

The Gryffindor of Christmas Present

by anogete

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Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 1

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When Severus was a child, he watched his mother fold each piece of his laundry in the dull Muggle fashion, but he found her graceful movements hypnotizing. She seemed to fold each article with carelessness, but the finished product was always neat and trim, with no piece of cloth out of place. As he grew older, he began to watch certain girls in such a way. Their attention to their hair and appearance always attracted his interest simply because the hygienic rituals were so unfamiliar to him. And then there had been that lamentable time he spent as a true Death Eater when he believed Lucius Malfoy to be the most graceful and enviable man on the planet. The crisp way Lucius's cane snapped upon the ground each time he took a step increased Severus's desire to be only half so graceful.

His years as a professor and spy were spent in a daze of students, grades, and covert meetings with one side or the other. He found he barely had time for rest, much less the guarded perusal of another person's unguarded behavior. However, after Voldemort was defeated, and the mess the war left behind was tidied up, he happened to come into contact with Miss Hermione Granger. She had always been a troublesome pupil with a penchant for raising his ire with her attitude. She reminded Severus too much of himself at such a young age. He found it rather embarrassing to remember how terribly eager he had been to be accepted and how deeply it had cut him to be outcast by both peers and staff members of Hogwarts.

Miss Granger had sought him out shortly after the business of the war was settled and the Ministry had regained its footing in the minds of most wizards and witches. She claimed she had admired him for his bravery and sacrifice, wanting to name him a friend, but Severus would hear none of it. Her very presence brought forth unpleasant memories from his own childhood and those miserable years teaching Potions at Hogwarts. It was only with hindsight that Severus could admit he had been exceedingly cruel when turning her away on more than one occasion. *Another regret to add to the many already plaguing me* he thought.

Despite the short time he had spent in her company after the war, and despite her absence in his present life, he found himself thinking of the wispy tendrils of hair curling around her neck and the delicate length of her fingers. The thoughts disturbed him, and he supposed he surely was going mad if Hermione Granger was occupying his thoughts during times of leisure. Without too much effort, he cast the bothersome girl from his mind and set himself to work on several new potions he had spent the previous months developing. Easy company and conversation never had been a virtue of Severus's, and he thought it best that he stick to what he knew: potions and solitude. He was in want of neither in his isolated laboratory.

Unfortunately, Christmas approached faster than he was prepared for, and Severus found himself in need of presents. The remainder of the staff during his time at Hogwarts had unfaithfully sent him gifts each year since his departure. Severus felt it only fair that he return their gifts with ones of his own, but it was not a business he looked forward to each year. This is what led him to standing in a narrow aisle of Flourish and Blotts on Christmas Eve without a clue what he should purchase for Minerva. Severus could only think of gifting her with a book, but he was unsure of which book would be best. He carefully traversed the narrow aisle and slipped around a tower of books rising from the floor before turning the corner into the next aisle.

Just below the aged wooden board with the word *Transfigurations* burned into it was none other than Hermione Granger.

She was engrossed in a large volume supported by her dainty hands. He could barely make out ink-stained fingers cupping the spine of the text. Lifting his gaze, he traced the curve of her neck that was bent over the pages, finally arriving at the tendrils of hair that had escaped from the hair clasp situated at the base of her skull. Severus sighed, but kept his distance.

Nearly a year had elapsed since last he saw her, since last she tried to insinuate herself into his life, but none of his pleasure in watching her had diminished. Her beauty wasn't so great that it provoked rapture in him, but he had secretly admired the simple charms of her movements and habits since their first meeting after the war. She was so exact, so meticulous that each motion she made held him in awe.

Severus watched a small pink tongue quickly wet her lips as she lifted a hand to turn the page. The soft scratch of her fingers over the rough page of the text demanded his attention. Watching her was like watching the easy precision of his mother, the wonder of the beauty rituals of his female classmates, and Malfoy's unerring grace at the same time. *No wonder I find watching her to be so appealing. It's been so long since I've been able to enjoy the unshielded movements of another person*, he thought. That must be the reason why the tilt of Hermione Granger's chin seemed to be the most perfect in the world.

As if sensing that she was being watched, Hermione turned her head and immediately met his eyes. Surprise flashed over her features before she schooled them to a more distant look. "Professor Snape," she offered by way of acknowledgement.

"Miss Granger," Severus replied with a quick incline of his head before he stepped closer to peruse the shelves before her.

It took her mere moments to regain her footing and begin asking all of those infernal questions that he knew she had knocking about in her brain. "I'm surprised to see you here, sir. What brings you out so late on Christmas Eve?"

"What else but gifts, Miss Granger?"

