

Touch

by Ravensblood

Eleven moments, eleven touches served to brand him into her heart. Murderer,
Healer, Friend, or Foe, which will he be, in the end?
Rating for later chapters.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 3

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The first was a brush of fingertips when she handed in her assignment. Certainly, it wasn't the very first time he'd touched her, but it was the first time she could remember the zing of electric energy flit from where his skin contacted hers. He didn't meet her eyes but continued marking essays.

The second was at Headquarters as they cleared the dishes from the table the ordinary way. Neither were going to engage in foolish wand-waving for such a menial task. The last glass between them, their fingertips met and pulled back abruptly. This time, it was she who would not meet his eyes, ducking her head to hide the blush. He gathered the glass and took it to the sink.

The third was in the Lab in the basement of Headquarters where she'd been assisting him in brewing the Wolfsbane. He'd swept a curl back from her face and secured it with its fellows in the barrette at the base of her neck while she chopped. The shiver made her slice into herself. The fourth followed swiftly as he held her hand to heal the cut made by the silver knife in the pad of her thumb. His dark eyes raised to meet hers once the cut was sealed. A bubble on the surface of the cauldron broke, the wet sound breaking the silence. He whirled to tend it and they spoke no more but when he gave her instructions.

The fifth time was when he hauled her by the collar of her robes around the corner of a building and out of the path of a Death Eater's hurled hex. She took in the strength of the chest beneath her hand in an instant before erecting a shield charm over them both when he whipped his arm around the corner to return fire.

The sixth time was when she tended his wounds after that skirmish. He sat on the lid of the toilet in the third floor bathroom as she worked dittany into the cuts and massaged bruise balm over his abused flesh. When she was sure that all of his wounds were completely covered, she couldn't find it in herself to take her hands away, but she'd run out of excuses for keeping them there. Their eyes met and sparked in the dim light, but he began pulling on his shirt, and she had to move her hands or else be a hindrance to his modesty.

The seventh time was when they traded places and he tended to her wounds in return. Neither brought up the idea that anybody else should be tending them; the mediwitch was the last person they wanted to see at the moment. The healing was for them, alone. She dropped her shirt to the floor and gave herself over to his care. His hands were warm and sure as they healed her hurts. His eyes never stayed glued to anywhere inappropriate, though all those bits were still covered by her bra or her jeans. His hands left her all too soon to collect the jars and close their lids. He left her there to replace her shirt. She watched him go with a strange longing in her heart.

The eighth time was an accident. He'd been avoiding her for a week. She fell on him in the library when she tripped on the rug. He grunted at the impact, and she scrambled to relieve him of her weight. She hissed in pain when she tried to stand, her ankle protesting the abuse. He swooped in to support her and helped her down onto the couch. He removed her shoe with a gentle tug and rolled the sock down, testing the injury with gentle pressure. Just a sprain, easily dealt with. She would have sworn there was magic in his touch, not just in his wand work.

The ninth didn't happen for some time. There was no room for casual contact in the rigid structure of their roles at school. During that mad night when the vanishing cabinet had been used to nefarious purpose, they stood alone for a bare moment in the hallway outside the Charms Professor's office. She knew he had to go, had to do his duty. She planned to do hers. She had no idea if they would survive the night. She clutched his hand to her face and wished him well, as a friend or somewhat more. Emotions so often buried cried out to her from the darkness of his eyes: regret, guilt, longing, acceptance. He commanded she be safe and then he was gone.

Term was over, the Headmaster dead, and she'd been on the run hunting for Horcruxes with her friend, the Chosen One. The third to their trio had abandoned them when the burden that they carried became too much. Alone in the tent, she froze at the hint of his scent, the caress of his lips upon her brow. She reached out at nothing, not sure if she could count that one or her brain was playing tricks on her. Her eyes reflected the same emotions she'd seen in his when last they'd met.

