

## Love By Another Name

### CHAPTER 1

So, I've always really wanted to write a fic like this - this sort of 'time between' because I feel like there's so much room for things to happen and to be explored about the characters that I haven't had a chance to flesh out before. I don't want to give the whole plot of the story away but I reckon it's important to know up front that The Trio will be going to Hogwarts for their 7th year in this universe. HOWEVER, because this story is still going to have a sort of 'DH' feel to it and I'm not ignoring the fact that they will have to eventually search for Horcruxes, this story isn't going to be about The Trio's whole seventh year at Hogwarts. I'm bad with starter explanations so I hope things are clear as the story unfolds. Anyway, enough babble! To sum up: AU cake with DH sprinkles. ;) Oh, most important to know: this story will be told from both Ron and Hermione's pov, (YAY!) but I don't have any sort of system as to who goes when. Though I think Hermione may have more chapters by the end.

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School was finally out for the summer, and Ron was finally back at home. Usually, this gave him a sense of peace and curiosity for what the holiday would bring, however, that wasn't the case this time around. It had been such a long day and an even longer night, so in no way would he consider what was happening now a 'holiday'. As it stood, Harry was burdened with more secrets, Bill was recovering from a werewolf attack, and Albus Dumbledore was dead. Dumbledore, the most powerful and respectable wizard alive, was no long amongst the living.

He rubbed his eyes as the funeral played over in his mind. Hogwarts had been dreary and silent afterward. People had packed their trunks, leaving for home without a word; Harry included. Ron glanced at his best mate's empty cot. Harry would arrive in only a few days. He could never tell Harry, but he deeply hurt for him. Ron wanted to do more. Except, there was nothing for him to do. He was stuck in his room with a million ideas but no way to put them into action. All he could do now was wish with all his heart that Harry was doing okay at the Dursleys.

There was a knock on the door. With a minor frown, Ron tried to deduce who it was. It was awfully late. He hoped that it wasn't his parents wanting to talk again about him not being afraid to let out his feelings, or Ginny wanting Ron to tell her what he knew about Harry's state. Ron already felt like he had done enough talking in one day to last a whole month. He didn't really want to see anyone right now. Well!almost anyone. "Yes?" he breathed. His throat was a little scratchy because he had been up for so long.

The door opened, revealing the one person Ron didn't mind seeing. "Did I wake you?" Hermione asked.

Ron sat up straighter. In an instant, all of his attention focused on her, as if she was holding him under some spell. "No,

not at all. Come in." She slowly walked over to him, sitting on the edge of his bed. He wanted her to be closer to him. Ever since parting from Hermione after the funeral, Ron had felt a bit off, but already he could feel solace return to him. Hermione simply had that effect on Ron; no matter how mental she made him at times or how hard he tried to discount the pleasant sensation.

Ron tapped his fingertips together. It was far too quiet for him; he had to say something. "Um, you don't have to sit all the way over there." He moved his pillows down by their feet so she could scoot up and sit closer to him against his headboard.

"Thank you." Hermione put her back against the wall, stretching out her legs. She ran her finger across her tensed brow, giving Ron an opportunity to take Hermione's presence in: her hair was down and messy, she was dressed in only a t-shirt and cotton shorts, and she looked completely knackered. Her appearance was vastly different from her usual neat, attentive demeanor. Hermione seemed broken now; she had all day. It did Ron's head in, and he wanted to fix her. She stopped tending to her brow, turning to him. "I couldn't sleep, and I saw your light on. I just figured I'd..." She trailed off.

Ron mentally shook off the hold that he was under. "You don't have to explain. I haven't been able to sleep at all. Is Ginny asleep?"

"Yes. That's why I left. I kept tossing and turning; I didn't want to wake her. Like I said, I saw your light," Hermione said. Ron nodded, peeking down at his holey pajamas. Ginny's room was on the second floor. His was on the fifth. There was no way that Hermione had seen the light from under his door. She had gotten up and walked to his room. He had been her destination. Ron didn't know how to respond, but he never did in situations like this. During his stay in the hospital wing he'd been her destination as well. According to Harry, she'd spent all her free time by his side. It touched Ron's heart deeply that Hermione sought after him and even wanted to be around him while he lay unconscious, but he didn't know how to express those feelings to her.

Ron pulled at the string around the hole, making it bigger. He wasn't unconscious now so he knew that he had to say something. He'd gotten so much better last term at making her smile " on his best day, he could even come up with something really clever to make her laugh " but he was far too drained now. Anything he said would probably just sound stupid.

Ron heard her sniff, so he moved his eyes to her. Hermione was staring at her hands as her lip quivered. "I just can't believe he's gone." Her watery brown eyes locked on his. "Ron, Dumbledore is dead."

It no longer mattered if he came off as a tit. Ron repositioned his body, completely facing her. "I don't think you're supposed to believe it. At least not right away. I reckon it'll take a lot of time to accept Dumbledore's murder." Hermione gawked at him in horror. Her face glowed more and more pink while her eyes swelled

with tears. It was as if an overpowering punch struck him in the chest. Hermione was never supposed to be so upset about anything. She didn't deserve it. "I know that probably sounds horrible," Ron swiftly added, "but it's still new. It's okay to feel whatever it is that you feel. Let yourself take it in. We all need time." He touched her upper arm for a moment.

Something in the gesture calmed Hermione down a little. She wiped her eyes, sniffing again. "You're right. So much has happened. I guess it's really getting to me right now. There's just so much, between Dumbledore and Bill—"

"Bill's fine," Ron said sharply. There was no way that he would allow Hermione to link Dumbledore's death to Bill's current state. His oldest brother was going to recover. Bill was going to get married. He was going to live his life. No one else would die, especially not a family member.

Hermione must've sensed the urgency in his voice because she hastily shook her head. "Of course he is, Ron. I didn't mean to imply otherwise. I'm rather boggled at the moment and not really thinking clearly. I'm sorry."

"It's all right. Sorry for that," he said, feeling like a prick. "You can tell me what's going on and why you're feeling so boggled."

"It's okay," she said. "I don't want to trouble you. I'll take care of myself."

Ron rolled his eyes. The woman was extraordinarily stubborn and independent. "Hermione, I know that I'm not the friend that usually has the right things to say, but we can talk. I want you to tell me what's going on. It's why I'm here—and probably why you walked three flights of stairs in the middle of the night." It was a long shot, but he hoped that she would listen. His words were genuine.

Hermione cracked her first grin since leaving Hogwarts. It opened up her face brilliantly. "You're rather clever, Ronald."

"I have my moments," he said casually. "No need for the tone of surprise. Now, go on." He, Hermione, and Harry had barely been able to speak to one another as they packed and returned to their homes. Ron and Hermione's communication hadn't improved either, considering she'd locked herself up in Ginny's room for most of the night. This was the first time they had truly spoken in hours.

Hermione pressed her lips tightly together, clasping her hands. Ron knew the gesture well. She was trying to formulate every word in her mind before she spoke. "So," she started, "on top of dealing with Dumbledore, I'm worried about Harry. I mean I'm really concerned about him. He must be feeling extremely overwhelmed because there's so much to take in. I barely got a word in before he went back to the Dursleys'."

Ron understood what she felt. He too wondered how Harry would handle everything. Harry was easily the bravest person Ron knew, but dealing with the death of Dumbledore so soon after accepting Sirius' death had to take a toll on him. Nonetheless, Ron couldn't let his worries be known to Hermione. He had to stay strong for her. "It's a lot for him to take in, but you know Harry. If there was one person in the whole world who would be fit to deal with this, then it's him. Besides, he's not alone. He'll be here in a few days and then we'll work it out together."

Hermione didn't seem relieved. "Well, you and Harry will work it out. I have to go home tomorrow and I won't be back right away."

Ron's heart skipped a beat in both surprise and disappointment. Hermione generally went back to her house for only a week or so, however, he hadn't expected her to leave so soon this time. Ron needed her far too much. He always needed her, yet there was a heightened sensitivity to the necessity now. He told himself that it was because of everything going on with Dumbledore and Harry, but he knew that it wasn't true. While he'd been with Lavender, Ron had found himself needing Hermione more, and for reasons beyond needing help studying or because she was his friend. He found himself needing to see Hermione's face, to hear the way she said his name in the soft yet bossy tone that only she could create, and he needed to be around her so he could feel a bit more alive. Ron merely chose to ignore these real reasons. "O-ohâ€¦I didn't know that you were going back already."

"Neither did I." There wasn't even a hint of excitement in Hermione's voice. She appeared to be as gutted about it as he was. While it did make him feel better, it also confused him. Hermione appeared as if she wanted to stay at his house instead but she wasn't telling him why. It was just like when Ron had broken up with Lavender; Hermione had seemed excited, causing him to believe that maybe she at least fancied him, but she never said anything. Now that he thought about it, she'd never really made it clear why dating Lavender had bothered her so much either. It seemed to be a pattern of hers: she hadn't given him a reason then and it didn't appear as if she'd give him one now.

Ron moved closer to her so that his knee touched the side of her thigh. Even through the material of his pajamas, he could feel her skin. Ron allowed himself a brief moment to wonder if Hermione could feel the same thing before shaking off the thought. He had to stay focused on her emotions now - not just her figure, which was progressively making his mouth water. "Is something going on?" he asked.

She exhaled deeply. "A lot is going on. You see, right after the funeral, I had a discussion with Kingsley and Professor McGonagall. I think you know what about."

"I overheard Lupin and Kingsley talking about it," Ron said. "They want you to relocate your parents, yeah?"

"Not just relocate them, Ron," she snapped. "They want me to clean their memories. They want my parents to be on a new

continent, with new jobs, new goals, and a new everything as if they never had this lifeâ€with their daughter."

Ron was taken aback. He knew things were bad but not bad enough to where the Grangers had to go into complete reassignment. He thought about what had happened to Lockhart's memory. The idea of Hermione's parents not recognizing her made him feel sick. "Why does it need to be something so drastic?"

"Because Death Eaters know that Harry and I are friends. Because everyone knows that I'm a Muggle-born." Hermione hugged her stomach, letting out a shaky breath. "My parents aren't safe. They could be used as ransom so I'll give up Harry. Do I really need to go on?"

Ron felt like an arsehole. His plan to make Hermione feel better was only making her feel worse. "I'm sorry," he said. "Would it be forever?"

"No, thankfully," Hermione said, putting a hand to her chest. "The spell they want me to use can be reversed but only by the person who cast it."

He didn't know what to say. She looked so weighed down. "Well, I don't know how this feels for you, but I reckon it's for the best. Kingsley and McGonagall are in the Order, so they know what they're talking about. If this will keep them out of harm, then it has to be done."

"I know. I'm not disagreeing with them. It's a well-groomed arrangement and the best way to ensure their safety." Hermione's voice was firm but he could easily tell that she wasn't confident about the plan. "That's why I'm going home tomorrow. I'm going to tell them that I think we should take a holiday to Australia like they've always wanted to do." Her small smile faded before it ever got a chance to brighten up her face. "Then, I'm just going to spend every moment with them for as long as I can."

"That doesn't sound so bad," he said.

"I guess not," she said in a nasally tone. "I'm just scared. I fear for them, Ron. I'm so terrified that something is going to happen to my parents. I'll never forgive myself if it does." Hermione started to cry again as heavy anxiety fell over Ron. He would never get used to hearing and seeing Hermione cry; it was just too bloody awful. He had to do something.

Ron put a hand on her shoulder. "Oi, nothing's going to happen to them."

"Something could," she said. "It's not like they can defend themselves against magic. What if someone finds them and hurts them and-"

Ron put his hands on either side of her shoulders, squeezing firmly. "Stop it. Hermione, nothing is going to happen to your parents. They're going to be safe. Nothing and no one will get to them, I promise."

She shook her head. "You can't promise something like that."

"Yes, I can," he said, moving hair out of her face, caressing her damp cheek. "Look at me." Hermione moved her eyes to meet his gaze, letting him see her exhaustion and uncertainty. It wasn't who she was; Ron hated it. "Hermione, I promise that your parents are going to be okay. I wouldn't promise it if I didn't mean it. I'm not going to let anything happen to them. I'm also not going to let anything happen to you. If I have to apparate to Australia and take a spell for them, then I'll bloody do it."

"Oh, Ronâ€¦"

"I mean it. I'll take a curse right in the bollocks," he said with a wink. He ran his thumb over her cheek to erase her tears. Her skin was soft; he liked touching it.

Hermione grinned faintly. "That's rudeâ€¦but I hope it doesn't have to come to that. Thank you though. I trust you."

"Wicked. I'm glad that you've finally decided to agree with me on something," he teased.

"Just this once. I won't make a habit of it," she cheeked. Ron smirked, taking his hand off her shoulder. He left the other on her face. Ron just couldn't stop touching her cheek and brushing his knuckles against her hair; it felt too good. Hermione shivered against his touch. Her eyelids drooped a little. "You're so gentle."

Ron hadn't expected her to speak and, the moment she did, it reached inside of him. He didn't know what to take it as. It had been such an emotionally demanding day, but somehow Hermione was re-energizing him. They were sitting so close and they were alone. Everything was just more than usual. "How else would I be?" he asked. "I'd never hurt you." He tucked hair behind her ear, pulling on her earlobe. Ron didn't know why he had done it, but he was glad that he did.

Hermione moved her head further into his hand. "I know you wouldn't, but your handsâ€¦it's like you know exactly how to touch me. Just like during the funeral."

In Ron's heart, he knew what she was talking about. Although he had been devastated and distracted during the ceremony, Hermione had calmed him. She had laid against him and cried, and, for the first time, Ron truly let his guard down. He had cried as well, and had held her and touched her the way he'd always wanted to. Hermione had smelled so good as her body had connected to his in a natural way. They were in their own world, even though people surrounded them. He'd never wanted it to end, and he hated having to let her go. Ron was upset but simultaneously more joyous than he'd ever been; he felt guilty for it. Everyone else had been thinking about the future of the wizarding world, but the only thing that was on his mind was how Hermione's hair felt a lot silkier than it looked.

Ron shook it off to bring himself back to the present. He knew that he had to say something. Hermione was staring at him; it was more than gorgeous. Her eyes were fixated on him while her body hypnotized him. Ron made the mistake of looking at her legs, finding them completely exposed. He'd never seen them so bare before. They were slender, tan, and smooth, as were her ankles and feet. Ron even thought Hermione's toes were sexy. He had to get his head on. "I-I just want to make you feel better," he finally said, dragging his gaze back to her face. The air around them started to thin out as his room seemed to get smaller and smaller. Ron didn't know how to stop it all, but, then again, he honestly didn't want to.

Ron wasn't a knob. He knew that he had feelings for Hermione and that some of those feelings were more innocent than others. Ron was attracted to her in every way, however, too much had happened between dating Lavender, Hermione apparently snogging Vicky Krum, Cormac bloody McLaggen getting in the way of things, going ages without speaking to each other, getting poisoned, breaking up with Lavender, eventually making up with Hermione, and just about everything else that could possibly happen between two people. By the end of the term, they had finally become friends again; they actually seemed to have gotten closer, but Ron was still too unsure to do anything remotely close to making a first move. For these reasons, he had decided to swallow his feelings for her like he'd done for years. It took a lot out of him and he hated it, but it kept him from mucking up their friendship completely. Besides, why would he make a move when she'd been so hard to read? He'd been so sure that Hermione would've said something after he'd come out of the hospital alive and well, but she hadn't. He reckoned it would've been the perfect time for her to tell him how she felt, seeing as how he had been near death, but she hadn't. Hermione had never once said that she fancied him, so, in the end, he had been left to assume that she didn't. Denial and ignorance were his best tools for defeating the constant tug and pull that he felt for her.

Hermione lay her hand on top of his, breaking him out of his thoughts. Ron's heart skipped a beat. Not only was she touching him, but also she apparently wanted him to keep touching her. "Well, you are," she said. "You're making me feel a lot better."

Once again, Ron had to battle himself. His body and his mind were never on the same bloody team. He flipped between two options until one forcefully fell out of his mouth first. "Is there anything else I can do to make you feel better?" The moment the question was out, he felt uneasy. Ron didn't know how the statement sounded to her. He knew what he meant by it, and he realized how much it scared him that he hoped she felt the same way.

A tinge of faint pink stained Hermione's neck. "I don't know," she whispered. She took her hand off his; he finally removed his own from her cheek. Hermione placed her hands on her knees, peering ahead. "I think I just want to go to sleep."

Ron immediately backed away from her, nodding. As always, Hermione seemed to want one thing but asked for another. Hermione

didn't want Lavender to date him, but she apparently didn't want to date him either. She had wanted to ask him to Slughorn's Christmas party, but she'd gone with Cormac bloody McLaggen instead. "Yeah, of course," he said. "It's late. It's ah - late." He got out of bed, running his fingers through his hair.

Hermione didn't move, she only looked up at him, swallowing hard. "Can I stay in here with you?"

"What?" he said in a gasp.

"I just mean - can I sleep in here? I'm too tired to go back downstairs." She hugged her stomach, moving her eyes away from him. "I can sleep on the cot or on the floor." Ron opened his mouth but found that he had nothing to say. They'd gotten closer last term and had become more comfortable around each other, but this was different. Hermione wanted to sleep with him - sort of. He had never been in this situation before. Every part of Ron screamed at him to say yes. Unfortunately, he couldn't get the words out. Hermione groaned, putting a hand over her face. "Oh, I'm sorry. That was inappropriate to ask. I'll just go." She started to get up but Ron quickly found his voice again.

"No," he said, holding out his arms. "You can sleep in here if you want. Take my bed. I'll sleep on the cot."

For a moment, it seemed as if Hermione had regretted asking. "You can have your bed, Ron," she finally said.

"No, honestly, you take it," he said, feeling relieved that she still wanted to stay with him. "Um, what kind of bloke would I be if I didn't let you have the better bed?" He hoped that he sounded sincere. While he did want Hermione to be comfortable, he mostly wanted to always know that she had slept in his bed and that her smell would be on his covers until his mum washed his linens.

Hermione glanced between the two beds, looking hesitant. She gradually smiled. "All right. Thank you." She got into his bed, easing under the covers and flattening the pillow.

"Will this work for you?" Ron asked. It certainly worked for him. Seeing Hermione snuggled under his Chudley Canons blanket was a masterpiece.

"It's lovely," she said, closing her eyes and nestling her nose in his pillow.

Ron tried not to think about why she was doing this. Every assumption he'd ever made about her feelings had turned out to be wrong. "G-great." He got into the cot next to her, extinguishing the light. "Night."

"Goodnight, Ron," she breathed. Hermione didn't say another word as she settled against the squeaky mattress, closing her eyes. Ron knew that he couldn't watch her like he wanted to. He turned over so he couldn't tease himself, attempting to tame the rhythm of his heartbeat. Hermione's breathing grew softer. Ron was glad



that she was finding some sort of peace. He, however, couldn't sleep at all. All Ron could think about was his horrible day and baffling night. He didn't know what was wrong with him. Asking Hermione if he could 'do anything else' to make her feel better had been foolish. She must've thought that he was insensitive or thick. He really had to get his head on before he said something else outrageous.

"Ron?" His mind froze in its tracks and he stopped fidgeting. The only sounds Ron had heard for the past several minutes had been Hermione's breathing and his tearing the fabric of his pillowcase. "Ron?" she asked again.

Ron decided that he wasn't hallucinating and that her call was real. "Yeah?"

"Are you awake?"

He thought that it was obvious, but he decided not to be a prick. Ron turned toward her. Hermione was already sitting up, facing him. He wondered how long she'd been this way. "I'm awake," he said. "Do you need something?" It was dark in his room but the light from the moon and stars gleamed brightly through his window. It usually annoyed Ron. Now, it allowed him to view Hermione in a soft white glow. She didn't answer him. "Hermione?" he asked.

She kept her focus on her lap. "I-I don't want to be alone right now."

Ron's heart pounded against his chest. She couldn't have meant what he thought she did. He didn't know what was happening, but he couldn't ignore her. "I can come over." She nodded, making his mind collapse and his body take over. Ron got out of the cot, sitting next to her on his bed. He didn't know where to take the conversation. Ron lit his wand instead, setting it on the far end of the side table so he could see her better. "What's going on?" With more light, he could see how nervous she was.

"I," she said in a faint voice, "want to feel better."

Ron wanted to take every happy memory, every great feeling that he'd ever experienced, and give it to her. Hermione had no idea how much her pain was tearing him up. He had to do something. He looked around before settling his eyes on the bed. "Do you want me to sleep next to you?" Sleep was all he could offer her, and he wouldn't let her be alone one minute through it.

Hermione shook her head. "I don't know," she whispered. "I don't even know if it's a proper thing to ask right now. Maybe I'm wrong or I'm mental—"

"I don't think you are," he said. "You're just upset. Bollocks to what's proper or appropriate. It's only us here. So, what do you need? I'll do anything you want me to do, Hermione." Ron blushed as he thought about how their conversation could go either way, but it wasn't about him and his embarrassment. Everything in their moment together was about Hermione. He

touched her cheek again for a moment. She turned back to him, causing Ron to lose himself in her gaze. His pounding heart echoed in his ears. The two of them were amazingly close.

"You're sweet, Ron," she said after some time. She glanced down at his lips. Ron knew what that meant but it didn't make sense. The signal meant that Hermione wanted to kiss him, but it went against everything Ron understood about her feelings for him. Ron had thought about kissing Hermione day after day for ages, however, he never imagined it actually happening. The closest they'd ever come to this moment had been during Herbology last term, when he told her that he'd rather she didn't go to Slughorn's Christmas party with Cormac bloody McLaggen. They'd gazed at each other, Hermione giving him a smile that made Ron feel like he'd been hit with a Bludger; however, it hadn't gone anywhere because Hermione, as always, had gone right back to helping Harry. That alone was enough to tell Ron that she apparently didn't want what he did, so he couldn't understand what was happening now.

She looked up at him and, for a second, Ron thought that she would kiss him. To his relief and horror, she didn't. In fact, Hermione moved her body away. "Okay," she said, clearing her throat. "Will you sleep next to me? I'll feel safer." It was barely a whisper but there was so much feeling behind it.

There wasn't a doubt in his mind when it came to his answer. "Y-yeah," he practically wheezed. "Of course I will." He pulled the blanket back. Hermione looked at it before settling in. Ron slowly lay on his side behind her. He felt a little dizzy. Even though there was space between them, he could smell her body. Ron never realized how appealing Hermione's scent was before. It went against everything that defined her. Hermione was low maintenance and not superficial in the least. In spite of this, her scent was completely sweet and girly. It was almost like some sort of flower, or cream pudding, or fruit - maybe peaches. Whatever it was, it drove him mad.

"Move back a little so I can hold you," he found himself saying. "If you want me to, of course," he swiftly added. He didn't want it to sound like a command but he was going to implode if he didn't get closer to her. Ron only hoped that Hermione felt comfortable and wouldn't think that he was trying to be a sod.

"All right," she said after awhile. "I'd like that." She shuffled until her back was against his abdomen. Ron's heart skipped a beat again. Her response was another testament to how much closer they'd gotten over term. It was times like these when he truly believed that she liked him, but it wasn't enough proof for Ron. Yes, they'd gotten closer - to the point where she didn't mind laying against him - but it didn't mean that she felt more than friendship. Friends held each other all the time and, for all Ron knew, Hermione thought that he was doing this simply out of friendly obligation. It wasn't the truth, but Ron didn't know how to tell her that.

Ron placed his hand on her hip. He tried not to shake, but it was impossible not to. Hermione was so warm and soft. Part of her

arse was against his hardened muscle. Ron swallowed the desire and need to rub against her. He'd acted like a horny tit while dating Lavender, and he didn't want Hermione to think that was all he was. "I don't know what to say," she whispered.

"You don't have to say anything." He began to run his fingers through her hair like he'd done during the funeral. Ron enjoyed touching Hermione and, even if she'd never shown that his touches charged her up, she'd at least never recoiled from them. "It's just me, Hermione," he said. "You don't have to be or do anything."

Hermione let out a wavering breath. She sniffled. "Thank you, Ron. Sometimes, I feel like you're the only one who can understand that—that Iâ€¦"

"Shh, it's okay." He kissed the back of her head as tenderly as he could, continuing to stroke her hair. She broke out into soft cries again; it shattered Ron's heart. Not only was he seeing and hearing her cry, but he could feel it as well. Her body quivered powerfully against him. He lifted his other arm, leaning his head on his palm. Ron wasn't going to get any sleep but he didn't care. He would stay up all night holding Hermione if it made her feel better. Frankly, it was what he wanted to do. He continued to stroke her hair even as Hermione moved closer to him. There was nothing between them but their clothes, making it difficult to focus. Ron smoothed her hair back until it was completely off the side of her face. He had done it so many times that he was afraid he'd taken strands out. Ron tucked the last piece behind her ear, putting his hand on her shoulder.

"D-don't stop," Hermione whispered, almost in a pleading way. Ron didn't know how to respond. Her hair had never been flatter, and his fingers were actually going numb.

"Okay." He started rubbing his hand up and down her arm. "Is this all right?" he asked.

She nodded. "I trust you." Her saying that meant everything to him. Hermione was going through so much and was so scared, but she was in bed with him and she trusted him. There was no way that she couldn't feel Ron's stiffy poking her in the back, but she still trusted him. Ron didn't know exactly what to make of it. Regardless, he moved his hand down to her side, rubbing it. She flinched.

"Is this too much?"

"N-no, it's fine. It tickles, that's all."

He grinned. "I'll try to be careful."

Ron decided to use the knuckle part of his fingers, instead of the tips, so it wouldn't be as delicate. Hermione flinched every once in awhile but she didn't protest. Ron watched his fingers move over the curve of her stomach, liking that he couldn't easily feel her ribs or anything. Girls were so barmy when it came to their bodies. For the smarter species, he didn't get how

they could be thick enough to believe that blokes enjoyed skin and bones. Blokes wanted a bit to hold onto. They wanted something soft, comfortable, plush, sweet, and perfect; something like Hermione. Ron bit his lip. He wanted to moan as a heavy wave of yearning washed over him. He used everything to beat it down as he recalled that Harry had once told him that Hermione thought Cormac bloody McLaggen had too many hands; Ron didn't want her to think the same thing about him. Hagrid's bollocksâ€¦a pile of dragon dungâ€¦Umbridge's sagging tits, he thought. He stuck out his tongue as the winner made itself known. He kept his mind on Umbridge's sagging tits so he wouldn't cross the line with Hermione.

"Ron?" Hermione snuffled. "What are we all going to do without Dumbledore? This is so awful." Ron quickly snapped back to his task. He kissed the back of Hermione's head, forgetting about Umbridge.

"It'll be okay, I promise," he said. "We're talking about Dumbledore here. I know the man has one last trick up his sleeve. We'll figure it out, whatever it is."

"How are we going to do that?" Hermione asked. "We barely have anything."

"That's not true." Ron moved his pointer finger down the entire length of her side, stopping right at her hip. "We have you. You're better than every teacher and every book combined. As long as we keep you with us, we'll accomplish whatever it is that we have to do."

She sighed. "You think so highly of me, Ron."

"Maybe, but it's true. You know it is," he said. "You haven't lost your brains, Hermione, or your talent." He kept his eye on his hand that was at her hip. He didn't know where to touch her next.

Hermione let out a rickety breath. "Yes, that's right. I only lost one of my mentors." She started to sob once more. Ron wanted to kick himself. He'd been doing so well but now he'd made her cry. He was such an arse. He had to try something else.

He kissed her temple then began to rub her hip. "I'm sorry," he whispered against her skin. His lips tingled. They had never been anywhere near her skin before; it felt so good.

"It's okay," she said just as softly. Ron wasn't sure if she was referring to his apology or the kiss, but he wouldn't question it. Ron had wanted to kiss Hermione ever since watching her brew Polyjuice Potion in the girls' toilet when they were second years. It had finally happened and Hermione was 'okay' with it. He had no idea what that meant, but he didn't want to waste the time making guesses.

He continued to leave tiny kisses on her temple while he massaged her hip. He closed his eyes as he left a kiss close to her ear. His hand slipped further down. The moment he touched her thigh,

Hermione jerked. He stopped, waiting for her to tell him to stop. She didn't. Her crying merely wavered. The lack of response was agonizing. Not only was Ron's head hurting from battling all his thoughts and desires, but he was also achy in the trouser area. He wished that she would give him a simple 'yes' or 'no', but it never happened. Then again, Hermione never gave him any sort of vocal response about his more-than-friends actions. He bloody broke up with Lavender, signaling to her that he'd made a mistake about the girl he chose, but she hadn't said anything. When Harry had left with Dumbledore, Ron had stayed by her side, holding her hand and comforting her with reassuring thoughts in the hopes of proving that he could be a decent boyfriend to her, but she hadn't said anything. Well, this time, Ron couldn't wait for her. He had to make a decision. Hermione had been brave enough to ask him to sleep next to her. It was only fair that he be brave enough to make a move now that they were in bed together.

Ron shifted down a little so he had more access to her body. He reached out his hand, placing it on her leg. Ron had to question his reality. He had been itching to touch Hermione for years, and now he was. Her skin was piping hot. Ron could feel her goose bumps. As he rubbed her thigh and the back of her leg, a noise that sounded like a moan escaped her. It sent a flourish of pleasure and craving through Ron. The sound had been so simple, yet it was layered with so much importance.

After a little while, he heard another moan from her. Hermione must've liked the feeling, helping Ron to relax a little. He smiled on the inside, wanting to enjoy whatever it was that he was doing with her. Ron was no longer sure if it was in the friendship category, but it might've been the closest thing to 'something more' that he'd ever get with Hermione.

As he touched her, Hermione no longer wept. On the contrary, her moans grew stronger. Hearing Hermione and knowing that he was making her feel good heightened the experience for him. He was also harder than a pile of broomsticks. Ron thought back to the days he'd gotten a glimpse of Madame Rosemerta's cleavage and all the times that he had ever felt hot for a girl. It didn't compare to how Hermione was making him feel now and how she had always made him feel. It wasn't just sexual heat. Hermione was truly making him feel happy and almost desired. The thought petrified Ron because he had convinced himself for so long that she didn't want him.

Ron's hand moved closer to her inner thigh. He could feel the heat from her and it began to make him sweat. All he could focus on was his best friend. All Ron could imagine was taking the pain away from the girl he knew he wanted and loved, even if he'd never openly tell her the truth or admit it to himself. It frustrated Ron, being a coward and being doubtful. Those loathsome traits were why he and Hermione had fought so terribly last term. They were the reasons why he'd dated Lavender Brown, and his flaws were why he hadn't punched Cormac bloody McLaggen, telling him that he'd never be good enough for Hermione and making her realize that they should be together instead. As a result, he kissed her ear, shifting down so he could reach her neck. He froze, waiting for Hermione to move away, tell him to

stop, or slap him. She didn't. Hermione didn't do anything but move closer to him. The movement was swift and easy and accompanied by total silence.

Ron took her gesture as her way of speaking. He knew that he was too scared to speak. Speaking meant that he had to put himself out there, telling her that this was what he wanted more than anything in the world. Using his words also meant that he'd have to find the right words in the first place that wouldn't make him sound insensitive or mental. No "speaking was far too difficult, and it was the last thing Ron wanted to do right now. There was no reason to believe that Hermione didn't feel the same way.

He kindly kissed Hermione's neck. Her hair tickled his face as he did. Her neck smelled even better than the rest of her, causing a moan to escape him. Ron kept going, dragging his lips around her skin and allowed a bit of his tongue to graze it. Hermione whimpered, backing into him. He kissed her neck with more meaning and force. Ron was on fire, hard, and dazed as he kissed her neck and she whimpered and shook. He wanted to keep kissing her, holding her, and possibly even tell her that she was everything to him. Ron wanted to be sweet, however, his less innocent feelings for Hermione were little by little coming to surface, dirtying his mind. Words and phrases like 'sex', 'Hermione', and 'right bloody now' started to cast shadows over the sweeter ideas. Being a bloke was hard work, literally.

Out of nowhere, Hermione lifted her leg. Ron didn't think about it. He instantly helped her and, before he knew it, her leg was on top of his own and his hand was on her inner thigh. Ron started to wheeze, amazed by how fast that had happened. Hermione's own breaths sounded as if they were coming out in shallow spurts. He didn't know what to do. Ron could feel the heat from her better in this position. His heart pounded to the point where his chest ached. As always, he didn't know what Hermione wanted. Neither of them moved nor said a word. He couldn't take it anymore. "Hermione?" he asked against her neck.

Hermione reached back, tangling her fingers in his hair. She then moved her arse against his crotch. He gasped and jerked. "Ron," was all she said in barely a breath. She tugged on his strands; it was then that he decided to completely stop thinking. Ron kissed and sucked on her neck whereas Hermione continued to move her arse while playing with his hair. He ran his fingers up and down her inner thigh, biting her neck very hard. He knew it would leave a mark and it most likely had stung, but she didn't seem to mind. She hissed, pushing back into him with a strong thud. Ron was content on doing this for the rest of the night but suddenly Hermione put her hand on his. His reality hit him like a bludger to the head.

Everything stopped. The heat, yearning, fear, and excitement all solidified when she touched him. Ron lifted his mouth from her. Their time was up. Hermione was finally in her right mind. He knew that she was about to tell him to move away to the cot or out of the room altogether. Ron swallowed hard, preparing himself. He could feel her hand shaking on his. Ron was at least

glad to know that he hadn't been the only one trembling so badly that he'd thought he'd break his teeth. Hermione squeezed his hand, bringing it up to the line of her shorts. She curled his fingers, making him tug on them.

Ron practically stopped breathing. Hermione was giving the impression that she wanted him to pull her shorts down, but that didn't make sense; that would mean that she wanted him to touch her there. Under her shorts was where their close friendship stopped and where something more began. Her hair and neck were easy, but what she was keeping hidden under the blanket and under her shorts was so much more. The intensity would have been unbearable for Ron had he not already shut off his brain.

He followed her lead, pulling her clothing down with her assistance. Hermione kept pulling past her knees, kicking them off. Ron put his hand on her hip, touching her knickers. It was too much. He eased his hand to her inner thigh. Hermione whimpered again as his fingers glided up and down repeatedly. He could feel the edge of her knickers beneath his fingers and he stopped just before touching the middle part of the fabric. Ron also stopped kissing her but kept his lips against her. He had to concentrate somehow. He moved his hand higher up. Even though she was covered, he could tell how warm and damp she was. Ron could even feel the edges of her flesh and the fine hairs that weren't completely covered.

Hermione tugged on his shirt collar extremely hard before fully placing his hand against her. His fingers linked to the cotton of her knickers. Ron's heart burst, causing everything he knew to break into pieces. His hand was actually on her. She made the tiniest sound and gave a gesture that seemed like a nod. Ron knew what she wanted. He wanted it too. Ron wanted it so badly that he had considered strangling people over it throughout the years. He couldn't just do it though. It didn't seem right. Ron was sweating through every inch of his clothes, and it didn't help that he could feel slickness on Hermione's skin. He was suffocating. Ron, without thinking, pulled the blanket off them.

Seeing their closeness made things more intense and thickened the air even more. They were both clammy, breathing hard, and their bodies were damn near glued together. Hermione's lower half was almost bare. The light blue knickers on her were lovely. Ron licked his lips, feeling hungry. Her outline was flawless. She had the perfect little curve, and the flesh of her arse was gorgeous. There was a tiny mole on the plush of her right cheek. He touched it. Hermione's goose bumps returned as she shuddered and placed her leg back on his. She was once again talking to him without words. Ron kissed the back of her head, touching all over her thigh and cheeks. He gently massaged, doing what he could to show Hermione all the respect that she deserved. His hands roamed over her before moving to her inner thigh. He kept moving his hand higher up and closer until he could feel the heat right on his knuckles.

Ron touched the edge of her knickers. He had no idea what he was supposed to do, but he didn't let it stop him. He gave a mental nod, moving all the way up until his fingers were directly on

her. He used his fingertips to gently stroke upwards on the center of her knickers. At first contact, he heard a sharp intake of breath from Hermione. She lifted herself a little off the bed. He watched her for any sign of discomfort. When he didn't see any, he peered down at his hand between her parted legs. The vision turned him on more. Ron kissed her ear before moving his fingers up and down and in circles. He loved the way her body reacted. She ground tentatively into his hand, clenching her arse with each movement. As he massaged her, she became more and more wet. Ron wanted to really feel her; her gasps and shakes told him that maybe she did to.

He was already out of his mind, so nothing stopped him from gradually moving his fingers under her knickers. "Oh â€" oh - god," she whined, gripping his sheets. He let out a harsh breath, trembling. The feeling was new to him. Every part of Hermione was warm and silky. His body reacted to the feeling of her female parts in the most pleasurable way. Ron became so stiff that he was certain it wouldn't take much more than a few pokes at his cock to make him cum. He already wanted more, so he arched his fingers to get a better feel, moving them all around, feeling and slicking himself with her. He closed his eyes, licking his lips. All Hermione had to do was tell him no. With the tiniest look or sound of distress, he would stop. Ron almost wanted her to push him away because he was terrified of what was happening, but he needed to keep going. He wouldn't stop until she made him.

Hermione's nails dug into his neck in a painfully pleasing way. She liked it. She wanted it. Hermione had to. He had to have been giving her what she wanted so he continued. Ron massaged her, using the tip of his middle finger to touch her clit. He had no experience, but he had heard enough from his mates and brothers to gather an idea. Ron moved around aimlessly for awhile but soon found a consistent rub. With the new movement, Hermione unraveled and went mental. She panted continuously while every few seconds letting out a small whimper. Everything else diminished in importance; Hermione was all he knew. Ron had to satisfy her. He had to show her in some way that she was everything to him and that nothing in the world could ever take him away from her. He went a little faster, pressing a bit harder and touching her with more passion than he had ever given himself before. Ron wanted to be good for Hermione. He wanted to give her what she needed. He felt the deep words on his lips whereas his hand acted in response to their importance.

Hermione pulled away a little, her mouth opening to release a throaty moan. She started almost purring to the rhythm of his fingers. He at last found the courage to look down at her face. Hermione looked at up him. Her pupils were large, her face was an attractive shade of red, and her mouth was wet with saliva. It was the most erotic sight he'd ever seen. Ron felt as if he was under a spell. He didn't know who he was or what had happened that day. It was as if he had spent his whole life touching her while in a sleeping state, but he was just now waking up to enjoy it. Ron felt entirely intertwined with Hermione; he didn't want it to end.



Abruptly, Hermione's body stiffened. She jerked her hips forward as her chest heaved. She fell forward, clawing at his pillow. Hermione weakly cried out while she bucked, rolling her hips as her body shook. Ron could only watch as Hermione came. It was wonderful - beyond anything he'd ever imagined. She vibrated and crumpled. Her movements and noises were frantic and organic. It was unlike anything he'd ever seen from her before. It made Ron want to discover more about her.

Hermione finally quit jolting, stopping his hand. He pulled it away. The state of her was fucking maddening. Hermione Granger was always narrow and somewhat stiff. Now she was twitchy and flushed. She was even more astonishing, and Ron found himself even more attracted to her. Hermione opened her eyes as her body settled. They stared at each other, breathing unevenly. Ron's mind gradually pieced itself back together. What was happening no longer seemed possible. What they were doing wasn't with friendly motives, nor was it anything they'd done together since making up last term. No - this went beyond friendship.

Although Hermione just came against his hand, there was a new intimacy that hung over their heads. She stared at him in a powerful way that made him weak in the knees, even though he was lying down. Ron still wanted her. He wanted her so much more than he ever had in his life. Ron had to say something. He just didn't know what. Hermione completely faced him. She was so raw and open. She was commanding, beautiful, and worth every bit of the pain that she sometimes made him feel. Ron didn't know what was wrong with him. He knew what he felt, and he should've swallowed it, but it was too hard to this time. Years of practice and horrible conclusions had trained him well enough, but not for this.

Hermione once again looked down at his mouth. He'd never thought that kissing would be more extreme and personal than feeling someone up, but it was. Ron was scared, confused, and eager. Everything jumbled and throbbed but the pull was too strong. Every time he'd kissed Lavender, he'd wanted Hermione to see what he was capable of giving to her - what he only wanted to give to her; however, she'd never seemed to care before. Ron was more than happy to show her once more, directly this time, exactly what he was capable of. He licked his lips, inching forward. Ron was suddenly terrified because Hermione did as well. Ron wasn't sure what this would lead to, but he figured it out just as Hermione's lips pressed against his. He reckoned that Hermione finally did want to know what he was capable of with his mouth.

Ron didn't know what to do as they continued to hold their lips together. All he knew was that his lips were finally against Hermione's. The sensation felt more amazing than his years of daydreams had ever produced. She parted her lips slightly; Ron did the same. He tenderly moved his lips over hers, gradually increasing the pressure. He couldn't help but to moan. Ron kissed her in the same way again. Soon, their mouths moved, in almost a panic, against each other. The fear and thrill made Ron open his mouth wider, eventually moving his tongue out and around her lips. Hermione didn't hesitate one moment. He quickly felt her tongue. A shock hit Ron right in the groin. He pushed his tongue

along her teeth then inside of her mouth. Hermione tried to do the same and, very soon, their tongues fought against each other.

Ron wanted to be stronger. Over the years, she had ruled everything in their friendship. Hermione was the boss and Ron, her willing and ready soldier in every way; however, this was different. Whatever space they were in now was between two mediums. He wanted to take her trust, showing her that he could be something more to her. Ron needed her to know that he could be a light for her. He put his arm on the other side of her, rolled himself on top of her. Hermione opened her legs so he could settle between them. She shook, moaning in his mouth as he let out a strangled sigh. Ron was kissing her while being on top of her mostly uncovered body. Only a day ago, he'd been ready to endure another summer of pretending not to crave Hermione's body. Now, she was letting him snog her fervently. Life was too bloody confusing.

Ron pressed his face against hers as his tongue invaded her mouth again. He made the kiss hotter and heavier. A thousand thoughts and feelings ran through him. Lavender's palm brushing over the crotch area of his trousers and his hands bumping into her chest while they sucked each other's mouths dry now seemed pointless and a waste of his energy. Ron would constantly have to shake off the distractions or shut up the whispers in his mind when he'd touch her in any way. It wasn't like that with Hermione. Then again, nothing compared to tasting Hermione's mouth and feeling her body against his. What Ron was doing with her was true passion, and he wanted to do so much more. He just didn't know how or if it was right.

Ron finally lifted his mouth from hers, resting his forehead against hers. Their breaths huffed out and tickled each other's lips. He didn't open his eyes. Already he knew that he had to kiss her again. Ron didn't like being away from Hermione's mouth, and every second that he was increased the draw toward her. He put his lips on hers once more, kissing her with more vigor than before. They kept giving each other fast, wet kisses. His cheeks expanded every time she gave a huge puff of air into his mouth. The sound of their snogging filled the room, intensifying their connection; however, all the work made his jaw hurt. Hermione's jaw must have hurt as well because she pulled away a little.

She slowly opened her eyes, touching his cheek; Ron shivered. Hermione was so sexy, gorgeous, perfect, and kind. Part of him wanted to stay in the position and admire her small hand on him, but the bigger part - the part throbbing in his pants - wanted more. It didn't matter if he wasn't sure if what was happening now meant that they more than friends, that she was leaving the next day, that the walls of his house were sometimes very thin, or even that Dumbledore was dead. What mattered was that they were together, alive, and in heat. What mattered was that the sexual frustration was too much.

For a moment, Ron let himself think about what it meant if Hermione was sexually frustrated. He reckoned it had to mean that there wasn't any sort of 'sex' in her life. It could possibly mean that she had always wanted to do sexual things with him and

had just been waiting for the opportunity, like he had. Both would take some time to think about, however, the words 'sex' and 'Hermione' fit together too wonderfully in Ron's mind to ponder anything else. He wanted those two things together right now. It wasn't an innocent thought, but it was honest.

Ron finally found courage and put his hand on the hem of her knickers. Hermione bit her lip, swallowing hard. "W-wait."

It was the first thing either of them had said in days it seemed. It made Ron's better senses return. He had gone too far. As horrible as it was, he was ready to move away, forgetting everything and returning to their friendship, like always. He merely needed reassurance. "What?" he asked thickly. It was the dumbest thing he had ever said, but his brain was broken.

Hermione blushed, pressing her lips tightly together. "I need my wand." Ron only stared vacantly at her. He couldn't figure out why she would fancy her wand at a time like this. He couldn't think of any spell or magic that could help their situation, but then it suddenly hit him. Fear, like Ron had never felt before, stung his spine. Hermione's face went crimson as he put the pieces together.

"Do - do you want me to get it for you?" It was his way of telling her that they didn't have to go any further. It was his way of letting her out, giving her a chance to confirm that they were only friends like they'd been when they left Hogwarts today. Everything was in her hands again.

Hermione licked her lips before pressing them even tighter together. Centuries went by as she looked at him. "Yes. We need it for this." This was her confirmation that she wanted more. It was her signal. It was her way of telling Ron that she trusted him with the most precious thing that she had. Ron didn't know what this meant. A friend could prefer that her mate not date a certain girl, however possibly not want her mate to leave her alone in bed; maybe even let her mate feel her up. A friend like Hermione, however, would never let her first time happen with someone she considered 'merely a mate'. What Hermione felt had to be more.

Ron reached on his bedside table before he could come to his senses. He gripped her wand. Ron's hands shook so terribly that he thought he'd drop it. He gave it to her. "Thank you," she whispered. Her wand wobbled in her hand as she put the tip against her stomach, closing her eyes. She went stiff for a moment then opened her eyes. "Okay." The word had never sounded so heavy before.

Ron was almost angry at how simply the spell had worked. He'd almost wanted a voice like McGonagall or his gran's to shout tales of caution and rage from her wand, but there was nothing. It was only them in this moment. Hermione stared at him with gigantic eyes. Ron could see how terrified she was. He was as well. "Okay," was all he could say. Ron put his hand on her knickers again, pulling them down. She didn't stop him. Hermione took over when he couldn't reach anymore and added them to the

shorts that were on the other side of her. Almost instantaneously, he took her hand, putting it on his pajamas. Together they tugged them off along with his boxer shorts, once more adding to the pile of clothes. Their bodies were free, touching each other. Their sweaty, boiling skins felt fantastic, but it didn't matter. He kept his eyes on Hermione. Ron wanted her so badly. Still, he was unsure of what she wanted. "Hermione!"

Hermione raised her head, kissing him gently. He kissed her back. It was the most breathtaking thing he had ever been a part of. The kiss was so much more passionate than getting her off or having his cock against her. It was the most influential, charged, loving, trusting feeling he'd ever had. If the entire world had blown up and disappeared, Ron wouldn't have known. The kiss was his life. During it, he finally allowed himself to believe that Hermione was in love with him and she wanted him as badly as he wanted and needed her. In that moment, the idea seemed real and tangible. Tonight, Hermione was his and he was hers. The thought alone gave him the strength to continue. He parted for a moment to tell her what it all meant to him but the words weren't there. Love, devotion, need, and destiny didn't formulate like they should have.

Ron gripped himself instead. He felt slightly embarrassed about being naked in front of her but he didn't want to think about what cocks Hermione had seen to compare his to. So, Ron focused on the moment, but quickly realized that he had no idea what to do. Ron had sat through 'the talk', he'd overheard Terry Boot's first experience in full detail, and he had just finished feeling around Hermione, but he was completely lost. All Ron could go on was instinct. He put his forehead against hers, mentally telling himself not to pass out. This was the greatest moment of his life but he also resented everything he had to feel as it was happening. Ron slid his head up and down her creamy center. Hermione made a faint noise. He couldn't tell if she was enjoying herself or if she wanted him to move along with it already, but he kept doing it until his wrist started to hurt.

Ron couldn't stall any longer. He gripped himself, prodding his tip at the small hole between her legs. He concentrated as hard as he could on the shape of the hole as he moved into Hermione, slowly and with difficulty. Hermione shut her eyes, grasped his shirt, and gave a high-pitched wince. She was scorching and extremely taut to push through. Ron gave a breathless moan as she let out a broken whimper. He didn't stop until he felt as if he couldn't go any further because he didn't want to risk possibly getting stuck or hurting her more than he already was. Hermione's body felt incredible. Every part of him that was inside of her was being smothered by a fiery pleasure. Ron had no idea sex would feel like this, however, it wouldn't mean anything to him unless Hermione was all right with what was happening.

Ron stilled his movements, gazing at her. There were so many different things he could've asked her but only one question seemed to fit the moment. "I - is this okay?" he rasped, almost holding his breath as he waited for her response.

It took several seconds before Hermione opened her watery eyes. She nodded. "T-thisâ€|this is okay." He could see the pain and fear all over her face and in her eyes, but she still had nodded, telling him it was all right. Hermione was unbelievable, and it was the last coherent thought he had.

The rest of the night went by in a sweaty, muffled haze. Ron was clumsy with his thrusts. Hermione wheezed, weakly kissing him as her nails dug into his back. Every push was like a lifetime of intense emotion. Ron quietly moaned against her mouth as a new breed of feelings impacted him. They didn't speak but their bodies screamed volumes. They were both so hot and sticky. It didn't take long before the blasting pressure and heat erupted, making Ron cum without warning and in a way that he didn't know was possible. Nothing compared to how he felt the moment he lost himself completely inside her. Hermione was the only girl he had ever truly wanted. For years he'd felt the aching crave, but somehow he had finally made it to her. He shut his eyes, letting the ecstasy of it all crash around him. Ron felt an overpowering emotion encompass him. Only once during his years of friendship with Hermione had he felt so strongly. It was the night he'd told her that he loved her, when she brilliantly and kindly fixed his essay. He hadn't planned on saying it, and she hadn't responded in the way that he'd always hoped. Ron wasn't brave enough to let that last feeling go again â€" not now with him giving his virginity to her but still not having a definitive answer about what she felt for him.

Afterward, they were exhausted and breathless. Ron felt drained of everything. When he found the strength to move off of her, he kissed her gently. It couldn't begin to express what he felt but it was all he had. Once more, he found he only had actions, not words to convey all he wanted to say. Hermione ran her hands through her damp hair, letting out a shaky breath. Ron stayed in bed with her. The last thing he did before they both quickly drifted off to sleep was squeeze her hand, mumbling something about staying with her...

...

Ron opened his eyes and yawned, hearing something move. He frowned as bright sunlight almost blinded him. What Ron saw when his eyes adjusted made him sit upright in bed. Hermione was on the other side of his bed, pulling on socks. Everything from last night came back to him and seeing his boxer shorts folded neatly by his bedside confirmed that it hadn't all been a dream. Hermione turned around, freezing in her movements. She looked different: her eyes were dry, her hair was tame, and her posture was somewhat rigid again. They stared at each other in silence.

Waking up more, on top of being entirely separated from her body, caused the fog in Ron's brain to clear. What he had done to her sank into his mind as the fervor and yearning no longer kept him from thinking. This wasn't like seeing Hermione in the Great Hall the morning after a fight they'd had the night before, or finally letting go of Hermione after giving her an extended hug, watching for her reaction. Ron was viewing her for the first time after a night of shagging.

Ron knew that he needed to speak but he wasn't sure what words would be best. Their night had started off with a discussion about Dumbledore's death but it had ended with them shagging. His throat started to hurt. He was amazed by how little she blinked and how still she stood, almost like she had a stunning jinx cast on her. Ron had to say or do something because the ongoing silence scraped at his spine. "Hey." It was stupid and the last thing that either of them needed but something had to change. He waited for her response, half wishing that she'd punch him and half hoping that she'd say that last night was the best of her life.

"Hi," Hermione said. Ron was both relieved and slightly let down by her response. He wanted to get up but, now that there was real light in the room, he couldn't imagine being naked in front of her. It had been so much easier the night before. Hermione sat on the very edge of the bed, pulling on her trainers. Ron took a peek at her neck. He could still taste it under his lips and remembered how it felt to make her flinch when he had bitten her. Though, there was no mark to signal that it had happened. Ron didn't know what to make of it. He was sure that it had happened. He focused on the room instead. Hermione had a bag at the end of the bed but it wasn't just her stuff that was tidy. His room was nearly spotless. It looked as if she had cleaned his entire room while he had slept. Ron wanted to thank her but he wasn't sure if her cleaning had been a good thing or not.

"Umâ€¦did you get any sleep last night?" he asked instead.

Hermione stood up again, blushing. "Some." Her words were short and stiff. He couldn't tell if she was mad, embarrassed, or oblivious to what had happened.

He rubbed his neck, shrugging. "Are you okay?"

She just looked at him as her entire neck flushed red. She licked her lips slowly, holding her hands together. "I'm a little sore if that's what you mean."

It was Ron's turn to blush. It wasn't what he'd meant. Hearing her say this caused the memories to flood back again. Even though their night had been hazy, Ron remembered how tight Hermione had been and how she softly sobbed. She'd been a virgin when she came into his room the night before. Now, she wasn't because of him. "Yeah, sorry," he mumbled.

"It's okay," she said. "It's better than it was." She frowned like the words hurt to say.

Ron needed to say something substantial. The two of them had fought and given each other the silent treatment many times before so he had to believe that this was no different. It didn't work. Everything was different and new. The only thing that was the same was his feelings for her. Hermione was still beautiful. She still made him feel like a prat because he was somewhat nervous yet excited at seeing her. If anything, his normal feelings for her were just more passionate. "Hermioneâ€¦"

"I really need to take my things downstairs," she quickly said, getting up. She grabbed her bag, heaving it over her shoulder.

A pang hit his chest. "Then let me help you. I just, ah, I gotta get dressed." He reluctantly reached down, grabbing his shorts.

She frantically shook her head. "No - that's okay."

"Hermione," he breathed as another pang hit him. "If you're angry--"

"I'm not," she said. She readjusted her bag. "I only mean—why don't you go shower and get dressed first? I've had a chance to. You haven't."

"But you're leaving today," he said with a heavy heart. It was suddenly a lot harder for Ron to accept that she was leaving. He was sure that he needed her now more than ever.

Hermione's icy composure finally thawed. Even her eyes softened. "I know I am," she gently said, "but I'm still packing. Just go shower and get dressed." Her bossy tone was back, meaning that once more she was in command.

Ron nodded. "Okay."

"Great." Hermione went to the door. She turned back, looking at him in a way that he didn't understand. "I'll see you, Ron." There was something heavy and almost sad in her voice and features. Hermione was obviously dreading the conversation they would have when he got out of the shower.

"Yeah, I'll see you," he said. She gave him a weak smile before closing the door behind her. Ron hurriedly slipped on his shorts, flopping back on the bed. So much had happened on it. He wanted to close his eyes and go over it all but he didn't want to keep her waiting for too long.

Ron quickly got new clothes then went to the bathroom. He felt flushed but the cold water streaming down from the showerhead soothed him. Ron looked at his fingers, causing his mouth to water. Hermione's smell, taste, and feel were right at his mouth. He had felt her up then watched her lose it. They had kissed heavily then had sex. The warmth and tautness of her body had been enough to make him burst with a force he had never experienced before. It didn't get any better than that. He sucked the tips of his fingers whereas his other hand absentmindedly gripped himself. Ron let out a well-deserved sigh as he pulled on his muscle.

However, he immediately brought himself back to reality, moving his hand away. "What are you doing?" he asked himself aloud. He couldn't wank over what had happened like he did over his usual fantasies about Hermione. This was real. Ron didn't even know if it was a good thing. He had to stop thinking about himself and get back to her. With his new orders, he washed himself, brushed his teeth, got dressed, and left the bathroom. He was nervous

about seeing her on his bed again so he slowly walked back up the staircase. Ron took a deep breath before opening the door.

His shoulders sagged as he felt yet another punch to the chest. She wasn't there. "Hermione?" he said. He looked around, not seeing her anywhere. For a moment he thought that maybe she had gone to the toilet, however, they only had one bathroom and he'd just come from there. Ron deflated into his bed, deciding that the extra time would give him a chance to think.

He thought of things to say. Ron wasn't sure if he should apologize or try to give an explanation first, but something needed to be done. Hermione was his best friend, and he couldn't lose her. Whatever the right words were, they wouldn't be simple to say. They couldn't be anymore. Neither was the belief that there was nothing between them. There was no way in bloody hell that a girl like Hermione would ever let a bloke touch her in the way that Ron had if she didn't feel anything for him. She must've felt something for him that was more than friendship. Ron didn't know if he was supposed to go after Hermione or wait for her return. He decided to wait. She was probably just trying to get her head on. They had shared something so intense, frightening, uncertain, andâ€¦special. Ron smiled. He was a tit for thinking of it as such but he knew deep down that it had been special, maybe even perfect. Their actions last night might've been the perfect way to start a new relationship together. He straightened his bed before sitting on it, waiting for Hermione.

The seconds turned into minutes, then half an hour. Ron went downstairs. Hermione must have meant for him to go after her. His parents were at the kitchen table, eating and talking in haste like they had all the day before. He looked around. "Is Hermione outside?"

"Oh, sweetheart, you're awake," his mum said. "Can I get you something?"

"No, I'm fine," he breathed. "Hermione," he said again, "is she outside or with Ginny?"

His parents shared a look. "Ginny went to Luna's," his dad said, "and Hermione's gone. She left almost twenty minutes ago or so."

Ron held on to the top of a chair, putting all his weight against it. He felt like he'd had the wind knocked out of him, making him lightheaded. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. It didn't make sense. "What?"

"Yes, dear," his mum said, nodding and sipping her tea. "She told us that she said her goodbye to you but that you were half asleep and perhaps didn't realize. I told her that you're a deep sleeper."

Ron's heart started to beat incredibly fast. He collapsed into the chair. Hermione had changed her mind about talking to him. She was disgusted, mortified, and most likely furious with him. Ron had fucked up again. He thought touching her was what she had wanted, but he was wrong. He thought kissing her and giving



himself completely to her had been what she needed, but he was wrong about that too. Hermione obviously had wanted him to stop and purely talk to her or hold her, telling her that her parents would be safe.

In hindsight, everything was plain and easy. Ron had failed. He ruined the next step of their relationship before it ever had a chance to start. It was exactly why he always kept things in and knew that he could never be a decent boyfriend. Ron wanted to apologize. He needed to turn back time so he could tell Hermione that it would be best if they didn't go any further. She had to know that he wouldn't take advantage of her again. "She left this for you, dear," his mum said. She reached across the table, handing him a sealed envelope. Ron swallowed hard. It simply said:

To: Ron

From: Hermione

"Ron, it's time to get up," Harry said, shaking his arm very hard. Ron was already awake but he kept quiet. Harry shook him again. "I mean it. You have degnoming to do."

Ron groaned, pushing the pillow off his face. He sat up, rubbing his eyes. He'd been lying awake for at least half an hour but he was never alert enough to degnome. "Says who?"

Harry grinned, making him look young but, at the same time, easily showing that there was nothing youthful about his life. "Says your mum," he said. "She wants you and me to get it done before noon. Actually, just you. She told me that I could rest, but I'll help. I'm tired of sitting around. I'll go mental if I have to once again sit and do nothing." Ron yawned and stretched. Harry looked rather peaky and stress was all over his expression. Even after weeks at Ron's house, Harry wasn't any more relaxed. All he wanted to do was talk about Dumbledore, Snape, Voldemort, and Horcruxes. Nevertheless, he did his best to seem beyond it all to everyone except for Ron. In front of Ron, Harry groaned, kicking things in frustration because there was no plan for them. Harry didn't have a choice but to be beyond it all for now and keep kicking things around.

Harry sat on the edge of Ron's bed. "You know Hermione's coming today, yeah?"

Ron focused on his knee and at the sunburn he had accumulated the day before. He tried to appear indifferent about Harry's news but Hermione's arrival had been the only thought on his mind for days. "I know that. She's my friend too."

"Is she really?" Harry asked in mock surprise. "I never would've guessed. You've barely mentioned her name since I got here. I thought you'd at least be more excited today. Then again, I should be used to it. It's not like she's talked about you a whole lot either in her letters."

"Just shut up, Harry. Stop trying to analyze everything. We're fine." Ron got out of bed, searching around his cluttered wardrobe for clean clothes.

"I hope that's true," Harry said. "I know you both so I can tell when something isn't right."

"Then I reckon you don't know as much as you think you do because nothing is wrong," Ron said. "Hermione and I don't have to talk about each other every second of the day. We're not obsessive like--"

"Like who?" Harry quickly asked. "Like me?"

Ron turned back to him. Harry was frowning at him. "I'm sorry," Ron said, rubbing his neck. "I didn't mean that. You're not obsessive."

"No, I'm not," he said. "I just want to do something."

"I know you do, mate," Ron said. "I do too."

"Then let's do it, Ron. Something needs to happen and change." Harry's eyes were wide. It was almost like he was pleading with him. Ron didn't know what to do. He wanted to help Harry but there was nothing he could think to do. He honestly didn't mind; there was so much going on in other areas of Ron's life. Finding Horcruxes wasn't at the top of his list.

"I feel the same way, but now is not the time," Ron said. "Please, let's at least wait until Hermione gets here. We'll all think of something, okay?"

"Fine," Harry breathed, looking disappointed. "Then what should we do now?"

"We should probably degnome. I need to get dressed first though." Ron hoped that it was enough for Harry. He would've given Harry the world if it would calm him down, but Ron didn't have that to offer.

Harry just continued to look at him as if he was waiting for more. The two of them seemed to have something foreign between them that neither talked about out loud. "All right," Harry said. "I'll meet you downstairs. Don't forget your cream."

"Bugger the cream." Ron grabbed his clothes, heading to the loo. He brushed his teeth, looking at himself in the mirror. Hermione was coming back. After almost a month of not speaking to her, she would be back in his house and in his room. He had tried to prepare himself but he didn't know how. Nothing seemed right to say or do. The bold truth was that they had sex the night before she departed, and Hermione had left him with nothing but a note the next morning. Ron changed into his clothes as their night together seeped into his mind like it always did in the morning. Ron closed his eyes, letting the recollection of their time together fill him up. It was only in the mornings that he allowed himself to feel good about it because he was alone and he didn't

have to hide all his feelings. Ron moaned as he thought about the way her mouth had tasted and remembered how gorgeous her knickers had looked on her.

"Ron! Breakfast is ready!" his mum shouted. Ron opened his eyes, shaking off the memory. His time was over; he had to get back to what was real. When Ron made it to the kitchen table, his mum put a plate full of delicious bacon and toast in front of him. "I hope you're hungry."

"Mum, I'm always bloody hungry for this," he said.

She tapped the top of his head. "Don't bring that language to the table, Ronald."

"Sorry," he mumbled between bites of greasy heaven.

"Did Harry tell you that I want you to degnome the garden today?"

"Yes, he did," he said. "I still don't see why. They always come back."

His mother sat across from him, making her plate. "That's not the point. It's your chore."

"What about Ginny? She never has any chores."

"She does have chores," she said, not meeting his eyes. "Just yesterday I had her straighten up your brothers' bedrooms."

Ron rolled his eyes. He wanted to tell her that it was hardly a chore, considering that his brothers didn't live there anymore. "Whatever," he said instead.

"Oh, you know how much I hate that word," she said with a frown. "All you ever say is 'whatever', Ron. I wish you would open up a little."

"I am open," he said nonchalantly. "I'm open about the fact that I don't want to degnome, but I'll do it because it'll make you happy."

"And I am honored that you're willing to withstand my torture because you want me to be happy," she said with humor in her voice. He laughed, taking a bite of his toast. "So, do you think Hermione will want anything special today?"

Ron's heart skipped a beat at the sound of her name. "What do you mean?"

"She's coming back today and--"

"I know," he said.

"--and I want to cook her something special," his mum said. "The poor girl has gone through a terrible time these past few weeks. Everything with her parents and fixing their memories had to have been very tough."

Suddenly, Ron's breakfast wasn't as appetizing. Hermione's state must've been awful. She had been gutted enough the night in his room. "Yeah," was all he could say.

"Ron, are you all right?" she asked.

"I'm fine," he promptly said.

"If you say so, dear," his mum said with a sigh, evidently not believing him. "Well, I think Harry's already out there. I told him that he didn't have to."

"I think he enjoys it," he said. "Besides, he doesn't like being stuck in the house."

His mum smiled widely. "What a helpful boy. I'm so proud of him and how well he's keeping positive. He's one very special person." His mum continued to smile as if she was looking right at Harry. Ron shifted in his seat. His mum was always so proud of Harry. She had a look for him that Ron had never seen for anyone else, especially himself.

The kitchen door opened and his dad came in, looking exhausted. Ron's spirits lifted at the sight of him. "Hi, dad."

"Morning, son." His dad kissed the top of his head before sitting next to him. He ruffled Ron's hair while Ron poured him juice. "Cheers," he said, almost gulping it down at once.

"Why are you home so late again, Arthur?" His mum put a plate in front of his dad, kissing his forehead. When she pulled away, his dad held on to her collar, planting a real kiss on her mouth. Ron blushed at his dad's boldness before returning to his bacon. "Arthur Weasley," his mum said, lightly slapping his hand and blushing a bit herself.

"Sorry, Molly," his dad said with a smirk. "I really needed that."

"I'm not sure if you do in front of your son," she said, taking off his hat and rubbing a bit of dirt off the side of his face. "Why are you late?" she asked again.

"It wasn't all about work this time," he said. "I went to see Bill after I got off."

"How's he doing?" she asked.

"He's getting better every day," he said proudly. "He was making breakfast when I arrived."

"That's wonderful," she said, lighting up. "I hope Fleur's taking care of him. It's her greatest responsibility now as his wife."

"I'm sure she's doing a great job, Mum," Ron said. "You know how much she loves Bill." Ron thought of the day of Bill's wedding.

He'd looked so happy, even though it wasn't the wedding he had planned for.

To keep Harry and their family under a low profile, it had only been the eight Weasleys, plus any dates any of them had, Harry, Kingsley, Lupin and Tonks, and Fleur's parents and sister. There wasn't a big ceremony or a real reception afterward, but his mum had still done everything she could to make it special. It was special. Ron had stood at the front with the rest of his brothers, watching Bill and Fleur exchange vows. His heart and happiness had been all for his oldest brother that day but Ron couldn't help but notice Hermione's absence and how a repetitive thought in the back of his mind made him think of his own possible wedding one day and who he would slip the ring on.

"I know she loves Bill," his mum said, breaking Ron out of his illusions. "I just want to make sure that she takes care of him the right way. We still don't know what's going to happen with the scar."

"Nothing will happen, Molly. We're all taking care of him," his dad said. He took off his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose. "There is something I have to tell you though."

"Oh, no," she said, looking grim.

"It's nothing major," his dad said, holding up his hands in defense. "We just have another meeting and possibly another patrol with the Order."

His mum's brown eyes widened as if he was mad. "Nothing major? Arthur, that's more than major. What for?"

"Because it's our shift," he said, not appearing too happy either. "The meeting is in a few days. Moody and Kingsley want us to pull a few for the job."

"Harry and I will go," Ron said.

"Ab â€" so - lutely out of the question!" his mum said.

"Why not?" Ron asked.

"Because I won't risk my children any more than I have to," his mum said. "You and Harry are staying here."

"But-"

"That's enough. I've given my order, Ronald," his mum said.

"That's not fair!" Ron said, feeling as angry as she did. "I'm not a kid anymore, and it's Harry that we're all risking our skins for anyway."

"Ron," his dad said with a frown, "you don't have to speak that way about him."

"I - I didn't mean that," Ron said. He didn't know what he meant. All Ron knew was that he'd rather risk his life than have one of his brothers risk theirs and if Harry didn't do something productive, he would most likely go mad. Ron also knew that the idea of his parents getting hurt, or he losing them like Hermione had more or less lost hers, made Ron sick. It was all on the tip of his tongue but he couldn't get the words out. "I'm only saying-"

"Why don't you go help Harry in the garden," his mum said, waving a hand. "Your father and I need to talk." Ron wouldn't get anywhere else with her so he pushed his plate away, standing up. "Are you wearing your cream?" she asked.

"Yes," he lied before he slammed the door behind him. Ron walked over to the shed, feeling like a prick. He hadn't meant what he said but sometimes he just got so angry that he had to shout out the first things that came to his mind.

As he got closer to the shed, he slowed his steps. Harry's back was against the door and Ginny was standing awfully close in front of him. Ron cleared his throat. Whatever conversation they were in the middle of abruptly stopped as soon as his presence was known. Harry's smile disappeared whereas Ginny rolled her eyes. "Yes, Ron?" she asked.

"I'm sorry," Ron said, putting a hand to his chest. "I didn't know that I needed a reason to come over here."

"But you do have a reason. You have to degnome, eh?" she teased. "Amazing day for it."

"Bugger off," he muttered. "Where have you been?"

"I went to Luna's."

"Bloody hell, you're always over there," he said.

"But I'm back now," Ginny said. "Hermione is coming."

"I know," Ron said for what felt like the tenth time that day.

"Then start acting like it," Ginny said, jabbing his shoulder. "She'll need a bit of sunshine when she gets here and, for whatever reason, your light is the brightest to her."

"Huh?" he said, raising an eyebrow.

Ginny shook her head. "You're thick, Ron, and incapable of thinking any deeper than the width of your trainers." She looked back at Harry, touching his arm. "Come find me when you're finished."

"I'll do that," Harry said. She bit her lip, giving him a look before walking off. Harry gazed after her as if he didn't have a care in the world.

Ron waved a hand in front of his face. "Mate?"

"Wha-?" Harry asked, tearing his gaze away from her.

"You're still gonna help me, yeah?" he asked.

"Of course," Harry said. "Ginny and I were just talking."

"About where to shag after tea?"

"It's not like that," Harry said.

"Right," Ron said. "Mates with benefits means something else."

Harry hit his arm. "Fuck off, Ron! That's not what we are."

"You're bloody right that's not what you are!" Ron shot. "That's my little sister you're doingâ€¦whatever it is with."

"I know she's your sister. She's also my friend. That's why I'm trying to handle this the right way," Harry said. "It's complicated."

"Why?" Ron asked. "You fancy her. She fancies you. You were bloody dating her a month ago, for fuck's sake."

"Yeah, me fancying her and dating her is fine. It's Ginny fancying and dating me that's the problem," Harry said. "If I was someone else, then we'd pick up right where we left off, but I'm me. I can't just date her right now. I can't just bloody do anything right now." He kicked at the dirt, leaning back against the shed.

To some extent, Ron could understand what Harry felt. He knew that Harry cared about Ginny but didn't want to put her in harm's way or hurt her. It was how Ron felt about Hermione. He wanted to tell Harry that, but he couldn't. If he did, then he'd have to tell him about their night together, and Ron had sworn to himself that he wouldn't. "Look," Ron said, "I get that this is difficult but you can't just drag her along on whatever this is."

"I'm not dragging her anywhere," Harry said. "I told her what we had to be right now. She decided on her own to stay." His smile returned. "She wants to continue this thing we're doing, and so do I. I have to be with her in some way while I have her."

"I reckon that's great then, mate," Ron said, patting his arm. "As long as you're never a prick and you only do what's comfortable for her, then I reckon I don't have to hate this, just dislike it."

"I'll take that," Harry said. "We care about each other, Ron."

Ron was happy for them but jealousy also tugged on his heart. "Come on, we should start before the sun gets too high."

"Are you wearing your cream?" Harry asked.

"I don't need it." Ron took off his shirt then ran up to a gnome that was making its way to the pond. After almost an hour, Ron and Harry finally returned to the house. Ron was pink and sizzling.

"Ron, what happened to you out there?" his mum asked when he came back inside. She touched his shoulder. "I thought you put your cream on?"

"I didn't need it, Mum," Ron said, hissing at the pain from her touch.

"Clearly you did. Look at you. You're too fair not to use protection." She surveyed his chest and back. "What a shame. Your skin is gorgeous when you take care of it. You got that from your father's side. All the Weasleys have gorgeous complexions."

Ron blushed. "My skin isn't gorgeous."

"What are you talking about?" Ginny cheeked. "You're one of a kind - and look at those muscles!"

"That's what happens when you play Quidditch almost every day," Harry said. "It's all he does. Well, that and apparently not wear his cream."

"I put mine on before I went to Luna's, Mum," Ginny added.

"Shut up, you," Ron said, throwing his sweaty shirt at her. "I'm fine. A shower will make me even better."

"You'd better put some cream on, Ronald Bilius Weasley," his mum said. "Don't make me do it myself. I'll lather you up from head to toe."

"Let me know when you're done, Ron," Harry said, laughing a little. "I might take a short nap while you're in there."

"Actually, Harry, can I talk to you first?" Ginny asked.

Harry turned to her. Any ounce of fatigue he had, vanished. "Sure." The two of them got up, swiftly walking up the stairs to her room. Ron shuddered, trying not to feel nauseous.

"I'm leaving now," he said. He left for the staircase.

"Ron, wait a minute," his mum said, following him to the staircase.

He put his hand on the banister, turning to her. "Yes?"

"I don't want this morning's argument to fester," she said. "I'm sorry for what I said and the way I said it."

Ron immediately walked down to her. "Don't apologize, Mum. I was an ars - I was wrong. I'm the one who's sorry."



She touched his cheek. "I just don't want anything getting between us. Our family has to stay together through all this."

"We will, I promise," he said. Ron put his hand on hers, wishing that he had more to give her. No matter how she treated him, she was his mum and he loved her. He needed her.

"I hope so," she said. "With Percy--"

"Don't talk about that git," he said.

"Ron," she breathed, "he's your brother."

"And your and Dad's son," he said. "I haven't forgotten that. He's the one that apparently has. He didn't even show up to Bill's wedding. I won't pretend that he's this brilliant guy because he's not."

"But you love him and he loves us, Ron," she said. "Things are hard, but that fact will never change. You can't have all these bad feelings for him."

Ron shrugged. "Then I reckon it's not always about love. It's got to be about what's right. Percy obviously didn't get an N.E.W.T in that subject."

"Ronald," she said, shaking her head.

"I really need to shower and get that cream on before I start peeling or something," he said. His mum looked at him, almost in disappointment, and started walking away. It had him feel sicker. Ron had to do something. "Apple crumble with a sprinkle of cinnamon."

"Sorry?" she asked.

Ron rubbed his neck. "You asked if Hermione would want anything special to eat. She loves apple crumble with cinnamon. It's her favorite dessert."

His mum smiled a little. "Thank you, dear. I'll start cooking in a little while. She'll be here soon."

"I know," Ron said. During his shower, he thought about everything that had already happened that day: his dad had once again come home late, he and his mum had an argument, Harry and Ginny were once again going at it in her room, and once more Ron would have to sit on his hands and wait, like a nutter, until whoever from his family came back from patrol duty in one piece. It was too much to take, but it was just the usual worries of his day. Ron hadn't even taken into account that Hermione would arrive soon.

Ron got out of the shower, then got dressed in his room. He searched around for cleaner and more appealing clothes, but he didn't have any. Ron didn't know why he was trying to fix up. Hermione wouldn't care what he looked like. She probably wouldn't notice that Ron had in fact gained a bit of weight, making him a

little broader, or that the haircut his mum had given him a few days ago actually hadn't turned out half bad. The only thing Hermione would see was the bloke who shagged her when she hadn't wanted him to.

He applied the cream to his tender spots before pulling on jeans and a clean blue shirt. Ron sat on his bed and in the exact spot where 'it' had happened. The imprints of their bodies were gone, but he could still feel them. Ron could feel himself inside Hermione, and he could feel her juices and the softness of her skin. He could smell her hair on his pillow and her sounds still echoed around the walls of his room. It wasn't only the sexual events that he recounted though. Hermione's tears and his confidence about comforting her were there. Hermione had called him sweet and had said that she trusted him. It made Ron smile.

Ron opened the drawer on his side table, rustling to the bottom. He pulled out the wrinkled envelope but didn't open it. He wouldn't do it to himself with so little time until Hermione's arrival. He put it back before laying on his mattress. Ron held a pillow in his arms, closing his eyes. He didn't know what they were supposed to do now. With everything going on, he didn't know how he was supposed to handle their new situation. Ron turned to his side. He was so tired of keeping things in his head. With Hermione around, he'd have to keep even more in. Ron thought about how he had made her laugh a little and how, for a moment, he thought that she had loved him. Ron's breathing slowed. The comfort of that thought made him fall asleep.

"Hermione!" someone screamed. Ron shot up, looking around. "Oh, my dear, look at you!" his mum's voice said. He hurried to the door, cracking it. He could hear everyone talking downstairs.

"It's great to have you back," his dad said.

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley," Hermione said. Ron's heart skipped four thousand beats. It had only been four words but they were enough to heat him up. He gripped the handle, telling himself to go downstairs, however, his legs wouldn't move. Ron couldn't meet her down there. He backed up, sitting on the cot.

"It's great to see you, Harry," Hermione said. "I'm glad you're okay."

"I'm fine. It's great to see you too," Harry said. "Ron's upstairs in his room."

"Why don't you go get him so we can eat," his mum said. There was a pause. Ron started chewing on his nails.

"All right," Hermione said.

"Shit! Bollocking shit!" Ron breathed. He paced his room, trying desperately to steady his breathing. He ran his hands through his hair then fixed his shirt. It had been weeks but it hadn't been enough time. Ron forgot all the things he had practiced telling her. Ron couldn't remember his plan to keep things from getting

too hard. All he could think about was that Hermione had left him.

"Ron?" He froze and silently gasped. He told himself that he really could disappear if he stayed still enough. "Ron?"

Ron let out a shaky breath, turning around. Hermione was just inside the door. Their eyes connected, and he forgot who he was. She was so beautiful. She was slightly darker and her hair was longer; her hair, that he knew from experience was silkier than it looked; her hair that had been under Ron's nose when he'd held her. His body began to throb and ache as his heart raced. Seeing Hermione in front of him made her seem more real than she had in weeks. For the first time, Ron truly realized how much he'd missed her. What was worse, every feeling he had for her was there and it was stronger. Their time apart hadn't healed him. Ron wanted her more than ever before.

"Hermione," he rasped.

She finally let go of the handle, walking into the room. "Harry told me you were up here."

"I was asleep. I didn't hear you get in."

"That's fine," she said. They went quiet again as they stared at each other. Ron didn't know what was wrong with him. He should've been yelling at her or feeling furious because she left him but all he felt was relief and joy. Ron was so bloody happy that Hermione was back. "Um, I can go back downstairsâ€¦"

He panicked for a moment. His legs finally started moving. He practically ran up to her, yanking her into a hug. Ron held her so tightly that he was sure he could feel her skin beneath her shirt and jeans. "No, don't go," he rushed. Hermione pulled her arms around his neck. She put her face against his neck while he clutched her lower waist. She smelled good and was small and soft against him. Her body healed Ron in a way that he didn't know he had needed. It felt incredible and for a moment the complication wasn't there. Ron was simply holding Hermione - his best friend and the girl he'd fancied for years.

"I've missed you," she whispered.

"I've missed you too," he said without thinking. It was true. Ron had thought about Hermione every day.

She moved away, looking up at him. Ron wanted to kiss her. He wanted to touch her face, asking how her parents were doing. He couldn't. He had tried all that before and it had been wrong. "Well, your mum says dinner is ready," Hermione said. "I'm not that hungry but I know she probably worked really hard. I haven't had a nice meal in ages." Hermione always rambled when she was nervous but he didn't know why she would be. She was the one who had walked out.

"Then you should eat," he said. She just kept looking at him, and they kept holding each other. He knew that it couldn't keep going

on, although he didn't want to let her go. Now that she was back, he never wanted her to leave again.

However, Hermione got out of his hold and backed up. "We should go."

"Okay," he said. She left his room and he followed right behind her.

Hermione sat between him and Harry during dinner. Everyone asked her questions, which she answered politely. Ron hoped that he wasn't the only one to notice her move things around her plate and frown every once in awhile. She was obviously upset. He wanted them all to shut up and leave so he could find a way to take care of her. "I'm once again so sorry for missing Bill's wedding," Hermione said. "I underestimated how long I'd be away."

"Don't apologize, dear," his mum said. "We understand. It was still very nice with the smaller crowd. I have pictures."

"I'd love to see them," Hermione said.

"I'll show them to you after dessert," his mum said. "Anyway, I plan to have some sort of reception for them here. Bill's my oldest boy and Fleur's a woman, so she must want something."

"Molly, we'll work it out with them soon," his dad assured. "Probably before the summer is up, all right?" He looked to Hermione. "Did you get a chance to see Kingsley? I forgot to ask."

"Dad, she just got here," Ron said.

"It's all right, Ron," Hermione said. "I was supposed to check in as soon as I got back. I did, but he wasn't in his office. I'll try again in the morning so Kingsley can know that everything is in place."

"What does that mean exactly?" Ginny asked.

Hermione frowned again, moving her fork around her beans. Ron's heart beat for her in that moment. All Hermione had to do was say the word and he would've apparated them as far away as he could, where no one would ask her painful questions. "It means that the spell is in effect. My parents have new names, new jobs, and a nice flat in Sydney. I checked everything, then double-checked before I left. Kingsley's the only one with the information besides me in caseâ€¦well, just in case."

"They'll be safe there, Hermione," Harry said.

"Harry's right. They're completely safe now. When this is over, you'll pick them up and put things right again," his dad said. She quickly took a sip of her drink, rubbing her brow. She nodded but said nothing.

Ron had to change the subject somehow. He had to give her a way out. He moved his plate to the very edge of the table then rested

his elbow on it. When he lifted his arm, his plate fell off, crashing to the floor. "Damn! Fucking Merlin's left bollock!" Harry laughed as his mum gasped.

"Ronald Bilius Weasley!" she said. "I thought I told you about that language!"

"Sorry," Ron muttered. He bent down, picking up his mess.

"Wicked, Ron," Ginny said. "Did you get any on Hermione's trainers?"

"Piss off," Ron said.

"Ronald!" his mum snapped.

"Let me help you," Hermione said. She got on the floor, pulling out her wand.

He put his hand on hers. "No, let me get it. Mum's going to yell at me some more then Dad will calm her down. Someone will bring up dessert after that and this conversation will be dropped." He smiled at her. Hermione softened, smiling as well.

"Thank you," she said gently. She squeezed his hand. He looked at their held hands. They looked good and it felt good. Plus, touching her helped to return blood to his system. Ron had missed how alive Hermione made him feel.

He scraped everything on his plate, then sat back in his seat. "I apologize for the swearing, Mum."

"You'll be more than sorry, young man!" she snapped. "Arthur."

"Yes, dear," his dad said, nodding. "Ron, you better watch your mouth at your mother's table. You're not funny."

"I know," Ron said, honestly feeling guilty. "I'm sorry. I truly am."

His dad nodded. Ron could tell that he wasn't too upset. "There, Molly: everything is fine and Hermione's shoes are clean."

"They really are," Hermione said.

"Maybe we should just have dessert," Ginny said. "It might be easier for Ron to handle."

His mum's fury instantly disappeared. "That's right! Hermione, I made your favorite. There's apple crumble with cinnamon somewhere on this table."

"Over here, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said, passing the covered dish to her.

"Oh, lovely," Hermione said, looking genuinely pleased and surprised. "How did you know it's my favorite?"

"Ron told me," his mum said.

Ron shrugged. "No big deal. I heard you say it once, Hermione. Do you want me to get you a piece?"

"Yes, please," she said. He attempted to keep his hands steady as he gave her a generous helping. Having Hermione's gaze on him made Ron shake. "Thank you," she said.

"Anytime," he said. They grinned at each other, falling into their own little moment. Ron thought that maybe things could be okay between them.

After dessert and tea, his mum got with Hermione and Ginny on the couch to show her the pictures from Bill's wedding. Ron was stuck cleaning everything because of his foul mouth. Harry helped him clear the table. "That wasn't so bad, eh?"

"What?" Ron asked.

"Hermione coming back," Harry said.

"I didn't expect it to be," he said.

"You two must think I'm thick or something," Harry said. "I saw her face when your mum told her to get you. If something is going on—"

"Nothing's going on, Harry. She's tired. You know what, so am I," he said. "Why do you bloody care anyway? You usually just let Hermione and I work it out."

"Why wouldn't I care, Ron?" Harry asked. "You two are my best friends. If something's going on, then we should work it out now."

Ron knew that Harry was trying to help, but Ron really needed to get to Hermione before the night was over. He honestly couldn't comprehend anything else that was happening around him. "I appreciate it, but there's nothing to work out," Ron said. "Besides—there's nothing for we to do."

"What does that mean?" Harry asked, giving him a look.

"Hermione's the one that had to wipe her parents' memories of her, and I'm the one having shit going on with me every day."

"So I couldn't possibly understand what you're going through? My life is just a piece of piss?" Harry asked. "I don't have anything standing in my way?"

"That's not what I'm saying," Ron said in irritation. "I just—I—not everything's about what's going on with the Horcruxes, Harry. There are other big things happening that we're worn out from." He cleaned the last plate then left the room.

Ron couldn't get anywhere near Hermione alone for the rest of the evening. If his mum wasn't talking to her, then Ginny was. If she

wasn't, then Harry was discussing something with Hermione. The two of them huddled close, whispering things as if they had been dying to do so all summer. Ron decided to go to his room. There was no point in trying to talk to Hermione now. He flipped through magazines then played Snaps by himself. The anticipation, fear, and almost dread Ron felt for her arrival wasn't really there anymore. He didn't know what he'd expected when she came. Ron thought she would yell at him, slap him, explain herself, or possibly even cry. He had expected almost anything but the ease that they'd exchanged with each other. Ron never assumed that they wouldn't talk about their night, but a part of him was now considering it their best option. Ron didn't want to forget it, however, it had never been about what he wanted. What Ron needed was the survival of his friendship with Hermione.

Harry came back into the bedroom sometime later. He sat on his cot. "Everyone is in bed. I know Hermione must be knackered."

"Where is she?" Ron asked.

"In Ginny's room," he answered.

Ron nodded. "Um, Harry, about what I said, I didn't mean to sound like such a wanker. You were right. I'm - or at least I was - a little mental about Hermione coming today."

"Why?" Harry asked.

Ron wanted to tell him. Harry was his best mate in the whole world. They usually told each other everything, however, what had happened with Hermione was between him and her, and, until something was settled, it had to stay that way. "We sorta had a row the night before she left," Ron came up with.

Harry sat on the edge of his bed, looking intrigued. "What about?"

"I dunno," Ron said, trying to think of something convincing. "You know how we are. We were talking and then we were arguing. After I said some really stupid rubbish, she went to sleep then just left the next morning."

"Ron, you could've said something to me," Harry said. "I wouldn't have been on you about it if I knew."

"It's my fault," he said. "I've been trying to forget about it is all."

"I don't think you can now, mate. She's here." Harry grinned a little. "I reckon she'll be ready to let it go too. I saw her smiling at you a few times during tea."

"Yeah?" Ron asked hopefully.

"I wouldn't lie," he said. Harry lay back in his bed, taking off his glasses.

Ron fidgeted with his pillowcase. "So, what were you talking about with her earlier?"

"Just some research she's been doing," Harry answered. "I'm bloody glad she's here. We might get somewhere now." Ron didn't know how to answer him. Harry made it seem as if Ron had been useless to him. Ron wanted to voice his opinion but he kept it in. It wasn't worth an argument.

Ron couldn't get to sleep that night knowing Hermione was downstairs in Ginny's room. He wanted to talk to her and find out what was really going on with her parents. Even if they didn't talk about what had happened between them, Ron knew that there was loads for her to discuss about Australia. He wanted to help her, and he still believed that Hermione wanted his help. Yet, it would have to wait. He'd have to find the right time and place to speak with her alone. He pushed the blanket off him. Ron was entirely too hot. He got out of bed, stripping off his shirt. He needed cold water.

Ron crept out of his room and downstairs to the kitchen. When he got to the bottom step, he stopped. Hermione was on the couch, staring into a mug. She had her legs crossed, clenching the mug as if it controlled her heartbeat. Ron felt every bit of himself pull toward her. She was alone, quiet, and hisâ€¦in a way. "Mione?" he said.

Hermione jumped then turned to him. Her eyes widened. "Where's your shirt?"

"Huh?" he looked down and blushed. "Oh, I'mâ€¦I forgot I wasn't wearing one." He felt like a sagging tit. The last thing Hermione probably wanted to see was his naked chest. "Let me go-"

"Don't worry about it â€" you live here. I'm sorry," she quickly said. "Come sit down." He obeyed without a second thought. Ron sat on the cushion next to her, watching her as she continued to stare into the mug. Being this close to her, he could see how tired Hermione was. "I thought you were asleep."

"I thought you were too," he said.

"No, I can't sleep. Not at all," she said. He wanted to brush the hair out of her face or take her hand, but he didn't. The new hesitation was peculiar. Before, it'd always made Ron nervous to touch her, but a pat, grip, or brush had been all right. Now, after doing everything from kissing Hermione to having sex with her, Ron could barely sit close to her; however, it didn't stop him from wanting to. He told himself it didn't matter, but he had missed her body. Even after only having it for one night.

"I can't really sleep either," he finally said.

"Why is that?"

Ron didn't know what to say. Hermione's dark eyes locked on him, making it impossible to hold everything back. "Because you're here," he said. Hermione went back to looking into her mug. He



couldn't take it anymore. He grabbed it out of her hand, slamming it on the table. "Will you stop doing that? You invited me to sit with you."

"What do you want, Ron?" she asked. "Do you want me to tell you that you're the reason I can't sleep either?"

"No. Not if it's not the truth," he said.

"Well, it is," she said. "It's hard for me to sleep knowing you're in the house, but I also can't sleep because I don't know what my parents are doing right now."

Ron swallowed a bit of his anger and irritation. "We can talk about it."

"Like you want to hear it," she muttered.

He gaped at her "Are you taking the piss? Of course I want to hear it."

"You haven't acted like it," Hermione said. "All day you've been avoiding me."

"That's not true," he said. "You've been surrounded all day. I couldn't get anywhere near you without my mum or Harry getting to you first. I reckon you would just tell one of them everything."

"I didn't! At least, not the whole lot of it," she said. She sighed. "You may not believe this right now, Ron, but all I wanted to do was see you today. What's happening right now between us is what I want, regardless of all the sweet hospitality and support I received today from everyone else."

Ron's body warmed over as some of his confidence returned. "It's what I want too. I tried getting you alone today, but it was impossible. I really missed you, Hermione."

"I missed you too." Hermione pressed her lips together, clasping her hands "œ" once more, to form every word in her mind.

"Go on and tell me," Ron said. All his attention focused on her. Hermione was the only person in his life.

"We really had a great time. It didn't take much convincing on my part. I think my parents were eager to get away with me," Hermione said. "We spent time in Melbourne and Darwin before going to Sydney. We traveled, ate different foods, and visited parks. It was so wonderful. I don't think the three of us have ever had so much fun before."

"That sounds brilliant," Ron said.

"It was; however, it couldn't always be." The joy in Hermione's expression faded somewhat. "I had to research and find out what I was going to do with their new memories. I can't give you details, unfortunately."

"That's fine," he said.

"Anyhow, about four days ago I finally found the nerve and did it. I did it right as they were asleep in the hotel room." Hermione practically winced.

Ron repeated what she had just said in his mind. "Four days ago?" he asked. "What did you do after?"

"I sort of followed them to keep an eye on them day-to-day. It was to make sure that they were set in a routine and that there weren't any troubles with the spell I cast." She gazed back at her mug, almost longingly. "I kept the hotel room we stayed in and sort of lived out of there, eating at the restaurant that was downstairs. Then I came here." Her words were grave. Ron felt like such a prick. For weeks he'd been anxious about what he would do when Hermione came back. Ron had worried about himself and his family and he'd been angry with her for leaving without a word. Ron didn't think about what Hermione must've felt or the loneliness she'd had to endure. His fears no longer mattered. Ron moved closer to her, lacing his fingers with hers. He ignored the pleasant feeling. It wasn't the time for it.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione," he said. "I wish I could've been there with you."

"I would've liked that," she said in a somewhat stuffy voice as if she were fighting back tears, "but it was something I had to do alone. They're my parents."

"I understand," he said. "Family means everything." Hermione nodded. She looked down at their hands like she had looked into her mug. They were quiet, but Ron didn't mind. He was close to her and that was all he needed. He couldn't stop his body from reacting to how bloody pretty Hermione was. She didn't have to do anything to be perfect.

"You didn't write me back," she said after some time.

"Sorry?" Ron said, breaking out of his daze.

Hermione looked up at him. "You didn't write back to me," she repeated. "My letter. You never responded." He finally moved his hand away, facing forward. He didn't want to hear this. "I regularly checked the address I left for you to write to," she continued with, "but I never got anything."

Ron rubbed his face. It was a heavy truth and it had been an even heavier decision to make. Her bringing up the letter broke the easiness between them. 'It' had happened. They shagged on his bed, and she had left. Some of Ron's confusion and irritation returned. "I didn't know what to say."

"You could've said anything, Ron," Hermione said, her voice growing stronger. "I can't believe that you didn't write me back."

"You can't believe me?" he asked incredulously. "What was I supposed to write? What was I going to say to make anything seemâ€¦normal?"

"I don't know, Ron, but you shouldn't have-"

"Don't tell me what I should have done," he snapped. "You can't make it my responsibility to fix everything. Besides, who knows if you would've read it anyway?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

He faced her. At long last, the anger and hurt that Ron wouldn't show had completely returned. "Because you left without a proper goodbye. How was I to know that you'd read a whole damn letter about it?"

Hermione paled. "Ron, that's - that's not-"

"Fair?" he asked. They were quiet once more. Ron wanted Hermione to try to justify herself. He almost needed to have a fight with her so he could stop carrying all his feelings around.

"Iâ€¦I may have left, but I left a note as well," she said in a softer voice. "I left you a goodbye. I gave you something. You gave me nothing for weeks."

Ron actually chuckled a little. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "It wasn't exactly a goodbye note now, was it?"

"Don't be mean," she said.

"I'm not. I'm being honest," he said. "You didn't give me anything, Hermione. What you said, I already knew. That letter was nothing more than an excuse to get out of talking to me."

"That's not true," she said.

"I'm sorry that I don't want to go on about Horcruxes," he mumbled as if he couldn't hear her. "I'm not Harry, Hermione."

"Harry? This has nothing to do with him," she said. She shook her head, glaring at him. "I don't believe you, Ron. I'm going to bed." She got up, walking right past him. Ron sat back and listened to her practically march up to Ginny's room. He wanted to apologize and go after her, but he really had nothing to say. Ron was a lot angrier than he'd realized. Even missing Hermione like mad couldn't change that.

Ron went back up to his room as well. He dug into his side table as silently as he could but it wasn't good enough. Harry stirred, turning over. "Wuz happen? You in danger?" Harry felt around his bed for his wand; Ron put a hand on his wrist.

"I'm just looking for something, Harry," Ron said, hating how on edge his mate always was now. "Everything is fine. I'm fine. Go back to sleep." Harry nodded, collapsing into his pillow and instantly falling back to sleep. Ron took out two envelopes then

eased back out of the room. He went into the loo, shutting the door. Ron gazed at the two and picked the wrinkled one first. It was to him, from Hermione. The paper was so worn and wrinkled like it had been handled roughly. It wasn't a lie. Ron had picked it up, skimming through it at least once every couple of days. He knew the sentences by heart, but he read it over again for reassurance.

Dear Ron,

I don't know where to begin. I know I said that we would talk but I honestly don't know if I can right now. With everything that happened last night, I think this will be a much better, simpler way for us to communicate initially. We might even find this system as an easier method to be honest with each other. Well, I guess we'll see how it goes.

So, you're probably furious because I left without saying goodbye or talking to you about this. You have every right to be; however, I hope in time you can forgive me and understand that I honestly couldn't stay. There was too much that needed to be said and not enough time to say it, and the subject at hand was too extreme for us to merely converse casually about. About last nightâ€¦it was intense, to say the least. I'm oversimplifying but at this moment it's the best I've got.

I know the both of us were very upset, Ron. I was certainly devastated about everything. On top of our stress and Dumbledore's funeral, Bill, Harry, and all the chaos, I guess we got ahead of ourselves. We got caught up in the moment, causing all those things to happen. I think it's the best way to explain it, right? Now, I'm not saying that it was wrong or that it was your fault or mine. I'm grateful for everything you did for me. We've gotten so close, Ron, and after everything we endured last term, I'm grateful that we were able to help each other. You gave me what I needed, and I did feel better. I can only hope that, in some small way, I made you feel better too.

However, I'm sure that's all it was. We're best friends. As best friends, we want to take care of each other and help each other through troubling times. Yesterday was horrible, and last night was our way of taking care of each other. For that, I truly thank you. I'm sure a thank you isn't what you want but it's where I will start. I honestly can't give you much more than that at this time. There's so much going on with my parents, your family, and with Harry already. I can only focus on so much at one time without losing myself, Ron. I'm probably rambling but I guess what I'm trying to say is that I don't know if I can add what we did onto my heap as well right now. Us making up and getting to the point we're at now took some work, and I'm not sure if we can accomplish that again in our current situation.

Please, I hope you read this and give me some sort of reassurance or guidance about what we should do next. I don't think we can pretend that it didn't happen. You were there, I was there, and we clearly felt things for each other. I urgently need to know more about that on your part, and I'll tell you about me, of course. Whether it was just the heat of the moment or something

else, we have to talk about it. It was a very big deal but what kind of big deal I don't know. That's why we need to communicate. Not communicating was the reason why it took us so long to make up the last time. I don't want you to almost die for us to talk again, Ron. I know we can be better than that.

Once again, you're probably saying that I have no right to demand that we talk because I left, but I genuinely can't talk about this face to face. Not today. I'm barely holding on as it is. Looking at you and thinking about what we did, on top of what I have to do to my parents, will be too much. I have to focus. I have to get through this short holiday with them and the spell. It's the most important thing to me right now. I'm sorry.

I hope you can understand. I also hope you write back soon. I've added a slip telling where to address the letter. I'll try to check every few days. It'll be nice to talk to you in some way while I'm here going through this, Ron. I expect that we can keep writing to each other for the whole duration and figure this out. That way, when we see each other again, it won't be as difficult. I don't want this to be harder than it is, Ron. I'm sure you don't either. It happened, and we have to deal with it.

I have to go. My parents are expecting me soon. I'm so sorry, Ron.

Hermione

Ron put the letter down. When he had first received it, it had given him peace of mind. Hermione hadn't seemed angry or regretful; however, the more he read it and the more time went on, the more he realized that their night together hadn't meant anything to her. While she didn't hate it, she obviously didn't enjoy it either. It wasn't special or perfect or passionate; it was nothing more than a wrong answer on an exam to her.

He stuffed the letter back in the envelope. Hermione had no reason to be upset with him. What could he possibly write back to her? He would be the biggest tit in the world if he told her how he had been confused about it, but definitely enjoyed every moment of it and felt changed in some ways. No - it wasn't what Hermione wanted to hear. She simply wanted reassurance that it was as pointless to him as it had been to her. For that, Ron chose not to write her back. He couldn't tell her the truth about his feelings, but he couldn't lie about them either. It was something he refused to do, even if he was the only one to feel that what happened that night was a reflection of their possible love for one another.

He picked up the other envelope, flipping it between his fingers. Hermione had given him his answer: they were only friends trying to make each other feel better. The touching, kissing, and sex had been about healing, and nothing more. Ron kept seeing, 'I'm so sorry, Ron' over and over in his mind. He had to shut off his feelings for good and do whatever he could to preserve his friendship with Hermione. He would start tomorrow with an apology. Being Hermione's friend was what Ron had been since he was eleven and apologizing was what he did best.

Ron stood up, splashing water on his face. Hermione had acted first, so his answer didn't matter. He looked at the other envelope - the one that was from him and addressed to Hermione. Ron had written it, in the heat of the moment, right after he read hers. He had poured his heart out to her, telling her exactly what he had thought about it all. He had written it, sealed it, and almost found the nerve to send it, however, his senses had quickly returned and so the letter stayed in his drawer right under hers. He stuffed them both back into his pocket, going back to bed.

What was in his letter was just a dream. Ron had to live in reality.

\*\*\*\* Ahhhh. That was refreshing to write, lol. It's got a different feel from my other works. I like to have diversity. I'm going to incorporate feelings and thoughts from DH into this story because I think they're important. This will show a different, yet equally real and vital, side to Ron and Hermione that I haven't so far. However, I'm me â€”ROSE, so obviously R/Hr will still be FTW - do not fear! Lol. Anyway, I hope you lot enjoyed this. Hmmâ€¦ what's up with that Hermione, eh? Maybe we'll find out sometime soonâ€¦ ;) Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

## CHAPTER 2

I AM SO, SO INCREDABLY SORRY! I know it's been too long since I've updated anything but this week has really kicked my arse. It shouldn't happen againâ€¦ If you're reading this story and happen to follow, "Turned to Real Life" as well, please know that I will be updating that story within the next couple of day. So sorryâ€¦

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Hermione pressed her fingers into the bark as she closely observed her parents getting out of their car. She gasped, scampering behind the tree when her father looked in her direction. Once Hermione thought it was clear, she peeked over again. Her parents were walking up to their flat now. They stopped at the door and Mr. Granger said something to his wife. She laughed, touching his chest like she usually did when he gave a witty, yet mildly inappropriate, comment. He then took her hand, kissing the top of her head. The exchange was one mannerism from their old life that Hermione thankfully hadn't had to erase. That regular bit of flirtation between them was sophisticated, beautiful, and something Hermione had adored for years. Finally, they went inside. After verifying that no one was watching, Hermione tapped the tip of her wand to her scalp. She felt the uncomfortable sensation of something being cracked on her head as the Disillusionment Charm went into effect. When the feeling disappeared, she disappeared.

Hermione appeared inside her parents' bedroom. She could hear her mum in the kitchen. Staying as quiet as she could, Hermione slid

against the wall and followed her mum's voice. Mrs. Granger was sitting in a chair, getting her feet rubbed by her husband.

"It was such a long day, Sam," she said.

"At least we're both off tomorrow," he answered. He peered around their flat as if they'd been there for years. "I live for the weekends. It's always so quiet."

"It is," she said. "I love it." They looked at each other, smiling.

Hermione bit her lip very hard. Yes, there was no one to bother them or make noises that interrupted their peace. They had no pets to tend to nor a daughter to worry about. Hermione's hands started to itch. She wanted to tuck a piece of her mum's gorgeous dark hair behind her ear. She also wanted a nice, comforting hug from her dad. Her parents were gazing at each other as if they were so happy that there was no one in their life to disrupt their carefree lifestyle. Hermione kept sliding along the wall, moving into their bedroom again. On the table were pictures of her parents in Chicago, Madrid, and Paris. Hermione had once been in those photos, but she didn't exist to them anymore. Her 13-year-old self that had stood proudly between her parents in the Paris photo was now gone. She wasn't even an elapsed memory to them but completely nonexistent. Hermione felt tears in her eyes, but she refused to let them fall.