"Oh, gifts? For whom?"

"My former colleagues. They insist upon sending me presents, and I feel obligated to return the favor, despite my reluctance to shop for others," he replied, pulling a thin volume from the top shelf.

Hermione shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "I see."

Just as she turned to leave him alone in the aisle, he spoke up. "And you, Miss Granger? What brings you out at such an hour this evening?" He returned the book to its place on the shelf.

She slowly turned back to him, but Severus avoided her eyes by scanning the selection of books in front of him. After several silent moments, Hermione replied, "I was shopping for gifts as well."

Severus pulled another book from the shelf and flipped it open. "Indeed?" he asked. "For Potter and all your other little friends, I presume?"

Hermione cleared her throat and stepped closer to him. "Actually, for you, sir."

Severus finally turned his head to look at her. "Pardon?"

Her lips curled into a soft smile. "I was trying to find a gift for you. I'm afraid that I've come up empty-handed though." She paused for a short moment before continuing, "But no matter, sir. It's all for the best since I would hate for you to feel obligated to buy me something."

Severus dropped his eyes to the floor. His heart ached, not necessarily for Hermione Granger, but for the fact that he refused to let anyone into his life. Long ago, he had made amends with himself when he realized he would never share his life with anyone. He knew shortly after he left the Death Eaters for the guidance of Albus Dumbledore that a companion would never be his lot in life. However, being confronted with a young woman who had gone out of her way to become his friend, he felt his heart breaking into pieces. He was so close, and yet so far away. She was never meant for him.

"Yes, Miss Granger, perhaps it is for the best. I know many things, but I know nothing about gifts for young ladies," he finally replied as he turned his attention back to the book in his hand.

"You could just buy me what everyone always buys me."

He lifted his eyes to hers. "And what is that?"

"Books. No one buys me anything but books, not even my parents."

"I was under the impression that you liked books, Miss Granger."

"Of course I do. It's just that... nevermind."

Snape shifted his eyes away and muttered, "I understand. I, also, always receive books."

Hermione chuckled lightly. "Well, it's a good thing I didn't buy you a book." She moved another step closer to him to peer over his shoulder at the book in his hands. "For Professor McGonagall, I presume?"

Severus nodded and took a step to the side. She was uncomfortably close to him, and it made him very uneasy.

"I've heard it's excellent. I'm sure she would like it." Hermione cleared her throat and backed away. "I'm sorry I've interrupted your Christmas shopping, sir. I should leave you be. Have a good holiday."

Severus felt his stomach lurch. She was fading from his life again, and his first impulse was to stop her. Of all the people in the world who would accept his company, she was the only one he felt like conversing with at that moment. Severus thought this a very strange feeling since he had turned her from his doorstep not even a year ago with some very harsh words. *Ah, but she's strong. She's still talking to me like I had not insulted her in every way possible*, he thought.

"I trust you will be having a good Christmas?" he said quickly before she turned her back on him.

Hermione gave him another soft smile. He watched as the dainty corners of her lips lifted just the slightest bit. "I'll be having a quiet Christmas, sir."

"Surely not. You must have several friends and relatives to visit."

"Oh, no, my parents are away on holiday."

Severus raised a brow. "And your friends?"

"They have families now, and I don't want to intrude upon them during Christmas."

"I doubt that neither Potter nor Weasley would let you get away with avoiding them this time of year."

She smiled again. Each sad smile was like a knife wound inflicted on his chest. "I lied. I told them all that I would be spending Christmas with my parents. And, I told my parents that I would be spending Christmas with my friends."

"Why would you do that, Miss Granger?"

Her gaze dropped to her feet, and Hermione was silent for several long moments. Severus held his breath. Finally, she looked up and met his eyes. "Honestly, sir, I didn't want any of them to feel sorry for me because I had no one to spend Christmas with."

Severus opened his mouth, only to shut it again. He had no idea what to say to her or how to respond to such a painfully truthful statement. He had told that lie many times over to nearly everyone he knew for years. Slowly, he pulled his eyes from the hold of her large, brown ones so he could slide his gaze over the curve of her cheek, the slope of her jaw, and the proud tilt of her chin. He wondered why he had been so uncaring and cruel to her during her attempts to befriend him earlier in the year.

"I'm sorry to take up your time," Hermione said softly when he did not reply. She turned around to look for the exit.

Severus felt panic well up in his mind. "Miss Granger!" he called after her.

Hermione turned to look at him, surprise etched across her face.

"If you're not terribly opposed to spending Christmas with someone, you're welcome to spend it with me. I've no other plans."

