

Once Upon A Time

by HBAR

Once upon a time, there was a lonely prince and princess who needed to be rescued from themselves. If only there were such a thing as magic ...

Not Your Everyday Princess, Still, A Princess Every Day

Chapter 1 of 3

Once upon a time, there was a lonely prince and princess who needed to be rescued from themselves. If only there were such a thing as magic ...

She was the only one in the waiting room, save a balding man draped over a chair in the corner. She passed the time by coming up with scenarios as to why he was snoozing in the waiting room at St. Mungo's at such an early hour. A middle-aged man in hospital uniform entered and approached her where she sat.

"I understand you're the grandmother," he said with a smile. He extended his hand and helped her off the couch. "I'm Healer Robinson, and I've spent a great deal of time working with your grandson."

"I hope he was nice to you," she said. At his look of disbelief she said, "I'm sorry; maybe that was in bad humor."

He shook his head. "No, of course not. Oftentimes, in this profession you have to either laugh or cry, and I personally prefer the former."

"I like you already. Are you single?"

He blushed and appeared flustered.

"I'm kidding. You'd never be able to keep up with me."

He laughed out loud and then offered her his arm. "Come with me, and we'll get his discharge papers in order. Incidentally, when you made the comment about him being nice, I didn't find it ill humor at all. I was simply wondering if the joke alluded to his infamous personality or the fact that he has been unresponsive for the last year."

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"I'm sorry, Miss Granger, but this institution has strict standards for money lending. You haven't had a job in ... well, ever. What is it that you've been doing?"

"I've been in school."

"And how have you supported yourself?"

"I was at boarding school. It was all-inclusive, paid for by my parents."

"Could you just borrow from them, then?"

"We are no longer in contact."

The loan officer started to speak, but she didn't allow him the chance.

"We had some ... issues, and they moved away. I haven't really spoken to them since."

Tears welled up in her eyes, and he patted her on the arm.

"I didn't mean to upset you. It's just that you have no collateral, no references, nothing to go on. You seem like a very nice young lady, but ..."

She stood and collected her purse. "I understand. Thank you for your time."

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Hermione entered her flat and was followed by Ginny, who tossed her purse on the side table. Hermione's mail scattered to the floor.

"Oops," Ginny said, stooping to retrieve the scattered envelopes. A postcard on top caught her eye and she read it out loud. "'A Match Made in Heaven: over thirty years experience uniting Mr. and Mrs. Right'."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "That goes in the rubbish bin."

"Oh, but there's a personal message," Ginny said, giggling. "'We miss hearing from you. Please come back and we'll give you your first month for free.'"

"Toss it, Gin," Hermione said.

"Did you even try dating anyone?" Ginny asked.

"Yes, a number of times."

"Why didn't I hear about any of them?"

"If you must know, they were all first dates." Hermione knew that look. Ginny wasn't going to let this go. "Men are pigs, okay?"

"That's not true, Hermione. I can name a whole handful who I adore."

"Fathers, brothers, and your husband don't count."

Ginny opened her mouth to speak, but Hermione held up her finger, halting her. "Hold that thought. I want to change into something more comfortable before you rake me over the coals."

Ginny followed her into the bedroom and flopped onto her bed. "So, what happened with you and Ron? I've tried to get the juicy details out of him, but he's so bland about it all."

"That's because there's nothing to tell. I love Ron, you know that, but I love him just the same as I love all of the men in your family."

"Even Percy?" Ginny asked, making a face.

"Well ..." Hermione pulled her dress up and over her head while her friend had a laugh at her brother's expense.

"Ron is going to make some girl very happy," Hermione said. "He'll be a wonderful husband, but it isn't enough for me." She opened her closet door. "I want the fairytale."

"I'll say," Ginny replied, staring at the princess dress and matching hat hanging in the closet. "Do you wear that on your dates? Because that may very well be what scares the men away." Ginny ducked to avoid the pillow that was launched at her head. "Seriously, Hermione, what is that all about?"

Hermione donned her bathrobe and sat on the bed. "You have to promise that you won't interfere and you won't tell your husband."

"I promise."

"You know that special project I was working on?"

Ginny nodded.

"It was supposed to be perfect. I ..." She took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment. "I poured not only my heart and nine months of my life into that thing, but my entire savings account, as well."

"Hermione, if you need money..."

"Ginny," Hermione warned.

"Sorry." She fastened an imaginary zipper over her lips.

"I'm working at The Enchanted Forest. It isn't a career move or anything, but it is decent money and there was a sign-on bonus. So five days a week, I am Princess Azalea."

Ginny's grin faded when Hermione burst into tears. "Don't cry, love. If you hate the job, just quit."

"It's not that ... It's just ... I'm a fraud," she said, choking back a sob. "I walk around all day as someone who impressionable little girls look up to, but I'm perpetuating a lie. I'm despicable!"

Ginny handed her a tissue and pulled her into a hug. "Stop being dramatic. It isn't as if posing for souvenir photos is ruining anyone's life."

"Don't you see? I'm leading them to believe that they are one single true love's kiss away from happiness, and that simply isn't true."

"This is completely unlike you," Ginny said. "You're always so level-headed and sensible."

Hermione shrugged her shoulders.

"Since when do you care about men, anyway?" She paused at Hermione's grimace. "Well, you know what I mean. You are just so independent, and you make work your priority. I guess it never occurred to me that you cared if you were single."

"It isn't so much that I dislike being single, but sometimes I think I am too practical. It serves me well in my academic life, but personally, I just think it would be nice to be adored. You know, to truly be treated like a princess."

"I can understand that. But maybe your expectations are a little lofty. Harry is everything I could ever want in a man, but you didn't see him come charging in, sword in hand, to slay the evil dragon so we could be together, did you?"

"Well, metaphorically speaking..."

"Hermione!" Ginny said, exasperated. "Listen, you can't judge a prince by his horse or his castle. Perhaps your definition of a prince is too stringent. If he has a good heart and a beautiful soul, that's what defines him."

"I know. You're right."

"Of course, a smoking hot body is good, too."

Hermione shook her head, but an amused smile crept across her face.

"Come on," Ginny said, pulling her friend off the bed. "Chocolate makes everything better. Let's go rummage through your kitchen and see what we can find."

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When the tea and chocolate biscuits had been devoured, Ginny stood to leave. "I hope you aren't just placating me with your smile, only to return to tears once I'm safely out the door."

"No, I promise. I'm not used to failing at things, and I suppose having both my professional and social life in the gutter is just overwhelming me at the moment." She threw her arms around the younger girl. "Thanks for talking me down from a ledge."

"Any time," Ginny said. "Oh, here's an idea. You should get a journal. Sometimes when I'm feeling out of control it helps me to get my feelings down on paper and out of my system."

"Duly noted."

Ginny rolled her eyes, but then headed out the door, blowing Hermione a kiss as she descended the steps from her flat.

Hermione sat down and flipped through channels on the television. She was hoping for something comedic or mindless in which she could immerse herself, but found nothing worth her time. She wandered over to her desk and picked up a quill and parchment. She didn't have a journal, but she did have an idea that was going to make Ginny groan. That thought alone made her smile. She tapped the quill to her chin a few times before addressing the letter to *the household of the nearest prince*. She was pleasantly surprised at how easily the words flowed out and onto the page. Her friend had been right; this really did make her feel better. Maybe she'd even let Ginny read it and they could have a good laugh before she threw it out.

The rustle of wings broke her concentration. "Oh, Archimedes, I didn't even hear you come in." She handed him a treat despite knowing that she indulged him a little too often. He was such a good owl, though, and she couldn't resist. "Well, my friend," she said, smoothing the feathers on his head, "it's a hot bath for me, then I'm retiring with a good book."

He hooted a soft response as she turned out the light.

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Victoria Prince sat at her desk, reviewing her grandson's discharge orders. She'd had no idea that he would require such extensive care when she had offered to bring him home. Still, he was family, and she had loved him since she'd first laid eyes on him. She had let him know early on that she was a force to be reckoned with, and she expected to be treated with the utmost respect. On a number of occasions, she had reminded him that he would never be too old to be thrown over her knee and given a good spanking right there in public. He must have believed her, because the Severus Snape she had heard others talk about bore no resemblance to the man she had helped raise.

She had just finished reviewing the range of motion exercises when a small gray owl swooped in through the open window. "Hello there, little fellow. You're not the usual post owl. I'd say you're a fair bit more handsome than the rest."

The owl hopped up and down, rustling his feathers, then dropped an envelope from his beak.

"Why, thank you. Let's see if we can't find you a treat." She held out the plate with the remains of her breakfast and let him have his pick. She then tore open the envelope and began to read.

Dear Mr. Prince. "Well, Mr. Owl, you're a little late. My husband has been gone for nearly a decade. Unless ..." A smile crept across her face as she read the rest of the note. "Severus," she hollered, "you've got mail!"

