

Hiding

by ubiquirk

If you live a life of lies, how long can you go without telling anyone the truth and keep your sanity? And who would be safe to tell?

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Chapter 1 of 1

If you live a life of lies, how long can you go without telling anyone the truth and keep your sanity? And who would be safe to tell?

AN: Written for poe_momm at the SSHG Exchange to her prompt: 'Hermione's hiding a secret ... Snape's just plain hiding, and Ron likes boiled potatoes.'

This story wrote itself by skipping around in time, the scenes falling into place like puzzle pieces. Then it absolutely refused to be put into normal temporal order, so it moves between three different timeframes as indicated by fonts. It's also not a romance. Many, many thanks to my beta, firefly_124, and my Brit-picker, saracen77.

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She raises her hand to knock, yet it hovers above the wood of the door.

The hall smells of corned-beef and boiled cabbage, and she can hear yelling from the flat directly across the way. A lone bare bulb does little to light her surroundings, though she's thankful she can't see exactly what discolors the faded carpet of an indiscernible original color.

It's not council housing, yet she can't help thinking that it would probably be better for him if it were the landlord here doesn't even meet such standards.

A crash of shattering glass behind her causes her to flinch, and she turns quickly, raised hand now grabbing for her wand. When all that follows is more yelling, her shoulders drop, and she pushes her hair off her face, smooths the front of her jacket, and knocks firmly three times before she can stop herself.

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"Mum," Hermione says, "I need you to do me a favor."

"All right."

"Do you remember the name of that fertility specialist Beverly went to last year?"

Her mother looks up sharply, brow pinched. "Dr. Stapleton?"

"Yes. Can you make an appointment for as soon as she can see me?"

"Oh, Hermione." Kate reaches out and pulls her close, hand stroking hair. "Still nothing, then? I'd hoped well, I'd hoped ..."

"I know." Hermione pulls back to wipe at her cheeks. "But we've been trying for over two years now, and nothing. So ... so I'd like to make sure it's ... well ... I'd just like to make sure, you know?" Fresh tears fill her eyes.

"Of course, dear."

"Oh, and Mum? I'd rather use my maiden name for this and have them contact me here through you."

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"Look at you, would you?" Ron says to a giggling Rose as he takes her from her chair and lifts her up into the air.

She squeals and kicks her little legs, one small yellow sock threatening to fall off.

"You're just like your dad, you are! All covered in chocolate because you're too greedy to eat it slow and proper like."

Something twists in Hermione's gut.

When he pulls Rose closer, she waves the spoon towards him and coats his cheek with chocolate pudding, squealing and repeating the motion.

Ron's laugh rings out, and he turns to Hermione. "See! She's just like me, she is. Though, she may have got a bit of Fred and George thrown in with as much as she likes mischief."

Hermione's smile feels strained, and she turns to gather the pudding dish, gripping it tightly to hide the shaking of her hands.

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The office feels hollow and strange without the bustle of nurses and the vibrant energy of hopeful patients permeating the air. The light from her torch also doesn't offer much illumination, throwing corners into gloom. But then, she hasn't been to Dr. Stapleton's in over twelve years, so the atmosphere could have become somewhat odd over time. It's nothing to do with her breaking in at night. Nothing.

At least Hermione's variation on the traditional Point Me Spell seems to be working. Her wand rotates in her palm as she walks, leading her to a certain filing cabinet. As she runs her hand down the cabinet's front, the wand taps at the third drawer down and, once said drawer is open, hovers over a particular file.

The name on the form from Thames Side Clinic, Warren Peters, means nothing, and the address listed is in a section of London she'll need her mother's *A to Z* to find. But she has to know who this man is a wizard living outside of that world, a man who means something indefinable to her, if only because of Rose and Hugo.

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"Hello. I'm Lydia Stapleton." The pleasant looking woman with straight blond hair rises and walks around her desk to shake Hermione's hand before gesturing. "Won't you have a seat?"

"Yes, thank you, and hello. I'm Hermione W Granger." She smoothes her skirt nervously once sitting.

Taking a seat beside her instead of across the desk, Dr. Stapleton picks up a folder and flips quickly through it. "I see here, Ms. Granger, that your husband is not joining you for treatment."

"No, he's not. Ron ... well, Ron comes from an absolutely humongous family that's very ... fecund. If the problem is me, I'd like to try to take care of it on my own."

The look the doctor gives her is somewhat measuring, and there's a bit of silence. "Very well. I typically don't take cases without the participation of both parties involved, but it can't hurt to run some diagnostic tests on you."

