

Something Sweet

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A series of vignettes leading up to a rather special Christmas day for Severus

One

Chapter 1 of 1

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~*~ *Eighteen Days to Christmas* ~*~

Monday morning wasn't Hermione's favourite time of the week. Judging by the expressions of her fellow staff members at the High Table, they all agreed whole-heartedly. There wasn't much conversation apart from requests to pass the milk or the sugar. Severus glowered at the coffee pot and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like "Billywig's piss", earning him a glare from Irma.

Hermione quickly hid a smile and was busying herself with buttering a second slice of toast when the post owls streamed into the Great Hall. Most headed for the four house tables, but two continued to the High Table. One, a pretty barn owl, delivered the *Daily Prophet* to Minerva who immediately disappeared behind it. The other, a tawny owl, dropped a parcel in front of Sean Keene. A smile appeared on the round face of the new Transfiguration teacher as he opened it.

'What have you got there?' Filius asked.

'Mince pies and Muggle Christmas biscuits. My sister bakes them every year.'

By now he had the attention of more or less the complete table. The staff was always quite attentive when it came to their colleagues' post. Severus was sitting directly in Hermione's line of vision. For a very brief moment, she saw an expression flicker across his face that looked like longing. Then his eyes met hers, and it was gone again, replaced by his customary scowl.

~*~ *Fifteen Days to Christmas* ~*~

Hermione watched from her office window as Hagrid towed the usual four large fir trees towards the castle entrance. No point delaying the inevitable any longer. She pulled two long lists from her desk drawer. The first Christmas cards was easily dealt with. She'd taken those people she didn't really care about off the list last year. Everyone still on it would get a card. The list was colour-coded according to distance, and a stack of Christmas cards was waiting for her. She put a reminder charm on the list. Something to deal with at the weekend.

Most items on the second list were already ticked off. Only a few smaller things and the pressie for little James were left, and she knew what she was going to get him. The Muggle puzzle would make his granddad happy as well. She could get it on Saturday when she planned to venture into pre-Christmas Muggle London. She made another note on the list to mail the package to her parents at the same time. Bit late but then they'd made noises about coming to the UK this year before deciding to stay in Australia after all. Hermione sighed. At least this way there wouldn't be the usual awkward conversation. Since this was her first year teaching, Minerva had made it very clear that she was expected to stay at Hogwarts over Christmas.

Right, back to the list. Only one name remained. She had scribbled it at the very bottom and only in brackets. Should she? Or shouldn't she? What if he got the wrong message? Though perhaps that would be exactly the right message.

She quickly shoved the list back into the drawer and postponed that particular decision again.

~*~ *Ten Days to Christmas* ~*~

'The second to last point on today's agenda are the proposed changes to the Care of Magical Creatures curriculum for the fourth years...'

Predictably, those changes only interested Minerva because she had no other choice, and Rubeus who had come up with them. As the discussion lagged on, Filius amused himself by making the notes on his parchment turn into tiny magical creatures which were chasing each other. He had just managed to direct his Diricawl to safety from the two pursuing kelpies when he heard a soft "tut."

He threw Irma a dirty look before he cancelled the spells. Hagrid and Minerva were still on about what should and shouldn't be taught to fifteen-year-old students. Outside, a December gale was howling around the castle with the occasional bout of rain splattering against the windows. Inside, it was warm, but the day had been long, and the last staff meeting of the term seemed to be dragging on forever. Filius cast a look around. It appeared his colleagues had all found their own ways to get through this. Rolanda was busy making doodles on her parchment. Probably Quidditch strategies or calculations which and how many games the Holyhead Harpies would have to win in order to win this year's league. Pomona was gazing out of the window, a dreamy expression on her face. Poppy looked plain bored. Severus was scowling at no one in particular, though occasionally his gaze would drift to the youngest member of staff, and his expression would soften just a little hardly at all unless one knew him really, really well. Now that was interesting.

Filius turned his attention to the object of Severus' interest. Miss Granger, no, Hermione was busy organising her notes, but ever so often she would look up and when he wasn't looking smile at Severus. Now that was even more interesting. Filius filed this information away for further reference. Speaking of reference, Irma was, as usual, more or less the only one really paying attention to the discussion. Give it a few more minutes before she challenged Minerva: she'd question her suggestions, and the ensuing bickering would entertain the rest of the staff as it had for years. Hmm, perhaps there was something else going on--

An elbow connected with his ribs.