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Hermione awoke feeling completely rested for the first time in weeks. She showered and then wandered out to her sitting room. She still felt miserable about her situation, but a weight had been lifted off her shoulders, and she wondered if it was the fact that she'd finally confided in someone or if Ginny's writing idea really had some merit. Either way, it was Hermione's day off, and she went to the Floo to invite Ginny over for lunch.

After they'd eaten, she gestured for Ginny to follow her into her small study so that she could share the letter she'd written the night before and have a good laugh.

Hermione shifted some things around on her desk, looking for the letter, but it was nowhere to be found. "Archimedes, did you see what happened to my letter?" Her question was met with silence, and she turned to look at him, finding an empty perch. Her head turned quickly toward the window which stood open and then to Ginny. "No, no, no. This is bad."

"Calm down," Ginny said. "Who did you send the letter to?"

"No one. I mean, I put something about the nearest prince, but that means nothing."

"You're right. And did you sign it with your name?"

Hermione blushed and mumbled, "It was from Princess Azalea."

Ginny laughed, despite her friend's obvious lack of amusement. "What is the big deal? So you wrote a silly letter to a person who doesn't exist signed by a person who doesn't exist. There's no harm done."

Hermione nodded. "I guess you're right."

"Unless this prince happens to be a regular at the Enchanted Forest. Then he'll know right where to find you."

"Not helping," Hermione said.

"I'm kidding. What prince in his right mind would hang out at such a place?"

They both had a good laugh, and afterward, Hermione had forgotten all about the letter.

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Victoria walked into the room and stood over Severus' bed, trying to assess whether or not he was awake. She renewed the charm to keep his eyes from drying out, then she sat down beside him and grabbed the hairbrush from the bedside table. As she ran it through his hair, she told him about her plans for the day, only some of which included him. She checked to make sure all of the equipment around his bed was functioning properly, then rolled him on his side, propping pillows behind him and between his knees as the therapist at St. Mungo's had shown her. Once she was satisfied that he was comfortable, she told him she had one more thing for him.

"A letter came in the mail for you. This is one of the few times I am pleased that you can't move, or else you'd walk out of the room before I've finished, and this one is too good to miss."

Mr. Prince,

I've never written a love letter before, so you'll have to bear with me. Technically, I suppose this isn't even a love letter at all. It's more a position paper on the state of my love life. Let's see if I can find an appropriate thesis statement. I currently find myself single and desperate to be swept off my feet by a handsome prince. Therefore, I am writing you this letter so that I may find you and harass you until you consent to join me in what is surely bound to be a happily ever after.

Yours (though you don't know it yet),

Princess Azalea

P.S. I am not really a princess. I just thought I'd be upfront about that to avoid any awkward situations which may arise in the future if you have objections to marrying outside of royal bloodlines. Incidentally, that will not stop me from pursuing you.

She folded the letter and laid it on his bedside table. "Somebody's got an admirer," she teased. "That will give you something to think about while I am out running errands. Dipsy is here and will check on you in a bit to make sure you're doing okay." She smiled as she glanced once more at the letter, then walked out of the room.

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"What's up, Hermione?" the silver fairy asked, setting her tray on the table.

Hermione quickly stowed her pen and paper under her lunch sack. "Hello, Camille. How are you?"

"Fabulous, as always," she said. "Did you see the new dragon that Cameron built for the arena battle?"

Hermione shook her head.

"It's amazing! So lifelike. Well, you know what I mean. How cool would it be if they were real?"

"Yeah, that would be great," Hermione agreed.

Camille set down her fork and leaned across the table. "What is going on? You're, like, a million miles away, and you have been all day."

"Oh, sorry."

"No need to apologize. Just tell me who he is."

Hermione laughed. "You're right ... sort of. I've been daydreaming about my weekend plans. I'm going out with an old friend."

Camille grinned.

"It's not like that. He's just a friend."

"Is he married?"

"No."

"Someone's getting shagged senseless," Camille said.

"He's my ex."

"Oh, even better. He already knows how great you are. And you seriously need to get some, my friend."

Hermione kicked her under the table.

"Guys don't care if you are friends or exes or anything. They just want sex. Make yourself available, and he won't be able to resist."

"That's a dreadful idea, Camille, but thank you for your advice."

"Anytime," she said, winking mischievously.

Once they had finished their lunch, Camille left, and Hermione pulled her letter out from its hiding place.

Mr. Prince,

Let me just start by saying how utterly ridiculous I feel writing to you a mere forty-eight hours after my last missive. A proper pen pal would wait for a response, but since one may not be forthcoming, I am going to break all rules of etiquette and take another turn. I can't stop thinking of you. There, I've said it. I'm not one normally taken by flights of fancy, but somehow you've got me under your spell and my mind continues to come back around to this line of thinking. I know that is not possible, as we have not met, and honestly, you probably don't even exist, but I must find an excuse for my unusual behavior. I even dreamt of you last night. I was trapped in a tall tower when I heard your voice below. I shouted to you, but you couldn't hear me. So, I did what any sensible girl would do and grabbed an armful of hair, tossing it over the windowsill. You understood my intent and climbed up to see me. Please don't laugh. I can't help it if my dreams are clichéd.

Here's the thing: when I woke up there was no tower, no prince, and I certainly didn't have the fairytale hair. I fear this is a sign of how things will be for the rest of my life. So, I have decided that I have wasted too much time pursuing my happily ever after. I am giving myself until the nineteenth of September to find my prince. On that evening, I shall inhabit the highest tower at my disposal and await his arrival. At the stroke of midnight, if I haven't found him, I will face reality and learn to be alone. Maybe I'll adopt a cat or ten. I leave my fate in your hands, dear prince.

Azalea

She reread it to make sure it was complete and then tucked it away in her purse where it would be safe until she could have it delivered.

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On Saturday evening, Hermione arrived at the location Ron had given her and then double checked the note from him to be sure she was in the right place.

"Nice, huh?" Ron said, approaching her from behind.

"Quite," she said. "I hope I'm dressed okay."

"You look perfect. And before you fuss about it, I'm paying tonight."

Hermione gave him a quizzical look but entered the restaurant at his side. The interior was even nicer than it appeared from the front, with candlelit tables and a dance floor at the rear. "This is the sort of place you take a girlfriend."

Ron shrugged his shoulders. "I've never had a girlfriend and money at the same time. But, I have a friend who's a girl, and I'm certain I owe her at least one nice dinner."

Once they were seated, Ron ordered them a bottle of wine.

"Since when do you know about wine?" she asked.

"I don't. I just ordered the first one on the menu that I could pronounce."

They laughed at what was typical Ron behavior, and all tension from their recent breakup faded away.

"I've missed you," she said.

"I've missed you, too," Ron said. "That's not the only reason I invited you to dinner, though. When I have good news, you're still the first person I think of to share it with."

She reached across the table and squeezed his hand, glad that they were able maintain their friendship.

"I got a job, and I'm really excited about it."

"Good for you," Hermione said. "I didn't realize you were looking."

"I would have been happy to keep working the shop with George, but this just fell in my lap. I'm going to be writing for the Daily Prophet."

"That hardly sounds like something you'd want to do."

"I know; it's insane. See, I read that article they published about Jeremiah Sprightleigh." At her blank stare, he added, "Quidditch, Hermione."

"Oh, of course."

"Anyway, they were bashing him, saying things that weren't true. I met him once, and he was a really decent bloke. I was so angry about it that I wrote a letter to the Prophet telling them just what I thought of their column. They responded with a letter that said they loved my wit and very much enjoyed reading my rebuttal. I was furious because I thought they were making fun of me, turning my serious letter into a joke. So I responded to them, and again, they laughed at my letter. At that point, they offered me a job writing a humor column twice a week."

"So, you accepted the job. Is it possible that they are still making fun at your expense?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Who cares? I'm bringing in gobs of money."

Hermione smiled and congratulated Ron, but jealousy won out over guilt. *I was supposed to be the one with the successful career, but my job is a joke. At least I am not the only one unlucky in love.*

"Oh, did you hear?" Ron asked. "Neville and Hannah are engaged."

Hermione closed her eyes and took several deep breaths.

"Hey, did you hear what I said? You look a little pale."

She exhaled one last time and then opened her eyes. "I'm fine. Just a little heartburn." She dug through her purse until she found her small stash of emergency money. *This certainly qualifies.* "I think I'll order another bottle of wine to toast the happy couple."

"Put your money away. I told you I'm paying tonight."

"Oh, okay, thanks."

"Anything for the lady."

She rolled her eyes at his dramatic declaration.

When she'd polished off the second bottle of wine, she slammed her glass down on the table. "Oops," she giggled. "Dance with me."

"Um ..."

"Come on." She stood up, swaying slightly, and hauled him to his feet.

