

The Letter

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer: Not mine, else I'd be rich and living on my own private island. :)

AN: My second publicly posted piece of HP fiction, so I hope you enjoy. Please, if you could, take a moment to review and let me know what you think. :) Thanks so much!

It begins with a letter.

It is an unassuming piece of parchment, folded innumerable times and wrinkled by the wringing of nervous hands and hesitant fingers. It is plain and utterly dismissible and, perhaps, it would end up at the bottom of a wastepaper basket or adhered to the bottom of someone's shoe were it not for its inconvenient appearance during a Charms lesson one morning near the end of term.

Red faced, sweating, and trembling in utter fear and determination, Peter Oldridge carefully aims his wand at the folded piece of parchment and mutters a near silent levitation charm. The note sputters and struggles for a moment, but soon it floats clear of the table and over the length of three desks toward its intended target. It is nearly there, nearly within reach of an oblivious Iris Lufkin, when it is intercepted by the most unwelcome of targets.

The Charms Mistress plucks the note out of the air and eyes Peter sternly. "Honestly, Peter," she says. "I would have expected more from you."

"But Professor Granger, I..." Peter meekly attempts.

"No excuses, Peter," she says with a disapproving shake of her head. "Five points from Hufflepuff for passing notes."

Peter hangs his head in embarrassed, defeated, utterly dejected shame, earning a smile of sympathy from Hermione. "On with your work, then," she urges before continuing to pace the classroom of fifth years, monitoring their progress in giving legs to their teacups.

It is as she nearly steps on an escaping teacup that she slips the note into the pocket of her robe. She doesn't remember the existence of the note until later that afternoon, after classes have ended for the day and she's settled into her desk with a thick stack of essays to read and mark. Her hand scrounges around in her pocket for a spare bottle of ink and, instead of the cool, smooth glass of an ink well, her fingers fumble with the dry, ragged parchment folded in her pocket.

She produces the note and lays it on her desk. She knows she shouldn't read it and that it should be tossed into the wastepaper basket with Davis Finley's attempt at an origami charm, but it's far too late in the day, she is far too exhausted, and she is curious. She is in no mood to question moral boundaries and issues of privacy, although she does silently attribute her curiosity to the necessity of knowing whether there is a conspiracy going on in her classroom.

Satisfied with her reasoning, her fingers easily unfold the clumsily doubled parchment and she stretches it open, able to read the small, slightly messy script.

I know I shouldn't be writing you a note like this and I know it's probably foolish, but it's the end of term and people tend to do stupid, regrettable, brave things before taking off for the summer holidays. I just wanted you to know, before the term ends and we go our separate ways for the summer, that I love you. I always have, and I think I always will.

Hermione leans back in her seat, chewing her lower lip as she re-reads the note. Impressed by the sentimentality contained within the note and surprised that the author is a fifteen year old boy, she feels slightly guilty for interrupting such a confession. But, she reasons, it is all a matter of timing and poor Peter, no matter how sweet and romantic, doesn't seem to realize that the middle of a Charms lesson is no place for a confession of love.

A soft knock at the door interrupts her thoughts and she looks up as Professor McGonagall enters the classroom. She offers her former pupil and current colleague...a smile.

"May I be of some assistance?" Hermione asks.

"I just stopped by to drop this off," says Professor McGonagall, handing Hermione a thick roll of parchment. "Final grades for the seventh years," she supplies to the question forming in Hermione's mind.

"Oh, thank you," says Hermione, eyeing the roll with some trepidation. "I'll make sure to fill this in and get it back to you soon, then."

"Actually, could you perhaps pass it on to Severus?" asks Professor McGonagall. "He is the only one who has yet to fill in final grades, and I am in no particular hurry to see him." She frowns ever so slightly. "Since Slytherin won the Quidditch House Cup, he's been *insupportable*."

Hermione fights back a smirk. "I shall see that it gets to him, then."

