

A Kiss at Midnight

by linlawless

When their friends drag them to the Ministry's New Year's Eve ball, will Hermione and Severus find themselves together as the clock chimes twelve?

A one-shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: This little plot bunny refused to run away until I wrote it, so Happy New Year, everyone! As usual, most of the characters and concepts herein belong to JKR. If they were mine, I'd be making money off of this, but alas, they aren't and I'm not. Reviews, however, are always greatly appreciated.

A Kiss at Midnight

"No, Harry, really, I'd rather just stay in with a good book," Hermione pleaded.

"But it's New Year's Eve!" Harry protested from the Floo. "You can't just hide away from the world forever, and this is traditionally the night for making fresh starts. Come on, just for a little while."

"Harry, no offense, but I don't want to have to pretend to be happy and social with everyone watching to see if I'm dying of my broken heart." She couldn't quite prevent the lingering taste of bitterness she felt from sounding in her voice.

"Hermione " Harry began.

"I know, I know, it's not Ron's fault," Hermione interrupted before he could wind himself up again. And it *wasn't* Ron's fault, not really. They had just woken up one day and realized that they wanted different things from their lives. Ron wanted a dozen children actually, Hermione suspected he meant he wanted a baker's dozen, so that with all the children plus himself, they'd eventually be able to play full matches of Quidditch in the back garden. Hermione, on the other hand, would be more than happy with one (or at most, two) children, so as not to interfere with her career plans which involved rapid advancement through the ranks of the Department of Mysteries and either an eventual seat on the Wizengamot or election as the Minister of Magic. Unless, of course, she decided to take a detour and become a Hogwarts Professor on her way to the Headmistress-ship. She sometimes thought she ought not to wait much longer before deciding between the two paths, but one thing was certain with either of these goals, even a 200 year lifespan wouldn't leave time enough for her to spend the next thirty or so years raising thirteen (or twelve or even just three or four) children.

"That's not the point, Hermione. I know the tabloids have been merciless since you and Ron broke up no one realizes that your breakup was mutual, and months ago, because *you* wanted to keep it quiet. I hate to say I told you so, Hermione, but I did warn you that it would be better to announce it at the time rather than wait for gossip to spread the news."

Hermione sighed. "I know that, Harry, and I suppose if we had thought it through a bit more, we'd have just announced that we had decided to be friends at the time, and then no one would think I was hiding away after discovering Ron cheating by way of the *Prophet*. But it wasn't anyone's business then, and it's not now, either, and I just don't want to go out in public tonight, all right?"

"But don't you see? The absolute best thing to do at this point is to show up at some very public celebration and show everyone that you don't care that Ron is dating other women that you and Ron are still on good terms."

Unfortunately, Harry was probably right though Hermione was fairly certain that the photographers would find a way to fit their photos to the story they wanted to tell, one way or another.

She said as much to Harry, but he pointed out, "Yes, but there'll be all the people who are at the party saying that you looked to be getting along fine when they saw you."

"It's too bad you didn't talk me into this earlier," Hermione mused aloud. "It would be ever so much better if I had a date ..."

"Oh, don't worry about that," Harry said cheerfully, obviously recognizing that he had gotten his way. "Ron and I lined one up for you."

"You *what*?" Hermione nearly shrieked. "Oh, no, forget it. I'm not going on a blind date. No way, no how."

"You don't even know who it is," Harry pointed out. "I promise, you'll enjoy yourself. Besides, he knows it's just a publicity thing. It'll be fine. Now, do you have something to wear?"

"I'm sure I can find something," Hermione sighed, resigned. "What time and where am I supposed to meet my date? And who is it, anyway?"

"You'll see when you get there," Harry said. "Meet us at Grimmauld Place at seven. We'll all go together."

"All right," Hermione agreed. "I'll be there. I just hope this works."

"No," Severus said stubbornly. "No, no, and no again. I'm not going to some ridiculous party to celebrate the ending of an inauspicious year and the beginning of yet another, likely worse one. I won't do it. Forget it, Lucius. Go with Narcissa, have a good time, and tell me all about it next week sometime if you feel you must."

