

# Crimson

*by Clover Bay*

Hermione was always finding Viktor - first among the stacks of books in the library, then in the ancient and most noble house of Black, in her room at Shell Cottage, and again before the final battle. When she needs to see him the most, though, her heart begins to ache at the prospect of never seeing him again.

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

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The dirty, hazy air clung like a film across Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. The final battle between light and dark, the Order and the Death Eaters, Harry and Voldemort had ended, but chaos still reigned.

Hermione, among many others, began her frantic search for the faces she most longed to see in the crowds. Harry, Ron, the Weasleys . . . they were all accounted for. It was his image she impatiently sought.

Viktor Krum was somewhere in the midst of the Great Hall, and finding him became her paramount goal . . .

*The world of Hogwarts knew that Viktor asked her to the Yule Ball the year of the Triwizard Tournament. What they weren't aware of was that Viktor had to chase Hermione, asking her repeatedly to accompany him. So few guys at Hogwarts had noticed her as anything but a brainy friend, that she was sure the handsome Durmstrang student and Quidditch player must be playing some kind of cruel joke. But, night after night of seeing him brave the twittering throngs of girls to sit near Hermione began to change her opinion; he did nothing but pretend to read while looking over the top of his book to gaze at the girl who had exhibited kindness to those she passed in the halls and help that poor, pudgy boy who couldn't seem to walk in a straight line without falling over. He later told her that he admired her strength at not backing away when the blonde-haired jerk (his words) would push his petty prejudices. She would later confide that she, too, spent much of her time in those weeks staring at him discretely.*

*What began for Hermione as flattery at being sincerely sought after as Viktor's date for the ball soon evolved into a sweet puppy love. He would walk her through the corridors to class, hold the doors open for her as they entered or exited the castle, and sat with her and the boys during meals at the Gryffindor house table. She was, frankly, overwhelmed by his attention. The first time he kissed her cheek left her blushing for the better part of the afternoon, including Potions class, though Harry, Ron, and the others assumed it heat of the bubbling caldrons was the source of the redness.*

*At the end of the school term, it felt like a newly formed piece of her was being pulled away. When Viktor asked permission to write to her over the summer, she was thrilled. The old-world charm that was evident to her even then stole another piece of her heart. The letters they exchanged introduced her to more of his real life outside of confines of school; he sent scrolls of parchment in every city in which he played that summer.*

Though their letters continued beyond the summer, it wasn't until Christmas break that she saw Viktor in person again. That fated weekend where she, the Weasleys, and Harry holed up in Grimmauld Place to await news of Mr. Weasley after the attack at the Ministry were nerve-wracking. After their initial visit to the hospital, Hermione stayed behind when the others returned. On one afternoon, she saw a familiar form enter the kitchen; his short, dark hair and deep brown eyes were unmistakable. Standing across the room was none other than Viktor. Her Viktor.

She ran around the circumference of the table, colliding into him as he met her. The tender kiss he placed on her forehead seemed to magnify the feelings she'd been harboring for him. Speaking from the muffled vantage point of Viktor's chest, Hermione asked wonderingly, but happily, "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing, except I've already been informed of the newest inhabitants of the Order's headquarters." Viktor shared more in those few words than he would have been allowed through direct questions. The oath taken by the Order of the Phoenix's members prevented such information from being transferred.

"Really? And you're still able to play and not be detected?" Hermione's eyes were shining with a mixture of happiness at seeing Viktor and relief at the confirmation that they were fighting alongside one another, even though Hermione wasn't officially allowed to declare her allegiance to the Order.

Their relationship changed over the remainder of Christmas break. Mundane and trivial matters gave way to more pressing issues that they were privy to, namely Voldemort and the work of the Order. He confided that Charlie Weasley had recruited him after the Triwizard Tournament. The two met when Viktor played Quidditch in Romania. A brief reintroduction, based first on the dragon task of the tournament, led to further meetings, culminating in Charlie bringing Viktor to Dumbledore to be inducted into the Order.