Professor McGonagall offers Hermione a grateful grin before disappearing out the door. Hermione sighs resignedly and glances at the parchment roll now laying across the unmarked essays. Reaching into her desk to pull out the grade ledger, she quickly goes through the list of seventh years in her N.E.W.T. level Charms class and marks their grades. She is happy to see that they've all passed with moderately high marks.

She glances at the grandfather clock sitting on the other side of her office. It is just near dinner time. "Not enough time for marking, in any case," she mumbles to herself as she carelessly rolls up the parchments and ties them with a bit of twine. Straightening out her robes and rubbing her ink stained fingers along the front of her dark clothing, she leaves her office and heads down to the dungeons.

"Excuse me, Severus?" she asks, knocking lightly on the classroom door.

Professor Snape's head jolts up and he eyes Hermione with disdain for the disturbance. "Yes, what is it?"

"I have this for you," she says, striding into the empty classroom and to the desk belonging to her former Potions Master.

"And what is *this*?" he snarls.

Hermione fights the very teenage urge to roll her eyes and instead takes a deep breath. "The final grades for the seventh years." There is no response from Snape as he eyes the parchment rolls now lying across his desk. "They're graduating at the end of the week, you know," she supplies.

"I know fully well when the students are graduating, Miss Granger," he snaps. "I trust you remember that I've been teaching far longer than you have."

Hermione crosses her arms over her chest as her expression hardens. "And I trust you remember that I haven't been your student for a full *eight* years. I am your colleague now and as such I expect you to refer to me by my name."

"Miss Granger *is* your name," he says silkily.

Hermione lets out a small growl of frustration. "You know perfectly well what I mean, Severus. I expect you to refer to me by my *first* name. *Hermione*. It's not that difficult, you know. I've managed to adapt to calling you by *your* given name, haven't I?"

"I had no say in that decision, as you may well remember," he says with a well timed sneer, ignoring her pleas for informalities. Instead, Severus eyes her very much as though he'd like nothing better than to blast himself into oblivion before referring to her by her first name.

Hermione sees this and places a hand on her hip. "Well if it's so difficult, can't you at least refer to me by my title? *am* a professor you know, despite your seeming disbelief of that fact."

"It is not disbelief, but rather a lack of acknowledgement," he says silkily. "Now I suggest you leave *Miss Granger*. I have a great many things to get done before supper and you are keeping me from them."

Hermione's fists clench and she spins around on her heels. It is as she is marching out the door that she cries "You are impossible!" and slams the heavy door behind her.

The corner of Severus's mouth twitches into an amused smirk at the sound of Hermione's fading footsteps. Quite satisfied, he unties the twine holding the parchment together and begins marking off grades for the few students who'd managed to make it to his N.E.W.T. level Potions class. Adequate grades for all but Cassandra Croaker, who'd managed to fail miserably, and Cuthbert Hopkirk, who'd managed to obtain an Outstanding.

It is as he moves to the second page of the roll in search of Edgar Ketteridge that he notices the folded paper stuck between the parchment pages. Frowning in confusion, he unfolds the note.

He has to read it at least ten times before he is able to formulate thoughts at least somewhat coherently. Amongst the wildfire of thoughts raging in his head are what, why, and the startling questions coupled with the realization that the note had come from *her*.

Professor Granger, the Charms mistress. Miss Granger, his former student. Hermione, sender of love letters?

He decides he needs a few moments to sit down, and it is then that he realizes, most unsettlingly, that he is already sitting. His long fingers rake through his hair and his thoughts are nothing but a scrambled mess with no hope of being sorted ever again.

And it is then that he realizes that it is time for dinner.

Hermione decides that Severus Snape is ill, or perhaps mad. She can't properly discern which.

In addition to not doing anything to his food except shifting its position around the plate, she continually feels his eyes on her as she goes about her business, eating forkfuls of her potato while reading a volume she'd planned to finish by the end of term. She finds that she can't get past page 212 due to Severus's extended glances in her direction.

