

Gruaduating

By

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Chapter One

Harry half ran, half walked, in an attempt to catch up with Hermione who was positively storming ahead of him, holding her books tightly to her chest, her robes and long hair both flying out behind her.

'Hermione! Slow down!' he called to her.

She stopped so abruptly as she swung around to face him that Harry had to jump sideways to avoid colliding with her.

'Jeez, Hermione - I said "slow down", not "stop suddenly and cause a collision"!'

Harry looked down at her, concern on his face. He knew she was either very angry or very upset or worse - *both*, because Hermione was positively glaring at him. It made Harry feel very nervous.

'Are you mad at me?' he asked quietly, afraid he already knew the answer.

'Don't you think I have a perfectly good reason to be?' she asked, her voice tense.

Other students walking past along the corridor were sending curious glances at two of the most well known students at Hogwarts. Hermione glared back at them and they quickly averted their eyes.

Harry looked down at his feet. *Damn! You're such an idiot Potter! You should've given it a bit more thought. No, make that a LOT more thought.* He sighed. *Serves me right. I really screwed up.*

Looking back up at Hermione, who was still standing there glaring at him, Harry cleared his throat and decided, "in for a penny, in for a pound".

'Hermione, I didn't give it any thought and it serves me right that you're mad at me. I screwed up. I'm really, really sorry.'

Hermione clicked her tongue as she raised her eyes, bringing them back down to gaze at Harry. Then she sighed deeply.

'Oh Harry! What *am* I going to do with you?' She sounded exasperated, but at least she didn't seem to be as angry and upset as she'd been a minute ago.

Harry dropped his eyes again. *Ha! I know what I'd like you to do with me, Hermione. What a question! Trouble is, you wouldn't be able to believe it - what I think about, when I think about you. And why the hell am I thinking about this now?! Merlin, she's driving me crazy!*

He ran his fingers through his untidy black hair, a gesture Hermione was well aware meant that he was nervous or on edge. Her gaze softened as she looked at his down turned face, waiting for him to reply.

'Well, you could put me out of my misery and say you'll come with me to the Graduation Ball...' he ventured, looking at her hopefully from beneath his eyebrows.

'Why Harry? Why do you want me to go with you?' she asked, then continued, 'After your attempt at asking me back there in the class room-!' Hermione gestured with her hand in the approximate direction of the class room, at the same time making a sound of disgust at the memory...

Earlier, she and Harry had been sitting together, as they usually did in Transfiguration, and after Professor McGonagall had given them their homework assignment at the end of the lesson, she explained she needed to leave immediately to attend a meeting with the headmaster and left the class to see themselves out. Harry had leant over and asked Hermione to stay back as he wanted to ask her something. Hermione thought nothing of it, nodding in agreement as she gathered up her books. It didn't take long for everyone else to leave the room, Ron being one of the last; he cast a questioning glance over his shoulder at his two friends as he walked out the door. Hermione caught the look and

shrugged her shoulders then sat, her chin resting on her hand, looking at Harry and waiting for him to speak.

*Harry, however, was studying the desk top as though it contained all the answers to everything, and was having quite a problem with any form of speech or sound. Or any form of thought, for that matter. He felt as though his brain had been transfigured into cottonwool as it was totally useless. He was in a bind. He wanted Hermione to come to the Graduation Ball with him. But how the hell could he ask her; if not as a friend? And she probably wouldn't want to go with a friend; she'd want to go with a boy she fancied, a boy she'd want to kiss at the end of the night, not with **him**, not good-old-best-friend-Harry. But shouldn't he ask her as a friend? He didn't think he could ask her for the reason he really wanted to, that reason being that he fancied her and he wanted to kiss her at the end of the night. Just kiss her? Yeah, right. And the rest.*

Unfortunately, before he regained even the slightest use of his brain, his mouth opened and said, 'Hermione, would you come to the Graduation Ball with me? I'm not game to ask anyone else, not that I really want to anyway, and you'll do - I mean, no one's asked you, thank goodness - no, I mean-', but he didn't get any further because Hermione rose from her chair clutching her books, glared at him more ferociously than she'd ever done in the long years of their friendship, turned on her heel and stormed from the room to leave Harry dropping his head to the desk with a distinct thud as he groaned in disgust at himself. Perhaps hitting his head on the desk caused his brain to kick back into gear, because he realised that he had to fix this now or life would be unbearable and so he ran from the classroom, pausing to check which direction Hermione had gone in, then running after her as he saw her heading towards the Great Hall along with the other students for lunch.

Not a pleasant memory. Harry lifted his head. Hermione was still waiting for him to tell her why he wanted her to go to the Ball with him.

Clearing his throat, Harry said, 'Hermione, what I said to you before was *so* stupid I can't believe I actually said it. I can't tell you how sorry I truly am. I really have trouble thinking straight when I'm around you-', this elicited a look of surprise from Hermione, '-and that's my rather lame excuse. Very lame. I want you to come with me because I want to spend that night with you and at the end of the night I want to....' Harry hesitated. *What should he say now? How the hell was he going to put this?*

Hermione spoke before he could say anything further. 'That's all very well Harry, but why do you want to spend that night with *me*?' A frown creased Hermione's smooth brow as she continued, 'And for your information Harry Potter, I *have* been asked by someone else. I just chose not to go with him.' Hermione was glaring at him again.

Harry's eyes widened in total surprise. *He hadn't known that! Who else had asked her?* It was his voice that was tense now as he demanded, 'Who's asked you? When did he ask you? Why did you say no?' Harry couldn't stop himself from glaring back at Hermione as he waited for her to answer.

'Harry,' said Hermione in a very determined voice, 'if you don't tell me *right now* why you want me to go to the Ball with you, this conversation is over. It never happened. And I will go to the Ball with-'

Harry didn't wait to hear who Hermione would choose to go to the Ball with if it wasn't him - he interrupted her quickly with, 'Hermione, I should have said this before, in the class room: I really like you. I think you're great to be with. You make me feel good and you make me laugh. I enjoy your company. I also happen to think that you look damn hot and I'd really, really like to kiss you, not to mention-'

'Harry!' Hermione's shocked exclamation of his name stopped him dead in his tracks.

Harry froze. *Oh hell, now I've done it! I went and told her and now she's horrified and she definitely*

won't come to the Ball with me and she won't even want to be friends with me and she won't talk to me and she won't help me with my school work anymore and I'll never get to kiss her let alone-

'Harry, I'd be absolutely delighted to go to the Ball with you!' said Hermione in her sweetest voice.

She smiled widely at Harry, then turned on her heel and walked into the Great Hall, with a quick glance over her shoulder at him, her eyes shining. Harry stood there dumbfounded. Then Hermione's words sunk in. She was going to the Ball with him. He was taking Hermione to the Ball. He and Hermione were going to the Ball together. Slowly, a huge grin spread across Harry's face and with it fixed firmly in place he headed into the Great Hall after Hermione.

Harry wasn't sure how he got through lunch without making a total fool of himself. He had difficulty *not* smiling continuously and foolishly. Hermione, on the other hand, was as cool as a cucumber. She ate her lunch, chatted and smiled - no sign of foolishness at all, thought Harry, with admiration. The only reassurance he had that he hadn't dreamt the whole thing was Hermione's occasional little glances at him. He'd suddenly realise she was looking at him and when his eyes met hers, she'd smile a sweetly secret little smile that only included the two of them, and no one else. No doubt about it, she made his heart sing.

Late that evening in the Gryffindor common room, Harry, Ron and Hermione were sitting in the large, squashy lounge before the fire, their homework finished (a fact of which Harry and Ron were extremely proud), just talking in a desultory manner as they watched the fire ever-so-slowly die down. Harry, sitting in the middle with his legs stretched out in front of him, his hands clasped behind his head, was very conscious of Hermione's nearness as she sat in the corner of the lounge in her usual manner with her legs tucked up under her, a book on her lap that she'd marked and closed when they all started talking. Ron was sitting at the other end of the lounge, stretched out in the same manner as Harry.

They'd discussed such things as the identity of Ginny's latest love interest - it was a complete mystery and Ginny continued to be totally secretive, much to the annoyance of all but especially to Ron; the last Quidditch game - Gryffindor defeated Slytherin - always a source of satisfaction and then on to their NEWTS...

'Hermione,' remarked Harry, 'you will do disgustingly well - you'll get more NEWTS than anyone else in the history of Hogwarts!'

Hermione sighed.

'Not possible.'

'Why on earth not for heaven's sake? If *you* can't, no one can!' cried Ron.

'Because,' said Hermione patiently, 'I am not as prepared as I should be in a number of my subjects considering that our NEWTS are a mere 4 weeks away.'

'Four weeks is forever!' replied Ron.

'Well, not quite, Ron,' said Harry.

'Exactly!' said Hermione, giving Harry a grateful look.

'Well, it's certainly more than enough time to study for NEWTS,' said Ron, frowning at Harry for siding with Hermione.

To prevent another of Ron and Hermione's heated arguments breaking out, Harry quickly changed the subject and asked Ron who he was planning on asking to the Ball.

Ron smiled dreamily and sighed. 'Luna.'

'Luna?' exclaimed Harry and Hermione together, looking at each other as if to say, *Ron and Luna? When did that happen?*

'Yes,' said Ron. 'Luna. I asked her yesterday after lunch. She was on her way to Care of Magical Creatures and we were on our way to Herbology - '

'Ah, I wondered what kept you back!' broke in Harry.

'Anyway,' continued Ron, 'she said "yes" straight way so I'm all set! How about you two?' he asked as he turned to look at them, leaning forward a little to see past Harry. 'Going to the Ball with someone special, Hermione?' he inquired with a cheeky grin.

Hermione suddenly looked down at her hands as she twisted them in her lap and Ron could swear she was actually *blushing* for crying out loud!

'Yes, I am and I think I'd better get up to bed as I'm really tired and I want to get up early tomorrow to do some more study on-'

'So, who are you going with?' questioned Ron, totally ignoring Hermione's rambling excuse for an answer.

Hermione put her book aside, stood and yawned, stretching her arms over her head (Harry watched her, transfixed; yawning and stretching had never looked so *good!*) and speaking as though she hadn't heard Ron's query, 'See you both tomorrow. Sleep tight!' Then she walked off to the staircase that led up to the girls' dormitories.

Ron turned to look at Harry, speechless.

'What's wrong with her?' he asked, astonishment written on his face. 'Do *you* know who she's going with?' he shot at Harry.

It was Harry's turn to look down. Then he decided that honesty was the best policy so he sat up, straightened his shoulders and looking Ron in the eye, said, 'Yes, I do. She's going with me.'

Ron was once again struck speechless, gazing at Harry. As the shadows cast by the fire danced across the two friends' faces, Ron continued to simply stare at Harry, saying nothing. Then he slowly blinked as he remembered something.

'Did you ask her after Transfiguration this morning?'

Harry gave him a lopsided smile and nodded. 'Yes. Look, I'm tired too,' he said, rising from the armchair. 'I'm off to bed. See you in the morning, Ron.'

Harry walked off to the boys' staircase, leaving Ron staring after him, unable to say anything although his head was full of questions, spinning around and around in a fast, confusing whirl. Why had Harry asked Hermione? Why had Hermione said yes? Why did she blush? Why didn't Hermione tell him who she was going with when he asked her? What did this mean? Weren't Harry and Hermione just friends? Why hadn't they told him during lunch? Why-?

Ron sighed as he stared into the fire. He knew there were to be no answers for him tonight. But he'd sure as hell get some tomorrow.

Chapter Two

As luck would have it, Ron slept a little later than usual the next morning, no doubt due to his tossing and turning the night before; it had felt like hours before he'd drifted off to sleep, the puzzle of Harry and Hermione continuing to taunt him. He woke feeling rather as though he'd been hit by a stampeding hippogriff and sat up, pushing his red, unruly hair out of his eyes, blinking at the bright sunshine streaming in through the windows. After passing his gaze over the four empty (unmade) beds around him, he cursed under his breath when the realisation hit him that this undoubtedly meant he was late for breakfast. *Bloody hell.* He hated to be late for breakfast, it being the most important meal of the day, as everyone knew. Then he remembered... last night. *Bloody hell.* He swung his legs over the side of his bed and sat there, his hands resting on his flannel-clad thighs as he tried to control the maelstrom happening inside his head. *Harry and Hermione. Bloody hell.* He felt definitely fuzzy in the head about this, as though he couldn't pin down any one single, coherent thought about the matter. He decided it was definitely going to be easier to sort this out on a full stomach. *Breakfast being the most important meal of the day, and all.* This decision having been made, he dressed hurriedly and walked as fast as his very long legs could carry him to the Great Hall. Two thoughts were clear in his head: *one, eat breakfast; two, interrogate Harry and Hermione. Too bad he couldn't get hold of some Veritaserum to slip in their pumpkin juice; it would come in handy if they didn't co-operate.*

Harry and Hermione on the other hand, had both woken rather earlier than usual with smiles on their faces (refusing to explain why to their respective, curious room mates) and while they, too, felt a little shocked, they both found themselves filled with a rather delicious sense of anticipation - as if they were each standing at the edge of a precipice with a breathtaking landscape of the unknown spread out before them, awaiting their exploration.

They had arrived almost simultaneously in the common room, stopping suddenly as they caught each other's eye, then smiling and falling into step without a word as they left the common room to head for the Great Hall. They found themselves turning their heads often and grinning foolishly at each other as they walked. Everything seemed different today. Even themselves. It was all quite intoxicating. Behind the foolish grins and happiness, Harry was wondering when he'd get a chance to talk to Hermione about the events of the day before. He still didn't really understand her about-face over his invitation to the Graduation Ball, although he certainly wasn't complaining about the end result.

As they sat down next to each other at the Gryffindor table, filling their plates with food and quite oblivious to their schoolmates, Harry decided he couldn't stand the suspense any longer and clearing his throat, said, 'Hermione, about yesterday,' Harry felt a little nervous, but he took a large gulp of pumpkin juice and continued, '-when I asked you to the Ball - the second time that is, when I asked you properly - why did you say yes after having been so angry with me?' *Harry swore to himself. Do I really want to bring this up? Do I really need to know? Does it really matter now?*

Hermione smiled at him and putting down her knife and fork she twisted on the seat a little so that she faced Harry.

'Well, Harry - I suppose it did seem a little like I went from being totally mad at you one minute, to saying yes the next, but actually, I've wanted to go to the Ball with *you* from the start - which is why I said no to - well, I was *so* hoping that you would ask me eventually, but I got such a shock when you finally did because of the *way* you asked me - it didn't fit in with how I'd imagined it would be...'
Hermione's voice faltered and a slight blush rose in her cheeks at this point, then she swallowed quickly and continued, 'It sounds so foolish out loud - talking about daydreaming and such - but I guess I was awfully disappointed as well. Anyhow, after I asked you *why* you wanted to take *me* you managed to come up with the *best* reasons - I felt *so* good - and so I said yes!' Hermione took a deep

breath after her long reply and smiled at Harry, waiting...

