

## CHAPTER 22

### THE HALLOWEEN BALL

At half past five, all of Hogwarts began eagerly flocking to the festively garnished Great Hall for the initiation of the Halloween Ball. As they passed beneath the tall broad arched entryway leading into the space, they were met by a soft, enchanting interlude emanating from the baby grand piano, which sat center stage at the rear of the room, playing on its own accord. It had been bewitched to entertain throughout the course of the meal, as The Weird Sisters weren't scheduled to perform until half past seven.

Harry entered the grand embellished Great Hall with Ginny on his arm, and Ron and Hermione at his side, intermingled amongst a large grouping of other couples. The eager guests inched their way through the room, where they were ushered off to their assigned tables by purple and black robed attendants. Harry and his friends were shepherded to a table in the center of the space with Neville, Luna, Seamus, and much to Hermione's dismay, Ron's ex-girlfriend, Lavender Brown.

When Harry looked off to the far right front corner of the room, he spotted Hannah seated between Fred and George, drinking her favorite nettle wine, flirting and giggling merrily with the dapperly dressed twins. His stomach curdled into a thick twisted mess of infinite nerves as he watched the lot of them, wondering how it was possible that she had managed to grow even more beautiful from the last moment he saw her. He circled his gaze around the table where she sat, spotting Lupin, Tonks, and the other members of the Order, and watched as Remus swathed his arm around Tonks shoulders and kissed her passionately. Harry felt entirely *sick* for Tonks. He couldn't believe Remus's nerve. A mere hour ago, Remus had his hands, along with the rest of himself, all over Hannah and *now* he was snuggling up to Tonks as though nothing had ever happened. To further his dismay, Harry noticed that Hannah appeared to not even care.

Concluding that he could no longer stand the sight of them any longer, Harry rounded the table and managed a seat with his back to them, mostly so that he didn't have to watch Hannah having so much fun while he was utterly miserable. He thought if he did his best to avoid the whole lot of them, he might actually have a chance at making it through the meal without retching.

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The dinner edged along for what seemed like an eternity to Harry, who barely ate a thing, as he was entirely disenchanted by the day's events. He swore he heard the voices of Hannah and Remus laughing in the background, which only added to the intensity of his nauseated discontentment. He felt so badly for Ginny. She had obviously sensed his dissatisfaction with the evening and now appeared to be just as miserable as he was.

Upon the long awaited conclusion of the elaborate supper, the Weird Sisters took over the stage, dominating the hall with their signature-piercing blare of riotous heavy-metal grunge music. A massive swarm of energized teenage witches and wizards rushed forth to congregate along the outskirts of the stage and the dance floor, dancing and singing along to every note. Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Hermione followed suit. As Harry neared the stage, he chanced a quick glance off to his right and noticed that Hannah had let her hair down and was dancing wildly off to the side of the stage with Fred and George, while pelting down several goblets of nettle wine.

Following the performance of a lengthy set of up-tempo rock compositions, the band settled into a series of ballads. The great messy throng of head banging guests instantly settled, breaking off into couples, and filtering evenly among the dance floor.

Harry asked Ginny to dance every slow dance with him, as reparation for his melancholic behavior. He felt entirely sorry for the grueling evening he had managed to fashion out of what could have been an amazing and magical time for her. Much to his amazement, Ginny appeared to respond instantly to his concentrated efforts. She actually seemed contented for the first time all evening. Her sweet freckled face blushed with glee as she enjoyed the stirring sensation of Harry's warm embrace, her head nestled in his shoulder as she moved with him across the dance floor. Harry glanced up and noticed that Ron and Hermione were dancing across from them and had started to kiss, as did several other dancing couples surrounding them. Harry squirmed in his dress robes hoping Ginny wasn't expecting similar sentiments from him.

After dancing to a series of droning ballads, Ginny and Hermione retreated into the girls Lavatory to freshen up. Harry and Ron returned to their table and gladly took their seats, welcoming the break. They looked on as Hannah proceeded to dance her way through just about every male adult in the room before she finally made her way over to them. Harry swore his heart was nearly ready to burst out of his chest from a severe overdose of longing and angst as she sauntered over to him. The sight of her long, dark, wavy locks brushing delicately against her bare, ivory, satin shoulders, and her stunningly flawless face as it shimmered beautifully under the floating candlelight was more than he could bear. And, when his eyes met her brilliant green ones, he found himself struggling for proper breath.