'Ow, what was that for?' He glared at Pomona.

She tilted her chin in the Headmistress' direction. Filius looked up to find everyone staring at him. Apparently, Irma was foregoing her usual discussion ritual tonight.

'Well?' Minerva asked, her eyebrows nearly disappearing into her hairline.

'Erm, sorry. I must have been momentarily distracted.'

'Hmph. I was asking whether we could leave the organisation of this year's Christmas festivities in your capable hands as usual?'

Ah.

'Of course, Minerva,' he replied. 'Just leave everything to me.'

'Excellent. Thank you, Filius.'

~*~ *Nine Days to Christmas* ~*~

Filius was busy ticking items off his list as he placed the corresponding small bits of parchment on his desk. Yes, that was everything. He summoned a crystal bowl only used for special occasions before he prepared to cast a couple of charms. First the general ones, and then he started on a few extras. Just on selected pieces.

Knock, knock

'Who is it?'

'Poppy.'

Quickly finishing his spells, he said, 'Come in.'

Poppy appeared in his study just as he was directing the bits of paper into the bowl. She was carrying a bottle of wine. 'I thought we might start the celebrations a bit early,' she said with a grin.

'Sounds good.' Filius placed a piece of red cloth over the bowl before putting it on a shelf. 'There. All done.'

They were well into the second bottle and reminiscences of Christmas celebrations past when Poppy frowned. 'Now I know what's been bothering me all along.'

'Huh?'

'What were you doing with those bits of paper earlier?' She peered at him over the rim of her wine glass. 'Not trying your hand at matchmaking again, are you?'

He had the grace to look sheepish. 'It did turn out all right for Rolanda and Wilhelmina.'

'No thanks to you. Those two only had eyes for each other, anyway. And remember what happened when you tried to pair up Albus and Minerva?'

'They would have been a good match,' muttered Filius.

Poppy snorted. 'Apart from the tiny inconvenient gender issue. So, who do you plan to help on their way to happiness this time?'

A sly grin appeared on Filius' face.

~*~ *Seven Days to Christmas* ~*~

Diagon Alley was teeming with people loaded with parcels, bustling from shop to shop. Occasionally, a heated discussion erupted. 'No, Jack, I'm not shrinking those bags. I'll never get the wrinkles out of that dress again. Don't make such a fuss just because I asked you to carry something for me.'

'Muuuuuum, I want another Chocoball!'

Hermione tried to tune out the cacophony of voices and the constant bustling around her as best she could and focus on her own shopping instead. After nearly two hours of this, her feet were aching, her shoes, despite cushioning charms, were too tight, and she was starting to get a headache from all the noise and all the people. With a weary sigh, she pulled out her list again. Her heart gave a little leap of joy when she realised that all the items were now ticked off. Almost all, that was. She stared at the name she had scribbled at the very bottom.

'Ow.'

'Oops, sorry, love. Didn't see you standing there.' The elderly witch who had just bumped into her looked as tired as she felt.

'It's all right,' Hermione said and moved out of the way, a bit closer to the window of Madam Primpernelle's. She consulted her list again and came to a decision. Now

determined, she made her way back through the Leaky Cauldron into pre-Christmas Muggle London.

Which turned out to be just as mad as Diagon Alley.

Perhaps more so as people couldn't shrink their purchases or cast protective charms around them. She decided to get the puzzle for James first. Of course only because Regent street was closer, not because she might still be dithering about the last item on her list. Hermione smiled proudly at her own deductive reasoning before she braced herself for the mayhem that was Hamleys only the best for her godson.

Once she'd survived the throngs of noisy, grumpy children and their even grumpier parents and resisted the urge to cast a few wandless hexes at the most obnoxious, there was no more reason to postpone what she had set out to do, so she joined the masses of people heading for Oxford Circus station.