Her father suddenly came into the room. Hermione pressed herself against the wall even more to blend into it. He sat on the bed, taking off his shoes.

"Lauren, do I need to go to the shop for anything later?" he asked.

"No!" her mother answered. "I'm cooking the roast tonight."

As her dad took his tie and watch off, Hermione told herself that she could leave him. He would be all right, and most importantly, he would be safe.

Hermione slipped out of the room just before he closed the door. She put her hand against it, kissing the wood. "I love you, Dad," she whispered. Hermione then slid herself into the kitchen once more where her mum was pulling tins out from the cabinets. Hermione leaned against the refrigerator. She was doing the right thing for her parents because she was ensuring their protection. The pain that she felt was worth their safety. Hermione reminded herself that her mother would love her again. Her mother would dislike the quite once more as she flipped through her photo album that held pictures of the three of them in Chicago, Madrid, and Paris.

Hermione's tears were falling far too steadily now, so she slid away, leaning against a wall. This had to be her last visit. Her parents were in a solid routine; they were doing fine without her. Hermione gazed at her mum from the living room. It would be

okay to leave her. "I love you, Mum," she said to her before disappearing back to her hotel room.

After taking the charm off, Hermione straightened the already made bed, gathered all of the trash into one pile, and sorted through all of her belongings again. She kept cleaning and organizing, but it wasn't enough of a distraction. She ultimately collapsed on the bed, letting her stubborn tears scrape down her cheeks. Hermione kept wiping them away but more came down. It all felt so wrong, but she was doing the right thing. Her parents were fine. There were no glitches or reasons to panic. No matter how much the situation hurt her, nothing was worth more than her parents' safety. Hermione had to accept it; she had to leave Australia before she spent the rest of her life watching her mum and dad go through life without her.

Hermione bought a sandwich and some crisps then sat alone in her hotel room. She skimmed through one of her Transfiguration books while she ate, feeling a little better as she studied material she knew by heart. Schoolwork was something Hermione knew, loved, and could control. Her books were the only things in her life that she would never have to part with or be forced to leave behind. She shut her eyes tightly, no longer feeling hungry or in the mood to read, and decided to go to bed, even though she wasn't very tired.

She would have to get up before dawn if she wanted to get back to England at a decent hour. Hermione's heart skipped a beat as she thought of what she would return to. She had to expunge the images of ginger hair, blue eyes, and large hands from her mind; she would never be able to get to sleep if she didn't.

She reset her alarm, then got under the covers. Her parents were probably eating their roast now or sipping wine as they read together on the couch. They were safe now; that was all she cared about. Hermione repeatedly reminded herself of this until her body at last relaxed enough for her to slip into a light, uncomfortable sleep.

Hermione didn't feel any better when she woke up in the wee hours of the morning. "Okay, get up. You're fine," she told herself aloud. She let out a deep breath then took a shower and got dressed. There were bigger things at stake now than her happiness or whether or not her parents knew her. Harry needed her help, and she and Ron had to be there for him.

At the thought of Ron, she popped away to the last vacant mailbox on the corner. It was where she had told him and Harry to write to her. She had received a letter from Harry the day before, meaning that if anything was inside, it would be from Ron. Hermione opened the mailbox in nervousness and anticipation, but the box was empty.

Her heart sank as her shock overtook her. Ron had officially not written to her at all during their time apart. She gazed into the box, hoping that something would magically appear, but nothing did.



Hermione sat on the bed when she returned to her room. All of her bags were packed, and she was ready to go back. She was prepared to give a smile, and be strong in front of everyone, to begin figuring out what was to be done concerning the Horcruxes; yes, Hermione was equipped for everythingâ€¦except Ron.

The images of Ron's ginger hair, blue eyes, and large hands seeped into her mind again, however, she couldn't erase them this time. She had to see him now, but she wasn't sure if she could handle it. Hermione had missed him so much. She'd thought about him constantly during her stay in Australia, but she knew that staying with him for the summer wouldn't be the same as before.

Hermione lay back on the bed, closing her eyes. Sometimes when she lay perfectly still, she could feel Ron on top of her. She could sense the exact moment when the sharp, deep thrust burned her from head to toe, making her no longer a virgin. Hermione softly moaned, squeezing her stomach. The heated moment had been painful, but Ron's body had felt so good. His muscle, hands, and mouth had pleased her, caring for her expertly and delicately. Hermione shouldn't have been surprised. Ron was rude and sometimes far too tempered, but he was beyond passionate. It didn't matter if he was playing chess, defending his loved ones, or even arguing with her; there was always so much fervor behind Ron. She smiled. It was Ron's passionate nature that had made her fall for him in the first place years ago.

Hermione squeezed her stomach again but quickly sat up. She rubbed the sweat from her brow. Their night of fervor was over. Those strong feelings had to be over, because there were more important matters to attend to. Ron's lack of letters told Hermione that he apparently felt the same way. He hadn't written to her, telling her that her letter was rubbish and that they could try to have a relationship beyond friendship. All Ron had done was ignore her, leaving her in Australia to think of everything about their situation herself. Well, since it was, as always, up to her, she decided that it was nothing more than a simpleâ€¦and very hot and enjoyable act of infatuation. Ron touching her, kissing her, and making love to her had only been about a single moment of passion. She bit her lip, closing her eyes. She had to stop describing their act using the word 'love'. Love was for couples - or at least for adults in defined relationships. What she and Ron had done was have sex on his bed. He had wanted her to stop crying, and she had wanted to stop her body from aching with need.

Hermione had to stop thinking about him, so she checked herself in the mirror. She disliked how tired she appeared. It was the only major thing about her that looked different from the morning she left the Burrow. Then again, Ron wouldn't care if she had changed in some way. He hadn't even bothered to write her to see if she was still alive, so there was no reason to believe that he would care if her hair had gotten longer or if her skin was a bit darker.

Hermione straightened her shirt then grabbed her bags. She took a deep breath, telling herself that she would be okay. She and Ron would come up with something, even if it were weeks too late. She

tried not to feel angry at how irresponsible they'd both been or how Ron could've let so much time pass without answering her letter. Hermione shook her head to rid herself of the thought. She couldn't be angry now. Now - she had to work.

She apparated to the Ministry to see Kingsley, but he wasn't there. It frustrated her because she'd wanted to be completely finished with her parents' relocation procedure before she put all of her focus into helping Harry. Now, not only would she have to wait another day, but she also had to return to the Burrow earlier than she had been prepared to. Hermione had no choice but to accept the glitch in her plan and apparate to the Burrow.

While she walked to the front door, she reminded herself that she was strong and intelligent enough to handle whatever would be thrown at her. She reached the door but gave herself a minute to put on a smile before knocking. Hermione would be okay. She was back where she wanted to be, and Harry and Ron were inside waiting. Her heart skipped a beat again. She was about to see him. The idea made her excited and anxious at the same time. She quickly knocked on the door; it only took a second before it opened.

"Hermione!" Mrs. Weasley screamed. She pulled her in, embracing her tightly. "Oh, my dear, look at you!" She kissed her ear. "You're so beautiful." Hermione merely shrugged, blushing. She knew she looked the same.

"It's great to have you back," Mr. Weasley said.

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley," Hermione said. A bit of warmth hugged her body. She loved the Weasley family dearly. They were like a second home to her. Well, they were her only home now. Ginny gave her a hug next while Hermione looked around the room: the only other person inside was Harry. Ron was nowhere to be seen. Once Ginny let her go, Hermione practically jumped into Harry's arms. Ron left her mind for a moment, and she was incredibly happy and relieved to see her other best friend. Harry had written to her and had met her at the door. Hermione wanted to tell him how much she appreciated those two small gestures, but she didn't know how. From what she gathered, Ron hadn't told him about what had gone on between them.

"It's great to see you, Harry," Hermione said. "I'm glad you're okay."

"I'm fine. It's great to see you, too," he said. "Ron's upstairs in his room."

"Why don't you go get him so we can eat," Mrs. Weasley said. Everyone looked at Hermione as if the request wasn't any big deal - as if she even wanted to go get him. She did but didn't at the same time. She wanted everyone to know that it probably would be best if someone else fetched Ron, but Hermione had to act as if nothing had changed.

"All right," she said. Harry gave her a curious look but she ignored him. She dropped her bags then slowly walked up the

stairs. She heard Ron's family and Harry converse as they set the table, but the loudest sounds came from her own mind. The closer Hermione got to Ron's door, the more she could hear moans, cries, and mattresses squeaking. She didn't know what to expect upstairs. She'd left Ron's room with a promise that she never intended to keep. For all Hermione knew, Ron was still sitting on his bed, waiting for her to return from Ginny's room so they could talk about what had happened.

His door was slightly ajar. When she pushed it open, she found Ron pacing and fidgeting. Hermione wanted to give herself a moment to observe him but they'd already spent enough time away from each other. Their silence had to end now. "Ron?" she said.

He stopped his movements but kept his back to her. She didn't know how to interpret it. She was scared but she told herself that she didn't need to be. It was only Ron.

"Ron?" she said again.

He finally turned around. Hermione gripped the door handle. If it was at all possible, Ron was even more gorgeous than when she'd left him. His hair was shorter, showing off more of his face and ears. He was wearing a blue shirt that she had seen many times on him before but actually looked a little tighter on him now. It also appeared as if Ron had grown in both height and build. Hermione's body went into a frenzy as all her anger for him disappeared. They were alone in his room again. It was quiet, and Ron was staring at her. Her body completely relaxed for the first time in weeks. She suddenly remembered what kind of power Ron's presence had on her, and she let him take her over, filling her up with goodness.

"Hermione," he said in a somewhat scratchy voice.

She let go of the handle, walking over to him. The closer she got, the more she wanted him. Her need for Ron hadn't died out at all. Everything she felt for him was more intense. "Harry told me you were up here."

"I was asleep," he said. "I didn't hear you get in."

"That's fine," she said. They stood in silence as they looked at each other. She stared into his blue eyes then let her gaze roam over his lips. Hermione started to feel a heavy pressure and strong heat. Ron just stared at her blankly; she couldn't tell what he was thinking. If he was happy, furious, excited, or bored, he wasn't showing it. The silence became too much for her. "Um, I can go back downstairsâ€¦!" She started to walk off but Ron ran up to her, forcefully pulling her into a firm hug.

"No, don't go," he swiftly said, almost in a pleading way, holding her even tighter. Hermione automatically put her arms around him, hugging him back. She stood on her toes, nuzzling her face to his neck as he gripped her lower waist. His hold was secure, his skin smelled clean, and his body felt amazing against hers. She felt safe and comfortable. Ron's embrace made Hermione feel normal around him. Everything difficult about their

relationship backed off. Ron was just Ron again. She didn't have to be anything.

"I've missed you," she said quietly. It was the truth. Hermione had throbbed for Ron but now she could heal. She didn't realize how much she'd missed him until now. She'd missed his voice and his hands and everything about him that made her feel so good.

"I've missed you too," he said.

She pulled away, looking up at him. Hermione wished that Ron would clutch her face, kissing her deeply like he had that night. She wanted him to say that he hadn't written to her because he wanted to tell her to her face that her words were nonsense, that he would never leave her side; however, he didn't. Ron didn't confess his feelings, and they were still just friends.

"W-well, your mum says dinner is ready," she said. "I'm not that hungry but I know she probably worked really hard. I haven't had a nice meal in ages." Hermione bit her lip to stop talking. She had to keep herself together and not ramble on.

"Then you should eat," he said. The statement was probably Ron's way of telling her to let go of him, but she didn't. Hermione didn't leave his body, and they didn't stop holding each other, but she knew that she had to move away. Slowly, almost painfully, she left his embrace.

"We should go," she said.

"Okay," he said. Ron had given his response quickly and easily so she must've been right in thinking that they should go downstairs rather than talking a bit more perhaps or staying alone together in his room for awhile. There wasn't anything more to say.

The Weasleys' table was full of hot, delicious foods. Hermione didn't know what to do with herself. Everything looked tasty and she felt rather guilty for not being hungrier. Mrs. Weasley must've worked hard to make things special for her. The least Hermione could do was pretend that she was starving. She sat between Harry and Ron at the table. Since Hermione was twelve, she'd usually found herself between them whenever the three of them would sit somewhere. This was the first time that being between them had ever felt overwhelming. To her right was Harry: the friend she had to serve and protect in every way that she could. To her left was Ron: the friend she had given herself to in every way that she could.

Hermione tried to only focus on her food, but it was difficult. People kept asking her questions and distracting her, but not enough to keep her focus off of Ron. Regardless, she had to try.

"I'm so sorry for missing Bill's wedding," Hermione said. "I underestimated how long I'd be away." She hadn't, actually. She'd known from the day she left the Burrow that she would miss Bill's wedding. Hermione simply didn't have the heart to tell them that.

"Don't apologize, dear," Mrs. Weasley said. "We understand. It was still very nice with the smaller crowd. I have pictures."

"I'd love to see them," she said.

"I'll show them to you after dessert," Mrs. Weasley said. "Anyway, I plan to have some sort of reception for them here. Bill's my oldest boy and Fleur's a woman, so she must want something."

"Molly, we'll work it out with them soon," Mr. Weasley assured. "Probably before the summer is up, all right?" He looked to Hermione. "Did you get a chance to see Kingsley? I forgot to ask."

"Dad, she just got here," Ron quickly said, looking a bit upset.

"It's all right, Ron," Hermione said, feeling her heart melt for him. He'd always been quick to come to her aid. It was nice to know that sex hadn't changed that. "I was supposed to check in as soon as I got back. I did, but he wasn't in his office. I'll try again in the morning so Kingsley can know that everything is in place."

"What does that mean exactly?" Ginny asked.

Hermione stirred her fork around her food. She knew that Ginny was only being curious and that the situation with her parents was intricate, but Hermione didn't want to talk about it. She felt everyone's eyes on her so she had to respond. "It means that the spell is in effect. My parents have new names, new jobs, and a nice flat in Sydney. I checked and double-checked everything before I left. Kingsley's the only one who will have the information besides me in case—well, just in case." Hermione couldn't speak anymore. She couldn't bring herself to say, 'in case something goes wrong'. Nothing was allowed to go wrong, and she had to make herself believe that.

"They'll be safe there, Hermione," Harry said.

"Harry's right. They're completely safe now. When this is over, you'll pick them up and put things right again," Mr. Weasley said. Hermione knew all of these things, but hearing them a hundred times didn't make what she did any easier. She could only respond by taking a sip of her drink. Suddenly, Ron's plate crashed to the floor.

"Damn! Fucking Merlin's left bollock!" Ron groaned. Harry burst into laughter while Ron's mum gasped, scowling at him.

"Ronald Bilius Weasley!" Mrs. Weasley said. "I thought I told you about that language!"

"Sorry," Ron said indifferently. He bent down, lazily piling food back on his plate.

"Wicked, Ron," Ginny said. "Did you get any on Hermione's trainers?"

"Piss off."

"Ronald!" his mother practically growled.

"Let me help you," Hermione said hastily, feeling somewhat confused. She couldn't believe Ron's behavior. She kneeled in front of him, taking out her wand. He immediately put his hands on hers, giving her a jolt.

"No, let me get it," Ron said. "Mum's going to yell at me some more, then Dad will calm her down. Someone will bring up dessert after that and this conversation will be dropped." He smiled handsomely at her; she automatically smiled as well. He was being her knight. Ron was sacrificing himself for her, covertly trying to take the attention off her by putting it all on him.

"Thank you," Hermione said. She grasped his hand; he looked down at them. She began to think that maybe he wasn't angry, that maybe things weren't as damaged as she thought. Ron was still acting like Ron, and his confidence and kindness was making her feel stronger. Ron slopped everything back on his plate then sat back in his chair. Hermione got back into her seat as well.

"I apologize for the swearing, Mum," Ron said.

"You'll be more than sorry, young man!" Ron's mum said through gritted teeth. "Arthur."

"Yes, dear," Mr. Weasley said. "Ron, you'd better watch your mouth at your mother's table. You're not funny."

"I know," Ron said. "I'm sorry. I truly am."

"There, Molly," Mr. Weasley said. "Everything is fine, and Hermione's shoes are clean."

"They really are," Hermione said. Ron had thrown himself in the path of Mrs. Weasley's anger for her. She wanted to help him in any way that she could.

"Maybe we should just have dessert," Ginny suggested. "It might be easier for Ron to handle."

Mrs. Weasley lightened up a bit. "That's right! Hermione, I made your favorite. There's apple crumble with cinnamon somewhere on this table."

Harry passed a covered dish to her. "Over here, Mrs. Weasley."

Hermione was at a loss for words. Ron's plan had been flawlessly executed and now apple crumble was being passed around. "Oh, lovely," she said as she saw the gorgeous dessert. "How did you know it's my favorite?" She hadn't had real homemade apple crumble in almost a year.

"Ron told me," Mrs. Weasley said.

"No big deal," Ron said indifferently. "I heard you say it once, Hermione. Do you want me to get you a piece?"

Hermione's heart beat for him in that moment as he, once again, reminded her of why she fancied him so much. She had only told Ron once that her favorite dessert was apple crumble with cinnamon. It'd been on the train ride back to King's Cross after first year. Hermione remembered because Ron had shared a chocolate frog with her. She simply couldn't believe that Ron had remembered as well.

"Yes, please," Hermione said.

Ron scooped her out a hefty portion, which she was happily going to eat. She noticed that the spoon shook in Ron's hand but she didn't know why. "Thank you," Hermione said, grateful for so many more reasons than Ron would understand.

"Anytime," he said. Ron gave her another amazing grin. She grinned back, sighing a little. His gaze took Hermione someplace far away from the table. She wanted to stay there with him.

Hermione enjoyed her crumble and tea. She kept giving Ron small smiles when he wasn't looking. It felt normal — like what she'd always done when they ate together. She wanted to talk to Ron and thank him for what he'd done since her arrival, but his mother made him clean the dishes and the entire kitchen by himself. Harry joined him and Hermione offered to help as well, but Mrs. Weasley wouldn't hear of it. She pulled Hermione to the couch where they, along with Ginny, looked at the pictures from Bill's wedding.

"Fleur looks stunning," Hermione said, loving how the style of her dress had a heavy French influence.

"She really does. Bill, my baby, didn't look too bad either," Mrs. Weasley said. Hermione thumbed through the wedding photos. All of the Weasley men looked exceptionally handsome. Even Harry had attempted to fix up.

"You can skip over this one," Ginny muttered, pulling a picture away.

"No, let me see," Hermione said, holding on to it. The picture was one of Ginny and Ron dancing together. "Oh! This is precious!"

"See, Ginny?" Mrs. Weasley said. "Hermione, that's exactly what I said. I knew they would look precious together, but it took ages to get this shot. I had to nearly shoot sparks at their bums to get them on the dance floor."

"I don't know why it's such a surprise that Ron and I don't fancy dancing together. It might look cute but it doesn't feel cute," Ginny said, shivering a little.

Hermione laughed. "Well, we all know who you do fancy dancing with, yes?"

Ginny smirked, shrugging innocently. Mrs. Weasley beamed at her daughter, tucking a piece of hair behind Ginny's ear. "She got her dance in with Harry." Mrs. Weasley thumbed through the pictures, stopping at one with Ron talking to Fleur's parents. "Ron is really growing up. He looks so handsome here. Don't you think so, Hermione?"

Mrs. Weasley and Ginny both looked at her with the same smile. Hermione blushed, then gazed at the picture of him. "Ron is always handsome," she said honestly.

"Hmm, I reckoned you'd say that," Ginny said. "He wasn't quite all there this day. I think, well, I know it's because you weren't there."

A pang hit Hermione's heart. "Ginnyâ€¦!"

"I'm not trying to guilt you," Ginny quickly added. "I just want you to know that he was thinking about you the whole time. He's far too obvious."

Hermione didn't know what to say. Ron did look absolutely gorgeous; it would have been lovely to see him in his dress robes in person, possibly getting a chance to slow dance with him, but that would've meant that they'd recovered from sleeping together. Hermione bit her lip.

Weddings were special and full of love. Dancing with Ron at the ceremony as his girlfriend would've enhanced every good feeling, making the day magical; however, Hermione knew that they would've only been friends on the dance floor because they were only friends now. Her day at Bill's wedding would've still been nice, but she would not have received a kiss at the end of a song from Ron or even made a mad dash up to his room so they could kiss in peace, possibly leading toâ€¦!

"Hermione?"

Hermione looked up from the picture of Ron, almost relieved that she hadn't been able to finish her daydream. "I'm sorry," she said.

"It's all right," Ginny said, giving her a curious look. "You seemed deep in thought as you were staring at my brother."

Hermione blushed again. "I was just wondering if there are any of these that I could keep for myself."

"Of course, dear," Mrs. Weasley said. "I know the one." She flipped through the pictures then handed her one of Ron and Harry talking at a table, unaware of the camera. "Here: this is a great shot of Ron but it's not obvious."

"You're a smart lady, Mum," Ginny said, kissing her mother's cheek. The two smiled at each other lovingly. Hermione couldn't help but feel a little saddened by it. They were so close as



mother and daughter. Seeing them made Hermione miss her own mother to the point where it made her chest ache.

When they finally let Hermione leave the couch, she quickly made her way to the kitchen, but Harry came out of the room, blocking her from reaching Ron. "Can we talk?" Harry asked. Hermione looked past him but didn't see Ron. "Hermione?" he said. "I was thinking about the Horcruxes."

Hearing the word 'Horcruxes' brought her back to the situation at hand. Hermione shook her head slightly then looked at Harry. This was what she needed to take care of right now. "Yes, good idea. Is Ron going to join us?"

Harry frowned. "I think he went upstairs to his room or something but he'll probably come back."

Hermione didn't know what to say. She wanted Ron with them but this time it was mainly because the three of them had to work together. Ron must've known this but still thought that it was more important for him to keep away from her.

"Hermione?"

"Yes," she said, drawing her attention back to Harry.

He sighed. "Will you just tell me whatever's going on between you two? Ron won't say anything but I know there's something. You hadn't been too keen on talking about him in your letters and when I'd ever mention you--"

"- he'd what?" she asked.

Harry shrugged. "I dunno. He'd get mental and mumble something. He barely said your name once the whole time you were away."

Hermione pressed her lips tightly together. Yes - things were making sense now: Ron hadn't written to her, he obviously didn't want to stick around to talk about Horcruxes with her, and he hadn't brought her up once after she left. Ron was clearly ashamed of what they'd done. Their moment over the apple crumble must've been some sort of front, and his soft words and firm embrace when she arrived had to have been misinterpreted on her part.

The truth stabbed Hermione deeply in the chest, but she couldn't let it hurt her now. Harry was still waiting on an answer. "We're fine, Harry," she said faintly. "Can we please talk about what's important? I did a bit of research on possible hideaways."

She hurried over by the door, bringing over one of her bags. Hermione pulled out her books and the notes she'd taken when she hadn't been keeping an eye on her parents. She shook her head, trying not to think about them. Her mind automatically went to Ron, but she couldn't think about him either. The only thing that was important was helping Harry.

They spent a good portion of the evening with their heads together, talking about Dumbledore and all they knew about Tom Riddle's past. This activity was a lot easier for Hermione to handle. Jotting quick notes while searching through books was something she could do in her sleep. Being productive gave Hermione a sense of control, power, and excellence. She forgot about everything as she put her nose deep into a book, absorbing the information as her other worries fell onto the pages.

After awhile, Harry felt satisfied with what they'd discussed and went up to bed. Though the conversation had been beneficial, she was relieved that it was over. All Hermione wanted to do now was go to sleep.

Once she brushed her teeth and washed her face, she went to Ginny's room. The door opened before she could touch the handle. Harry came out, looking happier than she'd seen him all day.

"Harry?"

He blushed, nodding. "Night, Hermione."

"Goodnight," Hermione said with a grin.

She went inside. Ginny was also rather giddy as she sat on her bed, brushing her long and gorgeous ginger hair. Hermione wasn't sure of how to address her, but for whatever reason she imagined what Ron would say.

"Did Harry read you a nice bedtime story or something?" she asked.

Ginny burst into laughter. "Merlin, Hermione!" she said. "That was really funny. No, we just talked a little."

"Talked?" Hermione asked, sitting on her cot.

"Yeah, talked," Ginny said. "Possibly more after that..." She shuddered, moaning a little. "Harry drives me so bloody mad, Hermione."

"Boyfriends usually do," Hermione breathed as she changed for bed.

"He's not though," Ginny said with less enthusiasm. "Not officially anyway. I wish he was but this isâ€¦okay."

Hermione pulled her bra off then put on her t-shirt. She looked at Ginny, studying her face for any resentment. She found very little. "'Okay' is fine with you?"

"It's not 'fine' but it's all I've got," Ginny said smoothly, as if she truly believed her words.

"Well," Hermione said, "I'm really happy for you both. I hope this works out."

"Me too," Ginny said. "I love him, Hermione. I know I do."

Ginny's large brown eyes were set and confident. Her voice held power and determination, and Hermione knew that Ginny's feelings for Harry were real. She'd seen them since she first met Ginny. Hermione also understood how complicated it was for her. Being Harry's best friend was tricky enough at times; she couldn't imagine what it would feel like to be in love with him too. Then again, she could understand Ginny's dilemma, to a point. Hermione might not have felt anything for her raven-haired best friend, but as for her gingerâ€¦

"Hermione?" Ginny asked. "Are you with me?"

Hermione came back to the present. "Yes, I'm here. Sorry, I was just thinking about what you said. I know you love Harry, Ginny. He loves you too."

"You really think so?"

"I know so," Hermione said. "Harry is really guarded with his feelings, but I know him well enough to see when he feels deeply about something. He feels very deeply for you. Things will work out for the two of you. I know it will." She stifled a yawn then brushed her own stubborn hair.

"Hermione," Ginny said, looking grim. "I haven't had a chance to say this, but I'm really sorry about what had to happen to your parents. What you did was incredibly brave. I can't imagine having to do that to my mum and dad."

Hermione gripped her hairbrush very hard. "Yes, it was difficult. It still is, but it had to be done. Nothing is worth their lives." She bit her lip, telling herself to keep everything together.

"We don't have to talk about it anymore," Ginny said. "I just want you to know that I'm sorry. I'm here if you ever want to talk and get away from the blokes. We're friends too." She gave Hermione a caring expression, making her look a bit like Ron. Seeing a bit of him in Ginny's face actually calmed Hermione a little.

"I know," she said. "I appreciate it, Ginny."

They both settled in their beds. Ginny faced her, smirking. "Will you be staying in here the whole night this time?"

Hermione didn't know what to say. She had almost forgotten that Ginny knew she'd left her room the night 'it' happened. "About thatâ€¦Iâ€¦"

"Look, whatever's going on or not going on between you and Ron isn't my business," Ginny said, holding out her hands in defense. "I just want to make sure you both are okay. Ron's been stranger than usual since you left."

Hermione didn't want to hear any more from other people about how Ron had acted since she left. She wanted Ron to tell her himself

but, at this rate, Hermione didn't know if she and Ron would ever get an opportunity to talk.

"It's nothing really," she said. "That night—we stayed up, talking. Then we fell asleep together in his bed. It's been a little awkward." It was a mild version of the truth – the version that should have happened.

Ginny seemed a bit skeptical but she nodded. "All right. Please, don't be afraid to slap some sense into him. What you say happened isn't too bad. If Ron is making it a big deal out of this, then don't take it personally. He missed you a lot."

"I missed him too," Hermione said gently.

It didn't matter if his firm hug or their moment over the crumble hadn't been what she thought; experiencing both had made her happier and more relaxed than Hermione had felt in almost a month.

Ginny smiled. "I know you did. See you in the morning."

She extinguished her light as Hermione settled under her blanket. She tried to sleep but she couldn't. Once again, she was stuck in Ginny's room, unable to fall asleep, while Ginny breathed peacefully next to her. Hermione didn't know what to do. Ron was somewhere in the house, not wanting her there. Her parents were somewhere in Australia, not thinking about her at all. It was too much. She had to do something.

Hermione put on her robe then eased out of the room. She didn't go up the staircase this time. Instead, she went into the kitchen to make tea. Afterward, Hermione sat on the couch, watching the steamy brown liquid in her mug. She thought about possible research she could do on extension charms, healing potions, protection spells, and other useful tools that would aid in their expedition for Horcruxes. Hermione tried to lose herself in her ideas so she would stop feeling so unsure about everything else in her life.

"'Mione?" Ron's voice said.

Hermione practically jumped out of her skin. When she turned to him, her heart skipped a beat, and wearing a thick robe suddenly felt like the worst decision of her life. Ron was only dressed in his maroon pajama pants. His upper half was bare, pale, freckled, and a bit firm. Hermione wasn't sure if she was dreaming, and she had no idea what to do.

"Where's your shirt?" It was all she could think of to say. Ron was some sort of ginger god, obviously trying to do her head in. It was working, while also sending Hermione too many mixed signals. He had forgotten about her for weeks yet he was now presenting himself to her half naked.

"Huh?" Ron asked, seeming confused. He looked down and his face flushed. "Oh, I'm—I forgot I wasn't wearing one. Let me go—"

"Don't worry about it â€" you live here," she said. "I'm sorry. Come sit down."

Ron came over right away, sitting next to her. Hermione had to look into her mug. She could see way too much of Ron: the splashes of freckles that covered his entire torso, the trail of light ginger hair on his lower stomach, and the red sunburn on his shoulders and back. Hermione could even see Ron's pale pink nipples and the muscles that were maturing in various places on his upper half. Ron's skin was gorgeous. Her body heated up, throbbing and aching to touch him, but she had to fight it. Hermione had to want him less, even though she couldn't.

"I thought you were asleep," she said.

"I thought you were too," he said.

"No, I can't sleep. Not at all," she said.

Hermione wanted to pour her heart out to him, but she was honestly afraid of what it would lead to. She had always had so much poise, but tasting Ron and feeling him had changed her. She didn't know what she was capable of now when they were alone. No matter how straightforward things had seemed so far, it couldn't last. Everything would always come back to what they did: he'd made her cum. Then he came inside of her.

"I can't really sleep either," Ron, at last, said, picking at a loose string on the couch cushion.

Hermione was stuck. She was trapped between wanting him and wanting to get away from him. Ron's body was too close; his voice was too soothing. "Why is that?" she asked.

She looked at him; he stared right back. There was a vulnerability to his expression that was rare. "Because you're here," he said.

Hermione gazed back into her mug because it was too difficult to keep looking at Ron. His words stung, but the truth was finally out. Abruptly, he snatched her mug out of her hand, dropping it on the table.

"Will you stop doing that? You invited me to sit with you." His voice was stern but it was something she had more experience with than his more vulnerable side.

"What do you want, Ron?" she asked just as angrily. "Do you want me to tell you that you're the reason I can't sleep either?"

"No," he said. "Not if it's not the truth."

"Well, it is. It's hard for me to sleep knowing you're in the same house, but I also can't sleep because I don't know what my parents are doing right now." Hermione wished that she hadn't said anything, but she had to get her words out. No matter what situation they were in, Hermione still trusted her feelings with Ron more than she trusted them with anyone.

Ron's features softened. "We can talk about it."

"Like you want to hear it," she said.

He looked at her incredulously. "Are you taking the piss? Of course I want to hear it."

"You haven't acted like it," she snapped. "All day you've been avoiding me." The feelings were coming out of her faster than she could control, but it felt good to get them out of her system.

"That's not true," Ron said, shaking his head. "You've been surrounded all day. I couldn't get anywhere near you without my mum or Harry getting to you first." His face grew a little grim at the mention of Harry. "I reckon you would just talk to one of them about everything."

Hermione couldn't believe what Ron was saying. How could he not know that all she had wanted to do was slip away so she could be with him? All Hermione had wanted all day had been Ron. "I didn't. At least, not about the whole lot of it." She paused for a moment, knowing that she had to be honest with him. "You may not believe this right now, Ron, but all I wanted to do was see you today. What's happening right now between us is what I want, regardless of all the sweet hospitality and support I received today from everyone else."

Hermione was amazed at how effortlessly the words had flowed from her. Yes, kissing and giving her virginity to the only person she'd ever wanted had changed her tremendously.

Ron's skin flushed more than it already had. He licked his lips. "It's what I want too. I tried getting you alone today, but it was impossible. I really missed you, Hermione."

"I missed you too," she said just as effortlessly. She wanted to apologize or ask Ron why he hadn't written to her, but it wasn't important now. Hermione needed to tell him about her parents; she had from the moment she arrived.

"Go on and tell me," he said gently.

Ron was looking at her powerfully, like he had when he gave her a scoop of crumble. It didn't make sense to her. If that moment hadn't meant anything to Ron, then why was he giving her the same beautiful gaze, making her feel as if they were the only two people in the world? Perhaps it had meant something to him. Maybe Ron was just Ron again - her Ron again.

"We really had a great time," Hermione began. "It didn't take much convincing on my part. I think my parents were eager to get away with me. We spent time in Melbourne and Darwin before going to Sydney. We traveled, ate different foods, and visited parks. It was so wonderful. I don't think the three of us have ever had so much fun before."

The memories warmed her, making her feel incredible. Her parents might not have had the same memories anymore, but Hermione did. As long as she could keep the recollections in her mind, they would remain real.

Ron smiled. "That sounds brilliant."

"It was, however, it couldn't always be." Her good feelings turned sour. "I had to research and find out what I was going to do with their new memories. I can't give you details, unfortunately."

"That's fine," he said.

"Anyhow, about four days ago I finally found the nerve and did it. I did it right as they were asleep in the hotel room." Hermione suddenly felt a horrible chill pierce her back. Neither of them spoke for a moment.

"Four days ago? What did you do after?" he asked.

This was the section of her holiday that she didn't know if she wanted to share with anyone, but somehow she felt okay with telling Ron. She had already given him the most private and delicate part of her body; there was no reason to believe that she couldn't tell him a private and delicate part of her experience in Australia.

"I sort of followed them to keep an eye on them day-to-day," she said, "to make sure that they were set in a routine and that there weren't any troubles with the spell I cast." Hermione peered down at her fingernails that needed to be cleaned. "I kept the hotel room we stayed in and sort of lived out of there, eating at the restaurant that was downstairs. Then I came here." She felt so raw and open to Ron. She didn't know what he would say or do, but her heart would be bound to it.

Ron scooted closer, intertwining their fingers. His touch was comforting and felt so good. He was always so gentle. Even after sleeping with her, Ron still acted like her body was precious and new to him. "I'm so sorry, Hermione," he said in a quiet voice. "I wish I could've been there with you."

She believed him totally, but his sweetness couldn't keep the tears from stinging her eyes. "I would've liked that, but it was something I had to do alone. They're my parents."

Ron nodded. "I understand. Family means everything."

Hermione knew that she didn't have to say anymore - family was always something they would agree on. She focused on their held hands as they sat in comfortable silence. She was alone with Ron, holding hands. It seemed so simple, yet it was all she wanted. The moment was uncomplicated and so incredible that she didn't ever want it to end, but she couldn't help herself. There was a realization too powerful and infuriating for her not to release.

"You didn't write me back."

"Sorry?" he said.

She told herself to be strong so she looked up at him. "You didn't write to me back. My letter. You never responded."

Ron's entire demeanor changed. He removed his hand from hers, looking forward. She didn't care though. They had to be adults now.

"I regularly checked the address I left for you to write to, but I never got anything."

Ron rubbed his face roughly like he usually did when he was irritated. "I didn't know what to say."

She gaped at him, hoping that he was attempting to lighten the mood with a joke. "You could've said anything, Ron. I can't believe that you didn't write me back." All of a sudden, her calmness was gone. They were right back where they'd started. 'It' had happened.

Ron gave her a look as if he thought she was mad. "You can't believe me? What was I supposed to write? What was I going to say to make anything seemâ€¦normal?"

It was an honest question but Hermione didn't have an answer. All she knew was that he shouldn't have left her with nothing.

"I don't know, Ron, but you shouldn't have-"

"Don't tell me what I should have done!" he said heatedly. "You can't make it my responsibility to fix everything. Besides, who knows if you would've read it anyway?"

Hermione didn't understand what Ron was trying to get at. Of course she would've read it. She wasn't cruel. "What do you mean?"

Ron practically glared at her. Suddenly, he was the old Ron who she had bickered with a thousand times over the course of their friendship. "Because you left without a proper goodbye. How was I to know that you'd read a whole damn letter about it?" He had finally said it. Her worst fear - that he hated her for leaving - had finally come to light.

"Ron, that'sâ€¦that's not-"

"Fair?" he added rudely.

Hermione didn't know what to say. She needed him to know that it wasn't about hurting or lying to him. She did what she thought was best for the both of them. Ron was the one who hadn't done anything to help their situation. "Iâ€¦I may have left, but I left a note as well. I left you a goodbye. I gave you something. You gave me nothing for weeks." She was surprised when he laughed a little.



"It wasn't exactly a goodbye note, now was it?" he asked sarcastically.

Hermione couldn't stand his attitude. Yes, she was hurt and angry as well, but at least she was trying to talk to him civilly.

"Don't be mean."

"I'm not. I'm being honest." Some of Ron's anger faded, and what looked to be pain took over. "You didn't give me anything, Hermione. What you said, I already knew. That letter was nothing more than an excuse to get out of talking to me."

"That's not true," she said. Hermione wanted to tell Ron that, in her letter, she didn't write everything that she was feeling at the time. She needed him to know that if he wanted to, then maybe they could try to be something more, because even though everything was complicated, a real relationship would be worth it. She opened her mouth, trying to find the words.

"I'm sorry that I don't want to go on about Horcruxes," he suddenly spat. "I'm not Harry, Hermione."

Hermione closed her mouth, feeling unsettled and rather gobsmacked by his statement. "Harry? This has nothing to do with him," she said, shaking her head. He had no right to throw Harry in her face. They had to help him as his best friends. Ron had to know that her feelings for Harry didn't go any further than friendship, especially after giving herself completely to Ron. "I don't believe you, Ron. I'm going to bed." She stood up, walking right back up to Ginny's room. Hermione eased into her bed and didn't move.

Ron evidently couldn't be mature about their situation. He was furious and juvenile. Hermione trying to do anything more than repair their friendship was certainly out of the question. She bit her lip, hugging her pillow. She didn't know how something that had been so beautiful and enjoyable could have caused so much grief. She didn't want to, but she thought back to the night that changed everything for her and Ron.

...Flashback...

Hermione turned over in her cot. It didn't matter how still she lay, she couldn't fall asleep. She flipped over again, looking at Ginny. Her eyes were closed, her body was still, and she breathed deeply. Ginny made sleeping look so easy. She had climbed into bed, instantly falling asleep like a normal person. Hermione rubbed her eyes, attempting to clear her mind. It didn't work. Dumbledore was dead and nothing would change that. Albus Dumbledore was actually deceased. The greatest sorcerer in the world had been defeated. Now the wizarding world was left without a true leader.

Hermione pressed her lips tightly together. She told herself to adjust. Harry was adjusting and he'd seen it all happen. Hermione had to be strong like him. She had to be strong for him. Harry needed her bravery, intellect, and support. She would gladly give it all to him. Hermione once again rested on her back. Harry

wasn't the only one who needed her. Her parents needed her too. She bit her lip, fighting back the heavy emotion. Hermione couldn't let herself think about them yet. She could only live one day at a time. If she started obsessing now, then she'd never be able to do what was necessary for her parents' survival.

After tossing and turning a few more times, Hermione realized that she was never going to fall to sleep; she felt too alone, boggled, and scared. She needed something to calm her down; to make her feel warm and safe. Hermione's mind immediately turned to one thing.

She slipped out of bed, searching around for her robe to cover up her current wardrobe of merely a t-shirt and shorts. Hermione started making noise, causing Ginny to stir. She ultimately gave up - what she had on was enough.

Hermione closed the door behind her, tiptoeing to the fifth floor. Hermione breathed a little easier when she saw light coming from under his door. She knocked, waiting. It was horribly late but he had to be awake. Somehow she knew that he probably couldn't get to sleep, just like her.

"Yes?" his voice croaked.

Hermione didn't know how to respond, so she simply opened the door. Ron was sitting against the headboard of his bed with his long legs sprawled out. Already she felt a little better. "Did I wake you?" she asked.

His vibrant ginger hair was messy and he looked paler than usual but it didn't take anything away from his looks. Ron sat up. "No, not at all. Come in."

She walked over, sitting on the very edge of his mattress. It was unpleasantly late, and they were alone. Hermione didn't want to simply jump into bed next to him, even if her body thought it was a good idea. No - she had to be decent. Hermione had come to him because she trusted him and somehow his mere presence made her feel safer and more relaxed. It had always been that way but last term Hermione had known for sure that Ron's presence was the key to her everyday survival.

"Um, you don't have to sit all the way over there."

His voice muted the stubborn thoughts in her head. Ron removed his pillows, rearranging them by their feet. There was a space for her right next to him, which she took. "Thank you," Hermione said.

She rested her back against the headboard, extending her legs. She then massaged her brow, trying not to smell the faint scent of Ron's hair. His hair had always smelled a bit like the ocean. It was such an enjoyable scent and during Dumbledore's funeral it had been all around her. The smell of Ron's hair turned her attention to the position of his body. She felt so stiff but Ron's body was, as always, relaxed. He was so tall and lanky, and his black Chudley Cannons t-shirt fit his body a little too

perfectly. The blackness of the shirt contrasted beautifully to the paleness of his skin, making his freckles stand out.

Hermione had to remind herself of why she was there. She looked at him. "I couldn't sleep, and I saw your light on. I just figured I'd..." She stopped talking. Her statement was a lie but she hoped that Ron would just shrug and not question her.

Ron stared at her blankly for a moment. She couldn't tell if he believed her or not. "You don't have to explain," he said. "I haven't been able to sleep at all. Is Ginny asleep?"

Hearing Ron say Ginny's name made Hermione's heart melt. Ron's voice always changed when he talked about Ginny. It didn't matter how he spoke to her or treated her sometimes, Ron probably cared about his little sister more than anyone else. Hermione found his love for Ginny touching and rather inspiring.

"Yes. That's why I left," she said. "I kept tossing and turning; I didn't want to wake her. Like I said, I saw your light."

Ron nodded then started messing with a hole in his pajamas. Hermione had wanted to tell him about her feelings regarding his relationship with Ginny, but she didn't have the strength. She hadn't even had the strength to tell him the truth about why she was there. Hermione didn't know understand why it was so difficult to simply tell Ron that she'd been thinking about him all night, and that she'd come to his room because he was the only thing that could make her feel better. It was the truth, but it was also more than she knew she could say.

Once more, she tried to focus. She couldn't sleep because Dumbledore's funeral had been that day. He'd been buried in a white tomb. The emotion unexpectedly pushed against her chest. She sniffled, gazing at her hands as if the answers were written on them. She looked at him. "Ron, Dumbledore is dead." It sounded so final and she lost herself in its conclusiveness. "I just can't believe he's gone."

Ron faced her. "I don't think you're supposed to believe it. At least not right away. I reckon it'll take a lot of time to accept Dumbledore's murder."

The word 'murder' made her even stiffer. Hermione didn't like the harsh bluntness that Ron was using. It hadn't been what she wanted. Now, she knew that she was moments away from losing herself completely.

"I know that probably sounds horrible," he quickly said, "but it's still new. It's okay to feel whatever it is that you feel. Let yourself take it in. We all need time." Ron placed his hand on her arm. Everything stopped tensing. It was a simple, gentle touch but it calmed her down somewhat. Ron's touches always made Hermione feel relaxed and human.

Hermione dried her eyes. His words were not only brilliant, but true. Hermione didn't regret coming to his room. Her body had

been telling her things but her mind took control again. She had come for his words - the touches were only a bonus.

"You're right. So much has happened. I guess it's really getting to me right now." Hermione thought about the people who had been hurt. "There's just so much, between Dumbledore and Bill-

"Bill's fine," Ron said, swiftly and stiffly. He was frowning at her a little, causing her to feel horribly insensitive. She didn't know why she wasn't acting intelligent. Obviously talking about Bill's state in relation to Dumbledore's death was a bad idea.

"Of course he is, Ron," she said. "I didn't mean to imply otherwise. I'm rather boggled at the moment and not really thinking clearly. I'm sorry."

"It's all right. Sorry for that," he said a bit softer. "You can tell me what's going on; why you're feeling so boggled."

She did want to tell him. Hermione wanted to hear his deep, calm voice soothe her. She also wanted Ron to keep looking at her in the way that he was, with his large and light blue eyes. Then again, Hermione didn't know if she would be able to handle it. She didn't want to break down so extremely that she lost all her composure.

"It's okay," she said, trying to appear indifferent. "I don't want to trouble you. I'll take care of myself."

Ron rolled his eyes at her like he always did when disagreeing with her. "Hermione, I know that I'm not the friend that usually has the right things to say, but we can talk. I want you to tell me what's going on. It's why I'm here—and probably why you walked three flights of stairs in the middle of the night."

His words lightened her up, easing her muscles more. This was the reason why Ron was so amazing: sometimes he said the perfect thing to her. His statement had been cheeky and sweet. In her heart, Hermione knew that Ron wouldn't have believed her about seeing his light, but he wasn't directly calling her out on it. She was glad that he saw through her and wanted her to speak.

Ron was also wrong though. She knew that he'd implied that Harry was the friend that usually had the right things to say, but that wasn't true. Yes, Harry was great and she did wish that he were with them so they could talk, but only Ron had the right words to make Hermione feel more capable. Ron was right in a lot of ways that she needed him to be. She smiled for the first time in days it seemed.

"You're rather clever, Ronald."

He grinned at her. If Hermione let herself truly be honest, then she'd say his grin was sexy. "I have my moments," he said nonchalantly, adding to his sexiness. "No need for the tone of surprise. Now, go on."

She held her hands together, rubbing her lips against one another. Ron was pushing her to speak, but it was what she needed. People usually just let her take control and did what she said "but not Ron. He pushed back at her. He told her 'no' sometimes and he made her explain herself. It might've made Hermione mental for thinking it, but that was one of the best things about Ron.

"So, on top of dealing with Dumbledore," she said, "I'm worried about Harry. I mean I'm really concerned about him. He must be feeling extremely overwhelmed because there's so much to take in. I barely got a word in before he went back to the Dursleys'."

As much as she would've liked to stay in the moment with Ron, her mind turned back to Harry. It was her and Ron's duty to be by his side. The three of them were best friends and, even if Ron and Harry acted like stupid boys, pretending like they didn't have feelings, she knew that the pair needed each other greatly.

Ron's eyes became distant for a moment but he quickly became more confident. "It's a lot for him to take in, but you know Harry. If there is one person in the whole world who would be fit to deal with this, then it's him. Besides, he's not alone. He'll be here in a few days and then we'll work it out together."

The last part of Ron's statement made her dread come back. "Well, you and Harry will work it out," Hermione said. "I have to go home tomorrow and I won't be back right away."

She couldn't hide the truth anymore. Hermione didn't want to talk or think about it, but she had to. She felt selfish as well, because while Hermione knew that she had to protect her parents, she was angry that it would keep her away from the Burrow. She, Ron, Harry, and Ginny always had a good time over the holiday. She made herself believe that their foursome was what she would miss the most but the idea didn't last long. Hermione knew that being away from Ron would be the hardest. Being away from him always felt like losing half of her body's blood supply.

"O-oh I didn't know that you were going back already."

"Neither did I," Hermione said. She had a responsibility first and foremost. Her childish fantasies couldn't come before it.

"Is something going on?" he asked, scooting closer to her so that his knee touched her thigh.

Her skin warmed at their contact while everything around her clouded a little. Ron was so close to her. His body made her feel and want things that she probably shouldn't have because she knew that they didn't mean anything to him. Hermione tried focusing again. She was supposed to be devastated about her parents, not wishing that Ron's leg was bare so she could really feel his skin.

Hermione let out a heavy breath. "A lot is going on. You see, right after the funeral, I had a discussion with Kingsley and

Professor McGonagall." She couldn't grasp the specific words so she added, "I think you know what about."

"I overheard Lupin and Kingsley talking about it. They want you to relocate your parents, yeah?" Ron made it sound like nothing more than checking out a book in the library. He spoke so casually. It angered her.

"Not just relocate them, Ron. They want me to clean their memories. They want my parents to be on a new continent, with new jobs, new goals, and a new everything as if they never had this lifeâ€¦with their daughter."

The truth was out. What Hermione had to do was real. Lupin and Kingsley had been serious with their words. She had no choice but to be strong and obey them.

"Why does it need to be something so drastic?" Ron asked, looking stunned.

"Because Death Eaters know that Harry and I are friends. Because everyone knows that I'm a Muggle-born." She wanted to fall into Ron's arms but instead she hugged her stomach. "My parents aren't safe. They could be used as ransom so I'll give up Harry. Do I really need to go on?" She knew her voice was bitter but she couldn't help it. It wasn't Ron or Harry's fault, but it didn't make it any easier.

"I'm sorry," Ron said. "Would it be forever?"

"No, thankfully," she said. Her heart began to pound horribly at the idea. She'd never make it if she had to permanently clean their memories. "The spell they want me to use can be reversed but only by the person who cast it."

Ron was quiet for a moment. He just kept looking at her, not moving. "Well, I don't know how this feels for you, but I reckon it's for the best," he said. "Kingsley and McGonagall are in the Order, so they know what they're talking about. If this will keep them out of harm, then it has to be done."

Hermione didn't need to hear this. She'd told herself this exact thing dozens of times since the order was given to her. "I know. I'm not disagreeing with them. It's a well-groomed arrangement and the best way to ensure their safety." She felt tears pricking her eyelids but she had to be strong. "That's why I'm going home tomorrow. I'm going to tell them that I think we should take a holiday to Australia like they've always wanted to." Her parents loved Australia. For years they had wanted to go there as a family. It was tragic that Hermione had to exploit that desire in order for her plan to work. "Then, I'm just going to spend every moment with them for as long as I can."

"That doesn't sound so bad," he said, giving her a slight smile.

Hermione knew that he was trying to cheer her up, but she had too much to accept right now. "I guess not. I'm just scared. I fear

for them, Ron. I'm so terrified that something is going to happen to my parents. I'll never forgive myself if it does."

She couldn't hold her emotions back anymore. Tears fell and she allowed herself to cry because what she had to do was worth her sadness. The fear that her parents would be happier without her was horrible, but nothing compared to the thought of them dying because of her involvement in a world that they didn't even live in.

"Oi, nothing's going to happen to them," Ron said, touching her shoulder.

"Something could," she sobbed. She was so overwhelmed that she could barely enjoy his touch. "It's not like they can defend themselves against magic. What if someone finds them and hurts them and-"

He put both of his hands on her shoulders, gripping them tightly. "Stop it. Hermione, nothing is going to happen to your parents. They're going to be safe. Nothing and no one will get to them, I promise." Feeling his strong hands while hearing his promise caused the warmth she'd already felt to spread.

"You can't promise something like that," Hermione said. She knew that he was just trying to make her feel better with his pledge, but somehow, Hermione did believe that nothing would happen to her parents purely because Ron had promised her. His word meant that much to her.

"Yes, I can," Ron said gently. He moved hair out of her face, caressing her cheek. She shivered. "Look at me." She followed his order, finding his eyes. Hermione felt so weak, but Ron gazing at her strongly and seriously gave her strength and something sturdy to stand on.

"Hermione, I promise that your parents are going to be okay," Ron said. "I wouldn't promise it if I didn't mean it. I'm not going to let anything happen to them. I'm also not going to let anything happen to you. If I have to apparate to Australia and take a spell for them, then I'll bloody do it."

She sighed, shaking her head. "Oh, Ronâ€¦"

"I mean it. I'll take a curse right in the bollocks," Ron said. His words were brave and somewhat vulgar, but they helped. It was a typical Ron Weasley statement that made Hermione thankful that they were best friends. Ron winked at her, running his thumb over her cheek. Hermione didn't know how he was being so soft with her but she didn't want him to stop. His hands were big and his fingers were a little bony, but she liked them. She always had.

Hermione couldn't help but to grin. "That's rudeâ€¦but I hope it doesn't have to come to that. Thank you though. I trust you."

"Wicked," he cheeked. "I'm glad that you've finally decided to agree with me on something."

Some of her old spirit came back as they bantered. "Just this once. I won't make a habit of it."

He removed one hand from her shoulder, but his other stayed on her face. Ron repeatedly swept his knuckles against her hair. Every time he did, she shivered. It was so soothing and enjoyable. Her eyes closed for a moment at the pleasure of it.

"You're so gentle," she said. She hadn't even thought about saying it; the words just came out of her.

Ron didn't say anything. For a second she feared that she had said too much. They were alone, in his room, at night, after all. "How else would I be?" he finally said. "I'd never hurt you." Ron tucked a few strands of her hair behind her ear, then tugged on her earlobe. Hermione wanted to moan but instead she moved her face into his hand. It was like he was beckoning her as her king. She had no choice but to follow his command.

"I know you wouldn't, but your handsâ€¦it's like you know exactly how to touch me. Just like during the funeral." Hermione's filter was slowly dissolving because she was saying exactly what was on her mind. She told herself to have more poise but Ron was too much for her. She needed to stay on top of everything but she wanted to let go.

During the funeral, she'd cried against Ron's chest while he held her securely the whole time. His chest had been firm, and his hold on her had felt safe. Hermione had even heard a few sniffles out of him, making her feel more connected to him. Ron was always so tough, but they had both let go and wept. It'd felt right; she'd felt like things were the way they were supposed to be. Even though Dumbledore had died, they were all lost, and Harry was put in a horrible position, Hermione had felt like she was where she was meant to be: in Ron's beautiful and protective embrace. Hermione had never wanted him to let go of her and when he had, she felt even worse than she had during the ceremony.

As they stared at each other, Ron's cheeks turned red. He glanced down at her legs, causing heat to spread on her back. Hermione didn't know why he was looking at them or what he was thinking.

"I-I just want to make you feel better," he said. He returned his gaze back to her face. Hermione didn't know what to say: desires, whispers, and fears drummed in her head.

Hermione wasn't naïve. From the day they'd met, Ron had gotten under her skin in a way that the other boys hadn't, however, it wasn't until she was thirteen and had seen him at the Leaky Cauldron that she noticed the true difference. Her feelings for both Harry and Ron had changed. She found herself wanting to comfort Harry more as a sister and wanting to get to know Ron better as something more. From that moment, her feelings for him had grown fast and powerfully. Now, Hermione fancied Ron completely but deep inside she knew it was even more than that. That 'more' was the reason why Hermione had hated seeing Lavender's hands all over Ron. It was the reason why giving Cormac the time of day had been a mistake, and why seeing Ron in



the hospital after his poisoning had been the most painful experience of her life. She needed Ron in every way because everything about him was different from her. Those differences pushed her away yet drew her closer to him at the same time. She wanted him emotionally, but her physical and sexual attraction to him was sometimes too much to bear.

Nonetheless, they were only feelings, desires, and thoughts that Hermione knew couldn't be acted upon. Their sixth year had been awful because she'd been too jealous of him with Lavender, and he'd been too immature to apologize for treating Hermione poorly. They were finally good friends again and it was what she needed. Besides, Ron had never given her a reason to feel as if he fancied her. He had only realized she was a girl when they were fourteen, and not once last term had he ever made a move on her. Therefore, Hermione kept all her feelings locked in her mind, letting them roam freely every once in awhile when she was alone. It hurt and was difficult, but it was necessary to maintain her balance.

Hermione told herself to move away and redirect the conversation, but her body and desires didn't listen. She put her hand on his. "Well, you are. You're making me feel a lot better."

Ron swallowed hard; his cheeks stained even more. It was adorable and sexy. "Is there anything else I can do to make you feel better?" His voice was a little husky. She felt his hand on her cheek tremble.

Hermione felt a blush of her own. She did want him to make her better - it was why she had gone to his room - but she didn't know how exactly he could. "I don't know," she said quietly.

Hermione started to feel heat below her waist as arousal started to affect her in different places. Ron was most likely speaking innocently. This wasn't sexual at all. It couldn't be, because Ron wasn't sexually attracted to her. He'd fancied Madame Rosemerta; Hermione assumed he'd at least found Padma attractive since he went to the Yule Ball with her, and Lavender had been the girl he'd slobbered over all last term. Hermione looked nothing like them, with their curves and more exciting features, so she knew that she wasn't Ron's type. No - the situation wasn't sexual and she shouldn't have wanted it to be.

Hermione dropped her hand and was relieved yet rather let down when he did too. She had to look away from him. "I - I think I just want to go to sleep."

Ron quickly moved away from her, shaking his head. "Yeah, of course. It's late. It's - ah - late." He then got out of bed, running his fingers through his hair.

Hermione suddenly felt lost. She didn't want to leave. She knew what she wanted, but she didn't know how to ask. "Can I stay in here with you?"

"What?" he breathed, his eyes growing wide.

She had to act quickly before Ron assumed the worst. "I just meanâ€¦can I sleep in here? I'm too tired to go back downstairs." She felt flustered so she hugged her stomach again, turning away from him. "I can sleep on the cot or on the floor." It probably sounded desperate to him but anything would be better than leaving his side. Ron merely stared at her. He obviously hadn't understood.

She groaned in embarrassment, covering her face with her hands. "Oh, I'm sorry. That was inappropriate to ask. I'll just go." She and Ron were too different. They couldn't have wanted the same things. She headed for the door but he held his arms out.

"No," he said loudly, outstretching his arms. "You can sleep in here if you want. Take my bed. I'll sleep on the cot."

While the idea of sleeping in his bed was something she had thought about for years, she couldn't be rude. "You can have your bed, Ron," she said.

"No, honestly, you take it," he said, gesturing to his bed. "Um, what kind of bloke would I be if I didn't let you have the better bed?" He smiled a little, appearing sincere and somewhat eager, though she couldn't understand why. In the end, she assumed it was pride over his random bursts of chivalry.

Hermione looked between the cot and Ron's bed, but she already knew her answer. She smiled. "All right. Thank you." She got into his bed and under his blanket. She fancied her pillow level and stiff so she flattened it somewhat.

"Will this work for you?" he asked.

"It's lovely," she said without thinking about it. Hermione closed her eyes, smelling his pillow. It had the same faint scent of the sea, and she could feel the imprints of his body on the squishy mattress. Ron's bed was perfection.

"G-great." Ron backed up, getting into the cot. He extinguished the light. "'Night."

"Goodnight, Ron" she said. She got more comfortable in his bed, and Ron didn't say another word to her. Hermione relaxed as Ron's smell and Chudley Canon memorabilia engulfed her. She looked up, but Ron's back was to hers. It sounded as if he was tearing at something but she didn't ask him about it.

Hermione had to get some sleep. It was what she had wanted â€" to gain peace. She closed her eyes, trying to drift off, but she couldn't. Hermione didn't know why it was still so hard. She was in Ron's bed while he lay right next to her in the cot. The situation was wonderful but it didn't change the fact that Dumbledore was dead or that she would have to modify her parent's memories.

Hermione lay in silence for several minutes. All she could think about was Ron's question. He had asked her if he could make her feel better. She thought he already had but something more pushed

at her chest. Hermione had gotten what she needed but there was so much more that she wanted. The only problem was that she didn't know what Ron wanted. They had gotten closer last term and knew more about each other, but some things hadn't changed. He never said what was on his mind - at least not to her. She always received the news after the fact. It wasn't until after Krum had asked her the ball that Ron wanted to go with her; it wasn't until after Cormac showed interest in her that Ron suddenly had a thousand reasons to hate him, and it wasn't until after Ron was already in a relationship with Lavender that he told Hermione that he loved her. She knew he'd only meant it as a thank you, but she still wished he had elaborated as to why he apparently loved her.

"Ron?" Hermione found herself suddenly saying. She was making a mistake but something had to change; she could no longer ignore the voices in her head, encouraging her to act on her desire. "Ron?" she said again, sitting up.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"Are you awake?" It was a stupid question. Not only had he answered her but she'd heard him tearing at something moments ago.

He turned over in her direction. "I'm awake. Do you need something?"

She needed more light but some came through his window. It was just enough for them to make each other out. Ron looked peaceful, almost angelic, in the subtle glow.

"Hermione?"

Hermione hadn't planned far enough ahead. She didn't know what to do. All she had was the truth; it was too personal and too pathetic, but she realized there was nothing else to say. "I-I don't want to be alone right now."

Ron sat up. "I can come over."

She had no words. She only nodded, keeping her gaze down as he got up and sat next to her. He lit his wand, setting it on his side table and away from them. It gave her a better view of his face and his body, but she wasn't sure if she wanted it. It only made things harder.

"What's going on?"

So much was going on in Hermione's mind, in her heart, and below her waist. Somehow it was all because of Ron; he was making her like this, and she wanted more, even though she shouldn't have.

"I," she said in barely a whisper, "want to feel better."

Ron peered around his room as if searching for an object that could fix everything. He stopped, looking to her. "Do you want me to sleep next to you?"

It was exactly what she wanted and had meant when she asked if she could stay in his room. It was what she had thought about while she tossed and turned in Ginny's room, however, she couldn't show it. "I don't know. I don't even know if it's a proper thing to ask right now." She wanted him to tell her that it wasn't and that she was out of her mind. It would make sense and would explain her sudden cravings. "Maybe I'm wrong or I'm mental-"

"I don't think you are," Ron said. "You're just upset. Bollocks to what's proper or appropriate. It's only us here. So, what do you need? I'll â€" I'll do anything you want me to do, Hermione."

Hermione started to feel lightheaded. She was warm all over and a pulse started to beat between her legs. Ron was so powerful but at the same time, he was offering himself to her. She didn't know what he meant but she knew what she wanted. Ron was right next to her; she was afraid that he would feel how badly she wanted him. She had to act normal, even though she felt far from it.

"You're sweet, Ron." She lost control of herself and looked down at his lips. They were full and had a nice bit of red color to them. Hermione thought about his mouth all the time but tonight she had never been so close to it. She wanted to kiss Ron but it was out of the question. Hermione returned her focus to his face, backing away. It was the only thing that would keep her from touching him. "Okay. Will you sleep next to me? I'll feel safer." It was the truth but only part of it. She was amazing herself by how open she was being with him but she couldn't relax until he gave her an answer.

"Y-yeah," he breathed in a higher voice. "Of course I will."

He lifted the blanket and, for a moment, Hermione panicked. Part of her had expected him to say no because there was no reason why he'd want to sleep next to her; however, things were moving forward now and she didn't have the answers to what would happen. She settled back anyway and Ron moved in behind her. He wasn't extremely close but it was enough to feel the heat of his body. Hermione wanted to be closer, feeling his warmth in its entirety but she became stiff again, feeling lost.

"Move back a little so I can hold you," he said out of nowhere. "If you want me to, of course." It sounded a bit like a demand but it was also soft. Hermione didn't care either way because she did want him to hold her. She had never wanted him to stop holding her since the funeral, but things were getting too deep now. They were alone, in the dark, lying together in his bed. It wasn't proper; her better judgment told her to tell him no.

"All right," she said. "Iâ€¦I'd like that." She moved back, ignoring the protests in her head. She felt his torso to her back as he placed his arm on her hip. Hermione pressed her lips tightly together. They'd never touched like this before, and she was taken aback. Their sixth year had split them apart yet made them stronger and closer by the end of the term (though she didn't know they were this close). Ron's touch almost burned

through the material of her shorts; she felt something warm and slightly hard against her lower back. She tried to ignore it.

"I don't know what to say," she said. Hermione knew that it was her job to have all the answers and to make the situation clear, but she had nothing this time.

"You don't have to say anything," Ron said, running his fingers through her hair in the exact same way as during the funeral. His fingers made her feel less nervous — just like they had during the service. "It's just me, Hermione. You don't have to be or do anything."

Hermione didn't know how he was able to read her mind. People depended on her for a lot of things, but no one ever told her that she didn't have to do everything herself. No one ever allowed her to just be anything. Ron was the first, and what was so special about him was that she was sure he'd be the only.

"Thank you, Ron. Sometimes, I feel like you're the only one who can understand that—that I—"

"Shh, it's okay," he whispered. He kissed the back of her head. The gesture was sweet, gentle, and everything she knew Ron was. He kept stroking her hair in silence, which she appreciated. They fought all the time, but when it mattered most, Ron could just be quiet and be there with her. All the emotion became too much and she finally let go. Hermione cried, letting herself be vulnerable to Ron. She kept sobbing whereas Ron kept running his fingers through her hair. When he eventually stopped, she panicked.

"D-don't stop." She was too emotional to think clearly, but she knew that Ron's touch was the only thing keeping her hanging on.

"Okay." Ron began to run his hand up and down her arm. "Is this all right?"

With only a few glides of his hand, all the hairs on Hermione's arm stood on end. She nodded. "I trust you."

It was the truth. Hermione was in bed with him and there was no denying that Ron was hard. His muscle was officially erect, poking her in the back, but it didn't annoy her. Ron was a bloke after all, and she knew that it didn't take much contact for men to stiffen up. She was sure Ron got hard because of many things (or nothing at all) very often. She shook off the thought. Hermione couldn't allow herself to think about what made Ron hard.

He moved his hand down to her side, massaging it. It surprised her and tickled. "Is this too much?" he asked.

"N-no, it's fine," she said. "It tickles, that's all."

"I'll try to be careful," he said in a deep, humorous voice. He started massaging her again but with his knuckles. It didn't tickle as much but she still jumped every once in awhile.

Ron moved all around her stomach and side. It felt so good. She'd seen Ron's hands punch, yank, stick out the middle finger, and make other aggressive maneuvers; however, they were being incredibly sensual now, with movements that she had never encountered before.

Hermione tried not to move too much as she didn't want to aggravate his already aroused state. It couldn't have been because of her though. She was just Hermione to him, not a girl who turned him on or made him sweat. No, she was sure any girl could have this effect on him; certainly Lavender had done more for him. In fact, she'd seen Lavender make grabs at him. The thought of Lavender touching Ron's hardness made Hermione feel sick, so she tried to think about something else but soon realized that was a mistake. If she couldn't think about Ron, then her mind automatically turned to more difficult subjects.

"Ron?" she suddenly asked. "What are we all going to do without Dumbledore? This is so awful."

She was already tired of crying but she wanted to get it all out so that the grief was gone before she left with her parents to Australia and before she came back to begin researching with Harry. Now was her only chance to be alone and safe with Ron. She needed to get the last of her sorrow out with him.

He kissed the back of her head again. She longed to feel his kisses on her face. "It'll be okay," Ron said, "I promise. We're talking about Dumbledore here; I know the man has one last trick up his sleeve. We'll figure it out, whatever it is." Ron spoke with so much confidence; she didn't know where it came from. Hermione was usually the certain one.

"How are we going to do that? We barely have anything."

"That's not true." Ron's pointer finger glided down her whole side but didn't go below her waist. She bit her lip, closing her eyes. Hermione was beginning to burn all over. She knew he was just showing sensitivity toward her, but it felt like so much more; she felt teased. "We have you," he said. "You're better than every teacher and every book combined. As long as we keep you with us, we'll accomplish whatever it is that we have to do."

A bit of Hermione's wall went up. "You think so highly of me, Ron." Everyone did, so she shouldn't have expected any less from Ron. She knew that she would come up with something, but it still didn't mean that sometimes she didn't feel unsure or unable.

"Maybe, but it's true; you know it is," he said. "You haven't lost your brains, Hermione, or your talent."

She knew that he had said it to be flattering, but all it did was remind her of the savior that they had lost. "Yes, that's right. I only lost one of my mentors." She started crying again. This time she didn't let herself be conscious of it. She simply bawled, disconnecting herself from her better judgment. She needed a break; she needed something more.

Out of nowhere, Ron's lips pressed against her temple as his hand moved to her hip. "I'm sorry," he said in barely a whisper. The feeling seeped into her pores, filling up her body and causing a wave of calmness and pleasure to come over her.

"It's okay," she said. It was okay. Ron holding and touching her, kissing her temple, and even poking her in the back was okay. Hermione wanted it all; she was sure she even needed it. Ron repeatedly left butterfly kisses on her temple as he kneaded into her hip with his hand. He placed a kiss close to her ear at the same time as his hand touched her thigh. She couldn't help herself. She jerked and the constant flow of tears subsided. Cloudiness shadowed her mind. She was trapped between what she wanted and what she needed. Ron didn't say anything; he didn't move. Hermione wanted him to read her mind again and just know what to do, but he couldn't. Her mind told her that they had gone far enough, but it wasn't a strong enough call to fight off the need for him to touch her that she felt in both her heart and in her body.

She'd known, even from the first time Ron had somewhat touched her when she was thirteen, that there was something powerful about his contact. He'd unknowingly brushed his hand across her chest when he'd reached for the sausage plate during breakfast. In that moment, Hermione had felt an overwhelming jolt of energy and heat. She knew from that moment on that Ron's touches would be something special to her. The belief still held true, however, she never thought that she could have more - especially since she and Ron were just friends who had only recently repaired their friendship. Moreover, she still, as always, didn't know what Ron wanted.

As all of these ideas came to light, Hermione realized what she needed to do but it was too late. Ron moved down on the bed, placing his hand on her bare leg. He ran his fingers all over the back of her leg and thigh. The touch was so unexpected and enjoyable that she couldn't hold back a slight moan. Ron's hand was big and warm, practically melting against her skin. For a moment, she feared that letting her enjoyment become audible had been a mistake, but Ron didn't stop. He kept touching her, so she kept moaning, feeding into her heightening sexuality.

Hermione had never had a real boyfriend, but she'd been somewhat touched before. Krum had kissed her, touched her face, and brushed his hands across her stomach and over her arms a few times. Even Cormac had tried to get a feel at her bust and legs while they were at the Christmas ball last term. Those moments, however, had been almost completely one-sided and felt empty. What Ron was doing to her now brought her genuine arousal. While he wasn't the only guy she'd ever found attractive, Ron was the only person who she truly wanted to do more with. He might have dated Lavender and done Merlin knows what with her, but it didn't change Hermione's feelings. For her, it wasn't just a sexual thrill like she knew it had been for Lavender. Ron's touches were safe, kind, and even loving. He made her feel special, not just like some girl - and Hermione desperately wanted to be more than just a girl to Ron. She wanted to be woman Ron let his bodily urges out on, but she also wanted to be the woman he confided in,

held closely as he laughed, studied with, and cherished. Hermione wanted to be Ron's girlfriend.

The truth caused her to moan again. Hermione pressed her face against his pillow. Almost as if in response to it, Ron's hand moved closer to her inner thigh. She wanted to thrust her hips or tell him to keep going. She was wet and sensitivity began to produce. What was happening was going beyond what she and Ron were used to in their friendship. They'd never been the type of people to act so boldly with each other. Ron deliberately making her wet wasn't something Hermione expected from him as her friend; it was something she'd assume he'd do as a boyfriend or at least someone interested in her sexually, however, that did not correlate to what she knew Ron to feel for her, which she thought was only friendship.

She became lost again but the feeling didn't last as Ron kissed her ear then moved his mouth to her neck, stopping almost immediately after his lips touched her. Hermione didn't know what to do. It was almost as if Ron was waiting on her order but she didn't have one. She had no words to describe the feeling of his lips or how she wanted him to kiss her again, even though she wasn't sure if it was appropriate for their friendship. Hermione wanted him to do it again because now was the closest they'd ever been to being in a relationship that went beyond friendship, and she was desperate for that. If Ron honestly wanted to feel all over her body, then it was okay with her. She trusted him completely, but none of her feelings turned into audible words.

Instead, Hermione hoped that Ron would interpret her silence as her signal for him to go ahead. She moved back into him so he could get more access. Ron let out a shaky breath. She wanted this, and if he kept going then he had to want it too. Hermione gripped his sheets when he gently kissed her neck, moaning deeply and beautifully. He spread his kisses around. Then, suddenly, she felt heat and wetness from his tongue as he licked her skin. She whimpered as her heart pounded. Hermione automatically pushed back, touching his hardness. She was no longer herself; she was something more - something different - with him. Ron began to kiss and suck on her neck with a greater power. All Hermione could do was whimper and shake as he ravished her. Her mind was cloudy and void of all rational thought. She was pure feeling now.

Ron's mouth was talented, but she shouldn't have expected any less. The way he ate, spoke, smirked, and even chewed on his lips showed that his mouth knew how to work. Also, no matter how much it had hurt her, Hermione had seen what his mouth was capable of when he'd kissed Lavender day after day last term. Hermione didn't want to think about that now. She was the one reaping the benefits of his lips now.

Ron's tongue dragged down her neck, causing her nipples to stiffen. Hermione was sweaty and a thick coat of moisture was in her knickers. She had never felt such a sexual urge before; she couldn't stop it from growing. Hermione didn't know what was wrong with her. She didn't know how she could want him to comfort her, wipe her tears away, and take her against his bed all at the



same time. It wasn't what friends did, but Hermione didn't want to only be his friend anymore. She had to believe that Ron didn't either. He might've been all over the place with Lavender, but Hermione believed that he wouldn't treat her like this if he didn't feel something. He had to feel something more, so Hermione allowed herself to believe that it was okay to let herself go.

Her brain completely switched from rationality to desire. She lifted her leg so she could rest it on his. Ron quickly helped her while his hand finally moved down to her inner thigh. He began to breathe roughly against her skin. Hermione could hardly puff out air herself. She'd made the maneuver so he could feel her and realize what he was doing to her, but Hermione didn't know how they could let it happen. She cared about Ron deeply, but at the end of the day, she didn't know for sure what he felt. She had her ideas and her hopes, but they were only just that. Hermione honestly didn't know what was real and what was impulse for Ron. Dumbledore's funeral had been that day, and as friends, they should have been telling each other their feelings. They should've been coming up with strategy or something productive, but they weren't. They weren't doing what they needed to do, but they were doing what Hermione wanted them to do.

"Hermione?" Ron whispered shallowly against her neck. He needed a real answer this time; she appreciated it. It was her decision, and she knew that Ron would respect her words. Hermione quickly went over her options: there was responsibility, and then there was desire. They were the desires that made her heart ache and her muscles seize. Even if Hermione wanted to be responsible, her body wouldn't have allowed it. Ron had too much power over her.

So, Hermione slowly lifted her hand, grasping a handful of his amazingly soft ginger hair. She rubbed her bum against his erection and he shook, making him gasp harshly. Hermione didn't know what she was doing, but it was okay because she was with Ron. It was only with him that she didn't have to be perfect.

"Ron," she said. It was one word but it summed up everything for her. She wanted him; she needed him; Hermione would collapse into herself if they had to stop.

She pulled on his hair, emphasizing her need, and waited. Ron had her answer. It was time for Hermione to finally find out his - before the fact.

It didn't take long. Ron started kissing and sucking on her neck again. In turn, she kept bumping into him, twisting his locks in her fingers. It was a side of Hermione that she had only allowed out in her fantasies involving Ron. She was surprised by how much she knew when she acted in real life.

Ron bit her neck so hard that she flinched. She hissed at the slight pain, but the sting only increased her arousal. Ron was deliciously passionate, and he was giving everything to her without her having to tell him. He was moving and doing things because he wanted it. He had to want things with her. Hermione wanted to give him a bit of encouragement to see if they truly wanted the same thing.

After finding her courage, she put her hand on his. Ron moved his mouth away but she hoped that he wouldn't speak. What she wanted was more than she could ask for, but it wouldn't stop her. Hermione's hand shook terribly as she placed his hand on the hem of her shorts. She arranged his fingers, then pulled her shorts down a little with his hand. Hermione had to show him what he could do next because all of her vocabulary was gone.

Ron stayed frozen. Hermione feared that she had gone too far. She wanted more from him but it honestly might have all been innocent for Ron. She didn't know if she was 'just Hermione', or more, or less. He was certainly more to her. Ron was the only guy she wanted pulling down her shorts, seeing and touching a part of her that no one had before. Hermione felt tears in her eyes again because of her stupidity, but they evaporated when he started moving her shorts down. She helped him. When they were at her knees, she took them off herself, kicking them over the side of the bed.

Ron put his hand on her hip. Now, there was only one layer on her part that separated him from her. She whimpered again as he caressed her inner thighs. He rubbed all over and higher with each caress. Hermione grew damper and the sensitivity grew more extreme. His fingers moved up, stopping right before they touched the center of her knickers. She bit her lip to keep herself from telling Ron not to stop. It was difficult. Hermione had him all to herself. She didn't have to share him with Harry or the Weasleys. Hermione always tried to share and give everyone what he or she needed. This time, she wanted something for herself: Ron.

She yanked on his collar then moved his hand completely against her. Her heart was in her throat. Ron could now feel her heat, moisture, and how mad she was for him. He'd offered himself to her earlier when he'd told that he would do anything she wanted; this was her way of responding to him. Hermione was nervous and scared, but she knew that Ron wouldn't hurt or mistreat her. She moaned softly, nodding. That was the most she could do. Ron pulled the blanket off them then made a slight noise. At first, Hermione thought that it was due to the feeling of air getting to his skin, but then she realized that he was looking at her bare legs and knickers. No one had ever seen her so bare before but somehow she was okay with Ron seeing her this way. No matter what they were doing, they were best friends. After how sweet and gentle he'd been so far, Hermione had no reason to believe that would change now.

Ron touched her right cheek and most likely the mole that was there. The slight feeling made her shake while flourishing waves of comfort barreling through her. Ron could've pulled her knickers off, smacked her bum, or even pushed his hardness into her, however, he'd simply touched her mole. He'd taken an extremely sexual situation and chosen to do something kind and less obvious. That was the type of guy Ron was, and it was why Hermione trusted him most.

She returned her leg to his. He kissed the back of her head. It was something that she'd expect him to do as her boyfriend in a situation like this. Hermione knew it wasn't concrete proof of what Ron wanted, but she let the idea grow a little. He gently moved his hands all around her before climbing to her inner thigh. He didn't stop until he put his fingers right on her.

Everything Hermione felt stopped. She could feel his fingers shake as he stayed frozen as well. Ron didn't stay stiff for long. He soon moved his fingers around the center of her knickers. Hermione inhaled sharply as an extraordinary spike of pleasure seized her completely. She even moved a bit off the bed. Ron kissed her ear as he massaged her in circles. Hermione couldn't believe how amazing it felt. She moved her pelvis into his hand, clinching herself around the sensation. She hadn't known what to expect but this had to be better. "Oh " oh - god," she whimpered, digging her nails into his sheets.

Ron's hand had gone beneath her knickers. He was now wholly touching her. Nothing separated his hand from her. Everything she had he could feel. The idea should have scared her but Hermione felt intoxicated.

Ron curved his fingers, moving them all around. Hermione practically clawed at his neck. She didn't want to hurt him, but she couldn't help herself. He used the tip of his pointer finger to caress her nerve. His movements were clumsy for awhile, but Ron eventually settled on a delicate rhythm. It felt so incredible. His fingers worked her in a way she'd never felt on her own. She didn't know how he knew what he was doing, but she refused to believe that he'd practiced with Lavender. His touches were too precious and intimate to be for just anyone. No - Ron must have been working with the same instinct he used to make Hermione feel more relaxed or know when she wanted to be pushed back.

Hermione panted heavily, moaning with every touch. Every part of her burned and throbbed pleasurably. Ron was feeling her, taking her to the edge, but they were only friends. It didn't make sense, but what she knew was that Ron was making her feel good. She didn't even know she could be so sexual but Ron was bringing it out of her. It was all because of him. Hermione had to believe that he felt it too. What he was doing wasn't just about her; it had to do something more for him.

The pressure started to build in her lower stomach, causing her to hum. He responded by going faster. It was becoming too much for her. She felt the heat and pressure; she knew that she was already close. The realization frightened her a little. People saw the same sides to Hermione everyday, but no one had ever been around when she gave up complete control to her pleasure. She trusted Ron but she didn't know what he would think when he saw her.

Hermione turned her head and found Ron looking at her: he was flushed, his eyes were gigantic, and he was sweaty and breathing hard. He was gorgeous, commanding, and all for her. She wanted to tell him that she could only be this way for him. She wanted him

to know that there wasn't a day where she didn't think about him breathing her name while he'd been in the hospital. She wanted to say that Cormac and Krum were mere ink stains compared to him, and that she'd only acted like a bitch when he'd dated Lavender because they should've gotten together instead. The words were there, and she and Ron were practically plastered in heat and passion together, but it still wasn't enough to convince her that telling him would be a good idea.

All of a sudden, Ron found the most sensitive spot on her nerve and hit the electric area repeatedly. She couldn't hold back. Hermione wanted it to last all night but this was beyond her control. The pressure burst from her, causing her body to convulse. She clutched his pillow, crying out. Hermione had never cum so hard before. It didn't matter that Ron was watching her at her most primal and vulnerable moment. He had made her that way. She wanted Ron to see what he was capable of. When Hermione finally felt the flow move down to her toes and settle, she stopped his hand. Ron pulled it away. Hermione squeezed her legs together, letting the final jerks and spurts burst through her with pleasure.

Hermione opened her eyes, looking at him. They gazed at each other, panting. Ron had just felt her up, then watched her lose it. Her wetness was on his hand, and she felt the slight throb and slobber on her neck where he'd bitten her. She decided not to hide anymore. They were all over each other's skin now and she loved it. This wasn't friendship. This had to be something deeper, and it was no longer something that Hermione just wanted " she needed it; needed Ron in a way that rendered all of her control. It didn't matter if the idea was scary because it was honest. For years she'd hidden himself from him, but she didn't want to now. Hermione completely faced him; Ron stared right back at her. His eyes were so beautiful. His face and body were so relaxed and confident. She once again looked down at the mouth that she craved. Hermione had felt had felt his lips and tongue on her neck, but she wanted them against her mouth. She wanted to taste Ron, hearing him moan because of her. Hermione wanted to give him something close to what he gave her - had always given her.

She was scared and slightly confused, but she knew that Ron was real. They were together in his bed and nothing else mattered. Their existence together was her reality, and Hermione truly believed that they could be something more. Kissing would be more than him giving her a massage or an orgasm. Hermione needed to have more with him, and she could only hope that Ron did too. He slowly licked his lips then moved closer to her. She knew then that Ron did want more. She inched forward as well and didn't stop until she felt his lush lips against hers.

The first touch of Ron's mouth against hers held more magic than any spell Hermione had ever seen performed. Hermione had wanted to kiss him since the day she woke up from being petrified. She'd thought about it constantly ever since then but now that it was happening, she didn't know what to do. He, unfortunately, had more experience. She wanted Ron to take the lead so she wouldn't

mess up. Hermione had to tell him in some way, so she parted her lips slightly, leaving it up to him to make the first major move.

To her delight, Ron did the same, gently moving his lips. He groaned, making Hermione's ears burn. She moved her lips and it didn't take long before his tongue slicked them. Hermione instantly opened her mouth to Ron. She sighed at the taste of him as he moved his tongue all around her mouth. Her heart raced, and she felt her wetness and arousal returning. They snogged quickly and deeply. Hermione let her kisses tell Ron all the things that her voice couldn't. She couldn't believe that she was actually kissing him. It meant more to her than him touching under her knickers. This was both of them working together, making each other feel good. She wanted so much more, but she wouldn't ask. Hermione was worn out and tired of leading. For one night - one time - she wanted to be taken.

Ron draped his arm over her stomach then rotated on top of her. She gasped as she opened her legs; he eased between them. Hermione bucked and moaned in his mouth while he let out a broken sigh. Ron was unbelievably hard. His weight pressed into her sensitive spots. What they were doing was something she never thought would happen as friends: Ron was on top of her, kissing her, rubbing himself against her knickers. She was torn between confusion and pleasure, but she didn't have time to think.

Ron smashed his face against hers, kissing her vigorously. None of her wildest fantasies compared to the intensity. Ron was taking control, making Hermione listen and respond to him. She always loved having the upper hand, but being submissive to Ron was setting her on fire. He parted his lips from hers for a moment. She opened her eyes only to find that his were closed. Hermione took the opportunity to take in her surroundings. She had no idea how much time had gone by or how loud they were being. He didn't give Hermione time to take a guess. Ron put his lips on hers once more, kissing her with more passion. Hermione closed her eyes, responding to his mouth as best as she could. Things got sloppy and wet; their tongues practically painted each other's mouths. She got so sweaty and light-headed as she exhaled inside his mouth. Everything about her was being touched and discovered by Ron; it was beautiful. They kissed for so long that Hermione thought she would pass out. She had to pull away before she did.

This time, when Hermione opened her eyes, Ron did too. His eyes were so blue and so open to her. They were the same eyes that had invited her in and told her that her parents would be safe. He was just as caring and gentle; what was happening and what had already happened hadn't changed that. It made Hermione believe that Ron may have wanted her all along " maybe even as much as she wanted him. She touched his cheek, causing him to shake. Even though Ron was commanding, strong, and confident, he was also gentle, nervous, and gorgeous. Ron was perfect to her and Hermione wanted to be a part of his perfection. She wanted to give what she had to him to make herself perfect with him.

Ron suddenly put his hand on the edge of her knickers. There was no guessing or waiting until after the fact this time. The gesture told her exactly what he wanted next. She began to panic.

"W-wait." That one word had been the first thing said in a long time. Hearing her voice so soft and shaky made her reconsider what was happening.

"What?" Ron asked, almost in confusion, as if her hesitation didn't make sense to him.

It was obviously easy for him, but Hermione didn't know how it could be. Massaging and kissing was one thing, but the issue of sex was now on the table. What was happening was complicated and probably improper for their friendship. She suddenly hated the word. There was nothing 'improper' about Ron in this moment; besides, she couldn't pretend that she didn't want it too.

Her cheeks flushed as she realized what she was about to say. "Iâ€¦need my wand." Hermione shook as she thought about what she had said and what it meant. Ron merely stared at her like he did when she explained potion ingredients to him. Hermione wanted to roll her eyes at his moment of thickness. It was clear why she would need her wand. She may have been covered in heat, but she wasn't dim-witted. Ron just continued to look at her. Hermione really wanted him to stop. Even if he told her that he was no longer in the mood or that they were acting irresponsibly, she'd handle it. She just needed something from him other than silence.

At last, a bit of clarity and shock came over Ron. He must have figured it out. "Do - do you want me to get it for you?"

It didn't sound quite like a question; more of a statement or a challenge. Hermione knew Ron well enough to tell when he was trying to lead her into a new topic. Ron wanted to know if she would need her wand because he was asking her if she truly did want to have sex with him. Hermione thought about it. Dumbledore was dead, she knew that she, Harry, and Ron would have to do something about the Horcruxes, and her parents would soon forget about her very existence. So many difficult and horrible things had happened and would continue happening. Almost everything was uncertain, but one thing she did know was Ron. He was on top of her, breathing on her, and pressing into her, but Hermione was still in control. She still felt safe, beautiful, and even loved.

Hermione looked into the blue eyes that she first found striking at eleven and knew what she wanted; what she needed. Ron had been the only person she'd ever thought about having sex with and she knew that she wanted to give herself to him. Even if they were only friends, Hermione wanted Ron to have her and she wanted to have him. She needed them to be each other's firsts; she couldn't exactly hide from herself why that was. Hermione licked her lips then rubbed them against each other. "Yes. We need it for this."

It was her final word. Whatever would happen from this moment on in their relationship would be as a result of her last statement. Hermione trusted Ron more than anything; she trusted him with the decision she'd made and what to do with it from here. Ron grabbed

her wand from his bedside table then handed it to her with an unsteady hand.

"Thank you," she said. Hermione told herself to stop shaking. She had studied and practiced the nonverbal Prophylactic Charm many times over the course of her sixth year. For whatever reason, sex had been a constant idea in her mind and she always wanted to be prepared. Hermione closed her eyes, seeing the instructions perfectly on her lids. She put her wand tip to her stomach, then applied the charm. Her whole body stiffened for a moment, almost painfully, like it was supposed to. The sensation passed and everything was ready now. Hermione was relieved that the spell had worked, but the simplicity behind it made her anxious. There was nothing simple about what was going to happen now.

She opened her eyes. "Okay."

Hermione was terrified; she saw some of the same fear in Ron. He was paler but his nerves made her feel better because she no longer felt alone or guilty for being so nervous. This was Ron's first time too, and he would be just as clueless as she was.

"Okay," he said in a deep, shaky voice. Ron put his hand on the band of her knickers again, tugging them down. They did the same with his pajamas and boxer shorts. Soon, his erection was directly against her. She shuddered. Ron was hot, hard, and big. Hermione had nothing to compare him to, but he seemed particularly large for his age. He felt incredible but that barely took the edge off her nerves. Ron kept his eyes on her. There was a longing in his expression, along with fear. It looked as if he wanted her but there was something holding him back. "Hermione!"

She quickly rose up and kissed him, putting everything she had into it. Ron kissed her back. Hermione didn't want him to talk because she had nothing to say. She was unsure, scared, and nervous. She also knew that sex could complicate their friendship. All of these factors were significant but somehow they weren't most important right now. All that mattered was that they were together. While they kissed, Hermione loved Ron more than she had ever allowed herself to feel anything before. Ron kissed her harder, loving her back like she let herself believe he did. They weren't friends; they were soon-to-be lovers, giving each other something that could only be offered once. Hermione wanted Ron to have the only thing that was unique and special to her. It made her want to cry because she suddenly felt pure happiness. She was giving her virginity to the only man she secretly knew she could give it to. It was a real and powerful thought that had always been in her heart. Ron was the only person she wanted or would ever need.

Ron broke away from her mouth, gazing at her. Hermione could tell that he wanted to say something but she wouldn't ask what it was. He took himself in his hand, appearing lost. She was too. Girls talked about sex often, so Hermione had heard experiences from her classmates over the years. She'd read books on it, and she had had her own fantasies as well; however, nothing compared to

the real thing " to actually being moments away from true intercourse.

For once, Hermione was completely out of her element. Ron put his forehead against hers. She jumped as she felt the tip of him circle around, eventually poking at her opening. Hermione took a deep breath, putting her hands on his shoulder blades. It was happening. They were going to have sex. Right now. Right in Ron's bed. Hermione tried to prepare herself for what was next. Maybe there was something she was supposed to do or say!

Unexpectedly, she shut her eyes, squeezing his shirt. She let out a blaring wince, cringing. Nothing thicker or longer than her own fingers had ever been close to her insides. Now, Ron's large, steamy piece of muscle was making its way through. Hermione hadn't been prepared for this. Ron kept moving in. Each long, slow second felt like Ron was digging into her with a hot spade. Deeper and deeper he dug, piercing through her insecurities, secrets, dreams, and desires. Ron was finding his way through Hermione's entire life and all the things she had always kept so intimately locked inside her body. Finally, she felt him push through a kind of firm barrier deep inside her. She knew then that Ron had broken her. The most private and sacred part of her existence was Ron's now. He would always have it. Hermione could never ask for it back, but she didn't want to. She knew that she had always wanted Ron to have her virginity.

He let out a strangled moan whereas she whimpered feebly. Ron stopped; Hermione opened her eyes. It was a little hard to see him clearly through her tears, but somehow she was able to concentrate. She focused on his face. Ron looked as if he had been hit by something hard, but the pleasure was there.

"I - is this okay?" he asked.

Hermione couldn't believe it. His voice was hoarse yet still full of so much concern. Ron was still - almost too still for her - waiting on her command like always. He wanted to know if what they were doing was okay and if she wanted it. Hermione gave the thought a moment to fester in her mind. She realized that she could've said 'no', stopping the pain and whatever complication this would add to their friendship, but she honestly didn't want to. Hermione was being selfish but she couldn't help herself. She'd wanted Ron so badly for years; last term it had begun to hurt. Being with him now was making that pain go away. She wanted to feel good and she needed to make him feel good too.

"T-this is okay," she said with a nod. The statement was all she could muster but it was apparently enough for Ron. Seconds later, he began to push.

Everything after that was sweaty and thick with heat. As Ron sporadically thrust, it hurt, but wasn't unbearable. Hermione gasped with every push. She kissed him, digging her nails into his back like he was digging himself into her body. Ron moaned beautifully, pushing into her body with a passion she never imagined. She was in too much shock and slight pain to speak, but she didn't want to. Ron didn't either. There was too much to say



and not enough words to do it. Hermione peered down, watching as their bodies slid against each other. They were connected and it was what she wanted - it was what she had needed. Hermione closed her eyes, sobbing. It wasn't just because of the ache. She cried because she was having what she truly wanted more than anything, and she was afraid of what would happen once it was over. Hermione sobbed because she had never felt anything so intimate before, and she sobbed because what they were sharing now wouldn't last. They would have to part sometime.

When Ron came, he moaned longingly, filling Hermione up with everything he'd never shared with anyone else before. It was a spiritual sensation: Ron had cum inside her and because of her body. She had taken Ron to that incredible place. Hermione watched him. He was beautiful, raw, and all for her. Ron eased down on her; she tried her best to hold him. Hermione didn't know what to say. They were both out of breath. She was finally exhausted and drained of all her feelings and thoughts. Ron pulled out of her, making her moan as her body reformed. Hermione was open, more hollow, but also filled with him. Ron had reshaped her body. It would forever be custom to fit and react to him. She wanted to tell Ron these things and ask if he liked the idea of her body only being made for him, but she was far too exhausted.

Ron kissed her tenderly. It was sweet, but she barely had the strength to kiss him back. As he broke away, she let out a breath, running her fingers through her hair. Hermione didn't know what to do; she was relieved when he didn't leave. Ron moved over, and she made more room for him. He squeezed her hand, telling her that he would stay in the bed with her. Hermione couldn't respond. She was glad but far too tired to say anything.

â€¦

Hermione heard a sharp snore. She opened her eyes, automatically smiling. Ron's face was right in front of hers. His mouth was slightly open, and his hand was right near her stomach. Hermione gently brushed his hair out of his face, kissing the top of his head. Ron didn't stir; he was too heavy of a sleeper. She sat up, rubbing her eyes. She didn't know how much sleep she'd gotten but she felt well rested. Last night had tested every one of her emotions, but she had survived them all. She looked back at Ron, biting her lip. Things had to be different between them now. If nothing else, they would be better than they were when they left sixth year.

Hermione got out of bed, wincing as she felt a deep soreness inside her. She eased on her knickers and shorts, then quietly left his room. She didn't know what she would say to Ginny, but luckily their room was empty when she got there. She remembered Ginny mentioning that she would be going to Luna's and felt grateful - she needed a moment to herself. She lay back on the bed, letting out a loud sigh. Hermione covered her face with her hands, wiggling her feet.

She had left her cot last night thinking she'd get a nice speech about confidence and bravery from Ron, but he had given her so much more. They had touched, kissed, and given themselves to each

other. Hermione wasn't a virgin anymore and neither was Ron. She had dreamt about it, but she never thought it would happen. Hermione was anxious and excited about what was to come. She hurriedly rifled through her bag, searching for clothes. She wanted to see Ron, kiss him again, and figure out how they would start their new relationship. She pulled out fresh jeans and knickers. When Hermione pulled out a shirt, papers fell to the floor. Dumbledore's funeral program was one of those papers; the name of a book covering advanced protection charms was another; the last, the itinerary for her trip to Australia that she had made yesterday afternoon. At the very bottom was the date and time in which she planned to clean her parents' memories.

It all slowly came back. Hermione honestly couldn't believe that she had forgotten about it. All she had been thinking about was Ron and what she wanted. She dug deeper into her bag, pulling out her journal that had detailed notes on how she would approach finding the Horcruxes. It was all in the same bag as her clothes. Hermione had been so hysterical when she packed that she hadn't thought to separate things. She had been distraught and scared but at least she knew what eventually had to be accomplished. Now, she was happy, relaxed, but totally clueless.

Hermione sat on the ground as the weight of everything that had happened finally caught up with her. Her mind wasn't cloudy anymore. Sure, she'd lost her virginity, but Hermione had to wipe her parents' memories, find some way to search for Horcruxes, and do it all without Dumbledore's guidance. She couldn't believe herself. A minute ago, her biggest concern was how long she'd have to wait until Ron woke up. Hermione grabbed her clothes then raced to the loo. She locked the door, stripping, then stood under the showerhead. Hermione let the water thaw out her better judgment. As she scrubbed, she felt Ron's sweat, saliva, and cum leave her body. She didn't want to let those things go. It had all felt so good. Her body heated up, tingling a little. Hermione wanted to keep Ron on her, but she had to prepare for the day.

As she dressed, she noticed a large red bite mark on her neck. She shivered at the memory of Ron's mouth sucking her skin. It had been incredible, but she couldn't keep thinking about it. She searched around Ginny's room for makeup. She covered up the mark with foundation, feeling guilty. She dried her hair then sat on the bed. Hermione had no idea what to do, and time went by a lot faster than she wanted it to. She grabbed her bag, socks, and trainers, then went back up to Ron's room. She had to see him and be near him, even though things were different.

Ron was still asleep and snoring slightly when she walked in. She opened the blinds, deciding to tidy up while she thought about what to do. She straightened his wardrobe, comic collection, and even folded his pajamas and boxer shorts neatly by his bed. She went over to the other side, setting her bag down. Ron looked peaceful and adorable when he slept. Being close to him, Hermione shivered again, reliving the heat of what had happened. It had all been so much, but having him once didn't make her want him any less. In fact, she had never wanted him more. Hermione's body pleaded for her to wake him up and see the eyes that had given her all the reassurance she needed last night.

Last night, when they had talked, touched, kissed, and made love. Hermione bit her lip. She was sure last night that it had been love, but now she wasn't for some reason. Hermione looked at Ron's half-naked body, finally gaining the courage to ask herself what had happened. She had approached Ron in tears, and she knew he had his own struggles. They had done things that they had never done together before—then it all exploded, ending with them having sex. Hermione had never even gone out on a date or so much as kissed Ron's forehead before, but last night she had let him feel her up and he came inside her. All of it had happened while the world around them slowly shifted and crumbled.

Hermione reached out, touching his hand. Ron still didn't stir. She was blown away by how beautiful and perfect he was. This wasn't his fault. He'd asked her every step of the way if she wanted to continue. Hermione's eyes stung a little. She didn't know what was wrong with her. It was obvious that she wanted Ron, and she wanted things to change between them. Now, no matter what, they were different. Her feelings were exposed, and Ron's facade was a little less vacant; however, her better judgment told her that having sex didn't mean that they were together now; that what she wanted wasn't the same as what they needed.

It wasn't realistic to believe that Ron would wake up and the two of them would kiss, flirt, and start dating. Hermione had to leave and lie to her parents. She had to do research for Harry. She had to accept Dumbledore's death. She had to get through the hardest time in her life, and as much as she wanted her love life with Ron to be her main focus, it simply couldn't be at the moment. She swallowed the truth, moving her hand away from his. Hermione wouldn't kiss him. She wasn't his girlfriend. They were still just best friends. Only now they were best friends who'd had sex with each other. It hurt to think about.

Hermione didn't know why she hadn't considered this last night. She still didn't know what Ron thought. If last night hadn't been serious for him and they jumped into a relationship anyway, then their friendship would be over; however, if he did feel something real for her, their relationship could be ruined anyway. They might not have time to nurture a relationship with everything going on, and they could end up fighting more than usual and breaking up. If they didn't want to spoil everything, then they would need time for their love.

Ron stirred a little as Hermione wiped a tear away. Love. She could wish all she wanted but she didn't know if Ron actually loved her. Caring about her as a best friend was different from being in love with her. Hermione couldn't believe she had given it up without knowing for sure.

She looked away from him, standing up to put on her socks. She turned for her trainers when she saw Ron staring at her as if she were a foreign creature. She didn't know what to say. Her heart skipped a beat, her muscles relaxed yet tensed at the same time, and her body drew toward him. It wasn't any different from how Ron usually made her feel first thing in the morning, but it was

different somehow. Her instinct to smile and say something nice was abandoned.

"Hey," he said dully. Ron Weasley was a man of simple words but it actually didn't bother her this time.

"Hi," she said.

He remained still and quiet, so Hermione sat on the edge of his bed, putting on her shoes. She wouldn't risk getting closer. She wanted him to say something. She needed proof that it had all actually happened; needed him to drown out all the noise in her head.

"Umâ€¦did you get any sleep last night?" he asked.

The word 'sleep' sounded a lot more intimate coming from Ron than it ever had before. She stood up, feeling her face heat up. "Some."

Ron looked at her as if he was waiting for more. He shrugged, rubbing his neck. "Are you okay?" He sounded sincerely concerned, as his voice was deep and gentle. Ron cared for her no matter what. He was half-naked and still had the residue of her on his hand, but he was thinking about her. It felt good and made Hermione blush more.

"I'm a little sore if that's what you mean." She couldn't believe that she'd said it. Hermione had meant to say that she was fine but instead she told him the plain truth. Being intimate made it harder to keep things from Ron. He had touched her and watched her lose it. He had the privilege of knowing her most private thoughts now.

Ron blushed furiously. "Yeah, sorry."

Hermione hadn't wanted him to feel bad or apologize. She was glad that it was Ron to give her the special pain. Hermione felt like a bitch for being so short with him. "It's okay. It's better than it was." Hermione frowned, wishing that she could go back to that moment. She and Ron had been together, oblivious, and things were simple. It had only been the two of them and nothing else.

"Hermioneâ€¦"

"I really need to take my things downstairs," Hermione said swiftly, getting up. She heaved her bag over her shoulder, pressing her lips together. She couldn't let him say too much. She was already losing her strength. Ron had never said that he loved her nor that he wanted to start a real relationship, so she had to keep herself from saying it.

"Then let me help you. I just, ah, I gotta get dressed." He reached for his boxer shorts as if it was no big deal.

Hermione panicked. "No - that's okay." She couldn't imagine seeing his naked lower half with proper lighting. It would've been much too temptation. Hermione had to leave today and seeing

Ron's muscle would've only made her want to stay more than she already did.

"Hermione," Ron said like he was let down. "If you're angry-"

"I'm not," she said. She was a lot of things right now, but angry wasn't one of them. There was no possible way she could feel angry towards Ron, and she felt horrible that he thought she did. It wasn't his fault. Hermione had to try harder. "I only mean—why don't you go shower and get dressed first? I've had a chance to. You haven't."

He looked a little sick. "But you're leaving today."

