

Letting Go

by irishredlass

Severus Snape has been named the new Headmaster of Hogwarts. Before he can assume his new duties with a clear conscience, he must first bury his wife and child. How does Hermione help him?

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 9

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Severus re-cast the prolonged Stasis Charm on the lifeless bodies before him. This was a more advanced charm than what was typically used to preserve potions for a limited time...instead, they would remain as such until he reversed the charm himself.

As he gazed upon the features of his wife and child, there was a part of him that wanted to keep them just as they were... forever. Had it been so long? It seemed like only yesterday little Melissa had happily thrown herself into his arms, on one of the rare occasions he was able to steal a visit home, her curls bouncing and her beautiful brown eyes dancing with mischief. No one would believe that such a beautiful, outgoing and loving child had come from the surly Potions Master.

Soon he would no longer be in his long-time quarters in the dungeons, and he needed to put these last vestiges of his past to rest. With Minerva's passing, Severus Snape would...once again...become Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. This time he wanted to do things differently... but in order to do so, he had to say goodbye.

When he had first put Helena and Melissa under stasis, it had been a necessity...not even Albus had known of them. In hopes that perhaps this one small corner of happiness could be spared from the nightmare he had brought upon himself, Severus had concealed his family through the years of "peace" preceding...and the first six years of...Harry Potter's career at Hogwarts. No one had known that the year the boy had started at Hogwarts, Severus Snape's Muggle wife had given birth to a daughter; no one knew on the night Charity Burbage had died, so had a piece of Severus Snape.

That was the night the Dark Lord discovered Severus had a weakness.

After having watched Charity suspended before him...looking at him, pleading with him...his Occlumency had slipped; it had been only for a fraction of a second, but it had been enough to give Voldemort a glimpse of Severus' secret. In that brief moment, it was not an image of Professor Burbage begging for her life...but Helena. The unfamiliar face had sent the Dark Lord careening through his spy's mind, madly searching for the identity. Severus had struggled to regain control without alerting

Voldemort, but the damage had been done.

Voldemort's first act after Burbage's death was to murder the family of his most trusted spy.

That was also the night the Dark Lord had all but ensured his spy would do everything and anything to aid Harry Potter in ridding the world of his rejuvenated, fetid soul.

As Severus brushed an errant curl from Melissa's smooth brow, he was tumbled back in his mind to a time when he had known love and laughter.

"Papa, stay!" Melissa had been insistent, but Severus, knowing his duty, had gently extracted himself from her arms as her tears began to fall.

"Hush, love," he had murmured, his baritone barely a rumble in his chest, as he had rocked his inconsolable child and wiped her tears away with a gentle hand. "Sprite, I want nothing more than to stay here with you and Mum, but I have to go. Remember our song until I come back."

Sniffling, she had rubbed her moist cheek on his robes, and as her thumb had found its way to her rose petal mouth, she had murmured, "Please sing it, Papa?"

That was the last time he had held his baby girl... the very last time.

Looking back, he wished he had stayed. He wished he had walked away from everything: Voldemort, Dumbledore, the wizarding world, and Unbreakable Vows he damned. Had he stayed, he would have surely died when he failed to fulfill his Vow to Dumbledore, but his child...his beautiful child...might have lived.

Shaking himself from the memory, Severus readied himself for Minerva McGonagall's funeral. Next September, he would be reinstated as Headmaster; fortunately, summer lay ahead, so he had two months to see to the burial of his wife and daughter. No longer in his quarters...but they would be in his heart, always and forever.

The sun was high in the noon-day sky. It appeared that every wizard from Great Britain and beyond had made the journey to bid farewell to one of their own. The only shadow cast was from Dumbledore's white tomb...Minerva, too, had requested permission to be buried on Hogwarts grounds. Severus wondered if this was to become a tradition for Headmasters and mistresses who died while still overseeing the school. He shuddered to think one day he, too, might be laid to rest on the grounds of what had been his home, his sanctuary, and his prison for most of his life. He made a mental note to purchase a third plot when making arrangements for Helena and Melissa...he wanted to be near *them*, not on this windy hillside overshadowed by the castle and all it represented.

Severus stood at the back as he watched people milling before the services began. He knew Minerva had made the arrangements herself when the Healers had told her there was no hope of recovery. Though she was young in wizarding years, the damage done to her heart during Umbridge's tenure at Hogwarts had taken its toll. She had been in a gradual decline since the end of the war, and now she was gone. Severus felt as though everyone who had mattered had died. Although he and Minerva had never displayed their affection for one another, it was there all the same...she was the mother he wished his own had been. He hoped whoever had been engaged for the service would be able to do justice to her memory.

Severus' thoughts were interrupted by the haunting call of bagpipes floating across the air. Realizing the service was about to begin, he took his seat. He recognized the song without having to look at the lyrics printed on the parchment in his hand: *Going Home*. No voice broke the beauty and clarity of the bagpipes wafting on the wind. (lyrics below)

He felt a chill course along his spine. Either the Funeral Director knew Minerva McGonagall well, or had had enough respect for her to follow instructions *Perhaps some of both*, Severus thought as he felt unbidden tears gather at the corners of his eyes. By the end of the funeral, there was not a dry eye to be found. No one was left unmoved by the tribute paid to the late Headmistress. Eulogies were spoken by those who had known and loved her...not by unwelcome Ministry officials grandstanding for their own political gain. The music selected reflected the heart and soul of the deceased without being maudlin. The services concluded with Winter Solstice Song (lyrics below)...a song Severus knew to be a particular favorite of Minerva's, and so fitting it should be played now as she entered her longest night. He recalled how Minerva had spoken in her last months of all she wished to do and had yet to accomplish, and how she had hoped death would bring her the chance to complete work she felt would be best finished without the hindrance of her ailing body. He hoped she was right.

As the last strains of music died, Severus looked at the back of the funeral programme. He wanted to know who had so tastefully sent Minerva off to her rest...perhaps they would do justice to the memories of his wife and child. His eyes flickered to the bottom of the parchment which read:

H.G. Funeral Directors ~ We Care.

16 Belkamp Row

London, England

Post or Owl

Severus was surprised...the establishment could not be entirely wizarding, as it accepted Muggle post. This would make things easier; Helena had been a Muggle, and he did not want his private business bandied about the wizarding world. This way, he could do the right thing without bringing undue attention to himself...no one in the magical world knew he had married and fathered a child, and if news of their funeral were to get out there would be many questions... questions he did not have the heart to answer. Yes, a Muggle service would be best.

Going Home

Going home. Going home. I'm a-going home.

Quiet-like some still day, I'm just going home.

It's not far, just close by, through an open door.

Work all done, cares laid by, Going to fear no more;

Mother's there expecting me, Father's waiting, too.

Lot's of folks gathered there. All the friends I knew.

Morning star lights the way, restless dream all done.

Shadows gone, break of day, real life just begun.

There's no break, there's no end, just a-living on;

Wide awake, with a smile, going on and on.

Going home. Going home, I'm just going home.

It's not far, just close by, through an open door.

Lyrics by: William Arms Fisher and Bob Bible

## Winter Solstice Song

On the longest night we search for the light,  
And we find it deep within.  
Open your eyes to embrace what is wise,  
And see the light of your own soul shining.  
Enter the night and you'll find the light,  
That will carry you to your dreams.  
Enter the night, let your spirit take flight,  
In the field of infinite possibilities  
Wrap up in the cloak of starry darkness my child,  
And you'll find the center of all things.  
For from this space of the deepest dark place,  
Life Eternal does spring.  
Enter the night and you'll find the light,  
That will carry you to your dreams.  
Enter the night, let your spirit take flight,  
In the field of infinite possibilities  
So when you find that spark  
When you dream in the dark,  
Hold it close to your heart and know.  
All that you see is all that can be  
When you give birth to the dreams of your soul.  
Enter the night and you'll find the light,  
That will carry you to your dreams.  
Enter the night, let your spirit take flight,  
In the field of infinite possibilities.

Lyrics by: Lisa Thiel

Hermione arrived to the office a half an hour before business hours began. This gave her time to consume the first, necessary jolt of caffeine and go over the day's calendar. She sighed to herself when she saw it would be a full day...three Muggle appointments and one wizarding. She looked over the names to see if she knew any of the families. Two of the Muggle families were most certainly unknown to her, but the third rang a depressing bell of familiarity...Margaret Creevey (deceased), Dennis Creevey (son to the deceased). Hermione had known that Mrs. Creevey had been diagnosed with cancer. She had been through every known treatment...Muggle and wizarding...but even magic cannot cure everything. She was thankful to see Dennis was her next to last appointment...it was sure to be draining.

When she had started her business, it was with the determination that every funeral or memorial would be unique to the parties involved. She had suffered through too many services during which the deceased was barely mentioned by name as countless politicians used her friends' deaths as means to promote their own political agendas. Ginny Weasley-Potter's funeral, a mere eighteen months after the fall of Voldemort, had been the final straw...not one person who spoke actually described the vibrant young witch; her love of horticulture, flying, her friends and family. Instead, she heard how, "Ginevra Molly Weasley-Potter's death was a tragic loss because she was a hero of the wizarding world." Those who knew and loved the family understood the tragedy was that Harry was now raising their young daughter alone, and that she would never know her mother's laugh.

Six months later, after Hermione had just finished her licensure to become a Funeral Director in both worlds, she had arrived at Godric's Hollow for a visit to discover the baby in sore need of a bath...as was her father...the dirty dishes untouched in what appeared to be weeks, and dust an inch thick on every surface. "Oh Ginny," Hermione had sighed.

She had stalked over in front of the television Ginny herself had charmed to work in the wizarding house as a wedding present for Harry.

Harry had jumped visibly. "Huh? Whah, oh... hi Hermione," he'd mumbled as he had settled back down and stared in the direction of the video game he had been playing.

Hermione had remained in place, blocking his view of alien invasion and war. Harry had leaned to the side, trying to see around her. "Hermione! Can't this wait? Just one more level and I'll beat the game," he had whined.

"No, Harry, it can't wait!" she had snapped. "You have a daughter who needs you now, not whenever you come up from that stupid game long enough to realize she's still alive. You're all she has!" Harry's face had crumpled, and his body had seemed to fold in on itself. Hermione continued, "Molly says you've not been by in more than two months. I heard you were fired from the Aurory. What has happened to you?"