The tube was jam-packed with other Christmas shoppers, tourists and all sorts of people, so that there was barely standing room. Hermione wrinkled her nose as the man next to her sneezed, followed by a fit of coughs. She was glad to change trains at Paddington, though the next one wasn't much better; at least this time she was only accosted by the smell of a rather pervasive after-shave rather than viruses. Still, she was relieved when she finally arrived at Ladbroke Grove. It had started to rain, yet she enjoyed the short walk to Books for Cooks.

Entering the bookshop made up for all the hassle. There were shelves from floor to ceiling all crammed with books. A squishy sofa was tucked into a corner, and delicious smells of coffee and pastries were wafting from the small café at the back.

Hermione's hopeful look turned into one of disappointment when she realised that every single seat was taken and nobody looked in a hurry to leave. No coffee, then. The selection of cookbooks on the shelves more than made up for it, though. She had never seen so many books on cooking and baking in one place. It wasn't easy to get to the section on Christmas baking because she kept getting distracted by other books. The preliminary selection she took over to the sofa to peruse consisted of only eight books not being able to levitate things in a Muggle environment made things really inconvenient six of which were indeed Christmas baking books.

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'Sorry, but we're closing now.'

Hermione lifted her eyes from *Family Favourites: Quick and Tasty Christmas* She cast a forlorn look at the books in front of her. She had only made it through five out of the eight in the last two hours. How could she make an informed choice now? What if she chose the wrong book? What if *The Great British Bake-Off: Christmas* contained the perfect recipe, and she left it behind? What if it was in *Country Christmas Baking*? Or in the one called *Delia's Happy Christmas*?

The slightly impatient look the shop assistant cast her way put an end to her hesitation. She grabbed all five baking books and one of the cookbooks -*The Lazy Cook*-- and made her way to the till. As soon as she was out of the shop, she looked around and, seeing nobody on the dark, wet street, quickly shrank her purchases and put them into her bag. After a quick trip to Coffee Plant, she was more than happy to Apparate back to Scotland.

Back in her rooms at Hogwarts, after dinner and a shower, she Flooed Grimmauld Place, catching Harry just before he and Draco went out for the night.

'Can I borrow your kitchen?'

'My kitchen? But you don't cook.' Harry looked a bit surprised at her request.

'Just because I usually don't, doesn't mean I can't. And I'm not cooking, I'm baking.'

'Baking?' Harry still looked sceptical.

'Yes, baking. It's a Christmas surprise.'

From her view out of the fireplace, she could see Draco gesturing impatiently at Harry. 'Sorry, got to go. Wednesday afternoon all right?'

'Fine. Thank you.'

Hermione plopped down on her sofa and opened her cookbooks again. Maybe, some classics like mince pies and Christmas cake? Hm, a cake might be a bit over ambitious. Some gingerbread, perhaps? She opened another of the books. Chocolate and vanilla buttons sounded rather tasty, too.

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Something was nudging her arm. Her eyes snapped open to find Crookshanks trying to snuggle up to her side. There was a crick in her neck, and her toes felt like ice. Not surprisingly as the fire in the fireplace had gone out.

Hermione yawned. 'I think I'll decide tomorrow,' she announced as she stood up, scooped up a grumpy Crookshanks and headed for her bedroom.

~*~ *Two Days to Christmas* ~*~

There was a note on the kitchen table at Grimmauld Place.

Best of luck.

If it all goes awry you can always ask Molly for help.

Love, Harry

Hermione harrumphed as she sat her full bag down on a chair. Then, she took out her two cookbooks as well as the ingredients she had bought on the way. She started to mix butter and sugar, followed by eggs...Damn, she had forgotten to preheat the oven. She pulled out her wand, lifted it and put it back in her bag.

'Remember, baking the Muggle way here,' She muttered, dashing over to the oven to turn it on before she continued to prepare the dough.

Once the Christmas biscuits were happily baking, she took a deep breath. Somehow doing things without a wand hadn't seemed that complicated when she and her mum had baked in her childhood. But then, her mum was very good at multi-tasking and never forgot...With a little yelp, Hermione ran over to the oven once more to adjust the temperature.

The rest went smoothly, though the wand very nearly came out again when it was time to sprinkle the icing with a little glitter.

