

The Curse of True Love

by GinnyW

Some people believe that love is an amazing gift while others feel that it is the worst curse to befall them. The course of true love never did run smooth. Of course, Hermione could always blame sexually charged teenage witches, Divination and Valentine's Day.

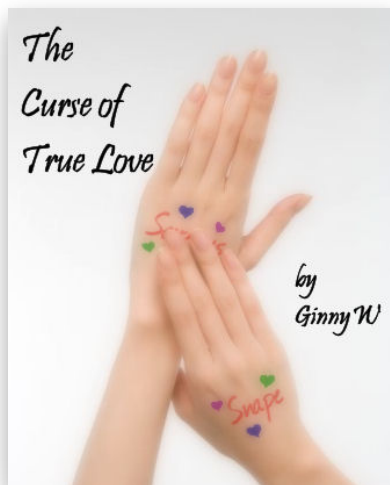
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Chapter 1 of 4

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Thank you to my beta readers, JuneW and DeeMichelle. And also to my very supportive cheerleaders who wouldn't let me toss aside this little plot bunny when it bit.



Hermione didn't care what anyone said; no matter how old she was, the fact remained that wandering around the castle at night had the potential of being downright scary. Well, maybe not exactly scary, but it always made this nasty little knot in her stomach and caused her heart to beat much faster than it should.

Even when she wasn't breaking the rules.

And even if she was a seventh year Prefect and honoured veteran of the second Voldemort war.

And even if there were no more Dark Lords or Death Eaters.

None of that meant that she was supposed to be wandering the halls at half-past midnight on a Thursday night.

As she walked down the corridor by wandlight, she kept a watchful eye on the ever-moving shadows from the dimly lit candles flickering against the cold stone walls. Every so often, she'd notice movement in one of the portraits, but thus far, none of them had spoken to her.

She continued to creep down the hall on her trek back to her common room. Hermione was softly cursing under her breath at the idiotic stunt that her dorm mates had just pulled on her. Needless to say, Hermione was none too happy. What it boiled down to was that Lavender and Parvati had wanted Hermione, Susan and Padma to go to the Astronomy Tower to perform some stupid spell. Of course, they'd not actually told Hermione this. Instead, they'd told Hermione that they needed her up on the Tower because they had Professor Sinistra's permission to track a comet, and they wanted Hermione's help with creating the star chart.

Hermione had told the others that she wasn't taking Astronomy this year, but they still seemed to think that she could help them since she was one of the few students who had actually managed to earn an 'Outstanding' on their Astronomy O.W.L. two years ago. She'd been so busy with so many other things tonight that she hadn't thought to confirm the activity with Professor Sinistra; had she done that, then she would never have been fooled by her fellow classmates' story.

But she *had* been fooled.

Hermione had left her common room at ten minutes before midnight, without fear of being out after curfew as she was certain that she had permission, and she made her way up to the Astronomy Tower where she met the other girls. That was when the others told her that real reason that they'd wanted her there.

A spell.

A bleeding spell.

They'd lured her up to the Astronomy Tower...under false pretences, mind...for a fucking spell.

During their study of the fine and truly magnificent Art of Divination, Lavender and Parvati had come across an ancient spell for determining one's soul mate, and they had wanted Hermione's help in performing it.

'You're the best girl in our form in Charms,' Lavender had said.

Of course they bloody well said that. Yes, she was the best seventh year student in Charms, but more important to the girls' scheme, Hermione was the only person who they could trick who had the bleeding key to the Astronomy Tower. When she had realised that she actually had to unlock the door for the girls...that Professor Sinistra had not sanctioned this event...she knew that the entire thing was a set-up. She knew that she should've simply turned around and gone back to her rooms and back to bed.

But, for whatever reason, she hadn't. Hermione still didn't know if it was the pleading voices of the others, the opportunity to learn something else (even if it was doomed from the start to be a complete failure), or the fact that they were actually including her in one of their schemes. Sure, she was usually included in Ron and Harry's schemes, but being included in something by the other *girls* in her year was truly something that even people who claim to not care about... well, deep, deep down, you know that they truly do care.

She'd unlocked that damn door and had helped them perform that stupid spell. Really, in her seven years of living with her roommates, there was no question that she had actually learned that sometimes it was simply easier to go along with them than to argue. This had been one of those times.

According to Lavender, if the spell was performed by five maidens at midnight on Valentine's Day, then they would have a vision of their true love and know their intended's name as well as if it were written on the back of their hand.

So, after telling herself it was a learning experience, Hermione joined them by applying Enchanted Rose Water and Bewitched Bay Leaves to the back of her hands. As the clock chimed twelve the five young women stood in a pentagon on the top of the tower and recited:

'Good valentine, be kind to me; In dreams, let me my true love see.

Quos amor verus tenuit, tenebit.'

Then Lavender had done some odd little wand movement and they had seen a shower of sparks and....

That was it.

Of course, the spell hadn't worked. Hermione had not had a vision of any kind, and after the other witches finally admitted that they'd not had a vision either, Hermione had been able to convince them to all go back to their dorms and back to bed. Like a responsible Prefect, Hermione had simply stayed behind to clean up the mess, and to ensure that the door was locked. Besides, if there was one thing that she learned from their time in the D.A., it was that it was best to split up when traversing the hallways when one was trying not to get caught.

'Miss Granger,' came a sneering voice from the shadows, causing her to jump. 'To what do I owe the pleasure of deducting Gryffindor house points?'

'Professor Snape,' she said and then swallowed. 'Um, I was just doing a quick patrol. I had heard some of the fourth years say that they were planning on sneaking into the library tonight.'

He glared at her, his eyes forming narrow slits. 'Really? I believe that my sources are more accurate than yours, and I never heard any such thing. But I did hear about a group of seventh year girls who had thought it was a good night to play on the Tower.'

Uh oh.

'Detention. Tonight at seven o'clock. Don't be late.'

'But... I...'

'And twenty points, Miss Granger. Would you care to make it more?'

'No, sir,' she said resignedly.

He gave her a sharp nod and swept back down the hall.

The moment that he turned the corner, Hermione hurried her steps back to the Fat Lady's portrait and went upstairs to her own dormitory.

Lavender and Parvati were already asleep.

Hermione snarled.

Detention. She bloody well now had to go to detention. A perfect end to an effing perfect evening, she decided. She fumed for quite a while, mentally kicking herself for having gone along with their mad scheme, and wondering how Professor Snape knew of every little infraction. Then at long last, she allowed herself to relax long enough to fall asleep.

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Hermione awoke the next morning with a headache. The reasons for said headache were presently whispering and giggling at the other end of the room. She didn't want to get up, but there was little choice. There were classes today.

As she did every morning before she got out of bed, she began to mentally write her to-do list; she stopped short just after she listed dinner and before she listed study. She had a detention to serve; the thought raised her hackles, but a small smile grew on her lips when she recalled what else she was supposed to be doing tonight.

Dumbledore had elected to reinstate the Valentine's Day Ball that had been a tradition for nearly forty years before the rise of Voldemort. The headmaster had decided to cancel the ball during the height of the first war, but even after Voldemort fell the first time (after his attack on Harry,) Dumbledore hadn't trusted that the Dark wizard was truly dead. Apparently, he'd not felt much like celebrating yet.

And now he did.

But, Hermione didn't have to go to the ball. As Prefect, it was one of her responsibilities to chaperone such activities. However, Hermione really hated Valentine's Day and she wasn't terribly excited about attending a ball where she'd not been invited as anyone's date. Ron was going with Luna, Harry with Ginny, Neville with Hannah... and that was about the limit of her male friends.

Sure, she knew other boys from her year, but other than passing comments, she didn't really know any of them, and last she'd heard they all had found dates.

For a brief moment, she found herself silently thanking one Professor Snape for giving her an alternate activity for the evening.

Hermione finally crawled out from under her covers and behind the drapes of her bed, only to see the grinning faces of her roommates.

'Good morning!' called Lavender, who had opened the drapes around her bed and was sitting next to Parvati. Both girls were giggly and bubbly as if they had just spent the entire night gossiping at a slumber party.

'Morning,' she managed to mumble as she went to her trunk to gather her clothes for the day.

Once her things were collected, she began to make her way to the bathroom until she was stopped by Parvati who had just jumped off of the bed to intercept her.

'So...' Parvati said, with a hint of a question in her tone.

The annoying witch hadn't even asked her anything. If this was some sort of game, Hermione was in no mood to play. Hermione looked at her levelly. 'So, what?'

Lavender bounced on her bed. 'So, tell us about your dream!'

'Why do either of you want to know about my dream?'

Lavender gave an exasperated sigh and exchanged a look with Parvati that clearly said: *She's hopeless.*

Parvati turned back to Hermione and answered, 'Because of the spell.'

'The spell didn't work. We decided that last night.'

Hermione moved again towards the loo, but was stopped when Parvati grabbed the sleeve of her nightgown.

'Well, I think that we were wrong.'

There's a surprise, Hermione thought, barely managing to hold her tongue.

'The spell said, "*In dreams, let me my true love see.*" So, we realised that it wasn't really supposed to be a vision, but the answer was in our dreams,' Parvati added.

'So, who did you dream about?' Lavender wanted to know.

'Who says I dreamed about anyone?' Hermione pulled her arm out of Parvati's grasp and headed back towards the bathroom, and some privacy.

'But, Hermione, you had to have! Both Par and I did!' Lavender all but shouted.

Hermione entered the bathroom and turned back to look over her shoulder. 'The only thing I recall dreaming last night was about the ruddy detention I have to serve because you two conned me into breaking curfew,' she snapped, before slamming the door behind her.

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Breakfast in the Great Hall found Hermione sitting next to Harry and Ron. (Really, who else would it have been?) While Ron attempted to see how many spoonfuls of eggs he could fit in his mouth whilst flirting with Luna, (who was at the Ravenclaw table with a sappy grin on her face,) and Harry continuously shot surreptitious glances at Ginny, who was seated further down the table. Neither boy seemed to notice that Hermione was not at all interested in anything that was going on around her.

Oh, she was aware of the lovesick antics of her schoolmates. She simply wanted nothing to do with them. Honestly, she didn't understand why the teachers were putting up with it all. Students kept jumping up from their seats and dashing across the hall to drop a note in front of another student. Notes were being passed along tables and there was an insane amount of giggling going on.

Of course, Hermione didn't care to analyse the reasons for her disgust over all of the lovesick and childish behaviours. After all, it couldn't possibly have anything to do with the fact that she was entirely sick to death of being thought of as nothing more than an information desk.

