

Love Never Fails

by Becky

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Chapter 1 of 1

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The battle had ended. When all was said and done, there was relief and everyone cheered, but then reality set in. No one was untouched by the losses, and everyone was in mourning.

Hermione Granger sat next to Ron Weasley and cried for those who had died and for everybody who remained without their loved ones. As if the war wasn't enough, now they had to grieve for the dead.

She stared at the dais where people were sitting, some still wearing blood-covered clothing. Exhaustion was plain on their dirty faces. Harry sat close to Neville, who was holding onto Luna's hand. They were all talking quietly. She blinked and stood suddenly. "Oh, my God," she exclaimed, ignoring her own aching muscles. Wide eyed, she turned towards the entry and with faltering steps began to move towards the door.

Ron looked up at her and followed. Grabbing her by the arm, he stopped her progress. "Where you going?" he asked.

"We forgot about Professor Snape. I'm going to retrieve his body." She turned once more.

"Mione, let the Aurors get him. Stay here," Ron insisted. A pout graced his features, as if to say he disapproved of her going.

She jerked her arm away. "You can't stop me. I'm going."

He snatched his hand back and stared at her, but did not offer to go with her.

Shaking her head, she walked quickly to the door and exited. *What is wrong with him? Professor Snape did so much for us, and he wants to act like his life didn't mean anything. He deserves our respect. We didn't give it to him in life, we should at least in death. Ron will never grow up.*

She knew in her heart Professor Snape was a good man, and she wasn't going to wait for the Aurors to bring him back to the Great Hall. He deserved better than that.

As she neared the creaking old structure, the guilt she'd felt when she realized they'd left Severus' body at the Shrieking Shack was turning into concern and care. She thought about how she'd left Ron standing in the Great Hall, looking after her, hurt on his face, but she felt no regret.

She entered the building, just to find it empty. The only thing marking the murder was a pool of blood and a vial. Picking up the vial, she sniffed the opening and knew that it had once held a Blood Replenishing Potion. She knew then he'd not died as they had thought. Professor Snape had not been dead when they had left him. The thought made the ache in her heart double. Right then and there she was determined to find him by any means necessary.

Hermione shook herself from the memory and finished checking the papers on the desk. She had been with Severus for two years now and not a day went by that she didn't think about just how she'd found him and in what condition. Her thoughts returned to the past.

Several days had passed since she'd discovered the Shrieking Shack empty. Most of her time after her discovery had been spent at the Ministry, looking at books with information on tracking a person.

She'd tried using her wand with the tracing spell, but it had taken into the Dark forest, to a small glen. She had looked closer and found traces of blood, but not Severus.

"A Portkey," she huffed. "He used a bloody Portkey!" She quickly returned to the Ministry and began looking for anything that had to do with tracing a Portkey signature.

As time went by she was forced to abandon the constant search and continue on with her life. But Severus Snape was never far from her mind.

Between going back to school to complete her seventh year and onto university, Hermione continued to search every book she could find, even going so far as to venture into Knockturn Alley to several Dark arts bookstores.

But it had been years, and she was no closer to finding him. The trail had long turned cold. After all, he was Severus Snape, master spy. If he didn't want to be found, it was not likely he would be.

After her graduation, she traveled to Italy for a small vacation before starting her work as the office manager of a prestigious but failing apothecary. She had always wanted to see Italy. It had been a dream since leaving Hogwarts.

It was her hope and dream, once she returned home, to build the business back up and one day own it outright. But first things first, she thought as she walked slowly through the small town of Imperia, looking for the booksellers at the local market.

This part of Italy was a Wizarding town that held all sorts of magical charms and potions ingredients, as well as books. Her plan had never changed in the years following her graduation from Hogwarts and the Muggle and Wizarding Universities in Salem.

Her search for a way to find Severus Snape continued, hence her stopping here in Imperia on her way to her next stop in Salerno.

She heard that a few bookstalls held older books on magic that could possibly help in her search to find the missing Potions master, and she was, if nothing else, tenacious in her efforts.

The outdoor market had numerous stalls that held massive amounts of books. As Hermione strolled through the first one, looking at the shelves and carts that held the tomes, she chose one of the old books from the top shelf. As she turned round, from the corner of her eye she caught sight of a profile she thought she recognized.

Turning slightly to look at the man, her breath caught in her throat, and she almost dropped the book she held. She was gazing at one Severus Snape. His dark hair and impressive nose stood out amongst the shoppers. Why was he sitting so low?

Her eyes were suddenly drawn to the man behind her Potions professor, who seemed to have his hands resting on handles. It was then, after her initial shock had subsided, that she noticed the wheelchair Severus Snape sat in.

