

A Little Christmas Story

by HannahSmith

Severus went into the show business after the War! And he wasn't the only one.
Based on *White Christmas*.

One-shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N 1: This is a response to the Yule 2008 Challenge, prompt no. 4, Movie Madness. The story was beta'd by Sshg316 in an incredibly short time; she contributed invaluable comments as well as commas. I owe much, including many pieces of dialogue, to the movie *White Christmas* with Bing Crosby, Danny Kaye, Rosemary Clooney and Vera Ellen (Paramount, 1954). The lyrics of *Love, you didn't do right by me* and *White Christmas* are by Irving Berlin. The Potterverse characters are of course J.K. Rowling's. No infringement of copyright is intended, no money is made by me.

A/N 2: *White Christmas* is one of my favourites, not so much because of the plot, but because of the wonderful dancing and singing. Of course a number of changes to canon were necessary, such as Ginny's blue eyes and some family relations. It was fun writing about Albus Dumbledore in a rather dependent, penniless position, acting a supporting part, doing chores ('No magic; elbow-grease!'), nagged by his housekeeper, instead of being the central figure who's pushing everyone else around on his chess board. I liked the idea of a freckle-faced, dog-faced Ron Weasley having the nerve to have sisters; and I've always considered Molly and Arthur very brave for having so many children. Making them brother and sister was a convenient way to prevent that absurd marriage between Hermione and Ron. No one will be surprised that Severus, with his voice, could have become a great singer in an alternative universe. We all know that he is a gentleman deep inside, though a reluctant one, and that it would annoy him very much if someone could rightly claim his gratitude. And I suppose that Draco could only be caught by a Gryffindor with a few tricks up her sleeve. (I wonder what his dad would have to say about that.) I hope you will enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. Merry Christmas to you all!

How it all began

Severus Snape was sitting in the dingy room that was crowded with other soldiers. Dumbledore's Army, they were preparing themselves to finish off the Dark Lord and his followers, and were now having a night off. Severus did not really care for such things himself, but their general, Albus Dumbledore, strongly believed in keeping up morale by having his army unwind every now and then by giving them some time to collectively amuse themselves. The final battle against the Dark Lord was to begin soon; they all knew it.

On the stage, a number of amateurish performances went on. Some people danced or sang. Others had tried to get up a comic scene, but their talents obviously laid elsewhere. And there were the red-haired Weasley twins with their jugglery. Not his cup of tea at all. General Dumbledore, the only one who knew his secret, had tried to talk him into performing, too. But no, thanks. Not him, Severus Snape, who had, under another name and with a handsome glamour, managed to turn his beautiful dark velvet voice into a goldmine. No one else had any idea that this ugly, moody git excelled in romantic love songs that made women swoon all over Britain and France. He was not going to cast his pearls before a bunch of sorry amateurs. But let them make a spectacle of themselves if they liked. Anything to take their minds off the grim reality.

Snape rose from his chair, intending to sneak out, but he was stopped by a fair-haired boy, tall and lean, with boyish good looks and a shy, yet slightly impudent expression on his face, who had performed a little dance of some distinction earlier in the evening.

'You should wait for the next song, sir,' the boy said. 'It's really good. Well, better than the rest, that is.'

'Is that so?' said Snape. He sat down again, more from a reluctance to argue the matter than from any interest.

'Well, I don't know about the singing,' the boy said apologetically. 'But the lyrics are rather nice.'

Snape cast him a doubtful look.

'I see,' he said sourly. 'Trying to write poetry in your spare time, are you?'

The boy pretended not to hear this and kept his eyes fixed on the stage, but the red-haired performer (another Weasley, no doubt) had only just started to sing when he was interrupted by a lot of noise. It came from outside: people shouting, spells zipping, furniture crashing, walls crumbling. It had begun.

Everyone grabbed their wands; Dumbledore moved forward and took charge. They fought like mad; the make-shift building came tumbling down around them.

Severus was counting: so many Death Eaters, so many comrades. After a few hours of fighting, their numbers had decreased dramatically on both sides, but the fair-haired poet was still keeping up, firing off spells and shouting. Suddenly a loud hissing was heard.

'Snake!' he heard people screaming. 'Snake! Watch out!'

Severus felt his blood turn to ice. As the Dark Lord's spy, he knew only too well what it meant. It had to be the Dark Lord's pet snake, Nagini, fast and aggressive, horribly poisonous, murderous and invincible. The hiss was very close. Severus turned his head to see the snake's fangs approaching. He knew he was a dead man.

But at that fatal moment he was shoved aside with great force. The snake's bite missed him by less than an inch, and he stumbled onto the floor. He heard another piercing scream and then a thud. The snake's head had been severed from its body and rolled away.

Severus tried to sit up. He had a few bruises, but nothing serious. Then he saw the young poet sitting next to him, holding his arm.

'Did it bite you? Quick, show me!' Severus yelled. There was no time for politeness. If the boy had been bitten, time was of the essence. He grabbed the boy's arm and pushed up the sleeve.

No bite marks. Thank Merlin. He dropped the arm.

'What are you going on about?' he snapped. 'There's nothing the matter with you.'

The boy inspected his arm. 'True, sir,' he said. 'No bite. Just a sprain, I guess.' He rubbed the arm with his other hand.

Another red-haired boy...not one of the twins...came running to them.

'The Dark Lord's dead and the snake, too! Did you see my brother George cut off its head? King George slaying the dragon! What a pity I couldn't finish your song, Draco. Why are you sitting there like that? Are you hurt?'

'Of course not, freckle-face,' said the fair one. 'We Malfoys are tougher than that. I only saved someone's life.'

Severus grunted. The boy was probably right, but that didn't mean he liked it any better.

'Well, I guess I ought to thank you,' he said ungraciously.

'Not at all,' the boy said. 'I'm glad to have been of help.' He rubbed his arm again and pulled a face as if in pain. Snape felt uncomfortable.

'If there's anything I can do for you...'

The boy...Draco, the ginger one had called him...immediately turned to him with a beaming smile.