Back during the height of the war when she and Ron had been helping Harry to bring down Voldemort, Ron had turned to Hermione and said with all of the finesse of a troll: *'I don't know what we'd do without you, Hermione. You're right useful when it comes to knowing things. It's like having our very own encyclopaedia and we don't even have to look through it or read the unimportant bits!'*

It was at that moment when Hermione's one-sided crush on one Mr Ronald Weasley had crumbled to dust. Ron, on the other hand, had been under the impression that he had paid her a glorious compliment and couldn't comprehend why she wouldn't so much as look at him the rest of that day.

Much later, when Ron had decided that Hermione would be a rather nice girlfriend and he'd tried to kiss her, she'd turned him down stone-cold. Ron, naturally, didn't take

this rejection well and had begun telling others from their year that she was nothing but a frigid little know-it-all prude, and even though he'd apologized (and she'd forgiven him) the idea had become stuck in the minds of the other students.

Hermione continued to eat her solitary breakfast until Lavender plunked down in the seat next to her, interrupting Hermione's thoughts.

'So, what was that about dreaming about detention?' the blonde asked in a tone that spoke of scandal, as she leaned close to Hermione's ear.

'Oh, sweet Merlin! It wasn't *that* kind of dream,' Hermione hissed.

'Oh. Well, I just spoke to Padma and Susan, and they both said that they dreamed about people who they thought could possibly be their true love.'

Hermione bit her tongue. Quite literally. She had to in order to keep from shouting at the idiocies she was listening to. When a slight coppery flavour began to invade her taste buds, she decided that she was calm enough to be able to restrain herself. 'I'm sure you are quite aware that if you want to dream about something specific, then your mind has the ability to accommodate that. Aren't you? There is nothing to say that your dreams had anything to do with the spell. How would you even know it was true unless *you* make it happen? You do have that ability, Lavender. If you dreamed about, I don't know, Draco Malfoy, let's say.... Well, you dream about him, you decide that he's your "true love" and you pursue him. You've just created your own destiny.'

Lavender looked at her, as did Parvati who couldn't help but hear since Hermione was no longer whispering. 'You make a good point,' she said at last. 'However, based on the information of the spell, we should have proof that the dream was real by midnight tonight.'

Oh, good Lord!

'And do you know what that proof will be, Lavender?'

'Well, no. The passage didn't go into that much detail, but I'm sure that the information is right. We'll simply have to wait to see,' Lavender finished in a hopelessly optimistic tone, complete with a beaming grin, that told Hermione that she believed this entire situation was the most fantastic thing to happen to them since they'd learnt a charm to magical increase their breast size for a promising date.

Hermione couldn't take any more. With a shake of her head, she gathered her things, stood from the table and went to the library. At least she knew that Madam Pince wouldn't allow the same juvenile activities in her domain.

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Fridays were Hermione's favourite day of the week. Not for the same reason as most of the other students. It had nothing to do with the approaching weekend. She loved it because she enjoyed her classes that day...double Charms in the morning and double Potions after lunch. Honestly, they were her two favourite courses at the school.

This morning's Charms class had been very uneventful and now, after lunch, she was ready for Potions. Potions felt more like a traditional Muggle course, similar in many aspects to chemistry. It was an actual science that she felt she could wrap her mind around, something she could actually understand, as opposed to something like Divination, which was, well, pointless. The very notion that Lavender and Parvati had found a spell to divine something like 'true love' was, in a word, ludicrous. And from the reading that Hermione had done in her other classes, it was pretty common knowledge that spells claiming to reveal one's 'true love' or 'heart's desire' weren't real; they were nothing more than the fantasies of wishful thinkers and dreamers.

Last night, she'd only dreamt of detention with Professor Snape. Had she actually dreamt about a tall, dark stranger, then it was possible that she might feel differently about the spell. Maybe she would've held that small bit of hope that magic was something more than what she saw everyday. That perhaps magic was as fantastical as she'd thought it was when she was a child and her parents had taken her to see *Cinderella*. A glass slipper that held the key to Prince Charming's heart...now that was magic!

She was walking through the doors of the Great Hall, on her way to Potions when she was accosted by the four witches of last night's misadventure. Before she could even say anything, she found herself being dragged off into an alcove behind the staircase.

'So....' Parvati said.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Honestly, did the girl know how to start a conversation any other way?

'Can we see it?' Hannah asked.

'See what?'

Susan held up her hand for Hermione to see.

'What is that?' Hermione asked as she studied the very clear 'Ne' that was written in red ink on the back of Susan's hand.

'It's part of the spell,' Susan said smugly.

'It is not,' Hermione said. 'You just wrote that. Besides, how are we even supposed to know what it means?'

'That's who I dreamt about last night,' Susan said. 'Neville Longbottom.'

Hermione gave her a disbelieving look. 'Isn't Neville going to the ball tonight with...?' She looked over at Hannah.

Hannah, in turn, held up her hand to show the start of a name...'Dr'.

Hermione's eyes widened. 'Who did you dream about last night, Hannah?' she asked with trepidation.

The blonde girl mumbled something that Hermione could not discern, but she was afraid to ask again. Finally, Hannah said clearly, 'Draco Malfoy.'

Hermione covered her hand with her face. The entire day was turning into a bad dream. That's what it had to be... nothing more than a very bad dream. She felt someone grab her hand, and Hermione looked up.

'You lied, Hermione.'

'What? I did not!'

'You said that you only dreamed about having to serve detention,' Lavender said.

'I did dream about that!'

Lavender gave her a sceptical look before turning Hermione's hand back towards her and showing her the letters written there that she'd not noticed before. They were a very clear 'Se'.

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Hermione stumbled down to Potions in a daze. Upon seeing the letters 'Se', Lavender had insisted that Hermione's 'true love'...Merlin, how she hated those words!...was Seth Smethwyk. He was a former Ravenclaw who had left school two years prior and was currently a Healer-in-Training at St Mungo's. He also held the record for the most detentions in Potions held by any student in any given year. Apparently, he had a knack for arguing with Professor Snape, and was one of the main reasons that Ravenclaw had not been in contention for the House Cup for the seven years he'd attended.

However, by the time she made it to the entrance to the Potions classroom, it was clear, Lavender Brown had been wrong. As Hermione watched the 'v' appear on her hand, as if drawn by her own quill, Hermione knew that Seth was no longer a contender. And if her suspicions were correct...

Oh, Merlin, what would she do if her fears were correct?

And it was with that thought that she concealed her hand in the sleeve of her robes and trudged into the Potions room. Barely arriving on time, she slid into her chair.

The professor, who had just walked to the front of the classroom to begin his lecture, turned around and glared at her. However, just as he opened his mouth to say something, Hermione heard the door creak open, followed by a muttered apology.

'Ten points from Ravenclaw, Miss Patil, for your tardiness,' Professor Snape said with a sneer. He glanced again at Hermione, giving her the impression that if Padma hadn't have arrived later than she had, he would've done the same to her... even though she hadn't been late.

And with that, his lecture began. Though, the only thing Hermione could tell anyone later was that Professor Snape had elected to deviate from his lesson plan and was, in fact, not lecturing on Dreamless Sleep as their reading assignment would have suggested. He had chosen, instead, to lecture about poisons.

An utterly romantic topic. She found herself wondering if Snape held the same loathing for Valentine's Day that she did. But she quickly realised that similarity went without question. Hermione gripped the sleeves of her robes tighter around her hands as she attempted to take notes, while her mind wandered. Thus, when Professor Snape dismissed them, she found herself looking around the classroom and then down at her near empty sheet of parchment as she tried to figure out how time had flown by so quickly.

She didn't have long to ponder as she began packing up her things and Professor Snape summoned her to the front of the classroom. Reluctant to face him, but knowing that there was little choice, she finished putting her things in her bag and approached him.

He stood from his desk and looked down his long nose at her. 'I regret that your detention tonight has been postponed, Miss Granger. Apparently the Headmaster feels that a detention is not a valid reason to keep me from having to chaperone his ridiculous excuse for matchmaking teenagers,' he said with a sneer. He paused and snorted. 'Pity, really, especially as you've obviously gone to the trouble to write the time on your hand.'

Hermione's eyes widened and she let out a small gasp as she tried to hide her hand back in the sleeve of her robe. But Snape became even more intrigued and he grabbed her wrist, pulling it up towards him for closer scrutiny so that she was pulled up against the desk and now leaning over it. Her face flushed as he inspected the red writing, which now read 'Sever'. She could see how he would have thought that she'd written 'Seven' before, but now, it should be rather clear that it was something else, entirely. Especially as while he was inspecting her hand, to her utter embarrassment, little hearts began appearing on her hand as the next letter began to form. As the 'u' finished, much quicker than any of the other letters had appeared, Snape dropped her hand as if he'd been burnt.

'I'm sorry, Professor, I didn't...'

'Get out,' he bellowed, cutting her off.

And 'get out' she did, as quickly as she could manage it. She vaguely heard the door to the classroom slam behind her. Heart pounding wildly, Hermione didn't stop running until she was well-clear of the dungeons, at which point she stopped and leaned against the wall to catch her breath. Dropping her bag on the floor beside her, she pulled her hand up to look at it. Just as she had suspected, the name 'Severus' now stood out proudly in bright red ink, flanked by small hearts in a variety of colours.

Taking a deep breath, she steeled herself and made her way to the girls' toilet on the second floor, so she could properly wash away the ink, which was presently marring her skin.

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Thirty minutes later, Hermione exited the second floor toilet. Her hands had been rubbed so raw that they were near bleeding. And yet, the name 'Severus' clearly remained there to taunt her. Even worse, it appeared that the same writing was beginning to form on her right hand as well. A bold and proud 'S' was now there to mock her even further.

Lavender's words from the night before rang clearly through her head, *'We'll know who our true love is as clearly as if it were written on the backs of our hands.'*

'As if...' Lavender had said 'as if'. Which meant that Lavender didn't know. Before, Hermione had written off the spell as being stupid and pointless. Now, she suddenly wondered what it was that she'd got herself into, and Hermione ran all the way to the Gryffindor common room in an attempt to find the answers. She needed the book or whatever it was that the spell had come from.

Hell, she'd even speak with Trelawney if she thought that would help her be able to figure out what was happening.

Slightly out of breath and now grabbing at a stitch in her side, Hermione entered the common room and immediately began scanning the room for her dorm mates. When she didn't see either of them, she made her way up the stairs to the girls' dormitories. Lavender was sitting in a chair they had by the window with a well-read, paperback book in hand, but a quick look around the room told Hermione that Parvati was no where to be found.

Lavender looked up from her book and smiled at Hermione. Then she glanced at Hermione's hands and let out a small gasp while rising from her chair. 'Sweet Merlin! What happened to you?'

'I need to see the book where that spell came from,' Hermione said, shaking off her roommate as Lavender tried to grab her hand.

'But your hands, Hermione! What happened?'

'I tried to wash off the ink.'

Lavender stared at her for a moment. 'It doesn't come off.'

