

Facets of Love

by karelia

The latest murder was executed in exactly the same way as the other two. Hermione decides it's time to solve the case. Written for the first ever Imhg exchange on LJ.

Murders Among Us

Chapter 1 of 5

The latest murder was executed in exactly the same way as the other two. Hermione decides it's time to solve the case. Written for the first ever Imhg exchange on LJ.

Chapter I: Murders Among Us

Lughnasadh 2002

The pain from the sword slicing into her was extreme, unbearable even. Passing out fleetingly entered her mind, but her focus centred only on the pain. The agony she'd gone through in the last hours of the Dark Lord's reign, not knowing whether or not Draco was alive, had been excruciating, but this pain, acutely physical, was far, far worse. *Please ...*

More suddenly than it'd been inflicted it disappeared, vanished so completely she wondered if it had been an illusion. An incredible lightness engulfed Narcissa, and she wasn't surprised to float in the air, defying gravity with ease.

Upon the sound of a chuckle, one she hadn't heard in decades and one from a once much loved voice, she turned around. "Daddy?" She looked at him in confusion before it dawned on her. "I'm dead, aren't I?" A regretful sigh escaped her. "Well, there goes a somewhat wasted life."

Cygnus Black embraced her. "That waste could have been much greater, my love. You've done well, and your love for both Lucius and Draco did much to redeem your lesser acts."

"Oh, Merlin," she cried out. "Draco will be fine, but Lucius ..." Her eyes filled with tears. "My poor Lucius. What will he do without me?" Then she turned to her father again. "Where is Bella? Or does she hold a grudge that I turned against the vermin in favour of my family?"

Cygnus shook his head slightly. "No, my love. Bella is still resting and healing. She saw the wrong she did, and she'll take a while to recover."

"Rest? I hope I don't need rest. I feel fine. And I need to watch over Lucius. I'm afraid for him! He won't know how to live his life without me!"

Cygnus smiled. "You'll tire soon enough. But do not worry. I and others will watch over you, and we'll have someone take care of Lucius. When you're rested, you can decide what you think is best to do for your soul to grow further."

"Promise me Lucius will be all right."

"I promise, my love. No harm will come to him."

Content with her father's word, Narcissa soon gave in to an overwhelming tiredness.

Ostara 2005

Hermione's stomach turned inside out when her eyes fell on the victim, a young, obviously pregnant woman, no older than herself. Her body was sliced open in various places, blood still trickling into the ground, her face distorted by utmost horror, and eyes staring blankly into space. Hermione's eyes widened in sheer revulsion when she recognised the person. *Lavender Brown ... Oh my god!*

She turned away and managed barely a foot before her breakfast spewed onto the grass. *Thank Merlin it's about to start raining ...* As oblivious to the random thought as to the soft touch on her neck, she looked up into Harry's eyes when he handed her a goblet filled with water. "Thanks. Sometimes I hate my job." Her hands were shaking, but she managed to bring the goblet to her mouth and rinse it before gulping down a few sips.

"But most of the time you love it, and thank goodness, this kind of gruesomeness rarely happens." He took the goblet back and stretched his hand out. "Come. They've covered her body." His voice held a rough edge, the only indication that he was as shaken as Hermione.

A distance away, two souls, silently floating in the air, watched the crime scene. "Ah, her grandpa is here to greet her. Good," Narcissa said and looked at the other. "I didn't know you cared for the girl, Severus. Comforting her like that was sweet, even if she didn't notice." The pleased smile she offered elicited a snort from him.

"Aren't you glad I'm dead? If you had mentioned sweet and my name in the same sentence while I was alive, I might have used an Unforgivable." He sounded amused.

Narcissa grinned. "Yes, you would have. I'm so glad you're here rather than continuing a miserable life, Sev." Then her face took on a sly look. "Don't change the subject, though. You are fond of her."

Severus shrugged. "I made it my duty to look out for her. After all, I really made the poor girl suffer during her school years."

Narcissa scrutinised him, and her expression turned triumphant. "Ha! As if you could hide the truth in this dimension! She's very close to you. Like Draco and I or even closer."

"We spent a few lives together," he admitted. "Now, I think our work here is done, yes? Miss Brown is safely with her family on this side of the Veil, and Hermione is getting ready to Disapparate. Let's find a more pleasant activity. I'll look in on her later to make sure she's all right."

Samhain 2006

Like every Thursday evening over the past three years, Hermione found herself knocking at the door of number twelve, Grimmauld Place. The square looked as gloomy as ever, emphasised even more so by the dismal weather typical for mid-Autumn, but Harry's home these days offered a stark contrast to the time it had been Order headquarters. Harry had shown surprising talent in the transformation of a dreary house to a warm, welcoming home.

Thursday nights had evolved into an antidote to what had become increasingly stressful days. An evening of idle banter, excellent food and wine, and routing her two friends in a game of Scrabble was a guarantee to lift her spirits.

Harry opened the door and stepped forward to hug his oldest friend. "Hello, mate. Didn't see you at work today. How are you?"

"I'm not bad," Hermione replied as she followed him inside. "It's been a busy day. Where...?"

"Kingsley requested his presence on a murder scene," Harry interrupted. "I have no clue why; couldn't get any details." He shrugged. "It's probably some case he hasn't experienced yet as an Auror."

Hermione felt the weight of her working week press down on her. *Please, Merlin, don't let it be another Sword Murder ... I've done enough overtime this week already.* Dread washed over her as her thoughts jumped to the two still unsolved murders that had wound themselves onto her desk as cold cases. Her hunch that there was no Muggle involvement whatsoever had done nothing so far to aid in her scant investigations. She pushed the unpleasant subject out of her mind, determined to enjoy the evening.

Leading the way to the kitchen, Harry said. "I haven't put the pasta in yet; want to give it another half hour or so. Maybe he'll be back by then."

"Pasta?" Hermione beamed. "You spoil me! What sauce did you create this time?"

Harry grinned at her. "We procured a truffle, so no sauce. Only butter. But I figured you wouldn't mind."

"Oooohhhh, truffle!" Hermione took a deep, appreciative breath as she stepped into the kitchen where the scent of the small fungus already filled the air.

"Just took it out of the icebox. It's better served at room temperature." Harry motioned for her to sit down. "Wine?" He busied himself choosing a bottle from the large wine rack and emerged with an exquisite Italian red.

Hermione smirked. "I take it the truffle is from Italy, then?"

"Oh, yeah. The season there starts earlier than in France. But they're nearly as good as the French ones." Then he grinned. "In fact, I doubt either you or I could taste where it's from if we tried."

"You know ... If anyone had told me during our time on the run that you'd pose competition to any professional chef, I'd have accused them of being a Polyjuiced Trelawney."

Harry grinned. "Amazing what a good relationship can do for one's talents."

A pensive smile played around Hermione's lips when her eyes met his. "Sometimes I still can't get over how much things changed. Who would've ever imagined this..." she gestured between them, "...the day we got rid of Voldemort?"

"I know what you mean," Harry said. "It took me a long time to get over being shunned by those I thought my friends, but I wake up every day and now I've never been happier in my life."

"And I'm happy for you, Harry. As to friends," Hermione shrugged, "sometimes they show their true colours, and then you realise they've never really been friends. And I'm glad I found out their true colours when I did. Every time I think about it, I figure I should have known Ron better. Remember how he abandoned us when we were on the run? But then, it would have been worse if we'd already been married when he decided to turn against you. I guess he's never been able to get out of the grasp of his mother."

"And now he's getting married to Parkinson." Harry snorted. "How the mighty have fallen ... I wonder why Molly approved of that relationship."