Her eyes filled with tears as she watched the two of them head off down the lane to the next bookseller. Shaking and unable to speak, she left the book and walked slowly out of the stall. She followed the pair as they moved from stall to stall. In each one Severus looked over the books that were old and were mostly potions related from what she could see.

She warred with herself as to whether she should approach him, or follow along behind him at a discreet distance and see where he went. Her mind was suddenly made up when he turned in her direction and looked at her.

His eyes held a gleam of wariness, but the look on his face spoke volumes as to the loneliness he felt.

Walking over to where he was, she held out her hand to shake his and smiled. "Professor, I am so glad to see you," she said with genuine warmth.

Snape looked at her offered hand, and then with his gloved hand grasped it and gave it a cursory shake. "Granger, how did you find me? Of course, if anyone could, it would be you. Brightest witch and all that." The bite that would have normally been there wasn't. There was a weariness about him.

"Sir, I've been looking for you since the final battle was over, when I found you gone from the shack," she told him, never taking her eyes off the man for fear he would suddenly evaporate into thin air.

His eyes widened as he thought about her statement.

"You've been searching for me for five years? Heavens, girl, what for?" He scrutinized her. She'd blossomed into a beautiful young woman. But some things never changed; her fingers were still ink stained. He found that somewhat comforting. He knew his were too, under the gloves he wore when he knew he'd be handling old books.

"I just needed to see that you were all right," she replied with a smile, blinking back tears that had formed in her eyes. "I am so glad you are alive," she whispered as she took a hankie from her pocket and dabbed at her eyes.

Severus shook his head, astonished to see someone who cared enough about him to shed real tears. He cleared his throat. "All right, all right, enough of that now," he said gruffly. "I'm alive. Let's not get maudlin about what might have been. You kids did what needed to be done that night." He gave her a slight almost smile and then looked past her to the book bin near the front of the stall.

"Granger, look there to your left. See the top uppermost book? Get it for me, please," he requested. She complied and retrieved the massive tome.

She looked at the title and knew right away what he was trying to do.

She nodded as she handed it to him, and her mind began to race. He was trying to find a cure for the paralysis in his legs, obviously caused by Nagini's venom. She knew what her next words would be as she watched him scan a few pages of the book.

Clearing her throat, she stepped closer to his side and began to read what he was looking at. Her eyes scanned the text, and suddenly she reached out and pointed to a passage on the page. "Sir, this potion here has been quite effective on patients at St. Mungo's. The apothecary I will be working for supplies them with a few of the ingredients listed here. I've heard the name, although some of these ingredients I've never heard of. I'm sure you know what they are."

He looked up at her then and nodded. "Something the know-it-all doesn't know." The words were not biting, but spoken with a warmth she'd never heard in his voice. "I would think that in your line of work that would be annoying to you."

She smiled and said, "You're right, it is very annoying."

"So you've deduced what I am trying to do then?" he questioned, looking at her with the same stern expression he'd used when she was his student.

"Yes, sir, and if I may, I'd like to help you," she replied and watched the play of emotions cross his face before he answered.

"This is my friend, Beale." He indicated the man behind him.

Beale smiled. "Pleased to meet you, Miss Granger."

Hermione shook his hand. "It's good to meet you too, sir."

Snape explained, "Beale is my right hand man. He helps me on these outings to the booksellers; perhaps we might forfeit this outing and return to my villa, if that is acceptable to you, Miss Granger."

Severus turned slightly to let Beale know he could pay for the book and he was ready to return home. "Yes, sir that is quite acceptable," Hermione replied and followed Severus and Beale down the street to a car that was parked in front of a coffee shop.

Hermione watched as Snape placed his arms about Beale's neck. The man lifted him up and pivoted him into the car. His legs were useless. She saw the embarrassment on her former professor's face, so she walked to the other side of the car.

Beale placed Severus in the back seat, took the wheelchair to the boot and then turned towards the driver's side of the car.

"Granger, are you going to get in or stand there all day?" Severus said loudly with a distinctive bite to his statement, still trying to cope with his display of weakness.

Hermione looked at him and saw that there was no room in the front, as it was so full of books, and so she climbed into the backseat next to him and settled in. "Merlin, what a nice car," she exclaimed as she closed the door and sat back.

Severus nodded, glad to have something to talk about.

"It was one of the first things I bought when I settled here in Italy, besides the villa," he replied.

Hermione took in the sights as they rode along. Snape pointed out a few interesting things as Beale drove carefully through the crowded street. Hermione took note of where they were in relation to her hotel. Finally they turned down a long driveway.

"This is where I live. It isn't much, but it is mine," he said to her as they came to a stop in front of a large sand-colored villa with a terracotta-tiled roof and several rooms, both upstairs and down, judging from the number of windows.