The eleventh had her on her knees in his blood, desperately trying to save his life. When her friends demanded a reason, she made up something plausible about interrogating him later and they went on without her. When she'd done all she could with dittany, blood replenisher, and the phial of antivenin she found in his robes, she took off her heart-shaped locket and wrapped the chain around his wrist. Brandishing her stolen wand, she tapped it, activating the portkey. Surprisingly strong fingers caught and held her wrist at the last second, spinning her off alongside him to the portkey's destination.

It was the safest place she could think of when she'd made her experimental, very illegal, first portkey. It was the last place they'd look had they known to. There she was on the rug, staining the carpet with mud and blood. She would have laughed with the irony had she not been so confused. He had been dying, hadn't he? How had he known to grab her if he was unconscious?

"Well, Miss Granger, aren't you going to interrogate me?"

The Shelter

Chapter 2 of 3

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"Well, Miss Granger, aren't you going to interrogate me?"

Her heart leapt at the sound even as adrenaline coursed through her. She was careless, stupid, to find herself in this position. Eleven touches had stripped her of her defenses when it came to this man. He was a murderer, a Death Eater, and still she had run to his defense, had trusted him to the point where he could break her, now, and no one would be the wiser.

"Speechless? Out of questions? Hades must have frozen over."

She stared at him, eyes too large in a thin face. The year had not been kind to her. She looked pale and drawn.

"Perhaps I am dead and have somehow found my way into heaven. Here you are, and blessedly silent, too," he teased, a smirk providing the balm for the barb. Her eyes grew wet. A sniffle threatened. Was the chit about to cry? Merlin preserve him!

"You.... you're," she mumbled hoarsely.

"It's all right," he insisted, pulling her into an embrace, seeking to comfort her after all she'd seen this night and all others since they'd parted.

He expected wracking sobs, lasting hours. He did not expect her to moan instead and seek out his lips with unerring aim. Shocked, he could do naught but submit to her impassioned assault, until he found himself kissing her back, rolling her beneath him on the floor. Finally, he tasted all he'd been denying wanting since that night she'd touched him with his shirt off and he'd seen only desire and warmth in her eyes. They were covered in blood and dirt, but he couldn't care because she was catching his lip between her teeth and holding him in the cradle of her body as if he belonged there forever after. Passion ruled for a few mad moments, their heated clinch giving rise to the need for more flesh, more contact. She was making sounds of coming undone, head tilting to give him access to the skin of her throat, legs wrapped tight about his waist and abandoning herself to the need to grind against the ridge in his pants. His head spun as he sank against her welcoming softness, wishing for all the world that he could live in the moment where she writhed beneath him and he gave her all he could while their clothes remained in place. As lost as he was, he wouldn't be able to stop what he was doing to rectify the garment situation.

"Oh! GOD!" she cried and trembled beneath him when she'd reached the flashpoint. Knowing what he'd done to her, there was nothing he could do to not reach his own conclusion like a callow schoolboy in his trousers. The afterglow subsided while they panted, and he began to immediately feel contrite. Although, given the circumstances, he had to admit it was a far better outcome than taking her fully for the first time on a bloody, muddy carpet. He'd never expected to take her at all.

He rolled off of her to perform a cleaning spell on his trousers and looked about him fully for the first time. "Where in the name of...?"

She continued panting, staring up at the ceiling, shell-shocked but unaccountably happy for the first time in ages. She started to giggle. "My parents' house," she managed. "I didn't sell it."

"I thought it burned to the ground," he mused, still looking about him with a strange sense of wonderment. Concrete walls, canned goods, spartan furnishings and a single, harsh lamp throwing everything into sharp relief in the otherwise murky dark met his gaze.

"It did. This is the bomb shelter my grandfather built during World War Two. It's in the backyard. Dad replaced the generator with a solar panel after I was born."

"Why didn't you lot stay HERE instead of in that tent?"

She looked at him oddly, then. "I ruled out using it because it's in a Muggle neighborhood. Somebody was bound to notice us coming and going from a burned-down house. How did you know we were living in a tent?"