"Well, if he's happy, I guess that's what counts. Maybe he finally stood up to her," Hermione said. "And in case you wonder, yes, I do mean it." She cast him a lopsided grin. "Although I can't help wondering if she's pregnant and that's why. It seems rather rushed from what I've heard. But then again it might just be Mrs Weasley pushing

them."

"It could be that she's pregnant. I've heard rumours, too." Harry shrugged. "I know you are happy all on your own, Hermione. For now, anyway." He regarded her thoughtfully. "Even Skeeter stopped mocking your single status, and that's saying something."

"Of course I'm happy," Hermione confirmed. "All it took to get that cow off my back was a reminder of her months in a glass jar and my promise that I have no scruples to repeat it. My lifestyle may not be everyone's choice, but it suits me, and that's all that counts." She paused. "Besides, I love my work; it offers just the right balance of fieldwork and research and thinking. And the pay allows for the kind of holidays I love."

The clatter of the front door interrupted them, and Harry shot up at the sound. "We're in the kitchen!" he shouted into the corridor as he moved to the stove and slid the fettuccini into the boiling water.

Hermione's smile fell away as Draco entered the kitchen, visibly shaken.

"What happened?" Harry asked flatly and spread his arms to embrace the blond.

Draco leant heavily against him. "I need a drink. Scotch, I think." His voice was unusually coarse.

"Here, sit down." Harry led him to the chair opposite Hermione. "I'll pour you one."

Draco sat, staring at the table with glassy eyes, while Harry prepared his drink. Hermione flinched as he swallowed it in one go. He shuddered, but faint spots of much-needed colour rose to stain his cheeks.

"It was Pansy." His voice was so low that Hermione thought for a moment she'd misheard him. But his agony rolled off him in waves, and she knew that nothing short of this...of horror brought into their circle of friends could make Draco cry.

The whimper of pain was hers.

"Merlin," Harry whispered. "How?"

"Same as my..." He swallowed thickly. "Another Sword Murder. Muggle method. No magic detected at all."

Hermione frowned. *First Mrs Malfoy, then Lavender Brown, and now Pansy Parkinson ... There is a pattern somewhere here ...*

"The third pureblood female to be killed without magic," Harry said as his arm sneaked around Draco, pulling him closer for a moment before he stood up to tend to the pasta.

Dinner was taken in silence. The truffle shavings emitted their powerful scent, but nobody paid attention. The wine bottle was emptied, yet nobody had noticed how.

Hermione folded her napkin and stood up. "Draco, do you think your father would mind if I paid him a visit?"

Surprised, Draco looked up and shook his head. "No, I don't think so. Not if you're approaching him for help. I'm sure he'd do anything if it means finding Mother's murderer. And Father is a night owl," he added. "So if you go now, he'll be far more approachable than he would be if you turn up at ten in the morning."

"All right, I'm off then." She reached over to embrace Draco. "I'll see you at work tomorrow." He nodded absently as Harry escorted her to the door.

"Thanks, love. I think it's better that you go see him. Lucius may have come to terms with Draco's sexuality, but I doubt he'd appreciate seeing me." Harry offered the shadow of a grin.

"You just take care of Draco," she said. "This must have shaken him to the core. I'm sure there was a time in his life when he thought he'd marry Pansy." Hermione patted his arm. "I'll pop in to your office tomorrow and let you know how it goes with Mr Malfoy."

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New Findings Amongst Strange Reminiscences

Chapter 2 of 5

The latest murder was executed in exactly the same way as the other two. Hermione decides it's time to solve the case.
Written for the first ever lmhg exchange on LJ.

Chapter II: New Findings Amongst Strange Reminiscences

Hermione knew that Lucius Malfoy had changed for the better. He'd been far too busy mourning his wife to ponder any evil plots over the past few years. Knowing, however, did not thwart the bout of anxiety enfolding her, and she shuddered at the memories that simmered to the surface. *Better not think about that night. Need to keep a clear head ...*

Hermione had not felt any protective wards, but they undoubtedly were there, since Malfoy stood in the frame of the open door waiting for her as she climbed up the flat stone stairs to the large front doors.

"Miss Granger ..." He looked at her wearily. "I'm not sure if it's a pleasure to see you, forgive me."

She nodded. It had not been much of a pleasure for her to see him either. Not during her school years, and not recently. She'd been the one to accompany Kingsley to inform Malfoy of the murder of his wife. Hermione determinedly suppressed a shudder. She'd also been the one to reason with him when he'd thrown a fit over Draco moving in with Harry, his hope of the Malfoy line continuing seemingly drowned for all eternity. *No wonder he doesn't want to see me ...*

Hermione concentrated on the issue at hand. She'd need to lay to rest any worries he might have. "Mr Malfoy, Draco is fine. And I apologise for barging in without notice, but..." she swallowed, "...another murder happened today." She closed her eyes briefly, not quite certain how to continue.

Malfoy exhaled audibly. "You'd better come in, Miss Granger." He stepped aside, gesturing for her to enter. "I'm relieved, naturally, that my son should be well. But you look shaken. Was it someone of your acquaintance?" His voice turned to a whisper. "Or of my acquaintance?"

Hermione stopped and turned to meet his eyes. Then she nodded slowly. "It was Pansy Parkinson."

Malfoy closed his eyes. "Pansy," he whispered. The shadow of a mocking smile graced his face. "My aspirant daughter-in-law. I admit, I was infinitely relieved when she stopped pursuing Draco and went after a Weasley." He sighed. "Such a young life, all lost. Weasley didn't deserve losing her like this."

Hermione waited as he stood, absorbing the news. Finally, he led her to the drawing room and motioned for her to take a seat. "I take it no magic was used in this case either? Or did you come here because you suspect me of murdering her?" His glance was both suspicious and calculating.

Hermione shook her head. "Don't be ridiculous, Mr Malfoy. That thought never even crossed my mind. The murder appears to be identical to that of your wife. And Lavender Brown. No magic. By the looks of the wounds, it was the same type of sword that killed your wife. A katana, according to my Muggle law enforcement contact. I will know more details tomorrow." She paused for a moment. "You are probably aware that I've managed to resolve a few cold cases in the last couple of years."

He nodded curtly, and she continued. "Both your wife's and Lavender Brown's files found their way to my desk, and I have every intention of finding the murderer. Or murderers, although I'm pretty sure it's one and the same person in both, or now three, cases." Her eyes closed and her face scrunched involuntarily. "Look ... Mr Malfoy, I never knew your wife beyond a few childhood encounters, and Lavender and Pansy were quite the banes of my existence...each for different reasons...during my years at Hogwarts, but I need to find their murderer before he...or she...strikes again. And I think you can help me do this."

Malfoy shook his head. "How can I, Miss Granger? Do not get me wrong. I will do anything to find that ... vermin who destroyed my life. Cissy and I finally arrived at a point where we had come to terms with the fact that Draco was highly unlikely to ever provide us with an heir. We eventually reached a stage in our relationship that was comfortable enough to allow for another life to be created. Cissy had just been to see Poppy to have the good news confirmed. She was anxious, of course, but I assured her it mattered not in the least to me whether the child would be magical or not. I would have loved him or her nevertheless!"

Hermione's widened eyes met his. "Narcissa was pregnant?" She cleared her throat. "I'm sorry. It's just ... That information is entirely new to me, and believe me, I've read both her and Lavender's files often enough to know every single snippet."

Malfoy regarded her. "I was interrogated once, shortly after you and Shackbolt informed me of my wife's demise, by utterly insensitive Aurors who tried their best to find me guilty. I answered all their questions, but I doubt I was in any state to furnish information they did not ask for."

Hermione tried not to roll her eyes. "I'm sorry, Mr Malfoy." *Narcissa pregnant ... Time to visit Madam Pomfrey, I think ...* She met his eyes. "Lavender was pregnant at the time of her death. Rumours have been flying about Pansy, about the reason she was marrying so quickly ..."

