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Coming to Term

by [KariAnn1222](#)

Summary

COMPLETE! Ron Weasley knew when he decided to become an Auror that it was a dangerous career choice, but he never imagined that his job would propel a serial killer to target his pregnant wife. Meanwhile, Hermione comes into contact and forms an unlikely friendship with a man widely believed to have died in the war.

Notes

So, when I originally set out to write this fic, it was intended to be a lighthearted, fluffy, humorous, &, well, domestic piece about how Ron & Hermione ended up with their Rose, but it didn't exactly work out that way. At least, not entirely...

This story is (mostly) canon-compliant to the best of my knowledge, based on the novels, interviews with J.K. Rowling that I've read, and referencing the Harry Potter Wiki. However, I have been known to utilize creative license on occasion.

Warnings: This fic contains sexual content, violence, language, and deals with disturbing subject matter. By reading on, you certify that you are of the legal age of consent in your country or place of residence.

Furthermore: While this starts out lighthearted and humorous with a healthy dose of smut, it does become angsty and rather dark as the plot progresses. Consider yourself warned.

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writing this. No copyright infringement is intended.

One-Upped

"Hermione," he rumbled into her ear, using his best seduction voice, the one that had worked countless times in the past.

"Hmm," she responded, her eyes never leaving the heavy, leather-bound book open in her lap. She was propped up by pillows on her side of the bed. She looked pretty to him in one of his t-shirts, which was three times too big for her, no make-up, and her kinky, frazzled hair piled on top of her head. She was biting her lip in concentration, seemingly enraptured by the text, which Ron Weasley deemed snooze-worthy based on the age of the book alone. It always amused him that this was his wife's idea of "light reading," rather than the sorts of books that had pictures of barrel-chested, long-haired blokes like his mother and sisters-in-law left lying around their houses.

But then, he didn't fall in love with Hermione and marry her because she was ordinary. Quite the opposite, in fact.

"Hermione, I'm gay."

She didn't look up from her book.

"I'm leaving you for Draco Malfoy. He's part Veela. We're going to live with the mer-people in the Black Lake."

She made another noncommittal noise as she turned the page.

Merlin's saggy left nut-sack, what would it take to make him more interesting than her bloody book?

"Hermione, let's make a baby."

At those words, the book finally lowered, her eyes shooting to his. "Wh-what? Are you serious?"

"Why not? Harry and Ginny already have a—"

"Ron, if this is about Harry 'one-upping' you—"

"No, no, it's not that," he insisted. "I've been thinking about it for a while."

"You have?" Those brown eyes that he loved so much bore into his curiously.

"Well...yeah. I mean, haven't you? I see the way you are around James and our other nieces and nephews."

"Yes—I mean—I've thought about it, but, Ron, we've discussed this. Our careers...it's just not the right time."

"When will it be the right time, Hermione?" he asked her quietly. "We agreed to wait 'cause we were so young when we got married, but it's been *five years*."

"Ron, I'm only twenty-five. Lots of women *much* older than me ha—"

"And our careers are gonna be around for a while still. We might have to do what other couples do and just take a *chance*, just dive in. Unless you were thinking we could wait 'til retirement, assuming you can still get pregnant at fifty—"

"Ron," she cut in, shutting her book with a *thud* and sitting up straighter. "I...I don't know if I'm ready. The department needs me now more than ever. We're on the very verge of—"

"There's no reason you can't keep working," Ron cut in quickly. "I mean, yeah, you might have to take a few weeks off to *have* the baby—believe me, I'd do that part for you if I could, love, but my plumbing don't work that way—but there's no reason you can't go back to work soon after—and I can help. You know that on days I'm not on a field assignment I hardly ever have to make an office appearance. Good thing about my best mate-slash-brother-in-law being my immediate superior. And Mum says she would be happy to help, too."

She stared at him for a moment, clearly somewhat stunned. "You've really put a lot of thought into this, haven't you?"

He grinned at her, feeling somewhat sheepish. "I prepared my arguments ahead of time. I knew it's the only way I could actually beat you in a debate."

There were several moments of silence as she continued to regard him, biting her lower lip in apparent thought.

"Hermione, you do still want kids, don't you?" He hated the fear in his own voice. It was never a deal-breaker: He would've married Hermione even if she'd expressed a desire to be a cat lady, but he couldn't deny his own desire for children. He *really* hoped she still wanted the same thing.

"Yes," she replied quickly, reaching for his hand and squeezing reassuringly. "Yes, I've always wanted children with you, Ron." She paused before saying slowly, "If I agree that we can try, I'll need you to swear an oath on *Hogwarts, A History*."

"Come again?"

In response, she shifted, picking up the old, worn copy off her nightstand and taking his hand, placing it on the leather. "An oath," she repeated, trying to seem serious even as a grin cracked her pretty face. "Repeat after me: I, Ronald Bilius Weasley..."

"You're joking, right? You want me to swear on *Hogwarts, A History*."

"I'm serious. If you wish to fertilize my eggs—"

"You make it sound so romantic."

"—then you'll make the oath."

He shook his head, a lopsided grin breaking across his face as he said, "I, Ronald Bilius Weasley..."

"Agree to change nappies without being urged to do so by my wife..."

"Agree to change nappies without being urged to do so by my wife," he repeated obediently.

"Furthermore," Hermione continued, "I agree to take out the trash every evening without being asked to do so from this moment on, and I will no longer leave my shoes in the middle of the den for my wife to trip over..."

"Hermione, I really don't see what that has to do with—"

"My eggs, Ron. If you want them—"

"Wait, are we still talking about having a baby, or breakfast?"

When her eyes narrowed at him, he let out a chortle: "All right, all right. I agree to...not let my wife nag me about taking out the trash, or whatever it was, and to pick my shoes up off the floor, because apparently my wife doesn't look where she's walking..."

She tried valiantly to glare at him again, but she was grinning widely now. "I suppose that's close enough."

"Excellent," he said as he threw aside the oversized volumes that covered the bed, climbing on top of her and kissing her as her head fell back against the pillows. "Do we start now, then?"

"Well, even if I go off the potion now," she said a bit breathlessly, her hands wandering beneath his t-shirt, "it might take a week or two for the effects to wear off completely."

"Ah, well. I don't suppose some practice will do us any harm..."

"No, I don't suppose it would," Hermione agreed as he pushed up the hem of the shirt she wore as a nightgown before peeling her knickers from her hips, and he found her warm and wet and pliant beneath his searching fingers...

Ron's Trousers, A Washing Machine, & a Shag

"Ron, I'm home!" Hermione bellowed as she stepped out of the fireplace, wiping the soot from her clothing. "Take off your trousers and—"

"Hello, Hermione," Harry said, grinning at her in barely-contained hilarity from where he lounged on her sofa, his feet crossed at the ankles where they rested on her coffee table.

"Hi, Harry!" she said a little too shrilly, her face burning in mortification. "I, uh, where's Ron?"

"In here," her husband's voice called from the kitchen, followed by the distinct slamming sound of the refrigerator door. "Honestly, Hermione," Ron said as he rounded the corner, two cans of beer in hand, "I know you're eager to get me out of my trousers, but it'd be polite to wait 'til Harry goes home, don't you think?" He then plopped down in his recliner chair, tossed one of the cans to Harry and cracked open his own, taking a deep swig.

"So, Harry," Hermione said, shooting Ron a you-are-so-dead-Ron-Weasley glare as she crossed the room and made her way into the kitchen, starting the tea. "How are Ginny and James?" she called across the bar that divided the kitchen from the den.

"Good," he said. "Everyone's good. Actually, they're waiting for me, so I think I'll be going now and leave you to your, uh, business..."

"You don't have to go," Hermione said quickly, thinking that after Ron's flippant comment there wouldn't be any "business" to attend to.

"Ah, well, you know how Ginny gets when I'm late. See you tomorrow, Ron. Bye, Hermione." He paused, apparently unable to resist adding, "Good luck with Ron's trousers."

"Get out of here already, you prat, and give your wife and son my love. Ronald Weasley, you are an incorrigible git," she added when they were alone, stepping into the laundry room to strip off her stifling robes and start a load of laundry. Although she knew several laundry spells, Hermione preferred the scent of the detergent. The clothes somehow came out fresher the Muggle way, in her opinion.

When she turned around, she found her way blocked by her husband's lanky form. "Such language," he said with a *tsk*, his arms crossing over his chest. "You've been a bad girl, Hermione Weasley."

Even as she pretended to try and push past him, she couldn't help but grin at his playful words. "It's Hermione *Granger*-Weasley, and I'm not in the mood, Ron," she added, stifling her grin.

"Is that so, Hermione *Granger*-Weasley?" he replied, refusing to budge from the doorway and placing exaggerated emphasis on 'Granger.' "You seemed to be in the mood when you came home demanding I take off my trousers. Really, I feel used. You only want me for my sperm."

She rolled her eyes at that. "As I recall, *you're* the one who suggested we try to get pregnant."

"And as *I* recall, you're the one who showed up at Headquarters earlier today and shagged me senseless on top of my desk."

She bit her lower lip, her entire body warming at the recent memory. It had been the boldest, sexiest, and, well, *hottest* sex they'd had in a long time. "I don't recall you complaining," she said as he slowly closed in on her, causing her to back into the washing machine, which was now

churning away.

"Nope, no complaints there," he agreed as he trapped her between his body and the machine, and she felt a thrill of excitement race through her veins as Ron abruptly spun her around, one hand sliding beneath her undershirt, kneading her aching breasts while the other shoved her leggings and knickers down her hips in one fell swoop. "So wet already for me already, Hermione Granger-Weasley," he groaned as his fingers stroked her core, strumming her clitoris in a practiced manner before he plunged two thick fingers deeply inside her body.

Hermione cried out, more than eager for it as she heard the telltale sound of a zipper lowering, and then his fingers were gone from her center, replaced by the thick, spongy tip of his length as he prodded the lips of her eager sex.

"*Ron*," she groaned, her hands gripping the washing machine for dear life as he invaded her from behind, his hands coming down on her hips as he slammed into her repeatedly, the primal nature of the encounter overwhelming her senses...

In minutes, they were both slouched against the machine, their bodies pulsing in the aftermath of mutual release. "Have I mentioned what a fantastic shag you are, Hermione Granger-Weasley?" he said as he pulled out of her tenderly. He had his wand out immediately, cleaning up the residual fluids that ran down her thighs.

"You can stop calling me that now," she said with a shaky laugh as she turned around and kissed him.

"What? It's your name, isn't it, Hermione Granger-Weasley?"

"Now you're just annoying me."

He laughed as he gathered her to himself, scooped her up into his arms, and carried her up the stairs and to their bedroom.

Murder Most Foul

She was going to murder him.

Never mind that murdering her husband, the well-respected Auror, would earn her a one-way ticket to Azkaban. She might actually just kill him.

As she stormed about her house, attempting to shrug on her robes while simultaneously waving her wand at the open pizza boxes, paper plates, and half-empty glasses that littered her den and kitchen, she couldn't remember the last time she'd been so enraged with him. Possibly that time she'd set those birds on him in sixth year, or during the war when he'd abandoned her and Harry. Yes, that was definitely the last time she could recall her blood boiling with this amount of fury.

Hermione didn't mind her husband hosting a wizard poker match at their house once a month. In fact, she encouraged him to do so because she thought a "boy's night" on occasion was good for him, but this was just plain ridiculous. When she'd gone to bed early the previous evening, she'd fully trusted that Ron, Harry, George, Charlie, Neville, Lee, Seamus, Dean, and a few blokes from the Auror office would pick up after themselves, just as they'd done once a month for the last year. When she'd awoken the next morning, however, it was to find her house looking as if a bunch of Muggle fraternity boys had thrown a shindig.

Not only were there empty beer cans stacked on her table, coffee table, and kitchen counters, but the doors to the liquor cabinet were wide open, the now almost-empty bottle of firewhisky overturned on the cabinet below, surrounded by empty shot glasses—one of them shattered. Judging by the amount of drinking that had evidently gone on, she was surprised that Ron was already up and gone for the day. (Vaguely, she recalled him coming to bed last night and kissing her goodbye earlier, but she'd practically been in a coma.)

Smashing the cans, plates, and Styrofoam cups into the wastebasket, she then took out the trash—manually, since they lived in a Muggle neighborhood—and when she returned moments later, she grabbed her mobile up off of the bar and punched in his number. She fully expected the Muggle device she insisted that he carry to go straight to voicemail since Magical interference often hindered its functionality, so she was therefore somewhat surprised when he answered on the third ring: "Hey, sweetheart, what's going on?"

"What's going on, *Ronald*,"—she only used his full first name when she was particularly aggravated with him —, "is that you and your moronic friend *strashed* the house last night and couldn't be bothered with picking up after yourselves, and I distinctly recall you swearing on *Hogwarts, A History* that you would remember to take out the—"

"Ha! Fooled you, Hermione! Leave me a message after the tone. Particularly one that describes in vivid detail what exactly you're gonna do to me when I get home." *Beep*.

Her vision blurred as she fumed, her hand squeezing the delicate electronic device pressed against her ear. She took a deep, composing breath before speaking in a deceptively calm voice: "You want to know what I'm going to do to you?" she purred smoothly. "I suppose you remember the birds I set on you in sixth year? Well, that's *nothing* to the havoc I plan on wreaking on your life the moment you get home, Ron Weasley." Her voice had risen, gaining in intensity as she spoke, and vaguely she realized that she sounded

a lot like his mother in that moment, but she found that she didn't care. "In fact, you might consider just staying over at Harry and Ginny's tonight, until I've had time to calm down and reconsider my decision to murder you."

She hit the 'end' button, thinking that she had a bone to pick with Harry as well. And Neville. The others she would expect that sort of behavior from, but those two, at least, had more sense than to leave her house in such a state.

Moving toward the couch while simultaneously summoning her pumps from the coat closet, Hermione tripped over something, stumbling forward and barely avoiding bashing her head on the mantel. Regaining her footing and fuming in renewed anger, she whipped around to see what had tripped her, her eyes immediately landing on the Xbox on the floor in front of the entertainment center, its controls a tangled mess of wires.

After the war, when she and Ron had begun dating and he'd consequently started spending more time with her family, Hermione's cousins had introduced him to video games during their first Christmas as a couple at her grandparents' house. It wasn't too long after that that he'd asked her where he could buy one of his own "video playing things." At the time, he'd been living with Harry at Grimmauld Place, and the drawing room of the old Black family home had soon thereafter housed a television, DVD player, and Ron's very first video game console; she'd imagined Mrs. Black rolling in her grave.

It had never bothered her, really, because it wasn't as if he spent an unreasonable amount of time playing games when he wasn't working—no more so than Hermione spent submerged in her books—but she wasn't feeling particularly rational at that moment in time. Blinding white vindictiveness blazing behind her eyes, she marched forward and snatched it up off the floor, controls and all, and stormed back into the kitchen, where she retrieved a garbage bag. She then bagged the console and marched outside, dumping it unceremoniously into the bin.

Rushing back into the house, she quickly slid on her pumps, grabbed her briefcase and handbag, and stepped into the fireplace in a dizzying blaze, emerging moments later into the familiar grand foyer of the Ministry of Magic. She dodged people as she hurried into the nearby lifts, and, rather than getting off at level four, Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures as usual, she kept going until the lift stopped at level two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, which played home to Auror Headquarters.

Drinking & Apparating

Bypassing the ramshackle cubicles—out of which the Aurors, most of whom she knew in passing, peered at her curiously—she marched straight toward the set of double offices at the very back of the long, low room. She could see that there were no lights on in the one that her husband normally occupied, the one on the left, but illumination streamed out of the open door to the office on the right, Harry's office.

"Where is he?" she demanded, poking her head inside.

Neville Longbottom startled from where he sat bent over Harry's desk, the quill flying out of his hand at Hermione's abrupt appearance. On the desk, animated, framed photos of Ginny Potter and the red-haired toddler, James Sirius, beamed and waved; there was a golden plaque that read, "Harry Potter, Head of Auror Headquarters, Great Britain Division."

Behind Neville, the magical window depicted a tranquil scene of sunshine, blue skies, and fluffy white clouds. Dimly, she mused that Magical Maintenance must be happy with their salaries.

"I...uh...Harry?" Neville stammered. "Or Ron?"

"Either. Both. I don't care."

"They're, uh, out on a field assignment. Harry left me in charge of the Headquarters for the next week or so." He paused, looking awkward. "Ron didn't tell you?"

"Oh," Hermione replied, feeling supremely idiotic as the conversation she'd had with Ron two nights ago came back to her abruptly. "As a matter of fact, he *did* tell me. I've been so scatterbrained lately," she added, scrubbing her face absently as she walked into the room, plopping down into the armchair in front of Harry's desk. "Neville, what happened to your face?" she asked, slightly startled when she got her first good look at him and realized that his eyelashes and eyebrows were missing.

"Splinched. That's what I get for drinking and Apparating. Could've been worse, though, I suppose."

Hermione's eyes narrowed at the reminder of why she'd been seeking her husband in the first place: "As it happens, the reason I was looking for Ron is because when I woke up this morning, my house was abolished. *Abolished*, Neville. I don't suppose you could explain to me exactly what you lot were thinking?"

He groaned, shaking his head, and it was only then that Hermione realized how pale he was: He was suffering a horrible hangover. "I'm sorry, Hermione. See, Ron told us you guys were trying to have a baby, and he was all excited and proud, so someone—I think it was Lee—no, George—suggested we celebrate, so we're drinking beer and talking about wives and kids, and the next thing I know, Ron brings out the firewhisky, and we start taking shots, and I've gotta admit I don't remember much after that. Apparently I Apparated home, 'cause the next thing I know I'm waking up on my couch feeling like I spent the night getting holes drilled into my head." He paused, appearing awkward once more. "I'm really sorry, Hermione. If it helps, Hannah was in a right state this morning about me coming home pissed."

Hermione felt a stab of sympathy in spite of herself, and she even softened somewhat at the idea of Ron being "excited and proud" about being a father. Not that that excused the state in which he'd left the house, mind you.

With a sigh, she reached into her bag, pulling out a small vial, which she then placed on the desk in front of Neville. "Here. Drink this. It'll cure your hangover."

"You keep a hangover cure in your handbag?" he asked as he picked it up and uncorked it.

"Not exactly. It's supposed to work quite well for morning sickness as well. I brewed up a batch of it last week."

Neville choked somewhat as he drained the vial in one gulp, wiping his mouth on the back of his sleeve. "Wait...you don't mean you're...are you?"

"I don't know yet," she said with a nervous laugh. "I was planning on taking a test today, actually. But I wanted to be prepared. Better?"

"Yeah," he said after a moment, a smile cracking his face. "Loads. Thanks, Hermione."

"Excuse me, Auror Longbottom?"

Hermione looked over her shoulder to see a pretty, young blonde woman with a lip and nose piercing—she couldn't have been older than twenty—standing framed in the doorway, clutching a roll of parchment. She smiled at Hermione when she caught her eye.

"Yes, what is it, Sam?" Neville asked the girl.

"I completed the Severns report, like you asked," she said, stepping around Hermione with an air of absolute confidence and handing him the parchment.

"Already? You're a bloody miracle worker, you are."

The pierced Auror known as "Sam" beamed at the compliment before excusing herself just as suddenly as she'd come.

"Sam's a transfer from the Glasgow field office," Neville told Hermione offhandedly. "Don't know how we ever managed without her. She's got a temper if you get on her bad side, but she's as organized and efficient as they come."

Hermione forced a smile, unable to prevent herself from wondering how Ron had failed to mention a new transfer into the office, particularly one that was apparently such an asset. After all, he usually spoke of all of his co-workers at one point or another. "Well, I should probably get going," she said, rising from the armchair. "I haven't been late since...well, I'm never late. I wouldn't want them to think that something's happened to me."

"Hermione," Neville said, rising from his own chair and moving around the desk. "Please don't be too hard on Ron. I know we...got a little carried away last night, but the bloke's *really* excited about being a dad. He—he's crazy about you. Always has been, in fact."

She smiled at her friend in genuine affection before briefly hugging him. "I know that, Neville."

"Oh, and let me know how it goes!" he called after her as she turned to leave.

"After Harry and Ginny, you'll be the first to know," Hermione promised.

Famous Weasley Super Swimmers

"So tell me how this works again?" Ginny Potter said later that evening. "When I suspected I was pregnant with James, I just made an appointment with my Healer, who did some sort of complicated incantation."

The sisters-in-law were sitting in the living room of the Potter home, a glass flask of golden-hued, slightly bubbling liquid on the coffee table before them. Next to the flask was a tray of untouched biscuits, a teapot, and two largely untouched teacups.

"Well, it's rather simple, and just as accurate as the test performed by Healers," Hermione explained, picking up the flask with a trembling hand. "When I take a sip, the color of the remaining contents will either stay the same, in cases where there's not a pregnancy, or change to blue or pink, depending, obviously, on the gender of the child."

"Sounds simple enough," Ginny agreed, sounding as nervous as Hermione felt. "What if it's twins?"

"I hadn't thought of that, actually," she replied truthfully, feeling slightly stunned that it had never occurred to her. Obviously twins ran in Ron's family and were therefore a conceivable possibility. "I...suppose I'll find out when I go to the Healer. I just want to know if I'm actually pregnant before I make the appointment."

"Have you missed a period?" the younger girl asked somewhat breathlessly. "Or shown any other symptoms?"

"No, it's too soon for that," Hermione admitted. "I'm not expecting my period for another week, which is actually why I chose this particular method. Supposedly it detects pregnancy sooner than the incantation or Muggle pregnancy tests." She paused before adding, "Maybe I'm being a bit premature, but I'm relying on the famous Weasley super-swimmers to have done the job..."

Ginny guffawed at that: "Apparently Potter men have super-swimmers, too. It only took a few goes for us to get James when I went off the potion. So did you brew it yourself?" she added as Hermione chuckled along with her.

"Actually, buying it pre-brewed was less expensive than purchasing the individual ingredients. Not to mention, less time-consuming."

"Ah, I gotcha. So does Ron know you're taking it today?"

Hermione's mood darkened somewhat. In truth, her annoyance with him had subsided as the day had progressed, but she was now more than a little concerned that he hadn't returned her call or sent an owl: His job was a dangerous one, and she had not become accustomed to it in the seven years since he'd first begun his Auror training. When he was away, she was prone to fretting, but, for the most part, she hid her fears from Ron. She didn't want him to have the added stress of worrying about her emotional state while he was gone; after all, his job required that he stay focused on the task at hand.

"I'll tell him when he gets back," Hermione said, pausing momentarily, her hands tightening around the flask before she asked in the most casual tone she could muster: "So have you heard from Harry today?"

"No, but that's not unusual, is it? You know how it is when they're on field assignments." Her

expression darkened somewhat. "You'd think that since Harry and Ron co-head the office that they could send someone else."

"Well, they're the best at what they do," Hermione replied reasonably, feeling comforted by Ginny's reassurance. "They're their own most valuable assets; that's why they run Headquarters after less than a decade."

"Yeah, I know. Besides, can you imagine Harry or Ron behind a desk fulltime?" the younger woman replied with a certain amount of pride. "But even still. By the way, speaking of the boys, I apologize about my husband for last night. He's in the doghouse, just so you know. Can you believe he actually tried to initiate sex when he came home pissed off his arse?"

Hermione burst into laughter at that: "Men," she said with a shake of her head. "What are we going to do with them?"

"Well, I know what I'm doing with *mine*. As soon as he gets home, I'm sending him to your place to do any job around the house that you need done. *Without* magic."

"I could definitely use him. The entire house needs to be repainted, actually. Between him and Ron working manually, it shouldn't take too long."

"So," said Ginny with an air of finality, "are you going to take that, or are we going to stare at it all night?"

"I'm considering," Hermione returned with an anxious smile. She took a deep, calming breath, attempting to soothe her nerves. "Well, here goes, then—"

Abruptly, a high-pitched wailing pierced the air, issuing from the wireless behind the sofa.

"Drat," Ginny grumbled, climbing to her feet. "I'll be *really* happy when he finally starts sleeping through the night. I'll be right back. Go on without me."

Her pulse thundering in her ears as Ginny disappeared up the stairs, Hermione closed her eyes, lifted the flask to her lips, and took a small sip. Her eyes still closed, she counted backward from twenty before opening them again.

Nothing happened. It remained a golden hue, bubbling gently.

She bit her lower lip, disappointed tears rising in her eyes unbidden, and it was only at that moment that she realized how much she'd gotten her hopes up.

"Hermione..."

Ginny had come back downstairs in the next moment and was lowering herself beside Hermione, her arm coming around her shoulders.

"Well, you've only been trying a couple of weeks..."

"I know," Hermione replied with a dismissive smile, shrugging off her friend's arm as she rose to her feet. "I'm just being silly. Well, I'm feeling a bit tired so I think I'll be going home now, maybe take a hot bath and read a book."

"Sounds lovely," Ginny said, rising with her friend, and the women shared a brief embrace. "I'm too wound-up to sleep, so I'll be up for a while if you get the urge to Floo back on over."

"I'll keep that in mind," Hermione said gratefully as she gathered her bag, briefcase, and

abandoned robes. "I'm so glad tomorrow's Saturday so I can actually make it to the library. I've been meaning to catch up on my research—"

"What you *need* to catch up on is your sleep," Ginny stated as Hermione reached for the Floo powder.

Hermione merely smiled at that. "I'll see you tomorrow," she said, turning to go—

"Wait—Hermione—*look*."

Wheeling around, she saw that Ginny's eyes were on the flask that was still sitting on the coffee table: The contents had turned the shade of cotton-candy-pink.

"Seems as if my brother's got the famous Weasley super-swimmers after all..."

Shagging Trolls, Wanking, & Phone Sex

She stood in front of the full-length mirror on the back of her bedroom door, turned sideways, and shoved a pillow under her shirt, studying the effect: In truth, her "baby" looked, well, lumpy.

Withdrawing the pillow from her t-shirt with a sigh, she tossed it to her unmade bed.

I'm having a baby, she told herself, still not quite able to believe it. *Ron and I actually did it. We're having a little girl.*

She'd decided to take Ginny's advice about sleeping in when her alarm clock had woken her up at 6AM as usual, and she'd been unable to make herself climb out of bed. Generally speaking, Hermione was a morning person, and she stuck with a rigid schedule: Up at six o'clock on weekdays, she made tea and a quick breakfast of porridge, and then it was off to work. On weekends, she was up at the same time, made tea as usual, but she then immersed herself in a book. If Ron happened to be home, she would cook a large breakfast for him before he dragged himself out of bed, yawning and bleary-eyed, around ten or so.

However, on this Saturday, Hermione had felt particularly exhausted, so upon shutting her alarm off, she'd rolled over and fallen immediately back to sleep.

It was after eleven when she'd awoken again, and she'd immediately reached over and snatched her mobile off the nightstand: To her anxious disappointment, she had no missed calls or messages from him; nor had she received any letters by owl.

After that she'd gotten up, made tea, and showered, but she'd been too apprehensive to focus on a book. Now, as she sat on the unmade bed, she contemplated going to the library. After all, she had a lot of work to do and could certainly use the distraction.

No sooner had that thought crossed her mind when her phone began to ring from amongst the folds of her comforter. Hermione rolled over and searched the covers, throwing pillows off the bed in her desperation to find it, but to no avail. As it continued to ring, she ended up yanking the sheets and comforter up, dragging them off the bed, and only then did her mobile dislodge itself from its hiding place, sailing across the room.

She cursed uncharacteristically when the back panel flew off of it upon contact with the hardwood floor, ejecting the battery. Within moments, though, she'd put the bloody thing back together, turned it on, and was dialing Ron, tapping her foot impatiently. *C'mon, c'mon, c'mon.*

He answered on the third ring—*really* answered this time: "Hermione, I am so, so sorry about the house," he said immediately, launching into an apology before she could get in a word. "I meant to pick it up before I left, but I ended up sleeping too late, and I had to rush outta there. I'll do anything to make it up to you when I get back. Anything, sweetheart. I'm your slave."

In the background, she could hear Harry chortling: "Blimey, Ron, I've never heard a grown man grovel like that. Show some dignity, mate."

"Shut up, Harry. Anyway, Hermione? You still there?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm here." She bit her lip, the words on the tip of her tongue: *I'm pregnant. We're having a baby. You're going to be a father.* However, she didn't want to tell him like this—over the phone. She wanted to tell him in person. "It's fine, Ron."

"Come again?"

"It's fine. I'm not angry anymore."

"Oh." He seemed completely taken aback. "Okay, that's good, 'cause I'm really sorry. I promise it won't happen again."

"Oh, I know it won't," she agreed. "Just because I'm no longer angry doesn't mean there aren't going to be consequences. You're going to make it up to me when you get back—you and Harry both are going to repaint the house. By hand."

There was a pause before Ron responded: "You mean the Muggle way? Without magic?"

"That's right."

Again, there was a drawn-out pause before he spoke: "Bloody hell, Hermione, you know I'm rubbish at Muggle chores."

"I'll do anything to make it up to you when I get back," she repeated, throwing his words back in his face. "'I'm your slave.' Or did you not mean that? If not, then I'm not inclined to feel so forgiving, after all."

"No, I meant it," he confirmed with a resigned sigh. "If it means you won't stay mad at me. Hey, you said Harry has to help?"

"Help you do what?" she heard Harry ask.

"Yes. As a matter of fact, Ginny's loaning him to me," Hermione replied, "and since Neville informed me that the 'celebrating' was actually George's idea, I'm sending Angie an owl this morning to ask to borrow him as well."

"Gin loaned you out to my wife," Ron responded to Harry. "Not like *that*, you bloody perverted git," he added, evidently in response to Harry's facial expression.

Hermione grinned. "Tell Harry I love him, but not *that* much."

"My wife says she'd rather shag a troll," Ron responded, addressing Harry.

"Wait, doesn't she already do that every night?" Harry retorted.

"Hardy-har-har. Very funny, Harry," Ron replied while Hermione laughed.

"I thought so," Harry agreed.

"Could you get out of my room, you git, so I can talk to my wife in private?"

"All right, all right, no need to get your knickers in a twist," Harry said, chuckling. "Give Hermione my love, and my apologies about the other night."

"Sorry 'bout that," Ron said into the phone a moment later.

"It's not a problem," she replied, smiling gently, so giddy with relief that he and Harry were all right and excited about her pregnancy that she couldn't maintain any ill will even if she wanted to. "It's good to see that some things never change."

"I really am sorry about the other night."

"I know. Neville told me what you guys were celebrating. He said you're excited and proud."

"Well...yeah, of course I am. I've only been wanting to knock you up since about fourth year. I wanked off about every bloody night while thinking of you... Especially after the way you looked at the Yule Ball. I was so effing jealous of Krum..."

She laughed at that as she pulled the covers back into the bed, settling cross-legged on the comforter, a pillow in her lap. "If that's the case, it certainly took you long enough to make a move. In fact, as I recall, *I'm* the one who kissed *you*."

He chuckled warmly in response. "Yeah, well, you didn't exactly make it easy for me."

"No, I don't suppose I did. It's a good thing you expressed sympathy for house-elves, or else we might still be beating around the bush." There was a brief pause before she said, "I love you, Ron."

"I love you, too, sweetheart. So fucking much."

"Are you being careful?" She knew he couldn't divulge details about where he was or what he was doing. After all, loose lips sank ships—but that didn't mean she wouldn't make sure he wasn't taking unnecessary risks.

"Of course. You know I wouldn't do anything stupid to prevent me from coming home to you."

She smiled, comforted by his words. "I know. You and Harry just take care of each other, okay?"

"Like always," he promised, hesitating before adding: "So Harry and I just got checked into an inn, and I've a bit o'time on my hands. I was thinking, remember that thing we did that one time... over the phone...?"

She bit her lower lip as she settled back against the pillows, her free hand drifting down her belly as she recalled vividly the time she'd introduced Ron to certain...perks of Muggle technology. After all, "owl-post sex" was a little more difficult to achieve. "I remember," she replied.

"Well, I was thinking I wouldn't mind doing that again, if you don't..."

"Not at all. So...you used to wank off to me nightly, did you? What about when we were hunting Horcruxes? Did you ever...?"

"Hell yeah, I did. Sometimes I'd do Muffliato around my bunk at night, but usually I'd go off into the woods during the day, when you and Harry were busy. It was maddening, being in an enclosed space with you twenty-four/seven..."

"I noticed," Hermione confessed, "when you went off. I wondered. I even considered following you once. It was October, I think. The weather had turned cooler, but there wasn't frost on the ground yet."

"What would you've done if you'd caught me?" he breathed.

She licked her lips, her own breath quickening as she envisioned coming upon Ron pleasuring himself in the woods. She could imagine him with one arm braced against the bark of a tree, the other hand wrapped around his considerable length, stroking himself rapidly as he panted and groaned.

"I would have watched you for a moment, probably feeling both shocked and aroused," she whispered as her hand slipped inside her knickers, her fingers parting her labia. "Then I would've had a decision to make—Do I approach you? Or do I walk away and pretend I never saw you?"

In actuality, Hermione knew that at that point in her life she wouldn't have had the courage to approach him, but this was about fantasy. "Steeling my resolve, I decide to approach you."

"I freeze up when I see you," Ron interjected, his voice ragged to her ears. "At first I'm humiliated, embarrassed that you caught me, but then you're standing in front of me with something like...hunger in your eyes."

"I say, 'Don't stop, Ron,' and when you hesitate, I drop to my knees in front of you—"

"You reach out and touch me, I come undone. You're trembling, hesitant, so I reach down and wrap your fingers around my cock..."

"I start stroking you," Hermione whispered, now touching herself with practiced ease. "I'm clumsy; I have no idea what I'm doing, but you don't seem to mind as you thrust into my hand. On impulse, I lean in and take you into my mouth..."

Ron groaned over the phone. "You've got a talented fucking mouth... Knew it was good for more than spouting facts..."

"Are you touching yourself, Ron?"

"Fuck yeah," he grunted. "Are you?"

"Yes," she whispered shakily. "So I start sucking you off, my other hand coming up to massage your scrotum..."

"When I get close, I suddenly pull away, and my hands are on you—"

"You spin me around, shove my jeans down my hips, and push me to the ground—"

"And then I fuck you, Hermione." His voice was gravelly and raw. "You cry out my name when I invade you, you beg for more, and you're so fucking *wet*..."

Hermione whimpered, the beginnings of her orgasm building low in her womb as she continued to stroke herself—

"And then I fucking come in you..." Ron groaned. "*Fuuuck*, Er-my-nee, so fucking *good*..."

Hermione gasped his name raggedly, the sound of Ron climaxing in her ear propelling her into her own release, her inner walls contracting forcefully...

"Y'know," Ron breathed after several moments, when their mutual ragged breathing had slowed, "if it'd actually played out like that, I never would've left back then, sweetheart."

Steak & a Blowjob Day

Chapter Seven: Steak & a Blowjob Day

oOo

"Pardon me?" Hermione's face warmed considerably as she stared at the hugely pregnant Angelina Weasley, who was propped in a chair in the cramped stockroom of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, a clipboard in her hands.

"Steak and a blowjob," Angie repeated, her mocha cheeks flaring an unmistakable pink despite her blasé tone. "It's how I broke the news to George when I found out I was pregnant with Fred. With Roxanne here, though," she continued, patting her rounded belly, "I just stormed in here on a busy Saturday much like today and yelled, 'Thanks for knocking me up again, you abominable wanker.'"

Hermione laughed at that: "I take it she wasn't planned, then."

"Considering that the Harpies had decent chances of winning the Quidditch League last season, what with our new kick-arse Seeker, no, she most definitely *wasn't* planned," the older woman replied with a good-natured chuckle of her own. "That fresh-faced rookie tart, Cruz, took my place. Is it terribly evil that there's a small part of me that's *glad* they didn't win the League Cup without me?"

"Actually, I think that's *human* of you," Hermione replied even as she noted that her sister-in-law looked, well, fantastic at eight months pregnant with her second child. Angelina had a perfectly round, bowling ball-shaped belly, but, other than that, her statuesque figure hadn't changed much in all the years that Hermione had known her.

She only hoped that genetics would be so kind to her when *she* was that far along. Judging by her own mother's pregnancy photos, however, Hermione highly doubted that she would be so lucky: Rosalynn Granger had gained three stones while pregnant with her only child, and Hermione had most decidedly *not* been a three-stone baby.

"So back to the subject of a steak and a—a blowjob," Hermione stammered, her cheeks burning once more. "Did you find it necessary to, ah...soften the blow like that? Didn't he want children?"

"Necessary? Nah—George definitely wanted kids—but why not? I mean, women get Valentine's Day, right? Where men are expected to shower their ladies with romantic candlelit dinners, chocolates, and flowers. It's only fair that blokes get—"

"Steak and a Blowjob Day?"

"Exactly."

Hermione couldn't help but laugh: It was quite easy to see why George Weasley had fallen for Angelina. Not only was she beautiful, athletic, and intelligent, but she was hilarious, to boot. If Hermione hadn't liked the other woman so much, it would have been incredibly easy to envy her those qualities.

"So have you told Molly and Arthur yet?" Angie asked, rising to her feet and accepting Hermione's helping hand. Once she was upright, she placed both hands on her lower back in an obvious attempt to stretch her undoubtedly aching muscles.

"No, I already feel a bit guilty that you and Ginny both know before Ron. I haven't even told *my* parents yet."

"Well, your secret's safe with me. I won't even tell George until you've given the okay."

"Thanks, Angie."

"It's not a problem. So I'm pretty much done here." She tossed her clipboard carelessly onto a nearby crate. "Wanna grab a bite to eat? I'm so hungry I could eat the arsehole out of a dead hippogriff, and I've got about an hour before I'm supposed to pick up Fred from the Burrow."

"Lovely," Hermione replied, bemused, "but, yes, I'm quite famished myself. I'm actually supposed to meet Ginny at the Leaky Cauldron for lunch anyway, so it's perfect timing."