He reassured Hermione that he wasn't in too much danger with his current assignment. And, against the protocol established by the Order, Viktor explained that he was given the daunting task of collecting information from foreign wizards who seemed to help bankroll the Death Eaters' activities. Through his connections as an international athlete, he already identified which of the Durmstrang school governors who had been funneling a portion of the tuition paid by its students to Voldemort's cause. He had further leads, but didn't have any concrete information as of yet.

Viktor's last visit to Grimmauld Place during her winter break left Hermione's lips tingling with their first real kiss. It was soft and sweet, yet purposeful and . . . and . . . amazing. She had no other words for it. The anticipation that had been building throughout their meetings over the fortnight had been satisfied, fortified for the coming months that would separate them.

After the Death Eaters' ambush and attack at the Ministry of Magic, Viktor managed to visit her in the hospital wing at Hogwarts. He held her throughout the night, rubbing her back gently when she would wake with a night terror of the day's events. He felt her tears soak through his shirt as she cried for the others' injuries and pain caused at the hands of Voldemort's minions. Together, they promised to do all that was in their power to rid the world of them all . . . she helping Harry, him helping the Order. That night the war drew even closer to their hearts.

The next morning he formally met her parents; any awkward introductions at being found holding their daughter dissolved when their relief at seeing her healthy overshadowed his position. Plans were soon made to spend a portion of her summer break together, with Hermione and her parents visiting Bulgaria.

Viktor's missions for the Order became more dangerous the longer he searched for the monies behind the Death Eaters' activities. By the fall of her sixth year, he had identified the largest bankroll for Voldemort. Petrovich, the International Quidditch League's most prominent racing broom supplier, had been paying a generous tribute to further the agenda of the Death Eaters. As discretely as possible, Viktor had been steering the league away from their brand. It was no coincidence that Petrovich created two new, elite brooms in such a short period of time. The teams might have relied on the broom manufacturer, but the league valued Viktor's name and contributions much more. Numerous letters to Hermione conveyed that he couldn't get away from Bulgaria for the weekend because he needed extra practice to hone his skills on the lesser quality Legacy broom models. He couldn't risk the chance that anyone would find that his displeasure with Petrovich was anything other than Quidditch related.

He'd also become concerned that their relationship might further endanger them, Hermione in particular. They constructed a plan for her peers, and the school-aged Death Eaters' children, to believe that she was single rather than attached to Viktor. Ron happily obliged as the 'friend who might be something more', as he was portrayed to the rest of Hogwarts. This freed Hermione to write to Viktor and 'seek advice from Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall'; this ruse allowed her to meet with him on evenings in which the Order was scheduled to convene. Often, this would be the only times in which they would see one another.

But they didn't live in constant fear, rather with a heightened sense of alertness. Viktor proved to be particularly romantic in September when he received permission to take Hermione into Muggle London for dinner. Coming of age in the wizarding world held a special place each witch and wizard's life, and Viktor wanted her to have a wonderful seventeenth birthday. It was as they left the elegant Italian restaurant that Viktor finally worked up the courage to say those three words that they both felt, one of which she attached to the signature of his letters and he returned when addressing hers. She melted into him the first time he said 'I love you.' It was said with tenderness and conviction; he sounded more sure in his quiet enunciation of those words than she had ever heard him sound before. No doubt could ever be placed in her mind about the authenticity and genuine feelings for her.

Later, the Christmas holidays for Hermione coincided with the International Quidditch League's winter break. Having met Viktor the previous year, and knowing how much he meant to their only daughter, Hermione's parents invited him to spend a week as a guest in their home. Not wanting to disrespect her parents, Viktor exhibited an even greater amount of propriety while staying with them. That both frustrated and delighted Hermione. His old-world charm and gentlemanly upbringing shone through, impressing both of her parents. It wasn't until the last hours of the evening that they would find themselves alone in the living room, snuggled together and watching the lights twinkle on the Christmas tree. He held her close, but refrained from doing anything that would embarrass them if it had to be suddenly explained to her parents. Just holding her, though, gave them more physical contact than they had been allowed due to their distance apart. When he held her hand, or kissed her goodnight, his eyes would meet hers, silently showing her how happy he was.