Severus felt his heart in his throat and his stomach in his feet while she considered his offer. Finally, she spoke up. "You're only asking because you feel sorry for me."

"I'm not the sort to feel sorry for anyone, and you know it," he replied, snapping the book in his hands shut.

"You're really asking me to spend Christmas with you?" she asked, her voice full of incredulity.

Severus gritted his teeth together. She wasn't making this very easy for him. For a fleeting moment, he considered retracting his offer and walking out of Flourish and Blotts without so much as a glance back at his former student. However, the slender fingers of her left hand nervously wrapped in her tidy black robes made him reconsider.

"Yes, I am," he said softly, "but if you would rather spend your time alone, then there is no harm done."

Hermione cleared her throat and nodded, not taking her eyes from his face. "I would be delighted to spend the holiday with you, sir."

An awkward silence stretched between them. Severus was unsure how to proceed. He had not invited anyone to his home for years. He had visitors, but they were always unplanned ones that he could have taken or left without much debate. This was the first time in recent memory that he had asked for the company of another person.

Should I Apparate her there now or ask her to meet me there later? he wondered.

"I need to pay for this book," Hermione said softly, lifting the heavy text in her right hand.

Severus nodded and followed her to the clerk at the front of the store. She paid for the book, and he paid for Minerva's gift in a silent haze. The bustle of Christmas Eve shoppers surrounded them as soon as they stepped outside the door of Flourish and Blotts. Hermione was jostled away from him by an excited crowd of teenagers making their way to view the newest broom model in the window of a nearby shop. On instinct, his hand shot out to grab her arm and pull her into an empty spot near the building.

"It's busy," she noted, dropping her eyes to look at his pale hand curled around her upper arm.

"Indeed, it is," Severus replied. "Do you have other errands to attend to this evening?"

"No. Do you?"

He shook his head, the black strands of hair sliding against his cheeks. Absently, he pushed them back, conscious of her eyes on him and what she might think of his appearance. Her arm was warm beneath her black robes. Severus desperately wanted to slide his hand up to her shoulder and neck to feel the graceful bend that connected the two. It was the closest he had been to anyone in a very long time.

He cleared his throat and tried to reign himself in before she thought him a complete fool. "If you have no objections, I'll Apparate us both to my home."

Hermione nodded her assent and pulled away from his grasp. She took a step closer to him and pulled his arm tightly against her body, wrapping her arm around it. He nodded numbly and closed his eyes tightly. He thought of home, turned, and suddenly, there they were, standing on the overgrown path leading to his modest house on Spinner's End. Hermione still held fast to his arm as they walked up the shabby path together.

Severus pulled out his wand and removed the wards from his door before opening it. He had allowed her to enter only once when she attempted to befriend him. She had been unceremoniously booted out within fifteen minutes. Afterward, he had regretted what he had done and said, and that regret was painfully tangible now in the soft twilight entering through the windows.

"Have a seat," he said, pulling his arm from her grasp. She seemed reluctant to release him, and Severus felt his heart skip a beat at the thought that she might enjoy his company even after the way he had treated her.

She sat on the edge of his threadbare brown couch and appeared to feign interest in several open books lying on his coffee table. Severus glanced around and suddenly became nervous over the state of his home. It was sparsely appointed with only the necessities, and even those were old or in shabby shape. With a flick of his wand, he kindled a fire in the fireplace.

"Would you like something to drink?" he asked, busying himself with the askew rug in the middle of the floor.

"Whatever you're drinking, sir," she replied softly.

Severus turned his back and winced. It really was his own fault that Hermione felt she had to call him by formal titles. He insisted on calling her Miss Granger, despite wanting to be able to call her by her given name. The entire business was just so damn awkward that he wasn't sure how to approach the subject of being less formal with one another. He carefully poured a small amount of brandy into two elegant crystal snifters that had belonged to his father.

He crossed the creaky floorboards to hand her one of the drinks. "You may call me Severus, if you'd like," he said under his breath as he sat down on the other end of the couch.

Severus took a sip from the snifter in an attempt to occupy his hands. He desperately hoped that she wouldn't ask him to repeat what he had just said. Thankfully, she didn't. Instead, she said, "Only if you call me Hermione." After she sipped the rich cognac, she smiled into her glass and continued, "I feel like I'm twelve years old when you call me Miss Granger."

He nodded and sat back on the couch, watching her from the corner of his eye. "I have a turkey in the oven if you are hungry. It should be done shortly."

"Yes, I could smell it when I walked inside. I hope I'm not intruding since you didn't know you'd be returning with me when you began cooking your meal this evening."

"Not at all," he replied, turning to face her.