"Good, a *ménage a trois*!" Angelina said with a beam. "You might as well begin stocking up on the calories now, by the way, before you start puking so much that you practically move into the loo."

"Yes, one of the joys of pregnancy I'm looking forward to the most," the younger woman stated as they exited the stockroom together, moving out into the crowded shop. "Thankfully I know of a few good potions for that."

"Well, let's hope you're luckier than me and don't need 'em. Oi, George!"

"If you'll excuse me, ladies," George Weasley said, extracting himself from the cluster of giggling teenage girls to whom he'd been attempting to sell love potions. "Darling," he greeted his pregnant wife with a tender hug and a quick kiss. "Hermione, I trust you're keeping my brother on a well-needed leash?" he added in greeting to his sister-in-law.

"About the same as Angie here keeps *you* on," she countered, gracing him with a good-humored smile.

"Touché."

"So how's business, George?" Hermione asked him by way of making conversation. She was already well aware from spending time around various members of the Weasley clan that WWW was flourishing.

"Booming. I'd say I'm not looking forward to the first of September, except that the Hogsmeade branch'll more than make up for the loss of business I'll experience here in Diagon Alley. I just hope the parents'll remember to send off their precious offspring to Hogwarts with plenty o'pocket money."

"I'm sure they will, darling," Angelina reassured him, clutching his arm. "On another matter, I hope that you're not too busy next weekend, because I have plans for you."

"You do?"

"Yes," she said cheerfully. "You're helping Ron and Harry repaint Hermione's house by hand. Doesn't that sound lovely?"

"Well...yes, it does," he replied, the expression on his face heavily implying that he found the prospect anything *but* lovely, "but, unfortunately, the shop needs me next weekend—"

"George, I know perfectly well that they don't actually *need* you here. That's why you hired a shop manager and extra—"

"Yeah, love, but appearances—it's called *Weasleys' Wizard*—"

"Brilliant!" Angie exclaimed, elbowing him hard in the ribs. "He'll be at your place at eight o'clock on the dot next Saturday, Hermione. Shall we go, then?"

Before George had an opportunity to argue further, she wheeled around, grabbed Hermione by her elbow, and waddled away, pushing past shop-goers that stood between her and the exit.

Reprieve

He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so drained—both mentally and physically.

Although he'd discovered early on that he had a particular knack for what he did, and there was undeniably a large part of him that obtained a great deal of satisfaction from seeing people who did evil locked up, he oftentimes didn't enjoy the process. In fact, a *majority* of the time he didn't enjoy his work. At least, he didn't enjoy witnessing day in and day out the evil that intelligent beings—Muggle or magical, human or otherwise—were capable of.

During the war when he'd been a wet-behind-the-ears kid, it had been very easy to believe in such simple, black-and-white concepts like "good" wizards and "bad" wizards, and to automatically lump all those categorized as "bad" in with the Death Eaters, or, at the very least, to label them as "dark."

This was a naïve falsity that he had learned to recognize over time and with experience. Evil existed everywhere: It was in the well-respected politician who murdered his Muggle wife in a fit of rage; it was in the seemingly upstanding witch who punished her Squib offspring by use of the Cruciatus Curse; it was in the young wizard who raped and tortured his preteen sister and was incapable of showing remorse for the act.

Ron Weasley dealt with similar cases on a day-to-day basis, and it was often difficult to determine which ones actually required use of the Auror department and which should be referred to regular Magical Law Enforcement. Cases involving domestic abuse were generally referred to the Domestic Violence Department unless something stood out about the case: Say the person inflicting the abuse had a history of being involved in the Dark Arts or used an extreme form of magic to impose the violence; crimes performed in the "Muggle manner," on the other hand, i.e. strangulations, beatings, rapes, and other forms of physical violence, were commonly handled by the MLE.

More recently, in a small village in Wales there was a series of mysterious murders that made national Muggle headlines, partly because of the shocking and disturbing nature of the crimes: Six women—at least, at the time only the remains of six women had been discovered—had been violated sexually, repeatedly and in the most brutal manner imaginable, and had then been dismembered. However, the aspect of the crimes that had baffled Muggle forensic investigators and had caught the attention of the local MLE had been the fact that the women had been found without mouths—that is, their mouths had been removed by magic. Presumably so they couldn't scream.

Upon investigation, it was determined by the MLE that the women, all Muggles and all mothers in their mid-twenties to early thirties, had still been alive and very much conscious when they'd been slowly, painstakingly dismembered. It had also been determined that they'd been force-fed a potion—before their mouths had been removed, of course—that had kept them conscious and aware for the entire ordeal.

Because of the extreme nature of the crimes and due to the fact that a perpetrator had not yet been apprehended, the MLE had turned the case over to the local Auror field office. After conducting their own extensive but ultimately fruitless inquiry, they'd made the decision to contact Headquarters in London to head the ongoing investigation.

While it wasn't the most shocking case that Ron and Harry had taken on during the course of their careers, it was certainly one of the most daunting. A world-renowned Psychological Healer who worked for the German Ministry of Magic had been brought in to partner with the London Aurors

to determine a criminal profile, a science that the Americans had first adapted from Muggles, and which, post-war, had become commonplace in magical society worldwide—a true testament to the changes in general attitude toward Muggles and their practices.

The profile established by Healer Rosenthal predicted that their perpetrator was a wizard between twenty and thirty-five years of age; he was possibly a pureblood but, based on his intense hatred of women, particularly *Muggle* women, was more likely a half-blood born to a wizard father and a Muggle mother. The perpetrator's dominate parental figure was either a father who preached anti-Muggle propaganda and abused Muggle women in the presence of the perpetrator, or else an abusive, domineering mother that the perpetrator grew to despise. He was disorganized and careless, based on the fact that he'd left the remains of his victims lying around to be discovered by authorities, or else he merely craved the attention of the media. He was also a sociopath, incapable of experiencing remorse for his crimes.

In Ron's opinion, this "profile" was both vague and obvious: Young, psychotic wizard gets off on torturing Muggle women because of his own fucked-up up-bringing. Real original. It could've been referring to half the wizards in Flintshire.

All the same, after two weeks of digging and—grudgingly admitting to—using Rosenthal's profile as a guide, Ron and Harry had had enough to arrest a wealthy wizard by the name of Aeron Davies, a thirty-one-year-old half-blood (deceased pureblood father, declared missing Muggle mother). Upon searching the Davies family estate, the remains of twenty-two more women were discovered—including those of Davies's mother.

Apparently Aeron Davies, Sr., had been a career serial killer who'd specialized in kidnapping his victims from afar and bringing them back to his manor for a slow, agonizing death. (It was now theorized that he Apparated to far away locales in order to target potential victims.) It seemed that the meticulous, woman-hating bastard had passed the trade on to his only son. Unfortunately for Junior, though, he'd been a lot sloppier and dumber than Daddy Dearest by not only picking local women, but also, rather than abducting them, he choose to rape and torture them in their own homes—in front of their spouses and children—before abandoning their remains.

At least he'd had the sense to magic away his DNA from their bodies before he'd Apparated home to his house-elves and dinner parties, not that it had made much of a difference in the long run. The bastard was caught, and, if Ron had any say, he wouldn't be sitting in Azkaban right about now with three-square meals and not even any dementors to keep him company; he'd be six feet under, where he deserved to be.

Ron scrubbed his face absently with a deep sigh, beyond glad to be done with this case—well, sort of done, anyway, since he and Harry would both be required to testify at the bastard's trial—and ready to get home to Hermione. He missed his wife; he missed talking to her and seeing her pretty face; bloody hell, he even missed her nagging.

As he left the Flintshire Auror field office, stepping out into the fading afternoon sun, all he could think was that the one thing that had gotten him through this whole bloody mess—the one thing that *always* got him through these cases—his one reprieve, had been the intimate moments he'd shared with Hermione over the phone when he'd dragged his arse back to the inn every night—or every morning, since he'd worked through the night more than once.

They never spoke about his cases while he was working on them: This was in part because of Auror policy—he'd sworn a magical oath that literally prevented him from speaking about unsolved cases to people not involved in the investigation—but also because he didn't want her to know about the evil he witnessed on a daily basis.

Even after everything they'd been through, all the death they'd seen, Hermione was good to her

very core and believed that people were ultimately good, and he didn't want to take that from her. He didn't want her to become as jaded about the world in general as he'd become.

Sure, she would ask him about his prior cases on occasion, and Ron would give her vague responses, but he never truly confided in her about the things he'd seen and the things he was really feeling: How could he? How could he take from her her belief that people were inherently good? It was one of the things he loved about her.

"Ready to go home?" Harry asked, stepping up beside him on the front step.

"Hell fucking yeah."

He'd Always Been an Arse Man

He was coming home that evening.

He'd texted that morning, approximately two weeks after his departure, to say that he was wrapping up the case and that he'd be home that very night.

Hermione was ridiculously excited. Not that she wasn't *always* excited about her husband's impending homecoming when he'd been gone, mind you, but she'd been sitting on the fact that she was pregnant for an agonizing two weeks, and every time she had spoken to him, her resolve to wait to tell him in person had weakened considerably.

However, she'd made herself strong, and she'd waited, and now he was *finally* coming home.

Work had been a complete waste that day, as she hadn't been able to focus on her tasks, something that caused her to experience a great amount of guilt. After all, she was an advocate for sentient beings in need of assistance, and her most recent case involved a house-elf that experienced daily, brutal abuse at the hand of a cruel master. While Missy had outright refused to acknowledge her mistreatment when Hermione had had an opportunity to interview the elf, a trusted colleague of Hermione's who worked for *The Daily Prophet* had personally witnessed the exploitation while visiting the home of the pureblood slave-owner and respected Wizengamot member, Caledon King.

If Hermione was distracted, it only further delayed progress, but, as her friend and co-worker, Natalie Johns, had told her that morning: "You're allowed to think about yourself on occasion, Hermione. Your husband's coming home; enjoy each other."

She had decided to heed that advice, and damn the accompanying guilt.

Rather than Floo'ing home as usual after work, Hermione Apparated into the alley of the nearby grocer, entered the low-ceilinged building with the dirt-grimed floors and fluorescent lighting, and picked up a couple of steaks. She was on the verge of grabbing a bottle of wine at random, but, on second thought, hefted into her cart a case of Ron's favorite beer instead.

Once in the alley again, she shrank the entire lot and put it in her handbag before Apparating home and beginning preparations for dinner—or Steak and a Blowjob Day, as she had deemed it to be.

oOo

Ron wasn't sure what to expect upon his arrival home—okay, maybe Hermione to greet him with a hug and a kiss as she'd done a thousand times, or to have dinner ready—but *this*? He was absolutely floored. What greeted him was one of his dirtiest fantasies come to life:

Hermione was wearing some sort of black bustier-thing like he'd only previously seen in Muggle lingerie adds that pushed her tits up and together, matched with a pair of tiny black lace knickers, and tights held up by—were those called *garters*? He didn't know. He didn't care. All he knew was that his wife was smokin' hot, especially with the eye make-up she'd piled on thick and her hair all smooth and sleek like she usually only did it on special occasions, which had Ron wondering if it was his birthday and he'd somehow forgotten.

Not that Ron didn't *always* think that Hermione was gorgeous, but he was a bloke, after all, and there was something about the tart-look that had the primitive male in him wanting to whack her

over the head with his club and drag her to his cave by her hair—not that he'd ever, *ever* want his wife going out in public like that, or anyone other than himself thinking dirty things about her.

Fuck, he had a hardie and she hadn't even touched him. And was that enticing aroma? Steak cooked to mouth-watering perfection?

"Is this heaven?" he asked, the first thing to pop into his head, 'cause surely this must be what heaven was like: Hermione, nice and slagged-up just for him, and a juicy steak waiting to be consumed. He couldn't think of anything that would make it a more perfect scenario. Except maybe his wife polishing his knob. Yep, that definitely worked for him.

"Welcome home, Ron," she finally purred, an air of sultry confidence about her that made him briefly wonder if this wasn't his wife at all, but someone who had taken Polyjuice Potion and was *pretending* to be Hermione. "Dinner's on the table. Why don't you come eat? There's a special dessert I have planned for afterward."

She winked at him suggestively before spinning around and sauntering toward the dining room, swinging her hips as she walked. His wife was wearing a thong, and he couldn't help but stare at her perfectly round little bum, his dick further hardening in his trousers. He'd always been an arse man, and Hermione's was perfect in his book.

"Hermione?" he asked as he followed her. "Not that I'm not pleasantly surprised by this unexpected welcome, but what's going on?"

She smiled at him once more as she cracked up a beer and sat it next to his plate on the table. "I just wanted to celebrate a little holiday that Angelina introduced me to," she replied innocently.

"Holiday? What holiday?"

"Steak and a Blowjob Day, of course."

Mother of all things holy...

Dessert

She hummed around his member, eliciting a shudder and a deep groan from him as his hands tightened in her hair. Peering up at him from between his thighs where she knelt on the floor—on a throw pillow at Ron's insistence, since he was ever the gentleman—Hermione saw his full lips parted, his head falling back in evident ecstasy as her head continued to bob up and down over him, suckling with practiced ease. One of her hands was wrapped around his velvety, throbbing length to compensate for his size, the other applying gentle pressure to his bollocks.

"Er-my-nee," he groaned, his eyes, heavy-lidded and dark in lust, watching her for a moment before fluttering closed. "Ungh, so fucking good, sweetheart..."

She smiled around him as she continued to pleasure him, sensing he was near his release by the way his body tensed, the stream of random half-curses escaping his lips becoming more broken and erratic...

Abruptly, she lifted her lips from him, her hands continuing to work him while she gazed up at his pleasure-clouded face. "Ron," she said gently but firmly. She wanted to have his complete and undivided attention when she articulated the words she planned to speak next.

"Mmm," he groaned in response, his eyelids fluttering open, apparently somewhat confused about why she'd removed her mouth from him at such a time.

Continuing to stroke him with her hands, she took a deep breath and said, very clearly, "I'm pregnant. You're going to be a father, Ron."

His reaction was instantaneous: Ron erupted in her hands, climaxing so violently that an animalistic roar escaped his lips at the same moment that he ejaculated, his seed spurting forcefully from his thick tip. Hermione arched back down, managing to swallow the majority of his hot fluids, a minimal amount spilling down her chin as he continued to pulse and shudder and grunt and curse beneath her.

"Hermione...wha...?" he breathed shakily when he'd finally stilled beneath her mouth and hands, and she pulled away gently as his large hands disentangled from her scalp, discreetly using her wand to clean herself up.

Suddenly, he swooped down and dragged her to her feet, his lips crashing down on hers with such fervent intensity, evidently not caring that traces of his semen lingered in her mouth, that she was momentarily stunned into inaction. However, she recovered from her surprise quickly enough, her hands sliding up his t-shirt-covered chest and gripping the back of Ron's neck as he rose to his full, lanky height, backing her against the table.

He then pulled away from her slightly so as to peer down into her face, his cerulean eyes piercing her very soul. She vaguely wondered what she must look like to him in the dim lighting from the nearby lamp, what with her lips swollen from the fellatio she'd just performed on him, her more dramatic than usual eye makeup, and her hair undoubtedly frizzing already despite her painstaking attempts to straighten it.

"Are—are you serious?" he stammered as if expecting her to exclaim, "April fools! Of course I'm not pregnant!" Except that it wasn't April, and he was most decidedly *not* a fool.

"Yes, Ron, we're having a baby," she confirmed, cracking a grin so wide that it felt as if her face might break in half, but she didn't care how silly she looked. "I found out right after you left, but I

wanted to wait and tell you in person. You have no idea how difficult it was not to let it slip every single time we spoke the last couple of weeks."

"It's prob'ly a good thing you didn't," he conceded, a goofy, face-splitting grin of his own breaking across those features that she knew as well as her own, his palms coming up to grip her waist, and she didn't miss his gaze flicker toward her still-flat belly as his thumbs rubbed circles on the strip of flesh visible between her bustier and garter belt. If Hermione closed her eyes, she'd be able to count every freckle across his nose and cheeks from memory; there was one right below his lower lip that she had a particular soft spot for. "I wouldn't've been able to concentrate on the case," Ron continued, "and since Harry relies on my brains to crack 'em, we'd probably still be blundering about, clueless..."

Despite his lighthearted tone, she sensed her husband's weariness at the mention of his latest field assignment, but she decided to let it go for the time being; now was the time for celebrating the new life they'd created together, and she wanted him to leave all that unpleasantness associated with his work behind for now.

"Well, you *are* the brains of that operation," she murmured in agreement, her silly smile still firmly in place.

"Yeah, I know. Just don't tell that to Harry, 'cause I let him think he's the leader. Lets him maintain his Chosen One, Hero of the Battle of Hogwarts, Defeater of All Things Evil image."

Hermione laughed at that, her hand coming up to affectionately caress his unshaven face, and he leaned into her touch unthinkingly. "You're my hero," she told him sincerely, aware of how cheesy the words sounded but, again, unable to care: It was the simple truth.

"Yeah? Well, you're *my* hero after that bloody brilliant B.J. you just gave me...and what a way to break the news, by the way."

She play-swatted at him, somewhat amazed that he still had the ability to make her blush like an adolescent schoolgirl after five years of marriage and two years of dating before that.

He deflected her playful blows easily, grinning mischievously as he captured her wrists in a single grip over her head and closed the distance between their bodies. As his eyes smoldered into hers, he finally released her wrists, trailing his hands down her body to grasp her bum, his fingertips dipping under the top of her thong and teasing her sensitive flesh.

Hermione's breathing increased in anticipation of what he would do next, feeling quietly pleased that she was still so attracted to him after being with him for the better part of a decade—and that he clearly was still just as attracted to her, judging by the fact that he was currently looking at her like he could eat her up.

"I believe you promised me dessert, woman," he murmured into her ear, pulling her delicate lobe between his lips and nipping gently.

"That—that *was* your dessert," she stammered, feeling rather confused as warmth bloomed low in her womb, saturating the scant lace between her legs.

His fingers still kneading the flesh of her arse while her own hands explored the smooth plains of his back beneath his shirt, he chuckled warmly, in that tone that she'd learned to recognize as his "seduction voice"; it was, in truth, very effective. It still had the ability to make her tremble in her knickers.

"Not that that wasn't fan-fucking-tastic," he rumbled, making her shiver, "'cause it was, but I'd

rather have *you* for dessert, especially since you're having my kid, and there's nothin' effing hotter than that..." In the next moment, his fingertips slid back up her back, tugging fruitlessly on the rather constricting bustier she'd chosen for him: Although it was uncomfortable, she'd been rather pleased by the result, and, going off

Ron's expression when he'd Floo'ed into their living room, it was well worth the brief discomfort.

"How does this bloody thing come off?" he grumbled in frustration, and she giggled, pushing him back a step so she could reach behind her back and unsnap the fastenings. It was difficult to work, but, with Ron's assistance, she managed to shrug out of the thing, freeing her breasts and feeling like she could breathe once more.

She'd barely regained her bearings when Ron's hands were on her sensitive mounds, lifting and squeezing their heavy weight and rolling her nipples while his lips attacked her throat, nuzzling his way down. His hands left her breasts, sliding down her ribcage and over her hips once more, and she helped him push her knickers down her legs. (Luckily, she'd thought to put them on *over* the garter belt and fastenings.)

"So fucking gorgeous," he groaned, gathering her up and lifting her easily onto the table while swooping in to capture one taut peak between his lips. His large hands skimmed up her thighs, squeezing gently as he urged her legs apart, and then he made her feel exactly as gorgeous as he claimed her to be:

After casting a Cushioning Charm on the table, he proceeded to worship her from head to toe, caressing her, kissing her, nipping her, lingering on her sensitive areas—her breasts, her belly where his unborn child grew, her swollen, needy sex. With his talented tongue, lips, and fingers, he brought her to earth-shattering climax again and again, until Hermione thought that she might literally die of sensation overload and from the magnitude of the sheer love conveyed by his every touch, every look, every word.

Only when she was fully satisfied and quivering in the afterglow of release did he lift her right leg, draping it around his hip; looking into her eyes, his expression the sexiest thing she'd ever seen in her life, Ron drove himself smoothly into her pliant, willing body.

Slowly, agonizingly slowly, her husband made love to her, driving them to mutual bliss in a practiced manner. When he'd finally collapsed in exhaustion and satiation, he gathered her up into his arms, hugging her tightly, and she returned the embrace just as passionately. "I love you so fucking much, Hermione," he said fiercely, his strong arms squeezing her so tightly it was almost painful. "You make me so fucking happy. I know you're gonna make a great mum."

"And I know you're going to make a great dad, Ron Weasley," she murmured, tightening her arms around his trim waist and burrowing her head into the soft flesh of his toned chest. "Just as soon as you stop using the word 'fuck' in your everyday vocabulary. It won't do for our daughter to get into trouble at Hogwarts for her use of vulgar profanities, now, will it?"

The World's Mental

"We could name her after your brother."

Ron's eyes snapped open, surveying the naked, gorgeous woman who was currently curled catlike on his chest, tracing random patterns on his pectorals. He got the idea that she was playing connect-the-dots with his freckles, but he couldn't care less.

He didn't have to ask which brother she meant. "You mean you wanna call our daughter 'Freddie' or 'Frederica?'" He cringed at the thought. "As much as I appreciate the thought, Hermione—and I'm sure Fred would, too—I think he'd rather her not get bullied in school for having a ridiculous name."

"We could always call her 'Erica' for short," she persisted.

"Yeah, but as soon as some snot-nosed little tosser figured out her real name, he'd take the piss, and I'd rather not end up having to arrest myself for putting some kid in his place. Let's just stick to boring but safe names."

"You mean like 'Hermione?'" she replied with a teasing smirk.

"Yeah, not sure what your parents were smoking when they came up with that one, Hermy-own-ninny."

"I actually rather like my name," she protested with a laugh, "but I *do* tire of explaining to people how to pronounce it properly, so that's my criteria: Whatever we call her, it should be simple enough to pronounce."

"I like your name, too, love," he assured her, planting a kiss to the top of her messy, frizzy head. "I'm only taking the Mickey."

"What if we named her after my mother?" Hermione suggested after several moments of contemplative silence.

"Rosalynn?" Ron's brow furrowed in another frown as he silently considered the name she was suggesting. While he loved Hermione's mum, he wasn't so sure he wanted to think of Mrs. Granger every time he looked at his daughter. It just didn't *feel* right somehow.

"I take that as another 'no,'" she said in apparent response to the expression on his face.

"It's not that I don't like the name... It's just... What if we shortened it somehow? 'Rosa?' Nah, that makes her sound Spanish, doesn't it?—Not that I have a problem with Spaniards or anything —"

"Rose," Hermione interrupted softly. "Our Rose."

Ron was quiet as he considered that for a moment. "Rose," he repeated, trying it out. "My little Rosie—I like that. Simple, but sweet—"

"Like her father," she interjected with a laugh, reaching up to lazily pat his face.

"Oh, I'm simple, am I?" he replied playfully, flipping her over onto her back abruptly, causing her to squeal in delight and surprise as he pinned her to the mattress.

"And *sweet*," she reiterated. "Honestly, Ron, I'm only taking the Mickey—" She burst into hysterics when he began tickling her like she was a toddler, thrashing against his hold on her as she giggled uncontrollably. "*Ron—geddoff—*"

"Not until you say I'm the most brilliant, intelligent, sexy, *manly* man you know," he said, a wide grin cracking his face as he continued to tickle her mercilessly.

"You're brilliant!" she squealed. "You're the smartest, most—most—"

"Sexiest—"

"—*SEXIEST* bloody man that I know, you bloody wanker!"

He stopped tickling her just as abruptly as he'd started. "All right, I believe you."

"You complete *arse*, Ronald Weasley," Hermione bit out, attempting halfheartedly to push him off of her, but he wasn't fooled for a second despite her best efforts to stop herself from smiling.

He grinned impishly in return as he slid down her body until he was face-level with her stomach. "Do you hear your mummy, Rosie-posey?" he asked, addressing her belly. "What appalling language she's teaching you. Really, she's gonna get you in trouble at school for using such vulgar profanities." He then leaned down and kissed her, right on top of her navel while his hands lightly gripped her waist.

"You think my stomach's going to talk back?" she asked with an amused smirk.

"Figured it's sorta like talking to plants," he replied, looking up and gracing her with his best crooked smile. "Y'know, how it's supposed to be good for...development or something?"

"Ron, that's completely mental."

"The world's mental," he said with a chuckle, even as he was unable to prevent grisly images from the Davies Manor from drifting to the forefront of his mind. It never failed to amaze him, the sick shite that humankind was capable of. The very first case that he and Harry had been involved in after their training had concerned a sadistic pedophile wizard who preyed on little children. When Ron had first lain eyes on the remains of one of the victims, he'd become violently ill.

And to think that he'd thought Voldemort was evil.

Even still, it had only reinforced the idea that he'd made the right career choice: He was willing to sacrifice his own naïve views of the world if it meant getting these bastards off the streets. Over the years he'd developed an iron stomach, and he was sometimes disturbed by the fact that he was becoming accustomed to these fucked-up things he saw.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked him suddenly, the humor fading from her eyes. "It's your latest case, isn't it? You always seem a bit...off when you come home. I know these assignments affect you more than you wish for me to know."

He rolled off of his wife, propping himself up by his elbow as he turned to face her. "It's nothing you need to worry about, love. Everything's fine. I'll be fine—especially now that I'm home with you, and I have Rosie's birth to look forward to..."

Hermione pulled herself into a sitting position before climbing from the bed and pulling on a dressing gown, her back to him. Normally, Ron would have allowed himself to enjoy the delicate, feminine line of her back and the swell of her small but plump arse, but there was a tension in the set of her shoulders that caught his full attention.

"It hurts me that you don't feel like you can confide in me," she finally said when she was dressed, turning to face him once more. "After five years of marriage, and after everything we went through together, during and after the war, you never truly open up to me about how your work affects you." While her voice was quiet, there was the familiar heat behind the accusations—accusations that Ron couldn't deny.

"You don't understand," Ron replied, sitting up in bed. With a rush of guilt, it all came back to him: How Hermione had helped him through Fred's death seven years ago; how she'd quietly held his hand during the funeral, and, afterward, though she had been hurting, too, she'd selflessly allowed him to vent his grief on her.

He recalled how he'd gone with her to Australia to support her while she reversed the Memory Charms she'd performed on her parents and brought them home. That had not been an easy time for anyone involved: Craig and Rosalynn Granger had at first felt betrayed by what their daughter had done to them against their knowledge and consent, and it had taken several long, emotionally draining conversations before they'd truly understood and accepted that what Hermione had done had been for their own protection.

Though they loved, cherished, and trusted their mature-for-her-age daughter, such a seeming betrayal would be a lot for *anyone* to take in, and it had taken many months for the relationship between parents and child to be fully restored. And Ron had been there for Hermione the whole time, even bravely accepting it when Mr. Granger had initially placed the blame on him for "influencing" his child to uproot them from their very lives.

Then there had been when he and Hermione had *finally* discussed at length Ron's emotional state that had led up to his abandoning her and Harry during the war and, subsequently, what he'd seen in the Horcrux; then they'd dealt with what had happened at Malfoy Manor, which had been painful for both of them. And when Kingsley Shacklebolt had offered Ron, Harry, and Neville positions as Aurors in the new regime that he was attempting to build, Hermione had readily supported Ron's decision to accept the offer, despite any personal fears that she retained.

Following the Battle of Hogwarts, they had vowed to base their newfound relationship on openness and trust, and Ron knew that he had never been open with her about how his work really affected him. Even still, he didn't want her to be negatively influenced by his job, especially now that she was pregnant; he wanted her to focus on having a happy, healthy pregnancy.

"Then explain it to me, Ron," she said quietly. "Why don't you feel like you can talk to me?"

"It's not that—it's just—you're so *good*, Hermione. You're the best person I know. And...well, the stuff I see out there...it's not good. Actually, it's about as far from good as it can get, and I don't wanna burden you with all that shite. I don't want you to become...jaded."

She was quiet for a moment as she stared at him, her arms crossed over her chest, those brown eyes boring into him. "I know that there's bad stuff out there," she finally said. "I was tortured by a sadistic, crazed woman—"

He winced at the blunt reminder of arguably the worst day of his life, but she barreled on as if she hadn't noticed:

"—while the Malfoy family stood around watching on, and nobody thought it worth interfering on the behalf of a Mudblood. I was there that day at the Battle of Hogwarts, and I watched good people—friends—die.

"I *know* there's evil in the world, Ron, and that it doesn't always exist in the obvious form of a bald, serpent-like sociopath. I see it every day, too—Perhaps not always in the extreme form that

you do, but I deal with cases where highly respected government officials starve, burn, beat, and sometimes actually kill—yes, *kill*—house-elves for...cooking their steaks more well-done than they prefer. It's an *atroc*ity that murder and enslavement of an intelligent, feeling species is not only considered socially acceptable, but that it's actually *legal*, after everything we fought for during the war so that our society could be free from tyranny and oppression."

She paused, licking her lips, her voice considerably softer when she spoke again: "I know that you want to protect me, Ron, but I'd prefer that you confide in me. I'm supposed to be your partner in this journey, and I can't be that for you if you're keeping me at arm's length, if you're shutting me out from a major aspect of your life."

Hermione grew quiet then, her eyes drifting to their framed wedding photos on the bureau, and Ron knew that she was done. She'd had her say, and she was waiting for his response.

"Hermione..." His voice came out raspy, so he cleared his throat as he dragged his hands through his hair. "You're right," he finally said. A decade ago, Ron mused, he would never have admitted such a thing; funny how time had a way of changing things so dramatically. "I mean, you're *always* right, so there's no surprise there." He cracked a hopeful smile, watching as the corners of her mouth tugged up reflexively. "I'm sorry, love. I never meant to shut you out; I just...I love you *so much*...and it's *because* of all those things you went through that I wanted to protect you from more harm."

His mood darkened then: "Sometimes I wish I could go back in time and murder that psychotic bitch for what she did to you—before Mum got to 'er. I still replay it in my mind sometimes, how I'd do things differently, how I could've protected you... And not just that, but I think about that day I left you. I think about all the pain I would've spared you if I'd just given myself a moment to calm down before Disapparating away. I should've...I should've stopped when I heard you calling my name—and I wanted to—I'm still not sure why I didn't—and...I should have rushed to you when I saw you chasing after me in the rain, your hair all plastered to your face. I should've kissed you right then and there, admitted that I loved you..."

"Ron," she whispered, all the tension and anger having drained from her face as he spoke, and she hurried forward, diving on the bed and engulfing him in her arms. He returned her embrace just as fiercely, planting kisses to her eyelids and squeezing her to his bare chest.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione—for everything."

"There's nothing to be sorry for," she whispered, pulling away from him slightly to peer up into his face. "Just...please confide in me from now on. That's all I ask."

He sighed gently, feeling almost relieved that he no longer had to keep everything bottled up inside as his eyes closed briefly and he nodded. "What d'ya wanna know?"

"Anything," she replied, settling against the headboard as she watched him. "Anything you need to get off your chest."

"Okay," he said with a shaky laugh. "I can do that."

oOo

A half an hour later, Ron wandered down the stairs, heading for the kitchen for a late-night snack and feeling lighter than he had felt in a very long time.

As he fixed himself a sandwich—by hand, since, he'd left his wand upstairs like a dumbarse—he considered that it felt good to have finally unloaded some of the burden he'd been carrying, and

Hermione had taken everything he'd revealed to her in stride.

Of course she did, you prat, he told himself reasonably. She's the strongest witch you know.

He made his way into the living room then, flipping on lamps by hand as he finished his sandwich in three bites and moving toward the entertainment center, thinking that some *Halo* was just what he needed.

Ron frowned upon realizing that the Xbox wasn't where it was normally kept. "What in Merlin's...?" He opened the little doors that housed their small collection of movies, then peered into the space where the DVD player and video recorder were kept, but with no luck.

"Hermione!" he bellowed in the general direction of the stairs. "Where the bloody hell is my Xbox?"

Logic Must Dictate

The unexpected, intense bout of nausea came on so suddenly and so violently that there wasn't much to be done about it.

Hermione had been sifting through her filing cabinet and contemplating the advantages of Muggle technology over magic since, one must face it, in many ways technology seemed to be quickly bypassing magic. For example, all the magical minds in the world had yet to come up with a filing system less antiquated than an old-fashioned *cabinet*—no matter how roomy and space-saving an Undetectable Extension Charm made it. In truth, she had been taking her files home and converting them into digital files on her laptop, but the problem was that she couldn't bring her computer into the office for obvious reasons: She was in the heart of the Ministry of Magic, where the concentrated amount of magic in the air would reduce her poor machine to absolute rubbish.

No sooner had that crossed her mind than the nausea had struck, and, knowing she wouldn't make it out into the corridor and the nearest loo, she dived for the wastebasket.

"Hermione, are you all right?" asked a familiar, booming voice unexpectedly.

She nodded in affirmation at the appearance of a concerned-looking Kingsley Shacklebolt in her office as she straightened, quickly using her wand to clean herself up and to dispose of the mess.

"Just a bit of morning sickness," she replied dismissively as she climbed to her feet, thinking that since she was nearing the end of her first trimester that hopefully her regular bouts of nausea would soon begin to dissipate. "Thank you, sir," she added gratefully when the Minister for Magic produced water from the tip of his wand and filled a glass, pressing it into her hands.

"You're quite welcome," he said as he lowered himself into the chair in front of her desk, his lips quirked up in a small smile, and Hermione knew that he was bemused by the fact that she refused to refer to him by his first name while at work despite the fact that they were friends.

"What can I do for you, Minister?" she asked with a shaky smile as she followed his lead, taking a seat at her neat, organized desk, which was adorned with exactly one photograph encased in a no-nonsense frame. It was a picture that Molly Weasley had taken during Christmas holiday the year following the war when Hermione had gone back to Hogwarts without Ron and Harry: There was snow on the ground, and Ron's arm was slung casually around her shoulders while he grinned roguishly at the camera; Hermione, on the other hand, wasn't looking at the camera: She was laughing as she gazed up at Ron with an expression of utter adoration and love on her face.

It had always been her favorite photograph, which is why she'd chosen it as the one she wanted at her workplace.

"As it happens," Minister Shacklebolt said, "I received a visit this morning from a rather... distraught Caledon King. It seems he's most unhappy that you interrogated his house-elf against his consent."

"Is he?" Hermione bit out, unable to rein in her annoyance, even for Kingsley. "What a shame. And it was hardly an *interrogation*. I merely interviewed her based on intelligence I'd received—"

"Hermione, I'm on your side—you know that. You have support in the Ministry, including myself, or else you wouldn't be paid to do what you do, but you can't simply start interviewing house-elves without their owners' knowledge—"

"Owners?" Hermione repeated, feeling outraged. "They're not *property*, Kingsley," she ground out, ignoring her own rule about professionalism in the office. "They're thinking, feeling beings deserving of respect and fair treatment. Perhaps *I* should be kept under lock and chain and denied civil rights for merely being a Mudblood—"

"Hermione, you know you're preaching to the choir," he interrupted firmly but gently. "I *am* on your side; I agree with you, but since this isn't a dictatorship, unfortunately I'm not the only one you have to convince."

"But after everything that we fought for, after all that was lost—"

"We've had this conversation on more than one occasion: Change takes time and patience. The practice of keeping house-elves is a part of wizarding society that goes back hundreds of years. Unfortunately, it will take more than a decade or two to tear down an injustice so deeply ingrained, but the more toes you step on in the process, the further, I fear, it will delay progress."

Hermione leaned back in her seat, taking a deep, calming breath and grudgingly admitting to herself that he had a point. "I would like to state for the record that I did nothing illegal. According to Section Five, Article Four of the Decree for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, if there is a seeming legitimate complaint of maltreatment toward any magical being, sentient or otherwise, then this department has the right and obligation to intercede on that creature's behalf, and to not do so would be a negligence of duty.

"Since the source of the complaint received was," she continued, "in my professional opinion, legitimate, I was merely performing my job as I saw fit. Frankly, and with all due respect, Minister, I don't care if Missy's *master*,"—she literally spat the word—,"is a senior member of the Wizengamot. If Caledon King were accused of beating his wife, then I have no doubt that the MLE would take that complaint seriously and perform a thorough investigation. Likewise, so will I on the behalf of Missy, especially since she can't and won't speak up for herself."

By the time Hermione finished her little speech, Kingsley was grinning widely, with something resembling admiration and respect gleaming in his eyes. "Hermione, if you weren't already married, I do believe I might just propose to you right now..."

She gaped at him, her mouth opening and closing like a fish. "P-Pardon me?"

He let out a deep guffaw: "Relax, Granger-Weasley. I only meant that you're probably the most passionate, admirable witch I've ever met. Truly. If there were more people like you willing to step forward, I believe that progress would not take so long to achieve, after all."

oOo

Later that day found Hermione Apparating into an alleyway in Muggle London, very near where she had made plans to meet her mother for some shopping for baby clothes and accessories. (As much as she loved Ron's mother, she refused to let her child wear nothing but crocheted outfits.)

Ever since Hermione's Department Head had visited Hawaii on vacation, he'd declared every other Friday to be "Aloha Friday," and therefore they were only required to work a half a day on those days. She thought this to be absurd and generally ignored her well-intended boss when he strutted around the department in a brightly-colored, hibiscus-covered Muggle shirt, peering into offices and declaring, "Aloha! Get out of here and enjoy your weekend!"

However, since she had made plans with her mother, she'd decided, for once, to take advantage of Aloha Friday.

As she straightened her Muggle clothing—she'd pulled off her robes and shoved them into her desk before leaving the office—she noted that it was rather warm for October in London and was glad to be wearing a loose skirt and open-toed flats.