His voice was soft, and for a moment, things were how they were last night. Ron was sensitive and all for her. Hermione wanted to tell him that she didn't want to leave; that she wouldn't fix her parent's memories; that the two of them could be together and work things out with Harry as a couple. She wanted to tell him that the idea of leaving had already been almost unbearable but, now that they'd had sex and had shown so much emotion and beauty toward each other, she wasn't sure if she would survive the days without him; however, she couldn't. She had to leave. Hermione had known that before she walked up to his room last night.

"I know I am," she said, "but I'm still packing. Just go shower and get dressed." It all sounded okay in her mind — as if it wasn't a lie.

He nodded. "Okay."

It pained her a little that he had instantly taken her at her word. Ron hadn't grabbed her, telling Hermione that she wasn't going anywhere until they figured out where they stood. He didn't hold her, kiss, or even tell her that he had enjoyed last night. Ron was acting as if everything was normal, like they hadn't lost their virginities last night to each other. They were still best friends. They were still 'just' Ron and Hermione. It helped reinforce what Hermione had considered in the shower: last night, Ron had wanted to make her feel better. He'd wanted to release his sexual energy. Now, he wanted to move on. It would be stupid if she tried to challenge that.

"Great," Hermione said. She slowly went to the door, touching the handle. She wanted to cry but she didn't. Hermione had to be strong. She knew what she had to do once she left the room. She turned back to him. Ron was staring at her strongly like he had last night. His hair was fluffy, and she could see the bit of his bum where the shirt didn't cover and the blanket didn't hide. Ron was so gorgeous. She wanted to stay with him more than anything else in the whole world. "I'll see you, Ron." Hermione wanted him to take the lead and say something worthwhile. She needed him to guide them now because she didn't know what to do. All Ron had to do was tell her 'no' or tell her to wait and she gladly would.

"Yeah, I'll see you," he said, shutting down all of her hopes. She let her heart drop as she gave him a weak smile then closed the door behind her. Hermione almost collapsed against it. She

closed her eyes, forcing herself to move. She walked back downstairs into Ginny's room where she pulled out parchment and began writing to Ron all of the things she knew she had to say. It wasn't what she wanted to do, but she had to. She had taken their relationship there so they had to face reality and the consequences.

Hermione sniffled, rubbing her eyes. She had to hurry if she wanted to be gone by the time Ron was finished. It was wrong and Hermione felt horrible because she knew he would be waiting on her, but she couldn't be there. She would be with her parents, enjoying them as her parents for the last time. The thought sobered her up. Hermione sealed the enveloped and addressed the front. Ron would understand. In time, he would realize that friendship was what they'd always had and that they could still have it after what they'd done. It was right and proper, she was sure about that, but a large part of her hoped that he'd tell her she was mental and that they could never just be friends again. She didn't want to just be his friend, but she didn't know what Ron wanted.

If Ron could show her how they could make it work, then she would follow him and be with him. It was what she wanted - what she had always wanted. Hermione dried her face, taking a deep breath. She was doing the right thing. It was right for her, Ron, and for their friendship. It would keep her focused while she was with her parents. It would allow her and Ron to be ready to help Harry. She kept repeating all of this to herself until she could stand up. Hermione went downstairs and found Mr. and Mrs. Weasley sipping from their mugs and talking.

"Up already?" Mrs. Weasley said. "Ginny isn't back yet."

Hermione tried to smile. "I know but I have to go. My parents are expecting me. You knowâ€¦"

"Of course, dear." Mrs. Weasley got up, giving her a hug. Hermione hugged her back, taking in the bit of comfort. "Have a great time with them. They'll be all right and soon you'll be back here with us, Hermione. We can help you get through this."

"Thank you," she said. Mrs. Weasley words were comforting but they didn't fix her problems.

Mr. Weasley smiled at her. It was a little too much like Ron's smile. "If you can, get a nice tan down there. Do it for those of us who can't."

Hermione laughed, loving that Mr. Weasley's humor was a lot like Ron's. "I'll try, Mr. Weasley."

"All right," he said. "We'll see you soon. If you need anything just write."

"I will." Hermione reached into her pocket. The letter felt so heavy in her hand. "Can you please give this to Ron when he wakes up? I said goodbye to him but he was half asleep."

"Yes, that boy could sleep through a wizarding duel," Mrs. Weasley said. "I'll make sure he gets it." Hermione didn't want to give it to her but she did. She was scared that Ron's parents could read through the envelope but she knew she was being paranoid.

"Thank you. I should go. I'll see you both soon." Hermione took her bag and Mrs. and Mrs. Weasley walked her to the door. She gave them her best smile, waving and walking down the path. Her knees felt wobbly; her heart told her to go back to Ron. She wanted him - needed him - and she had to apologize for lying and for leaving him with nothing but a note. Hermione stopped, closing her eyes as her tears fell. For a moment, she considered turning back but she reminded herself what was ahead. Her parents' safety needed securing and she was the only one who could do it. Besides, if she went back inside and things turned pear shaped for her and Ron, then their relationship would never be the same. Hermione would lose him and nothing scared her more than that, even considering what she had to do in Australia.

What Hermione was doing was unfair to her desires but it was what she needed to do for her life. No matter what she wanted, it wasn't stronger than her love for Ron. Last night hadn't produced that feeling for her - she had always loved Ron and she would keep being in love with him. It was why it hurt so much to leave him.

It was why she apparated away.

\*\*\*\* I bloody LOVE Hermione Granger! I also love freeing HP characters from the literary shackles they're sometimes locked in while kicking them into reality as well. Of course I love doing this with Ron but I love releasing Hermione from certain binds too. Her character is incredibly multilayered and raw which makes her so fun/beautiful to write. I just love her! JK created such an amazing and intricate garden for these characters but that doesn't mean new flowers can't bloomâ€¦if that even makes sense, lol. Damn, I'm a knob, lol. Oh, I should say thisâ€¦ I'm not going to make a habit of these sorts of 'mirrored chapters' but its CRUCIAL that Hermione's experience of this is exposed. Anyway, thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

### CHAPTER 3

Thank you all for the reviews!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

"I'm so sorry that I've kept you waiting, Hermione," Kingsley Shacklebolt said as he closed the door to his office. He sat behind his rather large desk, taking off his dark blue hat.

"It's all right, sir," Hermione said, crossing her legs and sitting a bit more properly, "I know how busy you are. Did you receive the note I left for you yesterday?"

"Yes, I was able to finally read it this morning." Kingsley rummaged through his desk then pulled out a thick black folder. "You can imagine how busy the Auror Department has been lately."

"Yes, sir," she said. "The whole Ministry seems busy. I could barely walk around downstairs with all the people crowding the common areas."

"There are a lot of employees and their families showing up, wanting to speak with officials from the Magical Law Enforcement Department, as well as this one," Kingsley said. "We're approaching darker times, so, naturally, there's a lot of fear and uncertainty, there's no denying that."

"Definitely not, sir," Hermione said in a gentler voice. Ever since Dumbledore's funeral, she had felt something in the air. It swept across her body sometimes, giving her stinging chills. Hermione didn't know what that something was but it wasn't coated in hope or light. It was something sinister.

"There's also no denying that there's still a very strong force of good in our world," Kingsley said. "Dumbledore's passing is really going to make people realize where they stand. Don't you think so, Hermione?" He gave her a very small yet warm smile.

Hermione felt a little better as a grin tugged on her mouth. What was so brilliant about Kingsley was that he didn't believe in shadowing the hard truths of life, but he also never dwelled in grief. Kingsley was always able to find a sliver of light in even the darkest of times. Hermione admired him greatly for having that ability.

"I do, sir," she said. "Following a tragic event, I think there's inner strength that people gain. If there was ever a time to realize how strong you are, it's during a crisis."

Kingsley nodded. "Very honest and intelligent words. Dumbledore would be proud."

"I hope so, sir," Hermione said, feeling her eyes sting a little. "I'm trying as hard as I can. I think everyone is."

"Yes, we are," he said, nodding. "We all have jobs to do now."

Hearing the word 'jobs' made her sit up straighter in her chair. She pulled out a completed relocation form from her bag, sliding it across the desk to him. "And I've completed one of mine. Here's my parent's information."

Kingsley picked up the form, reading it closely. Watching him read it so effortlessly made Hermione feel a little nauseous. It hadn't been easy to write down that her parents were no longer Mr. and Mrs. Granger: successful dentists. It was heartbreaking that her parents' entire life had been changed and crammed onto one piece of paper. Hermione wanted to rip the paper up then give her family its true identity back, but she couldn't. Doing this for them was one of her many jobs.



"So," Kingsley said, "everything involving the Memory Charm was carried out cautiously, yes?"

"Yes, sir," Hermione said. "I performed the charm while they were asleep."

"No problems?"

"None at all," she said. Hermione's nausea churned in her stomach. Once she'd known when and how, the execution of the spell had been quite simple. She'd removed her parents' memories of her as easily as she could take stains out of her shirt. It didn't seem right. It shouldn't have been as easy as it was.

Hermione cleared her throat, trying to work through the heavy emotions. "Just to make sure, I stayed a few extra days to watch them in their new routine. Everything is sorted. My parentsâ€|they have a new life now."

Kingsley finally put the sheet down. "Hermioneâ€|"

"I'm fine, sir," she swiftly said. "I know this was something I had to do. I'm okay."

"It's all right if you're not," he said. "I can certainly understand the difficulty in what you had to do. Remus and I talked about this for quite awhile before we came to this conclusion. This is the best course of action to keep your parents safe. It's about your safety as well, and to an extent, Harry's."

"Yes, I know," Hermione said, nodding vigorously. Kingsley definitely didn't have to tell her these things. She had repeated them in her mind at least a hundred times before walking into her parents' room and modifying their memories. "That's why I'm okay. I know this is for the greater good, and that it won't be forever."

"No, it won't," he said, shaking his head. "These sorts of arrangements happen a lot more often than you'd think. You're not the first person - and you're definitely not the first daughter - to have to do something like this."

All Hermione could do was nod. Hearing that more people had to give up their parents wasn't comforting. It was all due to the evil in their world. Hermione was desperate to relieve them of some of it. She had to be strong, sharp, and brave so that families could be reunited again.

"Sir," she said, rubbing her brow, "what happens now?"

"A trusted member of the Order will check in on them every couple of months," Kingsley said. "Your parents will never know, and it'll never be invasive. It's just to make sure they're safe and that the spell is still in effect. I'll receive a report of their whereabouts and keep them on file."

"Do I get a copy?" Hermione asked.

"It won't be anything too personal," he said. "It'll simply be a check system to see if they're safe, still in their routine, and if they're thinking of making major changes to their lifestyle."

"Well, if it's okay, I'd still like a copy." To Hermione, the reports would be her only way of keeping up with her parents now. It might not have been personal to Kingsley, but to Hermione, reading that her parents came home at five o'clock every day would be cherished information.

Kingsley gave her a once-over with his dark eyes. "You'll have to keep the reports guarded."

"With my life," Hermione said confidently.

"Okay," he said, nodding. "I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you, sir," she said in earnest. "I can't contact them so the reports would be all I'd have." She rubbed her brow harder, pressing her lips together.

"You did the right thing, Hermione," Kingsley said in a soothing voice. "That's what we want every person in this situation to understand. This is exactly what you and I were talking about earlier. You're a very tough woman and one of the good forces we have."

Kingsley talking about her in such an appreciative way made Hermione's sickness go away while somehow managing to make her feel stronger at the same time. She knew that she was a good person; she knew that when she was focused, she could also be incredibly strong. It wasn't until recently that she'd ever really started to doubt herself.

"Thank you, sir," she eventually said. "I'm grateful that there's a way to keep them safer. Now that they're okay, I can focus on other things. Speaking of which, I should probably return to the Burrow so I can get to work on some of them. Excuse me." She stood up. Kingsley walked her to the door.

"Has anyone had a chance to tell you that a few members from the Order are conducting a small meeting at the Burrow in a few days?" Kingsley asked.

"No, sir."

"Well, you, Harry, and Ron are welcome to join us," he said. "We've got to create a new patrolling team for safe houses."

"That sounds great, sir," Hermione said, appreciating that Kingsley didn't treat her like a feeble child. "I'm sure the three of us will be there."

"Wonderful," he said, opening the door for her. "Remember, if you ever have any questions about the relocation process or anything else, my door is always open."

"I will definitely do that, sir," Hermione said. "Thank you so much for all of this."

"You don't have to thank me," Kingsley said. "This is the right thing to do."

'The right thing to do' was something Hermione thought about as she took the lift down to the main floor of the Ministry. The right thing was always in the front of her mind. It was how she lived her life and made choices to keep her and the people around her safe and prepared for the worst. As Hermione walked over to one of the apparation gates, she bit her lip. Wellâ€¦ always keeping to the right thing hadn't been completely true lately. In fact, lately, 'the right thing' had been a concept she'd struggled with. Suddenly, the images of blue eyes, ginger hair, and large hands drifted into her mind. Her body felt relaxed, yet excited as it always did when she thought about Ron. She couldn't totally bask in the goodness though. Their situation was a prime example of how Hermione hadn't been doing the right thing lately.

When she appeared back on the Weasleys' property, she adjusted her clothes then walked through the field to the Burrow. Hermione mentally checked off the first item on her list of duties. Her parents had officially been relocated. Even though it felt wrong, Hermione couldn't help but to feel a little proud that she had completed the task. She had survived weeks with her parents, knowing that she'd have to alter their memories then suffered through days of having to watch them without her. It was still so painful and sensitive, but it was, unfortunately, her duty.

Now, Hermione could focus on academics. She could commit her time to researching and preparing for their inevitable expedition. She, Harry, and Ron could be a team and discover a way to help free their world of some of its darkness. Hermione slowed down as she approached the kitchen door on the side of the house. All those things were important and needed to be accomplished. Nevertheless, it wasn't all she wanted. Hermione wanted to enjoy time with her two best friends. She was keen on watching Harry and Ginny flirt and look lovely together. Most of all, Hermione wanted to spend time with Ron without complication. She thought of brushing his shoulder with hers as they compared the sizes of their feet like they sometimes did when they sat under a tree with their trainers off. Hermione closed her eyes. She could see Ron's handsome smile. She imagined telling him something witty then hearing his somewhat raspy laughter that somehow touched deeply inside her body.

To put it simply, Hermione wanted Ron back. That was the task that was at the very top of her to-do list in invisible ink.

"Let's go, Hermione," she said to herself aloud. She couldn't dwell. Good forces could never stop moving. She had to move forward and keep trying. Hermione opened the kitchen door.

Mrs. Weasley was inside at the stove. "Hermione? Heavens, that was quick."

"The meeting ran a lot shorter than I thought," Hermione said, sitting at the table and taking in the delicious smells of whatever Mrs. Weasley was cooking.

"I guess that's a good thing," Mrs. Weasley said. "I didn't expect you back till later so I didn't put extra eggs on, dear."

"It's all right," Hermione said. "I'm not that hungry anyway."

It was a lie but she never liked the idea of Mrs. Weasley doing extra work for her. She already had such a big immediate family to tend to. Hermione took an apple from the fruit bowl.

"Well, if you do get hungry, let me know," Mrs. Weasley said.

She turned around, giving Hermione the same look of concern in her brown eyes that Ginny had given her the night before. Ginny's facial features were almost identical to her mothers, whereas Ron looked so much like Mr. Weasley. The only time Ron ever really looked like his mum was when the two were arguing over rude behaviors on his part or unfair rulings on hers.

Hermione couldn't think about Ron for too long. She had to answer the question at hand—it was something about food.

"I will," Hermione said, suddenly remembering Mrs. Weasley's question, "but I'm sure an apple will suffice."

"Okay, dear." Mrs. Weasley gave her a smile but her expression quickly became more hardened. "How did the meeting go?"

Now was the time to be strong, showing people that she could be a force. "Smoothly," Hermione said. "The relocation process is complete. It's in Kingsley's hands now."

"He's the one man you can trust with something like this," Mrs. Weasley said.

"I know," Hermione said.

"I'm very proud of you, Hermione," Mrs. Weasley said, reaching across the table and touching her arm. "I haven't had a chance to say it, but I am. What you did was incredibly brave and it was the right thing to do. For loved ones—sacrifices are necessary sometimes." Mrs. Weasley spoke with a sharp edge to her voice. Hermione could tell by the distance in her eyes that Mrs. Weasley didn't want 'sacrifices' and 'loved ones' side-by-side.

Hermione wanted to help take Mrs. Weasley's mind off the matter. "Thank you, Mrs. Weasley. I know I'm doing the right thing for them. I also want to thank you for letting me stay here."

"You're always welcome," Mrs. Weasley said, automatically brightening. "You and Harry are a part of this family. We all have to take care of each other, especially now with so much going on."

"Like the meeting?" Hermione asked. "Kingsley told me that some members from the Order are coming by for a patrolling job."

Mrs. Weasley sighed, turning back to the stove. "Yes," she said curtly. "Arthur says it's our turn to patrol. I imagine a couple of my boys will be selected." Mrs. Weasley's back was still to her but Hermione could tell that she was distressed. It was probably her worst nightmare: sending her children out to fight. Hermione sympathized with her but she understood the other side as well. The Weasleys were all so powerful, compassionate, and courageous. They were good forces and leaders that the wizarding world needed.

The situation wasn't easy though. Hermione feared for Ron's life every time they put themselves in danger. She knew that she would never survive if anything serious ever happened to him. Even so, Ron was a born knight. Fighting and protecting was something innate in him and Hermione could never envision him doing anything else. Ron would fight his whole life as a good force. Hermione always wanted to be at his side fighting as well.

Almost as if he had felt her thinking about him, Ron abruptly appeared in the kitchen. "Mum, do we have any Essence of Feverfew left? My head feels like it's going to..." He trailed off when he noticed Hermione in the room.

Hermione had to set her apple down before she dropped it. Everything around her slowed down and turned mute. Her heart began to beat unbelievably fast while heat touched her back. Ron was wearing the same pajamas and Chudley Canons shirt that he'd worn the night they slept together. Hermione couldn't believe that he was wearing them. She'd worn the same pajamas since that night but never together. It was probably mental but it was almost too tempting for her. Then again, she didn't think it was so mental anymore. By only looking at him, memories from their time together overwhelmed her mind and body. All five of her senses were bombarded by the thick, sweltering passion of their night.

"I think your father used the last of it," Mrs. Weasley said. "Ron? Ronald?"

"Huh?" Ron shifted his gaze away from Hermione and to his mother.

Mrs. Weasley frowned at him. "I said we're out of Feverfew."

"Bollocks," Ron breathed in defeat.

"Ronald Weasley--"

"I know, Mum. I'm sorry," Ron said, holding out his hands. "My head just really hurts."

"Drink some cold water with your breakfast then - here." Mrs. Weasley set Ron's plate right next to Hermione as if she knew Ron wanted to sit next to her. Ron didn't move. He just kept looking at his plate then to his mum.

Mrs. Weasley touched his forehead with the back of her hand. "Ronald, is this headache really that bad? Do you feel sick as well?"

He moved his face away. "No, I'm fine. Sorry." Ron pulled out the chair in front of his plate and sat next to Hermione. She automatically tensed, taking another bite of her apple.

"Thank you, Mum," Ron said, keeping his gaze on the table.

"Of course, dear," Mrs. Weasley said, obviously not seeing or feeling the tension between them. "I can owl your father and ask him to pick up some Feverfew."

"I'm all right," Ron said with a shrug. "It'll go away."

Hermione fought the urge to smirk. Ron was a typical bloke when it came to showing physical pain but his toughness wasn't arrogant. In fact, it was a quality that made him exceptionally sexy.

Mrs. Weasley rolled her eyes. "You're just like Charlie. That boy never believed in any sort of aid when he was younger, and I'm sure he still doesn't. Anyhow, how is Harry doing? He was rather quiet this morning when I made him breakfast."

"He's fine, Mum." Ron moved around in his seat, looking extremely uncomfortable. He'sâ€|talking with Ginny."

Mrs. Weasley beamed. "Aww, that's lovely." Ron didn't say anything. His discomfort was clear so Hermione didn't understand how Ron's mum couldn't tell. "Well, I'll go write to your father anyway. We'll need some for the house. Be sure to ask Hermione about her meeting, Ron. Be courteous."

"I will, Mum," Ron said, almost groaning.

Mrs. Weasley patted his head then left the room - leaving Hermione and Ron alone.

Hermione kept her vision on her apple. She didn't know what to do. As soon as she got up that morning, she left straight to the Ministry. Hermione hadn't seen or spoken to Ron since their argument the night before. She was still hurt about what Ron had said about Harry, but she was glad that they were sitting together.

Hermione let out a soft breath, feeling her cheeks flush. She peeked at Ron. He was poking his sausages with his fork, almost glaring at them. Hermione tried to think of something to say but her throat felt too constricted to speak. They were barely shoulder-to-shoulder but she felt completely incased in Ron. She could smell his body and she felt heat from where they were slightly touching. It was almost too much for her. Even his breathing made her dizzy.

There was some sort of current charging between them. Last night, Hermione had thought that maybe their intensity had been the

product of not seeing each other in ages, but now she was certain that it was because they'd had sex. It was weeks ago, but every time Hermione was alone with Ron or was close enough to smell and touch him, the feelings from that night returned.

"So," Ron said in a low voice, making Hermione jump out of her thoughts, "your meeting went okay?"

Even though he wasn't looking at her, Hermione knew that he honestly cared because of the tenderness in his voice. It was so different from how it had been the night before when he'd argued with her.

Hermione licked her lips then took another breath. She could do this. He was only Ron. "Yes, Kingsley and I finished the last of the formalities. It's over now. Everything is okay."

"Good," Ron said with a nod. "And what about you?"

"Me?"

Ron slowly turned to her. He stared at her mightily, his blue eyes demanding her attention. "How are you doing?" he asked. "Are you okay?"

Hermione pressed her lips together. Ron was driving her mental with all of his contradictions. His voice was so soft, yet his gaze was incredibly strong; his boyish freckles were clashing with the intense expression on his face, and he was being nice to her even though he had seemed to hate her the night before. There were some things about Ron that were rather routine and expected, but when it came to her, Hermione could never understand what he wanted or what he was thinking. He confused her to no end, but his mystery made her more attracted to him. Ron's complexity made him perfect.

"I'm all right," Hermione finally said.

It wasn't a lie. Even though her parents didn't know her anymore, there was still so much research to do, and her relationship with Ron was in dire straits, right now she was okay because he was gazing at her kindly, giving her a bit more room to stand on. They were alone and so close. It was lovely and she didn't want to ruin it.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Just got a headache," Ron said. He moved his gaze away from her and to his plate. She was finally able to exhale and didn't feel so entranced. Ron seriously had no idea what he did to her. He pointed to her apple. "Is that all you've got?"

"Yes."

"My mum didn't make you anything?"

"She didn't know I was coming back so soon," Hermione said. "I'm fine."

Ron gave her a look. He slid his plate in between them. "We can share."

"No, that's okay," Hermione swiftly said. "I'm fine with just this."

He rubbed his face in frustration. "Do you always have to reject my offers?" he said a bit heatedly. "Just share breakfast with me, all right? I know you're hungry." He ate a forkful of egg then handed the fork to her. "Take it."

Hermione felt a spike of excitement as she took the fork. She was horribly childish but she was rather excited to use the same fork that had been in his mouth. Hermione had sucked Ron's tongue and let him cum inside her, yet somehow, putting her lips to the same fork he'd used still somehow seemed intimate, new, and extraordinary.

Ron must've been able to read her mind because his ears went pink. He rubbed his neck. "I can get you a new--"

"-no. This is fine. Thank you, Ron." Hermione took a forkful of egg, keeping her eyes on Ron as she did. His blush spread to his cheeks. He grinned a little then looked back to their breakfast. Ron picked up a piece of sausage with his hand, biting off a rather considerable amount.

They ate slowly and in an intense silence. Hermione spared every moment she could to watch Ron. She took in every motion of his mouth, the ways he peered at his food, and how his hands touched things. Hermione even noticed how Ron closed his eyes and tapped his feet when he took rather large bites of things. These actions weren't new to her. Hermione had been studying Ron since she was a confused first year that couldn't understand why the rude ginger boy attracted her interest so extremely. Things were different now though. It wasn't Hermione merely watching him eat. She had felt his mouth and those hands on her body, so watching him ravish his food made her think about what he had done to her. It was madness. Even eating was more passionate now.

Hermione had to focus on her own food. "Ron, could you pass me the jam jar, please?"

"Sure." Ron handed the jar to her.

For whatever reason, feeling his hand brush against hers caused Hermione's body to rapidly tense up. She lost control of herself, dropping the jar. It crashed to the floor where strawberry jam splattered everywhere.

"Oh!" Hermione groaned in horror. "I'm so sorry!"

"I'll get it," Ron said.

"No -- let me."



They both got out of their seats and bent down, knocking foreheads.

"Bloody hell!" Ron whined, rubbing his head. "Hermione, I've got it."

"But I dropped it. Let me do it," Hermione urged, rubbing her head as well. She didn't know what was wrong with her but she felt as if she had to pick up the mess herself. Hermione couldn't let Ron take the fault for it. She had been the distracted and careless one.

Hermione felt flushed as suddenly breathing became harder to do. She didn't even bother with her wand. She simply scooped jam back into the jar with the lid.

"What are you doing?" Ron said, moving her hands away.

"I'm helping!"

"Hermione â€” bloody stop it." Ron snatched the jar away. He held her wrists firmly, scooting closer to her. "I - I'm sorry, okay? I'm really sorry, Hermione. Just stop this."

Hermione had no idea what he was apologizing for. It could've been for the jam incident, yelling at her last night, or even for taking her virginity. It didn't matter either way because she didn't want to apologize for any of those things. She told herself to calm down and, slowly, she came back to her better senses.

"I'm sorry too," Hermione said. "Ron, I'm sorry."

Hermione shook her head, not knowing what to say. The air felt so thick and it was far too hot in the room for her to concentrate. It wasn't just the atmosphere though. Ron hands on her wrists made the hairs on Hermione's arm stand on end, and his smell was circling itself around her. Ron was just so much of so many things; she couldn't handle it anymore.

They merely sat on the floor in silence. Hermione looked into his eyes as he stared right back at her, almost frozen in place. She couldn't tell what was in his gaze; all she knew was that he was making her want to jump into his arms and apologize for everything so they could make things right.

Before she even had time to think of something to say, Ron's expression changed and the gentle intensity disappeared. He let go of her then backed away.

"Just let me get this, yeah?"

Ron didn't even wait for her to respond. He pulled his wand out of his back pocket, ridding the mess on the floor.

Hermione felt a mixture of relief and disappointment that Ron had moved away. "I'll take care of the table," she said.

Ron didn't respond so she got up, telling herself to keep her composure. Hermione cleared off the table then washed the dishes. Cleaning helped to clear her mind but it couldn't completely erase the fact that Ron was in the room with her or that she could still feel his hands on her arms.

"Ron, did you get any â€" Hermione?"

"Sorry?" Hermione asked hurriedly, turning to Harry.

"What are you on about, mate?" Ron asked with an eyebrow raised, clutching the jam jar in his hand.

Harry apparently didn't understand the suggestiveness of his wording. He just shrugged. "Did you get something for your head?" he asked Ron.

"Oh," Ron said, relaxing somewhat and setting the jar back on the table. He massaged his temples. "No, but I'm all right."

Harry walked over to Hermione. "I didn't know you were back already. Did you just get in?"

"Not too long ago," she said. Harry's presence was helping to thin out the intensity. It would be easy to focus if she had something or someone else to give attention to.

"So how did it go?" he asked.

"Everything is in place now," Hermione said.

Harry gave her a small smile but she knew him well enough to see the guilt in his expression. Harry thought everything that happened in their lives was because of him and his 'destiny'. The bloke carried too much on his shoulders.

"Where's Ginny?" Ron asked rather loudly.

Harry turned to him. "I think she's taking a shower."

Hermione could tell that Harry was trying not to seem knowledgeable as to why she was taking a shower at the moment.

"Ah," Ron said dryly. "Evidence to wash away?"

"I'm not even going to try to answer that," Harry said with a bit of humor in his voice.

Hermione looked between her two best friends, feeling her confidence grow. She always felt a bit stronger when she was in their company. Hermione knew that she had to seize the opportunity. They were finally all together, and even though there was so much going on, now would be the perfect time to start working.

"How about instead of arguing as to why Ginny showers, we work a little," Hermione said. "We're all here so we might as well. I

want to go over some research strategies I came up with while waiting for Kingsley."

Harry instantly stood a bit straighter. "Brilliant. Ron?"

Ron looked to the jar then to Hermione. His gaze didn't stay long. He quickly turned to Harry, nodding. "All right."

"Great. I just have to get my bag," Hermione said a bit cheerfully. "We can work here."

She swiftly left the room then ran upstairs. Most of Hermione's work was in her bag that was already in the kitchen, but she needed a few moments alone. She walked into Ginny's room, shutting the door. Hermione leaned against it, closing her eyes and clutching her stomach. This was the next big assignment on her list. Her moment with Ron would have to be put on hold while they worked as friends. Hermione rubbed her brow. Actually, she wasn't sure if they were still friends. They had apologized but Hermione didn't know what for. They were still playing the game of never explaining their actions. It wasn't how things were supposed to be, and it wasn't how Hermione was as a person. She needed to work things out with Ron but it simply wasn't the time. She had to take things as they were and move forward.

Hermione heaved her bag on her shoulder then went back downstairs. She sat across from Ron and Harry at the kitchen table, laying everything out with a bit of pride. She had worked so hard on cataloging their research by type.

"Just so you know, Harry, you were a topic of discussion at the Ministry," Hermione said.

"Yeah, Ron's dad told me that people can't keep me out of their mouths â€" as if people haven't always been talking about me," Harry said. "While you were away, Hermione, things got really quiet around the Ministry."

"We should be thankful that things are somewhat quiet," Ron said.

"But for how long?" Harry asked, softly pounding his fist on the table. "This is all building towards â€" something, I know it." He shook his head. "He's getting stronger. I can bloody feel it."

The stinging chill Hermione sometimes felt swept over her as she watched Harry grow pale and a haunting, almost vicious look formed in his eyes. She hated when he got this way. Harry looked nothing like himself and there was a touch of hostility to him. He wasn't the sometimes distant yet caring and clever Harry Potter that Hermione knew and loved as a brother. This was the Harry who always surfaced when they talked about You-Know-Who.

Hermione looked at Ron, hoping that they could put their differences aside long enough to help the person they both loved. It only took a second for Ron to vaguely nod and pat Harry's shoulder.

"Whether he's getting stronger or not, he's not getting to you. Hermione and I will never let that happen."

"Ron's right," Hermione said. "That's exactly why we're doing this. We'll be prepared. Do you hear me, Harry?"

Harry looked between the two of them. "Yeah, I hear you. I hear you both."

Hermione nodded. "I'm glad for that." She started flipping through some of her notes. "So, I heard there's going to be a meeting with the Order in a few days?"

"You heard right," Ron said. "Mum isn't too keen on it."

"Who do you think will go?" Hermione asked.

"Kingsley and Moody for sure. I reckon at least one of my brothers as well." Ron nudged Harry. "I offered for us to do it but Mum wouldn't hear of it."

Harry sighed. "I really appreciate your mum—"

"— I know," Ron breathed. "I told her that we could handle it but you know how she is. We're her 'babies'."

"Well," Hermione said, "maybe it's best if we do only sit in on the meeting and not help with the patrolling."

Ron gaped at her as if she had insulted his entire family. "How can you say that? If I don't go, then one of my brothers has to. I'd rather it be me than Bill or one of the twins."

For only a moment did Hermione allow herself to get caught up in Ron's protectiveness of his family. It was one of her very favorite things about him. "I understand your position, Ron," she said, "but we all have jobs to do. Maybe it's the job of your brothers to patrol while you, me, and Harry focus on the Horcruxes. What do you think?"

Ron crossed his arms over his chest, sitting back in his chair. "Whatever."

The one word was dry, meaningless, and the last response she wanted to hear from him, but she had to take it. The three of them had work to do.

Hermione began explaining the ideas she had for different protection charms and possible safe locations they could rest at during their travels. She had absolutely no idea what to base anything on so everything was purely hypothetical. They talked about possibly brewing batches of Polyjuice, and Hermione showed Ron and Harry the book that held the extension charm she was thinking of using on her bag to keep all of their possessions in it.

Talking with Ron and Harry was incredibly fulfilling. Hermione felt as if they were truly a trio again, bringing their unique

qualities to the discussion. For her, she felt in charge, smart, and capable as she went over her ideas with her best friends. This was the type of activity that always gave Hermione a sense of purpose and enjoyment.

In spite of this, she couldn't completely ignore the fact that she and Ron barely looked at each other or only answered each other in short sentences. It was difficult to act normal around him and Hermione felt smothered. It was also painful to see Ron move his hands or arms away when she reached over the table to show him things. Whatever intensity they'd had at breakfast was now gone.

The longer the three of them talked and planned, the more distant Hermione felt toward Ron. It got to the point where they didn't even look at each other as they talked to one another. It was as if they were going through the motions. Hermione couldn't stand it.

Sometime later, Ron dropped his quill then rubbed his face. "I can't look at another bloody potion ingredient."

"Neither can I," Harry said, taking off his glasses so he could scratch his nose. "Hermione, did we do okay today?"

"We did fine," she said, feeling more than capable of going another couple of hours, however, she wouldn't push them too much on their first real day of planning. "We started and that's usually the hardest part."

"What if we don't have a solid plan by the time school starts again?" Ron asked.

"We will," Harry said without hesitation.

"You can't say that with full confidence, Harry," Hermione corrected. "I've actually been thinking about that a lot, and I guess we'll go back if nothing comes about."

"There's no bloody way I can go back there," Harry said, shaking his head.

"Same," Ron said, appearing a bit horror-stricken, "how would we ever concentrate on anything?"

"I don't know, boys!" Hermione said rather intensely. She realized that they had a very small window of time to get things accomplished but she didn't need to hear them complaining about it. "I don't have everything worked out yet, I'm sorry. I'm still going to say that if we don't have something substantial by late August then we should go back to school. Maybe it'll help."

Harry snorted. "Yeah, school has always been a big bloody help."

"Oi," Ron said, hitting Harry's arm. "Don't be a dick to Hermione. This isn't her fault."

"I didn't say it was," Harry shot, hitting him back.

"Then what the hell are you saying?"

"Boys â€" please!" Hermione said, outstretching her arms to touch both of them for a moment. "Let's all just calm down. We still have time and we'll be all right either way. Regardless of when and where, we will ultimately figure this out. Okay?"

"All right," the two boys muttered in unison.

"Sorry, Hermione," Harry said.

"It's fine," she said as Ron got out of his chair.

"Where are you going?" Harry asked.

"I'm gonna get dressed then go out for a fly or something," Ron said. "My head still feels like goblin bollocks so maybe the fresh air will help. I just need to get out of this house." Hermione gathered her papers together, trying not to take his statement personally. "Good brainstorming today," he added. Ron pushed his chair in then walked back upstairs without another word.

All Hermione could do was organize her notes before putting them neatly into her bag.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," Harry said.

"I've already said it's fine, Harry," Hermione said. "I know how intense all of this is for you. We'll get something together." She sat in Ron's old spot. "When I was in Kinsley's office," she continued, "I saw a few notes on the subject of Dumbledore. Apparently something was lostâ€"I didn't want to go through Kingsley's things so I tried to crane my neck as much as I could. I think it was about a Will. Do you know anything about it?"

"Not at all," Harry said with a shrug, "but I don't see how his Will would have anything to do with us anyway."

"Very true," Hermione said, nodding. She looked down at the goop of strawberry jam that Ron had missed on the floor. That had seemed like so long agoâ€"

"Ron told me, you know."

"Told you?" Hermione asked, pulling her gaze back to Harry.

"About what happened the night before you left," Harry said.

Hermione's heart skipped a beat. Ron hadn't mentioned anything about telling Harry, and Harry certainly wasn't acting the way she'd imagine him to upon finding out that she and Ron had had sex. Her impulse told her to blurt out something but she kept a hold of her emotions. She was smarter than she was impulsive.

"I'm sure his version is a little different than mine," she said. The statement was ambiguous enough to sound authentic.

"He told me that you two had a long row and didn't make up before you left," Harry said.

Hermione mentally praised herself for keeping her poise. "Oh, well, that's basically how it went. We made up a little yesterday."

"Did you really?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow. "I know you two better than you think I do."

"Harry, I told you yesterday that it's nothing," Hermione said. She couldn't lie to Harry very well so she kept her eyes away from his brilliant green ones whenever possible. "We've both just been stressed out a bit. We'll talk more. I think Ron is still a little upset about our fight."

"I don't know about that," Harry said.

"What do you mean?" Hermione said. "You told me yourself that he barely said my name once while I was away."

"Yeah, but he didn't seem angry," Harry said. "He was more on edge" like he was anxious or something. I think he was just nervous about you showing up here and hating him."

"I could never hate him," Hermione said. Ron had done things to make her cry and hate his actions but she could never hate him as a person. The mere thought made her chest hurt.

"Well, you know Ron," Harry said. "He's different with you."

Hermione gave him a look. She didn't know if 'different' was a good or bad thing. "Different?" Hermione asked. "What do you mean by that?"

"I don't know. He's just different."

The exaggeration Harry used to say 'different' made Hermione unexpectedly laugh. "Like how you're 'different' with Ginny?" she teased.

Harry smirked as faint pink stained his cheeks. "I reckon. Look, Hermione, I know Ron is acting like a knob right now. I don't know why but you can't take it seriously. He's really been worried about Ginny and his family, so don't be too hard on him, yeah?"

Hermione wished with all of her heart that Ron was only acting like this because of the stress of protecting his family, but she knew better. "I don't know, Harry," she said.

"I thought you would say that," Harry said with a grin. "No offense, Hermione, but I think I know Ron a little better than you do. He missed you, and I'm sure he wants you to know that."

Hermione smiled, feeling warmth in her chest. Hearing Harry talk so optimistically about Ron made her feel good. It helped that

Harry appeared somewhat more relaxed and happy. That realization certainly made her feel better. "You really care about Ron, don't you?"

Harry instantly looked away, clearing his throat. "You knowâ€¦"

She rolled her eyes. Boys were suchâ€¦boys. "Yes, I do know." Hermione patted his forearm. She was so thankful to have Harry at the Burrow with her. "Thank you, Harry."

"For what?"

"For being you," she said. Hermione hoped that he would recognize what she was trying to say, but Harry just seemed confused. They were extremely close but the understanding between them wasn't as strong as it was between her and Ron.

"Um, you're welcome?" Harry said slowly. "I didn't realize that I had the choice to be someone else though."

"How clever, Harry," Hermione said.

"All right, I'm leaving," Ron said, coming back into the kitchen with Ginny. He had his broom swung over his shoulders. "If any of you want to join me, I'll be out by the pond." He nodded to them then rushed outside.

Hermione peered out of the kitchen window and saw Ron stretching by his broom. His hair was like one large flame in the sunlight. She wanted to go join him.

"I swear that prat needs a good shaking," Ginny said.

"That's rude," Hermione said automatically, keeping her eyes on Ron.

"What? It's true," Ginny said.

"Maybe we shouldn't be talking about Ron while he isn't here," Harry suggested.

"I agree," Hermione said.

"All right, fine," Ginny said. "Hermione, how did things go with Kingsley?"

Hermione mentally sighed then turned back to Ginny. For the fourth time that day, she talked about her meeting with Kingsley and how everything was now in place with her parents. She, Harry, and Ginny spent most of the afternoon talking while Ron stayed outside. Hermione wanted to out to meet him but she didn't know what to say. She wanted to believe Harry's words, but it was so difficult when the distance between them grew larger and larger.

Even when Mr. Weasley came home and they all had dinner, Hermione and Ron were distant. They didn't look at each other or really talk. It was even worse than when they had gone weeks without speaking last term, because at least then they had school and



their holiday to keep them separated. There was no escaping Ron at the Burrow; every time their eyes connected or he had to say her name, it hurt Hermione. This wasn't what she had wanted to come back to; each moment of their friction was a result of their night together. Everything was because she had told Ron that she needed her wand.

Later that night, Hermione organized her books in Ginny's room but she couldn't concentrate. Her body throbbed, her heart ached, and her mind was boggled. This wasn't what she wanted or needed. Ultimately, the suffocation became too much and Hermione realized that there was no way she could survive the rest of the holiday this way. She was confused, scared, and angry, but she had to be responsible. Someone would have to step up, and it seemed that it would have to be her.

Hermione made up her mind that the time was now, then slipped into her trainers, leaving Ginny's room. She started walking up the staircase but something made her stop. Hermione didn't know why, but somehow she knew that she was going the wrong way. She went through the kitchen door and outside.

Hermione walked down the Weasley's property and to a small lake that always had still and dark water filled in it. It was his favorite part of the property. She knew that because Ron had told her one night during hall patrol last term. Last term - back when they could still talk to each other, they could look at each other in the eye, smiling and slightly touching; they could even bicker horribly but know by dinner that they'd be okay. It wasn't all Hermione had wanted, but at least then she had her best friend, which was what she needed.

Back when Hermione and Ron had been 'just' best friends who hadn't so much as kissed each other's hands, they talked, bantered, hugged, and smiled. Those were the things that she had worked so hard to gain with Ron over the years. The small exchanges were what Hermione had habituated into her daily routine. She needed his hugs, talks, smiles and banters to feel human and relaxed.

When Hermione made it down to the pond, sure enough, Ron was sitting under a large tree with his wand lit next to him. She couldn't describe the intense feeling that enveloped her. Hermione had unconsciously known Ron would be here. Harry said that he knew Ron better, but Hermione knew that she at least could 'feel' Ron to a greater extent.

She stopped, not really wanting to disturb him. He was peering off toward the lake, almost looking at peace. His long body was sprawled out and his head rested against the bark. Hermione's fear told her to turn around but she didn't give in to it. She tiptoed right up to him but he didn't notice her because his eyes were closed. Hermione wanted to take a picture of the beautiful moment, but this couldn't be about her personal feelings. She had to do what was right for the both of them.

"Ron?" Hermione said softly.

Ron didn't even jump. He slowly opened his eyes, looking at her as if he had expected her to find him " as if he had felt her just as she had felt him.

"Yeah?" His voice was so low and dry.

"Can I sit with you?" she asked.

"Sure, whatever," he said, sitting up straighter. Hermione sat next to Ron but didn't let herself get too close. She was close enough to see his body and feel excited. There was something about Ron being outdoors and incased in nature that made him so captivating and almost larger than life.

"Hermione?" Ron said.

She blinked, plucking herself out of her thoughts. Hermione didn't know how to begin. She had thought that getting to him would be the hardest part, but that wasn't the case now. Hermione decided to go with something easy to say.

"Sorry. It's been a long day. All the planning!"

"Yep," he said.

Ron kept his focus on the water as he threw grass blades at it. Hermione pressed her lips together. This wasn't going the way she'd planned. They were so disconnected, more than they'd ever been; yet they had shared the most intimate act two people could ever share. Hermione knew what Ron's mouth tasted like and how big his penis was. He knew that she had a mole on her bum and how she sounded when she had an orgasm. Everything they had shared had been so personal, but now they were like strangers. The most beautiful thing Hermione had ever been a part of was why she couldn't be in the same room with Ron for more than five minutes without feeling smothered.

Hermione's eyes stung as she felt the full weight of their actions fall upon her. If something didn't change, this was how it would always be.

"How long are we going to do this?"

Ron was quite for a moment. "Do what?" he asked dully.

"Will you look at me?" she demanded.

Ron looked at her. Now that Hermione knew what Ron looked like when he wanted something or felt passion, it was really easy to see that none of that was present in his features. In fact, Ron looked as if he didn't want her there. Hermione pushed through the hard feelings. She had to be strong.

"How long are we going to ignore everything that happens between us?" she asked. "How many more days are we going to go without talking to each other unless we're forced to?"

Ron shrugged. "I dunno, Hermione. I honestly have nothing to say to that."

"I do. I have to tell you, Ron, it's only my second day hereâ€¦and I already feel like things might've been better if I hadn't come back."

It was rude but Hermione had to get through to Ron. She had to stop being nice and quiet. She needed to take control again and fix them somehow.

A pained expression touched Ron's face. "Why?" he asked gently. Even though his tone was one of hurt, Hermione was glad to be getting something out of Ron. His indifference was the one thing she couldn't take from him.

"Because of this," she said. "Us not talking and pretending that everything is all right. We had a fight last night but we haven't even formally apologized to each other or talked through it. I have no idea what's going on anymore. You probably don't even want me here."

"Don't ever assume things about me, Hermione," he said intensely. "I might be angry andâ€¦confused, but I don't want you to go." He sighed, looking away from her again. "I want you here. It doesn't even matter that this is happening."

"I want to be here too," she said effortlessly. It was true and there was more that she wanted to tell him. Hermione was afraid of that truth and what it would mean to Ron, but she couldn't run anymore. "Ron, the idea of coming back here was the only thing that kept me going in Australia. I want to stay here for you and for Harry, but I don't know how I can do that when we're acting like this."

"How else are we supposed to act?" Ron turned his body to completely face her. He rocked gently. "I meanâ€¦w-weâ€¦" Ron's chest suddenly rose and fell roughly as he let out a rather harsh breath. His entire face flushed. Ron's extreme emotion was so intense that it seeped right out of him and into Hermione's body. She shuddered, holding her stomach as she felt a powerful sensation hit her body. Ron stared at Hermione; she had never seen such force in him before.

Ron's body settled. He gripped his knees tightly as he licked his lips. "We had sex, Hermione," he said almost breathlessly.

It was barely a whisper and seemed to float right out of him and into the air. She could hear his voice saying the words all around her. Hermione felt her whole body heat up as the words touched her all over. What they had done was out in the open and hearing Ron say that they had done it made their night seem so much more real now.

"We've been avoiding having to say it, but I'll say it now," he continued in a much stronger voice. "We shagged right in my bed. Then you left the next morning and I didn't write you back. That's the truth, and I don't know how to act now. It's like

everything that's happened afterward has been about those things, even if they weren't. I know it doesn't make sense but-

"-it does," she quickly said. "That's how I've been feeling. The fight we had last night and even the thing this morningâ€¦it was because of that."

"You can't even say it, can you?"

"I'm not as weak as you think I am," Hermione snapped. "I know that we had sex. I was there, feeling every moment of it like you did." She felt embarrassed and terrified, but she wouldn't hold back. It felt so good to get everything out. "Iâ€¦that was my first time, Ron. That night with you was the first time I've ever experienced any of the things we did."

"Same for me," he said gently. "I've never been that way with anyone before."

Hermione hoped that she wouldn't regret asking Ron her next question. "Not even with Lavender?"

"Wha-?" he asked incredulously, dropping his jaw. "Bleeding Merlin, no. Not even close. Didâ€¦did you think thatâ€¦what we did was something I'd done with her?"

"I thought a lot of things, Ron," Hermione said, shaking her head. "There was just so much happeningâ€¦just like now."

Ron sighed, covering his face. "Oh, fucking hell," he said softly and somewhat nasally.

"What?" she asked.

He was sitting right in front of her and she wanted to reach out to him, but she didn't. The situation was extreme enough. He lowered his hands. Ron's confidence and fire was gone. In fact, he looked washed out.

"Everything is mucked up, Hermione," he barely whispered. "I'mâ€¦I'm so sorry. I should've apologized the morning after or yesterday, but I was being thick."

Hermione felt her heart in her throat. She didn't understand what he meant. "Apologize for what?"

"For what I did to you," Ron said. "For what happened."

They got quiet. Hermione felt everything in their moment together press on her from all sides. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. It had always been a mere whisper in her mind, but now it was out and very loud. Ron regretted having sex with her. It hadn't been what he wanted. It was a mistake.

"O-oh," Hermione whispered. She swallowed the solid, fiery lump in her throat. "I'm sorry too."

She wasn't sorry for having sex with him, but if Ron was, then she would have to pretend to be. It would be the only way to bring them back together.

Ron frowned. "I know it's all you see when you look at me."

"I'm sure the same can be said about you, Ron," Hermione said. "It's why you were out of the house all day."

"What the hell do we do, Hermione?" he asked. "Everything is in the shit."

He ran his fingers through his hair, staring off toward the lake. If Hermione wasn't mistaken, then Ron's eyes were a little glossy.

Ron was overwhelmed and the honesty was too much. Their sex had been too much. Hermione didn't know what to do. She had two options: she could tell him her deepest truth - that she wasn't sorry for being with him because she had wanted it more than anything and was eager to find some way to be with him - or Hermione could do her job and be responsible; she could keep their friendship in tact and find a way to think and breathe around him again without feeling trapped.

Hermione heavily weighed the options. She had always wanted to kiss Ron and explore his body. Numerous times she had envisioned the two of them walking the corridors holding hands and spending weekends lounging together in his room. These ideas were beautiful and gave her so much joy, but her fantasy wasn't worth their friendship. It wasn't worth not being able to talk to Ron, look him in the eyes, or laugh with him. Hermione had always dreamed that she could have both - but that wasn't the case. It was a harsh and painful truth to swallow, but she would for Ron. No matter what, she loved him and needed him most of all.

Hermione understood what they had to do so they could be normal around each other again.

"Maybe we should just let it go."

Ron merely looked at her as if he hadn't heard her. "What?"

Hermione didn't want to have to repeat it. She already felt as if her heart was slowly shattering and her sickness from earlier that morning was back. "M-maybe we should let what we did go."

"N-no, Hermione-"

"- we have so much going on, and we need each other." Hermione couldn't let Ron interrupt her until she was completely finished. Every word took the air right out of her. "We need to be friends again," Hermione almost pleaded. "Don't you want to be friends again?"

Ron opened and closed his mouth several times. "Of course I do," he said in a breath. "It's all I want."

Hermione had to swallow the bile in her throat. She couldn't look at him anymore. All Ron wanted was friendship. That must've meant that even when he'd made love to her he only wanted to be friends. Hermione wanted to get the last of that word out of her mouth. Sex wasn't love - it was friendship. It was just yet another thing Hermione had to learn after the fact.

"Then let's do this," she said.

Ron seemed gobsmacked by this idea. He rubbed his neck.  
"Hermione, we can't honestly just forget it."

"I know, but we can try to focus on other things," Hermione suggested. Ron wasn't making sense again. He didn't want to forget it but he wasn't coming up with any alternatives either. "I'm not saying that we should forget what happened. I'm just saying that we could take it as it is andâ€¦move on." Moving forward was Hermione's new strategy for life but it didn't seem right here. He shook his head, looking defeated but she didn't know why.

"Then what is it? What was it?" he asked.

Hermione had thought their time together was the beginning of a flourishing love, but she'd been wrong. She could see clearly now and recognize what their time had been â€" even if she didn't believe it. "Well, I guess what we did wasâ€¦we were being there for each other. We were both in pain, so we took each other's pain away, right?"

Ron wasn't even looking at her. He was merely staring into the blades of grass with a hand tangled in his hair. "Iâ€¦I reckonâ€¦butâ€¦your first time-"

"-was with my best friend," Hermione said. It was the only thing that didn't hurt to say. Her heart was breaking but she had to find the light in the situation. It was what forces of good did. "I don't think that's so bad. What do you think?"

Ron looked at her. He smiled very faintly. "I reckon we're kinda lucky if you think about it like that. I mean we know and trust each other."

"Exactly." It was wrong. Harry was Hermione's best friend too and she knew and trusted him, but she would never let him get anywhere near her knickers. She cleared her throat. "Soâ€¦what do you think, Ron?"

"I honestly don't know, Hermione," Ron said with a shrug. "I don't know if this is right."

Hearing him say the word 'right' stung. The right thing was all she was trying to do for them. "Do you have any better ideas then?" she snapped. "How else should we handle this?" Hermione wanted him to have a better idea. She needed him to. All he had done was reject her ideas without reason, but at the same time agreed with her notions on what their sex had meant.

Ron searched around the grass as if the answer would magically pop up. He finally gave up searching. "I don't knowâ€¦I just don't want to lose you more than I already have," he said. "I-I reckon you're right. We were helping each other and now...now we can keep going."

Hermione rubbed her brow furiously. "We can move forward."

"Yeah," he said, coughing and rubbing his chest. "This is for the best."

"I think so too," she said. "Doesâ€¦this mean we're okay?"

"We're okay." Ron rocked a little, shaking his head. He rubbed his chest, coughing a few times again.

"Are you okay?" Hermione asked.

Ron suddenly got up. "Um, I'm gonna go inside. I think I swallowed a bug out here."

Hermione wasn't sure if she believed him but she was in too deep of a state to question him. "Oh, all right. I think I'm going to stay out here a little longer."

"Okay," Ron said. He just stood and looked at her for awhile then frowned, rubbing his neck. "Um, goodnight, Hermione."

"You too, Ron," Hermione said.

She watched him walk away and go back toward the house. Hermione waited a few more minutes before crawling over closer to the pond and lying on her side. She put a hand over her face, finally letting her tears out. She let herself cry and get all of her feelings out.

Ron only wanted to be her friend and had only ever wanted to be her friend. Hermione was his first time, but now, if they did return to Hogwarts, he could do whatever he wanted with other girls. Ron was sorry for what they'd done. Their experience on his bed had been so beautiful, special and tender, but now it was something to feel guilty about.

Hermione sniffled, wiping under her nose. She wasn't Ron's girlfriend, and she was most likely never going to be. The large hands, blue eyes, and ginger hair that she ached over would never belong to her.

None of that mattered anymore though. It was time to move forward. It was time to repair their friendship, and the only way to make it strong again would be to devote everything into seeing Ron as her best friend â€" not her lover.

Hermione kept crying until her eyes were dry. She sat up, scrubbing her face clean. She could do this. Hermione had successfully relocated her parents. There was no reason why she couldn't continue to be Ron's friend like she'd always been.

Hermione slowly stood up then walked back to the house. Tomorrow she would start fresh. She had Ron again, and she wouldn't mess it up.

They all had jobs to do and one of Hermione's was getting her friendship back with Ron.

Nothing else could matter.

Hermione rolled over onto her back, opening her eyes. She looked at Ginny's bed to find it vacant. She yawned, rubbing her eyes. They were sore from all the tears that had scraped out of her but that had been necessary. Hermione felt a moment of sadness but she didn't let it grow. "Come on, Hermione," she said. "New day."

Hermione got out of bed and exhaled deeply. She made up her mind that she wouldn't be weak anymore. She wouldn't cry all the time or dwell on dreams. Hermione was a force. Things might've seemed unfair but they could be a whole lot worse. The more Hermione told herself, the better she felt, so she told herself these things over and over as she made her bed then got out her clothes for the day.

She gathered her shower kit then headed to the bathroom. Right as she raised her hand to knock, the door opened. Ron was on the other side. Her heart skipped a beat. He was dressed, but his hair was wet and the droplets were rolling down his neck. Ron was amazingly sexy without even having to try. Hermione told herself not to think about this fact for too long.

Ron ran his fingers through his hair. Beads of water rolled down his forearms, increasing his sex appeal and making her believe more that he was some sort of ginger god.

"Um, hi," he said. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Ron," she said. She was happy to see that he looked a lot better than he had last night.

He dug his hands deep into his jeans, pulling them down a bit. His shirt was short enough so that Hermione could see the edge of his black boxers. She quickly averted her eyes to his face.

"So," he said slowly and a little awkwardly, "did you sleep okay?"

"Yes, I was finally able to rest after awhile," she said. Hermione needed to back away from him. They were far too close. She didn't move though. "What about you? Did your cough go away?"

Ron shrugged. "Eventually." He nodded, then she nodded.

Hermione didn't know what they were supposed to do next. Even though they were friends again, she wasn't thick enough to believe that it would be in the same way. Some things would need to be adjusted — like how long she allowed herself to stare at him before her mind started wandering.



"Well," Ron said, bouncing on the heels of his feet, "I'll let you have it."

He brushed past her. She took a whiff of his clean smell as she watched his tall, lanky body walk up the staircase before she finally headed into the bathroom. It was still warm and slightly foggy inside from his shower. Before, Hermione would always let herself relish in the fact she was taking a shower right after Ron, but she couldn't do that anymore. She wouldn't tease herself.

Hermione stripped, then stood under the showerhead. She lathered herself while going over her plan for the day: she wanted to do more research and possibly pick up some new quills; she had to still return a shirt to Ginny that she'd let her borrow, and she wasn't even halfway through her summer reading list. There was so much that had to be completed and she soon discovered that she was finding it much easier to focus when she knew what had to be done.

As she dressed, Hermione reminded herself of who she was. Sirius had always told her that she was the brightest witch of her age. She wanted to truly believe that again. Hermione had to be strong and intelligent no matter what. She looked at Ron's toothbrush that he'd left on the sink. She grinned a little as she placed it back in the holder. Things had gone pleasantly enough during their greeting. Ron seemed okay and they were at least talking. A whisper prodded the back of her mind and a pang hit her chest, but she didn't let herself dwell. Some things were simply more important than desire. She left the loo then went back to Ginny's room to get her things.

Hermione wanted to express her plan to Ron and Harry so she slowly walked up to the fifth floor. This would be her first real test. Ron's room was where everything had changed but she couldn't let that scare her. She raised her hand and knocked.

"Come in."

Hermione quickly expunged the memories of how something like this had ended last time. It was a new day, so she opened the door. Ron was sitting on his bed, flipping through a magazine. Hermione gripped the knob. She had been prepared to see both of her friends. Only Ron being inside made things complicated.

She walked further into the room and over to his bed. "Where's Harry?" she found herself saying.

Ron let out an exaggerated sigh. "Harry? Oh, well, he went into work with my dad. Kingsley and Lupin want to talk to him in Kingsley's office. I'm sure Harry won't be gone all day."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say it like that," Hermione said. "I just wanted to tell you both something, but I can tell him later. I guess Ginny went to Luna's?"

"Not this time," Ron said. "She's at Fred and George's flat. Fred wants her to be the judge between his and George's new Rancid

Quill idea. Of course the pricks didn't ask me." Ron closed his magazine, giving her a once-over. "Um, Hermioneâ€¦you can sit down."

"Ohâ€¦right," she said. Hermione wanted to be strong and focused, but there was only so much she could control. As soon as she sat down next to Ron on the bed, everything that happened on it flooded her mind. She could hear herself sobbing over Dumbledore and feel Ron soothing her. The air around her thickened and it was getting harder to ignore everything she wanted. Hermione kept her eyes on the floor.

"Hermione?"

Hermione looked up at him. "Yes, Ron?"

He picked at a hole in his jeans. "It's hard, isn't it?"

Her eyes grew. "Sorry?"

Ron blushed. "I meanâ€¦being in hereâ€¦on this bedâ€¦with me. It's hard to do, right?"

Hermione couldn't believe how open Ron was being with her. His voice was so deep and wise and he looked so handsome and mature. She needed to take a page from his book.

"A bit," she said. "Is it like that for you?"

"I have to sleep in here every night, Hermione," Ron said. "It's really bloody difficult sometimes."

"I think it will get easier in time," she said, hoping that was true. "We just have to slowly work through this."

"Yeah," he said.

Hermione stared at the pillow she had clutched as he felt her up. She rubbed her thighs together, trying to think about her reason for coming to his room in the first place.

"So, um, what is that you wanted to tell me? Hermione?"

"Yes, right," Hermione said, snapping out of her thoughts. "Well, I plan to go to Diagon Alley and visit a few book shops and possibly the library."

"Of course," Ron muttered with a smirk.

She tapped his knee with her hand. "You're not funny, cheeky boy. I also wanted to get some new quills and vials. Just a shopping day, really."

"Wicked," he said.

Hermione nodded, pressing her lips firmly together. "Soâ€¦would you like to come with me?"

"With you?" Ron asked. "To all the shops?"

"Yes," she said as sweetly as she could. She honestly did want to spend time with him. It was all Hermione had wanted since arriving back in England. "It would be nice to get away for awhile and justâ€¦be together." She feared that her last statement had sounded like something beyond friendship. "We don't have toâ€¦"

"No â€" no," Ron rushed. "I'd love to. That sounds brilliant."

She smiled, feeling her heart slowly pull its pieces back together. "Great. There will be books involved. We may even have to read a little. I'm not sure how prepared you are for that."

"Oi, cheeky girl," he said, very lightly pushing her arm.

Hermione laughed and Ron did as well. It was short, but so bright and enjoyable. She stood up.

"All right, I just need to get my bag."

"Hey, maybe we can take a break sometime and get tea somewhere," Ron said, digging his feet into his shoes. "I don't have much money but I reckon we can get sandwiches or something."

It was her turn to blush. She couldn't let herself fantasize that she was going on a date with Ron. Friends ate sandwiches together all the time.

"I'd love that. We should get to it then."

"Wait," Ron said.

He touched her upper arm, peering down at her. Hermione's heart was in her throat again. She didn't know what he was going to do next, but she wouldn't resist whatever it was.

Ron looked at her very seriously before pulling his arms around her lower waist. He held her closely and tightly. Hermione didn't know what to do with herself. She was frozen as Ron held her. His embrace was so warm, sweet, and powerful that it scared her. Hermione had to push through it. She'd told herself that she wouldn't give into fear anymore. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, rising on her toes.

Hermione closed her eyes and held him as firmly as she could, letting out a shaky breath. Friends hugged all the time so she knew not to take it as much than that, but it was the fact that they were actually touching and not suffocating that Hermione was blown away by. She did her best to nuzzle his neck as Ron laid his cheek on top of her head. What they were doing was so beautiful and felt so good. She felt safe and the smell of Ron's hair made her feel like she was swimming in a sea of warmth.

Hermione smiled, realizing that this was what she'd always had and could live with happily. She made herself believe that this

embrace would always be enough. It wasn't all she wanted, but it kept her heart beating.

"I'm glad we're okay, Ron," she said. "I need our friendship."

"So do I," he said deeply, hugging her even tighter. "I missed you so bloody much, 'Mione. I went mental without you."

She couldn't help herself. She moaned a little, putting her mouth right at the dip where his neck and collarbone met. She didn't apply pressure; only let herself imagine that she did.

"I missed you too, Ron," she said. "I missed you more than anything else when I was in Australia." She pulled away from him.

They gazed at each other as everything else slowed down and turned mute. Ron was giving her those eyes that made her feel as if they were the only two people in the world. Her heart wanted her to take this as a sign of romance, but her rationality told her that it was just the way Ron was in their friendship.

Ron looked away for a moment then back at her.

"Weâ€¦should probably go, yeah?"

"Yes, we should," she said, slowly moving her arms away.

Ron backed away from her, gesturing for her to lead the way out of his room. Hermione mentally nodded then left his room. Leaving the space in which they'd had sex calmed her down a bit. She would need to be calm if she was going to spend the whole day with Ron.

When they arrived in Diagon Alley, Hermione and Ron talked about the possible books she would buy and commented on the things they saw around them. Hermione couldn't believe that they were communicating and spending time alone again. Maybe everything she had endured after Ron left her by the pond would be worth it.

As light and easy as things were though, Hermione couldn't help but notice that something was off. Ron moved and spoke with a bit more stiffness than she'd ever seen and Hermione couldn't help but feel distracted every time she had to look or speak to Ron. She kept telling herself that it was only the first day of their new friendship. Things were still a bit awkward and difficult to get through, but the two of them would make it. They had to.

They went into a bookshop where they split up to hunt for books. Hermione went to a stack in the corner, looking around for Ron. He was at the other end, thumbing through a thick text. Hermione held her book close as she watched him. She needed to move forward, but she couldn't help but think of how things would be different if she had told Ron she hadn't been sorry of their night together. Hermione also thought about what they would be doing now if they simply had never slept together in the first place.

Hermione tried not to believe that, in both situations, things would be better than they were now. She had her friend back and it was what she needed.

Hermione kept telling herself that until she believed it hard enough to walk back over to Ron, pretending that she wasn't aching for him.

\*\*\*\* (gives Hermione a REALLY big hug) I love this woman! Hmm, did I mention that Ron/Hermione makes me tingly? lol. Anyway, I hope you lot enjoyed this! Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

#### CHAPTER 4

Thank you all for the reviews!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Ron spun around in place as fast as he could then abruptly stopped, opening up his hand. He grunted as he chucked the gnome far away from the garden. Ron squinted while trying to see how far away the sodding little bastard had landed. The distance wasn't far enough for him. Nothing would ever be fucking far enough and it angered him for some unknown reason. He wiped the sweat off his forehead then spit in the grass.

"You all right, mate?"

He turned his attention to Harry who didn't appear nearly as worn out as Ron felt. Just like the gnomes, Harry's small size didn't express how much energy and strength he truly had.

"Fine," Ron said, yanking his shirt off and buffing it over his sweaty neck.

"Didn't seem that way a couple of seconds ago," Harry said, launching a gnome across the field.

He didn't say anything else. Ron wanted to roll his eyes. He knew that Harry wasn't going to explain himself. Ron would have to guess "â€" just like he always had to guess everything these days.

"Why - what ever do you mean, Harry Potter?" Ron asked with extreme sarcasm. He mockingly looked shocked and put a hand to his cheek.

Harry laughed. "You're such a fucker, Ron."

"And you're a tosser," Ron said. "What am I apparently doing wrong now?"

"You're not doing anything wrong," Harry said. "You've just really been hurling these gnomes today - like each one insulted the Canons."

"That's bollocks. Real Canon fans have thick skins so it would take a lot for these buggers to get to me that way," Ron said. He clapped at a gnome to convince it to come toward him. "Besides, I'm doing it the way that you're supposed to do it. You know this doesn't hurt them."

"Yeah, butâ€¦I dunno," Harry said, shrugging. "You seem tense."

'Tense' didn't even begin to explain how Ron felt. 'Seconds away from bursting into a million bloody pieces' was more accurate but he couldn't tell Harry that.

"I'm all right," Ron said. "I've just got a lot on my mind. The meeting is tonight and the patrolâ€¦"

"I'm aware," Harry said.

"Then you should know why I'm like this," Ron said.

Harry frowned a little, looking away. "You know I would go if I could. I don't want anyone in your family doing this any more than you do."

Ron felt like a sagging tit. He knew how much Harry cared about the Weasleys. Ron also knew how hard it had to be for Harry to watch everyone else go on patrol while he was stuck in the house. Harry was his best mate and all Ron was doing was making him feel more guilty than he probably already did. Harry didn't deserve it. It certainly wasn't his fault that Ron was feeling on edge. Ron wanted Harry to understand these things but he didn't know how to tell him.

"I know you don't," Ron said. "I'm sorry, Harry."

"We're sorted," Harry mumbled.

Ron rubbed his neck. His apology didn't feel like enough to fix things so he looked around the garden for help. "Oi, there's a fat one over there. I bet you can't take that one and this ugly one here at the same time."

"You underestimate me, Ron," Harry said, automatically brightening up at the challenge. He ran up to the ugly one first and scooped it up. Harry then grabbed the fat one then launched them both.

"Oh, I will never agree with this practice."

Ron felt a tug at his heart, as well as a spark of excitement, due to the soft, yet somewhat bossy, voice. He turned around to look at his main reason for feeling so anxious: Hermione was standing not too far from him with a glass of water and a towel in either hand. She was staring off toward the gnomes.

"They're okay," Ginny said. She smiled at Harry. "That was impressive, Harry."

"It wasn't too bad," Harry said rather smugly.

Ron gave in to the urge and rolled his eyes that time. Harry always looked like such a prat when he was trying to impress Ginny.

"We thought you two might fancy a refreshment," Ginny said, handing Harry a glass of water.

"Cheers." Harry almost gulped all of his water down at once.

As Hermione walked up to Ron, he told himself not to shake or hyperventilate, but it was proving difficult. It had been days since they'd agreed to move on from what had happened, but he was still adjusting.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi."

What Ron found so extraordinary about Hermione was that she never had to do anything special to look beautiful and elegant. She was dressed in jeans and a plain brown shirt, but Ron was completely out of his mind. The sunlight was making her hair shine as well as bringing out the brown of her eyes. Even her skin was glowing in the light. Ron knew exactly how soft her body was, and he wanted to touch her so badly. It was taking everything inside of him not to pull her close.

Ron cleared his throat, glancing at the glass of water and towel in her hands. "Um, are those for me?"

Hermione blinked several times as if coming out of a spell.

"Oh, yes. I'm sorry. Here." She handed him the glass and towel. He closed his eyes as he chugged the amazingly fresh cold water.

"I'll take that for you," Hermione said, taking the glass back from him.

"Thanks."

Ron dried his face, neck, and chest with the towel. He noticed Hermione's eyes following where he scrubbed. He couldn't stop himself from taking his towel further down, rubbing his lower stomach with it slowly. He didn't know why he did it, but Ron was enjoying Hermione watching him. She bit her lip as she gripped the glass in both of her hands.

Harry's laughter brought them both out of whatever spell the towel had them under. Ron draped the piece of cloth around his neck. He had to get his head on.

"Thank you for the water and the towel," he quickly said.

Hermione nodded, taking a step back. "Of course," she said in haste. "Ginny and I felt bad that you two were stuck doing this."

"Not quite, Hermione," Ginny said, walking over to them with Harry. "I had chores too."

"Like what?" Ron asked, throwing his towel at her. "Did you have to water the imaginary plants in the second bathroom we don't have?"

"Don't be a jealous little dick, Ron," Ginny said, throwing the towel back at him.

"Is that really necessary, Ginny?" Hermione asked rather loudly.

Ginny gave her a look. "Sorry?"

"Do you always have to insult your brother like that?" Hermione asked, placing a hand on her hip. "I know his last comment was rude but you don't have to make it worse. He's been out here sweating and working hard all morning while we've been inside. How would you feel in Ron's place?"

Ron and Harry shared a look of complete bafflement whereas Ginny gaped at Hermione. She stood confident and firm as she kept her gaze on Ginny. Ron didn't know what to say or do. All he knew was that Hermione was the most wonderful person he'd ever met, and he was damn lucky to have her in his life.

Ginny looked to Harry but he was pretending to wipe dirt off his glasses.

"Okay," she said. Ginny looked to Ron with confusion. "I'm sorry, Ron."

"It's okay," he said.

As good as it felt to have Hermione stand up for him, Ron didn't want her to fight with Ginny. He knew firsthand how feisty and stubborn both girls were.

The four of them went quiet, which suddenly made things very awkward. Ron took a survey of the garden. "Well, ah, I think we're done here. I'm gonna go take a shower."

"I'll go back with you," Hermione said.

Ron had to slide his fingers over his mouth a few times so he wouldn't blurt out for her to stay put. He did want to walk with Hermione but being alone with her was always a test of his willpower.

"All right." He pulled his shirt back on then the two began to walk back to the house.

"I reckon I should thank you for telling Ginny off," Ron said, digging his hands deep into his pockets. "She doesn't get that too often."



"You're welcome, but I hope I didn't come across too harshly," Hermione said. "I just don't like the way she speaks to you sometimes."

"She's my little sister," he said. "I talk to her the same way."

"And you're always berated for it," Hermione said. "I happen to think that there should be more fairness in the world."

"That's what makes you so brilliant," he said with a wink.

She smiled gorgeously at him. They reached the house but didn't go in. Ron stared at the kitchen door, almost hating how close they were to it. Being outside with Hermione was a lot easier than being with her in the house. While being in the colorful open space with her, Ron didn't feel as cramped up, hot, and short of breath.

Hermione gestured to the door with her hand. "You don't want to go inside?"

Ron opened his mouth but didn't know how to express his feelings to her. He told himself that he could talk to her as his best friend. Friends opened up to each other all the time; it didn't have to mean more than that. If Ron was ever going to repair his friendship with Hermione, then he would have to feel and act normal around her - even if 'normal' didn't begin to explain what he felt.

"Let's just wait another minute, yeah?"

He leaned against the side of the house, dropping down to the grass. Hermione sat next to him.

"Is there something you want to tell me?" she asked, rubbing her brow.

The question was so profoundly loaded that Ron laughed a little. "Not really. I just want to sit here."

"Okay."

She stretched her legs out next to his. Ron loved that her feet didn't even reach halfway down his calves. Hermione was so much shorter compared to him. Then again, everything about her was smaller than him. Her nose, hands, and mouth were all smaller; however, her size didn't take away from her power or her ability to drive Ron mad. In fact, her petite stature in comparison to his much longer body was one of things he truly

"What have you been doing this morning?" Ron asked before he could finish the thought. He simply had to get a better hold on himself. He looked up from his lap (that he hadn't realized he'd been staring at) and turned to her.

Hermione immediately looked down as if she'd been staring at him. "I've been gathering ingredients for the Polyjuice I plan on starting tomorrow night."

"Already?" Ron asked.

"I'm not sure when exactly we'll need it and I want to be prepared," she said. "I also don't know how much we'll require so I'm going to make a decent batch. I'll keep it safe and somewhat hidden in the shed though."

"Sounds brilliant," he said in awe. "Is there anything I can do to help? It'll be for all three of us so I'll help you make it."

"That would be lovely, thank you," she said, giving him another stunning smile. "It'll be nice to have some company while I'm in there."

"Yeah, the shed can be really gloomy at night when you're in there by yourself," he said.

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. "Are you speaking from personal experience?" Ron felt his face flush. He hadn't meant to tell her the truth but he couldn't help it. Giving himself to the only girl he'd ever wanted had somehow affected his honesty barrier because lately Ron found himself opening up to Hermione in ways he hadn't before.

After a prolonged silence, Hermione said, "You don't have to tell me."

"But I will," Ron swiftly said, coming back to the present situation. "I go in there every once in awhile to clear my head. I also like the shed because it's sort of my dad's own joke shop with all the Muggle stuff he has lying about. Even when he's at work or something, I can feel a little closer to him in there." He shook his head. "I'm sure that's stupid though."

"No, it's very sweet," she said. "You really love your dad, don't you?"

"A lot," Ron said.

His dad was one of Ron's heroes. He wanted to be like him one day, though Ron doubted whether he'd ever get himself together enough to be as kind, loving, smart, funny, and brave as his father.

"Well, those are good reasons for being in there at night," Hermione said. "I thought you had more dangerous and extreme reasons for the seclusion."

"You're thinking of Fred and George."

Actually, Ron had one more reason why he went to the shed, but he couldn't exactly tell Hermione that it was the perfect place to be loud and wild when he was wanking off to the thought of her.

"Speaking of your brothers," she said, "are they coming to the meeting?"

"I think so," Ron said, feeling relieved to be off the topic of the shed.

"Are you ready for tonight?" she asked.

"I reckon I have to be. I dunno, 'Mioneâ€¦" He trailed off.

"Talk to me," she said, shuffling closer to him.

The closer Hermione got to Ron, the easier it became to feel her body heat and smell the peachy scent of her skin. The sensation that her heat and smell gave to him felt so good, making it almost impossible to resist. So, Ron decided not to. He scooted closer to her as well. He leaned his head against the side of the house so he could look right at her; Hermione did the same. It didn't matter what was going on between them, Ron wanted to talk to her and he knew that he could trust her.

"I know that it's probably for the best if I don't volunteer for the patrol but I still want to," he said. "I want to protect my family in any way that I can. I'll always rather it be me than them. Can you understand that?"

"I definitely can, Ron," Hermione said. "You're very protective of the people you care about. It's not a fault nor is it something to apologize for. The way you feel about your family is what makes you so brilliant."

Ron wanted to say thank you, but he couldn't find the words. They simply gazed at each other and it didn't take long before Ron felt under some sort of spell again. He kept telling himself to pull back but he couldn't - he didn't want to. Hermione was healing Ron at the same time that she was driving him mental. Her smile and her eyes were lifting Ron's spirit, making him less afraid of the outcome of tonight's meeting. Hermione was giving him a comfort that he couldn't find anywhere else.

Hermione suddenly looked as if she was examining his face.

"Are you wearing your cream?"

"Huh?" Ron rasped, finally breaking free from the hold Hermione had him under.

"Your face," she said with an airiness, as if just waking up. "I think you're getting a sunburn. Are you wearing your cream?"

"Bugger the cream," he muttered in irritation.

Hermione frowned. "You shouldn't treat your skin so poorly. It doesn't deserve the sunburn its getting right there." She pointed to his face.

"Where?" he asked, feeling light-headed and tingly for some reason. "Show me."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"With your hand," he said smoothly. "Touch where you see it."

Ron truthfully didn't give a rat's fart where he was getting a sunburn, but a desperate need tightly twisted itself around him. Ron was so close to Hermione and was feeling so much at once. He had to make them touch somehow or he would explode.

Hermione looked apprehensive as she pressed her lips together. "Okay." She slowly reached out, touching the side of his nose with a soft finger. "Here." She ran her finger up and down the spot.

Ron closed his eyes, feeling a chill as the hairs on his arm stood on end. "Is that the only place?" He didn't know what was wrong with him but he didn't want her to stop touching him. It was as if her hand was the only thing that was keeping him alive.

"No," she whispered, "on your cheek too." Hermione ran her finger over his right cheek, causing him to shiver.

Ron opened his eyes. Hermione was even closer to him and for the first time he noticed that her face was completely red. She was so bloody beautiful, and her hand was melting right through his skin. Ron had to do something before he crossed the line of friendship. They were only mates now. He couldn't think about or want Hermione in that way anymore.

"Thank you for bringing me water and the towel," he said thickly.

"You're welcome, again," she said, not moving her hand away.

"A-and thank you for standing up for me," he added. "That was really nice of you."

"It's my job, Ron," Hermione said. "We're friends."

Normally, hearing Hermione say this wouldn't be a problem, but hearing her say the word 'friends' in this situation cut right through Ron. All of a sudden, her touch burned his skin and her gaze made his chest ache. Ron staggered to his feet.

"Ron?" Hermione asked, looking up at him.

"I need to take a shower," he said. "I smell like troll dung. I'll, um, see you later."

Ron hurried back into the house and up to his room. He grabbed some clothes, then practically ran into the loo. Ron rushed to the sink, splashing water on his face and telling himself to stop shaking. He could do this. All he had to do was remember what was most important and focus on only that. Ron was used to not getting the things he really wanted, so there was no reason why this situation had to be any more difficult to accept. He would stop being a tosser and get over himself. There were bigger things happening — like the meeting tonight.

Ron got under the showerhead, letting the water revive him. He would never get over the pain if he didn't stop his urges. He and

Hermione had decided days ago that they would move on. Ron scrubbed his body more vigorously. The night they had decided to forget about their time together was still punching him in the chest. Even though he'd known it was the right thing to do, agreeing with Hermione had hurt Ron to the point where he truly believed his chest would collapse and he would burst into tears. It had been his worst nightmare come to life, hearing her tell him that they should basically shrug off the fact that they'd touched, kissed, and had sex with each other. Hermione had broken his heart that night, but it wasn't her fault.

Ron should've grabbed and shaken Hermione, forcing her to realize that it hadn't just been about feeling better in the moment. It had all been there in his head but he didn't act on it. All Ron had done was sit and go along with the horrible nonsense as if he believed it. Well, he had to believe it now. Hermione only wanted to be friends and move on; Ron had to as well. Their night had been about 'healing' and they were supposed to enjoy the fact that they got to experience sex for the first time with each other "as best friends. Those ideas were supposed to be good enough for Ron, but it didn't matter; there was no alternative.

Ron washed his hair, reminding himself of what was important. Hermione's reaction to the bloody jam jar and her distance from him the other day was enough evidence to know that their time together had been too much for her and their relationship. They had gone all that day without speaking and Ron couldn't stomach doing that again. He couldn't take anything more happening to them simply because their shag was hanging over their heads, so if forgetting about it was what it took, then Ron would do it. No matter how much it gutted, confused, and angered him, nothing was worth her friendship and absolutely nothing was worth Hermione thinking that he viewed her the same way he viewed Lavender. Ron still felt like a disgusting prick for giving Hermione the impression that he'd had previous experience or that she was mere seconds. Nothing about Hermione had or ever would be second for Ron. He had thought that had been obvious when he held, touched, kissed, and came so hard inside of her, but it hadn't been enough. Hermione still assumed Ron didn't think anything of her. It was bloody fucking ridiculous.

Ron turned the water off then stepped out of the shower. He really needed to stop this. He and Hermione could talk and be around each other again. That was what he needed more than anything else. He'd gone years fighting his urges; he'd simply have to do it again. Ron knew it would be harder though. He no longer had to imagine what Hermione was like because he'd experienced her. Knowing what she felt, smelled, tasted, and sounded like reinforced Ron's belief that it would be impossible to be completely happy with anyone else. Hermione was the best the world had to offer and anything else would be a waste of his time.

He suddenly thought about Hermione and what would happen if they did end up going back to Hogwarts. Cormac bloody McLaggen would most likely take the last of his N.E.W.T's sometime over the summer so he wouldn't be there; however, other blokes would. Hands, lips, tongues, and pricks that didn't belong to Ron could

wind up getting near Hermione in just a couple of months. He coughed, rubbing his chest and sitting on the toilet seat. A bloke was allowed to protect his mate from a slick git, but Ron didn't think he was allowed to personally rip the limbs off of any guy who so much as chatted Hermione up. No - that wasn't what mates did.

Ron tapped his foot, feeling a bit of panic, but he told himself to calm down. Ron had time to think about how he would handle other blokes around Hermione. Right now, he would relax and enjoy the fact that he and Hermione were on speaking terms again and that things were at least manageable.

Ron returned to his room to find Hermione, Ginny, and Harry inside. Harry and Ginny were both sitting on the cot so he'd have to take a place next to Hermione. He mentally told himself to find his bollocks and sit. He had to act normal. Ron slowly walked to his bed, sitting next to her.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, trying to sound indifferent.

"Percy," Ginny said.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Why would you ever do that?"

"I was just asking if he might come to the meeting," Hermione said.

"Hmm, let's see," Ron said, "the rest of the family is coming; we could really use his help, and it would be the right thing to do â€" yeah; that surely means that Percy is not going to be here."

"Ron," Ginny breathed.

"What â€" are you gonna start sticking up for him now?" Ron asked.

"No," she said. "I'm as angry with that prat as you are, but maybe you should calm down a bit - at least around Mum and Dad. You know how upset they get over this."

"I just can't believe he's still broken off with your lot," Harry said. "He has to know that I'm not a liar. I mean, Dumbledore is dead. What more does Percy need?"

The four of them went quiet again. Whenever they talked about Dumbledore, they always took an unconscious moment of silence.

"It still feels raw," Ginny said softly. "Part of me doesn't believe all of this is happening."

"It certainly is happening," Hermione said. "I think the best thing we can do is to be as optimistic as possible. Percy will come around, and at least your other brothers will be here tonight. That surely counts for something."

Hermione was incredible for many reasons and one of those reasons was because she could be unbelievably inspiring at the best moments.

"I reckon it does," Ron said, looking to her. Hermione moved the focus of her eyes to him, grinning. Ron wanted to warm himself up with all of her grace but he didn't. "So," he added, turning his attention to his ugly maroon socks. "I really think we should keep out of the house for as long as possible today. You know how Mum gets on meeting days."

"I agree," Ginny said. "You should've heard her earlier this morning."

"Well, I may not be able to go," Harry said.

"Why not?" Hermione asked.

"I told you," Harry said with irritation, "Lupin and Kingsley want me to keep a low profile. That's all they kept telling me the other day at our meeting. I can't go to too many public places - at least not without an escort, and I don't want one."

"That's right. I'm so sorry, Harry," Hermione said. She gave him a look of deep sympathy that Ron was sure Harry didn't want.

"We can go out into the field and play Quidditch or something," Ginny said.

Harry shrugged. Ron knew that his mate felt like a burden but wouldn't say so.

The two of them were a lot alike. Neither one ever wanted to admit weakness or their honest feelings because it was too much to handle. Ron had to help Harry though. He may not have been treating his friendship with Hermione in the way that he should've been, but Ron could be the mate that Harry needed. Things with him were more straightforward.

"How about we go see the twins?" Ron suggested. "I don't think the shop is open yet so they won't be busy. We can also make sure that they're coming tonight."

"How would we get there?" Hermione asked. "Harry and Ginny haven't passed their Apparition tests, and we probably shouldn't take a grate into Diagon Alley."

Ron smirked. He had hoped that Hermione would be the one to question his plan. He loved showing her that he wasn't always such an idiot.

"I'm aware," he said slickly. "I'm also aware that the twins keep a small fireplace in their storage room for emergency floos. We can take that and walk up to their flat. I don't think they'll mind."

"I don't know how much floo powder we have left," Ginny said.

"We have enough," Ron said. "Besides, only you and Harry will need it to get back." He was so relieved that he had finally passed his Apparition test early on in the summer. Ron felt like such a tit for failing it in the first place. He looked around at everyone as they mulled his idea over in their heads. He wanted to roll his eyes.

"That sounds like a plan, Ron," Harry said, breaking the silence.

"I reckon you can be brilliant," Ginny added with a smile.

Hermione was the only one who didn't appear convinced. "Are you sure they won't mind us using the grate?"

"I honestly don't care either way," Ron said. "This is the best way for the four of us to get out of the house. If anyone has any better ideasâ€¦!"

"No," Harry said, standing up. "I'll go take a quick shower and then we can go."

"I should probably tell Mum we're leaving," Ginny said, getting up as well. "I'll meet you lot downstairs."

The two of them left the room, leaving Ron alone with Hermione. Even though he was getting used to being with her on his bed, it always became more intense when they were alone; however, Hermione had told him that things would get easier. Ron believed her.

"So," Hermione said, "you created a really good plan for us, Ron."

"It's more for Harry than anything else," Ron said. "I know that he's tired of only being able to go out into the field. He feels bad."

"I know he does," she said. "I wish there was more we could do for him."

"We can treat him like he won't break for starters," Ron said.

"What do you mean by that?"

Ron rubbed his neck. This was one of those times when he wasn't exactly sure how to speak to Hermione. Only, it had nothing to do with what they'd done on his bed. Ron had always found it hard to tell Hermione that sometimes she coddled Harry a bit too much.

"I just mean that Harry gets it enough from everyone else. As his best friends, we should treat him normally."

Hermione lifted her chin a little like she always did when she was offended. "Are you saying that I don't?"

"Wellâ€¦sometimes you talk to him like he can't take the words and you give him that look-"



"-of concern," she promptly said. "I'm not babying him or anything. I'm simply concerned. I want Harry to be all right."

"I get that, Hermione," Ron said.

"Obviously not!" she shot. "I'm sorry that I don't call him vulgar names or punch him all the time, but I'd like to think that I treat Harry in the correct manner."

Ron exhaled heavily. "Whatever you say, Hermione. Just don't ask me what I think if you don't plan on listening. That's never made any bloody sense to me."

"How dare you?" She stood up. "I'm going downstairs."

"Bye," he said, waving at her.

Hermione threw a pillow at him then left his room.

Ron flopped back on his mattress, dropping a pillow on his face. He gave himself a few moments before slipping on his shoes and heading downstairs. Hermione still had her chin pointed and gave him a rather cold stare as they walked over to the fireplace. Ron didn't know what was wrong with him but he felt better. Though their bickering was sometimes bothersome, he'd missed the usual aggravation that she caused him and how alive it made him feel. It was also nice to see Hermione with fire in her eyes instead of worry or fear.

Ron knew that their aggression wouldn't last long. The back and forth behavior they had toward each other was typical and something Ron expected out of their friendship. It was necessary, routine, and completely normal. He fancied the idea of being normal with Hermione again.

Ron's plan worked out smoothly enough. They took turns flooing to the joke shop, and Ron was the last to appear inside the cramped storage room. It was overstuffed with boxes, toys, and wizarding gadgets.

"Are we all here in one piece?" he asked.

"I reckon so," Ginny said.

"Wait." Harry plucked something out of Ginny's hair. "There."

"Thank you," she said, giving him a huge smile.

Harry gave her a smile that was just as wide. "Of course."

Ginny's cheeks went pink but she gazed at Harry assertively. Ron looked between his best mate and little sister, suddenly feeling as if he was interrupting something special between them.

Ron cleared his throat. "We should probably get out of here, eh?"

Harry and Ginny dropped their gazes.

"Let's go," Harry said.

Ron led the way out of the storage room, finding the store vacant. They walked up the wooden staircase and to the second floor where the entrance of Fred and George's flat was located.

"Do we have a plan in case they get angry?" Hermione asked.

"Yes. We'll tell them to piss off," Ron said, knocking.

The door opened and Fred was on the other side. "What in the bloody hell are you lot doing here?"

"Who's there, Forge?"

"Four children too naïve to understand the world," Fred said.

"Look â€" can we come in or not, yeah?" Ron asked.

"Damn, you're a rude one, Ronniekins," Fred said. "I should demand payment before letting you enter."

"What about the rest of us?" Ginny asked.

Fred smiled. "Nope. You lot can come in."

"You're a prat," Ron mumbled, pushing past Fred and entering the messy flat. George was sitting on the couch, mixing potions together in a small cauldron.

"Should you be doing that in here?" Hermione asked.

"I think I know what I'm doing by now, Professor Granger," George said. "This isn't for the store anyway. I'm brewing a new cologne that'll attract single witches."

"You'll need more than a potion for that, George," Ginny teased.

Fred wrapped his arms around Ginny, kissing the top of her head. "Listen to her, George! She's growing up and sounding more like us every day! It'll be brilliant to get another one on our side. Here, sit down." Fred gestured to the armchair. Ginny flopped down proudly while Harry sat on the arm.

"There's room for you over here," George said.

"Ah, I'm all right," Harry said.

George grinned. "Of course you are, mate."

"I'll take a seat," Hermione said, sitting next to George. She picked up one of the potion vials that had a blue liquid inside. "Is this really some sort of pheromone?"

"It'd better be," George said. "The bloke at the shop charged a fortune for it."

Ron and Fred both sat on the floor in front of the table.

"Why are you making this?" Ron asked.

"Why do you think, Ron?" Fred asked. "George gets lonely at night."

"I don't get lonely," George said. "I simply get tired of hearing you and Angelina-"

"Oi - not in front of the little ones," Fred said, placing his hands over Ron's ears.

Ron brushed his hands away. "Piss off!"

"Fine, keep your knickers on," Fred said. "How about we move on then? What are you lot doing here and how did you get in?"

"It was Ron's idea that we come through the fireplace in the storage room," Ginny said.

"I didn't think it would be a big deal," Ron said. "It's there for a reason, right?"

"Spoken like a true Weasley," George said. "We did tell them that they could use it for emergencies, Fred."

Fred gave Ron a once-over. "I reckon. Okay, this time I'll let it slide, Ron, but we can't just have any ol' bugger coming in here."

"We're sorry," Hermione said.

George nudged her shoulder with his own. "You don't count as 'any ol' bugger', Hermione. In fact, we'll allow you and Ron to rent the place for an hour or so of private time after closing. As his girlfriend you-"

"Sorry?" Hermione asked in a high-pitched voice, turning horribly pink.

Ron couldn't help but to blush as well. "Hermione and I aren't dating," he said hastily. "We're also not..." Ron couldn't finish the second part because it was true - at least it was true once. Everyone would realize that as soon as Ron attempted to explain things with lies.

"How about you two leave them alone," Ginny said. "And why aren't you telling me that I can use the shop after hours?"

"Because that's crossing the line," Fred said.

"And I'm sure Harry enjoys his bollocks where they are," George added.

Harry's jaw dropped. "I didn't say anything!"

Fred and George started teasing Ginny and Harry, so Ron felt it safe to peek at Hermione. She vaguely nodded then turned her

attention to George's potion. Ron let out a low breath. That had been a test of his strength and he'd survived. He was already getting better. Fred eventually made tea, then Ron and Ginny caught the twins up on what was going on at the Burrow.

"I'm going to the meeting tonight," George said.

"I'm going too," Fred said. "I'll ask Angie and Lee to tend to the store for the last few hours. I'd hate to close early. Mischief never takes a holiday."

"What an inspiring quote," Hermione said, chuckling. "If that isn't soul-stirring then I don't know what is. You should hang that as a banner around the shop â€" like a motto for the store or something."

"Blimey," Fred said. He poked Ron in the arm. "She's getting feistier these days, eh?"

Ron smirked. Hermione's fiery nature was one of her most attractive qualities. "Yeah, she is."

"Are either of you going to volunteer?" Ginny asked. Her voice broke Ron out of his thoughts.

"Definitely," Fred and George said together.

"Mum will love that," Ron said.

"Mum will understand," George said. "She can be a wee bit slow to come around to the idea of things, but she always gets there eventually."

"The both of you are lucky that you can volunteer," Harry said.

"Don't get any ideas, Potter," Fred said. "You don't have to do everything by yourself."

"Something we've been telling him for ages," Hermione said.

"And a few weeks more after that," Ron mumbled.

"Oi," Harry said with a laugh, "I'm not that bad." He looked at Ginny. "Am I?"

"Do you want the truth or do you want me to lie to you?" Ginny asked.

"Another point for Ginevra Weasley," Fred said, looking at her affectionately.

"When do I start getting points?" Ron asked.

"When you say or do something worthwhile," George said. "Being a Prefect doesn't count."

"I know it doesn't," Ron muttered.

"Of course it does," Hermione said. "It's a great honor and you should feel proud. I still am."

"Aww, bless her," George said, patting her arm. "All right, you get a point for having Hermione as your girlfriend."

Ron rolled his eyes. "She's not--"

"I'm really not his girlfriend," Hermione said. "We're just friends."

"Yes, like always," Ron said with a nod. He held his hands tightly together, trying to be as strong as he could.

George looked at Hermione then gave Ron a look that he didn't understand. Ron wanted to turn away but he couldn't. His family members had a way of locking him into their gazes. George was a prick to him a lot of the time, but he still had a hold on him.

"Fred?" George said. "Can you get Charlie's letter? I don't reckon Ron and Ginny have seen it yet."

"Good thinking, twin," Fred said.

"Charlie?" Ron said, peppering up a little.

Fred got up from the floor, disappearing into his bedroom. He emerged with an envelope and handed it to Ron. Ginny rushed to the floor and sat beside him while they read Charlie's letter together. Ron was in awe of his brother's tales of training dragons and spending daring nights at Romanian pubs with his mates. Ron found Charlie's life so adventurous and fulfilling. He envied his brother's strength and humor, but also how bloody likable he was.

"I wish he was here," Ginny said as they reached the bottom of the page.

"He'll be back for Bill's extra reception," Fred said. "Charlie promised."

"I hope so," Hermione said. "It's a shame that I missed him the last time. I wanted to ask him about a few magical creatures that I heard are popular in Australia."

"How are your parents doing, Hermione?" George asked.

She rubbed her brow. "I suppose they're all right. I have no way of contacting them anymore. Kingsley is the only person who can tell me how they're doing."

"I'm sorry," George said.

"Me too," Fred said.

"Thank you both, but it's okay," Hermione said. "I'm adjusting."

"Also spoken like a true Weasley," George said, wrapping an arm around her shoulder. "Mum should start making you Weasley jumpers."

"She doesn't already?" Fred asked.

"No," Hermione said faintly. "I guess she ran out of colors."

"That doesn't make any sense," Ron said, crinkling up his nose.

"Speaking of Mum," Ginny said in a raised voice, "I promised her that I'd be back soon to help her with a project."

"What project?" Ron asked.

"None of your business," Ginny said. "Besides, it doesn't matter what the project is; I have to get back."

"I'll go back with you," Harry said.

"We should probably get ready to open the store, eh, twin?" Fred asked.

George frowned as he mixed the cologne in his cauldron.

"Bollocks. I don't think I'm doing this right."

"Maybe you need to give it up," Fred said.

"I might be able to help, George," Hermione said. "If you have the actual name of the potion, or the ingredients, I can try to rephrase the instructions or come up with alternative components. I can give it to you at the meeting tonight."

George beamed at her. "You would do that?"

"Of course," she said sweetly.

Ron felt warmth in his chest and a powerful spike of affection for her. Hermione had no idea how bloody perfect she was.

"Wicked! I'll find the directions then give it to you downstairs," George said. "I'll also let you take an item for free."

"You don't have to do that," Hermione said.

"I'd be honored," George said.

"Don't you two prats," Fred said, pointing to Ron and Ginny, "think the offer extends to family. We charge extra for you."

Harry laughed but both Ron and Ginny rolled their eyes.

"You're a git, Fred, really," Ginny said.

"So I've heard," Fred said. "I should have that put on my tombstone in large sparkly letters."

"Here lies Fred the git," George said with a chuckle. "He shall be forever loved but missed only on occasion."

"Beautiful, George," Fred said.

George shrugged. "I'm a wizard of many talents."

"I've had enough of this," Ginny said, opening the door. "We'll see you at the meeting."

"Thank you for the tea," Hermione said.

"Anytime," George said. "Ron, hold on a second."

"Yeah?" Ron asked.

Fred closed the door then stood by George's side. The two started stepping toward Ron, forcing him to walk backwards until he hit the wall. He balled his fists, ready to defend himself if they started attacking him. Ron was far too old to be his brothers' punching post.

"Aww, bless him," Fred said. "I think he's ready for a go."

"Shall we indulge him?" George asked.

"Just tell me what the hell is going on," Ron demanded. "I'm not scared - just annoyed."

"Calm down, Ron," George said.

"We're not going to challenge your testosterone," Fred said. "We simply want to ask you a question."

"Involving a certain witch who was just in here," George said.

"I don't know what Ginny is up to with Mum," Ron said. "They never tell me what they're doing. She's fine though - and you don't have to worry about her and Harry. I'm on it."

"We're glad to hear that, Ron," George said, "but we weren't talking about our baby sister."

"We're talking about a witch with brown hair and more brains than any sane person would know what to do with," Fred said.

"O-oh," Ron said.

"Yes - 'oh'," Fred said. "Are you and Hermione acting shy or are you honestly not dating?"

"We're honestly not dating," Ron said, shrugging. He had to act indifferent to keep up appearances.

"But how can that be?" George asked. "Fred and I were so sure that you two would be all over each other when she came back from Australia."

Ron ignored the part of him that felt the same way as George.  
"Things don't happen like that."

"Why not?" Fred asked. "It's always been painfully obvious that you worship Hermione."

"I don't worship her," Ron muttered.

"And Hermione at least stomachs you soâ€¦" George said.

"I bloody hate you two! I'm leaving." Ron turned for the door but someone pulled on his arm. "Fucking leave me alone!" he shouted. "Talking about Hermione and me and taking the piss isn't funny. You two can say whatever the hell you want about anything else but I won't let you talk about my relationship with her. That'sâ€¦different."

Ron scrubbed his face roughly. The twins were always giving him a hard time but this punched his chest and made him hurt.

"Hey, Ron," George said gently, "we're sorry."

"Yeah, we didn't know this was putting you in a state," Fred said, rubbing Ron's arm.

"Well, it is," Ron said. "You aren't the only people who had expectations, okay? Things, um, didn't work out. We're friends but that's fine. I just need you two to not go there, especially around her. Please - listen to me this one time."

Fred and George gave him identical expressions of concern before sharing a look with each other. George nodded, then Fred pulled his wand out of his pocket.

"We'll do you one better, Ron." He pointed and flicked his wand at the small round table in the corner of the room. The drawer opened and a book rose into the air. It flew across the room to them before Fred grabbed it, holding it close. "We were going to wait until you went off to school to give you this."

"But now seems like the perfect time for you to have it," George said. "Fred, if you will?"

"This, little brother, is the solution to all of your problems." Fred handed Ron a green and gold book titled: Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches.

Ron merely stared at it for a few seconds before looking up at the twins. He suspected that they were having a laugh but they seemed completely serious.

"What in the bloody hell am I supposed to do with this?"

"What the title says," George said. "This book is full of brilliant tips and suggestions on how to impress the woman you love."

"You're taking the piss," Ron said dully.



"Afraid not, Ron," Fred said. "This is the real deal and it's supposedly very effective."

"Then why aren't you using it, George?" Ron asked, causing Fred to snort.

"Another point for Ronald Weasley."

"Shut up, Fred," George said, shoving him. "I'm not using it, Ron, because I have to attract a woman first. You've already got your witch."

Ron flipped through the book, scrunching up his face. "If you two are trying to trick me--"

"-- we'd have more public and embarrassing ways of doing so," Fred said. "This is something from a big brother to a little brother."

Ron still didn't believe them. "Why do you two care about my love life anyway?"

"Because after the disaster with Lavender, we want to push you in the right direction," Fred said. "Plus, we like Hermione and we want to keep her around."

"And it would be a bonus if you ended up happy too," George said. "Just skim through it at least, yeah?"

Ron didn't know what to think of his two brothers. He could usually always tell when they were up to something but this time they seemed genuine.

"I guess," he said. "Can I keep this here though? I don't want to walk downstairs with it."

"For obvious reasons," Fred said. "Sure, we'll bring it with us to the meeting."

"Cheers," Ron said. He rubbed his neck. "Can I go now?"

"If your heart desires, Ron," George said. "Don't let Hermione leave yet. We were serious about her taking something for free."

"I won't," Ron said. He opened the door but paused before leaving. He wanted to thank Fred and George, but it wasn't how they were with each other.

As Ron traveled down the staircase, he spotted Hermione at an aisle of masks that stuck to your face and changed your voice. He stopped mid-step, watching her pick up the different packages and read the information on the back. She was so meticulous with the way she studied new things: Hermione loved to use her pointer fingers to get a feel of new objects; she always read the descriptions or directions at least twice, and she took a moment to purely stare at the object - as if she were having a conversation with it in her head. Hermione was fascinating and Ron loved how much time and effort she put into discovering the

world. Some things about her were exactly the same as when he'd met her as a know-it-all eleven-year-old.

"You want one of those?" Ron asked.

Hermione jumped a little, placing the masks back. "Never. These are atrocious. Why would someone want to look and sound like a dying ghoul?"

"Because it's cool." Ron walked down the staircase and then over to her. His heartbeat quickened as he felt excitement flourish in his body. It didn't matter if they were only friends. Ron's delight at seeing Hermione would never go away and he didn't want it to. "I'm not allowed to let you leave until you pick something out."

"There's nothing here that I need," she said. "I don't use these type of things."

"Some items are practical," he said.

"Like what?"

Ron took her wrist. "I'll show you."

He walked her over to a shelf that held potion vials of different sizes and colored liquids inside of them.

"What are these?" she asked.

"These are scent amplifiers," Ron said. "They're divided by range, potency, and volume."

"Curious," Hermione said. "How do they work?"

"You take a swab of your saliva—"

"—saliva?"

