In Love and War

by keeptheotherone

Summary

May 1998. The war with Voldemort is over and won ... or is it? Hermione Granger's parents are somewhere in Australia with no memory of their former life or even their own daughter, and Hermione has resolved her war is not over until she brings them home to England. Ron Weasley has family struggles of his own: with the death of one brother and the awkward return of another, a summer on the other side of the world sounds like the perfect escape. But transitioning from friends to lovers is not always easy, and some hurts seem impossible to forgive, as Percy Weasley knows all too well. Can the bonds of love and family mend the pieces of their lives torn apart by war?

The second of three fics covering the first year after the war; this one runs concurrently with Faintest, Slimmest, Wildest Chance and focuses on Ron and Hermione's summer, including the trip to Australia to retrieve her parents, as well as Percy’s reconciliation with his family.

Notes

The prelude is short, so I will post again in about twelve hours, but in general expect a new chapter every Wednesday. This story is in three sections, and I should (fingers crossed!) have the second one completed before I finish posting this first section, which is eleven chapters (not counting the prelude). Just a fair warning that posting might be sporadic later on, which is not typical for me. If you haven't read FSWC, this story should stand alone just like
FSWC's readers were able to follow along without having read this fic first. The title comes from Ron's repetition in DH of the famous quote "all's fair in love and war."

Disclaimer: You know the drill ;)}
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

May 2, 1998

Molly Weasley surveyed the Great Hall from her position at the Ravenclaw table. Minerva had replaced the house tables, and the Weasleys had simply sat down where they had previously been standing. Ginny’s head rested on her mother’s shoulder, and Molly stroked her hair absently as her eyes bounced round the room, moving from child to child in the old ritual she used to keep track of them in public. Bill, sitting across from her with Fleur. Charlie, next to Bill. Percy … despite his slumped posture and pale complexion, Molly’s eyes feasted on her prodigal son for a moment before searching the doors into the Great Hall. Arthur had gone with Fred and George, and they weren’t back yet. Ron and Hermione were at the table behind her with a group of friends. Ginny nestled under her wing. Harry sat with the Lovegood girl beneath a window at the Gryffindor table. Bill and Fleur, Charlie, Percy … Arthur and George still weren’t back, and Fred wouldn’t be with them when they were.

Fred would never be with them again.

Molly pulled Ginny a little closer and resumed the ritual that had kept her children safe during countless visits to the Muggle village, Diagon Alley, even Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. Ron and Hermione, still talking with other members of Dumbledore’s Army, almost directly over the spot where Remus and Tonks….

Molly had been so close … so close to keeping her family intact through this war. Percy had stumbled into the Room of Requirement and her heart had positively soared—soared straight into her mouth and robbed her of speech so that Fred had actually been the first person to greet him. Mere hours … her family had been whole again, if scattered across the castle and grounds, for mere hours before Freddie….

“Mum, you’re hurting me,” Ginny said gently.

Molly realized her fingernails were digging into her daughter’s arm and Ginny’s face was squashed against her shoulder. She let go with a gasp, stroking the nail marks with her opposite hand. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, love, I—”

Where was Harry?

Molly turned round. Ron and Hermione were gone too. Frantic, the natural worry of motherhood expounded by years of fear, Molly repeated the ritual. Bill and Fleur, Charlie, Percy, and as she scanned the doors for a sign of George and Arthur, she spotted them—Ron and Hermione leaving the Great Hall with an unnatural gap between them. Understanding and remembrance washed over her, and Molly settled Ginny’s head back on her shoulder.

They were safe. Voldemort was dead—she had watched him fall—and his best lieutenant with him. Greyback would never threaten any of her family again. It was not without cost or sacrifice, but her family was safe.

As long as there was breath in her body, Molly Weasley meant to keep it that way.
Chapter End Notes

This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:

Feedback

- Short comments
- Long comments
- Questions
- Constructive criticism
- “<3” as extra kudos

LLF Comment Builder

This author replies to comments.

If you don’t want a reply from me, for whatever reason (no judgement here!), feel free to sign your comment with “whisper” and I will appreciate it but not respond!
Chapter One

Hermione Granger drifted towards consciousness slowly, cocooned in warmth and softness with an overwhelming sense of safety.

*Ron.*

She had often woken in Ron’s arms since the escape from Malfoy Manor, but never quite like this. For starters, they were in a bed—at Hogwarts, Hermione remembered. She was in Ron and Harry’s dormitory in Gryffindor Tower, in the bed she had made by magically joining both boys’ mattresses into one. Ron’s arm was heavy across her, his hand—

With a blush she knew was ridiculous since no one could see (not only was it pitch black inside the closed bed curtains, but two sets of snoring filled her ears), Hermione gently moved Ron’s hand off her breast, reaching back to set it on his own thigh. Harry lay an arm’s length in front of her, facing the door. Hermione contemplated her situation for a moment, flexing the hand that had been gripping her wand before carefully sitting up and crawling to the end of the bed. She couldn’t find the break in the bed curtains without moving too much and finally settled for climbing over the footboard and ducking beneath them, reaching up to smooth the static out of her hair. It was rough and crunchy, and she remembered it had been badly burned.

Hermione shivered and pushed the memories away. They hadn’t thought to light the fire before they laid down, and the air was cool outside the heavy velvet. She lit her wand, found her shoes, and tiptoed out of the room.

The common room was bustling. Pupils and family members alike were scattered around the room’s squishy armchairs and sofas, and a large fire blazed in the fireplace. Hermione sat down in front of it to put on her shoes.

“Hungry?”

She looked up to see a freckled hand holding a sandwich and accepted Bill’s offer gratefully.

“Thanks,” she said, losing no time in taking her first bite.

“Come sit with the family.”

Warmed by the invitation, Hermione followed him to the edge of the room where the Weasleys had pulled a sofa beside one of the tables. She looked out the window. The night was starry and cloudless; smoke rose from the chimney of Hagrid’s cabin. Hermione took the empty seat across from Fleur, who poured her a glass of pumpkin juice from the pitcher in the center of the table, which also contained a platter of sandwiches and scattered biscuit crumbs.

“Ron and Harry still asleep?” Bill asked.

Hermione nodded, then greeted the young man sitting beside her. “Hi, Percy. It’s … good to see you.”

She didn’t know when Percy had arrived; hadn’t even known he had come back until he and Fred backed into the corridor off the Room of Requirement, and then there was the explosion….

Percy cleared his throat. “Thanks. I’m—I’m glad you’re okay.”
Hermione remembered seeing her own name on the list of witches and wizards “invited” to appear before the Muggle-born Registration Commission, a list that Percy, working in the Minister’s office, had likely seen even before it was published.

“Thanks.” She looked round the table at Fleur, Bill, and Percy, at Charlie and Mr. Weasley sitting on the sofa. “Where’s Ginny?”

“She took Mum upstairs hours ago,” Bill said. “Fleur doesn’t know where Ginny’s dormitory is, and none of us can get up there. Would you mind…..”

“Not at all,” Hermione said, taking a second sandwich before standing up.

“Let the girl eat, Bill,” Mr. Weasley said reprovingly. “Sit down, Hermione. Chew your food. I’m certain they’re doing all right.”

Hermione obeyed, feeling self-conscious in the silence as she was the only one eating. Beside her, Fleur’s head slipped on her propped hand.

“Have you slept yet?” Hermione asked her. “I’m sure there’s extra beds in the lower dormitories. I’ll show you.”

“It is all right. I want to stay here.”

“Here, take my place,” Charlie said, and there was a short shuffle as he and Mr. Weasley moved to make room for Fleur to lie down on the other end of the sofa.

Hermione finished her juice and wiped her mouth. “I think—” She yawned. “Excuse me. I think I might be able to sleep again. I’ll check on Ginny and Mrs. Weasley first.”

Hermione opened the door on the sixth landing, waited a moment for her eyes to adjust to the moonlight, and moved to the second bed on the left.

“Ginny?” she whispered.

A pale hand reached out from the middle of the bed, parting the curtains. “It’s okay, I’m awake,” Ginny said softly. “Is Mum asleep?”

“Where is she?”

Ginny indicated the bed beside the door, and Hermione pulled the curtains back, stepping aside so Ginny could see her mother, asleep on her side with her plait falling over one shoulder.

“Good,” Ginny said in relief, scooting over to make room as Hermione climbed in beside her, then pulled the curtains closed again.

“Who’s that?” Hermione said, pointing at the bed directly opposite, where the outline of a person had been visible. She spoke in a normal voice, having set the privacy charms on Ginny’s bed herself, years ago.

“Amy Green.”

Hermione frowned. “Why does that name sound familiar?”

“Egypt.”

She gasped. “Bill’s old girlfriend? Really?”
“Mm-hmm. She joined the Order. Apparently Charlie sent a message to everyone.”

Hermione studied her friend, whose face was just a few inches away from hers on the same pillow. “How are you?”

Ginny shrugged one shoulder.

Hermione turned onto her back, careful not to fall out of the single bed. “Yeah,” she sighed.

“I can’t stop thinking about them,” Ginny whispered. “The only way I can stop thinking about Fred is to think of Tonks, or Lupin, or Colin, and—”

Hermione’s eyes welled with tears, and she reached for Ginny’s hand. Ginny squeezed back painfully, and the two girls lay still in a silence too heavy for words.

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Ron Weasley woke suddenly and completely. Hermione was gone.

He sat bolt upright, then relaxed as his movements caused a flutter of fabric to his left. He was in his dormitory at Hogwarts. At Hogwarts, and the war was over.

The mattress beside him was cool to the touch. Hermione was indeed gone, but probably no farther than the common room. Ron squinted to his right, where Harry’s form was just visible as a blacker shadow in the darkness. He had not stirred with the sudden movement, and now Ron got out of bed carefully, not wanting to wake Harry from what was probably his best sleep in months.

Maybe years.

Ron didn’t join his family in the common room. Dad and Seamus’s mother were talking in one corner, and Bill and Percy sat at a nearby table, but the armchairs in front of the fireplace were empty. Ron dropped into “his” chair, staring at the empty one beside him.

For a while there, he had thought Harry would never sit beside him again.

It was such a Harry thing to do, to sacrifice himself for everyone else, to not risk Ron or Hermione by facing Voldemort alone, that as soon as Ron looked round and saw that Harry was not with them in the Great Hall, Ron knew where he had gone—and the knowledge had nearly knocked him to his knees. Even now, just the memory of that fear was powerful enough to make Ron glad he was sitting down.

Like the moment when Percy backed into view with Fred.

Ron hadn’t recognized him at first; so used to seeing Fred and George together, his brain simply identified the tall ginger as “not-George” and stumbled over that fact even as he, Harry, and Hermione had run forward to help. The shock—the sheer shock of seeing Percy here, at Hogwarts—had been superceded by what happened next.

And then it didn’t matter, did it? It didn’t matter that he hadn’t spoken to Percy in ages, it didn’t matter that Percy hadn’t had a chance to apologize. Ron had lifted himself off the floor after the explosion and looked first for Hermione and Harry. It was only when he saw them staggering to their feet, covered in dust but basically uninjured, that he had checked on his brothers, and….

“Here you go.” Bill dumped a bag of Chocolate Frogs into Ron’s lap and sat down.
“Midnight snack,” Bill said. “Or close enough, anyway.”

Ron glanced at the grandfather clock near the portrait hole and saw it was nearly two in the morning. That meant Kreacher’s breakfast had been more than twelve hours ago.

“Thanks,” he said, ripping open a Chocolate Frog and glancing at the card by habit. Morgan le Fey. He had nearly as many of her as he did Morgana.

“Where’s Hermione?” Ron said.

Bill raised one eyebrow, but Ron was unfazed. He hadn’t not known where Hermione was since Christmas, and he wasn’t going to apologize for asking.

“She came down a little after eleven and had a couple sandwiches, then went upstairs to check on Mum and Ginny. She didn’t come back, so I guess they’re all asleep now,” Bill said. He watched Ron eat for a moment, then said, “You should come say hello.”

Ron didn’t look up from Myron Wagtail. “I will. In a minute. I….”

“Yeah.” Bill looked across the room to where Percy was pretending to ignore them. “Don’t leave it too long, okay? He wants to see you.”

After assuring Harry he was coming home with them, Ron left Harry to eat with Neville and went to meet his family. As he got closer, he saw Fleur asleep on the sofa that faced their table. Percy had his back to the room.

What did you say to a brother you hadn’t spoken to for nearly three years, whom you had last seen crying over the dead body of the brother between you?

Percy stood up as Ron approached, and there was an awkward silence while they just stared at each other.

“I’m sorry about the letter,” Percy said. “The one that I wrote—”

“Warning me to stay away from Harry?”

Percy swallowed. “Yes. I—made a mistake. I was wrong. About a lot of things.”

“Yeah,” Ron said, remembering the hateful things Percy had said about Harry, about Dumbledore. About Dad. “You were.” He kept staring at Percy, so similar as before, and yet … not. “Blimey, this is weird.” Ron waved his hand between their faces, which were even in height. “I don’t have to look up at you any more.”

He froze, as usual having not thought before he spoke. This was difficult enough without Percy thinking he meant….

Percy pushed his glasses up with one finger. “I think,” he said with reassuringly familiar solemnity, “that it might be the other way round now.”

Ron’s jaw went slack. He glanced down at Percy’s outstretched hand, then back at the blue eyes so similar to his own. They were brothers. No matter what had happened, they were brothers, and Ron wasn’t going to lose any more of those than he had to.
He grasped Percy’s hand and pulled him into a hug. Percy gripped his shoulders tightly, and Ron fist ed the back of Percy’s robes with his free hand. They separated after a moment, heads still close together. Then, just because he could now, Ron spun Percy around into a chokehold and dug his knuckles into his skull. Percy gave a shout of protest and grabbed his wrist.

“Qu’est-ce que c’est?” Fleur raised up, her long hair falling into her face.

Ron only just managed to avoid sitting on her as Percy twisted, trying to throw him off.

“For Godric’s sake,” Bill said. “You’re not the only people in the room. Knock it off and sit down.” But he smiled.

So did everyone else who had witnessed the reunion, including Dad. Fleur mumbled something else in French and rolled over.

Ron and Percy broke apart, Percy ruffling Ron’s hair and Ron making a grab for his glasses, which quickly changed into a grab for food when he saw the platter on the table.

“What’s going on?” he asked, swallowing his first bite whole.

“No idea,” Charlie said, pushing the food closer to Ron. “The Prophet printed a special evening edition, but it didn’t really say anything we didn’t already know, seeing as we were here. Food’s been sent up a few times. Everyone’s just sleeping and eating whenever they feel like it. I reckon McGonagall might make some announcements at breakfast.”

“What about the people sent to St. Mungo’s?” Ron said, thinking of Lavender and the others he had seen lined up at the front of the Great Hall.

Percy shook his head. “No word there, either.”

Bill, who was facing the dormitories, jerked his chin towards the stairs. “Hermione’s here,” he said quietly.

Ron spun round, but when she saw him sitting with his brothers, she gave him an understanding smile and changed directions to sit with Harry, who was now talking with Amy Green and shooting repeated looks at the door to the girls’ staircase as he waited for Ginny to appear.
“Have you seen me mam?”

Percy looked up at the sandy-haired young man who had approached Ron and tried to place him, having made a point of learning the names of everyone in Gryffindor while he was a prefect. The wizard’s features were distorted with bruises and swelling, but he had an Irish accent and was presumably Ron’s year from the apparent familiarity between the two as he flopped onto the sofa beside him. So … Finnigan. Seamus Finnigan.

“Dad was talking with her a couple hours ago, but I haven’t seen her in a while,” Ron said.

Bill stuck out his hand, which Seamus shook. “Bill Weasley. This is Charlie, and I reckon you remember Percy.”

Seamus nodded and introduced himself. “I, er … I’m sorry about Fred,” he said to Ron.

“Thanks,” Ron muttered.

“Those look like old bruises,” Charlie observed.

“They are,” Seamus said. “Courtesy of a few fellow seventh-years.”

“What?” Percy said sharply. “Surely the teachers—”

Seamus gave him a scathing look. “We had Death Eaters for teachers this year, mate. Or don’t you read the Prophet?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Ginny’s been in the hospital wing more than once,” Bill said quietly. “And there was no Quidditch this year.”

Percy looked away. Despite everything, he’d always assumed Hogwarts had been a haven, that his sister, at least, was safe.

“Ah, but she gives better than she gets, our Ginny,” Seamus said with a contortion of his features that might have been a smile. “She’s a brilliant witch.”

“How so?” Charlie said curiously.

Desperate for news on the siblings who’d grown up without him, Percy sat back and tried not to look too interested.

“She’s fast. Nobody in the DA has been able to best her since before Christmas. I reckon even Harry would be hard-pressed to do it now.”

Ron snorted. “Godric, I’d like to see that.”

“I thought we might have earlier,” Bill said.

The row between Harry and Ginny had been a shock, for Percy to see that Ginny’s celebrity crush had grown into something more, to watch the girl who used to knock things over whenever Harry entered a room stand up to him to the point she nearly knocked him over, to notice a young woman
whom Harry—or anyone, really—had fallen in love with and realize it was his little sister. Whatever happened between the two of them after that row, there was no denying there were strong feelings on both sides.

“That’s the first time I’ve ever seen her cry, and believe me, she had reason enough this year,” Seamus said. “Nothing fired her up like when the Carrows started torturing the first- and second-years. She’s good with the younger kids. They trust her, listen to her. Kept a lot of people out of trouble this year, Ginny did. She’s good with charms too—she did most of the banners and slogans we left around the castle. Picked up on nonverbal spells pretty quick, which is dead useful in a duel, as you might imagine. Oh, and she does this neat trick with wandless magic, some kind of stinging jinx if anyone grabs her.”

“We remember,” Ron said darkly.

Seamus laughed, then stopped abruptly, grabbing his ribs and wheezing. Bill conjured a glass of water for him.

“Couldn’t have done it without her,” Seamus said after a few sips. “Her and Neville and Luna. Kind of like you three,” he said to Ron. “Course the stuff from Fred and George’s shop helped a lot too.”

Percy thought about the girl he’d left behind. Ginny had been thirteen when he walked out, by all indications a good pupil but still young enough not to know anything impressive. She couldn’t have conjured a glass or the water to fill it, and now she was a leader of what sounded like a serious resistance movement and the best dueler in the school?

“Comes by it honest, doesn’t she?” Seamus said.

“What?”

“Your mum,” Seamus said simply. “There’s Bellatrix Lestrange dueling the three best witches in Hogwarts, and in comes your mum and finishes her off. I think maybe we’re all lucky Ginny’s still not fully qualified.”

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“Hi.”

It was Hermione, looking a little worse for wear despite being freshly showered. Her burned hair had broken off in clumps, and the rest of it was wadded into a knot at the back of her head. She was dressed in jeans and her mum’s university jumper, and she’d obviously been crying.

Seamus jerked a thumb in Ron’s direction. “Please tell me this prat has found his bollocks and confessed his undying love for you by now.”

“Oi, watch your mouth!” Ron punched him in the arm.

“You’re one to talk,” Hermione retorted.

“Did Mam go upstairs?”

Hermione shook her head. “I’m sorry, Seamus. She’s not in Ginny’s dormitory. Do you want me to go look for her?”

“Nah,” he said, looking disappointed. “No need to disturb anyone else. Just tell her I was asking
about her if you see her, yeah?”

They said they would and Seamus walked away.

“How’s Ginny?” Bill said instantly.

“Really, really upset,” Hermione said. “There was some Dreamless Sleep Potion sitting on your mum’s bedside cabinet, so I gave her a dose. She should be out for a while.”

“Fancy a walk?” Ron asked, eager to get out from under the noses of his brothers.

She followed him through the portrait hole, and they set off down the corridor, alone together for the first time since they had come back from the Chamber of Secrets.

Since she kissed him. And since she had done that, the least he could do was—

He reached out and took her hand, and she looked up at him with a smile.

“Here.” Hermione led him into an empty classroom, then began digging in her beaded bag. “We need to find Harry and convince him to give Ginny another chance.”

Ron sat on a desk. “I thought once Voldemort was dead we’d be done with these ‘what are we going to do about Harry?’ conversations.”

Hermione looked up with the Marauder’s Map in hand. “I know. We need to talk about—” She bit her lip and blushed, dropping her gaze.

“I meant it,” Ron blurted. “Not what I said about now or never, I mean—the kiss. I meant it.”

“So did I.”

“Okay then.”

She was looking at him again, the same direct, open look she’d given him weeks ago when he’d first told her he loved her that night after Malfoy Manor, when he’d refused to let her say it back and they’d agreed to set aside their feelings to focus on Harry and the war.

“So, um, Harry,” she said, smoothing out the map on the teacher’s desk. “Any ideas where to look? Oh!”

“What is it?”

“The map,” Hermione said. “It’s all messed up. Look.”

Ron moved to look over her shoulder. The entrance to Gryffindor Tower appeared to be on the fifth floor, the dungeons overlapped with the Entrance Hall and the Great Hall, and there were gaps and broken lines everywhere.

“Blimey. Do you think it can be fixed?”

“I don’t know, but certainly not before the castle is repaired. We’ll have to just search for Harry’s dot.”

Ron summoned two chairs and began examining the left side of the parchment. “Maybe we should let Harry and Ginny work it out themselves.”
“We will,” Hermione said, ignoring the chair behind her as she poured over the map, her finger tracing in straight, systematic lines. “I know Ginny wants to apologize—she wanted to go find him right away—but I don’t think Harry wants to listen to her. He’s been so focused on what he had to do that I know he hasn’t been thinking about what it was like for her this year.”

“That’s not true. He’s been worried sick about her. You’ve seen him with the map.”

“I know, that’s my point. He’s been worried about her, about what’s happened to her physically, not emotionally. Ginny had to deal with being left behind, with loving someone who couldn’t love her back.”

“But he does love her,” Ron said, confused. “I’m not sure he’s figured out yet that’s what it is, but —”

“She thought he was dead, and he didn’t say goodbye. He hardly said hello to her. She’s had a whole year of stress and worry and fear, and then Harry comes back, and then Fred dies, and then we all think Harry’s d-dead, and—”

Ron reached out to rub her back. “Okay. It’s okay, Hermione.”

She sniffed. “I just want him to understand where she’s coming from, that’s all. They’re good together. You know they are.” She glared up at him like she expected him to disagree.

Ron held up both hands. “Yeah, I know. All right. I think we can eliminate any of the usual places. He’ll want somewhere remote, out of the way, where no one is going to come on him by accident.”

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Percy followed his family to the Great Hall for breakfast. He had slept a few hours after Ron and Hermione left the common room but thought he might actually feel worse for it. Ginny had still not reappeared, but Mum had come downstairs shortly after sunrise. Although Percy was reasonably certain George was awake, he had not responded to an offer of breakfast, and after a moment’s contemplation, Percy left him alone.

Hermione was already sitting at the Gryffindor table, reviewing a copy of the Daily Prophet. The Weasleys spread out along both sides of the table, passing dishes and teapots back and forth until everyone was served. Ron and Harry arrived in the middle of this process, the first time the family had seen Harry since he ran out of the common room after the row with Ginny. Percy followed Bill and Charlie’s lead in his treatment of Harry, which could best be described as a distant politeness. As Charlie had predicted, McGonagall got up to make a few announcements: the school was closed, Filch would coordinate volunteers for castle repairs, and the Aurors were still working and requested everyone stay within the house dormitories until further notice. As the family merged with the others leaving the Great Hall, Percy noticed his dad dawdling behind and caught Bill’s eye, and the three men let the others move ahead.

“We need to secure the house,” Dad said quietly. “I was hoping you would be willing to help, speed the job along.”

“Of course,” Percy said, pleased to be asked.

“Definitely,” Bill said. “Charlie will want to help too. Where is he?” He looked over his shoulder.

“I saw him leave the castle with Amy,” Dad said. “We’ll meet him coming back from the gates. Let me tell your mum where we’re going.”
Percy waited by the marble staircase as Bill followed to do the same with Fleur. It was strange, thinking of him as married. Not that Percy thought Bill wouldn’t be, some day, but Percy had known nothing about it, had no idea his brother was even seeing someone on a regular basis when the wedding invitation arrived. Fleur Isabelle Delacour, the Beauxbatons champion. He hadn’t seen that one coming. Percy watched as she spoke quietly with Bill, glancing in his direction, and wondered what she had been told.

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Ron, Hermione, and Harry left the Great Hall together, but Harry stopped as soon as they entered the Entrance Hall.

“I’m just going to—” He broke off, pulling a corner of his Invisibility Cloak out of his pocket.

“Yeah, okay.” Ron nodded.

Hermione watched Harry cross the blood-stained Entrance Hall, disappearing in just a few steps before they could tell if he was heading for the marble staircase or the front doors. She opened her mouth.

“He’s fine,” Ron said firmly. “He just needs some time alone, that’s all.”

She looked unconvinced but nodded anyway. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Do you want to be alone? With your family?”

Ron looked down at her, the wild hair, the busted lip, the University of Bristol jumper she wore when she was especially homesick, and said the first thing that came to mind.

“I—I mean—”

But she smiled and reached for his hand, and they turned towards the great oak doors without speaking, following the slope of the lawn towards the beech tree they had sat under so many times before. She didn’t say a word about McGonagall’s instructions for everyone to stay within the common rooms and dormitories; Ron thought she had become so used to rebelling against the status quo over the last few years that she hadn’t even noticed they were breaking the rules. Hermione leaned into him, her head against his upper arm as they walked. He wanted to put his arm around her, to hold her, but he didn’t want to let go of her hand.

He didn’t want to let go of her ever again.

She conjured a blanket (in Gryffindor red and gold) and they sat down, backs against the trunk and facing out towards the lake.

“Do you think McGonagall is going to let us come back to school?”

This question was so far from Ron’s thoughts he physically jerked. “What?”

“McGonagall. Do you think she’ll let us come back next year? She said all the seventh-years had to meet with their Head of House at eleven o’clock, and Harry said she specifically mentioned she was
expecting us.”

Ron began plucking blades of grass with one hand. “I don’t know.” As much as he loved Hogwarts, he didn’t want to come back. Not now, not after everything that happened this year. But he knew without asking that Hermione would want to take her N.E.W.T.s and leave school properly.

“I’m sure I can, as a Muggle-born. They’ll have to let all the Muggle-borns back … that means all of us will be a year behind….”

But not Colin. Little Colin Creevey was left behind for good.

“Can’t we talk about something else?” Ron complained. “For a whole year, it’s been nothing but Horcruxes and Harry and Hallows, and I’m sick of it.”

“I was talking about Hogwarts,” she retorted.

“Enough with the ‘h’ already.”

“Fine.”

She made to stand up, and Ron realized his mistake.

“But not Hermione,” he said quickly, grabbing her arm. “There’s never enough Hermione.”

She looked down at her hands. “You’ve got sick of me before.”

“No, I haven’t, not really. I just … didn’t know what to do about how I felt about you.”

She glanced at him, then back at her hands, which were clenched tightly together. “And now?”

“Now, I—”

Why was this so hard? He’d already told her he loved her, during that first night at Shell Cottage. But having a real chance with her had seemed a far-off dream then, something vague and hazy that only existed on the other side of an impossible set of “ifs.” If they could find all the Horcruxes. If Harry could destroy Voldemort. If they could stay successfully hidden, avoid another capture.

If they both survived.

“Now I don’t want to be friends anymore, Hermione.”

She sucked in a breath, golden-brown eyes wide.

“No! Shit, that’s not what I mean. Of course I want to be friends with you.” He took both her hands in his. “Sorry,” he said, stroking the backs of her hands with his thumbs, tracing every scratch and bruise she’d acquired in the Battle. “That’s just not all I want anymore. I want more.” He forced himself to look her in the eye. “I want everything, and I want it with you. Say—” He swallowed. “Please, say you want that too.”

“Of course I do,” Hermione said, lacing her fingers with his. “I want that more than anything—I want you more than anything. I love you, Ron.”

“I love you,” he whispered, right before his lips touched hers.

It was a gentle kiss, sweet, nothing like their first kiss in the Room of Requirement. This kiss was slow and deliberate, and Ron wanted to savor every second of it. Hermione dropped one of his
hands to place hers behind his neck, and he used his free arm to pull her closer. After a minute, he
pulled back to look at her. She was pink, and she gave him a shy smile.

So he kissed her again.
Chapter Three

Following Bill’s instructions not to Apparate inside the house or garden, Percy landed on the dirt road beside the crooked sign identifying the Burrow.

“It’s still standing,” Dad said in relief. “Come on.”

“No, wait,” Bill said sharply, putting out one arm to stop him. “They’ve almost certainly cursed it.”

“You two stay here,” Dad ordered, following slowly in Bill’s wake, both of them with wands out.

Percy and Charlie watched Bill work for a few minutes, then lost sight of him when he entered the house. Charlie sat down in the long grass beside the road.

“Fancy a game of Exploding Snap?” Charlie asked.

“What?”

Charlie drew his wand, and in seconds Percy saw a small, deck-of-cards-sized object fly out of one of the upstairs windows.

“CHARLIE!” Bill’s magically magnified voice followed in short order.

Percy laughed at the look on Charlie’s face.

“Dammit,” he said, catching the cards. “I really didn’t think he’d notice.”

“He’ll have a magical detection shield up,” Percy said. “You just set it off.”

“Better make it worth it then. Come on, sit down.”

They were two and two on a best three out of five when Dad called them inside the house.

“Stay on the first two floors,” he instructed when Percy and Charlie entered the kitchen. “Bill’s still clearing the rest of the house, but we can start putting things in order.”

Percy looked around the room at the overturned table; the smashed stoneware; the slashed bags of flour, beans, and sugar or salt that spilled out of the pantry. Even with magic, this was going to take a while. Bill’s work did too; they had cleaned the ground and first floors and were waiting on the staircase to the second floor before he reappeared.

“Our brilliant baby brother didn’t think to take down the ‘Ronald’s Room’ sign,” Bill said, joining them with a sigh. “They left him some very nasty welcome home presents, indeed.”

Dad looked alarmed. “Is it—”

“It’s fine,” Bill said. “Nothing I haven’t run into before. It just took a while, that’s all. I’ve cleared the whole house, every room, cupboard, and stair. Even the attic. You can reactivate the usual protective charms now.”

“Charlie, you do that. Percy, head over to your auntie Muriel’s and start packing up everyone’s belongings. We’ll join you when we’ve finished clearing up here.”

“Dad, Percy can’t get in,” Bill said as Charlie clattered down the stairs to set the wards from outside.
“The Fidelius Charm.”

“Oh, right. Listen carefully, Percy. The home of Arthur and Molly Weasley is at Riverdale, Ottery St. Catchpole.”

“Dad, I’m going to get a drink,” Bill said. “I’ll be right back.” He followed Percy into the kitchen.


“Yes, it is. There’s one on our house too.”

Percy frowned in confusion, then realized by “our,” Bill meant his and Fleur’s.

“What happened?”

“You heard the story that Ron was home with spattergroit?”

Percy nodded. He had guessed (hoped) that wasn’t true, but there was something that had been nagging him. “How did you fool the Ministry inspectors?”

Bill looked up from digging in the pantry and grinned. “Ron and Dad charmed the ghoul and dressed him in Ron’s pajamas.”

Percy gaped. “The—What? The ghoul—our ghoul? The one in the attic?”

“The very same,” Bill said, twisting the lid off an extremely dusty Butterbeer bottle and taking a long drink. “We found out Ron, Harry, and Hermione were captured when they came to Shell Cottage a few days before Easter. That meant the Death Eaters knew he was traveling with Harry, knew he didn’t have spattergroit, and knew we had lied. Mum, Dad, Ginny, Fred, and George went into hiding at Auntie Muriel’s, and we put a Fidelius Charm on her house and on ours.”

“Malfoy Manor,” Percy said quietly. “They were captured and taken to Malfoy Manor.”

Bill nodded, then lowered his bottle. “You knew just enough to be scared shitless, didn’t you?”

“Pretty much,” Percy said, staring out the kitchen window. “I heard—overheard—there had been three high-security captures, that there was some scuffle at Malfoy Manor involving You-Know-Who himself, but that was it. I couldn’t find out what actually happened.”

“You want me to go over to Auntie’s with you? She’s going to be in rare form.”

Percy groaned but shook his head. “Better for you to come rescue me in half an hour or so.”

“I’ll do it,” Bill promised, then clapped him on the shoulder and went back upstairs.

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Hermione held Ron’s hand as they walked down the drive with Harry, Ginny, and the rest of the Weasleys, leaving Hogwarts behind. Hermione had been beyond relieved to see Harry and Ginny holding hands when they climbed through the portrait hole into Gryffindor Tower this afternoon. Now they walked side by side but not hand in hand, and Hermione gathered they had at least reached an understanding, if not yet a return to their previous relationship. She wasn’t surprised; if she hadn’t witnessed the row herself, she would not have believed Ginny could throw their relationship back in Harry’s face like that.

Mr. Weasley spoke as they stepped through the metal gates. “All right, everyone, let’s Apparate into
the garden. Bill, Charlie, and Percy in the front, George, Ron, and Ginny, you’re out back. I don’t want anyone getting splinched because we tried to Apparate onto the same spot.”

Without thinking about it, Hermione reached out for Harry and twisted the three of them into darkness, getting just a glimpse of Ginny’s outstretched hand before the suffocating pressure overwhelmed her.

They landed just outside the fence, between the garden and the house. George and Ginny appeared several yards to their right seconds later. Hermione dropped Ron’s and Harry’s hands and followed Ginny into the house.

“I’m sorry, I forgot—”

“It’s fine.”

Ginny did not hold the door open for her, and Hermione grabbed it just before it closed in her face.

“I forgot you’re still underage,” Hermione said, trailing Ginny through the kitchen. “We’ve been Apparating all over the country all year, and that’s how we did it—I took Harry and Ron by Side-Along.”

“Fine.” Ginny started up the stairs.

“Did you have Apparition lessons this year?”

“No.” Ginny entered her room and immediately began stripping her unmade bed.

Hermione watched her for a moment, but when Ginny didn’t say anything else, she left to get sheets for both of them.

“I’m sorry,” Ginny said, taking the top set of sheets when Hermione returned.

“It’s okay. I didn’t mean to exclude you.”

“I should be used to him disappearing right in front of me by now.”

“What happened?” Hermione said quietly.

“I apologized, he said some things that made me feel like a prat, and we agreed to start over.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

“It’s better than we were this morning. Not as good as I hoped for yesterday.”

“It’ll get better,” Hermione said. “Harry adores you.”

“Not right now, I’m afraid.” Ginny kicked her dirty sheets to the side and shoved her trunk, sent ahead from Hogwarts, to the foot of her bed.

Hermione sat on her own freshly made bed. “I don’t want to get you in trouble, but … do you think you could cut my hair? It’s burned so badly, and I don’t want to bother your mum.”

Ginny dropped a framed photo back in her trunk and pulled out her wand. “Let’s take a look.”

Hermione was reaching up to let her hair down when she heard a commotion on the stairs. Several loud thumps and a screech, George’s voice swearing, and more noise that sounded like—meowing?
“Crookshanks?” Hermione said, bounding out of the room. “Is that you—oh, Crookshanks!” A cat carrier lay upended at the base of the stairs, looking for all the world as if it had been carried partway up before being dropped and allowed to slide back to the bottom. Crooks was standing on his hind legs to press his face to the grate, and if possible, he meowed even louder at the sight of his long-lost mistress.

“He scratched me,” George said indignantly, blood trickling between his fingers as he clutched his injured forearm with the opposite hand. “Reached right through the grate and scratched me!”

Hermione paid him no mind. “Oh, Crookshanks, you poor thing,” she cooed, picking up his basket and carrying him back to Ginny’s room. “Let’s get you out of this basket, love, what do you say? Yeah? Mummy missed you.”

Hermione set the cat basket on her bed and opened the door. Crookshanks shot out, butting into her stomach with surprising force. She knelt beside the bed to put her face near his and smoothed his fur, fighting back tears.

“I have Arnold too,” George said, standing at the very edge of Ginny’s doorway and pulling the Pygmy Puff out of his pocket.

“You carried him with Crookshanks?” Ginny exclaimed. “No wonder you got scratched, George! Crooks thinks he’s his personal play toy.” She raised her pet to her shoulder, where he burrowed happily into her hair. “Here, let me take a look at that.” She reached for his arm, but he waved her away and climbed on up the stairs.

Hermione half-lay on the bed, scratching Crookshanks’s ears, chin, back—whatever part of him she could reach as he circled around her in excitement.

“Look at him,” Ginny said, laughing. “He hasn’t let me give him that much affection all year.”

“Thanks for taking care of him,” Hermione said, burying her face in his fur. “He looks really good.”

“Ah, well. Not much to do at Auntie’s but help with Fred and George’s owl orders and brush the cat.”

Ginny went very still, and Hermione knew she had said Fred’s name without thinking. Knew she was thinking there was no more “Fred and George.” Before Hermione could come up with something comforting to say, Ginny was chattering again.

“Crookshanks has good taste. He didn’t like Auntie, either. He was happier here where I could let him outside to chase gnomes. Come on, let’s see what we can do about your hair.” Ginny dragged her desk chair in front of the mirror on her dressing table, avoiding Hermione’s eyes.

Hermione gave Crookshanks one last head rub and stood up. The cat followed her, jumping into her lap as soon as she sat down. The two girls looked into the mirror and winced.

“It’s pretty bad,” Ginny said, separating Hermione’s hair carefully. “What happened?”

“Fiendfyre.”

“Cursed fire? Godric, Hermione! You’re lucky you survived that.”

“I know. Crabbe didn’t. Malfoy almost didn’t either, if Harry hadn’t gone back for him.”

“Harry went back for Malfoy?” Ginny raised one eyebrow even as another long burned section
broke off in her hand.

“Ron was furious.”

“I can imagine.”

Hermione was quiet for a few minutes as Ginny worked, petting Crookshanks in long strokes as he purred loudly, trying not to watch as the crispy black strands hit the floor. She hated her hair, but still … it was better than being bald.

“It’s going to be short,” Ginny warned, setting the side of her hand on the back of Hermione’s neck where she expected to make the cut.

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut. “Just do it.”

Ginny murmured the spell, and Hermione felt a draft around her neck.

“It’s not too bad,” Ginny said, stroking the hair that was left. “It’ll grow.”

Hermione opened her eyes. The first thing she saw was piles and piles of brown curls surrounding her chair, and hot tears sprang to her eyes. She looked in the mirror. Her hair was shorter than she ever remembered it being, floating just above her shoulders. She reached up, flinching when the hair fell out from between her fingers almost before she pulled her hand away from her head. Without the weight of the extra length, the curls were kinkier and frizzier than ever.

“Stupid.” Hermione sniffed. “So many things worth crying about, and I’m going on about my hair.”

“Everybody cries when they get their hair cut,” Ginny said, vanishing the remains on the floor. “It’s just—I don’t know. It’s emotional, somehow.”

Hermione nodded, still fingering the ends.

“Ron won’t care,” Ginny said.

“You don’t think so?” Hermione studied her reflection. This would take some getting used to. Even in her childhood photos she had longer hair than this.

Ginny shook her head. “I want details,” she said, tossing her wand on her desk before bouncing onto her bed and patting the space beside her. “All Harry said was that it just happened. Spill.”

The following evening, Hermione sat on the sofa in the Weasleys’ sitting room with her knitting bag in the floor on her right and Ron and Harry wedged in on her left. The room was occupied but unnaturally silent; the family instinctively huddled together, yet it seemed to Hermione that no one knew what to say. This room—this entire house—had burst with love and joy and laughter every time she had been in it, and to be here now, to feel the grief and sadness that came from their loss of Fred, was heartbreaking.

Bill and Fleur sat end-to-end on the love seat opposite, each with their own book. Mr. Weasley had settled in his armchair with the newspaper over an hour ago but had yet to finish a single section. Charlie and Percy faced each other across the chessboard, and the quiet clinking of chess pieces, closely monitored by Crookshanks, was the loudest sound in the room. Ginny had carried a tray up to Mrs. Weasley, and George remained in his room, having refused to come down for dinner. Again.
Hermione was knitting by hand, not by magic. She needed something to keep her occupied, something to do, and the repetitive motion of the stitches was soothing. She slipped the yarn around her knitting needles by feel and looked around at her second family, whom she loved. They were hurting, missing one of their own, and Hermione’s heart hurt for them. But her first family—her parents—were stranded on the other side of the world, and they didn’t miss her. They couldn’t miss her because they didn’t know their daughter existed.

But Hermione knew they existed—she had not forgotten, not one minute of one hour of one day of this accursed year had Hermione not borne the weight of removing herself from her parents’ life, and she could not rest until she had rectified that fact. She wanted to be here to comfort Ron, to support Harry, but she had to go to Australia. Hermione knew it the same way she had known she had to go to Hogwarts: an inner certainty that nothing in her future could begin until this change was accomplished.

As long as Wendell and Monica Wilkins had no knowledge of Hermione Granger, her war wasn’t won.
Chapter Four

Hermione lay awake in the darkness, reviewing old Astronomy lessons with the charmed stars on the ceiling of Ginny’s bedroom. They had come up to bed over an hour ago, and Ginny’s breathing had just now become even and regular. Hermione waited ten more minutes, watching them tick by on the alarm clock by Arnold’s cage, then gently nudged Crookshanks to the floor and got up. Crookshanks glared at her and jumped back onto the bed, turning in a circle once before lying down with his back to her. Hermione scratched his head, already feeling guilty for planning to leave him behind again.

She pulled on her dressing gown, picked up her wand, and with one final glance at Ginny’s sleeping form, slipped out of the door and up the stairs, knocking softly on Ron’s door.

“Who’s there?” Harry’s voice, sharp and watchful.

“It’s me.” She waited a beat, knowing he was lowering his wand, then opened the door.

Ron and Harry sat up in the darkness, moonlight illuminating two heads turned to face her.

“Can I—” Hermione stuck her hands in her pockets, knowing her request was terribly awkward.

“Can I … sleep up here with you?” She looked at Harry, not wanting to make him feel uncomfortable given that there were only two beds in the room.

Harry looked at Ron, who shrugged, then back to her. Hermione said nothing. Harry knew about her nightmares; he had sat with her in those first few days after Malfoy Manor until they had figured out they all got more sleep if Ron simply stayed with her rather than the boys taking it in turn. Hermione could fall asleep with Harry, but when the nightmares came, when in those first terrifying moments of waking she thought she was under Bellatrix’s wand again, it took Ron to reassure her, Ron to convince her she was safe.

“Course you can,” Harry said, and he laid back down with his back to the room.

“Here, take the bed,” Ron said, throwing his covers back and standing up.

He was wearing pajama bottoms but no shirt, and Hermione’s protest died in her throat. His fair skin virtually glowed in the dark room, and she hoped her blush wasn’t visible.

“Do that cushion charm thing again,” he whispered, indicating the floor.

Hermione gathered herself and complied, softening the floor between the two beds and adding a duvet. She stepped around Ron’s long legs and crawled into the bed warmed by his body. It felt incredibly intimate, lying in the same spot he had been moments before, cocooned under his blankets and surrounded by his scent. She turned onto her stomach, drawing one arm underneath her and hanging the other off the edge of the bed. Ron reached up to hold her hand and Hermione closed her eyes, content.

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“Ron!” Hermione searched the open area around the Burrow, spotted Ron going around the corner of the broom shed, and broke into a run. If he got on a broomstick, she’d never catch up.

“Ron! Wait!”

Fred’s funeral date had been announced. Mr. Weasley had read the letter from the Ministry of Magic,
“Ron.” Hermione caught up with him as he emerged from the broom shed with his Cleansweep in one hand. Breathless, she grabbed his arm.

“I just—I just need to get away for a while.”

“Let’s walk,” Hermione said. “Come on, I’ll go with you.”

Ron gave a jerky nod but didn’t set down his broomstick. Hermione took his hand and jogged alongside him, taking three steps for every one of his long strides as he moved with confidence even in the darkness.

“I thought it would be me,” Ron said, slowing down once they climbed over the hedge. He left his broomstick where it fell, and they passed the path to the treehouse without turning down it. “You know, the Weasley who died in this war. There was bound to be one of us, and I thought it was going to be me.”

Hermione squeezed his hand. She had thought so too, terrified Ron would fling himself into harm’s way to protect Harry.

Or her.

“It just—I wouldn’t have chosen any of them, not a single one, but it wasn’t supposed to be Fred. I just—I never even thought of losing Fred or George.”

He was crying; she could hear it in his voice.

“Mum had nightmares, you know. That something happened to Percy and we didn’t know. I used to worry—I mean, Merlin knows, he can be the world’s biggest prat, but I didn’t want Percy to die cut off from us. I thought maybe Bill—he’s always been the adventurer, did a lot of stuff for the Order. I could see him getting in a duel, being outnumbered and defeated. Like Uncle Gideon and Uncle Fabian.”

Hermione nodded, remembering Mrs. Weasley’s brothers had been killed while fighting five Death Eaters, but she didn’t think Ron was paying her any mind.

“I should have been faster. We were right there, and—”

“No,” Hermione said sharply. “There was no way you could have known that explosion was coming, Ron. There was nothing we could have done.”

He was quiet for a while, long enough that they had crossed the orchard into the open fields beyond before turning back.

Ron began rubbing the back of her hand with his thumb, still not looking at her. “I looked for you first,” he said, so quietly that she had to strain to hear him even in the stillness. “When the world stopped shaking, I looked for you first, and Harry. Two of my brothers were right there, but I—” He turned to face her. “I looked for you.”

“Me too,” Hermione whispered. Harry had caught her attention by moving first, and then she had spotted two men kneeling beside a third, and in the dust and the darkness, she hadn’t been able to tell who was who. She had seen Percy’s glasses, then recognized Ron’s striped jumper, and her first reaction was relief. Sweet, overwhelming relief that it wasn’t Ron who was dead. How guilty she felt about that now, and how much more that guilt must be magnified for Ron.
“You love Harry like a brother,” Hermione said, choosing to ignore the significance of being the first person Ron thought of in a life-or-death situation. “Harry’s always in danger. You’ve been watching out for him for years. It’s only natural that your first instinct was to check on him. It was a conditioned response—something goes wrong, look for Harry.”

Ron gave a weak chuckle. “That about sums it up.”

“It doesn’t mean you loved Fred less,” she said firmly as they approached the Burrow’s back garden.

Ron tossed his broomstick over the hedge, then helped her over. “He liked you, you know.”

Hermione snorted. “Yeah, that’s why he changed the covers on all my books the first summer I came to visit. Remember?”

Ron laughed, sounding a little more like himself. “I’d forgotten about that. He had the best time winding you up.”

“Every time I got them memorized which was which, he’d go and change them again. I spent half my study time that summer just searching for the right book!”

“Serves you right, trying to swot at the World Cup.”

“You were really sympathetic then too,” Hermione said sarcastically, but she was pleased Ron was teasing her again.

“Listen, I, er … I want to check on George. Put my broom back for me?”

“Okay.” Hermione accepted the broomstick and watched Ron cross the garden and enter the crooked house, most of its windows dark against the night sky. She couldn’t decide which was worse: losing Fred, or watching everyone try to figure out how to go on without him.

The following morning, Hermione followed Ron down the now-familiar path through the trees beyond the garden to the old treehouse. It had been in surprisingly good shape when Ron first brought her here the day after they came home, and a couple hours’ worth of work had made it downright habitable. It was quiet and private and theirs in a way that Ron’s room wasn’t, and Hermione had quickly grown fond of the small space. Ron was too tall to Apparate inside with her, but he climbed the sprawling oak easily enough. They had brought extra linens and snacks from the house over the last few days and created a comfortable retreat where they could hang out for hours.

Ron sat and leaned against the wall opposite her, their legs side-by-side. “So, what’s on your mind?”

“What?” Hermione said, startled from her thoughts about last night’s funeral announcements.

“I recognize the look. You’re thinking about something. Planning. What’s on your mind?”

She hesitated, wanting to explain in a way that wouldn’t seem selfish and thoughtless. “I want to go to Australia,” she said quietly. “I need to find my parents and reverse the memory charms.”

“What’s your plan?”

She licked her lips. “To leave on the sixteenth, a week from Saturday. That way I can attend Fred’s funeral, and Remus and Tonks’s, and Colin’s. It’s tight—there’s a lot of preparation to do—but I want to go as soon as possible.”
Ron nodded. “Two weeks at home. I think Mum and Dad will be okay with that, under the circumstances.”

Hermione frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well, obviously they wouldn’t normally be happy about me taking off so soon, but with your parents and all—wait, are you going to tell them? My parents, about your parents not knowing who they are and stuff?”

“I—well, I was just going to tell them that I’m leaving to spend the summer with my family since I haven’t seen them all year. Longer, really. I was barely home last summer before….”

Ron reached down and squeezed her ankle. “Yeah, but that won’t explain why I’m going with you.”

Hermione’s heart skipped a beat. “You’re coming with me?”

Now it was Ron’s turn to frown. “Of course I’m coming with you. You can’t do all that by yourself. Well, you could,” he amended, “because you’re brilliant and strong and resourceful. But you shouldn’t have to. I don’t want you to—I want—”

The tips of his ears turned pink, and Hermione smiled reassuringly to let him know she wanted to hear what he had to say.

“I want to be there for you, that’s all. To help, if you need it.”

Tears burned her eyes at the sincerity of his offer. “I’m sure I will.”

“But … if we tell Mum and Dad the truth….”

“What?”

“Right now the only people who know what you did are you, me, and Harry. If we start going around telling everyone, how … well, how are we going to keep you out of Azkaban?”

Hermione gasped as if Ron had poured ice water over her. There it was, the consequence she’d been avoiding since she arrived at the Burrow in tears last July.

“It’s a big deal, Hermione. We’re not talking about a simple Confundus or even just a breach of the International Statute of Secrecy, which would be bad enough.”

“I know how bad it is, thank you,” she said acidly, jerking her foot out of his grip.

“No, I’m not blaming you,” he said quickly. “I understand why you did it, you know I do. It was the best way to protect them. I’m just saying we need to be careful. Really careful.”

Hermione chewed one nail. “You don’t think your parents would turn me in, do you?”

“No!” He paused, thinking it over. “No, I don’t think so. Dad would be in enormous trouble at work if it’s ever discovered that he knew and didn’t tell anyone, but he won’t tattle on you. I don’t think we should tell my brothers, though.”

Hermione knew without asking that he was thinking of Percy, and a shard of fear pierced her heart. Percy had abandoned his family, and she wasn’t even that.

“No,” she agreed. “But we’ll have to tell Ginny.”
Ron opened his mouth to protest, but Hermione pressed on.

“Harry needs her to know,” she said. “He needs her to know so she can help but also so he doesn’t have to hide this from her. It’s too big of a secret to expect him to keep it forever.”

“I suppose,” he grumbled.

“She’s trustworthy, Ron. You know she is. You’re always talking about how Ginny is the best co-conspirator because she can keep a secret from anyone. And she’s a much better liar than I am,” Hermione added.

He nodded, but his expression had turned downcast. Hermione nudged his thigh with her foot. “Is it hard for you, thinking of her with Harry? I mean—not like that,” she said, laughing at the horrified expression on Ron’s face. “I just mean … as partners, I guess. Me and you, Harry and Ginny. We’ll be a foursome instead of a threesome.”

“It’s just … different,” Ron said slowly. “I mean, normally it would be me, you, and Harry hanging out together, or maybe me and Harry but you and Ginny off somewhere else. This is … different.”

“Good different?” Hermione said hopefully, still not completely confident where she stood with him, still appreciating the reassurance.

“Very good different,” Ron said, leaning forward to pull her close.

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Quite a while later, with Hermione tucked against his side, Ron returned to the topic of Australia.

“A week from Saturday,” he said. “Hang on—isn’t that Snape’s funeral?”

She nodded, having dreaded this part of the conversation. “It is, but … Colin’s and Remus and Tonks’s are all on the eleventh. That’s five whole days earlier. We could be in Australia by the time Snape’s funeral is held.”

“I think we should stay,” Ron said, pushing away from her to sit up. “Hermione … he’s the reason I came back. If Snape hadn’t sent the silver doe, if Harry hadn’t come out from behind the protective enchantments, it could have taken me forever to catch you up. He gave us Gryffindor’s sword. He helped us destroy the Horcruxes.”

“I know, but—”

“I think we owe it to Harry,” he said bluntly.

Hermione gaped. “Ron, that’s not fair!”

“I’m just saying—”

“You know I care about Harry just as much as you do! But Snape’s dead, he’s not going to know we were there, and I don’t think he would care even if he did. My parents—don’t you see? I’m still fighting this war, and I will be as long as my parents don’t know who they are. I want it to be over, Ron.” Her voice cracked, and she balled her hands into fists. “I want it to be over!”

“Okay, shh, it’s okay.”

Hermione swiped her tears with one hand and turned her head away from him.
“It will be over, Hermione. Soon, I promise. We’re going to find them, and you’ll do just as brilliant a job of reversing the spell as you did casting it.” He pushed her hair out of her face. “Let’s talk to Harry, okay? If he feels strongly about it, will you reconsider?”

Hermione sniffed and thought about it. “I suppose, if we had everything ready to go, we could leave right after the funeral. But I thought….”

“What?”

“Harry’s going to offer to come with us, but he’ll want to stay for the funerals too. If we leave before a—” She groped for the right word. Not important; they were all important.

“If we leave before he’s ready, he won’t feel guilty about not going with us,” Ron said.

“Exactly.”

He sighed. “All right. Saturday the sixteenth.”
Chapter Five

Percy sat still and silent as Dad’s footsteps climbed the stairs. Mum had not been out of her room all evening, and Ginny, Hermione, Harry, and Ron had gone upstairs over an hour ago, leaving Charlie, Percy, and George waiting for Dad to give up so they could implement their plan. Percy had been starting to suspect he was winding them up, as “a quick scan” of the paper had turned into a cover-to-cover perusal, followed by a book he’d been given for Christmas three years before, picked up to pass the time before the nightly news on the wireless. Dad never listened to the news on the wireless. The footsteps stopped, followed by a distinct click.

“That’s it, let’s go,” Charlie said, standing up. “George, you get Ron. Percy, the Firewhisky. I’ll Floo-call Bill.”

The brothers scattered as ordered and five minutes later were standing in the grass outside the back door, waiting for George and Ron.

“What’s taking so long?” Bill demanded.

“Maybe he’s off somewhere with Hermione,” Charlie said.

“You didn’t think to check that before I came over here?”

“What were we supposed to do, go through the house room by room?” Percy said.

“You’ve never heard of homenum revelio?”

“That just tells you the number of people present, not who is present. It could just as easily be Ginny and Harry off somewhere if the count is two people short,” Percy retorted. “Or Ginny and Hermione, or Ron and—”

“I get your point, Perce, you don’t have to beat me over the head with it.”

The back door opened and Ron appeared, but he turned round while he was still on the steps.

“I knew Hermione wasn’t out here, you git—”

“Just get outside, Ron. We’re not pranking you, I swear,” George said impatiently, giving him a shove.

Ron looked around at all his brothers, lingering on Percy, who had placed both hands conspicuously behind his back. “What’s this about, then?”

“You’re seventeen—” Bill began.

“Eighteen,” Ron and Percy said together, and Ron looked at Percy in mild surprise.

“The point is, you’re of age,” Charlie said, “and there’s this little ritual we didn’t get to carry out last summer.”

Ron actually took a step back. “What little ritual?”

Percy brought his hands forward, revealing the Firewhisky and five glasses. Ron looked relieved but still confused.
“We’re going to have a drink in the garden? What’s wrong with the kitchen? With, you know, chairs? And biscuits?”

“Oh!” George ducked inside the house.

“No, not there—” Bill disappeared. “Up here!”

“What?” Ron craned his neck to see Bill grinning down from the first floor roof.

“Don’t miss it,” Percy said, and turned on the spot.

George was already there with the biscuit tin open in his lap.

Ron Apparated up a moment later, staggering a couple steps on the pitched roof before recovering his balance.

“Well, you did better than Fred,” George said matter-of-factly. “He landed in the chimney.”

“And you’re the idiot who tried to summon him out of it,” Percy said, helping himself to a handful of biscuits before levitating the shot glasses in a row and beginning to pour. “Mmm, these are good. How did a whole tin of Mum’s biscuits go uneaten for a week?”

“They’re not Mum’s,” Ron said. “Ginny made them today.”

“Ginny burns everything she bakes.”

“No, Ginny burns everything she cooks,” Bill said. “She’s been a decent baker for a couple of Christmases, at least.”

Of course. She’d only been thirteen the last time Percy had seen her bake anything. When would he stop being surprised by his youngest brother and sister?

“So,” Bill said, holding his glass aloft. “We missed your seventeenth birthday, Ron—”

George snorted. “Ron nearly missed his seventeenth birthday.”

Ron, Bill, and Charlie laughed.

Percy looked round the group. “What? What did I miss?” He cringed at his poor choice of words and hoped it wasn’t visible in the darkness.

“I, er, got served a drink that was intended for someone else. It was poisoned.”

“Harry shoved a bezoar down his throat and saved the day,” Bill said, glass still raised to toast.

“What, he just happened to have a bezoar with him?”

“We were in the potions master’s room. Harry knew he had one because he’d given it to him in class a few weeks before, when we were studying antidotes.”

“Why were you in the potions master’s room?” Percy asked.

Bill let his arm drop with a sigh, but Percy hadn’t heard anything about Ron being poisoned.

How many other near misses had he never heard about?

“ ‘Cause somebody gave Ronnie a loooove potion,” George leered. His shot had already
disappeared and been refilled.

“She did not! It was Harry’s, not mine. And I didn’t know it was love potion, did I?”

“I certainly hope you weren’t desperate enough to knowingly take a love potion,” Charlie said, drinking the shot intended for the toast.

Percy did the same. “Who was it, Ginny?”

Ron scoffed and downed his own. “Unfortunately, she has no need of it,” he said. “Harry would follow her around, anyway.”

“You’re one to talk,” Bill said.

“So are you!” Percy, Charlie, and George said together, and were flipped off for their trouble.

“Look, are we going to toast Ron’s seventeenth birthday, or what?”

“Or what,” George said, eating another biscuit.

“I’m eighteen!” Ron insisted.

“Just drink it already,” Percy said.

“Oh, for—” Bill downed the shot and held out his glass for a refill.

Percy filled the glass to the brim, forcing Bill to sip it delicately in order not to spill it, and returned his dark look with a smirk.

“What did you do for your eighteenth, Ron?” Percy said, pouring all around.

“Dunno.”

“There must have been something,” Charlie said.

Ron shrugged. “Fleur made me a cake. We didn’t find out it was my birthday until weeks later, when we— when we arrived at Shell Cottage. As far as what we were doing on the actual day, who knows? Even Hermione lost track of the days.”

“You and Hermione Granger,” Bill said, leaning back and stretching out. “Called that one, didn’t we?” He and Charlie high-fived.

“I beg your pardon,” Percy said indignantly. “That was ages after the Gryffindor betting pool started.”

“What Gryffindor betting pool?”

“The one that started up—must have been during your third year,” George said. “Everyone agreed you two would get together. The only question was how soon and for how long.” He stared thoughtfully at Ron. “I suppose I have bets to pay.”

“You did take your sweet time about it,” Charlie said.

“Lavender,” George coughed, and Ron scowled.

“How long has it been?” Charlie said.
“Six days.”

Charlie choked on his Firewhisky. “Bloody hell, Ron—the night of the Battle?”

Ron frowned. “Wait, maybe it was before midnight … yeah. Yeah, it was. Seven days, then.”

“It’s been a hell of a lot longer than seven days,” Bill said with a pointed look, which Ron ignored.

“I thought you two had been together all year,” Percy said, wondering what Bill had observed while Ron and Hermione were at Shell Cottage.

“We’re always together all year,” Ron said easily.

“No, I meant … you know.”

Ron turned serious. “In a way,” he said, tracing the rim of his glass with his thumb. “In a way, it started at the end of last year, but … well, we needed to help Harry.”

Percy considered this, the obvious display of maturity Ron showed in putting his wants aside for a friend’s needs, but George scoffed.

“What, you couldn’t hunt Voldy by day and shag by night?”

Ron shoved him in the shoulder. “It was complicated.” He stared into his glass. “It’s still complicated.”

“It’s always complicated,” Bill said.

“Great,” Ron muttered, and tossed back his drink.

“You said sixth year, didn’t you, Perce?” George asked.

“I did,” he confirmed, pouring Ron’s refill. “But only once it was defined that seventh year started on September first. I thought it would be the summer after. Last summer.”

Percy took some satisfaction in Ron’s gobsmacked expression. He knew his youngest brother better than Ron thought.

“It nearly was,” Ron said in amazement. “If it hadn’t been for—”

“Lavender,” George coughed again.

“Shut up, git, we were long over by then,” Ron said. “How did you know?”

“What, that you fancied her?” Percy laughed. “Pick something, Ron.”

“The acromantulas,” George said with exaggerated solemnity. “To do that for a girl… I knew you had to be serious about her.”

“I was thirteen!”

“You’re terrified of the little spiders that live in the corner of your room,” George retorted.

“Yeah, well, whose fault is that?”

“Not mine,” George said in a sing-song voice.
Fred’s memory hovered amongst them like a palpable presence.

“You liked Hermione more than you were afraid of spiders, and that’s a hell of a lot,” George said finally. “That’s all I’m saying.”

“That’s right,” Charlie said, sitting up and leaning forward to refill his glass. “She was Petrified, wasn’t she? And you and Harry went into the Forbidden Forest because—why, again?”

Ron had told this story five years ago, when they had been in Egypt and Bill finally confronted them about what happened to Ginny in the Chamber of Secrets.

Another one of Percy’s spectacular failures with his family.

“Because Hagrid told us if we wanted to know anything, we should follow the spiders.” Ron rolled his eyes. “Quite possibly the worst advice I’ve ever received in my entire life.”

“I don’t know, I think I’m with Bill on this one,” Percy said, fishing around in the nearly-empty biscuit tin with one hand. “You two seem a lot more together than seven days.”

“What would Hermione say if we asked her when you got together?” Bill said.

“Last Friday, I think. Or maybe Saturday….”

“I’ll ask her for the bets,” George said. “None of the girls would believe you anyway.”

“Oi!”

“No, that’s a good idea,” Percy said. “You can’t remember an anniversary if you don’t know when it is.”

Bill pointed a finger at him. “That’s good advice, that is. Ask Hermione, George. We’ll go by whatever she says.”
Chapter Six

Hermione followed Ron through Hogwarts to the prefects’ bathroom. She and Ron and the Hufflepuffs in their year had been helping Hagrid outside, gathering up the dangerous plants that had been scattered over the grounds during the fighting, and she was filthy: her face and arms were streaked with a combination of dirt and dragon dung; her hair and tee were damp with sweat; despite her protective dragon-hide gloves, her hands stung with multiple little scratches; and Harry had pulled a bit of Devil’s Snare out of her hair. Ron had just goaded her into kissing him in the Entrance Hall in front of everybody, a proper, serious kiss complete with whistles and catcalls from their audience, and Hermione’s body still buzzed with a combination of anger, arousal, and now anxiety.

The prefects’ bathroom? Did he have any idea the fantasies she had imagined in that very space?

Ron gave the password, and they entered the marble room.

“So, er … do you want to take a bath?”

Now that they were here, he seemed nervous too, his eyes darting all around the room.

“I’m too dirty for a bath. Shower first.”

“Right. Me too. I’ll just—” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder, towards the shower stalls.

“Ron?”

“Yeah?” He turned back.

Hermione wrapped her arms round herself. “Why did you bring me up here?”

He looked at her, that open, intense look that heated her insides.

“I told you why.”

He had, but this was no broom cupboard, and she was both eager and terrified.

“I, um—I’m not sure—”

Ron stepped close to her and lifted her chin. “I’d never make you do anything you didn’t want to do.”

“I know, it’s not that, it’s just—I don’t—” Hermione turned away from the swimming pool-sized bath and took a deep breath. “Just a shower, and we can find somewhere else to....”

Ron raised one eyebrow. ”Why, Miss Granger, what are you suggesting?”

“Shut up.” She gave him a half-hearted shove.

“C’mere.” He placed one hand on her face and kissed her.

Hermione opened her mouth and kissed him back, a week’s worth of mornings alone together having done wonders for both her confidence and her technique. When they pulled apart, both were breathless.

Ron touched his forehead to hers. “Different showers, same cupboard?” he suggested.
Hermione smiled. “All right.”

Neither moved.

“You do have to let go of me first.”

He kissed her quickly, then lingered, then broke off with a groan. “Quick shower,” he demanded.

“I have to wash my hair.”

Ron turned her towards the stalls. “Then get started already.”

Hermione laughed and complied. Each of the shower stalls was divided into two sections, an outer dressing room with benches on both sides and hooks on the wall closed off from the main bathroom by wooden swinging doors and an inner glass door separating the shower itself. Hermione reached in and turned the hot water on, then stripped quickly, shaking out her dirty clothes and doing a quick cleaning charm before folding them and laying them on the bench to her left. She took a clean, brightly white towel from the stack on the right bench and hung it on the hook closest to the shower, then stepped inside.

She couldn’t resist a small moan as she tilted her head back into the steaming spray. She had yearned for this shower while bathing in the cramped, makeshift stall of the tent’s tiny bathroom. She smoothed her hair back from her face and lifted it off her neck, letting the hot water saturate the thick strands, luxuriating in the ability to stick her elbows out with space to spare, then considered the soaps and shampoos lined up in dispensers on the wall. All of them felt like favorites after months of “just plain soap,” as Harry refused to use anything with a scent and Hermione refused to be cooped up with a boy who didn’t bathe.

She settled on strawberry shampoo, lathering it into great pink bubbles that dripped down her back before rinsing half-a-handful down the drain, still not used to the smaller amount she needed with her shorter hair. She rinsed it out, worked a glob of conditioner through her ends, and soaked a sponge with peppermint soap, scrubbing her hands and arms vigorously, spreading it all over her body, trying not to picture Ron doing the same thing on the other side of the wall….

Hermione stuck her face under the spray. She was making herself blush, and Ron wasn’t even here. Wasn’t kissing or touching her….

“Aren’t you done yet?” he said.

“In a minute,” Hermione called, rinsing off, lingering to make sure all the conditioner was out of her hair. She shut the water off and reached blindly for the towel, eyes squeezed shut against the wet. She inhaled deeply, taking in the wonderful smell of fresh laundry that couldn’t be duplicated with a charm, before squeezing all the water out of her hair that she could, wrapping it in a fresh towel, and redressing.

Ron was seated on one of the stools in front of the long mirror and held out a comb.

