

Life Lessons

by NixItAll

A wild Halloween party and anonymous tryst lead 23-year-old Hermione on a path to self-discovery. She learns the importance of friendship, forgiveness, and getting on with life after war.

*Originally written for the October Challenge at Granger Enchanted, then sort of grew a life of its own.

Everything In Moderation

Chapter 1 of 3

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I. Am. Drunk. That extra special magical level of drunkenness where everyone is my best friend and incredibly good-looking. I love being this drunk. This is the best party ever. I don't even know who threw it, but they are my new best friend. I wonder where the bar got off to. Hey, look, it's Harry! He's my best friend too. He looks funny. Oh, right, a costume. I forgot this was a costume party. I wish I had a costume. Hey, I'm wearing my old school uniform. That can be my costume. I wonder where my tie went.

"Hermione!"

"Harry! You're my best friend!" He smiles at me.

"Hermione, you're wasted."

"Yes, isn't it marvelous. You don't look so sober yourself." He smiled again. He smelled funny, kind of sharp and smoky. He and Neville must have been 'studying herbology' again. Silly boys. Now, where did that firewhiskey get to? The redhead with Harry is looking at me funny. "Harry," I whisper, "be careful with that girl. You don't want Ginny to find out." She's glaring at me now. I need to work on that whisper. Damn, she looks just like Ginny. Weird. Now, I need to find some more booze before I lose this spectacular buzz. There's Professor McGonagall: she'll know where the booze is. I walk over to her. A table bumps into me on the way. How rude.

"Professor!"

"Hermione!" She's cheerful too; she must be drunk.

"Professor, have you seen the liquor?"

"I haven't been your professor in five years, girl; call me Minerva."

"Okay." I give her a big hug. She's my best friend.

"Dear, don't you think you've had enough to drink?"

"Never."

"Ha! Five points to Gryffindor for a very correct answer." She slaps me on the back. For an old lady, she can pack quite a wallop. "This way!" I follow her through the crowd. This is so cool. I know all these people. I have so many friends. I wonder if any of them want to have sex with me. I hope so. Drunken sex is the best.

Minerva found the bar, and yay, Flitwick has a line of shots all ready for us. He's my best friend. I can't believe I'm drinking a round with my old professors. Who knew they knew how to party? A wizard grabs me around the waist and leans into me to reach a shot on the bar. It's my lucky night! Mmm, dark hair, dark eyes, strong arms, wearing a toga. Definitely my lucky night. He's still holding onto me while he downs his drink and drops the glass.

"Hmm, naughty schoolgirl, Hermione? I never would have guessed," he slurs in my ear. He runs his free hand down my chest, giving my breast a light squeeze on the way. Ding, ding, we have a winner, folks! "Where's your tie, little girl?"

"I don't know." I use my best breathy voice possible. "How about we go somewhere dark and quiet and try to find it." I press a finger to his lips. Oh, I'll be kissing those in just a minute. He smirks down at me. Damn, he's good looking. They make them hot in Hufflepuff.

Uh-oh, something's wrong. He's as pale as his toga, he's letting go of me... and he's down. Crap.

"Mr. Flitch-Fen..., Mr. Fletch-Fin... , Justin!" Minerva's trying to rouse him now. Damn. Damn. Double damn. I was so close this time! Justin's not waking up. Sigh. Best take another shot and be on my way before Flitwick starts looking good. Hmm, I wonder what it would be like. He's so small... Oh, Ron and Luna are here!

"Lon, Runa!" I give them big hugs. They're my best friends.

"Wow, Hermione, you're drunk."

"She's more than drunk; she's completely pissed!"

"I believe the phrase is 'tore up from the floor up'." I am so smart. They just look at me. "I love you, Ron." He looks white. I hope he doesn't pass out too. "I mean, you're my best friend. You and Minerva."

"Minerva? Hermione are you mental?"

"No, she's wonderful; she gave me house points!" I really need to use the loo. "I really need to use the loo. Toodles." I wave them goodbye. I wonder where the loo is. There are so many people here; there has to be a bathroom somewhere. Maybe this door. Oops, that's a closet. And it's occupied. Hi, people, have fun fucking! Don't mind me. Well, shoot, I'll try these stairs. Great. A hallway full of doors. One of these has to be a toilet. Please, please let one of them be. I try the first couple doors. Locked. Locked. Locked. Damn. I pound on a door and give the handle a shake. It opens. Cool! Oh, it opened because a man opened it. A tall, dark, handsome man.

"Hi."

"What do you want?" Well, good sir, I want sex. Now. And you look like a fine candidate to me.

"May I use your bathroom?" Where did that come from? He's scowling at me. How can he be cranky? He could use some firewhiskey. It does wonders. Look how fabulous I am. He's still glaring at me. "Pleeeeeease!" He rubs his face with his hand.

"Fine."

I run past him to the bathroom. Thank Merlin, I make it in time. That would be embarrassing. I suppose I should shut the door. Sweet blessed relief. I feel so much better. Now to attend to other biological matters; wait, maybe I ought to put my knickers back on. Nope. Too difficult. Must press on without them. I go back out to the main room. This looks just like one of the rooms at the Leaky. That looks like Diagon Alley out the window. Hey, it's filled with drunk people. Just like me!

"Ahem." My new cranky friend is standing by the door. I think he wants me to leave. He needs help. I smile at him. He is quite dashing. Fit body, long face, pale skin, blue eyes. Looks Russian. And that dark brown hair with a touch of grey. Yum. A little older than I'm used to, but there is something to be said for years of experience.

I walk up to him and stand an inch away. He doesn't step back. Good sign. "What are you doing up here all by your lonesome?" He smiles.

"Let's just say I don't have many friends here."

"Really, I have loads of friends." Duh, Hermione, be sexy! That was stupid; he'll think you're a drunk tart. Oh, wait.

"I'm sure you do. You should get back to them." Not good, not good.

"What if I want to stay here..." He looks intrigued now, girl; keep going. "... and make sure you have a good time?" I think he just blushed.

"Are you sure about that, child?" Child? Really!

"I'm not a child! I'm 23!" That was mature, Hermione. Way to make a point. He's laughing at me. Time to regroup. I hook my fingers in his trousers. He's not laughing now. My thumb flicks open the button. He grabs me; one hand clutches my hair and pulls it back so I have to look up at him. It hurts, but in a very, very good way. He lowers his mouth to my neck and proceeds to nip and suck at it. He's holding me tight so I can't reach him. I squirm enough to free my right hand, which I use to unbutton his shirt. Damn, this man takes care of himself. Smooth chest too. Double yum. He finally releases me and we stumble to the bed. His quick fingers have my shirt and bra off before we get there. My sex is pulsing; I need him so bad. He's too busy working his magic on my breasts right now, and that is not a bad thing. Not at all. I can't put this off anymore though, so I push him back on the bed and climb on top of him, pressing myself against his hard erection. Crap, I forgot to get his pants off first. Fiery fingers burn their way up my thighs. He's going slow on purpose, the evil, evil man. Hold on, he looks confused. He gives my skirt a flip, and hey, it's my tie! How did it get wrapped around my thigh?