Ron placed his hand on her waist and reached for her hand with his other like he'd learned years ago, but Hermione had already snaked her arms up and around his neck, leaving little distance between them.

Ron had no choice but to follow as she led him all over the dance floor with her awkward sway.

"You're a great dancer," she announced.

Ron laughed. "You're drunk."

"You say that as if it's a bad thing."

"It's an odd thing."

She lay her head on his chest. "You smell nice," she said.

"Well, you know, it was my day to shower."

"I forgot how funny you are," she said, giggling.

Before he could respond, her lips were on his.

Ron allowed it for a moment, then pulled his head back. "What was that?"

"If you don't recognize a kiss, we've got a lot of ground to cover."

"I should take you home."

"All right," she said, but didn't move from his embrace.

Ron peeled her arms from around his neck and led her back to the table to collect her things.

On her doorstep, she pawed through her purse, the item she sought eluding her.

Ron had his wand out and her door open before she even remembered what she was looking for. He gestured for her to proceed him inside, but she just stood there, so he scooped her up and carried her into the bedroom. After placing her on the edge of the bed, he knelt down to remove her shoes. Once her feet were free, she wrapped them around his torso and lay back, pulling him with her. The momentum threw him off balance and he sprawled on top of her.

"Would you dim the lights?" Hermione asked. "I can't seem to find my wand."

He rolled off and lay facing her. "Sure. Do you need anything else before I go?" he asked.

"Aren't you going to make love to me?"

"What? Are you mad?"

"All right," she said while trying to focus her eyes on the man sitting on her bed, "none of that emotional nonsense that you guys hate." She poked her finger into his chest with each word for added emphasis. "You can just fuck me instead."

"Bloody hell, Hermione!"

"What?"

"I've never heard you talk like that. Even that time I slammed your hand in the door."

"Oh. Well, it hurt like fucking hell." Her next words were muffled beyond recognition.

Ron rolled his eyes and leaned over to free her from her shirt, which she'd pulled halfway over her head before getting stuck. He pulled the blankets up around her neck, kissed her on the forehead, and turned out the light.

"You're really not staying?"

"You need to sleep this off. I'll come around tomorrow and check on you, okay?"

"We've had sex before. I fail to see the problem."

Ron shrugged his shoulders. "We were in a relationship, for one thing,"

"Oh, so you were in a relationship with that moronic blond girl Ginny told me you were drooling over at the bar last weekend?"

"No, but that was different."

"How is that different?" she yelled, making Ron wince. "Men don't care who they're with. If you are willing, so are they. Someone told me that ..."

"Look, Hermione, you're not that kind of girl, okay? I respect you, and we've been friends long enough for me to know that you'd hate me in the morning. No, you'd hate yourself. You don't really want this."

She rolled over to face the wall. Her sniffles could be heard from under the covers.

Ron paused in the doorway, but then let himself out the front door, locking it behind him.

Hermione lay in bed wondering how horrible she must be to be turned down by Ron. In all of their time together, that had never happened. *He must have found out how lacking I am since we broke up.* Her bladder informed her of the need to get out of bed. At the rumbling of her stomach, she stumbled to the kitchen to make an omelet. She set the eggs to frying and then started tossing what ever she could find from the fridge into the skillet.

She sat at the table with her plate full of runny, yet somehow also burnt eggs. She gagged on the first bite which seemed to have mushrooms, cranberries, and something unidentifiable yet crunchy in it and promptly tossed the rest in the rubbish bin.

She stormed across her flat, seething with anger. Would nothing ever go right again? There was one activity that would calm her down, and she grabbed a quill to begin. She scratched away for fifteen minutes before finding an empty box in which to deliver her package. "Sorry, Archimedes, you may need to find a friend to help you with this one." She turned and walked out of the room without another thought and collapsed, barely making it to bed.

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Ron sat at his desk and toyed with his Jeremiah Sprightleigh figurine. "This was supposed to be fun and easy," he said to his miniature companion. "I've written all I have in me and still can't meet the word count for tomorrow's edition." He stared at the page before him and wondered if he ought to contact Hermione. *There was a girl who had no trouble filling a page with words.* He decided to have a snack first, and if nothing came to him, he'd talk to her. He needed to check on her after last night, anyway.

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Victoria entered Severus' bedroom with an envelope and a package in her hands. She set them on the bedside table, then pulled a chair up to the bed near his feet. The lotion she squeezed into the palm of her hand was cold from sitting on the windowsill, so she let it warm up for a moment before rubbing it onto her grandson's legs.

"We have some new neighbors. He's a total wanker yes, you heard me correctly but she's a true beauty." She flexed his ankle joint as she spoke. "I'm certain he would be stunned to know that while he is at work, their gardener spends most of his time inside the house with the wife. Would you wake up if I threatened to tell you in detail what I suspect they're doing?" She watched his face for any sign of a reaction, but the only change in expression was hers going from anticipation to disappointment. She

released her hold on his leg and sat back with a sigh.

"Severus, a letter came today from the Department of Health at the Ministry. Apparently, once a patient has been unconscious for twelve months with no noticeable improvement, it is legal for the family to withdraw all care, including feeding and medicating, so that the patient may die in peace. They tell me that you aren't even in there, that this is a lost cause, but I can't seem to let you go. So, just wake up, damn you. I need you, and you've abandoned me."

She put her head in her hands and sobbed, releasing the tears she had been holding back for the last year. "You've always had such strength and given such good advice. What I wouldn't give to have you here now, even just to tell me your wishes. I'm certain that you would hate lying here helpless, dependent on others to care for your basic needs. Still ..."

She closed her eyes and bowed her head. "God, please give me a sign. I can't do this on my own. Something, anything to let me know how to proceed." She sat there for a moment longer with her hands folded in her lap. When she opened her eyes, the box from that morning's post caught her eye. She dabbed at her tears with a tissue, then reached for the box. "On a lighter note, there is a package from your lady friend. This has been a taxing day. Let's forget the rest of your exercises and dig right in, shall we?"

My Dearest Prince,

I suppose I am writing this as my farewell note. Wait, that makes it sound as if I am going to end my life. I have no plans of the sort because, after all, you have to actually have a life to end it, right? So, I am penning this note to save you from the train wreck that is me. I always thought that I would make a good wife someday- not that I am domestic or anything, but I envisioned long holidays and chatting in front of the fireplace, drinking hot cocoa. Maybe we'd own a home-based business together so that we never had to actually change out of our pajamas if we were so inclined. But I digress ... Not only am I rejected by men, but my career, which is my number one priority, no longer has any direction. I created a product that was going to help people. That's all I ever wanted, but I failed. I did some time volunteering at a local hospital, and I noticed how many people were unable to communicate. Some lost the use of their arms, some their voice, and some, well ... anyway. My Intelli-quill would allow them to write. The ear piece attaches to the back of the ear, and when the patient thinks about what they want to say, the quill writes it for them. I even programmed it to translate into other languages, and for those who may have lost some mental faculties, it analyzes speech patterns so that the medical staff can tell whether the patients' thoughts are valid attempts at speech or just random static. I kept my project a secret, though it was eating me alive. The hospital, which had unfounded faith in me, set up a luncheon for me, inviting some of the most prominent figures around. When it came time to reveal it, the thing didn't work. Can you believe it? I guess I didn't perform enough practice runs, and that is a lesson I won't soon forget. I've never been so humiliated. What's more, I can't count how many hours of research and trial and error charming I went through to make this perfect. What a joke I am. Anyway, I've told you more than you need to know: a trait that I have in spades, I fear. I am including in the letter one of my prototypes. I know it isn't worth anything, but I wanted to leave you with a token to remember me by. This is the last you will hear from me. It doesn't matter that I am wasting my time on a fantasy, but if somehow you were real, I would hate for you to take me up on my offer of happily ever after, only to find that it doesn't exist for me. Thank you for listening to all of my ranting. I haven't been myself for awhile, but now that I have this out of my system, maybe I can salvage something of my existence and move on.

Yours,

Azalea

"Oh, the poor dear. She is certainly down in the dumps. If only there were a way to help." Victoria picked the pieces out of the box and read the instructions. She knew better than to get her hopes up, yet she found herself checking the serial numbers to make sure the quill and ear piece matched, as instructed. Her hands were shaking as she brushed her grandson's hair away from his ear and placed the device where it belonged. "She said this doesn't work, but if there were anyone who could make it happen ..." She sat back down and, with the piece of parchment on her lap, laid the quill down on the page. The instructions didn't say if it would work instantly or not.

Ten minutes later, she was still staring at a blank page. Though apparent that this was a lost cause, somehow setting the paper aside signaled the official moment of their defeat, and she just couldn't commit to it.

The ringing of the doorbell finally brought her back to the present. She rose quietly, gripping the paper to her chest, and walked down the stairs and across the house to the front door. "Hello, Mrs. Prince," the man on the front stoop said.

