

Choosing Summertime Dilemmas

Chapter One – Summertime Dilemmas

The sun set on an affluent London estate, as a seventeen-year-old girl looked on. The girl wasn't normal, however, as she had two very close, but platonic male friends, she tended to read more than sleep, and she was a witch. Everyone Hermione Granger knew in both the magical and Muggle worlds were dating someone – everyone but her two platonic male friends. They had the ability to pretend that their lives were normal, because they weren't the target of a megalomaniac who was bent on killing them – she wasn't like them. As the best friend of the focus of a decades-old power struggle, Hermione knew she could never casually date anyone, least of all one of the friends she'd seen war and fought to the death with.

Hermione Granger stared mopingly out the window at her neighbour, Polly Pratchett, as she kissed the lips off her boyfriend on her front porch, completely unaware of the war raging around them. Hermione would have been in Polly's year at finishing school, had she not attended Hogwarts. She wondered how different her life would have been if her parents had not let her go to the all-Wizarding school, or if she'd let her parents convince her to quit the Wizarding world after her brush with death in second year.

With a wry laugh, Hermione flopped back onto her bed and let her hair fly loosely across the duvet. Who was she kidding? As inquisitive and thirsty for knowledge as she was, a pack of Mountain Trolls couldn't have kept Hermione from going to Hogwarts and learning everything there was to know about magic. Even her parent's renewed threats to take her out of school following last year's nearly fatal run-in with Voldemort's Death Eaters hadn't kept her away.

"I'm of age in the magical world ," she had explained. *"I can leave you and go anyway ."*

In truth, Hermione hadn't wanted to leave her parents and would have been hard pressed, indeed, to do so. Her perseverance had won out in the end, however, and it hadn't been necessary. Which brought her back to her current problem; she didn't have a boyfriend.

Not that she had *wanted* one...at first, anyway. Her mother had confronted her about her dating status soon after their near separation last summer holidays.

"If you had someone to be close with; someone who you could confide in and share your life with..."

“No, mother,” Hermione said adamantly. “I’ve got two friends that are boys. We share just about everything together as it is. Why should I have to get a boyfriend?”

Her mother hadn’t been able to provide an answer, but the nagging hadn’t stopped. The seed was planted in her mind, however, and Hermione had spent the next year at school looking at her friends, Ron and Harry, in a slightly analytical way. Her scientific, unendingly curious mind couldn’t help but discern all the possible scenarios if she were to become romantically involved with one or the other. When she stepped off the Hogwarts Express this year, she was no closer to taking the next critical step, and her mother seemed to know it. She waited only until they were in the car before harping on the subject once more.

“Have you given any thought to pairing off with a boy?” she queried.

Hermione rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. “Yes, Mum, but I’m not going to just jump into some wizard’s arms and snog him senseless, now am I?”

“Yes, well...” her mother replied, “about that.” She gave her father a surreptitious glance and continued, “There’s a nice boy around the block that’s talked about you before. The Miller’s boy, you know?”

Ryan Miller was as snooty as his parents, and only tolerable for short intervals. “Yes, Mum. I know him, but what’s that got to do with me getting a boyfriend?”

There was another awkward pause and her mother’s hands began to wring themselves together. Hermione groaned, guessing what she was about to say. “Well...we just thought it’d be nice for you to have a date with him.”

“Mother,” Hermione said, pinching her nose in frustration. “Please don’t tell me you’ve set me up with Ryan Miller.” She’d rather date Malfoy...well, almost.

The date had been an unqualified disaster. The meal itself was fine, but the idiot had the gall to order her food for her, refused to listen to anything she had to say, and when the night was over, tried to kiss her! She was not amused and told her mother as much.

“Mother, don’t ever interfere in my love life again. I’m not a child, and I know what I want in a man – Ryan Miller is not it!”

So, her mother, becoming much more like the cagey, intelligent dentist that she was, and not like the obsessed mother that she had been acting like, issued Hermione a challenge.

“All right, Hermione, let’s compromise. If you know what you want, then find a suitable partner at your school, and we’ll stay out of it. Otherwise, we’ll have a full card of suitors for you when you return next year.”

After that, Hermione stewed in her room for an entire hour before something hit her. She couldn’t pretend to have a relationship, it just wasn’t her style...and the two dunderheads she had the

fortune of being close with couldn't date their way out of a wet paper bag.... Still, Hermione had been forced to consider her friends differently than she had done since she was fourteen. From her observations over the previous ten months, it had become clear that she *could* be with one of them, but it had to be handled gently.

The idea was intriguing, and as she dwelled on it more and more, a plan formulated in her mind; one that brought back long-repressed feelings, and caused her to realise that it was only a matter of time before she would have to choose between them anyway. They were too close for one of them not to date her in the end. The only question was, how would the other one react to her choice?

