

# Best for Last

*by Savva*

A chance encounter that led to a crush, passion, hurt and finally hope.

## One

*Chapter 1 of 1*

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Written for SSHG gift exchange.

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Best for Last

*Prologue*

*Spinner's End, Autumn 1998*

"Are you sure?" Lucius asked, warily eyeing a porcelain doll that bore an uncanny similarity to Lily Potter. It was seated on a wobbly old table, and the way its green eyes glowed in the dim candlelight made him uneasy. "Why you made it so creepily realistic is beyond me," he remarked irritably, squinting at his friend, who was slouched in a chair, his fingers tightly wrapped around a glass of Firewhisky. "As far as I'm concerned, you could have used anything as a vessel. Why go to such lengths and create a porcelain copy of a dead woman?"

Severus reached for the doll and gently caressed its pale, porcelain cheek. "A woman I love, Lucius. It was meant to be symbolic," he rasped, his vocal cords still unable to produce a proper sound. "But as the whole concept of love is foreign to you, don't try too hard to understand. You may unwittingly hurt that fragile mind of yours."

"Symbolic?" Stifling the urge to roll his eyes and smoothing his already perfectly-coiffured hair instead, Lucius murmured, "Melodramatic is more like it," and walked to the shabby sofa. He heard the sound of a glass being slammed on the table right before Severus' fingers gripped the collar of his shirt, forcefully turning him around. Watching Severus' face as it writhed in fury, Lucius thought that making that comment hadn't, perhaps, been the wisest choice. He also wondered how on earth Severus managed to move so quietly and rapidly even in such an impaired state.

"None of this would have happened if you ... pompous, selfish, dim-witted bastard that you are ... hadn't interfered," Severus hissed, and his Firewhisky-reeking breath washed over Lucius' face, reminding him how unstable his friend had been lately. "I was supposed to die. I had to. I yearned for death, do you understand?"

"Yes, I've heard that before," Lucius agreed calmly, locking his eyes on Severus. "However, with me being a selfish bastard, as you so expressively put it ... though I don't agree with the dim-witted bit ... I wasn't about to lose my only friend. I'd lost enough in this war, and losing you wasn't in my plans. Now, answer the question, Severus: are you sure you want to do this?"

Severus released his shirt and, stepping back, muttered, "Yes."

"You do realise that to reverse this spell will be almost impossible?" Lucius said, frowning. He knew that it was useless to try to change Severus' mind, and yet he kept trying.

Severus returned to his chair, finished his drink in one gulp, and said, "Perhaps it would be nice of you to stop wasting your breath and finally start. We've talked about it more than enough, and you agreed. So, if you please ..." he made a theatrical gesture of invitation, "... it's time to see if you really are as true a friend to me as you claim."

Lucius sighed, "As you wish," and picked up an ancient-looking leather-bound book. Opening it on a bookmarked page, he skimmed over the text and shifted uneasily. "Severus," he started again.

"Do it," barked the wizard impatiently.

"Stubborn git," Lucius muttered under his breath and drew his wand. Clearing his throat, he said, "Place your left hand on the vessel."

Severus placed his palm over the doll's pale hand, and Lucius could swear that the moment Severus touched its porcelain fingers, its face lit up with an eerie smile. A chill made its way down Lucius' spine, and stepping closer, he did a double take. He scrutinised the doll for a long moment, but it looked at him with soulless green eyes, and its face was blank. Eventually deciding that it was just a trick of the candlelight, he whispered, "Salazar help me," and, pressing his wand to Severus' chest, began to chant an incantation.

*Forgive Me First Love*

*Autumn 2005*

Hermione pushed the toe of her wellies into the puddle and pensively watched the ripples she created run over the glassy surface, momentarily distorting the reflection of the cloudy sky. It had been raining for the past five days, and she, like everyone else in London, had expected to be stuck inside this weekend. Yet, miraculously, Saturday morning met her with patches of sunlight and a surprising amount of warmth for October, impelling her to rush outside right after she finished her usual weekend chores. Glimpses of the sun glistening on the wet pavement and brightly-coloured leaves twirling in the air tempted her further and further down the streets, and she eventually ended up in the park, sitting on a cool iron bench, watching the clouds.

Admittedly, it wasn't the most intelligent way of passing the time. But since she used her brain more than enough on weekdays, she was entitled to a short break. Her career was at its crest, and she enjoyed her work in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. She felt that she was in the right place, making a difference and, perhaps, even history. Given her knack for making her workload immense though, she was under a lot of pressure. Hence, if she had any sense of self-preservation, she ought to allow herself to watch the sky idly every now and then. It felt good just to sit there and feel the wind and the soft warmth of the autumn sun on her skin. It felt right, peaceful.

She loved autumn and, to be honest, she didn't mind the rain that much. Grey, rainy days were perfect for work. Also, they made her appreciate those rare sunny moments when the air became crisp and lucid, and the sky turned from dull to that impossibly bright azure she loved so much.