Malfoy raised his eyebrow. "Do you have some conclusion?"

Hermione shook her head. "Not yet. But it's a new avenue to explore."

The Granger girl again ... But at least she's civil to my love. Very civil! Narcissa had watched the interaction, unnoticed by either witch or wizard. So, finally, the girl is on the right track. I'll have to see what I can do to help her solve the case. I do hope it'll bring closure to my poor Lucius.

Narcissa focused on Hermione's Ministry office and instantly arrived. She far preferred this form of travelling over any methods available to the living. Death in general was considerably less restrictive. She saw solid matter for what it was: energy of very low density. With that knowledge it was easy to overcome, and anything solid no longer represented any obstacle. She missed Lucius, or rather interaction with him...she looked in on him at every opportunity, but it was all very one-sided. He was oblivious to any gestures, such as her straightening his bed sheets, stroking his hair when he went to sleep, or blowing a gentle kiss on him.

Narcissa looked around in Hermione's office. *Hm. What to do ...* Her eyes fell onto a shelf filled with periodicals, *Wizards Science Today* on top. *Oh!* She'd not be able to manage on her own. *Need to find Severus.*

Hermione wearily started reading the parchment sitting prominently on her desk. *Female, 26 years old, 18 weeks pregnant ...*

The words swam.

Pregnant. She shook her head and looked at the report from her Muggle Law Enforcement liaison.

Female, 26 years old, 18 weeks pregnant. The letters stared at her.

Oh, Merlin. PREGNANT! Rising out of her chair with the intention to find Harry and Draco, she was startled by a journal floating from the shelf on the wall right to her nose. "What the hell?"

Hermione sat down again and started leafing through the journal, too preoccupied to pay attention to the fact that it had been floating on its own accord. She stopped abruptly on page 36.

The Cause of Squibs

Hermione only skimmed the article, remembering it well from the day it had been published some six years ago. She'd never entirely agreed with the scientists' conclusion that a Squib could be the result of *any* pureblood pairing. "No. No, they're missing *something*, I have no doubt," she muttered to herself. As if on command, one sentence caught her eyes.

Blood groups and rhesus factors were disregarded, as the authors of this study see the differentiation of such as a purely Muggle obsession.

Riiiiiiiiight. She decided to let it go for the moment. A quick visit to Harry and Draco was in order, followed by a Floo call to Hogwarts. Once she talked to Poppy, she'd return to pondering this particular study as well as blood groups and rhesus factors.

Severus cast a grin towards Narcissa. "She'll get there."

Narcissa returned the grin. "You know, I wonder ... We eventually have to return for another life."

His eyes widened. "Oh, Cissy. Perfect. Absolutely perfect," he breathed.

"You better help me there, Sev!"

"Madam Pomfrey, thank you for seeing me at such short notice." Hermione dusted the soot off her robes as she followed the Healer to her desk.

"Miss Granger, what a lovely surprise, although I suspect your call is not a social one." Madam Pomfrey frowned slightly.

A sigh escaped Hermione as she readied herself to reveal the reason for her visit.

Madam Pomfrey turned pale when Hermione informed her of the third murder. "Poor, poor Miss Parkinson. And she was so happy with Mr Weasley. She visited me only a few days ago."

Hermione started at the confirmation. "Pansy was pregnant."

"I am not allowed to answer that, Miss Granger. I hope you understand."

Hermione sighed inwardly, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. "Both wizarding and Muggle reports concluded she was eighteen weeks pregnant. I'm here trying to resolve a case of three murders, Madam Pomfrey, and I do hope you'll part with any information that might help my case."

An hour later, Hermione Apparated to a narrow alley near Islington Police Station and entered the decaying Victorian building. "Colin, have you had lunch yet?" she greeted the Muggle Law Enforcement officer.

"No, sweetheart. Why? Got somethin' you wanna discuss?" The middle-aged, balding officer grinned at her and then frowned when grains of paint slowly floated from the ceiling. "Bloody hell. It's getting worse and worse in here, but the government insists there's no money to refurbish the building."

Hermione carefully looked around and, once she was satisfied there was no other presence, took out her wand to cast a sticking charm on the paint. "Yes. Or rather, a few questions pertaining to the Malfoy and Brown murders. I suppose they're as cold a case with you as it is with us." She looked at him questioningly.

He cast her a look of admiration, glanced longingly at her wand, and then sighed. "Yeah." Looking at his watch, he added, "You're lucky. I can get away for a bit. Let's go to *The Chain and Anchor*, they've decent fish and chips, and it won't be too busy at this time of day."

Hermione did not waste time. The moment she sat down opposite Colin, she filled him in on what she perceived he needed to know and asked, "Is there any chance you can find out what blood group and rhesus factor the victims were?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's recorded somewhere. I'll have a dig when I get back."

Another hour later, Hermione entered the narrow alley and stopped momentarily to switch on her mobile phone and cast a magic-repelling charm on it; then, she Apparated back to the Ministry to make further enquiries.

When, finally, she heard the polyphonic sounds of "Summertime," she read the message on her mobile and decided to call it a day as far as office work was concerned.

"Miss Granger, so soon again. Dare I hope you have some new information?" Lucius Malfoy motioned for her to enter the manor.

"I think I do, Mr Malfoy. I made a couple of visits today and found out some possibly interesting facts." She accepted his invitation to take a seat. "Do you remember that study about the cause of Squibs a few years ago? The one that caused serious dismay amongst both purebloods and Muggle-borns, for different reasons?"

Malfoy raised his eyebrow. "Yes, I believe I do. If I remember correctly, Muggle-borns went all up in arms over the fact that blood groups were ignored, and pureblood couples were consternated by being blanketed as the possible cause for producing Squibs."

"Yes," she said, "exactly that one. Well, in the course of a day, I learned that both parties likely had good reasons to be annoyed."

Yes! You're doing well, Granger! Narcissa floated near a wall at an angle that allowed her to look at both Lucius's and Hermione's faces.

"I can't say too much, as I need some more work done to confirm my suspicions where blood is concerned. You could be of help, if you're so inclined, by providing me with the information of *your* blood group and rhesus factor." Hermione looked at him expectantly.

Malfoy sneered at her. "If it involves seeing some Muggle *medical* professional to have my blood extracted with a needle, the answer is no, Miss Granger."

Hermione smiled at him. "Madam Pomfrey is perfectly willing to determine your blood group and rhesus factor, Mr Malfoy. No need to see any Muggle for it."

Malfoy nodded. "I can arrange that, yes. Do you have any other news? And besides, what does this Squib study have to do with resolving the murder of my wife? Please, do enlighten me, Miss Granger."

Hermione exhaled slowly, trying to buy the seconds needed to decide on how to answer him. Being elusive had never been her strength, she figured, and she had nothing to lose by being honest with him. "It's merely a hunch I'm following." She held up her hand when his expression turned into another sneer. "I have managed to solve several cases by simply following my gut feeling, and I thank you for not sneering at me, Mr Malfoy." Hermione pointedly looked at him and remained silent until he schooled his face into an expression of indifference.

"I ... Okay, let me tell you what I know: all three women were pregnant, all three were killed in the same manner, and all had been visiting Poppy at least a couple of times. The first murder...that of your wife...was about three months after this study received a great deal of media attention. Poppy has had many visits from pregnant witches, given the population explosion following Voldemort's fall, but the *only* ones who ended up dead were those who were purebloods themselves and known to be either married to or dating pureblood wizards.