'Actually, sir, there is,' he said. 'It's such a pity that my songs don't get to be heard. Could you... perhaps....'

He searched his pockets and produced a handful of sheet music.

'Please have a look at them, sir,' he said. 'If you would be willing to try them on your audience....'

Snape stared at him furiously. What the hell! How was this possible?

Freckle-face was still standing there and found it necessary to add his bit to the conversation.

'Of course,' he said with a broad smile. 'I cannot do them full justice, Draco. But he can.'

Him, too? Did the whole sodding army know? Snape gnashed his teeth. He and Dumbledore were going to have a chat soon.

Then he looked down at one of the sheets in his hand.

'This is a duet,' he said.

'Yes, sir,' Draco answered meekly.

'I don't do duets. I work alone.'

'I know, sir. But I thought you might try this one, just this once.'

'No, I sing alone.'

'Won't you just have a look at it, sir?'

Snape held up the bunch of sheets for Draco, expecting him to take it back, but the boy only rubbed his arm again and looked up at him with big blue-gray eyes.

'I couldn't perform it anyway. I have no partner,' said Snape.

'Well, sir,' Draco said, 'maybe I know someone.'

'You know someone?' Snape said in horror.

'Yes, sir. He's... ah... he's quite nice, and he knows how to move on the stage, sir, and he has quite a nice voice.'

'And who is this paragon?'

'Well, ah... I mean, ah, I mean *me*, sir.'

'There's no effing way I'm ever going to....' Snape began furiously, but he fell silent when he saw Draco nurse his arm.

Snape hid his face in his hands.

Success

During the following year, Severus and Draco's act blossomed into a full-blown show. Draco worked hard on his singing; he worked even harder on new songs for Severus. Severus sang Draco's songs to the delight of the public. He had to admit that the boy did not only have a way with words, but he also knew exactly what sort of melodies would best bring out the qualities of Severus' wonderful voice. By the end of the year, they had a number of people working with them and for them, and their names were plastered all over the bill boards. They had also developed a friendship of sorts, Draco constantly trying to lift Severus' frequent bad moods and Severus constantly trying to reign in Draco's soaring spirits (for he also turned out to have a quite way with the showgirls).

A few weeks before Christmas, they gave their crew some time off and planned a holiday trip to New York before starting on another hardworking season.

After their last performance of the year, they were changing in their dressing room. Snape was even more grumpy than usual while Draco kept trying to talk him into dating one of their chorus girls.

'Honestly, Severus, why don't you even give them a chance!'

'For three months you've been trying to set me up with some girl, Draco: fat ones, tall ones, thin ones...it doesn't make any difference as long as they're wearing skirts and are still breathing. You don't really think I would start up something with one of those silly twits you're constantly pushing towards me! They cannot even string two words together. Like that nuclear scientist from tonight. You tell me her name, and I say: 'Hello,' and she says: "Mutual, I'm sure!" I mean, really, Draco.'

'All right, all right. I'll try to find someone a bit more intellectual for you next time. But believe me, it's for your own good! You're a lonely, miserable man because you haven't got a girl. And when you're unhappy, I'm unhappy! Ever since that night I saved your life, I feel a strong sense of responsibility for you...'

'Not that old routine again! As if saving my life gave you the right to run it! What's your agenda anyway? Why do you want me to get a girl in the first place?'

'I want you to get married and have nine kids to keep you occupied, so I can have some time I can call my own every day, that's why!'

They were interrupted by an attendant who handed Draco their train tickets to New York. This intermezzo soothed the atmosphere a bit, and when the man was gone, Snape said, 'All right, Draco, I'll let you have some time off for the hunt from now on.'

'Gee, thanks. But all the same, we're going to see a show tonight.'

'We're going to see a show? You're going to spoil our last hours in Florida by seeing a show?'

'Yes, a sister act.'

'What do we need with a sister act?'

'Well, nothing, but I got a letter from that singing mate of mine, Ron Weasley.'

'What, freckle-faced Weasley? You mean dog-faced Weasley? The one with the freckled twin brothers? Does he have sisters as well?'

'So he claims.'

'Oh, come on, Draco. How can a guy that ugly have the nerve to have sisters?'

'Must have very brave parents,' Draco shrugged. 'We're only doing it for an old pal in Dumbledore's Army, Severus.'

'Well, it's not a good reason, but it's a reason,' sighed Severus, flicking his wand to fasten the many buttons of his black silk shirt.

Sister Act

In the dressing room, Ginny and Hermione were busy preparing for their act when the stage manager suddenly came in without knocking.

'Hey, girls! Do you know who's here? Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy!'

Hermione looked up, a little disturbed at the interruption.

'Who? Snape and Malfoy? What are they doing here?'

'Listening to you, of course! It seems they got a letter from one of your brothers. Old army pals, you know.'

Hermione turned around to Ginny, full of amazement.

'Did Ron write to *them*?'

'So it seems,' said the stage manager, and then he disappeared again.

Ginny busied herself with her toilette. 'Well, well! What a good brother he is to us, Hermione. Isn't that amazing?'

'Yes, amazing,' Hermione said, watching Ginny with a suspicious look on her face. 'I wonder whatever gave him the idea.'

'Well, he probably thought we would be too shy to make use of such a vague contact,' Ginny said, fastening her earrings.

'Ginny, did you read Mum's letter this morning?'

'No, why?'

'Ron's been out of the country these last three months. He's with Charlie in Romania.'

'Oh,' said Ginny. She drew out her wand and made the coffee pot fill a cup that was sitting on the table. 'Well, he could have written from there.'

'But he didn't, did he? Ginny, next time you plan to write such a letter, will you talk to me first before you write us right out of show business?' said Hermione severely.

'Oh, please, Hermione. You sound like a mother hen looking after her little chick. I get enough of that from Mum already.'

'Mum's not here, love, and you still need looking after,' Hermione said, pinching Ginny's cheek. 'Now you listen to me and be a good girl, and don't do it again.'

'Ladies and gentlemen, the Weasley sisters!'

Snape was sitting with Draco right in front of the stage, quite prepared to be bored. But he wasn't. Halfway their song, Draco nudged him.

