

One Perfect Valentine

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One

Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: Potterverse not mine. Just playing here.

EWE of course. And just in passing, I have gratuitously resurrected Remus Lupin, because I don't like him being dead.

With grateful thanks, as ever, to Subversa for being my wonderful beta.

Eight years after leaving Hogwarts, Hermione Granger gave in to Headmistress McGonagall's pleading and returned to take over the teaching of Ancient Runes. It was a light option, given that few students chose to take the subject at OWL level, and fewer still for their NEWTs, but after her stint at the Ministry, she felt that light duties, Scottish air, and undemanding company would be just the thing.

The war over, Hermione had sat her exams and gone straight into the elite Department of Mysteries programme. They worked her hard, stretching her innate intellectual capacities and giving her the opportunities she had always wanted. She drove herself hard and progressed accordingly. In parallel, she played as hard as she worked. After finishing amicably with Ron, she went out for a while with another Cannons player, and subsequently drifted into a series of physically satisfying but emotionally trivial affairs with other Quidditch players - the only men apart from Unspeakable geeks (pun intended) she ever met. Sometimes she felt she was living an entirely double life: a disembodied brain at work, and a disembodying body in her free time. It was not healthy, she decided one evening over a lonesome bottle of good red wine (Thinking Potion, as she called it), and called a halt.

Minerva McGonagall welcomed Hermione like a long lost daughter, and the rest of the staff were not far behind - with one exception. Severus Snape, also lured back by the cunning old biddy to a comfortable life and the promise of few extra-curricular duties, was distant. Never mind. She could live with that. It was a shame that the next-youngest person on the staff should be disinclined to spend any time in her company, but their history had always made it unlikely. Hermione sometimes looked a little wistfully at the tail of his billowing robe disappearing down some corridor or other, while she headed to another session in the library or alone in her rooms - if she did not feel like an evening that would result in washing the smell of linseed oil (Hooch), compost (Sprout), cheap perfume (Sinistra), formaldehyde (Pomfrey), Whisky (McGonagall), marzipan (Flitwick), something probably best left unexamined (Hagrid), or Bonios (Lupin) out of her hair.

She settled quickly into a routine, enjoying the cocoon of institutional life. It wasn't forever, she told herself, but it was a good stop-gap while she thought about what to do next. Lessons, marking, free periods, after-school study groups, night patrols, and meals. These were the measures of Hermione's days. Over dinner in the Great Hall, she would look out over the sea of young faces and be glad that a staid and boring existence had been made possible.

But gawd, was it boring.

For the other members of staff, it was almost as if there was no world outside the school. Their conversation so seldom left the confines of school affairs that Hermione soon began to wonder whether she had hallucinated her other life. She reverted to old habits, taking refuge in books and puddings. Nothing at Hogwarts had changed, she would think, scraping out her bowl and turning another page.

Staff meetings were probably the worst aspect of the job. Three hours of boredom and petty bickering every week. They did, however, produce the first moment of interest in the year, when the Headmistress broached the subject of the Valentine's Day celebrations. *Oh, my giddy Aunt*, thought Hermione, who had always (as someone who, during her formative years, had been sadly lacking in gratuitous admiration from the opposite sex) despised the festival. Already working out excuses for her non-involvement, she accidentally met the equally pissed-off gaze of Severus Snape. She was subsequently, and almost immediately, on the receiving end of the first incidence of spontaneous chivalry in her life, when he responded to some remark of McGonagall's, saying:

"Oh, I'm sorry, Headmistress, but Professor Granger has already committed herself to watching over the improved Wolfsbane Potion with which I have been tinkering. I need a trustworthy assistant to do that while I continue with the supplies for the infirmary."

It didn't even spoil the euphoria of the moment when he hissed in her ear, "Don't get cocky, Granger. You get an evening in a freezing dungeon. I'm going down the pub."

No hearts, no cupids, no *pink*. Dripping stone walls and stinky potions sounded like bliss. She disconcerted him with her huge grin.