Hermione smiled nervously and shifted in her seat. "This is rather awkward."

Severus couldn't stop the relieved chuckle that escaped from his throat. "Yes, it is, isn't it?"

"Listen, if I pushed too hard before, when I came here demanding that you pay attention to me, then I'm sorry," she said before taking another healthy gulp of the brandy.

"I was remarkably rude to you, Hermione," he replied, nearly stumbling over her first name. "I... well, I apologize for saying what I said and kicking you out of my home."

She shook her head. "It's nothing, really. I was being far too pushy. I should have left you alone when you said that you weren't interested in becoming friends."

Regretting that now, aren't you, old man? Severus thought as he pulled his eyes away from her expectant face. "I was rude."

"I forgive you," she said in a more cheerful voice. "You can't be all that rude if you invited me to spend Christmas with you." Hermione laughed under her breath. "I'm having such a difficult time with this name thing. I've called you Professor or sir for so many years that it's difficult to make the switch."

"Yes, I know what you mean," he agreed.

"Severus is a Roman name. It means strict. How fitting for you, yes?"

Severus suppressed his smile at her tendency to throw out facts when faced with an uncomfortable situation. "Quite fitting," he agreed, nodding his head. "And what does Hermione mean?"

"Eloquence, I think. It appears I'm not quite as suited to my name as you are to yours."

"No," he replied thoughtfully. "I think it fits you rather well, Hermione."

She looked shocked. He took the moment to trace her open lips with his eyes before she snapped her mouth shut. "May I ask you a question?"

"Yes, but I make no promises of answering it."

She leaned forward and sat her snifter on the table in front of them. "Why are you being so kind to me?"

Severus repressed a deep sigh, instead, fixing his eyes on a portrait of his mother hanging on the far wall. He was unsure how to answer her question, and he strongly considered just avoiding it altogether by refusing to answer. Finally, he began to speak, laying his words with care. "I regret treating you so cruelly when you came to see me last. You did not deserve it. I'm afraid you remind me of myself quite a bit, and I find it... unnerving."

"Is the Christmas air getting to you, or are you actually being honest with me?" she asked with a smile.

With all of his heart, Severus wanted to lean forward and touch the stray hairs that had escaped from her clasp to lie softly on her neck. "I'm being honest with you," he whispered.

"Thank you." Hermione's voice was no more than a whisper as well.

She held his eyes for a long moment. Severus felt the seconds as if they were hours. Finally, Hermione broke away and said softly, "I'm glad you invited me over this evening. As much as I denied it, I think I would have been miserable at home without anyone to talk to all night." She laughed. "It's not like I haven't spent time alone before; I actually enjoy it. I suppose it's just Christmas and the connotations of being alone on Christmas that get me. I'm not keeping you from anything, am I?"

"No, nothing," he replied. "I should tend to our dinner, though."

"May I help?" Hermione asked, standing up, her hands clasped nervously in front of her.

"Hermione, you are a guest. Sit."

"I really do want to help. Please?"

Severus had wanted to spend some time alone in the kitchen before immersing himself in her presence again. He felt like he was drowning in her, and he needed a quick breath of air before she pulled him under. However, he couldn't give her a good enough reason to remain in the living area, so he allowed her to follow him into the small kitchen.

"What should I do?"

When he turned around to address her question, he nearly collided with her. The kitchen was small and the modest table that sat in the middle of the floor reduced the walking space to the bare minimum. Hermione's hands lifted to stop his body from crashing into hers, and she pressed them lightly against his chest. Once he regained his composure, Severus carefully took her small hands in his and removed them from his body. "Excuse me," he mumbled, stepping aside to look for a hand towel.

"Should I set a place for myself?" Hermione asked.

Severus felt like his mind was tripping over itself. She was completely harmless and just as nervous as he was, but he couldn't reign in his severe fright of these sorts of social situations. *Is this a date?* he thought, before chastising himself with, *Of course it isn't. She wants to be your friend because she feels sorry for poor old Snape.*

"The plates are in the cabinet beside the sink. The cutlery is in the drawer just below them," he finally replied as he pulled the turkey from the oven. When he turned around, he found Hermione staring at him with a smile on her face. "What is so amusing?"

The question only made her smile grow wider. "I just never thought I'd see you stooping to pull a turkey from the oven. This is all very surreal. Just minutes ago, I was due to go home to an empty flat, and now I'm here with you."

"Well, I'm sorry I've kept you from your empty flat." The sarcasm was evident in his voice, but it just made her all the more amused.

"Don't be like that. I'm enjoying myself here. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

"Then perhaps you should set yourself a place at the table," Severus suggested.