"It just doesn't seem real, Hermione. I keep thinking that Gin is going to walk through that door any minute, talking about the flowers blooming in the garden, and..." That was when he had broken. Hermione had moved to her friend's side and held him as he cried. His body had shuddered with the effort of his sobs, and it had seemed his soul was purging all of the pent up hurt and pain of a lifetime. Finally, the wails of a wounded animal had changed to the shuddering and hiccupping of a body spent of its grief. Hermione had leaned back, holding his exhausted body upright. She had brushed the hair from his face as he looked at her with pain-filled eyes. "Her birthday is next week," he'd whispered as more tears had silently fallen.

Ginny Potter's memorial service was the first Hermione had planned.

The following week...on her birthday...Harry, the Weasleys, and as many school friends as Hermione could muster, had gathered at the graveside. This time, instead of grandstanding speeches, there were memories shared, "Remember when Mum caught her sneaking into the broom shed?" "How about the time she tried to bring the

dahlia bulbs to bed with her because she thought they would be cold in the dirt!" The stories had gone from the sublime to the ridiculous, each recorded by a charmed quill Hermione had devised for the occasion. These were the memories Harry could share with their daughter when she asked about her mother. Some...like the time she was covered in Stinksap by startling a *Mimulus Mimbletonia*...Hermione was sure Ginny would prefer remained unshared, but each one spoke of the woman they loved and how she had enriched their lives.

As the sun had moved low in the western sky, Hermione had brought out a bag filled with bulbs, seeds, starters, and many hand trowels. She had walked to where Harry, Molly, and Arthur stood talking, Molly cuddling her granddaughter. She'd handed each a trowel and gently removed baby Lily to her own arms. As she'd passed the bag to Harry, she'd said, "I want you to go plant a garden right there, over Ginny, so each season she will have her flowers."

Harry had visibly swallowed, then nodded his head before, together, the three had moved to where Ginny had been buried in the Potter plot. They had soon been joined by the remaining Weasleys and their friends. The initial whispered conversations and tears had soon given way to laughter. Hermione had remained the small distance away, content to hold Ginny's daughter and watch as Harry took the first steps to healing and letting go.

Hermione smiled at the memory...that had been three years ago...but as her first family member was due to arrive in less than ten minutes, she couldn't afford to spend any more time in the past. She did make a mental note to stop by Godric's Hollow one day soon to say hello and spoil her god-daughter a bit. She had no more concerns where Harry was concerned...unless it was his desire to get Lily on a broom when she was too young for such things. He had become a wonderful, attentive father.

## Chapter Two

### Chapter 2 of 9

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Severus paced the elegantly appointed sitting room as he cursed. *What right do they have to ask such personal questions?* "How long have you known the deceased?" *Is it not enough for them to know this was my wife and child?* "What religious or cultural backgrounds do you and/or the deceased practice?"

As if he would tell some anonymous funeral director? All they had to do was open up the ground, say a few words, and be done...he was not about to opethat can of Pixies.

He stopped by the supine form of his wife. "Ah, Lena, what am I to do? They want to know so many things I've not thought of in all of these years... isn't it enough that you and Bee will forever be lost to me?" There was no answer... never again would he hear the melodious lilt of his beloved wife's voice, nor the laughter of his little Bumble Bee.

Drawing himself up, he checked his appearance one last time before Apparating to the location included with the questionnaire. He would keep the appointment. He would bury his family. But he would not give in to their idle curiosity.

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Hermione looked up as she heard a knock on the door. "Yes, Elyse?"

"Umm, your four o'clock appointment is here...early, but I thought you might want to know."

"That'll be fine. Please tell Mr. Smith I'll be with him momentarily." Hermione set to straightening her desk before switching her Wizarding Robes for a less conspicuous suit jacket. Hermione then walked over to her door and laid her hand upon the frame. With her murmured incantation, the door changed to a one-way window...it still appeared as a door to the outer office, but this gave her an opportunity to view the family and get an idea of what to expect.

Hermione's eyes widened as she took in the man sitting in her waiting room. If it weren't for the elegant Muggle suit and hair pulled back in a queue, she would have sworn she was looking at Severus Snape... but that was *impossible*.

Straightening her shoulders and checking the lay of her jacket one last time, Hermione opened the door and walked across the marble floor to greet her client. The click of her heels drew his attention...had Hermione been watching him more closely, she would have noted the flash of surprise in Mr. Smith's eyes before they were, once again, shuttered in blank neutrality.

"Mr. Smith? I'm Hermione Granger. Won't you come in?" She gestured toward her office, then stopped for a moment to dismiss Elyse for the day. She had a feeling this was going to be an *interesting* meeting...one that would require privacy and careful handling...as on closer inspection she was certain that Mr. Smith was, indeed, Severus Snape. But what was he doing in *her* office posing as a grieving widower?

When she entered the office, she found her former professor staring out the window.

"Professor Snape?"

Severus let out a sigh. "I should have known."

"Should have known what?"

"When Minerva said she had everything in order and was completely confident all of her wishes would be met...I should have known."

"You were at Professor McGonagall's service? I didn't see you there."

"Nor I, you. And had I connected you with the funerary, I assure you I'd not be here now."

"Professor, I do believe you have me at a disadvantage...why are you here?"

"You read the letter of inquiry and responded with a foot-long questionnaire...what is there to be confused by, Ms. Granger?"

"You really *do* have a family you are seeking a memorial service for?" she sputtered as her voice rose in question.

"Yes," he sighed.

"I'm sorry, Professor...I didn't know you had married since the war ended."

"The details are not important, Ms. Granger, other than how quickly you can procure a burial site and have an interment performed. I wish to have this matter settled post haste," he snapped.

"Once again, I am sorry, sir, but you have requested my services...had you looked over the brochure I sent, you would know the details are very important." Hermione didn't understand why, but his attitude raised her hackles, and she found herself responding to her client with far less diplomacy than she normally prided herself on.

"Ms. Granger, I am a busy man. I do not have time to school you on my familial history, nor is it any of your business. Just tell me when ..."

"No, Professor," Hermione interrupted. "I'm sorry, but if you don't care to adhere to the guidelines and practices I have outlined in the pamphlet you received, then I think it's best you contact someone else."

"Why, you insufferable..."

"Yes, yes, *know-it-all*...Merlin knows I heard it enough from you during my six years at Hogwarts...regardless, I take my profession seriously, and I will not compromise. I will not provide a generic, unfeeling memorial for any client...not even for the next Headmaster of Hogwarts."

Hermione turned away, effectively dismissing him from her office. "I think you can see yourself out. Good day, sir."

She presumed the slamming of the door meant that Professor Snape had taken her at her word.

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The nerve of the witch!

Severus furiously paced the parlor floor. *How dare she send me away, telling me that either I conform to her wishes or I find someone else? Who did she think she was talking to, one of her dunderheaded friends? She has no right to delve into my thoughts, my feelings...no right!*

He would just find someone else. There were plenty of other funeral establishments throughout Great Britain. He did not want the Wizarding World to know, and if he used Granger, he had no doubt she would tell all of her ridiculous friends.

He should have Obliviated her before he left...too late, now.

Severus spent the next fortnight covertly observing funerals and memorial services throughout the British Isles. All of them were too cold, too maudlin, or just wrong.

It took another week before he sent an Owl.

Ms. Granger,

I request an appointment to speak to you once more regarding a memorial service for my family. I await your notification of time and date.

SS

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"Professor, I have to admit I was surprised to receive your Owl," Hermione greeted Severus. "I thought your family would have been buried by now, and you would be preparing for the coming school year."

"Indeed, I had thought the same, Ms. Granger...apparently you do know it all." Severus sneered, already convinced it had been a mistake to request this meeting.

Hermione maintained her placid expression, fighting the urge to roll her eyes at the man's comments...honestly, she hadn't suggested this meeting. She sighed. "Professor, I'm sure we could sit here trading insults all day long." She ticked them off her fingers. "Greasy Git, Bat of the Dungeons, et cetera... Instead, could we please get down to business?"

Severus clenched his teeth. "Agreed."

She smiled. "Now, how can I be of assistance? I was under the impression you did not approve of my professional approach."

"I do not. However, yours is somewhat less offensive than others, so I shall attempt to comply with your invasive, idle curiosity."

Hermione had a sinking feeling this was going to be...as her parents had always said...like pulling teeth. "Perhaps we should approach this a different way."

"I'm listening."

"Would you consent to my seeing them? I hope to gain a better understanding of the situation."

"Is that necessary?" Severus blanched.

"Professor, I cannot help you without access even to the bodies," Hermione replied in exasperation. "They need to be prepared for interment. At the very least, a Stasis Charm...."

"They are already in stasis," he interrupted.

Hermione frowned. "When were the charms applied?"

"Approximately six hours after death," he replied tightly.

"And that was..?"

"Is this really necessary?" he thundered.

Hermione looked at him, willing her face to hide how his growing agitation was affecting her...she was beginning to suspect she really didn't want to know the answer to her question.

Severus turned away from her. "*Fine*. If you *must* know, they have been in place, with regular renewal, for approximately six years."

"What?! You have had your wife and child in stasis *for six years*? But why?" Her voice rose as she lost her last hold on placid professionalism.

"*Do* use the brain everyone has heralded for so many years, Ms. Granger. Six years ago was the summer before what was to be your seventh year...can you think of any reason why I might need to have placed the charm? *Hmmm*?" He stared at her sourly.

Hermione was speechless. *Six years*?

"If you insist, we will go. Now." He reached out to grasp her arm. Hermione jumped. "Ms. Granger...as you well know...Side-Along-Apparition requires physical contact." He smirked.

"Y-yes, yes. Of course," she stuttered.

Without another word, Severus again reached for her arm, and Hermione felt the dizzying sense of being Apparated without direction. She opened her eyes to find herself in a typical...*Muggle*...parlor, staring at the apparently-Turkish rug on which she'd landed when Professor Snape released her arm immediately upon arrival.

Merely raising an eyebrow at her squeak of surprise when she toppled, he turned and walked purposefully through the house. "This way, if you please."