"Just let me finish, 'Mione," Ron said, holding out his hands. "You take a swab of your saliva and mix it into the potion. You then drop in a bit of your favorite soap, shampoo, perfume, food — really any substance that linked to your scent," he explained. "Once everything is mixed and settled, you basically have yourself in liquid form."

Hermione frowned. "Why would you want that?"

"From what I understand, the purpose was originally to boggle Filch," Ron said with a grin. "He apparently tracks misbehaving students by their scents around the castle. This is a good way to confuse him. You only need to add a drop to a wall or something and the scent will stay on it for a very long time."

"Oh," Hermione said, "that sounds awful."

"It can have a practical use," Ron swiftly added. "If we were traveling and you wanted to leave a trail of where you were, or

even wanted to lead others astray, this would be a brilliant way of doing so. It's in potion form so you don't have to worry about spell traces or anything too complicated."

"Very true," Hermione said, examining the shelf. "Hmm. I think I'll take a couple."

"I recommend one with a high potency that is also fire and waterproof," Ron said.

"You're a really good salesman, Ron," she said. "You should work here."

He blushed. "I'm not that great, and I'm sure Fred and George would never trust me with their stuff."

"They should," Hermione said. "You're gifted."

Hearing Hermione call him gifted was like winning the Quidditch Cup. "Thanks."

"So," she said, growing a bit more serious. "What were you three talking about?"

Ron rubbed his neck. "Oh, n-nothing, really. They mostly wanted to talk about how Mum is doing but they didn't want to ask in front of Ginny. You know how she gets."

Hermione nodded. "Oh, okay, good. I thought that maybe they wanted to talk about you and me. You knowâ€¦"

"No - no," Ron said. "The twins were just being arses. They don't mean anything by it though."

Hermione turned her focus back to the potions. She picked one up. "If we do use these, then we'll have to add something of yours too. We'll have toâ€¦mix our scents together."

Ron cleared his throat, feeling his ears burning. "Y-yeah. That sounds smart."

Hermione's neck flushed a dark pink. "Yes. So, I - if you want to give me a bit of your soap or shampoo or something then that would be great."

"I can do that."

Ron nodded but immediately stopped moving. He was starting to feel exceptionally hot and sweat began to accumulate on his lower back.

Hermione tucked her hair behind her ears, sliding her lips across each other. "You know, you have such a distinct and powerful scent, Ron."

"Sorry," Ron said, frowning a little. He smelled his collar.

"No, no, no," Hermione quickly said. "It's not bad. In fact, it's really nice. Your smellâ€¦it's lovely."

She slowly blinked, but Ron noticed her chest rise and fall a little faster. He had a feeling that whatever was happening to him was happening to her too, but he couldn't understand why. They were only friends talking about smells, so he didn't get why it felt as if they were feeling all over each other's bodies.

"So is yours," he said rather hoarsely. "You have a really good smell."

"I don't wear much," she said.

"That's the thing: you don't even have to," Ron said. "Your scentâ€¦it's perfect exactly the way it is."

Hermione lost balance, tripping backwards. She hit the shelf but acted as if nothing had happened. "So - so is yours, Ron. It's perfect."

Ron couldn't stop himself from moving in front of her. He outstretched his arms to either side of her shoulders, pressing his hands against the shelf behind her. Hermione's chest rose and fell even faster and more jaggedly. Her face went scarlet as she panted. Ron could hardly breathe because he was so hot. It felt as if the sunlight was blaring on his skin, burning right through and into his body. He licked his lips, swallowing hard. There was only so much he could control.

Ron didn't know what to do but something needed to happen before he lost himself and pressed against Hermione - or worse, pushed his tongue deep inside her mouth, kissing her madly until they were both moaning and tugging at each other's trousers.

"H-Harry," Hermione whispered out of nowhere.

Ron's heat froze over as he felt yanked out of his passion. "Harry?"

She put a hand to her face, peering down. "We'll need something of his too to mix with our scents since it will be the three of us."

"Right," Ron said, taking a few steps away from her. "You, me, and Harry." He tried not to feel bitter. They were a team - a trio of best friends. That's all they would ever be.

"Did you find anything you like?"

Ron and Hermione looked up. Fred and George were dressed in their matching green dragon skin suits and were smirking at them. Ron blushed furiously while Hermione held up a vial. "I'll take two of these, please."

After the twins wrapped up Hermione's purchase, she and Ron left the store. They strolled down the streets of Diagon Alley in silence without looking at one another. Ron hated it; he knew he

had to do better. He also had to stop causing things between them to get so heated.

Ron touched her elbow. "Can we stop for a moment?"

"What is it?"

"About what happened back there," he said, "I'm sorry."

"Me too," Hermione said. "I don't know what got into me."

"Same here and it's been like this all day, yeah?" Ron asked.  
"Can you feel it?"

Hermione rubbed her brow. "Most definitely. I guess we should expect this sort of thing to happen, at least for awhile. We've only been reunited for a few days so it's all very sensitive and sensual."

Ron dug his hands deep into his pockets. Hermione's words were wise and he trusted them, but Ron knew that 'awhile' could wind up being a lot longer than they needed it to be. "I reckon. It's just so much."

"We're still getting through this, Ron," Hermione said. "Weâ€|had sex. It was bound to change our relationship a little."

Ron bit his lip, hating the word 'a little'. He had thought that sex would've changed their relationship completely and in all the right ways, but he'd been wrong. All he could do now was keep going. "Right. So, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she said. "You?"

"I'm all right," he said. "I got a little hot in there though."

"So did I." Hermione looked around the busy streets. "Why don't we get some ice cream to cool down before going back to your house? I still haven't repaid you for the sandwiches the other day."

Ron grinned at her, calming down a little. He laughed. "Bloody hell."

"What?"

"That's the best suggestion I've heard all day," he said.

She smiled confidently. "I have my moments. Do you know a good place?"

"I do, actually."

Ron led the way down the street to a dessert shop. He couldn't believe that he was still functioning. In the joke shop he had felt moments away from exploding (in more ways than one) but he had survived and things were still okay between them. Even in the most complicated situations, he and Hermione were somehow pushing

through them. They were proving that they could recover from heated moments and that the intensity between them could stay casual. Ron was relieved, but it also hurt everything inside of him.

When they returned to the Burrow, Hermione went straight to work on George's potion. Ginny informed Ron that their dad was home and wanted to see him in the shed. Ron ran out of the house and through the yard as fast as he could. He'd had such a hard bloody day so far and his dad was everything Ron needed right now.

The door was already open when Ron reached the shed. He walked into the overcrowded room that was rather dusty and stale. Mr. Weasley was sitting at a small table, investigating one of his Muggle items. Ron grinned, feeling a little safer and happier. His dad always had that effect on him.

"Hi, dad," Ron said, walking over to him.

Mr. Weasley looked up. "Oi, Ron."

Ron pulled up a stool next to his father and sat down. "What's that?"

"This is a compact disc," Mr. Weasley said, turning the small circular object in his hand. "Muggles use these to listen to music." He handed it to him.

Ron eyed the silvery disc. "How?" he asked, handing it back to him.

"That will be the next thing I discover," his dad said with determination.

"I believe you," Ron said, nodding. "Ginny said you wanted to talk to me?"

His dad put the disc down. "I do. I was going to wait until after the meeting but I think this is something we should talk about now." His dad took off his glasses, placing them on top of his balding head. He looked straight at him. Ron knew that the topic would be serious because his dad was giving him 'the eye'.

"Yes?" Ron asked apprehensively.

"Your mum tells me that you two haven't been getting on so well lately," his dad said. "She says you're being distant."

Ron was gobsmacked by what he was hearing. "I'm not being distant."

"Ronâ€¦"

"I'm not," Ron urged. "I haven't even noticed a change."

"Ron, I may work a lot but it doesn't mean that I don't see what's going on," his dad said. "I've noticed some tension. You've been short with her."

It took all of Ron's willpower not to blurt out that his mum was short with him too. He knew it would only make him look like an arsehole.

"I don't mean to be," he said instead.

"And yet you are," Mr. Weasley said, not appearing angry. "So tell me why. What's been going on with you?"

Ron focused on his hands so he wouldn't have to look at his father while he lied. "Nothing. I'm fine."

His dad cleared his throat, making Ron look up. He gave him a look that Ron had seen a million times before when he tried and failed to keep things from his father. "What do I always tell you, Ron?"

"Dadâ€¦"

"What do I always tell you, Ron?" his dad repeated.

Ron sighed. "That I look just like you."

"So?"

"So," Ron breathed, "you can always tell when something is going on with me."

"Spot on," Mr. Weasley said. "So how about you stop pretending that you can't talk to me and tell me what's going on? I know I'm old but I'm still useful."

"Of course you are," Ron said.

"Then let's talk, son," his dad said. "We finally have time to and you know that you can tell me anything." His father's words were true. He was one of the people Ron trusted the most and always felt comfortable with. Ron never felt stupid or unwanted when he talked to his dad. It had been that way for as long as Ron could remember.

Ron rubbed his neck. "I guess thatâ€¦I just feelâ€¦stressed."

"About what?" he dad asked.

"Everything," Ron said in a heavy breath. He paused but his dad didn't say anything. This was his way of telling Ron to continue. "I'm worried about everything that's been happening in our world. I don't know when the next big thing is going to happen or who will be effected by it."

"I think that's more than natural to feel at this time," his dad said.

"But not everyone has to really live in the worry like I do," Ron said. "I'm worried about Harry and what might happen to him. I don't know if I'll be able to protect him. He's my best mate in

the whole world. I have to keep him safe, but I don't know if I'll be able to. I don't know what to say to him sometimes and that isn't helping."

Ron didn't know where this newfound energy and bravery to speak his mind was coming from but he didn't want it to stop. He always felt as if he was moments away from exploding, and talking to his dad in the secluded shed felt like the only safe place to speak his mind so he could release the build-up of thoughts and emotions.

"I sorta feel that way about Ginny too," Ron said. "It's almost like we only interact to take the Mickey out of each other."

"She's your sister, Ron," his dad said. "I've seen you two act horribly to each other, but I've seen you two care for each other as if nothing else in the world existed."

"It's getting harder to find those moments," Ron said, feeling slightly ashamed of where his relationship with Ginny was.

"You two are teenagers â€" it's natural. You can't let that blindsides the connection you have with her," his dad said. "I'll say the same for you and Harry. He has the world on his shoulders right now; that makes being his best friend very difficult, I'm sure. You two will always be best mates though, and you have to remember that we all can only do the best we can."

"Knowing that doesn't make things any easier though," Ron said.

"That's because life isn't that simple," his dad said, patting Ron's knee. "So, these are the things you've been keeping in your head?"

Ron stared off toward the floor. There was one more thing - the biggest thing - that he still had to tell.

"There's something else and it's, um, stressing me out the most." He looked at his dad. "Hermione."

Ron had only said her name but he felt so much sweep into his body as he said it. Even with all the heavy things he'd just explained to his father, nothing was more complicated or scary or confusing than his new relationship with her.

"Go on and talk about her, son," his dad said, gripping Ron's knee tightly for a moment. "I had a feeling you might."

"I don't know how to be around her anymore." Ron knew that as open and close as he was with his dad, he couldn't tell him that he'd slept with her. It was too raw and powerful. Plus, the idea of disappointing his dad over something that he'd preached about on numerous occasions was too much to bear. "She's trying to be so strong through all this rubbish with her parents while coming up with everything to aid Harry. Hermione is incredible and I want to be the best friend she needs. I know that I have to do everything I can to help make her happy."



Ron had to stop talking for a moment to rub his chest. He had to control what he was saying and the emotions that were slowly stirring in his heart. "I just don't know how to anymore, and I feel like a prick. It used to be so much easier but nothing is easy anymore when it comes to her." Ron stared off again. "Nothing is the way it used to be."

"Ron, look at me," his dad said. Ron obeyed his order. "I don't know Hermione as well as you do so I can't tell you what she personally needs from you; however, she's a very strong, caring, and independent woman - like your mum. I can tell you that even the strongest of women need to know that they having something safe and dependable to fall back on."

"I want to be what Hermione can fall back on," Ron said in earnest.

"So be there for her," his dad said simply. "Even if it's only answering a question, giving your opinion, holding her hand, making her laugh, or just looking her in the eyes as she speaks. Respect her and be honest. That's most important."

Hearing these things made Ron feel a little sick. He was lying to Hermione about how he felt. He was also finding it more and more difficult to respect their agreement on how they would treat their friendship. If those things were the most important, then Ron was completely in the shit.

"You make it sound so easy."

"But it's not a lot of the time," his dad said. "I understand that."

"I just know fuck-all right now," Ron said. He started to breath heavily while he gently rocked. The emotion was so heavy, and it was burning inside his chest. Ron couldn't take it anymore. "I - I love her, Dad. I love Hermione."

Ron felt horribly exposed but it felt good to get the words out. This was the first time he had ever said them out loud and in the way that he truly meant them. Ron reckoned that having sex with Hermione had broken some barrier he'd had in regards to his feelings for her. He was terrified as he looked up at his dad. Ron didn't know if he would laugh or roll his eyes or say he was too young to be in love or tell him he was mental and would never stand a chance with her—but his dad didn't do any of those things. He gazed at Ron in silence for a few moments before smiling.

"I know you do, Ron. You have for a long time. The way you look at her and talk about her tells me everything."

"But you can't say anything to anyone," Ron rushed. "I haven't even told Harry."

"You know that what we talk about stays between us," his dad said.

"So what should I do?" Ron asked, feeling impatient. "We're only always going to be friends but it doesn't change how I feel."

"Then don't try to change. Don't give up, son," his dad said. "I see the way you look at her, and I also see the way she looks at you."

"She doesn't feel the same way - believe me," Ron said.

"I wouldn't be so sure, Ron," his dad said.

Ron shook his head, shrugging. He was certainly sure. Ron could make Hermione laugh, cry, scowl, blush, and even cum, but he couldn't make her love him. He would never have the skill for that.

"It honestly doesn't matter," Ron mumbled. "All I want is to be her friend but it's complicated. It's causing me a lot of stress, along with all of those other things."

Ron needed to finish this conversation. He couldn't keep torturing himself with these ideas in his head and he couldn't keep talking about them as if they were as superficial as they sounded.

"Well, I can see why you've been so tense lately, Ron," his dad said. "I'm so sorry for not being around."

"It's not your fault, Dad," Ron said. "I understand. You're really busy but you try."

"I'm glad you can see that," his dad said. "I only wish you would apply the same idea to your mother. You two share a lot of the same concerns. She's worried about the family, about Harry and Hermione, and about what's going on in our world. Can't you at least sort of understand why she may seem a little more on edge than usual?"

"Yeah, I- I guess," Ron said.

"Then be understanding and talk to her, knowing all the things she has to worry about and tend to on top of running the house," his dad said.

Ron sighed. "I'll try."

"No, you'll do," his dad said sternly. "I didn't raise my sons to be disrespectful. You will respect all the things your mum does around here."

"I do," Ron said. "I just can't talk to her the same way that I can talk to you."

"You don't have to," his dad said. "I'm your father and she's your mother. As a teenage boy, your conversations with her are of course going to be different, but you have to talk to her regardless."

"It's not even because she's my mum really," Ron said. He felt heavy emotion again but he had to control it all this time. What Ron was feeling now dug a lot deeper and came with years of pain and fear. "I'd like to talk to Mum butâ€¦she's always with Ginny. They do projects and eat breakfast together while I'm in the garden degnoming." It sounded so pathetic but it was so hard to say.

His dad raised Ron's chin. "Ron, your mother loves you."

"I know," Ron said half-heartedly.

"I hope you do," his dad said, "because it would be a very tragic thing if you didn't. Molly loves all seven of you kids more than anything else. She loves you all equally but she may show that affection in different ways. It's natural in a family this big and with so many diverse personalities."

Ron chewed on his lip as he looked down at his hands again. He had been told these things multiple times but they were still hard to believe sometimes. Ron wasn't thick. He knew that his mum had wanted a daughter for years before Ginny was born. He also knew that she had a different light about her when looking at Ginny or speaking about Bill, Charlie, and Percy. Even Fred and George had something to impress her with. Ron wasn't sure what he had but he knew it wasn't enough.

"Ron."

"Huh?" he asked, looking up.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Of course," Ron said. "She's my mum so I know she loves me. There's just distance."

"Distance doesn't mean anything, son," his dad said. "Molly would give everything she has to make you happy and to keep you safe. She feels that way about all of you. Your mum has the biggest heart I've ever seen. She's just stressed right now. You're so much more like her than you think. I reckon when you grow up a bit more and start to realize that, it'll be easier to talk to her."

"I hope so," Ron said honestly.

"Well, regardless of the difficulty," his dad said, "you're her son. You must work on your communication with her because if anything were to happen to me—"

"Don't say that," Ron blurted out, feeling a terrible chill.

"If anything were to happen to me," his dad said in a stronger voice, "I would expect you to take care of her, just as I would expect her to take care of you. Our family is our shelter, Ron, and if I were to ever fall, I'd have to know that you lot were taking care of each other."

Ron opened his mouth but didn't know what to say. His muscles started to seize up and he felt lost. He didn't know what he would do if he ever lost his dad. Sometimes, Ron was sure that his dad was the only person in their family who loved him and felt proud of him.

"Dad, I - I." He rubbed his eyes then soon felt arms wrap around him.

"I'm sorry, Ron," his dad said, rubbing his back.

"Don't talk like that," Ron said through his tears. "I almost lost you once and I can't go through that again. You're safe and Bill keeps getting better, so we shouldn't talk about these things. The nine of us have to stay together."

Ron sniffled roughly as he let the fear out of him. It didn't matter what was going on in his family or how they treated each other, Ron loved each and every member of his family more than anything else in the world and they were the most important people in his life. He couldn't imagine what would happen if he were to lose any one of them, but the possibility of that happening became more and more real as the darkness in their world spread.

His dad pulled away, wiping tears off Ron's cheeks.

"It's okay, Ron. We're all okay. Do you feel better for letting this out though?"

"Yes," Ron said, sniffing. "It's too much sometimes."

"Which is why you have to keep talking," his dad said. "You're a strong young man, Ron. You'll make it through all this and you'll be better for it." He kissed the top of Ron's head. "I love you so much, Ron, and I'm so very proud of you." Ron loved hearing things like this. It felt so good and gave him a sense of purpose. It also hurt him sometimes because his dad was the only person to ever say it.

"I love you too, Dad," Ron said. "I'm glad I make you proud."

"Always, son," his dad said, ruffling his hair. "How about we both get back inside and see what everyone is up to? It won't be long before the meeting starts."

"Sounds good," Ron said.

"I'll give you a few minutes in here alone to get yourself together," his dad said.

"Thank you."

His dad gave him a smile then patted his cheek before leaving the shed and closing the door behind him. Ron hopped off the stool then leaned against the table. He kept rubbing his eyes, breathing deeply. He was the luckiest person in the world to have a father like his. Ron had been able to be open with someone and

let his emotions go. He didn't feel like such a tit; however, the moment was over now. Ron had to get his head on and be strong and ready again for whatever came next.

As Ron walked back to his house, he couldn't help but to grin a little. He had finally told someone that he loved Hermione and had survived.

By the early evening, people started to arrive for the meeting. Regardless of the slight nerves, there was a certain thrill and sense of importance that Ron felt by getting to be a part of it all. Everything was always so secretive and dangerous, but he loved it. Ron was serious about wanting to become an Auror someday.

Everyone squeezed into the kitchen. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were soon joined around the table by Ginny, Ron, Harry, Hermione, the twins, Bill, Fleur, Lupin, Kingsley, and Moody. The meetings were always the same: they talked about the rumors floating around the Ministry, what Aurors were discovering on missions, what members of the Order were trying to uncover, and what Harry knew. Ron found it rather amazing that Harry could confidently stand up around all the adults, talking as if he was on the same level as them. Then again, his best mate had experienced more than probably everyone in the room combined. It was times like these when Ron was truly in awe of Harry and couldn't help but realize that he was 'Chosen'.

"That's really the only thing I've heard regarding the Malfoys though," Bill said later on during the discussion. "Narcissa apparently checks Bellatrix's vault every few days but no one knows why."

"What about Draco?" Lupin asked.

"Draco isn't going to step foot out in public," Harry said darkly. "I reckon he's staying low. I think that wherever he's hiding is also probably where Snape is."

"According to McGonagall, he might take a leave of absence from Hogwarts this year," Kingsley said.

"Thank Merlin," Ron mumbled.

"Can I get anyone anything else?" Mrs. Weasley asked as she went around filling everyone's teacup.

"I'm fine, Molly," Moody grunted. "In fact," he said, standing up from his chair, "it's time the patrol groups head out." His magical eye spun around frantically as it stared everyone down.

"What's the area tonight?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"We have a few safe houses that have apparently seen recent activity from Death Eaters," Kingsley said without a hint of fear in his voice. He stood up as well. "We need to send three pairs out to patrol the locations. Moody and I will secure the first site."

"Always a pleasure," Moody said, clapping Kingsley roughly on the back.

Ron looked around the table to see who would volunteer next. Anyone who offered to go would be leaving someone behind who depended on him or her. The risk was necessary though because the cause was so much greater. Ron wanted so badly to raise his hand and prove his worth, but he couldn't. He turned to his left; it was obvious that Harry was dying to volunteer as well.

"I'll go tonight," Bill said, standing up.

Ron felt a slight tug at his heart. His brother's scar was still a little swollen as it was not yet completely healed. Bill wasn't out of recovery but Ron knew that wouldn't stop him. He admired his oldest brother for that.

"Zen I am coming weeth you, Billy," Fleur said, swiftly standing up.

"I'll be in a pair as well," Lupin said. "Tonks really wanted to be here but she'sâ€¦not feeling too well."

Ron raised an eyebrow. There was something about Lupin's excuse that Ron didn't believe for some reason.

"I'll go with you Professor Lupin," George said excitedly, standing up.

Ron felt another tug but was actually rather shocked at how quickly George had thrown his name out there.

"I'm not your professor anymore, George," Lupin said with a faint smile.

"But it sounds cooler to say that I'm hunting Death Eaters with my professor rather than with Remus," George said. His cheek made a few people around the table laugh, which broke up the tension, but Ron's mum didn't twitch a smile.

"So: Kingsley and I, Lupin and George, and Bill and Fleur," Moody said. "Are there any objections to this?"

Ron looked back and forth between his parents, expecting one of them to say something.

"No, these pairs will work," Mr. Weasley finally said. "Molly?"

She vaguely nodded. "Yes, Arthur."

"Oi, why do you get to go, George?" Fred asked, slapping George's thigh.

George shrugged. "I don't have any dependants."

"George, that's not funny," Mrs. Weasley said.

"Sorry, Mum," George said. He slapped Fred's arm. "I reckon it's my time to shine."

Kingsley briefed them all about where to go and when to report back. One by one the pairs set off into the night. Ron's parents didn't let Bill or George leave without first hugging and kissing them goodbye. Ron didn't want to do that. There was no reason to say goodbye or make a big fuss out of things. His brothers would be okay.

Everyone who was left moved to the living room to talk and wait. Ron felt fidgety and he noticed the way his mum frantically cleaned the kitchen. He quickly decided that what he was doing wasn't good enough. Ron got up from the floor then went into the kitchen.

"Mum? Do you need any help?" he asked.

"I've got it, dear," his mum said, washing a pot vigorously. "You know I like to clean after the meetings."

"I do," Ron said, "but I'd still like to help. I need to do something with my hands - to keep my head clear while Bill and George are out there."

His mum stopped washing for a moment. Her expression softened. "Okay, Ron," she said. "Why don't you clear the bread tin for me?"

"Easy." Ron took the last large chunk of bread left, stuffing it into his mouth. He then dipped a spoon into the butter dish and shoved it into his mouth. He did his best to keep it all in as he chewed. "'air ew go!"

His mum gaped at him as she placed a hand to her chest. "Ronald Bilius Weasleyâ€¦!" She started to chuckle. Ron placed his hand over his mouth, laughing as well.

" 'orry, 'um," he mumbled through a thick wad of buttery bread.

"Oh, stop talking with your mouth full." She handed him a glass of juice. "You're mad, Ron â€" just like your father." She was still chuckling even though she was looking at him with concern.

Ron painfully swallowed down the bread, feeling a bit queasy. It had been worth calming his mother down thoughâ€" at least for a few moments. He continued to help her clean the kitchen and kept his mouth shut as she corrected how he did things. Ron wanted to be better for her. A couple of times he considered telling her about what he'd talked about with his dad, but he didn't. Repairing things with his mum wasn't as easy to do as it was to talk about. This fact was starting to become true regarding all the women in Ron's life.

After the kitchen was cleaned, Ron went to the loo. He opened the door to find Harry on the toilet. "Bollocks! Sorry mate!"

"It's all right," Harry said calmly.

Ron slowly opened his eyes. Harry was merely sitting on the lid, staring at his hands. Ron looked around before walking in and closing the door. He believed in giving Harry his space, but the expression on his face compelled Ron to see what was going on.

"Are you okay?" He sat in front of Harry on the floor.

"I'm fine," Harry said. "I just wanted a few moments alone while everyone is talking." He ran a hand through his wild black hair. "I should be out there, Ron."

"We both should," Ron said, "but you know we can't."

"It doesn't make this any easier," Harry said - Ron thought Harry sounded exactly like himself saying this - "Neither does knowing that Snape and Draco are out there somewhere. They could be doing anything."

"You can't keep thinking like that, Harry," Ron said. "All you can do is focus on what's going on here. We don't have much, but we're getting somewhere."

"I know," Harry said. "That's what Hermione keeps telling me."

"You should listen to her. She's brilliant."

"She really is," Harry said with a smile. "I can't say enough how glad I am that she's back."

Ron nodded, trying not to take the comment as a personal insult. "Yeah, me too. It's brilliant that she's been able to help you." They were quiet for awhile.

"Well, you help me too, Ron," Harry said after an extended silence.

Ron snorted. "I'm sure it's not much."

"Don't be a prat," Harry said. "You help a lot. I really appreciate you always listening to me and taking my side; I need that. I can't be this way around anyone else."

"What about Hermione and Ginny?"

"Hermione's great but you know how it is talking to her sometimes," Harry said. "As for Ginny, well, I really care about her but I can't talk to her - not like this. I hope that doesn't sound horrible."

"It doesn't," Ron said. "I get it." He felt guilty. Harry told him things that he never expressed to anyone else while Ron was keeping the biggest moment of his life from Harry. It was all so complicated considering that both Harry and Hermione were his best friends. "You can always talk to me," Ron said. "You know I'm here."



"I'm here too," Harry said. "There's a lot of shit going on but I'm still here."

"I know," Ron said, nodding.

The door opened.

"Bloody hell," Ron said, turning around.

Fred raised both eyebrows as he came into the room. "Umâ€¦am I interrupting an intimate moment?"

Harry rolled his eyes, standing up. "Very funny, Fred."

"Yeah, piss off. We were just talking," Ron said, getting up as well.

Fred chuckled. "Yes - I know that I certainly talk to all my mates in empty loos. The setting really brings out my sensitivity."

"You are such a git," Ron said.

Fred raised a finger and opened his mouth but the sound of a door being busted open drowned out his words.

"GEORGE!" someone screamed.

Fred's brown eyes widened. For a split second, he looked at Ron, but then dashed out of the loo. Ron and Harry ran quickly behind him.

"What happened?" Fred demanded, storming into the living room.

"Weâ€¦wereâ€¦ambushed!" Lupin said breathlessly, placing his hands on his knees. His hands and shirt were covered in blood.

Ron started to feel dizzy as his heartbeat began to gallop. He tripped over to where everyone was hovering over the couch. What he saw made him gasp and almost lose balance.

George's face was hideously pale and blood oozed out of the side of his head. Ron put a hand over his mouth. Unless his eyes were deceiving him, George's left ear was missing. There was nothing there but a hemorrhaging hole.

"Oh - my boy!" Mrs. Weasley sobbed, collapsing to her knees next to him. She repeatedly dabbed his face with a towel.

"Is he breathing?" Ginny asked in a quivering voice. She held her dad's arm tightly.

"Of course he's breathing!" Fred snapped, looking more serious than Ron had ever seen him. He fell to his knees then snatched the cloth out of his mum's hand. He started tenderly wiping George's face. "He's just knocked out."

"Maybe he should go to the hospital," Hermione said, also looking pale and frightened.

"They won't be able to repair his ear," Lupin said. "It was cursed off. George will survive, but his ear is unfortunately gone."

"What happened?" Mr. Weasley asked in a heavy breath.

"I honestly don't know, Arthur." Lupin shook his head, running his fingers through his straggly grey locks. Ron had to turn away as George's blood smeared Lupin's hair. "Things were quiet, then out of nowhere George and I were ambushed by a group of Death Eaters. It was as if they knew we'd be there. We duelled and got out of there as soon as possible but I wasn't quick enough. I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault," Mr. Weasley said.

"What about Bill and Fleur?" Harry asked. "Or Kingsley and Moody?"

"I'm not sure," Lupin said.

Ron tried to pay attention to everyone's chatter but all he could do was stare at George's colorless face and watch Fred's hands become bloody as he cleaned the wound. This was exactly why Ron was always so tense and now he knew that he had reason to be. His brother's ear was gone.

"There has to be something we can give George at least," Ron said in frustration.

"We've got Quoncil in the cabinet," his mum said, rubbing George's arm. "It should keep the area from getting infected."

"I'll get it," Ginny said, quickly running away.

"I think I should go after the others," Lupin said.

"No," Mr. Weasley said. "Let's wait."

"Arthur!" Mrs. Weasley said. "Our other son is out there!"

"I know that, Molly!" Mr. Weasley said. "That's exactly why I want to wait. I don't want anyone to compromise their positions. If it gets too late then I'll go with Lupin myself."

"There's not much left, Mum," Ginny said, handing her the bottle.

"It'll be enough to get him through the night," their mum said. "Tomorrow I'll get George checked out at the hospital."

"Let me do it," Fred said, taking the bottle from her. He covered a towel with the potion then dabbed George's gash with it. "Come on, Fred," he said softly. He kept dabbing the side of his face; Ron could hear George's skin sizzling. It made him feel sick; however, he also heard something coming from George.

George groaned as his arm twitched. He slowly opened his eyes; everyone took a collective breath.

"George?" Fred asked, taking his twin's hand.

George's hazy brown eyes roamed around the room before settling on what was closest to him. He grinned weakly at Fred.

"Twin?" he rasped.

Fred nodded, rubbing his eyes. "Not very identical anymore though. You're missing a part or two."

"Bugger," George breathed. "At least I'll finally be able to say I'm the more attractive one. Women love scars, eh, Harry?"

Harry rolled his eyes, chuckling. "You've finally guessed my secret, George."

"Oh, George! I'm so happy you're okay!" their mum said, flinging her arms around George and soon joined by Mr. Weasley. Fred got out of the way so they could reach him. Ron let out a heavy breath, resting back against a wall. Words couldn't describe the relief he felt.

Lupin, with the slight assistance from George, went into greater detail about what had happened. Ron kept his eyes on the Weasley clock, but it simply said that Bill was 'traveling'. He couldn't stand the suspense. He needed both of his brothers back alive.

Ron got tired of waiting around for Bill and looking at George's missing ear so he went up to his room. He just needed a moment. He sat on the floor, shuffling a few cards. He wanted to clear his mind but it was impossible. All day "all week" he'd been telling himself to stay calm but he had been right all along. Now one of his brothers was missing an ear and the other was missing altogether. It wasn't right. Ron's family was far too important to constantly be getting hurt. He knew that he should've volunteered. It should've been him with Lupin or now possibly with Fleur.

There was a knock on the door. Ron sighed. "Yes?"

The door opened.

Hermione gently waved. "Hi."

"Hi," he said, no longer feeling annoyed. "Come in."

Hermione closed the door behind her then sat on the floor next to him. "I hope it's okay that I came to check on you."

Ron had actually wanted to be alone, but now that Hermione was here, he realized that he had wanted her to find him. "It's fine. I just got restless down there."

"I know what you mean," she said. "All of this came with no warning. It was only supposed to be a routine patrol."

"And now it's turned into this â€" my brother's blood," Ron said.

"Ron," Hermione said, "George is going to be all right. He'll only have one ear, or at least one real ear, but he'll recover."

It infuriated Ron that yet another brother of his would now have a permanent scar. "I know," he said. "I actually think George is excited about getting a fake ear. He's mental."

"He's also alive and making jokes with Fred," Hermione said with a small smile.

"Well, I'm not in a joking mood right now," Ron muttered. "Bill is still out there." He looked to the floor, stomping his foot.

"Talk to me," Hermione said, gently scratching his back.

Ron shivered, closing his eyes. The touch felt wonderful but it wasn't in a sexual way that made him sweaty and mental. No â€" this touch was soothing and calmed Ron down. It was how Hermione, his best friend, usually touched him. Ron welcomed the feeling.

"Ron?"

He opened his eyes then turned to her. Hermione was gazing at him with her beautiful brown eyes and giving him a tender expression. It was what Ron was used to and needed on a daily basis. He felt like such a wanker for not feeling completely satisfied with it. Ron was lucky enough to have her as his friend.

"You know what I've been thinking about since George came back?"

"Tell me," Hermione said. She scratched his back in a horizontal pattern, making sure to travel all the way across before moving down a bit to repeat the process.

Ron couldn't help but to let out a soft moan. "Mmm. That feels so bloody good."

"I'm glad you like it," she whispered. "Keep going."

"Okay," Ron said, trying to concentrate on her words and not her fingers. "Before George and Bill left, my mum and dad hugged them and told them that they loved them. At the time, I didn't see what the point was, but now I get it. George could've died tonight and for all I know Bill is lying somewhere dead as we speak. I can't even remember the last thing I said to him."

"Ron, your brothers know that you love them," she said.

"It doesn't matter," Ron said. "I told George and Fred that I hated them today. I don't know what I would've done if I had to accept the fact that those words were some of my last to them."

"But Ron, they weren't," Hermione said. She stopped scratching his back but moved closer so that their legs touched. "George and Fred are both here and are alive. Bill will be okay too."

"You can't know that he will be."

"And you can't know that he won't be," she said. "I'm simply choosing the better outcome because it's the only way to keep myself together."

"It's not as easy to think that way when the blood is your own," Ron said. "My family means everything to me. I can't imagine losing a single member. I've been worried all week about this meeting and look what happened. I justâ€¦I have this awful feeling that something really terrible is going to happen. I don't know how to get rid of it. I don't know what to do or if I'm going to make it through all this."

"Ron, listen to me," Hermione, gripping his hands very hard. "You're going to make it through everything that comes our way and so will your family. I have complete faith in all of you - you're all so strong. No matter what happens, you all will make it."

"'Mioneâ€¦"

"I mean it, Ronald," she said loudly. "You told me before I left for Australia to trust you. Well, I'm telling you to trust me now. I promise that your family will weather whatever is coming, and I swear that you will make it through and you won't be alone. I'm here for you, Ron. I always will be."

Ron let out a heavy breath. There was so much going on but it wasn't consuming him; he didn't feel like he was moments away from bursting either. All Ron felt was warmth and Hermione's words filling him up with courage, hope, and strength. He trusted and believed everything she said. Hermione was so lovely, smart, kind, and everything else that was still perfect and beautiful in their world and in Ron's life.

"I trust you," he said quietly. "And I'm so bloody happy you're back."

She smiled. "So am I."

Ron leaned forward, resting his head on her shoulder. Hermione readjusted herself so she could drape her arm over his neck and rub his shoulder. She placed her cheek on the top of his head.

"Everything will be okay, Ron," she said. "You have to believe that we can all still be okay in the end."

"I'm trying."

"Then that's all I'll ask of you." She kissed the top of his head; Ron shivered again.

He closed his eyes, relaxing for the first time since the meeting began. Ron loved how close they were and how it wasn't complicated with sexual urges and heat. Sex had changed a lot about their relationship but it couldn't touch them being there for each other and being tender when they needed to be. During this moment, Ron didn't want anything other than Hermione - his best friend.

They were quiet as they simply sat and stared off, but once again, a door opening interrupted the moment. Ron and Hermione hurriedly got up, rushing downstairs. Ron felt a flourish of relief when he saw Bill and Fleur at the door. Both looked okay but when Kingsley walked through the door, Ron knew something was horribly wrong.

Kingsley took off his hat, looking grim. "Moody is dead."

Ron heard Hermione take in a sharp breath. He looked at her and all the color was drained from her face. She looked ready to collapse. Ron knew he had to do something. He had to respect her, treat her right, and be there for her like she had been there for him in his room. Ron thought back to what his dad had told him: even the simplest things could be what Hermione needed from him.

Ron stood closer to Hermione, holding her hand as firmly as he could.

No matter what happened next, she could fall back on him.

\*\*\*\* This chapter was really fun, touching, and exciting to write for many reasons. I hope you all enjoyed it as much as I did! :) Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

## CHAPTER 5

All I can say is: Rose's life right now=bollocks. I'm REALLY sorry that this has taken so long. Trust me, I would shoot out these chapters every day if I could, but life just doesn't work that way. Thank you to everyone who's sticking this out with me. I appreciate it. Also, if you follow my other story Turned to Real Life, I'll tell you right now that I WILL update that story this week!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

"I checked the Polyjuice this morning and everything is coming together," Hermione said. "I was a bit worried about keeping it in the shed but nothing seems to be contaminating the supply. Tonight I'm going to add a few more ingredients to it so I'll have a definitive update tomorrow. Okay?"

"Okay," Ron and Harry said together.

"Great," Hermione said, making a note in her journal. She, Ron, and Harry were having their morning planning hour in the field behind the Burrow. It was something they'd done for several days

now. Moody's death had sparked a sense of urgency in Hermione; she knew that they needed to work harder. Preparing themselves for their expedition was the most important thing to her now. She had to stay focused because every day more lives were at risk.

"So, Ron?" she asked.

"I think I finally have a good idea for how my parents can account for my absence from school if the professors or the Ministry nose around," he said.

She raised an eyebrow in curiosity. "And?"

He shrugged, smirking. "I'll let you know when I have something definitive."

Hermione playfully narrowed her gaze at his obvious cheek. The sunlight brightened Ron's hair, causing the strands to look like flames. The light also illuminated the color of his eyes, turning them into a piercing blue. Ron was exotic and powerful under the sun's rays; it took most of her strength not to drool all over her notes.

Hermione was eventually able to move her focus to her notes so she could jot down comments.

"And Harry?" she asked.

"I've been thinking about Grimmauld Place. We need to go back there," Harry said with intensity in his voice. "I just feel like there are too many unanswered questions and we might find answers there. R.A.B might mean something there."

Hermione nodded, writing frantically. "I completely agree." She wrote the initials several times, circling the letters as if the action would unveil their meaning.

"Hermione?" Harry asked.

"Yes?" she said, looking up from her notes.

Harry and Ron were giving her identical expressions of concern.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked.

"Yes," she said. "I'm sorry. I just feel a little rushed. With everything that's been going on these past few days, I really want to make progress."

"I reckon everyone feels that way," Ron said.

"Is anyone closer to finding out who murdered Moody?" Harry asked him.

Ron shook his head. "Dad has been spending a lot of time with Kingsley at work and he says that no one has any ideas. Dad reckons the patrols will be suspended for a bit longer until Kingsley gets some answers."

"This is shit," Harry said. "I hate not knowing who we can and can't trust; meanwhile, good people just keep dying." He let out a heavy breath, peering out toward the field in front of them.

Hermione could tell how much all of this was affecting Harry. Moody's death was something everyone was slowly and painfully trying to come to terms with, however, she knew that Harry was taking Moody's death the hardest, even if he didn't show it. He believed everything was his responsibility, and while Harry's altruism was a nuisance at times, it also made him so incredibly special.

Hermione wanted to say or do something for her best friend but she didn't know what. She looked at Ron; he was staring at Harry too. Just by the tenderness of his expression, Hermione knew that Ron probably would've given Harry his heart if he'd asked for it.

"Oi, mate," Ron said, nudging Harry's arm. "You're right: there are a lot of people who we can't trust, but no matter what, you can trust me and Hermione. The three of us can always put our faith in each other."

"Ron's right," Hermione said, feeling her love for Ron grow. "In the end, what we have right here is what we'll need the most."

Harry looked between them. "Yeah, I know. Um, thank you. You really don't know how much I appreciate you two being here with me. You don't have to be."

"But we want to be," she said in earnest, touching Harry's knee for a moment.

"And of course we have to be here," Ron said. "You can't have a golden trio without three people who areâ€¦golden." He frowned, rubbing his neck. "Well, I reckon you and 'Mione can be golden. I'll be stuck as the pale, freckly freak."

Harry burst into laughter but Hermione gasped, hitting Ron's leg. "You are not a pale, freckly freak, Ronald Weasley!"

Ron shrugged whereas Harry kept laughing. "P-paleâ€¦freckly freak," he wheezed between chortles.

Ron smirked at him, appearing rather pleased with himself. "Was it that funny, Harry?"

"You have no idea," Harry said, wiping away his tears of laughter. "I needed that."

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself and didn't bother to correct me. At least I know what you really think of me, prick." Ron shoved Harry then glanced at Hermione; he winked. She then realized what his action had been for: he'd done it for Harry. Ron had insulted himself, hit Harry, and called him a vulgar name, but somehow this combination had been exactly what Harry had needed to feel better.



Hermione found Ron and Harry's friendship somewhat puzzling and peculiar at times, but they understood each other in a way that was unfathomable. It seemed as if Harry could read Ron's mind and Ron just knew what Harry needed. It had always been that way. Hermione sometimes envied their connection but was ultimately more thankful for it than anything else. All she wanted was for them to be safe and happy. Ron and Harry were the most important people in her life; they were both such beautiful people and essential to her survival.

"Brilliant display of maturity, boys," Hermione said loudly to drown out their laughter. "Well, regardless of whether the three of us can be golden together, at least in a few days we'll all be of age."

"Yes," Ron said, grinning at Harry. "A knob we know will finally be seventeen. Blimey, it's about time."

Harry's mood seemed to elevate even more. "The Trace will finally be off of me."

"And you'll finally be able to take your Apparition Test," Hermione said.

"Of bloody course," Ron said with exaggeration. "What's a birthday to Hermione Granger without an exam to take?"

"You're rude!" She reached out to hit his arm but Ron grabbed her wrist before she could touch him.

"Too slow," he said.

"Maybe I wanted to distract you so I could attack with my other hand."

"You can try. I'll still be able to stop you though."

"Oh?" she asked, trying and failing to free her arm. "You can take me?"

"Any time of the day," he said. "I could pin you right now."

Hermione's heart skipped a beat. She and Ron occasionally bantered in this way but it felt like so much more at the moment; it was almost as if they were consciously flirting with each other. It didn't help that Ron's grip was firm and that he kept staring at her, barely blinking.

Hermione's thoughts became unclear; she wasn't sure of what to do.

"Shower is free," Ginny's voice said from somewhere behind Hermione.

Ron let go of her and they both averted their gazes. Hermione quickly remembered where they were and that Harry had been sitting right next to them the whole time.

"Great. It's my turn," Harry said. "I'll take all this for you, Hermione."

"Thank you, Harry," Hermione said, not meeting his eyes.

"Uh-huh," he said. He gathered all of their papers, sliding them into her bag. When Harry stood up, he gave her and Ron a curious look. Hermione knew his green eyes all too well. She had to look away before all of her thoughts became obvious.

Harry walked back toward the house and Ginny took over his spot in the grass. Hermione was a bit surprised when the pair didn't say anything to each other or share their usual adorable smile.

Ginny ran her fingers through her long, thick ginger hair. It shined in the sunlight just like Ron's. All of the Weasleys had such gorgeous hair.

"So what were you lot talking about?" Ginny asked, taking a lick of her ice lolly.

"Nothing you would be interested in," Ron said. He reached out for her treat. "Give me some of that."

Ginny pulled her arm back just in time to avoid his grab. "No. This is mine."

"But you know lime is my favorite," he said in a fairly whiny voice.

"I don't care," Ginny said, taking another lick. "I have no idea where your mouth has been today."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Well, I did meet a pimply ghoul earlier this morning who paid me a sickle for a good time. Just give me the bloody thing." He yanked Ginny's hand to his mouth then bit off a rather large bite of her lolly.

"You sod!" Ginny said, hitting his arm. "You took most of it!"

"It's bloody good too," he said through the icy treat. "Cheers, Ginny." He lay back, resting his head on her lap.

Ginny punched his chest but didn't make him move as she finished her lolly. Ron kept poking her stomach and soon the two were slapping each other's hands, laughing.

"You two are lovely," Hermione said, smiling broadly.

Ron and Ginny stopped fighting each other. Ron sat up. "What?"

She hadn't meant to speak but she couldn't help herself. Ron and Ginny could be vulgar, mean, and violent toward each other, but she didn't mind their behavior when it was mutual and not blatantly hurtful. In fact, most of the time their relationship melted her heart.

"Oh, I just mean that I enjoy seeing you two like this," Hermione said. "It's really lovely and cute."

"There's nothing 'cute' about Ron - especially not when you include me," Ginny said.

"Yeah, you sound like our mum," Ron said, crinkling up his nose. "I'm hardly related to this thing sitting next to me."

Hermione sighed in defeat. "Sorry. My mistake."

"I'm glad you can recognize that," Ron said. He turned to Ginny. "Is there something in particular you wanted?"

"Actually, yes," Ginny said. "Mum came back from Fred and George's right before I came out here. George is doing better - he and Fred are picking out his ear today."

Hermione slightly shivered. She still couldn't believe that George's ear was gone. One minute she had been discussing the components of his cologne and the next he had been attacked by Death Eaters. The dark red blood that had oozed from George's gash and the sound of his skin sizzling from the cleansing potion invaded her senses every once in awhile.

"It's good that he's picking out an ear, right?" Hermione asked. She had to get past her own discomfort to be strong for Ron and Ginny. George was their brother, so if they could be brave, then Hermione could be.

"It's all George has been talking about," Ron said. His tone of indifference didn't match the worried expression on his face. "Only the twins can turn something like mutilation into a big joke."

"I'd rather have George laughing than dwelling," Ginny said. "Angelina and Lee have been really helpful to them. Mum said that when she arrived, Angelina was taking care of George while Fred tended to the store. She's been around a lot for George."

"She's their best friend," Hermione said. "It's her job. If Ron or Harry lost an ear, I'd act as their nurse - or whatever they needed from me."

Ron abruptly cleared his throat, blushing furiously. He rubbed his neck. "T-that's good to know, Hermione - that you'd be my nurse."

Hermione didn't know what was wrong with him but his flushed face caused her to redden as well.

"Are you two all right?" Ginny asked, glancing between them.

"Fine," Hermione promptly said.

"Yeah," Ron rasped with a nod.

"Rightâ€|" Ginny raised her eyebrow. Hermione knew Ginny well enough to tell that she didn't believe them but Hermione had to act natural. She wasn't even sure what was happening or why things were suddenly so intense. All she knew was that it was probably for the best if she didn't bring up being a nurse around Ron ever again.

"So," Ron said, clasping his hands together, "if you're done annoying us, then -"

"- there's actually something else that I want to talk to you both about while Harry isn't here," Ginny said.

Hermione and Ron sat up a little straighter. "What about him?" they seemed to say together.

"Calm down," Ginny said, holding out her hands, "it's just about his birthday," she said with a smile. "Mum and I have been planning a little party for him. I reckon you two should know about it now."

"Party?" Hermione asked.

"It's nothing too big or formal," Ginny said, "but Mum really wants to give Harry something nice because of all he's been going through lately."

"Harry isn't too keen on parties or surprises though," Ron said.

"It doesn't matter," Hermione said. "I think this is a great idea. He deserves a party."

"I think so too," Ginny said. "Harry needs some happiness in his life, and I want to do my best to make him feel a little better. Both Mum and I do."

Ron merely looked at Ginny. "So, is this the project you two have been working on?" She nodded. "Why didn't you tell us? We could've helped."

"Because Mum and I are more than capable of doing something for Harry ourselves," Ginny said. "He's my friend too. Besides, Hermione seemed to have enough to do."

"And me?" he asked.

"You tell Harry everything," Ginny said. "We didn't want you to spoil the surprise."

"That's bollocks," he muttered. "You and Mum just didn't want to include me."

"Ron," Hermione said. She never liked when Ron got like this about his mother.

"That's right," Ginny said, rolling her eyes. "Everything we do, including planning a birthday party for Harry - your best mate who's going through a difficult time - is somehow all about you."

"Ginny," Hermione breathed.

"You know what--"

"Please!" Hermione said in a raised voice. "Let's not argue. This is supposed to be about Harry, yes? Now, Ginny, will you please tell us what's going on?"

Ginny gave Ron a fierce look before turning her attention to Hermione. "As I was saying, it won't be much. Mum is going to make him a big breakfast that morning, and I thought we could have a party out by the larger pond after that. I invited Luna, and I bought a big bag of sweets so we can eat that and just swim or whatever Harry wants to do. Then that night Mum's got a cake for him."

"Wow, that sounds lovely," Hermione said.

"Yeah," Ron said, looking rather impressed. "How long have you and Mum been planning this?"

"Awhile," Ginny said. "So what do you think?"

"It's brilliant," Ron said. "I can't wait to see Harry's face."

"I think it's a great idea too," Hermione said. "Harry needs a good birthday."

"So we'll give him one," Ginny said confidently. "I reckon that's all I wanted to 'annoy' you two with. Mum is stalling Harry right now. I should probably go back so she'll stop bombarding him with random questions."

"Actually," Hermione said, "do you mind keeping him away a bit longer so Ron and I can talk a little more about this?"

"I'd be happy to," Ginny said, standing up. She looked between them once more then chuckled as she walked back to the house.

"What was that?" Hermione asked in confusion.

"Dunno. Ginny's a mental."

Ron stared off toward the field, looking deep in thought. She loved the calm, intense expression on his face. He'd been looking this way more often ever since Moody died. Hermione knew that his death, George's state, and Harry's grief affected Ron a lot more than he was letting on, but she also knew that Ron wouldn't express it.

The morning following the patrol, Ron came down to breakfast with a different attitude. He acted with a greater strength and he was more attentive and constructive when Hermione spoke or exchanged ideas with him. She didn't know where Ron's new enthusiasm was coming from but she greatly appreciated it. His strength was what she was holding on to and feeding off of to become more capable herself.

"So," Hermione said, after a long silence, "Harry's partyâ€¦"

"It'll be great," Ron said, turning to her. "It's a wicked idea, but I still think that it's bollocks that Ginny and Mum didn't tell me."

"I'll admit that the way Ginny explained her reasoning was a bit off-putting," she said, "but I think she meant more in general that they didn't want anything to spoil the event."

Hermione hoped that this was what Ginny had been trying to say. She was usually patient with Ginny and accepted her attitude, but lately Hermione had been finding some of her behavior toward Ron unacceptable. Hermione didn't know if it was because she was falling deeper in love with Ron or if it was because she'd slept with him, but she had a heightened sensitivity to other people's treatment of him now.

"And if it makes you feel any better," Hermione added, "they didn't tell me either."

"That's because you're busy," Ron mumbled. "I, on the other hand, can't be trusted."

"Stop it, Ron," Hermione said, hating the way he spoke about himself. "That's not true. I don't think Ginny was trying to imply that."

"Then what did she mean?"

"Well, you and Harry do share a lot with each other," Hermione said. "It's always been that way."

"We're best mates," he said with a shrug. "It's how we should be, but I wouldn't spoil a surprise for him. Ginny and Mum worked really hard on this, I know that." He peered down, picking at his fingernails. "I just wish I could've helped."

It didn't matter how coarse Ron's behavior was at times because she knew that he was sensitive and kind at his base. All he wanted to do was help make the lives of the people he cared about better. It was why he was such an amazing person but would probably never believe it himself. Hermione was determined to change that.

"I know," Hermione said, "and you still can. The actual party may be planned but that doesn't mean you can't contribute to Harry's happiness that day, right?"

Ron looked back at her, lightening up a bit. "I reckon." He grinned and she smiled back at him.

Hermione was relieved that she and Ron were still okay. They were talking, spending time together, and actually seemed to be getting closer. It reminded her of last term and how their relationship had grown immensely following Ron's breakup with Lavender. This time, however, Hermione didn't know what was

bringing them together. It honestly didn't matter though. All she cared about was that they were truly best friends again.

"Ginny and Mum probably won't believe this," Ron said after another prolonged silence, "but I don't really tell Harry everything. You should know that."

Hermione had a feeling of what he was referring to in particular, and she wasn't sure if she could talk about it during the day. There was nothing to mask her emotions in the sunlight. She decided to be brave and open regardless. She had to be strong. "You know, Ron, that's something I still find a bit surprising."

"What?" he asked.

"That you haven't told Harry about us."

Ron pulled at the laces of his trainers. "I've thought about it but I couldn't say anything during the first part of the summer without talking to you about it first."

"I felt the same way," she said, already sensing a change in the atmosphere around them. "What about now?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Do you think it's something he should know?"

Hermione wasn't sure what was right to say. She looked at Ron who was simply gazing at her with his gentle blue eyes. He was just Ron; she didn't have to be afraid of her honesty around him.

"I always want the three of us to be open with one another," Hermione said, "but I'm not sure about this."

"Neither am I," Ron said, scooting closer to her. "What happened—it's something between you and me—in our personal friendship." He kept his gaze on her. Their shoulders were touching now. She could smell him and feel him all around and inside of her. It was incredible, but she had to push through and concentrate.

Hermione rubbed her brow. The air between them was thickening. "I absolutely agree."

Ron nodded. "A part of me does want to tell him though. I'm gonna sound like a knob, but what happened was a really big moment in my life. It's something I'd like to share with him — even more than I don't want to share it with him."

While Hermione softly laughed at the look of perplexity on Ron's face, her insides were melting because Ron considered their time together to be a big moment for him. It hadn't been a moment of love, but it had been something substantial.

"Don't worry, that made sense, and I honestly think it's great," she said. "I've read that sometimes men don't acknowledge their first time as having major significance."

"I'm not one of those men, Hermione."

"No, you're not." She had to press her lips together to keep herself from adding 'and that's why I'm in love with you'.

Ron finally looked away from her. "How should we handle this then?"

She blinked several times, trying to focus. "I think the right approach is to just tell him when the time feels right for either of us."

"Okay," Ron said. "Honesty will keep the three of us—friends."

There was something about the way Ron said the word 'friends' that troubled her.

She couldn't let Ron loosely intertwine the word sex and 'friends' while they were on the subject of Harry. It wasn't right; the ideas floating around her mind made her feel nauseous. She had a sudden urge to be more open with him.

"I should tell you, Ron—" she said. Her fear began clawing up her back but she had to stay firm. She had to get him to understand that while she felt deeply for both of them, Ron was who she ached for.

"Though you, Harry, and me are all best friends," she continued, "I don't want you to think that I could do what we did with him. I could — I would never be that way with Harry."

Ron let out a slow, shaky breath. "Really?"

Hermione wanted to touch him so badly but she knew she couldn't. "Yes."

He closed his eyes for a moment. "Good," he whispered.

Hermione felt a warm sensation in her chest. She liked the fact that Ron didn't want her to do anything sexual with Harry. She was just too afraid to ask why.

"Um, I should tell you then that—" Ron trailed off, looking pained, "that even though you think I might've done stuff with Lavender, I didn't. I never wanted to."

It was her turn to unsteadily exhale. Hearing those words felt so good.

"I'm glad."

Ron blushed, tapping his knees with his fingertips. "I also know that blokes aren't supposed to care too much about their first time, but it matters to me."

"It should matter," Hermione said. "I'm so sorry, Ron. All we really talked about the night we made up was about my first time but—we both lost our virginity."



Ron's entire face turned red. His chest rose and fell jaggedly, but he looked her square in the eyes and shook his head. "I didn't lose anything, Hermione. I gave myself to you."

Hermione whimpered faintly. She felt dizzy; her whole body began to shake. She bit her lip hard, feeling a heavy emotion swirl in her chest as tears developed in her eyes.

"Hermione?" Ron asked at once. "Are you okay? Did I say something wrong?"

"Not at all." She sniffled, hastily wiping her eyes. "This is still really sensitive and it's a powerful subject. I just feel a little overwhelmed. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said, placing his hand on top of hers.

Hermione looked right into his eyes. She felt so safe, warm, capable, and beautiful. Just from having Ron's intense gaze and his large, gentle hand touching her, Hermione felt more connected to the world. She'd felt the same way the night of the patrol, when she'd held Ron in his room. Only this time, he was giving her strength.

Ron swiftly removed his hand, scooting back. "Bloody hell," he breathed.

"W-what?" she asked, feeling slightly dazed and let down that he had moved.

"I don't have a gift for Harry."

It took Hermione a few seconds to comprehend what he was saying. She suddenly gasped, widening her eyes. "Oh no — I don't either!"

"Bleeding bollocks," Ron groaned, covering his face with his hands. "We have to get him something, yeah? I don't have much money though."

The intensity between them was broken but Hermione had to accept the change. Their moment couldn't have lasted forever, and she felt guilty for forgetting about buying Harry a present. She had to clear her mind and focus on her next task.

"Let's combine our funds and get him something together," she said, sitting up a little straighter. "We can look around Diagon Alley."

Ron smiled. "Sounds brilliant."

"Let's go then," she said, standing up.

Ron got up too but didn't move after that. He rubbed his neck. "Are we okay?"

"We're fine," Hermione said. She didn't want to be 'fine', she wanted the passionate bliss they'd shared moments ago; but 'fine' was stable and necessary.

She and Ron quickly walked back to the Burrow and inside.

"I need to get my money from my room," Ron said when they reached the second floor.

"I'll meet you here," Hermione said.

"Where are you two going?" Harry asked, walking down the staircase.

"Uhâ€¦," Ron began.

"To Diagon Alley," Hermione said. "I need new books." She nudged her head in Ron's direction. "I'm making Ron come along because he knows the different areas well. I want to go to all the shops that I can."

Ron looked at Hermione for a moment then sighed. "She's punishing me for being a pure-blood," he said to Harry.

"I am not," she said, happy that she and Ron were thinking the same way. "I simply believe that we should take advantage of your geographical knowledge."

"Ah, what a smart, fancy way of saying that I'm only useful as a tour guide."

"Oh, hush!"

"All right, all right," Harry said, massaging his temples. "Your bickering is giving me a headache. Just go already and try not to strangle each other while you're shopping, yeah?"

"It's her, not me," Ron said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Hang in there, mate," Harry said, patting his arm. He continued walking down the staircase.

Ron turned to her. "You're clever."

"You're not too bad yourself," Hermione said. "We're a good team."

"I reckon so," he said. Ron gave her a once-over. "You ready?"

"Absolutely."

Hermione and Ron walked the streets of Diagon Alley, hoping that a store would grab their attention. Even though they hadn't found anything yet, she was in a good mood. Hermione loved the idea of carrying out a secret task with Ron that wasn't life-threatening. For once, she was doing something crucial that was also fun and lighthearted.

"What exactly are we looking for, Ron?" she asked.

"Dunno. Harry's plain so I'm sure he'd like almost anything."

"Hmm, well, there's this rather controversial author named Hullbert Tollstar who recently wrote an interesting book about-

"- I said Harry was plain, not mad," Ron said. "The only people who fancy books for their birthdays are you and Percy."

She pointed out her chin a little. "I'll ignore your bit of rudeness and say that books make great gifts."

"Not for a bloke like Harry," he said, shaking his head, "and I don't care how interesting the book is or how ridiculous the author's name is."

"Urgh - fine!" Hermione snapped. "What should we get him then since you're apparently the expert on all subjects related to Harry Potter."

"Actually," Ron said with a grin, "when the three of us met, you knew the most about him. I reckon that makes you the expert."

She glared at him. "You're really trying to drive me mad, aren't you?"

"Huh â€" and here I thought you already were."

"Oh! You are so infuriating!" Hermione said, hitting his arm. "How long do you practice saying these one-liners in the mirror every morning?" She hit him again.

"Ow! Dammit, 'Mione," Ron said, rubbing his arm. "I reckon I practice about as long as you exercise your jabs."

"Did I hurt you?" she asked. Ron nodded. "Excellent. Maybe the pain will act as a reminder of why we're here."

"I get it," Ron muttered. "Save me the lecture." They stopped walking and once more looked around the crowded streets. "How about we get him something Quidditch related or, to be even safer, something for his broom? Maybe polish or something?"

Hermione thought it over but soon realized that she didn't have any better ideas. It didn't seem like a personal or significant enough gift but Ron genuinely knew best in this case. "I guess that will work, but I don't know where to go."

"I do," Ron said. "We'll go after we get food."

"Food?" Hermione asked. "I didn't know that was on the schedule."

"It's not, but sometimes I feel like deviating."

"Sometimes?" she asked. "Hmm. That word must be Latin or Greek for 'every moment of every day'."

"Blimey, you really are getting good at this," Ron said, nudging her arm with his elbow. "I reckon I'm a bad influence."

"Possibly," she said, "but I'm not complaining."

They smirked at each other. Hermione knew that she probably should've looked away but she couldn't. She noticed that his cheeks and nose were slightly pink with sunburn. Ron's fair skin was so sensitive and a thin layer of sweat glistened on his forehead. He just looked so striking.

Hermione had to focus before she lost herself. "W-where do you want to go?"

"Go?" Ron asked, looking a little startled.

She rubbed her brow, feeling heat on her neck. "To eat."

"Oh." His shoulders slumped. "Ah, Kelly's has great desserts."

"Isn't it a little early?" she asked.

Ron gaped at her incredulously. "You must live in a cold, dark world if you believe that there's such a thing as 'too early' when it comes to dessert. Come on."

Ron led the way to the teashop. While Hermione ordered a sandwich and pumpkin juice, he got as much as his budget would allow. He even requested the largest strawberry cone offered on the menu.

As Ron spoke to the waiter, he flipped his wand. Hermione watched the wood glide between his long fingers with ease; she still found herself in awe when Ron did this. It was an impressive skill but he made it look effortless. In fact, Ron hardly paid attention as he did it.

Hermione completely focused on Ron and what he was doing. She'd always found Ron playing with his wand incredibly sexy, but there was something more to the action now that made her body heat up.

"It amazes me how much you eat," she said when their waiter walked away.

"I never really feel full â€" just less hungry," Ron said. "I could eat for days on end."

"Trust me, I know," Hermione said. "You have a very talented mouth."

She gasped, clamping a hand over her mouth whereas Ron's eyes grew massive. He went scarlet.

"Oh, I am so sorry!" Hermione groaned in mortification. "I - I didn't mean it like that. I was only trying to say that you're able to consume a lot at one time. I-I wasn'tâ€"oh, I'm sorry." Hermione thought she had learned her lesson previously when she brought up being Ron's nurse. The last thing Hermione needed was to make more suggestive statements â€" even if they were true.

"I-it's, ah, okay," Ron said, still blushing. "Thank you, I reckon."

"You're welcome," she mumbled, feeling like an idiot.

They went quiet and awkwardly avoided each other's eyes until their food arrived. It was then that they silently agreed to pretend the embarrassing moment never happened. They talked about other things that in no possible way could lead to sexual innuendos.

"So your mum hasn't come any closer to deciding on a date for the second reception?" Hermione asked awhile later in the conversation.

"No, and Bill keeps trying to talk her out of it," Ron said. "I reckon she wants it more than he does."

"I hope it happens."

"Me too," he said. "My family is hardly all together anymore, and it'll be nice to have you around this time."

"Ronâ€¦"

"I know you would've come if you could," he said. "I'm just saying." He flipped his wand in one hand then moved it to the other.

"Do you notice yourself doing that?" Hermione asked.

"Sorry?"

"The thing with your wand," she said. "I've always wondered if you realize that you're doing it."

"Oh, not really," Ron said. "It's something I started ages ago but I don't know why. I reckon you must think I have talented hands too." He dropped his wand. "Bollocks, that didn't come out-

"-it's all right," she quickly said. "I knew what you meant andâ€¦yes, I do." She shifted the focus of her eyes to the tablecloth. She felt so hot, embarrassed, and slightly giddy. Hermione had no idea why everything between them was so sensitive today.

Their waiter came back to their table. "Here is your ice cream," he said. He handed Ron his strawberry cone.

"Wicked. Thank you." Ron ogled it, licking his lips as if he'd been craving this treat for years. Hermione studied the colossal tower of strawberry.

"How is the ice cream standing up like that?" she asked.

"It's called magic, 'Mione," Ron said. "That's what this shop is famous for. Kelly makes almost all of her desserts tall like this." He grinned widely then slowly licked the sides of it. His tongue disappeared under the pink cream, and the strawberry slicked his lips. He closed his eyes.

"Merlin, this is so bloody good," he moaned. His mouth was covered in strawberry. He was so messy, but the way he ate the ice cream was rather sensual. Ron dragged his tongue up the sides again. He then sucked the strawberry from his lips.

Hermione stared unabashed. There was nothing else she could do. Ron was like an art piece. She watched his tongue and lips, remembering how expertly his mouth had treated her. She thought about him biting, kissing, licking, and sucking her skin and lips.

Hermione shifted her legs against each other. Ron's passionate eating had made her tender and wet. All she could think about was what they had done in his bed.

Ron stopped ravishing his cone. Hermione finally looked away.

"Do you want some?"

"No, I'm fine."

"But you hardly ate anything here and this is good," Ron said. "I promise you won't be disappointed."

Hermione wanted to say no but she couldn't. She was under some sort of spell that rid her of any logic or self-control. "O-okay," she said.

She reached for her spoon but Ron held the cone right to her mouth.

Hermione didn't know what to do. Ron had grown up with six siblings so he had probably done this numerous times. It was only earlier that day that he had shared an ice lolly with Ginny; however, Ron obviously didn't understand that her licking on his used cone was probably improper. The word 'improper' burned Hermione; she wanted to rebel against it.

Ron pulled the cone away. "Sorry. Let me get you a spoon."

"No - I don't need one." Hermione pulled his wrist back and brought the ice cream to her lips. It did look tasty and it wasn't as if she had never tasted Ron's saliva before.

Hermione slipped her tongue out, slowly licking the cone. She kept her eyes on him. Ron bit his lip. His blue eyes stayed glued to her tongue as she swiveled it around the cream. Her heart was in her throat but she loved Ron watching her.

She closed her eyes, moaning as Ron had. "Mmm, this is good."

Hermione had no idea what she was doing or what was happening. It was just ice cream, yet somehow it was an outlet for the tension that had been building between them all day. She opened her eyes again, licking the cone. She sucked a bit off the top then pulled away. "Thank you," she said softly.

Ron swallowed hard. "You're welcome." He slurped some off the top as well. Hermione had to tense her body to keep from jerking.

She always strived to learn new things, and today she'd discovered the power of ice cream.

By the time they left the shop, all Hermione wanted to do was go back to the Burrow so she could shower. She was extremely aroused and completely distracted. Unfortunately, they had to keep moving and look for Harry's gift.

Hermione followed Ron into a Quidditch shop. Ron blushed as he smiled at her. "So, um, let's look around."

"All right," she said a bit shyly. She knew that strawberry ice cream would never be the same for them.

As they searched around, Hermione realized that there were very few items she was familiar with. She merely nodded while Ron explained the functions of certain objects and pointed to things that excited him. Hermione appreciated the sport and admired the people who were brave enough to play it, but for whatever reason, she would never understand Quidditch. She had tried once to educate herself but her brain simply couldn't comprehend the concepts or terms.

"Here we are," Ron said, walking over to a shelf that held an assortment of broom polishes. Hermione was surprised that there were so many different kinds. A broom was a broom to her, so she thought anything would do.

"Can I help you two find something in particular?"

Hermione looked up. A woman, who had to be around their age, if not a few years older, was standing next to Ron. She was dressed in jeans and a tight sleeveless shirt that accentuated her curves and somewhat toned arms. Hermione wanted to ask if she worked there but she had on a nametag and a picture of a Quidditch team on her shirt.

Ron smiled at her. "We want to buy our mate some broom polish for his birthday."

"Fantastic," she said. "Well, my name is Amy," she said, pointing to the nametag on her chest, "and I'll be happy to assist you with your purchase."

Hermione didn't want to be a bitch, but for some reason she questioned if Amy could even spell Quidditch.

"We want something really nice," Hermione said. She sounded so stupid but she had to at least pretend as if she knew what she was talking about.

"You've come to the right shop," Amy said, running her fingers through her straight brown hair. "What type of broom does your mate have?"

"A Firebolt," Hermione said.

"And the series?"

"I'm sorry, series?"

"There are different models of Firebolts," Ron said to Hermione. He turned back to Amy. "He has the Windcurve Nine."

"Brilliant. That's an excellent broom for competitive players," Amy said.

"Yeah, his position is Seeker," Ron said. "The Windcurve is great for diving."

Amy smiled widely. "Agreed." She took Ron's wrist, guiding him down the aisle of polishes. "I suggest any in this row. These are odorless, weatherproof, and aren't heavy on oils, so it shouldn't affect his grip."

"Streak free?" Ron asked. "I'd hate to get him something that ruins the integrity of the wood."

"Definitely," Amy said. "These are also the more expensive and professional polishes, so streaks won't be an issue."

Ron picked up different polishes. Hermione watched him study each can carefully then she looked at Amy. She was watching Ron too. "So," Amy said, "do you play Quidditch too?"

"Yeah," Ron said.

"What's your favorite position?" she asked with an even wider smile. Hermione sighed, rolling her eyes. Amy was being disgustingly obvious, but Ron was oblivious.

"Keeper," he said, still browsing the polishes.

"That's one of my favorite positions," Amy said. "It takes a lot of vigilance."

"It isn't too bad."

"Did you find a good one?" Hermione asked, walking closer to him.

Ron handed her a jar. "I reckon this one."

Hermione read over the description but had no idea what any of the analogies meant. "Oh, yes, this one sounds great."



"It is an excellent choice," Amy said. "May I interest you in buying a team towel to go along with the polish?"

"He doesn't really have a favorite team," Ron said.

Amy took his wrist again, guiding them further down the aisle to a shelf overstuffed with small, colorful towels. "Well, we just got these in and we're having a special. If you buy one then you get the second discounted."

"We told you that our friend doesn't have a favorite team, but thank you," Hermione said. "Ron, maybe we should-"

"Ace!" Ron said, holding up a Chudley Canons team towel.

"Fan?" Amy asked, chuckling.

"Have been all my life," he said, gazing at the towel. "They're eighth in the league."

"And they might actually have a chance this year since Bryson is starting again," Amy said.

Ron gaped at her. "Fan?"

She shrugged. "I like to keep up with all the promising teams."

Hermione tapped her foot impatiently. She wasn't impressed but Ron seemed to be.

"Their first game of the season is against the Tornados," Ron said to Amy.

Amy pretended to gag. "I hate those buggers."

"Me too!" Ron threw the Canons towel at one of the Tornado cloths. "It's good to know that I'm not alone. People only started calling themselves fans a few years ago when the team started winning matches again. I reckon we're all just supposed to forget about their five year dry spell."

"Or the fact that Jakcobs only made that trade with Miles so he could finally get his pay raise," Amy said. "It's an outrage. I call Tornado fans torknobo fans."

Ron burst into laughter. "Bloody brilliant! I'll have to start using that."

"Well," Hermione said loudly, clapping her hands together. "I really think we should make our purchase. I have a lot of things to do today."

"Right," Ron said, wiping away his tears of laughter. "We'll just take the polish. Thank you though."

"Okay, fair enough," Amy said.

Amy talked about the Tornados and Canons for a few more moments with Ron as they bought their polish. Before they left, she gave him a wink and told them both that she hoped they came back soon. Of course, she'd been looking straight at Ron as she said this.

Once they stepped out of the shop, Hermione inhaled and exhaled deeply. It had been rather difficult to breathe inside the store.

"That was successful, eh?" Ron asked.

Hermione could only nod and give him a strained smile. "Yes."

They walked down the street and Ron talked about the polish more, along with how he wanted to get a better broom. Hermione tried to listen but she couldn't concentrate. She felt dim and jealous and totally immature because she had no reason to feel either emotion.

Hermione was proud of her intelligence; she didn't believe it was necessary for her to belittle herself or conform to get a bloke's attention, but she still felt a bit put out. She had thought that Amy would turn out to be a twit; however, she seemed to know everything about Quidditch and she had been able to talk to Ron in a way that Hermione would never be able to. She would never know enough about Quidditch, brooms, or the teams to make clever jokes and form insightful opinions.

Hermione hated shallowness. She didn't want to be someone who cared about appearing attractive to guys, but since she was a seventeen-year-old female, she couldn't help but envy Amy for being beautiful as well as athletic.

The combination probably made a girl really cool in Ron's eyes.

"'Mione?" Ron asked, touching her arm.

"Yes?" she said, looking at him.

"Did you hear anything I just said?"

"Of course."

"Then what did I say?"

"You were talking about..." She sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm a bit distracted."

"And you have been ever since we left the shop," Ron said.

"What's wrong? Are you unhappy about the polish?"

"The polish is great," she said. "I'm fine."

Ron gave her a look. "Come on." Hermione followed him to the corner of the street. They took a left and entered an alley. Ron leaned against the side of one of the buildings. "All right, you can tell me what's really going on now."

"Nothing is going on." Hermione didn't want to lie to Ron but she couldn't tell him the truth either. She would sound mean and childish, and it would probably raise a lot more questions than she felt comfortable answering. Hermione wished that they were at the teashop again, sharing strawberry ice cream.

"Hermione," Ron said, "you know you can talk to me. Is it about your parents?"

"No," Hermione quickly said. "I mean, I'm always thinking about them, but I'm okay."

Ron nodded. "Good. Then what is it?"

Ron's eyes were staring right into her. She thought back to the night that George had been hurt and how Ron had opened up and exposed himself to her. Hermione had to do the same thing. If they wanted to keep improving their friendship, then they would have to be open.

"It's silly but that girl at the Quidditch shop, Amy, she got under my skin."

"Really?" Ron asked. "I thought she was funny and kinda cool."

Hearing him say the word 'cool' stung. "Of course you'd think that," she said before she could stop herself.

"What do you mean?"

Hermione had already said too much so she decided to keep going. "Well, she was flirting with you."

"Wha-?" Ron said. "No she wasn't."

"Oh, come on," Hermione said. "You had to notice the way she was looking at you, how she made those off comments about Quidditch positions, and how she kept taking your hand."

"She was just being helpful and polite," he said. "She's a store clerk so she was going to do everything she could to make a sale. It's a business tactic."

"You don't have to tell me about business tactics, Ron," she said. "I think I can tell when a girl is being helpful and when she's being flirtatious."

Ron shrugged. "Whatever. So, that's why you don't like her because she was apparently flirting with me?"

"That's not what I'm saying."

"Then what are you saying?"

"Nothing, Ron, and this is why I didn't want to talk about it," she said. "I don't want to argue."

"Then let's not," Ron said. "Just tell me what your problem is."

"I don't have a problem!" Hermione shot. "I just found her annoying because she wouldn't stop talking."

"About Quidditch and we were in a Quidditch shop," he said. "What else was there to talk about?"

"Just forget it," she said, resting her back against the building and turning away from him. She couldn't expose herself any further. "I didn't mean to offend you or Amy."

"I don't care what you say about her," he said. "I just find your reasoning for why you don't like her rubbish."

"Rubbish?"

"Yes," Ron said with a nod. He looked angry and annoyed and all the things Hermione was afraid he'd be if they talked about this. "I reckon if I had been talking to a bloke then you wouldn't have cared, but because it was a girl, it bothers you. Why?"

"It doesn't bother me."

Ron tugged on her arm so she'd face him. He was taking control again and demanding that she listened to him. "I don't believe you," he said intensely. "Why does the idea of a girl chatting me up get under your skin?" He let her go. "Do you think girls shouldn't? Am I not worth fancying to you?"

Hermione felt a pang in her chest. His theory was the exact opposite of what she had expected. "Ron, why would you ever ask me that? You know I don't think that way."

His anger vanished and there was something softer in his expression that she couldn't read. "I have absolutely no idea what you think, Hermione. It's just like when I dated Lavender. I know she wasn't well, we just weren't right together but she still fancied me."

"What are you trying to say, Ron?" Hermione asked, feeling a bit of tightness in her throat.

"I'm saying that Lavender got under your skin too. You even hated her."

"I never hated her," she said, "and I don't even know Amy so there's no possible way that I could hate her. I just"

"What?"

"I don't know what to say. She was scared but Ron needed to know the truth. "I don't want you to think that you're not good enough to be desired. That's definitely not true. I think that you deserve more."

"Like what?" Ron asked.

Hermione moved a little closer to him so he could see how desperately she meant her words.

"I know obvious beauty and athletics are good things but so is loyalty and trust," she said. "You should feel comfortable enough to be open and yourself around the other person. Whatever girl you're with should make you completely happy because you deserve to be happy. I guess I'm just too overprotective of you."

Hermione thought about holding back the last bit but she decided not to. The words were too important. She touched his hand. "Ron, in no way do I think you're not worth flirting with nor do I think there's something wrong with fancying you. There is absolutely nothing wrong with you, and I'm sorry for making it sound like there was."

Ron glanced down at their hands. He pulled his away, nodding. "I think I can understand what you're saying. You're just looking out for me â€" as my friend."

"Exactly," she said with difficulty, swallowing a fiery ball of emotion. "I didn't mean for any of this to happen. I just made a mistake; I hate doing that." She rubbed her eyes.

Ron ran his palm up and down her arm, giving her chills. "You don't have to be perfect every second of the day, especially not around me," he said. "It's like I told you before: you don't have to do or be anything with me, Hermione."

"That's right," she said, thinking back to their night. "I can just be me."

"Yeah, and I reckon you can be wrong sometimes too â€" like now," he said. "I don't need a girl to be a Quidditch expert for me to think she's interesting. I also don't find girls who look like Amy or Lavender 'obviously' beautiful."

"I'm sure a lot of men would disagree with you," Hermione said.

"Let them. I like to deviate from the norm, Hermione." He smirked.

Hermione smiled a bit herself. "Yes, you do."

Hermione and Ron returned to the Burrow and quickly ran into Ginny's room. They hid the broom polish in Hermione's trunk.

"I'll see you at dinner," Ron said, heading for the door. "I'm gonna take a nap."

"Okay. Thank you for going with me," she said, sitting on her cot.

"Of course," he said. "It was good idea, and I had fun."

She smiled. "Me too." Ron just stood at the door, holding on to the handle. "Ron? Is there something else?"

"Huh?" he asked. "No, I'm sorry. I reckon I'm more knackered than I thought." He cleared his throat. "I'll see you, Hermione." He swiftly left the room.

"Bye," Hermione said quietly to no one.

She lay back on the bed. She felt drained from such an eventful day but it seemed as if so much had been lifted from her shoulders. Hermione had made things complicated for her and Ron but they had gotten through it. Every day she and Ron were proving that they could just be friends. Even if they had intense moments like in the field or with the ice cream, they could accept the heat and keep things casual. It hurt Hermione that they could but she knew it was for the best. Their friendship was all she needed; she had to keep reminding herself of that.

Later on that night in the loo, Hermione finally allowed herself to relax. She gave herself a moment every night to forget about all of her responsibilities. Hermione kept her mind blank as she washed her face and brushed her teeth. She needed these few minutes to keep herself sane.

She returned to Ginny's room, expecting Harry to open the door before she could reach the handle. Right on schedule, the door opened and he came out. Only, he wasn't wearing his usual broad grin. He was frowning and his posture was rigid.

"Harry?" Hermione asked.

"Good night," Harry said dully before walking past her.

"Good night," she said, watching him ascend the stairs. Hermione wanted to go after him but she had a feeling that she wouldn't get much out of Harry. Hermione was better off asking Ginny.

She walked into the room. Ginny was on the bed, stiffly brushing her hair with almost the exact same expression and posture that Harry'd had.

"Are you okay?" Hermione asked, closing the door. She sat on her cot and faced her.

Ginny shrugged. "Fine."

Hermione knew her tone well enough to understand that Ginny wasn't going to talk until she was ready. In the meantime, Hermione changed into her pajamas then began skimming through one of her literature books.

Ginny yanked her brush through her long locks. "Dammit! I fucking hate my hair."

"Why?" Hermione asked. "It's gorgeous."

"It's too much at times."

"You don't know thickness until you've had to wash this heap on my head," Hermione said with a small smile. Ginny didn't respond.

She just kept brushing her hair. Hermione realized that she couldn't use Ron's tactic of using humor to get people to open up. She had to do it her way.

"I haven't had a chance to personally tell you that I think Harry's birthday surprise is a really good idea," Hermione said.

"Mum and I just want to give him something special," Ginny said. "Harry needs some light in his life. He's stressed andâ€¦so bloody introverted right now, particularly with me."

Hermione finally had her opening. "Is there something going on between you two?"

"No, we're fine," Ginny said.

"Ginny, we can talk."

Ginny looked at her apprehensively but sighed. "Okay. Well, Harry and I haven't really been getting on lately. We hardly spoke to each other for most of the morning and afternoon today."

"Why?" she asked.

"I don't know," Ginny said, shaking her head. "Before you came in here, we had a row but I honestly couldn't tell you what about. It's so strange, Hermione. Harry used to be my boyfriend and nowâ€¦things are different." There was a vulnerability in Ginny's tone that was rare and somewhat tragic.

"I thought you were okay with that," Hermione said.

"I thought I was â€œ we were," Ginny said. "I was so sure that we were still okay but I don't know anymore. I hate that I don't know."

Her heart reached out to Ginny. She understood that better than anyone. "I don't like not knowing things either," she said. "Especially when it comes to things like this."

"It's just so much, Hermione," Ginny said. She let out a shaky breath. "I love Harry, but I can't be one of those girls who cries and waits. I don't know if I should feel worse for not always wanting to wait or because I know I'm going to regardless."

Ginny clutched her brush tightly in her hand. "I won't go through another relationship like the one I had with Dean. I won't risk another friendship again because of my feelings for Harry. I just wonder if he knows that."

"He does, Ginny," Hermione said. "There's nothing Harry wants more than to be happy with you without any interruption. He's just got a lot on his mind and Moody's death put a lot more pressure on his shoulders."

"I understand that," Ginny said. "My brother's ear got cursed off so it's not as if I don't understand the intensity of everything."

I only wish that Harry would talk to me and know that he can trust me."

"He does," Hermione said, "but you know Harry."

"Yes, I do. He's stubborn, maddening, and completely worth it," Ginny said, smiling. "I'm hoping that Harry and I will find some time to really talk on his birthday and figure out what's going on. It should be a good day."

"While we're on the subject of the party," Hermione said. "I will say that I wish I had known sooner about the swimming portion. I don't have anything to wear."

"I have a bikini you can borrow," Ginny said. "Mum and I went shopping and I got a new one — well, newer for me." She got up then searched through her wardrobe. She tossed a plain black string bikini onto Hermione's cot.

Hermione picked up the clothing. The top tied around the neck and back while the briefs tied at the hips. She frantically shook her head, feeling slightly horrified. "I can't wear this. I'm surprised you even wore this."

"What else would I swim in?"

"But — with all the males around?" Hermione asked.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Yes, because I give a shit what my brothers think."

"Well, I can't wear this," Hermione said, offering the suit back to her. "Do you have anything else?"

"No," Ginny said, pushing her hand away, "and there's nothing wrong with this."

"It's so revealing," Hermione groaned.

"It'll cover your kit," Ginny said. "It's not slutty or anything."

"I know," Hermione said, blushing. She knew that she was being horribly immature but she couldn't help it. "I just — my body will be exposed."

Ginny evidently didn't understand because she merely looked at her vacantly. "Hermione, you and I have changed in front of each other for years and everything you have is something Luna sees every morning in the shower."

"But the guys haven't seen — my parts —" Hermione had to trail off. That statement wasn't exactly true. Ron had seen her in just her knickers and even less than that. He knew about the mole on her bum, had smelled her arousal, and had even felt her pubic hair. Ron had stretched her out, touched every inch of her insides, and emptied himself into her. Ron was familiar with her



body, so Hermione didn't know why she was so terrified at the idea of him seeing her in a bikini.

"The guys or just Ron?" Ginny asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

Hermione rubbed her lips together. "I don't know what you mean by that."

"Bollocks!" she said. "I can tell how you feel about him."

"I don't want to get into this right now!" Hermione said irritably. "Suffice it to say that even if I did feel something, it doesn't matter because we're just friends and we're fine with that. We have a healthy and nurturing relationship right now. That's what matters."

"Right," Ginny said skeptically. "Then you shouldn't care what he thinks, eh?"

Hermione had nothing to retort with. "I suppose that's correct."

Ginny got up and sat next to her. She patted Hermione's thigh and gave her a warm smile. "Hermione, I don't want you to feel uncomfortable. So if you really don't want to wear this then that's fine, but you shouldn't worry about what Ron is going to think. He's rude and thick as all bloody hell a lot of the times, but he's a good bloke. In fact, Ron can be really traditional sometimes."

"Traditional?" Hermione asked.

"He's not the type of bloke who's going to ogle you and make judgments," Ginny said. "Besides, Ron already thinks you're beautiful."

Hermione's heart skipped a beat. Hearing these things from Ginny affected her greatly. "How do you know that?"

"Because he's my brother," Ginny said. "I've seen the way Ron looks at girls he finds attractive. He's completely different with you, and I doubt wearing a bikini is going to change that. If anything, you'll just make him toss one in his swimmers."

"Ginnyâ€¦" Hermione said, blushing again.

"I'm being serious," she said with a laugh. "At least sleep on the idea. If tomorrow you still feel uncomfortable wearing it, then we'll rush to a shop and find you something else, yeah?"

"Okay, thank you," Hermione said. She held out the top. "I can't even fit this, Ginny. Your chest is bigger than mine."

"Not a good excuse," Ginny said. "We can shrink the top if need be with this little thing called magic."

"Incredible - you sounded exactly like Ron," Hermione said.

Ginny scrunched up her face. "I had a second helping of pie, Hermione. Don't make me waste it on the floor."

"My mistake." Hermione had almost forgotten that Ginny had no problem defending Ron only to go right back to insulting him.

She waited until Ginny was in a light stupor before slipping into her shoes and leaving the room. She first went to the loo and tried on the bikini. While the briefs fit her decently, the top was a little loose.

Hermione examined herself in the mirror. She didn't look hideous, but she knew that she could've used a bit more plush in some places to make the bikini more impressive. The black did look good against her skin though and it fit comfortably. She wasn't as exposed as she thought she would be. Her breasts were safely tucked into the top and her bum and front were completely covered.

She decided that wearing the bikini was acceptable. It would help that Ginny and Luna would also be in swimwear, and she really wasn't too concerned about Harry. It really was just Ron who Hermione was nervous about, but she told herself not to be. He wouldn't judge her, just like he hadn't that night. He had been kind and gentle then, so there was no reason to believe he wouldn't be now.

Ron was traditional and apparently found her beautiful. Hermione had a hard time believing this but it did give her a bit of comfort. What calmed her down even more was the thought of swimming with him. Ron was an excellent swimmer and she was excited about seeing him wet and glistening.

Hermione leaned against the sink, thinking about how sweat had glistened and slicked his forehead earlier that day when they were in Diagon Alley.

The word 'slicked' turned Hermione's mind to other subjects.

She thought about Ron eating the ice cream and how alive watching him had made her feel. He had ravished the treat, moaning and closing his eyes as he did so. Hermione squeezed her stomach. She thought about licking the cream, making him blush. She then remembered how Ron had sucked on the cone after her. He had looked so sexy with the rich strawberry against his pale, freckly skin.

Hermione moaned, closing her eyes. She repeated the images in her mind until she felt hot and tender. A powerful, raging lust came out of her and Hermione couldn't keep the beast at bay. She thought about the way Ron had eaten the cone and how the cream had gotten all over his mouth. She fantasized about his tongue and lips deep in a part of her body that was also wet and creamy.

She bit her lip hard as she turned on the faucet water to drown out the sounds of her pants and muffled whimpers. Ron was too much for her at times.

Not too long after, Hermione left the Burrow and walked to the shed, feeling slightly more relaxed but also confused. She had never been so wild before and she wondered if it would always be like this now.

When she opened the door, she was met with all of her reasons for feeling lust and confusion: Ron was leaning against the table, reading a letter.

"Who is that from?" Hermione asked.

Ron jumped, quickly jamming the letter into his back pocket. "Sodding goblin toss, Hermione! Don't sneak up on me like that."

"I'm sorry."

"And the letter is from no one. It's just a thing."

Hermione nodded, closing the door. She grinned at the cauldron of Polyjuice and all the supplies that Ron had already laid out for them. "Thank you for setting up."

"I wasn't sure if you were still coming," he said.

Hermione did her best not to blush. He had no idea that she had just 'cum' in the loo, moaning his name while thinking about him giving her oral sex.

"Sorry, I was making some notes," she said. "Let's get started."

The two of them began cutting, mixing, and adding different ingredients to the potion. They never talked much as they worked, but Hermione didn't mind it. She enjoyed their comfortable silence; it was the perfect time for her to reflect. She was being proactive, using her intellect and skill to brew an intricate potion. This was her element; she felt able to breathe, not closed in like she had in the Quidditch shop.

"Hermione?"

"Yes, Ron?"

"Did I cut these right?"

She looked at his diced Ringshaft stems. "Yes, you're really good at that now."

"I had a helpful teacher," he said, nudging her arm with his.

She beamed. "I thought you didn't like listening to teachers?"

"You're my exception." Ron ran his fingers through his hair. Hermione noticed for the first time that the strands were somewhat damp.

"How come you never dry your hair?" she asked. Her hands were itching to tug on his silky locks.

"I never feel like it," he said simply.

She shook her head, stirring Beetle Root. "Just like you never feel like wearing your cream?"

"Sorry that I'm not like my sister who always wears her cream," Ron said, adding the Ringshaft to the Polyjuice.

"I don't want you to be like her," Hermione said honestly, "but while we're on the subject of Ginny, how was Harry before you came out here?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"How did he seem after returning from Ginny's room?"

"Oh, um, he was a little quiet," he said. "Why?"

"Because Ginny was too," she said. "I think they might be having some problems."

"Shit," Ron said. He leaned against the table. "I was afraid of this. There's so much going on right now with everyone."

"What do you think they should do?" For whatever reason, Hermione couldn't look at Ron as she waited for an answer.

"I don't know," he breathed. "I just want them to get back to someplace decent."

"Do you finally support them together?" she asked.

"I support Ginny and I support Harry," Ron said. "If they happen to be together then I reckon I can tolerate it - as long as they're happy and as long as Harry doesn't hurt my little sister."

"He's not trying to, Ron," Hermione said, "and I'm sure he's probably hurting too."

"I know he is," Ron said. He paced in front of her. "I hate this."

"So do I," she said gently.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking these past few days, Hermione." He stopped right in front of her. "I'm starting to realize how important a stable friendship truly is. It's important to know where you stand and who you can depend on."

Hermione didn't know what he was trying to say, but Ron seemed so determined and sure. She wanted to believe his words. "Yes, friendship is manageable and consistent. It's better than...other things, I guess." Hermione suddenly felt something dark and cold sweep across her, but she had to push through it and ignore the whispers in her ears. She searched her mind for a way to change the subject.

"So," she quickly said, turning back to the potion, "are you going to tell me what your plan is in regards to your whereabouts when you go missing from Hogwarts?"

Ron stood by her side. "I told you: I'll let you know when I have something definitive."

"Why do you keep using that word?" Hermione asked. "I've never heard you say it in the six years that I've known you."

"Because you said it today in that voice you have," Ron said. "This is my way of gently taking the Mickey out of you."

"You're so rude," she said, poking his side.

"And honest," he said, chuckling. "I thought you would like that - or are you now being dishonest regarding your feelings on honesty?"

"Urgh! Do you always have to challenge what I say?"

"I dunno. Do you always have to question me?"

"I don't know. I guess we just like to keep each other sharp."

"I don't see anything wrong with that."

"Neither do I. See? We can agree."

"My, my - aren't you clever?" Ron said.

"I had a helpful teacher," she said.

They smiled at each other and began to laugh shyly.

Hermione didn't know what to say as they kept looking at each other. She was simultaneously relieved and let down when the potion bubbled, catching both of their attentions.

"We should tend to that," she said.

"Good idea," he answered.

They turned back to the table and once again worked in silence.

They didn't return to the Burrow until late into the night. Ron walked Hermione to Ginny's room.

"Thank you for helping," she said. "We're getting so much accomplished."

"You don't have to thank me, we're in this together," he said, yawning, "but you're welcome. Anything I can do to help you and take some stress off of Harry, I'll do."

Hermione didn't know why, but she suddenly felt nervous about saying goodnight to Ron. She was completely exhausted so she was

sure that had something to do with it. "Great," she said dimly. "So, d-did you have a good day?"

"Yeah," Ron said, rubbing his neck. "You?"

"Fine," Hermione said. They went quiet. She watched his chest slowly and evenly rise and fall beneath his black Canons shirt. It looked incredible on him.

Hermione had to focus, so she rubbed her brow. "Well, um, I'll see you in the morning?"

Ron nodded. "Yeah, I-I'll be around."

Hermione started nodding as well. She felt stuck, as if something was keeping her from opening the door. She gave his body a once-over. All day she had wanted to really touch him but never found the courage to make it happen. Now, if she didn't, she would spend the rest of her life nodding in front of Ginny's room.

Hermione walked right in front of Ron and looked up at him. Ron stared down at her. She heard his breathing hitch.

"H-Hermione?"

"It's okay," she whispered.

She rose on her feet, hooking her arms under his and clutching his shoulders. Ron wrapped his arms around her waist, holding her securely.

Hermione closed her eyes, loving the warmth of his body and the fresh scent of his skin. He was firm and towered over her in a way that she adored. Every part of her body connected to Ron in some way, and she finally felt at home and safe. The air around them thickened even more, but she didn't mind it now. She was in Ron's arms and the intensity wasn't too much. Everything felt so good.

Hermione didn't know what got into her, but she moved a hand up, touching the back of his neck. His hair lay flat against his skin and was still a little wet. Hermione played with those few strands, causing Ron to sigh and shiver. She soon felt his fingertips skip around her side before slowly moving to her stomach. He dragged his fingers across her stomach. Hermione flinched and gasped " just like last time.

"Too much?" he asked quietly in her ear.

"No, it just tickles," she whispered back " just like last time.

"Yeah, that's rightâ€¦I remember."

She kept playing with his hair while he continued touching her stomach. He swayed them somewhat and Hermione gained strength through their dance. She wanted to open up to him more. Her better senses told her to shut up and stay rigid but she

couldn't. Ron's body was fusing to hers, gently demanding to know her secrets.

"Ron?"

"Hmm?"

"This morning you told me that you gave yourself to me."

"I did."

"Well, I want you to know that I've never taken that for granted. It may seem like I have, but you're my best friend. Iâ€¦I cherish everything you gave me."

Ron's other hand clutched her side rather hard. "A-and what you gave meâ€¦"

"Yes?" she asked, gently tugging on his strands.

"I keep close to me every day," he said deeply. "You're my best friend and you gave me something that you'll never be able to give to anyone else. That matters to me."

"I'm glad," she said. "It matters to me too."

Hermione finally stopped her hand and so did Ron. They pulled away from each other. She smiled at him and he smiled back. Ron's face was a light red and he looked so handsome. She was completely in love with him and knew everyday that her feelings for him would grow â€" regardless if they were only friends.

"I'll see you," he said.

"Goodnight," she said.

Hermione watched him turn around and walk back up the stairs. She waited until she couldn't hear his footsteps anymore before walking to the bedroom.

Honesty was so incredibly terrifying, but nothing created a better feeling.

\*\*\*\* I bloody LOVE Ron and Hermione! You can just feel IT! Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

CHAPTER 6

Thank you all for the amazing reviews!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Ron walked into the kitchen. His parents and Ginny were standing around the table.

"Harry is officially being distracted by Hermione," he said.

His family let out a collective breath as they relaxed their bodies.

"That's wonderful," Mrs. Weasley said, clapping her hands together. "I really need to finish this tonight." She went into the small cupboard then came back out with Harry's favorite cake: lemon with white frosting and sprinkles.

"It looks gorgeous, love," Mr. Weasley said, kissing her temple.

"Thank you, dear," she said. "I added extra lemon. I hope Harry likes it."

"He'll love it, Mum," Ginny said. "You know how much he likes cake."

"And you worked really hard on this," Ron added, eyeing the enormous dessert. "I'm sure that'll mean more to him than anything else."

His mum smiled at him. "Thank you, Ron. Hearing that gives me a bit more confidence; especially after Ginny talked me out of drawing something on the top."

"He doesn't need it," Ginny said dully. "The cake is perfect the way it is. Harry's a plain bloke anyway, so I'm sure the candles will be more than enough decoration."

"All right, Ginny," their mum said in what sounded like defeat. She used her spoon to smooth over parts of the frosting while adding more sprinkles in certain places. She was so determined and focused on Harry's cake. Ron could tell how much she loved Harry just by the effort and detail she used.

"Is everything else ready for tomorrow?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"Yes, finally," Ginny said. "I told Luna when to come over, and I made sure to get enough towels for everyone."

"What about the pond?" Mrs. Weasley asked. "It's been ages since anyone has been out there."

"I took care of it this morning," Ron said. "I got rid of some of the weeds and cleaned the water a little."

"You did?" his mum asked.

Ron couldn't tell if she was impressed or doubtful. "Yes, I did," he said with confidence. "That's why I was late to breakfast. I just really want to be sure that nothing is going to crawl into our swimmers and lay eggs or something."

His dad burst into laughter. "Smart man," he said, ruffling his hair. "What spell did you use?"

"Aqua Purgo," Ron said.



"Great choice," his dad said. "That's probably the best one you could've chosen."

Ron rubbed his neck, clearing his throat. "Percy, um, he told me a few years ago to use that spell if I ever wanted to clean the pond."

Everyone's composure stiffened a little.

Ron shouldn't have mentioned his prat brother's name but he wanted to give Percy credit. More importantly, when Ron said Percy's name out loud, he didn't feel as far away from him. Ron knew that he was mad; he didn't want to see or speak to Percy, yet he wanted to keep him close.

"W-well," Mrs. Weasley said with a strained smile, "leave it to Percy to teach Ron a spell like that. He was always gifted in Herbology. He could've had a career in the area if he wanted to."

"I'm sure he would disagree with you, Molly," Mr. Weasley said. "Percy has always wanted to work at the Ministry. He used to tell me all the time as a kid that he wished he could go in to work with me to learn things."

Mr. Weasley suddenly looked pained. He took off his glasses, tightly shutting his eyes. Mrs. Weasley rubbed his arm as she peered up at him rather miserably.

Ron snuck a glance at Ginny; she looked right back at him. They silently agreed that something had to be done to make their parents feel better.

Ron raked over the room for inspiration before settling on the cake. He cleared his throat, then reached out to touch it. Ginny swiftly slapped his hand to stop him.

"Hands off, goon!" she said.

"Ow!" Ron whined, slapping her hand back. "Don't tell me what to do, banshee!"

"Goblin ball!"

"Bat tit!"

"Enough!" Mrs. Weasley said. She shook her head, looking fierce. "Now, I'm only going to tell you this once Ronald Bilius Weasley and Ginevra Molly Weasley: never again will you to speak to each other in that manner - especially at my table. Do it again and I will jinx your mouths shut! Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Mum," Ron and Ginny said together.

"Arthur!" their mother said, pointing her frosted spoon at them. "What is happening to your children?"

"I don't know, love," he breathed. "Ron, Ginny: apologize to each other."

"Yes, Dad," they grumbled.

Ron looked at Ginny, trying not to smirk. He held out his hand. "Ginevra, I'm sorry for insulting you by calling you a banshee and a bat's tit."

She shook his hand while trying and failing to mask her laughter. "And Ronald, I'm sorry for saying that you were a goon and a goblin's ball."

They dropped hands, turning back toward their parents.

"Happy now?" Ginny asked.

"Yes, it will do," Mrs. Weasley said. She sighed. "Arthur..."

"I know, dear," he said, smiling a little. They quietly mumbled for a few moments about how outrageous their kids were at times. Meanwhile, Ron gently prodded the side of Ginny's heel with his toe; she then stepped on his foot. It was their way of congratulating each other on their brilliant scheme.

"All right," Mrs. Weasley said after she had calmed down. "I think the cake is finally ready. I'll keep it hidden in the cupboard until it's time to give it to Harry."

"What time are we starting this in the morning?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"As soon as Harry wakes up," Ginny said. "I figured that we could save gifts until dinner. It'll keep Harry on edge."

"Unfortunately, your mother and I won't be here to watch him slowly go mad," Mr. Weasley said.

Mrs. Weasley placed her hands on her hips. "Unfortunately?"

"You heard that right," he said.

"What's going on?" Ginny said.

"Your father and I are taking Bill and Fleur out to look at decorations for their reception," their mum said. "I hate that we have to do this on Harry's birthday, but it was the only free day they both had and August is almost here."

"Shopping for decorations?" Ron asked. "Dad, why are you going?"

"Well, son, someone has to protect Bill from Fleur and your mother's madness."

"Oh!" Mrs. Weasley reached out to hit his arm, but Mr. Weasley was too quick for her and was able to take her hand.

"Too slow," he said with a chuckle.

She playfully glared at him as she blushed. "Evidently." She returned the cake to its hiding place; Ron's dad watched her with a sly grin.

Ron wasn't quite sure of what he was feeling at the moment. All he knew was that the all-too-familiar exchange he'd just witnessed between his parents was one of the most amazing things he'd ever seen. It gave him hope, but he wasn't sure what for.

"Ah. I can retire awhile from party planning â€" at least birthday party planning," Mrs. Weasley said when she came back into the room.

"You look knackered, Mum," Ron said.

"I am rather exhausted but tomorrow is a big day," she said. "We'll probably leave right after breakfast."

"But we'll certainly be back before the eveningâ€"hopefully," his dad said.

"In the meantime, it'll just be the four of you and Luna here." His mum appeared a bit apprehensive. "Ron, Ginny: can your father and I trust you with the house?"

Ron had to use all of his willpower not to roll his eyes. "Is this a real question?"

"It most certainly is," his mum said pointedly. "I don't want to return and find my house floating in midair."

"That would never happen," Ron said.

"Or seeping with foul smelling blue goo," she added.

"That was Fred and George, Mum," Ginny said, casually waving a hand. "We know how to behave and not to mix explosive potions together. We'll be outside for most of the day anyway."