And so it went on.

He was never very nice to her, but they did spend increasing amounts of time together, talking about interesting stuff, hiking over the hills or in the Forest after potions ingredients, arguing some obscure point over a particularly good bread-and-butter pudding. (Who would have guessed that Snape had a sweet tooth?) Hermione even went to the Quidditch matches he refereed, admiring the flutter of his ever-present voluminous black robe as he swooped athletically around the pitch. She came to associate his scowling face and trademark billow with contentment.

She missed him when she went back to London for the summer holidays, and looked forward to seeing him again in September. She had somehow not managed to make any progress with her plans for the future. Oddly enough.

One thing, however, would definitely have to change when she went back. A late-twenties body was evidently not as resilient towards the effects of Hogwarts cuisine as a mid-teens body. None of her summer clothes would do up. Not even close by a margin of inches in some cases. She resolved to forgo puddings, and wondered if the kitchen elves had ever come across the concept of salad.

She was gloomily contemplating the piles of delicious stodge on the table in front of her when Snape took his place at her side. He apologised to the Headmistress for his lateness the Weasley twins' successors in mayhem had begun their campaign even before the introductory feast and turned to greet Hermione, whose face was wearing a peculiar expression as she looked back at him.

"Is there something wrong, Professor Granger?" he enquired politely.

Hermione sought frantically to avoid blurting out the epiphany she had just experienced.

"Um no," she managed, stuffing in a mouthful of cabbage to give herself time. "You look well," she continued, as he helped himself to the roast pork and crackling. "Did you have a good holiday?" It was inane, but it would have to do.

"Yes, thank you. A little light research and plenty of fresh air and exercise. Scotland is a fine place in the summer."

Hermione poked at the buttered parsnips on her plate. "I thought you looked tanned," she said.

"Are you well?" he enquired again. "You do not seem to be eating much."

She pulled a face.

"It's all very well being back at Hogwarts," she said wryly, "but I went up three sizes last year. I spent the summer starving myself, and I'm still not back where I want to be. It's a good thing these robes conceal a multitude of sins."

He frowned, looking back at his own plate.

Stupid, stupid! Hermione chastised herself. *Don't talk about dieting and clothes. Find something less girly.*

She brought up the topic of some dodgy developments in potions manufacture, and they spent the rest of the meal conversing comfortably enough. She had a difficult moment when he took a portion of sticky-toffee pudding, but survived the experience of him eating it. Strangely, he didn't approach it with quite as much gusto as he had the previous year. He seemed particularly disappointed that she wouldn't join him in the indulgence.

Hermione's little Moment of Truth at the dinner table explained quite a lot. Her lack of focus over finding a new career was accounted for, as well as the summer's single-minded drive to improve her looks. It also explained why a hitherto introspective young woman had not until this point in time chosen to analyse such a blatant character reversal in herself.

Severus Snape, she thought, taking her accustomed place next to him at breakfast the next day and sending him a brilliant smile. He blinked, but didn't scowl in response, which for him was as good as a grin. *Well, it's unexpected but why not? He's not totally hideous, he's fit and healthy, he's got brains to power Oxford and Cambridge combined, and he's bloody good company, even when he's grouching. As he is now. Why is he frowning at my breakfast?*

She was trying with little success to convince herself that unsweetened black coffee, orange juice, and a slice of dry wholemeal toast with a scrape of Marmite was a sustaining start to the day. Having him give her what looked like a "T" for her selection didn't help much. Particularly not when he was wrapping his face round streaky bacon, scrambled eggs, mushrooms, and her mouth watered fried bread. She scowled at his plate.

McGonagall, on Hermione's other side, wondered what on earth they had done to piss each other off so early in the day. Still, it wouldn't last. If love wasn't in the air, then she was a mangy Siamese. She had *never* seen Severus pass the butter to anyone *ever* before. It was a bit churlish of Miss Granger to turn it down, but then she probably didn't read passion into dairy produce. It was different for cats.