“Thanks,” Hermione said quietly, accepting it and sitting down beside him.

There were some intimacies that had been forced on them in the close quarters of the tent, and this was one of them, her post-bath ritual. He waited patiently as she toweled the excess water out of her hair and slowly combed through it, detangling the curls as much as was possible before performing a drying spell that immediately tripled it in volume.

He smiled at her. ”Ready?”
Hermione replaced the comb, tossed her towels in the laundry chute, and followed.

“Damned peppermint. Do you have any idea how long I’ve waited to do this?”

Ron had pulled her into the first cupboard they passed and Hermione was now standing between a mop bucket and a month’s supply of bath paper, her back pressed against the closed wooden door as Ron licked and sucked along her neck.

“Me and my sweet tooth, and here you are back from the bath every bloody night, all soft and clean and smelling like a damn sugar stick, good enough to eat.”

She giggled.

“You did it on purpose, didn’t you?” he accused, switching to the other side, lingering on her pulse point until her hands fell from his shoulders, boneless.

“N-no, I love peppermint,” Hermione said breathlessly. “Mum used to buy it for me whenever I had a doctor’s appointment, as a— as a— special treat.”

“Mm-hmm.”

She heard the skepticism even in the hum. “Really, I—”

“It used to make me so—”

Hermione looked up at him, a shadow looming over her in the darkness. “So what?” She thought she knew … maybe, but....

Ron moved closer, placing his feet to either side of hers and bringing their bodies together. Hermione blushed and hid her face in his chest. It wasn’t like she hadn’t known that was happening when they were together, but she’d always been careful not to get too close, not to press into him.

“Really?”

“Really. I can’t believe you never noticed.”

“I hardly went around staring at your—at that,” Hermione said tartly.

“Mmm, well, I stared at you.”

His hands were very low on her back now, pulling her away from the door and more firmly against him, and Hermione wrapped her arms around his waist and turned her head so her cheek rested on his chest.

“Sometimes I thought so, but I could never catch you at it. Never enough to be sure.”

“Sure now?” His voice rumbled under her ear even as his hands slid down into the pockets of her jeans.

Hermione sucked in a breath and Ron laughed, the rich uninhibited laugh she had heard so little this year, the laugh she loved. Hermione raised her head and sank into their kiss, into the happiness bubbling up that she was finally, finally getting to do something as simple and age-appropriate as snog a boy in a cupboard.
“Have you told Mum and Dad?” Ginny asked.

The four of them sat around the kitchen table later that evening. Hermione had just told Ginny about her parents.

“They’re next,” Ron said.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?” Harry said. “I could come later, after….”

Hermione shook her head. “I love you for offering, Harry, but no. You’re needed here, and that’s okay.”

“You promise to let me know if you need anything? Either of you?”

“We promise.”

Ginny pulled Hermione aside as they left the kitchen, and Ron hoped she was apologizing. Ginny’s first reaction to the news that Hermione had modified her parents’ memories was not positive, and Ron knew Hermione was under enough pressure—and guilt—as it was. He said goodnight to Harry, who continued on up the stairs, and waited for Hermione to join him before knocking on his parents’ bedroom door.

“Come in!” Dad called.

His parents were sitting up in bed, Dad still dressed and Mum wrapped in a dressing gown. Ron didn’t think he’d seen his mother in actual clothes since they came back from Hogwarts, and he didn’t need to see the untouched tray on her bedside cabinet to know she wasn’t eating; her pale face was drawn and tired, despite spending virtually all her time in bed.

“We need to talk to you,” Ron said.

“Of course, son—and Hermione!” Dad set aside a stack of photos and got up at once at the sight of her, clearing off the small bench at the foot of the bed and pulling it out so Ron and Hermione could sit down facing them.

Ron looked at Hermione expectantly, but she shook her head.

“Last summer,” Ron said, “when we were planning to go on the run with Harry, Hermione modified her parents’ memories. She was afraid the Death Eaters would come after them because of her friendship with Harry, and she knew the things she’d told them about Harry over the years could be dangerous.”

Dad looked from Ron to Hermione, his brow furrowed, but said nothing.

“She implanted the idea that they had always wanted to live in Australia, so she made the arrangements to close their dental practice and gave them fake identities and bank accounts.” Ron looked at Hermione once more, just to be sure. “Then she removed all their memories of her.”

“What!”

“Hermione!”

“I’m sorry,” Hermione said tearfully, addressing his mother. “I know it was a horrible thing to do, and illegal—” A quick look at Dad— “But I couldn’t think of any other way to keep them safe.
They had already—"I—" She swallowed. “I’d lied to them quite a bit over the years, you see, and they didn’t really understand what was happening. I tried to convince them to leave, but—” She began crying in earnest. “But they didn’t want to leave me.”

Mum pushed herself to the side of the bed and opened her arms. Hermione accepted her invitation at once.

“There now, it’s all right,” Mum said, patting her back. “You clever, brave girl. You brave, brave girl.”

“I miss them so much,” Hermione sobbed. “I thought—I’m always away for months at a time, I thought it would be okay, but I miss them so much and—and—and I don’t even know if they’re all right!”

Ron wrapped his hands around the edge of the bench. It was hard to watch Hermione come undone like this. She was always in control, always so put together, and while there were little indicators occasionally that she was missing her family, she had never talked about them during their months in the tent or at Shell Cottage, not since she had told Harry about it last summer.

Now Ron knew why.

Hermione accepted the clean handkerchief Dad passed to her and sat up, wiping her eyes.

“I’m sorry.”

“Not at all,” Dad said. “That’s a big secret to keep hidden.”

She nodded. “What we really came to tell you is that—I’m going to Australia to fetch them,” she said firmly, as if she expected an argument.

“Well, of course you are,” Mum said. “I can’t imagine anything more difficult than forgetting your child.” Her eyes lingered on the photographs in the middle of the bed. It looked like she and Dad had been choosing pictures for Fred’s funeral tomorrow.

Hermione’s eyes welled up again, and Ron spoke quickly to distract everyone.

“I’m going with her.”

Mum and Dad jerked their heads towards him.

“I know it’s not the best time, but—well, I have lots of family. You all can support each other. But Hermione is alone, and I’m not letting her do this by herself.”

Ron saw a very familiar look pass between his parents, then Dad spoke.

“Are you sure about this, son?”

“Yes,” he said defiantly. “We’re staying for—” He swallowed. “To say goodbye to Fred, and Colin and Lupin and Tonks, but Hermione wants to leave by next Saturday.”

“What about Harry?” Mum said.

“He’s staying here,” Ron said. “He wants to attend the funerals for everyone in the Order and from Hogwarts.”

“He offered to come, of course,” Hermione said, coming back to sit beside Ron, and he let go of the
bench to grip her hand. “But I don’t want to wait any longer than necessary.”

There was a long silence as Ron and Hermione sat side-by-side and endured the parental scrutiny.

“You should speak to Percy,” Dad said finally. “I’m sure he can help expedite your travel papers. And Bill. He’ll be able to exchange your galleons for Muggle money. Even Australian Muggle money, if you give him a few days’ notice.”

“I—” Hermione cleared her throat.

“We don’t want to tell too many people,” Ron said. “Harry and Ginny know, we just told her, but we’re not telling anyone else. We don’t want Hermione to get in trouble with the Ministry.”

“No, of course not,” Mum said. “We’ll speak to the boys, tell them not to ask questions. You just let them know what you need.”

“I’ll do that. Thank you, Mrs. Weasley.” Hermione stood to leave.

Ron bent to hug his mother and allowed her to kiss his cheek. “G’night, Mum.”

He and Hermione stepped onto the landing and closed the door behind them. Hermione collapsed, using the bannister to lower herself to the top step. Ron sat beside her and put an arm around her. She turned into him, and he rested his chin on her head.

“That wasn’t so bad,” he said.

“Thanks for talking for me. I just couldn’t get it out.”

“You’re welcome.”

She sniffed and shifted to a more comfortable position but didn’t let go.

“Do you think we can ask Bill and Percy for help without telling them? I mean, do you think they’ll help without asking questions?”

“We’ll just say your parents went abroad for safety. Loads of Muggle-borns and their families did. We don’t have to say anything about the memory charms.”

She nodded.

“Mum’s right, you know. It’s going to be okay.”

Hermione’s only answer was to squeeze him more tightly, and Ron knew she had just as many doubts as he did.
Chapter Seven

Thanks to MandyinKC (www.fanfiction.net/~mandyinkc) for letting me borrow her OCs of Oliver Wood’s family and some details from her fic *Pictures of You*.

Ron didn’t remember much about his brother’s funeral. He remembered the interminable waiting before it was time to leave for the orchard, where the service would be held. The initial surprise, followed by a sense of rightness, at seeing how many people showed up, how many lives Fred Weasley had touched. The unspoken consensus among his siblings that seated George between Ron and Charlie. Ron remembered his mother crying, the weight of George on his shoulder, the color of Harry’s shirt. What he could not remember—what haunted him for years afterwards—was whether he had said anything nice about Fred that day. Whether he had said anything at all. Ron had a vague impression of the officiant, of Lee Jordan at a podium, but no memory of the actual end of the service. It was only when he heard Hermione’s voice that time seemed to return into motion, and he followed her without thinking, without caring where they were going, knowing only that he could not spend another moment in the presence of his brother’s coffin.

Hermione helped Ron stand and led him away from the crowd, through the trees to the base of the treehouse where all the Weasley children had played. She did not trust him to climb in this state, so she pulled him down to squat beside her, keeping his head low as they reappeared inside the space. For a moment, Hermione was afraid he was going to be sick—his pale skin had gone positively green and he shuddered, but then he swallowed and sat back, laying his head in her lap as soon as she settled herself on the blankets.

Hermione ran her hand through his hair, trying to soothe without words. This was *awful*, horrible, watching Ron hurting and being unable to do anything about it. It was a long time before his shaking stopped, and longer still before he sat up beside her.

“Sorry.”

“No, it’s okay.”

“Can we just—can we just stay here for a while? I don’t want to be with anyone right now.”

“Of course we can,” Hermione said, and her grief was eased a bit at the realization Ron didn’t mind being with her.

He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her tight to his side. Hermione lifted her face for his kiss, unsurprised when it was not gentle or tender, understanding without words that Ron wanted the distraction. *Needed* the distraction, needed her. Hermione said nothing when his fingers tangled painfully in her hair, nor when he pulled her into his lap. She gripped his hips with her knees, crossed her arms behind his neck, and deepened the kiss, trying to absorb the pain, to draw his sadness into herself. She made no protest when he sucked her neck hard enough to bruise or when his hands slid inside her shirt and up her back, and when he made to pull it off, she raised her arms over her head. Ron dove back into kissing her immediately and Hermione began unbuttoning his
shirt, driven by an instinct that told her skin contact was comforting, that if she could touch him, hold him tightly enough, this awful empty ache behind her chest would ease.

Ron’s hand moved up to cup one breast through her bra, and Hermione abandoned her efforts to push his shirt all the way off, settling for her hands on the smooth skin of his shoulders and panting into his neck. He was murmuring her name, over and over and over, and Hermione didn’t stop him even when he turned with her in his arms, laying her back on the blankets and bracing himself over her on his forearms, holding her face between both hands as they kissed. He kissed his way down her neck, her chest, skimmed over the space between her breasts onto her stomach, and Hermione’s focus narrowed to only Ron, only his touch, his voice, how he made her feel. She brought his face back up to hers, and it was only when she felt his hand inside the waistband of her trousers, realized he was fumbling for the button, that she reached a hand down to stop him. He batted her away and she broke the kiss, gasping for enough air to be heard.

“Ron,” she said, catching his hand with hers again. “Ron, wait … please … Ron!”

He jerked away from her, looking down in surprise, then sat up and backed away.

“Hermione … oh Merlin, I’m sorry, I didn’t—I wasn’t paying attention, I—I—”

“It’s all right,” she said, sitting up and reaching for something to cover herself.

Ron kept his face turned away from her. “I shouldn’t have—” He cleared his throat. “Shouldn’t have used you like that. I’m sorry, really sorry.”

“Ron….” She shrugged into his shirt, rolling the cuffs up to free her hands, waiting for him to look at her. When he didn’t, just sat there with hunched shoulders and red ears, she closed the distance between them, wrapping her arms around him from behind and kissing one bare shoulder. “Don’t apologize. That was the first time I tried to stop you.”

He twitched uncomfortably in her grip, but she didn’t let go.

“I kind of thought he’d approve of us skiving off, to be honest,” Hermione said.

Ron snorted, reaching up to hold her wrist. “He’d be taking the piss something fierce if he knew about me coming up here with you.”

She smiled against his skin. Ron must have felt it, for he turned round. She sat back, a little shy. He reached out with one hand and she froze, thinking he was reaching for his shirt. He saw her tense and paused, meeting her eyes before touching one of the marks on her neck.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“You didn’t.”

He let his hand drift lower, pushing the unbuttoned shirt open, watching her face the whole time. Hermione’s heart was pounding but she didn’t flinch.

“Do you still have the blue one?”

“What?”

He was tracing the edge of her bra with one finger, and she felt her skin prickle in its wake.

“The blue one, with flowers. Do you still have it?”
“Uh, yes, I—” She swallowed with some difficulty. “It’s in the wash.” Yet another tent-forced intimacy, doing one another’s laundry.

“I like that one.” His hand closed over one breast, just resting there. “‘Course, I like this one too,” he whispered, leaning down.

“This one’s plain,” Hermione whispered back, mesmerized, drowning in the look in his eyes.


Hermione closed her eyes and kissed him.

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Percy pushed through the Burrow’s crowded sitting room and kitchen, avoiding eye contact and trying not to overturn the vases of flowers protruding from every available—and a few unavailable—surfaces. Opening the back door, he slipped through and crossed the garden, leaning on the fence. It was a beautiful day, bright and sunny, with the perennials blooming amongst the clover and weeds. It felt good to take a deep breath unscented by cut flowers and the perfume of maiden aunts, to have enough space to stick his elbows out, to have enough space to think.

Even sad memories were better than the cloying sympathy of an uncomfortable crowd.

“I thought I’d find you out here.”

Percy stiffened at the familiar voice but didn’t turn.

“Mind you, I did check the loo and your room first, but I knew you’d be somewhere on your own.”

Oliver Wood braced two burly arms on the fence beside Percy and stared off into the distance.

“You were right,” Percy said.

“Aye.”

“You were right, and I was too damn late.”

Oliver had warned him. When Oliver’s older brothers had been killed on a mission for the Order, he had warned Percy it was only a matter of time until tragedy struck the Weasleys too and advised him to get his head out of his arse and make up with his family. As usual, Percy’s head had been so far up his ears didn’t work properly. Or something.

“I’m sorry, Perce. I wish I’d been wrong.”

The sorrow welled up so fast it took his breath. Getting the news from Bill about Dougal’s and Fergus’s deaths, telling Oliver, grieving for two young men who’d been so close to his own older brothers they were nearly like two more … seeing Fred in the middle of the rubble, carrying him into the Great Hall, his mother’s scream, George’s face….

“At least—” Percy blinked rapidly and cleared his throat. “At least you had no regrets.”

Oliver made a rude noise. “I had plenty of regrets. Still do. Doesn’t change anything.”

“But—”

“Aye. I know.”
Percy tilted his head back, hoping gravity would keep the tears in check. He was afraid if he started crying, he would simply never stop.

“Brought you something.”

Percy cast his eyes down to see Oliver holding out a Butterbeer bottle.

“For Godric’s sake, Ollie, I’m not thirteen.”

Oliver angled the bottle, and Percy noticed the seal was broken. He twisted off the lid and took a hearty swig. Oliver had added Firewhisky to the drink, its welcome burn chased by the sweet warmth of the Butterbeer.

“Thanks.”

Oliver shrugged and turned round, facing the house. “Thought it might save you some harassment from nosy relatives. How’s your mum?”

Percy took another drink and sighed. “Quiet. Withdrawn. Not at all herself.”

“I remember, she—she took care of Dougal and Fergus. Afterwards. I never thanked her for that.”

“She knows.”

“Still.”

Percy nodded. “I’ll tell her.”

Later, much later. Years, maybe, when they could speak of Fred without falling apart. Right now it didn’t seem possible, but Percy had been there after Oliver’s brothers died. He had seen the progression the family had made, the highs and lows, the gradual healing, and he understood it would come to his family too. Maybe not him—he couldn’t imagine ever being free of his sorrow and regret—but it would come.

“Your parents still got an anti-Apparition charm on this place?”

“What?”

“Some of the old gang were going upstairs to have our own party. The way Fred would have wanted. Think we can Apparate straight there and skip all your family in the sitting room?”

Percy recapped the bottle and shook his head. “Dad sent Charlie to set the wards before everyone came home, so of course Bill went out and did them over. Probably be choked to death by our own guts wrapping round our necks or some other weird Egyptian curse. Best just to run the gauntlet.”

Oliver nodded in stoic acceptance. “I’ll go with you.”

He always had.

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Most of the guests at Fred’s funeral had left, and the few family friends that remained were saying goodbye. Ron left Luna by the front door and made his way through the sitting room, looking for George. Harry and Hermione had disappeared already, and Ron hadn’t seen Ginny since she left to take a tray up to Mum. Lee Jordan, Angelina Johnson, and Alicia Spinnet were shaking hands with Dad, but there was no sign of George. Oliver Wood and Percy talked with Charlie in one corner.
Charlie caught Ron’s eye, jerked his head towards the back door, then raised his eyes to the ceiling. Ron nodded his understanding and climbed the stairs.

He didn’t bother knocking, just swung open the door and entered. George sat cross-legged on his bed, and Ron did a double take—he was playing with Arnold, Ginny’s purple Pygmy Puff.

“We were going to start breeding them for color. Fred had the idea that we could make magenta ones, to match the robes and logo for the shop.”

“Magenta Pygmy Puffs?” Ron said skeptically, swinging one desk chair around. He had learned the hard way a few days ago that Fred’s bed was off-limits.

“Kind of like a mascot. They’re great gifts. Not as much care as a regular pet, you know? We thought they’d be popular around Valentine’s Day.”

“Does Ginny know you have him?”

George shrugged. “She won’t care.”

No, probably not. Normally Ginny would not be happy about her pet in the possession of her prankster brother, but Ron didn’t think she would begrudge George the company tonight.

“Come on, we’re going up on the roof.”

“You go.” George set Arnold in an empty box, where he rolled from one end to the other, bumping against the sides.

“We’re all going.”

“No, we’re ‘all’ not,” George said with a pointed look, and picked up the half-empty glass Ron hadn’t noticed setting on the ledge of his headboard.

“Look, you don’t have to sit up here by yourself. Come outside.”

George took a slow, deliberate drink. Ron shrugged.

“Well, if you’re too drunk to Apparate, maybe you should stay here.”

“I am not too drunk to Apparate.”

“You’re too drunk to recognize a feint,” Ron said, tapping George’s empty right hand before making a grab for his left.

George jerked the glass out of reach, and the contents spilled into the floor. He glared.

“Oops,” Ron said.

“Git,” George muttered, drying the carpet with his wand.

“Guess you’ll have to come downstairs for a refill,” Ron said with forced cheer.

George allowed Ron to pull him to his feet, grumbling, and Ron took special care to bounce him off the doorway as they walked through. They wrestled their way down the stairs, Ron dragged him past the sideboard and its supply of liquor in a half-nelson, and they stumbled through the kitchen’s swinging door to find Charlie, Percy, and Ginny already sitting around the scrubbed wood table. Ron didn’t resist George’s evasive maneuver, and they had just sat down when Bill appeared with
what looked like all the Firewhisky in the sideboard and a stack of glasses. He walked straight through the kitchen and out the back door without stopping, and one by one, each of his siblings stood and followed. Ron watched George closely, but without a six-foot-plus brother hanging off him, he seemed able to walk a straight line.

For now.
Hermione lay on her side in bed with Crookshanks curled up in front of her, staring sightlessly at Ginny’s empty bed. Hermione and Harry had gone upstairs to Ron’s room hours ago, giving the family privacy as the guests at Fred’s funeral had left the crooked house. It was painfully quiet; she didn’t know where all the siblings were, but none of them were home, and a quiet Burrow was a sad Burrow. When the clock ticked past midnight with no sign of either Ron or Ginny, Hermione had said goodnight to Harry and come downstairs and got ready for bed, although she didn’t feel at all like sleeping.

This time next week, she and Ron would be in Australia.

In a land she’d never seen, in a land that contained her parents. Hermione hadn’t allowed herself to think much about them while they were on the run, but ever since the Battle—since she had realized Harry had accomplished the impossible mission set before him, since she had realized her time was now her own—she couldn’t stop thinking about them. Wondering where they lived, if their new house was anything like the old one. If they were still practicing dentistry. If they lived near the beach; her mother loved the sea. She wondered if they were safe, if they were happy, and most of all —

Hermione wondered if they ever thought about her.

Did they notice something missing? See a curly-haired little girl in the shops and wonder why she seemed familiar? Smile at a brunette with a book at the bus stop? Crookshanks butted her chin and it was only then that Hermione realized she was crying, soft muffled whimpers of pain. She reached out and stroked his fur, remembering the day she bought him and how angry Ron had been with her. That fight seemed so long ago. How different she and Ron were from those two stubborn third-years, and yet how much the same.

She and Ron had hardly ever been alone together; only during Harry’s Quidditch practices for years, and then when Ron joined the team they hadn’t even had that. There had been Harry’s Occlumency lessons in fifth year and his meetings with Dumbledore in sixth, the time Harry had spent on guard duty in the tent. A day or two in the summer if she arrived at the Burrow before Harry did. But for two people who had been friends for seven years, she and Ron had spent shockingly little time as a pair. Now they were more than friends, a couple, and Hermione couldn’t make up her mind whether she was thrilled or apprehensive about a summer alone.

Not completely alone; hopefully they would find her parents soon after arriving in Australia, and she would of course spend as much time with them as she could, but it would definitely be more time alone than she and Ron ever had before. More uninterrupted time alone, days and maybe even weeks. She wanted this time, wanted a chance to solidify her relationship with Ron without his brothers butting in or even double-dating with Harry and Ginny.

Time alone together with her boyfriend meant other things too … decisions about how far was too far and the physical aspect of their relationship. They had shared so much … been through so much together, that sometimes it felt inevitable, this transition from friends to lovers. She had fallen in love with Ron long before he said he wanted to be more than friends; he had even told her he loved her before they had been free to pursue a relationship. Hermione felt like her heart was miles ahead of her head, and she wasn’t sure she liked the feeling.

Ginny’s empty bed caught her eye again and Hermione sighed. She and Ron were both dealing with a lot of grief, a lot of heavy emotions. She wanted them to be able to help each other through that,
not complicate it.

If only she could figure out how to differentiate between the two.

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Having been rebuffed by George yet again, Ron entered the kitchen after Remus and Tonks’s funeral to find Hermione surrounded by papers spread over half the surface of the long, scrubbed wood table.

“What’s all this?” Ron said, picking up an apple from the fruit basket she’d pushed to one side.

“Preparation,” Hermione said. “I’m working on reversing the charms on Mum and Dad’s accounts and practice and everything. I have a list of things I need from their safe deposit box and the house —” She waved a piece of what Ron recognized as Muggle school paper. “Percy’s working on our Portkeys and passports … we’ll have to go to the post office to apply for yours … we should probably open a box while we’re at it….” She pulled out a roll of parchment and scribbled something at the bottom of a long list.

“What’s a passport?” Ron sat down at the empty end of the table.

“It’s a photo identification Muggles use to travel from one country to another,” Hermione said absently, duplicating something in Percy’s handwriting with her wand before passing it to Ron. “Give that to Harry. It’s the address for the Australian Ministry of Magic. He can contact us there until we find Mum and Dad.”

Ron put the scrap in his pocket. “Why do I need Muggle identification? You just said we’re going to Portkey.”

“But not on the way back,” Hermione said, looking up at him. “You need proper Muggle identification to board the plane.”

Ron ignored the queasy feeling in his stomach whenever he thought about being suspended in the air without magic. “What’s up with the Muggle paper?”

“My notes from last year,” Hermione said, crisscrossing stacks into a single pile. “You need your Apparition license too, Ron.”

“Oh! I forgot.” He licked apple juice from his chin and turned the fruit, avoiding a bad spot. “I can do it tomorrow.”

She nodded and passed him a sheet of parchment. “Look that over and tell me if you can think of anything else.”

It was a packing list that was, as per usual for Hermione, detailed and exhaustive. “Why cloaks and jumpers? I thought Australia was warm.”

“It is in the summertime. But it’s fall, almost winter there. The seasons are opposite in the Southern Hemisphere.”

“What?” he said, chucking the apple core into the bin with a satisfying hollow thunk.

“The southern half of the earth, Ron. Below the equator?”

At times like this, experience had taught Ron it was best to smile and nod, so he did.
“It won’t be cold like our winters, but I want to be prepared.”

“I can see that,” Ron said dryly, but Hermione was so engrossed the humor went unnoticed. “You said you needed some things from your parents’ house.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I think we should talk to Bill about it first.”

“What? Why?”

“Odds are pretty good the house is cursed, don’t you think? I mean, you didn’t do anything to hide the fact that it was your house. The Death Eaters probably found it, no problem.”

Hermione stared at him, stricken. “I didn’t even think of that! How could I have missed that?” She began digging frantically amongst the papers still strewn across the table, looking for who knew what.

“Can we do without that stuff?”

“I suppose we could if we have to, but I wanted to take some personal things for Mum and Dad.”

“Can we summon them? You know, just stand on the pavement outside and—” He flicked his wrist in imitation of the *Accio* charm.

Hermione chewed her lip. “Maybe,” she said thoughtfully. “I don’t know … it might depend on what curses they’ve used. And whether the house is still standing…. I need to talk to Bill anyway. He’ll need my Building Society account number so he can withdraw the funds and exchange them for Australian dollars. Do you think he—”

“Probably, if he’s talked to Percy.” Ron spotted a piece of upside-down parchment that had “Bill and Percy” written at the top and underlined. “Here,” he said, pushing it towards her. “Write it down and let’s ask.”

“I could ask McGonagall and Flitwick too,” Hermione said, scribbling busily.

Ron paused, certain he hadn’t heard her right. “What?”

“McGonagall and Flitwick. They should be able to tell us if we can summon objects from a cursed building without harm.”

Ron’s stomach began to churn, the same whining sense of panic building up that he had felt when Hermione wrote him about this idea last summer, when Lupin had told them about the Muggle-born Registration Commission, when he had Disapparated away from the tent in a pique and realized he wouldn’t be able to find Harry and Hermione again.

“Hermione … surely you’re not thinking about telling McGonagall? I mean, I know you mentioned meeting with her when we told Ginny, but I didn’t think you were serious.”

“And Flitwick,” she said, sorting through the stacks she had just stacked together.

Ron reached out a hand to stop her. “Hermione. We can’t do that. We’re trying to keep you out of Azkaban, remember? What if McGonagall tells Kingsley? You know what a stickler she is for doing the right thing.”

Hermione looked at him, her hand still underneath his on top of the parchment. “You think the right
thing is for me to go to Azkaban.”

“I definitely do not! But that’s what the law says, Hermione, and you can’t get around that!”

She turned back to the papers in front of her, removed one of the stacks, and flipped through it.

“Here,” she said, shoving a piece of parchment in front of him. “Read that.”

Dear Professors McGonagall and Flitwick,

Hermione is going to reveal some information that we all expect to be kept in the strictest confidence. In case you have any qualms or attacks of conscience about keeping this information private, you should know that I will not hesitate to reveal some private information of my own. Professor McGonagall, you are aware of my knowledge of the Unforgivable Curse you performed in front of me. Professor Flitwick, I am unaware of any illegal activity by you, but I assure you, I will comb through your life with unpleasant thoroughness, and if I can’t find anything, I’ll make it up.

I think we all know I will be believed.

Hermione is my best friend, and she has saved my life multiple times over the years. She was indispensable in helping me defeat Voldemort, and I will not stand by and allow her to be punished for protecting her parents from their association with me. Thank you for your cooperation in this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Harry Potter

Ron stared at Harry’s handwriting with his mouth hanging open in shock. “Did you—Harry, did he—”

“I’m not stupid, Ron,” Hermione said curtly, yanking the letter out of his hand and placing it back with a sheaf of others. “I know what’s at stake.”

“But you just threatened our Head of House with a life sentence in Azkaban!”

“No, I didn’t,” she said calmly. “Harry did.”

Every time he thought he had a grip on Hermione’s sense of right and wrong, she surprised him again.

“Did you ask Harry to do this?”

“Of course not! I didn’t even know that Professor McGonagall had—had—” She seemed unable to say it. “I mentioned that I wanted to ask McGonagall and Flitwick for advice about how to reverse the memory modification but I wasn’t sure if it was wise to tell anyone else about what I’d done, and Harry said not to worry about it. He came back a few minutes later with this.”

Ron caught himself gaping again and closed his mouth. Of course Harry would defend Hermione; in fact, Ron was counting on his friend’s fame and status to protect her if word did get out.

“I don’t like it either, Ron, but I need their help.” She bit her lip. “I don’t know what else to do.”

“It’s hardly the biggest crime against Muggles this year,” he said bitterly. He laid his hand on her shoulder. “If McGonagall performed an Unforgivable to defend Harry, she’ll understand. Maybe we won’t even need the letter.”
Hermione heaved a sigh. “I hope so.”

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Hermione entered the kitchen and was surprised to find Harry at the cooker. He’d been sleeping through breakfast ever since the Battle.

“You’re up early.”

“Couldn’t sleep. Eggs?”

Hermione nodded and poured herself a cup of tea from the pot sitting on the table. “Me either.”

“You should have come upstairs,” Harry chided, cracking fresh eggs into the skillet before transferring his own onto a plate.

“It was late. Early. I woke up and couldn’t go back to sleep.”

“Not Malfoy Manor, then?” Harry said, quietly enough she could ignore him if she chose.

“No.” Hermione wrapped both hands around the sturdy mug that was part of the dinnerware Mrs. Weasley used for everyday. “My parents.”

“What happened?”

She shrugged, just the memory of her parents’ empty faces and blank looks enough to turn her stomach.

“Hermione?”

She sighed. “They—they reminded me of Neville’s parents.”

“Hermione!” Harry spun round, spatula in hand. “That’s completely different. Neville’s parents were tortured. The Cruciatus Curse.”

“I know.” She leaned back as Harry set a plate of crisp bacon and runny eggs in front of her, just the way she liked them.

He carried his own plate to the table and sat down across from her. “You can’t be torturing yourself with things that aren’t true,” he said, unusually stern.

“I know.”

“I mean, I understand you’re scared,” he said, shoveling in a forkful of egg, “but that doesn’t mean you should let your mind run away with you.”

“You’re one to talk,” Hermione said crossly, nibbling on a rasher.

“I am.”

Hermione looked up to find his eyes focused on her, his expression serious, and realized of all people, Harry knew what it was like to fight with your own mind.

“Keep that up, and you’ll be the crazy one who loses her mind.” He paused, then grinned. “What would happen to me and Ron if you’re locked up in St. Mungo’s?”
“Yeah, yeah.”

“Are you going to eat that?” He eyed her untouched egg.

“Yes,” Hermione said, wrapping a protective arm around her plate and pulling it closer to herself. “Cook your own.”

“I did. And yours.”

“You don’t like it when I cook for you.”

“That’s because you can’t cook.”

“I can too,” Hermione lied. “Just not—you know, with magic and no food.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Have some fruit if you’re still hungry.”

He grimaced but reached for the bowl in the center of the table.

“Harry?”

“Hmm?”

“What if I can’t do it? What if I can’t reverse the spell?”

“You can,” he said with the same easy confidence he’d shown when she’d prepared for exams.

“But … what if I can’t? What if I can’t reverse it and they never remember me?”

Harry set down his half-peeled orange. “Then you’ll be an orphan, like me,” he said simply. “And we’ll be our own family. Always. You’ll never be alone, Hermione. I promise.”

She grabbed his hand and tried to smile through her tears.

“You’re not going to cry, are you?”

She sniffed. “No.”

“ ‘Cause if you start crying, I might be forced to remember you’re a girl, and I try to forget that as much as possible.”

Hermione laughed and let go of his hand to wipe her eyes. “I love you too, Harry.”
Ron gave Hermione’s hand an encouraging squeeze, and she knocked on Professor McGonagall’s open door.

“Enter!”

They did so to find Professor Flitwick already present. Both teachers looked up.

“What’s this about, Miss Granger?” McGonagall asked as Ron closed the door.

“I need your help,” Hermione said, sitting down in one of the two chairs McGonagall had placed in front of her desk and pulling out her notes. “With a spell.”

McGonagall looked surprised. Professor Flitwick returned his teacup to its saucer and set it on a corner of McGonagall’s desk.

“As you know, I’m Muggle-born, and I needed to hide my parents before I went on the run with Harry. So, I modified their memories and sent them to Australia last summer. Now I need to find them and reverse it.”

A moment’s silence.

Ron saw Hermione’s hand squeeze the beaded bag in her lap, which held the letter from Harry. “I am trusting you not to report it,” she said.

“There are many things that occurred over the past year that will not be reported,” McGonagall said tartly. “But I assume you came well-prepared, as always?”

Ron knew that expression very well, but Hermione had not often been at the receiving end of Professor McGonagall’s beady-eyed stare.

“I—I—er, Harry wrote a letter,” Hermione admitted.

“Did he now?” But she did not ask to see it and Hermione didn’t offer. “Professor Flitwick?”

“I trust you, Miss Granger,” he said simply.

“As do I.”

Hermione slumped in her chair, notes clutched in her hand even as she let her handbag slide onto the floor with its characteristic thunk. “Thank you.”

“That’s quite an impressive bit of magic, Miss Granger,” McGonagall said.

“If it worked,” Hermione said grimly. “I followed them as far as the airport, but I—” She swallowed. “I have no idea what happened after that.”

“I take it you didn’t use Obliviate,” Flitwick said.

She shook her head. “No, I couldn’t. I needed them to still be able to care for themselves, so I couldn’t mess with anything that would affect their ability to practice. They’re both dentists.”

McGonagall nodded in understanding, but Flitwick stared blankly.
“It’s a special kind of Muggle Healer,” Ron said.

Flitwick’s expression cleared. “An intricate modification indeed,” he said. “You’re worried about reversing it without causing additional damage.”

Hermione nodded and gripped Ron’s hand again.

“I’ve been reading up on it,” she said. “It seems modification reversal is best performed by someone who has a relationship with the subject.”

“That should be no problem,” McGonagall said. “You’re their daughter.”

“No, I—I erased all their memories of me. It seemed the simplest way to erase anything that had to do with Harry.”

Another stunned silence. Ron saw McGonagall’s expression soften and thought maybe they had misjudged her when they feared she might turn Hermione in to the Ministry.

“Well, that does complicate the situation,” Flitwick said slowly. “Let’s start at the beginning. What do you know for certain, Miss Granger?”

“ THEIR NAMES ARE WENDELL AND MONICA WILKINS, AND THEY BOARDED A PLANE TO SYDNEY.”

“That’s not much to work with.”

“I know.”

Ron glanced at Hermione, who was staring at her shoes. He turned to Flitwick. “Do you think it would be better for her to try to get to know her parents in their new identity and then perform the charm?”

“Miss Granger,” McGonagall said before he had a chance to reply. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but I think you are more worried about what will happen after you reverse the charm than you are about your ability to successfully do so.”

Hermione opened her mouth, closed it, then nodded.

“That is something none of us knows,” she said, not unkindly. “I do not know your parents, but it seems to me that to approach them as a friend and later inform them you have known who they are all along, that you are in fact their daughter, is duplicitous and untrustworthy.”

“They would remember that?” Hermione asked Flitwick.

“Yes. Your goal is to go back through their memories to the point in time where the original memory modification was performed. A proper reversal will restore the memories of their lives up to that point and also preserve their memories of their new identities from the time of the modification until the charm is reversed. Done correctly, the only things they will not remember are the actual modifications themselves.”

“So … so if I approach them in their new identities, they’ll remember that? How—what I’m like and what we talk about and things?”

“Yes.”

Ron could see Hermione hadn’t expected that.
“How do I find that point in their memories? Where I performed the spell?”

“How have you ever studied Legilimency?” Flitwick said.

“Only when Harry took lessons from Professor Snape.”

“His extra Potions lessons in fifth year,” McGonagall said.

“Potter is a Legilimens?” Professor Flitwick said incredulously.

“No!” Hermione and Ron said together, laughing.

“He was terrible at it,” Ron said.

“But it was Occlumency that Snape was trying to teach him. To—well—for reasons,” Hermione finished lamely. “But all I know about it is what I read at the time and what I could pry out of Harry, which wasn’t much.”

Flitwick nodded thoughtfully. “It’s certainly something you can’t pick up in a few days. Memory modification requires the same type of concentration and intensity. You will need to focus very specifically on the moment when you performed the spell: the day, date, time. Where you where, what you could see and hear—recreate that moment as precisely as possible for yourself, and you can transfer that energy to each of them.”


Hermione nodded, and Ron could see her storing the information away.

“I strongly recommend you do them one at a time,” Flitwick said.

“Can I do it while they’re sleeping?”

“You can. But I think I agree with Professor McGonagall that it may be perceived as untrustworthy. Imagine falling asleep as Hermione and waking up as someone else. It would be confusing and frightening, would it not?”

Hermione bit her lip and nodded. “I see your point.”

“The most difficult thing about this, Hermione, is not the magic,” McGonagall said gently. “It will be having the courage and honesty to approach your parents directly.”

“But I can’t just walk up to them and say ‘hello, I’m your witch daughter Hermione!’ ” she said, throwing up her hands. “They’re Muggles, Professor. Muggles who have no knowledge of the magical world because they don’t remember anything of me!”

“Filius?” McGonagall turned to her colleague.

“What about a Confundus Charm?” Flitwick suggested. “It would allow you to get physically close enough to perform the memory modification and prevent any distracting questions during the process. Reversed immediately, of course,” he added.

Hermione actually brightened. “I could do that. I’ve done that before!”

For some reason, she looked at Ron out of the corner of her eye and flushed, then looked down at her notes.
“So to summarize, I approach my parents surreptitiously, cast a Confundus Charm, concentrate on the original memory modification spell with determination and deliberation by summoning precise details about the time, location, and surrounding events, rewind that process in my mind as I cast the spell, and reverse the Confundus.”

Flitwick smiled. “Correct as usual, Miss Granger.”

“I suspect you have hidden the truth of many of the events of your Hogwarts years from your parents,” McGonagall said.

“Yes. Or lied,” she admitted.

“Tell them the truth, Hermione. It is only once they understand the significance of the situation that they will be able to understand why you felt such an extreme action was necessary. But I feel I must warn you—not all actions done out of love are perceived as such.”

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Percy lay on his bed with the window open, listening to the hum of chatter as the members of the Order of the Phoenix gathered for their final meeting in the garden below. He, Charlie, Ron, and Harry had helped Ginny and Hermione all afternoon, sprucing up the house and garden and preparing food for the dinner that was to be served before the meeting. Hermione had sent Percy upstairs with fresh towels for the bathroom a few minutes ago, and he had simply never returned. He wanted to spare his parents the embarrassment of introducing him, the wayward son who had not fought beside his family.

The one who had thought they were all fools, more the fool he.

He could hear Harry saying the same thing over and over again as the members arrived, thanking people for their service and brushing aside the effusive praise directed towards him, always complimenting Ron and Hermione and saying he couldn’t have succeeded without their help. It made Percy wonder exactly what Ron had done, giving him a weird mix of confusion and pride.

Hermione’s voice carried over the din as she directed the placement of the food, followed by a decrease in the noise level as everyone began to eat. It was some time later, after the clink and scrape of cutlery had eased and the chatter of voices risen again, that the temporary Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, called the meeting to order.

Harry’s voice came through loud and clear, introducing Ginny and two others as leading the resistance at Hogwarts and being invited to the meeting by him. Even from two floors above, the resulting silence felt tense until McGonagall’s calm voice interceded. Percy listened with amusement to Amy Green scolding Charlie for her confusion about the Apparition coordinates that resulted in her late arrival and knew his brother would be hearing more about that later.

McGonagall spoke for several minutes about the rebuilding of Hogwarts, and Percy’s thoughts drifted to George, who had been at the castle every day. Despite Percy’s frequent attendance as well, they had yet to work together, an arrangement he knew George was making deliberately. Percy sighed, the memory of Fred holding out his hand to him in the Room of Requirement floating to the front of his mind as it did whenever he thought of the younger twin’s resentment. He did not blame George for holding him responsible for Fred’s death; it was his fault. If he had not been there, Fred and George would have gone off together, Fred would have been with George when the castle wall exploded, not Percy, and Fred would have lived.

Percy had thought—before that night, he had thought there was nothing in his life he would ever
regret more than walking out on his family, no bigger mistake he could make. He was sadder than words could say to discover he was spectacularly wrong yet again.

Listening to the meeting now, hearing everyone reacting to the heroism of the boy Percy had once called unbalanced and violent, learning that some of these people had spent nearly a year in hiding to protect Harry’s Muggle family, filled Percy with shame. No, he did not deserve to be down there, even if he had helped. To hear the undisputed hero of this war (no matter what Harry said) refer to Ron as an essential ally, that Kingsley had nominated all the members of the Order for Orders of Merlin, that his parents had not simply participated but actually opened their home as Order Headquarters and all the danger that implied … even his baby sister, underage, unqualified, unable to leave school, was described as a resistance leader!

Percy had helped. After the Muggle-born Registration Commission was announced last August, his conscience couldn’t tolerate the dichotomy any more, and he had managed to pass a coded message hidden in a letter to Professor McGonagall supposedly expressing his concern that Ginny might reactivate her rebel activities from two years ago, which apparently she had done in spades. Less than a week later, Aberforth Dumbledore had contacted him about protecting the underage Muggle-born witches and wizards, and Percy had set about destroying as many of their records as possible, crippling the Ministry’s ability to try them for their “crime.”

He might have helped, but Percy couldn’t help thinking it was too little, too late … and he had no idea how to make it up to the people he loved.
Chapter Ten

Hermione caught Dedalus Diggle’s eye and waved him over. The last meeting of the Order of the Phoenix had just concluded with the dissolution of the Order, and one of the items of business had been preparing the Dursleys’ home for their return from hiding. Mr. Diggle spoke to an older woman who stood and joined him, and Hermione had to admit Harry was right: Mrs. Figg was the exact image of the classic crazy cat lady with her tartan slippers, fur-covered clothes, and vacuous demeanor. At least she wasn’t wearing a housedress.

“Mr. Potter.” Mr. Diggle beamed, shaking Harry’s hand so vigorously he nearly shook Harry. “A great pleasure to see you. A great pleasure.”

“Thanks, Dedalus,” Harry said, looking as uncomfortable as he always did when someone responded to his fame.

“I’m very glad to see you, Harry,” Mrs. Figg said.

A genuine smile this time. “Hullo, Mrs. Figg. Do you know everyone?” Without waiting for an answer, he introduced Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Luna, and Neville.

“What time should we meet you on Friday, Mrs. Figg?” Neville said.

“Oh, let’s start early and get it done. Eight o’clock? I’ll fix breakfast.”

“Rubbish. I haven’t had anyone to cook for since Harry got big enough to stay by himself.”

“Well, I think I’m going to leave it to all of you, if that’s all right,” Harry said. “I, uh, I don’t really want to go back.”

“Perfectly understandable, Mr. Potter,” Mr. Diggle said gently.

“I hope—” Harry hesitated, sticking his hands in his pockets. “I hope they didn’t give you too much trouble.”

Mr. Diggle smiled. “We muddled along. They’re doing well. Eager to go home, now that it’s over.”

“Can they, though?” Ron said. “I mean—” He turned to Hermione. “If you think the Death Eaters may have cursed your parents’ house, they definitely cursed Harry’s.”

Harry winced. “They knew where it was too. They were waiting for us, the night the Order moved me to the Burrow.”

“We’ve thought of that, Mr. Potter,” Mr. Diggle said. “I mentioned it to Professor McGonagall, and she referred me to your brother.” He nodded to Ron. “Bill, I believe?”

Ron nodded. “Yeah, Bill’s the one you should talk to.”

“Perhaps you could introduce us?”

Ron left with Mr. Diggle, Mrs. Figg excused herself, and Fleur dragged Harry away to meet the
friends she’d recruited from Beauxbatons. Neville was chatting with Aberforth Dumbledore and Luna had drifted … somewhere, leaving Hermione and Ginny alone.

“Are you okay?” Hermione asked her.

Ginny started, looking away from Harry to face Hermione. “Yeah, why?”

“Nothing. You’re just very quiet.”

Ginny had said nothing about going to the Dursleys, neither volunteering to help when it came up during the meeting nor participating in the recent discussion.

“Busy day.” She began clearing the table.

Hermione stood to help. “Friday will be too, I expect.”

“Mmm.”

Well. It looked like Ginny’s devotion to Harry had limits, after all.

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Hermione stared out the window of the Burrow’s sitting room several minutes later, listening to Harry and Ron argue about when to start Auror training and trying not to cry. Kingsley had just offered all of them a position in the Auror Academy without their N.E.W.T.s, and Ron and Harry had accepted. She shouldn’t be surprised that Ron didn’t want to come back to Hogwarts, but she had been hoping she could persuade him over the course of the summer. She hadn’t expected this decision to come so soon.

“Hermione?” Harry said tentatively.

“I can’t believe you two don’t want to go back.” How could anyone not want to go back to someplace as wonderful, as incredible, as magical as Hogwarts?

“Then you weren’t paying attention the first six years,” Ron said. “You’re the one who likes school, not me and Harry.”

Hermione turned, not bothering to hide her tears.

Harry hurried across the room towards her, obviously alarmed, and Ron put an arm round her shoulders.

“You’re both smart and talented,” she said, the old frustration of watching two capable wizards blowing off their education rising to the surface. “You would pass your N.E.W.T.s with no problems, I know you would. I’d help!”

“Hermione, Ron and I wouldn’t even have been able to take Potions last year if Slughorn hadn’t accepted Exceeds Expectations,” Harry said. “What if we went back and our marks weren’t good enough? You know we’ve wanted to be Aurors since fourth year.”

She remembered that exact conversation with not-Moody. “I know, but—”

“This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance, Hermione,” Ron said earnestly. “I can’t turn it down. You can understand that, can’t you?”

“But—” Her lip trembled, and she realized she was going to have to spell this out for them. “But I’ve
never been at Hogwarts without either of you.” She glanced at Harry and back to Ron, trying to remind him without words of the difficulties she’d had the first few months of her first year.

“You won’t be alone,” Harry said. “You’ll be in Ginny’s year— and Luna’s! You know lots of seventh years from the DA.”

“But I want you to come with me,” Hermione said, looking up directly into Ron’s face.

“Hermione…” Ron placed both hands on her upper arms, rubbing up and down.

She heard the front door close softly behind Harry but didn’t break Ron’s gaze. She could see all she needed to know in his eyes. He hated to disappoint her … but he was going to do it anyway.

“I don’t want to go back,” Ron said. “I know Hogwarts means something special to you because it was where you learned about the magical world for the first time. But after this year, I just can’t picture myself going to lessons and mucking about in the common room, buying sweets in Hogsmeade or revising in the library. Not when there are still Death Eaters on the loose. Not when there’s so much work to be done outside of it. Please, try to understand.”

She stepped forward and rested her cheek on his chest. “I do understand. I just don’t like it.”

Ron’s arms wrapped around her, and Hermione closed her eyes and leaned into him more fully. Safe. She relished the sense of safety she felt in his embrace, and it made her feel brave. Like she could do anything.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she said, tightening her grip on his back. “I don’t want to think about being separated from you, not when— when—”

“When we’ve finally found each other.”

She leaned her head back to smile up at him and accepted his kiss. Four months. She had almost four whole months to spend with Ron this summer, and she wasn’t going to spoil it worrying about school.

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The suffocating compression eased and Ron opened his eyes, pleased to find himself exactly where he’d deliberately determined his destination to be: across the street from Gringotts Wizarding Bank. He spotted his brother at once; at over six feet tall and with the same flaming red hair as Ron, Bill stood out in a crowd even before the scars from Greyback caused strangers to give him a wide berth. Moving quietly, Ron approached from the opposite direction Bill expected and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Bloody hell, Ron!”

Ron grinned at the (admittedly impressive) scowl, pleased to have got the drop on Bill for once.

He glanced over Ron’s shoulder to the Apparition point. “Is that even legal?”

“Freshly minted as of Tuesday,” Ron said, pulling the license out of his pocket and showing it off. “What are you doing out here?”

“Reckoned you’d need an escort,” Bill said. “I thought Hermione would be with you.”

“Nah, too much to do so we split up. She’s home packing, I’m stuck with a list of errands. I have to
meet Percy after this.”

Ron followed his brother as he took the white stone steps two at a time and nodded to the goblin at the door. Ron noticed the goblin seemed even more suspicious than usual, then realized the last time he’d been here, he’d flown out on the back of a dragon. They stepped inside the marble hall, busy with customers and tellers, a far cry from the empty, echoing cavern it had been just—

Had it really been only a fortnight since he, Harry, and Hermione had broken in here only to break out again?

“Ron?” Bill was ten feet in front of him.

“Coming.”

“I’ve been getting the evil eye all week,” Bill said, leading Ron past the tellers, opening the half-door at the end of the counter, and turning right down a hallway of offices. “You, Harry, and Hermione are seriously *persona non gratae* around here, and the goblins are convinced I had something to do with it.”

“Sorry about that,” Ron said, dodging a goblin levitating a tray of bullion who made no pretense at hiding his dislike, even turning to continue his glare.

“Are you kidding?” Bill said, entering his office and waving Ron towards a chair. “My kid brother getting past all the goblins’ security?”

“We had help.”

Bill snorted. “That was obvious even before you left Shell Cottage. Still, I’ll have bragging rights for the rest of my career.”

After a moment, Ron realized Bill wasn’t baring his teeth but rather exposing them in a smile, and his eyes twinkled. He wasn’t angry, he was ... chuffed?

“Every time someone tells that story, which I reckon will be a hell of a lot, I’ll get to say, ‘yeah, that Ron Weasley? I’m his brother.’ ”

Ron flushed, stunned at the idea of Bill identifying himself as his brother rather than the other way round.

Bill performed a complicated set of wand movements before opening his bottom desk drawer. “Charlie’s dead jealous, you know.”

Ron laughed. “I know. He asked me about it a couple nights ago.”

Bill pulled an envelope and a money bag from the drawer and laid them in front of Ron. “What’s this?” Ron picked up the envelope, which was fat but light.

“Half of Hermione’s Muggle account in Australian dollars,” Bill said. “There’s a card in there too. I included a receipt so she knows how much is left in the account.”

“It’s paper?”

“Muggle money is, yeah. At least the larger denominations. This—” Bill pushed the money bag forward, its clinking coins revealing its wizarding contents— “Is your share of Fred’s estate. I cashed out the whole thing, but I strongly recommend you open an account in your name and redeposit at
least half of it. You can access a Gringotts account anywhere in the world.”

Ron stared at the bag, unsure how he felt about it. All he knew was he didn’t want to touch it—not to hold it, and not to spend it.

“It’s yours, Ron,” Bill said quietly. “Fred wanted you to have it.”

“It should belong to George. For the shop.”

“He did leave some for the shop. This is what he left for you.”

Ron clenched his jaw and looked away. He didn’t want to cry in front of Bill, not here, not after what he just said.

“What are you doing with yours?”

“Fleur and I haven’t decided yet. We’re thinking maybe a honeymoon, or … saving it for a little niece or nephew.”

Ron forced a smile. “Fred would go for the honeymoon.”

“Yes. I reckon he would.” Bill picked up the moneybag and threw it at Ron, fast enough he didn’t have time to think, just catch. “Like I said, I’d save at least half … but Fred would be disappointed if you didn’t blow some of it on something ridiculous in Australia.”

“And Hermione,” Ron said, considering this for the first time. With the weight of the coins in his palm, he could buy her something really nice. Something she wouldn’t buy for herself. Something a boyfriend would buy.

“And Hermione,” Bill agreed.
Chapter Eleven

Percy sat at the bar at the Leaky Cauldron, his resolution to save half the chips for Ron weakening with every one he ate. He forced himself to slow down and look around.

Only a handful of patrons were in the pub, but mid-afternoon was an awkward time; too late for lunch and too early for dinner or after-work drinks. At least people were talking. Percy had eaten at the Leaky regularly when he first lived away from home until the suffocating fear that permeated the magical community during You-Know-Who’s reign had affected even this favorite gathering place. Then he had preferred the safety of his own flat or the anonymity of Muggle London. He kept an eye on the door from the courtyard and raised his hand when Ron arrived.

Ron grabbed a handful of chips even before he sat down. “Why’re meet’ here ‘stead’ve ’ome?”

Percy straightened to his full height (which no longer towered over Ron) and looked down his nose at his youngest brother. “I do hope you remember to chew with your mouth closed when you’re with Hermione.”

Ron rolled his eyes but did pause to swallow before repeating his question.

“I thought you might like to do some shopping,” Percy said.


Percy signaled Tom for a Butterbeer for Ron. “Because you are about to spend what appears to be a considerable amount of time in the Muggle world with your Muggle-born girlfriend’s Muggle parents. I thought you might like to look the part, and in something that hadn’t passed through a few other people first.”

“Yeah, I would,” he said immediately, thanking Tom as he set the drink in front of him. “But what do you know about it?”

“Enough to get by,” Percy said, not wanting to explain why he’d spent a large chunk of his free time over the last three years wandering in and out of Muggle shops and restaurants. “If you don’t want to, that’s alright, but I thought you might not want to ask Hermione, and Harry—”

“Is wrapped around Ginny’s little finger,” Ron said with disgust.

“I was going to say ‘is busy at Hogwarts,’ but true enough.” Percy took one last chip and pushed the basket towards Ron before wiping his hands and pulling a packet from inside his jacket pocket. “I have the passports for Hermione and her parents, stamped as if they arrived in Australia by airplane. I have your passport application as well, which I took the liberty of filling out. Hermione will have to include the payment and post it.”

“Cheers, Perce,” Ron said, putting the envelope in his own pocket. “Between preparing for the Order meeting yesterday and going to the Dursleys’ tomorrow, she’s going spare trying to get ready to leave by Saturday.”

Percy swallowed at the easy way his nickname rolled off Ron’s tongue, as if he’d never stopped saying it. Other than Bill, who’d forced his way into Percy’s life now and again during his absence,
Percy’s relationship with Ron had unexpectedly been the easiest to resume. Charlie was awkward, George was mean, Ginny was extra-nice, but Ron was just normal. Ron made Percy feel like nothing between them had changed. No, that wasn’t quite it. Previously Ron had had a chip on his shoulder, alternating between resentment and jealousy, suspicious of Percy’s motives. Percy had always blamed it on the twins’ influence over their baby brother. Now it was more like—

“What about the Portkey?” Ron said, startling Percy out of his own thoughts.

“Not ready yet, but it will be. I checked today.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. I’ll have it for you.”

“Okay,” Ron sighed. He pulled out a list in Hermione’s handwriting and reviewed it. “Okay, that’s everything.”

Percy drained the last of his Butterbeer and slid off his stool. “Let’s go then. I reckon you’re going to need a little bit of everything.”

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Ron trailed his brother through the men’s section of what Percy had called “a department store,” having long ago been overwhelmed by the vast selection of choices. Not just because of the size of the store, but also because he was carrying enough money for jeans and shoes, for the green shirt and the blue one.

Ron was carrying more money than he’d ever had in his life.

He had taken Bill’s advice and opened a Gringotts account in his own name, depositing the majority of the money Fred had left to him and keeping the rest. Not that it would be any good here, of course —

“Percy!” Ron hissed.

Percy was bent double, walking his fingers down one section of a wall of jeans—a whole wall of nothing but jeans in different styles and sizes—and didn’t answer.

“Percy, I don’t have any money. I mean, I do, Bill cashed some for me, but it’s in galleons. I don’t have any—you know—” He looked round. “Any Muggle money.”

“That’s okay,” Percy said, pulling out a pair from the middle of a stack. “I do.”

“No, that’s not what I meant—”

“I know it’s not, but I’d planned to.” Percy flopped the jeans onto the stack of shirts in Ron’s arms. “Go try those on. I pulled my size to start with. Just remember you don’t have to make do—if they don’t fit, we’ll go up or down a size. And you can change the waist but not the length, and vice-versa, so be specific.”

“I don’t need you to buy me clothes. Just—a loan or something. You can figure up how much it is and tell Bill to transfer it from my account to yours.”

*His account* … Ron had a Gringotts account of his very own, and it actually had money in it. Not money that he’d earned, not yet, but it would. Soon.
“Don’t worry about it,” Percy said, now flipping through a rack of belts. “I owe you a few birthdays’ and Christmas’ worth of gifts, anyway.”

“Well, I owe you some gifts too,” Ron said stubbornly, turning away when Percy tried to add the belt to the stack in his arms.

“Ron.” Percy pushed his glasses up his nose with one finger. “Shut up and say thank you.”

“Er—but—” It wasn’t just the tees and jeans and belt in one arm and the button-down shirts hanging from the fingers of his other hand. It was the stuff being held for them at the register too, the pants and socks and shoes. Percy had been right—he did need a little bit of everything; with the exception of a week’s worth of pants, none of his clothes had been new when he got them.

“My birthday is in three months. Puddlemere tickets will do nicely.”

“You can get those from Oliver for free.”

“A case of Madame Rosmerta’s mead, then,” Percy said impatiently. “Whatever makes you feel better, just—go try those on.” He pointed towards a curtained alcove Ron had assumed was for staff only.

Ron had a sudden flashback to one of Bill’s surprise trips home from Egypt. He’d been eight, maybe nine, and in addition to a model of an Egyptian tomb and a package of sweets, there had been a coat as well. Now he thought on it, the first Christmas after each of his brothers had gone to work had been unusually generous. He’d never made the connection before.

“All right. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Ron knew he meant it.

“How’d you learn all this stuff, anyway?” Ron brushed the curtain aside to find a row of curtained cubicles and entered one.

“Trial and error, mostly. It seemed easier to disappear here than … the usual places. And Penny liked to shop.”

Penelope Clearwater. Ron had forgotten Percy had dated a Muggle-born witch. “Is she okay?”

“I don’t know.”

Ron paused, one arm in and one out of a new shirt. He’d always liked Penny; she never treated him like a nuisance the few times he’d come across her and Percy together. “Shit, Perce, I’m sorry.”

“We broke up a long time ago.”

Ron wasn’t dating Lavender anymore either, hadn’t liked her nearly as much as Percy had liked Penelope, and he’d still been horrified that Lavender had been badly injured. But instead of saying that, Ron stared at his scrawny self in the mirror.

“Everything’s too big,” he complained.

“Where?”

“What do you mean where? It’s just big!”
“The sleeves, the trouser legs, the waist, what?” Percy shoved the curtain aside.

“Too big around,” Ron said, pulling the shirt away from his body. “Hermione could almost fit in here with me.”

“Nice, Ron. Really mature.”

“At least I have a girlfriend, unlike some people I know.”

“At least I know what to do with one,” Percy retorted.

“Oi!”

“I’m not the one who misinterpreted Bill’s advice,” Percy said.

“I’m not the one who asked for it,” Ron said, stepping out of the changing room and shoving the too-large items into Percy’s chest. “From any of you, you bloody arrogant gits.”

“That’s ‘generous, bloody arrogant git’ to you,” Percy said, grabbing for a denim leg before it fell onto the floor.

“Piss off,” Ron said, but he grinned.

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Ron came downstairs with Hermione the morning of their departure to find his entire family waiting in the sitting room. Mum came through the kitchen door with two packed lunches in her hand.

“Bacon sandwiches and fruit,” she said with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. She looked like she had been up all night, rather than simply having arisen early.

“Thanks, Mum,” Ron said, bending down to wrap her in a hug as Hermione added the bags to her magical handbag, which was their only luggage.

Mum felt small and fragile, thinner than usual, leaning her weight against him as if she were trying to draw on his strength rather than the other way round. Ron swallowed down the lump of emotion in his throat, reminding himself he still had to face his dad and brothers in order to keep back the tears. Bill was next, pounding him on the back and practically ordering him to owl Gringotts if they needed more funds. Charlie wanted pictures of any poisonous animals, while Percy shook his hand rather stiffly and handed him a newspaper.

“What’s this?” Ron asked, seeing at a glance by the stationary picture on the front page that it was a Muggle publication.

“Your Portkey.”

“Oh. Thanks again, Percy.”

He nodded, and Ron turned to George with some trepidation.

“Be good to her,” George said. “She’s twice the witch you are.”

Ron rolled his eyes at the obligatory insult and gripped George’s hand, pulling him close enough that his words wouldn’t carry to the others. “I’m sorry about leaving. Now, I know you could use some help—”
“Don’t worry about it,” George said, but Ron thought there was something more to the dismissal. He felt George slip something into his jacket pocket. “Don’t open that in front of Hermione,” he said, and winked.

Ginny and Harry waited by the door in unspoken understanding that their goodbyes would be said outside, in private. Ron turned to his father as his brothers made their way into the kitchen for breakfast. Hermione went outside with Harry and Ginny, leaving them alone.

“I’m proud of you, son,” Dad said, hugging him. “Be careful, and send us a note when you’ve arrived. Your mother worries.”

Ron nodded, lingering an extra second in his father’s embrace. “We will.”

“I just have one last piece of advice.” Dad stepped back and waited for Ron to look at him. “Book two rooms and wait for her to come to yours.”

He left the room, leaving Ron staring open-mouthed behind him.

Chapter End Notes

To help make the length of this fic manageable to write, I broke it down into three sections (Before Australia, In Australia, and After Australia). As you can see, we’ve reached the end of Before Australia, so this will be the last update for a while. I’ve just finished a rough draft of the next section, and now it needs to be revised and sent through beta. Once that process is complete, I'll begin posting again. In the meantime, I'm returning to my Sherlolly (BBC Sherlock) series The One. Thanks for reading!
Chapter Twelve

Hermione stumbled forward as she heard the Portkey fall to the ground. She managed to catch herself, then staggered again as Ron’s weight on their joined hands pulled her sideways. She took a moment to gather her bearings, then opened her eyes.

She was surprised to find herself standing outside in a broad courtyard outlined by eucalyptus. Shorter trees with a sort of rounded-triangle shape grew on either side of the entrance to each of the four buildings, so different from the big, broad oaks and maples and beeches at home. Spaced amongst the trees were several bright pink flowering shrubs, their wild stems reminding Hermione of forsythia. A young woman about their age waited on the tan gravel path.

She consulted her clipboard. “Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley, welcome to Australia! I’m Kylie Singh and I’ll be guiding you through the immigration process.”

“Oh, but we’re not immigrating,” Hermione said quickly. “We’re just visiting.”

Kylie waved a hand as if such details were not important and began walking towards the entrance on their left.

This did not endear her to Hermione.

“I have all the necessary paperwork,” Hermione said, pulling it out from her beaded bag. “If you could show us to the Department for Muggle Relations—”

“I will help you with anything you need,” Kylie said, leading them into a narrow room with a counter with multiple windows along each side, similar to the hall at Gringotts but significantly smaller. “Transportation, lodging, maps, food—are you hungry? Let’s see, it must be … about six a.m. for you? Breakfast in the canteen, perhaps?”

“That sounds—” Ron began.

“No, thank you,” Hermione said, politely but firmly. “We will be traveling as Muggles while we’re in Australia.”

This stopped Kylie in her tracks. “Oh?”

“That’s why we need the Department for Muggle Relations.” Hermione tried a smile.

“I see.” Kylie indicated for them to wait at the third window from the end and proceeded to circle around the desk to help them from behind it. “Your papers, please.”

Hermione passed them over.

“You haven’t indicated a return date.”

“No,” Hermione said nervously. “We—we don’t know when we’ll be going back.”

“Very well.” Kylie stamped both forms with a heavy, official-looking embosser and handed them back to Hermione. “I’ve stamped your papers for three months from today. When you know your exit date, come back to this office and they—” She waved her hand at her colleagues behind the elongated desk on the opposite wall— “will assist you with arranging your Portkeys back to England and the paperwork for you to get back in country.”
“We, um, we won’t be using magic to travel home,” Hermione said. “We’ll be with my parents. They’re Muggles.”

Kylie’s gaze sharpened. “Then you will need the appropriate Muggle paperwork.”

“I know. I have a passport, and Ron’s applied for his. A friend is going to send it when it’s available.”

“You really do need to talk to Muggle Relations.” Kylie sighed.

Hermione pressed her lips together in a smile to keep in the I told you so.

“This way, please.” Kylie circled the desk and led them back out into the hallway and across the lobby to the lifts. “Second floor, turn left and then the first door on your right. I don’t know if anyone is still there this late on a Saturday, but there’s a big blue sign—you can’t miss it.”

“Thank you,” Hermione said as the lift dinged, and she and Ron stepped inside.

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They were the only people in the lift and found the Department of Muggle Relations exactly where Kylie said.

“G’day. How may I help you?” He was a portly man with a well-groomed mustache, dressed casually in a Muggle shirt and jeans. Glenn Cook was printed on a plaque in front of an overflowing inbox.

“I’m Hermione Granger and this is Ron Weasley. We just arrived from England and were sent here by Kylie Singh with the Department of Magical Transportation.”

“Papers, please.” He extended his hand. “No return date—indefinite plans, then?”

“Well, yes, but the real reason is we will be flying home. In an airplane,” Hermione added.

“Oh, wonderful! I love flying,” he said enthusiastically.

“Really?” Ron said.

“Absolutely,” Mr. Cook said. “It’s like Muggle magic. What brings you to Australia?”

Hermione opened her mouth but no sound came out. Ron glanced at her, then turned back to Mr. Cook.

“It’s her parents,” he said. “You’ve heard about the war with Voldemort?” Mr. Cook flinched at the name, and Ron must have taken it for confirmation because he continued. “Hermione sent her Muggle parents here for safety. We’re here to find them and escort them home to England.”

“Do you have Muggle passports?” he asked.

“I do. Ron’s applied for his but it hadn’t come before we left. A friend of ours is going to send it on. We need to set up mail delivery too.”

Mr. Cook nodded. “Here in Canberra?”

“Er, well … We only plan to stay here a night or two. I think my parents will be somewhere on the coast.”
“Ninety percent of the population is,” Mr. Cook said cheerfully. “Muggle or owl post?”

“Owl,” Ron said. “We’ll be sending mail to my parents’ house.”

“And receiving your passport by owl post?”

Ron nodded.