"My hunch is that the murderer is someone, either a Squib or a Muggle with wizarding connections, who lives in Hogsmeade, or at least near Hogwarts, is aware of Hogwarts alumni preferring to see Poppy for any maternity issues, and wants to make absolutely certain that no more Squibs will see the light of day. I could be outright wrong, of course, but it's a lead, and no matter how weak, I'll take it anytime over just staring at the files with no idea how to solve the murders."

"Or it could be a Muggle-born who hates Squibs or a pureblood who hates women or children," Lucius added dryly.

Hermione shook her head. "With two cases, I would have accepted all similarities as coincidence, but with three? Highly unlikely, Mr Malfoy. Most Muggle-borns who read the study scoffed at the poor science. Most purebloods scoffed at the generalisation of how Squibs can come to be. I've reached the stage where I have nothing to lose by following a hunch and everything to gain. Whoever murdered these three witches belongs behind bars. How do you think the public will react if they are informed there is a murderer on the loose who goes after pureblood, pregnant witches? It'll put a right dip in the population growth!"

Narcissa, floating above the fireplace, grinned at Severus. "I can see why you like her."

Severus smirked. "She has a well-functioning brain, that one."

Thursday arrived, and Hermione found herself once more heading to Harry and Draco's place. To her relief, both wizards greeted her at the door.

Draco was choosing the wine and Harry was busy preparing the food when a knock on the door interrupted the comfortable silence. Harry looked questioningly at Draco.

"Expecting anyone?"

"Nope, not me."

"Not me either," Hermione answered Harry's glance at her.

Harry shrugged and left to answer it.

Hermione's breath hitched when she recognised Ron's voice. Her eyes met Draco's, and he put a comforting hand on her arm. "We'll see what that's about. I doubt he is here to berate us."

"Probably not," Hermione agreed, feeling suddenly very tired.

Low voices drifted from the corridor before Harry returned to the kitchen, followed by his former friend.

Ron stopped in the doorway, eyes filled with uncertainty as they met Hermione's.

Merlin, he's grown old, Hermione thought. His clothes were crumpled as if he'd slept in them, his hair was lacking the lustre of ginger that'd made it catch every ray of sun, even during their days on the run, and his face was shadowed from days of no shaving. The image of an impeccable Mr Malfoy sneaked itself to the forefront of her mind. *The difference between night and day doesn't begin to describe it ...*"Ron."

"Hermione." His hands fidgeted, and he looked away from her. "I ..." He took a deep breath. "I don't know where to start, Hermione. I'm sorry for being such a complete brat, but that's hardly enough."

"No. But I guess it's a start," she replied quietly, recognising suddenly that the feeling washing over her was relief...glowing relief that they'd parted ways before any commitments. The man standing in the doorway evoked nothing but memories, some wonderful, some not so good, as if he weren't the same person. *He probably isn't,* Hermione realised. "I'm so sorry about Pansy, Ron. I'm working on the case, and I promise you I won't stop until the murderer is found and sent to Azkaban."

Ron inhaled sharply. "Thanks. I ... Her sudden death made me realise again just how abruptly life can end." Then his eyes sought Draco's. "Mal...Draco. I know I've done you wrong. Harry looks happier than I've ever seen him, and I know you're good for him."

Ron continued stammering apologies until Harry, to Hermione's relief, came to his rescue. "We're just about to have dinner, Ron. Want to join us?"

"No, that's all right. I better go."

It had been a most awkward visit, but somehow, the air in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place seemed a lot cleaner suddenly.

Dinner started silently, but then Draco said, "You know, I understand where he's coming from. When Mother died, I had this great worry that she hadn't made peace with some people and would become a ghost because of that ..." He looked decidedly uncomfortable with this revelation.

Harry placed his hand on Draco's arm and nodded. "I understand that, I think. When I found out the truth about Sirius and Pettigrew, I wondered if my parents ever knew that Sirius was innocent...not that they were ghosts, but then, they'd always had each other, which probably ensured they were happy even in death. I eventually figured they did know when I was sort of playing dead, and at some stage thought I was dead, and talked to Dumbledore, who very evidently was dead; I'm sure that once you're dead, you know. Really know. And I have no doubt that all those we lost, whether in the battle or by murder, they *know* how they died and by whose hand. And they make peace with everyone they wronged in their lifetime."

"You really think so?" Hermione asked. *In that case, please, Mrs Malfoy, help me find your murderer.*

Silly girl. What do you think I've been doing lately? Narcissa thought, hoping fervently the girl was receptive to cross-dimension communication.

Hermione's eyes widened. She could have sworn a female voice had just called her *silly girl*. She exhaled slowly before finishing her dinner in a hurry.

"Guys, I'm bushed. It's been one hell of a week for me, and I have a meeting with Madam Pomfrey in the morning."

Applying Evidence-based Science

Chapter 3 of 5

The latest murder was executed in exactly the same way as the other two. Hermione decides it's time to solve the case.

Chapter III: Applying Evidence-based Science

She saw the Gryffindor Sword on the bottom of the small pond and dived in after it, not realising her heavy winter clothing would only speed up her downward journey. With a tight grip on the sword, her feet pushed her upwards and then stopped. Oh, damn. Despite desperately flopping her feet in hopes to reach the surface, she felt her body descend again. "Silly girl! This is not the sword that killed Narcissa or the other two. Why are you going after it?" Hermione had never been so grateful to hear a Malfoy's voice. Lucius pulled her up, and finally, she was able to breathe, taking in big gulps of air.

Hermione woke up, still gasping for air. "Oh, gods," she groaned. "Why on earth am I dreaming about the Gryffindor Sword and a Malfoy, and as a rescuer at that???" Once the fog of sleep cleared, she realised that Malfoy no longer posed any fear to her. She wouldn't call his company pleasant, given the usual subject matter she sought him out for, but at least he'd never leered at her, a gripe she held against most males of her acquaintance, and his manners were always impeccable.

The dream forgotten, Hermione peeled the covers off and rose to prepare for the day. A visit to Madam Pomfrey was the first item on the day's agenda. She quickly copied the data from the text message she'd received from Colin onto a piece of parchment.

"Miss Granger, good morning," the Healer greeted her as she stepped out of the fireplace. "I have interesting news for you." She led the way to her office and motioned for Hermione to sit down in front of the desk. Taking several parchments and handing them to Hermione, she said, "Look at the rhesus factor. Three hundred witches and

wizards, Hermione! I wish we could obtain funding for redoing the Squib study!"

Hermione skimmed the parchment, her eyes widening. "Not a single positive rhesus factor? That's incredible!" The blood groups themselves seemed to be somewhat randomly distributed: mostly A and O, but far fewer Bs. Her eyes came to rest on the last two names. Lucius Malfoy and Draco Malfoy.

"Did the Malfoys come here together?"

"Yes, they did, yesterday afternoon. I was surprised myself."

Hermione nodded. "Their relationship has been somewhat strained, but I hope they can sort it out ..." She turned her attention back to the parchment. "You must have been very busy to check so many students!"

"Yes, well, it was a diversion from the usual boring days between Quidditch matches." Poppy smiled. "To tell the truth, I'm rather excited. If now I'll manage to find data on Squibs, we may yet be able to prove the authors of the Squib study wrong."

Hermione nodded. "Looking at these results, I think it's actually doable. I'll take it up with Kingsley. That study was the sloppiest I've ever read, honestly." She took the parchment out of her pocket and handed it to the Healer. "These are the blood groups and rhesus factors of the murder victims, if you wish to add them to the list."

Poppy glanced at them. "Hm, all rhesus negative. Why am I not surprised ..." Then she faced Hermione again. "I would enquire at St Mungo's about blood data pertaining to Squibs, but I'm not holding out much hope to receive anything."