*"Hey...Potter,"* drawled Hannah breathlessly, seemingly equally as enamored by Harry's handsomeness. *"I've been looking for you all night. Fancy a dance with me, then?"*

It was as though the enchanting visual compilation of her had entirely vanished and he was left standing in awe of her remarkable impudence. He wondered to himself just how many men's hearts she deemed it necessary to break before she found fulfillment in this odd sort of ritual she regarded to as harmless flirting. A long stretch of silence ensued while Harry and Hannah proceeded to stare longingly at one another. Ron's sharp clearing of his throat and his subtle jabbing of his elbow into Harry's ribs jolted Harry back to reality.

Harry shook out his head and managed to force out, however unwillingly, “Hey, Hannah...um...I’m actually waiting for Ginny. She’s in the loo. I’m to dance with *her* when she returns.”

“Alright, then,” she replied somewhat wounded. Then, swiftly withdrawing from Harry, she centered her attentions on Ron, inquiring playfully, “How about you, handsome? Fancy a dance?”

Ron sprung to his feet to meet her. He was clearly fully prepared to make leaps and bounds to get her to the dance floor with him, until he caught a glimpse of Hermione rounding the corner with Ginny at her side.

He took several steps back, hung his head low, and grumbled resentfully, “Um, I’d better not. Hermione might — you know —”

Before Ron had the occasion to complete his sentence, Remus zipped up from behind Hannah, took her by the hand, and twirled her into his arms. “Hannah, come, let’s have a dance. Ron, Harry; good evening to you.” he said with a wink and a sound nod.

Harry felt the anger in his blood spoiling his veins like some kind of deadly toxin the instant Remus touched her. He could have sworn he saw Hannah flinching in opposition the moment Remus pulled her close and whispered in her ear. All the while, Hannah’s eyes continued to desperately seek out Harry’s as Remus whirled her briskly across the dance floor with the stunning grace of a weeping willow spiraling in the breeze. Just as she and Remus faded into the mass of swaying couples near the foot of the stage, Hermione and Ginny returned to the table.

“Harry! Was that Hannah that was just over here?” Hermione inquired, bothered.

“Yeah. She wanted to have a dance. I told her *no*...as did Ron,” he said bitterly, making Ginny and Hermione smile all the same. “Ginny, you want to dance?”

“Sure!” she exclaimed with obvious delight, totally disregarding the blaring volume of disquiet that his voice practically reeked of when he asked her. She took his hand and he led her onto the dance floor with him. Ron and Hermione followed.

As Harry swayed with Ginny to the slow steady rhythm of the music, he circled his gaze about the room until his eyes settled on Hannah, again. She was still dancing with Remus, her cheek resting sadly against his shoulder and her eyes still focused intently on Harry. He didn’t know what made him do it what he did next. Perhaps it was emotional revenge, or his need to force out his passion for Hannah, somehow. Nonetheless, before he realized, he had swept Ginny into the midst of a steamy embrace and was kissing her. And, this was no ordinary kiss. Harry literally made love to Ginny’s *soul* as he claimed her lips with a bold and passionate yearning, molding her body to fit perfectly with his, caressing her back, neck, and shoulders with his equally impassioned hands.

Once his long, drugging and lingering display of intimate affection had been so eloquently delivered, Harry lifted his mouth from Ginny's and returned his focus to where Hannah had been dancing. He was fully ready and eager to survey the hopefully ill effects his romantic work of art had had on her nerves. Unfortunately, she was no longer there, and neither was Remus.

His eyes darted frantically around the room until he caught sight of the tail end of Hannah and Remus as they left together through the Great Hall entryway. He jerked his head off to his right in a flood of panic, collecting the astonished expressions washing over Hermione and Ron's faces. Then, he looked to Ginny, addressing the broad lovesick grin on her face. He swore he had never felt more ashamed of himself in his entire life.