She closes the book in defeat and lays it across her lap as she spears a slice of tomato on her plate. She idly begins to wonder if she'd upset him with her demand to call her by her first name earlier. She decides that it's a foolish reason to be angered and, instead, turns to Professor Sinistra to discuss the end of term celebrations, including a commencement ball by the end of the week.

The conversation is short and soon she finishes her meal. Eager to escape Severus's discerning eye, she excuses herself to return to the classroom to finish marking the last set of essays. Though she slips quietly out the side door, she can still feel Severus's eyes on her.

She continues the endless wondering at Severus's odd behavior on her way to her office, as she marks essays, and as she lays down for bed that night. She begins to wonder why he had paid attention to nothing but her during the meal, and why, under his stare, she felt a pleasurable shiver travel the length of her spine.

It's the potatoes, she resolutely decides, and it is only then that she is able to fall asleep.

Severus decides that Hermione Granger is ill, or perhaps mad. He can't properly discern which.

Above all else, he can't understand why she would send him a note like that, confessing feelings that it seemed she didn't have. She had avoided his stare all during dinner and seemed nearly desperate to leave once she'd finished her meal. It is the sort of behavior one doesn't expect from a person supposedly in love, he decides (not that he has a breadth of knowledge and experience in this sort of situation to compare it to). He attributes the note to a temporary moment of insanity and attempts to forget about it in its entirety.

Then comes breakfast.

It is over breakfast that Severus feels Hermione's eyes locked on him. He glances at her through the long, dark strands of his hair and he finds that he is indeed correct. Hermione is watching him with a look of deep contemplation on her face. *Probably wondering what she ever saw in me* he thinks glumly to himself. With that, he focuses fully on eating as quickly as possible and now it is his turn to leave the Great Hall early with her gaze still locked on him.

It is a difficult business, he decides, to attempt to forget about someone. He knows that he should but he doesn't seem to possess the capacity. The more he attempts to forget about Hermione and that blasted note, the more she seems to invade his mind.

He knows, deep down, why it is impossible to forget her, but to admit that being loved is much like a drug, intoxicating and addicting, would be an admittance of weakness, and Severus Snape has no room for weakness.

Instead, he barks maliciously at his classes. He tries to convince himself that it is a result of wanting to scare certain individuals from attempting his advanced classes in the next term, but he knows that it's secretly a consequence of unbridled frustration.

The frustration begins to eat away at him. He finds himself consumed by the memories of Hermione's stare and the tingle of shock he'd felt upon reading the note. He is driven closer to the dangerously thin line of madness by curiosity at her intentions and, of course, whether or not she is the true author of the note. The implications of that thought, either way, turn his stomach to the consistency of lead.

Soon he knows he will be unceremoniously thrown over that line into madness and it will all be a result of that blasted note.

Hermione begins to wonder why she never noticed Severus's hands before.

It is rather inappropriate timing, really, that she should notice them when she does. It is the end of year staff meeting and generally Hermione is the epitome of attentive and alert, keeping to the reputation built during seven years at Hogwarts as a student. This time, however, Hermione is distracted and unsettled, and she blames it on inter-house rivalries.

Hermione had been on her way to the staff meeting ten minutes early (as she generally preferred to arrive promptly), when she'd heard the unmistakable cries of jinxes in a corridor mere meters from where she was standing. When she'd arrived on the scene, a third year Gryffindor lay on the ground with a grotesquely overgrown nose. Similarly slumped against the opposite wall sat a fourth year Slytherin with a face full of pustules.

Once she'd escorted the duo to the hospital wing (and taken the appropriate number of house points from each), she'd made her way to Dumbledore's office. By the time she'd entered the circular room, she found all the chairs occupied, save for the single empty armchair beside Severus Snape.

It was alarming, really, the way her heart began beating just a tad faster as she settled into the leather wing backed chair. Severus shifted in his seat and Hermione tried her best to focus on Professor Dumbledore's announcements and the discussion amongst the staff.