"You didn't let me finish, my friend. Narcissa's cousin Eugenie is visiting, rather unexpectedly, from Nice. I cannot afford to miss the opportunity to re-establish our connections with the current political machinery, yet Narcissa insists it would be rude for us to leave Eugenie to her own devices for the evening. She needs an escort, Severus, and you're the only suitable person I know who doesn't already have plans."

"But I *do* have plans, Lucius."

Lucius snorted inelegantly. "To do what? Sit alone in your dungeons drinking yourself into a stupor?"

Yes. "No, and what does it matter what my plans are? Plans are plans, after all."

"Plans can change, my friend," Lucius insisted. "And if you change yours, I'll provide the capital for that business you've been wanting to start."

Severus bit back the refusal that had been on the tip of his tongue. Trust Lucius to offer the one thing he would find hard to decline. "Bugger it all, Lucius, why'd you have to go and say a thing like that? And how did you know about my business plans, anyway?"

Lucius smirked. "Well, old friend, I didn't, actually, until you just confirmed it. On the other hand, knowing how you've always felt about teaching in particular and about most people in general made it likely that if given the option, you'd prefer to work for yourself, one way or another." He paused. "Just for argument's sake, why don't you tell me what sort of business you had in mind?"

"If you must know, I believe there might be an untapped market for high quality, hard-to-get potions, so I had considered opening a shop of that nature."

"Done. We'll see you at seven. Dress to impress." He disappeared from the Floo without allowing Severus the opportunity to respond.

Still, Severus called after him, "I want it in writing, Lucius!" Realizing the man couldn't have heard him, Severus muttered, "Bugger."

Then he sat down to memorialize the agreement in writing. When he got a signed copy back from Lucius, he would get ready for the stupid party.

Hermione smoothed her hair when she arrived at the Apparition point near Grimmauld Place. She really hoped this wasn't a mistake. It would be a miracle if nothing went wrong starting with whomever Hermione was paired with for this 'date.' She had a momentary flashback to Slughorn's party all those years ago, and shuddered at the memory of trying to escape the overzealous attentions of Cormac McLaggen.

Well, it was too late to back out now, so Hermione let herself into Grimmauld Place (Harry always got annoyed when she knocked, insisting that she was as close to family as he had), and tiptoed as quickly and quietly as possible past the curtained portrait of Mrs. Black. Entering the study, she found several people already present. "Hermione!" Ron called, spying her first. He detached himself from his date, who Hermione recognized upon closer inspection as Susan Bones, and hurried over to hug her warmly. "I'm so glad Harry talked you into this. It'll put an end to all the speculation, I promise." He led her quickly over to the rest of the group, where she was hugged in turn by Ginny, Harry, Luna, and Neville. She greeted Susan with a smile, as well.

Just as she was about to ask who they had arranged as her date, a knock sounded at the door and Harry hurried off to answer it. She nearly drooped with relief when she saw who he brought into the room and straight to her side moments later, and her greeting smile was genuine. Harry obviously noticed, commenting, "See, Hermione, I told you you'd be pleased with your date for the evening."

"Hi, Hermione," Terry Boot said. "Glad you could make it tonight. It's nice to have a friend to spend New Year's Eve with."

"Yes, it is," Hermione agreed, pleased that Harry and Ron had made such a good choice of date for her. After all, while he certainly *could* talk Quidditch as well as anyone (and was friendly with everyone in the room), he also could converse with Hermione on any number of *interesting* topics, as he had demonstrated on numerous occasions over the decade she had known him. Best of all, they had both realized long ago, after a brief attempt at dating, that there was simply no chemistry between them, and had agreed that friendship worked much better between them. Therefore, she didn't have to worry that he would attempt to get *too* friendly.

Just then, Ron called out, "Whaddya think, Hermione? Did we choose well?"

Hermione laughed and called back, "Perfect choice, Ron."