"Yes," their dad said, "these are things I've told your mother already."

"I just want to make sure you're all safe," Mrs. Weasley said, not looking too assured. "You're still so youngâ€"you never know what could happen."

Their dad gave her a tender expression. "Molly," he said, touching her hand, "they'll be fine. Besides, we won't be gone all day."

"Yes, Mum, we'll be fine," Ron said, hoping that she'd believe him. All she did was nod. Ron had to do more for her.

"Look at it this way, Mum," he quickly said. "If you add up my and Ginny's age with Hermione, Harry, and Luna's, it's at least seventy or something. So together we make one old, powerful wizard."

"It would be an old, powerful witch in this case," Ginny corrected. "There are more girls."

Their parents laughed, which caused Ron to smile widely.

"Spoken like true Weasleys," his dad said.

"And wonderful children." His mum came over to them. She kissed Ron's cheek then kissed Ginny's before putting an arm around her. "Okay, I guess things will be all right."

"Of course they will, Mum," Ginny said.

Ron tried desperately not to be a whiny, overly sensitive twat, but he felt a bit put out because his mum had chosen to keep an arm around Ginny and not him.

"We should get to bed, Molly," his dad said. "We've got a lot of walking to do tomorrow."

"Yes, a good rest sounds nice," she said.

"We'll finish up the cleaning, Mum," Ginny said.

Their mother beamed at her. "Thank you, sweetheart." She kissed Ginny again and gave her a hug. She then squeezed Ron's hand. "Goodnight, dear."

"G'night, Mum," he said softly.

His dad gave Ginny a hug too but also gave Ron a tight squeeze. "See you in the morning, son," he said, kissing the top of Ron's head.

Already Ron felt better. "Night, Dad."

His parents held hands as they walked out of the room.

"Now, Arthur, will you please explain to me again exactly what you meant by 'unfortunately'?" Ron heard his mum say.

"Oh, Molly," his dad groaned as they ascended the stairs.

Ron grinned, chuckling softly. He loved his parent's relationship.

"Are you gonna help me or just be useless like an empty bollock?"

"I'll help," Ron said, turning to Ginny. "Bend over so I can put the dishes away."

She threw a towel at him. "You should've saved that one for Mum and Dad."

"I don't reckon they would've found it funny," he said, wiping off the table. "Especially Mum. She's really losing it."

"It's the stress of the party that's making her like this," Ginny said. "She wants everything to be a success; so do I. I really need Harry's birthday to be perfect." As Ginny began washing the dishes, he noticed how hard she scrubbed; she was practically glaring at the dishes.

Ron wasn't sure of what to do, but he knew that he needed to say something. Ron walked over to her, trying to think of the right thing to say. "Hey, um, I know this isn't any of my business but—are you and Harry okay?"

Ginny didn't look up; she merely kept scrubbing. "Did Harry say something to you?"

"No, but I'm asking something."

"Why?" Ginny asked. "You made it clear last term that you don't want to know anything involving my relationship with him. Why the sudden interest? Are you dying to know if things aren't going so well?"

"Oi," Ron said, shutting off the sink water.

"What is it, Ron?" Ginny asked irritably, dropping the dishes back into the sink and finally looking at him.

Ron tried to read her, but he knew that even with Legilimency it would've been impossible. Ginny was one of the toughest people he knew and trying to understand what was going on with her was always difficult.

"Listen, Ginny," Ron said. "I may not be the biggest fan of you and Harry together, but it doesn't mean that I don't care if you two are having problems. I could never feel happy about that."

"I know," she said quietly. She rested her back against the counter, staring off. "—we're fine."

"Really?"

"Yes," she said, still not looking at him. "Harry and I both have a lot on our minds but we're okay."

Ron didn't believe her but he wouldn't push her to be honest with him. If the truth was worth hiding, then it must've hurt, frustrated, confused, or scared Ginny quite badly. Ron could definitely understand her hesitation.

"That's good then," he said with a nod. "And what about you personally?" Ginny gave him a curious look. "I just mean how are you doing with everything that's been going on lately? We haven't really had a chance to talk about anything."

Ginny nodded. "Yeah, I know—"

As Ginny appeared to be thinking about the words she wanted to say, Ron kept his gaze on her. He really hoped that she would at least be honest regarding this topic. It felt a bit awkward

asking her to reveal her feelings, but the discomfort was worth it. Ginny annoyed and infuriated him, and she was good at driving him mad, but she was Ron's little sister. That fact always came first. Ron would probably never tell Ginny, because the feelings were too deep and raw, but he loved and cared for her very much.

"Well," she breathed after a long pause, "I'm honestly all right. I've been thinking a lot about George and how lucky he wasâ€|that night. He came out okay while an Auror like Moody was killed."

"I think about that a lot too," Ron said, "but our family is all still here."

"And everyone seems to be doing something â€" except for me," Ginny said.

"That's not true."

"But it is," she said. "It's why I've worked so hard on Harry's party. I want to do something productive." She looked up at him. "I know you're offended because you weren't asked to help out with Harry's party, Ron."

Ron rubbed his neck, shrugging. "Maybe a little."

"Well, just know that it wasn't personal; at least not in regards to you," Ginny said. "It's just that you and Hermione are always there for Harry and give him everything he needs. That's great, but I'm capable of giving him things too. The party is my way of giving Harry something. Even though this is something small, it's my contribution to him and to everyone. I want a happy day - away from the rubbish."

Ron took a moment to think about her words; he suddenly felt like a prick. "I never really thought about it that way, but you're right. I'm sorry."

"We're sorted," she said. "I never expect too much out of you anyway."

"Piss off!" He splashed her with dishwater.

Ginny laughed, splashing him back. "I guess since you asked how I'm doing, I should ask you the same."

"I'm okay," he said. "I'm still here, yeah?"

"That you are," Ginny said with a smile. "So is Hermione."

Ron couldn't help but to grin widely. "Yes, she is."

Ginny's smile grew bigger as if she had come to some sort of conclusion. "Well, we should probably finish up here and rescue Harry."

"Good idea," Ron said. "Poor bloke is having to sit through another idea Hermione has for S.P.E.W."

Ron and Ginny laughed whole-heartedly for a few moments before washing and drying the dishes together.

"Bloody hell, Ron," Harry said as they hurried down the staircase. "I still don't understand why I have to take the test today â€" especially so early."

"I've already told you," Ron said. "Dad says that the Magical Transportation Department will be under renovation for the next three weeks. Do you really want to wait that long to take it?"

"I already know how to apparate though," Harry said, yawning loudly.

"Then passing the test should be a piece of piss, yeah? Just view this as a birthday gift from the Ministry, all right?"

It was Ron's job to bring Harry downstairs without giving anything away, but the bloke was making the task rather difficult. He dragged Harry down the stairs with complete disregard to their safety.

It was only when they reached the bottom step that Ron let go of Harry's arm.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY, HARRY!"

Harry's eyes grew wide as his jaw dropped. "W-wowâ€!"

Ron clapped his shoulder. "Happy birthday, mate."

Harry gave him a small smile before walking further into the living room. There was a large green banner floating in the air and dancing streamers hanging about the room. Ron's parents, Ginny, and Hermione were all beaming at Harry.

Harry's face turned slightly red; he ran a hand through his hair, exhaling deeply. "Wow," he said again.

Hermione laughed. "You've already said that." She kissed his cheek then gave him a big hug. "Happy birthday, Harry."

"Thank you," he said, hugging her back.

"Do you like your surprise, dear?" Mrs. Weasley asked. She pulled Harry into a bone-crushing squeeze.

"Yes, this is excellent," Harry said. "I've never seen decorations like these before."

"Molly was very adamant about getting them for you," Mr. Weasley said.

As Harry talked to them, Hermione eased out of their circle to stand next to Ron. "We were a little worried at first," she quietly said.

"You know how stubborn Harry is," Ron said, watching Harry hug his dad.

"Well I'm glad you were able to get him down here," Hermione said, giving Ron a beautiful smile. "Good morning."

"Morning," he said, smiling back at her. His heart began to beat faster as it always did when Hermione's dark brown eyes locked him into a gaze, but Ron wasn't hesitant to peer right back at her. If at all possible, they had gotten even closer in the past few days since admitting that being each other's firsts had meant a lot to them.

Ron heard his mum laugh, causing him to take his focus off of Hermione. It was Harry's birthday; he was supposed to get all of Ron's attentionâ€that was the idea anyway.

"Happy birthday, Harry," Ginny said.

Harry grinned at her but Ron knew him well enough to tell that it wasn't a completely genuine smile. "Thank you."

She slowly reached out her arms; Harry slowly embraced her. As they hugged tightly and tenderly, Ron could practically feel the tension between. He thought back to the night before and Ginny's expression when they'd talked about Harry. It was apparent now that something was definitely off.

Ron had to look away; scrutinizing his little sister and best mate's relationship was giving him a headache. His eyes automatically went to Hermione. She was looking at Harry and Ginny in a way that told Ron that she too was having concerns about them. Ron would have to find time to talk to her about it later.

"Well," Ginny said, finally pulling away from Harry. "I guess it's time for you to have your birthday breakfast."

"Birthday breakfast?" Harry asked, looking both confused and dazed.

"Oh, Harry, sweetheart!" Mrs. Weasley said. "I cooked you a special big breakfast this morning."

"You did?" Harry said, appearing overwhelmed. "You didn't have to do that, Mrs. Weasley."

"But I wanted to," she said.

"And there's never a point in trying to talk her out of something when her mind is made up," Mr. Weasley said.

"Oh, Arthur!" she said, lightly hitting his arm. She took Harry by the hand, leading him into the kitchen.

Ron had been told about what she'd planned to cook, but seeing it all displayed on the table took his breath away. There were at least two dishes represented from each food group and every



gorgeous smell blended with one another, creating an aroma that Ron found intoxicating. His stomach growled as the room in his trousers shrank; breakfast always made him this way.

"What do you think, Harry?" Hermione asked, rubbing his arm.

Harry seemed gobsmacked and slightly embarrassed. Ron found it curious, and rather incredible, that Harry was so uneasy and shy about celebrating his birthday with them while he couldn't care less about how almost everyone in the wizarding world praised him like a god. "W-wow," Harry said for the third time.

"The boy is speechless, Molly," Mr. Weasley said, laughing.

"Harry isn't a boy anymore, Dad. He's seventeen," Ginny said. "Here, sit down." She pulled out a chair for him.

"Thanks," he said.

"Anytime, birthday man," she said with a wink, sitting next to him.

Ron sat on the other side of the table; Hermione took a seat next to him. With this one action, Ron knew already that his breakfast was going to be perfect.

"We should probably explain things before we eat, right, Ginny?" Mrs. Weasley said.

"Sure," Ginny said. "Harry, with everything that's been going on lately, I thought it would be nice to do something really fun for your birthday. Mum and I have been planning this for awhile so I hope you enjoy yourself."

"I was told that you don't fancy surprises, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said, "but you deserve a surprise party, my dear, and if nothing else, seventeen is an important year."

"Well thank you both for throwing this party for me," Harry said. He touched Ginny's shoulder. "And you don't have to worry, Ginny; I'm already enjoying myself. Iâ€¦well, it means a lot to me. I just hope you all didn't go through any trouble on my behalf to make all this food."

"Of course not, dear," Mrs. Weasley said. "You're a member of this family so it'll never be a problem. Besides, Ginny had everything planned out. I simply followed orders."

Harry gave Ginny a look. "Really?"

She merely shrugged. "Always the tone of surprise."

"Oi!" Ron said; he stopped buttering his toast to gawk at Ginny. "That's my thing."

"I didn't know you had a monopoly on certain idioms," Hermione said.

"Uhâ€¦okay I don't know what that meansâ€¦but I own that phrase and the way she said it."

"Ronald!" his mother said. "You're supposed to wait for Harry to pick out his food first."

"Oh, sorry," Ron mumbled, lowering his bread. "I'm just really hungry."

"It's all right," Harry said with a laugh. "You can eat if you want."

"Yes, let's get started before poor Ron slips into a state," Mr. Weasley said.

"Good idea, Arthur," Mrs. Weasley said. "Now Ron, make sure you pass the dishes to Harry first before you start grabbing."

"Yes, Mum," Ron said dully.

As they passed the dishes around, Ron tapped his feet against the floor in anticipation. Eating was such a bloody fucking joy; delicious food was like steamy sex on a cold day.

Actually, he'd had steamy sex before and in all honesty, even though his mother's cooking was extraordinary, it didn't even compare.

Ron snuck a glance at Hermione who was neatly spreading jam on her bread. He told himself not to stare for too long and quickly returned his focus to Harry. His mate was talking and laughing with Ginny and his parents. It was brilliant to see Harry happy and more relaxed â€" especially since those concepts were so scarce in relation to him.

"It's lovely isn't it?" Hermione asked in Ron's ear.

Ron closed his eyes, shuddering slightly as her breath touched his skin. He resisted the urge to press his ear against her lips.

"What is?" he asked. Ron had an idea of what she was referring to, but he wanted to hear Hermione's soft yet confident voice close to his ear again.

"Harry's expression right now," she said. "He looks okay. I love that he's okay."

Ron turned to her. "Me too." His stomach growled again, making him blush. "Sorry."

"No harm done," Hermione said, laughing a little. "Go on and eat."

"Cheers." He snatched a slice of bacon off of her plate then took a bite.

"I beg your pardon, Ron!" she said, snatching the bacon back. "I was referring to you eating your own food."

"It's not my fault that you didn't specify the first time."

"Oh, you're lucky that it's Harry's special day!" Hermione said in a sharp, quiet voice. "I'm not going to get you â€" yet."

"I'm really scared right now, Hermione," Ron said, pretending to yawn.

"You should be." Hermione knocked her leg against his; in return, Ron nudged her shoulder with his own.

Throughout breakfast, Ron tried to give all of his attention to Harry. Ron really wanted to make him happy and do everything he could to enhance the joy of Harry's celebration; however, it was proving difficult to only concentrate on him.

Hermione took a lot of Ron's attention because she ate so properly and kept her food organized on her plate. It was barmy yet fascinating. The situation wasn't helped by the fact that she was being incredibly kind to Harry while giving him the most amazing smile. Ron wanted to kiss her; he wished that he could put an arm around her and tell everyone at the table that his girlfriend was the sweetest bloody person he knew.

Ron took a large gulp of juice. Things between them were great but it didn't mean that they were where he wanted them to be. They were still only friends, they were still taking their shag as an act of kindness, and Ron still had his letter to Hermione buried at the bottom of his drawer. Almost every hour of every day Ron came back to that realization; it felt like taking a Bludger to the head.

By the end of breakfast, Ron told himself to cheer up and focus on the day ahead. Before his parents left for Bill's cottage, his mum told them where she kept emergency potions, how to lock up the house, and where to go in case of a disaster. She also went over a list of rules that she had made up for them. They weren't allowed to mix potions, duel, or attempt to transfigure parts of their bodies. Ron sighed heavily as his mum was practically blaming them for things that Fred and George had done in the past. He would never escape his brothers' shadows.

"Molly, we really need to go," Mr. Weasley said, pulling her towards the front door.

"Are you all sure that you'll be okay?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"Yes, Mum, and if for any reason I happen to turn my arm into a Hippogriff's wing, I'll know what to do," Ron said.

Everyone laughed while Mrs. Weasley huffed. "Fine! I'm ready to go then." She walked out of the house, looking slightly irritated.

"You lot have fun and be safe," Mr. Weasley said. He gestured to Ron. "Come here for a second."

Ron followed him outside. "Yes?"

"We're leaving you in charge," his dad said.

"Me?"

"You're the oldest."

"Actually, Hermione is," Ron said.

"Then you're the oldest person who technically lives here," his mum said. "Just keep an eye on everyone; especially Harry. If you lot do decide to leave, lock up and leave a note. Can you do that?"

"Of course, Mum," Ron said. Rarely was he left in charge of anything; he felt rather excited to be given a chance to prove himself.

"All right, we'll be back soon," his mum said.

"Have a good day, Ron," his dad said with a smile, giving his forearm a squeeze.

"You too," Ron said. "Tell Bill and Fleur I said hi." Mr. Weasley took Mrs. Weasley's hand and the two walked away from the house until they were able to apparate.

"What did they want?" Ginny asked when Ron came back into the house.

"Just to tell me again of where the first aid is," he said. "I reckon they think that I will be the first one to get hurt." Ron was relieved when everyone nodded and seemed to believe him. It would've been too awkward to tell them that he was apparently in charge of all of them.

"Well," Harry said, "I guess since your parents are gone then I can do this." He hit Ron hard on the arm.

"Ow! You anus!" Ron said, punching him back.

"You know I don't like surprises!" Harry said.

"Calm down, Harry," Ginny said. "I told Ron not to say anything."

"Precisely, Harry James Potter," Hermione said sternly. She pinched Harry's hand.

"Ouch! Violence on my birthday?"

"You hurt Ron first," Hermione said, pointing out her chin. "I simply believe in equality."

"Thank you, Hermione," Ron said.

"You're welcome, Ron," she said sweetly.

Ron smirked at her. While his mother's overprotective nature was sometimes overbearing, he didn't mind it so much from Hermione. Although, he was still a little confused and somewhat annoyed at how she had gotten so angry with him for not believing that Amy had apparently flirted with him. Though talking to Amy had been fun (and he wasn't thick enough to say that she hadn't been good looking), Hermione had to know that Ron would've preferred to walk around the shop all day with her, explaining the products that she didn't understand while also telling her that she was 'obviously beautiful'.

"Ron? Hermione?" Ginny asked.

"Yes?" they said together, dropping their stares.

"We have a lot to do today; we should get ready, yes?"

"Certainly," Hermione promptly said.

"Yeahâ€|" Ron added.

"Wait - get ready for what?" Harry asked.

"We're going to the larger pond," Ginny said. "It's where we're having your birthday party."

Harry smiled at her. "I haven't been out there in ages."

"That's why I thought it'd be a good place," Ginny said, touching his hand for a moment. "We should get to it then. We'll meet you boys outside. The towels and whatnot are already out there."

"Don't forget your cream, Ron," Hermione said before following Ginny upstairs. Ron couldn't help but grin like a nutter. He turned to Harry who didn't look nearly as happy as Ron felt.

"Mate? Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine," Harry quickly said. "I'mâ€|just not the strongest swimmer."

Ron knew that wasn't what was bothering him but he wouldn't call Harry a liar on his birthday. "I'm sure Ginny wouldn't mind saving your life," he said. "Pretend to drown so you can find out for sure."

Harry laughed. "Brilliant idea."

"I keep a few handy," Ron said, giving Harry's arm a pat. "Now, let's follow the orders of Captain Ginny, eh?"

As they changed in his room, Ron tried not to look as manic as he felt. It was something he'd taught himself to do years ago when Hermione had first swam with him the summer before their fourth year. Seeing Hermione wet and in swimwear effected Ron's body extremely while simultaneously completely destroying his mental state. Her current suit was a plain dark blue one-piece that looked incredible on her. Ron had waited for ages to see her bare

arms, a bit of her back, and a little of her chest, but it was always worth the wait. Her curves were almost perfectly outlined in the one-piece, and Ron loved the way Hermione's hair became incredibly dark and wavy when it was wet. In short, Hermione was a goddess during 'swim time'. Ron always found himself worshipping her body a little more on these special days.

"Are you ready?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," Ron said, breaking out of his thoughts. "Actuallyâ€¦I need to put on some cream first."

"Cream?"

"If you say one word, then it won't matter that it's your birthday, mate." He applied the cream to his arms, face, and chest. He hated the way it felt on his skin but getting a bollocking from his mum would feel a lot worse. Ron sighed as he examined the small tear on the leg of his dark green swimmers. He usually never cared about the state of them, but it bothered him a little today.

Ron and Harry soon left the house and walked to the bigger pond out in the field. "How do you like your birthday so far?" Ron asked.

"It's brilliant," Harry said. "Breakfast was fantastic. It means a lot to me that your mum and Ginny worked so hard on all that."

"That's what I told them you'd say," Ron said. "Everyone really wants you to be happy today â€" especially Ginny."

Harry stared off ahead. "She's amazing."

"She really is," Ron said with a nod. He was hesitant about asking Harry anything too serious on his birthday, but Ron could only keep his curiosity at bay for so long. "Is there anything you want to tell me?"

"About what?"

Ron rubbed his neck. "About Ginnyâ€¦or anything involving her. I promise that I'll listen if you want to talk."

Harry just looked at him for a few moments as if he was truly considering it. "Can we talk about this another time?" he eventually asked.

"Sure, mate," Ron said. "I just wanted to remind you that I'm here."

"I know, Ron," Harry said. "Thanks."

They finally reached the pond. While it was vastly larger than the one by the Burrow and the location provided a great view of the field surrounding it, there were a lot more hazards. The grass was a lot wilder and thicker, so finding small dips or sharp rocks in the ground was harder to do.

"It's a lot cleaner out here than I remember," Harry said.

"That's because I straightened up," Ron said, taking off his shirt. "I also brought that table out here and all these towels." He stretched out on his towel but instantly groaned and rose; a rock had jabbed him in the back. Ron swore at it before chucking it away.

He once again lay back, shielding his eyes with his arm. The sun was blaring on him but his skin wasn't sizzling under the blaze. Ron hated to admit it, but the cream worked wonders. The sunlight felt warm on his body and the cool grass beneath his towel created a perfect balance. Ron could easily fall asleep out here.

"Hiya," Ginny said.

"Luna?" Harry asked.

Ron sat up. Ginny, Luna, and Hermione were all standing by the small round table. Luna was wearing a long blue and purple dress that went past her feet. It had many sheer layers to it and sparkles that were scattered around the cloth. Luna looked mental, cool, and even pretty in a mad way that only she could pull off.

"Hello, Harry Potter," Luna said a slow, light voice. "Happy birthday."

"Thank you," he said. "I didn't know you were going to be here."

"Another surprise," Ginny said.

"Would you prefer me to leave?" Luna asked. She barely blinked as she waited for Harry's answer.

"Oh - no," Harry said. "I'm glad you're here. I just didn't expect to see you."

"I see," she said, nodding slowly. "Dad says that it's always best to keep your mind clear of expectation."

"How is your dad doing?" Ron asked.

"Only he can answer that, Ron," Luna said, completely free of sarcasm or attitude.

"He helped capture Harry's gift," Hermione said. "It'sâ€¦interesting."

"Capture?" Harry asked.

"Well, 'pick' is the proper term but it felt like I had to capture it." Luna reached into one of the layers of her dress, pulling out a large plum.

"Ah. Food always makes great gifts," Ron said.

"You mustn't eat it," Luna said. "It's a Kreeto Plum. You hide it under your pillow because the smell keeps Fritwits from flying up your nose; they cause people to have nightmares you know." Everyone was quiet as Luna smiled affectionately at the plum while twisting a strand of her long blonde hair around her finger.

"O-okay," Harry said after a long silence. "Um, thank you."

"I'll take that for you, Harry," Ginny said, chuckling. She placed the plum on the table then threw him a bulky bag of candy. "Here's one of your gifts from me."

"Brilliant!" Harry said.

"Give me something, Harry," Ron said. Harry tossed him a Sour Seeker candy ball as Ron took a seat next to him in the grass. The three girls joined them, and Ron was a little disappointed when Hermione didn't sit next to him. She seemed preoccupied and didn't really make eye contact with him. Ron couldn't understand why. He hadn't done or said anything stupid yet; he also hadn't begun to drool over her body because Hermione was still in her shorts and t-shirt. The reason for her distress had to have been brought on by something else.

Ron didn't want to be a sagging, sensitive tit, but he assumed that her sudden discomfort had to do with her having to look at him in nothing but his swimmers. He couldn't help but think about Cormac bloody McLaggen and Vicky Krum; those twats had easily impressed Hermione with their masses of stupid bloody Quidditch muscles.

"Ron?"

"Huh?" he asked, looking up.

Ginny nudged him with the bag of candy. "We're passing it around."

"Oh, thanks." He grabbed a handful then quickly popped a few different pieces into his mouth. He looked at Hermione again but she was hugging her knees against her chest while staring at her feet.

For awhile, the five of them passed around the candy bag and talked. It was a struggle for Ron to get Hermione to look at him for more than a minute as he talked to her. Engaging with Harry and Ginny wasn't that great of an alternative though. They talked to each other and maintained eye contact, but everything looked and sounded so strained. Ron couldn't believe it, but he actually missed the way Ginny and Harry used to smile at each other and make suggestive comments. He'd rather feel nauseous and annoyed than worried and anxious.

Ron was relieved when the idea of swimming was finally brought up; he was ready to get up and distract himself with something. He kicked off his trainers then popped his neck and back.



"The water should be safe. I cleaned it."

"How deep is this lake?" Luna asked.

"It's quite shallow for a few paces but then it drops off and gets really deep," Ron explained.

Luna slipped off her shoes, dipping her foot in the water. "Cold. I like it."

"Are you swimming in that, Luna?" Ginny asked.

"What else would I swim in, Ginny?"

Luna didn't wait a second longer before walking right into the water. Her layers spread out like wings as they floated in the water.

Ron laughed, feeling glad that she had come. "She's got the right idea." He took a few steps back to get a running start.

Hermione held up a hand. "Ron, maybe you shouldn't -"

" - go Canons!" Ron ran and jumped into the pond. He stayed submerged for a few seconds to get used to the stinging cold water before surfacing. "Bloody hell it's gorgeous in here! Come on Harry!"

Harry walked to the edge, then slowly eased himself in. He shivered violently. "Y-you liar! It's b-bloody freezing!"

"It's part of the experience, Harry," Luna said, swimming circles around him.

Ron splashed Harry with water. "Yeah. You'll get used to it." He looked back to where Ginny and Hermione were still standing in the grass; they were whispering to each other but Ron was too far away to hear them.

"Oi!" he said. "Do you plan on joining us?"

"Yes!" Ginny said. "It's Harry's birthday and this is his party." She nudged Hermione then started getting out of her clothes.

Ron took a glance at Harry. His mate's gaze was stuck on Ginny as if he'd been jinxed that way. Ron rolled his eyes, then turned back to the girls.

Ron sucked in air, almost losing the rhythm of his tread. He suddenly could only faintly hear Harry, Ginny, and Luna swimming and talking in the distance. An invisible force punched him in the face, causing him to feel disorientated. Ron could hear and feel his heart rapidly beating, and even though he was in the cold pond water, his limbs were on fire. He wasn't sure if he was going to pass out, explode, or spontaneously cum in his swimmers, but something drastic was about to happen to his body.

He must have drowned or had something crawl into his swimmers and infect him with poison because he had to be dead or at least hallucinating right now. Those were the only options that could explain what he was viewing at the moment.

Hermione had stripped off her clothes, but instead of wearing her one-piece, she had on a black bikini. Ron had seen it before on Ginny but it had always appeared as just a black mass on his sister's body. On Hermione, however, it was a proper swimsuit. Her skin looked incredibly smooth and tan against the black, and all of her curves were right there for Ron to see. He'd never seen Hermione's chest before but for years he'd come up with what it possibly looked like - nothing compared to the real thing. She didn't have an enormous chest but they certainly weren't the size of elf balls. Hermione's tits were likeâ€two large peaches inside of the top. They were full, very round, and looked deliciously soft.

As Ron's eyes roamed over her small yet soft stomach, his hands began to itch. He thought back to how her stomach had felt under his hand. He thought the same thing as he studied her hips and gorgeous thighs. Ron's eyes stopped on her black briefs; his mouth watered. The piece of clothing was more or less a cut of dark chocolate just begging to be eaten off by him. He shivered, thinking about her damp knickers and how her wet pussy had felt against his fingers.

Ron had to get a hold of himself and contain the unruly dragon inside of him. He didn't want to lose his mind completely and wind up scaring Hermione. He had no idea why she was wearing Ginny's suit, but he was thankful and he didn't want Hermione to regret her decision to put it on. Ron submerged himself under the water just as Hermione bent over to set her clothes down. He couldn't watch her bend over; it would've been too much for him.

Ron was relieved that Hermione was in the water by the time he came up for air. She was treading near him; her face was scarlet.

"A-are you okay?" she asked. She looked nervous but Ron didn't know why. He was the one containing a growing monster inside of him.

"Y-yeah, I'm okay. How are you?"

"Fine."

"Come over here you two!" Ginny said to them. "There's a game I want us to try!"

Ron looked at Ginny then back to Hermione. She was so bloody fantastic. Ron could go all day and night staring at her and creating fantasies in his mind; however, he didn't want to make things more tense and awkward than they already were. He swallowed his desires and shook the thoughts out of his mind. Hermione was his best friend; Ron would respect her in her bikini and honor the great friendship they had finally achieved.

"We should probably get over there," he said with a small smile. He gently splashed Hermione in the face.

Hermione gasped. "Oh! You're rude!"

"And you're bossy."

She splashed water back at him, smiling a little as well. "Let's go, rude little boy."

Though Ron's entire body was throbbing and he was harder than all bloody hell, he told himself to relax. It was Harry's birthday so he couldn't mess things up. The five of them swam around while discussing their best and worst birthday gifts received. Most of Hermione and Harry's gifts needed explaining because they were Muggle items. Ron's selections were easy. He hated all the itchy, maroon clothing he'd gotten and loved all the Canons gear and candy.

As the afternoon went on, Ron grew a little more accustomed to Hermione in her 'sex suit' as he called it. He was glad that Hermione seemed to grow a bit more relaxed as well. She swam around gracefully, laughing more and more as the time passed by.

Though Hermione was dripping sex, Ron found himself noticing other things about her body that he'd never seen before. She had a few moles on her back and shoulder blades; her naval was the perfect little hole, and her shoulders and arms were small and void of muscle tone. They didn't look frail though. In fact, every single part of Hermione's body was soft and somewhat delicate, but nothing looked weak or gangly.

Hermione was the most beautiful person Ron had ever seen. He still couldn't believe that he had touched her body and had been inside it. While watching her splash water at Ginny, Ron felt a tug at his heart. He missed Hermione's body so badly. He wanted to have it again but he knew that he couldn't. In spite of that fact, Ron still felt like the luckiest bloke in the world that he had experienced it â€" even just once.

Luna was the first person to finally get out of the water. Her long dress was sticking to her, almost like a mermaid's tail. She didn't even bother drying her hair or moving it out of her face. The locks just stuck and dripped everywhere, making her look even more like a sea creature.

"Hermione," she said, sitting at the edge of the pond. "Do you think you'll be made Head Girl?"

"Sorry?" Hermione asked, dipping her head back in the water to wet it - Ron loved watching her do this.

"Head Girl," Luna said. "Do you think McGonagall will send you the letter?"

Hermione looked taken aback. "Oh, I don't know."

Ron felt somewhat caught off-guard too. While the thought of going back to Hogwarts had been brought up several times, Ron had never once considered ideas such as who would be Head Boy or Quidditch Captain.

"Of course you know, Hermione," Ginny said. "McGonagall was ready to make you Head Girl your second year, I'm sure."

"That's not true," Hermione said with a grin.

"Yes it is," Ron said. "There's no point in being modest. McGonagall will give you the letter for sure. Damn, that means I'll have to go back to being a Prefect."

"Unless you get a promotion," Hermione said.

Ron laughed so hard he threw his head back. "Ha! If I end up being Head Boy then I'm sure the world will explode. I'm a horrible Prefect."

"That's not true," Hermione said. "When you actually try, you're wonderful."

"Only because you're always around to help me," he said. "Thanks for that."

"You're very welcome."

Ron suddenly felt a little giddy. The concepts of Hermione Granger and Head Girl were almost interchangeable. No one else from their year deserved the job more. She would most likely be a little scarier with the authority but also the kindest, feistiest, and sexiest influence that Hogwarts had ever seen.

"Does that mean you'll still be captain, Harry?" Ginny asked.

Harry shrugged as he got out of the water and sat next to Luna. "I dunno. I'm not sure I can even imagine a season this term."

"Why not?" Ginny asked.

"I agree with Harry," Hermione said. "With everything that's happenedâ€¦"

"That should be all the more reason to have a season, I believe," Luna said. "Getting everyone outside in the fresh air will be good for the soul. I'm sure Dumbledore would want the season to keep going."

"Maybe," Harry said. He dug into the candy bag then popped a piece of chocolate into his mouth.

Ron could easily detect a change in Harry's voice and attitude. He had to do something. It was Harry's birthday â€” his one day where he was allowed to be totally happy and carefree.

"Ginny," Ron said. "Let's show everyone that trick we used to do in this pond."

"What?"

"The shoulder thing."

"I'm too big for that, Ron," Ginny said.

"You haven't gained that much weight since we were out here last," Ron teased.

She splashed water at him. "I was talking more about how I'm too big for you. You probably couldn't support me."

"What are you two talking about?" Harry asked.

"There's this trick Ginny and I used to do when we were younger," Ron said. "Younger and I reckon skinnier too - at least on Ginny's part."

"Oh bugger â€" fine!" Ginny said.

"Ace." Ron swam over to the swallow end of the water.

Hermione looked a bit apprehensive as Ginny swam up behind him. "What are you going to do exactly?" she asked. "Is it dangerous?"

"It can be," Ginny said.

"Can be?" Hermione asked. "Maybe you shouldn't do it then."

"It's fine, Hermione. We've done this a hundred times." Ron said. "Ready?" he asked Ginny. She nodded. Ron then submerged himself more into the water so she could grab on to his upper arms. He hoisted Ginny up so she could mount his shoulders.

"Watch my tits, Ron," Ginny said as she climbed up his body.

"Yuck!" Ron said, cringing and instantly dropping his hands. "Don't ever talk about thoseâ€"things you have."

Ginny laughed. "You're so mature, Ron."

"Just shut up before I drop you right on your hypothetical tits."

"Ronald Weasley!"

"I'm not being serious, Hermione!" he quickly said. Once he felt the full weight of Ginny sitting on his shoulders, he held on tightly to her knees that were dangling over his chest. "Are you okay up there?"

"I'm fine," Ginny said. "Wow, you're so tall, Ron."

"So what happens now?" Luna asked, looking curious.

"You'll see," Ron said with a smirk. He began to slowly tread back from the swallow end. Ginny gripped a handful of his hair.

"Ronâ€¦" Harry said.

"I'm not going to drop her, Harry," Ron said.

"See, Hermione? I'm okay," Ginny said, waving one of her arms - doing that only seemed to frighten Hermione more.

Once Ron got to the spot where he knew it dropped off to the deep end, he stopped. "Ginny?"

"Go ahead!" she commanded in excitement.

"One, two, three!" Ron squatted then used as much force in his legs that he had to spring up. He arched his back and let go of Ginny's legs. She arched her back too and flung herself off his shoulders.

"Oh my god!" Hermione screamed as both Ginny and Ron fell back into the water. Ron emerged, hearing whistling and clapping from both Harry and Luna.

"That was brilliant!" Harry cheered. "Ginny, you were amazing!"

"Thank you, Harry," Ginny said in a slightly different voice. She turned to Ron but didn't say anything. Ron didn't need her to.

"Good team?" he asked.

"Good team," she said.

Ron then turned to Hermione who had a hand over her mouth. "Hermione," he said. "We're all right."

"That was incredibly dangerous!"

"Yet we've lived," Ginny said.

Hermione shook her head. "I think I need to get out of the water for a moment."

"Are you okay?" Ron asked.

"Yes, it's just getting cold, and I need to give my legs a rest," she said. She swam right past him and to the shallow end. As Hermione got out of the water, Ron marveled at how her bikini suctioned to her. He could see the outline of her cheeks, and the water dripping down her back and legs was extraordinary.

Hermione walked over to her towel, wrapping it around her. She turned around then made a sharp noise, instantly lifting her foot. In the process, Hermione had awkwardly put all of her weight on the other foot, causing it to bend at a horrifying angle.

"AH!" she howled as she fell to the ground.

"Hermione!" Ron yelled. He swam as fast as he could to the edge of the pond, then crawled out of the water.

"Hermione, are you okay?" Harry asked.

"'Mione?" Ron asked, nudging past Luna and Harry. He kneeled at her side. "What happened? Are you okay?"

Hermione was clutching her ankle and whimpering in pain. "I - I think I twisted it or something!"

"What happened?" Ginny asked.

"Iâ€|steppedâ€|on a really sharp rock," Hermione panted. "I lost my balance when I jumped back and landed in a dip."

Ron's heart dropped. "A rock?" She nodded. Ron mentally tore his bollocks off. "Oh bloody hellâ€|I'm sorry, Hermione. I threw that rock when I first got out here. I'm so sorry."

Hermione winced and groaned again. "Iâ€|it's okay, Ron."

"Let's take a look at it, Hermione," Luna said.

Hermione reluctantly let go of her foot. It was red and blotchy and already a little swollen. She bit her lip. "It really, really hurts."

"Maybe we should take you to the hospital," Harry said, touching her arm.

"No! There's no way you're spending your birthday at the hospital," Hermione said.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I don't care about that. You're hurt."

"I care, Harry, okay?" Hermione snapped. "I care!"

"Well we can't let you stay like this," Ginny said.

"I'll take her back to the house," Ron promptly said.

"You don't have to do that, Ron," Hermione said.

"It's not up for discussion." Ron stood up, grabbing his shirt.

"What are you gonna do?" Harry asked.

"What Mum kept lecturing to us about: first aid," Ron said. "We've got some cream that should help her."

"I'm coming with you two," Harry said.

"No, Harry!" Hermione said. "Stay here with Ginny and Luna. I mean it."

"We'll be right back," Ron said. "Or I'll at least let you lot know if we actually do need to go to the hospital. Come on, Hermione. I've got you."

Ron reached down, lifting Hermione from underneath her arms. She winced as she used one leg to stand up. She limped horribly. "Ow!" she groaned in frustration. "I wish I could just apparate into your house."

"Don't worry about it; I'll carry you," Ron said.

"Y-you'll what?" she asked.

"Come on," he demanded. He turned around, bending down. Hermione didn't move at first but he eventually felt her wrap her arms around his neck. Ron reached back to get a hold of her thighs. When he lifted her onto his back, she did her best to wrap her legs around his waist.

"Are we steady?" she asked in a shaky breath.

"We're good," Ron said. He felt guilty for enjoying how Hermione's legs and arms were firmly around him. He shook his head, telling himself to stay focused. "W-we'll be right back, lot."

"I'm so sorry, Harry," Hermione groaned.

Ron didn't stay long enough to give Harry time to respond. He ran back to the Burrow as fast and as safely as his feet would allow him. Ron told himself over and over that he would fix Hermione. He had indirectly hurt her, and he felt like the biggest arsehole in the world for it.

He didn't stop running once they were back inside the house. He went straight to the loo and barged in.

Ron rushed over to the sink and turned around so Hermione could sit on the edge. "Are you stable?" he asked.

"Yes, you can let me go."

Ron removed his hands from her then started searching through the First-Aid Kit. "I'm so sorry about this, Hermione."

"I told you that this isn't your fault, Ron."

"No, it really is," he said. He finally found the right ointment and placed the small jar in his pocket. Ron then turned to Hermione. She was dripping wet in her towel and was wincing as she peered at her dangling foot, which was horribly red.

This was a disaster that his mum hadn't prepared him to handle.

"You want to know something funny?" Ron asked. "Dad and Mum asked me to join them outside because they wanted to tell me that I was in charge. Who knew that it wouldn't even take three hours for me to turn things pear-shaped."

"Urgh! Stop it, Ron!" Hermione shouted, slamming her hand against the side of the sink. "I hate it when you talk about yourself like that! Your parents wanted you to be in charge because you're



responsible and caring. This accident doesn't change that. I'm the one who made this happen " not you! Do you understand me, Ronald Weasley?"

Hermione was glaring at him in a manic way. If she hadn't been hurt, then Ron would've feared that she might jump on him.

"Yes," he said after a few moments of silence. "I understand."

"Good." She stopped glaring but only because a violent shiver had abruptly taken her over.

"Cold?"

"Very."

Ron didn't know what he could do for Hermione. Along with their wands, all of his mum's good towels were at the pond. He considered getting her a blanket or hot tea, but he didn't want to leave her. "Um, why don't you use your towel to dry off your hair and wear this instead?" Ron picked up his shirt from the floor, offering it to her.

Hermione glanced between her towel and his shirt. It was eerie how she'd had the exact same expression on her face when choosing to either sleep in his bed or the cot.

"What about you?" she finally asked. "You must have brought that for yourself."

"Not exactly," he said. "I'm not even that cold." It was a lie, actually. Ron was so cold that his bollocks felt like snow balls between his legs. It didn't matter though; his needs meant nothing compared to hers. "I really am fine, Hermione. Go on."

"All right," Hermione said, looking a little guilty as she took his shirt. "Thank you."

"Anytime."

Hermione clutched the shirt in her hands but didn't put it on or even move for that matter. She merely pressed her lips tightly together while focusing on his shirt as if she was having a conversation with it.

Hermione looked apprehensive, confused, and even a little scared. Seeing her fear gave Ron the hint he'd needed. Underneath her towel was her wet body in only a bathing suit. While he'd already seen her this way, there had at least been water separating them and other people around to keep things from becoming intimate - they had none of those tools now.

"Do you want me to turn around?" he asked.

She peeked up at him. "Would you?"

"Of course. Just tell me when you're finished."

He turned around and stayed quiet as Hermione changed. Ron could hear her unwrapping the towel; the sound caused his ears to burn whereas pleasant warmth developed in his chest. There was something so secret and special about this small, delicate moment. Ron couldn't see Hermione but he felt incredibly close to her.

"I'm finished."

When Ron turned back around, he had to ball his fists to keep from jerking. His black Chudley Canons shirt looked absolutely amazing on her. The sleeves covered a good portion of her arms while also concealing all of her torso; his shirt even covered up some of her upper thighs. Hermione's body didn't need to be bare for Ron to think she was incredibly beautiful though. In fact, there was something sexy and even a little funny about her being encased in his shirt.

"Nice fit," he said before he could stop himself.

"I completely agree," Hermione said with a smile. She closed her eyes then used her towel to dry off her hair. Ron simply watched her, almost in a trance, as she rung out her wet and wavy brown strands. He couldn't understand how watching something so mundane could do so much to his body and mind at once. Hermione was the only person who had the beauty and magic to make this action breathtaking.

She opened her eyes; Ron quickly turned his attention to his feet that had blades of grass sticking to them.

"This will do," Hermione said. "My foot hurts too much now for me to care about being cold."

Hearing her talk about her pain reminded Ron of why they had come to the loo in the first place. "R-right," he said. He walked right up to her, taking the jar out of his pocket. "This is what I'm going use on your ankle. It's a healing cream that's got Essence of Boswellia in it. It's a-

"- powerful anti-inflammatory," Hermione said. "Yes, I know."

"Why am I not surprised? You know everything."

"It's not that I know everything, Ronald," she said. "I just read and study." She sighed, shaking her head. "Though I wish I'd read a book on how to properly shift weight onto one foot. Do you think Ginny is upset?"

"Why would she be upset?"

"I might have put the party behind schedule."

Ron rolled his eyes. "It may be Harry's birthday but it doesn't mean that we shouldn't care about this. Nothing is ruined or behind schedule, Hermione. Ginny's going to accomplish everything on her list; Harry is still going to have a good day, and I'll

make sure that you'll be able to walk â€” not limp - his gift right up to him."

"You can't promise that."

"Actually, I can," he said. "You just have to trust me."

"I do, Ron," Hermione said, touching his hand. "I trust you more than anyone else. After everything that's happened, you should know that."

He squeezed her hand before letting go. "I guess I do."

Every second that they gazed at each other made it that much harder for Ron to turn away. The room was so quiet; the only sounds came from their breathing. Something needed to change. Things between them were solid and a lot easier, but by no means were the longing and pull Ron felt towards Hermione gone. His need and desire for her was something that would only grow with time.

"So," Hermione said, moving her attention elsewhere. "What happens now?"

"S-sorry?" Ron asked, almost dropping the jar.

Hermione blushed as she rubbed her brow. "In regards to my foot."

"Oh, uh, I reckon I should put this on you." Ron mentally told himself to stop being a wanker as he sank to his knees in front of her. Hermione bit her lip, appearing a bit nervous. Ron felt quite tense himself in this position but he had to swallow the feelings, thoughts, and wishes to do what needed to be done. He peered at her small tan foot and perfect, sexy toes. He knew that he was a tit for thinking that toes could be attractive, but Hermione's certainly were.

"Ron?"

"I was just thinking about how I wanted to approach this," he quickly said. Ron didn't want to make Hermione feel any more uncomfortable than she probably already had, so he told himself to move along.

With shaky hands, Ron opened the jar, placing it on the floor next to him. He then gently lifted Hermione's foot up by her calf; she winced and recoiled.

"I'm sorry," Ron rushed. He dipped a few fingers from his other hand into the cream. He'd done this a thousand times before on himself and his siblings; there was no need to lose his bollocks now.

Ron licked his lip, looking up at her. "Now this is really gonna hurt at first, but I promise that it won't last, and I'll be gentle."

Hermione let out a shaky breath, nodding. "I know you will. I'm ready."

Ron gave her a reassuring look before he began applying the cream to her swollen ankle. Hermione cried out, hissed, and flinched but Ron couldn't stop. He felt like such an asshole but this was the only way to help her.

"Ohâ€|Ron," Hermione sobbed. "That hurts so much."

"I know, Hermione, but it's almost over. I promise."

Ron kneaded his fingertips into her inflamed skin, rotating her foot a little. He watched Hermione squirm in pain; she whimpered and tensed her body as he continuously massaged her foot. It was horrible; he couldn't help but to think back to their first time and how Hermione had jerked, sobbed, and cried out. Though the two events were very different, on both occasions he'd severely hurt her - regardless of how gentle he'd tried to be.

"Do you want me to stop?" Ron suddenly asked.

She wiped her eyes, shaking her head. "N-no. I'm all right." Ron wanted to stand up and take her into his arms. Though she was in pain, Hermione didn't want him to stop â€" just like that night.

"Okay," he said gently. He continued to rub the ointment into her foot while Hermione continued to wince; Ron admired her bravery and strength.

After awhile, her sounds of pain finally died down. "How are you doing?" he asked.

"Better."

"Good. I know you don't want to hear this, but I'm so sorry for the rock."

"It's fine."

"Well, 'fine' isn't good enough," Ron said strongly. "I hate seeing you in pain. It does my head in, Hermione."

"I can tell," she said. "I know this is going to sound awful, but it means a lot to me that it bothers you so much, Ron."

"It doesn't sound awful. It means a lot that you yell at me when I speak badly about myself," he said. Ron returned his focus to her ankle. He noticed that when he pressed against her heel, Hermione didn't recoil. "Do you feel a change?"

"I do," she said in a somewhat happier voice. "It doesn't hurt as much. The throbbing went down; it's mostly a dull ache now."

"Brilliant." Ron rotated her ankle again. "I think you just have a minor sprain. The Boswellia should fully heal you, and the swelling shouldn't take more than a couple of days to completely go down."

Hermione gaped at him. "Incredible; how do you know so much about this?"

Ron shrugged, blushing terribly. He loved that he was impressing Hermione in one of her areas. "Years of playing Quidditch," he said. "Plus, I grew up with five older brothers. I had to learn how to take care of myself and not cry to my parents all the time after they took gos at me."

"Oh, that's awful."

"Not really. I always got a few hits in too."

"It's just so violent," Hermione said with a frown.

"It's supposed to be, Hermione," he said. "You fight, then move on. Even when they did really horrible things to me, I never told."

"Well it breaks my heart to think about your brothers hurting you all the time as a child, but I must admit that I admire your strength and courage, as well as your loyalty to them."

"It's not something you need to admire," Ron said, though he was glad that she did. "It's simply how things are. My brothers can be pricks, but they're loyal to me. Well, almost all of them." He started pressing his fingertips a little harder into her foot.

"Ron?"

"Hmm?"

"Percy will come around."

"I don't care," Ron muttered. "I don't want to talk about him - ever."

"If that's how you feel," Hermione said.

Ron couldn't look up at her and see her all-knowing brown eyes right now. He gave her ankle a full rotation; Hermione didn't make any sort of noise. "How is it?"

"About normal. I'm awed by how fast this worked."

"Mum doesn't mind paying extra for the really good healing creams," Ron said. "With so many Weasleys in the house, it's vital." He chuckled. "When I was little and she'd put this on me, she'd kiss the spot that was hurting and say that it added a bit of magic to the healing. Like a knob, I believed her."

"Aww, that's adorable!" Hermione said, clasping her hands together. "Are you going to add a bit of magic to my ankle?"

Ron stopped rubbing her foot, looking right at her. "Do you want me to?"

Hermione's smile slowly faded. "O-oh, I was just teasing. I wouldn't make you do that."

Ron could easily just shrug off the suggestion or say that he too was taking the piss, but Ron's better judgment was starting to slip out of reach as he was finding it harder to breathe and his body no longer felt cold.

"I don't mind doing it," he said. Ron knew that he was being stupid and pushy, but something that had been building inside of him for days was starting to ram against his body. Ron wanted â€"no needed to be as close and connected to her as possible.

Hermione rubbed her brow as she continued to stare at him. "Iâ€¦I guess it would be best to do the whole bit, right?"

Ron could only nod. He probably should've asked if she was being serious, but he didn't want to ruin his opportunity. "R-right," he breathed. "For all I know, maybe there is a magical element added."

Hermione gripped the sides of the sink. "Let's try it then."

He didn't hesitate. He kept his eyes on her as he lowered his lips to her ankle. He slowly and tenderly kissed the swollen flesh.

Hermione jerked a little, letting out a faint noise.

Ron reluctantly pulled away; his lips were tingling. "H-how was that?"

Hermione rotated her ankle. "I-I think your mum was right."

He smirked, standing up. Even though Hermione was sitting on the sink edge, Ron was still taller, however, he had a better view of her face like this.

Ron cleared his incredibly dry throat but still couldn't say anything. In the one second it'd taken him to stand up, something in the room had changed. The air was extremely thick and sweltering; everything around Ron that wasn't Hermione was difficult to see, and the quiet atmosphere enhanced the pulse and tension between them.

Hermione hugged her stomach.

Ron gave her a once-over. "You're still shaking."

"I'm still really cold."

"I can try to fix that too."

"Okay..."

"I'dâ€¦have to touch you."

"I don't mind."

Ron rubbed his hands together in a quick motion to get them warm. As he did, his body and brain had a mini duel. His mind yelled for him to fetch her some trousers or make her some tea while his body pleaded for him to touch her. Over and over the two sides battled before finally one was defeated.

Ron placed his hands on Hermione's knees. She gasped, jumping a little.

"Is this-"

"- it's fine," she promptly said. "I was just startled. Go on."

With her blessing, Ron started rubbing her kneecaps, then her lower thighs with his palms. Repeatedly, he moved his hands up and down her gorgeous legs. It was just like the last time - only better because Ron had light to see her perfectly. He kept his focus on his hands as they massaged Hermione. His complexion looked so foreign against hers but he loved it. In fact, he loved it so much that he moved his palms over to her inner thighs.

Hermione jumped again, but this time moaned.

Hearing her made Ron's body shake while his awareness of what was happening started to crumble. "G-getting warmer?" he managed to ask.

"Yes," she whispered.

"I'm not hurting you am I?"

"No. You're always so kind and gentle." Hermione closed her eyes, hanging her head a little as if she was drunk. "Iâ€¦I like feeling your hands on me, Ron."

Ron's heart skipped a few thousand beats. Not only was he not cold, but now he was also starting to sweat. Ron had no idea what her words meant. Friends could enjoy massages from each other, so he needed to believe that was what she meant. It was difficult to though. There was something soâ€¦sexual and slurred in her tone that made the intense feeling in Ron's body stir and pound harder against him.

Hermione opened her eyes, looking at him; he stared right back at her. Their silence must have scared her because she shook her head frantically. "I'm sorry for saying that."

Ron wasn't sure of what to say to her. She was trapping him in her spell again; he couldn't get out. Then again, he didn't want to. Ron only wanted to keep touching her.

"Don't be sorry," he whispered. "I'm glad you like my hands becauseâ€¦ I-I enjoy touching you."

Hermione didn't respond. She only blushed and hung her head again. Ron began rubbing higher up her soft thighs. Hermione eventually stopped jumping but kept moaning and whimpering

lightly. Ron watched as his hands disappeared under the black cloth of his Canons shirt. His shirt against Hermione's skin was already unbelievable, so reaching under his shirt, while it was on Hermione, effortlessly became the sexiest bloody thing he'd ever seen. Everything in the moment just looked and sounded so bloody good, but Ron knew that he needed to stop.

"A-are you warm now?" he asked. Ron already knew that she was. He could feel the heat on her legs as well as in between them. Ron attempted not to think about how warm and creamy he'd hopefully made her.

Hermione held her head straight. "Yes, I'm feeling much better," she said a bit out of breath. "You've been really helpful today, Ron; thank you."

Ron shrugged, saying nothing. He now had a good reason to let her go but he didn't; he just kept rubbing. The strong gaze from Hermione's brown eyes was burning right into his body. Sometimes she truly did have complete control of him. She'd displayed some of that power only days ago when he'd said goodnight to her outside of Ginny's room. Hermione had given him the most fierce and loving expression he had ever seen. It'd made him so scared yet so excited at the same time.

He was feeling that sensation again now, but this time he didn't have any restraint. Ron's filter had dissolved ages ago. All he knew was Hermione; all he could feel were her legs that he was massaging. Kissing her ankle had added a bit of magic, but only to Ron's bravery.

"I-I don't mind being helpful," he said, hoping that too much time hadn't gone by. "B-but I probably should stop though."

Hermione frowned, shaking her head. "Why?"

Ron couldn't believe that after so much time and after so much fucking pain, effort, and energy he'd used to keep his feelings at bay, it would all be shattered by a small, quiet word such as 'why'.

Ron told himself to shut up and move away, but he couldn't. They were wet, bare, and alone together. Even if Ron wanted to stop, he didn't have the strength to leave or the perseverance to get through the agony of walking away.

"Because I want to do other thingsâ€¦things I shouldn't."

Hermione swallowed hard as her entire face glowed pink. "L-like what?"

Ron thought it was obvious, so he wasn't sure if she was testing him or if she genuinely couldn't see and understand that he was seconds away from exploding. He wanted to turn away, but he couldn't. "Do you really want to know?" Hermione only nodded.

Ron finally removed his hands from her. He needed to be completely focused if he was going to do this. Ron unsteadily



exhaled, regretting that he had started this whole thing. This shouldn't have been happening; Ron should've just told her that he was joking about kissing her ankle.

"W-well, I think I should stop because...becauseâ€¦!"

Ron couldn't say the words. They were too jagged and heavy to let out. He bit his lip, shaking a little as he realized what he had gotten himself in to and how badly he had fucked up. "B-becauseâ€¦!"

"Because you want to kiss me?"

Ron froze and almost stopped breathing. He studied Hermione's face. She didn't seem angry, disgusted, or even shocked. She simply lookedâ€¦curious. When he came to the conclusion that she wasn't going to slap him, he nodded. "Y-yeah," he wheezed, "but that's not what we should be doing, right?" He needed for Hermione to tell him that he was right; it would be the only way to stop his urges.

Hermione rubbed her brow as if she was in deep thought. "No - it's not what we should be doing. You should move back, and I should put some clothes on" â€¦ Ron sighed in relief â€¦ "but I-I don't think I can."

Ron's eyes widened. This hadn't been what he'd expected; this couldn't be happening. "R-really? W-why?" he asked, practically afraid of the answer.

Hermione hugged her stomach again as she roughly trembled. She looked just as lost as he felt. "Beâ€¦b-because I want you to kiss meâ€¦ and I want to kiss you back."

Ron couldn't help but to let out a moan; he couldn't believe what he was hearing. Ron felt as if he was going to collapse. His body burned and jolted; it felt so fucking incredible while also confusing him to all bloody hell. Hermione wanted to kiss him. The hot thickness in the air was apparently something she could feel too.

Knowing these things gave Ron an opportunity to express himself like he'd wanted to all day. He unabashedly roamed his eyes all over her body, loving how wet and wavy her dark hair was. He finally allowed himself to stare at the midsection of the shirt. The two large orange CCs looked amazing against her tits. Never had the Canons seemed more brilliant.

Ron found himself tugging on the hem of the shirt, shaking his head slightly as he bounced on the heels of his feet. "You look so damn good like this, Hermione. I've honestly wanted to tell you that all day."

Hermione moaned, placing her hand on his wrist. "I've actually been a little afraid of what you'd-"

"- you look incredible."

She smiled shyly, squeezing his wrist. "Well, thank you. You look good too - amazing, really. You've definitely gotten bigger since we..."

Ron knew that it was too much for her to say the words - especially in their current situation; however, Ron wanted to hear them. He already felt pissed and slightly mad. There was nothing stopping him from pushing things.

"Since we shagged?" he asked.

"Y-yes. I mean, you looked great then but even more so now."

"T-thank you. I didn't think you'd notice that-"

" - I always notice," she quickly said.

"So do I."

The two just kept staring at each other. Ron didn't know what to do or say next. On the night they'd had sex, using words had been the most terrifying idea in the world. Now, everything was out in the open, but the actions were lagging so very far behind. Ron didn't know which universe he preferred.

"H-how's your foot?" he randomly asked.

Hermione merely blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"Your foot," he said a bit louder. "The one you hurt. The one I tended to...the one...the one..."

"Ron?"

He looked up at her (though he hadn't noticed that he'd been looking down).

"It's feeling much better," she said.

Ron nodded thickly. The air was smothering him now as their confessions started to beat on his head; he couldn't stand it any longer. "Hermione," he said clearly, "did you mean what you said earlier?"

"I did, Ron. You?"

"Completely. So...what now?"

Hermione searched around the room as if the answer was written somewhere on the wall. "I guess...it happens."

Ron once again didn't hesitate. His heart and bollocks were going to explode if something didn't change. He put his forehead to Hermione's while she placed her hands on his shoulders. Feeling her warm, small, soft hands on his bare skin gave him goose bumps while also making him dizzy. "O-okay?" he asked. He hoped that it was; Ron had missed being so close to her.

"Yes, this is okay," she said with a nod.

Ron slowly licked his lips; Hermione did too. He couldn't believe that it was going to happen again - especially on Harry's birthday. Ron had been trying for ages to come to terms with the fact that he would never touch her lips again - but now he was moments away from doing it. He had no idea what doing this would mean, and if he were smart, he'd find out first.

Ron never did claim to be a smart person though, so instead he simply leaned forward just as Hermione did.

The instant their mouths touched, it felt as if someone had shocked Ron with a spell. All the hairs on his arms and legs stood on end, and though his heart was galloping and his breathing was horribly shallow, Ron developed a peace that he hadn't felt since he'd kissed Hermione the first time. All of his insecurities and bad thoughts went away as a familiar haze encompassed him.

Ron had never given up on his feelings for Hermione, so kissing her for a second time only reinforced everything he'd felt and knew to be true that night. He hadn't been exaggerating or dreaming - kissing Hermione honestly was his most favorite thing to do. His lips were made for her; they always would be.

Ron let out a deep sigh whereas she moaned longingly. They held their mouths together for days it seemed, but they eventually parted for air.

Hermione slowly opened her eyes, looking dazed.

Ron's lips didn't even feel connected to his body because they were tingling so badly. He felt incredibly eager yet sluggish at the same time as a ringing boomed in his ears.

Hermione slowly blinked, touching her mouth. "W-wellâ€¦we did it."

"Yesâ€¦we didâ€¦"

It only took a moment - a minute fraction of space - before a powerful, fiery energy pushed and jolted their bodies.

Ron's nostrils flared; he made a strangled sound before suddenly grabbing Hermione at the same time that she whimpered and clung herself to him.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. Ron clutched her backside, pressing himself as close to her as possible. He easily pried open her mouth with his tongue, digging it in as far as he could.

That was when his brain officially broke - again.

They kissed wildly. Hermione roughly sucked on Ron's tongue; he couldn't help but to repeatedly moan as she tugged and slurped. It made him think back to her slurping and licking his strawberry

ice cream cone. The 'less innocent' thoughts had been swarming in his mind then, but now they were attacking. Ron wanted to feel Hermione's mouth somewhere else. He wanted Hermione to wrap her perfectly full and soft lips around his cock while her talented tongue licked and slurped him. Ron moaned, kissing her more recklessly. He'd thought about her sucking him off many times over the years, but it was only now that she was showing him how gifted her mouth truly was. He gripped the sides of her waist, trying to keep balance.

Hermione's hands also moved. One gradually slid down his chest, resting on his lower stomach—right above the top of his swimmers. Ron jerked and actually whimpered. Hermione was giving him too many ideas. Sure, he wanted her mouth but he also wanted Hermione to reach under his shorts. He was desperate to feel her incredible hand grip and stroke him until he came.

Ron growled as her other hand tangled and tugged on his hair. He was so sexually charged that he was considering shoving her hand down his swimmers himself but he couldn't. No matter how hard, horny, and frantic for a wank Ron was, he couldn't make Hermione do anything that she didn't want to. Ron had learned his lesson the first time. It may have seemed like Hermione wanted to touch him, but Ron didn't know for sure; he certainly wouldn't risk everything again just to find out. No, if Hermione wanted his cock, then she would have to reach for it herself.

Ron wasn't sure how long they'd been kissing but it honestly didn't matter. Everything that had been building since the night they'd shagged had finally erupted. Ron didn't know what century he was in or where he even was anymore. All he knew was that Hermione's mouth tasted just as delicious as it had that night; her sounds were just as beautiful, and her body was, as always, a masterpiece.

Hermione pulled on his hair harder, making him open up his mouth more. She was so much more forceful and commanding but Ron loved the change; it made him so much more attracted to her. He curved his hands over her arse, pushing himself against her. The action caused them both to gasp. The dragon Ron had been keeping chained up inside of him finally broke loose.

Ron very much wanted to be a gentleman; he believed in chivalry when it came to women. It was how he'd been raised and how he honestly thought men should behave; however, there was nothing Ron wanted more right now than to shag Hermione as madly as he could against the sink. He almost couldn't comprehend the idea of it not happening. It had to happen. It had to be now.

Ron tore away from Hermione's mouth, resting his forehead against hers. He didn't open his eyes as he pathetically tried to catch his breath. It would've been too much to look at her right now.

The heat was there; the passion was there; the desperate need was obvious. All Ron had to do was ask.

He licked his lips, telling himself to be brave.

"H-Hermione?"

"Y-yes, Ron?"

~To be continued~

: ) Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

CHAPTER 7

Thank you ALL for the amazing reviews!

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He licked his lips, telling himself to be brave.

"H-Hermione?"

"Y-yes, Ron?"

Ron needed to back down and step away before it was too late, but he honestly couldn't do it. He had to ask her because he wanted it to happen again so bloody badly. There was utterly nothing that could stop him this time. "D-doâ€¦do-"

"How's it going in there?"

Ron opened his eyes, withdrawing himself from Hermione at once and slapping his back against the wall as if he had been cursed to it. Hermione went scarlet, her eyes widening as a look of terror took her over. Ron couldn't speak or move as footsteps drew closer to the bathroom door (that had apparently been wide open this whole time).

"Ron? Hermione?" Harry asked as he stood right outside the door. He opened his mouth again but closed it right away. Harry just looked between them in what appeared to be puzzlement. Ron didn't know how his mate would interpret the situation. Hermione was flushed and panting while sitting on the sink in his shirt; he was against the wall opposite her with a heaving chest and a very obvious cut of wood in his swimmers.

The silence between the three of them grew; every slow, agonizing second it extended made it harder for Ron to breathe. He was still so hot, boggled, and horny as all fucking hell. Hermione's smell, taste, sounds, and feel were all around him. Ron was too afraid to look at her for fear that he would get entranced by her beautiful dripping hair or how she looked like perfection in his shirt once more. He couldn't look at Harry either though - the

bloke read him a little too easily; but the most important reason was that Ron very much wanted to punch Harry in the stomach for interrupting his moment with Hermione.

"Uhâ€¦did I interrupt something?" Harry asked after what felt like fifteen years or so had gone by in the excruciating silence.

Ron, at last, took a peek at Hermione to find that she was already looking at him. She immediately turned to Harry, shaking her head. "N-no, Ron was justâ€¦putting the finishing touches on my ankle."

"R-right," Ron said, his voice cracking. The phrase 'finishing touches' caused his cock to grow so stiff that it was now fit to use as a Bludger bat. He had to ignore it though and focus on the moment instead. "Right," he said again in a stronger voice. "I was just on my way to tell you lot that she only has a minor sprain."

Harry nodded, but Ron could tell that he didn't believe them. "That's great. We were starting to worry because you two have been up here for so longâ€¦"

"It, uh, takes awhile for the cream to settle into the muscle," Ron said awkwardly.

"But it finally started working, and I feel a lot better now," Hermione quickly added. "In fact, I believe I'm ready to walk on it."

Hermione looked as though she was about to hop off the sink so Ron rushed over to her, placing his hands on her waist and helping her down. He felt her shiver and heard her make a faint noise as his hands gripped her hips. Her reaction made Ron's ears burn and his heart race. He just wanted to take her so fucking badly.

"Try taking a step," he said to her. "I've got you just in case."

"All right." Hermione slowly raised her swollen foot then put pressure on it. Ron was relieved when she didn't wince or limp. As she shifted weight between her feet, she didn't appear to be in any pain.

"There you go," he whispered.

"Thank you."

"Anytime." Ron removed his hands; Hermione backed away from him.

She only glanced up at him for a second. "I'm going to go now," she announced. "Thank you, Ron, for helping me. I also appreciate you coming to check on me, Harry. I'm sorry about all this."

"Don't be," Harry said. "I'm just glad you're better."

She smiled softly then went to the door. All of a sudden, Ron began to panic as he thought about what had happened the last

time he'd let Hermione leave after doing something physical with her. "Her-muh-mione?" he stuttered in a frantic breath.

Hermione looked back at him. "I'm just going back to the party, Ron."

Ron wanted to tell her to stay or ask Harry to at least give them a second alone so he could make sure that they were okay. He even considered exclaiming that he loved her but he couldn't tell her any of those things right now. "All right," he said instead. She nodded then gave Harry's hand a squeeze before walking out and descending the stairs.

It was at that moment Ron realized how cold and wet he was. Shivering, he rested his head against the wall and closed his eyes. Ron sighed as he thought about what had just happened. He couldn't believe that he had been moments away from asking Hermione if she wanted to shag. Now that she was out of the room and the heat wasn't choking him into oblivion, Ron knew that asking her would've been an awful mistake. He had no idea what the bloody fucking hell was wrong with him; he was obviously too stupid to learn from past missteps.

"Ron?"

Ron jumped. He had forgotten that Harry was still in the room. "Bollocking shit, Harry! I mean - yeah, mate?" Ron's mind was in a thousand places at once and all the adrenaline from earlier was now giving him a headache, but he couldn't take it out on Harry â€" at least not on his birthday.

"Are you gonna tell me what's going on?"

"What d'you mean?" Ron picked up the healing cream, placing it back in the drawer in an effort to avoid having to look at Harry. Harry closed the door then walked over to him; Ron wished that he hadn't. It was much more difficult to keep things from Harry when his bold green eyes were staring right at him. Sometimes, Ron wondered if his mate put a spell on those buggers to make them look so intense.

"Ron," Harry said patiently. "How thick do you think I am?"

"Depends on the subject. You may be a brilliant Seeker, but when you talk about professional Quidditch sometimes, I have to remind myself that you were more or less a Muggle for most of your life."

Harry rolled his eyes. "You know what I'm talking about, so stop acting like a knob. What did I walk in on just now? I came up here because the girls and I thought something serious was going on."

Something serious had gone on, but he knew that Harry figured it involved Hermione's sprained ankle â€" not her tasty tongue or fantastic hands that had made him lose his mind.

"Ron?"

"Huh?" He looked up; Harry was still staring at him. They were talking about somethingâ€¦something important, probably. "Oh, right," Ron said. "I told you that the cream takes awhile to settle. I wanted to wait for it to start working before she tried walking on it."

Harry crossed his arms over his chest. "That's all?"

"That's all, mate."

"Okay," Harry said, opening the door. "I reckon we can go back to my party then."

"Sorted."

Ron attempted to leave but his legs wouldn't let him go beyond the threshold. He looked at Harry; he was Ron's best mate in the whole bloody world, and he trusted him more than anyone else.

Ron closed the door, leaning against it. "All right, maybe there is something, but I don't know if I should talk about it."

Harry frowned. "Is it that bad?"

"No," Ron said, starting to pace the loo, "but it's not just about me. It'sâ€¦it's about Hermione too; the rules are different when she's involved." Ron gazed at the sink where they'd been all over each other. He walked back until he hit the wall again and slid down to the floor, never taking his eyes off of it.

Harry sat next to him; neither of them spoke for awhile. "I reckon the rules are different in general when girls are involved, eh?"

"Makes sense. You didn't want to talk to me about Ginny earlier."

"I know," Harry said, "but what if I do now?"

"You mean like an exchange?"

"I guess, but only if you actually listen to me."

"I told you that I would hear you out, Harry."

"Fine." Harry let out a low, steady gust of air. "So, um, if you haven't noticed by now, Ginny and I haven't been getting on too well. We had a bad row a few nights ago, and I reckon we're only good today because it's my birthday."

Ron bit his tongue, telling himself not to get hasty. His instinct was to defend Ginny and call Harry a twat, but he had to listen to his best mate's side. It was what Hermione had told him was important to do.

"What was the row about?" Ron asked.



"Us," Harry mumbled. "How we don't know where we're going anymore. I know that's my fault. I was her boyfriend, then basically told her that I couldn't be anymore, but I'm still here and we're stillâ€¦"

"What?" Ron swiftly asked. He needed to let Harry tell the story, but Ron couldn't take the nagging question anymore. "Harry, I'm only going to ask you this one time ever, so I hope you'll be honest with me, mate: it's none of my business at all, but are you and Ginny, wellâ€¦shagging?" Ron felt queasy but he had to know either way. He sat on his hands so he wouldn't hit Harry if he heard the wrong answer.

Harry blushed, focusing on his feet. "You're right - it is none of your businessâ€¦but no, we're not. We didn't even get that far when we were dating."

Ron let out a breath of relief. "That's a good thing, mate."

Harry didn't look nearly as thrilled. "I'm not surprised you feel that way. Even if we were though, our problems wouldn't be about that."

"So what's going on?"

"I'm what's going on, Ron," Harry said impatiently. "I really want something with Ginny while we're together, but I don't think I can anymore. I tell myself every morning that this could be the day that you, Hermione, and me finally decide to start searching for the Horcruxes. I'll need to be clear-headed when that happens."

"What does that have to do with my sister?" Ron asked.

"Everything, Ron," Harry said, looking pained. "When you're really close to someone, sometimes your judgment becomes flawed. You lose focus and you can't always make the right decisions. Dumbledore told me that once; Iâ€¦I get it now." He shifted in his spot. "You'll think I'm a prick, and I'm sure you'll want to punch me after saying this, but if I had to pick between keeping Ginny safe and making her happy, I'd choose her safety."

Ron didn't know what to do. Harry wasn't an emotional bloke, which made it rare that he ever talked about his feelings. Hearing all this and clearly seeing what it did to him affected Ron greatly. He could even sense Harry's regret, how badly he wanted things to be different, and how self-conscious he was about sharing. Ron had to help him. If for no other reason, it was Harry's bloody birthday.

"Harry, mate," Ron said, touching Harry's shoulder, "I'll tell you this as a best friend and as someone who deeply, deeply cares."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"There is not one single day that goes by when I don't think you're prick or I don't want to punch you."

Harry burst into laughter, shoving Ron's hand away. "Piss off! You are such an arsehole!"

Ron laughed as well. "I'm sorry, but you set that up so nicely for me."

"I hate you," Harry said, pushing him.

"The feeling is well deserved I'm sure." Ron let Harry laugh until it looked as if he was a bit more comfortable. "Seriously though," he said, "you know how I feel about my sister. When she's hurting, I'm not happy, but I can tell that all you want to do is the right thing. I don't know what all this is like for you, but I get how it feels to want to protect something that means a lot to you."

"What I have with Ginny does matter a lot, Ron. I justâ€¦I don't know if I can let us get to that point again right now. Moody's death was a huge reminder of that."

"Then you should tell her," Ron said. "Ginny's smart and really tough. She'll be able to handle it, and I'm sure she'll appreciate your honesty." Ron ignored the voices in his head that told him he should take his own advice. They were talking about Harry right now, not him.

"I know I need to, but I hate the idea of ruining things," Harry said. "I guess I'm like Hermione in that way."

Ron knew that was Harry's way of telling him it was his turn to speak. He looked ahead to the sink again. Hermione's taste hadn't left his mouth; his scalp was still tender due to her rough tugs on his hair. Even though Ron was completely boggled, he was of sound enough mind to know that he needed to get this weight off his chest. Harry had done it; Ron could too. He just didn't know where to start. Ron figured that it would be easiest to stay current and work his way back.

"You still want to know?" Ron asked.

"I'm still here," Harry said simply.

"Right. Well, um, before you walked inâ€¦Hermione and Iâ€¦well, we wereâ€¦"

"What?"

"Kissing," Ron blurted out before he lost his nerve. He waited for the world to explode, but it didn't. Harry just stared vacantly at him, blinking several times in a row.

"Kissingâ€¦each other?"

"No, the bloody toilet seat â€” yes, each other!"

Harry still remained expressionless. "A-are you having a laugh?"

"Would I ever make a joke about snogging Hermione Granger?" Ron asked. "I'm being bloody serious right now. We were kissing - a lot."

Harry scratched his head, looking as lost as if he were writing an essay for McGonagall. "Butâ€¦what? So, you two areâ€¦together now?"

"No," Ron said grimly.

Harry's already confused state seemed to worsen. "Thenâ€¦does ankle cream serve as some sort of bizarre aphrodisiac for you two?"

"No! Well â€” maybe, but that wasn't why it happenedâ€¦not really anyway."

"Bloody hell, Ron. What are you saying?"

"I don't know, Harry! It's complicated and a very, very long story. This isn't the first time it's happened. We've kissed before andâ€¦" It was suddenly very difficult for Ron to speak. The matter had only been discussed between him and Hermione for so long now that talking about it to someone else made everything feel so much more real. Ron hoped that it was okay for him to tell Harry; Hermione had told him that either could share with him when the time felt right. He was getting that sensation now - even though he felt uncomfortable and somewhat nervous as well.

Ron let out a frustrated sigh, telling himself to find his bollocks. It was just Harry after all.

"There's something important I have to tell you, mate."

"Still here," Harry said with encouragement.

Ron rubbed his neck. He had no idea how to tell him. There were so many different combinations of words he could use but none of them seemed right. Ron stuttered and stumbled with the English language for several seconds before he finally blurted out, "Hermione and I shagged."

In an instant, Harry's expression morphed from blank to total shock. His eyes widened; he even gasped.

"W-WHAT?" he practically shouted. "Just now? Before I came up here?"

Ron shook his head while mentally telling himself to stop wishing that he could say yes. "No, mate, it happenedâ€¦well, it happened the night we came back from school."

Harry's eyes grew bigger as his jaw dropped even lower to the ground. "You're not being serious right now."

"Harry, I would never joke about kissing Hermione. Do you really think I would make up a story about having sex with her?"

Ron exhaled again before divulging into the story. He left out certain intimate and important details but summed up his experience with the fact that Hermione had come into his room, they had talked about Dumbledore, become upset and overcome with emotion, then finally shagged. It didn't begin to describe what had actually gone on, but it was the best he could do. Explaining the next morning to him was even harder, but he decided to gloss over the truth and simply tell him that Hermione had to leave before they could figure anything out.

When Ron was finally finished, he felt exhausted. Talking about everything was almost as taxing as experiencing it had been. Harry appeared a bit worn out himself. He shook his head, putting a hand over his mouth.

"Bloody hell, I can't believe this," he said.

Ron didn't know how to respond. The two of them had never really talked about Ron's feelings for Hermione or the possibility of either of them seeing her as more than a friend. Ron had no idea how much Harry knew or what his feelings for Hermione were. Harry may have fancied Ginny, but Ron had always assumed that he liked Hermione too. The two of them got on so much easier than Ron did with her; they certainly had more things in common. It definitely made sense why Harry would fancy Hermione, and Ron wouldn't be surprised if she loved Harry - every girl did.

"I can't believe it either, mate," Ron said, trying to beat down his fears. "It all just happened so fast â€" but really slowly at the same time." He gazed at the sink, thinking about that night with her. It was still the greatest moment of his life.

"To tell you the truth, I'm not so shocked that it happened. What I honestly can't believe is that you didn't tell me sooner," Harry said. "I knew something was off with you and Hermione but I had no idea it was something like this. Why didn't you say anything?"

Now Ron wanted to ask Harry if he was being serious. "Whaâ€¦? You mean, you- you're not upset that Hermione and I shagged?"

Harry gave him a look. "Why would I be upset about that?"

Ron rubbed his neck. "I dunno. I thought maybe you would be mad thatâ€¦"

"Ron, mate, you two are my friends," Harry said. "That's the only reason why I care. My feelings don't go any deeper than that."

Ron nodded, wishing that he could fully believe Harry. "I guess I didn't tell you because I didn't know how to. It was only recently that Hermione and I started talking about it and figured things out."

"And what did you decide?"

"That we were taking care of each other and we needed to let those emotions out so we could focus."

Harry didn't look convinced. "That sounds like something Hermione would suggest. What did you say?"

"The same thing," Ron mumbled. "I agreed with her, and I helped her come to that conclusion." It troubled Ron that Harry had effortlessly been able to see through his wall. He'd worked for weeks building a barrier that would keep Hermione from seeing his true feelings regarding their arrangement. Ron wasn't sure if he was more frustrated with Harry for figuring him out or Hermione for not being able to.

"You can stop giving me that look, Harry," Ron said, standing up. "Hermione and I have been able to keep our friendship intact despite everything that seems to be bloody working against us. That's proof that our system is working. We just lost ourselves a little today, but we'll handle it."

"I'm sure you will." Harry stood up too. "So, how you two are is how you want to be with Hermione?" He stared right at Ron with those eyes again. As much as he wanted to, he simply could not hold back from Harry.

"No," Ron said quietly, "but you know better than anyone that it's never about what you want."

The bathroom door opened; Ron was surprised to see his dad. He shifted his gaze between them, giving an expression very much like Harry had when he'd walked in on him with Hermione. Ron and Harry glanced at each other before looking awkwardly back at his dad. Ron didn't know how his father would interpret the situation. He and Harry were alone in the loo together, wearing nothing but their swimmers. It didn't help that they were standing particularly close together.

Mr. Weasley cleared his throat. "I consider myself to be a fairly liberal wizard, but do I want to know what you lads are doing in here?"

Ron rubbed his neck. "It's a long story, Dad."

"Too long, Mr. Weasley," Harry added.

"I see," he said. "Well, we're back, and Fred and George are here. When you two are finished, come join us downstairs." He gave them both another curious look before closing the door.

Harry took off his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose. "We've got to stop getting caught like this, Ron."

"Weasleys don't believe in knocking, Harry. I thought you knew that already," Ron said. "Let's go before someone else comes up here."

"Wait," Harry said. "Are you and Hermione going to be okay?"

"We'll be fine," Ron said, wishing that he could fully believe himself. "Hermione and I are getting better at talking things out."

Once again, Harry didn't appear convinced. "I'm sorry, Ron."

"For what?"

"For interrupting."

"Me too," Ron said truthfully, "but it's okay. I needed to tell you about all this sometime anyway."

"Should I say something to Hermione?" Harry asked.

"Let me tell her first that I've told you," Ron said. "She'd probably prefer to be the one to mention it during a conversation."

"I'd rather she bring it up," Harry said. "This is a lot."

"Yeah, it is," Ron said, "but it's more than that too." He grinned as he thought about touching her for the first time. "I mean, it was brilliant. I'm glad it happened."

Harry's expression morphed again, but Ron couldn't tell what he was feeling. "You're really lucky, Ron," he said dryly. Ron wasn't sure how to take the comment. Before he could ask Harry what he meant, he opened the door. "I'm gonna put on some dry clothes. I'll meet you downstairs." He walked out before Ron had a chance to respond. Ron stood still for a moment, wondering if Harry was mad, jealous, or both. If he was, then Ron wasn't sure if he wanted to know why.

He forced his fears into the back of his mind then left the loo to change into drier clothes as well. Ron was nervous as he made his way downstairs; he didn't know how Hermione would treat him. When he reached the bottom step, she stood up from the couch, giving him a shy yet radiant smile. There was so much going on in Ron's head and to his body, but he couldn't help but to let it all go and smile back.

"It's good to see you," she said.

"You too," he breathed. Ron walked over to her and was happy that everyone else was in the kitchen. She was dressed in jeans and a shirt now, but she was still making his heart race and his ears burn. "I'm sorry that I took so long. I, um, I've never had so much business to take care of in the toilet before."

Hermione's cheeks went pink as she crinkled her nose. "Ronald, that's rude and absolutely vile."

"It's also funny."

"Oi," Fred said, walking over to them and hooking an arm around Ron's neck.

"Hi, Fred," Ron muttered. Everyone in the Burrow seemed keen on ruining moments between him and Hermione.

"Hate to disturb you two but Georgie and I have some gifts we'd like to give Harry before dinner. Care to join us?"

"We're saving gifts until after dessert," Hermione said.

"Oh, he'll want these now," Fred said, winking at her. Hermione rubbed her brow, pouting slightly. Ron found her exceptionally gorgeous when she got this way. It only happened when Hermione was forced to deviate from her plans.

"We might as well," Ron said to her. "Come on." She reluctantly followed him and Fred into the kitchen.

Despite everything that had happened at the pond and in the loo, things seemed to be okay between Ron and Hermione. He hadn't expected to argue with her in front of everyone or watch her storm off and leave Harry's party, but he had thought there'd be some sort of distance between them. There was tension, of course. He could feel a strong pulse beat between them every time they locked gazes, spoke to each other, or touched in any way, but they were all right - even happy around each other. Ron didn't know if it was real or how long it would last, but he wanted to enjoy every second of it. The pounding thoughts in his head and the ache in his muscles and heart could wait.

As his mum and Ginny got the table and food ready, his dad divulged the horror he and Bill had endured while shopping with the women. Fred and George then entertained them with products from their shop and kept giving Harry toys that blew up in his face or candy that turned his fingernails different colors. When Luna went into further detail about 'capturing' Harry's Kreeto Plum, Ron had a hard time keeping his fits of laughter back. Hermione and Ginny repeatedly had to pinch him so he'd stay quiet.

Dinner was brilliant. His mum had prepared all of Harry's favorite dishes and as they passed the food around, they each took turns saying embarrassing things Harry did that they found intriguing (it was a Weasley birthday tradition). Harry was red-faced and sheepish by the end of Ron's list, but he could tell that Harry was enjoying the attention and teasing from everyone. The bloke looked so happy, normal and carefree; Ron had never seen him in such a way before. He wished with everything he had that he could keep Harry in this moment of bliss.

After dinner, Ron's mum finally brought out Harry's cake. He seemed completely taken aback as she placed the large lemon dessert with seventeen floating candles in front of him.

"W-wow," Harry whispered.

Hermione chuckled. "You've said that word at least four times today."

"He's still speechless," Mr. Weasley said.

"I am," Harry rasped. Even though they were celebrating him getting a year older, Harry looked younger than Ron had ever seen him before.

"It's all for you, dear," Mrs. Weasley said, rubbing his back.

Harry peered around at everyone. "This is amazing. Thank you all."

"Don't thank us, just make a wish," Ginny said. She tenderly kissed his cheek. "Happy birthday, Harry."

Harry gave her a look of longing; Ron knew what his mate would wish for. He blew out the candles and everyone clapped for him. Harry glanced up at Ron; he nodded to him. Harry's wish wouldn't come true now, but they would fight as bloody hard as they could to make it happen one day.

Harry's mood seemed to improve once people started passing him gifts. Just as he had anticipated, Harry absolutely loved his broom polish. Ron smirked smugly at Hermione while Harry went on about how much he had always wanted professional cleaner. She merely rolled her eyes, gently pushing Ron as she mumbled about the simple minds of boys.

By the time Harry had opened all of his gifts and everyone had at least two servings of cake and tea, it was well into the night. Ginny then officially declared Harry's birthday surprise party a success. Ron couldn't believe how smoothly everything had gone. There had been so much worry and chaos, but Harry was still smiling and laughing. At the end of day, that was all Ron cared about.

Fred and George apparated to their flat, and Ron's dad and Ginny offered to walk Luna home. Ron would've asked Harry to try out his new polish, but Hermione hurried Harry up the stairs before he got a chance to say anything. Ron had no idea why; he tried (and failed) not to let it bother him. Instead of sulking, he began cleaning the kitchen with his mum. Ron needed to do something with his hands and he was hoping that the chore would clear his head. Now that the party was over, he only had memories of snogging Hermione on top of the sink to occupy his mind.

"You don't have to do that, Ron," his mum said, breaking him out of his thoughts.

"I don't mind," he said with a smile, wiping down the table.

"Well, I appreciate your help. It's been a long day."

"It really has," Ron said. "Everything came together though."

"Yes, it did. The party was wonderful. I'm assuming everything before that was all right too?"

"Everything was fine," he said.



"That's a relief," she said in a heavy breath as she continued to wash the dishes.

Ron stopped scrubbing. "A relief?"

"That everyone was taken care of, yes."

He looked up at her. "I told you that I could do it. Did you doubt me or something?"

"Of course not," she said, turning to him. "I was just a little concerned. I didn't know if you would be able to handle it all."

"Handle it all?" Ron asked. "I had to keep an eye on Ginny, Harry, Hermione and Luna. What wouldn't I have been able to handle about that?"

"Nothing, Ronald," his mum said, waving a hand at him. "I only mean that this is the first time you've been left in charge and -"

"- that's not my fault. I've never been allowed to be in charge before."

"Because you've never had to be," she said in a patient yet sharp tone. "It's always been Fred and George or Percy."

"But none of them live here anymore. I can take care of things too, Mum. I can look after my sister and my mates just fine." Ron knew that he needed to stop talking but there was something inside of him that wouldn't leave him be. Whatever it was, Ron figured that his mum could feel it too because her demeanor was growing stiffer by the second.

"I can see that now, Ronald," she said curtly. "There's no need to argue with me."

"I'm not trying to argue, Mum," he said in a calmer voice. "I'm just letting you know that you don't only have to consider me when you're in a tight spot. I can be dependable, too. You can trust me."

"I do trust you, Ron," his mum said. "That's why I left the house, Ginny, and Harry in your care." Her statement punched Ron viciously in the chest. Voices that he always had to beat down grew louder whereas the thing that had been growing inside of him was now clear; it was anger and hurt rolled together into a malicious ball that made Ron want to smash his foot right into Harry's half-eaten cake.

"Yes, mother, I did somehow manage to take care of your house and your precious babies while you were away for less than four hours."

His mum gaped at him. She marched over to where he was standing and pointed a soapy finger at him. "Don't you ever talk to me that way, Ronald Weasley. If this is how you're going to react to my comments then maybe you shouldn't take the lead anymore. I

thought we could have an adult conversation about this. Whenever I would talk to Bill, Charlie, or Percy, I-

"- I am not, Percy!" Ron said loudly. "I'm not Charlie or Bill either. They're not here anymore, and Percy - that bloody git - couldn't care less about-

" " Ronald Bilius Weasley, do not talk about your brother that way! How dare you insult him?"

Ron put a hand to his chest. "Me? Mumâ€¦I â€¦ I don't believe this. Percy's not even here and you're defending him. Why can't I say what I feel? He's my brother; I should be allowed to have these feelings towards him."

"You can feel whatever you want to," his mum said in a raised voice, "but if you only have negative things to say about him then you better believe that I won't allow you to blare them out whenever you feel like it." Now was a good time to accept his defeat. Ron tried to remember what his dad had told him about reaching out to his mum, but he couldn't. He was too far gone.

"And why is that, Mum?" Ron asked, shaking. "Because he's a Weasley and I should respect him? I don't. I don't care at all about honoring him or kissing his arse, because he walked out on us."

Ron hated fighting with his mum; he felt like such a failure for once again putting space between them but he couldn't just let her gut him like this. "Look, I knowâ€¦I know I'm not as smart as Percy or as pleasant or whatever else, but I would never do what he did to you and Dad. I'd never walk out on our family or think that I was superior. I'm here, Mum. You justâ€¦you just gotta give me a bloody chance."

Ron threw the dishtowel down before walking out of the room and up the stairs to the loo. He opened the door without knocking and was relieved that no one was inside. Ron went right to the sink, continuously splashing his face with water. He needed to calm down but he didn't know how. His anger and impulsive behavior had gotten him into trouble again. He'd gone too far this time. Ron was sure that she would tell his dad everything the moment he came back, then both of them would hate him and think that he was once again proving why he was rubbish as a son.

Ron turned the water off then tripped back against the wall. He banged his head against it several times as he stared at the sink. He made himself remember everything that had happened against it only a few hours ago. Ron felt awful now but while his body was against Hermione's, and even before that when he'd massaged her ankle, he had felt unbelievably good and untouchable. It was only with Hermione that Ron was completely free of his demons and doubts.

"I fucking want you so badly, Hermione," he said. His body was flooded with memories of her taste and their mixed sounds. Ron was hard again; his heart skipped a beat at the idea of seeing her perfect smile. He wanted to find her, if only to say hi, but

she was somewhere with Harry and Ron needed to apologize to his mum. He took a few deep breaths, telling himself to get his head on before going back to the kitchen.

His mum wasn't there, and the sink was full of dishes. Ron felt another blow to the chest. He'd not only angered his mum, but had hurt her too. He couldn't talk to her now. Ron was sure that she wouldn't even open her bedroom door for him if he knocked and tried to explain himself. Ron picked up his towel again, wiping down the table before finishing the dishes. He cleaned the kitchen with more care than he ever had before. It wasn't enough but Ron hoped that it would at least tell his mum in some small way that he loved her and was sorry for always being a disappointment.

After Ron was finished, he went back to the large pond. No one would look for him there; he would be alone and safe to say, think, and feel whatever he pleased. When Ron arrived, he lowered his lit wand tip to the ground so he could see where he was walking. He picked up the sodding rock that had caused Hermione's injury, holding it tightly in his hand as he sat on his towel, which had been left behind. It was so dark and quiet. He was incased in the open black space of it all and Ron enjoyed the feeling. He ran his fingers over the sharp rock, thinking about what had happened because of it.

Ron had found out new things about Harry and Ginny. His little sister and best mate meant so much to him; he wished that he could do something for them. Ron tried to ignore the small sensation (that felt a lot like relief) when thinking about them. He couldn't shake it off. The horrible truth was that Ron was somewhat thankful that he was seeing this happen to them because it reinforced his thoughts regarding Hermione. The one thing Ron knew for sure was that he couldn't let his relationship with her turn out the same way; he was glad that he wouldn't have to give Hermione any bad news that could possibly hurt her and their relationship.

They had already gone through so much since Dumbledore's funeral, and on top of everything that had happened during their sixth year, it was remarkable that they had still been able to enjoy a birthday party together. Ron knew that they needed each other. No matter what happened, he simply could not put them in a place again where they didn't even know if they were friends.

Ron held the rock so closely in his hand that he felt the edges leave impressions in his skin. He'd always been so certain that friendship wasn't all he wanted, but he suddenly wasn't so sure anymore. The truth was that in spite of everything Ron wanted to believe, he honestly didn't know if he could be a good boyfriend.

Being a friend was nothing like being a boyfriend - Ron had found that out the hard way with Lavender. He would have to be different for Hermione. He'd have to be smart all the time and constantly think with his head, never letting his impulse get in the way. Ron had already proven twice today that controlling himself was damn near impossible. That wouldn't do as Hermione's boyfriend. There was no telling if he had the endurance or the

skill to make her the happiest girl in the world. His mum obviously thought that he was rubbish as a son. There was no reason to believe that Hermione wouldn't think the same thing of him as her boyfriend.

"Ow." Ron opened his hand. He'd been squeezing the rock so hard that an edge had broken his skin. He shook his head, telling himself to get it together.

Ron didn't know what was wrong with him. He usually always knew where his bollocks were but, like he had told Harry, the rules were different when Hermione was involved. Ron had enjoyed his moment with her so bloody much, but he needed to see the situation differently this time if he wanted to keep them together.

Yes - if Ron wanted to keep talking to Hermione and seeing her smile then he'd have to accept the fact that casual was better and friendship was all he should want. It didn't feel right; the words tasted fucking rancid on his tongue, but Ron would grow accustomed to it. He had to so he could survive everything else in his life that was in the shit. He'd have to at last swallow the pain and words of defiance, and admit to himself that friendship was all he and Hermione could probably ever have.

Ron wound his arm back then chucked the rock into the air. "Reducto!" he shouted, rapidly pointing his wand at the stone. It exploded into a dozen tiny pieces that dropped into the pond. He watched the particles splash into the water then sink below. He felt better yet worse at the same time.

Ron set his wand next to him then stared at the once calm pond water that was now chaotic with ripples and fragments of sharp rock.

Ron was sure of what he wanted now; he just needed to find a way to tell Hermione.

"Good night, Harry," Hermione said with a smile before closing the door. She eased herself down the squeaky staircase as best as she could, then returned to Ginny's room. She jumped, yelping faintly.

"Ginny!" Hermione exclaimed. "You startled me!"

"Sorry. I thought it would be all right to come into my own room."

"You know what I mean." Hermione sat on her cot, letting out a contented sigh.

"How's the birthday man?" Ginny asked.

"Happy," Hermione said with pride. "He had a really good day, Ginny. I can't tell you enough how glad I am that you did this."

"I am too," Ginny said, slipping into her nightgown. "I'm going to go up there soon to talk to him. I can't believe that I haven't had a chance to already."

"A lot has happened today!" Hermione looked off to the side; images of ginger hair, blue eyes, and large hands skipped across her vision. "It's understandable that you're only now getting the time," she quickly added. "At least you two will be alone."

"I suppose," Ginny said. "I just wish that I could've had more time with Harry today."

"I understand, but if it makes you feel any better, the moments I did see you and Harry share were beautiful," Hermione said.

Ginny gave a genuine smile. "Things just felt so right – better than they have in awhile. I guess we'll see where Harry and I go from here."

"It'll be someplace great, I'm sure," Hermione said, stretching out her legs.

"How's your ankle?" Ginny asked.

Hermione raised her pant leg, rotating her foot. Though it was still swollen and horribly red, it didn't hurt at all. The cream had worked brilliantly but she knew that her fast recovery was largely due to Ron. He had acted like such a knight and had taken amazingly good care of her. Massaging the Boswellia into her skin had been painful but Ron's kind fingers, soothing deep voice, caring blue eyes, and tender kiss to her ankle had been more than enough to heal her even without the cream.

"Hermione?"

"Yes?" She looked up from her ankle and to Ginny. "Oh, yes, my ankle is fine. It's stiff but there's no pain."

"I reckon you have Ron to thank for that, eh?" Ginny said.

"Absolutely," Hermione said in earnest. "Your brother – he's fantastic. I didn't know he knew so much about taking care of muscle strains."

"I don't know where he got it from," Ginny said. "I guess after years of being the brother who had to rub the sun protecting or healing cream in, Ron picked up a few things. He's always been the one we go to after hurting ourselves from Quidditch or wrestling about."

"Curious," Hermione said, finding this new talent of Ron's extraordinarily sexy and sweet. She would never run out of reasons for being madly enticed with him.

"You know what else is curious? You and Ron spending four hours in the loo."

"We did not spend four hours in there!" Hermione said. "It's like I told you earlier: I was in severe pain, and the cream took awhile to settle. I couldn't just run back downstairs the moment he put it on me."

"Uh-huh," Ginny said, placing a hand on her hip.

Hermione could tell that Ginny didn't believe her but she had to stay firm. She felt bad enough for tarnishing Harry's party and Ginny's plans with her clumsiness. Hermione couldn't also tell Ginny that things had been delayed because she had been frantically and passionately kissing and running her hands all over Ron in the bathroom.

Hermione stared off again, thinking about Ron's lanky yet firm body that had been dripping and flushed. She'd never see him so god-like before. Everything - from his sopping locks of fire, to his light ginger hairs that had been plastered to his freckly legs - had been perfect and beautiful. Even the bold green blades of grass that had stuck to his large pale feet had caused Hermione to ache all over. She knew that seeing him in his swimmers would be a delight, but she hadn't been prepared for Ron's magic.

"Hello? Hermione!"

"Pardon?" Hermione said, looking up from the floor.

Ginny merely stared at her. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine" sorry. I'm just a little tired. All the swimming wore me out." Actually, Hermione hadn't felt so energized in ages. She owed her liveliness to one of her best friend's having a great birthday and her other best friend giving her an amazing afternoon. Ginny just continued to look at her skeptically; Hermione figured it would be best if she changed the subject. She stood up, flipping a shirt over her shoulder.

"I should return this to Ron."

"Good idea," Ginny said, smirking, "but before you go, isn't there something you want to say to me?"

Hermione gave her a once-over. "Is there?"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "I was right, remember? About wearing the bikini. It wasn't so bad, was it?"

Hermione blushed but it had nothing to do with Ginny's statement. She thought about how Ron's eyes had slowly examined her body in the bikini. There had been hunger in his gaze, which only made her yearning for him grow more extremely. "No, I guess it wasn't," she said.

"See? I told you that Ron would behave himself."

Hermione's blush intensified. While Ron hadn't disrespected her, she wasn't sure if plunging his talented, fiery tongue into her mouth and squeezing her bum while pushing his erection against her was considered 'good' behavior. "Y-yes, I suppose." She cleared her throat. "Do you know where I might find him?"

"I think he went outside," Ginny said. "I didn't run into him on my way up here."

"Thank you," Hermione said. "I'll see you in a bit." She left the room but didn't go outside. She first went to the loo, closing and locking the door behind her.

Hermione walked over to the sink and carefully sat down on it. She once again lifted her pant leg to view her swollen ankle. Hermione stared at it until she could see Ron kneeling before her, rubbing her foot and telling her that the pain wouldn't last. She'd believed every word he had told her, and he'd proven his claims. Hermione had been so unsure while Ron was confident and wise.

She bit her lip. She could still feel his strong yet gentle fingers increasing the pain while taking it away at the same time. Hermione made a faint noise, thinking about Ron kissing her ankle with his soft, full lips. She couldn't believe that he'd done it. Hermione hadn't expected him to take her joke seriously but she was glad that he had. It was another shining example of why she sometimes needed a push from Ron. She trusted his word and judgment more than he would ever realize.

Hermione thought about her entire day with Ron. It was Harry's birthday but she would be lying to herself if she believed that it had only been about him. She hadn't been able to ignore the hot current that had gone back and forth between her and Ron from the second he'd come down the stairs with Harry. Hermione had tried all day to relax and act normal around him, but it had all crumbled to the ground when she'd arrived at the pond. Pretending that nothing was going on with her while Ron moved and swam around in his dark green swimmers had been exceedingly difficult - doing it all in Ginny's bikini hadn't helped either. Her only saving grace was that Ron had acted like a gentleman and hadn't contributed to the awkwardness.

No - Hermione had been the one, once again, to ruin things. She'd gotten herself so wound up by her nerves and desires that she had actually become jealous watching Ron performing the swimming stunt with Ginny. Though it had looked horribly dangerous, she would've loved to mount Ron's shoulders and feel his hands on her. Hermione also would have given anything to tell him playfully that, as her boyfriend, he needed to watch her tits while they were in mixed company. She smirked as she thought of a hundred different ways the cheeky ginger boy would've responded. Her favorite was Ron saying something about how Ginny, Harry, and Luna getting a chance to watch them grope each other made them the luckiest prats in the world.

At the word 'groping', Hermione's memory shifted beyond the pond to the very place she was in now. They had kissed - again - a lot too. She had lost herself completely the moment Ron started rubbing her thighs, and she knew then that something was going to happen if she didn't stop; it was exactly why she hadn't. Sometimes it only took a deep look, a sweet phrase, or a soft touch from Ron for her to give up all control to him. Hermione never had any say in the matter. Her body had been made to

automatically respond to him. She didn't mind it though. Ron was the only man she truly wanted to show that kind of weakness to.

Hermione slipped Ron's t-shirt on, smelling the collar. His fresh scent was there as well as a hint of earth that must've come from it lying in the grass for most of the day. She looked down at her body, swallowed up in his shirt. She loved how everything about Ron was so much bigger than her but was still so comfortable, natural, and a perfect fit.

She bit on the collar, moaning quietly as she ran her hands up and down her thighs. They had kissed again. Hermione didn't know what it had meant to him or what it would mean to them now. She was confused and a bit scared, but she had enjoyed every second of it and was glad that it had happened. Hermione had missed his taste and his sounds so much. She pressed her fingertips into her inner thighs, remembering how wild she had been with him. She had acted without any regard but now she had to face the consequences of such behavior. Hermione would have to look Ron in the eye and explain to him somehow why it had all happened.

Hermione stopped touching herself. She was losing her firm grip on things. She wasn't being the solid, textbook Hermione Granger that she always had been; she didn't know what to do or what was happening to her decency. Ron wasn't her boyfriend, and his feelings for her were unclear, but if Harry hadn't barged into the loo, Hermione was sure that she would've reached down Ron's swimmers and touched him. For heaven's sake, for all she knew, she would've gone even further than that and gotten on her knees before him.

"Oh, Ron," Hermione panted, shutting her eyes tightly. She pulled off his shirt, taking several deep breaths. It all seemed so wonderful, but Hermione knew that it couldn't be. If she was ever going to stay on top of the situation then she had to remember that actions couldn't change things on their own; words and agreements had to be declared too. She and Ron had made a deal, and though they had kissed heavily, it didn't mean that the situation was suddenly different.

Hermione held Ron's black Canons shirt out in front of her. She grinned at the spectacular shirt and the large orange C's on the front. She had to talk to him and figure out what was going on, but she was petrified of what would come of it. Hermione panicked for a second, worrying that their actions would take their friendship a step back. She had worked so hard to gain what she had with him. Hermione couldn't - wouldn't - survive losing it all again.

"I want you so desperately, Ron," she said to the shirt before kissing one of the C's. She put the collar against her nose again, closing her eyes. Hermione told herself to calm down and not to lose herself to her fear. She didn't know anything yet; she wouldn't until she talked to Ron. "Come on, Hermione. You're fine. Get up," she said. Hermione took a few more deep breaths before easing off the sink. She sniffled, wiping her eyes then giving herself one firm, assuring nod in the mirror before rolling her shoulders back and leaving the loo.