'I think I figured that out. Now where is the book that the spell came from so I can research this?' Hermione asked, growing irritated.

At this point, Lavender grabbed Hermione's hand to look at it. Hermione felt the sudden urge to snap at her for doing something so intrusive. Though, as soon as she saw that superior gleam appear in her roommate's eyes, she was thankful that she'd held her tongue. It would have made Hermione appear as if she were protesting a bit much.

'So,' Lavender said. 'It appears that your dream last night had nothing to do with Seth Smethwyk. It really was about Professor Snape. Just like we told you. Severus Snape is your true love.'

It was the first time that Hermione had allowed herself to think the complete thought, let alone have the words spoken aloud to her. She had been dancing around the preposterous idea all afternoon, but she'd not allowed herself to think it through. And the fact that Lavender Brown was the one to say them, did not help Hermione deal with it any better. Nor was it helping that Miss Brown was presently laughing at her expense.

Before she even realised what was happening, Hermione's legs gave way from beneath her and she fell heavily on the floor...

And she began to sob.

Author's notes: This story was originally started for Scattered Logic and Southern_Witch_69. Both women have been invaluable in the work on the SS/HG Exchange and this was the only way I could think of to thank them properly. There are aspects in this story that appeal to both of them and I really hope that they enjoy it. Yes, to answer the looming question, this is a WIP. No, it is not finished yet. And, no, it will not be abandoned.

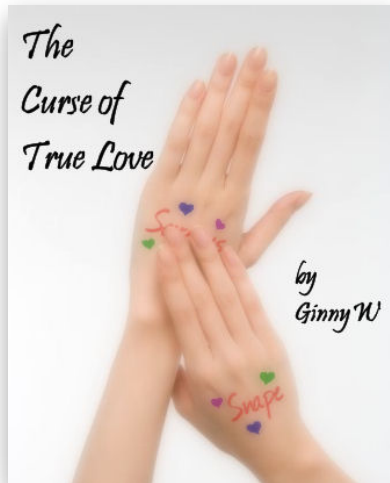
II

Chapter 2 of 4

Some people believe that love is an amazing gift while others feel that it is the worst curse to befall them. The course of true love never did run smooth. Of course, Hermione could always blame sexually charged teenage witches, Divination and Valentine's Day.

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Thank you to my beta readers, JuneW and DeeMichelle. And also to my very supportive cheerleaders.



Of all people, Lavender Brown was consoling her. Hermione shook her head at the absolute absurdity of it all. Lavender was not her friend. Lavender Brown barely even liked Hermione. Yet, here they were, with Lavender wrapping her arm around Hermione's shoulders and making soft hushing sounds while Hermione sobbed.

She was sobbing! And rather uncontrollably at that. It was the pathetic blubbling and sniffing that normally made her roll her eyes and caused her stomach to turn. As Hermione acknowledged this, she finally allowed the events of the last day sink in. She sniffed and wiped away the tears. How utterly absurd it was. All of it. The spell had been ridiculously silly and now, to think that it predicted that her soul mate was actually Severus Snape. To see that his name was presently carving itself on the back of her hand for everybody to see... it was ridiculous. It was....

As she thought about all of it, she began to laugh. Lavender jerked her hand away and gave Hermione a puzzled look which caused Hermione to only laugh harder.

Several minutes later, after she finally composed herself, she used her wand to Conjure a handkerchief and began to dry her eyes and wipe her nose.

'Are you okay?' Lavender asked, with a look on her face half-way between confusion and annoyance.

'I'm fine,' Hermione replied. 'Now, about that book...'

The book, as it were, turned out to be a magazine, and not just any magazine. It was a Muggle magazine, the *Tattler* to be precise...a gossip publication about high society people worth millions of pounds, yet they all shared a grand total of two brain cells.

She read the 'spell' thoroughly while shaking her head. Looking up at Lavender, she raised her eyebrow and pressed her lips together tightly, imploring the other witch to simply answer the unasked question.

In response, Lavender rose again from the chair and went over to her bed. She pulled a tattered book out from under the pillow and placed it in Hermione's hand.

Hermione didn't have to ask where to look. The book was obviously earmarked and Hermione quickly flipped to the page. A quick scan told her that she'd found what she was looking for.

'You took a Muggle myth and a *fake* spell from a tawdry romance novel and created your own spell,' she accused.

Lavender shrugged, though her nonchalant act didn't fool Hermione. She could clearly see the glimmer in her roommate's eyes, who was obviously pleased that she'd created a new spell that seemed to work... at least on some level.

'But this doesn't mean anything!' Hermione said. 'You made up a spell. How do you know it worked like you intended? For all you know, Snape is just the last person I saw

before I went to sleep, and that's the only reason that I dreamed about him or that his name appeared on the back of my hand.'

Lavender smiled. 'I don't think so. If you look at the Muggle tradition, I think that it has some merit. Usually those old myths do. Besides, who says that you are the only one who can create new spells or research this sort of thing? You may know your Potions and Transfiguration, but Parvati and I are best in our form for Divination. In fact, Professor Trelawney says that we are the best Divination students to pass through these halls since she was a student herself.' She finished with a superior sniff which Hermione scoffed at.

'So, what is this supposed to do?' Hermione asked angrily, holding up her hand.

'It's supposed to tell you who your soul mate is,' came the reply, as if it were blatantly obvious.

'And how do I get the name off of there? Merlin's balls, Lav! I look like a firstie fawning after Professor Lockhart!'

'Which we all know you were.'

'So were you! And I wasn't a firstie.' Okay, it was a lame argument about something terribly stupid, but.... Hermione sighed and rubbed her forehead. 'I need to know what this spell is going to do.'

When she heard no reply, Hermione dropped her hand from her face and looked up.

After several long moments, the blonde witch finally answered. 'I don't know yet.'

Of course she didn't.

'But Parvati is out right now doing some research.'

'What sort of research?'

'She's with her soul mate.' At Hermione's narrowed glare, Lavender amended her statement. 'Okay, she's with the wizard whose name is written on her hand.'

Hermione nodded.

'By the way,' Lavender added in a curious tone, 'when did the hearts appear?'

'What do you mean? Does it matter?'

'You know as well as I do, that it's highly possible that everything matters. We just don't know. But you are the only one with hearts so far.'

The only one with hearts? Hermione methodically ran through the events of the afternoon and tried to piece together when the hearts had first appeared, but the answer quickly became clear to her.

'It was when Professor Snape touched my hand,' she all but murmured.

'Professor Snape held your hand?' Lavender asked in disbelief.

'No! Well, he did, but it wasn't like that! He was just looking at my hand to see what I'd written because he thought it read 'Seven' for my detention tonight and then the 'u' appeared along with several hearts.'

By the time Hermione finished her little spiel, Lavender had a disgustingly happy grin on her face. 'How long have you fancied Professor Snape?'

'What? I don't fancy him! There is nothing about my feelings towards him that are amorous in any way, shape or form! I respect him. That is all!'

Lavender gave her a look that clearly implied that she thought that Hermione was protesting a bit much to be convincing. But it was true. Hermione didn't have any secret feelings for her professor. She respected and admired him, but it certainly wasn't a crush and she hadn't had any silly schoolgirl fantasies about him. Well, at least not in quite some time.

Back when they were still fighting Voldemort and she'd been helping the Professor as he brewed Potions to stock the infirmary, she'd had a few fleeting thoughts along those lines, but that had been several months ago, and she got over it. Now, she simply wanted to finish out the rest of her school year, take her N.E.W.T.s and leave school. She was certain that she'd meet someone nice and her own age where ever it was she ended up working.

This entire ordeal was ridiculous. Hermione walked over to the desk in the corner of the room and pulled parchment, quill and ink out of one of the drawers; then walked over to Lavender. 'Here. Write down *everything* that you did to the spell and why you did it. Include any non-verbal spells that you may have cast without telling us. Hopefully, if we analyse everything, we'll be able to determine the purpose and how to end it, or at least know if everything will simply end on its own.'

'No.'

'No? Lavender! We have to figure this out!'

'No. We don't! I'm happy. Everyone is happy. Merlin! After the initial shock, even Hannah seems happy at the prospect of pursuing Draco Malfoy. Apparently he was rather flattered when he saw his name written on the back of her hand just a bit ago. Besides, I have a dance to get ready for.'

Hermione groaned. And now that her detention was cancelled, she figured she might as well get ready for the ruddy dance as well. Then she could sit down and try to figure out how to remove the bleeding spell.

Hermione wrapped her hands in small bandages that she had Conjured. It had been an attempt to avoid others from staring at the damage she'd done with the vigorous hand washing. Gathering her things for the evening, she made her way to the Prefects' bath to ready for the evening's *festivities*.

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Ninety minutes later found Hermione clean, refreshed and ready to deal with whatever was to come. For the brief amount of time that she'd been able to privately lounge in the bath, she had allowed herself to forget her present problem. The aromas from the soaps, oils and bubbles that the tub provided had truly served to alleviate her tense muscles, even after others began to arrive and disturb the quiet.

She headed back to her dormitory to finish dressing for the night in a much calmer and relaxed mood than she had been in before. Though, she had to admit that she still dreaded the idea of seeing Lavender Brown any time soon. By the time she returned to the room, she was almost pleased to note that Parvati had returned. That is, until Hermione heard the constant giggling and squealing that the two girls were emitting as they dressed for the dance.

Ignoring them as best she could, Hermione put on the new set of dress robes that her parents had given her for Christmas. *Now that that dreaded war you told us about is over with, perhaps there will be more opportunities for you to wear these,* her mother had said.

It was almost as if her mother had known that Dumbledore was going to have this ruddy dance. Hermione had even heard rumours that the headmaster was also planning

to have a dance after the Leaving Feast this year.

'Merlin, Hermione, if you pull on that zipper any harder, I'm sure that you'll tear your robes,' scolded Lavender. 'Here, let me help you.'

Hermione sighed and closed her eyes, willing herself to calm down. It was stupid to get worked up over dances or ruddy celebrations. And what a waste. Seeing as she'd been so relaxed when she'd finished with her bath.

'There. Your dress robes are really nice, Hermione. But please tell me that you're not going to wear those bandages tonight.'

'No, I'm not.' Hermione unwrapped her hands and groaned as Lavender giggled.

Her right hand now read 'Sna'. There was no denying it: by the time the name was complete, her hands would read 'Severus Snape'. At least there were no hearts covering her right hand.

'And who is your true love, Lavender?' Hermione asked snidely, hoping that it would be someone just as dreadful to contemplate as Snape.

Then she remembered what Lavender had said earlier, *I'm happy. Everyone is happy.* And the dreamy look in the blonde's eyes told her more than enough, but Lavender answered anyway, 'Stephen Cornfoot.'