It wasn't so much that Hermione wanted a good snogging partner, as much as it was that she knew neither of her best friends were going to make the decision for her. Admittedly, the snogging part probably wouldn't be too hard to adjust to. Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley were anything but decisive when it came to girls, but thinking about kissing one in particular made her even more determined. But was he interested in being with her? Almost instantly another question appeared in her mind: what to do about the other one, who would be at least a little bit hurt if they did pair off?

Hermione slid off her bed and walked over to her desk. There, among the various, neatly-stacked books, homework, research pads, and notes, were two identical boxes. Each wooden box had a hinged lid with a lock and a single, engraved letter. She opened the one with the 'H' etched on the top and began to read the last letter she had received from him.

Dear Hermione,

Yes, I finished the essay for Snape. He's a git for having us do such a large, involved assignment over our last Summer holiday, especially because I can't exactly find ground scarab beetle, or sliced arvanago root, can I? And before you go off on me, yes...I know it's N.E.W.T. year, and that it'll help us be better prepared. But honestly, who cares about hair restoration potions, anyway?

Blimey. I sounded like Ron, just then, didn't I?

Well, Aunt Petunia is yelling at me to finish weeding the garden. Something about her Azaleas being choked to death. Talk to you later.

Harry

She replaced the letter in the box and closed the lid. The other box was opened, the one with the 'R' on it's top, and she took the top letter on the smaller stack inside.

Dear Hermione,

Pig's being a bloody pain, so I'll have to make this short.

Dad's let me work with the twins in Diagon Alley. Work's good, the pay is all right, but the working environment is dodgy. I've got to test new product for four hours and run the till the rest of the time. Fred and George are being weird, too; always slipping off somewhere and whispering so I don't hear them when they get back.

Susan Bones is working in the Alley now. Her aunt (not the Minister) got her a job working at Flourish and Blott's as a stocker. I'm sure you'd like that, eh? Working with books all day

sounds like your kind of thing, not hers.

Well, Pig's about to go spare, so I better send him off to you.

Ron

The two letters had come within days of each other, and to Hermione, demonstrated where she stood with both boys. Her plan started to evolve, and as she considered both Harry and Ron, she knew that her quest to turn one of them into her boyfriend was much more important than to satisfy her mother's demands; she was ready to move on, and it was time for her to choose.

Choosing Plans In Motion

Chapter Two – Plans in Motion

Hermione adjusted her too-small white polyester top and smoothed the fabric of her skirt. There were three weeks left in the summer holidays and Hermione was finally going to Grimmauld Place to meet her friends. The Granger family trip had been postponed from the beginning of her break from school to the middle because of a dental conference in Brighton. Now that she was back, however, Hermione was eager to begin her plans.

It was with some surprise and a little bit of pleasure that her mother took her out to shop for new clothes instead of books on their holiday in Florence the previous week. Hermione knew that there would be little time to utilise the Muggle clothes that weren't worn at Hogwarts to their full advantage, and that first impressions were extremely important. Well, not *first* impressions, but the first after being away for a good while.

“Good morning, Hermione,” Tonks said cheerfully as she stepped off the Knight Bus to grab Crookshanks' carrier. Stan Shunpike nodded absently on his way to take her trunk but did a double-take as they walked onto the giant purple bus.

“Hello, Tonks,” Hermione said cheerfully, beaming up at her pink spiked hair. “Beautiful day, isn't it?” She was satisfied to see Stan stumble a bit on the steps as he kept more than one eye below her chin while wrestling with the heavy, book-filled trunk.

“I'd say,” Tonks replied, seeming to take a second glance at her as well. “Looks like it's going to be beautiful for a certain wizard, eh?”

Hermione just smiled knowingly and took her seat on one of the many moving beds on the first floor. She made sure to cross her legs like her mum taught her, careful to preserve her modesty, and focused on her pet's gleaming yellow eyes.

When Hermione first tried on her blouse and skirt, it was with gleeful anticipation of the looks her friends would give her upon her arrival. Now that the moment was almost at hand, however, she felt more than a little nervous that she was being someone she wasn't. Then a familiar voice appeared in her head and reminded her that if she was going to change the balance of her relationship with a certain boy, she needed to change how things had always been. If that meant utilizing her assets more than she had previously, then so be it.

Tonks was whistling an old Beatles tune while the Knight Bus sped around London. Every so often, the Auror would turn an eye to Hermione and smile. *Yes*, Hermione thought, this was going to be an interesting three weeks.

*

With a loud rap of her knuckles, Tonks knocked on the front door to Number Twelve. Hermione's insides writhed with worry. She ran a hand over her recently tamed hair, ending at the bit of coloured elastic that held it close to the base of her head. Satisfied that it wasn't frizzing-out like her nerves, she grasped Crookshanks' carrier and set her chin.

The door opened and she was smothered in Mrs. Weasley's warm embrace. "Oh, Hermione!" the cordial woman declared and moved back, standing silent for a moment as her eyes swept up and down her new exterior. After a silent spell, she continued with an oddly knowing smirk, "We're so very glad you've finally come. The boys have been bored to tears without you." She gathered her inside and they were followed by a chuckling Tonks, who was levitating Hermione's trunk behind her.