'Beautiful blue eyes, don't you think?' he whispered, watching Ginny with her flaming red hair, her dimples and sweet smile that seemed directed straight at him.

'They're brown,' said Snape, not taking his eyes off Hermione's more distinguished looks, her playful brown curls and the intelligent expression in her beautiful dark eyes. She probably took after some other family members.

'No, blue,' Draco said.

'No, no, they're brown,' Snape insisted. Draco turned to him and saw his eyes riveted on the taller of the two girls. He closed one eye and gave himself a satisfied nod.

Afterwards, when Hermione and Ginny had changed and arrived in the restaurant, Draco hastily got up and walked over to them. He bowed and introduced himself, then led them to the table where he and Snape were sitting. They all sat down and a polite conversation began.

'I wonder that your brother never told us how much talent there is in his family,' Snape remarked.

'Well, actually, Mr Snape,' Hermione began, but Ginny kicked her under the table and hastily finished the sentence:

'You know him, Mr Snape. You know how shy and modest he is.'

Snape lifted an eyebrow.

'Look, I have a recent picture of him,' said Ginny, groping around in her purse. 'Here it is!'

She put it into Snape's hands, and he lifted his other eyebrow.

'Oh, ah.... he always was a good-looking kid, I guess,' he said with an uneasy smile.

Draco winked at him. 'Well, here we are all together! Isn't this nice, Severus! Such wonderful girls for company!'

'Now that we've met,' Ginny interrupted him, 'I for one would like some free advice. Mr Snape, do you have any suggestions for the act? Should we do something about our hair? Should Hermione's be straighter, or should she dye it red, like mine?'

Snape stared at Hermione.

'No,' he said decisively. 'I wouldn't change a thing.'

Draco almost choked on his wine. He rose and offered his hand to Ginny. 'Would you like to dance, Miss Ginny?'

She smiled up at him. 'Of course,' she said, and the two of them disappeared onto the dance floor.

Snape leaned back in his chair and stole a glance at his companion. Hermione was looking down at her hands, then glanced at the dance floor. He decided that she was certainly different from the other showgirls he'd met. She did not try to draw his attention, she did not flirt with him, she didn't talk incessantly, but she sat there quietly. Then she reached out and touched a petal from one of the flowers in the vase that was on the table. The vase was more than half empty, and the flowers were obviously having a difficult time in the hot room. To Snape's amazement, Hermione muttered something under her breath, and the water level in the vase rose to just below the rim while the flowers immediately straightened themselves.

'I'm impressed, Miss Weasley,' Snape said. 'Wandless magic, no less. Why are you earning your bread by singing instead of getting a magical job?'

Hermione threw him a quick glance. 'Perhaps I like singing,' she said. 'Perhaps I like to work with my sister. Perhaps it's not so easy to find a magical job when you're not from a pure-blood family.'

'That's just a silly prejudice,' Snape said, trying to forget that he had realised this fact rather late in life himself.

'It may be silly,' she answered, 'but it's very real nonetheless.'

She smiled at him, and he was captivated by her warm brown eyes. A girl who actually only spoke when she had something sensible to say. That was certainly something new.

At last, he managed to tear his eyes from her face and turned to the dance floor.

'They look well together, don't they?' he said, watching Draco and Ginny.

'Yes,' said Hermione. 'By the way, Mr Snape, I have to tell you something. You were brought here tonight under false pretences. Ron did not write that letter...my sister did.'

'Ah, I see,' said Snape with a rather sarcastic smile. 'Well, well. So even little Ginny there has got an angle going.'

Hermione sat upright. 'She didn't mean anything by it,' she said defensively.

'No need to apologise, Miss Weasley,' said Snape. 'Everybody's got an angle.'

'That's a pretty cynical point of view,' Hermione said. 'Just for the record, I want you to know that my sister and I don't play angles.'

'Come now, Miss Weasley. What about that letter?'

'I don't like your inferences, Mr Snape,' said Hermione, getting angry.

'Let's not make a big deal out of it, Miss Weasley,' said Snape in a bored tone.

'Aren't they getting along just fine?' said Draco on the dance floor, holding Ginny a little closer.

'Oh, yes,' said Ginny. 'And so quickly!'

'Isn't that nice?' said Draco, laying his cheek against hers.

'Mr Snape, since the chance of our seeing each other again is extremely remote, I don't think it's important for us to go on arguing,' said Hermione, trying to control herself.

'Well, I'll drink to that,' said Snape, and with an irritated gesture, he lifted his glass. Women...they were all the same, quarreling about silly things, taking offence for no reason at all.

'Be my guest,' Hermione answered icily and touched his glass with hers.

'Look,' said Draco, 'if they go on like that, we'll be in-laws before the dance is over. Too bad we're leaving town tonight.'

'What a shame,' said Ginny. 'But we're leaving tomorrow anyway. We're going to Vermont for the holidays.'

'Vermont,' repeated Draco. 'Must be very beautiful now, with all that snow.'

They took another turn, and soon they saw nothing else but each other's eyes.

Their dance was suddenly interrupted by Hermione coming up to Ginny.

'Shall we go home now? It's getting late.'

'Sure,' said Ginny with a dazed look in her eyes. Then she looked past Hermione, and her expression became very alert.

'Look, Hermione! What's that?'

The stage manager was wrestling his way through the crowd, heading straight for them.

'The sheriff's here,' the man said panting. 'In my office. With a warrant to arrest both of you.'

'The sheriff!' said Hermione, shocked.

'What's up?' said Draco.

'It's our landlord,' Ginny explained. 'He claims we burned a hole in his old rug, and he wants us to pay 200 dollars for it.'

'Oh, no! Not that old rug routine!' said Draco.

'On top of that, we sneaked our bags out of our rooms,' added Hermione. 'They're in our dressing room now.'

'Right,' said Draco. 'You girls go and pack. We'll take care of it.'

'Oh, no, we don't want to cause you any trouble,' said Hermione, but Draco pushed them towards their dressing room.

'Don't worry,' he said. 'We like to take care of our friends.' He turned to the stage manager while the girls hastened away.