Hermione went into the kitchen and cut a large piece of cake for her and Ron to share. She figured that it would be a great way to keep things pleasant between them and to give them both something to focus on if it became too much to look at each other. She went outside; something told her to check the large pond rather than the one closest to the house. As she approached the lake, she saw a light. It had to be coming from Ron's wand. She mentally told herself to stay sharp and patient. Hermione refused to let her impulsive behavior cloud her judgment again.

She opened her mouth the moment she saw Ron, but she couldn't say anything. He was staring off towards the pond; his expression was intense, and his body was still. Ron was so powerful; his demeanor touched her deeply. Hermione wondered if his attitude was due to him thinking about what they had done. She cleared her throat before she had a chance to come up with an answer.

"Ron?"

He looked up at her, instantly sitting a little straighter. "Hi, Hermione."

"Hi," she said. "I don't mean to disturb you."

"You're not."

"Good. Then can I join you?"

"Sure. Come on over."

"Thank you." Hermione tried to walk straight and without stumbling as she made her way over to him, but she was incredibly nervous and shaky. She hadn't been alone with him since they'd lost themselves in the loo. Hermione could hear him telling her how good she looked and how he wanted to kiss her. She was still so shocked that he'd said it and that it had actually happened.

When Hermione made it over to him, Ron shifted off his towel. "Here."

"No — no," Hermione said. "You keep sitting there."

Ron gave her a look. "Do you always have to reject my offers?" Though his tone was sharp, there was something playful in his expression that put her at ease.

"Fine," she breathed, sitting on his towel. Their shoulders touched; it made her toes tingle. "I've come bearing gifts." She handed him his shirt back and a fork, then placed the plate of cake in her lap.

"You're amazing, you are."

Hermione couldn't help but to blush. "I don't know about that."

"'Ew 'r," he said through a mouthful of frosting before swallowing it down. "How's your ankle?"

"It's healed," she said, rolling it for him. "Thank you so much."

"You're welcome," he said. "I'm really glad you're okay."

"Me too." Hermione was very relieved that her ankle was better, but a small part of her actually wanted it to still be damaged so Ron could take care of her. She looked at her cake, quickly taking a bite. "I can't believe I've had so much of this. I think I've eaten more of it than Harry has. It's just so good."

"It's because of the extra lemon my mum added."

"Hmm. Possibly." Hermione picked off a blue sprinkle, popping it into her mouth. "It could just be because your mum's cakes are so much sweeter than the ones my parents used to make. Low sugar frosting is the choice amongst dentists."

"That's cruel," Ron said. "I would've run away after my sixth birthday or something."

"I should run away now from this cake," she said, "but it's too good to abandon."

Ron grinned at her. "That's brilliant."

"It is?"

"Yeah," he said. "I honestly don't get girls sometimes. Like Lavender—she always felt guilty and embarrassed for eating more than the bare minimum - like she had to feel ashamed because she wanted more. Who bloody cares?"

"A lot of people do."

"Not me," Ron said, stuffing a very large chunk of cake into his mouth. "People should eat when they're hungry and when they just want a bit more. Food is so bloody delicious, so why not?"

Hermione burst into laughter. "That's an admirable philosophy, Ronald, however, some people can't afford to just keep eating — financially or health-wise." Ron merely shrugged. The two began eating their cake in silence.

With their wands providing the only light, their surrounding was dark and somewhat mysterious. Hermione loved being alone with Ron like this. It was as if they were the only two people in the world; everything was new, exotic, peaceful and beautiful. After they finished eating, she moved the plate off her lap then rubbed her brow. Ron was quiet as he continued to stare at the pond water.

Hermione was having a difficult time standing the space that they were in. She could feel something between them but they weren't acting on it. Hermione feared that their kiss from earlier had taken all of their bravery and passion away.

"So," Ron said in a deep, slow voice. "How's Harry?" He didn't look at her as he spoke. Ron seemed preoccupied with something.

"He's all right," she said. "I talked to him for awhile after dessert about how his day had gone. I think he had a lot of fun."

"That's good," Ron said dully.

His tone and attitude reminded Hermione of how distant and indifferent Ron had been the night they made up. She couldn't go through that again. Hermione refused to cry her eyes dry in the grass for a second time. "Ron, will you look at me?"

He turned to her. Even in the darkness, she could see how intense his eyes were. "Yes?" he asked.

Hermione pressed her lips together. She had to take control and speak. It was the only way to keep things from getting any more complicated. "I — I, um, think we should — we need to talk about what happened. Don't you think so?"

Ron's chest rose and fell a little faster. He nodded. "I do, but I don't know how to start."

"Neither do I," Hermione said. "Maybe it'll be for the best if we keep things honest and straightforward." Her heart started to beat faster. Rationality was always supposed to come before emotion, but there was something so — tragic about Ron in this moment that was affecting her. She could feel some undefined heavy emotion pouring out of him; it was making her emotional too. Even if it wasn't right, all Hermione wanted to give Ron was emotional truth.

"Well — I —" Hermione stopped, giving herself a moment before starting again. "Ron, I meant everything I said in the bathroom. I think it's important that you know that first. I can't sit here and tell you that all those things didn't happen or that they didn't mean anything."

"I can't either, Hermione. I mean — fucking hell."

"What?" she asked in total fear.

Ron just kept gazing at her, opening and closing his mouth several times. "I think you're beautiful," he said after a long pause. "I always have and — and — I'm really attracted to you. What happened in the loo wasn't something I did because you were crying or I felt like rubbish. I did it because I wanted to."

Hermione's entire body warmed over as she became dizzy. She had dreamed about Ron telling her these things for years — nothing compared to the real thing. "Y-you find me attractive?"

"Very."

Hermione let out an unsteady breath. Her head didn't feel connected to the rest of her body. "I'm incredibly attracted to

you too, Ron. I have been for the longest time. Am I wrong to say that there's a physical and sexual attraction between us?"

He shook his head, blushing madly as he licked his lips. "No," he said faintly. "So, uh, what does this mean?"

"I don't know." Hermione was finding it hard to breathe; she felt like she was spinning in place, even though she was sitting down. She had to keep herself together and keep their conversation open, moving, and free of complication. "All I can say is that I honestly enjoyed what we did in the loo, Ron."

Ron's chest heaved more jaggedly. He rubbed his neck, frowning a little. His emotion was pushing right against Hermione, rubbing itself into her skin. It felt so good but was becoming too much for her. "I really enjoyed it too, Hermione," he wheezed. "I'm glad that doesn't bother you."

"Not at all," she whispered.

"Good, because all I want is to keep us okay. I need our friendship."

Hermione felt a pang in her chest at the word 'friendship', but she knew it was what she needed to hear. "O-oh, yes, I completely agree. I think we're close enough to admit there's a desirability between us but that it doesn't have to interfere with the good relationship we have." Ron nodded. He looked as though he was about to burst; Hermione wasn't sure if it would be from pain or emotion. All she knew was that, for some reason, they were flushed, sweaty and panting. Hermione didn't know why talking was making them feel this way; she wanted it to stop but continue at the same time.

"H-Hermione?"

"Y-yes."

Ron used his shirt to wipe his forehead. "What's going on right now?"

"I honestly don't know, Ron," Hermione said, shaking her head as she looked right into his beautiful blue eyes. "I don't have all the answers. In fact, there's something I'm hoping you could tell me."

Ron raised an eyebrow, looking apprehensive. "W-what?"

Now was the perfect time to ask Ron if they would remain friends, push for something more, or decide to keep their hands off of each other. Those were the responsible, important questions that Hermione needed to raise. For some reason, however, she couldn't bring herself to ask them. They were alone together, unbelievably close, and completely engulfed in the fire between them. Hermione was obedient to her intelligence and better judgment, but right now her heart was what she wanted to be loyal too.

"What were you going to ask me before Harry came in?" she asked before she could stop herself. Ron's eyes widened; Hermione was surprised when he actually shifted away from her. He stared off toward the pond, rocking in place as he frowned.

"It's nothing," he said.

Now was an even better time to let the subject go, but Hermione couldn't because she didn't believe Ron. He had carried her back to the Burrow, massaged her foot back to health, and had given her a few moments of pure heaven and passion. He'd been a knight for her; she had to be a warrior for him now.

"I still want to know, Ron," she said.

"Why?" he asked, not looking at her.

"Because I'm curious and because you were going to ask me anyway."

He snorted. "Clever - but it doesn't really matter now."

"Why not?"

"Because that moment is over."

"Urgh!" Hermione tugged on his arm so he'd look at her. "Who says it's over, Ronald?"

Ron pulled out of her grip. "You don't even know what I was going to ask you, Hermione, so for once in your life, just trust my word and believe that I know best!"

"Fine!" Hermione said in frustration.

"Besides," he mumbled. "I'm sure you probably wouldn't have wanted to hear it."

"You don't know what I would or would not have wanted, Ron. Trust my word."

"Bloody fucking hell, Hermione!" Ron shot. "All right then!" He rubbed his face in fury, but when he removed his hands, Ron seemed lost and even a little scared. "I was justâ€¦I wasâ€¦I dunno..."

"Just tell me," she pleaded. "Please."

"Okay," Ron said in a gentler voice. "We were just in the moment andâ€¦Iâ€¦I was going to ask ifâ€¦if you wanted to do it again. I know that's horrible and stupid and-"

"-I would've said yes," Hermione immediately said before she had any time to think. "And since we're being honest, ifâ€¦if you were to ask me again - right now - I'd say yes too." Hermione hadn't meant to say that last bit. It had simply flowed from her so smoothly with everything else. It was her deepest truth in the moment; she felt liberated yet tense saying it. Hermione didn't

want Ron to think that she was easy, but she couldn't pretend as if she didn't want it to happen. Hermione had to let Ron know in some way that she wanted it with him again.

Ron's shoulders slumped. He let out a deep, broken whimper. "Really?" he asked. All Hermione could do was nod. She'd offered herself to Ron. Now, she had to wait on his response. Hermione was shaking badly; her eyes were stinging with tears of desire, fear and love.

Ron sighed heavily, closing his eyes for a moment. "Hermione, please, please don't say that if you don't mean it or if you're not completely sure." Hermione had no words so she hastily leaned over, kissing him. She pulled away before he had time to kiss her back. Hermione felt even more lightheaded as her lips tingled. She looked right into Ron's eyes. Hermione loved him so much and ached badly for him. Her former plans had vanished. All she had now was this moment with the man she wanted more than anything else in the world and would die for any day.

"I do mean it," Hermione said confidently. "I - I want to have sex with you again, Ron." Those were the words she had wanted to tell him since it'd happened the first time. Everything Hermione knew was screaming at her to find a Time-Turner and go back, but she couldn't and didn't want to. All she wanted was Ron and something more with him, no matter what the 'more' was.

Ron kept his gaze on her as he held her hand tightly between his two larger ones. They were sweaty and trembling. "Are you sure?" he asked.

She placed her free hand over his. "As long as you are."

"I am. I really want it, Hermione. I just don't know what you'll do tomorrow."

His words hurt, but she understood why he had said them. "I'll be here, Ron," Hermione said. "I'm not leaving. I promise." She placed a hand on his piping hot cheek, resting her forehead against his. "I promise," she repeated.

Ron's eyes went to her lips so she licked them. He tugged on her hand that he was still holding. "Come here," he whispered.

Hermione obeyed, pressing her mouth against his. They both sighed and moaned as the comfort and pleasure covered them again. She moved her hand from his cheek to the back of his neck; Ron parted his lips for her. Their tongues slipped and slicked over each other's in delicate, intricate detail. It was a lot like their first deep kiss in his bed, and Hermione was able to lose herself totally in it. Ron's lips were marvelously full and he tasted like lemon cake. He was just such a damn good kisser, and she loved how he was still holding her hand while his other gripped her waist, like Ron wanted to let her know that he was always protecting her.

Everything else in Hermione's life faded away as she found herself lying back on Ron's towel. She spread her legs; Ron

settled between them, kissing her deeper. He pressed into her, making her gasp in his mouth as his full weight and hard muscle teased her through her denim. It felt wonderful but caused Hermione's heart to beat out of her chest. She was so nervous and scared; she didn't know why. Hermione had been through this before with him but it was still new and uncertain.

Ron finally pulled away, panting. He placed his hand against her zipper. "Hermione?"

"Yes," she said, nodding. She knew what he was asking.

Ron started to unbutton her jeans. In turn, she hastily began to unzip his trousers. They were both breathing heavily. Hermione felt wobbly and hot. She couldn't believe this was happening again, but she was incredibly happy and terrified that it was. Her hand found its way to the bulge in his jeans. Ron was so hard and big. Hermione shuddered in anticipation, thinking about him pushing inside of her. Ron's mouth began a trail of kisses, curving around her neck then up to her jaw. Hermione felt him trying to fumble with her fly with one hand while he held himself up with the other. She had finished first, so she stopped his struggling and took over, unzipping her own jeans down.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

"You're welcome." Hermione didn't know what to do as they just lay there in their underwear. It had been so much easier the first time because things had happened in a haze. Now, they were conscious of everything. "Ron?"

"Yes?"

"Kiss me."

Ron instantly put his lips to hers. They kissed more feverishly and her command appeared to have given them both more courage and vigor. They inelegantly pulled down each other's denim to their knees. Hermione awkwardly kicked her jeans off and, with difficulty, pulled them over her trainers. Ron yanked his jeans down to his ankles all without breaking the kiss. Hermione had to though. The time was now.

She broke away. "Ron?"

"Yes?"

"I â€” I need my wand."

Ron's eyes widened as he froze. She bit her lip and stopped moving too. Everything stalled as they once again realized the impact of her words. That statement signified the seriousness of what was to happen. Ron just stared at her for several seconds â€” just like he had the first time.

"O-oh, um, right." Ron looked around then reached for her wand that was sticking out of a pocket of her jeans. He handed it to her. Hermione put her wand tip to her stomach. Her body went

painfully stiff for a few moments. She dropped her wand next to them once the sensation passed.

"All right," she said.

Ron nodded. He put his forehead against hers whereas he placed his hand right against her knickers. Hermione bucked, whimpered, and arched herself into his touch. Ron's hand burned right through the cotton. She instantly became wetter as a fire grew in her stomach. "You sure?" he asked.

"Yes, Ron, I'm sure," she whimpered. Even if she wasn't, she couldn't say no. Her heart would give out if she did.

"O-okay." He touched the hem of her knickers. She lifted her hips so he could pull them down. He did, slowly, and didn't stop until they were by her ankles and she could kick them off. Hermione blushed; she was fully exposed to him now. Ron kept his eyes on her pussy, chewing on his lip. A sudden urge pleaded for her to tell Ron that he could taste it if he wanted to but Hermione couldn't bring herself to say it.

"R-Ron?"

"I'm sorry," he rushed, looking up at her face at once.

"It's okay. I - I hope that-"

"- you're beautiful. I told you that," he said. She smiled, feeling a bit more confident.

Ron then focused on himself, tugging down his boxers. When he was free, Hermione was once again amazed at the size and hardness of his cock. It was good to know that she hadn't been imagining Ron's endowment. He glanced up at her; Hermione hadn't been fast enough to look away. It was his turn to blush and hers to feel guilty. "Oh, I'm so sorry."

"It's all right."

"You know, Ron, you're quite astonishing," she said.

He smirked as his ears flushed a deep red. "You think so?"

"Completely," she breathed.

"Thanks. Um, should I keep going?"

"Please," Hermione said. Ron slicked his head with her moisture, circling the tip around her entrance. She moaned, shaking in pleasure as well as slight fear.

"Is this going to hurt you again?" Ron asked.

Hermione looked up from their naked parts. Ron seemed so concerned, which made her love him more. She was sure that other blokes would've just dove right into her, but Ron wanted to take



care of her first and ask as many questions as possible. It was yet another reason why he had her heart.

"I'm not sure," Hermione said honestly. "Maybe. It won't be as bad though." She hoped that it wouldn't be. She wanted to focus on Ron as much as possible.

"Just let me know if you need anything, yeah?" he asked. Once again, all Hermione could do was nod. Ron kissed her; she kissed him back, deeply, and with all the strength that she had. He rested his forearms on either side of her to steady his weight.

Then, in a careful manner, Ron gradually eased into her. Hermione sharply took in air while Ron moaned loudly. Her fingers automatically curled into his shirt. Even though she had been broken, Ron's muscle stretching her out still hurt; however, it wasn't at the same level as before. She let out a cracked whimper as he completely filled up her insides. It burned in a pleasurable way.

"Are you okay?" he asked breathlessly against her mouth.

"I-I'm okay," she whispered. "This is okay." He kissed her again then began to move.

Ron kept a faster pace this time, and he pushed a littler harder. Hermione's entire body moved up and down the towel as he thrust repeatedly into her. She rolled her eyes back every time Ron slid in. She hadn't realized how much she'd missed his body and the special way that he commanded hers.

Ron left small kisses all around her jaw and neck as he moaned and gave himself to her again. Hermione cradled the back of his head with one hand while she clutched his side with the other. She gladly let Ron be in charge because she trusted him and knew that he would take care of her. After awhile, he moved faster and pushed with a stronger force. Ron moaned and panted repeatedly. Hermione pulled on his shirt. She was tender but he felt so incredible to her. Hermione couldn't believe how talented he was.

Ron put his forehead to hers; she opened her eyes and watched him. He looked to be in complete ecstasy. She was so happy that she was making him feel good. Hermione needed to give him more. She gripped Ron's waist, spreading her legs out more as she raised them. Hermione wanted him to feel as much of her as he could. Ron responded immediately, going a little further into her. Hermione met his thrusts, arching his back. With every stroke, she did her best to pull him deeper in. Hermione whimpered noisily, clawing at him as the mixture of tenderness and bliss made her head spin.

"Mmm-mm," Ron moaned against her mouth. He sucked on her bottom lip for a moment before going back to her neck and softly nibbling on it. He pulled his hips away from her then slid all the way back in. Ron let out a choked cry. "Mmm - oh, oh, myâ€¦Hermione."

Ron moaning her name was beautiful; she'd never heard anything so spectacular in her life. He must have been close. Hermione wantedâ€” no needed him to cum inside of her again.

"R-Ron?" she whimpered. "Please." It was all she could say so she hoped that it would be enough. Hermione moaned, arching her back once more. Ron lowered his face, kissing her madly. She let him take control, tangling her fingers in his hair as he showed her everything that no one else got to see.

Ron suddenly broke out of the kiss, gasping. Hermione felt him jerk and fill her body up. She closed her eyes, letting out a blissful sigh. Ron didn't stop thrusting until his orgasm faded. They gave each other wet, slow kisses as they shuddered off the last of their strong sensations. Ages passed before Ron finally parted from her mouth. He was out of breath, trembling extremely.

They stared at each other, panting madly. Every single part of them was completely connected. Hermione had total awareness of Ron and of herself. She felt worn out yet so alive at the same time. She touched his cheek like she had always envisioned doing after having beautiful sex with him. He pushed his face into her hand.

Eventually, Ron slipped out of her, lying next to her. They were quiet for awhile. Then, as if they'd had an unspoken agreement, they both sat up and started pulling their clothes back on. Hermione didn't know what to say or do. She was tingly and somewhat sore, but also happy. Regardless of the trouble it could bring on, sex with Ron was the best sensation Hermione had ever experienced. Nothing would ever match up to the feeling of Ron's body and the care that he gave her.

She watched Ron pull his trousers back on. After she was done zipping up her jeans, she sat up straight, rubbing her brow and licking her lips several times. Ron tapped his fingers on his knees. Hermione might've laughed if it had been an appropriate thing to do. They'd gone from eating cake and talking about how to handle their mutual attraction to kissing and having sex. Never in her life had she deviated from her plans so profoundly.

"Hermione?" Ron rasped after a prolonged silence. "H-how are you doing?"

She gave herself a moment to think about it. "I'mâ€¦fine. You?"

"I'm good," he said. "I, um, I really liked that."

"So did I."

He rubbed his neck. "But it hurt you. I know it did."

"It wasn't as bad," Hermione assured. "And you took care of me, again. Trust me, Ron, I enjoyed every second of it."

"You have no idea how much I did," Ron said.

She ran her fingers through her hair. She could feel Ron all around and inside of her. Him sitting right next to her and talking to her was only making Hermione feel more intoxicated. "I guess that along with the attraction there's a need between us,"

"I reckon there is," Ron said. "I don't know if we can pretend that it's not there anymore either. I don't even want to."

"Neither do I." Hermione now had new questions to ask him; her better judgment made no protest (she didn't know if that was a good thing or not). "So is this something you want to continue? Do you want something like this between us?" It wasn't an intelligent question but she hoped that Ron would understand.

Ron looked right at her. Hermione loved how evenly his chest rose and fell and how relaxed his body became after sex. He was silent for a long time. "I just want to feel good with you and not fuck things up. I want to make you happy, and I don't want to ruin what we have now."

"I don't either," Hermione said, scooting closer to him. "I don't want us to drift apart or start hating each other."

"I could never hate you, just myself for hurting you." Ron took her hand again. "Hermione..." He sighed, shaking his head. "Bloody hell, I'm not sure what to make of all this. I just don't want to mess up. You and me we're okay. We keep getting better, and I don't want that to change."

"And you think I do? I'm terrified of not having this anymore, Ron. I wasn't sure where we would end up after we fought the last time. Somehow though, we're both here tonight. We even ate cake together."

Ron smiled. "I want to keep it that way, Hermione - us always being able to eat cake together." He cleared his throat, letting go of her hand. "Hermione, what do you want? You ask me that question all the time but what do you want?"

Hermione wasn't sure of how to answer. She wanted Ron as her best friend, boyfriend and lover; she also wanted to keep a strong friendship with him while becoming something more. What Hermione needed though was for them not to lose each other. Their bond would be essential for their survival once they began searching for the Horcruxes.

"I want what we just had," she finally said. "And only with you. I know that's -"

" - that's great," Ron rushed. "I mean - I understand. I don't fancy doing this with anyone else either. This is something between you and me" in our friendship, like I said before."

Ron's words hurt her so much that she wanted to collapse into herself but they also made her feel so good that nothing else mattered. She was torn between two sides of what she wanted. Her better judgment at long last woke up and told her to take what

was safe and already there. That was the right, practical thing to do. Ron was making it clear that he wanted to stay friends. For the first time, Hermione didn't see a problem with that.

"I agree," she said with confidence. "This can be something special - just for us. A way to be happy together and not make things complicated. I think the issue last time was that we didn't talk - I didn't talk - but I am now."

Ron nodded, looking as terrified as she felt. "And what are you saying exactly? Do - do you want to keep having sex?"

She couldn't help but to moan. The words sounded so good. "Y-yes," she choked out. "Do you?"

"I do. I want to keep doing this, Hermione. As long as it's okay with you."

"It has to be okay for both of us, Ron," Hermione said. "It always has to be a mutual decision. If we're truly going to do this, then we'll have to be smart and honest and"

"Safe," Ron added. "We'll have to be really careful. Not just with the technical stuff but with everything going on around us."

"I completely agree," she said. Ron was boosting her confidence and reassuring her that this could work. She was already feeling like her alert, capable self again. "We have to stay focused. There's still so much work to do and I - wait, I don't know what to tell your family, especially your mum."

His expression hardened a little. "We don't have to tell her or them anything, Hermione. It's none of their business; it's no one else's business but ours."

"What about Harry?"

Ron rolled his eyes, looking off toward the pond. "I reckon he knows enough. I told him about us after you left."

"You did?"

"There was no way around it," Ron said. "He took it well, I guess."

"You guess?" she asked.

"Urgh! You know what I mean. The point I'm trying to make here is that this is something we can keep just for us, Hermione. My family doesn't need to have any say over this part of my life. You - I mean this, it's mine."

Hermione blushed, feeling a bit shy. "Wow. I really like that you feel that way. Me - I mean this, being yours."

"It's yours too," he said. "It's ours."

They gazed at each other. Hermione wasn't sure if what they were saying was completely true or right, but she couldn't give up what they had shared again. She desperately wanted to be more with Ron, and she knew that a real relationship with their intercourse would be better, but they had talked things out and had a solid plan. Hermione honestly couldn't find a reason to protest. They were consenting adults who cared very much about each other. Even if Ron wasn't romantically in love with her, she knew that he deeply cared for her. That could be enough for her.

She leaned forward, kissing Ron. He kissed her back, gripping her knee.

Hermione had Ron in a different way now. She could kiss him, touch him, and let her desire for him be known; she could also plan with Ron, be a part of the Golden trio with him, and eat cake with him by the pond. The only things Hermione couldn't do were hold him all night, walk around Diagon Alley hand-in-hand, and tell Ron how much she loved him. The irony was that she desperately wanted those things more than anything else.

While Hermione couldn't have it all, she was old and wise enough to realize that no one ever got everything they wanted.

The smartest thing she could do now was hold on to what she did have and enjoy it.

\*\*\*\* Guh! I tell you that girl Rose is a mental! Oh wait...that's me, lol. Thanks for reading and REVIEW!  
CHEERS!

## CHAPTER 8

Thank you lot for the reviews! They all mean a lot to me and keep me writing, honesty. :) Now, if any of you happen to follow Turned to Real Life, yes- I WILL be updating that story soon. No worries!

Okay, I wasn't going to do this, but since SO many people have been reviewing/pm'ing me the same thoughts and questions, I'll just make a statement now so I won't have to later. If the plot or idea of this story seems far-fetched or if it makes you uncomfortable or upset then I really don't know what to tell you because this is how the story is (at least right now). I can only suggest that you just keep reading, have some faith in me, and don't judge a...well, don't judge a fiction by its cover. I'm a hardcore R/Hr shipper and I LOVE, LOVE Ron and I love Hermione too. I don't mean to get defensive but after some of the pm's I got, I feel as though I should say this - which just boggles my mind(especially if you've read my other works on this site). One last thing, I don't mean to sound bitchy, but I know what I'm doing with this story. I might be mad but there's always a method to it, lol. So, I hope that clears some things up for everyone! :)

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter

Stretching and sighing, Hermione walked downstairs and into the kitchen. She felt incredibly well rested and clearheaded for the first time in months it seemed.

"Good morning," she politely said to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, who were both sitting at the table.

"Good morning, Hermione," they said together. She smiled, sitting across from them.

"You're certainly up early," Mr. Weasley said. He poured her a cup of coffee while giving her a grin that reminded her distinctly of Ron.

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley," Hermione said, taking the mug. "I really don't think it's that early though. I'm usually awake at this hour."

"You'll have to excuse Arthur, Hermione," Mrs. Weasley said, rubbing her thumb across Mr. Weasley's cheek. "He's always at work in the morning so all of this is new to him."

"Oh, that's not true," he said. "I was here just yesterday morning."

"Only because you owled in," Mrs. Weasley said.

"I try as hard as I can, Molly. You know I'd rather be here with you."

"I do, and that means a lot," Mrs. Weasley said, kissing his cheek. When she pulled away, Mr. Weasley quickly gave her a proper kiss on the mouth.

"Arthur Weasley," Mrs. Weasley said, blushing.

"Sorry, love. I needed that," he said. He then looked to Hermione. "Sorry, Hermione."

Hermione giggled. "It's perfectly fine, Mr. Weasley."

"I guess you'll also have to excuse him for that," Mrs. Weasley said. "He's quite mad in the morning." She got up, lightly hitting his shoulder before taking bowls out of the cabinets. Mr. Weasley chuckled, then continued reading his newspaper.

Hermione's heart melted as she watched Ron's parents. They were so lovely as a couple, and she saw so much of Ron in Mr. Weasley. Hermione had to expunge the dreams she had about one day flirting with her husband, who was also mad in the morning, snuck in extra kisses, and had ginger hair and blue eyes.

"So, Hermione," Mrs. Weasley said.

"Yes?" Hermione promptly asked, looking up from her coffee.

"How did you sleep last night, dear?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

Hermione opened her mouth but surprisingly lost all sense of vocabulary. She had slept soundly, but she wasn't sure if she could tell Mrs. Weasley that. Hermione might then be asked why she had slept so splendidly; she couldn't look Mr. and Mrs. Weasley in the eye and say that it was because their youngest son had given her amazing sex, rich conversation, and at least twenty-five minutes worth of slow, deep kisses before going to bed last night.

"Hermione?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"Oh, yes, I'm so sorry," Hermione said, shaking her head and rubbing her brow. "I think I might've woken up a bit too early after all." She chuckled nervously but Mr. and Mrs. Weasley just continued to stare at her. Hermione cleared her throat. "I, um, sleptâ€¦all right. The party took a lot of energy out of me."

"Ah, the party had that affect on everyone," Mr. Weasley said.

"But it was worth it," Mrs. Weasley said.

"Yes, it was." Hermione took a rather large gulp of her steaming hot coffee and was relieved that Ron's parents had been satisfied with her answer. All of a sudden, she felt uncomfortable and exposed sitting across from them. They had no idea that she was sleeping with their son. Hermione respected Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and sneaking around behind their backs with Ron was definitely the opposite of showing respect. She felt guilty having to lie to them, but right now it had to be for the best.

Though the secret put pressure on Hermione, she also felt guilty because she sort of liked sharing something with Ron that went over everyone else's head. She usually did things by the book, but her agreement with Ron deviated from her normal structure entirely. At the same time, however, Hermione wished that things didn't have to be secretive. She wanted to tell Ron 'good morning' with a big hug and kiss in front of everyone - just like his parents did every morning. Even more so, Hermione wished that she could pour Ron a cup of coffee, telling him that she loved him. In her fantasy, Ron would then - in a sleepy yet adorable way - grin and say that he loved her more and that she was exceptionally beautiful in the morningâ€¦!

"M-morning," Ron said with a huge yawn as he padded into the kitchen. Hermione's heart skipped a beat; she felt heat and excitement flourish in her body at hearing his voice and seeing him.

"There's my boy," Mr. Weasley said. He pulled Ron down by the shoulder, giving him a one-armed hug while ruffling his hair. "Morning, son."

"Morning, Dad," Ron said, smiling widely and handsomely at him. Hermione could tell that Ron felt completely happy in the moment with his father.

"How did you sleep?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"Like a baby dragon," Ron said casually as he stretched. "I feel really relaxed." Hermione choked on her coffee, coughing a few times.

"Hermione, are you all right, dear?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"Yes, I'm fine," Hermione said, wiping her mouth as she gasped for air. "I justâ€¦the coffee is very hot."

"That's usually how it's served, Hermione," Ron said. "I'm sure you've read at least one book on coffee preparation â€" maybe even written an essay about it?"

"How clever," she said.

Ron smirked and just kept gazing at her as if he was going over everything they had done together the night before. Hermione hoped that he was because she was doing the same thing. The sounds, feelings, and tastes all came gushing back into her mind and body. It felt so good; what made the experience even better was that she was still there and so was Ron. They'd had sex and were still okay.

Mrs. Weasley started cracking eggs into a bowl. Ron finally looked away from Hermione. He turned to his mother, rubbing his neck. "Um, good morning, Mum."

"Morning, Ronald," Mrs. Weasley said. She stopped mixing then looked at him, placing a hand on her hip. "I came in here and saw that the kitchen was clean."

"Yeah, I took care of it last night afterâ€¦you went to bed," Ron said, picking at his nails as he spoke to her.

Mrs. Weasley's facial expression hardened. "Well, thank you."

"Anytime," Ron said. Mrs. Weasley nodded then returned to stirring the eggs. Ron stood there, watching her, and seemed slightly upset. Hermione didn't know what to think. She could feel the tension between them and see that there was something wrong, but she couldn't understand why. The day had only begun and last night Ron hadn't mentioned anything about there being a problem.

Hermione took a peek at Mr. Weasley; he too was looking at his wife and son curiously. She would have to find out for herself later.

"Come have a seat, Ron," Hermione said, gesturing to the chair next to her. Ron walked away from Mrs. Weasley without so much as giving her hand a squeeze and sat next to her. Though Hermione's body reacted pleasantly to the close proximity they now had, her mind was going through a thousand scenarios as to why he was suddenly so miserable.

"Here, Ron," Mr. Weasley said, sliding a mug over to him.

"I don't fancy coffee," Ron mumbled, still looking at his mother.



"I'm aware. That's why I poured juice in here," Mr. Weasley said. "You've loved juice in the morning ever since you were an adorably plump toddler."

"Aww!" Hermione said, placing a hand to her chest.

"Oi - that's not true!" Ron blushed, snatching up the cup.

"Yes, it is," Mr. Weasley said, chuckling. "Every morning you'd tug on my pajamas and ask me to get you some 'duce'."

"Oh my! How precious!" Hermione squeaked, pinching Ron's cheek.

He brushed her hand away. "Keep your hair on, Hermione! My dad is having a laugh - but even if I did do that, I was referring to me being a plump toddler as being untrue. There's no way that I was fat - just look at me now."

"He didn't say that you were fat, Ronald. Your father said you were plump, which you were," Mrs. Weasley said, turning to him. "You had squishy cheeks and the cutest little tubby toes that I'd ever seen. When you were about four, you had your first major growth spurt and all the weight shed off. The memories haven't shed though; they never will." She smiled kindly at him; Ron smiled back.

"Morning Weasleys and Granger," Ginny said as she and Harry entered the room.

"Good morning, Ginny dear," Mrs. Weasley gave Ginny a hug and kiss, then repeated the process with Harry, "and good morning, birthday boy."

Harry laughed. "It's not my birthday anymore, Mrs. Weasley, but good morning to you too."

Hermione heard Ron sigh so she looked at him; he was gazing deeply into his cup as he absentmindedly flipped his wand between his fingers. She wanted to help, but what Ron needed was something she couldn't give to him. Hermione glanced up at Mrs. Weasley, trying not to feel resentment toward her. Though Hermione didn't have any siblings, she understood that parents usually treated each of their children differently; however, she couldn't help but wish that Mrs. Weasley would realize how disproportionate her affection came across sometimes - particularly when Ron was the child receiving less attention. It wasn't Hermione's place to make suggestions, but recently it had gotten harder to remember that fact. Once more, she figured that her ultra sensitivity to Ron's care was a byproduct of sleeping with him.

"Breakfast will be ready soon," Mrs. Weasley said. "I hope everyone is hungry."

"You should definitely eat and build up your strength, Harry," Mr. Weasley said. "I scheduled your Apparition exam for later today."

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley," Harry said, sitting next to Hermione at the table.

"You'll be fine, mate," Ron said. "It's a piece of pis--"

"-- Ronald," Mrs. Weasley rapidly said.

"Pie," Ron smoothly finished with. "I mean to say that the test is quite easy."

"Says the bloke who failed it the first time," Ginny teased. Ron stuck his finger in his mouth before jamming it into Ginny's ear. She gasped, yanking his arm away. Ginny bit his finger hard while giving him a wild expression.

"Ow!" Ron said, snatching his hand free. "You're a lunatic!"

"And you're disgusting!" Ginny said, rubbing her ear against the top of her shoulder. "Ugh! I can feel your slime in my ear."

"What about me, eh?" Ron asked. "I reckon your dragon teeth broke the skin on my finger. How about you keep my body parts out of your mouth."

"Only if you keep your body parts away from my ear," Ginny said.

"How about you two leave each other alone?" Mr. Weasley suggested. "Keep your mouths and your body parts to yourselves - like good little children."

"I believe Ronald and Ginevra have already proven that they can't be good little children, Arthur," Mrs. Weasley said, peering sternly at them.

"That's not true, Mum," Ginny said. "We can be good; watch." She kissed Ron's cheek. "Good morning, big brother. I love you," she said sweetly.

"Ah, but I love you more, little sister," Ron said, patting Ginny on the head. The two started laughing as Mrs. Weasley plopped eggs onto their plates, and Mr. Weasley hid behind his newspaper.

Hermione blushed in slight embarrassment and delight as she watched Ron and Ginny. Though the two had been joking, she'd found their moment very sweet. She envied how easy it was for them to express themselves to one another, whether they were being serious or not.

"Weasleys, eh?" Harry whispered in her ear.

"Unquestionably," Hermione breathed, feeling a mixture of heavy emotions.

For the first time in ages, having breakfast with Ron wasn't complicated for her. He gave her furtive looks, extended smiles, and light touches that she now understood. Hermione didn't feel as self-conscious giving him her own dose of light flirtation

either. They could now expose their attraction, which made it easier to breathe, but at the same time, demanded a greater effort on her part. Hermione had a solid arrangement with Ron, but her intense feelings for him were still there. She had to maintain a level of indifference so he couldn't see through her shield.

"Lots of post this morning," Mr. Weasley said, walking back into the kitchen sometime after breakfast. "Molly, there's a letter here from your brother. Ron, Ginny, Harry, Hermione: your Hogwarts letters are here."

Hermione dropped her napkin, then shared a three-way look of shock with Ron and Harry.

"Hogwarts letters?" they all said together.

"It is August first," Mrs. Weasley said.

"Yes, butâ€¦all this seems so sudden," Ron said, slowly reaching out to take his letter.

"It's been a whole summer, Ron," Ginny said.

"Hasn't felt like it," Harry said as he took his.

Hermione took her letter as well but kept her attention on her two best friends. She could feel and understand everything that they were going through at the moment because she was enduring it too. She placed either hand on their knees and squeezed; they instantly put their hands on top of hers. Sometimes, the three of them were so perfectly connected that they didn't need words to speak to one another; this was one of those times.

"Well, it's your last year," Mrs. Weasley said. "Just remember that."

"It's not my last year," Ginny mumbled as she unfolded a long piece of parchment.

"Are those your results, Ginny?" Mr. Weasley asked eagerly.

She nodded as her eyes widened. "I got eight O.W.L.'s and an Outstanding in Charms."

"Oh, Ginny, that's wonderful!" Mrs. Weasley, giving her a bone-crushing hug.

"We're so proud of you, sweetheart," Mr. Weasley said, kissing the top of her head.

"T-thank you," Ginny said in apparent surprise. "I didn't expect this."

"Why not?" Harry asked, squeezing her hand. "You studied practically every night last term and you're fantastic with charms. Congratulations."

"Thank you, Harry," she said, giving his hand a squeeze this time.

"Yes, Ginny, eight is impressive," Hermione said, "and an Outstanding in Charms is quite an achievement."

"You're right up there with Hermione, Ginny," Ron cheeked. "Great work."

"Oh, my baby!" Mrs. Weasley said excitedly. "I can't wait to tell everyone! Your brothers will certainly want to hear about this."

"It's not that big of a deal, Mum," Ginny said.

"Yes, it is," Ron said to her, though he was looking at his mother. "You're the first Weasley in awhile to do so well."

"You did fine too," Mr. Weasley said.

"No, I didn't," he said.

"Cheers, Ron," Harry said with a laugh. "You and I both got seven."

"But you got an Outstanding in something. I don't have anything."

"Ron, you know that's not true," Hermione said.

"Yeah, Ron. They're just O.W.L.'s. Who cares?" Ginny gave Ron a look that Hermione had never seen her give him before; there was something very tender and understanding about it. Ron gave Ginny the exact same expression, shrugging.

"I don't believe it," Harry said in a heavy breath.

"What?" Hermione asked, finally tearing her gaze away from Ron and Ginny.

Harry shook his head as he read over a letter. "I'm Quidditch Captain again."

"We're having a season?" Ginny asked.

"McGonagall says that it'll be on a temporary basis for now," Harry said. "She thinks it might boost moral, so that's why she's continuing the program."

"Brilliant," Ron said, sitting back in his chair. "At least I'll have something to do now at school."

"Ronald Weasley!" Hermione and Mrs. Weasley exclaimed together.

"I don't want to hear that kind of talk," Mrs. Weasley said.

"Nor do I," Hermione said. She skimmed over all the books and supplies that she would need for her N.E.W.T. courses. There was so much planning going on already for the expedition; Hermione wasn't sure if she could also get the boys organized and focused

so they could prepare for a vigorous seventh year. It would be a challenge, but she had to bear it in case they did wind up attending their last term.

There was an additional letter attached to her itinerary. Hermione frowned as she unfolded the shiny gold parchment. She gasped, placing a hand over her mouth. "Oh my god," she said breathlessly.

"Is something wrong?" Ron asked.

Hermione repeatedly read over McGonagall's words; each time she did, her heart beat a little harder and her stomach flipped. A strong wave of exhilaration, pride, and anxiety swept over her entire body.

"Hermione?"

She looked up from her letter, raising the small red badge that had covertly fallen into her lap when she'd unfolded the parchment. "I'm Head Girl."

The room erupted into applause and congratulations. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Harry, and Ginny took turns giving her hugs and kisses, and telling her that they were proud and knew she would be chosen. Hermione said 'thank you' to all of them and tried her best to hug them back, but all she could focus on was the badge in her hand, McGonagall's praises in her head, and Ron's eyes and wide smile that hadn't left his face since she'd uttered the words 'Head Girl'.

When Harry finally let Hermione go, Ron turned in his chair so he completely faced her. "Can I see your badge?" he asked.

"Of course." She held it out to him, realizing for the first time that she was shaking. Ron's hand brushed over hers and he tugged on one of her fingers as he took the pin. He traced the shape of it then outlined the words. Hermione's cheeks started burning again. It was just a badge but it was a part of her now. It represented her achievement and power, and Ron was carefully stroking it. She was most likely mad, but watching him handle her pin turned her on.

"I'm so bloody proud of you, Hermione," Ron said, looking up at her. "You were always meant to have this."

"Thank you," she said softly.

Ron gave Hermione back her badge, then pulled her into a hug. She held him, closing her eyes. Hermione inhaled the scent of his neck and hair. Her letter was already making her feel amazing; Ron's embrace was taking her to an even higher level.

Ron pulled away from her but not too much. He looked down at her lips; she instinctively licked them. Her heart was beating out of her chest, and she felt light-headed. Ron kissing her in front of everyone certainly went against their agreement, but she wouldn't stop him if he did. In fact, she hoped that he would. Receiving a

tender kiss from him after being made Head Girl would be extra special.

"Oh, we'll have to do something for all of you!" Mrs. Weasley said rather loudly. Her voice pulled Ron completely away from Hermione; she mentally sighed in disappointment.

"Mum, we just had a big party. We don't need another one," Ginny said.

"Besides, we're still planning for Bill and Fleur's reception," Mr. Weasley added.

"Yes, but there's so much good news going around the table that should be celebrated," Mrs. Weasley said.

"We don't want to overdo it though," Ron said.

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Weasley asked. "We could never overdo it. We're not living in the best of times right now so any happiness we get should be celebrated."

"I get that, but as Ginny and Dad said, there's already so much going on," Ron said.

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said. "I don't need a party or anything."

"And I've already had one," Harry added.

Mrs. Weasley frowned, placing a hand on her hip. "That's very sweet, dears, but I wouldn't mind."

"Molly," Mr. Weasley said. "It's all right."

"I know, Arthur," she said shortly, holding up a hand. "We won't celebrate then."

"It's probably for the best anyway," Ron mumbled.

Mrs. Weasley pursed her lips. "You know, Ronald, I'd think you would want to have a party for your friends and sister. Not everyone is made Quidditch Captain and Head Girl. Getting eight O.W.L.'s certainly isn't something that happens every day."

"At least not to me, right?" he asked.

"Ron, Molly," Mr. Weasley said sternly. "It's okay. Let's all just relax."

Mrs. Weasley and Ron didn't seem to be listening. They only had eyes for each other.

"I wasn't trying to make any sort of reference to you, Ron," Mrs. Weasley said.

Ron rolled his eyes. "So what else is new?"

"Ronald Bilius Weasley!"

"Okay, I'm sorry!" Ron said in a raised voice. "Is that what you want to hear? I'm truly sorry for what I said. Iâ€¦I didn't mean to upset you. Just forgive me, Mum."

Mrs. Weasley's anger faded. "What I'm saying now has nothing to do with that. I just want to hold on to the happiness that our family is granted every once in awhile. Can you understand that, dear?"

Ron shrugged. "I just want to know if you're going to forgive me."

Hermione was utterly confused. She had no idea what they were talking about or why Ron needed to be forgiven, and she'd never seen Ron bicker with his mother like this before.

Mr. Weasley stood by Mrs. Weasley and rubbed her arms. "I have a suggestion. If it's all right with Ginny, I propose that we celebrate her O.W.L.'s and Harry and Hermione's letter on her birthday. It's in less than two weeks so it'll still be a fresh celebration while also eliminating the need to plan additional parties."

"That sounds brilliant, Dad," Ginny quickly said. "I love that idea."

"So do Hermione and I," Harry said, nodding vigorously.

"What do you say, love?" Mr. Weasley asked.

Mrs. Weasley finally looked away from Ron. "I'm happy if everyone else is."

"Fantastic," he said. "Ron?"

Ron bit his lip, frowning as he stared at the tablecloth. "Whatever," he mumbled. He got up from the table then walked over to his mother. "I'm really sorry, Mum." He bent down, giving her a delicate kiss on the cheek before swiftly walking out of the kitchen and up the stairs. Even though his room was on the fifth floor, Hermione heard him slam his door shut. Mrs. Weasley just stared at the entryway as if she expected Ron to return.

"Molly," Mr. Weasley said in her ear.

Mrs. Weasley's bottom lip trembled but she quickly strained a smile. "I'm fine, dear." She eased herself out of her husband's embrace then snatched up their Hogwarts letters. "I'll compile a list of supplies, then later we can all decide when to go shopping." She too swiftly left the room without another word.

Hermione's heart was in her throat, and her eyes burned; she loved Ron and Mrs. Weasley. She hated seeing Weasley family members at odds with one another. They all deserved to be happy, and as a unit they were a strong guiding light for everyone else. Their world desperately needed to keep all the light that it had.

"Dad?" Ginny asked, moving closely by his side. "What's wrong with them?"

Mr. Weasley gave her an encouraging look, but since his facial expressions were so similar to Ron's, Hermione could tell that he was confused and concerned as well. "They're all right, sweetheart. Ron and your mother are justâ€¦everyone is under pressure right now."

"Maybe I should go talk to him or her," Ginny suggested.

"No, leave them be for now," Mr. Weasley said. "I'm sure they'll appreciate some space. I wouldn't mind help though. Will you collect the dishes for me?"

"Sure." Ginny quickly began gathering plates and cups, then placed them in the sink.

Hermione and Harry shared a look; they didn't know what to do. "Is there anything we can do to help?" Harry asked.

"No, we've got it," Mr. Weasley said. "Go enjoy the weather while you still can. You won't have all this free time in a few weeks." Mr. Weasley went back to giving all of his attention to Ginny who stood by his side and helped him wash the dishes.

Hermione and Harry quietly got up from the table and went outside, leaving the Weasleys to be alone as a family.

"Do you know what's going on?" Harry asked.

"I was just about to ask you the same thing," Hermione said. "I figured Ron or Ginny might have told you something."

"Nothing from either of them," Harry said. "I mean, Ron and Mrs. Weasley have argued more often than usual this summer, but nothing like what we just saw. I didn't even know they were in the middle of one."

"I didn't either," she said. "I hope they work it out."

"Me too. I hate feeling so helpless."

"Especially when it comes to the Weasleys," Hermione said. "They've done so much for us over the years. One of these days I'd like to give something back, you know?"

"Who do you think I'm fighting for, Hermione?" Harry asked.

They kept walking until they reached the small pond. They sat down in silence. Hermione gazed at the calm water, going everything that had happened.

"Do you ever think about what Ron says?" Hermione asked after some time had passed. "About the off comments he mumbles about his mum?"



"Yes," Harry said. "A lot, actually."

"And what's your belief?" Hermione asked. "Do you agree with him?"

Harry sighed, peering out to the water. "I do understand where he's coming from and I feel bad when he gets so upsetâ€¦"

"But?" Hermione asked.

"But at times I get frustrated," he said. "I'm not thick. I know Ron gets mad at me for how his mum treats me, but sometimes I honestly don't care. Mrs. Weasley is just trying to be nice. I know she feels sorry for me; she just wants to help. It makes her feel good. I'm not ashamed to say it makes me feel good too."

Harry pulled out blades of grass, chucking them at the water. "What Ron doesn't understand is that no matter what he thinks about how Mrs. Weasley feels about me, he's her son. At the end of the day, they're family and she loves him more than she'll ever care about me. That's how it should be. I'm just Harry â€” Ron and Ginny's friend. I'm no one's son here. I never will be."

"I don't think that's true, Harry," Hermione said softly. "Mr. and Mrs. Weasley already see you as their son."

"But I'm not," Harry said. "I'm not trying to be a prat, Hermione. It's just the truth. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley care about Ron so much; he just doesn't want to see it."

"It's not that he doesn't want to," Hermione said. "It's that he can't. Ron only knows the dynamic of his family from his viewpoint. It's hard to break free and find new perspective after having the same ideas and feelings for seventeen years."

"I try to remember that. That's why I back off when I can or help tone things down," Harry said. "Ron may be a git sometimes but I do care. I just wish that he could see how lucky he is that he has siblings to annoy him and parents to fight with."

"I completely understand," Hermione said, gazing at the still water. "He gets so angry and blames himself, as if he's the only one at fault. That's what frustrates me about Ron. He has six siblings and two parents. He's not aloneâ€¦not like us anyway." Hermione hadn't meant to let the last sentence slip out, but she couldn't help herself. She was holding on tightly to her Head Girl letter and the weight of the pin was pulling her down, lowering her guard.

Hermione looked at Harry; he stared right back at her. She wanted to apologize for what she'd said, but the look in Harry's eyes told her that she didn't have to. He understood exactly what she was talking about.

"When I read the letter about making captain againâ€¦"

"Yes?" Hermione asked, scooting closer to him.

"The first thing I thought about was what my dad's reaction would've been if he found out that I was spending my last year at Hogwarts as captain like he had." Harry gave a small smile. "Right after that, I thought about Sirius and what he'd say. I'm sure he would've referenced my dad somehow, then said something really funny about me once again having authority."

Hermione gently laughed. Harry's words touched her so deeply. "I can clearly hear him saying something to that affect." She curved her finger around her pin. "I can only imagine how many pages my parents would write to me if they found out that I'm Head Girl. I'd probably just show up and surprise them with the letter though. My dad would put his arm around me while my mother talked about how great of an achievement this is."

Hermione let out a shaky breath while she held back her emotions as best as she could. "I love the Weasleys and I adore being here, but I miss my parents. I wish I could celebrate this achievement with them too. It's like what Mrs. Weasley said: not everyone is made Head Girl. I'm sure that sounds awful but-"

"- it doesn't," Harry said. "I appreciate being here more than I'll ever be able to explain to the Weasleys, but I still think that my true home was supposed to be with Sirius. Now that he's gone, I justâ€¦I'm a seventh year Quidditch Captain with no one to go to for advice." His expression was firm, but Hermione could hear the emotion in his voice. Harry was a marvel at keeping stoic but he was still human.

She placed a hand on his. "I'm sure your dad would've had a lot of great advice to give you, Harry. He and Sirius would be so very proud of you. In fact, I'm sure they and your mother are proud now - wherever they are. I certainly am."

He smiled more openly this time. "Thanks; and once you return to your parents and take the spell off, I'm sure they'll want to give you a party for becoming Head Girl, even if it's late. You deserve a party, Hermione, and you deserve that badge."

"Thank you," Hermione said, feeling a powerful flourish of love for him. "I'm really glad that you're here, Harry. Not just at the Burrow, but hereâ€¦for me."

"Of course, Hermione, and I'm glad you're here too."

Hermione leaned over, giving Harry a hug. With everything that had been going on lately, she had almost forgotten about her other vital friendship. It was yet another reason why Hermione knew that she had to stay on top of things regarding the situation with Ron. She couldn't lose Harry because of her lapses in judgment. He wasn't just someone she felt obligated to help; Harry was her best friend and had been since first year. He was someone she connected to, gathered strength from, and could talk to when she didn't have anyone else. Harry had stood by her all last term during the disaster with Lavender, and she was eternally grateful. In some ways, Harry understood her a little better than Ron. There were some topics that she simply couldn't discuss with Ron but felt comfortable divulging to Harry.

Harry pulled away. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she said. "I just have a lot on my mind." Harry nodded, then went back to looking at the water. Hermione pressed her lips together, wondering if now would be a good time to talk to him. She didn't want to make the situation awkward, but she needed to get things out into the open while she had the time alone with him.

"Soâ€¦," she said, "Ron told me that he explained the event that happened between us."

Harry abruptly cleared his throat. "Yeah, he, um, told me," he said, not looking at her.

Hermione could feel the discomfort thickening between them but she had to push forward and handle this like an adult. "Y-yes, well, I want you to know that Ron and I are fine and it won't get in the way of our friendship or our duty to the expedition."

Harry turned to her. "What?"

"Ron seemed a bit unsure about your overall reaction to this," Hermione said. "If you're concerned about how this will effect our concentration then you needn't worry."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Hermione, I don't know what he told you, but I'm not upset or anything. The only thing I'm concerned about is what's going to happen to you and Ron."

"Nothing at all," Hermione quickly said. "We're all right, and it's going to stay that way. We had a discussion about where we are."

"He told me about that too," Harry said. "I don't know, Hermioneâ€¦"

"What is it, Harry?"

Harry looked at her with his enormous and brilliant green eyes. They were so profound and Hermione appreciated how his intense gaze made her want to be honest. "I'm not sure, really," he said after a prolonged silence. "I justâ€¦I asked Ron this so I should probably ask you too: is this how you want things to be with him?"

"I don't follow," she said, shaking her head.

"Well, this arrangement," Harry said. He shrugged. "That's all you want?"

Hermione was taken aback. She couldn't believe that Harry was asking her this. Ron should've been the one challenging her statements and making her realize that this wasn't all they could have. "W-well, yes," she said. "It's smart and uncomplicated. It happened and it's over." Though Harry's gaze made her want to be

honest, she couldn't be right now. There was too much riding on her ability to control herself and accept what she had.

Harry gave her a once-over as if he was trying to look right through her. Hermione wasn't worried. Harry was her best friend and she loved him, but his eyes couldn't weaken her like Ron's did. "If you say so, Hermione," he muttered.

She pointed out her chin, crossing her arms over her chest. "I do say so, and you know what, Harry? I think you should be asking yourself the same question in regards to your relationship with Ginny right now."

"Don't change the subject, Hermione," Harry said dully. "You know it's not the same."

"And how is that?"

"Because," Harry said, "Ron isn't like Ginny."

"I was able to figure that out all by myself, funny enough," Hermione said.

Harry rolled his eyes again. "You know what I mean."

"Actually, I don't."

"Then let me tell you," Harry said. "Ginny says what's on her mind; she's amazing that way. When we do talk, I'll know that she's telling me what she really thinks. We'll be able to figure something out - no matter what it is or how much we may not like it. Ron's not like that. He's telling you stuff but it doesn't mean that it's true."

"So you're saying that he's lying to me?" Hermione asked.

"No - yes - maybe." Harry closed his eyes for a moment, sighing. "What I'm trying to tell you, Hermione, is that Ron has a lot of things to say but at times it takes a push or a kick in the bollocks or something before he starts spitting out what he truly feels. I thought that'd be obvious by now."

Hermione didn't know what to say. Harry was talking to her as if Ron had confessed his feelings to him; she knew that couldn't be the case though. It was true that Harry understood Ron better in some ways, but he was making the situation seem so ridiculous and easily handled. It wasn't - it couldn't be.

"What's obvious, Harry," she said quietly, "is that Ron and I are handling things all right as it stands. I'm not going to kick him anywhere."

"All right," Harry said, holding out his hands in defense. "I'm just telling you what I know."

"Well, I appreciate it, but we're quite all right as we are." Hermione looked down at her letter, reading over it again. "We should probably focus on what's coming up."

"Yeah, getting the letter for Hogwarts really shut out my theory that we'd leave before school started," Harry said.

Hermione's heart dropped a little. She hated that they weren't further along in their plans. "Don't worry, Harry, we'll get there. You, Ron, and I will start putting our heads together again tomorrow morning. We'll continue working on our strategy while also preparing for school, just in case."

Harry nodded. "I guess that's all we can do right now."

"Exactly, so we should accept these letters," Hermione said. "It might not be so bad, going back. No matter what else happens, you get to be captain again, and I can throw the Slytherin players into detention so they won't be able to practice."

Harry laughed, perking up a little. "You would never do that."

"No, but it's okay to talk about," she said, nudging his shoulder with hers. "Now come on; let's go over what you need to remember for your Apparition exam today."

"Oh, Hermione," Harry groaned.

"Don't start with me, Harry James Potter!"

She and Harry went over important details for him to remember regarding his test, then simply spent the morning talking and enjoying the weather. It wasn't too often that Hermione was alone with Harry; she liked the time with him. He helped her feel more like her old self, and she could always remember her purpose with him. Knowing her purpose and goals was extremely important to Hermione.

When the two returned to the Burrow, Ginny informed them that neither Ron nor Mrs. Weasley had emerged from their rooms. Harry decided to talk to Ron, and Hermione and Ginny went into her room. Though Hermione desperately wanted to talk to Ron, she told herself that it was probably for the best that Harry tried to reach him alone first. Hermione took the opportunity to write out a new schedule for herself and create a new entry in her journal for what she would need to do to prepare herself, Ron, and Harry for school.

After Harry and Mr. Weasley left for the Ministry later in the evening, Hermione decided to go to the shed to check on the Polyjuice Potion. Mrs. Weasley was still in her room, and Ginny had taken it upon herself to make dinner. Hermione figured that now would be the perfect time to slip away and cut more ingredients.

As Hermione walked to the shed, she let out the few weighty tears that she had been holding back for hours. She missed her parents every day but receiving her Head Girl badge had done something to her. There was nothing Hermione wanted more than to tell them about her new position and hear their excited praises and wise advice. Hermione sniffled, wiping her ears. What she had done to

her parents was for the best. One day, she would be able to lift the spell and show them her pin and letter from McGonagall.

Hermione opened the shed and walked inside. She slowly closed the door behind her, blinking several times. Ron was at the table cutting Ringshaft stems. "Ron?"

"Bloody sodding hell!" Ron dropped his knife. "Hermione, don't ever do that!"

"I'm sorry," she said.

"You're like a cat or something! I didn't even hear you open the door."

"I said I was sorry, Ron," Hermione said, locking the door. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?"

"It looks like you're working on the potion," Hermione said, walking over to him. He had all the ingredients neatly laid out on the table and the book was open next to the cauldron. "I guess my question should be why are you brewing this alone?"

"I'm not brewing anything," Ron said. "I'm just cutting things up and separating the components. I know tomorrow we have to start mixing again and adding stuff to the pot; I wanted to get an early start."

She smiled at him. "That's fantastic, Ron. You're wonderful."

He shrugged. "Just bored really. You're not upset?"

"Of course not," Hermione said. "I came here to do the same thing. I guess you read my mind."

"Or I'm becoming a genius," Ron offered. "Muggles apparently say that smart people think alike."

"They do say that," Hermione said as she began crushing Boomslang.

Hermione didn't know what to say to Ron as they worked. His face was blank but his body told her everything. Instead of loosely gripping items, Ron clutched everything with a tight grasp; his shoulders, which were usually a little hunched, were now straight and stiff. Hermione had been watching Ron closely enough over the years to know that those differences signified that he was still in a state.

"Well," Hermione said after awhile of working in silence. "It must be nice to get out of your room for a bit, yes?"

"I've been out of my room," Ron said. "I washed myself up and even took a wee a few times."

"Did you really have to add that last bit?" Hermione asked. "I assumed that you would at least step out for that."

"So what's the problem?" he asked. "If you were already thinking about it, then it shouldn't matter."

"I wasn't already thinking about it, Ronald!" Hermione slammed down a jar. "I just meant that everyone has to do that daily so I could infer it for myself. There's no need to add the superfluous detail."

"Uh, I don't know what 'superfluous' means, but I reckon you should calm down," Ron said, touching her shoulder. "You don't have to yell at me."

"I'm not yelling!" Hermione said, moving herself away. "I just find it offensive that you assume I think about you urinating all day long." She sighed, feeling flustered. She wasn't even that upset about Ron's comment. Hermione was, however, totally embarrassed that they were talking about his penis doing something. They were sleeping together now, so those kinds of details hit her profoundly.

Ron could evidently notice her discomfort because he grew very serious. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I was just having a laugh," he said. "I didn't mean to upset you." It was the same apology Ron had given to his mother. For that reason alone, some of her aggression slipped away.

"It's all right," Hermione said. "I'm sorry for snapping. I just have a lot on my mind."

"Don't we all," Ron breathed before returning his focus to the potion.

Hermione watched him as he continued to cut and separate items. She had to steer the conversation in a different direction to create a lighter atmosphere. "Thank you for getting started on all of this, Ron."

"Anytime," Ron said, smiling at her. "As long as you don't sneak up on me again."

"I didn't mean to scare you," she said. "You startled me as well. You have no idea how surprised I was to see you working on this."

Ron stopped cutting. "Surprised?"

"That you got a head start, yes."

He set the knife down. "Why? Because it's responsible and the right thing to do? Believe it or not, Hermione, I am capable of doing some things."

"I never said that you weren't capable."

Ron shook his head and began pacing in front of her. "I am so bloody tired of everyone thinking I'm useless and that the

sodding world must be coming to an end because I'm being helpful and responsible. No one has any bloody faith in me."

Hermione had no idea why Ron was acting this way or felt the need to get defensive. "I never said any of those things, Ron," Hermione said patiently. "No one did."

He simply kept pacing. "None of you have to actually say the words. It's written all over your face, and I can hear it in the backhanded compliments."

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, I'm so surprised that you're doing this, Ron," Ron said in a high-pitched voice that Hermione assumed was his rendition of her. "Oh, I'm so relieved that I can trust you with my babies, dear," he added in a lower tone of the high-pitched voice.

Hermione shook her head in confusion, latching onto his arm so he'd stop moving. "Ron, slow down. Tell me what you're talking about."

"Let me go," Ron said, snatching out of her hold.

"Fine!" Hermione said, stomping her foot. "Give me your snide comments then run off. Or maybe you'd like to just continue acting like an immature little boy!"

"Oh, thank you, Mum!" Ron yelled. "Do you have anything else for me?"

"Yes â€" as I matter of fact, I do!" she shouted back, stomping her foot again.

"The fucking floor is all bloody yours," Ron said, gesturing to it.

Hermione marched right up to him. He towered over her and was glaring at her but she didn't care. Ron was behaving like a moody prat and someone had to put him in his place. She placed her hands on her hips, looking up at him.

"Don't you ever call me your mother again." She poked him roughly in the chest. "I am your best friend, Ronald Bilius Weasley, and I will not tolerate you trying to push me away. I only want to talk and help you, but if you're going to behave like a mountain troll, then I'll leave you here to do so. Do you understand me?"

"Herm-

"- I said, do you understand me?" Hermione said, poking him in the chest again.

"Ow, 'Mione!" Ron whined. He took her finger, gripping it loosely in his hand. "Yes, I understand you. I'm sorry."



"You should be." She straightened her shirt, letting out a breath. "Now," she said calmly, "can we carry out a civilized conversation like adults?"

"I reckon," Ron mumbled. Hermione gave him a heated look so he quickly added, "Yes, Hermione, we can carry out a civilized conversation like adults."

"Perfect; so will you please tell me what's going on?"

He was quite and still for a few moments. "It'sâ€¦it's about my mum."

"I figured as much," Hermione said.

Ron let go of her finger then walked backwards until he hit the door. He rubbed his face, taking several deep breaths.

"Ron," she said.

"I know, I know." Ron lowered his hands. "Mum and Iâ€¦we had a really bad row last night."

"Last night?" Hermione asked, putting a hand to her chest. "W-was it after orâ€¦"

"It was before, but don't think it had anything to do with the things I saidâ€¦or did."

"Oh, Ronâ€¦"

"I mean it, Hermione," Ron urged. "She could've given me a million galleons last night or said that I was the greatest person alive, I still would've told you those things and I still would've wanted it with you. Don't you trust me?"

"Of course I do," Hermione said. "I believe you, Ron. I just want to be sure."

"Then be sure," he said. "My fight with her had nothing to do with my actions with you."

She felt a bit uneasy, but she trusted Ron completely. "What did you fight about?"

"How it's a miracle she came home to everything in one piece and that her favorite children were still alive," Ron said grimly. "I was cleaning the kitchen with her when she told me that she was relieved things had gone all right."

Ron's outburst from earlier suddenly made sense to Hermione. "Ron, I'm sure she didn't mean it in the way that you think."

"Actually, she did. I'd never been left in charge before and she was nervous about leaving you lot here with me." He kicked at the floor. "I reckon battling a giant chessboard and dueling Death Eaters at the Ministry is no match against staying home alone while the parents are away."

Hermione wasn't sure of what to say. Ron seemed so fixed in his beliefs and she knew how deeply they stemmed. She wished that they had talked about this last night. Hermione had been so busy wanting Ron that she hadn't taken the time to ask why he had been so preoccupied.

"Ron," Hermione said.

"What?" he asked dryly. "Are you gonna say that my mother loves me and I should just get over myself? Well save your energy because I've been telling myself that all day."

He pushed himself off the wall then started pacing again. "It wasn't even her lack of faith in me that was so bad. What really did my head in was that she thought I couldn't take care of you lot. She obviously doesn't understand that I would've taken down a Death Eater or gotten you all out of the house if it'd gone up in flames."

Ron stopped moving and stood in front of her. He took the finger she had poked him with, placing it against his chest. Hermione pressed into his skin while he loosely held on to her wrist. Ron wasn't even looking at her as they did this; she figured that he merely needed a bit of physical contact to continue on.

"Mum thinks that my brothers are more suited to take care of you lot because they're older, smarter, and better than me," Ron said quietly. "Even Percy, who I'm sure won't bother to send Ginny a birthday card this year. I don't knowâ€¦maybe they are better, but better doesn't necessarily mean 'right' to me."

Hermione couldn't believe that Ron had told her so much. He'd opened up to her in such a raw, tragic, and beautiful way that she had always assumed Ron reserved for Harry. It must have been a byproduct of him sleeping with her.

"Ron," she said again.

"Yeah?"

"Do you want to know what I was going to say?"

He finally let go of her, taking a step back. "All right."

Hermione took a step forward. "I was going to say that I wish I had told your mother about how you took care of my ankle. Maybe then she would've said better things to you. You did an excellent job looking after all of us, and neither myself, Harry, Ginny, nor Luna had expected anything less."

Ron looked down then back up at her. "Really?"

"This isn't something I have to make up, Ron." She lifted her pant leg, rolling her ankle. "See? It doesn't hurt and the swelling has already gone down. Because of your care, everything happened exactly the way you said it would."

Ron grinned a little. "I'm glad it's better."

"Thanks to you it is," Hermione said sweetly. "Now, you told me to save my energy, but I'll tell you anyway that your mum loves you. She's proud of you and she knows how incredible you are for battling giant chessboards and Death Eaters. Sometimes thoughâ€¦people just don't know how to say what they feel."

"I know all about that," Ron said in a low voice. "Fucking hell, I really messed up. I said stupid things then stormed off; I didn't get a chance to apologize."

"Which is why you did at breakfast?" she asked.

"Exactly. I mean, she's my mum. The last thing I want to do is hurt her. I just get so bloody angry and I explode."

"Trust me, I know," Hermione said.

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, we've established that I'm the biggest sagging tit in the whole bloody world, Hermione. I just want to make things right."

"Then talk to her," she suggested.

"It's not that simple," he said, shaking his head. "Things were already tense and I made it worse today. It's not that I didn't want to celebrate your lot's achievements. I just didn't want to put any more on her shoulders."

"I completely understand, Ron. All of us did."

He rubbed his neck, sighing. "I do think it's brilliant that Ginny did so well; Harry being made captain again is wicked; and you as Head Girl is the greatest fucking news this house has received in a long time."

Hermione blushed, laughing a little. "I don't know about all that, but thank you."

"I'm so proud of you, Hermione," Ron said, cheering up a little. "For the first time, I'm a bit excited about going back to school."

"Why?" she asked curiously. "So you can take advantage of my title?"

"Spot on," he said, winking. "Being best mates with the Head Girl has its privileges, I'm sure."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, don't get ahead of yourself. It's still not certain that we're going back or that we'll be there long if we do go."

"I think that's why Harry isn't too thrilled about being made captain," Ron said. "He may not get a chance to really do much for the team."

"Well, that's not the only reason," she said.

"I know. He wishes he could share the news with Sirius."

Hermione gaped at him. "Harry told you the story?"

"He doesn't have to," Ron said with a shrug. "I just know him; I know you too."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I know you were crying before you came in here," he said, rubbing under her eye with his thumb.

She closed her eyes and shivered at his touch. "I'm okay."

"I didn't say that you weren't." He pulled his hand away.

Hermione looked at him. Ron was gazing at her with his gentle blue eyes, obviously trying to see through her. She felt weak. Hermione didn't want to hide from him. "I was thinking about my parents and how I have no idea how they are," she said. "I've never gone this long without some form of contact with them, Ron. Being Head Girl means so much to me. It's something I've always wanted and something my parents always said I would be. I finally am and they may never know it."

"They'll know it, Hermione," Ron said. "This arrangement won't be forever."

"It feels that way sometimes." She wiped her eyes but wasn't fast enough to stop the tears. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said, rubbing her arms. "You listened to my rubbish and watched me throw a fit. Let me be here for you. I'm an arsehole but I'm also your friend."

Hermione opened her mouth but her voice cracked and she whimpered. She started crying so she covered her face. Strong arms wrapped around her; she rested her head against Ron's chest. Hermione always wanted to be strong; in order to do that, she had to succumb to her weakness and let it take her over every once in awhile.

There wasn't much to get out but what she did have locked away was powerful. It felt good, and by the time she was finished, she felt lighter and more alert.

Hermione pulled away. Ron went over to a shelf, pulling out a couple of tissues from a box. "Why are these in here?" she asked as she blew her nose.

Ron blushed horribly for some reason and cleared his throat. "U-uh, no idea. My dad is mad, remember."

Hermione wasn't curious enough to pester him for a real answer. "All right."

"Let me take those for you."

"You don't have to."

"I don't mind," he said, dropping the tissues into a bin.

"Thank you, Ron," Hermione said. "I feel a lot better. I just needed to let all that out."

"I thought you might've done that already with Harry," Ron said.

"I'd never," she said. "He feels responsible enough. If he saw me like this, it would only stress him out more and make him feel guiltier." She paused for a moment. "That's not the only reason though."

"What's the other reason?"

"Letting go for really sensitive reasons is something I'm only okay doing with you," Hermione said.

Ron nodded, picking at his nails. "That stuff I told youâ€¦well, I've only told you."

She smiled. "Ron?"

"Yes?"

"I know I'm probably biased, but I'd trust my life with you before any of your siblings."

Ron lightly snorted. "I reckon you are biased. Thank you though."

"Anytime," she said, taking a step toward him. "I should also thank you for noticing that I was upset. I probably wouldn't have said anything to you if you hadn't."

Ron took a step as well, finally closing the space between them. "I always notice, Hermione. I told you that."

"That's rightâ€¦you see me."

"All the time," Ron breathed.

Hermione was finding it difficult to breathe; she couldn't understand it. She'd thought that declaring their attraction for one another and having sex would take some of the edge off, but she found herself just as dizzy and tingly as ever before â€” if not more so. Ron's presence was all around and inside of her again. She suddenly felt hot and like her feet weren't touching the ground.

"H-Hermione?"

"Y-yes, Ron?"

"Can I tell you something?"

"Anything."

Ron licked his lips. "When you said you'd been made Head Girlâ€¦I-I really wanted to kiss you."

Hermione whimpered faintly, holding out her arm so she wouldn't lose balance. "I really wanted you to. You can nowâ€¦if you'd like."

"Do you want me to?"

"I have all day. I just-"

Her words were cut off by Ron's mouth. She kissed him back, wrapping her arms around his neck. She had to stand on her toes and Ron had to lower his head so they could use their tongues properly. They had never kissed standing up before; the obstacle proved to be problematic yet amusing.

Ron pulled away a little, chuckling. "Hold on."

"I'm sorry," she breathed against his mouth.

"I'm not. I love this."

"L-love what?" she asked.

"Nothing," he quickly said. "I'm just taking the piss. You're so damn short, Hermione."

"Hush!" she said, hitting his arm. "You're simply too tall."

"We'll work it out. It'll be an adventure," he said. "Here, let meâ€¦" Ron cupped her bum, lifting her higher on her toes.

She squeaked. "Ronald!"

"Is this bad?"

"No. Not at all," she said, blushing madly and gripping his shoulders. "You justâ€¦startled me."

"Soâ€¦you don't mind me squeezing you like this?"

Hermione blushed even harder. "It's not like you haven't before. Do you recall your actions in the loo yesterday?"

"Oh, yeah, right," Ron said, smirking. "I'll take that as a no then?"

"Just hush and carry on!"

"Yes, miss," Ron said.

"Did you just call me 'miss'?" Hermione asked.

"No."

"Now you're lying! I swear, you're such a-"

His lips once again cut off Hermione's words. Ron's new hold on her made it easier for Hermione to kiss him, but she still wasn't adjusted to the height difference.

"Standâ€|on my feet," Ron panted as his tongue slipped in and out of her mouth. Hermione obeyed and was able to capture his tongue a little better. It was still quite awkward though; it began to frustrate her.

"Ron," she groaned.

"I know â€" fuck it." Ron placed his hands on her sides, backing her up against the table. He brushed some of their bottles and tools to the side then lifted her onto it.

Hermione moaned, loving Ron's strength and urgency. She spread her legs; Ron pressed himself against her. They were able to kiss much more intimately this way. It didn't seem real that they were actually doing this. It would certainly take her some time to get over the shock that she could now be this way with Ron.

Hermione ran her hands through his silky strands as he skipped his fingertips back and forth across her stomach. She liked it but she wouldn't mind if he moved his hand lower or higher. Hermione wasn't the most endowed woman, but she assumed that she had at least a decent handful. Then againâ€|Ron's hands were fairly large. For all she knew, her breast would become totally lost under his palm. She'd have to take some measurements and find something she owned that matched the size of Ron's hand to form an analysis.

"Hermione?"

"Yes?" She opened her eyes. Ron wasn't even kissing her anymore. He was just looking at her with both eyebrows raised. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"I have no idea. You just stopped and kept your eyes closed. At first I thought you were trying something out but you never started moving again. I thought maybe someone had thrown a curse at you through the window."

"Oh, no," she said, rubbing her brow. "I was just thinking."

"Are you bored or something?"

"Of course not," she said. Ron didn't seem convinced. She felt like a twit. "I-I'm sorry. It's been a long day." She pulled on his shirt, bringing him close to her again. "Can I try again?"

"I guess," he said.

Right as Hermione put her mouth to Ron's, there was a knock on the door. He instantly backed away from her, and Hermione felt a terrible case of dÃ©jÃ vu. There was no way that Harry was interrupting them again.

"Bloody hell," Ron breathed.

"Just answer it." She hopped off the table then looked at all their supplies. "Ron?"

"I'll handle it," he said. "Just move out of sight."

Hermione scurried behind a shelf as Ron unlocked the door and cracked it. "What?" he asked rudely.

"What the hell is going on, Ron?" Hermione heard Ginny's voice ask.

"None of your business. What do you want?"

"It's time for dinner," Ginny said. "Dad and Harry just got back. He passed his test."

"Ace. I knew he would," Ron said. "Well, thanks for the update."

"Wait, where's Hermione?"

"She went to Diagon Alley to see if a bookshop has one of her favorites in yet."

"At this time of night?" Ginny asked.

"You know the woman is barmy," Ron said. Hermione quietly gasped and scowled.

"That's very kind of you, Ron," Ginny said. "Compliments like that will certainly-"

"- will you just shut up and bugger off?" Ron quickly asked. "I got your message. I'll wait here until Hermione gets back then we'll both be right in."

"Is Hermione really not in there?" Ginny asked.

"No."

"Then what the fuck are you doing?"

"Do you really wanna know?" Ron asked. Hermione stiffened; she couldn't believe that Ron was going to tell her.

"It can't be that bad," Ginny said.

"Fine," Ron said. "I was wanking. I come here to get one off every once in awhile and you were right in the middle of the big finish."

"Oh, bloody hell, Ron! You're not being serious!"

"You can stay and watch if you don't believe me."

"Ugh! You are a freak! I can't believe you just told me that!"



"You wanted to know," Ron said simply.

"And I regret ever asking. Ugh! Wellâ€¦clean up when you're finished, yeah? That's dad's shed â€” not your place to slap your ginger monkey."

"My ginger monkey?" he asked with a laugh. "Hmm, I reckon you've been spending too much time with Fred and George."

"And you've been spending too much time in here."

"I'll be along shortly, Ginny."

"I'm sure you will," she said. "We should expect you at the table in what - forty-five seconds?"

"How bloody clever."

"I'm sorry," Ginny said, chuckling. "A minute and ten if you hold your breath and tug slowly."

"I'm shutting the door now." Ron slammed the door then locked it again.

Hermione came from behind the shelf. "Wow," she said.

"I know," Ron said. "I can't believe we share blood."

"I certainly can," Hermione said. She was burning up and felt heat in her lower stomach.

He rubbed his neck. "Um, what I told Ginnyâ€¦it was just to get her away."

"I figured," she said, though she couldn't believe him entirely. The tissues were a big clue. Hermione shouldn't have been so timid, but she was. Ron and Ginny had playfully teased about his activities in the shed but it was different for them. It didn't make sense how Hermione could kiss Ron passionately but talking about him masturbating made her flustered and boggled.

"S-so, you think I'm barmy?" Hermione asked, desperately trying to change the subject and put an end to the silence.

Ron smiled, chuckling rather tensely. "That was the truth."

"Well, we should probably get back then. As it turns out, the book wasn't there."

"Wait." Ron walked over to her, brushing dirt off her shoulder. "That shelf you were standing against is really dusty; stuff is always falling from the ceiling over there." He swiped her shoulder a few more times then smiled. "There; all neat again."

Hermione had no words. She was taken back to sixth year when Ron had brushed snow off her shoulder after breaking up with Lavender. It had been such a powerful moment for her; she felt

the same energy between them now. She didn't know why, but that simple touch had pressed itself deeply into her.

She wrapped her arms around Ron's stomach, hugging him. He automatically circled his arms around her shoulders. "Hermione, are you okay?" he asked in a soft voice.

"I'm fine," she whispered. She pulled away, looking up at him. They were so close and everything felt so right. "Ron?"

"Yeah?"

"I-Iâ€¦Iâ€¦thank you," she said. She had really wanted to say 'love you' but it was too heavy and raw. 'Thank you' was the best translation she could find.

Ron's shoulders slumped a little. "For what?"

"For being such a good friend to me," she said. Even if she had told him the complete truth, her reason would've stayed the same.

Ron gave her a smile but there was something else to his expression that she couldn't read. "We should probably go, yeah?" he asked. He let go of her and left the shed before she ever got a chance to answer. Hermione just looked after him, feeling torn.

...

Later on that night, Hermione tried as hard as she could to fall asleep in her cot but she couldn't. There was too much that needed to be planned out and too many unanswered questions. She tossed and turned until Ginny stirred, groaning. Hermione had to do something; she couldn't take her insomnia out on Ginny.

She quietly got up and tied up her hair before leaving the room.

Tea and some time by the fire was what Hermione needed to fall asleep. When she reached the bottom step, however, Ron was already occupying the couch. As not to scare him, she cleared her throat first then said, "Ron?"

He turned to her, sitting up straighter. "Hermione?"

"I don't mean to-"

"- you're not disturbing me." He scooted over, patting the cushion next to him. Hermione's heart skipped a beat as she walked over and sat next to him. "Couldn't sleep?" he asked.

"Too much on my mind," she said, taking in his maroon pajamas and black Canons t-shirt. "I thought tea would help."

"Have mine. This would've been my third cup. It's a really strong brew."

She took the mug. "Thank you. Strong is exactly what I need." She sipped her tea; Ron continued to look into the fire. After leaving the shed, he'd grown quiet and somewhat distant. Hermione

wasn't sure why he was so upset but she figured it had something to do with her.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked.

"I'm fine."

"If I said something to upset you, just tell me."

"You didn't," Ron said. "I justâ€¦I've got a lot on my mind too. I'm really not prepared to go back to school; neither is Harry. It was all we talked about before he went to sleep."

"Believe it or not, I'm not entirely prepared either," she said. "That's why we have to start planning tomorrow. We have to be ready to go to Hogwarts and go searching for the Horcruxes."

Ron sighed, rubbing his face. "Fucking hell."

"I know."

"I don't think you do. The last thing I want to do is go back to that bloody school, but in some ways, I'd rather do that than leave for those bloody Horcruxes."

Hermione took another sip of her tea. Already she felt more relaxed. "How would I not be able to understand that?" she asked.

"Because you're just like Harry," Ron said, picking at a loose string on his pajamas. "You twoâ€¦you'll always be ready. Meâ€¦I've got more that's holding me back."

Hermione knew that she couldn't come back with anything. This was one of those instances where their differences kept them apart. She still wanted to try though.

"Well, I may not have a big family, but it doesn't mean that I'm completely ready to quit school," she said. "I want my N.E.W.T.'s; I want to be Head Girl. Getting that letterâ€¦it just made the idea of leaving more difficult. It's necessary though."

"I know that," Ron said. "No matter what, I'm going the whole way with Harry. That'll always be most important to me."

"To us both," Hermione said. She sat back against the couch, looking into the fire.

They sat in silence and watched the orange and yellow flames crackle in the pit. It was soothing; so was resting against the squishy cushion and listening to Ron's deep, steady breaths. She moved her gaze to him; he was peering into the fire with droopy lids. He didn't look sleepy, rather in a peaceful trance. His outer appearance matched her feelings. As Ron kept his attention elsewhere, it gave her a great opportunity to watch the light spread across his pale skin.

"You should've been made Head Boy," she found herself saying.

He chuckled lazily. "Why? I'd be terrible. I'd punish all the Slytherins, give Gryffindors points for no reason, and sneak out of the castle every other night."

"Maybe, but at least we'd see each other. I imagine that my schedule is going to be extremely busy with all my classes and Head Girl duties."

Ron calm expression hardened a little. "Yeah, that's right."

"Ronâ€¦"

"Can we not think about that right now?" he asked. "Let's just enjoy this."

"Okay," Hermione said. She took another large gulp of her tea. "This is really good."

"I know. I was searching the cabinets and found a few bags of this tea my mum's been sending to Bill to help him settle."

"Mmm. I bet it's got a nice calming agent in it," Hermione said, taking another sip. She went back to staring unabashedly at him.

After awhile, Ron leaned on his side so he could completely face her. "How long have you been staring at me?"

"I don't know," Hermione said, facing him as well. "I can't help it. The firelight looks lovely against your skin." It had been the exact thought on her mind, and she was surprised that she had said it.

Ron crinkled his nose. "I doubt that, and I should probably put on some cream before I burn."

Hermione chuckled. "Aww, that is so precious."

"Stop saying 'precious' when you're talking about me, Hermione," Ron said, sluggishly waving a hand. She tried to hit it out of the way but she missed. "I'm not precious or adorable or cute. I'm seven â€" bloody â€" teen years old. I should-

"Okay, okay," Hermione said, knocking her head against the cushion. "Just stop whining already. You whine too much, Ronald, which is funny since you apparently consider yourself an adult."

"Clever," Ron mumbled. "It just never ends with you, does it?"

"I guess at the end of our lives you'll find out," she said.

They both started softly laughing and couldn't stop for awhile. Hermione felt so tranquil and connected to Ron. It was nice not having to worry about anything or think about a million problems at once. Just being okay and happy with Ron was what Hermione wanted.

"Hey, Hermione?"

"Yes, Ron?" Hermione asked, setting down her now empty mug.

"Remember when you said that you liked the light on my skin or whatever?"

"Yes."

"Well, there's something I like about you. May I?"

"Um, I suppose."

Ron reached over, slowly pulling out her hair tie. "This is what I like â€" your hair down." He ran his fingers through her strands, which caused Hermione to shiver violently and moan.

"Did I pull on it?" he asked.

"No," Hermione whispered. "I just really enjoy you touching me. It feels soâ€"so good."

Ron smiled. "I like making you feel good. It's all I want to do right now."

"I'm right here, Ron," Hermione said. She didn't know what was going on with her but she didn't feel contained or a need to stop herself. "I'm sorry for making you upset in the shed. I did, didn't I?"

"Yes," Ron said, nodding, "but it's not for the reason you think. I'm just an asshole. I'm justâ€"never mind."

He leaned over, kissing her. Hermione kissed him back and felt a surge of pleasure run through her. Ron quickly pulled away, putting his forehead to hers and placing a hand on her cheek. "We have to be quiet in here. Can you be quiet?"

"Certainly," she said. "Of course I can."

"Brilliant." Ron went back to kissing her. They snogged slowly but with force. Hermione felt so hot; Ron's touches were pleasing every part of her body â€" even her organs.

Hermione lost the feeling in her body and fell back against the couch; Ron lay on top of her. They gasped together at the sensation. Hermione didn't want to be loud, but Ron was heavy, and she could easily feel his cock through his pajamas. He was hard; the realization sent another wave of pleasure through her.

Ron ran his hands up and down her arms; Hermione gripped his shoulders and nibbled on his lips. She knew that they shouldn't be doing this on the couch, but she'd honestly always wanted to. Plus, Ron tasted amazing, and his weight pressed against her in all the right places.

Ron broke out of the kiss. "Hermione?" he asked in her ear.

She trembled as his warm breath seeped into her skin. "Yes, Ron?"

"I want to touch you."

"You are touching me."

"Then I want to touch you more," he said. "I won't hurt you. I promise."

"You don't have to keep promising me that, Ron," Hermione said, placing his hand against her stomach. "I trust you; I always will."

"You mean that?"

"Absolutely," she said.

Ron smiled. "I'm glad. That means a lot to me."

He began kissing her again as his hand moved back and forth across her stomach. His nails horizontally ran down her abdomen until he reached the waistband of her pajamas; Hermione nodded. Ron repositioned himself so his back was more against the couch and he wasn't lying completely on top of her. He started kissing her neck as his hand slid under. She flinched but kept quiet.

Hermione looked around the room; no one was watching them. She bit her lip as Ron touched her knickers. Hermione's legs began to quiver. His hand kept moving around her knickers and each touch increased the intensity of her shake. Hermione gripped Ron's upper arms in anticipation.

Then, it happened. Ron moved his hand under the cotton, touching her. His warm, soft, and long fingers connected to her once more. It was incredible. A burning jolt shocked her from head to toe as memories of the first time he'd touched her flooded her mind. Nothing in the world compared to Ron's touches. "O-oh!" Hermione gasped.

"Sh'Mione, you have to be quiet," he whispered against her temple.

"I'm sorry. I'll try harder."

Ron put his thumb against her clit, pressing down and in circles then rubbing it in between his fingers. Hermione was so sweaty; she ached because it felt so good and the pressure was overwhelming. Hermione felt the burn already. "Hmm, hmm, Ron," she whimpered. "So nice." She closed her eyes, which somehow enhanced the feeling.

"Hermione?" Ron asked after awhile.

"Y-yes?"

"Do you trust me?"

She moaned, biting her lip. "I told that you I did, Ronald."

He stopped touching her. "Then can I try something?"

"Yes, please - whatever you want to do."

"Okay; raise your hips for me," he said. Hermione quickly obeyed. Ron slid her pajamas and knickers down to her knees. She didn't even feel embarrassed this time. Hermione only wanted to experience whatever he had in store for her. Ron placed his hand against her. She arched her back, kissing him.

"Hermione?" he asked against her mouth. She knew what he wanted to do, and she desperately wanted it. Hermione nodded then swiftly let out a sharp breath.

"Oh - oh, god!" she whimpered against his mouth as Ron eased a finger, then another, into her.

"Is this okay?" he asked.

"It's perfect," she wheezed as a current of energy shot up from her lower stomach and straight to her heart. She moaned loudly as his fingers began to move.

"Hermione, please, we have to be quiet."

She nodded but whimpered loudly anyway. His fingers filled and stretched her in a way she had fantasized about for years. Ron pressed in places that had Hermione moaning, gasping, and whimpering with delight. She leaned up to kiss his mouth, slipping her tongue between his teeth. She mumbled something.

"What?" Ron asked.

"Harder," she whispered in a clearer voice.

Ron's eyes grew wide as he nodded. He brought their lips together, and she whimpered into his mouth as he pumped a little harder. Hermione moved down the cushion so Ron was able to go deeper and curve his fingers. That's when something extraordinary happened. He hit something fiery and powerful inside of her that stiffened her entire being. Hermione had never felt such an overpowering sensation but it was pure ecstasy.

Ron's hand kept a hard, steady rhythm. He took Hermione closer to an edge she'd never been to before. Jagged spikes of bliss touched all of her body, and she began to lose herself. She was so close to completely losing control.

"Ron, Ron," she whispered urgently. "I-I don't think I can stay quiet any longer. I mean, I really can't."

Ron put his forehead to hers, slowing his movements. He was completely red, sweaty and out of breath. "Are you cumming?" he asked.

She nodded. "Y-yes. You're about to make me."

"Fucking incredible," he whispered, kissing her forehead. "Okay, okay. Um, um â€" here." He used his free hand to pull back the collar of his shirt. "Take my shoulder."

Hermione didn't understand at first but one look in his eyes told her everything. "No â€" no."

"Stop rejecting my offers, 'Mione."

"This is different. I don't want to hurt you or leave a mark."

"I don't care about a mark andâ€|pain doesn't bother me," he added with a smirk.

Hermione found herself blushing and feeling shy, which was remarkable considering she was half naked and Ron's fingers were inside of her. "Okay."

Ron lowered himself to her; she began kissing and sucking on his shoulder. It didn't take too much longer before she had to dive off the edge. Hermione held her breath and let the astounding pleasure fill her before letting go. She bit Ron's shoulder hard, muffling her cries as best she could. Ron flinched and groaned but never pulled away.

Hermione stilled Ron's arm, wanting to hold on to the divine moment as long as she could. She grew silent and still as each spasm wringed the last shudders of pleasure from her, until finally her breathing grew calm again. She finally pried her mouth away from Ron, resting her head against the arm of the couch.

Hermione's body was on fire, and she felt slightly dizzy. The pleasure she had just experienced was something she couldn't explain. All she knew was that Ron had taken her to a magical place that no one else would ever be able to find.

She smiled as he grinned at her. "Ron?"

"Hermione?"

"Whatâ€|what was in that tea?" she asked as she pulled her clothes back up.

"I dunno," he said, rubbing his neck. "I'm sorry that I gave it to you."

"Don't be," she said. "That was incredible. I'm glad it happened."

"Me too." He leaned down, kissing her once more.

Hermione parted from him. She felt so good but she wanted more â€" for both of them. "Ron, do you-?"

"- no."

"O-oh."



"Not because I don't want to," Ron quickly said. "I just mean, no  
â€" not here. Come on." He got off of Hermione then helped her to  
her feet. Ron took her hand, snatched up her wand, then lead her  
to the loo.

"Is this safe?" she whispered, looking around.

"As long as we don't take too long," he said, opening the door.

Hermione gently closed it behind her, placing a silencing and  
locking charm around the room. She then pointed the tip of her  
wand to her stomach and said the nonverbal twice for good  
measure.

"Okay?" Ron asked.

"Yes," she said excitedly. Ron tugged on her hand, bringing her  
over to the sink. He lifted her onto it then snorted.

"What's so funny?" Hermione asked.

"I reckon we were always bound to wind up here, eh?" he asked.

She frowned for a few moments before realizing where she was and  
what was about to happen. "Oh myâ€"are we that bad?"

"Afraid so," he said. "At least nothing's sprained this time and  
we don't have to feel guilty about holding up a party."

"Good point, Ron," Hermione said, laughing a little.

Ron cleared his throat, giving her a handsome grin. "Hermione?"

"Yes, Ron?"

"Do you want to do it again?"

She nodded. "Yes, I want to do it again." They kissed for awhile  
until they both worked up the courage to finish what they had  
started yesterday.

For once, no one interrupted them.

(Snickers and walks away quietly) Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

CHAPTER 9

Thank you all for the amazing reviews!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

"Fucking hell, I have too many freckles," Ron said to himself as  
he examined his pale hands. He'd had them for seventeen years now  
so it wasn't as if he didn't know what they looked like. Ron  
reckoned that he had just never stared at them long enough to

notice how many of the buggers covered his fingers and knuckles. He began tapping his hands against his knees and shifted his focus to the floor instead; the sight wasn't much of an improvement considering that the worn wood was cluttered with dirty socks and candy wrappers. He really needed to clean up his room.

The door opened; Ron immediately stood up.

"Hey," he said.

"Hi," Hermione said, closing the door behind her. As she approached him, he felt a rush of adrenaline flood through his body. He didn't know what to say; 'good morning' seemed simple enough, but after the plan they had made the night before, Ron wasn't sure if the casual greeting would only make things awkward for them. They both knew what was going to happen now. Ron could see the anticipation and slight nervousness in her eyes; those feelings matched his perfectly. He loved the nervous energy he got every time it began.

Ron glanced down at her lips, causing Hermione to instantly lick them. He didn't even have to touch her to get her body to react; somehow, he was able to command her just with his eyes. Ron wasn't used to having this power over Hermione and he wasn't sure if he deserved it.

"I didn't mean to take so long," Hermione said, finally breaking their intense silence. She rubbed her brow. "I got held up by your mum. She wanted to talk about getting school supplies again."

"Sorry about that," he said, detecting a bit of annoyance from Hermione. "She's just not used to this. We've always gone to Diagon Alley as a family."

"It's all right. I understand."

Ron nodded then watched closely as Hermione lowered her hand, squeezing her stomach. He loved her doing this, and it made him incredibly hard. Hermione was the most gorgeous girl that Ron had ever seen and when she touched herself like that, it drove him mental. "S-so, umâ€¦where's Ginny?" he asked.

"She's eating breakfast. Where's Harry?"

"In the loo."

Hermione took her wand out of her back pocket. "Do you want me toâ€¦?"

"Yes," he quickly said. She looked away from him for the first time and put a locking and silencing charm on the door. "Hermione, did youâ€¦?"

"Yes, I put it on me before I came up here," she swiftly answered.

At hearing this, everything inside of Ron's body seemed to come alive and his senses received a major boost. It was only like this in the morning when everyone was awake and in the house. Though he and Hermione used charms, the level of danger was elevated, somehow increasing their need and thrill.

"Ready?" he asked quietly.

Hermione let out a shaky breath. "Ready."

Ron didn't waste any more time. He walked right up to her, kissing her and backing her up against the door. He moaned as his mind calmed and his body reacted enjoyably to her delicious mouth. Hermione's lips were so bloody soft; he loved the way her mouth instantly opened when he slid his tongue along her teeth. She tasted so sweet and her whimper at his invading tongue was even sweeter to him.

Hermione rose on her feet, hugging his neck while he lowered his head. They were better at kissing upright, though he didn't mind the slight struggle. It was one of reasons why kissing her was so brilliant. Ron had always figured that snogging Hermione would be fun (if not a little amusing) because of their height difference. He wanted to tell her this, but he couldn't.

Hermione tugged on his hair as he moved his tongue deeper into her mouth; it felt amazing. Ron wanted her to know how hard she had made him so he cupped her arse, raising her higher while also pushing himself against her. He'd been sitting in that one bloody spot on the floor for almost ten minutes before she had arrived; it was pathetic but Ron had needed Hermione too fucking badly to care.

He slipped her bottom lip between his teeth, nibbling on it. Ron considered letting her know how much he wanted her, but he chose to keep his thoughts to himself. He placed his hand on her stomach, squeezing it in the exact same way that she had. Hermione squeaked, flinching. She took over the kiss and backed him up rather roughly against the wall.

"Bloody hell," Ron breathed in the split second that Hermione broke out of the kiss to reposition herself against him. She kissed him hard again and he let her have all the control. Ron had no problem with Hermione taking the lead; he found her fire and strength extremely sexy. She was naturally bossy and meticulous, and her skills transcended into her passionate nature when they did things. Whether she was writing an essay or snogging him, she was a bloody genius. Plus, seeing and feeling her need for him was incredible.

Ron pushed himself off of the wall and guided Hermione back until she hit something. He opened his eyes; she was against his small bookcase that held all of his comics and games. Ron lifted her onto it and began kissing her neck as he unbuttoned her jeans; Hermione responded by unzipping his trousers. The sounds of their shallow pants and their jeans coming undone made his heart beat so much faster. His awareness was always sharper in this moment, and his thoughts and body finally synchronized.

Ron took in a long whiff of the fruity smell of her neck. It was all over her and drove him madder than he already felt. As he began pulling off her denim, he felt her warm, small hand touch his cock. Ron sank his teeth into Hermione's skin, jerking.

"Good?" she asked. All Ron could do was nod. He had no idea why she felt the need to ask. Hermione had to know that a wave of powerful magic flourished in his body every time she touched him. He continued to take off her jeans and slide down her knickers as she firmly moved her fisted hand up and down his cock.

Hermione was very thorough as she stroked him; Ron tried hard to concentrate. He couldn't cum yet, even though he badly wanted to. She gave him another stroke, touching the slicked tip of him with her thumb. Ron groaned, then placed a hand on hers so she'd stop; he only possessed so much control. Ron was aching now and he needed the slightly painful pressure to go away.

He looked at her: Hermione's face was pink and she seemed unfocused. She smiled at him; he smiled back. There was so much that he wanted to say, but none of the words fit in this situation. The only thing that would fit was his body against and inside of hers. Sex would have to be his way of telling her how he felt right now. Ron leaned forward, resting his forehead against hers. Hermione pecked his lips, wrapping her legs around his waist. He held her side as he gripped and placed himself against her creamy, warm center. Once again, Ron thought about telling her something but quickly changed his mind and eased inside of her.

Hermione moaned loudly as he let out a pleasurable sigh. Her body was like nothing else in the world. It was as if their bodies had been designed to connect and create something so fucking extraordinary that Ron could hardly see straight. He began kissing her again as he pushed himself deeply into her body then pulled out in a slow movement.

Hermione bit her lip, digging her nails into his upper arms as he thrust. There was nothing but satisfaction in her expression. Ron was incredibly relieved that it didn't hurt her anymore. Hermione experienced what he did during their sex—or at least sort of did. Though shagging Hermione was the most enjoyable feeling in the whole bloody world, knowing that he made her happy during it allowed him to love it even more. Ron was giving his best friend something that no one else got to while she provided him with a feeling that would be impossible for any one else to give him.

Ron clutched the shelf, pushing a little faster. He wanted to go slow and really experience it, but Harry would only be gone for so long; Ron couldn't exactly tell him to bugger off so he and Hermione could shag in peace.

"O-oh—Ron—" Hermione panted, tangling her fingers in her own hair.

Heat and sweat covered Ron's body as a mighty passion grew inside of him. He gave it to Hermione harder, causing her to gradually

unravel on top of his bookcase. She kept moaning Ron's name which did his head in. Nothing sounded sexier than his name coming out of her irresistible mouth as she built to an orgasm, yet sometimes he wished that Hermione only whimpered things like 'more, ' 'please,' and 'yes'. When she said his name, Ron wanted to hear things after it. Just once he wanted to ask her 'what?' and get an answer. Ron always did his best to control his words while they shagged. He didn't have a lot of self-control and he knew one day something would slip out that could ruin everything.

The night they had sex after Harry's birthday party was his first and last time ever moaning her name. If Ron hadn't found his brains and stopped himself, he knew that he would've told her that he loved her or that cumming inside of her was something he'd dreamt about doing for ages. Ron didn't know what was wrong with him. He was proud of the fact that he wasn't a complete emotionless wanker but he didn't know why he couldn't separate the heavy emotional feelings of sex from the heavy physical ones.

"Oh, oh, yes!" Hermione let out a choked cry, rolling her hips. She came with a look of pure ecstasy. Her body shook and contracted around him. He had taken her to that point; it made him feel so good.

Ron wanted to feel the powerful bliss for himself, so he went faster until he felt a pounding pressure build and knock against his cock. His moans grew louder and soon, he couldn't hold himself back. Ron bit Hermione's shoulder, cumming hard. He let himself go while she tightly held him and tenderly kissed his head. The pleasure was tremendous; he rode the wave of it for as long as he could. Hermione's body was his remedy and somehow gave Ron things that he didn't even know he needed.

When he was settled, he kissed her neck. Ron loved that this had happened. Hermione was breathing heavily against his ear; he fancied the sound of it. Ron knew that he could make Hermione feel good and it gave him a burst of confidence.

Ron moved away; Hermione brushed hair out of his face. Even though they'd just had sex, he still really wanted her. He touched her cheek.

"Are you all right?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

"I'm fine," she whispered. Hermione took his hand, skipping her fingertips over his knuckles. "Hmm, you have a lot of freckles on your hands, Ron."

"I know," he mumbled.

Hermione looked up at him. "It's not a bad thing." She grinned gorgeously at him; Ron didn't know what to say. Sometimes Hermione said things that made him feel as though she could read his mind. That talent had become more accurate lately and Ron wondered if it had something to do with them having sex. He certainly felt a stronger connection to her now.

"You really think so?" he asked.

"Of course, Ron. Your freckles are beautiful." Hermione gazed at him as if she truly wanted him to believe her and understand something about her feelings. Regardless of her intentions or his confusion over them, Ron was touched, completely happy, and blushed like mad. Something needed to change before he lost his mind.

"W- we should probably get out of here before Harry comes back, yeah?" he asked. It was the last thing he had wanted to say.

Hermione's smile faded; she let his hand go. "Yes, certainly. I just need to get my clothes."

"Right." Ron parted from her and fixed his trousers. Hermione's demeanor went rigid while she pulled her knickers and jeans back on. Ron knew that he had messed up. Hermione had been nice to him and instead of being kind back, he'd acted like a dick. "Hermione!"

"I'll see you downstairs," she said, not looking at him.

"Okay," he said, rubbing his neck. "So, um, when do you want to meet up again?"

"We'll figure something out." Hermione headed to the door.

"Hermione, wait."

She turned around. "Yes, Ron?"

Ron needed to apologize for being rude. He didn't want her to think that all he'd wanted was a quick morning shag from her. It wasn't who he was or what he wanted with her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I've never heard the word 'beautiful' in relation to me before and I didn't know what to say. I liked hearing it though—especially from you. I find my freckles annoying but if you like them, then I reckon they're all right."