The first batch done, Hermione set to preparing the pastry for the mince pies. She had caved in and bought ready-made mincemeat; at least it was organic and vegetarian. Pushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear, she glanced at the recipe again. Had the instruction to let the pastry chill twice always been there? Oh well, she could use the time to pop out and buy a biscuit tin since it had just dawned on her that she needed something in which to put the biscuits.

Two hours and a few minor hiccups later, there were two bowls filled with Hermione-made Christmas biscuits and mince pies on the table. She left a couple as a thank you for Harry and packed the rest before she cleaned up.

~*~*Christmas Eve*~*~

The parcel was mocking her. It sat slightly apart from the rest little presents for some of her other colleagues and looked as uncertain as Hermione suddenly felt. She had charmed the biscuit tin to look like a little cauldron and placed it, filled with her biscuits and mince pies, on top of a packet of quality coffee, wrapped it all in silver and gold paper and attached a little card to it. She took up the package and turned it around. Perhaps she should give it to Severus later? Like next year?

Winky, who had apparently been put in charge of distributing the parcels through the school, chose this moment to pop into Hermione's room. Hermione gave her the little pile, still holding on to Severus' present.

Winky tilted her head to one side. 'Is this to be delivered as well?'

Feeling all of a sudden a bit silly, Hermione quickly put the package on top of the others in Winky's arms. 'Yes, please. Thank you, Winky.'

With a nod, the elf disappeared.

~*~*Christmas Day*~*~

Christmas day dawned bright and early. Too early for Hermione. She was woken by a ray of sunshine that peeked through her curtains. She peered at it with bleary eyes before she dived under her duvet again. She'd woken up twice during the night and hadn't been able to go back to sleep for quite a while. When she'd finally slept, she'd dreamt of Christmas biscuits chasing her all over the castle.

After she had made it out of bed, she spent most of the rest of the morning pacing around her rooms, annoying Crookshanks who would have preferred to spend the morning cuddled up to her, preferably with the occasional titbit coming his way.

By lunchtime, she felt faintly nauseous. 'What have I been thinking,' she murmured to herself as she tried yet another charm on her dress robe, briefly considering to skip Christmas dinner. But then, she couldn't avoid Severus forever. Might as well get it over with.

As there were only nine students staying at school this year, the house tables had been put aside, and there was just one table for both the teachers and the students. As always, the Great Hall looked magnificent. Twelve twinkling Christmas trees adorned it, garlands of holly and mistletoe hung from the ceiling, and enchanted snow was slowly falling. Hermione stopped for a moment to admire it all, causing Pomona who had been right behind her to nearly bump into her.

'Sorry.'

'It's all right,' Pomona answered, her look drifting to the table. 'Hm, place cards. That's new.'

At the table, Hermione realised that Filius had placed her next to Severus; they had the far end of the table all to themselves since the students hadn't arrived yet. Severus rose at her approach. 'Miss-- Hermione.'

Was that a faint blush spreading over his pale features?

'Happy Christmas, Severus.' She gave him a reassuring smile, hoping that she wouldn't blush as well. After all, she was a grown woman, an accomplished Arithmancy teacher and a couple of other things she couldn't quite remember at the moment.

'Happy Christmas.'

He stood at the table, looking at her with real warmth in his dark eyes: warmth and another emotion she couldn't put her finger on. Her heart started to beat faster.

After what felt like an eternity, he said softly, 'And... thank you.'

Hermione smiled. 'You're very welcome.'

He continued to look at her as if he was searching for something in her face. Then, 'Wouldyouhavecoffeewithmesometimenextweekperhaps?'

'Sorry? I didn't quite catch that.'

Severus looked ready to bolt. 'Would you have coffee with me? Some time next week perhaps?'

Warmth spread through Hermione. 'I would like that very much.'

~*~ fin ~*~

A/N:

Books for Cooks is an actual bookshop:<http://www.booksforcooks.com/>

As far as I'm aware all the book titles are my invention, except for these:

Kamenetzky, Lizzie. *The Great British Bake Off: Christmas*. London: BBC Books, 2014. Print.

Kelly, Suzie. *The Lazy Cook: Quick and Easy Meatless Meals*. London: Blackbird Digital Publishing, 2015. Print.

Smith, Delia. *Delia's Happy Christmas*. London: Ebury, 2009. Print.

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