Hermione followed him through a formal dining room and what appeared to be a private sitting room before being led into what could only have been the master's study. Candles flared to life as he passed through the doorway. He waved his arm with a dramatic flourish to indicate two long library tables spaced close together in the center of the room.

Hermione could not stifle her gasp as her eyes came to rest on the late Mrs. Snape: her face still held the look of sheer terror she had died with. It was apparent she had been killed by the Killing Curse, but the Death Eaters had done more than that...Hermione could see where her blouse had been hastily repaired and barely covered the blood and bruising...the torture had gone on for some time before she died. One eye was blackened, her lip was split, and she could see the beginnings of a wound at her collar bone...Helena Snape had died afraid and in great pain.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione turned toward the child. In direct contrast to her mother, the child looked as though she were only napping and would awaken at any moment. Her dark brown hair was plaited down either side of her head, and her hand was curled along the side of her face. One lone thumb was out as though seeking the moist comfort of her mouth.

"What color were her eyes?" Hermione blurted out. She cringed at asking so callously, but...for some reason she didn't understand...she needed to know.

"Blue," Severus sighed, "like her mother's."

"And how old was she?" The information would be on the forms grudgingly filled out by the Professor, but she wanted to hear it from his mouth...

"Surely, this invasive questioning can't be necessary!" he bellowed. "Must you have every personal detail?"

Hermione took an involuntary step back at his vitriol, then squared her shoulders before looking him in the face. "Yes, I do. Age at death, birth date, and other vital statistics must be entered on the Certificate of Death."

Severus physically cringed at her last words.

"For that matter," Hermione continued, "we may have a few difficulties with the authorities, if they have been in stasis this long. They will want to know why they have not been buried before now."

"I don't suppose you would consider an Obliviate or well-placed Memory Charm?" Snape asked.

"N-no," Hermione stammered, shocked. "I will see to the necessary paperwork. I'll need to return tomorrow. Say, two o'clock?"

He barely had a chance to nod his consent before Hermione had turned on the spot, Apparating away with a soft pop.

## Chapter Three

### Chapter 3 of 9

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At two o'clock the next afternoon, Hermione rapped sharply on the door.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" Severus shouted as she breezed past him.

"What *is* all of this?" he further asked when he had caught up with her in the kitchen.

Looking up from her unpacking, Hermione held an aubergine in one hand and a bag of potatoes in the other. *This* is an aubergine, and these," she said, gesturing with her right hand before raising her left, "are potatoes."

"I know very well what aubergine and potatoes look like, Ms. Granger. What are they...and you...doing in my kitchen?"

Hermione sighed. "They're a portion of the ingredients for the Wake Dinner that must be prepared for tomorrow."

"*Wake dinner?* We never discussed this! There is to be no wake ...I told you...no one else is to know!"

"Yes, yes I know...no one else must know the great and terrible Potions Master was actually a loving husband and father..." Severus flinched. She continued, "I get it, and I respect it... but Professor, I am *not* burying your family without the proper observations, even if it is only the two of us present."

"Why?" he asked, sounding more defeated than angry.

"Why?" she repeated. "Because they were *people*, people who lived, breathed, loved, died, and mattered. They deserve this, and ... and so do you."

Hermione ducked her head, avoiding his eyes as she continued to unpack the grocery bags.

She finished her unpacking, noticing that Severus hadn't left the room in a huff, instead choosing to perch himself on a high-backed stool at the breakfast bar. At first it was unsettling...as unsettling as it had been when she was his student, to have him watching and tracking her movements...but soon she relaxed. Cooking and preparing food always had a calming effect on her.

As Hermione fell into the repetitious movement of peeling, she again spoke, "I'm making moussaka. Given the heritage you and Helena shared, I think a Greek Ceremony is the best way to proceed. And moussaka is one of my favorite dishes."

"You are familiar with Greek cuisine?"

She chuckled. "Oh, yes!"

He gave her a quizzical look, then gestured for her to continue.

"My maternal grandmother was Greek, the child of immigrants. Moussaka is a dish she taught my Mum, who later taught it to me. I spent a lot of time in the kitchen with Mum before I came to Hogwarts, and when I went home the first few summers, after that...Mum felt it important I learn the old ways, and that included the food of my heritage."

Hermione deftly began slicing the now-peeled aubergine, then layered it into a colander, pausing only to sprinkle the surface with kosher salt after each layer. As she worked, she continued her monologue...chattering about her Yiayia's cooking...before topping the colander with a weighted plate and moving to prepare the potatoes. Once she had them simmering, she looked over at Severus.

She smiled when she saw he had actually unbent enough to rest his chin in one hand as he watched her work...it was the most relaxed she'd ever seen him.

Feeling her eyes on him, he looked up from the colander in the sink and its slowly gathering drips of moisture that had seemingly entranced him.

His confusion was in his eyes, if not in his voice. "Why are you doing this, Ms. Granger?"

She sighed. "Do I need a reason?" This was always the hardest part of the career she had chosen, and it was made all the harder when she knew the families. Her former professor was not likely to appreciate her actions...she hoped she would escape with only minor hex wounds.

He hadn't answered her question...not that she'd expected him to.

She quietly explained, "You need to grieve...you need to let go of Helena and Melissa. What I do is give people a way to do so by honoring the deceased, their heritage, and their memory. You're of Greek ancestry, and it just so happens I am, as well. So, tonight I'm making moussaka...at least as far as the Béchamel sauce...tziki, and baklava; tomorrow morning we'll bury your wife and child in a private Greek Orthodox Ceremony in the family plot I located yesterday, and tomorrow evening we will eat in their honor."

"How dare you assume I have not already grieved for them!" he spat, his relaxed state evaporated in the wake of her words.

Hermione kept her eyes trained on the onions she was chopping as she answered calmly, "If you have, then all you need to do is toss some dirt and enjoy a good meal."

He gave no reply.

Hermione moved on to mincing the garlic, and soon the uncomfortable silence was filled with the sound of the crackling of fat as she fried off the lamb. The scents that filled the kitchen were a comforting mixture of the heavy, meaty smell of lamb mixed with aromatics (and just a hint of cinnamon), their calming familiarity keeping Hermione on-task under the unrelenting gaze that continued to study her every movement.

She was placing the second layer of aubergine on the moussaka when he finally spoke. "You seem quite comfortable in the kitchen, Ms. Granger."

She jumped at his remark...she'd allowed her mind to wander, fondly remembering the advice of her grandmother and mother to let the shape of the food work for her rather than against her... advice she put into practice in her career, as well.

"I am," she agreed, with a sad smile. "I feel closer to my family when I cook...especially when it's something Greek."

"Helena wasn't," he stated flatly.

Hermione paused, waiting for him to continue.

"During the school year, she and Melissa subsisted on packaged meals, but during the holidays/cooked." He smiled faintly. "I didn't mind...cooking is somewhat similar to potions."

She had an idea.

"Why don't you open the bottle of wine next to you; then you can help me get the tziki prepared before I tackle the real challenge for the evening." Hermione held her breath, waiting to see if he would comply or shout her down for giving him orders in his own house.

It was only after she inhaled the bouquet of the Greek white she'd brought from her own kitchen that she breathed a sigh of relief.

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Once Severus fell to dicing cucumbers...while simultaneously observing Hermione carefully measuring and combining sour cream, Greek yogurt, garlic, and dill...he

hazarded a question. "Ms. Granger... I've noticed that you refer to your mother in the past tense. Do you no longer see your parents?"

Hermione's shoulders stiffened at the question. "I haven't seen my parents since the summer before what would have been my seventh year," she answered, her voice nearly a whisper.

"Surely after all this time, it would be safe for you to visit... all of the known Death Eaters have been captured."

"Yes, I am sure it would be. But, you see, my parents no longer know they have a daughter." She could feel tears threatening to fall, but continued, "Before I set off with Harry and Ron on Dumbledore's mission, I placed a strong memory charm on my parents and sent them to Australia...it was the only thing I could think of to ensure their safety." Hermione chose to believe it was the onion she was mincing causing the tears flowing down her cheeks, not the overwhelming sadness and guilt that still plagued her.

Severus stared at her in surprise. "And you never returned to retrieve them?"

She looked up, the bleakness in her eyes something he recognized only too well from his own reflection. "Oh, I did, a few months after the final battle...Kingsley even offered to accompany me. But the memory charm had become permanent, you see.... not even the Unspeakable Kingsley summoned to help was able to reverse it. So, I left them there, where at least I know they're happy." Hermione forced a wobbly smile as she swiped at her cheeks with the backs of her hands.

"Few know. Harry, Ron, the Weasleys, Kingsley... oh, and the Unspeakable. He offered me a job as an Obliviator." She finished with a harsh laugh. "As if I would ever want to meddle with anyone's mind again."

"I... I'm sorry. I had no idea," Severus whispered.

Hermione met his eyes briefly before turning to the refrigerator to store the tsziki and pull out a cellophane package.

"This is the one thing I consider using magic to make, but every time the thought crosses my mind I hear my Yiayia telling me it only takes patience."

"And what would that be?"

"Baklava, of course. I may be a fair hand in the kitchen when it comes to cooking...and truly better at it in the Muggle way...but baking is not my strong suit."

"Ms. Granger, surely all this fuss is not necessary..." Severus protested.

"Nonsense. It's no fuss, and you can't have an authentic Greek meal without Baklava for dessert," Hermione countered, not noticing how Severus had paled.

He silently watched as she continued chopping first almonds, then walnuts in the food processor before adding sugar, cinnamon, and cloves. Hermione then squared her shoulders, as though preparing for battle...it was a small gesture, but enough to draw Severus' attention.

"This is the part I hate...I don't know what I always do wrong, but the phyllo never comes out flaky enough."

Severus eyed her workspace with the critical eye of a Potions master. "Where is the butter?"

"Butter?" Hermione asked, puzzled, as she consulted her recipe.

"Yes, butter," Severus reiterated crisply.

"The recipe doesn't call for butter...see for yourself." She offered him the printed page she had been working from.