She lifted up her head and gazed at the sky. Yes, she still loved that colour, even though it always reminded her of Ron's eyes, which made her feel melancholic. For years, even a glimpse of something bright blue would fill her heart with a feeling of such absolute love that she was sure it would last for eternity. She truly did believe that after what they had gone through during the war, they would have lived happily together until their last day. Alas, fairy tales don't happen in the real world, even for wizards and witches. She sighed. Who would have thought that she would be the one who would stop loving him? The one who would be forced to explain to her teary-eyed then-husband that her love for him had died, and that she had to move on in order to be able to breathe freely again? That talk had been the most difficult task in her entire life and, even now, two years later, her throat tightened painfully every time she recalled it.

A pair of young lovers passed by, drawing Hermione's attention by the almost palpable sense of happiness around them. Oblivious to the world with their eyes locked on each other and their fingers intertwined, they paused for a kiss and, giggling, continued down the path. Hermione watched their retreating silhouettes with envy. She was ready to feel again. She yearned so badly for that fluttering feeling in the pit of her stomach and craved for those first, not-so-accidental but oh-so-electrifying touches that are nothing more but light brushes of fingertips. She wanted to feel that first kiss that had to be followed by suffocating awkwardness, making it even more perfect. Her heart thirsted for strolls in the park and sleepless nights and ... tears, though they would be happy ones, of course. Or maybe not. It didn't really matter, as long as that aching hollowness in her heart was filled.

Yes, she had been alone long enough, she thought, and stamped her foot in a puddle to accentuate the fact that she was ready for a new man in her life. This time, however, she didn't have an opportunity to watch the ripples on the surface. A dark figure stepped into her line of vision, and she heard a familiar voice ... though it sounded a bit huskier than she remembered ... saying mockingly, "Well, well, well, is it really Hermione Granger, the best and, shall I say, the brainiest part of the Golden Trio, playing in the park like a child of three?"

Squinting against the sun, she glanced up, meeting the pair of black eyes observing her. It took her a moment to collect herself ... he had caught her off guard. Fortunately, at twenty-six she wasn't easily intimidated and, after the first shock of encountering her former professor after so many years had ebbed, she smiled and said, "Is that really you, Professor? What a pleasant surprise."

The wizard's lips curled in a predatory smirk. He gave her a quick once over, allowing his gaze to linger on her chest, and said, "Indeed."

*Crazy for You*

*Two weeks later*

Hermione glanced at the clock and pouted: time was creeping by especially slowly today. She had been all dolled up and ready for about an hour now, and it was still only five o'clock. "Two more hours," she grumbled to herself and spun in front of the mirror, inspecting for the umpteenth time her dress and hair. One particularly unruly curl caught her attention, and she tried to wrestle it back where it belonged. It didn't work, and she gave up on it. After glancing for the last time at her reflection and deciding that she looked all right, Hermione sighed and walked to her desk.

*Perhaps a bit of work will help to pass the time*, she thought, sitting down and looking at the proposal for a new amendment she had been working on lately. For a while, she tried to focus on the words on the parchment. Her consciousness, however, wasn't interested in reading and working in the slightest, unwaveringly steering her thoughts to the wizard she was supposed to see tonight. Frankly, she still couldn't wrap her mind around the bizarre fact that she was about to go on a date with Professor Snape.

*Severus*, she corrected herself and grinned. How they had managed to get on a first-name basis so quickly was another mystery to her. She would never have thought that Severus could be so ... civil. Actually, they'd had a really nice and stimulating conversation that Saturday in the park. Although, naturally, Hermione had done most of the talking, Severus had been unexpectedly forthcoming. *Ah, the joy of having a brilliant opponent.* She sighed dreamily. That wit, dry humour and a little bite in every phrase ... Merlin, she hadn't had so much fun in ages. Also, he had listened to her babbling about her work, and that was ... exhilarating, even though his eyes had wandered from her lips to the tiny mother-of-pearl buttons on her shirt every so often.

That afternoon, they'd strolled through the park for what felt like hours, ending up in a cosy bakery, where they spent the rest of the evening, drinking perfectly-brewed Earl Grey and eating pastries. Hermione giggled at the recollection: Severus Snape eating pastries had been a truly surreal sight. Surreal and very enjoyable.

The dim light of the café hadn't deterred her from taking the opportunity to study his appearance. He looked heaps better than when she had seen him the last time, right after he was released from St. Mungo's. The haunted look in his eyes was gone, and he appeared content. Also, she had to confess that somehow, to her, he seemed

ridiculously handsome. Perhaps she had breathed too much ozone or something, but she had always been a sucker for a white shirt, black trousers and black frock coat combination. All that paired with Severus' long raven locks (which, by the way, weren't greasy nowadays) and the smooth huskiness of his baritone was an absolute killer, and she had been almost hyperventilating even before he had 'accidentally' brushed her fingers with his.

"Oh God," she groaned, as her cheeks reddened at the thought of her reaction to him. She'd eyed him shamelessly for the whole evening. Thank goodness, she'd had enough self-control not to drool. It had been pathetic, really.

"Pathetic indeed," she muttered, shaking her head. She barely knew him, for Merlin's sake, and yet she wanted to climb the man like a tree. When had she become so absurdly oversexed? Maybe two years without a wizard could do that to a witch. Well, to be fair, she had known Professor Severus Snape for quite a while. Also, she had talked with Harry about him on numerous occasions, and she thought that he was nothing short of a hero. So, she definitely knew one side of him, and she certainly wasn't against learning more about the other, hidden one. Much, much more.

