

Partners

by Savva

They were partners ... in more ways than one.

18-Feb-05

Chapter 1 of 2

They were partners ... in more ways than one.

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc., are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author.

Huge thank you to my beta krazyredhead0317.



Partners

Love me love me love me

Say you do

Let me fly away with you

So my love is like the wind

And wild is the wind

(Wild Is The Wind/Nina Simone)

February 18, 2005

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to San Francisco International Airport. The temperature outside is 18C, and it is 6:30 PM local time. It was a pleasure to have you aboard our aircraft. Thank you for choosing British Airways. Have a nice evening." The weary voice of their captain rang through the cabin, somehow reminding Hermione of Kingsley Shacklebolt. Their head of Aurors also always sounded tired and yet surprisingly reassuring. She drew a relieved sigh and finally let go of Harry's hand, which she had been frantically clasping almost continuously for the last thirteen hours. Although their flight had been smooth enough, it had done nothing for her panicky state of mind. She absolutely loathed flying. Still. Even being an Auror hadn't helped her drop that stupid phobia.

"Thank goodness, it's over," she muttered and turned to Harry, who just opened his eyes and groggily stared at her through his glasses, which sat slightly askew. Nowadays, he sported sleek, modern frames that made him look quite sharp most of the time. "Remind me to never, ever fly again," she said and straightened the glasses on his nose.

Harry's face immediately assumed a guilty expression, and he shifted nervously. "You know we couldn't request a Portkey. Kings will kill us as it is, even without adding an unauthorized use of International Portkey to it."

"I know, partner, I know." She smiled and patted his knee. "Don't worry about it. We're back on the ground, and that's what counts."

"Chicken." He snorted and covered her hand with his. "Robert promised to organize the Portkey for our way back. He said that he has connections. With any luck, he'll be able to do it for all three of us," he said, and his green eyes lit up with hope. For a moment, she saw a glimpse of the Harry she had met more than a decade ago – open and optimistic. Alas, before she even managed to blink, his jaw tightened, his gaze turned hollow, and he added in a dull voice, "If there *will be* three of us."

Hermione stifled a sigh and squeezed his knee. "We'll know soon enough."

"Yep." Harry nodded and averted his gaze suddenly very interested in his surroundings.

Meanwhile, the plane had reached its gate and stopped moving. Impatient to leave, people around them began to bustle about, hastily pulling their suitcases from the compartments and rushing down the aisle. Hermione and Harry waited until the plane was almost empty before taking their bags and moving toward the exit. No one was waiting for them, and they weren't in a hurry to get to their hotel, knowing quite well that falling asleep wouldn't be a simple task.

About an hour later, seated in a yellow taxicab and listening to cheerful Hindi music, they moved rapidly towards San Francisco, which was blanketed in a thick fog. Harry was silent, keeping his eyes on the window, though Hermione was certain that he wasn't watching the scenery. Just out of habit, she tried to engage him in conversation, knowing beforehand that it was completely useless – she didn't get anything more than a noncommittal 'hmm' from him. The landscape wasn't at all interesting, and eventually, lacking other options, she focused her attention on their driver, who gleefully sang along to the song that was streaming from his radio, swaying his head in its snow-white turban along with the beat.

Soon, their cab stopped near an old hotel, and a handsome attendant in a flashy red uniform gallantly opened the door for her. Harry, seemingly unaware that they had arrived, kept staring at the window, and Hermione had to tug on his elbow in order to get his attention. He gave her a vacant smile, muttered, "Sorry," and hastily climbed out of the car.

The pompousness of the burgundy-coloured and gilt-covered foyer gave Hermione an instant headache, and she was grateful when they made it to the lift, which, fortunately, was decorated in much milder colours. Their two adjacent rooms looked pleasant, and Hermione went looking for Harry after throwing her bag on the bed. She found him investigating the contents of a mini-fridge. "Aha!" he exclaimed, and withdrew two tiny bottles of Jack Daniels.

"I think we need to eat first," said Hermione, muttering the cleaning charm on the glasses that Harry had already plunked on a coffee table.

"Don't be a killjoy," he said, and emptied the bottles into the glasses. "Cheers."

Hermione sighed, echoed his 'cheers', and took a swig, watching him finish his drink in one go.

"All right, what do you want to eat?" he said, grabbing a ridiculously thick menu and skimming through its pages.

