

A Christmas to Remember

by Alley_B

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Hermione stomped through the thin layer of snow on her way to *Madam Boris' Mementos and Collectibles*, her heavy boots crushing grooves into the thin ice that covered the streets of Diagon Alley. It was Christmas morning, their first Christmas together, and she had wanted it to be perfect. Not so much for herself...she'd had plenty of joyful celebrations with her family gathered around the Christmas tree, singing Christmas carols, their cheeks tinted pink by the heat from the roaring fire in the hearth...but for Severus. He had been quieter than usual during the past month, showing only a mild, polite interest each time a card from one of their friends arrived or when anyone brought up the topic of Holiday plans. At first, she had thought he was being his obstinate self, but it hadn't taken her long to realize that Severus had no happy memories of Christmas to relate or from which to draw. His parents had not believed in 'foolish nonsense' such as presents and festooned trees. As an adult, he had spent the Holidays at Hogwarts with the few staff members and children who stayed behind at the castle, or alone at his home in Spinner's End. *A day like any other*, he had called it. That's when Hermione had decided to make their first Christmas together one unlike any other...a Christmas to remember.

Her planning had been meticulous. She had put in her request for five days off from work three weeks in advance, had started her Holiday shopping early and finished well before the crowds had swamped the stores and drained them of all their goods (everything except for Severus' gift, which she'd had special ordered), and she had even reserved a limited edition Christmas tree at *Arbour's Enchanted Christmas Trees Emporium*. She had been on her way to pick it up when the owl had arrived.

Dear Hermione,

I know you and Severus are not due to visit us until the day after Christmas, but your great-great-aunt Gretchen is feeling poorly and fears she might not have that long to live. Seeing as how you are her favourite niece and the only other witch in the family, she has expressed a desire to have you at her bedside. Please hurry.

Love,

Mother

Hermione's great-great-aunt Gretchen was a somewhat scheming, sturdy witch of ninety-two years who had been announcing her imminent passing for the last twenty. Yet, Hermione couldn't bring herself to ignore the summons, and Severus had been surprisingly understanding.

"It is family," had been his unequivocal declaration.

After spending three days nursing her great-aunt through what turned out to be nothing more serious than a winter-cold, Hermione had returned home.

Two days left, she told herself. I can do this.

A quick Floo call to *Madam Boris' Mementos and Collectibles* revealed that the custom-made gift she had ordered for Severus had not yet arrived, but Madam Boris' assistant assured Hermione that the gift was ready, on its way from the crafters in Egypt and should arrive at any moment, "...well in time for Christmas." Hermione felt the urge to remind the obnoxiously cheerful woman that Christmas was only two days away, but decided it wasn't worth the trouble, so long as she got Severus' gift in time to give it to him Christmas morning. She was about to Floo call Mr Arbour at the *Enchanted Christmas Trees Emporium*, when the embers in the fire-place crackled, and the face of Minister Shacklebolt materialized in the low flames.

At first, Hermione couldn't believe her ears.

"A what?" she asked.

"Like I said. An infestation at the Creevey's Home for War Orphans...Blibbering Humdingers."

"That's impossible...Blibbering Humdingers don't exist!" Hermione practically screeched.

"We didn't think so either, that's why we ignored Miss Lovegood's warning that the early cold and wet winter, combined with fluctuating barometric pressures and a sharp decrease in the population of Billywigs in Australia meant that conditions were prime for such an eventuality."

"How much is the damage?" Hermione sighed with a sinking heart.

"The children are safe."

That's a relief.

"But, the building is uninhabitable, the Christmas decorations have been torn to shreds ... and few of the donated presents were salvageable...certainly not enough to go around. The children have been moved to Hogwarts Castle. Headmistress McGonagall is doing her best to accommodate them, but this time of year ... she is understaffed and unprepared ..."

Hermione was already donning her cloak. It was impossible to suggest that anyone else took over the emergency...there was no one else. The children knew her and trusted her, and it was unthinkable to let her old Head of House down in a time of need.

"Severus, I ..." she started to say to the man leaning against the door jamb of their living-room, listening to the Minister's message with slight disinterest.

"I understand. Duty first. Anything I can do to help?"

Hermione shook her head. "It's probably not as bad as it sounds. I'll be back as soon as I can." She brushed a kiss across his lips on the way out the door.

It wasn't as bad as the Minister had made it sound...it was worse. The main hall of Hogwarts Castle was filled with running children, crying toddlers and wailing babies. An army of house-elves was doing its best to battle the mayhem, with little success. A haggard and discomfited Minerva McGonagall met Hermione at the door.