"Did you learn nothing from your years as my student? A recipe is a guide, not a series of rules set in stone." His remonstrance reminded her of the impatience he had displayed in the classroom. "But of course, *you* were always adept at parroting answers from a book. Have you *never* learned to take any risks? How are you ever to become your own person if you are constantly relying on *others* to do your thinking for you? Now...get me some butter, before you turn this Baklava into a gummy mess with that water."

Hermione was stunned into silence by his outburst and reacted as she had in her school days...she quickly retrieved the butter from the refrigerator, no questions asked, and watched him as he precisely cut the phyllo into two stacks, then began layering them in the pan. He carefully brushed each layer with melted butter.

"You bake as well?" It was inane, but she felt compelled to break the awkward silence.

"No."

"But..."

"Lena... Helena was never much of a cook, but..." he paused, looking up at her and sadly shrugging his shoulders before adding the filling and covering it with another layer of phyllo.

In that moment...that simple, revealing movement...he'd looked just like any other man who had lost his wife and didn't know what he was going to do without her. He wasn't an invincible and infamous double spy, the stern Potions master of her school days, or even the implacable man that had entered her office less than a month ago...he was a man lost, alone, and set adrift in a world he no longer knew, in which he was unsure of his place.

Distracted by her moment of discovery, Hermione nearly missed a crucial step. "Wait!" She quickly cast a cooling charm over the pan as he reached for the serrated knife to score the top. "There."

He gave her a quizzical look.

"Yiayia always chilled it first to make it easier to score...using that bit of magic won't change the taste like preparing it entirely with magic would have done," she explained.

He simply nodded his head and finished this final task before sliding the pan into the oven.

## Chapter Four

Severus Snape has been named the new Headmaster of Hogwarts. Before he can assume his new duties with a clear conscience, he must first bury his wife and child. How does Hermione help him?

Hermione hesitated at the door.

She thought of the night before...she had never thought she'd see her former teacher so lost. The Baklava had been baked, and the honey sauce made and poured over it, in complete silence. Twice she'd tried to instigate a conversation, but had been met with stony silence and bleak black eyes that begged for peace. He hadn't acknowledged her last words as she left, warning him she would return in the morning to prepare the bodies for burial; he only hung his head in resignation of the events to come.

Hermione didn't know in what state she would find the man this morning...did he drink himself to sleep? Stay awake all night watching over the bodies of Lena and Melissa? ...but the interment was scheduled for two, and despite the ungodly early hour, there was much that needed to be done.

After knocking three times with no response, Hermione decided to brave the possibility of potentially dangerous wards on the home and tried a simple Alohamora...the door unlocked quietly and easily. Just as quietly, she made her way through the house. Traditionally, it should have been the role of a female family member...or lacking that, a close female friend...to prepare the bodies for burial. In this case, there was neither.

Hermione would see to the task herself.

It was fortunate the preservation spells used on Helena and Melissa did not prevent her from touching the bodies...only decomposition. Hermione wondered what drove a man, particularly a man like Severus Snape, to keep the bodies of his wife and child under stasis for six long years. Was it grief, guilt, remorse? Or ambivalence, as he appeared to want her to believe... recalling the look on his face last night, she didn't think it was ambivalence. No one could look so shattered and yet be unmoved by death.

She entered the darkened study. Once her eyes adjusted to the dimness, she could make out the sleeping form between the two resting bodies, his dark head resting on the table next to Helena's torso as, even in sleep, he held the hand of his child. Hermione could just make out the dark shadows under his eyes...he did not rest easily, and Hermione wondered what he dreamed of or what horror he was reliving as he kept vigil with his family.

Hating what she had to do, Hermione moved gingerly across the room and placed her hand gently on his shoulder. At the barest touch, he startled awake.

"How did you get in here? What are you doing here at this hour?" he demanded.

"I came through the front door...I'm here to prepare the bodies, as I told you last night." Hermione replied in what she hoped was a reassuring tone.

"About that...I have decided there is no need. There will be no burial today. Lena and Bee are fine where they are."

"What?"

"Don't worry, Ms. Granger, I will pay you for your time and services. But I am not burying my wife and child...not today, not ever. They shall remain here at home, and I will see to them on weekends and breaks. Nothing needs to change."

"Why have you suddenly decided on this course of action?"

"It's not sudden. I have tended them for six years, and I will continue to do so. You may go."

"No." Hermione said firmly. "I am not leaving, and you are not keeping your dead wife and child under stasis in your study for the rest of your life. I understand why you did through the war, and even these years since its end, but *it's time to let go.*"

"What do you know about letting go?" he spat. "Have you? Have you let go of your parents, your friends, people you love? Oh, yes, you've made a profession out of forcing others to let go by taking their families away and imprisoning them in the ground to rot while the living continue on, but have you?"

He was shouting now, standing between Hermione and his wife and child as though trying to protect them from her.

Shocked at his raw grief, Hermione took a step back. "This is not about me. This is about them, about you. You are moving on with your career by becoming Headmaster...how do you expect to ever move on with your life if you can't allow your wife and child to rest in peace?"

She drew a shuddering breath and continued, "You have already indicated that you will no longer have the time to return here every four to six weeks as you have in the past...do you know what will happen if the stasis begins to fail? Your wife and child will rot." Hermione hated herself for having to do this, but he gave her no choice. "Because of the length of time they've been in stasis, the decomposition will happen rapidly...in a matter of hours they will fully decompose. Is that what you want to come home to? Wouldn't it be better to give them peace? Don't they deserve peace?"

His horror was evident, as was the grief he was fighting to hold in check. "Have it your way," he mumbled as he fled the room.

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Once out of sight, Severus ran to the other side of the house. His chest constricted with pain over the images Ms. Granger had painted. Stumbling into his room, he fell to his knees as he reached the bedside and let his grief overcome him. As his body shuddered with suppressed emotion, he remembered: the first time he had met Helena, in a second-hand bookstore, her laughter on their first date, the day she had said 'yes' to his proposal of marriage, the day...against all odds...she told him she was pregnant... the first time he had placed Melissa's tiny body in his too-large hands, laughing about the wisdom of giving her the shape of his eyes...not his nose. She was his life, his soul, his sanity, and his sanctuary. When everything else was wrong, there was Lena: she had held him the night he had had to murder his friend and mentor...she had held him while he wept and thought he wanted to die himself.

And then she was gone. They were both gone.

He crawled onto the bed, his body too tired to do anything but draw shuddering breath after shuddering breath as he stared at the ceiling, lost in his memories.

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That was how Hermione found him, after she had prepared Helena and Melissa for what was to come. Tentatively, she sat on the side of the bed and took his hand. Blindly he turned toward her, wrapping his arms around her waist, still weeping. Unsure of what to do, she rubbed his back in soothing circles, as she had for Harry's daughter during Ginny's memorial.

"I can't do this; I can't put them in the ground. I can't do this alone."

"Sshhh... you're not alone...I will be with you. I promise."

He looked up at her. "*Promise? Promise me.*"

"I *promise*. Now you need to dress yourself. We must leave soon."

With one last shuddering breath, Severus released her from his grip, rolling away to face the other direction. "What must you think of me now?"

Hermione chose not to answer, instead quietly stating, "It's nearly time to meet the priest at the cemetery. I need you to pull yourself together and meet me in the front hall in fifteen minutes." She then left him to dress and gather his strength.

As Hermione approached a wide window, she looked up at the sky as rain poured down... as though the gods were reflecting the mood of the grieving man in the other room.

Severus had made it to the front hall on time, had calmly sat in the hearse as she drove to the cemetery, had shaken the hand of the priest who had said the appropriate words... and he had yet to speak himself. Not a sound passed his lips as they had lowered first one and then the other coffin into the ground...unmoving, barely breathing, watching as the earth slowly filled the grave.

The priest was gone. The grounds crew had gone. The canopy over the gravesite was gone.

"Sir..." No response.

"Professor Snape?" Hermione touched his arm, and still, there was no reaction.

"Severus? We need to go." She grasped his arm to gently lead him away.

"No, I'm not leaving. I can't do this. I can't leave them here alone." He spoke so softly, she strained to hear him. "We made plans. I was supposed to be the one to die. I was supposed to die in the war...not Lena, not Bee. I was supposed to die." Severus fell to his knees, clawing at the fresh, wet soil. I was the one that was supposed to go! I was *ready* to go first."

"Severus, stop!" Hermione kneeled beside him, wrapping her arms around his to stop him from digging.

"Let me go!"

"No!" In desperation, she closed her eyes and pictured the sitting room of Snape's house. Never before had she concentrated so hard*destination, determination, deliberation*. She felt the pull on her magic and the slight nausea that accompanied dual Apparition, then opened her eyes and released his arms.

He slumped over where he had landed.

"Come, let's get off the floor and out of these wet clothes."

He didn't stir.

Finally, through tugging, pulling, and shouting, Hermione managed to get him to his room. More arguing got his sodden jacket and muddy boots off, before she guided him to lie down on the bed. He never uttered a single word. She pulled a quilt over him, and still he stared into space not blinking... barely breathing.

## Chapter Five

### Chapter 5 of 9

Severus Snape has been named the new Headmaster of Hogwarts. Before he can assume his new duties with a clear conscience, he must first bury his wife and child. How does Hermione help him?

A/N: This story was originally written for the Autumn 2011 SS/HG Exchange as a gift for Droxy. Her prompt was: EWE. Single Hermione takes a profession that allows her to work in both the Muggle and magical world. She's a funeral home owner and director. One day Snape shows up; he's there to bury his wife and child. Have HG help SS through the grieving process. SS is in a lot of pain. Looking for hurt/comfort/angst/romance-or not. Happy or not happy ending is up to you. I am not JKR and my betas rock.

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He did remember to eat. It was a near thing, but after five hours of lying on his bed, staring into nothing while tears tracked his face and shudders racked his thin frame, his stomach reminded him he was still alive. If he had been capable of feeling anything beyond bone deep grief and pain, he would have felt gratitude for Hermione Granger when he opened his refrigerator to find the tzatziki sauce, a tray of cold cuts and pita bread...he would not starve, and he was grateful, though there was no room in his heart to feel it. His heart felt so empty, yet there was no room to feel anything...it was full of nothing... a vat of emptiness.

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Severus had been almost catatonic when she left, but there was nothing more she could do...he needed time to rest and come to terms with the reality that the next time he walked into the study, Helena and Melissa would not be there waiting for him.