“That’s simple enough, then. You can visit the owl office downstairs to get a list of all the owl offices across the country.”

Ron spun to face her. “We need to do that. I promised Mum and Dad we’d owl them as soon as we arrived.”

“We will,” Hermione promised.

“Well then, you’ll need a place to stay. Muggle lodgings, I take it?”

“Yes, please,” Hermione said.

Mr. Cook spun his chair to face the wall behind him, which was covered in cubbies filled with pamphlets. “Let’s see … this, and this, and—where—oh, yes … and this one…. He pulled more than half-a-dozen pamphlets before turning back to Hermione and Ron.

“Here you go. Any of these hotels—” He opened one of the pamphlets and underlined several names. “Are reputable places to stay and will be in a safe location.”

Hermione recognized a few chain names from travels with her parents in both England and the Continent and nodded. He opened a second pamphlet, which she immediately recognized by the geometric shapes as a map of the city.

“We’re here.” Mr. Cook traced a big star over their location. “The National Library is here.” He circled it. “The National Museum and National Gallery are here and here. This—” He unfolded yet another pamphlet with a diagramed map of the city and timetables below. “Is the bus schedule. It should be sufficient to get you anywhere in the central business district, but once you get more than a few blocks out, you’ll be better off in a car. Can you drive?” He looked up at Hermione.

She shook her head.

“Then I encourage you to choose a hotel in this area—” He drew a circle on the map with his finger, which encompassed most of the intersecting bus lines— “as cabs will be expensive. You said you think your parents will be at the coast. Any idea where?”

“Sydney, probably,” Hermione said. “That’s where they flew into, but I don’t know if it’s where they stayed.”

Mr. Cook turned back to the wall of cubbies and selected another assortment of pamphlets.

“You can fly to Sydney, of course, but if you’re looking for a cheaper alternative, there are inter-city coaches. Two a day Sunday through Friday and three on Saturdays.”

“I was hoping … once we know where we’re going, can we take a Portkey to Sydney’s magical district?” Hermione asked.

“Oh, of course! Just come back to the Department of Magical Transportation downstairs. Different office, though—you’ll want domestic travel. Though with only two of you, coach tickets or even the
train will be cheaper.”

Hermione nodded. Assuming they could find her parents in the dental registry relatively quickly and didn’t need to spend a lot of money here in Canberra, she thought she could afford the extra expense of a Portkey in favor of speed.

“The owl office is downstairs—back down to the ground floor, cross the lobby, and follow the hooting,” Mr. Cook smiled. “There’s a small Gringotts branch as well where you can exchange your money, although they’ve already closed for the day.”

“Oh, we’ve already done that,” Hermione said. “Ron’s brother works for Gringotts.”

“Very good. We’re actually in the same building as the Muggle Parliament. Once you’ve left the owl office, head back to the lobby and follow the signs for the Muggle exit. That will put you in their lobby, and then you simply exit the front doors. You’ll have to walk down the hill to the ring road for the bus stop.” He indicated it on the map, and Hermione memorized its location.

“Is there anything else I can help you with?”

Hermione looked at Ron, but he had the same glazed expression he wore during exam prep.

“I don’t think so. Thank you very much.” Hermione added the pamphlets to her beaded bag and led Ron back towards the lifts.

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With his parents notified via an automatic service that dispensed a postcard once knuts were dropped in a slot and an additional fee to expedite it by Portkey, Ron followed Hermione out of the Australian Parliament and down the stairs. She hesitated in the big courtyard laid with mosaic tile (Ron wasn’t sure why since there was only one path down the hill), and they walked toward the road in silence. She stopped in a glass box open on the street side where a number of other people were standing.

“This is the bus stop?”

Hermione nodded without looking at him and pulled out one of the pamphlets. “I was going to suggest we check in, but now I’m thinking we might be better off going on up to Sydney.” She glanced at her watch, then ran one finger down a list of what looked like times.

“Check in where?”

“To our hotel.” She looked up. “But it’s Saturday, all the business offices will be closed. Oh, I wish we could have come in yesterday!”

Ron took her hand, hoping to calm her before she got too worked up. “Yesterday we were cleaning at the Dursleys,” he reminded her.

Hermione dropped his hand to examine the bus schedule again. “I know, but now I have to wait until Monday to call the dental registry, and if they are in Sydney, we’ll have wasted two days!”

“But if they’re not in Sydney, we’ll have made a trip for nothing.”

Hermione chewed her lip. “I don’t know . . . .”

“I think we should eat first.”

“Ron—”
A bus pulled up to the curb and Ron moved forward to join the forming queue. Hermione laid her hand on his arm and pulled him back.

“That’s not our bus,” she said.

“There’s more than one?”

“Yes, there’s lots of them. That’s what the colored lines are for, see?” She pointed to a map on the back wall of the glass box that looked identical to one of the ones Mr. Cook had shown them. “Each route is numbered and has a different color on the map. You have to find the route or routes that run past your stop and match that up with the route that serves your destination. Here, see?”

“So, which one are we waiting for?”

“I don’t know. It depends on where we’re going.” She stared at the route map as if it were a difficult rune translation.

“Let’s find someplace to eat and talk it over, okay?”

After much dithering over hotels versus food versus Sydney, Hermione finally chose a route that would take them into the central business district. Over burgers and chips, Ron managed to convince her to spend at least one night in Canberra.

“Is there any other way we can find out about the registry while the office is closed?” Ron asked.

“The library, maybe?”

Hermione paused with a chip halfway to her mouth. “I don’t know. I don’t know if they print the registries, and if they do, how often. I mean, it depends on how long it took Mum and Dad to get licensed and when the registry was printed whether or not they’d be in it. But it’s worth a look, don’t you think?”

Anything that might get rid of the sad, uncharacteristically indecisive Hermione he’d seen today was worth it.

Ron followed Hermione a lot that day. He followed her onto the bus, and off the bus, and into a café. He followed her as she ordered for both of them, and paid, and chose a table. He followed her when she carried their plates and rubbish to a small station in the corner that he would never have recognized as the bin, then into and around the city library (at least that part felt familiar) and out again (into darkness already!), into a small shop, and to a telephone right on the street. Hermione made several calls with the code on the back of a small stiff card she had bought in the shop, squinting in the light from a nearby streetlamp, and then they were on the bus again, this time changing routes before disembarking and entering a building at the corner. Ron followed her across what he realized must be the ground floor of a hotel.

“Hello.” Hermione greeted the desk clerk. “I called about an hour ago about two rooms—Hermione Granger?”

The clerk looked down her nose through her brightly colored spectacles. Clearly she hadn’t expected someone so young. “Identification, please, Miss Granger?”

Hermione pulled out her purse and passport, followed by the card with a string of numbers that she
had told Ron was money. The clerk examined both of them and appeared to be concentrating on the first one.

“As you can see,” Hermione said, “I turned eighteen last September, which means that’s a legal credit card in my name.”

The clerk passed the items back to Hermione, whose hand shook slightly as she returned them to her purse. The clerk then looked pointedly from Hermione’s handbag lying on the desk to the empty floor around them, and Ron realized they had no luggage. Muggles traveling from another country would have lots of luggage, and all they had was Hermione’s beaded handbag, which Ron had seen today was smaller than most Muggle women used for everyday. He wished he had asked for his rucksack back rather than leaving it with Hermione.

“Two rooms, you said?”

Ron flushed, remembering his dad’s last words.

“Yes, please. We would like to be on the same floor if possible.” Hermione produced a third card from her purse. “Add them to this account, please.”

The clerk’s demeanor changed so fast, Ron wondered if Hermione had performed a Confundus Charm.

“Of course, miss. We’re happy to have you staying with us again.”

“Thank you.” She accepted her card back as well as two small envelopes and barely waited for the lift doors to close before muttering, “I can’t believe her!”

“We must look pretty suspicious without luggage. Why did you want to stay here? We don’t need anything fancy.”

Hermione stabbed the number two button. “This is actually one of the more basic brands, but I knew it would be clean and we need to stay on a bus line. The company has a loyalty program where members earn free nights by staying in one of their hotels,” she explained. “Mum and Dad are platinum members.”

“Oh, so that’s why she changed her attitude? I thought maybe you had confunded her.”

Hermione flushed but shook her head. “Of course not.”

The lift dinged and they stepped out into a small carpeted foyer.

“This way,” Hermione said, pausing in front of a sign before turning left. She stopped in front of number 223.

Ron took a deep breath and followed Hermione into the room.
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Notes

*looks around an empty room* Hello? Is anyone here?

If you're still following this fic, thank you ever so much! I have fifteen new chapters for you, all edited and ready to go :) I'll update every Wednesday (I have a reminder set on my phone and everything). I'm also working on this fic for Camp NaNoWriMo next month, with the goal of finishing it completely.

“Here’s your stuff.” Hermione tossed the paper envelopes the clerk had given her onto a dresser and pulled Ron’s rucksack out of her beaded bag.

“Thanks.” Ron took it and remained standing in the doorway between the little entrance area, which had a door opening into a bathroom, and the bedroom. “Um, Hermione?”

“Yes?”

She had already removed the pamphlets Mr. Cook had given them and was spreading them out on the bed around her.

“I, er, I don’t know how to get into my room.”

She finally looked up. “Oh! I’m sorry, Ron. Here.” She picked up one of the paper envelopes from the dresser and pulled out a card. “This is your key,” she explained, handing it to him. “It has a little arrow here to show you which way to insert it into the lock, and the black stripe should always be facing away from you. You’re in room 228. That must be across the hall.” She slipped her own key into her back pocket and led the way out of the room.

“You have to have your key with you any time you leave your room because the door automatically locks when it closes. Here we are. Now, just insert it into the lock, wait for the light to glow green, then remove the card and open the door.”

Ron followed her instructions, but the lock flashed red.

“It does that to everyone sometimes,” she reassured. “Try again.”

He did so, and this time the lights shone green, the lock clicked, and he was able to open the door. His room was a mirror image of Hermione’s but otherwise identical.

“Okay, the bathroom should be self-explanatory…” Hermione’s voice trailed off as she entered the little room.

Ron dropped his rucksack on the bed and opened the lined curtains to reveal a busy street with more of the long-leafed trees they’d seen in the Ministry courtyard and mountains in the distance. He wondered what the rest of Australia looked like.

“Let me show you how to work the telly.”
She showed him the power, volume, and “channel” buttons, and Ron was quickly distracted from the rest of her instructions about the remote as the picture on the telly changed with each press of the button. Seeing this, Hermione turned it off.

“Do you remember how to use a telephone?”

Hermione had taught him the summer before third year, after his disastrous call to Harry’s uncle. Ron nodded.

She consulted a paper beside the phone, under the alarm clock. “Right. All you have to do to call my room is dial my room number, 223. Don’t call anyone else,” she warned. “Unless it’s the front desk, which is zero. We’ll be charged for any other phone calls. That’s why I got the phone card.”

Ron nodded again.

“Anything else?”

“How did you know what floor we were on?”

“What?”

“When we got into the lift, you pushed the number two button, but the lady didn’t tell us what floor we were on. How did you know?”

“Because of our room numbers. The first number—or the first two numbers, if there’s more than nine floors—is the floor number, and the last two are the room number.” Hermione studied him, and Ron thought it might be the first time she’d truly seen him all day. “You’ve never stayed in a hotel?”

He shook his head.

“What about when you went to Egypt?”

“Mum and Dad rented a little house in the magical district.”

“Oh.”

“Is this what it was like for you?” Ron said, looking around at the unfamiliar items. The clock that glowed all by itself. The telly with its changing pictures and Muggle wand. The holes in the wall he guessed were plugs from their similarity to the ones in Dad’s shed. The box that blew warm air without a fire.

“Is what like it was for me?”

“Coming to Hogwarts. Joining the magical world, is this—this confusion, the sense that everyone knows something you don’t and it would be stupid to ask….”

“That’s exactly how I felt,” Hermione said quietly. “That everyone knew and I would look stupid for asking. It wasn’t exactly a feeling I was familiar with.”

Ron looked her full in the face. “I couldn’t have got us here. Hell, I couldn’t have got us fed.”

Hermione nodded. “I had to learn all that stuff too. I’m still not very good at traveling by Floo Powder. I’ve Apparated a lot more than I’ve used the Floo Network.”

No wonder Hermione had been so obsessed with books when he first met her; she’d had no other way of figuring out what was going on around her.
“I’m sorry I made fun of you for being swotty when we first met.”

She dropped her gaze and laid the remote on the bedside cabinet, careful to square it with the edge. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. You’ve had a million opportunities to take the mickey today, and you haven’t used one of them.”

She looked up in surprise. “Of course I haven’t! It’s not your fault you’ve never traveled in the Muggle world.”

Ron raised one eyebrow. “It wasn’t your fault you’d never seen the magical one, either.”

Hermione shrugged one shoulder. “You were eleven. You haven’t made fun of me in a long time. Not maliciously.”

She looked away, and Ron knew she was thinking of that awful day in Transfiguration in sixth year. He scrambled for something to distract her.

“Bit tempting at the library today,” he teased, then immediately regretted it when her face fell.

“I’m sorry the library didn’t have anything,” Ron said, sitting on the bed beside her.

“It’s okay.”

“But now you have the phone number for the registry,” he said, trying to encourage her.

She shrugged again. “I could have got that from the phone book any time.”

“Let’s go back to your room and see how to get to Sydney,” he suggested. Anything other than sitting here feeling helpless. He’d had enough of that over the last year.

“I thought you wanted to wait until Monday, when we can call the registry and find out where they are.”

“I do think that’s the best plan, but we can still find out about the coach and train schedules, where they leave from and what time and stuff. Come on.”

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Hermione lay very still with her eyes closed, trying to convince her body to go to sleep despite its insistence it was dinnertime, when someone knocked on her door.

She peered through the peephole and unlocked the door. “Ron? What are you doing? It’s two in the morning!”

He leaned one arm on the jamb but made no move to come in. “Do you have any food in your handbag?”

“It’s two am,” Hermione repeated. “We’ll never get turned around to Australia time if we don’t—”

“Please, Hermione? Dinner, breakfast, lunch—whatever meal that was, it was a long time ago.”

True enough, and while stress decreased Hermione’s appetite, nothing seemed to affect Ron’s. She stepped back and opened the door.
“All right. I never did eat my bacon sandwich your mum made.”

Ron gave a huge sigh of relief. “Have I told you lately how wonderful you are?”

“You only say that when I feed you,” Hermione said in amusement, passing over the wrapped sandwich and an orange.

“Well, it’s true all the time. Cheers.”

“Wait,” Hermione said when he turned for the door. “I can’t sleep, either. Watch telly with me?”

Ron hesitated, then shrugged. “If you like.”

Hermione nodded and threw the covers back into place before climbing onto the bed and wedging a pillow behind her back. Ron dragged the single chair over to face the telly.

“So, what’s on telly at two in the morning?” he asked, unwrapping his sandwich.

“Reruns. Shopping. Twenty-four hour news.”

“You can buy things with the telly too?”

Hermione began explaining the concept of commercials.

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Percy stood at the red front door of Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes and tried to see through the boarded-up glass panes. Over his head a rabbit was half-visible on the giant ginger head, its arm motionless in mid-air. He banged on the door again.

“George! It’s me, open the door!”

Nothing. No answer and no movement, at least not that Percy could see. He pulled his wand from his pocket.

“Alohomora.” To his astonishment, the lock clicked, the knob turned, and the door actually creaked open a few inches.

In hindsight, Percy realized it was way too easy. Unfortunately, this did not occur to him until he was standing naked in the open doorway with red and blue lights flashing in every window and the voice of his mother shrieking “Thief! Help! Thief!” loudly enough to draw the attention of the entire street.

Percy knew this to be true because they gathered outside the shop windows, laughing.

“What the bloody—” George came barreling into the room, wand out, but stopped short at the sight of his brother.

“Really, Percy? Our shop—my and Fred’s shop, and you didn’t realize the door would be jinxed?”

Percy reminded himself his mother would be more angry about him killing George than she would be about George humiliating him. Not fair, but there you have it. He spoke through gritted teeth.


“You’re so clever, you figure it out.” With a wave of George’s wand, the blinds rolled down over the shop windows and he turned away.
Percy tried several variations of the Summoning Charm without success before he remembered Fred and George never did what was expected of them. As he calmed down and thought, he realized he could feel the brush of cloth over his forearm when he waved his wand. He reversed a Disillusionment Charm, and his clothes reappeared on his body.

“Clever,” Percy muttered, impressed despite himself. Anyone entering the shop with malicious intent would be too busy removing themselves from the potential humiliation and incarceration of the attention-grabbing spectacle to notice they weren’t really starkers, after all.

“I see you worked it out,” George said when Percy joined him in the small office.

“How did you get Mum’s voice?”

“We saved all our old Howlers. Well, from third year on. Fred had the idea we could mix up the words and come up with something really funny for her birthday. Never got around to that, but it still came in handy.”

“I, er, came to see if you need any help.”

George didn’t look up from an apparently fascinating order form. “By breaking in?”

“I knocked—twice! Loudly!”

“And I didn’t answer,” George said coldly, raising his gaze. “That generally means one’s presence isn’t welcome.”

Percy stared at him, but there was no hint of warmth in his expression. No ready smile, no crinkling of his eyes. George hadn’t even laughed when he’d found Percy naked in the doorway.

Godric, he looked strange. A stranger—that’s what George reminded him of. A stranger who disliked him genuinely and intensely. But Percy wasn’t a stranger, he was George’s own brother, and—

Apparently that didn’t matter a knut.

Percy swallowed. “All right. I just—well, if—if you change your mind—”

“I won’t.”

“It’s a standing offer,” Percy said, and left the shop.

0000

Hermione woke to bright sunshine coming through a disproportionately small gap in the curtains and a stiff neck. Rolling over with a groan, she found herself tangled in the duvet and realized she’d fallen asleep on top of the covers, not underneath them.

Ron and his snack. I must have fallen asleep first, and he covered me before he left.

For indeed, the room was empty with no sign of Ron other than a note scribbled on a pad propped against the phone. Sweet dreams. Ring me when you wake up. Lots to do today!

Lots to do? There was nothing they could do today, Sunday, except travel to Sydney, and Ron had firmly vetoed that idea last night when they found out it was only a three or four hour trip from Canberra.
If you call the registry first thing, and your parents are still in Sydney, we can be there just after lunch. Plenty of time to look around,” he had reasoned. “But what if they’re somewhere south or west of here? Then we’ll have wasted both time and money. One day, Hermione. Let’s find some kangaroos.”

Hermione had not been keen on the idea (mainly because she hated admitting that she’d been so focused on getting here that she hadn’t considered basic logistical details like the day of the week), but she had to admit Ron was right. There wasn’t really any point in traveling just for the sake of doing something, no matter how much she despised inactivity. She picked up the receiver and dialed Ron’s room number.

“Hello?” His voice was tentative and unsure, and it made Hermione smile.

“It’s me.”

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

The silence stretched in a not-unpleasant way, and Hermione curled the cord round one finger.

“What did you mean, we have a lot to do?”

“Did you know Canberra has the best museums in all Australia? The National Gallery, the National Museum, the War Memorial—you can even watch Muggle money being made!”

“At the mint.”

“Yes! And…” He paused dramatically. “The National Library is here too! And it has a café! Come on, what could be a more perfect attraction for the two of us than a library with a place to eat?”

Hermione laughed. “How do you know all this?”

Ron was quiet for a moment. “I, uh, I read about it. In your travel book.”

She snugged the handset closer to her ear, wishing Ron were here and not down the hall. “You read a book for me?”

“It seemed like the right thing to do. You had to learn about my world.”

“But, Ron, this is Australia. We don’t live here.”

“I know, but … well, Muggle things work the same way everywhere, right? Please say I’m right. I don’t want to have spent a whole hour reading a book for nothing.”

“ Mostly,” Hermione said, not fooled by his dramatics. Ron wasn’t a particularly fast reader; he’d spent more than an hour with that book, and he’d done it to show her he understood how hard it had been for her to fit into the magical world.

“Come on, get ready. I picked out someplace to have breakfast, and I think I even know how to pay for it.”

“All right. I’ll meet you in half an hour.”

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Ron talked Hermione into going to the National Museum first. After wandering the exhibits covering
Australia’s original inhabitants and first settlers as well as immigration during the twentieth century (Hermione’s choices) and tracking down an extinct Tasmanian tiger (Ron’s), they boarded yet another bus and headed for the National Library. Once entering the library, Ron headed for the café, but Hermione went straight for the information desk.

Ron tugged on her hand and indicated the beautiful stained glass windows visible through the clear glass wall that separated the café from the foyer. “Once you get in the actual library, you’re not going to want to leave before closing time, whenever that happens to be,” he reminded her. “I promise I won’t complain if you feed me lunch first.”

She smiled, the soft, understanding smile she’d been giving him more and more often since Malfoy Manor.

He’d do a lot more than stay late in a library for that smile.
Chapter Fourteen

Percy came downstairs early Monday morning to find his dad sitting alone at the kitchen table with the *Daily Prophet* and a half-empty plate.

“Morning,” Percy said. He’d been hoping he was early enough to Floo to work first. He didn’t know if Dad would want to be seen with him after … everything.

“Good morning. Help yourself to breakfast. I made extra.” Dad waved a hand at the cooker behind him.

“Thanks.” Percy filled his plate and sat down. “Anything interesting?”

Dad folded the paper and laid it beside his plate, then poured Percy a cup of tea and refilled his own. “Ministry employees can reconnect their home Floos directly to the Ministry again.”

Percy made a noise of interest around his first bite. “Starting when?”

“Today. They’re starting with top officials and working their way down. We’ll have to Apparate this morning, but hopefully it will be up by the end of the week.” He took a sip of tea.

“If you’re ready, you can go on,” Percy said, spreading marmalade on his toast. “You don’t have to wait for me.”

“I don’t mind. We have plenty of time.”

Percy swallowed and nodded. He scrambled for a neutral topic of conversation. “Mum still asleep?”

Dad nodded. Percy unfolded the newspaper and pretended to read.

“How was dinner with Bill and Fleur last night?” Dad said.

Bill had invited Percy to Shell Cottage for the first time. “Good.” Other than having to explain how Fred died, crying, and being told off by my oldest brother. “Fleur’s a good cook.” Much better than Ginny. With Mum not feeling herself, everyone was helping out, but despite having spent time in the kitchen with their mother nearly every day of their childhoods, no one person seemed to know the whole process. “Fleur is … different than I expected.”

“She is. Are you going back to the Minister’s office?” Dad asked.

Percy paused with his cup halfway to his mouth, then took a sip. “I thought I’d start there, but I don’t think I’ll end up there.” He’d been junior assistant to the Minister of Magic, but somehow he didn’t think Kingsley Shacklebolt would be too keen on hiring a wizard who had worked directly for Voldemort’s puppet.

“I could put in a word with Kingsley, if you like,” Dad offered.

“No!” Percy took a deep breath at Dad’s flinch and repeated calmly, “No, I don’t want any help. I never did.”

The silence stretched. Percy chewed out of habit, the food like ashes in his mouth. He looked down at his plate. What little appetite he’d started the day with had completely vanished, so he pushed the
plate away and downed the last of his tea in one gulp.

“I’ll clear up,” Dad said, standing and carrying their plates to the sink. “You go brush your teeth.”

“I’m not five years old, Dad,” Percy said irritably.

He smiled, but it was a sad smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “No. Of course you’re not. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t mention it,” Percy muttered, and left the room.

It was going to be a long day.

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Percy moved away from the Apparition point and fell in step alongside his father. As they joined the stream of wizards and witches heading towards the golden gates and the lifts beyond, Percy felt a smile stretching across his face. He loved working at the Ministry of Magic—when it actually was the British Ministry, not an extension of Voldemort’s regime—and it already felt different, more like the Ministry he first joined. No “security” watched from posts at regular intervals, and a small group of Aurors chatted as they queued for the Floo. He looked round at the gleaming dark wood floors, the flickering of emerald flames, and the golden runes floating across the ceiling. Today’s theme was peace: accord, harmony, agreement, alliance, and unity formed and reformed in shifting orientations so as to be readable from anywhere in the hall.

“The statue is gone,” Percy said in surprise.

They both stopped and stared at the empty space where the massive, oppressive black stone sculpture had been.

“Wonder what they’ll put up in its place? Good morning, Eric.” Dad spoke to the security wizard on duty. “Do you know my son Percy?”

“Hello,” Percy said, somewhat embarrassed that he’d walked past this man for four years and didn’t know his name.

“Yes, I do,” Eric said with a nod. “He’s the only one of your boys to follow you into the Ministry, isn’t he?”

“So far,” Dad said with a smile.

“I was sorry to hear about Fred,” Eric said seriously.

Dad pushed his glasses up with one hand. “Ah, yes. Thank you.”

And there it was, the reminder of why they hadn’t been to work in the last fortnight. Compassionate leave.

“Well, welcome back, Mr. Weasley. Mr. Weasley.” Eric turned to a visitor waiting for his assistance and they moved on.

Dad spoke to more people waiting for the lift, and again as passengers entered and exited on various floors, but for the most part they stood at the back of the lift, facing forward and not saying anything. As the disembodied voice announced the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, Dad spoke without looking at him.

“Lunch?”
“Er, yeah. Okay.” It felt a bit lame to eat lunch with his dad, but it wasn’t like Percy actually had friends here. Hell, he might not even have a job here.

“I’ll see you then, son.” He moved forward as the lift doors opened.

“Wait, where are you going?”

Dad turned back. “I don’t work in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office anymore, remember?”

Stunned that he’d forgotten what he’d once longed for, Percy could do no more than duck as a pale violet paper airplane whizzed past his ear.

Dad joined Percy as he queued for lunch.

“Well? How did it go?”

Percy stared. He hadn’t seen his dad in the canteen the entire time they’d not been speaking to each other; for him to casually join him in line was beyond strange.

“Department of Magical Transportation,” Percy said. “They need lots of help with all the returning Muggle-borns.”

“That’s not too bad then,” Dad said.

“No, it’s fine.” And it was. Nowhere near the pay or prestige of his last job, but all things considered, Percy was glad of that. It was a pay grade above where he’d started four years ago, his department head seemed like an okay bloke, and the work was straightforward but detailed—right up Percy’s street.

“Hello, Arthur, what can I get for you?”

“Hello, Agnes, how’s your day been?”

As Percy watched the plump, matronly woman in a hairnet fill a plate with his dad’s selections, he realized what was so strange about meeting him in the canteen.

Mum always packed Dad’s lunch.

Percy had never run into his father in the canteen because his father never ate there. He always brought a lunch from home, but Mum wasn’t even feeding herself, much less packing food for someone else.

“And for you, sir?”

Percy returned his attention to the food. “Er, I’ll have—”

“Agnes, this is my son Percy.”

To Percy’s horror, the sneeze guard protecting the food from being breathed or spit upon misted and blurred. Dad had said that half a dozen times today, always with the same warmth and pride in his voice, just like when Percy brought home his first end-of-term marks or received his prefect letter. As if Percy had never flung his father’s shortcomings in his face, never scorned his life choices, never been ashamed to acknowledge their relationship.
“Percy.”

There was the mildest rebuke in the word, and Percy blinked furiously before reaching a long arm over the food guard and shaking Agnes’s hand.

“Hello, Agnes, it’s nice to meet you.”

Even more than being told to brush his teeth, being introduced to everyone made him feel about five years old. But it was obvious Dad was thrilled to have Percy back and eager to show him off despite there not being not much to show, and sometimes—well, sometimes it was just nice to be appreciated.

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Hermione sat on her bed facing the telephone and the piece of paper with the number of the Dental Board of New South Wales. Beside her phone card, the red numbers of the alarm clock spelled out 8:02.

Ron squeezed her shoulder. “It’s time.”

She took a deep breath, picked up her phone card, and began dialing.

“Dental Board of New South Wales, how may I direct your call?”

“Yes, I need to verify a dentist’s registration. Two dentists, actually.”

“One moment, please.”

Hermione tightened her grip on the receiver and waited while she was transferred.

“Registration and Notification Committee.”

“Yes, I need to verify registration for two dentists, Wendell and Monica Wilkins.”

“City of residence?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe Sydney?”

“Okay, let’s see … I have several Wilkins here…. They’re a married couple?”

“Yes,” Hermione said.

“Okay, we can narrow it down by location. Give me a minute to compare the addresses. Can you hold?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“What’s going on?” Ron mouthed.

Hermione let go of Ron’s hand to cover the mouthpiece. “She’s looking for a Monica and Wendell that have the same address.”

“Miss?”

Hermione moved the handset back to her mouth. “Yes?”

“I have a Monica and Wendell Wilkins that have both the same address of residence and practice
Hermione began to shake. “Wh-what’s the address, please?” She shoved the pen and paper to Ron and repeated it out loud for him to write down. “How is the city spelled? Thank you.”

“Did you need anything else?”

“No, thank you. Thank you very much!”

Hermione hung up the phone and stared at the paper in Ron’s hand. Wahroonga. Her parents were in Wahroonga, New South Wales, Australia.

“Where’s Wahroonga?” Ron said.

“No idea,” Hermione said. “But we found them, Ron!” She flung her arms around his neck and laughed.

“I told you it would work,” he said, hugging her back, then standing up and spinning her around. “You’re brilliant. It also means you didn’t mess up the memory charm—you were worried about them being able to do their jobs, remember?”

Hermione nodded, already reaching for her handbag and pulling out every bit of reference material she had. “We need a map. A map, a map … tell me Mr. Cook gave us a map of Sydney somewhere….”

“But you said Wahroonga.”

“I’m hoping it’s a suburb, a community just outside the city.”

Maybe it was, but it was on none of the maps. Nor was it indexed in her travel book. Hermione dropped the book on the stack of papers and pamphlets and pushed her hair back with both hands. “Well….”

“We just need a better map,” Ron said. “There were maps in that shop where you bought the phone card.”

“Yeah,” she said, dropping her hands and letting her hair spring back into place. “Okay. We’ll look at one of those, and if I’m right, we can go up to Sydney today and check it out.”

“I can’t believe she gave you their home address, just like that,” Ron said, tearing off the sheet he’d written it on and adding it to the stack as Hermione reorganized the papers. “She didn’t even ask your name!”

“It’s not their home address. It’s their work address. That’s public record, the type of license they have and where they practice. We’ll have to follow them home, somehow….” She frowned. Mum and Dad probably had a car. How were they going to follow them in a car?

“Okay, first the map shop and then breakfast.”

“First we check out,” Hermione corrected. “Wherever Wahroonga is, we’re going there today.”

Their errands took longer than expected, and Ron convinced Hermione it would be easier (and cheaper) to leave immediately via train than to travel back to the Ministry and wade through the bureaucracy necessary for a Portkey. Taking a coach would be cheaper still, but they would still
need to take the bus or train from Sydney to Wahroonga. In the interest of simplicity, Hermione bought two train tickets from Canberra to Wahroonga, and they settled in for the ride. But as soon as she stepped off the train onto the platform in Wahroonga, Hermione immediately knew she didn’t want to see her parents today.

“Let’s find a hotel.”

“What?” Ron asked, leading the way upstairs to the street. “I thought you wanted to go to their office.”

“It’s nearly five o’clock. They’ll be closed by the time we get there. We can go tomorrow.”

Ron gave her a suspicious look over his shoulder but didn’t argue. “All right. Do you want to call first?”

She nodded. “Do you see any pay phones?”

“Not yet.”

Ron maneuvered them through the dissipating crowd, and as soon as they spotted a pay phone, Hermione pulled out her parents’ loyalty card. After booking two rooms at the closest hotel and jotting down the address, she turned to Ron.

“Let’s do something tonight,” she said impulsively.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. We could see a film or go to the mall or—”

Ron took her hand and led her to a nearby bench. “What’s going on?”

“What? Nothing’s going on. Business hours are almost over, Ron, we can’t see my parents today anyway and we might as well—” Hermione looked around the street for inspiration. A chemist, an office building, an outdoor café— “We might as well eat.”

“That’s the third time you’ve tried to feed me since we left Canberra,” he said, looking at her shrewdly. “If you’re scared to see your parents, just say so. You don’t have to distract me with snacks.”

Hermione’s eyes welled with tears. “Of course I’m scared to see them! I—” She blinked, then looked down at their joined hands. “I don’t want to have this conversation here,” she said in a small voice.

Ron squeezed her hand. “Okay. How about we send a letter home, let them know we found your parents and where we are? We’ll be here for a while, right?”

Hermione nodded.

“Where’s the list of all the owl offices?”

Hermione sniffed and opened her bag, being careful not to plunge more of her arm in than would visibly fit. She pulled out her folder of paperwork and passed it to Ron, who moved over and smoothed out the roll of parchment on the bench between them.

“There are six listed under Sydney,” Ron said. “Do any of these addresses look familiar?”

Hermione glanced over the list. “I don’t think Chatswood is very far,” she said. “Maybe we could
just walk?”

Ron looked skeptical. “I think we’ll have to Apparate,” he said. “Look, they’ve included the coordinates. We can’t ask a Muggle for directions to a magical address.”

Hermione swallowed against another rise of tears. There were so many things she hadn’t thought of, so many situations she hadn’t planned for. They couldn’t take a bus when they didn’t know where they were going, and they couldn’t taxi everywhere, even assuming they could catch a cab from here. She only had so much money, and a lot of it was going to their rooms.

“Come on,” Ron said, standing up and pulling her with him. “We learned how to do this at Ho—at school. All you have to do is concentrate. Detection, detonation, deviation.”

“Destination, determination, deliberation,” Hermione corrected.

It wasn’t until Ron grinned at her that she realized what she’d done. He always had known how to make her smile.
Hermione and Ron rematerialized under the pale yellow arch of a courtyard. Directly across from them was an open door with a multi-branched perch on either side, both full of brightly-colored and various-sized birds, many of them with their heads under their wings, snoozing in the shade of the deep overhang.

“We’d better hurry,” Ron said. “It’s nearly closing time.”

They passed under the shade of the porch and stepped into a room much like the owl office in Hogsmeade—well, except for the owls. A few large owls occupied the top perches, but many other birds were arranged from smallest to largest on perches all around the room. Several workers stood behind a counter, assisting the last customers of the day.

“What are all these?” Ron asked.

“Lots of parrots,” Hermione said, cheered by the birds’ bright plumage and squawking.

“I want that one.” Ron pointed to a bird with emerald green feathers and a blue and yellow ring around its neck.

“It’s too small,” Hermione said. “It’s a long way to England.”

“Sirius sent Harry a letter by flamingo once,” Ron said excitedly. “Harry said it almost didn’t fit through his bedroom window!”

“No flamingos,” Hermione said firmly, unsurprised that Sirius had made such a flamboyant choice even when on the run. She pointed to a gray bird with a spiked yellow crest. “I recognize that one but I can’t remember what it’s called,” she said. “Cockatoo, cockatiel, something like that.”

A loud, stuttering cry sounded over the rest of the clucking, hooting, tweeting, and warbling. Hermione spun towards the noise that sounded eerily like human laughter and began to sing under her breath.

“Kookaburra sits on a old gum tree-ee….”

“What?”

“It’s a Muggle children’s song about a kookaburra, there,” she said, pointing to the large, brown-and-cream-colored bird with a narrow beak that was—well, it wasn’t singing, exactly.

“How does it go?”
Hermione flushed but sang the children’s song softly, and by the time she finished, they were next in line. She explained what they needed, paid, and carried the kookaburra to where Ron stood along one side of the room next to a table with quills, ink pots, and leather ties scattered along its length for public use.

“I’m almost finished,” he said, scribbling. “You can add the hotel address at the bottom.”

Hermione stroked the bird as she waited and then did so, noticing that he signed the letter with “love” and both their names. She tied the letter securely to the kookaburra’s leg in three spots and carried him outside before releasing him into the air.

“Okay,” Ron said, watching it fly high into the night sky. “Now I could eat.”

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Dinner was Chinese takeaway eaten on a bath towel spread over Hermione’s bed.

“So, what’s the plan for tomorrow?” Ron asked.

Hermione picked the pork out of her fried rice. “I think we’ll have to wait until the end of the day again. I mean, I can’t reverse the charm while they’re at work. That would be unfair, and they have patients and coworkers and everything….”

“You want to follow them home?”

She nodded. “I’ve been thinking about that … they’ll have a car. We’ll have to Apparate into the back seat.”

Ron stared at her. “You want to ride in your parents’ car before they even know who we are?”

“Disillusioned, of course,” Hermione said.

It was worse than he thought; she really wasn’t thinking clearly. “Hermione, a Disillusionment Charm doesn’t make us invisible, especially from just a couple feet away! What if they have stuff in the backseat? Or do the shopping on their way home? What if one of us accidentally makes a noise, or moves or—”

“Fine,” she said, setting her little paper box to the side and abandoning all pretense of eating. “Do you have a better idea?”

“Let’s go to their office tonight. There will be personnel records, right? I remember Percy having loads of forms to fill out when he started at the Ministry. We could search their office, find out where they live, and meet them at their house after work tomorrow.”

Hermione’s mouth fell open. Ron was half-proud, half-annoyed at surprising her.

“That’s … that’s actually a good idea. We would have to be careful not to get caught, but—”

“A Disillusionment Charm will work for that,” Ron said. “And it’s already dark.” The early onset of darkness in May was something he was still getting used to about Australia.

Hermione still looked hesitant, so Ron broke open his fortune cookie, hoping for something motivational. He popped one broken half in his mouth and held the slip of paper where Hermione could read it.

_Do or do not. There is no try._
Hermione stood outside her parents’ dental practice and tried not to think about the Muggle legal implications of what she and Ron were about to do.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Ready.”

They had already Disillusioned themselves, and now Hermione pointed her wand at the metal keypad to the side of the door. It popped and sparked and went dark.

“Alohomora.” The back door swung open.

Ron followed her inside, and they lit their wands.

“Ridiculous, that a first-year charm opens any door,” he muttered.

They were standing in a break room, table and chairs directly in front of them and a wall of lockers to their right. Hermione crossed the room, pushed open the door into the hallway, and opened the first door on her right—a treatment room. Guessing that all the rooms on that side of the hall would be the same, she tried the first door on the left. An office, but not Mum’s or Dad’s: two blond, tanned boys filled the picture frames on the bookshelf. She tried the second door and knew at once this was it.

A black, streamlined partner’s desk with two upholstered round-back chairs sat in the center of the room on a cream and tan rug, and Hermione knew at once which side was Mum’s and which Dad’s. A large unadorned window looked out onto the landscaping at the side of the building, and two tall black storage units with open shelves on the top half and file drawers below flanked the window. Hermione cast a spell to darken the window and flipped on the light.

“Nice,” Ron said.

It was. It was a beautiful room, elegant in its simplicity, and it reminded Hermione so much of her mother that it hurt to look at it. She walked around the desk to her mother’s side and opened the first file drawer.

Ron went to the opposite side. “What should I look for?” he asked.

“It won’t be there,” Hermione said, closing the drawer of patient files and opening another. “Mum keeps track of all their licensing and professional stuff.”

“She’s neat, like you,” he observed.

“Mm-hmm,” Hermione said, knowing he was looking at the clean surface of the desk away from him compared with the files, pens, reference book, and even a couple of x-rays that Dad had left out.

“Here it is,” Hermione said, turning away from the storage unit and spreading the folder open on the end of the desk. “Their application for licensure. It lists their address as—damn.”

“What?”

“It’s a hotel,” she said, flipping through the rest of the file. “They must not have got a house yet when they applied….”

“Maybe they updated their address once they did?”
“Wait,” Hermione said, standing with both hands flat on the desk. “A utility bill, or a check … anything that would have their address on it. Look on Dad’s desk, see if there’s any post.”

Hermione pulled a fistful of files out of the drawer. It had to be here somewhere. It just had to. To be this close—standing in her parents’ actual office, surrounded by their things and her mother’s decorating choices, to be this close and not know where they lived was maddening.

“All the post is addressed to here,” Ron said. “Mr. Wendell Wilkins, Mr. W. Wilkins, Wendell Wilkins BDS.”

Hermione froze in place. “I am such an idiot!” she exclaimed. “Where’s the business office?”

She ran out of the room and down the hall to the front of the building, circling behind the reception desk.

“What are we looking for?”

“A telephone directory. A telephone directory! I’ve been so stupid, Ron!”

“What does it look like?”

“It’s a book. A big, fat book with a glossy paper cover that looks like the pages are made of newsprint. Assuming the Australian ones are the same,” she muttered, opening and closing cupboard doors and drawers with minimal care.

“Is this it?”

“Yes!” Hermione snatched the book from him but was shaking so much she couldn’t balance it in her hands.

“Let’s go back to your parents’ office,” Ron said uneasily, looking around. “Someone might see us here.”

Indeed, the entire front wall was floor to ceiling windows. Hermione gasped.

“I forgot, I forgot! Okay. Hurry up.” Even with his longer legs, Ron wasn’t moving fast enough for her.

“I don’t understand,” Ron said as she sat in her mother’s chair and opened the directory. “What good does it do us to know their telephone number?”

“Because phone books list addresses too! I can’t believe it, we could have looked them up at the pay phone … as long as they live near here. Please, please live near here.” Her hands were shaking, and she tore the corner of one page in her haste. “You do it,” she said, standing up and giving her chair to Ron. “I’m in the Ws, just find Wilkins.”

“Wilkins, Anthony … Charles …”

“Go to the bottom, it’ll list Dad’s name first.” Hermione was practically dancing, shifting from foot to foot and bouncing on her toes.

“Here they are. Wendell and Monica, sixteen ten Gilda Avenue, Wahroonga.”

“Let me see.”

Ron pointed to the line with one long finger. Hermione covered her mouth with her hand and
swayed on the spot.

“Sit down,” Ron said at once, springing up and guiding her to the chair. “Put your head down. It’s okay.”

Hermione buried her nose between her shins and laughed. “We found them. Oh, my, I can’t believe I forgot about telephone directories! It’s the simplest way to find someone once you know what city they’re in.”

“You’ve lived in the magical world for a long time. You were just a kid when you came to Hogwarts.”

Hermione sat up, careful to avoid bumping her head on the edge of the desk, and pushed her hair out of her face. “Sixteen ten Gilda Avenue.”

“Sixteen ten Gilda Avenue,” Ron said, smiling back at her. “Feeling better now?”

“Yes.”

“All right. Let’s put everything back.”

“You take this,” Hermione said, handing him the telephone directory. “I didn’t see where you got it. I’ll put the files back.”

Hermione was just sliding the last folder in place when Ron returned.

“Ready to go?” she asked.

“There’s something I want to show you first.”

Ron crossed the room and picked up a picture frame from her dad’s shelves that Hermione hadn’t noticed before. It was her parents, standing in front of the fence of a coastal walk with rocks leading down to bright blue ocean. They had their arms round each other and were smiling into the camera, Dad’s sunglasses propped on his head, Mum’s exposed shoulders shaded by a large straw hat.

“They look happy,” Ron said gently. “You did a good job, Hermione.”

She stared at the photograph, drinking in every detail. Dad’s nose had been sunburned and was peeling slightly; his chin was more pronounced, like he’d lost some weight. Mum wore a poppy red halter that looked like it was part of a dress. Her hair was lighter—bleached by the sun, Hermione assumed, and she wore the drop earrings Hermione had given her for her birthday the year before she started Hogwarts.

Hermione didn’t realize she was crying until she saw a tear splash onto the glass.

“Hey,” Ron said, setting down the photo and pulling her into his arms. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you sad.”

“They do look happy. Without me.”

Hermione felt Ron’s arms tighten around her as she began to sob. She hadn’t allowed herself to think about her parents, had kept all those memories and worries and emotions locked tightly away for another time, and now that other time was here. Tomorrow, in fact—if she could work up the courage. It was several minutes before she could speak the fear that had haunted her for almost an entire year.
“M-maybe we should just go home. Maybe—maybe I’m not doing the right thing, bringing them back. Maybe they—maybe they would be better off with—without m-m-me.” She hiccuped.

“That’s not true,” Ron said, his voice sharp and almost angry. He pushed her away and bent down to look into her face. “There’s no one in your life who would be better off without you, Hermione, and that includes your parents. Maybe they won’t want to leave Australia, but I know they’ll want to know about you. That’s why you did all this in the first place, remember? They wouldn’t leave England without you.”

Hermione nodded and opened her mother’s desk drawer for a tissue.

“Come on.” Ron put his arm around her and kissed her temple. “Let’s go.”

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Ron lounged on the second single bed in Hermione’s hotel room, flipping through channels on the telly but not watching anything. Well, except Hermione.

She was dealing with the stress of seeing her parents tomorrow in typical Hermione fashion, which was to say she had books and papers spread all around her and was reading so intently she hadn’t noticed Ron hadn’t left after saying goodnight.

He was a little afraid to leave her on her own tonight; afraid that if he did, she’d be right there, sitting in a pile of parchment and pamphlets when he came to get her for breakfast in the morning. Afraid that if she did try to sleep, she’d have one of her nightmares and wake up without him, alone and frightened. Afraid she might be right. Afraid her parents wouldn’t understand what she had done, or why, and he and Hermione would end up returning to England alone.

Ron was afraid he would be left to pick up the pieces.
Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Notes

You can see pics of various places and details I used while researching this fic and get insider information on the last section of the story by following me on tumblr at keeptheotherone.tumblr.com. I'm writing for Camp NaNoWriMo this month with the goal of finishing this story and blogging excerpts and bits about my writing process/progress. Check it out!

It started with a dog.

Ron was walking home with his brothers from Ottery St. Catchpole when he heard whimpering coming from behind a set of bins. Glancing forward to make sure no one was watching him, Ron stepped off the road into the alley and found a curly-haired dog with golden-brown fur staring up at him with plaintive brown eyes. He reached to pet the animal, and just as he touched it, the dog screamed. Ron had just enough time to wonder why a dog was screaming like a girl before he woke up.

Hermione had fallen asleep.

She was screaming, the same high-pitched, blood-curdling sound she had made while being tortured by Bellatrix Lestrange. Ron was at her side in a single step, shaking her awake.

“Hermione! Hermione, wake up. It’s just a dream, Hermione, wake up!”

She sat bolt upright and Ron pinned her arms to her sides from painful experience. She had a wicked right hook.

“It’s me, it’s Ron, you’re safe. You’re safe, Hermione. I’m here.”

Her eyes finally focused on him, and his fear that lurked at the edges of every one of these nightmares (for they were nightmares for Ron too), the fear that his brilliant, magical Hermione had lost her mind, faded with the terror in her eyes.

“Ron,” she breathed, flinging her arms around his neck with more force than usual, knocking him sideways across the bed. Undaunted, she climbed onto his lap.

“Yeah, it’s me. You’re okay now,” Ron said, trying to spit her hair out of his mouth as unobtrusively as possible, unwilling to let go of her.

He turned them so he was sitting properly on the edge of the bed with Hermione’s legs out to one side and rubbed slow circles on her back, waiting for her trembling to stop.

“You didn’t go to bed,” she said after a while.

“You didn’t notice.”

“I heard you say goodnight.”
“You didn’t look up.”
“I’m sorry.”
“I’m not.”

She turned her head to look at him.

“If you’d looked up, you’d have made me leave,” he said.

Hermione hummed and laid her head back on his shoulder, moving one arm to wrap around his back.

“Thanks for staying,” she whispered.

Ron dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “You’re welcome.”

He hadn’t held her, really held her, in days, since before they came to Australia. She was soft and warm against him, and Ron was very aware they were alone. Together. On a bed. He remembered what Charlie had said about not making a move after she’d been crying and sighed.

“Hermione?”

“Hmm?”

He could feel her tensing against him, although she didn’t back away, and knew she had realized the same thing.

“I, uh … I should probably go back to my room now. If you’re okay,” he added quickly.

“Mm-hmm.” But she still didn’t move.

It was moments like this that drove Ron crazy, the unpredictable, guessing moments when she didn’t behave like he expected but didn’t say what she was thinking, either.

Until she did.

“I miss the treehouse,” Hermione blurted. She leaned back to look up at him. “I miss—I miss the time with you. Just the two of us, without….”

“I know. Me too.”

“I, um…” She reached up and straightened the sleeve of his tee, which had bunched up on his shoulder. “I don’t think—I mean, I thought I was, but now that it’s here, I don’t know—”

“Slow down,” he said. “What are you talking about?”

Hermione swallowed. “I don’t think I’m ready for—” She waved her hand at the room, from the bed they sat upon to its twin against the other wall. “This. To, um, to sleep together. I thought I was—I mean, I thought I might be, once we got here and, you know, had some privacy and space and—well, opportunity, but—well, I’m not.”

“Okay,” Ron said simply.

“Really?” She looked up at him through her lashes.
“Really.”

“The—the other stuff is nice, though,” she said shyly.

Ron tapped her nose, amused. “Yeah. It is.”

“Okay. Well, maybe … I should—”

She stood up and Ron followed suit, waiting for her to unlock the door. He had just stepped into the hallway when she said his name.

“Ron?”

He turned back. Her hand was still on the door handle, and she stood half in and half out of the room, leaning against the edge of the door.

“I love you.”

“I love you, Hermione.”

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“So, what’s the plan for today? When do you want to go to your parents’?”

Ron had just polished off a very satisfying breakfast in the hotel restaurant with its big, bright windows that faced the trees in the car park and now he and Hermione were waiting on the lift.

“Not till later this afternoon,” Hermione said, stepping inside and pushing the button for their floor. “I can’t revise all day, I’ll go crazy, and besides—”

The lift dinged, the doors opened, and they stepped out.

“If I wait until this afternoon to go over my notes, it will all be fresh in my mind when it’s time to—to actually do it. I thought maybe we could just hang out here this morning.” She slipped her key from her back pocket and unlocked her room door.

After their conversation last night, no way Ron was reading into that.

“Come in, Ron.” She held the door open.

“I’ll, uh—I’m just going to go brush my teeth,” he said, pointing over his shoulder in the direction of his room, suddenly mindful of the onions in his omelet.

“Take my key, then,” Hermione said, handing it to him and letting the door swing shut.

Ron stared at the closed door for a moment, then gathered himself and turned down the hallway. He returned to Hermione’s door a few minutes later and only then realized he’d put both keys in the same pocket. He lucked out on the first try, though, and when the little lights turned green, Ron turned the handle. Hermione was watching telly but turned it off at once. Ron remained standing just inside the door, waiting to see how bold she would be.

As usual, Hermione did not disappoint.

She was already sitting on the foot of one bed and patted the space beside her. “Come here.”

He complied.
“I don’t want to talk about it,” Hermione said, both hands in her lap with one fist balled in the other palm. “I just want to forget for a while, like our mornings in the treehouse.”

Godric, he understood that feeling. He shifted, bracing himself with one hand behind her and turning so his chest brushed her arm. “Kiss me, then.”

She turned her face towards him and Ron leaned down, fitting his mouth to hers. She tasted of toothpaste and mint, and she responded to his touch more freely than she had before, almost as if the conversation last night had lowered barriers instead of raising them. They kissed for long minutes, tasting and touching, until Hermione pushed him away.

“Move back,” she said breathlessly.

Ron kicked off his shoes and pushed himself backwards until he was completely on the bed. Hermione followed, sitting between his outstretched legs with her feet behind his back. They were fully facing each other but not touching, and she took advantage of the space between their bodies to run both hands up his chest. Ron rested his left hand on her waist, stroking her face with his other hand as Hermione leaned forward and began kissing him again.

Her free hand slipped beneath the hem of his shirt, and he took the hint at once, letting go of her just long enough to pull the shirt over his head, emerging to find Hermione doing the same. She wore a thin vest underneath with skinny straps but no bra. Its neckline was lower than she normally chose, exposing the tops of her breasts. Ron traced the edge with one finger and her breath caught.

“This is new.”

She shrugged one shoulder. “I thought it might make things easier. Sort of—less but more.”

Ron paused. Hermione had thought of him—this—this morning? She had chosen her clothes and got dressed planning to—well, get undressed? The idea was intoxicating, and he hooked his finger into the gap between her breasts and pulled her closer.

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Hermione looked from the paper in her hand to the rectangular windows and evenly-spaced balconies of the long, four story building in front of her.

“It’s a flat.”

“What?”

“It’s a flat. Mum and Dad’s address, it’s—it’s a block of flats.” Their home in England was a beautiful old Victorian inherited from her mother’s aunt. This, this was a stack of identical flats, square and proportional and … well, boring. She had wondered why the address was hyphenated, but it never occurred to her that her parents would be living in a flat.

“Which one is theirs?” Ron said.

“Let’s find out.” Hermione looked right and left and crossed the road.

As they approached the building, Hermione realized the flats had external entrances, and a directory was posted by the lift. She looked at the paper again (not that she really needed to; she had memorized the address the moment Ron read it out to her last night).

“It must be on the other end of the building. Let’s wait in the courtyard on the other side. We’ll
follow them up, and I'll do the Confundus.”

Ron was blessedly silent as they waited for her parents to show up. It was getting dark. While the days were lengthening at home, they were shortening here; the sun set around five o’clock, hours earlier than it had at the Burrow, which was earlier still compared to the previous six Mays she had spent at Hogwarts. Hermione amused herself for a while reviewing her knowledge of astronomy, latitudes, and seasons, always conscious of the feel of her wand in her pocket, placed there before they left the hotel for easy, inconspicuous access.

She heard them before she saw them.

“I knew we should have stopped yesterday. Petrol’s gone up eight cents just overnight,” her mother said.

“Yesterday you said it was too late and you were hungry.”

“I was hungry,” Mum admitted, rounding the corner with a bag of groceries on her hip. “Hello.” She smiled.

“Hello,” Ron said.

“Monica, do you have the milk? We didn’t leave it in the car, did we?”

Ron nudged her, but Hermione was frozen in place, her right hand just beside her face as she had reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear in the wind.

Mum turned, and she and Dad began comparing the contents of their bags.

“Now,” Ron said out of the corner of his mouth. “Do it now, Hermione, while they’re both distracted.”

She didn’t move.

“Hermione!” he hissed. “Use your wand.”

She dropped her hand to her pocket and whispered the word. “Confundo.”

Her parents paused and stared at each other in confusion.

“What were we looking for again?” Dad asked.

“I don’t know. Let’s go upstairs.”

“Hello,” Hermione said with forced brightness. “Remember us? We live next door.”

“Oh … oh, yes,” Mum said vaguely.

“I’m sorry,” Dad said. “Quite embarrassing, but I can’t remember your names.”

“Ron,” he said quickly. “And this is Hermione.”

“We thought we’d join you for dinner tonight,” Hermione said, trying to forget the confused look on her dad’s face when he looked at her and asked her name.

“That sounds nice. Doesn’t that sound nice, Wen?”
“Lovely. We haven’t had guests in ages.”

He pressed the button for the lift and Ron and Hermione followed behind, quietly facing forward in the awkward silence that accompanied lift rides with strangers.

_Not for long_, Hermione promised herself. _Just a few more minutes, and we won’t be strangers any longer._

Dad unlocked the door and held it open for all of them, and Hermione followed her mother to the right, down a short hall and into the dining room. Mum walked through it to the open kitchen and Dad followed her, setting the bags on the worktop.

“Have a seat, please,” Mum said, indicating the stools lined up under the bar that made one side of the galley-style kitchen.

Hermione did so, pulling out her wand under the cover of the bar’s overhang. As they had planned, Ron made conversation with her parents to give her a chance to concentrate. She closed her eyes, picturing her parents’ bedroom … the white sheers at the window, the dark wood of the mantel. A fan hummed on her mum’s bedside cabinet, and she could hear the gentle drum of rain on the side porch roof and her parents’ quiet breathing. The wool rug was scratchy under her bare feet, and her wand was smooth and familiar in her hand. It was Wednesday, the sixteenth of July, one thirteen in the morning; the red numbers of the alarm clock glowed from the chest on Dad’s side of the bed.

Hermione gripped Ron’s arm for dear life, took one deep cleansing breath, pointed her wand at her parents for what she sincerely hoped was the last time in her life, and cast the charm.
Chapter Seventeen

“Hermione?”

She smiled weakly. “Hi, Mum.”

“Hermione, love!” Arms already outstretched, Mum circled the end of the kitchen to embrace her.

“Princess!” Dad exclaimed, coming round the other way and kissing the top of her head. “When did you get here?”

The question seemed to trigger her parents’ memories, and their looks of unsurpassed joy faded to confusion and dismay.

“Hermione?” Mum said slowly. “Why do I have the feeling I haven’t seen or talked or written to you since last summer?”

“And why do I want to call your mother Monica?”

“I can explain,” Hermione said quickly. “Please, sit down.”

Mum and Dad took seats at the dining room table beside each other and Ron and Hermione did the same, opposite.

“I modified your memories so you knew nothing of me or Harry, changed your names to Wendell and Monica Wilkins, and convinced you your life’s ambition was to move to Australia in order to keep you safe from Voldemort and his followers, the Death Eaters.”

Dad gaped at her. Mum managed a “wh—what?”

“You probably—at least I hope you do—you should remember the last year or so here in Australia and have all your same memories from before of growing up and living in England.”

“Hermione.…” Dad had found his voice. “Are you saying you performed some kind of spell on us? Without our permission?”

“I had to, Dad,” Hermione said, her voice breaking. “I—I tried to get you to go abroad, to travel for the summer, but you wouldn’t leave. The war with Voldemort, it was—it was really bad. The Death Eaters—his followers, they would have come after you.”

“The wizard who killed Harry’s parents? But that was years ago. What does that have to do with us?” Mum asked.

Hermione licked her lips. “Because he wasn’t dead. He regenerated three years ago, the same night as the end of the Triwizard Tournament. And, um, Professor Dumbledore didn’t die of old age. He was murdered, a murder planned by Voldemort. Harry—after Dumbledore’s funeral, Harry decided that he was going to track down Voldemort to destroy his powers, and Ron and I went with him. That’s why I needed you out of the country but more than that, I needed to remove your connection to Harry. I couldn’t do that without making you forget about me too.”

“My own daughter. How could I forget my only daughter?”

“I don’t understand,” Dad said. “Why didn’t you just tell us this?”
“I tried! I tried to explain that the situation was dangerous, but you didn’t understand. It’s not your fault,” she rushed on. “You didn’t have all the facts. But you wanted me to come with you, and I couldn’t do that. We had to help Harry.”

“I assume that includes you,” Dad said to Ron, who had been sitting in silence.

“Yes, sir.”

“You were in on this?”

Ron glanced at her. “I didn’t like the idea any more than she did, but it really was the best way—the only way—to keep both of you safe once you refused to leave the country. Harry’s family went into hiding too.”

“I assume he didn’t make them forget about him,” Dad said icily.

“Daddy!”

“Harry’s family went into hiding in the magical world. They were given every protection possible, including a twenty-four-hour guard. The Order simply didn’t have the resources to do that for everyone.”

“What order?”

Before Ron or Hermione could answer, Mum stood up.

“What are you doing?” Dad said.

“I’m calling Becky,” she said, wedging the phone between her ear and shoulder and beginning to dial. “We’re not going in to work tomorrow, and she needs to cancel our morning appointments tonight.”

The silence was tense as they waited for her to complete the call and come back to the table.

“Now,” Mum said, fixing her gaze on Hermione. “I have a feeling you’ve been lying to us for years. You’d better start at the beginning, young lady.”

So, Hermione went back to her first year at Hogwarts and retold the story. Mum and Dad listened in silence for the most part, at least until she explained how no one believed Professor Lupin about Sirius and Wormtail because of his lycanthropy.

“A werewolf?” Mum gasped, putting one hand to her throat. “Hermione, you said he was ill! Too ill to teach another year.”

“Snape ‘accidentally’ let it slip,” Ron growled. “The stigma, you know. He had to go.”

“Stigma! What about safety?”

“Oh, he was perfectly safe,” Hermione said. “Professor Snape made him wolfsbane potion, which modified his transformations so he simply changed into a wolf instead.”

“Oh, well, that’s all right then,” Dad said.

“Hermione?” Mum said gently.
Hermione cleared her throat and looked up. “I’m sorry. It’s just … um … he’s—he died. We—well, we got to know him better—and his wife, they got married last summer—we got to know them over the last three years working with the resistance, the Order of the Phoenix—that’s the Order Ron was talking about earlier—and they had a baby boy. Lupin asked Harry to be godfather just a few weeks before—before the Battle. He and his wife, they were killed in the Battle of Hogwarts, and we were friends.”

Her parents were quiet for a moment, then Dad said, “There was a battle at Hogwarts? Actually at the school?”

“Yes,” Hermione said shortly. “Two weeks ago Saturday.”

Her parents were very white and still by this point, and Ron conjured Hermione a glass of water, then made tea while she continued. It was an indication of their—shock? Fascination? Horror?—that her parents didn’t notice the magic happening feet from them.

She had to stop her story again when describing Barty Crouch Jr.’s impersonation of Mad-Eye Moody.

“Polyjuice Potion?” Mum frowned. “Why does that sound familiar?”

Hermione flushed. “Because it’s the same potion I had an accident with in second year.”

“When you grew cat fur and whiskers.”

“And a tail,” Ron added. “And cute little pointy black ears that just barely poked out of her hair.”

Hermione gave him a dark look, but he just grinned at her.

“I really don’t see how any of this is funny.” Dad’s voice was firm, his mouth pressed tight.

Ron’s expression sobered at once. “No, sir. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“That boy, what was his name?” Mum said. “The one who died at the end of your fourth year. It wasn’t an accident in the tournament, was it?”

“No, Cedric’s death wasn’t an accident. He was murdered by Wormtail on Voldemort’s orders. Harry saw it happen.”

“At the school?” Mum said sharply.

“No. The Tri-Wizard Cup—the trophy, it was a Portkey. Do you remember those? I wrote you about taking one to the Quidditch World Cup.”

“It sends you somewhere else, right?” Dad said. “It’s a portable transporter.”

“Yes,” Hermione said. “Barty Crouch—he was the Death Eater masquerading as our Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher—he charmed the Cup into a Portkey, and it took Harry and Cedric—they helped each other at the end of the tournament and decided to take the Cup together, so it transported both of them to where Voldemort was. He….” This part was rather gruesome, so Hermione glossed over it. “He needed Harry’s participation in his regeneration so he would have some of the magical protection Harry had got from his mother.”

“Hermione….” Mum rubbed her forehead.

“I know. It’s confusing, and detailed, and some of this we only found out a few weeks ago. I’m
“Are you really?” Dad said.

“What?”

“Are you really sorry? Because this sounds like a well-thought-out plot to keep us in the dark. A plot a bit advanced for one eleven-year-old girl, even a brilliant one.”

Hermione swallowed. “It didn’t become a plot until last year, I swear. I just—I left out the things I knew would upset you, the things I thought might cause you to pull me out of Hogwarts. No one helped with sending you to Australia; until just a few days ago, no one but Ron and Harry even knew that’s what happened. And yes, I’m sorry. Of course I’m sorry! You might have forgotten about me, but I couldn’t forget about you!”

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Tears spilled down Hermione’s face, and Mr. Granger’s expression softened.

“She saved your lives,” Ron said quietly. “Harry, Hermione, and I were fugitives and wanted criminals. There was a ten thousand galleon price on Harry’s head. I don’t know how much that is in Muggle money, but it’s a lot. An awful lot. Everyone knows the three of us are friends, have been since first year. Anyone could have come looking for Hermione, and by extension you, to get information about Harry and cash in that prize. They would have killed you as easily as looked at you. We’ve lost lots of friends in this war. Hermione didn’t want to lose you too.”

Mrs. Granger stepped away from the table and returned a moment later with a box of tissues. Hermione took one and wiped her face.

“Of course I’m sorry,” she repeated, looking from one parent to the other. “I’m sorry I couldn’t come up with another way to keep you safe, I’m sorry it was my lies that made you not believe me when I told you your lives were in danger, I’m sorry I’ve—” She waved her hands. “I’ve messed everything up. I just—” She sniffed and took another tissue. “I just thought you deserved the truth.”

“We always deserved the truth,” Mrs. Granger said.

Hermione’s shoulders slumped and she twisted the tissue in her lap. “I’m sorry, Mum. I don’t know what else to say.”

Ron moved closer to her, despite the watchful eye of her dad.

“So, what’s happening now?” he asked.

Ron looked at Hermione, but when she kept her head down and her eyes averted, he responded. “It’s over. Well, at least the fighting is. Voldemort was killed in a duel with Harry at the Battle of Hogwarts two weeks ago, like Hermione said. Most of the Death Eaters are dead or captured, and the Auror office is hunting down the rest of them.”

“That’s the special police,” Hermione said quietly, eyes still on her lap.

Ron glanced at her, then continued. “The Ministry has named a good bloke as temporary Minister for Magic, and volunteers are cleaning up Hogwarts, and—well, everyone is trying to return to normal. Or whatever normal is going to be now.”

“Your family, Ron—if we were targets for the Death Eaters, your family must have been too. I know
you have a lot of siblings. Is everyone okay?” Mrs. Granger said.

It came back to him in a rush, the reality of Fred’s death. It had been easy to avoid here in Australia, easy to push to the back of his mind, but now he had to explain. At home, everyone knew what happened, but Hermione’s parents didn’t. He felt a firm pressure on his hand and squeezed Hermione back.

“No, uh, my brother—my brother Fred, he—” Ron swallowed. “He was killed.”

Both Mr. and Mrs. Granger gasped.

“Oh, Ron, I’m so sorry to hear that,” Mrs. Granger said. “Truly.”

“Yes, our … our condolences,” Mr. Granger said gruffly.

“Thank you.”

“And Harry? He’s all right?”

Both Ron and Hermione nodded.

“Where is Harry?” Mr. Granger asked. “Why isn’t he here? The three of you have always seemed inseparable.”

Ron and Hermione looked at one another. “He, um, he wanted to attend the rest of the funerals,” Hermione said. “And I didn’t want to wait that long.”

“My god,” Mrs. Granger said softly. “How many?”

“Over fifty, just at the Battle,” Hermione said. “Not counting the Muggles and Muggle-borns killed over the last two years.”

Silence.

“You look worn out, the both of you,” Mrs. Granger said, pushing back from the table. “It’s well past dinnertime. Hugh, come and help me. Let’s get something to eat and Hermione can tell us the rest of the story.”

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Ron Side-Along Apparated Hermione from the corridor outside her parents’ flat directly to her hotel room. She collapsed against him, sobbing.

“Shh, it’s okay,” Ron said, wrapping his arms around her and stroking her hair. “The worst part is over now, you’re all right.”

“No, I’m not! I am bloody well not okay!” She pushed against his chest and swiped one hand across reddened cheeks. “They hate me, Ron. They’re never going to forgive me!” Her eyes welled with tears yet again.

