

The Trapeze Swinger

by fallingconsciously

Forced into a position of power following the Final Battle, Hermione and Harry struggle to regain order in the now reckless world of wizarding kind. Hermione is at a loss, physically exhausted from her endless expectations and duties, and emotionally deserted, from the after effects of the war and her personal battles. From there, she accidentally stumbles upon a situation that ultimately, and quite literally, transports her from the world that is slowly starting to slip from her fingertips and into one that proves to be impossible to stay in... and, as time wears on, even more impossible to leave.

Grace

Chapter 1 of 2

Forced into a position of power following the Final Battle, Hermione and Harry struggle to regain order in the now reckless world of wizarding kind. Hermione is at a loss, physically exhausted from her endless expectations and duties, and emotionally deserted, from the after effects of the war and her personal battles. From there, she accidentally stumbles upon a situation that ultimately, and quite literally, transports her from the world that is slowly starting to slip from her fingertips and into one that proves to be impossible to stay in... and, as time wears on, even more impossible to leave.

It was her new alarm clock. They were always precisely on time, standing outside her window at six a.m. sharp, each crying out the mantra, *"Long live Harry Potter!"*, until it became a thunderous roar. She could always ignore the first hundred or so.

Every morning she'd find her way to the kitchen, her hair pulled back into a severe, unforgiving bun at the nape of her neck, with her work robes in shades of grey and stiffly ironed. She would find Harry already sitting there, a faraway look on his face and a hot cup of coffee in his hands.

"Morning, Hermione," he'd say as she helped herself to a cuppa.

"Morning, Harry," would be the generic reply as she took her seat. They sat together in silence until they could no longer postpone the inevitable.

Every morning they'd leave the house at a quarter to eight. Before the door could even be closed behind them, they'd find themselves swarmed and separated in the endless crowd. Hermione would avoid the prying eyes and lecherous hands, fighting her silent fight through the ocean of people.

She'd always be the first out. If it took him longer than fifteen minutes, she'd go on without him. The Ministry had to open, and she was the only one, save for Harry, who could do it.

There would always seem to be an innumerable amount of people standing and waiting outside the gates. Every morning she couldn't help but approach with dread, knowing she would have to spend another ten minutes, at least, outside and under the bounds of the suffocating gratitude of the Wizarding Community.

She then meticulously checked each and every Ministry employee via potions, spells, and pointed questioning for positive identification. It was the new dictum, forced upon Harry by the people. *No mistakes*. It was not a suggestion, but a threat. All she could do once she got inside the safe, solid four walls of her office was collapse.

In the beginning, she cried. Her body would wrack with powerful, uncontrollable shudders as she gasped and clutched her blotchy face. Her entire person would fill up with an overwhelming feeling of betrayal, and she'd sob until it was subdued.

Now, she just stared. There was a photo on her desk of her, Harry and Ron in fourth year, around the fire in the Gryffindor common room. She'd watch their miniature figures moving around until she became encased in the image, her fingers almost tingling with the heat of the fire. There was a rare moment in the picture where Ron cast a small glance at her out of the corner of his eye, his ears brightening to a shade of light puce.

Her mounds of paperwork would eventually call to her, broken only at midday when Harry would appear at her doorway, a procession of subordinates trailing along behind. Bless his heart; he'd always try to be polite as he shut the door in their eager faces.

"Tough day," he'd exhale, the lukewarm sunlight pouring through the window, reminding them it was barely even noon.

She'd look at him with barely registered eyes and steel herself as he went on to explain the new legislation the members of the revised Wizengamot had pitched and how they had managed to back him into a corner on this one, as well.

"Not that I know a good legislation from a bad one," he'd say quietly. "I'm not cut out for this."

Sitting down in a chair opposite Hermione, he'd run a hand through his messy black hair, a familiar action with newfound motive. She'd take his free hand and they would sit together, tense and exhausted, until that inevitable knock at the door would force them both to their feet again.