The first thing she noticed was that the portrait of Mrs. Black was gone; a bright patch of broken plaster the only sign she had every hollered invectives at her only a year ago. The troll legs were missing, along with, thank Merlin, the elf heads. It was a testament to Hermione's love for her friends that she had endured last summer here with them still hanging along the entryway. Her only regret had been that Kreacher had died before she could convince him to accept wages.

Tonks walked up the stairs with Hermione's trunk in tow while Mrs. Weasley continued to dote on her. "Such a beautiful woman you've become, Hermione. We're all lucky to have you with us." She was crushed in another warm embrace when Tonks made a startled cry and a sound like an elephant stampede reached their ears.

Hermione broke free from Mrs. Weasley's arms and was instantly presented with the faces of her friends bounding down the stairs. Harry's black hair stood at odd angles from the top of his head, as messy as ever. It was his smile that she noticed first, however. Throughout the whole of last year, Hermione had made it her mission to bring that smile back to her friend's face. She was so very glad it was there again.

Before they could utter a word, Hermione launched herself at Harry, smothering her face in his shirt. Once upon a time, they were the same height, but puberty had doled out different results to each of them. The boys had grown a head taller than her and she had been given... well, *different* assets. As Hermione pulled away from Harry, she kissed his cheek, much like she had for the past few years, but this time, she left behind the red impression of lipstick. She lingered for a moment as his hand automatically covered the spot on his face.

Just before it became too awkward, however, she latched onto Ron and hugged him just as fiercely. "Oh, Ron," she breathed into his shoulder. "It's so good to be with you two again." Ron patted her back awkwardly and when she pulled away, his face had flamed a red as deep as she had ever seen.

Both boys were still looking at her, sappy grins on their faces, when Hermione knelt to open Crookshanks' cage. The bandy-legged feline tore from his erstwhile home and up the stairs, presumably to see if any of the mice he had found last summer were still infesting the attic.

"You look...good, Hermione," Harry finally said. He reached a hand behind his neck and pulled on it nervously.

"Y-Yeah," Ron agreed, digging a toe into the worn carpet. "Looks like Italy was good for you."

"It was wonderful," she gushed and hooked her arms in each of theirs. "I can't wait to show you my pictures!" Hermione pulled on them until they were upstairs and in the room the boys had been sharing for the past two weeks. "We've got so much to catch-up on."

*

"So," Harry asked, fingering the collar of his shirt, "this is that Ryan bloke?" He was holding a picture that Hermione's mother had slipped into the shoe-box she kept her pictures in at the beginning of the summer holidays.

"Yeah," Hermione confirmed. "I told you how horrible that date was, didn't I?" she asked, watching his expression carefully.

Harry didn't take his eyes off the picture, but nodded his head. "He's good looking, wouldn't you say?" When he said this, however, he lifted his head slightly – enough to pin her with a penetrating stare.

Hermione forced her emotions to the side and averted her gaze, picking up a stack of pictures from Hogwarts. She could feel Ron's eyes on her as well. "I suppose," she said as nonchalantly as she could. "If you're into that sort of thing; he's too...arrogant."

She looked up again to see Harry still staring at her. Ron made a huffing noise on her left.

"You can tell that from a picture?" He rolled his eyes and tossed the picture he was looking at back onto the pile. "Blimey. How's a bloke supposed to hide his insecurities?"

Harry smirked a little at this and Hermione turned to answer him. "I don't know, Ron. Ryan's as big a git as one can be without having it stamped on his forehead. Every time I see this picture, I can't shake the feeling that he's mentally undressing me."

Ron's reaction was predictable, he looked like he wanted to find Ryan Miller and pound him into the ground right then. Harry, however, held out the photo to Hermione and said, "Why do you keep it, then? If it's such a bad thing, why not get rid of it?"

Hermione considered his question, pulling her legs underneath her and tilted her head slightly. "Sometimes," she began, keeping her eyes fixed on Harry's, "we need to remember the bad experiences to motivate us to make new ones."

The pictures in Hermione's hands became sweaty, and she put them back into the box. Then, she reached out to take Ryan's photo from Harry's hand and their fingers brushed for a moment.

"You're right, Hermione," Harry said softly. "Sometimes, we just need the proper motivation to make happy memories."

There was a call from Mrs. Weasley for lunch, and the three of them put away the photos. As Hermione followed Ron and Harry downstairs, Ginny appeared beside her, sweaty and covered in cobwebs.

"Hey, Hermione," the perky redhead said and they stopped to embrace. The boys kept walking.

"Ginny!" she cried as they hugged. "Where have you been? I've been looking for you."

Ginny rolled her eyes, a trait that she seemed to share with her brother. "Mum had me cleaning the library. She knew you'd be anxious to see it now that we've got the doors opened. When I saw Crookshanks chasing another mouse, I knew it was time to take a break. Besides, I had to see what you have in store for my brother and his equally dense friend."