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The Weird Sisters played until midnight, but Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny deserted the ballroom at half past ten, returning to Gryffindor tower, under Shackbolt's charge, with a handful of cakes and a jug of pumpkin juice they nicked from the refreshment table. Harry noted upon his departure that Tonks was still seated at her table chattering merrily away and laughing heartily with the Weasley Twins, while Hannah and Remus were nowhere to be found. His heart ached when he thought about what they were probably doing together behind Tonks' back.

The group worked their way through the castle and up to Gryffindor Tower. When they reached the portrait hole leading to Gryffindor common room, they met up with Bill Weasley, who was standing guard in front of it.

"Hey, you lot. How was the Ball?" he inquired cheerfully.

"Brilliant," answered Ginny in a dreamy throaty tone as she virtually floated through the portrait hole.

Bill turned to Harry and whispered, "Blimey, Harry, what did you do to her? She looks.....*high*."

Harry blushed and shrugged his shoulders, hurrying past him.

"He *snogged* her," answered Ron, rolling his eyes.

"*Snogged her?* Got off with her on the dance floor is more like it, Ronald," snapped Hermione.

"It was just a plain old kiss, Hermione," growled Ron.

"Not from where I was standing," countered Hermione.

“So they’re together again then, eh? I reckon that means Potter finally gave up on chasing after Hannah,” said Bill with a light chuckle.

“Let’s hope so, but I doubt it,” said Hermione quietly, crossing through the entryway into the common room with Ron at her side.

When the door to the portrait hole swung shut, the lot of them coupled off and plopped down on either end of the sofa in front of the fire. Ginny appeared exceedingly contented as she cuddled up to Harry and leaned her head against his shoulder, picking cheerfully at one of the desert cakes. Harry gulped when he caught sight of the harsh, threatening glare that had spread across Hermione’s face; this was clearly her visual shorthand version of snapping aloud, *‘Don’t you dare break Ginny’s heart!’*

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Shortly after one o’clock, Harry resolved to turn in. As a goodwill gesture, he opted to plant a friendly goodnight kiss on Ginny’s cheek to mark the official end their date. Only, she turned her head as he moved in and the kiss landed smack dab across her lips. Her hands cleaved to him with a *startling* grip while she locked her mouth firmly around his. He hung in there, giving into her deep affections and not having a clue how he was to worm his way out of the mess he’d created; all these factors being the product of what was supposed to be nothing more than a silly vengeful kiss.

With that in mind, he promptly pulled away from Ginny and bid her, Ron, and Hermione a hasty goodnight, then he scurried up to the sanctuary of his dorm room. Much to his satisfaction, he was the only one there. He took the opportunity to pace the floor, pondering over everything that had happened and wondering what he was going to do with his sorry self. He felt utterly dreadful that he had let something as trivial as his male ego cloud his better judgment.

Then he realized he couldn’t stand it anymore. He had to find Hannah to confront her about everything that had happened earlier. It didn’t matter that it wasn’t his business who she was seeing. He was going to make it his matter, because he knew that what she was doing was wrong, and he knew that she was miserable.

Hence, he stole a quick glance around the room to verify that no one else was there with him. Next, he slipped into his walk-in wardrobe, snuck through the secret entrance into the enchanted corridor, and re-emerged seconds later in the walk in wardrobe of the Grimmauld secret room.

Not surprisingly, Hannah was nowhere in sight. He shuffled over to her four-poster bed, plopped himself and every bit of his disappointment sharply down upon it, and stared blankly about the room. His emotionally bludgeoned spirit quickly flooded with intrigue when his eyes rested upon a small golden parcel set atop the nightstand. It was addressed to Hannah. His hands trembled as he reached for and un-wrapped the parcel, revealing a shallow black velvety box. He raised the lid of this box and uncovered a pair of stunning

emerald cut diamond studded earrings and a note resting beneath them. He picked out the message and read over its contents.