"Henry, what a surprise. Can I help you with something?"

"Donations for the boys' home?"

"Oh, I am so sorry. I forgot you were coming by."

A small boy stepped in front of Henry. "Hey, lady, I can count. Watch me. One, two, three ..."

"You'll have to excuse Thomas," Henry said. "He is one of our more precocious youngsters."

"He's fine," she said, smiling at the young boy. "Wait here while I go round up my things. I'll just be a minute." She set the paper on the table and headed downstairs to the cellar.

"Henry, I can juggle. Want to watch me?"

"Not in Mrs. Prince's house. You'll break something."

Victoria came up the stairs with an enormous box, and Henry scrambled over to her to help.

"Mrs. Prince," Thomas said, "I can read."

"That's wonderful, dear."

"I really can, I swear. All you do is sound things out."

"Perhaps he thinks I'll donate more if he can prove the money's going toward a good education." The adults laughed at his enthusiasm then set to sorting out the items into two boxes so they would fit in the car.

"I am ... here. I am here!" Thomas said.

The adults continued their efforts.

"Pl ... e ... as." Thomas scrunched up his face, then smiled. "Please. do. not. go. Oh. God. do. not. give. up."

"What are you messing with, Thomas?"

"Nothing. I'm just reading the letter from the ghost."

They looked at Thomas, and he grinned. "You want me to read it again? I know it really well now."

The words from the boy's mouth were drowned out by the crash of glass when the lady of the house dropped the vase she had been holding.

~~*

She took the stairs two at a time, defying her age. Out of breath, she hovered over his bed and stared, as if expecting him to move. "Severus, was that really you? Come on, talk to me." She glanced around the room, then remembered taking the paper downstairs. She rushed out the door in pursuit of his lifeline.

Downstairs, Thomas was turning somersaults. Henry stood there, mouth hanging open, and watched her tear down the stairs. "Is everything all right, ma'am?" Henry asked.

"Yes," she panted. "I just have a family issue to attend to. Feel free to take the stuff and see yourselves out, please."

She was gone before he could respond.

Once upstairs, she looked at the parchment where the quill had now added words. *It is true, and I must tell you something important.* She perched on the edge of the bed, one hand holding his, and the other balancing the equipment on her lap. "I'm listening," she said.

The silence was deafening, most notably the absence of quill to parchment. "No, Severus, don't give up now." She picked up the quill and shook it in an attempt to jump start the ink, but it remained motionless once she set it down. "Okay, think, Victoria." She shook her head. "I suppose I'll just have to find Azalea. If it worked once, we'll figure out how to make it work again. Hold on. I'll hurry back."

She grabbed the writing materials and headed toward the front door. She set them down at the last minute, not wanting to take the chance of losing them. "Dipsy," she called out, "I'm going out for a bit. Please check on Severus while I'm gone."

She drove without purpose for awhile, then ended up at the Daily Prophet. The man at the front desk stared wide-eyed as she rushed to the counter. "I need to place a personal ad."

"Sure thing," the man said. "Let's see, this is Sunday, so your ad placed today will run on Tuesday."

"I can't wait for Tuesday; I need it now."

"Well, my personal ad space is full. You'll just have to wait."

"Is there somewhere else?"

He glared over the top of his glasses at her. "Sure, we'll just knock some important news off the front page so you can give a shout out to your long lost sweetheart."

Victoria slammed her hands on the counter. "Sir, this is important. My grandson is in danger, and I need to place this ad."

"Danger, you say? Well, maybe security can help you when they come to escort you off the premises." He gave her a shove, and she stumbled backward.

"Hey!" said a voice from across the room. "That's no way to treat a lady."

"Oh, good. It's the resident joke columnist. Or should I say, columnist who is a joke?"

"Back off, Watson."

"Or what, Weasley? Is your daddy gonna come beat me up?"

"Clever." He turned to the woman at the counter. "Is there something I can help you with?"

Victoria recounted the story to Ron, whose eyes lit up as she spoke. "Come to my office. I think we can work something out."

As she exited the building, Watson took one last stab at her. "I hope he didn't lead you to believe that posting in his column will help you. He's losing his contract due to lack of readership. So, unless you are trying to locate his mother, you're going to be out of luck."

She kept walking out the door and never looked back.

A/N- This chapter title is from the song "Everyday Princess" from Disney's *The Princess and the Frog*. I have to thank the wonderful gals who helped me get my act together in the writing process. Palathene Britpicked, alpha read, and cheered in all of the right places, and my beta, Keppiehed, slashed away with her red pen in the gentlest of ways. Thanks, ladies.

Some Day My Prince Will Come

Chapter 2 of 3

Once upon a time, there was a lonely prince and princess who needed to be rescued from themselves. If only there were such a thing as magic ...

Hermione was relaxing on the sofa when Ron appeared in her Floo.

"Can I come through?" he asked.

"Of course," she said.

Ron walked across her flat and sat down next to her. "I came by yesterday to check on you, and you were fast asleep. How're you feeling?"

"Embarrassed," she said.

"Don't. I know it was the alcohol talking. I don't think I've ever seen you have more than one drink."

"And don't expect to see a repeat any time soon."

"Learned your lesson, did ya?" he asked, poking her playfully in the ribs. "Hey, do you want to go to lunch with me?"

"I've already put something in the oven."

"Oh," he said, and his face fell.

"Yes, there is enough for two. You can stay and join me if you'd like."

"I suppose I should. We can't have you getting lonely, after all."

"Me, lonely? For all you know my secret boyfriend is on his way over now."

"Oh, you have a secret boyfriend, do you?"

She frowned. "No, but the search is on."

"Hey, speaking of, did you read my column today?"

"You wrote your column about your secret boyfriend?" she teased. "No, I'm sorry. It's on my agenda, but I haven't knocked much off my to-do list today."

The timer on the oven sounded, and they headed for the kitchen to eat. Once the dishes were cleared, they moved back to the living room, and Hermione grabbed her copy of the newspaper off the counter before joining Ron on the sofa.

He watched her expression as she read his column. An amused smile was pasted on her face until the very end where she went pale.

"Are you okay? You look dreadful." He put his hand to her forehead as his mum had always done to him when he was sick. She continued to stare at the page. "Hermione!" he said.

She blinked a few times and then turned toward him. "I'm ... I just have a stomachache. I think I ate too much food at lunch."

"Or, maybe it's safer if we don't let you cook, next time," he said, laughing.

She stood, walked into her bedroom, and shut the door.

"I was only kidding," he hollered. She didn't respond, so he knocked on her door, then opened it a crack. She sat on the bed with her pillow clutched to her chest. "I'll leave you alone now, but I'll be at work if you need me, okay?"

She nodded, and he closed the door and left.

~~*

"Healer Robinson, thank you so much for coming by. And at such short notice."

"My pleasure, Mrs. Prince."

"Victoria, please," she said, taking his jacket and hanging it on the back of a chair.

"All right, then. And you must call me Logan. Is everything okay with Severus? I don't typically make house calls, but you sounded rather frazzled."

"Oh, yes, Severus is doing just fine."

"So, this was just a ploy to get me to your house?" He smiled at her, and she broke into tears.

"Hey, I was only joking. I thought you said things were fine."

"Yes, I am just overwhelmed. How embarrassing to be acting like a teenager with my emotions all over the place." Victoria grabbed a tissue and dabbed at the corner of her eyes. "Something amazing has happened, though, and I need your help."

"Of course. Whatever I can do."

"Follow me," she said and started up the stairs. "You are never going to believe this."

They stood outside the patient's room while she debriefed the healer. He listened while she explained Azalea's wondrous invention to him, and she swore him to secrecy until the product was ready to be distributed, just in case the girl hadn't had the sense to get a patent. He didn't interrupt during the entire story, appearing as stunned as she'd predicted he'd be. At the end of the tale, though, he didn't miss a beat.

"How did you figure out that the quill's magical properties don't work in close range?"

"That is a story unto itself. I contacted the lady who came up with this contraption, but then I couldn't just sit and do nothing while I awaited her reply. I owed it to Severus to keep trying to work out this thing. I noticed that every time I was in my sitting room, the writing would pour onto the page, but when I moved back to his room it would stop. Naturally, I assumed that somehow it got better reception in the living room, so I levitated him downstairs and set him on the couch."

"And then nothing happened." Logan's grin couldn't be suppressed.

"Of course," she said, laughing. "It was actually Severus who figured it out. I was so intent on learning how to use the thing so we could have a proper conversation that I didn't pay any attention to what he was saying on the page. This is where you come in."

"I'm sincerely waiting with bated breath. I don't have a clue what you are going to tell me."

"Your team treated him for the effects of the venom from the snake bite, and all of us assumed that his state of being was due to the time lapse between the attack and his treatment."

Logan nodded in agreement.