Severus arrived punctually at the gates of Malfoy Manor. He adjusted his cuffs carefully as he waited for admittance. The house-elf arrived just as he had decided to remove the leather tie holding his hair off his face, and he sighed internally at the missed opportunity.

Moments later, he was admitted to the drawing room, where Lucius and Narcissa waited with a stunning, elegant blonde of indeterminate age. Severus could see the family resemblance immediately. Once introductions had been performed, Severus sipped his drink and allowed the small talk to flow around him, adding a brief comment now and then just enough to avoid seeming rude. He was surprised to see that Narcissa and Eugenie seemed close, though he had never even heard mention of the Frenchwoman before this afternoon.

Severus was also surprised to discover that though Eugenie was objectively gorgeous, he felt no particular stirring of interest in her not even the slightest spark of

attraction. He wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or depressed by this lack of interest. Perhaps he was too old to feel such stirrings. Or perhaps he had simply left his libido untended for so long that it had withered and died.

Nevertheless, the woman seemed pleasant enough, if formal. Regardless, Severus would be a courteous companion for the evening. Lucius had particularly added the courtesy requirement to the contract before signing it, and then he would be able to start his company and leave the teaching of the dunderheads to someone else at last.

He wondered suddenly who else's company he might be forced to endure this evening with good grace. After all, the foursome present now would hardly have an entire table to themselves. Lucius's whole purpose was to curry favor with the Right People, so there were sure to be some bumbling fools or other seated with them. *No matter*, he decided. He would be courteous for the entire evening if it killed him.

An hour later, Hermione sat with her friends at their table in the Ministry ballroom, enjoying the feast that had been provided for the occasion. The talk turned to New Year's resolutions (as it always seemed to at this time of year). Ginny declared, "I'm going to figure out at last how to make a comfortable dress shoe," as she flexed and stretched her foot, which had lost its shoe somewhere under the table. "I can't believe these hurt already. Madam Malkin insisted that the built-in cushioning charm would do the trick."

Susan laughed and said, "If you manage it, let me in on the secret, will you?" She turned to Ron, "What about you? What's your resolution?"

He grinned as charmingly as Hermione had ever seen him. "I'm going to make the Cannons this year for sure."

Rolling her eyes, Susan said, "Well, I'm going to take a trip to all the great Wizarding cities. My aunt Amelia always wanted to travel, but never had a chance, so I'm finally going to go on her behalf." She winked at Ron. "If the Cannons don't work out, maybe you'd like to come along?"

Ron grinned at her, obviously not taking offense as he wiggled his eyebrows and leered at her. "Hmmm, maybe I *don't* want to play Quidditch this year, after all." Hermione was surprised to find herself a little envious of Susan, not because she wanted Ron back, but because Ron would never have been able to take a remark like that from *her* without getting defensive and angry. It was more clear than ever that their decision to break up had been the right one.

Luna said dreamily, "I suppose I intend to find the Crumple-Horned Snorkack this year."

Harry gave her a fond look, squeezed her hand, and said softly, "I certainly hope you won't spend *all* your time out searching ..."

She smiled back. "Of course not, silly. I *do* have the paper to run, don't I?"

Harry murmured, "I was hoping you might spend some time with me at Godric's Hollow." He added to the rest of the group, "I'm finally going to restore it this year."

Luna looked pleased, nodding slightly. Hermione struggled not to feel left behind. All her friends were pairing off, it seemed, and she herself was suddenly feeling just a little bit lonely. Of course, that was probably because other than Valentine's Day, New Year's Eve was the most couple-oriented holiday of the year. She wondered suddenly whether she and Terry would be expected to kiss on the stroke of midnight.

She forced her attention back to the conversation. Due to her woolgathering, she had already missed whatever Neville had resolved to do next year; whatever it was had led Ginny to kiss him thoroughly and the rest of the table to burst out laughing. "What about you, Terry?" Susan asked.