Every girl in the sixth and seventh year had fancied Stephen at some point during the last seven years. He had brilliant blue eyes and sandy brown hair, and over the years he had grown into a tall, muscular and handsome wizard. It was quite obvious that Lavender was thrilled that he was supposedly her destined soul mate.

'Oh! Par did learn something about the spell this afternoon!'

'What?' Hermione asked as she conjured a mirror to float in front of her bed so she could easily begin applying her make-up.

'Par got the writing on the back of her hand to disappear.'

'She did?' Hermione exclaimed, accidentally smearing her eyeliner.

'Par! Come here,' Lavender called.

Their other roommate came over from her corner of the room where it was obvious that she'd just finished styling her hair.

'What?'

'Show Hermione your hands.'

'Oh, yes,' Parvati said, smiling. She approached both girls and held out her hands for Hermione to see.

There was nothing on either side. No name, no hearts, no... nothing. Just clean, freshly washed hands.

'How did you do that? What do I need to do?' Hermione sat there with a hopeful, expectant look on her face.

The other two witches began laughing at her, as if this entire thing was some huge joke on her behalf. After several frustrating minutes while Hermione began to grow more and more irritated and upset, Lavender finally gasped out between howls of laughter, 'She snogged him senseless!'

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It hadn't taken Hermione long to gather her things and go to Ginny's dormitory room. Even if Hermione hardly knew Ginny's roommates, anything was a more welcoming environment than staying with her own roommates. Though, thankfully, Hermione found she didn't even have to deal with the other sixth year Gryffindor girls; Ginny's roommates had already dressed for the ball and had gone to help some of their friends in Hufflepuff.

Ginny let Hermione in and, within moments, had finagled Hermione into helping the redhead finish dressing for the ball.

'When my hair is finished, I'll help you with yours,' Ginny said. 'I don't remember those gloves as being part of those dress robes. Where did you get them?'

Before she had left her room, Hermione had taken a pair of woollen gloves and Transfigured them into long silk gloves that perfectly matched her royal blue dress robes. There was no way she was going to go anywhere when others could see the writing on the back of her hands. 'Do you like them?'

Ginny looked at her thoughtfully for a moment before answering. 'Yes, I do. I don't believe I've ever seen anyone wear anything like that.'

Hermione shrugged. 'Muggle women sometimes wear them with fancier dresses. It's not terribly common, but common enough.' Though, inwardly she cringed, she had hoped that she wouldn't stand-out too much at the ball.

She helped Ginny cast several charms on the redhead's hair before Ginny helped Hermione with her own.

'Why didn't you use any Sleekeazy's?' Ginny asked.

'Too much work. It took me hours last time I used it and it really wasn't worth the effort.'

Ginny nodded. 'Well, I have some ideas with what we can do.'

And that she did. By the time Ginny was finished casting charms on Hermione's hair, it had been tamed from its usual bushy mass to a beautiful set of ringlet curls. Then Ginny had taken strands from each side and braided them, joining the braids in the back. Finally, she Transfigured some stones to look like pearls and then Charmed those to stick in Hermione's hair on the small braids.

Looking at herself in the mirror, she thought that the braids looked almost like an unobtrusive and tasteful crown. She smiled at her reflection, deciding that she liked what she saw.

'Blue really is your colour,' Ginny observed.

'Thank you. That green really suits you.' Hermione noted, however that the shade of Ginny's dress robes bore a shocking resemblance to the green of Harry's eyes. Ginny was already going to the ball with Harry, but for whatever reason, Ginny still felt that she had to do things to ensnare him.

And Hermione thought that it was rather unlikely that Harry would even notice the shade of Ginny's robes, let alone recognise the significance behind them.

'So, Hermione, what's going on?'

'Nothing. Well, there is tonight's ball, which I'd rather not attend...'

Ginny smiled. 'Well, yes. But that's not what I meant. What is wrong?'

'There is nothing wrong. I'm just annoyed.' Hermione began fidgeting with her hands and pulling at her gloves, which truly looked beautiful and glamorous, but really they were downright uncomfortable. Her hands were beginning to sweat and they were sticking to the insides of the gloves. 'You know how I feel about Valentine's Day. It's an utterly ridiculous day to celebrate and the fact that the Headmaster suddenly feels the need to encourage it...' She growled. 'It's almost as if he's trying to play matchmaker. Incredibly annoying. And, I believe it to be highly inappropriate.'

At this, Ginny began to laugh and shook her head. 'Well, surely you don't think that it's that bad! Professor Dumbledore just wants us to have a chance to enjoy things for a change. Look at everything that Harry's been through in his life. And I'm not saying that this is all for Harry, but for all of us really. The last few years, since Voldemort returned, there has been very little chance to celebrate. I think that tonight's ball was a brilliant idea.'

Of course Ginny did. She and Harry were destined to be together. Hell, Harry had shown both Hermione and Ron the necklace that he'd bought for Ginny for Valentine's Day. The pendant on the necklace was a crystal Snitch with fluttering gold wings. It was beautiful. And he definitely deserved bonus points for the fact that he hadn't forgotten.

Unlike Ron, who was set to go to the ball with Luna, the witch he'd been seeing for the last six weeks. He had approached Hermione yesterday, asking if she happened to have an extra book or something lying around that he could give Luna.

'Since she's a Ravenclaw and is really smart like you are, Hermione,' he'd said.

He really could be a bleeding, clueless twit at times when it came to dealing with women. Hermione idly wondered how Luna would react the first time he tried making some comment about her being useful for her knowledge. But then Hermione remembered that Luna actually liked things like Quidditch, and therefore had already earned a form of respect from Ron that Hermione had never been able to attain.

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment and tried to figure out why she was suddenly so worried about everyone else's relationships.

'So, are you going to tell me what's really bothering you?'

Hermione sat down hard on Ginny's bed, earning a glare.

'You're going to wrinkle your robes,' Ginny scolded.

'I don't particularly care.'

'Harry and Ron said that you had detention tonight. What happened?' Ginny asked, sitting down next to her. Apparently Ginny wasn't nearly as worried about wrinkled dress robes as she pretended to be.

'It was postponed... or cancelled. I'm not sure which, Professor Snape never really said. All he told me was that the Headmaster was insisting that he and I attend the ball tonight and that detention wasn't a suitable excuse for missing it.'

'He didn't tell you whether it was postponed or cancelled? That doesn't seem like Snape to cancel a detention.'

'Professor Snape. And no, it really doesn't, but he never told me when I was to make it up.'

'That still doesn't sound like him. Are you sure it was really Snape?'

'Professor Snape,' Hermione said automatically. 'He was distracted.' Hermione turned her head, unable to look at her friend.

'So, what aren't you telling me?' Ginny asked after a long, thoughtful pause.

Hermione sighed and turned her gaze back up at her friend. 'That I received my detention for helping Lavender & Company up to the Astronomy Tower last night, where they performed some spell that Lavender bloody well MADE UP! And now Snape's name is writing itself on the back of my hands, which...according to Lav-Lav...means that he is my true love. And Snape saw a letter write itself and he saw a bunch of little hearts appear, and he must think me to be one of the biggest idiots in this school. And I tried scrubbing the markings off and all I got for my efforts were two raw, sore and nearly bloody hands. And now Parvati and Lavender tell me that the only way they know of to get the ink off of my hands is to snog him senseless!'

By the time Hermione was finished with her emotional outburst, she realised that she was pacing the floor in front of the bed and waving her hands about wildly. Turning around to face her friend, she found the redhead smirking like a proud kneazle kitten who had just caught his first mouse.

'Professor Snape,' Ginny corrected.

'Oh, bloody hell!' Hermione exclaimed as she stomped her foot with exaggerated dramatics. 'Fine. Lav-Lav and Par think that I should snog Professor Snape senseless! Are you happy now?'

Ginny shook her head, her smug look having melted back to one of sympathy. 'Not particularly. I can't believe you'd trust Lavender Brown to perform a spell. What sort of spell was it anyway?'

'I told you. It was supposed to divine our true love. Give us a vision or something.'

'You know as well as anyone that there are no such spells like that.'

Hermione gave her friend an exasperated look. 'Of course I know that. I didn't ask her to cast the spell. I was just there, and for whatever reason, I decided that it was easier to join them than to argue. I didn't expect anything to result from it anyway.' Sitting back down on the bed, Hermione sighed and then proceeded to tell her friend what all had happened since the spell had been cast, causing Ginny to grow more than just a little bit amused at Hermione's plight.

'So, you have to snog Snape senseless?' Ginny asked, with a smile.

'Apparently so.'

'Is there a time limit on this?'

'I don't know. Lavender showed me where she derived the spell from. There were two sources.'

'Okay. That's reasonable. What do those spells do?'

Hermione made a face. 'One of them was taken from one of those smutty little romance novels that she's so fond of. And the other came from the *Tatler*.'

Ginny made an odd face.

'The *Tatler* is very similar to *Witch Weekly*. They have write-ups on fashion, gossip and the like.'

'But how could she get a spell from something *Muggle*?'

'There was this old tradition where women would apply rose water and bay leaves to their pillow and say a little rhyme with the hopes of dreaming about their true love.'

'Let me guess, you used the magical forms of those ingredients and said a little rhyme?'

Hermione smiled. 'It is a bit ridiculous when you think about it.'

'Well, yes. But something happened, so obviously it held some merit,' Ginny observed.

'It's the other spell that's worrying me,' Hermione finally admitted. 'I don't fully understand it. But what I saw in the book involved a five-pointed star wand motion, a shower of sparks... erm... and then the Latin words that we spoke.' She closed her eyes for a moment as she tried to remember. 'Quos amor verus tenuit, tenebit.'

'What does that mean?'

"Those whom true love has held, it will go on holding." It is an old quote by Seneca, a Roman playwright, politician and philosopher from about 30 AD. But I'm not sure what that really has to do with a spell to determine one's soul mate.'

'So, did Lavender draw a five-pointed star with her wand?'

Hermione shook her head. 'No, it was more complicated than that, though I don't remember it exactly. And this doesn't even begin to consider that she very well could've cast a non-verbal spell through the entire thing which could've done something else.'

Ginny looked at Hermione sympathetically.

'But Lavender did say that we'd know our true love by midnight tonight. I don't know if that was in reference to the names on the back of the hands or if it was something else. Or maybe I have to kiss him to make the name disappear before midnight.... Or maybe I should just leave it and after midnight this entire mess will end on its own.... Or maybe...'

'Or maybe the answer will become obvious and you won't have to worry about it,' Ginny said, interrupting her. 'But no matter what, it's time to head down to the Great Hall.'

Hermione glanced at the small clock next to Ginny's bed and gasped. There were only five minutes until seven. Harry was probably downstairs pacing by now, waiting for Ginny. She jumped up, and took a quick glance at herself in the mirror. With a brisk wave of her wand, she eliminated the wrinkles in her robes and then did the same for Ginny. Smiling, she asked, 'Are you ready?'