On this particular day, it had been the exalted Adjudicator of Wizarding Affairs, Henry Duke. The large, domineering man required Harry for a signature or two, which her friend did with obvious resignation, his eyes in a tight squint as he attempted to decipher the fine print. Hermione stood perched at his shoulder, much to the disdain of Duke. She could hardly comprehend the thought process of the public, unanimously appointing this emotionless thug of a man to overlook all Ministry Affairs. But that was how everything was done these days, through unopposed election, unless one dared face a revolt.

"It's all right," she whispered softly into Harry's ear, and he nodded slowly, signing his name in the spaces provided.

Duke turned to her next, requesting her assistance with certain logistics of the Polyjuice Potion. He barely looked at her as he spoke and turned to face Harry as soon as the last word had left his mouth.

"Nothing major, I assure you, Minister," he said to Harry, whose glazed look told them both he couldn't care less.

Still, Harry managed a bleak nod and wordlessly exited the office, giving Hermione only the briefest of kind glances before shutting the door behind him with an eerie silence.

"Miss Granger, I just want to be absolutely positive on the facts," he explained, clasping together his grubby sausage fingers. She did not meet the cold grey eyes sweeping her face. "Please, take a seat."

Hermione mused on the absurdity on asking someone to take a seat in their own office, but kept quiet, offering instead a polite smile as she sat.

Duke's eyes flashed around the small office. Anyone else would have been pacing but Duke stood completely still, the urge to move apparently absent. Even Hermione felt the powerful urge to twitch in the silence.

"Before operation goes ahead, I just want to be sure of the causes and effects," he explained slowly, his eyes now steady on her. The urge to twitch got stronger. Hermione pursed her lips, looking up and holding his gaze.

"Absolutely. I put together a brief overview last night." Hermione flicked her wand and a large, neatly packed brown folder appeared, a far cry from anything resembling brief. "It has any possible information you could require."

The question burned her throat, but she forced it down: Why on Earth was Duke asking about Polyjuice?

"This is greatly appreciated," he responded, taking the folder brusquely from her outstretched hand. Duke studied her with unwavering repentance for a long moment. "Would you care to join me in my office for a short moment?" Before Hermione had a chance to respond, the large, imposing man snapped his fingers and Hermione felt a nauseating pull at her navel before landing ungracefully on the floor of a completely different room, the walls still spinning around her.

Great sod, she thought with malice, trying to stand. She could hardly hide her contempt at this new practice of instant transportation within the Ministry; her own realm of thought pointed out that if Inner Ministry employees could access these teleports, presumably an infiltration could be possible at the hands of an appropriately skilled wizard. But of course, who would listen to her?

Duke's office was much smaller than Hermione's and most unjustly so. The space was crammed with boxes of paperwork and otherwise, and there was barely room for a desk and two chairs, which she took the liberty of placing herself in, not willing to hear his grating voice request it of her again.

He did not sit. His strong, protruding jaw seemed even more so as he towered over her, his eyes just meeting the top of her face. His features, in all, told quite a story they weren't unkind, but just as the man they foretold of a person who wasn't to be bothered. Despite his age, he had few signs of it, other than a growing bald patch amidst tight grey curls his expressions were mainly bland and expressionless, quite like the monotone range of his voice. But of course, the Wizarding Community didn't vote for him for his good looks and pretty voice; they voted for him because of his promises. They voted for him because he swore for protection and order; admittedly, the two things Duke knew how to do best.

"Miss Granger." His low voice snapped her out of her reverie. The formal address brought a ghost of a smile to her face. She hadn't heard herself referred to like that much since her Hogwarts days. His dark eyes glinted in the dim office light. He cast a swift glance at the folder of information still in his hands. "First, I must thank you for this. Again, the Wizarding Community owes you a debt." Hermione internally scoffed at the comment perhaps a little overdramatic?

