

Hanging by a Chain

by GinnyW

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer: I own nothing.

Severus sat and stared at the flames as he contemplated his lot in life. It was New Year's Eve and here he was, alone, sitting in the staff room with nothing stronger than a cup of tea laced with a jigger of firewhisky. All but six students were home with their families, while most of the staff were on holiday. The only inhabitants still in the castle were the portraits, ghosts, house-elves and the few staff needed to keep things up and running... or those with no place to go. Severus fell in the last of those categories.

It wasn't quite true that he didn't have any other place to go. He'd had a few other invitations, but none that he'd cared to accept. Truth be told, the very idea of spending the evening at the Ministry's New Year's Eve party, hosted by none other than Harry Potter, was not what he considered to be an enjoyable evening.

He swirled his tea and took another sip, the firewhisky doing far more to warm him than the potent tea leaves steeped in hot water.

The students would not be returning to the school for still another five days, and most of the professors would be staying with their families until the last possible moment. Hogwarts was not the same as when Dumbledore had been Headmaster of the school. Most of the teachers these days were married and had families both inside and outside of the castle walls.

The only unmarried staff members were the Headmistress, Sybill, Severus, and the Gryffindor Head of House, Hermione Granger.

Granger... now there was a thorn in Severus' side. She hadn't always been.

Well, she had, he amended quickly. However, she had been a pleasant distraction... at least for a while. As he thought this, his hand absently reached for the pocket in his trousers until he realised what he was doing and stopped himself.

After Albus' death, Severus had been able to convince Minerva of his desire to help and had continued to spy for the Order. (It had not taken much to convince the woman. Albus had left several letters attesting to Severus' undying faith and loyalty to him and the Order of the Phoenix.) Once Voldemort had been killed, the inevitable murder charges had been pressed and eventually dropped due to inconclusive evidence, despite a lengthy trial.

To this day Severus did not know how Harry Potter had lost his memory and had been unable to give testimony on the charge of murder against Severus. Some said it was a result from the backlash of the curses thrown during the battle in which Voldemort had been destroyed, while Severus suspected that someone had cast a well-placed Obliviate on the obnoxious prat. But regardless, this left them with no eyewitness of what had happened the evening that Dumbledore had died; Severus' testimony was considered unreliable because it could not be proven.

His defense used the fact that the Headmaster's body had been full of a deadly poison which was melting his vital organs, causing an agonizing and painful death, as verified by healers from St. Mungo's. Severus' guilt was clouded by the presence of several other Death Eaters in Hogwarts that night, including several up on the Astronomy Tower at the time that the Killing Curse had been cast, any number of whom could have done the deed themselves. And strangely enough the only member from that group who was still alive to testify was Draco Malfoy, and he refused to testify on the grounds of self-incrimination.

The only evidence that the prosecution had was that Severus' wand had, at some point in time, cast the Killing Curse. No one knew when or under what circumstance.

Leaving Severus as a free man.

Thus it was almost ironic that the freedom was short-lived when not more than a month after his acquittal that Minerva rehired him. The woman brought him back to the place that he had originally considered a prison. He no longer felt that way, however. Instead, he had found it to be almost rejuvenating to once again be a resident of the castle.

That didn't mean that it hadn't taken some time for Severus to readjust to living back at the castle, but adjust he did; Slytherins were survivors and knew how to adapt. It wasn't long, however, before he had taken his place as the black bat of the dungeons, scowling at the students and ignoring his colleagues.

When he and Hermione first began working together, they'd butted heads, argued and bickered. Over time they eventually began to form a tentative friendship as they realised that they were both on the same side. Their sniping turned into polite conversation, and he decided that it was possible that she could possibly be more than a Potter Sycophant.

Four years ago, after too much to drink at the staff Christmas party, he'd woken up in the morning to find the former bushy-haired nuisance nestled up against him, her leg draped over his ... and wearing nothing more than the bed sheet. They barely left each other's company for the remainder of that holiday.