"I don't know," she said, and shuffled back to her room. "Order whatever, you know what I like. I need to take a quick shower," she called from her bathroom before closing the door.

After the shower, an unknown number of tiny bottles of whiskey and dinner, which was filled with a heavy silence despite all Hermione's efforts, they finally admitted that it was time for bed, though both of them knew that they wouldn't be able to fall asleep easily – there was too much on their minds. After about an hour of restless turning and tossing, Hermione gave up and just lay in her bed, staring at the flickers of light on the wall and listening to the sounds of the city. A soft knock on the door confirmed her suspicion that Harry couldn't sleep, either.

"It's open, Harry," she sighed, and a moment later she could discern his vague silhouette on the threshold.

"I can't sleep," she heard him whispering.

"Yeah, me too," she said, and moved to the side, opening the covers for him. "Come." The sound of his bare feet on the floor drew closer, the bed bowed, and in the next second his arms were wrapped around her midriff with his warm lips sliding over her bare shoulder.

"I'm sorry, but I need it ... need *you* right now," he muttered against her skin, his uneasiness almost palpable in the darkness of the room.

She smiled and kissed his messy hair. "Don't be silly. That's what friends are for, and besides, I need you too." Shifting, she let his lips find hers and returned his hesitant kiss with reassuring decisiveness. Encouraged, he took it from there, deftly driving them to the brink. They had known each other for so long and so thoroughly, it felt natural, perfect, really. Moving in unison, they reached the release they sought simultaneously, though there weren't any accompanying declarations of affection. It wasn't about love.

Later, after Harry's laboured breathing had turned into a light snoring, and his sweaty forehead rested against her side, Hermione once again lay wide awake, listening to the sleepy sounds of San Francisco and thinking about what had just happened. If Kings had known what was going on between them, they would both have been sacked in the blink of an eye. There was a strict policy about fraternising. Thank goodness they didn't do this often, just once in a while when the stress level was too high to handle. Their first time had happened spontaneously, a few weeks after Ron's funeral. His death had hit them hard. Unbearably hard. Not only had they both lost their friend, but Harry had also lost his partner. Yet it had been Hermione who had come to him, crying and pleading for him to make her feel alive. He had, and the morning after, she had decided to join the Aurors. It had seemed logical to her, to take Ron's place – that was what friends were for.

For some reason, Kings hadn't been too pleased with her decision and had denied her request to be taken on without proper training. Hence, Malfoy had become Harry's new partner, while she had taken the required courses. The first couple of months were rough for both wizards, and Harry had spent a lot of time with her, endlessly ranting

about Malfoy's shortcomings. Eventually though, they had got along well. Surprisingly well. So well that it had set Hermione thinking, to be honest. She had caught Harry staring at Draco more than once, and every time his green eyes had lit up with something she couldn't quite place. She even had asked him, "Is there anything going on between you two?"

Alas, Harry, being Harry, had just shrugged his shoulders, and said, "We're partners, nothing more." And indeed, they were the perfect partners for almost three years. They would have definitely made Aurors of the Year if Draco hadn't suddenly disappeared without any trace. It had happened nine months ago, and Harry hadn't stopped looking for him ever since. And that was when Hermione had returned the favour, trying to keep Harry from climbing the walls from uncertainty. Maybe it'd been wrong, but it'd worked. Besides, sex was much healthier than a Calming Draught or Firewhisky.

Hermione turned to Harry and gently stroked his face, lingering on the long horizontal crease that was now permanently etched into his forehead. So much had changed since the summer of 1998; it was hard to wrap her mind around it. So much hadn't gone as planned. She remembered all three of them, the Golden Trio, sitting in the Leaky and talking about their future. It had seemed so bright, so necessarily peaceful and wonderful. If someone had told her then that it would come to this, she would never have believed it. And yet, here she was, Hermione Granger an Auror and Harry's partner, in San Francisco, looking for Draco Malfoy, who was presumed to be dead months ago. No one could have imagined that, not even Professor Trelawney. Apparently, the future didn't need Voldemort to go astray.

The first glints of dawn found Hermione still wide awake. She sighed. It was going to be a tough day.

19-Feb-05

Chapter 2 of 2

They were partners ... in more ways than one.

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc., are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author.

Huge thank you to my beta krazyredhead0317.

February 19, 2005

She looked up at the grey sky. Warm droplets pounded on her face, streaming down her neck, washing off her memories, making her feel whole. Here, she thought, this is happiness.

