . . ."

She looked at him reproachfully. "Neville. Who else is out there for me?" He blinked, taken aback, and she cringed. "That came out wrong . . . I meant . . . I thought I was going to walk into that matching and meet a complete stranger. I thought someone was going to walk out and tell me that the programme was being tossed aside, that a law was passed, and I would have to marry Malfoy or Goyle or someone twice my age or . . . but it was *you*. My friend. My . . . my *first* friend," she reached up and cupped his stubbly cheek in her hand. "You are loyal and brave and caring and I feel very lucky right now."

"All things considered?" he asked, his hand moving back to her hip and then around to her arse, gently rubbing where he'd smacked earlier.

She blushed again, or he thought she did, since she smiled shyly and looked down. "We'll figure it out," she said.

He tried to keep his fingers from shaking as he slipped the ring on her left hand, happy that the bauble was out of the vaults where it had been for the last twenty-five years. "I know we're just friends and . . . and obviously more right now," he said when she pressed her hand against his bare chest, running her fingers against the soft hair there, "but . . . I want you to know that one day, probably one day very soon . . . I'm going to love you."

Chapter 12

September 25th, 2006

Neville and Harry left Britain, headed back to Germany to finish up the paperwork that came from Neville's last case and the work he'd done with the help from the German Ministry. The boys were back safe within two days after Neville had shown Harry the bakery that sold the little lemon cakes that he favoured. Back in Britain, however, didn't mean back to a relaxed life, as Neville still had a great deal of work to do in order to prepare for his early retirement from the Aurors. While Kingsley had been preparing Harry to take over the D.M.L.E as Head Auror, he'd apparently been making plans to advance Neville and Ron both in the process. Neville's decision to leave the Aurors had thrown a wrench in the Minister's plans, and he was trying to wring out every last drop of talent from the young Auror that he could in the short time allotted him.

Hermione was used to being alone and enjoyed the solitude for the most part. There were times, however, when she was at work in the Department of Mysteries—being treated unfairly by her boss—that she thought of Neville and wondered how he would know if she broke one of the rules that they'd set together. She assumed she would have to tell him.

When the Head Unspeakable insisted that she stay late one day, when she'd already come in early the following four days, Hermione paused before answering. She thought about Neville and the delicious sting on her skin, wondering if she could provoke a punishment by, just this once, breaking a rule. At the same time, she remembered *why* it was set. Neville wanted her happy and healthy. She was already exhausted and knew that working too hard and too much was a trigger for her stress.

She found it interesting that she didn't want to disappoint him by not taking care of herself. He did not nag her, or try to guilt her into doing things. Rather he insisted because he cared, and the effort he put into proving his affections made her quite dissatisfied with the thought of letting him down.

"Actually, Unspeakable Croaker, I have plans," she told him. Saul had always been a cantankerous sort, and he certainly did not like being argued with or told no. She sucked in a breath, reminded herself that she was the brightest witch of her age and he'd be a daft fool to fire her, and stood her ground.

"Is that so, Unspeakable Granger?" he sneered at her. A light in the room reflected off of her new ring and his eyes narrowed. "And what, may I ask, is more important than the work we're doing here?"

She wanted to roll her eyes. Ever since Kingsley had put her on the Squib problem, Croaker had been giving her nothing but busywork in the D.O.M. "Ministry protocol," she coolly replied. "As you very well know, those within my age and graduating years of Hogwarts are involved in the Minister's new . . . Procreation Bill," she said the words through clenched teeth. "I have meetings to attend, errands to run, Healers to visit, and a wedding to plan."

He scoffed, clearly annoyed that his own plans were now disrupted.

"And," Hermione added as she flicked her wand to lock up her workstation. "That will be Unspeakable *Longbottom* soon enough."

His sneer turned into a slight grin. "Is that so? You're marrying Gussy's little grandson, are you?"

Hermione swallowed nervously. *Gussy!?* "I'm sorry . . . Gus . . . Gussy?"

Saul grinned. "Oh yes, Augusta Longbottom and I go way back. We attended Hogwarts together you see. We're old friends."

September 26th, 2006

"He called her Gussy," Hermione said as she nervously clenched Neville's hand.

He'd Side-Along Apparated them to the gates of Longbottom Keep because he'd shown up at Hermione's flat, walking through the front door at her beckoning, to find her

sitting in a pile of clothes in her bedroom, naked from the waist up. She'd rambled anxiously about how she'd had to deal with Molly's disapproving stare for years and years and now she was terrified of meeting Augusta Longbottom, who was more intimidating than Molly ever was, seeing that she did not come wrapped in homemade jumpers and likely didn't smell like freshly baked bread.

Neville struggled at the sight of Hermione's bare skin, ducking from time to time when she accidentally flung a bra over her shoulder, trying to find something appropriate to wear. He very briefly thought about doing something to distract her, but knew they were on a schedule and Hermione would be even more anxious if he and his wandering hands made them late to dinner.

"Gussy?" Neville repeated, eyes wide. "Did he really?"

Hermione nodded. "My boss who hates me is friends with your grandmother."

Neville scoffed. "Not if he calls her Gussy. I'm surprised he's alive."

She did her best to not focus on the size of the house, being grateful that the shape and layout of it looked nothing like Malfoy Manor. The size of it was intimidating, to be certain, but Neville had promised that the house they would buy in Hogsmeade would be something simple, that fit both of their tastes.

When he leant forward and rang the bell, she turned and stared at him curiously. He smiled down at her and shrugged. "I told you, I don't live here anymore. Plus, it annoys Gran," he said with a mischievous grin that made her chuckle, losing a bit of her anxiety in the process.

She remembered a young Neville who sat at the Gryffindor table while his grandmother's Howlers screamed and hollered at him for numerous reasons, most often forgetting something and getting in trouble because of it. Losing the passwords during third year that allowed Sirius Black to break into Gryffindor Tower had been a very special Howler that left nearly half of the table temporarily deaf in one ear. It was good to see that he'd lost some of his fear of the woman, enough so to purposely do something that she found annoying.

The large door was opened by a small elf in a purple hand towel dress, and Hermione turned blazing eyes on Neville. The elf, seeing who was behind the door and recognising Hermione immediately, gulped and held out her hands in supplication. "Elsie already a free elf. Gots her own clothes," she said, tugging at the hem of her dress.

Sighing, embarrassed, Hermione squeezed Neville's hand again. "It's very nice to meet you, Elsie. And how much are you paid?"

Neville couldn't stop himself from laughing as he kissed Hermione's temple and muttered, "Don't ever change."

Augusta Longbottom was just as stern-looking as Hermione remembered from the final battle and the few times she'd seen the woman in passing over the years, usually at Ministry functions and events where she was too busy trying to keep Ron from spilling something on his robes, and making sure that Harry had his notes for whatever ridiculous speech that he had been goaded into saying. Augusta Longbottom was a bit frightening, certainly intimidating, but she had a softness about her when she looked at Neville. It was not just the kind that came from a woman seeing her own son in her grandchild either; this formidable witch was immensely proud of the boy she had raised.

And one thing was certain: no one in his or her right mind would *ever* call her Gussy.

"Tell me, Miss Granger, what is it that you do again?" Augusta asked, bringing a glass of wine to her lips and simultaneously flicking her wand at her brother-in-law, Algie, who fell into a brief coughing fit when he tried to drink his brandy, eat a roll, and swallow all at the same time.

Hermione watched the interaction briefly, amused by the way Augusta didn't even bother to look at Algie as she set him to rights. The wizard in question gave an embarrassed grin and then went back to nibbling on his meal. "I umm . . . I'm an Arithmancer in the Department of Records and Statistics," she answered automatically, setting her glass of water down and feeling a bit of relief when Neville placed his hand on top of hers.

The table was much too large, reminding her of the one that she and Ron once shared, only three times as large. This one was also longer than it was round. Augusta sat at one end of the table, with Algie halfway down, and Neville took up the other end with Hermione to his left. A large, overly complicated centrepiece with rare flowers and bright red feathers stuck out at all angles, nearly blocking both of Neville's relatives from Hermione's view, and she had to lean to the right anytime she wanted to make eye contact.

"Do you enjoy Arithmancy?" Augusta asked.

Hermione smiled genuinely. "Yes, Madam. It was one of my best subjects in school."

Neville grinned at her. "She's being modest, Gran. Hermione's brilliant. Always has been."

Augusta gave a curt nod. "Well, yes, she would have to be to be matched to you, dear. Only the best for my Neville. Only the *very* best!"

Algie nodded in agreement and then giggled. "Remember when he was just an ickle tyke? Poor bitty thing." Hermione watched as Neville tensed. "Not an ounce of magic, I tell you Miss Granger, not an ounce! He sure showed us, though, didn't he?" he asked, looking to Augusta.

"He showed the *world*," Augusta said proudly.

"Gran." Neville cringed, his cheeks turning red. He let go of Hermione's hand just as his palm started getting a bit sweaty from all the attention being focused on him.

"Did you know, Miss Granger, that my boy has spent the past ten years—?"

"Nine," Neville quietly corrected her.

"—single-handedly—"

"I actually had a partner, and we worked pretty heavily with other—"

"—capturing and detaining over *twenty* Death Eaters?"

Neville stared at his grandmother incredulously. "Twen—no . . . no . . . there were *three*. And . . . and I did other stuff in between but—"

"And," Augusta said, speaking over Neville again. "He was at the *top* of his graduating class."

Hermione lifted a brow and looked at Neville who was breathing heavier, rubbing his face with his hands. Hermione, of course, knew that Neville was not at the top of his graduating class. Mostly because he'd not graduated at all, opting out of N.E.W.T.s alongside Harry and Ron to go straight into the Auror training. He had still done his Herbology N.E.W.T. through correspondence, he'd told her, and Kingsley made a deal with the Ministry and the Board of Governors to allow for in the field experience to qualify the new Aurors for a N.E.W.T in Defence Against the Dark Arts.

"He's quite brilliant," Hermione said in agreement with Augusta, throwing Neville a sweet smile. Though she had loved her former mother-in-law, sometimes Hermione had trouble listening to Molly lecture her adult children on any little thing that she disapproved of. Exaggerations or not, Augusta bragged about Neville to the point of embarrassment, and Hermione found it a bit endearing.

"Too brilliant to give it all up," Algie commented quietly.

Neville sighed. "I enjoy working with plants," he said. "And taking over for Professor Sprout . . . I'm honoured that she even thought of me."

"Who else would she think of?" Augusta quipped. "No one better."

"Still," Algie groaned. "You were an Auror, my boy, an *Auror*. Just like your mother and father. Brilliant, they were."

"*Are*," Neville corrected quietly under his breath.

Hermione watched as her confident Neville began to shrink much the same way she had seen Harry do in the face of public scrutiny, or the way Ron did whenever Molly really got on his case about something. The way Sirius did when someone mentioned Azkaban, or the way that Remus did when the full moon approached. The same way that she knew she began to pale and diminish a little when she thought of her parents, or anyone even mentioned Oblivation.

Everyone had their scars from the war, even Neville.

Reaching out, Hermione took Neville's hand and held it close. When he did not squeeze back automatically, she looked around the centrepiece of the table at Algie and Augusta, both invested in their dinner and drinks, and pulled hers and Neville's hands

beneath the table. Neville raised a brow and stared at her for a moment, but his eyes widened when she pressed his palm against her leg.

Hermione heard the way he sucked in a breath, the tips of his fingers playing with the hem of her dress that had bunched up around her thigh when she'd crossed and then uncrossed her legs during the meal.

"Actually," Neville said, his voice a bit louder than before. "Minister Shacklebolt is basing a new training regime on my work in Germany. I'd much rather go out on a high note than spend the rest of my life doing paperwork behind a desk. I could teach the next generation," he said proudly, and Hermione beamed at him.

"Hogwarts professors don't make much money, do they?" Algie asked Augusta, who very subtly shrugged.

"It's not as though he *needs* the money. Speaking of which," Augusta said. "When do you plan on retiring, Miss Granger?"

Hermione stiffened at the question and looked up, fully aware that Neville's hand had crept higher up her leg. "I . . . I don't?" she answered. "I enjoy my work very much, Madam."

"Well, who doesn't? But if you're going to be a wife and mother soon enough—"

"We're not talking about that just yet, Gran," Neville said firmly. "And Hermione and I are looking to buy a house in Hogsmeade. We've a decent amount saved, but with both of us working, we'll be able to travel a bit during the summer when I'm not at Hogwarts. Go on holiday and such."

Augusta made a throaty noise of displeasure, and Hermione shakily exhaled when Neville's hand moved higher and higher, his posture rising with every inch that his fingers explored beneath the lace knickers she'd recently bought just for him, regaining the confident look that had her shivering.

"You have plenty of money to—"

"You have plenty of money," Neville politely corrected his grandmother.

Augusta pursed her lips in disapproval. "Your parents left you—"

"Money that I have transferred into charities in their names, care for them at St. Mungo's, and research for their condition," he said, his tone leaving what Hermione thought would be no room for argument.

But Augusta *liked* to argue.

Hermione, however, hadn't let Molly Weasley passively aggressively bully her into quitting her job, she wasn't about to let Augusta Longbottom. "I'm actually working on a series of calculations at my job right now," she said. "In alignment with the Ministry's new protocols. Kingsley himself asked me to look into it," she added, watching as both Augusta and Algie looked impressed. "I can't bear to leave my work now." Of course, she left out the fact that she'd been doing that project on her own, separate from her actual work in the D.O.M.

"What calculations might those be?" Augusta inquired.

"The Squib problem," Hermione replied, not letting anyone know that she was the one who discovered the reason for the drops in magical births and, therefore, the following Procreation Bill and approaching Marriage Law. "I'm trying to find solutions to discovering magical genetics, the key to displayed accidental magic. That way parents can know whether or not their child is a Squib long before their Hogwarts letter arrives. I've already completed a testing system that can be used as early as sixteen months, and we're shortening the time every day."

Hermione sat tall and proud, a look on her face that was just short of arrogant. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks were pink, though that was mostly due to the fact that Neville scooted closer and was rubbing his thumb teasingly against her clit.

Algie looked incredibly impressed and Augusta appeared contemplative, looking as though she was aware that Hermione had derailed the previous conversation.

"Do Muggle-borns like you have to worry about Squib problems?" Algie asked curiously.

"No, seeing as most of us aren't even aware of our magical inheritance until we received our Hogwarts letter," Hermione said. "I just want to do my best for the community as a whole. That way children aren't dropped outside of windows in order to trigger their

accidental magic," she added quietly, slowly exhaling in an attempt to control her breathing, which was rapidly increasing as Neville adjusted the pressure of his fingers.

Algie did not hear her final comment, returning to his glass of brandy and adjusting his overly large moustache so that it didn't get wet as he drank. Augusta, on the other hand, heard the quiet muttering and subtly grinned in approval at the younger witch.

"I'm very happy for you both. You've picked a perfect match for you, Neville."

"I agree," Neville replied, pulling his hand out of Hermione's knickers and bringing his fingers up to his mouth. He licked them one at a time, causing Hermione's eyes to dilate at the sight, before pushing his plate away from him. "Dinner was lovely, Gran. I really should be getting Hermione back to her flat. She's got a lot of work to do tomorrow."

When he stood up, holding out his hand for Hermione's, he leant in and whispered, "And tonight."

Chapter 13

September 26th, 2006

The green flames cast a brief glowing light around the room as Neville and Hermione stepped out of the fireplace and into his flat. He'd had time, since she'd last been there, to unpack, though it was still fairly minimal when it came to decor. While putting all his things away, he had been cautiously optimistic that he would soon be packing them up again; if Hermione decided to stay with him, they'd be picking out a house in Hogsmeade very soon. That, at least, had been his thoughts while emptying out all of his boxes, folding and storing them in the front cupboard instead of pitching them.

Now, however, he was more than certain she was going to . . . she was going to *marry* him. The display she had made at dinner with his gran and uncle . . . it was nothing short of everything he had always expected from Hermione Granger. The light in her eyes ignited like a blazing fire, and he was desperate to see it happen again, this time from passion rather than indignation.

"Strip," he commanded automatically, stopping briefly as he stepped ahead of her.

Neville winced, rethinking his tone. It was a command he had given before, but never specifically to her, and certainly never so abruptly. Turning, he gauged her reaction, wondering if he needed to apologise before explaining and then taking things slower, but the witch was already shimmying out of her dress, letting the soft fabric pool around her feet leaving her standing there looking nervously excited.

He smiled at her, a brilliant smile that displayed the happiness he was feeling. Memories flashed before him, recalling many moments at Hogwarts when a question would be asked and Hermione's hand would fling into the air with a speed that sometimes made him worry that she would dislocate her arm. She *enjoyed* it. Enjoyed being the best, proving her worth, responding immediately, and following orders.

He stepped close to her, but moved slowly, his gaze wandering over her beautiful body, not stopping very long to linger on any one bit about her because it was all beautiful and soft and supple. He reached out, the tips of his fingers ghosting across her belly, up her ribcage, over her breast, watching as she tensed in anticipation for that skin to skin contact they both craved. He grinned and let his fingers land on her chin, which he tenderly took in his hand and lifted, directing her gaze up to his face.

Their stares connected and he whispered, "Good girl."

And she smiled so very smugly.

Something felt like it caught in his chest, and Neville desperately knew that he wanted to make her smile forever.

He stepped closer, right into her personal space, letting the fabric of his robes graze against her skin, paying extra attention to the way one of his buttons touched the peak of a breast, the cool metal sending a shiver through her, though he hoped that *he* had a little something to do with that. Brushing her soft curls from one bare shoulder, he leant in and gently rested his lips against her ear. "Go into the bedroom, bend over the mattress, resting your stomach on the bed, but *this*," he ran the tips of his fingers against the curve of her arse, "remains in the air."

Hermione slowly exhaled.

"Can you do that, sweetheart?"

She nodded quickly.

Neville pulled away and smiled. "Can you do that *silently*?"

She stared at him incredulously and that expression made his smile turn into a teasing smirk, adding a raised eyebrow—a challenge—into the mix.

When he stepped back, Hermione looked at him for just another moment, longing in her eyes, before she darted off to the bedroom with the same soft, quick steps she used to take when slipping down the stairs Christmas morning, anticipating the most wondrous presents.

The bedroom was dark and Hermione looked around, noting that there were more shapes and shadows since she'd been there last. She took a moment before deciding not to

cast any light, knowing that it wasn't something he'd specified in his requests—demands?—no, *commands* .

Feeling exposed but wanting to please, Hermione ran her fingers against the soft blanket that covered the bed before setting her wand down on the mattress where she could see it, reach it, and then bending over, pressing her stomach and chest against the bed, angling herself so that her arse was in the air. She felt exposed and vulnerable, but she breathed in the scent from the blankets that immediately triggered her memory of the last time she was there, the first time they'd . . . well, she wasn't sappy enough to call it making love, though he'd been a bit more gentle with her than what she'd expected after seeing his toy chest.

He had been . . . strong, unyielding . . . *powerful*.

She remained utterly silent save for her breaths, which came out quicker and quicker as the tension built while she waited. Listening, Hermione tried to listen for his footsteps, wondering if he was getting undressed in the other room, or if she'd hear the slip of fabric when he entered through the door—the snap of buttons, the fall of his robes, and the click of a buckle.

But silence remained.

She looked back at the open door, a part of her wanting to call out for him to see if he was still coming, but she stopped before speaking. He said *silently*. She needed to do this *silently*. Squaring her shoulders, she retook her position and waited.

Slowly, her fingers started tapping impatiently.

Her nose twitched.

What is he waiting for? she wondered irritably.

Had he changed his mind? Did he not want her anymore? No, that couldn't have been it. She had seen that look in his eyes: he *wanted* her. Maybe . . . was he planning something extravagant? Did he move his trunk? She didn't dare move from her space on the bed to look to see if the yet untouched toy chest remained where she'd last seen it. Maybe he had moved it into another room and he was getting things from it. But what? Her mind began racing through the things she'd seen and the potential situations Neville could create

with them. Not that he *needed* tools to begin with; she remembered what he had done with a pile of torn knickers and a transfigured hook.

Memories came to her of hanging there from the ceiling while he just stared at her as though she were the most beautiful art, lightly touching, unbearably teasing with the hinted promise that eventually . . . *maybe* . . . she would be rewarded for her patience. Ultimately, Hannah had interrupted all of that, and while the spanking that came later that night was abundantly—and surprisingly—pleasing, she'd craved him, wanted him, needed him. Memories of being filled by him were overwhelming and she felt like an addict after just the one taste.

She whimpered slightly, still waiting, still listening for him to enter. Her knees ached a bit and her hands clutched at the blanket as the frustration built—as the *anticipation* built. She had not even noticed that her legs were shaking until the warm moisture from the apex of her thighs overflowed and touched the skin just beyond her soft folds.

When she felt the touch of a hand on her back, she jumped and then let out a sigh of relief, slightly embarrassed for her reaction, though she was a bit annoyed that he'd clearly cast a Silencing Charm on his feet to prevent her from hearing his approach. His hand was warm and her skin was cool and his touch spiralled out from her lower back, working its way up and down her legs, around her stomach and straight to her now pulsing core, desperate for any amount of attention now.

"So patient," he whispered.

Her mouth fell open when she realised he was still clothed and had nothing in his hands. He'd made her wait *on purpose*. Made her mind race, anticipating the many things he could do to her and all for—

"Perfect," he said again and then ran the pad of his thumb against her exposed centre, rubbing the silky wetness against her skin and then between his fingers.

Oh, she thought before pressing her cheek into the mattress and purring.

There was complete silence when a *Lumos* was lit from Neville's wand, and with two sudden swishes of movement candles on a shelf above the bed ignited, casting a soft glow in the room. Hands suddenly grabbed at her backside, one palm on each cheek, kneading the

skin and muscle. She could feel him kneeling behind her, could feel the fabric of his clothes against the back of her thighs, could feel his breath suddenly against her—

"Hold still," Neville ordered as he spread her, touched her, inspected her.

Exposed and awkward, Hermione was half tempted to stand up, search the room for something to cover herself with, when a wet warmth covered her, as Neville's tongue slowly lapped against her from behind.

She mewled at the feel of him and her legs nearly gave out but she found that her thighs were braced by his shoulders and arms. One large hand ran up over her arse and rubbed at her lower back soothingly, silent praise while he feasted on her. He wasn't hesitant or experimenting, he was enthusiastic, ravenous, insatiable with every swipe of his tongue, every flick and swirl. Her eyes rolled back when she realised he was kissing her, truly *kissing* her, mimicking everything he'd done previously against her mouth.

But now . . .

He kissed and nibbled and sucked and moaned at the taste of her, and, just as with her lips, when his tongue delved inside, she saw stars.

When he groaned against her—the same noise that she recognised most of the boys she had grown up with made while eating treacle tart—her legs began to shake and her body flushed, her face growing hot instantaneously. She whimpered and panted and prepared to fall and crash and burst into a million pieces.

But then he stopped.

Hermione let out a loud sound of great frustration, nearly sobbing. Neville made no sound but kissed one of her thighs affectionately and then, after another moment, chuckled. "I thought I told you to be silent," he said and then quickly added, "I'll let it go . . . this time."

His thumb pressed against her again, circling her entrance as though he were curious about it rather than as desperate as she was. "You almost came, didn't you?"

She held back a growl, determined to be the most silent witch that ever existed. *I'll show him silent!* However, when one finger slipped inside of her and pressed down, pushing a tender spot up against her public bone, she tensed and nearly cried out, biting down on her

lip to stop herself from making noise. She was glad that she was facing away from him and that the room was dimly lit, for she was certain her eyes had briefly crossed.

"I'd like it very much if you asked my permission to come."

His words were a request; his tone was not.

She clenched her eyes tightly and waited, shaking.

Neville smiled against her, his mouth still pressed to her thigh. After a full minute of silence, still pressing his finger inside of her, moving it in small, teasing circles, he said, "You can speak now."

"Please!" she blurted out instantly and loudly, having lost all control of the way that the sound came tumbling out of her mouth. "Oh god, please! Please, Neville!"

He was gone from her instantly, fingers removed from cunt, mouth removed from thigh, and she could hear it—*finally!*—the sound of his robes hitting the floor, the sound of fabric—*oh yes!*—rubbing over skin, the sound of—*thank god!*—the click of a buckle.

"Yes," Neville said as he pressed the head of his cock against her soaking centre and slowly pushed forward, stretching her muscles that were so very tight due to the tension he'd built within her.

Hermione gripped the blanket beneath her and moaned, cried, and mumbled incoherently as he filled her repeatedly, withdrawing only to thrust back in, each time harder and deeper. As much as he seemed to favour silence moments earlier, Neville fed off of her noises, adding in his own with little thought to how he might have sounded. He did not hold back. His grunts and groans only spurred her on, thrilled that her body was able to—that *she* was able to—bring those noises out of him.

She barely heard the continued words of praise that fell from his lips, so lost in the animalistic moaning and growling.

"So good—god, you're perfect—I can't believe—"

Her body was vibrating and her legs couldn't hold her up anymore. She was on fire. "Please!" she yelled again as she felt herself getting far too close for comfort and now terrified with the prospect that if she didn't ask permission, that he'd feel her clenching around him and pull out, throwing cold water on her climax once more.

She didn't need to worry. "Come," he said, and she did.

The earlier silence was made entirely pointless as Hermione's scream echoed off of the walls. She pulsed and fluttered and everything throbbed deliciously. Neville stilled for only a moment inside of her before thrusting again. When her body collapsed on the bed, he leant forward and wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her up against him tightly as he fucked her faster, eventually erratic with his movements, and then suddenly, he pressed his forehead against her back and shouted, spilling himself inside of her with three short but powerful thrusts.

Sweaty, shaking, and delirious, Hermione barely noticed when he pulled out of her and leant forward, turning her body over and sweeping her up into his arms. Lying down on the bed, wrapped up in Neville's large arms, she gently ran her numb fingers against the hair on his chest in amusement, finding pleasure in the texture. His breath was heavy and his heart was racing, she could feel it against her cheek when she snuggled into his embrace.

He kissed the top of her head before pulling away, cupping her face with one hand. "Hermione?" he whispered. "Hermione, look at me. Are you all right?" His tone was soft, having lost all hardness that he used when commanding and the gravelly husk when teasing her. He was just . . . he was Neville. Sweet, wonderful Neville.

Heavy-lidded eyes looked up at him and he pushed back a few wild curls from her face, repeating his question, "Are you okay?"

She giggled deliriously in reply.

Neville grinned and laughed and kissed her forehead. One by one, he took her hands within his own, rubbing warmth back into them before kissing each fingertip. He pulled the blanket up and over their bodies but kept an arm wrapped around her as she curled on top of his long body like a cat. As though she really were a beloved familiar, Neville stroked his fingers through her hair and then down her back, petting her with a softness that left her feeling just that: *beloved*.

Exhausted, when words *finally* returned to her, they came out only one at a time.

"Thanks."

He chuckled and kissed the top of her head.

She didn't even care that she knew her hair was soaked with sweat.

"Thank *you*," he replied.

"Good?"

"Perfect," he whispered. "You're—gods, Hermione, you're . . . beyond *outstanding*," he said, clearly choosing his words carefully. Hermione caught his meaning and laughed softly, her breath causing his chest hair to move. "Everything about you is perfect." He pulled her in close and she used what little strength she had in her arms to hold onto him. "I want you always," he said. "I think I'm addicted to you, Hermione."

If you think I'm addicting, you ought to try yourself, she thought in amusement.

"I don't ever want to let you go," she heard him say as sleep finally took her.

Chapter 14

September 27th, 2006

Neville woke with a slight ache in his back, an old injury from that last year at Hogwarts courtesy of Alecto Carrow. It had been left untreated by the school matron since he, technically, was in hiding and couldn't very well wander down to the Hospital Wing and ask nicely for a Pain Potion. No, he'd had to wait hours, hiding out in a broom cupboard under the most advanced Disillusionment Charm that he knew, one that Hannah had actually taught him—Hufflepuffs were the very best at finding *and hiding* things. By the time he had made it back to the Room of Requirement, two new recruits from Ravenclaw in tow, his back was spasming and he had cringed while drinking down the subpar Pain Potion that Lavender Brown had brewed.

He remembered really hating the fact that the only ones who had made it into Advanced Potions were Slytherins—most of whom kept their noses to the ground in fear of Carrows, like Malfoy, or eyes bright with excitement at the prospect of cursing, like Crabbe. Hermione got into the class of course, as did Harry and Ron—somehow—but those three had been as far away from Hogwarts as possible at the time. The only other halfway decent brewer had been Ernie MacMillan, and the prat had been stubborn that year, holding out on joining Dumbledore's Army in the Room of Requirement because Luna had taken a fancy to Neville, and Ernie had apparently harboured a secret crush on the blond Ravenclaw.

He twisted a bit to stretch the muscle, releasing the tension. Sighing as he reached a hand out to the witch beside him, Neville wondered if it would be too much to ask her to brew for him from now on. He had heard from Harry once that she had done so for Ron, not trusting local Apothecaries who may or may not have been bribed in the aftermath of war to take out one of the Order's famed heroes out of spite or vengeance. Many years had passed since then, and he certainly didn't want to think that anything Hermione did for Ron

she would automatically do for him. As far as Neville was concerned, he wanted to start this relationship with Hermione with a clean slate.

Which was why, when he sat up and found her at the foot of the bed with the lid to his trunk open, his eyes widened a bit in slight worry.

"Nosy," he accused.

Hermione jumped up and looked at him from over the top of the trunk's lid; only her mass of tangled curls and bright brown eyes visible, but the blush that came across her face at being caught red-handed, went all the way up her forehead.

"You're awake," she stated, clearly stalling.

Neville raised a dark eyebrow and smirked. "And clearly, so are you. Find anything interesting?" he asked, leaning back against the headboard, far too amused with the way that one brown curl on her head spiralled to the left, while the rest seemed to move right. When she tried to blow the lone curl out of her face, he almost broke and laughed.

She closed the trunk and then stood up demurely, folding her hands in front of her body as though she were suddenly shy. She wore nothing save for the button down Oxford that he had worn the night before to dinner with his family. Her bare thighs peeked out from the lifted corners despite the fact that the shirt reached her knees, and it was held together in the middle by only three buttons, leaving the swell of her breasts and the smallest hint of hair between her legs visible to his gaze.

Before she had a chance to answer his question, he smiled sweetly at her. "You should always wear that," he said. "Can I make a new rule? You always wear that."

Hermione blushed and bit her lower lip, rolling her eyes as she toed the floor and then tugged the shirt closer around her. "I would think that the rest of society would have a problem with that."

Neville scoffed. "Rubbish, society. Never been much a fan of it, myself."

Reaching a hand out to her, his smile widened when she came without any anxiety written on her face. No worried looks, no visible confirmation that she may be overthinking about the night before. She looked . . . rested and relaxed and completely at ease. Desperate

to convey his feelings for her, when she sat on the bed at his side, he sat up and leant forward, placing a simple kiss against the side of her neck.

She let out a sigh of contentment, and his heart soared at the sound. "So, what did you find, sweetheart?"

Hermione's brows furrowed slightly. "They're different. The umm . . . your things. The ribbon before was black, not red; and the leather straps in there look new. They were clearly used before. Oh, and there were these," she tried to mimic the size with her fingers "little metal things with diamonds."

"Clamps," he said, and at her confused look, he reached forward and pinched a nipple through the shirt. Her eyes widened slightly, causing him to grin, quite love-struck at the expression on her face.

"Right . . . er . . . they were silver before with diamonds, like I said, but now there are three different pair, and they're all gold with different adornments."

Neville nodded, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "That was what was in my trunk when I moved back to Britain. I wanted to give you a chance to see for yourself before you made any decisions, but . . . well, when you did, I threw everything out and bought all new when Harry and I went to Germany to finish up the last of my work there."

He did not think it was possible, but her eyes widened further.

"H-Harry!?"

Neville winced and then tried to correct his blunder as quickly as possible. "He didn't go with me. Not to . . . not to those shops. Dropped him off at the place we were staying and said I needed to run a few errands. He might have thought I ran out to get you that ring," he said, gesturing to her hand.

She looked down. "Well, it's a family ring. If you'd like, I'll tell him you were having it professionally cleaned or something. *If* he brings it up," she added, assuming that Harry wouldn't. "But the things?" she asked, gesturing to the trunk again. "Why'd you waste money on buying all new—?"

"You threw away all your old knickers," he said and then shrugged. "I wasn't going to let you think you weren't worth more than used goods to me. Because everything between us is brand new."

She smiled at that, secreting away the fact that she was relieved she never needed to think about where or who he had used one particular thing with, no matter how many *Scourgiflûes* it might have gone through. She watched as Neville's eyes drew to the window, cringing a bit at the light.

"Do you work today?" he asked.

Hermione frowned. "No. Since I knew that I'd be dining with your grandmother, I've been going in extra early and staying a bit late as well to compensate for taking today off. I figured I might need it to recover," she said sarcastically, but the stress was evident in her eyes.

He frowned and reached up, touching her chin. "You needn't have done that. You have to take care of yourself, Hermione. I demand it."

She swallowed hard, looking down guiltily at her bare feet.

"Hey," he said, his tone soft. "Hermione . . . I've seen what happens when you overwork yourself. You don't have to. You're the brightest witch in the world, and even if you were outshined by anyone else academically or magically, no one can match your heart. That . . ." he began but hesitated, a glimpse of the young boy he had once been shimmering beneath the surface. "That will be *my* heart very soon," he said, pointing at her chest. "I expect you to take care of it for me."

Eyes slightly glistening at the unexpected declaration, Hermione inhaled shakily and licked her lips before clearing her throat and tamping down the growing emotion in her chest. "I umm . . . so I suppose that means I've the whole day off. Do *you* have to go in?"

He gave her a small smile, looking just a bit distraught that she had pulled away, though he didn't appear surprised. "All I have until my official retirement in two weeks, is meetings with Kingsley and a few members of the team; Harry and Ron, mostly, funny enough."

"All right, so . . . do you have plans today? Or would you like to spend it with me?"

Neville grinned. "I'd love nothing more in the whole world."

She beamed brightly. "What would you like to do?"

His turn to swallow, Neville schooled his expression as he mentally alphabetised every belt, clamp, crop, and cuff and then again in which order he wanted to use them with her—*on* her. Very briefly, he wondered if there was anything in his cooling cabinet that was good enough to lick off of her stomach.

"Neville!" Hermione scolded him, blushing.

Blinking, he looked up at her face, having completely sidetracked himself and ended up getting caught staring at her breasts. Bright red and slightly embarrassed, he tried to recover with a sly, "Well, you really can't blame me, how lovely they are."

When she did not scold him further or make a move to get away from him, he reached out and plucked at one of the buttons on her shirt—*his* shirt—and listened closely to the way her breathing changed. The lovely noise was just barely interrupted by the tinkling sound of the security wards being activated, following by predictable and distinctive barking of multiple owls.

Groaning, Neville flung himself back against the mattress and let out a heavy sigh. "Real life."

Hermione giggled. "Wretched thing, isn't it?"

Moment wrecked, Hermione re-buttoned her shirt and stood up, throwing the covers back and urging Neville out of bed. He was half-tempted to drag her back into it with him; her productivity reminded him of how she used to boss everyone around in school, shiny prefect badge on her uniform. Images that happily—and sometimes awkwardly—haunted the dreams of his teen years.

Soon, though, she had him up and dressed and out the bedroom while she slipped into the shower. He sighed, stretching the tense muscle in his back again before walking to his kitchen, where two large barn owls were fighting over what looked to be a leftover sandwich that he had forgotten to bin yesterday after lunch.

"Oi! Off with you, greedy vultures," he swore and shooed at the birds while they flapped their wings and tossed bits of wilted lettuce and bread crumbs all over his table,

floor, and half of the post that they had brought in with them, a copy of the *Daily Prophet* included.

THE WAITING GAME

WILL SHACKLEBOLT'S PROCREATION BILL BIRTH A SOLUTION TO SQUIBS?

Rolling his eyes at the headline, Neville tossed the paper to the side and picked through several letters. Two were from friends in Germany hoping that he had made it safely back home, each curious about the identity of his potential wife, seeing as the British Ministry hadn't just made headlines in London, but all of Europe. There were several adverts, a note from Kingsley's secretary confirming an appointment the following morning, and two envelopes at the bottom of the stack, each giving him equal amounts of trepidation.

Ignoring the letters, for now, Neville put the coffee on and was shocked to see Hermione step out from the hallway, a towel wrapped around her head, by the time that he had fixed them each a cup. "That was fast," he commented.

She shrugged. "Dawdling wastes time," she said and smiled brightly as he held out the cup to her. Scanning the table, she raised an eyebrow. "Was it like this last night? You didn't give me time to look around."

He cringed at the mess. "Bloody owls," he said, flicking his wand to clean up. "I was just going through the post." Casually, he gestured to the two envelopes left. "You want to guess which I should pick first?"

Frowning, Hermione looked down and sighed. "Your grandmother. I supposed my approval rating will be in that and . . . wait, why is *Molly* writing to you?" Her volume went up a slight octave at the familiar penmanship of her former mother-in-law, and suddenly panic flooded her in a way that only Molly Weasley could cause.

"Let's find out," Neville said and tore open the letter. "Hmm . . . well, Ron blabbed our pairing. I imagine she would have pestered or threatened until he caved regardless. She says she's happy for us both, though she still considers you her daughter, which apparently means I'm becoming an official Weasley. That's . . . umm . . ."

"No boundaries," Hermione said with exasperation. "None. Merlin bless her."

He chuckled and finished the letter. "She's invited us both 'round for dinner tonight. Harry and Hannah'll be there as well. The *whole* family."

Groaning, Hermione guzzled her coffee, wishing it were Draught of Living Death.

Picking up the letter from his grandmother, Neville glanced over the short note and smiled. "Well, this should cheer you up," he said. "You scored yourself an Outstanding, Miss Granger."