Terry replied, "I'm going to finish my Masters in Charms this year." He added, "Of course, that's less a New Year's resolution and more a career plan ..."

Everyone laughed, then Neville put in, "Speaking of career plans, what about you, Hermione? What's your resolution?"

"Oh," Hermione said awkwardly. "I don't really believe in New Year's resolutions. I've never met anyone who managed to keep one past the end of January." They all stared at her, looking shocked, so she added lightly, "Now, if you want to see my color-coded, step-by-step career plan, I probably have a copy in my handbag."

Laughter rang out around the table, and Hermione was surprised to discover she was having a really good time after all. The only thing that marred the otherwise perfect evening was a frequent tingling sensation running down her spine, insisting that she was being watched rather more closely than was strictly comfortable. But whenever she casually looked around, hoping to see who might be watching, there was no one. It was very strange ...

Severus couldn't believe his bad luck. Out of the dozens, perhaps hundreds? of tables in the Ministry ballroom, how had he managed to land at the table adjacent to the Golden Trio and all their friends?

He found himself observing them out of the corner of his eye. He was surprised to see Granger there after the scandal had hit about Weasley's cheating ways. Not that he had read the details, of course, what was it to him, anyway? It didn't appear to him that they were anything but friendly, however; Granger seemed to be getting along well with both Weasley and his date, with nary a sign of jealousy anywhere at the entire table. In fact, the whole group seemed inordinately happy, periodically bursting out in gales of laughter. He caught himself listening to snippets of their conversation, even as he continued to respond appropriately as necessary to the conversation at his own table. It wouldn't do to have Lucius accuse him of failing to uphold his end of the bargain, would it?

Besides Granger's presence and apparent comfort with Weasley and Bones, Severus was surprised by other things he saw at the Potter table. He had always thought, for example, that Potter and the Weasley girl were an item, but it appeared that she was with Longbottom, of all people, while Potter was fawning all over that odd Lovegood girl. Weasley was clearly flirting with Bones, though that shouldn't be a surprise, as the boy had always been rather more successful with the girls at Hogwarts than Severus felt his looks or personality warranted.

Granger was the most interesting member of their little group, however. She seemed entirely comfortable with her friends, but her interactions with Boot weren't in the least flirtatious. Severus wondered briefly if she even knew how to flirt, then dismissed that question as irrelevant. More interesting was the question of whether Boot's interest in Granger was purely platonic, and if so, whether Boot was perhaps secretly gay?

For Severus had found (much to his chagrin) that the feelings of attraction that had been so clearly lacking in his interactions with Eugenie had roared fully to life the very moment he had caught sight of Granger out of the corner of his eye. The attraction had hit so suddenly, in fact, that he hadn't immediately realized it was Granger he was reacting to. He saw a curvy, sexy woman from behind. She had a heavy pile of hair in some sort of updo that looked like it was defying gravity as it bared the elegant length of her neck, and Severus had to remind himself that walking up to an unfamiliar woman and nibbling on her neck whilst releasing the pins and spells that held her hair in place would most certainly not be considered appropriate behavior.

He had wanted to, however.

Until, that is, she had turned, and he had realized for the first time that he was lusting after a former student, and not just any former student, but one of the three banes of his existence for six full years, not so many years ago. Still, he had found his attention straying to her repeatedly all evening, through all of the cocktail hour and every one of the eight courses of dinner.

Now, he was trying to convince his libido that asking her to dance was a terrible idea. He resumed listening to their discussion of New Year's resolutions, rolling his eyes at the things he heard. Hearing Granger say something about not believing in resolutions, he mentally nodded approvingly though he kept his face impassive. Resolutions, for most people, were nothing more than an exercise in wishful thinking.

Even as he continued to eat his Beef Wellington, he continued arguing with himself about the merits of asking Granger to dance. The decision was made for him, however, when Lucius commanded his attention while the ladies were off powdering their noses before the dancing began. "Severus, I believe it would be a good idea for you to

dance with Miss Granger."