Hermione nodded and opened the cabinet that held the plates. They were on the top shelf, just a few finger widths from her outstretched hand. Severus saw her struggling on the tips of her toes to reach the top plate, and he finally took pity on her. Careful not to touch her body, he stepped behind her and pulled down the plate she had been reaching for. Unfortunately, he had not expected Hermione's reaction to his unexpected help. In surprise, she stepped back and collided with his body. The force pushed him back, the plate falling from his hand and shattering across the tiled floor.

"I'm sorry," Hermione quickly said, turning around to look at him. "You startled me."

Severus took her shoulders in each of his hands to keep her still. The shards of the plate were littered across the floor. "It's quite alright, Hermione. Don't move until I've cleaned this mess up." With a simple flip of his wand and a muttered word, the plate was as good as new and sitting on the countertop.

"Sometimes I think Tonks has had too much of an influence on my clumsiness," she said with a small laugh.

He grazed the tip her nose with his gaze before he settled his eyes on her lips, hearing the soft timbre of her voice pass over them. "Nonsense. I should have warned that I was behind you."

Abruptly, Severus turned away from her and focused his attention on the turkey. She continued setting two places at the table while he carefully carved several slices of tender meat. He sat the turkey in the center of the table, covering up a large chip in the paint of the tabletop. A small bowl of gravy and a basket of bread followed. As Hermione laid out the cutlery, Severus rustled around in a cabinet. He turned around to present a dusty bottle of wine and two mismatched wineglasses to her.

"I'm afraid I don't entertain much," he said by way of explanation.

She chuckled and took the smaller glass from his hands before sitting down across from him at the table. "The food smells lovely."

"I spent the entire month of October trying to find the perfect combination of herbs and spices to compliment a turkey."

Hermione held out her plate as he speared a couple thick slices of the turkey breast for her. "I'm sure, with your experience, you've found a way to make the most delicious turkey in the world."

"I'm not sure it was so much experience as boredom," he replied, serving himself and covering the slices with a healthy dose of gravy.

They both fell silent as they began to eat. The clock hanging beside the door chimed the hour. Severus counted as he used a piece of bread to clean the errant gravy off the edge of his plate. It was nine o'clock in the evening. He wondered how long she would stay and if she would return tomorrow to share Christmas morning with him.

He watched her with dark eyes beneath heavy eyelids. Her plate was organized. The gravy was pooled in the upper left corner with the slices of meat in the middle. A slice of bread perched on the edge of the plate, very nearly in danger of toppling off at any moment. It didn't, of course. Hermione Granger was too neat of a person to have her food go flopping about on her guest's table. She methodically worked her way through one piece of turkey, then the other, cutting small squares before swirling each into the gravy. Every three bites, she would pluck a bit of bread from her plate and pop it into her mouth to mingle with the turkey and gravy.

"This is the best turkey I've ever had." Her voice broke the silence and made him drop his eyes back to his own messy plate.

Severus quickly ate the other half of his meal before Hermione could finish with hers. Once she had finished, she sat back in the wooden chair and smiled at him. "Thank you for dinner. It was lovely."

He felt woefully unworthy of her companionship when she showed herself to be so kind. "I am glad you enjoyed it, even though I am no conversationalist."

She smiled. "Oh, I don't mind. I spent seven years as your student. I *know* you aren't the chatty sort." Hermione paused before pressing on. "You know, this is all I wanted when I came to visit you before. I didn't expect you to tell me your life story or engage me in small talk for hours at a time."

"This? You wanted dinner?"

"No, not dinner. This." She waved her hand in the air to indicate the space around them. "I just wanted to be able to sit in a room with you and know that if I need to talk, you'll understand what I'm talking about."

"Surely all of your friends aren't such dunderheads that they cannot converse with you."

His comment made her chuckle. "No, but they don't understand my interests. They don't know anything about the three most common uses of fluxweed, the correct temperature to brew the most effective Dreamless Sleep potion, or the finer points of eighteenth century poetry."

"And what makes you think I know anything about poetry, Hermione?"

"I saw the tattered copy of Byron on your coffee table, *Severus*."

Her quick response caught him off guard, but also made him want to laugh out loud. "You're still as nose-y as ever, I see."

She appeared to take his comment in stride, replying, "I like to think of it as being observant."

The only response he gave her was the slight lift at the corners of his mouth. A moment later, he leaned across the table and took her empty plate, stacking it on top of his in preparation for cleaning up.

Hermione cleared her throat before he could stand. "So, does your inviting me for dinner and being civil to me mean that you'll be my friend?"

"You have more than enough friends already." Severus stood, pushing his chair back with his legs and taking the plates to the sink.