"Oh, it's okay. I can do that and claim it's to resolve a case. They're usually quite helpful that way." Hermione grinned and stood up reluctantly. "Time to do some brainstorming with my favourite Aurors."

She Flooed to the Ministry and quickly checked her office before heading for Harry and Draco's department to inform them of the latest findings.

"Ah, just the person!" drawled Draco when she entered the Aurors' office. He grinned at her. "I spoke to Father yesterday, and he would, for once, like to spend Yule with his only son. I told him Harry, you and I have been spending the last few holidays together and that I'd like to keep it that way, so he suggested we all spend Yule at the manor. That work for you? Or do you find the notion of spending a whole day with him too horrifying?" He looked at her questioningly.

Hermione shrugged. "That works fine. As long as there's Scrabble involved."

Draco raised his eyebrow. "Naturally. Couldn't imagine Yule without a game of Scrabble." He didn't bother to hide his sneer, and Hermione laughed.

"Aaawww, Draco. Still hoping to best me?" She grinned and then looked around. "Where is Harry?"

"Oh, he's in his weekly meeting with the Minister," Draco supplied. "What's your news then?"

Hermione quickly relayed what she'd learned from Madam Pomfrey.

"Have you read the Squib study from the point of view of a Squib or someone with very limited amounts of magical power? I really think you're on to something by assuming this study to play a role, you know? Now, if you imagine yourself in a situation of someone who is maybe a pureblood but has few or no magical powers ..."

Hermione stared at him with wide eyes. "Draco," she breathed, "you are a genius."

Draco grinned smugly. "And you've just found out?"

The last few days before the holidays flew by in a haze. The more Hermione researched and thought about the cases, the more she suspected a Squib to be the culprit. Every answer to the question of *who would most likely?* she answered rather resoundingly with a *Squib*. She'd checked all the Muggles married to witches, having excluded the likelihood of a female being the culprit for now; the wounds on each victim had been too deftly applied to come from a woman, considering the lack of magic. Fewer than a hundred Muggle men were currently living in or on the edge of the wizarding world, and only three near Hogwarts. Two of those were in their seventies or eighties and likely too frail, and one was in his early fifties, married to a Muggle-born witch, and a police officer...the other Muggle Law Enforcement liaison in addition to Colin...a most unlikely suspect.

Hermione shut the file with a resounding *thud*. It was time to start her ten-day break, beginning with tomorrow's Yule lunch at Malfoy Manor. She was in two minds about the visit. The recent numerous meetings with Lucius Malfoy at the manor had taken the edge off her decidedly bad memories of the place. Even the man himself was ... no. She refused to think of him as attractive. He was acceptable and not quite such a bane as she remembered him. She wasn't exactly uncomfortable spending her favourite holiday at the manor, especially given the guaranteed company of Harry and Draco. She didn't feel entirely comfortable, though, and was irritated not knowing what exactly made her feel that way.

"Severus, you better work on her some more. She looks mightily miffed there," Narcissa said, watching the young witch clear her desk. "And I know she's just thought about spending Yule at the manor."

Severus sighed. "Look, it's not my responsibility that she doesn't remember her dreams, you know." He was observing the young witch intently from his place near the wall of her office. "I have a feeling she is confused about Lucius. She likes him, but she's not quite sure about it or wants to deny it. Or ... something." He cast an exasperated glance at Narcissa.

"Yes, that's the impression I have. I'll have to work on Lucius, won't I ..." With that she disappeared, leaving Severus to watch Hermione.

The witch, entirely oblivious to the presence of a spirit, left the Ministry and Apparated home, looking forward to a relaxing evening. Maybe she'd decide on where to spend her next holiday; maybe she'd just take a book and indulge in some pleasure reading.

Severus observed Hermione in the kitchen as she prepared a quick dinner, which she then ate at the table while reading. He saw her mind churning; she was certainly not taking in a word of the book in front of her. A sigh escaped him. *There is nothing wrong with liking Lucius, Hermione ... You know he's changed since Voldemort's death. For the better.*

Hermione let the book fall down on the table, frowning. *Might as well give up. Can't concentrate anyway.* Her dinner finished, she cleared the table and moved to the bathroom. *Maybe a hot bath will help clear my thoughts.*

Hours later, with Hermione safely tucked into her bed...not that she'd noticed...Severus cast a smug grin at Narcissa. "Oh, yes, worry not. She's having sweet dreams of a tall blond, no doubt."

Yule dawned, and Hermione woke up refreshed from a good night's sleep, filled with pleasant dreams she didn't remember details of, and ready to spend the day with Harry, Draco and Mr Malfoy. It would be fun, she assured herself; Mr Malfoy wasn't bad company by any means, and Draco and Harry were her closest friends. Draco had rather seamlessly taken over that spot from Ron and only added in terms of quality.

Hermione showered quickly and then took care to apply some make-up. Green eyeshadow because it suited her brown eyes. Chocolate-coloured eyeliner because it emphasised her eyes. Mascara because it was *a rule*.

She scrutinised the outfit she'd taken out the night before. Dress robes. *Sod it!* She slipped into her jeans, as she'd done for previous Yule celebrations at Grimmauld Place, then chose a plain, black, long-sleeved t-shirt and an oversized black hoodie with a silhouette of Louis Armstrong playing the saxophone on the front. She'd be damned if she wasn't at least physically comfortable for the day.

Hermione picked up her presents for the three wizards...for the older Malfoy, she'd found a 2005 Pichon Longueville Baron, knowing he liked red Bordeaux...and went outside to Apparate to Grimmauld Place from where she'd Floo to the manor with Harry and Draco.

Hermione felt slightly anxious as she stepped out of the fireplace, but one look at Harry told her that he was far more nervous than she. "Merlin, I'm glad you opted for jeans as well," he said, pointing to his own, decidedly Muggle, outfit. "Draco insisted I'd be comfortable."

Mr Malfoy embraced his son first, then bowed his head over Hermione's hand, murmuring, "Merry Meet," and finally turned to his son's partner. "Potter," he said softly. His self-assured smirk was replaced by an uncertain grin...*Endearing*, Hermione thought...and he added, "*Harry*. You are practically family now, so we should, maybe, address each other by first name. I am Lucius, by the way." He stretched his hand out.

Hermione watched in fascination as Harry took Mr Malfoy's hand. "A pleasure to meet you, Lucius." He smiled at the blond. A genuine Harry smile.

Suddenly, everyone smiled. "Um, Father? *Dad?* I did tell you we'll do the cooking, didn't I? Um, that is, Harry is doing the cooking. He likes to employ Hermione and me as sous-chefs. I hope that's all right with you." Draco's voice held an edge of nervousness.

"Yes, son, you did tell me. I have no objections, although I'll feel rather lonely while you all do your cookery magic."

"Why don't you join us in the kitchen, Mr Malfoy?" Hermione asked. "I think the reason Draco and I initially became Harry's lackeys for his culinary adventures was for purely entertainment reasons." She dared a grin at him.

"Oh, well, Miss Granger, if you put it like that ..."

Hermione was in the middle of washing morels...an unthankful task, having to remove the soil from the many wrinkles...when Mr Malfoy approached her from the side. "Miss Granger. *Hermione*. Do you mind if we go by first names? It seems ridiculous in twenty-first century Britain to keep up Victorian etiquette."

Hermione was unable to suppress a smile. "Not at all. As a Muggle-born, I have enough trouble accepting all the facets of said etiquette."

Finally, Harry was satisfied with his culinary creations and allowed the house-elves to take over serving lunch.

"Oh, this is excellent, P...Harry!" Lucius exclaimed after taking a couple of bites. "Where on earth did you learn to cook like this? Surely, the Dursleys don't have such a refined knowledge of food!"