What began as a fiery sexual relationship, soon ended up after a few months as nothing more than ashes. By Easter break he'd had enough. Looking back now, he didn't know if it was that he'd finally had enough of her chatter, or if he was truly afraid that she had suddenly become too close. When they'd been together she'd harassed and annoyed him with her presence. Not that she was particularly annoying. It was the simple fact that after years of spying and then of being on the run, he'd grown used to his solitude. Her desire to talk and build a relationship had unnerved him on many levels ... it was something that he'd not yet been ready to do. Truth be told, he'd simply wanted the perks of an intimate relationship, none of the messy entanglements that were always sure to follow. After four months, Hermione was becoming a messy entanglement; it was safer for Severus to cut her loose, and cut her loose he did.

Of course, it had not been as successful as he'd hoped it would be. The woman was strong-willed and opinionated as they come, and although she willingly agreed to break off their sexual relationship, she refused to leave him alone. She did, of course, leave that night, and he spent the remainder of the Easter holidays alone. During that time he started to realise that he'd turned away more than just the sex, but also the first person since Albus Dumbledore or Lucius Malfoy who had actually spoken to him about something other than potions, plans of mass destruction, teaching, or the like.

It was strange to think about four years later, but if Severus was to be honest with himself, it was severing the sexual relationship with Hermione that had made them become friends. For a man who didn't know much about how friendship worked, he never would've suspected that was a way to go about gaining more. Of course, it hadn't been an instantaneous bond between them. There had been hurt feelings and such to work through; in fact, there were still issues that they left safely under the rug where they belonged.

But he missed her.

More so now than usual. They had not attempted another intimate relationship with each other after the first. He'd said things to her that he now regretted, she'd said some things as well, and although they were friends now, he found that he wasn't sure that he was willing to give that up by re-opening old wounds. Oddly enough he found himself in a position he never before thought he'd be in: almost afraid that if things went poorly in a second relationship with her, then he would lose the friendship.

Over the last four years he had been in a few other relationships, none of which went very far. Most of the witches bored him beyond comprehension and simply wanted to date him because of his status of a war hero, ex-Death Eater, resident of the dungeons and potential murderer. He quickly discovered that these things supposedly meant that he enjoyed rough sex. Who knew?

Erm... Severus didn't, and several of his dates wound up to be rather short once he realised what the women truly expected of him.

Was this really any way to spend New Year's Eve? he wondered. Drudging up the past and staring into the fire? Hell, he couldn't even get pissed because he had to be a responsible adult in case the six dunderheaded children still staying in the castle got into trouble!

He sighed and refilled his teacup with a wave of his wand. When he heard the staff room door open with a click, Severus didn't even bother to look up from his cup. The only person it was likely to be was Minerva, and he had no desire to engage the woman in conversation this evening.

Hermione entered the staff room and spotted Severus sitting by the fire. She hadn't even considered seeing him here tonight; she'd assumed that he had been invited to Draco Malfoy's party *didn't Draco have a party every year?* or someplace else equally exciting. Bloody hell, even ringing in the New Year with the Ministry would be more exciting than trying to catch the half-dozen students who had stayed at the school this year as they lurked the corridors after curfew.

"Good evening, Severus," she said as she took the chair opposite him.

He looked up from the fire, a quick look of confusion quickly masked by the typical mask which he wore. Severus nodded his greeting. "Tea?"

Hermione smiled. "Only if it's laced with firewhisky."

"Would I be drinking it any other way on such a joyous occasion?"

Moments later, steaming teacup in hand, Hermione closed her eyes, sipped, settled back and relaxed for the first time since the start of her holiday.

"What brings you back to the castle early? Especially..." he said as he pulled his watch out of his trousers pocket, "at only nine o'clock on New Year's Eve? You aren't due back to the castle for another four days."

"I know, but in another four days, if you'd wanted to see me, you would've had to come visit me in the closed ward at St. Mungo's."

Severus snorted.

"Just think of it, Severus. You wouldn't have to dream up excuses to go into hospital to secretly visit Lockhart. I know how much you have been missing him."

"Don't make me ill."

She grinned at him before turning her eyes to stare at the burning embers in the hearth. There was something peaceful and almost meditative about a fire, she decided. It relaxed her to her very core, and made her feel as if she could finally cope with the last several days she'd had to deal with.

This place, by far, was the most relaxing place for her. No, not the staff room ... never the staff room. Typically, there were so many people in the room nattering on about students, lesson plans, the Board of Governors, or new Ministry educational testing requirements. It never ended.