Neville followed Hermione through the Floo, a silly grin on his face over the fact that she had opened access from his flat to hers. It was only when he almost tripped over a stack of books that the smile faded from his face, replaced by a sudden expression of concern.

"Was this . . .?" he began to ask, remembering that when he had come for her the night before, he had Apparated instead of used the Floo, sidestepping the living room entirely and going straight to her bedroom to help her dress for dinner.

"Please pardon the mess," Hermione said as she stepped around a table that had several books opened up; a three-ring binder had fallen to the floor with copious amounts notes. The floor itself was littered with highlighters of various colours, and Neville was transported back to their fifth year, watching with worry as Harry and Ron tried to talk a stressed out and exhausted Hermione into sleeping instead of preparing for upcoming exams.

"I've been a bit busy lately and haven't . . . well . . . have you ever heard the term organised chaos? Are you all right?"

Neville ran a hand through his hair. "I'm having a strange flashback to fifth year and O.W.L.s."

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. "You sound like Harry and Ron."

"Well, they were there too when you . . ." He stared at her and forced himself not to finish the sentence with: *had a nervous breakdown*. She appeared to figure out that's what he

was thinking, however, considering the way she raised a daring brow at him. Any other day and he would likely swat her arse for that teasing brow, but he was just a smidge overwhelmed. "Umm . . . is this all for work?"

"What?" Hermione blinked in confusion and then glanced down at an open book, blushed, and flipped it shut immediately. "Oh no, I keep all those files in my office. Don't go in there! This is all—"

Neville stepped forward and opened the recently closed book. The pages fell to a detailed pornographic image of things he had only seen at parties he had casually attended in Germany, being tutored under Mistress Liese. He cocked his head to the side to view the woman in the photograph being choked by one masked man, while a woman in shiny leather whipped her from behind. He cringed. Though he did his best not to concern himself with the preferences of others—and certainly not judge—Neville did not like to share.

"Wow. Umm . . . Are those . . . Are those diagrams?"

Hermione snatched the book away and closed it shut. "I found a few books in some speciality shops in London; the others I ordered online."

A few? Neville thought to himself as he eyed the rest of her "small" collection. There were several books on sadism and masochism, plenty with covers of hands holding whips and crops and handcuffs. There was a stack of books to his left that appeared to be actual "guides" on kinky sex, some on bondage, others on topping, some on bottoming, and one that was flipped open to show a step-by-step guide on blood play.

"Oh shit," Neville muttered quietly under his breath, eyes wide.

"You wouldn't believe the hassle it takes to get both electricity and internet to work in a magical house, even as simple as this flat," she was saying, and Neville followed her from one end of the living room to the other where she casually gestured to her computer. "But I did some research and . . . well, I've cleared the search history because I stumbled upon a few things that were rather disturbing, as well as some sites that had me asking more questions than finding answers, and there's a list of things I certainly *never* want to try and—"

"Hermione . . . I've . . . it's been just over a *week*."

She looked back to the explosion of research that had taken over her living room like an infestation. "Well, I *did* have to pay extra to have the books shipped overnight."

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose with one hand, and reached out for her. "Hermione, sweetheart, please come sit down."

He took her hand and led her to the sofa where he gently pushed a few books aside, placing them on the nearby table, on top of what he presumed was a list of things she was curious about as many had question marks next to them while others were scratched out with black ink. In the brief glance he got, he was pleased to note that some of their hard limits matched up. Making a mental note to revisit that list later, Neville kissed her knuckles and stroked the back of her hand, wanting to make sure that she didn't think he was upset.

Still, she frowned. "What's wrong? I thought . . . I thought you'd be pleased."

He looked down at her small fingers, smudged with ink, and smiled at the permanent stain that he found so very endearing. Her nails were not painted and her skin did not smell like some over-scented lotion. Rather, her nails were chipped and cut close to the finger, and he could feel rough patches between her ring and middle finger where small calluses had built up from holding a quill. He kissed her fingers again, wondering if she had noticed the black ink stain that had clearly been there when she had dined with his family. Likely not. Even in the dimly lit room, he could see it, a stark contrast of black against the shining ring on her finger.

"Did you . . . did you order these things *before* or *after* I gave you my mother's ring?"

"After," she replied immediately. "But what does that—?"

"Do you have any wedding things?" he asked. "Lists for what you might like for the ceremony? Places or food or guests?"

She made an expression of displeasure that she tried to cover up immediately but wasn't quick enough to hide. "What? I mean I . . ."

He sighed heavily. "I'm not upset, just . . . concerned. I think that I've been so happy that you didn't turn me away that first night that I haven't been taking care of you the way that I should."

"I don't need to be taken care of."

He did his best not to roll his eyes. Whether he agreed with her or not, he would try very hard not to dismiss her thoughts or feelings. But disagree, he did. "Of course you do. *Everyone* does. I'm to take care of you, and you'll take care of me. That's what that ring means to me, no matter what the Ministry likes to think. I've been . . . This past week has been Christmas and birthdays all come at once, and I think I've taken it all for granted." A frown overtook his face and he sighed again, looking down in contemplation. "You're new to this; I should be going slower."

"I don't *like* slow," she said through pursed lips.

He smiled up at her. "No, you like to absorb every bit of knowledge that you can as quickly as possible."

"What's wrong with that?" she asked with a huff.

He blinked at her slowly and then looked around the room. When she shrugged her shoulders and widened her eyes as though still waiting for an answer, he swallowed hard. "Nothing . . . er . . . there's a Muggle quote, something about moderation."

"Moderation in all things."

Neville nodded. "This is only a part of my life, *our* lives, Hermione," he said, gesturing to her collection of books. A small stack of fictional novels nearest him caught his eye and he cringed in distaste, reaching over the table and knocking the lot of them into the cardboard box beneath. "Our relationship or . . . or what it will be. It's okay not to throw yourself into it one hundred per cent."

Hermione frowned and pulled her hand away from him, and began picking anxiously at her fingernails. "I don't know any other way."

"Have you lied to me?" he asked, concerned, as his heart beat hard against his chest. Had he pushed her too soon, too far? Did he not pay attention to her enough to know whether or not she . . . "About . . . about feeling comfortable about the things we've done so far?"

She looked up, eyes wide. "What? No! I . . . nervous, maybe, sometimes, but . . . that's to be expected with *anything* new. Plus, I assume sometimes you *like* me to be . . . well . . . I've not been dishonest."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Neville reached out and captured her hand again, glad when she didn't pull away. "All right. I believe you. But . . . do you understand why it's so important that we communicate? That you . . . that you talk to me about these things? I don't know what information you've been reading. I never read books about it, I learnt it all from others. I *did* know submissives who'd come from abusive relationships, however."

Hermione's lips parted in shock.

"Girls who thought they had to give everything regardless of their own fears and limits, keep silent because that's what their . . . what their Dominant or partner wanted," he said, his tone taking on a bit of his obvious anger. "Some *men* even, who were afraid to say their safe word when they knew they needed to because they didn't want to disappoint."

Understanding came to her. "Oh," she whispered softly.

Neville kissed her hand. "Please . . . *talk* to me about what you're researching."

Glancing around her flat with a new outlook, Hermione gasped, cheeks flushing with a different kind of embarrassment. "I didn't realise. It was something new and I . . . I wanted to know everything."

They sat in silence for a few moments while he allowed her to collect herself. When she let out a resigned sigh, he smiled and whispered, "Marriage will be new for *me*."

She, however, frowned. "I've already . . . if we're being honest, Neville, I'm *dreading* the idea of another wedding. It was ghastly last time." She stood and walked to the nearest bookshelf and bent down, pulling out a scrapbook that sat between several others; one had her name on the spine, another just said *Hogwarts*. She sat back down beside him and flipped the album cover open, revealing the moving photographs within.

Hermione looked beautiful in her wedding robes, surrounded by Ginny, Fleur, Molly, and the wives of the other Weasley brothers. Two he recognised immediately, Angelina Johnson and Katie Bell. The third, presumably Percy's wife, looked just as prim and proper as he did. Despite the fact that Hermione was smiling in the photograph, her shoulders looked tense, and she was clearly anxious. Given what he knew about Hermione disliking crowds and attention, he figured that the photograph version of the witch was just on the brink of a panic attack.

"So many people, most of which I'd never met before in my life," she said, turning the pages. He noted that captions beneath the photos were not in Hermione's handwriting. The fact that a few labelled people as "cousin" this and "uncle" that, Neville assumed that Molly had put the album together.

"Every Weasley and Prewitt woman kissing my cheek and telling me what *pretty babies* I was going to make," she said bitterly, stopping on a photograph of Ron laughing with Harry and his brothers, while Hermione stood in the background, frowning as an old woman with a beak nose and bony fingers appeared to be scolding her, gesturing to the expensive looking tiara on top of her head.

"Half of the gifts I received were books on Household Charms," she said, shutting the album. "It was too loud and too bright and everyone stared at me, and I just . . ."

"I'm not Ron."

She looked up at him and frowned. "I know. I *know*. I . . ." She let out a sigh. "I'm trying to remember that. When you and I are . . . intimate," she said softly, "it's most evident. I think I might have been excited *because* of that. Because it didn't *feel* like a marriage or my worries and it didn't *feel* like the Ministry breathing threats down our necks."

"Hermione? Stay with me."

Confused, she rose her eyes to meet his. "What?"

"If, and hopefully when, the Ministry pulls their heads from their arses. Stay with me anyway," he pleaded.

She gave him a half-hearted smile. "Is that a command?"

He leant forward and kissed her sweetly. "No. You will *always* have a choice."

She sighed and relaxed against him. "Yes."

Chapter 15

September 27th, 2006

They Apparated to the Burrow, hand in hand, and Hermione had to take a deep breath before moving a single step forward, terrified over the immeasurable amount of things that could go wrong. She looked to her side and felt her heart leap at the adorable crooked smile on Neville's face as he stared ahead at the oddly shaped Weasley home, held together by love and magic and the sheer force and will of the incomparable matriarch.

When she and Ron had divorced, it felt like fourth year all over again. Molly had fallen to pieces and, according to Ginny, had cried herself into hysterics for a week straight. Not even Hermione had been that emotional about the split. Though no Howlers appeared at her window, she couldn't help but feel that her former mother-in-law blamed her for the end of the marriage. Things had been awkward despite remaining friends with Ron, and it was only after Hermione's discovery that their magic was not sympathetic that Molly had completely returned to the motherly figure she'd once been, instead of the nervous and emotional witch Hermione had come to expect.

The prospect of remarrying—and knowing that Ron would be as well—had Hermione worried about which version of Molly Weasley they'd be visiting with that night.

The cracking sound of Apparition from behind had Hermione shrieking and jumping to the side, shielding herself behind Neville and reaching for her wand.

Harry and Hannah stood, the man looking concerned at Hermione's stance. "It's just us, 'Mione."

The brunette leant forward and slapped Harry's chest hard. "Harry Potter you're going to be the Head Auror! Learn how to Apparate silently!"

Rubbing his sore chest, Harry laughed and gave a nod of hello to Neville. When he tried to smile at Hermione, she waved him off with her hand as though he were a fly. Hannah, catching sight of Hermione's ring, snatched her hand and grinned.

"Oh, Hermione, how lovely," the Hufflepuff beamed brightly. "Neville, you did well!"

Harry smiled at the couple, doing a double take at Hermione's face as though he were making sure her smile was real. Satisfied with his best friend's joy, he clapped Neville on the shoulder. "Congratulations, mate. I figured you were fussing about something in Germany."

Neville rubbed the back of his neck and chuckled. "Yeah . . . er . . . had it cleaned by a specialist," he said and shared a look with Hermione. "It was my mum's."

"Lucky. I wanted to give Hannah *my* mum's ring, but I'd already given that to Ginny the first time around." Harry grimaced, cheeks turning a bit pink in embarrassment. "Seemed a bit in poor taste, though Gin did return it to me."

"I love mine," Hannah insisted, looking down at the large ruby on her hand. "I would have preferred my *own* House colours," she teased, "but it's actually quite hard to find yellow gems that are prettier than rubies."

Hermione's smile widened. "You're engaged as well?! Harry!" She turned and slapped his arm, this time softer.

Harry laughed and pulled the witch in for a hug. "We would have told you, but you've been working too much."

Catching Neville's raised eyebrow, Hermione flushed and cleared her throat. "Not *too* much."

"Yes, too much," Harry insisted, unaware that Neville was grinning deviously behind him at Hermione. "Luna told me she stopped by to see if you'd have lunch and your boss said you weren't taking lunch due to some big project or—"

"I'm not working too much!" Hermione snapped, reaching up and covering Harry's mouth with her hand. "I just . . . I'm fine." Harry narrowed his eyes at her and then Hermione let out a loud squeal, yanking her hand away from him. "Harry! Ugh! You're disgusting!" She wiped her wet palm off on her shirt.

Laughing and wiping saliva from his mouth, Harry turned and grinned at Neville. "You need to make sure she takes care of herself. Bloody witch works too much."

Neville smirked. "I'm on it."

Hermione turned away from all of them to avoid Harry and Hannah seeing the blush on her cheeks. "How bad do you think it will be?"

Harry sighed. "Gin's not here yet," he told her. "Ron fire-called just before we left to make sure we were still coming. Molly won't say who Ginny's paired off with, which makes me nervous. You don't think it's Malfoy, do you?"

Hermione snorted in amusement at the suggestion. Ginny and Malfoy would murder each other before the honeymoon was over. Before she had a chance to confess that she'd been present when Draco left the matching with Astoria Greengrass, Neville spoke up.

"Malfoy's marrying Astoria Greengrass."

Hermione turned and narrowed her gaze at her fiancé. "Wait . . . how do *you* know that?"

Neville blinked and looked away from her as though she were a Legilimens. "Umm . . . conversation for later?" he asked, clearing his throat. "No secrets . . . just . . . well, not my business to go saying to everyone, I suppose."

Hermione stared at him curiously, much more interested in finding out what Neville was keeping than she was attending the approaching dinner. Preventing her from speaking, Harry scoffed loudly. "If it's about Malfoy, I don't even care. Tossers can do what he likes."

Rolling her eyes, Hermione laughed at her best friend. "Just like you didn't care what he did all sixth year?"

Harry lifted his chin in defiance. "I had my reasons for being vigilant."

"Stalking," she corrected.

"Keeping an eye on!"

Hermione looked at Hannah and whispered, "I think he might have taken a fancy."

Harry, gobsmacked and red-faced, opened his mouth to yell at her, but no words came to him. When she grinned victoriously, he hugged and took Hannah's hand in his. "I smell treacle tart! C'mon, Hannah, let's go."

The Burrow was packed with Weasleys. Molly was in the kitchen, putting the finishing touches on a feast while Arthur entertained the small group of children in the living room with a robotic, battery-operated stuffed dog that barked and did backflips. The older

wizard was delighted by the toy, much more so than his grandchildren, several of whom were half-bloods and had seen much more advanced Muggle toys.

Hermione and Neville were separated in the group as Fred and George rushed to greet the Auror, while a very pregnant Angelina ducked out of the kitchen, eyes wide as she passed by. Hermione could still hear Molly offering birthing advice to the daughter-in-law she *thought* was still behind her. When the matriarch turned in response to the silence, she huffed at Angelina's disappearance, but a smile grew on her face at the sight of the Muggle-born.

"Oh, Hermione!" Molly cried out with a happy voice, pulling her apron off and throwing it at the nearest redhead—Bill—in silent communication to finish whatever she'd been doing. The eldest Weasley son snorted in amusement at the apron and set it aside before grabbed a wooden spoon and stirring a large pot on the stove. "Hermione, dear, let me have a look at you."

Hermione smiled nervously and kissed Molly's cheek in greeting. "It hasn't been more than a few weeks since I've visited, Molly."

"Too long," the older witch scolded. "You know you're welcome anytime you'd like, and I serve up a Sunday dinner to everyone that can make it. Every week! You don't look like you've been eating, my girl." She reached out and lightly pinched Hermione's collarbone.

"I'll eat right now," Hermione assured her, exaggerating the way she sniffed the air, letting out a feigned satisfied sigh of hunger. "Mmm! Smells delicious."

Molly grinned. "Good, good. Oh, I've so many . . ." Molly looked to the side, where Fred and George's sons were lifting Bill and Fleur's youngest child up onto their shoulders in an attempt to reach the treats that had been put up on a nearby shelf. "Boys! You stay out of those biscuits! If you ruin your supper, I'll—"

Turning away from Hermione to scold her grandchildren, Molly did not see Ron slip behind her. "Have a drink," he whispered to his ex-wife, putting a glass in Hermione's hand. "I put some fancy liquor in it that Charlie sent back from the reserve. Don't let Mum see." He pulled a small flask from his pocket with a nervous grin. When Neville and Harry

approached, Ron tipped the flask into their glasses as well, watching as purple smoke fumed out of the drink for a moment before vanishing with a wave.

Harry grinned. "Good man."

"Thanks, mate," Neville said.

Ron nodded and then looked down at the flask. He glanced back up at Neville and then looked to Hermione before turning back to his friend and clearing his throat. "Nev . . . you good?"

Neville quickly recalled the last time he'd seen Ron earlier in the week when the man had drunk too much and said unkind things about Hermione. "I'm good," he assured the redhead with a smile before putting a hand on Hermione's shoulder.

Hermione leant into the touch subconsciously and Ron caught the movement. He looked away, expression sad for a moment before he swallowed hard and then forced himself to smile. "Good," he said and then held up his glass in toast, his eyes drawn to Hermione's hand that lifted her drink to her mouth. "'Mione, that's umm . . . that's a nice ring. Fits you."

Hermione smiled nervously as she swallowed, looking down at her ring. The four friends stood around in silence, each taking turns forcing a smile and nodding their heads. Hannah quickly joined them and chuckled at their ridiculousness. "See?" she said. "Not awkward at all!"

Ron snorted. "We'll chat later once *Gin* shows up," he said, earning a laugh from both Harry and Neville. "You can reevaluate your opinion on that, yeah?"

Molly finally shooed the young children out of the kitchen and turned, hands on her hips. "I swear, why did I even bother raising children if they're not capable of doing the same with their own—And you!" Her eyes widened and she stormed forward, pushing both Ron and Hermione aside to face the tall Auror in front of her. "Neville Longbottom, all these years and not a single visit? And no owl? Young man, I should turn you over my knee."

Neville blushed, accepting the hug that followed Molly's reproach, but he eyed both Hannah and Hermione, who choked on their drinks and promptly burst into hysterical laughter.

Ron stared incredulously at the witches. "What's wrong with the two of you?"

"Pumpkin juice . . ." Hannah said, coughing, "went down the wrong . . ."

"We're fine," Hermione insisted, taking deep breaths to calm herself. "Just . . . just fine."

The dining room was magically expanded to fit everyone, though the younger children were banned to the kid's table in the other room, where Molly had set up Self-Cleaning Charms on the rug and walls. The only exception had been seven-year-old Victoire, who pleaded with her parents to let her stay with the adults. She, however, had eventually been banished as well when Fleur caught her using her Veela allure to try to con both Harry and Neville out of their cake. Harry, who was used to the little girl's abilities, was able to hold onto his pudding, but Neville had smiled stupidly at the adorable child, and parted with his slice of cake immediately.

Hermione laughed at the scene and watched as Fleur carried her sullen daughter out of the room to finish dining with her cousins and siblings. Bill patted Neville on the back. "Don't feel too bad, she's been doing that to the rest of us for years. I had to ask to be banned from most toy stores on Diagon Alley for my own sake. Little beast," he said affectionately of his daughter.

Hermione looked down the table, feeling a mixture of anxiety and happiness at the sight. There were still too many people and it was far too cramped at the table, but without the tension between her and Ron—and what little of their marriage they'd allowed his family to see—she felt the familiar warmth that came with a welcoming family.

Bill and Fleur spent the majority of dinner eyeing one another in between disciplining their three children. Fred and George conspired at one end of the table, while their wives,

Katie and Angelina talked about baby names, pausing only to jab their husband's in the ribs when their children could be heard screaming in the other room. Percy and his wife Audrey were deep in conversation with Arthur about new Ministry reforms in the Improper Use of Magic Office where Audrey worked. Ron sat beside Mandy, who was mentally taking notes from Molly, who went on in detail about how to make Ron's favourite meals.

Chuckling at the sight of the strange, but clearly proper match, Hermione turned to share a laugh with Hannah, only to find her friend in concentration, eyes focused on Harry. Turning to look at the man, Hermione noticed what Hannah was staring at. Despite talking to Bill with a relaxed expression on his face, Harry's arm was positioned over his plate defensively. It looked uncomfortable and awkward, though he never moved it except when taking a bite of his food.

Frowning, Hermione reached for Hannah's hand and forced a smile. "We *all* still have scars," she said softly. When Hannah looked up at her with worried eyes, Hermione sighed. "Some aren't just from war."

When the plates magically cleared from the table, Molly cleared her throat loudly and Arthur stood up, holding a glass in hand. "I'd like to propose a toast," he said, and the room fell silent. "I consider myself a very lucky man. To have met my beautiful Molly so young, and to have been blessed with the most amazing children."

"Aw, shucks," Fred said with a grin.

"You don't have to lie to Ron just because the rest of us are so great," George added.

Ron rolled his eyes and kicked one of them beneath the table.

Molly sighed in irritation and Arthur chuckled. "As I was saying . . . we all know *now* that . . . well, that magic picks some perfect people for us. Puts them in our lives and fills us all with love. For a bit of time, I guess that wasn't so clear to see," he said, glancing mostly between Ron and Hermione. "But, now we've so much to celebrate! We haven't lost anyone," he insisted, turning to Hermione and Harry. "Instead, we're adding to our large brood. So, Mandy, Hannah, Neville . . . welcome to the family."

"Cheers!" Bill said and everyone else followed.

Mandy smiled warmly as Molly leant forward and hugged her.

Hermione discreetly wiped a tear from her eye, but Harry caught her and smiled. "Oh, shut up," she whispered.

"Now," Molly said loudly. "So many weddings to plan."

Hermione's face paled and Harry suddenly looked quite green.

"Oh, umm . . . Molly, I . . . Hannah and I were . . ."

"You see . . . Neville and I haven't . . ."

"It's weird!" Fred chimed in on behalf of the two former Weasleys. "Mum, they were married to your kids. You don't think it's odd that you'd have a hand in planning their weddings?"

"Overstepping a bit?" George added.

"Just a smidge?"

Molly stared at the twins as though they'd both grown horns. "No," she insisted. "Harry and Hermione are family . . . just like my own children, and I . . ." She looked up. "I thought . . . I mean, we had such lovely weddings for you both last time."

"Very lovely," Hermione said, feeling her palms begin to sweat. She looked up at Ron with pleading eyes.

He took the hint and cleared his throat. "Mum, maybe Hermione and Harry can plan their *own* weddings. Maybe . . . I mean . . . Mandy and I are fine with a Burrow wedding, right?" he asked his fiancée who nodded.

"Absolutely!" she said brightly. "My mother's so excited. She wanted to come tonight to meet you, but I didn't know if it would be appropriate. I think you'll get along quite well. She has a lot of ideas for the wedding, you see."

Molly looked torn, trying to decide whether or not to jump right into planning Ron and Mandy's wedding, and arguing her involvement in Hermione's and Harry's weddings. "But I . . . right. I . . . I suppose you all know," she said, looking at the two couples at the end of the table, "that I am willing and available for anything you need when planning your events. And Harry Potter, do not let that godfather of yours plan a single thing. He's just as bad as Fred and George."

"Oi!" George said, feigning offence. "I like to think *we're* as bad as Sirius."

Fred nodded in agreement. "Right inspiration, he is."

"We were . . . we were thinking something small," Harry admitted quietly.

"Harry," Hannah nervously said. "Is now really . . .?"

"What's that dear?" Molly asked, looking up.

Harry cleared his throat. "Hannah's got so little family, y'see . . . we were thinking that . . . that we'd just maybe go down to the Ministry and . . . and sign the papers."

The room fell completely silent and everyone turned to stare at Molly. "What? I don't . . . but . . . no wedding? No ceremony no . . . oh . . ." she muttered, finally understanding. "You don't want us—"

Bill sighed. "Mum, you don't think it'd be weird for Harry to have all of his ex-in-laws at his wedding?" he asked. "It's not like they're going to invite Ginny. What do you think the papers would write about her when all of us went to Harry's wedding and she stayed behind?"

Harry looked down.

"But . . . *of course* Harry would . . . I mean, they're still friends, aren't they?" Molly asked.

Fred snorted. "So are Ron and Hermione, but I doubt *they'll* attend each other's weddings."

Ron, confused, turned and looked at Hermione. The witch looked away immediately, her face turning red. She could feel Neville's hand at the small of her back in constant support, and she closed her eyes, focusing on the warmth and security there.

"Oh gods, you're not serious?" Everyone turned to spot Ginny standing in the doorway, a scowl on her face. "Mum, you cannot expect any of us to attend our ex's weddings. That's insane. That's insane for insane people. Gilderoy Lockhart would tell you that idea is mental."

Molly pursed her lips. "Ginevra—"

"Ron's not going to Hermione's wedding and she's not going to his. I'm sure as hell not going to Harry's," Ginny insisted. She looked at her ex-husband and sighed. "No offence, Harry."

He shook his head. "None taken. I wasn't exactly looking forward to attending yours and . . . who is your match?"

Clearing her throat, Ginny looked behind her and nodded. The cracked door opened a bit more and Oliver Wood stepped through, removing a cap from his head and smiling politely in Molly and Arthur's direction. "Sir, ma'am," he said in greeting.

"Wood!" Fred and George cried out in unison, both grinning brightly at their former Quidditch Captain.

"Bloody hell," Ron mumbled.

Harry couldn't stop himself from scowling. "Wood? *Really?*"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Hannah? *Really?*"

"Kids," Arthur said reproachfully.

Both Harry and Ginny sighed and then smiled awkwardly at one another as though they were both children being reprimanded.

"Sorry, Gin," Harry mumbled.

She nodded, looking shame-faced. "Same."

Molly stood. "Oliver, come and have a seat young man," she said with a happy smile. "We would have waited for you, but Ginevra wouldn't return my owls. We were just about to start planning the weddings!"

"No need for that," Ginny said loudly. Beside her, Oliver's posture straightened and he looked a bit flustered. "Ollie and I eloped yesterday. We're married."

Molly shrieked, "MARRIED?!"

"Yesterday?" Arthur asked with a frown.

"Eloped?" Hermione and Harry said at the same time with grins crossing their faces.

Ron blanched. "Ollie?"

Chapter 16

September 27th, 2006

While Molly and Ginny screamed at one another, the older Weasley children ushered their own young families out of the house and into the yard for a game of Quidditch on brooms with height regulating charms for the children. Ron leant against the side of the house smoking tobacco from an old wooden pipe, a habit he'd started shortly before he and Hermione had divorced; something she'd considered his nonverbal "well, you don't like anything else I do" last stand. From a distance, the smell was somewhat pleasant, but she was more than happy to watch Neville turn Ron down to join him.

Harry stood beside the redhead, talking about an upcoming case in the D.M.L.E., while Mandy politely stood by, the small hints of admiration already easily read in her eyes when she looked at Ron. Hermione sat on a bench and watched them from a distance, a small sad smile creeping onto her face.

"Do you miss it?" Neville asked.

She turned and looked at him, her smile turning into one of genuine happiness. "Ron? No . . . not being married to him anyway. I miss . . . I don't know," she admitted. "It's strange to see him standing there with someone new and think that it should have been me. But it *was* me, and it was awful," she said. When Neville put his arm around her, she sighed and leant into his warmth. "It's like my brain is telling me that I'm supposed to feel jealousy, but logically I know that I don't. I'm actually very happy for him."

"I'm not interrupting, am I?" Hannah said as she walked over to the pair, arms folded tightly around her body. Hermione reached for her wand, cast a Warming Charm around her friend, and then silently invited her to join them. "Thanks. So . . . *that* was a Weasley meal."

Hermione snorted. "That was a Weasley meal."

"Is there usually that much screaming?"

"Pretty close to it."

Neville laughed. "Poor Wood."

"Don't you mean *Ollie*?" Hannah said with a giggle. "Oh, that man had no idea what he was walking into, did he?"

"Poor bloke."

Shaking her head, Hermione tried not to join them, but the sound of something breaking inside of the house, followed by what sounded like a minor explosion, had her bursting into quiet laughter. Shortly after the sound of Ginny yelling and Molly yelling louder, Arthur and Oliver exited the house, the elder man with a look of relaxed resignation on his face, while the younger appeared quite petrified by whatever he'd seen.

Hannah sighed, shoulders slumping forward in defeat. "Ginny hates me."

"Ginny doesn't hate you. Ginny hates the world right now," Hermione said. "She spent her whole life in love with Harry, planned the perfect fairytale wedding and marriage, and built it all up in her head so much that when reality crashed down, it crashed too hard. Besides, their magic wasn't even slightly sympathetic."

"Yeah, he told me," Hannah said, nodding. "It was one of the first things I'd asked, actually. Once we'd left the matching and gone back to Grimmauld Place. Or at least, once we'd hidden underneath his Invisibility Cloak and dodged the press on our way to the Apparition point"

"Are you ready for it?" Hermione asked, concerned. "He's Harry Potter."

"No," Hannah admitted freely. "But a part of me figures that if things get ugly—with the press, I mean—I can just blame the stupid Procreation Bill. That or . . . I mean, maybe it will all work out. Yeah? I think it will. I fancy him," she said with a happy sigh, watching Harry from across the yard, smiling when Harry threw back his head and laughed. "So . . . eloping?"

"Genius," Neville commented with a soft chuckle. "I mean, maybe not for Ginny, but it's not like the rest of us have a giant family who'd throw a fit about it."

Hermione and Hannah nodded sadly.

"What about your grandmother?"

Neville shrugged. "She told me she hates parties, and she doesn't like people in general. If we take enough pictures, maybe she'll be willing to overlook the fact that she wasn't there?"

Hermione frowned. "Your grandmother loves you. She should be there."

Hannah jumped in, interrupting their thoughts. "I think Harry and I just want to do something with close family. You lot, Ron, Sirius, of course. Professor Lupin and his family. Maybe have it at the Leaky when we close up one night. Tom would be fine with it," she said with an affectionate smile. "He doesn't get out much. Would do him some good to go to a little wedding. Plus, no one would suspect because they'll be thinking that he'll have another big wedding with all the press."

Hannah's wedding plans were put on instant hold when the sound of a door slamming echoed around the yard and Ginny stormed away from the house, her hair whipping behind her, looking like a blaze of angry fire. "Fucking hell," the redhead said with a growl as she approached her friends.

Neville smiled awkwardly at her. "All right, Ginny?"

She scoffed, but forced a smile. "Sorry I haven't come to say hello since you got back."

He nodded his head, silently accepting her apology. Turning, he looked across the yard where Oliver was standing next to Arthur, hands shoved in his pockets and looking terribly apologetic over the circumstances. Arthur, ever the peacemaker, embraced the man. "I'm sorry about the . . . er . . ." Neville began but then stopped and cleared his throat. "Congratulations?"

"What for?" Ginny rolled her eyes. "This whole thing is a bloody nightmare. Sorry, Hannah, about earlier," she said, frowning at the blonde. "I'm . . . goddamned *Skeeter* cornered me outside of practice asking me how heartbroken I was that Harry had left me for Hannah," she said sarcastically, though there was a hint of leftover bitterness considering her and Harry's divorce was still much newer than Ron and Hermione's. "Like our whole divorce wasn't published word for bloody word. Plus, her photographer was trying to get a picture of me crying or some shit, and ended up blindsiding one of my teammates. The girl

tripped and broke her wrist and *now* we've got to pull in a backup Chaser for tomorrow's practice and it's thrown our whole schedule off. I didn't even want to come here tonight but I knew it would be worse if I didn't."

Neville swallowed as the three stood in front of the redhead, eyes wide. "Wow. I umm . . . I mean congratulations on your marriage?"

Hannah tried to smile. "Oliver seems nice?"

Ginny waved her hand and shrugged. "He's fine. He's convenient to me, and I am to him."

Hermione raised a brow. "Wait, what do you mean? Ginny, were you and Oliver even a match?" she asked, her tone a bit hysterical at the thought that Ginny had not only tried to play the system, but would end up heartbroken all over again.

"So so," Ginny answered. "He wasn't any brighter than anyone else there. Anyone that I'd *willingly* marry, at least. I matched to Malfoy," she said and then shivered in horror. "MALFOY! Can you imagine?"

Hermione kept a straight face when she shook her head and said, "Nope."

Turning, Ginny sat down on the end of the bench nearest Neville, throwing her head back on the table behind her and groaning. "I didn't want to get remarried. This soon, if ever. And I'd read recently that Oliver had given an interview in *Quidditch Monthly* about his love life and how he was purposely concentrating on the next World Cup since he's being scouted. He doesn't have time for a relationship. If it weren't for this stupid Procreation Bill, then both of us would still be at flying right now, thinking about upcoming games."

Brows furrowed, Hermione stood up and walked over to Ginny's side, hands on her hips. "So why did you get married?" she asked. "The Procreation Bill is a programme that's completely based on volunteers for the time being. Most of the people who did it in the first place were either asked by Kingsley like Harry, Ron, and me, or they were pressured by their families."

"Or they were curious," Hannah said, raising her hand.

Ginny sighed and sat up, slouching forward and putting her head in her hands. "Because we *had* to. The Ministry's pushing that bloody law and every department outside of

the D.M.L.E. is putting together incentives and even punishments for not going along with it. Sports and Games as well. The Quidditch league put together a bloody rotating schedule for players, that way we can all get properly knocked up and pop out a kid without losing our places on our teams." When Hermione gasped in horror, Ginny nodded and continued. "It's insanity. Most of us got married for job security. So I saw Wood across the room at the matching and remembered the article I'd read on him. Took him to lunch and made a deal. We could both pass inspection, so to speak, and still basically live separate lives."

"Oh Ginny," Hannah said with a frown. "But what happens when you don't get pregnant?"

The redhead shrugged again. "I'll worry about that if the Ministry actually makes it a *law*. Right now, if the programme works and enough of the pairings start having magically sound children, then there's a margin for those of us who don't . . . well . . . to get away with it. And when it all blows over, we'll just get divorced. It's not exactly hard."

Hermione sighed. "I'll agree to that."

Everyone looked up as Ron and Harry approached, a frown on Harry's face as he made eye contact with his ex-wife, clearly noticing her obvious misery.

"Hey, Harry."

"Gin. So, no congratulations?"

She flashed him a smirk. "Congratulate me when I win next week's match against the Cannons."

Ron scoffed. "Like that'll happen."

Ginny stood and reached out, hesitantly hugging Harry and ignoring her brother. The black-haired wizard paused and stiffened his posture before hugging her back just in time for her to pull away, both looking awkward. "But umm . . . *you* . . . congratulations. Honestly. You look well."

Harry nodded and ran a hand through his hair. "Thanks."

Ginny sighed and toed the ground, digging a small hole in the grass with her trainer. "But not as well as Neville," she said, looking up with a grin, trying to break the tension. "Do

they slip potions in the water in Germany? You weren't this fit the last time I saw you. I'm surprised Hermione can *walk*."

Hannah laughed and both Ron and Harry groaned at the obvious blush that instantly covered Hermione's face. "Ginny!" she hissed.

The redhead ignored the reprimand. "What's he look like starkers?"

Neville turned bright red and lowered his face while Ron shouted, "Oi!" and Harry actually did laugh, stepping aside to join Hannah, who was still giggling.

"Ginny!" Ron tried again.

Hermione reached for Neville's hand. "That's our cue to leave."

Ginny grinned. "Getting a head start on that baby making? Good on ya, 'Mione!"

Stopping from stomping away, Hermione spun around and pointed at her former sister-in-law. "You're a terrible person," she said, and then stepped in and hugged Ginny close. "I've missed you."

Ginny sighed. "I know. I'm sorry," she whispered, her voice breaking a bit. "Come to a game soon, yeah?"

Hermione pulled away and cringed. "Quidditch. Fun."

Back at Hermione's flat, Neville had ignored the rest of the books Hermione had displayed in her living room, instead snatching up the list he'd seen earlier and sticking it in his pocket while she put the tea on for the both of them. They drank in awkward silence before she looked up at him and smiled.

"Stay?"

He let out a sharp exhale of relief. "Yes. Yes, absolutely."

They readied for bed separately, Hermione letting herself relax into the familiar feelings of domesticity. He stepped politely out of the bathroom to allow her to shower in privacy, which was amusingly chivalrous considering the number of things he'd already done to her since their matching. When she came out of the bathroom, steam billowing behind

her, he had turned down the covers and was already comfortably lying beneath the blankets, reading a borrowed book on aquatic plant life used in Dark potions from one of her shelves.

Hermione crawled into bed, happy that he'd chosen the left side instead of the right, and curled up beside him, resting a hand on his chest. "Tonight was awful," she said with a sigh.

He smiled. "It wasn't so bad."

She scoffed and poked him lightly in the ribs. "You're amazing to have put up with any of it."

"It was nice to see everyone," he said after turning the page and then closing the book, setting it down on the bedside table where he'd also set his wand. He moved back, putting an arm around Hermione and playing with the ends of her hair.

"I'm glad you're here," she whispered.

She felt him sigh, breathing against her hair. "Me too," he said softly and then, after a beat, smirked and pushed on her shin with his foot. "Other than you're horribly freezing feet. Honestly, I'm half-tempted to make a new rule. No putting your cold feet on my legs."

Hermione laughed and pressed the soles of her cold feet against the tops of his and laughed when he visibly stiffened and grimaced. "It's not a rule yet, I can do this," she said and then shrieked when he fought back by tickling her sides. Hermione yelled and tried to scoot away, but Neville's large hands and long arms soon had her pulled back and pinned beneath him.

"New rule," he said when they'd caught their breath. He stared down into her eyes and sighed. "You let me make you laugh as often as possible."

