

All Night Long

by Grace has Victory

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Diagon Alley

Chapter 1 of 4

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CHAPTER ONE

Diagon Alley

Share a room with Hermione Granger?

I can't do that I felt my face fall before Mum had finished speaking. I managed to change the droop to a nod. I had faced Tom Riddle and lived. I could face Hermione Granger, and my insides would die only a little more.

"But why are we staying at the Leaky Cauldron?" I asked. "Won't it be fearfully expensive?"

"The Ministry is paying," said Mum briskly, "as a favour to your father. It owes him a few. Hermione will be staying with us, because her parents can't afford to take two days off work. They seemed quite relieved when I said we'd see Hermione safely onto the Hogwarts Express."

Mum didn't say that our family owed Hermione Granger a few favours, but it hung in the air between us. It was my fault that Hermione had spent five weeks of the last year unconscious in the hospital wing. If Mr and Mrs Granger were to feel comfortable about sending Hermione back to Hogwarts, they had to see that most wizards were safe, responsible people.

I wish Hermione wouldn't come back to Hogwarts. I squashed that self-centred thought and pulled out Charlie's battered old school trunk. Ron's last-year books were stacked in one corner, and I began removing the titles by Gilderoy Lockhart, because this year the DADA syllabus had changed (again). Last year's robes still fitted ... more or less ... and it would be all right to ask my parents for a couple of new quills. I really needed a new cauldron, one with a thick, solid bottom, but I knew I couldn't mention that to Mum and Dad.

For all my wishing, nothing went hopelessly wrong. Our family moved inexorably towards the new school term without flaw or hitch from the moment I locked the lid of my half-packed trunk to the moment the Granger family burst through the door of the Leaky Cauldron. Hermione was looking brown and radiant. Dad paid for a round of drinks and asked Mr Granger excited questions about street lamps, batteries and televisions. I lifted my nose from my tumbler (of milk, because Dad said I was too young for butterbeer) and stole a glance at Hermione. The very sight of her untidy curls sent a stabbing pain right through my ribs.

Think: *it's my fault that she lost five weeks of her life* But I was not feeling guilty.

Think: *she's taking up all Ron's attention.* But Ron and I had lived on top of one another all summer, so in fact I was glad of a break from him.

Finally Mr and Mrs Granger announced that they had a train to catch ("How do those eckeltrick trains work?" asked Dad). They hugged Hermione goodbye and disappeared through the front door. The rest of us filed out through the back door to Diagon Alley.

"Come on, Hermione," Ron shouted, "let's go and find Harry!"

Stab. Even as Hermione protested, "Wait, Ron, we should buy our books first " I was processing the truth.

Hermione Granger was Harry Potter's girlfriend.

"Slow down," said Mum. "We need to take you to Ollivander's first, young man."

As Mum propelled us towards Ollivander's, I feebly rationalised that not-quite-in-third-year boys don't have girlfriends. Harry probably didn't think of Hermione that way. Not yet.

Hermione was Harry's best friend, and they did everything together. They told one another everything. She might as well be his girlfriend already. No other girl would have a chance.

Especially not a silly, prattling dupe who had broadcast her adoration to the whole world before Harry had even had the chance to decide whether or not he wanted to be friends (no wonder he had decided he didn't!), and then been tricked by Tom Riddle into attacking the whole school so that Harry had been forced into battle against a basilisk in order to save her life ...

"*This one!*" Ron's shout broke into my thoughts. I shook myself. Tom Riddle was *over*, and nothing else could be as serious as that. Ron was waving a fourteen-inch willow wand above his head, and a shower of scarlet stars was swirling out of its unicorn-hair core.

"Oh, look, Ginny," said Mum, "answer your friends when they wave at you!"

Friends? I stared wildly, knowing very well that I had no friends. The waving girls were Vicky Frobisher and Sarah Hooper. By the time I had timidly waved back, they had disappeared into Madam Malkin's. I knew I would never *dare* suggest that we follow them into that forbidden palace Mum might think I was hinting, and really, the old robes did still fit.

All last year I had hoped and hoped that Vicky and Sarah would want to be friends with me. They had been kind, never telling me directly that they didn't want me sitting down next to them in lessons or tagging along after them to the Charms Club, always sharing their sweets or including me in conversation. But they had never taken any initiative in inviting me along. In the end I had realised that I couldn't interfere between two Best Friends like that, so I had stopped following them around. Vicky and Sarah had become even kinder when they realised that I had given up, but not in a way that had encouraged me to try again.

Just as I could never interfere between Harry Potter and Hermione Granger. They were Best Friends. They might share their sweets with me, but they would never share their secrets.

Next we went to Flourish & Blotts, and Ron immediately asked after Harry Potter. Everyone knew Harry, of course, and the manager confidently stated that he had not been here today. Hermione began flying around the shop, gathering armfuls of books, while Mum frowned at our list. Ron was taking up Care of Magical Creatures and Divination, Percy was studying History of Magic (a subject that neither Bill nor Charlie had taken to N.E.W.T. level), and we all needed new DADA texts.