A soft tap on her shoulder tore Hermione from the dream, and startled, she ripped her eyes open. She couldn't recall falling asleep, but judging by the bright sunlight filling the room, she must have dozed off for a few hours. Harry, already dressed, his unmanageable hair still wet, smiled at her. "Morning, sleepyhead. Robert will meet us in forty-five minutes."

A quiet knock interrupted him, and a muffled "Breakfast" sounded from the corridor.

"Coming," shouted Harry and dashed across the room.

Using the moment, Hermione rolled off the bed. Her head felt heavy, and it took a moment for everything around to stop spinning. Muttering that she hated Jack Daniel's, she wrapped herself in a bedsheet, grabbed her jeans and a tee and shuffled to the loo. She really did hate drinking, and the whiskey combine with jet lag, Hermione was feeling quite the worse for wear. The cool shower did help, and she felt much better when she came back.

As she returned to the room, she found Harry waiting for her, absent-mindedly skimming through a fresh issue of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, with their breakfast neatly served on a coffee table. He threw the newspaper on the table the moment she sat down near him. "I didn't know if you wanted any juice," he said, removing the Warming Charm from the tea and pancakes. Pushing his glasses low on his nose, he opened the menu. "They have some weird stuff here." He began to read in a nasal monotone. "Wheatgrass juice, sprouts juice, broccoli juice, acai berry juice, fresh coconut water. I'm pretty sure they have dandelion juice too, and I think I've seen carrot tea somewhere as well. They must have ordered it all straight from Lovegood's gardens." He unsuccessfully tried to conceal a wry smile.

Hermione snorted and elbowed him. "Stop it."

"Hey," he exclaimed, and unable to hold his façade any longer, laughed out loud.

Sipping her English Breakfast tea and nibbling on her pancakes, Hermione grinned at him: she treasured these rare moments of Harry being so carefree.

"Fresh coconut water, though ..." Harry rubbed his chin with a puzzled expression. "Draco likes it; he likes everything coconut. I've never come round to understanding the taste." He grimaced. "It's pretty weird, actually...reminds me of wet socks. Yucky stuff."

Wanting to prolong the moment, Hermione flailed her hand and puckered her lips, trying her best to impersonate Lavender. "I dunno," she said. "Piña Colada tastes sooo fabulous."

Alas, Harry's gaze became unfocussed, and he drew a heavy sigh. "Yeah," he breathed out absently, and Hermione reckoned that the moment had passed. They finished their breakfast in silence, and fifteen minutes later, they were ready to leave.

"Are we going to come back?" she said as she put her jacket on and threw her purse over her shoulder.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Not sure. I hope not. I paid while you were sleeping, just in case." Setting 'Do not disturb' signs on both doors, he added the Muggle-repellent charm, said, "Come on," and walked down the corridor to the elevator.

Robert, a cheerful-looking American Auror, was already waiting for them in the lobby. Hermione had last seen him in London in November. He had been coming to the Ministry every four or five months to exchange information on wanted wizards and witches. Functioning under the regulations of Magical Intergovernmental Criminal Information Management, they were supposed to disclose such data regularly. The lack of a Muggle-like network and computer system was a drawback, of course, so they had to do it the old-fashioned way, by physically cataloguing pictures, names and other facts. Naturally, as soon as Hermione had begun to work there, the majority of the paperwork had somehow landed on her shoulders. Thus she knew Rob rather well.

"Hi, guys," he shouted as soon as they were close enough, blinding them both with his sparkling-white toothy smile and enthusiastically shaking their hands. His smile always made Hermione nostalgic: it reminded her of a toothpaste commercial that had been popular when she was little and of her parents. She focused on his eyes rather

than his smile: he had nice, warm eyes.

"Sorry I couldn't make it to the airport yesterday. My girls had a soccer practice," Rob said.

"It's all right, Rob. We were dead tired anyway." Harry smacked his shoulder in a friendly gesture. "Did you say soccer practice, mate? Why not Quidditch?"

Rob let out a hearty chortle. "Ah, man, they're still too young for Quidditch," he said, steering them from the hotel to the street.

It was surprisingly warm and sunny outside. With London's miserable February weather, it seemed to Hermione that the winter wasn't going to end any time soon, if ever. Here in San Francisco, however, spring was definitely in the air. Plus, Rob's cheerfulness appeared to be contagious, and Hermione found herself grinning despite everything and without reason. "How old are the girls?" she asked, tilting her face up and enjoying the warmth of the Californian sun on her skin.