Hermione's frosty attitude melted away. "I do like them, Ron; a lot."

He blushed even harder. "Will you save me a seat next to you at the table?"

"I will," she said, blushing a little herself.

Hermione left the room; Ron took his spot right back on the floor. He lay on his back, sprawling out, and closed his eyes. He felt so good and relaxed in a way that only Hermione's body could make him. After almost two weeks, Ron still couldn't believe that he was having sex with her. They were being open about their urges for each other and acting on them.

Ron now knew that Hermione found him fit and thought that he had a nice sized cock. He smirked, chuckling softly. Knowing those things was brilliant, as was being able to tell Hermione how

gorgeous she was and touch her without worrying about hiding his excitement. Ron could kiss and explore the mouth that he'd been aching over for years, and do so much more while still being Hermione's best mate and keeping their friendship in order. He was glad that things had worked out for them.

Ron turned his head to the bookcase they had shagged on. For some reason, looking at it made a bit of his happiness go away. Yes, he and Hermione were more open now, but there were still things that Ron had to keep from her.

Though he could tell Hermione how attracted he was to her, he couldn't let her know that his desire and the pleasure he received from touching her wasn't purely sexual. His reasons for truly enjoying himself involved emotions that violated their new relationship. Swallowing the whole truth distracted him sometimes and it kept him from doing certain things with her. Then again, there seemed to be unspoken rules between them in regards to what they did and didn't do sexually.

Not once had either of them ever taken off more than their jeans and underwear during sex. Ron had never touched Hermione's chest nor had he even seen her bra; he definitely wanted to though. He wanted take off her shirt, pull down the straps of her bra, and reveal the gorgeous breasts that he knew were there. Ron's mouth watered as he thought about how tasty her nipples must be. The word 'tasty' made him think about another part of her that was off-limits in a way. He'd had his cock in her quite a few times now and his fingers were no strangers to her but for whatever reason, going down on her couldn't happen. He wanted to eat her pussy so badly and feel her thighs quiver on either side of his head. He didn't though â€” just like Hermione never sucked him off or dug her nails into the skin on his back instead of merely pulling on the material of his t-shirt.

Ron could only reckon that those things would be too intimate for them. Keeping away from certain activities established boundaries and kept their goals clear. They were still only friends after all. As Hermione's mate, Ron wasn't allowed to kiss, caress, or suck on her body from head to toe. Asking her to take him in her mouth was probably too much also. No, those were intimacies that only Hermione's boyfriend got to share with her.

Ron flipped over on his stomach, staring at his bed. It symbolized everything that he would never have with her. They'd shagged in the grass, against walls, on tabletops, and even on the bathroom sink, but not once since their first time had they shagged in his bed â€” or any bed for that matter; they never so much as kissed on one.

Ron shouldn't have cared, but he did. His bed was where it all had started and he knew that it was the one place where they could really lose themselves â€” just like during their first time. Ron could touch and kiss Hermione with a blind passion, and he could feel as though they were more than just very close mates. For those reasons, he simultaneously hated and was grateful that they didn't do anything on it.

Ron reached under the bed, pulling out the book that the twins had given him. He flipped through Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches but didn't see a 'casual shags between best mates' section. He slid it back under in mild frustration. He had to stop being a sagging tit. No matter what further intimacies they did or didn't share, he and Hermione were fine and were able to share something special with each other that no one else was a part of. He couldn't help but to ignore his grievances to a degree, because that fact was the most amazing fucking thing that had ever happened to him. It wasn't everything, but it was more than Ron ever thought he'd get. His stomach growled so he got up from the floor and left the room. Feeding his hunger was always a good distraction.

Ron walked downstairs and into the kitchen. Hermione was eating at the table while Ginny wandered around, apparently looking for something. Hermione gave him a smile.

"Good morning, Ron."

"Morning," he said. He could act normal around her and function to a higher degree now that the stifling anticipation was gone.

"Where's the salt?" Ginny asked, looking under the table.

"Maybe you should try a summoning spell," Ron said. He looked at her plate full of mouth-watering breakfast. "Can I have some of this, Ginny?"

"No. I plan to demolish it once I find the sodding salt."

Ron could have told her that the salt was on the side table by the couch, but he chose to let her keep searching. He sat in her seat, taking a bite of her bacon. "Mmm, cheers, Ginny."

She looked up. "Damn it, Ron! Get up!"

"I just want a little. Be nice," he said.

"How can you ask Ginny to be nice when you're stealing her food?" Hermione asked.

"Because I'm starving," he said. "I always get really hungry after-" He stopped before the words 'we shag' slipped out. Ron really needed to get himself together.

Out of nowhere, a mane of ginger hair blocked his vision of Hermione.

"Oi!" Ron said as Ginny plopped herself on his lap. "Get off of me, Ginny! I'm not a bloody chair!"

"Don't care. You're eating my breakfast, in my spot, when I told you no. I have a right to get to my plate in whatever way possible while also ignoring your requests." Ginny plucked the piece of bacon out of his hand then started eating it.



"All right! All right!" he whined, gently pushing her shoulder. "Get your boney behind up so I can move."

Ginny scrunched up her face. "It's not boney." She started wiggling herself against him.

"Bloody Merlin - stop it!"

"See? I have a nice arse."

"Urgh! I should have you thrown in Azkaban!" Ron felt horrified. The piece of bacon certainly hadn't been worth all of this. "This has to be sexual assault or something! And no - you don't have a nice arse, because you don't have an arse to begin with. You're my little sister and little sisters absolutely do not posses that body part."

"What do I have then?" Ginny asked.

Ron shrugged. This was definitely something he never thought about nor wanted to start pondering. He was keen on seeing Ginny as a hazy, block-shaped, ginger midget his whole life. He only wished that all the blokes at Hogwarts would do the same. It would certainly save him a lot of misery and threatening gestures.

"I dunno," he mumbled. "A lump of sorts, I suppose."

Ginny burst into laughter. "You're unbelievable sometimes, Ron! So, is this belief exclusive to little sisters or does it carry on to other people?"

"Sorry?" he asked.

She gave him a grin worthy of Fred and George, then nodded toward Hermione. "What about Hermione? Does she have an arse?"

"Ginny!" Hermione said in exasperation. "I don't think-"

" - of course she does," Ron said. "A gorgeous one too." It wasn't until the last word came out that Ron realized what he'd confessed. It had been the genuine thought on his mind, but he was surprised that he'd said it. Ron felt his face go up in flames; Hermione was rather red too. She and Ginny were gawking at him and the silence started to weigh down on him. Ron had to do something.

"U-uh, umâ€¦I mean, you should know that better than anyone, Ginny," he quickly said. "You two room together; who knows what's been seen."

Ginny hit his arm. "You're a prat!" she said.

Ron chuckled nervously, feeling relieved that Ginny had gotten over his comment. Hermione, however, was still staring at him and tightly clutching her fork.

"You also smell funny, Ron."

"Huh?" he said, leaving his thoughts.

"Your smellâ€¦it's strange," Ginny, who for whatever reason was still sitting in his bloody lap, said.

"Ta," Ron said in irritation. "First you assault me, then you insult me."

"Yes, Ginny," Hermione said, sounding distracted. "What's that comment for?"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "It's not 'bad' strange; it's justâ€¦" She leaned in, sniffing Ron. "Are you wearing one of my lotions?"

"Why on earth would I be wearing one of your lotions?" he asked.

"I dunno. I just smell something on you that I know I've smelled before in my room." She took another whiff, frowning.

"It'sâ€¦fruity or something."

Ron and Hermione shared a look. Her scent was probably all over him as it usually was after sex; it was one of his favorite things about being with Hermione. Ron was never quick to wash or change because he wanted to keep her as close to him for as long as possible. Hermione's smell was intoxicating, but he had no idea that it was powerful enough for other people to detect on him.

"Uhâ€¦" Ron started off with.

"Ginny Weasley, get off of your brother," Mrs. Weasley said, walking into the room.

"Sorry, Mum," Ginny said, getting up; Ron did too. "We were sharing breakfast because Ron doesn't have a plate," she added. He raised an eyebrow at her. He hadn't expected Ginny to stick up for him.

"I planned to make you something when you came down here, Ron," his mum said.

"You don't have to cook me anything, Mum," he said. "I'll eat cereal."

"But you had cereal yesterday. I'll make you something."

"Okay, thank you," Ron said, feeling guilty for some reason. Their last major row about throwing extra parties had put their relationship into an even deeper state, and though they did talk, their conversations were always rather stiff and brief.

"You're welcome, dear," she said, going to the stove.

Ron wanted to hug her or do something loving, but he was worried that it would make things awkward. In a way, it was funny: earlier he'd had the same issue with Hermione. Cutting tension with the women in his life was obviously getting harder to do as

he got older. Ron wondered when it would suddenly become too much to ask Ginny for a game of Snaps.

"Do you mind running this plate out to your dad, Ron?" his mum asked, handing him a plate. "He's in the shed."

"I'm sure he won't mind coming in to eat," Ron said.

"Yes, but since you lot are going shopping today, I want Arthur to get all the shed business out of his system so we can spend the day together."

"All right." Ron opened his mouth but his mother went right back to cooking. He gave up on his thoughts and walked out of the kitchen door.

As Ron journeyed to the shed, he tried to clear his mind. He just felt so distracted and boggled. Ron would never say it out loud, but he knew that having sex with Hermione was doing this to him. He felt so much more now, which also meant that there was more that he wanted to say and show but knew that he couldn't. Keeping all the new things in while also holding back the old emotions and thoughts was becoming more taxing as the days passed.

It wasn't Hermione's fault though; he simply hadn't adjusted to this new way of living yet. Ron hoped that he would soon. He was sure that he'd embarrassed Hermione with the arse comment, and his sister's bloody gift at detecting scents certainly hadn't helped make things less intense for them. Ron really needed some time alone so he could calm down and figure things out.

He knocked on the shed door that was ajar. "Dad?"

"Come on in, Ron."

Ron walked in and saw his dad tweaking something with his wand. "I've got your breakfast from Mum."

"I told her that I would be right there."

"And she said that she wants you to get all of the 'shed business' out of your system first," Ron said with a smile.

Mr. Weasley laughed, taking the plate. "Great Merlin, I love that witty woman. Unfortunately, she's never quite sure when to stop piling food on my plate. Do you want to help me with some of this?"

"Already there, Dad." Ron stuffed down a forkful of eggs. His dad winked at him, ruffling his hair. Ron swallowed his food, nodding toward the Muggle contraption on the table. "What are you working on?"

"A computer game, as I've been told," he said. "I'm hoping that Harry and Hermione might be able to help me later."

"They are the experts."

His dad gave him a look. "Sorry for always borrowing your mates."

"It's all right," Ron said. "I don't mind, and I reckon they really enjoy it; especially Harry. You really make him laugh with all this stuff."

"He's a good lad."

"Yeah, he is," Ron said, wiping his mouth.

"How's he doing?" his dad asked, taking a bite of bacon.

Ron wasn't sure what to say. The truth was that he wasn't sure how Harry was doing. His mate had gotten so quiet over the past couple of weeks. Ron hadn't seen him so tense since their fifth year at Hogwarts.

"All right I guess," Ron said anyway. "He isn't too keen on going back to school, but who is, eh?"

"I'm sure Hermione would disagree."

"That's true. She's Head Girl now, so I'm sure she's counting down the days."

"She was beaming at the party, Ron. I think she really enjoyed herself," his dad said. "I'm proud of her, and I'm sure her parents would be too. Hermione's sweet and so helpful." He laughed. "I probably ask her the most ridiculous questions imaginable regarding these Muggle trinkets, but she's always pleasant and patient."

Ron felt warmth grow inside his chest. It meant so much to him that his dad liked Hermione and could see why she was so special to him. "That's how Hermione is, Dad; she's justâ€¦"

"Perfect?" his dad asked, nudging his shoulder.

Ron smiled widely. "Yeah, she kinda is. I'm glad we had that party for her, Harry, and Ginny. They deserved it."

"It was also nice to get all of the Weasleys together."

Ron picked up the fork and started moving eggs around the plate. "Well, not all of us. Charlie wasn't thereâ€¦and of course, Percy wasn't."

"Ronâ€¦"

"I'm just stating a fact," Ron said. "He wasn't here for the party and he didn't even bother giving Ginny her present in person. He had to send it through the post as if apparating here would've killed him."

"You don't have to tell me any of that, Ron. I'm aware of my son's actions." Mr. Weasley's composure finally broke. He slumped his shoulders, looking pained. "He'll come around."

"That's what everyone keeps saying," Ron said dully.

"And it's true. Percy is just—he's trying to find his identity. He has firm opinions on certain matters that are distorting his images of things."

"A lot of things, really," Ron mumbled. "I dunno, Dad. I get so angry at him, but sometimes I think I—well—"

"Miss him?" his dad asked.

"'Miss' is a very strong word and it's not what I'm going for. I don't know though. I mean, Percy's, well, Percy, but we need him to be a whole family." Ron said. "All of us have to be here."

"I understand exactly what you mean, Ron," his dad said, squeezing his shoulder.

Ron wanted to ask him if he thought Percy would come to Bill's reception but he figured that would be too painful to answer. Instead, he said, "I'm glad someone understands me."

Mr. Weasley's composure changed. He sat up, giving Ron a look. "Is that your way of telling me that someone in particular doesn't understand you?" Ron shrugged, stuffing bread into his mouth. "Well, if that's your way of subtly bringing up your mum then I'll tell you right now that talking like that isn't going to solve anything."

"I'm sorry," Ron said.

"I'm not the one you should be apologizing to." Mr. Weasley shook his head. "You give Percy such a hard time, but you're right here and I don't reckon you've ever been so far away from her. Now, I always try to understand you, but that can only go so far. I don't like the way you've been acting towards her lately. It's not right."

When Ron's mum got on him, it hurt. When he disappointed his dad, it shattered him. His dad one of the few people who was always on his side and felt proud of him. Ron hated taking that pride away. "I know that I'm an arsehole, Dad. You don't have to remind me."

Mr. Weasley yanked the fork out of Ron's hand. "Let me tell you something," he said, pointing it at him. "First, don't talk about yourself like that. Second, that's not what I was trying to say. Don't you ever put those kinds of words in my mouth. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," Ron said.

His dad put the fork down but kept his stern look. It wasn't often that he got angry, so when he did it was always serious. "I know that temper you have, Ron. You got it honest from your mother and me, but there's no way in hell that I'm going to let you run around with it and have it make all of your decisions for you. You're better than that and you know it."

"I guess," Ron said quietly. "I really haven't been feeling like myself lately though."

"You're not the only one," his dad said. "When you lot do your school shopping I plan to talk to Molly about a few things; you're one of them."

"Do you think you could tell her that I'm sorry for all this?"

"That's something that you'll need to tell your mother yourself, Ron," his dad said. "Here, take my plate back into the house for me. I'll finish it at the table."

He felt a tug at his heart. "Are you mad at me?"

"No, I'm not mad. I just get a little more concerned every day."

Ron couldn't look his dad in the eye anymore. "All right." He got up to leave.

"Oh, Ron, the cloaking charm that Hermione is using on her cauldron and supplies is wearing off. She should consider reinforcing it."

Ron almost dropped the plate. "Y-you know about that?"

Mr. Weasley shrugged. "This has been my shed for over twenty-five years. I know the space well."

"Dadâ€¦"

"It's okay," he said casually. "Hermione can brew in here if she needs to. I trust that she has a good reason. It's why I didn't nose around and why I won't even mention it to her. Just tell her that you saw the pot handle or something when you came in here." Ron's body relaxed as he smiled at his dad; the man was so bloody brilliant.

"Dad said that he'll be right out," Ron said to his mum when he walked back it into the house.

"All right. Here you go, Ron." She handed him his plate.

"Thank you." Ron turned to sit in the vacant seat next to Hermione, but Harry came down at the exact same moment and pulled the chair out.

"Ron's sitting here, Harry," Hermione said.

"Oh, okay." Harry shrugged, sitting next to Ginny.

Hermione looked at Ron, nudging her head for him to come over. He tried not to grin like a prat as he sat next to her. They shared a mischievous look as they blushed.

"Harry, dear, what would you like?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

Harry took off his glasses, rubbing his eyes. "Nothing, Mrs. Weasley, but thank you."

"I don't mind making you something," she said.

"I'm not really hungry," Harry said.

"You should probably eat something, Harry," Hermione said. "Even if it's something small."

"I don't care how small it is, Hermione. I'm not hungry."

"Easy, Harry," Ron said, sitting up straighter.

"Be quiet, Ron," Ginny breathed.

"Don't, Ginny," Hermione quickly said.

"It's fine!" Harry said loudly. He looked at Mrs. Weasley, straining a smile. "I'm honestly okay right now."

She gave him a deep look of concern. "All right, Harry, but you're definitely eating lunch."

Harry nodded, pouring himself water. Ron and Ginny returned to their food while Hermione folded the edges of her napkin. Silence swept across the table as the four went off into their individual thoughts.

Mrs. Weasley cleared her throat. "So, have you all agreed on a plan for today?"

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said. "We're going to head to Diagon Alley after breakfast. Ginny will meet us at the Tabbyforth's grate."

"Lovely," Mrs. Weasley said. "Ron, Ginny, if you two end up needing more money just come back and I'll give you some more."

"We will, Mum," Ginny said before sharing a look with Ron. Even if they did need more money (and they probably would), they wouldn't ask for it. The two were used to pinching as tightly as possible.

"Harry, are you sure that you don't need either me or Arthur to go with you?" Mrs. Weasley asked. "I don't know what kind of attention you'll get out there."

"I'll be all right, Mrs. Weasley. Hermione has a plan." Harry nodded to her; she smiled, laughing a little.

"Harry and I spent time last night thinking of a possible disguise for him," Hermione said. "It's not great, but it should work for this."

"I think it's brilliant," Harry said. "It's all about hair tucking, Hermione."

Hermione laughed harder. "Yes, lots and lots of hair tucking." They kept giggling and giving each other a look that Ron couldn't understand. He wasn't sure how he felt about it.

"Oh, it's a relief that you won't be easily recognized, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said. "That's a smart idea, Hermione."

"Thank you, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said. "I figured incognito would be best for Harry." She checked her watch. "I should go get our itinerary for the day. We'll want to get out there before the crowds start showing up."

"Good idea," Harry said, getting up and walking off with her.

Both Ron and Ginny stared after them. "I guess I'll go get my list," Ginny said stiffly. She left too but Ron stayed put, peering at his food; he wasn't that hungry anymore.

"Ron?" his mum said. He looked up at her. "You all have to be careful out there."

"We will be," he assured. "We won't be gone long. Hermione devised a whole schedule and layout of where we're going to go."

"I'm glad," she said. "I trust her and all of you. It's why I'm letting you lot do this alone. Ginny's sixteen now and the rest of you are seventh years."

"We'll be responsible," Ron said.

She nodded. "Good. I'm still going to leave you in charge though."

"You want me to be in charge?"

"Yes, Ronald. I believe that you can do it. Just make sure to look after Harry and help him. I told Ginny and Hermione the same thing earlier."

"I will, Mum. Don't worry." Ron wanted to say something more meaningful to her but he didn't know what. "Um, I should probably go get ready too."

Ron went upstairs to his room. Harry was sitting on his cot, yawning and rubbing his eyes. "You all set?" Ron asked.

"Just about. I can't find my other trainer," Harry said.

"Ah." Ron reached under his bed then tossed the shoe to him.

"Cheers." Harry looked peaky and exhausted as he laced his shoes.

"So," Ron said, sitting next to him, "you and Hermione created a disguise?"

"She created it really," Harry said. "I was keen on using my cloak but she quickly wrote that off. That's when the disguise idea came up. We thought of really complicated and over-the-top



concepts before settling on something simple. It took ages." He chuckled. "And lots of hair tucking."

Ron didn't say anything. He'd known that Hermione and Harry had worked together the night before, but he hadn't figured that they'd spend all night talking and creating inside jokes. Ron felt weird knowing that after making a secret plan to have sex with him, Hermione had gone to Harry and laughed with him out in the open.

"Ron?"

"Huh?" Ron looked up from his hands.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I, um, I reckon I'm just thinking about all the shit we have to buy today."

"It's rubbish. I hate N.E.W.T.'s already," Harry said. "At least we'll be able to get out of the house. Iâ€|" He stifled a very loud yawn. "Blimey, sorry, mate. I didn't get a lot of sleep last night."

"I know," Ron said.

Harry looked away, frowning. "That's right. I kept you up again, didn't I?"

"Not really," Ron lied. "I only woke up a couple of times. Youâ€|you were making noises again and moved around a lot."

"Fucking hell."

"It's okay, Harry."

"No, it's not. I hate this, Ron," Harry said, rubbing his scar as if it hurt. Ron felt horrible. He would do anything to take Harry's pain away but there was nothing he could do. His best mate was hurting and he had no way of stopping it.

"Harry, listen to me: I know you hate this but it's not always going to be this way," Ron said. "We're going to stop him and in the meantime, we'll find you something to help you sleep. Bloody hell, I'll make you tea every night if I have to."

Harry cracked a smile. "You'd do that?"

"I'd at least consider it," Ron said, clapping him on the back. "Maybe if you pay me we can work something out."

"Bugger. I reckon I'll just have to make my own tea," Harry said.

"That's probably best," Ron said. "When I make tea, things can get wonky."

Harry gave him a look. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing, mate," Ron rushed. "I'll meet you downstairs." He patted Harry's arm before leaving the room.

As Ron walked down the staircase, he could hear his mum and Ginny talking in the living room. The reassurance allowed him to stop on the second floor. He stared at Ginny's door with his hands deep in his pockets. He hoped that Hermione was still inside. Ron needed to set things right with her before they spent a whole day shopping together. He took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

"Yes?" Hermione said from the other side.

"Hermione?"

"Come in, Ron."

Ron went inside; Hermione was on the bed putting papers into her bag. "I'm just about ready," she said.

"No hurry," he said. "I want to talk to you for a second anyway."

"All right." She moved her bag over, giving him room to sit next to her.

Ron ignored how quiet and small things around him became as he sat beside her. He also pretended that he couldn't smell Hermione or sense the pleasure his body received from being so close to her.

"Look, umâ€¦I just want to apologize for how I behaved earlier at breakfast," he said. Hermione gently shook her head as if she didn't understand. Ron was taken aback. He'd figured that she'd be demanding an apology for taking about her arse in front of Ginny. "What I said to Ginnyâ€¦about your bum," he said awkwardly.

"Oh," Hermione said, turning pink. She actually giggled a bit. "That's quite all right."

Ron wanted to question his reality. He couldn't believe that she didn't care. "No, it wasn't right; I didn't even mean to say it really. I justâ€¦if you haven't noticed already, I'm saying a lot of things today that I shouldn't."

"You honestly don't need to apologize, Ron," Hermione said. "I can tell that you've been preoccupied today. Quite frankly, so have I. Besides, I find what you said about me rather sweet."

"Really?"

"Yes. I, um, I - I liked what you said," she said quietly. "I thoroughly enjoyed you saying it in front of Ginny too."

Ron rubbed his neck. "I thought you might've been mad at me for that."

"Not at all," Hermione said. "I'm glad you said it."

"Well, even though I'm apologizing, I meant every word. It'sâ€¦it's really gorgeous."

Hermione looked away shyly for a moment. "Th-thank you, Ron." She cleared her throat. "Well, if anyone should be apologizing then I think it should be me. I almost got us caught today because of my perfume."

"Don't apologize for that. I'm sure Ginny's already forgotten about it, and I don't plan on letting anyone else sit in my lap."

"Ronâ€¦"

"Please, don't change anything," Ron said, touching her knee. "We didn't get caught and, well, I told you that I really like your smell. I'd hate for it to change."

"Honestly?"

"I wouldn't lie."

Hermione nodded. "Okay. We'll just have to be more careful."

"And we will. Small details like that are just hard to remember I reckon."

"I understand." She sniffed her shirt. "You're on me too, Ron."

"I am?"

"You can check for yourself if you'd like," she said.

Ron leaned forward, smelling her collar. All he could identify was her fruity scent and the lighter, yet equally amazing, aroma of her hair. He closed his eyes, leaning his nose right into her neck. Hermione trembled, pressing into his face.

"You smell so bloody good, 'Mione," he said against her neck.

"Actually, we smell so goodâ€¦together," she whispered.

Ron had to pull away; he felt so hot that it was difficult to breathe. Hermione was flushed too, and her chest quickly rose and fell. It amazed him how swiftly things had changed for them. He looked down at her lips; Hermione ran her tongue across them. Ron leaned in once more and she closed the space between them.

The snog was incredibly slow, wet, and detailed. All of Ron's thoughts disappeared; he only knew Hermione. They kissed loudly, parting every few seconds for desperately needed air. Ron didn't know what was happening, but this felt different. Memories came back to him and he didn't know what to do with them.

Hermione cupped his face, rubbing her thumb across his cheek. In return, he ran his fingers back and forth across her stomach. It kept his hand from wandering to other places but he also just loved the gesture because massaging Hermione's stomach was one of

the first things she'd ever let him do to her. It had led to everything they were now.

Hermione jerked, moaning louder as he continuously touched her. She tugged on his ear, making him kiss her deeper and harder. Ron increased the intensity and commanded her mouth " just like he had their first time together. His actions must have come as a surprise because Hermione whimpered and lost balance. She fell back against the bed; Ron found himself moving on top of her.

Hermione spread her legs; he pressed himself into her. They both gasped. Ron felt all the blood rush south. He could hear his heart beating in his ears. They kissed urgently in a way that only snogging in a bed could produce. Ron repeatedly pushed into her whereas Hermione snaked her hands into his back pockets. She clutched his arse which only made Ron push against her more roughly.

Everything was enhanced and better this way. He'd missed this kind of passion and it felt good to know that Hermione must have too.

Ron broke away for a moment, sliding one of his shaky hands down her arm and to her stomach. He felt so alive and he wanted her so badly. He kept his hand on her as they continued to moan and he continued to push. The metal from the cot creaked as it hit the wall. The sound should've bothered Ron, but it didn't. He knew that they should probably stop or at least put spells up, but he couldn't move. This was too incredible.

As Ron flicked his tongue over the roof of Hermione's mouth, he finally found the courage to move his hand to her jeans. He could feel how hot she was through the denim. Ron unbuttoned her trousers, pulling down the zipper. He reached his hand under, pressing his fingers against her damp knickers.

Hermione whimpered loudly. "No - wait," she said, moving his hand away.

Ron stopped everything he was doing and examined her face. "Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head. "N-no. It's justâ€¦we shouldn't do this. It's not right."

All of the fire in Ron died out. He immediately got off of her and sat up. "Y-yeah, um, this isn't right at all."

"No, that's not what I meant," Hermione said, sitting up as well. "I meant to say that it's not right that we do this here and now."

"I get it," he mumbled.

"Don't, Ron," she said. "Pleaseâ€¦"

"It's okay. I'm sorry. I shouldn'tâ€¦I shouldn't have touched you like that without asking first."

"That's not what this is about, Ron. I liked you touching me and I wanted you to. I just suddenly remembered where we were and who's waiting for us downstairs."

Ron felt like a terrible brother and friend because he hadn't given a shit about Ginny and Harry waiting for them downstairs. "You're right. We have shopping to do."

"Exactly, that's all this was," she said. "Do you believe me?"

Ron completely understood what she was saying but he knew that it wasn't the truth. The look she'd had on her face when she stopped him was something he'd seen before. It was the same expression Hermione had given him right before she left his room and went to her parents; it was her look of regret and fear that only being in a bed with him could produce.

"Of course I believe you, Hermione," he said.

Hermione rubbed her brow. "Good. I'm really sorry, Ron."

"I'm sorry too."

She stood up, fixing her jeans. "I'll meet you downstairs. I have to put Harry's disguise together."

"All right," he said. Hermione got up and left the room without another word.

Ron held his hands together, closing his eyes. He now knew why it was best that they didn't do anything on a bed. He took a few moments to settle and get his head on before getting up and leaving the room.

When he went downstairs, he saw Hermione putting the finishing touches on Harry's disguise. She'd used a spell to change the shape of his glasses and gave him a hat to wear that covered up his scar. She slicked and tucked Harry's hair back so much that you could barely see the black strands. Hermione looked up at Ron, giving him a small smile. He did his best to smile back.

After Harry's look was in order, Ron's parents gave them a speech about being careful and keeping an eye on the time. Ron could tell how nervous his mum was, but it meant a lot to him that she was leaving him in charge again. He, Harry, and Hermione apparated while Ginny Floo'd to Diagon Alley.

Seeing all of the kids and their parents buying supplies for school and gathering his own items from various shops gave Ron a headache. He couldn't believe that he was going back. Ron wasn't ready to be a seventh year or to take on a heavier course load. He didn't want to wear his uniform or take bloody Potions again. Ron couldn't imagine walking into the Great Hall the first night and not seeing Dumbledore. There were just too many awful memories at Hogwarts and too much stress.

The realization started to overwhelm him so he tried to think of good things that he would return to. His mates would be there, and he would get play Quidditch again. Ron also wouldn't get distracted by Lavender's

The idea of Lavender worsened the throbbing against his temples. Ron had no idea how he would handle interacting with her again. He'd never had an ex before and he didn't know how these things were supposed to be after spending a summer apart.

Ron glanced up from the ground; Hermione and Harry were ahead of him. They were talking and pointing to things on one of her lists. He didn't know why, but looking at them made him feel even more unprepared. He'd have to go back to being Harry's sidekick and the ginger bloke who was Hermione's other male friend.

"Ron?"

"Huh?" He looked at Ginny who was walking next to him.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm fine," he said. "I just don't want to do this."

"I don't either," she said, looking ahead to Hermione and Harry as well. Ron could tell that she was trying to appear indifferent, but he could see something in her gaze.

It was at that moment when Ron realized that he wasn't alone in this. Ginny had stress and reasons for not wanting to go back too. She would be another Weasley at Hogwarts and would have to deal with the stigma of that along with the conflicting emotions of seeing Hermione and Harry talking and being mates with such ease. Ginny and Harry had officially gone back to being 'just friends' and he knew it completely gutted her.

Ron wanted to tell Ginny that he was thankful that she would be returning to school with him; he even wanted to let her know that no matter what happened with Harry or any bloke, there would always be one guy at Hogwarts who loved her and thought that she was brilliant. Ron couldn't though; the words weren't there.

"Ginny," he said.

She finally looked away from Hermione and Harry. "Yes?"

"I wrote down that I needed some new quills but Hermione's got so many that I'm sure I can borrow a few of hers," he said. "We can use that money to get you bigger ink bottles."

Ginny shook her head. "That's okay, Ron."

"No, we should do that. You need them."

"Okay, um, thanks," she said, smiling a little. "Well, one of the gifts that Luna gave me was this huge package of colored parchment that has tiny shapes on them."

"Are you serious?" Ron asked, chuckling. "Like little moons and shit?"

"Leave her alone," Ginny said, laughing too. "It's an interesting gift and I like it. I'll have to alter the colors though so I can actually use them for coursework. Anyway, the point is that I'll have plenty of parchment this year. We can use some of that money to get you a better cauldron. As an N.E.W.T. student, you'll be brewing a lot in Potions, right?"

"Most likely."

"Then it's sorted."

"Thanks, Ginny," Ron said.

"Anytime," she said, knocking her shoulder against his.

"Ron, Ginny," Hermione called. They both looked up. Hermione had a strange look on her face. "We're going to head into this bookshop."

"All right," they said together.

The shop was hot and crowded inside. Ron's irritation and headache grew every moment that they were in there. He spotted Harry in a corner, flipping through a book and clearly trying not to stick out. Ron walked over to him.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm all right," Harry said. "I can't wait to get out of here."

"I'm with you, mate. So, you're okay? Do you need anything?"

"No, I'm good, thanks."

"Of course," Ron said.

Harry adjusted the rectangular-shaped frames on his nose. "What about you? Do you need anything?"

"No. I'm all right."

"You should probably tell Hermione that then."

"What do you mean?" Ron asked, searching around for her.

"She's worried about you," he said.

"When did she tell you that?"

Harry shrugged. "Before we came in here."

"Oh, um, I'm fine." Ron rubbed his neck. "Why are you two talking about me anyway?"

"I don't know, Ron. Maybe because you're our friend?"

"Well, I don't need you two to do that. If you or Hermione have questions about me then you're better off going to the source."

"You're rich saying that," Harry said.

"Don't give me that bullshit today, Harry," Ron said.

"Me? You're the one acting like an arsehole. Just calm down."

"Don't tell me to calm down," Ron said, feeling his anger rising. "I have every right to get upset when my best mates are talking about me behind my back."

"You know we're not doing that," Harry said. "Damn it, Ron. What is your problem?"

"I don't have one. It just bothers me that you and Hermione-

"- what?" Harry asked. "That we talk to each other?"

"No. I'm glad you two talk," Ron said, "but when I hear that Hermione is going to you about me instead of talking to me, it does my head in. Things aren't as easy for Hermione and me as they are for you two, and rubbish like that won't make it any better."

"So why are you telling me this?" Harry asked. "I'm not Hermione, Ron. I didn't do anything. Although, I can understand why it might be hard for her to talk to you."

"Bugger off" and save the hero speech until after you're done being a prat to Ginny."

"Don't bloody go there!" Harry shot. "You have no idea what's going on."

"Neither do you!" Ron sighed, taking a step back. "I don't need this, Harry. I only wanted to come over and see if you needed anything."

"I don't. I'm fine."

"Brilliant. I'll meet you lot outside." Ron walked out as fast as he could. He needed to get out of the shop and find peace away from everything in his life.

It wasn't too much longer before Hermione, Harry, and Ginny came back out.

"What happened, Ron?" Ginny asked.

"I got too hot in there," he said.

"Well, there's only one more shop that I want to visit and then we can leave," Hermione said. "Is that okay with everyone?"

"It's fine with me," Ginny said.



Harry nodded. "Sure."

Ron mentally groaned. He couldn't imagine having to walk into another store. He just couldn't do it. "Actually, I think I'm done."

"Done?" Harry asked.

"I've got all my supplies and I don't have extra money to buy stuff, so I'm gonna nip off," he said.

"Ron," Hermione said. "We should stay together."

"But you said that there was only one last shop then you're going home. I don't want to go back yet." He rubbed his neck. "I just want to walk around for a bit."

"We can do that then," Hermione said.

"No, it's okay. You lot go ahead. I'll be home soon."

Ginny gave him a look. "Ron, maybe we should just stay together."

"But nothing is happening," Ron said as calmly as he could. "I'm just going to take a quick walk around by myself, that's all." All three of them were looking at him skeptically. He couldn't understand why.

"Okay," Harry finally said. "Let's just go then and get back to the Burrow. Ron can take care of himself."

"Thanks, mate," Ron said.

Hermione rubbed her brow. "Iâ€¦I suppose."

"Will you take this for me?" Ron asked, handing his bags to Ginny. "Tell Mum that I'll be home soon."

He didn't even wait for an answer before he started walking in the opposite direction.

Someone tapped his shoulder. "Ron?" Hermione said.

Ron turned around. Hermione was looking at him apprehensively. "Hermione?"

"Are you really all right?"

"I'm fine. I just want to go for a walk."

"I can walk with you," she said. "You don't have to be by yourself."

Ron wished that he could tell her that he'd love for her to walk with him. All he wanted was to be alone with Hermione for as long as he could before they went back to school and were separated again. He needed to get used to that feeling though because even

though they had never been closer and they were having sex, they were still just mates. Hogwarts would bring back feelings and memories that would take a toll on him like they did every term. The only difference was that Ron usually had time to adjust. This summer, all he had done was live in his head and it was only now that reality was coming to light.

"I appreciate it, Hermione, but I just want to be alone right now," he said. "I need to clear my head."

Hermione paled a little. "Ron, if this is about what happened in Ginny's room—"

"It's not," he said, feeling like a prick. "Hermione, I'd never get mad at you for telling me to stop. I'm okay and we're fine. I just— you know how you sometimes say that Harry needs time?"

"Ron—"

"Do you?"

"Yes, of course," she said drearily.

"Well, I need that time now," Ron said. "It's nothing against anyone. I just want to walk around and come to terms with the fact that we're going back to Hogwarts. I'll be back at the house soon, don't worry."

Hermione's shoulders slumped. "Okay. I guess I'll see you later."

Ron's body ached to get closer to her; his throat hurt because he was keeping so many words crammed down. He hated making her worry. "We're fine, Hermione. I promise," he said softly. "I'll be right there." She merely nodded then started walking away. He quickly took her hand, holding it firmly. "Hey, um, Harry's disguise looks really good."

"Thank you," Hermione said, looking down at their held hands for a moment. She pulled away, then caught up to Harry and Ginny who were looking at him curiously. Ron kept walking down the street, increasing the distance between him and his best mates and sister. He never enjoyed walking away, but sometimes it was necessary so he could find his head again. Ron didn't plan on making a habit of it though. He knew that his friends needed him and once they started searching for the Horcruxes, they would always need to be a unit.

Ron didn't know where he was headed but the more he walked, the better he felt. He found himself standing right in front of the twins' joke shop. He peered inside through the front window. His big brothers were, of course, charming customers and selling Skiving Snackboxes to school kids. Ron grinned. He was proud of them and especially proud of George for keeping a smile on his face despite what had happened to him. Ron couldn't believe it, but he actually missed them living at the Burrow. Things with the twins were always frank and easy. The three of them could act horribly to one other but then turn around and make each other

laugh all within the span of five minutes. Ron considered going in but he didn't want to have to explain why he was by himself.

"Ron?" someone said. He turned towards the voice. A girl with long, straight, brown hair was standing not too far from him wearing a sleeveless Salem Short Snorts Quidditch shirt. "Hi," she said, smiling and waving. "It's me, Amy. I'm sure you don't remember me but I-"

"-work at the Quidditch shop. Yes, I remember," he said. "You helped me pick out the broom polish."

"Yes!" she said excitedly. "How did your mate end up liking that, by the way?"

"It was the right choice. He loves it and uses it a lot."

"That's great!"

Ron nodded, not really knowing what to say to her. "Soâ€¦are you going in?"

"I just came out," Amy said, holding up a bag. "It's for my nephew. He loves your brothers' sense of humor. Well, I guess it's your humor too."

"Only sometimes," Ron said. They went quiet; once again he didn't know what to say. Ron was surprised that Amy had even remembered him, let alone approached him. He'd thought that her kindness was just an act, but she was evidently just a friendly person.

"Well, I don't mean to hold you up," Amy said, tucking hair behind her ear. "I just wanted to say hello. I'm sure your brothers will be happy to see you."

"I'm not going in. I thought I was butâ€¦well, I'm just not," Ron said inelegantly. "I'll probably just head home. I'm starving."

"That's perfect because I am too. We can grab some quick sandwiches if you'd like."

Ron blushed, clearing his throat. "O-oh, um, thank you for the offer, but I should really get back."

"Okay, that's fine," Amy said, shrugging. "Well, maybe I'll see you around. Come by the shop if you need more polish or change your mind about that rally towel."

"I will," he said.

"Brilliant. Oh, before I go, did you happen to read that article on the Thunder's latest trade?" Amy asked with a smile.

Ron smiled a bit himself. "I did. It's a shame, really. I reckon I could be a better manager for that team than Milton."

"I think even my nine-year-old nephew could. Well, I'll see you, Ron." Amy touched his arm for a moment, then started heading up the street.

"Wait," Ron found himself saying. Amy turned around. He had no idea what he was doing but he couldn't stop himself. "Um, I reckon I might as well get something out here. Quick sandwiches, right?"

Amy nodded. "Sure. I have to work later today anyway. Come on."

Ron followed her to a sandwich shop. During their meal, they talked about Quidditch on a professional and personal level. It was a completely new experience for him. He'd never gone out to lunch with someone he'd more or less just met; he'd certainly never talked Quidditch with a girl who wasn't on a school team or his sister so extensively before. Amy seemed to be just as much of a fanatic as he was. She laughed at his jokes while also having some good ones of her own. Ron didn't feel any pressure talking to her, and she was very nice.

He didn't consider himself an expert on interpreting the confusing signals that women gave off, but he'd learned enough over the years to realize that Hermione was right about Amy; she did appear to fancy him. She kept giving him a pretty smile and a look that he'd seen Lavender give him multiple times. Ron was as polite as he could be, but the truth was that whatever Amy was trying to give off on him wasn't working. She was fit and could make him blush, but the sensation didn't last; he wound up feeling empty after awhile.

Yes, talking to her was easy and fun; he liked that she got his jokes and took the piss with him—but it was just like talking to Harry. She didn't do anything for him, and Ron started thinking about home and the possibility of Hermione waiting for him there. He was probably a tit for thinking so, but sitting with Amy made him miss Hermione a great deal; it was just like when he had dated Lavender. Amy was a bizarre combination of Harry and Lavender and before too long, Ron found himself putting Harry's face on Lavender's body. It made him feel sick, so he told Amy that he had to go before she could suggest dessert.

Ron walked the streets again, keeping as far away from Amy's shop as possible. He didn't know what was wrong with him. She was an attractive girl who had only tried to be nice and give him some attention, but he had lost his mind over it. Any other bloke probably would've killed to be in his position, but Ron just couldn't do it. He couldn't take a good-looking body and expect that to be enough for him. He needed more, and there was only one person who had it all.

Hermione was the only 'obviously beautiful' girl that he knew, and no matter what he did or who came into his life, she would always be the only girl who made him feel anything real. It didn't even matter if the reality of the emotion was pleasant or painful; she was able to reach inside of him and pull things out that he didn't know he had. Hermione could warm Ron's body when he didn't even know it was cold and rub out the numbness that

kept him from truly enjoying life. Hermione Granger was the bloody magic that ran through his veins; he had to get back to her. He had to do something about their situation before school started and things turned to rubbish like he was slowly starting to suspect would happen.

Ron returned to the Burrow much later than anticipated. The sun was setting and his mum was waiting right at the kitchen table when he walked through the door.

"Ronald, where have you been?" she asked, standing up at once.

"I'm really sorry, Mum. I lost track of time when I was walking."

"I was worried when they came back without you. I've been checking the clock every ten minutes or so." His mum genuinely looked scared; it surprised Ron.

"I'm sorry. I told Ginny to tell you that I was fine," Ron said, walking over to her. "I checked on Harry and we got all the things we needed before I parted from them. I just needed to get some air."

"Alone? Why?" she asked. "Harry and Hermione are your friends."

"I know, but I needed a moment on my own."

His mum gave him a once-over. "Is something going on?"

"No, I'm fine," Ron said for what felt like the twentieth time today. He was getting a little tired of people assuming that he had a problem for wanting to do things just for himself. Ron figured that he was allowed to be 'just Ron' on occasion and not a part of a group. "I justâ€¦at times I want to do things by myself. I am my own person, Mum."

She heavily sighed, shaking her head. "See, this is why it's so hard to talk to you. You always give those nasty little comments and don't communicate with me properly."

"What are you talking about?" he asked. "I'm talking to you right now."

"No, you're talking at me as if I'm not listening; I have to say that I'm sick of it. I know you're of age but I'm still the adult here, and your mother. Why can't you show me the same respect that you give to your dad?"

"I do respect you, Mum," Ron said, feeling gobsmacked. "Why can'tâ€¦whatever - never mind."

"Don't you do that, Ronald Bilius Weasley!" his mum snapped. "Now, you tell me what's going on â€" and don't you dare use the word 'whatever' again." Ron could tell that she was upset. He didn't want to make it worse but he also wanted to give her what she was asking for. Ron was just so bloody tired of the arguing.

"I was going to ask why you can't give me the same credit that you give Ginny," he said. "She shows just as much attitude as I do and says things that I find nasty, but you give her - and even Percy - the benefit of the doubt. What about me?"

"This isn't about Ginny or Percy, Ron," Mrs. Weasley said. "I honestly don't understand why you always have to bring him or your little sister into the conversation when we're talking. You can't blame them for this."

Her statement was all the proof Ron needed to know that his mother still didn't understand him. "I'm not blaming them, Mum, and you're obviously not listening."

"I am trying to listen to you," she said in a calmer voice. "You're my son and I don't want things to be like this; especially with you going off to school soon." She looked sadly at him, shaking her head again. "What happened to my baby boy, Ronnie? We were okay before. What aren't you telling me now, sweetheart?"

Her words cut right into him. His chest ached, and his head started throbbing again. "I've been telling you things, Mum, and I haven't gone anywhere," he said quietly. "I don't want it to be like this either. I'm so sorry that I've been upsetting you; I don't mean to. I love you, Mum, and I don't want to fight with you anymore. I guess I just get really angry."

"I understand, Ron. I honestly do too sometimes."

They looked at each other in silence. Ron waited for her to hug him or tell him that she loved him too, but she didn't do anything. "Well, if it's okay with you, I'm going to go up to my room," he said.

"Wait." She took his hand. "I love you, dear. You do know that, don't you?"

Ron looked into her eyes that were so much like Ginny's. Ginny got everything from their mum. Ron didn't know what he had from her. "Yeah, of course, Mum."

For the rest of the evening, Ron tried to get himself in a better mood, but everyone around him seemed to be a state too. He could tell that his mum was hurting, and his dad still seemed concerned. Ron didn't know what had happened after leaving Harry, Hermione, and Ginny, but all three of them were quiet and didn't say much to him or to each other. The atmosphere of the Burrow was so static and the tension so thick that Ron could cut through it.

He couldn't get to sleep that night. Ron sat up in bed, watching Harry repeatedly turn in his cot as he mumbled or hissed; it scared him. He felt so bad that even Harry's dreams were polluted with darkness. Ron considered waking him up, but Harry usually got defensive and upset when he did. Ron knew that Harry would settle eventually and fall into a better sleep.

Ron checked the clock against the wall, then decided that now was the time to get up. He slipped out of the room as quietly as he could, anxiously looking at Harry once more before closing the door behind him. Ron eased down the creaky staircase and into the living room.

"Hi."

"Hi," Ron said, taking a seat next to Hermione on the couch.

An additional unspoken rule between them was to meet on the couch late at night when everyone else was asleep. It was something that had started after they'd gotten wonky off of Bill's tea. Ron wanted to smile as he thought about their mad conversation and how good it had felt to be open with her. He was sitting in the very spot where he had felt Hermione up so hard that she'd bitten him, leaving a bruise on his shoulder that had taken over a week to completely heal.

Hermione took a sip of her tea, then handed the mug to him. "Thank you," Ron said. She nodded but said nothing. They simply passed the mug back and forth in silence as they watched the fire. Ron didn't mind; he felt better just being around her.

"Is Harry asleep?" Hermione asked after awhile.

"Yeah. He's turning over a lot though."

"Probably bad dreams," she said, rubbing her brow. "I need to make him something for that."

"I thought you weren't keen on that kind of magic?"

"If it'll help Harry then I'll do anything." The intensity in her voice and determination in her expression told him that her words were true.

"You're a really good friend to him, Hermione," Ron said.

"I'm trying as hard as I can to be what he needs," she said, scooting closer to him. "I know you are too."

"I wish there was more I could do," he said, edging over as well.

"So do I; for Harry and for Ginny," Hermione said. "I feel bad for them." There was something in her gaze that was so distant and weighed down.

Ron slowly reached out, touching her shoulder. When she didn't move away, he began rubbing her back. "I reckon it's better that they know now exactly where they stand."

"Very true," she said, shivering and leaning into his touch. "It'll help them focus and probably make them stronger when they do find a way back to each other."

"You think they will?"

"Yes, Ron. They care deeply about each other and they should be together. Theyâ€|they have to find a way back." Hermione stared right into him with her gorgeous eyes. He wanted nothing more than to be honest with her.

"Hermione, I need to tell you something," Ron said, moving his hand away.

"What is it?" she asked. Ron didn't answer her. He wasn't even sure of what to say. "Ron?"

"Sorry." Ron shook his head. His heart started beating faster, and he felt sweat on his back. He hadn't done anything wrong but in the back of his mind, he knew he had. He licked his lips and tried again. "Okay, umâ€| when I parted from you lot earlier today, I didn't just walk around. I got lunch."

"That's good. You were out there for awhile; I assumed you ate."

"No, that's not it, Hermione."

She frowned. "Then I don't understand."

Ron started to feel sick again. Things always made so much more sense after they'd happened. "I-I didn't eat alone."

Hermione sat up straighter. "Who did you eat with?"

He rubbed his neck, hating the fear in her voice. "Amy. I'm not sure if-"

" - the girl from the Quidditch shop," she quickly said. "I know who you're talking about." Her voice took on a sharp, dry tone that bothered him.

"Yeah, well, we ate together. It wasn't intentional or anything and -"

" - I thought you said that you wanted to be alone?" Hermione scooted away from him.

"That's the truth," he assured, feeling a pang to his chest. "I just wanted to take a walk and I did. Amy saw me outside of the joke shop and asked if I wanted to get food with her."

"And you said yes?"

Never in Ron's life had the idea of saying 'yes' to something seem so horrible. "W-well, Iâ€|yes, I did."

Hermione moved as far away from him as the couch would allow. She folded her arms over her chest, sticking her chin out.

"Brilliant. I'm happy for you, Ron. Meeting up with old friends is always a lovely thing to do."

He rolled his eyes. "It wasn't like that, Hermione. I didn't plan it."



"Why are you even telling me this?" she snapped, slamming her hand on the cushion.

"Because I thought you should know," he said as evenly as he could.

"But why? The girls you fancy and what you do with them is none-

"- hold on, I didn't do anything with Amy and I don't fancy her."

"Oh, right," Hermione said sarcastically. "You just wanted the company that you told me you didn't need."

"Hermioneâ€¦!"

Hermione stood up. "I'm not thick, Ronald," she whispered fiercely. "Amy likes you and you obviously went to eat with her because you fancy her too." She snatched up the mug.

"Wait," Ron said, quickly following her. "What are you doing?"

"I'm putting this away and then I'm going to bed."

"What - you can't just leave."

"Why not? You did!" Hermione spat. She dropped the mug into the sink before starting to walk off again; he took her arm. "Let me go, Ronald."

"No - not until we're finished talking about this." He tugged on her arm, pulling her to the door. He opened it, then gently pressed Hermione against the side of the house once he'd closed the door.

"What are you doing, Ronald?" she asked.

"There; now we can talk normally," Ron said, standing right in front of her.

Hermione huffed, placing her hands on her hips. "There's nothing to discuss. You already told me about your date with Amy the Quidditch star."

"Just stop it, Hermione," he said intensely. "I know you're a bloody genius, but you really don't know everything. I keep telling you not to assume things about me; I can't fucking wait until you start listening to that advice."

"How about you stop throwing swears and just tell me what's going on then, Ron?" Hermione asked, pushing him away.

"What's going on is that I'm trying to tell you that I don't fancy Amy. The truth is that I really didn't think she fancied me before when we were shopping for the polish, but when she asked me to lunch, I sorta picked up on it. I ate with her regardless, and I wish that I hadn't."

"Oh and why is that?" Hermione asked skeptically.

Ron outstretched his arm, placing his hand next to her head. "Because it just felt wrong, okay?" He searched all over her face for her first honest reaction. "You're looking at me like you don't believe me but fucking hell, Hermione, it's true."

"And why should I believe you, Ron?"

"Because there's nothing for me to hide. We ate and talked about Quidditch. I liked that I could talk to her about the recent trades and things like that, but it turned pear-shaped."

Some of Hermione's aggression disappeared; her body relaxed a bit. "You didn't enjoy yourself?"

"Not for too long. She fancied me but I didn't feel anything for her." He looked away. "Even if I wanted to feel something, I couldn't. It's just empty." Ron turned back to her. "It was empty, like so many other fucking things, Hermione. That's the truth." He backed up. "Now, you can go back in the house and think I'm an arsehole and a liar all you want, but just know that I told you the truth and this is where I am."

Hermione didn't move; she just kept looking at him quietly. "Iâ€¦I don't think you're either of those things, Ron. I think you're mature and a good friend for telling me."

"I'm so sorry, Hermione," he said.

She finally moved away, turning her back to him. "There's nothing to apologize for, Ron. You didn't do anything wrong. I should be the one apologizingâ€¦again."

Ron nodded but he didn't believe her. He wanted to keep talking while he finally had the chance. "You know, the whole situation with Amy got me thinking about something else too, Hermioneâ€¦"

"Yes?" she said, still not looking at him.

Ron leaned against the side of the house, peering out into the night air. "We said at the beginning of all this that we were only going to do things with each other. Soâ€¦what's the plan if we go back to Hogwarts and find ourselves in relationships?"

Saying the words did his head in, but Ron had to hear the answer out loud to silence the whispers in his ear. "W-what'll happen ifâ€¦if you get a boyfriend, Hermione? We'd have to stop, yeah?"

Hermione turned back to him. She seemed frightened by his question. "Ron, I don't plan on dating anyone once we get to school." Hearing this made Ron's heart skip a beat. He felt something that he hadn't in weeks reach inside of his chest and run all through his body; it was hope. He let it fill him up and in that moment Ron truly believed that Hermione wasn't interested in anyone else and wanted to be with him. The feeling didn't last, however, because he knew that he was misinterpreting her words â€” like he always did. Hermione said that she didn't plan

on dating anyone once they were back at school. That must've meant him too - Ron was sure of itâ€¦almost sure anywayâ€¦.

He had to brush off the feelings and concentrate. "It doesn't matter if you plan things or not, Hermione," he said. "I meanâ€¦I never planned on dating Lavender last term. What if it happens anyway? This would have to stop..."

Even in the dark, Ron could tell that she was blushing. Her eyes grew wide as she placed a hand to her chest. "R-Ron, I meanâ€¦I-I think we'd have to stop. It'd be the decent, good thing to do. Don't you agree?"

"Of course," he rushed. "If we didn't, it'd be wrong and I know that, but-"

"- what?" She walked right up to him, making his heart race and breathing stagger. "Ron," she said breathlessly. "Doâ€¦do you think we shouldn't stop? You think it should just keep happening?"

The only thing Ron knew was that he wasn't going to last too much longer like this. Hermione was supposed to be his â€" not some fucker's who knew nothing about her or how to treat her right. "No," he said quietly. "I justâ€¦I don't know."

"And what about you?" Hermione asked. This time she stood in front of him, placing her hands on either side of him against the house. She had to look up at him, but it didn't take away from the power she had over him.

"What if you get a girlfriend again, Ron?" she asked in a stronger voice. "Are you going to keep sleeping with me? Is that what you want? Doâ€¦do you want to keep this up even if we're with other people?" Hermione was asking too many questions and they were all jumbling in his mind; he couldn't take it.

"No!" he said loudly. "I meanâ€¦I - I don't know what the hell I'm saying, Hermione. I'm just asking what's gonna happen because I'm lost. I'm sorry for being like this. Just ignore me."

"I'm not going to ignore you, Ron."

Ron watched her chest rise and fall in a jagged rhythm. She was wearing the white t-shirt that he had shagged her in during their first time; it was putting him in a trance.

"I-Iâ€¦I don't know what to say," Hermione whispered. She pressed her lips together, looking just as lost as he felt.

Ron forgot about everything else and only focused on the moment with her. Powerful feelings returned, hitting him hard. "You don't have to say anything, Hermione. Justâ€¦fuck it - kiss me or something because I about to lose my bloody mind and- "

Ron shut up as he felt Hermione's mouth press against his. He instantly gripped her waist, lifting her a bit. She wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing him as hard as she could. Ron

roughly snogged her back. He didn't know what was happening but he knew it was right. Being with Hermione was the only fucking thing that seemed right anymore. He needed to tell her that.

"Hermione," he panted, breaking away.

"I need to get my wand," she said, biting his bottom lip. "It's on the table. Then we'll go to the shed, all right?"

"Okay," he said. Hermione moved away.

Ron knew what he had to do. He was going to shag her – no – bloody make love to her in the best way that he could, then tell her exactly what he wanted – and what he hoped she wanted too.

Hermione took his hand, leading him back into the house, but instantly let it go of him. "Harry?" she said. He was sitting at the kitchen table pale and sweating horribly.

"Mate?" Ron quietly said, feeling all of the fire fade from his body.

Harry slowly raised his head; there was nothing but darkness in his eyes. "He's killed again."

\*\*\*\* I love writing. I really, really do. :) Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

## CHAPTER 10

Happy Holidays everyone and thank you all for the reviews! I've received quite a few pm's/reviews asking me if I'm all right and if I plan on updating my stories. Well, of course I always plan to but the issue is when, I reckon. The holidays are always busy for everyone and this year has been exceptionally hectic. That's all I can really say. Sorry that it's been ages but I'm doing my best to get back into the groove!

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Hermione tried to steady her breathing as she pulled up her knickers. Her hands were badly trembling, as was every part of her body.

"Here," Ron rasped.

"Thank you," she said, taking back her jeans. Ron nodded and fastened his trousers; he too was out of breath.

Hermione turned away from him then peered around the shed; she hadn't expected it to happen tonight. All they were supposed to have done was work on the potion. As Hermione examined the bottles and ingredients that were on the floor and scattered about the table, she hoped that they hadn't ruined anything. She couldn't imagine having to start the Polyjuice over again due to their recklessness.

Hermione closed her eyes, squeezing her stomach. She and Ron had been exceedingly busy lately and had hardly touched each other in days. Tonight it had only taken a brush of Ron's hand over her wrist to cause a great burst of energy and sexual heat to erupt from them. Following that one morsel of contact, she had shoved their supplies off the table while he lifted her onto it. They then had frantic, intense sex that Hermione wasn't sure what to make of.

Yes, it had felt incredible; she was still charged up and tender, but there had been something missing as they kissed and made each other cum. She wasn't sure what it was though. Then again, Hermione was uncertain of a lot of things these days. Too many thoughts, feelings, and ideas were bustling around in her mind, and she couldn't work them out as easily as she used to. Her newfound inability was concerning her.

"Hermione?"

She opened her eyes, turning back to Ron. He seemed anxious as he clutched the edge of the table. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm fine," she said, though she wasn't sure if that was an honest answer.

Ron gave her a once-over. "You look upset."

"I'm not." Hermione rubbed her brow; she really needed to focus. "Sorry. I'mâ€¦I guess I'm just a little distracted."

"Oh. You should've told me sooner, Hermione. Weâ€¦we didn't have to do this."

"No, Ron - listen to me," Hermione said as patiently as she could. "This has got nothing to do with you. I've honestly been feeling unfocused all day."

Ron merely shrugged; she could tell that he didn't believe her. Hermione wanted to explain further but she didn't how to. She felt spread too thin from all of her duties; the physical exhaustion was starting to alter her mental state.

They looked at each other in silence; the quiet pressed uncomfortably against her. They'd been having sex for over two weeks now, but Hermione still wasn't used to the silence that followed afterwards. She could only assume that now was when she was supposed to tell Ron that she loved him, mildly tease him about how much she enjoyed his large size, or even just hold him while the last of their bliss passed through them â€” like a proper girlfriend would do. She couldn't do that though because she wasn't his girlfriend, they weren't a proper couple, and their new relationship didn't operate in such a way.

"W-well," Hermione said. "We should probably clean up."

"Yeah. I'll get the stuff off the floor," Ron said. Hermione watched as he gathered their supplies. She wanted to say

something to him but she couldn't. Saying what she felt was much more complicated than using her body to express those feelings to Ron. "Is anything damaged?" he asked.

"I don't think so," Hermione said as she mended bottles and checked the potion. "I'm sorry that I wasn't more careful."

"Don't apologize. I was here too." Ron set the other materials back on the table then ran a hand through his ginger locks. His breaths were even now but his cheeks were still faintly red. Standing so close to him, Hermione could smell his sweat and the natural scent of his skin. It was wonderful and made her feel so good. Ron caught her stare and she promptly averted her gaze.

"I believe that's everything," she said, keeping her focus on the table. When she thought it was safe, she took a peek at him; Ron was still looking at her. Hermione wanted to touch his face or rub her thumb over his soft mouth, but she couldn't. She was too afraid but she didn't know why.

"Are you sure that you're okay, Hermione?" Ron quietly asked. He was gazing at her with his beautiful blue eyes. Hermione felt as if he could see right through her. Part of her was troubled by the idea but another side hoped that Ron could see what was truly in her heart so she wouldn't have to find the words.

The truth was that ever since they'd discussed the possibility of dating other people and stopping their arrangement, something inside of Hermione had snapped off and disappeared. It'd been a sickening thought of hers for weeks, but talking about it out loud had brought the fear to life. She didn't know why she couldn't just tell him that. Hermione adored words and she considered herself a master of them, but finding the right way to tell Ron the truth felt like an extreme, foreign task.

"Yes—I'm sure," Hermione finally managed to whisper. "I'm just really tired. I've been working overtime on our expedition plans and catching up on my reading for school. It's all coming down on me now. I'm sorry for being a ghost tonight, Ron."

Ron's demeanor softened. He rubbed her arm. "It's all right. I've felt knackered for most of the day too."

"Why?" she asked.

He rubbed his neck, shrugging. "When Harry doesn't sleep, I don't sleep. I don't reckon either of us got more than four hours or so last night."

Hermione pressed her lips tightly together. Hearing this didn't help her mindset. She hated the idea of Ron and Harry not sleeping. Hermione was also terribly worried about Harry. His state was a constant reminder of why she needed to stay vigilant. It was so very important to be there for him. Staying ahead of her thoughts and feelings was making that job rather difficult but Hermione couldn't stop trying. Failure would never be an option.

"Well, hopefully tonight will be different. Tomorrow morning we'll all regroup."

"Can't," Ron mumbled. "Harry's got that meeting in the morning, remember?"

"That's right! I completely forgot," Hermione said in frustration. "I don't understand why though. I mean, I wrote it down in my journal and everything. I'm so sorry, Ron. I'm not usually this slow and-"

"- Hermione, stop it," Ron said, gripping her shoulders. "Stop apologizing for everything. You're fine. It's just me here."

"I know, I know," Hermione said, refusing to let the frustrated tears burning her eyes fall. "I'm trying to relax. I just feelâ€¦I'm stressed out."

She began to pace. "There's just so much happening lately with the Death Eaters and people disappearing and Harry's condition and preparing for the hunt and getting ready for seventh yearâ€¦it's all boggling me."

Hermione glanced up at Ron. "But I know you're worried that you did something wrong to make me like this and you probably think that I didn't want to have sex tonight and I hate that you feel that way because I'm actually really happy that it happened because I've missed you and it felt so good and for once I could just enjoy myself with you an-and I-Iâ€¦!"

Hermione covered her face so she'd finally stop talking. She'd already said way too much because her filter was weak and she was horribly on edge. She let out an unsteady breath.

"Come here," Ron whispered, pulling her into his arms. "It's okay, Hermione." She rested her head against his chest; her body at last relaxed and she felt safe in a way that only his embrace made her. Hermione took in Ron's smell, warmth, and goodness. Being in his arms was lovely. It was rare that they touched now without it leading to something sexual. She enjoyed being close to him simply because.

"I've missed you, Ron," Hermione gently said as she held him back.

"I've missed you too," he said in a deep, calm voice that made her shiver. "We've barely been alone together in days. I hate it."

"So do I. I wanted this with you tonight. Please believe me."

"I do, Hermione. You just get so quiet sometimes. I don't know what to think."

"I could say the same about you, Ron. You never speakâ€¦when it's happening."

"And you don't talk once it's over," he said. "I-I thought I'd been too rough or something."

"Not at all." She pulled away a little so she could look up at him. "You're always gentle, Ron, no matter what's you're doing. I find that amazing."

"It's you, Hermione," Ron said, tucking hair behind her ear. "How else would I be?"

Hermione smiled, clutching his upper arms. Ron was breathtaking. She loved him so much. Even though trying to figure him out was strenuous and being around him made her feel like she couldn't breathe sometimes, she cherished every moment that she had with him.

Ron suddenly moved away. "So, um, why don't you go and I'll finish up in here?"

Hermione dropped her smile. Her body abruptly felt cold. "I can help."

"It's all right, there's not much left to do. You go get some sleep."

Hermione opened her mouth to protest but Ron immediately began storing away and cloaking their supplies. This was why she didn't like talking afterwards. Ron would take her to such a deep, beautiful place then rapidly rip her from it. It hurt every time and made her feel as if he was eager to get away from her after sex. She knew that wasn't true but she couldn't help but to feel it when he acted like this.

"All right," she said softly. Hermione went to the door.

"Wait." Ron walked over to her then looked down at her lips. She mindlessly licked them. Hermione couldn't help herself. Ron had a power over her that was impossible to deflect. Then again, she didn't want to repel it even if she could.

Ron gently cupped her chin then leaned down, pressing his mouth to hers. The kiss was so tender and soft that she sighed, gripping his wrist. Hermione wanted to stay in this moment for as long as possible. She kissed Ron back, feeling exceptionally vulnerable to him. Hermione wished that Ron could tell from their kiss that she would gladly give him anything he wanted from her. All he had to do was ask.

Ron pulled away, slowly opening his eyes. Hermione had to remind herself of how to breathe. "Try and rest, yeah?" he said. "Tomorrow we'll find some time to work on the plans. I promise."

"Okay," she said, talking a reluctant step back. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night, Hermione."



Hermione nodded then left the shed. She leaned against the closed door, placing a hand to her chest. She stayed completely still until her heartbeat stabilized and she felt well enough to walk.

As Hermione made her way back to the Burrow, she told herself that she would be sharper tomorrow. This summer had already tested Hermione of every emotion she possessed - and even some that she didn't know she owned. Things were changing and not necessarily in the way that she wanted them to.

Hermione held herself, shuddering even though she wasn't cold. She once again recalled the conversation she'd had with Ron in regards to them dating other people. The idea of giving him up was driving Hermione mad. It terrified her to think about another guy touching her in the way that Ron did. Her body was exclusively for Ron, and she felt nauseous at the image of foreign hands, mouths, and genitals burning her.

When Ron had pushed himself inside of her for the first time, he had stretched and marked her permanently for himself. Ron was imprinted all over her skin, like tiny freckles that only she could see. Yes, Ron was the only guy she wanted to have her body, but more importantly, he was the only person she trusted with it.

All of these feelings throbbed inside of Hermione and considering all that she'd done with him, she thought it would be obvious by now. It was painful that Ron still couldn't see that he was the one for her. Even more so, it shattered her to know that he was potentially looking for someone else. She bit her lip, thinking about Ron having lunch with Amy. She was still heartbroken over him seeing her. Though Ron wasn't Hermione's boyfriend and didn't owe her anything, she'd thought that having sex had made them at least close enough to where they wouldn't date other people. Hermione had been wrong though, which was something she hated being.

She entered the house, feeling more angry than anything else. Regardless of what she felt for Ron, she would not be his side prize. Hermione rejected the idea of being someone he shagged on the side while he dated some big-breasted twit who couldn't understand him or appreciate his impulse and passionate nature. No - Hermione refused to be 'that girl', no matter what.

She ascended the creaky staircase to Ginny's room. When she eased the door open, she saw that the light was on and that Ginny was sitting up in her bed. "Oh, Ginny," Hermione said, closing the door. "Did I wake you coming up the stairs?"

"No," Ginny said. "I've been awake for awhile."

Hermione sat on her cot. "Trouble sleeping?"

"I can't get comfortable." There was something in Ginny's tone and in the way that she was looking at Hermione that bothered her.

"I've been having the same complication," Hermione said, brushing off the feeling. "It's why I went downstairs to drink some tea."

Ginny gave her a curious look, then scooted to the very edge of her bed. "When I woke up and didn't see you, I figured you'd do that. I went to the couch to join you, but you weren't there."

Hermione rubbed her brow. On her best day she would have five different explanations lined up but she was running on fumes tonight. "Yes, well, I only had half a cup or so then took a walk outside. The weather is nice tonight."

"Hmm. I reckon that was a good idea. I just came back up here and starting looking around."

Hermione wasn't sure if she wanted to know what for or why, but her curiosity won out. "Looking around?"

Ginny chuckled. "You're going to think I'm mad, but ever since I smelled that fragrance on Ron the other day, it's been doing my head in to figure out what it is."

Hermione sat up straighter. She had hoped that Ginny would've forgotten all about that. "O-oh? Why is that?"

"Because I've never smelled anything like that on him before. I justâ€¦I just had to know where it came from. You can understand that, right Hermione?"

"I suppose. Persistence is a good trait to have."

"I reckon so because I finally figured it out about an hour ago." Ginny walked over to her small table that held all of her lotions and perfumes. Hermione's heart skipped a beat when Ginny picked up one of her bottles of body spray. She tossed it to her.

"Peach Splash," Ginny said. "I knew I'd smelled it before. It's your perfume, Hermione."

Hermione clutched the bottle in her hand and gazed at it for a moment before looking up at Ginny. She was standing before her, smugly, as if she expected Hermione to applaud her triumph.

"That's an interesting discovery, Ginny," Hermione said as indifferently as she could. "It makes sense though."

"Really?" Ginny sat back on the edge of her bed. "How so?"

"Well, Ron and I are around each other all the time and we hug on occasion. My scent is bound to rub off on him now and again." She was trying her best to stay composed but she felt distracted, exhausted, and somewhat annoyed at Ginny's current behavior.

"I reckon you're right," Ginny said after a prolonged silence. "I'm glad that I figured it out though."

"And I'm very happy for you," Hermione said, taking off her trainers. "Although, I honestly don't see why it matters. It's just a smell. Everyone has one."

"I'm aware. I was just surprised at how much was on him," Ginny said. "I didn't know a hug could do so much."

Hermione neatly tucked the laces into her trainers then slid them under the bed. Something was beginning to twist inside of her, but she counted in her head, telling herself to let it go. "It probably wasn't as much as you think, Ginny," Hermione found herself saying anyway. "I mean, you were sitting on Ron's lap and violating his personal space. I can understand how the scent of peach may come across as overpowering when you've got your nose all in someone's neck."

"I'm sorry?"

"Nothing," Hermione swiftly said. "It really doesn't matter either way because you completed your quest. We can all go to sleep now."

"There's no need to get defensive, Hermione," Ginny said.

"I'm not getting defensive! I'm just confused by this entire conversation." Hermione took a breath. "I'm sorry. Maybe I am a little tense right now, but it's been a long day and I didn't expect to get this from you tonight. I just want to sleep."

Ginny ran her fingers through her hair, sighing. "You're right, Hermione. I'm sorry. It's been a long day for me as well and I reckon I get a bit mental when I'm knackered. I just want to go to bed too."

"Wonderful," Hermione breathed.

"However," Ginny quickly added, "I get even more mental when there's something on my mind that won't go away."

Hermione mentally groaned. She didn't know what Ginny was getting at but there was only so long she could extend her patience. "What's on your mind now?"

Ginny sat next to her. "I had an idea about something and sitting next to you now is reinforcing that thought. You see, I don't reckon I need to 'violate your personal space' to know what you've got on you. I've known that smell for ages. It's Ron."

"Ginny, I told you that--"

" - you and Ron keep close contact. Yes, I heard," Ginny said. "That makes sense, Hermione, but what doesn't make sense is why you two would be hugging long enough for him to be all over you like this and especially after midnight."

"My goodness, Ginny!" Hermione shot up from the cot. "Why don't you stop this charade and simply say what's on your mind? I know you're clever but I'm sure that I'll be able to keep up with you. You can spare me the mind game."

"Fine," Ginny said, getting up as well. "You want to know what I think?"

"Please - enlighten me."

"I think that you and Ron have been acting really strange lately. I've seen the way you two have been whispering and looking at each other. I've also noticed how you've been slipping out of here at night then coming back a few hours later."

Hermione wasn't sure whether to be more irritated or troubled. She'd thought that she and Ron were being extra careful but it apparently wasn't enough; the realization only angered her more. "I didn't know that I needed your permission to leave my bed," Hermione said. "I was also unaware that you had a chart listing pre-approved scents for everyone." Hermione shook her head; she couldn't believe that she was having this conversation right now. "This is ridiculous. Ron and I are best friends. We spend time together, we tell each other secrets, and sure - we share looks. What's the problem? Everything you've just told me are things I could've easily said about you and Harry not too long ago, Ginny. If this is your way of taking out your frustration-"

" - this is not about me taking out my frustration!" Ginny said loudly. "What I'm saying has got nothing to do with Harry."

"So it's simply a coincidence that you're asking me all of these questions when you're having problems with him?"

Ginny's cheeks flushed and she narrowed her eyes. "Don't throw around our situation as if you know what's going on, Hermione. That's not it at all, and it bloody angers me that you'd think I'd be that childish."

"How do you think I feel right now?" Hermione asked. "You're putting me through an interrogation without even telling me what I'm being accused of."

"I'm not accusing you of anything," Ginny said. "I just thought that you'd be honest like I've always been with you. I guess this friendship only goes one way though."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the fact that I'm not as blind as you think I am. I'm saying that even if you could say those things about Harry and me now, it would make sense."

Hermione felt a pang hit her chest. "And what - Ron and I don't make sense?"

Ginny shook her head. "No, the idea of you and Ron being together is quite easy to understand. What's confusing me is that even though you two aren't together, you're apparently shagging anyway."

Hermione quietly gasped; she didn't know what to do. One voice screamed at her to tell Ginny that she was wrong while the other ordered her to storm off; she couldn't do either though. Ginny was giving her a commanding look that Hermione saw on Ron's face

when he was incredibly worried or scared. Ginny was a spitting image of him in this moment and it was why Hermione couldn't leave or lie to her.

"Ginny," Hermione said calmly, "whatever Ron and I are or are not doing is none of your business. We're both of age and can make our own decisions."

"I get that, Hermione," Ginny said just as coolly. "You're one of the smartest people I know. I'm sure you can handle yourself. If this were any other bloke I wouldn't think twice, but it's my brother - it's Ron. I have to care and even more so because it's you he's doing this with."

Hermione wasn't sure if that was supposed to be an insult or not. "What does that mean?"

"It means that you're different, Hermione," Ginny said. "You're right, what you and Ron do usually isn't my business and I've always respected your privacy, but when it comes to something like this, the rules change. I mean, it's Ron - you know him."

"You're right, I do. I also know that he's stronger than you seem to think he is."

"No - you don't get it." Ginny let out a heavy breath. "Ron can be a thick wanker sometimes and he'll do everything he can to ignore the fact that he's got feelings, but the truth is that his heart is as big as a fucking dragon's egg."

"I know that, Ginny," Hermione said. "I know how much he cares."

"Then you should understand that something like this could completely destroy Ron if it's not handled properly. I know that it takes two people to do whatever it is you're doing but he's my family - my blood - I can't let you hurt him."

Hermione gaped at her. "Me hurt him? I don't know where you've been over the past few years, Ginny, but -"

" - I'm aware of all the rubbish he's put you through," Ginny swiftly added. "I told you that he could be a wanker but you honestly don't know, Hermione. You didn't see how gutted he was when you two weren't speaking last term, and you have no idea how he acted before you came back this summer. He was - different."

Ginny sat back on her bed, shaking her head. "You affect him so extremely, Hermione. If you really are shagging him then I hope you know what you're doing. Ron's not one of those blokes who will take it lightly - especially not with you."

Hermione was at a loss. She was moved by Ginny's concern but also horrified that Ginny worried whether or not she was taking Ron's feelings seriously. "Ginny, I care about Ron," Hermione said. "He's my best friend and has been for almost six years. Anything I say will only reinforce your position because we're arguing for the same side."

"Not exactly," Ginny said. "You're talking about your best mate of almost six years and I'm speaking for my big brother who I've known my whole life. We may not get on all the time but I still want to protect him in whatever way that I can."

"I respect that," Hermione said.

"Good, because it's not going to stop. Ron's been going through a lot of shit this summer and things with our family haven't been helping the matter. I-I love Ron a lot and need for him to be okay." Ginny studied her hands. "My mum is brilliant butâ€¦ but sometimes he's the only person I can talk to about certain things."

Hermione couldn't stand anymore. She sat next to Ginny, swallowing hard. "I feel the same way about him."

"Then please understand why I'm being like this," Ginny said. "We're friends, Hermione. I care about you and I do know that you wouldn't purposely do anything to harm Ron. Justâ€¦ just be careful with him, yeah?" Ginny touched Hermione's shoulder for a second then grabbed a pillow.

"What are you doing?" Hermione asked.

"I know that I'm never going to get comfortable in here so I'm gonna sleep on the couch. I'll see you tomorrow." Ginny left the room without another word.

Hermione stayed seated, going over everything that had just happened. Suddenly, she began yanking off her clothes. She peeled away her socks then tugged off her shirt and jeans. She unsnapped her bra, got out of her knickers, then stuffed it all into her rucksack. Afterward, Hermione pulled the largest t-shirt she owned over her head, then crawled into her cot where she disappeared under the blanket.

Hermione fell asleep with Ron's scent still all over her body.

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The next morning during her shower, Hermione told herself that today would be better. She had slept in later than expected and the extra sleep had improved her mood. She could handle the situation with Ron, and she would eradicate the tension between her and Ginny. Hermione simply had to make an effort because she couldn't keep functioning like this.

She returned to the bedroom and found Ginny inside searching through the bottom of her wardrobe. Ginny looked up at her but didn't say anything; Hermione hadn't expected her to though. She was a Weasley after all, which meant that Hermione would have to be assertive. "Can we talk?" she asked.

"I said everything that I needed to last night," Ginny said in tone that could rival Ron's.

"Well I didn't." Hermione walked over to her. "Ginny, look at me."

Ginny finally stood up. "If you're wondering if I'm going to say something to Ron, then the answer is no. I can only take so many headaches."

"That's not what I wanted to talk about," Hermione said. "I need to tell you that I think you made some very valid points last night and I understood what you were saying. Ron's your brother â€" you love him and you don't want to see him get hurt."

"Exactly," Ginny said. "This is just about his state, Hermione, nothing else. It's important that you see that."

"I do, and I think it's important that you understand something about me as well. It's something that you've evidently misunderstood."

Ginny gave her a look. "Yeah?"

"Believe it or not, I have noticed that Ron's been through a lot this summer," Hermione said. "I have seen the stress he's been under and how there have been issues with him and other members of your family."

She stood as tall as she could. "You see, Ron may not be my blood and I may not have known him my whole life, but it doesn't mean that I don't care about him with every ounce of strength that I have. He's my best friend; I don't take that lightly nor do I find his feelings things to play with. I know he's sensitive. It - it's one of the reasons why I love Ron."

Saying the words took a pressure off of Hermione's shoulders that she hadn't even known was there. She'd never told anyone that she loved Ron before and it felt fantastic and so freeing to say. Most importantly, it felt right.

Ginny's sternness dissolved. "You love him?"

"Very much," Hermione said in a stronger voice. "It's why I understand your concern. I feel that fear too, and I promise that I take it seriously. The last thing I want to do is hurt him."

Ginny gave her a once-over, then nodded. "I trust you, Hermione."

"I really hope so because I want us to be okay. I don't want to fight with you, Ginny."

"I don't want to fight with you either. I just get worked up sometimes. Ron's my family."

"Trust me, you don't have to explain. You're more like your brother than you know."

Ginny crinkled her nose, sticking out her tongue. "I wouldn't go that far. He's still a wanker most days."

Hermione held out her hands in defense. "My mistake. Well, I'll let you finish."

"Wait." Ginny's expression grew more serious. "We're sorted for the most part, Hermione, but I still mean every word I said last night. If Ron gets his heart broken over whatever this is, then it's going to be really hard to remember this talk."

"I can respect that too, Ginny."

Hermione walked downstairs to the kitchen, feeling more focused. She sat across the table from Mrs. Weasley. "Good morning," she said, pouring herself some coffee.

"Morning," Mrs. Weasley said. She was furiously writing what appeared to be party plans on a scrap piece of parchment.

"Still getting things together for the reception?" Hermione asked.

"I had a last minute idea regarding the food platters and I wanted to write it down before I forgot," Mrs. Weasley said.

Hermione had been so busy keeping up with her own lists and goals that she had forgotten that Bill and Fleur's reception was only in a few days. Hermione wasn't sure if she was ready to fix up, dance, and pretend that there weren't a thousand other things to do. "If you need help with anything let me know," she said.

Mrs. Weasley smiled. "Thank you, Hermione, but I'll be fine. If anything, I'll need you to remind Ron to clean up his room and get all of the wrinkles out of his dress robes. Sometimes that boy acts as if he can't hear me but I'm sure he'll listen to you."

"He hears you, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said kindly. "Ron's just been a little tired lately with looking after Harry and all."

"How is Harry?"

Hermione was taken aback by how quickly she had shifted the focus away from Ron. "I haven't seen Harry yet today but I'm sure he's okay. Ron's been caring for him."

Mrs. Weasley stopped writing. "I heard you the first time, Hermione," she said with a sharp tone. "I think it's wonderful that Ron's looking after Harry. That poor dear is going through a terrible time; he could use some light in his life."

Hermione didn't know why, but something suddenly swept over the kitchen table. The air thickened with tension but she didn't know where it was coming from. "I completely concur with you, Mrs. Weasley. Harry does need some light in his life, so it's a good thing that he's got Ron. Don't you agree?"

Mrs. Weasley merely looked fiercely at her. Hermione stayed firm and didn't avert her eyes. "Yes, Hermione," Mrs. Weasley said. "My baby boy is a very good friend."



"No one knows that better than I do, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said, feeling a strange sensation run through her. "Ron's my very best friend; I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him. It's why I'm giving him all the support that I can. Ron needs light too."

The two of them stared at each other in silence. Hermione had no idea what was happening but she couldn't look away first. For whatever reason, this was her way of showing Mrs. Weasley how serious she was—but she didn't know what about.

"Hermione? Mum?"

Hermione and Mrs. Weasley both turned to the voice; Ron was looking at them apprehensively. Whatever had surfaced between the two women crashed to the floor. They gave each other a quick look before turning back to Ron, smiling.

"Good morning," they cheerfully said together.

He raised an eyebrow, rubbing his neck. "Um, hi. Is everything okay?"

"Of course, dear," Mrs. Weasley said.

"Yes, Ron," Hermione quickly added as she pulled out a chair for him. He flopped down, yawning loudly. Ron looked drained, which told her that he and Harry most likely hadn't slept well. Hermione shifted all of her other feelings to the side to deal with what was right in front of her.

"Here," she said, sliding her mug of coffee over to him.

"Thank you," he said. He smiled at her; she smiled back, nodding. It was her way of telling him that they were still okay.

"Ron, I can get you your own," Mrs. Weasley said.

"That's all right," he said. "I only want a little and Hermione's is just the way I like it."

Hermione tried not to blush but she couldn't help it. She watched Ron as he sipped her coffee and thought about what Ginny had told her. He didn't look as if he was hurting, but she had been misinterpreting a lot of his signals lately. She didn't want Ron going along with their new relationship simply to appease her. As much as it pained Hermione, he had every right to want nothing more than friendship.

Ron set the mug down then rubbed his temple. "So," he said, yawning again. "When Harry comes down, just treat him normally and don't pressure him into talking or eating or anything. I swear that bloke needs a holiday."

"So do you," Hermione said, scratching Ron's back and causing him to shiver. She was surprised when he placed his head on her shoulder.

"Then I reckon you're taking one with me, eh?" he said.

Hermione was startled at first but the feeling didn't last long. She rested her head on top of his, closing her eyes. "Where to?" she asked.

"Breakfast," Mrs. Weasley said loudly as she set plates in front of them.

Ron instantly sat up. "Brilliant. Thanks, Mum."

"You're welcome, sweetheart," she said, gently patting his cheek. Hermione rubbed her brow while attempting to shake off the sensation that felt like animosity.

Ridding herself of her resentment was easier to do once Harry entered the room. He looked absolutely dreadful: his skin was pale, his eyes were bloodshot, and his voice was hoarse and void of emotion. They all followed Ron's order not to force anything on him, but Ron himself encouraged Harry to eat and talk. That was evidently okay though because Harry listened and only seemed keen on talking to him. It was another mark of how close the two were as friends.

Mr. Weasley returned to the Burrow halfway through breakfast after another long shift at the Ministry. Both Kingsley and Professor Lupin accompanied him, and Mrs. Weasley insisted that they have breakfast with them.

"I got an owl yesterday from Minerva," Kingsley said. "Before I disclose the details, I want to ask you something first, Harry."

"Yes, sir?" Harry said, sitting up in his chair.

"I know we've been over this many times, but are you sure that you can't identify the victim?" Kingsley asked.

Harry took off his glasses then rubbed his eyes. He let out a deep breath. "No. I-I keep trying, but I can't."

"It's okay, Harry," Ginny said from her seat next to him.

"No, it's not," he said. "I should be able to do more." Harry gripped his glasses so tightly that Hermione thought he'd break them, but he quickly put them back on. "All I know is that it was an older woman. Vol - You-Know-Who was talking with his followers in some sort of meeting room, I think. The woman was there...hanging about them. Heâ€¦" Harry stopped talking, looking pained.

"It's all right, Harry," Hermione said. "You're safe here."

He looked at her for a moment then licked his lips. "He used the Killing Curse on her," he said in a stronger, yet more devastating, voice. "Then his snake appeared and that's when everything went black. I'm sorry, but that's all I've got."

"You don't have to apologize, Harry," Professor Lupin said. "That's more than enough information â€" especially with the news we received. Kingsley?"

Kingsley nodded. "As I said, I got an owl yesterday from Minerva. She told me that a faculty member has unexpectedly departed from the school. All she received from this particular professor was a note announcing her resignation. This is apparently atypical of her, and Harry's brief description fits the teacher in question."

"What's more is that this woman is unfortunately someone who we believe You-Know-Who would target," Professor Lupin said.

"Who is it?" Hermione asked. She felt Ron take her hand.

Professor Lupin looked at her grimly. "Ms. Charity Burbage."

Hermione gasped. "The Muggle Studies professor? He-he killed her?"

"Bloody hell," Ron said, squeezing her hand tighter.

"That still remains to be seen," Kingsley said firmly. "Minerva is looking into Ms. Burbage's resignation and it could check out as legitimate."

"That's right," Professor Lupin said. "These days many are going into hiding. Ms. Burbage could easily be doing the same."

"I can't believe this," Ginny said, shaking her head. "I've never taken her class but I've heard of her."

"Well, I have had her class," Hermione said. "She's always been outspoken about her appreciation of Muggles and putting an end to the idea of the pure-blooded families. Professor Burbageâ€¦she is the perfect target."

"Hermione," Mr. Weasley said, "you heard Remus and Kingsley. We don't know anything yet."

"I told you lot I'd keep you up-to-date," Kingsley said. "It's important that everyone in the Order stays sharp, especially with the school term starting soon."

Everyone nodded in agreement except Hermione. She kept her eyes on her hand that Ron was holding. She had to appear composed in front of the group but inside she was screaming. Professor Burbage was a brilliant teacher and if Hermione had had the time, she would've stayed in her class. As a Muggle-born, she loved that there were magical teachers like Professor Burbage who saw the beauty and importance of Muggles. Even more so, if Death Eaters didn't mind kidnapping and killing witches who merely talked about liking Muggles, Hermione couldn't imagine what You-Know-Who would do to people like her parents.

Through the rest of breakfast, Hermione thought about her mum and dad. She knew that they were safe but an awful fear still wrapped

itself around her spine. Once the meeting was over, Kingsley ushered Hermione outside.

"What is it, sir?" she asked.

Kingsley looked around then stood a bit closer to her. "Here," he said, handing her a folded piece of parchment "This is your parents' progress report."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Sir?"

"They're fine, but no one knows that I'm giving this to you. It has to stay that way."

"Yes, sir."

"Put it someplace safe or even burn it after reading if you have to. I mean it, Hermione. A lot is riding on my faith in you."

Hermione held on to the report securely. "You can trust me, sir. I'll keep it safe."

"Good. Now while you're at Hogwarts I will receive more, but I won't send those to you because I don't want your parents' information traveling by owl. If you'd like, over your Christmas holiday you can come by my office and get copies."

"I will, sir," Hermione said. "Thank you so much for this."

Kingsley patted her arm. "I'll see you in a few days."

"Are you coming to the reception?" she asked.

He faintly chuckled. "There are very few things I find intimidating, but Molly Weasley's wrath certainly frightens the hell out of me."

Hermione covered her mouth as she laughed. "Understandable, sir." She grew more serious. "Sir, do you think Professor Burbage is the woman who Harry saw?"

"You want my honest opinion?" Kingsley asked. Hermione nodded. "Yes," he said bluntly. "Sometimes I just get a feeling and, regrettably, it's usually right."

Hermione rubbed her brow. "I know exactly what you mean, sir."

While Kingsley returned to the Ministry, Professor Lupin decided to stay a bit longer. He talked with everyone at the table about other events happening in the Order. Hermione wanted to be a part of the conversation but her parents' report was burning in her hands. She had to read it so the anxiety would leave her system. Ginny was in her room changing, so she ventured up to Ron's.

Hermione closed the door behind her then sat on his bed. She hugged one of Ron's pillows as she unfolded the report and read it. Everything she had created for her parents was still in place. They were living in the same flat, working the same jobs,

and eating at the same Thai restaurant Hermione had chosen to add to their memories. Her eyes scanned over the small details that the member of the Order had added. Her mum had gotten a haircut, her dad was thinking about switching auto insurance companies, andâ€¦

Hermione harshly bit her lip. There was a note written in red ink at the bottom of the page. It read: Idea of children was raised but subject was quickly dropped.

She swallowed the fiery ball in her throat. Hermione had spent ages thoroughly researching memory charms in order to learn how to wipe out certain desires and dreams. Making sure that her parents' new goals didn't include children had been crucial, so it alarmed her that there had even been a discussion on the matter. However, it also hurt her that they had 'quickly dropped' the idea. Hermione's parents didn't want a childâ€¦but they already had one â€” her. They had a daughter who loved and missed them more than she would let anyone, including herself, realize.

Hermione folded the parchment until it fit in her palm, then placed it deep into her front pocket. She closed her eyes, sitting as still as she could. She had to put away the severe fear and sadness. She needed to compartmentalize her feelings and only use what would help her at the moment. Her parents would want a child again. They would want her again. Hermione just had to make sure that they were safe first. She, Harry, and Ron had to find the Horcruxes and stop You-Know-Who once and for all.

Hermione lay back on Ron's bed, holding his pillow close again. She nuzzled her face against it and smelled the oceanic scent of his hair. It was all over his pillow and sheets. Ron's bed was so comfortable, squishy, and inviting. Hermione missed being on it and the shelter that it provided her. Already she felt a little better.

She eased under his blanket, closing her eyes. She let out a contented moan as she hugged Ron's pillow tighter. Hermione gently kissed it, thinking about how her experience would be enhanced if Ron were cuddled against her. She knew firsthand that sharing a bed with him was beautiful and she longed to experience that beauty again. They never got close on his bed, but she desperately wanted to. She liked the rather adventurous places and positions they'd gotten themselves into since they'd started their arrangement, but Hermione was a simple girl in a lot of ways.

It might've seemed boring to Ron and anyone else, but she fancied Ron resting his head on his pillow as she took command of his mouth or moved her lips down his freckly neck and torso before thoroughly sucking him off. Hermione moaned, thinking about herself gripping the headboard as he thrust deeply into her; however, her desires weren't completely sexual. She also wanted to simply snuggle and flirt with Ron on a bed. She wanted to tangle her legs in his, have pillow and tickle fights, and get lost underneath his massive Chudley Canons blanket. There was just something loving and special about being intimate in a bed; Hermione wanted to have that.

She knew that she couldn't though; their brief moment of passion in Ginny's room a few days ago had taught her that. A powerful wave of pleasure and emotion had flooded through her the second Ron had touched her knickers. Hermione knew that letting Ron feel her up would've turned into them having sex. She'd wanted to and she'd felt badly about stopping him, but it'd had to be done.

Hermione could wish for things with Ron in a bed all she wanted to, but at the core, the idea scared her. They hadn't been so intense and affectionate since their first time; she wasn't sure if she could handle something so delicate yet extreme with him again. Hermione didn't know if she could give herself to Ron in such a tender way knowing that her feelings weren't returned. She nestled herself further into Ron's bed as she tried to fall into the memory of their first time. No one else had mattered; time hadn't existed; they had been in love.

"No," Hermione said aloud, swiftly pushing the covers off of her and sitting up. She didn't have the energy to go there right now; she had to think about something else. Hermione sat on the floor and opened Ron's drawer. She needed to write out possible places to hide her parents' progress report and start making notes regarding Professor Burbage's disappearance. She rustled through scraps of paper and pulled out envelopes and candy wrappers before finding a whole sheet of parchment, a quill, and an inkbottle.

Hermione closed the drawer then quickly began writing. Her mind and body regrouped as her scholarly side took over. She didn't know how long she worked but after awhile she heard someone walk into the room.

"What are you doing up here?" Ron asked.

Hermione looked up at him; he seemed upset. "Just making some notes. All my material is in Ginny's room but I couldn't get in there. I wanted to write everything down while it was fresh in my mind."

He rolled his eyes. "Like you could forget anything. I'm sure you remember your own birth." He closed the door then sat in front of her on the floor.

"Did Professor Lupin leave?" Hermione asked, grinning slightly at his cheek.

"Yeah, then Ginny took Harry out into the field to play Quidditch and cheer him up. The meeting really got to him." Ron rubbed his hands against his thighs. "I thought that's why you disappeared - because of what Kingsley and Lupin told us about Professor Burbage. You talked about her a lot third year." He was looking right at her again, but this time she knew that he could see her thoughts and feelings. No one else was able to do that, and it was something she loved and sometimes feared about Ron.

"Yes, well, this is coming as quite a shock," Hermione said. "She's a lovely person. I hate the thought of her being gone."

"Me too," Ron breathed. "I didn't know her personally, but she seemed nice and she really cared about Muggles; that alone makes her brilliant. It's horrible that she could've been hurt over her beliefs."

"It's sickening, really," Hermione said. "All Professor Burbage did was talk about integrating Muggles and learning from them; she could be dead for those reasons. I mean, I actually have Muggle parents. I am a Muggle-born. What would happen if--"

"- don't. Don't go there."

"Why not? I should probably think about these things so I can prepare."

"Fucking hell!" Ron said loudly. "What is with you and Harry?"

"Sorry?" Hermione asked.

"Do you know what Harry's been doing lately?" Ron asked as he stood up. "He's been talking about preparing himself for the end. Ever since he had that dream or vision or whatever the fuck it was, he's been getting himself 'ready' as he calls it. It's bloody exhausting, and I can't talk him out of it most of the time."

Hearing this hit Hermione hard, and she empathized with Ron but she also understood why Harry was feeling the way he was. "Well, Ron, try to see this from his side. You know how Harry is and what a vision like that can do to him. Now that we know it might actually be genuine, he just wants to be ready. That's smart."

"No, it's morbid," Ron said, shaking his head. "You and Harry preparing yourselves for death isn't healthy, Hermione."

Hermione stood up too. "It's not like that, Ron; it's about planning for the worst. Are you saying that you've never done that before?"

"Of course, but there's a huge difference between entering a situation and not letting the fear of death hold you back, and already assuming that you're going to die before you even get started."

"I disagree. There's nothing morbid or wrong about accepting reality."

"I accept reality plenty," Ron said. "My sister almost died - my dad only a few years later, I've had one brother attacked by a werewolf, another who got his ear cursed off, a best mate who's being sought after by a psychotic serial killer, and you who--"

"-what?" Hermione asked, placing her hands on her hips. "What are you accepting about me?"

"Nothing," he rushed. "It doesn't matter." Ron sighed then looked to the floor. His jaw went slightly ajar as his eyes widened.

"What is it - what's wrong?" Hermione followed his gaze to an unmarked envelope on the floor that she'd forgotten to put back in the drawer.

"Did â€" did you read that?" he asked quietly.

She shook her head. "No."

"Then what the hell is it doing on the floor?"

"I looked through your drawer for writing supplies," Hermione said. "I must've pulled it out and forgotten to return it." Ron snatched up the letter, stuffing it into his back pocket. "Ron, what does it say?"

"Nothing."

"Ronâ€¦"

"No, Hermione, really - it's nothing. It's none of your business." Ron rubbed his neck. "Why were you even going through my stuff in the first place?"

"I already told you," Hermione said as patiently as she could. "Do you want me to explain again?"

"No, I just want you to ask next time you need something," he said.

"There's no need to be rude, Ronald. I didn't nose through your things nor did I read that letter that's apparently nothing. Look, I know you haven't been getting a lot of sleep lately but you really need to calm down."

"Bloody Merlin - I'm so sick of people telling me what to do. I'm managing as best as I can with everything that's been happening but it's still not enough for anyone."

"Please - don't make this another story about how the world is against you. I'm trying to talk to you but you're not listening. You always get on my case for not listening but you obviously have some sort of auditory processing deficiency."

"Yeah, I'll take those big words as your way of having a dick at me," Ron grumbled. "Well, regardless of what you're trying to say, I think I have a right to get upset when I find out you're going through my stuff."

Hermione stomped her foot. "Damn it, Ronald Weasley!" She was getting so furious that she could hardly control it. A spark that had been burning inside of her for ages seemed had finally explode into a wild fire. "I was not going through your stuff! Urgh! What is with you and everyone in your family getting on my case?"



Ron scrunched up his face. "What are you talking about?"

"Nothing - as you'd say!" Hermione spat. "Unless you count the fact that I think your mum is upset with me for some reason and Ginny finding out that you and I are sleeping together."

Ron's jaw fully dropped. "You bloody told her?"

"Of course not, but Ginny's smart and she put the pieces together. She found out that it was my scent on you from the other day and she smelled you on me last night as she caught me sneaking back into the room. We had an argument but we're okay now. She's just worried about you."

Ron started to pace in front of her. "Shit."

"It's okay. She's not going to mention it to you or anyone," Hermione said.

"Fucking hell, Hermione."

"What - are you saying this is my fault?"

"No. I'm justâ€¦" He sighed. "I don't bleeding need this right now."

"Neither do I. It's why I would appreciate it if you didn't yell at me over nothing."

He stopped pacing. "Oh, so my stuff is nothing, eh? I should just let you roam over every inch of my life and do whatever you want to it?"

"There's no point in trying to speak to you right now," Hermione said in defeat. "You're cranky and just complaining."

"I'm not a bloody child, Hermione," Ron said.

"You're certainly acting like one. I'm not going to continue taking it from you either. It's not right - you are not right in this instance."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Which obviously means that you are, yeah?"

"In this case I believe so."

"It's unfortunate that you think that because I've got a bit of information for you."

Hermione glared at him, taking a step forward. "Oh? What is that, exactly? What do you have to teach me today?"

Ron mimicked her movements. "What you apparently don't know, Hermione, is that shagging me doesn't automatically give you the right to thumb through my letters."

Hermione blushed, feeling a horrible pressure in her chest. Ron's words made her feel cold andâ€¦wrong in a way. "M-my mistake,"

she said. "I should have realized that I'm only allowed to touch your penis and let you cum inside of me. Searching through your drawers for ink and parchment is strictly prohibited."

Ron groaned. "That's not what I'm saying, Hermione."

"No - that's precisely what you're saying, Ron. There are rules that we must follow and I'm not doing that. Well, I'll leave you to your sacred room and stupid letter-"

"- it's not a stupid letter!"

"Whatever! It doesn't matter either way because I won't be disturbing it or you again." Hermione pushed past him and headed for the door.

"Oh, that's right," Ron said, going after her, "just walk out like you usually do. I reckon I should get used to this, yeah?"

Hermione turned back to him; his words were like knives cutting into her. She wanted Ron to stop talking and making her feel so awful. He was managing to bring up everything in her mind that scared and pained her. It was a power Ron had always had. Whether it was painful or pleasurable, no one got to her like Ron could.

Hermione only stared at him. She knew that she needed to stay calm and mature, but she felt too upset right now. Ron was so good at hurting her; she had to get back at him, even just one time. Hermione could only stay ideal for so long.

"Maybe if you didn't always give me a reason to leave, I wouldn't have to walk out."

Ron's aggression vanished as his shoulders slumped. He looked at her as if she were a stranger. Hermione stood as tall as she could but inside she was crumbling. She needed to apologize. She hadn't meant a single word. "Ronâ€¦"

"Just leave then," Ron said, opening the door. "Get out."

Hermione let out a shaky breath and obeyed. She walked all the way down the staircase and, after telling Ron's parents where she was headed, she left the house and apparated as soon as she crossed the protection barrier.

Hermione walked the streets of Diagon Alley with no real purpose. She hadn't any money nor her list of books that she still needed to read before school started. She was totally unprepared for an outing, but it didn't bother her. Hermione had needed to get away from the Burrow and all the things that were distracting her.

She kept her head down as she thought about her row with Ron. She had no idea why he had reacted so poorly to the idea of her possibly reading his letter â€" which she hadn't. It couldn't have been so important that it was worth treating her like rubbish. The things he'd said had been so harsh and unnecessary andâ€¦right. As much as it frustrated her, Ron had been correct.

Having sex with him didn't mean that she had full privilege to his life. It made and didn't make sense at the same time.

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest as she continued to walk. Ron always became a mountain troll when he got angry, but she hadn't acted any better. Hermione had much more patience and tact than this, but everything was loosening. She knew why too: it was because of her new relationship with Ron. Their intense physical contact clashed with their emotional distance, and it had created a fog in her head that was keeping her from staying on track and seeing her goals clearly.

Hermione hadn't expected this. She'd thought that releasing the sexual tension would free them, but in some ways she felt more closed in. The sex was always enjoyable and during it their chemistry was solid, but everything outside of those moments of heat appeared to be shifting now. Hermione didn't know how to control the change nor was she certain that it would stop.

It wasn't fair; she wanted to be with Ron so badly; she wanted his ginger hair, blue eyes, and large hands to be for her, but Hermione didn't know if she would have to give up her peace with him for it. Their plan had seemed so simple and logical when they'd first started, but now the path in front of them was splitting in two.

Hermione stopped to rest. She was standing in front of the Quidditch shop where she and Ron had bought Harry's broom polish. She peered in through the window; sure enough, Amy was inside, cheerfully helping customers. She was beaming, her hair was perfect, and she had on yet another sleeveless Quidditch shirt. Hermione touched the window. Ron had said that he'd felt nothing while having lunch with her, but Hermione still envied Amy. She seemed like such a relaxed person who Ron could easily get along with. In fact, Ron seemed to get along easily with everyone other than herself and his mother. Hermione wasn't sure what to think about that.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a group of men in tatty black cloaks entering a shop not too far down. Hermione glanced at them for a second, then looked back into Amy's store. A part of her wanted to go inside but she had nothing to say to Amy or about Quidditch. She needed to go back to the Burrow and work things out with Ron. If he wouldn't to speak to her, then she could at least check up on Harry and see if she could do anything for him. Hermione couldn't help but feel as if she'd been abandoning him lately.