It is during Professor Vector's suggestions for post-commencement ceremony celebrations that Hermione's gaze shifts to the rigid form beside her. She notices his fingers, long, calloused, and scarred. She knows their talent and ability, and it seems almost a wonder that hands as seemingly unremarkable as his hold so much power and skill. She runs over years of memories of those fingers patiently chopping ingredients and mixing potions with amazing precision and unprecedented gentleness and care. She begins idly wondering how his fingers would feel brushing against her skin, and it is then that she lets out a small gasp at the shock of the thought.

Conversations instantly stop, leaving a thick silence hanging ominously in the air. Professor Dumbledore's eyes are fixed questioningly on her and Professor McGonagall frowns in concern. Beside her, Severus eyes her from behind his hair, and the fact that she *knows* that he's watching her is altogether disconcerting. "Sorry," says Hermione, busying herself with pouring another cup of tea from the hovering teapot. "Hiccup."

Professor Dumbledore seems to be satisfied by her excuse and picks up the conversation from where it left off. Mercifully soon, the meeting is adjourned. Hermione is rather anxious to leave and gather her new and startling thoughts in the privacy of her quarters, but a voice calls to her before she has a chance to escape.

"I have a brew that cures hiccups, should you require it," drawls Severus, and Hermione can't quite tell if he is mocking her or not.

"I don't think I'll be requiring it," Hermione says quickly. "I believe they have passed. However, I thank you for the offer."

"I hope you are not under the impression, Miss Granger, that I offered the potion for your own benefit," he says silkily. "I rather suggested it so as not to give you an excuse for another batch of complaints, as you've taken to doing as of late."

Hermione catches his meaning fully and she scowls. "Asking you to call me by my given name is not a complaint, Severus; it is a request for respect."

"Tell me; is there anything disrespectful in the use of 'Miss Granger?'" His eyebrows rise challengingly.

Hermione begins to feel the familiar heat of frustration crawling up her neck and into her cheeks. "There is when you purposely refuse to acknowledge my achievements and success thus far."

"I fully realize that you have reached the title of Professor, but you have been teaching for a mere two years, Miss Granger," says Severus. "It has not been that long since you yourself were a pupil of mine. The transition from one address to another merits time, and thus far there hasn't been time enough. I suggest you stop insisting." He seems to think the matter is closed and he takes a sip from his tea.

Hermione wonders why eight years isn't yet enough time, but manages to admirably keep from pointing that out. "I'm not a little girl anymore, Severus," she instead insists.

Severus's eyebrows rise in an expression that Hermione can't quite discern. "But I will try to give you time. We are about to go on summer holidays. Do you think that would be enough time?"

"Hardly," he says with a sneer.

"I think you underestimate the power of a holiday, Severus," says Hermione, placing her empty tea cup on the tea tray. "Things happen over the summer, things that cause great changes. Even *before* the summer break begins, things can happen." She pauses to brush a stray strand of hair out of her eyes and she catches Severus's gaze. "Knowing that a long break is coming brings with it a sense of bravery and determination. If you don't agree with me, take the example of those who save their confessions of love until just before a long break, such as the summer holidays. They can be brave knowing that, should things turn out poorly, there are three months available to nurse those wounds." She smiles slightly, remembering poor Peter Oldridge and idly wonders at his reaction, were he to know that his note had become support for her argument. "If people can be brave and foolish and reckless like that now, Severus, then you can certainly *attempt* to call me by my first name."

At this, Severus looks slightly paler than before.

At earning no response, Hermione cocks her head to the side. "Well, good evening Severus," she says, giving him a slight smile before excusing herself from Dumbledore's office. As she negotiates the staircase outside the door, she wonders why Severus suddenly had the distinct pallor of someone about to be sick.

For the next two days, Severus can't sleep.

He knows the lack of sleep *should* be wearing him down, but it doesn't. He manages to successfully go through the motions of day to day life, but all the while he is soundly *not* there. It doesn't make sense, not that he expects it to...nothing seems to make sense anymore.

The faculty meeting had been a testing ground in his mind...an experiment to see whether or not Hermione appeared to act any differently toward him. She hadn't, and he'd been somewhat certain midway through their conversation that the note had been nothing but a misplaced letter from one love-struck student to another and his belief that it had come from Hermione had been a misguided and pathetic mistake that he would rather soon forget.