"Five. They're twins," said Rob, and he readily fished a picture from his chest pocket, in which two blue-eyed girls giggled just as cheerfully as their father.

"They're gorgeous," said Hermione and Harry in unison.

"My little stars," Rob muttered as he thoughtfully gazed at the photo, before clearing his throat and stashing it back in his pocket. "All right, guys, follow me," he said, with his enthusiastic smile once again in place. "The Apparition point's a few blocks from here."

"Where are we going?" questioned Harry, hurrying after him and forcing Hermione to hurry as well, even though she didn't really want to speed up: she would have gladly enjoyed a lovely relaxing stroll.

"We're going to our famous Monsieur Henry," Rob said, navigating them up the steep hills of San Francisco. "Just don't be surprised...he's quite a character."

"Why? Who's he?" Harry frowned. "Does he know something?"

"Well, Henry's owned an escort agency for, I think, the last ninety years or so. He has the vastest clientele and the best girls and boys in the Bay area."

"Escort agency!" said Harry, who obviously didn't like the sound of it and failed to see a connection. "What does it have to do with Draco?"

Hermione put a calming hand on his shoulder and whispered, "Wait. I'm sure we're about to find out how it connects to Draco." She sighed...patience had never been Harry's strong suit.

"You see," Rob said, "we routinely check Henry's so-called establishment. Just in case. There have been instances when we discovered runaway kids among Henry's escorts. Anyway, long story short: I visited him last week and found this." Rob stopped, extracted a photograph from a pocket of his trench coat and offered it to Harry. Solemnly, he went on, "I'm not sure if it's Draco; he looks kind of different. I did ask Henry the name of the man in the photo, and I'll be honest, I even pulled a bit of a bad-cop routine on the old bastard. Alas, he swore that he didn't know anything. He said that the man calls himself D, and that he found him wandering the streets."

Harry's sharp intake of breath caused Rob to cease talking. "It's him," Harry managed to rasp as he turned to Hermione and thrust the picture into her hands. One quick glance lodged a hard lump in Hermione's throat: it really was Draco, and, oh Merlin, did he look different. Claspings Harry's arm, she felt his muscles tense, and she could bet that he was silently clenching his wand.

"Well, let's get going," said Rob, beckoning them to a hidden courtyard. "Ready?" He took hold of their hands.

"Yes," they answered simultaneously, and a second later Hermione felt the nauseating force of a Side-Along-Apparition. As soon as they landed, both of them assumed ready-to-strike positions with their wands out. Rob, however, shook his head at them, mouthed, "Relax, there's no need," and guided them up the stairs. Henry, clothed in a flashy à la seventies terracotta suit, met them in a foyer, which looked rather dated to Hermione's eyes. Muted sage wallpaper wasn't really her thing.

"Robbie, my dear, so nice to see you again," Henry murmured, making a special emphasis on 'again' and curling his lips in a polite smile.

"Hey there, old man, how are you?" Rob strode to Henry and smacked his shoulder, perhaps with a little too much force. "I brought you visitors," he said, nodding toward Hermione and Harry.

Henry's face lit up with curiosity. "You did, Robbie? Hmmm, let me see." He grabbed the glasses that dangled from a thick gold chain on his chest and put them on his nose, scrutinising his guests. "Merlin, is that Mister Harry Potter himself?" he eventually whispered. "I can't believe it. In my humble establishment!" He dashed to Harry, clasped his hand, and shook it enthusiastically. When the stern-faced Harry, after a bit of a struggle, finally managed to free his hand, Henry turned to Hermione. "Miss Hermione Granger, I presume. What a pleasure," he purred, and with a gallant bow, kissed her hand, peering in her eyes.

It took all Hermione's politeness not to wrestle her hand from Henry's. There was something repulsive about him: his almost colourless, slightly bulging eyes, or his clammy fingers, or maybe it was his insincere grin. She couldn't quite determine. Noticing from the corner of her eye that Harry was discreetly wiping his hand on his trousers, Hermione concluded that it was indeed Henry's fingers.

"Mister ..." Harry paused, prompting Henry to provide his last name.

"Just Henry, Mister Potter. Call me Henry." Henry waved his hand dismissively.

Harry cleared his throat and said, "We have a few questions for you, Henry."