I stretch up so he can pull my skirt over my head. He seems content to leave the tie in place. He is touching me everywhere except where I need him to. Bastard. I rub against him desperately to get a little friction going since he's denying me. He continues to caress me with long strokes.

"Why weren't there girls like you when I was in school?" He gasped the words.

"C'mon, every school boy's dream is to have a naked Gryffindor on top of them."

"I, um, I guess so. I don't know. I went to Durmstrang."

I had to laugh at him. He grabs me by the hips and yanks me forward, then moves down so his face is under me. Surely he's not going to... Oh... He is. Oh, total stranger that I just met ten minutes ago, where have you been all my life? I reach up and grip the headboard to steady myself as his tongue slides across my soft lips. I can't help but shudder. It's absolute heaven. He pushes his tongue harder into me. This is almost unbearable. I moan and whimper, but he keeps on. I'm getting dizzy. I know it has to be soon. Aaaaaaaah! He nips my clit, and I come completely undone for him.

I can't think. I can barely breathe. He slid off the bed, hopefully to lose those pants. I'm still on my knees gripping the headboard. Dear Merlin, did I ever bang on the right door tonight. He's back and gloriously naked this time. I arch back against him, and he resumes his maddening strokes along my body.

"Are you ready for more?" He's whispering right in my ear. My supercharged senses are reeling at that hot breath in my hair. Apparently, I'm not answering soon enough. He grazes my earlobe with his teeth. "Hmm?" He's rubbing his fingers against my sex now. How am I supposed to think when he does this, let alone talk? He slides one

finger in, then two. I can't hold back a yelp. Not very sexy, Hermione, but I think it hardly matters at this point.

"Yes, please, now!" I buck against his hand, reaching back with my own to find his cock. It's hard and thick and as ready for me as I am for it. I grip the base and tug lightly toward me. He gets the hint. With a firm grip on my hair, he pushes me down on the bed, his other arm holding my hips up. Doggy style. My favorite. Without hesitation, he thrusts in all the way, filling me so completely I'm absolutely breathless. Drunken sex really is the best.

I'm moaning and panting into the bedspread. Each stroke makes me more delirious. He's hitting all the right spots and making all sorts of noises of his own. His thrusts are becoming more frantic. I can feel his cock twitch inside of me. I can't hold on anymore and come all around him. I've never had such a workout, and the firewhiskey isn't helping out on that front. As soon as he pulls out of me, I collapse on the bed and instantly pass out.

Hmm, I feel so good. My cunt is still tingling from my new best friend's masterful work. My head doesn't even hurt! Probably because I'm still drunk. It's dark. I must not have slept long. My leg hurts where the tie was. I don't know where it's gone off to this time. We're both under the covers. He's out cold. I wonder if he'd like another go. I stretch and rub my body against his. Nothing. I am fully awake and ready to be ravished. Oh, well, desperate times call for desperate measures. I shimmy under the covers and straddle his legs. With one good lick, his cock stirs to life. I continue to lick and suck until he is totally hard for me. I take as much of it in my mouth as I can. Suddenly, there are fingers in my hair, caressing my scalp and tugging on a strand here or there. Somebody's awake. I start to massage his balls, and he grips my shoulder. Hard. I take it that means good job. I have to come up for air. When I do, he pulls me up to face him. We're both breathing hard. He looks wild with desire. I'm sure I look the same. He rolls us over so his weight is crushing down on me. It feels wonderful. I spread my legs in invitation. Hardly needed though. This time, however, he pushes in with agonizing slowness. I have to admit he feels amazing. What did I do to deserve a royal shag from a hot, sexy stranger? There has to be a catch. He pulls all the way out and slides in again. I hook my ankles behind him to take him a little deeper. Oh, mercy, that does the trick. His face is right next to mine, so much so his light stubble scratches my cheek. I turn my head so I can lick the shell of his ear. He shudders and starts thrusting more forcefully. So that's the key! I work my way down his neck. Damn, even his neck is sexy. I decide to up the ante and scrape my fingernails up his back. Bingo. He's really going now. I can't think anymore. I give up my effort on his neck because breathing in and out is too complicated a task right now. Oh... Good... Gracious. He's going to make me come again. Mmm, third time's the charm.

"Yes, oh yes!" Thank you, sir! He slumps on to me after he comes. I love the feel of that warm weight on top of me, his cock still inside me. I feel totally secure. It looks like it's his turn to pass out first. He kisses me on the cheek and rolls off. How sweet. I realize we never really kissed. I snuggle into his arms and yawn. This was the best party ever.

"Ow." My head hurts. I try to open my eyes, but it's all a blur. Ever so slowly, the room comes into focus. It's definitely a room at the Leaky. I recognize the ugly curtains. There are arms wrapped around me and a warm body at my back. Oh, yes, I remember now. How could I forget? What a fantastic night; I hope I wasn't crap. My mouth is sticky. Bleh. I hate that. I need to use the loo again. It's getting real urgent, real fast. I wriggle free of his arms and scoot off the bed. He shifts, but doesn't wake. Damn, he looks good. Uh, bathroom. Now.

Goodness, I'm a mess. I rinse my mouth out and clean up a bit in the sink. I really want to take a bath. I wonder if he'd mind or if I should just go home. I need to find my clothes first. Well, here are my knickers on the floor. That's a start. I sneak back into the room. He's still asleep. I find my shirt on the floor. It looks like the buttons are missing in action though. I think the skirt came off on the bed somewhere. Shoot, it's half under his pillow. I tug on it as lightly as possible. He stirs. Again, he doesn't wake up. He stretches, leaving his left arm above his head. There is a faint mark on it. That's a funny place for a tattoo.

Crap.

Crap. Crap. Double crap. What have I done? He's a Death Eater! And I shagged him! Eew! I stumble back and hit a table. A stack of dishes fall off with a humongous crash. Brilliant Hermione! He leaps up from the bed, confused, but recovering fast. He's smiling at me.

"Good morning to you too, love." I'm absolutely horrified. He takes a few steps closer and grips my shoulders. My traitorous body starts to tingle. He's still smiling at me. Quite cheekily actually. "Not having regrets are you?"

Oh, you have no idea.

I search my brain. He does look familiar; is that because I know him or because I spent all night shagging him? Those fantastic fingers of his are trailing down my body. I take a sharp breath and try to make my best 'not terrified' face. Relax! Relax! If he was going to hurt you, he would have done it by now. He brushes over the long thin scar on my chest and scowls.