Although he argued out of habit, inwardly, he was pleased at the idea. "That was not part of our deal, Lucius," he replied. "And I fail to see why you think it would be a good idea. The girl despises me."

"First, given her outspoken defense of you immediately after the war, it seems highly unlikely that she despises you. And second, haven't you heard? She's on the fast track in the Department of Mysteries rumor has it she'll eventually be either Chief of the Wizengamot or perhaps even Minister of Magic. In either case, she's a connection we cannot afford to ignore."

"Then *you* dance with her, and leave me out of it." Severus ignored the twinge of pleasure he felt at Lucius's reminder of the way Granger had demanded that he not only should not be tried for anything he had done during the war, but also had insisted he should have an Order of Merlin, first class (he had eventually actually gotten an Order of Merlin, second class, but that didn't negate the fact that she had fought hard to win him more).

"I would, but alas, Severus, she still holds a small grudge against me from the war."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "What sort of grudge? She's never appeared to hold grudges before, even when they were deserved." He thought of the various times she had fallen out with Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum; everything had always been patched up soon afterward.

"She appears to blame me for certain activities that my dear, departed sister-in-law engaged in toward the end of the war."

Severus frowned. "Why would she blame you for things Bellatrix did, Lucius? She has that annoying Gryffindor sense of fair play, you know."

Lucius sighed. "Unfortunately, Bellatrix engaged in a rather unfortunate approach to information-gathering from Miss Granger in my drawing room. For some reason, Miss Granger does not appear to realize that I could not prevent it."

"Or she realizes that even if you could have, you wouldn't have."

Lucius ignored that comment. "Just dance with her, Severus. One dance."

"If you expect me to even attempt to dance with Miss Granger, I want an extra three thousand Galleons of working capital."

"Two thousand if you actually dance with her. Five hundred if you ask and she refuses."

"Three thousand if I dance with her, one thousand if she refuses."

"Done."

The dancing began shortly after the last course was served. Wine was flowing freely, and more than one person was a little bit tipsy. Hermione had danced with each of the young men at the table twice already, and now she was ready for a break. She sat sipping her drink, chatting with Terry about a recent article in Potions Quarterly. She was surprised how much she was still enjoying herself. She was even relatively glad that Harry had talked her into this.

Even as she had the thought, a smooth, silky voice spoke from her right. "May I have this dance, Miss Granger?"

Hermione froze, then forced herself to turn to look and confirm what she already knew but couldn't quite believe. "P-professor?" she asked, trying not to sound as gobsmacked as she felt.

"A dance, Miss Granger," Professor Snape repeated, then looked past her to Terry and added, "Assuming your date doesn't mind, of course."

"Of course," Hermione murmured, trying to process the fact that the professor who had always so disliked her apparently wanted to dance with her. She glanced at Terry, who shrugged, then turned back to Professor Snape and took his proffered hand. She allowed him to lead her to the floor, and they began to move to the opening strains of a waltz as she tried to think of something to say. She happened to catch sight of the unfamiliar woman she had seen him with earlier, so for lack of a better topic, she asked, "Won't your date mind?"

"No," he answered tersely.

"Oh," she said, then offered, "She's very beautiful."

"If you like that sort, yes, she is," Snape replied.

"Y-you don't?" Hermione asked, and when he didn't respond right away, she added, "I didn't realize tall, blonde elegance was *evenot* a man's type."

"She's nice enough, I suppose," Snape answered. "But she's too like Narcissa to appeal to me as anything more than a friend."

"Oh," Hermione said. "Still, you are her date tonight, aren't you? Doesn't she mind that you're dancing with another woman?"

"I only met her tonight," Snape assured her. "If my dancing with someone else upsets her now, I'm certain it's better she get over that now." He glanced over Hermione's shoulder as he twirled her and added, "In any event, she appears to be dancing with Percy Weasley at the moment."

Unable to think of anything else to say, Hermione nodded and fell silent.

After a moment, Snape said, "I never thanked you for all your efforts on my behalf after the war."