"Of course you do, my dear boy," Henry croaked, throwing an odd and not entirely friendly glance at Harry. The next second, however, his smile was back, and he exclaimed, "My goodness, where are my manners? Follow me, my darlings," and strode down the wallpapered corridor, beckoning them to follow him.

"Would you be so kind, Mister Potter, as to give me an autograph? I want to surprise my grandchildren."

"You don't have grandkids, Henry," said Rob with a snort. "Who are you kidding?"

"He-he-he, Robbie, Robbie, you know me too well," Henry cackled, rounding the corner. "Here we are," he said when they all reached a big and surprisingly modern room. A huge window filled one of the walls, showcasing a beautiful view of the Golden Gate Bridge. "Make yourself comfortable, dear friends." Henry gave them another of his smiles and settled behind an elaborately carved mahogany desk. "How can I help you, Mister Potter?" He locked his fish-like eyes on Harry.

Rob walked around the desk and, hovering over Henry, his usual friendliness completely gone, said, "Did you find the wizard I was asking you about?"

Henry shifted in his chair. "Robbie, I told you before, and I'm telling you again, I don't know where he is. He appears once in a blue moon, and I give him clients. That's about it. If you think I like this situation, you're terribly wrong. They ask for him when he's not around he is a pretty boy, you know. It's not how I like to conduct my business, and I hate it. If clients are unhappy, I am unhappy."

He didn't get a chance to add anything else, because the next moment, Harry's wand was pressed into his jugular vein. "Clients?" Harry hissed. Driving the sharp end of his wand deeper into Henry's neck, he continued through clenched teeth, "What kind of clients? Did you force Draco to work for you, you stinky pimp?"

For a moment, Hermione contemplated interfering. However, eventually deciding that a little bit of heat would do Henry good, she remained silent. Impressively, he didn't bat an eye at the sudden attack. He just uttered a displeased grunt, raised his hands in a pacifying gesture and said, "Young man, please remove your wand from my neck. I'm too old for these games, and as you can see, I'm unarmed." When Harry ignored him, he went on, "I'll tell you one thing: I've owned this business for ninety-five years. None of my escorts has ever been forced to work here. It's a privilege to be hired by Henry's Escort Agency. I have very high standards." He paused and drew a

tired sigh. "Please do step back; it's getting highly taxing to talk with you two hovering over me like that."

Rob growled but took two steps back, whereas Harry moved only about an inch, though he did remove his wand from Henry's neck. "Keep talking," he got out gruffly.

"Ahh, much better," Henry murmured. "I believe, Mister Potter, you owe me an apology. I did save your friend, after all."

"Partner," Harry corrected.

Henry chuckled and arched an eyebrow. "As you wish: I saved your *partner*. He was cold, hungry and sick when I found him. Barely conscious. Wandering the streets, still in a hospital gown: he probably walked out of a Muggle infirmary the moment he came to. He still had a needle in his arm. He was bleeding, Mister Potter. He might have died if it hadn't been for me. I reckon I've earned at least a little respect, if not gratitude."

"Hospital gown," Harry whispered, recoiling and gazing around, his green eyes frantically seeking Hermione. Sensing his need for her, she was near him in a heartbeat, her fingers intertwined with his and her shoulder keeping him from slumping. *God*, she caught herself thinking, *in just what kind of mess did Draco get himself?*

"As for your concerns, and I can see you have them ... " Henry's voice was cold, and his eyebrows arched suggestively. "Alas, I cannot tell you anything soothing, as what happens between an escort and a client, stays between an escort and a client. You'll have to ask your partner. Perhaps he will tell you, some day. I bet he's got some stories." He chuckled.

Hermione felt Harry trying to leap toward him once again. This time, she didn't let him. "He isn't worth it, Harry," she whispered, clasping his hand with both of hers. She could feel Harry's heart thumping wildly, and her own heart tightened in response: she truly wished that Henry would stop talking. He had spoken enough drivel already.

As if sensing her thoughts, Henry stood up, walked around his desk and stopped near them. "All in all, I have been extremely nice to your partner. I offered him a place to stay and a job. The fact that he could never stay here for long wasn't my fault. Something wasn't right with his head." He tapped on his own head to demonstrate his point, and Hermione noticed how long and perfectly polished his nails were. Somehow that discovery made her nauseous. Henry was positively disgusting.