“They don’t hate you,” he said firmly. “Remember how happy they were to see you at first?”

“At first. Until they found out what I’d done.”

“They’re hurt and angry,” he said soothingly. “It’s just the first night. It’s new. It will get better.”
Hermione stared up at him, brown eyes wide, wet, and swollen. “What if it doesn’t?”

“It will,” he said, pulling her back into his arms. “We’ll make it better.”
Chapter Eighteen

Jean Granger closed her front door behind her daughter and her—best friend? boyfriend? co-conspirator?—and turned to her husband.

“What do you think?”

Hugh stared at her, looking just as shocked and hurt and she-didn’t-even-know-what as she felt.

“We always knew she’d run circles around us,” he said. “I just never thought it would be like this.”

“Can you imagine what this year has been like for her? All alone in the world, knowing we had no idea she even existed?”

“She wasn’t all alone,” Hugh said darkly, turning on the tap and beginning to load the dishwasher.

“Mmm, you noticed that too?” Jean carried in the glasses from the lounge.

“Bit hard to miss. The boy traveled ten thousand miles with her.”

“What are we going to do?”

“What do you mean?” Hugh said.

“Well, we have two lives now,” she said. “One here, as Monica and Wendell Wilkins, and one in England, as Jean and Hugh Granger. What are we going to do?”

Hugh stared at her like she’d just taken leave of her senses. “We’re going with Hermione, of course.”

Something sharp and piercing that had been present inside of Jean since she realized she had forgotten about her only child softened just a bit. “We’ll have to pretend.”

“What?”

“Here. Our lives here. We’ll have to pretend to be Monica and Wendell, at least until we leave. You remember what Professor McGonagall said when she came to the house with Hermione’s Hogwarts letter. The International Secrecy law. If we couldn’t tell our parents, we certainly can’t tell anyone here.”

Hugh set down the bowl in his hand and braced both hands on the worktop. “Bloody hell,” he breathed. “What the bloody hell was she thinking?”

“Hermione never would have done something like this on a whim, Hugh. You know that. I think—I think we have to believe her. And Ron.”

“How could we have missed it for so long? How could we not have noticed our girl was in danger?”

Jean picked up the bowl and placed it in the dishwasher, then rolled the rack in and closed the door.

“I think … if you’re like me, you didn’t want to know. You wanted to believe she was safe and happy because you had no power or influence over the world to which she belonged. I needed to believe it. And I was wrong.”

The tears she’d held in all evening overflowed, and she turned into her husband’s embrace and sobbed.
Hermione knocked on Ron’s door at seven o’clock the next morning, beaded bag in one hand and a thick book under the opposite arm. She had her exam face on, and Ron didn’t even try to make conversation. Despite his rumbling stomach, he followed her past the breakfast buffet and out of the foyer without question and didn’t protest when she opened her book the moment they arrived at the bus stop. Hermione read when she was stressed (well, Hermione read all the time, but she was especially irritable about being interrupted when she was stressed), and Ron reckoned with the possible exceptions of the night they’d been captured and that eternally long hour they’d spent looking for Harry at Hogwarts (neither of which had been conducive to reading), she’d never been under more stress than she was now.

She did pay enough attention to navigate their route (although Ron was learning; he figured they’d make this journey enough in the coming days he would soon have it memorized), putting her book inside her bag when the bus pulled up to the corner of her parents’ street. Hermione pressed a button on the directory, and Ron started when he heard her mum’s voice.

“Hi, Mum. It’s us,” Hermione said, and just like that, the lift doors opened.

And they said Muggles didn’t have magic. Hermione called it “technology,” and Ron thought some of it was just as good.

“I hope you haven’t eaten yet,” Mrs. Granger said pleasantly when they arrived at her door.

“No. I know Ron’s hungry, but I wanted to come on over.”

Ron rounded the corner of the dining room, unsure what to expect, only to find a full English laid out on the bar before them. His stomach rumbled.

“We were just getting ready to sit down,” Mrs. Granger said, crossing to a large shiny silver box and opening one edge. Ron caught a glimpse of brightly lit shelves and containers of food before she shut it again, now holding a carton. “Help yourselves, please.”

“Remember, there’s no refilling charms,” Hermione said in an undertone. “Once it’s gone, it’s gone.”

Ron nodded and took a plate from the stack on the corner, filling it with a little of everything. “This looks great, Mrs. Granger.”

“Oh, thank Hugh, not me,” she said, pouring orange juice from the carton into four glasses. “I hate to cook. Luckily I married a man who’s good at it.” She smiled at her husband, lifted her face for a kiss, and he obliged.

Breakfast passed pleasantly enough as Hermione asked her parents questions about their time in Australia. Ron listened but didn’t have to say much, and as the meal came to an end, he offered to wash up.

Mr. and Mrs. Granger looked surprised. “Do you know how?”

“My sister and I have been doing it since we had to stand on a chair to reach the sink,” Ron said. “My mum and dad thought it was important for us to have chores even if they could do it faster with magic. Teaches a good work ethic and—” He broke off.

“And what?” Mr. Granger asked.

“And empathy for Muggles. I’m sure you’ve noticed, Dad’s fascinated with everything Muggle.”
Her parents were smiling broadly, as if they knew a secret, and Ron turned to Hermione, confused.

“This is a bit different from the washing up at your house;” she said. “Mum and Dad have a dishwasher.”

“What, like a house-elf?”

“No, like a machine. Come and see,” Hermione said, picking up her plate and glass and leading the way into the kitchen.

Ron was fascinated. All they had to do was put the dishes in a rack, add a powdered soap, and push a button. Ron stared in amazement as he heard the swish of water and the hum of a motor behind the dishwasher’s door. Finally he turned to Hermione.

“But … you’ve always done it by hand at my house.”

She shrugged. “Your parents don’t have a dishwasher.”

“Yeah, they do,” Ron said. “Us.”

She laughed, and Ron was pleased that he had lightened the mood for her.

“It never occurred to me that something might be easier at your house than mine,” he said. Other than buying things. Buying things was definitely easier at Hermione’s house.

“Well, washing up might be easier, but cooking’s certainly not.”

“Hermione, your dad and I have some questions for you.”

She turned at her mother’s voice, and she and Ron followed her into the lounge. He said “into”; more like “over to.” The entire kitchen, dining room, and lounge was one open room, delineated only by the cupboards and bar separating the kitchen and dining room and an area rug in the lounge. Hermione walked over to the sofa, so Ron sat beside her while Mr. and Mrs. Granger took the chairs opposite.

“How did you find us?” she asked.

“The dental registry,” Hermione said.

Both her parents nodded.

“Oh, of course. The Board gave you the practice address and then—what? You couldn’t have followed us. You were already waiting when we got here yesterday.”

“I took a chance that you lived in the same city you worked in and looked in the phone directory.”

Ron noticed she conveniently left out it was located in her parents’ office.

Mr. and Mrs. Granger looked at each other. “That’s so obvious it’s almost scary.”

“I wasn’t expecting a flat,” Hermione admitted. “When I saw the address was hyphenated, I thought maybe a semi-detached or terrace, but I was surprised when I saw the building and realized what it was.”

“We needed a place to live right away and—well, look at that sunlight!” Mr. Granger beamed, spreading his hands wide to encompass the light streaming into the room.
A large window nearly spanned the wall behind Ron and Hermione, and with a terrace sitting in the corner between the kitchen and the lounge, the entire wall to their right and the wall at the end of the kitchen were floor-to-ceiling glass.

“It’s lovely. Much nicer than I was expecting. Just … different.”

Mrs. Granger glanced at her husband. “I think we were looking for different without really knowing it,” she said.

“I assume you’re not in school because of the battle?”

“Well, yes and no,” Hermione said. “It’s true school was cancelled for the rest of the year, but we weren’t at Hogwarts this year. I wouldn’t have been allowed to attend, anyway.”

“Why ever not?” her dad said indignantly. “You have the best marks in the school.”

“But I’m Muggle-born,” she said gently. “That’s basically what this whole war was about—eliminating the Muggle-borns and other undesirable magical creatures.”

“You’re not an undesirable creature,” Ron said sharply, disturbed to hear Hermione refer to herself that way.

She smiled at him but continued. “The Ministry of Magic essentially made it a crime to be Muggle-born. There were two—well, a few weeks ago we would have said three—Death Eaters teaching at Hogwarts, and the school was controlled by the Ministry.”

“Like during your fifth year? The Ministry was meddling in teacher assignments or something, right?” Mr. Granger said.

Hermione nodded. “That’s right. Similar to that, but less … cloaked. More out in the open. Ron would have been a target because of his family’s status as blood traitors—the Weasleys have openly supported the rights of Muggle-borns for generations—”

“I don’t understand,” Mrs. Granger said. “Traitors, what—”

“I’m pure-blood,” Ron explained. “All-magical on both sides of my family, Weasley and Prewett. Some pure-blood families, they think that makes them better than everyone else. We disagree. Now Harry, he’s what we call half-blood. His dad was a pure-blood wizard, but his mum was Muggle-born. ‘Course, that’s not why the Death Eaters hated him. They were scared of him, really. Scared he was a threat to Voldemort.”

“Which it sounds like he was,” Mr. Granger said.

“Yes.”

“So, if you weren’t in school, what were you doing?” he said.

Ron looked to Hermione, who shook her head slightly. No Horcruxes. “You do it, then,” he said.

Hermione took a deep breath. “Voldemort had … collected certain objects that had meaning to him. His grandfather’s ring, an ancestor’s locket, things like that. He was able to give these objects special power that helped him stay alive. In order to kill him, we had to find and destroy those objects first.”

Mrs. Granger studied her daughter. “You spent your seventh year preparing to kill someone.”

“Well … yes,” Hermione admitted. “It was him or Harry, and we chose Harry.”
“Hermione, this all seems rather far fetched,” Mr. Granger said. “You’re asking us to believe there was a madman destroying the world under the radar who was stopped by three teenagers who haven’t even finished school. It all sounds like a bad tabloid article. Hyperbole.”


Mr. Granger looked surprised. “They deliver to Muggles?”

Ron shrugged. “Hermione had it delivered when she was living with you. Don’t see why it couldn’t be delivered to a Muggle flat as well as a Muggle house.”

“You did?” her parents said together.

Ron turned to her and raised one eyebrow.

“I didn’t tell them because I didn’t want them reading it,” she said sharply. “Not that past issues would help much.”

“Voldemort controlled the press,” her mother said shrewdly.

“Yes. Over the last year especially, but even before that, Fudge—the Minister of Magic—didn’t want to believe Voldemort was back. Didn’t want to believe it was possible, so they didn’t print anything that supported it and attacked the people who did. Dumbledore lost his position on the International Confederation of Wizards and everything.”

“Well, I think it would be helpful,” Mr. Granger said. “I suppose it will come by owl?”

“Yes,” Hermione said. “We’ll—how do we do that?” she asked Ron. “Will it have to come from London every day?”

“Nah, all the major cities can get each other’s newspapers,” Ron said. “Percy got papers from all over when he first started in the Department of International Magical Cooperation.”

“How long have you two been in Australia?” Mrs. Granger asked, looking from one to the other.

“Since Saturday,” Hermione said. “I was so eager to get here, I didn’t even think about all the offices being closed for the weekend.”

“Then you haven’t done much sightseeing,” Mrs. Granger said.

Hermione shook her head. “Just a day in Canberra. Ron insisted.”

“We’ve been meaning to go down to Canberra, haven’t we, Hugh? Just never seemed to find the time.”

“What were you doing in Canberra?” Mr. Granger said.

“I thought it would be best to come in through the Australian Ministry of Magic, and that’s where it is. Inside the Muggle Parliament building, actually.”

“So, you just arrived in Sydney yesterday?”

“Monday,” Hermione said. “We came in right at the close of business and I—well, I—”

“Hermione wanted to reveal herself to you at home, and all we had was your work address.”
“I see.”

Ron was getting the feeling that Mr. Granger saw rather a lot.

“What about the two of you?”

“What about us?” Hermione said.

“You seem more … friendly … than I remember.”

“Hugh, don’t tease.”

“I’m not teasing. I’m asking a sincere question about my daughter.”

“I’m eighteen, Dad.”

“So is he.”

“We are friends,” Ron said, resisting the urge to drop Hermione’s hand under her dad’s probing stare. He hadn’t even noticed he’d been holding her hand and didn’t know when he took it.

“Ron,” Hermione said under her breath. She looked up at him. “It’s rather more than that now.”

“But we’ve been traveling as friends,” Ron said pointedly, shooting a quick glance at her parents and back to her.

Hermione turned pink instantly and faced her dad. “Oh! Yes, definitely friends. Separate rooms and everything.”

Ron remembered a conversation he’d had with Harry about Hermione’s parents.

_There’s just people, Ron. People who care about their daughter like your parents care about you and your brothers and Ginny._ And what his parents wanted to know was that their children were surrounded by people who loved and cared for them too.

“Everyone else already knows, and I’ve told Hermione, so I reckon I may as well tell you too. I love her. And nothing you do or say will change that.”

Hermione looked up, startled, but this time, Ron didn’t look back at her.

“She loves you too,” he added. “It tore her apart, what she did, and I know she never stopped thinking about you even though she didn’t talk about it. Please believe me, and believe her. She never would have done something like that if she’d had any other choice. It was the best way to keep you safe.”

“Well, I—” Mrs. Granger faltered. “We can see that you two mean a lot to each other.”

Hermione let go of his hand to hook her arm around his and leaned into him, beaming.

“But if you’ve been traveling as friends, Hermione, maybe you’d like to stay here,” her mother said tentatively. “We have a spare room.”

Hermione sat up straight. “Oh—well—um—” She looked to Ron for help.

“Maybe once I have the bus thing sorted, but right now I still need Hermione’s help to get around,” he said. “I’ve never really traveled in the Muggle world, just gone down to the village near the
Burrow for an ice cream or something. This is all new for me.”

“But I thought Harry lived with Muggles,” Mrs. Granger said.

“He did, but I was never at his house. Just once or twice to pick him up but never for a visit.”

“Well in that case, let me give you a tour. What would you like to see first?”

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Hermione trailed Ron and her mother around the flat, only half-listening as Mum pointed out various features and Ron asked all kinds of questions. She couldn’t believe he had said that to her parents about loving her. Yes, he’d said it to her; and he was right, no one, not even the other pupils at Hogwarts, had been surprised they were together, but he’d never said it in front of anyone else. Other than Harry and Ginny, they had never kissed in front of anyone else, but all Hermione had wanted to do ever since he’d said that—*I love her. And nothing you do or say will change that*—ever since then, Hermione had wanted nothing more than to shove Ron against the nearest wall and snog him senseless.

She had been curious about the rest of the flat and unsure how to politely ask to see it, but now none of it held her attention. The tour didn’t take long (they had already seen everything except the two bedrooms and bathrooms), and as her mother continued back down the hall to the living area, Hermione grasped Ron’s arm before they came out into the open room.

“Come here,” she said, dragging him around the corner into the entryway.

“What—”

Hermione pushed him against the wall beside the demilune table, stood on tiptoe, and stretched up to place both hands behind his neck.

“Hermione, your parents—”

“Know you love me,” she said, and pulled his mouth down to hers.
Hermione and Ron walked hand-in-hand along Circular Quay. Her parents had brought them into Sydney after breakfast, and the four of them had spent the rest of the day sightseeing along the harbor, including a very pleasant lunch by the waterfront. Hermione and Ron had left her parents to go to the owl office and make arrangements for delivery of the *Daily Prophet* and as darkness fell, Hermione had asked to come back here and see the city at night. Dead ahead were the graceful white sails of the Sydney Opera House, lit so as to emphasize their three-dimensional shape, and to her left was the arched outline of the Harbor Bridge, its lampposts throwing green light onto the water.

“Today was a good day,” Ron said.

“It was,” Hermione agreed. “Thanks for saying you needed my help to get around.”

“I do.”

“You’re getting better.” She smiled up at him. “You got us back here from the—newspaper place.” It was dark but not late, and there were still lots of people around.

“I think it will help to be in the same place for a while,” he said.

“Mm-hmm.” Hermione stepped a little closer, appreciating the simple pleasure of strolling with her boyfriend. *Her boyfriend.* She relished the word, and most especially that it applied to Ron. It had been warm in the sunshine but cooled considerably after dusk. The wind picked up when they passed the shelter of a group of restaurants, and she shivered.

Ron took off his jacket and draped it over her shoulders. She had a perfectly good jumper (several perfectly good jumpers, in fact) in her handbag but didn’t protest.

“Thanks.” The plaid flannel was warm, and she turned her nose into the collar and inhaled his scent.

“Welcome.”

They walked a few more paces before Ron asked, “You don’t want to stay with your parents?”

Hermione grimaced. “It’s not that, really. I just—if I’m staying with them, I won’t have as much time with you.”

“They won’t be off work every day.”

“True.”

“Are you worried about your nightmares?”

“A bit,” she admitted.

Ron rubbed his thumb back and forth along the back of her hand. “You could put up a Muffliato Charm.”

“Yeah.”

“You’ve been doing okay since we got here, haven’t you? Other than last night?”

She nodded, watching a ferry move into the open harbor.
“Ron?” She turned suddenly. “Thank you. Thank you for leaving your family, and coming with me, and keeping me on track and—you’ve been wonderful. Just lovely, and a real help, and—I’m so glad I didn’t have to do this without you.”

He dropped her hand to squeeze her shoulders. “I wanted to come.”

“I know, but—it must be hard, with Fred … and Percy….”

Ron stopped, staring back the way they’d come towards the lights of the business district. “As hard as it has been watching you try to mend your relationship with your parents, it seems easier. Maybe because it’s not my family? I don’t know. I just—it was kind of suffocating being home, you know? Here, it feels like—” He took a deep breath. “Like I can breathe, like I can take some time to process for myself.”

“You know I want to help. If you want to talk about it, or not, or just—whatever. I want to help you too.”

Ron pulled her against his side and kissed her temple. “I know you do. And you are, just by being here.”

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Jean Granger looked at the paperwork spread over the dining room table, this week’s Saturday project, and sighed.

“How on earth did Hermione do all this in less than four weeks?”

“Magic,” Hugh said wryly.

“Mmm. About that….”

“Yes?”

“I want to go home our way, the Muggle way. I want to know that all of our documentation is correct and everything is above board.”

Hugh looked surprised. “Of course.”

“Well, I’m not sure … I’m afraid Hermione thinks she can undo all this the way she did it in the first place and we’ll be in England in a few days.”

“But we can’t just abandon the practice,” Hugh said. “We have to give them adequate notice.”

“I know. I was thinking … a month?”

“At least,” he said, setting a cup of tea at her elbow.

The intercom buzzed.

“That will be them,” Jean said.

“I’ll get it.”

A few minutes later, Hermione and Ron entered the room.

“Hi, Mum. What’s all this?”
“‘This’ is all the stuff we have to take care of before we go back to England.”

Hermione’s face lit up. “You’re coming back to England?”

“Of course we’re coming back to England. You’re there.”

“Unless you have secret plans to move to Australia that you haven’t told us about,” Hugh added.

“No! No, we’re not moving, but—well, you hadn’t said anything, and I didn’t want to assume.”

Jean looked from Hermione to Ron, never more than an arm’s reach away from her, and couldn’t help but feel she’d already lost her daughter. She didn’t know how long Ron and Hermione had been together as a couple but it couldn’t be a year yet, and already Hermione spoke of the two of them as a unit, as if their futures were inexorably intertwined.

“Well, in that case, I can help,” Hermione said brightly, pulling out a chair at the table and setting down a purple beaded bag with a puzzlingly loud thunk.

“That’s the handbag we bought over Christmas the year before last!” Jean exclaimed.

Hermione smiled. “Yes, I chose lilac dress robes to match it. That’s what I wore to Bill and Fleur’s wedding.”

Jean nodded. Hermione had written about the beautiful French witch who was engaged to Ron’s oldest brother.

“What do you mean, you can help?” Hugh said cautiously.

“I have all your original paperwork,” Hermione said, plunging her hand—indeed, half her arm—into the small bag.

“What—”

Ron laughed at their expressions. “Harry and I had the same reaction,” he said. “It’s an Undetectable Extension Charm. It makes the inside of the object bigger without affecting the size on the outside. Bloody brilliant, she is.”

“May I see?” Jean asked.

Hermione pulled a fat folder out of the bag before pushing it across the table. Jean picked it up, running her hands all around and squishing it between them. She could feel the shape of various things inside it, just like a regular handbag, but it was lightweight. Lighter than her own handbag, even.

“You can look inside,” Hermione said.

Jean looked up at her, then peered inside the open drawstring. “Why, this is your luggage!” she said in surprise, seeing various pieces of clothing, toiletry items, and books.

Hermione nodded. “I used it to carry everything we needed while we were on the run.”

“That’s amazing! And incredibly convenient.”

“I can cast it on your cases, if you like,” Hermione said shyly. “So you won’t have to—”

“No!” Hugh said.
Jean and Hermione both looked up.

“We want to get back to England on our own,” he said. “No magic and no tricks.”

Hermione swallowed. “Okay. It was just a suggestion.”

“What’s in the folder?” Jean asked, moving past the awkwardness.

“Your original documents. Passports, driving licenses, credit cards … everything that was yours as Jean and Hugh Granger.”

Jean opened it and saw Hermione had organized the papers by name, with hers on the left and Hugh’s on the right. She pulled out her stack and passed the folder over to him.

“This is great,” she said in relief. “I thought we were going to have to travel back as Monica and Wendell, but now—”

“You can do either,” Hermione said. “Percy added the arrival stamps in your original passports, so it won’t look suspicious for you to leave the country as yourselves.”

“That’s probably for the best,” Hugh said, tearing open a small envelope and dumping his license, bank, and credit cards into his palm.

“What about you two?” Jean asked. “When are you going home?”

“We’re going back with you,” Hermione said.

“What about your passport? You didn’t fly, did you?”

Hermione shook her head. “No, we took a series of Portkeys. I thought of that when I was making the plans to come and get you. Percy stamped my passport too and will do Ron’s before Harry mails it to us.”

“Another brother?” Hugh asked Ron.

He nodded. “Percy used to work in the Department of International Magical Cooperation. Between him and Dad, they figured it out.”

“How many brothers do you have again?”

“Fi—four,” Ron said, clearing his throat. “It’s four now. And my sister, Ginny.”

“How many of them work for the Ministry?” Jean asked. God, that really was an awful passport picture. She’d forgotten.

Of course she had.

“Just Percy and my dad. Bill works for Gringotts, Charlie is a dragon keeper in Romania, and Fred and George had their own joke shop in Diagon Alley, Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes.”

Hugh tucked his papers away and closed the folder. “Hermione, there’s something we’ve been meaning to talk to you about.”

“Yes?” Her voice was calm, but Jean saw the slight movement of her arm where she reached for Ron’s hand under the table.
“I said we wanted to travel back home without magic, but that’s not all. We—” He shot a quick sideways look at Jean, and she gave a nod of encouragement. “We’re asking you not to perform any magic around us.”

Hermione nodded. “I understand,” she said. “It’s why Ron and I have been traveling as Muggles.”

“What do you mean?” Jean said.

“Well, we took Portkeys here because it’s so much faster and cheaper, but once we left the Australian Ministry, we’ve been traveling without magic.”

“We did Apparate to the owl office the first time,” Ron reminded her.

“But only because the only address we had was Apparition coordinates, and obviously we couldn’t ask anyone,” Hermione said.

“Apparition—didn’t we pay extra for you to have Apparition lessons?” Hugh said.

“Yes. It’s the process of disappearing in one place and reappearing in another.”

“I remember,” Jean said. “You had extra lessons in Hogsmeade and passed your test there.”

“That’s right, Mum.”

“Do you have your wand with you?” Hugh asked.

Hermione nodded.

“May I see it?”

She pulled it out of her trouser pocket and handed it over without hesitation.

Hugh examined it carefully, but as far as Jean could see, it looked exactly the same as it always had: about eleven inches long, tapered at the tip with a twirling vine pattern covering the lower two-thirds of its length. He held the wand with both fists, and for a moment, Jean thought maybe—

Hermione gasped. “Daddy?”

He passed it back to her whole. “Have you hurt anyone with that wand?”

Ron shifted, leaning forward and angling himself towards her protectively. Hermione stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“Yes.”

Jean felt a heavy pain in her chest, as if a hand was squeezing her heart tightly and it was trying to beat against the pressure.

“Did you kill anyone?”

“Hugh!”

Hermione’s eyes filled with tears, but she didn’t cry. “No.”

“She saved our lives more times than I can count,” Ron said, his voice tight and angry. “She packed ahead of time so when the Death Eaters crashed Bill’s wedding and we had to escape, we had
everything we needed. She learned the protective spells that kept us hidden for months. She did the research so we knew how to destroy the—Voldemort’s magical objects that she told you about. She was absolutely, positively brilliant and essential to Harry’s success even without that wand, but if Hermione was not a witch—if she was not as good at magic as she is, I’d be dead,” Ron said flatly. “We all would.” He waved his hand to include Jean and Hugh. “And so would Harry. There would have been no battle at Hogwarts, because Voldemort would have won long before then.”

“Told you,” Hermione said quietly. “I won’t apologize for that. I’m a witch—that’s who I am.”

Jean looked at Hugh, then back at her daughter. “You’ve changed so much,” she said with a sad smile. “It’s—sometimes it’s like we don’t know you at all.”

Now Hermione did cry, the tears spilling over both cheeks. “I’m sorry. I know I lied to you so many times, and I am sorry, really I am. I don’t want to do that any more. I want to be able to share this part of my life with you, but—”

“All right, love.” Jean pushed away from the table and walked past her husband to embrace her daughter. “It’s all right. We’ll work it out.” She wasn’t sure quite how, but living without her daughter now that she did remember her was not an option.

Hermione buried her face in her chest and cried as she hadn’t since—well, since she’d told Jean about Ron’s new girlfriend. And that had turned out all right in the end, hadn’t it?

Jean stroked Hermione’s hair—short and wilder than ever—and murmured soothing nonsense. Hermione raised her head after a few moments and Ron thrust a box of tissues under her nose.

“Thanks, Ron.”

“You cut your hair,” Jean said, fingering the ends. “I’ve never heard you talk about cutting it. What made you want to do that?”

“It got burned when we were attacked with Fiendfyre,” Ron said shortly.

Jean froze for a moment. She had thought she was changing the subject, making innocent conversation, but she kept blundering without knowing it.

“It’s—well, it’s….”

“Horrible and more unmanageable than ever,” Hermione said, standing up to throw her tissues in the bin.

“It will grow.”

“That’s what Ginny said when she cut it for me.”

“Hermione,” Hugh said. “Hermione, I—”

“It’s okay, Daddy.” But the words were said to the hands in her lap, not the man sitting across from her.

“No, I—I should have known you wouldn’t hurt someone else without good cause. I don’t really understand, but that’s no excuse for doubting you.”

Now Hermione did look up. “Thank you,” she said, and Hugh nodded.
“Come on,” Jean said, forcing a smile. “Let’s see what’s on telly. You’ve missed so many shows this year!”

Even now, Jean thought, those words still managed to sound a bit forced. Jean had been trying to disguise her worrying about her daughter’s relationship with Ron, but sometimes, she just couldn’t help herself.

Lunch was over and Jean and Hermione were folding laundry in the master bedroom. In the lounge, Hugh and Ron sat in front of the telly, Hugh giving Ron a crash course in football.

“So,” Jean said, accepting a clean stack of undershirts from her daughter and turning to put them away. “You and Ron.”

Hermione smiled. “Yes.”

“How did that come about?”

“With great difficulty,” Hermione said dryly.

“I know that. Seriously, though.”

Hermione turned a sock right side out. “It started last summer, really. We—”

With her shorter hair, her blush was easily visible.

“We had this huge row, and I found out why Ron was so angry with me sixth year—”

“Why was that?” Jean asked with interest, lining up a pair of Hugh’s trousers by the hems.

Hermione sighed. “Because Ginny told him I’d been snogging Viktor Krum.”

Jean frowned. “You told me you didn’t fancy Viktor.”

“I didn’t, not really.”

“She lied?” Jean said indignantly, sliding into mother-bear mode with no difficulty at all. “I thought you two were friends!”

“We are,” Hermione said, pairing up the socks.

It threw Jean back for a moment; it was the first chore Hermione had learned to help with when she was just a toddler.

“Ron and Harry walked in on her and her boyfriend, and—”

“Walked in on them doing what?” Apparently she didn’t succeed at affecting a casual tone, for Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Kissing, Mum, they were just kissing in a deserted hallway, and Ron—well, he didn’t handle his sister dating very well and they got into it and Ginny blurted something she knew would hurt his feelings. And because she and I are friends, he believed her, and—well, that’s how the whole mess with Lavender got started.”

“Okay,” Jean said. “But how does that relate to—”

“I’m getting there. After the fight Ron and I had last summer, all that stuff came out, about Lavender and the Yule Ball and all these misunderstandings, and … well, I kind of shouted that I was in love with him,” Hermione said sheepishly.
Jean leaned back against the chest of drawers, another pair of trousers draped over one arm. “You shouted at him.”

“He was so bloody oblivious, Mum! It—sorry.” She caught Jean’s disapproving look. “Nine months in a tent with two boys.” Hermione shrugged.

On second thought, if all Hermione had caught was a propensity for colorful language, Jean should be thankful.

“So, you’ve been together since last summer?”

Hermione shook her head, smoothing a pillowcase and setting it on top of the stack of matching sheets. “No, we—we knew we were going to go off with Harry, see, so we couldn’t really be together. We decided to wait until after the war.”

Jean slid the wardrobe door to access the other side. “That’s very mature of you.”

“It was just logical.”

She smiled. Now that sounded like her daughter of old.

“So what, then, after the Battle at Hogwarts? When did you say that was, two weeks ago?”

“Three now,” Hermione said, passing her the linens and sitting down on the end of the bed. “That was me too, I just dropped the basilisk fangs and kissed him.”

Jean ignored her questions about basilisks and why Hermione was carrying fangs and focused on the important issue. “Did he kiss you back?”

Hermione blushed, one foot crossing over the other as she fidgeted. “He did.”

“That’s a long time, from one summer to the next.” Not really, in the grand scheme of things, but at eighteen, it must have felt an eternity to Hermione.

Eighteen—she’d missed her daughter’s birthday!

“Hermione!”

Her expression morphed into concern. “What, Mum, what is it?”

“We didn’t do anything for your birthday! Your eighteenth birthday!” Jean spun around. “Hugh!”

“Oh, that’s okay,” Hermione said, following her out of the room. “I came of age at seventeen, remember?”

“Hugh, we missed Hermione’s eighteenth birthday!”

“It’s okay, Mum, honestly, I don’t need—”

“But of course we should do something for your birthday,” Hugh said, looking up from the match. “What would you like, love?”

“No, really,” Hermione insisted. “It’s fine. I’ll have another one in a few months.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Hermione,” Ron said. “We should at least have cake!”
“You’re only saying that because of your sweet tooth,” she accused, but Jean could tell she was amused.

“We haven’t had pudding all week!”

“Cake it is,” Jean said. “Tomorrow. And perhaps a new outfit? Or some books?”

Hermione glanced toward Ron, then nodded. “A new dress, maybe.”

*For a date*, Jean realized. “That sounds lovely. I’m sure we can find something nice for a special occasion.”

Hermione smiled.

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Ron had just crawled into bed and was reaching to turn out the light when there was a knock on the door. He threw back the covers and got up without bothering to pull on his jeans.

Hermione stood in the hallway freshly showered (he could smell the strawberry shampoo she favored) and wearing pink pajama bottoms with hearts and one of those strappy vests, gray this time.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

This was new. They’d already kissed goodnight (and more), and neither one of them had ever approached the other once they split to separate rooms. Plus she was fidgeting, and if she needed a spider killed or something off the top shelf of the wardrobe, she wouldn’t be nervous about asking.

“Can I—” Hermione looked down, to the side, then up through her lashes. “Can I sleep with you tonight?”

Ron leaned against the doorjamb, amused at this attempt at flirting from his practical Hermione. “Just sleep?”

Her mouth fell open and she flushed, stammering. “I—er—” She bit her lip. “Yeah. I think so. Um, yes.”

“That was convincing.”

Her eyes skittered across his chest and down, then anywhere but at him when she realized he was just in his pants. Ron resisted the instinct to cover himself, despite the fact his body was starting to react to her suggestion.

“Maybe … something between sleep and—and everything?”

He closed his eyes and groaned. “Hermione, you’re killing me.”

“We don’t have to,” she said quickly. “I can sleep in my room, that’s fine, I—”

“Shut up and come in.” Ron opened the door wide, then closed and locked it behind her.

She stood at the foot of the bed. “Which side—”

He pointed to the left and she crawled in. Ron turned out the light and joined her, and she turned
towards him. He reached for her in the darkness and she responded immediately, wrapping her arm around his waist and laying her head on his shoulder. He could feel her breasts pressed against his side and her head tucked under his chin. Ron lay quietly for several minutes, heart thumping, waiting for Hermione to make the first move.

“I thought Dad was going to break my wand.”

He took a deep breath, scented with strawberries, and brought one arm around to rub her back. “For a minute there, so did I.”

“I’m so glad they’re coming back to England.”

He squeezed her. “Me too. They do love you, Hermione. They’re doing it for you.”

She nodded against his chest. “I know. It’s just … hard. It’s just really, really hard.”

“You’ll think of something,” Ron said. “You always do.”
Hermione's memory was inspired by a sweet tear-jerker of a fic called *Chocolate Stars* by My Dear Professor McGonagall.

A week after Hermione reversed the memory charm, her days had fallen into a simple routine. She and Ron would go downstairs for breakfast in their pajamas (with Hermione pulling on a jumper for modesty) and return to the double bed in Ron’s room for conversation, a snog, and sometimes a nap —though not always in that order. Lunch was eaten whenever Ron couldn’t wait any longer, and the couple would tour the city or visit the beach before boarding the bus to have dinner with Hermione’s parents.

This particular morning found the two kissing before they even reached the bed. Ron pushed himself back towards the headboard when he bumped the mattress, and Hermione crawled up to sit between his knees, bending her legs into a butterfly stretch position, feet resting behind him. It was surprisingly intimate despite not lying down; other than Ron’s hands cradling her face, their only other point of contact was his knees pressing into either side of her hips. Hermione was very conscious of the way her thighs were spread open and the space between their bodies.

Ron kissed her soft and slow for long minutes without pressing for more, his hands on her face or neck or back, her hands on his chest controlling their closeness. The sitting position erased a significant portion of their height difference, and without him towering over her or his weight pressing her down, Hermione felt physically equal to him. It was exhilaratingly freeing, and she gathered his shirt in her hands, pulling it off. She leaned forward for another kiss, stroking the bare skin of his chest and shoulders, and Ron shifted position again, softening his mouth against hers and stroking her jaw with the back of one hand.

The tenderness was almost too much. Breathless, Hermione broke the kiss, crossing her arms at her waist and pulling her mother’s university sweatshirt over her head, exposing the long-sleeved tee she’d worn to bed in defense against the cooler nights. Ron nuzzled her neck, one hand sliding just under the hem of her shirt but no higher. Wanting him to touch her but unsure how to ask, Hermione made an affirmative humming noise and arched her back. Sliding his hand all the way up her bare back, he wrapped her in his arms, trapping her hands between them.

“Ron….”

“Okay?”

He pulled back far enough to look at her, running his hands up and down her sides in a firm, soothing motion he’d used before, but never against her skin. Other than that time right after the funeral, she’d never removed her shirt. Close, more than once, but a thin cami was still some protection, and this morning Hermione wasn’t even wearing a bra.

She moved Ron’s hand to cover her bare breast underneath the tee and they both gasped. His hand molded to her curves, one long thumb stroking the underside, and this was completely different, nothing at all like being pressed up against him or his touch through her clothes. Hermione linked both hands behind his neck and kissed him hard, but Ron was trying to remove her top, pulling her
hands away to push her arms through the sleeves. She let him, peppering his jaw with little kisses as he stretched the neckline over her head and flung the tee aside. His hands returned to her breasts as if they were magnetic, and Hermione leaned into his touch without conscious thought, increasing the pressure. Her breasts felt full, almost tender, and her nipples were tight and aching.

“So beautiful,” he murmured, stroking her sides again, grasping her hips and pulling her closer. “You’re so beautiful, Hermione.”

“I—”

But he smothered her protest with his mouth, and Hermione surrendered to the kiss, to the heat pooling low in her belly, to the shiver that vibrated through her when he brushed the tips of her breasts with the backs of his fingers. They had never—she didn’t even know what she liked, how was it that Ron was burning her up from the inside when—

Hermione’s eyes popped open and she pushed hard against his chest with both hands, forcing them apart.

“Wha—”

Hermione covered herself with one hand and turned her head away, trying to fight back tears as she scrambled for clothes.

Ron swung his legs over the side of the bed to sit beside her. “Hermione, what’s wrong? What happened?”

“It’s nothing.” Ron’s shirt was closer, so she pulled it on, not bothering to turn it right-side out or check the tag placement.

“I thought … you wanted me to touch you like that.”

She had … until she remembered she wasn’t the only one.

He touched her back briefly. “Hermione? How can I avoid messing up if you won’t tell me what I did wrong?”

“I—it’s—” She reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear. “I just remembered … I was thinking about how you—and—but—” Her face heated. She knew Ron was right, she wasn’t being fair, but she didn’t want to be a shrew, either. Ron and Lavender were history, and she and Ron had already had this fight last summer. She didn’t want to row again; she just needed some time to pull herself together.

Ron studied her for a moment, then said, “It’s Lavender again, isn’t it?”

Hermione fell back on the bed with a groan. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry, I know it’s not fair to bring it up again, but I—” She squeezed her eyes shut. “I remembered that was my first time but it wasn’t yours, and—” She swallowed. “It surprised me, that’s all. I wasn’t expecting to think of her.”

“Well, I certainly wasn’t thinking of her.”

Hermione squinted up at him, one corner of her mouth turning up.

Ron grinned, reaching out and flipping his shirt’s tag, under her chin. “So. Wanna go to the library?”

“What makes you think I want to go to the library?”
“When in doubt, go to the library. Isn’t that your motto?”

“Very funny,” Hermione said, turning Ron’s shirt around without taking it off. “That’s like me always offering you food, just because you like to eat.”

“An excellent idea! We can go back to that library with a café.”

“That was in Canberra,” Hermione reminded him, pulling the tee down her torso.

“So? We can—not Apparate.” Ron broke off with a sigh when she frowned. “How do you stand it, not being able to go wherever you want?”

“Muggles don’t know any different.”

“You’re not a Muggle,” Ron pointed out.

“But as a Muggle-born, I find it fascinating that witches and wizards don’t have to wait for a train or bus or plane timetable. Plus Apparating is free, once you have your license. I find magical travel just as fascinating as you find Muggle travel confining.”

Ron stared at her for a moment, obviously having not thought about it like that before.

“Come on,” Hermione said, getting up with a smile. “Let’s have lunch.”

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Hermione returned to her hotel room that night after one of her nighttime walks with Ron to find a large barn owl perched on the very edge of her narrow windowsill, constantly adjusting its feet to maintain its balance and pecking the glass as soon as it saw her. She immediately opened her window and the bird stepped inside, fluttering down onto the desk. Hermione untied the scroll from its leg and filled a cup with water from the bathroom, carrying it back and setting it beside the owl so it could drink its fill. She had just unrolled the parchment when there was a knock on the door.

Ron held up an identical scroll. “You got one too? It’s from the Ministry for Magic. About the Death Eater trials.”

Hermione unrolled the letter again and read it quickly. “‘We have reason to believe you may have information regarding the actions of various suspects charged with crimes during the recent war with Lord Voldemort.’” She snorted. “You think?”

“What are we going to do?” Ron said. “We won’t be back in time—the trials start next week.”

“I’ll write to Kingsley,” Hermione said, digging in her bag for a quill and ink. “I’ll let him know—”

“That you’re out of the country helping your Muggle parents whose memories you illegally modified?”

Hermione sighed. It had been difficult making the arrangements for her parents to go to Australia, but that was nothing compared to the complexity of bringing them back while maintaining the secret about how they’d left.

“I’ll just say they went abroad for safety, and we’re … helping with the transition. I’m sure there are plenty of other witches and wizards who can testify against most of the people—what did it say?”

She smoothed out the scroll. “‘For whom we have firsthand knowledge of a crime.’ I’ll let Kingsley know he needs to postpone the trial for anyone for whom our testimony may be crucial.”
“This could keep us busy for a while,” Ron observed, reviewing the list of suspected criminals.

“It is going to keep Harry busy for quite a while,” Hermione said, activating the affidavit by signing her initials with her wand in her other hand, starting with Dolohov, Antonin.

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The following morning, Ron and Hermione lay side-by-side in his hotel bed, still in their pajamas. Well, Hermione was; his shirt had disappeared and not been replaced.

“Tell me something about your childhood,” he said.

“You already know about my childhood.”

“Something from before Hogwarts. Before you knew you were a witch. Something with you and your mum or dad.”

Hermione was silent for a moment, her thumb tracing the back of Ron’s hand.

“My parents always tried to make my birthday special,” she said.

“Like how your mum insisted on doing something for your eighteenth because they missed it,” Ron said.

“Yes. And because my birthday is in September, it falls at the beginning of the school year. At first Mum tried to throw parties, invited all the girls in my class over, to help me make friends, you know?”

Ron got a sickening feeling in his gut. Her voice was flat and even, and she looked straight ahead, up at the ceiling.

“It was okay for a couple of years, there were a few girls who came, but when it became obvious no one wanted to come to my house, Mum would get something at the bakery for me to share at school. But that didn’t go well, either, and I finally convinced Mum to just celebrate them at home. Just the three of us.

“Dad would make me breakfast in bed, even if it was a school day, and Mum would pick me up after school and we’d go somewhere special—maybe to a museum, or the zoo, or once to the university library.”

Her voice had more animation now, and Ron squeezed her hand, encouraging her to continue.

“They’d tell stories about when I was born, or the silly names Dad came up with when Mum was pregnant, and—”

“Sillier than Hermione?” Ron teased.

“Way sillier,” she assured him. “Once Mum said she wanted a name from literature, Dad searched for the craziest names he could find—Rumpelstiltskin, and Maleficent, and—”

“Cinderella?”

“Cinderella would have been an improvement,” Hermione said. “After we found out I was a witch, they added stories about my accidental magic, things I didn’t remember because I was too little. Or sometimes I did remember them, but hadn’t realized they were me. My first birthday at Hogwarts, I missed them so much.”
“Your parents have supported you, haven’t they? I mean … they didn’t care about your magic?”

“It was a shock—I remember my mother’s face the day Professor McGonagall came to our house—but it was also a relief, I think, to know the answer. To know that what was ‘wrong’ with me wasn’t anything wrong at all. I was certainly relieved.”

“And excited,” Ron said, remembering a bushy-haired little girl in her robes on the Hogwarts Express, nattering away about reading all their textbooks.

“So were you!”

“Yeah, about doing magic, not going to lessons.”

“Well, I was excited about everything,” Hermione said.

Ron toyed with her fingers, changing the grip of their hands, weaving them in and out. “Are you still excited about going to Hogwarts this year?”

Hermione turned to face him. “Not excited, exactly,” she said slowly. “I’m looking forward to finishing school, certainly. To the best of Hogwarts, like Hagrid and the library and revising in the common room and—”

“The prefects’ bathroom,” Ron said with a grin.

She continued, blushing. “And the Halloween feast, but I’m not looking forward to leaving you. Or my parents. Or Harry. It’s going to be so weird to be at Hogwarts without you and Harry.”

“Well, lucky for me, my best mate has an Invisibility Cloak.”

“Unluckily for you, your girlfriend is a prefect,” Hermione retorted.

“Mmm, I know,” Ron said, leaning in. “All those nights out after curfew, wandering the halls alone, who knows what she might find in an empty broom cupboard….”

“Ron.”

“Hmm?” He traced her collarbone, pushing the thin strap of her vest off her shoulder.

"Kiss me."
Jean and Hugh had just dropped their belongings in the entry and turned the corner when the intercom buzzed.

“Go ahead and get changed,” Hugh said, reversing course. “I’ll let them in.”

Jean entered their bedroom, kicking off her heels into the wardrobe and exchanging her blouse and dress trousers for a pair of broken-in jeans and a light cotton sweater. She dropped her earrings into her jewelry box and placed her watch on the mirror tray on her chest of drawers before joining Hugh and the kids in the lounge.

“What’s all this?” she asked, stopping at a large pile of newspapers on the dining room table.

“The Daily Prophets came,” Hugh said.

“I wasn’t expecting so many.”

“I ordered everything from the day before the Battle until now, plus a few other significant dates,” Hermione said. “I hope that’s okay.”

Jean smiled at her daughter. “That was very thoughtful of you.”

Hermione shrugged, looking uncomfortable.

“This is quite the selection,” Jean said, noting the date on the top paper: June 10th, 1994. “How about pizza?”

“Hrmmff!”

Hermione made an excited noise around a mouthful of pizza with—of all things—pineapple on top. Ron was doing his best not to drool over his own slice of pepperoni, so it was Mrs. Granger who answered.

“What is it?”

Hermione swallowed too fast, gagged on a hunk of cheese, and turned the newspaper she was reading so they could see it.

The Chosen One Chooses One!

In his first public appearance since the Battle of Hogwarts, Harry Potter arrived at The Leaky Cauldron this morning accompanied not by his long-time friends Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, but rather another pretty young Gryffindor, Ginny Weasley. Mr. Weasley and Miss
Granger, made famous in their own right not only through their association with The Boy Who Lived but also their very own wanted posters over this last year, have still not been seen in public since their defense of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry over a fortnight ago.

Ron scoffed. “She’d have seen us all in public if she’d bothered to help with the cleanup.”

Hermione had recovered from her choking fit and now beamed at the picture of Harry and Ginny hand-in-hand with a light layer of soot on their clothes. “They look so adorable together!”

Ron watched as Harry stepped between Ginny and the crowd that approached him while Ginny tried to draw him away. “They look like they always do.”

Mrs. Granger put down the paper she was sharing with her husband and examined the recent issue more closely. “Your sister is very pretty, Ron.”

“Er, I reckon.”

“He means thank you,” Hermione said, giving him a pointed look.

Ron took another piece of pizza and pretended not to notice.

“Apparently there was quite the kerfuffle,” Mrs. Granger said. “It says here a near riot ensued and was broken up by Ginny’s brother George. Your brother,” she amended.

“That’s a new one,” Ron said, holding a sliding slice of pepperoni in place with one finger. “George is usually the source of any nearby rioting.”

“Well, Ginny’s in it now,” Hermione said, taking the newspaper back from her mum. “Everyone will be after her for information on what it’s like to date the Chosen One.” She licked a finger and turned the page to finish the article. “Typical Rita Skeeter,” she said, returning the paper to its position in the stack at her father’s elbow. “All gossip and no news. She’s painted Ginny as the proverbial maiden, waiting patiently for the hero to return from battle.”

Ron snorted. “Too bad we’re on the other side of the world.” He grinned at Hermione. “If there’s anyone else I’d like to see put Rita in her place more than you, it would be Ginny.”

“What’s that?” Mrs. Granger said. “Why would Hermione—”

Underneath the table, Hermione’s foot came down hard on Ron’s trainer, with an added little vicious twist.

“Nothing, Mum!”

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Hermione looked up from her position on Ron’s shoulder when her mother screamed.

“Hermione Jean Granger, is that a dragon?”

“What!” Dad said. “Let me see that.”

“Ah. You made it to May, eh?” Hermione said weakly. Ron paused the film they’d been watching.

“It is! An actual, fire-breathing dragon. What the hell….”

“Probable death seemed a better option than certain death,” Ron said cheerfully. “Plus he was blind.”
“Blind—blind? Hermione, do you mean to tell me you rode a blind dragon?”

The corners of Hermione’s mouth twitched at her mother’s rising indignation, and she bit her lip to control her laughter, certain the humor would not be appreciated.

“We were cornered, Mum, and Ron is right—if we’d stayed, we definitely would have been killed.”

Her mother’s eyes tracked down the article beneath the enormous front-page photograph of the dragon bellowing fire from its perch on the roof of Gringotts with three round lumps on its back.

“It says here that you broke into someone else’s vault and stole an ancient golden cup!”

“We did. It was one of the magical objects Voldemort used and therefore had to be destroyed.”

“You impersonated its owner!”

Hermione wasn’t sure if it was the bank robbery itself or simply the buildup of four years’ worth of (relatively) accurate news, but Mum seemed to have reached her limit.

“And committed an Unforgivable—what does that mean?” Mum’s eyes were round with fear.

Hermione and Ron glanced at each other.

“There are three crimes in the wizarding world that have an automatic sentence of life in Azkaban,” Hermione said. “The Cruciatius Curse, which is used to torture; the Killing Curse, which does just what it says—that’s what Voldemort tried on Harry when he was a baby—and the Imperius Curse, which is basically mind control. It wasn’t me, it was Harry. He used an Imperius on another wizard who came with us when he recognized me—recognized Bellatrix, I mean. Bellatrix Lestrange, that’s who I was impersonating.”

Mum covered her mouth with one hand. “Harry’s going to prison?”

“Lestrange, wasn’t that the name of one of those Death Eaters who broke out of Azkaban?” Dad asked, rifling through the now-disordered stacks.

Hermione decided to answer the simple question first. “No, Mum, Harry’s not going to prison. He’s very famous and popular, and he won the war. The Ministry is not going to convict him, I’m sure.”

“Hermione….”

She heard the unspoken censure. “He’s a good person, Mum. It was war. Haven’t you ever heard of good people doing bad things for justifiable reasons in a war?”

The silence was tense and absolute, not even broken by movement for a long time.

“Yes, of course,” Mum said finally, “but you’re all so young….”

“Joan of Arc was fourteen when she led the French army to Orléans to defeat the English,” Hermione retorted.

Dad reached out and took Mum’s hand. “I think what your mother means,” he said evenly, “is we’re very sorry such a thing was necessary. For all of you.”

When Hermione said nothing, Ron spoke up.

“Thank you, sir,” he said quietly.
Hermione wasn’t so quick to forgive; it felt like her parents were assuming the worst of her and judging her incapable all at the same time.

“You might as well read the rest of them,” Ron said. “I think it will give you a different opinion of Harry.”

Hermione turned away. She didn’t want to think about that horrible hour when Harry was missing, when she and Ron knew he’d gone to die for them and all the others.

“I’m going out.” She stood suddenly and headed for the door.

“Hermione—”

“Just down the street, Dad, I won’t go far. I—I just need to get out for a minute.”

“I’ll go with her,” Ron said.

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Hermione was hopping mad.

Ron had to jog the stairs to keep up with her despite his longer legs, and she burst through the stairwell door to the outside so forcefully it clanged into the brick wall behind it. It was rather refreshing to see her this angry with someone else for a change, even if he was sorry she and her parents were struggling.

“I nearly said ‘I have my wand, don’t worry,’” she said, her tone sharp and bitter and not at all like herself. “I’m better at magic than you are, but nooo, I can’t go outside after dark unless there’s a big, strong man to go with me.”

“I do all right,” Ron said mildly. He’d known that would upset her but had made the offer because it was the quickest way to get her out of the flat and defuse the upcoming argument.

Hermione stopped abruptly, their brisk pace leaving Ron two steps ahead of her before he realized it.

“I overreacted, didn’t I?”

“A bit.”

“I knew what Mum was thinking, though.” She pitched her voice high and sarcastic. “Hermione, be careful who you spend time with. Choose your friends wisely. Bad company corrupts good character.” She dropped the act. “Ugh. As if there’s even a handful of people in the world who would do what Harry did. Everything Harry’s done.”

“Your mum doesn’t know that, though,” Ron said gently. “She’s just finding out about all this stuff tonight. Remember your reaction when I first told you about Charlie’s job? And what it was like when we knew Harry had to face a dragon in the Tri-Wizard Tournament?”

She leaned into him. “It was scary. Terrifying.”
“That always seemed to make Mum the maddest, when one of us did something dangerous, something that could get somebody hurt. And it’s a lot easier to heal people with magic than it is with Muggle—what would you call it?”

“Medicine.”

“Even if it’s not actually a medicine?”

“Mm-hmm. The art of medicine, the practice of medicine, the discipline of medicine…. ”

“Well, it’s a lot easier to heal with magic than Muggle medicine, and it still upset Mum. I’m sure your mum is no different, wanting you to be safe and healthy.”

Hermione tilted her head up to give him a suspicious look. “When did you get so wise?”

“Lots of lectures from Dad, then Bill and Charlie,” Ron said dryly.

“I know they wanted to ask if I’d performed an Unforgivable. Or you.”

“Maybe you should tell them you haven’t.”

“Maybe. But it just—I hate feeling like I have to justify myself. We worked so hard, Ron, and to have them act like—like I’m making it all up, like it wasn’t really that bad—”

He squeezed her hand. “I know. They just don’t understand right now, Hermione. It will get better.”

She sighed. “You keep saying that.”

“I believe it. Come on, let’s go back inside.”

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Ron woke the following morning to the sensation of something tickling his nose. He tried to bat it away only to end up smacking Hermione in the head. He froze, but other than a grumbling noise and burrowing deeper into the pillow, she didn’t stir. It was becoming something of a habit, Hermione sleeping with him after a difficult visit with her parents. Weekends were the worst; with the addition of extra hours of time together and the lack of structure compared to their weeknight visits, the strain between the family members became more obvious.

He and Hermione had moved in the night and now lay side by side facing the same direction, with Hermione’s body tucked into the curve of his. Ron was intensely aware of two things: his pants were very tight, and Hermione was very close. He liked having her close; she was warm, and soft, and smelled good, but would she like it? It wasn’t like he’d never got hard with her before, but they’d been snogging, not asleep, and—

She stirred, pushing back against him with a soft, sleepy moan. “Ron?”

“Hmm?”

She turned in his arms and reached one hand up to the back of his neck, pulling him down for a kiss. Her tongue traced between his lips, and Ron opened his mouth to kiss her fully.

“Good morning,” she said, breaking the kiss.

“Very good morning.”
She smiled and turned again, pushing him onto his back and curling up against his side like she’d done the night before, but instead of laying her head on his shoulder, she leaned down and kissed him again, slow and sensuous.

“Hermione—” Ron pushed her hair away from their faces with one hand.

“Hmm?”

She wasn’t listening. That was her “I’m not listening” voice, the one she usually used when she had her nose in a book, not the hollow behind his ear, when her lips were sucking the end of a quill, not the underside of his jaw.

“If you—if you’re not—Hermione!” He tightened his fingers in her hair and pulled her mouth away. “If you’re not serious about that ‘more than sleep’ offer, you need to go. Now.”

Her lower lip slid out in a ridiculous yet sexy pout. “I’m always serious.”

She kissed him again, one of those open, exposed kisses that seemed unique to their time in Australia. Ron returned it, sliding his hand down her back, stroking the bare skin where her vest had ridden up in the night. He rolled them over, settling between her thighs in a position that left no doubts about his attraction to her. Hermione squeaked in surprise but didn’t shy away.

“You feel so good,” he murmured, kissing down her neck, lingering when she turned her head and displayed herself with a hum of pleasure. “So soft, and you curve everywhere.”

She laughed. “I do not.”

“Yes, you do.” He let his hand run down her body, directly over her breast and around her waist and hip.

Hermione’s breath hitched. “I—” She bit her lip, then reached down between them. “May I?”

“Yes,” Ron said, with no idea what she was actually asking. To his horror, she pushed him away and sat up … but she didn’t go far.

“I read that morning erections are actually a reflex to prevent accidental urination during sleep,” she said. “Is that true?”

“Wh-what?”

“Morning erections,” she said patiently, staring at his crotch. “Is it true they prevent accidental urination during sleep?”

“You want to ask questions now?”

She moved her gaze to his face, then bit her lip and tucked her hair behind one ear. Ron knew if it were longer, she’d be twisting a curl around one finger.

“I want to see,” she said. “May I?”

Contrary to what some people thought, Ron was not stupid. “Turnabout is fair play.”

“All right,” she said. “But not now—I don’t want to distract you.”

He laughed.
Hermione began to shrink in on herself, and he realized her courage was fading.

“Here,” he said, reaching for her. “Come here for a minute.”

She complied readily enough, leaning down and accepting his kiss, and Ron reached one arm across her to grasp her hip and pull her fully on top of him. Hermione brought a knee up for balance, and he could feel the heat of her even through her pajama bottoms. The kiss intensified until they were both panting, rocking gently against one another.

“Wanna come?” Ron asked against her mouth.

“Wh—what?”

“Do you want to come?” he repeated.

Hermione braced herself on her forearms and stared down at him with wide eyes. “I—what—”

Ron cupped her bottom in both hands and thrust upward, just a little. Her eyes glazed over. “We could do it like this. We wouldn’t have to do … everything.”

She was tempted; he could see it on her face. She was flushed and panting and pushing back against him without realizing it. Ron raised his head and kissed her softly, and Hermione dropped her head, deepening the kiss. He placed his hand on the back of her left thigh and tugged, encouraging her to bend her second leg so she was kneeling on top of him. She moaned at the increased pressure.

“Good?”

She nodded. “Yes, that’s—” Another moan.

Ron swore. She moving deliberately now, rubbing herself against him with an eagerness that was blisteringly hot. He thrust up against her weight and kissed her again. Sloppily and without finesse, but Hermione was making little humming noises, and then she shuddered in his arms. She collapsed over the edge a minute later, groaning as he sank boneless into the mattress.

Hermione’s face was buried into his neck, and she lay motionless, still curled around him, her breath fast and heavy against his skin. Ron took a couple of deep breaths himself and rubbed her back.

“You okay?”

She nodded but didn’t speak. Ron held her head steady with one hand and rolled to the side, forcing her legs out of their curled position around his hips. She remained in his embrace, bringing her right hand to rest over his rapidly thumping heart, but she still didn’t say anything. Was she upset or scared or angry with him? He hadn’t given her much of a chance to decide…. No, he never had to wonder if Hermione was angry with him; she always made that clear. So, what then? Why was she—oh!

“Hermione?” When nudging her chin was met with resistance, he began kissing along her jawline. After a minute, she turned her face and met his lips in a soft and gentle kiss, and at last he felt her relax.

He smoothed her hair back from her face. “That was your first orgasm, wasn’t it?”

She blushed bright red and nodded.

“Good?” he said, tweaking her nose.
“Hell, yes.”

Ron laughed at the unusual phrasing.

“Just … intense.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. His brothers were right, it was different with a partner, and watching Hermione come apart…. “You okay here for a minute?”

“Don’t go.” Her hand tightened on his shoulder.

Now it was his turn to blush; he could feel his ears prickling with heat. “I’ll be right back, I just need to use the loo.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Hermione lifted the covers for him on his return, then moved over, and Ron sank into the warmth left by her body.

“I still want to see,” she said.

He turned his head to look at her, but she was lying on her back, staring up at the ceiling.

“Er, now?”

She shrugged. “We don’t have to be at Mum and Dad’s until eleven.”

Ron looked at the clock. Nine-oh-four. Okay, then.
Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Notes

Two things: the book Hermione is reading is Stardust, by Neil Gaiman. Aaand, there’s an ask meme posted on my tumblr (keeptheotherone.tumblr.com) with questions about writing fic. Pic a story (and a number or two) and ask me about my fics! Anon is on :)

Percy’s porridge sat forgotten to one side. He was engrossed in an article about the Death Eater trials starting today when Dad made a noise of interest around a mouthful of toast.

Percy looked up. “What is it?”

In answer, Dad pushed another section of the Prophet across the table, tapping an advert with one finger.

QUALIFIED WIZARDS NEEDED: Due to the shortened school year, O.W.L.- and N.E.W.T.-qualified wizards are needed to tutor fifth- and seventh-year pupils in all subjects in preparation for exams in August. Contact M. McGonagall, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, a.s.a.p.

Finally, something Percy could do! He’d been helping with the Hogwarts cleanup, but anyone could shift rubble or mop floors. He had O.W.L.s in all twelve subjects and multiple N.E.W.T.s as well.

“You should sign up,” Dad said. “Minerva would be thrilled to have you.”

“And Bill. I’ll ask Oliver too—he doesn’t have as many qualifications, but she’ll need lots of tutors for the fifth years.”

“We can spread the word at the Ministry. I don’t want to leave your mother, but I’ve heard lots of people say they wished they knew how to help.”

“Excellent,” Percy said, shoving in his last slice of toast as the hand on the kitchen clock hovered between “time to make tea” and “you’re late.”

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Percy’s plans to Floo-call Bill about McGonagall’s request immediately after work were derailed by the arrival of an unusual post bird. Ron and Hermione had written from Australia—but not to him. “Dear Mum, Dad, Harry, and Ginny,” Mum had read out loud a few minutes ago. Ginny alone had noticed Percy’s mood, flicking a knife out of place to get his attention as he laid the table for dinner. She said Ron hadn’t done it on purpose. She said Ron just didn’t expect him to still be at the Burrow. She said he hadn’t written to Charlie either, and that was proof Ron hadn’t meant anything personal by excluding Percy.

She was probably right.

Charlie had left for Romania just last night, and if he had been here today, Percy was certain he wouldn’t be feeling sorry for himself just because his name wasn’t written in a letter. George had been staying (after seeing him last night, Percy was not at all convinced he was sleeping) in the flat above the shop for a fortnight. But Percy wasn’t sure where he stood in the family; welcome, yes,
but so often still an outsider. So many things had to be explained to him; so many things he hadn’t known, like how George lost his ear or that Harry was Professor Lupin’s son’s godfather. It left Percy feeling out of sorts, and he didn’t like it at all.

Even if he did have the sense that he should get used to it.

Percy glanced over at Harry, who had lain the other half of the table and was now following Ginny’s instructions for seasoning the vegetables. Percy thought it would help to get that apology out of the way. He had already apologized to Ron, and Bill, and his parents, and Ginny. He needed to make an apology to Harry too, for despite not being family (at least not yet—Percy may have been out of the loop, but he had eyes), Harry wasn’t a stranger, either. Unlike most of the rest of the wizarding community working at the Ministry and reading the *Daily Prophet*, Percy had known the boy who claimed Voldemort had returned, and he had ignored what he knew in favor of what was politically expedient. His family had been gracious, extending their forgiveness almost before he asked.

If only he could find a way to forgive himself.

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An hour later, Percy turned away from sliding clean plates into their rack in the dresser. Ginny had left the kitchen with a tray for Mum, and he and Harry were alone. Percy crossed the kitchen and picked up the stack of bowls at Harry’s elbow. Harry was still drying cutlery and didn’t look up.

Percy cleared his throat. “I, er, I assume Ron showed you the letter. The one I wrote a few years ago —”

“Warning him to stay away from me?”

Percy walked around the table and placed the bowls on their shelf. “Yes.”

“Yeah, he did.”

Percy nodded, resting his hands on the back of a chair. He had expected that. It hadn’t occurred to him at the time, but, well, that just emphasized his foolishness, didn’t it?

“I, uh, I’m sorry. I was wrong, obviously, about a lot of things. Especially you.”

Harry looked up but said nothing. Percy forced himself to meet his eyes without fidgeting. After a tense silence, Harry gave a small nod of his head and returned to the cutlery.

“I—” Percy pushed his glasses up with one finger. “See, Ginny—” He took a deep breath. “Ginny and I have always got along, at least when it was just the two of us, and it’s obvious from the way she looks at you that you’re going to be around for a while. So I was hoping—I mean, I know we’ve never been friends like—” He swallowed. Harry just watched him without speaking. “Like Fred and George, but I was hoping we might put the past behind us, so to speak. For Ginny.”

Harry set down the fork he was essentially polishing and faced him directly. “All right,” he said. “I know that would mean a lot to her. She adores all of you.”

Left unspoken was the hurt that came out of that adoration. Percy forced down the wave of guilt and held out his hand.

“For Ginny,” he said, and Harry shook.

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Hermione pushed her sunglasses up her sweaty nose and turned another page in her book. She’d been completely wrong about the weather in Sydney; yes, it was autumn, and yes, the days were short and getting shorter, and yes, looking up at the stars at night and seeing none of the familiar Northern Hemisphere constellations was disorientating, but when the sun was up it was warm, bright, and abundant. She lay on her newly-purchased beach towel on Manly Beach, soaking up the sun and glancing over the top of her novel occasionally to admire the bright blue-green Pacific, such a contrast to the cold gray sea back home.

Another page turn. Ron had gone to get drinks for both of them, but judging by the length of his absence he’d stopped for food too. Hermione shoved her sunglasses up again, too engrossed in what was happening to Tristran outside Wall to bother wiping off her face. It was some minutes later—Tristran had just been given the magical candle—when a shadow fell over her.

She looked up and burst into laughter.

Ron stood over her with an orange surfboard with blue and white stripes down its center stuck in the sand behind him and a proud smile on his face.

“What are you doing with that?”

“It’s a surfboard.”

“I know it’s a surfboard.” Hermione sat up. “What I want to know is, what are you doing with it?”

“I bought it.”

Her mouth dropped open. “You’re going to learn to surf?”

“Maybe,” Ron said, his smile fading at her incredulous tone. “It doesn’t seem that different than balancing on a broomstick.” He let the board fall flat, and Hermione turned her head to avoid the cloud of sand at its impact. “Sorry.”

She brushed the sand off her towel as Ron stretched out on the surfboard beside her.

“You bought a surfboard.”

“I bought a surfboard.”

“They’re not exactly cheap,” Hermione said.

“I know. I used some of Fred’s money.”

“That he left to you,” she said pointedly. Ron had been reluctant to take the gold and even more reluctant to spend it.

He was quiet a minute, then said, “I wanted something to remember this trip, something special. Something I wouldn’t buy at home.”

Hermione stared at the striped board again. “Well then, I’d say you succeeded.”

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Over a week later, Hermione sat in the hotel foyer, reading a Daily Prophet charmed to look like today’s copy of The Sydney Morning Herald, which she’d nicked from the breakfast area this morning. She and Ron had sent their affidavits to the Ministry two weeks ago, and the Death Eater trials had started last Monday. She was looking for some indication of a witness schedule or order of
events, but so far there was nothing. Harry had made the paper again; just a single-sentence mention of his presence in the audience, but he was visible in the courtroom photograph, sitting still and alert. Hermione would have thought it was a Muggle photo if it weren’t for the fidgeting Wizengamot members in the center rows.