"Thank goodness it's only one DADA text each this year," said Mum. "Let's look in the second-hand section. Careful, Ronald!"

Ron did not need to be warned. He was holding a book that appeared to have *bitten* him. The assistant held out a pillow case into which Ron dropped the book, then a second pillow case for Hermione. "No good putting these monsters in a bag together," he said. "They'd kill each other before you even reached Hogwarts."

The shop door bell jangled as Mum was paying for the books, and in walked Emma Bailey and Katharine Stimpson.

"Hello, Ginny," said Emma cheerfully. "Do you know where to find Goshawk's book?"

"Silly, she won't be buying it," said Katharine. "There hasn't been a new edition for ten years. I'm using Patricia's old one."

"You're lucky, saving all that money on hand-me-down books," said Emma.

"No, *you're* lucky, having all your text books looking so shiny and new," said Katharine.

"Oh, Ginny's met up with some more friends," said Mum briskly, just as I had decided that Emma and Katharine were speaking more to each other than to me. "It's certainly your day today!"

I put the new books into my bag, not troubling to explain that Emma and Katharine weren't really friends either. They were already pulling brand-new books off the shelves. My new DADA book had its cover completely loose from its spine: it was the kind of book a Weasley could afford.

"*Now* can we go and look for Harry?" asked Ron impatiently.

Mum waved them off. Hermione glanced back at me, but Ron did not. They were going to look for Harry without me.

I glanced through the window of Quality Quidditch Supplies even though I knew I would never own my own broomstick. Harry flew like a swallow. There was a crowd of schoolboys goggling at something in the window display, and when I moved a step in the shop's direction, I knew what it was.

A Firebolt.

A real, live, new-release Firebolt, taking up the whole display. Even Mum could not stop herself from staring.

"Hey, Ginny!"

The boys turned their heads, and I realised I knew all of them: Jack Sloper, Andrew Kirke, Howard Dingle and Rhys Jones.

"Hello, boys," I said politely. "That's not real, is it?"

"Of course it's real!" protested Howard indignantly.

"The Irish International Side bought seven of them from this very shop!" said Jack.

"Price on request," I read. I turned away again, feeling queasy. That one broom probably cost more than our family's entire sweepstake winnings.

"Weren't those boys in your class?" asked Mum. I nodded, leaving her to wonder why I hadn't been friendlier. I couldn't explain that none of them had ever taken much notice of me ... and it hurt to look at that beautiful Firebolt ...

Mum started to worry about money again when we entered the Apothecary. We could hand-me-down text books, but there was no escape from the need to buy five separate sets of potion ingredients. While I was staring wistfully at the unicorn horns, I realised that someone else was staring too. Was the whole world trailing me through Diagon Alley? This time it was Colin Creevey.

"Hiya, Ginny, don't you just wish you had a unicorn?" he asked cheerily.

I smiled non-committally. Colin was the one classmate who had been consistently friendly to me last year. It was my fault that he had spent *six months* unconscious in hospital, yet he had never held it against me.

"It would be hard to smuggle a pet like that into Hogwarts, don't you think? It would be scared of all the people. You couldn't keep it indoors, and there isn't really any kind of stable or paddock outdoors. A unicorn might even try to escape to the Forbidden Forest and get hurt. Feeding it would be a problem too. All the same "

"Unicorns do live in the Forbidden Forest," I interrupted, just so that Colin knew this wasn't a monologue. "My brothers told me. The other creatures don't seem to be much of a threat to them."

Colin looked relieved. "*Really?* They live there, and they're more or less safe? I wonder if we'll ever see one? Because you can't really keep a creature like that in captivity at all, it would pine away. But it would be the most brilliant pet ..."

Before I could say anything else, Mum had swooped down again, bulging bags full of basic potions supplies. "Here's another of your friends! They're everywhere!"

"I'm Colin Creevey," he held out his hand to be shaken. "Pleased to meet you, Mrs Weasley."

"Nice to meet you too, dear. Now come along, Ginny, I think we have just enough Sickles left to invest in a few quills. I don't know how Percy wears out his so fast, it must be all those long essays he was writing over the summer ..."

I nearly pointed out that Percy had intended to use his own allowance to buy his new quill (he wanted some kind of special ink-efficient unbreakable-nib swan's feather) but I realised in time that this could give Mum unhelpful ideas. If she bought an economy set of a dozen plain common-and-garden ones, I could always beg Percy to hand his share over to me.

We nearly bumped into Fred and George, who were emerging from Gambol & Jape's as we passed. Their bags were bulging. Fred winked at me and hissed in a stage whisper, "We'll show you *after* dinner, Ginny."

"Frederick Weasley, are you planning to waste your O.W.L. year fooling around with ..."

I tuned out of whatever Mum was saying. George relieved me of my heavy book bag in exchange for his bulging sack of toys. We also met up with Percy a little beyond the Post Office, so we all entered the Leaky Cauldron together just as the clock was striking five.