But then, in those few moments toward the end of the conversation where her words echoed nearly precisely the note he'd received and where she'd clearly implied involvement with such a scheme, he'd found himself quite unable to breathe. Thinking clearly is now a thing of the past, he decides, as he presses his index fingers in circular motions on his temples.

He eyes his dress robes lying across his bed. It is the night of the commencement ball and he has, naturally, been "persuaded" by Professor Dumbledore to attend as a chaperone. In all reality, Severus would rather be grading a monotonous and altogether painful pile of ignorant first year essays than attending the ridiculous festivities, but he has already given the Headmaster his word that he will attend and, once given, it cannot be broken, no matter how much he'd like to. With a defeated sigh, he pulls on the black tailored robes and mentally prepares for the evening.

He has come to no conclusions about Hermione. All he seems to know is he inconveniently appears to lose control of breathing ability and coherent speech patterns when she is in the vicinity. He finds himself drifting over old memories of their arguments, proof of her wit and intelligence, and the reminders of the fact that she possesses a warmth that is unique to her...a warmth that he will never have. He realizes, startlingly, that warm feelings are resonating in his chest and his stomach is irrevocably twisted at the thought of her, and somehow it has always been that way, missing his notice all these years.

Why he feels this new stirring, he's not at all sure, but he has an odd feeling that this may be what love is like, which leaves him wishing strongly for a bottle of firewhiskey.

He straightens his collar and he leaves his quarters with an elegant swish of his robes. He reaches the Great Hall with little notice and easily settles into his usual place along the wall. The Headmaster spots him and nods, giving him an amused smirk, and Severus briefly wonders what could possibly amuse the Headmaster so. With a sniff, he straightens his collar and pours himself a glass of punch and settles into a chair at one of the tables lining the dance floor.

It is then, between the dancing couples and laughing seventh years, that Severus sees Hermione enter the Great Hall. He nearly chokes on the bit of punch he was swallowing and looks down, hiding the foreign sensation of warmth rushing up his neck and into his face. He tries not to notice how lovely she looks in a rich blue muggle gown, and he admirably tries to ignore the graceful, sensual curve of her neck, exposed by the elegant twist her normally untamed hair is in. He tries to ignore the way his stomach turns to lead but fails miserably, as in the next moment she is approached by Remus Lupin.

"You look lovely, Hermione," says Remus, smiling genially. "May I trouble you for a dance?"

Hermione grins and hooks her arm around his. "The pleasure would be all mine," she says, and she allows him to lead her onto the dance floor amongst her former students and soon Hogwarts graduates.

"How do you think your students did on their N.E.W.T.s, Remus?" asks Hermione politely as his hand settles on her waist and he gently begins to lead.

"I dare say they did well," says Remus with a smile. "Defense Against the Dark Arts is a bit of a wooly subject, but generally one of great interest." He nods a quick greeting to a passing student. "Besides, I'm proud to say that their marks came out rather high, all in all. And your students?"

"The same," says Hermione. Her mouth opens to continue but her explanation is cut short as her gaze meets Severus's from across the hall. His stare is penetrating and stern, and Hermione can't help but feel that she is being reprimanded, but for what she doesn't know. The corners of his mouth turn down in a brief frown and a hint of dark anger flickers across his eyes. In the next moment, he tears his gaze away and gulps down a glass of punch, looking very much like he wishes it were something infinitely stronger.

Hermione feels a small flutter in the pit of her stomach and she finds she has to look away from the dark figure looming along the side of the hall, else Remus Lupin might be the only way she won't fall to the ground.

She makes an admirable effort and continues the conversation with Remus, all while trying pointedly *not* to look in Severus's direction. Too soon the dance is over, and before Hermione can rush to the refreshment table for something to drink (and, possibly, to regain some semblance of control), she is swept into the arms of one of her seventh year students, Colin Fletchings.