'Yep. Unless you want to take another minute to show me your hands...'

'Maybe after the ball.' Silently she added, *If the ink is still there.* She felt better than she had before. It was an odd, yet comforting feeling. Usually Hermione was the one to console Ginny and be the rational person in the face of drama. This time it had been Ginny's turn to keep a cool head and look at things objectively, and the redhead had done admirably. At least now Hermione felt as if, when given the time, she would be able to more carefully analyse the spell and determine if there would be any long-lasting effects.

She couldn't help grinning from ear-to-ear when they reached the bottom of the stairs to find Harry waiting for them. He could hardly keep his eyes off of Ginny as he commented on how the green shade of her robes complimented her hair colour and fair skin. Being the chivalrous gentleman that he was, Harry insisted on escorting both Ginny and Hermione down to the Great Hall. They chatted amicably and Harry even deigned to spare Hermione a glance to comment on her appearance. Then, right after they descended the final steps to the Entrance Hall, Harry tugged Ginny out of the path of the throng of students and presented Ginny with her gift.

Knowing her cue, Hermione wished them both a good evening and made her way into the Hall alone. She had no desire to see Ginny gush over the pendant, nor did she desire to witness the inevitable kisses that were to follow. She paused to take a deep breath and will herself to stay calm before entering the Great Hall. Finally realising that the night would not be overly long or trying, Hermione walked into the room.

Just as the Yule Ball in her fourth year, the long house tables were gone and replaced by large round tables. After several minutes of trying to locate her place card, Hermione finally had to cast a simple Location Charm to find her seat.

'Good evening, Miss Granger,' Professor Dumbledore said when she sat in the chair next to his.

'Good evening, sir. If you don't mind my asking, why am I sitting with the professors?'

'Ah, well, this isn't a table for just teachers. When we arranged the place settings we decided to place teachers and Prefects sporadically at different tables. We did the same mixing with the houses. You'll notice that Mr Goyle is sitting over there at that table with Mr Finch-Fletchley and Professor Trelawney.'

'I see,' Hermione said as she reached for her glass of water and took a sip.

'Those are lovely gloves, Miss Granger,' the headmaster remarked. 'I don't believe I've seen a witch wear gloves like that in nearly half of a century.'

'I thought that they might go well with these robes.'

He reached over and patted her left hand. Professor Dumbledore paused for a moment and gave her a quizzical look before smiling at her with a twinkle in his eyes. 'They do indeed.'

Hermione had the strangest feeling that he knew that something was amiss, and it made her stomach clench to think that the headmaster might know more about what was going on with her than she did. Though she quickly realised that worrying about that now wouldn't help her situation and even though she'd not been looking forward to this evening, she was determined to make the most of it. Making a conscious decision to push any thoughts about the spell aside for the remainder of the night, Hermione looked around and realised that others were already eating and so she ordered her food as she had remembered doing during the Yule Ball and soon dug into a perfectly prepared beef wellington.

During her meal, she began chatting with Luna and Ron, who were seated on the other side of Professor Dumbledore. That is, until she felt something on the back of her hands. At first she tried to brush off the irritant without bothering to look at it. But soon afterwards, it felt as if a thousand tiny bubbles were dancing on her skin and bursting at random. If she were to really think about it, she would swear that her skin was only tingling where she knew the hearts were on her left hand and where the letters that spelled Severus Snape's name were written on both.

She gasped when she looked down at her hands and saw that the writing had now gone through the gloves and was no longer hidden from view. Panic seized her. She had to leave. She had to get out of there... *now.*

Hermione quickly pushed her chair back from the table and stood. Turning to leave, she took two steps only to find herself blocked by a tall man dressed all in black.

A/N: Thanks to sshg316 for the lovely banner. I absolutely adore it. And I'm terribly sorry that it took this long to update. I'd had every intention of posting this before last weekend, but I ran out of time before I left on my vacation. :)

III

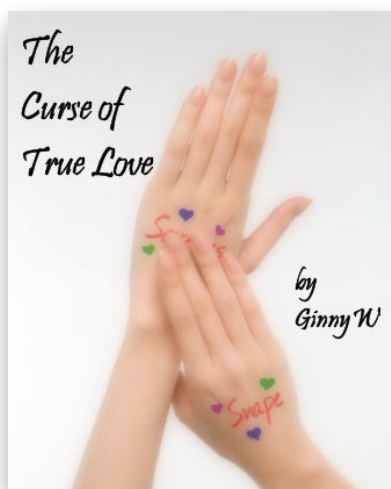
Chapter 3 of 4

Some people believe that love is an amazing gift while others feel that it is the worst curse to befall them. The course of true love never did run smooth. Of course, Hermione could always blame sexually charged teenage witches, Divination and Valentine's Day.

Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. Not mine. Never was. Never will be.

Thank you to my beta readers, JuneW and DeeMichelle. And also to my ever supportive cheerleaders.

This story is dedicated to Southern_Witch_69 and ScatteredLogic.



Before Hermione could do little more than let out a small gasp, Professor Snape's hands had gripped her upper arms, pinning them to her sides.

'Where are you off to in such a hurry?' he asked her snidely.

'I'm sorry, Professor,' was all that she managed to say in reply before another voice chimed in.

'Ah, Severus, I'd wondered where you were,' said the headmaster. 'You've missed dinner, of course, but you're just in time to start off the dancing.'

Before Hermione could say anything or try to escape from her teacher's grip, Professor Dumbledore had risen from his chair and gathered the attention of the students so he could clear away the tables.

Next, Hermione heard Professor Dumbledore say, 'If you and Miss Granger would do the honours...'

This was followed by a disgusted grunt from Professor Snape and some mumbling which she thought sounded like, 'Bumbling, interfering, barmy old poufter,' as she felt herself being dragged to the centre of the dance floor at the very moment that the orchestra began.

Of course, through this entire ordeal, Hermione felt like she was standing in the midst of a thick fog and it wasn't until she heard the first bars of music that Hermione began to register what had happened. It came upon her suddenly that she was standing in the middle of the Great Hall with all of her professors and classmates staring at her as she stood in Professor Snape's stiff, unforgiving arms. As the music continued, Professor Snape began to rigidly lead her around the floor and after another several bars, Hermione finally felt herself relax as other couples joined them.

As they moved across the floor, Hermione looked anywhere but at the man who was holding her in his arms and she thought about anything but about him. Well, that is to say that she tried...rather unsuccessfully. After all, it's rather difficult not to look at someone who is standing directly in front of you, and it's even more difficult not to *think* about someone whose very presence was invading every single one of your senses.

Merlin, she could feel him as one hand gripped her waist and the other held her hand. She could hear him breathing, slow, calm breaths with the occasional annoyed sigh. Hermione could smell him; the juniper, honeysuckle and orange peel were the strongest of the scents, and she recognised them as ingredients in a common shaving potion used by many of the males in the school, including Harry and Ron. And recognising that he was male and she was dancing in his arms, Hermione felt as if she could almost taste him...

She drew her eyes up to look at him to find that he was staring intently at her hand, which he held tightly in his own.

He moved his gaze to her face. After several uncomfortable seconds while Hermione felt as if he were scrutinising her for everything that she'd ever done, he finally spoke, 'I believe that we need to talk, Miss Granger.'

She swallowed hard and nodded her agreement.

When the dance ended, he quickly led her away from the dance floor and out one of the doors in the back of the hall that was reserved for the staff. Hermione ducked her head and irrationally prayed that no one was watching them flee.

Professor Snape continued to pull her down a dark hallway that Hermione had never traversed in all her years at Hogwarts, and she felt herself running slightly to keep up. Finally, he stopped, opened a door on their right and escorted her inside before shutting the door behind them. A quick flick of his wand illuminated the torches along the wall and with another flick a fire began to burn in the hearth, all of which gave the formerly dark room a warm, rosy glow.

'Now, explain that,' Snape said without preamble and a gesture of his hands.

'I don't really know where to begin, sir.'

He narrowed his eyes. 'You can start by removing those ridiculous gloves, Miss Granger. You do realise that even wearing them drew attention to you, and once the writing burned through it was even more noticeable. Not to mention the fact that even in the Muggle world, when those sorts of gloves are worn at formal occasions, women do remove the gloves before eating a meal.'

It wasn't until he spoke the last words that her cheeks flamed. She hadn't thought that anyone would notice her little faux pas. 'And I suppose that you would've thought that it was better if I'd not worn the gloves at all?'

'No, it would have been preferable if there had been no reason for you to need to cover up your hands to begin with!'

As his voice grew louder with each syllable, Hermione sucked her lower lip into her mouth with her teeth and began to bite on it in an effort to fight the slight quivering that had begun on that same lip. She refused to cry in front of him; especially over something so incredibly stupid.

And as he watched her struggle to tamp down her emotions, his scowl grew.

'I'm sorry,' she said lamely.

He responded with a derisive snort.

When he said nothing else, Hermione took a deep breath and peeled off the long gloves. And there it was: his name, clearly written on her hands. Each word was decorated with little hearts in various colours, from blue to green to purple to pink.

The only thing she could even think of to say was to utter another apology, but before she could say it, Hermione felt him tug at one of her hands.

'What is this?' he asked with something that she could almost swear was concern.

'I believe that's rather evident, sir.'

'No. What did you do to your hand here?' he asked as he brushed his thumb along a particularly tender part of her skin and Hermione winced.

'I tried to wash it off.'

'With what, Miss Granger? A steel brush?'

'It wouldn't come off,' she all but whispered, feeling even more humiliated.

He dropped her hand and looked directly into her eyes and she suddenly remembered that he was a skilled Legilimens. With effort, she began focussing on her Occlumency barriers in an effort to keep him out. Or, if nothing else, to show him that she truly wanted to block him and hope that he stopped trying to invade her mind. Unlikely, to be true, but still it was worth the effort.

'How did the writing appear on the back of your hand?' he asked softly, almost gently, as she felt him retreat from her mind.

'It was a spell.'

'That much is obvious. Which spell?' His eyes narrowed. 'Would this have anything to do with your trek up to the Astronomy Tower last night?'

'How did you know about that?' she asked.

'I believe that I mentioned that I knew of your trip with your little friends last night when I assigned your detention.'

Oh, yes, that's right. He had. Hermione's eyes darted around the room, as she noted the bookshelves, a long table and several chairs. She ran her fingers along the cold mahogany of the smooth table. This was similar to the teachers' lounge, though this room was not one that she'd ever been in. Perhaps this was where the teachers came when they didn't want to be alone in their quarters, but they didn't want the students to find them either...

'I'm growing impatient, Miss Granger,' he said, interrupting her thoughts.