As the weeks passed, Severus and Hermione resumed their routine of walks and talks, even patrolling the corridors together, flouting the gossip that this inevitably caused. Hermione was somewhat hurt that he had taken to avoiding her at mealtimes, but then again, she couldn't monopolise him completely, she supposed. But it was painful that she didn't have his interesting conversation to keep her mind off the iron regime she was forcing herself to follow. Her customary place was now between Hooch (who talked of nothing but Quidditch and Quidditch pin-ups) and Hagrid, whose menagerie aroma was not entirely compensated for by his simple affection though to be sure, it did help her stick to her diet.

Once a week, however, the strict etiquette of the staff table was relaxed, and they usually all swapped places in order to gossip more freely about the weekend's scandals. It also happened to be one of these Sunday evenings that Severus sidled up with a large bowl of chocolate mousse in his hands, and Hermione decided that it wasn't humanly possible to exist without chocolate just once a week. In fact, it was probably downright irresponsible even to try, when she came to think about it rationally. She patted Hagrid's vacated chair and brandished a spoon.

As far as the rest of the staff were concerned, arguing over the correct interpretation of an ancient Sumerian potions text while eating from the same dessert bowl until their spoons clashed, pretty much counted as full-on hanky-panky, but still Severus kept Hermione at arm's length.

She was getting very frustrated. Particularly as the Sunday evening public spoon-tangling became a regular event.

McGonagall decided to help things along, and organised a Yule Ball.

Hermione was resplendent in clinging rose pink, cut daringly low at the bodice. Her hard work had paid off, and she felt light on her feet, comfortable with curves rather than bulges. So it was a double disappointment that Severus had not chosen to match her by abandoning his billow (though his new robes were of a particularly ravishing heavy black silk), and that he did not hold her close while they danced.

There was, it is sad to say, a little pouting.

The pouting was dispelled by the giving of a crystal rose, exactly the same shade as Hermione's ball gown, presented in a velvet box as rich and brown as her eyes, and accompanied by one single, absolutely perfect, dark chocolate truffle.

Fortunately, Christmas Day was a Sunday. Severus watched Hermione's even white teeth bite through the truffle. She gave him the other half. They briefly tasted the bittersweet cocoa dust on each other's lips.

Yet still he would not enfold her in his arms.

And still he would only eat with her on Pudding Days.

Hermione grew exceedingly frustrated, in more ways than one. Firstly, she never could stand a mystery. And secondly, it was getting so the mere sight of a piece of flapping black cloth was starting to make her walk funny which was a tad inconvenient, given the nature of the school uniform.

The answer came, as such answers do, entirely accidentally. Filch was in hot pursuit of some Evildoers. The Evildoers were running fast, looking over their shoulders. Hermione and Severus just happened to be standing talking around the next corner. The Evildoers, rushing past, knocked into Hermione, who crashed into Severus and would have fallen, had they not instinctively wrapped their arms around each other.

Hermione's startled eyes flew to meet Severus' mortified black gaze. He flushed and disentangled himself, quickly beating a retreat. Billowing.

As he always billowed. Those robes really did hide a multitude of sins. Or rather, a multitude of puddings.

She wouldn't have said he was fat, but the whip-thin spy of her schooldays was gone, that was for sure. Instead, there was a kind of reassuring solidity that she found she would like to be much, *much* better acquainted with.

She had to admit, though, that he had a point in concealing the evidence of a comfortable and secure existence. Severus "Love-Handles" Snape wasn't exactly a moniker with which to conjure terror.

Clearly, a plan of action was required. Luckily, Hermione was a woman who liked to plan, and planned to act.

Valentine's Day was just round the corner....

Stage one: behave as if nothing has been noticed. Induce an entirely false sense of security in the efficacy of billowing as a cunning disguise. No problem.

Stage two: engage Hooch in conversation about the latest "Stars of the Stadium" calendar. No problem the woman would never shut up about the bloody thing. All Hermione had to do was let drop that she had been out with Mr April, Mr October, and "Circe's tits!" breathed Hooch, regarding the younger woman with awe Mr November. (She'd also been out with Mr March, but Ron didn't really count.)