Waiting for what? wondered Harry. *For me to say something? What?*

Harry felt a little panicky, but he heard someone call out, "Morning Ron!" behind him and realised he had scant seconds to say something, **anything** before Ron joined them so he quickly said the first thing that came into his head - which luckily for him this time, was just the right thing: 'Hermione, you wouldn't believe how happy you've made me by saying yes!'

They sat smiling at each other until Ron plonked himself down on the other side of Hermione so that she was now between her two best friends.

'Morning,' said Ron, as he immediately began to pile as much on his plate as it could hold without actually spilling over onto the table, 'So, are you ready to tell me now what the heck's going on with you two?'

Hermione managed a strangled, 'Morning, Ron', but looked as though she wanted to be anywhere else other than where she was at that moment. She straightened in her seat, picked up her knife and fork again and tucked into the remainder of her breakfast, choosing to pretend she hadn't heard Ron.

Harry, however, couldn't ignore him and said, as he dropped his head forward to look at Ron, 'Morning, Ron! Look, so far the only thing going on is that I've asked Hermione to go to the Ball with me and she said yes. That's all. Full stop.'

Ron frowned, 'But why did you ask her in the first place?' he inquired, his voice a little muffled around a mouthful of scrambled eggs.

Harry sighed. Really, his best friend deserved an explanation - such as it was, so he put down his knife and fork and leaning on his elbows as he looked at Ron, he said matter-of-factly, 'Because I fancy her.'

'Fair enough,' said Ron, who felt as though he wasn't truly taking this information in, but rather storing it away for later consideration.

A rather strange choking sound came from Hermione at this point, but Ron seemed oblivious, appearing to be satisfied with Harry's answer for the time being and as Harry patted Hermione on the back in an attempt to relieve her choking fit, looking at her with great concern, Ron turned and said to her, 'So, Hermione, why did you say yes?'

Hermione was now desperately sipping at her pumpkin juice in an effort to quell the coughing so Harry answered for her, giving her a lopsided grin, 'Because she fancies me back, I imagine. I hope!'

Hermione didn't hear Ron say, 'Makes sense,' because her coughing fit had renewed itself rather violently on hearing Harry's answer and she was sure she was going to cause herself permanent damage if she didn't stop coughing some time soon.

'Actually,' continued Harry, frowning, 'someone else did ask her but thank goodness she turned him down. Mind you, I'd probably have to have done something rather drastic to him if she'd yes. I couldn't bear the thought of her being with someone else. I don't suppose you could tell me who it was?' he finished, looking quizzically at her.

Hermione in the interval had managed to get her coughing fit under control and taking another sip of pumpkin juice she looked from Harry to Ron, exclaiming, 'I absolutely cannot believe you two!' Then she kept her gaze on Harry as she said, 'No, I won't tell you who asked me - you don't need to know and it doesn't really matter now, anyway.'

Two pairs of startled eyes fixed themselves on her and there was silence. Hermione felt a little silly, but pushed on.

'Harry, you really shouldn't go round telling people we fancy each other like that, it just sounds a bit flippant or something. I mean, you're right, all we've done so far is agree to go to the Ball together - we haven't really gotten going as a couple yet, if you know what I mean. Not that I don't want to - or that we won't-' Hermione seemed to realise the possible implications of what she was saying and floundered, looking down at her plate and deciding to shut up before she could embarrass herself even more.

'So you don't fancy him, then?' asked Ron as he once again attacked the diminishing mound of food on his plate, not really sure what Hermione was on about.

Hermione sighed in frustration. 'For heaven's sake, Ron, of *course* I fancy him-' Hermione groaned at her unthinking repetition of that word, '-but you just don't go round talking about it as though we're discussing sweets from Honeydukes! Honestly, you two have a lot to learn!' Hermione was far more exasperated that she was angry, but she was rather fed up with her two friends and their lack of sensitivity so she rose from the table and left, saying, 'I'm going back to the common room for my books.'

Harry and Ron were left looking at each other, confusion on their faces, then Ron shrugged (he was never going to figure girls out) and went back to eating but Harry decided he'd much rather catch up with Hermione and make sure everything was all right so he left too, once again running after Hermione.

He caught up with her fairly quickly and without thinking about it, grasped her left hand as he walked up beside her. Hermione looked up at him in surprise but then smiled and gently squeezed Harry's hand.

'Hermione, I'm really sorry - again! I seem to have such a knack for saying exactly what I'm thinking without actually thinking about it first! I definitely wouldn't win any prizes for my attempts at romance,' he grinned sheepishly. 'Besides, I think Ron has a far less complicated outlook about many things-'

'You can say that again!' laughed Hermione. 'It's all right Harry - I can never stay angry with you, you know that. And besides, I did go on a bit - after all, it was just between the three of us; it's not as though the whole of Gryffindor was listening in!'

Harry smiled happily at the Fat Lady as they reached her portrait and he gave her the password so they could crawl through to the common room to get their books for the morning's lessons.

Once he finished breakfast, Ron walked slowly back to the common room, hands in his pockets, a far away expression on his face. *Harry and Hermione. Who would have thought? Hard to imagine those two actually fancying each other. Bit weird. Or maybe it just seemed so because they were Harry and Hermione - always just friends... Well, not any more it seemed. He thought that Harry might be the only person Hermione wouldn't be able to organise to death; she never really did get angry with Harry either, not the way she did with him. She only really got mad when he did something that put him in danger and even then she never really stayed mad for long. Not with Harry. And Harry had always seemed quite comfortable with the fact that Hermione was cleverer than he was - she was probably the cleverest witch they'd ever known - or would ever know, for that matter. Mind you, Harry was probably going to end up being the most powerful wizard around - after Dumbledore that was, and after he got rid of You-Know-Who which Ron had no doubt he would.*

Slowing to a stop, Ron walked to a window overlooking the lake, perching on the wide, stone windowsill as he looked down at the autumn sun sparkling off the water, the giant squid visible in the warm shallows. *He remembered that at sometime in the past he'd felt jealous about Hermione. Over Krum, mainly. That seemed to have just faded into nothing without him even realising. What would*

happen now? he wondered. *Would the Trio become a Duo? Somehow, he didn't think so. There was, between the three of them, such a bond that he didn't feel in danger of being left out. Except maybe when they snuck off to the Astronomy Tower... Now there was a thought. He could take Luna and show her the Astronomy Tower!* He pushed off from the windowsill, a smile on his face as he decided it was going to be a pretty good day: he'd made it to breakfast despite sleeping in, he'd sorted out the Harry and Hermione thing in his head without giving himself a headache and he could now work on getting Luna to visit the Astronomy Tower with him. A good day, indeed!

At lunch later that same day, Harry, seated next to Hermione, and Ron, sitting opposite them, listened patiently as Hermione outlined the revision timetables she'd drawn up for the two of them covering the next four weeks before their NEWTS which were to commence the second week in June (she'd done the same for herself, of course, only much, much earlier). Ron groaned when she finished as it seemed to him she'd left hardly any time for what he considered to be very important relaxation breaks. After all, a game of wizard's chess, walks outside and visiting Hagrid were surely essential activities as well!

Harry really didn't care because he planned on spending as much of his study time as he could studying Hermione - *oops!* Studying *with* Hermione! He grinned to himself. *He'd do both.*

Then Ron remembered something. 'Isn't this weekend a Hogsmeade weekend?' he asked.

Hermione sighed. 'Yes, but we don't *have* to go-'

She was interrupted by both Harry and Ron making loud noises of disgust at such an idea.

'You must be joking!' cried Ron, looking at her aghast. 'There's no way we're missing a Hogsmeade weekend, is there Harry?' He looked across at Harry for support.

'Absolutely not,' Harry said firmly. However, he smiled gently down at Hermione as he continued, 'And just think, you and I could go together.'

Hermione smiled back, but then broke into a chuckle. 'Harry, we *always* go together!' she laughed.

'Yes, but this time it'll be different,' replied Harry, gazing at Hermione with an intensity that made her breath catch in her throat.

Ron sat gazing forlornly across at his two friends, a sinking feeling in his stomach at the thought of it being *them* and *him* until he remembered Luna - surely she'd come with him? He said as much to Harry and Hermione and they encouraged him to ask Luna as soon as possible. Ron decided to go and find Luna then and there. At Hermione's suggestion, he wrapped a couple of sandwiches in a serviette for Luna as she hadn't come in to lunch and then left, giving them a wave as he did so.

Hermione watched Ron as he walked towards the entrance hall. *How strange*, she thought to herself, *one day we're just Harry, Ron and Hermione - the next we're Harry and Hermione, Ron and Luna - it seems so far away from how we were in such a short time. It's sort of a little bit sad, but at the same time it's rather exciting. Exciting - like the thought of Hogsmeade - with Harry. She thought of the way he'd looked at her a few minutes before and felt an unfamiliar sensation set out from her stomach and trickle throughout her body and found herself wondering if he'd kiss her...*

Chapter Three

Both Harry and Hermione wondered, after all their years at Hogwarts and the many, many trips they'd made to Hogsmeade, why it was that somehow, on *this* trip, the wizard village seemed so very different. Nothing appeared to have changed on the surface - Zonko's was still full of squeals of laughter - and a few screams! Honeydukes was, as always, packed to the rafters, Hogwarts students were *everywhere* and the Three Broomsticks... well, it was, without a doubt, the best place in Hogsmeade, decided Harry, dropping his head and burying it in Hermione's hair, breathing in her soft, fresh scent.

Earlier, as they'd walked along the main street, Hermione had joked about going to Madam Puddifoot's; it took Harry a second to realise she was in fact joking and then only after a heartfelt, horrified groan had escaped him. Madam Puddifoot's dredged up only one memory for him - the rather mortifying date he'd had with Cho Chang there on Valentine's Day two years earlier.

'Not funny, Hermione!' he'd cried, trying hard to scowl at her.

Hermione had tugged on their clasped hands, pulling him round to face her. She then threw both her arms around his waist, pulling them together and looking up at him, a wide smile on her face.

'Harry, I'm sorry! I can't help but see the funny side of it now,' she told him.

Harry brought his hands up so that they rested on Hermione's shoulders as he looked down at her.

'Well, I guess it was pretty funny - if you weren't me or Cho!' he told her, but he smiled as he did so. 'How about we go get that table at the Three Broomsticks and have a drink before Ron and Luna arrive?'

'Good idea! Let's go!' agreed Hermione, laughing softly as she gazed up at Harry.

Only they didn't move. Somehow, in that short space of time, the space of a heartbeat, they became intensely aware of each other. The smiles slowly left their faces, their eyes locked and they simply stood there, lost in each other.

Harry's eyes slowly dropped to Hermione's slightly parted lips, causing a soft, small 'oh!' to escape her. Without giving a thought to the passers-by who were either staring at them, glaring at them or smiling fondly at them, Harry's hands went from Hermione's shoulders to gently frame her upturned face, at the same time taking his mouth down to meet hers. *Oh, YES!* he thought triumphantly, revelling in the amazing softness of her lips. Reluctantly, he drew back, just a little, and gazed into Hermione's shining, soft, brown eyes, unable to speak. Hermione felt as though she was floating on air.

'Harry,' she managed to whisper, 'please do that again.'

She'd barely finished speaking when Harry did just that.

'Oy! You two! Cut that out! You're in public!'

Harry and Hermione turned their heads simultaneously, both still feeling dazed from the intensity of the feelings created by their kiss, only to see Ron and Luna walking towards them, arms around each other. Luna had wanted to go to Dervish and Banges so the two couples had separated, arranging to meet in the Three Broomsticks.

Luna smiled at Harry and Hermione, 'That looked like fun,' she remarked.

Harry, his arms wrapped around Hermione, replied with a rueful smile, 'And it would've been even more fun if Ron hadn't shown his usual, impeccable timing!'

Ron groaned. 'You can do that anytime! C'mon you lot - let's go get a table. Provided there are any left, that is - seeing as you two stood out in the middle of the street snogging instead of doing your job!'

There were still a couple of empty tables ('bloody lucky!' commented Ron) and they were now all seated in the back corner of the pub, their half empty tankards of Butterbeer on the table in front of them. Harry had his right arm around Hermione's shoulders as she leaned into him, her head resting in the crook of his neck and her left hand resting lightly on his knee. She thought she couldn't possibly be happier than she was at that very moment.

Harry and Ron were discussing Gryffindor's win against Hufflepuff as well as rejoicing in the fact that Ravenclaw had beaten Slytherin. This meant that Gryffindor would be playing Ravenclaw for the Quidditch Cup this year and they were both confident that Gryffindor had it in the bag, discussing various strategies that would make it so.

In the meantime, Hermione and Luna were enjoying a light-hearted chat about Ginny's mysterious boyfriend, speculating on who it could be and why she wouldn't tell anyone.

'Maybe', said Luna vaguely, 'there is no boyfriend - she's making it all up because...' She couldn't think of a good reason why anyone would do such a thing.

'Not Ginny,' said Hermione with authority. 'There's definitely someone but she won't give anyone even the tiniest little clue! I told her she was a mean tease and she just laughed! I know she didn't keep up with Dean Thomas because he's been moping around and when I asked him what was wrong, he told me Ginny had broken it off.'

'I wonder what I should wear to the Ball?' Luna said, seemingly to no one in particular. Hermione gave her head a tiny shake, a smile on her lips. You never really knew where you were when talking to Luna, or where you were going next for that matter.

'Speaking of the Ball,' interrupted Harry, looking at Hermione, 'you still haven't told me who it was that invited you first.'

'And I'm not going to Harry. I told you - it really doesn't matter.'

Harry didn't look as though he entirely agreed with that.

Hermione turned to Luna, 'I have my dress,' she said. 'Are you going to buy a new one or do you have some dresses you're going to choose from?' she asked Luna.

'I'm not sure,' said Luna. 'What's your dress like, Hermione?'

'Did you get your dress before or after your *first* invite to the Ball?' Harry interrupted again. Hermione ignored him, answering Luna, 'Can't tell you with Harry here - I want to surprise him!'

'Won't make any difference - they won't remember what we say anyway - come on, tell me, *please!*'

'All right,' Hermione relented, 'but not here - let's go to the loo,' she suggested. The two girls reluctantly disentangled themselves and left, telling Harry and Ron they'd be back shortly.

While they were gone, Harry thought it might be a good time to ask Ron something he'd been wondering about for some weeks now. 'Ron,' he said, 'have you ever found out anything from Percy or Charlie or even Bill about the Ball? What do we wear? What happens? I don't recall ever seeing any of the seventh-years getting ready for a Ball. How did you know it was all right to ask Luna when she's a sixth-year?'

