

Let Somebody Love You

by Mhor Rioghain

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Prologue

Chapter 1 of 1

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Sixteen-year-old Hermione Granger was a source of constant bafflement to her roommates, Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown. Each morning her alarm began its shrill call at six o'clock. As Parvati and Lavender grumbled under their breath and covered their heads with their fluffiest pillows, Hermione would rise promptly from her bed. She would shower in what seemed to Lavender and Parvati like record time. Then, with nary a thought for the state of her hair, with no jewelry or accessories or even a swipe of makeup, she would plunk herself down at her desk to review for her morning classes...wholly extraneous review, in their opinion.

Hermione would then traipse down to breakfast with an enviable amount of energy, seemingly excited by the prospect of another full day of classes, studying, and the arduous essays and spell-work ahead of her. She received a monthly allowance from her parents that far exceeded their own, yet she'd never once taken them up on their offer to look through their clothing and lingerie catalogs to see what she might enjoy receiving herself. Instead, she put her allowance toward her books and her subscriptions, of which she had plenty. She pored over the *Daily Prophet* each morning during breakfast. She devoured academic journals during lunch. Why she would *want* to devote more of her scant free time to Transfigurations or Charms was unfathomable to Lavender and Parvati.

As if that wasn't enough, during the evenings she could be found in the library or the Gryffindor common room, expanding her knowledge of Wizarding history and politics with some of the heaviest tomes Parvati and Lavender had ever seen. There was reading material in abundance in a library as fine as Hogwarts', of course, but Hermione Granger alone seemed to have made the rounds of each and every shelf, consuming all possible offerings. Evidently, she even had to repeat herself for lack of new reading material...they'd lost count of the number of times she'd reread *Hogwarts, A History*.

She was truly a bizarre teenager, in her roommates' view. They regularly encouraged her to forgo extra credit work in favor of a cup of hot cocoa in the kitchens, but Hermione would shake her head. All their offers of makeovers and manicures...six years' worth of makeovers and manicures!...were similarly politely declined. Thus, when they found her one winter evening outlining a proposal for a research project with Madam Pomfrey, they both threw up their hands in disgust.

"When do you sleep?" Parvati demanded, slamming a hand over Hermione's parchment. "Honestly, Hermione, it's not healthy...even for *you*. How will you have any time to do this? Seventh year will be busy enough."

Hermione gently set down her quill. "I have evenings and weekends," she began, stopping when Lavender rolled her eyes.

"Take a break, Hermione. Honestly, do something frivolous. Do something *fun*."

"A mediwizardry research project *would* be fun..."

But Lavender barreled on, undeterred. "Read a magazine with us or something! *Please*. You're nothing short of *exhausting*. I feel worn out just looking at you every evening."

"I haven't the time for a magazine," she said with a frown. "I appreciate the offer, but once I'm done with this, I really need to focus on reviewing for Charms..."

Parvati and Lavender glanced excitedly at one another, their eyes gleaming. Hermione quieted, and a suspicious look crept over her features. "Now what? What's your issue with studying for Charms?"

"Actually," Parvati murmured, wrapping a hand around Hermione's wrist and tugging her to her feet, "now that you mention it, we *would* use some help with Charms."

"We've just looked through the last issue of *Witch Weekly*, you see, and there's a very interesting charm we're anxious to try," Lavender elaborated.

Hermione reluctantly left her quill and papers on her desk, picked up her wand, and allowed herself to be led to Lavender's bed, which was already strewn with the Lavender and Parvati's evening reading...none of which was remotely academic in nature. Her frown expanded, and Lavender hastened to add, "It's very advanced magic...the magazine even warns that you shouldn't bother to try if you haven't got at least an Exceeds Expectations in your Charms NEWT."

"I should think you would both be capable of at least an Exceeds Expectations," Hermione said dismissively, turning back toward her desk. Her patience was visibly wearing thin. "If you'll excuse me..."

"Just try it for us," Parvati pleaded. "We've both tried already, and it doesn't seem to be working. Lavender got some rubbish about a five-year engagement but nothing beyond that, and we're almost certain it told me that I won't marry at all."