*Hannah,*

*Happy Birthday.*

*I am hoping this gift finds you well.*

*It's been a fortnight since I've seen you last.*

*We have some pertinent information we need to discuss; please respond ASAP.*

*P. S. I miss your touch.*

*-Yours, &*

*10/31*

“What?” uttered Harry aloud as he reviewed the note in complete bewilderment. The note couldn't possibly have been from *Remus*. Hannah saw him on a daily basis because Remus, too, lived at Grimmauld Place. An overwhelming sense of dread began to flood Harry from the inside out as he wondered, *Just how many men is Hannah seeing?*

He took to circling the floor in trepidation, reading, and re-reading the note, going over and over it again and again in his mind, searching for some viable explanation. Somewhere along the line, quite possibly between the combination of the trials overwhelming upset and the tribulations of reaching the height of complete exhaustion, he surrendered to the unsolved mystery and lay down on the bed, drifting off to sleep.

The next thing he knew, he was being jolted awake by a loud crashing noise above him. He heard the distinct sound of a girl's charming giggles and the deep resonate echo of a familiar male voice sounding out loud. Harry tore out his wand from the inside pocket of his dress robes and darted into the walk-in wardrobe, lurking secretly behind the doorway.

Meanwhile, two figures had quickly descended the stairwell of the kitchen, rounded the corner, and faded into his view. It was Remus Lupin, escorting Hannah by her arm. Harry noticed she was openly intoxicated and plodding along in a clumsy zigzag fashion. His heart was thumping wildly in his chest as she and Remus headed for the four-poster bed.

“There we are, now. Alright, then,” said Remus releasing her for an instant to pull back the bedding for her.

Hannah unzipped and dropped her dress to the floor, kicking it aside.

“Here you go; under the covers with you,” said Remus, helping her into bed, removing her shoes, and tucking her beneath the soothing warmth of the silken blankets.

“Nighty-night, *Loopie!*” giggled Hannah, patting him sloppily on his head.

“I shall call for you in the morning when you are more sensible. We have some important issues we need to discuss,” he said sternly, and he withdrew to the secret kitchen, exiting through the enchanted entryway of the cupboard.

As soon as Harry was certain he heard the cupboard hatch close, he poked his head out of the walk-in wardrobe and snuck over to the bed.

He tapped Hannah lightly on her shoulder and whispered out, “*Hannah.*”

“AH!” she squealed, shooting upward, her eyes wide with shock. “*Harry?* What are you doing here?!” she inquired, slurring her speech and tripping out of bed.

She stood before him scantily clad in her undergarments, stumbling and smashing against the nightstand and knocking over the plate of burning candles on top of it. Harry flicked his wand, returning the candles to their upright position.

“I wanted to talk to you about today, that song, and your crying.” He paused for a moment before spitting out heatedly, “Your *affair* with *REMUS LUPIN!*”

Hannah’s face contorted as though she was trying with great difficulty to absorb and comprehend everything he had said to her. Unexpectedly, she began cackling out in hysterics.

“M-my af-fair wi-with LUPIN! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!” She continued laughing, falling over onto the bed and clutching her abdomen with her arms in complete stitches over what he had said to her. “*My affair! LUPIN!* Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!”

“*Why is that so funny?*” He retorted nastily. “I for one don’t find it a bit funny, Hannah! I think it’s DISGUSTING!”

Hannah’s laughs died down to a few faint chuckles and then to silence, followed by a look of total disorientation when she noticed the dead serious expression on his face.

She sat up and stuttered. “W—Wh— you’re *serious?*”

“Yes, I’m *serious!*” shouted Harry.

Hannah let out a loud snort and burst into a roaring fit of giggles, again.

“Hannah! I’M *NOT* JOKING! Ron, Hermione, and I followed you up to the third floor corridor this afternoon. We saw you two carrying on up there! HOW COULD YOU! That’s your cousin’s fiancé!”

“Wait, wait, *WAIT a minute*, Harry!” said Hannah, standing up with her hand in his face, her laughs ceasing and making her seem almost sober. “How much of our little...how much did you see?” she inquired, staring at him with her drunken eyes drawn open while she swayed perilously from side to side.