Hermione blushed slightly that her plans had been so transparent. Still, Hermione had been planting subtle hints in her letters to Ginny since before her trip to Italy. It was no wonder then that the intelligent younger witch had figured her out. "Well," she said and took a step back. "What do you think?"

Ginny eyed Hermione carefully. "I think," she said with a feral grin, "that if they don't get the hint, especially one in *particular*, then they're beyond hope. Hermione, you're lovely."

She blushed again and took her friend's hand. "Thanks, Ginny." They began to walk down the stairs again and it occurred to her that maybe Ginny could help her with something that had been gnawing at her since she first decided on having a boyfriend. "But...I'm a little nervous about something."

"What?" Ginny asked as they set foot on the landing before the entryway.

"Well," Hermione said with hesitation. What if confiding in Ginny spoiled her plans? What if she didn't think Hermione's choice was suitable? With one of the boys being her brother and the other someone she, herself had had feelings for... "I don't want to hurt the other one's feelings."

Ginny stopped them outside the closed kitchen door. "So...you've chosen, then? You know which one you want to be with?"

Hermione chewed on the inside of her cheek in despair. Finally, she found her resolve and locked eyes with Ginny. "Yes," she said at last. "I have."

Much to Hermione's surprise, a smile formed on Ginny's lips. "Good," she declared. "I think it's about time those dunderheads moved on. You've been holding them back from serious dating for the last three years, did you know that?"

Her face contorted into a mask of confusion. “Huh? I-I-I...”

“It’s true,” Ginny confirmed. “When I asked Harry out last year...he told me.” There was a note of sadness that passed on her freckled face, and then she continued. “He said that he really liked me, but that he needed to sort out things with you and Ron before he could get serious with anyone.”

Hermione’s hand inched up to her mouth as it dropped slightly open. “He – He said that?”

“Uh, huh,” Ginny said solemnly. “So...if you’ve chosen the one I *hope* you have...things will work out all right. The other one’s all wrong for you, Hermione. You know that, don’t you?”

She so dearly hoped she did, but Hermione couldn’t help but second-guess herself. “I know. It wouldn’t work with...”

“No,” Ginny said, taking both of her hands in hers. “It wouldn’t. You know how it would be if you and he got together.”

A vision of the future unfolded in Hermione’s mind. Being with him, fighting about stupid things, never feeling like she could be who she wanted to be...the jealousy if she did try to pursue her dreams. “No, it wouldn’t be good at all,” Hermione verified. “Neither of us would be happy.”

They stood for a moment longer, each considering what was about to happen when Ginny spoke again. “Well,” she said, pulling her own hair back into a ponytail. “If you’re worried about how he feels about you, don’t.” A twinkle appeared in the younger witch’s eyes that reminded her strongly of Fred and George when they were about to prank someone. “Let’s just say that I’ve heard some things during my cleaning of the library; it’ll work out fine. You just need to go for it.”

Hermione took a deep breath and nodded her head sharply. “Right. Just go for it.” She gathered her Gryffindor courage and pushed open the kitchen door. Two pairs of eyes fell on her as she walked to sit by the one she had chosen. It was time to begin the relationship she had wanted for years.

*

That evening, Hermione had had enough with the tight clothes. It became apparent that she had certainly gotten the boys’ attention and the need to constantly keep her legs crossed for fear of showing off her knickers quickly became tedious. Dressed in a soft cotton jumper and baggy sweats, her hair still pulled back, Hermione made for the library and the promise of some of the most obscure books in Wizarding Britain – if Sirius’ will had been halfway truthful.

She stole into the brightly-lit room and began to run her fingers over the spines of the books. She wasn’t looking for anything in particular, only that she wanted to read something new. Her finger stopped on a barely-worn binding bearing a title she’d been told didn’t exist any more.

In Goblins We Trust was one of several books devoted to the banking industry, but it was the only known one actually *written* by a goblin. She pulled the book from its shelf and cracked it open.

The smell of ancient parchment and dusty leather assaulted her nose. She padded carefully over to a cosy loveseat and plopped down for a good read.

When she had finished the fourteenth chapter – detailing the methodology for assigning risk factors to loans – an hour later, she rested her head on a pillow on the armrest and held the tops of the open book from the back with her hands. There was a creak from the door and a person appeared on the edge of her peripheral vision. She tried to ignore the person encroaching on her personal reading time, but as she became engrossed in the text once more, the intruder appeared at the sofa and lifted her feet from the other cushion. He sat down, sending a small ripple across the pillows that caused her to lose her place, and then put her feet onto his lap. Again, she tried to ignore him.

It was only after her slippers were removed and warm hands enveloped her feet did she relinquish her hold of the book and set it on the floor. “Mmm,” she moaned and turned onto her back, allowing her masseuse greater access to both feet. “That’s good.”

“You looked a little tense,” came Harry’s voice. “Though not as tense as you did in your *new* clothes.”

She cracked an eye and looked on as Harry continued to work the muscles in her feet. “Why do you say that?”