Ron leaned forward and leaned on the table. 'Actually, I did ask Charlie about it during last Christmas break. It's a bit like the Yule Ball - only seventh-years can go, but they can take a sixth-year as their partner. I'm not sure the Ball's even held at Hogwarts - he said he didn't want to ruin it for me but he did

tell me this - make sure I take a girl I fancy because snogging's actually allowed! I hope he wasn't pulling my leg,' he finished thoughtfully.

Harry smiled to himself. Snogging allowed? Of course, just going with Hermione was enough to make it a wonderful night, but a nice little snogging session - or two - would be like 'icing on the cake'. Yum.

* * * * *

The next few weeks raced by, full of intense study, visits to the library and revision, revision, revision with no time for visits to the Astronomy Tower, so there was very little happening in the way of snogging, much to Ron's dismay.

'You'd think as a matter of self interest she would've put in a little free time so we could maybe sneak up to the Astronomy Tower at least *once!*' Ron was heard to complain bitterly as he surveyed his revision timetable.

The last Saturday before their NEWTs began saw Harry and Ron in their common room, bent over books, reading and scribbling notes as they went, the only sound being that of their quills as they travelled across their parchments.

'Please, no more!' groaned Ron half an hour later as he dropped his head onto the open Transfiguration book he'd been reading. He and Harry were sitting at one of the small side tables in the common room, books and parchment on the table in front of them and on the floor around them. Harry took off his glasses, closing his eyes and rubbing the spot on his nose where they rested. Hermione had gone to the library, positive there was a book on Arithmancy she'd overlooked, although Harry and Ron were sure that wasn't possible considering Hermione was probably close to having read just about every book in Hogwarts' library!

'You know what?' said Harry, replacing his glasses and looking across the table at Ron. 'I think we deserve a break, don't you?'

Ron pushed up onto his elbows. 'Yes, I do. We've been bloody wonderful. What d'you want to do?'

'I think,' said Harry with a wicked grin, 'that we should get the girls, snaffle some food from the kitchens and go for an afternoon picnic by the lake.'

'Harry, mate, you're a genius!' crowed Ron, standing up and stretching, visions of food and snogging warring for supremacy in his head. 'Let's go!'

They packed their books away and left, Harry heading for the library and Hermione, Ron to the kitchens for provisions and then to find Luna. They agreed to meet in the Entrance Hall in half an hour.

Harry found her in her usual corner, three books open on the table in front of her, oblivious to everything around her as she read. He walked up silently behind her and leaning down, kissed her on the cheek.

Hermione's loud squeal of fright brought Madam Pince scurrying to see who had dared disturb the peace and quiet of her library.

Harry apologised, saying that Hermione had seen a mouse. Madam Pince sniffed, looking as though she couldn't decide which was more dreadful: Hermione squealing in the library, having a mouse in the library or the fact that she didn't believe Harry at all. It must've all been too much as in the end she gave another disdainful sniff and left them to it.

Hermione smiled at Harry and told him he was ridiculous. 'As if I'd squeal at a mouse!' she said indignantly.

Harry just grinned at her. 'Got us off, didn't it?' he said, as he sat down next to her.

Hermione's smile was suddenly replaced with a slight frown. 'What are you doing here anyway? You're supposed to be studying in the common room!'

Harry told her what he and Ron had come up with but she didn't seem too impressed.

'Harry, there's only today and tomorrow left! We shouldn't be wasting any time - especially not on *picnics!*' saying it as though a picnic was something disgusting.

A determined glint came into Harry's eyes. He looked straight at Hermione and said in a very firm voice, 'We all deserve a break. We *need* a break! It's only for a couple of hours and if you don't come peacefully, I will kidnap you.'

Hermione stared at Harry for a few seconds, taking in that look in his eyes and wisely deciding she wasn't going to win this one, she simply smiled and said, 'Okay.' Besides, being kidnapped would undoubtedly involve something undignified, she was sure!

'Good! Let's go.' Harry grabbed her hand and pulled her up, not letting go as they walked out of the library and headed for the Entrance Hall. It was still a little while before Ron and Luna were due to arrive so they went to sit in the sun on the front steps. It was a perfect June day and they both leaned back, their elbows on the step behind them, soaking up the warmth of the sun and enjoying the fresh air.

'Well, well, what have we here? Potty and his mudblood,' drawled a familiar voice.

Harry opened his eyes to see Malfoy standing at the bottom of the steps, usual sneer in place. For a change, Crabbe and Goyle weren't in sight. 'Bugger off, Malfoy,' he said placidly, closing his eyes again. Hermione hadn't moved. Like Harry, she didn't intend to let Malfoy ruin even one minute of what promised to be a glorious afternoon.

Another familiar voice sounded from the steps above and behind them, 'Luna, look! It's Malfoy, the amazing bouncing ferret!' exclaimed Ron.

Malfoy shot Ron a filthy look and without another word, ran up the steps and disappeared into the castle, not liking the four-to-one odds.

Luna and Ron sat down behind Harry and Hermione, all four of them laughing heartily; Malfoy hated being reminded of that incident but they loved to remember it!

A little later, they settled themselves under their favourite beech tree. Harry and Ron were sitting, backs against the tree, the girls sitting between their bent legs, leaning back against them. The contents of the picnic basket Dobby had put together for them had been happily demolished - ham and cheese sandwiches, delicious treacle tarts and four bottles of Butterbeer. They were feeling wonderfully relaxed and let all thoughts of the looming examinations drift away.

Harry started playing with tendrils of Hermione's hair and as she turned to look up at him, smiling, he gently stroked her velvety cheek. Hermione twisted a little and slid her left hand behind Harry's neck, bring his head down to hers so that their lips almost, but not quite, met.

'Harry,' she whispered, 'is kissing allowed on the school grounds?'

'Too bad if it isn't,' he whispered back.

* * * * *

The riotous cheering from the Great Hall could be heard as far away as Hagrid's hut on a Friday afternoon two weeks later. The exams were over! They were free! No sooner had their quills been put down and their "History of Magic" exam parchments collected - flying through the air to the command of 'accio!' from Professor McGonagall - than students were streaming through the Entrance Hall and

out the main doors into the grounds and the beautiful afternoon sunshine. Harry found Hermione in the crowd and lifting her up, he swung her around, making her laugh with delight.

As Harry put her down, she wrapped her arms around his neck, a huge smile on her face.

'Harry, I simply can't believe it! It's all over! Only one more week of school!'

'Doesn't seem possible, does it?'

'Harry! Hermione!' came a familiar voice. Ron appeared and wrapped a long arm around the shoulders of each of his friends. 'That's it! We're done! In a week - no more school! Life begins!' The three friends hugged each other, rejoicing in the wonderful feeling of relief and freedom. That night would see a serious amount of celebrating in Gryffindor Tower.

Chapter Four

No one was sure who'd managed to smuggle in the Butterbeer and Firewhisky - but everyone was very appreciative. The food was happily supplied by Hogwart's house elves, Dobby taking it upon himself to look after the Gryffindors. He did a magnificent job of it, too.

The real partying (for partying, read "snogging"!) couldn't begin until all but the seventh-years had gone to bed, although some of the sixth-years chose to stay up and join in, especially if they had friends or siblings amongst the seventh-years. Sixth-year Colin Creevey chose to stay up for a little while so that he could add to his already enormous photo collection featuring the one and only Harry Potter. Ginny also elected to stay up, although Ron disapproved and told her so.

'You are not my mother Ronald Weasley, so pull your head in!' she told him rather rudely.

'Jeez, all right already Ginny! I was just thinking of you - it could get a little, well, *heavy* in here tonight.'

'Oh, and I suppose I'm going to be scarred for life by what I might see, big brother, is that it?' Ginny winked at him facetiously over her shoulder as she sauntered off.

Ron and Harry were sitting in the lounge before the fire and Ron eyed Ginny's back as she left, frowning. 'I wish I knew who the hell it was she's seeing now,' he grumbled. 'She'd be quite capable of biting off more than she could chew, I'm sure.'

Harry actually agreed with Ron, but kept it to himself. He thought it better to change the subject as Ron could easily get quite worked up over the whole thing.

Hermione then appeared at the bottom of the girls' staircase and all thoughts of Ginny left Harry's head. As most of the students had, Hermione had changed into jeans and a top, her hair pulled back and up in a high ponytail. Harry smiled at her, thinking to himself how great she looked.

She came and sat down on his lap, linking her hands behind his neck. 'Well, Mr Potter, exams are over at last - no more revision or studying for us!' She gave him a cheeky smile as he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her in for a quick kiss. Harry had already decided they weren't going to the Astronomy Tower - Ron and Luna would not be the only ones up there and Harry rather fancied a little more privacy; he definitely wanted to be alone with Hermione so he'd decided on taking her for a walk around the shore of the Lake to their favourite beech tree. If they were unlucky enough to encounter some others who'd had the same idea... well, he'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

'Ron and I have already eaten,' Harry told her, 'but are you hungry?' he inquired. 'There's plenty of food. I think Dobby brought ALL the food here, not just Gryffindor Tower's share!'

'Yes, I am actually,' Hermione replied and she nimbly hopped up from Harry's lap and went to get something to eat. Ron went with her, claiming his first plate of food 'hadn't touched the sides' and he needed some more.

When they returned to sit with Harry, a number of their friends stopped to have a chat and they passed the time exchanging some light hearted chatter with them.

By around half past eleven, the seventh-years had herded all the younger students (who were grumbling and complaining about the state of affairs) off to bed. Couples had already settled themselves in various armchairs around the common room while many left either for the Astronomy Tower (such a marvellous, out-of-the-way place with so many nooks and crannies!) or some other part of the castle where they felt sure they wouldn't be disturbed. Harry and Hermione were exchanging frequent glances full of anticipation until Ron groaned and complained to the room in general that he felt like a ship on a

rock ('That's *shag* on a rock, Ron', Hermione corrected him, with a smile).

Just before midnight, Harry, Hermione and Ron decided to make their way out through the portrait hole ('You shouldn't be going out NOW!' scolded the Fat Lady, wagging her finger at them. 'Oh, we won't be too long,' said Harry. 'I've heard THAT before!' was the indignant retort.)

Ron and Luna had arranged to meet in the Astronomy Tower at midnight and just before Ron parted company with Harry and Hermione, he told them, 'Do you know, I actually miss Fred and George at times like this! Things would've been a lot livelier in the old common room tonight if they were still around! It was pretty tame, really.'

'Yeah, it was a little. There's no one quite like Fred and George. Maybe,' said Harry, with a grin, 'they should start some sort of celebration consultancy - they could give people ideas on how to celebrate in a manner worthy of the famous Weasley Twins!'

'And they could supply the required weapons needed for fun!' threw in Hermione.

'Ha! That'd certainly liven things up!' laughed Ron.

As Ron left them, heading up to the Astronomy Tower, Harry and Hermione waved him off, heading down the stairs and along the corridor leading to the Entrance Hall. As they walked, they glimpsed someone ducking into a doorway arch quite a way ahead of them - a girl - 'Was that Ginny?' asked Harry, glimpsing red hair swinging down her back. 'And - what the hell?! Was that Malfoy?' he whispered urgently as he saw a head with silver blonde hair lean out of the doorway to check up and down the corridor. Harry and Hermione were sticking close to the wall to avoid being seen and so remained undetected by whoever it was up ahead of them.

Hermione's stomach was churning as she said, 'Come off it Harry! It couldn't possibly be! What are you thinking? Ginny and Malfoy? Hardly!'

'Well, true...' Harry's face remained thoughtful, even after they'd reached the doorway only to find it empty as they'd expected. Still, they had better things to do than follow other students who were no doubt just as bent on finding some privacy as they were, whoever they were.

They crept out the main door, down the steps and headed across the grounds to the Lake. The sky was dotted with some cloud but there was a little moonlight, enough to see by since they were familiar with the path they were taking. So far they hadn't seen anyone else, to Harry's delight.

When they reached the other side of the beech tree, Harry stopped and pulled Hermione into his arms at the same time as she wrapped her arms around his waist; they smiled at each other.

'Alone at last,' murmured Harry as he lowered his head.

'At last,' echoed Hermione just before their lips met.

They decided standing wasn't really a good idea and quickly stretched out on the soft grass beneath the tree, Hermione lying on her back, her hands behind her head; Harry was propped on his left elbow with his head resting in his hand and with his free hand he began gently tracing the sweep of her cheek, down to her mouth, his finger running along the outline of her lips.

Hermione closed her eyes, enjoying the marvellous sensations Harry's touch was creating; then Harry's fingers trailed lightly up along her jaw to her ear, then down her neck, over her collarbone and into the valley between her breasts where they came to rest, waiting, just as Harry was, for Hermione to let him know whether he'd gone too far or whether, perhaps, he might go further...

Hermione stopped breathing as she watched Harry's hand come to rest while Harry was watching Hermione's face... then, by lifting her hand to softly touch his face and allowing the tiniest of smiles to

touch her lips, she gave him what he was waiting for: permission. With their eyes locked, his trailing fingers resumed their tantalising journey down over her stomach, then down... to her belly button... circling around it twice... Hermione gasped and Harry froze; he sure as hell didn't want to stop but neither did he want to go past the point of no return if Hermione didn't want this.

'Harry,' she whispered, her voice husky, 'you wouldn't believe how you make me feel and you have no idea how much I want you...'

'Tell me how I make you feel, Hermione,' he said, his voice rasping in his throat.

Oh, God! she thought, *I can't speak while he's doing that - I can't think-* She groaned softly.

'Harry,' her voice was a husky whisper, 'I want you more than I thought possible, but...' *I can't believe it - but I'm a little afraid!*

Harry froze. *"But"?* *Merlin, if this is as far as we go...* through almost clenched teeth he managed to say, 'Hermione, it's your call love.' *I'm think I'm either going to explode or break!* Then they were simply staring into each other's eyes. Harry knew he couldn't do anything except keep going until she said stop and then somehow find the strength to do just that. Somehow. He could see fear and desire warring in her eyes and he dropped his head to kiss her again, hoping to drive the fear away.

Hermione thought she was going to melt into a puddle right there and then. She must have groaned again because Harry lifted his head to look at her. *He's turning me into a puddle again,* she thought. *It's not bloody fair! He can just LOOK at me with those incredible green eyes and I melt! Dear Merlin, my insides feel like mush!*

With a soft noise that acknowledged the futility of resistance in the face of her own desire, Hermione pulled Harry's head down and kissed him more passionately than she ever had. She couldn't help it - she groaned into his mouth.

That was Harry's undoing.

'Hermione-' he rasped out.

Merlin, she thought, *even the sound of his voice like that is doing things to me!*

'Hermione,' he repeated, 'please... this is killing me... I need to know... please tell me we can finish this...'

The green fire in his eyes as he gazed down at her, his soft, barely discernable panting as though he was unable to catch his breath properly, prevented her from thinking... *she had to think! She had to decide!*

Harry felt her shudder slightly as she finally spoke, 'Yes, Harry, yes- I want you so much it hurts- '

She'd said yes! There was a roaring in his ears; their gazes locked and it was at that moment that the sound of footsteps reached them, followed by the sound of voices...