"Who do you think brought Potter the sword? I followed Weasley until he led me to you."

"So you DID come to me in the tent! I thought I was imagining things."

He debated lying to her, but after what they had shared, he couldn't see the point in it. He settled for nodding slowly.

Remembrance dawned on her. "Oh, God! Harry! I have to get back! The battle--"

He sighed as she jettied up from the floor, preparing to leap headlong back into the madness of war. She whirled and looked at him again. "If I leave, will you still be here when I come back?"

He debated his options. If he went home, they would find him. Whichever side won, he was better off dead and gone, which had been his plan from the very first when he'd become sure that the Dark Lord was going to kill him. He had already used magic in the shelter, though it might take some time before everything settled at the Ministry enough for them to come chasing down that tiny spell. All thoughts of his own survival aside, he couldn't, in good conscience, let her go into danger by herself. For all he knew, the Dark Lord could have already won, and she'd be defenseless if that were the case. There was nothing he could do or say to make her remain in safety while her friends would be lost without her. Mind made up, he stood as well. "I'm going with you."

Spinner's End

Chapter 3 of 3

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"You can't be serious. Vol--the Dark L--Voldybutt tried to kill you! As far as he and everyone else knows, you're dead! You're free and you're going right back there?"

He smirked at the fanciful nickname she'd picked for the most feared wizard of their time. It served both to circumvent the taboo and cut out some of the fear she felt for the one it named. No one would dare use it to His face, regardless of how they felt. Death would be assured at that point.

"I could say the same for you, foolish Gryffindor."

"I'm Muggleborn! I have to fight this--and, and Harry's counting on me!"

"War is no place for children."

"It became our war when we were. We aren't children any longer."

"I can see that," he said, measuring her up and down with his eyes from his position on the floor with a single mocking eyebrow raised. She blushed only slightly but raised her chin. Stubborn.

"I said I was going with you. You will be no more effective in dissuading me than I will be in you. I will take every precaution to keep us safe. Doubtless I will think of many things that you won't. Allow me to provide what protection I can, one more time. I'm not old and useless yet."

"I never said you were," she whispered. "I just wanted..."

"Wanted me to remain safe where you wouldn't have to worry about me? I've been wanting the same thing since Mr. Potter arrived at the school seven years ago. Get used to not having your wishes met by circumstance. I want that megalomaniac gone as much as anyone. If there's a chance that I can free myself and keep others safer for it, I will not stand idly by. Not this time."

"Fine." She offered her hand to help him up. "We'll prepare as best we can and then we'll go back. I only hope we will be in time to lend aid where it's needed."

He took her hand and the two of them got his feet back underneath him.

"We will need a few things from my home. Do you think you can wait that long?"

"I've always felt that being properly prepared made up for any time lost in the preparation."

"Good. Off we go, then." He spun them off into nothing with only that small warning. The next thing she knew, they were standing in an ill-lit alleyway with cobblestones beneath their feet.

She felt the cold creep of a disillusionment spell wriggle down the back of her neck and watched her own hands disappear from sight.

Severus grabbed her by the wrist and led her quickly across the street to the row of houses on the other side. They shifted apart, revealing another one between them like the houses at Grimmauld Place. She felt the slight shifting of his hand at her wrist, indicating his body moving with the strength of his other arm as he dismantled whatever wards he had in place. They were silent until they were safely behind the door inside. It closed with a finality that chilled her to the bone.

"Be wary. Wormtail might still be about," he whispered to her.

"Wormtail is dead," she told him while the disillusionment lifted.

"Ah. Very well then. Welcome to my humble abode," he said with a strange sarcastic curl to his lips and the flourish of his hand.

"Thanks," she said honestly and followed him further in to the dark, neglected house.

He moved swiftly and with purpose past the sitting room, opening the panel behind a bookcase that led to a staircase. "You will find a bathroom at the top of the stairs. The water closet is to the left of it. There are some of my strongest wards at the end of the hall. I will be up to dismantle them once I've been in my lab. Do not attempt them yourself."