His hands paused for a moment, and then he brought his thumbs across the sole of her right foot, using his other fingers on top as counter-pressure. “You looked like one of the girls Dudley likes to drool over. It was too...different.”

“Different can be good,” she pointed out and relaxed once more.

There was a long silence as he switched feet, releasing stress she didn’t know she had. “You just didn’t look like Hermione is all.”

Once again, Hermione opened her eyes to look at Harry. This time, he was looking back at her. “What does Hermione look like, then?” she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders as he held her feet, his hands warm and comforting. “I dunno. Like this.” He nodded at her.

Hermione let out a low growl. “What’s that supposed to mean? Give me a little something to work with, here.”

Again, he shrugged his shoulders. “Like you are now, I guess. The Hermione I know doesn’t like to hit boys over their heads with her...um, well, with the fact that she’s a girl.”

“I did at the Yule Ball,” Hermione countered, pleased that they were getting somewhere.

“Yeah, but that was because you *had* to wear a dress...and makeup...and...do your hair.”

He wasn't looking at her anymore, so Hermione sat up, making sure to keep her feet in his lap so he wouldn't have an excuse to stop the wonderful pressure he was exhibiting on them. "I didn't have to do any of those things, you know. I could have worn a dress that didn't show off my shoulders or my cleavage, I didn't have to wear makeup, and I didn't have to change my hair." The air seemed to grow heavy as Hermione stared anxiously at Harry. "I didn't do any of those things for Victor, either."

Harry's head cocked to the side ever so slightly, as if he hadn't ever considered that before. "You...didn't?"

"No," she confirmed and placed her hand on top of his. "I didn't."

She could see the wheels in his mind turning; he had always been easy for her to read, and this time, she forced herself to wait for him to speak.

He never did. Suddenly, he shot off the sofa – how he managed to do so with her feet still in his lap, she'd never know – and began to pull on his neck again. "I, uh...need to...um, well, I've got to go to bed. G'night," he said, and was gone.

Hermione sat in her place on the sofa, staring at the closed door, feeling the heat from Harry's hands slowly melt away into the suddenly chilly air of the library, and wondering what had just happened.

Choosing Everyone Knows

Chapter Three – Everyone Knows

“Ron?” Harry asked the next morning as they were getting ready to head down to breakfast. The door was still partially-opened from when he had gone to the loo in the middle of the night. “What did you make of Hermione yesterday?”

Ron suddenly froze in the process of putting on his sock, his foot half-clad and his balance kept awkwardly with one foot. “I, uh...what do you mean?” He shoved his sock on fully and turned to grab a Cannons shirt from his chest of drawers.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t notice,” Harry replied. “She was fairly bursting out of her clothes, she had make-up on, and she kept *looking* at us.”

While he’d been talking, Ron had slowly put on his shirt. He was still turned away from Harry, but the distinct Weasley blush had wrapped around his neck. “Yeah,” he said softly. “I reckon I did notice that bit.”

Harry bent to tie his trainer and smirked. “Well, I think she’s trying to have us on.”

“Why would she do something like that?” Ron asked, finally conquering his blush and turning around. “It’s not like her.”

“Yeah,” Harry confirmed and stood up. “I told her that much last night and she agreed. That means there’s a *reason* for her...for what she’s doing.” Harry was tempted to tell his best friend what Hermione had confessed about the Yule Ball, but something held him back.

“She’s not having us on, Harry. Maybe she’s just going through a phase. Mum said that’s what happened with Bill and his ponytail.”

Harry thought about that. Maybe Hermione *was* just going through a phase. But then...why would she have acted so strangely in the library. The more Harry thought about it, the more suspicious he became. His best friend would never do something without a reason. There was a method to her madness that he was determined to discover and he hoped his first impression was wrong. At least he thought he did.

“I’m headed to breakfast,” Ron said, interrupting his thoughts. “You coming?”

Scratching his head in thought, Harry decided that the mystery of Hermione could wait until his belly was full. “Yeah, all right.”

*

A slim figure stood back in the shadows of the drapery that hung in the hallway and watched as the two boys descended the stairs to the kitchen. She knew they would be occupied for a while and that this would be the perfect opportunity to report what she had heard. With a cat-like gait, Ginny slunk back to the room she shared with Hermione, a playful smile on her face.

*

Later that morning, Hermione appeared in the sitting room off the kitchen with a book and a grin. Harry and Ron were halfway through a third game of wizard’s chess, and Harry’s prospects of winning at least *one* of the three was evaporating before his eyes. Ron gave a half-hearted wave at Hermione, which she returned, and he resumed his plot to annihilate Harry’s chessmen.

Hermione sat next to Harry on the bench that lined the south wall and cracked open her book. Her fingernails were red, and he had to do a double-take to make sure – Hermione never painted her nails. He also noticed that she was modestly dressed and gave an inward sigh of relief. She was reading the same book that she had last night and it appeared that she hadn’t done any more reading since then. Her leg grazed his, as it had a hundred times in the past, but this time, he began to feel inexplicably warm from the contact. Contemplating moving away from Hermione, but deciding against it. He used a shaky hand to move his rook in a bid to protect his king from an attack by both of Ron’s knights.