'Now you go back to your office and stall the sheriff,' he said to the stage manager, and then he made his way back to Snape, who was still sitting at their table.

'Severus, the girls are in a jam. We have to help them!' He grabbed Snape's arm to pull him up.

'What? What's the trouble then?' said Snape, resisting at first. But Draco led him out of the room with a firm hand, explaining the situation to him.

'Why don't we just turn that fellow into a rat?' said Snape when he had heard the story.

'No, we can't...he already is a rat,' said Draco with disgust. 'Now you go and get a cab for them, and I'll meet you in the dressing room.'

'Why do I listen to you?' said Snape, finally wrestling his arm free of Draco's iron grip. 'Can you give me one good reason?'

'Well,' said Draco, 'let's say we're doing it for an old pal in the army.'

Off to Vermont

In the dressing room, Hermione and Ginny were throwing their belongings into their suitcases. Draco began to help them by tossing things from the shelves onto the table.

'Now you girls just hop on a train as fast as you can,' he said.

'We can't! Our tickets aren't good until tomorrow,' said Hermione.

'Wait a minute,' said Draco, 'tickets... tickets.... Here, take these!' And he pulled the New York tickets out of his pocket.

'We can't take your tickets,' Hermione said. 'What will Mr Snape think?'

'It was his idea in the first place,' lied Draco. 'Now will you get going?'

'His idea?' said Hermione, staring at the tickets Draco had thrust into her hand.

Then Draco closed the suitcases, and Ginny began to climb out of the window where the taxi was waiting. Hermione followed her.

'We'll pay you back,' Ginny said through the window, 'but where can we reach you?'

'Don't worry,' said Draco. 'We'll be in touch.'

'Bye!' said Ginny breathlessly.

Draco ran out of the dressing room and back to the stage.

'I can't stall him any longer,' said the desperate stage manager.

'We've got to give the girls ten minutes more,' said Draco. 'I've got an idea, if you can stall him just one more minute.' He grabbed Snape's arm again and dragged him back to the dressing room.

'Well, I'll try, but that sheriff is eating me out of business already,' said the manager, hastening back to his two unwelcome guests.

'I've got a feeling I'm not going to like this,' said Snape, shrugging off Draco's arm.

'I've got a feeling you're going to hate it,' said Draco, opening the door and pushing him through.

'Please tell me what I'm doing this for!' said Snape, beginning to sound more and more annoyed.

'Let's say we're doing it for a pal in the army,' said Draco, his head already buried in the wide skirt of one of the girls' celestial blue dresses.

In the meantime, Sheriff Sirius Black was sitting at a table in the back room, eating a hearty meal. Landlord Filch was standing next to him and shouting.

'Now listen to me, Sheriff! I haven't got all night to wait here while you eat free food! You've got your warrant, now arrest those girls!'

'Come on,' barked Sheriff Black. 'We agreed to let them finish their show first.' He chewed on an especially nice chicken leg.

'I did not agree!' screamed Filch, pointing at the stage manager. 'It was his idea!'

'I've got some rights, too,' said the stage manager. 'You'll only get them after they've done their number. Listen, here's their music.'

And indeed, the first few bars of Hermione's and Ginny's act began to play. Then they heard the audience beginning to laugh. Filch ran out of the back room, followed by Sheriff Black who was still holding his chicken leg in his hand.

There they were: Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy, all dressed up in Hermione and Ginny's blue fluffy dresses with wide skirts. They were stumbling on their high heels, sparkling diadems on their heads, miming and walking to the record of their act that Draco had found in the dressing room. Severus was looking grumpy even by his standards, but Draco was sending one radiant smile after another into the audience. Filch stood gaping like a fish while Sheriff Black looked on, contentedly gnawing his bone.

When the song was over, Severus and Draco sprinted off the stage, locked the door of the dressing room, changed clothes, and jumped out of the window and into a taxi while the unfriendly landlord was banging on the door and ordering them to open up.

They made the train in the nick of time and were immediately caught by the ticket collector.

'Show him the tickets,' said Snape.

Draco began to search his pockets, his wallet, his bags. No tickets.

'You've got them,' he said.

'No, I don't,' said Snape, eyeing him suspiciously.

'Can't find them,' Draco said. 'They're gone.'

'Well, gentlemen,' said the ticket collector, 'either you have tickets or you haven't.'

'We've got a drawing room,' said Snape with an accusing look at Draco.

'Every available space on this train is occupied,' said the ticket collector. 'However, if you purchase tickets, you can spend the night in the buffet car.'

'Very well,' said Snape, 'how much is it to New York?'

'How much more is it to Vermont?'

'We're going to New York!' said Snape.

'Vermont must be very beautiful at this time of the year, with all that snow,' pleaded Draco. 'It will do us much good, Severus; the snow, the fir trees, the clean fresh air....'

'Two tickets to New York,' said Snape. 'You pay him.'

'Ah....' said Draco, again searching his pockets. 'I don't seem to have any cash.'

'What did you do with your stuff?' said Snape impatiently. 'No tickets, no cash....' He pulled out his wallet and paid the money. Then they made their way to the buffet car.

'I still don't get it,' muttered Snape from under the weight of their suitcases and coats. 'We had reservations.'

'It must be the holiday rush,' said Draco.

'That's just great,' said Snape, opening the door to the buffet car. 'We paid twice for those tickets, and now we can sit up all night.' He dropped the luggage next to a table and sat down.

'Stop fussing,' said Draco, taking to opposite seat. 'If we'd taken a plane, you'd be sitting up all night.'

Snape suddenly looked at him as if bitten by a snake.

'Oh no,' he said. 'No. No, you wouldn't do this to me, would you?'

'Do what?' said Draco, trying to look unconcerned.

'First you dress me up like a dame, then you get me involved with a sheriff, I almost lose my life trying to catch a train...I just know that on top of all that, you wouldn't take away my nice, warm bed and make me spend the night out here in a drafty old buffet car. Now would you?' he said with his darkest scowl.

'Whatever are you talking about?' said Draco with his most indignant look.