Rounding the corner onto Portobello Road, heading in the general direction of the boutique that Rosalynn Granger had named, Hermione contemplated stopping into the nearby bookstore for a while since she had over an hour to spare. She was just reaching for the handle when the door was flung open from the inside, and a tall man stepped out, barely avoiding barreling right into her.

"Excuse me," the man murmured, not even looking at her, but his voice had her eyes shooting immediately to his face. In the instant before he moved around her, she noted his features: Shortly cropped black hair and a neatly trimmed beard, but, despite those changes, she would recognize that hooked nose, those black eyes, and his sallowness anywhere: Hermione had only sat in his classroom for six years. She'd only witnessed his supposed death.

And his silky but snide, biting voice had only cut her to the core about a hundred times.

No. It can't be. Can it...?

Before she'd made any sort of decision, as she stared at his retreating back while he walked down the sidewalk, she began to follow him.

She wasn't sure exactly why she was doing this, other than to satisfy an intense, burning need to know the truth. It dawned on her, as she kept her distance, trying to blend in with the other pedestrians on the busy pavement, that his body had never been recovered. At the time, because of all that had happened, everyone—including herself—had been much too preoccupied to consider the mystery at length. There had been so much chaos and confusion that by the time Harry, Ron, and Hermione had given their eyewitness accounts of the death of Severus Snape, and a subsequent search of the Shrieking Shack had revealed nothing, it had largely been assumed that his body had been disposed of by magic at some point in the night.

It had never occurred to her that he could have survived; after all, Hermione had witnessed the light drain from his eyes.

Just as that thought flickered through her mind, she found herself cursing as she realized that she'd lost him. She stopped in her tracks, peering into shop windows before moving further down the street and looking down an alley, knowing that if it *was* him, he could have found a safe place to Disapparate, and she would never know for sure...

Hands on her hips, feeling beyond frustrated by that prospect, she turned and stalked toward the shop on the strip just in front of the place where she'd last seen him, yanked open the door, and stepped inside. She cast her eyes about, noting that it was a woman's clothing boutique, so she highly doubted—

"Did it fail to cross your astute mind, Miss Granger, as a young, not entirely unappealing female, that if you follow a man still arguably in the prime of his life, that he might just get the wrong impression?"

Hermione wheeled around: Severus Snape was leaning casually against a rack of clothing, his arms crossed over his chest. It was the first time she'd ever seen him in Muggle attire and without greasy curtains of hair hanging in his face, but he was, nevertheless, unmistakable. "You're dead," she blurted before she could stop herself, the stupidity of her statement making her cringe inwardly.

"Indeed." It was neither a question nor a confirmation as he cocked one eyebrow at her. "I

suppose I should retract my previous statement about your mind being 'astute,' Miss Granger, because, if what you say were the case, then it must be highly impressive that I'm managing to find the strength to walk about and speak. Or perhaps you believe me to be a ghost, or an Inferius? What was it that your perceptive friend, Mr. Potter, once said about how to tell the difference between a ghost and an Inferius? Ah, yes, a ghost is 'transparent,' I believe it was. Therefore, logic must dictate that I am an Inferius."

She merely gaped at him, her face warming as she found herself transported back in time to his dungeon classroom, when she'd been an awkward schoolgirl, eager to prove herself to her peers and teachers. Not only had Snape been her one teacher that she hadn't been able to impress, but he'd openly mocked her more than once.

I'm not that insecure little girl anymore, she told herself firmly, and I won't allow him to get me flustered as such.

"Indeed," Snape drawled once more, appearing amused, and with renewed mortification she realized that he'd been inside her head without her knowledge.

Looking around, she realized abruptly that the shopkeeper was watching them curiously. Seized by a sudden onslaught of boldness and curious to know how he'd survived and what he'd been doing these last years, Hermione said suddenly, "There's a pub a block over. Please, let me buy you a drink, Prof—er, Mr. Snape."

The Sweeter the Indulgence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He was unsure what precisely had enticed him to acquiesce to the Granger girl's unexpected offer: Perhaps, he admitted to himself only grudgingly, he was just as curious about her as she was about him. After all, though he would have rather died not one but a thousand deaths by a poisonous serpent than admit to such a thing, the bothersome, irritating child he'd known whose hand had been perpetually in the air had, in fact, been one of the most brilliant students he had taught in the course of his career.

Perhaps, however, his acceptance had more to do with the fact that he was merely a man—a *lonely* man, though, again, Severus Snape would never admit to such a thing—and she was not, as he'd said, entirely unappealing: Though her hair was as bushy as he remembered, her complexion was alabaster and smooth, her lips were ripe and plump, and while she was a bit too thin for his personal tastes, her legs and buttocks were nevertheless shapely and appealing beneath her simple but feminine Muggle garb—as was the swell of her breasts beneath her blouse. In short, the know-it-all had grown up...rather sufficiently, though, again, he would never admit to such a thing. Although, if the opportunity presented itself he would not hesitate to utilize his skills of persuasion to use her to satisfy his base needs, and he was not dissuaded by the wedding band and diamond engagement ring on her finger; that was not a concern of his.

Though Snape was acutely aware that he was not a particularly attractive man, he was equally aware that women, and even some men, responded to his voice, and he'd perfected his various tones and inflections over the years, developing his voice into quite an effective tool that had served many beneficial purposes.

"So how did you survive, Professor?" she breathed the moment their drinks were placed in front of them and the waitress had scampered off.

They were in the back corner of a foul Muggle pub with sticky floors, stickier tables, and watered down whiskey—the latter observation he discovered upon taking a cautious sip and subsequently grimacing. "I mean, I'm not sure what to call you," the know-it-all tacked on, and he wasn't sure whether he should be charmed or revolted by her girlish tendency to blush every two minutes despite her obvious, futile efforts to portray the strong, confident witch that she undoubtedly believed herself to be. "Obviously you're not my professor anymore, and 'Mr. Snape' just sounds strange—"

"What is it that you want, Miss Granger?" he cut her off biting. "I assume you had a purpose in mind for inviting me here, other than to bore me with your tedious ability to incessantly prattle?"

She bit her lower lip, the color blooming in her cheeks once more. Curious, but he did not find it at all revolting this time. "I just—it was a shock...seeing you. I was there, Severus," she said, apparently having come to a decision on her own about how she should address him. "I was in the Shrieking Shack, just behind Harry—"

"So I recall. I am not so old yet that my mind has become decrepit."

"I saw the light drain from your eyes. I saw—"

"You saw what I wanted you to see—nothing more."

"But—"

"I must say, it is rather...peculiar, to say the least, to read one's own obituary. I found Mr. Potter's eulogy, in particular, to be quite interesting and unexpected, if somewhat vomit-inducing. I have always been curious: Did it never cross any of Britain's finest wizarding minds that it just might occur to a Potions Master to make a habit of carrying an antivenin on his person while in the presence of that serpent-loving, homicidal megalomaniac, and to ingest potions designed to prolong one's life prior to meetings with said homicidal megalomaniac? And what of the minor, insignificant detail that my body was not recovered? After all, if I am a 'hero, never to be forgotten,' in the words of Potter, it is curious that reports of my demise were so readily accepted."

"I'm sure Harry would be touched to know that you memorized his eulogy," the girl in front of him quipped, and he glared at her, feeling somewhat surprised and experiencing a twinge of begrudging respect: The brat he'd known had been too terrified of him and too fearful of tarnishing her rule-abiding reputation to have given him any cheek.

He observed her in a new light, a practiced expression of neutrality on his face as he watched her take a cautious sip of ginger ale.

"Many bodies were recovered that day, as you can imagine, Severus," she finally said, her tone serious once more. "There were many funerals to arrange and attend, and, just so you know, people *did* wonder why your body hadn't been found, but in the aftermath of war there was quite a lot to deal with, so, yes, people readily accepted our word that you'd been killed. It was...very convincing since, as you said, we saw what you wanted us to see."

As she spoke, she'd retrieved a small vial from her handbag, and Snape watched on as she tipped an amber liquid into her ginger ale.

"When are you due, Miss Granger?"

Her eyes shot to his abruptly. "Excuse me?"

"You are either suffering from the lingering effects of consuming copious amounts of alcohol, which seems oddly out of character, or else you are with child."

"Perhaps I enjoy to let loose now and again," she replied evenly as she stirred the liquid into her drink and took another cautious sip, her eyes never leaving his. "A lot's changed in the last seven years."

"Clearly, since you're actually attempting to lie to me, which you should know is a pitifully useless endeavor, given that I'm inclined to simply delve into your mind and take what I seek rather than indulge in childish games."

She glared at him: "Fine. I'm due in April, if you must know." Her cheeks were lightly pink, and even without employing Occlumency he knew that she felt like a schoolgirl admitting to her professor that she'd been 'knocked up,' to use the common Muggle vernacular.

"Who is it?" he inquired, his eyes lingering on her wedding band while he kept his expression carefully guarded. While he was partly curious as to whom this young witch had chosen as her partner, what he truly desired to know was whether she carried Lily's grandchild. After all, Granger had been attached to Potter and Weasley by the hips; it was a fair probability that she had ended up with one of them, and Potter was the less moronic of the two males.

"Ron," she replied, seemingly taken aback by the question. "We've been married for five years now. This will be our first child."

"Weasley?" He didn't bother stifling his derisive scoff. "Truthfully, Miss Granger, I realize that I wasn't in the habit of coddling you in the classroom like your other professors, but I did, nevertheless, believe you to possess an above-average intellect; I'm therefore fairly astounded that you would settle for that brainless—"

"My husband is hardly *brainless*," she cut in, her face flushing again as she puffed herself up in indignation, "and I most certainly did not *settle*. Ron is good, loyal—"

"The same qualities of which can be found in a stray dog—"

"—and brave—and he happens to be a successful, well-respected Auror."

"Yes, admittedly, that is a surprise."

She narrowed her eyes at him, her jaw set in an expression that gave her the appearance of a petulant child. "Why did you run away?" she bit out. "Why did you let people think you were dead? After all, you were acquitted—"

"I had no desire to be a hero to the magical world," he cut in. "I had no desire to be anything to anyone. I wished merely to live out the remainder of my life in peace and quiet. As it happens, I left the country and only recently returned. Generally, I hire someone to do my shopping, or else I only venture into Muggle territory, which I assumed to be safe. Cleary, my assumption was erroneous, seeing as I almost literally ran into *you* today in the middle of Muggle London. For the purposes of any future outings, I'll be sure to disguise myself more thoroughly."

"Why did you accept my invitation, Severus?" she asked quietly. "Why did you let me find you in the first place? If you'd slipped into the alley and Disapparated, I would've convinced myself that it was my imagination—nothing more than an incredible likeness, yet you waited for me in that shop. You *wanted* me to find you."

There were several answers Snape could have given her, and all would have been partially accurate—loneliness, simple human curiosity—but the response he decided to give her, while the most crude, was also the most truthful: "As I implied before, Hermione, I am a man with needs, and you're not an unappealing female. I was hoping to utilize my advanced powers of persuasion to convince you to let me fuck you. But since you're with child by your famous Auror husband, I'm no longer certain that that's a conceivable possibility."

She recoiled in shock and disgust, just as he'd expected her to. "As if it ever was!" she hissed at him. "As if I'd ever..."

"Would it be such a shock to you if I revealed that it's quite easier than you'd think to convince a woman to spread her legs for a strange man? Even for a physically unappealing one such as myself?"

Her face was beet-red as she sputtered: "It's not—it doesn't have anything to do with—with your *physical* appearance! You're not ugly—at least, not outwardly." Impossibly, her face turned an even deeper shade of scarlet. "Even if I weren't married, though, I still wouldn't consider...*that*...with *you* because...well, you—you mocked me about my teeth! You humiliated me in front of the entire class!"

He had to admit that he was taking a great deal of pleasure from watching her blush and sputter in mortification. "Did I?" he drawled lazily. "I'd forgotten. So what you're saying, in effect, is that if you weren't married and if I hadn't humiliated you that you would consider letting me fuck you, since you do not find me to be physically repugnant."

"*What?*—No—most certainly not. This entire conversation is absurd, not to mention wildly inappropriate," she huffed, rising to her feet so hastily that she bumped the table hard with her hip, but she hardly seemed to notice. "You're twisting my words, you insufferable, arrogant man. You're just as boorish as I recall you being, but since I'm no longer one of your students I'm not required to sit here and bear it. I wish you the best of luck, Mr. Snape—"

"What happened to 'Severus?' I find that I rather enjoy the sound of my given name issuing from your pretty, know-it-all mouth."

She paused in her indignation, and he knew instinctively what she was thinking: She was wondering if her former professor was not only propositioning her, but whether he was actually openly *flirting* with her now. That thought combined with the rather amusing expression on her face propelled him to do something that he rarely felt the urge to do: He let out a low chuckle, which, in turn, caused the expression of shock on her face to become impossibly more comedic.

"Please, by all means, sit back down, Hermione," he said, gesturing toward the seat she'd vacated as he managed to compose himself. "I promise not to tease you anymore if you promise in return to never again invite me to such an appalling establishment."

He watched as her eyes flickered about, noting that a few patrons were glancing at them curiously, but the raucous noise that somehow qualified as "music" had, for the most part, masked their rather...heated conversation.

"Fine," she muttered, plopping herself back down in the chair, that petulant expression on her face once more. "I'll stay. If that's what you want."

oOo

He kept his distance as he observed the Mudblood leave the Muggle pub with the dark-haired, bearded man—the man who was most definitely *not* her husband, the renowned Auror.

Whore.

They were all whores, of course, every last one of them: Muggle or Mudblood, they were all the same—filthy, disgusting, adulterous women.

Before turning his interests on Granger-Weasley, Henry had at first begun following the wife of the famed hero, Potter, but he had found the slender, red-tressed witch to be boring and commonplace with her obnoxious brat in tow. Pureblood women had never suited his particular tastes, at any rate; they were dreadfully faithful to their husbands and tediously monotonous in their day-to-day activities. In short, they were not worth his notice.

When he'd consequently turned his attention on the Auror Weasley's wife, the Mudblood with the ridiculous, unpronounceable name, Henry had at first found her to be just as dull as Ginevra Potter. He'd done his homework, of course; he'd learned that Granger-Weasley was an advocate for the rights of *house-elves*, of all ridiculous things, and other pathetic, semi-intelligent creatures—goblins, giants, centaurs, and the like.

Still, Henry was nothing if not patient. Despite the Mudblood's bushy-haired, generally ordinary appearance and absurd agendas, he was quite certain that the slag would make her true nature known if he was tolerant enough.

Three months into his surveillance, his persistence had paid off.

It had been laughably easy to buy information from the Department of Magical Transportation with the right price; he'd even gone to lengths to procure an Undetectable Trace, normally

reserved for criminals on parole but capable of being purchased on the black market for the right price, to place on her against her knowledge, thereby ensuring that he could trace her movements at all times.

Granger-Weasley left her home for the Ministry of Magic, by means of the Floo Network, at precisely 6:30 each morning and usually Floo'ed home sometime between 6:30 and 7:30 in the evening, except on the occasions where she stopped off at the market or visited a friend. On Fridays, however, she sometimes left her office early, and today had proved to be one of those days.

Accessing her Trace, he had Apparated to Portobello Road in Muggle London, locating her easily enough. He'd tailed her as she'd followed the black-haired man from the bookstore, but Henry had been cautious, keeping his distance to avoid detection as he sensed instinctively that this man, whoever he was, was lethal. As such, he hadn't been able to get close enough to follow their conversation, yet it had been simple enough to follow their body language.

He'd stood a distance away from the filthy Muggle pub, the Irish Rose, waiting for them to emerge, and emerge together they had after about an hour or so. The black-haired man had held the door for her, and, even at a distance, Henry hadn't missed the blush in Granger-Weasley's cheeks, a telltale sign that the Mudblood was attracted to this man that was not her husband.

As he'd Apparated to the Leaky Cauldron, he mused that the Auror Weasley should consider it a favor when Henry finally disposed of the Mudblood whore he called his wife, because he would then be free to find someone more suited to his pureblood station.

Once through the doors, he made his way through the pub and toward the stairs, bypassing a whore that propositioned him along the way. It had been almost tempting to accept the offer as a means to tide him over until he got his eager hands on Granger-Weasley, but he declined; he knew that he must remain patient.

The longer he abstained, the sweeter the indulgence when it came down to it.

As Henry locked himself into his room, stripping from his clothing without bothering to light a single lantern, he immersed himself in images of what he intended to do to the slag: He could already envision the piercing of the knife as it penetrated her and the beading of deepest scarlet on alabaster skin; he imagined the shock of terror and helpless realization in her eyes and her screams in the moment before he silenced her forever.

And then the horrors would truly begin for her.

Chapter End Notes

In regard to Hermione's supposed attraction to Snape - Please bear in mind that those observations are from the POV of a psycho.

I would also like to remind readers that although Snape is widely associated with actor Alan Rickman, who's in his 60's, the character would actually only be 44 at this point in time had he lived. Although I can't deny that Alan's voice gives me yummy shivers, I actually have come to picture the much younger actor Adrien Brody as the face of Snape.

A Lost Cause

Ron, Harry, and Ginny stared at her with identical, dumbfounded expressions on their faces: Their mouths were open, their eyes wide in their faces.

Hermione almost laughed at the rather comical sight, but she restrained herself, biting her lower lip as she waited for one of them to speak. At last, Harry cleared his throat, seeming to rouse himself from his initial shock. "Are—are you sure it was him?"

"Positive. I followed him into a boutique. I actually spoke to him."

The four of them were sitting in the den of the Weasley home: Harry, his legs stretched out in front of him, his ankles crossed where they rested on the coffee table, had one arm slung over Ginny's shoulders on the sofa; Ron was in his recliner, and Hermione was perched on the loveseat, facing the others. There was an open bottle of sparkling white grape juice on an end table, and Hermione absently traced the rim of her mostly forgotten champagne flute with one finger while the others stared at her.

There was another pause before Ron said, "So...Snape—the same Snape that the three of us—," he gestured between himself, Harry, and Hermione, "—saw die—just happened to be... wandering around Muggle London? Shopping in Muggle stores?" He appeared incredulous.

"That's exactly what I'm saying, Ron. Apparently he felt safe in the Muggle world—like there was less of a chance of him being recognized."

"Well, he was wrong about that, wasn't he?" Ginny observed with a grin. "So what happened? What did he say?"

"Blimey," interjected Ron. "Is he still a git?"

"You have no idea," Hermione replied, returning his smile and thinking that she would have to tell him the rather...crude intentions Snape had claimed to have for her, but that wasn't a discussion she wanted to have in front of Harry and Ginny. "He's just as crass and uncouth as always; apparently his status as a 'war hero' hasn't changed him much in that regard." She looked back at Ginny then, who took a sip from her own glass as she leaned forward in apparent anticipation of what Hermione would say next. "Anyway, I invited him to a nearby pub for a drink—"

"Hold up," Ron interrupted. "You did *what*?"

Hermione barely suppressed the urge to roll her eyes. "I was curious about how he'd survived and why he'd chosen to let the entire wizarding world think he was dead—"

"And he accepted the offer?" This time, Harry was the one who gawked at her in wide-eyed disbelief.

"Surprisingly, yes." In her mind, she heard Snape's silky voice: *I was hoping to utilize my advanced powers of persuasion to convince you to let me fuck you.* Though Hermione had no doubt that Snape himself believed what he'd told her, she suspected a simple, human truth beneath the façade: "Although, maybe it's not so surprising, at all—I mean, I think he's lonely, to be honest. From what I gathered from our conversation, he lives the life of a recluse. Whether he'd admit to such a thing or not, I think he was pleased to run into a familiar face." She paused before adding, "He laughed. He actually *laughed*."

"Bollocks," Ron protested after another moment of stunned silence.

"Yeah, I'm with Ron," Ginny agreed. "Didn't think that was possible."

"So did he tell you how he survived, then?" Harry asked somewhat impatiently, clearly more interested in getting answers than he was in Snape's ability to convey human emotions.

"An antivenin and some life-prolonging potions he'd taken earlier that day. Why it never occurred to me, I have no idea. It's rather obvious, isn't it?"

"Don't be so hard on yourself, love," Ron soothed. "I mean, I was there, too. His 'death' was pretty bloody convincing, wasn't it?"

Harry nodded in agreement while Ginny glanced between the three of them. "Tell us the whole conversation."

At Ginny's request, Hermione relayed the relevant sections of the hour-long discussion she'd had with Snape, omitting the bits about him expressing a physical desire for her. "I sort of...might have...told him that you two are planning to name your baby after him," Hermione confessed after several minutes, when she'd gotten to what she had discussed with him after she'd very nearly stormed from the pub. "I don't know why I did it," she said quickly as she noted Harry's face redden somewhat and Ginny's arms wrap instinctively around her stomach. Briefly, Hermione recalled how Ginny had found out she was expecting her second son shortly after Hermione had learned of her own pregnancy. "It just sort of...came out."

"It's all right," Harry said dismissively. "Since he's alive, then he might as well know."

"Did he say anything about it?" Ginny asked, her tone inquisitive.

"He made a snide comment, of course, but there was a subtle change in his facial expression," Hermione replied, recalling how Snape's eyes had widened ever-so-slightly before he'd hastily regained his sarcastic countenance and cocked an eyebrow at her. "I think he might've, beneath the surface—*way* beneath the surface—been somewhat touched by the gesture."

Ron snorted at that, which, in turn, had Hermione shooting a glare at him. "What?" he said defensively. "You talk about him like...like..."

"He has feelings?" she asked pointedly. "He may be an arse, but he's human like the rest of us, Ron."

"Hermione, you remind me of Hagrid sometimes," he replied affectionately, gently teasing as he sat up more fully in his chair, "the way you're always worrying about creatures that can take care of themselves. Don't get me wrong, it's one o'the things I love about you, hon, but in this case I think it's a lost cause."

"He loved my mother," Harry said quietly. "We know that much."

The room went quiet at that, and, shortly thereafter, they made the unanimous, unspoken decision to turn the conversation to lighter topics.

oOo

"What is it you didn't wanna tell me in front of my sister and Harry earlier?" Ron asked Hermione about an hour later. He was in the kitchen, waving his wand at the china, which soared—newly washed and dried—from the drain board and into the cupboard.

He hadn't missed the way she'd glossed over parts when she'd recounted her meeting with Snape.

Seven years of being with Hermione and seven years of friendship before that, and he knew his wife as well as he knew himself. Hell, he probably knew her *better* than he knew himself, and, as such, Ron had sensed instinctively that there was more to the story, but that she hadn't wanted to say exactly what that was in front of Harry and Ginny.

She flashed a smile at him across the bar, where she was rummaging through a stack of books. "Sometimes it amazes me how perceptive you've become, Ron," she observed, moving around the bar and coming to face him in the kitchen.

"What makes you so sure I wasn't *always* perceptive and that I just chose not to let anyone know?" he countered.

"And what purpose would that have served, exactly?"

"Hey, I had a reputation to uphold as a big Quidditch star," he replied with a teasing smirk. "Wouldn't've wanted anyone thinking I was a brainiac or something. George and Fred would've taken the piss for sure, and I'd've never heard the end of it."

"True," Hermione conceded, stepping up to him and sliding her arms around his neck as her body pressed enticingly against his. "But if you weren't acting all barmy, we might've gotten together a *lot* sooner than we did."

"Mm," he replied, his arms tightening around her waist. "What a prat my younger self was. I oughtta go back in time and kick my own arse."

"There's something I'd like to see," she rumbled in that sexy, throaty way she had that usually gave him an instant woody, but he hadn't forgotten what had started this conversation to begin with.

"So what else did he say to you?" he asked, steering the subject back on track.

She bit her lower lip as she gazed up at him, and he knew at that moment that he wasn't gonna like it, not one bit: "He...propositioned me. Well, sort of. When I asked him why he let me find him instead of Disapparating away, he admitted that he'd been...well...hoping for sex." Even as she tried to state the facts in a rational Hermione-like manner, her cheeks turned pink in obvious embarrassment.

Ron's vision blurred into red-hot anger as those words sank in. In his mind's eye he saw that greasy, disdainful git, and, war hero or not, Ron would be damned if he let that arsehole treat his wife so disrespectfully.

"Ron?" Hermione said, backing up slightly in evident response to the expression on his face. "He didn't try anything. Honestly, he was only trying to get a rise out of me. He's always been insulting and crude; I suppose he was going for a new angle, is all, now that I'm an adult and no longer his student."

In an act of sheer will, he blinked back the abrupt flood of rage, focusing on his wife's pretty, earnest face. When he finally spoke, he was proud that he managed to sound decidedly calm and collected: "Has he completely gone around the twist in the last seven years? Why in the name of Merlin's saggy bollocks would he think that you'd...especially after some of the things he said to you in the classroom?"

"I'd wondered the same thing," Hermione admitted, "but it's like I said earlier—I think he's just lonely. Of course he would find a crass way of expressing that. He *is* Snape, after all."

"Yeah? Well he can find a cure for his *loneliness* with someone other than *my wife*," Ron replied

heatedly, his composure slipping. "The bloody tosser."

"That, he is," she agreed, her arms sliding back up his chest once more as she regarded him.

"Are you planning on seeing him again? It's just that I know you have a thing for hopeless cases, and I trust you, love, but I don't trust *him* one bloody bit—and I don't care if he loved Lily Potter. Being capable of love doesn't automatically make someone a good person, in my book. The bastard could...put something in your drink or something. I see cases all the time where shite like that happens to unsuspecting women," he rushed on when her eyes widened, her mouth opening as if to protest, "and even some *men*, and Snape is a bloody Potions Master. He'd know exactly what to use, Hermione."

"Ron," she said gently, looking him directly in the eyes as she toyed with the collar of his shirt, "even if you hadn't already drilled it into my head not to leave my drink unattended in public settings, meeting with him again didn't come up. I assume that he got what he needed from me, which was a human connection rather than *sex*."

Relief coursed through his body in a rush, and he felt himself relaxing at her words. "Oh. Well. Okay. That's good, then."

She smiled again, and it lit up her entire face, her beauty warming him from the inside out as her small hands slid up the sides of his neck, her fingers threading in his hair and tugging gently. "Let's forget about Snape, yeah?" Hermione murmured just before she stood up on the tips of her toes and crashed her lips against his, claiming him in an aggressive kiss.

Hell fucking yeah, he thought in compliance, returning her kiss just as urgently as his arms snaked around his wife's waist, hoisting her up as they backed against the counter.

He could definitely deal with not talking about the greasy git.

Fright Fest

"Aunt 'Mione, look at me—I'm a MUGGLE!"

Five-year-old Victoire Weasley held out her arms in the den of Shell Cottage, twirling in excitement as she showed off her rather ordinary blue jeans and pink sweater, her blue eyes wide in her face, which, incidentally, was a mini-replica of her mother's. The cherubic girl's smooth, shiny hair flowed down her back and shoulders in a shocking scarlet cascade, and she seemed completely oblivious to the green-haired boy who ran circles around her with a toy wand and who appeared to be warding off unseen enemies.

"You look brilliant!" Hermione beamed at the little girl. "The loveliest Muggle there ever was. And who are you supposed to be, Teddy?"

"I'm Harry!" the little boy exclaimed as he paused in his pretend dueling. "Duh!"

"Teddy, what 'ave I told you about speaking to adults zat way?" Fleur Weasley admonished as she flourished her wand, looking flustered, her silvery blonde hair falling from its clasp as nappies and bottles zoomed into the diaper bag on the kitchen table.

"My Uncle Harry does NOT have green hair!" Vickie huffed indignantly, planting her hands on her small hips as she glared at the little boy.

"He does today!" Teddy Lupin insisted.

At that moment, three-year-old Dominique walked up to him and snatched the fake wand out of his hand, which caused Teddy to protest loudly while Fleur let out a string of agitated-sounding French. Apparently all the noise was enough to awaken baby Louis, because there was an abrupt high-pitched wail from the nearby bassinet.

"I've got him," Hermione offered helpfully, moving across the room to lift the baby as Fleur went off on the bickering children: "Victoire, Dominique, and Teddy, if you zree do not stop zis fighting at once, none of you shall go trick-or-treating! Do I make myself clear?"

Hermione couldn't help but grin as she lightly bounced Louis, thinking that Fleur was reminding her more and more of Molly; she couldn't help but wonder if *she* would appear much the same in a few years' time. After all, she had been an only child, and her mother liked to talk about how she'd always been an "easy child," so Hermione had never witness the chaos of a household with multiple children until she'd started spending time with Ron's family on holidays.

At that moment, a flash of light from the mantel distracted them all, and Ginny Potter stepped out of the fireplace, holding her toddler—who was adorable in a pumpkin costume—followed shortly by Angelina, who carried newborn Roxanne in a sling and clutched the hand of two-year-old Fred, who was sporting red horns and a tail—both of which appeared to be real.

"George's idea," Angie explained with a shrug as she graced Hermione with a grin. "Don't worry—it's not permanent." She lowered her voice to a whisper then: "Although, sometimes I just think he might actually be the devil."

"Are we ready to go, then?" Ginny asked while Hermione laughed, flashing a beatific smile as she surveyed the chaotic scene.

"Please, take zem!" wailed Fleur, which earned good-natured laughs all around as she managed to finish packing the diaper bag.

Hermione, Angie, and Ginny had offered to take Bill and Fleur's children—plus Teddy, who was temporarily staying with them because his grandmother was ill—trick-or-treating in order to give the couple a much-needed break. Ron and Harry were working, as was George, but they would see him, at least, in Hogsmeade shortly for the fifth annual Fright Fest Celebration.

As Fleur shrank the diaper bag and slipped it into Hermione's pocket, she rattled off instructions: "...if zere are any problems do not 'esitate to bring zem back, 'Ermione. Victoire and Teddy bicker relentlessly—"

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Hermione told her with a reassuring smile before looking at the children. "Are you lot ready to go?"

There was a chorus of raucous cheers all around.

"Please, be good for your aunts, and *be nice to each o'zer!*"

"They're not *my* aunts!" Teddy protested.

"Bill!" Fleur called toward the stairs, causing Louis to startle in Hermione's arms. "Come say goodbye to your leetle ones!"

There was a shuffling sound from upstairs, followed by the rapping of Bill Weasley's feet as he bounded down the stairs. "Bye, girls!" Bill said as he scooped his daughters up in his arms as one and squeezed them. "If your aunts give me a bad report, you won't get to eat any of your candy. Same goes for you, Ted."

"Yes, *Papa*," Victoire and Dominique replied in unison while Teddy said, "Yeah, all righ,' Bill."

"*Au revoir, Papa! Au revoir, Maman!*"

oOo

"I thought we'd never get outta there," Ginny commented minutes later after the group had taken a Portkey directly into the back office of the Hogsmeade branch of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes.

"Freddie, don't touch that—Daddy worked hard on that!" Angie was saying, snatching back her son's curious hand from a potion on the desk while Hermione and Ginny un-shrunk a couple of double-prams. Into one went James and Fred, while Dominique—dressed as a fairy princess—and baby Louis, who'd drifted back to sleep in Hermione's arms, were placed in the other.

"Isn't there room for Vickie in there?" Teddy asked pointedly as he stared at the prams.

"Those are for babies!" Victoire protested. "*I'm* not a baby!"

"All right, you two," Ginny chastised. "No bickering."

"What did you want to do first?" Hermione asked the other women. "It's going to be awfully crowded..."

"Well, Mum and Dad, and Percy and Audrey are supposed to meet us here," Ginny replied. "I suppose we'll decide from there. I hope you remembered to take your nausea potion," she added. "What with all the different foods..."

"I don't know about you ladies," piped up Angie, "but I'm looking forward to eating something deep-fried and chocolate—and damn the consequences."

Hermione and Ginny laughed at that as they pushed the prams out of the office and emerged into a dark, unfamiliar setting. The shop had been completely transformed for Halloween night: While it was almost pitch-black, the displays of sweets and jokes were brightly lit in blue and green, as if by Muggle fluorescent lights. There were what appeared to be actual ghouls and ghosts, moaning and jumping out of darkened corners at masked teenagers.

Behind Hermione, Victoire squealed and grabbed onto her leg. "It's okay," she soothed her niece, stroking the girl's hair as they moved through the shop, trying to avoid bumping displays and people in the darkness. "This is just your Uncle George's idea of a joke."

"Yeah, Vickie, don't be such a babeeee—" Teddy let out a shriek of surprise as a ghost shot directly in front of him, shining brightly in the near dark and rattling his chains at the boy as he let out a frightening howl.

"Go on!" Angie shooed it like she would a stray dog. "Get out of here."

Obediently, the ghost drifted away to pester a teenager.

When they'd finally navigated their way through the shop and out the front door, it was to find George waving in a group of Hogwarts students undoubtedly directly down from the feast: "Step right inside for WWW's new line of Frightening Fancies, on sale tonight exclusively! Ten-percent discount to Hogwarts students!"

As George turned his attention on his family then, first greeting his wife and children, Hermione noted that the whole square was strung with magically suspended jack-o-lanterns, some rather frightening, and there were more ghosts randomly floating about—she wondered vaguely where they'd come from.

As she'd anticipated, there had been quite a turn-out: Not only were there teenagers from the school about, but families with younger children such as their own were lined up in front of booths that showcased games, toys, and candy; there were erratically-spaced stands that offered a wide array of foods and sweets, and some of the shops along the square had obviously been turned into "haunted houses." The Three Broomsticks was open to the street, black and orange lanterns hovering around its entrance, and ominous music, laughter, and shrieks drifted out of the pub's open doors.

"Right—I say we go to the Shrieking Shack first!" Teddy was saying excitedly, his head tilted over a brochure he'd picked up from a nearby booth.

"Excellent choice!" said George approvingly. "It's brilliant! WWW was actually contracted to handle some of the special effects magic. There's this—"

"George, we can't take the little ones in there," Ginny protested to her brother. "Besides which, I know Teddy, and *he'll* have nightmares, too."

"Will not!" the boy protested with a sulk.

"Now *you're* being a baby!" Vickie replied, sticking out her tongue at him.

"*Enough* already, you two! Look, there's a hayride," Ginny said, bending her head over Teddy's leaflet. "The next one leaves in half an hour—it goes onto the Hogwarts grounds—and partially into the Forbidden Forest? Oh, but it says measures have been taken to ensure that it's perfectly safe. Right then, we'll hit some of the booths, get something to eat—"

"Hayrides are *lame*," pouted Teddy.

"Are not!" interjected Vickie.

"All right, all right," said George with an air of finality, "since I'm not really needed here, how about *I* take Teddy..."

Shortly thereafter, they were joined by Percy Weasley and his heavily pregnant wife, Audrey, who waddled rather than walked, one hand on the small of her back. Once they were joined by Arthur and Molly as well, it was decided that George and Arthur would take Teddy to the Shrieking Shack, and the women and Percy would take the other children around to the booths before going on the hayride.

A half an hour later, as she sat on the hay in a magically enlarged, heated trailer with Dominique and Victoire vying for room in her lap, Hermione breathed in the scent of the dried grass, which elicited childhood memories of hayrides and hot cocoa with her mum and dad, back before she'd known what she was; autumn had always been her favorite season, perhaps partly because of the colorful array of leaves in the trees and on the ground, but mostly because of her treasured childhood recollections.

As the trailer began to move of its own accord—it wasn't attached to any sort of vehicle or animal—she found the lolling of the trailer to be soothing and relaxing. She laughed and shrieked along with the children and the women of her family as more ghosts and ghouls jumped out of the forest at them; she was thoroughly enjoying herself and in high spirits by the time the trailer had glided back to Hogsmeade.

"I need to find a place to change Roxanne," Angelina said as they were climbing out of the trailer. "Would you mind watching Fred for a minute?"

"No problem," Hermione replied, slipping her hand inside the little boy's. Next to her, Molly stood holding Louis and cooing at him while Victoire and Dominique ran in circles around them.

"Ooh, I think I need to change James, too," Ginny said, wrinkling her nose and moving to follow Angie.

As Hermione turned to Audrey, about to inquire as to how much time she had left until the delivery, she caught sight of a man just over her shoulder: He was masked, which wasn't so unusual at a Halloween celebration, but there was something about how utterly motionless he stood that caused the hair to stand up on the back of her neck. Also, when she looked into the eyeholes of the solid red mask, she realized with a surge of unaccountable dread that he seemed to be staring right at her.

"Hermione, are you all right, dear?" Molly's hand was on her forehead. "A bit peaky, are you? We should probably get you something to eat."

"I'm fine," she said dismissively. "Molly, do you see that man—?"

When her eyes flashed back in the direction the man had been moments before, however, he was gone.

Constant Vigilance

"What? Are you sure?" Ron shifted beneath her on the sofa as she straightened, pushing her hair out of her face with both hands.

"Well...no," she admitted. Minutes ago, she'd been leisurely resting on him, a book open in her hands while Ron watched a program on the telly. It was the evening following Halloween, and Ron had only gotten home about an hour previously; he'd just had time to shower, scarf down his meal that she'd re-warmed for him, and gotten settled in before Hermione had decided to tell him about the man she'd been certain had been watching her.

Honestly, she wasn't sure why the incident bothered her so much. After all, while men didn't exactly flock to her, she'd had her share of male attention in her adult life—including from, she reminded herself uncomfortably, Severus Snape. Not to mention that following the war, she, Ron, and Neville had found themselves almost as famous as Harry himself, and Hermione had garnered her share of admirers as a result. Therefore, it wasn't entirely unreasonable to think that the man she'd seen had been one of those admirers, or else someone who was merely curious about her. It certainly wouldn't have been the first time someone had stared at her or Ron when they were out in public.

Even still, she couldn't forget the way that her hair had stood up on the back of her neck. It had been, well, *creepy*.

"Could it've just been some bloke with a hard-on for ya?"

"That's a charming way of putting it, Ron," she replied, torn between chastisement and amusement, "but I'm not sure. I got a really bad feeling about him."

"What do you mean?" Ron had sat up beneath her, concern written all over his familiar features.

"He just... I don't know. You know, it was probably my imagination, maybe the result of weird pregnancy hormones interfering with my healthy sense of caution."