Hermione waited two days...it wasn't easy, but she waited. She worried, she castigated herself for becoming overly involved with her client, then she worried some more. Never before had she seen someone so demoralized by death. She had been in the business now for almost five years, and never had she seen someone so lost...not even Harry. She took a deep breath and knocked on the front door anxiously, dreading what she would be faced with. Would he answer the door? Would she have to force her way in? Some small part of her feared she would find he had gone to be with Lena and Bee.

When he opened the door with a dour look on his face...unshaven and eyes bloodshot...all she could do was smile, as inappropriate as it might seem.

"Severus..."

"What are you doing here?" he snarled. "Haven't you done enough? Or have you come to gloat?"

"What?" She was shocked.

"Are you *happy* now?" Severus asked, "I'm alone. Isn't that what I deserve after all I have done in my life? Well, be on your way so I can rot here."

Hermione pushed her way past him. "I will do no such thing, and I don't know how you came to such a conclusion."

"How I came to such a conclusion?" he backed her into a corner, his nose nearly touching hers. She could smell the Firewhisky on his breath. "Perhaps it could be because *you forced* me to bury them! You are the one who took them away, put them in the ground...where I will never be able to see them again, to touch them." His voice broke with the last. "They're gone."

She drew a sharp breath as realization dawned. "Yes, Severus, they were buried. You gave them the respect they deserved because you loved them... but that does not mean they're gone...they live on within you."

"How sweet! Pardon me if I am not comforted by your words," he snarled, his tone venomous. "I would much rather my wife and child *be here*, not just a *memory*."

"You have no right to speak to me this way!" His mention of memory hit a nerve. "I *am sorry* your wife and your child are not here, but at least they died knowing *who you* were and you *them*, and you both have the *same memories*." She punctuated her speech with sharp jabs of her finger into his chest. "And we *are not done*. Greek Tradition dictates that you must visit the three days following the burial."

"No." Severus' face went ashen.

"You *will* do this," Hermione stated firmly, "You *will*...so I suggest you go get cleaned up."

"I am not going back there."

"Yes, you are. First, tonight, you are going to shower while I bake the moussaka. You are going to have a decent meal. Then, we will go to the cemetery in the morning."

"I can't..."

"You can and you will, if I have to use Petrificus Totalus to force you. They...Helena and Melissa...deserve this."

Severus let out a heavy sigh and turned away toward his rooms.

"And so do you," Hermione said as she headed to the kitchen.

Hermione's hands shook as she removed the moussaka from the refrigerator. She was glad she'd thought to place a Freshening Charm on the dish before leaving his house two nights ago. She set it out on the counter to come up to room temperature while she preheated the oven and prepared the Béchamel. She heard sounds of a shower in progress as she cracked the first egg and let out the breath she had been holding.

He would go.

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Severus had tried to wash the guilt off as he scrubbed his body in the shower, but it was no use...he had been out of line. The way he had yelled at Hermione had been unforgivable, yet he couldn't stop... it had been as though he were standing outside of his body, watching a stranger that looked like him yelling at her, at this young woman who had shown him every kindness in the world as he hurled insults, anger, and venom at her. He had not been so out of control of his emotions since, well... since she had been his student. But she was not his student, and she did not deserve what he had said.

He was further amazed at the way she had stood up to him...the only person who had ever called him on his actions and gotten away with it before had been Helena... dear Helena. Severus wondered what Ms. Granger would think if she knew her time as his student could have been twice as bad had it not been for the calming influence of his wife. He didn't know how he was going to survive without her...it had only been two days since the burial, and already he was drunk and yelling at people. With that sobering realization, he bent to soak his head under the pulsating jet of water.

Severus entered the kitchen as Hermione was pulling the steaming moussaka out of the oven. She placed the casserole on a hot plate and turned to the refrigerator. He was curious to see what else she'd made and was pleased to see a simple Greek salad of tomatoes, cucumbers, red onions, olives and crumbled feta with a garlicky olive oil and lime dressing...something light would complement the heavy moussaka.

"It will be ready in just a few minutes." Hermione smiled. "Would you mind setting the table?"

He was taken aback by her pleasantness...by all rights, she should have stormed out, never to return. Instead, she was in his kitchen preparing a meal. Silently, he moved to do as she bade.

Within moments, they were seated across from each other at the kitchen table.

"Ms. Granger, I would like to apologize for my earlier behavior." Severus kept his eyes lowered, unwilling to meet her gaze.

"It's all right," she replied quietly.

"No, it's not. You have only shown me kindness these past weeks and... and Lena would not be pleased with how I have repaid your kindness."

"Lena would not have been pleased?"

He shook his head.

"What would she have done? What was she like?" Hermione asked.

Stunned by her question, he looked up at her. No one had ever asked about Helena, but then, no one knew he had been married. He had never spoken of her to anyone... he just now realized how isolated she must have felt...as isolated as he felt, now, with no one else knowing. He took a deep breath and began, "Helena and I, we met the summer before you started at Hogwarts..."

He talked for hours, eventually moving to sit on the couch in the study as he shared his life away from Hogwarts, away from Voldemort, and away from being Dumbledore's spy. He spoke of how his wife had balanced him, had been a horrible cook, and had a passion for Muggle murder mysteries...it was as though once he started, he couldn't stop.

When he caught Hermione holding back a yawn, Severus glanced at the clock on the mantle and was startled to see it was past ten. "I'm sorry; I should not have kept you so late. You're tired."

"No, don't apologize. I've enjoyed myself, learning about Helena and Melissa. They both sound like wonderful people, people I wish I could have met. This is what a wake is...sharing stories and remembering those we love whom we have lost. But it is late, and I should be going if we are going to go to the cemetery tomorrow morning."

Without thinking, Hermione leaned over and gave him a hug.

"I'll see myself out...be ready at nine."

After hearing the front door close, Severus made his way to his bedroom, candles winking out as he passed them. In his room, he prepared for bed and, for the first time in years, drifted to sleep with lightness in his soul. Tomorrow would be difficult, but he would manage it...somehow.

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After the emotional upheaval of the last week, the visit to the cemetery was rather anticlimactic, in Hermione's opinion, but seeing the graves side by side, still mounded with fresh dirt...but without a marker...seemed surreal... it was as if they could be graves of strangers.

Severus was quiet...it was as though the last week had drained him of strength. The words were said, prayers were offered, and together they returned to his home, where Hermione had left her bag.

Retrieving it, she hesitated. "Well, um, I guess I'll be going." She wanted to tell him if he needed anything he should call, but was not sure how he would respond to such sentiments. He had been withdrawn all morning...the difference between this Severus, the man full of rage and grief, and the loquacious dinner companion of the previous night left Hermione's head spinning and uncertain.

"Yes, yes, I am sure you have much better things to be doing. I appreciate your assistance with all of... well with..." he replied awkwardly.

"Severus, are you going to be all right? That is...do you want some company today?" Her face flushed at her boldness.

"You needn't watch over me Ms. Granger. I assure you I will be fine," his tone nearly as acerbic as the night before.

"Very well. I will check back in with you later, then."

"That won't be necessary."

Hermione left his house with a heavy heart, but she could not force the man to accept her company...her comfort...when he didn't want it. All she could do was follow through with her responsibilities as a Funeral Director...there were still other rites and rituals that would need to be fulfilled in regards to Greek Tradition, and she meant to see they were observed.

## Chapter 6

### *Chapter 6 of 9*

Severus Snape has been named the new Headmaster of Hogwarts. Before he can assume his new duties with a clear conscience, he must first bury his wife and child. How does Hermione help him?

Well, friends, we are more than half way through the story. I still love and adore my betas. Harry Potter still does not belong to me.

Severus stood in the doorway of what had been Melissa's room, willing himself to step across the threshold. It had been eight days since they had been buried, and in the five days since he had sent Ms. Granger on her way, he'd been attempting to gain control over his life. He had managed to remove the smaller items: Lena and Bee's belongings from the loos, the toys from the family room, and assorted inconsequential items from other places in the house...but he had not yet been able to remove his wife's belongings from the rooms they shared, nor even enter his daughter's room.

It was the same as it had been the night the Death Eaters Voldemort had sent had walked in and snuffed out her life. The bedclothes were turned back, revealing the pink fairy sheets she had slept on; a doll lay neglected in the corner; and her favorite book of bedtime tales was on the bedside table, marked for the next story. If he closed his eyes, he could still see her lying there as though she were asleep, her braids lying dark on the pillow upon which the indentation of her head still remained. In truth, when he had first returned home, he had thought perhaps her life had been spared.

Taking one last deep breath, Severus squared his shoulders and entered the room. He walked over to the bed, intent on stripping the linens...he would change it over into a spare room, a study, anything just so he did not have to see these reminders of his lost Bumble Bee...but as soon as he pulled back the comforter, it hit him: the talc-and-heather scent of his little girl. Sinking to his knees beside the bed, he clutched the blanket to his chest, rocking, much as he would have rocked his daughter when she awoke, frightened in the night.

That was how Hermione found him. She had tried to reach him by Floo, phone, and owl to schedule tomorrow's visit to the cemetery; it had been nine days since the burial, and tomorrow was The Lament of the Child. When she had not been able to reach him all day, she canceled her dinner date and Apparated to the house. After spending five minutes knocking on his door with no response, attracting the attention of the neighbors, she decided she had no choice but to, again, invade his home with a silently cast *Alohamora*.

She entered the house quietly in case, against all odds, he was sleeping at six o'clock in the evening. Feeling like a Muggle cat burglar, she silently walked from room to room...she had just entered the kitchen when she heard a sound. She entered a hallway she didn't recognize, following strange sounds that reminded her of Crookshanks just before he had died...he'd been in such pain. Did Severus have a familiar she had never seen? Perhaps Melissa had had a cat?

Then she saw him...the sounds of a tortured animal were coming from him.

She knelt by his side and made to draw him into her arms as she would anyone in pain. He startled at first contact, but then fairly collapsed, winding his own arms so tight around her she could barely breathe. As before, she rubbed circles onto his back and hoped it might help. Gradually, he calmed. After she shifted so she was sitting on the floor with her back braced against the bed and Severus' head pillowed on her chest, she asked, "Do you want to talk about it?"