'I'm going down there to our drawing room,' said Snape, slowly rising from his chair, 'I'm going to open up that door, and if I find those two Weasley sisters there, I'm going to take them by their hair, and with these two hands I'm going to...'. He turned and shut his mouth, for the door had opened and Ginny and Hermione walked in.

'Oh, Mr Snape,' said Ginny with her sweetest smile, 'how can we ever thank you enough?' She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him on the cheek. Snape stood stupefied.

'It was really so sweet and generous of you,' said Hermione. 'Mr Malfoy told us how you insisted on giving us your tickets.'

'Now, wasn't there something you wanted to say to the girls?' said Draco.

'Well, yes,' said Snape, throwing murderous looks at Draco. 'I mean... won't you sit down and have something to drink with us? A few sandwiches, maybe?'

They all sat down at the table with sandwiches and drinks.

'Now this is cosy,' Draco said happily, brushing his knee against Ginny's.

'Tell me,' said Snape, 'where are you going to stay in New York?'

'We're not staying in New York,' said Hermione. 'We're booked for the holidays.'

'Where?'

'Pine Tree, Vermont ... at the Colombia Inn.'

Snape looked at Draco.

Draco looked at the ceiling.

'Oh,' said Snape. 'I see. It must be beautiful at this time of the year in Vermont, with all that snow, fir trees, clean fresh air....'

'Yes, wonderful,' said Ginny enthusiastically. 'Could you come up for a couple of days?'

'Well, I don't know,' began Snape.

'Oh, if you could,' said Hermione, smiling at him, 'it would be so nice.'

Snape looked at Draco. Draco rubbed his arm.

'Very well,' said Snape with a sigh. 'To Vermont it is.'

In Vermont

After a long journey, they arrived in Vermont. Ginny peered through the windows.

'This cannot be Vermont,' she said to Hermione. 'We're not there yet. There's no snow.'

'Pine Tree! Coming in to Pine Tree!'

'Did you hear that?' said Hermione. 'It must be Vermont.'

Ginny pushed open the door of their compartment while Hermione was still sitting on the upper bed. Draco and Severus came walking down the corridor.

'Hi, girls!' said Draco. 'Did you sleep well?'

'Oh, yes,' said Ginny. She picked up her suitcase and laced her arm through Draco's. Then they both looked back at Snape, who was gallantly helping Hermione from the top bunk. Hermione did not dare to look at him when his hands lingered a bit longer at her waist than was strictly necessary.

Draco nudged Ginny.

'Your strategy is a little obvious,' she whispered. 'I've got a hint for you. She's a real slow mover.'

'Well, I've got one for you,' said Draco. 'He's a real slow mover, too.'

'Hm,' said Ginny. 'Looks like we've got our work cut out for us.'

The train had stopped, and Draco pushed the doors open.

'Hey, Severus! Ginny! We got on the wrong train!'

'What?' said Snape.

'There's no snow! It's all green out here!'

They all got off the train and wondered at the landscape; there wasn't a snow flake to be seen.

'It's warmer than Florida,' said Ginny sadly.

'Where is the beach?' said Snape sarcastically.

'We haven't had snow since Thanksgiving,' said a man on the platform.

They took a taxi to the Columbia Inn. It looked awfully quiet, with not a guest in sight. They were received by a hopeful housekeeper with a Scottish accent.

'Hello, my dears,' she said. 'Welcome to Columbia Inn. I'm Mrs McGonagall, the housekeeper. What kind of rooms would you like? I can offer you an ample selection. Every room is free, including mine.'

'We're not here as guests,' Hermione told her. 'We're the Weasley sisters.'

'My friend and I are guests,' said Snape. 'We came up for the snow. Where do you keep it?'

'We take it in during the day,' the housekeeper retorted. She turned to Hermione.

'I'm terribly sorry,' she said, 'but I'm afraid we won't be able to use you. We'll pay you half of the salary for cancelling.'

'Are things really that bad?' asked Ginny.

Mrs McGonagall sighed. 'Yes,' she said. And to Snape she added, 'You aren't going to stay either, are you?'

'If the girls are leaving, I'll take the luggage,' said Snape. He took up the suitcases and headed for the door, through which a man with a long grey beard was just entering the hall, carrying a large pile of woodblocks.

Snape dropped the suitcases. 'General Dumbledore!' he said.

'Don't call me General, Snape,' said Dumbledore with a twinkle in his eye. Behind him a young girl with violet hair had entered. On seeing the guests, her hair turned into a shade of deep purple.

'That's great, Uncle Albus!' she exclaimed. 'Hotel guests at last!' She stumbled over the suitcases that Snape had dropped.

'Careful, Nymphadora,' said Dumbledore. Then he saw Draco, who had just entered with two more suitcases. On seeing Dumbledore, he dropped them exactly as Snape had done.

'General Dumbledore!' he said.

'The very same,' answered Dumbledore.

'Carrying woodblocks,' said Draco, too surprised to remember his manners.

'Unusual sight, isn't it, Malfoy?' said Dumbledore, still smiling.

'Ah, yes, well, no, sir; I'm sure you can do anything you put your mind to, sir,' said Draco. 'But why....'

'Actually, I'm a hotel owner these days,' said Dumbledore.

'He got it in a shrewd business move,' muttered Mrs McGonagall.

'I'm forgetting my manners,' said Dumbledore. 'This is my housekeeper, Minerva McGonagall, and this is my niece, Nymphadora Tonks.'

'We're the Weasley sisters,' said Hermione.

'Your floor show,' Ginny added.

'Don't worry,' Mrs McGonagall said to Dumbledore, 'I already told them we have to cancel.'

'Why?' said Dumbledore. 'We have a floor, haven't we?'

'Yes, but who are they going to sing to?'

'Even if it's only to you and me, it will be well worth it,' said Dumbledore, looking approvingly at the girls. 'Besides, there will be six inches of snow tonight.'

'Is that the weather forecast?' Hermione asked.