Ron didn’t seem to notice Hermione at all. He furrowed his brow and surveyed the board once more. Harry looked at Hermione again. Not taking her eyes off the page, she slowly moved her book down to her lap and one arm casually rested on both of their legs where they were still touching. One hand disengaged from the book and was pressed, palm-down into his thigh. The heat in his face intensified and there was a rushing noise somewhere in Harry’s head that was in time with his heartbeat. It took a second before he realised it *was* his heartbeat that was causing the rushing noise, but that he couldn’t fathom the reason *why* it was being so particularly loud.

“Check,” Ron pronounced smugly.

Harry’s eyes jerked back to the board. Sure enough, Ron had dispatched his rook and was a good two or three moves from pinning his king completely.

Ginny appeared in the room and glided into the seat next to Ron. She looked at the pieces for a moment before shaking her head. “Too bad, Harry. You may be the Boy-Who-Lived, but you’re miserable at chess.”

“Shut up!” Harry yelled good-naturedly, and Ginny poked her tongue out as a reply.

Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw Hermione look up at Ginny and...*wink* . Suddenly

unsure about which game was the more important, Harry pushed his king deliberately into the path of Ron's bishop. Ron instantly directed it to murder his sole remaining pawn and the game was over.

"Check mate," Ron announced unnecessarily. "You lose, Harry."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, looking suspiciously between Hermione and Ginny. The latter pounced on her brother immediately.

"How about I play you next, brother of mine. It's been a while since I pounded you into the ground."

Ron's eyes flashed as he setup the board once more. "As if. You haven't beaten me since before I left for Hogwarts."

Ginny jutted her chin out. "I haven't *played* you since then, either, Ron."

"Yeah, yeah," Ron agreed. "Let's see if you can put your knuts where your mouth is."

Ginny slapped a coin down on the table and Ron did likewise. It was shaping up to be a real family feud.

"Harry?" Hermione said softly from beside him. She closed the book with a snap and sat up. Her legs shifted as she moved, sending chills up his side where they made contact, but her hand stayed exactly where it had been. Harry found his leg somehow pinned by its light pressure. "I was wondering...you never really said why you broke things off with Susan last year. I have my own ideas, but I was wondering what your reasons were."

Harry looked back to Ron and Ginny, who were now so engrossed in their game, that he thought a dungbomb might explode over them and they wouldn't notice. "I, uh...well, that is to say...w-we just weren't compatible is all." He inwardly cursed himself for being so jittery around Hermione. It was just Hermione after all – Hermione with her *hand* on his *leg*.

"How so?" she asked. She rotated on the bench to face him fully and placed her other hand on Harry's shoulder. Her gaze was oddly unnerving.

"W-Well," Harry started, feeling the heat rise in his neck again. "She and I had different ideas on what it meant to date. The snogging was fine – she's a wonderful girl – but groping in the broom closet in the dark got a little old after the tenth time."

"I see," Hermione replied, and looked every bit like she would love to be taking notes just then. "And what is it that you look for in a girl? Her body? Her hair? Dizzying intellect?"

Harry budged down the bench a little as she spoke, hopefully being surreptitious about it, but knowing that he had failed when her hands withdrew. "I, uh...honestly?" he asked.

She didn't seem fazed by the removal of her hands and nodded. "Honestly."

“Why, uh...why the sudden interest?”

She leaned over, reached out a hand and placed it back on his thigh. “It’s purely intellectual curiosity,” she said seriously.

Something told Harry that wasn’t the entire truth, but he felt confident enough to volunteer some information. “Looks are a part of it, I’ll admit – I wouldn’t ever go out with Millicent Bultstrode. Daphne Greengrass is gorgeous, but her allegiances are all wrong; so I would say being an evil witch turns me off to a girl no matter how she looks.” A flash of something appeared on Hermione’s face when he mentioned Daphne’s appearance, but it went away just as fast. “I admire Susan’s loyalty, so that’s important, too.” A sudden thought hit Harry and he ducked his head.

“What?” Hermione asked, poking him in the side. “You were about to say something, what was it?”

Harry slowly raised his head. “It’s stupid.”

“What is it?” she asked in a near whisper. “I promise I won’t laugh.”

Her sincerity caused his lips to curve upwards slightly. “All right,” he conceded, “I’ll tell you, but no laughing.”

She crossed her heart, as if they were sitting in a Muggle primary school.

He pinched his lips together to stifle the fit of humour that had attacked him. “Smell.”

Hermione’s eyes furrowed. “Smell?” she asked.

“Yes, smell,” he confirmed. When she didn’t seem to understand, he continued. “How a girl smells is really important to me. With Cho, she always wore this really spicy perfume that made me want to gag when I was around her.” He gave Ginny a glance to make sure she was suitably engrossed with Ron, leaned close to her, and whispered, “Ginny was the best of the lot, some kind of flowery shampoo and mint. It’s too bad that didn’t work out... With Susan...” he trailed off.