"According to Severus, after he was bitten by the snake, he was discovered by a few Death Eaters who were angry that he'd changed sides. They stopped the bleeding, but then they cursed him with Sileo Anima and left him there to rot."

"Sileo Anima?"

"I take it you aren't familiar? I wasn't either."

"I've seen some nasty stuff, but I can't say I've ever encountered that one."

"Well, there's not much to explain, as you've seen its effects. His mind has been working just fine most of this time, but his body has been paralyzed. He gave me the reversal spell, but he said there will be nasty side effects for a day or two."

"That shouldn't be a problem. We can monitor him around the clock, give pain medication, sedatives ... whatever is necessary to keep him comfortable while this passes."

"Is it too forward of me to ask you to stay the night?" She tried to keep a straight face, but broke down laughing that the look on his face. "I'm sorry, but it's so easy to make you blush."

"He doesn't really want any publicity about this. I know you have private rooms, and you do your best to keep the media away, but it will get out. I thought maybe you and I could take care of him here."

"Let me read what he wrote to you regarding the symptoms, and I will determine if we can handle it," Logan said.

"Thank you. I'll owe you one."

"I'll remember that," he said.

A touch on his arm halted his entrance into the bedroom. "Just a warning. I haven't yet determined whether his year of solitude has given him time for some introspection or whether being fussed over by everyone has built up a year's worth of temper," she said.

"I am medical only. You get to deal with that other stuff," he said. "You owe me, remember?"

~~*

"Hermione?" Ginny called out as she entered her friend's flat. "Hello? Are you home?" She set the pot of soup she'd brought on the counter and went to search the bedroom. She found Hermione sitting on the bed, clutching a pillow to her chest. "I went by your work and they said you'd stayed home sick. Is everything okay? I brought you some dinner."

Hermione didn't respond, but held out the newspaper.

Ginny's eyes went wide when she finished the article. "Oh, God, Hermione, this is for you?"

She nodded.

"So, did you?" Ginny asked.

"Did I what?"

"Don't be thick. Did you send your owl?"

"No, I didn't."

"Why not?"

Hermione shrugged her shoulders.

"Let me get this straight. You have been pining away for this prince who may or may not be real, and when he finally confirms his existence, you are going to do nothing."

"Well, what would you have me do? I don't even know this guy. He could be a troll."

"Since when are you so vain?"

"Okay, well, he could be dangerous."

"I think he sounds charming," Ginny said, grinning. "Plus, it isn't like he asked you to donate a kidney. Send your bird, and if I'm wrong, I promise I won't force you to respond."

Hermione contemplated her friend's argument, then stood up and sighed. "All right, but if this turns out bad, you're going to owe me big time." She narrowed her eyes at Ginny, then wandered off to get her owl.

"Hey, Archimedes. I need you to go and find the prince. He'll have a message for you." She stroked the feathers on his chest. "But, if he's creepy, bite him and run."

~~*

"Small sips," she said, supporting his head with one hand and holding the straw to his lips with the other. Victoria glared at her patient during his coughing spell brought about by ignoring her advice. "I know you hate being at the mercy of others, but if you listen to Logan's instructions, you will get stronger with time."

"Logan?" he whispered.

She blushed. "Healer Robinson, that is."

"Logan?" he repeated.

It seemed to Victoria a positive sign that he already had the ability to raise his eyebrow at her. "I'm old, Severus, not dead."

He closed his eyes, let his head roll off to the side, and fell asleep.

~~*

Archimedes hooted softly and perched on the end of Severus' bed.

"Give me a minute, you lousy bird."

The owl clicked his beak and then turned to face the other direction.

"I'll have it ready in a moment. Have some patience." He did a quick read-over to make sure he hadn't said too much or too little.

Princess Azalea,

I shall begin by telling you that I have been on my own for a lengthy period, and as such, I find myself with much more to say than usual. Forgive my verbosity, although you admitted once that you suffer the same affliction, so you have no room to judge. I have several things to say to you, and I will detail them herein.

First, I must disabuse you of the notion that such a thing as happily ever after exists. It most certainly does not, and I will not feed into that pipe dream brought about by the writers of fairy tales. Many a person has wasted away, pining for that ultimate state of bliss, only to find in their final hours that no matter how hard they might have tried, it would elude them until the end of time. If this is your reason for contacting me, then you had best take your advances elsewhere. In related news, from now on I shall refer to you as Azalea. I don't want to encourage this ridiculous princess business.

On the other hand, you are well spoken, and that, coupled with your creation of the Intelli-quill leads me to believe that you are an intelligent woman. Brilliant, actually. And so, I have a proposition for you. If you let me work with you to improve your invention, I will tell you why it did not work for you. The choice is yours.

Sincerely,

The man whom you believe to be a prince

~~*

"Gram, I need you to send a letter for me," Severus said.

"Oh? To whom?" she asked innocently.

"Coy does not suit you."

"Severus, darling, *everything* suits me." She winked at him and motioned for the owl to come to her. "Let's go, Bart. We've got a relationship to spark."

"Now you are being ridiculous. There will be no sparking of anything. I merely need a distraction while I recuperate, and there is little I can do from this bed. I still can't feel anything from the waist down, and I only have the strength to move a fraction of the parts I can feel. If I can talk her through experimenting on some theories I have, then why should I sit quietly? After all, I owe her my life. The least I can do is help her with her project."

Victoria stood in the doorway, smiling at her grandson.

"Stop that at once!"

"What's that?"

"Pretending you know something when you are clearly out of your mind." He fell into a coughing fit, and she rushed to his side to help him sit up and take a drink. She brushed the hair out of his eyes.

"Are you finished with your rant?"

"It was not a rant," he insisted. "And yes, I am finished. I just have one more question."

"What's that?"

"What makes you think his name is Bart?"

"Oh, Bart is just a nickname. His real name is Bartholomew, but he is such a laid back, carefree bird, that seemed too stuffy and formal."

Severus rubbed his hand across the back of his neck. "Of course. How foolish of me."

~~*

Hermione was at work when her owl found her, so she stashed the letter in her bag for later. The rest of her day was wasted, however, as she could think of nothing else but what lay inside the envelope currently burning a hole in her bag.

~~*

Mr. Prince,

I am flattered that you think so highly of my intellect. For better or for worse, that has always been my best feature. And God knows I could use some praise at the moment, even if it feels undeserved. Do you really think you know what is wrong with the quill? I do hope you are being sincere. I had finally started to come to terms with the fact that this was never going to happen for me, that my days of research and experimentation were best left in my past. You've got my hopes up now, and I will never forgive you if this is a ruse. It feels good to be excited about something again, you know? So long story short, my answer is: yes, I would love to work with you. I am afraid that I do not have the funds to compensate you for your time. If this product really proves to be a success, however, I promise to split the profits with you. You have my word on that. I know that doesn't mean much to you at the moment, but it is all I have, so you will have to trust me.

Your partner in crime,

Azalea

P.S. How do you propose we work on this? Should we meet? I'm afraid that while I just made you a business offer, I am still a bit shy about giving up any personal information. Can you see any way of communicating through mail?

~~*

Azalea,

I have the perfect idea about how to communicate. But first I must tell you about your quill and its supposed defectiveness. Please send a second set with your owl, and I will explain from there.

Prince?

Hermione scrambled around her flat, digging through drawers and cabinets to find a matching quill and ear piece. She finally uncovered one and boxed it up to send with Archimedes the following morning.

~~*

Hermione arrived home from work at the same time her owl descended towards her front door. A small package was attached, and she tore it off so quickly that she had to

pause her enthusiasm to make sure she hadn't removed his leg along with it. Once inside, all thoughts of dinner and cleaning up her flat were forgotten in favor of hearing from her prince. Inside the box was a set of her Intelli-quills along with a letter advising her to have the product ready to use at precisely 8:00 p.m. Glancing at her watch, she groaned over the hour she'd have to pass before ... Well, she wasn't actually sure what to expect when the time came. The letter said she was to use her quill to write a test message. Maybe there was time to clean a bit. Her stomach certainly had no room for anything but butterflies, so dinner was off the books.

At 7:55 p.m., she sat in her favorite chair with a steaming mug of hot cocoa and prepared herself for whatever was to come. Would he Floo call? *Oh, God, I should have cleaned my flat.* Would a letter arrive? *Surely he won't show up at my door.* She smoothed her hair down with her sweaty palms and pinched her cheeks for some color, just in case.

Though she hadn't heard from him, when the time came, she thought about her message and watched the quill, hoping it would start its dance across the page. She was disappointed, but not altogether surprised, when nothing happened. Then, after a moment, the quill stood on end and printed the message. *Hello out there. Can anyone hear me?* Her hand flew to her mouth. It was actually working. She took a few deep breaths, remembering that this had happened one time before and it would be unwise to get her hopes up. She tried again, and just like last time, after a pause her words appeared on the page. "Defective, my arse," she said to herself. "So, the prince is impressed with me. He hasn't seen anything yet." She smiled to herself, imagining several other ways to impress him. The quill popped up and started writing.