She heard the front door’s arrival chime and looked up, but it wasn’t Ron. They needed a few simple things—her tube of body lotion had run out, she wanted some gum, Ron had eaten all the snacks Mum had given them last weekend for the hotel room, he needed razors, and he did not appreciate her taste in reading material. Hermione turned a page and straightened the newspaper with a snap, still slightly offended by his insistence she couldn’t pick out something he would like. Honestly, it’s not like she’d choose something she’d buy for herself. Anyway, everything they needed could be found at the chemist’s two streets over, and Ron had insisted he could manage without her help. Hermione had hidden her skepticism (at least, she’d tried) and given Ron both a list and an expected price range for each item, estimating the Muggle exchange rate as best she could.

They were doing okay on funds. Mum and Dad were feeding them every evening and throughout the weekends, and breakfast was included with their rooms, but the bus trips every day were adding up, not to mention almost a month’s worth of two hotel rooms. Hermione knew she could stay with her parents, and honestly, she would probably have to do that soon, but … she was still having nightmares about Malfoy Manor. Not every night, but often enough that the idea of staying somewhere without privacy charms made her nervous. She could cast them without telling her parents, but she was worried they would find out eventually and afraid doing hidden magic would destroy the fragile rapport they were building.

The entrance chime went off again. Hermione glanced up, then back to her newspaper when she realized it was just a flower delivery boy. Then the flowers—over a dozen red roses—appeared beneath her nose. Ron beamed down at her. Hermione looked from him, to the roses, and back again, then sprung to her feet.

“What the hell were you thinking?”

Ron blinked, then pushed the flowers closer to her. “I brought you roses. Here.”

“No, you bought me roses! Ron—I told you exactly what to get and how much to spend, and roses were not on the list!”

He dropped his arms, the roses dangling upside down from one hand. “Well, excuse me for wanting to do something nice for you!”

“Nice would have been doing as I asked,” Hermione said coldly. “But apparently that’s too much for you.”

“I don’t see what the big deal is,” Ron said, tossing the flowers into her empty chair and crossing his arms.

“The big deal is roses are bloody expensive, that’s what! We have to keep enough money for our tickets home, and food and bus fare and this stupid hotel for I don’t even know how much longer, and—” Hermione felt the tears welling up, a combination of fear and worry and panic. “And it’s all on me to plan and prepare and figure out how to do everything, as usual, because you’re acting like a child!”

Ron flinched—actually flinched, as if she’d struck him. Then he turned on one heel, heading for the lift, and Hermione completely lost it.
“RONALD WEASLEY, DON’T YOU DARE WALK AWAY FROM ME AGAIN!”

She heard her shrill voice echo off the tile floor and metal furnishings; saw everyone stop, turn, and stare; felt the wetness on her face that last time had been rain mixed with tears; but the only thing that mattered was Ron’s reaction.

He had her in his arms before she saw him move, the familiar feel of one of Mrs. Weasley’s wool jumpers and the fresh scent of his soap surrounding her. Hermione fisted the back of his jumper and buried her face in his chest, trying to keep her sobs contained to normal sniffles instead of the ear-splitting wail that threatened at the back of her throat.

“It’s okay, I’m here, I’m sorry. I’m here, Hermione, I won’t leave you. It’s okay. It’s okay, I’m right here. I’ve got you, Hermione.”

His voice faded into a steady, soothing murmur in her ear, his arms wrapped all the way around her, and he was holding her so tightly her toes barely brushed the ground. When she was still crying just as hard a minute later, he picked her up and began walking. Not caring where he was taking her, Hermione hid her face in his neck until she felt Ron sit down.

“All right, love, it’s all right,” he said again. “We’re out back now, there’s no one around. I’m right here.”

“I’m so so-ory,” she wailed. “I—sh-sho—shouldn’t-t’ve—”

Ron ran one hand up and down her back, the other wrapped round her hips to hold her in place. “Shh, don’t talk. You have to calm down if you want to talk. I can’t understand you.”

“C-c-can’t s-s-st-stop,” she gasped, weeks worth of tension bleeding off faster than she could control.

“Yes, you can. You can do anything.”

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Hermione cried still harder at that, and Ron was starting to get worried. He understood she had panicked when she saw him walking away from her in a temper again, but he didn’t know how else to reassure her. If they were at the Burrow, Mum would have some Calming Draught, but he had no idea what the Muggle equivalent would be, and he wasn’t leaving her like this. So, Ron sat on the hard concrete wall, feeling useless as Hermione trembled and sobbed in his arms.

It was some minutes later before her breathing settled into the shaky, stuttering pattern of several short breaths in, one long breath out, and longer still before she lifted her head from his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” she said, wiping her face with the hem of her shirt. “I just—” A deep breath, slow and steady this time. “I saw you walking away from me, hurt and angry, and I just panicked.”

“I don’t care about that,” Ron said. “Well, I do,” he added quickly when she stiffened. “I meant I don’t mind. I understand why that upset you.” He paused, but when she said nothing, looking down at her fingers twisting in her lap, he continued, “what I don’t understand is why you were angry with me for bringing you flowers. You didn’t even give me a chance to say I bought them with my money.”

She looked up, eyes wide and bloodshot. “You did?”

“Of course I did. What kind of git would I be if I used your money to buy you something?”
She groaned and covered her face with her hands. “Oh, Ron, I’m so sorry.”

“It reminded me of something too.”

“What?”

“The Slytherin match, sixth year,” he said quietly. When Hermione had thought he’d only played well because of Liquid Luck.

She swallowed, looking shame-faced. “I’m sorry. I should have had more faith in you than that. Both times,” she emphasized. “You’ve been wonderful this trip, Ron, you really have. So supportive and trying to help my parents understand the wizarding world and—all but a child. That was me today, and I’m sorry.”

He kissed her softly, melting a bit when she placed her hand on the back of his neck and relaxed against him.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you too … but would you mind standing up? My legs are numb.”

She swatted his arm but laughed and complied, lifting herself up onto the wall beside him with a cute little hop.

“Are you really that worried about the money?” Ron said.

Hermione grimaced. “I just don’t know how much our plane tickets will be,” she said. “I’ve checked a couple of times, but the prices vary so much depending on the day of the week and how far out it is.”

“Maybe you should stay with your parents, give up your hotel room. That would help a lot, wouldn’t it?”

“It would,” she agreed. “But—” She bit her lip.

“What?”

“I’m worried about my nightmares.”

Ron stared at her a moment, then it clicked. “Ah, that’s right. No magic, no privacy charms.”

She nodded.

“Well, why don’t you talk to your mum? She seems like she really wants to spend more time with you, and I think she’d be easier to approach than your dad.”

Hermione nodded again. “She would, at least about this.” She chewed her lip some more. “You think I should tell her about the nightmares?”

“I think you should tell her about Malfoy Manor,” Ron said, unsurprised when Hermione started at the suggestion. “It would give her some serious perspective on what you’ve been through and why you did what you did.” He paused to let his point sink in. “And as … cautious as your parents have been, you’ll have to give a specific reason why you want the privacy charms, and it needs to have nothing to do with me.”

“Oh! I didn’t even think about Mum thinking I wanted the charms for … that. That’s a good idea.”
“Just think about it,” Ron said. “You can talk to her this weekend.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” She gave him a sweet smile.

“Now, would you like to have some roses?”

“Yes, please.”

Ron stood and extended his hand. “Let’s go see if anyone has sat on them yet.”
Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Notes

Hey, guys, sorry about the missed updates! As you'll know if you follow me on tumblr, I've been in London. Didn't have as much time to update as I was hoping. I'll do a couple extra posts to catch us up. Enjoy!

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Ron returned with two snow cones (fairy floss and green apple) only to find an empty table where Hermione and her mum were sitting, the beach towels draped over their chairs the only sign they had been there. Taking a bite of green apple, which was starting to melt despite his strategic licking on the way over, Ron stepped to the railing that separated the pathway from the beach and looked around.

Sunbathers, surfers, kids, castles, buckets, bikinis, and—books? Ron began moving towards the bookstand on the beach without conscious thought. He couldn’t see Hermione from here, but he knew that was where she would be.

By the time he picked his way around the crowds on the sand, his snow cone was completely gone, its paper cup was tossed in a nearby bin, and Ron was seriously considering eating Hermione’s just to limit the sticky syrup melting onto his hand. He passed Mrs. Granger with her head tilted sideways to read the spines, dodged two surfers with boards under one arm and books in the other, and found Hermione on the far side, engrossed in the inside jacket of a hardback.

“Here’s your snow cone,” Ron said, extending it in her direction.

“Hmm? Oh, Ron!” Hermione didn’t take the snow cone. Both her eyes and smile were wide. “Look! It’s a library on the beach! Isn’t that simply brilliant?”

“I reckon. Convenient, at least.” He moved the snow cone closer to her face and gave it a wiggle, but she didn’t seem to notice. Shrugging, Ron bit off the top globe in its entirety.


“You do know it’s things like this that make people think you’re a swot, right?” Ron swiped a pink dribble from his chin.

“I am a swot,” Hermione said indignantly, as if this were in question.

“Yeah, well, I’m going around to the other side where there’s shade. My snow cone is melting.”

“Okay.” She’d already turned her back to him, completely oblivious to the absence of the snow cone that she’d been the one to request in the first place.

On second thought, Ron reflected, chucking the second paper cup and a handful of damp serviettes,
better find a chair.

Jean unlocked her front door with a sense of relief—not so much that she was home, but that they made it home with the good mood still intact. Well, at least between her and Hermione; Ron’s expression had glazed over hours ago with the discovery of the beach library and had yet to recover. But she and Hermione had spent a pleasant afternoon discussing books, finding new books, discussing some more, and reading in companionable silence. Jean sighed in satisfaction even as Ron and Hermione rushed past her.

There was nothing so satisfying to an introvert’s soul as company that let you read in peace.

“Daddy, guess what!”

Hermione sounded much younger than her eighteen years, and that was good for Jean’s soul too.

“A shark washed up on the beach and ate your ice cream cone!” Hugh said.

Hermione giggled. Actually giggled. Jean turned to catch Ron’s reaction and saw an indulgent smile.

A third snack for her soul in as many minutes—by all accounts, and this was hardly the first, it seemed Hermione had found someone who loved her. Truly loved her, and whatever Jean’s reservations about the wizarding world and her daughter in a serious relationship at eighteen, she was grateful.

“No, Dad. We found a library! On the beach! Like, actually on the sand!”

“No just at the beach, but on the beach?”

“Yes!”

“Any calls?” Jean asked, stepping up to her husband for a hello kiss.

Hugh grimaced. “Four year old knocked his left upper incisor out. Mum let him stand on a ball, and he fell face first onto the edge of the kitchen worktop.”

Jean stared, ignoring her daughter vibrating beside her. Hermione was well used to their professional routine when one of them was on call. “She let him—what? Why?”

“She did tell me, ‘I guess I shouldn’t have let him do that.’”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.” Sometimes she thought if it weren’t for stupid parents, she wouldn’t have a job.

“I put him on your schedule for Monday morning.”

Jean sighed. “All right, fine.” A technically easy patient; the difficult part would be balancing reassuring the mother there was no lasting harm done while warning her to exercise better judgement. “Yes, Hermione.”

“You didn’t need a library card or anything! You could just walk up and take as many books as you wanted!” Hermione said gleefully. “Free books and a beach, can you believe it?”

“I cannot,” Hugh declared. “Did you bring any evidence of this miraculous discovery?”
Hermione reached into her handbag—despite their request for no magic, which Jean had to admit Hermione was honoring in every other way, she insisted on carrying the magically enlarged bag with her everywhere. Not unlike her old cuddly toy, Cocoa the Cat.

“Hermione,” Jean said, causing both Hugh and Hermione to interrupt their conversation over the Australian Rules football manual Hermione chose for him. “What happened to Crookshanks?”

Her expression relaxed. “Oh, he’s fine, Mum. Ginny’s taken really good care of him. He—er, I had to leave him behind last summer, and when her family had to flee the Burrow, she took him to her aunt’s—well, her great-aunt’s— Or is Muriel your great-great aunt?” she asked Ron.

Ron set down the now-empty juice glass he’d poured as soon as they came in. “She’s Mum’s paternal grandmother’s sister, so she’s Mum’s great-aunt, our great-great.”

Jean exchanged a glance with Hugh. So, he’d been surprised at the way the boy rattled that off without having to think about it, too. Maybe it was something to do with the pure-blood stuff the kids had talked about that first day? Sort of a wizarding aristocracy, where knowing your ancestors and how you were related was actually important?

“Anyway, Ginny took Crooks to Great-Auntie Muriel’s and her brothers brought him back with all the rest of their stuff, so he’s at the Burrow again. He likes it there, even if I do miss him,” she said wistfully.

“Chasing gnomes,” Jean said, remembering letters from previous summers.

“Yes.” She smiled.

“Why did your family have to flee their home, Ron?” Hugh asked.

Ron and Hermione shared one of the knowing, silent-communication looks that Jean had seen all-too-much of.

“We—me and my dad and Fred and George—we arranged a cover story that I was sick to explain why I didn’t show up at Hogwarts this year since attendance was compulsory for all magical-born kids. But somewhere in—March, right?”

Hermione nodded. “During the Easter holiday.”

“Our security spells were broken, and the Death Eaters found out I was on the run with Harry. We… went to Bill and Fleur’s, and—” Ron blew out a breath. “Thank Merlin, he realized the danger everyone was in and warned them, and they were able to escape before the Death Eaters got there. There was a fight, but Bill and Dad were able to stall them long enough for Mum and Ginny to get away. She’s still underage, you see, so she needed Mum to Apparate with her.”

Now it was Jean and Hugh’s turn to exchange a knowing look, and they were in agreement—that was far from the whole story.

Jean laid her hand on Ron’s arm. “Well, I’m thankful your family got out okay. What about the house, was there much damage?”

Ron looked surprised. “You know, I don’t know. Dad and my brothers cleared it before we came home.”

“Must be nice to fix things with just a wave of a wand,” Hugh said.
Both Jean and Hermione tensed, familiar with that tone of voice. But Ron just laughed.

“When it works,” he said. “Dad sent Charlie to reset the wards, but Bill—he worked as a curse breaker for Gringotts in Egypt before the war broke out—Bill did them all over again. They were still arguing about it when we came home.”

“Speaking of which….” Jean said.

“Arguing?” Hugh raised one eyebrow.

“Coming home,” Jean said, with a “you know that’s not what I meant” look for good measure.

“What’s for dinner?”

“I think Hermione should cook,” Ron said, pretending not to see the glare she aimed in his direction.

“I’d like to see that,” Mr. Granger said, giving Hermione a friendly nudge.

“Ron’s teasing,” Hermione said, shooting him another dark look. “He always complained about my cooking in the tent.”

“So did Harry.”

“Harry ate whatever I put in front of him,” Hermione said.

Ron scoffed but like a true mate, said nothing else. Harry was better at Transfiguration than he liked to let on, especially to Hermione.

“You insisted you could cook fine if you actually had food to work with.”

Shit.

Now Hermione was really scowling, and he couldn’t blame her. He’d put his foot in it with that one.

“I just meant—”

“We know what you meant,” Mrs. Granger said evenly, turning to unpack the beach bag she’d set on one of the island stools. “Hermione is slimmer than she’s been in years. You too, Ron.”

“Mum—”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Granger. I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

“Besides, you’re not being fair,” Hermione said. “First there wasn’t anything other than fish, now I can’t use magic.”

Ron stared at her. “Sh—oot, I forgot about that. Sorry.”

“But we are pretty good at prep and washing up,” Hermione said brightly. “How can we help, Dad?”

Ron was washing up (he actually liked using the dishwasher), Hugh had staked out his customary spot on the sofa, and Hermione had stepped to the loo. Jean leaned against the hall wall and waited
for her to come out.

“Mum,” Hermione said, looking surprised and taking an instinctive half-step backwards, even as her right hand went to her pocket.

Reaching for a wand?

Jean shoved this thought aside and smiled at her daughter. “I wanted to talk to you a minute, away from your dad and Ron.”

“O-kay,” Hermione said, following her into the guest room.

Jean sat down on the bed and motioned Hermione to sit beside her. She did, warily.

“I wondered if you’d thought any more about staying here with me and your dad.”

“Oh!”

Hermione looked both surprised and relieved, and Jean hid her smile. She did plan on having a conversation with her daughter about responsible sexual behavior, but … one thing at a time.

Hermione looked away, biting her lip. “Um … well, yes, I have thought about it. It’s just—”

Jean waited, but she remained silent. “Hermione? Please talk to me. No more lies, remember?”

Hermione nodded, then took a deep breath and began speaking to her lap.

“It’s just that—well, I have nightmares, you see. Ron and Harry and I—it wasn’t just that our security wards were broken. We were captured and taken to Malfoy Manor, Voldemort’s headquarters.”

Jean gasped.

“Oh, Hermione, love.” Jean pulled her close, as much to hide her own tears as soothe Hermione’s. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay, it’s not your fault—”

“Hermione.” They’d had this conversation before, many times, in fact. Rational, practical Hermione often mistook sympathy for an apology.

“Sorry. I forgot.”

Her body had molded to Jean’s, her head on her shoulder. Jean smoothed the soft, curly hair brushing her cheek, enjoying the closeness while it lasted. After a minute or so, Hermione shifted and Jean let go.

“That’s why I had to send you away, see? I didn’t want something like that to happen to you or Dad.”

“Are you all right? Have you seen a doctor, or—or Madame Pomfrey, or something?” The school matron’s kind, explanatory letters had reassured Jean more than once over the last seven years.
Hermione nodded. “I’m fine. I haven’t actually seen a Healer—I hadn’t thought of it, to be honest, that’s probably a good idea—but Bill and Fleur checked me over and did some healing the night I arrived. Bill’s a curse breaker, like Ron said, he’s trained to fight dark magic, and Fleur has some healing skills as well. They—” she swallowed. “They were very good to me. To all of us.”

Jean reached out and squeezed her hand. “I’m glad.”

“But what I meant to say is—” She was talking to her lap again. “Because of the nightmares, I’d like—I’d like to cast some privacy charms. Just so I don’t bother you if I’m up during the night,” she said in a rush, looking up now. “I’ll do the kind that will let you cross them, you’ll still be able to come into my room and stuff. I can—I can show you what I mean, if you like,” she added shyly.

Jean hesitated. “I think I need to discuss that with your dad first.”

Hermione’s face fell. “Okay. I understand.”

“But if I’m understanding you,” Jean said, actually encouraged by Hermione’s apparent willingness, “you’re saying you’ll come stay with us if we allow you to put up this privacy charm.”

She nodded. “Ron and I have talked about it, and it’s really the only way I feel comfortable. Not because of you and Dad! Just … after what happened.”

Jean nodded in turn, trying to act as if it were normal for an eighteen-year-old girl to consult with her boyfriend about living with her parents. “And you’ll stay here without Ron?”

“He can still visit, right? And eat with us and stuff?”

“Of course he can.” Did she have a choice? “But I’m not ready for my daughter to be having sex under my roof.”

Hermione grimaced. “Mum, we’re not—” She broke off at Jean’s knowing look and blushed.

“I assume there’s a magical equivalent to condoms and the pill?”

Another nod. Hermione was positively squirming now.

“And you’re well-versed in it? You don’t need—I don’t know, to see a Healer here or anything?”

“Oh, no, it’s just a spell that anyone can do. Madame Pomfrey taught us in third-year, and Mrs. Weasley made sure I knew how to do it too. When she taught Ginny.”

Yet another thing Jean owed the older woman. The list was stacking up.

“All right, well, why don’t you call us before you come over in the morning? I’ll talk to your dad tonight and let you know if you need to pack a bag.”

“All right.” Hermione smiled. “Thanks, Mum.”

Jean kissed the top of her head. “You’re very welcome, love.”
Hugh, already in bed, looked up as Jean turned out the light in the en suite.

“What was that private conversation with Hermione about earlier?”

Jean hung her dressing gown on the back of the wardrobe door and sat on the edge of the bed. “I wanted to ask her to stay with us.”

“And? What did she say?”

She twisted off her rings and picked up the tube of hand cream.

“She wants to do a privacy charm.”

“A privacy charm?” Hugh repeated. “Whatever for? No, wait, don’t answer that.”

“It’s not what you think,” Jean said. “She’s been having nightmares.”

The bed shifted as Hugh sat up.

“About the war?”

She nodded, wringing her hands together long after the lotion was well-absorbed. She felt his hand on her shoulder but didn’t turn around.

“What else, Jean?”

“She was tortured,” she blurted, watching her own knuckles turn white. “Our beautiful Hermione, she—they were captured, and—”

Hugh pulled her into his arms, and Jean let loose the wail that had been twisting in her chest since Hermione uttered those same words. She felt Hugh’s cheek resting on top of her head, his hand stroking her back, heard his heartbeat under her ear, but above it all was the crack in her daughter’s voice, the tears in her eyes, the pain Jean had been unable to prevent. A pain she very much suspected still continued. She pressed her face tighter into Hugh’s neck only to find it already wet.

“Hugh?”

He wiped her cheek with one thumb, ignoring the tears glistening in his own eyes. “What happened?”

Jean sniffed and shook her head. Reaching out to grab the tissues off her bedside cabinet, she took one and passed the box to Hugh as they settled shoulder-to-hip against the headboard.

“I don’t know, exactly. I didn’t trust myself to ask any questions without completely losing it.” She blew her nose. “She just said they were captured and taken to Voldemort’s headquarters and—and—”

He squeezed her shoulder.

“You should have seen her, Hugh, she was so brave,” Jean said. “She said it didn’t last long, only a couple of hours and—” She broke off at the sound from her husband, like a wounded animal, and gripped his hand harder. “She doesn’t want to bother us—”
“She’s our daughter! Of course she bothers us!”

Jean snorted, then covered her mouth. “Sorry, I’m sorry, it’s just—”

“I meant she’s not a bother because she’s our daughter. Even if she were doing something bothersome. Which this isn’t.”

“I know.” She laid her head on his shoulder, following as he slid down in bed and pulled the covers over them.

“Is she okay?”

“She says so,” Jean said. “Ron’s family—the brother who was in Egypt, what’s his name?”

“Bill.”

“Yes, Bill, he and his wife took good care of her, she said. Apparently his training as a curse breaker was helpful.”

“So, that story about Easter holiday and the Weasleys having to flee their home….”

“ Took place on the same night, yes, I think so,” Jean said.

“Good lord, no wonder they didn’t want to drop that bombshell just before dinner.”

“Quite.”

“So,” Hugh said after a few minutes of silence. “Hermione wants to use magic to….”

Jean wrinkled her forehead, trying to remember how Hermione had described it. “She called it a ‘privacy charm’ and said we could ‘cross it,’ so we’d still be able to enter her room.”

“But not hear anything from it?”

“I think so.”

His chest expanded and his breath washed over her hair in a sigh. “All right.”

“Thank you!” She raised up on one elbow and kissed him.

“I want to be there when she does it, though.”

“Me too,” Jean agreed. “She said she would show us.”

He turned off the lamp.

“Hugh?”

“Hmm?”

“She also said it’s why she had to send us away. So something like that didn’t happen to me or you.”

Hugh said nothing, but his arms tightened around her in the darkness.

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As Percy climbed the winding drive towards Hogwarts, he was surprised to see a group of people,
mostly pupils, gathered in the grassy area in front of the open oak front doors. His instructions from Professor McGonagall had said the pupils would be Flooing into their common rooms and meeting in the Great Hall.

Maybe they dreaded entering that space as much as he did.

As he approached, he recognized the wizard talking to Bill and Fleur. Bill kept a straight face as Percy approached his best mate from behind, reaching a long arm around to tap his right shoulder while standing at his left.

Oliver fell for the feint, giving Percy a gentle (for Oliver) shove.

“I thought you weren’t coming,” Percy said. Then Oliver turned, revealing a short blonde witch, and Percy grinned, knowing exactly why Oliver changed his mind.

“Aye, well, Katie found out about it and wanted to help, so I figured if she was going to be here every Saturday, I might as well be too.” Oliver shrugged, then slung an arm around his girlfriend’s shoulders.

Muggle-born Katie Bell had spent the last year in France. Percy wasn’t at all surprised his fellow Gryffindor wanted to help; rumor had it there had been a major row with Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet before Oliver convinced her to leave the country at all.

“You’re a perfectly capable wizard, Oliver Wood,” Katie chided.

“That’s true,” Percy said mildly. He’d spent a good portion of their seven years at Hogwarts trying to convince Oliver lessons were as important as Quidditch. He’d failed, of course, but considering the end result was free Puddlemere tickets as long as Oliver was on the team, Percy didn’t mind. Much.

“What’s everyone doing out here?” Percy said, scanning the crowd. “I thought McGonagall wanted us to meet in the Great Hall.”

“She did,” Katie said quietly. “I think the kids are afraid of the castle.”

“Bloody hell,” Percy muttered, taking a closer look.

At first glance, it seemed typical—clumps of teenagers chatting with one another, breaking off and reforming like the changing patterns in a kaleidoscope. But they stood unnaturally close to each other, some of the younger girls were holding hands, and lots of sideways glances were thrown over shoulders towards the gaping Entrance Hall.

A tall, dark-haired girl in cat-eye glasses climbed the steps, cast a Sonorus, and announced it was time to go inside.

“Don’t worry. The Entrance Hall is still a bit of a mess, but the Great Hall is fully restored,” she said with a smile.

The pupils followed her readily—a prefect, Percy surmised, and possibly a member of Dumbledore’s Army as well.

Inside the Great Hall, which was indeed restored to normal with the enchanted ceiling mirroring the sunny sky outside and the fireplaces dissipating the morning chill, only two tables were set up, offset so they were in neither the Ravenclaws’ nor Hufflepuffs’ usual places. The kids filed in and sat down without being told, waiting quietly for instructions.
Definitely not normal.

Percy hung back with the other tutors, seeing several familiar faces of people who had been both ahead of and behind him during his time at Hogwarts, not to mention—Ginny would flip!—Gwenog Jones, standing near the doors with a group of witches and wizards Percy recognized from the sports pages, including some of Oliver’s teammates.

Oliver elbowed him in the side. “Look who it is,” he hissed.

Percy followed his line of sight, saw a familiar mane of blue-black curls, and his heart rate doubled.

Penelope Clearwater had survived the war.

Percy didn’t realize he was moving towards her until he felt a hand fist in the back of his robes. He glanced over his shoulder and scowled. Honestly, sometimes Bill really let being the oldest go to his head. Bill looked pointedly at Professor McGonagall and back again. Percy made a face and stepped back beside Oliver and Katie.

He would wait until McGonagall was done speaking, but no way was he waiting an entire morning to speak to his ex-girlfriend.

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In the chaos of shuffling pupils as fifth- and seventh-years separated by level and lesson as directed, Percy caught up with Penny and laid a hand on her arm.

“Penny?”

She turned, and her beautiful blue eyes lit up. “Percy!”

She reached up for a hug and he obliged, happy to hold her and reassure himself she was all right.

“I’m so, so sorry about Fred,” she said gently when they let go. “How are you doing?”

He swallowed. “Okay. Thanks.” He kept thinking it would get easier, that he’d find a more graceful way to accept people’s condolences, or he’d get used to it instead of the other’s sympathy feeling like a stake to the heart.

“And George?”

“Not so okay.” Percy gave a wan smile.

“Yes, of course.”

“So, where have you been? I—” He felt the back of his neck start to prickle and hesitated, not wanting to give the wrong impression.

Oh, to hell with it. Penelope Clearwater was his first love, his first lover. Of course he cared whether she lived or died.

“I watched for news of you but couldn’t find out anything.”

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it?” She stepped out of the way of one of their fellow tutors and pulled Percy out of the aisle. “I was in Canada. The whole family. I did my last year of Healer training there.”
“You graduated? That’s fantastic! Congratulations!”

Her toothy smile had always made Percy smile back. “Cheers,” she said. “I saw the advert McGonagall put in the *Prophet* and was relieved. It feels good to be doing something to help.”

“The kids are lu—”

“Mr. Weasley, I realize it has been some years since you and Miss Clearwater courted in this very hall, but surely you can wait a few more hours before resuming the ritual?”

As a ripple of laughter came from the pupils within earshot, Percy turned to see McGonagall peering at him over her square spectacles.

“Yes, Professor,” he muttered.

“Your group is waiting for you in the middle of the second table, if you please,” McGonagall said. “We’ll break at 10:30.”

“Yes, Professor.”

Percy dumped his rucksack in the center of the table and sat down in the empty space that had been left for him.

“Is she your girlfriend?”

“McGonagall? No, she’s not my type.”

A mixture of rolled eyes and chuckles.

“No, not McGonagall, the pretty one. The one you were talking to.”

“She used to be,” Percy said, digging for his list of who was revising for what. “Not anymore.”

“Why not?” The speaker was a fresh-faced Ravenclaw, complete with wide eyes and freckles.

Percy was pleased to discover the same look that shut up nosy little sisters worked on other nosy brats as well.

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Hermione opened the door to her parents’ flat and kissed Ron hello.

Ron returned the kiss, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a manila envelope. “It came.”

She gasped and snatched the envelope from his hand, opening it even as she walked down the hall to join her parents in the kitchen.

“Mum, Dad, Ron has his passport!”

Mrs. Granger turned at once. “Oh, good! I was getting worried.”

Hermione waved the burgundy booklet. “Now we can buy plane tickets,” she said.

“There’s a letter too,” Ron said.

“There is?” Hermione blew into the envelope to open it, then reached inside. “Why didn’t you tell me?”
“I just got here,” Ron said, amused at her excitement.

Mrs. Granger went to the bookcase and pulled out the pocket folder Ron recognized as the one Hermione had made for her parents’ documents. “Let me get my diary.”

She and Hermione sat down side-by-side at the dining room table, which was soon covered in papers, both official and non.

“Have a seat, Ron,” Mr. Granger said, waving his spatula at one of the stools at the island. “We might as well eat—they’re going to be a while.”

Hermione lay in the curve of Ron’s arm, one hand on the warm skin of his chest and her bare legs tangled with his.

“We’re not going to have many more mornings like this,” Ron said.

She sighed, watching his right nipple tighten in the wash of her breath. “I know. Three weeks, probably. And a lot of those will be tied up helping Mum and Dad make arrangements.”

His hand closed around her shoulder and squeezed. “It’s been incredible, this time with just the two of us. Finally.”

“Mm-hmm.” She nestled her head more comfortably against him and closed her eyes.

“It will be our last chance to be alone together for a while. Since you’ll be living with your parents and then leaving for Hogwarts.”

And you’re not, Hermione thought, but all she said was, “Mm-hmm.” Why did Ron keep talking about this? She wanted to savor the time they had left, not mourn its passing.

“So … I was thinking….” Ron fiddled with the strap of her cami. “Maybe we should take advantage of it.”

Hermione turned to face him, propping her chin on his chest. Ron winced and slid his hand underneath the point of her chin.

“We are taking advantage. We’re taking advantage right now,” Hermione said. She sat up on one elbow. “Unless….”

Ron raised an eyebrow.

“You want to have sex?”

“Only if you do,” he said quickly. “And if you don’t, that’s okay, I just—” He swallowed. “I don’t know when we’ll have another chance. After this, I mean. After Australia. It doesn’t have to be today.”

“What’s wrong with today?”

It wasn’t like the thought hadn’t occurred to her. Time, privacy, space, comfort … they had everything they needed right here in Ron’s hotel room. All right, it wasn’t the most romantic setting, but it was considerably better than the treehouse. Or—Hermione suppressed a shudder—Ron’s room, with its bright orange decorations, Chudley Cannons posters, and Pig fluttering about.
“N-nothing,” Ron stammered. “I just don’t want you to feel rushed, or pressured, or anything like that.”

“I don’t.”

“Okay then.”

“Okay.”

They stared at each other for a moment, then broke into laughter.

“You’re mental,” Ron said, pulling her down with a hand on the back of her neck.

“And you love me for it.” Hermione’s mouth hovered over his, their eyes locked.

“I do,” he whispered. “I really, really do.”

It was not a gentle kiss; coming on the heels of their regular pre-lunch snogging session, emotions and hormones were still running high. Ron slid his hand over the curve of her hip, under the hem of her cami and on up her back. Hermione broke the kiss and sat up, crossing her arms in front of her to pull the snug garment up and over her head. He eased it away from her face and down her arms, then tossed it aside. Hermione would have laid down again (the better to hide herself) but he stopped her.

“No, let me look at you.” He trailed the back of his fingers from her neck, down between her breasts and onto her stomach. “You’re so beautiful.”

Hermione swallowed, goosebumps rising in the wake of his touch. “They’re small.” And ghastly white contrasted against the golden brown of her arms, shoulders, and chest, courtesy of the Australian sun.

“No, they’re not.” Ron shifted, covering her breast with one large hand. “You’ve always had curves, now more than ever.”

“That’s not true.” Somewhere in the back of her mind, Hermione knew she was being unreasonable, but she couldn’t help it. Her need for precision and accuracy, combined with her nerves, was causing her to shift the focus away from what was really happening between them. “My bras are a little loose. I lost weight this year.”

“You know what I meant.”

Ron had been touching her this whole time, smooth, sweeping circles around the tip but not over it, and Hermione leaned forward to kiss him again. He lay back and pulled her on top of him, chest to chest, and she felt his erection pressing into her stomach. She squirmed, enjoying the sensation of his chest hair against her nipples, and in a blink she was flat on her back.

She gasped against his mouth, surprised. He was big, filling her field of vision—not frightening, just … male. Taller than she—his back was hunched to kiss her neck, and her toes pressed into his calves—and wider, despite the leanness of his frame. Hermione was surrounded by Ron; his scent, his skin, his strength. His hair, trimmed after the Battle but still long and shaggy, brushed against her face and she inhaled a deep breath, thinking of her Amortentia smell. But Ron didn’t stop kissing at the base of her neck, or her collarbone. He continued with soft, open-mouthed kisses, right over the mound of her breast and onto the tip.

Hermione gave a long, low moan. Her breasts ached with fullness, her nipples drawn tight and tingling, and as Ron suckled one into his mouth, laying it with his tongue, she arched her back,
increasing the pressure. She could feel warmth being drawn from deep in her chest through her breast and spreading downward, low in her belly. He began moving to the other side, the same soft kisses down one curve, lingering a moment over her breastbone, and up the other, the same wet pressure and gentle warmth. Hermione grabbed the back of his head, holding him against her even as she spread her legs and gripped his bum with her free hand. Ron broke away from her with a curse as his groin settled against hers.

“Off,” she demanded, sliding both hands inside his pants and pushing them down as far as she could reach … which wasn’t far enough.

He rolled away from her and finished the job, then settled against her again, cupping her face in both hands and kissing her deeply. Hermione stroked the length of his body, all naked skin and muscle from shoulder to bum to thigh. She arched against him and suddenly realized she was still wearing her knickers.

“How?”

“Yes,” she gasped. She didn’t care what the question was, the answer was yes, a thousand times yes.

“I think you should do the spell now.”

“What?” She blinked, shifting her focus from the removal of her underwear. It sounded important….

“The spell,” Ron repeated, stretching a long arm out for her handbag on the nightstand. “We need —”

“Oh, that.” With an extra wiggle, her knickers cleared her knees and she worked them the rest of the way off with her feet. “I already did it.”

He stared down at her. “You did? When?”

“Um…” Hermione felt her face flush. “Before I left.”

Ron’s mouth dropped open. “But—we hadn’t—we hadn’t decided anything yet.”

She shrugged. “I’ve been doing it every day for a while now. Just in case.”

A slow smile spread over his face. “You’re bloody brilliant, you are.” A hard kiss. “In that case….”

He stroked the newly exposed skin of her hip, his thumb tracing the join of her thigh, almost ticklish. “I’d like to make you come first.”

She flushed deeper, remembering the handful of times she’d climaxed during the last three weeks, since that first spontaneous decision. “Okay,” she said, knowing it wouldn’t happen during the sex itself.

Ron adjusted their position, lying on his side beside her and sliding his left arm under her neck to wrap around her side, snuggling her against him even as she lay on her back. Feeling secure and treasured, Hermione reached up and kissed him, taking her time, both of them breathless when they finally broke for air.

“You’re sure?”

She nodded and drew her left foot up, letting her knee fall out into a passé. Ron’s long fingers encompassed her thigh as he ran his hand from the inside of her knee, slowly up her leg, and cupped her mound. Hermione blew out a shaky breath.
“Okay?”

She nodded.

One finger stroked the seam of her labia, gently, feather-light, before increasing the pressure and slipping in between. His teeth closed over her earlobe, and he murmured, “I love the way you feel.”

Hermione shivered, even as a second finger joined the first, sliding easily up and down. She turned her face for a kiss, hyper-aware of what it suggested when his hand was there. His brushed his thumb back and forth at the very apex of her legs, and she broke the kiss with a sharp gasp, falling back on the pillow. His thumb traced in hypnotic circles, firmer than his previous touch, and Hermione lifted her hips to increase the pressure still.

“How?” Ron said, their faces pressed close together. “There’s no rush. We have all day.”

He drew the vowels out, and the idea of lying here, in bed with Ron, while he touched her like this all day…. Hermione moaned, lifting higher into his touch. It still felt strange, giving in to her body’s cues, expressing her sexuality so obviously, but a lot of the awkward firsts were over, and he expressly said he wanted to make her come, and they were going to—

She cried out.

Ron had slid two fingers inside her, something he’d never done at once, and after her breathy, “yes,” moved deeper still. Hermione arched her back and groaned, shifting her weight to press down harder, brain overloaded with sensation. It was foreign and intrusive and the pressure was deliciously sweet, and she rode Ron’s hand for some minutes, feeling the tension gather and coil in her pelvis, her lower back, her groin, an ache she wanted to both draw out but also end. Ron planted little kisses everywhere, her face, her jaw, her neck, and as the pleasure heightened towards an intense peak, her body arching and pushing against his touch of its own accord, not requiring any thought, Hermione scrambled for Ron’s free hand at her side, needing something to hold on to, to anchor herself.

“Ron—”

“It’s all right,” he soothed, fingers twisting, sliding, pressing deep against her inner walls. “Just a minute more.”

Hermione took a stuttering breath and nodded. It felt so good, like nothing else she’d ever experienced, and she wasn’t thinking about what she looked or sounded like anymore, wasn’t thinking about the “right” thing to do, and it was magical, freeing, like floating underwater, but it was scary too, not being in control of her own reactions, overwhelming and intense and—

“Shh, you’re thinking too hard.” Ron’s voice had a trace of humor, and Hermione opened her eyes when had she closed them?—to find his were barely blue, pupils wide and dark, and even through the haze of sensation, the idea that Ron was aroused just by touching her, by watching her…. Hot little tingles raced up her spine, and Hermione gripped his hand harder.

“Please, Ron!”

He’d been holding the rest of his fingers away from her, but now he lowered his thumb to rub alongside her clitoris, brushing against it with a firm, steady rhythm that matched that of his hand inside her.

“Oh, Merlin, I—” She was going to come. She’d only experienced it a few times, but the prequel was unmistakable and instantly recognizable. “Yes, there, that, please—”
The pressure increased, centered, and Hermione moaned as the pleasure burst outward in a series of spasms, starting deep within. She trembled with the sudden release, her muscles involuntarily tightening against Ron’s hand when he pulled away from her.

“Mmmm.” She sighed, the delicious warmth and relaxation enveloping her whole being.

“Hermione?”

She met his eyes and smiled, bringing one hand up to cup his face as she kissed him. “Come here.”

She felt his hand move on the sheet between her thighs, then he shifted over her, bracing one hand beside her shoulder as he guided himself with the other. It took a moment to find the right angle, and then they both gasped.

“Hermione,” Ron panted.

“It’s all right.” Well, sort of. He was considerably bigger than his fingers, even two of them, and her opening stung with the stretch. But behind the sting was a deeper stretch, a greater pressure that instinctively told her it would be worth it to get past the mild pain. She shifted, bending both knees so her hips opened wide, and that helped.

“Oh, okay,” she said, wrapping her arms around his back.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, leaning down to kiss her as he pushed forward.

Hermione cried out against his mouth, her fingernails digging into his skin. Now that hurt, a sharp burn almost frightening in its visceral location.

“I’m sorry, sorry, sorry—”

She shook her head. “No, it’s all right. It can’t be helped. Just—don’t move yet, please.”

His forehead dropped to hers, eyes closed as he breathed deeply. She did the same, and after a moment, felt Ron’s hand run over her shoulder onto one breast. She hummed, welcoming the distraction, the pinch and gentle tug of her nipple changing her tone in a way that had Ron laughing into her neck.

“Better?”

“Yessss.”

Her sigh turned into a hiss as he shifted, pulling out and sliding into her again, past her torn hymen, and this was … okay. Somewhat uncomfortable, but completely tolerable. Hermione relaxed into the mattress, enjoying the sight of Ron propped over her, the muscles flexing in his chest and arms. He withdrew again, and the friction began shifting from pain to pleasure, her nervous system starting to process other sensations, like the weight of his body and the warmth of his thighs between hers. This might be more than okay, Hermione thought as the motion continued, Ron pressing deeper still, deeper than his hand, making her incredibly aware of her body in a way she’d never felt before. It made her feel intensely feminine and sexy, and she let her hips rise to meet his. His breathing was short and fast, and she could feel the tension in his back as he kept his movements gentle. Hermione stroked his back and buttocks, feeling them clench and release with every thrust, the soft grunt he made whenever their bodies came together.

“Hermione—Godric, I—”
His rhythm changed, faster and erratic. Hermione gripped him tighter with her legs and arms as he shuddered and came with a rough groan.

Ron rolled to the side, pulling her to face him. “I love you.”

She smiled. “I love you.”

He brushed her hair away from her face. “Are you okay?”

“Mm-hmm.”

A soft kiss, then two.

“Wait, where are you going?” Hermione asked when he sat up.

“Just to the loo.” He leaned forward and kissed her again. “I’ll be right back.”

Hermione heard a cupboard door open and close, water running, and Ron reappeared with a wet flannel. He sat on the edge of the bed beside her, slid his hand under the covers, and reached for her leg. Hermione flushed and resisted, keeping her knees close together. He raised one eyebrow but didn’t protest, leaving the flannel draped across her thigh and walking around to his side of the bed. Then, before she could protest, he put one arm under her shoulders and one under her knees and pulled a squeaking Hermione over to a fresh section of sheet. Ron slid into the small space that remained between her and the edge, reaching for the flannel again.

“Let me. Please?” His hand was heavy on her thigh and the flannel was soothingly warm.

Still flushed—somehow this seemed even more intimate than what they’d just done—Hermione consented without a word, trying not to wince at his careful cleaning. When he was done, he pitched the flannel over his shoulder into the open bathroom doorway.

“I need to see for this part, I’m sorry.”

“What?”

“Healing charm.”

“No, it’s fine, really—you don’t have to do that—”

But he ignored her protest, gathering the sheet in one hand and drawing it down her body, then reached back onto the nightstand for his wand. There was a pleasant tingling coolness, then … nothing. No soreness, no ache, just the warm relaxation of satisfaction.

Hermione stared. “How—”

Ron smirked, setting his wand aside and gathering her into his arms more comfortably before reaching down and pulling the covers up over them both. “Five older brothers ought to be good for something.”
Jean saw the bus pull away from the curb as Hugh turned into the car park. “Hermione and Ron are here,” she said, watching the two familiar figures—one really, since they had their arms round each other, Hermione leaning into Ron as he shortened his stride to walk in step with her.

“Hmm.”

She turned back to her husband. “Honestly, Hugh, it’s been almost two months. You should be used to the idea by now.”

“What do you think they’re doing together all day? Having sex, that’s what.”

“Hermione says not,” Jean said, bending forward to pick up her leather bag from beside her feet as Hugh pulled into their spot and shut off the engine.

“When was this?”

She paused, one hand on the open door handle. “Two weeks ago,” she admitted.

Hugh gave her a look, then got out of the car. Jean followed, closing her door and slinging her bag over her shoulder as he set the lock.

“She’s eighteen,” Jean said, “obviously in love, in a committed relationship with a boy who genuinely seems to care about her, and taking precautions. What were you doing the summer you were eighteen?”

“Living it up on the Mediterranean coast with no thought of the fathers of the girls I was seeing.”

“See? I was waiting tables in Brighton by day and skinny-dipping with a twenty-four-year old tattoo artist with a motorbike and a pot habit. Trust me, it could definitely be worse.”

Hugh gave her the same scowl he always did whenever she mentioned any of her previous boyfriends, but Jean ignored it in favor of smiling at her daughter and Ron as the couples approached the lift from different directions.

“Hello, love. How was your day?” To her surprise, Hermione blushed bright red and shot a quick look up at Ron, who dropped her a wink.

“Oh, god.”

Hugh stabbed the up button.

“Good,” Hermione answered. “Did anyone throw up on you today?”

It was an old script from Hermione’s childhood, when one of her preschool classmates had returned to class after his own dentist appointment and announced he threw up everywhere, and Jean latched
onto it gratefully.

“No one even spit on me,” she said with forced cheer. “Hugh had twins though, didn’t you?” She had heard them screaming from the reception area.

“I’m about to,” he muttered under his breath, obviously having picked up on the same clues she had.

The lift chimed its arrival, and Jean stepped on his foot as they entered.

The silence was painfully awkward as the doors closed and they waited what seemed a long time, until Ron realized no one had pressed the “one” button and did it himself. The lift jerked into motion.

“What’s for dinner, Daddy?” Hermione asked. She had unglued herself from Ron upon getting in the lift, and now took Hugh’s arm with a smile.

He didn’t look down at her. “Ask your mother. She seems to know everything.”

Hermione gave him a confused look before turning it on her mum. Jean frowned at her husband —don’t bring Hermione into this—before saying, “What about Indian?”

“That sounds great!” Ron said.

Jean tried not to think about how he’d worked up an appetite.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “All food sounds great to you.”

Hugh held the doors for them, and Hermione and Ron followed her down the hallway, then stepped aside for him to unlock the door.

“Hermione, will you order for us, please?”

“Of course, Daddy.”

He followed Jean down the hall to their bedroom.

“I’m sorry,” he said as soon as the door closed. “That was a cheap shot.”

“Yes, it was,” Jean said, setting her bag on the bed and kicking off her heels.

“It’s just hard to trust Hermione’s judgement after….”

A complete and total betrayal.

She softened. “I know,” she said, turning to put her arms around his neck. “But you need to separate how you feel about her relationship with Ron from how you feel about her.”

He sighed, resting his forehead against hers. “It’s just easier to be mad at her about that than it is … the other thing.”

“You shouldn’t be mad at her about Ron at all. She hasn’t broken any house rules.”

“Yet,” Hugh said darkly.

“What kind of girls did you date before me, anyway?”

0000
Ron sat beside Hermione at the Grangers’ dining table, eating triple helpings of everything (he had
skipped lunch today—not that he was complaining!) and trying to keep the shit-eating grin off his
face. Their new intimacy was affecting Hermione too; she ate politely enough (and in abundance),
but she’d been unusually reluctant to let go of him since they’d finally got out of bed mid-afternoon.
They hadn’t done more than hold hands or exchange a chaste peck in front of her parents all
summer, but she’d stayed in his embrace even when they heard her parents approaching from the car
park, and moved her chair closer to his before she sat down, and even now was running her bare foot
over his and around his ankle. Ron kept a close eye on her left hand as he tore off another piece of
naan. He didn’t think she would be that bold, but she’d surprised him before.

He caught her eye for the hundredth time since they’d left the hotel. Her lips curved and her golden-
brown eyes lit up, and he found himself smiling back at her without thinking about it.

“I thought steaks tomorrow night,” Mr. Granger said. “Out on the deck, enjoy this fine weather.”

“That sounds—” Hermione began.

“Not tomorrow night, sir. I’m taking Hermione out.”

She turned to him. “You are?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“When were you going to tell me?”

Ron rolled his eyes. “Not everything has to be planned nine months in advance, Hermione.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but her mother interrupted.

“Is there something special happening in nine months we should be aware of?”

“What?”

“No!” Hermione all but shouted. “Nothing special about nine months at all, right, Ron?”

He stared at her a moment, confused by her adamant attitude, until the significance of the number
clicked. Why nine? Out of all the numbers, why did I have to pick that one?

“No, not at all. Just a figure of speech.” He gave her parents his best “nothing to see here” smile.

Hermione nodded vigorously. Ron gave her leg a gentle kick. She was brilliant and all, but the
world’s worst liar. Give him Harry as co-conspirator any day.

“Hermione used to set up revising schedules for me and Harry months before exams.”

“Six weeks, Ron.” She huffed. “Don’t exaggerate.”

He smirked, pretty sure he could get away with a lot more than exaggerating today. She turned away
and returned her attention to her plate, but not before Ron saw her hide a smile.

0000
Oliver Wood flopped onto the worn-out sofa in Percy’s new bedroom. “Tell me again why you’re living in a Muggle neighborhood?”

Percy moved a lamp from the floor to the top of the chest of drawers, the only other piece of furniture in the room, and joined him. “It’s what was available on short notice.”

Oliver turned his head, still resting against the back of the sofa. Even though they’d moved everything by hand, he couldn’t be that tired; the Quidditch season had just ended, and Oliver was muscly enough Percy would disappear behind him. Probably two of me, Percy thought with a resigned sigh.

“And why the short notice, again? I thought things were going well with your family.”

Percy shrugged. “Bill threw me out.”

Oliver laughed. “Bill doesn’t live there anymore.”

Percy used his wand to summon the lunch his sister had packed for them. “Doesn’t stop him being obnoxious.”

“No, I reckon not.” Oliver accepted a flask of pumpkin juice with a smirk—what, are we firsties again?—and bit into a sandwich without bothering to see what lay between the bread.

“How is it with your family?”

Percy took his time examining his corned beef sandwich. “Okay. A little awkward sometimes, but—” Another shrug.

Oliver nodded and, like a true mate, changed the subject. “Listen, there’s something I want to ask you.”

Percy raised one eyebrow.

Oliver cleared his throat and sat up. “Katie and I—we’re getting married, and—”

Percy choked. “What!”

Oliver’s expression shifted into the stubborn look Percy associated with being forced outside to watch Quidditch. “I’ve asked Katie to marry me, and she said yes.”

“Well, of course she said yes, you bloody tosser, but—why now? Isn’t it a bit—oh.” Percy broke off as color crept into his friend’s face, even as he smiled widely.

“Aye, she’s pregnant. We’re going to have a baby!”

Percy set his pumpkin juice and sandwich down with minimal care and thumped his obviously-thrilled friend in the shoulder. “Ollie, that’s brilliant! Congratulations!”

“Cheers. We’re keeping it quiet for now, until after the wedding. So don’t tell anyone, all right?”

“Yes, of course. When’s the big day?”

“We haven’t completely decided yet. Katie wants to do it soon, before she starts to show, but whenever it is—will you be my best man?”

Percy stared at him for a moment, the shadow of Oliver’s two dead brothers hovering between them.
“Of course I would—but you should ask Alex.”

“Alex? But he’s just a kid.”

“He’s old enough. And he’s your brother,” Percy said, as if that settled the matter.

Oliver looked doubtful.

“What does a best man do, anyway?” Percy said. Even if he’d been at Bill’s wedding, the best man was always going to be Charlie.

“I dunno. Something about rings.”

“I’ll plan the stag night, and Alex can do the rest—all the actual wedding day stuff. All right? Come on, you know it would mean a lot to him.”

“Aye, it would, at that,” Oliver admitted.

Percy picked up his lunch and added the crowning touch. “And Katie will like it. I’ll even let you tell her it was your idea.”

0000

Ron led Hermione out of Town Hall Station towards the Darling Harbour waterfront, shortening his stride to make up for her slower pace in heels. There was something to be said for Muggle clothes, he thought, glancing down at her beside him. They certainly revealed more of a woman’s figure than robes. Hermione was wearing a slim dress in bright blue that skimmed her curves and ended at her knees. It was sleeveless, so she wore a—well, Ron didn’t know what to call it. Maybe a jumper, if you cut the front and bottom off so that it was all shoulders and sleeves. It was snug and soft and highlighted the graceful line of her collarbones, exposed above the neckline of the dress.

“This city is so beautiful at night,” she sighed.

He looked round. Everything was reflected in the dark water: the tall buildings of the central business district with their white and gold windows, the white and red signal lights on boats in the harbor, the softly glowing fairy lights in the trees along the pavement. He had tried to correct Hermione the first time she used that term, reminding her of all the Muggles around, only to have her laugh and explain that’s what Muggles called them too—they just ran on electricity or batteries instead of real fairies.

“I’m glad you think so since we’ll be out on the water.”

Hermione looked towards the wharf where he was leading her and gasped. “A dinner cruise? Really?”

“Really,” Ron said, drawn up short as she stopped, then tugged on the front of his shirt to bring his face down to hers. He savored the kiss, despite the stickiness of her lipstick.

“Thank you.”

“We’re not even there yet.”

“I don’t care,” Hermione said. “You planned this before yesterday, didn’t you?”

He nodded and they resumed walking.

Ron gave his name to the crewman at the ramp, and they boarded and walked up the narrow spiral
staircase, where they were shown to a table for two at the stern of the upper deck. The host seated Hermione, who thanked him, and Ron took his seat across from her, trying to ignore his nerves at the posh, unfamiliar atmosphere.

The sun was setting, casting a stream of golden light across the water, but the lights on the ship were dimmed, complimented by glowing candles at every table.

“This is so romantic,” Hermione said again, stroking the white tablecloth and leaning forward to smell the single rose that was the table’s centerpiece. “It’s beautiful.”


Hermione’s eyes welled with tears at his repetition of the words he’d said to her last summer before they left the Burrow. She reached across the table, and Ron enveloped her hands in his. So delicate, so fragile, yet they wielded such strength. She was full of contradictions, his Hermione.

“That’s not true,” she said. “I’ve always only ever wanted you, and that’s never going to change. You are more than a match for me, you always have been. Why do you think I always pushed you so hard? I wanted you to see it too.”

“Oh, that’s what that was about?” Ron said. He’d finally cottoned on during those long autumn weeks at Shell Cottage, but it had nearly been too late. “I always thought it was because you were a swotty know-it-all.”

“Well, that too.” She grinned. “How long does the cruise last?”

“Two hours, then they clear up for the next tour. Why?”

It was hard to tell, given the dim light of the room and her recently acquired tan, but Ron thought she was blushing.

“I just want to make sure we have time … for us.”

Definitely a blush.

“Before I have to go home.”

Her parents had asked her to be home by midnight, a restriction that Hermione chaffed at, but Ron had spoken up and agreed before she could voice her protest.

He toyed with her fingers, still laced with his. “We’ll have time.” He gave her hands a final squeeze, then dropped them as he saw their waiter approaching.

The ordered drinks and began reading the menus he left for them.

“I can’t believe I have a curfew,” Hermione grumbled. “Me, after everything we’ve done this year. Harry would die laughing.”

“The look on your face was funny,” Ron said, then switched tack at the look she gave him now. “We need to keep the peace, Hermione. It was an easy way to do so.”

“I suppose.” She sighed and closed her menu. “No, I know agreeing was the right thing to do. I just wish I had more time with you.”

Ron’s heart skipped. She’d never given him quite that look before. Suddenly two hours seemed like
“Here,” Ron said, pushing a sheet of paper and a pen towards Hermione. “You do it.”

It was the following Monday, and Ron and Hermione were seated at a table in the hotel restaurant, two cups of coffee at their elbows and a slew of papers between. Hermione and her parents had finalized the travel plans for their return to England over the weekend, and now they needed to notify Harry.

“I’ll write to Harry about the house. You do the rest,” Hermione said, digging another pen out of her beaded bag. Or more likely using a nonverbal Summoning Charm, since she barely put her hand in it.

Ron grimaced but picked up the pen and started to write. He was better at it than when they first arrived, but the weight of the pen still felt odd in his hand compared to a quill, and he kept lifting it every few words out of habit before remembering there wasn’t an ink pot to dip into.

Dear Harry,

Good news, mate—we’re coming home! The airplane arrives in London 18th July—it’s going to be a bloody long trip. Nearly twenty-six hours by plane, then a train from London to Exeter. Can you meet me at the train station? It’s too expensive to fly all the way home, and Hermione says I’ll be in no shape to Apparate. She says Muggle trains are just like magical ones, so I shouldn’t have any problems. She and her parents are going straight home from London (she’s working on instructions for you now about the house. Good luck with that) and she won’t be at the Burrow until your birthday. I’m supposed to tell you she’s really sorry, and misses you “dreadfully” but wants to spend as much time with her parents as possible. The counter charm worked perfectly (of course it did, it’s Hermione) and her parents are fine, but it’s been pretty tense, and she’s still hoping they can work things out before she leaves for Hogwarts in September.

Ron glanced up to make sure Hermione was still engrossed in her own letter, then continued.

It’s hard to watch her like this, almost like she’s a different person. More quiet (yes, Hermione!) and reserved, almost hesitant. I can see her brain turning all the time, watching everything she says and does, trying to figure out when to tell the truth and when to obfuscate (she insists it’s not lying—you know Hermione). Merlin, it makes me tired just watching her. I don’t know how she’s held up this long, except—it’s Hermione. She’s amazing.

Her parents are nice enough, even if her dad is suspicious, and I don’t think it’s only about magic (we can’t all worm our way into their affections years beforehand like a certain spectacled git). But it’s obvious they don’t know Hermione. Not really. But then, how could they? She’s spent almost all her holiday time with us since Christmas third year. So, yeah. Reversing the spell was the easy part.

Hermione continued writing without pause.

She’s still working on that bloody letter, mate—you’d better let Ginny read it to make sure you don’t miss anything. Say hello to the runt and give my love to the family. We’ll see you soon.

Ron

Ron swallowed down the wave of homesickness that washed over him at his sister’s name. Less than three weeks until he saw them again, but right now it felt like forever. He hoped Mum was doing better, and George was sober, and wondered if Percy was still living at home.
He wondered if anyone was placing flowers on Fred’s grave.
Feel loved, my readers, feel loved, for despite being wildly off schedule—again—I have taken nearly two hours to extract this chapter from Scrivener for iPad and manually html-edit it into readability ... while traveling in Scotland and Ireland! It is the second-to-last chap before we go on hiatus again, but it shouldn’t be too long as the bulk of the remainder of this fic is written and ready for beta.

Percy had just settled at the desk in his sitting room when the doorbell rang. Thinking someone had the wrong house, he stepped into the hall, where the outline of two men on the front steps was visible through the glass twin lites. Two very familiar outlines, especially when they stood side by side.

Percy opened the door, and Bill and Charlie came right in.

“You could have told me you lived in a Muggle neighborhood,” Bill complained, squeezing past the white wooden radiator cover. “We just scared the shit out of the little old lady two doors down.”

“I don’t—”

“I come bearing gifts,” Charlie said, holding up the cartons of mead he carried in both hands. “And Apparating was his idea.”

“I do have a fireplace, you know,” Percy said, following them past his closed bedroom door and into the sitting room.

“We weren’t sure if it was hooked up yet,” Bill said, flopping into the only upholstered chair in the room.

“You could have Floo-called,” Percy said mildly, enjoying the opportunity to needle his oldest brother. “Or checked with the Ministry. Or Mum, for that matter.”

Charlie set the mead down on the desk and sat in its chair, leaving Percy to conjure one for himself.

“Mum,” Charlie said. “We should have thought of that. No way Mum would have let ickle Percykkins out of the house without a way to stay in touch.”

“I have lived away from home before.”

It was beyond irritating to be called “ickle” anything when he had four—three—multiple—younger siblings. It wasn’t until Charlie pulled a bottle of mead out of the carton and tossed it to Percy that he noticed Charlie’s smirk. It was an old sore spot, and Charlie had pushed it just because he could.

He took a bottle for himself and pushed the carton to the end of the desk, towards Bill, who was paying considerably more attention to his chair than his brothers.

“This looks familiar,” he said, running his hands along the chenille arms of the tub chair. “Why does this look familiar?”
“Because it came from Auntie Muriel’s front parlor,” Percy said, taking a long drink. He’d forgotten how good Rosmerta’s brew was. He’d recognized the cartons as soon as Charlie had shown him. Either his brothers had made a detour to Hogsmeade, or Bill had planned this visit and placed an order.

“You always did get the best stuff from her,” Charlie said.

“Trust me, I paid for that chair,” Percy said. “Just not in galleons.”

“I bet.” Bill twisted off the lid of his own bottle. “So, if I walk into your kitchen am I going to find a table and chairs?”

“Shut up.”

“What’s this?” Charlie looked from one to the other of them.

“Percy here has been making his female guests eat breakfast standing over the kitchen sink,” Bill said.

“I have not.”

“Well, you told me you didn’t have a table in your old flat, so….”

“You’ve never heard of breakfast in bed?”

Bill raised his eyebrows. “If I walk into your bedroom, am I going to find a bed?”

Percy scowled. This flat wasn’t furnished, and he’d been making do with a transfiguration charm on his old sofa, the “housecooling” gift from Fred and George.

“Well done,” Charlie said, tipping his bottle in Bill’s direction.

“Cheers.”

“I didn’t say there hadn’t been anyone, just … no one important.”


“You still haven’t answered my question,” Bill said.

“Yes, there’s a table and four chairs,” Percy snapped. “Happy?”

“Very happy,” Bill said, taking a drink. “We can’t have you ruining the family reputation.”

“You did that when you got married,” Percy retorted.

“You haven’t talked to Fleur recently, have you?”


“He was at dinner Sunday,” Percy said.

“Eventually,” Bill said. “That’s the first one in, what, three weeks?”

He looked at Percy, who nodded.

“Something like that.”
Charlie raised one eyebrow. “Yeah? What about the shop?”

Bill shook his head. “I haven’t had a chance to stop by in a while.”

“Perce?”

Percy took a drink, suddenly wishing it were something stronger. “Last time I was at the shop, he jinxed me,” he said flatly. “Not wishing to repeat the experience, I haven’t been back. He doesn’t want me there.”

Charlie opened his mouth like he wanted to argue but only said, “How long are you going to let this go on?”

Percy felt heat climbing the back of his neck. “It’s not my fault! Wait, no—it is my fault, so I reckon he’ll stay pissed at me forever.”

“Percy—” Bill began.

“Shut up,” Percy muttered, draining his second bottle of mead and reaching for a third. “You know I’ve tried to talk to him, more than once. He won’t listen to me.”

“Still….” Charlie said.

“Oh, don’t give me that crap about being older and therefore responsible,” Percy snapped. “You bloody talk to him if you’re so worried.”

Godric, he hated when Bill and Charlie ganged up on him. It was like being five years old all over again.

“It would mean a lot to Mum,” Bill said quietly.

Percy gaped at the unfairness of this comment for a moment before crossing the room, putting his back to his brothers. He pushed his glasses up with one hand and pinched the bridge of his nose, hard.

“Just—don’t give up, okay?” Bill said.

“C’mon, Perce, sit down,” Charlie said. “I hear the tutoring’s going well.’’

“Who told you that?”

“I did.”

Percy dropped his hand and blew out a breath. Bloody meddling older brothers. He had missed his family because, why, again?

“Well then, you tell him how it’s going, if you know so much.”

Bill raised one eyebrow—a truly gruesome look now with his scars—but didn’t rise to the bait. “I know you’ve been spending time with Penelope Clearwater.”

Percy scowled. “It’s not what you think. She and I have been tutoring together, that’s all.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. She’s clever and patient, and I’m glad that someone I had lessons with for seven years
and dated for two of them is still alive, all right?"

Bill turned to look at Charlie, who blanked his expression as he avoided Bill’s eyes.


“I miss her too, Charlie.”

Charlie leaned his head back and closed his eyes, his arm by his side so the bottle of mead dangling from two fingers almost, but not quite, touched the floor. “I just thought she was safe, you know? When I heard she was pregnant … I thought she would be safe. Stay out of harm’s way for the baby’s sake.”

“She did, mostly. But—”

“Yeah. I know.”

Better to be the focus of his brothers’ ridicule than listen to this macabre discussion. “Well, you two are a barrel of laughs,” Percy said. “Thanks for stopping by, truly.”


“Truly I’m not going to feed you,” Percy retorted, getting up to explore the contents of his cupboard.

Bill and Charlie followed him into the kitchen.

“Like we’d want anything you cooked, anyway.”

Percy pulled out a package of chocolate biscuits—not homemade, but still, chocolate biscuits—and turned to find Charlie standing unnaturally close. Without conscious thought, he tossed the package to Bill, who lobbed it back in a high arc over Charlie’s head. Percy caught them easily in one hand, waited for Charlie to make a grab for them, then threw them back.

“This is not funny,” Charlie protested, standing between his two taller brothers with his hands on his hips as the biscuits sailed over his head for the third time.

“On the contrary,” Percy said, wincing as he felt a definite crunch beneath his fingers this time.

“We think it’s hilarious.”

“Oh, for—”

With both hands over his head in an attempt to catch the package without breaking any more biscuits, Percy was wide open as Charlie lunged, wrapping both arms round his middle and taking him to the floor with minimal effort. They rolled around for a minute, laughing like loons. Percy tried to get enough leverage to fling the biscuits back in Bill’s direction, but Charlie was pinning his upper arms to the floor, and as they kicked over a chair and Percy twisted away from it, he saw Bill was doubled over anyway, in no shape to catch anything … except maybe a stitch in his side. Knowing his defeat was inevitable, Percy brought one knee up to jab Charlie in the ribs and allowed the biscuits to be pried from his hand.

This, Percy thought, sitting on his kitchen floor breathless with laughter, this was why he’d missed his family.
Percy dumped his armful of books onto the near end of the far table in the Great Hall and took a seat. None of his pupils were here yet, which wasn’t particularly surprising since he was half an hour early. He had ten fifth years doing the usual required subjects, of which he was tutoring Potions, Transfiguration, Herbology, and Astronomy, as well as electives in Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, and Muggle Studies. They worked in double-lesson blocks, required lessons before break and electives after. It was good to have something to focus on, a legitimate reason to hole up in his flat after dinner and on weekends, brushing up on the content himself and planning review drills for the kids.

He had just cracked open *Advanced Potion-Making* to make sure he had all the ingredients for Aging Potion when Professor McGonagall entered the hall.

“Percy,” she said upon entering, changing direction to speak with him.

Percy stood. “Hi, Professor.”

“How is your family doing?”

“Oh, er … as well as can be expected, I think.” He pushed his glasses up with one finger, considering what to say. “Everyone’s back at work, although Charlie’s been visiting every fortnight or so. And I guess you know Ron and Hermione are in Australia with her parents?”

“Yes, someone mentioned that. What about your parents?”

“Mum and George are still struggling a bit, but Dad’s alright. Spends a lot of time out in his shed.” He gave a half-smile.

“And your sister?”

Percy grimaced. “She and Harry are inseparable.”