No, it was sitting in front of the fire, cup of tea in hand, with Severus Snape sitting in the chair opposite her... or, if she was lucky, on the sofa next to her. His presence was

as essential as fluxweed was to Polyjuice Potion ... without him you had nothing.

"You still didn't give me much of an answer, Hermione." His soft, almost velvety voice pulled her head up to look into his eyes.

"Oh. Where should I begin?" She set down her teacup and curled her legs up under her in the chair before she took a deep breath and sighed. "Let's open with me going home to my flat in London at the start of the holidays. There, I found that my ex-boyfriend, David, who I had tossed out of my home at the beginning of term, had foolishly decided it would be a good time to surprise me and try to mend things between us."

"He broke into your flat?"

"I don't think he ever moved out."

"Stupid man," Severus muttered.

"Indeed."

"What did you do to him?"

"The same thing I did to Ron when I caught him cheating on me with Susan Bones."

Severus winced, not in sympathy for David, but simply because all men seemed to wince when a man's bits were at stake, even if the curse was only temporary.

"Sounds like a wonderful way to start your vacation," he said dryly.

"Yes, definitely. And I always thought that some of my most bothersome times were here trying to keep stupid children from blowing themselves up."

"At least you only have them using their wands. Think of the noxious chemicals that I have to deal with on a daily basis."

"I was never saying that your job wasn't any more or any less dangerous, Severus," she placated, although she thought it best to move the conversation along. "So, I went to visit my parents before their winter trip."

"You didn't go with them."

"No. This year they travelled to Banff, Canada, to ski and they didn't give me enough notice to file for a Portkey."

"And there was no way you were going to travel on an airplane."

"Of course not." Hermione hated travelling in most every form, and she was certain that Severus knew this. She was a Muggleborn, but that didn't mean that she liked flying by airplane any more than she liked flying on a broomstick.

Apparition was her preferred method, followed by Floo, and after that, Portkey. When one of those methods weren't available then she settled, but just barely. And a witch or wizard had to be extremely powerful for something like Transatlantic Apparition; she didn't even believe that Dumbledore had ever accomplished that feat. No, it was definitely not safe.

"Surely the highpoint of your vacation was not seeing your parents off at the airport or hexing an ex-beau, Professor. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here now."

Hermione looked at him, puzzled for a moment as to why he was being so agreeable and willing to listen. True, there were occasions when he did this, but they were few and far between. Not that she was going to complain about it tonight, nor was she ready to bring it to his attention, but she was curious. She glanced at his lap to see that he'd neglected to put his watch back in his pocket, and that the watch's chain was now threaded through the fingers of his left hand. *Curious.*

"Those *were* the highpoints," she said. "After I threw David out of my flat, it took me three days to get my Christmas shopping done out in the insanely busy streets of London. I don't know which was worse, Oxford Street or Diagon Alley." Even Severus quirked a small smile at that; coming from a half-blood family, he was at least familiar with some of the horrors of traversing through Muggle cities, she knew.

"Then I spent Christmas Day at the Burrow. My head is still pounding from all of the screaming."

"How many children were running loose?"

Now Hermione knew that he was just saying anything to carry on the conversation, but again she chose to leave it. She leaned an elbow against the arm of the chair and began massaging her temple. "I've lost count, and I have no desire to devote any of my attention now to trying to add them all up. Regardless of that, I must say that I am rather impressed with the modifications that Arthur and Molly have made to the Burrow. Eight years ago I never could have envisioned that so many people would've ever been able to dine there."

Severus made a non-committal sound.

"Molly outdid herself on the food, too. It reminded me of Christmases when I was a child and would go to my grandmother's house. Of course, Grandmum didn't try to set me up with Charlie Weasley at every turn."

Hermione raised her head and noticed that Severus suddenly looked interested again.

"She didn't," he said in mild disbelief.

Hermione nodded. "She did. That nosy old busybody first tried to be subtle, but eventually she settled for being blatant by trapping Charlie and me under Magical Mistletoe. I swear that she would've tried one of the twins' love potions if she thought that she could get away with it."

"That woman needs something other than her children and grandchildren to consume her time with."

"I know."