Such language from a lady.

"What? I didn't think that."

No, you didn't. But you did think some other choice things. In fact, at one point, you almost had me blushing."

Hermione ripped off her ear piece and flung it across the room.

"What the hell is going on?" She touched the quill and then pulled her hand away quickly as if prolonged contact would burn her. Nothing happened. She tiptoed across the room and bent to pick up the item she'd thrown. When she returned, there was an additional note.

You are awfully quiet. Cat got your tongue?

She stared at the paper, not wanting to look away lest she miss something.

You are angry. Such a typical woman. Check your serial numbers, then put the ear piece back on and cease your pouting.

"I'm not pouting," she grumbled. She compared her quill and ear piece and noted that they contained different numbers, then slipped it back over her ear.

You sent me a mismatched set.

I will still contend that you are brilliant, but I must add that you are dreadfully slow.

Are you going to be obnoxious every time we speak?

Are you going to ask a million questions every time we speak?

Yes. Isn't that the point of this conversation?

Certainly, but if you get out of control, I will put a limit on you.

Fair enough. So, what? They only work at a distance?

Right in one.

How close can we be?

I do not know exactly. It worked from the far ends of my home, but it might work closer.

That doesn't mean much to me. Your castle could be huge.

It is a shame that you did not work out a way for it to convey facial expressions or obscene hand gestures.

Isn't that why you've signed on to help?

Be careful what you ask for. I have something else I must attend to, so I will be signing off. Are you available for a standing meeting at this same time each evening?

Yes, I can make that work.

Very well. Your assignment for the night is to make a list of the things that you think could be improved upon, and we will discuss them tomorrow. Until then, I bid you goodnight.

Hermione removed her ear piece and set it on the table with the quill. *Did he just give me homework?* She was not altogether pleased with his attitude, either. Still, the mysterious nature of his identity, along with the promise of stimulating conversation, had her a little giddy. Buoyed by the fact that she'd have another date tomorrow it's a work date, she kept reminding herself she felt she could almost face a theme park full of children in the morning.

A/N- This chapter title is from the song "Some Day my Prince will Come" from Disney's *Snow White*.

The spell used roughly translates to silent soul. Note the word roughly. Sure, I could have used English or Spanish, or something with which I am more well versed, but it just loses some pizzazz, and where's the fun in that?

My alpha plus my beta equals an awesome team for me. Thanks, Palathene and Keppiehed.

Flowers, Chocolates, Promises You Don't Intend to Keep

Chapter 3 of 3

Once upon a time, there was a lonely prince and princess who needed to be rescued from themselves. If only there were such a thing as magic ...

"Good morning, sleepyhead," Victoria said and pulled open the curtains to let the mid-day sun shine in.

Severus groaned and turned his head away from the windows.

"Sit up; your lunch is ready."

"Lunch?"

"Well, you've missed breakfast by a long shot."

She helped him sit and propped pillows behind him to hold his posture. "You must have had quite a late night. These days I thought that didn't happen until at least the third date."

"I have no idea how you can hold to such rules when your boyfriend spent the night before you were actually dating."

"Do I sense a bit of jealousy?" she teased. "You know, if you keep refusing your vitamins and ignoring your physical therapy, your equipment will never work properly."

He glared at her, but she set about smoothing out his blankets as if this were the most normal conversation a woman and her grandson could have.

"I have made it perfectly clear to Azalea, and I will do the same for you: There is nothing romantic about our relationship. Even if there was, she has this ideal for the perfect man, and I don't make the cut."

"I was talking about sex, not romance. But now that you mention it, I think you two could be good for each other."

"Gram, you do not even know her. Hell, I do not know her. You cannot make an assumption based on a handful of letters regarding an academic endeavor."

"A handful of letters that you have saved in the drawer by your bed," she said.

"Well, it is not as if I make fifty trips a day to the rubbish bin, now is it?"

"All right," she said, wearing the obnoxious smile that Severus was beginning to hate. After placing a cooling charm on his soup, she excused herself and walked out the door.

~~*

Hi.

Good evening.

Did you get the letter I sent? I know that initially, I only had a few things for us to explore, but now the questions and possibilities are coming to me fast and furious. I started to just make a list in my head so I could detail them for you here tonight, but once I got started, I realized that I wanted to put things in several categories. So, you'll find that the chart contains things that I think are imperative to fix prior to unveiling the product and things that would be on my wish list, maybe for a future version. I also arranged things into lists based on ones that I have an idea how to fix and ones that I am going to need some input from you about. Then...

Stop.

What?

Bart dropped by to deliver your novel a few hours ago, so you do not need to rehash its contents. I realize that you do not know me, but I do have enough sense to follow an over-the-top flow chart.

Wait ... who's Bart?

Your owl.

That's not his name.

No, but it is a perfectly acceptable nickname for Bartholomew.

Of course it is. But his name is Archimedes.

She waited for his response, but the page remained blank.

Don't be embarrassed. I think it's adorable that you named my owl. In fact, you get even more points for nicknaming him.

I am not adorable, so please stop your inane rambling. It is not my fault that he responds to a name that does not belong to him.

Okay, I'm sorry that I called you adorable.

Apology accepted.

I'll be more careful to keep my thoughts to myself next time.

Oh, you are so clever. Now on that note, can we get back to the topic at hand? I wish to know how you were able to filter out all of the extra junk that goes on in one's head. I am aware that some of that bleeds through because I still recall some appalling thoughts you had about me yesterday which you surely did not intend for me to hear. Still, there are things going on in my mind that are not making it to the paper.

Well, I based the foundations of drawing what you want to say to the forefront of your mind while blocking out passing commentary on the principles of Legilimency and Occlumency. If you are not familiar, I can give you an overview ...

~~*

Hi.

Good Evening.

I appreciate all of your insight into how the mind works. I took the things you told me and cross-referenced them with several sources. Before you get offended, that's just something that I do. Also, I was never formally trained in either skill. Perhaps someday ... Well, I'm getting off topic as I am wont to do.

Perhaps and yes, you are.

What? Oh, right.

I think it is the mark of a good researcher to avoid taking something an unknown person tells you at its face value. Several references ought to be cross-checked. I will not fault you there, at least.

Thank you, I think. Oh, there's something I was thinking about while lying in bed last night after our conversation. What do you think about making this a three-way?

A three-way?

Sure. I mean, that would make it better, right? Except I don't know how that would work. Who would give what to whom, you know?

How would I know?

Well, if you think it's a bad idea ... I just thought we could discuss it.

Wait, are we talking about the Intelli-quill?

Aren't we?

Of course!

So, how would you trade ear pieces and quills between three people?

I will have to think on that one. Tell me, where does the ink come from? Does it run out eventually?

I based it on a Muggle ink pen. Then, I used an extension charm on the ink chamber so that it can hold a really large amount. It would depend on how often you used it, of course, but I estimated that you would only need to change it out about three times per year. Do you think that's reasonable?

Certainly. I was thinking that if you were going to have multiple participants, perhaps it would be easiest to follow a conversation if there were several colors of ink. You could potentially add a name stamp to each quill, but that might get messy when determining who gets what equipment.

Yes, I agree that colored ink is the way to go. Would that be best achieved through a potion or a charm? Or maybe a combination of both?

I will have to think about that, as well. I am leaning toward a potion because I am better with them.

I'm better with charms.

Why is that?

Oh, well, I'm not sure. I had a really good teacher. Maybe that has something to do with it.

But your Potions teacher was lousy?

Oh, no. I mean, he could have been fantastic.

But ...

I don't know how to explain. I suppose his heart wasn't in teaching at the moment.

Sounds like he should have retired.

Maybe he did. I don't honestly know what he's doing now. I haven't returned to school since I finished my studies.

I have been meaning to ask your age. At least I now know you are out of school.

Would you mind terribly if I kept my age to myself?

Suit yourself. But, that answer tells me that you are either extremely young or ridiculously old.

No, it doesn't.

Of course it does. If you were middle aged, you would have no qualms about telling me how old you are.

I won't be goaded into giving you an answer if that's what you are going for.

Not at all.

This would be easier if I could see you. I haven't yet worked out when you are serious and when you are being sarcastic.

Well, the ability to see the subject to whom you are speaking will perhaps come along in a later version.

You're making fun again.

Am I?

You're impossible.

If you say so. It seems the hour has grown late, so I must be going.

All right then; good night.

~*~

Hi.

Good Evening.

What shall we tackle tonight?

I rather thought we could forget about the quill for the evening.

Oh ... If you have other plans, you can just say so. It isn't as if I meant to monopolize your time.

Of course not. I am merely tired of discussing the same subject night after night.

That's a relief.

It is?