"Well, the Dursleys did make sure I knew how to fry bacon," Harry consented and smirked. "I suppose it was Draco's love of good food that inspired me to learn. So I took a leaf out of Hermione's book," he glanced at her sideways, "and started to read every cookery book I could find and then just practised."

"Feel free to cook lunch or dinner for me any day. This is fantastic."

"You are welcome at Grimmauld Place any time, Lucius," Harry said, his eyes challenging.

Go, Harry! Hermione thought. Lucius's consistent absence in previous years had doubtlessly put a burden on both Harry and Draco, and she was happy if there was a chance to change the habit.

"I ... I thank you." Lucius's eyes were cast down.

The day flew by with conversation, eating, drinking, and eventually, Scrabble. Harry and Draco had never been a match for her, but Lucius's skill was rather impressive. Hermione had a scary moment when he added *BIA* to her earlier *AERO*, doubling points of his word, but then she added *EAU* to someone else's *ABOUT* and the *U* hit a triple-word score. She grinned as she put the rack face down.

"Not bad, not bad," Lucius grumbled. "I suppose purebloodedness is overrated in Scrabble ..."

"Only in Scrabble?" Draco laughed. "Father, look around you!"

Lucius followed his son's advice, and his eyes widened. "Why, you're right, son. How could I have been such a fool for years? No, don't answer that." He looked uncomfortable. "I am learning, I think."

Much food, much laughter, and a considerable amount of wine and port later, the party finally broke apart, but not before Harry made Lucius promise to spend Boxing Day at Grimmauld Place, making Hermione's heart skip a beat. *I'll see him again, and not for work-related reasons ...*

She could not help but admit that she'd had one of the best Yule celebrations she remembered. Harry and Draco were always fun to be with, but what had surprised her most was Lucius's change of heart where his son's relationship was concerned. He seemed to have finally accepted Draco's choice, in fact *approved*, Hermione thought, judging by the way he'd treated Harry.

A/N: The words in the Scrabble scene are taken directly from the Scrabble site.

Grateful thanks to sunny33 for explaining and providing statistics of blood groups.

With a Little Help from Friends

Chapter 4 of 5

The latest murder was executed in exactly the same way as the other two. Hermione decides it's time to solve the case.

The holiday flew by far too quickly, and soon Hermione found herself back at work, confronted with the challenge of years-old cold cases, of piecing bits of information together in the hope to solve one.

Sighing inwardly and taking a deep breath, she readied herself to open the Malfoy and Brown cases and then read through her copious notes.

A trap. We need a trap, she suddenly thought. Excitement began to build inside her, and in an instant, she rose to look for Harry or Draco to share her idea. She'd need Auror help to go through with it, in any case.

Hermione stopped for a moment to gain some order. Then she headed for the fireplace to speak to Madam Pomfrey before leaving for the Aurors' department.

"Are you mad?" Harry asked incredulously. "You want to put yourself on the frontline? Hermione, that's crazy! That person has managed to murder *murder*...three women already! I'd hate for you to be the fourth!"

"Harry," Hermione started, "I've been familiar with these cases for months now, probably more familiar than anyone else except the murderer himself. I'm going to see if Colin can give me any additional pointers; he's more familiar with swords than I am. I won't go into this unprepared."

Harry stared at her. "No, I know that, Hermione. But still. I think it's mad."

"Not if I have a group of Aurors hiding in the vicinity!" Hermione cast him a challenging look. "Harry, please. We need to find the murderer before he strikes again." She lowered her voice. "There are currently two witches who fit all the previous victims' criteria. Both are seeing Madam Pomfrey. It's a matter of time, Harry, before he strikes again."

Harry shrugged. "Let me think it over and discuss it with my team, Hermione. That's all I can offer you right now."

The following evening...Hermione had just changed into more comfortable clothing...the bell rang. She frowned, wondering if she'd forgotten to switch on her cell phone upon leaving the Ministry and there was some emergency regarding her parents. Shrugging to herself, she went to open the door. "Lucius! What are you doing here?" She was unable to hide a smile.

He bowed. "Hermione. Uh, may I come in?"

"Of course." Hermione stepped aside, led the way to her living room, and motioned for him to take a seat. "Would you like some tea? Or a glass of wine maybe?"

"If you don't mind, I'll opt for wine."

Hermione proceeded to the kitchen and returned with an opened bottle of red wine and two glasses. She poured the drinks and then sat down opposite Lucius, who'd made himself comfortable on the sofa. "So, what brings you here?"

"Well ..." Lucius took a sip of wine. "Oh, not bad. What's this one, then?"

Hermione cast an amused look at him. *Why did he come here???* "It's only a Bordeaux Superieur. But a 2005, so I expect it's not bad."

Lucius took another appreciative sip before he spoke. "My son paid me a visit, informing me that you are suicidal."

Hermione's eyes inspected the ceiling. "Lucius ..."

"All right. He told me you plan to put yourself out there, with Polyjuice," he corrected. "Hermione! Do you know the danger of this? I lost my wife to this madman. I have no intention...oh, never mind."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean to say, please reconsider. Let an Auror do the job." He grabbed his glass again to take another sip, but it seemed more like a gesture to occupy his hand. Then he put the glass down hard. "Hermione, please. I hate to see you in such danger."

She closed her eyes for a moment. *Why is he so concerned?* Taking a deep breath, she said, "I have to, Lucius. Let's face it, a lot of Aurors aren't the sharpest wands around. Drumming all the facts I know into any of them would be a major task whilst I know them inside out already. I've had field training. And I'll only do it if I have an Auror contingent standing by." Her eyes met his. "Besides, why are you so concerned? This is about finding your wife's murderer!"

He looked at her. "My wife died over five years ago. I mourned her from the day she died until recently. Then ... something changed. I don't know exactly when, but when I realised that I was preventing myself from being happy by not accepting Draco's choices and asked him to spend Yule at the manor, well, when he pointed out that you'd been spending the last few holidays with him and P...Harry, I suddenly looked forward to Yule, for the first time since Cissy died." His eyes wandered everywhere but her direction. "And I'll freely admit, I had a ball then as well as on Boxing Day at Grimmauld Place, and it was because of you. You make me feel ... you allow me to be *me*. I feel I don't have to pretend anything in your presence." His grin was uncertain. "There. Now you know."

Hermione smiled at him. "I would hate for you to feel obliged to pretend anything in my presence, Lucius. I quite like you the way you are." She blushed upon realising what she'd just said. "Although I'd like you probably even better if you shared the secret of your perfect hair."

He laughed at that. "I'll gladly share my hair products with you, Hermione, but part of your endearing charm is your wild hair, you know."

She blushed a new shade of red. "Uh. Okay." It was time to steer the conversation back to the topic of his choice. "Really, Lucius, I have to do this myself. I know you need closure. I know Lavender's family needs closure. And, by Merlin, I know Ron will not take up living again until he knows who murdered Pansy."

"Then, please allow me to be there."

"I have no objections, but it's not for me to decide. You'll have to take it up with Harry."

"That's good enough. I'll do that."

Hermione Flooded to Hogwarts' hospital wing once or twice a week throughout January, every time one of the now three pureblood witches had an appointment with Madam Pomfrey. Each witch was sent on her way via Floo with Madam Pomfrey's stern lecture of the dangers of Apparition during the first and second trimesters, and Hermione took Polyjuice Potion, walked through the Hogwarts grounds towards Hogsmeade, and Apparated somewhere halfway to the wizarding village.

Lucius had convinced Harry to let him accompany his team, but the Aurors were starting to lose their enthusiasm as January came to an end and the murderer was still on the loose. As the group gathered around Harry in his office after yet another unsuccessful walk from Hogwarts to Hogsmeade, Hermione felt suddenly overcome with dread. She excused herself and went to her own office to check the files again. Then it hit her.