Viktor managed to convince Hermione's parents to let her spend Christmas evening with his family in Bulgaria. She wasn't sure what to expect from his pure-blooded parents, whom she was sure were steeped in traditions passed on for generations. However, she discovered that his mama and papa were as soft-spoken as him; they were warm and welcoming, each giving Hermione smothering hugs of greeting as she crossed the threshold of their home. The smells of spiced cider and ginger biscuits added to the comfortable, homey feeling of their farmhouse. Viktor teased them about moving into a newer, more modern home somewhere closer to the city, but they scoffed at his offer as flashy and a waste of his money when they had a perfectly nice home. And, Hermione couldn't agree more. Viktor's obvious wink in her direction let the room know that he was all too aware of the useless offer. In fact, he agreed that not every house could be made into a home; the memories that permeated the small rooms of his parents' home were more valuable than the gold in his vaults.

Before they left, Viktor pulled Hermione away from his parents to give her a special Christmas gift. A white-gold bracelet with round, looping links was the most delicate piece of jewelry she'd ever seen. A pink flower charm hung securely from one of the links, swinging gently.

"For my beautiful English Rose," Viktor whispered as he fastened it around her wrist. With a kiss to the top of the hand he still held, he continued, "You are the first woman I have loved, the first I've brought to meet my mama and papa. Hermione, I love you more than I can say in English."

She wanted to giggle at his reference to his evolving mastery of her language. The sentiment, though, silenced her. After another long look at his gift, she lifted her eyes to meet his. "And, I love you, Viktor. Whenever I look down, this beautiful bracelet will remind me of you, of us . . . and our time together here."

Bill and Fleur's wedding finally gave them another opportunity to see one another again.

Hermione knew Viktor would be attending the summer wedding. One of the more ingenious ideas he initiated was finding a way to converse without drawing too much attention from anyone else. Hermione never doubted Viktor's intellectual talents; when others scoffed at his entrance in the Tri-wizard Tournament as a fluke of brawn rather than brains, she listened as he planned multiple tactics for overcoming the challenges the tournament presented. This time, he used his ingenuity to devise a plan to communicate in plain sight.

Buried deep within the thick Daily Prophet newspaper, between the 'items-for-sale' and 'lost-niffler' advertisements were the virtually hidden want-ads. Viktor created a moniker to identify himself when he submitted a message to Hermione, seeking some variation of English Roses. She, in turn, would be searching for bon-bons of the highest quality. Their arrangement, which cost pittance and required no additional personal information, would be posted in the paper for one day and then removed.

Viktor's most recent advertisement read, "Wanted, English roses in full bloom, periwinkle in color."

She caught the reference to her beautiful blue dress from their first real date all of those years ago at Hogwarts and the date of the summer solstice. Fleur wanted to have the greatest amount of daylight to celebrate her special day, so Hermione guessed that he was associating that day as being in 'full bloom'. And she was correct.

From her seat near the Weasleys, she could see Viktor's handsome form. She was tempted to stare, itching to sit beside him and hold his hand in hers. She restrained herself, though, and settled for quick glances and wondering about the possibilities of a day like this of her own.

Their dances following the ceremony were far too brief. Being held so closely, breathing in the masculine aroma of Viktor's aftershave mixed with his cologne, and hearing his deep, rumbling voice whispering in her ears left her lost to the audience around them.

They stole away from the others, walking in the dimly lit yard surrounding the white-tented area. It was in those moments that she confided, in its entirety, the quest that she, Harry, and Ron were embarking upon the next day.