Yes ... No ... I mean ... I would love to talk about something else. Just, you know, to break up the monotony of it all.

There was a pause while he contemplated what to ask. Getting acquainted conversations were never his forte.

Well, then, are you employed?

Yes.

Stop, please. Your elaboration is out of control.

Hahaha. I'm a princess, remember?

Ah, but you already told me that you are not really a princess. And, technically, that is not a job.

Okay, what about you?

I am between jobs at the moment.

That's the fancy way of saying you're unemployed. What have you done in the past?

At one time I had two jobs. The first one I quit a couple of years ago.

Why is that?

Irreconcilable differences with my coworkers.

Fair enough. And the other?

That one ended about a year ago when the organization I worked for fell apart.

That's too bad.

Actually, it is not.

Care to elaborate?

I think it is best left for another time.

All right, then. I have to get up early tomorrow, and I didn't sleep well last night, so I should turn in.

Did you check for peas?

Cute. I'll talk to you tomorrow.

Good night.

~*~

"How is my favorite patient today?" Victoria asked.

"If he stops by, I will be sure to ask him," Severus said.

"Oh, don't go all sour grapes on me, young man. Shouldn't you be doing your exercises?"

"I am skipping them today."

"You skipped them yesterday."

"And you are the therapy police? It is not as if they are doing any good."

"You'll never be able to walk if you don't strengthen your muscles. Your body works fine; it is just suffering disuse. You aren't getting better because you're being lazy about it."

"Damn it, Gram! I am never going to get back what I have lost. And even if I could, there is no reason for me to be up and around!"

"Stop shouting at me," Victoria said, her voice wavering.

"I'm not shouting at you!" Severus turned his head to stare at the wall.

"Okay, I am going to leave here now. If you decide you want to have a productive conversation, then we can talk."

With a violent sweep of her hand, she smoothed down his covers and stormed out the door.

~~*

Hi.

Good Evening.

Are we talking business or pleasure tonight?

Whatever you want.

We have made decent strides in our research, so we deserve the night off.

Excellent.

So, you don't believe in fairy tale romance?

No.

Did you ever?

I suppose that since I am shielded by complete anonymity, I can tell you that I used to sit down by the river at dusk and kiss frogs in the hopes that I would find a princess.

I love that! I've never met a boy who did that.

My best friend was a girl, and she planted the idea. I never did it in front of her, of course. What about you?

I had a pet frog that my dad brought home from a fishing trip. His name was Fredric Reginald Ogden G ... I best not give away my surname, or I won't be able to share any more embarrassing stories.

Let me guess: he might have been a prince, but you were too prissy to actually kiss him.

Well, you're right about one thing: I didn't kiss him.

I knew it.

I threw him against the side of our house. No prince, but we did get to add a small decorative tombstone to our garden.

That is brutal.

My mother was a big fan of the Brothers Grimm. How about you? Any proclivities toward murder that I ought to be aware of?

She waited for a minute, hoping he was either inventing a clever story, or took an emergency trip to the loo. Instead, his abrupt statement had her concerned.

I have to be going now. Good night.

No, wait! Did I say something wrong? I'm sorry! Hello?

Hermione lay in bed that night wondering why her comment had disturbed him enough to end the conversation. Did that mean he had killed someone? The thought gave her the chills. She analyzed all of the reasons she could think of to explain why he would have taken the life of another human being, and in her introspection realized that she had likely killed before, as well. *Avada Kedavra* was not in her repertoire, but perhaps she had hexed someone while on a broom, causing them to fall to their death. Or maybe she'd Stunned someone in the heat of battle, leaving them defenseless and in the path of the giants and centaurs. Did that count?

Later, she dreamt of a nameless, faceless James Bond type who had blood on his hands, but always in a heroic sort of way, acting for the greater good.

~~*

Hermione walked into the lunchroom where Camille was wildly waving her arms.

"You don't have to flag me down since we sit at the same table every day," Hermione said, laughing.

"Bad luck, Hermione; you just missed him."

"Who's that?"

"Jared. He was sitting here at this very table."

"Oh, well, maybe next time." Hermione shrugged her shoulders and began to unpack her lunch.

"Hermione! Just last week you said he was handsome."

"I'm sure he still is. What's your point?"

"Maybe he sat here hoping you'd show up for lunch." Camille nudged her with a silly grin on her face. "Anyhow, a bunch of us are going out for drinks after work, and you're coming along."

"Tonight? I can't."

"You have better plans?" Camille asked, looking ridiculously hopeful

Yes. "Not better, just ... I'm working on a project tonight."

"So work on it later."

Hermione shook her head. "I can't. I'm working with a ... mentor."

"So blow him off tonight."

"That would be rude."

"Oh, live a little."

Hermione watched Camille's face transform from insistent co-worker to delighted matchmaker, complete with clapping of hands and squealing.

"You have a crush on him."

"No, I don't."

"Is he sexy?"

Hermione's eyes lit up. "He's really smart."

"So 'no' on the sexy front?"

"A person can be both," Hermione said.

"Oh, sure. Like, he's tan and muscular but wears glasses and reads the newspaper?"

Hermione put her head in her hands. "Remind me why we're friends?"

"You need me to keep you from shriveling up into an old maid."

"Right," Hermione said, laughing. "Thank you for your concern, but I really do need to get some work done tonight."

"Next time, then?"

"Perhaps."

~~*

Hi.

Good evening. I wasn't expecting your return after the events of last night.

I will admit that I was a bit bothered by your hasty retreat.

So now you are here to demand an explanation?

No, that's not what friends do.

Are we friends?

I didn't mean to be presumptuous, but I thought we were.

I am afraid that I have minimal knowledge in the realm of what friends do.

Well, for example, they offer to help you with a project even though they are not getting paid up front. When you plan a study date each evening, they always show up and come bearing good advice. Need I go on?

No, although I am sure you could fill the silence for hours.

And, as you've just illustrated, friends are honest. Look, you don't owe me any details, but just to ease my mind, when you, you know, killed someone, was it for pleasure or out of necessity?

The latter.

Just once?

No, there have been several.

Would you do it again?

Only in self defense.

So, I'm not in any danger from you?

That depends on whether you are planning to attack me.

Of course not!

Then you are in none, whatsoever.

That's good enough for me.

You are quick to forgive.

My past isn't entirely rose-colored ...

~*~

Hi.

Good evening.

I hope you are well.

Well enough, thank you. I read the proposals you have made on improving the quill, and I think they are all sound.

Wonderful; thank you for looking them over.

There is one thing I would like to point out. We have become so wrapped up in the social aspect of this, and rightfully so since that is the manner in which we are using it, that we have lost sight of its original intent: hospital use.

Oh, I hadn't realized, but now that you say that ... Must you always be right about everything?

I would certainly prefer it if you continue to tell me so.

Since we have not yet finalized the means to add emotion to the conversation, I'll tell you that I've almost strained myself rolling my eyes at you.

I am trying desperately to work up some sympathy for your injury. How do we always get so off topic?

Perhaps we are meant for bigger things than working.

Are there bigger things than working? I am shocked that you would say so.

No, I still put it as my number one priority. Still, I've found other things tend to occupy my mind as of late.

Oh. Well ... my point was that I believe you are ready to unveil your product.

I know, although I must admit that I am terrified of doing this again.

Consider last time a trial run.

Right. And, I have you this time. Oh, how do I give you credit when I don't even know your name?

I do not wish to have my name attached to this.

So much for confidence.

I have every confidence in both you and your quill. What I wish is for you to go out and make a name for yourself.

But we did this together. It wouldn't be right.

Please honor my wishes here. If at some point in time you decide to offer an updated version, perhaps I will be willing to consent.

Okay, but I'm feeling nauseated just thinking about this. Will you come with me?

I cannot accompany you. You need to do this on your own. And I am not going to offer platitudes because I cannot guarantee how you will be received. However, you are going into this with a high quality product to sell that we know will work this time. They will have to love you.

Do you really think so?

Indeed. Go in there and dazzle them as you did with me and you will be fine.

I dazzled you?

You are the only princess with whom I have spent this much time in correspondence.

Oh, so you've been contacted by princesses in the past?

They are a dime a dozen.

Thank you.

For what?

Everything.

You are welcome, princess.

Good night, sweet prince.

Good night.

~*~

Hi.

Good Evening.

Everything is set for Thursday morning, so there's no going back now.

I am proud of you for not backing down. I know all too well how frightening it can be to put yourself out there.

It really is. I'm going to be a nervous wreck until then. My best friend says that the Intelli-quill is just an object, so if no one likes it, I shouldn't take it personally.

But you cannot help it because while everyone else sees it as another new product, you view it as an extension of yourself.

It's like you're in my head.

I have done my fair share of research and development, mostly streamlining existing techniques. In fact, I have always dreamed of having a career in that field, but I have had neither the time nor the money necessary to make that a reality.