"Where do they lead?" she wondered aloud.

"My bedroom. The rat kept trying to get in. He still has a nest up there somewhere. If you get bored and don't mind the smell, you might find something of interest in it, but I doubt it. Just wait for me once you've finished. I won't be long."

"Right. Thanks again." He nodded curtly and disappeared through the doorway on the wall beside the stair. She traversed the creaking steps with trembling legs, her stolen wand out and wavering in her hand. Her heart pounded. The house seemed to hate her very presence and she couldn't shake the feeling of being watched, judged, and

found wanting. At least there were no shrieking portraits.

She found the closet and shut herself inside to do her business. The bathroom was cramped and a little dusty, but on the whole, clean. She dug inside her beaded bag for a fresh change of clothes. Her old ones hung a little tattered on her frame.

She knew he said he wouldn't be long, but still she could not resist stripping off and jumping under the shower head to spray herself off. She strained her ear to listen for the sounds of him coming up the stairs but it was hard to hear over the spatter of water on the tiles.

She showered quickly, running the soap over cuts sustained in the battles fought over so many days, hissing when they stung, but wanting to ward off any infection. The water never got properly hot and it had a slight sulfurous smell, but it felt like heaven after being on the run so long. Her days at Shell Cottage hadn't inured her to the perks of civilization quite yet.

Once the water ran clear of blood and soil, she switched it off, feeling odd to be naked in Snape's house. The towel on the rack smelled of mildew, but still she felt it was a luxury beyond words to be clean and dry once again. She shoved her soiled clothing deeper into the bag and hunted for a clean change of underwear. She pulled them on over still-damp legs, dragging them mercilessly although they wanted to catch, just in case Snape came looking for her and found her like that. They didn't have time for it and she was very certain she wasn't ready to be seen starkers by a man. It thrilled and scared her at the same time to think about it.

The rest of her clothes went on in a hurry and she brushed her teeth and used mouthwash with a proper sink. She exited the bathroom to find Snape on the other side, leaning against the wall with a pile of clothing bundled in his arms and absolutely no look of reproach on his face.

"My turn," was all he said as he swept past her into the bathroom. She leaned against the wall to get her raging pulse in check as she heard the rustle of fabric and the water come back on.

He closed the door but did not lock it.

Why hadn't he locked it?

Her hand trembled toward the knob. Her pulse pounded. She hovered, uncertain, on the edge of a discovery that might change her life.

She drew her hand back, curling the fingers under, and held the hand to her chest.

She wasn't ready. Her courage failed her in this.

Battles, she could face. The Cruciatus curse was nothing next to the torture of wanting something and being unable to grasp for it. She waited, leaning on the far wall until he came out in fresh robes with wet hair, looking for all the world like her professor after a shower. She smelled him then, a mixture of old parchment, freshly mown grass, dragonhide leather, and something undefined that was purely his own skin.

"How is your neck?" she questioned lamely while all she wanted was to sink into his chest and shut the world out.

"Better. I had some strengthening solution, blood replenisher, and a bit more of the antivenin in my stores. Now all that's left is a slight headache and a bit of shell-shock to deal with," he answered truthfully. "Are you injured in any way? Do you need something?"

"Scrapes and bruises. A little bit of lingering wobble from the Cruciatus. A pulled muscle here or there, but otherwise good."

"You were put under the Cruciatus?" he came forward quickly, grasping her arms and looking her over in alarm. "How long? When? Who cast it?"

"A few minutes at the most," she replied while he grabbed her hand and manipulated the joints. "It happened a few days ago, before the break-in at Gringott's. Bellatrix Lestranger cast it."

"You're still inside the window. Come," he demanded, pulling her back down into the lower floor, passing an old kitchen and taking her through another hidden door in the pantry to the basement.