Hermione couldn't hide her surprise. "I assumed you didn't appreciate my interference," she exclaimed.

"Well, perhaps I didn't, at first," Snape replied. "But that was largely because I assumed you had no chance of success, and I was trying not to hope for the impossible. However, once I realized that you had, against all odds, made the Ministry recognize my efforts toward the greater good, I was more appreciative."

She stared at him, stunned. She had no idea how to respond to a seemingly sincere, pleasant, courteous Snape she was too accustomed to the sarcastic, rude one. Eventually, she said, "You're welcome, sir, but they should have awarded you first class."

He actually smiled at that, and Hermione was arrested by how much younger it made him appear. She absently noted that her own parents would have been impressed by the quality of the dental work he must have had since the end of the war as he chided, "They were never going to award me first class, Hermione. I may call you Hermione, yes?" Hermione nodded, and he continued, "And you must call me Severus."

"You don't sound at all bitter about that, S-severus," Hermione answered, feeling her cheeks warm as she stumbled over his name.

"I dealt with any bitterness ages ago. Things could have ended a lot worse for me, in any number of ways." He must have noticed her shock. "What? You don't agree?"

"Well, yes, of course I agree," Hermione said. "I just ... I suppose I never expected you to treat it with such equanimity. You were never really known for that when I used to know you."

"Ah, but did you really know me before?" Severus replied. "Or did you know only the image I presented to the world? The cruel, heartless teacher who hated all Gryffindors? Particularly Harry Potter and his friends and even more particularly, his Muggleborn friend?"

She smiled ruefully. "Good points all, sir." At his raised eyebrow, she hastily corrected herself. "I mean, Severus." He nodded as the music drew to a close.

He released her and bowed, then offered his hand she assumed to lead her back to her seat, so she was surprised when he asked formally, "Would you care to remain for another dance?"

Hermione smiled. "I would enjoy that very much." For the third time this evening, Hermione was surprised to discover she was enjoying herself. She was actually rather glad that Harry had talked her into leaving her book behind for the evening. Who would have believed that Severus Snape would be both a good dancer and a decent conversationalist? At least, one who was willing to dance and converse with *her*?

Severus was pleased with the way things were progressing. He had managed to charm Hermione into relaxing in short order, and persuaded her to remain with him for a second waltz. If all went according to plan, he could offer to escort her for a fresh drink or some air at the end of this dance, then keep her engaged in conversation until the New Year had been rung in.

Halfway through their first dance, he had given up any self-deception that he was going to leave tonight without making his best efforts to seduce her. It had been far too long since he had desired any female, and even longer since he had felt free to act on such feelings. He wasn't sure what it meant past tonight, if anything at all, but for this one evening, he planned to throw caution to the wind.

He didn't examine his motivations too closely. Best not to consider that Lucius might think it discourteous for him to fail to present himself for the standard midnight kiss with his own date, which could theoretically ruin the deal he had worked out.

Realizing he had been silent long enough to settle into the dance, Severus decided to satisfy his curiosity. "You seem on good terms with young Mr. Weasley," he commented. "Does this mean that, as usual, the *Daily Prophet* is less concerned with accuracy than sales?"

Hermione laughed. "Right in one," she said. "Ron and I actually decided months ago that we made better friends than lovers. Our mistake was in failing to realize that the entirety of wizarding Britain thought that our relationship was their business."

"Ah," he answered. "Unfortunately, that's rather unavoidable, given that you are both considered war heroes."

"So are you," Hermione pointed out. "I haven't seen your private life splashed all over the front page of the *Prophet*."

"That's because I don't have a private life." He thought for a moment, then added, "I don't have a public life, either, come to think of it."

"What's left?" Hermione looked intrigued.

"A Hogwarts life, I suppose," Severus mused aloud. He infused his voice with suggestiveness as he continued meaningfully, "But I have plans to start having both a public and a private life very soon."

"You do?" Hermione asked, sounding rather breathless.