"I hope you have been in well spirits and good health celebrating your newfound peace to the highest degree," he continued in an even duller tone. Hermione doubted it was pertinent she respond, so she offered a diminutive smile instead. "However, I have a very serious matter to discuss with you today. That is..." He paused momentarily, lacing his fingers over his chest. "There are questions being raised in concern to your dedication to your government."

"What?" Hermione snapped into acute focus. "That's... that's absolutely ridiculous."

"I'm sure it is, Miss Granger. However, a simple guarantee from myself and others alike will hardly stop people from talking. It is my duty to investigate the issue at hand to the lengthiest and deepest extent."

"Mr. Duke, I can assure you there is no need for investigation. As I said before, any such accusations are entirely ridiculous and unfounded. As you may fondly remember, Mr. Duke, I helped form this establishment." Her eyes pierced into his and for a moment she thought she saw distress.

It took a moment for her companion to respond. "As I am well aware. But perhaps you forget, Miss Granger, that this establishment was not formed from a single mind or a handful of minds, at that. The wizarding public have created this." He stood back and gestured grandly with one arm. "And they lead it to this very second. *That*," the word was enunciated with far too much meticulousness than Hermione could appreciate, "is where concerns have been raised."

A thousand different angry retorts raced through Hermione's mind. The man did not once let her out of his steely gaze. Hermione inhaled, full of emotion and spirit, but with her exhale found herself empty handed and appallingly defeated.

She sighed deeply, letting her eyes fall to the floor and dutifully examine floor patterns. Damn it, Hermione, where did your spirit go? "I can only hope then, that the questions can be put to rest by the declaration of my sincerest dedication." The words came out in a whisper, but she could feel the environment before her drastically changed. Duke seemed to exude pleasure.

Hermione felt tender and worn in the silence. She felt so oddly inferior to this man to whom she was... superior. In technical rankings, of course. He was clearly at least thirty years her senior. He was also a man who had spent years working as a lowly employee of the Ministry, the terms ambition and power prosperous youthful notions to him. In lieu of magical protection, and effectively destruction, he instead relied on a jaw-dropping knowledge of legal systems and all their compliances to hold his place of respect among his peers. A wizard by blood, he was truly a Muggle at heart; the man only used magic for efficiency.

Hermione had no idea how to deal with such a man. So instead she resigned herself to simple obedience. A sickening thought, no matter how much she tried to mollify it.

Not able to stand the prickling silence any longer, Hermione rose. "Everything you need is in there," she said with a nod to the folder, rising swiftly from her chair. "Excuse me."

The door was shut behind her before the man had a chance to respond. Directionless, she wandered through the corridors, her heart pounding nauseatingly in her throat. Her fingertips grazed the whitewashed walls as she walked on, the cool stone sending a chill up her arm. Her head buzzed with a million different thoughts, so loud she was certain every passerby could hear. A sickening sensation of panic filled her and her thoughts began to bellow, sending harsh vibrations throughout her skull. Her high collared robes became unbearable, and her forearms itched under the heavy grey fabric, tickling her barely healed marks of war.

Vivid flashbacks raged through her memory, and her heart flared open in the pressure cascading through her body. Every image she'd tucked away hoping to bury and forget burned in the forefront of her mind, shaking her entire body and throwing her into a state of pure defencelessness. Her breathing became rapid, and fear gripped her; she was surely going crazy. She was losing the one thing had she left...

"Hermione."

Her sanity.

"Hermione, I'm so glad I've found you."

She looked at him blankly, frozen in the midst of her panic attack.

"Do you have plans for dinner tonight? I tried calling stupid of me, really, you're always busy... of course you'd be here."

Hermione let out a little breath, closing her eyes for as long as she could get away with. The haunting images of Tonks, Remus, Fred and the rest of them slowly began to dissipate.

"How's Quidditch going, Ron?"

The redhead smiled sheepishly, looking positively jolly at her interest.