Both Lavender and Parvati were deeply distressed by the news they'd received after ordering the product in question, which, to the casual Muggle observer, would have appeared to be a basic Ouija board. Lavender murmured a quick Levitation Charm, causing an imitation engagement ring that had been lying alongside the board to rise suddenly into the air. It hovered over the center of the board, which boasted the full alphabet, *yes* and *no*, and the numbers zero through nine.

Hermione experimentally pushed a finger against the floating ring, which quivered slightly and bounced back into place over the letter G. "I don't follow," she said shortly.

Parvati sighed. "It's a Matrimony Monitor! All a witch has to do is cast the basic charm to divine whether or not she'll get married..."

"...and the board tells you yes or no, and gives you details about the length of your engagement," Lavender finished. "Of course, it doesn't tell you *when* you'll get engaged, which is really a shame..."

"...or how to change your current life course so you *will* get engaged," Parvati muttered darkly.

Hermione gave her roommates a searching look and crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Exactly how much did you pay for this thing?"

"Who cares?" Lavender said breezily. "You focus too much on *cost* all the time. This is a great investment, Hermione. All we have to do is make sure that our decisions don't negate our chances of getting married in the future."

"So you're going to base your life choices on a cheap plastic imitation ring that hovers over a board," Hermione said flatly.

"You're oversimplifying things, as usual," Parvati insisted. She and Lavender sat cross-legged on the bed, tugged on her Hermione's arm, and dragged her down with them. "Telling you whether you will or won't get married is just the Monitor's basic function. I mean, obviously if you've made an irreversible decision you might be in trouble, but if it tells you you've just ruined your chances for marriage, sometimes you can go back and fix it."

Lavender nodded. "If you just broke up with him and the Matrimony Monitor suddenly changes its tune..."

"...take him back!" Parvati nodded vigorously. "Besides, I doubt the ring is plastic. Have you ever known Zonko's to use plastic in their products?"

The scowling expression on Hermione's face clearly suggested that she didn't think much of Zonko's products irrespective of their constituents.

"And we haven't even told you about the best part yet," said Lavender, noticing that Hermione's gaze was beginning to drift back toward her desk and the loads of homework still awaiting her. Infusing her tone with new enthusiasm, she continued, "If you're powerful enough to cast a Compatibility Charm, it can even tell you the *characteristics* of the man you're going to marry. And if you're not currently on the path to marriage, it helps you narrow down your options to focus on the most promising candidates!"

Hermione still looked skeptical. "I wish I could help, but I really need to focus on work right now."

"Just try casting it for us," Parvati pleaded. She held up the manual containing the details of the Compatibility Charm enticingly. "Neither of us is powerful enough to get it to work, but we can still learn our future husbands' traits if someone else casts the Charm. Honestly, Zonko's claim it's an 'extra enhancement,' but the Compatibility Charm is really the reason we bought the thing in the first place."

It seemed that their cajoling had worn her down at last. Hermione shifted in her seat, took up her wand, and muttered resignedly, "All right, fine. Who's first?"

If there had been any doubt in Lavender and Parvati's minds that Hermione Granger was powerful enough to cast the Compatibility Charm, it vanished the moment they saw the bright pink sparks issue from her wand. The vapor seemed to envelop them, and the engagement ring still hovering between the three girls began vibrating madly. It jerked around the board, stopping here and there, and Lavender raced to transcribe its proclamations.

For a "cheap plastic imitation," as Hermione had so disdainfully phrased it, the ring was quick to make its decisions. In fewer than ten minutes, they had determined that Lavender's future husband would be a shopkeeper of average wealth, above average height, and exceptionally neat personal habits, and Parvati...though still not, at the moment, destined to marry...should narrow down her search to brown-haired wizards with some postgraduate education and large feet if she wished to be lucky in love.

The moment Lavender's quill ceased scratching, Hermione rose to return to her homework. Lavender's hand on her knee arrested her movement. "What about you?" she said solicitously. "The manual says if you're powerful enough to cast the Compatibility Charm on yourself, you get extraordinarily accurate results!"