That's my dream as well. Maybe ... Oh I'm being silly.

Out with it.

Well, perhaps if this is lucrative, instead of dividing the money in half and then parting ways, we could pool some of it and work on something else.

That would be acceptable.

Could we meet, please? You seem apprehensive, but I already know that you're intelligent and kind. Well, when you want to be. The only real unknown is what you look like, and I promise you that is of little import to me.

Then why are you so adamant that we meet?

I want to hear your voice.

My voice?

Yes. I hear you talking in my head each evening, and I don't know if it's accurate. And, sometimes when we discuss certain topics, you get excited about them. Or, at least I think you do because you start writing faster, but I want to see it in your eyes.

I don't know.

Please. Dinner on Friday, that's all I ask. I promise, whatever you are worried about is of no consequence to me. If things go well on Thursday, you can congratulate me, and we'll drink to our success. If things go poorly, I may need you there to console me.

I am no good at consoling women.

Well, it's high time you learned. Anyhow, let's hope that isn't necessary. Please.

If it means that much to you, we can have dinner, but we are going somewhere Muggle.

It's a deal.

~*~

Severus was out of bed for the first time since he'd left St. Mungo's, and he wasn't sure why he hadn't tried it sooner. His legs were much too weak for walking, but he had a motorized wheelchair that could take him where he needed to go. A baby gate over the stairs was a little much, he thought, but he appreciated his grandmother's concern just the same.

Victoria walked into the room with scissors and a comb.

"How lovely. The cleanup crew is here," he said.

"And what a job they have in front of them," she said. "I know that according to you this is not a date, but you could do with a haircut to make you more presentable."

"It is not just according to me. It really is not a date. We are considering going into business together." Severus could not contain the smile that was creeping across his face at the idea of prolonging his relationship with Azalea.

"How wonderful. I can't wait to meet this girl. From what little you've told me, she sounds lovely."

"She is different from most women. She is mature and sensible."

"Both good traits for you."

"Except she still occasionally talks about this fairytale nonsense."

"Oh, Severus, every girl dreams of her prince riding up on his noble steed and sweeping her off her feet. Some of us hold onto that longer than others, but it's intrinsic to the female population."

"If you say so."

A few more snips and she held up the mirror for him to see. "It's a minor improvement," he said.

"Don't sell yourself short. Here." She held out her hand for the mirror, then picked up his shaving kit.

"I can do that," he said.

"I know, but I want to. This was one of my favorite activities while you were unconscious."

"You should get out more."

"If that isn't the pot calling the kettle black. Oh, I forgot: you have a date tomorrow."

"Gram," he warned.

"You don't scare me. Not while I have a freshly sharpened blade in my hand."

"You would never hurt me."

"No, but I have no qualms about etching something embarrassing onto your cheek."

"You would not."

"You don't know me very well, do you? Just sit still." She began to pull the blade across his jaw. "I can't decide between 'kiss me Azalea' and..."

"Enough!"

"Okay, I'm sorry. It's just good to see the fight back in you."

He closed his eyes and allowed the constant scraping of the blade and the steady hand of his grandmother soothe away the nerves that had begun to collect in his stomach.

~~*

Friday morning started with a dreary rain which reflected Severus' mood. Victoria walked in and found him still in bed.

"I thought that once you'd been up in your chair, you'd be chomping at the bit to get back there each morning. You spent so much time in that bed, I can see the imprint of your arse in the mattress."

She flitted about the room, straightening the curtains and picking up some trash off his bedside table to dispose of. "I pressed your slacks for tonight. I wasn't sure what shirt you wanted to wear, so let me know, and I'll take care of that, as well. I don't know that you're strong enough to Apparate, especially with the added weight of the chair, so I thought I'd drive you. I can drop you off a block away so that she doesn't see, although it seems she would understand why you aren't driving yourself." She finished fussing with the drapes and turned around to face him. "Severus?"

"I am not going," he mumbled.

"Excuse me?" she asked.

"I said I am not going."

"Severus, don't chicken out now. You should ju..."

"I know her, Gram." He held up a section of the *Daily Prophet* where a young girl stood at a podium, speaking and gesturing wildly with her arms.

"Doesn't that make it easier?"

"She was a student, and not one to whom I was particularly nice."

"Let me see." Victoria grabbed her glasses where they hung at her chest and put them on. "Is that Harry Potter's friend? She's lovely." She looked over and shushed him before he could speak. "I'm not saying that she likely has a shelf full of beauty pageant trophies, but she has stunning eyes. And what I wouldn't give for her hair instead of this ramrod straight business the Princes were cursed with. But mostly, she's passionate. You can tell from here how much she cares about what she's saying. You don't find that so often anymore, and let me tell you, that will serve you well in every aspect of your relationship."

"God, does everything have to be about sex with you?"

"I was referring to the spectacular arguments you are bound to have. But, if you want to talk about sex ..."

"It does not matter. I am not going to dinner, and I am no longer going to have any contact with her."

"Severus," she said.

"It is not up for negotiation!"

She placed her hand on his shoulder. "All right, I'll leave you alone. I do hope you will reconsider, though. Call me if you need anything."

Severus was glad to see her and her sad eyes leave his room. He yanked open the drawer on his bedside table and extracted his wand. He had yet to try and use magic, and he made his debut with an *Incendio* directed at the *Daily Prophet*.

~~*

Hermione sat at the table, sipping on wine and munching bread sticks. She tried to control herself, but eating was a nervous habit, and her basket was nearly empty. She checked her watch. *Fifteen minutes late*. He had seemed to her to be the punctual type. *Of course*, she reasoned, *how much can one really gather about a person from a few months worth of exchanged letters?*

A waiter approached her with an envelope in his hand. "Are you Hermione Granger?"

"Yes."

"This was dropped off at the counter for you."

"Oh? Did you see who delivered it?"

"No. It sort of just appeared while the hostess was away."

"All right, then, thank you."

She noted the prince's handwriting and tore through the envelope.

Hermione,

I find myself unable to join you for dinner tonight. I apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused you. Please find enclosed the means to pay for your dinner.

She turned the page over as if it would continue on the back. *That's all he has to say? He didn't even sign it.* She shoved it back in the envelope and left it with the breadcrumbs on the table.

~~*

The incessant pounding on the front door disturbed the Potters from their dinner.

"I'm coming. Hold your horses," Harry said. He opened the front door and immediately had an armful of Hermione.

"Is your wife here?" she sobbed onto his shoulder.

"Yes. Is everything okay?" He looked out the door over her shoulder and saw nothing but the night sky and the park beyond.

"Does it look okay?" she asked.

"Right. Let's get you to the couch, and I'll go fetch Ginny." He guided her over and helped her sit, then released a strand of hair that was stuck to her face and tucked it behind her ear.

Moments later, Ginny emerged from the dining room. "Hermione, what happened?"

"Oh, Gin, it's just awful."

Ginny grabbed a box of tissues and joined her on the couch. "Tell me."

"We were supposed to meet for dinner, and he stood me up."

Ginny gasped. "But I thought things were going so well. He didn't even have the decency to tell you he wouldn't be coming? That doesn't sound like the same person."

"I know," Hermione said, hiccuping. "There's only one explanation. He saw me in the *Daily Prophet*, and my picture was too hideous. He couldn't bear to be seen with me in public."

"I think you're overreacting. He probably doesn't even read the paper. Chances are this is a coincidence." Ginny waved her wand at the ever growing pile of tissues between them, and they disappeared.

"No, he did send a letter, but it was really curt. And, it was addressed to *Hermione*."

"Oh, dear." Ginny wrapped her arms around her friend and let her cry herself out. "Why don't you stay here tonight?"

Hermione nodded her agreement.

"Do you need to send an owl to your employer?"

"No, I don't work tomorrow. And anyway, I turned in my notice when St. Mungo's signed an agreement to buy my product."

"Hermione! Why didn't you say so?"

"It was in the paper. I thought everyone knew."

"Ron is at odds with them. Made us swear we wouldn't read it any more. But congratulations! Let me go find Harry, and we can celebrate."

"Thanks, Gin, but I don't feel much like celebrating."

"Okay, I understand. Why don't you go up to the guest room and take a hot bath. I'll get the bed made up so it will be ready when you're done. There's dinner left if you're hungry, but if you just want to go to bed, that's fine too."

"I think I will just go to bed, but would you help me with something tomorrow?"

"Whatever you need."

Hermione nodded her thanks and headed up the stairs.

A/N- This chapter title comes from a scene in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*:

Beast: I want to do something for her ... but what?

Cogsworth: Well, there's the usual things: flowers ... chocolates ... promises you don't intend to keep.

As always, a million thanks to Palathene for being the first set of eyes on this story, and to Keppiehed for disposing of my grammatical disasters. I should also thank Teaoili for being a fantastic admin.