Before she could even lift her foot, a thunderous boom shook the ground and debris exploded all over the street. A scorching blast knocked her back on her bum. Hermione blinked several times, trying to muscle through the shock. There was a ringing in her ear and a pain in her arm. She checked it out: her sleeve was cut and red with blood. A shard must have clipped her.

Hermione stumbled to her feet, feeling dizzy and dazed. People were screaming and running about, but she didn't know why. Then, the men in black cloaks she had seen no more than five minutes

ago came rushing out of the now annihilated shop. An older woman ran after them, bloody, crying, and pleading to one of the wizards who had a young girl struggling and screaming in his arms. Hermione figured she must've been the older woman's daughter.

One by one, the men started disappearing. The older woman tried to take her daughter back but she was knocked down. The man laughed harshly, then looked as though he too was about to disappear.

"NO!" Hermione bellowed. She pulled her wand out of her pocket then sprinted towards them. "Relashio!" she said, pointing her wand at the man. The fiery sparks hit him and he instantly dropped the girl, staggering back.

The wizard appeared shocked that he had been attacked. He pointed his wand at her, but Hermione was able to duck behind a broken table that had been thrown out from the blast. When she thought it was safe, she slowly rose. The man was once again going after the woman and her daughter who were running now. He hit the mother with a spell; they both fell to the ground. Hermione didn't know why the mother wasn't using magic but it didn't matter; she had to help them.

She quickly pointed her wand at them. "Mobilicorpus!" Both women rose horizontally into the air, then she rapidly shouted, "Protego!" Before Hermione had any time to plan her next move, a spell hit her in the stomach. She fell back again, clutching herself. It felt as if she'd been sliced open but she was still in one piece.

Hermione looked up; the wizard was coming towards her. She kept scooting back, feeling around the ground for her wand. She couldn't think of any wandless magic that could help her right now, nor did she figure that she could outrun him. Hermione would have to fight with only her hands until she found her wand or was able to take his. She knew that would be unlikely but she'd have to try something. She couldn't die yet; not without fixing her parents' memories, helping Harry search for Horcruxes, and making up with Ron. No — there was no way that Hermione would let herself get murdered. She had to get back to Ron; she needed to lose herself in his warmth, beauty, and goodness; Hermione wanted to hear that deep, raspy laughter again.

Her back suddenly hit something that kept her from moving. The wizard was right in front of her now. He was stocky with scraggly brown hair and cold light eyes. He looked down at her; she looked up at him. For a moment their eyes connected. She could see the hatred in his gaze and the power behind it made her heart race. Everything else disappeared; all that existed to Hermione was this dark wizard — this man who represented evil and terror.

She heard a whistling sound that was most likely coming from Magical Law Enforcement officers. Hermione didn't check though; she had to keep her focus on the wizard. He glanced up the street, then looked at her again. He slowly licked his lips, then gave her a sickening smile. A second later, he disappeared.

It was only then that Hermione let out the quivering breath she'd been holding since she was hit with the spell. Her adrenaline level surged, which caused her head to start pounding. Her stomach and arm were throbbing, and every part of her was shaking. Hermione had no idea if he was coming back, but she didn't want to wait around to find out.

As she staggered to her feet, the rest of her world returned. She could hear the commotions, feel the heat of the explosion, and smell the smoke and fear in the air.

Officers were assisting people and trying to mend the destroyed building. At once, Hermione remembered the woman and her daughter. After finding her wand that was not too far away from her, she searched around for the women and saw them speaking to an official across the street. Hermione ran over to them.

"There!" the little girl sobbed, pointing to Hermione. "She's the one, Mum."

"You assisted these two?" the officer asked her.

"Yes, sir," Hermione said.

"And you are?"

"Hermione Granger, sir," she said, surveying the two females. The little girl had dirt all over her pale cheeks and her dress was slashed from the back, but otherwise she looked all right. The mother, however, was bleeding from her scalp and the crimson stained her blonde hair. "We should take them to the hospital," Hermione added.

"I'm not going anywhere!" the older woman shouted. "I've had enough!"

"Ma'am," the officer said, "you need to see a Healer. Do you think you can apparate to the emergency landing center at St. Mungo's?"

The woman seemed utterly confused. "Wh-what? Sir, I don't know what you're talking about. I'm not magical. I was just taking my daughter shopping for her school supplies today. She got a letter from Hogwarts a couple of months ago."

It all started to make sense to Hermione. The mother hadn't fought back with magic because she was a Muggle. She peered at the building that had been destroyed, finally realizing its significance. The shop used to be Hasdrubal's Lexicon. It was a place for Muggle-borns and their families to buy books, reference guides, and manuals regarding different words, spells, terminologies, foods, animals, and histories regarding the wizarding world. Hermione had gone there with her parents when she was eleven. She had quite a few books from there that she still used from time to time. Without the shop, she would've never been prepared for school or life as a witch. Hermione

closed her eyes for a moment, beating down the anger and sadness. She had to focus on what was happening now.

"Ma'am," the officer said again, "I can understand how difficult all of this is for you right now, but you really need to get yourself checked out at St. Mungo's. The Healers will help you and your daughter. I will assist you there."

"What's a Healer?" the little girl asked.

"A Healer is like a doctor," Hermione said, "and the hospital isn't all that different from what you're used to."

"I don't care!" the older woman said. "I just want to take my daughter home."

The officer opened his mouth to speak, but someone called out a name that was most likely his. He looked up the street, sighing. "All right, just wait here," he said to them before quickly walking away.

"Mum, I'm scared," the girl whined.

"I know, sweetheart," the woman said, kissing the top of her head.

Hermione rubbed her brow; she had to do something. "What if I promised you that I could take all three of us to the hospital at the same time? Would you go?"

The woman frowned. "How on earth would you do that?"

"With magic called Apparition," Hermione said. "It's disappearing and reappearing somewhere else entirely in an instant. I'm sure one of the books you bought from the Lexicon talks about it."

The woman just looked at her skeptically, shaking her head. "One of you already tried taking her away from me today."

"No - ma'am, we're not all like that." Hermione had to do better. She knew that there was no point in trying to explain You-Know-Who and Death Eaters to her. The woman wasn't a wizard, so Hermione couldn't treat her like one. She'd have to step out of the magical world for a moment and fall back into her roots.

"I'm a Muggle-born, just like your daughter," Hermione said. "I know how overwhelming all of this is. There was a lot in the shop that was new to you, yes?"

"Everything was new to me," the woman said. "I've never even believed in magic."

"Neither did I. It's daunting to shift from thinking about driving a car to riding a broomstick." Hermione looked at the little girl, smiling. "You're going to Hogwarts?"

She nodded. "Yes, I am."

"Well I go there too and it's a really great school," Hermione said. "You'll learn a lot of interesting and incredible magic there, I promise." She touched the girl's face for a moment, then looked back to the mother. "I know you don't know me and you have no reason to trust me, but I just want to help. The sooner you get fixed up and your daughter is looked over, the sooner you can both go home to the things you know."

The woman held her daughter close, appearing absolutely petrified. She looked down at her daughter, then let out a shaky breath. "What do I do?"

"Each of you take my hand and hold on tightly," Hermione said. "It won't take more than a breath to get there."

"Mum," the girl whispered.

"It's all right, sweetheart," the woman said, taking Hermione's hand. "She's going to help us." The little girl's bottom lip trembled, but she took Hermione's hand anyway.

"When we arrive at the hospital, I'll take you to a Healer then come back here and tell the officer where you've gone," Hermione said.

"What's your name again?" the woman asked.

"Hermione - Hermione Granger," she said. The woman and her daughter nodded. Hermione squeezed their hands, giving herself a moment to relax and focus. She'd never apparated with another person before, but now she had to do it with a bleeding woman and her young daughter who knew nothing of this form of transportation. She knew she could do it though; she merely had to focus.

Hermione closed her eyes and a second later was at St. Mungo's. Like Hermione had promised, she took the woman and her daughter to the emergency center of the hospital where she soon discovered other people from the explosion. After returning to the site and informing the officer, she apparated back to the hospital and spoke to another official. Hermione then finally saw a Healer herself. Luckily, the spell she'd been hit with had no lasting effects and the gash on her arm was easy to mend. She was bandaged, then given a potion for the pain.

Hermione waited in a chair outside of the woman and her daughter's examination room. She rubbed her hands together that were still badly shaking and groaned in mild pain. Hermione refused to take her healing potion until she knew for sure that they would be all right.

As Hermione waited, she thought about the moment she'd shared with the dark wizard. She had seen evil but never so directly and personally before. She'd looked straight through the man and had seen his darkness. He must've been able to peer into her and see the exact opposite. It chilled Hermione how close she had been to him and how alive she'd felt in the moment. The sensation would

now always serve as a reminder of why she had to keep to her goals.

"Hermione?"

She looked up from her hands, gaping. "Ron?"

Ron ran to her, yanking her out of her seat and into his arms. "Oh my god, Hermione!" He held her so closely that it hurt, but she didn't care. She hugged him back, finally releasing her fear and panic.

"R-Ronâ€|" she breathed. Hermione didn't know if it was Ron or herself severely trembling, but it was rather hard to hold him. She took in his smell, feel, warmth, and all the things that she had wanted to return to. She closed her eyes, squeezing him tighter. Hermione didn't know how long they held each other but her already sore arm started to throb; she had to pull away. "Ron," she said for the third time.

Ron nodded, clutching her shoulders. His face was paler than usual and his eyes were red and puffy - almost as if he'd been crying. "I was so scared," he said in a nasally voice. "I was so fucking scared. Are â€" are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," she said. "I've got a bruise on my arm and a bit of pain from a spell-"

"- a spell? Someone threw a spell at you?" Ron whipped his head around. "Where is the fucker so I can tear out his fucking ribcage with my bare hands!"

"Ron, please." Hermione placed a hand against his chest; his heart was beating rapidly. "He disappeared. So did the others. I'm fine though. How did you know I was here?"

Ron let her go but swiftly took her hand. "Fred and George came by and said there'd been an attack in Diagon Alley. Mum and Dad said that you'd gone there earlier. A few of us went looking for you but everything was a mess, and I couldn't find you."

Ron roughly rubbed his eyes, sniffing. "Something told me to check here next. I can't explain the feeling, but it was there and bloody powerful - I had to listen to it. I knew you'd be here. I justâ€|I didn't know on what end. I asked at the front desk if anyone had come from the explosion and I was led here."

Ron ran his fingers through her hair, tucking strands behind her ear. "I searched around for ages but then I saw your hair and knew it was you. I - I had to find you, Hermione. I had to be wherever you were."

Hermione felt weak in the knees; so much was happening to her body and mind at once. "You found me, Ron," was all she was able to say.

He swept her into his arms again. "You have no idea how scared I was because I didn't know where you were or if you were okay. I



went mad. Nothing else mattered to me but getting to you - nothing else matters still."

"Oh, Ron," she breathed against his chest. She closed her eyes, feeling so good.

"Hermione Granger?"

Hermione pulled away from him; the woman and her daughter were standing outside of the room with their Healer.

Hermione quickly wiped her eyes. "Hi. How are you two?"

"We're okay," the woman said.

"The spell cast on her back was a mere laceration charm," the Healer said. "I was able to seal it and I've given her something for her pain. Janice is also okay," he said, gesturing to the little girl. "She's shaken up, but all right. They're both free to go."

"Thank you so much," Hermione said, shaking the Healer's hand. She smiled at the woman and Janice. "I'm so relieved that you two are all right."

"Call me Rachel," the woman said, shaking Hermione's hand. "You did so much for us. Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me," Hermione said. "The important thing is that you're safe to go home."

"We have to speak with Ministry officials first and give a statement," Rachel said, "but then yes, we're going home. Okay, Janice?"

"Okay, Mum," Janice said, hugging her.

Rachel took Hermione's hand again. "God bless you, Hermione. You saved our lives today; I'll never forget this." She then looked at Ron. "Your girlfriend is very brave."

"Yes, she is," Ron said, holding Hermione and kissing the top of her head.

Hermione was speechless. She could only smile as Rachel and Janice followed the Healer down the corridor. The ringing in her ears returned. She wasn't sure if Ron had misunderstood Rachel or what, but he had just indirectly called her his girlfriend. It was so silly and maddening, but that fact suddenly became the most extreme thing Hermione had going on in her life — more extreme than getting hit by a spell or dueling a dark wizard. She didn't know what to do.

Ron looked down at her as if nothing had happened. "Are you ready to leave? Everyone is worried sick about you."

Hermione nodded, trying to calm down. "Y-yes, okay."

"Wait - I want to tell you something first." Ron sat on the arm of the chair then took both of her hands. With this position, Hermione knew for sure that he'd been crying. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Sorry?" Hermione asked. Out of everything she'd hope he would say to her, 'sorry' definitely hadn't made the list.

"For the things I said before you left; for acting like an arsehole for hurting you."

Hermione had no idea what he was talking about at first, but like lightening it all came back. She couldn't believe that her row with him and the attack in Diagon Alley had all happened in the same day. "Oh, Ron, don't-"

"- no, I need to apologize," he said. "I told myself that I would the second you can back to the house but you never did. Iâ€|" He stuffed his palm into his eye but he wasn't fast enough to stop a tear from slipping out. It struck Hermione powerfully. She'd never seen Ron cry before, but now he had shed tears at least twice for her. She affected him greatly - just like Ginny said she did.

"Ronâ€|"

"Let me finish," Ron urged. "I told you to go away, then I found out that there'd been an attack and you might've been in the middle of it. I didn't know what to do or think, Hermione. All I knew was that I couldn't let those words be my last to you. I'm so, so sorry for being mean. I justâ€|I've been really fucked up lately and I took it out on you. I didn't mean to."

Hermione put her hands on his shoulders as she moved in closer to him; Ron spread his legs so she could stand between them. "I've honestly been feelings the same way," she said. "I've been entirely in my head, and I didn't handle our argument like I should have. I'm sorry too. I know I hurt you with that last comment; I feel awful about it. Iâ€|I didn't want those words to be my last to you either."

"Bloody hell, Hermione." Ron hugged her, burying his face against her stomach. Hermione lost one of her hands in his silky hair while the other moved up and down his back. "I don't think I've ever felt so afraid before. I got nauseous and I was shaking so fucking badly. I just kept hoping that you were okay."

"I am okay," she said.

"Were you scared?"

"Yes, but I didn't let it stop me."

"You're so bloody incredible. I don't know if I could've lived with myself if you weren't all right or if I couldn't find you."

"I'm here, Ron," Hermione said. "I made it."

Ron looked up at her. Even though he was sitting down, he was able to tower over her with his gaze. "I know that through all this shit with the war there are things we'll all have to sacrifice, but I won't lose you. I can't lose you. Not you, Hermione â€" ever. You're the one thing I always have to have. Do you hear me?"

He was looking right into her, demanding that she listen to him. She could hear the intensity and see the passion in his eyes. Ron was so gorgeous and raw in this moment. She hadn't seen him this open in a long time. "I hear you," she said.

"Good, because I'm not letting you out of my sight. I'm so bloody tired of not knowing what's going to happen once you walk out the door." He stood up, placing a hand to her face.

Then, out of nowhere, Ron's mouth was fiercely pressed against hers. Hermione's heart began to gallop. He was kissing her in public where anyone could see or recognize them. Hermione knew that Ron's worry and possible elevated levels of adrenaline and hormones were causing his sudden disregard, but she wouldn't criticize it. She kissed him back, sighing as a calm flowed over her.

Ron broke away, resting his forehead to hers. "Ready to go home?"

"I am home; I'm with you." Hermione couldn't hold the heavy feeling back; she didn't want to. She figured that she'd earned the right to let some of her secrets go. She opened her eyes, waiting anxiously for Ron's response.

Ron swallowed hard, lacing their fingers together. "Yeah, you areâ€"and I always want you to be."

Hermione had no idea what that meant but it felt amazing to hear; she didn't want to ruin the moment with a question. She looked down at their held hands; hers was dirty and some of the soot was on Ron's, but she found it lovely in a way. "I'm ready to go back," she said.

Once they returned to the Burrow, Hermione sat on the floor in front of the fireplace and gave her account of what happened. The twins, Bill and Fleur, and Professor Lupin were all there. As she captured everyone's attention, she couldn't help but to feel accomplished. Yes, looking back there were things that Hermione would've done differently, but she had helped Rachel and Janice. She had at least stopped one dark wizard from hurting another person because of their link to the Muggle world.

While she talked, Harry's expression was a mix of distress and pride; the latter gave Hermione a rush of power and satisfaction. Harry was someone she looked up highly to when it came to battling the dark arts. He was a warrior, and she wanted to make him proud and know that he had a strong and intelligent ally on his team.

"They were most likely scouts from his army," Professor Lupin said once Hermione had finally finished.

"They definitely had an agenda, and I at least know that they weren't Death Eaters," Hermione said. "They weren't dressed like them and they didn't fight in their style. I think the men from the Alley just wanted to add numbers to the blood count. Hasdrubal's Lexicon is where all Muggle-borns go when they find out they're magical."

"They were probably lower-level supporters then," Harry said. "This was another scare tactic."

"I agree with you," Hermione said. "He didn't even seem interested in the Muggle mother or meâ€¦just the little girl."

"That's horrible," Ginny said. "I don't want to think about why that is."

"Then don't," Bill said. "Spreading the fear is what they want."

"The good news is that the mother and daughter are safe," Mr. Weasley said. He smiled at Hermione. "You saved them."

"Yes, she did," Fred said, grinning as well. "That was really brave of you."

"I wish I could've seen your hero work in action, Hermione," George added.

Hermione's ears and cheeks burned. "I wasn't trying to be a hero; I just wanted to help. I hadn't known their situation at the time, but I'm glad that I was there. Someone has to stand up for Muggle-borns and their families - just like Professor Burbage taught." Hermione looked down at her trainers, feeling more certain than ever that it had been her Harry saw in his vision.

"Well, I'm sure she'd be very proud of you today, Hermione. Everyone here is, and we're all so bloody happy that you're all right." Ron squeezed her knee then started rubbing her arm again. He winked at her, making her smile. Ron had kept to his word and hadn't left her side since they returned. The moment Hermione had sat on the floor, Ron had sat right beside her and held her hand in his lap. He continuously rubbed her arm, knee, or even her thigh.

Hermione was still in awe of his openness. Ron was staying close and touching her in front of his family; he didn't seem embarrassed or nervous at all. It only added to her confusion spurred on by his comments at the hospital. They weren't dating, but Ron was certainly behaving in a way that she'd expect him to as her boyfriend. It didn't bother her though. After what she'd been through, Ron's affection was something she craved. She also fancied the 'more than friends' way he was treating her. She could only imagine how Ron would behave in front of other people if they were actually a couple.

Hermione knew that she was most likely blowing his actions out of proportion though. They were just close friends reuniting after a horrific event, and no one even seemed to notice the change in

his behavior. Well - no one except Mrs. Weasley. While she didn't appear upset, she did give them curious looks every now and again as if she knew something more was going on between them. At least now Hermione knew where Ginny got her intuition.

Everyone stayed over for a late dinner and talked about what the attack could possibly mean for the war. Ron sat right next to Hermione at the table and kept his left hand on her leg on the whole time.

Later that night, after everyone had gone to bed, Hermione slipped out of Ginny's room, then headed for the loo. She was uncomfortably hot for some reason. Hermione was still on edge and there was so much in her head.

Right as she reached the loo, the door opened, revealing Harry. "Hermione," he said.

"Harry - sorry if I scared you," Hermione said, placing a hand to her chest.

"I'm all right. I just needed to splash some water on my face. It's hot in this house."

"Agreed," Hermione said, fanning herself. "I was going to do the same thing in there. I'm hoping it'll settle me a little. I'm still really energized from today."

"I know what you mean. Sometimes that feeling lasts for days." Harry looked away from a moment. "You know, I can't say enough how happy I am that you're okay. We were all really worried about you, Hermione."

"I'm okay, Harry," Hermione said.

"I kept telling myself that you would be," he said. "If anyone could get through all that, it would be you. Like Sirius said: you're the smartest witch of our age."

She gave him a tender smile. "Thank you."

"Still," Harry said, "after everything that's been happening lately and with the news about Professor Burbage - it's all starting to unravel. I can feel it, and something tells me that you can too. You don't have to brush it off, Hermione; it's real."

Never in Hermione's life had she appreciated Harry more. "I'm so glad you said that, Harry. I've been feeling it all summer and there was a moment during the attack today when everything became clear. This is really happening; it's here and we have to stop it."

"It's all I want to do, Hermione," Harry said, practically pleading. "I need to finally end this. I just - I don't want anyone else to get hurt, especially you and Ron."

"We're always going to do the best that we can to stay safe, Harry," Hermione said. "I know how important it is that we work through this together. We're not going to split up; it's always going to be three of us."

"You and Ron?" he quietly asked.

She wasn't sure what he was asking. "Yes, Harry. Ron and I will be here for you."

"No, I meanâ€¦you and Ron are going to be all right?" He sighed. "I know you two had a bad row before you left."

"He told you?"

"He didn't have to. You two are my best friends; I just know."

"We're all right, Harry. You know how we get sometimes."

Harry nodded. "Yes, but nothing this summer has been like before. Things are different â€” for all of us."

Hermione rubbed her brow; he had no idea how right he was. "Well, Ron and I haven't changedâ€¦despite what happened." He gave her a look as if he didn't believe her, but she knew that he wouldn't push it any further. Harry wasn't like Ron; he didn't demand that she listen to him.

"That's good then," he said. "I know firsthand what it feels likeâ€¦when things aren't okay." The horrible frown on Harry's face let her know that he was most likely talking about Ginny. "So, um, bugger - you know that I'm really bad at this, Hermione. Just know that I'm here, all right?"

She covered her mouth as she lightly chuckled. Harry wasn't the best with words but Hermione didn't need him to be. She could see how much he cared regardless of how stoic he always tried to appear. "All right, Harry." Hermione pulled him into a hug; Harry firmly hugged her back.

"I'm glad you're okay, Hermione," Harry said.

"So am I," she said. She pulled away then kissed his cheek before giving his hand a light squeeze. "Try to get some sleep, yes?"

"Yeah, I'm heading to bed now. I'll see you in the morning." He gave her a smile, then headed back up the stairs.

Hermione went into the bathroom and washed her face. The cold water was refreshing, but she still felt jumpy. She then decided to watch the fire on the couch. The flames only made her hotter, but studying the blaze calmed her down. In fact, the longer she stared into the orange and blue flames, the better she felt. Hermione let out a long breath, hugging her stomach.

Things were different for all of them. She was changing as was Harry, Ron, Ginny, the rest of the Weasley family, and even her parents. There had to be at least one thing that didn't modify.

Her friendship with Harry and Ron had to always stay the same. It would be the only way she'd know that she was still a part of the world.

"Hermione?"

Hermione looked up from the fire; Ron was standing just inside of the room, wearing his maroon pajamas and black Chudley Canons shirt. She let her body react pleasurably to the image before answering. "Ron," she said.

Though the two of them had been meeting on the couch for quite awhile now, she hadn't expected it to happen tonight. There was so much to say but she wasn't sure how to talk to him right now. Hermione frowned slightly as Ron just continued to gaze at her. His face was flushed and his chest rose and fell jaggedly. There was something unbelievably intense about his expression; it heated up her body more than the flames in front of her did.

Hermione licked her lips, clearing her throat. "R-Ron? Are you okay?"

In a flash, Ron rushed across the room and over to her. He smashed his lips hard against hers while cupping her face. Hermione faintly squeaked in surprised but eagerly kissed him back while clutching his wrists. They pressed their mouths against each other's so roughly that Hermione was sure their lips would bruise.

"I want you," Ron growled in a throaty voice. "I want you right now." Her eyes widened as her entire body flushed and broke out into sweats. Before she could respond, he kissed her again but this time flicked his tongue across her teeth. Hermione automatically parted her lips, moaning as he ravished her mouth.

She relaxed her body, falling back against the couch. Ron got on top of her where he continued to kiss her hard and deeply. He rested his forearms against the cushion, tangling his fingers in her hair while she clutched his sides. Kissing Ron this way felt so fantastic; it wasn't long until he was sweating as much as she was.

"I want you," Ron said again as he left small kisses on her jaw and neck. He started sucking on the skin just below her earlobe. Hermione bit her lip, arching her back as a spike of pleasure shot right below her knickers. She knew that he meant this in a sexual way, and while she loved it, Hermione wished that he also meant that he wanted her simply because.

"W-what if someone hears us or comes down here?" she asked, brushing off the feeling. She figured that Ron hadn't literally meant that he wanted her on the couch, but she needed to get the question out of the way so they could transition to wherever they were going to go.

Ron stopped his attack on her neck. "Bloody let them. I honestly don't care. Do you?"

Hermione didn't know what to say. She had no idea what was happening to Ron or why he suddenly had no regard to people finding out about them; it both baffled and thrilled her. She thought about his question. A millions reasons why they should care quickly came to mind, but as Hermione peered into Ron's blue eyes, saw his ginger hair, and felt his large hands, she realized that none of those reasons mattered. She could've died today and would've never been able to do this with him again.

"No, I don't care," she said. "I want you too. Iâ€¦I need this."

Ron promptly began kissing her again. His took one hand out of her hair, moving it down to her arm, which he squeezed. Hermione broke out of the kiss, whimpering in pain. "Ow - ow."

"I'm sorry," Ron rushed. He sat up; Hermione rested on her elbows. "Did I touch your sore spot?"

"Yes. I removed the bandage and took the potion awhile ago, but it still hurts."

"Can I see?" Ron asked. She nodded, raising her shirtsleeve. The greenish bruise on her upper arm was the size of a lemon and had a thin cut across it. "Blimey." Ron delicately moved his fingertips over the area. Hermione closed her eyes, shivering, though every part of her was practically drenched in sweat. "I'm so sorry that you got hurt, 'Mione," he said. "I should've been there with you."

"It's all right, Ron. I've had worse," she said.

"It doesn't matter. You know what seeing you like this does to me." He outlined her bruise. "You got hit in the stomach too, right?"

"Yes, but there's no mark," Hermione said. "It was just a spell."

Ron licked his lips. "Can I see anyway?" He was looking at her with a combination of concern and lust. It was making her head spin and her toes tingle. Hermione was slightly nervous, but she couldn't say no.

"Okay," she whispered. Hermione gradually raised her shirt so that her entire stomach was exposed. She kept lifting until the hem touched her bra. Ron took in a sharp breath while his eyes roamed over her stomach. Hermione tried not to shake but she couldn't help it; they'd never done anything like this before.

"You're gorgeous, Hermione," Ron softly said before skipping his fingers over her stomach. She flinched but tried to stay as quiet as possible.

He kept moving his thumb around and over her naval. She whimpered, feeling the hairs on her abdomen and arms stand on end. Then Ron leaned down, kissing her stomach. He left tender kisses all over her skin; Hermione could feel his long, hot tongue licking her. It was just like what he'd done to her neck their first time together. The feeling stiffened her nipples and



caused her to grow incredibly wet. She ran her fingers through Ron's hair as he sucked and nibbled on the skin just above the lining of her pajamas.

"O-oh, yes," Hermione moaned.

She was shaking extremely and felt tender and electrified. Hermione had no idea that Ron simply kissing her stomach could feel so pleasurable, but it did. His mouth was pure magic and he was taking her to the edge without even having to do anything below her waist. Hermione wanted to feel the power of Ron's mouth in other places. She wanted his tongue to trace patterns over her breasts and wedge between her lips where it lathered her clit. Hermione softly cried out at the thought then tugged on his hair. She burned and ached for Ron so damn badly and she needed him more than anything else right now. The one thing that had truly terrified her during the attack was the idea of never seeing him again.

"R-Ron, please, come up here," she panted, tugging on his hair once more. He rose, resting on top of her. She could feel how hard he was; it made her shiver again.

"Yes?" Ron asked in a deep, wavering voice.

"You want me?" she asked.

"So fucking badly."

"Then take me."

Ron let out a harsh breath before capturing her lips under his again. They kissed madly while still trying to stay as quiet as possible. Ron broke away to grab her wand from the table and handed it to her. Hermione carefully performed the spell on herself. Once she knew it was in effect, she dropped her wand to the floor. They stared at each other, and Hermione used the opportunity to decide if she really wanted to do this.

They could easily get caught - worse case scenario by one of his parents. Hermione would then most likely get chucked out of the house. That wasn't the only thing she had to consider though; she had no idea what would happen once it was over. That uncertainty scared her more than anything else. So much had happened that day; Hermione wasn't sure if everything now was the result of the events or something deeper.

"You ready?" Ron asked.

Hermione peered into his eyes again, seeing the warmth and goodness that always made her feel so wonderful and protected. It was completely different from the look the dark wizard had given her, and it was what Hermione had wanted to return to. "Yes," she said. "I'm ready."

Ron began kissing her much more slowly and gently this time. They pulled off their pajamas and underwear; Hermione was so hot and soaked by this point that Ron seemed to trickle right into her

body like a dripping fire. They muffled their moans and gasps of pleasure as best they could. Ron thrust into her deeply and kissed her so hard yet slowly that Hermione could hardly breathe. Their shirts were plastered to their torsos and the smell from their perspiration and sexual fluids increased Hermione's arousal.

She worshiped every second of their sex; it didn't take long before the fiery pressure started to pound against her, then finally burst. The sparks were still going through her as Ron began to push harder and soon let himself go inside of her. He moaned longingly into her mouth as she dug her nails into his sweaty hips.

Ron didn't break away from her mouth or stop pushing until they were both settled. Hermione brushed hair out of his flushed, sweaty face and smiled. Ron grinned too. Everything about her body was his right now; she wanted to give him other parts of her too.

"There was a moment while dueling the wizard today that I thought I might not make it," Hermione said. "I told myself that I had to though because I had to get back to you. Iâ€¦I thought about you, Ron. You made me want to fight harder."

Ron stared at her blankly for a few moments. She worried that he might have not heard her, but he suddenly looked pained. "But it's because of me that you were out there in the first place," he said.

"No, Ron. That's not it at all. None of that mattered in that moment. Iâ€¦" Hermione just wanted to tell him how she felt but she wasn't sure if she could. Ron was worrying her again; she didn't know what to do. "You're my best friend, Ron. I-I'm sorry." She didn't know what she was apologizing for but she felt like she needed to.

Ron pulled away, sitting up on the couch. He rubbed his neck. "Don't apologize, Hermione. I'm not sure of what I'm saying right now. I just know that everything in my life shut down when I thought I was gonna lose you today. I'm tired of fucking up. I'm just so bloody sick of this."

Hermione bit her lip hard, sitting up too; they both stayed quiet. The only sounds came from their breathing and the crackling of the fire. It was what Hermione had been afraid would happen and it was hitting her harder than she had prepared herself for. Like an unspoken agreement between them, they began dressing.

"Here," Ron rasped.

"Thank you," Hermione said, taking back her pajamas. She swiftly put them on, then tied up her soppy hair. "We should probably go to bed."

"I'll walk you," Ron said.

Hermione took a glance at the couch before going up the staircase with him. They stopped on the second floor. Ron kept his eyes on his feet while Hermione focused on the doorknob. She couldn't believe that this was happening. It was outrageous that she could hold her own against evil forces and save lives, but she couldn't even manage to say something real to Ron. "I guess I'll see you in the morning," she said.

Ron nodded. "Yeah."

Hermione looked up at him; he stared right back at her. They hugged each other closely and once again Hermione couldn't tell if it was Ron or herself shaking. She pulled away a little; Ron leaned down, kissing her softly. Hermione used the last of her energy to kiss him back.

"Goodnight," he whispered against her lips.

"Goodnight, Ron," she whispered back.

Ron kissed her hand before walking up the rest of the staircase. When he was out of sight, she leaned against the wall, letting out a shaky breath. There was so much bustling through her mind again. Hermione had no idea how things had been so clear before but were suddenly obscured by a thick fog. She squeezed her stomach, peering at the staircase. A lot was so unclear to her, but two important discoveries had been made: Hermione didn't think that she could go on much longer keeping her feelings hidden from Ron. She also wasn't sure if she could continue having sex with him.

The consciousness frightened and devastated her but it was something she needed to deal with. Putting pleasure aside, their tension, the horrible silence, and Ron's demeanor after intercourse was slowly eating her alive. Hermione gently hit her head against the wall. One or both of her findings needed to change regardless of consequence.

Hermione quietly slipped into Ginny's room and was relieved to hear her light snoring. She didn't need another lecture, especially since she was already giving herself a brutal one. Hermione climbed into bed, then looked to Ginny who was sleeping soundly. She didn't want things to end badly and hurt Ron, but she didn't want to hurt anymore either. Hermione knew that she had a powerful affect on him but he had a profound one of her too. Hermione had to consider both of their feelings in order to figure out what was best.

She snuggled into her cot, pulling the blanket over her head. Ron's smell was all around her; she breathed it in deeply.

Something had to drastically change in order to keep things the same.

\*\*\*\* Hmm, what does it all meanâ€¦? Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

## CHAPTER 11

Hiya, lot! I know it's been ages and when I last updated TtRL I said I'd update this story 'soon' but unfortunately I had issues come up. There was a tragedy in my family so I had to fly home and be there for quite some time. I'm back at home now and I'm finally getting back on my feet. I'm sorry that things have been slow for awhile now but I'm gonna make it. All I can say is THANK YOU all so much for the reviews and kind words. They mean a lot to me. :)

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Ron tripped back to his bed. He sat down on the mattress but then slid to the floor. He rubbed his hands against his knees while looking at Harry who had crumpled to the floor and was breathing heavily. He'd been so loud and had flailed about so harshly before Ron had finally been able to wake him.

"Y-you okay?"

All Harry did was nod as he buried his hands in his hair and kept his focus on the floor. He had never been the biggest or tallest bloke but right now he seemed particularly small, pale, and frail. It pained Ron to see him like this. He wanted to reach out and grip his shoulder but he was too afraid that Harry would break. "D'you wanna talk about it?" Ron asked instead.

As expected, Harry shook his head. "No," he whispered dryly. He took his wand from underneath his pillow and held it tightly. "It-it's just the same shit really." Ron nodded, looking down. No matter how bad Harry's dreams were, he never wanted to talk about them. Ron didn't blame him though. In fact, with everything going on in Harry's head, he was surprised that his mate managed to find sleep at all. Ron wasn't sure if he would ever be able to close his eyes knowing who was after him but he reckoned that was why Harry was the hero and he was merely the best mate.

Ron heard a rattling so he glanced up. His bedside table was shaking and the drawers were slowly pushing themselves out. Ron then looked to Harry again: he was staring off, still clutching his wand. His intense state was clearly causing this. Ron only wondered if Harry or the table would explode first. He needed to do something to prevent either from happening. Even if Harry didn't want to talk, Ron had to help him in some way.

He pushed the drawers back in then scooted over to Harry. "Mate?"

"Hmm?" Harry answered.

"You do know that you're safe here, yeah? Even if someone came looking for you, they'd have to get past everyone downstairs who would do anything to protect you then get through me which will be bloody impossible. No one's going to hurt you â€" not while I'm around."

The rattling stopped. Harry finally set his wand down then looked up at Ron. He didn't seem comforted by his words at all. "I know that, Ron. That's the point," he said grimly.

Ron wasn't sure of what to say at first. He knew that Harry wanted to endure all of the risk and work alone but the prat was obviously mental if he believed that was ever going to happen. While the idea of sacrificing himself was devastating, Ron would do it any day for Harry. It was his duty as a friend and fighter in this war. "Well, we don't have to talk about that tonight," Ron finally managed to say.

"Then what do we talk about, Ron?" Harry asked. "I just keep wondering if there's going to be another attack in Diagon Alley andâ€" he stopped, looking sick, "and I keep thinking about what could've happened to Hermione."

The hairs on the back of Ron's neck stood on end; he swallowed hard. "B-but nothing happened to her, Harry," he said. "Hermione's fine." Ron rubbed his hands against his knees again, feeling his heartbeat pick up. A wave of nausea churned in his stomach; he suddenly felt the urge to puke. "I'm gonna go make us some tea," he quickly added, standing up. He didn't give Harry time to respond before hurrying out of the room. He closed the door then pressed his back to it. Ron needed a few minutes to fight off the queasiness and anxiety.

The attack in Diagon Alley had been days ago but Harry wasn't the only person still thinking about what could've happened to Hermione. The horrible thoughts crept into Ron's mind several times a day, and he always became scared out of his fucking mind when he allowed himself to process the idea of her getting seriously injured or worse. Ron may have only known Hermione for six years, but he knew that he couldn't live without her; the pain, fear, and horror that would overtake him would be too much to handle. He'd felt some of that darkness when he had gone looking for Hermione and couldn't find her.

Ron shivered in fear, closing his eyes. He had absolutely no idea where he would be if the bloke Hermione dualed had taken her prisoner. All he knew was that he would've personally torn the heart out of every fucker who so much as looked suspicious until someone told him where she was. Ron kept telling himself that he didn't need to go there though. Hermione had brilliantly and courageously defended herself while rescuing two people. She was fine now and would continue to be. That's all that mattered â€" that's all that Ron thought about as he made his way downstairs.

Ron stopped once he reached the entryway to the kitchen. He hid behind the wall, peering inside the dark room. Hermione was at the table, reading and writing practically simultaneously. A small portable fire was burning in a jar as many books and papers were neatly stacked about the table. Ron rested his head against the wall, taking in the way her skin glowed in the firelight. He loved Hermione like this: strong, focused, studious, and beautiful. Ron didn't know what he'd do if he weren't able to quietly and covertly observe her like this anymore.

Hermione suddenly looked up as if reading his mind. Ron automatically stood straighter, pushing all of his ill feelings and thoughts away.

"Ron?" she asked, her eyes widening.

He rubbed his neck. "H-hiya."

"Hello yourself. Um, how long have you been standing there?"

"Not long. Sorryâ€¦!"

"It's fine," Hermione said, pulling out a chair. "You can come sit if you want."

Ron tried not to grin like a git. "Cheers. I've gotta make some tea first though for Harry and me."

"Harry is up too?"

"Yeah," he said, grabbing mugs and teabags. "We can't get to sleep."

"Hmm. Now is it really 'we' or just one of you who can't get to sleep?"

"What difference does it make?"

"Well, it's two thirty-five in the morning," Hermione said matter-of-factly. "If both of you are having trouble falling asleep, why haven't you made tea already?"

Ron stopped fussing with the bags and turned to her. Hermione's tone told him that she already knew the answer to her question. He felt torn. He wanted to be loyal to Harry but sometimes Hermione just had too much power over him.

"Okay," Ron breathed, "Harry had another dream."

Hermione's shoulders slumped. "Oh, Harry," she lightly groaned.

"He's better now though," he quickly added. "Don't worry about him."

She gave Ron a look. "I'm going to disregard your last request and just inquire as to what the dream was about."

Ron knew that it would be pointless to try to keep anything else from her. Asking Hermione not to worry about Harry was like asking a mother dragon not to look after her hatchlings. "He wouldn't say but I know it was bad."

"I'm sure they're all bad," Hermione said, bleakly. "What should we do?"

"Nothing right now. While Harry's alone up there he'll calm down and work some stuff out. Trust me, I've been through this with

him many times." Ron had meant to comfort Hermione with his statement but her misery only seemed to worsen.

"Butâ€¦don't you worry, Ron?" she asked.

"More than you know," he said honestly. "But Harry's tough and I'm gonna do whatever I can to help him regardless. I promise." Hermione still didn't appear convinced which pained him. It was a nasty kick to the bollocks every time she expressed her doubts about his abilities. Ron knew that he wasn't everything - or even anything special â€" but he could take care of his mates. "Why don't you join us then and see for yourself?"

Hermione shook her head. "That's all right. I don't want to invade your privacy." Ron felt his heart drop. He wasn't sure if she had meant for her words to cause damage to him but they did. He deserved it though. No amount of time, apologies, or kindness towards Hermione could erase the way he'd treated her during their last big row. Ron telling her to leave still haunted him. It was his fault that she had been in danger; for that reason alone, Ron wanted to tear his own heart out.

"You wouldn't be invading anything, Hermione," he gently said. "I want you to, and I'm sure Harry does as well. Will you come, please?"

Hermione's stiffness dissolved as she let out a soft breath. "Okay, I'll join you two."

"Thank you," Ron said. She merely nodded, getting back to work. He finished making the tea then took the seat beside her. Ron didn't know what to do or say. This was the first time that they had been alone together in days. Hermione glanced up again so he decided to keep his focus on the table. He picked up a book and flipped through the pages. "This lot looks like Hogwarts rubbish."

"First, it's not rubbish," Hermione said, plucking the book out of his hand. "Second, yes - it is Hogwarts material. I'm studying." Ron waited for her to add on how barmy she was for doing so but she didn't. Hermione honestly appeared to be proud of what she was doing.

"What do you need to study for?" Ron asked. "You're Head Girl â€" that means you don't have to give a shit anymore." Hermione swatted his knee. "Ow!"

"Serves you right! You really need to stop talking like that anyway. It's almost September."

Ron stuck out his tongue. "Don't remind me."

"I won't make any promises." Hermione gave him a small smile then started reading again. Ron pretended to look through some of her notes as he watched her. She brought the knuckle of her pointer finger up to her mouth, gently biting down as she wrote more vigorously. Ron understood the sexy little habit well enough to know that it signified Hermione coming to the end of her notes.

At this point she'd usually look up and make some sort of comment regarding the theme of her notes, but this time she remained silent. It bothered Ron a little. Ever since Hermione had come down to breakfast following the attack, she'd been somewhat quiet. Ron wanted to believe that she was acting this way because she was still trying to recover from what happened, but a tiny, commanding voice inside his head told him that wasn't the whole story.

"S-so," Ron said, attempting to silence the confusing noise in his head. "Why are you studying at three in the morning?" Hermione stopped writing and faced him; she seemed uneasy. "Hermione? Are you okay?" he asked.

"It's nothing," she said. "I justâ€¦ I've been doing this for the past few nights. Studying helps me relax."

A pang hit Ron's chest. "You can always come to my room and wake me up if you can't sleep," he said. "I'll keep you company down here or anywhere you want to go."

Hermione's entire face went pink. She rubbed her brow, swiftly returning her attention to her notes. "O-oh, Ron, that'sâ€¦ that's really sweet but I couldn't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because you love your sleep and I wouldn't make you stay up with me just so I could feel better."

He rolled his eyes. "First," he said, mockingly, "you wouldn't be making me do anything because I offered this, Hermione. Secondâ€¦" Ron trailed off. He wanted to say something intelligent but all he had was the truth. "Second," he repeated. "I honestly think I'd love keeping you company down here more than sleeping upstairs by myself."

Hermione slowly looked up at him. "Y-you're not technically alone, Ron. Harry is in there with you."

Ron didn't know if it was because of the fire burning on the table or the fact that they were so close now that their knees touched, but a warm, pleasurable breeze swept over him. "True," he said, "but he's not exactly sleeping with me is he?"

"No, I guess not."

"That's for the best, I reckon. I mean, Harry's brilliant but out of all the people I could fall asleep next to, he's certainly not at the top of my list."

Hermione's blush extended to her neck. She tucked hair behind her ear. "Oh? An-andâ€¦ who is?" Ron had a feeling that she was testing him with this question; he had no intention on failing. While Ron had to get back to Harry, he wanted this moment with Hermione. It was times like these when he felt the most alive. He



needed to continue it for as long as possible while he had her safely in his care.

Ron leaned in closer to Hermione. Her breathing hitched while his heart beat a little faster. "Who do you think?" he asked.

Hermione didn't answer him right away. Instead, she pressed her lips together, giving him a look of what seemed to be confusion. "R-Ron?"

"Yes?"

"Do you think the tea is ready?" Hermione's question was so unexpected that it took Ron a few seconds to comprehend it. He was abruptly yanked back to where he was and what he was supposed to be doing.

"O-oh, um, yeah - it's ready. I just need to fix up Harry's." Ron got up then added the necessary extras to their tea. While he stirred, he told himself to calm down and stop acting like such a knob. Just because Hermione was making him feel the world right now didn't mean that he was having the same effect on her.

"It's lovely that you add milk and sugar for Harry," Hermione said as she placed all of her belongings into her schoolbag.

"It's nothing really."

"I think it is. Small delights can go a long way." Hermione put the strap of her bag over her shoulder. It looked so heavy on her back.

"Then can I take that for you?" Ron asked.

"I can carry it myself, Ronald."

"I never said you couldn't." He pulled the bag off her shoulder then put it on his. "Merlin's bollocks, 'Mione. What's in here â€" Bludgers?"

Hermione laughed, making Ron smile. "They're called books, actually, but for you they might as well be Bludgers. You certainly avoid them as if they'd hurt you."

"Bloody hell, I reckon I've forgotten how cheeky you can be," Ron cheeked.

Hermione's smile faded. "I'm sorry, Ron. I know that I've been somewhat distant latelyâ€" "

"No - it's all right, Hermione," he hastily said. "I wasn't being serious. You're going through a lot right now. I understand that. We're fine." He reached out, touching her shoulder.

Hermione pushed into his hand for a moment before nodding. "I'm glad. I've just been trying to work some things out for myself." She sighed, looking bewildered again. "I've been thinking a lotâ€" since we were last together on the couch."

"Oh, um, yeah â€" me too." Ron didn't know what else to say. In some ways he was still recovering from the last time they shagged. Ron hadn't given so much of himself to Hermione since their first time. He'd been so intoxicated, happy, terrified, and bloody confused during it. All he had wanted to do since finding her at the hospital was tell her how he felt but his bloody fear and insecurity had gotten in the way.

Even without telling her his true feelings, Ron had still managed to fuck everything up. He hadn't known how to respond to Hermione telling him that she had fought to get back to him, and it wasn't even until they started putting their clothes back on that he realized he'd pushed her away with his response. It was the last thing Ron had wanted to do â€" especially after thinking that he'd never see her again.

Ron had no idea what his problem was. He was furious at his weakness but a part of him didn't feel as though he even deserved to have Hermione forgive him or say the most amazing fucking thing anyone had ever said to him. Ron constantly thought about 'I am home. I'm with you' and what Hermione really meant by it.

"Ron?"

"Huh?" He looked up. Hermione was giving him a look of deep concern. He felt his cheek flush in embarrassment. He had no idea how long he'd been staring off like a nutter. "I-I'm sorry," he said. "What were you saying?"

She shook her head. "It's not important."

"Hermione-"

"- honestly, Ron. It's okay," Hermione said. "In any case, do you plan on broadening your chivalry or am I allowed to take the tea upstairs at least?"

Ron wanted to press Hermione more on what she had said but she seemed tense enough and he needed to get back to Harry. "Yeah, I reckon you can carry that."

"I'm glad you trust me." Hermione used her wand to extinguish the fire then took the cups from him. "Thank you for taking my bag."

"Anytime," he said, gesturing to the entryway. As they climbed the stairs, Ron told himself to stay positive. Regardless of what was going on between them, for the most part Hermione seemed okay with him. Ron would gladly take that.

Ron was relieved to see Harry flipping through a Quidditch magazine and looking relatively normal again when they returned to his room. He seemed startled to see Hermione.

"Hermione," Harry said, flashing a look at Ron. "I hope Ron didn't wake you up."

"I didn't," Ron said, handing him his tea.

"I was already up and in the kitchen," Hermione said, sitting next to Harry's cot. "Ron told me that you two were up talking so I thought I'd join you. We might as well endure our insomnia together, right?"

Harry smiled and seemed to relax more. "You've got a point there."

"Hermione usually does," Ron said, beaming at her as he sat on the floor by his bed. Hermione's genius and sensitivity was unbelievable. Ron knew that she probably wanted to know every detail about Harry's dream, but she obviously cared more about his state and keeping him comfortable than pressing the issue.

"So, why are you up anyway, Hermione?" Harry asked.

"Well, prior to Ron coming down I was-"

"- she was studying before I rescued her," Ron said.

Harry choked on his tea. "S- sorry? Sheâ€|she was what?"

"Studying, mate â€" 'just because' too."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Is it so hard to believe that I enjoy educating myself?"

"Yes," Ron and Harry said together.

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest, pointing out her chin. "Maybe you two should expand your imaginations then. Some of us fancy getting a head start."

"Weasleys don't believe in head starts," Ron said. "We do things right when we're meant to."

Harry snorted. "That's a load of wank."

"Don't be jealous, Harry."

"I don't believe it's jealousy," Hermione said, "and while I'd never use Harry's vulgar vocabulary, I agree with him."

"Of course you do," Ron mumbled.

Hermione reached over to Ron, slapping his thigh. "I'm serious, Ronald. Take Bill for example: I'm sure he had to study and work ahead often to earn twelve O.."

"Maybe," Ron breathed, sprawling out on the floor. "Then again, he could've just charmed the trousers off of all his professors. Bill's the most handsome Weasley boy according to everyone."

"That's inaccurate," Hermione said.

"Why - are you saying Bill looks like a toad?" he asked.

Hermione held her hands in her lap. She glanced at Harry for a moment before looking at Ron. "No, but I am saying that, wellâ€¦I've always considered you to be the most handsome Weasley boy."

Ron propped himself on his elbows so he could see Hermione's face. Her cheeks were faintly pink but she seemed serious just the same. It made him blush as well. Other than Ginny, Bill was the sibling that Ron was compared to the most so knowing that Hermione found him more attractive than his eldest brother was a small victory. "Th-thanks," Ron said.

"You're very welcome," she answered with a soft grin. Ron had to ball his fists to keep from touching her. He wanted to pull Hermione over by her foot so he could kiss her neck and tell her how much he appreciated her sweetness. Harry took a sip of his tea; the sound caused Hermione to move her focus away from Ron.

"Well," she said, loudly. "While we're on the subject of Bill, is there finally a cap on the guest list, Ron?"

"I dunno. The number keeps getting smaller. I wish everyone would make up their bloody minds."

"Not too many people are in the mood to travel right now, I reckon," Harry said.

Ron smiled widely. "Yeah, like Vicky Krum. Apparently the seeking git couldn't get the time off."

Hermione gasped. "Ronald Weasley! You are so rude!"

"What? I was just-"

"- how about we change the conversation all together, eh?" Harry swiftly asked, looking between them.

Hermione shifted her attention from Ron to her schoolbag. "Yes, that's a good idea. I propose we take this free time to read over some of my Potions notes."

"Or we can talk about whatever Harry was reading," Ron promptly suggested.

"I don't think-"

"- that has my vote," Harry said, tossing the magazine to Ron. Hermione tried and failed to grab it before Ron snatched it out of the air.

"Too slow," he said.

"Urgh!" Hermione huffed. "This is not fair! Why does it always come back to Quidditch? It's been like this since first year."

"Because we'd rather talk about sports than Potions," Harry said, shrugging. Hermione rolled her eyes again, shaking her head and looking put-out.

Ron gave her a once-over. One of the more valuable pieces of information he'd learned from the book Fred and George gave him was that compromising with women was essential. "How about we do both?"

"Both?" Harry and Hermione asked together.

"Yeah," Ron said, nodding. "We can talk about Quidditch for a bit then look over notes â€" maybe swapping every few pages?"

"Wait - what?" Harry asked, dropping his jaw.

Hermione's eyes lit up. "That sounds fantastic!"

Ron tried not to giggle like a tit at her excitement. "Sorted. A brilliant witch I know always says that there should be more fairness in the world. I reckon I agree with her." Though Ron wasn't keen on studying, he desperately wanted to make Hermione happy and straighten out all the rubbish he had gotten them in. He had her with him again, alive and safe, and he didn't want to do anything to jeopardize that. It was his duty as Hermione's friend and as someone who loved her.

Hermione gave Ron a tender expression. "And I'm sure she appreciates it." She continued to gaze at him for a few seconds before taking the magazine and turning to the beginning. "So, gentlemen, what's a Slapstick Tag?"

"I'll let you take this one, Harry." Ron once again lay back on the floor, this time interlocking his fingers behind his head. He watched and snickered as Harry attempted to explain the complicated maneuver to Hermione.

The three of them could have talked about Harry's nightmare, Hermione's duel in Diagon Alley, or even how Ron's family was going mad over the reception, but instead they discussed Quidditch and Hogwarts. It was fun teasing Hermione, and Ron loved making Harry repeatedly burst into laughter. There weren't any relationship problems, Horcruxes to find, or heroic measures to take. They were in their own little world where they could just be best mates, and when they were like this, Ron felt as though he could do anything.

OOOO

Ron shut his eyes tighter as the frustratingly bright sunlight invaded his room. He tried to ignore the feeling of arousal but it was too late. He was already becoming alert to his surroundings and his current position was starting to get uncomfortable. Ron lightly groaned as he came to terms with the fact that he was awake and opened his eyes. He gasped while his heart skipped about a thousand beats: lying before him was a sleeping Hermione.

Ron's eyes immediately flicked up to Harry's cot to see that he was still sleeping and had his back to them. Ron then flipped over to his stomach, continuing to gaze at Hermione. He couldn't

remember when they had all fallen asleep, but knowing Hermione, she had most likely been the last to give in to her fatigue. She was lying on her side with her head resting on her hands, her knees were tucked toward her chest, and she was facing his direction. This last, tiny detail made Ron's insides go wonky. If Hermione was in this position all night and had been the last to close her eyes, then it meant that at some point she had watched him sleep " like he was doing now.

Ron couldn't help but to smile at the idea of Hermione watching him while drifting off. Maybe it meant that she wasn't mad at him or even possibly that she had stronger feelings for him than she was letting on. Perhaps Harry had even understood this in some way and had given them all the privacy that he could offer because he really just wanted them to be happy together.

Ron knew his interpretation was most likely wrong, however, he allowed the possibilities to fill him up and make him feel good for a few more minutes before getting up. He took a pillow and the blanket from his bed then knelt next to Hermione. Gently, Ron raised her head, slipping the pillow under it. She made a noise and extended one of her legs but didn't wake. Ron held his breath and when he was sure Hermione was settled, he put the blanket over her, tucking it around her as much as he could.

Then, before Ron could talk himself out of it, he bent down, tenderly pressing his lips to hers. He held there long enough for the pleasure to reach his feet. Though Ron was relieved when Hermione didn't stir, he would've loved to wake her up just to get a deeper, fuller kiss. Ron wouldn't have cared if Harry woke up and saw them or if anyone from downstairs had walked in on them. He had quickly learned after kissing Hermione right in the middle of the hospital corridor that other people seeing his affection for her didn't worry him anymore.

Ron smirked, thinking about their amazing snog. He still couldn't believe that he had done it or that Hermione had kissed him back. It was another small detail that made him question what she was feeling for him.

Hermione shifted a little so he moved away. Ron pulled Harry's quilt that had been kicked to the foot of the bed back over him. Harry's face was pale and his body was unnaturally still. Ron felt a wave of panic flourish inside of him so he gently placed his hand against the center of Harry's back; he could feel warmth and the slight vibration coming from his heartbeat. Ron sighed in relief, deciding it was finally all right to leave his friends and get ready for the day.

He grabbed fresh clothes then headed for the door. Before opening it, he looked back at his two best friends who had somehow become the center of his world. They had to deal with so much pressure, fear, and danger in their lives. It wasn't fair. People like Harry and Hermione deserved so much better. Ron only wished that he could give it to them. All he had to offer was his life, loyalty, strength, and love. While the first three were things he'd shown them ages ago, the last was the hardest for Ron to display.

He didn't know how he could easily sacrifice himself for Harry and Hermione but telling them how important they were to him was practically unimaginable. Ron couldn't understand why the thought of getting ripped to pieces by Death Eaters in order to save his best mates' lives seemed a lot less frightening than telling them that he loved them. It was yet another reason why Ron was so fucked up and hated himself. He knew that he had to stop being stupid and spineless, but until that day came, he hoped that his small delights in some way showed them how much he cared.

After his shower, Ron went to the kitchen where his mum was pulling pots and pans from the cabinets. She looked so much more tired, tense, and thin than she used to. It bothered Ron. His mother was beautiful, bright, and could be extremely funny when she wasn't stressed out.

"Morning," he said.

Mrs. Weasley jumped, clutching her chest. "Oh! Ronnie dear."

"Sorry, Mum," he chuckled, bending down and kissing her cheek.

She patted his face. "It's all right. Are you just now waking up?"

"No. I've been up for awhile."

"That's excellent because there's a lot that I need you to do today."

"I figured." Ron poured himself some juice, taking it down in almost one gulp.

"This is for you," his mum said, handing him a napkin with toast on it.

"Fanks," Ron mumbled between bites. "Where are Dad and Ginny?"

"Dad is out with Bill and Ginny went to Luna's to help her make something for the party." She handed him a scrap of parchment. "Here are your responsibilities."

Ron skimmed his list of duties, noticing right away that the lot were outside chores that would most likely take all day. "I thought this was taking place in the yard?"

"It is."

"So why did you write down that I need to wash the windows?"

Mrs. Weasley stopped fussing with the pans and looked up. "Because I want them to look nice, Ronald. I bought scrubbers that leave a lovely purple tint on the glass. All you have to do is put them on and they'll wash the windows themselves. I also got some secondhand lights and streamers."

Ron nodded, telling himself not to feel overwhelmed by her instructions or from all of the additional notes she'd included on his chore list regarding his arrangement of the decorations. "So when is Ginny coming back then?"

"I'm not sure. Why?"

"You didn't get the self-balancing lights so I'll need her to tell me if they're straight."

"Oh no, no, Ron," his mum said, shaking her head. "Ginny can't do that."

"Why not?"

"I have other things for her to do when she returns."

Ron raised an eyebrow. "Like what?" He had never seen Ginny do any real chores around the house so he was eager to know.

His mum suddenly became very interested in what was in the pocket of her apron. "Well, I need her to straighten up your brothers' bedrooms. It's important."

Ron merely stared at her. He could understand why his workload would be heavier than Ginny's but all she ever did was straighten bloody bedrooms or put clean dishes away. It was completely unfair but he tried not to let it get to him. The last thing Ron wanted was to get angry and blurt out something stupid.

"O-okay, I understand," he managed to say, leaning against the table. "I reckon I'll just ask Harry to help me when he gets up."

"Actually, I have a job for him too. Do you know how much cooking experience he has?"

"Um, not really, but I do know that the Dursleys made him cook for them a lot."

His mum furrowed her brow, sighing. "Oh, poor dear. I'll have to give him a better experience then."

"Better experience doing what?"

"I'm going to have Harry help me make the cakes and puddings," she said with a smile while showing him her recipe book. "Do you think he'll like that?"

Ron didn't know what to say to her. Though he wasn't too keen on cooking, the idea of doing something fun with his mum and being able to eat the sugary leftovers sounded brilliant. They hadn't done anything like that together since Ron had helped her make brownies for the twins the night before they went off to their first year at Hogwarts. He had been nine.

"Ron?"

"Y-yeah," he quietly said. "I'm sure he'll love it."



His mum didn't even seem to realize what her decision was doing to him. She simply went on through her notes. "Perfect. So, that just leaves Hermione. Have you seen her this morning?"

"She's still asleep," Ron said, looking away. It was too much for him to watch his mother gather cooking supplies for her and Harry.

"She is? Hmm, that's odd. I didn't see her in Ginny's room."

"That's because she's sleeping in my room." Ron heard a crash. He turned to his mum who had dropped a pan on the floor. She was looking at him strangely.

"In your room?" she hastily asked, picking up the pan.  
"Hermione's asleep in your bedroom?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Weasley placed her hands on her hips. Her shoulders went rigid and she pursed her lips. "Where exactly is she sleeping, Ronald? And where were you before you woke up?"

Ron scrunched up his face in confusion but it only took him a second to realize what he had said and what it must've sounded like to her.

"Oh, n-no, Mum - it's not like that," he said. Ron rubbed his neck, trying to find the words. "I mean, umâ€¦Harry, Hermione, and I were up late last night talking and we all just kinda fell asleep."

His mum's stiffness didn't fade. She only grew more tense. "But where, Ronald?"

"On the floor, Mum," Ron said, feeling irritated and uncomfortable. "Hermione slept on the floor and so did I. We - we weren't together or anything. I swear."

Mrs. Weasley relaxed a little. "All right. I guess that's okay." She put the pan on the table then started making notes again. Ron waited for her to ask about Harry but she didn't. It didn't make sense. He had thought that she'd been worried about him and his mates engaging in some sort of wild, sticky threesome in his bed or something, but she seemed to only care about what he and Hermione had been up to.

"Mum, don't you want to know where Harry is sleeping?" Ron asked.

His mum looked up. "I'm sorry?"

Ron knew that it was probably best for him to keep his mouth shut but he couldn't help himself. "Well, you just asked how Hermione and I were sleeping in relation to each other. What about Harry? Don't you want to know how close he and I were sleeping or maybe him and Hermione?"

His mum rubbed her temples, letting out a frustrated sigh. "Oh, Ron, please - not now."

"You'll be happy to know that Harry's asleep in his cot," Ron said regardless. "And if it means anything to you, Hermione slept closer to him than me."

"No, no - no!" His mum slammed her notes on the table. "I am not going to do this with you today, Ronald Bilius Weasley. I won't tolerate your attitude."

"My attitude?" Ron asked, jabbing at his chest. "You're the one who got on me!"

"I think I have a right to when my teenage son casually tells me that his female friend slept with him in his bed."

Ron's face flushed. "My 'female friend' has a name, Mum."

"Don't you dare change the subject now, Ronald," she said, wagging a finger at him.

"I'm not changing the subject. I justâ€¦Iâ€¦" Ron was surprised by how his mother was reacting but maybe he shouldn't have been. He knew that there was friction between her and Hermione but he didn't know why. His mum had always seemed to like her. Ron didn't know why that would change now.

"Look, Mum," he said, "it didn't happen so there's nothing for you to worry about, b-but even if it were the truth, I don't think it would be something wrong."

His mum's eyes widened as she placed a hand to her chest. "Ron, what are you telling me?" Ron opened his mouth but immediately closed it. He thought about what waking up and seeing Hermione's calm, beautiful face had felt like. He knew then that he couldn't tell his mum anything but the truth. Ron wanted to be completely honest about something for once in his fucking life.

He stood a bit taller, looking her right in the eyes so that she'd have to listen to him. "Hermione's my best friend, Mum. I thought I was going to lose her last week but I didn't. If we happen to fall asleep in the same place as we're talking and working stuff out then I don't see the problem. I also don't understand why you're mad at me and evidently still don't trust me."

His mum's aggression instantly vanished. Her shoulders slumped and she looked pained â€" like he had hurt her. "Sweetheart, I do trust you. I justâ€¦" She stopped, shaking her head. "There's so much that I want to say, but I can't right now because there's just too much to do."

"So you'd rather just put this and me to the side, right?" he asked.

"No, not at all. I want desperately to work this out with you, Ron. I promise that there's nothing more I want in the world than

to just have a nice day with you when we don't have to argue or be like thisâ€¦!"

"But?"

"But judging from this conversation, it breaks my heart to admit that I know that day won't be today." She bit her lip, frowning horribly. "Your brothers will be here in the morning and tomorrow is a big, special day for Bill and the rest of the family."

"I know but-"

"- you do want things to go well for him and everyone else, don't you?"

Ron sighed in defeat. "Yes, of course I do."

"So do I." His mum picked up his chore list, handing it to him. "And I think the best way we can make that happen is if we just stick to our lists and do what needs to be done. So, Ronald, do you think we can act civil toward each other long enough to see Bill and Fleur's day through?"

He beat down the heavy emotion as best as he could. It scared him that his relationship with his mother had come to this. "Y-yesâ€¦we can do that."

She swallowed hard. "Then will you please just do the chores that I've asked you to do?"

Ron's chest ached and his throat hurt so badly that he thought it would catch fire. "I'll let you know when I'm finished," was all he could say.

"Thank you, Ron." His mum walked to the entryway but looked back at him. Ron hated that she looked even more tired and stressed than when he first entered the kitchen. "Don't forget to put your cream on. It's quite sunny today."

He said nothing as she then left the room. Everything began pushing down on his shoulders and cruel voices infested his mind. "Bugger the cream," he mumbled under his breath before going outside.

Ron took all of the supplies from the shed then went out into the yard. He had to squint in the intense sunlight and already there was sweat on his neck. He needed to put some sort of protection on his skin but he couldn't bring himself to go back into the house. Ron closed his eyes, clutching the spare broom as he thought about his argument with his mum.

No matter what she did to him - or in most cases didn't do to him - Ron never purposely tried to make her feel bad. All he wanted was for his mum to react to him, letting him know that he had an effect on her like his siblings did. It was horribly pathetic and wrong but Ron would rather have his mum yell at him or even nip him across the face for something stupid he'd done than ignore him.

Ron pulled off his shirt, telling himself to get over it for now. He needed to put all of his focus and energy into fixing the windows. It was his task and his contribution to the family. He stuffed his t-shirt into his back pocket then mounted the broom. If his mum wanted him to wash all of the windows and put up all of the lights by himself, then he would to the best of his ability.

It didn't take long for the sun's rays to find the sensitive spots on his back. Ron's skin burned as he struggled to get the bloody scrubbers to stick on the windows correctly. He ended up breaking two of them before finally figuring it out. He swore in aggravation, wishing that the Burrow didn't have so many fucking windows while also resenting Ginny for being able to spend the morning at Luna's doing nothing.

Ron flew back down to the ground so he could examine the lights he added to a third floor window. Right as his feet touched the grass, Harry and Hermione came from around the house. It only took a second of their presence for Ron to feel a little better. "Oi," he said, wiping sweat out of his eyes.

"Blimey, Ron," Harry said, giving him a once-over. "How long have you been out here?"

"Since I woke up. Mum's given us all jobs to do. I've got yard duty."

"Where's Ginny?" Hermione asked.

Ron rubbed his neck. "At Luna's. She's apparently making something for tomorrow."

"Then why didn't you wake me up, mate?" Harry asked. "I can help you do this."

"That's all right. Besides, my mum wants you to help her bake the desserts."

Harry shook his head. "I'd probably be more helpful out here. Maybe Ginny or even Hermione should help your mum with that."

"No, Harry! My mum only wants you to help her! Not Ginny or Hermione or me — just you." Ron regretted his words the second they came out of his mouth. Both his mates gave him a look that he'd hated since they were kids. Ron knew that they felt sorry for him, which made him feel even more like a tit. "I'm sorry, Harry. I'm a bit mental right now, that's all," Ron said in a calmer voice. "It really is fine. My mum's excited about doing this with you so you should do it. It'll be fun and you'll get to stay cool in the house."

"You know I don't care about the heat, Ron," Harry said. "I mean, I'll help your mum but if you want I can do a few of these windows with you first."

Ron couldn't help but to grin. "Thanks, mate, but I'll be fine. Just save me a bit of frosting, yeah?" Judging by Harry's expression, Ron could tell that he wanted to protest some more but thankfully he nodded.

"Okay," Harry breathed. "I reckon I'll see you two later."

"Bye," Ron and Hermione said together.

As Harry walked back to the house, Ron dug his hands deeply into his pockets and turned to Hermione who hadn't taken her eyes off him. "It's honestly all right, Hermione."

"So you've established. When is Ginny coming back?"

"I dunno, but she's gotta straighten up my brothers' bedrooms when she does."

Hermione looked at him in disbelief. "Their bedrooms?" she asked. "But they don't live here. How dirty can they be?"

Never more had Ron wanted to grab Hermione and snog her – but that would only be after he took her back into the house so she could repeat the statement to his mum. "I don't know," he said, nonetheless. "I reckon there's dust and maybe some spiders." Hermione rolled her eyes, not seeming impressed.

Ron relished the fact that she was on his side but in some ways it only made him feel worse about the situation. "So, did you and Harry wake up around the same time?" he asked.

"Just about," Hermione said. "I hadn't intended on sleeping in so late."

"I glad you did – the both of you."

"Yes, Harry certainly looks better. I think a lot of that has to do with you though and all the times you made him laugh early this morning."

"It's what I'm good at."

"It's not all you're good at," Hermione said. She gazed right at him; he stared back, walking closer to her. Ron loved what the morning light did to her eyes and hair. Hermione was just so bloody beautiful and captivated him in every way.

"You think I'm good at other things?" he asked.

"Ron, we both know that I think you're great at a lot of things – like keeping your friends warm." Hermione took his hand, smiling. "I was surprised when I woke up to a soft pillow and a big blanket. Thank you."

Ron squeezed her hand before letting go. "I guess I felt like broadening my chivalry."

She laughed. "Maybe I should do the same. Can I get you anything while you're out here?"

"I'm okay, thanks," he said. "You should probably find out what job my mum has for you anyway."

Her expression grew a bit more serious. "No offense to your mother, Ronald, but right now all I care about is making sure you have what you need out here." Hermione was giving him a bold and determined look that was both sexy and powerful. Ron felt his face burning again but this time out of happiness and appreciation. The woman in front of him had no idea what she did to him.

"Well, um, I am really hot," he said.

Hermione gave him a detailed once-over, blushing a little herself. "Yes — yes you are." It wasn't until that moment that Ron remembered that he'd taken his shirt off. He glanced down at his sweaty pink torso, wondering what Hermione saw in him. Ron wouldn't question it now though.

"Are you gonna elaborate on what you mean by that, Ms. Granger?" he asked. "You're usually very thorough."

"Mm, I think you can put the pieces together yourself this time, Mr. Weasley."

"You're unkind."

"No, I merely have faith in your abilities. I'll be right back."

"Kay." Ron leaned against the side of the house while he waited for Hermione. He couldn't believe the bit of flirtation they'd just exchanged. It had been fun and felt so instinctive. It also reminded Ron of how he and Hermione used to be before sex had changed everything for them. He wasn't sure how he felt about it exactly, but one thing he did know was that he wanted those feelings back.

It only took a few minutes before Hermione returned with water and a towel. "Here you go," she said.

"Cheers, Hermione." Ron demolished his glass of water then buffed his chest, back, and stomach. He could feel her gaze meticulously tracking the movement of his hand, making Ron sweat even more.

"Y-your mum asked how you were doing," she said, soundly fairly dazed. "I told her that you were doing fine and that I don't think anyone will have complaints with your work." Hermione stopped, looking bothered. "I don't know why but she seemed tense when we spoke."

Ron didn't know what to say. He considered telling Hermione about the row he'd had with his mum but he didn't want to upset her or make things more complicated. "Don't take it personally," he decided to say. "Mum's just got a lot on her list. She'll get better once the party is over."

Hermione didn't look completely convinced but she waved a hand anyway. "You're right. I would probably be the same way if I were in her shoes."

Ron looked down for a moment, hoping that he'd made the right decision in not telling her. "Yeah, probably," he mumbled. "Did she say anything else?"

"Only that she hopes you're wearing your cream. I told her you were even though I know you're not."

"Bugger the cream," he groaned. "I hate having to put it on."

"So you'd rather take the painful sunburn?" Hermione asked. "Doesn't that sound strange to you?"

"Not particularly," Ron said, shrugging.

She sighed, shaking her head in clear disapproval. "We'll just have to agree to disagree." Hermione then pulled a tube of skin cream out of her back pocket.

"Aw! I already told you that -"

"- and I heard you," she said, holding out a hand to silence him. "But as your friend who's concerned for the health of your skin, I'm obligated to make you wear this anyway. Listen, what if I put it on your back for you?"

"Ha! Really - you will?"

"Certainly."

He immediately stopped laughing. Ron had been sure that Hermione was taking the piss, but he knew her far too well now to mistake when she was being completely serious. "Youâ€¦you'd do that for me?" he asked. Part of Ron was hoping that she was in fact teasing him, but most of him prayed for her to mean every word.

Hermione clutched the bottle tighter, taking a step closer to him. "I'd be more than happy to. Skin health is important."

Ron rubbed his neck. Hermione was confusing the bleeding bollocks out of him - again. If she wasn't being exceptionally quiet and acting uneasy around him, then she was flirting and actively trying to get closer to him. Ron didn't know what Hermione was doing or if she was just trying to drive him mental, but it was working either way. For a whole second he entertained the idea of asking her what the hell was going on between them before realizing that he wasn't strong enough to pass up this opportunity.

"Well, yeah. I guess, uhâ€¦I guess keeping my skin healthy is important. Sure - we'll go with your plan." It was the dumbest few sentences Ron had ever put together, but it had apparently been enough for Hermione because she relaxed a little.

"Excellent," she breathed. "Soâ€¦where should I start?"

Ron had to force himself not to shake. His knees felt like they would buckle any minute. "Th-the top's good."

"All right. T-turn around for me."

Ron obeyed, digging his hands deeply into his pockets again.

"Are you ready?"

"Yeah â€" go ahead." Ron jumped the instant he felt pressure against his shoulder blades.

"Something wrong?" Hermione asked.

"No - I'm fine," he rushed. "The cream's really cold is all. I like it though."

"Oh, good. Just let me know if I press too hard, okay?" Hermione started to massage the cream into his shoulders again. Ron body's automatically loosened up and he pushed against her palms so he could feel more. Once she began to rub her fingertips into his spine, Ron closed his eyes, letting his head droop to the side. His skin was tender, but Hermione was gentle with her motion. It felt so bloody amazing and made him more relaxed than he'd been in days.

Ron unexpectedly moaned as Hermione dug her palms into his lower back. "F-feel good?" she quietly asked.

"Y-yeah," Ron wheezed. "Your hands are brilliant."

Hermione made a faint noise herself. "I-I'm glad you think so. You know, Ron, I really wish that you would take better care of your skin."

"I know that I need to," Ron said. "I reckon sometimes I just-"

"- RON!" Mrs. Weasley called out. Her voice shattered their moment and the hot thickness that had encased them. Hermione instantly jumped away from Ron whereas he turned around.

"Yes, Mum?" he shouted back in irritation.

"Is Hermione out there with you, dear?"

Ron and Hermione shared a look. "Go ahead," he whispered to her.

Hermione licked her lips, clearing her throat. "Y-yes! I'm here, Mrs. Weasley."

"Oh, great! When you're finished out there, would you mind coming inside? There's something I need your help with."

"Yes, I'll be right there." Hermione stepped even further away from Ron. Her face was incredibly red, her forehead was sweaty,



and when she rubbed her cheek, he could see how badly she was trembling. "Well, I should probably go back inside."

"Yeah, you'd better go." The last thing Ron wanted was for her to leave but he didn't know what else to do. "Thank you for all this, Hermione," he added to strengthen his resolve. "It really means a lot."

Hermione pressed her lips together. There was something about her expression that worried him. She seemed tense and confused again "as if she was having her own internal battle. "You're welcome, Ron. Be careful on that broom, all right?"

Ron hated how awkward things had suddenly gotten between them. He was sick of them constantly ending like this. "I always am," he breathed. "Be careful inside. It's gotta be mad in there."

"I'll try my best." Hermione placed the cream back into her pocket then picked up the towel. She gave him another slow once-over, smiling slightly. "I'll see you."

Ron didn't say anything as she went back inside. He leaned against the house again, giving his mind and body time to recover before hopping back on his broom. He felt so knackered but it had little to do with his chores. The constant tug-and-pull with Hermione was draining. Ron just wanted one bloody day where he didn't have to play these games or question what people wanted from him.

By the time Ron finished the windows, it was well into the day. He hopped off the broom, massaging his neck with his sore fingers as he surveyed the house. Everything appeared straight enough but he would have to wait until dark to know for sure. He put the supplies away and headed back into the house.

Bill was in the kitchen talking with their mum when he walked through the door. "I just don't see why Fleur and I can't help out with anything, Mum," Bill said. "At least let me do some of the work around here."

Mrs. Weasley shook her head adamantly. "Absolutely not, Bill. We've been over this a hundred times. The party is for you and Fleur - what kind of a mother would I be if I allowed you to work for your own party?"

"One who understands that she can't do everything by herself."

Mrs. Weasley gave Bill a look. Ron thought that she might yell at him but instead she took his hand. "I know that I can't do everything by myself, Bill," she said. "But this is one thing that I can and will do."

Bill sighed, nodding. "Well, I really appreciate it, Mum, and I'm sorry if I'm not showing that enough. I just worry about you."

She took Bill's hands, smiling broadly at him. "I know you do, sweetheart. I'm fine though. Besides, I'm not actually doing all

of this by myself; the family is working together. We all want this for you, Bill, and you deserve so much more."

Bill grinned, pulling her into a hug. "I love you, Mum."

"Oh, I love you too." She wrapped her arms tightly around him, rising on her toes so she could kiss his cheek. "I love you so much, Bill. You're my boy."

Ron gently closed the door behind him, clearing his throat. The sound broke his mum and Bill out of their moment. They let go of each other. "Oh, hi, Ron," Bill said.

"Hi," Ron quietly said. "I don't mean to interruptâ€¦!"

"You're not. Mum and I were just talking about the party. I saw you working on the windows when I arrived but I didn't want to disturb you. They look nice."

"Cheers." Ron moved his focus to his mother who didn't look nearly as happy as she had five seconds ago. He ignored his own horrible reasons as to why that was. "So, um, I'm all finished with the lot. I'll work on the tables next."

His mum smiled but it wasn't in the same way she had with Bill. "That's excellent. Thank you, Ron."

He nodded, shifting his weight between his feet. Ron hated the feeling that he was intruding on his family. "It-it smells really good in here."

"That's reassuring," Mrs. Weasley said. "Harry and I baked everything sugary that we have in this house. I just hope it's enough."

"It'll be more than enough, Molly," Mr. Weasley said, coming into the room. "We've got less than half the people coming so if anything there's too much." He ruffled Ron's hair. "Brilliant work on the windows. You did better than I would have."

Ron shrugged, feeling good for the first time in hours. "I guess I did all right."

"Humble like a Weasley," his dad said. "I can't wait for all of my Weasleys to get here tomorrow."

"I'm just happy that they'll all have a place to sleep, Arthur," Mrs. Weasley said. "Though I still don't know where we're supposed to put Charlie since Fleur will be in the room with you, Bill."

Mr. Weasley's smile faded a bit. "Molly, I thought we talked about that. Charlie is going to sleep in Percy's room, remember?"

"I know we talked about it but I hadn't thought we'd decided on anything. There's only one bed in there. If Percy comes—"

"â€" Percy's not coming," Mr. Weasley swiftly said.

Mrs. Weasley's cheeks went pink. She furrowed her brow, shaking her head. "No - no you don't know that for sure."

Ron could tell how badly his dad wanted to agree with her but he sighed. "I see Percy at work practically every day, Molly," he said, looking grim. "I do know for certain that he's not coming. Charlie can sleep in his room."

"Oh, Arthurâ€¦!"

"I'm sorry, Molly."

Ron's parents continued to gaze at one another as if carrying out a devastating conversation in their heads. Seeing them like this tore at his insides. They weren't supposed to be like this and it was Percy's fault that they were. His brother didn't deserve to come and be with the rest of the family.

"I've got a mate who has an extra cot," Bill said after a prolonged silence. "We can keep Charlie in the room for now and if Percy does show up then we'll have the extra space. It'll only be for a day or so anyway."

Mr. Weasley was the first to look elsewhere. He gripped Bill's shoulder. "That sounds great, son."

"Yes, thank you, dear," Mrs. Weasley said.

"Anything I can do to help," Bill said, nodding to them. Ron was in awe of him. As the eldest, Bill was terribly patient and somehow always bloody knew what to do and how to handle the situation. Ron wished that he possessed some of his brother's skill and coolness. Their parents just listened to and trusted Bill in a way that they didn't with anyone else.

"Hiya, lot," Ginny said, coming through the kitchen door. "I'm sorry that I'm late, Mum."

"That's all right, dear," Mrs. Weasley said.

"Well, I'd like to know why you're late," Bill said with a smirk.

Ginny smiled at him in the same way that their mum had earlier. "You'll find out tomorrow," she answered, giving him a hug.

"I'm glad that you were able to finish your business because I have a list for you," their mum said.

Ginny let out a heavy breath as she took the parchment. "Okay, Mum." Ron mentally snorted. He wanted to laugh at how little she had to complain about.

"Well since Ginny's here I think we should all get back to work," Mrs. Weasley said, clasping her hands together. "Now Williamâ€¦!"

"I know, I know," Bill said, holding up his hands in defense. "I'll leave here in a minute."

"That's what I like to hear," she said, giving him another hug. "Tomorrow is going to be lovely so please rest up. Tell Fleur to do the same."

"I need to pick up a few things that I forgot at my desk so I've gotta go too, son," Mr. Weasley said, squeezing him next.

"All right. I'll see you both tomorrow," Bill said. Once their parents left and were safely out of earshot, he leaned against the table, letting out a low whistle. "Merlin. Has it been like this all morning?"

"Yes. It's been completely mad," Ginny said.

"How would you know?" Ron asked. "You haven't been here."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Because I live here, you prat."

"Oi. Let's save the drama for the party, eh?" Bill said. "I want to ask you two something before I leave."

Ron could tell by his tone that this was going to be serious. "What's going on?"

"I want to know if you two have been okay through all this?"

"We're fine, Bill," Ron said.

"We really are," Ginny added. "Mum just wants this to be a success since we couldn't do it on your wedding day."

"I know, but this party is about a lot more than that. In fact, it's not even really about me and Fleur," Bill said.

Ron and Ginny shared a look. "What are you talking about?" Ginny asked.

Bill peered around the room before leaning in a bit closer to them. "Percy's estrangement from the family is really starting to take a toll on Mum and Dad, especially now that we know the attackers from Diagon Alley are most likely going to get away."

Ron knew that he wasn't as smart as Bill, but he was certainly intelligent enough to see what was going on in his own home. "We know what this is doing to them, Bill," Ron said. "We see it everyday."

"Then you should know that things have been building up," Bill said. "Between this, the Order, and Dad working all the time, Mum and Dad need this party so that they can feel like we're still a perfectly functional family, even without Percy."

"Bugger that twat," Ron muttered. "We don't need him here."

"It's not that simple, Ron," Bill said.

"How can you say that?" Ginny asked. "It's your party he's missing."

"Because he's still my brother, Ginny, which means he's yours too," Bill said. "Look, I don't want to make this all about Percy. I'm just trying to give you some insight as to why things have been more tense than usual for our parents. Their happiness is the only reason why I'm even letting the party happen. Fleur and I don't need this but they do — our whole family does, really."

Ron chewed on his lip as he took in Bill's words. "What should we do?" he asked. Ever since the twins moved out Ron had taken over as the oldest, but it was only recently that he'd realized how much having an older brother to go to for help had meant to him.

"Just be patient with Mum and Dad and don't take anything too personally," Bill said. "I also need you two to keep your mouths shut about something."

"What is it?" Ginny asked.

Bill grinned. "Charlie's arriving a lot sooner than planned so he can wake up Mum and Dad."

Ginny gasped. "Oh! Mum and Dad will love that!"

"Yeah, that sounds wicked," Ron said, smiling as well. "What's the plan?"

"Fleur and I are going to meet Charlie at Fred and George's flat, then we'll all come 'round and have a light breakfast before we start the day."

"You're brilliant for coming up with this, Bill," Ron said, shaking his hand.

"Charlie and I came up with it together. I glad you like it though," he said. "It's the least we can do since we've haven't been able to help around here."

"Ron and I are honestly handling it," Ginny said.

"Yeah, we've both been working hard." Ron had tried to say this statement with as little bitterness as possible but there had still been enough in his tone to make Ginny scowl at him.

"And I'm grateful," Bill said. "You two are fantastic." Ron and Ginny accompanied him outside and past the magical protection barriers. Bill hugged Ginny then patted Ron's shoulder. "We'll be here early tomorrow so prepare yourselves. Ron?"

"Yes?"

"The windows really do look good."

Ron grinned. "Thanks, Bill." Their brother saluted them then apparated. Ginny lightly kicked at the dirt while Ron picked

under his nails. Like Hermione, Ginny had also been quieter and somewhat distant over the past few days but Ron wasn't interested in finding out what her problem was. Anytime the two did talk to each other it seemed to end with them arguing.

"Well, I better get started on my list," she said.

"Don't break an arm turning over those pillows."

"Oh, bugger off, Ron! I'm sick of your dumb comments. Shouldn't you be working right now? You don't want to be out here all night, do you?"

Ron felt heat on his neck. "For your information," he spat, glaring at her. "I've been working all bloody day out here but thanks for the reminder - it's sweet of you."

"I could say the same about you, Ron," Ginny said through gritted teeth. "How many times are you going to bring up what I've been doing today?"

"I reckon zero considering you haven't been doing much of anything. You've just been taking the piss at Luna's."

Ginny hit his arm. "That's bollocks! I was working on something for Bill and Fleur and it wound up taking more time than I anticipated. I still have a full list of things to do this evening, Ron. There's no contest."

"I don't want to argue with you," he breathed. "You're right, okay?"

"Fine." Ginny ran her fingers through her hair with a sharp stiffness that told Ron she was just as unsatisfied as he felt. "We both did a lot of work today, all right?"

He shrugged. "Whatever."

"You and that word. It does my head in and it sounds so fucking thick."

Ron balled his fists. All Ginny ever did was get on his bollocks and act as if she was superior to him. He wouldn't take it tonight though. He had enough going on in his head without carrying her bullshit too. "Save it, Ginny. I'm not gonna listen to your rubbish right now."

She rolled her eyes. "What makes right now any different from all the other times you don't listen to me?"

"What is your problem?" Ron asked, shaking his head. "Why are you insisting on acting like such a--"

"- what? What the hell am I supposedly acting like?"

"I dunno. Well, likeâ€¦well like a sodding bitch!"

Ginny growled, punching his arm. "I don't know, Ron! I'll come up with an answer when you do the same - which will probably never happen because I doubt you'll ever be able to find your bollocks and stop acting like a twat!"

"Oh, sod off!"

"No â€" you sod off, Ron! It's mad that you can stand here and call me a bitch when you're the one acting like one."

"And how am I doing that, eh?"

"My list goes on for ages but I reckon the main reason right now is that you walk around here as if the family and the things we're doing aren't good enough for you."

Ron gaped at her. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Are you completely mental? That's not true and you know it."

"I do?" Ginny asked in a softer voice. "I mean, you spend more time in the shed than you do in the house these days." Ron didn't know what to say. He knew this was Ginny's way of telling him that she was aware of his situation with Hermione. She had told him days ago that Ginny had suspicions but Ron hadn't planned on bringing it up to her. Ginny knew nothing of the circumstances and her casually throwing his relationship with Hermione around infuriated him.

"That's rich coming from you, Ginny. I can't count how many times you used to nip off with Harry when I needed your help." Ron stomped his foot, grumbling. "Bleeding dammit - why are we talking about this? Why can't you mind your own business? Why are you always around me, my mates, and my bloody fucking life?"

"Trust me â€" it's not from choice!"

"Then fuck off! What you're saying is bollocks and you have no right to judge me."

"Oh, yes!" Ginny said, laughing darkly. "You're the innocent victim â€" again. You're the only one with shit happening in their lives and who feels like rubbish."

Ron wanted to scream at the top of his lungs. They hadn't rowed so horribly in ages but he was tired of everyone kissing her arse because she was the only girl. Ginny knew damn well that they were treated differently, and what angered him the most was that she didn't even seem to care. "I don't have time to listen to this," Ron said, backing away from her. "Why don't you just go to your harsh list of duties, yeah?"

Ginny's face and neck turned beet red. She slowly shook her head, glowering at him. "You make me so sick with this bullshit, Ron. You have no idea how much I wish you weren't my brother sometimes."

Ron glared back at her just as fiercely. "Believe me, I wish the same thing often. I'm sure there are poisonous spiders that would make better sisters than you."

"So why don't you stop whining and go find one."

"It would be my bloody pleasure. Anything will be better than you."

"Stupid tosser."

"Broom fucker."

They turned away from each other then stormed off in different directions. Ron spent the remainder of the evening taming grass, arranging chairs and tables in the yard, and straightening sections of the lights that were dodgy. As he worked, he attempted not to think about his row with Ginny but instead focus on what was to come the next day. Regardless of all the madness and stress, Ron was quite excited for the reception. He wanted to joke with his brothers, keep his parents in giggle fits, and have a brilliant time with his mates before they went back to school where everything was bound to change.

Ron finally finished his list of chores and walked back into the kitchen sometime after dark. During dinner he stayed quiet and he and Ginny did everything they could to pretend the other didn't exist. Ron had no problem with this for he was in no mood to apologize and make up with her. He only ate one helping of pudding before excusing himself for bed.

Ron took a long hot shower then applied healing cream to his sore muscles. As he did, he thought about how bloody awful his day had been and how all of the issues in his head had made it worse. There was no possible way that Ron could go back to Hogwarts like this. He would explode into a million bleeding pieces before Slughorn ever got the chance to correctly say his name. Ron had to change something to avoid portions of his limbs winding up on the floor of the potion's dungeon.

There was a knock at the door. "Hello? Is someone in there?"

Ron hastily turned off the water faucet then put his toothbrush away. He once again had no idea how long he'd been staring off. "Y-yes," he said, "but I'm coming out." Ron opened the door, seeing his mum on the other side. "Sorry, Mum."

"It's all right," she said. "Are you finished in there?"

"Yes. I'm going to bed."

"Good idea. I'm going to do the same thing very soon."

Ron nodded, rocking on the heels of his feet. He hadn't talked to or even been in the same room with his mother alone since that morning. It was pitiful and what made it even worse was that his mum's suggestion had been right. Staying apart had been the best



for them. "Well, um, I'll leave you to it," he said after too much time had gone by.

"Wait," she said, touching his arm. "I want you to know that I think the windows and the yard look lovely. You worked extremely hard today. I appreciate it very much."

Ron let an inch of his guard down. He smiled gently at her. "I'm glad you like what I did. I tried as hard as I could to make it look all right."

"It's more than all right, Ron." His mum gazed at him with uncertainty; it reminded Ron of how Hermione had been looking at him lately. "Well, I'll see you in the morning."

Ron wanted to say or do something that would enable him to have a moment with her like she'd had with Bill, but he didn't know what or how. "Yeah, goodnight, Mum," was the best that he could do.

Even though Ron was horribly sore and knackered, he couldn't get to sleep. There was too much twisting and turning inside of him. All of the chaos was driving him mental. Ron turned over in bed, peering at Harry's cot. His mate was fast asleep and had been ever since dinner ended. They both had been so busy that Ron had barely exchanged more than a few sentences with him. He wanted to wake Harry up just to make sure that things had been okay for him today, but every hour that Harry was able to find sleep was treasured.

Ron flopped back on his back, telling himself that he'd just have to force himself to sleep. He began listing professional chess players alphabetically in his head, eventually drifting off somewhere in the D's.

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Ron felt something tickling his nose. He flared his nostrils, groaning. "Humph â€" g-go 'way."

"Shh - it's me."

Ron opened his eyes at once. Though it was dark, the light coming through his window aided him enough to make out bushy brown hair. "'M-Mione?"

"SHH!" She clamped a hand over his mouth. "You don't want to wake Harry, do you?" Ron shook his head like an idiot. He had no idea what time it was and Hermione being at his beside was worrying him a little. A thousand reasons as to why this could be flooded through his mind.

Ron pulled her hand away from his mouth. "Is - is something wrong?" he whispered. Hermione shook her head, sitting on the very edge of the mattress. She was dressed in her pajamas but she didn't seem tired at all. Any drowsiness that Ron had felt was now gone. Being close to her like this was making his heart beat out of his chest.

"No, nothing's wrong," Hermione said. "I justâ€¦you told me that if I ever had trouble sleeping that I could come get you. I just thought, wellâ€¦I don't know what I thought." She covered her face with her hands, letting out a sharp breath. "Oh, I am so incredibly sorry, Ron. I was stupid for coming up here and I should-"

" - don't go," Ron rushed, gripping her knee. "I did say all that and I meant it. This is okay, Hermione. Sleep isn't really working for me right now anyway."

Hermione removed her hands. She glanced down then moved her attention to his face. "A-are you sure?"

"Completely." Ron nudged his head and Hermione scooted off the bed so he could get up. As he slipped into his trainers, Ron made up his mind that he wouldn't let anything jeopardize this moment with her. He hadn't handled himself correctly the last time Hermione had come to his room late at night and now was his chance to prove that he knew better. Ron took the blanket off his bed while tugging on Hermione's wrist with his free hand. "Come on," he whispered.

They smoothly tiptoed past Harry and out of the room as quickly as possible. Only then did they breathe and light their wands. "Do you want to go to the kitchen?" Hermione asked.

"No, I have a better idea. Follow me." Ron took her hand again, taking her up the small flight of stairs that led to the attic.

"What are we doing up here?"

"You'll see." Ron let her go when they reached the window near the attic door. He handed Hermione the blanket then unlocked the pane. A cool breeze swept over Ron's body as he opened the window. "All right," he said. "We go out this way."

Hermione didn't move or say anything at all. She simply stared at him vacantly as if she'd been stunned. "I-I'm sorry?" she asked after a long pause. "What do you mean 'we go out this way'?"

"We're going out through here to get to the roof."

She chuckled wryly. "Ha! You can't be serious. There's no possible way that I'm going out there. It's exceptionally hazardous. We could fall straight to our deaths."

Ron couldn't help but to laugh. Hermione was so brave and perfect all the time. Seeing her act a bit more human every now and then was something he needed. "It isn't too bad, Hermione," he assured. "There's a ledge out here so we'll easily be able to climb out. I've done it a million times."

"Then you've been out of your mind a million times."

"Come on. You won't fall." He grew a bit more serious, looking her directly in the eye. "Do you honestly think that I'd suggest this if it was that dangerous? I won't let anything happen to

you, Hermione. Trust me." Ron held out his hand. She merely stared at it as if it were a foreign object. Minutes went by it seemed before Hermione blinked again.

"I do trust you, Ron," she softly said while taking his hand.

He smiled, holding it firmly. "Good." Ron then carefully guided them out of the window. He kept hold of her wrist as he stepped along the wooden platform constructed to the siding until they reached a somewhat level portion of the roof. Ron kicked away a few leaves and twigs. "Here you go."

"Thank you," Hermione said, sitting down. He sat next to her and pulled the blanket over them. She snuggled under it. "Mm. It's a relief that you brought this."

"I fancy keeping my friends warm," he said. They smirked at each other then peered out into the quiet black night that was only lit up by the stars. The calm wind blew through Hermione's hair, carrying the light scent and the peach fragrance of her skin along with it. It smelled so damn good and was warm and inviting.

"It's so beautiful," Hermione breathed after awhile.

"Yeah, beautiful," Ron whispered, gazing at her. Hermione turned to him but this time he didn't look away. She blushed and smiled; he did the same.

"So," they said at the same time.

Ron laughed. "You go first."

"All right," Hermione said, giggling. "Who put the ledge out here?"

"My dad. He thought this would be a good place to use the saddle light he got from a Muggle shop."

Hermione laughed again, placing a hand over her mouth. "I think you mean satellite."

"Whatever. Dad couldn't get the thing to work either way but he left the ledge out here. I didn't even know about it until I followed the twins out here one night." Ron stretched, examining the space. He could see the entire field and what was beyond the large pond from this view. "I haven't been up here in ages though."

Hermione closed her eyes as the wind glided over them again. She put the edge of his blanket right up to her nose. "Well I'm glad you brought me."

"See? It's not so bad, eh?"

"No, I suppose not. You were right."

"Always the tone of surprise," he said, nudging her shoulder. "So, why are you awake? We did enough work today to put a fully-grown giant to sleep."

"I know, but I guess I'm really anxious for tomorrow. All of the anticipation is keeping me up." Hermione frowned, groaning. "I'm so sorry for waking you, Ron. I didn't plan on leaving my bed, it just happened. I'm sure that's silly though."

"It's not. I understand. I'm glad you woke me up."

"Really?" she asked.

Ron nodded, rubbing his neck. He didn't know if it was because he'd had a terrible day or the fact that they were sitting shoulder-to-shoulder under the moonlight, but Ron didn't want to keep anything from her. "Yes, really," he said. "I missed you a lot today, Hermione. Do you think that's silly?"

Hermione let out a shaky breath as she tucked her knees in towards her chest. "Not at all," she whispered. "I've felt the same way about you. All I wanted today was to go out to the yard but I had so many things to do inside. Harry and I both did."

Ron felt a wave of relief wash over him. He was happy that the feeling had been mutual. "It's okay. It was a rubbish day for me so I probably would've been an arse to you. Actually, I know I would've been."

"Why did you have a bad day?"

He wasn't sure of what to say. He could've told her an assortment of things but he didn't want to spoil the ease between them. "I just didn't feel good today."

Hermione gave him a look as if completely understanding what he meant. "I see."

Ron could already feel the mood changing. He had to do something to steer things back in place. "Bill told me that Charlie's coming earlier than planned," he said, grasping at straws. "It's supposed to be a surprise for Mum and Dad."

"That's wonderful. I can't wait to see him."

"You and me both. They're making breakfast for us lot before everything starts."

"Maybe we should get to bed then. I'm still not very tired but we do have a long day ahead of us." Hermione pulled the blanket off of her and began to stand; this caused Ron to panic. He couldn't let her go "not yet."

"Wait," he rushed, taking her hand. "We can stay out here a bit longer."

Hermione's eyes widened. She furrowed her brow, pressing her lips together. "O-oh, do you want to?"

"No - I mean Iâ€¦" Ron stopped talking to catch his breath. Hermione sat back down, looking just as uneasy as she had last night when they'd been at the table. He hated being stuck in the awkward place between sex and friendship. He had to do something because it killed him to see her this way.

"What you're thinking isn't what I meant," Ron said, trying again. "I mean that we can stay out here â€" just to continue sitting and talking if you want. Weâ€¦we don't have to have sex every time we're alone, Hermione. It's not something I expect. You do know that, don't you?"

Hermione was quiet for a few seconds as if she had to consider her answer. It broke Ron's heart that she felt the need to. "Yes, of course I know that, Ron," she finally said. "I'd love to stay out here for awhile longer. That sounds nice."

"Brilliant," Ron said. He pulled the blanket over them again while Hermione scooted as close to him as possible. She rested her head on his arm whereas he gripped her leg by her inner thigh. "Is this okay?"

"This is lovely," Hermione said, grinning up at him.

Ron couldn't help himself. He leaned down, kissing her forehead. "I'm glad you like it," he said against her skin.

The two of them resumed staring out into the dark space. Ron closed his eyes, finding true peace for the first time since waking up that morning. Having this connection with Hermione healed him while also making his terrible day not seem so awful. It was only with her that this type of magic existed, and it was the possibility of always having this gift while at home or at school that made the idea of telling Hermione how he felt feel more and more like a good idea.

Working alone all day had given Ron time to think about what the hell he was doing with Hermione. Things were so fragile and inconsistent between them now. They couldn't even sit together anymore without sex or their arrangement complicating it, and no matter what Hermione said, Ron knew that she didn't trust him as much as she used to. That, more than anything else, gutted him. Feeling overwhelmed, he unconsciously squeezed her thigh. In response, she gripped his elbow. Ron loved the powerful feeling that flourished inside of him; he allowed himself to believe that maybe Hermione was feeling it too. It was all just a guess though, and he was bloody tired of guessing.

Ron didn't want Hermione getting attacked in Diagon Alley again just so he could find his bollocks. Even though Ginny had been a dick for saying it, she was right in calling him a twat. Yes, Ron knew all of this. The problem lied in how he would do it or where he would find the courage to try. There were so many uncertainties, but as he thought about what had happened that day and how none of it mattered now because Hermione was making him feel so incredible, Ron realized that telling her might just outweigh the likelihood of rejection.

"Hermione?" he whispered.

"Yes, Ron?"

"I'm so glad that you made it out of all that safely. You have no idea how happy I am that you're okay and back with me."

Hermione hugged his arm, nuzzling her face against his shirt.  
"Actually, I do." Ron smiled, letting the good feeling fill him up.

Before, Ron had always assumed that nothing would be worse than Hermione telling him 'no'. Now, he was beginning to understand that nothing was worse than not finding out if she might say yes.

\*\*\*\* I hate horrible days too Ron... Maybe things will get better  
\*wink wink\* Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

CHAPTER 12 (Author's Note)

Hiya everyone,

It's me, Rose - if you've remembered. Now, I haven't read any of the pm's sent to me or any of the latest reviews yet (haven't been on my computer) so I don't know what people are thinking at the moment, but just to clarify: no, I'm not dead or seriously injured! In fact, at the moment I'm feeling better than I have in weeks. At any rate, I know it's been months since I've updated this story (and "Turned to Real Life" if you follow that one too) and I think I owe it to you all to explain why that is.

Long story short, the family tragedy that caused my absence a few months ago got worse. In fact, someone I loved passed away. Since then, it's been really difficult to transition back into my familiar routine, especially since for awhile I was splitting my time up between New York and England. I eventually went back home of course but even so I've just had no time/energy/passion to write, and for my work that requires a certain level of emotional intelligence, I need to have all of those things in tact.

So, because of all that, I've been taking a 'sabbatical' from my writing computer these past few weeks/months. It's been really hard because I love writing - HP fan fiction in particular, and I miss my stories so very much. However, I reckon it's been good for me too. It's given me time to heal a bit and really start analyzing myself as a writer.

So, what does this mean for "Love by Another Name" and "Turned to Real Life"? Well, to clarify, NO I'M NOT QUITTING EITHER STORY! As I've said in the past, I love these stories and I love writing them. The problem for me has ALWAYS been about having the time to write. It's been bollocks for the longest time but I think within the next few weeks or so I'll be able to get back to work and start posting again. I'm very, very close to wrapping up TtRL, and LBAN is just starting to heat up! Not to mention, of course I

have brand new material other than those pieces to add to my page within the next few months as well. So, even though it's been a mess, I promise that it won't last too much longer. Real life has really been taking its toll at me but I'm a fighter and I'm pushing through it all.

I'm sure most of you didn't want to read this and I don't expect anyone to comment or review (I'm most likely going to delete this 'chapter' once I get the new one up anyway). I only wanted to let you lot know what's going on and reassure you that I'm still going to complete these stories. I'm far too invested into them and I love Ron and his journeys far too deeply to stop. I miss him and I want to write about him again...

Once again, thank you all for always being kind and sticking around with me. It means a lot.

Cheers,

Rose

- one last thing, if you do follow the other story, the 'update' includes just the same information as this one does.