Relief washes through Hermione, her stomach unclenching for what feels the first time in months. "Thank you, Doctor. I ..." She trails off, uncertain as to how to tell a stranger she hates to fail at achieving any goal she sets her mind to, even conception.

"Right, then." Dr. Stapleton turns to a new page in the file and continues as if nothing untoward occurred. "Let's discuss some of the options and which will provide the most information with the least invasive procedures."

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Rose twirls her hands, and the bright silver rings of the logic puzzle come apart effortlessly.

"Ooch, she's a clever one, Hermione." Minerva nods towards where the girl plays on her office rug. "Most children don't master that for another year or so."

"The primary school you recommended is wonderfully qualified. Thank you again."

"I've taught students from Wheegle's Wittle Wizards and Witches for years." She sniffs. "This is more than schooling. The child is advanced."

Hermione shifts Hugo from one arm to the other to avoid having to answer.

Minerva leans in to chuck the baby under the chin and then grins up at Hermione. "She must get it from you."

"That must be it," Hermione agrees, giving her brightest smile the one she's practiced so much it only feels somewhat brittle.

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She's never been to White City before, and the part she's in now certainly hasn't shared in any of the supposed prosperity brought by the BBC opening a larger complex. This street seems grimy and somehow greyer than is typical even for London. Semi-detached houses have struggling plots of weeds as six-by-four foot front gardens, and those weeds fight to make it through rubbish and plastic children's toys to find sun.

The address leads her to one of the few buildings taller than two stories one built for flats. And if the street is grey, this building seems the very source of said greyiness. It lists like the Burrow, yet lacks the aid of magic to shore it up. If it were ever painted, it is doubtful that even the slow memory of stone could recall what the color had been.

Remaining Disillusioned, she paces for a while, then, as the hours pass, sits on the pavement across the way. The office thinks she's gathering research for a case, and she knows she can make the work up over the next few days, but the anxious boredom of waiting hangs tedious around her neck.

Occasionally, women bustle by with shopping, and once she has to jump up to avoid being hit by a boy careening down the pavement on a bicycle, yet neither of the two men she sees come out of the building feel like the right person.

Standing, ready to give up for the day, she looks up from brushing off her trousers to see a tall shape turn the corner. The impression of pale gauntness sharpens into

recognition as he draws close.

Her heart seems to stop in her chest as Hermione finally realizes who he is even though he can't be.

It isn't until he's been in the building for a good five minutes that she unfreezes enough to lower her hand from her mouth.

Snape. The man is Snape.

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"The test results have all come back negative, Ms. Granger."

Her stomach flips. "What ... what does that mean?"

"It means there's no physical reason that you cannot conceive."

"So ..." Her heart pounds, and the vibrations clench at her throat.

"The problem most likely lies with your husband, yes."

Perching on the edge of the chair, unable to relax back into it, she bites her lip, hands coiling like restless snakes in her lap. After what seems like hours, Hermione asks, "What are my options?"

"I'd have to examine your husband to know whether there is something that can be done to improve things from his side."

"I ..." She pauses to clear her throat, crossing her legs at the ankles and tucking them back under the chair. "I don't think that's going to be possible. Ron ... well, Ron's already said the problem *can't* be him." She presses her feet into the carpet and works to keep her face neutral. Lying may be a skill she acquired in her adventurous past, but it's never come easy.

Dr. Stapleton sighs and sets down the paper she was holding to pinch at the bridge of her nose. "I'm sorry to hear that, Hermione. I know that makes things more difficult for you."

"So there's nothing to be done?"

"There is one thing artificial insemination. But you'll need to decide how you feel about it and how it will affect your marriage if your husband is unaccepting of the circumstances."

Nodding, Hermione allows herself to slump back in the chair.

"Why don't I give you the forms to fill out, and you can take them home and look at them at your leisure?"

"Forms?" Her voice sounds a bit hollow.

"You get to make specifications as to things you're looking for in the sperm donor. Since this is a private practice and I also handle that side of things, you'll get more say in what type of donor than usual."

"Oh, yes. I can see that. And ... and I do have ... um ... specifications. Thank you."

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Ron spoons boiled potatoes onto Rose's plate and then Hugo's before adding a large pile of such to his own.

"But, Dad, you know I don't like them," Hugo whinges, pushing one of the offending objects around with his fork.

"Don't like them?" Ron replies around a mouthful of potato. "That's mental, that is. How could you not like them? I love them!"