Hermione swallowed down the rising emotion, clearing her throat. "That sounds more like a promise than a rule," she whispered.

He nodded and then dipped his head down slowly, brushing his lips over hers. "Keep all the rules and I'll keep all my promises," he said and then kissed her neck and then collarbone. "I'll keep all my promises regardless, I believe." When she let out a soft sigh, he met her gaze. "At least, I'll try."

She softly ran her fingers through his hair. "I'm sorry about earlier," she said. "About the . . . the books and research and everything."

Neville kissed her nose. "That's all right. I just wanted to go through some of it with you. Make sure you didn't stumble into anything . . . anything dangerous or . . . unsavoury."

She blushed and Neville sat up, taking the cue to reach for the list he had snatched earlier, which he'd stuck beneath his wand on the bedside table. Catching sight of it, Hermione's eyes widened. "That's just a . . . preliminary . . . umm . . . just notes and such."

"I don't want to cut you either," he said, looking at the words that were marked out with black ink. "And I'll never choke you. I don't want you to ever feel like you're in danger with me," he insisted. "Last time, when I grabbed your throat . . . I did that—"

"I liked it," she interrupted. "You . . . it didn't hurt. You didn't squeeze or anything. You just held me still." She let out a heavy sigh. "I like being still."

He kissed her forehead before crawling off of her and putting his arm back around her shoulders. She snuggled into his side, head resting on his chest and eyes glimpsing over the list in his hand. "You like everything that we've done so far?" he asked, though he noted that on the list she'd already underlined several things like spanking, oral, and suspension, though she did add a note to the last, specifically stating the small scene where he'd tied her to the hook from the ceiling with the rope made of knickers.

"Very much," she said.

"I won't ever, ever share you," he said, noting down on the list that'd she'd marked out group sex and put a question mark next to voyeuristic and exhibitionistic activities. "Soft limit?" he asked, gesturing to them.

Hermione made a face and then shrugged. "Maybe a . . . talk about in the future thing."

He nodded, making a mental note as well. "Oh, here," he pointed. "You've marked out the umm . . ."

"Double penetration," she said with a tone as though it were a vocabulary word.

Neville smirked, forcing himself not to laugh in amusement and joy at how easily she fell into the eager student roll. He half wished that he had a fetish for fucking her in her old

Hogwarts uniform, but considering that he was preparing to be a professor soon, he was quite glad that he never thought of the old pleated grey skirt as overly sexy. "Yes, double penetration. While I wouldn't share you with anyone else, would you be opposed to me using things, toys, on you for this?"

Hermione's cheeks flushed with heat and she swallowed. "Oh, umm . . . no. Not opposed at all."

They went through the list, item by item and Hermione found herself snuggling into him closer, his soothing tone of voice making the conversation much less awkward and embarrassing than she could have imagined. She was glad, in the end, that he'd put a stop in her personal research, as she'd written out several activities that needed further explanation, and some that she misunderstood were ultimately blacked out as a hard limit as well.

"What's a labia clip?" she asked him curiously. "I mean, I have an idea but . . ."

Neville glanced over the list once more, satisfied with their progress, and set it back on the table beside his wand and the book he'd been reading. "It's a bit like the clamps in my trunk," he told her. "I can easily use the ones I've got for both purposes, though." When she still looked curious, he smiled and snaked his hand beneath the blanket, letting his fingers brush back and forth against her belly. "You see, they put pressure, sometimes a bit painful—"

"A good pain?" she whispered, tilting her hips up suggestively toward his hand.

He grinned. "A very good pain," he replied before dipping his fingers beneath the waistband of her knickers, only to find her wantonly soaked. His cock rose to attention, but he did his best to ignore it. "Hermione? Was it all the talk about sex that has you so . . . so wet for me . . . or were you just excited to learn new things?"

She smirked deviously and bit her lower lip. "Both?"

He pinched her folds and swallowed hard at the sharp gasp that fell through her lips in reaction. "I'd put them here," he said softly. "And leave them tight . . . while I teased you." His fingers lightly circled her entrance several times before moving up to do the same to her clit, never once touching either directly. "Make you just . . ."

"Just what?" Hermione moaned, shifting her pelvis in an attempt to get him to touch her where she wanted.

Neville pressed his lips to her ear. "Make you beg for it."

She shivered at the words and immediately let out a "Please," knowing already that she would have to ask nicely considering how he'd made her plead before. Neville grinned and granted her request, slipping his index finger inside of her and curling it up, pressing and rubbing while his thumb flicked casually over her clit. Hermione pressed her body into the mattress, fisting the sheets and closing her eyes in pleasure. Neville, meanwhile, bent down and sucked a nipple into his mouth through her nightshirt, soaking it with saliva as he nibbled on the pebbled peak until she was shaking beneath his touch.

Her walls began to tighten and she panted each breath with a soft huff before gasping each new inhale. "Please," she moaned again, nearing the torturous edge.

"Hermione," Neville whispered her name. "Was Harry lying?"

"Wh-What?" she asked, blinking her eyes open and then whimpering as the heat in her belly pooled and built higher and hotter. "Oh gods, Neville please."

"Tonight. When he said that you'd not taken lunches at work. Were you not eating?" he asked, his tone suddenly demanding.

Hermione growled in frustration. "I . . . I . . . no. I had work and . . . I forgot . . . and . . ."

"What's my rule?"

She swallowed and threw her head back in frustration. "Take care of myself. Not . . . not overwork."

"Did you break my rule?"

Hermione gasped when he thrust a second finger inside of her at the same time as asking the question. "Oh gods . . . oh gods . . . please . . . yes, yes, I broke the rule."

Neville grasped her chin with his free hand and tilted her head to face him. His kiss was hard and commanding, his tongue still soft and yet controlling and Hermione buckled under him, eyes rolling, right up to the point that he withdrew his fingers from her cunt. "Wh-What?"

Pressing his lips against her ear and breathing heavy, indicating his own aroused state, Neville whispered. "Only good girls get to come."

He moved back from her then and watched with an amused stare as she processed his words while catching her breath, only to turn and glare at him. She whimpered and whined and kicked her feet from beneath the covers only to realise moments later that she'd actually thrown a tantrum in the middle of her own bed. Half tempted to tell him that she could finish the job herself, Hermione paused, remembering all the times she'd been with previous lovers who ignored her pleasure only to satisfy their own. Neville, however, was still watching her with growing affection, and made no move to satisfy himself, either by using her body or excusing himself to another room.

"Fine," she finally growled out. "But I'm not happy about it."

"I'm not happy that you didn't bother to eat," he said. "I . . . I'd like to live a very long life with you. That means you take care of . . . of this beautiful body."

She gave a stiff nod and then rolled over, pulling the blankets up around her body. "My shirt's wet," she complained. "It's cold."

Neville smirked and wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her flush up against his chest. She held back another whimper when she felt his hard arousal pressed against her arse, and did not—*did not!*—wiggle against it. "I'll keep you warm, love."

She smiled at the term of endearment, chuckling softly in resignation. "Goodnight, Neville."

He kissed the back of her head. "Goodnight, Hermione."

She waited until his breathing slowed and the weight of his arm sagged against her waist before she pressed the heels of her freezing feet against his warm legs.

Chapter 17

September 28th, 2006

Despite still having a shit memory when it came to things like passwords and the names of high-ranking Ministry officials or people he'd just met, Neville had grown out of most of the awkwardness of his youth. Though he did trip over his feet from time to time, Auror training had helped him learn to focus his senses, bordering on paranoid from time to time when he was on a mission. So when Hermione woke before him and tried to sneak beneath the sheets, he blinked open one well-trained eye and watched as she slowly moved, bottom lip caught between her teeth in concentration as she attempted to out stealth him.

Curious and amused at the way her hair had been pulled back in a magical twist, curls still falling in her face from time to time, he kept still and silent, his eyes cracked open just enough for him to see clearly, but not enough so that she suspected he'd woken.

When he realised what she was planning, it took every bit of strength in him to not groan aloud and let her know that he had been awake the whole time.

Neville steadied his breathing as Hermione pulled the sheet away from his body and positioned herself over his waist. She glanced up once to his face and he blinked his eyes shut quickly as she began to untie his pyjama bottoms. *Merciful Merlin*, he thought when her warm hand wrapped around his half-hard length and pulled him out of his clothes. He groaned a little and shifted his hips as though he were still asleep because he thought it would be a little suspicious if she had touched his penis and he'd not reacted, even unconscious.

She smiled slyly—smugly—in approval before licking her lips, bending forward, and taking him in her mouth.

Unable to stop himself, Neville fisted the sheets at his side and let out a low keening noise, blood rushing from his head fast enough to make him dizzy as it all fled south, hardening painfully between the warmth of her lips. When she dragged her tongue slowly up

the underside of the head, he muttered, "Holy fuck," under his breath and then smiled when he could hear her giggle at his very obvious wakefulness.

"Good morning," she whispered.

"Don't stop," he pleaded.

Her tongue swirled around the ridge and then ran back down the underside of his cock before she swallowed him again, deep enough that he could feel the back of her throat. He watched carefully to make sure she was still comfortable and when she began moving once more, he groaned and threw his head back into the pillow.

Looking to the side, Neville grinned at the sight of her arse bent over, perfectly in view and clad in soft knickers. He could already see the wet stain at the centre, though he was unaware whether or not that was from now, or the night before when he'd refused to let her come at his hand. Feeling particularly forgiving and hungry, he reached a large hand out, gripping her thigh and pulling until her back end fully faced him. While she paused her ministrations only in curiosity the moment he moved her, Hermione continued licking and sucking him with near expert precision, as though she'd been planning for this moment for hours. Knowing his witch, she very likely had.

Neville sat up just enough to reach the fabric covering her arse, and he bit into the side of the waistband, tearing through it with his teeth just enough to make it easier when he ripped the band apart. Stopping only when she swallowed, the head of his cock pressed hard against the back of her tongue, making him briefly see stars, Neville grabbed her legs and manoeuvred her to straddle his chest.

Her legs tightened at first, very aware of her position, but she relaxed when he parted her folds and then leant up to lick between them.

She whimpered in a high pitch and then mumbled words around his cock that he couldn't even dream of translating, but the vibrations of her voice against his sensitive skin were enough to make him eager to repay the kindness. When he wrapped his lips around her clit, he growled and let his ego grow quite a bit when Hermione lost her balance and nearly tipped over to the side.

"Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god," she moaned, her bottom lip rubbing against the head of his cock.

He could feel her heavy breath on him as he devoured her like a man starved and eventually, once she'd caught her breath, she returned to her own task and the two kept pace and time with one another until Neville's thighs tensed and Hermione's were shaking. He came first, warning her once with a breathy, "Hermione . . . I'm . . . I'm . . ." only to have her tighten her grip on his legs and speed up. His fingers dug into her arse, hard enough to bruise, and he pressed his face to her inner thigh when he thrust upwards into her mouth, groaning in pleasure when she swallowed.

She rolled off of him and Neville sat up to resume pleasing her, stopping only to take a deep breath and centre himself before lapping at her lazily until she shivered in blissful release, her hair having long since fallen out of its magical twist.

"Mmm." She laughed. "I take it I'm forgiven?"

"Always," he whispered against her outer thigh.

She looked down and ran her hands through his soft, dark hair. "And are you going to repair my knickers?"

Neville smiled. "It's on my list of things to do today, yes."

Hermione giggled. "What else is on this list?"

Silence.

When he didn't respond, Hermione sat up on her elbows and looked down at him. "Neville?" she asked, her eyes widening anxiously as she saw the expression on his face. It was the same one he wore back in Hogwarts the moment that his cauldron exploded or when he was found sitting beneath the Fat Lady's portrait, stuck outside the common room after forgetting the password—again.

"What did you do?" she asked suspiciously.

He sighed and kissed her knee affectionately. "You asked last night . . . about how I knew about Malfoy and Astoria Greengrass . . ."

Hermione sat up straight, looking down at her fiancé. "Yes, and?"

Neville groaned and looked up at her. "Malfoy—er, Draco," he said, correcting himself, catching the way her eyes widened at his familiarity with the Slytherin's first name. "We're kind of . . . sort of . . . friends."

Her mouth fell open. "How . . . what? How can you be kind of sort of friends with Malfoy?"

"Well, I consider us friends and he would likely try to hex me if I said that out loud in front of him," Neville stated clearly. When she sat in silence, mouth still gaped open in shock, he explained. "You know how everyone thinks that he ran off and has been gallivanting in the Caribbean all these years?"

"Yes. He told me himself that he was in the Bahamas," she said but then corrected, "Wait, no . . . Greece. He said he'd been in Greece."

Neville sighed. "Well, he's a liar. He was in Germany with me for a while, and then Russia and Bulgaria. He might've gone to Greece in the end but—"

"Malfoy was with you in Germany?!"

He sat up to face her. "The Unspeakables developed a Tracking Spell. We were hoping that could be used on escaped Death Eaters. The only problem was that you had to have someone familiar with the person's magical signature. Since Rodolphus was married to Bellatrix and Bellatrix was—"

"Malfoy's aunt."

Neville nodded. "We worked for years trying to make that damn spell work until eventually, it just . . . wouldn't. Would have been better if Malfoy had been blood-related, but . . ." He sighed in frustration. "After that, Draco said he would visit old family friends and try to send us whatever information he could. He's still a prat, but I think he was trying pretty hard to help undo a lot of the . . . trouble doesn't seem to cover what his family did during the war, but . . . he's not so bad now."

Hermione blinked, trying to process all of the information. "Wow. So . . . you're friends?"

Neville smirked. "I'd say so. He never exactly said he was sorry for everything that happened back in school, but we'd go out for a pint every now and then. Kind of had a mutual understanding to leave behind everything that happened in the past."

Slowly, she nodded. "I mean, I guess that's good. Harry and Ron don't know, do they?"

Laughing, Neville shook his head. "Merlin, no. Draco was technically an informant and his identity couldn't be compromised by anyone. Only my partner, Kingsley, and me knew. Harry'll likely be told when he takes over the Aurors, at which point he'll—"

"Pitch a fit," Hermione said, laughing. "Okay, that's all . . . strange. But why did you look nervous telling me about that? I'm not going to forbid you from being friends with anyone. Even if it is Malfoy."

Neville frowned. "Because I've—*we've* . . . been invited to his wedding."

"Granger," a voice startled her from behind.

Hermione looked over her workstation for a moment, making certain that she'd not lost her place in the ancient Eteocypriot plates that she was attempting to use a modified Conversion Charm to translate. She let out a relieved sigh and then placed a Stasis Charm on the brittle material before turning around. "You're supposed to call me Unspeakable Granger," she said, looking up at the smirking Slytherin.

"I'm supposed to call all of the Unspeakables by their titles; do you ever see me do such a thing?" Theo Nott asked her.

She grinned. "No. As a matter of fact, I overheard Unspeakable Croaker complaining about this exact thing just this morning," she said. "What did you call him now?"

Theo scoffed and brushed invisible lint from his finely pressed shirt. "Something along the lines of 'suck my dick you useless twat'," he said with a shrug. "I thought it would be a waste of time to add the title of Unspeakable to that."

Mildly scandalised, Hermione did her best not to laugh and have the man interpret her amusement as approval. "You're pushing your luck, Theo."

"Ah, that's Unspeakable Nott to you, Granger."

She rolled her eyes. She knew perfectly well that while Theo's job was technically in the D.O.M., he was neither an Unspeakable, nor did he fall under Croakers department and therefore, didn't answer to the man directly—and also couldn't be fired by the man.

The Department of Dark Arts had been created in the aftermath of the war where people like Theo who had been raised learning Dark magic outside of Hogwarts, could use their illegal knowledge to the betterment of wizardkind. While his father rotted in Azkaban for war crimes, Theo rose through the Ministry as a well-versed Arithmancer, specialising in Dark Arts. The department was well received by the Ministry, as most were quite eager to do what they could to avoid another rising Dark Lord, and old pureblood families practically fell over themselves to donate old books and grimoires in an attempt to save face in the new world based on equality. Sirius, Hermione recalled, had opted to donate the entirety of Grimmauld Place, but settled for most of the library—after he let her pilfer through it—and everything in the attic.

"Brought you this," Theo said, handing over a book. "All curses removed and scoured for anti-Muggle-born nonsense. There's a bit in the back and a few notes in the margins, but nothing you didn't hear by third year, I imagine."

She smiled as she took it, ignoring the brief look of guilt that came over his expression. Hermione never brought it up, but she imagined that he thought back to days when he would laugh at Mudblood jokes said by his friends, and stand idly by while Draco Malfoy hexed her in the face. "Thank you, Theo," she said brightly, flipping open the book.

"It's probably the oldest grimoire I've found that even mentions Squibs," he said.

She nodded. "Most that I've read seem to have cut them out of their family history entirely. There was even a detailed diary from the Black family that was missing pages and pages until eventually, they mentioned a daughter who'd been melancholic for several years after the loss of a pet to the point that she flung herself out a window."

Shaking his head, Theo sighed. "Pet, right," he said sarcastically. "Knowing the old families like the Blacks, she likely gave birth to a Squib and they had the thing killed."

Hermione frowned and then flipped through the pages. "What was your first bit of accidental magic again, Theo?"

"Fell down the stairs," he said. "I broke my arm on the first step, but—"

"That's right," she interrupted. "But you created a force field that floated you down the rest of the way. Interesting, don't you think? Every case of accidental magic I've logged, at least that first big incident, was caused by stress. Triggered by adrenaline."

"And yet wizard parents have been frightening and injuring their Squib children for centuries. I hate to say it, Granger, but I think Squibs are just Squibs."

Hermione made an angry, determined face. "If they are then they are and we should still treat them with respect," she insisted. "But I plan on making absolutely certain regardless of the fact."

"You're not just trying to get out of the Marriage Law?" he asked with a smirk.

She scoffed loudly. "It's not a law yet. And . . . and no, I'm not."

Theo's smirk turned into a full grin. "Is that because your fiancé is a fit Auror?"

Hermione looked up at him, eyes wide. "How—"

"Please," he said and then stared at her as though she were a bit slow. "Just because you didn't announce your engagement in the Daily Prophet doesn't mean that you aren't being typically obvious about it. You've been glowing for over a week. Longbottom that good in bed?" When her cheeks turned bright red, he let out a hearty laugh. "That good? Well, he is fit."

She narrowed her eyes at her friend. "Who've you been matched with then?"

Theo stuck his hands into the pocket of his robes. "No one. I didn't go. If the Ministry is so desperate to fix the population problem, they can beg the son of a Death Eater to breed and I'll make them do it publicly," he stated firmly. "I'm already with someone and I'm not about to get them pregnant."

She frowned. "You shouldn't think so poorly of yourself. I think you'd make a fine father, Theo."

He raised a brow in amusement. "Oh, I've no doubt. I'd have the most well-dressed child in all of Britain. They'd be as clean cut as a Malfoy but without all the sharp angles and stupid hair," he said with a crooked smile, eyes twinkling as he insulted one of his own friends. "Speaking of stupid hair, who did Potter end up—"

"Then why not start a family?" Hermione asked, quickly changing the subject back to Theo. "I thought that's what you purebloods were taught growing up. Creating heirs and all."

"It's not the desire, Granger, it's the complications."

She frowned. "What complications?" she asked, thinking of her own potential situation and the fact that her most recent visit to the Healers produced fertility results that were inconclusive.

"Well, I know anatomy and biology weren't much of a focus in our studies at Hogwarts, but I'm fairly certain that blokes can't get pregnant," he said pointedly.

Hermione stared at him for a long moment before her eyes widened. "Oh!"

"There it is."

She looked down, embarrassed. "I had no idea."

"Well, it's not like you walk around wearing a sign that says 'heterosexual female, good for a shag'," he said. "Do you expect me to wear one that says 'gay male, ask me if I'm a top'?"

She knew he was joking, but her cheeks continued to warm and she refused to meet his eyes, even as he laughed while he teased her. Eventually, she caved and hit him in the arm but only after setting the priceless book down on her workstation. "Well then, I'll be trying to find a solution to all of this to help you as well. If it really does become a Marriage Law, I'll not have my friend forced into a relationship when he's already happy in another. You are happy?"

"Quite," Theo said with a small smile. "And you? I don't really need to ask though, I saw Longbottom walking into the Auror Department this morning. You wouldn't be terribly inclined to share?"

She ignored him, rolling her eyes. "Theo . . . do you . . . are you going to Malfoy's wedding?" she asked a moment later, turning her eyes back to the book on the desk, her fingers tapping a nervous pattern on the sturdy marble.

He raised a brow. "Of course, why?"

She sighed. "Neville and I . . . we've been invited as well," she said with a frown.

Surprised, Theo ran a hand through his hair. "That'll be Astoria's doing, I suppose. The Greengrasses weren't staunch pureblood elitists like the Malfoys, and I imagine they're trying to create a good public image for their daughter. Draco's still not well liked, even after all of these years."

Remembering what Neville told her about how Malfoy had helped track down Rabastan, Rodolphus, and Dolohov, Hermione sighed. "No, I suppose not."

"Are you going?"

She shrugged. "Neville is. He says he doesn't expect me to go, all things considering. I just . . . I'm not afraid of going to that house. I just don't want to be the Muggle-born spectacle. It's Astoria's wedding and I'm concerned that someone will make a fuss. Or that there'll be anti-Muggle-born wards draped up over the front door that'll burn my skin off if I step past the threshold."

Theo snorted. "You'll be fine, Hermione," he said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Things have changed. If anyone is going to still have issues with your blood status, they'll be passive aggressive about it all."

"Why Miss Granger, so impressive how you've landed a Ministry job, what with the poor circumstances of your birth," Hermione said mockingly.

Laughing, Theo shook his head. "At a wedding? It'll be more along the lines of, so Miss Granger, how are you adjusting to the demands and pressures of being betrothed to the Scion of an Ancient and Noble House?"

Hermione made a face. "Betrothed. Who says betrothed anymore?"

"If it'll make you feel better, you won't be the only Muggle-born in attendance."

She looked up, eyes bright. "Who?"

He grinned. "My date."

Her mouth opened, another question on the tip of her tongue but she was stopped from asking it when an office memo floated past Theo, landing on the side of her desk. She picked it up and smiled, recognising Neville's handwriting.

"Dirty love letters at work already?"

She shushed Theo as she read:

Hermione,

I know it's short notice, but I was wondering if you'd like to come with me to St. Mungo's tonight. I understand completely if you don't.

Love,

Neville

She swallowed hard. "Not love letters," she said. "I'm meeting the in-laws tonight."

Theo chuckled. "That's always fun and . . ." He stopped for a moment, understanding coming over him. "Oh. Well . . . not so much fun."

Chapter 18

September 28th, 2006

They arrived at St. Mungo's and gone was the confident Auror that she'd woken with, who smiled brightly at her with light in his eyes and moved her body with large hands as though she were as light as a feather. Now, Neville sat beside her in the waiting room, hunched shoulders, a furrowed brow, and a line on his forehead. It was often endearing to see the boy still there beneath the man, the boy she had grown up with who was sweet and clumsy and just a bit too awkward. But Hermione wouldn't have wished to see this version of Neville because of the reason.

He looked too much like Harry did whenever they visited Godric's Hollow.

Not war *heroes*, but war *orphans*.

They had arrived twenty minutes earlier and had been directed to a waiting room. "They do this a lot," Neville had told her. Since the residents of the Janus Thickey Ward were often unpredictable, it was easy to arrange a time to visit, but rarely did everything go according to plan. Neville had sunk into a large chair and picked up a near copy of Potions Quarterly, which told her immediately that he was shutting down, but also that this was a routine he was familiar with, even after being gone for so long.

"Come on," she said and stood up, reaching out for his hand. "They still might be a while and I have an idea."

Looking nervous but curious, Neville silently took her hand and followed as she led him out of the Janus Thickey Ward and down two floors to the Magical Bugs and Diseases floor, stepping into a ward set aside for young children who were recovering from Dragon Pox.

She smiled at the sight of seven beds lined up against each wall, filled to capacity since the pox had been going around lately. Easily cured these days, the children were quarantined with one another. Thankfully, the Ministry required their employees to be

vaccinated. The adorable green faced children were busy colouring in books, reading, and two were playing a broken game of Exploding Snap in the back, the cards having long lost their zip. Didn't make much of a difference, however, when every few minutes one of the children would sneeze and sparks would fly out of their nose.

"I don't understand," Neville said, looking at Hermione with a confused expression on his face.

She smiled and closed the door behind her, the sound drawing attention to them was followed by a collective gasp and their names.

"Holy Merlin! Hermione Granger!"

"Neville Longbottom! Wait until I tell my brother!"

"Is Harry Potter here, too?"

"I've never been so glad to be sick!"

Hermione grinned and turned around, smiling brightly at the children. "I happen to know," she said with a mischievous smirk, "that Healer Baldwin keeps a stash of Chocolate Frogs in his desk there in the corner."

All at once, the children jumped from their beds and made for the desk, climbing over one another to pry open the drawers. While they worked, she turned to Neville. "Harry, Ron, and I come by once a month or so. The Healer in charge keeps Chocolate Frogs in his desk so that we can sign them for the kids. It took some convincing to get Harry to agree to do it, but when he saw their faces light up . . . it's just the best feeling in the world."

Neville couldn't help but smile when a little girl in the back screamed, "I've got Neville Longbottom!" and then came running toward him, chocolate smeared across her smiling, green face, card held out in her hand only partially covered with sticky fingerprints. "Will you sign it, Auror Longbottom? Will you please?"

He blinked his eyes a few times and Hermione held her breath at the wetness there, hoping that she had done the right thing. Neville cleared his throat and then grinned. "Course I will," he said and then knelt down beside the girl. "What's your name?"

"Fauna Cooper, sir."

He glanced down at the young likeness of himself, Gryffindor's Sword in hand. He furrowed his brow a bit at the strange sight, but smiled anyway and reached over, snatching a quill from a crafts table nearby and signing his name across the card and then casting an Impervious Charm to keep it in place for the girl. "How old are you, Fauna?"

"I turn eleven in three weeks!" she said proudly.

Neville grinned. "Can you keep a secret?"

She nodded excitedly. "Yes, sir."

"I'll be seeing you at Hogwarts next year. Do you like plants?"

Her eyes brightened. "I have a sister named Flora, but she's just a baby. I like plants, though, even if I'm named Fauna. Are you going to be a teacher?" she asked in a very quiet whisper, remembering that he'd asked her to keep a secret.

Neville nodded. "I look forward to seeing you there. Get better, yeah?"

Looking up as Fauna rushed back to her bed, card clutched tightly in her hands, he saw Hermione being swarmed by a horde of young children. There were scattered Chocolate Frog cards on the ground and he could see several Professor Dumbledores, two Merlins, and a dropped Harry Potter card that one boy was trying to pick back up but couldn't get a grip.

"Everyone calm down," Hermione said. "I always keep extras." She reached into the beaded bag that Neville noticed she almost always kept with her and pulled out several stacks. "Right then, who's missing Harry and Ron?" A few hands went up, and Hermione passed out the cards. "And me? Who needs me?" Several more hands shot into the air.

I do, Neville thought to himself with a happy smile.

"Thank you," he said later on when they'd gone back up to the Janus Thickey Ward to find that the Healer still hadn't come back to tell them that his parents were ready for visitors. "I can't . . . Hermione, thank you."

She smiled brightly up at him, seeing the sparkle back in his eyes. "You're welcome. Now, let's go see your parents," she said, looking over his shoulder as a Healer stepped through the double doors. "Everything all right?"

The Healer nodded. "A bit. Neville, good to see you, m'boy."

"Healer Strout," Neville said with a small smile. "Are they having a bad day?"

The older witch sighed a bit. "Just your dad, bless him," she said. "He's lost some weight lately and isn't taking too kindly to the switch in diet. He's finishing up his meal now in the other room since we don't like everyone to eat at once. Cleaned up far too many messes that way," she said, looking at Hermione in explanation before turning back to Neville. "Your mum's all ready for visitors, though."

The Healer turned around and walked back through the double doors. When she turned left and went down a long hallway, Hermione frowned. "I thought . . . the last time I was here everyone was all in that one large room."

Neville gave her a small smile. "Donations helped to build on private rooms for everyone," he said, and Hermione noted the way he held his expression as though purposely trying to deny the fact that he was likely the main contributor to the extensions on the too cramped ward.

"Alice, love," Healer Strout said as they stepped into a large, clean room that had cream coloured walls with beige accents. There was a potted plant in the corner with large orange tiger lily-looking flowers growing out of the dark leaves, exotic and magical, the blossoms turned to face sound as though they were sentient. Hermione smiled at the sight knowing that only Neville would have brought in such a thing.

Neville's mother looked up as they entered the room, her white hair just as bright as the first time Hermione had seen it, so many years ago. It was still cut short, though the years had aged the witch in a way that made the cut very flattering to her thin face. She still had that blank expression that so many in the ward had, though her eyelids flickered briefly at the sight of her son and she instantly reached into a drawer near the side of her bed.

Hermione heard the crinkling sound of paper and then smiled sadly when the woman pulled out a sweet wrapper, reaching up and handing it to Neville.

He took it from her hand and then bent forward, placing a kiss to her knuckles. "I love you too, Mum," he said with a smile before stepping around Healer Strout and sitting down in the chair opposite his parents' bed.

The Healer gave Hermione a pat on the shoulder and whispered, "I'll go and see to his father," before leaving the room and closing the door softly behind her.

"Mum, this is Hermione," he said. "She and I went to Hogwarts together. We were both in Gryffindor."

Hermione smiled sweetly and sat down next to Neville. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs Longbottom."

"She likes to be called Alice."

"Alice," Hermione corrected and watched as a small hint of understanding crossed the woman's features. She turned and looked at Neville, watching with curious eyes as he poured his mother a glass of water, folding a napkin into precise squares before setting it down, turning the glass twice until a faded heart pattern faced Alice. "Things have to be in such a way?" she asked.

He merely nodded. "It keeps her happy," he said.

Alice drank from the glass deeply and then put it back down, turning it once until the pattern faced her properly again. The woman looked back to Neville and smiled, actually smiled, and Hermione's heart lit up with excitement. The witch she'd seen years earlier had so little recognition for anyone, she barely seemed a person at the time. It had broken Hermione's heart. But this . . . this seemed like improvement. Alice looked down at Neville's hands, one of which reached out for Hermione's. The woman took notice of the movement immediately, and her focus then drew to Hermione's hands, eventually spotting the ring. She reached out, snatching up Hermione's left hand, her lips parting in question at the sight.

Neville sat up straight and puffed his chest a bit. "Hermione and I are getting married. I hope it's okay . . . I gave her your ring."

Alice stared at the ring for a very long time in absolute silence and Hermione had begun to worry. What if she didn't like her? What if she didn't want Hermione to wear her ring? What if she lashed out or got upset? Or . . . or . . . or . . .

"Hmm," Alice said and then brought Hermione's hand up to touch her cheek, lightly rubbing the ring against her skin. Next to her, Neville let out a sigh of relief and Hermione did the same, taking Alice's actions as a good thing.

The door opened once more and Healer Strout frowned. "Neville? We're having a bit of . . . we're shorthanded."

Neville stood and stepped around Hermione's chair. "Do you need . . ." he began but then looked down at Hermione. "Can you . . . can you stay with her for a bit while I help with my dad?" he asked, looking torn and guilty over the request.

Hermione gently squeezed Alice's hand and nodded. "Of course. We're fine here," she said and then smiled at her future mother-in-law. "We're fine, aren't we Alice?" Alice ignored her except to examine the ring once again, turning it on Hermione's finger so that it was straight and positioned exactly upright.

Neville leant forward and kissed his mother and then Hermione on the forehead. "I'll be quick, I promise."

When the door shut, Alice released Hermione's hand and looked at the seat that Neville had left empty. She frowned and then opened her drawer once again, running the tips of her fingers against the wrappers there, closing her eyes as though the feel of them and the sound soothed her. Hermione frowned at the sight, wishing she knew Legilimency or some way of helping the woman communicate.

Hermione looked around the room, noticing all the photographs on the wall, most of Neville in various stages of his life. She stood, looking at Alice once to make sure her movement didn't disturb or upset the woman, before she walked around the room to look at the pictures.

There were many of Neville as a baby and a young toddler, all chubby cheeks and light-coloured hair that had darkened with age. There were many with Christmas decorations, the Longbottom family standing in front of a tree that had been put up in the ward, though it wasn't decorated, likely due to the danger that glass ornaments could cause. Augusta stood in several of the earlier photos, positioned between Alice and Frank and with

a hand on Neville's shoulder as though she had to hold him in place. No one smiled, and Neville looked either sad or uncomfortable in each photograph.

The newer photos were a dramatic difference, she noted. There was one that had to have taken place after the war, because she could see a small scar at the top of Neville's hairline on the left side of his face where he had been hit with falling glass during one of the attacks on Hogwarts. He still had a bit of roundness to his face and was wearing a brightly patterned Christmas sweater as he stood between his parents. His mother was holding his hand, and his father, Frank, seemed distracted by something off to the side of the camera as he kept walking forward and trying to grab at something that Hermione could not see. The newest pictures showed Neville in Auror robes with one arm thrown over his father's shoulder, and Alice's head leaning against him affectionately. Though his parents still had the same blank expressions on their faces, Neville was finally smiling.

Hermione wiped a tear from her cheek and sniffed at the sight before turning back at the sound of movement to see that Alice had sat back on her bed, drawer still hanging open nearby, and she was scratching at her chest, eyes closed, in a specific pattern as though it were an established compulsion. Not knowing what else to do, Hermione stepped in front of the woman. "Alice?" she asked softly. "Is everything all right?"

When the witch did not respond, Hermione sighed and then reached out, gently prying Alice's fingers away from her collar. "Are the buttons uncomfortable?" she asked. When no reply came, Hermione chewed her bottom lip and then tried to help by unbuttoning the top two buttons. Alice let out a sigh of relief but kept her eyes closed still.

Hermione, however, was holding her breath at the sight of the scar tissue presented before her. Small, dark purple cuts were layered on the skin; scars, a few swollen red from the recent scratching, and Hermione knew exactly what had inflicted them. "Oh my god," she whispered, her breath catching in her throat.

Alice opened her eyes and looked up, meeting Hermione's gaze.

After several minutes of absolute silence, Hermione whispered, "I understand," and lifted the sleeve of her blouse, turning her forearm up.

Alice carefully touched Hermione's scars with the tips of her fingers as though examining them for lingering Dark magic. When nothing happened, she stood up and walked around to the other side of the bed and pulled out a pair of small, puffy socks. She slipped the socks on her hands and then sat back down and began dragging the fluffy material over Hermione's arm, making soothing humming sounds while she did it.

Hermione's bottom lip began to quiver.

"She's a pretty one," Healer Strout said as she walked with Neville to the bathroom where they could hear the echo of things crashing. "Ministry mandated? Part of that whole . . . programme they've got going on?"

Neville nodded. "Yes, but . . . but I'm happy."

"You look it," Healer Strout said with a smile. "You staying in Britain then? Now that you're all grown and getting married?"

Shrugging, Neville didn't bother to mention that they'd be moving to Hogsmeade. St. Mungo's was an easy Floo trip away unlike when he'd have to take International Portkeys to come home every few months to visit. "We're staying local, yeah," he finally said as they approached the bathroom to find two Healers attempting to gently wash Frank Longbottom, who was fighting them off as though they were Death Eaters.

"Dad!" Neville called loudly.

Frank turned and looked at Neville and immediately dropped his arms from behind the young Healer, whose hair he'd been pulling.

"I've got him," Neville said, stepping forward and awkwardly embracing his father, doing his best to ignore his nakedness. "You get into a food fight with someone over dinner?" he asked as he reached for the wet flannel and began washing away bits of what looked to be gravy on his father's face and neck. "Got to get you nice and cleaned. I've a pretty girl I want you to meet," he said with a bright smile, ignoring the complaining—

understandably so—Healers as they dried themselves off with a flick of their wands and stepped out of the room.

When Neville and a fully cleaned and dressed Frank walked back into the room that Neville's parents shared, the young Auror stopped in the doorway, panicked at the sight in front of him. His mother sat on the bed and Hermione was beside her, curled up with her head in Alice's lap as the older witch continually stroked the scars on Hermione's arm. Hermione, however, had obviously been crying.

"Hermione?" Neville whispered as something painful pinched inside of his chest at the sight.

She looked up, eyes puffy and red and immediately wiped the back of her hand across her face. "Oh, sorry . . . I umm . . ." She sat up quickly and sniffed loudly. "I'm fine, I'm fine," she said, noticing the concerned look on Neville's face. She reached for a napkin and blew her nose, tossing the tissue in the bin before standing up and running her hands down the length of her skirt.

"Umm . . . Hermione, this is my dad."

She gave the older man a watery smile. "It's nice to meet you, sir."

Frank looked at her, reached out and touched her hair, and then stepped around her to crawl into bed beside his wife before falling almost instantly asleep.

Hermione turned and pressed her forehead against Neville's chest and sighed when he wrapped his arms around her. "I'm okay," she whispered. "Good tears," she said. "Tears of relief. It's . . . no one else knows what it was like. No one else."

Neville held her closer and tighter until she squeezed him around the middle and let him bury his nose in her hair. He didn't even let her go when his mother stood up and approached them, pulling on Hermione's sleeve until one hand was freed. She then placed a small sweet wrapped in the middle of Hermione's palm and forced her fingers closed before turning around and sitting back on the bed.

Kissing the top of her head, Neville whispered. "I think they like you."

Hermione nodded and nuzzled her cheek against his chest. "Nev?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think we could get married here?"

He pulled away from her and stared down, eyes wide. "W-what? Here? In St. Mungo's? Hermione, you couldn't possibly—"

"My parents didn't get to come to my wedding before," she said softly. "Harry's didn't . . . and . . . your parents are alive and they love you. They should be at our wedding and they should be comfortable." She looked up at him, determination in her eyes. "We agreed, didn't we? Family only. Well . . . this . . . you are my family now."