"It did my business no favours," Henry continued, "and the last time he was here, I warned him if he left again, he mustn't come back. Ever. I'm not healthy enough to handle that type of problem; I'm an old man. And yet, just because I love Robbie, I asked around the other day and found out where he was seen lately. Here is the place." He extended his hand with a parchment to Harry. "Now, please, leave. You've made me tired." With that, he bowed his head, muttered, "Miss Granger," and, facing Rob, added, "You know the way out, Robbie. Kiss the girls and Sophie from me," and disappeared with a pop.

Rob, shifting awkwardly in the middle of the room, rubbed the back of his head and said, "Well, that was intense. Um, food, anyone?"

"Can we just go there?" said Harry, giving Rob the paper with the address.

Rob threw a quick glance at it and shook his head. "Nope. It's too early. Come on, I'll explain everything over lunch."

Soon, they were sitting in a cosy place on Union Street. Hermione had already ordered a shrimp cocktail and was now sipping a nice cold chardonnay, thoughtfully watching the motley passers-by and listening to the boys, who were waiting for their steak tips, meanwhile enjoying Bloody Marys. Though, to be honest, Harry hardly looked pleased.

"What did you mean, 'it's too early'? Why?" he said as soon as their waiter had taken the order.

"It's not what you think," said Rob.

"What? I thought it was a room or a motel or something of that sort," Harry said.

"It's not. It's a place, a church to be exact, where hobos spend the night."

"Hobos?" said Hermione, not quite grasping the meaning.

"Homeless people."

"Homeless people." Harry's eyes widened, and he raked his fingers through his messy locks. "I don't understand."

"I think it's my fault that our talk with Henry got out of hand. I should have explained more," Rob said, and took a swig of his drink. "First of all, Henry's not exactly a pimp. He does provide housing for newbies, just to get them going, you know. Until they can rent their own place."

"Still a bloody pimp," Harry muttered.

Hermione nodded. She had to agree, Henry did come across as an utter git.

Rob swayed his head. "Perhaps he is. It's not the point. We are talking about Draco now, and, as he explained to me, he found Draco in a very bad state, sifting through the trash, looking for something to eat. Henry took him in, cleaned him up, bought him a wardrobe and introduced him to clients. The usual shit, I guess."

"I just don't understand," Hermione said, "why Draco didn't try to contact us. He knows you, he could have found you." The whole story sounded illogical to her, right from the Draco-sifting-through-rubbish part.

"Henry said something about Draco's head not being right. What did he mean?" Harry said, his gaze dark.

Rob sighed. "Yes, about that. It seems that Draco doesn't remember anything, even his name, except that it starts with D. Some kind of traumatic memory loss, I guess."

"Oh, God." Hermione glanced at Harry, who kept silently clenching and unclenching his fists. "What happened to him?"

"No idea," said Rob. "What I do know...at least what Henry told me...is that Draco was restless. He kept disappearing for weeks and then reappearing on Henry's doorstep, hungry and dirty again. Eventually, Henry had it with him. I can imagine that there will be an extensive interdepartmental investigation, once you're ready to make it official, that is. There are so many questions, starting with how the hell he ended up in San Francisco in the first place."

"I have to talk to him," muttered Harry, staring at the window with blank, unseeing eyes.

The waiter brought Hermione's shrimp cocktail first, but her appetite just wasn't there any more. Somehow, the image of a dirty and hungry Draco deprived her of any desire to eat.

"We need to find him and take him back to London. Today," said Harry, just as his and Rob's food arrived at the table. He finished his drink, and to Hermione's surprise, began to consume his steak tips. Sometimes, boys astonished her. Truly.

A few hours later, Rob brought them to the desolate city-centre area where Draco supposedly spent his nights. Plastic bags and old newspapers covered the pavement, and the church that towered over it looked ominously dark for San Francisco. The thick fog that had begun to cocoon the city made the picture even more ghastly. "You can wait there." Rob pointed to a Starbucks across the street.

"Wow," Hermione said, genuinely surprised. "You have Starbucks in this kind of neighbourhood?"

Rob chuckled. "It's San Francisco, baby. We have them everywhere, and besides, on weekdays, this street doesn't look so empty." He glanced at his watch, coughed and, with a guilty expression, went on, "They will begin to gather right after sunset. I'm sorry, guys, but I need to go. It's Saturday, and the girls are waiting for me."

Harry patted his shoulder. "It's all right, Rob. You spent enough time with us, as it is."

Hermione readily joined Harry and, smiling, added, "Yes. Thank you for everything, and sorry for spoiling your weekend."