Hermione could almost swear that she could see a question playing about Severus' lips. In his lap, she saw that the chain which had been wrapped through his fingers slipped, so that he was only holding it by the single charm which was attached to the chain. Hope began to burgeon within her, and she felt the sudden urge to answer his unasked question. "Molly was wholly unsuccessful. Charlie gave me a chaste kiss and then whispered in my ear that he plays for the other team."

Severus' face relaxed as his hold on the charm appeared to loosen. He leaned over and picked up his teacup and sipped from it again.

"And what of your plans for this evening?" he asked. "Surely you would've been at the Ministry bash with the Weasley brood, or at least those old enough to attend. Weren't they calling it the party of the millennium?"

"I did go to the Ministry party tonight, but I've spent much of this last week in the Weasleys' company. My final breaking point was while I was at the party and Ron sidled up to me. The firewhisky from his breath was so strong that I think he must've consumed most of what Ogden produced in 1994. He leaned over into my ear and invited me back to his place after the party."

Severus stiffened.

"For a threesome with him and Susan."

The watch and chain dropped from Severus' grasp as the handle from his teacup broke off. Hermione wielded her wand and repaired it without saying anything.

"I gather that Mr Weasley is suffering from the effects of another hex?" he asked with barely restrained anger.

"Er... no, actually. I slapped him before I could even draw my wand. His mum was close enough to have seen and, of course, she immediately came running over to see what was wrong. So, I told her."

The evil smirk, which grew on Severus' face, matched Hermione's perfectly. "That does seem to be a most suitable punishment," he mused.

"I'm sure that you can imagine how loud Molly began shouting at him after that... in the middle of Embassy Hall, no less. Susan came over and joined her almost immediately, and I didn't stay to listen once Ginny and the rest of the Weasley wives gathered around, and then Harry noticed the uproar. I had no desire to be near any of it, so I left, and with the wonderful way that my holidays have been going so far, I thought it may be best to just come back here.

"I have just barely arrived back at the castle. I only stopped by my rooms to change my clothes before coming down here."

Severus looked thoughtfully at her a moment. She was certain that he was about to say something when, for whatever reason, he changed his mind and began staring back into the fire.

After several long minutes spent in tense silence between them, Hermione watched as Severus firmly grasped the watch, which had fallen into his lap. He paused for a moment and began to put it in his pocket.

She knew that this was her opportunity. Before Severus had a chance to put the timepiece away, she reached out her hand towards him. "May I?"

The initial confusion had flashed across his features before he reluctantly handed the piece to her.

Hermione held the watch reverently in her hand. This was not the first time that she'd seen it, of course. "I've always like this," she said, as she ran her finger along the outer case which showed a coiled snake etched on the surface with the word "Prince" proudly displayed above it.

It wasn't the watch that interested her.

She moved her hand along the chain to the small gold charm which was attached. The fob was a simple medallion about the size of a Knut. She already knew that on one side was a flask, and on the other side was an inscription that read:

Your own flask

of Felix Felicis;

to carry with you

wherever you go.

~HG

In some way it surprised her that he had even placed the charm on the chain. It had been a Christmas gift which she'd sent to him three years ago. It was not uncommon for them to exchange gifts for the holiday or for each other's birthdays, even though they'd not been romantically involved then just friends. Of course, that didn't mean that there wasn't motive behind it.

"I haven't looked at this since I gave it to you. It looks nice on here." As she spoke the words, Hermione looked carefully at the flask, brushed her finger across it. She smiled when she felt the telltale tingle as the charm activated.

The smile on her face remained as she placed the watch back in Severus' outstretched hand. Now all she had to do was wait and see what it was that he most desired.

He put the watch back in his pocket.

Her heart began to quicken and creep up into her throat as his gaze upon her changed. She wondered if he knew what she'd done. She had designed the charm to be subtle enough that most people wouldn't notice it, but Severus Snape wasn't "most people."

Severus watched her smile as she handed him the watch, her fingers lingering for a moment before she finally released it. He quickly put it away as an odd warmth began to fill him.

Although he never admitted it to anyone, Severus Snape was not the most confident person there was. He was just very good at making others think that he was. Of course, he felt that much of the insecurity with regards to Hermione Granger was a result of not wanting to ruin their current friendship... but that previous worry was slipping away faster than he could process it, leaving only a mild sense of calm and self-assurance.