"Are you sure?" he asked nervously, suddenly so excited about the idea that he was afraid to get his hopes up now that it had been thrown out there. He had never imagined the possibility of his parents being present when he got married, always assuming that he would have to bring photographs by later on.

She nodded. "Please give this to me?" she asked him as though it were about her and not about . . . not *for* him.

"I'll give you anything you want," he finally said before kissing her. After a few moments, smiling against her lips, he stepped back and brought her hand to his mouth, kissing the fingers that were still curled around the sweet wrapper within. He met her eyes, swallowed hard, and quietly said, "I love you."

Hermione beamed up at him brightly, fresh tears in her eyes, and opened his hand, placing the wrapper within it before standing on the tips of her toes to kiss him again.

Chapter 19

October 7th, 2006

"Auror Longbottom," Narcissa Malfoy greeted as they walked into the large ballroom of Malfoy Manor. The blond witch was the image of perfection as always and kept a composed smile on her face that Hermione was certain would stay in place long after the wedding and reception were over, likely magicked there with some sort of spell. The Blacks were adept at Sticking Charms, she reminded herself.

"Former Auror," Neville said politely, barely brushing the back of Narcissa Malfoy's hand with his breath, never actually letting his lips touch skin. Still, he felt Hermione's grip on his elbow tighten. "Mrs Malfoy, your home is lovely," he said as he stood back up. "I was pleased to receive an invitation. This is my fiancée, Hermione Granger."

"We've met," Hermione said stiffly, but smiled anyway.

Narcissa regarded the younger witch with that same polite, stuck smile but the obvious recognition flashed in her eyes. Still, she said nothing. Made no mention of how Hermione had been tortured in her home by her own sister, nor did she acknowledge that the same sister had all but murdered Neville's parents. Talk of war would likely be impolite and uncouth in the upper circles of Wizarding society, and talk of what happened during war would be even more so.

"I heard of your engagement. Not in the paper of course," Narcissa said, turning her nose up just slightly enough to make her opinion about the Daily Prophet evident. "You both look quite happy."

"We are," Hermione said and squeezed Neville's arm extra tight as Lucius Malfoy approached.

"Pardon me, dear," he said, kissing Narcissa on the cheek, "but Draco has requested us." He looked up, his grey eyes meeting Hermione's first and then Neville's. Unlike his wife, Lucius Malfoy did briefly break his stiff facade at the sight of the young witch. "Miss

Granger," he said, his tone one of surprise. "Please," the man took a step back, noticing that he'd been blocking the doorway. "Welcome to our home."

"Welcome," she scoffed later as she sipped her first glass of champagne, but only after subtly casting diagnostic spells over the drink, just in case.

Neville remained glued to her side until the last moment when Hermione held her head high in a way that told the entire room to watch her as she stomped through the house of her nightmares, crushing the past beneath her black fuck me heels while aristocrats, purebloods, society witches, and government officials watched in awe, shock, and amusement.

After the drawn out ceremony filled with old blood rituals and bonding vows that Neville recalled reading about in one of his grandmother's old books on pureblood traditions and etiquette, he met up with Draco by the open bar. He watched Hermione, still across the room, gesturing wildly with her hands to the head of the D.R.C.M.C. as she pummeled the poor man with the latest statistics regarding the benefits of providing a welfare-based programme to werewolves that included giving them free Wolfsbane Potion each month. When she actually dragged the man to the nearest window and pointed at the full moon, her brows furrowed in righteous anger, Neville adjusted his trousers.

"Keep staring at her like that and she'll get pregnant from across my ballroom."

Neville chuckled and watched as the man behind the bar quickly filled Draco's empty glass. "Lovely ceremony."

Draco grinned smugly, taking a quick look around the magnificent ballroom in approval. "Malfoys don't do anything by half measures."

Nodding, Neville scanned the room once more, keeping a casual eye on Hermione and any person that happened to look at her oddly. Thankfully, those who were not watching his fiancée with amused interest, had their gaze on the newly minted Astoria Malfoy, who walked with grace around the ballroom, arm in arm with Narcissa as they greeted guests. "Your new wife looks happy," he noted.

Draco gave a stiff nod and then pretended to sip at his glass of firewhisky at an angle that actually allowed a decent gulp. "My *parents* look happy," he corrected.

"Was she even a match?" Neville asked, turning his body in toward his friend so that they actually looked comfortable speaking to one another rather than strangers passing by, awkwardly stuck making small talk.

"Course not," the Slytherin replied, the scoff that came on the end of his answer told Neville all he needed to know about what his friend thought about the matching. "The ones who were wouldn't have . . ." Draco began to say, his eyes flickering once across the room before turning back to his glass. "They wouldn't have liked being married to me."

Neville snorted. "Meaning your parents wouldn't have liked them."

Draco did not answer, but instead raised his glass in toast before drinking down the rest of it and placed it back on the counter, tapping the side of it twice with two fingers and watching as the bartender refilled it. "I'm sure your grandmother was pleased, brightest witch of our year and all."

Hermione had moved on, her attention now turned to Kingsley Shacklebolt. The Minister for Magic had been invited as a political move, no doubt, another way for the Malfoys to reestablish a good standing and reputation associated with their name. Neville had shared many a conversation about it over the years, usually over a bottle of bärenjäger. Neville cared little for how people saw him, only how he saw himself. Hermione likely didn't even care about that. Considering she had her hand on the forearm of the Minister and a determined look in her eye, the same one she used when scolding Harry and Ron. The Aurors surrounding the Minister looked nervous, as though they were waiting to see if Hermione would hex Kingsley if he said the wrong thing to her.

"I love her."

Draco rolled his eyes and turned back to the bartender. "Another drink for my associate."

"Friend," Neville corrected. "You think you'll love Astoria?"

Sighing, Draco adjusted the collar of his dress robes, his attention drawn to the lithe little blonde hanging on his mother's arm like a lady in waiting. "I think marrying her made my mother happy," he said quietly, a tone of genuine affection, but weighted with something heavy and burdensome. "That's what matters, isn't it? Upheld the family name, abided by the

ridiculous Ministry protocols, and there's a good chance that tomorrow's *Daily Prophet* might say *Malfoy Heir Weds Pureblood a Princess* instead of *Disgraced Former Death Eater Wastes Family Fortune*."

Neville frowned. "No one's stopping you from telling the truth about what you've been doing all these years,"

"I don't owe the media a damn thing," Draco said with a leftover sneer from his youth.

Just then, a bright flash obscured their vision and both wizards had their wands in hand, instincts leftover from a war long ended. They both sighed irritably at the sight of the photographer staring at them, eyes wide and camera in hand, looking terrified as both men narrowed their eyes at him.

"Oh good," Draco snarled. "Former *Death Eater Interrogated by Hero Auror at Own Wedding*."

Unable to stop himself, Neville laughed and clapped Draco on the shoulder, hoping to control a bit of the caption that would likely run next to the ridiculous picture that had just been taken. When the photographer vanished, he turned his attention back to his friend. "Out of curiosity, when are you going to stop living your life to make your parents happy?"

Draco frowned. "When I have a son," he said very quietly. "Then I'll live my life to make *him* happy."

Neville smiled. "Anyone ever tell you you're a bit of a sap?"

"Yes," Draco said, finishing off his refill and setting the glass aside entirely, "but this sap will be going to bed with that gentle creature." He pointed to Astoria who was laughing sweetly as Lucius took her by the hand and led her to the centre of the dance floor. Draco returned Neville's clap on the shoulder and smirked at the man. "Try not to choke on all of Granger's hair tonight."

Laughing, Neville made his way across the room, sidestepping Pansy Zabini, who had been eying him all night as though she had not been a complete horror in school. Neville sighed; at least Draco had the decency to buy him a drink before pretending he had never been a bully.

"Is this gentleman bothering you, love?" Neville said to Hermione, gesturing to Kingsley, who threw his head back and laughed loudly, drawing the attention of Narcissa Malfoy; the blond witch looked none too pleased with the ruckus.

"Your lovely bride, Longbottom, has long been both a thorn in my side and the best thing to ever happen to my Ministry reforms," Kingsley insisted, smiling down at Hermione before returning his attention back to Neville. "You, on the other hand, have left me bereft of a proper Auror. When do you start at Hogwarts?"

Neville smiled. "Start of the year. Professor Sprout intends this to be her last term, so I'll be shadowing her for the next few months before completely taking over."

Hermione turned and beamed up at him proudly. "You'll be a wonderful professor, Neville."

"He was a wonderful Auror," Kingsley insisted. "Will you leave me too? Minerva's been poaching my employees for years. I know she's tried stealing Potter away for the Defence position."

Hermione snorted. "Harry loves his job too much. I think he'd prefer you as his boss to Minerva, Minister."

"Speaking of Harry," Kingsley said, looking around. "You would think that the Malfoys would assume having him attend the wedding would be decent public relations."

Neville grinned and stifled a chuckle as Hermione lifted her chin. "Oh they did," she said. "Harry sent the owl back with an invitation to his wedding. Needless to say, Malfoy and Harry agreed it was better for all parties to just stay away."

Kingsley furrowed a brow. "Am I missing something?"

"Harry might have misled Draco in thinking that he and Hannah were getting married at the Burrow," Neville said with a laugh. "Forcing polite company is something the Malfoys can do, but putting them in the same space as a room full of Weasleys? Never going to happen."

Kingsley nodded. "I doubt the real location would be much better. I received my invitation yesterday," he said with a smile. "Not quite the press I would have preferred, but I

understand why many of you want to stay a bit low key with your weddings. It's not the ceremonies that need to impress the Wizengamot, after all," he sighed, "it's the results."

Hermione stiffened a little at the words and Neville took immediate notice. "Will you excuse us, Kingsley? I realised that I haven't offered this lovely witch a proper dance."

They quickly stepped onto the dance floor, and Hermione smiled and laughed as Neville lifted her off of her feet, twirling her about every few steps, all in time with the music. "I'm impressed," she said. "And just a bit . . ." she began to say but stopped, shyly wetting her lower lip.

Neville pulled her tight against his chest, her small hand still held within his own as they swayed to the music. "You want to get out of here?" he quietly suggested.

Hermione thought for a moment, casting a glance across the room at the Malfoys before narrowing her gaze and returning it to Neville, a devious smirk on her lips. "No," she said. "This Muggle-born witch wants to find some dark corner where her handsome blood-traitor fiancé can snog her senseless."

They slipped down the long stretch of hallway and past a bunch of expensive looking paintings on the wall, some of which moved and others that stood motionless as though they were charmed into such perfect stillness while still carrying on a purely magical life in the paint. The flickering lights dimmed the further they disappeared, and Hermione let out a soft giggle when Neville tugged on her hand and pulled her around a corner and into a darkened alcove.

She moaned against his lips, still feeling soft bubbles from earlier champagne in the back of her mouth as he teased her tongue with his own, letting his hands wander down her hips and over the soft fabric of her dress that clung delicately to her backside. She tilted her head back and quietly laughed again when she felt the tips of his fingers search out the outline of her knickers on the side of her hip.

"I didn't do enough of this in school," she whispered in between kisses. "Sneaking off."

Neville scoffed. "You sneaked off plenty."

"Not for this," she said with a happy sigh, feeling closer to seventeen than twenty-seven. "Never to just . . . this."

He lifted her off of the ground and bunched up the skirt of her dress until her legs spread wide enough to wrap around his waist. Pinning her to the wall, Neville planted his mouth on her and held her close, doing nothing more than kissing her desperately with the occasional rocking of his hips into hers, hints of things to come later.

"Mmm . . . Oh!" Hermione quietly mewled and then gasped when she heard a deeper echoing moan that did not come from either her or her wizard. "Nev . . . Neville, do you hear that?" she whispered.

Running his lips over her jaw, Neville ground himself against her hips once more. "Hear what?"

Footsteps. Fumbled footsteps. And more moaning.

Hermione's eyes widened. "Neville, someone's coming."

Neville pulled his mouth away from her neck just in time to brace himself as another couple crashed into him from behind. The darkness did not help anyone from untangling limbs and righting clothing, so Neville just did his best to shield Hermione with his body. "Oi! Find your own alcove!" he said into the darkness.

"Neville?"

Hermione gasped and pulled her wand from its secreted holster against her thigh, lighting a silent Lumos. Her mouth fell open at the sight in front of her. Two very dishevelled wizards stood in front of her, robes wrinkled, lips swollen, and hair in such disarray that Harry might have teased them. It was not their state, however, that had Hermione's eyes bulging in shock, but who they were.

"Dennis!?"

Dennis Creevey had scarcely grown in the years since the war. Still stalk thin and a bit short in stature, the boy turned man still retained more of his youth than many she knew. There was, of course, the lingering lines of war that labelled them all battle-worn. Dennis still had a deep scar peeking out from the left side of his hairline where he'd fallen in the final battle, refusing to be healed because he wouldn't leave Colin's body.

The scar had faded over the years, and Dennis had traded his awkwardly adorable baby face for tousled blond hair, bright eyes, and a dark-haired Theo Nott currently grinning with an arm wrapped around his waist. "Hermione?!" her fellow Muggle-born squeaked.

Neville's mouth fell open. "Dennis?"

Hermione turned her attention to the Slytherin who was looking far too smug. "Theo!"

Theo chuckled, pulling Dennis tighter against him. "Granger. Lovely wedding, isn't it?"

"You . . . Dennis?"

Dennis cleared his throat and ran a nervous hand through his hair before attempting to untangle himself from Theo. The Slytherin, however, had turned boa constrictor, refusing to part with his prize. "Hi . . . umm . . . been a while, yeah?" Dennis said, blushing darkly. "How've you been? I mean, I know you're engaged because I ran into Harry last week and he told me all about you and Neville and Oh! He said you're going to be a Hogwarts professor next year? Taking over for—"

"Dennis?" Hermione said, interrupting him, gobsmacked. She looked at Theo. "Dennis is your . . . your . . ."

"Well, he's not my house-elf," Theo said with a smirk. "Near in size, though."

Dennis rolled his eyes and sighed dramatically. "Very funny."

Neville laughed and then just smiled, holding a hand out to his former Housemate. "I have no words. Umm . . . good to see you?" he said, shaking Dennis's hand and then giving a nod in greeting to Nott. "What umm . . . what have you been doing lately, Dennis?"

Theo grinned darkly and Dennis's eyes widened. He turned and threw a hand over Theo's mouth and the man could be heard chuckling from behind the palm. "Don't. Please."

Hermione's cheeks turned bright pink. "Oh my god."

Dennis looked back at her and shrugged awkwardly. Theo, however, was delighted. "It's amazing," he said. "She just shuts right up. Do you think she'd go permanently mute if I told her that we were late to the wedding because I was sucking you off in the—"

Her eyes widened even further and she shouted, "Oh my god!"

"Relax, Granger, it's just sex," Theo said, finally letting go of Dennis and sticking his hands in the pockets of his robes, but not before first adjusting Dennis's collar affectionately. "Nothing worse than you and Longbottom have done, I imagine." Theo paused and looked up, glancing over Neville's body with interest. "And I *could* imagine. Longbottom, you're looking . . . *quite* well."

"Oi!" Dennis snapped at the same time that Hermione shouted a disgruntled, "Hey!"

Neville smiled, his face flushing a bit and he toed the floor. "Umm . . . thank you?"

"How did this even happen?" Hermione asked, ignoring Theo's further attempts to flirt with Neville in order to rile her up.

"Oh, you know how it is, Hermione," Theo said with a sigh and leant against the wall of the alcove, draping a lazy arm over Dennis's shoulders. "Gryffindors and Muggle-borns. My father would have hated it. I think he might have inadvertently developed a taboo fetish for me."

Dennis snorted. "What Theo means to say is that we were introduced by a friend."

Neville couldn't help but wonder how many friends people like Theo and Dennis actually had in common. He said nothing aloud, however, deciding instead to just smile for the pair. "Wow. I . . . we're happy for you, Dennis."

The younger wizard grinned and reached up, lacing his fingers with Theo's. "Thanks. I'm happy," he said with that same youthful excitement that had thankfully stuck with him through the years. His smile faded somewhat after a beat. "So long as the Ministry stays out of our business."

Theo nodded stiffly, but said nothing further of his distaste, only sharing a small nod of understanding with Hermione. "Speaking of which, when's the big day for the pair of you?"

Hermione swallowed. "Soon."

"Two weeks," Neville added.

Dennis smiled, a small hint of sadness behind it. "Wow. I'm really happy for you both," he said, and Neville noticed that he squeezed Theo's fingers a bit when he spoke. "At least something good came from this matching nonsense, yeah?"

Neville frowned and reached out for Hermione's hand and felt something squeeze inside of his chest when she held onto him. *Lucky*. Gods, he was lucky. Lucky that not only he had been matched with the most brilliant witch to ever live, but that he loved her and she loved him and they were allowed to be together.

Chapter 20

October 14th, 2006

Hermione smiled, tears in her eyes as she looked across the small aisle that had been formed out of bar stools, standing up near the counter where Tom dabbed at his own eyes while Hannah chuckled good-naturedly, handing her boss a handkerchief that was passed over from Harry.

With Harry's new promotion, it was easy enough to pass off the secret wedding as a private party to celebrate, toasting to Harry's much talked about career. Tom closed the doors to the Leaky Cauldron, read an old book of really, terrible poetry, and then looked over a crinkled piece of parchment that had been stuffed in his pockets, specific instructions on how to properly marry a couple. When Kingsley asked Harry and Hannah if they'd like *him* to marry them, Tom had interrupted, asking the Minister for Magic if he happened to have a pub available for last minute weddings because, if not, then *Tom* would be in charge. "My pub, *my* rules," the man had insisted, and Hannah had rubbed his shoulder affectionately and kissed his cheek as though he were her father, giving her away.

War had torn families apart, and Harry and Hannah's wedding was proof enough of that. Without biological parents there to stand for either, Sirius and Remus naturally stood in for James and Lily Potter, whilst Minerva and Pomona stood for Hannah. It was a simple enough ceremony, and despite lacking in a significant amount of Weasleys—most had agreed that abandoning Ginny alone at the Burrow would be hurtful—there were plenty of interruptions from the few guests that had shown up. Tonks slipped and fell thirty seconds into Tom's first poem and then Teddy spent the next ten minutes giggling under his breath at his mother's expense. Remus scolded Sirius when the man tried to make an innuendo during the vows, and Pomona Sprout burst into happy tears—*loud* tears—when the couple had been pronounced husband and wife.

Hermione shed a few of her own, her joy for Harry overwhelming, but a part of her lingering on the sight of Ron standing opposite her, remembering their own wedding and how hopeful it had seemed—stressful, but hopeful. It was bittersweet, watching him from across aisle as they stood on either side of Harry and Hannah. Hermione anxiously rubbed at Alice Longbottom's ring that now sat on her fingers. Her gaze locked on Ron doing the same, rubbing the thick gold band on his own finger.

Mandy Brocklehurst—now Weasley—hadn't been able to get the time off from St. Mungo's to attend the wedding. With so many marrying so quickly, most businesses were hardly feeling generous to give their employees a night off every other day to attend one wedding or another, and the hospital was certainly no different.

"Lucky they gave her time off for our own," Ron had said when he explained why his wife of four days was absent from the party.

Hermione and Neville had naturally stayed home for the event. She had heard all about the grand affair the next day; nearly everyone she'd ever met had been there. Molly, perhaps to spite Ginny and Oliver, had thrown the grandest wedding the Burrow had ever seen, the tents overflowing into the orchard and one actually toppling over into the pond if what Fred and George said could be taken as truth. There had been laughter and dancing and an enormous amount of food. The Weasley matriarch had outdone herself and a part of Hermione wondered if Molly was trying to make up for the fact that two couples that had been married at the Burrow previously had eventually divorced. Superstitions in the Wizarding world were centuries old, and a giant wedding the likes of which that no one would ever forget would likely wash away the memories of failed marriages that came before it.

Hermione and Neville ordered take away and spent the night looking through adverts for houses in Hogsmeade that Minerva had scrounged up for them. They had fallen in love with a photograph of a small cottage that sat just behind the village, far enough away that students would not go trespassing through their front garden, but close enough that they would still be able to see Hogwarts from their front window. It helped ease the discomfort of feeling left out of the festivities. Hermione had wanted to be there with her friends, but

attending her ex-husband's wedding—amicably split or not—just felt uncomfortably awkward.

"Best wedding I've been to so far," Hermione stated, raising a glass in toast to Harry and Hannah.

"You should have seen Megan Jones's wedding," Hannah said. "She married Cassius Warrington and his parents bought out every flower shop in Kent, magical *and* Muggle. The whole place looked like a botanical garden."

Hermione smiled and watched as Neville rolled his eyes a bit, knowing his opinion on the uselessness of cutting flowers. Harry cleared his throat and chuckled quietly. "Though, while I didn't attend myself," he said. "I heard that Luna showed up at the Ministry to her own wedding wearing a wreath made out of candied oranges . . . and nothing else."

"Lucky Flint," Ron said with a laugh. "Barmy old girl, our Luna. Can't believe the poor thing ended up with a Slytherin."

"Don't be so quick to judge. Tracey Davis is a good friend of mine," Hannah said with a slight frown. "I went to her wedding last week to Adrian Pucey. It was quite beautiful, though nothing like the Malfoys. Not that we'd seen it ourselves," she said and then teasingly elbowed Harry in the ribs.

He chuckled. "I was *polite* in declining the invitation. I didn't even once tell him to shove it up his arse," he insisted, and Hannah rolled her eyes but then gave him a feigned look of adoring pride.

"I did," Sirius chimed in with a grin. "Of course, I sent *my* RSVP to Lucius."

"You didn't miss much," Hermione told them, unaware of the way Ron's eyes widened at her declaration. "It was lovely, of course, but hardly a celebration. Felt more like a Ministry Ball than a wedding at times considering half of the guests ended up mingling and discussing politics. Good champagne, though."

"Great champagne," Neville added with a grin. "And good company."

Hermione laughed, remembering running into poor Dennis, his hair in disarray and lips swollen pink. "You wouldn't believe who we literally ran into during the reception when—"

"Wait . . . what . . ." Ron began. "'Mione, you went to *Malfoy's* wedding?"

She looked up, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment that came automatically, though she didn't even know why. "Oh umm . . . yes. He's . . . we were invited," she simply said, reaching out and taking Neville's hand for support, knowing already that Ron's issues with Malfoy were practically bred into him from birth and no amount of explaining could make him see sense when it came to the family of former Death Eaters. "I actually was able to speak with the Head of the D.R.C.M.C., Remus," she said, turning the conversation away from Ron entirely. "He's asked me to put together a proposal for a Wolfsbane Humanitarian Project that he'll consider taking before the Wizengamot."

Remus smiled kindly at her and Tonks leant across the table and kissed Hermione's cheeks. Everyone carried on with various conversations while Ron sat there, jaw hanging open in shock.

"I'll go and fetch some more drinks," Hermione said, noting that the pitchers were nearly empty. Tom was snoozing in a corner next to Hagrid, who was chattering to him about something, one eyelid half closed, clearly unaware that his companion was asleep. Hermione wasn't about to let Hannah serve at her own wedding reception, so she stood up and squeezed past Neville, who cheekily pinched her arse when no one was looking.

She grinned but swatted him on the arm and laughed as she made her way to the bar, barely hearing Ron's polite offer to assist and then the sound of his chair squeaking as he pushed away from the table to stand.

"Don't start," she said quietly the very moment he reached her side, her tone uncomfortably reminiscent of one that had taken root during the last six months of their marriage. Already she could feel the tension building in her shoulders and crawling up the back of her neck to settle in her temples.

"'Mione."

"And don't '*Mione* me."

"Malfoy?! He took you to *Malfoy's* wedding? What the hell is Neville thinking? Bloke's completely lost the plot!"

She turned and hissed, actually baring her teeth at her ex-husband and lifelong friend as she carefully poured beer into the empty pitchers from the tap. "Keep your voice down," she scolded. "And Neville didn't drag me kicking and screaming, I'll have you know. He explained that Draco—"

"Draco?" Ron asked, his face twisting up into an expression of shocked disgust. "Did you just . . . he's *Draco* now?"

"—invited us to the wedding. He told me all about it and said that it would be my choice as to whether or not I attended. I chose to go of my own free will, and I actually had a good time."

"You had a good time? In Malfoy Manor?" His words were laced with bitterness and incredulity, anger from things he was unable to let go of that Hermione was more than happy to try and put under heel.

She narrowed her eyes. "I didn't panic," she insisted. "I was perfectly fine. I am not some weak little thing that's in need of protection from something that happened ten years ago."

Ron shook his head and ran a hand through messy ginger locks. "'Mione . . . I get that you want to be strong, and damn . . . you're the strongest bloody person I've ever met. But you had nightmares . . . all the time. I'd wake up terrified because you'd be screaming in your sleep."

"I haven't had a nightmare in a long time," she said quietly.

He sighed, weariness and frustration making him look much older than twenty-six. "Yeah well . . . you didn't always remember, y'know? You'd have them . . . night terror things and if I didn't wake you up, you'd just—"

"I haven't had any in a long time," she reiterated. "I . . . Neville would tell me, I'd think."

The implication was there and obvious and Ron looked away instantly, discomfort crossing his features. "Oh . . . so you umm . . . you're living together already?"

She shrugged. "Sort of. We're moving into a house in Hogsmeade in a few weeks." She sighed and set the pitchers of beer on the counter in front of him, silently telling him

that he'd be playing server when their conversation was finished. "Ron, you're married to Mandy, and I'm marrying Neville next week."

"I know. It's just . . . it's not even that. I've hated blokes looking the wrong way at you since Vicky bloody Krum," he said with a pout. "And . . . you went to . . . *that place* . . . you'd rather go to that place where it all happened, to attend *Malfoy's* bloody wedding . . . but you didn't come to mine."

Hermione frowned. "A part of me wanted to be there. You're still one of my best friends, Ron, and I'm so happy for you and Mandy. But it's weird, you know it is. That and . . . if I'd gone to the Burrow for your wedding, I would be the sad ex-wife. 'Oh, remember how pretty the last wedding was? Shame that' they'd say. People would stare at me like I was someone to be pitied."

He looked up, his brow furrowed. "And at Malfoy's wedding?"

She actually grinned. "Lucius Malfoy looked terrified that I was about to walk into his house. I don't think it had a thing to do with my blood status," she said. "I walked on those floors where I bled and screamed and I *dared* anyone to think me a victim."

He couldn't help but sadly smile at her words. "I'm glad . . . but . . ." the frown returned, "but Neville still shouldn't have—"

"Ronald," she snapped quickly, cutting him off. "Have I ever given you the impression that I'm the type of witch who'd do a single thing a man asked me to if I didn't want to?"

Without another word, they walked back to the table and gave everyone refills.

When the pitcher in her hand hovered over Neville's glass, he put his palm up to stop her. "I'm drinking water from here on out," he said with a sweet smile that she was beginning to note was something he'd perfected over the years to hide a smirk that lingered beneath the surface. His eyes sparkled with amusement and the wonder of what potential awful, filthy, wondrous, blissful things could be running through his mind made something twist delightfully between her thighs.

She passed the pitcher of beer down the table and rolled her eyes in amusement when Neville tugged her hand until she ended up perched on his knee. Hannah laughed, Harry

rolled his eyes, and Sirius muttered under his breath that Neville was likely to end up hexed for being so cheeky. Hermione ignored them all and kissed his cheek, whispering, "No beer?"

He shook his head. "I want to be sober when we get back to my flat."

She bit her lower lip, hiding her face in the crevice of his neck. Their friends likely thought she was embarrassed over the public display of affection. If only they knew. "What do you have planned for us?"

Neville smiled his sweet smile across the table when their friends giggled happily, and then leant close, rubbing his nose against the shell of her ear. "Are you tired?" She shook her head and he smiled. "You will be tomorrow."

Chapter 21

October 14th, 2006

They hugged and kissed their friends, wishing Hannah and Harry the best luck in their marriage. With little time available, the couple had opted to take a few days off of work and set up their new home, a new flat in Diagon Alley near the Leaky. Once Hermione and Neville had said their last farewells after watching Hannah and Harry Floo to their new home, they stepped into the green flames of the fireplace and headed to Neville's flat.

He had not unpacked everything after returning to Britain, which made it much easier to get everything sent to their new home in Hogsmeade. The furniture, however, was left behind. As was practically habit now, one look from Neville after stepping out of the Floo, and Hermione began undressing, leaving her clothing in a pool at her feet.

After lighting the lamps in the room, Neville turned and took a few long strides to get back to her, cupping her face in his hands before pressing his mouth against hers as though he'd been fighting the urge to kiss her, take her, fuck her all night long and was ready to snap. When she moaned against his lips, Neville swept her up into his arms without breaking their kiss, letting the fingers of one hand press between the back of her thighs, lightly brushing against the exposed apex.

Neville took her toward the small dining room and placed her down on the far end of a long table. "I like your table better," he told her. "But I wanted to get some use out of this one before it gets packed away." He was grinning excitedly, like a boy with his first broomstick, desperate for the chance to ride it.

Parting from her for only a moment, Neville rushed back to his bedroom and returned with a small bundle of items, folded within a long strip of deep blue fabric. He began unwrapping his tools and then looked up to spot Hermione eying them curiously. With a small smirk, he reached up and turned her away by touching two fingers to her chin, preventing her from staring. "Surprise," he muttered.

She chewed on her lip anxiously, legs shaking with anticipation as she watched him fold the fabric over several times before laying it across the table.

"Up," Neville said and reached for her hands, directing her to kneel on the table with her knees placed on the fabric for her comfort. Once there, on her hands and knees, Neville sighed and traced his fingers over her spine and then back over the gentle curve of her arse. "Are you all right to be tied?" he asked.

Hermione thought about the question, gauging her current emotional and mental state before nodding her head. "Yes, I'll be fine," she assured him.

Neville smiled and then moved to her head, kissing the top of her hair, which was pulled back into a soft braid that hung over her shoulder. Pulling linen rope from the side of a chair that was out of Hermione's eyesight, he began wrapping it around her wrists in a complex series of knots, wrapping the long ends of the rope over the edge of the table, securing each to the legs below. "Tight enough?" he asked.

Hermione gave each rope a tug and then nodded, smiling when Neville placed her wand in her hand, as was now customary—a sign that, safe word or not, Hermione had the ability to free herself if she truly needed to.

He kissed her then, one hand against her cheek, the other gently tugging at her braid. Tongues stroked one another slowly, liberally, until both were gasping for air. Hermione sucked in a deep breath while Neville pressed his lips against her throat and then to the back of her neck, kissing and licking his way down her back, trailing his fingers against the underside of her breasts. With very little pressure to the top of her spine, Neville directed her to bend forward, pressing her chest against the flat of the table, keeping her arse and hips in the air.

"Perfect girl," he said and then struck the backs of her thighs with his open palm swiftly before moving up to do the same to each cheek. He listened to her carefully as she hissed through the initial pain, flinching a few times but saying nothing. It wasn't more than ten smacks before her shoulders noticeably relaxed and she let out a quiet moan of pleasure. "Perfect," he whispered again.

He shifted behind her completely and remained absolutely quiet as he slowly disrobed, having remembered her mentioning once or twice over how the sounds enticed her, provoked her curiosity and made the anticipation that much more unbearable. Once fully naked, Neville gripped his cock in hand and stroked it to its full length, closing his eyes and relishing the feel for a moment. Releasing himself, he put one hand each on the back of her thighs, brushing against the tender red skin lightly before pushing them apart, baring her wet centre to him, and lowering her arse to a more desirable level. Once she was at the perfect place, he stepped forward and let her feet his length pushed against her core, thankful that his height allowed him access to a variety of surfaces like this.

"Please," Hermione said, pushing her hips back against him.

Neville chuckled. "Not yet. I'd get comfortable, sweetheart, if I were you."

It was going to be a long night.

Neville kissed one hip at the same time as he brushed his fingers against the outside of her folds. "This is such a beautiful body," he told her. "Who does it belong to?"

She let out the softest little indignant snort and the sound made him grin. A complete submission from Hermione Granger was never something he saw as appealing. Her fire was what made her so perfectly her. Still, it was fun to play and he enjoyed the way that she moaned, "It's yours. Your body," moments later.

"Who do these toes belong to?" he asked, smiling when she wiggled the tiny appendages.

"You."

"And these breasts? These perfect breasts? Who do they belong to?" he asked, walking back around to her side, touching the skin around each nipple lightly as they pressed against the table.

"You."

In front of her, Neville lifted her gently by the chin until she was looking up at him. He smiled affectionately down at her and ran the pad of his thumb over her bottom lip. "And these lips? Who do they belong to?"

Hermione smiled. "You," she said, turning to kiss his thumb.

"Can I kiss them?"

"Yes."

Neville licked his own lips. "Can I fuck them?"

Hermione whimpered and her eyes dilated with want, only slightly embarrassed at how utterly affected she was whenever Neville used crass language. "Oh, yes."

Pressing his thumb between her lips, Neville held back a groan as she sucked the digit into her mouth, laving it almost expertly with her tongue. He watched, fascinated, as she closed her eyes up until he pulled it out, wet and shiny from her saliva. He smiled down at her. "Maybe later."

Stepping back around to his position behind her, he ran one hand against her lower back and arse before using his still wet thumb to circle the one place he'd yet to fuck her. Hermione's body tensed at the touch and he smiled, rubbing her back again while still moving his thumb. "Don't worry," he assured her. "I won't . . . not tonight. But soon." His smile turned into a full grin when she relaxed and shivered at his words. He wouldn't enter her, not there, not tonight, but that didn't rule out playing with her quite a bit.

He remained completely silent as he worked her. Teasing his fingers with one hand between her wet folds while circling and gently pressing inside of her with the thumb of the other hand. "Perfect," he said while rubbing her centre, using his fingers to part her open for his viewing pleasure. "You have the most . . . you're pussy is beautiful, Hermione." She shifted uncomfortably but he held her in place. "Don't do that. You're beautiful, every bit of you."

Her face was red at his praise and she tried to hide her expression by pressing her cheek down flat against the table, regardless of the fact that he couldn't see her from where he was standing. Arms tied down at her sides and completely on display—on his dining table at that!—her vulnerability was creeping up to an all-time high, outside of the war at least. Still, she bit her lower lip, desire and curiosity always winning out against any discomfort. Saying the safe word hadn't even come to mind. Embarrassed, maybe even a little ashamed, Hermione wanted to hear more. So she told him so.

Shocked by her words, Neville stood there for a moment, unsure at first of what to do. But he smiled anyway and stroked her gently. "I love that every bit of you is real. Not like . . . like some of the witches in magazines wearing Glamour Charms. You're real and soft and . . . Merlin . . . so very wet. Is it . . . is it all me, Hermione?"

She moaned when he pressed a finger inside of her. "Gods yes, all you."

He chuckled, wondering what his teenage self would think of hearing something like that. Likely wouldn't think it was real. Couldn't be real, of course. She was Hermione Granger, after all. The thought sobered him for a moment and he had to take in a breath to resume his plans. "Your desire is mine; what about this pussy? Who does it belong to?"

"You!" she shouted, desperate for him to do something.

"Can I do anything with it, if it's mine?"

She whimpered, knees shaking.

"Can I kiss it?"

"Please," Hermione practically sobbed.

"Can I fuck it?"

"Neville . . ."

"Can I spank it?"

She fell silent, eyes wide and unsure. "I . . . I . . ."

Very lightly, but enough to get her attention, Neville smacked her centre, sending a small sting of delicious pain through her folds and up against her clit. The action drew a small yelp from Hermione and her knees instantly tried to close together. Neville grabbed onto each leg, preventing her from doing so. "I asked you a question, sweetheart. Can I spank this pussy?"

She mewled and whimpered and tried to move her hips closer to him, but couldn't with him holding onto her so tightly. Without an answer, he smacked her again, this time harder, and Hermione's feet kicked up in reaction. "Oh my . . . oh gods . . ."

"Hermione?"

"Yes! Yes! Please, do it again!"

So he did. Softer this time but repeatedly, over and over with great speed, his fingers dancing against her clit in sharp repetition. Hermione panted hard and squealed as her thighs tried to close on their own, nearly trapping Neville's arm between them. Still, the movement did not stop and soon Hermione was thrashing against the table as her toes curled and her legs stiffened.

Neville caught the movement easily and, without stopping, said, "If you come without my permission, I'm going to spank your arse until you cry."

Fighting the fact that the threat actually added heat to the fire inside of her rather than dousing it with water, Hermione screamed and tried to force her body into submission. When it took on a mind of its own, she yelled out, "Stop! Stop! . . . I can't . . . I can't stop it."

He did. Neville cupped her gently in his warm palm, aware of the way that her skin pulsed against his hand. She was breathing heavy, almost gasping as she came down from the near climax. When her breath had calmed, he slipped two fingers inside of her, testing the way her body reacted. She moaned and tensed against him, but didn't whimper or try to pull away as though she were over sensitised. Neville grinned. "Good girl."

He rubbed her back soothingly until her body slacked against the table. "Can you handle more?" he asked after several minutes. She whined loudly in response and he chuckled. Leaning forward, he pressed a kiss to the back of her thigh. "One day, I think I'll have you like this for hours," he said. "But for now . . . I'd much rather be inside of you."

Hermione let out a loud whimper, mumbled words that sounded something like "Oh thank Circe" and Neville spread her thighs again until her hips were lowered enough that he didn't need to angle himself in anyway, lining his cock up against her entrance. With just the tip inside of her, Neville reached around and circled his fingers against her swollen clit, building her back up again. Minutes later, when her wrists were tugging painfully at the ropes that bound them to the table, Neville thrust deep and hard inside of her, sending her tumbling over the edge, screaming through a powerful climax that had her sobbing by the end.