"Oh, it's beautiful!" she exclaimed as she gazed out of the car window and noticed the colorful flower beds and large, round pots that sat on a stone patio.

Beale came from the back of the car and opened the door. Hermione wandered closer to the patio to give Beale time to transfer Snape into his chair. Beale placed Snape in the chair and pulled it back away from the door and then closed it. Hermione then came around the car and followed the pair as Beale pushed Severus up the walkway and into the house.

Her mouth fell open when she entered the villa. As she looked around Severus said, "Close your mouth, Granger, before you catch flies."

"Not much! This place is huge, and oh, it is so lovely, sir."

Severus nodded his thanks, rather pleased that she liked it. He dismissed Beale and motioned for Hermione to follow him. He used his own arms to roll himself next to her. "This way, Granger. My study is down this hallway."

He stopped in front of a bookshelf filled with small earthenware pots. Hermione looked rather puzzled until he touched the dark black pot on the left and the shelf swung open.

"This is my study. Most of my notes are just there on the desk. Feel free to read them over. Then we can discuss them at length." He knew it wasn't that he felt he couldn't solve this problem himself, but a fresh pair of eyes and experiences might be what he needed to break the streak of failures. Also, a new face around here would be welcome.

He ushered her into the room and then followed her over to the desk.

"I am going to tell Mrs. Morino we have a guest for dinner." He exited the study. Hermione walked over to the desk and picked up the notes laying there. She was gobsmacked by the change in the man. She'd fully expected him to leave her standing on the street, staring after him, yet here she was as his guest. He was such a knowledgeable man, yet in five years he had not solved the problem. Was he so desperate, grasping at straws by asking for her input, or did he really have confidence that she might be able to help him?

As she settled down to read, she found her gaze wandering around the room and noted just how much this room didn't reflect the man she'd known as her professor of Potions all those years ago. His office had been so stark except for horrid potion ingredients and jars with mutant animals. This office had fine artwork and plants that livened the room and made it look comfortable and lived in. There was a large, polished wooden desk and soft chairs before it. She assumed he stayed in his chair because there was no chair behind it. The colors were warm brown and bright maroon.

She was seated in front of Severus' desk, reading over the notes, when Severus returned from the kitchen. She was so engrossed in the comments on the pages that she didn't hear him when he came into the room.

As he wheeled across the expanse of the room, she finally looked up. "Oh, sir, these are fascinating. I can certainly see the thoroughness of your research, especially here on page forty-five about the return of sensation to your legs," she murmured as she looked at him.

"Yes, well, it didn't last long. There was a bit of tingling and burning in my toes, but it was only temporary and lasted only a few hours at best," he replied.

His tone of voice told her he had considered giving up.

"Sir, might I ask if you've tried charms to go along with the potions?" Her eyes sparkled with enthusiasm and hopefulness as she waited for him to answer.

"No, Miss Granger, I have not tried any charms. You know how much I detest foolish wand waving." His voice held no tone of criticism, and if she wasn't mistaken, his eyes actually held a bit of anticipation at what her next words might be.

"Sir, as I'm sure you know, I got an 'O' in my Charms class and I have done quite a bit of research in several areas of healing using potions and charms, and as such I was thinking that perhaps I could help you in your endeavor to walk again."

Severus nodded several times during her statement, and when she finished, he held her gaze, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Perhaps, you can help me. I am not skilled in charm work, I admit, and I have not sought other help in that area for several reasons. Mostly, I do not want the general public to know I'm alive."

"Yes, sir, I quite understand. It is really a matter of just who to trust. I found that out after the final battle." Her tone sounded resigned, so he didn't ask her any questions. There would be time enough for those.

"Then might I ask you for your assistance, Miss Granger. I would very much appreciate the help." His voice sounded strained, like he was on the verge of tears, but his eyes bore into hers as he waited for an answer.

Hermione stood up and came around the desk. She stood in front of him. Her eyes held his as she stuck out her hand and said, "It's a deal, sir. I'd be glad to help you. In fact I look forward to helping."

Severus let the breath out he'd been holding and gently took her hand in his, annoyed he still had the gloves on. This time he shook her hand with a slow, careful, lingering caress before releasing it. "Done, then. I hope you will come stay here. You're very welcome, and it will give us more of a chance to discuss your ideas."

"Oh, sir, I wouldn't want to impose," Hermione protested.

"I wouldn't ask if I did not wish you here. Please stay, Miss Granger." Hermione nodded, and he continued, "I will have Beale show you to the guest room." He turned the chair and started for the doorway.

The dinner consisted of Veal Piccata with Italian summer squash and roasted asparagus and Brunello wine followed by a nice dessert of fresh strawberries with whipped cream.

Hermione pushed her plate away when she finished and sat back with a smile on her face.