He leans down and plants kisses along the silvery line. That should not be turning me on. I should be plotting my escape, not... Oh... He's massaging my breasts. Oh, he can stop that. In half an hour.

"What gave you that?" His breath is hot on my skin, and I am losing my battle with myself to stay in control. I got that scar in my fifth year. The fight at the Ministry. Dolohov. Oh no, no, no, no, no. Dolohov. I feel like a ghost just passed through me. He's looking at me strangely; he's noticed something's up.

"You." Bad thing to say. Very bad. Why not add 'Hey, I'm Harry Potter's best friend; remember him, he killed your old boss? Oh, and by the way, why aren't you in Azkaban?'

"What?" He stops caressing me and straightens up to his full height, hands back on my shoulders. I give up trying to not be terrified. I attempt a step back, but the table is blocking my way. He's studying me carefully. I really need to re-evaluate some of my life choices. Otherwise I wouldn't be trapped here, unarmed and unclothed, with one of Voldemort's most notorious followers. Ogden's Old Firewhiskey, you are so not my best friend!

My eyes flick to his arm. Damn, he saw that. "Oh, is that what this is about? Old news, love. Nothing to fret about now." His eyes travel back to my chest, and I can see it dawn on him what I meant earlier. He stiffens, and not in a good way. He lets go of me. Now's my chance to... To what? I can't outrun him, even if I did want to go streaking down the hall. Never taking my eyes off him, I fumble on the table behind me. There are a few old books I didn't knock off earlier. He looks melancholy a moment and opens his mouth to say something. I don't wait to find out what though. I grab a book and swing it as hard as possible at his head. He drops like a ton of bricks. I knew all that time spent in the library would be beneficial. I throw on my clothes and dash into the hallway so I can Apparate home. I never found my tie. I'm not sure I want to know where it went.

Do Unto Others...

Chapter 2 of 3

Hermione has to deal with the consequences of her actions and she learns a little lesson in forgiveness.

I think Ginny's finally talking to me again. She's been very funny lately. I hope I didn't say and or do anything dumb around her at the party the other night. It would be the least of my problems lately.

I don't know why we're meeting up at the Burrow. I guess there is always a reason for some big Weasley reunion. I am really not in the mood for it tonight. I haven't been in the mood for anything besides taking long hot baths in an attempt to burn myself clean followed by a big swallow of Dreamless Sleep potion. I really need to talk to Harry about Dolohov being out of Azkaban, but I can't come up with an explanation of why I know this, besides telling him the truth, which is not going to happen. I wonder if I can Obliviate myself?

I am never drinking again. Never. I need therapy. I should ask Ginny. She said it really helped her after the 'Diary Incident'. Hmm, I think I'll wear jeans and a jumper. I don't feel like dressing up for the Weasley men. I'm right out of the mood for men right now. Do they have wizarding convents? Oops. Should not have looked in the mirror. I'm looking mighty rough. Ugh. I will be single and alone forever. Plus, I am probably now harboring some horrible disease.

"So Hermione... It looks like you had a good time at the party the other night."

"I don't want to talk about it, George." He and Charlie are snickering. Bastards.

"Actually, I'm proud of you, Hermione. I was afraid you'd be a stick in the mud forever."

"Don't worry about him. He's just being a git." Charlie is doing the understanding big brother arm around my shoulders thing. Any moment now, he's going to drop his hand and cop a feel of my butt. And... there it is. "Besides, there's nothing to worry about. Justin passed out before you could do anything you'd regret."

Uh, sure, Charlie, now head on back to that magical world of sunshine and rainbows you've been living in. Have Harry introduce you to Neville before you leave. I try not to make a face. Crap. George noticed. I glare at him as threateningly as possible. Don't say a word. Not one word. I. Will. Kill. You.

It looks like he got the hint, but I have a bad feeling, he won't be forgetting this. Note to self: Do not be alone with George for, let's see, all eternity.

"Dinner's ready!" Thank you, Molly. You are my new best friend.

I really need to stop saying that.

I hustle in the kitchen and sit down between Harry and Luna, far, far away from George. Luna is making that face at me again. I know what it means, and I am not falling for it this time. I am not being set up with her distant cousin or friend from work or anyone. No more blind dates. I am now devoutly celibate, as well as devoutly sober.

"So Harry, what is the story with the Ministry releasing Death Eaters?" Thank you, Charlie! Harry sighs and looks a bit weary. Everyone is looking at him, so I'm not too conspicuous.

"Well, a group in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement has been rallying for some sort of reform for prisoners instead of leaving them in Azkaban for the rest of their lives. Without Dementors to guard the place, it's putting a strain on the wizarding staff there. They are testing a few prisoners now."

"I heard Dolohov and Avery were among those released." I shudder at the name. Please let no one have noticed.

"Guess who's funding the project?"

"Malfoy." I whisper. Harry nods at me. I am not hungry anymore. I need to go home and take another bath. The rest of the table bursts into discussion about it.

"So far, nothing's happened except Dolohov showed up at St. Mungo's with a nasty bump on the head." I laugh. Oops, too loud. They're all looking at me.

"Sorry, that's just funny; serves him right though," I finish lamely. I prod my potatoes a bit until Harry starts up again.

"I know, he wouldn't say where he got it," I snicker, but on the inside this time. "It just means more work for us Aurors with all the vigilantes." Gee, sorry about the extra paperwork Harry. It was worth it.

"They just let them go?"

"Yes, but it's more complex than that, the Ministry agents performed the Eximo Curse on them." I drop my fork.

"The Eximo Curse?" Ron looks clueless, as usual.

"That is awfully Dark magic! And irreversible! I can't believe the Ministry is doing that!"

"Relax, Hermione, these are Death Eaters we're talking about."

"Ron, she has a point. We know Avery and Dolohov are guilty, but what if they had done it to an innocent man like Sirius? It's as bad as the Dementor's Kiss." Arthur looks grim. He hasn't put much faith in the Ministry since the Muggleborn Registration Act.

"Any of you mind explaining what the Eximo Curse is?" Ron looks at me like I am his personal dictionary. Oh wait, I am.

"It releases your magic." I shudder to think about it. "It makes you a Squib." Everyone goes silent for a moment. I know living as a Muggle would be survivable, for me at least. I would still be heartbroken to live without magic. It has to be the ultimate humiliation for those Death Eaters.

Ginny elbows Harry in the ribs. Now that I think about it, she has been suspiciously quiet. She just winked at me. I smile back. I have no idea what she's grinning about, surely she doesn't know... No. Then again, she has been funny lately. Please, please don't let Ginny know that I... Yuck, I can't even think about it.

"I did want to talk to you all tonight about better news than Death Eaters." Harry's standing now. "Ginny and I have an announcement to make." Oh. Great. Merlin. That can only be one thing. I gape at Ginny. She winks at me again. "Ginny's pregnant!"