"Thank, Heavens. Blibbering Humdingers...and in winter! Who would have thought?"

"They thrive in cold climates and feed primarily on snow," Luna's calm voice came from a nearby table where she was entertaining a toddler who sat on her lap playing with her earrings: two large, red, glittering Christmas balls earrings that looked as she had just plucked them from the Christmas tree and perched them on her earlobes.

"Luna, I'm so sorry I didn't believe you; there's just never been any evidence ..."

"That's okay. Father is at the orphanage fixing things. Everything should be back to normal the day after tomorrow."

"The day after tomorrow? But tomorrow is Christmas!"

Hermione's resolve not to panic quickly evaporated. She still had to pick up their Christmas tree, put up the decorations that were sitting in a box in the cellar of her home, pick up Severus' present from Madam Boris...

One day left, I can do this.

After a moment of deliberation followed by a flurry of activity and with the help of the few students who had remained in the castle over the holidays, the children were divided into groups according to age and removed to the empty common rooms of each House. Luna, Hermione and Headmistress McGonagall set up headquarters in the Headmistress' office. Owls were dispatched, hasty Floo calls made and every method of communication employed in an effort to procure last minute donations of gifts. While the children slept, the air in the castle practically crackled with the pops of house-elves Apparating and Disapparating as they were dispatched to retrieve and deliver brightly wrapped packages filled with toys, jumpers and sweets, and the fluttering of owls' wings stirred the air in every corridor. By morning, a grand celebration complete with breakfast, gifts and decorations had been staged in the main hall. All that remained was for the children to awaken.

"Headmistress, do you mind if ...?" an exhausted but accomplished Hermione began to say.

"Of course not. You've done enough, dear. Luna, the house-elves and I will take it from here. You go on home and celebrate with your new husband."

Some celebration it's going to be, Hermione thought.

She looked at the massive clock that hung on the back wall of the office. Seven o'clock Christmas morning. She knew Madam Boris was a shrewd business woman known for accommodating the needs of her customers and never turning away profit, and she opened her shop early on Holidays, and Mr Arbour's cabin was just behind his tree-lot. She would just have to knock on his door and demand her tree.

Severus had taken to sleeping late on weekends and Holidays since he had stopped teaching. If she hurried, she could still do this before he awoke.

Hermione hastily bid the Headmistress and Luna goodbye before walking to the edge of the castle's grounds and Apparating to Diagon Alley. She walked to the front of *Madam Boris' Mementos and Collectibles* and swiped the dusting of snow from her cloak before she stepped through the door.

Madam Boris, a corpulent woman in her fifties, was behind the counter, bent-over a stack of boxes with her back to Hermione.

"Madam Snape, what brings you back? Something wrong with the gift?" the woman said as she turned around.

The concern on her face could not match Hermione's confusion.

"I'm here to pick up the gift," she explained.

"Oh, my." Madam Boris glanced nervously several times at an empty space on a shelf behind her. "Maybe Lulu moved it!"

Hermione felt a mild heat rise from her chest, over her neck and to her face. *Maybe* didn't sound promising. A hasty search of the shelves, the space beneath the counter and the back storage area failed to produce the gift.

"I'm sure it arrived yesterday. I had it right here ... wrapped it myself," Madam Boris continued to mutter as her search became more frantic. She finally produced a massive ledger, threw it open on the counter and smiled triumphantly.

"Aha! Here it is. You already picked it up, my dear."

"I...did...no...such...thing," Hermione hissed through clenched teeth.

"Sure you did. It's right here. See?"

Hermione pushed the ledger aside. "I'm tired, hungry and upset, but I assure you I would remember picking up a gift specially selected and ordered for my husband one month in advance...and...I...did...not...pick...it...up!"

Madam Boris seemed unperturbed by Hermione's pique.

"Well, if it was that important, perhaps you should have. It is possible my assistant assumed you were no longer interested in the object and sold it to some other prospective customer. We do, however, have some lovely gift items for you to choose from right here in our store ..."

It was the last straw. Hermione fisted handfuls of her cloak to keep herself from reaching for her wand until she was half-way down the street and a safe distance away from Madam Boris.

The only other shop open was a novelty stand two blocks away. Hermione had her choice between a rubber snake that wriggled and hissed when touched, and a mug with a picture of St Nicholas that chuckled and exclaimed 'Merry Christmas!' when filled with hot liquid. The snake had too many negative connotations, and the mug was at least practical, so she settled for the mug.