"Great, it's been going wonderfully. There's never been such a demand for the sport! You wouldn't believe how many autographs I've signed. It's bloody brilliant." He chewed his lip thoughtfully for a moment. "What about you? How's work? How's Harry? Odd, I feel like I never see you two anymore..."

He looked up at her with a genuine smile, and Hermione snapped. "Work? So glad you asked. It really is an honour to do this, Ron. Every day, getting that satisfaction of knowing we're really making a difference here by sitting around and agreeing to pass laws that are slowly turning our society into some kind of robotic colony. I mean, Merlin, just thinking about the good possibility that one day, maybe, we'll discover a potion that will turn everyone's brain to mush, so nothing bad could ever happen again is absolutely exhilarating! Forget the fact that we'll all be lying side by side on the floor fascinated by tile patterns and utterly satisfied with spending our whole lives as useless, unproductive invalids!"

Ron blinked at her, and Hermione could feel the anger slide off of her, pattering away to nothing. Why were her emotions so out of control?

Every inch of sunshine Ron had with him just moments ago turned to utter shite, and his ears were their familiar bright red.

"What is it with you? Every day, you've added another stick to all that kindling up your arse! Light a match and get over yourself. Smile for once!"

The comment stung, but she couldn't gather up the fury she had moments ago.

"You don't understand what we're going through," she said flatly.

"Then tell me!" he roared. A few people turned, taken aback.

"Ron, you're making a scene," she hissed through her teeth.

"I don't care!" His arms folded defensively.

Hermione just stared at her old schoolmate. When had they grown so far apart? When had they stopped being able to understand each other? How could he not feel... what she and Harry were feeling so powerfully?

"Hermione, why can't you just explain to me what's going on?" He looked at her, the way that had turned her legs to jelly just months ago. Back then, she would have broken down, spilled her heart out. But now all she saw, all she felt, was pity. He looked so young and confused.

"Ron," she began weakly, "if you can't feel this," she lowered her voice dramatically, aware of their public location, "then you can't understand."

His faced screwed into an expression of sheer incomprehension. "How do you know I don't feel what you feel?"

Hermione looked up, meeting his eyes for the first time in the entire encounter. They were blue and happy, just like they had always been. He moved a step closer, bridging the gap between them. She could smell that familiar smell: peppercorn, fresh mint, and something so distinctively Ron. His broad chest was inches away from her face, and she could feel his heat radiating off him like wildfire.

For a moment she almost gave into the comfort. Almost wrapped her arms around him like old times and let his embrace fix all her problems. But she took a step back, her heart still a slow, dull pound in her chest. She wasn't that easily mended anymore.

"I know, Ron, because you're still you." She gave him a half-hearted smile. "You're still okay." The corners of his eyes crinkled -- confused -- but they were full of hope. Hermione couldn't meet his gaze. "And, no, we're not on for dinner. I'm sorry Ron, but you deserve better than me."

"No, Hermione," Ron replied, glints of tears evident. "There's no one better than you. I get that you're... messed up right now, and I'll leave you alone if that's what you want. I... I love you, Hermione."

For a moment everything was suddenly crystal clear. Ron reached for her face, a long, freckly hand stroking her cheek. She gave herself to him, let his hand guide her head back and then slowly forwards for a soft kiss. His lips lingered on hers and her eyes closed, everything suddenly blank. Her hand touched the nape of his neck, immersing itself in his hair. She could smell him so strongly from the light sweat on his skin to all the pheromone reminders of his life their life at the Burrow.

She broke away mercilessly, tearing herself away with all the inner strength she possessed, otherwise she was sure she'd have remained in his embrace forever.

"Bye, Ron."

His voice was weak. "When will I see you again?"

Instead of answering, she turned her back to him and walked down the hallway.