'Holy mother of Merlin! I don't believe it!' groaned Harry softly as his head dropped and he closed his eyes. *He thought he was going to explode for sure.*

Hermione thought she was going to scream with the sheer frustration of it. Luckily they were on the far side of the tree and as she and Harry dragged themselves into sitting positions, the footsteps stopped perhaps five yards the other side of the tree.

Before either Harry or Hermione could stand up and walk around to reveal themselves (so they wouldn't interrupt what they presumed the other couple was planning on doing), they were both frozen instantly by the sound of one of the voices. It was male. It was Draco Malfoy's. Only he sounded different. Then they realised they'd only ever heard disgust, ridicule or sarcasm in his voice; now,

however, they recognised the husky tones of desire. 'Come here,' he commanded his unseen companion, 'I need you so badly...'

Harry, totally amazed, turned to look at Hermione. Why did Hermione look like a wild animal caught and frozen by oncoming headlights? 'Hermione?' whispered Harry, his voice full of concern - yet questioning. Hermione only moved her eyes from staring straight ahead, to look into Harry's. 'What is it?' he asked more urgently.

'Oh, Harry...oh, my God...! We need to go - get out of here - NOW!'

Hermione was galvanised into action - she stood up and started pulling on Harry's arm, urging him to stand up.

'What the hell is wrong?' he demanded in a fierce whisper. His thoughts mocked him. *Wrong? What could be wrong? Oh yeah, that's right! Malfoy gets to snog someone senseless while I have to clear off and to top it off, how bloody ironic was it that it was ferret-boy Malfoy who'd been the one to interrupt him!*

'Just let's GO!' Hermione's whispered command broke into his thoughts and she began pulling him away from the tree and towards the Forbidden Forest. 'We can follow the edge of the Forest round to Hagrid's and go back to the castle from there,' Hermione said as she kept walking and pulling.

Harry stopped and glared at her. He felt as though he was going to spend the rest of his life suffering this incredible level of frustration, on top of that Malfoy was exploring someone's tonsils just a short distance away after being responsible for interrupting what had promised to be the best moment of his life and Hermione was - well, for some reason her eyes were full of desperation as she continued to plead with him, 'PLEASE, Harry, PLEASE!'

'Why? I feel like walking over there and ripping into that freak and hexing him to hell and back-'

Hermione looked as though she might cry. 'Because - because - for me, Harry, please just do it for me. I'll explain, I promise!'

He couldn't refuse her in the face of her desperation. 'All right - but I want to know every-'

But then he heard the other voice. Her voice. The one who's tonsils Malfoy had been exploring. The unseen couple had no reason to speak in whispers and their voices carried on the still night air.

'Draco, this has to end! We can't keep this up - it's just too difficult - it's not going to work!' and then he heard her start sobbing. He knew that voice. He'd known the owner for seven years. Ginny Weasley.

He looked at Hermione and the reason for her desperation to leave suddenly became clear. 'You knew.' It was a statement, not a question.

Hermione dropped Harry's arm and nodded. 'I found out sort of by accident.'

'And you didn't say anything?' he asked in disbelief.

'Oh, yes, right, of course! Why wouldn't I run straight to you and Ron and tell you Ginny's new boyfriend was Draco Malfoy? I can't think of one good reason why I didn't do just that!' She made a sound of disbelief. 'Really, Harry! Besides, it's not as though Ginny herself told me - I told you I found out by accident. I didn't feel it would be right to snitch on her.'

'Snitch? SNITCH? That's Draco bloody Malfoy, Hermione! With Ginny Weasley!'

Hermione was wringing her hands. 'Well it sounds as though they're going to call it quits anyway, doesn't it? Let's just go and leave them to it.'

Harry looked agonised and very undecided. Hermione was terrified he'd take it into his head to go and

tackle Malfoy then and there.

'Please Harry - we can't interfere now. If Ginny calls it off, then there's nothing to worry about! Ron would get killed trying to kill Malfoy, you know he would! Please, let's go!' Hermione had taken both of Harry's hands in a tight grip and was looking up at him, willing him with all her might to come away with her.

He looked down at her and shrugged, giving her a lopsided smile. 'Do you know, I think you're the only person in the world capable of stopping me from having a go at Draco Malfoy when there's no one around to witness it!'

As they walked back to the castle along the edge of the forest and past Hagrid's hut, Hermione told Harry that many weeks earlier, she'd gone back to Snape's classroom to retrieve a box of beetle's eyes she'd left behind and then went on to explain what had happened after that.

The door had been open, no other students were to be seen, but as she approached - and just before she stepped into the room - she heard Malfoy's voice. She immediately froze on the spot, not wanting to run into him alone. Then she heard Malfoy speaking urgently to someone obviously in the room with him. Hermione explained that when she heard the girl's voice that answered him, she felt shock run through her like ice water: it was Ginny! She told Harry they sounded as though they may have been arguing. However, she had heard one thing clearly - Malfoy saying to Ginny that they'd find a way to be together.

Harry shook his head in part amazement, part horror. 'How the hell did Ginny get mixed up with Malfoy? I hope you're right about one thing Hermione - that they're calling it off.' Hermione was grateful for the darkness - if Harry could see her face, she was sure he'd know she hadn't quite told him every little detail. For instance, one little detail like Draco Malfoy asking her to go to the Ball with him that same night she'd stumbled upon him and Ginny in the Potions classroom.

Well, she consoled herself, leaving out a few details doesn't constitute lying, does it? I'm not going to think about it, she told herself firmly. No point in crying over spilt milk as Mum is fond of saying.

They'd reached the steps leading up to the main doors and quickly made their way to Gryffindor Tower, apologising to the Fat Lady who rather petulantly let them in, 'I do need my beauty sleep, you know!' she complained.

It was just after two in the morning and the common room was very nearly empty. There seemed to still be some couples snuggled up in armchairs but whether they were asleep or not was hard to say as the light from the dying fire was so low.

Harry walked with Hermione to the bottom of the girls' staircase and taking her face in his hands, he kissed her deeply.

'Night, Hermione,' he whispered tenderly. 'If ferret-face ever interrupts us again like that, I guarantee even you won't be able to stop me doing something dreadful to him!'

'I won't be trying to stop you, Harry, I'll be helping you!'

They exchanged one last smile before they started up their respective stair cases.

Harry stripped off and hopped into bed, pulling the drapes closed around his bed. The deep, regular breathing of his companions assured him they were all asleep. He wondered how Ron and Luna had fared in the Astronomy Tower. No doubt Ron would fill him in tomorrow. He was still feeling concerned over Ginny having anything to do with Malfoy, yet from what he'd heard Ginny say earlier, Hermione was probably right - she would call it off. She would know how impossible it was for a Weasley and a Malfoy to consider any sort of future together. And he sure as hell didn't want to be the

one to have to tell Ron his little sister had taken up with Malfoy! Once he'd sorted that out, he found his thoughts automatically returned to Hermione. Hermione, laying on the grass, groaning... wanting him... telling him how much she wanted him... he squirmed with discomfort then leaned over and grabbed his wand from his bedside table, placing it beside him on the bed. There was only one way he'd be getting any sleep tonight. Not surprisingly, he was getting very adept at the Scourgify charm these days.

As Hermione walked slowly up the spiral staircase, she thought about what they'd overheard out by the Lake. To tell the truth, she didn't really think Draco and Ginny would call it off, despite what Ginny had said. Malfoy, having been spoilt all his life, could be extremely determined when it came to something he wanted and he wanted Ginny Weasley. He'd told her so, in no uncertain terms. And it seemed as though Ginny wanted him just as much, despite the dangers and pitfalls. Would Malfoy be game to bring Ginny to the Ball as his date? *Oh Merlin, I hope not!* she thought. She sighed. *She'd worry about that tomorrow. She had to get some sleep.*

After she'd changed and climbed into bed, Hermione's last thoughts were of Harry: she wondered when they'd get another chance to be alone - to finish what they'd started that night. She groaned softly to herself as she sank beneath her covers. Her DLTs were becoming more and more disruptive and frustrating. *Maybe she should start thinking of them as Delicious Little Thoughts instead of Depraved Little Thoughts. Maybe Delicious and Depraved?* She was feeling very sleepy now... her thoughts were slowly whirling away into sleep... *Harry was delicious... he made her want to be depraved, well, nicely depraved... could you be nicely depraved? Harry... deliciously depraved Harry...*

She was asleep. And her dreams were definitely delicious and perhaps a little depraved...

Chapter Five

'So, d'you think you'll get a chance to talk to Ginny today?' Harry asked Hermione at breakfast the next morning.

Hermione shrugged. 'I can only hope! I've got to make absolutely sure we're alone. This is not something I can risk being overheard.'

When they finished eating, they headed out of the Great Hall to go and visit Hagrid, something they were painfully aware would become a far rarer and more difficult event in the not too distant future. Harry put his arm around Hermione's waist and pulled her in close to him as they walked. 'Fancy another walk around the Lake this evening?' he inquired, smiling suggestively down at her.

They had just passed through the open oaken doors of the castle when Hermione stopped at the top of the steps. 'Harry,' she chided him softly, 'why so impatient? Aren't I worth waiting for?' She looked at him coquettishly, fluttering her eyelashes, making light of the situation.

Harry's eyes met hers. 'Of course you are,' he told her in all seriousness and Hermione melted under the heat of that green gaze. Then Harry leaned down to whisper in her ear, ensuring none of the passers-by could hear him, the huskiness in his voice sending delicious shivers down Hermione's spine, 'But that doesn't mean I'm not going crazy here, thinking about you - about how you looked and *felt* last night by the Lake and about the way you kissed me-'

'Harry, *please!*' Hermione cried softly, images and sensations from the previous evening swirling in her head - *Oh, no! DLTs! Not NOW, standing here in bright daylight at the main entrance to the castle in full view of everyone!*

'You said that last night too...'

Hermione groaned. Then she stamped her foot, making Harry laugh. 'Harry, that's not fair! You're teasing me!'

'Feeling a little impatient, Miss Granger?' he asked, a definite *smirk* on his face.

Out of the blue, Hermione smiled sweetly at him as she said, 'Well, of course.'

He should've known better.

Harry smiled at her triumphantly, only to have the smile fade as Hermione continued, 'But then, you'd spoil your surprise.' Oh, Harry...

'Surprise?' repeated Harry, 'What surprise is that?'

He was beginning to sense *something*...

She'd thought it all out that morning as she'd showered and gotten ready for breakfast.

Putting her hand around the back of Harry's neck, Hermione drew his ear down to her mouth, her voice dropping to a low whisper as she said, 'Well now, it wouldn't be a surprise if I told you, would it? But I can't wait to give it to you.'

Hermione's hand slipped off Harry's neck and he straightened up, 'Give it to me?' he repeated, staring at her. It's about to hit him and he still doesn't see it...

Hermione had a wicked gleam in her eye.

'Yes, Harry, after the Ball, that's when I'll *give* it to you.'

Bullseye.

Oh, shit. If that wasn't a double meaning he didn't know what was.

Harry couldn't move. He simply stood and stared at her. FINALLY he gets it. *Holy shit! How does she do that to me?! From absolutely nothing to totally horny in a couple of sentences flat! And all the while she manages to look so bloody sweet and innocent, dammit!*

Hermione turned and started down the steps, looking back over her shoulder at Harry; she gave him that maddeningly innocent, sweet smile as she went, leaving Harry gaping after her, speechless.

That afternoon, Harry, Hermione, Ron and Luna once again visited the beech tree with afternoon tea packed in a picnic basket by a delighted Dobby who was so happy to see them, he tried to give them enough food for *ten* afternoon teas until Harry and Ron protested they'd need a herd of pack animals to carry it all.

Harry groaned as they packed away the leftovers from their feast. Dobby had still managed to fit in way more than they could possibly eat, even Ron. Harry groaned again. 'I am *so* full my stomach hurts,' he complained.

'You've nothing on Ron, Harry! I can't believe how much it takes to fill that bottomless pit he calls his stomach!' exclaimed Luna as she settled down, leaning back against the tree, her legs crossed so that Ron could comfortably put his head in her lap as he lay down.

'Can you believe it?' sighed Ron. 'For the rest of the week we have nothing better to do except enjoy ourselves, relax, eat, sleep in, snog, beat Ravenclaw at Quidditch,' he looked up at Luna, winking, 'do a little snogging...'

Luna smiled lazily down at him, 'Eating and snogging. Your two favourite things Ronald Weasley.'

'And Quidditch! What more could I want?' he laughed.

'It's a hard life, all right,' agreed Harry, also lying with his head in Hermione's lap as she absentmindedly ran her fingers through his hair which he was enjoying thoroughly. 'A little harder for us Quidditch players though, Ron, isn't it?'

Ron groaned. 'That's right,' he said as he remembered, 'no sleeping in tomorrow! Early Quidditch practise! Aye, aye, Captain!'

'And don't forget the late practise!' reminded Harry.

'Oh, well, it's worth it!' sighed Ron. 'To be in the team that not only contains the one and only Harry Potter but that also wins the Quidditch Cup is a great and wonderful thing!'

'Spare me!' cried Harry.

'By the way, Hermione,' Ron turned his head to look at her, 'have you managed to get anymore out of Ginny about that mysterious bloody boyfriend of hers?'

Hermione stiffened and she felt Harry do the same. Doing her utmost to sound offhand, Hermione replied, 'Actually Ron, I think it's blown over. I heard Ginny say yesterday that it wasn't working out.' At least that was the truth.

'Good!' said Ron, then he laughed. 'Too bad you snaffled Harry, Hermione - I used to think how great it'd be if he and Ginny got together!'

Harry rolled his eyes at Hermione and shook his head, laughing. 'Sorry Ron, it'd be a bit hard to snog the little sister of your best mate! You know what you're like!'

'Too true,' said Ron.

'We went and saw Hagrid this morning,' threw in Hermione, wanting to steer the conversation away from Ginny and boyfriends. She sighed. 'I'm going to miss him terribly when we leave.'

'Miss *him*, yeah, but not his bloody stroat sandwiches and that brown tar he insists on calling toffee!' cried Ron, making them all laugh. 'Actually,' he continued, 'how about we go see him now?'

'A perfect idea, Ron; you can walk off some of that food,' said Luna.

'Yeah, make room for dinner!' he replied as they stood up.

'You go,' said Hermione, 'I really must write to my parents. I promised them one last letter before the end of the week.'

'I'll walk back with Hermione and take the basket back,' said Harry, standing up and brushing himself off, then holding out his hand to Hermione to help her up. 'We saw him this morning, anyway. Tell him we'll come again tomorrow though; we have to make the most of it while we can.'

As Ron and Luna walked hand in hand towards Hagrid's hut, Harry and Hermione headed back to the castle.