The Leaky Cauldron

Chapter 2 of 4

There is no escape from the inevitable; Hermione is only a heartbeat away.

CHAPTER TWO

The Leaky Cauldron

"Mark my words." Dad was sitting at the bar of the Leaky Cauldron, saying something very earnest to Ron. Next to Ron stood Hermione and Harry.

I stopped in my tracks. I felt a slow, deep flush spread beneath my freckles as I nearly met the green gaze of the Boy Who Lived. I tore my eyes away in time and stared at the floor, thinking that he was handsomer than I remembered, while I murmured a polite "Hello". Fortunately, Harry did not notice me at all, because Percy had claimed his attention.

I tried to remember the appropriate way to behave in front of Harry. He was my brother's best friend. Ron's other siblings all considered Harry as at least a casual friend and spoke to him easily. I should have done the same. After all, I'd speak politely to Lee Jordan and spend a few moments asking him about himself ... wouldn't I? But it was too late now. I'd missed the moment. Harry either hadn't noticed my omission, or had noticed it in the wrong way. And anything I did now would make the situation worse.

Hermione had smiled at me, but I couldn't think of anything to say.

Hermione.

She had Harry and I didn't.

And we had to share a room tonight.

"I notice they haven't made you two prefects!" Mum was saying to Fred and George.

"What do we want to be prefects for?" asked George, while Fred made gagging noises. "It'd take all the fun out of life!"

I giggled. The idea of Fred or George handing out detentions was so very ridiculous.

Mum started to complain that the twins needed to set a better example for me, but nobody really listened. Soon I was able to grab two of the shopping bags and make some excuse about sorting out my new stuff.

In fact dinner was much more fun than I'd expected. I sat between Fred and George, which put me directly opposite Harry, so that I could look at him without apparently staring. Everyone had a great deal to say, and the five-course meal was very good. We might have sat around listening to the twins teasing Percy until midnight, but the

hard chairs were really not very comfortable to people who had slightly over-eaten after a long day's brisk walking. In the end, I was the first person to stand up and announce that I really must go to bed.

Alone. Safe. I dropped onto the bed. And an earsplitting howl shot out from underneath me. I sprang up again and felt cautiously down the bedspread.

Fur. A cat. I had nearly squashed a cat. I stroked the fur cautiously and it began to purr. I nearly laughed with relief. It was only a cat. It didn't even seem to be an angry cat, although it must know that I had nearly squashed it. I felt my way to the candle niches in the wall and lit them. The cat was stretched out contentedly on my bed, a huge, orange creature, still purring lazily.

My bed? I suddenly realised that the creature in front of me must belong to Hermione. I hadn't known she had a cat. But of course she would have left it on her bed over dinner. She had chosen the bed by the window. It wasn't my bed at all.

Abruptly, I pulled away from the orange cat, took my nightdress from my trunk, and tunnelled into it. Not alone. There was a cat in the room. There had been too much alone-ness last year. As I brushed my teeth, I reminded myself of my resolutions. *This year, I will make friends. This year, I will concentrate on my studies. This year, I will think before I act.* I picked up the cat and cradled it on my lap. *This year, I will join in with at least two extra-curricular activities. This year, I will not follow Harry Potter. This year*

The door swung open alarmingly. Was there a ghoul in the Leaky Cauldron? No, it was only Hermione.

"They're still going strong down there," she told me. "Ron would have kept me talking all night. Silly, really. We have all year to talk."

Ron. *And Harry, of course*, I thought.

Hermione sat down on the other bed and actually looked at me. "Oh, look at Crookshanks, what a cheek! He's taken over your bed. Do you hate cats, Ginny?"

"No, not at all no, I'm very fond of cats. It's all right, Hermione, you don't have to move him." I was proud of myself. I had managed to say something sensible to Hermione, and say it pleasantly too.

"I noticed you'd left your stuff by the window, so I put Crookshanks on the other bed. But he obviously liked your idea better. Silly puss, you should ask before you take over other people's furniture."

"I didn't know you had a cat. Did you buy him today?"

Hermione did not reply until she had finished cleaning her teeth. "He's a birthday present. I bought him at the Magical Menagerie today. Although I'm not sure how it will work out. Crookshanks has his eye on Scabbers, so of course Ron doesn't like Crookshanks. A load of fuss about nothing, if you ask me, because pets are always kept in dormitories.... So, did you meet anyone interesting in Diagon Alley?"

No, you had monopolised the interesting person... I swallowed and admitted: "I met Colin Creevey."

Hermione pulled her nightdress over her head and modestly began to remove her clothes from underneath it. "How's Colin?" Her voice was muffled through the cloth. "Has he grown over the summer?"

Thinking that was a very odd question, I replied abruptly that Colin still wasn't quite as tall as I was. *After all*, I thought, *he lost six months of growing time last year. It's amazing that his Muggle parents let him come back to Hogwarts at all.* No. No, I won't think about that. Hermione shouldn't have reminded me. "Colin was in a very good mood," I snapped defiantly.