The room explodes with noise, except me. I'm in shock. This is it. I am officially going to be an old maid. No husband, no kids, just me and a hundred cats. And venereal disease.

Okay, I felt a little bad about running out on Harry and Ginny last night. I owled Harry and told him that I would take him to lunch today. I head up to Harry's office early since I got done at St. Mungo's a bit sooner than expected, but with the news that I am completely healthy, just stupid.

"Level Two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, including the Improper Use of Magic Office, Auror Headquarters, and Wizengamot Administration Services." Blah, blah, blah, thanks, now open the doors. The sharp pounding of rain on the magical windows echoes in the empty hallway. Magical Maintenance must be thrilled with the new prisoner reform policy too.

"Hi, Hermione!"

"Hey, Ernie," I stop at his cubicle; it's immaculate. So very Ernie.

"Great news about Harry and Ginny, huh?"

"Yes, I can't believe it. I guess we're all grown up now."

"Never." I smile. I know it's lame, but his comment makes me feel better. I glance down the row.

"I wouldn't go talk to Harry yet; he's got company." Huh? I raise an eyebrow or at least try. I really should check that out in a mirror sometime. Ernie catches an interdepartmental memo that swoops down to his desk. "Sorry, just a minute, Hermione." Ernie starts scribbling a note. Hmm, Ernie's Quidditch calendar reminds me: I need to write to Viktor. I wonder if he's still with that beater from the Holyhead Harpies. Wait a minute, I don't care. Life of celibacy, remember?

"Well, well, well, look who we have here." No. No way. Not that voice. Fuck. It's him. Don't look. Do not look up. I look. Damn. Antonin Dolohov. Why can't he have the common decency to disappear off the face of the planet like one night stands are supposed to? Okay. Be strong, be cool, you are surrounded by Aurors, you can do this. "You're looking remarkably clear-headed today." Ugh, he had to go there. I smile, heavy on the sneer. Ernie is staring, I can feel it, but I don't drop eye contact with Dolohov. It was not just a trick of the firewhiskey, he is easy on the eye. Stop. Don't think that.

"I don't think *my* head has ever been an issue."

His grin just got wider. Git. He steps in closer. Damn, he smells good too. No! He's leaning towards me, hardly an inch away. Ernie, you are the worst Auror in history for letting this happen. Get off your pompous ass and stop him.

"Miss me, love?" His whispered breath makes me shiver. Is it possible to get a body transplant? This one and I are having a serious moral disagreement. He chuckles and leans back. I can feel my blood boiling. This is so embarrassing.

"Hermione!" Thank you, Harry! He looks at my flushed face, then to Dolohov, then to Ernie who is staring at us open mouthed. "Is something going on here?" I shake my head no and pray that Dolohov doesn't want our little tryst to be known any more than I do.

"I was just saying hello to the infamous Miss Granger here. I'll be on my way." He winks at me. "I would hate to not be home should anyone... *come knocking*." I clench my fists. Must. Not. Punch. Jackass. Harry's looking at him funny, but he just throws me a naughty smile and walks out. Harry's looking at me now. Oops, I guess I was staring.

"Are you all right?" Hmm, no. I am all sorts of not all right. Forget therapy; I'm going to check myself into St. Mungo's. Maybe I can get a bed next to Lockhart.

"I'm fine, just surprised to see him, that's all." Good one, Hermione, technically not a lie. "Let's get some lunch."

This is nice; I haven't had a long chat with Harry in ages. We laugh about the frightening reality that he is going to be somebody's father and speculate when Ron is going to get Luna pregnant and what a strange child that is going to be. He neatly avoids the subject of my love life, or lack thereof. He really is my best friend. I tell him about the project I have been working on in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Rather, the one I was working on before I took the week off to try to drown myself in my bathtub. It was almost the perfect lunch, until...

"So Williamson decides to go on vacation, and I get stuck babysitting everyone's favorite Death Eater."

"Hmm." If I don't say anything, maybe he'll change the subject.

"I have to supervise him shopping in Muggle London this afternoon. It's ridiculous." Maybe not. I admit my curiosity is killing me.

"Shopping?"

"Yes, now that he's officially a Squib, he has to fit in with the Muggles; and since Williamson bailed, Proudfoot's busy with Avery, and Ernie's useless when it comes to Muggles..." News flash Harry: Ernie's useless at a lot of things. "...I get the happy task of teaching him how to get along in Muggle society. He's been given Muggle Studies texts to study. It'd be comical if it wasn't me having to play nanny." So that is what he had all the books for...

I don't like how Harry is looking at me.

"Why don't you come with me after lunch? I know this is your week off, but please, please don't make me spend the whole afternoon with him alone." He's making a very sad face. Of all the things to ask. Why me, why? "Please Hermione, think of the Muggles." That was low. It's true; who knows how much trouble he could get up to? Um, ethically I should say yes. That's right, because there is no other reason I should say yes. None.

"You will not stop owing me until the end of time."

"Thank you so much!"

What in the name of Merlin's uncle did I just agree to?

I could be at home in front of the fire with a good book. But no, I'm here. In a Muggle furniture shop. With my so-called best friend and my own personal Undesirable Number One. Instead of looking at sofas and sitting on them to try them out, he pokes them, then stands back and scowls when they don't do anything interesting. Sigh.

"I don't see what the big difference is between this and wizard furniture."

"There isn't one. The point of this exercise is for you to prove you can function in the Muggle world. So try not to be conspicuous and watch your vernacular." Oh no. I sound like my mother. He gives me an odd look. Apparently I sound like his mother too.

My back is killing me; we've been wandering around for hours, explaining crosswalks and telephone etiquette. It's surreal. He's managed to find a modern sofa in blood red. Of course. Way to be understated. I look around for a salesperson. Aren't they usually leeches in places like this? Hmm. It is a good color for him. I bet he looked a treat in those Durmstrang robes. Crap, I'm doing it again.

"Oh, look at that!" A woman near the front window is pointing at an owl fluttering outside. Harry bursts out the door and grabs the message from the poor bird while I pull my wand out of my pocket and throw a quick Obliviate at the lady.

"So, that's an example of what not to do in front of Muggles." Yeah. Pretty much. Glad you saw that. Harry is rushing back inside. He looks a mess.

"Ginny's sick; they are taking her to St. Mungo's. I have to go." Ginny? She's always healthy as a horse. Please, please don't let something be wrong with the baby.

"I'll take care of this, just go."

"Thanks, Hermione." He gives me a peck on the cheek and runs out of the store.

"You'll take care of this? What am I, a boggart?" I roll my eyes. He pats the seat next to him. I suppose I could rest my feet for a minute. Wow, this couch is really comfortable. He's smirking at me, but I just ignore him. This is not a situation I had been looking forward to being in. A part of me, a deep dark part, feels sorry for him. I'll have to remember that for my therapy appointment.