"No, no, no," Ron said quickly. "Always trust your first instinct—it's what they teach you in Auror training, followed by—"

"Constant vigilance," Hermione cut in, having heard it a million times by now.

There was a serious expression on Ron's face now as he scrubbed his unshaven jaw absently with his hand before gently shifting her off of him, standing up, and moving to the nearby window. She watched on in confusion as he pushed the curtain aside, peering out into the darkness beyond: Hermione was aware that no one could see inside their home, as there had been several security charms placed around the property. In addition, no one could Apparate in or out of the house, and their end of the Floo network was only connected to the Ministry and to the homes of their closest family and friends, all of whom had taken similar precautions in their own homes.

"Ron—what are you doing? C'mon, sweetheart, I'm sure it's nothing—"

"If you were so sure, you wouldn't've thought it worth mentioning," he replied as his hand dropped from the curtain, allowing the sheer material to fall back into place, and she had to concede that he was right. "I'm not taking any chances with you, especially now that you're pregnant. I think—I think we should play it safe until we've figured this out, confirmed that you're not being followed—"

"Don't you think you're being a bit premature?" she cut him off, rising to her feet and feeling a bit alarmed and more than a bit annoyed by his paranoia.

"Hermione, you know that what I do is dangerous—you know the sorts of monsters I track—and you know that it makes my family—you—a potential prime target for anyone who has a vendetta against me."

She felt her face drain of color, feeling sobered by his words, yet eager to stand her ground. "Yes, Ron," she said quietly, "I was aware of the risks involved when I made the decision to spend the rest of my life with you, but by allowing fear and paranoia to run—"

"Paranoia?" he asked sharply. "If I'm paranoid, then I have good reason to be, love. You told me two months ago that you know monsters exist, so surely you can see that it's not paranoia if there's a possibility that they're really after you."

"Nobody's after me!" she practically shouted, having lost her patience and her temper.

"How do you know? And why are you being so fucking stubborn? *You* came to *me* about this—"

"Something I won't make the mistake of doing again, I can assure you," she replied petulantly, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Fucking Merlin, Hermione, all I want is to put some extra protection on the house—maybe make it Unplottable or something—and you should limit where you go. In fact, I should have someone from the Auror office tail you when you're not at home—"

"You're acting mental, you realize that?" she cut in icily. "Bodyguards, Ron? Because I saw somebody *staring* at me? Is this what being an Auror has done to you? If you keep it up, they'll come up with a nickname for you, much like 'Mad-Eye—'"

"Mad-Eye *died*," he cut her off sharply, his own voice rising. "Apparently he wasn't *too* mad, now, was he?"

"Yes, but that had nothing to do with his job," Hermione replied, feeling hurt by his words, her face heating. "That was about—"

"Didn't it, though? Mad-Eye was an Auror like me, he caught *Dark Wizards*, Hermione, and Voldemort, a *Dark Wizard*, was the cause of everything—"

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" she breathed, her voice now a deadly whisper. "Safer?"

"My job isn't to make you *feel* better as your husband; it's to keep you *safe*—"

"Lovely, Ron, really lovely."

He groaned loudly in frustration, running his hands through his ginger hair and making it stick up on end. "I didn't—I didn't mean it like that, Hermione. I just meant...I'd fucking die if anything bad happened to you—d'ya hear me?—I'd *die*. Especially while knowing that I could've taken measures to prevent it. Believe me, I fucking hope I *am* being paranoid, but just in case I'm not...I can't take that chance, sweetheart."

He was breathing heavily now, staring at her with something resembling...desperation, and, in that moment, Hermione experienced an intense wave of shame wash over her over the things she'd said to him. He just loved her and wanted to protect her, and she'd hurled insults at him; she'd called him paranoid, mental, and mad.

"I'm sorry," she breathed, moving to him at once, and he responded immediately by engulfing her in his strong arms. "I love you so much, Ron, and I'm sorry."

"Hey, it's not your fault you're hormonal, hon." He made a concerted effort to sound lighthearted despite the fact that he was still clearly attempting to calm himself, and she felt a pang of combined guilt and love.

"No, that would be *yours*." She gave him a tentative grin as she leaned back slightly in order to peer up into his face. "I'll agree to let someone from your office follow me, but making the house Unplottable, Ron? There's already security, and I need to feel somewhat in control of my own life."

"Fair enough," he murmured, pressing his lips to the top of her head. "Fair enough, love."

Tidings of Comfort & Joy

"Right. George—turn and face your lovely wife a bit more, I have t'get Charlie in the shot—good, perfect, sweetheart. Ginny and Hermione, could you two dears turn to the side and face each other?—Let's show off those pregnant bellies!—Oh, I still can't believe Ron and Harry aren't here... It feels so wrong that they won't be in the Christmas '05 family portrait... There's someone missing every year!"

"I'm sure *they* wish they were here as much as *you* wish they were here, darling," Arthur placated her.

The den of the Burrow had been magically expanded to accommodate the ever-growing Weasley clan, and Molly and Arthur's children—well, most of them, at any rate—and grandchildren stood grouped together in front of the hearth, impatiently waiting to get their portrait taken that Molly insisted upon every year.

"Grandma, I've gotta PEE!" little Dominique wailed from where she and Victoire stood squeezed together in front of their parents, hopping from foot to foot.

"OW!" Vickie squealed. "*Papa*, Louis is pulling my hair!"

Fleur let out a rapid stream of agitated French at her daughters while Bill, who was holding Louis, untangled his son's fingers from Victoire's hair.

"Let's just get this over with," Ginny said through gritted teeth, a ridiculous fake smile plastered on her face as she clutched James to her side, who was distracted and attempting to escape his mother's grasp.

"I second that," concurred George from over his sister's head, who was holding Fred, who squirmed every bit as much as James; Angelina was attempting to soothe baby Roxanne, who was inconsolable. Apparently baby Molly, Percy and Audrey's newborn, could sleep through anything, because the infant didn't make a peep from her father's protective arms.

"All right, then," Molly said as she aimed her antique-looking camera. "On the count of three, say 'Weasleys!' One, two, three—" She dived away from the camera, which hovered in the air, to join her family just before the flash.

The resultant photograph would be one of young, frazzled parents, their impatient offspring, a solitary uncle, and two proud grandparents, but it would be perfect: Molly Weasley would give it a place of honor on the forefront of the mantel—at least until next year, when Rose Jean and Albus Severus had joined the family.

The Christmas supper that followed was a cheerful if chaotic affair. Like the den, the kitchen had been expanded, and Hermione sat next to Ginny at the elongated dinner table, holding James—who was going through a phase where he insisted on being held almost constantly—so that Ginny could enjoy her meal before switching, handing him back over so that Hermione could eat. Like Molly, Hermione felt Ron and Harry's absence keenly and was more than a bit annoyed that her husband and brother-in-law had deemed it necessary to work during the Christmas holidays.

All she knew was that a known Death Eater had been located in Dallas, Texas, and the Great Britain Division had been contacted for their expertise and assistance; why U.S. headquarters couldn't apprehend the fugitive on their own, she had no idea.

"So are you going to your parents' after this?" Ginny asked her as the two women enjoyed their pudding in front of the hearth. James, Fred, and Dominique were playing with toy broomsticks in the den while Victoire brushed the hair of her newest doll. Outside the nearby window, Hermione caught sight of George chunking a snowball at Percy, who ducked out of sight, and it hit Charlie square in the face.

"Grandparents," Hermione corrected as she watched Charlie reciprocate in kind. "My father's side."

On the wireless behind the sofa, Celestina Warbeck bellowed her version of "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen."

"Ah, your side with all the male cousins, right?"

"That's right. Would you like to come with me? I could certainly use the female company. All that lot likes to do is play video games and watch football, and you and my mum would get along fantastically."

"Count me in," Ginny replied, her arms cradling her rotund belly. "I'm sure Mum wouldn't mind keeping James." Hermione couldn't help but notice that her sister-in-law had started to show sooner than herself, but supposedly that was common with subsequent pregnancies; Hermione had a noticeable bump when she wore maternity clothing, and theoretically she would "balloon out" in the next month or so, at least according to both Molly and her mother. "I must be becoming more like Dad, but Muggle things interest me," Ginny added.

"You and Ron both," Hermione said with a laugh.

"So..." Ginny seemed hesitant, clearing her throat before starting again. "Speaking of Ron, is he still having you followed? Have you seen that creeper from Halloween again?"

"No, nothing. I told Ron that I probably imagined it. At any rate, I convinced him last month that continuing to have me followed was pointless; his man didn't see anything out of the ordinary."

"That's good. So what do you think? Do you really think you imagined it?"

Hermione hesitated to answer: She had been so sure at the time, but in the intervening weeks it had become so easy to believe that she'd imagined the whole thing. "I'm not sure," she said sincerely.

Ginny nodded, taking a slow bite of Spotted Dick as she mulled that one over. "What about Snape? Heard anything from him?"

Hermione shook her head as she swallowed her own bite of pudding. "No, but I wasn't expecting to."

"I still can't believe he's really alive, especially after all this time."

"Neither can I. After all, I witnessed his death—yet I sat in a pub with him; I spoke to him."

At that moment, the front door banged open, carrying in a ruckus of laughter as George, Charlie, Percy, and Bill stumbled over the threshold, their cheeks ruddy from the cold. "Boys, keep it down!" Molly hissed at them, who'd just appeared at the bottom of the stairs. "We just got the babies down!" She shook her head, mumbling about how "Some things never change" as she brandished her wand, cleaning up the snow that her grown sons had tracked in: "And leave your boots by the door!" she added.

"Sorry, Mum," Percy said, kissing her cheek as he walked past her on his way up the stairs, and she couldn't help but smile after her third-eldest affectionately.

"That's quite all right, dear."

"Still a kiss-arse, Perce!" George teased loudly as he kicked off his boots.

"Anyone fancy some firewhisky?" Charlie asked as he stalked toward the kitchen. "Get us warmed up, yeah?"

"Wouldn't have it any other way," replied George.

"Definitely," added Bill.

"I'll take one as well, thank you very much," said Angelina, who'd just come down the stairs, looking particularly haggard. "Merlin knows I could use one," she added as she kissed her husband.

"Uncle George?" Victoire asked innocently from where she sat in a nearby chair, still playing with her doll. "What's a 'kiss-arse'?"

oOo

"What do *you* want?"

"Well, *bah*, 'umbug an' a merry effin' Christmas t'you, too, Ebenezer. Y'know, as yer supplier o'... shall we say... *rare herbs*, I'm a bit s'prised I didn't get a greetin' card. Reckon the post owl delivered it to the wrong address, did 'e?"

Severus Snape raised a cool eyebrow at the obnoxious, fat man standing in his study. "You have ten seconds to explain why you felt the need to impose your presence on me on Christmas Eve, after which I'm afraid that not even your own mother shall be able to stomach looking upon that already intolerable countenance of yours. Speak. Now."

"All righ,' all righ,' no need t'be 'asty. I reckon I'm 'ere for *you*, Master Prince." As the fat man spoke, he moved casually in front of the floor-to-ceiling bookcase in the cramped, candlelit room, his eyes wandering over the titles, and Snape vaguely wondered whether the man even possessed the mental capacity to comprehend the words even if he actually knew how to read, which was unlikely. "You 'ad a chat wit' a pretty little thing in a pub a few months back, the little 'eroine o'the war...what's 'er name? Granger?"

Snape experienced an unexpected jolt at the mention of the know-it-all, his wand hand twitching dangerously. "You have five seconds," he said coolly. "I suggest that if you have a point, then it would be wise to get to it."

"What's she worth to the likes o'you, the girl?"

"The idea that that insufferable twat is worth anything to me is laughable," he drawled, even as an arc of something resembling alarm shot down his spine, but he was a master of deception and hid his true feelings well.

"Then it wouldn't matter t'you none if she were being followed, then, would it?"

"Followed by whom." He didn't voice it as a question or a demand, but, rather, a request as he moved around his desk nonchalantly, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Now, now, Master Prince, you didn't say the magic words, now, did ya?"

"The girl is worth nothing to me," Snape said slowly, enunciating each word. "Perhaps you would do better to take this information to her famous Auror husband." He put exaggerated emphasis on the last words, making his sarcasm clear. "Clearly her life is worth more to him than it is to me."

"See, now, that there wouldn't do, now, would it? 'Er 'usband'd just as soon arrest me and interrogate me."

"Pity."

"*You*, though," the fat man continued as he wandered over to a nearby shelf and picked up the latest copy of *Modern Medicinal Potions*, "you've made quite the name for yourself in such a short period o'time, 'aven't you, Master Prince? No one 'ad ever 'eard of you before 1999, and you refuse to 'ave your picture printed in the journals next to your big, fancily-worded articles. Why is that, I wonder?"

"Your ten seconds are more than up. Either get to the point, or *get out*."

"All righ,' then, 'ave it your way: I want double what yer payin' me now per item, plus an extra fifty galleons for keepin' me mouth shut 'bout your identity, paid in full, and in exchange I'll tell ya 'bout the customer who bought an Undetectable Trace t'put on the lovely Granger. See, it's tricky business placin' one on someone 'gainst their knowledge, but it can be done. For the righ' price, o'course."

"*Or*," Snape cut in silkily, "I can simply delve into your mind and take what I want from you. It seems that that option would be considerably less...costly."

The fat man's greasy smile widened. "Try it if you must, Master Prince, but I think you'll find yer not the only accomplished Legilimens in the room. 'Sides which, what makes you think I'd continue t'sell me wares t'you if you raped me mind? Some o'those fancy potions o'yours call for some rare, difficult-to-acquire ingredients, and you'd be 'ard-pressed t'find another supplier that carries all what y'need."

"Twenty galleons for your continued silence, and I'll pay an extra ten percent per item, and that. Is. My. Final. Offer. I'll pay no more than that, and I care not if I have to go halfway around the world to find another supplier. I'd just as soon kill you now and be done with it."

"Yeah, yeah, I was shootin' higher than what I was expectin.' You've got yerself a deal, Master Prince. Tidings o'comfort an' joy to ya."

"If I find that you're lying to me about anything...or if you're withholding information, I *will* kill you. Do I make myself clear?"

oOo

Hermione Floo'ed into her darkened living room to grab the overnight bag she'd packed the night before. Remembering that she might want a novel she'd been intending to finish, she walked into the kitchen, flipping on the light. She experienced a moment of confusion that it wasn't on the cabinet where she remembered leaving it, but, rather, on the kitchen table.

"Are you all right?" Ginny, who'd stepped out of the fireplace just behind Hermione, called from across the bar.

"Yeah, I'm fine... Pregnancy is just making me a bit forgetful, I think."

"I know the feeling," the younger woman replied as she picked up Hermione's bag from next to the couch, swinging it over her shoulder. "Ready to go, then?"

Hermione forced a smile as she nodded and followed Ginny back to the fireplace, her eyes doing one last sweep of her living room as she Floo'ed to her parents.'

The Armpit of the Universe

Ron Weasley and Harry Potter arrived at the bustling Dallas International Apparition Travel Platform, which was in a giant warehouse similar to the London one, and went through security. Noticing the blatant staring and the whispering amongst the security guards and other travelers—who weren't only looking at Harry, but at *him*, Ron, as well—he was a bit unnerved to realize that even in America people knew who he was.

Growing up, he'd envied Harry his fame, but having gotten his own taste in recent years, Ron was more disconcerted by it than anything. He supposed any other bloke might relish the attention of random birds coming up to him and wanting his autograph—and, sure, it was quite the ego boost—but he didn't care for the attention nearly as much as he thought he would've.

"Alyssa—Alyssa, you're not gonna believe it—it's Harry Potter and Ron Weasley!" a young woman hissed to her friend none-too-subtly as the two Aurors walked by, escorted by security, and Ron felt apprehensive as he wondered why they hadn't used Polyjuice Potion: If the local papers reported their arrival in Dallas, it could compromise their entire mission. After all, it was no secret what they did; their presence usually meant they were on the hunt.

"Don't worry about it," Harry said to him lowly, as if sensing what he was thinking. "The whole building has been Charmed—no one'll remember seeing us when they leave here."

Even still, Ron was relieved to Apparate to the Dallas Auror field office, where he and Harry met with the Head, a man named Dwight Dalton, who spoke slowly but in a thick accent that Ron had difficulty understanding and who wore a really big belt buckle at the front of his robes, and a couple of blokes from U.S. Headquarters in DC who dressed like Men in Black from that Muggle movie he'd watched once.

"As I'm sure y'all already know," Head Auror Dalton began the briefing, "Rafe Callahan wasn't part of Voldemort's inner circle, but he's notorious for the crimes he committed durin' the war: Rapes—including that of a Muggle girl as young as eight—tortures, and murder for apparent shifts and giggles. He disappeared after the war and was sighted just last week by chance by an off-duty agent of mine who confirmed his identity with a simple Identity Confirmation Charm.

"Problem is," he continued, "despite this office's best efforts, we haven't been able to locate 'im again, but if he recognized our agent for what he was, he might've fled or be using a Location Concealment Charm, and, if that's the case, it'll be tricky flushin' 'im out. That's where you two London boys step in. They say you're the best, and, given what you've done, I'd believe it."

Harry stood at that, and Ron joined him. "If Callahan's in the Dallas area, we *will* find him," Harry said confidently. "And he'll pay for his crimes."

"That's what I—and the gentlemen from DC, I'm sure—were hopin' you'd say."

An hour or so later, Ron wiped his brow on the sleeve of the jacket he'd foolishly worn, thinking that it was ridiculous that it should be twenty-nine degrees at the end of December, and, as such, he came to the conclusion that Dallas, Texas was the armpit of the universe.

Silently, he cast a Cooling Charm about himself (since his wand was secured to a holster on his forearm beneath his jacket, this required practically zero movement) as he surveyed the scene where Rafe Callahan had purportedly been spotted:

Ron was standing, concealed by a Disillusionment Charm, in the shadows on a strip in downtown

Dallas that housed several seedy nightclubs, a liquor store or two, a tattoo parlor, and a Chinese take-out place. In truth, it didn't look all that different from some of the places in Muggle London that Ron had dragged George out of in the year or two following the war—except that the sun glared down upon the scene menacingly, wilting everything in its path: Trash scattered about the grimy pavement was yellowed, and the smell spoke of death and decay.

There were Christmas lights strung up in the windows of the businesses, but it hardly served to make the strip seem cheerful; it seemed to mock the general sadness of the place, somehow making it worse. Several feet away, a tired-looking young woman who had to be a prostitute chatted up a dirty-looking bloke, a cigarette hanging from her lip.

The sooner they caught this guy so he could get home to Hermione, the better. He didn't fancy spending Christmas away from her and in this hellhole, but hopefully he could be back in time for New Years.

"I think we've seen enough for now," Harry's voice breathed into his ear. "We'll come back tonight when the clubs are open."

"Yeah, all right," Ron breathed just as quietly, feeling relieved to be able to leave the strip for now as he and Harry moved into a nearby alley and Disapparated away, reappearing directly in their hotel room. Due to budget cuts they were sharing a room, but that was fine by both of them; it wasn't as if they'd never roomed together.

As Ron circled their room in the Muggle chain, the Holiday Inn, casting the usual protective enchantments and then some, Harry opened up his trunk and pulled out various documents, which he began shuffling through.

"Looks like we'll finally get to try out those Concealment-Revealing Glasses of George's," Ron commented as he plopped down on the full-sized bed closest to the door, placing the Sneakoscope and Foe Glass on the nearby table. "Problem is, we'll look like tossers wearing the bloody things at night."

"Considering that you *always* look like a tosser, you should be accustomed to that by now," Harry replied as he continued to riffle through his parchments.

In response, Ron chunked his pillow at the back of Harry's head, but Harry was quick: His arm shot out instinctively, snatching it out of the air before it had made contact with him, and he launched it back at Ron in an instant. However, Ron was just as swift as Harry, and he repelled the pillow with a silent incantation, and it landed in a corner of the room.

"So did you pack anything appropriate to wear to a club?" Harry asked as the friends chuckled good-naturedly.

"Well," Ron replied, taking on an exaggerated Texas accent: "Aw reckon aw can Transfigermacate ma trousers into assless leather chaps, y'all."

"Save that for Hermione, mate. You don't need to subject me or anyone else to your white, freckled arse."

"What makes you think my arse has freckles? Been imagining it in your dreams, have you?"

"You got me. I only married your sister 'cause I couldn't have *you*."

"And the truth comes out." Summoning the pillow from the corner, Ron shoved it between his head and the stiff mattress as he lay back on the bed. "Hate to break it too you, mate—I know I'm irresistible and all, but I'm not into blokes."

"Damn. Oh, and speaking of your sister, five galleons says my kid's born before yours."

"Five? Must not be *that* confident, if that's all you're wagering. Ten says my Rosie's born before your Al."

"Fine, you're on," Harry said with a grin, turning to face Ron.

"You do realize that my kid is also *Hermione's* kid, right?—she's bound to be an overachiever like her mum. You've got no chance in hell of winning this bet."

"And *you* realize *my* kid is also Ginny's, right?—so we'll just see about that. Hey," he added, "we've got some time to kill, let's go grab some dinner at—what was that place called that Dalton recommended?—the Olive Garden or something?"

"'The Olive Garden'?" Ron repeated, wrinkling his nose as he sat up. "What's that—some kinda restaurant? I don't really fancy olives too much, Harry."

oOo

Neville Longbottom stared at the parchment that he gripped in his white-knuckled hands, reading the same words for the fifth time on the red-lettered memo that had been owled that morning from Azkaban:

URGENT: To Mr. Harry Potter, Head of Auror Headquarters, Great Britain Division,
Department of Magical Law Enforcement, The Ministry of Magic, London:

During a routine examination of prisoner number 103890022, aka Aeron Henry Davies, Jr., who is currently awaiting trial for the crimes of multiple accounts of murder and aggravated assault, it was discovered that he is actually much older than his purported 31 years of age. Further investigation has revealed that the prisoner is, in fact, Aeron Henry Davies, SENIOR, long believed to be dead, and that he has been charading as his son for years through a combination of potions and Charms designed to make him appear youthful. Through interrogation by means of Veritaserum, it was discovered that the real Aeron Henry Davies, Jr. has been acting as his father's accomplice and is still at large.

Please be advised: The suspect is believed to be highly unstable and is considered an imminent threat.

A copy of this letter was sent to the Flintshire field office, and your immediate presence is requested to assist in locating and apprehending the perpetrator before he targets another victim.

Awaiting your response,

Charles S. Pearson, Head Warden of Azkaban

"Merlin's beard," Neville whispered, his hands shaking as he stood up from Harry's desk and wandered into the mostly-abandoned aisle of cubicles. Since it was the holidays, there was only a skeleton crew of employees lingering about in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, but even if the building had been jam-packed, though, he wouldn't have cared as he broke into a sprint and dived for the lifts; the ascent seemed dreadfully, painstakingly slow, and when the doors finally admitted him to the lobby, he ignored the public Floo stations and sprinted out the doors that opened up onto the bustling street, crowded with last-minute Christmas shoppers.

Neville didn't stop running, never mind that he nearly broke his neck on the icy pavement, until he'd found the nearest telephone booth—the nearest *real* phone booth—and was clutching a stitch

in his side as he inserted Muggle money and punched in Ron's mobile number from memory.

As he listened to the phone ring, he had time to feel aggravated that all the Magical minds in the world had yet to come up with a mode of communication that matched the convenience of Muggle phones, and he wondered vaguely why he didn't own one of the devices—but as soon as that thought had crossed his mind, someone had picked up on the other end: "Hullo?"

There was a lot of background noise, and it sounded as if Ron's mouth was full, but there was no mistaking that he'd gotten the number right: "Ron—it's Neville. Is Harry with you? I need to speak to him—it's urgent."

Unexpected

Severus Snape Apparated in a snow-covered lane between two closely-erected homes on Nightingale Lane, a Disillusionment Charm firmly in place. The snow was coming down in swirls of falling flakes in the lamplight that illuminated the quiet street, and he was meticulously cautious as he proceeded in the direction of the address he'd obtained from the weak-minded Ministry official.

As he crept along, having cast a Charm to erase his footsteps in the powdery snow before they'd barely had time to form in his wake, he was acutely aware of every movement around him: A stray cat leapt from a nearby garbage can, its eyes glowing as it caught sight of him before scurrying away; in a nearby house, a family of five sat down to a festive dinner through the brightly lit bay window.

Colorful lights adorned all of the modest two-story homes, and Snape couldn't help but scowl, feeling resentful of the holiday, of the entire *season*. After all, Christmas in the Snape household had never been anything worth celebrating; it had usually entailed a lot of shouting on the part of his overbearing brute of a father and a lot of crying on the part of his weak mother—Not that that behavior was reserved for the Christmas holidays, mind you, but favored at all times of the year.

He cursed to himself as he stood just down the street from the tidy-looking, snowcapped little home he knew to be Granger's—or Weasley's, or Granger-Weasley's, or whatever it was that she was calling herself—feeling more than a bit resentful that he'd been dragged into this situation to begin with:

Because Potter and Weasley were away on business, and they'd left that incompetent moron Longbottom in charge of Headquarters, it was up to *him*, Severus Snape, to play babysitter to the know-it-all.

He approached the house cautiously, mindful of the fact that she might not be at home as his eyes scanned the perimeter of the property for any sign of the man who was supposedly following her. (The information he'd been given had been annoyingly insufficient: an alias and an address that had turned up nothing but a condemned building in Muggle London. Only after his visit to the Ministry in which Snape had learned that *Longbottom*, of all people, had been left in charge of the Auror office had he decided to locate Granger himself.)

Observing no one in the nearby vicinity, Snape crept up to the property's perimeter, sensing the magic that emanated from the place in waves: The home was well-protected, and as such he had no way of knowing whether or not she was inside.

Feeling fairly satisfied that if Granger were indeed at home then she would be safe for the time being, Snape turned on the spot and Disapparated, heading for the next address he'd obtained from the Ministry.

oOo

"Wait, what?" Ron asked, rounding on Harry as they stormed out of the glass doors and into the parking lot. Outside, it was still as bright and warm as a summer's day, and Ron pulled off his jacket in agitation as they walked.

"Merry Christmas and have a nice day, gentlemen!" the hostess called to them as they left, but neither male was paying attention to her.

"Let's just get back to the hotel room," Harry replied, gripping Ron's elbow and dragging him around the corner of the building so that they could Disapparate safely. "The suspect we apprehended in Flintshire," Harry explained once back in their room and wasting no time as he waved his wand at his trunk, packing it in a hurry, "wasn't the son—he was the *father*, which means—"

"The son is still at large," Ron finished, a feeling of dread forming in the pit of his stomach as he remembered the desiccated remains of those poor women they'd found. "Have they discovered anymore remains? Have there been more disappearances?"

"No, nothing like that, but I think he's lying low—he thinks he's gotten away with it—that his father was willing to take the fall himself, which he *was*, but fortunately we've got this brilliant thing called—"

"Veritaserum."

"Right. Anyway, they're requesting my immediate presence, and I agree—it's urgent. We've gotta catch this guy before he thinks it's safe to resume his favorite pastime. I need you—"

"I've got this, mate—I'll explain to Dalton what's going on."

"Knew I could count on you," Harry said quickly as he continued to hurriedly pack. "I'll send McLean to replace me."

Immediately, Ron's stomach plummeted as he pictured the young blonde that the blokes around the office had taken to calling "Sam" with a familiarity that didn't sit well with him for some reason. He hadn't thought it worth mentioning to Harry, but there was something about the witch he didn't like; he supposed she performed her job well enough, but she made him...uncomfortable for reasons he couldn't quite explain. "Why her?" Ron found himself asking before he could stop himself, wincing internally at how unprofessional the question sounded.

"Because she's earned it," Harry said simply, his brow furrowing slightly as he paused. "You never mentioned having a problem with her before."

"I don't," he said quickly. "Well, not exactly..."

"Look, Ron," Harry said, clearly losing his patience, "whatever it is you don't like about her, you're just gonna have to deal with it. We're all professionals here, right?"

"Right—of course," Ron replied, his ears burning. "I can handle it."

"Great. Glad to hear it." At that, he clapped Ron on the shoulder, grabbed his trunk, and Disapparated.

"Bloody hell," Ron groaned when he was left alone, not at all happy with the idea of sharing this assignment with McLean.

oOo

There was a chorus of male protests as the electricity went out—*again*—interrupting the deeply intense and all-important game of *Halo*.

If it had been just her parents, grandparents, and Ginny present, Hermione wouldn't have hesitated to conjure some of her blue flames to illuminate the house, but her cousins, second cousins, and aunts and uncles had no idea of what she was.

Therefore, she instead joined her mother in retrieving candles out of the curio cabinet and walked about the house, placing them at intervals and lighting them—at first with a box of matches, but, once she'd drifted up the rickety staircase and away from the raucous voices, Hermione began lighting them by magic.

She hesitated on the landing of the third floor, wondering if it was necessary to place some of the candles up here—but then she reckoned it was probably best, seeing as how several of her cousins were staying up here, and there were so many guests in the house that someone might need to use the bathroom up here.

Hermione wandered up the darkened hallway, her wand alight in her hand as she stepped into the bathroom, placing a candle on the sink and quickly lighting it with a muttered incantation.

Satisfied, she lifted her eyes, and that's when she saw it reflected in the mirror—the figure of a man standing behind her in the shadows.

Heinous

"You look good with a tan; it suits you."

Samantha McLean was waiting in his room when he emerged from the cramped bathroom, his ginger hair now a shade of sandy blonde and a smooth, copper tan having replaced his normally pale, freckle-spattered complexion.

Ron saw that she was disguised as well: Her usually short, platinum hair was now mahogany and waist-length, her facial piercings had been removed, and she was dressed in a manner that called to mind the sorts of girls George had hooked up with in back alleys in the dark days following the war.

The door to their conjoined rooms was open, and she was leaning casually against the bureau as he turned away, doing his best to ignore her without appearing to be rude as he peered thoughtfully into the mirror over the sink. "Yeah, well, figured it'd be appropriate in this climate," he replied to her statement absently as he shortened his nose. His eyes were still shockingly blue, so he turned them brown, doing his best to make them as close to Hermione's shade as possible.

Ron still wasn't entirely comfortable with this arrangement: Even though he'd immediately procured his new partner the adjoining room, he now wished he'd gotten her one down the hall instead—or on another floor, actually—since the remainder of the evening she'd insisted on "hanging out" in his room and going over their plan again and again, which normally he would've insisted on. Except that McLean made it a point to touch him as often as possible, dropping innuendo here and there, and Ron was now realizing that he'd known all along that she had a... a *thing* for him, even if he hadn't told Harry that—or himself, for that matter.

During social gatherings at the Leaky Cauldron after work, she usually made it a point to sit by him; he was fairly sure she'd even put her hand on his upper thigh under the table during the last one, but he'd been far too inebriated to think much about it at the time. Luckily, Neville had appeared by his side at that moment to help him Apparate home—not that he was so far gone that he would've let anything happen, mind you. He couldn't fathom the idea of cheating on Hermione; he'd have to be pissed literally out of his mind.

A primitive, wholly male part of his brain couldn't help but acknowledge that she was an attractive girl. His younger self, as in "pre-war Ron Weasley," as he'd come to think of the prat he'd been back then, would've been flattered by her attention, but the man he'd grown into was simply uncomfortable: Not only was he married, but he was barmy over his wife. Could this woman not see that?

It didn't matter, though. Hopefully luck would be on their side tonight, and they could make the arrest, wrap up the case, and he could get home to Hermione.

"You look brilliant!" McLean gushed, all confidence as she handed him the leather pouch that contained the Concealment-Revealing Glasses and several different potions, which he then shrank and slipped into the pocket of his jeans.

"Did you take your Sobriety potion?" he asked as he slipped his wand into the holster on his forearm, which was concealed under his long-sleeved t-shirt. "We wanna look as inconspicuous as possible, and trained eyes will notice if we're only *pretending* to drink."

"This isn't my first rodeo, cowboy," she replied with a wink, showing him her empty flagon with the trace amount of pink-hued liquid at the bottom.

He gave her a wry smile as he picked up the second flagon off the bureau and uncorked it. "Let's not get too familiar here," he said as he tipped it back, grimacing slightly as he swallowed. "We may be partnering on this, but I'm still your boss."

"Fair enough, boss-man. You ready to do this?" She then held out her hand for his, her other planted on her bony hip as she cocked an eyebrow at him.

Ron almost denied the invitation and insisted on Disapparating separately, but then he figured that would just be mental. He was a professional, after all: the Deputy Head of Auror Headquarters, Great Britain Division, which he'd achieved through sweat, blood, nerve, and hard work. He could handle a little girl with a crush.

oOo

Hermione gasped in shock at the appearance of the male figure in the mirror over her shoulder; her wand hand tightened of its own accord, a curse on the tip of her tongue as she spun around, but before she could so much as form the thought, an iron-clad fist snatched forward, gripping her wrist and effectively knocking her wand from her grasp.

"Unless it is your desire to alert your entire Muggle family to your particular gifts, Miss Granger," an all-too-familiar, snide voice drawled silkily as he stepped out of the shadows and into the candlelight, "then I suggest that you not go about blindly setting off curses."

"You—you startled me," Hermione gasped, trying to control her racing heart as she placed one arm over the curve of her swollen belly, which attracted the attention of her visitor, who released her wrist, his black eyes flashing downward. In the candlelight, he appeared almost gaunt, the shadows in the hollows of his cheeks notably exaggerated. "What are you doing here, anyway?" she hissed demanding, maintaining a low tone. "Why—why are you lurking about in my grandparents' house?"

"It seems I have nothing better to do on Christmas Eve than to track down and babysit the likes of you," Severus Snape replied coolly, his tone considerably less harsh despite his words as he retrieved her fallen wand and handed it to her.

"Track me down?" she repeated, her panicked thoughts automatically flickering to Ron and Harry, but if anything had happened to either of them, Neville would have informed her.

"I don't have the time or the patience to go into a detailed explanation, but suffice it to say that I've received intelligence that you are being watched by an unknown predator. My first course of action was to take the information to Auror Headquarters, but it seems that your fine husband and the magnificent Mr. Potter are currently unavailable, and they unfortunately left the imbecile Longbottom in command. Therefore, I had no choice but to find you and warn you myself."

Ordinarily, Hermione would have defended Neville's intelligence, but she was far too focused on what Snape was telling her for it to even register. "Followed by whom?" she whispered, her thoughts flashing back to Halloween, and she shuddered at the memory of how her instincts had warned her of danger. "I thought I saw a man...at the end of October, but Ron had someone from the office trail me, and his man didn't notice anything unusual—"

"All I was given was an alias, not an actual identity, but logic would conclude that whoever this person is, he spotted your assigned Auror and decided to proceed cautiously by lying low. With Weasley being away, however..." Snape's brow furrowed in thought. "Have you noticed anything out of the ordinary? Sensed anyone watching you?"

She shook head slowly, thinking that it was common for people to stare at her when she was out

in public, but she hadn't experienced that instinctual warning since Halloween. She said as much to Snape.

He nodded slowly, that thoughtful expression still firmly in place. "Nevertheless, I would advise you to return to your home immediately and recall your husband—I assume you own a telephone, seeing as you're Muggle-born and would know the benefits of such a device?"

"How do you know I'm being followed?" Hermione asked suddenly. "Who told you this?"

"A reliable enough source," he replied neutrally, his vague and frustrating response only serving to make her want to fire more questions at him, but she suppressed the urge for the time being: It wasn't important at the moment.

"Fine. I trust you, Severus, but why are you doing this? Why are you helping me?—and don't tell me it's because you want to sleep with me." She indicated the swell of her abdomen. "Clearly, that's not happening."

The corners of his lips tugged up ever-so-slightly. "Is the idea of my playing the part of the Good Samaritan so unbelievable?"

"Honestly? Yes. Yes, it is." Then she grew serious once more. "My family—"

"I've already placed protection around this house—hastily, of course, but it should suffice seeing that they're not the ones being targeted and therefore not likely in any immediate danger. However, since the wards on your home are undoubtedly far more complex, I would advise that you return there immediately." He paused, hesitating before adding, "I will stay here to keep an eye on your family, if that is your wish, Miss Granger."

Hermione bit her lip as she considered what he was saying: If she stayed here, she could very well be putting her family at unnecessary risk, but then she felt panicked in the next moment as she realized that she might have *already* put her family at risk by coming here, but she felt reassured by Snape's offer to stay here with them.

"All right," she finally said, thinking that after she called her husband, the first thing she would do would be to owl Neville and have him station an Auror or two around her home until the mystery was solved. Snape may not trust his competence, but Hermione certainly did—and she also trusted his discretion when he inevitably asked her questions concerning where she'd received her information. "I'd appreciate it if you did that—thank you, Severus."

He merely nodded, appearing somewhat uncomfortable, as Hermione backed out of the bathroom, thinking that she would make some sort of excuse to her family. Being pregnant, it certainly wasn't a stretch of the imagination to think that she'd become ill.

Rounding the corner in the hallway, she nearly collided head-first with Ginny, who'd just come up the stairs. "Merlin, Hermione," the younger woman said, her hand on her own swollen belly. "I was just coming up to check on you. Is everything all right?"

Hermione threw a glance over her shoulder, wondering if Snape was still there. "I've got something to tell you," she said lowly to her friend.

oOo

The bass from the obnoxious Muggle "country" music reverberated through his temples, and Ron removed his Concealment-Revealing Glasses as he rubbed his bleary eyes, thinking that the night had been a complete bust. He and McLean had been wandering from bar to bar for the better part of four hours, and the only thing that he'd managed to accomplish was to get completely shitfaced,

a truth that was a bit inexplicable due to the fact that he'd taken the Sobriety potion. After all, blending was important.

Well, he'd blended, all right. At some point in the evening he'd attained a cowboy hat, which was a bit of a mystery considering that he had no memory of where the stupid thing had come from.