"Oh . . . gods, Hermione," he moaned as he pistoned in and out of her, riding through the waves of her bliss, hissing in pleasure as her body gripped him tightly, drawing

him in deeper with every thrust. She moaned and cried out as he held onto her hip with one hand, running the other up and down her sweat-slick back. When she came again, it was unexpected, and Neville nearly had to hold her body up to keep the momentum. "So close . . . so good," he said as he neared his own precipice. Biting his lip in contemplation, he reached up and took hold of the middle of her braid, pulling gently at first as he continued to push in and out of her. When Hermione moaned and allowed her head to be pulled back, his eyes rolled a bit in his head and he tugged harder on her hair, unable to stop himself from coming.

Once he had caught his own breath, Neville withdrew from Hermione's body and rushed around the table, undoing the ropes as quickly as possible. Hermione's body collapsed on the table, cheeks red and hair soaked in sweat, but she was smiling. Neville rubbed her wrists in his hands before kissing each, admiring the imprint of the rope left behind in her skin. "Are they numb at all?"

She lazily clenched her fingers before shaking her head. "Nope . . . feel good."

He laughed and kissed the tips of her fingers before standing up and walking swiftly into the attached kitchen, fidgeting around in the cooling cabinet for a minute before returning to her side with a glass of juice. "Sit up and drink this," he encouraged her, helping her to do so with the support of his arm.

Hermione sighed, exhausted, and leant against his chest as he wrapped his arms around her; the small glass of juice in her hands was ice cold compared to the heat of her skin. She brought it up to her lips slowly, noticing that he was watching her every move until she drained the last of it. He took the glass from her hands, setting it aside, and she nuzzled her face against his damp chest, kissing the centre of it and then licking the salty taste from her lips.

"Are you okay?"

She nodded. "Tired."

Neville laughed and kissed the top of her head. "I told you so."

She pulled her arms around his waist and smiled against his skin. "Show off."

Chapter 22

October 21st, 2006

She stared into the mirror in front of her, her face—along with toilet stalls—reflecting back at her.

The wedding dress was simple this time, not some giant monstrosity that Fleur and Molly had talked her into because she'd been too nervous to tell them no. She'd gone shopping alone and smiled the whole time as she browsed through dresses in perfect silence other than the occasional shop girl asking her if she needed help with anything. The process had taken her a whole forty minutes and she'd gone home and kicked up her feet in a small victory dance before shoving the dress in her wardrobe, left the rest of the wedding details to Neville who was coordinating with St. Mungo's, and spent the rest of the week packing up her flat to move to the new cottage in Hogsmeade.

Long arms wrapped around her from behind and Hermione smiled at Harry in the reflection of the mirror, leaning her head against his. "You look beautiful, Hermione."

"You look happy, Harry," she pointed out.

He grinned. "I am happy. Happier than I've been in . . . in a very long time. Does that make me an awful person? I couldn't make Ginny happy, we were miserable, and now . . . I feel awful that she's married to Wood and it's just this business arrangement."

Hermione turned around and pushed black fringe away from his forehead. "That is not your fault. Harry, you've spent too long trying to make other people happy at the expense of your own. Ginny made her own decisions. Don't sacrifice your own joy because someone else doesn't have theirs yet."

He nodded and then frowned. "Are you . . . you're not doing the same thing, are you, Hermione?"

"What's that?"

"You're not marrying Neville because . . . I don't know, because you think you need to?" he asked nervously, shoving his hands into the pockets of his dress robes and looking down as though it were his fault that they were standing in a bathroom in the Janus Thickey Ward of St. Mungo's.

She smiled softly. "I love Neville. Like . . . I really, really love Neville."

Harry's anxious expression melted away and he sighed in relief and hugged Hermione close. "I love Hannah," he admitted. "I know it's daft to say it like it's some big . . . thing, but . . . with the programme and not really having a choice . . . it feels like I shouldn't love her, but Hermione, I really do."

Hermione sniffed and dabbed at the corners of her eyes with her knuckles. "I'm so happy to hear that. All right, don't make my makeup run. I refuse to cry."

Harry raised an amused brow. "You didn't cry at your last wedding."

Hermione scoffed. "That's because I didn't want Molly running down the aisle to wipe at my face with a handkerchief."

"No aisle this time," he pointed out.

She sighed happily. "I can't wait."

They walked into Alice and Frank's bedroom a few minutes later and Neville lit up at the sight of her. Her dress was simple, cream instead of white, with no fancy lace or bows or anything that made it seem anything more than a sundress. Her long hair was pulled back into a loose braid with several curls having sprung loose on their own. The small bouquet in her hands was made up of freshly picked vervain and nightshade, which would be donated to the Potions Department of St. Mungo's after the ceremony.

Neville stood at one end of the room with Alice clinging to his arm. Frank Longbottom was sitting in a chair next to Augusta, who wore a displeased scowl on her face as her son continuously tried to pick at the moulting feathers from her large hat. Hannah stood on the other side of the room, practically bouncing on the tips of her toes in excitement as Harry and Hermione entered.

Kingsley cleared his throat. "I'm so happy that Hermione and Neville have asked me to marry them," he said and then threw a teasing smirk at Harry as he let go of Hermione's

hand to go and stand by his wife. Neville reached his free hand out for Hermione and laced his fingers through hers. "Sometimes it doesn't matter how love came to be, only that it did happen, that it does exist. And it very clearly exists for the two of you."

Healers and mediwitches gathered in the doorway to observe, most wiping away stray tears and blowing their noses into large handkerchiefs. A few other wards of St. Mungo's had joined them.

"Today, Neville and Hermione join their families, lives, futures, and hearts. I now ask them to join hands and recite the vows you've chosen."

Neville squeezed his mother's hand once before releasing it, smiling and kissing her cheek, directing her to the chair beside his father which she took with little prompting. He made his way back to Hermione's side and held his hands out for her, smiling when she gave Hannah her bouquet of flowers, placing her small hands in Neville's.

"These are the hands," Neville began, "of my new best friend, of my first friend," he said with a crooked grin, filled with happiness that was reflected in Hermione's expression at his words. "I hold your hands within my own. Hands that will work alongside yours in building our future together. Hands that will love you, cherish you throughout our life. Hands that will offer you strength when you seek it, hands that will comfort you in grief, hands that will hold you when you are afraid. These are hands that will wipe your tears, and forever reach for you."

Hermione smiled brightly and cleared her throat. "These are the hands of my new best friend, of my first friend," she said, remembering the first time she had shaken his hand when they were eleven on the Hogwarts Express. She needed somewhere to sit and he needed help finding his toad. "I hold your hands within my own. Hands that will work alongside yours in building our future together. Hands that will love you, cherish you throughout our life. Hands that will offer you strength when you seek it, hands that will comfort you in grief, hands that will hold you when you are afraid. These are hands that will wipe your tears, and forever reach for you."

Kingsley beamed at the couple, and everyone turned, wide-eyed, at the sound of Augusta Longbottom sniffing loudly. She looked up at the group and scowled. "Oh shut

up," she muttered before wiping a dark purple hanky against her eyes only to have Frank steal it away from her and shove it into the front pocket of his shirt.

"By the power vested in me as the Minister for Magic, I declare you bonded for life!"

The quiet applause in the small room soothed Hermione's nerves rather than the boisterous shouting that had happened at her first wedding to Ron at the Burrow. Quiet happiness was something she was becoming quite addicted to, she thought to herself as Neville kissed her sweetly, almost chastely as though he wasn't even capable of doing things like tying her to a dining room table, or throwing her over his knee.

Exhausted from all the excitement, Alice and Frank retired shortly after the ceremony, but not before Alice spent a good ten minutes insisting that she brush Neville's hair. He smiled, letting her, and sat there at the foot of his parent's bed like a small child, while Hermione listened to Harry and Hannah talk about their new place, and Kingsley tried to force his way out the door while Augusta badgered him with questions about new taxes that she very clearly opposed.

"Thanks, Mum," Neville said when he felt Alice pressing her forehead to the back of his head, breathing in deep as though he were a newborn baby. He turned and kissed her cheek and then stood to get out of the way as Healers took over and began preparing his parents for their scheduled potions.

"We've set up a little something for you all in the waiting room just across the way. No visitors were scheduled, so it's free," Healer Strout said with a bright smile. "It's not much, mind, but we all thought that every married couple at least deserves some cake."

Some cake had been a four-tiered monstrosity covered in fresh strawberries and two floating cherubs over the top, throwing sprinkles down on the dessert like flower petals. Hermione laughed and turned around, fully expecting to hear that Gilderoy Lockhart had had a hand in the decoration of such a thing. It was hideous and awful, but tasted like

heaven and when Hermione laughed as she shoved a piece into Neville's mouth, it felt like she had regained years of her life previously lost to stress and grief.

"Who knew the hospital could cater so well?" Hannah said with a laugh as she offered another bite of cake from her plate to Harry despite the fact that he already had his own.

Hermione noted the look on his face and smiled, catching Hannah in a glance and giving the Hufflepuff a look of pure adoration and gratitude. Despite loving one another, she'd watched as Harry and Ginny had descended into vicious fights where Ginny's temper would get the better of her and Harry would get angry and just shut down. Both were so damaged by war, and Harry more so thanks to his Muggle relatives. Ginny had struggled to understand and sympathise, trying to open him up. Hannah, somehow, was able to just accept his issues and quietly do what she could to make him happy and comfortable.

Clearly, it was working.

Turning to stare at her own new husband, Hermione couldn't help but smile at Neville, thinking that she was just so very lucky to have found someone similar, who somehow knew how to handle her issues. She only hoped that she was doing the same for him.

"You came!" Neville stood and moved to the doorway of the waiting room, greeted by Draco and Astoria, dressed in casual day robes that were of finer quality than Hermione and Neville were wearing on their wedding day.

Draco peered into the waiting room, raising a slender brow as he examined the situation, an expression stuck between amusement and mortification. "Merlin, Longbottom, did you actually marry Granger in a hospital?"

Harry stood, eyes narrowing and mouth open ready to defend his friends. Hannah's hand was quick on his arm, distracting him long enough for Neville to laugh and clap Draco on the back. "Wish you'd thought of it?" he asked the blond.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Hardly."

Astoria, however, was smirking softly at Draco's side. "You look lovely, Mrs Longbottom," she said, looking at Hermione.

Brown eyes wide, Hermione almost blanched at the name, immediately thinking of Augusta. "Hermione's fine," she insisted. "Please." She gestured to the seats beside her. "Would the two of you like some cake?"

Draco opened his mouth to speak, but Astoria stepped past him and sat immediately down beside Hermione, reaching out and taking her hands as though they were old friends. "How lovely, thank you. We would be honoured. Wouldn't we, Draco?"

He made a quiet grunting noise of displeasure with his gaze locked on Harry, before turning and nodding to his wife. "If it pleases you, love." He turned to look at Neville. "We were dropping off a donation to St. Mungo's and heard there was a commotion up here. I didn't think you'd actually go through with it. And what on earth happened to your hair?"

Neville smirked, running his fingers through his static-ridden locks. "My mum brushed it."

Draco nodded and then smirked. "Was she too busy to offer to do the same for Potter?"

"This cake is delicious!" Astoria said, louder than normal to hopefully distract the men from their posturing. Hannah had handed her a small plate and the little witch was delightedly feasting on a sprinkle-covered strawberry. "Hermione, I was hoping you'd be inclined to accompany me to tea one day. I know the Manor can be a bit . . . much," she said, looking as though she was saying so more for herself than for the other witch, "but I've heard that there's a new shop in Diagon Alley that's just wonderful. They do a lovely lemon scone."

Hermione stared at the woman for a moment before she turned and looked at Neville, who'd cleared his throat and smiled, likely at the mention of lemon scones. "Oh," she said, looking back at Astoria. "I umm . . . sorry, you caught me a bit by surprise."

Astoria merely smiled. "I'd like us to be friends. Our husbands are friends, after all."

"Not friends," Draco insisted.

"I'd love to," Hermione said.

Astoria beamed excitedly. "Wonderful!" she said and then turned to Hannah. "And you're invited as well, Mrs Potter."

Hannah grinned. "Terrific! And it's Hannah."

Harry and Draco stared at their wives and then at one another before Draco scoffing loudly.

"Astoria, we're going to be late," Draco said, extending his arm for his wife. "Longbottom, Granger, best wishes to you both."

"I'll owl you," Astoria said, kissing Hermione and Hannah's cheeks before offering a polite nod to both Harry and Neville, then following Draco out the door.

Harry's mouth hung open. "Did that . . . did Malfoy just technically come to your wedding?"

Hermione laughed. "There've been stranger things."

"No, there haven't."

Hannah smirked and licked frosting from her finger after swiping it on her plate. "I like his wife. She was a few years behind us, right? In Ravenclaw."

Hermione nodded. "And apparently we'll all be friends."

Hannah laughed and Harry stared at her, gobsmacked. "Are you really going to tea with Draco Malfoy's wife?"

Neville snorted and retook his seat by Hermione's side, feeding her a strawberry and then kissing away the juice from her lips when Harry and Hannah were distracted. Hermione tried not to giggle but, overjoyed with how the day had turned out, couldn't help herself.

Hannah smirked. "Don't be ridiculous, Harry. Of course I'm not going to tea with Astoria Malfoy," she said. "I'm going to convince her to go pub crawling."

Chapter 23

January 8th, 2007

Pub crawling with Astoria would have to wait.

The little Malfoy bride was confirmed pregnant in late November and despite Neville hinting that ritualistic magic and old fertility rites had been involved, the Ministry of Magic had decided to use the Malfoys as the poster couple for the procreation programme. Draco and Astoria, for that first week, were lauded as devoted citizens of Wizarding Britain, dedicated to the cause of stopping the squib problem. By association, the projected Marriage Law was becoming closer and closer to a reality. After all, if an incentive driven procreation programme was successful, wouldn't a mandatory law be that much more so?

Mandy and Ron announced their pregnancy a week later; Hannah and Harry a fortnight after that.

Neville started destroying copies of the *Daily Prophet* each morning before Hermione could read them.

The cottage in Hogsmeade was beautiful and it had quickly become an oasis against the rest of the world for the young witch. Compared to the stressful and crowded Ministry of Magic, their cottage was peaceful and quiet, filled with nature and the most beautiful sunrises that she'd seen in years.

"I'm happy for them, I am," Hermione said to Neville over morning coffee. "And having magical babies was the reason everyone signed up for this, but . . . but the things I overhear at work. Croaker has pushed aside by squib research because he's all but certain that the law will pass and my findings will be pointless. The squib testing timing has been lowered so significantly that we can tell whether a baby is a squib within hours of it being born. Merlin, why did I help with any of this?" she asked miserably.

Neville rubbed her shoulders from behind, kissing the top of her head. "I'm sorry, love. I know how much your research means to you."

She sighed. "I'm not giving up. I'll do it all outside of work if I have to."

He didn't bring up the fact that it was against the rules to overwork herself; he knew that this was more important to her. Instead, he smiled and wrapped his arms around her from behind, sighing a little when she reached up and gripped his forearm, holding him closer. "Let me know if you need my help with absolutely anything."

She made her way down into the Department of Mysteries where her boss shoved a stack of busywork at her and waved her away as though she were a pest, hovering around him. Doing her best to hide the scowl on her face, Hermione made her way to her office, surprised to find Theo already waiting there for her, a copy of that morning's *Daily Prophet* in his hands.

"*Birth rates increase dramatically with proposed Marriage Law,*" he read aloud. "Funny considering there is no law yet let alone births stemming from it. Witches are pregnant, not giving birth yet. Although, I saw Weasley at the Leaky last night and he looked like he was eating for two, so maybe not *just* the witches."

Hermione fought to stop the laugh that eventually escaped her, turning to cough into her hand. "What are you doing here?" She asked. "Skiving off of your own work, you need to come and distract me from mine?"

Theo glanced at the stack of papers she had dropped on her desk. "Yes, I'm certain that it's so very important to the Department of Mysteries that you solve the . . ." he took one of the papers in hand and squinted at the tiny print, ". . . causality of . . . is Croaker making you seriously look into whether or not unicorn migrating patterns affect centaur temperaments?"

Hermione stared at him, a tick in her right eye. "Not just important to the Department of Mysteries, this could change the Wizarding world at large," she said sarcastically.

Scoffing, Theo threw the paper back down on top of the stack. "Unicorns don't migrate."

"A fact that seems irrelevant," Hermione said with a defeated sigh as she sat down, looking defeatedly at the pile of work in front of her that was, indeed, pointless. Croaker was punishing her, surely. When she coughed again, turning to bury her face into the sleeve of her robe, Theo rose a brow. "I'm fine," she insisted. "Just a little cough. I'll take some Pepper-Up on my first break. Now, distract me, please."

He thought for a moment, leaning against the door to her office casually, one hand in his pocket and looking like he'd leapt straight out of a Muggle magazine. It was annoying how pretty he was. A fact that Theo knew and monopolised on any chance he could. "Well," he began, "I did think to come to you for advice about something."

She spun around in her chair to fully face him. "With what?" She asked, trying not to look desperate over her need to feel useful.

"When the law is passed, and it will pass," he said, the bitterness only an aftertaste in his expression that he was doing quite well at maintaining all things considered, "should I include in my wedding vows the fact that I prefer cock, or would that be considered oversharing? I thought to maybe include it in the marriage contract, but it seemed personal, and Dennis won't let me take photographs for the necessary diagrams."

She laughed because it was clear he was trying to make light of the very terrible situation he was in and she did not want to frown because that would indicate she pitied him, and Slytherins—from the little interaction she actually had with them—did not like to be pitied. "Thank you for the distraction."

He shrugged. "Well, you're not the only one that could use it. I suppose you're not willing to share some of your husband's hair, would you? I'm a dab hand at Polyjuice."

Hermione shook her head, her cough triggered again by the laughter. "You're terrible. What would Dennis say if he heard you ask me such a thing?"

Theo raised a dark, slender brow and grinned. "Who said I was asking for me?"

Her face turned red at the implication. "Theo!"

"She blushes," he said, laughing. "Is that a Gryffindor thing or a Muggle-born thing?"

"That's a stop thinking about having sex with my husband thing."

"You're too easy, Hermione," he said, shoving aside her stack of papers to sit on the edge of her desk. He looked completely undisturbed when the stack fell over and she let out a disgruntled huff. "Besides, how do you know I couldn't teach him a thing or two?"

Kneeling down to collect her work, Hermione rolled her eyes and muttered, "You couldn't handle Neville."

"What was that?"

Her eyes widened. "Nothing."

A dark grin spread across his face. "Oh, do tell."

Hermione stood, schooling her features as she dropped the stack of papers back on her desk. "Go back to work, Theo."

His eyes were twinkling, damn him. "You have secrets. I'm going to owl Potter and ask him what liquor best loosens that tongue of yours," he said, making his way to the door.

"Out you!"

Theo laughed once more before closing the door behind him. Hermione put her cold hands against her cheeks to will them to lose their colour. Unfortunately, once the thought of Neville was put in her mind, it was hard to get him out. Neville Longbottom had turned out to be doxies for the mind, and she was properly infested with thoughts of him.

She sat down, staring at the multitude of papers to sift through, but found herself unable to stop daydreaming about her husband, their life, their bed—among other surfaces in their home—and their wedding night.

She had been expecting something rough and severe; Neville had been good about slowly increasing the intensity of their playing each and every time he touched her. What she hadn't expected was how he looked at her with softness and amusement at the way that she stared hungrily at him. Once they'd left St Mungo's and returned to the bedroom they now shared, Neville just looked at her and did nothing else. When Hermione began to fidget, clearly expecting something, he smiled.

"Eager?"

She blew out a breath and struggled not to narrow her eyes at him. "You know I am."

"Me too, gods . . . me too."

She bit her lower lip, tensing as she waited. When he still did nothing, Hermione raked her eyes over him, noticing the way that he clenched his fists at his side, the way that the muscles in his forearms flexed, the way that his obvious erection strained against the fabric of his trousers.

"What are you waiting for?" she whispered.

"I'm curious," he answered, swallowing hard. "You're so tense right now. Are you shaking?"

She nodded. "I want you," she admitted freely, getting used to stating her desires for him, no longer as embarrassed as she'd been before about it.

"What if I took off the invisible collar that I put on you?" he whispered, stepping closer to her, but still not touching. "If I told you that you were in control? What would you do?"

Hermione's mouth fell open. She understood why Neville liked control, she enjoyed it as well, but she enjoyed it more in the bedroom and in their personal life when he took the reins and lovingly directed her. But she could tell he wasn't talking about that. He was talking about her need for him, her desire for him. Slowly, since the first time he took her, Neville had been feeding her addiction, growing her desire for him. Every night he would hand out small doses of him, letting her swallow the smooth firewhisky. She craved it now, and he was offering her a key to the liquor cabinet for just one night.

Hermione hadn't even answered because Neville had kissed her then, hard and deep and then took her hands, pressing them against his chest, allowing her to shove him back toward the bed. She tore at his clothes and he did little to help other than to push the hem of her dress up around her thighs. Once their clothing was spread around on the floor of their bedroom, Hermione sank down on his length and let out a groan that made her cheeks flush at the sound.

"Don't be embarrassed," Neville pleaded. "I love the sounds you make."

Eager to find out all the noises he could make, Hermione began to rock her hips back and forth, twisting every few thrusts to throw off the pattern. The movement always pulled a hiss from his lips, and she grinned and did it again. The only time Neville took charge was when it was clear she was getting distracted, lost in thought as she wondered if this was what he really wanted, or if she should stop and do something

differently. Neville swatted her arse—hard—and pulled her focus back to the moment. "Focus on you," he told her.

Hermione frowned. "But what about you?"

Neville grinned. "I'll come if you come. I want to see you filled with pleasure."

She licked her upper lip as a dangerous thought came to mind and she began rocking against him faster and harder, watching closely as she pushed him toward to own end. Neville's jaw tightened and his skin flushed pink. Pressing her hands against his chest, she dug her nails in and scratched him, grinning when he groaned, his legs tensing beneath her.

"Her-Hermione . . . you haven't—" he tried to say but she cut him off with a passionate kiss and held him there until he moaned against her mouth and jerked his hips up against her, spilling inside of her.

Catching his breath, Neville sighed. "Hermione . . . you weren't supposed to—Oh!" He looked up at her, still straddling his waist, still moving slowly, clenching her muscles around his softening length. She looked determined and smug as she moved above him, squeezing his over-sensitised cock. "What—Oh fuck!"

"Don't. You. Dare. Stop. Now."

She kept him inside of her, digging fingers into his hips and leaning back to adjust the angle. Neville shook and winced a few times, but his eyes would roll in his head and he would bite his lower lip hard. Anytime he'd give her an expression of frustration, she would teasingly pout and whisper, "Please don't stop fucking me, Neville."

Still half hard, Hermione worked him to a second orgasm within minutes. It looked painful and she almost apologised until she remembered who she'd married. Neville liked pain. He liked dishing it out and apparently taking it as well.

"You stopped," she pointed out. "That should be against the rules."

He let out a loud laugh on an exhale as he tried to catch his breath, reaching up and pinching her nipple in reproach. "Cheeky."

Hermione smiled affectionately and leant down, resting her cheek against his chest so that she could feel the pleasant thrumming of his heartbeat against her skin. His hands threaded through her hair and her smile turned into a grin when she felt him kiss the top of her head. "Was that okay?" she asked.

"Despite insisting that you be in control, I still expect my requests to be followed," he told her, stopping every few moments to breathe. "I expected you to come and you didn't. I think I'll spend the rest of the evening seeing how many times I can force the issue."

He had not been joking.

The two orgasms she'd pulled from him paled in comparison to the delicious torture that Neville put her through over the hours that followed.

"And how's Hermione?" Pomona asked Neville as they busied themselves with repotting a few of the larger plants in the herb garden that the Hogwarts house-elves used for preparing meals.

One of the fourth years thought it would be a funny prank to charm the basil, which had sprung out of control, looking more like Devil's Snare than a harmless little herb. When the leaves actually began trying to unearth the rosemary and thyme, Neville had to step in and save the garden, effectively arresting the basil. He'd said the joke aloud, and the fourth years had stared at him with awkward looks of pity, which made him feel much older than he was. Repeating the joke to the first years later that afternoon had boosted his spirits since most of them fell into giggles over the silly *former* Auror.

"Busy," Neville said, smiling up at his mentor. "The Ministry's a bit of a mess. I almost feel bad leaving it." Pomona laughed and he grinned. "I said almost. I'm not sad that I left. I'd rather be here," he admitted. "It's nice to be back at Hogwarts where I don't have to constantly be on the lookout for Dark wizards."

When Professor Sprout stared at him incredulously, he rolled his eyes. "Anymore. You know what I mean," he said, blushing. "Hogwarts is safe. Hogsmeade is safe."

"The cottage treating you both well?"

He nodded. "It's beautiful. When Hermione's a little less busy with work, we'll have you down for dinner."

Pomona smiled at the invitation and reached up, affectionately pinching Neville's cheek and leaving behind a smudge of dirt. "That would be lovely, my boy. Now, I think we're all set here. Why don't you take an early day? You've been elbow deep in dirt since you arrived this morning."

He had gone home excited. An early day meant that he would have time to properly plan out dinner for himself and Hermione. Normally the pair would stop in at the Three Broomsticks, or Neville would convince Madam Puddifoot to let him take some of her sandwiches and treats as takeaway. Since he normally worked into the evening, offering to take up shifts cleaning the greenhouses, assisting Pomona with grading papers, or even helping the prefects monitor the corridors, he rarely ever made it home before sunset. It worked out fine considering Hermione's work schedule was just as demanding.

So when he stepped out of the Floo to find his wife lying on the couch, eyes puffy and nose red, he frowned. "Hey," he said and rushed to her side. "What're you doing home?"

She stared at him miserably. "Croaker sent me," she said. "Ridiculous. Even sick, it's not as though I leave my office. I'm not infecting anyone else and I already took a Pepper-Up at lunch but—"

"You rest," he said, pressing his lips to her forehead to check her temperature the way his grandmother used to when he was little. "You're a bit warm. Were you feeling sick this morning?"

She looked away from his face, guilty. "I know, I know," she muttered, exasperated. "I'm supposed to take care of myself, but Croaker has been on my case and if I called in then . . ." She sighed dramatically. "Should I go and fetch a paddle?"

His brow furrowed. "What? No."

"Yardstick?"

He sighed in frustration and kissed her forehead again. "Silly girl. You're sick. I'm going to feed you soup and dose you with potions. When you're better, I'll redden that pretty arse for not telling me that you were sick. Hogwarts is just a quick Floo away and I could have asked Poppy for some of the good stuff."

"Job perks," she muttered.

Neville smiled. "Exactly."

Hermione sighed and pressed her head against his chest. "Can you make the telly work?" she asked. "I want to watch cartoons."

Neville kissed the top of her head affectionately. "Of course, love." He turned and flicked his wand at the box, noticing that Hermione's was just out of reach, showing just how tired and sore she must be. Once the television lit to life, playing some animated thing that he still couldn't quite grasp, Neville turned around. "I'm going to run down to see if Rosmerta has any soup."

Hermione nodded, eyelids lowering. "Love you," she mumbled.

Chapter 24

January 18th, 2007

Her flu had lasted for less than a week, but enough people had seen her looking under the weather and, instead of asking after her health, launched into loud squeals of excitement—that made her headache worse—about how she simply must be pregnant and how excited were she and Neville? Hermione had tried to be polite to the first three people, but when a perfect stranger tried to hug her in congratulations, she'd taken the rest of the week off and slammed every door that allowed her to as she exited the Ministry of Magic.

It was good to be back at work, though. Healthy and once again enthusiastic, Hermione finished the work that Croaker had given her days ahead of schedule, opting to use her time and the resources available to work on the squib problem. Despite his jokes about it, Theo's relationship with Dennis was a driving force behind Hermione's need to abolish the Marriage Law before it was passed, and that meant working twice as hard, especially since the Department of Mysteries was no longer directly involved in her research. Thankfully, as an Unspeakable, there were rules in place for personal projects so long as their end goal was to benefit Wizard-kind. As long as her mind-numbingly stupid assignments from Croaker were met, Hermione was allowed to do what she needed to.

She was so focused on the latest numbers involving magical core responses in children under the age of five, that she didn't hear Theo's voice until he'd placed a hand on her shoulder, said her name again, causing her to jump half a foot in the air, banging her knee on the underside of her desk. "Ow! Damnit, Theo!"

He chuckled, not looking sorry in the slightest. "Get your cloak, Hermione. I'm taking you to lunch."

She huffed. "I'm not hungry. And it's not even lunchtime."

Theo reached into his robes and withdrew a pocket watch, flipping it open so close to her face that the cover brushed against the tip of her nose. "You're right. It's three hours

past lunch. Get your bloody coat. As delightful as it would be to have your delicious husband come down every now and then to complain about your terrible eating habits, it's much more likely that Potter will show up instead, and from what I've been told, he and the Department of Mysteries don't get along so well. Things break."

Hermione smirked, tempted to tell him that it was actually her fault that the Time Room had been in such disrepair that the Unspeakables in charge of it were still recovering over a decade after their little infiltration to save Sirius. The mission had thankfully been successful, even if a few—or all—Time-Turners had suffered in the process.

They'd barely stepped out of the lift before nearly colliding with Harry. "Oh!" He said, shocked to see her. "Are you on your way to St. Mungo's?"

A flash of panic ran through her veins. "What? Why?"

Hannah, who was at Harry's side, pinched her husband. "Everything's fine, Hermione," she assured her. "We were just there getting a checkup when we ran into Neville. I assume you weren't told because he didn't want to worry you. We ran into him on his way to see his parents. His mum is having a bad day and they couldn't get her to calm, so they fire-called him at Hogwarts."

Hermione frowned, her forehead crinkling with worry. "Is she all right? I . . . I told Neville that it's almost impossible to get a message to me when I'm in my office because of the nature of my work and . . . he probably didn't even try. Should I go there?"

Harry shook his head. "It's all fixed. We stopped by the Janus Thickey Ward after Hannah's checkup and he had already gone home. The Healer knew Hannah from when she used to volunteer there and told us that Mrs Longbottom was all settled by that point but that Neville looked beat."

Hannah sighed and then reached up to wipe away the tears in her eyes. "Sorry," she muttered. "Fucking hormones." After a loud sniff and a scowl at an older witch who passed by, staring at Hannah with a disgusted grimace on her face, she looked back at Hermione. "They hired a new mediwitch. Neville's mum never takes well to changes like that. I guess she had broken a vase in their room, tried to make a weapon out of it, and ended up cutting

herself up quite a bit. Certain Calming Draughts interfere with other potions that she's on and—"

"Getting Neville would be the best way," Hermione said, quickly nodding her head. "I understand." She bit her lower lip in concern. She hadn't been hungry before, despite the hour, but she'd certainly lost her appetite now. "Theo, would you pass along a message to Croaker for me? Tell him I've gone home early for the day and that I'll make it up tomorrow?"

Briefly baulking at the idea of having to speak to Croaker, Theo reluctantly nodded.

"Hermione," Harry said, "you know that thing that you do when you want to take care of people and you tend to go a bit overboard and well . . . Mollyish?"

Eyes wide, Hermione's mouth fell open in shock. "I most certainly do not and—"

"You do," he insisted. "I'm just saying, from one kid with a fucked up family history . . . Neville might not want to feel well . . . you have a tendency to get a little . . . mothering when your loved ones are upset."

Narrowing her eyes, Hermione put her hands on her hips. "I think I know how to take care of my husband, thank you very much," she said snippily and then made her way to the Floo Network, tugging her cloak tightly around her and chewing the inside of her cheek in thought. Harry was right—though damned if she'd let him know that—she had planned on trying to take care of Neville, but knowing the man as she did, he wouldn't respond kindly to her overbearing nature.

She had to come up with something else.

It had been a shit day from beginning to end.

Neville had arrived early to Hogwarts to set up the first class of the day and a baby mandrake plant had wiggled itself enough that the planter that was its current home crashed on the floor and the thing started screaming, sending Neville to the hospital wing with a massive headache. At least he hadn't passed out, though.

After that, it was just one thing after another. He'd broken up a fight between a pair of third years—Slytherin and Gryffindor, of course—and after dropping the Slytherin off at Slughorn's office for proper punishment, he'd taken the Gryffindor to Minerva, who asked why Neville hadn't issued a punishment himself. He'd stared at her in confusion, and she smiled at him like a cat would a tiny mouse, the implication in her gaze and her words very clear: she was grooming him to be the Head of Gryffindor.

The moment that he finally wrapped his head around the Headmistresses words, Pomona found him and said that there was someone from St. Mungo's asking for him in the Floo. He'd run as quickly as possible, thinking that Hermione had been in an accident at work. He'd felt guilty when he saw the familiar face of Healer Strout and realised that this was about his parents.

Pomona gave him the rest of the day off and he'd spent the majority of it trying to pry sharp things out of his mother's hands while she bled all over him. His father was having an average day, which meant he was pretty much catatonic. Unable to bring himself to go home and stay there, fearing that the stress of the day would bring him to tears and he just wasn't in the mood to cry over it, Neville left a note for Hermione, briefly informing her of the situation, and said he would be back shortly, and with dinner. He rarely drank and wouldn't drown his worries with firewhisky, but a butterbeer or two would not go amiss.

When he walked back through the front door of the cottage, box of takeaway fish and chips in hand, his brows furrowed at how dark the place was. Hermione was normally home by this hour, spread out across the sofa with a fire burning nearby, a book—or several—in hand. Whatever she was reading usually gave him a clue as to how her day when. If she'd brought work home with her, it meant she was overwhelmed; textbooks meant she was trying to distract herself from something that happened at work by rebooting her brain with another subject; fiction meant that she desperately did not want to discuss her day and instead, escape from it; and if he saw *Hogwarts, A History* in her hand, it meant that she needed someone to interfere on her behalf because she was miserable and had gone straight to her comfort book the way that most people do with childhood blankets.

However, there was no Hermione on the sofa, and no books, and no fire.

Just darkness.

Always an Auror, no matter whether or not he spent his days wrist-deep in fertiliser at Hogwarts, Neville set the contained of food down quietly and withdrew his wand. "Homenum Revelio," he whispered quietly and watched as a light lit up, detecting one person in their bedroom. He hoped that it was Hermione, and considering the strength of the protective wards around the cottage, it was unlikely that someone had actually broken in, but one could never be too certain.

Neville made his way silently down the hallway, noticing that the bedroom door was cracked open and a light flickered on the wall, reflections of fire. Brow furrowed, he peeked in to see a small array of candles set up on either side of their bed. Hermione, however, was not in it.

She was, instead, kneeling at the foot of the large four-poster, next to the trunk of playthings. His mouth opened and watered at the sight of her. Completely naked and glowing in the light of the soft candles that she'd lit; her hair had been pulled back into a braid haphazardly, small spirals of brown curls sprung out from the plait. Her feet were tucked under her arse and her hands curled behind her back, which had the most pleasant effect of having her breasts thrust out. Her chin was lowered and her eyes open, gazing at the ground.

She was kneeling.

She was submitting.

Neville's tongue darted out to lick his bottom lip, remembering his time in Germany at the club where he'd been trained. The Mistress there kept people as decorations during parties. Men and women who dreamed of being beautiful objects to look at, like fine art. They would kneel beside chairs, holding plates of food in their hands, or balancing them on their heads as though they were tables. Others would be in corners of the room like decorations and each was very different than the next, having only two things in common: their physical positioning, and the pink flush of arousal and excitement on their cheeks.

He knelt down a bit to get a good look at Hermione's cheeks.

Pink.

The weight of the day lifted from his shoulder and there was a sudden lightness in his chest that had not been there earlier. He tried to take a moment to calculate his thoughts and feelings. Overwhelmed with pride for her, knowing how vulnerable the position was and how she'd likely fought with herself and her own stubborn pride over whether or not to do this. His eyes flickered to the trunk and he wondered what things she'd be willing to use tonight. "What do you want?" He finally asked.

Hermione, without looking up at him, whispered, "What would you have me do for you?"

Love me, he thought, and then fell to his knees in front of her, cupping her face in his hands and kissing her hard. She squeaked and then moaned against him and when it was obvious she was struggling to keep her position, he reached behind her and gently pulled her hands from behind her back, placing them around his neck.

No tools. No toys. Just the pair of them on the floor, rolling around on the carpet with her thighs locked against his hips and his teeth scraping the side of her jaw as he thrust into her over and over again, harder with every lovely little gasp, deeper with every clench of her fists in his hair.

When her hair was damp with sweat, Neville sat back on his legs, manoeuvring her legs from around his body until they were high in the air in front of him. He crossed them at the knee and then pulled both into the crook of his left elbow before pushing into her cunt again. The position, extra tight, made him groan with pleasure and the suddenly new angle had Hermione arching her back off of the floor and grasping at the carpet.

"Neville!" she shouted. "I . . . I need . . . please, Neville, I need it!"

He knew what she meant and a grin crossed his face, thinking that there was no creature on earth as perfect as this witch. With each deep thrust, his right hand came down hard on the skin where her arse met her thigh with a loud crack!

Her breaths quickened and her skin turned hot. Desperate for a better angle, Neville threw her crossed legs over his shoulder and leant forward. It appeared to be the right thing to do because she came instantly, her body clutching at him, drawing him in and holding

tight. She made no noise—at least none that a human could hear—and glass in the window behind her head vibrated and then cracked, splitting from one corner diagonally across.

"Hermione!"

His hips stuttered, breathing their steady rhythm and he turned his face against her calf, pressing his lips to her skin as he spilt himself into her. He tried very hard not to collapse his entire weight on top of her, but his head still found its way to rest between her breasts as he fought to steady his heartbeat. "I needed that," he finally muttered through his panting.

Her fingers moved through his wet hair. "I figured."

Neville kissed the side of one breast. "You're perfect."

"Hardly."

"Won't stop me from saying it."

"I love you."

He smiled, the lightness in his chest returning. "So much," he replied. "Love you so much."