“Yes, I expect so,” McGonagall said, mouth twitching. “It’s good that Harry has someone, after everything that’s happened in the last year, especially with Ron and Hermione being so far away. Ginny too,” she added.

“I reckon so,” he said grudgingly. He wasn’t convinced Potter was worthy of the abundant attention—and favors—Ginny was doling out.

“And you, Percy? How are you?”

Percy looked down into the familiar face of his Head of House and suddenly had a large lump in his throat. He swallowed hard.

“I’m—” He cleared his throat. “I’m doing okay.” He looked away, towards the books and rolls of parchment he’d spread out on the table. “This helps.”

“Good,” McGonagall said in her usual brisk manner. “I thought I’d try to visit your mother this weekend. Would tomorrow afternoon be a convenient time to call?”

“I’m sure that would be fine. She’d like that. I’ll tell her, Professor. Thanks.”

McGonagall gave one of her rare smiles. “You’re very welcome, Percy.”

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Ginny’s voice carried from the kitchen to where the siblings were gathered in the sitting room. “Harry, it’s another letter from Ron and Hermione!”
Percy hoped they were coming home, and soon. Ron had left just days after Fred’s funeral and George needed him. He wouldn’t admit it, but he did.

Harry got up and returned shortly with a scroll of parchment, followed by Ginny with several plates of treacle tart on a tray. Percy took one before she set the tray on a side table and snagged pieces for herself and Harry. George, who was sprawled over half the sofa with a drink in one hand, didn’t move, even when Ginny wedged herself in what little space remained at his feet. With all the limited seating occupied, Harry sat down in the floor between Percy’s chair and the sofa.

“What does it say?” Ginny leaned forward, her dessert untouched on her lap. “Are they coming home?”

Percy wasn’t surprised by her enthusiasm. She and Ron had always been close, and instead of spending the last school year together as usual, Ron had been on the run. She’d hardly had any time with him before he left again, especially when you considered virtually all Ron’s free time was spent with Hermione (and Ginny’s with Harry).

Harry skimmed the parchment. “On the eighteenth—that’s this Saturday!”

“With Hermione’s parents?”

Harry nodded. “They’re all flying into London, then they’ll split up and take the train the rest of the way.”

“Hermione’s not coming here first?” Ginny said, her face falling.

She and Hermione had spent every summer together since her third year, and she’d missed the girl’s company throughout the school year as well. Really, it was hardly fair the way Ron had just taken off, depriving Ginny of both her best friends during what had to be the most difficult time of her life (as much as Percy’s two youngest siblings might protest that description of their relationship). Ron had offered no explanation other than wanting to help Hermione. Why exactly Muggle-born Hermione needed help traveling in the Muggle world, or her Muggle parents for that matter, was a topic not even Dad and Mum would discuss, although Percy felt sure they knew.

“Ron says the situation between her and her parents is pretty tense and she wants to spend as much time with them as possible before she goes back to Hogwarts. She’s planning to come for my birthday, though.” Harry’s smile was wide, and his hands shook slightly as he retied the scroll.

Ginny smiled at his excitement, handing him his plate and fork as he set the letter aside.

“Ron’s taking the train from London?” George said. “The Muggle train?”

“He’s been traveling in the Muggle world for two months. I’m sure he can manage,” Percy said. “It’s about time if you ask me. I don’t see why he needed to go with Hermione in the first place.”

Ginny gasped. George sat up.

“You did not just say that.”

Percy felt the weight of his stare but avoided meeting his eyes, collecting the last crumbs of crust by pressing his fork against the plate. “He should have been here, with us.” Surely everyone else thought the same. “To support the family.”

“What, like you did when Voldemort came back?”
Too late, Percy realized his mistake. He ignored the churning in his gut and set his empty plate on the tray with calm precision. “That was different. There was no proof, but this time—”

“I’m sitting right here, Percy,” Harry said through gritted teeth.

He looked down at Harry, having forgotten the implications of the young man’s presence, then adjusted his glasses. “But Ron left less than a week after Fred’s funeral!”

George dropped his half-eaten tart onto the tray with a clatter. “You have no right to criticize anyone in this family. Merlin, you always have been a pompous arse.”

“George,” Ginny said quietly.

But George was too drunk to pay attention to the mild rebuke, and Percy steeled himself for an all-too-accurate onslaught. That was the thing about the twins—they were rarely mean, but when they were, they were spot on.

“Always right, always perfect, never making a single mistake and never admitting one even when it stares you in the face! Ron was right in the thick of it the whole entire time, but you didn’t have the courage to come home even when you started working for the Order!”

Eyes stinging despite his efforts to maintain control, Percy said the one thing he’d been holding in all summer. “I tried to come home, but you didn’t want me. You threw Christmas dinner in my face!”

“Percy,” Ginny cried.

He ignored her, turning away from the group and blinking rapidly to keep the tears at bay.

“Hello! Where—what’s going on?”

Percy didn’t turn at the arrival of his oldest brother; in fact, no one moved or greeted him.

“What’s going on?” Bill repeated, stepping fully into the room.

“What are you doing here?” Ginny demanded.

“Fleur forgot her dish.”

“I’ll get it for you.”

“I don’t care about the bowl. I want to know what’s going on.”

“It’s nothing, right, boys? Come on, Bill.” Ginny pulled him towards the kitchen.

Without a word to anyone, Percy stood up and walked out the front door.
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Notes

I can be such a dingbat! I forgot to tell you guys I’m accepting prompts for my 50-followers Tumblr celebration. You don’t have to be following me to participate (although that would be lovely!). More info here: https://keeptheotherone.tumblr.com/post/166152829560/im-taking-prompts

Percy watched his sister disappear and the emerald-green flames die down, then turned back to his spotless kitchen. Ginny had been waiting in his flat when he arrived home from work and stayed for dinner, sharing Percy’s chow mein and egg rolls as well as the bowl of parsnips she had brought as a peace offering. It was the first time he’d eaten parsnips since that Christmas two years ago, when his siblings had thrown them in his face. She had argued he shouldn’t have expected to be welcomed with Scrimgeour in tow, and Percy explained it hadn’t been his choice.

He wasn’t sure Ginny believed him, but she’d forgiven him; she’d stayed to help wash up and chatted all the while, giving him more news about his parents, Ron, and Charlie than he’d had from the sources themselves and making him promise to come to dinner on Friday. He and Ginny had always got along, especially when it was just the two of them. Too young to be anything but a nuisance to Bill and Charlie, and often left out by the twins and even Ron when he wanted Fred and George’s approval, Ginny would seek out Percy in whatever quiet corner he’d found and ask him to read to her. She would listen to anything, whether it was articles from the Daily Prophet, his Transfiguration or Arithmancy texts, Beedle the Bard, or the latest novel for Muggle Studies. Now it was Percy’s turn to listen as she went on about N.E.W.T. lessons, Quidditch, and—yes, Harry.

Percy twisted the top off a butterbeer as he walked into his sitting room. He still remembered a nightdress-clad sprite scurrying up the stairs the first time Harry was at the Burrow, gasping her dismay as she locked herself in the bathroom. Oh, well, he thought as he dropped into Auntie Muriel’s chair. That memory will come in handy some day.

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Ron crept forward in line as Mr. and Mrs. Granger pulled their luggage another six inches and Hermione gave her wheeled case a kick to keep up with them. They were waiting to check in at the Qantas airline desk for their flights to London. Hermione had prepped him on the process and security screening, but Ron was much more worried about how the plane would stay in the air than he was about someone having a knife on board. Hermione had insisted they needed luggage to “check” to avoid suspicion on an international flight, so in addition to the many boxes the Grangers had shipped back to England, Ron had a duffle bag with the last of the sheets and towels, Mr. Granger’s music collection, and Ron’s own clothes and personal items. His old rucksack from their trip contained three comics, his toothbrush, a change of pants and a clean t-shirt, and his brand new virtual pet, or as Ron liked to call it, POAK (short for “pet on a keychain”).

The airport was big, loud, and crowded; even more than King’s Cross Station, it reminded Ron just how many more Muggles there were in the world compared to wizards. Over the last two months he’d become comfortable moving around Wahroonga; working the electricity and telly in the hotel, learning the bus system, ordering in restaurants, finding and paying for sundries in Muggle shops.
Hermione had even taken him to the public library several times, which other than the lack of self-shelving books, worked just like the one at Hogwarts (it had taken him a few seconds to recognize the problem the first time he’d held up a book he didn’t want, waiting for it to float back into place).

This was different. Ron watched closely as people went up to the counter in groups with their traveling companions, handing over their tickets and identification. He could see the uniformed employees asking questions but wasn’t close enough yet to hear what they were. He hoped none of their questions would be directed towards him.

“Hermione?”

“Hmm?” She turned from the sign she was reading. SYDNEY PASSENGERS ARE ADVISED ALL ITEMS ARE SUBJECT TO SECURITY SCREENING. KEEP YOUR POSSESSIONS WITH YOU AT ALL TIMES. DO NOT LEAVE UNATTENDED ITEMS IN TERMINAL.

“Not everyone has one of these little books.” He held up the ticket and ID in his left hand.

“Passports,” she reminded him. “That’s because you don’t need one if you’re flying within the country, only internationally.”

“Oh. What are they using then?”

“Probably a driving license,” she said. “You’ve seen Mum’s and Dad’s.”

He had. They had been in the folder of papers Hermione brought with her. Mr. and Mrs. Granger had shredded, then burned, all the documents associated with Wendell and Monica Wilkins and were traveling under their real names and original passports.

The queue moved steadily, and finally Ron followed Hermione and her mother as Mr. Granger approached the young woman down the counter who had given him a wave. As she had them place their luggage one at a time on a low metal shelf beside her, then wrapped a tag around one of the handles, Ron realized it was a scale. It didn’t matter for Apparition or Portkeys, but he supposed in the Muggle world, too much weight must make it difficult to fly. He ignored his unease at this idea and watched as she inspected each of their passports and tickets, returning the passports with what she called a “boarding pass” and claim ticket for their luggage, and told them which gate they would be departing from.

Ron waited until they’d collected their smaller bags—hand luggage, that’s what Hermione called them—and stepped away from the counter before asking, “Is a gate like a train platform?”

“Sort of,” Hermione said, stepping onto a moving stairway quite like the one that lead to Dumbledore’s office, but this one just went up at an angle instead of moving in circles. “They’ll use a tunnel called a jetway to connect a door in the wall of the airport to the door of the plane, and that’s how we’ll board.”

Ron nodded, stepping off the moving stairway with a lurch (unlike Dumbledore’s, it did not stop when you reached the top), and followed the Grangers into an even larger hall, with people bustling about in all directions. Off to one side was a semi-circle with multiple restaurants and an open area filled with tables and chairs.

Mrs. Granger glanced at her watch. “We have plenty of time,” she said. “Who wants something to eat?”

“Ron does,” Hermione said without looking at him.
Mrs. Granger smiled. “It’s all right, Ron, I could use a snack too. Maybe a scone and a cuppa?”

“I’ll get it,” he volunteered.

It might be the last thing he knew how to do all day.

More than an hour later found Ron lifting Hermione’s bag into the overhead cupboard and taking his seat beside her. The plane was huge, much bigger than he had expected, with three seats on each side and a larger section in the middle, where he, Hermione, and her parents were seated. Ron pushed his bum all the way back in the seat, but it was no use—even bent at the knee, his legs filled the space between his seat and the back of the seat in front of him. Hermione took notice of his predicament and winced.

“I’m sorry, I forgot how tall you are,” she said, giving his leg a pat. “Once everyone boards, you can stretch out in the aisle a bit. You’ll just have to watch for the serving cart.”

Ron eyed the narrow aisle, barely wider than the bags being dragged down it, and doubted it would help much.

“How much longer?”

“A few more minutes,” Hermione said, picking up the book she’d taken out of her bag before giving it to Ron to store overhead. “They have to give everyone time to board and get seated, and then get clearance from the tower.”

“What tower?” he asked. Anything to keep from thinking about being suspended in the air in a metal tube without magic. A very large, very heavy metal tube over a very large, very deep ocean. For a very long time.

“Air traffic control,” Hermione said absently, already turning pages. “They tell the pilots who can land and take off and from which runway and stuff so none of the planes run into each other.”

Great. He hadn’t even considered that—without roads and stoplights, how did the planes avoid accidents?

Ron continued to watch his fellow passengers, and it wasn’t long until everyone was seated and the plane began to move. Two women—

“What are they called again?” he said, nodding at the young women standing in each aisle as a voice from overhead asked all the passengers to please direct their attention to the front of the cabin for important safety information.

“Stewardesses,” Hermione said without looking up. “Or flight attendants, to use the gender-neutral term.”

Ron checked his seat belt for the umpteenth time and did as instructed. It was a couple minutes before he realized Hermione—and her parents—were still reading, rather than paying attention to the life preserver demonstration in front of them. He elbowed her, hard.

“Ow! What—I already know what they’re saying, Ron,” she said. “I’ve flown several times before.”

Considering she had never accepted any of Ron’s excuses for not paying attention to their Hogwarts
professors, and this was a matter much more serious than revising, he gave Hermione his best “I’m the prefect, that’s why” look and waited until she marked her place with one finger and faced forward.

Less reassured than ever as the pilot announced, “Flight attendants, please prepare for departure” (he had never considered a loss of cabin pressure, much less what its consequences would be), Ron reached over and took Hermione’s hand. She smiled at him and squeezed back. The engines revved, he was pressed back into his seat, and a moment later he felt the familiar fluttering in his stomach of kicking off on a broomstick. He looked to his left, past the woman with two small children, and saw the ground falling away out the tiny window.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it,” Hermione confirmed, still smiling. “We’re flying.”

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“Tell me again,” Hermione demanded.

Swaying with fatigue, Ron glared down at her. He’d lost count of the number of times she’d made him repeat the directions since they landed in London an hour before. He knew it had been eight o’clock in the morning Sydney time when they landed at their stopover in Dubai; he’d slept most of the first flight and felt normal (at least physically—palm trees in the concourse and signs in Arabic had been disorientating) until he’d watched a little white airplane inch its way northwest across the Middle East and Europe on the blue display board of their second flight. Somewhere between Turkey and Hungary Ron’s brain had turned to mush from sheer boredom, and despite his burning eyes and puzzling lack of appetite, he hadn’t been able to sleep. Now the London clocks informed him it was morning again—on the same day—and the only things Ron was sure of were his name, he was going to Devon, and he was never, ever traveling so far the Muggle way again.

Ever.

“Ron!”

“Here to Paddington Station and then Devon.”

Hermione returned his glare—nearly thirty hours in airports hadn’t done anything for her mood, either. “Specifics, Ron.”

He closed his eyes—Godric, they burned, like they had the time he’d been caught in a sandstorm in Egypt with Bill—and tried to think.

“I take the Heathrow Express to Paddington Station, then switch trains and buy a ticket for Exeter. Harry is going to meet me at arrivals, and I’m not to leave the station until he gets there.”

“And what do you do if you get lost?”

“Ask anyone in a uniform for help. I have ridden trains before, Hermione, and we are back in England.”

She bit her lip and looked around anxiously. “I know, it’s just—I would feel better if I could go with you to Paddington. Be sure you get on the right train.”

Ron took a deep breath and reminded himself she was trying to help. “You’ve made sure I get on the right one out of here,” he said, indicating the sign over the platform. “You’d better get back to your
parents.”

The Grangers were taking the Underground to King’s Cross to catch their own train home and were waiting in the concourse above.

Hermione’s eyes filled with tears.

“Hey,” Ron said, setting his rucksack down to pull her into his arms. “It will be okay, I promise. I’ll write when I get home.”

Hermione buried her face in his chest and sniffed. “Get Harry to help you call from the pay phone at the station. In Exeter.”

“Okay. I’ll call when I get to Exeter, so you know I took the right train, and we’ll see each other at Harry’s birthday party. It’s only—”

“Thirteen days!”

“It can’t be longer than this plane trip,” Ron said, and Hermione gave him a small smile. “Kiss me goodbye.”

“Don’t say that word,” she mumbled, mouth already pressed to his.

Ron framed her face in both hands, forcing his sluggish brain to remember this—to remember every detail of kissing Hermione, the fresh mint taste of her since she’d brushed her teeth in the washroom, the slightly musty smell of her hair from the airplane seats, the smooth warmth of her skin beneath his palms. She was leaning her weight against him—Ron really didn’t know who was holding up who—and broke the kiss as he heard the train pull in behind him. Ron reached down for one more … and again.

“Go,” he said, hitching his rucksack onto his shoulder, now his only luggage after transferring his stuff and leaving the duffle with Mr. Granger. “I love you.”

Hermione fisted her hand in his shirt and pulled him down for a final kiss, a quick swipe of her tongue across his lower lip, and stepped back. “Hogwarts Express to Paddington to Exeter, and wait for Harry,” she said one last time. “Don’t forget to call me. I love you!”

Ron stepped onto the train somewhat mollified that even the brilliant Hermione Granger experienced the effects of crossing multiple time zones.

Hogwarts Express, indeed.
Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Notes

*gasp* She *does* exist!

All right, fangirls and fanboys, we're on the home stretch! The remainder of this fic is written and almost half is edited. I'm posting a little early because I have to be up early in the morning (and let's face it, I'm excited!), but otherwise expect weekly updates on Wednesdays. Enjoy the fic!

ktoo

Ron pulled his rucksack over one shoulder and waited for the train to come to a complete stop at the Exeter station. He’d asked the conductor to wake him at this stop but only dozed fitfully, not fully trusting the memory of the attendant who’d barely looked at him as he scanned his ticket. Using the seat backs for balance, Ron made his way to the front of the car and extended one long leg to bridge the gap between train and platform. Mindful of Hermione’s instructions, he kept his eyes open (with difficulty) for a phone booth as he followed the signs for the way out.

Spotting one opposite the stairs, he dug in his pocket for the little self-closing bag Hermione had given him with English Muggle money. Mrs. Granger answered after a few rings.

“You’ve reached the Granger residence.”

“Hello, Mrs. Granger, this is—"

“—can’t take your call right now—"

Belatedly, Ron realized it was a recording. Hermione had said something about an answer machine.

“—Your name and number, we’ll return your call as soon as possible. Thank you.”

“Er, hi, Hermione, it’s R—” Once again he was interrupted, this time by a loud beep.

He cleared his throat. “Hello? Is it okay to talk now? Okay, well, it’s Ron. I’m at Exeter, still on the platform, actually, and—well—I’m here.” He rested his head against the wall of the booth. Godric, that sounded lame. “It’s just … well, Hermione asked me to call and my parents don’t have a telephone, so … yeah. I’m here, and Harry and Ginny should be waiting upstairs, and—” Another loud beep.

Ron pulled the handset away from his ear and stared at it. “And I hope you guys got home all right and Hermione, I love you.” The disconnect tone blared from the plastic in his hand. He hung up the phone with rather more force than necessary, not at all impressed by answer machines.

The station was bustling but not crowded, and Ron made his way to the ticket hall without difficulty, looking for a head of messy black hair with a ginger stair step.

Ginny spotted him first. “Ron! RON!”
He turned to see his sister waving wildly, Harry at her side. Nearly running into a pram, he paused to let the mother and her trailing preschooler pass between them, and then Ginny was running at him, his own smile reflected on her face.

“Hi, sis. I missed you,” Ron said, ignoring her “umph” as they collided and picking her up to hug her hard for a long moment before setting her back on her feet. He turned to Harry who, as he always did after some time at the Burrow, looked healthier and bright-eyed. “Hello, mate.”

Harry took his hand, and they pulled each other into a half-hug, complete with hearty slaps on the back.

“You look knackered,” Harry said.

“Yeah, it’s been—I don’t even know how many hours. It was almost twenty-six just to London, so more than a whole day traveling. I thought Hermione was mental when she suggested I take the train from the airport, but she was right. I’d have arrived in pieces, if at all.”

Ginny had yet to let go of his arm. “Do you want a coffee?”

Ron eyed the café behind them, considering, but now that he could travel with magic…. He shook his head. “I just want to go home. Who’s there?”

Harry led the way out of the station as Ginny nattered on about their family.

“Mum and Dad are the only ones home right now. They wanted to come and meet you, but Harry convinced them it was best if it was just the two of us since it would be harder for all five of us to Ap —”

Ron turned to give her a warning look only to find Harry doing the same.

“Harder for all five of us to go unnoticed,” Ginny said blithely, tripping into the street without looking, pulling Ron’s arm away from his body as he stopped to check for traffic. “Bill reckoned you’d be exhausted from traveling the—from traveling so far, so he said you’re welcome to come to Shell Cottage if you like but otherwise he and Fleur will see you tomorrow. Mum’s having a welcome home dinner for you, obviously, and Percy has a new flat in London—you should see it, it’s nice. He’ll be at dinner tomorrow too, and so will George. He’s at the shop today, of course, Saturday and summertime and all that.”

“It’s Saturday?” Ron said, perplexed. He hadn’t paid any attention to the date of their arrival when Hermione planned the trip, just its length.

“Almost two-thirty,” Harry said, heading for the brushy bank at the back of the car park.

“We left Sydney at five-fifteen Friday evening,” Ron said. He squinted up at the sun, half-hidden by clouds. “That’s weird.”

“Mum’s excited you’re back,” Ginny continued. “She even cleaned your room. Charlie’s coming home on the twenty-ninth, and he’ll be here for Harry’s birthday, and Hermione’s coming, right? Did she and her parents get home okay?”

“I dunno,” Ron said, rubbing his face. “They had to wait for their train and everything, so….”

“Well, I’m sure she’ll write. You should send Pig as soon as you get home, Ron, so she can reply back this evening.”
Ron shook his head. “No owls. No Apparating, no wands, no magic. Her parents’ rules.”

They had reached the edge of the car park, and Harry pulled him and Ginny behind a large, leafy shrub.

“They’re not allowing Hermione to use magic?” Ginny gaped.

He shook his head again. “Don’t trust her after what she did last year. It’s been rough.”

“But—that was to protect them!” she protested.

“I know. But she is their daughter, and she used a skill they don’t possess against them, gave them no choice in the matter and no way to defend themselves.”

“Defend themselves!” she said. “You make it sound like Hermione was hurting them.”

“She made them forget her, Ginny. It hurt all three of them.”

Ginny’s face fell, and Ron squeezed her hand.

“So, how are we going to communicate with her?”

“Muggle post,” he said, deliberately not mentioning the telephone. Ginny would never shut up and spend the whole day in the booth outside Ottery St. Catchpole’s post office. “It’s slow but it works.”

“We need to go before someone sees us,” Harry said. “Ron, do you want to Side-Along?”

He nodded, stretched out his free hand, and was pulled into darkness.

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Hermione stared up at her parents’ Victorian as Dad helped the taxi driver unload their luggage. It looked perfect: stately and majestic and welcoming all at once, from the deep front veranda to the first-story turret. Hermione felt an unexpected swell of affection for the old house and, picking up Mum’s hand luggage, bounded up the front steps. Mum turned her key in the lock and pushed the door open.

Hermione’s nose curled as she stepped across the threshold, and given that the input from her eyes was flawless, it took her a moment to realize why; the house smelled different. Not musty, and not bad, but more of a chemical cleaner smell than the lemon-scented wood polish Mum used on the staircase and woodwork.

“All I want is a shower and bed,” Mum said, pushing her large case to one side of the hall and beginning to climb the stairs. Then she groaned. “The sheets! They haven’t been changed for a year!”

“Yes, they have,” Hermione said, following her up. “I had a cleaning service come in, and Harry and Ginny came over yesterday and made sure everything was okay and changed the linens and brought groceries and stuff.”

“Did they really?”

Hermione nodded.

“That was very thoughtful. Of all three of you.”
Hermione shrugged, setting her mother’s hand luggage on the bench at the foot of their bed. “I didn’t want you to have to worry about the house when we came back.”

Dad entered the room huffing, with a large case in each hand.

“Hugh, you didn’t have to bring both those up,” Mum chided. “I set mine in the corner on purpose.”

He shrugged. “It’s either now or later, love. Did I hear something about food?”

Hermione nodded. “There should be staples in the refrigerator and pantry. I asked Harry to get the basics.”

“Excellent. I’m going to make a sandwich—you two want anything?”

Mum was already in the bathroom and called her denial through the closed door.

“Me neither, Dad. I’m going to go to bed. It feels like—I don’t even know what time.”

“I’m with you there. Fix yourself something to eat if your mum and I aren’t up when you are.”

“I will,” Hermione said, and crossed the hall.

Her room looked just as she left it—well, almost; the bed pillows were askew—but it was neat and bare and utterly Muggle.

She hated it.

In a burst of energy, Hermione opened her handbag upside down over her bed and gave it several hearty shakes, dumping all her worldly belongings over the last year into one massive pile. She might not be able to do magic, but she could make her room magical. Make it hers. Pushing aside the clothes and personal items, she gathered her textbooks and lined them up on the left side of her desk, added the framed photo of her parents she’d carried last year, then another of her, Ron, and Harry casting their Patronuses in a DA meeting. She lingered over that one for a minute, watching the otter, terrier, and stag form and disappear.

Colin had taken that one, as he had almost every photo she had of Hogwarts and Hogsmeade since second year.

Blinking away her tears, Hermione turned to her wardrobe, opened the doors, and pushed aside the remaining clothes she’d left hanging before pulling open the middle drawer. It appeared empty; it wasn’t. Picking up her wand from the mess on her bed, she reversed the security and Disillusionment spells and breathed a sigh of relief. The Death Eaters hadn’t found it.

Inside was all her Hogwarts memorabilia, everything from robes to old essays and quills. She pulled out her Gryffindor banner and fixed it to the wall over her bed with a Sticking Spell, making a mental note to add some tacks later. More photos came out to decorate the bookshelves around the room, including the group photo from the Quidditch World Cup she’d previously kept inside the door, out of sight. Just as quickly as it appeared, the burst of energy vanished, leaving Hermione drained and slumped in the middle of her room, wanting nothing more than to crawl into bed … the bed that remained covered with clothes, toiletries, shoes, and the portrait of Phineas Black. With a swish and flick, she levitated everything onto the floor. Moving slowly, as much from reluctance as exhaustion, she laid her wand on top of the neatly folded robes, closed the drawer, and fell into bed.
Ron staggered down the stairs of the Burrow and into the kitchen the following day.

“Morning, Mum.”

“Ronnie!” She dropped the recipe she was reading by the light of the window and turned to hug him. “Try afternoon. How do you feel?”

Ron eyed the clock on the wall opposite, which read you’re late. “Drunk,” he said, flopping into a chair and scrubbing his hands across his face for about the fifth time this—afternoon, apparently.

“Do you want lunch or breakfast?”

“Whatever you’ve got,” he said, leaning back as a cup floated over and the teapot began pouring into it.

“Won’t be a minute,” Mum promised, Summoning ingredients from the pantry. “How’s Hermione? I was expecting an owl this morning.”

He shook his head. “No owls, no magic. Her parents’ request.”

Mum stopped and turned round, the eggs she was cracking suspended in mid-air at the tip of her wand. “No owls? How are you going to communicate with her?”

“Muggle post. And the telephone,” he added. “I called her from the train station yesterday—” Was it yesterday? Felt like a week at least since they’d left Australia. Yeah, yeah it was— “and told her I made it to Exeter okay.”

“Is she coming to dinner tonight?”

Mum toasted a slice of bread with her wand and gave it to him immediately before toasting the remainder of the loaf.

“Huh-uh,” he said round the slice, folded so as to fit in his mouth with expediency. “No’ ’til H’ry’s bifdee.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” she said absently, clearly out of habit.

Ron ignored her with equally ingrained habit and took another slice off the stack now in front of him without taking the time to butter it. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten; after greeting his parents yesterday afternoon, he’d laid down to take what was supposed to be a kip before dinner and ended up sleeping the clock around.

A plate of eggs, sausages, fried tomatoes (fresh from the garden, he was certain) and beans came to rest smoothly beside his toast, followed by a glass of pumpkin juice. Mum grabbed a mug and joined him at the table, reached across, and squeezed his hand.

“It’s good to see you, son.”

Ron took a sip of tea and let the temperature and familiarity warm him from the inside. He was home.

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“Oi, there he is,” Bill shouted, vaulting the garden gate instead of opening it and pulling Ron into a hug, complete with slaps on the back that threatened to dislodge the breakfast he’d eaten a few hours ago. “Rubbish at sun protection charms, I see.”
He chucked under Ron’s chin before tapping his sunburned nose.

“Gerroff,” he said, shoving Bill’s arm to the side with a twist.

“Welcome home, Ron,” Fleur said, stepping smoothly into the space between them and kissing him on both cheeks.

“Cheers,” he said, smiling at his sister-in-law. “I bet it’s nice to have your house back the way you like it, without half-a-dozen guests cluttering up the place.”

“The sitting room furniture is back in place, oui. And the food lasts more than five minutes now.”

Ron grinned, knowing she was teasing.

“Hey, Perce,” he said, greeting the brother standing awkwardly to one side.

Percy held out his hand, and Ron shook it with an amused smile.

“I assume all the paperwork was in order, then?” Percy said, pushing his glasses up with one finger.

“Perfectly,” Ron assured him. “Hermione said to tell you we couldn’t have done it without you.”

Percy looked pleased.

“All right, I’m here, let’s get this party started!”

George was smiling, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Thin and haggard, the magenta robes of Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes hung off his shoulders in droopy folds.

“Where’s Granger?”

“With her parents,” Ron answered, eyeing George’s pockets warily.

“They’re all right, yeah?”

Ron nodded. “Yeah.”

“Hey, sprite,” George said, tugging Ginny’s ponytail as she passed by with two dishes in hand. “Still not old enough to do magic, eh?”

“You know perfectly well my birthday isn’t for three weeks,” she said. “Make yourself useful and do something about the lack of decorations out here.”

A few waves of George’s wand and the nearby trees glittered Gryffindor red and gold, and the long table was covered in the blue, white, and red of Australia’s flag.

“Ginny, where do you want these?” Harry asked.

“I see not much has changed there,” Ron observed, seeing his best friend with two dishes in hand despite his seventeenth birthday nearly a year ago.

George snorted. “Unless you count being attached at the lips and hip.”

Ginny smiled as Harry approached her, and there was more brushing of hands than strictly necessary.

“He’s been good for her.” It wasn’t a question.
“Mostly,” George agreed, swiping a finger through the mash as soon as his sister’s back was turned, then giving the bowl a shake to resettles its contents. “They’ve had a spat or two.”

Ron wasn’t surprised. “They’re both stubborn with a temper.”

“Not unlike another young witch I know.”

Ron didn’t take the bait. “How’s the shop?”

George shrugged. “Business is slow, but I expect it to pick up in the next couple of weeks, especially once the Hogwarts letters go out. Spent most of May and June doing inventory and restocking.”

Ron nodded. “Harry’s been waiting for me so we could put our Auror applications in together, but I reckon once that’s done I can help out a bit. Maybe Hermione too. I’m not sure what she’s going to do once her parents go back to work.”

“Harry’s letter seemed to indicate they weren’t getting along too well.”

Mum began chivvying everyone towards the table, and Ginny actually let go of Harry to sit on Ron’s other side.

“Mmm. Lots of time away over the years. You know she spent a lot of her holidays with us, and they didn’t really understand anything about the war.”

George poured himself a glass of elderflower wine. “Who does?”

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“Okay,” Harry said, dumping the contents of his Auror application envelope onto the kitchen table. “We need to fill out all of this.”

Ron stared at the parchment that had spread over half the table in seconds. “I wish Hermione was here,” he moaned.

“You always wish Hermione was here,” Harry said, gathering his papers towards him as Ron turned his own envelope upside down. “Think about how impressed she’ll be when we’ve done the whole thing ourselves.”

Ron brightened. That would give him something to write about in his next letter to Hermione.

“All right, here’s the list,” Harry said, picking up a piece of parchment near the top of the pile. “Blimey, this is long. Official copies of O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. scores—that will be just the O.W.L.s for us—wand registration, Apparition license, non-familial references including at least one Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, criminal background check—that ought to be fun, certificates of birth—do I have a certificate of birth?” Harry asked, looking up at Ron.

He shrugged. “I dunno.”

“I did when I went to Muggle school. I remember the drawer Aunt Petunia kept it in. But that must have been a Muggle certificate—do I have a wizarding one?”

“No idea, mate.”

“Mrs. Weasley,” Harry called. “Do I have a certificate of birth?”

Mum stuck her head around the door of the scullery. “It will be at St. Mungo’s, dear.”
“It will?”

“That’s where you were born.”

“I was?”

“Of course you were. Did Remus never tell you the story of how your mum went into labor?”

Harry shook his head.

“Well, you’ll have to ask Bill or Arthur. They’ll tell it best. But yes, the hospital keeps records of all the births. You can get a copy of your certificate from medical records. Ron, I have yours in your box. I’ll get it down for you after I finish here.”

“Thanks, Mum.” She kept a box of important papers for each child on a shelf in her wardrobe.

“Look here,” Ron said, scanning his own copy of the list. “We need a medical waiver signed by a licensed Healer. We can get your birth certificate when we go do that.”

“Let’s make a list of what we need to get from where,” Harry said, picking up a quill and drawing two lines to outline the blank space on the application instructions. “That way we won’t forget anything and have to go back to the same place twice. We don’t have a lot of time.”

“What are we going to do about the reference from a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?” Ron asked. “Four are dead, one’s in St. Mungo’s, and one’s in Azkaban.”

“They know that,” Harry said. “Kingsley put a reference in my packet—did he include one in yours?”

Ron flipped through his paperwork and found the handwritten letter third from the top. “He did,” he said, reading it with some surprise. He hadn’t realized he’d made such an impression. “Well, the Minister for Magic … they can’t argue with that.”

“And I was thinking McGonagall? She was our Head of House. And she’s Headmistress now.”

Ron nodded. “Yeah, we saw that in the paper.”

“You got the Prophet in Australia?” Harry said.

“Hermione got it for her parents to prove that what she was saying was true, that there really had been a war and they really had been in danger.”

Harry frowned. “But she’s been getting the Prophet for ages, since, like, fourth year or something.”

“Secretly, apparently. She kept it hidden from her parents.”

“Really?”

“Really,” Ron said. “She was afraid if they read about what was happening in our world, they wouldn’t have let her come back to Hogwarts.”

“That’s probably true,” Harry admitted, turning one sheet face down and reaching for another. “They want our full name, address, and date of birth on every one of these. Think Geminio would work?”

“I think it will just give you another copy of the page, but try it,” Ron said.

Harry did and the amount of parchment on the table doubled.
Both boys sighed. “I wish Hermione was here.”
Chapter Twenty-Nine

Posting will be a little irregular over the next month or so because my job's irregular :P But I will get you a new chapter each week, I promise. If you want to read more about the Egypt trip Ron and Harry are talking about, check out my fics *More Than a Mug of Hot Chocolate* (one-shot) and *Hidden Chambers and Unseen Monsters* (multi-chap) over on ff.net.

“So,” Harry said as he and Ron stacked their applications into piles, sorting the duplicates created by his *Geminio* spell. “Ginny told me about what happened in Egypt.”

“What about Egypt?” Ron asked, though he could guess.

“The curse-breakers’ training course.”

“Oh, that.”

“Yeah, that,” Harry said sarcastically.

Ron didn’t reply. That was Ginny’s story to tell.

“What was it like?”

“The curse-breakers’ course?”

“No, the Nile River. I’ve been dying to ask, but I didn’t want to upset her. She said she had nightmares that summer.”

To say the least.

“The course was awesome,” Ron said, Vanishing his extra copies. “Except for the last bit. It was—well, the course was set up with all these different rooms to test different skills, and the goblins could adjust the difficulty level too, based on who was present for training. The last room we went in presented you with your biggest fear.”

“What, like a boggart?” Harry had approached his stack by trying to put both sets in order according to the application checklist and was constantly flipping pages, making very little progress.

Ron shook his head. “No, it could handle multiple people at once. So spiders for me, and snakes for Ginny—the Basilisk, of course, although she wasn’t fond of the dark either—and for Bill….” He paused, frowning. That was all it had been—a dark chamber with scuttling spiders and slithering snakes. He knew Bill wasn’t afraid of snakes or spiders (Charlie had brought home enough of those as a kid), but … his oldest brother couldn’t be afraid of the dark. It was unthinkable. “I dunno. Maybe something about being trapped.”

“So, you got to do magic,” Harry said, his envy obvious.

“Yeah,” Ron said, taking pity on Harry and beginning to sort his pile the way he’d done his own.
“Bill taught me how to reverse Disillusionment Charms.”

“It sounds brilliant.”

“It was.”

“Do you think the Aurors have something like that?”

“Must have, don’t you think? Otherwise people would be cursed before they even finished training, if it’s all on the job.”

Harry shrugged. “That’s how we learned.”

“Yeah, and you were in the hospital wing how many times?”

He grinned. “Dunno. I lost count.”

“My point exactly. Hermione would know.”

“Don’t ask her,” Harry said. “She’ll write me a lecture.”

“Well, that’s one good thing about no magic,” Ron said. “No Howlers.”

Harry laughed.

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Percy strolled round the edge of the Burrow’s pond. He’d waited until dinner was over, until no one was likely to be in the garden, before Apparating over, hoping the peaceful familiarity of the pastoral scene would calm his mind.

He couldn’t stop thinking about George.

It had been just over a week since their argument about Ron going to Australia, and while Ginny had reached out to make amends, George had not.

Far from it.

He had been at dinner last night, the first Sunday dinner since, but Percy had no illusions; that had only been because it was Ron’s welcome home party. George had arrived after Percy and left before he did and said not one word to him in the interval.

Bill and Charlie had hinted heavily that it was Percy’s responsibility to reach out and he had tried! Admittedly, not since last Sunday, but he hardly saw how another argument would improve his chances. George was grieving, understandably so, and angry—Percy understood that too—and Percy thought the more he pushed him, the more George would push back. He just needed time, time and not being preached at by his older brothers. Any of them.

Percy sighed. Other than each other, Fred and George had been closest to Ron. Now that he was back, maybe George would mellow out a bit. At least, assuming Ron wasn’t angry with Percy too. Although he didn’t seem to be; and Ron had been there, knew what happened. Knew Percy’s role in it.

He paused at an unfamiliar sound … that wasn’t crickets. He had walked about three-quarters of the way round the pond and now stood a few feet from the willow tree, but the lengthening shadows of twilight and the tree’s long branches made it impossible to tell what lay beyond.
Wand in hand, he crept forward, listening intently. The odds of Death Eater activity—or any illegal activity, actually—this close to the Burrow, this far from a city, were slim to none but—

A feminine giggle, a deeper, quiet voice, and Percy realized he had overlooked a prime reason why someone might be in the garden this time of night. Feeling vastly more cheerful, he pocketed his wand and prepared to humiliate his little sister.

Perhaps he could make George proud.

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“It hasn’t been just the two of us in a while, eh?”

Ron and Ginny were washing up after lunch on Tuesday. Dad was at work, Harry was at the Death Eater trials, and Mum pleaded a headache, so he’d eaten lunch with just his sister.

“Like before you went to Hogwarts,” Ginny said, wrapping the leftover cut fruit. “Ron?”

“Hmm?”

“Why didn’t you tell me about Hermione’s house?”

“What about her house?” He moved so she could slide the fruit bowl into the soapy water.

“It’s really nice. Gorgeous.”

“I remember.” He paused, thinking of his first impressions. “I’d only seen the outside, in pictures. Hermione showed us what it looked like decorated for Christmas one year. Like a gingerbread house. Then when Dad and I went to pick her up for the World Cup….”

“What happened?”

Ron swished the dishcloth round the inside of a glass. “We came out into this grand hall, almost like another room, with a big wooden staircase and stained glass in the front door. I knew right then I was in over my head, that a girl like her would never be interested in a boy like me.”

Ginny made a noise in her throat, which he ignored.

“But then we came home, and she was so fascinated by everything in the house—the clock, and Mum’s cooking spells, and the structure itself, and—” He rinsed the glass. “And she just acted normal, you know? Like she is at Hogwarts, all curious and questioning and good manners, and I thought maybe it wouldn’t matter after all.”

Ginny dumped in a handful of cutlery, then began to dry the plates he had already washed. “Do you think she cares? That the Burrow’s not as nice?”

“Nope. Do you?”

She ran the towel round an already-dry plate. “I don’t know. I—it makes me a little self-conscious, to think about her coming to stay over Harry’s birthday and what I have to offer her isn’t as nice as what she would offer me.”

Ron glanced at his sister in surprise, then fished around for another fork; he’d only washed two. “People like Malfoy, who treated us different because we don’t have a lot of money and wore hand-me-down robes, do you think that was wrong?”
“Of course it was!” Ginny said, finally setting the plate aside. “It’s not our fault. It’s not Mum and Dad’s either! They both work hard, and they’ve always given us the best they could. Besides, some things are better than money.”

“So, if you started treating Hermione differently because she has money, would that be wrong?”

Ginny opened her mouth, then closed it. “I see what you mean,” she said sheepishly.

“Harry’s aunt and uncle’s house is nice too,” Ron said. “Not fancy like Hermione’s, but more spacious and newer than ours. And he hates that house.”

“He said that last week too. That the best or worst thing about a house is the people who live there.”

“And Hermione’s pretty great.” Ron grinned, nudging his sister.

She laughed. “Yeah, she is.”

He used a serving spoon to flick soap suds in her direction and was rewarded with a towel snap, which he dodged.

“When Harry and I were there last week, to get the house ready for her and her parents to come home, her room was so plain. Nothing personal at all.”

“She hid everything to keep it away from the Death Eaters.”

“Mmm.”

“What?”

“I don’t know, it’s just … I keep picturing her in that big house all by herself, no brothers or sisters, and … it must have been lonely.”

“I think it was. You’re part of the reason she likes staying here, you know.”

Ginny smiled up at him, then twisted a dry corner of towel into the last glass. “What are her parents like?”

“They’re nice,” Ron said simply. “Her dad’s a big football fan, we watched some matches together, and he does all the cooking. Her mum likes to read, just like Hermione. She’s neat like her too. When we were in their office, everything on her mum’s side was all organized and put away, but her dad had stuff scattered everywhere.”

“What about as Muggles? Was it hard to talk to them or learn what was going on and stuff?” Ginny had finished drying and pushed herself up to sit on the worktop.

Ron drained the sink and wiped his hands on her shirt, ignoring her squeals and slapping hands.

“I reckon you expect me to put all this away?”

She gave him her innocent look. “I’m too short.”

He rolled his eyes but reached round her to open the cupboard.

“So?” She prompted.

“Not really,” he said. “I mean, when her parents showed us around Sydney, or took us to the beach,
we were all seeing and doing the same things, so we could talk about that. And I helped explain some stuff about our world, when they had questions about the Ministry or something they read in the *Prophet*. It helped that I’d been traveling with Hermione for a few days before we found them, so I’d learned a bit. How to work the telly and the electricity and stuff.”

Ginny bounced a little. “Percy says Muggles have machines that do their work for them, even at home!”

“Yeah, her parents had a dishwasher. It was like this big box with racks for the dishes, and you put powdered soap in a cubby and then close the door and turn it on, and it washes all the dishes for you. It even dries them, so at the end all you have to do is put them away.”

Ginny’s eyes were wide. “Really? You don’t have to get your hands wet?”

“No at all.” Ron dropped the forks in the cutlery drawer and closed it. “Fancy one-a-side Quidditch?”

She hopped down and past him in one motion. “Last one to the broom shed is a flobberworm!”

Later that week, Ron Apparated into the courtyard behind the Leaky Cauldron and headed down Diagon Alley to Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes. He could have used the Floo, of course, but it was fun to Apparate now that he had his license, especially since he hadn’t done much of it in Australia. It reminded him of that summer at Grimmauld Place, when Fred and George were newly licensed and Apparated everywhere, even from one floor to another.

It pinched, thinking of Fred. Like when you twisted wrong and a muscle spasmed in your chest. Ron hadn’t had to think about it much in Australia, but now that he was home, reminders of Fred were everywhere. Passing their bedroom every time he went up or down the stairs. The family photos Mum displayed in the sitting room. The empty chair at the kitchen table. And most of all….

Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes.

Ron stopped in the street to study its front. It didn’t look too bad, he mused. The giant wizard was raising and lowering his hat, exposing the rabbit on his head, and George was obviously in the process of redecorating the shop windows. Ron pushed open the door, which blew a raspberry instead of ringing a bell.

“Ron?”

“Yeah!”

“Over here!”

Ron followed George’s voice to find him standing with a short blonde witch, surrounded by boxes and studying a printed diagram.

“What’s all this?”

George passed him the diagram, which was a sketch of the shop marked with the locations of various products.

“All this stuff—” He waved his hand at the surrounding inventory— “Goes in this aisle. Verity—you remember Verity, right? This is my brother Ron—Verity is going to pull the items for each aisle
and we’re going to put them on display.”

“Sounds good,” Ron agreed. He pulled out his wand. “Geminio.” He stuck the original to the edge of the top shelf next to him and passed the copy to Verity. “Here you go.”

“Good thinking,” George said, sounding impressed. “Let’s get started.”

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Bill stood beside the Gryffindor hourglass, his and Percy’s pre-arranged post-tutoring meeting place, with a dumbfounded expression on his face.

“What’s up with you?” Percy said.

“McGonagall just asked me to teach this year.”

“What?” Percy led the way across the Entrance Hall and out of the castle.

“Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

“That’s great!” Percy enthused. “You’re going to take it, right?”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s not to know?”

“I—it’s a big responsibility.”

Percy snorted. Bill, protesting responsibility.

“And Head of Gryffindor House.”

Percy raised his brows. That was a big responsibility.

“We’d have to live at the castle.”

“Oh,” Percy said, finally understanding. As a professor, Bill would have the choice to live anywhere and simply Apparate or Floo to the school every day. But Heads of House were expected to be continuously available to their pupils, and that meant rooms in the teachers’ quarters. “You don’t think Fleur will want to live at Hogwarts?”

“I know Fleur doesn’t want to live at Hogwarts,” Bill said with a sigh.

Percy frowned. Wives were important and all, but to interfere with Hogwarts?

“Can’t you, I don’t know, persuade her?”

“Maybe.”

Percy paused in the middle of the drive, squinting at his brother in the afternoon sun. “You want to take the job, don’t you?”

Bill stopped too. “I don’t know.”

“You’ve been looking for something else,” Percy reminded him, and resumed walking.

“I’ve been looking for a curse-breaker position,” Bill corrected him, falling into step. “I hadn’t
considered leaving Gringotts.”

“Is it a permanent offer?”

“No. Well, she said during the summer term we could discuss me staying on if we’re both interested, but she made the offer as a one-year commitment. She’s scrambling for staff this year. Slughorn has agreed to continue with Potions, but she needs someone for Defense Against the Dark Arts and ideally Transfiguration too, and she said she’d prefer to hire a Gryffindor for at least one of the positions so the Head of House duties are taken out of her hands.”

“Headmistress, seven years of classes, and Head of House,” Percy said. “Even McGonagall isn’t that good.”

“I know. I want to help, but—”

“But what?”

“It’s a lot to ask of Fleur,” Bill muttered.

“Is it? I mean, Hogwarts may not be her favorite place in the world, but it would only be for one year. And she could still work at Gringotts.”

“Yes, but you have to remember—” Bill heaved a deep sigh. “We changed our wedding plans. Instead of a big fancy French wedding, she got married in a marquee in our back garden. Our wedding reception was crashed by Death Eaters, and we spent our wedding night being interrogated and tortured. We completely scrapped our honeymoon, and most of our first year of marriage we lived under the Fidelius Charm because we were hiding fugitives. Don’t get me wrong, she never complains, but….”

“You want to give her some normalcy.”

“Head of House—that’s not going to be easy this year, not with everything those kids have been through.” Bill continued as if Percy hadn’t spoken. “It means staying on over the holidays too, so we couldn’t go to France for Christmas this year, either. She hasn’t seen her sister or her parents since the wedding, and I know she misses them.”

They had reached the gates but made no attempt to Disapparate.

“Well, I’m no expert on relationships, but it seems to me you should decide for yourself whether or not you want the job, and if you do, you should talk to her about it. Once she’s over this cold and in a better mood,” Percy added. “Maybe she would agree if it was just the one year.”

“Maybe.”

“You’re a great teacher, Bill. I know the kids would be thrilled to hear you were staying on. Besides, you could coach Ginny through her N.E.W.T.”

Bill stopped staring out towards Hogsmeade and turned to face Percy. “I’d be teaching my little sister.”

Percy grinned. “Yeah, you would. Just think of the opportunities you’d have to make her life miserable as an actual, grown-up teacher. It would be brilliant.”

Bill shook his head. “We’ve really got to do something about this power complex of yours, Perce.”
Jean paused just inside Hermione’s open bedroom door. “Another letter to Ron?”

Hermione looked up from her desk and shook her head. “Not Ron, McGonagall.”

“Professor McGonagall?” Jean crossed the room to stand beside her. “Why?”

“To accept my place at Hogwarts this year.”

She stared at Hermione for a moment, gripped by a sudden panic. “But—last year was your seventh year. Your final year. Hugh!”

Hermione set down her pen and sighed.

“Did you know anything about this?” Jean demanded as soon as he walked in.

“About what?” Hugh asked, looking bewildered.

“About Hermione going back to school this year. To Hogwarts.”

Jean didn’t miss the “please help me with this crazy woman” look Hermione shot her dad. It wasn’t crazy to not want one’s daughter to deliberately choose to go somewhere known to be dangerous. For heaven’s sake, Hermione and Ron had said the final battle actually happened at the school!

“Well…”

He hesitated, and Jean knew he was going to take Hermione’s side. She crossed her arms.

“She did say she wasn’t at school last year.”

“But—but—she’s eighteen! Nearly nineteen!”

“Mum, what am I supposed to do without my qualifications?” Hermione asked. “They’re making special arrangements for the rest of my class, the ones who were actually there, because the summer term ended early, but I missed an entire year of instruction.”

“What about Ron and Harry?” Hugh said.

A good question. Maybe, if the boys were with her … they had survived this long together. If she knew Hermione wouldn’t have to face whatever trouble might arise on her own…. “Are they going back too?”

Now Hermione hesitated.

“Well?” Jean arched an eyebrow.

“No,” she admitted. “They’ve been offered positions at the Auror Academy without their N.E.W.T.s.”

“But you weren’t?” Hugh said.

“I was, but I don’t want to be an Auror, so I declined.”

Jean harrumphed, careful not to let any of her relief show on her face. She didn’t think working for magical police would be any safer than the regular kind.
Hermione reached out and took her hand. “Mum, I want to finish school. Properly. I’m thinking about working in the Ministry of Magic, for reform. For Muggle-born witches and wizards and house-elves and—” She broke off, clearly thinking better of whatever she had intended to say.

Would the secrets ever stop?

“I want to help make the law fair and equitable for everyone,” Hermione continued. “And I don’t want special treatment because I’m the the Boy Who Lived’s best friend. I want to earn my place for myself. You can understand that, can’t you?”

Jean turned her hand over to hold Hermione’s, whose earnest expression reminded her of the afternoon they’d found out Hermione was a witch, when the eleven-year-old had begged to go to school with children like her and spent the rest of the summer devouring her new textbooks.

But Hermione was no longer a child, and deep in her heart, Jean knew she couldn’t prevent her from returning to Hogwarts. Trying to do so would only widen the gap between them, not mend it. As she had said herself, Hermione was eighteen. A legal adult in both worlds. She squeezed her daughter’s hand and tried to explain.

“It’s hard to think of sending you back to a world that’s so dangerous. A world in which we have no influence or awareness.”

Hermione bit her lip, and the assertiveness drained out of her posture.

“Are you sure there isn’t another option?” Hugh said. “Maybe we could write Professor McGonagall and ask for permission for you to sit your exams anyway? You’re clever, you would pass.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “They’re the N.E.W.T.s, Dad—A-levels. Could you have sat your A-levels a year early?”

Jean caught his eye. “She does have a point,” she admitted. “Five years of uni and we still revised day and night for certification exams.”

“See? I want to be fully qualified. I want the career opportunities that affords me.”

Jean squeezed her hand once more and let go. “You surprised me, mostly,” she said honestly. “I haven’t heard you talk about going back to Hogwarts.”

Hermione shrugged, uncomfortable. “I’ve been trying not to talk about anything magic.”

“So!” Hugh said, glossing over her compliance with their own restrictions. “One more year, eh?”

“One more year,” Jean agreed.

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Sunday dinner was over and George was leaving.

Percy broke off his conversation with Bill. “George, wait!” He caught him up in the front garden, before he could go out the gate to Disapparate.

George turned round. “What is it now?”

“I wanted to talk with you about the shop.”

“It’s none of your business.”
Percy ignored what had become a token protest. “I just thought with Ron home now and able to help, that I could come in when he’s there. I wouldn’t bother you. I could help Ron with whatever he’s doing.”

“I’ve told you,” George said. “I don’t need—”

“Yes, you do,” Percy said flatly. “It’s almost August and if you don’t have the shop ready in time for the Hogwarts rush—”

“I’ll be ready. It’s really none of your business, Percy.” George made to walk past him, but Percy grabbed his arm.

“Fine. Let’s talk about something that is my business, and that’s you showing up here drunk.”

George pulled his arm free. “Piss off,” he growled.

“Grow up,” Percy retorted. “We’re worried about you.”

“Well, don’t,” he said shortly. “I’m fine.”

“You are anything but fine,” Percy said. “You’ve been pissed the last three times I’ve seen you—in the middle of the day, even knowing you’re coming to the Burrow, that you’re going to see Mum and Ginny. You’re not giving the shop the attention that it needs, you’ve lost weight—”

“For Godric’s sake!” George shouted, throwing up his arms. “How many times do I have to tell you our shop is none of your damn business!”

Percy pushed his glasses up his nose with one finger and lowered his voice. “That’s my point, George. The shop is just yours now, and that means you need—”

“And whose fault is that, eh?” George said icily. “Whose fault is it that Fred’s not here to help me?”

Percy went stock-still. They had danced round this issue all summer. He had known George blamed him for Fred’s death, but George had never come out and said so. He’d never accused him.

But he did now.

“YOU SAID YOU WOULD BRING HIM BACK! I trusted you, and you came back without him!”

“I’m sorry!” Percy shouted. “Dammit, how many times do I have to tell you? I’m sorry! You think you’re the only one who misses him? It was an accident, but it doesn’t matter now how it happened or what I said because he’s not coming back! And you keeping your head up your arse doesn’t help anything, because it’s like we’re losing you too!”

Percy didn’t see it coming. He felt his head snap back and realized by the burning sting of his lower lip that George had punched him in the mouth. He didn’t even have time to touch the cut, to assess the damage, before George was on him. They hit the ground hard, knocking the wind out of Percy, and there was no chance to get his breath back because George’s weight on his hips had him pinned and he was fighting wildly, striking Percy’s stomach, his ribs, his face. Percy closed his eyes and fist the grass in both hands.

Maybe George could beat the guilt out of him. Maybe the letting of blood would ease the pain Percy had carried in the center of his chest since he had turned round nearly three months ago and seen the smile frozen on the face of his first baby brother.
Maybe the damage could make him forget.
Chapter Thirty

Ron and Bill were the only two left at the table in the back garden when they heard the sound of shouting carrying from the front of the house.

“That sounds like more than Percy’s usual lecturing,” Bill said with a frown, pushing away from the table.

Ron followed at a jog, rounding the corner of the house to see George and Percy on the ground just this side of the front gate.

Ginny appeared next, flying out the front door and running pell-mell towards George, who was pummeling Percy mercilessly.

“Stop! George, stop it!”

Ron sped up at the sight of her, but Ginny was yards ahead of them. Harry and Dad were behind her, but Ginny was too small and light to break up a fight. If she reached them first….

“George, stop it!” she screamed. “Percy!”

“No, Ginny!” Bill lunged for her but missed, losing his balance and tumbling arse over elbow.

Ron leapt over him as Ginny latched onto George’s arm, then got shook off onto her bum. Harry was nearly to her—Ron thought it might be okay….

“Ginny, stop!” he shouted. “Wait!”

But Ginny didn’t wait. She got up, grabbed George’s arm again, and he turned. Even halfway across the garden, Ron heard it—a sharp crunch as George’s fist connected with his little sister and she went flying.

Ron skidded to a halt, half-sliding and half-falling onto the ground beside her still form. Despite her hard landing a few feet away from George and Percy, she lay motionless where she had fallen, like a rag doll.

“Don’t move her.”

It was Harry, panting with exertion and kneeling at Ron’s side. Ron glanced over his head to see Percy still on the ground, but Bill had George by the shirt and was swearing at him.

“Ginny!”

Almost before the thought formed that he needed her, Mum was there.

“What happened?” she asked.
“George and Percy were fighting, and she tried to stop them,” Harry said.

Ron stared at his sister, white and motionless, a whirling high-pitched sound starting in the back of his brain. Not Ginny. She’d be fine. She’d wake up and push him away any second now, complaining that she didn’t need to be babied.

“Back up, boys.” Mum’s voice was sharp, and she had her wand out.

He let go of Ginny’s hand (he didn’t even remember taking it), and he and Harry took a step back. Mum ran her wand over Ginny from head to toe, then cast a spell that Ron recognized as detecting broken bones.

“Ron, go Floo St. Mungo’s,” she said. “Tell them it’s a head injury and she’s unconscious.”

Ron took off at a run, the high-pitched alarm in his mind getting ever louder.

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“Percy. Percy!”

The voice increased in volume and tone, and with it the ringing in Percy’s ears.

“Perce, can you hear me?”

Percy roused to the sensation of burning in his nose, followed by coldness.

“For Godric’s sake, Bill, don’t shout.”

Keeping his eyes closed against the bright sunshine, Percy reached up and felt his face. Bill was siphoning off the blood.

“Stay down,” Dad said sharply.

He had no intention of getting up ever again, thank you.

“Can you sit up?” Bill said.

“No. And don’t try to make me, either.”

“Okay, just—”

Percy squinted through his lashes. He must be a sight; Bill actually looked worried.

“Just lie still. I stopped the bleeding, but I’m not that great with healing spells. I think we’d better wait for Mum. She’s with Ginny right now.”

The last he remembered, Ginny was nowhere in sight. Percy opened and closed his mouth slowly, then gingerly moved it from side to side, wincing. His jaw worked okay, at least. He wasn’t sure he could open his left eye even if he tried.

“What happened?”

“She tried to get between you two and George hit her,” Dad said. His voice was tight with anger, and Percy realized it was George Dad had told to stay seated, not him.

Percy opened his good eye and tried to sit up, rolling over onto one elbow when his breath caught as
his ribs protested the movement. “Is she okay?”

“She got hit pretty hard,” Bill said. “You know Gin-Gin, she’s just a wee bit of a thing.”

In addition to the ringing in his ears and the throbbing in his eye and the stabbing in his ribs, Percy now noted a sickening sensation in his stomach. His baby sister lay motionless on the ground, only her feet and legs visible as Mum, Harry, and Ron bent over her, and it was Percy’s fault. He shouldn’t have provoked George, he shouldn’t have stopped him from leaving, and now Ginny was paying for Percy’s mistake.

Again.

“I didn’t know it was her,” George said. “I just—I was angry, and I just—”

“She yelled for you all the way across the garden,” Dad said. “What, you thought she was your mother?”

“I didn’t hear her,” George said, his voice hoarse. “I swear, I didn’t know it was her. You know I’d never hurt Ginny.”

“No, you just brought her to the Battle when she was still underage,” Percy said, his temper flaring on top of all the other emotions of the last few minutes.

“But I brought her back,” George retorted.

Percy gritted his teeth. It was beyond unfair that they’d both had younger siblings with them that night and George, irresponsible clownish George, was the one who brought his back. And because Ginny lived and Fred didn’t, because Fred was George’s twin and not just his brother, no one had chastised George for the utter stupidity he’d shown in willfully bringing an unqualified child to a location under attack by You-Know-Who. Percy glanced at his sister again.

Well. There would be something said about this.

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Percy felt like shit.

Now that the adrenaline of the fight and its emotions had worn off, his injuries were making themselves known. His head throbbed; in addition to being swollen nearly shut, his left eye felt like it had been pushed a good two inches further back into his skull; his face and lips burned with multiple little cuts whose sting was quite disproportionate to their size; and the constant dull ache of his guilt was now accompanied by a sharp, stabbing pain in his chest whenever he breathed. Which, despite his efforts, was still several times a minute.

Everyone was in the kitchen, waiting for the Healer. Ginny lay unconscious on the scrubbed wood table, the stretcher Mum had conjured to transfer her still beneath her.

“Here.” Dad held out an ice pack.

Percy took it and carefully applied it to the left side of his face and eye, turning and bracing his elbow on the table to take some of the strain off his ribs. George sat two chairs to his right, at Ginny’s feet, staring at her with a look of pure self-loathing misery that should have made Percy feel better but somehow didn’t.

The fireplace flared green, and an attractive, dark-haired witch several years older than Percy stepped
out. She sized up the room in one brief glance and extended her hand to Mum, who sat across from Percy at Ginny’s head.

“Leah Jackson,” she said, setting her bag down in the space between Ginny and the edge of the table as he and Dad got up to make room for her. “And this young lady is…."

“Ginny. Ginny Weasley.”

“What happened?” Healer Jackson said, already waving her wand over Ginny’s form in a series of complicated figures.

“I hit her,” George admitted. Then, when the Healer looked pointedly from him to Ginny and back in silent censure, he added, “It was an accident.”

“Mmm. Well, she’s got a concussion, obviously,” she said, setting her wand down and running her hands over Ginny’s head. “But her vitals are excellent.”

“I think her jaw might be broken,” Mum said nervously.

“Yes, it is, but that’s easily fixed. I have some Skele-Gro in my bag.”

“Oh, we have some,” Mum said. “Arthur? I like to keep it on hand.”

Healer Jackson’s gaze traveled over Bill, George, Ron, and Percy before resting briefly on Harry. “Yes, I can see why,” she said with a trace of a smile.

Percy shuffled over so Dad could get to the cupboard. He set the bottle of potion at the Healer’s right hand.

“Thank you. How long has she been out?”

Mum glanced at her watch. “A little over fifteen minutes.”

“Okay.” Healer Jackson turned and reached for Percy’s ice pack. “Let me see that.”

Percy shifted his elbow so it was almost-but-not-quite in her face and didn’t lower the ice. She was short and could easily have stood under his outstretched arm; that is, if he could stand up straight.

“It’s fine,” he said. Just because he felt (and probably looked) like shit didn’t mean he wanted to be fussed over.

“The other half of your face doesn’t look fine, so if that’s the part you chose to ice, it must be even worse. Let me see,” she insisted, reaching up again. “And for goodness’ sake, sit down before I need that ice pack for my own neck.”

Percy wasn’t quite sure how it happened, but a moment later he found himself without his ice pack, sitting in the chair he’d just vacated. Healer Jackson stepped between his knees and leaned forward. Percy closed his eyes and willed his complexion to stay natural. She meant nothing suggestive by her position, even if he could feel the fabric of her lime green robes brushing the tip of his nose at what he was certain, despite his closed eyes, was precisely tit-level. She just needed to be where the work was, that’s all.

“I’m fine,” Percy repeated, his voice muffled in her dangling sleeve as her hands explored his face. He thought of Ginny, still lying unconscious beside him, rather than the fact this was the closest he’d been to a non-relative woman in ages. “Take care of my sister.”
“If she’s not awake by the time I’ve taken care of you, I will.”

“Healer Jackson—” Dad began.

“Leah, please. ‘Healer Jackson’ makes people look round for my dad. Does this hurt?” she asked Percy.

Her hands on his nose were smooth and cool and almost made Percy wish Bill hadn’t already fixed it.

“No.”

“Frank Jackson?” Mum said.

“That’s him.”

“Why, he delivered Percy!”

The back of Percy’s neck, which had been prickling lightly ever since Leah stepped between his legs, flushed in a rush of heat. Wonderful. As if he hadn’t already seemed young to her, now his mum was going on about his birth as if it were yesterday.

Leah paused, her hands still on his face, his face still between her tits. Percy wished he could breathe without that sharp, stabbing pain in his chest; she smelled good. Beneath the scent of washing powder on her robes was something sweeter, like honey.

“Was he born on a Saturday night or a Sunday morning?” Leah asked, talking about him with his mum as if he weren’t even here.

Mum sounded surprised. “Just before dawn on Sunday. How did you know?”

“Dad worked every Saturday night for years. He said the truly wild stuff only happened on Saturday nights. My mum always said he was a glutton for punishment.”

“That’s Percy, the family wild child,” Ron quipped.

Percy flung out his good arm but hit only air.

“What about this?” Leah said, returning her attention to Percy as she felt around his left eye, her touch gentle and almost feather-light.

“No.”

She walked her fingers in towards his eyeball, increasing the pressure, and he jerked away. “Ow!” Now his ribs hurt as much as his eye, since he had reflexively reached his left hand up to protect it.

“I did ask,” she said mildly.

“You didn’t have to push so hard,” Percy said, glaring at her out of his good eye.

Leah was unfazed. “You didn’t have to lie.” She turned to George. “I suppose you hit him too?”

“That wasn’t an accident.”

Percy froze, hoping George wouldn’t say anything else, hoping Leah didn’t think … what? She had seen his hands—and George’s face. She knew Percy hadn’t defended himself.
Leah picked up the ice pack she’d taken from Percy and leaned around Ron to smack it into George’s right hand. “Hold that,” she ordered.

She was clever too; she’d just iced George’s hand without any sympathy that would have caused him to reject the treatment. She picked up her wand and in seconds erased all evidence of the fight from Percy’s face. He opened his eyes and looked into hers; they were a dark sapphire blue.

“Mrs. Weasley, the Skele-Gro, please.”

“That’s for Ginny,” Percy said, unable to suppress the alarm he felt at the prospect of the unpleasant medicine.

Leah faced him directly. “I’m concerned you have a fractured orbit—the bones around your eye—and it’s easier to give you a dose of Skele-Gro now than for you to have problems later. Not to mention your ribs are bruised.”

She laid a hand under his left arm, precisely on the sorest spot, and he flinched. Leah’s only gloating was a raised eyebrow.


She had pulled a medicine cup from her bag and held it at eye level to measure his dose. She paused and looked down at him (he really wished he were still standing) without moving her hands.

“Don’t tell me I’m going to have to wake your sister just so she can show you up.”

Percy’s mouth fell open in indignation at her assumption that Ginny would be a better patient, and Leah tipped the potion in. Forced to swallow or choke, he swallowed the burning potion with a cough.

“You have brothers, don’t you?” Bill said in amusement.