He wondered briefly if Hermione had done something to him just now, but he doubted that. She'd never even drawn her wand and he had been the one to prepare the tea, so she hadn't had an opportunity to slip him a potion.

Still, it was curious that his feelings had changed so quickly, although he supposed that if he was to really examine it, it had been a quick change, more like a freeing of his repressed desires.

Most peculiar.

He narrowed his eyes at her briefly and noted only a look of slight puzzlement from her in response.

No longer caring of what the negative result could be, he made a decision to follow the path which had suddenly been set out before him. He somehow knew that things would go well if he followed through. In fact, for the first time since they'd developed this unlikely friendship, he saw the potential of things suddenly going sour if he *didn't* take action and make a move towards the woman.

It suddenly occurred to him that perhaps he had been misreading her all this time. He had always thought that she was content with her life and even more content without him. He never thought that she'd actually want to be with him again. It was odd to contemplate that thought. Severus was rarely wrong, and he was typically an excellent judge of character. It was, after all, what he had been forced to do for years. Know thy enemy... and thy ally.

With a flick of his wand, he banished the tea set. A second flick replaced the tea things with champagne flutes and a bottle of champagne.

When Hermione raised her eyebrows in surprise, he simply stated, "We cannot toast in the New Year with tea and firewhisky, now can we?"

"No, of course not."

Severus wasn't sure he trusted the sly grin which was now on her face. It made him wonder exactly what she was up to.

He poured the champagne and handed a glass to her. Lifting his own glass, he took a sip.

"It's hardly midnight, Severus."

"Does it really matter?"

"No," she replied, taking a sip herself.

Typically, he would have waited before saying anything else revealing to her, contemplating every move, every word... instead, he felt himself being led to speak.

"Hermione, how is it that we came to be here?"

"I would say that I walked, and I'm quite certain that you did the same, but I don't believe that's what you meant." That sly smirk was back on her face.

"No, it was not," he said brusquely.

She sipped from her glass again. "I believe that you told me that I was even more annoying as a know-it-all professor than I ever was as a student."

Severus snorted. "Indeed."

Hermione rolled her eyes at him before looking at him intently for a moment. "Although, I've looked back on it, and I don't believe that was the true reason that you told me that you wanted to end things between us."

Of course she's thought about this before, he thought, slightly amused. "Do enlighten me."

She looked at him quizzically.

He knew that she was wondering how honest she should be, but knowing her as well as he did, he knew that she'd say exactly what was on her mind. He wasn't disappointed.

"We barely knew each other, Severus. Most people wouldn't consider any relationship that was based solely on sex as one that would last."

He had to prod her along, he knew, although he admitted that he didn't truly wish to hear what she was going to say next. "But you don't honestly believe that was the sole reason for our relationship not working."

"No, I think that the real reason was that you had spent too many years alone, trusting no one. You didn't know how to respond when faced with someone who actually wanted to be a part of your life. It was easier for you to close yourself off and blame me for being too intrusive."

Severus said nothing after her matter-of-fact statement. He knew that she was right, and that was more disturbing than what she'd actually said.

"I considered fighting you," she said after a long pause. "I enjoyed spending time with you. A few times, you let your guard down and actually treated me like a person with thoughts, ideas and feelings. You let me know what was lurking behind the mask that you present to everyone else. After we argued that last time, I spent the Easter holidays thinking about what had transpired; I knew that if I were to push things with you then, it wouldn't be successful. You weren't ready for an intimate relationship, and I wanted to be more than just a warm body. So, after some time away from you, I realised that to truly have something with you that it needed to be built from the ground up."

"That's when you began commiserating with me before the staff meetings," he deduced.

She nodded.

"At first I thought that you were attempting to strike up conversation with me in an attempt to restart the relationship. I decided that must be wrong once you started dating that Quidditch player seriously." That was mostly true, as he had also thought that her dating the Quidditch player had been some ill-fated attempt to make Severus jealous. He finally relented that that wasn't the case after school began again in September, when he learned she had continued seeing the man through the summer holidays when Severus wasn't even around to notice.

"I suppose, in a way, it was an attempt to restart a relationship," she admitted. "But not in the way that you were thinking."