Despite his state of severe inebriation, though, Ron continued to make a genuine attempt to stay focused on the job at hand, but the only wizard in disguise that he'd located had been an ugly bloke pretending to be beautiful woman. To the eyes of Muggles, he was a five-foot-eleven blonde, but thanks to George's special glasses, Ron was able to see that the person was actually a short, balding middle-aged man with a potbelly in a miniskirt. Currently, some young, oblivious bloke was snaking his hand up the wizard's skirt, the poor guy. He was about to get quite the turn.

At that moment, Ron's attention was diverted back to the bar as a woman with fried blonde hair and wearing next to nothing clamored up on it, her dangerously spiky heels kicking over his beer—which Ron hadn't touched. He'd stopped drinking when he'd realized that the Sobriety potion wasn't working, but by then he'd already been pissed.

"Merry Christmas, Dallas!" the woman on the bar shouted at the top of her lungs, a sentiment that was met with a roaring round of cheers from the crowd. In the corner of the room, the lead singer of the band winked at her.

She was wearing a strand of Christmas lights, drooped over her neck several times.

"Howdy, partner," a voice whispered silkily into his ear, followed by a pair of arms sliding around his neck and a female torso straddling him on the barstool, nearly knocking him off of it in the process. "We're done for the night, yeah?" McLean added in a sultry whisper, leaning in close as her fingers threaded in the hair at the nape of his neck and she ground her hips into his. "How about we go back to the hotel and have our own little Christmas celebration?"

The whole thing was just so surreal that for a moment he imagined himself looking down on the scene, the way people who commit heinous acts in Muggle movies always say it happens. But this wasn't a movie: A woman who was most decidedly *not* Hermione was straddling his lap and blatantly propositioning him—on the job, no less.

Feeling abruptly sick and wanting nothing more than to get some fresh air and to try and clear his head, Ron pushed McLean unceremoniously off of his lap and dived for the door. He'd barely staggered out onto the dirty pavement before he was bent over at the waist, becoming violently sick.

As he finished up, he felt fingers running through his hair. "Oops, looks like someone had a bit too much to drink," McLean whispered in his ear. "Let's get you back to your room, shall we?" she added, and Ron didn't have the strength to fight her off as this girl half his size practically dragged him to a nearby alleyway, presumably for Disapparition.

Moments later, Ron was puking once more—this time onto threadbare carpeting, and he heard McLean cleaning it up with a whispered word just before he collapsed on something fairly soft that he reckoned must be his bed. Opening his eyes, he saw what had to be the ceiling of his hotel room, but he abruptly clamped his eyes shut once more when he saw that the room was spinning. He was on the very verge of unconsciousness when he realized that deft fingers were tugging up his shirt. "Wh—what are you doing?"

"Relax, Ron, you got vomit on your clothes. Just let me take care of you." He didn't have the strength to resist as he raised his arms halfheartedly, allowing her to tug his shirt over his head. In the next moment, he felt her fingers undoing the button and zipper of his trousers, which were

then tugged down his legs. It took him a moment to realize by the sting of cool air that his underwear had gone down with them.

Focusing his eyes on her in confusion, he watched as she leaned back on the bed and pulled off her dress to reveal that she wasn't wearing any undergarments. "You know," she was saying, "I became an Auror because of you. I requested the transfer from Glasgow to London because of you. I know Harry's the one who finished off Voldemort and all, but I always thought you were the sexier of the two. I guess you could say I've always had a bit of a crush on you." She then placed something atop her head, and Ron realized it was the cowboy hat that he'd been wearing earlier.

"What're you goin' on about, you crazy bitch?" he slurred, halfheartedly attempting to roll over, but his limbs felt like lead, and his body seemed to be responding to her against his will—which wasn't lost on her as she gazed down at him with a predatory expression on her face; in that moment, she wasn't remotely pretty. "Wha' the fuck didja do t'me?"

His hips jerked of their own accord when she reached down and touched him, his body responsive to her even as he felt the urge to be sick once more. "I'm just gonna ride you hard, cowboy, and you're gonna love it. Don't worry, I'm not a home-wrecker or anything—your wife will never have to know, and you won't remember a thing in the morning. Which is a shame, actually, because I'm good."

"Ermione..." he groaned, a desperate plea for his wife, but she couldn't answer him, because Ron was alone with this she-devil in disguise, halfway around the world...

"She's not here," McLean confirmed as she climbed atop him, straddled his hips, grasped his cock, and positioned him between her legs.

oOo

"Thanks for staying with me, Ginny," Hermione said as she stared at her roaring fireplace, her teacup clasped in her trembling hands. She'd been home for about half a day, which had given her ample time to owl Neville and to try calling Ron repeatedly—but his phone had gone straight to voicemail each time, unsurprisingly. She couldn't stop the intense feeling of anxiety that had first crept its way into every molecule that comprised her being and had since settled there. The fact that Snape had confirmed her paranoia scared her more than she cared to admit; she found herself hoping against all reason that they were *all* crazy.

What did this person want from her? Was he simply an admirer that had attained stalker status, or was he someone more sinister? She couldn't help but think about Ron's work and the sorts of people that her husband had helped to put away.

"I know that this whole thing is just...insanity," she added.

"Not as much as you'd think," her sister-in-law replied from where she sat in Ron's recliner, her feet propped up and her arms resting across the curve of her belly. "I mean, I suppose a nutter or two are bound to target the Aurors' families at some point or another."

Hermione turned to stare at Ginny, feeling surprised that she could seem so blasé about the entire situation—but then she realized that her friend was just trying to make her feel better. "Besides, Mum and Dad don't mind keeping James," Ginny continued, "and they'll be fine—especially since Neville sent a couple of Aurors to the Burrow as well. Oh," she added as if suddenly remembering something important, "I forgot to tell you—Harry owed earlier to say that he was recalled to Flintshire—"

She stopped midsentence, sitting up straight quite abruptly as her eyes went wide in her face and her teacup slid from her hands.

"Ginny—what—?"

Hermione gasped in a shock of sudden, crippling pain, her body crumpling on the carpet and her hands clutching her stomach as a wave of agony ripped unrelentingly through her body. She heaved violently as she curled into herself on her side, her eyes stinging as she tried to make sense of what was happening to her.

Through the cloud of pain fogging her vision and making it difficult to concentrate on anything, she tried desperately to see what was happening with Ginny, but her line of sight was blocked by a pair of tiny boots: Just before Hermione lost consciousness, she realized with a certain amount of confusion and fear that a house-elf was looking down at her, an expression of absolute contempt written in his bulbous eyes.

When It Hits the Fan

The first thing he became aware of when consciousness began to creep around the edges of his disturbed dreams was that he felt like shite warmed over: There was a terrible throbbing in his temples, a churning in his gut, and his mouth was as dry as a lesbian's snatch in a locker room full of strapping male Quidditch players.

What the fuck had happened to him?

As Ron slowly became cognizant of the general achiness in his body and of the fact that he was lying on a moderately soft surface, what felt like a warm thigh draped over his hip, he experienced confusion as he tried desperately to remember...well, *anything*. He tried opening his eyes, but they felt glued together, and the orange-ish glow behind his sealed eyelids made his head feel like someone had cut it open, filled it with razor blades, and repeatedly bashed it against a hard surface.

The last thing he truly recalled was getting dressed for the undercover operation. After that, things got hazy: He seemed to remember flashes of a bloke in a skirt, a woman shouting on a bar, and... McLean climbing in his lap?

At that thought, his eyes flew open and he shot up, ignoring the way the room swam and the bile that rose in his throat as he focused on the figure curled catlike next to him: McLean was naked, one of her skinny thighs draped over his hip.

Ron clamored away from her, tumbling from the bed as horrid, sickening realization overcame him; he was completely starkers, with the exception of his wand holster still firmly attached to his forearm.

No. He couldn't have...

"*Fuck*," he said aloud, hastily snatching up the sheet to cover himself before grasping his forehead with his free hand, grimacing at the pain there. "Fuck, fuck, *fuck*." He couldn't have cheated on Hermione. He just *couldn't* have. There was simply no possible way. What the fuck had happened last night? Had the Sobriety potion not worked? And even if it *hadn't*, how the bloody fucking hell could he have gotten *that* drunk? After all, he could generally hold his liquor pretty well and hadn't been that shitfaced since the days after the war when he'd occasionally drank with George—just to keep him in the flat, of course.

No...this was just a bad dream, had to be. He'd wake up any moment—

"Yes, yes we did," McLean purred, propping herself up by her elbow as Ron found his pants and attempted to tug them on, tripping on his long legs in the process. "And quite well, I might add."

At her words, he experienced a simultaneous urge to be sick and to punch her in the face. He'd never hit a woman in his life and had never thought he'd ever be in a situation in which he'd be tempted—his parents had raised him right—but he was pretty bloody close. Instead, though, he doubled over and dry-heaved, tears stinging his eyes as actual realization of what he'd done sank in.

He'd cheated on Hermione; he'd slept with another woman—and he didn't even have an excuse. He loved Hermione; he never thought in a million years that he could ever possibly—

"Ron, sweetie, are you—?"

"Don't you *fucking* touch me!" he growled in a rage when she tried to wipe his hair out of his face—he hadn't even noticed her rise from the bed—his entire body trembling as he straightened, quickly finding his shirt by the bed and pulling it over his head. He had to get out of here—he'd go straight back to London, send Neville in his stead, and then he'd...

He'd have to tell Hermione. Oh, fucking Merlin, his marriage was over. She wouldn't forgive him for this. How could she? He wouldn't forgive *himself*.

"That's not what you said last night," the girl behind him said harshly. "You weren't complaining when you begged me to ride you—"

"*Shut the fuck up*," he growled, his vision going red in his fury, but he knew he wasn't really mad at *her*—he was mad at himself. He'd done it; he was a real fucking scumbag... "And get some fucking clothes on, for fuck's sake," he added to the naked woman who lounged about as if nothing was wrong—as if his world hadn't just come crashing down around him...

Once he was dressed, he began packing his trunk hastily.

He had to get away from her; he had to get out of this hell-fucking-hole country.

"Where are you going?" McLean asked incredulously, appearing in his line of sight, still naked and looking ugly to him with her smeared eye makeup and her short, bleach-blonde hair sticking up. She was bony, her ribs poking out sickeningly, and her tits were freakishly small, and he wondered vaguely how he could've possibly...with her, even if he *wasn't* married.

The guys at the office all had a hard-on for her, but Ron liked...well, Hermione. He'd only ever really wanted his wife, and he'd always unconsciously compared every girl to her—and they all came up lacking.

He felt the urge to be sick again as he ignored the little slag, turned on the spot, preparing for Disapparition—

There was a pounding on the door.

Unthinkingly, he shoved McLean in the direction of the loo, grabbing up her dress and throwing it at her as he ignored her protests of his manhandling and slammed the door in her face. He then crossed the room and distractedly cast the Revealing Charm, and he was taken aback to see Head Dwight Dalton on the other side of the door to his hotel room.

Throwing a glance over his shoulder to check that McLean was still in the bathroom, Ron wrenched the door open.

"Sorry to disturb you this early," Dalton began before Ron could do more than glower at the Texan, "but I just got word from London: It's your wife and sister..."

oOo

By the time he arrived back in London he was in a right state: He'd managed to splinch himself during the overseas Apparition journey, leaving behind a sizable strip of flesh from the back of his upper thigh. However, Ron ignored the on-hand Healers when he arrived at the London International Apparition Travel Platform, shoving them aside and barely registering the pain; he was running on pure adrenaline as he marched to the security queue and flashed his identification that allowed him to bypass the wait. Once on the other side of security, he immediately Disapparated, landing moments later directly outside of his home.

Bleeding and limping, he ran up the snow-covered drive and wrenched open the door to his

house: Aurors and various members of the MLE swarmed the place, casting forensic charms and speaking in hushed voices.

He immediately spotted Harry, who was speaking to a man that Ron didn't straight away recognize, clenching and unclenching his hands at his sides in an agitated manner. His glasses were askew, his black hair messier than usual. It took Ron a moment to realize that the man that his brother-in-law was speaking to was none other than Severus Snape.

Ron strode to where they stood by the mantel, ignoring the glances in his direction and mutterings of the other Aurors. "What the fuck happened?" he demanded to Harry without preamble. He felt like he was going out of his mind; he had to have answers and he had to have them *now*.

Snape was appraising him with a raised eyebrow, and it occurred to Ron offhandedly that this man had come on to his wife, but it hardly seemed to matter given the current circumstances. "And what the fuck are you doing here?" he added, rounding on the man that he'd watched die—or so he'd thought: Snape's hair was clipped short, and he sported a trimmed beard, but his features were, nevertheless, unmistakable. "What do you have to do with any of this?"

"As it happens," Snape replied coolly, "I'm the one who informed your wife that she was being targeted. I'm afraid that your sister was merely an afterthought; she happened to be here—"

"How the bloody hell do you know all of this?" Ron demanded, barely hanging on by a thread as he lunged forward, grabbing the older man by the collar of his shirt. "*Where the fuck are my wife and sister, you rat fucking bastard?*" A part of him was aware that he was being irrational, but he found that he simply didn't care. He had to know what had happened to Hermione and Ginny, and he would kill—

"Ron!" Harry had stepped forward, inserting himself between the two men and attempting to unpry Ron's ironclad grip from Snape's collar. "Ron, *calm down*, for fuck's sake! He's helping with the investigation; he's cooperating with the MLE. He's already handed over a witness, a man who supplied him with—"

"How the fuck can *you* be so fucking calm about this?" Ron cut him off, forgetting about Snape as he released him and wheeled around, his hands gripping madly in his hair as he faced Harry. A wave of agony and grief overcame him in a breathtaking rush as he said, "Hermione and Ginny —"

"Need us to not lose our heads," Harry cut in, his green eyes flashing, and it was only then that Ron realized that his brother-in-law was barely holding it together himself. The same terror and madness that Ron displayed was mirrored in Harry's eyes, threatening to overwhelm his calm exterior. "*Please*, Ron, I need you on this. Hermione and Ginny need you. Do you hear me? *Hermione and Ginny need you.*"

Those words were exactly what Ron needed to hear in order to center himself, and he pushed his fear and terror for his wife, sister, unborn daughter, and unborn nephew aside as everything abruptly seemed to snap into focus.

"If you're through pounding on your chest like an ape and asserting your masculinity, Mr. Weasley," Snape cut in, straightening in apparent nonchalance at having practically been attacked by Ron, "perhaps you'd like to be updated on the situation so that we may proceed in a worthwhile direction—namely recovering Mrs. Weasley and Mrs. Potter."

"Tell me what you know," Ron replied lowly, his eyes flashing between Harry and Snape as he felt like kicking his own arse for allowing this to happen. This was all his fault. He'd let Hermione convince him that having her tailed was no longer necessary, rather than going with his gut

instinct. "Do we know who took them?"

Harry hesitated, clearly bracing himself for Ron's reaction before saying, "We have reason to believe that it might be Aeron Henry Davies, Jr. The M.O. fits with Hermione," he added miserably. "She may not be a Muggle, but she's Muggle-born and in her mid-twenties, and if Davies was following the investigation after we arrested his father, he would certainly have a motive for targeting her. And if Ginny happened to be here..." Again, the inner madness threatened to break through Harry's calm exterior, but he seemed to gain control of himself in the next moment.

Ron's blood ran cold as he processed what his brother-in-law was telling him, and he felt abruptly ill as he remembered the desecrated remains of the women they'd found in the Davies estate four months earlier. Those women had been tortured and repeatedly and brutally raped; they had died slow, agonizing, horrifying deaths.

Beyond sickened by the thought of his pregnant wife and sister suffering a similar fate, Ron doubled over, dry-heaving violently for the second time in the last hour. "How did he get through my wards?" he asked roughly once he'd straightened, wiping his mouth and eyes with the back of his sleeve.

Snape was the one to answer: "I would theorize that Davies merely sent a house-elf to...collect Mrs. Weasley, a simple and obvious means of breaking through Magical protection. The Davies are an old line of purebloods, after all, and would have house-elves at their disposal."

Ron's eyes shot to Snape suspiciously. He still didn't know what he had to do with any of this, but for the time being it wasn't important; the only thing that mattered was getting to Hermione and Ginny as quickly as possible.

"It makes sense," Harry agreed.

"I'm going to Azkaban," Ron said fiercely, feeling doubly sickened at the idea of a *house-elf* being the one to take Hermione—who'd spent her adult life fighting for the rights of the little bastards. The idea that one would take advantage of its considerable magic to take her for evil purposes... "We need to interrogate Davies, Sr.," he added, pushing aside his dark, useless thoughts. "I want a list of all their family properties—Unplottable or not—and to know the most likely location where the son might hold a—a victim." He couldn't suppress his disgust at the idea of referring to his wife and sister as "victims," but it couldn't be denied.

"We already have the list," Harry replied immediately, "and the local MLE and Auror offices have already sent out teams to check the locations throughout Wales, but I agree—Davies needs to be interrogated again so we can narrow it down—and we need him anyway, since he would likely be Secret-Keeper of any Unplottable places. Get on it, Ron—I'm heading back to Flintshire in the meantime—the majority of the family's properties are centered there. Snape—"

"I'll go with Mr. Weasley. I'm rather skilled at the art of interrogation and would be of assistance there."

Harry merely nodded, accepting this as Ron very nearly bellowed, "I don't need your help!" In the next instant, though, he remembered that it didn't matter—this was about getting Hermione and Ginny back by any means necessary, personal pride be damned. "Fine," he said instead. "I'll meet you there."

Wasting no more time, he was on the very verge of turning on the spot—

"Ron." Harry was looking at him, a fierce expression in his eyes. "We'll get them back. It's gonna

be fine—and that bastard is gonna pay."

oOo

Upon awakening, Hermione first became aware of a terrible throbbing in her temples and an ache in her stomach. Next, she realized that she'd fallen asleep on a hard surface, and she was cold, *so cold...*

When she attempted to move her arms up to hug herself, she realized that she was prevented from doing so by cold, metallic restraints around her wrists.

At that realization, her eyes snapped open and...nothing. Wherever she was, it was pitch black. Panic and fear seeped into her every pore in her body as she became aware that she was naked. She was cold, naked, and restrained to a hard surface. Paralyzed by dread, her sluggish brain tried to recall what had happened to her...and then it slowly came back to her: She had been in her home, talking to Ginny...and then a horrible pain had seized her body in the moments before she'd collapsed in front of the hearth...and then she'd seen a house-elf.

Fear for both her unborn child and Ginny threatened to overwhelm her, but in an instant she'd confirmed by the restless movement in her belly that Rose was fine, but when she attempted to call out her friend...Hermione couldn't open her mouth.

Not only had her lips been sealed shut, but so had her jaw.

As she struggled helplessly against the cold metal restraints in the dark, silent tears spilled down her cheeks as she remembered what Ron had told her about the Flinshire murders.

No. *No*. Not like this... Not like this...

Ron... Help us... Please...

Darkness Descends

Hermione was quite literally paralyzed by fear; she laid on that cold surface for an indeterminate period, shivering in the dark, her eyes darting about as her heart pounded a rapid tempo in her chest. She strained her ears over the sound of her own heartbeat, listening for any indication of Ginny's presence—or of a more ominous one that she quite frankly didn't even want to consider.

Even during the war, she couldn't recall ever experiencing this level of all-encompassing, debilitating fear—not even when Lestrage had tortured her: This feeling of vulnerable helplessness, knowing that she'd been forcefully brought here for some dark, unspeakable purpose was by far the worst feeling she'd ever experienced.

Gathering every ounce of Gryffindor courage that she possessed, Hermione breathed deeply through her nose, attempting simultaneously to slow her racing pulse and force aside the worst of her paralyzing terror so that she could call upon the logic and reason upon which she so heavily relied.

She reasoned that perhaps this had nothing to do with the Flintshire murders at all; after all, Ron and Harry had arrested a suspect in that case, a suspect who was currently sitting in Azkaban awaiting trial. Perhaps she had been abducted by a mere copycat who thought that the idea of magically sealing his victim's mouths was clever—not that that, if it were the case, would help her predicament.

With a chill, she considered the possibility that her husband and friend had arrested the wrong man—or that he'd had an accomplice. It wasn't as if they were infallible; though few and far between, Ron and Harry made mistakes.

At that thought, sheer terror had her heart racing once more, and she gasped through her nose as her body trembled—both from fear and the cold—but she forced aside the onslaught of panic with a considerable amount of willpower. *Think, Hermione—THINK.*

She couldn't rely on Ron and Harry to save her. While she knew that they'd do their best, if she wanted herself and Ginny to survive this situation, she would have to rely on no one but herself. Very aware of the growing life in her abdomen, she considered that she had absolutely everything to live for, and she *would* survive this, dammit. No lunatic was going to rob her or her child—or Ginny and *her* child—of a future. This wasn't Hermione's first time dealing with a lunatic, after all, and her quick thinking had gotten her, Ron, and Harry out of more than one tough spot during the war. She would just have to—

It hit her with all the subtlety of a lightning bolt: Her spare wand. The one that Ron insisted that she keeps on her person at all times. The one that she often forgot that she even wore due to its magical concealment.

The one that couldn't be removed from the just-as-concealed holster on her forearm by anyone except herself.

Trembling in combined fear and hope, Hermione twisted on the metallic slab, ignoring the cramping in her lower back as she turned her left wrist in its shackle. She assumed that the wand was still there; she couldn't feel or see it, but there was only a small chance that it could have been removed, short of severing her arm, even if it had been detected.

Hermione winced at that thought as she recalled the details of the Flintshire murders, but again she pushed those ghastly thoughts aside as she cast the silent incantation that would free her. There

was a telltale flash of light from her wrist, and, to her giddy, relieved triumph, it was followed by the clink of the shackle as the restraint released and fell from her wrist; the sound resonated deafeningly in the otherwise silent room.

She wasted no time in freeing her other arm before she sat up, ignoring the wave of nausea she experienced at the abrupt movement, and proceeded to free her ankles from their restraints. She was in the process of aiming the wand at her face, intent on giving herself a mouth, when a faint noise jerked her awareness back to her surroundings.

Her eyes had begun to adjust to the darkness, and as such she could make out vague shapes massed together in what appeared to be a low, narrow room. She held her breath in renewed horror as she waited for her captor to make his presence known; she was prepared to stun at the first sign of movement...

She waited a full minute before deciding that no one had, in fact, entered the room and aimed her wand at her jaw: There was a warm glow that spread across her face, and she gasped in relief a moment later, her hands coming up to grope her jaw, to confirm that she was indeed restored to normal.

Her feeling of relief was short-lived, however, as she realized in the next instant that her captor might already be aware that she'd managed to free herself. Wasting no more time, Hermione slid down from the slab, which she took to be some sort of medical table. Her knees felt weak as she put her weight on her legs, and she was somewhat nauseous as she raised her arms in front of her, determined not to trip over anything or to make any unnecessary noise. She was acutely aware of her nakedness, and she shivered violently while conducting a hasty physical inventory: Everything seemed to be in working order, and she noted with sharp relief that she didn't seem to have been... violated in any way. There would be definitive bruising or some degree of soreness between her legs if she'd experienced an assault—

A low moan broke out through the darkness, and Hermione's head whipped to the far corner of the room: There appeared to be another examination table, and a mass that had to be a person was lying atop it.

"Ginny," she whispered in combined relief and urgency, picking her way quickly but carefully across the room. She felt immensely relieved upon discovering that it was, indeed, Ginny tethered to a table much as Hermione had been. She performed a quick physical examination of her sister-in-law, confirming that she was breathing and that there was fetal movement beneath Ginny's bare, rounded stomach when Hermione pressed her hands to it.

While Ginny was still unconscious, Hermione hastily repaired the younger woman's mouth before releasing her from her binds. "C'mon, Ginny," she whispered urgently, placing her hands on her friend's cold, goosebumped flesh. "We have to get out of here." When Ginny did nothing more than groan and stir feebly, Hermione shook her more vigorously, desperation fueling her actions as her eyes darted about, paranoia and fear overwhelming her. They had to get moving. Their captor could very well already know that Hermione had freed herself and Ginny...

"Hermione?" Ginny's eyes had fluttered open, and she was gazing groggily up at her sister-in-law. "Why are you naked?" She had barely completed that sentence when she gasped, lurching to a sitting position on the table, and Hermione knew that Ginny must have remembered what had happened to them.

"We have to get out of here," Hermione whispered without delay, helping her friend climb to her unsteady feet. While Hermione could see that Ginny's eyes had widened in fear and confusion, she was levelheaded enough to save questions for later as she wrapped her arms about her naked body, visibly trembling.

Glancing around searchingly, Hermione spotted a row of lockers. Marching toward them purposefully, she wrenched them open one at a time, rummaging through them quickly and feeling relieved when she discovered several sets of Healers' robes. She thrust one set into Ginny's arms, saying, "Put this on—quickly," before pulling on another.

Once the two women had hastily dressed, Hermione Disillusioned them both. "What the fuck is going on?" Ginny hissed, reminding her of Ron, as she so often did. "Were we really kidnapped by a bloody house-elf?"

"No idea," Hermione whispered; there wasn't any time for explanations. "Just stick close to me. We've gotta get out of here before whoever did this notices we've freed ourselves."

"How did you get a wand?" Ginny returned in a low whisper, her hand on Hermione's arm as she followed close behind her.

"A spare—magically concealed."

The two friends were quiet as they picked their way cautiously through the dim room, which Hermione took to be some sort of basement, and peered into a just-as-darkened, dank-smelling corridor. She wanted to light her wand, but she was fearful of doing anything to draw attention to herself and Ginny. Even casting Homenum Revelio might alert their captor or captors—or the house-elf who'd abducted them.

"You reckon we're in a basement?" Ginny asked in a whisper. "I don't particularly fancy going upstairs to meet the nutter who dragged us here, but if it's the only way out..."

"Let's just keep moving. I'd rather meet him face-on than wait around to be caught."

"Agreed."

They crept silently along the passageway, clinging to each other, both with one hand trailing on the rough, grimy wall, until they finally reached a stairwell at the end of the long corridor. "There's a light at the top," Ginny whispered as they began to cautiously ascend. "I think we should—"

CRACK.

Hermione and Ginny wheeled around as one: Standing just behind them, framed in the foot of the stairwell, was the house-elf that Hermione had glimpsed just before she'd lost consciousness and ended up here.

"Where do you think *you're* going?" the diminutive creature croaked, his bulbous, contemptuous eyes seeing straight through Hermione's best Disillusionment Charm. "Henry will not be pleased that I somehow didn't notice your concealed wand when I brought you here—not at all."

Despite the imminent threat, Hermione couldn't help but note that the elf hadn't referred to this Henry as "Master" and that he was clothed in a tiny set of robes and boots, but the observation was inconsequential as Hermione flicked her wrist with the attached wand, on the very threshold of silently stunning the elf when it was yanked from its holster—

And landed smoothly, now entirely visible, in the elf's outstretched hand. Immediately, her Disillusionment Charm was broken. Next to her, Ginny assumed a defensive stance, her posture suggesting that she was on the verge of physically attacking the small creature before them.

"Don't," Hermione whispered in warning, instinct telling her that this being would aim to kill, and Ginny was wandless, after all, rendering her utterly helpless against elfin magic.

"What are your intentions with us?" Ginny demanded.

"*You're* merely an afterthought," the elf sneered at her, hatred plastered on its features. "It's the Mudblood whore that Henry truly desires, but I feel certain that he shall reserve some of his... affections for you as well."

In a blur of flaming red hair, Ginny lunged forward, her hands outstretched for the wand—

"*Ginny, no—*"

There was a flash of blinding light—and she lay unmoving upon the floor.

oOo

He planted his fists on the hardwood surface of the table as he leaned over it, watching on in a delirious mixture of satisfaction, desperation, and impatience as the dark man repeatedly raped the prisoner's mind. Ron Weasley was unaware of the nasty sneer that curled his own lip, for he had gone to a dark place in his mind on the brink of something resembling insanity, where there were only two things in this world that drove him onward: the overwhelming need to find his wife and sister before they were harmed, and vengeance.

He wanted *vengeance*, dammit—and not the kind that could be satisfied by a lifelong stint in Azkaban, which would be wretchedly insufficient a punishment given that Shacklebolt's regime had done away with using dementors as the prison's guards.

No, the sort of vengeance that Ron had in mind involved tearing Aeron Henry Davies, Jr. to shreds with his bare, bloody hands.

Before he satisfied that desire, though, he had to get to Hermione and Ginny; he had to make sure they were all right, and if they *weren't*...well, the thought was too horrid to imagine. He simply couldn't fathom it. He clenched his eyes shut as he remembered the remains they'd found in Davies Manor; he tried not to picture the terrified faces of his wife and sister in the places of those poor, desecrated, violated women.

Yet that could very well be their reality if Ron didn't get to them—and soon. He straightened to his full height at that thought, willing himself not to get sick again; being a weak-stomached git certainly wasn't helping matters.

"*Enough*," the prisoner gasped around feeble whimpers as Snape clutched Davies's lapels, his black eyes boring into the pathetic man's watery, bloodshot ones. Standing just behind them, the warden watched on in evident fascination, his arms crossed over his barrel-shaped chest.

After a veritable lifetime, Snape at long last released the man from his clutches, the latter of whom fell back into a chair, slumping in exhaustion.

However, Ron's attention was focused entirely on the dark man, who straightened, wiping down his nondescript clothing as if they'd become contaminated by the prisoner's close proximity.

"Well?" Ron snapped impatiently. Every second they stood around doing nothing, Hermione and Ginny's danger increased.

"He is indeed Secret-Keeper of three properties under the Fidelius Charm," Snape replied in a frustratingly calm manner, "but only one is in a remote location, isolated from civilization. I believe it to be the most likely locale for the son's purposes. Of course, since I am now bound by the Fidelius Charm myself, I cannot reveal to you the precise location."

"Give the bastard the Veritaserum," Ron snapped impatiently. "Make him say it out loud."

Wordlessly, the nearby guard gripped Davies's face, forced his mouth open, and dumped the vial of potion down his throat as the prisoner sputtered and gagged.

"Owl Harry Potter," Ron ordered, turning to Warden Pearson once the prisoner had spoken against his will, consequently making them all Secret-Keepers. "Tell him to organize a team to meet us in the vicinity. Neville," he added, turning to his companion, who'd remained silent during the interrogation, "you'll have to wait outside to reveal the location to Harry and the others, but I'm going in. Snape, I still don't know what the fuck you're playing at, but you're coming with me."

Ron didn't wait around to ensure that his orders were followed as he dashed from the room, desperation propelling him as he found the prison's Apparition Room, the only room where one could Apparate or Disapparate in or out of the establishment.

Within moments he was standing in a frost-covered wood, barely registering the cold as he whipped around, locating visually the lonely, wooden cottage within moments: It was covered in a layer of powdery snow, a far cry from the Davies' grand but ominous manor. It rather looked like something from *Beedle the Bard* or from the "fairytale" stories that Hermione had—

His stomach clenched as his heart seized in his chest. *Hermione*. He had to get to her. He set off at a dead run, his desperation blinding him to anything but the need to—

A firm grip closed on his upper arm, jerking him backward. "Unless it is your desire to be killed, Mr. Weasley, I'd implore you to proceed with caution. Although I'm sure your wife would appreciate your noble Gryffindor stupidity, I've no doubt she'd much prefer that you actually live to rescue her." Snape's Disillusionment Charm was so convincing that Ron could only see a faint shimmer in the air over his shoulder.

"Sod off," he growled, wrenching his arm from Snape's grip, but Ron had to concede that his former Potions instructor had a point. He paused long enough to Disillusion himself and to cast a charm that would erase his footsteps before resuming at a more cautious pace, literally using every ounce of willpower that he possessed not to break into a full-on sprint.

He'd been an Auror long enough to know how to keep himself alive, and he needed to keep his wits about him if he wanted to get Hermione and Ginny out.

He paused several feet from the cabin, casting a silent incantation to reveal any magical traps. Evidently Davies was confident that his secret was safe, because there wasn't any protection around the house aside from the Fidelius Charm.

"All clear," Ron said lowly to Snape, whom he could sense at his shoulder.

Just as he aimed to blast open the rickety-looking door, however, his wand was ripped from his grasp by an unseen force.

"What the—?" He whipped around, searching for his attacker, but was abruptly knocked to the ground as pain exploded in his temple. The last thing he saw before darkness descended was deepest scarlet coloring the powdery snow.

Desperation

Her vision went white with an overwhelming mixture of horror, rage, and panic as Ginny Potter collapsed like a stone, her flaming red hair fanning out around her head on the grubby floor, but the moment Hermione dropped to her knees at her side, desperate to check her friend's pulse and breathing, she was abruptly snatched back by her hair; gasping in pain and surprise as stars exploded behind her eyes, her hands flew instinctively to her scalp while her eyes wheeled frantically about:

As she was dragged roughly back down the corridor, kicking her legs and clawing at the steel-like vice in her scalp in a panicked attempt to free herself, she caught sight of the long, trouser-clad legs of a man and glimpses of short, dark hair and a pale face containing a cold callousness as he glared down at her with dead eyes.

"You really shouldn't have attempted to escape," the man said almost conversationally as Hermione's fingers continued to attempt to pry his fingers from her scalp. Tears of agony distorted her vision, and she felt dampness in the roots of her hair and smelled the telltale metallic sting of blood.

Without warning, she was thrown backward quite abruptly, and fresh, shattering pain exploded in her temple as her head made contact with a hard edge. "What do you want with us?" she gasped through her pain and fear, hating the caged-animal timbre in her voice as she was transported back through the years to Malfoy Manor—to the lunatic Bellatrix Lestrange hovering over her and Fenrir Greyback leering from just over the madwoman's shoulder.

She could almost imagine that she could hear Ron's desperate, panic-stricken bellows, but this was worse, so much worse because it wasn't just her life on the line, but her child's—Ron's child. She had to protect Ron's child at all costs.

She scrambled blindly to the left as the man approached her in the semi-darkness: She couldn't make out his features because he was now silhouetted by dim florescent lighting, but she could sense the animosity radiating from him. "Please," Hermione pleaded as her back hit a solid barrier, and she realized that she was now effectively cornered; she considered the possibility of attempting to overtake him, despite the threatening wand in his grasp and the fact that he had at least fifty pounds on her. If she could somehow distract him long enough... "Please, I'm pregnant," she said, grasping at straws, sure that he was already aware of that fact, assuming he was the one who undressed her. The thought sickened her, made her stomach churn.

"The brats of Mudbloods hardly stir my sympathies," the man sneered, and Hermione was briefly transported for a second time—this time to a dark courtroom where dementors glided about overhead, casting their desolation, and Mrs. Cattermole trembled in fear as Dolores Umbridge accused her of stealing magic. "Especially Mudbloods that dare to further pollute the Wizarding world by breeding with wizards."

"Why are you doing this?" she asked, desperate to keep him talking as her hands groped about blindly at her sides, searching for something, *anything* that could be used as a weapon against him.

"Because I can," he said simply, his voice dripping with disdain, and as he raised his wand ever higher, Hermione abruptly scrambled to her feet, preparing to charge him, which seemed to be her only option—

"Henry, we have a perimeter breach," came a croaking voice from the open doorway—they had ended up back in the room in which she'd awoken a short time ago—and Hermione recognized it

as that of the house-elf . "It's the blood-traitor and an unidentified companion, possibly a member of the MLE."

"Handle it," her captor, Henry, ordered, and the moment the elf had disappeared once more, Hermione took advantage of the distraction, launching herself at the man—

They landed hard on the floor in a heap, the element of surprise giving her a slight advantage as she grabbed at his wand, but he was much more powerful than her physically, and within moments Hermione was beneath the hard weight of his body, the wand pressed against her throat as he captured both her wrists in one of his hands, pinning them over her head. "You really shouldn't have done that, Mudblood," he grunted threateningly, his rancid breath in her face as he forced her legs apart with his knee. "I'm going to take my time with you—*after* I make you watch what I do to Potter's wife. But there's no need to be jealous—I'm gonna have the most fun with you."

Even as the panic threatened to overwhelm her, Hermione stilled her movements beneath him, desperation driving a new strategy into her mind. "I—I'll do anything you want," she whispered, abruptly remembering what the elf had said about the "blood-traitor" being here, her heart beating with hope that Ron was really here and that this would all be over soon. "*Please*—just let Ginny go, and I'll cooperate."

"What makes you think I desire your cooperation?" he breathed into her ear, making her shudder with repulsion, his knee driving hard between her legs: She very nearly vomited as she wrenched her head as far from his mouth as she possibly could, squirming to get out from under him. "I'd prefer to hear your screams, to see you uselessly struggle..." When he abruptly bit her neck, she gasped in pain and shock, hating his chuckle and his hot breath on her skin...

Enraged, she craned her neck up suddenly, her teeth clamping onto his ear, causing his chortle to dissolve into a scream of rage and pain as she bit down, *hard*, her teeth sinking through skin and cartilage as she tore into him. She took advantage of the opportunity as he howled, pushing him with all of her strength and rolling out from under him. She tasted his blood in her mouth, but she couldn't care less as she clamored for the wand that had rolled out of his grasp.

"You bitch!" he was howling as he clutched the side of his head, staggering to his feet. "You fucking Mudblood *cunt*!"

Her fingers had just closed over the smooth wood of the slender wand when something slammed hard into her body, the pain jarring her as she hit the floor with a sickening *thud*, and he was abruptly on top of her once more, straddling her torso, his hands clamped tightly over her throat. As pinpricks of light formed in her vision and she struggled uselessly for breath, she got a decent look at her kidnapper: He was average-looking and possibly in his early thirties, but his eyes were his most notable features because...they were soulless, and for a single moment in time, Hermione pitied him.