“Nope,” Leah said, using her wand to rinse the cup, then heat and cool it for handing in quick succession. “Just a lot of stubborn male patients.” She reached into her bag and pulled out a piece of Drooble’s Best Blowing Gum.

Percy allowed every ounce of insult and disdain he felt at being treated like a child to show on his face.

“It’s the best thing I’ve found to help with the taste,” she said, extending it towards him. “Seriously.”

Well … in that case….

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“Welcome to the nursery, Perce,” Ginny said with a grin.

“Shut up.”

Leah had left instructions that neither he nor Ginny should be left alone for a couple of nights, resulting in Mum ordering him into Ginny’s room so she could keep an eye on them both at once. Percy tossed his pillow onto Hermione’s bed and gave Crookshanks a nudge, which produced nothing but a yellow-eyed glare.

“Here, Crooks,” Ginny said, patting the bed in front of her. “C’mere, puss.” She made kissing noises.
Crookshanks looked at her, considered her offer, then stretched out his front paws, raised his bum in the air, and finally stood on all fours. He hopped down, trotted under the camp bed brought down for Mum, and leapt onto Ginny’s bed, submitting to a scratching of his chin.

Percy pulled back the covers and laid down with a groan. His ribs were better, but what had been a throbbing ache in his eye had turned into splinterly shards of pain all around it as the Skele-Gro began its work. Leah had been right on both counts: his ribs were merely bruised, and his orbit was fractured.

Ginny sat up. “What’s the matter? Does your head hurt?”

“Doesn’t yours?”

“Not as much as it did.” She had slept for several hours after Leah left and apparently woke up on the right side of the bed. “So, what did you think of Leah? I thought she was really nice.”

“I thought you had a broken jaw,” Percy retorted. “Don’t you ever shut up?”

She was quiet … for all of ten seconds.

“She’s pretty. Ron said you got a really close look at her.”

“Ron can get bent.”

Ginny laughed, then stopped abruptly, raising one hand to cup her jaw. “Owww.”

“I did warn you.”

She laid down on her side facing him, placing her face against the pillow with care. “Well? Did you think she was pretty?”

She was very pretty, especially when she smiled. “She was competent.”

Ginny scoffed. “Competent? That’s the most you can say about her?”

Kind, compassionate, thoughtful…. Leah had refused to accept payment for her services, claiming it was her pleasure to serve a family of heroes, and pretended not to know what Harry was talking about when he asked her to keep the events out of the paper.

“She’s a Healer. She was skillful and efficient.”

“Mm-hmm. And we all know how much you like efficiency.”

Where was Mum and why wasn’t she here yet?

“Go to sleep, Ginny.”

“I’m not tired.”

“Well, some of us are.”

“No, you’re not. You just don’t want to talk about Leah and how you liiiike her,” she sing-songed.

“You were unconscious. What do you know?”

“I know you haven’t said you don’t,” Ginny said smugly.
“All right, you two,” Mum said, entering without knocking. “Time for bed. You both need your rest.”

She extinguished the lamp on Ginny’s desk with her wand, but not before Percy saw his little sister smirking at him. He made a face back.

He really had missed her.
Chapter Thirty-One

It was two days after The Fiasco, as Ron had taken to referring to Sunday’s events in his head, and he’d finally managed to lure Harry away from Ginny’s side by warning if they didn’t turn in their Auror applications soon, they might be going back to Hogwarts after all. Ginny had insisted (for about the four hundredth and seventy-second time) she was perfectly fine, and Harry had reluctantly agreed. They’d turned in their Auror Academy applications to Gawain Robards’s no-nonsense assistant before meeting with him personally, at his request. Ron pushed aside his concerns about Robards’ requirement for a private debriefing about their activities over the last year and focused on something more cheerful.

“Let’s stop by Quality Quidditch Supplies on our way home,” he suggested as he and Harry made their way through the lunchtime crowd in the Ministry Atrium.

Harry hesitated.

“I was thinking maybe we could go in together for Ginny’s birthday present,” Ron said. “You haven’t got her anything yet, have you?”

He shook his head. “What were you thinking?”

“A broomstick. She’s never had one of her own,” Ron said simply. “And I reckon McGonagall will make her Quidditch Captain this year too.”

“She’d better,” Harry said, choosing a Floo queue. “I’ve been meaning to replace my Firebolt. Maybe we could get a discount if we bought two of them.”

“Nah, Ginny’s a Chaser. She needs agility and control more than speed.”

Harry looked skeptical.

“I know you loved that broomstick, Harry, and don’t get me wrong, it was amazing! But if Ginny is going to try out for the Harpies next spring, she’ll need a professional Chaser’s broom. It’s her favorite position.”

“She told you about that?”

“Yeah, like five years ago,” Ron said, taking a step forward. “She’s not exactly known for changing her mind.”

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Percy stepped out of the fireplace into his brother’s sitting room to find Bill standing by the hearth, awaiting his arrival.

“Thought you might need this,” Bill said, extending a glass.

Percy accepted the shot and downed it. “Cheers,” he said, sighing.

“How are you feeling?”
Percy narrowed his eyes. “Since you haven’t asked me that in two days, I’ll answer you. Fine, perfectly fine. No headaches, no blurred vision. I’m fine, my eye is fine, my ribs are fine—all fine. That’s what happens when you take Skele-Gro. You’re fine.”

“Mum’s been in rare form, eh?” Bill said, leading the way outside.

Percy groaned. “You have no idea.”

Bill gave him a dark look. “Try me. Fred and George and I were the only ones around last year, and since Mum wouldn’t go into Diagon Alley by herself, that left yours truly. Being the sole focus of a woman used to mothering seven children is not for the faint at heart.”

“I thought she and Ginny were going to come to wands this morning.”

“Well, that’s an improvement.”

“How’s that?” Percy flopped into a chair and leaned his head back, enjoying the evening sunshine, such as it was.

“Ginny let Mum mother her something fierce over Christmas. That’s when I started suspecting just how bad things were at Hogwarts.”

“Mmm.” Percy didn’t want to think about that. “Well, she’s not a willing victim now, that’s for sure. Ginny I can understand, and I didn’t really mind at first, not after … everything, but—”

“What?”

Percy hesitated. “I know Mum’s … not herself,” he said delicately, and Bill nodded, “but still … I don’t remember her fussing over you and Charlie like this after you moved out.”

Bill laughed. “We moved out of the country, Perce.”

“I see the appeal,” Percy said darkly. “Ginny practically begged me to come back tonight and not leave her alone.”

“Are you going to?”

“No!”

He held up a placating hand. “She can be pretty persuasive when she wants to be.”

“Only because you have a soft spot for her,” Percy accused.

Bill didn’t argue.

“I just thought—I don’t know, I thought moving out would make it better, but it seems to have made it worse.”

“Allowing yourself to be physically beaten doesn’t exactly inspire confidence in your decision-making abilities, Percy.”

He acknowledged the subject with a single warning look and continued. “She even made my lunch for me today! We’ve made our own lunches since we were—what, eight or ten years old?”

“Something like that. Best lunch you’ve had in ages, wasn’t it?”
Of course it was, but—

“That’s not the point,” Percy said firmly, straightening his glasses. “The point is—”

“It’s not always about you.”

“What?”

“It’s not always about you,” Bill repeated. “Fleur helped me see that last year, when Mum was downright smothering.”

“I did what?” She appeared with a platter suspended in mid-air in front of her and began unloading dishes from its floating surface onto the table.

“You should have told us you were ready to serve,” Bill scolded. “We could have helped.”

“You can wash up,” she said easily. “What is this I am supposed to have done?”

“Percy was complaining about Mum. I was just getting ready to tell him what you told me at Christmas.”

“Ah.” Fleur set the platter aside and sat down. “About it not being about you.”

Bill nodded and began serving. “It’s not necessarily that she thinks you need mothering, that you can’t take care of yourself,” he said to Percy, passing him a plate. “It’s that she needs to mother. Sometimes she hugs you not because she thinks you need to be held, but because she needs to hold you.”

Percy accepted bread from the basket Fleur held out and considered this. Mum did have a tendency to lean into him these days, as if she were drawing strength from him rather than the other way round.

“All right,” he said grudgingly. “Hugs I can live with, and goodness knows her cooking is better than mine, but the hovering and the nagging and all—when does it end?”

“I’m hoping for sometime after thirty,” Bill said, stabbing a positively raw piece of roast. “I’ll let you know.”

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Ron, Harry, and all four of his brothers were gathered on the Burrow’s roof, laughing like loons. Harry had just deflected discussing his activities in the orchard with Ginny by telling the story of when she and the twins celebrated his acquittal for performing underage magic.

“Bloody hell, Harry, I’d forgotten about that,” George said.

“You were pretty insistent about it, as I recall. Carried on all through lunch.”

“You said you didn’t fancy her then,” Ron said. “When Sirius and Lupin asked, you said—”

“I didn’t fancy her then. But she’s always been beautiful.”

Ron eyed his friend with suspicion, distinctly remembering a freckled midget in pigtails, but before he could question him further, Charlie called his name.

“So, Ron, how was Australia? And Hermione?”
Overlapping wolf whistles and catcalls heated the back of Ron’s neck.

“Hermione and her parents are well,” he said, deliberately downplaying the situation. “She’ll be here tomorrow for Harry’s birthday. Australia—or what I saw of it at least—is beautiful. I’d love to go back when I had more time to explore.”

“What did you do there?” Percy asked.

“A little touring. Their Ministry of Magic is actually inside the Muggle Parliament building, so we saw that and a couple of the museums in Canberra, the capital. Hermione looked for information about her parents in the National Library.”

“How did she find them? They went into hiding, right?” Bill said.

“The dental registry,” Ron said simply, but when everyone but Harry stared blankly at him, he explained. “Hermione’s parents are dentists—it’s a Muggle Healer for teeth.”

“Just teeth?” George said.

“Just teeth. Well, the whole mouth I think—” He shot a glance at Harry, who shrugged— “but the point is, Muggles who do that have to register with the government, which keeps a list of their names and where they practice. Hermione knew her parents had gone to Sydney and what names they used, so she called the dental registry for Sydney and asked for them.”

“And they just gave the information to her, just like that?” Charlie said.

“About where they worked, yeah. We went to their office to find their home address and met them there. Hermione didn’t want to make a fuss at their job.”

That was true, more or less.

“Sydney’s near the coast, right?” Percy said.

Ron nodded. “We spent most of the weekends at the beach with her parents, and we took a dinner cruise in the harbor. Hermione really liked the city.”

“I don’t know. I kind of miss the country, especially in the summertime,” Percy said.

“Definitely more romantic,” Bill said. “At least when there aren’t pesky little brothers about.” He gave Ron’s foot a nudge.

Ron shrugged. Even though they had missed the treehouse, he and Hermione had had plenty of romantic moments in the city. “Depends where you are. Or who you’re with, I reckon.”

George paused in refilling his Firewhisky. “Ickle Ronniekins, a philosopher?”

“I told you he’d come back more like Hermione than the other way round,” Harry said.

“Thank Merlin for that,” George muttered, dodging Ron’s elbow.

“We do have one important question for you, Ronnie,” Charlie said.

“Is this going to be about Hermione?” Harry asked. “’Cause you know she’s like my sister….”

“Just one question,” Bill promised.
“What we want to know is….” Percy paused for effect. “Did you take our advice?”

Now Ron’s neck and ears were hot, remembering how each of his three oldest brothers had pulled him aside to dispense his own version of sexual wisdom in the days before he and Hermione left.

“Yes,” he said defiantly.

“Did it work?”

“That’s two questions,” Harry warned.

“Shut it,” George said. “You’re sleeping with our baby sister.”

“Not yet,” Harry muttered.

“Shut it!” all the Weasleys ordered.

“Well?” Bill demanded.

“Yes,” Ron said. “But don’t go getting ideas. I can manage on my own.”

Harry smirked. “A know-it-all, just like Hermione.”

“I know where you sleep,” Ron said darkly.

“Right back at you.”

Harry’s smile was friendly, but there was a seriousness in his tone that Ron understood all too well, and he gave a tiny nod of agreement.

Hermione landed in the lane directly across from the Burrow, cleared her lungs of the pressure of Apparition with a deep breath, and smiled. She hadn’t done magic for two weeks and it felt good. She went through the gate, across the front garden, and round the house to the back door, which she opened without knocking.

Ginny shrieked and threw her arms around her. She laughed and hugged her back.

“I missed you so much! You have to tell me everything,” Ginny said.

“I will, I promise. I missed you too. You look nice. Gorgeous, actually.”

Ginny wore an emerald-green blouse the same color as Harry’s eyes, a skirt, and sandals and had done her makeup as well. Her long red hair hung halfway down her back and curled at the ends.

“Cheers.” She peered into the oven.

“You look busy, so I’ll just—”

“Ron’s in his room, agonizing over which shirt to wear. Go on, I’ll see you later.”

“Thanks, Ginny.” Hermione set Harry’s gift on the kitchen table and left the room, trying not to run since her heels echoed off the wooden floors. Both the sitting room and the stairs were deserted, and she was breathless by the time she arrived on the fifth floor. She knocked three times, careful not to syncopate the rhythm as she usually did. She wanted to surprise him.
“Come in.”

Hermione laid one finger over her lips, and Harry nodded and tiptoed out of the room.

Ron stood shirtless in front of his wardrobe with the door open, holding two shirts up in front of the mirror. “Which one, do you think?”

“I like the striped one.”

He spun around at the sound of her voice, and Hermione laughed at his gobsmacked expression.

“Hermione!”

He dropped both shirts where he stood and crossed the room in two long strides. She already had her arms up for a hug and Ron wrapped his around her, picking her up from the floor with a laugh. Then he set her down, framed her face in his hands, and kissed her.

“When did you get here?”

“Just now,” Hermione said, beaming back at him. “I saw Ginny in the kitchen.”

“You look good,” he said, never taking his eyes from her face.

“So do you,” she answered, running her hands along bare shoulders and down his arms.

He flushed adorably. “I, er, I couldn’t decide on a shirt.”

“I noticed.” Hermione tipped her face up for another kiss, loving the advantage of heels.

“You’re taller,” Ron mumbled against her mouth, backing towards his bed.

“Mm-hmm. Heels.”

“I like it.”

He sat down, and Hermione lifted the skirt of her dress just enough to enable her to sit on his lap. Ron spread one large hand on her back, balancing her, and she allowed herself to sink into the pleasure of his kiss for the first time in thirteen days. It seemed like no time at all before a loud bang interrupted them. Hermione started and would have fallen had it not been for Ron.

“What was that?” she gasped, looking at the window the sound had come from.

“That will be George’s idea of calling us to dinner,” Ron said sourly. “Are you okay?”

Hermione dropped her hand from her chest and nodded, stepping to the mirror to touch up her appearance. “It just startled me, that’s all.”

Ron took her hand. “Come on. You still haven’t said hi to the birthday boy.”

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Harry waited for her in the garden.

“Thanks for helping with the surprise,” Hermione said, smiling.

“Thank you,” Harry answered, enveloping her in a hug. “You just won me five sickles. I bet George I chose the same shirt for Ron that you did.”
“Well, happy birthday.” Hermione kissed his cheek.

“Cheers.”

“I can see Ginny’s influence already,” she teased, flipping the collar of his shirt.

“Yeah, well….” He looked adorable and happy, without the wan, pressured look he’d worn in those early days of May.

“All right, all right, no hogging the pretty girls, even if it is your birthday,” George said. He smiled at her. “Welcome back, Hermione.”

“Thanks, George,” she said, accepting his hug and permitting herself to be passed around the family.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley greeted her warmly, as always. Bill asked if they’d had any problems at the house, Fleur thanked her for the book she’d loaned her and promised she had it inside, and just when Hermione thought Percy was going to stick out his hand for her to shake, he grasped both her shoulders and pecked one cheek. That left Charlie, who always flirted with her.

“Hi, Charlie,” Hermione said, resigning herself to the forthcoming banter.

“Well, well, well, look who grew a few inches,” he said, taking both her hands and looking her over. “It’s a shame you’re so tall, Ron. She’s perfect kissing height now.”

In heels, Hermione could nearly look Charlie in the eye.

“And much better dressed,” he said with a wink, reminding Hermione of running into him coming out of Ron’s room in just her dressing gown a few days before they left.

“Yes, well, it’s early yet,” she said tartly, pulling her hands from his, and was rewarded with his surprised laughter.

“Sit by me,” Harry said, taking her hand and pulling her down beside him when she moved to sit on the other side of Ron. “Tell me about Australia. Were there really sharks in the bay?”

Hermione sat down at the empty end of the table. “What is it, Percy?”

He pulled out the chair across from her. “I’d like to get Ginny something special for her birthday. It’s her seventeenth, and … well, I’ve missed a few. I was hoping you might agree to go shopping with me.”

“I’d be happy to do that.”

“I know….” He cleared his throat, looking uncomfortable. “Well, I’ve gathered things are difficult with your parents right now, so I would be happy to meet you … wherever you live.”

“That’s not a problem,” Hermione said, smiling at him in the dim light from the paper lanterns.
floating above the table. “Mum and Dad are going back to work next week, so I can meet you in Diagon Alley during the day. Do you have any ideas?”

“I was thinking something feminine. Not too girly, just—something different. Special,” he repeated. “Jewelry, maybe? Mum has a family ring for her, but….”

“Ginny likes earrings,” Hermione said. “She doesn’t wear them a lot, but she always comments on Libby’s or Lavender’s or Parvati’s. I think she would wear them if she had them.”

“Okay,” Percy said. “Um, I guess I can’t owl you.”

Hermione winced. “No, please don’t. Which day is best for you?”

Percy stared over her shoulder as he thought. “How about lunch on Tuesday? I’ll meet you at the Leaky.”

“That sounds perfect. Ginny will love it.”

“I hope so.”

“We’re ready,” Ron said, coming up to the table. “Where’s Harry?”

“With Ginny, probably,” Hermione said, pulling out her wand, relishing the feel of it in her hand. “I’ll fetch them.” She hadn’t conjured her Patronus since—well, since the Battle, and it was a pleasure to do so now. Her otter seemed to think so too, twirling round Hermione once before streaking off in search of Harry.

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Sparks were still fading from the sky when Ginny stood up and pecked Harry on the mouth. “I’m going to change,” she said. “Ten minutes.”

Hermione waited a beat, then followed. “Hey, Ginny,” she called. “Wait up.”

She turned with a huff. “What is it?”

“I thought we could meet up and go to Diagon Alley together.”

“Yeah, sure.” She turned back to the house.

Hermione jogged around in front of her. “You know, to get our school supplies. Have you heard anything about when the Hogwarts letters are coming out?” she asked as Ron approached them.

Ginny glared, recognizing the stalling tactic. Hermione put on her best innocent face.

“It’s different every year, Hermione. They’ll come when they come.”

“I can be your go-between,” Ron offered. “Whoever gets theirs first, just let me know when you’d like to meet and I’ll tell the other one.”

Hermione gave him a deliberately sappy smile, enjoying Ginny’s eye roll. “That’s so sweet of you, Ron. Thank you.”

“Perfectly lovely,” Ginny said, shoving past her. “But I’ve got to wee—see you later.”

Hermione laughed, then took Ron’s hand and followed her into the house.
Chapter End Notes

This story is part of LLF Comment Project, whose goal is to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites:

Feedback

- Short comments
- Long comments
- Questions
- Constructive criticism (especially regarding plot development/how the story works as a whole)
- “<3” as extra kudos
- Reader-reader interaction

This author replies to comments.

LLF Comment Builder
Chapter Thirty-Two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Hermione and Ron left Ginny at the entrance to her room and climbed the remaining stairs. Hermione closed the door to Ron’s room and leaned back against it. “So…”

“So.”

They laughed, then she tipped her face up. “Kiss me.”

He obliged, bracing one hand on the door beside her head and slipping the other behind the small of her back.

Hermione hummed her appreciation, opening her mouth at the first brush of his tongue against her lower lip. They’d done the vast majority of their snogging lying down, or at least sitting, but there was something to be said for this, she thought as Ron pushed his knee between her thighs and leaned in. The door was hard and unyielding behind her back, completely different from the give of a mattress, and she stretched to cross her arms behind his neck, pulling him closer. Two weeks of abstinence and their brief time together before the party intensified every sensation, and she gasped when she felt his hand scrabbling at her leg, bunching up the skirt of her dress.

“I missed you so much,” he said, trailing kisses and nibbles down one side of her neck.

“Uh-huh,” she agreed, sliding her hands inside his open collar and then reaching for the buttons when she couldn’t get as much skin as she wanted.

Ron gripped her hips, lifting her without warning. Hermione wrapped her legs around his waist by instinct, her head falling back as their bodies met. Using his torso to hold her in place, he slipped both hands under her bum and began tugging on her knickers.

“No, wait!” But she couldn’t resist squirming into his hands, sliding a little further down the door. He paused, looking up at her, and she let go with one hand to push against the door, which rattled on its hinges. “Too noisy.”

Without a word, Ron spun and pressed her against the other wall with a thunk.

“Oh, god,” she said breathlessly, flinging both hands out at the unexpected movement.

“Sorry!”

“No, no, it’s fine, just—” She uncrossed her legs, but Ron had her lifted high enough they didn’t reach the floor. He took the hint, though, setting her down just long enough to pull down her pants before lifting her again, and she kicked off her knickers with her shoes, then crossed her ankles behind his back.

“Okay like this?” he asked, shifting one hand to cradle between her thighs.

“Yes, yes, please—” Hermione grabbed him by both ears and smashed her mouth into his, trusting Ron to support her as she moved against his hand. She needed—Godric, she needed him, more than his kiss and his hand and—
He moaned into her mouth when her fingers slid under the waistband of his jeans, and she fumbled with the button and zip, shoving his clothes down just far enough to get the job done.

“Okay, okay, wait a minute … let me make sure I have you—” He adjusted his grip, shifting her weight higher against the wall and spreading his legs for balance and then—

Hermione sighed with pleasure, her eyes fluttering closed even as her head dropped forward against Ron’s shoulder. He swore softly in her ear, then louder when she tightened her thighs round his waist. She giggled, a sound abruptly cut off when he began to thrust.

“Ohhh—” She bit her lip, cutting off her own curse as he pushed deeper. It was rough and intense and glorious and, she realized after a couple of minutes, not going to be enough.

“Ron.” She tried to shift her hips, looking for better friction, but he had a death grip on her and his weight pinned her to the wall. He was close, she could tell by his breathing, and while she didn’t often peak during the sex itself, she really, really wanted to now.

“Ron,” she tried again, tugging on his hair and giving another tiny wiggle. “Please?”

“Hold on” was the only warning she got before he pulled her lower body away from the wall, changing the angle completely, and in two strokes, Hermione was there. Her hands fell from his shoulders flat against the wall, the better to push herself onto him, and she shuddered, only dimly aware of him repeating her name a moment later.

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Ron slumped against Hermione and buried his face in her hair before lowering her legs to the ground. She slid down a few inches; apparently her legs were more like wet noodles than any kind of support. They stood like that for a few minutes, breathing hard and coming back to themselves, before Hermione said,

“I really hope you already did a sound-proofing charm.”

“I really hope you already did a contraception charm,” he returned, certain that she had.

“I did. Earlier.”

“Me too. Had a feeling we might not, er, have time.”

They still hadn’t made eye contact; wrapped round each other, each had their face hidden. Ron straightened first.

“So,” he said, pushing her hair out of her face. “That happened.”

Hermione’s cheeks reddened beyond the flush of orgasm. “Yeah.”

“Knocked a few firsts off the list,” he said, trying to make her smile.

She nodded.

Not just the new position; they were both still dressed, even if his pants and jeans were hanging just below the curve of his bum and her knickers were in a wad on the floor.

“You, re—” She bit her lip. “You’re not just saying that about the silencing spell, are you? You really did cast one before I got here? I, er…” More blushing.
“I really did,” he reassured, then smirked. “And you definitely screamed.”

“So did you,” she said hotly, ever competitive.

“I wasn’t sure you noticed,” he teased. She was practically glowing now.

“Shut up,” she muttered against his chest.

Ron laughed, hugging her. “You were fantastic,” he said, dropping a kiss on top of her head. The last few minutes had given him wanking material for weeks. “You’re okay? I didn’t hurt you or anything?”

She shook her head, face still pressed against him, but her arms had wrapped around his back and were sliding dangerously low.

“Hermione?”

Now she looked at him. “Undress me,” she demanded.

So he did.

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Afterwards, Ron lay under just the sheet in his magically expanded bed, Hermione curled in the crook of his arm with her head on his shoulder. He reached across and laced the fingers of his free hand with hers.

“Hermione?”

A sleepy hum.

“There’s something I’ve been wanting to talk with you about.”

She raised her head. “What is it?”

“Greyback.”

“Ah.” She shifted to lay her head on the pillow so they were face to face, but Ron couldn’t hold her gaze.

“I killed him. Well, maybe—it was me or Neville. But I wanted him dead. I tried to kill him.”

“I know.”

Ron’s eyes shot up to meet hers. “You do?”

She nodded. “I saw you go after him.”

“I just—” He stroked the back of her hand with his thumb. “I’ve been thinking about that first morning with your parents, remember? When your dad asked if you’d ever killed anyone, and I realized I couldn’t answer the way you did.”

“I know. I don’t care.”

Ron pulled his head back, surprised. “You don’t?”

“You’re not a killer, Ron, not here,” she said, dropping his hand to lay hers over his heart.
“Greyback was a monster, a genuine monster, and you were fighting in battle. He would have killed you and Neville. He nearly did kill Bill. Defeating him in battle, defending yourself and your family, that’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I defeated other wizards without trying to kill them.”

“I’m just saying, I understand why Greyback was different.”

Ron remained silent, unconvinced.

“Have you talked to your mum about it?”

“What? No! Why?”

Hermione hesitated. “Well, I was thinking….”

“Bellatrix,” he breathed.

She nodded.

Well, that cast a new light on things.

“I’m sure it can’t be easy, living with—knowing that you were the one who ended someone’s life, but if she had it to do again, I know your mum would make the same decision. For Ginny. For everyone she loved.”

For the first time, Ron wondered if maybe his mother’s depression this summer had a source other than Fred.

Hermione had returned to Ginny’s room shortly before midnight to find it empty, but Ginny didn’t keep her waiting for long. After discussion of their respective relationships, Hermione had talked herself nearly hoarse describing her and Ron’s trip to Australia and what was happening with her parents. Now she and Ginny lay in a sleepy silence, the first silence between them since Ginny came in from the orchard hours ago.

“Oh!”

Ginny’s voice was unnaturally loud and Hermione jumped.

“Sorry. I knew I was forgetting something I wanted to ask you. Your parents’ house—was everything okay? Harry and I went over there the day before and set everything up. You should have seen him—he must have memorized the letter you sent him.”

“Memorized it?” It was a long letter, and Harry had never been in her house before.

“I think so. He knew where everything was and what we were supposed to do. He worked really hard to get it all right for you.”

Hermione smiled to herself. Harry was not naturally detailed or observant, so it said a lot about how he felt about her that he had put in so much effort.

“Yes, it was great. Mum was able to shower and Dad had a snack and then we all went to bed. It was lovely, not having to make beds or go to the supermarket or anything. Mum and Dad were really touched that you and Harry had done that for them.”
“Of course,” Ginny said. “Hermione?”

“Mmm?” Crookshanks was warm and comforting nestled in the curve of her body, and it was very late. Or early, depending on your point of view.

“It’s a really nice house. Beautiful.”

“Mm-hmm. Was my great-aun’ Evelyn’s. Mum inher’td it.”

“Hermione?”

She ignored Ginny this time, hoping she would assume she had fallen asleep.

“Why wasn’t there anything personal in your room?”

“Mmm?”

“Your bedroom. It looked just like you, neat and blue with lots of books, but you didn’t have any photographs or stuffed animals on your bed or Gryffindor banners on the wall or anything.”

It was the middle of the night, but Ginny had stumbled across something Hermione had been trying to hide for seven years.

“I put my photos away because I was afraid the Death Eaters would search the house.”

“What about the rest of your things though? I mean, I have all kinds of stuff in my room besides my bed and my clothes.”

“Mum and Dad didn’t want any wizarding stuff out that they might have to explain to visitors.”

Ginny was quiet for a moment, but Hermione knew it wouldn’t last. She was sharp and intuitive, Ginny was.

“Do your parents have a lot of houseguests?”

“No.”

“So, you didn’t have wizarding stuff out even when you were home.”

“Just a photo of me, Ron, and Harry. I insisted. And I kept the photo of all of us at the Quidditch World Cup on the inside door of my wardrobe.”

“I’m sorry,” Ginny said quietly.

Hermione stared up at the ceiling, no longer sleepy. “Yeah. Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

This story is part of LLF Comment Project, whose goal is to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites:

Feedback
• Short comments
• Long comments
• Questions
• Constructive criticism (especially regarding plot development/how the story works as a whole)
• “<3” as extra kudos
• Reader-reader interaction

This author replies to comments.

LLF Comment Builder
Hermione was still in her pajamas when the old Victorian’s doorbell rang. Recognizing Ron through the glass of the front door, she broke into a run, socks sliding on the hall’s wooden floor.

“Ron! What are you doing here?”

He grinned at her. “Nobody ever said I couldn’t do magic. Can I come in?”

“Yes, yes, of course!” She swung the door wide, then closed it quickly as Crookshanks came round the corner to investigate the newcomer.

Ron bent down. “Hi, Crookshanks.”

Crooks considered his outstretched hand for a moment, then turned and trotted back into the dining room, where he could lay in the sun coming through the window.

Ron frowned at her as he stood up.

“Be nice,” Hermione chided. “He’s upset about not having gnomes to chase anymore.” Crooks had spent the last year at the Burrow (except for the few weeks at Auntie Muriel’s), but Hermione had brought him home with her on Saturday, after Harry’s party.

“Your parents got off to work okay?”

She shrugged. “I assume so. I had a lie-in.”

“We didn’t really talk about it over the weekend—how do you want to make this work?”

Hermione led the way back to the kitchen, waved her hand at the island to indicate Ron should take a seat, and began gathering cereal, milk, and bowls.

“Mum and Dad haven’t said you can’t come over, per se,” she said, setting a choice of cereal options in front of Ron. “But I know without asking they don’t want you over here all day when they’re gone.”

“Fair enough.” He filled his bowl nearly to the brim.

“So I think,” she continued, pulling out two spoons and bumping the drawer closed with her hip, “the best thing is for me to Apparate to you. I’ll walk away from the house and find a private spot.”

Ron accepted the milk and poured it over his cereal before digging in. Hermione poured hers and returned it to the refrigerator before taking a seat beside him.

A moment of crunching, then he swallowed. “Okay. So … back to the treehouse?”

“Or—” Hermione moved her spoon around the bowl, making sure every dry piece was submerged. “I still have Bill’s tent. From when we left Shell Cottage, thinking we’d be on the run after Gringotts.”

“Couldn’t have predicted escape on a dragon.”

“Quite,” Hermione said, amused.
“All right. Well, since I’m already here, how about you show me around today?” Ron was already scraping the bottom of his bowl.

She made what she hoped was an inquisitive grunt around her own mouthful.

“You know, where you went to school before Hogwarts, your favorite library, anyplace that’s special to you.”

Hermione smiled. “I love it when you do that.”

Ron slurped the last of the milk out of his bowl, then tilted it away from his mouth. “You hate when I eat too fast.”

“But I love when you ask about my Muggle life.”

He beamed at her, and her heart did the now-familiar flip.

“Are you—”

“Yes, I’m going to eat this,” she said with a laugh, sliding her bowl further away from him. “Get a piece of fruit. I know you had a cooked breakfast at the Burrow.”

He pouted but pulled a banana off its bunch from the fruit basket in the center of the island. “You can take me to your favorite restaurant for lunch.”

“I’ll take you to all my favorites,” she promised. “We still have a month.”

“Thirty-one days,” Ron said, trapping her hand with the spoon and leaning in to kiss her. “It sounds longer.”

Hermione pushed away the thought of leaving and kissed him back.

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Jean was carrying a load of laundry downstairs when she noticed Hermione laying items out on her bed.

“What are you doing?” she asked, balancing the heavy basket against the doorway.

“Packing,” Hermione said absently, weighing the different dress shoes she had in each hand.

“I thought you were going to Hogwarts tomorrow, to help with the cleanup.”

“I am.”

“In heels?”

Hermione shook her head, putting the rejected pair back on the bottom shelf of her wardrobe. “No, those are for the party.”

Jean set down the hamper. Even with most of its weight supported by the jamb, the plastic rim still dug into her hip.

“I thought the party wasn’t until the 15th,” she said.

“Not that party.” Hermione finally turned to face her. “Ginny’s party. Tomorrow’s her birthday.”
Jean frowned. “You didn’t say anything about an extra party for Ginny’s birthday. I thought they were celebrating hers and her brother’s together.”

“They are, as far as inviting other people, but since the party is actually between Ginny’s and Percy’s birthdays, they’re having a family dinner on the actual date. I’m not going for Percy’s,” she added. “I mean, we get along well enough and everything, but this is the first one since—and, well, with you and Dad….” She trailed off, apparently realizing her explanation wasn’t helping.

“So, if I understand you correctly,” Jean said, trying to stay calm, “you went to the Weasleys’ a week ago Friday for Harry’s birthday, and you want to go tomorrow for Ginny’s birthday, and then back again on Saturday for this joint party thing?”

Hermione nodded. “Everyone will be there on Saturday, people from the Order and the DA and everything.”

“Well then, why not just go Saturday when you can see everyone?”

Jean thought it a perfectly reasonable suggestion, but Hermione stared at her like she’d lost her mind.

“Because … tomorrow is Ginny’s birthday,” she said slowly, as if Jean didn’t understand English. “Her seventeenth birthday, Mum. Her coming of age? And she’s my best girl friend.”

“Three visits in a fortnight, isn’t that rather excessive?”

“No,” Hermione said stubbornly, beginning to stuff her chosen items into the beaded bag. “Everyone else gets to see their boyfriend and their friends every day, or at least send letters every day, but the Muggle post doesn’t work that fast, does it?”

“Hermione,” Jean said, unable to keep the exasperation out of her voice. “We missed nearly a year with you, we hardly saw you in Australia without Ron—”

“That’s not true!”

Jean sent her a “don’t interrupt me” look, and she subsided.

“You’re going to be gone for another year at Hogwarts in only three weeks, and—” She swallowed the words. You don’t seem to want to spend any time with me, and it hurts. “It’s just, we don’t have very much time left with you, and it seems you’re spending a lot of it with Ron’s family.”

“They’re my family too!”

Jean stepped back as if she’d been slapped.

“Mum—” Hermione moved towards her, then stopped. “I just meant—”

“Be home by midnight,” she said stiffly. “You do not have my permission to stay the night.”

“Mum, I’m sorry—”

But Jean didn’t stick around to hear the explanation. She picked up the basket and fled for the safety of the laundry room, tears already falling.

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Percy looked up from his novel when he heard the kitchen Floo flare to life. Marking his place, he turned the corner from the hall to see Charlie’s head floating in the emerald-green flames.
“Charlie! Is everything okay?” He knelt in front of the fireplace.

“Yeah, everything’s fine, I just wanted to tell you this in person instead of a letter.”

“Tell me what?”

“Er, has Bill or Mum said anything to you about having a joint birthday party for you and Ginny?”

He shook his head.

Charlie grimaced. “Well, I hope it wasn’t supposed to be a surprise. Anyway, Bill owled yesterday and said Mum had agreed to host a party on the fifteenth for both of you. That’s the weekend before your birthday because—”

“She didn’t want the party to be on my actual birthday when it’s Ginny’s seventeenth,” Percy said. He knew his birthday was on a Saturday this year, and he thought he knew where this conversation was going.

“Exactly. So I got to thinking—I mean, I had planned to come in for both your birthdays, yours and Ginny’s, but….” He broke off, looking uncomfortable.

“But you can’t leave the Reserve three times in one month,” Percy finished for him.

“No. Obviously I’m coming in for Gin-Gin’s coming of age—”

“It’s fine, Charlie. Come for Ginny’s birthday and then the party on the fifteenth.”

“Are you sure? I didn’t want you to think … this first year … I mean, it’s nothing to do with you or … things….” He rubbed his face with one meaty hand before it dropped out of sight again. “Shit.”

Percy rolled his eyes. “Of course I’m sure. I’ve had other birthdays, and now that Voldemort’s dead the odds are pretty good I’ll have more. Come for the party. You’ll be able to see everyone then, not just the family.”

“Yeah, Bill said he was going to invite the Order and a bunch of people from Hogwarts, from all our years.”

“Ahh,” Percy said, seeing a golden opportunity.

Charlie’s eyebrows drew together. “What?”

“The Order—does that mean Amy?”

“I reckon, why?”

Percy waggled his own eyebrows suggestively.

Now Charlie rolled his eyes. “Grow up, Perce. We’ve been friends for years.”

“Uh-huh.”

“She’s Bill’s old girlfriend.”

“Emphasis on ‘old,’” Percy said. “As in former, not aged.”

Another eye roll, which Percy knew would have been an elbow or a punch had Charlie been there in
person. This was rather fun, taking the piss when he couldn’t be beaten up for it.

“She’s seeing someone,” Charlie said flatly. “Seriously.”

“As in, you’re serious, or she’s serious about this bloke?” That earned him a rude gesture.

“Both. Now piss off.”

Percy held up both hands. “Hey, you Flooed me.”

“My mistake,” Charlie muttered. But then he flashed a smile. “See you, Perce!” And he was gone, leaving Percy grinning at a pile of ash in his fireplace.

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“Okay, Crookshanks,” Hermione said, holding up the stuffed animal she’d bought for this express purpose. “This is an owl.”

The ginger cat didn’t look up.

Hermione sat on the floor so she would be eye level with him as he lay on her bed in sphinx pose. “This is important, Crooks. I need your help.”

He laid his chin between his paws and blinked at her.

“What do you remember Pig? Pigwidgeon, Ron’s owl? Itty bitty bird about this big”—she wiggled the stuffed owl—“who likes to circle everyone and hoots a lot?”

Crookshanks flicked his tail.

“Yes, I know he annoyed you, but he really likes you!” She spoke encouragingly. “I need you to pass letters from him.”

Crooks blinked.

“You’ll have to be careful about it, like you did when you helped Sirius—Padfoot, remember? The big black dog on the Hogwarts grounds a few years ago?”

He purred.

“Good,” Hermione said, scratching his head. “So Pig will fly in with a letter, and you’ll climb the tree and take it from him. You can still climb trees, right?”

While the ginger cat appeared in perfect health and had been active in the Burrow’s garden, Hermione hadn’t seen him do any climbing higher than Ginny’s wardrobe.

Crooks pulled his head out from under her hand and glared in the way only cats can.

“I’m just checking,” she said defensively. “Pig can’t come into the garden or the house because Mum and Dad will be suspicious if they see an owl. So you’ll have to watch out for him—actually, I’m sure he’ll hoot when he sees you—”

Crookshanks rolled onto his side and stretched, clearly bored with the conversation.

Hermione had expected this development and pulled a bag of treats from her pocket. Recognizing the nuggets at once, Crookshanks sat up and leaned over the edge of the bed to nudge her, meowing.
Hermione pulled the bag out of reach and held up the stuffed owl.

“First the owl, then a treat,” she instructed.

Crookshanks swiped one paw across its face.

“Gently!”

He let his paw rest on the plush head, and Hermione gave him a treat.

“And if I gave you a scroll, like this—” She stretched to reach the blank roll of parchment she’d left on her desk. “Can you carry it in your mouth without slobbering all over it?” She offered it to the cat.

He stared at her.

Hermione balanced a treat on the scroll and tried again. Crookshanks nipped the treat without touching the parchment.

“C’mon, Crooks! I know it was you who took Neville’s list of passwords to Padfoot. I know you can do this.”

Crookshanks sat back and licked one paw.

She sighed. “What about tuna, eh?”

His ears twitched and the licking paused ever so briefly before resuming.

“Would you do it for a can of tuna?”

He looked up, paw suspended in mid-air.

“Okay, one can per letter?”

Crookshanks extended the freshly-bathed paw. Laughing, Hermione shook it.

“You’re a regular con artist, you are,” she said affectionately, scratching his head again and smoothing her hand down his back. “Come on, let’s go outside and try it out. I’ll get some tuna from the kitchen.”

Crookshanks pulled his lips back, picked up the scroll between sharp front teeth without tearing it, and led the way to the door.

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Hermione waited for Ginny in the now-clean-and-repaired Entrance Hall beside the empty Gryffindor hourglass, its top bulb of stacked rubies awaiting the start of a new school year.

“Happy birthday!” she exclaimed as soon as she saw her friend, enveloping her in a hug. “Here.”

“Cheers,” Ginny said, accepting the brightly flashing badge announcing I can't keep calm, it's my 17th birthday!, but her smile was tight.

“Ginny? What is it?”

She busied herself affixing the badge to her shirt. “I went to Fred’s grave this morning,” she said finally, so quietly that Hermione almost didn’t hear her.
“Oh.” Hermione reached out and squeezed her hand.

“But he wouldn’t want me moping around today of all days! Let’s go. I wouldn’t put it past McGonagall to reprimand me for being late, even if it is my birthday.”

Hermione followed her into the Great Hall, and they took seats along the Ravenclaw table along with the other volunteers. In the first few weeks after the Battle, there had only been a single table set up, and the volunteers had continued sitting together even after all four House tables had been replaced. Hermione greeted Justin Finch-Fletchly and Ernie MacMillan, then turned her attention to the front of the hall as Professor McGonagall stood up.

“You will be grouped by your house today because we’re working on the dormitories and common rooms,” she announced. “Prefects, you will organize volunteers for your house as you see fit. Is there any house that doesn’t have a prefect present?” She looked up and down the table, and heads turned to evaluate her question.

“Professor?” A young girl, no more than thirteen, raised her hand. “I don’t think there are any female Slytherin prefects present, and—”

“Yes, I know, the girls’ dormitories are charmed.”

“I can do it, Professor.” It was Andromeda Tonks.

Hermione hadn’t noticed her until she spoke, but she sat at the far end near the teachers’ table in plain blue robes. In front of her was a woven basket that Hermione assumed contained a sleeping Teddy.

McGonagall smiled. “Perfect, Andromeda, thank you. Anyone else? Very well, I’ll see you all back here at noon sharp for lunch.”

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Percy stood in front of the mirror over his dresser and took a deep breath, evaluating his appearance: light wash jeans, button-down shirt untucked and open at the collar, hair neatly combed, clean socks and neatly-tied trainers. But it wasn’t his clothes he was nervous about; it was that little black box sitting beside a small, festive bag in bright colors.

Ginny’s seventeenth birthday gift.

As if attending a family party wasn’t difficult enough—okay, he had been to dinner at the Burrow plenty of times this summer, but this was different, special, important—it wasn’t just Ginny’s birthday, not just the first of her birthdays Percy had been present for in four years, it was her bloody seventeenth. The most important birthday in a witch’s life, and despite Hermione’s guidance and reassurance, the gold crescent moon earrings with Ginny’s birthstone now seemed all wrong. Maybe she didn’t like Astronomy now. Maybe she didn’t like peridot, even if it was green. Hell, maybe green wasn’t even her favorite color anymore—how should he know?

He wanted this to go well; he wanted to fit in. He wanted to give his sister, who had welcomed him back with open arms and done everything she could to smooth things between him and George, he wanted to give her something she would like and appreciate for years to come, a little piece of the happiness she had given him this summer. He wanted his gift to be something his brothers and parents thought was fitting.

Percy wanted to give Ginny a memory of him that made her smile.
Hermione watched Ginny take off on her brand-new professional broomstick, chased only by her family’s laughter.

“Well, we won’t see her again for a while,” Ron said. “Come on, Harry, you can help clear up this time since it’s not your birthday.”

“Charming, Ron,” Hermione said, already scraping and stacking plates.

“It’s okay, I don’t mind,” Harry said, summoning all the glasses from the table and upending them in the peony bushes one by one.

“It was a nice party,” she said as Ron left to carry a stack of empty plates and glasses inside.

“It was,” Harry agreed.

“I love their tradition of a favorite memory from each family member.”

“Mmm,” Harry said, keeping his face turned away from her as he moved on to collecting cutlery.

There had been a lot of teasing from Ginny’s brothers when it came to Harry’s favorite memory of her this year.

“So … got any special plans?”

Harry glanced at her from under his fringe. “I could use some help.”

“With what?”

Ron reappeared, and Harry waited until he gathered more dishes and left for the kitchen before he spoke again.

“I’m taking Ginny into Muggle London tomorrow, and I need you to pack a bag for her. A small one, maybe with one of those Undetectable Extension charms? I want it to be a surprise.”

Why would Ginny need the space of an Undetectable Extension Charm just to—oh. “You’re going to spend the night?”

He nodded.

“I’ll take care of it,” Hermione promised, already plotting how she could raid Ginny’s wardrobe without her notice.
Chapter Thirty-Four

Congratulations, you've won a series of speedy updates! Through a combination of technical difficulties, idiocy, and real-life responsibilities, I'm three chapters behind. As soon as I can get them uploaded and proofed, they're yours ... plus a fourth next Wednesday! Enjoy!

Hermione woke in a familiar fog of warmth, scent, and safety.

“Shit!”

She sat bolt upright and opened her eyes in one motion, finding exactly what she feared: she was in Ron’s bed. At the Burrow. And it was well into the morning, judging by the bright sunshine Pig avoided by turning his back to the window and hiding his head under his tiny wing.

“No, no, no, no, no!” she wailed. It had been going so well with her parents, at least until she’d had to put her foot down about coming to Ginny’s birthday party, but Mum had told her to be home by midnight and now it was—

“Eight forty-seven.” Hermione moaned the results of her Tempus charm.

“What the hell are you carrying on about?” Ron muttered without opening his eyes. “Wait—” He pushed himself up on one elbow and stared at her. “What the hell are you still doing here?”

Hermione fell back beside him with a whoosh that fluttered the sheets. “We fell asleep.”

Ron, who was nearest the wall, glanced over her, and it was only then she thought to wonder about Harry.

He was out cold, face down on the camp bed with the sheet tangled around his legs and a dark spot of drool visible on his pillow.

“Why didn’t he wake me up when he came in last night?”

Harry and Ginny had disappeared after George’s fireworks, and she and Ron had had his room to themselves.

“Shame Voldemort never found a way to break into Hogwarts,” Ron said in a low voice, staring at Harry’s unmoving form. “Could have murdered him in his sleep ages ago and been done with it.”

Hermione’s laugh came out more like a snort, and she slapped her hand to her mouth. “Is he still having nightmares?”

“Sometimes. He’s not sleeping as much as when we first came home, but if you leave him in a comfortable position for more than a few minutes, he’ll doze off.”

“He needs it. He looks healthier,” she whispered.
“Not that I’m complaining, but … why aren’t you rushing out of here?”

She shrugged, burrowing deeper into the mattress. “Mum and Dad are already at work. At this point, it doesn’t matter what time I get home as long as it’s before they do.”

“Do you want to call them? Do you think they’ll be worried?”

She bit her lip, considering. Normally she’d say yes, but calling her parents from the Burrow meant getting dressed and walking into the village to use the pay phone only to pull one of them away from a patient to take her call.

“I don’t think so. Annoyed, definitely, but they’ll assume I decided to stay here.” Her stomach twisted uncomfortably. Mum would assume she’d defied her on purpose; it would only reinforce her fear that she was being replaced.

Ron’s stomach rumbled, and Hermione forced a smile, pushing away thoughts of her parents for now. “Go on. I’ll follow in a minute.”

He nudged her towards the edge of the bed.

“Climb over,” she whispered. “And hand me my clothes.” All she was wearing was Ron’s shirt from yesterday, and while it hung nearly to her knees, she didn’t fancy Harry waking up while she was sliding her knickers on.

Ron pulled her closer to him and consequently the wall, then rolled them both over so he was lying in Hermione’s spot and she on top of him, earning him a round of giggles and her a rather loud shushing.

Harry mumbled and turned the other way.


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Jean pushed her cereal round the bowl, taking care to knock the spoon against the edge repeatedly in hopes Hugh would notice her agitation. But he remained ensconced behind the newspaper, his toast disappearing at a steady rate.

“I messed up,” she blurted.

He folded down one corner. “What?”

“With Hermione. I messed up.”

“I didn’t want her to go to Ginny’s birthday party last night and told her she was spending an awful lot of time with Ron’s family when we hadn’t seen her for a year and she got mad and screamed they were her family too and I told her to be home by midnight and she wasn’t and she’s still not here and she’s probably never coming back!” she finished with a wail.

“Jeannie…” Hugh pushed their dishes back and pulled her into his arms. “Hermione is a very sensible girl. She wouldn’t move out without telling us, no matter how upset she was.”

“This is all your fault, you know,” she said, thumping his shoulder with one fist.
“Yes, I know.” A pause. “How’s that?”

She gave a watery chuckle and sat back. “Five years ago, when the Weasleys offered to see Hermione to King’s Cross. You said we should let her go, it was just one night, she should have the chance to spend time with her friends and a wizarding family.” She threw up her hands. “Now that’s all she wants to do!”

“I wasn’t hanging out at home with my parents at eighteen. Were you?”

“Don’t be reasonable,” she said irritably.

“When we agreed Hermione could go to Hogwarts … this is one of the things we hoped for her, do you remember?” Hugh placed one finger under her chin and turned her to look at him. “That she would fit in, find friends, find a community. That she could blossom when she was someplace where she felt she belonged.”

“She belongs here, with us! We’re her parents! She could have blossomed here.” Even as she said it, Jean knew it wasn’t true. Hermione was brilliant and compassionate and curious, but she wasn’t typical. She had been miserable in primary school, ostracized and picked on by the other children, and the change in her that first Christmas holiday had been remarkable. And encouraging.

“I just—” Her voice cracked, and Hugh squeezed her hand. “I’m just afraid we’re going to lose her. Really lose her, that she’ll disappear into the wizarding world and it’ll be like we never existed.”

“No,” he said confidently.

“Why not?”

“Because she had her chance, Jean. She could have left us in Australia, living our lives as Wendell and Monica. She didn’t have to come back for us; she didn’t have to reverse the spell when she saw we had a good life there. If Hermione wanted to leave us behind, that’s when she would have done it.”

Jean stared. That was so obviously true she couldn’t believe she hadn’t realized it before. “Oh,” she said softly.

Hugh squeezed her hand again. “Yeah. She’s trying, love. She’s pulled between two worlds, two families, and she’s naturally becoming more independent, as she should. We haven’t spent much time with her in the last five or six years, even less than other boarding school kids. But I still say allowing her to develop a relationship with the Weasleys was the right thing to do. She needed—needs—people who can guide her in the world she’s going to inhabit ninety-nine percent of the time. What do we know about which Hogwarts classes would give her the best career opportunities or how to get into wizarding government or even a safe area of wizarding London for her first apartment?”

“I know. I’m just scared.”

“You need to talk to her,” he said, returning to his breakfast.

She snorted. “That’s rich, coming from you.”

He shook his head. “You two always talk at each other. It’s like you expect the other person to understand where you’re coming from without actually listening to each other. You’re a lot alike, you know.”
“I know.” Jean sighed, wishing she could talk to Hermione now, to tell her she wasn’t upset she’d missed curfew, one Jean had set in anger. “It’s hard not to be able to reach her. I think that’s why I feel so cut off when she’s there, because I can’t just pick up the phone and call her. Or if she gets hurt or sick or she and Ron fight about something, I’m not there for her either. I don’t even know about it.”

“Well … I’ve been thinking about that. What are we going to do when she goes to Hogwarts?”

“What?”

“If we don’t use owls, how are we going to communicate with her?”

“Well, we’ll have to use owls once she’s at Hogwarts. I’m not spending another year not hearing from my daughter,” she said firmly.

Hugh relaxed. “I was hoping you’d say that. I’d thought maybe, if you insisted, Harry could help us since he knows the Muggle system but—”

“Owls,” Jean repeated. “We’ve always done it that way before, and the fact is, she is a witch. If we don’t adopt some of her ways, we will be cut off from her when she’s in the wizarding world. And once she finishes school, she has no reason not to be there.”

He smiled.

“All right, I’ve just talked myself into taking my own advice,” she said good-naturedly. “There’s no need to rub it in.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he said, leaning in to kiss her forehead. “Do you have an early appointment today?”

She shook her head, standing up to dump her soggy cereal and pour a fresh bowl. “Not until 8:45. Go on, I’ll find my own way in.”

He hesitated, but was shrugging on his coat. “Are you sure?”

“Sure,” she said around a mouthful of crunchy flakes, appetite restored. “Love you!”

Hermione was lingering over tea with Ron and Ginny when Harry finally came down to breakfast. She shot a glance at the two parchment envelopes on the worktop with her and Ginny’s names in emerald-green ink.

“I thought you were going home first thing this morning,” Harry said, drawing up a chair beside Ron.

“I overslept. Mum and Dad were already at work by the time I woke up, so I decided it wouldn’t hurt to spend a little more time here. I definitely have to be back before they get home, though.”

“There you are, Harry,” Mrs. Weasley said, coming in from the scullery and picking up the yellowish envelopes from the worktop. “The girls wanted to wait for you.”

Hermione opened the envelope addressed to Miss Hermione Granger, The Burrow, Ottery St. Catchpole and pulled out her booklist, but before she could read it, a red and gold badge fell out.

A prefect’s badge.
She stared at it for a long minute, then flung the parchment onto the table and ran out the back door.

“Hermione, what—” Mum began, but her only answer was the slamming of the door.

Ron reached for Hermione’s letter and began to read.

“It’s a prefect badge,” Harry said as Ginny picked it up. “Why would that upset her?”

“McGonagall says she thought Hermione might have lost hers, what with everything that happened last year, so she sent her a new one. A prefect badge,” Ron said slowly. He turned to look at Harry. “Not a Head Girl one.”

Harry swore softly. “If she hadn’t come with me—”

“It must have gone to one of the sixth-years,” Ron said. “Someone in your year, I mean,” he added to Ginny.

“Siân Jernigan, probably,” Ginny said, looking at the back door with a frown on her face.

“It’s not fair,” Harry said angrily. “She was wanted by the Ministry, she sent her parents away, she helped me defeat Voldemort, and McGonagall won’t make her Head Girl just because she’s too old?”

“Think about the other pupils, Harry,” Mum said, setting a bowl of porridge in front of him. “Would it be fair for the girls in Ginny’s year not to have a chance at being Head Girl just because Hermione took a year off?”

“She didn’t go on holiday, she was helping me destroy Voldemort!”

“We know, Harry,” Ginny said in a soothing voice that told Ron more than he needed to know about the relationship between his sister and his best friend.

“It’s not your fault,” Ron said. “She couldn’t have gone to Hogwarts last year even if she hadn’t come with us. That bloody Muggle-born Registration Commission, remember?”

“It’s not fair,” Harry said again, jamming his spoon in his porridge.

“It doesn’t seem right no matter how you look at it,” Ginny agreed.

“If anybody deserves to be Head Girl, Hermione does,” Harry said stubbornly. “She’s the smartest witch Hogwarts has seen in decades. Everyone says so. And she’d sooner cut off her hand than break a rule.”

“Yes, except defying Ministry decrees, impersonating a government employee, starting an illegal secret Defense Against the Dark Arts group, and…” Mum paused dramatically. “Oh, yes, armed robbery.”

Ron and Ginny laughed. Harry gave her a reluctant smile.

“That’ll be it for sure,” Ron said, swiping toast from Ginny’s plate rather than the platter beside him. “McGonagall’s afraid to make her Head Girl in case the Ministry decides to come after us for Gringotts after all.”

“Still,” Ginny said, looking at the door again. “Someone should go after her.”
“I’ll do it,” he said, pushing away from the table.

He found Hermione the other side of Dad’s garage, sobbing into her hands.

“Here. Come here.” Ron put his hand on her shoulder and turned her into his embrace.

She came willingly, leaning her forehead against his chest and fisting his shirt with both hands.

“S—sorry.”

“What, for being disappointed? Of course you’re disappointed. You’ve wanted to be Head Girl since we were ickle firsties.”

She turned her head so her cheek rested against him, making it easier to understand her.

“It’s stupid.” She sniffed.

“No, it’s not.” He rubbed her back in long strokes.

“I just meant I’ve done more important things than be Hogwarts’s Head Girl.”

“Not things your parents understand,” he said gently, and that set her off again.

She cried in great heaving sobs, shoulders shaking and a wet patch growing on his shirt with alarming speed. Ron pulled her closer and held her tighter, wishing there were something he could do to make her pain go away, wishing her parents could see how brilliant and kind and amazing she was; wishing Hermione could see that for herself even if her parents never understood.

He let her cry it out, understanding without being told that she had been stuffing her emotions, had been using the time showing him around her Muggle hometown as a distraction, hiding away in the privacy of the tent to avoid dealing with her fears about her relationship with her parents.

Godric, he understood that.

When she quieted enough to hear him, he began talking. “You should have seen Harry’s reaction,” he said, smoothing her curls. “I haven’t seen him that angry with McGonagall since she took his broomstick in third year.”

“That was m-my fault,” she said, then hiccuped.

“You were right. It was from Sirius. Anyway, he went on for a good five minutes, all about how you were helping him defeat Voldemort, not on holiday, and McGonagall wasn’t being fair, and you couldn’t help being Muggle-born, and how you’d never break a rule….”

She scoffed.

“Yeah, even Mum got in on that one,” he said, holding her at arm’s length and smiling. “Better?”

She nodded. “I think I’ve been holding that in for a while.”

“I think so.” He conjured her a handkerchief. “Blow.”

She did and had just wiped her face and smoothed her hair (as much as was possible, anyway) when Harry and Ginny appeared, her Hogwarts letter still unopened in her hand.

“What’s up?” Ron said, seeing his sister looked fit to burst.
She pulled out her booklist and once again, something red and gold fluttered out of the envelope.

“Is that—” Hermione said.

“A captain’s badge!” Ron and Harry shouted, recognizing the “C” emblazoned across the Gryffindor crest at once.

Ginny squealed, squeezing the badge in one hand and throwing her arms around Harry.

“See, I told you you would be selected,” he said. “Congratulations!”

“That’s wonderful, Ginny,” Hermione said, her arms already outstretched, waiting for Harry to let go.

Ron felt a swell of affection for Hermione and her generosity to be happy for Ginny even when she herself had just been disappointed.

“Not bad, sis,” Ron said, but he hugged her tightly and lifted her off the ground.

Ginny laughed when he set her down, holding the badge out in front of her. “I can’t believe it! Me, Quidditch Captain!”

“Oi, Charlie,” Ron bellowed over his shoulder. “Stop mucking about in there and come give the sprite some advice!”

“What is it?” Charlie appeared from the garage with a bicycle chain in hand.

Ginny held up her badge, grinning broadly.

Charlie dropped the chain. “No way!” he exclaimed, half-tackling Ginny before twirling her around.

“Watch it,” Harry said good-naturedly. “She can’t fly if you break her in half.”

Hermione had pulled out her camera after hugging Ginny herself and had captured both brothers’ reactions. “I still had it in my pocket,” she said, smiling. “I took a couple more too, you just didn’t notice.”

“Thanks, Hermione,” Ginny said.


Ron followed Charlie back into the garage as Hermione and Harry said goodbye.

“Everything okay?” Charlie asked, returning to the bicycle he was tinkering with. “I heard Hermione crying.”

“Oh. Yeah. She’s disappointed she didn’t make Head Girl. She was hoping to be able to tell her parents.”

“Ah.” Charlie studied the collection of screws, nuts, and washers spread out on the table, then selected one seemingly at random. “I didn’t expect her to still be here.”

Ron felt his ears turning pink. “No, we, er—we fell asleep.”

“Everything okay there too?”
“Yes. Good.”

“Good,” Charlie said, obviously amused. He gave the bike’s back wheel a spin and it fell off.

“Not good,” Ron said, laughing.

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Hermione heard her parents’ car pull into the driveway and wondered if it would be too cowardly to run upstairs and hide in her room. She wasn’t sure she could face another argument with her mum, not today. Before she could decide, Mum came in through the side porch.

“Hermione? Are you home?”

“In the study, Mum!”

Mum appeared in the doorway, still carrying her work tote and unbuttoning her cardigan. “Hello, love, how was the party?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t make it home last night—”

They spoke overtop each other. Mum smiled. “You first.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t make it home last night,” Hermione said. “I meant to, honestly. I told Ginny and Ron and they understood but … well, I should have set an alarm.” She hesitated, unsure if Mum knew the full nature of her relationship with Ron now. “Ron and I fell asleep talking.”

“I’m sorry too,” Mum said, setting her tote on the desk and sitting on the wide arm of Hermione’s club chair. “I—well, I was upset, obviously, and I just threw that out to annoy you.”

Hermione nodded.

“How was the party?”

“Really nice,” Hermione said. “They have a tradition where everyone shares their favorite memory of the birthday person over the last year. It’s lovely.”

“And what was yours?” Mum asked, standing up and motioning Hermione to follow her.

“Oh, when Ginny first saw me and Ron together, the day after the Battle, she wouldn’t believe it was real unless we kissed. And … I don’t know, it’s just a happy memory. A fun memory.”

She paused at the top of the stairs. “Mum?”

She’d already entered her bedroom but turned back. “Yes?”

Hermione twisted her hands together. “What I said, about the Weasleys being my family too … I didn’t mean you and Dad aren’t,” she said quickly. “Not at all. Just … I love them too. Not more, or better, just—”

Mum came over and hugged her. “I understand. It’s … hard, because as your mother I want to be everything for you. Anything and everything. But because I’m unfamiliar with so much of what you experience, I can’t do that.” She gave a final squeeze and let go. “That’s why we always agreed to let you spend some of your holidays with them. Because your dad and I wanted you to experience the parental and family support we couldn’t give you, and Molly and Arthur seemed happy to do that.”
“They are,” Hermione agreed. “They’re the most generous people I’ve ever met.”

Mum reached out and pushed the curls away from her face, and Hermione could tell there was something else she wanted to say.

“What is it?”

“Just—promise me something,” Mum said. “Promise me you won’t forget about us. We can’t join you in the wizarding world, Hermione, we can’t find you there unless you involve us in your life and I—”

“Of course I won’t forget you,” Hermione said, flinging herself into her mother’s arms. “I don’t ever want to spend another day like last year, completely cut away from you. Not ever ever,” she said, using an old childhood phrase. “I love you.”

“Oh, Hermione, I love you too. More than you know.”

Hermione inhaled the familiar citrus scent of her mum’s cardigan and thought maybe they would be okay after all.
Late that night, the door to Ron’s bedroom banged open without warning. He had his wand out and a jinx on his lips before the questioning voice registered as his mother’s.

“Is Harry up here with you?”

She cast a magnified _lumos_, and Ron threw his arm over his eyes with a groan of protest.

“Wha—”

“Ron!” Mum’s voice was sharp and urgent. “Where’s Harry?”

“I dunno, did you look in Ginny’s room?” Sudden awakenings in the middle of the night did not improve Ron’s diplomacy.

“She’s missing too.” Mum rifled through Harry’s things.

“Well, they’re probably out for a fly. Lost track of time.” He squinted at the clock: 3:07. Bloody hell, that was a lot of time to lose.

“Get dressed,” Mum ordered, abandoning Harry’s rucksack without bothering to replace the items she had removed. “I need your help downstairs.”

Ron ran a hand through his hair, trying to wake up. “Mum, what—”

“No, I’m going to Floo-call Bill.”

When Ron arrived in the kitchen a few minutes later, Charlie was already at the table and Mum’s head was in the fireplace.

“She still talking to Bill?”

“Huh-uh,” Charlie said, pouring a cup of tea and pushing it towards Ron. “Moved from him to Percy and now George.”

“Ginny’s going to love that.”

“Did Harry say anything to you?” Charlie asked.

Ron shook his head and took a sip. “I have no idea what he was planning, but he obviously did a crap job if Mum’s already found them out. Something to do with Muggle London, so Hermione was helping, but she didn’t say what. I didn’t want to know.”

“Were they even planning to come home tonight?”

Ron opened his mouth, then closed it, considering the implications. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “Could go either way. But neither one of them asked me to cover for them.”
“Ginny wouldn’t disappear without saying anything,” Charlie said. “She’s more responsible than that.” He frowned. “I thought Harry was too.”

“But Harry—”

Ron’s defense of his friend was interrupted as his mother scrambled away from the fireplace and a tall, spinning figure appeared.

“Bill!” Mum exclaimed. “They’re not at Shell Cottage?”

Bill, his long hair unbound and wearing what looked like Fleur’s dressing gown, placed a reassuring hand on his mother’s shoulder.

“They’re not in the house or the garden, and my wards haven’t been disturbed. Are we sure they haven’t just fallen asleep somewhere?”

“Not on the property,” Dad said, coming in and closing the back door behind him. “These wards haven’t been disturbed either, and none of the broomsticks are missing.” He focused on Ron. “You don’t know where they are?”

“No, Harry didn’t—”

“You’re certain?” Dad pressed. “This is not the time to cover for a friend, Ron.”

“Harry didn’t say anything to me. Hermione might know, but—”

“We’ve no way to reach her,” Bill said with a sigh.

“Well, I could go down to the village and ring her parents’ house, but….” That would definitely not help the situation between Hermione and her parents, to ring them in the middle of the night looking for two of her friends.

“No, I don’t want to worry them,” Mum said, wringing her hands together. “Oh, something bad has happened, I just know it!”

“Now, Molly,” Dad said, putting an arm around her and leading her to the table. “We don’t know that.”

“What if they’re lost, or cold, or—”

“It’s the middle of August, Mum,” Ron said. “They’re hardly going to freeze to death, even if they are outside.”

Both Bill and Charlie glared at him, and Ron sat back.

“Or in hospital. Or a Muggle hospital! With needles and stitches and—they could have been kidnapped, or attacked….”

Bill left Dad to deal with Mum and joined Ron and Charlie at the opposite end of the table. “What are you smirking about?”


“You’re sitting there like you know something we don’t,” Bill said suspiciously.

Charlie hesitated, shooting a glance towards their parents and lowering his voice. “An eighteen-year-
old boy and his seventeen-year-old girlfriend go out on a date and don’t come home on time. Now, assuming said boy was someone other than The Boy Who Lived, what would be your first thought?”

Ron saw Bill’s expression start to clear, then there was a loud crack! just behind them. Mum screamed, and both Ron and Bill drew their wands.

“Bloody hell, you lot are in a right state,” George said. “Gin-Gin’s finally revealed herself as the trouble-maker she is, eh?”