Mind you, he hadn't made it easy for her. The bloody wizard had really taken his sweet time before contacting her again. Ten days! After spending a magical afternoon with her that Saturday and promising to owl her the next day, he'd had the nerve to disappear for nearly two weeks. Bastard! His silence had driven her bonkers. Then again, she'd got all the more excited when she saw his owl at her windowsill. He'd apologised for the silence in his missive and asked her to join him for dinner in the hottest spot in town. Hermione, in turn, had made him persuade her a little, but eventually, after a bit of back and forth, she'd agreed. She would have been a fool not to, and perhaps it had been his nefarious plan from the beginning ... to drive her crazy and then ask her for a proper date. If that was the case, it had worked.

Glancing again at the clock, Hermione grimaced and forced herself to focus on her proposal. As the thought of equal rights for magical creatures filled her mind, she forgot about time.

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Severus strode out of the Floo right on the seventh beat of the clock, looking breathtakingly dapper in his black frock coat, and Hermione thought that punctuality was an extremely sexy trait in men. Pausing by the fireplace, he let the silence hang, simply watching her. Suddenly feeling unsure and covering her nervousness with a bright smile, Hermione picked up her purse and scurried towards him. "It's nice to see you again, Severus," she said, inwardly cringing at how awkward she sounded.

"The pleasure is all mine," Severus replied with a slight nod.

Unable to stop herself and knowing damn well that she was babbling, Hermione asked, "Do I look all right? I haven't been to Bella Luna before, so I didn't know exactly what to ..."

Severus cut her short by raising his arm. Successfully shushing her, he took a moment to study her from head to toe. His appreciative hum indicated that he liked what he saw, and when his eyes finally returned to her face, he stated, "You look most ... agreeable, today."

Somehow his choice of words struck her as amusing, and she snorted. "Well, thank you for such an eloquent compliment, Severus."

Unruffled by her sarcasm, he offered her his arm and murmured, "Shall we?"

"Sure." She allowed him to lead her to the Floo. He covered her hand with his, and the rough wool of his coat brushed against her bare shoulder. She shivered in surprise that such a simple thing could be so arousing. *Calm yourself, for Merlin's sake*, she said to herself, and tried to still her racing heart.

Minutes later, they were surrounded by the delicious smell of fine Italian cuisine and the boisterousness of a busy restaurant on Saturday night and, for a moment, Hermione thought that they wouldn't be able to hear each other in all that clamour. Luckily, Severus had been prudent enough to reserve a booth in the farthest part of the restaurant, ensuring their privacy.

They spent a few minutes discussing what to order, and Severus gallantly offered some suggestions. Of course, as she had expected, the food was perfect, and their conversation, once again, was delightful. They talked about him a bit more this time, and she finally found out what had happened to his house at Spinner's End. It was unlike the story of his rescue, which had been publicised by the newspapers, probably because it had been Lucius who had rescued him. The blond peacock, as Hermione secretly called Malfoy when she saw him in the Ministry, had made sure to secure universal recognition of his loyalty to his heroic friend. Though to be fair, he had certainly needed it at that point after the war.

The story about Spinner's End, however, had always been somewhat unclear. She had heard many different theories about why, one autumn morning seven years ago, the house had been reduced to a pile of ash. Apparently, Severus had burnt it down himself. When she, bewildered, asked him why, he simply replied, "I disliked the place." He also surprised her with the fact that he had been brewing for Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes for the last six years. She had had no idea; George had never said a word, that sneaky prat.

Sipping wine and listening to Severus' voice, Hermione couldn't tear her eyes from his face. Of course, he wasn't conventionally handsome; she was still sane enough to recognise that. He still had that huge nose, and his teeth were far from perfect. She didn't care about all that, however, because, at that moment, his dark eyes were watching her with barely-concealed desire, setting her insides aflame. It felt euphoric to be desired again. She almost had forgotten how brilliant it could be.

Besides, an older wizard had never wanted her before. It flattered her that Severus Snape considered her attractive. Watching him, she couldn't help but fantasise how good he would be in bed. She was in lust ... it was as simple as that. Did she want something more to come out of this? Absolutely. But right now, the thought of his lips on her was making her blood run high, making it difficult to keep a proper façade. Actually, almost impossible. She couldn't wait for the moment when she would be able to put her hands on him. So naturally, when he, grinning wickedly, offered her dessert at his house, she eagerly agreed. He met her readiness with a satisfied smile and once again offering her his arm, he steered her from the restaurant. As they stepped into the back alley, the cold air bit into her skin and her breath created white, puffy clouds.

"It's quite chilly," Severus remarked, and wrapped the folds of his frock coat more tightly around his tall frame.

Hermione, surprised that he made no attempt to shield her from the icy October wind, drew her arms around her bare shoulders. She didn't have a chance to reflect on the incident, though, as Severus pulled her to him the next second.

"Ready?" he asked.

Basking in the warmth of his embrace, she nodded.