"It must be done, we can't let Voldemort continue like this," she said quietly while looking up into his deep brown eyes.

"I know, love," he sighed resignedly. "And I will finish my part."

"And you have new leads?"

"Ya." Viktor pulled her tighter into his chest. "And I will be closer than ever to the Death Eaters, probably too close. But, as you said, it must be done."

Fireflies chased one another near the wooded area in front of them. She heard and felt Viktor's heart beating beneath her ear that was pressed to his chest. Everything was about to change, and she wanted to hold onto these moments for as long as possible, imprint them into her mind forever. There was no way of knowing when she would see him again.

Lifting her chin, he lowered his lips to hers.

"I love you."

"And I love you."

After the Death Eaters interrupted Bill and Fleur's wedding reception and Hermione, Harry, and Ron escaped, she and Viktor fell back to their newspaper correspondence. Now, however, they left messages for an entire week at a time as neither knew how often the other would have access to the paper.

It wasn't until spring that she and Viktor met again. While she and the guys were moving their search for Voldemort's horcruxes deeper into the mainland, they began tracing old and nearly forgotten traces of the Slytherin heir. Having combed through the English countryside more times than they cared to count, moving to the site of Voldemort's initial return seemed logical. If the dim-witted Bertha Jorkins could stumble upon him, then surely they could find traces left from his hiding.

Casting the wards around their tent that first night, Hermione felt an unusual backlash that made her arm tingle. Within moments, a tall, cloaked figure strode into the cordoned off area with his wand drawn. Hermione reacted first as the guys were busy hoisting the tent and securing it. The three were bound so quickly that they ended up laying in a heap on the cold ground.

No sooner than they were captured, they were suddenly freed. Having pushed the hood of his cloak down, the moonlight revealed Viktor Krum to be standing with his wand now relaxed at his side. Little did she know, but they had chosen to camp on the outskirts of Viktor's land in Bulgaria.

Having only visited the castle during the day, Hermione was in shock at Viktor's sudden arrival. It took only seconds for relief to flood within her; her emotions had traveled from lethargy during their fruitless hunt, to alarm and fear at someone discovering them, to a weight-lifting joy at seeing Viktor.

Ignoring the questioning looks from Harry and the slightly confused expression on Ron's face, Hermione clung to Viktor and accepted his offer to stay with him. It took only a short time to direct the guys to guest rooms before Viktor took Hermione to his master suite on the highest level of the castle. Lovingly, he sat her on the bed. Concern was etched on his face as he gently brushed her hair from her face, but the dirt and grime from her long absence from civilization couldn't keep him from kissing her passionately.

"I have missed you so much," she breathed between kisses.

Sinking down to his knees, Viktor looked lovingly into her eyes and asked the question that she least expected, the one that she never imagined possible with them caught in the height of the war.

"I love you so much, Hermione. My heart has been so heavy with you away from me. When I am called by the Order or am on a mission to derail the Death Eaters, I come home longing to see you, to tell you of my successes, and ask for help with the struggles. There is no way to know how long the war will last. But I know that my love for you will remain. So for however long this war continues, and for however long we live to fight and celebrate our victories, I want to have you as my wife. Hermione, the first and only woman I have ever loved, will you marry me?"

They eloped in the middle of the night. For the first time since their journey began, Hermione was absent from Harry and Ron's planning for the upcoming search. Instead, she and Viktor secluded themselves, surfacing only to collect food from the kitchen before returning to his rooms.

At week's end, Hermione reluctantly said goodbye to Viktor. It was sad, but necessary as they both wanted to find an end to the war.

Hermione redoubled her efforts to help Harry defeat Voldemort after the secret ceremony, knowing the conclusion of the war would be the only way to live in peace. Unfortunately, those efforts resulted in being captured and tortured by Bellatrix Lestrange at Malfoy Manner. A thousand thoughts ran through her mind as she tried to be strong. One fleeting thought emerged before she passed out that she was 'late'.