“Yes? What about Susan?”

Harry leaned in even further so that their heads were nearly touching. “I don’t think she showered very often,” he explained. “B. O.”

Hermione’s lips formed a round ‘o’ in understanding and they straightened back on the bench. Then, she smiled.

“I said, no laughing,” Harry accused, shaking a finger at her.

She held up her hands between them, palms out, and made a show of forcing her face to look impassive. “I’m not laughing, Harry. I think it’s sweet, actually. Not many boys list attributes like loyalty and smell when there’s things like cup-size to consider.”

Harry snorted. “Yeah, well, I’ve got my own ideas on what size breasts should be.” He held up his hands in a mirror of hers. “If they’re too big for me to hold all of them....” Suddenly, Harry realised exactly what he was saying – a conversation he’d had with Ron, Seamus, Neville and Dean the year before – and to *whom* he was saying it to, and felt his face flame in embarrassment.

Of all the reactions to Harry’s pronouncement, a *smirk* was not what he had expected. Her eyes were dancing with amusement and it took a full minute for Harry to jam his mind out of neutral. “Gotta go,” he said, and shot from the bench, not catching the look of triumph on Ginny’s face as he sped past.

*

Harry avoided Hermione the rest of the day, preferring to spend time in the attic feeding dead rats to Buckbeak, and to think about Hermione. Something was definitely not right about her, and he was determined to find out what it was. Why the sudden interest in makeup, boys, and Harry’s dating habits? The touching was a bit off, too, but a small part of Harry didn’t mind that so much, just as long as she didn’t become too forward.

The next morning, Harry woke-up before Ron and trudged downstairs to the kitchen. Mrs. Weasley had made pancakes, bacon, and eggs, and had heaped them upon large platters that dominated the centre of the table. Harry dug in eagerly, glad to be alone for the moment.

“This is great, Mrs. Weasley,” Harry declared as he filled his plate once more.

She smiled at him and flipped another large cake in her skillet. “I’m just glad of the chance to put some weight on you, Harry. You looked so peckish when you arrived...”

“Morning, Mrs. Weasley,” said a cheerful voice from the doorway and Hermione breezed into the room. Harry caught her eye for a moment and quickly looked away at the smirk on her face. “Good morning, Harry,” she said more quietly and slid onto the bench beside him. Unlike yesterday, however, she did not sit close enough to touch him.

Through the smells of bacon, pancakes, and eggs, a faint scent of some flower reached his nostrils. The smell itself was quite pleasing, but it was the fact that it was coming from Hermione, who usually smelled pleasantly like old books and apples, that caused him to take a second glance at her. It was a familiar smell, like something from a dream, but also quite real, but amongst the other kitchen scents, he couldn’t quite put his finger on where he’d smelled it before.

As Hermione loaded up her plate, Ron appeared in the kitchen, followed by Ginny. The siblings took seats opposite Harry and Hermione and also began to load up their plates. Ron was halfway through his first plate when he started to sniff at the air. “What’s that smell?” he asked.

“It’s my new perfume,” Hermione announced, dabbing at her lips with a paper towel. “Do you like it?”

Harry knew he had smelled it before – it was definitely a flower. Maybe another girl had worn it?

Ron looked thoughtful for a moment, and then pointing his fork at her, said, “What’s the deal with you this summer, anyway?”

“What do you mean?” she asked in return, placing her napkin down on her empty plate. Ginny was looking between her brother and friend as if watching a tennis match.

He waved his fork vaguely in her direction. “I mean with your clothes, and your hair, and stuff.”

“I’m glad you noticed, Ron,” she said smugly. “Don’t you like it when I dress like a girl?”

Ron swallowed his eggs and spluttered, “Well of course not.”

“What do you mean, ‘of course not’?” she replied indignantly. “I *am* a girl, after all.”

Ron spluttered some more. “I *know* that, Hermione, it’s just that....”

She crossed her arms furiously across her chest. “Why, Ron? Why do you care what I wear or how I smell?”

“Because I’m your friend. I don’t want you to be taken advantage of.”

“By who, Ron? Who’s going to take advantage of me here?”

Ron’s face froze, and his fork dangled limply in his hand, as if he hadn’t considered that before.

“Is it because you like me? Is that it?”

A faint blush appeared on his cheeks. “Of course I like you,” he muttered. “I’m your friend, how could I not.”

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it, Ron.” Hermione stood furiously and continued. “If you’ve been harbouring feelings for me that are more than friendly,” she said, pointing a finger at both of them. “Either of you...then you need to talk to me about it; we’re not fourteen any more and it’s time we got these feelings out in the open.”

An awkward silence lingered around them, and even Mrs. Weasley wasn’t pretending to wash the pan she was holding any more. Finally, Hermione stormed out of the kitchen and Ron let out a breath. “I’m glad that’s over,” he said, and resumed shovelling food into his mouth.