"Hold on, then," he whispered into her ear, and pressed her tightly to his chest as they spun into the void of Apparition. The scent of spices and sandalwood filled her nostrils, and clasping at his coat and hungrily breathing in his aroma, she realised that she was in over her head.

#### *Cold Shoulder*

She felt him easing down the zipper of her dress even before she managed to catch her breath. His cold fingertips skimming over her spine made her gasp and open her eyes. She tilted up her face and shivered; his gaze was positively smouldering.

"Kiss me," she whispered and rising on her tiptoes, tried to reach him, her hands desperately clawing at his shoulders, straining to bring his face down to her.

Severus didn't immediately comply with her request, instead deftly pushing her dress off her shoulders. As it slid to the floor, he kissed her jaw and murmuring, "You look nice," abruptly turned her around, giving Hermione an opportunity to observe a huge, four-poster bed. Apparently, the sneaky wizard had Apparated them directly to his bedroom. *Well, he definitely isn't beating around the bush.* A thought dashed through her head before her musings was cut short by Severus grinding his hips into her and making her gasp once more as she felt his hardened cock pushing between her buttocks. He glided his hands over her shoulders while his lips skimmed along her neck and continued trailing down her back. The sensation of his wool coat rubbing against her heated skin caused her to quiver, creating even more friction and driving her mad.

She was so fucking wet; it wasn't even funny.

Feeling his tongue licking her lower back in circling motion and his hands kneading her bottom, she moaned, "Don't tease, " arched her back and reached for him, tugging on his hair.

He muttered, "Impudent witch," and torturously slowly worked his way up, biting her earlobe in the process. "That's for hair-pulling," he rasped in that husky, sexy voice of his.

"You deserved that," she quibbled and, lifting her hand, pulled him down for a kiss. He allowed her lips to move over his but didn't make any effort to reciprocate. Puzzled, Hermione drew back a little bit, regarding him searchingly. Not noticing any signs of approaching rejection ... Severus' gaze was just as hot as before ... she decided to try again. Next instant however, she was thrown on the bed, causing her to yelp in surprise. Towering over her and keeping his eyes locked on her, Severus unbuttoned his coat, sending it to the chair with a flick of his hand. His hungry mouth descended on her breasts a mere millisecond later as he ripped off her bra and knickers.

"Oh, God," she muttered, loving his onslaught and undeniably wanting more. "Don't stop!"

Fortunately, by the look of it, the wizard wasn't going to stop any time soon. Making sure to drive her legs wide open, he positioned himself between them and ran his fingers up and down her inner thighs while he feasted on her breasts. Circling his tongue around her erect nipples, he continued to torment her with his deft fingers, skimming lightly over the outer lips of her pussy. It felt nice but wasn't enough. Delirious with want, Hermione struggled to navigate his fingers by shifting, but alas, it didn't work. The wizard still stubbornly avoided the centre of her burning quim. Frustrated, she shouted, "Severus!" just as he plunged two fingers inside her. Lifting himself on his elbows, he smirked, thrusting his fingers into her relentlessly and at last, *at last*, putting his thumb over her clitoris and massaging it as well.

Gasping for air, Hermione was well on the way racing towards her orgasm when Severus abruptly stopped, gripped her hips and turned her over, commanding, "On your knees and elbows, witch."

Feeling disoriented and hot and needy, she awkwardly scrambled to her knees just in time for Severus to part her legs and enter her from behind. "Oh," she moaned as he attempted to drive himself home with one strong thrust. It didn't work.

"Too tight," he grouched and, clasping her hips, pulled out and drove in again. This time she was able to take him in fully. Severus let out a satisfied moan and began to move, setting an intense pace.

Already teetering on the brink, Hermione flew apart in mere minutes, collapsing on the bed and wailing "Severus" into a coverlet. Keeping his firm hold on her hips and maintaining his pace as she was clenching around his cock, Severus continued fucking her to his heart's content, eventually bringing her to another orgasm. Only then, he finally came, exploding deep inside her and filling her with his seed up to the brim.

Utterly exhausted, she crawled under the bedcover and closed her eyes, murmuring appreciatively when a hard and naked body crept close and spooned her.

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Next morning, she was awakened by Severus' cock nudging its way inside her. She moaned and arched her back, making him aware that she was awake. "Morning," he whispered, and his hot mouth sucked on the sensitive skin of her neck. Filling her with one hard thrust, he began to pound into her, palming her breasts and mercilessly pinching her nipples. Moving in unison with him and listening to his muffled groans, she could tell that he was close. Their position didn't provide enough friction for her though, and she reached between her thighs to massage her clitoris. Heeding her cue, Severus shifted them, turning her on her stomach and lifting her hips. The change of angle drove him deeper, and they came simultaneously a short while later. Withdrawing from her with a satisfied sigh and groaning, "So fucking good," Severus slumped on the bed near her and drew the covers over them. Hermione sighed and closed her eyes again, fully intending to spend the rest of the day in Severus' bed.

She must have dozed off, because the next time she opened her eyes, he was standing in the middle of the room, fully clothed. Slowly buttoning his coat, he observed her with a cool smile on his lips. Hermione drew herself to a sitting position. She sat up and asked, eyeing him in confusion. "Are you going somewhere?"