His lab was small but serviceable, with cauldrons stacked along the wall on shelves and a strange mixture of alchemical equipment interspersed with mundane chemistry sets. Bottles lined the wall on the other side, phials dried in their racks, and a cabinet at the far side opened at their approach with more phials stored inside it. Snape's spiky handwriting stood out on all the labels, and he reached inside without hesitation to bring out one with a yellow liquid showing through the crystal glass. He unstopped it with quick, agile surety and held it out to her. "Drink," he commanded and pressed the potion into her hand.

"What is it?"

"Drink it first, I'll tell you what it is while it takes effect."

Did she trust him enough to drink something he handed to her without first knowing what it was? She took a moment to look at him. He was impatient but concerned, but also a master spy. Everything she had known about him was a lie. He wasn't her enemy, but he could still have something planned that she wouldn't like.

Whatever his game, she was sure he could have acted before now to ruin her own plans, so she felt that it was harmless to take something he offered her, now. It would probably save her from some lingering aftereffect from the Cruciatus she was unaware of. He'd certainly undergone it himself enough times.

She prayed for good luck and downed the phial. He led her to a chair right before the world went dim and pain blossomed outward from her chest. She stared at him in horror and betrayal right before she blacked out.

She came back around to see Snape siphoning something dark off her skin with his wand and putting it into a phial. "What the hell did you give me?" she whispered hoarsely at his retreating back.

He took the phial and poured it out into the flames of the fireplace at the far end of the room. Unearthly screams seemed to pour forth while the black smoke escaped up the flue.

"I gave you something to push the curse out to the surface so it would not taint you further. It is an unfortunate side-effect that you must relive the pain in reverse. For that I am truly sorry, but you were within the window of time before the curse became permanently locked in with your magical signature and I know no other way to prevent it."

"Oh." She was at a loss. She thought for sure he'd given her something to put her out of the fight and yet again she felt shame for misreading his intentions.

"How do you feel?"

"Like I've gone backward through hell. Weak. Hungry."

"That's good. It means it worked."

"Thank you," she murmured and smiled.

"Let us go find something to eat and then we'll go back."

"I hate fighting on an empty stomach," she joked and won a sly smile from him. Her heart nearly stopped in her chest at the sight of Snape. Smiling.

They ate beans out of cans with spoons. He apologized for the scarce selection, but she waved it away and ate with ravenous appetite.

"It's better than anything I've eaten in a long while."

She finished off the can and went to brush her teeth again. He watched her and said nothing, but she could tell he was puzzled. "My parents were dentists," she offered, "if nothing else, they instilled proper oral hygiene in me irrevocably." They stared at one another across the kitchen for a long time, needing to go back but fearing it.

"If we don't make it through this alive," she began, walking toward him with hesitation in her steps, "I want to say thank you. For all you've done."

"I should like to thank you as well. You saved my life although I was an enemy."

She reached him and stopped, peering up into his unfathomable black eyes. "I don't think I could ever see you as an enemy."

"Hmm," he said, and now he was at a loss for words.

"All those years you protected us. All those times you hid your true intentions, but your actions betrayed that you wanted to keep us safe. I almost lost faith in that. Thankfully, I found it again while you were still breathing. Will you... let me..." They'd grown quite close, her face inches from his.

"Let you what?" he murmured, raising a hand to cup the back of her neck.

"Kiss you," she responded, and they came together on a sigh, lips tangling and meshing once more. She poured everything into the kiss, all her hope and passion with her fear of never being able to do so again.

He devoured her lips, her tongue, her sighs. He held her close in a nearly crushing grip, his arms gathering her up to him while he knew that he had no right to. She chose this, he had to remind himself, and wonder at it.

They broke away, breathing heavy. He caught sight of a single tear glistening down her pale cheek and reached out to brush it away.

"Whatever happens, however things stand in the end," he rumbled, drawing her back to him, "my house can be found at Spinner's End."

"If we get separated, will you come back here?"

"I will."

"Very well, then. Let's go."