She rushed back to Harry's office. "It'll be tomorrow. Each murder happened on a Pagan holiday, Harry. I cannot imagine the nutter wouldn't take the chance when he can choose between three witches," Hermione said, her voice filled with excitement.

"Are you certain you want to do this, Hermione?" Lucius asked her yet again.

She brushed his concerns aside impatiently. "You know my reasons." When he abruptly turned and left without a word, Hermione sighed. They'd been seeing each other several times a week, but he'd never *just left*.

"Come over for dinner." She hadn't noticed Draco approach. She smiled and shook her head. "Thanks. But I think I'll just go home."

He nodded. "I understand. See you tomorrow." He paused for a moment, then added, "Hermione. I think my father likes you. He's concerned."

Hermione gazed at him. Finally, she shrugged. "I'm not sure how to handle this ..."

"Tip of the day: be yourself." He smirked, and she slapped his arm playfully.

"Thanks, mate!"

Despite a hot bath and a none-too taxing novel as aids for relaxation, Hermione stayed awake until long after midnight, and what little sleep she managed to find was restless and interfered with strange dreams she didn't remember details of. She woke numerous times, only to drift off again.

Suddenly, Narcissa Malfoy spoke to her. She looked younger, much younger, than Hermione remembered her. "He will hit from the right, from behind you, right after you exit through the Hogwarts gate. Be prepared. We'll be there and will do everything in our power to help you, but be aware that the danger comes from behind you, from the right." At her side stood Professor Snape, not only younger but almost handsome compared to how she remembered him. He nodded. "Listen to her, Hermione, and be prepared. We'll see you soon."

Hermione stretched, and suddenly, her arms fell down, back on the bed. *WHAT???* She stretched again, willing the strange thoughts away. To no avail. *He'll come from behind me, from the right. Noted.* She yawned and peeled herself out of the covers to head for the shower.

After a quick breakfast of muesli with yogurt, she Flooed to Hogwarts. Madam Pomfrey's meeting with Millicent Bulstrode seemed to take forever. When the matron finally rushed into her office, Hermione let out a sigh of relief.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione. Miss Bulstrode had so many questions, it was almost unnatural." She handed the younger witch a hair.

Hermione took it and placed it in the vial she held in her hands. "Thank you, Madam Pomfrey." Drinking it, gagging just a little bit, she rose. "I better be on my way."

"Hermione!"

At the sharp tone of the matron's voice, Hermione looked up. "Yes?"

"Hermione." The Healer's voice sounded soft now. "You're expecting something to happen today, aren't you?"

Upon Hermione's nod, she continued. "Is there anything I can do?"

Hermione looked away and shook her head. "I don't think so. Just ... uh, if I end up here, please know how to treat sword wounds." She laughed, feeling utterly helpless and euphoric at the same time. "I'll just be glad when it's over. This has been looming over me, and I'd like to be done with it. So, if Lucius, Harry, or Draco turn up with me ... I don't know. Try and save me."

The Healer embraced her. "Know that I will do anything in my power to save you, Hermione! But I doubt you'll need that. You are an incredible witch, as capable as the best Auror or Unspeakable. And here, take this," she fumbled for a moment and handed a black stone to her, "obsidian. It's ... let's just say it's special. It's saved more than one life. When you're done, return it to me." She embraced her again, then abruptly turned around. "Go. Go now."

"Thank you, Madam Pomfrey," Hermione whispered and, pocketing the stone, hurried out.

She exited the castle and slowed her pace to prepare herself. Checking her wand hidden in the sleeve of her right arm so it would fall into her hand the moment she straightened it downward, she let her left hand find the obsidian. It felt cool and reassuring.

The gate came into sight far too soon. Hermione sighed inwardly and stopped for a moment, looking around, and then walked on, the last few feet of safety before heading through the gate into uncertainty and possible danger.

Suddenly, she felt a reassuring hand on her shoulder, and someone whispered, "Don't be afraid. We're here with you. We won't let him kill you."

Looking around, she saw no-one. Hermione shrugged and continued. "Hermione, trust your abilities, and trust yourself," said Snape's for once reassuring voice. A beautiful voice, she thought errantly and wondered why he'd never used it for reassurance during his lifetime. Then she stopped abruptly. *Did Professor Snape just talk to me? Am I going mad?*

Hermione heard him chuckle. That it was him, she had no doubt, dead or not. "Yes, I talked to you. And no, you are not going mad. Narcissa and I are here to help you."

Then she heard Narcissa's voice. "We will help you. Lucius has become very fond of you, you know, and he deserves happiness. As do you of course. And a little tip for the future, Hermione: twins aren't that scary, really. They just need plenty of cuddling and love." Narcissa chuckled now. "Oh, and keep that obsidian in your hand. When it grows hot, look behind you to your right."

Not quite certain what to make of this ... interaction with two dead people, Hermione reiterated, *Right. Two dead people are going to help me bring the Sword Murderer behind bars without me being harmed in the process. And twins aren't scary.* She shook her head and walked determinedly towards the Hogwarts gate, the obsidian held tightly in her left hand.

A slight feeling of dread washed over her as she exited the grounds, knowing instinctively something was about to happen.

Then the world stopped spinning. The obsidian grew hot, unbearably hot, in her hand, and before her brain registered, she'd held her wand in her hand and flew around to the right. "*Expelliarmus!*"

A katana whooshed through the air into Hermione's hand, slicing it, but she didn't notice, too shocked at the sight of the man barely two feet away from her. Aurors suddenly appeared out of nowhere, rushing to the Squib who stood rooted to the ground, looking rather lost and at the same time casting longing glances at the katana in her hand.

"Mr Filch," she whispered, ignoring the flow of blood down her hand, still holding on to the sword. Strong arms caught her and pulled her towards a reassuring body clad in exquisite, soft fabric.

"Promise me to *never* put your life on the line like that again," a welcomed voice grumbled, holding her tight.

Whether it was his words or his voice or his arms wrapped around her, she had no idea, but suddenly, tears were flowing like water rushing free from the confines of a dam.

"Shshshsh, you're all right. Need to get your hand looked at, but I'm sure Poppy can fix in no time, love." He held her tighter until her sobs subsided. "Look at me."

Vanity be damned, she raised her tear-stricken face upwards. "You needed this closure more than anyone. As did Draco. I hated *hated*...seeing him so lost, so helpless whenever the talk turned to family. And seeing you that night when Pansy was killed ... it broke my heart." Her voice firmer now, she continued. "I never *liked* you until recently, but I knew since the final battle that you are a family man. You loved Narcissa, you love Draco, which proved to me that you're capable of loving, and nobody capable of love deserves a fate like that." Her eyes met his until he lowered his mouth to meet hers.

When they finally gasped, at the surprise of kissing or maybe simply for air, Lucius smiled at her, and she found she could get used to his smiles.

Narcissa, floating a short distance away in mid-air, looked at her partner. "Aw, look. They like each other."

"I should hope so, Cissy," Severus said indignantly. "I have no intention of reincarnating as the offspring of another one-night stand, you know."

Narcissa shook her head. "I don't think you'll ever need to worry about that where Lucius is concerned. He likes her. More than that, I think, judging by the way he kissed her."

"Indeed. And if he doesn't take her to Poppy soon, she'll die of blood loss," he said wryly.

Narcissa floated to the couple and whispered in Lucius's ear, then floated back to Severus. "Let's go and find a few more Squib parents to convince of having their blood analysed."

"You all right, lass?" Colin's voice ripped her out of her reverie, and Hermione blinked, trying to focus. She'd been too occupied to realise the Polyjuice had worn off.