"I have to attend an orchid auction," he answered in a matter-of-fact manner.

"Oh." She blinked. "But ..." she faltered, not quite knowing what to say. "May I join you?"

He shook his head. "I don't think that would be prudent. Perhaps another time." He finished buttoning his coat and was clearly eager to leave. "You may take your time getting up, though. Look around, have some tea," he offered her politely.

Thinking that she managed to grasp his meaning, Hermione smiled. "I'll wait for you here, then."

Impatiently shifting from one leg to another, he glanced at the clock. "You may, if you're so inclined," he said, his voice laced with annoyance. "However, I won't be home any time soon. I have plans. Now, please excuse me." He turned on his heel and walked toward the door. He did pause at the threshold and, facing her once again, added, "Oh, almost forgot, thank you for yesterday and this morning. It was delightful. We definitely need to do that again. I'll owl you." And then he was gone, leaving Hermione utterly perplexed.

*Orchid auction? Really?*

For a long moment she stared at the open door and tried to understand what had just happened. Had she somehow misjudged his intentions? What on earth could his odd behaviour mean? Had it all been only an elaborate one-night stand? It certainly hadn't looked like that, not yesterday, nor today. He had said they needed to do it again, hadn't he? She sighed. Her slightly muddled brain didn't provide any explanation. In fact, it was difficult to focus since her body still hummed and quivered, not ready to abandon its state of postcoital bliss. Leaving her attempts to understand Severus until after the shower, Hermione forced herself to roll out of the bed and went to the loo.

Thirty minutes later, washed and dressed, she still had no explanation whatsoever. She eventually stopped trying, deciding that the next time she saw him ... if there was a next time ... she would make him explain himself.

Taking her purse, she went looking for the Floo. She moved through the corridor, walking past an empty kitchen that proved that Severus lived alone. It was an oddly soothing discovery, and she continued down the corridor, feeling slightly better. Soon, she entered a dining room with drapery-covered windows and a majestic, old-fashioned fireplace that occupied almost a whole wall. She took some powder from a mantel and was about to step into the Floo, when a shaft of sunlight at the other end of the hall caught her attention. Intrigued, she wandered toward the light. Passing a heavily warded door on her way, which, she assumed, led to Severus' brewing lab, she reached a sunny enclosed veranda. A greenhouse, to be precise.

Expecting to see some kind of herb garden, she pushed the glass door open and stepped inside. The air in the room was warm and humid and filled with the heady aroma of blooming tropical plants. She walked around, studying row after row after row of exotic flowers. "Well, at least he didn't lie about the orchids," she muttered and grimaced. Some of the orchids were nothing like the Muggles' version of the plant, and to Hermione they looked downright ugly and carnivorous, with their petals forming open mouths and their aerial roots slowly circling as if trying to attach themselves to her. The over-sweet odour of their blossoms made her head spin, and she could have sworn that she heard something hiss. Suddenly feeling uneasy, she held her breath as she backed out of the orangery and carefully closed the door.

On her way back, she felt even more puzzled than before. The fact that Severus grew flowers seemed especially odd to her. Somehow, his behaving like a git was more fathomable than his growing orchids. That sounded completely surreal, unless, of course, he used them for potions.

The roar of an activated Floo interrupted her contemplations, and a second later she found herself face to face with Lucius Malfoy. "Miss Granger," he exclaimed, his perfectly-shaped eyebrows arched in surprise, "what are you doing here?"

Hermione, not being in the mood to explain anything to him, stepped around him and once again grabbed some powder. "I was about to leave, Mr Malfoy. Have a nice day,"

she said coldly, and then added, "Oh, and by the way, Severus is not home. He went to an orchid auction."

She had already thrown the powder when she heard Lucius calling her. "Miss Granger! Wait!"

Annoyed, she turned around. "Is there anything you need from me?"

Lucius let out a throaty chuckle and said, "No, Miss Granger. On the contrary, I have something for you. A piece of advice, if you will."

"Yes?" Hermione glanced at him sceptically.

Lucius' face became solemn. "I'll be brief. If you're looking for love, Miss Granger ... and somehow, I'm sure that you are ... you won't find it here."

Now, it was Hermione's turn to chuckle. "Hmm," she huffed, "and why is that, may I ask?"

Lucius frowned. "I can't give you any more information, unfortunately. Just, please, believe my words; they will save you from imminent heartbreak."

Feeling even more irritated and frankly disgusted, Hermione stared at the blond wizard. "You have got to be kidding me. I can't believe that I'm having this conversation with you so many years after the war." She strode closer to him and, prodding his chest with her index finger, hissed, "Listen to me, Mr Malfoy. I'm not sure why Severus still counts you as a friend, but I couldn't care less what reservations you have about my blood status, and I assume this is what your so-called advice is about. I'm sure Severus doesn't care about that either. He loved a Muggle-born once, and he can love one again. Therefore, I would really appreciate if you stayed away from Severus and me with your supremacist's ideas." Stopping short of slapping Lucius' face, she turned around once again and marched toward the fireplace.

"Miss Granger, wait! You've completely misinterpreted my words. This is not about you," Lucius called after her.