But then that moment was over, and her fingers flailed over the dirty floor at her sides as the blackness seeped in at the edge of her vision, searching desperately for the wand that had slipped out of her grip, and they closed over something metallic instead; she didn't even look as she grabbed whatever it was and drove it upward with all her might, sinking it into the tender flesh of his throat and taking perverse delight in the sensation of tearing tendons and the sight of gushing crimson as she hit her mark.

Even as her attacker grabbed at his own throat, wrenching out the object with which she'd stabbed him, he backhanded her hard, and Hermione cried out in renewed pain at the blow at the same instant that she doubled over on her side, a very different sort of pain assailing her body: pain originating from her womb.

oOo

Neville Longbottom wasn't sure what he'd expected to stumble upon when he arrived at the remote Davies property, but what he *hadn't* expected to see was a figure that could only be Ron—going by the ginger hair that stood out in sharp contrast against the whiteness of the snow—crumpled on the ground and a house-elf dueling with an unseen opponent, presumably Snape.

"*Stupefy!*" Neville shouted instinctively as he took aim at the elf while at the same time ducking for cover behind a fallen log. At the same instant, a piercing *crack* rent the air, and his head shot up in time to see a heavy-looking branch falling toward him; reacting on impulse, he aimed his wand, deflecting it effortlessly as he rolled to the side before taking aim at the elf once more.

He saw that Snape was visible now, firing curse after curse at the elf, who seemed to be deflecting the curses with ease, Apparating and Disapparating at random as if it were a game to him.

Another, very different *crack* rang out then, and in the next moment a half a dozen new figures appeared amongst the trees, dotting the snow with wands at the ready, and Neville immediately recognized his fellow Aurors; Harry was easily spotted, what with his jet-black hair and green eyes ablaze beneath his glasses. Automatically, Neville—now a Secret-Keeper—shouted out the location of the cabin as he jogged forward, knowing that Harry had a visual on the cabin at the instant that his friend and boss's jade gaze landed on Ron, who was bleeding on the ground. Immediately, Harry rushed toward his best mate.

Apparently the distraction afforded by the Aurors' arrival was all Snape needed to take out the mad elf, because his small form now lay unmoving in the snow as the dark man stood over him, his wand at his side as he nudged the little body with his foot.

oOo

Ron awoke with a start when he realized that someone was saying his name. "Harry?" he croaked, trying to make sense of where he was and what had happened. All he knew was that he was cold—really fucking cold—and that his head hurt.

"Ron," Harry said again, urgently. "Ron, can you hear me?"

As his eyes began to focus, he saw his best mate kneeling over him, fear and something like desperation in his eyes.

"Yeah, I can hear you, I—"

Abruptly, reality took a spiraling hold of him as his memories came crashing back, and he sat up in the snow, ignoring the throbbing pain in his temple and the way his vision refused to un-blur. "Hermione and Ginny," he said as he attempted to regain his balance, and he felt Harry's hands on his shoulders, helping to pull him to his feet.

Glancing around, he noted the other Aurors swarming on the place, and he didn't waste time with questions as Harry pressed a wand—Ron's wand, presumably—into his hands. "You good?" Harry asked impatiently, and Ron didn't bother answering: He was already blasting open the door to the cabin and ignoring his slightly blurry vision. In moments, he and Harry were filing into the small, dank-smelling house, the other Aurors on their heels; they wasted no time in clearing the front rooms before proceeding down a staircase off the kitchen.

Side by side, Ron and Harry led the way, lit wands raised. When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Ginny's feebly stirring form came into view, and both men were at her side immediately, Harry gathering her into her arms as her eyes fluttered open.

Ron's relief was immediate and absolute, but now that his fear for his sister's safety was satisfied, he had one immediate concern and one concern only: "Hermione," he demanded as he met Ginny's bloodshot, groggy eyes.

"He took her," she whispered, nodding toward the other end of the passageway.

Harry's eyes met Ron's briefly, and Ron knew that his friend was torn in two different directions: The need to stay with his wife—to get her to safety himself—and to continue on with Ron to rescue Hermione. "Get Ginny out," he said, saving Harry from having to make the decision, and Harry nodded once before lifting his wife into his arms.

Ron didn't watch him go; nor did he acknowledge the Aurors following close behind, because he was already making his cautious but steady way down the corridor, his wand raised, ready for a surprise attack. The door at the very end of the passage was ajar, and he pushed his way inside carefully, cognizant that an attack could come at any moment...

Davies was shielding himself with Hermione's body, his wand arm wrapped tightly around her, his wand pressed into her throat while he attempted to stifle the flow of blood from a wound in his neck; blood was also pouring from his ear.

"Let 'er go," Ron commanded, aiming his wand straight at the bastard's face over Hermione's shoulder. He didn't want to have to curse him while Hermione was in the way, but he had confidence in his aim.

"Well, well," said Davies mockingly, gurgling slightly; whatever had happened to his throat, the wound was deep. "The blood-traitor has come to rescue his Mudblood wife, has he?"

"Let her go now, or I swear to Merlin I'll fucking kill you," Ron growled, his sweaty grip tightening on his wand. In truth, he was preparing himself to stun the rat bastard; if he *did* miss, he couldn't risk harming Hermione. Meeting his wife's eyes, he saw that she was barely hanging onto consciousness by a thread, one arm curled protectively around her swollen belly, and it was only then that he noticed the deep crimson staining the material between her thighs.

The baby.

No. No.

Ron repressed the urge to be sick, tightening his fingers around his wand until it was clenched in a trembling, white-knuckled grip, the words to the Killing Curse flashing through his mind as his vision was clouded by a white-hot, all-encompassing rage.

If his baby was dead, he was going to kill that fucking bastard. He was going to kill him if Rose *wasn't* dead—for taking Hermione and Ginny. Either way, he'd make the fucker pay, dammit.

"You require medical assistance," said a calm, silky voice from Ron's left and slightly behind him, but he barely registered this, his eyes and attention focused solely on his target, on the man who threatened his wife—his wife who was teetering on the threshold of unconsciousness and bleeding from between her legs. "Let the girl go, and you shall receive medical attention and a fair trial—"

The words "fair trial" seemed to jar Ron back to reality of the situation, and years of training and experience drove his next instinctive reaction: Without thinking about what he was doing, he silently cast the Disarming Charm with practiced ease while simultaneously diving forward, shoving Hermione out of harm's way—

And found himself on top of the man who'd dared to take his wife and sister, his fingers around the man's blood-soaked jugular, his blood staining Ron's fingers as he increased the pressure. He was unaware of the satisfied sneer that curled his lip as he watched the bastard's eyes first begin to bulge out of his head, and then the light began to fade from his eyes.

Ron only dug his fingers deeper when he thought about Hermione—bleeding from between her legs, her face bruised and bloodied—and Ginny on the dirty floor, and all those women that this bastard had tortured and murdered in cold blood. Well, Ron would ensure that he never killed again, that he could never harm another—

"Ron..."

Hermione's voice, a broken croak, had his eyes wheeling about, and he watched as Snape crouched over his wife, lifting her broken, bleeding body into his arms, but her suddenly alert eyes were focused solely on Ron, watching as her husband drained the life from another human being. "Ron, don't..."

Other Aurors had swarmed the room, and Ron realized then that all eyes were on him, waiting, but only Hermione had spoken a word to stop him.

Feeling like he was waking from a deep sleep, jarred by his wife's voice, Ron released the suspect, somewhat horrified that he'd almost lost himself as he stumbled backward and scrambled to his feet. Raising his hands in front of his face, he saw that they were crimson with blood—

Blood. Hermione.

Wiping his hands hastily on his robes, he turned and lunged toward his wife, gently disentangling her from his former Potions instructor's arms, and, without thinking about what he was doing, he turned on the spot and Disapparated them straight to St. Mungo's.

A Better Friend than You

Ron was separated from Hermione by a set of seeming ominous double-doors; the separation taunted him, maddened him as the Healers attempted to save the child in his wife's womb.

He was literally sickened, half-crazed in his anxiety and rage as his hands fisted in his hair, as he marched back and forth across the cracked, dirt-ground linoleum, as he relived again and again how it had felt to wring the life from that bastard who'd taken his wife and sister—as he'd felt himself lose a bit of himself, his soul draining away as surely as that monster's life force.

Yet Ron knew that he'd do it all again. In fact, he longed for nothing more than to use his credentials to gain access to the high-security wing of St. Mungo's where the bastard was currently being treated for his injuries. His hands shook with an almost fanatical desire as he lived the fantasy in his head—as he saw himself first stun the Healers that were treating the murdering, woman-hating fucker, and then his hands closed over that windpipe once more, and he saw the monster's eyes widen with terror and realization as Ron finished the job with a sense of calm satisfaction.

He could do it; he knew he could. Even if the other witnesses present had already given their statements that Ron had used unnecessary force on a suspect, he reckoned things were still entirely too chaotic for him to be denied access just yet...

"Any word yet?"

Harry's quiet but urgent voice broke into his demented musings, and Ron wheeled around to see that his best mate was sporting a haunted expression that Ron knew must be plastered on his own face.

In response to the inquiry, he merely shook his head once. "And Ginny?" he asked simply, his voice coming out a hoarse croak. "And—and the baby?" It was difficult for him to say the words "the baby" without them evoking images of his wife on the floor of that dirty, putrid little house, bleeding from between her thighs, but he pushed aside those thoughts—even while his hands twitched with renewed longing to wrap them around Davies's throat—in favor of his concern for his sister and her child.

"They're gonna be fine," Harry said quickly, seeming to sense his brother-in-law's line of thought, and Ron's anxiety lessened a bit at the news. "Your mum, dad, George, and Angie are in there with her now. Gin's pretty shaken up, but she's mostly worried about Hermione; she's a tough one, that sister of yours, and evidently your nephew is as well." A small smile of pride tugged up the corners of Harry's lips, but then it was gone as quickly as it had come. "He'll pay for what he did," he added quietly. "Justice'll be—"

"Justice?" Ron repeated with a loud derisive snort, causing Percy's and Bill's eyes to shoot in their direction: The two brothers had been silent all this time, their arms crossed in mirrored imitations of one another as they both seemed to sense the danger boiling beneath the surface of their younger brother's exterior. "*Justice* would've been served if I'd strangled the life outta that fucking bastard like I wanted to... If I hadn't stopped, he'd be dead now; end of story." He was seething as he finished up his spiel, his hands once more opening and closing of their own accord.

"Ron, but at what cost? Believe me, I understand—"

Ron scoffed loudly at that, throwing up his hands scathingly. "You bloody think you understand, Harry?" He slung his arm in the direction of the magically sealed double-doors. "That's

not *your* wife behind those doors, is it? It's not *your* kid that could be dead—"

"It could as easily have been," Harry protested passionately but not quite raising his voice.

"Besides, don't act like I don't care for Hermione and my niece; she may be your wife, mate, but you know bloody well that she's one of the best friends I have."

Ron wasn't sure if Harry intended to imply the words *a better friend than you*, but he couldn't help but think that as his mind flashed back all those years to the Horcrux hunt: Hermione had stayed with Harry when things had gotten tough; he, Ron, had not. It was something Ron had never quite forgiven himself for and probably never would, even if Harry and Hermione had both seemed to have let it go.

Whatever the implications, though, the words got the point across: Of course Harry cared about his most loyal friend apart from his wife. Of course he understood Ron's pain.

"At any rate," Harry added much more gently, "even if you don't care for the state of your own soul, if you'd killed him, you'd have been arrested. Thankfully all the guys who were on the scene have no sympathy for that bastard and are willing to overlook your...exuberance, but if you'd actually *killed* him, Ron, their hands would've been tied..."

"I don't care," Ron replied roughly. "It would've been worth it."

"Ron." It was Bill who'd spoken this time, apparently unable to hold his tongue any longer. "Ron, if you'd been arrested for murdering a suspect, how would that help your wife or your daughter? They need you; Hermione needs you now more than ever. It's your most important job to be here for her."

"Bill's right," interjected Percy. "Besides, Hermione wouldn't want you to become a killer yourself, Ron."

Ron stared between his well-meaning brothers—both husbands and fathers of daughters themselves—knowing they were right but feeling more annoyed than soothed. "Can I talk to Harry alone for a minute?" he asked abruptly, knowing he was being rude but far from caring.

Bill merely nodded once in understanding before striding forward and clapping Ron on the shoulder briefly. "I should probably go check in on Gin anyway," he said before filing out of the room, Percy soon after dismissing himself in a similar manner.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked the moment the elder Weasley brothers had disappeared. "Aside from the obvious, I mean."

At that question, Ron flopped into a nearby plastic chair, his head coming down as he covered his face with his arms, unexpected sobs making his body tremble. For the first time, he allowed all that had happened in the last several hours to overtake him: Not only the very real possibility that his wife was losing their baby at that very moment, but that he'd cheated on said wife.

While Hermione had been experiencing unimaginable horrors because Ron hadn't been able to protect her, he'd been out fucking another woman—a woman he'd only barely tolerated to begin with and whom he now despised. No, he couldn't remember the actual act, and, yes, he'd been drunk, but that was no excuse, was it? What would he do if Hermione came to him and said, "Ron, I had a bit too much to drink and woke up in bed starkers with my coworker. Sorry."?

He imagined his first instinct would be to think she'd been drugged, because, pissed or not, there's no bloody way in fucking hell Hermione could ever...

His head whipped up at that thought, the sobs dying in his throat.

Why hadn't the Sobriety Potion worked? McLean had prepared it; she'd handed it to him after he'd come out of the toilet; she'd been lingering about in his room as he'd been getting ready for the undercover op. Could that bitch have tampered with the potion?

Strangely, Ron felt both enraged and yet hopeful by that thought: While he didn't want to think that one of his coworkers was capable of such a horrific act—and he particularly hated the idea that it had been done to *him*—he much preferred the idea that he'd been...well, violated, for lack of a better word, to the idea that he'd willingly fucked another woman, pissed or not.

"Ron?" Harry had plopped down in the chair next to his, a concerned hand on his friend's shoulder. "Ron, did something happen in Dallas?" Damn Harry and his perceptiveness.

Ron straightened in his chair, turning to face his best mate, ready to spill it all, even if it meant Harry would hate him for cheating on his other best friend. "When McLean replaced you for the undercover op, something *did* happen." He took a steadying breath before diving right in: "The Sobriety Potion didn't work, I ended up three sheets to the wind, and woke up starkers in bed next to McLean—but I don't remember a damn thing."

He stopped there, licking his chapped lips while Harry absorbed what Ron was saying: "Blimey, you—you cheated on Hermione?" he finally breathed, his eyes widening in shocked disbelief.

"I assumed I had—all the evidence pointed at that—but now I'm not so sure. *She* prepared the Sobriety Potion, Harry. *She* handed it to me. She insisted on hanging about in my bloody room when I was getting ready, and I'm not so sure she didn't do something to the potion while I was in the loo."

Harry took a deep breath before finally speaking, carefully: "Those are very serious allegations, Ron—"

"I bloody fucking know that, Harry!" he interrupted irritably, jumping to his feet again as suddenly as he had sat, running his hands through his hair while he resumed his pacing. "But before I go and ruin my fucking marriage by confessing to Hermione, I've gotta rule out all other possibilities, haven't I? What would you bloody do if it was *your* marriage on the line, Harry?"

"All right," Harry said, raising his hands as if in surrender. "All right, Ron—I'll owl Neville and have him recall her from Dallas as soon as I can. I've gotta admit that it's more than a bit suspicious that the potion mysteriously didn't work, and she was the last person to handle it; that alone should be enough to detain her for questioning." He paused for a moment before continuing fiercely: "Besides, I know you, Ron. I know how much you love Hermione. We'll get to the bottom of this—I promise you that."

"Thanks, Harry," he replied, feeling somewhat placated.

"I've gotta know something else, though."

Ron stared at him, waiting for him to continue.

"Have you showered since...y'know...?"

"Oh. Er, no." He pulled a face, the idea that McLean was still on his body making his stomach churn with disgust.

"Good! That's good, Ron."

"What do you bloody mean that's 'good,' Harry? It's actually quite sordid; I feel tainted—"

"No, what I mean is—Ron, are you sure you even had sex with her at all? You said you can't actually remember. Were there...signs?"

Ron stared at his friend, his eyes narrowing in confusion even as he reeled somewhat at the blunt term, "had sex," in regard to him and his coworker. "You mean aside from the fact that we were bloody naked *in bed* and she...complimented me?" Once more, his stomach churned, and he felt like he might get sick again.

"Yeah, Ron, aside from that. There are usually...y'know...other physical indications that you've been...having intercourse."

Ron let out a heavy sigh, rubbing his temples with one hand, which had started to throb. "I didn't really have time to notice, Harry. Two seconds after I stopped dry-heaving from horror and disgust, I got a knock on my door from Dalton, who told me he'd gotten word from London that my wife and sister had gone missing."

"You need to check yourself into this hospital," Harry said urgently, one hand absently scrubbing the back of his neck.

"I'm not bloody going anywhere until—"

"After we get word about Hermione," Harry amended quickly, "you need to get examined; they'll be able to tell you whether or not you've had sex recently, and they can also perform a test on you to see what was in that potion you drank. If it turns out you were drugged, that'll be more than enough to arrest McLean. If you weren't..."

Ron pressed his eyes closed at that thought. "Harry," he said when he'd opened them once more, meeting his friend's bloodshot jade eyes, "I never thought I'd actually be *hoping* that I've been...y'know..."

Harry nodded once and placed a hand on his mate's shoulder, the gesture indicating that he understood exactly what Ron meant.

"I know," Harry said after a moment, "why don't you come say hi to Ginny? I'm sure she'd love to see you, and it would do you some—"

He didn't get the opportunity to finish that statement, because in the next moment the double-doors banged open, and a Healer came striding out, her petite form looking harried as she used her wand to secure her fine blonde hair into a messy bun; Ron felt vaguely astonished to see that it was his girlfriend of a very brief boyhood stint, Lavender Brown, but she didn't seem surprised in the least as she locked eyes on him: "Ron, they're fine. Hermione and the baby are going to be fine now. There was a uterine rupture, which is ordinarily quite easy to repair by magic, but blood was leaking into the placenta, so the process was a bit more difficult, but not impossible..."

Once the words "they're fine" had left Lavender's mouth, Ron barely registered another she said, so immense was his feeling of all-encompassing relief; he had to brace himself against the nearby wall in order to prevent his knees from buckling. Lavender's lips were moving, but he was now having difficulty comprehending the syllables that undoubtedly formed words. After a moment, Ron realized that she'd asked, "Would you like to see her now?"

"Yeah," he said immediately, then cleared his throat and tried again upon realizing the word had come out as a gravelly rasp.

"Sorry, Harry," he vaguely heard Lavender saying, "but she can only be seen by her spouse and her parents for the time-being, but once we move her to a regular room, other visitors will be

permitted..."

Ron was already moving around her, dimly aware of the sound of her trainers squeaking on the linoleum as she hastily moved to follow him up the brightly lit corridor. "She's still unconscious," Lavender was saying from just behind him and to his right, "and when she awakens she'll be weak; she's been through quite a trauma, physically and emotionally—"

"Which room?" he barked over her words when they'd reached an Assistant Healer's station, behind which a small cluster of medi-witches and wizards stared at him curiously.

"That one," Lavender replied, pointing to the closed door just ahead of them and to the left.

Unthinkingly, he sprinted for the room and flung open the door: His wife was lying unmoving upon a hospital bed, one arm cradling the gentle swell of her belly as she slept. For an instant, Ron's mind flashed back to second year when Hermione had been Petrified, but he pushed such thoughts out of his mind as he pulled the door closed, entered the room, and fell to his knees at his wife's bedside.

A floating medical monitor was hovering two feet over Hermione's bed, and when Ron looked at it more closely, he realized that it was monitoring the baby's vital signs, proof that his baby was indeed still alive.

His baby with Hermione was alive; they were both safe.

He reached up a trembling hand to touch his wife's face: The bruises there had already begun to heal, having faded to a sickly yellowish color, but her face was still deathly pale, her lips dried and cracked; while it was obvious that a Cleansing Charm had been performed on her person, her hair was more frazzled-looking than Ron could ever recall seeing it, and his heart cried out for her. She'd been in pain and fear, and he hadn't been able to help her. He'd failed at his first duty as her husband, which was to protect her at all costs.

After what had happened at Malfoy Manor during the war, Ron had made a vow to always protect her, yet it was his fault that she'd gotten hurt again: Davies had targeted Hermione because she was Ron's wife; it had been, first and foremost, revenge against the Aurors who had arrested his father.

His career choice had caused this, Ron realized abruptly.

He couldn't bring himself to dwell on the possibility that he might have lost his wife and unborn daughter—not to mention his sister and unborn nephew—but if he *had*, well, it would've been entirely his fault.

You might still lose them, you prat, an inner voice reminded him, *if you really fucked McLean and she didn't actually put anything in that potion. Why should Hermione give you a second chance?*

At that thought, his shoulders began to shake for a second time as the sobs assailed him, and Ron didn't even attempt to stop them.

Haunted

Hermione Granger-Weasley felt like she was floating, only hazily mindful of her own sense of being; she felt no pain or sorrow or joy or elation. She merely *was*.

It was quite peaceful, actually; on a certain level, she was aware that at any moment her bubble of serenity might burst, and then she would experience a flood of sensation and emotion, but for the present time she simply allowed herself to enjoy this alien sense of non-being.

"Sweetheart."

A spike of joy intruded on her calm, and she couldn't help but smile at that familiar voice; his voice elicited memories of bright hair and an even brighter smile; strong, sure hands on her body and how good he felt when they made love, his body surging into hers with untamed passion.

She remembered their first time: They'd made love in the garden of the Burrow mere weeks following Fred's funeral; it had been somewhat awkward but so amazing once they'd gotten past the pain aspect and had let their bodies take over for their minds, moving in a natural, intense rhythm when it had begun raining on them, locked together body, heart, and soul, just as they were always meant to be...

"Come back to me, Hermione."

This time she blinked at his voice, as sensation started to intrude on her tranquility: She was in mild pain. Her entire body felt achy, as if she'd recently taken a beating followed by pain-relieving potion to dull the worst of it—

Then it all came back in a rush: The kidnapping followed by waking up naked and chained in that cold, dark cellar; their escape attempt thwarted by the house-elf, Ginny collapsing, and her struggle with her captor; searing pain in her womb and then Ron arriving...

Ron. Ginny.

Oh, God, the baby...

Forcing her eyelids apart—which felt as if they were made of lead and had been sealed by Spellotape—Hermione was met by harsh lighting, and she cringed against the pain that exploded behind her eyes and in her temples, squeezing her eyes shut once more.

"The drapes—close the drapes, dammit!" Ron ordered someone. "Percy, could you tell the medi-wizard to bring some of that potion for the pain?"

When the light behind her eyelids was muted in the next moment, she chanced opening them once more and was this time met by a dimly lit room and several familiar, concerned-looking faces peering down at her. "The baby," she said instantly, her voice coming out in a shaky rasp as her eyes focused on Ron, who was hovering closest to her.

"Rose is fine," he said quickly, taking her hand gingerly and placing it on her rounded tummy, and, as if on cue, her baby shifted subtly. "See? And they're monitoring her heart and stuff here," he added, indicating a monitor much like the ones she'd seen in the Muggle hospitals where her cousins' wives had had babies—only this one displayed a stunningly lifelike replica of a fetus. *My daughter*, she thought in awe. *My baby*.

As Ron had pointed out, there were indeed various indicators hovering about the replica that

indicated the baby's heartbeat and other vital signs. She couldn't help but stare in wonderment for a moment before she was distracted once more by reality: "What about Ginny?" she asked as she attempted to sit but was prevented from doing so by her husband.

"Whoa, take it easy, sweetheart," he said, gently pushing her shoulders back down, and, in truth, Hermione wasn't too keen to argue since her head had begun to spin the moment she'd attempted the abrupt movement.

"Ginny's great," piped up another voice from over her husband's shoulder, and as he leaned down to plant a kiss to her forehead, Hermione saw Harry peering at her with a concerned expression on his familiar features. "Worried about you, actually; threatened to hex the medi-witch if they don't let her out of bed to come see you."

Hermione couldn't help but smile at that even as her head spun and she was overcome by a wave of nausea.

"How're you feeling?" Ron asked her gently, his arm snaking around her shoulders.

"Like I was drugged, abducted, and beaten," she replied honestly, squeezing her eyes shut once more and wondering if she looked as bad as she felt. "How did you find me, anyway?" Now that the immediate crisis was averted, and she knew that she, Ginny, and their babies were safe, Hermione allowed the relief to wash through her like a rush of cleansing water, rendering her lightheaded.

Before Ron could answer her question, however, the medi-wizard entered the room, and Ron moved aside, giving the man room as he administered Hermione a potion, explaining that it was for the pain; she relished the immediate cooling sensation that settled over her body from the inside out, first soothing before killing the pain in her head, throat—which was very tender—and various not-quite-healed injuries.

The medi-wizard then waved his wand over Hermione, muttering diagnostic incantations and jotting his findings on a floating clipboard. "You appear to be doing well, considering," he said after a moment. "I'll inform your Healer that you're awake," he added before nodding once and sweeping from the room, and only then did Hermione notice the others gathered in the relatively small space: George and Angelina were smiling at her, and Angie greeted her with a "Hey, 'Mione, it's good to see you awake."

"Ugh, I hate that nickname," she grumbled, "unless Vickie and Nikki are using it," she added hastily to Bill, who was standing to Harry's right, with Percy on his left.

"Hey, it's loads better than 'Herm,'" George pointed out, moving to Ron's side to place a hand on his sister-in-law's arm while the others chuckled with giddy relief that Hermione was fine—that they were all going to be fine. "I'm glad you're all right, sis," he added quietly. "To say you gave us quite a turn is a bit of the understatement."

Despite everything that had happened, she couldn't help but smile up at George: He was always so full of life and humor. "Thanks, George—and, yes, I agree that 'Mione' is a much better shortening of my name than 'Herm.'"

"Glad you agree, Herm."

Before she could retort, someone else slipped inside the room, and Hermione was faintly surprised to see that her Healer was Lavender Brown, her fellow Gryffindor, DA member, and former dorm mate—not to mention Ron's first girlfriend and half the cause of much strife on Hermione's part in their sixth year.

Well, she was Ron's *only* girlfriend before Hermione, actually.

"Hermione," Lavender said, her voice radiating sincerity, "you're awake. How are you feeling?"

"About as well as can be expected, I suppose."

"That's good," Lavender replied as she approached her patient, waving her wand over Hermione much as the medi-wizard had, and Hermione couldn't help but watch her, noting that her former rival looked rather well. Of course, Lavender had always been pretty at school—Hermione had envied her peer's effortless good looks more than she'd ever admit to anyone—but she'd grown into a stunning woman. "Especially considering the trauma you've endured," Lavender was saying, oblivious to Hermione's internal dialogue. "Are you experiencing any intolerable pain? Does anything feel...off?"

Hermione shook her head as she did a quick physical inventory, noting that aside from some minor aches and pains, nothing felt particularly out of order.

"Fantastic," Lavender said as she jotted something down on the parchment that hovered in front of her. "You're doing spectacularly, Hermione: You suffered a uterine rupture, but we managed to repair it successfully and save your child's life. You also sustained some fairly minor lacerations, bruising, and a concussion, but you're healing nicely; I'd recommend that you stay here for a couple more days for observation, and when you go home I'd like to put you on bed rest for the remainder of your pregnancy as a precaution, since in cases of magical reparations of ruptures there's a sixty percent chance of a reoccurrence."

She glanced between Ron and Hermione then. "Physically, you and your baby are going to be fine, but I'd like to give you the name and address of a Psychological Healer, if that's okay; I can't pretend to know what you're going through, but I think you should seriously consider talking to her. She helped me quite a lot...after." She paused then, looking awkward before she cleared her throat and spoke again: "You saved my life that day, Hermione. There's not a day that goes by that I don't think about that, so anything I can do to help..."

"You've already done enough," Hermione replied sincerely, her hands coming down to cradle her stomach meaningfully. "Thank you, Lavender."

"Yeah, thanks, Lav," Ron said, his voice thick.

Lavender smiled and nodded once, her eyes briefly landing on Hermione's belly, before wheeling around and exiting the room as suddenly as she'd come.

Hermione forced a smile as she looked up at Ron, attempting to ignore the others in the room: "Lav-Lav has a point, you know; maybe I should talk to someone. It might help."

Despite her attempt at humor, Ron's respondent smile was grim: "Guys, I'd like to be alone with my wife, if you don't mind."

The others nodded their understanding, reiterating how happy they were that Hermione and the baby were safe; as Harry squeezed her hand affectionately and kissed her head before retreating, she didn't miss the meaningful look he threw in Ron's direction—which Ron ignored.

When they were finally alone, Ron sat down in the chair at her bedside, shifting it closer so he could grasp her hands and peer into her eyes: It was a breath of fresh air to see Ron's cerulean eyes again, when she'd so recently thought she'd never see him again. She shuddered in revulsion as she remembered waking up on that table, naked, chained, and her mouth sealed shut. Reflexively, her hands flew to her lips—which she knew was ridiculous. She'd been speaking; of

course she knew that her mouth was restored to its previous state.

Her experience in that horrible place was now reduced to a whirlwind of terror, rage, and adrenaline; she was just glad that it was over with, and she had Ron to thank for that.

"Thank you," she whispered suddenly, willing her voice not to crack.

"For what?" He seemed genuinely puzzled, which she found to be endearing.

"For finding me," she replied, one hand drifting up to touch his unshaven face. He looked rough: There were deep shadows beneath his eyes, the fine lines of his forehead somehow seemed more defined than usual, and yet it all somehow served to magnify the blueness of his eyes. "For saving me."

At that moment, his face crumbled, and he broke eye contact with her as he looked down. "Did—did he hurt you?" Ron asked, sounding broken. "I mean—I know he hurt you, but I mean—"

"No," she said quickly, reaching up to cup his face in both hands, forcing him to look at her. Leaning up, she kissed the particularly dark freckle beneath his right eye—a part of him that she'd kissed many times, among others. "No, Ron, you got there in time."

"But I was almost—"

"But you weren't," she interjected firmly, desperate to quell his fears. "You weren't too late, Ron."

Again, he shook his head as if unwilling or unable to accept her words. "If I'd insisted on putting more protection around you—bloody hell, how could I've forgotten to ward your grandparents' house, for fuck's sake—?"

"Ron, I wasn't abducted from my grandparents' house, but it wouldn't matter if I *was* and you'd warded it, because it was a house-elf that took me—"

"Yeah, but if I just hadn't fucking gone to fucking *Dallas* I might've been able t'stop the little bastard—"

"Ron, he didn't know what he was doing," Hermione said quietly, her hands sliding from Ron's face; she was disturbed by the murderous rage behind those eyes that she loved so much, even if she understood it. "He was bra—"

"Come off it," Ron hissed agitatedly. "Don't fucking say he was brainwashed, 'cause I don't think I can handle that about now, Hermione. Believe me, I understand what you do and why you do it, and I'm bloody proud of you and love you for it, but that little fucker tried to help kill you." As he finished his spiel he was running his hands through his hair in a frantic manner, and Hermione bit her lip, knowing that now was most definitely not the time to press her point.

"I'm sorry," he said suddenly, shaking his head as if pulling himself out of a dark place before taking her hands in his once more. "Here you are—just went to hell and back—and here I am biting your bleeding head off for just being you. It's just...seeing you in that place...and knowing I could've prevented it..."

"Ron, sweetheart," she whispered, hearing the tremor in her own voice as she pulled him into a fierce hug, as she relived the struggle with her kidnapper and the protective rage that had overcome Ron when he'd found them. "You couldn't have known. You have your career obligations; you can't just sit at home and protect me all the time—"

"Yeah, I can, actually," he said, pulling away slightly so he could look into her face. "My

effing *job* is the bloody reason you were targeted, Hermione; our daughter nearly *died*, and you could've, too, and it's all my fault; *I did this*—"

"Ron—"

"I'm quitting, and that's that. I'm putting in my resignation, and—and I'll go back to work for George; it'll be a pay cut, but we'll manage—"

"*Ron*," she interrupted sharply, cutting him off as she sat up straighter in her hospital bed, ignoring the fresh aches and pains in her body as she placed her hands on his face, forcing him to look directly into her eyes. "Ron Weasley, I can't and won't let you do that, because I need you out there tracking down...men like Davies and putting them behind bars; I need you getting murderers and rapists and...and evil people who abuse magic off the streets, Ron, and I need you to do it for Rose; do it for your daughter, so that she'll grow up in a safer world—and she'll grow up knowing that her world is safer because her daddy helped make it that way, one criminal at a time. You can't always control everything, sweetheart—but that's something you *can* do. Besides, you love being an Auror, and you're good at it; you'd be miserable if you quit."

She was breathing heavily as she finished up her little speech, and Ron was staring at her in astonishment. "But—"

"No 'buts'; no arguing with me on this one, Ron."

"Yeah," he said after a moment, clearing his throat. "Yeah, all right, Hermione, if that's what you want."

"It is. Although, I'm actually considering a career change as well." In truth, she hadn't considered it until the words had begun to form on her lips, but she knew it to be the truth as she said it. "I'm—I'm going to put in a transfer to Magical Law Enforcement. If any good has come out of this experience, it's that I've realized that I-I want to help people who've gone through some sort of trauma: kidnab victims, rape victims, victims of domestic abuse, that sort of thing..."

For the first time since Ron had asked to be alone with her, his lips quirked up in a shadow of that adorable smile that she loved so much. "Why, Hermione, are you telling me that you actually want to help members of your own species?"

She returned his smile, biting her lower lip. "Yes, well, I may still take on the occasional troll or house-elf..."

At the house-elf mention, all traces of humor drained from Ron's face, and it took on that haunted expression once more. "You said his name," he said quietly. "How did you know it was him?"

Hermione was at first unsure what he meant, but then she realized that she'd said to him, *I need you out there tracking down...men like Davies and putting them behind bars*. "Oh. Well. When I awoke, there were certain...conditions reminiscent of the crime scenes that you described to me regarding the Davies murders."

He visibly paled at her words, horror dawning as surely as understanding.

"It's a good thing you insisted all those years that I carry that concealed spare wand," she added gently, attempting to distract him. "I was able to free myself and Ginny. Obviously, our escape attempt wasn't successful, but I'd like to think I bought some time for you to get to us."

She attempted to smile gently at him in an effort to soften the details of her brief but terrifying captivity, but he wasn't having it. Instead, he somehow became even more agitated, rubbing his face with his hands, rocking back and forth slightly in his seat as if in extreme despair... "Ron, I'm

okay now," she whispered, confused and worried, fighting back sudden tears. "Our baby is safe; Ginny and her baby are safe—"

"Hermione, something happened—something bad."

"Wha—Ron, what is it?" she asked, alarmed, and only in that moment did she realize that she hadn't seen her parents yet. "Is it Mum and Dad? Did something—?"

"Your parents are fine," Ron said quickly as he stood up and began pacing in the small confines of the hospital room, absently scrubbing the back of his neck with one hand. "I didn't call them because—because, well, I didn't think you'd want them to know what happened."

"Oh." Immediately, relief flooded through her with the force of a tidal wave. "You're right—it's probably best that they don't know the details of what happened. Then what is it, Ron?"

He wheeled around to face her then, marching back to Hermione's bedside and kneeling next to her. As her anxiety mounted to a fever pitch, he looked her straight in the eye and said—

"Auror Weasley, here are the results of your examination."

Hermione looked over Ron's shoulder as the burly medi-wizard entered the room once more, carrying a rolled-up parchment and handed it to Ron, who then unrolled it with clearly trembling hands.

"Ron?" she inquired as she watched his eyes flashing back and forth over the parchment.

"That lying bitch!" he suddenly roared. "I knew it. I fucking *knew* it!" To her further bafflement, he then jumped up and punched his fist into the air as if in extreme jubilation rather than anger—and, indeed, the look in his eyes reflected triumph.

"Ron?" she repeated, unsure whether or not she should be amused. "What's going on?"

"She lied. She fucking *lied*, Hermione—I didn't do it at all. According to this, I didn't do a bloody fucking thing."

Complacency Kills

"Ron? What's going on?"

He stared at the parchment, which was clenched in a white-knuckled grip, his pulse thundering in his ears as he read the results of his examination over and over again, feeling torn between elation and rage—but ultimately it was the elation that won out.

The crazy bitch had actually had the fucking bollocks to drug him; the parchment explained that what he'd assumed to have been the Sobriety Potion was, in fact, a potion that was illegal to buy, sell, or brew, commonly bought on the black market and used by predators to subdue their prey, especially in conjunction with alcohol. One of the biggest problems with the potion was that it was almost impossible to recognize due to the fact that it held the same pinkish hue as the Sobriety Potion and could actually neutralize the effects of said potion.

However, the part of the results that really had his knees almost buckling in relief was the fact that he hadn't had sex at all—willingly *or* unwillingly; there hadn't been any traces of vaginal secretions on him, any female pubic hairs, or else any other physical indication that would suggest he'd recently spent the night shagging his colleague. Of course, she could've cleaned him up afterward, but that just didn't make any bleeding sense: She'd *wanted* to make him believe they'd had sex.

"She lied," he said aloud. "She fucking *lied*, Hermione—I didn't do it at all. According to this, I didn't do a bloody fucking thing." But why would she drug him and then *lie* about them shagging when he'd been in such a vulnerable state that she could've actually fucked him if she wanted to, and he wouldn't have been able to do a damn thing about it? Was she simply a home-wrecking nutter who got off on torturing men? Or did she think that he'd actually be with her if she wrecked his marriage?

And why hadn't she been weeded out during the psych screening process? Of course, that could be explained by the fact that after the Second Wizarding War, the Auror Divisions all over the world were looking to recruit more able bodies and minds into their ranks, so they were a bit less...picky in their screening process than they'd been before. Even still, there should've been signs that McLean was, in fact, nuttier than gnome shite.