"I'm fine, Colin, thanks," she said and leaned heavily against Lucius.

"Merlin, Hermione, I need to take you to Poppy. You're still bleeding!" Lucius picked her up, offered a short, "Excuse us!" to Colin, and hurried towards the Hogwarts gate, ignoring the buzz of Aurors around him.

Being carried by him felt good, exquisite even; she could get used to that sensation quite happily. "Lucius," she asked sleepily, "will you always carry me like this?"

"If that is what makes you happy, love, of course I will," he assured her, carrying her effortlessly up the hill.

Shortly after hearing his reassuring answer, everything went black.

"I'd be concerned were she a pianist, but really, her hand will be fine. There is nothing she can't do with it now, given a week or two of moving it frequently."

Hermione heard Madam Pomfrey's voice and wondered who the matron was talking about. *Oh. Maybe me.* She opened her eyes to meet Lucius's.

"How are you feeling, love?" he asked softly.

"I ..." she croaked.

He grabbed a goblet and helped her drink precious water. "I think I feel fine," she said, her voice restored. "Even though I won't become an accomplished pianist. But I think I can live with that." Her smirk was lopsided.

But it made him smile, and she treasured it. "Gods, you gave me a fright, Hermione. You need to rethink your professional career, woman, seriously," Lucius grumbled, but she knew it was half-hearted.

"He won't kill another," she said softly, reeling in the sensation of his hand on her arm. It felt so very assuring.

"No," Lucius agreed. "He won't. Ever."

Something in his mannerism made her question his answer. "What aren't you telling me?"

She followed the looks exchanged between him and Madam Pomfrey like watching a tennis match.

Eventually, Lucius said, "He died. He died minutes after you disarmed him. From what Draco and Harry said, he mumbled about Squibs being treated utterly unfairly and leading a miserable life, and he wanted to spare them the fate he had to live with."

Hermione's eyes filled with tears. "Of all the Squibs I know...not that there were many...Filch had been furthest from my mind ..."

"I don't think anyone suspected him. The Aurors found an entire arsenal of swords, nunchucks, and other Muggle martial arts paraphernalia in his quarters, and way too many photographs of pureblood witches and wizards. Really, I think he was one of the most misunderstood people in our world."

"Indeed ..."

"However, I believe Madam Pomfrey has some news for you that might cheer you up," Lucius said, gesturing for the matron to enter.

"Hermione! How are you feeling?" Madam Pomfrey asked. "See? You didn't need all that much patching up, although it was quite a fright you gave us, coming in here so lacking of blood. It did take quite a few doses of Blood-Replenishing Potion to return you to the living!"

Hermione grinned. "Thank you so much, Madam Pomfrey! I appreciate your efforts." Then she sobered. "So, what news do you have?"

Madam Pomfrey smiled. "I think I might have found the cause of Squibs."

"Oh? Do tell! Please!"

The matron wordlessly handed her a piece of parchment.

Looking at the names and their blood groups adjacent to them made Hermione gasp. *B! All parents of Squibs analysed have blood group B! With no exception!* Oh, Merlin! You've found the cause of Squibs! That's fantastic!"

"Well. Not exactly," Madam Pomfrey said. "We do have a handful of students with that blood group with one parent of the same. However, from what the teachers tell me, we can safely assume that a B inherited from both parents *does* affect magical power in a negative manner. In any case, it's thanks to your connections to St Mungo's that I was able to put the data together."

Hermione nodded slowly. Then she grinned. "You know ... Kingsley definitely owes me a favour, I think, now that another cold case is solved. I'm sure I can twist his arm to find the financing for a study to replace that excuse of the former one." Energy raced through her body. "And, oh, can I go home now?"

"No," Lucius said. "You can come to the manor with me, but there is no way I'll let you out of my sight for the foreseeable future." His expression did not invite any

argument.

"If Mr Malfoy looks after you, you can leave. But I'd rather you wouldn't be on your own for the next couple of days," Madam Pomfrey agreed.

The young witch grinned. "I think I can live with that!"

Love is all Around

Chapter 5 of 5

The latest murder was executed in exactly the same way as the other two. Hermione decides it's time to solve the case.

Yule, 2008

"Do you realise this is probably our last outing in this dimension, Sev?" Narcissa asked her companion, looking wistful. "She's thirty-two weeks now. Birth is imminent."

"Yes, I do. But I must say I've been feeling increasingly comfortable as my body has been growing. They are both so loving, I'm actually looking forward to this life." He raised his eyebrow at her.

Narcissa grinned. "Promise me one thing. Make sure you don't forget how to do that."

Severus frowned. "Do what?"

"That ... raising your eyebrow. *One* eyebrow!"

Severus snorted. "You are aware, Cissy, that we're highly unlikely to have any memories of anything, aren't you?"

Narcissa sighed. "Yes, Sev. I've done this reincarnation exercise often enough to know." She rolled her eyes at him. "But if you just concentrate on keeping one memory or one ability, it'll probably work."

"I'll take your word for it," he said.

Narcissa frowned. "Can you feel the pull? I think she's getting ready to bring us into the world ..."

"We better hurry and get back inside then, dear. And since we'll forget everything, I'll take the opportunity now and thank you for being a very acceptable companion. May our new lives be showered in love."

Narcissa smiled. "And I thank you." She held out her hand. "Come. Let's go."

Hermione half-sat, half-lay on the sofa in the living room, her feet in Lucius's lap. She'd been feeling off this afternoon, but finally felt a twinge of hunger.

As if he'd read her mind, Lucius asked, "Would you like to eat something, love? How about a cucumber sandwich?"

Hermione smiled at him. "I think I'm ready for one." She sat up. "Help me up, please. I need the loo. Again." She sighed. "Gods, I'll be glad when it's over. I'm feeling like a whale."

Lucius pulled her to her feet and gently rubbed her stomach. "It's quite an impressive bump, you know. I think I'll miss it when it's gone."

"Oh, no, you won't," she grumbled. "Get used to the idea of having a slim wife again."

"I have no problems with that, of course. Although, come to think of it ... if you were bigger, there'd only be more inches to love."

Hermione laughed. "I love you."

"And I love you. Now, you go to the loo, and I'll organise a cucumber sandwich, and then I'll read to you until you're ready to go to sleep. Yes?"

"Oh, yes, please! I'm in the mood for some Austen. Can you pick up *Sense and Sensibility* on your way from the kitchen?"

"Certainly, my lady. Your wish is my command."

Hermione trudged to the bathroom, feeling heavier every second. Then the first contraction hit.

It had been, according to Madam Pomfrey, the fastest twin birth in recent history. Five hours after her first contraction, a very exhausted Hermione held a baby boy and a baby girl in her arms. "Welcome to the world, Aimée and Davin." She smiled from one baby to the other. Both were watching her with wide eyes.

"You've done well, my witch," Lucius said as he sat down on the side of her bed and stretched his hands out. He picked up Aimée and whispered, "Look at your mum. Isn't she beautiful?" Then he looked at Hermione. "I think she's just smiled, love."

Hermione laughed. "They don't smile until they're at least five weeks old, according to all the books I've read!" She looked Davin over again and suddenly stared. "Lucius, look!"

There was no doubt. Davin was raising an eyebrow. Unable to hold back a laugh, Lucius said, "They allegedly don't ~~do~~ until they're a few years old, love." Careful not to squash the treasure in his arm, he bent down to kiss his witch. "I love you." Then he blew a very gentle kiss on Davin. "And I love you." Turning his head to look at Aimée, he said softly. "And I love you."

Memories of previous lives and intermittences on different planes faded over time. Love, however, in all its facets, remained.

Fin

A/N: The names Aimée and Davin both translate into the word *BeLoved*

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