Flawed Design

Chapter 2 of 2

Forced into a position of power following the Final Battle, Hermione and Harry struggle to regain order in the now reckless world of wizarding kind. Hermione is at a loss, physically exhausted from her endless expectations and duties, and emotionally deserted, from the after effects of the war and her personal battles. From there, she accidentally stumbles upon a situation that ultimately, and quite literally, transports her from the world that is slowly starting to slip from her fingertips and into one that proves to be impossible to stay in... and, as time wears on, even more impossible to leave.

"You don't have to do this."

Hermione could still remember the way Harry squirmed in his seat as he answered.

"No, we do, Professor. They won't have it any other way. It's what's right. My whole life I've been forced into a position of power... this isn't any different. And I think everyone knows that, that I won't abuse my position because I don't want to be Minister in the first place. Besides... I think it's what Dumbledore... what he intended." The words put a pained expression on his face. His fingers tapped on the arm of the chair, unable to sit still.

"Potter, you've done more than your fair share of self-sacrificing you too, Granger. You both need not take this on, especially not for the sake of others. The Wizarding community will get by, one way or another. We always have."

"It's different this time," Harry pointed out darkly.

McGonagall bowed her head, her fingers rubbing her deeply lined temple. "I don't think you understand how this could defeat you," she said quietly.

Though unbeknownst to her the true extent of McGonagall's words, Hermione had a nerve struck then. Her pulse pounded in her ears, as she looked fiercely into the eyes of her old teacher.

"Minerva," she said as confidently and neatly as she could. "We have to do this, and we will."

She could not remember a time when her professor's face looked as hopeless as it did then.

That was her last meeting with McGonagall. The biweekly tea they had for a few short months enjoyed so thoroughly dwindled away to nothing, losing touch with each other almost entirely. Hermione had pushed all thoughts of this loss, whatever the possible magnitude, out of her mind and out of her conscience.

So when she received the letter requesting a visit from her old Head of House, Hermione couldn't help but feel surprised. When she arrived, McGonagall had decided a walk in the garden would be more appropriate. The cool spring air rippled through her robes as they wandered through the gardens.

"How have you been?" McGonagall began, her eyes looking so weary and her face so drawn that Hermione felt inclined to ask the same of her.

Hermione pushed back a stray curl and drew her eyes over the variety of colourful blooms just beginning to wilt. "I've been well, thank you. And yourself?"

"Never mind me." McGonagall waved the question aside, as if her recently celebrated seventy-third birthday had instead been thirty-five. "I want to know about you."

The older witch's eyes narrowed, taking in every inch of Hermione, who tried to suppress a wince as she was vividly reminded of the many times as a student when she had been under quite a similar gaze.

McGonagall's impenetrable gaze seemed, at least, not to be soul-stripping. "You've cut your hair."

"It's easier to manage," Hermione replied politely, fighting the urge to reach out and touch her now chin-length pin curls. She bit her lips before the words, *"just don't have the energy anymore,"* slipped out.

"Ah. Quite understandable." McGonagall's eyes flicked up and down, surveying Hermione to no end. "It does show your years, my dear."

Hermione wasn't quite sure what to make of that. Instead, she let her eyes wander, drifting along the endless clear grey sky. It felt so close, almost captivating. The impulse to reach out her hand as high and far as she could was one she struggled to restrain.

"How is the potion coming along?"

Hermione jolted into focus, taking in a long breath of cool air to clear her mind. "The potion?"

"The Polyjuice Potion, of course." McGonagall stared at her flatly.

"Whatever are you talking about..." Hermione's brow furrowed, and her eyes met the professor's with a sudden suspicion. "We've only just begun... how on Earth could you know about that?"

If Hermione hadn't known better, she would have sworn there was a twinkle in the old woman's eye. "Hermione, you are not as stealthy as you might hope."

"Minerva, I assure you I made no pointed decision to keep this information from you, nor from any members of the Order. I was not aiming to be stealthy, as you put it," Hermione replied quickly, an edge to her voice she hadn't expected.