"That doesn't matter. I want you."

Severus turned around to face her. Did she just say that she wanted him? "Excuse me?" he asked, arching a dark brow.

Her eyes went wide when she realized what she had said. "To be my friend, that is," Hermione corrected as a flush crept across the fair skin of her cheeks. "I want you to be my friend."

"I don't know how to be a friend," he admitted, turning back to the sink. A quick Cleansing Charm left the two plates sparkling clean. Hermione had transfigured a container for the leftover turkey by the time he looked back at her.

Waving her away from the mundane tasks of cleaning up after their meal, he directed her to step into the living room. Severus followed close behind, inhaling the clean scent of her long hair. She took up her seat on the couch again while he filled both the snifters with more brandy.

Just as Severus settled himself on the other end of the couch, she sat up straight and began digging in her pocket for something. He placed her drink on the coffee table and watched as she fished around, finally pulling out a small white square. A moment later, she had enlarged it with her wand, and he realized it was a greeting card.

Hermione seemed inordinately nervous and anxious as she placed it facedown in her lap. She took a bracing swig of the brandy before going any further. "I know I said that I didn't get you anything," she began slowly. "I looked in shops for hours, but nothing seemed right. Which isn't surprising since I don't even know you all that well," she added with a smile. "I finally decided on a card. I was going to Owl it to you after I left Flourish and Blotts, but I obviously didn't have the chance."

Severus opened his mouth to speak, but she silenced him with a raised hand.

"Please, let me finish," she said softly. "I thought about sending it to you tomorrow after I leave, but that's just..."

"Not very Gryffindor?" he supplied. Severus was surprised to find that there was no malice in his voice when mentioning the rival house.

His comment made her laugh. "Exactly. Anyway, here."

She picked up the card and held it out to him. *Professor Snape* was written in neat letters across the envelope. Severus took it from her, holding it cautiously in his hands, as if it might turn into a howler of epic proportions if he made the wrong move.

"Go on," she urged. "Open it."

He carefully lifted the flap of the envelope and slid the Christmas card out. It had a festive pine tree on the front, decked out in lights and tinsel. The interior of the card had the words "Happy Christmas" printed in dark black letters across the right. Her unmistakable handwriting was centered on the left panel.

Professor Snape,

I hope this card finds you well. I simply wanted you to know that I was thinking of you, even though I know you most likely don't care. I wish you a very Happy Christmas, and I hope the New Year will bring you a great deal of success and happiness.

Sincerely,

Hermione Granger

Severus felt his heart constrict into his chest. The muscle felt so tight that he wondered if he hadn't permanently damaged it, leaving him to feel this uncomfortable ache in his chest for the rest of his life. After all he had done and said to her in all the years he had known her, she still showed him nothing but kindness.

Slowly, he closed the card and dropped his head to look at it in his lap. The tree on the front was lined in silver and gold sparkles that shined when the light caught them just right. Closing his eyes on the garish drawing, he could only conjure Hermione's face and the way her brown curls rested on her neck when they escaped from whatever device she was using to restrain them. How many times had he seen her tuck her hair behind her ears with those delicate fingers? Too many to count, he was sure. However, after her failed attempt at befriending him all those months ago, he had dwelled on those thoughtless gestures for weeks after she left. He could easily picture the tip of her nose and how it turned up just the slightest bit, the translucent skin of her eyelids that he knew would be soft to the touch, the sight of her teeth worrying the flesh of her lower lip, and how she had a habit of twisting her fingers in her robes when she was nervous or worried.

All of those things rushed back to him, despite the fact that he had pushed them from his mind long before this fateful Christmas Eve meeting. Severus nearly smiled when he realized it was quite fitting that they found each other in a bookstore, of all places, after these long months. Regret washed away the mirth before his lips could turn up too much. He wanted to return to that day February twenty-fifth, if he remembered correctly and take back every horrible insult he threw in her face. He had only turned her away out of fear. Deep down, he had known she was a kindred spirit, her friendship with the Boy-Who-Lived be damned.

"Thank you, Hermione," he finally said. "This was very kind of you." Severus couldn't yet bring himself to lift his head and meet her eyes.

When she spoke, he thought he could hear amusement lacing her words. "You mean to tell me you're not upset that a *Gryffindor* actually got you a card?"

"Don't be silly. Minerva has gotten me far worse than a card, and she's as Gryffindor as they come."

Hermione's laughter reverberated through his small sitting room. "Aren't you just full of surprises tonight? You answer my questions, share your dinner with me, *and* you're making jokes? You weren't visited by the Ghost of Christmas Past already, were you?"