Hermione gave Harry a worried look, 'I haven't given Ginny a thought all day! I got such a start when Ron asked about her like that.'

Harry squeezed her hand gently. 'Neither have I, so don't worry. We still have the rest of the week.' Looking down at her, he thought how adorable she was. 'You look very kissable right now,' he told her.

Hermione smiled up at him. 'So, you'll have to kiss me soon, then, won't you?'

'That's a promise!' he replied as they went up the steps and walked through the Entrance Hall, turning right and heading for the door to the kitchen. Suddenly, Harry muttered, 'Speak of the devil!' as Ginny came flying down the marble staircase, giving them a quick wave as she ran past them and out the door. 'I wonder where the hell she's in such a hurry to get to?' he said to Hermione, a slight frown on his face.

* * * * *

Outside, Ginny stopped, poised at the top of the stairs; she looked around as though checking to see the coast was clear, then headed for the forest, giving Hagrid's hut a wide berth. She tried to walk nonchalantly despite the fact that her heart was beating wildly and she felt as though she was having trouble breathing. As she reached the shadow of the trees, she spotted him, leaning against a huge, old oak just inside the perimeter of the forest. When he saw her, he straightened up and looked directly at her, waiting. She walked slowly towards him, unable to tear her eyes away from his tall, lean form. When she reached him, he said nothing. He simply enfolded her in his arms and kissed her passionately. Ginny held him tightly, drowning in the kiss, wanting only this, only *him*... When they finally parted, Ginny pulled herself right away, shaking her head violently when he made a move to take her back into the circle of his arms. Her voice sounded strangled as she spoke.

'Draco, I've given this a lot of thought and I won't be going to the Ball with you.'

He groaned, stepping towards her, his hands outstretched. She stepped back to avoid the contact she knew would cause her defences to instantly crumble.

'Ginny, *please*,' his voice a hoarse whisper, 'I want you with me, you *know* you want to be with me, don't deny it!'

'I'm not denying anything, Draco. But what I - *we* - want, is not possible. You *know* that and *you* can't deny knowing *that*!'

He fell back against the tree, crossing his arms tightly, his head dropping. He looked so defeated it

wrenched at her heart and she went to him, putting her small hands on each side of his face to lift it so that their eyes met as she spoke softly, 'Draco, you know what I'm saying makes sense. There is not one person either of us knows who would even *consider* the idea of you and I having a relationship. You *know* that! It's out of the question! You leave here in a week to take up a life *I* don't even want to *begin* to imagine so it has to end *here, now!*'

She dropped her hands and stood there as he slowly nodded. 'I know you're right,' his voice an anguished whisper, 'it is impossible, truly impossible. But that doesn't stop me from wanting it - *you...*'

In a swift movement, before she could escape, he pulled her back into his arms and crushed his lips against hers. She was powerless to resist and let her body mould to his, her arms holding him with desperation, knowing this would be the last time...

* * * * *

As they left the kitchen, the green door handle once again becoming a huge green pear, Harry noticed how quiet and deserted the stone corridor seemed and instead of walking back towards the Entrance Hall, he turned and swung Hermione around so that her back was against the wall. He leaned against her and by resting his forearms on the wall each side of her head he managed to get *very* close. Just one kiss wouldn't hurt and he *had* promised her he'd kiss her soon, hadn't he?

'Harry, what - ?' She got no further. Harry covered her mouth with his as he instinctively pushed his slowly growing hardness into the soft firmness of her stomach, achingly aware of the feel of her breasts against his chest. Hermione felt her legs tremble a little. *She'd never be able to resist him when he could do this to her so easily - with just a kiss. But, oh shit, what a kiss! And the feel of him so hard up against her...* Hermione groaned and wrapped her arms around Harry, responding to the feel of him pressed into her by slowly rolling her hips. The effect this had on Harry was electric. His hands clenched themselves into tight fists, every muscle in his body was tense, every instinct screaming for release, yet he lifted his mouth from Hermione's who then made a soft noise, like a whimper, 'Harry, *please*, don't stop,' she begged him. She had no idea the effort it took him not to do as she asked.

Holy shit - how stupid to start this when he knew how it would end - with a massive hard-on and an equally massive bout of frustration!

'I'm sorry, Hermione. I shouldn't've done that,' he managed, 'to you *or* me!'

He pushed against the wall with his hands to separate their bodies, breathing rapidly as though he'd just been running. Hermione felt as though she wouldn't be able to remain standing without the support of his body pressed against hers but she managed it somehow.

'Holy Merlin, Harry, you can do that to me *anytime!*' she told him, her eyes looking directly into his.

Harry gave her a lopsided grin, 'Don't tempt me, Hermione - one thing I can guarantee is that next time you beg me not to stop, I won't.'

Hermione put off writing to her parents until later that night as she and Harry decided the remaining daylight was too good to waste indoors and spent the time until dinner outside, walking and chatting to others who were doing the same. After they returned from the Great Hall, they followed their usual routine whereby Harry and Ron played chess and Hermione read. Ron went to bed a little earlier than usual, 'Can't afford to be late for Quidditch practise, now can I? Got no excuses sleeping in the same bloody dorm as the team captain!'

A while later, Hermione sat up and stretched as she put down her quill. 'There, done!' she announced, rolling up the parchment and sealing it. That should keep her parents happy until she saw them again in a week's time. She was sitting at one of the small tables in the common room, Harry not far away in

one of the squashy arm chairs, reading "Quidditch Through The Ages" for the umpteenth time; his favourite chapter was Chapter Four, "The Arrival of the Golden Snitch". He wondered what it would have been like to chase a *real* bird, the model for the Snitch, known as the Golden Snidget. Probably easier to catch than it's modern counterpart he thought.

'Not reading that *again* are you Harry?' she inquired in a rather exasperated voice. 'I could give you *heaps* of different books to read if you're interested!'

Harry smiled indulgently. 'It's all right, Hermione. This suits me fine, don't worry. I've done enough "serious" reading in the last seven years to last me for a long time!'

Hermione, having gotten up with the intention of walking up to the Owlery with her letter, bent over and kissed Harry on the cheek. 'Don't want to read, eh? Well, I never could resist a sexy air-head!' she mocked as she danced out of reach of his grasping hands. She ran for the portrait hole, almost making it through before Harry reached her - grabbing hold of her robes and pulling her back, both of them ending up leaning against the wall and trying to catch their breath after laughing.

Harry, still puffing a little, managed to say, 'Let me come with you - I can say hello to Hedwig while we're there.'

'All right,' Hermione agreed, 'but NO funny business Harry Potter, or else!'

Harry managed an injured look before they climbed through the portrait hole. 'We sexy air-heads have feelings, you know!' he told her.

As the portrait swung shut, the Fat Lady gave an exaggerated sigh and rolled her eyes at them. 'I suppose,' she said, huffing, 'you aren't going to be long tonight either, are you?'

'Not at all!' promised Harry

'We're just ducking up to the Owlery to send a letter,' put in Hermione, smiling despite herself. The Fat Lady sniffed loudly. 'We'll see,' she muttered, 'we'll see...'

They actually made it to the Owlery and back, Harry having seen Hedwig and Hermione having seen her letter safely on it's way to her parents, without any 'hanky panky' as Ron sometimes called it (to everyone's great amusement.) As they reached the portrait hole ('My, my, *very* surprising and *very* impressive!' remarked the Fat Lady, eyeing the timepiece pinned to her bodice).

Harry complained the walk had woken him up and he needed something like a hot chocolate to make him feel sleepy again. So saying, they settled themselves in the lounge before the remains of the fire and Hermione conjured two mugs of hot chocolate for them. Harry was extremely impressed. 'Now *that*,' he said, 'is an impressive spell!' Hermione, understandably, looked a tiny bit smug as she sipped her hot chocolate. They were sitting, both holding their steaming mugs, their legs stretched out in front of them to the warmth of the fire, a lovely, sleepy feeling creeping over them.

'Mmm, we'll have to go soon or we'll fall asleep right here and freeze to death when the fire's gone out,' commented Hermione, sitting up and putting her empty mug on the floor. Harry followed suit, but then as he turned to look at Hermione, he felt a sudden, upsurge of desire... a desire to touch her, and hold her, and kiss her...

As she stood, Hermione looked down at Harry, still sitting on the edge of the lounge, her eyes widening as she caught the intensity of his gaze. He stood too, bringing his hands to rest ever-so-gently on each side of her face. He moved himself closer to her and instinctively she hooked her arms behind his, placing the flat of her hands on his back, pressing herself tightly against him.

'Hermione...' his voice was nothing less than a husky whisper.

'Harry, we really should go up to bed...'

'Now *there's* an idea,' said Harry, a smile in his voice.

Hermione gently shook her head, smiling. 'Just kiss me goodnight Harry and then I'm going.'

'That's what we sexy air-heads do best,' he told her as he did just that.

* * * * *

The next day, Hermione was determined to speak to Ginny, all the more so because Ginny had seemed so *sad* at breakfast that morning (which hopefully meant that things weren't going well with Malfoy).

After a gruelling, early morning session on the Quidditch pitch, Harry had showered and changed and then he and Hermione had gone to have some morning tea with Hagrid. Coming back from their visit, they'd seen Ginny heading up the marble staircase. Being fairly certain she was heading back to their common room, Hermione told Harry she'd meet him in the Great Hall later and ran to catch up with her. As soon as she was within earshot, she called out to Ginny who stopped and turned, giving Hermione a small smile as she came up beside her.

'Hi, Ginny. Going back to the common room?' Hermione asked.

Ginny nodded. Hermione noticed her eyes looked a little red, as though she'd been crying.

'Me too. I'll come with you,' said Hermione, falling in step with her.

The path to the portrait hole was basically deserted as most of the students, if not in the Library or Great Hall, were outside enjoying the beautiful weather. Hermione decided it was now or never.

'Ginny, I need to ask you something. It's a little personal but your answer is *very* important.'

Ginny gave Hermione a puzzled look and shrugged lightly as she said, 'Ask away.'

'Well, you know this boyfriend we've all been wondering about,' Ginny nodded so Hermione continued, 'are you still seeing him?'

Ginny stopped and turned to Hermione, frowning.

'Why do you ask?'

Hermione sounded rather desperate as she said, 'Ginny, *please*, you *have* to trust me - I hate saying that, but it's true - *please* just tell me, are you still seeing him?'

Tears rose in Ginny's eyes, spilling silently down her cheeks. She shook her head, unable to speak.

Hermione pulled her into a hug, her heart breaking for her friend. 'It's for the best, Ginny, you know it's for the best,' she murmured.

Ginny pulled away, wiping at her tears with her hands, staring at Hermione. 'What makes you say that?' she demanded, sniffing.

Hermione leaned forward to whisper; even though there was no one around she just couldn't say it out loud: 'Because we both know that you and Draco Malfoy would *never* have a future. It's completely impossible.'

Ginny's mouth dropped open as she gaped at Hermione.

Hermione put her arm around Ginny's shoulders, steering her in the direction of the portrait hole.

'Come on Ginny, let's go talk,' she told her.

Early that evening at dinner, Ron and Harry were eating as quickly as they could as they had to get to Quidditch practise. Between mouthfuls, Ron asked Hermione if she knew where Ginny was as it wasn't

like her to miss dinner. Hermione had her story ready. She told Ron Ginny hadn't been feeling well that afternoon and she'd taken her up to see Madam Pomfrey who had given Ginny a potion, sending her to bed for the rest of the day.

'Hope she feels better tomorrow, it's not like Ginny to get sick,' he said when Hermione finished.

'I'm sure she will, Ron, don't worry,' said Harry, although he knew what the real problem was. Hermione had filled him in when she'd finally made it to the Great Hall to meet him as they'd arranged. He'd spent the afternoon, while Ginny and Hermione were talking, playing chess with Neville, Ron being busy with Luna. He told Hermione he wondered why Ron kept playing him when he always won because that's what it was like playing Neville - who was definitely no whiz at chess - and Harry found it a little tedious *knowing* he was going to win.

Hermione looked in on Ginny before she went to bed, pleased to find her sleeping peacefully. She'd been reassured by the talk earlier with Ginny - knowing that Ginny had called it off with Malfoy. Once he was gone from Hogwarts, Ginny would be able to spend the holidays getting over him and return to a Malfoy-free Hogwarts in September, although it seemed it could take a little longer than she thought for Ginny to put Malfoy behind her; she hadn't realised, until that afternoon, just how deep their feelings ran for each other. She shuddered. Draco Malfoy. What the hell was Ginny thinking?

* * * * *

The next few days passed in a blissful summer haze. With no homework, no study, no *classes!* -the seventh-years felt their holidays were already in full swing. Ron and Harry really didn't even mind all the Quidditch practice and when the morning of the final match dawned, it was with a cloudless sky that held the promise of yet another perfect summer's day.

As it was, there was not a teacher or a student left in the castle when the match between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw commenced at eleven o'clock that Wednesday morning. Even Filch, along with the dreaded Mrs Norris, his cat, were to be seen skulking at the back of the Slytherin stand.

The Gryffindors could taste victory before the game had even started and the air of excitement surrounding them in the stands was almost tangible - after all, they had the best Seeker Hogwarts had seen for many a year: Harry Potter. And this was his last year at Hogwarts. And he was captain of the team. How else could he go out except with a win? Plus, the other member of the "dream team" as Snape had once sneeringly dubbed them, was Goal Keeper, Ron Weasley. Double trouble for the opposing team now that Ron had found his goal keeping feet.

Hermione couldn't sit still; she was beside herself with excitement. She, Neville and Ginny had made a banner that they hung across the front of their stand:

GRYFFINDOR WILL WIN!

POTTER + WEASLEY = THE QUIDDITCH CUP!

As Madam Hooch blew her whistle and released the Quaffle, signifying the start of the match, the crowd rose as one to its feet, the roar almost deafening. Luna had forsaken her fellow Ravenclaws this day to be with Hermione, Neville and Ginny, barracking for Ron. After all, he was *far more* important than a mere *game* she'd informed her housemates. The Creeveys were madly snapping away until one of the teachers put a silencing charm on their cameras because they were so distracting.

Hermione couldn't remember the game in a coherent fashion; she remembered covering her ears as Hagrid roared his approval behind her when Gryffindor scored first; then Neville picking her up and shaking her as though she was a salt dispenser when Ron, as Gryffindor Goal Keeper, stopped the Ravenclaws from scoring their first attempt at goal. But always, every second, she knew exactly where

Harry was. He made her heart stop while he made it sing; her breath was trapped in her throat as he flew around the pitch, always at breakneck speed, looking for the elusive Snitch. He was in his natural element and it showed.