What does it matter how much I saw! I saw enough to know that—”

“Would you SHUT IT for a minute!” snarled Hannah, pressing the palms of her hands against either side of her head in a vain attempt at straightening herself out. “FIRST OF ALL, I wouldn’t sleep with Remus if you *paid* me. He’s not my type. SECONDLY, if ever I’ve taught you anything of any importance to you, that which is of the GREATEST SIGNIFICANCE is that *NOT everything is as it seems.*”

“Hannah, I know what I saw. *We all saw it!* You and Remus —” Without further ado, he drew a dazed expression fitting for having been hit with blunt force trauma to his head by some kind of worldly revelation.

Hannah nodded to him with an absolute mark of confirmation, and said, “Uh-huh.”

“Polyjuice Potion?” said Harry diffidently.

“Very good, Potter. I see you’re not nearly as *thick* as you used to be,” said Hannah curtly.

“So, that was actually *your lover* in disguise?”

“Yes. And if you would have stuck around, you would have seen me wave him off, because the whole thing entirely freaked me out.”

“Hannah, I’m sorry. I thought—”

“That’s your problem, Harry, you *don’t* think! Honest-to-Merlin! Do you really think so low of me that you believe I would go throwing myself about in such a reprehensible manner? I mean, it’s definitely no secret that I’m a *very* sensual woman, quite kinky, actually, but that doesn’t make me a cheat! I should think you know me well enough, by now.

Hannah, I’m sorry. I — *Wait a minute!* I know for certain that I saw you and the REAL Remus sneaking off together at the Ball, and neither of you were anywhere to be found until he brought you here and —”

“I snuck off early and went to see my lover,” said Hannah. “Remus came after me because he knew I had way too much to drink. He found me just after I re-entered the corridor from the secret entrance to my lover’s home. I nearly got caught. I made up some flimsy excuse that I was lost. With as much as I had to drink tonight, he wasn’t a bit surprised.”

“I feel like a *classic fool!*” said Harry, shame-faced.

“I’ll take that as an apology and raise you a ‘*you owe me the benefit of the doubt*’ next time,” she joked dryly, arching her brow to him.

“I believe I can afford to grant you *at least* that,” said Harry ruefully. “But, can I ask you why Remus removed you as my personal guard and why he won’t allow me to come here on the weekends any longer?”

“Harry, none of that was Remus’s doing. It was *mine*.”

Harry felt as though he just swallowed a band of thorns as the sound of her words ripped through him.

“You-you don’t want to be my guard anymore? You don’t want me here?” he asked, his mouth growing desert dry.

“Harry, it’s not that I *don’t* want to do either. It’s that I *can’t*. The man I’m seeing doesn’t find it prudent. He’s been concerned about all the time you and I have been spending with one another. And truthfully, so have I.”

“But, you’re my friend, my sentinel! Dumbledore assigned you to protect me!”

“Harry, I believe you know as well as I do that there is much more happening between you and I than mere comradeship or common protectorate bond. As I see it, an undeniably *strong* attraction has developed between us, one that is getting far too tempting for you and for me to bear.”

Harry felt his heart flutter.

“Is that what you were trying to tell me before, that you keep trying to make it right?” he asked.

Hannah turned away from him in a clear effort at gathering her thoughts.

“Harry, I need to make this work...with the man I’m seeing...I need to. I can’t explain why, but —” Her voice trailed off into an exasperated whisper as she tottered onto the bed and flung her head hard against her pillow, slurring off subject. “*God*, the room just won’t stop spinning!” She patted weakly on the mattress and said, “Harry, come here.

Let's catch a bit of rest and I'll take you back to the castle first thing in the morning when I'm less *incapacitated*."

Harry didn't need telling twice. He immediately kicked off his shoes, peeled off his clothes down to his boxers, and climbed under the covers beside her. This was all he wanted, to lay beside her and have her all to himself.

Hannah curled up to him, nuzzled her head in his chest, and draped her arms loosely around him as she said to him affectionately, "Harry, you're a good man. Any woman would consider herself lucky to have the chance to be with you. Right now, I cannot be that woman. But, I *can* be your friend. And I *will* be." With those words, she passed out, still lying on top of him.

Harry didn't dare move. The incredible sensation of her lying with him was like the adrenaline rush of life being pumped into a dying man. He wanted to remain like that with her forever under any circumstance. It didn't much matter to him. It felt so right just being this close to her.