She turned her eyes back to him and noted that his scowl had deepened, if that were even possible. Where should she begin? With the way she'd been tricked and coerced by her friends? Or maybe blaming them wouldn't be prudent. Perhaps if she took on the blame herself...well, at least the blame that truly belonged to her. She had, after all, unlocked the door to the Astronomy Tower, and she had chosen to stay. 'I don't really know the spell, Professor,' she finally said.

'My, my, my. It appears that you are not as intelligent as you try to present yourself to be.' He slowly began to pace in front of her. 'A spell that Miss Granger isn't familiar with, and yet she still performed it,' he said in a tone heavily laden with accusation.

'Well, yes, I mean... I didn't actually perform it, Lavender did, but it turns out that she made it up and now...'

He whirled around and took two steps towards her so that he was now towering over her. 'You were party to the implementation of an experimental spell? For fuck's sake, Miss Granger, even I thought that you had more sense than that!'

'Well, I didn't know it was experimental, when I took part!' she yelled back.

'Ten points, Miss Granger, for your disrespect and yelling at a teacher.'

Her rising temper quickly cooled in response to his remark. No matter what, she still respected him and despite everything ~~he~~ was still her professor. 'I'm sorry, sir.'

'So you've said.'

He took a step back and Hermione suddenly felt herself relax slightly. She backed herself up against the table and leaned against the edge of it for comfort, placing her hands on either side of her for support.

'Just let me say it all without interrupting, please, sir.'

She took his silence for acquiescence and, after a deep breath, she allowed the words to fall from her lips. The explanation came out in a long rambling string and it wasn't until she finished that she realised she was a bit out of breath. Without once looking at him, she'd told him nearly everything, from the way she'd been tricked into going to the Tower to the fact that Lavender had said that Hermione was the only one with hearts on the back of her hands. She'd even mentioned that most embarrassing part about Parvati saying that the writing would go away if she snogged him senseless. Hermione poured it all out in the open for him. When she was done, she felt emotionally spent and sat down heavily in one of the hard wooden chairs positioned around the table. Placing her head in her hands, she silently awaited his tirade.

It didn't come.

When at long last, she lifted her head from the cradle of her hands, she looked up to find that the door was left open and her professor was nowhere to be seen.

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Hermione didn't know how long she sat at the table, staring at the open door. It took her longer than she cared to admit for her emotional state to shift. It was odd to even admit that she had felt... *rejected*. After all, why else would he have left? Not that she could blame him for being so utterly disgusted with the very idea. If Lavender was correct, than some small part of Hermione's brain thought of him as her true love... or maybe it was a piece of her soul that *felt* that.

Determined to ignore that line of thought, she went back to pondering Snape's reaction. She'd expected him to scream, shout and deduct a slew of points from her house. She had anticipated he would use every piece of weaponry in his arsenal to degrade her in any way that he could. Those things she had been prepared for. She'd seen him act that way many times before.

But tonight, he hadn't reacted to her at all. He'd simply disappeared. Without so much as an "excuse me, I must be going." As if she were simply a piece of furniture.

And that was when the anger began to settle in. It was more than over a simple rejection from him, which logically she knew that she shouldn't worry about. It was anger that he chose to ignore the fact that she'd just revealed something so personal and he didn't even care enough about it to get angry himself. Shouldn't he, at the very least, be concerned about his own reputation? It certainly didn't bode well if the Gryffindor Know-it-All was walking around the halls with his name scrolled on her hands for all to see. Well, maybe that just didn't bode well for *her*.

Except there was also the fact that most people hadn't seen the writing yet and it was unlikely that she'd be able to hide it anymore. Not to mention the fact that the entire fifth, sixth and seventh year forms saw her dance the first dance at the Valentine's Day Ball with him. And after that, she was certain that someone witnessed Professor Snape drag her out one of the staffroom doors. Because even though she hadn't noticed any eyes upon them at the time, if even one person caught a glimpse, Hermione knew that the rumours would be flying about the school by tomorrow morning...at the very latest.

With what seemed like a monumental effort, Hermione stood from the chair and, after grabbing her discarded gloves, left the room to wander the halls.

She had no idea where she was going or what she had planned to do. If she had her wish, she'd go to her room and hide in there, but that wouldn't solve anything. And it was as she thought that very thing that she realised that was the reason she was the most upset with Professor Snape.

He hadn't fixed anything for her.

Had she truly grown to rely on him that much? Severus Snape had always been there; always behind the shadows protecting Harry and...as a result...protecting Ron and Hermione as well. Then, at the height of the war he had risked everything for them, everything for the Order and everything for... *her*.

He'd saved her life. Not that she ever spoke of it to anyone, nor did she try to think about it, but he had. It had been in a roundabout way. Snape had distracted Bellatrix Lestrange at just the right time to allow Hermione a chance to escape from the older witch's line of fire. As Hermione had glanced back at them while she'd scurried behind the bushes, she'd spied Snape watching her with a glimmer of concern. Then, at Bella's indignant response for his distraction which allowed Hermione to escape, he'd given her the task which ultimately led to her death.

He'd sent Bellatrix after Neville.

Neville Longbottom had been fighting alongside Remus Lupin and, before the full-scale battle had begun, Neville had quietly asked Professor Snape to lead Bellatrix Lestrange in their direction. Snape had used the opportunity and handed the prized bitch over to them. It sounded downright evil, even in Hermione's own head, to think that Neville was out for such cold revenge, but he'd never intended on killing the woman. He wanted her caught and sent back to a Ministry-controlled Azkaban. Hermione never asked for the details, but in the end, Neville had been forced to kill Bellatrix in order to save his own life.

'Hermione?'

She turned around and watched as Susan Bones approached her, with a cautious smile on her face.

'I just wanted to...' The red-haired witch sighed. 'Apologise, Hermione. We never should've tricked you into unlocking the door last night or coerced you to participate.'

Hermione had already forgiven her. Susan, Hannah and Padma, all three girls had been on friendly terms with Hermione before and she figured that they had been persuaded much the same way that she was. It had been Lavender and Parvati who had a habit of teasing Hermione and didn't always get along with her.

She cocked her head and pursed her lips. 'Why did you, Susan? I mean, why did you join in with Lavender's little scheme. That's not something that you'd usually do.'

Susan walked in front of Hermione to one of the windows and leaned her forehead against the glass. After another moment, Hermione joined her and slowly began to feel at peace as she too rested her head against the cold pane and stared out at the snow-covered grounds.

'Do you see that down there?' Susan asked.

Hermione lifted her head and looked in the direction that the other witch was pointing. 'The rose garden?'

'Yes.'

Hermione waited for Susan to elaborate. It was just a rose garden. It didn't look any different now than it did on any other day.

'The rose garden. Every girl I know had their first kiss either in the rose garden or up on the Astronomy Tower,' Susan continued with her voice soft and almost dreamy, as if she were revealing a secret wish. 'And when I overheard Lavender and Parvati as they spoke with Padma in the library yesterday afternoon, all I could think about was how badly I wanted to have that first kiss.'

'And Neville? Did you always have feelings for him?'

Susan looked at her, and even in the shadows Hermione could see the blush rise in the other girl's cheeks as she nodded. 'A bit. I mean, I haven't been doodling "SB + NL" on my parchment or anything. But after You-Know-Who fell, I began to admire Neville for everything that he did.'

Hermione hadn't realised it when she'd asked the question, but Susan's answers caused her to think again about the facets of the spell that Lavender had performed. 'So, just out of curiosity, were you thinking about Neville when Lavender cast the spell?'

The Hufflepuff shook her head. 'No.'

'What were you thinking about?'

Susan placed her palm against the glass and then, again, moved her forehead to rest on the cold pane. 'I was thinking about how much I wanted to have that first kiss with someone who truly loved me and who I could love in return.'

Hermione's heart ached at that. She wanted nothing more than to reach out and console Susan, and as she moved to do just that, she let out a small gasp.

'What?'

'Susan, when did these hearts appear?' Hermione asked, taking the other girl's hand.

'Oh, those. When I was dancing with him earlier.'

'Him? As in Neville?' Hermione asked, as if she'd finally had some sort of breakthrough.

Susan moved away from the window and nodded.

'Have you kissed him yet?'

'No. I want to; I'm just not sure...'

'According to Parvati and Lavender, that is how to get the name off of our hands.'

'That's what I heard,' she said wistfully.

'How did Neville take the news?' Hermione pressed.

Susan ducked her head shyly. 'I think he was pleased. I told him how guilty I felt about this entire thing and how we'd dragged you into it as well. He is actually the one who sent me along to find you.'

'Really? That's very sweet, Susan. Thank you.'

'I truly am sorry, Hermione.'

'I forgive you. It wasn't your fault. I never blamed you to begin with and even now, the only person who I can really point a finger at is me. I never should've allowed myself to be conned into something like this.'

'How did Snape...'

Susan's voice had trailed off, but Hermione could easily fill in the blanks herself. 'I don't think he was very pleased.'

'No, I don't suppose so.'

Hermione heard a loud cough from behind her and she turned to see Neville standing there with an awkward grin. She returned the smile and then looked back at Susan who no longer seemed to be paying any attention to her.

'Well, then, I think that I'll just let you two get on with,' she waved her hand between them, 'whatever it is that you two plan to do.' Hermione didn't even think that they heard her as she quietly slipped out of the way while Neville's and Susan's eyes remained locked on one another.

She briefly wondered if they would make it all the way to the rose garden before they started kissing.

~*~*~*~*~*~

It was late now. Hermione didn't have a watch, but it had been quite some time since she'd seen Neville and Susan. While she had walked along the halls, she'd found many snogging teenagers; including Lavender and Stephen, who were currently quite cosy in an alcove on the sixth floor.

At least Lavender would have Stephen's name erased from her hands.

Hermione began to rub her own hands and finally decided that it was time to head back to her room. With any luck, the curse would only last through midnight tonight and her hands would not be marred by the time she awoke in the morning. She took the stairs back down to the fifth floor and began walking down the corridor towards the portrait of the Fat Lady when someone grabbed her and pulled her into an unused classroom.

Hermione let out a small yelp as she was pulled through the door. Her heart racing, she turned around to face her abductor only to find herself once again staring into the inky black depths of her Potions professor's eyes. She jumped again as the door slammed behind her.

'What do you think you're doing?' she hissed. 'You scared the living daylight's out of me!'

'I am still your teacher, Miss Granger.'

Hermione snorted. 'Funny, *Professor*, I can't think of a single reason why one of my teachers would feel the need to abduct me from the hallway and lock me in a dusty, old room.'

Professor Snape made a face that clearly showed his revulsion as he raised his wand, flicking it at the door. 'There, you are no longer a captive. However, why in the name of Merlin you'd want to risk anyone walking in on us right now, I'll never know.'