Hermione seemed surprised at my tone, but she said quite placidly, "He always is. Do you know, when he woke up from being Petrified, his first words were, 'Hi, Madam Pomfrey, would you like a grape? They're really for Harry Potter, but would you like one?' He hadn't broken his train of thought since the second he was Petrified, and he didn't seem at all surprised to find himself in the hospital wing with his grapes and camera gone."

Hermione doesn't mean to be tactless, I reminded myself. But that thought was jangling with a louder one: *That's exactly the kind of reason why I don't want Hermione to share my room!* I stiffened my jaw, stroked Crookshanks furiously, and made myself ask, "What were your first words when you woke up?" And hoped it wouldn't show that I didn't care about the answer.

"Nothing very original, I'm afraid. I said, 'There's a Basilisk right behind us, Madam Pomfrey! We have to warn the whole school.' So I suppose I hadn't broken my train of thought either. I really was surprised when I realised that I was up in the hospital. Penelope was much clearer-thinking. She didn't say anything until she'd had a good look around and had seen Madam Pomfrey revive Colin. Then she asked, 'How much time has passed?' And Justin said nothing at all until the rest of us had finished orienting ourselves, when he told Professor Sprout, 'I am greatly obliged to you, Professor,' in that wonderful clipped Eton accent of his."

She came to pick up Crookshanks, who raised his head for just long enough to let himself be transferred from my arms to Hermione's. He raised the volume of his purring. He hadn't minded being stroked by me, but it was obvious whose cat he was.

"But Mrs Norris spat and yowled," said Hermione. She was still talking about Petrification. "She even tried to scratch Madam Pomfrey. She wasn't a good quiet cat, not like Crookshanks, was she, was she? Who's a gorgeous beastie, then? And Nearly-Headless Nick kept going on and on about how if the Basilisk could Petrify him, it ought to have been able to sever his head completely too, and could Madam Pomfrey do anything to complete his decapitation. As if she could do anything at all for a person who's already dead! If you ask me, he's lucky that the mandrake juice worked on him."

I moved myself to underneath my bedcovers. With any luck, Hermione would take the hint that I wanted to sleep. In fact my mind was racing, and I knew I would toss and turn, but at least I wouldn't be trying to think of things to say to Hermione.

"You know the most surprising thing about waking up?" Hermione could evidently think of plenty of conversation points herself. It was a pity they all seemed to converge back on the Chamber of Secrets. "It was noticing how different everything seemed. I was still thinking the same thoughts I'd had on the day I was Petrified. But they didn't fit any more. I had to take in five weeks of changes in just a few minutes."

"Oh?" I tried to sound politely interested in the great psychological change in Hermione.

"You see, it was all very quick. One moment Penelope and I were creeping out of the library, staring into her mirror in case the Basilisk should be on the loose, but not seriously expecting it would be. The next moment we saw the reflection of these two great yellow eyes. And I hardly had time to think, 'It is the Basilisk!' before Madam Pomfrey was feeding something into my mouth, and the mirror had gone, and the library corridor had turned into the hospital wing. I know now that it was five weeks, but at the time it only felt like a second. And I was bursting to explain that there was a Basilisk, and nobody must look at it, and we needed to bring in some roosters. It took me several hours to realise that my thoughts were all out of date."

"Oh?" Polite again. Talking about what Tom Riddle had done to Hermione was still easier than talking about what Tom Riddle had done to me.

"Well, the Basilisk had gone, thank goodness. So nobody was afraid any more. And there was no mystery to solve. And nobody was suspecting Harry any more. And I didn't have to waste any more energy trying to convince people that it couldn't have been him. And Hagrid had been cleared too. And the boys told me all about Lockhart "

Lockhart?" I sat up straight in bed. "What did Lockhart have to do with anything?"

"Well, Ron told me ... oh, dear, that was tactless." The colour drained from Hermione's face. For the first time she stopped talking and looked straight at me again. "Ginny, I'm *sorry*. I'd completely forgotten how you were concerned with all that Chamber business. Of course you don't want to hear about that cowardly peacock."

"Professor Lockhart?" I asked again. "I didn't like him much, but what was the problem?" The truth was that I didn't have very clear memories of any of my Hogwarts teachers, only general impressions of the way I'd felt about each one.

Hermione bit her lip. "Didn't they tell you how he behaved on the day you were taken down to the Chamber?"

"Professor Dumbledore told me that Harry and Ron worked out where the entrance to the Chamber was. Lockhart went with them to rescue me. But there was an accident on the way, and rocks fell down. Lockhart lost his memory and Ron was trapped. So Harry had to rescue me on his own." I said that with some pride. Harry Potter had saved me - saved me from a Basilisk *and* from Lord Voldemort. When Hermione did not reply, I stared at her. "Is there something they didn't tell me? Answer me! If this is about me, I have the right to know."

Unlocking the Heart

Chapter 3 of 4

Ginny begins to unravel the truth. Warning: ends on a worse cliffhanger than previous chapter did.

CHAPTER THREE

Unlocking the Heart

Hermione, still cradling Crookshanks, moved back over to my bed, and sat down in front of me. We stroked the cat together while she looked me in the eye.