He looked up into her warm, brown eyes. "The Ghost of Christmas Past?"

"A Muggle Christmas tale."

"Yes?"

She turned on the couch and Severus found that she was several inches closer to him. "Yes," she affirmed. "A miserly, bitter old man has no desire to share his life with anyone, but on Christmas Eve, three ghosts visit him. The Ghost of Christmas Past shows him how dreadful his life has been. The Ghost of Christmas Present shows him his current state and the state of those he has hurt. And, finally, the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come gives him a look at his future, should he stay on his current path. He wakes up a changed man, and vows to make his life and the lives of those around him better."

"I see. You think I'm a miserly, bitter old man."

She laughed again and laid a small hand on his forearm. Severus thought that he could feel her warmth even through his formal robes. "You aren't right now," she said softly.

"Yes, well, I don't need three ghosts when I have a persistent Gryffindor, now do I?" he replied, lifting the Christmas card off his lap and flapping it in her direction.

Hermione's eyes were gleaming when he was able to meet her gaze again. "Ebenezer Scrooge, I always knew there was a wonderful man underneath all that bitterness."

"Who?"

"The man in the story, the one who was visited by the ghosts."

Snape nodded. Her hand was still resting on his arm. He felt like it weighed a hundred pounds. Any minute now he expected the weight of her hand on him to collapse the couch and pull them both through the old floorboards.

"I regret that I have nothing to give you in return, Hermione. After... after what I said to you this past February, I didn't think you would appreciate any sort of contact from me."

"I wasn't expecting anything. This evening was quite a present in and of itself, though. I'm very glad that we happened upon each other earlier." She turned her head away from him. "I dare say I would have been quite depressed if I had spent Christmas Eve alone."

"Only miserable old men like me should have to spend the holiday alone, Hermione."

"Nonsense, Severus," she said, turning her head back to look at him. "Not even miserable old men like you should have to be alone." There was a ghost of a smile playing about her lips. It made him want to kiss her until that tentative playfulness rubbed off on him, allowing him to smile as effortlessly.

Just the sight of her made his chest tighten and his lungs stop functioning. He knew she was not perfect, but at that moment, Severus was hard-pressed to find a single flaw in her, regardless of her house, friends, and nosey nature. She was passionate and headstrong, loyal and trustworthy, intelligent and capable, with a delicate strength that made his heart want to pump out of his chest and throw itself in her lap as a sacrifice.

Her steady gaze made him uncomfortable. He was feeling out of his depth, and all those years of spying on the Dark Lord weren't doing him any good in schooling his features to impassive interest. He knew she could see it all playing out on his face, yet she had not excused herself and made a hasty exit. Could it be that she was feeling the same as him? *Surely not*, Severus thought.

There was really only one way to find out, though. Nervously licking his dry lips, he forced himself to look into her eyes. "I have an alarming lack of experience in social situations such as this, but... would I be terribly remiss if I were to attempt to kiss you?"

"Where?" Hermione asked in a soft voice.

"Where?"

"On my cheek? On my forehead? On my nose?"

Severus flexed his fingers in his lap. He hadn't realized he had been clenching them tightly into fists. "Well, all of those sound quite agreeable, but I was actually thinking of your... lips."

"I think I would enjoy that very much." Hermione leaned forward slightly, wetting the full flesh of her bottom lip with a quick tongue. The firelight caused the moisture to glisten, enticing him even more, making him wonder what she would taste like. Perhaps their turkey dinner? Or something even sweeter and more distinctly *her*?

Despite all of his lingering curiosities on the texture of her tongue and the taste of her mouth, he leaned in and placed only a quick, chaste kiss on her lips. He was no virgin, but the company of women had been lacking in much of his life. This sort of intimacy, especially with *her*, was something he found most uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry," Severus mumbled softly, pulling back a few inches to take a breath.

Hermione lifted a hand and weaved her ink-stained fingers through his dark hair. "Don't apologize," she muttered as she pulled him closer. He felt her warm lips brush over his, this time by her volition. It sent a thrill through him to know that she wanted this too, and he tilted his head up to press his mouth more fully against hers.

Two eternal seconds later, he felt her tongue tracing the seam of his mouth. Severus was sure that his heart stopped when he opened for her, and she slid her tongue inside. He allowed her time to explore his mouth, tracing his teeth and sliding sensually against his own tongue. As she ran the tip of her tongue over the roof of his mouth, Severus reacted, delving all of his fingers in the mane of her hair while he pushed both her tongue and his tongue into her mouth. Hermione's soft moan as he claimed her, spurred him on even more. One of her hands was flat against his chest, and the other was clutching his hair in a fist. Severus' heart pounded in his ears, and he felt like a teenager again.