"Well, I don't!" Hugo's small mouth sets into a hard line, lips thin. "I want sprouts instead."

They both look to her, and Hermione says, "Sprouts are better for him anyway."

Rose giggles and shoves a combination of potato, sprout, and chop into her mouth.

"That's just unnatural, that is." After moving the bits of white to his own plate, Ron places a few Brussels sprouts on Hugo's.

"More!"

"Hugo," Hermione warns.

"More please."

Shaking his head, Ron adds dark green balls to Hugo's plate until a definitive nod tells him he can stop.

"Unnatural," he repeats, looking to Hermione and gesturing towards the happily chewing boy.

Hermione looks down and uses her fork to mash a bit of boiled potato with such force that she almost tips her plate over.

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The forms begin with the basics race, hair color, eye color, height, body type. She specifies Caucasian, because what else could she do without being immediately accused of an affair, but selects randomly for the rest. She'll be overriding most of this anyway. Intelligence is the only other category she stops and makes a definite preference for choosing the highest level.

But much of it doesn't matter because she finishes by pulling out her wand. It's taken her a week of staying a bit late after work in the library to come up with this spell. Never mind the delay gave Dr. Stapleton the illusion that Hermione spent time talking Ron around.

"*Eligo Magicus!*" The wand movement at the end comprises a tricky twist of the wrist, but she's still a dab hand at Charms.

The paper glows for a few seconds and then returns to normal, and Hermione lets out a sigh of relief. She knows it's a long shot, but she wants her children to be magical to fit into the Wizarding world she herself loves.

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Apparating, already Disillusioned, to the small alley that runs behind his building, she waits for him to emerge at half past eight and follows.

After stopping off at his local shop to pick up a copy of *The Independent*, Snape makes his way to the small working-class diner around the corner. He attacks his food with gusto, eating everything mixed together - tomato and mushroom sharing space on the fork with sausage - just like Rose. The three-quid-special fry-up is washed down with two cups of milky tea while he simultaneously polishes off the first half of the paper.

The smell of lard billowing constantly from the cooker makes her queasy, but Hermione likes to stay close enough to him that she can use a Sight Enhancing Spell to see the titles of the articles he lingers over, what his interests are. Will it be the renewed unrest in East Timor? The way the pound is gaining on the dollar? The review of the latest YouPhone, which can now be implanted subdermally?

When he picks the financial article, she tries to imagine what their conversation about it could be. Does he think England should finally give in and change over to the Euro? Would any of this affect Wizarding currency?

In the semi-brightness of morning summer sun filtered through a dirty window, she stops short of envisioning discussions of Rose and Hugo, no matter how they've begun to echo through her night-shrouded dreams.

Thinking, once again, that this could be the day she approaches him, she follows him to the local park in which he seems to spend his days. As he settles himself on his favorite bench, the one tucked away in an arbor of trees no one else seems to visit, she paces on the quiet grass nearby. She tells herself the usual laundry list of excuses for why she should wait - it's too soon, maybe it's best to not do so in a public place, she needs to get back to work, etc. - and after another half hour of watching him finish the paper, she leaves.

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"Would you look at them?" Molly stares out into the whirling chaos of a garden full of running, yelling grandchildren, smiling widely.

"Hmmm," Hermione offers, the sound half statement, half question.

"I tell you, if we didn't make an effort to dress them a bit differently, I'm not sure how we'd tell them all apart." She laughs. "Why sometimes it's just a bobbing sea of red."

Shifting on the bench, Hermione presses her fingers into her thighs in little rhythmic pulses as the children run by. Ginger, ginger, ginger, brown, ginger, ginger, ginger, brown. It turns into an internal chant.

"Except for your two, that is. I can always spot Rose and Hugo with that dark brown hair." Molly looks at her, face neutral, which is an unusual expression for her. "Well, at least they got the straightness of it from Ron."

A bark of laughter that sounds nervous to her own ears, but hopefully not to others', pushes past Hermione's lips, and she runs a hand over her wild hair. "Thank Circe for some favors."

Molly's smile is small as she turns back to watching the children.

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"Hermione?" Dr. Stapleton's voice sounds happy. "I'm so glad you've rung back. I know it's taken longer than normal to find a donor who matches your profile, but I've got good news. We've found him."

Heart pounding, she switches the phone to her other ear and looks up at her mother, standing in the kitchen doorway. "That's ... that's wonderful." She's amazed someone magical was found.