"Ginny, Harry and Ron told me that Gilderoy Lockhart did everything he could*not* to rescue you. First he tried to leave Hogwarts by the back door. When Ron challenged him, he said he didn't know where the Chamber of Secrets was. He tried to wipe the boys' memories - but Harry was too quick for him. Harry had to Disarm Lockhart and force him down to the entrance."

Yes, Harry is her hero too, I thought. But this time I did not resent it quite so much. She was only telling me what had happened.

"Even when the Chamber door opened, Lockhart tried to get out of entering," Hermione continued, eyes wide with disgust. "They had to push him in. He was *despicable*. He just didn't care about rescuing you at all. And then he tried to Oblivate their memories *again*." I could feel the anger coursing through her veins as she remembered.

I was leaning towards her, tensing with the same anger. I hadn't known that Lockhart had tried to destroy Harry. "How did they escape?"

"It was because of Ron's broken wand, which Lockhart had stolen. The spell backfired and hit Lockhart, and it memory-charmed him instead of them. I wonder why they call them memory 'charms'? More like curses. Anyway, that's the sort of man our fine Professor Lockhart was. I don't understand how I never realised it!"

"Well, you couldn't have known he was bad, before he acted badly."

"But, Ginny, he wanted to abandon you to a Basilisk and to destroy Ron and Harry's minds! Surely there should have been a clue about what kind of criminal he was? But I never noticed - not the least little bit."

"I suppose you wanted to believe the best of him. Shouldn't we always believe -" But my words died in my throat when I remembered how willingly I had believed the best of Tom Riddle.

Crookshanks stretched plaintively, as if we had neglected him, and we both began mechanically stroking him again.

"So Ron didn't tell you my guilty secret." Hermione's voice was suddenly small.

"Ron never tells me anything. He just teases me and sends me away."

"So you didn't know that I used to fancy Professor Lockhart?"

"No!" How extraordinary! The girl who spent her whole day with Harry Potter could waste her energies on a mere teacher! "I suppose Lockhart was very handsome." I knew this wasn't much comfort, but I really didn't remember much about the man.

"He was," Hermione concurred. "But that was the *only* thing you could say for him. He was vain, and stupid, and dishonest, and cowardly, and self-centred, and ... need I go on? He hadn't even done the brave deeds he described in his books; it was all lies. Ron was sceptical from the beginning. He tried all year to warn me that Lockhart was a fraud. I don't understand how I could have wasted my time on him."

"But why would anyone suspect such enormous lies without a reason?" I asked. "*Most* people believed Lockhart. Why shouldn't you believe him too? Perhaps you fancied him because he was brave?"

"Brave, and adventurous, and exciting, and a defender of the weak ... oh, it's easy to find excuses. But usually I'm right about people. I've always known that Hagrid couldn't be a criminal, and that Snape isn't all bad, and that your friend Colin is trustworthy despite his faults ... really, I think I would have known all along that Lockhart was a fake if I hadn't been befuzzled by his handsomeness. That's a very embarrassing thought."

"Hermione, it was very brave of you to tell me when you didn't have to. After all, I was *befuzzled* by Tom Riddle because of his friendliness. It's the same thing. Or worse. Because Lockhart was only a fool, but Riddle was evil."

"Lockhart was an evil fool, then," said Hermione, although she sounded somehow happier. "The kind of fool who was happy to finish off all my friends. I'll never be able to forget how stupid I was about him. In fact, I shall never, never fancy a fair-haired man again."

Of course not. Not when there are black-haired men around! But my dislike for Hermione was rapidly losing all its passion. Instead, I felt sad and unlucky that we were rivals, when clearly we were so much better suited to being friends. *And I did promise myself I would make friends this year.* I must start with Hermione. Whatever it cost,

whatever the effort, I must try.

"What made you recognise you were over Lockhart?" I asked.

"Realising that I'd just spent fifteen minutes being outraged and disgusted at him! The boys had spent hours telling me about the Chamber, and I was so busy being angry with Lockhart that I'd completely forgotten that he was supposed to be my hero. So when I did remember that I'd forgotten, I knew at once that he *wasn't* my hero any more. I wasn't sorry to be over him. Who wants to have a crush on a teacher anyway?"

"Lots of girls have crushes on famous people Quidditch players or singers or Aurors," I pointed out. I could feel the flush spreading under my freckles as I remembered that the boy I loved was also famous. I hoped Hermione couldn't see it in the dim candlelight. "Men whom they don't even know." I looked up, a little defiantly, because I *did* know Harry.

"But, really, it makes more sense to love someone you know," said Hermione. "Someone whom you know isn't going to change into a coward as soon as you come close to him. Someone whom you know isn't stupid. Someone with whom you can have fun every day because he's always around. Someone with whom you don't have to pretend because you feel comfortable telling him anything."