She moved a bit, twisting her body and Neville groaned, wrapping his arms around her so that she'd stay still. She giggled at the petulant manoeuvre. "I broke the window."

"I'll buy you a new one," he said, not paying much attention to the actual words.

She laughed again and the sound vibrated against his skin. "I haven't had a mishap of accidental magic in a long time."

He heard those words and grinned smugly, kissing her breast again. "You're welcome?"

Chapter 25

April 17th, 2007

Hermione's research took on a mind of its own for months. Her first experience with accidental magic during sex had her theorising a hundred different ideas or so as to how accidental magic and the squib problem could be related. Luckily, Neville didn't feel even slightly neglected, since spring meant that his work at Hogwarts increased tenfold. While Pomona hadn't intended on staying another term, Minerva adding Head of Gryffindor to Neville's list of duties had the old Hufflepuff feeling a bit sympathetic for the man, so she'd agreed to stay on until the end of the year and help him plot out his classes for the following September.

With both so very busy with blossoming careers, they were often too exhausted to do much else other than to fall in bed with one another at the end of a very long day.

"You smell like hippogriff manure," Hermione said, eyes closed as Neville plopped into their bed.

"Showered"ready," he mumbled.

She lightly shoved his leg with her foot, too tired to do much else. When he did not move an inch, she sighed and reached for her wand on the stand next to her side of the bed. Yawning, she cast a charm to make the room smell like a rainstorm and then fell asleep with the bit of vinewood still in her hand.

Most nights ended like that.

Other nights ended with a sudden burst of energy and Neville pressing her back against the cold tile of their shower, hot water beating down on his back and turning it red as he pistoned in and out of her. Her nails dug into his shoulder blades, leaving scratch marks that nearly drew blood as he snapped his hips and made her scream.

Married life was exhausting, but oh so very good, he had decided.

So when he returned home from a long day, dirt still under his fingernails from helping Hagrid weed the pumpkin patch, he was surprised to find Hermione sitting on the sofa, staring off into space, her thumbnail tucked between her front teeth as she chewed on it anxiously. "Hermione?" When she did not answer, he noticed her worn copy of *Hogwarts, A History* sitting on the table in front of her. "What happened?"

She swallowed hard. "I've . . . I've been . . . a warning. An actual warning. I could be . . . I could lose . . ." She stood up and began pacing and Neville noticed that several locks of her hair had been pulled loose from her bun, not at curly as the ones that sprung free on their own, which meant that Hermione had been pulling at them anxiously. A habit he'd asked her to help break. "I've been lobbying for this . . . project," she said, choosing her words carefully which Neville knew meant it was one of the things that as an Unspeakable she wasn't allowed to talk about. She stopped to look at him, as though she were waiting for him to ask for details and when he didn't, she continued, "I put together an entire plan and budget and . . . months. I'd been working on it before the squib issue was even brought to light. Months of hard work and planning and practically begging for the job. Croaker had all but assured that it was mine and . . . and then . . . and then Zacharias fucking Smith walks in—don't tell anyone that he's an Unspeakable, by the way," she said as a quick interlude, "and steals it right out from under me! He's been in the Department for less than a year! I'd been planning for that project for longer than he's even known where the loo is down in the D.O.M.!"

Neville walked up behind her and placed his hands gently on her shoulders, but said nothing. She stopped pacing and he watched as her breaths came quick and unsteady, a panic attack likely just around the corner.

"I asked Croaker why he'd been . . . okay, I might have asked him what the hell he'd been thinking, giving something of that magnitude to someone so inexperienced and he . . ." She began pacing again, pulling away from him and then stopped, letting out a loud scream of frustration into her hands. "He said that since Smith was a pureblood, he inherently knew things that I couldn't possibly and that my years of experience counted very little in matters

of such—" The tears finally came and she pressed her forehead into the wall right next to one of their bookshelves, trying to hide her face as she hiccupped repeatedly.

"He gave me a warning. Said I was . . . in-insubordinate."

Neville cracked his knuckles, a bad habit he'd picked up during that last year of Hogwarts when dealing with the Carrows. Something to do to stop himself from lashing out. Of course, that had been months before he'd actually taken to lashing out against the Death Eater regime at Hogwarts.

Another sob broke free from Hermione's lips and her breathing steadied out.

"I'm so sorry."

She shook her head. "I feel like . . . like I'm on the verge of exploding. I'm so angry and frustrated and just . . . I want to throw something or hex someone or . . . I don't know what to do. Everything is just completely out of control."

"Can I help?"

She shook her head. "I don't know."

He swallowed and racked his brain for several quiet minutes before a thought occurred to him. "Can I *try*?"

Hermione turned her head and looked at him from over her shoulder. Her eyes were still wet but she looked more frustrated and confused than sad or even angry. Lost. She looked lost. He tried to show her the sincerity in his eyes without conveying his concern for her in a way that looked like pity. She seemed to understand because she nodded and he acted quickly, walking over and taking her hand, leading her to the small kitchen in the next room.

Neville took a tea towel and ran it under the sink, wringing it out and placing it against her cheek. She let out a sigh of relief at the cool feel of the cloth and let him move her hands so that she was holding the towel herself, allowing him to scrub his hands clean of the dirt that clung to him from the day. Once clean, Neville pulled the towel away from her, looking at the colour of her skin, which was much less red.

"Breathe in for me," he instructed. When she did so, he smiled. "Good. I need you to be completely honest with me at all times, do you understand?" She nodded. "Does this feel like a panic attack?"

"No," she said quickly. "I'm just . . . angry and frustrated and . . . I don't know how to . . ."

"That's fine, love," he said, kissing her forehead. "It's okay to feel out of control sometimes."

"I don't like it. Make it stop."

Without removing his lips from her forehead, he spoke softly against her skin, "I need you to go into the bedroom and disrobe for me." Before she had a chance to pull away from him and perhaps think about slapping his face, he added, "We're not going to have sex. I'm going to spank you. First with my hand and then with my belt." They had specifically chosen the crop for play and the paddle for punishment, but the other instruments had yet to find a specific use that Hermione would attribute to one emotional headspace or another.

She did pull away then, looking up at him. "Have I done . . .?"

"Nothing wrong," he assured her, taking her face gently in his hands. "This is neither play nor punishment. You're out of control, so I'm taking it back. *I'm* in control," he said, his shoulders squaring and his chest thrusting out a bit. His eyes were soft but unwavering in the way he stared at her. "Croaker is not in charge here, Smith is not in charge here; *I* am. I am in charge, and I love you. You are the most important thing in my world, and I am in control of you. Do you understand?"

Her shoulders sagged and she let out a heavy exhale, nodding. "Thank you."

"What's the safe word?"

"Devil's snare."

Minutes later, Hermione was kneeling on the bed, hands flat on the mattress and her knees; it was a favourite position of hers that was familiar and comfortable to her. The majority of her muscles were still tense from the day, and her mind was moving too fast for even *her* to keep up with. She thought about the project she'd lost and what she might've been able to do to save it—*should have made my proposal more concise . . . maybe I could have cut out*

one assistant and save the budget an extra . . .—the busy work that Croaker—*bloody Croaker*—kept shoving off on her and how she'd spent hours trying to get it done in order to have time available for more important things—*so much time lost and all for nothing*—and then there was the squib research that always lingered in the back of her mind. Kingsley had stopped in earlier in the week asking about it. He didn't say as much, but the man wasn't very good at hiding his stress about the subject from her, which made her think that the Wizengamot was working against the Minister once more—*Merlin, that awful law . . . poor Theo . . . poor Dennis* .

"Focus on me," Neville instructed and Hermione blinked, hoping that she had not been ignoring him this whole time. He rested a hand on her lower back and instinctively she pressed back into his warmth until she remembered that this was not about sex.

The first smack stung like it always did. His idea of a "warm up" was starting quite *hot* to begin with. It was something she appreciated since she was not a fragile witch, at least . . . not when it came to this. The hits came down like always; the warmth of his hand and her skin increasing with every additional smack. *I shouldn't have been so upfront with Croaker about—*

SMACK!

"Oh!"

About . . . about . . . and Smith; who does he think he is to come into my department and—

SMACK!

and . . .

"Mmm . . ."

Need to get back to Kingsley about the statistics on the—

Smack! Smack! Smack!

She purred and stretched her arms out in front of her, angling her arse in the air as her cheek fell to the mattress, her eyelids growing heavy as the warmth crept up her body, washing away the buzzing sensation that the day's tension had caused. Her muscles ached from the stress. Her mind was exhausted from thinking about it.

"Thank me," Neville encouraged as he rubbed her lower back with one hand, drawing the other to his trousers. She could hear the clinking of his buckle being unlatched and the sound of soft, worn leather rubbing against fabric. "Stop thinking about everything

that's running around in that beautiful head of yours. Let it all go. Give it to me and just feel what I'm doing." The leather ran gently up her rib cage, against her shoulder blades, and the down her spine until it brushed over her arse.

Her hands trembled as she waited, already briefly forgetting his request—no, *demand*—her mind lost in a sea of anticipation, wondering if the belt would hurt as badly as the crop, which was her favourite, or the paddle, which she'd once thought about tossing in the fireplace. Images of Croaker and Smith blurred somewhere in the back of her consciousness as the feeling of dread in her stomach was replaced by an excited flutter. Instead of trying desperately to catch her breath from the pent up anger, she was breathless. Her skin tingled instead of buzzed unpleasantly right up until the first hit of the belt against her arse.

CRACK!

Hermione yelped and fisted the sheets in her hands. It hurt, but in that . . . strangely good way she had all but learned to crave with him. Even as her skin burned, the warmth of his hand running up and down her back was what she really felt as her thoughts and emotions struggled for dominance. Glancing up at the headboard, she decided they really needed to install a mirror so that she could see the look on his face when he—

CRACK!

"Mmmphfff!" Hermione bit down on her lower lip to stop from crying out. It burned and thrummed and spread a heat all over her body. No sex. This wasn't about sex, she reminded herself over and over again until the heat dulled to a warmth and moved from between her legs, up her body and wrapped itself around her ribcage and arms like a blanket.

"Don't hold onto it," Neville encouraged. "You can always let go with me. I will take care of you when you need to feel vulnerable. It doesn't make you weak. Give it to me."

CRACK!

She sunk further into the mattress. Her mind flickered like a lightbulb in its last few moments, trying to remind her of the many things she needed to worry about. *What if? What if? What if?* her brain continually asked. *Neville has me*, she responded silently before remembering something important. "Thank you."

As a reward, the belt came down harder and she uttered a soft curse as her eyes fully closed. It wasn't the blunt hit of the paddle, which she detested the same way she did horrible tasting potions—awful but useful; it wasn't the sharp, teasing sting of the crop, which he liked to run up between her legs before smacking it down on her arse until she was writhing in need for him. The belt carried a softness she had not expected. Looking over her shoulder at him, she noticed that his arm was not tense at all, clearly not putting a great deal of strength into the smacks. It was controlled.

He was controlled.

He smiled at her, his eyes full of warmth and love. "Good," he said. "You're perfect. Let me take care of you. I will always be here to take care of you when you need me."

She turned back and let herself feel good, relaxed even. It was a relief to know that someone would catch her if she *needed* to fall. She almost thought about thanking him again, when the belt came back down and her body tensed. That one was harder than she had anticipated. The warmth still held onto her, though, even as the good pain started stinging a bit more. She wondered if it was leaving marks. The crop did that and she enjoyed the feel of them, even hours later. Running her fingers over them when he was not looking brought back the familiar sensations of how they got there and what they might have done before or afterward.

"I love you," he said.

CRACK!

It stung again, harder. More. Not too much, just . . . just enough. The warmth around her rib cage buried deeper and she felt almost drunk on it. Not the pleasant giddiness that came with the first few drinks when she was out with friends, laughing and dancing and recalling good memories, but the lack of inhibitions that came later when she'd had two too many and began reflecting too much on what she was feeling at any given moment and why. The lack of control of how she acted and what she said and the usual tears that followed if she stumbled onto the wrong thought or subject.

"Let it all go, sweetheart."

CRACK!

It felt like an emotional marathon and Neville was cracking a whip at her heels instead of a belt on her arse. The warmth tightened once again and buried deeper. It hurt. It genuinely hurt. Not enough to say her safe word, but enough to make her remind herself of what it was, just in case. She felt like she was being pushed toward something and she'd been digging her heels in, trying to stop the inevitability of it. Weighed down by anchors of pride and expectations.

"You're doing good," he said from behind her. "So good. I'm so proud of you."

The words, followed by a final crack of the belt and Hermione burst into tears. She pressed her face into the mattress and let the great sobs overtake her. She didn't hear him drop the belt, but he was right there at her side, lifting her into his arms and pulling her against his chest, muttering, "Breathe," while kissing her hair.

She clutched at his shirt and pressed herself harder against him as she cried; strange tears of relief instead of frustration and anger from earlier. She was not happy, no. They were not tears spent at a wedding or any sort of celebration. It felt like when she'd cried during the aftermath of the final battle. So much still needed to be done, but the heavy weight of that constant enemy always pressing down upon them was gone, and she'd just cried because she could. She didn't have to be strong then.

She didn't have to be strong now. Neville was strong *for* her.

Tomorrow, maybe *she'd* be strong for *him*.

An hour later, she was tucked into bed, sucking on an orange wedge that he had brought in from the kitchen, foregoing other dinner plans for the time being. He sat up in bed while she rested her head against his chest, smiling at the familiar smells of Hogwarts—of her childhood—that clung to his clothes. He had spent the first few minutes telling her over and over how much he loved her, how he would never leave her, and how strong and smart she was.

She bathed in the sound of his voice and eventually broke into a small laugh when he'd muttered under his breath that Zacharias Smith was an unbearable cocksnothead, prompting her to ask through giggles what the definition of such a thing was. Neville had blushed and laughed and kissed her softly, stopping only to ask if she was in any pain and

needed a potion or a salve. She shook her head and mumbled, "As long as I'm not bleeding, leave it. I like the way it feels."

"I'm going to keep asking you how you feel every so often. Sometimes when you come back down from that high . . . it can be confusing and kind of emotionally drop you on your arse."

Hermione snorted. "My arse can't take much more."

Neville smiled and kissed her forehead. "Just so."

She nodded. "I get it. Adrenaline . . . endorphins. When they fade quick enough, it could cause an upheaval. There would need to be a refractory period where hormones rebalance themselves . . ." She noticed Neville slightly snickering at her know-it-all reflex, and she smacked his chest lightly with her hand. "Prat," she said and then snuggled against his chest as though that were a punishment.

"Do you feel better?" he asked, pushing his fingers through her hair.

"Mmmhmm."

"I'm sorry you had a shit day."

She shrugged. "Croaker is an arse," she said, "and Smith is a cocksnoatch."

Neville let out a booming laugh of surprise and then groaned. "Gods, I'll never live that down."

"It's not a real word, but it fits," she said, rolling over to look up at him. Her gaze flickered to the wall and her eyes widened. "Neville . . . was the wall behind the bed always gold?"

He shook his head without looking back. "You had another burst of magic," he explained. "It's nothing to worry about. I say we keep it."

An interesting thought occurred to her. "Huh."

Chapter 26

May 11th, 2007

The day to day functioning of Wizarding Britain essentially shut down surrounding the anniversary of Voldemort's destruction. Normal departments in the Ministry were less strictly monitored in favour of adding heavier support behind the Aurors, charities, and departments responsible for putting on galas and memorial celebrations. There had been a whole new department created just for the donations made to Hogwarts. Most of the Unspeakables took their yearly holiday during this time, but Hermione used the quiet of the Department of Mysteries to focus on her side projects, namely putting an end to the squib problem and the approaching marriage law.

After the anniversary of the final battle had passed, Hermione and Neville clipped out the photographs of them dancing at one of the balls held in honour of the heroes—living and dead—and tossed out the rest of the *Daily Prophet*, knowing it was nothing more than hogwash. The photos, however, were nice.

A week later, things were back to normal. Or as normal as life was.

"When I was five, I fell into a duck pond near my mother's garden," Draco said.

Ron snorted, and Hermione threw him a withering glare.

Neville and Hermione had gathered their friends together at the Three Broomsticks, something that had taken a formal apology from Draco before Madam Rosmerta would even let him through the front door. Hannah and Astoria huddled together on one side of the table, forcing Harry and Draco to sit side-by-side. Hermione and Neville squeezed close on the booth end of the wooden table, leaving Ron in a chair at the other end by his wife. Despite being pregnant, Mandy had insisted on working at St. Mungo's as long as she possibly could and was just coming off of a long shift. Hannah, likewise, kept up her work at the Leaky Cauldron, though Astoria was quite happily to let Draco and the Malfoy staff of house-elves cater to her.

With Ron properly silenced, Draco continued, "I hadn't been taught to swim yet; father had wanted a proper tutor and was waiting until that following summer, when we were supposed to holiday in France."

"And what happened?" Hermione asked, scribbling in a small notebook that was already three-fourths filled.

"A second before I hit the water, the entire pond froze over."

Those around the table that grew up in magical homes all nodded thoughtfully, leaving Hermione and Harry to chuckle slightly in amusement at the thought.

"But it was *fear* that sparked the magic?" Hermione asked. "Adrenaline based on panic?" At Draco's nod, she began writing in her notebook faster. "It's all flight or fight response, just like everyone says. All witches and wizards that I've interviewed have told me that their first memories of accidental magic were caused by some sort of fear or anxiety. Some sort of trauma happened, and their magic protected them."

"If that's the popular answer, then why are you researching it further?" Astoria asked, adjusting in her seat to make herself more comfortable. At Draco's concerned glance, she waved him off.

Hermione smiled excitedly. "I have a theory . . . I'm just trying to get a wide range of responses. I have a feeling that everyone will have a similar story from their childhood." Her book was filled with circumstances where magical children were in accidents where their magic saved them, or where they were attacked somehow, but sheltered by a burst of accidental magic. Floors that suddenly became soft, wild animals that turned into toys. She had notes after notes of frozen ponds, sticky balconies, and staircases that turned into slides. "I need to do my own testing though in regards to my theory. I've already been looking at blood samples collected from magicals under the age of eleven for further study."

"Why under eleven?" Ron asked, taking a small sip from his beer, savouring it since Mandy had pleaded with him to cut down on his drinking since she couldn't drink at all. Marital solidarity. He'd been nursing the one pint for the whole hour that they'd been sitting there.

"Because that's the age they obtain their wand and the magic learns to funnel itself through the focus point of the wand's core," Hermione answered, a part of her wishing that her friends had been this interested in their studies when they'd been at Hogwarts. A part of her still half-expected one of them to roll their eyes and dismiss her in favour of Quidditch or Exploding Snap. "It's why wandless magic becomes harder as we grow. Our magic learns to adapt to the wand because accidental magic when we're children is chaotic. It needs to be properly channelled."

Harry's brow furrowed as a thought occurred to him. "Teddy said something about you giving him a checkup the other day. Were you taking his blood?"

"Yes," Hermione said with a nod. "And I didn't hurt him, I assure you. I've taken some from the Weasley children as well. Teddy and Victoire both displayed accidental magic *very* early, and I wanted to compare it to the other children who've yet to show signs, despite that ridiculous test ruling them out as squibs."

Draco and Astoria shared a look, and he turned his gaze on Hermione. "How early can the test be run these days?"

"Worried about the sprog, Malfoy?" Ron asked with a smirk.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Hardly. Besides, weren't you taught that it's impolite to discuss the magical status of an unborn child, Weasel?" he asked, levelling Ron with a sneer. Giving the redhead no time to actually respond, Draco continued, "No? Shocking."

"Here we go again," Hannah muttered.

Ron's ears turned red. "Oh, shut yer gob, ferret-face or—"

"You've something on your shirt."

Blinking, Ron stared at Draco, not trusting the words. "What?"

The blond repeated, "I said, you've something on your shirt."

Confused, Ron glanced down just in time for Draco to flick his wand at Ron's pint of beer, tipping the remaining liquid into his lap. Blue eyes flashed and Ron stood from his chair, throwing his hands out and shaking the liquid from the tips of his fingers. "You son of a—"

"Ronald," Mandy quietly cautioned, but he didn't hear her.

Neville jumped to his feet with his hands out in peaceful supplication. "Everyone settle! Honestly . . ."

Harry, still wearing his Head Auror robes, grinned brightly at the scene. "No, let them fight. I've had dreams of arresting Malfoy for years."

Draco turned and smirked at him. "Always knew you dreamt of me, Potter."

"Twenty-four hours!"

Everyone turned their heads to stare at Hermione.

Ron raised a brow at her as he pulled his wand from his pocket and spelled his shirt dry. "What?" he asked, leaning down to pick up the fallen pint glass, lamenting his great loss.

Hermione huffed. "I'm answering Draco's question, you prat. The test has been perfected—if you want to call it that—to twenty-four hours after birth," she said with an air of impatience. "The researchers at St. Mungo's are trying to make it accessible to prenatal. It's horrifying." She frowned but smiled when Hannah reached over and took her hand. Looking up, both of the other witches were offering her smiles of support. "If I knew what they were going to be using my research for, I'd have never—"

"Ow."

Ron turned his full attention on Mandy. "Are you all right? Is it the baby?! Do we need to go?!"

She chuckled softly, reaching out to pat his arm. "Calm down," she said and leant from one side to the other, pushing lightly against her rib cage. "He just moved a bit is all."

"Do you know already?" Hannah asked, eyes bright. "It's a boy?"

Ron snorted. "It's a Weasley."

"Condolences."

Before Ron could react to Draco's sarcasm, Neville had moved around the table and was tugging on the Slytherin's arm, pulling him from his chair. "Let's go buy the next round, Malfoy."

When the two friends were out of hearing range, Ron groaned and stared across the table at Hermione. "Do we really have to put up with him?"

"Yes," she answered primly. "He's friends with Neville. Besides, Astoria is lovely."

Astoria grinned, eyes sparkling. "You flatter."

May 25th, 2007

"Hello, Neville!"

Neville looked up from his desk and the stack of third year essays he had been grading. He smiled brightly at the blonde witch in the door of his office. "Luna!" He stood and walked across the room to envelop his old friend in a gentle hug, carefully noting that her belly was a bit larger than the last time he had seen her. "Blimey, Luna, you're going to be a mum."

She smiled sweetly. "Twins. Boys, for now. Though the Healer looked at me strangely when I informed him. He says it's too soon to know, and wasn't paying attention when I explained that the babies had already made up their minds, but they might change them later. To be honest, I think one might just be falling to peer pressure from the other. They're quite adamant about being identical, you see."

Neville chuckled and shook his head as he led her back to his desk. "You're a treasure, Luna. Would you like some tea? Biscuits? They're homemade. Not by me or Hermione, mind," he said with another laugh. "Hannah's been bored lately, I suppose. Not even Harry can eat all the treats she's been making." Holding open the tin container for her, he snagged a chocolate biscuit after she had taken one for herself.

"No tea, thank you," she said, standing next to the seat but not sitting in it.

"What brings you to Hogwarts?"

"Marcus and I met a lovely man a few weeks ago," she said. "He's a Magizoologist and wanted to see if I'd introduce him to my father. While our books at home are quite interesting regarding magical creatures, I knew that Hagrid might have a better collection, so I asked if he would mind lending me a few. Rolf, that's the man's name, is trying to expand

on a few books that his grandfather wrote, and he wanted as many outside sources as possible to see if there needed to be any corrections."

"Glad to see you're keeping busy. I hope you're taking it easy, though," he said, gesturing to her stomach.

Luna smiled. "Oh, they'll be fine," she assured him. "And I've already told Rolf that I don't think it would be a good choice to travel until the twins are properly weaned. Changes in sea level affect the consistency of breast milk."

Neville blinked, not sure which of her statements had him more gobsmacked. He did his level best not to glance down at her chest at the mere mention of the word breast, latching instead on her talk of travel. "Wait . . . you're . . . you're going with this Rolf fellow? What does Marcus think of that?"

She nibbled on the chocolate biscuit for a long time, chewing and then swallowing before answering, "I imagine he'll have his hands quite full of Quidditch fans to worry about me."

"But . . . b-but I . . ." Neville stammered, raking his fingers through his hair. "You're going to be with other people? I thought you and he were well paired?"

"Quite well," Luna agreed. "For breeding purposes, of course. Love, however, is a different thing. Love is a choice, Neville. The spell used for the matching was all about procreation, not suitability. I like Marcus quite a bit, and he's very . . . open to suggestions," she said with an innocent smile that was really anything but. "However, we discussed early on that while initial infatuation and sexual compatibility were prominent, he's not suited to monogamy or fatherhood. He had a Quidditch injury some time back that damaged his hearing. The sound of babies crying is quite painful."

Neville stared at her, outraged on her behalf. "So he's just going to . . . to leave you with two children?!"

"Rolf likes children," Luna said with a light in her eyes that looked almost surreal.

Jaw open, Neville shook his head. "I . . . is this even legal?"

She shrugged. "I imagine that when the marriage law passes, you and Hermione will fix it soon enough."

"You mean Hermione. What am I going to do?"

She stared at him the same way she looked at tiny, injured creatures. Like a turtle that had somehow ended up on its back and couldn't figure out how to flip himself back onto his feet. "Oh, Neville. You're a very adequate tool for her research."

He couldn't stop his cheeks from turning red.

"I should be getting back. Thank you for the conversation and the biscuit."

Wiping his dirty boots on the mat outside the door, Neville kicked them off before stepping inside the cottage. "Hermione?" Lamps were lit and he could see boxed food sitting on the table. It was from the curry place near the Ministry that she liked, but since he couldn't smell it from where he stood, he imagined she'd placed it under a Stasis Charm.

Grinning at the thought of not needing to eat right away, he very nearly skipped down the hall toward the bedroom, where he could see the soft glow of light from beneath the closed door. Steeling himself for anything that might greet him inside, Neville opened the bedroom door to find his wife kneeling on the floor, feet tucked under her arse, her head bowed.

Eyes slightly wide in shock at the display, Neville swallowed, trying to temper his excitement at the sight of her. "Hermione," he whispered as he knelt down in front of her, grinning. "What brought this on?"

She sucked in a sharp breath. "I need you." She shook, her hands clenched tight at her side now that they were empty, her arms taut with tension.

Before he could question her further, Hermione threw herself against him, pressing her mouth to his with desperate need. He caught her out of necessity, not wanting either of them to topple over. Both hands holding his witch, he was too preoccupied to stop her from undoing the buckle of his trousers and slipping her hand inside his pants to wrap around his cock. Not that he wanted to stop her. She was a bit controlling, but Neville was open to changing things up from time to time. Plus, he knew that if she got a little too dominant for

his taste, a few quick swats to her arse would bring her back down. As it was, she felt like a wild animal in his arms, filled with hunger and the inability to hold still, desperately trying to claw at him in search of bare skin to match her own.

"Fuck me," she pleaded.

"Always," he mumbled against her mouth and readjusted her in his arms so that her thighs fell open around his hips. Hand between them, Neville lined himself up against her and thrust hard and deep. Hermione let out a loud keening noise and pushed her fingers through his hair, gripping tightly. He bathed himself in the way she moaned "Yes!" and in her needy little whimpers of "More!" Eager to lengthen both of their pleasures, Neville held her tight and stood, bringing her to the bed and throwing her down onto it.

"Spank me?"

The corner of his lip turned up. "You're so perfect," he said happily. Whatever Luna had discovered about the matching spell, he was certain that—procreation be damned—he was in love with Hermione and nothing in the world short of her desires would part him from her side. Hell, he was shocked on a daily basis that he was ever able to part from her body.

"Spank me," she repeated, almost sounding like an order.

He raised a brow. "Have you been bad?"

"Yes," she answered and then rolled over onto her knees.

After a few teasing swats, he smacked her harder, adjusting the strength to the sound of her moaning. He stopped every few smacks to kiss the small of her back and lavish her with whispered praises. With her skin properly red, Neville lined himself up again from behind, eager to feel her come apart around him. However, as he brushed the tip of his cock against her wetness, she pulled away from him and said, "No. I want more."

"More?" he questioned.

"Spank me."

Not one to deny a woman her desires—at least not when he wasn't doing so to prolong them—Neville smacked her arse again. And again. And again. All the while, Hermione begged, "Harder. Harder. Neville, please . . . harder!"

She had taken more before, so he did not question her pleading, not until she screamed, "Harder! Please, just . . . just use the belt."

Cold flooded his body. Bugger. Bugger, bugger, bugger, fuck! He sat back on his heels and tried to control his breathing. He had been so happy, so eager, so lost in the bliss of just having her, loving her, and having her accept every single part of him. He had not been paying attention and he cursed himself for acting like a teenager and thinking with his cock.

She'd been kneeling without provocation. Hermione didn't do anything without reason. He hadn't had a terrible day, which was usually when she submitted herself so fully. Still, not entirely out of character for her. Nor was her pleading and begging and her need for him to be a little rough with her. She'd become used to him, so he'd gradually been giving her more and relishing in the way that she'd begun to crave it and him.

The belt, however, had only been used once.

"Please . . ." she whimpered.

"No."

But no didn't always mean stop in the bedroom, so Hermione pushed on, tilting her hips back toward him as though she could entice him to hit her. "Neville, ple—"

"Devil's snare."

Chapter 27

May 25th, 2007

"Devil's Snare"

Hermione turned her head back so fast, her neck slightly twinged in pain. "W-What?"

Neville acted quickly, stepping off of the bed to walk around to her side and sit down next to her. "I love you," he reassured her, taking her face gently in his hands. "More than . . . Gods, Hermione, you have no idea how much. You are beautiful and brilliant and I will never, ever not love you."

Her hurt expression quickly turned to one of shock, as though to prevent a burn she had been quickly dunked into a tub of cold water to normalise her temperature. "I . . . But you . . . You just . . ."

"And I *want* you," he added, his eyes still dark with desire. "All the time. I never want any other woman. Frankly, there are days when I'm quite glad I spend my time with my hands in the dirt instead of a cauldron, because I think about you, crave you, so often that I'm pretty sure I'd have set the whole castle on fire by now."

"I . . . Oh," she said, still looking confused but remarkably less hurt.

This close and paying attention, Neville noticed the magic on her skin and sighed. "Why're you wearing a glamour?" Her eyes widened and briefly showed a vulnerability he had not seen in a long time, if ever. When she did not answer, he leant down and kissed her. Not passionate and needy like minutes earlier, but as soft as he possibly could. Barely a breath against her lips before he pressed slightly harder until he felt her sigh in relief against him.

"Hermione?"

Slowly, she lifted her chin to look at him. "I'd forgotten," she whispered.

Sighing, Neville stepped from the bed to retrieve his wand, returning quickly. He waved it over her face and frowned when she grimaced as he whispered, "*Finite*." The

glamour she'd cast faded. Her soft skin revealed red splotches. From a distance her cheeks looked more freckled than usual, but up close he could see that the spots were red—broken blood vessels. Her clear brown eyes dulled to a distressed pink with swollen bags beneath them. "What happened?"

She let out a sob, and he pulled her against his chest to let her cry it out. She was not shaking with anger the way she had the last time she'd had a bad day at work, and her magic wasn't sparking off of her hair like it did when she was particularly irritated. She melted against him and cried her heart out. If Neville wasn't completely confident that she was in love with him, he'd be worried that someone else had broken her heart.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I should have paid more attention to you. I should have known that something was wrong. I promise I'll do better in the future."

She looked up at him, eyes wet and nose and mouth red. "What? Why're *you* apologising? I'm the one . . . Oh gods, I forced you to say the safe word and I—"

"You didn't force me to do anything," he quickly assured her. "If at any time either of us gets uncomfortable with anything and needs to stop things immediately, that's what it's there for. Apart from maybe not telling me what's wrong, or that something was wrong to begin with . . . Hermione, I don't feel ashamed for saying it, and I never want you to feel ashamed either. That is what the safe word is there for—to keep us safe."

She nodded, slowly breathing out against him. "Then I'm sorry I . . . I just didn't want you to know. Not yet. I'm so embarrassed."

Neville tucked her head beneath his chin. "What happened, sweetheart?"

It took her several tries, the words catching in the middle of a gasped breath or a choked sob, before she finally said, "They fired me."

Shocked, Neville did his best not to demand answers—or storm off to the Ministry to raise a little hell in the Department of Mysteries. He'd done it once when he was only fifteen, so it wasn't like it was hard to break into the damn place and break a few prophecies. However, he kept a calm facade, steadied his breathing to make sure that he was a rock that she could rely upon. "Take a breath and keep going, love."

She did so.

"I submitted my paperwork this morning. All those stupid projects that Croaker had me working on, in addition to the time I've been dedicating to help Smith with what should have been my project to . . . well . . . Even our personal research needs to be approved at certain points if we're using department resources and time. So per protocols, I had to have Croaker sign off on the squib research."

She sat up then to breathe easier, and Neville summoned a box of tissues from the bathroom, handing her one to blow her nose. She grimaced before she did so, offering him a look of apology that he ignored, doing his best not to roll his eyes in the process. A *Mimulus Mibletonia* spewed stinksap all over him that morning and he'd had to shower twice at Hogwarts; his wife having bogeys was the least gross thing he'd seen that day.

"Your research was sound, so far," he finally said, when it looked like she didn't want to continue talking. "Don't get me wrong, I don't understand more than half of it, especially when you started in on the Muggle biology bits."

Hermione scoffed. "That's where Croaker . . . I'm so angry, Nev. I thought I was going to hex him," she admitted. "He said that my research was corrupted. That I'd wasted valuable time and resources because I'd included Teddy and Victoire in the study."

Brow furrowed in confusion, Neville shook his head. "I don't understand. They were perfect for your studies because of how early they displayed magic, especially considering neither of them is a pureblood and they both have a variety of lineages."

"Yes," Hermione said, her eyes narrowing and her jaw clenching in anger, "but those lineages . . . include *creatures*."

Eyes wide in sudden understanding, Neville sighed. "Oh, Hermione."

"That prejudiced, ignorant bastard! He'd acted as though I hadn't taken Victoire's veela heritage into consideration! There were six pages of veela magic documentation, plus an interview with Fleur, Gabrielle, and their mother! I showed in two different graphs the differences between the diluted veela blood amongst the generations! He said that didn't count because Bill was infected!"

She stood up and began pacing around the room angrily, giving no care to the fact that she was still naked, or that her arse was apple red. "Never mind that neither Victoire or

Teddy are infected with lycanthropy—and I had blood samples to prove it—he said that because I'd used one proven child of an infected werewolf, and potentially another, that I might as well have doctored the results with Dark Magic!"

The back of Neville's neck grew hot with anger. "Did he actually accuse you of using Dark Magic?" he demanded through clenched teeth.

Hermione scoffed. "Not directly, no," she said, folding her arms across her chest. "I can't talk specifics about D.O.M. assigned projects due to oaths that I made, but if someone made an accusation like that, I could easily go to the papers. Not that I would," she added quickly. "They'd likely say I admitted to using Dark Magics."

"Not to mention you could actually bring slander charges against him. I don't know how the other departments handle it, but when I was an Auror, we took accusations like that seriously. It would be easy enough to prove that you only practise Light Magic, and he'd have the D.M.L.E. up his . . . er . . ." He cleared his throat. "Well, the whole Department of Mysteries could be turned upside-down." He almost grinned. "In fact, I kind of have it in with the Head Auror. I could put in a word . . ."

Hermione snorted a quiet laugh. "As though I don't."

The thought of Harry tearing the Department of Mysteries apart—this time with legal sanction from the Ministry—was entertaining at worst, damn near delightful at best. Of course, the resources spent would be phenomenal, and in the end, Hermione would be blamed for a great deal of the inconveniences of it. "So then what happened?" he prompted.

Hermione's arms fell to her sides and she looked down. "What do you think? I'm a waste of the department's time and resources, I cause problems with my co-workers—"

"Smith."

"Cocksnoat," Hermione growled. "Then Croaker accused me of trying to use the squib issue to promote my own interests because he knows that I was originally being recruited by the Department of Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures before the Department of Mysteries showed interest. So he thinks that I'm using the D.O.M. to work my own causes in other departments and try to sneak legislation through. Arsehole."

He reached a hand out to her. "Come here."

She huffed lightly. "I don't want to sit down."

Neville couldn't stop the small smile that crossed his face. "I honestly doubt you'd be able to right now, sweetheart. That's actually my point." He tilted his head in an exaggerated motion to stare at her arse. When she blushed and actually smiled a little, he felt a weight on his chest ease. "You can keep talking, but because we ended things so abruptly, I haven't had a chance to properly take care of you."

She slowly stepped into his open arms and then winced slightly when he gently ran his fingers over the skin of her bum. "Leave some of it," she quietly requested.

He leant to the side and opened the drawer on the bedside table, pulling out the Murtlap Essence jar and then setting it next to him on the bed before resuming his gentle touches. "So that's why you wanted the belt?"

She shrugged one shoulder. "It worked last time."

Neville sighed and pressed his forehead against her sternum. "It's my job to take care of you. To know what you need. Hermione, please don't shut me out like that ever again."

She frowned. "I'm sorry. I just . . . I wanted it to go away."

He reached up and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. "I understand. It's different, though. For one, last time you told me what had happened and asked me for help. This time, while I know your reasons now, you . . . well . . . there's no better way to say it, but glammers like that can be manipulative." At her look of shock and guilt, he put a gentle hand on her arm. "This . . . this marriage and everything we do, it's new. We're bound to both make mistakes. Do you forgive me mine?"

"Of course! You didn't even—" She stopped when he smiled sheepishly up at her. "I mean . . . of course I do, Neville. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to . . . to trick you. I was just . . . I wanted to be distracted and pretend it didn't happen, I suppose."

"I forgive you," he assured her. "I was prepared last time. I knew what emotional state you were already in, so when you reached that accidental magical high that you get, I knew how to take care of you for when you came down from it. I don't bring you juice and constantly ask you questions about your state of mind for my own reassurance. I know you

like what we do," he said with a small smile. "You often, and very loudly, are perfectly clear." He chuckled when she swatted his arm.