"I had to go outside of the donors who come directly to my practice, but Dr. Everton from the Thames Side Clinic assures me this man is clean and healthy. If that sounds all right with you, of course."

"Yes, that's fine." Pausing, she turns slightly away from Kate's smiling face. "When can we ... uh ... begin?"

"I thought you might ask that." A chuckle emerges from the phone. "I had Rita look at our schedule and your ovulation chart, and we can squeeze you in next Tuesday at eleven."

"I'll see you Tuesday then. And thank you." Ringing off, Hermione turns to her mother, big smile in place, hands pressed firmly to thighs. "Dr. Stapleton has found a new treatment that I can take. It should make me release eggs more regularly. I could get pregnant as early as the next time I ovulate."

Kate steps forward to hug her daughter. "Lovely! Just lovely!" Pulling back, her eyes roam Hermione's face, and her smile fades slightly. "You still haven't told Ron, have you?"

"No, Mum." Glancing away, she says slowly, "I just ... I just can't. Molly ... well, Molly already praises Fleur and her ability to have babies every time I visit. I can't take the pitying looks I'll get, the awkward attempts to talk about it." She looks her mother in the eye. "I want to handle this one on my own."

"Well, I may not agree with you, but I'm here for you nonetheless. And you know the ability to have children doesn't mean anything about your worth as a person, as a woman. Why, look at me." Hands flung wide, she continues. "I could only ever have you, and I think I'm spiffing."

Laughter rings out, the two sounds harmonizing as they reflect off walls that hold happy childhood memories.

As it fades, Kate takes her daughter's face into her hands. "You're wonderful, dear. Don't ever let anyone make you doubt that."

Hermione squeezes her mother to her again, but her eyes remain open and her shoulders refuse to relax.

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Snape walks past the park to the bus stop - something Hermione'd never witnessed on the handful of days she's been able to observe him these past few months since she'd found him.

It's after rush hour, and the bus heading south is only half full, giving her ample chance to sneak on and sit in the back.

Snape's body sways slightly with the stop-start motion of traffic, and he looks out the window instead of reading.

Staring at the back of his head, Hermione notices for the first time a cowlick towards the crown that swirls counterclockwise - just like the one she smoothed before putting Hugo on the Hogwarts Express. Her hands long to reach out to touch this one, to see if it feels the same.

The trip to Hammersmith doesn't take long, and she's soon following him off the bus and onto a busy high street. After walking for a few minutes, he ducks into a small door that bears no signage set beside a larger and more obvious entrance to an Odd Bins wine shop.

Hermione lingers, pressed into the wall so as to stay out of people's way, deciding there's no way to immediately follow him without him hearing the door being opened.

After a few moments, a young woman in a ratty tan coat leaves, pulling its collar high about her neck as if cold, though the day is mild. Her blond hair, typically thought to be a bright color, appears as washed out as the rest of her thin form.

A young man wearing baggy jeans and a dirty Man U shirt enters next, looking left and right furtively before ducking into the door with his head down.

Hermione follows him to the top of a narrow flight of stairs and into a small waiting room.

"Joey," says the middle-aged receptionist, "it's been awhile."

"Look, I just need a little something extra, all right? No need to go spreading it around I'm doing the plasma thing again, all right?"

The woman's smile falters.

Joey sighs and holds out his hand. "It's still twenty quid, right?"

"And you'll be paid after, same as always." She points to a chair.

"Yeah, yeah."

Hermione's fairly certain she clumps as she moves quickly back down the stairs, but she doesn't care. Pausing at the bottom to catch her breath, her mind races to match her heart plasma, he makes money from selling plasma. Her stomach churns as she tries to imagine what such an existence would mean to a proud person like Snape.

The door opens before her, admitting another boy who barely looks more than a teenager, and she squeezes to the side so that he moves past her without feeling her there.

Outside it's begun to drizzle, adding a more palatable gloom to an already overcast day. She has to move constantly to avoid the many pedestrians, and it's something of a relief when Snape emerges.

He looks even paler than before, the shadows beneath his eyes sunken bruises. His walk lacks any of its usual briskness as he continues further down the high street.

But it isn't until a half mile on when he enters another building that Hermione realizes what his logical next stop would be Thames Side Clinic printed large on the door.

Stopping in the middle of the pavement, she giggles somewhat hysterically at the thought of a 'dead' man keeping himself in food and housing by selling the very fluids of vitality and virility.

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"Gryffindor!" Ron yells, running into the sitting room, waving a piece of parchment like mad. "Rose was sorted into Gryffindor!"