She narrowed her eyes. 'What are you talking about? You obviously have nothing to say to me. You had your opportunity and you walked out on me!'

He raised his wand for a third time and cast yet another spell before he shouted, 'For fuck's sake, woman! Do you really want all of your Gryffindor friends to hear you? Or is it that you relish the idea of one of them walking in here while I kiss you?'

What? she thought, feeling suddenly bewildered.

The confusion must have shown on her face, for she never voiced her question before he continued. 'Though I want it made clear, Miss Granger, that you are to never speak of this again. You are not to spread rumours amongst your fellow classmates nor are you to even tell them how you cured this blasted curse. I have spent the last three hours trying to decide which I loathed more, the idea of having my name scrolled all over your hands for everyone to see and ridicule, or the thought of you spreading tales about me to all of your little friends.' His lips frowned in disgust. 'Are we clear?'

Eyes wide and her anger suddenly gone, Hermione nodded slowly, though she found that she was unable to say a word.

And as if her simple nod were permission, he flicked his wand again and Hermione heard the door once again lock with *click*. And then he moved towards her.

Hermione had expected his lips to descend upon hers and then depart just as quickly. She held her breath in a mixture of fear, trepidation and anticipation, as she did little more than stare at him. His thin, lithe frame towered over her, though she felt that she was no longer intimidated by his size. She tried to look at his face to read his expression as she felt him reach out and grasp her hands, but she found that she could not pull her eyes away from his.

She barely remembered to breathe as she felt his thumbs gently brush the backs of her hands. Then, bringing them up to his mouth, he kissed the writing on each hand softly, closing his eyes as he did so.

Hermione had to fight to hold back the *squeak* that was wanting to erupt from her throat. Professor Snape pulled her closer to him and moved his hands to her back. In turn, she gripped him around his neck, inhaling the scents of the shaving potion that she'd smelled earlier as he slowly lowered his head towards her. It seemed to take a lifetime

for their lips to meet, but when at last they did, Hermione sensed the tingling sensation from the contact through every nerve of her body and immediately felt herself melting into him while her hands began to tangle in his fine hair.

This time she couldn't hold back the soft moan that escaped from her throat as his tongue tasted her lips and sought entrance. His hands moved from her hips to firmly cup her arse and then slowly up her back as he pulled her tighter against his body. And then she truly became lost, in the soft, gentleness of his kisses combined with his demanding tongue and his hands that began to roam and explore her clothed body.

At long last, they finally broke apart and Hermione noted the slight flush of his cheeks as he removed one of his hands from her breast and the other from the nape of her neck. She was certain that her own cheeks outmatched him in redness the moment she realised that she was slightly grinding her hips against the now obvious bulge in his trousers.

She took a step back. 'I...I'm sorry, Professor,' she stammered.

He once again bore his serious, hateful mask and barely nodded as he said, 'I believe that the exact word you used was "senseless" and I think that has been accomplished. Now if you'll excuse me, Miss Granger...'

And without another word, he moved past her, unlocked the door and, for the second time that night, left her alone with her highly emotional and confused thoughts.

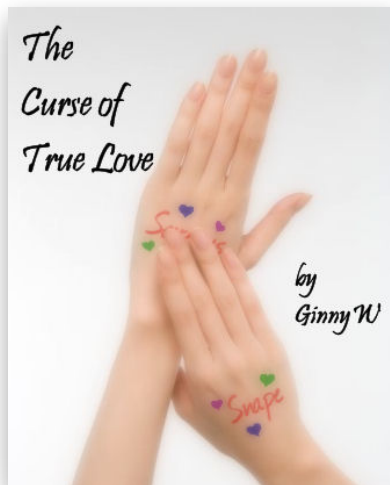
IV

Chapter 4 of 4

Some people believe that love is an amazing gift while others feel that it is the worst curse to befall them. The course of true love never did run smooth. Of course, Hermione could always blame sexually charged teenage witches, Divination and Valentine's Day.

Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. Not mine. Never was. Never will be.

Thank you to my beta readers, JuneW and DeeMichelle. And also to my ever supportive cheerleaders.



It had been an excruciatingly long night, even more so than most school balls he'd been forced to chaperone. Though, if he were to be completely honest with himself, he'd have to say that his chaperoning duties had been largely limited during last night's Valentine's Day Ball due to more pressing matters.

There were many spells which caused blood-red writing to appear on the back of a person's hand. The first such spell that came to mind was Dolores Umbridge's blood quill. When he'd initially seen the writing on the back of Miss Granger's hand, that had been his first guess. He'd not known whether it was due to childish pranks, hexes from her classmates or something that the Granger girl had done herself, but the very idea that she'd allow something like that on her hands had disgusted him.

Nothing could have prepared him for the truth of the situation. It ultimately equated to him being correct: the writing, the hearts, the foolish wand-waving...all of it had been the result of immature, irresponsible, dunderheaded teenagers.

He'd solved the problem the only way that he could think of. Granted, he'd not been entirely in his right mind, but Severus Snape was not the sort of man who wished to dwell on such inadequacies. The fact of the matter was that he'd dealt with the situation and, hopefully, rectified things....

He took a sip of his lukewarm coffee and glared out at the sea of students who were already assembling for breakfast and he froze. How could he have been so utterly stupid?

He hadn't even bothered to look at Miss Granger's hands after he'd kissed her last night. What had he been thinking?

Severus shifted slightly in his seat. Well, he *knew* what he'd been thinking at the time, but the fact remained that he rarely reached a point where all logic and all rational thought flew out the window.

Then again, the point had been to be snogged senseless or to do the same to her... he wasn't sure which, perhaps both. Either way, they'd both succeeded.

And just as he was thinking it, he saw the object of his thoughts walk into the room. It seemed that she'd started to raise her head up to look in his direction, but her eyes

quickly darted back to the floor. And just as she moved to sit down at the Gryffindor table, he saw her remove her hands from her pockets...

Her heavily bandaged hands.

Severus dropped his head into his hands. *Oh, fuck!*

He heard someone talking beside him and it was only after he felt his arm slightly jostled that he looked up.

'A long night, Severus?' Filius asked with a small wink.

'A long week,' Severus replied shortly. 'Topped off with Albus Dumbledore's idea of matchmaking teenagers to ensure the continuation of the wizarding world.'

The Charms professor nodded. 'Ah. Then you weren't with a woman last night.'

Severus turned his head sharply and stared at Flitwick.

'Well, when you left the ball after that dance with Miss Granger...that was quite interesting, by the way, whatever possessed you to dance with her?' he added as an aside, 'Anyway, after you left, Albus was looking for you everywhere.'

'Albus gave me no choice but to dance with the girl,' Severus snapped. Albus had been looking for him...that didn't bode well. 'Did he happen to say why?'

Filius snickered slightly causing Severus to grimace. 'He had invited a woman here last night. A Miss Moon, I believe. She wanted to meet you.'

Severus groaned. Why in Merlin's name had the headmaster forced him to dance with Granger if he'd invited a woman to the bloody ball for him to meet?

After another moment, Filius added conspiratorially, 'I do hope that you weren't off with a particular female student, Severus. I shudder to think of how surly you'd be after you'd received the same treatment as Kettleburn.'

Severus actually did shudder. Professor Kettleburn had been the former teacher for Care of Magical Creatures, the position that Hagrid now held. As Snape recalled, at the Welcoming Feast five years prior, Dumbledore had announced to the students that Professor Kettleburn had retired to spend more time with his 'few remaining limbs'. The other teachers, however, knew that Professor Kettleburn was enjoying the fact that he was still in possession of his favourite limb after Albus caught him with his pants down (quite literally) with a seventh-year Slytherin.

He looked to the centre of the table where the headmaster typically sat, and saw that the chair was still empty. Severus pushed his chair back so he could leave while he was still safe. He had some thinking to do and the last thing he needed was Dumbledore interfering... whether because the seemingly omnipotent fool had learned of his indiscretions, or because he still had this Miss Moon staying at the castle for Severus to meet.

It was the sounds of the owls that caused Severus to look up and decide to wait another moment before rising from his chair. If nothing else, he'd have his copy of the *Daily Prophet* to keep him company while he was trying to figure out what to do about Granger's hand problem.

But it was not the delivery owl from the *Daily Prophet* that settled down in front of him moments later. Recognising it as a Ministry owl, Severus anticipated yet another letter outlining suggested changes in his current curriculum and began to remove the missive. It was then that the first owl was joined by three more, each clamouring for Severus' attention.

'Popular this morning,' Filius noted, amused.

Severus glowered and then returned his attention to the owls, removing three letters in turn and then, eventually, paying for his copy of the *Daily Prophet*. All four owls remained at the table, waiting to be fed, and Severus simply shoved his nearly full plate of breakfast towards them before gathering his post in his hands and heading to his office.

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The purpose of going to his office had been for some peace and quiet. He wasn't allowed to spend his entire day in his rooms, as he would have preferred. Besides, Dumbledore was bound to seek him out sooner or later in regards to Miss Moon and Severus' failure to be present during the majority of the Valentine's Day Ball. Severus preferred Albus to visit him in his office rather than in his private rooms.

He opened the door to his office to find a rather irritated looking headmaster already sitting behind Severus' own desk.

'Albus,' he grumbled in acknowledgement.

The headmaster remained seated behind the desk and motioned for Snape to have a seat in the chair that was normally reserved for errant students. Begrudgingly, Severus sat down in the hard, uncomfortable chair and began to feel every bit as guilty as a first year who was receiving his first detention.

'I see that you haven't opened this morning's post,' Dumbledore said, nodding towards Severus' hands. 'Why don't you do that now? Don't worry, I'll wait.'

Though there was a question in Professor Dumbledore's words, it was very clear to Severus that he had no choice in the matter, and a knot of unease began to grow in his stomach. And he suddenly realised that perhaps the letters from the Ministry were not, as he'd assumed, new curriculum recommendations or book lists. He placed the items in his lap, and taking up the first letter, he opened it and read:

Dear Mr Snape,

This letter is to inform you that your marriage license was received in our offices on February 14th at 11.59pm, confirming your wizarding binding.

We here at the Ministry of Magic Department of Wizarding Statistics would like to be the first to congratulate you and wish you a long and happy marriage.

Sincerely,

Matilda McGriff

Department of Wizarding Statistics

The knot was now a lead weight, sinking faster and faster into the pit of Severus' stomach. How the fuck had he'd been married last night? And more importantly, to whom? Though, he thought that he already knew and that didn't bode well for him or for his favourite limb.

Severus looked up to the headmaster and opened his mouth to speak, to defend himself, but Dumbledore held up a hand. 'Keep reading,' was all he said with a nod towards the remaining letters in Severus' lap.

With even more trepidation, Severus took up the next letter.