"Admit it, you want to hate me," his voice is low and dangerous, "but you don't." The heat of his breath gives me goosebumps. This should not be happening. He leans over, arms spread, effectively caging me on the couch. I look away, but he grips my chin and turns my face toward him. Not good. I should resist, shivering when his hand moves to the nape of my neck. I should flinch when his thumb brushes my cheek. I should lean back when he brushes his lips against mine.

But I don't.

He's kissing me so softly I can hardly believe he is who he is, and he's doing it so well I don't care. I feel my nerve endings tingle with delight. The most frightening part is how natural it feels. This shouldn't be...

"May I help you?" Great. Now a salesman shows up.

Dolohov stands up immediately to shake his hand. The salesman sends him a knowing wink which neither even pretends to hide from me. It's official. Magic or Muggle, all men are pigs.

I stay seated. I think I may do something I regret if I get up...check that, I may do another thing I regret if I get up. What is happening to me? I can't even blame alcohol on this one. I peek through my eyelashes to see him staring, but continue to pretend the dirt under my fingernails is fascinating.

"Actually, it looks like I've found what I'm looking for."

"A fine choice, sir."

I have to admit it. I am starting to like this sofa. We've been kissing on it for roughly ten minutes now. Really. Just kissing. I know. Weird. I can feel how hard he is, so that is not the problem. I can't explain it, but it's very, very good.

"Hermione." It sounds so strange to hear him breathe my name.

"Hmm."

"Why are you so nice to me?" He strokes his fingers along the scar on my chest.

"I don't know." Well, I know I've lost my damn mind, but the truth is I've given up. I'm tired of being at odds with myself. It isn't just me. My future therapist is going to have a field day. "Why aren't you a Muggle-torturing fiend anymore? Or are you?" His expression is stony, eyes fixed on a distant point. He doesn't answer immediately. "I envy them now." He lowers his gaze to me. "The Muggles don't know what they're missing." I brush his cheek with my hand. I don't know what made me do that. Compassion? He covers it with his own hand, lacing our fingers and smiles. An honest one this time, not saucy or rude. It's nice.

"I spent 19 years in Azkaban, almost your whole life." He gives me a pointed look. Yes, I did less than eloquently tell him my age the other night. "I'll do anything to never go back there again." His eyes glazed over a bit. It was a look I had seen on Sirius a time or two. "It's no excuse, but I did what I did to survive." I shudder. He immediately starts rubbing circles on my back to comfort me. So many thoughts are rushing around my head, but they fade into oblivion when he plants little kisses and nips on my neck.

He's oh so gently pushing my skirt up. This would almost be romantic if my foot hadn't fallen asleep. Ow, ow. Oops, I accidentally kicked him. I think I know why I like drunken sex better now. Much less awkward if you are totally unaware of your clumsiness. He smiles at me and teases my knickers down. I undo his trousers. I am so ready for this. Past ready. I shake my knickers off my ankle and readjust so I'm straddling him. He pulls me in for a kiss while I work him out of his pants. I gasp when his fingers curl into me.

He may be a Squib now, but those fingers can sure do magic.

I'm whimpering; I know it. It's embarrassing, but what he's doing feels so good. I'm rubbing his cock. I really want more though.

"I want you." He raises a brow. I should ask him how he does that. Oh... "Now, please!" He smirks and draws out of me. His hands grip my hips hard. It would hurt if I wasn't so impatient for him. I can feel the tip of his sex at my entrance. I squirm to get more of him, but he's holding me tightly in place. Ugh, I can't stand the tease. I'm desperately wet for him at this point. I finally look up at his face. That's what he's been waiting for. With our eyes locked he pulls me down sharply. It's unbelievable. The intensity is spectacular. I can't look away. I don't think I've really looked anyone in the eyes during sex before. He fills me so completely and so naturally, I can hardly breathe. I rise up a bit and rock back down. His hands help me keep a rhythm. Oh, I can't think. I can't look away from his face. I trail my hands down his sides, and he grips harder. His breath comes in gasps, and I know he won't last much longer. Then again, neither will I...

I'm shaking. I'm actually shaking. Wow. He rubs my arms. It's such a simple gesture. I lean forward and kiss him softly. I'm beyond lost. This has to be the most insane thing I've ever done in my life, and at the same time it's the most natural. Maybe I don't need therapy. Maybe I just need more of this man's...

There's a sharp knock at the door. We both startle out of our post-coital stupor. I crawl off his lap to grab my wand and cast a quick *Scourgify* over both of us. There's another knock. I straighten my clothes. He has his trousers up and glances over to make sure I'm ready.

"Dolohov! Are you in there? I'm looking for Hermione." Harry. Dolohov opens the door. I take a deep breath. Crap! It smells like sex and new upholstery in here, and I'm pretty sure Harry will notice one of those smells doesn't belong.

"*Orchideous!*" A fragrant bouquet bursts from my wand. I conjure a vase for them and set my handiwork on the table. Both men walk toward me, and I get an approving smirk from the older one.

"Ginny and the baby are fine! It was just food poisoning." What a huge relief. I give Harry a big hug. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Dolohov make a quick sidestep over to the couch.

"So, you're all sorted for today?" Dolohov smiles like the Cheshire Cat. Bloody perv. Harry extends a hand to shake. Dolohov leans way forward to take it. That's odd. Why doesn't he just step closer? Harry shrugs off the strange behavior and takes my hand to lead me out of the flat. Dolohov still doesn't move. "I'll speak to you again Friday."

I wish I could say something to him other than a feeble "Bye." His expression tells me the same thing too. He looks down quickly while Harry has his back turned. I follow his gaze. There's a tiny corner of pink fabric poking out from under his shoe.

My knickers.

I cough to cover my laugh. Harry pats me on the back. I sneak a grin at Dolohov and get this warm tingling in my belly, rather different than the usual tingles I get from him, and I don't recognize it. I follow Harry out the door, but when he whips around the corner at the end of the hall, I turn and look back. He's still in the doorway, smiling and watching me. I smile back, and I understand the warm feeling now.

I'm *his* best friend.

Know Thyself

Chapter 3 of 3

The final installment of *Life Lessons*. Nothing stays a secret forever. Feelings are hurt, friendships are tested, but sometimes hope can come from the oddest of places.

Merlin help me, I love it when he pulls my hair. This has to be the best sex ever...well, that time on the couch was great, and that time a few weeks ago when he...oh! Fuck yes! I can hardly catch my breath. That actually made me dizzy. I have to close my eyes, but I can feel his lips kissing a trail across my collarbone. And up my neck. And along my ear.

His hot breath on my skin makes my toes tingle. He makes every part of my body tingle. With one more kiss on my neck, he lies still beside me.