'No,' said Dumbledore, 'but if there's one thing I learned in the army, it's to be positive. Especially when one doesn't know what one is talking about. Your first performance will be tonight, at eight o'clock sharp. I'm looking forward to it. Now, if you will please excuse me....' And with a friendly nod, he left the room, carrying a heavy bag that Mrs McGonagall had just handed him.

That night, the Weasley sisters performed for a practically empty house. Malfoy and Snape were there, of course, as were Dumbledore and his niece, Mrs McGonagall, and two or three dinner guests.

'I feel awful,' said Hermione afterwards. 'It's like taking money under false pretences. Mrs McGonagall, can't you talk him into letting us work for a half salary?'

Mrs McGonagall snorted. 'Not Albus Dumbledore,' she said. 'He never gives up, no matter whom or what he needs to talk into seeing things his way.' She dabbed her eyes with her apron. 'And everything is in it...his pension, his life-savings... everything.'

'Oh, can't we do something?' said Ginny.

'We'll go to New York,' said Snape.

'New York? We only just got here,' said Draco.

'We've got connections there. We can find him a job. He can work as a magician, perhaps even in our show.'

'Yes, but his first problem is here and now. We need to think of something to get the people here. Something unusual and new.'

'What this place needs,' said Ginny, 'is a dynamite act.'

'Right,' said Draco. He slapped the table with his fist. 'Something really big. Like...'

'Like Snape and Malfoy,' said Ginny.

'Exactly!' Draco said. 'What do you say, Severus? We could do a few of our old nightclub acts with the girls in between.'

Snape rose. 'It's a start,' he said. He walked over to Dumbledore's niece.

'Young lady,' he said. 'Get me a line to New York.'

'Yes, sir,' said Nymphadora, stumbling over her own feet. 'Immediately, sir. This way, sir.'

Draco whistled. 'Uh-oh,' he said. 'He's got that crazy look in his eyes.'

'Is that bad?' asked Hermione.

'No,' said Draco, 'but it's generally very expensive.'

He rose from his chair.

'Excuse me,' he said and went after Snape.

Snape was already talking on the phone.

'I want the whole show here in three days,' he said. 'Sets, costumes, and all the cast you can get.' He hung up.

'Wow,' said Draco. Together they walked back to the dining room. Mrs McGonagall caught up with them.

'I won't tell the General,' she panted, 'but I think bringing your show up here is one of the nicest....' She wiped her nose.

'How did you know?' said Snape.

'Well, like any decent self-respecting housekeeper, I listened in on the other phone,' she said. 'I just don't know what to say!' And she hugged Snape, who stood completely paralysed for a moment.

'Come on. Let's go tell the girls,' said Draco.

Rescue mission

Over the next few days no one had any time they could call their own. Hermione sang, Ginny danced, Severus and Draco rehearsed with their cast and tried to combine all acts into one dazzling show.

Ginny and Draco had concocted a plan. Draco wanted to get rid of Severus' bad moods and the non-stop work; Ginny wanted to get rid of Hermione's motherly meddling. They tried everything they could to get Hermione and Severus together. Once, it was Draco handing Hermione a sheet of music, assuring her that it was perfect for her and Severus; and indeed they rehearsed it once, Severus sitting uncomfortably on one corner of the piano stool and Hermione on the other, blushing and not daring to look up whenever Severus's arm touched hers, whereupon he would pull back as if stung. Another time, it was Ginny pushing Hermione late in the evening to go to the kitchen and have something to eat, pretending that she could hear Hermione's stomach rumbling and wouldn't be able to sleep a wink if she didn't do something about it; but in fact she had arranged with Draco that he would send Severus there with some equally silly excuse.

Hermione had taken that opportunity to apologise to Severus for getting angry with him that first night in Florida.

'I am a bit naïve, I suppose,' she told him. 'Of course I do know that people have angles. But I've always been a bit of a silly schoolgirl, I guess. Lady fair, knight on the white horse... that sort of thing.'

'It's always dangerous to place knights on horses,' Snape answered, softened by her apology and by the nice warm place by the fire, in the dark, with nobody around them for a change. 'They could fall off, you know.'

'I think mine won't,' said Hermione with a shy smile. 'And there's another thing, Mr Snape...I really think that what you're doing for the General is one of the most decent, unselfish things I've ever heard of.'

Snape mumbled something before going hastily off to bed. Still, they became quite good friends after that.

But a few days later, Hermione suddenly cooled down again. She wouldn't sing with Severus any more, she avoided him, she lay awake at night, she slammed doors, and she was even unkind to Ginny. Draco wasn't pleased either. Severus had returned to his old, foul moods with a vengeance.

Ginny went to see Draco.

'What's gone wrong?' she asked.

'I haven't got the faintest idea,' said Draco. 'But old Sev is completely impossible, unbearable, and unamenable. We must do something and fast.'

'Hmmm...' said Ginny, 'I have an idea. A few nights ago, she couldn't sleep. Today, she won't eat. She's in love.'

'It doesn't look like it,' said Draco sceptically.

'I'm sure she's deliberately putting up barriers,' said Ginny. 'Because of me. She thinks she has to take care of me. She'll never get involved with anyone before I'm married, or at least engaged or something.'

'Well,' said Draco, 'then that's the end of that, I guess.'

'Unless...' said Ginny, moving a little closer to him on the couch, 'unless I get myself engaged soon.'

'That's ridiculous,' Draco said, moving away a little. 'And even if it weren't, you couldn't. We're in the wilderness...there's no one around for miles.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Ginny with a sidelong glance at him. 'Of course, it would have to be someone I know.'

'Yeah, that always helps,' said Draco.

'And of course, he's got to be a mature man, a talented man, with experience... witty, charming, handsome....'

'Where are you going to find such a superman?'

'Don't be so modest,' said Ginny, her hand on his arm.

'What, me?' said Draco, moving away again.

'Well, you're not exactly superman, but you're definitely available,' said Ginny, moving closer to him again.

'Now don't get any ideas, Ginny,' said Draco in panic. 'I'm not the marrying kind.'

'It's just an engagement!'

'I'm not the engaging kind, either!'

'What kind are you?' whispered Ginny.