"Indeed." The dance was nearing the end now, and Severus glanced quickly around to ascertain where everyone relevant was. Boot was conversing with some of his table-mates, including the other two-thirds of the Trio, who weren't paying any attention to Severus and Hermione. Lucius and Narcissa were dancing, and also appeared not to be watching. Eugenie was now dancing with another Weasley on the other side of the ballroom perhaps Charlie? Severus couldn't tell for sure which one it was, but with that ginger hair, it was definitely one Weasley or another. Regardless, she was far enough away that she could have no intention of returning to his side in the next few minutes.

The timing was perfect, Severus decided, and a glance at Hermione offered him the perfect opening. "You look a bit flushed, Hermione. Perhaps you would like a drink or some air?"

"Some air would be most welcome," she responded, as he had hoped she would. He led her toward the terrace doors and out onto the balcony. Glancing around, he saw a few couples here and there, before spying a bench in the garden that was partially hidden by a yew tree. Perfect. He led her down the steps to it, surreptitiously casting a Notice-Me-Not Charm around them as he distracted her by asking about the Potions Quarterly article she had been discussing with Boot earlier.

Now, all he had to do was keep her occupied for the next ten or so minutes, and he would have the excuse he needed to determine whether the attraction he was feeling might actually be mutual. He set about being as engaging and charming as he could manage.

Hermione completely lost track of time as they sat in the garden talking. She was tempted to pinch herself it all seemed so surreal, didn't it? Perhaps she had fallen asleep before ever going to Grimmauld Place, and the entire evening had been some sort of odd dream.

She was brought back to reality when she heard the countdown to midnight begin. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "Your date will be looking for you. We must hurry!" She moved to rise, but he caught her hand and tugged her back down to her seat.

"Eugenie was otherwise occupied when we left the ballroom; I'm certain she'll have found someone to keep her happy." He paused, then seemed to force himself to ask, "What of Mr. Boot? Will he be looking for you, expecting a kiss on the stroke of midnight?"

Hermione laughed self-consciously. "No, not at all. He's just a friend."

"Then might I suggest that the most practical option is to kiss one another?"

Hermione stared at him. He wanted to kiss her? Really? Somewhere in the distance, the clock began to chime. Slowly she nodded. If this was a dream, surely she would wake up momentarily. And if it wasn't? Well, she rather wanted Severus to kiss her, if she was entirely honest with herself.

The clock fell silent, and then his lips were on hers, softly at first, but then, as she kissed him back, the kiss took on a life of its own, becoming increasingly passionate as the seconds ticked by unheeded.

This was clearly no dream Hermione's imagination was incapable, in her own considered opinion, of dreaming up anything this wonderful. Long moments later, they slowly pulled back, both breathing heavily. Staring into his eyes, she whispered, "Oh."

"Yes," he replied. He shook his head as though to clear it. "I suppose our respective dates will be looking for us," he added, sounding regretful. Hermione tried not to let her disappointment show. The best kiss she had ever had, and it probably meant nothing to him. What had he called it? The most practical option?

The look in his eyes wasn't practical, though, Hermione realized suddenly. It was rather ... hot, actually. Instead of leaving, he was suddenly kissing her again.

The next time they pulled apart, Hermione became aware that she was sitting on his lap (when and how had she landed there?!), and his hand was sliding up and down her thigh, leaving tingling heat in its wake, even through the silk of her dress robes. She suddenly, desperately wished the silk wasn't preventing him touching her skin directly, and she wished she could muster the courage to ask him to sneak out with her to come home with her and spend the night seeing where that kiss might lead.

And then she didn't have to, because he leaned in close and whispered, "I don't suppose you'd consider coming home with me to continue this discussion in more private circumstances?"

She smiled, delighted that they seemed to have the same idea. "I'd love to," she assured him, then frowned. "But didn't you say something about our dates?"

"We'll owl them," he said firmly. "Are you ready?"

She grinned. "Definitely," she agreed, tightening her arms around his neck and leaning in to kiss him once more before he Apparated them away.