Sometimes when I'm lying like this, casually drifting between sleep and consciousness, I think about our relationship or whatever this is. There can't be one though, can there? Antonin shifts a little next to me. I don't think he's really asleep either. Now that I think about it, I'm not sure of the moment when I started referring to him by that name in my head. One day he wasn't Dolohov anymore. Rarely do I ever say either name out loud, nor does he refer to mine. Hmm, he's rubbing small circles on my inner thigh now. I knew he wasn't sleeping. He'll be leaving soon, I know it. It's what we do. I really want to say 'stay' and see what happens.

Stay.

I guess I have to say it outside my head for it to work. I open my mouth. Nothing. Maybe it's for the best. Sometimes he comes here; sometimes I go to his flat, we have fantastic sex, and then I go home. We've never talked about it. It just happens. Six weeks now. I keep thinking it will get old and we can go our separate ways, but it doesn't. We talk, but never about our little situation. He's kissing me now. Mmm. How can I think this could ever get old? Oh, he's getting up to leave.

Stay.

I can't say it with my voice, but I think it really hard. When I open my eyes, he's gone. Sigh. It shouldn't bother me. I do the same thing. He never tells me to stay. Out loud anyway.

"What do you want to shop for next?"

I look up from the shop window I've been perusing and shrug. Ginny looks ridiculous wearing hot pink earmuffs with that red hair of hers. She's happily married and knocked up so she doesn't give a shit, and I do admire her for that. Damn, it's freezing out here.

"I don't care, somewhere warm!"

"How about we pop into the Wheezes to thaw out and decide what we still need?" I nod. Sounds like a plan to me. Anything to get out of the snow. I should have owl-ordered everybody's Christmas presents this year. George's shop is toasty warm and fairly crowded. Ron grins at Ginny and me and goes back to helping his customer. I look around for something Antonin might like. What does one buy the person they are secretly shagging for Christmas? I've never found that information in the library.

"Ginny, darling! You're positively *glowing*!" George is swinging his little sister in a circle. It'd serve him right if she puked on him. She's out of that stage, but a flare up would be perfect right about now. "Hermione!" He's set her down and is coming my way. Don't do it buddy, don't...

"Ack!" After two full swings I might puke on him.

"You're glowing as well! Something you're not telling us about, Hermione?" That is not funny. Really not funny. It's also impossible. I have been beyond careful. Plus I had my period last week. I, uh oh, he's looking at me. Now he's grinning. Git.

"We're not glowing, we're sparkling with frost, George; it's ruddy cold out there!" Whew, thanks for the save, Ginny. Wait Ginny, where are you going? Come back, don't leave me with...

"So, who's the lucky bloke, Granger?" George uses a low voice so only I can hear.

"No one. There's no bloke."

"You're a terrible liar." Sigh. It's true; I am. "Anyone I know, and does he have anything to do with your mysterious disappearance from the Halloween party?" George is officially the most annoying person I know.

"You've been wondering about that all this time?" Stalker.

"Well, it was suspicious, but not quite as suspicious as the cheery mood you've been in since then."

"I'm cheery because I like the holidays." He just glares at me. Okay, that was a dumb lie. Everyone knows I hate the holiday season after I brought my parents back from Australia four years ago this month only to have them disown me for modifying their memories in the first place. "All right, you win, George, but don't tell anyone. I'm not... I'm not ready yet."

Wow. For once, George looks like he's going to be a decent human being about this. I guess he's having a caring older brother moment.

"Your secret is safe... for now." I roll my eyes. He smiles and looks me right in the eye. "Whoever he is, he's doing a fantastic job."

"George says you're doing a fantastic job." He looks up at me over the counter. I smile. Antonin's boss, Mr. Fletcher, is busy helping an elderly lady. Both are giving us shifty glances, so I know they're talking about us. I keep my voice low so our little audience at the deli doesn't hear. "He commented on how remarkably well shagged I was looking these days." He smirks. Men and their egos. "He doesn't know who." His smirk falters. Oops, I thought he'd be worried about that.

"Hey, I don't pay you to flirt with all the young ladies." All the young ladies? Mr. Fletcher is laughing. Whew. Not that I shouldn't allow him to, should I? We're hardly dating if

it's some big secret that we even know each other. Mr. Fletcher knows we're friends, that's all. I hope. Harry knows I helped him get this job at the deli. Uh oh, they're both staring at me; I've been lost in thought again, haven't I? Antonin winks at me.

"I'm sorry, I just thought I would drop by and see if you wanted *aride* home since it's freezing out there."

"No, no Miss Granger, don't be. Mr. Dolohov, you can leave early, I'll handle things from here." He is grinning. This is kind of embarrassing actually. Antonin nods and heads to the backroom. "Your friend's a good worker, bit funny sometimes..." I try not to snicker; blending in with Muggles is harder than it sounds. "...but he's a good sort." Huh. Now he is. I hope. "I'm glad he's got a friend like you. I don't think he's had the best lot in life." That much you nailed, sir. Oh good, he's coming back. I doubt he'd be pleased his boss is confessing this to me.

A warm arm slides around my waist. "Good evening, Mr. Fletcher." Antonin leads me out of the shop with a grunted goodbye to his boss. I scrunch up to him when we get outside. I wasn't exaggerating; it is freezing! "He really cares about you, you know." He doesn't say anything. I shouldn't be pushy. I can't help it though. "He's not the only one." Wow, did I just say that? Out loud? He still doesn't say anything. We walk the rest of the way to the alley in silence.

My back hits the brick wall before I can even register what's happening. His hand keeps the back of my head from hitting too. His mouth is on mine, urgently attacking with lips, tongue and teeth. My body responds immediately. I press my crotch against his thigh. Why didn't I wear a skirt today? Damn. I think he's realized the same thing. His hand is stroking me through my jeans. I gasp and pull him closer.

"Let's get out of here." He nods, panting as much as I am.

"I'm going to bend you over the nearest piece of furniture when we get there."

I am definitely not freezing anymore. He grips my arm. I concentrate very hard on my destination, but part of my mind keeps trying to decide what piece of furniture I want to Apparate us closest to. I feel the familiar pressure and release. His hand is already gripping my hair. Yes, the couch! Oh. Crap.

There's someone on it.

Lucius Malfoy jumps to his feet, just as surprised to see us Apparate in as we are to see him making himself comfy in Antonin's living room. He glares at me with what I am sure is the most intimidating look he can muster. Antonin drops his hands from me immediately, but Malfoy's turning red.

"Cavorting with a Mudblood? You really are going out of your way to impress the Ministry." That man has a special way of wording things that makes me feel two inches tall. I look at Antonin. This is the part where he disagrees. He's not saying anything. His expression is hard. My insides go cold. He isn't going to disagree. I don't feel so good. I take a few steps away from them. They turn to look at me. Antonin's jaw is set. Malfoy is sneering, utterly delighted at my distress. Neither says anything.