"May I have this dance, Professor?" he says, although the courtesy is needless, as he has already commandeered Hermione's body into a waltz.

"Oh, um, of course, Colin," she says, hesitantly risking a glance in Severus's direction. He is watching, and Hermione's body decides to very inconveniently break into a brief shiver.

"So," says Colin, sweeping Hermione across the dance floor in grand, exaggerated, entirely inelegant movements. "Will you miss us after we've graduated?"

Hermione quickly gives Colin a thin-lipped smile and nods. "Naturally, Colin. Every class is special, of course, and the school will miss that spark that your class managed to bring."

"Will *you* miss us?" asks Colin softly, and Hermione can't help but notice Colin's fingers twitching madly on the small of her back.

"Of course I will," she says, nodding again and hoping her smile will reassure him.

Colin leans forward, his lips only centimeters from her ear, and his grip around her waist tightens. "And *wi*ll you miss *me*?"

Hermione tries her best to pull away from Colin's grip but it is useless. He is tall and strong while Hermione is inconveniently petite and physically powerless in comparison. She looks up into Colin's eyes and sees them darkened with a thick haze of lust. It is then that she begins to panic.

"Colin! This isn't at all..."

"I've always fancied you, you know," Colin continues, keeping her body firm against his. "That's why I took Advanced Charms. I hate the bloody subject, but I went to class because of you."

Hermione, meanwhile, *still* tries to push him away with *still* no success.

"Colin," she manages. "This is highly inappropriate behavior and... and I'm your *teacher*! Let me go, Colin, please!"

A pleased grin stretches his lips. "You won't be my teacher after tomorrow."

Hermione's eyes widen and her nails dig into Colin's arms. He still doesn't budge. Hermione is ready to scream for help when help arrives unannounced.

"Surely, Mr. Fletchings, you are not attempting to harass one of your professors, are you?" Severus appears beside them and Hermione is breathtakingly grateful. "Because that brand of disrespect is not viewed well in the wizarding world, as you well know." He pauses for a moment, eyeing Colin with obvious disdain. "I could, of course, arrange for the appropriate punishment, should you require further instruction on the subject of manners and etiquette." His eyebrow rises sharply.

"O-Of course not, P-Professor," says Colin, immediately releasing Hermione. "I-I was just...I was just saying goodbye to Professor Granger, is all."

"I trust you've said your goodbyes then," says Severus. "I suggest you find other means of...*entertainment*."

"Oh, um, sure," says Colin quickly. "Good evening Professors." With a nod, Colin disappears into the crowd of students.

Hermione looks up at Severus with wide eyes full of appreciation, spectacularly grateful for his ability to effectively intimidate. He shifts from one foot to the other, and for a moment they stand awkwardly on the dance floor.

"Are you going to ask me to dance, or was that talk about etiquette and manners simply a bluff?" says Hermione innocently.

Severus shifts again, and Hermione can't help but be slightly amused by his obvious discomfort. He hasn't said yes yet but he hasn't walked away either, which is always a good sign.

"The students are watching, Severus," she taunts. "You have to set an example."

Severus puts on his best frown and holds a hand out to Hermione. "May I have this dance?" he says gruffly.

Hermione happily takes his hand and guides it around her waist, letting it sit against the small of her back. She glides one hand into his and lets the other settle on his shoulder. His body is stiff and she knows he is uncomfortable, so she takes advantage and pulls nearer to him. She tells herself its all because she enjoys making the eternally stoic and composed Severus Snape squirm, but deep down it is the chidings of her heart and the flutterings in her stomach that pull her to him like a magnet.

"Thank you so much, Severus," she says, looking up at him as he begins to gently lead a graceful waltz.

Severus looks down at her, trying his best to ignore the warmth of her cinnamon eyes. "I had no idea you were so lacking in dance partners," he says snidely.

"That's not what I mean," she replies. "About Colin."

"Do not take my interference personally, Miss Granger," he says silkily. "I simply stepped in to assure that respect would be maintained between teachers and students. Once one student fails to respect a professor, the rest follow in suit."