'I'm the kind who pushes his best friend into it, but who gets scared stiff when he gets anywhere close himself.'

'How terrible could it be for a few days?' said Ginny, one hand creeping up from his knee to his thigh. 'You like me, don't you? I'm not exactly repulsive, am I?'

'Ah... sure I do,' said Draco, wiping away the beads of perspiration that had formed on his brow. 'No, of course you're not!'

'I was only thinking of Severus and Hermione,' said Ginny, pouting. 'But if you don't want to, then let's forget about the whole thing.' She moved away from him.

'So it would be only temporary?' Draco said, caving in to her wishes.

'Well, of course,' Ginny said in her most dignified tone. 'You didn't think that I'm the kind of girl who goes around throwing myself at a man, do you?'

'Of course not,' said Draco hastily. 'All right, only for a few days. Or two weeks at the most. And we don't announce it until it's absolutely necessary. And no kissing in public before it's absolutely necessary.'

'Deal,' said Ginny with a satisfied look in her bright blue eyes.

That night, there was a small party at the hotel for the cast. Draco and Ginny did what they could to get Severus and Hermione to dance together, but nothing worked. They each stuck to their own corner and sat there sulking.

Ginny took Draco aside.

'It looks like it's absolutely necessary now,' she said.

'Oh, Merlin,' Draco muttered. He clapped his hands.

'Silence, everyone! I want to say something. Ginny has just asked me... I mean, she just said... I mean, Ginny and I are engaged!'

Amidst the following tumult and applause, Hermione and Severus came to congratulate them, but they still did not speak to each other. Hermione was on the verge of tears and disappeared into the kitchen with Mrs McGonagall to help her with the champagne.

Dumbledore came up to them as well.

'Don't just stand there,' he said to Draco. 'Aren't you going to kiss the bride?'

'Oh, eh... yes, sir,' said Draco. He bowed over to Ginny and kissed her on the lips. And then again. And yet again.

'Well now,' Ginny said when she could breathe again, 'that didn't hurt so much, did it?'

'No,' said Draco, and he began to dance with her, his cheek against hers.

That night, Ginny sat on the edge of her bed and tried to persuade Hermione that she was free now.

'I know we said that we'd always remain together and never break up the act,' she said. 'But that wasn't realistic. And if there's anything you want to do now, anything special, you can go ahead and do it. Hermione? Are you still awake?'

Hermione didn't answer; she was silently crying in the dark.

Ginny noticed. She came to sit on Hermione's bed.

'What's the matter?' she said. 'We thought... I mean, I thought that you and Severus were getting along so well. What has he done wrong?'

'I'll tell you,' Hermione said. 'But don't breathe a word of it to anyone. I heard from Mrs McGonagall that the boys want to put this whole show on television. Right from here, on Christmas Eve. She heard Severus on the telephone a few days ago. They're going to make a lot of fuss. Even the General will be on television, with his poor empty hotel and no life-savings. That will make him a pathetic figure from coast to coast. He'll be the laughing stock of all his old mates from the army. And it means over two thousand dollars of free publicity for Snape and Malfoy.'

'I can't believe it,' said Ginny, completely perplexed. 'You must have heard it wrong. Severus and Draco would never do a thing like that.'

'She heard Severus on the telephone,' repeated Hermione. 'I couldn't believe it either, at first. But I caught a few words between them, and it's true. The show will be broadcast, with the General in it.'

'You must speak to him tomorrow,' Ginny said. 'Ask him what he means by it. Maybe there's some misunderstanding.'

'I can't,' Hermione said. 'I thought that he was hiding a good heart below that unfriendly exterior. But he's not.'

'Then I'll ask Draco first thing in the morning,' Ginny said. She tucked the blankets around Hermione. 'Try to sleep, honey.'

It looked as though Hermione wanted to say something, but she thought better of it.

'Good night, Ginny,' she said.

Running away

The next morning, Dumbledore drove Hermione to the station.

'I can't help feeling that you're making a tactical error,' he said. 'I watched you and Severus last night. I'd say you both need a good talking to.'

'No, General, this is a private war,' said Hermione. 'Don't do anything. Will you just give Ginny this letter from me?' And she was gone.

Ginny had just come out of rehearsal when she received Hermione's letter. She was stunned.

I'm sorry, Ginny, it said. But I cannot face Severus any more. You'd better be careful about your involvement with Draco. If he's in on it, maybe you should reconsider. If he is, leave him and come to me. I received a job offer in New York at the Carousel Club. I'm sure we can work there together, if you want to.

'Draco!' Ginny shouted. 'Draco, come here! I have a letter from Hermione!'

Draco came running to her. 'What's up?'

'Here. Read it,' said Ginny, and she burst into tears.

Draco wrapped his arm around her and started to read the letter.

'She's gone to New York? But what is she talking about, "if I'm in on it"? What does she think Severus has done?'

'She thinks that the two of you are turning a show that was meant to help Dumbledore into a major publicity stunt,' Ginny told him. 'Is that true, Draco? Are you going to put it all on television?'

'No!' said Draco. 'How can she think that?'

'But Severus was overheard talking on the phone to this famous talk show host,' Ginny insisted. 'What's that about, then?'

'Oh, Merlin,' said Draco, sitting down. 'That's just for an announcement. We want our old pals from Dumbledore's Army to be here on opening night, to show the General that they haven't forgotten him. He feels so left out, you see, after having run the show during the War, so to speak. As if he's of no use any more, now that Voldemort is gone.'

Ginny was silent for a while.

'We must tell Severus,' she said at last.

'Tell him what? That Hermione's gone?'

'Yes,' said Ginny. 'And that our engagement is fake. Everything. We have too many misunderstandings already.' She swallowed.

Draco laid his hands on her shoulders. 'I don't think it's really fake, Ginny,' he said. 'Now that I'm used to the idea, I'm beginning to like it. What do you think?'

'Oh, Draco,' Ginny sobbed. 'I've longed to hear you say that, but why does it have to be at a moment when I cannot be really happy about it? Poor Hermione.'

'And poor Severus,' said Draco. 'Come, let's go find him.'