I closed my eyes and dropped my head to my knees. For a while, I had almost been liking Hermione Granger. But there was no escape. There was no mistaking the light in her eyes or the tone of her voice. She was going to go on ... and on ... and on ... about how she and Harry were always together. Without even noticing that that meant: How Ginny Weasley was always being left out.

But I had faced Tom Riddle in the Chamber of Secrets. I must face Hermione Granger in the confidences of love. I lifted my face, and made myself say:

"So you do like someone else, then?"

She smiled ecstatically. "Of course."

"When did you realise he was the one?"

"About five minutes after I realised I was over Lockhart. There he was, telling me all about the Chamber ... and he'd been so brave, so enterprising, so very *right* in the way he'd behaved ... yet he was so modest about it, unlike *some* people. And he's so intelligent too. And he really is very good-looking, even if he does forget to comb his hair ... there just wasn't any doubt in my mind that I belong to him, and always will."

I swallowed hard and forced my voice to sound normal. How would I sound if I were happy for her? As if she fancied a boy whom I'd never met? "Do you think he's noticed that you like him?"

She laughed. "No-o. He's a *boy*. He hasn't noticed girls yet. He wouldn't realise I fancied him if I tattooed his name in a heart all over my face."

I was brave enough to ask, "Doesn't that worry you?" But it wasn't an enthusiastic question. Since Harry didn't know that Hermione fancied him, I had a chance, a very slim chance. I didn't want her to dash my chance away. I wanted her to tell me that she hadn't meant it, that this was only a mild crush, and it would fade away by next week.

"I read somewhere that girls start noticing boys younger than boys start noticing girls. Since we're the same age, it's natural that I would notice him before he notices me. But I'm sure he'll work it out in the end."

"When do you think that will happen?" *Please say next year, in ten years, never ... Please say that you'll have found someone else by the time he's old enough to care ...*

"I think it'll take another ten months."

I gawped. "How can you be so precise?"

"Because of his height," she said calmly.

I stared at her again.

"You should read more, Ginny. Last Christmas I'd nearly caught him up in height. But by the time the school year ended, he was towering over me. He was growing really fast in the first half of this year. Well, I read that boys start *er noticing* girls about six months after their growth spurt begins. But it usually takes them another year after that to *admit* that they're noticing. So he won't be telling me that he knows I'm a girl until the end of this academic year. ... Ginny, is something wrong?"

It's taken you a long time to notice that I thought, as I shook my head, fighting desperately against an overwhelming sadness. This was supposed to be a good year. But Hermione had planned, down to the minute, exactly when Harry would become her boyfriend, exactly when I would be cut off from all hope forever. "What if " I hesitated. We were skating on very thin ice here. But Hermione had started it, so I would continue. "What if he does start noticing girls, but the girl he notices isn't you?"

Hermione frowned and stopped petting Crookshanks. "I suppose that might happen, but it doesn't seem very likely. After all, I am his best friend. We're together every day. When he does wake up to girls, I'll be the *first* girl he sees. So I'm not really worried that he won't be interested."

Nice, I thought, to be so confident.

"No, I'm more worried that he'll *lose* interest after he's started. I'm sure I'll be the first. Sooner or later there'll be a school dance or or some kind of pairing-off activity, and he'll realise it's easier to go with me than to make the effort to approach a stranger. But once he's comfortable with me, he'll become more confident about other girls too. What worries me is whether or not I'll be able to keep him interested in me then."

I pushed back the glorious vision of Harry becoming so interested in other girls that he abandoned Hermione and transferred all his interest to me. *No. It wasn't fair to think that way. Take a deep breath. Say what a friend would say.* "If he does like you already as a friend, you have gallons of advantage over anyone who's still a stranger," I said, unable to keep the sad tone out of my voice. Intimate lighting or not, she would soon see that I was on the verge of tears.

She frowned. "Well, it may not be as easy as I'm hoping. He's not exactly the most in-touch-with-reality person. Today he was talking as if he'd catch Sirius Black single-handed. And he's refusing to face up to the painful truth about Scabbers' old age. Harry was saying today that the rat isn't going to live much longer."

I was confused. First she said that he wasn't facing the truth about Scabbers, then that he knew Scabbers was dying. I knew that I too had to face up to a painful truth soon. But my world was about to rock, and I wanted to keep it out of my consciousness for just a few minutes longer. It would be easier to talk about Scabbers of whom I had somehow never been very fond. What on earth did she mean about Harry *saying* it without *facing up* to it?

"Talking of whom," Hermione continued, "Harry's been getting himself into trouble this summer. Did you hear how he blew up his aunt? He wants to be more careful."

"It wasn't his fault!" I protested automatically. I didn't understand Hermione's sudden cool tone. "People can't *help* it, you know, when they do wandless magic."

"No, but everyone can develop self-control." There it was again, a definite coldness towards Harry when he was in trouble. "If Harry would deal with his resentful attitude "

"Hermione," I insisted, "Don't you *love* Harry?"