Not listening to him, Hermione shouted her address and let the flame engulf her.

*Tired*

*The Ministry of Magic, Annual Yule Ball*

Leaning against the wall, Hermione watched Severus twirling Daphne Greengrass in the centre of the ballroom. Her eyes followed them as she struggled to gauge her feelings. She should have felt betrayed, furious, disgusted. In reality, however, she didn't feel so at all. She knew, of course, that those emotions would find and consume her aching heart later. At present, though, she felt numb and, frankly ... tired.

No, actually, that wasn't entirely true. She did feel one more thing. She felt disappointed ... disappointed in herself. Oh, what a fool she'd been. For three months, she had been running wild with the idiotic notion that she could make Severus love her. Well, not love (that would be unrealistic), but at least, care about her ... with the possibility of love later. Despite a multitude of signs indicating that Severus just wasn't into her, she had stubbornly, or stupidly, thought that there was something she could do to make him care. To make him see beyond the casual affair they had had for almost three months. Somehow, she convinced herself that their convenient sex would eventually grow into something else, something more. Alas, she'd been mistaken. It hadn't. Not for Severus, anyway.

Merlin knows, she had tried and tried and tried so hard. Too hard, even. She couldn't help it ... Severus had grown on her, and she had foolishly allowed it to happen. Why ... why hadn't she run far away from him after their first night together? Where had her famous brain been? Everything had been so clear on that first morning, and yet ... and yet ... here she was, three months later, watching him dancing with another witch and feeling numb and tired.

Looking back, she knew exactly why she'd ended up in love with him. She'd been alone for too long before she'd met him, and her heart had been as thirsty for love as her body for intimacy. She had been so focused on falling in love; she had consciously disregarded all the warning bells that had sounded in her mind. She hadn't had any desire to hear them.

Severus, oh, Severus ... he'd made it so easy to fall for him. He had been so refreshingly witty, so fucking brilliant in bed and so mysterious with his bloody orchids and cryptic remarks. She'd wanted to crack that mystery so badly; she hadn't even noticed how deeply she had sunk. How accustomed she'd become to their talks over dinner at restaurants. She couldn't get enough of their nights together. And truly, their evenings and nights had been almost perfect.

Alas, their mornings had been far from perfection. Thinking about it, she couldn't even pinpoint the reason. She only knew that, no matter how hot and passionate things had been during the night, in the morning, she had always been greeted by a cool and detached Severus. Of course, his indifference had hurt her. More than she'd wanted to admit, in fact. For God's sake, sometimes she'd thought that he cared more about his precious orchids than about her, and perhaps he had. Oh, how she hated those bloody flowers and the orangery. Once, she had even had a dream about destroying it. Now, eyeing Daphne's hair, which was appropriately decorated with small orchids, she thought that she really should have destroyed the whole blasted thing. It might have been fun. She knew better, of course: the culprit hadn't been the orangery or the orchids. It had been Severus and Severus alone.

Mind you, she had confronted him quite a few times. But each time, he had stared at her with such genuine surprise that it had made her question her own sanity and adequacy. According to Severus, they had a mutually-rewarding relationship, and no matter how hard she had tried to explain to him that it wasn't enough, she couldn't succeed. He had refused to understand. In fact, he had behaved as if the concept was foreign to him. Frustrated, she had usually stormed out of his house, only to receive an invitation for dinner the following Friday. By the time it arrived, she would have missed him enough to accept an invitation, and the whole devil's circle would repeat itself. She shouldn't have been so easily persuadable, but she really missed him each and every time. She had missed his voice, his mouth, his hands, and, bizarrely, even his cold eyes, because sometimes there had been something in them, something real, something warm. Or, maybe, it had only been a figment of her imagination.

Remarkably, she had never been able to make him angry as well, probably because he had never cared enough. "I'm such a fool," she muttered. Perhaps she should thank Daphne for opening her eyes. Just this morning, she had asked him about the Yule Ball, and he had answered, in that nonchalant manner of his, that he might or might not come. He hadn't offered to escort her, hadn't asked about her plans. In fact, he hadn't demonstrated any interest at all. Trying to be optimistic, she assumed that, given his dislike for public functions, he wasn't going to attend. Well, apparently, she couldn't have been more wrong. The wizard not only attended, but also brought a date.

Returning her attention to the twirling couple, Hermione decided that she should have listened to Malfoy, all those months ago. He had been right, after all; she hadn't found love with Severus. Ugh, she hated that blond bastard! Perhaps it was all his underhanded doing. She sighed. Even if it was, it didn't matter. She was done with Severus. She wasn't going to try any more, because, frankly, she was tired of trying.

*Melt My Heart to Stone*

The music ended just when Hermione reached a decision. Emerging from her hiding-place in the corner, she walked over, and smiling sweetly at Daphne, said, "May I interrupt you? It'll take just a minute." Daphne made a face but stepped aside nonetheless, perhaps noticing the dangerous glint in Hermione's eyes and not wishing to take any chances. She valued her life too much. With Daphne out of the way, Hermione turned to Severus and, without preamble, slapped him across the face. The unexpectedly resonant sound was followed by a sudden silence, and it seemed that everyone in the ballroom stopped breathing.