It's not that important, she told herself. *It's the thought that counts*...although she wasn't too sure what to think about a novelty mug...and *we'll have a tree, and the decorations shouldn't take long with the aid of a few spells*.

With those thoughts, and the mug firmly in her grasp, Hermione proceeded to *Arbour's Enchanted Christmas Trees Emporium*.

"What do you mean gone?" she asked once there, eyes wide, mouth agape.

"Sold! Last one," a sleepy and hoarse Mr Arbour explained as his long arm swept across the empty tree-lot. "Just last night; didn't think you would show up."

Tears were starting to well in her eyes, and Hermione felt as if the fight had been drained out of her. "Why would you think such a thing?" she asked simply.

"Well, because it was Christmas Eve and you weren't here!"

"But ... but ... Aunt Gretchen had a cold and the owls from Egypt were slow and there were Blibbering Humdingers ..."

"Miss, there is no such thing as a Blibbering Humdinger ..."

"Yes, there is!" Hermione screamed. "And the orphans had no presents, and now I don't have a tree, and how the hell am I supposed to wrap this stupid mug!" she finished with a sob.

The man looked around uncomfortably for a moment before he said, "I do have some seedlings in the back...let me see what I can find."

Hermione left *Arbour's Emporium* cradling a novelty mug in one arm and a small, potted tree that sporadically whimpered and shot sparks rather than light up and sing the promised Christmas carols. By the time she reached the doorsteps of her home, Hermione's head hung low and her feet were dragging on the freshly fallen snow.

Not bothering with the conventional lock, she whispered a quiet *Alohamora* and snuck into the house, her thoughts travelling ahead to a hot bath and cuddling under the covers with Severus.

The sight that greeted her was startling. The living room twinkled with dozens of silver lights, and a choir of melodious voices drifted in the air to the tune of 'Come All Ye Faithful'. The lights and sounds came from a lush, white-pine tree that rose all the way to the ceiling. Small, enchanted doves hopped from branch to branch, lending their cheerful chirping to the notes of the song. Nestled beneath the tree were two gift-wrapped boxes, one gold and one silver, each tied with Madam Boris' distinct red ribbons. Everywhere there were tassels and garlands, and the inviting aromas of sausage and chocolate drifted from the kitchen. But most startling of all was the sight of Severus, dressed in crisp, black robes, and sitting in front of a cheery fire with a smile on his face.

"Merry Christmas, love," he said.

"But ... but ... the tree!"

"Picked it up last night, while you were at Hogwarts."

"And the gifts ..."

"I ordered yours last month. When I went to pick it up yesterday, there were two boxes under the name 'Snape,' and the clerk didn't know which was which, so I picked up both."

Tears were beginning to form in Hermione's eyes. "And the decorations ..."

"Saw them in the cellar while you were at your Aunt Gretchen's and assumed you would want them up for Christmas, otherwise you wouldn't have bought them."

"But I wanted to do all this for you." Hermione knew her voice sounded whiny, but she couldn't help feeling like a failure.

The enchanted seedling Hermione still held chose that moment to let out a loud whine and a volley of sparks. The situation was so ridiculous that Hermione burst into laughter.

"Don't ask," she warned Snape when he frowned at the small tree.

"I don't know much about the protocol for Christmas morning celebrations; do we have breakfast first and then open the gifts, or is it the other way around?" Severus asked.

"Gifts!" Hermione exclaimed, ignoring her stomach's growl of protest.

Severus' gift was everything Madam Boris had promised and more: a jewel-encrusted, gold pocket-watch engraved with the initials SS on one side. It was also a compass,

and the inscription on the other side read: *So should the passage of time ever do us part, you may always find your way back to me. HGS*

After confirming the look of appreciation on her husband's face, Hermione tore into the golden box. From a golden chain hung an exquisite, heart-shaped locket. It, too, was inscribed:

Truth resides in the heart.

"It's beautiful, but I don't understand."

Severus took her hand and Hermione saw the heart shimmer, a dim light that soon turned into a brilliant, white glow.

"No matter what angry words come from my lips, and they are bound to escape sometimes, this pendant is charmed to always reveal the truth in my heart...I love you, Hermione."

"I will treasure it always, but I don't need a locket to remind me of that, Severus." She looked around the room. "The memory of this moment will be enough. Our first Christmas together has truly been...one to remember."

The End