He shook his head 'no', obviously embarrassed.

Hermione feathered her fingers through his hair, finding it not greasy, but fine, and quietly replied, "All right...but how about we get you up off this floor?"

He reflexively tightened his grip as Hermione shifted to stand. "It's all right; just come with me." She took his hand and led him towards the room in which he'd left him after a not dissimilar bout of grief.

He halted when they reached the doorway. "No, not here... everything in this room reminds me of Lena."

"Of course," Hermione murmured, realizing how fragile he had become. "Do you have a spare room?"

Severus nodded and silently led her to a spacious and airy room filled with antiques. She continued walking toward the bed, and after watching the linens ripple with her silent Freshening Charm, instructed, "Come, you need to rest."

He nodded his assent and stumbled to the bed, never releasing her hand. He sighed as he settled back against the pillows and watched as Hermione silently moved to remove his boots, before drawing a lightweight throw up over his legs and turning to leave.

Before she took a step, he grabbed her hand. "Please don't... don't go. Just stay."

Squeezing his hand in reassurance, she sat at his side. Not wanting to make him uncomfortable, Hermione looked around the room decorated in soft blues and earthy browns...she looked anywhere but at the man whose hand she held. After she heard his breathing deepen and the death grip on her hand loosened... she chanced a look...he was asleep, the tears still moist on his cheeks.

With one last look over her shoulder, Hermione carefully untangled their hands and left him to rest. It seemed a good time to prepare something for a late supper.

Riffling through her former Professor's cupboards, Hermione found the makings for chicken soup. If her Yiayia was to be believed, it could heal anything from sniffles to pneumonia and was a comfort to the soul. Just now, she thought they both could use some good, old-fashioned comfort food.

As she sliced, diced, boiled, and chopped, Hermione let her mind wander. When she felt her heart tighten at the thought of Severus nearly prostrate in grief and clinging to her hand, she gave herself a good talking to...he was a client, and she needed to remember this and nothing more, not his sacrifice and bravery during the war nor anything else. Her treacherous heart would have to be ignored...there was no way she was going to allow herself to get any closer to the edge of *that* slippery slope. One of the cardinal rules of being a funeral director was to remain removed from the situation...don't let your own emotions get involved, for to do so was asking for trouble.

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Severus stretched, relieving some of the tension in his muscles as his mind tried to catch up. Once he opened his eyes and realized he was in the guest room, it all came flooding back...the crippling grief that had assailed him in Melissa's room, blindly throwing himself into Ms. Granger's arms, and then being so weak as to request she stay by his side. Groaning, he leaned back into the pillows... Would his humiliation never end? Resolutely, he tossed the throw to one side and sat on the edge of the bed. The bout of grief had been cathartic, but draining... he was reminded just how draining when his stomach rumbled. Sighing to himself, he decided to see what he could find for dinner before he'd have to phone Ms. Granger to apologize for his behavior.

Sock-footed, he padded down the hall. As soon as he approached the kitchen, his nose was assailed with the fragrant aroma of simmering chicken, herbs, and... was that freshly baked bread? Cautiously, he crept into the kitchen just as Hermione was setting a tray of buns on a trivet.

"Now there's timing. You're awake." She smiled cheerfully.

Wary as a caged animal, Severus' eyes darted about the room...on the stove, there was a pot of what must be chicken soup, simmering, plus the bread scenting the air with yeasty aroma...his stomach rumbled in response to the olfactory stimulation. Severus felt his face heat.

Hermione giggled. "Well, I guess I don't need to ask if you're hungry. Go sit down; I'll bring everything to the table."

Severus turned to do as she bid, only to realize there already were place settings, glasses of iced water, and to the side, a bottle of chilled chardonnay. He felt his throat tighten in with overwhelming gratitude...he couldn't remember the last time someone had treated him with such kindness. In fact, before Ms. Granger, the last person to show him any kind of genuine kindness was Lena.

Severus sat down and blinked away the tears of emotion that threatened to overwhelm him.

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Hermione had been watching him as she layered buns into a napkin-lined basket and poured the soup into a serving tureen. To give him a little more time, she retrieved some butter for the rolls and took her time carrying everything to the table...as she sat down, she noticed Severus had himself under control.

"This looks and smells wonderful, Hermione. Thank you."

Her heart leapt at the use of her given name. "Thankyou. Again, it's one of my Yiayia's recipes...she claimed chicken soup was food for the bodyandthe soul."

Severus closed his eyes in pleasure as he spooned soup into his mouth. He could tell she had availed herself of his herb garden; the freshness of the parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme mingled together, enhancing the flavor of the tender chicken and brightening the soft noodles. "I have to agree with her assertions about the soup...it's delightful."

Hermione blushed at the compliment as she tore a roll in two, offering him half. "I must apologize for the rolls...these had been prepped and frozen at home, so they are not as fresh as they could be."

Severus buttered the roll and raised it in toast to Hermione before taking a healthy bite.

She realized she'd been watching him with apprehension when he soothingly commented, "Ms. Granger, you have nothing to worry about. This meal is wonderful, and I am grateful to you for your kindness."

Hermione's eyes fell to her own dish. "Thank you, sir." Why was she disappointed? He had complimented her and thanked her ... ohMs. Granger.

As they were clearing the dinner dishes, Severus queried, "As grateful as I am for your assistance, Ms. Granger, one does wonder how you came to be here to offer it in the first place."

"Oh! I am so sorry; I nearly forgot myself," she stammered, not sure how he was going to respond after the earlier events. "Why don't we finish here and move to the sitting room so I can explain?"

Once they were seated, Hermione explained the importance of the next day's cemetery visit, according to Greek Tradition.

"Ms. Granger... Hermione. I don't really think that's wise."

She looked at him, puzzled.

He surged to his feet and began pacing before the hearth, clearly frustrated. "Do you recall the state you found me earlier?"

She nodded.

"Today was the first day I managed to enter my daughter's bedroom, and the instant I removed the bedding, I could smell her...I could smell my child, and I couldn't bear it!" he explained, his voice laden with grief.

Realization dawned, and Hermione's Funeral Director instincts kicked in. "That, Severus, is precisely why you must do this tomorrow...the ritual specifically relates to the loss of a child. This is the time for you to say goodbye."

Severus ran his hands through his hair before looking over his shoulder at her. "Do you think standing over her grave and saying a few words is going to be all it takes? To say goodbye?"

She approached him and laid her hand on his shoulder. "All at once? No. But I do believe that it will help. Why don't we go back to Melissa's room and you can find some small trinket to leave for her. If you can't enter her room again tonight, then I won't force this tomorrow."

Severus walked angrily down the hall, cursing know-it-all, interfering Gryffindors under his breath. He didn't pause at the doorway, but strode straight to the window box and retrieved a spun glass unicorn. He marched past Hermione, standing in the doorway, and thrust it at her before continuing down the hallway to the spare room, slamming the door in his wake.

She stood in place, staring after him, with the unicorn held in her open hand. Hermione had no doubt he would go tomorrow, but she thought it best she leave now.

The next day, Severus' hands trembled as he took the box Hermione handed him. He was knelt at the side of the graves, having already dug a small hole in the earth. Hermione spoke the Greek Lament of Loss as he placed the box in the hole and covered it with dirt. Once finished, he stood and took a deep, steadying breath.

He had fought her again, this morning, before leaving for the cemetery. In the end, though, Hermione had prevailed.

Once Hermione finished the reading, she turned to walk a few paces away to give him some privacy. "Wait." Severus stopped her with a hand to her upper arm. "Just wait. Please?"

She nodded, and he turned back toward the graves that stood side by side...mother and daughter. At first, she did not realize he was speaking. She took a small step forward, and his softly spoken words carried on the breeze:

"Tomorrow, at dawn, as the countryside whitens,

I shall leave. You're waiting for me; I know.

I shall go by the forest; I shall go by the mountain.

I can't stay away any longer.

I shall walk with my eyes closed in on my thoughts,

Seeing nothing beyond, hearing no sound,

Alone, unknown, back bent, hands crossed,

And sad. Day for me will be like night.

As golden evening falls, and distant sails

Make for Harfleur, I won't be looking.

When I arrive, I shall place on your tomb

A posy of green holly and of heather in flower."

As he finished, he bent and laid a blooming sprig of heather on the mound of dirt that protected Melissa.

"Victor Hugo?" she asked.

"Indeed," he replied. "He wrote it in response to the loss of his own daughter...he understands."

## Chapter 7

### *Chapter 7 of 9*

Severus Snape has been named the new Headmaster of Hogwarts. Before he can assume his new duties with a clear conscience, he must first bury his wife and child. How does Hermione help him?

Severus sighed when he saw the owl approach and recognized it as Ms. Granger's. He knew what message it would carry...after having been so vulnerable, he had made a point to research traditional Greek burial rites himself. It was the twenty-ninth day since the burial, and he had no doubt she was contacting him to make plans to visit the cemetery on the morrow.

He was of two minds about this...on one hand, he was comforted to know he was honoring Lena and Bee by following the traditions reflective of their heritages, but on the other hand... he *did not* want to go back, didn't want to see the mounds of dirt covering their lifeless forms, nor did he wish to be reminded they were really gone. This was what really bothered him...there had been so much wasted time, so many things he'd taken for granted.

He forced himself out of his memories before that line of self-recrimination spiraled out of control and unburdened the owl waiting before him.

Ms. Granger suggested a late afternoon tea followed by an evening trip to the cemetery. This was a deviation from her previously established pattern, but one that would work for Severus...he had returned to Hogwarts, and there was much to be done before the start of term, only two weeks away. If he met with the teaching staff in the morning, no one would need to know about his later meeting with Ms. Granger. He scrawled his acceptance of meeting time, then reattached the reply to the bird's leg and offered it an Owl Treat for its trouble.

The next day, Severus was notified by the gargoyle guarding the stairwell to the Headmaster's office when Ms. Granger arrived. With a wave of his wand, he set the staircase in motion and released the hidden panel to admit her; moments later she knocked on the office door.

Severus greeted her with reserve. Throughout the morning, thoughts of their task for the evening had intruded into his mind, breaking his concentration...so much so,

Professor Sprout had inquired after his health and suggested he see Madam Pomfrey.