"Ah, that's OK." Rob gave them his habitual, sparkling smile. "That's what buddies are for, isn't it? By the way, I made you a Portkey. Untraceable!" He wiggled his brows, looking very smug. "I told you I have connections. It should bring you right to Hermione's apartment." With that, he handed Hermione an envelope. "The card inside will activate it." He hugged Hermione, shook Harry's hand and, saying, "All right, then, I'm out of here," turned to leave. "Send a Patronus if you need me," he said, before walking down the street and eventually vanishing in the fog.

"How does he know where your flat is?" Harry said, as soon as Rob had gone.

Seeing his scowl, Hermione began to laugh. "Honestly, Harry, you're such a dunce sometimes," she said, and smacked him upside his head. "Don't you remember, we had lunch at my place, all three of us?"

Harry rubbed his smacked head and said, "Nope."

"Gee, and you're one of the best Aurors, the one that's supposed to remember everything. Oh, whatever, let's go to Starbucks. It's getting chilly." She hastened across the street, listening to Harry's grumbling that it wasn't physically possible to remember everything as he followed her. Once they had settled near the window with two Grande Lattes, they looked at each other and said in unison, "And now we wait."

And they waited, watching how slowly dark silhouettes began to appear near the church. They emerged from the fog from different directions, somewhat resembling ghosts, or so it seemed to Hermione. Some of them dragged big, black bags with their possessions behind them, while other used shopping-carts for the same purpose. Either way, the sight was depressing.

Hours went by, but they didn't see anyone who resembled the one wizard they needed. Hermione threw a glance at Harry, and if his clenched teeth were any indication, he was beginning to lose hope. She sighed and turned back to the window, noticing another silhouette that had appeared at the beginning of the street. He was tall, and he had long blond hair, but that wasn't what caught her attention. The shopping cart with his possessions rolled after him on its own. She did a double take, and then tugged on Harry's sleeve. "Look."

"Merlin," said Harry. A second later, he was on the street, yelling, "Draco!"

Did Harry just Apparate? Hermione thought as she ran outside. He was already near Draco when she caught up with him. Draco stopped and faced them, causing Harry to freeze on the spot. Hermione heard his loud intake of breath and locked her gaze on Draco's face. Yes, it was Draco: very thin, with his blond locks matted and stubble covering his face, but it was definitely him.

For a few long moments, all three of them silently stared at each other.

Harry was the first to speak. "Draco? It's me," he said and moved closer to him.

Draco blinked and, rubbing his stubby cheek, said, "It's interesting that you keep calling me Draco. It does sound familiar, although I cannot quite recall why." His gaze moved from Harry to Hermione. "You look somewhat familiar, as well. Do I know you?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, Draco, you do know me."

"Have we met through Henry?" he said and regarded her with interest, his eyes roaming over her and lingering on the places they shouldn't.

Feeling with embarrassment that her stupid cheeks were flaming...she was supposed to have dropped that blushing nonsense years ago; she wasn't a shrinking violet after all...Hermione hurriedly muttered, "No, not through Henry. Actually, you know Harry even better than me."

Draco returned his grey eyes to Harry again and frowned. "Hmm," he said, and, for a moment, it seemed that his gaze lit up with a spark of recognition. He made a tiny step toward Harry, whose face immediately brightened with relief.

Harry quickly covered the distance between them and, with the words "Come on, partner, it's time to go home," embraced Draco, who didn't protest and even shifted into Harry's embrace.

Hermione drew a sigh and relaxed. Alas, her delight was short-lived, because the next moment, Draco said, "I'm sorry, I don't remember you," and stepped back with a nonchalant shrug. "Oh, and I think I'll keep that," he added with a cocky, very Malfoy smile, showing them Harry's wand clasped between his fingers.

"Fuck," she heard Harry's grumpy whisper.

Indeed, Hermione thought. Apparently, with or without memory, Draco's reflexes still worked fine. His Auror training hadn't been in vain. Fortunately for them all, as soon as Draco began to walk away slowly, Hermione's skills kicked in as well, and, not giving it another thought, she drew her wand, called to Harry, "Be ready to catch him," and aiming at the retreating Draco's back, shouted, "Stupefy!"

Harry bolted with lightning speed and caught Draco in mid-flight, quickly repossessing his wand. It took only a second to activate the Portkey, and soon all three of them were swirling towards London.