He was silent as he finished off the glass of champagne. Severus poured himself another and refilled her glass as well. It was all within his grasp... After several long minutes, he asked, "And now what is it that you are after, Hermione?"

The young woman stared at her glass before bringing her eyes up to meet his. "I want what's best for us," she said. "If that means spending the next fifty years as your friend, I will try to be content with that."

And that's when he realised that something was amiss because he felt the sudden urge to sweep her up into his arms and kiss her soundly. He refrained, however, and tried to force the now increasing surge of self-assurance ... and was he really feeling *giddy*? ... back down. That was when it came to him, and he pulled the watch back out of his pocket.

He looked from the gold charm, glancing at the inscription, to the woman sitting across from him. "What did you do?" he asked, suddenly becoming angry. "Did you think that I wouldn't notice if you used this to try to cast some sort of love spell on me?"

"Love spell? Severus, I wouldn't... I didn't..." she said, stumbling over her words.

But he knew that she had, it was obvious to him now. He was torn between wanting to rip the charm off of the chain and keeping it there. Was it the spell, or were these feelings that he was having real? He thought he'd had feelings before, but suddenly he couldn't remember that.

In an effort to simply get the charm away from him, he tossed the watch onto the floor.

"I am only going to ask you once more," he warned. "What did you do to me?"

He could tell his reaction had frightened her some, as she began to worry her bottom lip. It was a habit she had, which he didn't even think she was consciously aware of.

"It's not a love spell. I just wanted you to have something that you truly wanted. I didn't know what it would be. I mean, I had hoped... but I didn't know for certain."

"Damn it, Hermione. You're not making one whit of sense," he said as he scowled. The spell on him was making it difficult for him to keep his anger, and he stood in an attempt to get further away from the enchanted object.

She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. It's not a spell to force someone to love someone else. If that's what you're feeling, Severus, then it's all on your own. It's exactly what it says, a charm which acts similarly to Felix Felicis, though it's supposed to be mild enough that you don't notice it. Simply, it brings good luck in pursuing what you want, although with this charm," she continued as she leaned down to pick up the watch and chain, "it only works for achieving your deepest desire. And it will only work once."

He studied her, watching her hand movements, her facial expressions, and her eyes. Even without using Legilimency, he could almost always tell when someone was lying... especially when that person was as poor a liar as Hermione. She was telling the truth.

"And the thing is, Severus, you didn't need magic for any of this anyway. I only activated the charm in hopes that it would push you enough to talk to me about this. Merlin knows that every time I've tried, I've failed."

It was an odd feeling to be torn between admiring her for her Slytherin-esque cunning, and being angry at being manipulated. He sneered at her. "You've never tried talking with me about any of this before."

Her eyebrows rose. "Anytime that I've mentioned our past relationship, you tell me, quite firmly, to leave it in the past. You go on to say that you like things the way that they are now. I was uncertain. It's not as if I've been pining for you, exactly. But I do care a great deal for you. I want that relationship back, Severus."

"And you were willing to do anything to get it."

"No, I wasn't. You're not listening to me. This charm only led you to do things to achieve a desire that *you* had. Bloody hell, don't you understand? If that desire had been to become the new Headmaster of the school, you would've worked towards that goal instead. I'm not guaranteeing that it would work, but it certainly wouldn't have hurt."

Severus growled. "Explain the spell to me."

Hermione sighed. "It was a complex spell that I'd been experimenting with. My desire was to do something for you. The flask and the inscription were key in developing it. The spell was much weaker without both. Incidentally, even the metal mattered. If I used anything but gold when I enchanted the medallion, then it had some serious side effects. They reminded me quite a bit of the hazards of brewing Felix Felicis, actually."

He nodded. It was to be expected. Obviously, he had brewed Felix Felicis on occasion as it was part of the Advanced Potions curriculum, so he knew it was a highly volatile potion with so much potential for things to go seriously wrong at several stages in the brewing process. He could only assume that casting an enchantment that reacts similarly would be just as dangerous.

"I am still feeling the effects of the charm," he stated.

"Yes, I simply activated the charm when I touched it a few moments ago. You only had to touch it once for it to recognise you and attach itself to you."

"How long does it last?"

"Only between one and two hours. Not nearly as long as the potion has been known to."