"Who lied?" Hermione asked, jolting Ron out of his thoughts, an odd mixture of anxiousness and amusement on her pretty face. "Ron, if you don't tell me what's going on in about two seconds, I swear I'll—"

"Hex my bollocks off," Ron interrupted smoothly, unable to stop the grin from cracking his face; he should've been royally miffed about that bitch McLean drugging him and lying to him, and he partly was, but he mostly couldn't stop his relief or joy over the fact that he hadn't fucked the slag. "You've been hanging out with Gin and Ange too much. All right, all right," he added at the expression on her face, trying to pull himself together. It wouldn't do to be grinning like a prat when he told this story. Hermione wouldn't find anything remotely amusing about it, and, in truth, there wasn't. After all, he'd been drugged and made to think he'd fucked another woman; the only silver lining was the fact that he actually *hadn't*.

Returning to her bedside, he wiped the ridiculous grin off his face and took her hands once more, and she waited for him to speak with raised eyebrows. "Harry and I got word that the wrong man had been arrested in place of Aeron Davies," Ron began once he'd decided where he should start. "We'd apprehended his presumed dead father, who'd been acting as his partner; the git was actually using charms and potions to make himself resemble his son, which explains a lot, come to

think of it—"

"Such as how he could appear to be in two places at once," Hermione interjected with a nod of agreement. "Like in Azkaban and in that...that house." She visibly shuddered, and he wrapped his arm around her shoulder in a comforting gesture, wanting to feel for himself her body's warmth and her steady inhales and exhales—physical proof that she was, indeed, safe and sound once more.

At the reminder of what had been done to her—at what *could* have been done to her if he'd gotten to her any later than he had—Ron experienced a fresh surge of white-hot rage, but he pushed it aside, his jaw clenching tightly as he struggled to control his anger.

"Right," he said after a moment, his voice thick with emotion, pulling away from her so he could look at her face once more. "So Harry was recalled to Flintshire to continue the investigation there, and he sent a replacement to Dallas. Look, I don't know how to put this...delicately, so I'm just gonna spit it out: The replacement, a witch named Samantha McLean who's been with the London office for about six months now, drugged me and told me that I...that we had sex," he said in a rush, forcing himself to meet her widening eyes as he felt sick to his stomach again. "But it's—it's not true, and this parchment," he added, holding it up for her to see, "is proof of that. It's the results of my physical exam. Like I suspected, the date rape potion was in my system, but weirdly enough—not sure why Psycho Bitch would drug me and lie about sleeping with me—there wasn't any...evidence to suggest...that we'd...that I'd..."

He let his voice trail off, swallowing hard, as Hermione remained silent, her jaw set, her eyes downcast momentarily as she processed what he was saying.

"Hermione, believe me, I was sickened by the idea that I'd...that I might've...I didn't really think I *could* have, but all the evidence...and then I got word about you and Ginny, and...and I literally went mad. I-I couldn't stand it, any of it—the idea that you might've...and that I'd..."

"Ron," she finally said, and he halted his ramblings, snapping his gaze up to see that she was looking at him with a barely concealed fire in her eyes. "It would've been rape," she stated slowly and clearly, her voice trembling in an obvious effort to contain the brunt of her emotions. "I know you," she whispered fiercely as her hands came up to cup his face, repeating the words that Harry had spoken to him in the waiting room. "I know that you'd never do that to me of your own volition, and if she'd actually...had intercourse with you after drugging you, it *would* have been rape, just as if your situations were reversed, and—and you'd slipped *her* the potion instead. Do you hear me?" Her voice was quavering, and the tears spilled over her pale cheeks as he reached out and wiped them from her face, rubbing his thumbs tenderly over her cheekbones as he fought his own tears at her words: *It would've been rape. I know you.*

"I just...I'm happy that you weren't," Hermione added quietly, biting her lip, "although I don't think that'll prevent me from—from doing something very rash as soon as I've had this baby," she added fiercely, wrath tingeing her voice. "Why would she do that? Why would she drug you and then lie about...that? What exactly was she trying to *accomplish*?"

"Search me," Ron whispered honestly, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "Personally, I think she's just barking mad. Who knows what goes on in the heads of some people? Anyway, Harry said he'd have Neville recall her from Dallas to be brought in for interrogation. Actually, I wanna be the one to do that."

"So she actually...she actually told you that you...had sex? And you had reason to believe her?"

"Bloody hell," Ron muttered, bringing his hands up to scrub his face. "I didn't wanna believe it, love, but I woke up...starkers next to her, confused as fuck about what'd happened the night

before 'cause I couldn't remember a damned thing...and, well..." When Ron chanced a glance at her, she'd moved from a propped position against the pillows to a full sitting position, a look of fury on her face as she attempted to pull herself from bed.

"Hermione, sweetheart, what are you doing?" he asked cautiously, placing his hands on her shoulders and attempting to gently push her back down.

"What does it look like I'm doing, Ron?" she replied biting, her brown eyes flashing as she struggled against his hold on her. "I'm going to Headquarters to wait for that...that lunatic to be brought in, and then I'm going to kill her. I reckon being a heroine of the Wizarding world and a close friend of Harry Potter's, not to mention a friend of the Minister's, I can be forgiven the murder of one would-be rapist bitch. Ronald Weasley, remove your absurdly large hands from me this *instant*."

Ron wanted to laugh at her murderous declarations as her hair seemed to crackle with electricity, but given everything that had happened, he knew it wouldn't be appropriate. "Love, think about the baby; you heard what Lavender said. You've gotta take it easy. Besides," he added quietly, "as I recall, you wouldn't let *me* commit murder when that bastard more than deserved it."

She stopped struggling abruptly at that and dropped back against the pillows with a huff of defeat. "Fine," she muttered, "but I won't make any promises regarding what I will or won't do after I've had this baby."

"By that time she could be in Azkaban for poisoning a fellow Auror," Ron pointed out.

"Humph. We'll just see if the prison bars can keep me out."

This time Ron couldn't stop the grin of pride that cracked his features; he was proud that his woman was so willing to fight for what was hers, even if his pride was tinged with guilt. After all, everything that had transpired was entirely his fault, because he'd made unforgivable mistakes. There was an old Muggle saying that Hermione's grandfather, a retired sailor, liked to use (well, one of many): Complacency kills.

Ron had let complacency replace vigilance. He'd gotten a bit too comfortable. He'd let McLean hang about in his room when he'd been preparing for the undercover op, leaving his potions and other supplies in the room where she had access to them. (A few years ago, he'd never have trusted anyone other than Harry and Neville enough to do that, the whole "Auror brotherhood" thing be damned.) He'd called off the Aurors assigned to tail Hermione after he'd let her convince him that it was a waste of manpower.

If he'd simply been more...well, *vigilant*, then none of this would have happened to begin with. They wouldn't be sitting in this hospital room where his wife and daughter were recovering from a traumatic experience they'd only just managed to survive, and he wouldn't have to be explaining to said recovering wife exactly why and how he'd woken up in a hotel room bloody naked with another woman.

"Ron?"

"Yeah, sweetheart?"

"I love you," she murmured, attempting to stifle a yawn.

He smiled down at her. "Love you too, Herm. So much. You and Rosie both."

She groaned, rolling her eyes at the terrible nickname.

"Why don't you get some sleep?" he whispered, leaning over to kiss her gently, his lips lingering sweetly on hers before he moved down, placing both hands on the swell of her belly, feeling the telltale movement beneath his palms before kissing her there as well. "We'll talk some more later."

She smiled weakly at him, and it hit him then how exhausted she must be, especially since her body was still healing. In truth, Ron was beyond knackered himself, but he didn't feel like he could ever sleep again. "Give Ginny my love," she whispered as her eyes drifted closed. "Oh, and merry Christmas, Ron."

"Merry Christmas, Hermione."

oOo

As Ron Apparated to the Ministry, having left his mum and dad to stand watch over his still-slumbering wife—and after having peeked in on Ginny to confirm with his own eyes that his sister and unborn nephew were all right—he was a man on a mission: Neville had sent word that McLean had arrived back in the country and was currently being detained in an interrogation room at the Ministry.

When the lifts opened on the familiar floor that housed the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and Auror Headquarters, he turned left and marched straight down the corridor, only vaguely noticing the snowstorm in the enchanted windows.

When he turned the corner that led to the interrogation rooms, he stopped short at the sight of the black-clad man leaning casually against the wall outside of Holding Room One, his arms crossed over his chest, one knee bent, his booted foot planted against the wall.

Further up the passageway behind him, a sagging Christmas tree twinkled sadly, reminding Ron what a dismally fucked-up Christmas this had turned out to be.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Ron blurted. "Harry bring you on as an Honorary Auror, or what? I know he's naming his kid after you and all, but this is getting ridiculous."

Severus Snape merely raised one dark eyebrow at that, evidently unfazed as his foot dropped from the wall and he straightened to his full height. "Since my holidays have already be irreparably ruined, I figured I might as well subject myself to further torment by remaining in the presence of my three absolute favorite people: Namely you, Potter, and Longbottom."

Although his voice dripped with typical sarcasm, Ron sensed something just beneath the surface, and abruptly he remembered what Hermione had said all those months ago about Snape being lonely.

Could it be true? Was this inhuman git actually trying to make a human connection with those who now knew about his secret—those who were connected to his former life? And was his secret now even a secret, since he was "helping" the MLE and hanging about in the Ministry apparently with a free pass to come and go as he pleased?

"I do not require your pity," Snape growled suddenly, edging forward, and that's when Ron noticed the older man's wand hand twitch at his side, where he clutched his wand. "However, I do not deny that I'm rather relieved that the cat is out of the bag, so to speak, although I'm already mourning my loss of privacy. I also rather enjoyed conversing with your wife that day, and...it pleases me to hear that she and her child are well."

"My child."

Again, Snape's eyebrow shot to his hairline. "So I assumed. I was going to retract what I said to

your wife about you being a moron, but now I see that that would be a mistake. Nevertheless, I'm going to do you a favor, Mr. Weasley."

"I don't want any favors from you," Ron said automatically, even as he was overcome by a certain amount of curiosity.

Snape smirked, his wand hand twitching once more—

The younger man reacted instinctively to protect himself, but he was a fraction of a second too late—

Ron staggered against the force of the spell, as his mind was invaded, his memories sifted like someone might flip through the channels of a television, his recent experiences flashing before his eyes before settling on one in particular, one that he hadn't believed to be capable of being recovered:

"Ermione..." he groaned, a desperate plea for his wife, but she couldn't answer him, because Ron was alone with this she-devil in disguise, halfway around the world...

"She's not here," McLean confirmed as she climbed atop him, straddled his hips, grasped his cock, and positioned him between her legs.

Ron struggled beneath her, his limbs sluggish and heavy, the room spinning as she moved to impale her body on him—

In a last-ditch effort to stop this from happening, Ron wrenched his arm up—the arm that his wand was still holstered to—and, with a force of will, silently stunned her.

Just before the darkness claimed him, he saw her naked body crumple next to his, her thigh still draped over his hip.

I'd Fucking Die For Her

"Tell me something: Are you so daft you actually thought I wouldn't figure it out?" Ron was leaning over the polished wooden table, his fists planted on the solid surface as he observed the pathetic creature in front of him with his best poker face, concealing the odd intermingling of supreme resentment and satisfaction that he was experiencing.

For her part, she did her best to play the part of the wrongfully accused innocent: Samantha McLean's eyes were wide and doe-like in her youthful, twenty-year-old face, but he wasn't buying the act. After all, thanks to Snape's help in accessing his "lost" memory, Ron was now aware that the witch was an attempted rapist—not just a liar and a home-wrecker like he'd originally thought.

Maybe Ron wasn't even her first prey; maybe she'd pulled this shite before on some other poor, unsuspecting prat—young blokes were stupid, after all. It wasn't as if there were a whole helluva lot of 'em that'd admit to being raped by a bird, especially if she were half decent-looking. But then, most young guys probably wouldn't be required to be in a subdued state for a shag, now, would they?

Maybe she was just some nut job who liked to drug and have her way with men she thought were unobtainable. Or maybe she just had a thing for war heroes. (If that were the case, by transferring to London she'd had her pick of him, Harry, and Neville.)

"I—I don't know what you're talking about," she stammered in her best innocent-little-girl voice, looking straight at him with those doe-round eyes. In truth, she looked a bit ugly in the harsh overhead lighting: Her bleached hair was almost yellow, her dark roots were blatant, and there were angry circles under her eyes. "We—we had a nice time together, is all. I admit that—that it was unprofessional since we were on a case, and I know you're married and all, but you're a grown man, capable of making your own decisions, and adultery isn't *illegal*—"

At that, Ron burst into decidedly humorless laughter. "You can't be serious," he said once he'd calmed, feeling incredulous. "You actually believe that I'd buy this innocent act? I've gotta say, the Glasgow Recruiting Office 'as got shite for standards, 'cause you're either dumber than a troll or nuttier than gnome shite, or both. I really don't give a rat's fart either way."

At that, anger flashed across her eyes, replacing the false innocence, and she slammed her tiny fists down on the table: "You *wanted* this pussy, you fucking tosser. The only reason you're trying to make me look like some sort of...of home-wrecking slag is because you don't wanna look bad for your bloody Fan Club!"

"So you're saying you're *not* a home-wrecking slag."

"Fuck you."

"I thought you said you already did that."

She narrowed her eyes at him, looking livid as she leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms over her small chest. "I did. Several times. And you fucking loved it; you told me all about how your wife's a lame shag," she added, throwing a glance at the mirror, behind which Harry, Neville, Snape, and Jones—the Head of the MLE—now watched and listened to their conversation. Ron knew that even though he could see them, McLean could not—though of course she knew that Harry, at least, was there. "After I sucked you off, you told me all about how your wife doesn't satisfy you anymore, how she doesn't attract you like she once did, especially now that she's pregnant."

It took a significant amount of effort for him to suppress his blinding fury at her words, instead retaining a neutral expression as he merely quirked an eyebrow. "So you're telling me you're not a liar."

"Everyone's a liar," she replied smoothly, arching an eyebrow of her own. "Tell me the name of one person who's never told a lie."

"Is everyone a rapist, too, then?"

"What—?—no, of course I didn't—"

"Only because I stopped you."

To Ron's satisfaction, her eyes widened as her snide expression slipped from her face. "But how—I mean—*rape*? You must be joking."

As she stammered, Ron reached into his robes and withdrew a vial that contained what appeared to be swirling smoke, which he held up for her to see. "I assure you I'm not. Do you know what this is?"

"Don't be condescending; of course I know that's a memory." There was no longer any trace of false innocence in her voice or on her face. She was a cold, calculating bitch, just as Ron had known.

"Any guesses about what it contains?"

She merely shrugged at that, her arms over her chest as she looked down at the table.

"Now, I know you're familiar with this one," he said as he replaced the first vial and drew another from his robes, this one containing Veritaserum. "I also know that you know that attempted rape is a serious crime, so I'll give you two options: One, you confess on your own and you get to keep your last shred of dignity, or, two, I feed you this, and you tell me everything anyway."

"Besides, I already know the truth, Samantha, and I can prove it in the courtroom: I've got signed documents from the best Magical Forensic Investigators stating that that memory hasn't been tampered with; I've also got the Healer's report that proves that I was drugged. Even without forcing a confession from you, I reckon that's enough evidence to land you in Azkaban for the next twenty years, and believe me—even without the dementors there, by the time you're through with that sorta stint in that place, no bloke with eyes is gonna want that 'pussy,' as you so eloquently put it." Ron grinned on the inside, silently thanking Hermione for saying, "Eloquently said, Ron," every time he said something particularly vulgar.

McLean stared resolutely at the table before slowly dragging her eyes up to meet Ron's; he wasn't sure what he expected from her—more anger, denial, perhaps—but what he hadn't counted on was for her chin to start quivering and for her to suddenly wail, "I did it for us! So that we could be together... Ron, I—I've loved you since I was a little girl, and—and I knew that we were meant to be together. I worked hard in school, I became an Auror, and then I was transferred to London. It's not a coincidence—it—it was fate! I love you. I thought that if I could get you to sleep with me—or at the very least *think* that you slept with me—that you'd come to love me too. Please, I know it was a mistake, a stupid, stupid mistake. When I woke up and remembered that you'd stunned me, I was actually *relieved*, but, I mean, c'mon—rape? Really? You're a *bloke*, for Merlin's sake! Blokes always want sex!"

As he watched her, Ron felt utterly unmoved by this pathetic, unstable woman who'd tried to ruin his marriage. "Not this bloke—not unless it's with my wife. Speaking of my wife," he added,

straightening to his full height as he began casually pacing behind the long table, "if you grew up hearing about me and my role in the war, then I reckon you also know about what Hermione did, since she was way more crucial than me. I mean, without her, me and Harry probably would've starved out there, or froze to death, and we definitely wouldn't've figured out how to destroy Horcruxes. She also sacrificed way more than me and Harry combined."

He paused in his narrative as he stopped in front of McLean, planting his fists on the table once more as she watched him with wide eyes. "I've no idea how much the history books get into about our time on the run, but...I had to listen to her screams while they tortured her, and she was so fucking brave. I knew then that if we managed to somehow survive that I'd marry that woman. Hermione is the smartest, bravest, kindest, most loyal, most spirited person that I know—and I'd fucking die for her a thousand times over. You made the biggest mistake of your life when you decided to try and fuck with our marriage."

"Ron," McLean whispered, tears spilling over her hollowed cheeks. "Please, I lo—"

"Neville, get 'er the fuck outta here. I don't wanna see her again 'til the trial, and then I'm not gonna waste another moment of my life on her."

oOo

"Wow." Harry waited until they were alone in the lifts to speak. "Wow, I can't believe I didn't see that she was a total nutter."

"Don't blame yourself," Ron muttered, rubbing his temples.

"You look like shite, by the way," Harry added as he observed his friend's particularly haggard appearance: Ron looked as if he might collapse at any moment, and Harry didn't blame him.

It had been a long, excruciating, nightmarish forty-eight hours: The moment he'd learned about Ginny and Hermione's abduction had been the worst in his life—at least up until *that* moment. The *real* worst had come when they'd stumbled upon Ginny's body at the foot of the stairs in that cabin, in the seconds that had seemed like hours before he'd felt her pulse and confirmed that she was alive.

Now that Ginny, Hermione, and the babies were safe, though, and they'd resolved this McLean business, the weight had gradually begun to lift, and Harry felt as if he could take a tentative breath again—and maybe work on regaining some sense of normalcy.

Eventually. Maybe.

"Thanks, Harry," Ron's sarcastic response intruded on his thoughts. "You don't exactly look like the best contender for *Witch Weekly's* Most Wowing Wizard Award yourself, y'know."

Harry couldn't help but smile, but then that smile faded when he remembered that Aeron Henry Davies, Jr. was still at St. Mungo's—in the same building as Ginny and Hermione. Though he was in a high-security ward, and Harry had assigned some of his best Aurors to stand guard, the idea didn't sit well with him.

Ron seemed to sense what he was thinking, because he became quiet, a stony, haunted expression on his face, and as the lifts opened up moments later, admitting them to the Atrium, Ron said almost urgently, "We should be getting back."

"Hey, listen," Harry said, stopping him with a hand on his shoulder. "Look, when we get there, why don't you try and get some rest? I'll stand guard myself, if that'll give you peace of mind, since Hermione and Ginny's rooms are right next door."

"I won't sleep until they're outta that fucking place. Come to think of it, I might not sleep again 'til I'm dead."

"Ron, I know exactly what you mean."

A Hunch

Three months later...

The sun rose clear and crisp on that day in early April, a clear indication that spring was in full bloom despite the ever-present chill in the morning air; winter had evaporated with the last snow of the season, leaving tentatively blossoming flowers and sunshine in its wake.

From her vantage point in her husband's recliner, she watched the robin that perched on a low branch outside her opened living room window as her arms framed her hugely swollen belly; she longed to go outside, to enjoy the fresh spring air, and perhaps take a walk in the nearby park.

At first Hermione hadn't minded the bed rest too much. Her body had been healing from her ordeal, after all, and she'd been able to do some of her work from home; Ron had even been sweet enough to pop into the nearest Wizarding public library for her every week—even if some of the titles he chose, such as *How to Blow Your Wizard's...er, Mind In Bed*, made her shake her head and roll her eyes in amusement, at which he would respond with a shrug of his shoulders and an innocent, "What? Next time you should be more specific if you don't like my choices, Hermione."

At any rate, after three months straight of mundane, mind-numbing inactivity, she had become understandably antsy. All right, more than antsy; she was straight-up bored.

With a heavy sigh, Hermione placed *Hogwarts, A History* face-down on her rotund belly, unable to resist a small grin when she recalled asking Ron to swear on the heavy volume all those months ago. At least he'd more than made good on that oath in the months that she'd been on bed rest: Since Ron became agitated when she did more than get up to use the toilet, he'd taken to cooking every evening—or at least getting take-out—and taking out the trash. He'd even mowed the lawn once or twice. Or, more accurately, he'd taken care of it by magic under the cover of darkness at three o'clock in the morning.

Unexpectedly, a violent jerking movement from her abdomen caught her attention, pulling her from her thoughts, and her book toppled from her stomach, landing on the floor next to the chair. She gasped in response, her hands coming up to rub the taut skin of her belly beneath Ron's t-shirt. "Don't like that book, do you?" she murmured, aware of how silly it would look if anyone were to see her talking to her stomach but not caring. "I have a feeling you're going to take after your daddy. Quidditch, chess, and chocolate frogs, I can deal with; I just hope you don't pick up his cursing habit."

Deciding to summon the fallen book since it was rather difficult to climb out of Ron's chair unassisted in her present condition, she cast her eyes about for her wand, feeling positive she'd placed it on the end table right next to her so it would be within reach. As she furrowed her brow in confusion, her gaze suddenly landed on it: It was on the mantelpiece, in front of the set of sterling silver picture frames her parents had given them for Christmas and in which Hermione intended to place pictures of Rose and Albus. She must have set her wand there absentmindedly when she'd gotten up to use the loo earlier.

Abruptly feeling panicked, Hermione scrambled up out of the recliner as quickly as she could, clutching her bowling ball-shaped stomach as she waddled toward the hearth. She avoided looking directly at the fireplace while snatching up her wand before collapsing on the nearby loveseat with a gasp of relief.

Ever since...the Davies incident, as she'd come to think of it, Hermione couldn't stand to be without her wand, secretly fearing an attack at any moment despite the extra protection that Ron

had erected around the house and the set of eyes that watched their home twenty-four hours a day—the latter caution of which Hermione wasn't sure how much longer she would allow. After all, they couldn't live out the remainder of their lives like this, despite Ron's adamant argument to the contrary.

Certainly, she understood her husband's position, especially considering that Hermione was still "jumping at shadows," as he put it, even though she was slowly becoming more comfortable being home alone again. After first coming home from St. Mungo's, she'd been terrified of being alone—particularly of being alone in her home, the place from which she'd been kidnapped—to the point that Ron had suggested they move.

She'd vehemently refused, however. Hermione was many things, but she certainly wasn't a coward; she refused to allow what had happened to her to affect her life anymore than it already had, and she had gradually become more comfortable being home by herself, even if she'd stopped using the Floo Network. She just couldn't seem to get the memory of collapsing in front of the hearth and seeing that set of tiny boots out of her head...

Ron came home for lunch when he could, usually bringing her something from the bakery that she loved near the Ministry—even though she'd asked him not to, since, as it was, she wasn't sure how she was going to lose her arse, which was roughly the size of a small house, after she had this baby—but today he was in court. (Ron had reluctantly gone back to Dallas the month before last with Neville as his partner, but only after Hermione had agreed to stay with Harry and Ginny. Thankfully, he'd been gone less than a week when he and Neville had located and apprehended the fugitive, who'd then been transported back to Britain to await trial, which had begun today.)

And, of course, Hermione usually had Ginny to keep her company during the day, or Molly, or another Weasley, or one of her friends, but today Ginny was having lunch at the Burrow, and Hermione had decided it was time to face her fears by spending the day in the den of her own home. Completely alone.

No sooner had that thought crossed her mind than there was a flash of brightest green from the hearth, and Hermione was on her feet at once despite her poor balance, her wand held aloft as her heart pounded a terrible rhythm in her chest—but it was only the familiar figure of Harry that stepped out of the fireplace, his black hair messy as usual, wearing his work robes and clutching a parcel in one hand, another tucked under his arm.

"Whoa, Hermione, I come in peace," he said half-jokingly, raising his unburdened arm as Hermione lowered her wand, her free hand coming up to press against her quickly-racing heart. "And I can prove it," Harry added, raising the grease-stained paper sack like a peace offering.

The aroma of fish and chips hit Hermione's nostrils in that instant, invading her senses, and she was abruptly ravenous. "Thanks, Harry—I'm famished. By the way, you really shouldn't jump out at people like that." She accepted the Muggle take-out graciously before waddling her way to the dining room, ignoring Harry's chuckle and settling at the table as he summoned plates from the kitchen cupboard.

"Sorry about that," he apologized, that same half-amused expression on his face as he handed her a plate. "I'll try to Floo a bit more cautiously next time."

"You do that." Ignoring the plate, she pulled a sandwich from the bag, peeled back the wrappings, and took a bite; her eyes practically rolled back in ecstasy as she savored the greasy fast food.

"Seriously, though, how've you been?" he asked as he watched her tear into her lunch, the amused expression having vanished completely from his features, replaced by concern.

"Other than the fact that you and Ron are apparently trying your best to fatten me up, I'm fine," she said after she'd swallowed her mouthful of food.

"Hermione, how long have we been friends?" he asked in that don't-lie-to-me voice she'd become accustomed to over the years. "I want the real truth—none of that 'I'm fine' business you like to pull."

"What if I really was fine?" she countered, taking a long drink of water. "Oh, all right," she added with a resigned sigh at the look on his face. "I'm doing fine *considering*. I'm usually all right with being alone here except at night, but I startle easily, as you saw. I don't always sleep very well, and when I do, it's usually riddled with nightmares...but the things I see in my dreams aren't always about *that place*; well, they are, but my subconscious seems to mix it all up with what happened during the war. You know, Malfoy Manor, the Battle of Hogwarts..."

Harry was watching her quietly, and she could have sworn she saw him flinch at the mention of Malfoy Manor.

"And sometimes it's those women that I see in my dreams...y'know...the ones he—he...tortured and murdered." She hesitated before adding, "And sometimes I see Ginny in their place..."

He unquestionably flinched at that.

"Or you, or Ron, or my parents... I just...even though I had nightmares after the war, a naïve part of me truly believed that it had all ended, that real evil had died with Voldemort, and that we're all safe to live our lives... But we're not, are we? Not really. None of us are safe as long as men like Davies...and women like McLean are out there." She laughed humorlessly. "I told Ron a few months ago that I know monsters exist—but I had no idea. I mean, *intellectually* I knew, but I didn't really *know*. Does that make any sense?"

For the briefest instant, a small smile cracked his face, but it was gone as suddenly as it had come. "Yeah, I think it does. Ginny said almost that exact same thing."

At the mention of Ginny, she experienced a surge of guilt. After all, her sister-in-law had gone through the same ordeal as Hermione, and here she was going on about it as if she were the only one who'd experienced it.

"But, hey," Harry added, "at least four more monsters are off the streets and behind bars where they belong: Davies and his father will never get out of Azkaban, McLean will be there for the remainder of her youth, at least, and, obviously, the house-elf is being handled by your department, but chances are good he'll never see the light of day again."

Hermione frowned at the mention of the house-elf, Zorbin. "He won't be given a fair trial, you know," she said quietly. "Because he's nothing more than a second-class citizen—"

"Hermione, you can't possibly be serious. He *kidnapped* you and Ginny; you could've bloody *died*—"

"I'm very aware of that fact, Harry," she cut in sharply. "I'm not saying that he deserves to be acquitted of his crimes or anything so ridiculous; I'm merely saying that he should be as fairly represented as Davies and McLean, or any other accused person on trial."

Harry removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"At any rate," she continued with a deep sigh, "I just want to put all of this nastiness behind me—move on with my life—and I know Ginny does, too." She became quiet as she finished up her meal, and when she looked up, Harry was looking at her with a strange half-smile on his face.

"What?" she said, the corners of her own lips tugging up ever so slightly.

"There's definitely no question that that's Ron's kid. I mean, since you've been pregnant, you've been eating like him."

"Oh, sod off, Harry," she replied with a good-natured eye-roll. "I don't recall asking you to bring me fast food."

"You've also been *cursing* like him," he added with an impish grin. "I still can't believe you and Ron are actually going to be parents. In my mind you two are still the same Ron and Hermione I knew back at Hogwarts: bickering, you threatening to hex off his bollocks..."

Hermione rolled her eyes again as she dabbed her mouth with a napkin. "Honestly, Harry, we've only been married for five years, and we were together two before that. Is it so surprising that we'd take the next step?"

"No," he said, his grin further widening, "not really. In fact, I predicted it second year. I had a hunch you two would end up together."

"Bollocks," she blurted before she could stop herself, blaming the slip on her spending far too much time with Ron and Ginny. "There's no possible way you could've predicted that. We barely even tolerated each other back then! Our only common denominator was our mutual friendship with *you*."

"That's not true," Harry said thoughtfully. "He saved you from a troll in first year—"

"Which is hardly an indicator that we'd end up married."

"—and he bloody belched up slugs for defending your honor. I reckon I know the bloke, and I know he wouldn't've done that for someone who was just his best mate's *other* best mate."

She laughed fondly at the memory. "Yes, that was rather sweet, wasn't it? I suppose he had his moments."

"Oh, yeah, I almost forgot—I got you something. Well, I mean, I got *Rose* something." Reaching under the table, he pulled out the other parcel that she'd noted when he'd first Floo'ed into her living room.

Hermione grinned as she took it from him, knowing what it was before she'd even unwrapped the package, revealing, as she'd suspected, a pale pink toy broomstick with streamers of varying shades of pink. Ron had actually already bought Rose one—only in shocking Chudley Cannon orange—but she decided to keep that information to herself. "Ginny wanted to wait 'til the baby shower," Harry was saying, reminding Hermione of the double-shower planned for herself and Ginny that coming weekend, which was being hosted by Hermione's mother, Molly, Angelina, Fleur, and Audrey, "but I couldn't wait that long to give it to you. We also got one for Al in blue—sorta like the one James has."

She laughed as she leaned back, rubbing her belly with one hand. "Harry, considering that they haven't even been born yet, it's probably a safe bet that they won't be getting the urge to climb on a broomstick anytime in the near future—but thank you; I'm sure when Rose is a bit older, she'll love it."

"You can never be too prepared," he replied with a shrug, rising to his feet. "Well, I need to get back to the office," he added as he gathered up the discarded fish and chips wrappings, sending them sailing toward the wastebasket.

"You're sure you can't stay for tea?"

"Wish I could—I really do."

"All right, then. Love you, Harry." She then moved around the table and allowed him to engulf her in a brief but heartfelt hug. "Thanks for lunch—and for the broom, of course."

"Anything for my best friend and her baby," he replied sincerely, pressing a kiss to the top of her head before disengaging from her arms. "We're still on for dinner at my house tomorrow tonight, yeah?"

"Of course."

"Brilliant, we'll see you and Ron then." He turned to go, walking back across her living room toward the hearth, but he paused when his hand was midway to the dish where Hermione kept the Floo powder. "Y'know," he said, turning back to look at her, "I think Rose and Al just might be best mates." He shrugged. "Just a hunch."

Barefoot and Pregnant

Ron couldn't get back home to Hermione fast enough; these last few months, when he was away from her he was anxious. He fretted constantly, texting or calling her mobile at every available opportunity just to know she was safe. He didn't want to drive her barmy, but ever since she'd been kidnapped he couldn't help but worry—and the week he'd spent in Dallas had been absolute torture: His only comfort had been that she'd agreed readily to stay with Harry and Ginny while he was away. If he could trust anyone to keep his wife safe in his absence, it was his best mate, and Hermione had had Ginny to keep her company during the day.

He'd told Harry that he was done with field assignments for now, and Harry had agreed (which he bloody well better have done, or Ron would've straight-up quit). Besides, they were both going to be fathers soon—Harry for the second time, of course—and Ron had three weeks of paid leave backed up, of which he planned on taking full advantage.

He was so giddy with excitement over Rosie's impending birth that he could hardly stand it: A few weeks ago while out with Hermione's mum in the Muggle shops, he'd insisted on buying everything pink in sight; and, later in Diagon Alley, he'd purchased his daughter a whole collection of Chudley Cannon baby novelty items, and one stuffed Gryffindor lion with a scarlet sash and a very realistic roar. Hermione had shaken her head and rolled her eyes good-naturedly when he'd brought the loot home, complaining that between all the pink, the shocking Chudley Cannon orange, and Gryffindor burgundy, the nursery would completely clash. "Besides, what if she's not even in Gryffindor, Ron?" she'd added in what she'd no doubt believed to be a reasonable manner.

Ron had stared at her for a moment, thinking she'd gone completely around the twist: "She's a *Weasley*, Hermione. Of course she'll be in Gryffindor! Besides, she's our kid, isn't she, and *we* were both in Gryffindor."

She had looked like she'd wanted to argue further but had instead bit her lower lip, evidently deciding that it wasn't worth arguing over; almost six years of marriage had, at least, taught them to pick their battles.

Now, three weeks later, after a long, tedious day in court and testifying against the Death Eater apprehended in Dallas, Texas, Ron longed for nothing more than a hot meal, a pint, a shower, and his wife's company—and not particularly in that order, mind you; after spending his days putting monsters behind bars, he longed for some peace and a sense of normalcy in the evenings, and Hermione provided him with that. It was bloody amazing how much he loved that woman.

He Apparated directly into his small, enclosed backyard after stopping by the bakery that Hermione loved, taking a moment to appreciate the crisp, clear spring air as he unlocked and entered his home cautiously, fearful of startling his wife. "Hermione?" he called as he stepped into the short hallway, mindful of the Auror stationed outside of their home even if he couldn't see him, and pulled the door closed behind himself, locking and double-warding it.

"I'm up here!" she called back, her voice floating down the stairs. Ron shook his head with a slight grimace as he stepped around the pram parked haphazardly against the wall, walked into the sitting room, and kicked off his shoes into a corner. After depositing his briefcase, mobile, and the package from the bakery on the bar that divided the den from the kitchen, he made his way upstairs, thinking that he didn't like it when she used the staircase while here alone (and since her Healer had advised against Apparition, she wouldn't have gotten up there like that). What if she fell and didn't have her wand handy? He shuddered at the thought of Hermione bleeding at the bottom of the stairs, alone and wandless, completely helpless...

Just as he thought he might, he found her in the pink-painted nursery; the orange broomstick he'd bought for his daughter was propped in the corner with a new pink one that he hadn't seen before; the stuffed lion was perched on the chestnut bureau that matched the crib, the latter of which was decorated with one of his mother's hand-crocheted blankets.

His wife in question was sitting in the "glider chair," as she called it, that Rosalynn Granger had given her daughter: Hermione's bushy hair was pulled back in a loose plait; she was wearing not a stitch of make-up and was donned in tracksuit bottoms and one of Ron's own t-shirts, which was stretched tight across her hugely swollen belly; she had one arm draped loosely over said belly, and her other, as expected, was holding open a book— a Muggle book, going by the quite stationary illustration, titled *What to Expect When You're Expecting*—and her swollen ankles were crossed on the padded ottoman. Her feet were bare, her toenails painted pink. His wife was barefoot and pregnant.

He couldn't help but grin at the thought; he'd never seen her look healthier or prettier than in that moment; she was so fucking beautiful, and so he said as much.

She didn't hide her grin very well as she bit her lower lip and afforded him her customary eye-roll. "Honestly, Ron, must you always swear?"

"Oh, stop it. I know you secretly like it. Don't worry—I won't do it in front of the baby!" he added hastily at the look on her face. "Only during Mummy and Daddy's 'special time.'"

She humph'ed at that, again failing to suppress a grin, but didn't argue as she lowered her book. "How was your day?"

"Let's just put it this way," he began, leaning against the doorframe and crossing his arms over his broad chest, "you remember Binns's History of Magic lessons? Well, being in court all day sorta makes *those* look like a Puddlemere post-game party. But at least it's over and done," he added with a heavy sigh. "Another bastard's in Azkaban where he belongs, and if I have any say I'll never set foot in Dallas-fucking-Texas again." He hated talking about Texas, or thinking about Texas, and evidently Hermione did too, going by the look on her face. "How was *your* day, love?"

"Uneventful, as usual," she replied, leaning back and folding both hands over her tummy, rubbing absently. "Harry stopped by for lunch—I assume he told you." When he nodded, she continued: "After lunch, the Healer came by." She paused, a playful gleam in her eyes that he knew by heart. "She said that Rose and I are doing well. So well, in fact, that she approved certain...activities. Actually, she *encouraged* certain activities; she said that research has indicated that specific activities could possibly trigger labor, and, according to this,"—she held up *What to Expect When You're Expecting*—"Muggle doctors are of the same opinion."

Ron froze, his heart rate increasing considerably as his breathing hitched. "Hermione, please tell me you're talking about sex." It had been months, and although he totally understood—what sort of dick would he be if he didn't?—and didn't want to be insensitive, and he certainly didn't want to hurt her or the baby, he was getting a bit tired of wanking in the loo—in fairness, though, Hermione had "taken care of him" many times because she was fucking amazing like that—and had secretly hoped that the Healer would approve sex again before the baby came along.

She grinned almost wickedly and licked her lips. "Ron, I am most definitely talking about sex. Although, it doesn't *have* to be intercourse specifically; evidently the uterine contractions triggered by orgasm can develop into labor contrac—"

He didn't give her the chance to finish: He was at her side in two strides, bending down to gently

heft her into his arms and put his mouth hungrily on hers, which effectively shut her up. She was a bit heavier than she'd been prior to pregnancy, but it wasn't a problem; the only problem was making sure he didn't bang her head against the doorframes of the nursery and their bedroom.