Whatever foolish notion of a twinkle that Hermione might have had vanished instantly as McGonagall's expression darkened, her observant eyes suddenly intruding. "Then, pray tell, what were you trying to achieve?"

"Absolutely nothing!" Hermione snapped, turning sharply to face McGonagall. "I deemed that particular information unimportant. It was merely a case of an inexperienced brewer attempting to expand his knowledge as he saw fit, given his new position and the tedious situation we are all currently living in. Knowledge is a weapon these days, as you should very well know."

Hermione's eyes flashed, and she paused for a moment, a sudden breeze pushing past her. "I don't know what information you received, or how you could have possibly received it, but I would have thought you held a little more trust in my judgement."

McGonagall no longer seemed to be watching her; instead her eyes were focused amusedly on something behind Hermione. In fact, Hermione noted with a start of indignation, it appeared very doubtful that the professor had been listening to her at all.

A slight smile fell upon the Headmistress' lips. It was shockingly close to smug, but somehow held a glimmer of respect; appreciation for something Hermione obviously failed to see or recognize. Their eyes met, and Hermione felt only further irritation in the woman's odd actions.

"Ah, now I see it," McGonagall murmured, her words soft. "There's a passion there that wasn't there before."

Hermione stared. It took her a moment to realize the professor was speaking of her.

"Well, the war changed us all," she fumbled heatedly, utterly lost.

"That it did, my child." The professor gave a long, tired sigh that seemed to shake her to the very bone. The smile, however, remained. "You must be strong, Hermione."

The only words Hermione could find were, "Could you excuse me for a moment?" A notion her feet seemed in eager agreement with. She did not pause for McGonagall's reply. She led herself blindly through puddles and shrubbery, increasing her pace as she reached the edge of the forest. Her thoughts were drowned out by her pounding heartbeat, and she collapsed on the trunk of a tree, panting for breath.

There were beads of fresh sweat on her face that she quickly brushed off, her breathing heavily laboured not from the exertion, but something else. Something that had been plaguing her for months now, that she couldn't quite put her finger on. Being a Muggle, she was well-read in all kinds of psychiatric disorders, and Post Traumatic Stress disorder seemed to fit perfectly, given her circumstances. But no, something in the back of Hermione's brain disagreed violently. Her entire body, in fact, seemed to scream in protest of this train of thought, and Hermione fell back hard against the torso of the tree.

If only she could steal away a moment where her thoughts were silent and her heartbeat steady. Perhaps then she could think she could make sense of it all. But even then, there would be her work at the Ministry slovenly and lonely, far below her aptitude. It was an insult working under Duke he treated her more as an obedient dog than an employee no, employer!

But what had she done to stop him, to put him in his place? Absolutely nothing. The war heroine had proved to be nothing more than a pathetic lapdog.

Her fingernails dug into the hard soil as another wave of panic swept over her, leaving her utterly exhausted. Her breath was raw and coming out in stiff gasps, but somehow she still heard it.

It was a soft, feminine voice. It struck Hermione as familiar, but distant all the same. Like some long lost acquaintance, perhaps, one she had been searching for all these years. A strange, warm blanket of comfort surrounded her, the eerie voice calling out over and over in her head.

"Hermione."

It called to her, so she rose to her feet. She let her feet guide her, and she broke into a run. The forest was getting deeper and darker, and she was only vaguely aware she was venturing into unknown territory.

It stuck out like a sore thumb. What must have been a very ordinary tree seemed to reach out to her, and she suddenly had the affirmation that she had gone the right way. She knelt at the base, the dark making it hard to see anything around her. She reached out a cautious hand, a strange fear overtaking her in the seconds before she touched it. But when she did, that ever so comforting warmth wrapped around her once again, making her forget it was a particularly chilly day in mid-October, and that she was deep into sparse, dark areas of the forest.

Hermione drew her wand. "*Lumos*," she whispered. Everything was illuminated. Her breath caught as she stared at the words engraved in the old tree, not understanding them, but lost in them.