"I bring you juice because sometimes a submissive can get shaky afterwards."

Hermione nodded her head. "Low blood sugar."

"Right," he said, not knowing *exactly* what that meant, but recognising it as a Muggle term. "And I make sure your temperature is right, that you're not too hot or cold because you might not be able to properly get a feel for it yourself. I tend to any injuries, make sure you feel safe and comfortable, and then we talk about everything that just happened so I know what you liked, and what you didn't." He paused, planting his lips against the skin between her breasts feeling her heartbeat against his touch. As though she sensed it as a sign that he needed her, Hermione threaded her fingers gently through his hair and held him close.

"I like this too," she whispered. "I like taking care of you."

He smiled. "I know."

"I was so embarrassed," Hermione quietly admitted. "I hadn't done anything wrong, but I felt like a failure. Oh, the Muggle-born couldn't do the job right, what a surprise," she said sarcastically and then pulled one hand from Neville's hair to wipe at a stray tear on her cheek. "I've never been good with failure. Being an outsider, well . . . I'm used to that."

Neville let out a quick breath. "I know he's my friend now, but if you'd like, I would have no problem punching Draco in the face."

Hermione laughed. "Of course not," she said. "He was hardly the first or the last to make me feel unwanted and unwelcome. Honestly, I thought I'd gotten over most of it. War was over; I was an Unspeakable working for a Ministry I mostly trusted. The Muggle-born issues only ever crept around when Croaker was in a mood or needed an excuse to dismiss me. Which, I realise, is pretty much exactly what he did today."

"Lie down," Neville instructed, picking up the Murtlap Essence and scooting back from the bed to give her room. When she was prone in front of him, he dipped his finger into the paste and smoothed it over her skin. "How does that feel?"

"Mmm. Good."

"What do you want to do about Croaker?"

She scoffed, folding her arms in front of her and resting her cheek on them. "Nothing can be done. Legally, he had every right to fire me. I wouldn't even think of asking Kingsley for help because it would look like preferential treatment, and I've more dignity than that. Plus . . . I loved my research, but I really hated my job. I feel guilty for being relieved, actually."

"What about your squib research?"

"It's on the table in the other room. Since it was a personal project, and one given to me by the minister himself, Croaker has no rights to it. Besides, even if he had my papers, he wouldn't know which direction I was going in." Her tone was suddenly smug and confident, reminding Neville of his Hermione.

"What is your direction?"

Hermione rolled slightly to the side to look up at him. "Sex."

Neville's brows rose to his hairline. "You . . . you think that sex . . . will solve the squib problem?"

She smirked at him. "According to all of my research, accidental magic that happens in children is caused by fear, panic, or trauma. Even something as small as when Harry's aunt used to cut his hair. He, and his magic, interpreted that as a form of assault because she was emotionally abusive, so his magic would grow the hair back and repair what it thought of as damage. Draco falling in the lake, Ron defending himself against Fred and George, even Mandy's magic protected her from a house fire when she was a little girl. When I got my Hogwarts letter, my parents told Minerva that I used to summon toys into my crib when I was upset."

Neville nodded in understanding. Unlike most magical children who displayed accidental magic early on, he remembered his family testing him to try to provoke the magic out. While his grandmother might've liked to think that he'd forgotten about being dropped out of a window, Neville had been eight years old, and he remembered thinking that he would smash against the ground right up to the point that he bounced on it. "What does that have to do with sex?"

Hermione grinned. "If accidental magic is caused by panic, fear, and trauma . . . then why have I had several outbursts of it during sex?"

Neville's mouth fell open. "I . . . I don't . . . honestly, I assumed it was trauma. Sort of."

She shook her head and sat up, gesturing wildly with her hands as she spoke. "No, I enjoy every bit of it. But think, Neville. I don't have these outbursts when we have mild play, and sometimes I'm more physically 'traumatised' than I ever am when we get more intense. I think it's a combination of adrenaline and endorphins. Just the right combination.

"That's actually why it was so important to have Victoire and Teddy in the study. While they aren't infected, their blood tests show that they carry a recessive gene that I could label as non-active lycanthropy. Because of this, their magic burns up excess energy faster than other children, and it's unable to keep up with them physically, so their magic lashes out. Magicals without creature genes, recessive or otherwise, have their magic attuned to their typical adrenaline release because it's been . . . observing it, controlling it since they were children. Keeping us in check until we were given a wand."

"You've lost me," he said with a frown. "You're talking about magical children, but what does that have to do with squibs?"

Hermione's eyes lit up. "Squibs have magic, but it's dormant. At least, that's my theory. All magical children do. That initial boost of fear-laced adrenaline is what kicks it into gear. What if a squib needs both adrenaline and endorphins?"

"Holy shit."

"Exactly!"

"So you'd—"

"Need to research a lot more, extensively," she emphasised. "Eventually, I might be able to figure out how to properly synthesise the exact combination and create a serum, or potion that would trigger the dormant magic in squibs. If I get the dosage right, then it would be completely safe because their magic would burn up any excess hormones as though they'd triggered the burst on their own."

Neville grabbed her and kissed her deep until she sighed blissfully against his lips. When he pulled away from her with a bright grin, her eyes were dazed, lids heavy. "You're brilliant. Absolutely, utterly brilliant!"

She beamed under his praise. "I still need to do it. And . . . well . . . now I need to find a job."

"This is your job, Hermione," Neville insisted. "Put together a . . . a plan for everything, and bring it to Kingsley. Demand funding. If he won't do it . . . well . . . I'll fund you. Or Harry and I will fund you. Hell, I'm pretty sure I could get Draco to chip in. I'll ask Gran as well."

Her cheeks turned pink. "I . . . I don't know what to say. I mean . . . I'll have to be discreet, of course, about how I discovered the connection. But . . . do you really think I could do this?"

"You will," he said excitedly. "Who's smarter than you?"

"Actually, there are—Mphf!"

As much as he loved hearing her talk, there was always a bit of delight in shutting her up when she felt like arguing his very obviously rhetorical questions. He kissed her soundly, smiling against her mouth when she wrapped her hands around his neck.

"Mmm . . . up for a little research?" she asked.

"Nope," Neville said. "You're going to get up and get dressed and we're going to feed each other curry and then go to bed after relaxing. You've had a rough day and I think you could use a night of nothing, don't you?" At her nod and soft smile, he continued, "Put on those great ugly pyjama pants with the kneazles on them. I know you like those the best."

Hermione huffed as she made her way to the dresser. "They are not ugly."

Chapter 28

June 15th, 2007

Nine months to the day that the procreation programme went into effect, the Marital and Reproduction Act of 2007 was passed in the Wizengamot by a slim margin, but slim enough that an asinine assumption and idea of a few old men became a law that did not even apply to them. The age range was still limited to the younger generation, missing Sirius by just a few years. The sadness of the situation had the man not even wanting to celebrate the escape from nuptials and nappies.

Luckily, the Ministry was so distracted by the new law being passed and the ramifications of this great upheaval, that Kingsley pushed through Hermione's request for funding as an independent researcher unassociated with any of the Ministerial departments. Croaker and Smith could kiss her arse for all she cared.

The Head Unspeakable had felt well rid of the Muggle-born witch, that is, until Augusta Longbottom cornered him in his office late one night—fuck knew how she sneaked in without drawing attention to herself, wearing a stuffed vulture on her head—and asked him if he had a problem with her *granddaughter*.

"I . . . who?"

"Hermione Granger," Augusta said primly, inspecting her nails. "She informed me that my old friend . . . and she had parted ways and she's had to find new employment. Come now, Saul, you tell old Gussy exactly what happened."

Hermione had received a letter that day with a formal apology and an offer for her old job back. She politely declined—in a Howler.

Saul Croaker was not the only man to be yelled at by Hermione, though Neville thought his position—between her thighs—was actually quite pleasant. The screaming, however, was getting a bit out of control and he had had to put a Silencing Charm on the room. Their cottage was a good distance away from their nearest neighbour, but Neville

would not put it past Hermione's accidental magic to end up adding an Amplifying Charm to her moans of pleasure. The very last thing he needed was for her screams of "Yes, Neville! Oh fuck!" to reach Hogwarts.

"How are you this strong?" he demanded, awkwardly trying to push her thighs down against the bed and away from his ears, which were liable to rupture under the pressure of her grip.

Hermione panted, gasping for breath, arms and legs shaking. "Wh . . . what? Did you say . . .?"

He smirked and kissed the inside of her knee, feeling relieved when her leg finally gave out and hit the mattress. While he popped and stretched his jaw, he ran two fingers against her, studiously avoiding her swollen and neglected clit.

Hermione's back arched at the touch, and she let out a needy sob. "I can't . . . I can't take anymore. Please, please, Neville . . . let me come."

"When I want you to," he replied. "I'll remind you that orgasm training was your idea—"

"Dumb idea."

"—and you're doing so well, sweetheart."

"How long?"

He glanced at the pocket watch he'd hung against one of the iron bars at the foot of the bed. "Just over an hour." She let out a loud groan and lazily kicked one foot in protest. Gods, how he adored her.

Hermione spent her days going over paperwork, charts, and blood samples in between visits to the children of their friends, as well as a small group of squibs that had volunteered for testing when she had a serum available. Originally, Kingsley had suggested Argus Filch be involved, which prompted the idea that squibs over the age of eleven be psychologically tested. Considering Filch's propensity toward favouring archaic methods of discipline—not to mention his remaining admiration for Dolores Umbridge's reign of terror—he was quickly ruled out. Hermione had felt relieved that it hadn't been left in her

hands to decide. A small group of Mind Healers and one squib psychologist were put to the task.

During the day, she tested wizards, witches and squibs with various methods of creating necessary levels of both adrenaline and endorphins—including Auror-level physical training. At home, however, Neville had been more than happy to offer his attention for her studies. So far, her accidental magic had painted the walls of their home a variety of colours, cracked six windows, and turned Neville's hair pink for two days straight.

"Please," she whimpered and writhed under the softest of touches. He had driven her to the brink of orgasm six times so far, prolonging it as long as possible. The moment she tensed and began to shake, he would pull back and stroke his hands against her thighs, or remove his mouth from her to kiss the inside of her knee instead. She was flush and pink all over, and a thin layer of sweat covered every inch of skin. Had he been a greedy man, Neville might have thought to keep her like that forever.

"You're so very pretty," he said with a happy smile as he leant his cheek against her leg.

"Neville!"

"Bossy," he muttered and nipped the skin of her leg with his teeth. "Are you sure no pain this time?"

Hermione nodded in anticipation. "No pain. I need . . . I need to test my blood after to see the difference in hormone levels."

It was not the best pillow talk, but Neville had always admired her mind. "Hands up," he instructed, using his wand to levitate her own into her grip before securing both wrists to the bars behind her head. "Hermione?"

"I'm good," she assured him.

He returned his attention to the apex of her thighs, kissing his way down from her navel before pressing his tongue against her clit with worshipful devotion. When she began to slowly tense, mewling and shivering beneath him, Neville sat back on his legs and adjusted himself between her thighs. "Watch me, love," he insisted, waiting for her to focus her

attention. With her eyes locked on him, he leant forward and ran a closed fist over his cock, letting the tip brush up against her wetness with every stroke.

She moaned at the sight of him, having been denied for over an hour the chance to see just exactly how badly he wanted her as he pleased her into submission. She stared, eyes hungry, licking her lips over and over. Her eyes fluttered when he brushed the tip of his cock against her clit. She nearly came undone when he bit his lower lip and moaned her name.

With his free hand, Neville resumed rubbing her slowly, teasing a circle around her entrance. "You've been so good," he said. "So perfect. I'm dying here, Hermione. I've never . . . never wanted to fuck you so badly."

"I . . . I can't . . . I'm going to . . ."

"Just a few more seconds, sweetheart," he promised as his thumb flicked over the head of his cock. He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. "It'll be so good. Best ever, I imagine." He glanced down and grinned at the sight of her. "Gods, I bet you're so tight right now."

"Please . . . Neville, please. Let me come. Please, let me come."

"Yes," he finally said, driving his cock into her with a deep thrust.

She came undone instantaneously, thrashing against the bindings on her wrist as her back bowed. Neville bent forward, eyes closed as her body squeezed him with a tightness that was almost blinding. It felt as though she were trying to force him out of her and pull him deeper in all at once. "Mother of . . . Merlin," he muttered, lips between her breasts, when her magic drifted over her skin like water—visible, tangible—and pulled him under until he was shaking with her, spilling inside of her.

When her magic pulled back, Neville actually struggled to pull himself off of her body—the need to take care of her and make sure she was all right a driving force at the forefront of his mind. He half expected her to be crying when he felt her chest shaking underneath his cheek. His eyes widened at the sight he was met with: Hermione—wrists still bound to the bars behind her—giggling deliriously.

"Hermione?" he asked with a dopey smile on his face. When she did not respond, he pulled his softening cock out of her, which promptly drew her attention.

"Hmm?"

"You all right, love?"

Her pupils were blown wide, black nearly swallowing the brown entirely. She grinned and nodded, still laughing softly before she asked, "Do we have chocolate cake?"

My life, Neville thought joyfully, *is perfect*.

June 16th, 2007

They slept through the rest of the night and all of the next day, waking only to bring more food in from the kitchen. While Neville fixed them each servings of chocolate cereal—unfortunately, there had been no cake—Hermione focused enough to magically drawn a sample of her blood for later testing. All hungers greatly satisfied, Hermione fell quickly asleep in his arms.

Sometime in the middle of the day, she woke to find Neville's arms wrapped around her waist, his head pressed against her breasts. When she tried to pry herself away so that she could go to the restroom, his grip on her tightened and his face, even sleeping, looked panicked. "Neville, wake up," she encouraged him, running her fingers through his hair.

His eyes slowly opened and he looked up at her. "Hermione?"

"Are you all right?"

He blinked, confused, but slowly nodded. "I . . . don't leave?"

Recognising that tone as one she'd often had herself when she implored him to stay close to her when she felt vulnerable after playing, Hermione nodded and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, kissing the top of his head. "Never," she whispered. "You're mine and I'm yours."

Relaxing against her, Neville sighed and whispered, "Love you . . . Hermione," before falling swiftly back to sleep.

They next woke hours later, when the sun had set once more, by a loud whooshing sound from the other room. Hermione blinked quickly awake and sat up. "Was that . . . Floo? Who Floo?"

Neville smiled and kissed her forehead. "I can get it. You rest."

"No, I'm fine," she said with a yawn. "If I nap any longer, I'll completely ruin my sleep schedule and be up for days." Stretching her arms over her head, she let out a small laugh and then fell back onto her pillows. When Neville chuckled at her, she pressed a cold foot against his thigh and grinned smugly when he hissed and nearly fell out of the bed to get away from her.

"Mean."

She shrugged.

"You're not having sex, are you? Because that would be a terrible inconvenience!"

Hermione's eyes widened. "Was that—?"

"Malfoy?" Neville finished and jumped from the floor, throwing his pyjama bottoms on as quickly as possible. "What's he doing—?"

Another voice interrupted him, "Can you at least finish quickly?"

"Put a shirt on!" Hermione told her husband at the sound of Theo's voice. When he looked at her with a raised brow, she sighed. "Theo fancy's you and just because he's in a relationship with Dennis does not mean that he's above gawking at your naked chest."

Laughing, Neville threw a t-shirt on and then ducked into the hallway, closing the bedroom door behind him.

In the living room, Draco leant against the fireplace, looking impatient as he stared down at his hands, picking at a nail with his thumb. "Where's Granger? Both of you are required for this little excursion." When Neville stared at him, confused, he sighed

dramatically and gestured to Theo, who was lying face down on the sofa. "Theo's Gryffindor boyfriend got his Ministry-mandated match today. Somehow, I think that fucking a wife on the sly is going to ruin their sex life."

"Granger! Drink!" Theo shouted, partially muffled by the pillow he was half lying on. Neville frowned. "Who was it?"

"Vane," Draco said with a raised brow and nodded when Neville actually flinched in response.

"Are you serious?" Hermione said as she stormed into the room wearing kneazle pyjamas and one of Neville's t-shirts. "They paired sweet little Dennis with Romilda Vane?"

"Not as little as you think," Theo mumbled with a laugh.

She ignored him and sighed, turning her attention back to Draco. "Are they even still using the matching spell?"

"Not nearly as politely as the volunteer programme was. There weren't even any snacks set out, as far as I've been able to tell," Draco said.

Theo rolled over, his hair mussed and one eyelid heavier than the other. "Put us all in a room and cast the spell, then wouldn't leave until we admitted who lit up like a Christmas tree for us. If we didn't make a bloody 'connection' within five minutes, they paired us off like . . . like . . . breeding . . . things."

Hermione frowned and sat down on the end of the sofa, putting a hand on Theo's foot. "Oh, Theo. I'm so sorry. Where's Dennis?"

"Meeting the in-laws," Theo said bitterly. "I'm meeting firewhisky. We're getting along famously."

"Who'd he end up paired with?" Neville quietly asked Draco.

"Don't know her. Some Ravenclaw that graduated about five years before we did. Apparently, Theo apologised in advance of any marital duties he would need to be potioned to complete, and then he left the Ministry in favour for what I can only assume was Ogden's brewing factory. He showed up like this at the manor and sent Astoria into a fit."

"A fit?" Hermione asked. "Is she all right? The baby?"

Theo began to giggle. "He's mad at me."

Before anything more could be clarified, the Floo lit up in a flash of bright green flames and Harry stumbled through. He coughed and then dusted the ashes from his cloak, blinking as his gaze settled on Hermione and Neville. "Why aren't you ready? Why aren't they ready?"

Draco sighed. "Because I hadn't yet told them the plans. Plans, I'll remind you, that I disagree with."

"I'm not the one dragging you on a pub crawl, Malfoy, don't glare at me," Harry snapped.

"Wait, pub crawl?" Hermione asked. "We're going on a pub crawl?"

Harry smirked. "Hannah and Astoria's idea. Ron's staying home because Mandy has to work, and she'd be upset if she missed out but he still went."

"Astoria and Hannah are pregnant," Neville pointed out as though Harry and Draco had forgotten.

"Very pregnant," Hermione added.

"George . . . kind of figured out a way around that issue," Harry said carefully.

"Weasley *and* Blaise," Draco corrected.

"Right, Zabini apparently opened some potions shop over in Italy and he's been working with Wheezes on the brewing end, giving George more time to invent. Apparently, they sort of created a potion to allow witches to drink while pregnant. Nothing happens to the baby at all," Harry said. "They're calling it Baby Bypass." Hermione's eyes widened in shock. "I know, 'Mione, I know. It's horrifying. But it works. They tested it out on a bunch of Aberforth's goats apparently."

"Goats!?" she shrieked.

"They've done human testing as well," Draco interjected. "Merlin, Potter. Pansy took the stuff throughout her entire pregnancy. Couldn't convince her to give up her bottle of wine a day to save her life. Weasley's wife tried it as well. Perfectly safe. I've seen the recorded results. Blaise is writing a paper on it, and I'm tempted to invest."

"Then why are you objecting to the pub crawl?" Neville asked.

Draco levelled him with a glare. "Because pubs are disgusting, rarely cleaned, the list of the ones *they* want to go to is ridiculous, and Astoria is . . . well . . . unlike herself when she's pissed."

That was apparently the deciding factor. Hermione laughed and turned around. "I am not missing this," she said as she made her way to her bedroom to find pub-appropriate clothing.

The first pub had been a disaster as Astoria and Hannah were still getting used to the Wheezes Hide-a-Baby Maternity shirts they were wearing. The built-in glamour was brilliant, and after inspecting the fabric multiple times—while Astoria and Hannah took shots of firewhisky at the bar—she couldn't help but wonder how George could create something so magically brilliant, and sell it alongside flatulent fake wands.

Unfortunately, the pregnant witches weren't used to the tops and kept adjusting them in the crowded pub, consistently resetting the glamour, which had their rounded bellies disappearing and reappearing at random, sending a group of old witches at a nearby table into hysterics. Properly tipsy, they all left the pub, and Hermione cast a Stasis Charm on the shirts to prevent her friends from moving them. Once secure—and against Draco's requests—the group ventured into Muggle London, following Theo to the nearest gay bar.

"You're really not going to have anything?" Harry asked Hermione and Neville for the second time as he brought back shots of some glowing green liquor for Hannah and Astoria, plus a beer each for himself, Theo, and Draco.

"I'm fine, Harry," Hermione promised. "Think of Neville and me as designated Apparaters."

Astoria shook her head. "Can't Apparate when pregnant," she said, attempting to touch her belly that currently was disguised with the glamour. She looked down and her eyes widened in shock. "Draco! I can see my feet!"

He smiled at her. "Such lovely feet they are."

Astoria smiled at her husband and leant her head on Hannah's shoulder. "Isn't he the best?" she said, staring at Draco as though he'd hung the moon in the sky just for her. Hannah grinned and patted the top of her head.

"Stop showing off, Malfoy," Harry mumbled.

Draco turned and narrowed his eyes. "What was that?" he asked over the loud music.

Harry leant forward, inches from Draco's ear. "I said stop showing—"

"Aww, aren't they a pretty couple," a man said as he walked by the group. "Shame, all the best-looking blokes are taken."

Hermione bit her bottom lip hard to stop herself from grinning, ultimately burying her face in Neville's shoulder. Theo had no such cares to hide and laughed loudly at the looks of confusion—followed by horror—on Draco and Harry's faces. Unfortunately, both Hannah and Astoria were far too into their cups by that point, and determinedly spent the next hour trying to beg, then blackmail, then threaten, then buy their way into watching Harry and Draco snog.

"Fine, fine, fine," Hannah said. "Twenty-five Galleons."

Harry snatched the glass from her hand. "You're cut off."

"Two-hundred Galleons!" Astoria shouted, throwing her hand up as though she were in an auction house.

Draco stared at her. "Those are *my* Galleons that you're trying to buy me with. I am not kissing Potter."

"Then kiss Longbottom," Theo suggested.

Neville sputtered. "W-What? I . . . I'm married!"

"No, no," Hermione said, sitting back and smirking at her husband as he turned several shades of pink. "I've no problem with you kissing Malfoy." She outright grinned when he pinned her with a look that said all sorts of terrible things that he promised to do to her in retribution for her sass.

Hannah giggled. "Enough with the eye-fucking, for Merlin's sake."

"Agreed," Harry said, scooping Hannah up from her seat and into his lap, mostly using her as a shield in case Draco finally caved to Astoria's pleas and made a move for him.

"This is fun," Astoria said as she mimicked Hannah, crawling into Draco's lap. "We should have fun more. I don't even like your mother's tea parties," she said, much louder than they all assume she had intended. "Don't tell her, though. She scares me a bit."

"She scares everyone, love," Theo insisted.

"She's not scary; she's my mum," Draco argued, narrowing eyes at everyone who was nodding their head in agreement with Astoria and Theo. "Perhaps all mum's are a bit scary."

Astoria gasped and covered her mouth. "What if I'm not a good mum?"

Hannah, as though the thought suddenly occurred to her as well, burst into tears. Horrified, Harry stood and collected his wife in his arms, wincing a bit since she was a bit heavier than she looked thanks to the Hide-a-Baby shirt she was wearing. "I think we're done for the night," he said.

"Need any help?" Neville offered.

Harry shook his head. "Leaky's not too far from here."

Draco, likewise, was trying to comfort a crying Astoria while staring daggers at Theo. "I knew this was a bad idea," he muttered. "I need to get her back to the manor. Hopefully without my mother overhearing how much Astoria dislikes her tea parties." He turned his attention to Neville. "Can you . . ." he trailed off, gesturing at Theo, who was leaning back against the sofa, staring at a couple in the crowd with their arms wrapped around one another. One very conveniently looked like Dennis, which would explain Theo's miserable pout.

"We'll take care of him," Hermione promised.

When Neville and Hermione stumbled out of the Floo into Theo's flat, they caught their balance quickly so as not to drop the inebriated wizard who had his arms draped over their shoulders for support. "Good 'ere," Theo said before flinging himself onto a sofa in the middle of the living room.

Hermione sighed and stretched her arms above her head, glancing around the flat as she did so. Photographs littered the walls as well as the mantle above the fireplace. Most were of Dennis and Theo themselves at various functions—mostly Muggle, as the photographs didn't move—but there were some old pictures as well that Hermione

recognised from Hogwarts. One of Dumbledore's Army just before Christmas fifth year. Everyone was in it, Dennis included, which meant that Colin had likely taken the photograph. Another photograph rested beside one of the Creevey family, this one of an old, stern-looking man and a young woman with a small boy on her lap. Theo, Hermione figured, and his parents: a dead mother and a Death Eater father.

"Gods, they've already lost so much," she whispered to herself as she stared at a smiling, happy photograph of Theo and Dennis. "It's not fair."

"Nothing's fair, Grange . . ." Theo murmured, eyes closed. "You think . . . you think I could make it as a Muggle?" he asked. "If we . . . if we ran away?"

Before she had a chance to answer him, soft snores filled the room. She frowned, looking up at Neville, who sighed and draped a blanket over Theo. "I need to fix this," she said determinedly. "Before it gets worse."

"Can it get much worse than this?" Neville asked.

June 17th, 2007

Neville woke first the following morning, eager to get a start on a few errands before he would need to head back to Hogwarts the next day. Mondays were especially busy and he liked to let the students work off the extra energy they built up over the weekend by getting their hands dirty and working up a sweat by replanting and weeding. That meant that he needed to get essays graded since he knew that his fifth and seventh years would be too distracted worrying about their grades to pay attention to any of the more dangerous plants.

Parchments stacked in front of him, Neville sat down at the dining table with a cup of coffee and a pastry, ready to dive into work. He wasn't ten essays in when a knocking sound at the window came, and he turned to see a brown owl sitting on the sill outside with an official-looking letter in its beak.

Opening the window, Neville exchanged a piece of his pastry for the envelope, smiling when the bird took the sweet without biting him. Despite it being addressed to both he and Hermione, Neville tore open the envelope and withdrew the folded letter inside. His eyes widened at the content, and he felt his heart leap into his throat in a panic that was swiftly followed by a rage he had not felt since the war.

Dear Mr and Mrs Longbottom,

We at the newly established Department of Marriage and Procreation are happy to serve Wizarding Britain during this trying time in our history. We appreciate citizens, such as yourselves, who volunteered for the Marital and Reproduction Act of 2007. Thus far, confirmed pregnancies are making promising numbers for our population. It is, however, noted that you have yet to report to St Mungo's for either pregnancy confirmation or treatments to progress fertility if necessary. Because of this, the Ministry has decided that the Department of Marriage and Procreation must insist that you both be seen by a Healer of our choosing to determine whether or not procreation is feasible. Should the Healer decide not, your marriage will be dissolved and you will receive a payment of three hundred Galleons for attempted services rendered. If one of you is decided to still be fertile, the Ministry will assign you a new match.

You have sixty days to comply before a disciplinary hearing will be scheduled, at which point, fines will accrue.

Hoping you are well,

*Emily Peasgoode
Department of Marriage and Procreation*

Chapter 29

June 17th, 2007

Hermione had never been the type of person to sleep in. All throughout her Hogwarts years, she was the first one up in her dorm room, fussing about with her books and materials, rearranging everything in her bag before she'd learned a *Lightweight Charm*. Even after the war, when most were resting, Hermione was awake before the sunrise, usually with a finely written errand list and detailed plan for the day. She often had to be so very organised, since Harry and Ron never were. It became that much more important when she married Ron and realised that outside of a few basic items of importance, he'd forget just about anything that needed to be done.

Neville, however, though not always great with his memory, was dependable in so many other ways. She knew she would never wake to a sink full of dirty dishes, nor would she have to remind him of his work schedule, bills that needed paying, or anything to do with his job at all. Occasionally she had to help him find his misplaced boots, or his favourite quill, but other than that, Neville was fairly self-sufficient. Because of their intimate activities at night, Hermione often found herself lazily exploring this wonderful concept of sleeping in. She lounged like a cat in the middle of the bed most mornings before she truly needed to get a start on the day. Her head was clearer, her body relaxed, and her magic did not feel so tightly twisted up inside of her. Rather than crackling sparks of energy ready to burst, it felt fluid, like a peaceful river cutting through the landscape of a great mountain.

Waking up to find Neville gone was nothing new to her. Waking, however, to the sound of the Floo igniting was. Pulling herself quickly from bed, she threw on a dressing gown and hoped that nothing had happened with Hannah or Astoria. While she trusted George's brewing—especially since apparently Angelina had used the *Baby-Bypass Draught* during her own pregnancy—she couldn't help but be concerned for the welfare of her friends and their unborn children.

Seeing Harry standing in front of her fireplace with a pensive look on his face all but caused her heart to drop into her stomach. "Harry! Oh my gods, is Hannah all right?"

He briefly looked confused, his brow furrowed as he processed her words. His expression softened quickly and he gave her a small smile. "She's fine, Hermione. Everyone is . . . technically . . . fine."

"Technically?" she asked, staring at him with her hands on her hips. "Harry Potter, what aren't you telling me?"

Sighing, Harry ran a hand through his hair and cringed as he said, "You need to come to the Ministry with me. We had a bit of a . . . Well, Neville's there." At her suddenly horrified look, he put both of his hands up. "He's safe and healthy and there's no . . . Neville's fine, 'Mione, I promise. Except he might've almost . . . kind of . . . got arrested."

"ARRESTED?!"

Harry winced at her volume and reached into the pocket of his robes, pulling out a folded piece of parchment. "He said to give you this. Pretty sure that'll explain everything."

She snatched the parchment from him quickly, unfolding and reading with haste. Hand to her heart, she frowned as her gaze burned over every letter. Her anger built and built and built, interlaced with horrible fear. Eventually, though, she realised that Neville would have felt the same things, and the typical recklessness that came with being a Gryffindor would have overtaken any common sense that her husband had. "How bad is it?"

Harry chuckled. "He's not officially under arrest, since no one's filing charges, but he's still in custody and needs you to sign him out."

"What happened, Harry?"

"I wasn't there when it all went down, but my Aurors filled me in. Apparently, Neville wanted to speak directly with Kingsley about that letter you two received. Unfortunately, there were two Aurors right out of training assigned as Kingsley's security. Since Kings was an Auror for so many years, we usually pair him with green Aurors while he's in his office since it's usually the most secure room in the building. Makes it so that I can free up the more skilled Aurors for field work, and the younger ones get a bit of one on one with

Kingsley, which helps ease them into the position. Unfortunately, it also makes them a little . . . overly eager for action."

Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose. "Harry, are you telling me that my husband was attacked by Aurors barely out of Hogwarts?"

"No," Harry replied. "I'm telling you that your husband put two of my barely-out-of-Hogwarts Aurors in St Mungo's."

Eyes wide, Hermione looked up at him in disbelief. "What?!"

Harry tried to hold back the laugh, but couldn't stop it from escaping. "He was storming through the Ministry with a look that could kill, Hermione," he explained. "You can't really blame my guys for thinking that Neville was a threat. Granted, I will be blaming them for not recognising Neville considering he helped put into place the new training programme last year. Idiots tried hitting Neville of all people with a Full Body-Bind Curse. He's been properly dodging those since the end of first year after you got him with one."

When Harry led Hermione into his office, Neville sheepishly looked up at her from the sofa. "Hi."

"Idiot," she said and walked into his open arms when he stood. "Did you really assault two Aurors?"

Neville sighed against her neck, closing his eyes and letting his lips just press her skin. "To be fair," he mumbled, "they assaulted me first." When she pinched his arm, he smiled and stood up straight, pulling her into a hug. With his chin resting on the top of her head, he looked at his friend. "Sorry, Harry."

Harry shrugged. "Don't be. If my Aurors can't bring down a Hogwarts Herbology Professor, then they should maybe go back to training," he said with a wry grin. "You should visit more often, Nev. It'll keep them on their toes." When Neville just smiled quietly, Harry cleared his throat. "I umm . . . I'll give you two a minute. Just make sure to have Hermione sign those papers right there."

When the door closed, Neville tightened his arms around her. "They can't do it."

"They'll try," she whispered. "I'll . . . I'll have to go and get tested. You should prepare—"

"I'm not letting you go," he insisted, pulling back to look in her eyes. When she wouldn't meet his gaze, he tilted her chin up with his finger. "Hermione, I love you. They cannot separate us. I won't allow it."

"And what are you going to do to stop them?"

"Last I checked, I was pretty damn good with a sword," he said defiantly. Hermione burst into laughter and pressed her forehead against his chest, pulling an awkward chuckle out of him in the process. "I don't know what we'll do. We've still got time, and we'll put it off as long as possible. You'll work something out. Maybe . . . maybe when you show them your research works, it'll put a stop to everything."

Hermione sighed. "If my research works." She took a beat and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Gods, I'm going to have to start trials sooner than I'd planned."

"It'll work, Hermione," he assured her. "You're brilliant, and it'll work."

June 25th, 2007

Hermione put the proposal in for her trials to begin earlier than originally planned. With Healers on hand to monitor vitals, the safety issues would be easily avoided. While waiting for the go ahead to begin, Hermione decided to distract herself by attending a dinner at the Burrow. Neville was busy finishing up the end of term at Hogwarts. The children had all been sent home on the Hogwarts Express the day before, and he wanted to get a decent head start on the approaching year, which involved repotting several plants in preparation for incoming first years. Considering the tremendous stress they had both been under that week, Hermione was happy to leave him to his work while she focused on trying to forget about work for a few hours.

"Do you think it's because I'm here?" Hannah quietly asked.

Hermione looked up at her friend and gave her a sad little smile. "It's not because of you. Ginny knows that she and Harry weren't good together. Their marriage didn't fall apart because she couldn't get pregnant. She doesn't want babies right now anyway. I think she's upset because of what the Ministry is doing."

Ginny had arrived late to the Burrow again, this time without Oliver at her side. When questioned about his location, she angrily ignored everyone and stole George's butterbeer right out of his hand.

The sound of screaming and splashing drew their attention toward the pond, where a group of the grandchildren, followed by their parents, had all jumped in at once. Molly immediately began hollering cautions from the kitchen window. Fred directed a tipsy Ginny away from the water. Harry came running up to Hermione and Hannah and bent low, picking up his best friend and throwing her over his shoulder.

"Harry Potter! You put me down!"

Hannah laughed at her husband and friend. "Well, it's not like he can pick me up right now," she said, putting her hands on her stomach. "Plus, if he works out all his energy now, he'll be easier to put to bed later. You know how hyperactive he gets."

Harry looked down at his wife with a fake scowl and readjusted Hermione's position over his shoulder when she tried to wiggle free. "I am Head Auror, I'll have you know."

Hannah cocked her head to the side. "Yeah, well, I'm having Harry Potter's kid, which is way more important than being Head Auror."

"Fair point, I guess—Ow! Hermione!" Harry practically threw her away from him when she pinched the skin on the back of his armpit. She landed with surprising grace, looking far too amused with herself, laughing harder when he glared playfully at her. "You always go too far and make things violent." When Hermione just stuck her tongue out at him, he ignored her and turned to his wife. "Come play in the pond with us. It's nice and cool today. Plus, the Healer said that you should be doing things to take pressure off your back."

Hannah sighed. "I have nothing to wear."

"Come on," Hermione said, holding out a hand. "Let's go upstairs and we'll transfigure something appropriate."

"Or inappropriate," Harry suggested to Hannah with a grin. "I am not opposed to seeing you in a bikini."

"I am eight months pregnant!" she retorted. When he shrugged, she pushed at his face until he was laughing. "Go away and leave Hermione and me alone. Make sure those kids don't wee in the water!"

"Or Ron," Hermione said, and then before turning around, added, "Or Fred and Geor—you know the drill."

"This is actually adorable," Hannah said, looking at herself in a mirror. Hermione had transfigured her flowy yellow maternity top into a swimming costume, changing her skirt into a pair of skintight shorts.

"You learn a thing or two when you room with Lavender and Parvati for a few years," Hermione said with a laugh. "It looks good. How's mine? I can't see the back."

A knock at the door distracted them and both turned to smile as Mandy made her way inside. "Sorry," she said, looking embarrassed. "Harry said you were up transfiguring clothes? I was wondering if you could fix this for me." Mandy turned around, showing that the bow tying back her blouse had ripped. "I really didn't want to go shopping for more maternity shirts since the baby's due in just over a month. I would've asked Molly, but she's against using magic to charm your clothes. I honestly don't have time in my schedule to learn how to sew properly."

Hermione smiled at her and stitched up the tear, adding a Sticking Charm for good measure. "She tried to get me to learn how to knit when I was married to Ron," she confessed with a laugh. "Never mind that I'd just become an Unspeakable and was working eighty hours every week."

"Thank you, Hermione. I . . . I wanted to let you know that I really appreciate you being so nice to me. I know it can't have been easy." Mandy's cheeks flushed lightly.

"Once a Weasley, always a Weasley," Hermione said with a shrug and pulled the girl in for a hug. "I might use this against you later on when I need a Healer to give me an opinion on my trials."

Mandy laughed. "You let me know when it's time to start work with the squibs under eleven. I asked for a transfer to the paediatric department."

"Will do."

Hermione turned back around once Mandy had left to allow Hannah to get a look at her transfigured swimming costume. "It feels a little tight in the back."

Hannah gasped. "Oh, Hermione, you've got bruises back here."

Eyes wide, Hermione spun around and looked at herself in the mirror. "What? Oh . . . hell. I must've missed that spot with the bruise removal paste."

Surprised, Hannah asked, "Neville doesn't take care of that?"

Hermione sighed in frustration, annoyed that she had apparently missed an area when getting ready that morning. "I prefer to do it myself. The murtlap essence takes the sting away, but I hate the smell of the bruise paste so I normally use it right before I shower in the mornings."