There was nothing tame about their embrace as he laid her out on their unmade bed, her hands immediately running through his hair, down his chest, and beneath his robes, finding his torso and scraping across his small nipples. Ron shuddered against her in pleasure and lust as he drove his tongue into her mouth, swiped it across her teeth, sucked her tongue—

Her tiny hands were now tugging on his robes, and he obliged her unspoken demand, stumbling off the bed in order to hastily strip, his gaze never leaving hers as he did so: Her pretty face was dark with lust, her lush lips swollen from their kisses as her eyes raked down his body in evident appreciation, causing Ron to glow with pride that he could still elicit such a reaction from his wife—and feeling grateful that the demands of his job required that he stay fit.

He was on her again in an instant, helping her tug the t-shirt over her head and taking a moment to appreciate her curves: Her breasts were quite larger than they'd been, and he relished their heavy weight in his palms as he squeezed them gently through her bra, savoring her shuddering moan. When he helped her peel the undergarment from her body, he was mesmerized by how dark her nipples had become in contrast to the creamy skin surrounding them; Ron experienced a surge of raw lust at the sight, his cock giving a jolt as he bent down to take her peaks into his mouth, teasing them with his lips and tongue as his hands shoved her trousers and knickers down her hips.

Her fingers gripped roughly in his hair, encouraging him as she panted and squirmed beneath him, his mouth now trailing hot, wet, open-mouthed caresses down the curve of her full tits and over her swollen belly. He lingered there for a moment, marveling, as always, at the gentle movement of his child, which gave him pause—

"Are—are you sure it's okay?" he asked her, his prior eagerness forgotten. "The baby—"

"Yes," she said quickly, clearly making a concerted effort to focus on the conversation at hand. "It's perfectly safe."

He felt awkward suddenly as the next thought occurred to him, his erection dying: "She won't—you know—feel...it?"

Hermione laughed, her expression incredulous as she propped herself up on her elbows, meeting his gaze. "No," she said as she giggled. "No, Ron, that's—"

"Don't tell me I'm being ridiculous," he cut in defensively, feeling somewhat insulted that she was actually laughing at his apprehension. "It's a legitimate concern, Hermione."

"You're right—it is," she said hastily, the expression on her face now serious as she evidently realized that she'd offended him. "I'm sorry, Ron, really. Yes, your worries are justifiable, and I shouldn't have laughed, but I promise it's fine; Rose won't feel it, sweetheart." She then reached up one palm, caressing his scratchy jaw and chin, and he couldn't help but press his face into her touch, feeling placated and reassured by her words.

"All right...if you're sure."

"I am," she said firmly.

Slowly, a trademark lopsided grin cracked his face: "Wicked. In that case, where were we?"

She laughed again, but her laughter soon turned into moans of longing as Ron resumed his

exploration of her body with renewed vigor, sliding between her legs as he finished pulling her knickers and trousers from her ankles. Then he was planting kisses and gentle nips to her bare inner thighs, the smell from between her legs hitting him full in the face, causing a fresh surge of animalistic lust to overtake him; he was abruptly hard as a rock again, the tender head of his cock brushing against the sheets as he leaned down, licking slowly up the swollen lips of her slick-as-fuck pussy.

"Ron!" she gasped when the flat of his tongue swiped over her clit; his hands were bracing her plump arse, and he slid one up, delving two thick fingers into her juicy cunt, which had her mewling—

"Fuck," he hummed against her, beyond turned on as he began licking, sucking, and finger-fucking in earnest while one of her hands fisted in his hair, the other clutching her own tits, and he could tell by the noises that she was making that she was already close. Changing tactics, Ron pulled his juice-slickened fingers from her body, rapidly stroking her clit with them as he plunged his tongue inside her—and then her muscles were contracting powerfully around his tongue, Hermione's thighs tensing against his ears as her hips thrust upward—

"Ron! *Oh!* Ron! Yeesss...unngh....RON!"

After several moments, she became silent, her cries and pants subsiding even though her breathing was still somewhat labored as Ron withdrew from between her legs. "Amazing," she breathed, her head thrown limply across her pillow, her sweat-dampened curls a cascade on either side of her face. "Ron, you're amazing."

He smirked at that as he wiped his face on the back of his hand. It was what she always said, but he never tired of hearing it. "And you're fucking sexy when you come." And that was what *he* said every time.

She rolled her eyes and grinned back at him: "I imagine I look quite ridiculous," she returned, her voice still slightly shaky.

"You don't—trust me. Feeling any labor contractions yet?" he added, only partly joking.

"No," she murmured thoughtfully. "Maybe we should try actual sex now."

She wouldn't get any argument from Ron.

Without another word, Hermione rolled over and straddled him where he now sat propped against the headboard, clutching him to her almost desperately, and his cock strained longingly as her silky, dampened thigh brushed against it. She began kissing him while settling in his lap, her rotund belly brushing against his abs as he felt her reach between their bodies and grasp his dick in a firm grip—and without any further warning, she impaled herself on him, sinking all the way down to his bollocks—

Ron's eyes rolled back in his head at the feeling of her slick, velvety, constricting walls squeezing him, a sensation he knew he would never get used to; if they lived to see their hundredth wedding anniversary, every time would be like their first...

His arms wrapped around her silky, petite back, pulling her closer, and he forced his eyes open so he could look at her face: Her own eyes were squeezed tightly shut, her lovely head tilted back, and he couldn't tell if she was experiencing pleasure or pain. "'Ermione?" he grunted, his voice an unrecognizable rasp. "Is—is this okay?" His cock twitched inside her body, eager for some friction, but he needed to make sure she was okay...

"So good," she whispered in a strained voice, her eyes finally fluttering open. "Ron, you feel so good," she breathed, and then, quite abruptly, she began to move, her hips bouncing up and down over his as she gripped his shoulders determinedly; his hands slipped lower, landing on her hips while he began thrusting upward to match her rhythm.

Already, his climax was poised in his shaft, ready to spill into her, and he had to concentrate on not coming too soon, especially when she began moaning about how much she loved riding him; he watched her through his eyelashes, how fucking hot she looked, her tits jiggling wildly as he slammed her up and down over his cock, the feel of her slick skin as it rubbed against his; it was all too much to handle, and when Hermione started coming again, her nails digging into his shoulders while she began screaming his name, Ron couldn't stop himself from releasing as he felt her inner walls contracting tightly around his dick...

It was all over way sooner than he'd intended, but considering that she'd gotten two evidently mind-blowing orgasms out of the deal, and he'd gotten his rocks off good—hey, he was a bloke, after all, so of course he'd think about his own orgasm—he didn't suppose there was anything to complain about.

He was therefore fairly surprised when, after several minutes of recovery, Hermione initiated sex for a second time—and this time he took her from behind while they lay on their sides.

"You're a good shag," he murmured in contentment against the back of her neck afterward, his dick now limp and completely spent; their combined dampness soiled the sheets and their thighs, but neither moved to clean up the mess they'd made.

In response to his statement, Hermione reached a hand back and smacked his arse lazily, which earned a deep chuckle from him. "Thanks, so are you," she murmured as she rolled over to face him, her right thigh coming up to drape over his hip, and Ron reached out to touch her pregnant belly; Rose had evidently decided to take a nap.

"Y'know, half a decade ago that comment would've earned me a slap in the face, but now it gets me a slap on the arse instead. Interesting."

She smiled sleepily at that. "Times change," she murmured, but then she went quiet, a thoughtful expression on her face.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Snape," she replied simply.

His eyebrow shot to his hairline at that. "We get done shagging each others' brains out, and you tell me you're thinking about *Snape*?"

She rolled her eyes playfully and punched him in the shoulder as he chortled again. "You never told me if he accepted Harry's offer."

"Turned 'im down," Ron replied, thinking about the job offer Harry had given Snape after he'd been so helpful in hunting down Davies. Ron still didn't much like the former Death Eater, but he reckoned he *had* helped him get his wife and sister back—and he'd helped him regain his memories about what had, or hadn't, as the case had been, happened with McLean—and didn't ask for anything in return. "Even though it got leaked to the *Prophet* that he's still alive, 'cause apparently even Aurors can't keep their big mouths shut, Harry says he's not ready to rejoin Wizarding society. He's hiding out again."

Hermione's brow furrowed at that, but before she could comment, a loud rumbling sound from her

abdomen caught both of their attention.

"Bloody hell," Ron grumbled, sitting up in bed abruptly. "You must be starving," he added, his head whipping toward the alarm clock, which revealed that it was after eight o'clock. "I'll go warm up some of the meat pie that my mum brought over..."

"That sounds lovely," she said appreciatively.

oOo

Hermione was jolted awake by a painful cramping sensation in her abdomen; she knew it had been going on for quite a while because she'd been dreaming about the pain, but it had only just reached the level of intensity to awaken her. She was confused and somewhat disoriented as her eyes shot to the clock on the nightstand: The bright red letters revealed that it was not quite three o'clock in the morning, and Ron's deep snores filled the room.

When the cramp eased up, she sat up in bed and took a long drink from the glass of water at her bedside as she waited for the pain to resume, desiring to time what she could only assume were labor contractions... Of course, it could simply be false labor, but the intensity of the contraction she'd just felt was nothing like anything she'd experienced prior.

Not three minutes had passed when she was startled by a tapping from the window; just as she grabbed her wand, which she kept close at hand, she saw through the glass that it was only Harry and Ginny's tawny owl, Ava. Feeling unaccountably relieved, she pulled herself out of bed and walked to the window, quickly unlocking and un-warding it and letting in the owl. "Hello, Ava, what've you got for me?" she asked quietly as she untied an envelope from her leg.

Quickly opening the letter while the owl fluttered to the bureau, she recognized Harry's hasty scrawl:

Ron & Hermione –

Ginny went into labor. We're at St. Mungo's. Molly has James.

—Harry

Just as she finished reading the short but to-the-point message, Hermione doubled over in pain, gasping at the unexpected intensity of it.

"Hermione?" Ron asked groggily; she saw him sitting up in bed by the light of the moon. "Is everything all right?"

"Ron, I—I think I'm having the baby..."

Everything

"You are the light

To my soul.

You are my purpose,

You're everything."

oOo

"Just push through the contraction; it's almost over; you're doing great, sweetie."

"My. Fucking. Name. Isn't. *Sweetie*."

Hermione was in a state of severe agitation, which wasn't helped by the medi-witch's insistence on addressing her as if she were a child, as she bore down with all her strength, her body feeling like it was being ripped apart from the inside out despite the potions they'd given her to help dull the pain. Her sweaty palm gripped Ron's as he craned his neck, the intensity at which he peered at her vagina giving the impression that he was watching a particularly grim Quidditch match.

As Hermione glanced up at him, she saw his face suddenly light up like a child at Christmastime, an absurd grin cracking his features as he looked back at her and exclaimed, "I can see 'er head!—fuck, she's got a head full o'red hair—keep pushing, baby, she's almost there—"

"Ron," she gasped when the contraction had thankfully, mercifully subsided, and she was left panting from the exertion as she slouched against the mattress and reached for her husband.

He leaned in close, tenderly swiping her sweat-dampened hair from her forehead as he kissed her temple; she knew that she must look an absolute fright, and she'd unfortunately gone off on Molly when her mother-in-law had attempted to bring in a camera; of course, having delivered seven children herself, the older witch had been completely understanding, adding, to break the tension, that by the time the twins had come along that they had practically walked out, and she hadn't even broken a sweat.

"Yeah, love?"

"If I survive this," Hermione said slowly, looking right in those baby-blues of his, "I'm gonna murder you for doing this to meeee—ARGH!"

Another contraction had hit unexpectedly, impossibly stronger than any of the previous ones, and she didn't require to be urged to push by the Healer and med-witch, because she did so instinctively, bearing down as her husband continued to encourage her despite her rudeness toward him: "C'mon, love, just think—she'll be here soon, and it'll've been worth it—good job, 'Ermione, almost there..."

She collapsed against the pillows once more, panting in fatigue and exhaustion as he rubbed her arm, and Hermione had to restrain herself from telling him to shut the fuck up—a very un-Hermione-like sentiment, admittedly, but she wasn't feeling particularly Hermione-like at the moment: She'd never experienced anything like this, and there was nothing "spiritual" about it like those insane women in those absurd books claimed it could be.

Quite the contrary, this was nature at its most brutal and primal, and the injustice wasn't lost on her

that the only effort that the male of the species was required to put into the perpetuation of the human race was a few moments of fleeting orgasmic pleasure; the female, on the other hand, carried the life to term, her body serving as an incubator and often sustaining irreparable disfigurements in the process, and at the end of forty uncomfortable and/or painful weeks she was required to expel that life violently and excruciatingly from her body, and, occasionally, it resulted in her death.

No male could truly comprehend the experience, and yet many women chose to do it again, and again, so Hermione could only assume that the memory of the pain would recede to a pale shadow once she set her eyes on the fruit of her efforts: When she held her daughter in her arms, as Ron had said, it will have been worth it, even if, for the time-being, she couldn't recall the Cruciatus Curse as being as painful, even though she knew on a rational level that it must have been far worse...

At that moment in time, however, she felt like she would happily trade: It seemed as if she'd been at it for hours and hours, when, in fact, the "hard labor" portion had begun about an hour and a half previously.

When Molly had informed Hermione and Ron about two hours ago that Albus Severus Potter had been born healthy, robust, and with Harry's dark hair and green eyes, and that Ginny was recovering nicely, Hermione had been unable to bring herself to feel anything but envy. "Not to worry, love," Molly had told her soothingly. "Subsequent births are usually easier than firsts, but I imagine your sweet Rose'll be along soon enough."

"Hermione," Healer Randall said, breaking into her thoughts and looking harried but confident as she met her patient's eye from between her knees; Hermione's mother, across from Ron on Hermione's other side, squeezed her hand and smiled reassuringly. "I know you're exhausted," Randall continued once she'd caught her full attention, "but I want you to give it your absolute all with the next contraction, all right? Let's meet this baby of yours already."

Hermione nodded, biting her lower lip as she braced herself; as the next contraction built, the pain beginning as a dull cramp before blossoming impossibly, she took a deep, focusing breath, squeezing Ron's hand before bearing down harder than ever, a scream of exertion erupting from her lips while Ron, her mum, and Healer Randall encouraged her: "Almost there, almost there, keep pushing, Hermione, keep pushing—"

After an indeterminate amount of time, as Hermione continued to bear down, her vision blurring as the world seemed to tilt on its axis—

She felt something break free from her body; between her knees, she saw the Healer holding something purple, wriggling, and covered in blood and some sort of mucus-y substance that Hermione had read about, but the name somehow escaped her at that moment: "*My baby*," she sobbed, relief coursing through her body that it was finally, mercifully over and that her daughter with Ron, Rose Jean Weasley, had been born into this world.

It's over, it's over, Hermione thought wildly while Ron bellowed, his voice full of emotion, "You did it, Hermione! *Look!* It's our Rosie—she's so beautiful...like her mum..."

As their baby's thin, high-pitched wail pierced the air, Healer Randall handed a pair of scissors to Ron, who, red-faced and looking more giddy with emotion than Hermione had ever seen him, cut the umbilical cord with shaking hands. "Congratulations, sweetheart, you're a mother now!" Rosalynn Granger gushed with tears in her eyes, kissing her daughter. "And *you*," she added as she hugged her son-in-law, planting sloppy, joyful kisses to both of his cheeks, "I know you'll be a great father, Ron. You've always taken good care of Hermione, and I couldn't approve more of her choice."

Ron blushed and sputtered, clearly at a loss for words, but he was spared having to respond when Rosalynn seemed to forget about him entirely as she beamed in delight at her tiny granddaughter, who was being whisked away by a medi-witch to the other side of the room in order to be cleaned up.

As another medi-witch went to work on Hermione, cleaning her up with a wave of her wand, disposing of the afterbirth, and healing the tear between her legs, her mother returned to her side, stroking her face and whispering how proud she was. Hermione grinned up at her weakly, her exhaustion catching up with her, but she didn't care about that—all she wanted was to hold her daughter.

Leaning over her other side, Ron kissed his wife gently but quickly—"You did fucking brilliantly, love, she's so perfect!"—before wandering back to the other side of the room to coo at his daughter as he watched them clean her up. The medi-witch, Miranda, was waving her wand over the infant, and Ron called back to Hermione, "She's got all o'her fingers and toes! She's fucking perfect, Hermione! I think she looks like you...but she might have my dad's nose—at least she doesn't have mine!"

Molly, who'd reentered the room only minutes before after checking on Ginny and Albus, was weeping openly, too overcome to even scold her youngest son on his foul language as she pulled him into a ferocious hug: "*Oh, Ronnie, I'm so proud of you!* My babies both had babies—at practically the same time!" She then wheeled around and rushed to Hermione's bedside, leaning over and hugging her daughter-in-law just as fiercely as she'd hugged her son.

"You've given me a beautiful granddaughter, Hermione," Molly said sincerely, her face wet with her tears. "I know I told you this on your wedding day, but it's as true now as it was then: This family is so blessed that you and Ron found each other; I'd hoped since that first summer you ever visited us at the Burrow that...well, anyway, you've always been like a daughter to me, and I couldn't be more pleased to have you as an official part of this family, and I know Arthur feels the same way."

Before Hermione could work up an appropriate response, Molly and Rosalynn were hugging, the two women gushing over how they shared the most beautiful granddaughter in the world. "Oh, I simply must go and tell the others!" Molly exclaimed suddenly, hastily pulling away from Hermione's mum and rushing from the room.

Moments later, Ron carried their now swaddled and cleaned newborn to Hermione, speaking softly to Rose the entire time, and laid their daughter in her eager arms. "Told you she was worth it," he whispered, tears shining in his eyes, and as they looked down at their precious little angel with her tuft of red hair and her squashed-looking face, Hermione didn't have the slightest inclination to argue. As Ron had said, she was perfect. She was beautiful. She was everything.

Hermione knew now without a doubt that she would experience the agony of childbirth a million times over for the tiny life currently nestled, already slumbering, in her mother's comforting arms. *Mother*. It was a name that had been difficult for her to imagine applying to herself, but it now came as easily as breathing: She was Mother. "I know, precious one, that must've been as exhausting for you as it was for me," she whispered, touching a forefinger to her tiny daughter's cheek and marveling at how silky-soft she was.

Ron's arms tightened around them both, and she looked up adoringly at her husband as he gazed down at his wife and newborn daughter, wonder and unadulterated love in his eyes. "Look what you did, Daddy," Hermione whispered, tears gleaming in her own eyes.

"This is my family," Ron said, as if unable to quite believe his luck, the tears finally spilling over

his cheeks.

Flash.

Molly had snuck back in with her camera and caught the moment on film.

oOo

"Would you tell me,

How could it be

Any better than this?"

—The above quote and the previous one are from the song "Everything" by Lifehouse.

Community For Underfed Nordic Tarantulas

Harry and Ginny's den looked like a gift shop had exploded, what with the multiple varieties of flowers and potted plants—including some Dirigible Plums "to keep away the nargles" from Luna and her husband, Rolf, always good value there—crammed onto every available surface, and a wide assortment of still-wrapped parcels shoved into corners, all in an overwhelming cascade of pale blue, with the occasional spattering of Gryffindor scarlet.

Of course, Ron mused, their own place hadn't looked much different before he'd gotten fed up with the clutter and had taken care of it: Ever since the news of the double-birth of the Wizarding world's most celebrated heroes' offspring had made the front page of the *Daily Prophet*—and, Ron knew, in other countries' publication equivalents, since Charlie had reported that it was big news even in Romania—the owls bearing gifts and well-wishes from the Magical population hadn't stopped coming, despite the fact that the two couples had made public statements proclaiming that donations should be made to various charities in lieu of sending gifts.

Still, people didn't listen; seemed like everyone and their owl was eager for the chance to congratulate those most directly responsible for the downfall of Voldemort on their bundles of joy.

"I'm thinking about just Vanishing the lot of it," Ginny said with an irritated sigh, stepping over a stack of presents piled on the bottom stair, as she came back down from putting James to bed. "Imagine the headlines if Harry Potter is crushed to death in his own home: Death by presents, after all he survived." Pushing her hair out of her face with a loud exhale, she sat down on the sofa next to her husband, who was holding Rosie and making goofy faces at the baby; Ginny reached a finger toward her brother's newborn daughter, whose grasp closed automatically around her aunt's pale digit.

Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, little James, and the newborns had just come back inside after having supper on the back patio: They'd enjoyed the late evening spring air and speaking of their family, Quidditch (Hermione alone had remained quiet throughout that particular subject), and other light topics while James had zoomed around the garden on his toy broomstick; they'd only decided to retire after the toddler had had a violent meltdown and the babies had become a bit fussy.

"That's what I did," Ron said about Vanishing the mess as he held Al against his shoulder, gently patting his nephew's back. Lowering his voice, he added, "But don't tell Hermione—she wanted me to send it all to Favors for Underfed Cornish Krakens, or some rubbish. I told 'er she's mental if she thinks I'm donating to an organization called 'fuck.' I mean, how barmy is that?"

"Actually, it's the Community for Underfed Nordic Tarantulas," corrected Hermione with mock-consternation, who'd just slipped back into the room after a trip to the loo, sitting down primly on the loveseat next to her husband. "Honestly, Ron, don't be so ridiculous."

"Honestly, Hermione," he teased, thoroughly enjoying himself, "it's not like 'cunt' is a better name. Well, okay, actually that's bloody brilliant..."

She managed to not smile for all of about two seconds before bursting into laughter, and the others joined in shortly: "Tell me that's not really the name," Harry finally said, removing his glasses so he could wipe the tears of hilarity from his eyes.

"Don't worry, I made that up for Ron's benefit," Hermione assured him, a mischievous glint in her eye as she closed one hand affectionately over her husband's knee. "You know how he loves acronyms."

"And *that's* one of the many reasons I love this woman, though 'spew' is still my favorite," Ron said, eyeing his wife fondly. "Hermione, you know it turns me on when you make up dirty acronyms—"

"Alllll right, then," Harry said loudly, cutting him off. "If you don't shut it, I'm gonna have to tell you about how the other night I was wearing nothing but my barbecuing apron, and Ginny—"

"Oi!" exclaimed Ron, appalled by the image in his head and feeling the urge to Oblivate himself. "I so don't need to hear this. I mean, I know she's your wife and all, mate, but that's still my baby sister you're talkin' about."

"Baby sister? I'm not that much younger than you, you prat."

"That's beside the point."

"Would anyone care to watch a film?" Ginny suggested, changing the subject abruptly. "Harry rented a comedy that we haven't watched yet."

"Sounds lovely," Hermione replied while Ron asked, "Comedy? That means no guns or explosions, right?"

"Very good, Ron," Ginny said, rolling her eyes at her brother. "You *are* capable of learning, contrary to popular belief."

"Shove a knob in it, Gin."

"I hardly think that's an appropriate way to speak to your *innocent baby sister*."

"Hey, I never said anything about you being *innocent*, 'cause we all know that's not the case—"

"All right, kids, don't make me send you to your rooms," Harry interrupted the cheerfully bantering siblings. As he carefully stood, clutching his now-sleeping niece to his chest before gently depositing her into Hermione's arms and moving to fire up the television and DVD player, Ginny stuck her tongue out at Ron behind her husband's back.

"What's the name of the film?" Ron asked, patting Albus soothingly, who'd started to fuss against his uncle's shoulder.

"*Fun with Dick and Jane*," Harry answered as Ginny moved to relieve her brother of the fussy baby. "It's American; it's got that funny bloke, Jim Carey?"

"Never heard of 'im, but it sounds like a porno," Ron snorted, earning a sharp smack to the side of the head from Hermione while Harry and Ginny sniggered.

As they settled in to watch the movie, Ron wrapped his arm around his wife's shoulders, his eyes captivated for about the millionth time by the tiny life in her arms: It had been three weeks since his daughter had been born, and, despite the frequent bouts of non-stop crying, the constant poopie nappies, the late-night feedings—which Ron tried to help with as much as he could, even though there wasn't too much he could do in that department since he was lacking the necessary equipment—it was still all so new and exciting, and oftentimes he found himself entranced by his beautiful little daughter and amazed by the fact that he, Ron Weasley, was actually a *father*. What was more, Hermione, the most amazing woman in the world, was the mother of his child. How did he get so lucky, anyway?

By the time the film had ended—Ron had found it quite amusing—Hermione, their daughter still

slumbering away in her arms, was fast asleep on his shoulder, her mouth slightly open; on the sofa, Ginny was also sound asleep, snoring lightly, while Harry had moved to the armchair, having taken Al up to his crib about an hour ago.

"Hermione," Ron said softly, nudging his wife gently and smiling as she snorted noisily before jerking awake:

"Wha—what is it?" she slurred immediately, blinking her eyes blearily as she sat up and looked at Ron, her hair even bushier-looking than usual.

"Everything's all right—I just think we might wanna move this party home," he said, gesturing at Ginny and Harry, the latter of whom was nodding off in his chair.

"Oh, right, okay then."

As Ron stood and gently plied his daughter from Hermione's arms, Harry's eyes drifted open and he offered a half-hearted wave. "Night, guys," he whispered, clearly mindful of his slumbering wife. "Thanks for coming over."

"Thank you for having us, Harry, we had a lovely time," Hermione replied warmly as she gathered up their things and slid her feet into her sandals. "We'll see you tomorrow at the Burrow."

"Sure thing," he whispered, smiling lazily. "Oh, and we'll do it at your place next time, since I don't fancy the clean-up. See you, Ron."

"G'night, mate."

It was a clear, cloudless night with just the slightest breeze stirring the leaves of the nearby shrubs as Ron carried Rose out to the car, casting several protective enchantments around her car seat once her tiny body was secured beneath the restraints. "Still don't know why we can't just Floo with her," he commented as he shut the backseat door and opened the driver-side one for Hermione. "My brothers and their wives do it all the time with their kids..."

"That's not exactly a smooth way to travel," Hermione admonished as she climbed behind the wheel, "and she's only three weeks old, Ron—that would scare her, or make her sick; as would Side-Along Apparition and Portkeys—and don't even think about mentioning brooms," she added with a shudder. "What *I* don't understand is why you haven't passed your driving test yet."

"Bloody hell, when've I had time, Hermione?" he grumbled as he slid into the passenger seat and buckled himself in before she had the chance to remind him. "Between having to go back to work and staying up all night with the baby—"

"You can't possibly be serious," she interrupted as she backed the car out of the driveway.

"*I'm* the one who's up all night with the baby while you usually just sleep—"

"Hey, it's not my bloody fault I don't always wake up. You're a lighter sleeper than me, and, besides, Merlin's bollocks, Hermione—"

"Watch your language in front of the baby!" she hissed in exasperation.

Ron stared at her profile, torn between amusement and an exasperation of his own. "As you just pointed out, she's three weeks old, she doesn't know the difference—"

"Yes, well, if you don't break the habit now, 'bollocks' will end up being her first word, but I suppose that would amuse you, wouldn't it?" He couldn't stop himself from bursting into laughter

at the thought of his toddler running around saying, "Bollocks! Bollocks! Bollocks!" while Hermione rolled her eyes in a manner that said, "See? I rest my case."

"Anyway," he said, forcing the amusement out of his voice, "like I was saying before I got sidetracked, there's not much I can do to help you out at night, 'cause it's not like I have tits, Hermione."

"That's arguable," she said with a humph, which had him chuckling.

oOo

They bickered lightly all the way home, and by the time they pulled into their own driveway, Hermione was feeling partly annoyed, partly amused, and partly turned on. She wasn't quite sure why, but all it took was a good row to get her going; not a *serious* one, mind you, but one of their silly arguments where they couldn't agree over the slightest thing was enough to get her heart pumping and her blood churning through her veins.

Unfortunately, however, her plans to "make up" with Ron by shagging him senseless were thwarted by their now wide-awake daughter, who was very vocal concerning her desire for one of her multiple late-night snacks.

Hermione dropped the bag by the front door with a resigned sigh and kicked off her shoes. By the time she'd changed into soft flannel pajamas and settled into the glider chair in the nursery, Ron had changed Rosie into a clean nappie and one of Molly's hand-knitted outfits, ready to hand the baby over to her.

She winced slightly as she placed her daughter to her breast—it was still a bit painful, but completely worth it—as Ron went downstairs to make tea. Humming softly while she began to rock, she watched on fondly as her baby's eyelids fluttered, her tiny hands settling on either side of Hermione's areola as Rose took of the nourishment that her mother had to offer.

It took over half an hour before Rose was sufficiently fed, burped, and asleep in her crib, due to the fact that Hermione had to wake her several times in order to get her to finish her meal; as it was, she would be doing it all over again in a few short hours, so she wanted to make sure her daughter's belly was full in the meantime.

By the time she crept downstairs, it was to find Ron snoring in his recliner, the telly tuned to a random channel. Making her way to the kitchen, she found the tea cold, so she reheated it with her wand before pouring herself a cup. She took a slow sip, staring out the window over the kitchen sink and studying the moon in the clear, obsidian sky; it wasn't quite full, as there seemed to be just the slightest sliver missing.

Abruptly, a pair of hands slid around her waist, and a yelp of surprise escaped her lips before she could stifle it, and she just managed to avoid sloshing tea down her front.

"Sorry, didn't mean to frighten you, love," Ron apologized as he squeezed her around the middle and planted a kiss behind her ear.

"That's all right," she replied with a laugh, placing her teacup on the counter and turning in his arms so as to hold him; wordlessly, they held each other tightly for several moments, silently conveying their love for one another, but in the next moment Ron leaned down and kissed her, and she couldn't help but moan when Ron's tongue found hers; her hands slipped below his waist and gripped his arse; she felt him hardening against her belly through their clothing, which further excited her—

"Bloody hell," Ron said with a gasp, his lips breaking away from hers.

"I know," she whispered urgently, tightening her hold on him—

"No, I mean, *look*."

Confused and slightly lightheaded, she looked up to see that he was staring over her head and out the kitchen window: Turning in his arms, she saw that there was a lone, shadowy figure standing across the street who hadn't been there moments before, and though he was silhouetted in the moonlight, his features indistinct, he appeared to be gazing toward their house.

At first Hermione experienced a surge of terror as she automatically thought of Davies, but in the next moment she realized that there was something familiar about his stance...

"What the bloody hell does he want?" Ron asked, apparently coming to the same realization that she had, but there was no heat behind his words; he was merely curious.

"I'll go and see," she said, kissing him quickly. "I'll be right back."

Pulling on Ron's jumper that was draped over the back of the couch before stepping into her trainers, she slipped quietly out the front door and walked up the drive.

Severus Snape met her halfway, stopping several feet in front of her, and she hugged herself against the cool night breeze, feeling intimidated as usual by his presence, despite their encounters over the last several months.

"Harry told me you'd left the country," she finally said after several awkward moments in which he didn't say anything.

"I had."

"So what brings you back?" she asked when he offered no additional explanation.

"I read about your delivery," he replied, his dark eyes flashing momentarily toward her belly, as if to confirm for himself that she was no longer pregnant. "And that of Potter's wife."

She nodded before responding, "If that's your way of saying 'congratulations,' then I thank you. Rose and I are doing quite well."

The corners of his lips quirked up ever-so-slightly, yet his face remained unreadable: "There's something I was curious about."

"Such as?"

"Potter's son..." he said slowly.

"Yes, your namesake."

While his expression continued to remain indecipherable, an emotion that she couldn't quite pinpoint briefly crossed his features. "Does he have—?"

"Lily's eyes? Yes. Yes, he does." She watched as he swallowed hard, unable to hide the most acute of his emotions elicited by the knowledge that there was a child in this world that shared his name and Lily Evans's eyes. "You know, you could go and see him, Harry wouldn't mind—"

"Thank you, Miss Granger," he said quickly, cutting her off, "but that won't be necessary. I was simply... curious."

Hermione nodded as another awkward silence descended.

"I'll be going now," he finally said. "It's late, and if I compromise your time any longer, your famous Auror husband may just become jealous."

"Severus," she said as he turned to go, his black cloak billowing behind him, "thank you. That day...thank you for helping."

Turning back to face her, he nodded once, and Hermione's first instinct was to hug him, but before she had the chance he said, "You're welcome," and Disapparated.

Epilogue: An Act of Fate

Epilogue: An Act of Fate

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She blinked at the pink piece of plastic that she held up in front of her face, feeling somewhat dazed and in utter denial: This couldn't be right. *No, no, no*—she'd just been promoted; the MLE was cracking down on domestic violence, due to Hermione's influence in the department, and she simply couldn't afford to take time off of work. Besides, this simply couldn't be right: After all, she and Ron had been having sex since the summer following the war, and, in all those years, the Contraceptive Potion had never failed them; they hadn't once gotten pregnant while protected.

Therefore, this had to be some sort of malfunction of the Muggle pregnancy test rather than a failure of her birth control. This afternoon, she decided, she would make a trip to the Apothecary and purchase the potion.

As Hermione began to dress for the day, however, she thought about the nausea she had been experiencing as of late, her aching breasts, and, not to mention, her late period: If she was being honest with herself, she would admit that she had known it all along. She wouldn't have stopped off at the local drugstore after work yesterday if she hadn't thought she might be.

Once dressed, she stepped into the hall and wandered to Rosie's open door: The Fairyland mural that Luna had painted for her first birthday sparkled and glimmered over the crib, realistic-looking fairies gliding over pink clouds and disappearing behind trees in a majestic forest while a pearlescent castle guarded over the scene.

It really was quite a spectacular piece of art, a children's fantasy come to life, and Rose adored it.

With a sigh, Hermione's eyes landed on the glider chair, eliciting memories of nursing her daughter and the smell of her warm skin, a sweet scent that seemed to only belong to young babies. She didn't realize until that exact moment how much she missed those newborn days, when everything was still so fresh and a bit surreal.

Rose had been walking for a couple of months now; her speech was still mostly gibberish, but she could say "Da-da," "Ma-ma," and a couple of other choice words—thanks to Ron. There was no turning back the clock: Their daughter would move forever forward in time, growing, learning, flourishing, changing every day—and Hermione would have it no other way, of course, as that was the natural way of things—but there was a part of her that mourned the idea that her baby soon would no longer be a baby, and she never would be again.

As her hands drifted to her belly she smiled gently, contemplating the new life that she and Ron had placed there by pure accident; maybe, she considered, it hadn't really been an accident at all, but an act of fate—such as meeting Ron and Harry on the Hogwarts Express all those years ago. At that instant, she decided that perhaps the department could do without her for a few months, after all. Just as when she'd been pregnant with Rose, she could work through much of her pregnancy this time around as well and take the necessary weeks off afterward.

She could make this work—not that she had a choice in the matter, mind you: Just knowing that she carried a piece of Ron in her body, created in an act of passion and love, was enough to make her love this new baby already.

When she'd descended the stairs, it was to find Ron and Rose in the kitchen: Her daughter, her

bright red, curly hair a frizzy mess on top of her head, laughed giddily from her highchair at her father, who currently had straws shoved up his nose and was making goofy noises for the toddler's entertainment.

"Ma-ma!" Rose exclaimed in greeting, catching sight of her mother and waving one chubby fist in her direction, her brown eyes gleaming and her cheeks all rosy and just begging to be pinched.

"Hermione," Ron said in a false-innocent voice as he turned to face his wife, the straws still shoved deeply up his nostrils. "Maybe you could help me out, I was just asking Rosie-Posey if I have anything in my nose..." As he spoke, one of the straws plummeted from his nose and landed in his porridge, which had Rose giggling madly while Hermione grimaced, shaking her head in barely-concealed amusement.

"Ron, that's disgusting," she chastised as she moved toward them, sitting in the seat closest to Rose in order to greet her daughter, who had managed to mash her bananas and smear them all over her front, her face, and even in her hair. "You eat like Daddy, yes you do," she said in a sing-song voice as she picked mushy chunks from the toddler's ginger locks.

"If you're saying that I eat like a toddler, then I resent that," Ron said in a tone of voice that wasn't very convincing.

"Of course not, sweetheart," Hermione retorted as she leaned in to kiss him—thankfully, he'd removed the other straw and Vanished them both. "I was implying that our baby eats like a grown man. So I was thinking," she continued before he could work up a retort, "that maybe it's time to clean out the extra room and move your stuff to the garage." Since they'd bought their home shortly before their wedding, the third upstairs bedroom had been used to store his exercise equipment and all of his Chudley Cannon paraphernalia that Hermione had banned from the rest of the house.

"Why?" he asked, drawing out the word as he gave her a puzzled look.

Maintaining as casual a tone as she could, she looked him straight in the eye and said, "Well, I was thinking we might want it for the new baby, since we wouldn't want Rose and him or her disturbing each other at night."

Ron had been in the process of taking a sip of pumpkin juice, but at her words he choked on it, coughing and sputtering as tears rose in his eyes and Hermione patted him on the back. "Wait—what—you're—*really*?"

"Really," she confirmed, unable to stop the grin from splitting her own face in reaction to Ron, whose expression resembled the time she'd broken the news to him about Rose, now two years before. She laughed as he let out a yelp of joy and pulled her to her feet, embracing her tightly and just barely avoiding upending the table.

"So one of my little swimmers got through in spite o'the potion, huh?" he said roguishly once he'd set her back on her feet. "Must've been meant to be. You hear that, Rosie? You're gonna be a big sister!"

"Charming, Ron, but yes," Hermione said with a laugh, his giddiness contagious, but before either could say another word, there was a flash of light from the living room, and the couple looked up in time to see Harry stepping out of the fireplace, his cheeks flushed, his hair even messier than usual.

"Guys, I'm glad I caught you before you left, 'cause I wanted to tell you first," he said with an air of having a grand announcement to make, his expression oddly similar to Ron's: "Ginny and I are

having another baby!"

Hermione and Ron exchanged a look of astonishment, and what was going through her husband's mind was as plain as day: *Here we go again.*

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