“You git,” Ginny said, and slapped Ron in the shoulder.

“What?” Ron replied.

“She’s probably crying and all you can say is, ‘I’m glad that’s over’?”

“Well...” Ron offered lamely. “Fine,” he said, and tossed his fork down, still chewing on his pancake. “She’s right about one thing. It’s high time we worked this out anyway.”

Ron stood, gave Harry a nod and walked after Hermione. Harry sat back against the kitchen wall and silently wondered who had kidnapped his friends and who these people were that looked and sounded like them, but definitely weren't.

*

Whatever Ron had discussed with Hermione after leaving the breakfast table earlier that day, seemed to have done the trick. She was just as cheerful and cordial as before and even offered to correct their summer homework assignments. This made Harry feel much better, but the smirk Ron had been wearing since then not only matched the one Ginny had on since he'd arrived at Grimmauld Place, it told Harry that he was rapidly becoming the last one to be included on a very private joke.

Holing up in the attic with Buckbeak again, Harry tried to work out what it was that his friends all knew and he didn't. Buckbeak clicked his beak expectantly at Harry as his distracted thoughts had forced him to stop petting the friendly Hippogriff. He resumed absently rubbing the feathers on his chin and his thoughts were drug forcefully back to Hermione.

Her behaviour in particular had been very odd. Not only had she been... well, *flirting* with him, but she'd also had that row with Ron earlier. Even their reconciliation had been too odd for Harry's liking. There was definitely something amiss and Harry was determined to figure it out.

Just then, the door clicked open and a figure entered the room, casting a shadow across Harry's lap.

"Am I intruding?" asked Hermione shyly.

Harry shook his head and motioned for her to sit, feeling a sudden jumble of foreboding relief. "Just keeping Buckbeak company," he explained.

Hermione sat next to him, opposite Buckbeak and began to fiddle with the hem of her skirt. There was a few seconds of awkward silence in which Harry was certain that she was going to announce her engagement with the Giant Squid, or that she was going to drop out of Hogwarts.

She looked up at him and the seriousness of her expression cast those thoughts out immediately. "Harry?" she asked tentatively. "How...? How do you feel about me?"

Had some deeply buried part of Harry not expected this, he imagined that he'd simply have run off again, but he knew he couldn't keep running off forever. He swallowed and took a deep breath. "How I... *feel* about you?"

She nodded. "I need to know."

The palms of his hands were sweating and he suddenly realised that he was in a room, alone with Hermione (Buckbeak didn't count, as he was a very poor chaperone).

"I, uh..." Harry started and faltered. Hermione hadn't stopped staring at him, but he didn't know

how in the world he was going to express feelings that he didn't even understand himself. Did he like her? Sure. Was she a great friend? The best. Did he love her? The thought made Harry visibly wince. Part of him answered that he, of course, did love her but that he'd felt that way since their encounter with the Troll. Another, more recently acquired voice told him that it wasn't just friendly affection that made him blush when she had her hand on his leg or motivated him to give her an impromptu foot massage.

"Harry?" Hermione asked, interrupting his thoughts.

It dawned on him that he had been staring at her. "I'm sorry," he said, flustered. "I guess I don't know for sure. It was so clear just last week and then..."

Hermione let out a breath of exasperation and stood. "I can see I'm going to have to take the direct approach. Come on," she said, holding out her hand. "Stand up."

Harry stood warily, but obediently, taking her hand for the extra lift and then tried to let it go. She wouldn't let him.

"Now," she said with an uncharacteristic smirk on her face. "I've been dropping anvil-sized hints for the last two days and I'm through being coy with you, Harry Potter." There was a flush on her cheeks from her outburst that Harry found thrilling. "Since all my clever ploys seem to be wasted on you, let me *show* you how I feel about you." She leaned in suddenly, not giving Harry a chance to react and her lips met his. It was very unlike any of the kisses on the cheek he'd received from her in the past. This kiss was firmly on the side of non-platonic feelings and it was some time before he was able to think of anything but how incredibly soft her lips were. He could feel her love for him in the way she moved her lips and held him close. The shock of this realisation caused him to pull back.

A damn burst somewhere in his chest, releasing a flood of emotion he'd not realised was there. "Hermione," he whispered fiercely, staring open-mouthed at her smiling face. "I...I..." But words failed him then. In his arms was someone that he'd known almost all his life, had faced Voldemort with and lived to tell about it. In front of him all this time was the one person that understood him above all others and it was this thought drove him to kiss her back.

Their kiss was much different this time. Instead of reacting to the kiss, he poured out how he felt about Hermione back into it, trying to tell her that yes, he felt the same way about her. She groaned and her hands melted into his hair.

Not even the incessant clicking and nudges from Buckbeak distracted them. Yes, he was a very poor chaperone.

THE END

Table of Contents

Summertime Dilemmas	1
Plans In Motion	5
Everyone Knows	12