"I have to go." I don't go though; I just stand there. So do they. He doesn't stop me. He isn't going to stop me. I feel a tear coming, so I Disapparate before I embarrass myself further.

I try to drown myself in the shower; it doesn't work. I still feel like scum. This shouldn't bother me so much. It's not like I would admit anything in front of my friends. Of course, it isn't about admitting anything; we were caught red handed. Lucius is his main supporter at the Ministry, and I know his greatest fear is being sent to Azkaban. Surely he knows I would vouch for him, and Harry too... That is, if Harry could ever forgive me.

Why am I so worried about this? This is more than just a ding to my ego. Hmm. Only a tiny bit of Dreamless Sleep potion left, not a full dose, but it should get me knocked out. I sit on the edge of my bed and raise the vial above my head. Here's to you, Antonin Dolohov, you stupid bastard. *Bottoms up.*

I need a new job. This was supposed to be the road to equality for house-elves, not the glorious battle of the red tape. I just had to spend an hour of my life that I will never get back explaining to my boss that... ouch! Damn interdepartmental memo just poked me in the head. It must be from Draco, he always charms them to do that. Yep.

Hermione Granger

Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures

House-elf Committee

Due to a recent surge in the use of side-along house-elf Apparition, our department is in need of information on its limitations and possible side effects for humans. Please provide a written report to me by the 23rd.

Yours,

Draco Malfoy

Department of Magical Transportation

PS ... I heard you finally found a pureblood that will have you, congratulations.

I crumple the paper in my hand, imagining it is his neck. Whew. That actually made me feel a little better. I need to get out of here. Almost lunchtime, close enough for me. I sneak past my boss' office.

"Miss Granger?" Ack! That was embarrassing.

"Sorry, you startled me, Mr. Cresswell." He's looking at me like I'm mental. Way to make a great impression on the head of the Goblin Liaison Office.

"Someone was asking around for you earlier." Huh? I try to do the eyebrow thing. Great. Now he knows I'm mental. "You were talking with Diggory so I told him you were too busy; he said to give you this." He's holding out a rose blossom. Wonderful. He knows that is my favorite. I might be touched by this if it didn't look just like the ones on his neighbor's rose bush.

"Was this man brown haired, blue eyed and about yea tall?" I hold my hand above my head.

"Yes, that sounds right." He holds his hand out further. I suppose I'm being rude for not taking it. It's not his fault.

"Uh, thanks." I shove it in my pocket. I know he's laughing at me, but I don't care.

It's times like this I wish I had a close girlfriend to talk to. Harry and Ron would not understand. I love Ginny, but I just can't share these sorts of things with her. Her views on men and mine never really coincided. Although, I'm thinking at this time that her way was more successful. Maybe I should go talk to Ron anyway. It's been a while since we have had a nice conversation. Especially without Luna around.

"Are you sure that has been tested appropriately, George?" He's trying to smear something on my shoe.

"Of course, here." Oof. He lifts me up to sit on the counter. "Much better, now don't squirm. This won't damage your shoes, it'll just give you traction so you don't fall in the snow." I'm so glad George is using his powers for good these days. Ha! I take that back, he's tickling my ankle. The bells on the door tinkle.

"Hermione."

Oh no, no, no, no. Not here, not now.

Ron comes out of the backroom, scowling. "You aren't welcome here; move along."

George lets go of my foot. He's confused. I don't pay attention to him though. Antonin is standing in the front of the shop staring at me. That man is a bloodhound. He's quite good at using the telephone now. It's much easier on than knees than Floo calls. Why couldn't he just call me? Oh, he did. I hung up on him, that's why.

"I said move along." Ron walks up to him and gestures to the door.

"I just want a word with Hermione." Perfect. Ron is glaring at me now. I try to look innocent; I don't think it's working.

George is still confused. He looks at me, looks at Antonin, and his mouth drops open. He grabs the front of my cloak.

"Please tell me this is not..." He can't even say it. I don't know how I ever thought this would be okay. George is horrified. I feel so guilty. Oh great, now I'm going to cry.

"George, please." He yanks me off the counter and holds me flush against him so he can speak right in my ear.

"Do you know what he did, Hermione? Who he murdered?" He shakes me. Hard. I want to get away from him, but all my limbs are rubber and my eyes are burning and I know I deserve much worse than what George is doing. "My uncles, Hermione, my family."

He's absolutely disgusted and shoves me into Antonin's arms. Again, I don't have the strength to escape. If it wasn't for Antonin's strong grip, I'm not even sure I could stand. Mercy, what have I done?

"WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?" Ron roars. George points at me.

"Ask her! Ask her why she's been in such a good mood lately! Ask her who she's been shagging the last two months!"

I would have preferred it if Ron yelled at me or hit me, but he doesn't. He doesn't do anything but stare at my sobbing wreck of a person.

"Get out." It is hardly a whisper, but it echoes in my ears as if he had shouted it. Antonin half carries, half walks me to the door. I regain enough strength to pry myself free. I may not have any dignity left, but I am still walking out of here on my own two feet. Antonin follows me out and, unfortunately, so does George.

"Take your whore girlfriend and don't ever darken our doorstep again." Oh no. I think I'm going to vomit right here in the street. I spin around to look at George.

"Aaaaaahh!" I can't hold back my scream as Antonin decks him right in the face. I step backwards on a patch of ice and slide.

Before I hit the ground, I realize George only treated one of my shoes.

Wow, I'm all nice and warm and drowsy. It's nice. Comfy. Wrong. Something's wrong. I open one eye. Crap. I'm in St. Mungo's. I open my other eye. Harry's sitting by my bed. It looks like he's almost asleep.

"Harry, psst, Harry." He jerks upright.

"Oh good, you're awake." He's got the 'I've got good news and bad news' look on his face. "You hit your head pretty hard." Really Harry, you think? Oh, the pain relief potion is starting to wear off. The pain in my head is nothing compared to the emotional damage I've done to myself.

"How's George?"

"He's fine, a black eye and a large bruise to his pride, but otherwise...he's sorry too. For what he said. And how he treated you."

"I deserved it." Harry covers my hand with his and squeezes. "What about..." I can't bring myself to say his name.

"Dolohov?" I nod. "He got a reprimand, but he doesn't have to go back to Azkaban if that's what you mean." Sigh. I am still royally pissed at him, but I don't want him to go back to prison for something that's my fault.

"Do you think Ron, and George, will be okay?" He sighed. I take it that is a no. Harry rubs his face with his hands before answering.

"Give them some time."

I bite down on my tongue to keep from crying again. I really buggered things this time. "What about you?" He takes my hand again.