*Waking to Fleur's ministrations, Hermione tried to push her hands away, resisting the potions being offered to her. In a moment of clarity, Fleur realized that Hermione was lucid; shooing Bill and Ron out of the room, she used her wand to cast the definitive spell. In a motherly tone that Hermione had never heard from the French woman, Fleur convinced Hermione that it would be better for both her and the baby if she was strong and she accepted the modified version of the pain and healing potions.*

*While they longed to see one another again, Viktor physically cringed at the condition that he found his lovely wife in when Charlie and Bill Weasley contacted and brought him to Shell Cottage.*

*Through the semi-darkened room, Hermione watched Viktor near her bed. He looked as broken as she felt. His lower lip quivered, like he was fighting back tears when he came into the room. Her proud husband's stance seemingly shrinking, shoulders slumped and moving slowly as though he had been the one tortured. Her mind was willing her tired body to reach out to him but her arm resisted. Her limbs felt like lead, too heavy to move.*

*As he perched on the tiniest edge of the bed, she felt him gently lift the hand nearest to him, her left. His callused hand softly rubbed around her ring finger, undoubtedly thinking of the few days in which they each wore their wedding bands before securing them in a locked trunk in Viktor's rooms. It had been too dangerous for either of them to suddenly be found with such revealing jewelry. Viktor's foresight undoubtedly kept their marriage private since it would have only spurred Bellatrix Lestrange further into her crazed torture.*

*When Hermione woke from a sleep she didn't remember entering, some of her strength had returned. Her eyes met his as she gave him her best smile. Even that hurt, but she wanted to show that she appreciated his presence.*

*Slowly, he brought a basin of warm water and cloth to her side and began to wash her, gingerly lifting her arms, wiping carefully down the length of her legs. She watched the muscles in his arms contract as he used his considerable strength to raise her body, with his large hand cradling her head, to run the warm rag along the back of her neck. His gentleness and devotion heartened her; soon she was holding onto him, leaning into his solid chest.*

*They whispered their love for one another. He said over and over how sorry he was that she had been hurt and he'd been unable to do anything about it.*

*"Viktor, I'm alright," Hermione soothed when she felt his body begin to tremble. She wasn't okay, but she would be. And, at the sound of Viktor's tears, she knew reassurance was what he needed most. Very rarely had she seen a man cry, and never Viktor. It tore at her heart to hear him in pain, even though it was out of worry and concern for her rather than himself.*

*After a few minutes, Viktor composed himself and they lay in bed together. He held her closely, though with a loose grip so as not to hurt her tired body.*

*In the midst of a long stretch of silence, Hermione began to speak quietly. "Viktor, do you remember the week we spent with you at the castle?"*

*He couldn't help but grin at her timid question. Of course he remembered. Marrying the love his life wasn't easy to forget. Their honeymoon . . . now thoughts of those days and nights brought out a full blown smile. "How could I forget, Mrs. Krum?"*

*She smiled at his use of her new name, though she blushed when he continued.*

*"Is it perhaps that 'you' have forgotten and need me to refresh your memory when you regain your strength?"*

*His teasing caused her face to flush brightly. A week with her husband had hardly been enough time to be fully comfortable with the playfulness and innuendo that she knew would come with time. Glancing up at him, she managed to say, "Um, well, yes, perhaps. No! I mean I haven't forgotten, it's just . . ." He cut off her nervous ramblings with a kiss that left her momentarily wondering what they had been discussing.*

*His quiet voice rumbled lowly as he reminded her of the initial question.*

*"Viktor," she took his hand in hers, "I'm pregnant."*

*The shock at her words stunned him. His mind was whirling, thought after thought competing for attention as flashes of their honeymoon drifted into the horrors he imagined from Malfoy Manner; those thoughts led to panic and fear for their unborn child. Then, a beautiful image pushed the others aside, one where their small family was safely tucked away in the castle that they would call home once this terrible war ended.*