Professor Snape,

We have received notice that you married a student via an ancient, illegal and permanent charm last night. The Board of Governors for Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry do not look lightly on these types of infractions, especially when a student has clearly been taken advantage of.

You are immediately suspended from your teaching duties, without pay, until an informal hearing can be held.

Sincerely,

Gabriel Guntz

Chairman of the Board of Governors for Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose, allowing the offensive letter to fall to the floor. *Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.*

'There is more, Severus,' prodded Dumbledore.

Severus' eyes shot up to the non-twinkling eyes of his superior. *Fuck!*

He grabbed the final envelope, slit it open and read.

To: Severus Snape, Esq.

We are aware of the high sense of devotion which you displayed during this recent bloody war, and we need hardly remind you how important it is that we have a steady army of such faithful servants, to ensure the continued survival of the wizarding race. Organised training of skilled soldier-servants must begin at the earliest age possible; by age five if not sooner, in order to prevent such evils from happening again. Just as Merlin himself was trained in magic starting in his early years, so too shall your child be trained.

Under the terms of your pledge, we anticipate receiving your first child for training no later than six years hence, which means your child must be born within one year of this letter. We must again warn you that this magical pledge is unbreakable and cannot be changed by anyone, even the Office of Unspeakables. The Tower of London still has the remains of wizards and witches who tried to claim that they were not aware of the consequences of their contractual commitments.

It will be a very great satisfaction to us when we admit your child to our training program. We are anxious for confirmation of your wife's pregnancy, and have a variety of spells and potions to ensure timely conception.

We must remind you that the punishment for not upholding your agreement is two years in Azkaban for both you and your wife, during which time you will still be required to meet your commitment. We cannot do anything about releasing you from this imprisonment if you have not been actively attempting to fulfil your contract. You have entered into a powerful magical obligation and even we cannot break it unless specific terms can be met, such as sterility.

Finally, please note that we are not responsible if you neglected to inform your spouse of this agreement that binds both of you to these terms.

Again, we thank you for your pledge. Together we can ensure the continuation of the wizarding race as we prepare to enter into the 20th century and a brighter future.

Sincerely,

K Abbott

Ministry of Magic

Department of Magical Military and Defence

Severus dropped the last letter to his lap with a smile beginning to form on his lips as the weight in his stomach lifted. The old man had finally managed to pull one over on him, or nearly. Severus had to give him props for being able to tug Severus along this far, but Albus had made too many fatal mistakes in that last letter.

With only a hint of a smile on his face, Severus said, 'You truly had me going, old man, until I read that it was from the Department of Magical Military and Defence.'

Severus felt as if he'd been kicked in the stomach as soon as he noticed that Albus Dumbledore was still sitting before him, sadly shaking his head, with a grim expression.

'I'm afraid that this is no joke, my dear boy.'

'But this is preposterous!' Severus shouted, jumping up and waving the last letter in Dumbledore's direction.

'I quite agree with you, Severus, though I find *all* of it to be preposterous, not simply the pledging of your and your *wife's* firstborn child.'

Oh... Yes.... That's right. And as Severus suddenly acknowledged the full impact of everything that had been stated in the letters, his blood began to boil.

'What you did last night was foolish, Severus.'

'I didn't do any...!' Severus began to rage, but he was cut-off.

'You sought her out and you kissed her. Now, I may know that much, but I'm not even going to pretend that I know what your motives were, but the fact remains that you are just as much at fault in this matter as she is.'

Severus fought the urge to defend himself. He knew Albus well and since the old man was already blaming him, there was no talking himself out of anything now. As usual, Severus would be left with ensuring that those who were really at fault...Gryffindors...paid for their crimes.

The two men sat in silence for several minutes before curiosity about how much Albus truly knew got the better of him. 'How did you know?'

'As you well know, Severus, I have many eyes and ears within these walls. And, I happened to be walking towards the Gryffindor common room when I saw my Potions master emerge from an abandoned classroom in a highly agitated and dishevelled state. Once I looked inside the room and saw an equally flushed and rumpled seventh-year prefect, the pieces clicked immediately into place.'

'What do you know about the spell?'

'Not much more than you do.'

'I swear, Albus, that it was not an ancient charm. Miss Granger told me that her friends had simply created it.'

'Rest assured, I intend on interrogating Miss Patil and Miss Brown this morning, as well as the others who were involved. You and Miss Granger were not the only ones

who were wed as a result of this mess. Now, if you'll excuse me,' Dumbledore said as he stood from his seat, 'I have to go extend some invitations to my office. I expect to see you there in two hours, Severus. That should give you plenty of time to brood.' The headmaster stood, hovering over the chair that Snape occupied and waited until Severus gave a small nod of acknowledgement before Albus, at long last, left Severus alone with his thoughts.

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Up in his office, Albus went to his fireplace and with a handful of powder called, 'Minerva!'

When the Deputy Headmistress' head appeared in the flames, he beckoned her through and Summoned some tea for them.

They sat on a small sofa that he had Conjured in front of the fire as Albus prepared tea for them both.

'This must be something serious, Albus. Usually when you ask me to tea you insist that I be mother.'

He pulled from the pocket of his robes a small stack of letters and placed them on the coffee table in front of them.

'What are those?' Minerva asked suspiciously, lifting her cup to her lips and taking a sip.

'Today's post for a few of our seventh-year students that I took the liberty of intercepting this morning.'

Minerva lowered her cup and placed it back in the saucer. 'Now, I know that this is serious. Have you spoken with Severus yet about what his Slytherins are up to?'

Albus sighed and picked up the top letter and handed it to Minerva. 'I'm afraid, Minerva, that the students involved are from all houses, but the main culprits this time are from Gryffindor, and it's not good. Not good at all,' he said sadly, as he watched her face fall when she began to read one of the letters.

'Albus?' was all Minerva could say, in a soft, questioning voice.

'I know. It seems that Miss Brown tried a hand at spell creation a few nights ago and inadvertently triggered a bit of ancient magic. If we can find out exactly what happened, perhaps we can stave off the worst of it.'

'It gets worse than this?' Minerva asked, waving the letter in her hand.

He nodded. 'Much worse.'

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When Hermione had looked at her hands last night, after her... well, after the snogging session with a certain Potions master, she'd been on the verge of tears to see that the writing was still there. What was worse was that her left wrist now had what looked like a tattoo of a bracelet, which had two interlocking hearts on it. One heart held the letters 'SS', the other, 'HG'.

She'd tried to go to bed, but tossed and turned all night, barely even able to sleep. Her brain simply wouldn't shut down. But really, how could it have? It had been a horrible day that ended with the best kiss of her life, only to find that what she had been told was a cure to her affliction had only made things worse.

Insomnia didn't hit her very often, but when it did, it meant that she wouldn't be able to sleep even a single wink. As a result Hermione had spent a good portion of her night sitting in the Gryffindor common room with parchment, quill and ink, trying to see if she could figure out what to do about her problem.

Unfortunately, because it was the middle of the night, her resources were limited to the books she had in her trunk. And, although she had a rather impressive library, she had very few books on Divination and love spells. So, in reality, it had all been an exercise in futility.

This morning, before the other girls had awoken, she'd bandaged her hands again, hoping that the writing would not show through long enough for her to eat her breakfast and grab a few books from the library. Sitting in the Great Hall, where she could feel Professor Snape watching her, had been disconcerting and she couldn't help but think about what he'd say to her as soon as he realised that his name was still on the back of her hands. When she'd finished eating her small meal, she glanced up at the Head Table to realise that he had already left and she made her way to the library.

After thumbing through the card catalogue, Hermione collected a stack of books and found a table off in the far corner to begin her research. While on her third book and fifth sheet of notes, she was interrupted by someone sitting down in the chair opposite to her.

Without looking up from her current page, she asked, 'Can I help you with something?'

'What are you looking for?' the friendly voice countered.

'What do you think?' Hermione asked, exasperated.

'The writing didn't go away?'

Hermione looked up from her book and looked at her friend before shaking her head. 'No.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Well, I'm certainly not blaming you.' Hermione looked back down at her book and resumed her note-taking. When her friend didn't leave, Hermione asked, 'Was there something else? I need to research.'

'I just ran into Professor McGonagall. She's been looking for you.'

Dropping her quill, Hermione looked up again. 'She has?'

Ginny nodded. 'She told me that if I saw you, that you're wanted in Professor Dumbledore's office.'

A jumble of thoughts suddenly ran through Hermione's head, but all formed into a single thought *He knows*.

'Um. Thanks, Ginny.' Hermione took a deep breath and, after marking the page of the book she was on, collected her reference material. She checked-out the books and then left for her impromptu meeting with the headmaster.

After dropping off her books in her room, Hermione reluctantly made her way to Professor Dumbledore's office. It wasn't like her to dawdle, but... he knew, she knew that he knew, and facing the headmaster over something like this wasn't something that she was rushing to do. What would Professor Dumbledore say? What would he do? Would Professor Snape lose his job for kissing her? Would she be expelled? Well, if either of those things happened then she just had to prepare her defence well.

Mentally preparing herself for what she thought was the worst, she made her way to the gargoyles.

'Coconut ice,' she said, as she began to rub her hands. The itching, bubbling sensation that she'd felt the night before had suddenly returned. She looked down at her tightly bandaged hands to find that, once again, what was on her skin had bled through the covering. Irritated, Hermione pulled out her wand and Vanished the bandages.

'I don't know why you're even bothering trying to hide that. As I told you already, it brings more attention to it when things like that happen,' came a snarl from behind her.

Hermione turned around. 'Professor Snape,' she acknowledged in what sounded like a relaxed, calm voice. She wasn't calm and she certainly wasn't relaxed, not by a long-shot, and now that Professor Snape was standing so near her, she didn't know how she'd be able to appear relaxed in front of Dumbledore. The fact that Dumbledore had obviously summoned Professor Snape for this meeting confirmed Hermione's suspicions. 'Merlin, Professor Dumbledore must be furious,' she said softly.

He studied her for a moment, as if he was expecting her to say more, but when she remained silent, Snape simply nodded towards the staircase. 'The Headmaster will be even more irate if we keep him much longer.'

Taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly, Hermione stepped onto the staircase and it slowly began to move up. When Professor Snape moved onto the step behind her, she nearly held her breath in hopes that it would slow her heartbeat back down to a reasonable rate. She wanted to ask Professor Snape what to expect, wanted to know what all Professor Dumbledore *knew*, but just as she opened her mouth to say something she decided that it was easier not to know.

So, when she at last arrived at the door to Professor Dumbledore's office, she had no idea what to expect.

Professor Snape's arm came around the front of her and grasped the door knob, pushing the door open for them. 'After you.' Hermione thought he'd said something else, but didn't have time to try to decipher the words in her mind as she felt herself pushed into the room full of people.