"As you have never imagined... Love"

It felt like hours before she even thought of rising to her feet and Apparating home.

"Spoke with Ron today," Harry mentioned conversationally, pushing a particularly dismal batch of canned green peas around on his plate.

Hermione continued scrubbing dishes. The only sign that she gave that she even heard him was the excess force she was now putting into cleaning the plate in her hands.

"He invited me over for lunch," Harry persisted, unprompted. "At Grimmauld."

"Well, where else?"

"I don't know..." Harry took a small, unenthusiastic bite of his meat, chewing it with a look of minor disdain. "He says he finds it homey. Only no one comes around, anymore."

"Everyone's busy, Harry."

"I know that." Harry took another small bite, rubbing his temples as he slowly swallowed. "He can't help but miss his family."

With Bill and Fleur taking up a semi-permanent residence in France, Molly and Arthur shutting themselves up in the Burrow save for emergencies, Charlie back with his dragons, and Ginny completely absorbing herself in helping George get the joke shop back on its feet, he didn't have much of a family left. Suffice to say her and Harry weren't offering any support but how could he expect anything else? They were up to their eyeballs being responsible adults, instead of gallivanting around a Quidditch pitch, thinking all the world's a stage...

Hermione let out a slow breath, slowing her washing and allowing a pang of guilt to hit her. When she had started allowing herself to think such horrid things, she'd never know.

"I heard you had a few words with him at the Ministry." Harry's tone was flat. The topic seemed to be brought up purely in the favour of conversation. She snuck a glance

at him. He was staring blankly down at his food, his face drawn and pale, lined with worry and much too thin. He'd been looking roughly the same for the last five months.

"I've been having words with everybody lately, it seems." Hermione resumed her scrubbing, drawing out the process as she reached the very last dish.

"Really?" He didn't sound interested.

"I don't know what's come over me," she said, thinking of McGonagall.

"I see." She heard the clatter of dishes, and Harry's plate appeared beside her, barely touched. Hermione looked up at the man beside the plate, who was attempting to stifle a yawn.

"You should really make an effort with Ron," he muttered half-heartedly. "You two have barely spoken in weeks."

Hermione's eyes snapped up to Harry. "You really should make an effort with Ginny."

"Don't." His voice came out hoarsely. He didn't meet her gaze.

"Okay," she said after a moment, studying his hard expression. "I won't. I'm sorry."

Harry moved back, his palms pressed on his forehead as he let out an exhausted groan.

"Merlin," he muttered.

Hermione turned at the sound of a stopper being pulled out, forgetting about the dishes.

"Do you want to stay up with me for a while?" he asked, already collapsing back on the couch with a tumbler of Firewhisky in his hand.

She looked at the clock. It was nearly midnight. Surely, it was going to be one of those nights. Drawing a long breath, she poured herself a cup of lukewarm tea, wishing she hadn't brought up Ginny.

Her sleep had been, in a word, restless. Dawn broke much too soon, and as soon as the yellow sunlight fell upon her face, she woke, feeling as though she had hardly been asleep. At a quarter to six, with an hour or so to go before she absolutely must be up, she turned the clock round in a fit of irritation and covered her head with pillow, willing herself into a few more minutes of slumber.

Upon waking for the second time, only precious moments engulfed in sleep, she lay still, blankets pulled up to her chin, and stared at the ceiling. Her dreams had been obscure and unsettling, flashes of familiar and unwanted faces prodding her consciousness still even in wakefulness. Ron had been a recurring theme, his freckly, utterly unperturbed smile taunting her, driving her to a state of complete hopelessness. Her heart panged, and she blinked rapidly, as though pushing back tears that were not present. The boy she had loved so dearly for so long had never felt so strange, so distant. She could not grasp hold of him as he was now, but she still felt shrouded by the memories, so much more distinct and real than where they were now.