For once, Hermione is not bothered by his attempt at indifference. She knows what she saw and she knows that she has every right to be grateful. "I had no idea you were such a martyr," she says with a sardonic smirk. "Thank you for your help just the same."

Severus nods ever so slightly and lets his gaze travel the room. There is a pregnant pause and Hermione takes a moment to listen to the elegant waltz resounding in the hall. She feels Severus's fingers shift ever so slightly against hers and goosebumps that she hopes he doesn't notice prickle at her skin. She notes that there is a gentle aroma of spice intermingled in his robes and she takes a deep breath, inhaling the intoxicating aroma. It is as she lets her fingers slide between his and she shivers at the sensation of skin on skin that she wonders when Severus Snape began having such an effect on her.

"He confessed his love for me, you know," she says, breaking the silence and looking up at Severus with a gaze he can't quite interpret. When he doesn't respond, she continues. "He says he took Advanced Charms solely because of me." She pauses for a moment and takes her bottom lip between her teeth...an act Severus keenly notices. He shifts and tears his gaze away again. "It's rather flattering," she continues. "It's flattering to have someone in love with you; or, in this case, *think* that they're in love with you."

Severus shifts yet again and his grip on her hand slightly tightens. "I'm rather puzzled, Miss Granger," he says silkily. "Am I to congratulate you?"

Hermione sighs and moves ever closer to him, making his breath momentarily hitch in his chest. "It's no *Miss Granger*, Severus," she says, her voice lower than before and her eyes locked completely on his. "It's Hermione. Say it... *Hermione*."

For once in his life, Severus Snape is absolutely speechless. It's really better this way, as at the moment his language skills have seemingly disintegrated. His heart, however, has begun pounding with such ferocity that he's sure she hears it. His body has begun trembling and he's furious with himself for losing control. He is also, for the record, furious with Hermione for writing that letter, for feeling so warm, for fitting so perfectly in his arms, and for making him wish that he could find a way to do exactly what he feels like doing at that moment.

Suddenly it's too much to handle and all at once Severus loses the final precious, thinning thread of control he'd had. Around his closed throat he manages to croak out the words "Outside. Now," before dragging her out the staff entrance along the side of the hall.

Hermione follows, helplessly anchored to him by the strong grip he has around her smaller hand. She is puzzled, but not frightened as she would normally be. Instead, the fluttering in her stomach grows ever stronger until Severus pulls her through the door and closes it roughly behind him, muttering a quick locking spell.

He turns around to face her in the small room. She is staring at him from her position leaning against the opposite wall. She is understandably confused. He can't quite understand it either, but all he knows is now he is following instinct rather than thought and he can't quite bring himself to explain that fact to her.

"Severus, honestly," she begins, brushing a stray strand of hair out of her eyes. "If this first name business is bothering you..."

All at once, Severus closes the distance between them and crashes his lips into hers.

He expects her to push him away. He expects her to scream. He expects to find himself blasted through the wall. The one thing that he doesn't expect is the way that

Hermione moans into the kiss.

Her arms wrap tenderly around his neck and fingers stretch into his hair. His hands wrap around her waist and his hips push against hers, pressing her against the wall. Her tongue flicks out to meet his and he finds himself groaning against her lips.

Breathless moments later, when Severus finally pulls away and Hermione whimpers in protest, he leans his forehead against hers and risks a small smile.

"Hermione," he whispers breathlessly, tenderly tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear and allowing his fingers to trace along the contours of her cheek and jaw.

Hermione sighs uncontrollably and shudders, sliding ever so slightly down the wall. "See," she whispers, tracing her fingers along his lips. "That wasn't so difficult, was it?" The corner of her mouth twists into a tiny smile and she reaches up to meet her lips with his once more.

Minutes later, when they've parted and they pause to catch their breath, Hermione giggles. "It took a kiss to finally convince you to say my first name," she whispers, gently laying a kiss on his cheek. "If I had known that, I would have done it much sooner."