"To be honest, I wish it was someone else, anyone else." He doesn't say anything for a minute. "Maybe in some sort of dark, perverse way, we needed this." Huh? "A wake up call I mean. All this time Dumbledore lectured us on the importance of second chances. It's not so easy when you have to make the choice to believe in someone yourself. Look at how he changed his life or how Snape changed his."

When did Harry get to be so wise? I lean forward and give him a hug. Whoa, moved too fast, now I'm dizzy.

"The Healer said you could leave when you felt up to it, but to get plenty of rest. Do you want me to help get you home?" I nod. Yes, Harry, I need a lot of help.

"You shouldn't be here. I don't know how you even found my parents' house, but I don't want to talk to you." I put my hands on my hips and glare at him. He's got a lot of nerve showing up here. My head still hurts.

"If you didn't want me to find you, you shouldn't have taught me how to use a telephone directory." Fair point.

"Look, I'm on shaky ground with them as it is. I don't think this is a good time." His eyebrows knit.

"Why are you in trouble with your parents?" He's not giving up. I step out on the front stoop and shut the door as quietly as possible. I should have grabbed a jacket first. This has to be the coldest winter ever.

"I modified their memories five years ago so they would change their names and move to Australia. I was afraid Death Eaters would come looking for them." He lowers his eyes for a moment. I have no idea what he's thinking. "After it was safe, I brought them back, and they were very cross with me for altering their minds without their consent. They wouldn't even speak to me for a few years."

"You did this to keep them safe from, from..."

"You." He nods.

"And they were still mad?"

"I violated their basic human rights. They had every right to hate me." Oh no. Not that look, not pity.

"You must have been an exceptional student to do memory charms at that age." Don't blush, don't do it. He's just trying to get on your good side.

"I guess so. A little after that I, uh, may have..." Just spit it out; he deserves to know. "...Obliviated you." The last part was barely audible, but technically I said it.

"What?"

"Hermione?" The front door cracks open. "Is that one of your friends at the door? You know how we feel about that kind under this roof." Way to be subtle, Mother, but your timing is fabulous.

"It's okay, Mum, he's not, um, he's not a..." Can I still call him a wizard?

"I am unable to do magic, ma'am." Whew. Nice save. I'm still pissed at you.

"Well, come in then; no sense in standing out in the cold." He slides past me, throwing me an uncertain look before my mother drags him down the hall to the living room. I am gobsmacked. This is not how this was supposed to go.

"Close the door, Hermione, you'll freeze the whole house." I shake my head. It is going to be a long night.

This is so wrong. My parents love him. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. Oh, no, Dad is telling him the infamous 'first root canal' story. Why don't they just invite him to Christmas dinner while they're at it?

Come to think of it, this is the nicest they've been to me in ages. I may get invited to Christmas dinner at this point. He's being quite charming. I suppose working at the deli has been a crash course in Muggle Studies.

I must relax. I am going to give myself an ulcer if I keep this up. I've been tapping my foot and readjusting my position every few minutes, but they keep bloody ignoring me. Antonin isn't. He's been staring at me enough to make me even more of a nervous wreck.

"So where did you two meet?" Uh, well...

"At the Ministry." He says it in a small voice, almost shameful. I feel bad now too. We stare at each other. He's sorry, he's telling me silently across the room. What were we even fighting about? Mum and Dad are staring at us.

"I need to check on the roast. Hermione, will you set the table?" I follow her into the kitchen.

"I still can't trust you." Please, Mum, don't start on this. I can't take it right now. "But," and she strokes my hair, "I miss you. Your dad misses you." I am an intelligent, articulate person. Usually. I have never been at a loss for words so many times in one night. I may even cry again. I hug her and she hugs me. There are some times you just need Mum therapy.

"I miss you too."

She wipes my face with a cloth. I feel like I'm eight years old again and I've gotten in trouble for nicking sweets.

"Now," and she dabs at her own eyes too, "tell me all about your boyfriend." In the interest of preserving our newfound harmony, I think I'll leave out some details.

I feel rather relaxed after my talk with Mum. Upbeat almost. Dad and Antonin are still chatting in the living room when I go to tell them dinner's ready. Just as I reach for the door, Antonin's voice stops me.

"I know this is not my place, sir, but I have to tell you about what happened. In the War." So much for feeling upbeat. I should run in there and stop him from ruining all the progress I've made tonight, but my own curiosity stops me.

"I don't..."

"Please, sir, it was a dark and dangerous time, for everybody." He pauses to collect himself. "People were doing unforgivable things. I'm not saying that she was right for not asking you first, but I know for a fact what she did saved your lives."

I held my breath. My brain couldn't register the idea that what he said was true. I wait to hear my father's answer. It seemed like ages before there was one.

"That is a family matter, but I appreciate your honesty. Now, be honest with me about something else. What are your intentions with my daughter?"

This is why eavesdropping is a bad thing. There are things I don't need to hear. I push open the door and try to look clueless. "Dinner's ready." Dad smiles at me. He thinks he's clever by sliding past me and down the hall, leaving Antonin and I alone. I'm so busy watching him, I don't notice Antonin has his jacket already on until he's standing before me pressing a kiss to my forehead.

"I'll leave you to your family."

What? He's not leaving, is he? I don't want that. Wait a minute. I really don't want that. My pulse jumps. He's got the door open. It's now or never. I reach out and touch his sleeve.

"Stay."

Relax, Hermione; remember your breathing. You can make it through this; just breathe. I grip the seat harder.

"Push down." My father's voice is low and steady. My whole body rocks forward and I screech. "Relax, Hermione. You're being melodramatic." The car slows down. "Now ease up on the clutch." The whole thing lurches forward and dies. "No problem, just start her back up again and raise your foot slowly until you find that contact point."

I debate getting out of the car, but decide it is marginally safer inside of it than out. Why did I think it would be a fine idea to come along while Dad teaches Antonin to drive? The car lurches again, but stays running and we are off down the deserted lane. I take a few deep breaths and relax a tiny bit.

"You've got it now! Good job!" Antonin turns to smile at me, making the whole car swerve. Dad grabs the wheel and saves us from ending up in the ditch. "Might want to

keep your focus forward until you get the hang of it." Dad doesn't sound so chipper now. "Pull over up here."

They switch seats and Antonin turns to grin at me. I don't know which he enjoyed more, driving or terrorizing me. I close my eyes and lean back in my seat, utterly content now that my life isn't in danger. Something has changed between us; I know it's not just that the sex is better. It's the connection. There is nothing to hide anymore, and that rush of freedom is intoxicating. My friends hate him; his friends hate me. Everything is out in the open. My parents are talking to me; I'm not lying to my friends anymore. My job still sucks, but I can get another one, one where I can actually make a difference. I may even be in love. I open my eyes to see him still looking at me.

That is a definite maybe.