"Of course I love Harry," she replied, still coolly. "Harry's my second-best friend ever "

The world did rock then. The bedroom walls shrank away, and the bedcovers billowed up enormously, and the candles and shadows flared up to the ceiling. I had lost all sense of balance and didn't know whether I was swaying backwards onto my pillows or forwards into Crookshanks. I was suspended in an eternal moment, barely hearing what Hermione was saying about acknowledging her friends' faults *because* they were her friends, because nothing else that Hermione said was really happening. A year could have passed around me, and I wouldn't have known.

Hermione had said something desperately important, but I couldn't hold on to it; it would fly away forever unless I managed to grasp the important point before Hermione started talking about something completely different. I tried to dredge out the significant idea, but when I found any voice at all, I could only whisper an echoed:

"Second?"

Patience and Potions

Chapter 4 of 4

When Mrs Weasley joins the collusion, the girls come to a surprising conclusion.

CHAPTER FOUR

Patience and Potions

Now Hermione stared at me. "Of course second, it's obvious that Harry and I are not exactly enemies *.oh.*" She stopped in full train. "We were talking about who was boyfriend material, weren't we? But, Ginny, surely you didn't think that Harry ... that I ... that we ... oh, you must have understood whom I meant!"

"Who?" My mind hardly dared to move. "You said that ... I mean, after Lockhart ... he was a friend ... and you're always together ... and he's been growing taller ... whom else could you ...?"

My brain was whirring round in circles now, like cogwheels on an over-speeding clock. From the dregs of the chaos, the nonsensical thought that leapt into my brain and out of my mouth was:

"You mean ... you fancy ... *RON?*"

"Of course it's Ron. Who else would it be Draco Malfoy?"

I was weeping in earnest now, tears coursing down my cheeks while waves of relief swept over me.

"Ginny," she said, "I know Ron's just a brother to you, but you have to understand, to other girls he's a boy, and a very good-looking one too."

"But ... why not Harry?" It was a stupid question, but my mind was full of it.

"Of course it was never going to be Harry. Harry drives me round the twist, the way he won't answer me whenever we're trying to work out the best thing to do."

"I thought," I ventured, "that Ron irritated you with all his arguing."

"Yes, but I like being irritated by Ron. If you like men who go quiet and moody when they're supposed to be talking, you're welcome to Harry!"

"Harry hasn't noticed me."

"You'll have to be patient with Harry," she agreed, "because he's still growing."

"Do you think he ever will notice me?"

Hermione became very serious. "Ginny, I don't know. I can safely tell you that Harry hasn't noticed *any* girls yet. So you have as good a chance as anyone."

"But he knows I like him. Tom Riddle told him. So now Harry finds me annoying."

"No, he doesn't. Honestly. I've never seen the smallest sign that he finds you annoying, any more than he finds you flattering. To him it's just ..."

"Yes?" I said eagerly. "Give me the bad news. To him it's just ...?"

"... not very interesting," she admitted. "I've told you, he hasn't noticed girls yet. But he will because he's growing taller too."

"What do you think a girl has to do," I asked, "to *make* a boy interested in her?"

We had a very long conversation about this. We talked on and on, but I don't remember all of it. After we had discussed Crookshanks and Scabbers and Sirius Black and Hermione's new subjects and my problems with making friends in my own year, Hermione suddenly yawned.

"It's nearly four o' clock in the morning," she said. "We need to sleep if we're to be fit for school tomorrow. I mean today."

I lay back on my pillows. My mind was still busy, so I didn't think I could sleep. I heard Hermione return to her own bed, settle down, and grow still. The candles were long since finished, but I was too comfortable in the dark to want to waste the moment by sleeping. The new school year had begun well after all because I had made a friend. I knew then that if I were meeting Tom Riddle for the first time now, I wouldn't be interested in him. Just as Hermione couldn't be interested in a Professor Lockhart once she had decided that she liked Ron, so I couldn't be interested in a manipulative, talking diary now that I had a real human friend.

There would be more friends. I would find some people who wanted to play Quidditch in the lunch hours, even if I wasn't good enough for the House team yet. I would try to be closer friends with Colin this year, always grateful that he didn't blame me for his misfortunes. Perhaps I would get to know Vicky and Sarah in a way that didn't annoy them. Certainly I would make an effort to be kind to that poor Ravenclaw in my Herbology class whom everyone else teased, because I knew what it was like always to be the one left out.

I must have slept after all because suddenly the room was light and the clock showed half-past six. But I didn't feel sleep-deprived. I was light and full of energy as I stepped into the shower, put on school robes, and threw a pillow at Hermione.

"Wake up! It's time for school!"

Hermione sat bolt upright. "New subjects this term!"

"Come on, let's get down to breakfast before all the boys!"

Mum, sitting opposite a vertical copy of the *Daily Prophet*, was eating porridge in the Leaky Cauldron dining room. "Good morning, Hermione. Ginny, you have dark rings under your eyes. I hope you girls weren't up talking all night. You have a busy day today. Come and have some bacon before the boys take it all."

"We can sleep in the train," I said, knowing very well we would do no such thing. "Mum, how old were you when you met Dad?"

"I'd known him all my life, of course," she said, "because we're second cousins. Then we were at Hogwarts together after we were eleven."