When they finally broke the kiss in favor of a much-needed breath, he immediately moved his mouth to the elegant jaw-line that he had admired in the bookstore. From there, he trailed lingering kisses down her neck to nuzzle the collar of her clothing with his nose. His teeth grazed the sweet spot that connected her pale neck to her shoulder. The sensation made Hermione suck in a sharp breath and use her hand on his head to pull him in closer.

"Severus..." she moaned, twisting on the couch to press her body more fully against his.

His name on her lips pulled Severus out of the lust-induced trance he had fallen into only moments before. With a great deal of hesitation, he pulled away from her, taking both her wrists in his hands and placing them in her lap.

It took several calming inhalations before he could say anything at all. Finally, he stood and righted his robes. "I think, perhaps, that we've both had a bit too much brandy. I apologize for my actions."

"Don't you dare apologize," she said in that bossy tone he had heard her use on Potter and Weasley. "I'll hex your balls off if you try to take any of that back."

Severus would never admit it, but her forthright manner made him want her even more, if it were possible. "Should I apologize for my apology, then?" he asked with a small smirk turning up the corners of his mouth.

"No more apologies."

He nodded at her. "Fair enough. However, it is getting late, and we've both had... a long day."

"Can I come back and see you tomorrow morning? It will be officially Christmas then, after all."

"Perhaps you can stay here for the night. My parents' bedroom is empty. With a few cleansing charms for the sheets, I believe you'll find it comfortable."

"That sounds lovely. You'll let me treat you to breakfast tomorrow, then?" Hermione's hair was a complete mess. Most of it had been pulled from the clasp during their kiss moments before. Severus thought she looked quite enchanting with those swollen lips and mussed mane. The sight nearly buckled his self-control.

"I would be honored to join you for breakfast tomorrow." He turned on his heel to escort her down the hall. He didn't make a habit of entering his parents' old bedroom all that often, but with a few charms to provide clean sheets and warmth, he knew she would find it cozy enough for one night. Of course, thoughts of inviting her to stay in his bed were rattling about in his brain. He dismissed them right away. Slower would be better, despite his sudden desire for her.

A few flicks of his wand had the bedroom at the hall's end lit and several degrees warmer than it had been when they entered. After cleansing the sheets on the bed, he turned to face her.

Hermione stood in the door, her fingers curled deeply into her robes. She was nervous. Severus raised his eyebrows, inviting her to speak her mind.

"I'm afraid I didn't bring any nightclothes for a sleep over," she said, trying to smile at him.

Severus nodded. "If you aren't opposed to it, I could lend you one of my shirts."

Her feeble attempt at a smile broke out into a full one at his offer. "That would be perfect."

Severus swept out of the room and took two long strides down the hall to his bedroom door. The wardrobe was just inside the entrance, and he quickly pulled a simple white shirt from it. He took a moment to lean against the heavy doors of the wardrobe once it was closed. This sudden turn of events, while welcome, was quite disorienting.

Returning to the bedroom she was waiting in, he handed her the shirt. "I hope it will do."

"Of course it will," she said, laying it on the foot of the bed.

Severus shifted from one foot to the other. He was unsure of the etiquette in such a situation. "Well, I..." he began after clearing his throat. Unable to finish the thought, he trailed off.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Severus."

He simply nodded in acknowledgement.

Hermione's brown eyes caught his. "May I have a good night kiss?"

"Pardon?" Severus looked down at the bare floorboards. As he returned his eyes to her face, he saw her slender fingers still curled tightly into her robe.

"A good night kiss," she repeated, worrying her lower lip with her two front teeth.

The worn floorboards creaked as Severus took small, tentative steps toward her. Hermione waited, her teeth pressing into the flesh of her lip. When he was finally standing before her, only inches away from her body, he noticed the top of her head only hit the bottom of his chin.

Gently, he lifted her face with a hand on her warm cheek and bent his head down to brush his lips over her forehead. From there, he trailed his lips down the slope of her nose to press against her mouth. The kiss was tender, yet spilling over with his long-denied desire for her.

Hermione's breath hitched when he pulled back and lovingly caressed the line of her jaw with his fingertips. "Goodnight, Hermione," he whispered.

"Happy Christmas, Severus." She caught his lingering hand in hers.

"Perhaps we can discuss this tomorrow morning..." he said, motioning between them with his free hand.

"I would like that," Hermione said with a smile, releasing his hand and taking a step back toward the bed. "As long as you don't kick me out of your house like last time."

"I hardly think that I could do that now, Hermione."

THE END