The knot that had grown increasingly tighter over the past few hours releases its hold on her gut, and she takes the first deep breath of what feels like years.

"Did you hear, Hugo?" Sweeping the boy up and into a whirl, Ron laughs. "Your big sis is a Gryffindor, and that's just what you'll be too when you go to Hogwarts."

"Ron." Her voice carries a note of warning. "We've talked about this."

He sets Hugo down and turns to her. "Oh, come on, Mione. It's not like he's going to be anything else, is it? Not with both you and me Gryffs."

"You never know." She almost winces at the prim sound she can hear in her own voice but keeps her face neutral. "He could be a Ravenclaw or a ... a Hufflepuff or Slytherin."

Ron's bark of laughter rings with derision, and he swipes a hand through the air to cut her off. "A Slytherin? Are you mental? There's never been a Weasley Slytherin ever." He turns to Hugo. "And there never will be, will there?"

The boy looks up at his father with dark eyes wide and adoring, shaking his head no in perfect mimicry of Ron's movements, brown hair flying outwards.

Her stomach re-clenches.

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"Hermione, it's so good to see you again. It's been what ... a year?"

She smiles at Dr. Stapleton. "At least."

"And how is our Rose?"

"A sheer delight. The entire family can't get enough." She delves into her purse before holding out a small rectangle. "I have a photo."

Taking it, Dr. Stapleton says, "Would you look at her! She's beautiful." She hands it back. "However, as lovely as it is to see you, I'm fairly certain you made an appointment for a specific reason."

"Yes, I'd like ... I'd like a brother or sister for Rose." She twists the photo in her hands. "And one not too much younger, so ..."

"And your husband?"

"Ron agrees." Suddenly, a corner bends under her nervous fingers. Laying the picture on her thigh, she worries at it, trying to smooth it back out.

"Well then, I'll want to do a quick check-up on you, but I'm going to assume we'll use the same procedure as before." She rummages in a desk drawer to pull out a packet of papers. "Which means filling out the same forms as before."

Seeing the profile questionnaire on top, Hermione asks, "Isn't there any way to just ask for the same donor again?"

The doctor sighs. "No, I'm afraid not. Legally, his anonymity is protected and it's impossible for me to contact him. You can try filling out the form with the same parameters again, but there's no way I can guarantee you'll get the same donor." She hands over the papers with a pen. "Why don't you get started on these while I go and see if there's an examination room available?"

Nodding, Hermione begins ticking boxes. She's familiar enough with Muggle law that none of what the doctor just said comes as a surprise.

As soon as the door clicks shut behind her though, she pulls her wand from her sleeve, tapping it to the questionnaire. "*Econtra Pater Rose!*"

As the green glow fades from the paper, she smiles slightly and puts her wand back to pick up the pen again. Just because Dr. Stapleton can't select for the same donor doesn't mean Hermione is similarly constrained.

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Long moments pass, and she's not sure if he's going to answer, even though she saw him enter the building ten minutes before she ventured to climb its stairs.

Continued yelling from the neighboring flat ruins any chance she has for hearing the scruff of foot or rustle of clothing that would indicate his approach.

The cabbage stench begins to get to her, stomach turning nauseously.

Hermione smooths a faintly trembling hand over her hair and knocks again.

There's another crash behind her, and just as she involuntarily turns towards it, the door in front of her clicks open and almost immediately begins to close.

Panic squeezes her chest, breath impossible, and she gasps out, "Wait!" Hermione wedges one leg into the gap and pushes, palm pressed to rough wood.

The door doesn't move, but that also means it's no longer closing.

"Wait!" she pants, mouth dry, tongue uncooperative. "I'm not here to harm you or turn you in."

The pressure that had been grinding the bones of her knee into the door jamb eases somewhat.

A voice from her past emerges from behind the peeling wood, its reality somewhat wearier and less grandiose than her remembrances. "Why, then, are you here, Miss Granger?"

"I ..." She clears her throat. "I came to talk."

"Talk?" She doesn't need to see his expression to imagine which one goes with that snort of disdain.

"Yes, talk."

"I find it highly unlikely that a popular Gryffindor war hero such as yourself would ever need to seek out the likes of me for a 'talk.'"

"But there's ... there's no one else." She leans her forehead against the door, pressing both palms to it, and whispers, "For either of us."

Moments pass, and when the door does finally move, she totters, too much of her weight having rested upon it.

She falls for a heart-wrenching split second before catching herself with one solid step forward into his flat.

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