Nearly three-quarters of an hour into the match, the score was Gryffindor 70, Ravenclaw 40. Then Harry saw the Snitch. Hermione knew the moment he spotted it. She'd been watching him for so many years she was an expert on Harry's Seeking. Her heart was in her throat. It wasn't even beating. She wasn't breathing. Time stopped. Only Harry moved. He was a blur, hurtling directly towards the ground, his right hand outstretched. The Ravenclaw Seeker was too far away to stand a chance. If Hermione had been capable of making a sound, it would have been nothing more than a whimper. It was the same every time she watched him play Quidditch. Her thoughts were just a jumble. *Harry. Oh, God. Please. Get it. Pull up. Catch it. Stop. Oh, God. Harry. Stop. Catch it. Please. Harry. Harry!* It was as though some strange mantra was running through her head, independent of her own thoughts.

Then he had it. His fist was raised in victory as he rose up through them all, a look of total triumph evident on his face. Hermione could hear nothing but whether it was because of her own scream of victory or the noise of the whole crowd, she couldn't say. She didn't care. He'd won. Gryffindor had won. He was part of Hogwarts history and not just because he was Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, but because he was one of the best Seekers Gryffindor and Hogwarts had ever seen. And this was his last Quidditch game at his beloved Hogwarts. *How marvellous it would be if Fred and George were here to celebrate with them! She never thought she'd miss the pranks those two would pull, but at times like this she did!*

The whole Gryffindor team flew to hover ecstatically in front of the stand, waving and yelling, sending their supporters into a total frenzy. Harry, with his unerring skill, stopped right in front of Hermione in the first row, his right hand clutching his broom, his left arm encircling her small waist as he leaned over and pulled her out of the stand and onto his broom in front of him, totally oblivious to the jealousy this created in many of those watching.

Hermione threw her arms around Harry's neck in sheer fright even though his arm was still tightly holding her on the broom in front of him. She couldn't help herself because, despite her terror, she was more elated than she remembered ever being before in her whole life and she kissed him. They were both grinning madly as their lips separated.

'Harry!' she called above the noise of the crowd, 'I love you! You're brilliant - no, wonderful! No, wait - you're PERFECT!' She threw her head back and laughed, joining in the chant that had been taken up in the background: *"Har-ry! Har-ry! Har-ry!"*

The whole crowd, not just the Gryffindors, took up the chant. Except the Slytherins, of course, who would never join in such a thing.

Harry waited until Hermione was looking at him again. 'Hermione,' and although he was smiling he sounded solemn, 'I dedicate this moment to *you* and when I get a chance, I'll also dedicate it to Ron as my other saviour. Without the two of you - either of you - I wouldn't be here today.'

The youngest, most famous and infamous Seeker in a century, saviour of the wizard world (lining up for a second bite at that particular cherry), landed with the rest of his team, his heart filled with pride in his team; the girl he loved had her arms around him, kissing his face wherever she could reach it. He made sure he congratulated each and every one of his team mates, shaking their hands and drawing them into a one-armed hug, he and Ron hugging the hardest and longest of all, Hermione crying with joy between them. It was a wonderful, memorable day, guaranteed to make everyone present smile when they thought of it. Except, of course, for the Slytherins.

That evening, after a rather raucous dinner in the Great Hall with the awarding of the Cup by the

Headmaster, Gryffindor Tower was awash with Butterbeer and Fire Whisky - and Gillywater for the younger years - because ALL Gryffindors, first-years and up, were included in the celebration. By eleven o'clock, all but the sixth and seventh-years were herded up to their dormitories and a small measure of calm descended upon the common room. Within an hour, most of the remaining students had either left for quieter and more private spots or gone to bed themselves. Harry, Ron and Hermione were in their customary spot before the fire, happily exhausted from the days' exertions and celebrations. Hermione was lying between her two friends, her head in Harry's lap.

'Now it's just the Ball to go and...' began Hermione.

'And we leave Hogwarts, never again to return as students,' finished Harry.

'Fully fledged, adult wizards,' added Ron.

Hermione pretended to clear her throat in a very loud manner.

'Oh, yeah! Sorry Hermione!' said Ron, turning to smile at her, 'Fully fledged adult wizards and *witch!* Can't forget the "baby" of our little trio!'

Hermione groaned, rolling her eyes.

'Actually, he's right, isn't he?' put in Harry.

'Rub it in, rub it in! Thanks you two!' she exclaimed.

'Nothing wrong with being the "baby" of the group Hermione,' said Ron, totally enjoying himself.

Picking up a wrapped sweet from the dish on the floor beside the lounge, Hermione threw it with startling accuracy, hitting Ron on the side of the head, causing her to double up with laughter as he shot her a look of amazement. Harry couldn't help but laugh either and Ron eventually stopped trying to pretend to be injured and laughed as well.

Then Harry remembered what he'd told Hermione earlier.

'Ron, I told Hermione this just after we won today and I haven't had a chance to say it to you. Just between the three of us, I dedicated our win today to you and Hermione because you're both my saviours. And as I said to Hermione, without you, or her, I wouldn't be here today. Thanks, mate.'

'Fair's fair,' replied Ron gruffly. 'We wouldn't be here without you either!'

The three of them laughed, each grabbing a Butterbeer to make the toast official.

'To us!' they cried, then fell about laughing.

* * * * *

In the Great Hall at dinner time the following Friday night, Professor Dumbledore asked that all seventh-years and any sixth-year partners remain behind when the meal was finished. Luna walked over to the Gryffindor table to meet up with Ron and they all waited until the Hall was empty of all but those students specified by the Headmaster.

When Professor Dumbledore, standing behind the teachers' table, stood and cleared his throat, the room quietened immediately. He smiled at them all, the trademark twinkle in his eye, then said, 'Tomorrow night's Ball is all organised which I'm sure you are pleased to hear. You will each be given your own, personalised invitation tonight without which you will not be able to attend the Ball so I would advise you not to lose it. All other information you require is on the parchment accompanying your invitation. The invitations are bewitched so that only the person whose name appears on them is able to read and use them. The same goes for the parchment containing all other instructions. This is to ensure that those students below sixth and seventh-years do not know the details of the Ball and so, avoid spoiling their

enjoyment of their own Graduation Ball when the time comes. Please make sure you have your parchments before you leave the Hall. It's not something you would want to miss, I'm sure,' he finished, smiling graciously.

Ron and Luna decided to go to the Astronomy Tower to read their parchments so they could do it together. Harry and Hermione decided to join them as they knew the common room would still be full of younger students for many hours yet and they didn't want to wait that long before reading their own invitations.

They sat outside because it was such a mild, beautiful night, each breaking the seal on their invitations, Harry using his wand for the *Lumos* spell so they could see to read. The invitation was straight forward and had their names on it as Dumbledore had said it would, but it was the instructions they were interested in. They explained that a long-held tradition to maximise the enjoyment of the Ball for those yet to reach seventh-year, was that no one below the seventh-year (except their sixth-year partners) would know any details about it. Luna's instructions contained a small vial which she was to drink at the end of the evening, so that she would actually forget all details of the Ball until the night of her own Graduation Ball when she would remember everything.

'No wonder we never heard about it from anyone,' commented Harry.

'It's all rather ingenious, isn't it?' said Hermione. The instructions went on to say that at seven o'clock on Saturday evening they were to sit on their beds, dressed and ready for the Ball, holding their invitations. Any sixth-years would have to join a seventh-year; Luna said she'd be going to Padma Patil's dormitory. Each invitation was a Portkey and so each student would be transported to the location where the Ball was being held at seven o'clock. They would be arriving, the instructions continued, in an Antechamber where their invitations would be kept as they were also a Portkey to return to the castle and also it would give partners time to find each other before proceeding into the Ballroom.

Once everyone was in the main Ballroom, you could leave at anytime by simply returning to the Antechamber and picking up your invitation, although everyone was warned not to do this unless they had no wish to return to the Ball as it wouldn't be possible once they'd left. The Ball would end at one o'clock in the morning and - to everyone's delight - this was the one night of the year when the Hogwarts feared and hated caretaker, Argus Filch, would NOT be prowling the corridors, although he always grumbled mightily about this. They would be transported back to the Great Hall and from there they would then have to make their own way back to their dormitories. Eventually.

'Quite simple, really,' said Luna as she rolled up her parchment.

'I can't wait!' exclaimed Hermione. Harry shot her a look that made her smile sweetly at him. She knew he was thinking about her "surprise" and that it was driving him crazy. *No crazier than he's driving me, though - he really doesn't realise what he does to me. One day, I might tell him about my DLTs.* She giggled, feeling very happy and excited - and full of anticipation. It was going to be a wonderful night!

Chapter Six

The day of the Ball dawned fine and clear. Hermione woke and stretched, smiling and thinking about that night... about the Ball itself of course, but also, *afterwards... Harry. Sweet Merlin but she wanted him SO badly! The fear she'd felt the night by the Lake had long since passed and although she had no doubt she'd probably feel a little nervous, she was no longer afraid. In fact, she thought impatiently, running her hands down over her own body; how would it feel when Harry did this... or this... or touched her here... or - dear God tonight seemed such a long time away! She hoped she'd look lovely for Harry... that he wouldn't change his mind - no, not possible! Her "surprise" she'd been teasing him about was really no more than speaking to their Divination Teacher, Firenze, to make sure he didn't mind her "visiting" his classroom after the Ball; he told her he didn't mind at all as he'd be attending the Ball and was staying with Hagrid afterwards. He asked no questions for which Hermione was grateful. Her thoughts returned to Harry. Tonight would be their first time. She felt butterflies take flight in her stomach then felt the heat gathering between her legs and the tension in her lower stomach as she thought of Harry lying on top of her; that hardness pressing into her stomach, making her want to spread her legs and... oh shit, it was going to be a LONG day.*

Harry woke slowly, aware he felt hungry and - *wait a minute! This was THE day! He lay perfectly still, now fully awake and suddenly filled with anticipation, nervousness and awe. Would he and Hermione REALLY make love after the Ball? All the little moments from the last few weeks seemed to be vying for a place in his head, all at once: Hermione saying she'd go to the Ball with him; Hermione telling Ron that of COURSE she fancied Harry; that first kiss in Hogsmeade and Hermione asking him to do it again; that night by the Lake... so much had happened - Hermione saying yes, she wanted him - that thinking about him made her wet! The indescribable feeling of her breast in his hand - how it felt to have her beneath him - Oh shit! He should know better than that by now - thinking like this always gave him a raging hard on, although since he'd woken up with one it just made him harder and even more uncomfortable and then came the memory of Hermione's sweet smile as she told him she couldn't wait to give it to him... He closed his eyes and reached over to his bedside table for his wand.*

Hermione made it to the Great Hall for breakfast first, although Harry and Ron arrived only ten minutes later. Ron filled his plate and excused himself as he wanted to go and sit with Luna.

Hermione was sipping her tea as Harry filled his plate with eggs, bacon and sausages.

'How was your morning?' she asked him, an unfamiliar sense of strangeness washing over her. It really did feel rather peculiar sitting here, sipping tea, Harry eating breakfast when all that she was really interested in thinking about was... *Making love. With Harry. Having sex. With Harry. Harry. And knowing that's just what she'd be doing that night. This was beyond DLTs!* She closed her eyes, putting her elbows on the table and bringing her forehead forward to rest on her cup which she was holding with both hands.

'Hermione, are you all right?' asked Harry, concerned.

'I will be Harry, I will be.' She turned her head and looked at him, 'After tonight, I'll be fine. I think I'm just suffering a severe case of sexual frustration.'

Harry's knife and fork fell to his plate with a clatter, his eyes widening as he stared, unblinking, at Hermione. A strangled, 'What?' was the only sound he could make.

Hermione smiled apologetically. 'Sorry, I don't suppose that sounds very ladylike, does it? But I thought it was better than "horny" or "randy". Harry, close your mouth, it's not a pretty sight.'

Harry closed his mouth. *Only Hermione, he thought, could sit at the breakfast table, sipping tea,*

discussing how horny and randy she felt. Shit. Why the hell hadn't he put his robes on this morning? Now he'd have to wait until he didn't look as though he'd stuffed a basket of the bread rolls off the table down his jeans before he could leave. She'd never cease to amaze him. Or make him hard.

'Hermione,' Harry smiled at her with a wicked gleam in his eyes, 'you have my permission to say whatever you want to and I promise I won't think you're unladylike and anytime you want your "sexual frustration" taken care of, just let me know, okay?'

'You can be sure of that,' she told him, an equally wicked gleam in her shining brown eyes.

That afternoon, the girls disappeared at about three o'clock to "get ready".

'How is it they need four hours to get ready?' complained Ron, 'FOUR hours! It's bloody ridiculous!'

He and Harry were playing chess in the common room.

Harry shrugged by way of reply. 'What does it matter? They'll look great and they'll be happy so I don't mind.' Harry remembered something then. 'By the way, why do you actually keep playing me when you always win?' he asked Ron.

Ron grinned at him. 'Well, you're the second best player after me and you always put up a good fight so it's not too boring.'

Harry grinned back him. 'Good to know.'

Harry and Ron went up at six o'clock to get ready. As they showered, Ron asked Harry what he and Hermione were planning on doing after the Ball. Harry felt his stomach suddenly become a butterfly farm.

'Actually, I wasn't sure whether we should walk 'round the Lake again or maybe...' *Maybe what?* he thought to himself. *The Room of Requirement? He hadn't actually thought it out, but probably...* 'The Room of Requirement - I think that might be the better option,' he finished.

'Woh!' whistled Ron. 'Serious happenings, eh?' There was a tinge of jealousy in his voice.

Harry busied himself rinsing shampoo out of his hair so Ron wouldn't see how embarrassed he felt. His head was so full of what he and Hermione were planning on doing that night he hadn't even stopped to consider that Ron was probably only talking about snogging and nothing more.

'It's just a little more private, that's all,' he mumbled. 'What about you and Luna?'

'Our favourite spot,' said Ron, 'the Astronomy Tower. Beautiful view too!'

As they dried off, Ron asked Harry, 'D'you think the girls'll like our get up?'

'Yep. I told Hermione I was wearing a black tux with my dress robes and she just about swooned. Dunno what it is about girls and tuxes.' He pulled on his shirt, doing up the buttons.

'Luna wanted to know what colour I was wearing so she could match,' said Ron. He shook his head, smiling. 'Only a girl would think of that!' He pulled on his midnight blue waistcoat.

As they stood side by side in front of the mirror, making sure their ties were straight they smiled at each other.

'Last night at Hogwarts. Can't believe it,' said Ron.

'Me either,' replied Harry. 'It's sort of good and bad, isn't it?'

'Yeah. Well mate, we look bloody great, so let's go get 'em!'

The five dorm mates - Harry, Ron, Dean, Seamus and Neville - all shook hands, wishing each other a

great night before sitting on their beds, holding their invitations waiting for the seconds until seven o'clock to pass.