The most painful of all her recollections was the clearest in her mind; it still felt fresh and new. It was a memory that most would prize, recall with glee and warmth, but she felt cold as she drifted over it now in her mind. Her skin prickled as it drifted into the forefront of her thoughts, overtaking reality as her thoughts did so often now.

It had been her first time, and it had been awkward, to say the least. There had been a significant trace of punch drunk victory in the air, and it was against her better judgement that she allowed herself to be led into his bedroom. Their first kiss was still fresh on their breath as they clumsily let their hands travel to every place on the other that they had spent years fantasizing about. Their veins were filled to the brim with second-hand electricity, so they didn't search for passion in their fumbling advances. So much of what had happened was a jumbled memory in Hermione's mind. It seemed like everything had happened in a simple blink of an eye.

When it was over, Hermione had watched him sleep. Her own naked body was curled up in the corner, avoiding the moonlight that splashed onto the bed. She hadn't felt anything then; she could only remember watching him with a blank mind, catching murmurs of excitement still raging downstairs, assuring her that their absence was still unnoticed. Any exhilaration had been painfully drawn from her by that time, replaced only with a startling sensation of purely physical discomfort.

The next morning, neither could bear to meet the other's eyes. Hermione had wondered briefly if she had done something horribly, inexcusably wrong the night before. But, she reasoned, how on Earth would he know? He was just as inexperienced as she, if not more so. Hermione could hardly imagine that Ron and Lavender had gone much farther than undignified poking and prodding.

Ten days had passed before either of them finally worked up the gall to speak.

"Was it horrible?" Ron asked, coming to an uneasy stop before her one night in the library of Grimmauld Place.

"No," she replied, setting down her book. Ron could barely meet her eyes, and his flaming red ears were highly prominent. "But it wasn't good, I don't think."

"Oh." Ron made to sit in the armchair, but on a second thought spun on his ankle and started to pace, his hands wringing together forcefully. "Is this the sort of thing that takes ... err, practice?"

"Maybe," Hermione said softly, an unidentifiable feeling settling in the pit of her stomach.

With hesitation, he kissed her, and in a moment of blindness, Hermione began to wait. As he laid her down, his body grinding against hers for the second and incredibly vivid time, she had held her breath. It would come any moment, she was absolutely positive. She moaned when he kissed her neck because she knew it was coming. Her act of pleasure would be true in a moment, and the page would finally be turned to reveal the next, final chapter. The one where she lived happily ever after with the man she was destined to be with.

It was too late by the time she realized she was a naive fool. Her first time had been rushed, forgettable, and uncomfortable, but her second time had been complete agony.

So many years worth of yearning came to an abrupt halt that day. Everything she used to find extraordinary about Ron Weasley suddenly couldn't be more mundane. He wasn't spontaneous, he was forgetful. He wasn't creative, he was sloppy. Every exciting notion she had built up about Ron had come crashing down and try as she might, she couldn't pick up the pieces fast enough. A part of her was desperate to keep these quickly retreating feelings.

She couldn't understand how she could possibly have had a sudden change of heart after all these years. It simply wasn't logical. But every time he touched her, she had to make a forceful, conscious effort to not shrink away. Those long fingers would leave glossy sweat marks on her pale skin. They would press against her hips, her breasts, and the nape of her neck with such an aimless, unaware passion. He wouldn't reassure or encourage her to respond; in fact her involvement seemed entirely unnecessary. The depth of her revulsion made her stomach turn, and she could never remember dressing as fast as she did that day. The excuses she hurtled at him as she sped through the door were pathetic.

To go on pretending didn't seem like much of an option, but approaching him with a mouthful of, *You see, Ron, I'm just not attracted to you in the slightest anymore!* didn't seem particularly doable either.

There was a coward's way out and she took it. She hadn't spoken to him in three weeks before their encounter in the Ministry. As far as she might have shoved the whole affair into the back of her mind, Ron certainly hadn't forgotten about it.