Hermione responded with a question. "Would you want tea now, or after? I've brought spanakopita tarts and a Greek lemon cake." She motioned to her satchel.

"Later, if that would be acceptable to you," Severus snapped, then cringed at his brusque tone as Hermione raised her eyebrows in question.

He sighed and tried again. "Ms. Granger, Hermione, I..." He turned toward the unlit hearth and began to pace. After taking several steps and a deep, steady breath, he stopped and met her gaze. "I don't know if I can do this...I know that I *should*, and I know it is the right thing to do *for them*...but I..." His voice trailed off.

He felt relieved as he saw realization dawn on her face and crossed the room to look out onto the grounds. He heard her footsteps behind him; then she gently rested her hand on his back as she said quietly, "It has been a month now. You've moved back to Hogwarts, and I bet there have been times...days, even...when you have been able to put Helena and Melissa out of your mind."

He braced himself against the window casing, then hung his head at her words and nodded in agreement.

She continued as she moved behind him and began to knead his tense shoulder muscles, "You feel guilty for moving on with your life. Perhaps you feel guilty because you're glad to have days not filled with grief."

Severus sighed again. Her gentle ministrations were undoing him...he felt the too-familiar tension leave his shoulders.

He replied as he turned to face her, "All you say is true, and more, but not here and not now. I need to see Lena and Bee." He cringed at how his voice was roughened with barely suppressed emotion.

Hermione nodded in agreement, then quietly followed him out of the office and across the grounds to Apparate to the cemetery.

The late summer sun still hovered high in the western sky, casting shadows through the trees. As they approached the graves, Severus was visibly pleased to see the sod had been laid...the sight of fresh grass taking root instead of mounds of fresh dirt clearly eased his tension.

He motioned at Hermione to sit with him graveside. "I know the Trisagion must be recited, but I have some things I need to say first."

"Of course," Hermione replied as she took his hand and squeezed it reassuringly.

They sat in silence for several minutes, their clasped hands suspended between them. Severus had bowed his head, his hair curtaining his face...unconsciously Hermione mimicked his pose and allowed her mind to wander to thoughts of those she had lost, as well.

When finally he started to speak, his voice was barely above a whisper. "Helena, I am sorry. There are no words able to express the depths of despair I feel for forcing you into isolation. You did not deserve the life marrying me resulted in...you always said that as long as we had each other you were happy, but because of me you lost out on so much life even before it was taken from you. You must have felt so alone, waiting for the precious few moments I could spare for you and Melissa... I am so grateful we were blessed with such a beautiful gift as our daughter...you were a wonderful mum, and I... I'm sorry I missed so much of our lives together and the life of our sweet Bumble Bee. I love both of you and always will."

Hermione could hear the tears in his unsteady voice...her own tears flowed freely at his unburdening. She took a shuddering breath and started the Trisagion, "Agiōs O Theos..." smiling to herself when she heard his voice join hers.

After returning to Hogwarts, Severus led Hermione to the private quarters located above the Headmaster's office. He felt out of sorts...almost nervous...as he gave Hermione a tour of his rooms. It wasn't as if she were the first person, male or female, to have visited his rooms...both Pomona and Poppy had been to call, as well as Filius...but this felt different. She wasn't a colleague, and it wasn't just that she was a former student... The difference wasn't unsettling...just the opposite: he felt more comfortable in Ms. Granger's presence than he did the other professors.

He stopped walking as he realized he'd missed something she'd said as he mused. "Pardon me?"

Hermione repeated herself. "If you will show me to the kitchen, I'll get the spanakopita in the oven."

"Ms. Granger, you *do* know this is Hogwarts...there is no electricity here."

"Yes, but I *also* know...from *Hogwarts, A History*...that all staff quarters are equipped with wood-fueled kitchen stoves." She smiled.

"So, it *is* true."

"What is true?"

"When you were a student, there were rumors that you could quote that book chapter and verse, as if it were the Bible."

Hermione blushed and opened her mouth to retort.

"Relax, Ms. Granger...I assure you, you're not the only one who considers knowledge power. I was *teasing*." Severus felt his face heat.

The stunned look on her face triggered Severus' laughter...he couldn't recall when he'd last relaxed enough to enjoy a deep, genuine belly laugh. The sight of Hermione flustered at his mirth only made him laugh harder.

It occurred to him that on this visit to the cemetery, he had left a great deal of the debilitating, strangling guilt behind.

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Hermione was startled by the pecking of an owl at her kitchen window. She hurried to let the bird in. It was only mid-October, but winter was making its presence known already...the temperature had dropped substantially over the last fortnight, and there was a feeling of early snow in the air.

After struggling to open the casement against the cold wind buffeting the window, she fumbled for an Owl Treat before removing the message from the bird's waiting leg.

As she unrolled the scroll, she recognized Severus' familiar scrawl on the parchment. It seemed he was taking a more proactive approach to the next ritual and wanted her to accompany him two nights hence, after joining him for dinner in the Great Hall.

Hermione hadn't given much thought to the remaining four visitations required by Greek tradition, thinking that he'd finally started healing at their last ritual and would no longer need nor want her there to guide him. It gave her a warm feeling inside to know he still wished to include her. Pulling out her date book to note the appointment, she sighed sadly when she saw the date...her parents' thirtieth wedding anniversary. She felt a twinge in her heart when she remembered the celebrations they had planned.

Two days later, she awoke with a splitting headache and called Eileen, asking her to reschedule her appointments. Hermione rarely deemed herself ill enough to cancel meetings with grieving clients, but the three month ritual that evening was quite enough to face on this date.

That evening, she Apparated to the gates of Hogwarts, then sent her Patronus to request admittance...with school in session, the gates were now warded. The wind was fierce and as she quickly chilled to the bone, she wished she could have just walked in, as she had in August. Soon she saw Severus billowing his way across the grounds.

"My apologies for the delay, Ms. Granger...there was an incident in the Potions classroom, and I needed to help Professor Malfoy begin an antidote for the dunderheads involved."

"Professor Malfoy?" Hermione hadn't heard he had taken a teaching position.

"Yes. When Minerva passed and I was promoted, I needed to find a Potions professor quickly. Fortunately, Draco was available and consented to teach at Hogwarts if I would oversee his final year of study...in six months, he will complete his Mastery," he explained.

Something occurred to her. "Would you prefer *he* attended tonight's ritual with you?" she asked as they made their way up to the castle.

He turned and looked at her with surprise in his eyes, and was that... hurt?

Seeing his expression, Hermione opened her mouth to explain, but he quickly replied, "No, Ms. Granger, I would not prefer that Draco attend. As you should recall, no one knows of Helena and Melissa's existence except you. And although I have been increasingly at peace with their loss, I do not care to attempt to tell others about them. Do you... not wish to attend?"

"No, no, that's not it," she hastened to reassure him. "I just thought, since Draco is your godson, and now in close proximity, that you'd prefer him present as a member of your house. I'm honored you asked me."

Nothing more was said as they entered the Great Hall for dinner. Severus offered her his arm, and she rested her hand at the crook of his elbow as they made their way to the High Table.

Hermione was glad she'd remembered to wear wizarding robes this evening...so many heads turned and so many people whispered to their neighbors, it sounded as though a roar rippled through the Great Hall. Severus guided her behind the staff members already seated, where she was greeted by her former professors with smiles and puzzled expressions, and held her chair as she sat. Hermione wondered how he was going to explain her presence this evening...she didn't have long to wait.

"Silence!" The Headmaster's voice boomed across the hall. "Yes, this is the famous war heroine, Hermione Granger. If you have any other questions... I suggest you keep them to yourselves. Eat!"

Severus glared at her as she giggled to herself. "You find something amusing?"

"It's just so nice to know some things don't change. I can see you're as personable a Headmaster as you were as a professor, sir." She smiled.

Severus found himself struggling not to grin at her observation. "And I can see you are still an incorrigible know-it-all." He allowed one corner of his mouth to raise, briefly, to let her know there was no harm done.

Hermione blinked. *Did Severus Snape just make a joke?* Her head was spinning, trying to catalog his ever-changing moods.

After dinner, they made a hasty exit to avoid questions from the staff. After Apparating, they lit their wands...unlike two months ago, the sun had long set, and they needed to light their way through the dark cemetery.

This time, when they reached the gravesides, Severus did not hesitate, but took Hermione's hand as he kneeled between the two graves. There were no formal headstones yet, just the concrete slab provided by the cemetery. She made a mental note to talk to him about formal markers...they should be placed at the one year anniversary and would need to be ordered soon.

After the recitation, he turned to her, shifting to sit, and took both of her hands. After a gentle tug, she joined him on the ground.

They sat together for several quiet minutes until finally he spoke. "I hope you understand how much I appreciate all that you have done, both for me and for my family. I don't think I could have made it through this were it not for your support."

Hermione felt a leaden ball of guilt form in the bottom of her stomach. For the first time...after all the years in business and all the funerals...she felt like a fraud. Here was this strong, brave man thanking her for her guidance and support, and she had yet to muster the courage to travel the path of grief and healing herself. She still needed to let go of her family and grieve for her loss...for they now were, and must be, dead to her.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 9

Severus Snape has been named the new Headmaster of Hogwarts. Before he can assume his new duties with a clear conscience, he must first bury his wife and child. How does Hermione help him?

A/N: I still love and adore my betas. Harry Potter still does not belong to me.

Six months after the burial of Helena and Melissa Snape, Hermione stood, shivering, outside the gate of Hogwarts. It was mid-January and the wind bit bitterly to her bones, despite the heavy cloak she wore, as she awaited Severus' arrival. As she bounced from foot to foot to stay warm, she looked up to spy him walking briskly across the grounds...he seemed to glide upon the surface, barely disturbing the snowy lawn.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting...there was a matter of discipline I needed to see to..." he apologized.

"It's all right," she huffed, blowing a wayward curl out of her face. "I suggest we hurry...the wind is wicked." Without another word, they both Disapparated.

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief once in the cemetery...it was not nearly as cold here as it was in Scotland.

Severus reached inside his cloak to retrieve a long wreath of woven holly. "I thought about bringing this at Christmas, but though it's getting easier, I just couldn't bring myself to come here alone."