The conversation had to be where Severus could overhear without appearing to do so. This could be safely left to him. He had mastered the fine art of Lurking long ago.

The conversation had to include something along these lines:

"Oh, I'll admit they're pretty to look at, but frankly, Rolanda my dear, you can have them. All those muscles? It's like holding onto a block of concrete, not particularly appealing at all in reality." Granted, this was a blatant lie, but a girl couldn't be too unscrupulous when it came to getting what she wanted.

Two days before Valentine's Day, Severus could be seen to leave the staff room looking slightly light-hearted. There was definitely a soupcon of cheerfulness in the way he docked sixty points from the fifth-year Gryffindors during their afternoon's double lesson.

The next day, he was ready with his chivalrous offer of slave labour in the Potions lab (aka bijou love-nest), but was doomed to disappointment as well as to Valentine's patrol duty. By prior arrangement with the Headmistress, Hermione had been called away urgently by her mother, and would not be returning until the fifteenth.

"Cheer up," said McGonagall. "As I suspect the pumpkin juice will have been spiked with aphrodisiacs again, you'll be able to indulge in a positive orgy of points taking."

She pretended she hadn't heard his muttered retort: "That's about all the sodding orgy I'm ever going to get at this rate..."

Hermione met the Headmistress in the entrance hall precisely half an hour before he was due to end his patrol. The Headmistress, having spent the evening watching gemstones in every shade but green cascading merrily out of the top part of the hour-glasses (a little light snogging, maybe some fumbling), was in none too good a humour. The solitary plink of an emerald hitting bottom (the customary Slytherin seventh-year bacchanal) as they made for the dungeon stairs was just adding insult to injury. This had better be worth it.

She used her override and let Hermione into Snape's quarters to complete her preparations. From Plan into Action: there was no going back now.

The moment Severus entered, his wand was in his hand: even the Hogwarts Diet could not dull the man's reactions.

"Put it away," said Hermione. "There's nothing wrong."

He shut the door, taking in the candle-light, the soft music, and the good fire crackling in the hearth.

"Come here," she said.

Cautiously, he rounded the sofa and beheld the scene she had so meticulously constructed. She smiled, hearing his breath catch.

It was an artful arrangement: pride of place was taken by Hermione herself, reclining on the sofa in nothing but a few scraps of black lace, a book in her hands. On the low table between sofa and fire stood a bottle of the finest St Emilion Grand Cru she had been able to find, opened and breathing, with two glasses. Next to it, on a plain china platter, was the enormous chocolate fudge cake over which she had slaved all day in her mother's kitchen. Two slices were already cut, waiting to be eaten.

Severus licked his lips nervously.

"What...?" he managed to croak.

Hermione rose sinuously from the sofa and took a step towards him.

"Everybody, no matter who they are, deserves one perfect Valentine's Day celebration," she explained. "This is mine and it is very nearly complete."

Her eyes were on his as she took another careful step forwards.

"Nearly?"

"Very, very nearly. Take your robe off, Severus."

Poor man. He looked so self-conscious slipping the damn thing off his shoulders, using the act of draping it over the end of the sofa to break eye contact. He drew in a deep breath and faced her again. She took the final step that closed the distance between them and put her hands against his chest. Thanking the foresight that had sent her out to buy four-inch stilettos (she needed the height, and he wasn't to know that three steps was about her limit for walking in them), she tilted her face up and kissed him. Her fingers got to work releasing the long line of gently straining buttons as her lips coaxed him out of his frozen posture.

At long last, she slipped her arms round his waist under the jacket. His hands came up to cup her face.

"You really don't mind?" he asked.

"Dunderhead."

She smiled and squeezed him round the middle.

"Now I really do have my perfect Valentine."

The End

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A/N: "Bonios" are a brand of dog biscuits, shaped like bones.