Severus stared at her speechlessly as a crimson handprint bloomed across his pale cheek. "What is the meaning of this?" he hissed, when his initial shock subsided. "What has got into you? Are you drunk?"

To her disappointment, even after she had struck him in public, he still wasn't furious. Somehow, she had hoped to elicit a stronger reaction. She gave a bitter chuckle and shook her head. "Oh my, look at you, you can't even get angry at me properly. Am I not worthy even of your fury? Who are you? Are you even alive?"

Severus opened his mouth to respond, but Hermione, feeling fed up, stopped him. "You know what, save your breath for your new bimbo. I'm done here." She spun around

and stormed out of the room. Running in her heels was hard, and she definitely didn't want anybody see her crying. So she paused to take her black pumps off, and then scurried through the Ministry corridors.

She had almost reached the west wing Floo, when she heard hurried footsteps and Harry's voice calling her. "Hermione, wait," he called again when he rounded the corner and saw her.

Hermione stopped and watched him rushing toward her. His dress robes billowed behind him, and his hair was as messy as usual. His face bore a concerned expression, and she stifled a sigh, anticipating being bombarded with gazillions of questions. "Hey," she said softly when he was close enough. "Sorry, I didn't make it to the table tonight. I got ... sidetracked." She smiled guiltily and added, "How is everybody?"

Harry waved his hand impatiently, demonstrating that he wasn't going to fall for her clumsy attempts to navigate their conversation away from the drama he had just witnessed. "Are you all right?" he asked, pushing his glasses up and focusing his worried gaze on her.

Hermione shrugged. "Not at the moment, but I'll be fine. I just need to be alone for a while."

Harry readily nodded. "Let me just warn Ginny that I won't come back, and we can go."

"No, Harry, no." Hermione caught his arm just as he was about to send a Patronus. "You're staying here. I need to be completely alone. Truly. I'll tell you everything tomorrow. I promise."

A shadow of hurt flashed in Harry's eyes, but a second later, worry once again filled them. "Are you sure you don't need to talk, to rant, to cry? I can just sit there quietly and listen. We've done that before. Remember?"

"I know, Harry, I know. I swear we'll do it the first thing in the morning. I'll come to Grimmauld Place at ten."

Harry sighed uneasily. "All right. We won't be late tonight. Promise me that you'll call if anything ..."

"I promise." Hermione gave him a quick peck on the cheek and turned to the Floo.

"If you're not at our house by breakfast, I'll come and get you," he called after her as she stepped into the flames.

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Hermione's tears had just begun to fall when she heard her Floo roar. She wiped her wet cheek with her sleeve and began to say, "Harry, please, we just talked "

"Miss Granger."

The familiar drawl made her jump from the sofa, swivel around and draw her wand. Staring at Malfoy in bewilderment, she shouted, "What are you doing here?" Pointing her wand at him, she demanded an explanation, "How did you find me? Have you come here to gloat? Because if so, you'd better move fast before I show you exactly how unwelcome you are in my house."

Lucius raised his hand in a pacifying gesture. "Miss Granger, please calm down, I'm not here to gloat or do anything malicious. I'm here as Severus' friend. I found your address in the Ministry directory."

Hermione lowered her wand. "Why are you here, then?" she said wearily, feeling the beginning of a terrible headache pulsing behind her eyes.

Lucius came closer. "First of all, please forgive me for this unsolicited visit. However, in the present circumstances, I believe that I mustn't guard Severus' secret any longer."

Hermione frowned and, warily eyeing Lucius, said, "What are you talking about?"

Lucius, now sure that he had her attention, went to the nearest armchair and said, "May I?"

She nodded. "You may, but don't get too comfortable."

Lucius muttered, "Such a feisty witch," and settled in the chair. It was only then that she noticed that he was holding a bundle wrapped in white cloth.

"What is this?" she asked, when he placed it on a coffee table.

"Patience, Miss Granger, we'll get to it in a minute. However, let me begin by assuring you that there is nothing between Daphne and Severus. I know that is important to you. Severus came to the ball only because I asked him to, and as for Daphne ..." He grinned. "Just believe me when I say that she isn't into Severus' type."

Hermione eyes widened, and all she could say was, "Oh."

"Well, now, with that out of the way, I want to return to our conversation three months ago. I'm certain you still remember what I said to you?"

"Yes." She nodded again and sat down on the sofa.

"What I tried to tell you then, perhaps rather inarticulately, was that Severus couldn't love you. In fact, he can't love anybody. He just doesn't have that ability at the moment."

She gasped as the words sank in, and the hair on her nape stood on end. She could almost feel the presence of the old magic. Focusing her eyes on the bundle, she asked again, "What is this?"

Lucius grunted, shifted closer to the table and began to unwrap the white cloth, simultaneously explaining, "This is a vessel, which, as you have already probably guessed, contains Severus' ability to experience strong feelings. I'm sure that you've noticed, during your time with him, that Severus is not quite the man you used to know, and this is why." With that, he took off the cloth to reveal a porcelain doll.

Hermione peered at it and shuddered ... there, in front of her, was a porcelain replica of Lily Potter. "Oh my God," she whispered. "It looks like Harry's mum."