Hermione thought back to the poem he had recited when they performed the lament of death for a child. "A posy of green holly?"

"Indeed."

After completing the Trisagion, Severus turned to Hermione. "Would you care to return to my London house for tea?"

She nodded. "That would be lovely."

"I altered the wards for the school term...I'll need to Side-Along Apparate you, so you may pass unimpeded." He held out his arm in invitation.

As she stepped closer and wrapped her arm around his waist, Hermione noticed how warm he was and unconsciously snuggled in as she closed her eyes. Then she felt the familiar sensation of being drawn through a drinking straw.

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After they had settled in with a pot of tea and plate of biscuits between them, Severus decided it was time to broach a topic that had often been on his mind these last three months.

"I'm very pleased you agreed to attend to today with me."

Hermione looked at him, obviously puzzled. "I told you I meant to see this through to the end. Had you doubted me?"

He shook his head. "I got the impression in October that you did not wish to be there and were, perhaps, tired of hand-holding me through this."

"Oh, Professor. Severus... I am so sorry if I gave you that impression!" she hastened to reassure him. "Nothing of the sort has ever crossed my mind...I'm honored to be a part of this and to be able to be of assistance."

"But your reticence then... And today you didn't join in the laments, as you have in times past."

"I should have rescheduled that visit with you...it had been a difficult day, and although there is no excuse, I am sorry," Hermione replied, her head bowed.

"Ms. Granger?" She looked up. "I may be mistaken, but I thought we had become, well, friends."

"Well, I... I hope we have, but I never wanted to presume."

He rose and began pacing in agitation. "You have been a friend to me...perhaps closer than I realized... When we were at the cemetery in October, the emotions rolling off of you made it almost impossible not to notice, although I did not wish to intrude... and again, today."

Hermione sighed. "I shouldn't burden you with this, but our last two visits have coincided with anniversaries in my family, and I am not coping as well as I should be."

"Go on."

"Do you really want to hear this?"

"I do believe it was you who told me it is healing to speak of those we have loved and lost," he chided.

"Last time ..." She told him all of it...how it had been her parents wedding anniversary, and how she had realized at that very moment what a fraud she had been attempting to lead people through the grieving process when she had yet to accept her own losses. She told him of how she had spent the next two weeks going through her parents' papers...documents that she'd left undisturbed since returning from Australia. She told him of the weeping spells that overcame her when dates she had ignored in the past seemed to loom large and crush her heart.

At some point during her confession, she had ended up curled against him with his arms wrapped around her shoulders as she cried out her anguish.

Severus let her talk and cry as he held her to his chest. For the first time in years, he felt the beat of another's heart against his own. He gentled his touch, and gradually her breathing evened to match his own...when her tears were spent he spoke. "I would say that was five years in the making."

He felt her nod her head against his chest as she clung to him.

Hermione didn't know what to do. She was a professional. She took pride in the business she had built from the ground up. It... It was unconscionable; she could lose her Muggle license if this got out...it would be considered highly unethical, a breach of the client contract...but she couldn't lie to herself any longer about the way she was beginning to feel about Severus.

In the three months since she had cried in his arms, she had thought of little else. She had to have Eileen replace the calming incense she used in the office because every time she smelled sandalwood, she was transported back to that chilly January evening and the warmth and comfort she had felt in his arms.

Severus wasn't helping matters either. No longer did they only meet on ritual days...four times had she dined at Hogwarts, despite initially making her apologies. Her refusals stopped when he asked, "Are we not friends?"

She wanted to be his friend. She wanted to be more than just his friend, if she was honest, and she suspected he felt the same way. But there were rules.

Tonight was the nine month anniversary...just one more obligation after this evening and she would be free. She will be able to walk away, having fulfilled the obligation of burying his family... and then he would no longer need her. This thought should have filled Hermione with relief...not sadness...but she truly enjoyed the quiet times spent together, his sense of humor and their like-minded discussions... She had found there was much more to Severus Snape than she had seen years earlier as his student.

This visit, Hermione arranged to meet him directly at the cemetery...some distance was necessary... *for her*, at least. When she he heard a *softpop*, she turned to greet her client. Severus looked so much better now...no longer were his eyes darkly shadowed in grief. There was still some sadness, but he no longer appeared entirely consumed by it.

"I'm sorry I was unable to meet you at the school."

"That is quite all right, Ms. Granger. I do understand that death cannot take a number and that you have other obligations. Perhaps we can adjourn after the lament has been sung and conclude our business over a cup of tea?"

Lately, it seemed when she was in his presence, all resolve evaporated, and she found herself smiling in response. "Is there something more we need to discuss?"

He did not reply as he turned to proceed to the grave site to begin the ritual.

It did not take long for the laments to be sung and the spring flowers he'd brought to be laid between the graves. Very shortly thereafter, Hermione stood beside him, braced against the olfactory onslaught of ever-present sandalwood as he Apparated them through the wards of his London home.

Was it her imagination, or did he squeeze her a bit tighter before moving to make the tea?

Once they had settled on the couch, a pot of tea steeping next to them, Severus turned to Hermione and took both of her hands in his. "Ms. Granger... Hermione, I do not know what I would have done without your assistance these many months," he began. "No, that's not true...I do know what I would have done. I would have gone mad, or Bee and Lena would still be in Stasis in my study."

"Severus..." She squeezed his hands, noticing the fine calluses and wondering how his time-and-work roughened fingers would feel on her skin, despite herself. "You give yourself far too little credit...all I did is what I was paid to do."

Severus' eyes hardened at her words. "Is that all this is to you? *A job? A responsibility?*"

Hermione heard the hurt in his voice. "Yes... No. *It should be...* but... I can't do this, Severus." She stood.

Severus rose. "I did not mean to upset you."

"Yes. Yes, you did...let's be honest."

"No, Hermione, I did not intend to hurt you...but I have to know..."

"Know what?"

"I have to know if this...if I...*mean* something *more* to you," he said as he ghosted his fingers along her jaw line. Ever so slowly, he lowered his mouth to hers.

Her breath caught in her throat. Common sense said she should refuse, she should leave, she should run... but once she felt the touch of his lips on hers, she couldn't move. How could lips that had spewed such venom be so soft? How could a mouth that had made her quake in fear now be making her melt?

She broke the kiss and buried her face in his robes. She heard the husky breathlessness of her voice betraying her attempt to end the moment. "We shouldn't be doing this. It's wrong on so many levels: I could lose my license and my business, you're still grieving..."

He held her close as he threaded his fingers through her hair, then cupped her head and tilted it back.

Hermione saw determination and desire in his eyes before he claimed her mouth again and was lost.

Minutes...hours?...later, they were comfortably entwined on the sofa. He held her while she was curled into his chest, playing with one of the many buttons of his frock coat.

"Severus, I won't claim that this is all part of the job."

A soft chuckle rumbled in his chest as he held her tighter.

"But the fact is... that job is what brought us together and... and I can't allow myself to do this. Not now." Her voice cracked as she tried to hold back tears.

"Please, just don't say *never*," he sighed.

## Chapter 9

### *Chapter 9 of 9*

Severus Snape has been named the new Headmaster of Hogwarts. Before he can assume his new duties with a clear conscience, he must first bury his wife and child. How does Hermione help him?

A/N: This marks the end of the journey for Letting Go, and I want to thank all those who have made this the story I am most proud of: my lovely betas, my cheerleaders, the mods of the sshg exchange and Droxy for creating the prompt to begin with. She said to make him suffer, and I hope in the end he was rewarded for his suffering.

Hermione checked her appearance in the mirror one last time before leaving—it was silly, but she was nervous. It had been three months since she'd seen Severus.

She had suggested no contact at all, but he wouldn't hear of it. At first she had tried ignoring his owls.

Then he'd sent flowers.

When she had ignored *those*, he had surprised her by calling her home. Hearing his voice—even a phone line could not distort the deep, rich baritone she'd longed to hear—she had finally relented. For the last two months, they had enjoyed weekly phone calls. He would go to his London home on Saturday—a good thing, because their conversations would go on long into the night—to make that evening's call.

They had shared stories of their childhoods, his time as a Death Eater, and the years following the war. Sharing their secrets over the phone had been both easier and more difficult—on more than one occasion Hermione had had to talk herself out of Apparating to his house. The nights he had told her of Lily's death, and when he had broken down as he described the pain of having to kill his mentor in cold blood, she had wanted nothing more than to comfort him, but they had both agreed they would wait.

Until today.

Today would mark the end of their professional contract. And she had something else she wished to share with him—she hoped he would understand the significance.

Severus was nervous as well.

It had been difficult this last month, especially since school had let out, to not just go to her. He had not felt a bone-deep connection with anyone since the early years of his marriage, since before Harry Potter had entered Hogwarts and his life spiraled out of control.

There were so many things he wished he could have done differently.

He still felt guilt over how he had neglected Bee and Helena during those years, but he realized that, had he had it to do over again, nothing would have—could have—changed. Helena was a defenseless Muggle—he *had* done what was necessary to keep her and their child safe... He understood that now.

He planned to continue visiting the gravesite—but to honor them, not because he couldn't live without them. He'd lived without them for ten years—it had been past time to admit that a *year ago*—and would continue to do so.

He had finally forgiven himself and was ready to move on with his life—he was ready to let go.

Two soft pops of Apparation echoed through the quiet of the cemetery as Hermione and Severus appeared almost simultaneously.

They were both dressed formally for the conclusion of the rite. The laments were sung one last time, and Severus laid holly and heather on the graves. Both grass-covered mounds were now marked with a stone of obsidian marble with wreaths of holly and heather etched into the surface above the names.

When Hermione sensed he was ready to go, she took his hand. "I have something I want to show you. Do you trust me?"

He nodded his assent and put his arm about her.

She Apparated them to another cemetery not far from her home; taking his hand in hers, she led him to the far corner.

The stone resting there looked very much like those they had just visited save for the inscription:

Jeffery and Jane Granger

May You Live in Peace

1955 – 1997

"Hermione," Severus whispered as he read the inscription. "Does this mean...?"

She turned to him and took both of his hands in hers. "Yes, Severus, this does mean..."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm *ready to let go* of the past and look to the future. I'm truly free."