* * * * *

The Antechamber was full of the sound of chatter, giggles, laughter and people calling out to one another. It was rather crowded which made it a little difficult to quickly find someone in particular. Arranging to make sure they sat at the same table later, Harry and Ron separated, looking for the girls. Ron found Luna first. She wore her blonde hair down, but she'd curled it; she'd applied light, flattering make up and was wearing a beautiful, midnight blue, satin evening dress with shoestring straps made of tiny imitation diamonds. It was close fitting, flaring out just before it reached the floor. She carried a matching wrap and evening purse. Ron's heart hammered in his chest as he approached her.

'You look *beautiful!*' he told her, awe and admiration fighting for supremacy in his eyes. Luna smiled dreamily up at him, bringing her hand up to softly touch his cheek. 'So do you,' she told him.

Harry spotted Hermione first. She was standing to the left of the doors that he thought must lead into the Ballroom itself. She was obviously looking for him, but while she was looking to her left, he was approaching from her right. As he got closer and could see her properly, his steps faltered. He had no words to describe how she looked. Her hair was piled softly on top of her head, with a number of soft curls falling to frame her face and trailing down her neck. She had tiny diamonds in her ears and a fine gold chain around her neck. Her face seemed to glow, her slightly parted lips softly coloured and shining. As he took in her dress, Harry could feel that familiar tension rising; she wore a simple black, strapless dress in some soft, shimmery fabric that clung to every curve down to her hips from where it fell straight to the floor. She was clutching a small, black evening purse made of the same material as her dress. Her soft, pale skin shimmered against the gown, making her look as though she was lit from within. He had to get to her. He started to walk again and she turned at that moment, the most beautiful smile he'd ever seen appearing on her face when she saw him. Then, as she took in his appearance he saw her eyes darken with an intensity of feeling. And he knew full well what that feeling was because it was also coursing through him. When he reached her, he took her free hand and brought it to his lips.

'Hermione, you look exquisite. And you are beautiful. You can't begin to imagine how I feel, knowing you're here with *me.*'

With Harry's lips on the back of her hand igniting a fire that coursed through every vein, Hermione was flooded with sensations. Harry was looking at her with such intense desire she felt her breath catch in her throat; his words caused her pulse to race, but mostly, her knees still felt weak from the impact of her first sight of him as he'd been walking towards her. She had thought he looked magnificent in the black tuxedo, his black silk dress robes, lined with the deepest green, gently rippling out behind him as he walked towards her.

At that moment, Professor Dumbledore appeared through the tall, carved wooden doors which seemed to open of their own accord. Hermione turned to look at Dumbledore, Harry standing directly behind her, his left hand sitting possessively on her waist. He wondered fleetingly what perfume she was wearing - it smelt quite intoxicating.

Then Dumbledore spoke, telling them they could enter the Ballroom, making sure they left their invitations in the large, decorative cauldrons provided for that purpose each side of the doors. They could sit where they pleased and in half an hour, he would address them all again. He turned and walked into the Ballroom, a stream of students following in his wake.

Harry kept his arm firmly around Hermione's waist, at the same time looking around for Ron and Luna. Luckily, Ron was quite tall and his red hair was easy to see in the distance. Harry and Hermione headed in his direction and when they reached them, they all seated themselves at one of the round tables

situated on the edge of what was obviously the dance floor.

Each of the thirty plus round tables in the room sat eight and Harry and Hermione, Ron and Luna were joined by Neville and Lavender and Seamus and Parvati.

The dance floor was a huge oval with a stage, also oval shaped, situated in the centre on which was the large table (oval, of course!), no doubt for the teachers. The customary floating candles lit the Ballroom, throwing shadows on the walls which were draped in a soft, silvery fabric, interspersed at regular intervals with long oval mirrors, reflecting the candles and multiplying their glow a thousandfold. The ceiling, as in the Great Hall, was bewitched to look like the sky outside... or was it? Was that in actual fact the sky outside? It was hard to say. There was a small parchment at each seat which gave the menu and drink choices. You simply needed, they read, to tell your plate or glass what it was you wished to eat or drink.

Once everyone was seated and had a drink, Dumbledore rose to his feet and by simply raising his hands, an action visible to everyone, he achieved quiet.

'Thank you,' he said. 'I will refrain from boring you with the many stories of the past seven years as you are all probably quite familiar with them since they would be about you. My hope is that you all go forward to the future of your choice. I speak for all your teachers when I say that, as always, it has been a joy to have each of you here at Hogwarts and you will be sorely missed. One last matter: I wish to make a personal toast to Mr Harry Potter for his unfailing bravery and endeavours on behalf of all of us who wish to rid the world of Lord Voldemort. He has yet to meet our common foe for the last time but my faith in him is unshakeable and I truly believe he will prevail, no doubt with a little help from his friends whom I also honour: Miss Hermione Granger and Mr Ronald Weasley. Of everything you have all done that has made me proud, he has given me my proudest moments and I honour him. Thank you, Harry.' Dumbledore raised his glass to Harry who was sitting, stunned, looking at the smiling headmaster.

There was a sound of hundreds of chairs being pushed back as everyone stood to join in Dumbledore's toast, then the sound of those hundreds of voices saying in unison, 'Thank you, Harry.' Dumbledore's eyes twinkled with amusement as he saw that even the Slytherins, forced by common courtesy, stood, although many of them did not actually raise their glass.

'And now, let's eat!' called out Dumbledore, a huge grin on his face.

Harry turned to look at Hermione, the stunned expression still in place. Hermione smiled at him, then leaned forward and kissed him. 'What he said is true Harry; you can't know how proud I am to be your friend.' From the other side of Hermione, Ron leaned forward and winked at Harry. 'Ditto, mate,' he said with grin. 'Now let's eat!'

Harry laughed. 'Trust Ron to bring things into perspective!'

Both Harry and Hermione couldn't have told anyone what they ate. They knew it was delicious, but they were so caught up in the excitement of the night and the sea of anticipation in which they were swimming they noticed little else. Conversation flowed easily around and across the tables.

Hermione was sitting on Harry's right side, his arm resting on the back of her chair. Harry told his glass he'd like some Butterbeer and also ordered some for Hermione, earning himself a grateful smile and a kiss on the cheek. He objected.

'What was that?' he demanded.

'A kiss,' she replied.

'No, it wasn't,' replied Harry, '*this* is a kiss,' and so saying, he turned towards her and putting his hand

under Hermione's chin to tilt her face up to his, he bent down to kiss her slowly and sensually, gently probing with his tongue until she opened her mouth with a barely audible groan. Harry's hand slipped effortlessly around to the nape of Hermione's neck so she couldn't move, enabling him to hold her mouth hostage. As they finally moved apart, Harry smiled against Hermione's soft lips, 'Charlie was right, snogging *is* allowed.' Hermione had no idea what he was talking about and right now, with his lips on hers, she didn't care.

Then they heard it. It started out as a few soft notes, floating on the air... it grew slowly louder and table by table everyone stopped to listen and work out where the music was coming from. Then someone looked up and everyone followed suit. There was a huge, psychedelic rug descending slowly from the sky.

'Dumbledore must've pulled a few strings to get that in here!' exclaimed Hermione. It was at that moment that Harry realised where they were and thought he'd have to tell Hermione as soon as possible once the rug had landed. The rug, however, did not land. It hovered. It came to rest above the teachers' table and the musicians on it smiled and waved at their captive audience. It was the latest popular wizard rock group, The Grinning Spoons. Their audience clapped and cheered then sat back to wait and see what would happen next.

The floating candles suddenly took on all the hues of the rainbow so that coloured light was thrown around the Ballroom in a random display.

The Grinning Spoons left behind the soft notes played for their entrance and launched into their signature heavy rock. The dance floor was quickly filled with dancing witches and wizards, many quickly discarding their robes, jackets and ties. The teachers' table seemed untouched by the noise and they looked as though they were holding a normal conversation. Harry surmised there was no doubt some kind of silencing charm around them. Borrowing Ron's expression he smiled and thought, "Bloody brilliant!"

Then his attention immediately returned to Hermione who was dancing *very* closely despite the fact that the huge dance floor afforded plenty of room for all. Harry, too busy with his own feelings, was totally unaware of the effect he was having on Hermione. Hermione was also not thinking about her effect on Harry as she was too busy being aware of Harry - in his black pants, with the top two undone buttons on his white shirt which made her want to undo more; the muscular forearms exposed by the rolled up sleeves and those incredible green eyes boring into hers.

After a good twenty minutes of fabulous rock, the band switched to a slower, softer song, the melody inviting couples to get close, very close, and move slowly...

With Hermione's arms around his neck and his around her waist, her body moulded to his, Harry whispered into her ear, 'Do you know where we are?'

Hermione turned her head so that she could kiss Harry. 'Where are we?' she asked him as she pulled away, her tone implying that she really didn't give a damn as long as Harry was holding her, and kissing her.

Harry smiled indulgently. For some reason that he wasn't going to bother about right now, he felt somehow powerful and supremely masculine, full of confidence. Probably all Hermione's fault, he laughed to himself. 'It's the Quidditch pitch,' he told her.

'What?' said Hermione, throwing back her head and looking up at Harry.

'This, the Ballroom - it's the Quidditch pitch. Look at the shape. And the size. And the sky above it. Dumbledore and the other teachers must have done some truly amazing magic to get it to look like this. It's the perfect setting. Not too far away - big - yet close.'

'Just like you,' she whispered.

'Jesus, Hermione,' he groaned quietly into her ear, 'do you know what you're doing to me?' he asked in an anguished voice.

'Oh yes! Precisely the same thing you're doing to me,' came the reply.

He looked down at her. 'Why don't we separate, circulate and say thank you and good night and so on and so forth and then meet over by the Antechamber doors in about half an hour?'

'See you there,' said Hermione with a look that compelled him to lean down and kiss her once more...

As they passed through the throng in opposite directions they smiled and waved, chatted and laughed. Hermione felt as though she'd seen every Gryffindor in the place and she probably had because as she got to the outer edge of the crowd, she found herself standing momentarily alone. Until Draco Malfoy appeared at her side.

'Ms Granger, good evening.'

Hermione looked up, barely able to believe Malfoy had actually been civil.

'What do you want?' she asked abruptly.

Malfoy seemed to radiate some sort of aura which Hermione found unpleasant and disturbing.

'Momentary civility would be greatly appreciated.'

Hermione was taken aback. There was no sarcasm in his voice - it held only a tone of neutral politeness.

'You may find it hard to believe, but I would like to thank you.' Malfoy said.

Hermione had to suppress a very strong urge to laugh in his face. 'What for?' she managed, using the same neutral tone as he had.

'That night, you remember? In the Potions classroom?'

How could she forget?

* * * * *

She'd stood outside the classroom, frozen in shock. She'd heard Malfoy practically pleading with someone to reconsider something. Then she'd heard Ginny's voice, carrying clearly. 'Draco, if we are to be together it can only be like this - hidden, in secret - always being careful not to let anyone see what we mean to each other and I don't think I can live like that!' Malfoy had replied by telling Ginny he would find a way, some how, for them to be together..

Hermione heard Ginny say that she had to go - that it would be suspicious if she was missing for too long - and Hermione had quickly moved away from the door, flattening herself against the wall in the shadows, praying she wouldn't be seen. Ginny had left without seeing her because she'd come out of the room and turned immediately to go in the opposite direction. Before she could make any attempt at getting away, however, Malfoy had come out of the room, turning straight towards her, immediately freezing when he saw her standing there, a look of horror and disbelief on her face.

'What the hell are you doing here, Mudblood?' he'd demanded harshly, his fists clenched by his side, his voice angry.

Hermione felt her anger clear her mind. 'I actually came to retrieve something I left here during today's class. Believe me, if I knew I was going to intrude on your pathetic little tryst I'd never have come anywhere near the place!'

Malfoy dropped his head, rubbing his forehead with his hand as though he felt pain. He looked up at her, frowning slightly, a speculative look in his eyes. His demeanour suddenly seemed to change as he gave her a half smile.

'Sorry, Granger. You just caught me off-guard.'

Hermione just gaped at him. She thought she heard Malfoy apologise, but surely that wasn't possible, was it?

'Listen, Granger, I've got an idea. I've been thinking about the Ball and who I'm going to take. I don't want to ask any of the girls in my house because they seem to think it constitutes some sort of long term commitment. What if you come to the Ball with me - no, wait!' he said, holding up his hand as though to say "stop" on seeing the look of incredulity on Hermione's face, 'it would only be for appearances although I imagine we'd be the talk of the night - it would create quite a sensation!'

Hermione was speechless. All emotion had fled except pure astonishment. She could think of nothing to say.

'Well?' he raised an eyebrow, looking down at her with those pale, bloodless eyes.

Hermione shook her head. 'You are joking, of course,' she managed.

'Actually, Granger, no. His eyes raked her from head to foot and back again. 'You know, you're quite presentable these days... for a Mudblood.'

Hermione was stung into speech. 'And why aren't you taking your *girlfriend*? What's wrong with Ginny? Doesn't she want to be seen with you, Malfoy?' Hermione couldn't help herself. She smirked at him, even as she groaned inwardly. *Dammit! Don't sink to his level!*

Hermione had trouble believing her eyes. Malfoy actually *slumped!* If she didn't know better, she'd say he looked downright dejected! Holy shit!

'I did ask her, but she said she'd have to think about it.' His voice was low and quiet and - was she dreaming? - *surely that couldn't be hurt in his voice!*

He raised his pale eyes, looking directly into Hermione's eyes. 'Forget I said anything. I had a crazy notion that you could ask Potter to take Ginny so she wouldn't miss out or some such thing, then you could come with me but once we're there, we could just sort of swap partners. There wouldn't be as many repercussions if you came with me, rather than Ginny. I thought something like this might convince her to come... but it's madness, really.'

'You're right about that. You are mad. You're completely crazy.'

Malfoy sighed, 'You're probably right.'

'You're that desperate to get her there?' Hermione had asked in total disbelief.

Malfoy simply looked at her. 'Forget it. Do me a favour, and forget we even had this conversation.'

'No one would believe me if I told them, anyway!' exclaimed Hermione still reeling from the shock of being asked to the Ball, for whatever reasons, by *Draco Malfoy!*

* * * * *

'I remember,' Hermione told him. 'What about it?'

'What I want to thank you for is not saying anything, to anyone, about it.'

'I said I wouldn't tell anyone and I didn't. End of story.' Hermione cringed inside. She just couldn't bring herself to say, "You're welcome" or "Anytime!" to Draco Malfoy. He gave her a half smile and moved

away. She felt a sense of unreality. She'd have no trouble keeping all this to herself because she didn't feel as though it had really happened. Who would?

As she finally walked away, Hermione very quickly found herself next to the tall doors that lead to the Antechamber. And Harry was there, waiting for her.

'Great timing!' he said as he reached out to put his hands on her waist, pulling her to him. She was all he'd thought about for the last half hour. 'Jesus, Hermione, you look *amazing!*' he told her.