Severus watched as she sighed contentedly. "That was wonderful. I haven't had anything like this, ever," she admitted. She picked up her glass and drained the remainder of the wine.

"I shall convey your approval to Mrs. Morino. She will be most appreciative of your compliments," Severus replied as he picked up the wine bottle and poured some more into her glass before refilling his own.

"Thank you. I wonder if she would share her recipe." She took another sip of wine and closed her eyes as the flavors mingled on her tongue.

Severus stared at her and marveled at how much she had changed. He looked away and began to fold his napkin when she opened her eyes moments later and gasped. He wondered if she'd felt him watching her and turned his head to look at the sideboard where the rest of the dessert sat.

"Oh dear, I forgot to check out of the hotel. Could Beale take me back to get my belongings?" she asked, with panic in her voice. She stood up and started towards the door.

"Miss Granger, I had Beale go back to the hotel, retrieve your bags and sign you out of your reservation this afternoon," he replied.

"You did?" she murmured. "I appreciate that." She smiled, then sat down again before taking another sip of wine.

Severus nodded as he rolled away from the table. "Shall we move to the patio? The breeze is quite nice this time of the evening." His ears picked up her hum of approval as she stood and followed him down the hallway to the door that led to the patio. Severus opened the door and rolled out onto the veranda. Hermione followed close behind him, and when she stepped out of the house, her murmur of approval was also heard by Severus.

"Oh, this is lovely. Do you know what these flowers are, sir?" she questioned as she looked across the railing. "Oh, what a magnificent view you have." Her gaze turned from the sight of the town across the field to Severus. She smiled when he gestured towards the chair as he rolled closer to the table that held a tray of tea and two cups.

Hermione sat down and waited until Severus settled the wheelchair next to the table before she spoke. "Sir, if I may ask and if it isn't my business then please tell me so, but have you been here all this time? I mean, who helped you with your injuries?" She waited, unsure if she would receive an answer to her inquiry. She watched the play of emotions cross his face.

Clearing his throat slightly, Severus turned towards the girl. Woman, he admonished himself. "Before I went to meet the Dark Lord that night, I made several potions to take with me. Potions that might well put a stopper in death."

His classic smirk had more warmth in it than she remembered.

"I had an inkling that it might be my last day, so I also carried a Portkey with me. It was made to take me to the Prince estate when I passed out."

"There's a Prince estate?"

"Yes, it's Secret-kept."

"Oh, I see. That was very well thought out, sir. Of course, I always knew you were resourceful. I'm glad you anticipated what might happen and had a backup plan."

"When I arrived at the estate, Hinky, the family house-elf, and his rather extended family helped me to recover. I was there for over a year. When I was finally strong enough to leave, I was still unable to walk," he grumbled bitterly, causing Hermione to reach out and touch his arm.

"We will find the potion and charm to restore your ability to walk, I... I promise," she whispered urgently, never taking her eyes from his.

Severus, surprised by her touch, pulled his arm away and reached for the teacup. "Tea, Miss Granger?" he offered as he looked away from her face and focused his gaze somewhere over her shoulder.

Hermione saw the nervousness in his visage and voice and said, "Yes, please, sugar only, thank you."

Smiling at her, Severus handed her the cup and pushed the sugar bowl across the table towards her. "I believe this has turned out to be a very nice evening," he articulated as he began to sip his tea and look towards the sky.

The summer sun rose high in the sky and shone through the lacy curtains in Hermione's room, waking her. Stretching as she sat up, she looked at the room and smiled. "Who would have thought I would be in Severus Snape's house after all these years and possibly have a permanent job too?" she whispered.

Looking towards the door on the opposite wall, she judged it was the loo and rose, padding her way towards the door. She was shocked when she opened the door to the room. It was a huge room, with a sunken bathtub surrounded by a small ledge of rose marble. There were several bottles of shampoo and a variety of soaps. On the wall hung a large robe, and next to the robe was a linen closet filled with towels and flannels.

"Wow, what a room," she whispered as she walked to the tub and turned on the faucet to fill it. Looking around the expanse of the room, she noticed another door, and when she opened it, she began to giggle. "So that's where it is," she murmured as she sat down.

When she exited her bedroom, she went downstairs and saw Beale standing just inside the doorway to the dining room. "Beale, where is Professor Snape?" she asked as she tried to see past the man and into the room.

"Master Snape is on the terrace. He suggested breakfast be sent there today," he replied with a smile and watched as Hermione thanked him and turned towards the outer door.

When she opened the door that led to the patio, Severus turned and greeted her. "Miss Granger, I thought we could begin our day out here and then after breakfast retire to the lab. I have more notes there I think you might need to see before we begin."

"I'm anxious to read them, sir, but first, what's for breakfast?" she asked as she sat down and watched a smile cross Severus' face.