Severus was absolutely livid. Even Draco had never seen him like that.

'How could you be stupid enough to try a stunt like this? You, her own sister! How could you do such a thing? Phoney engagements! Messing around with people's lives! You ought to be horsewhipped! Listening in on my phone calls!'

'That wasn't me,' said Ginny. 'That was Mrs McGonagall.'

'I don't care!' shouted Snape. 'You've ruined everything, including the show!'

'Well, you just go get her back,' said Draco.

'Do you think she'll listen to me now?' said Snape furiously.

'She'll be so glad to find that it wasn't true what she thought,' Ginny said in a small voice.

But Snape was already gone, slamming the door behind him.

Ginny burst into tears in Draco's arms.

Snape was sitting at a table at The Carousel. The lights were dimmed. He had already seen that Hermione would indeed be performing here tonight; that was one thing gained. He could only hope that she would be willing to listen to him afterwards.

The curtains rose, and then he saw her in a tight black velvet dress, surrounded by four male dancers. And when she began to sing, he was enthralled. He'd never heard her voice so beautiful, so full of emotion.

Love, you didn't do right by me

You planned a romance that just hadn't a chance

And I'm through Love, you didn't do right by me

I'm back on the shelf and I'm blaming myself

But it's you

He saw her eyes widen, and he knew that she had seen and recognized him. He had to admire her professionalism; her voice did not waver once as she continued on, looking straight at him.

My one love affair didn't get anywhere from the start

To send me a Joe who had winter and snow in his heart

Wasn't smart

Love, you didn't do right by me

As they say in the song

You done me wrong!

The applause was long and loud; she did not smile, but almost fled from the stage. Severus rose and went to the back, to her dressing room. He knocked. No answer.

'Hermione! Hermione, may I come in, please?'

At last the door opened. There she was, her eyes red. 'What do you want?' she said.

'I want to resolve a few misunderstandings,' said Snape. She opened the door a little wider to let him in, and they both sat down on a chair. A silence followed.

'I told you that knights tend to fall off their white horses, Hermione,' Snape said at last. 'But I also haven't fallen into the ravine, as you seem to think. I haven't organized a publicity stunt at Dumbledore's expense. I just wanted to get all our army comrades together at the inn, and this was the best way to reach them in time.'

'Oh,' said Hermione with a sigh full of relief. 'So you didn't...'

'No,' said Snape. He coughed. 'And did you know that your sister and Draco are not really engaged? It was all an act. Ginny wanted you to think that you were free to do what you liked without having to worry about her.'

'What?'

'They were just pretending,' said Snape.

'But she is really in love with Draco,' said Hermione. 'I'm sure she is.'

'Well, let's hope he'll come to his senses then,' said Snape. 'Do you believe me, Hermione?'

'Yes, I do,' she said. 'I've had some time to think. I shouldn't have run off like this. I should have given you a chance to explain. And you would be a fool to lie to me now, for I would find out soon enough.'

'I'm glad you can think logically again,' Snape said drily. 'I've never liked women who cannot think straight and only ever act on impulse.'

He lifted her chin with his finger.

'Hermione, will you come back to Vermont with me? We need you in the show. And Ginny needs you, even though she thinks she's a big girl.'

'And what about you?' said Hermione, looking up at him though her tears.

Snape bowed his head and kissed her.

White Christmas

On their way back, when they were getting close to Vermont, they saw thick clouds gathering in the sky. By the time they arrived in Pine Tree, the train had become very crowded, and Snape had to greet many old army pals who were coming to the show on Christmas Eve. And as if it were straight out of a Christmas story, it had begun to snow very softly.

'The show is tonight,' said Hermione. 'That's great. All those people, and snow too!'

'We'll have a white Christmas,' said Snape, taking her hand in his.

'Does that mean anything to you?' Hermione asked curiously. 'Are you a romantic after all?'

'There's still much about me you don't know,' he murmured softly.

At the hotel, Ginny fell into Hermione's arms.

'I'm so sorry, Hermione,' she sobbed. 'I really meant well, but it all came out wrong! I suppose I do need someone to look after me....'

Draco was shaking Severus' hand. 'I'm so glad you managed to bring her,' he said. 'And...? Well...?'

Severus showed his very rare smile.

'I see,' said Draco. 'Congratulations! So I'm going to have my time off every day!'

'Yes,' said Severus sternly. 'But not for the hunt. You're going to make a respectable woman of that young girl over there.'

'Sure,' said Draco. 'It's all been arranged already.'

The show was a great success. The hotel was absolutely crowded with skiing guests as well as army pals. Dumbledore was very touched by all the attention he received. The final scene was beautiful: red costumes, white furs, and a large tree with lots of presents. Severus sang the show's title song.

I'm dreaming of a white Christmas

Just like the ones I used to know

Where the treetops glisten,

and children listen

To hear sleigh bells in the snow

I'm dreaming of a white Christmas

With every Christmas card I write

May your days be merry and bright

And may all your Christmases be white

Afterwards, Draco and Ginny and Hermione and Severus went for a walk through the freshly fallen snow.

'All my dreams have come true,' said Ginny. 'I'm so happy, Draco.' She wrapped her arms around his neck, and he settled his thick cloak around her shoulders. 'You're not sorry, are you? Because if you are, I don't want you to feel like you have to go through with it.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' said Draco. 'I've never had so much fun before as I have with you.'

'I'm so glad you came to fetch me,' Hermione said to Severus. 'I wouldn't have missed this Christmas in the snow for the world.' She stood still and laid her hands against Severus cheeks. 'Have you really forgiven me?'

'Don't talk so much, silly girl,' he said. He took her in his arms and kissed her thoroughly and passionately. 'Let's go home,' he whispered into her ear.

Sometime later, the snow was still falling softly but steadily, muffling all sound. The trees were covered in white, and the snowflakes glistened and sparkled in the glow of the lonely lantern by the front door. Nearly all the windows were dark with only two exceptions; candle flames caused faint shadows on the curtains. But the occupants of those rooms paid no attention to the snow outside. They were otherwise engaged.

FINIS