"But when did you start to you know fancy him?"

The newspaper may have grunted slightly, but perhaps Dad was only turning a page.

"About two years before he started to fancy me. You don't need more sugar than that, Ginny. Boys are like that. It takes them years to catch up with girls. If you girls are smart, you'll save yourselves the agony by choosing boys who are slightly older than yourselves, boys who are ready to appreciate you."

"Mum, did you ever *do* anything to make Dad notice you?"

"Goodness, don't tell me Hermione wants to make a boy notice her already. There's plenty of time for that, and you have your homework to think of. Well, I must admit, I did try to cheat a little."

"When? What?"

Hermione was listening as closely as I was, and I wondered if she would really find it as easy as she hoped to attract Ron.

"We-ell. I was about fifteen. Fifteen, I said, Ginny, not twelve. And I was tired of seeing my classmates go off meeting boys in Hogsmeade while Arthur tinkered with an old Muggle radio and never offered me so much as a walk around the lake."

The newspaper was very still.

"So I told poor old Professor Slughorn that I was interested in the theory of Polyjuice Potion, and he believed me and gave me permission to borrow a book from the Restricted Section of the library. And I copied out every love potion in the volume."

"Oh, is there more than one kind?" asked Hermione excitedly.

"That depends on what you mean by love potion," said Mum. "There are draughts that make you look more attractive, but it's really better to use charm-work for that kind of thing. Then there's the Pheremonal Potion. If you can persuade a man to drink it, his hormones will go full fire, and you have guaranteed, um, love." She simpered, and then admitted, "Well, lust. The problem is, there's no guarantee about after *whom* he'll be lusting. It could be anyone or everyone. So I decided not to brew that one. Then there are fidelity jinxes, but they don't guarantee fidelity, they only put terrible punishments on an unfaithful lover. Which is no good at all before you actually have a lover. So in the end I decided on a nice smooth Soulmate Potion. Give half of that to your soulmate, drink the rest yourself, and your minds will unite, so he'll know at once that you're his one true love."

"And did you make it, Mrs Weasley?" asked Hermione breathlessly.

"I was terrible, really," said Mum happily. "I waited several weeks. Then I told Professor Slughorn that I wanted extra practice in Forgetfulness Potions because I knew they smell very similar and he let me work in the dungeons on a Saturday and opened the students' supply cupboard for me. I spent all morning brewing the Soulmate Potion. Oh, I did make some Forgetfulness too, because I had to be able to show him some proof of honest labour. You need to know, girls," Mum tried to look stern, but she really wasn't in a very stern mood, "that all forms of love potion are illegal. I'd have been expelled from Hogwarts if I'd been caught making it, and sent to Azkaban if I'd actually used it."

"So what happened?" I asked, giggling a little as I tried to weigh up whether a year in Azkaban would be worth sneaking a Soulmate Potion into Harry's pumpkin juice.

"I poured the potion into an empty butterbeer bottle, and I brought it to Arthur while he was wiring his blasted radio."

The *Daily Prophet* rustled to the floor, and Dad didn't even notice.

"It seemed rather unnatural just to hand it to him for no reason, so I left the bottle on the edge of the table, and we started chatting. He told me all about his radio, and it really was quite interesting. And I told him about *Moste Potente Potions* not the love potions, of course, but the Polyjuice and some of the others that I'd read up. Then he turned on the radio, and there was the Muggle news, all about some Muggle politician who'd been murdered that day. We talked so hard that in the end it was Arthur who offered me a butterbeer, and "

"And?" Hermione and I were both agog, but Dad suddenly picked up the newspaper again.

"And he had a whole crate of them behind his work bench. We both had a couple, and we kept talking, and then Arthur moved to pick up a spanner, and oh, dear "

"What, Mum? What *happened*?"

"He accidentally knocked over my butterbeer bottle, and my morning's work crashed onto the floor! He hadn't even realised it was my bottle, he thought it was one of his, so he just said 'Whoops,' and cleaned it up with a *Scourgify*. So nobody ever drank that Soulmate Potion after all. But you know the oddest thing about it all?"

"What, Mrs Weasley?"

"When I was helping him tidy away his radio, he suddenly asked me if I would like to meet him in Hogsmeade the next weekend. That's what we did, and we've never looked back. And nobody ever did find out that I'd broken all the rules."

By this time Hermione and I were both overcome with giggles. We hardly noticed when Harry and Ron walked into the room, asking for scrambled eggs and sausages. It was bad enough to think of Mum as a naughty teenager who nearly broke the law to ensnare a man. My eyes met Hermione's, and I knew that she too was thinking about a flame-haired, flame-eyed girl, just like me, who had wasted a perfectly good Soulmate Potion.

We found it just too funny that, without the benefit of either magical or Muggle love tricks, her soulmate had noticed her anyway.

THE END

A/N. The reference to the assassination of Kennedy is a nod to my own parents, who, on their second evening out together, sat holding hands in my father's car while they listened to the shocking broadcast.