Hermione smiled at him but then, no doubt due to the encounter she'd just had with Malfoy, she felt the need to ask Harry something. She wrapped her arms around his neck so that she could whisper in his ear, making sure no one else could hear her. 'Harry, you know that whole thing with Ginny and... well, you know! You don't feel guilty not telling Ron about it?' As she drew back to look at him, Harry frowned. 'Well, I guess it's because I know what it'd do to Ron - and what Malfoy would do to Ron when Ron went after him, which he would!' Harry grinned ruefully at Hermione. 'I think if Ginny hadn't called it all off things would've been different but now it's as though nothing truly happened. And I don't think I could bear to be the one to tell Ron something that would hurt him so much.'

Hermione nodded. He'd put into words almost exactly how she felt for not telling *him* all the details of that night outside the Potions classroom.

'Speaking of telling people things,' continued Harry, 'who the hell was it that asked you to the Ball first?'

Hermione laughed, shaking off the strangeness she'd felt brought on by her encounter with Malfoy.

'Oh, if you must know! It was Draco Malfoy!' There! She'd told him! And she knew he wouldn't believe her...

Harry through back his head and laughed. '*Very* funny Hermione! Draco Malfoy knows I'd hex him six ways to hell if he so much as laid a finger on you!'

Hermione shrugged, still smiling.

'By the way, Mr Potter, you look *really... um...*'

'Really *what?*' asked Harry, forgetting about everything but Hermione.

Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *Sweet Merlin, Harry, you look so amazing and gorgeous and sexy and I can't wait to rip that adorable tux off you and there's no way I'm saying all of that to you here in public!*

Her eyes said it all though, and as she slowly opened them and looked at Harry he pulled her closer and dropped his head to kiss her. Hermione's arms wound around his neck, holding him there.

'Oi! What is it with you two and kissing in public? Jeez!'

Harry and Hermione parted, laughing, having recognised Ron's voice.

'Impeccable timing, as usual, Ron,' said Harry.

'For most things,' said Luna with a smile; she was standing next to Ron, their hands clasped.

Ron smiled down at Luna.

'Well, we're leaving,' he said, 'what about you two?'

'Doing the same,' said Harry, putting his jacket back on and throwing his robes over his arm. 'Let's go before the rush starts.'

So the four of them entered the Antechamber together, pulling their wands out and saying, "Accio

Invitation!" and each of their invitations flew out of the cauldrons towards them. As soon as they took hold of them, they were instantly transported back to the Great Hall. The house tables had disappeared and except for a few scattered couples, the Hall was empty, only the roaring fire places giving any life to the room.

Ron took Luna's hand and started walking out, 'Off to the Astronomy Tower!' he called as he and Luna both waved to Harry and Hermione.

Harry and Hermione turned at the same time to face each other.

'Hermione-'

'Harry-'

They spoke at the same time and laughed at themselves.

Hermione put a finger to her lips and one to Harry's, 'Sssh.'

'Now, listen, Harry. My surprise is where we're going next... I have to admit I was teasing you a little that day!' and taking his hand, she led him out of the Hall and along the opposite corridor to Classroom 11. Harry felt distinctly puzzled until Hermione opened the door and they walked into the Divination classroom.

As they stood inside the door, hands clasped, Harry took in the sight of the forest clearing he'd become familiar with over the last couple of years; the ceiling was moonlit with stars twinkling softly. In the centre of the clearing was a large, white, soft looking rug with a couple of plump pillows and a picnic basket that Harry would've bet his life on had been packed by Dobby.

Harry looked at Hermione. 'Firenze?' was all he said.

'Staying with Hagrid,' replied Hermione. 'They're apparently working on tactics for some sort of reconciliation with Firenze's herd. I already cleared this with him.'

Harry looked suitably impressed. Hermione closed the door and put a locking charm on it.

'Come on,' she said, pulling Harry towards the rug.

Once they were standing at the edge of the rug. Hermione kicked off her shoes; Harry had already dropped his robes and jacket beside the rug and after seeing Hermione, he also kicked off his shoes and removed his socks, thinking how good the soft grass felt beneath his feet. Then he pulled her to him and kissed her, his tongue sweeping into her mouth. Hermione pressed herself against him as hard as she could, enjoying the feel of his arousal pressing into her stomach and instinctively rolling her hips against him, causing Harry to groan.

Hermione pulled away and pushed down on Harry's shoulders, 'Lie down for me,' she whispered, so he lowered himself to the rug, although he remained propped up on one elbow, looking up at Hermione and before he had too much time to wonder what she was up to he found out.

Hermione took a couple of small steps backwards so that Harry could see her clearly and he watched as her eyes travelled down his body to the telltale bulge in his pants; he saw her unconsciously lick her lips and his eyes closed with the force of the feelings brought on by that one small act. He heard the distinct sound of a zipper opening and his eyes flew open to see Hermione pulling down the zipper situated in the side seam of her dress. Then the beautiful black dress was pooled around her feet and Harry thought he was going to pass out. Hermione was standing before him in nothing but some tiny, black, lace panties and a matching, strapless bra. Harry thought she looked breathtaking, then she lifted both her arms to undo the clasp on her gold necklace causing what was, to Harry, the most fascinating movement in her breasts.

Hermione stepped out of her discarded dress, dropping the necklace on top of it, dropping slowly to her knees, then sitting to the side, her right arm supporting her, her free hand caressing Harry's face.

Harry sat up and running his hands up her arms, over her shoulders and then into her hair, he found the pins she'd used to secure her hair and slowly drew them out, her hair cascading around her shoulders. Hermione reached up and removed Harry's glasses, carefully tossing them to lie on the dress, Harry doing the same with her hair pins; then cupping his hand around her neck, he pulled Hermione towards him and kissed her with potent urgency, his tongue immediately invading her mouth. He pressed his body against hers so that she lay down, his lips not leaving hers, his free hand running slowly down her body, passing over her breast, down the smooth, flat expanse of her stomach, coming to rest on that black, lacy triangle and pressing gently. This made Hermione automatically arch her back so that she was pressed more firmly against Harry's hand at the same time groaning wantonly into Harry's mouth. Harry knew then that *not* ripping both their clothes off in that instant and plunging himself into Hermione was going to be the hardest thing he'd ever done.

His voice hoarse with pure lust, he whispered against her lips, 'Hermione, I can't last much longer here - and there's something I want to do, but I need you to take the rest of your clothes off.'

Hermione was only too happy to do as he asked - she'd never imagined it was possible to feel so much downright *lust* for someone - her whole body felt on fire. After she'd wiggled out of her panties and expertly undone her bra in one movement as a only a woman can do, she lay back down, suddenly feeling a tinge of shyness as Harry's eyes raked over her naked body. He was breathing heavily as he brought his eyes back to hers, 'You look bloody amazing - perfect - just incredible!' he rasped out, his free hand cupping her face as he bent down to kiss her again with a passion that was driving Hermione crazy. She ran her hand down the firm length of Harry's body until she encountered his erection, then rubbed her hand up and down over it, thinking of finally having that hardness thrust into her, groaning at the thought. Her actions were causing Harry to pull away from the kiss - what she was doing was robbing him of all sense - he was so close to coming that it was agonising for him to take Hermione's wrist and pull her hand away but he had to do it.

'Don't you like that?' said Hermione in a throaty whisper, smiling seductively at Harry, knowing full well the effect it was having on him; she was finding that she *loved* driving Harry crazy, bringing him to the brink of losing control - it was a definite turn-on!

'Oh, hell yes!' he said with feeling, 'but another couple of seconds Hermione and I would've lost it and first I want to do this for you...' his voice trailed off and Hermione involuntarily arched her back as Harry's hand ran up the outside of her thigh then across to the small triangle of curls, delving gently, moving his finger slowly until he felt it - that swollen little nub that when he gently rubbed it with his thumb caused Hermione to cry out and Harry discovered that seeing Hermione like this - because of him - was in danger of making him totally lose it again. Keeping the pressure on, Harry slowly inserted a finger into Hermione, then a second one. He watched her face as he did so and was rewarded with a shuddering sigh and a soft, husky, 'Oh, my God Harry - that feels unbelievable!' Hermione had one arm around Harry's shoulders and her free hand sliding into his hair to pull him down to her - '*Faster Harry!*' she whispered before she kissed him, thrusting her tongue into his mouth. Harry did as she asked and suddenly Hermione was no longer kissing him, she'd thrown her head back, arching her body as her orgasm tore through her, wave after wave of ecstasy washing over her. As it subsided and her breathing and pulse began their return to normal, she smiled at Harry, her eyes shining.

'That was totally incredible,' she told him softly.

'I'm glad,' he told her, then bent to kiss her, starting slowly, taking his time before he gently ran his tongue across her lips and then slowly sweeping it into her mouth, loving the taste and feel of her. Then he slowly drew his mouth away and began kissing her neck, down and across her soft shoulder, then

down again, now using his tongue which he ran lightly up the rise of her breast to the erect nipple which he first carefully nipped with his teeth before pulling it into his mouth and sucking - Hermione giving little gasps as each kiss and lick caused delicious sensations to shoot throughout her body.

Hermione once again slid her hand into Harry's hair to gently pull his head up; her eyes widened and she drew her breath in sharply when their eyes met and she saw the depth of his lust for in his. 'Harry, please, I want you inside me, *please!*'

Harry gently laid her down and then stood up, pulling out his shirt and undoing the buttons, his eyes not leaving Hermione who lay there and looked at him, thinking how incredibly *hot* it made her feel to be lying there, watching him do this... thinking about what was going to happen very soon... she stretched her arms above her head, feeling incredibly sexy and wanton as Harry pulled off his shirt and tossed it aside before undoing his pants and kicking them off to stand there, down to a pair of black briefs. Hermione felt her heart rate increase dramatically, her breathing become fast and shallow, their eyes locked and Harry bent down to remove his briefs. Hermione had to look so she dropped her eyes which immediately widened as they reached Harry's straining erection. As Harry knelt down beside her, she raised her eyes to his once more and to his consternation, he once again saw a flicker of fear in their brown depths. He lay down beside her, resting on his elbow, his free hand framing her face. 'Hermione, what's wrong?' he asked, his voice low.

She closed her eyes, then opened them slowly before answering, 'I know it's probably a little late for this, but... well -' her voice dropped to the merest whisper, 'are you *sure* something that big can fit inside me?'

Harry gave her a tender smile, leaning down to kiss her. 'You were made for me Hermione - we were made for each other. There's nothing to worry about.' Hermione smiled at him, reassured, and then he felt her hand once again travelling down his body and his head snapped back, his breath escaping in a hiss when he felt her fingers curl around his length.

'You feel amazing, Harry. It's so hard and yet the skin is so soft all at the same time.' Then her hand travelled down further, her fingers spreading over his balls and a soft, "Oh!" escaping her lips.

Harry groaned loudly and rolled onto Hermione, his weight pushing her legs apart to accommodate him. He kept his weight on his forearms, his hands tangled in the hair on each side of Hermione's head. Hermione put her arms around Harry's waist, bending her knees and crossing her ankles on top of Harry's legs. They looked at each other; they were both well aware of the *theory* of what they were about to do but the reality was very different because the reality was so full of feelings and sensations and desire and needs...

'Harry,' Hermione whispered, 'make love to me. I want to watch you come this time.'

Harry groaned again at her words, then dropped his head to kiss her; the feel of her naked body beneath him and her hands running down his back and over his butt driving him to the next step. He moved until he could feel the soft, warm, wetness he was craving, then pushing... Hermione gasped and Harry stopped. *He was going to do this as slowly as possible if it killed him and he thought it might. God, she felt unbelievable!* He lifted his head to look at her as he pushed a little more. *Oh, Christ! She was so tight!*

Another push. Another gasp. Then Hermione tilted her hips up and Harry went deeper again. He saw her bite her lip, her eyes closing at the same time as he felt himself come up against her internal barrier. He didn't move until she opened her eyes and seeing the question in his eyes, she whispered, 'Now!' and he covered her mouth with his as he made the final thrust. He felt her stiffen, her nails digging into his back as she convulsively clutched him. He continued to kiss her until he felt the first signs of relaxation in her body and only then did he take his mouth from hers. She had tears in her eyes but her

mouth was curved in a small smile. He kept perfectly still. 'Are you all right?' he asked.

'Oh, yes - and I think it's starting to feel, um,' Hermione made a slight movement with her hips that made Harry cry out hoarsely, 'nice. In fact, better than nice...' And it was. Hermione was amazed by the fact that the initial shock of pain had passed so quickly and the feel of Harry inside her was even better than she'd ever imagined. She smiled to herself. *Now she really had some great material for those DLTs!*

But right now she wanted to see Harry come, to feel that incredible ecstasy she'd felt.

She brought her legs further up Harry's body, ankles locked, watching his face as she did so. Harry's eyes were closed and his teeth were clenched with the effort of *not* thrusting; and when Hermione moved her legs, taking him even deeper he cried out her name as though in anguish.

She took his face in her hands and spoke softly against his lips, 'Harry, I want you to move, I want to feel you, *now* - I want you to come for me.' Using her legs, she pulled him hard against her until he was buried in her to the hilt and then no longer able to help himself, Harry started pumping, faster and faster, He'd been so close for so long, that it took no time at all for him to finally explode in ecstasy, crying out Hermione's name. Hermione felt exultant, watching him, feeling the heat of his release inside her, seeing him enjoying that same incredible rapture he'd given her.

Harry collapsed, barely able to hold himself off her. Hermione brushed his hair out of his eyes, kissing every part of his face she could reach. When he could finally speak, he smiled down at her, his voice full of tenderness, 'Hermione, I will never forget this night as long as I live.' He kissed her softly on the lips. 'And I love you more than you'll ever know.'

'Oh, Harry! You know I feel the same... I love you *so* very much...' she replied, kissing him back.

Harry rolled slowly onto his back, holding Hermione against him as he moved so that she ended up on top of him with his arms wrapped around her. 'That's better,' he told her, 'you're much lighter than me.'

Hermione sighed as she rested her head on Harry's chest, listening to the steady sound of his heartbeat.

They were both starting to feel rather sleepy so Hermione rolled down to snuggle up next to Harry, her head resting on his chest as he pulled the blanket over to cover them. Harry kissed the top of Hermione's head. 'Good night, my love,' he whispered and she smiled, already thinking about waking up the next morning, next to Harry, both of them naked...

* * * * *

In the Headmaster's office, Dumbledore was enjoying a last cup of tea before retiring. He had before him on his desk a map that somewhat resembled the Marauders' Map in Harry's possession, although this one was far more intricate and detailed. He liked to make sure, after each Graduation Ball, that the students in his care were all safe. This year had presented no problems although he did feel a deep concern when he saw that Draco Malfoy and Ginny Weasley were to be seen together just inside the Forbidden Forest. He'd have to keep an eye on that situation.

A warm, satisfied smile broke out on his face as he looked once again at the two names showing in the Divination Classroom: Harry Potter and Hermione Granger. As it should be.

FINIS