Severus stood and looked at her for a moment. "I will see you in two hours then."

"All right," she answered with a nod before he turned and left.

It had been just over two hours and Hermione was wondering if Severus would return or not. This was definitely not how she'd envisioned ringing in the New Year. At least she had champagne.

She cursed under her breath.

She'd activated the spell because she'd hoped that it would help further things along with them push Severus to actually speak with her about something other than House rivalries, Quidditch matches and marking essays. That had happened, of course, but it certainly hadn't led to the result that she'd been hoping for.

Strategy wasn't her strongest suit, she had to admit. It was one of the reasons that she'd not ever been very good at chess. Hermione had great ideas, but putting them into action wasn't what she was skilled at.

For what seemed the hundredth time, she stood from her chair and began pacing the room. Glancing at the clock, she noted that it was five minutes until midnight. She would wait until then before dragging herself upstairs to her quarters.

She was still unsure of what had possessed her to activate the charm. Three years and she'd done nothing with it.

Their conversation tonight had just been going so well, and of course, she'd originally sent the charm to him with the intent of using it at some point. It had been as she watched him toy with the fob that she'd decided that tonight would be a good time. She had been able to tell that his mood had been extremely introspective, and if he had been thinking about mistakes from his past then perhaps that had meant that he'd want to change things for the future. And she'd hoped that since they'd been getting on so well, that his desire would lie with her.

At least she had been correct on that point.

She wondered if the fact that the enchantment had laid dormant for so long that it was stronger than it was supposed to be. She'd created and tested it, but had never left one dormant for three years.

It no longer mattered, however. Severus was obviously angry, and it was highly unlikely that he would be returning... at least not tonight.

Two minutes until midnight.

She heard the door click open, and she turned around.

Severus Snape strode towards her and stopped just inches in front of her.

"Severus, I'm sorry. I really..."

He touched her lips with his finger. "I know."

Hermione held her breath and stared into his eyes, waiting for him to say more.

"I waited for the spell to wear off. I didn't want to do or say anything that was influenced by magic. When I felt the last of it wear away, the feelings were still there. They were there before, of course, I just never had the motivation or inclination to act on them."

"I understand."

"You need to understand why, Hermione. I don't want things to destroy our friendship. I have enjoyed your company, and I value what we have. To do anything more is a chance to lose that."

"But it's an opportunity to gain so much more," she asserted. "I am willing to take that risk, Severus."

His gaze intensified as he brought his hand up to cup her cheek. "As am I," he said.

His lips met hers the very moment that the clock began its chimes. The kiss was at first tentative... soft and sweet. It was nothing like the raw, demanding passion that she remembered. It was better.

Hermione could feel the emotion pouring out from him as he nibbled lightly on her lip. She knew that he wanted as much from this as she did.

Their kiss ended, and she brought her hands up to the back of his neck and ran her fingers through his hair.

"Happy New Year, Severus."

"And to you," he answered, softly kissing her forehead. "And Hermione..."

"Hmmm."

"You're still not off the hook for enchanting me."

It was hard to miss the sly smirk and devious glint in his eyes, which left little doubt that if she tried to do such a thing again, then he wouldn't hesitate to slip her a potion that would do far worse than help her fulfill her own desires.

Moving her hands from his hair, she stepped back and placed a hand in her pocket. She removed the watch and handed it to him, smiling as he fingered the watch and chain.

"The magic is gone?" he asked, firmly.

"Yes, I checked about an hour ago to be sure," she answered.

His lips curved slightly as he brushed his finger across the charm before placing it into his pocket. "Thank you."

Hermione smiled and stepped closer to him again, winding her arms over his shoulders and leaning up to kiss him once again, for a very long kiss. All the time, she was thinking that it had likely been both of their hopes that had been hanging by the chain... for far too long.

~Nox~

Author's Note: Another story from the SSHG Exchange. This story was a gift for OzRatbag2. Her prompt was: *Hermione and Severus have been lovers (post Hogwarts), but now they're just good friends. Somehow, they find out that the reasons they drifted apart aren't so important now. They find themselves wanting to be more than friends. Ending up to author.*

This story took on so many different forms as I was writing it and there are many people to thank for their encouragement. Especially my beta, JuneW.