Neville was always more than attentive, always making certain that she was never in any pain—or any pain that she wasn't agreeable to. He always made sure to use whatever first aid available to remove any lingering marks unless she asked him not to, which she often did. With their safe word always on hand should she need it, Hermione knew that it was really her in control when they played, regardless of how submissive she behaved. However, taking on the task of removing the marks herself had become a bit of a ritual for her, as though she were transitioning from a lack of control in the bedroom, to near complete control in real life.

"How bad is it from where you're standing?"

Moving around to look from various angles, Hannah gave her half a shrug. "Not *too* bad. Maybe transfigure a scarf or a pillowcase into one of those wrap thingies? Sarongs! It's either that or ask Molly if she has any bruise removal paste."

Hermione blanched at the idea. "Absolutely not. Busybody that she is, she'll start asking questions. And loudly!"

Hannah walked across the room to snatch up a pillowcase, bringing it back to Hermione. She smirked when she examined the bruise. "Fresh one," she said thoughtfully. "Gods, you can actually see the outline of his fingers there."

"Hush it," Hermione swatted at her, and Hannah laughed. "It's been a stressful week for both of us. Between dealing with the Ministry, my trials coming up, and the end of Hogwarts term, we've both been knackered."

"I know the feeling," Hannah said. "I knew being pregnant would be physically exhausting, but I can't do more than half of the things I used to, sex included. My Healer said that some witches use sex to induce labour. I've got a month or so to figure out how to accomplish that comfortably. My back has been killing me."

Hermione cringed, but tried not to be too disparaging when it came to hearing about Hannah and Harry's sex life. She wasn't thrilled with it, but she knew Hannah had few female friends, and considering the amount of trust that Hermione put on her on a frequent basis with what she knew about Neville, it was only kind to reciprocate. "Are you really . . . I mean . . . *nothing?*"

Shrugging, Hannah pulled her hair up into a ponytail while Hermione wrapped the newly transfigured sarong around her waist. "Mostly foreplay stuff. We get each other there, but not much . . . you know . . . penetration. He's nervous about the baby. The last time we tried, I got a cramp in my hip and yelped. I thought he was going to try to run me to St. Mungo's completely starkers," she said with an amused little chuckle, and Hermione shook her head, hiding her own amusement. "I might've scared him a bit at the start of my second trimester. Hormones went crazy, and I got a little rough."

Hermione snorted and rolled her eyes. "I'm terrified that if I ever *do* get pregnant and something like that happens to me, rough will mean quite a different thing at this point."

Hannah burst into laughter and looped her arm through Hermione's as they left the room and descended the stairs.

Once outside, their attention was drawn to the sight of Harry and Ron arguing halfway between the Burrow and the pond, where everyone else was blissfully unaware of whatever fight the two were having. Mandy stood behind Ron, hands over her mouth as he threw his arms up and Disapparated away.

"What the hell?" Hannah blurted out and sped up her steps to get to Harry, who turned and began walking toward the two witches. "What was that about?"

Harry ignored her, his entire focus on Hermione. "Ron just overheard a conversation between the two of you."

"I am so sorry, Hermione," Mandy said as she approached, looking positively mortified. "I went to the loo after you fixed my blouse, and Ron must've gone looking for me. He overheard—"

Harry cut her off, a look of anger and concern warring in his eyes, "Hermione, does Neville hit you?" When she reeled back in shock, eyes wide, Harry pressed again, "Hermione, does Neville *hit* you?"

"What? Of course not!"

The shock and outrage that Harry had expected were instead replaced with a strange look in her eyes as though she were embarrassed or hiding something. Awfully reminiscent of times during their childhood when Hermione would do something she knew was against the rules, but did it anyway, like blackmailing a reporter or secretly adding the Sneak Jinx to the signup list for Dumbledore's Army.

"Why'd you hesitate?" he asked suspiciously.

"Because your question is insane!" Hermione snapped at him. "Neville would never harm me! This is *Neville* we're talking about!"

Harry threw his hands up. "Yeah, well, last week Neville walked into the Ministry and put down two of my Aurors! What the hell am I supposed to think when Ron says you've got bruises that you're trying to hide?" His gaze flickered to his wife. "And that *you* know about them."

Hannah pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes at her husband. "Harry, Hermione is not being abused. Now drop it."

Huffing, he looked back at his best friend. "Show me."

Hermione scoffed and took a step back from him, folding her arms across her chest. "I am most certainly not showing you a thing."

"Harry, if Hermione were being harmed by her husband, do you think this is the appropriate way to confront her?" Hannah pointedly asked.

Looking slightly embarrassed, Harry ran a hand through his hair. "I know . . . but . . . it's *Hermione*. It's different." He stared at his friend with pleading eyes. "Nothing's wrong? Promise me?"

Hermione stepped back toward him and put her hands on his shoulders, staring into his eyes. "I love Neville. He makes me very happy. I would never stand for any man to abuse me, I swear it. The mere fact that he's able to walk upright should clue you in."

Believing her, Harry looked down and muttered, "Shit."

"What?" Hannah asked.

Mandy worried her bottom lip between her teeth before answering, "Ron still thinks that Neville hurt you."

"You know how he is," Harry muttered as he headed for the ward boundaries. When Hermione and Hannah began following him, he turned back and held up his hand. "You can't come with. *You* especially," he said, pointing to Hannah. "You're not allowed to Apparate while pregnant."

"He went to Hogwarts?!" Hermione shrieked.

Harry sighed. "Yes, and I have to get there before one of my Aurors violently attacks a Hogwarts professor, very likely loudly attempting to arrest him for abusing his wife!" Before either witch could stop him, Harry Disapparated.

"Come on," Hannah said, grabbing Hermione's hand. She turned to look at Mandy. "Run interference with the Weasleys. If anyone asks, Harry and Ron got called into the Ministry for something minor, and Hermione and I went back to Grimmauld Place to find something better to wear." Mandy gave a nervous nod, and Hannah practically dragged

Hermione toward the house. "If you come with me, we can get through the Floo in Neville's office."

Once the baby mandrake seedlings had been planted and set under a shaded area in the greenhouse so that they wouldn't be too exposed while growing, Neville had spent the rest of his day looking over essays. The fifth years were surprisingly still precise in their wording, even though he had suspected that most would have slacked off once they'd completed their O.W.L.s. The third years, however, could barely pay attention in class, let alone focus enough to structure together a few paragraphs on the differences between fluxweed and asphodel.

Considering the castle was nearly empty save for the staff, Neville was surprised when his office door opened, as the other professors rarely visited. Looking up from his desk, his brows raised at the sight of his friend walking toward him in a vest and swimming trunks. "Ron? What're you doing at Hog—Whoa!" he shouted when Ron rushed at him and kicked his chair over, throwing Neville to the floor. "What the hell, mate?!"

"No bloody mate of mine!" Ron shouted, balling one hand into a tight fist and grabbing the front of Neville's robes with the other. Neville immediately began to manoeuvre his way out of Ron's grip. "You're under . . . fucking—Hold still!—arrest!"

"What for?" Neville demanded as he regained his feet. Ron swung a fist at him and he dodged it. "The mess in the Ministry was all cleared up! Stop trying to hit—Ow!" Had it been another Auror, Neville might've just put them down automatically, but Ron was his friend and usually had a decent reason for whatever put him in a temper like this. Unfortunately, when Ron finally landed a punch to the side of Neville's jaw, the current Hogwarts professor flipped the switch and became the former Auror, sweeping Ron's legs out from under him.

Ron hit the ground with a loud thud and groaned when his shoulder smacked a stack of books on the way down. "Ow! Tosser!" He kicked at one of Neville's legs, trying to bring him down with him.

Neville brushed the bare foot away with a kick of his own. Ron reached for his wand, and Neville levelled his own at his friend. "Calm down or I'll knock you out!"

Ron scowled at him, looking angry and betrayed. "Assaulting an Auror, too? As if abusing your wife isn't bad enough?"

Shocked by the words, Neville almost dropped his wand as something heavy—likely his heart—fell into his stomach. His face paled, and his eyes widened dramatically. "What?" he quietly asked. "What did you just say to me?"

"Don't even bother denying it!" Ron snapped, pulling himself to his feet. "I heard it straight from Hermione's own mouth! She's got bruises!"

Confused, Neville tried to remember the details of the night before. Nothing abnormal had happened. They barely even played because he knew he had to be up early in the morning. It had been Hermione who'd asked for more, for harder and rougher and even then, it was just a typical spanking before he'd made her come with his mouth. Had he forgotten to make sure she was fine? No, he remembered that he applied the murtlap essence because they were almost out and he'd put it on his to-do list to pick up more on his way home from work the next day. Had she been upset with him? No, they'd had breakfast that morning because she wanted to see him off; she said that she was going to miss him all day since he'd be unable to go to the Burrow.

It did not make sense.

"Hermione said that I . . ." He shook his head. No. He trusted his wife, and he treasured the trust that she placed in him. He could not think that she'd hide something like this from him, nor spread their personal business around so carelessly. "Wait, no, that's not right. Hermione wouldn't . . . Ron, what *exactly* did Hermione say?"

Instead of answering him, Ron swung another punch and both men fell to the ground, their wands rolling down the small slope of Neville's office floor. The door swung

open once more and Neville barely saw Harry before his vision was obscured by red hair. "Harry! I don't want to hurt him!" Neville said, the threat in his tone very obvious.

Harry groaned. "Ron! Bloody hell!"

Neville rolled their bodies until he had Ron pinned beneath him, arms stuck to his sides and held down by Neville's knees. "Get him off me, Harry!" he shouted. "Then let me hex him!"

"No one's hexing anyone," Harry said. "Both of you let go right now. That's an order!"

Auror training—that had clearly been failing them up to that point in the shock of the situation—finally kicked in at the sound of a superior's order, and both men practically jumped away from one another, Neville rising to his feet quicker than Ron, who stumbled and hissed as he grabbed at his ankle. Glaring at Neville before turning his attention to Harry, Ron yelled, "He hurt Hermione!"

Neville shook his head. "Harry, I *love* Hermione."

Harry sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. He put a hand on Neville's shoulder. "I know, Nev. She told me that you'd never hurt her."

Ron's eyes widened, shocked that he was the only one rising to Hermione's defence. "I *heard* her, Harry!" he insisted. "She told Hannah everything!"

Neville looked at Ron, concern written clear as day on his face. "What exactly did Hermione say? Did she say that I *abuse* her?"

"Yes! Hannah saw the bruises. Said they were shaped like your *fingers*." Ron's face turned redder and redder the more he spoke, and Harry stepped between the men to prevent them coming to blows once more. "Hermione hadn't had time to hide them."

"But did she say that I *abuse* her?" Neville asked very slowly, enunciating every word the same way he did when he spoke to sixth years who'd come to class late the day after a Quidditch game and were too tired to pay attention properly.

Ron actually growled, and Harry turned to look at Neville in surprise as something occurred to him. "Wait . . . you don't look surprised about the bruises." He swallowed

nervously, unaware of the Floo bursting to life with green flames in the corner of the room. "Neville, what's wrong with Hermione?"

"Nothing is wrong with Hermione, thank you very much!" The witch in question stormed out of the fireplace with Hannah at her heels. Neville tore away from Harry and Ron's sides and swept Hermione up into his arms as though he needed to check for himself that she wasn't injured. "I am so sorry, Neville," she whispered. "I didn't know Ron was eavesdropping. He was looking for his wife and must've thought she was in the room with me and Hannah."

"Are you all right?" he asked, staring into her eyes.

She smiled and placed her hands on his cheeks before kissing his lips. "I'm fine, I promise."

"You're not hurt? They said—"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at Ron and Harry. "I imagine they said a lot of things that aren't any of their business."

"Why are you bruised, Hermione?" Ron demanded. "If he's not a rat bastard, then what happened?"

"Ronald Weasley," Hermione spun on her heel and stomped across the room to poke a finger in Ron's chest. "Neville has been your friend since you were eleven years old. You apologise to him right now!"

Gobsmacked by her reaction since he had been there to defend her, Ron's mouth fell open in absolute shock. "He was a suspect up until about three seconds ago, and I'm not entirely sure that he's not still!"

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. "You've known Neville for fifteen years!"

Ron mimicked her mocking noise and folded his arms across his chest. "I knew my rat for twelve before he turned into a great bloody Death Eater!"

"Everyone shut it!" Hannah shouted, drawing all attention to her. She'd sat herself in Neville's chair, propping her swollen feet up on his desk. Neville sighed but she threw him a look that had him holding up his hands in silent surrender. "Hermione is not hurt. Neville

would never harm her. Ron, you misunderstood everything that you heard. Harry, calm him down."

"I'm fine," Hermione said quietly looking up into Neville's eyes as he searched hers again in concern. "I promise. I'm so sorry; I thought Hannah and I were alone. I know you want discretion, but now that the idea is in their heads—"

He looked down, defeated. "I know. If you're sure?"

"They'll likely be too uncomfortable to ever bring it up again," she said with an irritable sigh. "Besides, thanks to Hannah, I already know far too much about Harry's sex life."

"Wait, what?" Harry asked, his brows rising to his hairline and his mouth falling open. "Why are we talking about my sex life? Why are you talking about our sex life?" he asked, his attention drawn to a shameless Hannah, who was fanning herself with a small stack of essays.

"Is it hot in here?" Hannah asked, innocently ignoring him. "Oh my gods, why does Floo travel make me sweat so much? It's not *real* fire for Merlin's sake!"

"Harry, Ron, I would never ever put a hand to Hermione . . ." Neville paused and let out a breath. "Unless she wanted me to."

Ron was glaring at him again. "Why on earth would Hermione want you to—?"

"Shut up, Ron," Harry said, covering his face with his hands to hide the obvious redness in his cheeks as all the pieces clicked together. "Hermione, Neville, I apologise . . . so much." He removed his hands to narrow his eyes at his wife. "You couldn't have given me a clue?"

She shrugged. "It's their business."

"You apparently tell them ours!"

"Are you yelling at your pregnant wife?" Hannah asked sweetly, raising a brow at him.

"No!" Harry shouted, and then grimaced, lowering his tone. "I was—Wait . . . you used to date Neville."

"Uh oh," Hermione muttered.

"Is . . ." Harry cleared his throat and stepped closer to the desk. Speaking quietly through clenched teeth, he asked, "So a few months ago . . . that time when you . . . you know . . . was that . . .?"

Hannah smirked. "Little bit."

"Wait, wait, wait!" Ron snapped, trying to get back to the matter at hand. "Is this . . . is this a *sex* thing?" He blanched looking at Neville and Hermione, who just stared back at him and let him fill in the blanks. "And . . . you *like* that?" When Hermione merely raised a challenging eyebrow at him, he flustered a bit. "B-but . . . we were married and you never . . . so that means that Neville . . . and I . . . wait . . ." Eventually, his gaze landed back on Neville and he shook his head. "Bloody hell, mate, what has being friends with Malfoy done to you?"

Hannah giggled loudly.

"For what it's worth," Neville said, approaching Ron with a hand held out. "I am glad to know that you're still looking out for her."

Ron stared at Neville's hand as though he were contemplating where it might have been. Eventually, he begrudgingly took it, shaking it a bit harder than he might've ordinarily. "Yeah . . . well . . . ex-wife or not, she's still one of my best friends."

"Thank you, Ron," Hermione said. "However, I'd very much appreciate it if everyone would recall that I'm quite capable of handling things on my own. Honestly. As though I'd let Neville—"

Ron interrupted her by clearing his throat loudly, rubbing the back of his neck and avoiding her gaze; his ears were still pink. He let out a small, awkward laugh. "No offence, 'Mione, but I really don't want to know the details of what you let Neville do."

Chapter 30

August 17th, 2007

They waited until the very last day to go to St. Mungo's for fertility testing. Hermione had wanted to protest it further, but Kingsley had shown up at their cottage to inform them that the Wizengamot was serious about the disciplinary actions for couples who refused fertility testing.

Though it was not required until the infant was a month old, Ron and Mandy had little Rose tested within forty-eight hours of her birth; Harry and Hannah had done the same for James. Both children were highly magical. The *Daily Prophet* printed a two-page spread on the births and how the Marital and Reproduction Act of 2007 would save their world. There had been no mention of Hermione's trials, nor of the fact that so far three adult squibs had had their magic awoken after only three weeks of treatment. The one teenager they had in the trial—a twelve-year-old squib named Eric, who'd been placed in a Muggle foster home while his pureblood siblings attended Durmstrang—had his magic woken after only one administration of the serum that Hermione had all but perfected. Minerva was beside herself with joy, and Neville had been instructed to help the boy prepare to come to Hogwarts the next term.

There was no front-page announcement in the Prophet on the "Cure for Squibs", nor had the Wizengamot pulled back on the marriage and procreation laws. Why bother, when the matching process was so obviously successful? Wasn't it easier to magically force a new population into existence than have to financially back a serum to fix the "broken" ones already alive?

"I'm scared," Hermione admitted quietly as she sat in the room, Neville holding her hand tightly. "If they . . . Neville, if they say that we have to divorce—"

"I'll walk into the *Daily Prophet* offices and snap my wand in front of the first photographer I see," he said determinedly. "I may not be Harry Potter, but I was a war hero

in my own right, not to mention my record with the Aurors is practically flawless. I'm the last of my House. I'll leave it all to make a point. They'd have to make an exception for us."

"I don't want them to," she admitted. "Don't get me wrong, I . . . I want them to, but not because we're more special than the countless other couples who are having their entire lives uprooted over this nonsense. If we manipulated the system to only save ourselves, I don't think I could ever look Theo or Dennis in the eye again." She reached a hand up to wipe at the tears on her cheeks. "This is a nightmare. I was supposed to fix this!"

Neville rubbed his thumb over her knuckles. "I'd do it," he whispered. "Not just to try and manipulate the Wizengamot. I'd leave it all. I could be a Muggle with you."

She frowned at him and raised a brow.

"What?" he asked, looking affronted. "I could!"

Hand on his cheek, Hermione smiled sweetly at him. "I love you."

"I love you."

When the door opened, they both sucked in a sharp breath in a panic, ready and waiting for their potentially horrid results. The Healer, however, was followed in by Harry. Hermione wrapped her gown tighter around her body, and Neville stood. "What's going on?"

"Are James and Hannah all right?" Hermione asked, a shock of concern flooding her senses. The baby had been born perfectly healthy, but Hannah had nearly magically exhausted herself during the delivery and had needed to stay at St. Mungo's for a few days to make sure she was fully recovered.

Harry looked guilty. "They're fine," he said, clearly having been unaware that his presence would've caused Hermione to jump to such a conclusion. "Aurors were called in for a disturbance, and well . . . Hermione, you're needed upstairs. Neville, we could use you as well."

"What's happened?"

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "The Malfoys."

Leaving the Healer and their test results behind in the room, once Hermione was fully dressed, she and Neville followed Harry up to the paediatric department, where a number of other Aurors were standing outside a door. Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy stood beside another blond couple that Hermione figured were Astoria's parents. Both sets of parents looked absolutely enraged.

A very perturbed-looking Healer approached Hermione. "Here," he said and thrust a chart into her hands. "Not that I'm not completely adept at my own job, but apparently if you have enough money to throw around, you get to make whatever demands you'd like." He snapped at Hermione, though he was glaring every so often in the direction of the Malfoys and Greengrasses.

Hermione looked down at the chart in her hands. *Malfoy, Scorpius* was written across the top in black letters. "What's wrong with him?" she asked, flipping through the pages. She was not a Healer by any means but assumed that if something was the matter, Draco or Astoria thought that her expertise in diagnostic magics as a former Unspeakable could help. As it was, if there was anything physically wrong with the baby, she figured she would just do her best to convince them to let the Healers do their jobs to help.

"The parents of the child are refusing the mandatory magical expectancy test," the Healer said in a huff.

Neville frowned. "Scorpius won't be a month old until the twenty-sixth." He looked over the Healer's shoulder at Draco's parents. "Why are they even here?"

"Scorpius had a bit of a cough," Narcissa admitted. "We gave him the same potions that we gave Draco when he was a baby, but he broke out in a mild rash. It was nothing serious, but they needed a Healer to prescribe the specific salve for the reaction." She turned and levelled the Healer with a glare. "Draco fire-called us from the lobby saying that these people were trying to force the test on Scorpius, stating that since they were already here, they wouldn't waste time in making another appointment for the test."

"And you called the Aurors on them when they refused?" Hermione hissed at the Healer. "Was that really necessary? They're brand new parents and were already worried about their son being sick, and you threatened to . . . What? Have them arrested!"

The Healer narrowed his eyes at her. "It's a part of the law!"

Neville took a step forward but was held back by Harry's hand on his shoulder. "When Aurors are called on anyone with the Dark Mark, it's automatically sent up the chain to me," Harry said. "I was able to stop Malfoy and Astoria from doing anything . . . well . . . Malfoy agreed that if they have to do the test, they want Hermione to do it. Since she invented it."

Sighing, Hermione nodded and stepped toward the door. The Aurors parted for her but stopped to prevent Neville from entering. After glaring at them, the younger ones glanced to Harry for silent instructions and then stepped back after another moment, allowing Neville to pass into the room with his wife.

Once the door was closed and secured behind him, Neville turned to see a red-faced Astoria sitting on the bed, cradling Scorpius to her chest. Hermione was already at her side, wrapping the girl in a hug that cocooned the baby between them. Neville looked across the room where Draco was standing in the corner looking ready to break at any moment. The man's magic was practically hovering on the surface of his skin. Neville was certain that if he had any type of magical sight, the colour of Draco's aura would be Avada Green.

"Come on," Neville said, putting an arm around his friend's shoulders. "Let's take a walk."

Draco shook his head. "I can't . . . I won't leave them."

"Mate," Neville said, pulling Draco's gaze toward him and away from Astoria. The blond's eyes were red-rimmed, and the normally silver irises were a dull, stormy grey. He looked like he hadn't slept in a week prior to this disaster. "They're safe," Neville promised. "Hermione would never let anything happen to either of them. And both of your parents are right outside the door with Harry. No one's going to do anything without your permission."

"Only Granger," Draco said angrily. "She invented the stupid thing, and I won't have some half-arsed Healer straight out of Hogwarts—who may or may not have a problem with me personally—raising their wand to my son."

"Only Hermione," Neville agreed. "Come on."

He gave his wife a look of support, frowning as Astoria heaved sobs against Hermione's shoulder. Neville directed Draco out of the room and closed the door behind him. "No one goes in," he ordered, giving a nod to Harry to make sure that he'd work to make sure. Harry gave a nod right back and stepped in line with the rest of the Aurors, effectively creating a human gate in front of the room, preventing any and all access.

Neville led Draco down a long stretch of hallway and around a corner where an old stairway remained neglected since most elected to use the lift these days. The moment the door was shut behind them, Neville threw up a Silencing Charm just in time for Draco to fling a wandless hex down the flight of stairs. The boom echoed around them, and the wall where the hex landed had a black scorch mark dead centre. Despite the multitude of times that Draco had insisted that they weren't friends, Neville knew better. He pulled the blond into a hug, regardless of the way he fought it off, and held on tight until it was returned.

"He's a squib," Draco eventually muttered. "I knew it. Granger warned me at the matching, and I fucking ignored her."

Neville pulled back. "What do you mean?"

Draco angrily wiped at his eyes. "Astoria and I weren't matched. We lied. There weren't any lights. No magical signs that we were meant to be anything. I chose her because my parents were already in talks for a marriage contract with the Greengrasses, and . . . she was a pureblood, which would make them happy. It helped that she was beautiful."

"You love your wife," Neville said, as though he were trying to argue the point.

"And I love my son. But he's a squib, and it's my fault."

Sighing, Neville rubbed his hands down his face. "Hermione . . . Hermione can fix that."

Draco looked up, confusion and irritation written on his face. "I don't care," he snapped. "I don't give two shits whether or not Scorpius is magical. He's mine! I was

preparing to legally pull away from Britain and take Astoria and Scorpius to France or Germany. I would dare the Ministry to chase us down to force this test on my son. Then he got sick, and my parents panicked, and now here we are with the fucking Healers and the fucking Ministry forcing their way into my forsaken life!"

Neville gave the man space and silence, letting him process his emotions. Eventually, Draco looked up. "Is it safe?" he asked. "Granger's serum."

"Zero side effects," Neville promised. "She has a team of expert Healers on hand just in case. Everyone who's had it administered to them has had their magic wake as naturally as it would have if they'd been a child. Easier even," he added. "None had to experience trauma or panic to display magic. Most end up accidentally turning their own hair green, or grass starts growing around their feet. The one teenager she helped sprouted rabbit ears, but she was able to transfigure him back right away."

They made the walk back to the room and found Hermione outside of the door yelling at a collection of Ministry-appointed Healers, Astoria's included, while Hermione's small research team stood by mimicking the enraged look on her face. The Aurors had dispersed down the hall; only Harry remained standing guard. Likewise, both the Malfoys and the Greengrasses were gone.

"What's happened?" Draco demanded as he approached Hermione.

She turned and answered immediately, "Go on inside. She's waiting for you." Without missing a beat, she returned to her scolding of the Healers. "And you can go and tell the Wizengamot yourselves that not only are you not properly trained to conduct this charm, but it's a violation of—"

"Hermione?"

She looked over her shoulder. "What?"

Harry's eyes were slightly wide and alight with a mixture of excitement and mischief. "I have an idea."

She flicked her hand in the direction of the thoroughly reprimanded Healers, and they backed away slowly before disappearing around the corner, leaving her and her team in the hall with Harry and Neville. "What is it, Harry? I should get back in there and explain

things to Draco. Astoria's likely too emotional to get all the details across, and I need both of their signatures to administer the serum.

"Do you still have Skeeter under your thumb?" he asked quietly, glancing around as though the unregistered Animagus could be lingering nearby.

"Yes," she replied. "I send her a Christmas card every year with a jar of jelly bellies."

Harry's eyes widened again, this time in horror. "You do . . . Merlin, Hermione." She shrugged, clearly unapologetic. Harry blew a breath out and shook his head. "Right, well, send her a message before you do anything with Scorpius. I'm going to go and speak with Malfoy and Astoria."

Confused, Hermione raised a brow. "Wait, what?"

Harry grinned. "It's time your serum made the front page of the *Prophet*."

August 18th, 2007

SQUIB SERUM SAVES BRITAIN!

The magical cure for squibs—that might not have been if it were up to the members of the Wizengamot—was administered today for the first time on an infant squib child. The baby in question, Scorpius Malfoy (son of Draco and Astoria Malfoy) was tested for magical expectancy yesterday afternoon when Ministry-appointed Healers at St. Mungo's assaulted the Malfoy family, who had come to the hospital seeking care for their child, who had a mild allergic reaction to a common coughing potion.

"He wasn't scheduled to have his test done for another two weeks," says Narcissa Malfoy, Scorpius's grandmother. "The Ministry Healers all but forced my grandson to be tested. We've no information on the test or whether or not these Healers are even qualified to perform it. Thank goodness Mrs Longbottom was nearby."

Hermione Longbottom (formerly Granger) was, until recently, an Unspeakable for the Department of Mysteries. When questioned about her work with the D.O.M., Mrs Longbottom confessed that her personal ethics, in addition to vows she took upon being hired for the Ministry of Magic, prevented her from talking openly about her work there. However, she was able to inform us that the research into a cure for squibs was a project she has been

adamantly working on for over a year, and was dismissed by the Department Head due to personal prejudice against the children involved in the testing based on what he thought was "inferior blood status". The Head of the Department of Mysteries must surely be kicking himself now for letting this brilliant witch go, as Hermione Longbottom has indeed found a cure for squibs!

Hermione Longbottom was requested to perform the test on Scorpius Malfoy, as she had been the original creator of the charm and could be trusted to adequately perform it, unlike the Healers on hand. Unfortunately, it was not good news. The Malfoys were horrified to find out that young Scorpius's test result showed that he was, in fact, a squib.

"I don't understand," Astoria Malfoy says, sobbing into the arms of her husband. "We followed the Ministry's orders exactly."

"I returned home to Britain after hearing about the population crisis," Draco Malfoy told us. "I thought it was my duty as a citizen of Wizarding Britain to help contribute to the restoration of our community. Astoria and I met at the matching ceremony that we both volunteered for."

It is clear that these two are magically meant to be as they look into one another's eyes.

"He was the brightest light in the whole room," Astoria says as her doting husband wipes away her tears.

Draco agreed. "I couldn't even see anyone else. Magic told me that Astoria was meant just for me. That's why we don't understand. The Ministry assured us that the charm would direct us to our perfect match. Someone who would help us create magical children. How many other couples will go through this pain? How many others will have their lives dictated by the Wizengamot, only to find out that it was all a lie?"

How many indeed, dear readers? Members of the Wizengamot were unavailable for comment, but Minister for Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt was more than happy to offer his thoughts on the matter.

"It is a sad thing indeed when not even the Minister for Magic can help alleviate the pain that families like the Malfoys went through. They put their trust in a Wizengamot that supposedly had their best interests at heart. They married after the matching ceremony when it was a volunteer programme that I proposed almost a year ago. I voted against the Marital and Reproduction Act for this very reason. While the matching was thought to be a good way to pair couples, we were not given a long enough period to test it."

What was able to be properly tested, however, was Hermione Longbottom's Squib Serum! According to Mrs Longbottom, several squibs ranging in age from twelve to forty-five have had their magic awoken! And now Scorpius Malfoy is included amongst them!

"It was amazing," Harry Potter, friend of the Malfoys says. "Hermione administered the serum and within minutes, little Scorpius started glowing. It was a beautiful moment that almost didn't exist because of the

Marital and Reproduction Act forced on us all. I trusted the Wizengamot and was matched myself. I believed that magic chose a perfect spouse for me. Now I think I'm just incredibly lucky. Apparently, my son could have also been a squib since there hadn't been enough research. We should all be grateful for Hermione."

"Harry laid it on a bit thick," Hermione said as she folded the paper back up and tossed it across the table beside the lengthy letter from the Department of Marriage and Procreation. It had arrived an hour after the *Daily Prophet* was delivered alongside an owl from Harry, who said that there were protesters in the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic, and the Department of Magical Games and Sports had literally created an owl-catching activity because so many Howlers were being delivered to the Department of Marriage and Procreation, as well as the Wizengamot chambers.

The ridiculous law would not be tossed out overnight, especially over one Daily Prophet article, but this was progress. They had made a statement. They had publicly embarrassed the Wizengamot, cast doubt on the whole process revolving around the Marital and Procreation Act, and erased the entire need for the law in the first place by openly discussing Hermione's serum. Draco and Astoria were more than happy to be the poster family for the takedown against the Wizengamot, and if no one but their friends knew that they'd lied about the matching, then they were all the better for it.

"Testing postponed until further notice," Hermione muttered under her breath as she looked at the letter with disdain. "Because they couldn't just come right out and say that they were wrong in this."

Neville laced his fingers through hers. "I don't care. They'll cave eventually. In the meantime, I have you."

She smiled sweetly at him. "Do you think we should?" she asked. "Get tested on our own, I mean? I know you've said before that it doesn't matter, but I just . . . I want you to have everything. I'm not . . . There might be something wrong with me, and while I honestly don't really see myself having a child, at least not for quite some time, I can't help but think that . . ." She looked up and caught him staring at her. His sweet smile had faded, and his

eyes were hard and dark. She swallowed nervously, a pleasantly nervous flutter building in her belly. "What?"

"Get in the room," he ordered, the very smallest hint of a grin showing at the corner of his lips. "I thought I'd made it perfectly clear how I feel about you speaking negatively about yourself."

Hermione licked her lips and very slowly stood from her seat, her hands moving to rest behind her back as though she could protect her arse with them. "No."

He raised a brow. "No?"

"No," she grinned cheekily.

"I don't believe that's our safe word."

Hermione's cheeks flushed, and the flutter in her belly turned into a rapidly growing fire of anticipation. "I don't believe I said our safe word. I said no."

They let half a beat pass between them before Hermione spun on her bare foot and darted down the hallway toward the room, Neville right after her. Just before she reached the door, he pulled her up into his arms, flinging her over his muscular shoulder. "Why on earth," he said, landing the flat of his palm against her arse in a loud smack, "would you think I could even handle children"—*SMACK* !—"when I still have trouble properly disciplining *you*?"

Hermione let out a loud laugh just as he threw her onto the bed.

"Still no?" Neville asked her with a grin as he knelt between her thighs.

She shook her head. "Forever yes."

Epilogue

July 28th, 2010

Twenty-nine years, eleven months, and twenty-eight days.

Neville had always expected the thirtieth year of his life to be terrible. Didn't everyone? He knew exactly why the number thirty had struck him. He could clearly recall being eight years old, still shaking from being thrown out a window and triggering his accidental magic, and being taken to visit his parents at St Mungo's to celebrate the fact that he wasn't a squib. It just so happened that his father's birthday was that week, and what a gift it would be to be told that he had not fathered a magical dud. Neville counted the birthday candles on the cake that his father stared at—unlit because fire was not allowed in the Janus Thickey Ward and for good reason. Thirty candles. Neville could not imagine being thirty. It looked terrible.

He learned better as he grew, of course, that thirty was just another number and nothing to be anxious about. However, Hermione would have quite a bit to say on the subject since she had been thirty for just over nine months and got the most adorable crinkle on the bridge of her nose if she was reminded of it.

Ignoring the weird creaking noise in his right knee as he stood, pulling himself up against the fence surrounding Hagrid's pumpkin patch, Neville dusted his dirty hands off on his trousers and made for the castle. Seeds were planted, seedlings repotted, plants that needed harvesting had been harvested, and flowers that needed a little attention had been thoroughly entertained by tales of his youth, of his worries for the incoming first years, and of his concern for Hermione's stress levels since she'd expanded her research team to another ten people, including two from France and another from America, who were eager to learn the key to curing squibs.

She had been running herself ragged for weeks. He was determined that once she'd properly recovered from the busy schedule that week, he'd lock her in their room and redden her arse until she was begging for mercy and promising to take it easy on herself.

Flooding home was easier than walking, and he made the excuse that since he was almost thirty he could do with just a little less strenuous activity. His creaking knee agreed. Kicking off his boots against the fireplace, he winced when mud fell onto the carpet. Looking around to make sure Hermione was not there to catch it, Neville flicked his wand and vanished the dirt.

Walking further into the cottage, he spotted the note on the dining room table.

Meet me at St Mungo's. Labor and Delivery!

Eyes wide, Neville grinned and ran back through the Floo, forgetting his boots in the process.

"Where the hell have you been?" Draco snapped when Neville stepped out of the lift wearing his professor's robes and mismatched socks. "And . . . no," Draco said, shaking his head and gesturing to all of Neville, "I'm not going to bother addressing this."

"I was at work," Neville defended himself, leaning down to pick up Scorpius. "Your daddy's a grump sometimes."

Scorpius giggled. "I'm three!"

"I know that, bud, I was at your birthday party," Neville said, following Draco down the hallway.

Astoria sat in a chair outside of a room reading a copy of the *Daily Prophet* discussing the Puddlemere versus Holyhead Quidditch game that occurred the night before. The headline read: *Wood versus Weasley*. He'd read the paper that morning, a ridiculous article speculating that Ginny and Oliver Wood had brought the supposed drama of their

divorce—which Neville knew had been perfectly amicable—into the game. The Harpies had won by two hundred points, and Ginny was being lauded as a woman who'd risen above the oppressive nature of a more-famous-than-her ex-husband.

Astoria looked up as he, Draco, and Scorpius approached, putting the paper down on a table next to her. "Good! You made it. Hermione was worried."

"How's everything going in there?" he asked, handing Scorpius over to his mother.

"It was pretty loud for a while," Astoria answered. "The baby arrived about two hours ago. Perfectly healthy and perfectly magical."

"Not that it matters," Draco mumbled as he took a seat beside her, ruffling Scorpius's hair.

Neville knocked once on the door before cracking it open, looking for his wife. She was sitting in a large chair in the corner of the room, a tiny bundle in her arms. He smiled at the sight and slowly approached her, quietly closing the door behind him. "Boy or girl?"

She looked up and grinned. "Girl."

Neville chuckled softly. "Trouble."

"Don't you know it."

Neville peeked over her shoulder and beamed down at the babe in her arms. "How'd it go?"

She nodded her head, gesturing to the other side of the room, where Theo and Dennis were passed out together in one large chair; Romilda Vane, their surrogate, was asleep in the bed. "She'd been having false labour for several days, so none of them have been sleeping well. Mandy gave them all a mild Sleeping Draught and I promised to look after the baby while they rested."

"You thinking about having one of our own?" he asked her, watching as Theo and Dennis's daughter sucked on her fist. They had talked about it over the years on occasion, but for one reason or another it just never felt the right time to get the test done. Neville was perfectly content to be the favourite uncle to Harry's, Draco's, and Ron's kids. Hermione was overjoyed to be named godmother to the little girl in her arms. It helped that for the

majority of the year, Neville looked after several hundred children, and Hermione every so often came up to the school as a guest lecturer.

"I think we'll have our hands full," she said.

Raising a brow, Neville asked, "Are you . . .?"

Hermione snorted and shook her head. "Goodness, no. If I even suspected that I was pregnant, I wouldn't have let you do that thing you did last night."

Neville sighed happily. "I like that thing."

"I know you do," she teased and kissed him when he leant down to brush his nose against hers. "Actually, I think I've finally decided to step out of the research side of things. The serum is fully integrated at St. Mungo's, and other than needing to train people coming in from other Ministries, there's not much left for me to do."

His eyes brightened. "You're going to take Minerva up on her offer?"

Hermione grinned. "I'll start shadowing Septima when the new term starts."

Neville hugged her around the shoulders, careful not to disturb the baby. "I am so proud of you. It'll be great seeing you in the castle every day."

"Mmm," she agreed. "Eating all three meals together, patrolling the halls . . ."

"Broom cupboards?" he asked suggestively.

She smirked. "I was thinking Room of Requirement. Can you imagine the possibilities?"

His heart fluttered.

Thirty was going to be phenomenal.