"I don't really care whether this board thinks my future boyfriend will have large feet or clean our kitchen very frequently," she replied.

"It's not like it's going to give you a name," Parvati pointed out, "just some general parameters. Come on! Have some fun for once. It'll take all of three minutes, and then you can spend the rest of the term drawing up plans for your research project."

"Unless you already know who you want to marry, and you're afraid it'll say you haven't got a chance," Lavender teased.

Hermione's brows knit together, and she worried unconsciously at her bottom lip. Lavender and Parvati were astonished. There had been Viktor Krum and the ongoing flirtations with Ron Weasley, of course, but Hermione had evinced no serious interest in any other wizard. The way she was fidgeting, twirling her wand in her fingers and looking nervously at the Matrimony Monitor, was entirely out of character.

"Aren't you a *little* bit curious?" Parvati said softly. "Here, let me start." Raising her wand, she trilled out the initial charm, inquiring of the Matrimony Monitor whether Hermione was destined to marry. Hermione snorted and put on an indifferent face, but Lavender and Parvati noticed immediately that she kept her eyes trained intently on the board as it confirmed that Hermione Granger, given her current life trajectory, was indeed destined to marry.

That seemed to do the trick. Her interest piqued, Hermione resumed her seat on Lavender's bed and, with a flourish and a clear voice, invoked the Compatibility Charm for her own benefit. They watched as pink vapor issued forth once more, and the ring snapped instantaneously into action. It wove to and fro, indicating letters almost too quickly for Lavender to copy them.

"*Powerful*," Lavender and Parvati recited, while Hermione simply mouthed the words silently, her eyes growing wider and her attention more rapt as the ring painted its picture of her future husband. "*Intelligent. Incisive. Loyal.*"

On and on went the ring. Hermione's husband would be highly educated. He would be respected. He would be feared.

"Feared?" Lavender echoed dubiously. "Who is this referring to, the Director of Azkaban? Who would really want to marry this guy?"

He would be tall. He would be fierce. He would be protective. He would be intuitive. He would be an excellent father, and he would be dark.

Parvati frowned at that. "Does it mean dark, or, you know, *Dark*?"

"Can't distinguish upper from lower case," Lavender muttered with a shrug as she scribbled. "And stop distracting me. *Athletic. Driven.* Thank Merlin, I think it's stopping finally! Like any one wizard could be all of these things at once. He'd end up in St. Mungo's with an anxiety attack."

She offered Hermione the paper on which she'd written the many adjectives describing the future Mr. Granger, but Hermione declined. She rose abruptly to her feet and snatched her warm winter cloak from the back of her desk chair. "Thanks anyway, but my legs have fallen asleep. I think I'll go for a walk."

"Are you sure?" Parvati called, but Hermione was already out the door.

Lavender shook her head. "Just when I thought we could get her to have some *fun*. She really is strange."

Though she heard all of Lavender's comment, Hermione didn't break her stride. What she hadn't told them...what she was still coming to grips with herself...was that she knew perfectly well whom she'd marry, given the chance. She'd married him in her fantasies. She'd had him numerous times, body and soul, every night as she closed the curtains surrounding her bed and buried herself and her traitorous thoughts under the blankets.

Exiting the common room, she ignored the Fat Lady's greeting and headed immediately for the darkest, least populated corridor she could find. She knew perfectly well that Lavender and Parvati had been able to tell she desperately wanted the Matrimony Monitor to indicate one man in particular. Her cheeks were still pink with the thought of their appraising gazes.

Turning a corner, she paused to lean against the wall, closing her eyes in appreciation of the cool stone against her back. Her fantasies had become such an integral part of her private life that the mere thought of someone glimpsing her desires made her feel light-headed. She couldn't have revealed to her closest friends the object of her nocturnal imaginings even had she wanted to. Ginny might have endeavored to be sympathetic, but she wouldn't have truly understood. Harry and Ron had always despised him too deeply, always announced so cavalierly that they knew his true nature and where his loyalties lay.