Lucius grimaced. "Yes, it does, and please don't ask me why."

"B... but how and what was the purpose of that?"

"It was one of the biggest mistakes of my life, Miss Granger. I still can't forgive myself for agreeing to this madness." He pointed at the doll. "Though, seven years ago, it didn't seem such a horrible idea. Severus was miserable then, condemning me for saving him from that nasty creature. He didn't want to live, and I was afraid of losing him, this time for good. Hence, when he asked me to cast the spell, I agreed. I thought it was better than battling with his constant depression and suicidal thoughts. So I cast it. I was also supposed to destroy the vessel. But, as you can see, I didn't."

"What kind of spell did you cast? Is it reversible?"

"It's an old spell that our ancestors used for healing broken hearts. A somewhat simplistic approach, I must say. Severus found it in an ancient book and got obsessed with the idea of living without the possibility of falling in love, ever again. Fortunately, it is reversible. However, there is a condition that has to be met." He paused, and

Hermione's heart tightened painfully. "Before I go any further, I ought to ask you, Miss Granger. Do you love him?"

She drew a shuddering breath, and her throat went dry. "Why ... why do you need to know that?"

"Because, Miss Granger, the spell can be cast only by a true friend, which unfortunately turned out to be the case with me, and broken only by a true love." Lucius fixed his grey eyes on her. "So, let me ask you again, do you love Severus?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"Good." He rose. "My mission is over then."

Hermione scrambled to her feet. "What? Wait! What am I supposed to do? What will happen?" she shouted frantically, and then as one more thought came to her, added, "Will he remember me?"

"If you decide to destroy the vessel, the best thing to do is to burn it." He glanced at the doll with disgust. "Severus will feel as if he woke up from a seven-year-long dream. Regarding your other question, alas, I cannot tell you anything optimistic. I simply don't know. Perhaps you should be ready for the worst and consider the possibility that Severus may not only forget you but also be still in love with Lily Potter." He walked around the table and squeezed her shoulder. "I'm sorry. I think you have to decide. Do you want him to become himself again? Do you want him to be able to love and truly live, even if it means he may not be interested in you?"

"Would you do it, if you were me?" she whispered.

Lucius remained silent for a moment, and then, after clearing his throat, said, "Miss Granger, seven years ago I lost my friend. The shell you know is not Severus. It's a weak, diluted copy of him. Having *this* after saving him from death has been excruciating, to say the least. I would love to have my friend back, and if you choose to release him, I shall be forever grateful. I've done my part. I saved the vessel from the fire. Now you have a decision to make. I hope you will make the right one." He squeezed Hermione's shoulder once again and Apparated before she could ask anything else.

Slowly, Hermione turned to face the doll. Its uncanny similarity to Lily Potter was downright creepy. However, it was its eyes that unnerved her the most. They were green, of course, and lifeless, but to Hermione, it appeared that they were gleaming with something buried inside. The more she looked at it, the more she believed that it was Severus' soul, trying to escape from its porcelain prison.

For hours she stared at the doll and, with every passing minute, its expression seemed more evil to her. And when the moon lit up her room, she could swear that its pale face contorted in a malicious smile. Overcome by a sudden revulsion, she grabbed the doll by its hair and threw it into the fire. An explosion of silver and gold sparkles burst from the fireplace, and a severe pain pierced her heart. Pressing a hand to her chest, she collapsed on the rug as unconsciousness claimed her.

#### *Best for Last*

A thunderous bellow of "Granger!" ripped Hermione from her slumber. She tore her eyes open and was met by a furious Severus, towering over her. Grasping her shoulders, he hoisted her from the floor and roared, "What. Have. You. Done?" Each word was accompanied by a strong shake.

Suddenly very awake and livid, Hermione slapped his hands off her and shouted, "I've set you free! So you can finally live, feel, shout and be furious. Glad it worked, and by the way, you're welcome."

Severus' nostrils flared. "I didn't ask for it. I was happy without those senseless feelings. I felt nothing here ..." he hit his chest with his clenched fist, "and I was content with that until you came along with your idiotic idea of rescuing me. I didn't need to be rescued, do you understand?"

Hermione's eyes began to burn. Stifling a sob that lodged in her throat, she replied, "I don't care, Severus. I really don't. You can hate me all you want, but I refuse to let you eke out such a miserable existence. I just can't do it. I ... I love you too much." The words flew from her mouth before she could stop them. She glanced at Severus, noticing with agony his dumbstruck expression. God, he hadn't got a clue. But, of course, she had been warned. Hermione drew a shaky breath, shook her head, and stepped back from him. "Get out, Severus. Please. Live your life and let me be."

For a long moment, the only sounds in the room were the tick of the clock and their breathing. Hermione purposely kept her gaze on her hands. She just couldn't bear to see his rejection. Especially now, when it would be real.

Severus was the one who broke the silence. Muttering, "Imprudent Gryffindor," he once again took hold of her shoulders and slammed his lips to hers. Roughly forcing her mouth open, he plunged his tongue inside, making her knees buckle. An eternity later, or so it seemed to her, he drew back and gazed into her eyes. "Teach me how to love, Granger. I know you can."

*Fin*