*"Viktor . . . Viktor . . ." Hermione tried several times to get his attention. It wasn't until she moved his hand to lay on her stomach that he was roused.*

*All of the emotions that were coursing through him burst forth as his lips collided with hers. He vowed to Hermione and their newest Krum that he would do all in his power to make a safer world for him. Him. Even with the news of Hermione's pregnancy only moments old, Viktor laid claim to their child, referring to him in the masculine form.*

*They drifted in and out of sleep, spending their waking moments dreaming of their future.*

*Neither knew that the final battle would be converging on them within the next few days. The inevitable confrontation that would signal then end of this awful, bloody war was closer ta hand than either could image. Their departure from Shell Cottage separated them again: she toward London and he back to Bulgaria.*

*As Hermione and the others left the room of Requirement and the Order began to converge on Hogwarts' castle, there were tides of people passing in the hallways. From the third floor corridor, Hermione saw a sea of red moving up the nearest staircase. Dressed in their Durmstrang capes, Viktor led the Bulgarians as they prepared to throw themselves into the battle. Their target the Death Eaters approaching from the West.*

*Viktor and Hermione met, only once, passing in the corridor while moving in opposite directions. Their eyes conveyed what their voices could not with the noise surrounding them. This brief moment of connection was followed by Viktor lovingly placing his hand on her stomach; the tiniest bulge that he would have been hard-pressed to find lay cradled tenderly by his strong hand. The kiss, their last, was full of more words than could be expressed in a lifetime. Turning quickly, he led his Durmstrang brothers to secure protection for them all.*

*She had to find him.*

*Then, Hermione saw the red of his cape, the one that he'd wrapped around her bare shoulders the night of the Yule Ball those years ago, the one that heartened her when she knew he would be helping to defeat Voldemort, the one that now covered a lifeless body on the farthest house table in the Great Hall.*

*She knew it was his, distinguishable from the others by the tiny Hogwarts crest sewn onto the hem of the cape. Dumbledore had given them to both Viktor and Fleur as champions competing in the Triwizard Tournament. If she looked closely enough, the charmed Gryffindor Lion emblem could be seen moving among the others on the school's embroidered shield.*

*Her breath caught in her chest, a sob choking her and making it nearly impossible to swallow. Her world seemed to shatter . . . there, a few meters away lay her husband.*

*As if in slow motion, her heavy feet formed a detached cadence . . . left . . . right . . . left . . . right. Closer and closer she came to the end of the small world that had been secured for their little family only moments ago.*

The red cape was there, an arm's length away, calling to her. Even though she dreaded looking beneath its canopy, it somehow felt important for her to see his face one last time.

Hot, angry tears were now pouring down her face. Raising a trembling hand, Hermione closed in on the once beautiful fabric of Viktor's red cape.

"Hermione." A low, rumbling voice spoke from behind her. "Don't look . . . you have enough visions that will haunt you without adding this one."

Her muscles were so tense. Allowing her hand to hover, she waited for the voice to speak again.

"Hermione," he placed his large hands atop her shoulders, "love, please listen to me."

Turning quickly, faster than her exhausted muscles should have been able to move, she spun and found herself now being held by the strong arms of her husband. Viktor. "What . . ."

"Shh, love, it's over."

"But . . . I . . ." Hermione choked over her words as tears continued to spill down her cheeks, "I thought . . ."

Her gesture to the still form lying on the table drew Viktor's attention again. He pulled her even tighter into his chest as it dawned on him what she expected to find beneath his cape.

With a quiet, shaking voice, he whispered, "I was with him when he fell. His injuries were too great, and I couldn't let his family him so broken."

"Viktor." Hermione repeated his name over and over, seeking reassurance that he truly was alive.

"I'm here," he soothed. "I'm here, and I'm staying here with you. We can finally have a safe life . . . you, me, and our son."