But Hermione couldn't seem to stop her thoughts from straying beyond the unpleasantness of his public façade, speculating as to what lay beneath. Perhaps it was foolish of her to believe that it *was* a façade, she reflected as she resumed strolling through the deserted castle.

A quick glance at her watch confirmed that Lavender and Parvati had taken up more of her evening than she'd anticipated. The seventh floor was deeply shadowed, moonlight catching the burnished toes of her boots when she passed the small windows scattered at intervals along the corridor.

They afforded her a decent view of the Forbidden Forest, but it wasn't enough. They were small and cramped, their panes distorting the dusky contours of the trees. Her breath caught in her throat, and she took off at a rapid pace for the Astronomy Tower.

Nothing...no feature in Hogwarts, not even the dungeon halls he stalked...beckoned to Hermione like the Forbidden Forest. Her heart refused to calm its racing until she crested the topmost step and found herself in the crisp night air of the Astronomy Tower. She drew in a shuddering breath and crossed her arms, shivering. She'd told herself that she would spend the evening focusing on her studies in a desperate bid to overlook his movements. She desperately wanted the strength to stay in her cozy room with her roommates rather than make her weekly pilgrimage to this place.

But she was here now, and she needed to see him, to remind herself that he moved and breathed, to reflect on the raw, intimidating physicality of his presence. She leaned over the ledge in a practiced movement, her eyes automatically trained on the ground floor of the castle, seeking the door through which he would exit. Lord Voldemort was nothing if not demanding, and Hermione was observant. She knew that the Potions master reported to his lord for regular sessions. She could have safely bet a dozen Galleons that as soon as the clock struck eleven, the door would swing open silently. Her professor would leave his dungeon lair, stalking quickly into the depths of the Forest. She could only assume he sought some distance Portkey, or a place from which to Disapparate.

Only seconds remained. The deep, reverberating toll of the bell migrated along her spine. She noticed first the way the moonlight shifted, catching the door as it swung outward. It never betrayed his movements with a sound. One of his arms emerged first as he crept through.

To the casual observer, he would simply have been a figure cloaked head to toe in black; looking more closely, the rapid pace with which his long legs traversed the distance to the Forest and the breadth of his shoulders under the cloak marked him as male, and tall. His Death Eater mask had never been visible. Hermione suspected that he shrank it and stowed it in the deep pockets of his robes, which were an inky black even darker than the Forbidden Forest itself.

Hermione could only imagine the horror his life had become...accountable to Albus Dumbledore during the days and facing Lord Voldemort in the early hours of morning, walking constantly on a razor-thin ledge. He must have long since left behind such childish notions as total honesty and outright deceit. He played a part infinitely more nuanced, portraying himself and his motives only in shades of the murkiest gray.

It seemed a cruel joke, Hermione thought, that Harry and Ron should be so convinced they knew what kind of person Severus Snape truly was. Hermione couldn't imagine how *he* could have kept hold of his sense of self, having been the servant of two masters for so many years.

As he drew nearer to the border of the Forest, she became aware of a low thrum in her abdomen; her entire body pulsed with the need to reach out and miraculously pluck him from the Hogwarts landscape, pulling him away from everything that threatened him. She wanted to find some distant room in the castle to which no one ever ventured and create for him a new lair, a sanctuary in which no one could threaten him. She wanted painfully to care for him herself, to see his every need fulfilled.

Her heightened awareness of him compelled Lavender and Parvati's words to run through her mind once more. Powerful. Loyal. Intelligent. Incisive. Driven. Feared.

Dark, in more ways than one, but the board hadn't once implied that he was evil.

In answer to your question, girls, she thought tearfully, there is only one man who could possibly be imbued with all those qualities And Hermione Granger had known for

some time that she desired to give herself only to him.

Each time she stole a moment of his privacy, she counted down the seconds until his form merged with the darkness of the trees.

Three.

Two.

One.

He melded into the vastness of the Forbidden Forest, and Hermione sent with him a silent prayer for his safety.