“You—you—” Mum’s face was bright red, and Ron ducked out of the way as she swatted at George without particularly aiming.

George looked from his parents to his brothers and back. “Am I the only one who thinks Harry and Ginny going missing together is a good thing? I mean, if it was only one of them … then I’d be worried.”

Charlie raised his brows in Bill’s direction.

“He does have a point,” Bill said. “Maybe they’re just … together.”

“In Muggle London,” Mum muttered, obviously not reassured. “Merlin only knows what kind of dangers lurk in that place. Cars and criminals and—and—regurgitating toilets—”

George pulled out a chair and sat down across from Bill. “Doing some experimenting tonight, were we?”

Bill followed his brother’s gaze and saw the lace trim on the edge of his—or rather, his wife’s—dressing gown. “Shit,” he said, beginning to shrug it off as his brothers smothered their laughter.

“I’ll thank you to watch your language at my table, young man,” Mum said sharply.

“Yes, Mum.”

Ron laughed harder when the sleeves caught, trapping Bill with both arms behind his back.

“Didn’t you notice it was too small?” Charlie said, standing up to help.

“I thought it felt lighter than usual—don’t rip it!—but it was dark and I was in a hurry.”

Now with both arms free, Bill stood up. Charlie pulled the filmy garment away from him and handed it back. Bill began to wad it into a pile, then thought better of it and folded it neatly with his wand.

“So what’s Fleur wearing, that old blue monstrosity you wouldn’t let Mum replace?” Charlie teased.

“None of your damn business.”

“Oi!”

“Sorry, Mum.”

Ron, George, and Charlie sniggered.

But having to call out her oldest son twice in as many minutes had aroused Mum’s suspicions, and she took a closer look at the activity at the end of the table. “What are you lot giggling about? Your sister is missing! And Harry!”
“Oh, come on, Mum,” George said. “It’s not like they’ve been captured by Death Eaters.”

“George!” Dad said.

Ron gave him a hearty kick.

“Ow! Well, there’s only—”

“Oh, my word, what if Harry saw one of them? He’s always been reckless, and Ginny would follow him anywhere—”

“That’s kind of our point, Mum,” Charlie said dryly.

“They’ve been captured, and now they’re being held and tortured,” Mum said, near tears. “My poor babies.”

“Molly!” Dad said sharply. “Now that’s enough. We have no reason to think this is anything more than teenage shenanigans.”

Bill leaned across the table into George’s space. “Now look what you’ve done, jackass.”

“Bill Weasley!” Mum shrieked. “If I have to tell you one more time….”

Ron sucked in his cheeks to stop the laughter. It wasn’t funny—of course Mum in tears wasn’t funny, and George deserved more than a kick in the shin for winding her up like that—but the look on Bill’s face….

“Look, Mum, why don’t I go to St. Mungo’s,” Charlie said.

She started.

“Just as a precaution,” he said quickly. “To put your mind at rest. If they’re not in hospital, then we’ll know they’re not hurt. Okay?” He glanced at Dad, who nodded.

“Thanks, son.”

Charlie had just disappeared into the fireplace when there was a knock on the door.

Mum was up before anyone could move. “Percy?”

Ron wondered why he hadn’t just come in.

“Hi, Mum.”

She pulled him into the kitchen with one hand twisted in the front of his robes (because of course Perce was wearing a full set of robes at three-thirty in the morning), then put both hands on her hips and glared up at him.

“And just where the hell have you been?”

Percy gaped, whether at Mum’s sudden attack or unusual language, Ron couldn’t say.

“Well?” she demanded.

unusual callouts. Nothing to suggest Ginny and Harry are in trouble.”

“Oh, they’re in trouble all right,” Mum said darkly. “Sit down. Have some tea.”

Percy scurried to Charlie’s empty seat.

“There, see?” Dad said, patting Mum’s hand when she returned to the table. “Nothing to worry about. They’re just being kids. Thank you, Percy.”

“But this is so unlike them, to go off without a word,” Mum fretted, stirring the spoon she’d left in her tea. “Ginny has been so responsible this summer, such a big help, and Harry—he’s always conscientious. He’s never given us a bit of trouble.”

Other than the obvious, apparently.

“Do you think they might be at Grimmauld Place?” George said in an undertone. “Harry owns it since Sirius died, right?”

Ron nodded, having already considered and dismissed the idea. “If it were just Harry … maybe. We hid there after the wedding, when we had no other place to go. But I don’t think he’d take Ginny there. He hates that house. And if we suggest it, and Mum goes over there, and they’re not there…..”

“She’ll freak out even more.” Bill sighed.

Percy sent a wary glance over his shoulder. “I hope Charlie hurries up.”

“I hope Charlie has good news,” Bill said.

George scoffed. “Harry’s the most recognizable wizard in Britain, and everyone knows he’s living here. If anything had happened, we’d have been notified already. No news is definitely good news.”

“Unless they’re in Muggle hospital,” Percy said.

“You don’t really think anything’s wrong … do you?” Ron said, looking at his oldest brother.

“You know them best,” Bill said. “What do you think?”

Ron thought for a moment, then said, “Harry’s used to doing his own thing without answering to anyone. I think he got it in his head that if he waited until Ginny was of age, they didn’t need permission to go away.”

Three sets of confused blue eyes blinked back at him.

Ron shrugged. “No mum, remember?”

“But surely his aunt—” Percy began.

“Didn’t give a damn about him,” Ron said flatly.

Bill looked to Mum, who continued staring into her teacup, and back to Ron. “That is so not fair,” he muttered.

Before Ron could do more than smirk triumphantly, the fireplace flared green and Charlie stepped out.

“Good news, Mum,” he said at once. “Neither Ginny nor Harry have been treated at St. Mungo’s.”
“There now,” Dad said. “No suspicious activity, no injuries. They’ve just gone to London to celebrate Ginny’s birthday, that’s all.”

“Ginny’s birthday was two days ago!” Mum said in exasperation.

“As I recall, the … festivities for your nineteenth carried on for quite a while.”

Ron and George groaned, and even Bill winced.

“Yes, well……” Mum tucked a stray hair back into her braid. “We had a late start. We were still living with your parents that autumn. Ginny and Harry have——”

“Been living with us all summer,” Dad said, obviously amused now. “And most of this lot.” He indicated the five brothers gathered round the table.

Mum huffed. “That is not what I meant and you know it.”

“Molly. Our daughter has snuck out to spend the night alone with her boyfriend. I’m not saying that doesn’t present some concerns, but they’re neither dead nor in imminent danger of becoming so, which is more than we could say for most of the last year. They’re fine, honestly. I’m sure they’ll turn up in the morning.”

“Mum’s right,” Bill said quietly. “They’ve practically had the house to themselves all summer. Why go away now?”

“More to the point,” George said, “how is it that my sister did such an abysmal job of covering her own——” He shot a quick glance at Mum. “—tracks? Fred and I taught her better than that. Like, a decade ago.”

Ron snorted. “Forget Ginny, what about Harry? He spends months hiding from the most powerful wizard of all time, and my mum finds him out in less than twelve hours! It’s disgraceful.”

“I don’t know about you, Perce, but I’ve been craving some of Mum’s cooking,” Bill said. “Dinner at the Burrow tonight?”

Percy cottoned on at once. “Definitely. George?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for all the jokes in Zonko’s.”

Ron looked at the gleam in his brother’s eye and started to feel sorry for Harry … until he caught sight of the ginger plait down his mother’s back and was reminded of her panic and the dead of night. The git had taken off with Ron’s sister without so much as an attempt at a cover story; time to welcome Harry to the family properly.
The following morning, Ron lay sprawled on the stairs outside Ginny’s room. She scowled when she saw him waiting for her.

“What do you want?” she asked, stepping over him and continuing up the stairs with a basket of clean laundry on one hip.

He stood and followed her. “How was your date?”

“None of your business.”

“It is, actually.”

She set the basket down on their parents’ bed with a sigh. “Just because Harry’s your best friend doesn’t mean you can poke your over-long nose into our relationship.”

Ron grabbed her wrist as she turned to put a handful of Dad’s socks away. “I’m not asking about Harry. I’m asking about my little sister.” He didn’t play the big brother card very often—not with Ginny herself, at least—and she softened.

“I had a wonderful time.”

“Yeah? Where did you go?”

“He took me to see a film. Ever After: A Cinderella Story.”

“I know that! It’s a Muggle fairy tale, right?”

“Mm-hmm.” She turned her back to him again, carrying another stack of clothes to the chest. “Then we went to the hotel and had dinner.”

Sure they did.

“You didn’t know he was planning to stay the night, did you?”

Her plait swung across her back as she shook her head, still fiddling with the contents of a drawer.

“But … you were okay with it? I mean, it was your decision too?” Ginny was not easily swayed, but if anyone were able to talk her into something, it would be Harry.

“Harry was perfectly lovely,” she assured him, finally closing the drawer and sitting down on the bed beside him. “I’m sorry about worrying Mum and waking everyone up and everything.”

“That’s going to become family legend, I think,” Ron said, bumping her shoulder.

Ginny smiled beatifically. “That’s okay.”

Ron studied her. “You really love him, don’t you?”

“I do. So much that it scares me sometimes.”

He sighed, picturing brown curls and brown eyes and a slow, sweet smile. “I know just what you mean.” All too well.
Hermione, Ron, and Harry sat on the floor in Ron’s room. Hermione had come to the Burrow ahead of Ginny and Percy’s joint birthday party so the three of them could discuss their upcoming meeting with Gawain Robards, Head of the Aurors, on Monday morning.

“Where do we even start?” Ron asked.

“With the Horcruxes,” Harry said. “The diary I destroyed in the Chamber of Secrets, Marvolo Gaunt’s ring that Dumbledore destroyed two years ago, Slytherin’s locket, Hufflepuff’s cup, Ravenclaw’s diadem, and Nagini.”

Hermione scribbled all of these down in order.

“Saying we were hunting Horcruxes explains why Ron and I weren’t at Hogwarts last year, the locket explains why we broke into the Ministry, the cup explains Gringotts, and—”

“The diadem explains why we showed up at Hogwarts when we did,” Ron said.

“Exactly.”

Hermione added no Hogwarts, Ministry, Gringotts, and Hogwarts beside their respective events.

“That’s—actually very simple,” she said, staring at her notes. “Except … what about Xenophilius Lovegood?”

Harry winced. The destruction of Luna’s home was still a sore spot for him.

“We could always just say Lovegood is crazy,” Ron said. “It’s true enough, and I bet they would believe us if we said he made it up, that Harry wasn’t really there.”

“I hate to do that,” Harry said slowly, “but otherwise we have to get into the Hallows, and I really don’t want to do that.”

Hermione tapped her quill against her mouth. “The Invisibility Cloak, the Resurrection Stone, and the Elder Wand,” she mused. “Mmm, the Elder Wand is really the only one that gives us a problem.”

“I dunno, I’m not wild about the Auror Department knowing I have the actual Invisibility Cloak.”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t mean that—I mean your fight with Voldemort. The Elder Wand came to you because you were its true master, because you wrestled Draco’s wand away from him and he earned its loyalty when he disarmed Dumbledore on the Astronomy Tower. It’s the only Hallow we actually need to explain.”

“No, we don’t,” Ron said. “We say Harry used Expelliarmus to disarm Voldemort and that’s that. No Elder Wand, no Hallows.”

“Expelliarmus against a Killing Curse?” Hermione was doubtful.

“It worked, didn’t it? Everyone who was there knows that’s the spell Harry cast. No one is going to argue because it is what happened.”

She looked at Harry, who nodded.

“We can’t talk about one Hallow without talking about all of them, and I do not want a bunch of people flooding the Forbidden Forest looking for the Stone or desecrating Dumbledore’s tomb to get
the Wand,” Harry said firmly. “And I’m not giving up Dad’s Cloak.”

Hermione wrote down _Expelliarmus_ and underlined it. “Okay. What about … what about Malfoy Manor?”

“They must know we were captured and where we were taken,” Harry said. “Scabior notified the Ministry, remember?”

Hermione remembered little of that night other than the crushing terror and inescapable pain.

“So … you don’t think we’ll have to talk about it?”

“You won’t,” Harry promised. “I’ll explain it was Bellatrix’s panic that someone had been in her vault that tipped us off about a Horcrux being hidden there.”

“Tipped you off,” Hermione reminded him.

Harry waved this detail away, and she smiled at the characteristic modesty.

“What about Snape and the silver doe?” Ron said.

Harry nodded. “I want everyone to know Snape was on our side, that Dumbledore was right about him all along.”

Hermione added _Snape—sword of Gryffindor_ to her notes and drew an arrow placing it between _locket_ and _cup_.

“What do you want to say about the Forest?” Ron asked. “You know they’re going to ask how you survived.”

He sighed. “Hermione?”

She’d already thought of this. “Magic,” she said simply.

The boys stared at her.

“The sacrifice your mum made when you were a baby gave you magical protection,” she explained. “It’s sort of true—it’s how you survived the first time—and a lot less complicated than explaining you were a Horcrux. If that ever gets out….”

Harry ran a hand through his unruly hair. “Ginny still doesn’t know that, by the way.”

“Have you told her we’re going to the Ministry on Monday?”

“Not yet,” he muttered.

“Harry!”

He leaned back against his camp bed, staring at the ceiling. “I know, it’s just—she feels left out when it’s just the three of us, and we argued about it last night, and—I just didn’t want to upset her any more.”

“So … what does she think we’re doing now?” Ron said.

Harry looked guilty. “She doesn’t know you’re here,” he said to Hermione.
She huffed. “That’s why you asked me to Apparate directly to Ron’s room.”

“Yeah.”

“And I suppose I’m to Apparate back outside and appear at the garden gate as if I came from halfway across the country?”

“Please?”

Hermione set down her quill. “Well, I’ve done worse things than that for you, Harry Potter.”

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Percy glanced round the Burrow’s rapidly-filling garden. It was the beginning minutes of his and Ginny’s joint birthday party, and while guests continued to arrive, there was one Weasley still missing.

He left his older brothers sitting on the fence and approached Lee Jordan, who was chatting with Ron, Hermione, and Harry as he queued albums to play on his magically modified phonograph.

“Hey, Perce,” Ron said.

“Have any of you heard from George?” Percy said, looking at Lee.

They all shook their heads.

“I offered to help him close the shop so he could be here on time, maybe help your mum, but he refused,” Lee said.

“She’s worried,” Percy said bluntly.

Ron leaned around him for a better view of their mother where she stood between the food and drinks tables, directing traffic as guests arrived with dishes and bottles to share.

“Should we go after him?” Ron asked.

“I thought maybe you could take some friends with you?” Percy said.

Lee nodded. “I’ve got this set to play for a while,” he said. “I’ll find Angelina.”

“Go,” Hermione said, giving Ron a quick kiss. “I’ll see you when you get back.”

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Ron, Harry, Lee Jordan, and Alicia Spinnet stood back as Angelina Johnson banged on the service door of Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes.

“Open up, George, we know you’re in there!”

She was pounding for the third time when the door opened abruptly and she nearly fell through.

“Been walking long?” George drawled.

“Shut up, prat,” she said, straightening to her full height, which equaled his. “Did you forget what day it is?”

“Unfortunately, it’s not the day my so-called friends do as I ask and leave me alone.”
Lee threw his weight against the door before George could close it. “Your family’s expecting you at the Burrow, man.”

“My family expects a lot of things. They’re destined to be disappointed.”

“Percy is asking about you,” Alicia said.

“Bill and Charlie too,” Ron added quickly, having seen his three oldest brothers together before Percy came over.

“Free Firewhiskey!” Lee said. “And I’ve seen the puddings. You don’t want to miss those.”

“Gin-Gin will be disappointed if you don’t show,” Ron said, using their pet name for her to emphasize his point of brotherly duty, however onerous.

“Gin-Gin needs to come up with better titles if she wants people to show up,” George retorted.

All right, Ron could see his point there; the Weasleys’ We Have Plenty To Celebrate Party didn’t exactly trip off the tongue, even if it was an improvement on Percy’s suggestion of End of Summer/Ginny’s Birthday/Ginny’s Captaincy/Percy’s Birthday/We Actually Won and Harry Lived.

“It’s her birthday,” Harry said.

“It is not, and I was there for her birthday, thank you very much.”

“It’s a birthday party, George,” Angelina said. “For two of your siblings. At least you still have enough family to throw one.”

Ron heard Alicia suck in her breath; Angelina’s parents and older sister had been killed in the war.

The guilt trip worked. Scowling, George allowed himself to be dragged off to the nearest Apparition point.

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Hermione took another sip of her Butterbeer and tried to look like she was having a good time. Ron and Harry had gone with several of George’s friends to fetch him from the shop, and while she knew almost everyone here, she’d never been very good at parties, and definitely not without the boys. Glancing round for someone she knew who was also standing alone, and trying not to think of this as portent of things to come at Hogwarts this year, Hermione finally spotted Ginny coming her way with two of the girls in her year.

May her red head live long and prosper; she shoved a tin of biscuits at her even before Hermione had a chance to say hello.

“Biscuit?”

“Thanks. Hi, Libby.” Hermione took one and smiled at the other sixth—no, seventh-year Gryffindor.

“How’s your summer been?”

“Good, thanks.”

“You know Siân, don’t you?” Ginny said, indicating the second dark-haired girl beside her whom Hermione knew she should know, but couldn’t quite place.
And then it clicked. Siân Jernigan, Ravenclaw and top of Ginny’s year.

Now her year.

“Congratulations on Head Girl.” The name had been listed in her prefect letter, along with the Head Boy and other prefects.

“Thanks. Ginny said Harry and Ron aren’t coming back to school this year.”

Hermione shook her head, wondering if it would be too presumptuous to reach for another biscuit. “Auror training,” she said.

“Have you heard about anyone else?”

“No,” Hermione said. “I assume Dean Thomas will be there, since he missed the whole year like I did, but I don’t know.”

“What will they do about the dormitories, do you think?” Libby asked as they began walking.

“What do you mean?” Ginny said.

“Well, they’ll need what was the seventh-year dormitory for the first-years, right? So … I bet that means you’ll be rooming with us!” Libby gave Hermione a big smile.

“Oh, I—I suppose so.” She hadn’t thought of that. She wasn’t overly fond of Parvati and Lavender, and their instant friendship had left Hermione somewhat on the outside from the beginning, but they had lived together for six years. Six years of swapping notes, and sharing sweets, and telling nighttime ghost stories (Parvati knew the best). Not to mention Hermione’s bed was charmed just the way she liked it, and on a clear night she could roll onto her left side and see the moonlight gilding the trees of the Forbidden Forest.

“Cheer up,” Ginny said. “You know the magic in the castle makes room for as many people as needed.”

Hermione nodded, then reached for the container in Ginny’s hand. This was worth a second biscuit.
“So, who’s the beauty?”

Bill and Charlie had finally tired of harassing Oliver and his sister-in-law Catriona had rescued her son Campbell from Oliver’s roughhousing, leaving Percy and Oliver to themselves at the edge of the garden.

Percy turned and followed his friend’s gaze. “Amy Green, Bill’s old girlfriend. She was in the Order and at the Battle.” She and a blond bloke in Muggle dress clothes were standing just inside the garden gate, talking with Mum.

Oliver whistled. “Egypt Amy?”

“That’s her.”

“You weren’t kidding,” Oliver observed.

“No.” Amy Green was a beautiful witch.

“Who’s that with her?”

“No idea.” Percy took another drink.

“Must be a boyfriend.”

Percy wasn’t particularly interested in Amy or her boyfriend. Ron and Lee and company were back with George.

“George is here,” Oliver said with a jerk of his chin in their direction.

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

Oliver snorted. “Three years in politics should have made you a better liar, Perce.”

Percy took a deliberate sip and refused to look in his brother’s direction.

“Have you talked to him? Since the fight?”

“No.”

Oliver sighed. “Percy—”

“Don’t start,” he snapped. “Bill and Charlie have already given me the big brother responsibility speech. I don’t need to hear it from you too.”
The muscle in Oliver’s jaw flexed once, twice. He didn’t need to speak; Percy could imagine the words. Both of Oliver’s older brothers were dead.

“Lots of Quidditch players here,” Percy said to distract him.

“What?” Oliver’s head swiveled round.

“Everybody you ever played with at school, plus the other houses. Maybe people would be interested in a pick-up match?”

Oliver brightened at once. “That’s a great idea! Where’s Katie?”

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Hermione couldn’t believe the number of players gathered in the center of the open field beyond the orchard in response to Oliver Wood’s suggestion of pickup Quidditch: Harry, Charlie, Alicia Spinnet, Angelina Johnson, Katie Bell, Demelza Robbins, Dean Thomas, Cho Chang, a couple of other Ravenclaw players, and even George, whom Hermione hadn’t seen on a broomstick all summer. Ron and Ginny coming over the hill made enough players for two full teams.

“This is going to require a referee,” Hermione observed, taking in the crowd.

“Not you!” Ron, Harry, and Ginny all spoke at once.

“Actually, I was thinking of McGonagall. She knows the rules better than I.”

“She’s asleep,” Ginny said.

“She’d wake up for Quidditch,” Charlie said, and a murmur of agreement spread among the Gryffindor players.

“You go and wake her up, then,” Ginny said.

All McGonagall’s former pupils laughed at the expression on Charlie’s face.

“Maybe we could just make a really loud noise.”

“Do you think the light from all our Patronuses would be bright enough?”

“What about an atmospheric charm? We could make it rain.”

“Pick a straw,” Hermione ordered, thrusting two handfuls of conjured plastic straws into the center of the group.

“Why don’t we just make Hermione do it?” George said. “It was her idea.”

Hermione’s eyes widened when the entire group turned to her.

“Off you go, Granger,” Charlie said dismissively.

She looked to Ron for support, but he just waved goodbye. Seeing nothing for it, she turned and headed back towards the house.

Professor McGonagall was asleep in a chair at the edge of the vegetable patch under an unfamiliar green tartan blanket. Hermione had never seen her use that pattern before. Stepping closer, she spoke in a low voice.
“Professor?”
No response.

“Professor McGonagall? Professor?” Hermione laid her hand on the witch’s arm.

She woke with a start.

“I’m sorry,” Hermione said at once. “I’m sorry to wake you, but Oliver has put together a couple of Quidditch teams, and they need a referee….”

“Yes, of course.” McGonagall took a deep breath, then reached up to smooth her bun, dislodging the blanket. She frowned at it a moment before vanishing it with her wand and stood up. “In the orchard, I presume?”

“Yes, Professor.”

Hermione led the way, veering off to the side to sit with Luna while McGonagall strode onto the pitch.

“McGonagall’s making them choose straws,” Hermione muttered, watching as she held four out to Charlie, Oliver, Angelina, and Harry, all experienced team captains. “Why couldn’t they do it before?”

“You don’t have Professor McGonagall’s authority,” Luna said. She was wearing her radish earrings and her butterbeer necklace, but her hair was pulled back from her face in multiple plaits and looked quite nice.

“May we sit down?”

Hermione looked up to see Amy and her boyfriend David Townsend, whom she’d met earlier.

“Of course,” she said, and introduced Luna.

“David’s never seen a Quidditch match,” Amy said enthusiastically, waiting for him to conjure them a blanket before sitting on the ground. “Bill took me to a couple back in the day, but he got impatient with my questions. The goal is to put the ball through the hoops, right?”

“The Quaffle,” Hermione confirmed, and began explaining what she knew about Quidditch.

Ron grinned when he saw Professor McGonagall extend four straws to Charlie, Harry, Oliver, and Angelina, certain Hermione would be annoyed her idea was accepted when presented by someone else. Harry and Angelina won the draw, and since it had already been decided Harry and Charlie would play as opposing Seekers, Harry waved Ron over as he walked away from Angelina and Charlie so each team could strategize in private.

“You know why Ginny wants to play with Charlie, don’t you?” Ron said when Angelina called her name.

“She hardly ever gets the chance,” Harry said. “Alicia!”

“That was a mistake,” Ron said as Angelina took Katie. “Katie and Ginny are brilliant together.”

“Yeah, but Alicia played with Katie and Angelina,” Harry pointed out. “She’ll be able to anticipate
their plays. George!"

Ron tipped his head, conceding the point. “You’re wrong about Ginny.”

“What?”

“She’s not playing with Charlie, she’s playing against you, prat,” George said, joining them.

Harry looked confused. “Why would she do that?”

“Because she likes to win?” Ron suggested, watching as Stewart Ackley, a Ravenclaw Beater, joined Angelina’s team.

“Just be sure to keep your eye on the Snitch and off our sister, eh?”

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Ron could hardly see his hand in front of his face, much less the Quaffle at a distance, when McGonagall finally called the match over without a capture of the Snitch. Hermione was waiting for him when they landed and slipped her hand in his.

“We’ll have to play again, Harry, in the daylight,” Charlie said.

“You’re on,” Harry said, and they shook on it. “Nice scoring,” he said to Ginny, slinging an arm around her shoulders as she approached. Her team had won, 210 to 150.

Not that Ron was surprised.

“Thanks. Are you okay?” she asked Harry. “I saw you take a hit.”

Ron snorted. “Try five. And that was with us reminding the prat to keep his eyes off you and on the Snitch.”


“I did once, but it was right above us, and you two were at the other end of the field,” Hermione said. “Remember, Luna?”

“I was watching the fairies,” Luna said.

“I’m starving,” Ron said. “Do you think there are any of those stuffed pastries left?”

“They’re called samosas, Ron,” Hermione said patiently.

“They’re called delicious. Harry, you coming?”

“Do you want anything?” he asked Ginny.

“Whatever looks good to eat and a pumpkin juice, please.”

Ron and Hermione filled their plates and split off, leaving Harry to make his way back to Ginny and Luna.

“Want to take these to the treehouse?” Hermione suggested.

Ron shook his head. “Can’t,” he mumbled around a mouthful of samosa. “Charlie’s home.”
Hermione stared at him. “I beg your pardon?”

“Charlie’s home,” Ron repeated. “Treehouse is off limits.”

Hermione floated her plate in front of her to put her hands on her hips. “Do you mean to tell me—”

“That we’re not the first couple to use the treehouse for a little privacy? Yeah.”

Hermione looked over her shoulder to the orchard, where they had last seen Charlie. “You can’t possibly be talking about Amy,” she hissed. “She’s here with her boyfriend!”

Ron shrugged, polishing off another samosa. “Amy, Alicia, some witch he’s never met … it doesn’t really matter.”

“Ron!”

He dodged her slap. “I didn’t do anything! I’m just saying … not the treehouse, not tonight.”

Hermione took a bite of cake from her plate. “Your room?”

He shook his head, swiping one finger through the icing on her slice. “Too many people between here and there. Bound to get sidetracked.”

She bit her lip, obviously disappointed.

“Actually….,” Ron took her plate and Banished it to the bins set up at the corner of the house. “Do you have the tent?”

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Hermione did have the tent, but before she and Ron could find a secluded spot to set up and cast the privacy charms, they ran into Bill, Fleur, Amy, and David.

“Ronnie!” Bill shouted.

Hermione smiled when Ron grumbled under his breath but they turned.

“Is it true?”

“Is what true?” Ron said warily.

“Can you cast a Patronus?”

“Yes.”

“A corporeal Patronus?” Amy said eagerly.

“Huh?”

“Yes,” Hermione answered for him.

“And you too?” Bill asked her.

She nodded.

“I do not understand why this is so hard to believe,” Fleur said impatiently. “Dean told you it was true, and I have told you many times Harry is very good at Defense Against the Dark Arts. He was a
wonderful champion, especially as he was so very young.”

“Not that young,” Hermione said, hoping she kept most of the annoyance out of her voice.

A month in Fleur’s home, not to mention the witch’s healing skills and kindness, had done much to
dissolve Hermione’s animosity towards her, but Fleur could be pretentious, especially when one
considered she was a mere two years older than Hermione.

“Only four—”

“Never mind that,” Bill said, waving a hand in his wife’s face.

Fleur’s expression at his drunken carelessness caused Hermione to giggle.

“What I want to know—”

“Is what on earth is a Patronus?” David interrupted.

“A Patronus is a positive force—” Hermione and Bill began the textbook definition at the same time.

Ron rolled his eyes. “It’s a projection of a truly happy memory that repels Dementors.”

“Handy,” David said, looking impressed.

“I didn’t learn until I was in curse-breaker training,” Amy said. “When was this?”

“Fifth year,” Hermione said. “Harry taught all of Dumbledore’s Army to cast a Patronus. He learned
from Professor Lupin.”

“This I have to see,” Bill said.

“Me too!” Amy said. “Where’s Harry?”

 Hermione was not in the least surprised when her and Ron’s search for Harry involved a circling of
the puddings table. She grabbed two sticks of marshmallows for herself and Ginny (find one, find the
other) and she and Ron made their way to the bonfire.

As they approached, she saw a bunch of DA members gathered round Harry and Ginny, and it took
her a moment to realize the attraction— baby Teddy, cradled in Ginny’s arms drinking his bottle.

“Where have you two been?” Ron demanded, licking marshmallow from his fingers as he
approached the group. “Bill and Amy want to see everyone cast their Patronus.”

“Inside,” Ginny said promptly.

Harry pulled her closer.

“Just now?” Ron’s ears turned red.

“I keep telling you, Ron, don’t ask questions you don’t want to know the answer to,” Hermione said.

“Here, have a stick.” She held the second stick of marshmallows out to Ginny.

Harry took Teddy and the now-empty bottle so Ginny would have a free hand.

“The boys brought some food over for toasting.” Hermione indicated a spread of food on the other
side of the bonfire, but before they could head that way, someone called Harry’s name.

“Potter, there you are! Dean tells me you taught everyone in Dumbledore’s Army to cast a Patronus.”

“That’s right.”

“That’s N.E.W.T. standard, that is,” Bill said suspiciously. “I’ve met curse breakers who had trouble with that spell.”

“They didn’t have Harry to teach them,” Ginny said.

Hermione smiled at her obvious pride; Ron gagged.

“Over there,” Bill said, waving his hand towards the other side of the bonfire, where a line of people had formed facing the open field beyond the Burrow. “I want to see this.”

Hermione and Ron joined the line, marshmallows in one hand and wands in the other. Harry and Ginny filled in the space between Ron and Bill.

Harry, still balancing Teddy on one hip, called, “Ready everyone? On three—one, two, three!”

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

The roar of sound drew the attention of everyone in the garden, the orchard, and the pond, and a cluster of pearly-white light put the lampposts to shame. Hermione watched as a Jack Russell terrier, a horse, a stag, a boar, a fox, a toad, a hare, a cougar, and other animals flew, ran, crawled, and hopped across the field.

Her own otter took off in a streak and Ron’s terrier gave chase, scrambling on all fours to follow when the otter used her wide, flat tail to dive and roll as if the air were water.

“I love watching them play together,” Hermione said, leaning into Ron.

“Me too,” he said, laughing as the otter took a playful swipe at the dog’s snout and he backed off. “I always have.”

They watched as the terrier lunged and the two rolled over and over, blurring into one silvery-white light until it faded out.

Hermione sighed, then looked up when Ron squeezed her against him.

“I love you.”

“I love you,” she answered, and tipped her head back to accept his kiss.
Hermione and her parents were seated round the table when a barn owl flew in the open kitchen window with a scroll clamped in its beak.

“That better not be from Ron,” Dad said, setting down his fork.

“I’m sure it isn’t,” Hermione said, reaching up with her forearm level so the owl would land there and not on her mother’s tablecloth. “He—” He just left about an hour ago, but she couldn’t say that. “He knows better.” She laid the scroll by her plate, fed the owl her next bite of pork chop, and walked him back to the window.

“Well?” Mum said when Hermione resumed her seat. “Who is it from? You said you’d told all your friends not to send owls.”

“I did,” Hermione said, untying the blue ribbon and unrolling the parchment to see the signature at the bottom. “It’s from Siân Jernigan, the new Head Girl. I met her at the party last weekend. She’s friends with Ginny.”

Her parents relaxed. Hermione had got a letter from the Head Girl every year since she’d been made prefect.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “She didn’t know.”

Mum shook her head. “Of course, no way she could have. What does she say?”

Hermione let the scroll curl itself up and scooped up a bite of jacket potato. “Just the usual. Meet on the train, fifth-years are responsible for the first-years after the Welcome Feast, first meeting is on Thursday night, et cetera et cetera,” she said, having skimmed the contents.

Mum pushed her carrots round her plate. “Are you looking forward to going back to school?”

Hermione looked up in surprise. This was the first time her parents had asked her anything about Hogwarts since she’d announced she was going back.

“I am,” she said. “Especially after seeing everyone on Saturday. I’ve been nervous about being there without Ron and Harry, but the party helped me remember I have other friends too.”

“That’s nice,” Mum said. “People from—what was it called—Dumbledore’s Army?”

She sounded nervous, and Hermione realized she was trying. Trying to connect with her, trying to show she was learning about Hermione’s world and willing to accept it.

“Mm-hmm. And Ginny’s always been popular, so I’m sure I’ll meet a lot more people in her year. Our year,” she corrected herself.

“Will you two be rooming together now?” Dad asked.

“I don’t know,” Hermione said. “We talked about that at the party. The magic in the castle causes the dormitories to adjust size based on how many pupils are assigned to each one, but I don’t know if it will actually add another floor.”
“What do you mean?”

“Well,” Hermione said, encouraged by this show of interest from both her parents, “there are seven floors in each dormitory, one for every year, right? And the school has been seven years long for ages, so if the expansion charm is just on each dormitory horizontally, rather than the tower vertically, then I’ll have to come down to the sixth-years dormitory because they’ll need my old room for the new first years.”

“It can do that?” Dad said. “Actually change physical size?”

Hermione nodded. “It’s a modification of the Engorgio charm. Or maybe elf magic…” she said thoughtfully. “House-elves aren’t mentioned in Hogwarts, A History, so it’s possible the house-elves modify the dormitories after the Sorting Ceremony.”

“So, you’re still a prefect, then?” Dad said, nodding at the scroll still lying by Hermione’s plate.

“Yes, why?”

“Well … won’t that mean there’s an extra Gryffindor prefect in your year? The two sixth-years plus you?”

Hermione swallowed. “No, Colin—Colin died. In the Battle at Hogwarts.”

“Colin….” Mum frowned. “Why does that name sound familiar?”

“Colin Creevey. He was a wonderful photographer. He took most of my pictures.”

“That’s right,” Mum murmured. “I’m sorry, Hermione.”

She pushed her plate away, no longer hungry. “Me too.”

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Percy paused for a moment outside the Burrow’s garden gate, steeling himself. He was here for his twenty-second birthday dinner, but he was not looking forward to being the center of attention.

The garden was already set up with table and chairs, the mismatched tablecloths Mum used for outdoors, a large banner in Gryffindor red and gold proclaiming “Happy 22nd Birthday, Percy!”, and streamers crisscrossing from tree to tree. Percy eyed them suspiciously before deciding even George wouldn’t risk Mum’s wrath today. He opened the back door.

“Percy! Happy birthday!”

He returned his mother’s hug and kiss, eyeing the dishes on the scrubbed wood table appreciatively.

“Hi, Perce. Happy birthday.”

Ginny was drizzling a pan of chocolate sauce over a cake, scraping the sides with a spoon as she went. With both her hands occupied, Percy deemed it safe to take her face in his hands and smack his lips against her forehead.

“Thanks, Gin-Gin.”

She scowled but held the spoon out to him anyway, and he stepped to the sink to lick it clean without making a mess.
“You can take your stuff up to your room,” Mum said. “I made the bed fresh today.”

Percy caught a drip with one finger and made an inquisitive noise around the chocolate. “Mmm?”

Mum paused in icing a second cake to look at him. “You are spending the night, aren’t you?”

He stared. The last time he’d been home for his birthday, he was eighteen and still living at the Burrow. Bill and Charlie usually spent the night after holidays or big family events since they moved out, but having lived on his own for several years now, it hadn’t occurred to Percy that Mum and Dad (and maybe Ron and Ginny?) would expect him to stay.

“I—”

“He’s going out with us,” Bill said, entering the kitchen from the living room and swiping a finger through the cake icing, ruining the perfectly smooth sides.

“Bill Weasley!” she screeched, immediately directing her wand to repair the damage and therefore not seeing the wink Bill gave Percy over her shoulder.

“It’s okay, Mum, I’m sure it will taste as good as always,” Percy said as she continued to fuss at Bill, complete with the occasional (fruitless) swat of the spatula she held in her other hand.

“I have not made you a birthday cake in four years, and I want this one to be perfect,” she said stubbornly. “I would not have expected you—” She paused to give Bill an extra glare—“to be the one to ruin it.”

“Joyeux anniversaire, Percy!” Fleur said, stepping into the tension of the room as if she did not notice it. “What is the phrase … many happy repeats.”

“Returns,” Mum and Ginny corrected.

“Quel que. The sentiment is the same.”

Percy leaned forward slightly to accept his sister-in-law’s kisses. “Merci beaucoup.”

She beamed at him.

“I’ll carry these out for you, Mum,” Bill said, taking advantage of Fleur’s distraction to get out from under Mum’s scrutiny.

Percy followed him outside. “Thanks for covering for me. I hadn’t thought about staying over.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Bill said, setting the dishes down. “We really are going out tonight.”

“I want to go first,” Ginny announced as soon as all the dishes had been passed.

Everyone looked up at her in surprise.

“I know it’s tradition to start with the oldest, but I want to go first,” she repeated.

“All right,” Percy said.

“My favorite memory of Percy this year is sharing Chinese food and parsnips in your flat.”
He smiled. She had surprised him that evening and was already in his flat when he arrived home from work. Percy had stopped to pick up take-away, and Ginny had brought a bowl of parsnips as a peace offering after the argument that broke out in the wake of Ron’s letter two days prior about coming home from Australia.

She nudged Ron. “Your turn.”

“Er, shopping for Australia,” Ron said. “And all the paperwork you helped with for me and Hermione and her parents.”

Percy had a sudden realization of what exactly made up the perfectly cube-shaped present at the end of the table.

“Well,” Dad said, “if we’re going in reverse order … George?”

Percy braced himself.

George stared at him for a moment, then smirked. “You, naked, in the middle of the shop. At the beginning of the summer, remember?”

Percy’s mouth fell open, then he laughed.

“Percy Weasley!” Mum said. “What in Merlin’s name were you doing naked in public?”

“I wasn’t really, Mum,” he said. “I broke the wards on the shop. It was a prank. A bloody good one,” he added.

George twirled his hand and gave a bow.

“All right, Bill, since Charlie isn’t here, you’re up next.”

No one mentioned it would have been Fred’s turn after George, not Charlie’s, but everyone noticed.

Percy’s oldest brother took a deep breath, looking at his folded hands on the table before meeting his gaze. “My favorite memory of Percy this year is having you with us when we took Ron up on the roof for the first time,” he said simply. “It felt right, to have you back where you belonged. As a brother.”

Percy swallowed against the lump in his throat but managed a croaky “cheers.”

“My favorite memory this year was taking you to work with me,” Dad said. “And not having to worry about you breaking the toaster.”

Bill and Percy laughed, as Percy had done that very thing on his first visit to the Ministry as a boy.

“You know what mine is,” Mum said, smiling.

Percy returned her smile, nodding.

“Seeing you stumble into the Room of Requirement—I thought I was hallucinating, at first. And then you straightened up, and—” Her voice cracked. “I realized it really was you, and my heart jumped straight into my throat and I couldn’t breathe. That will always, always be one of my favorite memories of you, Percy.”

He shoved his chair back and circled the table, and Mum stood to meet him, wrapping him in a fierce embrace.
“Don’t cry, Mum. I’m sorry. I’m really, really sorry I put you through all that.”

“Never mind that,” she said, smiling through her tears and patting his cheek. “You’re here now.”

“Aaaand on that happy note,” Ron said, “Harry? Anything you’d like to share?”

Harry, who had been eating steadily during the family time, looked up and swallowed hastily. “Me?”

“Since you’re too old now for Mum to adopt you, Ginny has officialized your status as an honorary Weasley, with all the harassment and duties thereto,” George said.

“Well…” He looked hesitantly at Ginny, who nodded.

“It’s okay, even if it’s sad,” she said.

“All right then,” Harry said. “My favorite memory of Percy is helping him get Fred out of the fighting after—after. It was obvious how much you cared about him, and I’m so sorry it happened.”

Percy stared at the dark-haired young man, speechless. He and Harry had never talked about it; never talked about how they were in the same corridor at the same time, but it was Fred who died; never talked about how Ron had tried to get Percy to safety but Harry was the one who understood why Percy wouldn’t leave.

Unable to find his voice, Percy met Harry’s eyes and gave a nod of acknowledgement.

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The last of George’s Whizbangs had yet to fade from the sky when Bill half-tackled Percy, ruffling his hair.

“Come on, little brother. Let’s go find you a girl.”

“I don’t need a girl,” Percy said, stepping out of Bill’s reach only to be shoved back towards him by George.

“Let’s get drunk, then,” George said cheerfully. “It’s your birthday, Perce, make yourself useful.”

“Fine, but I’m—”

Trapped between his brothers, Percy felt the sudden pull and pressure of Apparition. They landed in what he recognized as a side street off Diagon Alley in front of an establishment with darkened windows and a neon-green sign proclaiming it The Melted Elf, complete with a puddle of neon-pink goo.

“NOT STAYING OUT ALL NIGHT!” he shouted.

Bill and George acted like they didn’t hear him. Maybe they hadn’t. The noise level emanating from the club was something like the Quidditch stands during a Gryffindor/Slytherin Quidditch Cup match … if everyone had a megaphone. Ron and Harry appeared beside them a moment later.

“Great!” Bill said. “Let’s see if the others are here yet.”

Percy resigned himself to spending the next few hours in introvert hell and followed.

It was, if possible, even louder. And brighter. What appeared to be a large, magically modified Sneakoscope hung from the ceiling in the center of the dance floor, its movement sending arcs of
pink, green, yellow, and blue light spinning all round the room. The ceiling lights were different too: dim and focused, they left entire swaths of pitch-black darkness scattered across the tables and floor. When Bill passed directly under one as he led the way through the crowd, his pale, freckly skin glowed with a purple tint.

Charlie saw them coming and stood up.

“Hey!” Percy said, pleased to see him. “I didn’t think you were coming in.”


Percy raised his voice further as Ron and Harry slid in behind Charlie.

“I SAID—”

Charlie wrapped a meaty hand around Percy’s upper arm and tugged, dumping him in the bench seat beside Oliver. The noise level dropped significantly. Realizing the tables had some type of silencing charm around them, Percy beamed at his older brother, who grinned back.

“Now, what was that?” Charlie said in a normal voice.

“I thought you weren’t coming in.”

He made a face. “Yeah, well, Big Brother Bill stuck his nose in, as usual. Said it was just as easy to go out here as in Romania and arranged an International Portkey. I’m going right back, so don’t tell Mum I came to England and didn’t see her, all right?”

“Yeah, all right. Thanks.”

“I ordered for you,” Oliver said, sliding a glass in front of Percy.

“What the hell is that?” Percy asked, eyeing the multi-colored concoction with distaste.

“No idea but it’s not bad. Sweet, though.” Oliver picked up his matching glass and drained it.

Percy looked at the drink, then round the table at the changing-color faces of his brothers.

Maybe drunkenness would mitigate the pain.

0000

The Monday of their afternoon meeting with Robards, Hermione entered courtroom ten to find Ron and Harry already there.

“Morning,” she said, sitting down beside Ron.

“Good morning,” he said, bussing her cheek.

“Hi, Harry.”

When he didn’t answer her, Ron elbowed him.

“Huh?”

“Hermione’s here,” Ron said, leaning back slightly so Harry could see her.

“Oh. Hello.” And he returned to staring at the prisoner chained in the chair, Antonin Dolohov.
“Is he always like this?” Hermione whispered.

Today was her first day attending the trials; she had received a notification from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to appear in anticipation of testifying against Dolohov.

Ron shook his head. “Sometimes he doesn’t talk at all.”

Hermione studied her friend, the forward-directed posture, the balled fists, the intense green eyes piercing even through his glasses, and hoped the trials would not drag on for months.

How much more was Harry expected to take?

0000

Ron watched as Hermione looked round his and Harry’s new flat in the magical section of London.

“That was unbelievably easy,” she said.

He and Harry had used Shrinking and weight-modifying charms on all their belongings, piled them into one box each, Flooed from the Burrow to The Leaky Cauldron, and floated the boxes ahead of them with their wands as they walked down Diagon Alley and through the side streets to their small, slightly shabby, fully-furnished flat.

Ron flopped onto the sofa, raising a cloud of dust that immediately had Hermione chivvying him off it and Scourgifying it with her wand.

“Harry! Harry,” she called, walking down the hall towards his room. “Don’t make your bed yet, the mattress needs to be cleaned.”

Harry appeared round the corner a moment later. “She knows I don’t care how clean the mattress is, right?”

“I care!” Ginny shouted from the bathroom.

Ron ignored the implications of that statement and shrugged. “Just let her, mate. It makes her happy, and it’s a hell of a lot easier.”

“So, how about ordering a pizza?”

“YES!”

Perhaps he said that a little too enthusiastically, judging by Harry’s expression.

“What’s your favorite?”

“Hermione likes ham and pineapple.”

Harry smirked.

“You don’t even know Ginny’s favorite,” Ron accused.

“My favorite what?” Ginny asked, sitting down on Harry’s lap instead of the open space between them.

Harry brushed her hair out of her face. “Have you ever had pizza before?”
She brightened. “No, but I’ve heard Hermione and Colin and Dean talk about it,” she said. “They all love it. Why, are we getting pizza?”

“We are.”

“We need something classic for Ginny to try,” Harry said. “In case she doesn’t like ham and pineapple.”

“Pepperoni and extra cheese,” Ron said promptly.

“All right. Hermione!”

“Yeah?”

“Where’s the closest pay phone to here?” Harry asked.

“How should I know?”

“You know everything,” Ron, Harry, and Ginny shouted.

“Very funny,” she said, stepping into the hall. “There should be one on Charing Cross Road, outside the Leaky.”

“Well then, know-it-all, put your wand away and let’s go!”

0000

Mum and Dad had taken off work early so they could all have tea together before Hermione left for her last night of summer at the Burrow.

“Are you sure you have everything?” Dad asked.

She nodded, patting the beaded bag on the table beside her. “It’s all in here.”

“It’s so odd to think of you leaving without your trunk,” Mum said wistfully.

Hermione grinned. “It’s in here too.”

“What, that?” Dad exclaimed.

She nodded. “I don’t want to live out of a handbag all year. It’s too hard to keep it organized, especially my books.”

“Your final year. Are you excited?”

“Kind of nervous, actually,” she admitted, sipping her tea. “I’m going to miss Ron so much … and Harry. And I don’t know which dormitory I’m going to be in or what the sixth-years—my year,” she corrected herself—“are going to be like. Well, I know the Gryffindors pretty well, and Luna, of course, but—”

“It will be fine,” Mum soothed. “Drink your tea.”

“No, don’t,” Dad said. “You can’t leave until you finish your tea.”

Hermione returned his smile and took a bite of scone instead.

“It’s almost a rite of passage, a long-distance relationship at school,” Mum said, finishing her cup.
“You and Dad weren’t.”

“Not at uni, but in residency. I was still in Bristol, but your dad was all the way up in Glasgow.”

He groaned. “I never wanted to ride the train again. If either of us had a day free, we’d go see the other. Down and back the same day, most times.”

“Stop, Hugh, you’re making her homesick already,” Mum chided.

“It’s all right,” Hermione said, smiling. “It’s nice to think of the separation being just a memory some day.”

“Here,” Mum said suddenly, digging in her own capricious handbag. “Take this.” She pulled out a wrapped gift.

“For my birthday?”

“Yes, and don’t open it until then. I’ll know,” Mum warned.

“I won’t,” Hermione promised, warmed by the small box. She still had tea in her cup, but it had gone cold. “I should go,” she said, looking at the clock over the café window. “I still have to walk to—before I can leave.”

Her parents stood, and she and Mum waited outside while Dad paid.

“Take care of yourself,” he said gruffly, hugging her tightly. “Study hard, but don’t forget to have fun too.”

“I won’t,” she said, knowing it would be harder without Ron and Harry egging her on.

“I’m so glad you came back for us, princess,” he whispered in her ear, then let go.

Hermione blinked, then was enveloped by her mother. “Your dad’s right. Don’t study all the time. And write to us. We want to know how you’re doing and what’s happening.”

She nodded. “I will, Mum. I love you. Bye, Daddy. I love you.”

“I love you!” her parents chorused.

Hermione turned and walked away, blinking back tears.

Chapter End Notes

An alternate version of the boys out for Percy's birthday can be found in One Big Happy Weasley Family chapter 18, "The Melted Elf." https://www.fanfiction.net/s/9070910/18/One-Big-Happy-Weasley-Family
This fic was written in fits and starts over almost 3 1/2 years. As we end its journey today, I'd like to speak to three groups of readers.

For those of you who have stuck around since the beginning, I cannot begin to express my gratitude for your patience and encouragement. Your desire to see Hermione and Ron through this summer is what kept me returning to my keyboard when I wanted to chuck the whole thing. Thank you so much!

For those of you who are reading this as a completed work, I would LOVE to hear your thoughts! I'm not brave enough to go back to the beginning and read it all over myself, so I'd really appreciate any comments on flow, plot holes, contradictions, etc.

Finally, for those of you who read Harry and Ginny's story of this summer in *Faintest, Slimmest, Wildest Chance*-I'm dying to know how you think the two fics fit together (or don't!).

Please feel free to message me on tumblr (www.keeptheotherone.tumblr.com) if you don't want to make your comment public. Anon is on!

Finally, to my BFF and beta-I love you dearly, and only you know how true it is when I say I'd never have finished this without you. Mwah!

(A reminder that Ginny refers to Hogwarts events according to her year, which is of course one behind HRH.)

Ron watched as Hermione and Harry walked back inside the Burrow after dinner, turning to Ginny with a questioning look. It was unusual for neither of them to offer to help clear up.

“Early birthday present,” she said, smiling. “He wanted to do something special for her this year.”

“Ah.”

“Ginny, you can help,” Mum said, making her way down the table scraping plates. “You won’t have any chores at Hogwarts.”

It was August thirty-first, the girls’ last night at home. Hermione had come over for dinner and was staying the night; Ron and Harry had packed a rucksack each and were staying to see the girls to King’s Cross in the morning. Bill, Fleur, Percy, and even George were all here too, though now the meal was over, Ron expected George to make a break for it as soon as he could get away from Bill.

“You are through, Ron, yes?” It was Fleur, reaching an outstretched hand for his glass.

“Yeah, thanks.” He pushed back from the table, collected several serving dishes, and followed Ginny and Fleur into the kitchen.
“So, seventh year,” Ron said, adding his dishes to the stack by the sink, which Ginny was filling with soapy water from her wand. “Ready?”

A big sigh. “I think so.”

“Nervous about being Captain?”

“A bit,” she admitted. “But that’s going to be fun.”

“What’s not?”

She lowered the glasses into the water one by one. “Hermione and I have never shared lessons … we’ve never had to compete before.”

Ron accepted Fleur’s second armful, salad bowls this time. “You’re worried about your friendship?”

Ginny shrugged one shoulder. “I don’t know, it’s just … different. And we’ll have some classes with Luna, and you know the two of them are like oil and water.”

“Hermione and Luna got along really well when we were at Shell Cottage,” Ron said. “Malfoy Manor, it changed both of them. Gave them something in common, even though their experiences were different.”

Ginny thought about that for a moment. She had several clean items in the right-hand side of the sink now, so Ron began to rinse and dry.

“I hate that,” she said finally.

“We all do. But listen—you and Hermione probably are going to rub each other the wrong way sometimes, especially since you’ll be spending so much time together for a lot longer than before. You’re both strong and opinionated, but you’re also both direct and honest. Just don’t do that stupid girl thing where you refuse to talk to each other, and you’ll be alright.”

“Like when you and she didn’t talk after the first Quidditch match in fifth year, or you and Harry avoided her after she told McGonagall about the broomstick from Sirius?”

“Exactly,” Ron said, reaching around her to drop in a platter with a splash that soaked her shirt. “Learn from my mistakes.”

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“What are you doing?” Ron asked several hours later. Harry had followed him up the stairs past Ginny’s room.

Ron had assumed some private time for all of them—him and Hermione, and Harry and Ginny—was a given, considering they weren’t going to see each other again until at least October, during the first Hogsmeade visit of the school year.

“Hermione has a plan,” Harry said simply. “Chess?”

Ron shrugged. “Might as well.”

He turned to pull his chess set from under his bed, then remembered. The room was bare except for its furniture and their rucksacks on each bed.

“Oh, right,” Harry said. “Guess not.”
They sat down on their respective beds, the silence palpably awkward. Ron was just getting ready to ask if Harry had brought any books when the door opened, then closed, apparently by itself.

“It’s me,” said Hermione’s voice, and she lifted off the Invisibility Cloak.

Harry was already standing to take it from her. “I’ll be back in the morning,” he said.

She nodded.

“Do try to be dressed,” he said, giving her a small smirk before disappearing in a swirl of silvery gray and closing the door behind him.

Hermione remained where she stood. “I don’t want to go!” she blurted, near tears.

Ron crossed the room and took her in his arms. “You don’t want to go, or you want me to come with you?”

“Yes!”

He nuzzled her hair, then tucked her face into the curve of his shoulder. “We’re not going to fight about this again, are we?”

She shook her head.

“You’ll get to Hogwarts and be so busy with lessons and revising and the library, you won’t even think about me,” Ron said.

“That’s not true and you know it.”

“Close enough,” he teased, swaying back and forth far enough to throw her off balance, making her lean into him that little bit more.

“I’m going to think of you everywhere I go.” She sniffed. “Even the library. And the common room….”

Ron stilled, squeezing her more tightly. He couldn’t imagine being at Hogwarts without Hermione or Harry; it just wouldn’t be right.

“I know. But we have tonight, yeah? And I’ll write, I promise I will. And I’ll see you in Hogsmeade.”

“In two months,” she wailed, tears now spilling down her cheeks.

“Hermione? What’s this really about?” Other than the day she’d gone to Diagon Alley to get her school supplies, she’d hardly talked about Hogwarts all summer.

She pushed back and sat on the bed, wiping her face with one hand. “It’s real now, isn’t it? It’s actually here. I’m leaving tomorrow.”

Ron joined her and took her hand. “But not tonight. Not yet.”

She turned her head, bringing their faces close together. “No,” she whispered. “Not yet.”

0000

They made love slowly, reverently. Removing one piece of clothing at a time, pausing to stroke, then
kiss, each new section of exposed skin. Hermione drank it in, forced herself to keep her eyes open when instinct wanted her to get lost in the sensation of Ron’s hands. She drew patterns with the freckles on his shoulders, circled his nipples, traced the fine trail of hair below his navel. He held her face between his hands as he kissed her and she did close her eyes then, the better to memorize the feel of them, palms against her cheeks, knuckles at her ear, long fingers digging through her hair into the back of her scalp.

She felt so small in his hands, feminine and treasured. He was making love with his mouth, sucking on her lips, tracing inside them with the tip of his tongue, waiting for her little whine before plunging deep, allowing her to rub her tongue against his, to twine them together….

She fell back on the bed, pulling him with her, reaching for his hips. They were skin to skin now, his chest hair coarse against her breasts. She locked her legs around him and stroked his back, held him close to her, relished his weight and height even as she wedged a hand between them.

He jerked and grunted, and she grinned against his shoulder even as he nipped her collarbone in rebuke.

“I love you,” she said.

He raised his head to look down at her, ginger fringe framing those blue, blue eyes. “Hermione, I love you. So much.”

They kissed again, more urgently this time, his left hand now braced beside her shoulder to support himself as his right traced her breast in slow, maddening circles. Ron’s mouth left hers, trailing little kisses down her neck, along her collarbone, onto the swell of her breast.

Hermione’s eyes tried to flutter closed and she forced them open, wanting to have the visual memory to refer to as well as the tactile one. She held her breath as he closed his lips over her nipple, but he didn’t move. Her back arched of its own accord, pushing into his face, but it wasn’t until she said his name that he acted.

“Ron!”

Holding her gaze, he traced her nipple with his tongue, then opened his mouth and sucked her breast inside. Hermione felt she was melting—her breast into his mouth, her bones into the mattress, her insides into a pool between her thighs. Ron made little humming noises, as if she were his favorite sweet dipped in chocolate and topped with whipped cream. The sound of his pleasure in pleasuring her sent heat stabbing through her. She grabbed the back of his head in one hand and a buttock in the other, squeezing both, pulling him into her to increase the friction.

“Wait—wait a minute,” he gasped, turning his head to the side and resting against her chest.

“Whatever for?”

“I had—” He groaned as she shifted to nestle their bodies closer together, fondling his arse. “I had plans.”

“Later. Next time.” The feel of him against her was not nearly enough; she wanted him inside, wanted him part of her.

Something about that statement disagreed with him, though, because he pushed her hands away and gave her a determined look.

“No. Not waiting. This time.”
Her breath caught at his tone and she lay still.

He braced a forearm on either side of her and kissed her again, slow and languid, intimate and beyond suggestive. Hermione sank her fingers into the shaggy hair at the nape of his neck, tilting her head to change the angle of the kiss, pleading against his mouth.

“Ron….”

He kissed her neck, her shoulders, her chest, talking to her all the while between tantalizing little sucks and licks.

“I love you. I think you’re beautiful. It doesn’t matter how much time we spend together, I always want more. More of you, your smile and your mind and your laughter.” He shifted, lifting one hand to trail down the side of her body from shoulder to knee, and she shivered, breaking out in goosebumps. “More of your body.” He began kissing down her trunk, between her breasts, round her navel with a little flick. His next words left his breath on her sex as he dragged his lips along the crease of her thighs.

“I don’t just want you to know that, I want you to feel it. I want you to feel my love so clearly, so strongly, that you remember it every day until we see each other again.”

She was crying, wet streaks trailing down her temples. “Oh, Merlin, Ron, I love you so much. I do, I do, I do—”

She couldn’t pull him to her fast enough so she sat up, smashing their lips together, going up on her knees.

“Wait, wait,” he chided, hands pushing against her hipbones when she would have joined them immediately.

Her response this time was a growl, fingernails sinking into the skin of his shoulder while she kept hold of him with her other hand.

“Just for a second. Just to be sure—we remember—exactly—”

Hermione counted to five. “Enough,” she declared, and lined them up.

They both groaned at the sensation, and the penetration took forever. She slid her knees out wider, dropping that last little bit to feel his body against hers. Then he laid back, nearly cracking his head against the footboard, and Hermione froze as she realized she was on top. She stared down at him, wide-eyed.

“Told you I had plans.” He smirked.

“I—but—” She felt exposed, vulnerable, and suddenly shy, despite the demands of her nervous system for movement, friction, anything.

He sobered, linking his fingers through hers. “Ride me,” he said quietly, looking straight into her eyes. “I want to watch you. I want to watch you in my mind’s eye every night for the next two months.”

“I—” Her hips shifted without her permission, operating on pure instinct, and she knew if Ron held out even a little longer, he was going to win.

“I know you don’t know how,” he said, guessing her unspoken protest. “Do whatever feels good. I
promise, you can’t do it wrong.”

Hermione squeezed his hands tighter, still hesitant. But he did feel delicious, full and hard inside her, and he looked delicious, stretched out beneath her, and—she was moving before she realized she’d decided, rising up on her knees only to sink back down again, instantly missing the sensation of depth. But this was good too, the friction, and she adjusted her balance and tried again. Very good, beyond good, different than being on her back or even standing up, and—yes, harder was okay, he was thrusting up into her strokes and she thought faster might be better still, fast and hard and long and deep and—

Hermione threw her head back, abandoning her mind to her body, letting go of all inhibitions and shoulds and just being, natural and free and—this was wonderful, this was fantastic.

Ron was barely intelligible around his swearing, mumbling that she was beautiful and perfect and sexy and he “love love loved” her. She focused on his face again, blue eyes blown black, cheeks flushed with exertion, ginger fringe matted dark with sweat.

“I love you,” she gasped. “I—” She let go of his hands, leaned forward, and nearly fell at the increased pressure on her clitoris. “Oh, Godric, I—” The pressure broke and she came in long, hot waves, hands spasming around his shoulders, holding on as her whole body shook with violent tremors. She was still awash in aftershocks when he began to chant in swears. Breathless and boneless, Hermione dropped onto his chest, only dimly aware of Ron’s arms wrapping round her as she drifted off to sleep.

0000

Hermione woke early on September first. Ron was still asleep, mouth open, one arm flung over his head, the other round her waist. He looked younger like this, softer. Boyish in a way that reminded her of those early days of puppy love.

But this was more, more in a way that was new and exciting but also frightening. She and Ron had never been separated for this long. What would it be like when they could only communicate by letters? Would Ron write to her on a regular basis? Would his letters say more than “I’m fine, training’s great, Harry’s moping without Ginny”? Would they still feel close, even though they were geographically hundreds of miles apart? What if he couldn’t come up for Hogsmeade weekends? What if her parents wanted her home the entirety of Christmas holidays? What if—

She got a grip on herself and stopped borrowing trouble? Hermione took a deep breath and laid her head on Ron’s chest, over his heart, reassured by the steady thump. She loved him so much, and after this summer—after this last year, really—she had no doubts Ron loved her too. Really loved her, flaws and all.

It was hard to look past this morning and the pain of leaving him behind, but Hermione knew she wanted to go to Hogwarts. To finish her education, help finish the rebuild, spend time with friends and in the common room and the Great Hall and the library, feasts and Quidditch matches and yes, even prefect rounds.

It was going to be challenging to be a prefect this year. To follow someone else’s lead, to care about forbidden items and magic in the corridors and who was out of bounds after curfew. To be the odd person out, the oldest pupil who should have already left school.

To not be Head Girl.

Ron’s arms were long enough that the one round her back draped onto his stomach, and she wound
her fingers through his, tracing them absent-mindedly. She had made her peace with missing out on
the Head Girl position; she had known, given the circumstances, there was a good chance it would
go to one of the prefects in Ginny’s year, but there had still been a flame of hope that maybe, just
maybe McGonagall would….  

Hermione sighed. It was done now, and she had no hard feelings towards Siân Jernigan. It certainly
wasn’t the Ravenclaw’s fault Hermione hadn’t been at Hogwarts last year.

Something squeezed her fingers, and she shifted to look up at Ron without lifting her head.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“’s alright,” he mumbled. His hand slid up her arm to smooth her hair. “You okay?”

“Mm-hmm,” she said, letting her own hand slide over his bare stomach and snuggling closer.

“Again?”

“Yes, please.”

0000

Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Harry, and Mum stood amongst the happy chaos of Platform Nine and
Three Quarters as people, pets, and parcels swirled around them. There was press too, taking pictures
of not just Harry but Ron and Hermione and especially Ginny, putting their heads together to gossip
about the witch who was obviously Harry Potter’s girlfriend. Ron scowled at them over the heads of
—well, everyone.

“Here are your lunches,” Mum said, handing a brown paper bag to Ginny and another to Hermione.
“Just two this year.” She pasted on a brave smile.

“Come on,” Ron said in an undertone to Hermione, pulling her towards a nearby signpost as Ginny
reassured Mum. “This is Mum’s last trip to Platform Nine and Three Quarters as much as it is
Ginny’s. She won’t notice we’re gone for a minute.”

It wasn’t exactly private, but at least they were hidden from the photographers.

“I love you,” Hermione said, immediately reaching up to link her hands behind his neck.

“I love you,” Ron answered, drawing her close. “I’m going to miss you like crazy.”

“Same here,” she said, her voice muffled against his chest.

He took her chin in his hand and tipped her face up until she met his eyes, then slowly, slowly bent
down to kiss her. He hovered for a moment, his mouth just above hers, her breath warm against his
skin, and her mouth quirked in a little smile just before they made contact.

Ron kept it simple, light, just the press of her lower lip between his, kissing her as if they were alone
again with all the time in the world. Hermione sighed against his mouth and melted into him,
depening the kiss, and it was slow and sensuous, warm, a kiss to treasure. A promise.

Until his mother’s voice interrupted.

“Hermione, it’s time to go!”

Hermione made a little noise of protest, then backed away. “I have to go,” she whispered.
Her eyes glistened with unshed tears, and Ron swallowed against the sudden lump in his throat.

“I know,” he said with a nod. “I know you do.”

He leaned in for one more quick peck, but Hermione’s brilliant mind had already shifted gears and she turned to board the train, climbing the steps nearest the compartment where he and Harry had stashed their trunks, Crookshanks, and Arnold just a few minutes ago. Steam puffed, the whistle blew, yet Ginny and Harry were still locked together. If she didn’t hurry—

“Ginny!” Both Mum and Hermione were yelling now.

Ron watched in dismay as his sister swung onto the now-moving train without so much as a goodbye. But then she stuck her head out the open compartment window and waved at him with both hands.

“Bye, Ron!” she yelled. “Bye, Mum, I love you!”

“Bye-bye, Gin-Gin!” he shouted, grinning as she flipped him off, safe from any consequences from him or Mum as the train picked up speed.

Ron and Harry stood shoulder to shoulder, waving long after the girls’ compartment rounded the curve, dropping their arms only when the caboose was out of sight.

“Well,” Harry said, still staring down the tracks. “I guess that’s it.”

“That’s it,” Ron confirmed. “No more train rides to Hogwarts for us.”

Harry turned to him. “Remember when you asked if there was any room in my compartment?”

He nodded. “And you bought one of everything from the trolley?”

“And Hermione came in talking a mile a minute about having read all our schoolbooks?”

“She told me I had dirt on my nose,” Ron said ruefully, rubbing it even now.

“You did have dirt on your nose.”

“Well, you’ve got lipstick all over your face,” Ron retorted.

“Shit,” Harry muttered, swiping the back of his hand across his mouth, frowning when it came away smeared with orange-y red.

“Serves you right.”

Harry scrubbed his hand against his jeans.

“Who knew, eh?” Ron said.

“Knew what?” Harry asked, preoccupied with restoring his pre-snogging appearance.

“Me and you. Me and Hermione. You and Ginny. That first train ride—who knew we’d end up here?”

“I—hoped,” Harry admitted. “I watched your family on the platform and hoped maybe someday.…”

Ron thumped his back. “Someday’s here, mate. And tomorrow—”
“Tomorrow we start as Aurors.” Harry grinned. “Just like we imagined in fourth year.”

“Just like that,” Ron agreed, and the two friends turned away from Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, ready for whatever adventures lay ahead.

Chapter End Notes

This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:

Feedback

- Short comments
- Long comments
- Questions
- Constructive criticism
- “<3” as extra kudos

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