"I believe you are mistaken if you think you were the aggressor," says Severus, his voice warmer than its normal tone. ~~I~~kissed *you*, Hermione. Remember that."

Hermione giggles again and reaches up to kiss him. "Oh, I believe I will," she mumbles against his mouth.

"I must confess," says Severus, parting his lips from Hermione's. "I never expected a letter to have such an impact on me, but I must say I am rather pleased by the result."

Hermione sighs happily and leans her head against his chest, savoring the sensation of his arms wrapping around her body. "Letter?" she says lazily.

"Yes," says Severus, kissing her hair. "The letter you sent. If I hadn't known that you felt that way about me, I might never have pulled you in here tonight."

She buries her head deeper into his robes and sighs deeply. "I didn't send you a letter."

Severus freezes for a moment as a cold, sobering rush of reality washes over him. "What?" he demands. "What do you mean you didn't send me a letter? It was there in the parchment you left on my desk a few days ago."

Hermione, startled by his sudden change in demeanor, looks up at him in puzzlement. "Parchment? When did I ~~do~~h!" She jolts slightly by the realization. "The note! From Peter Oldridge! It must have gotten mixed in with the roll."

"What?" Severus cries, jumping away from Hermione as though he's been burned. "You mean to tell me you never sent a note?"

Hermione looks worried. "Well, no, but that really doesn't matter, Severus," she adds quickly.

"Are you daft? Of course it matters!" he cries, beginning to pace the room.

"Severus, *please*," she pleads, reaching out for his arm only to have him pull abruptly away.

"Forgive me, Miss Granger," he says, straightening. "I believe this has all been a mistake. Forgive my boldness. Good night."

And with that, Severus leaves, letting the door slam behind him.

It is the next day, and Severus still hasn't gotten any sleep.

Now his insomnia is driven by a different source. While his lack of sleep in past days had been due to his preoccupation with certain forbidden fantasies involving a certain woman, his latest bout of insomnia is driven by pure mortification and reprimand. Thus far, he hasn't allowed himself a moment of peace without constant reproof over his mortifying actions of the night before.

He had kissed Hermione Granger. To add insult to injury, he'd kissed her because of a note an enamored ~~Hufflepuff~~ had written. He decides that he humiliated himself to a mortifying degree and he is certain he deserves a lifetime of suffering for his foolish and reckless actions, for there is clearly no hope for redemption.

Thus, during the graduation ceremony the following day, Severus makes sure to keep his distance from Hermione at all costs. He seats himself at the far end of the platform, opposite of Hermione. He refuses to look at her, despite the way his body seems to ignore his demands. He has to stop himself twice...from letting his gaze fall on the Charms Mistress whom he'd no doubt psychologically scarred for life. *No*, he chides himself, forcing a gaze away from her again. *I will not be reminded of my astoundingly daft actions.*

It is during Dumbledore's commencement speech that it happens. Severus is casually staring at his shoe, pretending that Hermione Granger, love letters, and Hufflepuffs didn't exist, when he feels a tapping at his hand.

Startled, he jolts slightly before spotting a small, folded piece of parchment hovering beside him. Puzzled, he glances around the hall and finds everyone too preoccupied by Dumbledore's speech to pay him any notice.

Carefully slipping the note in his hand, he unfolds it, and it is what it is written on the note that makes Severus Snape smile his first true smile in years.

I know I shouldn't be writing you a note like this and I know it's probably foolish, but it's the end of term and people tend to do stupid, regrettable, brave things before taking off for the summer holidays.

I just wanted you to know, Severus, that I do not regret last night. You sparked emotions in me I didn't know I had. Please don't take them away now. When you kissed me, it seemed that the world was perfect for those few moments, and I'd do anything to have them back. You kissed me because you had received a note you believed that I'd sent you. I hope I can, with my own note, elicit a similar reaction.

I just wanted you to know, before the term ends and we go our separate ways for the summer, that I may love you, Severus Snape, and I hope that you'll give me the opportunity to figure it out. The summer, perhaps?

Yours,

Hermione